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A Socio-Political Approach to Modernist Architecture in Soviet Lithuania

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Abstract:

The book *Baltic Modernism. Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania* is a detailed analysis of the characteristics of modernist architecture in Soviet Lithuania. It emphasizes the close relationship between the architectural community in Lithuania and the historical, urban, and ethnic heritage as well as the national landscape. Starting from a broad discussion of Soviet Modernism, the author zooms in on specific aspects: industrialization, urban and rural planning, housing, and the consumer-cultural network. The buildings and urban structures are analyzed using a socio-political approach pointing to tensions between standardization and customization. The book is an important source for historians of architecture as well as for interdisciplinary research in cultural, history, urban studies and sociology of architecture.

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Drémaitė, Marija: *Baltic Modernism: Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania*. Berlin: DOM publishers, 2017, 319 pages, 28 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-86922-470-1.

Abstract:

The book *Baltic Modernism. Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania* is a detailed analysis of the characteristics of modernist architecture in Soviet Lithuania. It emphasizes the close relationship between the architectural community in Lithuania and the historical, urban, and ethnic heritage as well as the national landscape. Starting from a broad discussion of Soviet Modernism, the author zooms in on specific aspects: industrialization, urban and rural planning, housing, and the consumer-cultural network. The buildings and urban structures are analyzed using a socio-political approach pointing to tensions between standardization and customization. The book is an important source for historians of architecture as well as for interdisciplinary research in cultural, history, urban studies and sociology of architecture.

In her new publication *Baltic Modernism: Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania*, Marija Drémaitė analyzes in detail the practices, actors, and forms of architecture in Soviet Lithuania and connects them to the post-war processes of modernization and industrialization. The main objective is to identify „the specific architectural traits that distinguished modernism in the Baltic region from that of other Soviet republics“ (p. 10). In addition to its role as an archive of the period, based on written sources, interviews with architects, photographs, and other illustrations, this scholarly work gives insight into „the milieu and the system of architecture in which architects of Lithuania were forced to act and how architecture as a cultural activity could develop“ (p. 11).

The discussion of trends, projects, and practices specific to each stage of Lithuanian architecture points to an uncertainty about the universality of Soviet Modernism that was, according to Drémaitė, actually shaped by time and space as well as the „local priorities and values“ (p. 313). The uniqueness of Baltic modernism stems from „the extraordinary relationship Lithuanian modernist architects maintained

with their historical, urban, and even ethnic heritage“ (p. 315) and with their national landscape. This close relationship was based on the principles of *genius loci*, meaning that the landscape design was adapted to the context in which it was located.

The monograph is structured into five chapters and two parts, a theoretical and historical overview and more detailed case studies. The first two chapters are more general accounts of Soviet Khrushchevian modernization as part of the discussion about Soviet Modernism (chapter one) and of architecture in Soviet Lithuania between 1940 and 1990 (chapter two). In the following three chapters, the author zooms in on certain aspects of modernization visible in industry and urban and rural planning, housing, and the consumer-cultural network.

The main strength of the book is the socio-political approach through which the author looks at the buildings and urban structures. She analyzes these architectural projects in relation to tensions, contested goals, tendencies, and groups of actors. The central disagreement explored is between standardization and customization. Even after 1956, during the more liberal period in Lithuanian architecture, there was still a strict requirement for using standardized designs. However, architects constantly attempted and sometimes succeeded in using experimental and custom designs, for example in resort architecture that was meant to look different from the environment in which people lived and worked (chapter 5.4). This opposition led to some professional conflicts between groups of architects working with standardized and custom designs, in which the second group „clearly developed a strong authorial culture where aesthetics were a central topic of discussion“ (p. 314).

There is another conflicting relation that is part of this general dynamic: that between the public character of architecture and the covert form of resistance in which architects engaged. This is interesting not least because there was no dissidence through architecture since it couldn't operate from the underground like other art forms. In the highly regulated and standardized field of architecture during the Soviet period, architects had to use their expertise and professional position within the communities to subvert some of these norms. For example, they tried to improve the comfort in mass housing, to bring variation and uniqueness to architecture. The fascinating case of *mikrorayon* (microdistrict) centers for shopping and leisure illustrates how architects were able to go around the rules for using standardized designs since these buildings were not so ideologically significant and, thus, not so much in the spotlight (sub-chapter 5.3.2).

Another recurrent topic is less prominent, but still a valuable observation: the difference between what was planned and what was put into practice. There are numerous mentions of unfinished or partially completed projects and ideas or proposals that were developed on paper, but never implemented.

The author links these situations to the economic hardship, lagging technology, stagnation, and bureaucracy characteristic of late socialism in particular. In addition to providing information about the history of urbanization and architecture in Soviet Lithuania, this aspect also enhances the value of the book as what can be called an ‘archive of intentions’. It contains descriptions, sketches, and plans for these projects that were never completed, thus contributing to the history of architecture in Lithuania with a rare source of data.

This study of Lithuanian architecture within Soviet Modernism is based on three central aspects of the theory of planning history: „the relationship between planning discourse and local social practice; the contested ambitions and goals of social planning; and the wide range of historical actors in planning practices“ (p. 29). The first focal point is particularly interesting since it has the potential to bring insightful findings about the role of architecture in local contexts and social practices associated with the built environment. However, throughout the book it seems like the author defines local social practices as the practices of local *architects* and not so much of the residents and users of buildings. The instances in which she refers to local actors as inhabitants offer insights that could be relevant for various disciplines, such as cultural history, urban studies, and anthropology. For example, in chapter three she discusses how the period of extreme rural urbanization (1959-1969), in which residential zones were separated from service zones, affected the quality of life for villagers.

A more detailed discussion of these connections and a broadening of the definition of local actors would have been helpful for achieving a nuanced understanding of Soviet Modernism in the Baltic region. A more comprehensive analysis of how wedding and funeral palaces shaped the social and cultural environment of Lithuanians would have been particularly interesting since these were relatively specific to Lithuania.

In addition to being an important source for historians of architecture, this monograph is of interest for researchers in the cultural history of the Soviet Union, urban studies, and the sociology of architecture. It points to relevant topics and raises further questions for the study of socio-political dimensions of architecture, the built environment linked to local contexts, and the identity and strategies of architectural communities. The author conveys the singularity of Baltic modernism without losing sight of the wider social, political, and cultural framework within which architectural practice unfolds.

German Abstract:

Eine gesellschaftspolitische Untersuchung der modernistischen Architektur im sowjetischen Litauen

Baltic Modernism. Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania beinhaltet eine detaillierte Analyse der Charakteristika modernistischer Architektur in Litauen zur Zeit der UdSSR. Der Schwerpunkt liegt dabei auf der engen Beziehung zwischen der Gemeinschaft der Architekten in Litauen, dessen geschichtlichen, urbanen und ethnischen Kulturerbe sowie den nationalen Rahmenbedingungen. Nach einem einführendem Überblick über den sowjetischen Modernismus, geht der Autor detailliert auf Aspekte der Industrialisierung, der städtischen und ländlichen Entwicklungsplanung, des Wohnungsbaus und der Vernetzung der Konsumkultur ein. Die Analyse der Gebäude und kommunalen Strukturen deckt dabei mittels eines gesellschaftspolitischen Ansatzes die Spannung zwischen Standardisierung und Individualisierung auf. Das Werk zeichnet sich somit als wesentliche Quelle für die Geschichte der Architektur sowie die interdisziplinäre Forschung im Gebiet der Kulturwissenschaft, Geschichte, Urbanistik und der Architektursoziologie aus.

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