East Bloc, West View: Architecture and Lithuanian National Identity

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The waning of the Western Cold War discourse has made it possible today to render a more nuanced picture of cultural developments, and their political undercurrents, that once took place in different regions of the Soviet bloc. This article evaluates historical evidence from the past half-century to demonstrate that a Westward orientation played a significant role in Soviet Lithuanian architecture, retaining a subterranean influence even through the region’s most trying periods as a republic in the former U.S.S.R. Applying innovations from countries like Finland and France, Lithuanian architects worked both within and on the outside of a Soviet bureaucracy to introduce humanizing elements and a Western, decidedly non-Soviet orientation into their designs. By grafting this Westward-looking orientation onto local traditions, architects at the Baltic periphery of the Soviet Union kept alive an historical ambition to be included in a Western European national and cultural community.

For the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the twentieth century has often provided a dramatic affirmation of the old adage that “geography is destiny.” The fates of these nations have been tied to the expansion and contraction of neighboring states such as Poland, Russia and Germany for longer than many Baltic citizens care to remember. As a result, periods of independence like the interwar period of 1920 to 1939, or the recently regained independence that dates to March 1991, have taken on heightened significance as times when national identity and culture must be affirmed.

One historical constant in Lithuania since 1945 has been the persistence of a “Westward gaze” among architects as an expression of national and cultural identity. And though certainly not reducible to a single cause, the wish to participate culturally and politically in a community of Western European nations can be understood as one response to Lithuania’s historical subordination to foreign neighbors. Present-day
Lithuanians live in the shadow of the period from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, when Lithuania occupied a junior position in a Polish-Lithuanian state (until 1795), and then an even more subordinate position as a province ruled by Russian czars until after 1918. The period of national independence between 1920 and 1939 offered the first sustained opportunity to establish the culture and symbols of independent nationhood, although these were surrendered to the Soviet Union after 1945.

Nonetheless, the cultural nationalism expressed through architecture during the Soviet era can be understood as a kind of substitute for the political nationalism that was repressed until the glasnost period of the 1980s. And today these architectural expressions of political and cultural identity may provide an important index of the thoughts, feelings and energies that were pent up in Lithuania during those decades. In a region where notions of identity — Lithuanian or otherwise — have been contested for so long, examining the record of the built landscape is one way to render a clearer picture of recent Lithuanian accomplishments.

LITHUANIAN ARCHITECTURE IN THE MODERN AGE: A HYBRID TRADITION

One would be hard pressed to identify a single, cohesive Lithuanian national building tradition. Pre-Soviet indigenous Lithuanian domestic architecture, for example, belongs to a variegated Northern European and Scandinavian tradition of wooden house-building that features steep, sloping roofs to protect against an unforgiving local climate. Reflecting regional differences across the villages of Lithuania, vernacular builders have tended to erect clusters of buildings that hug the land, orient toward the sun, defend against the wind, and feature hand-crafted wooden ornaments of plants, the sun, and other natural motifs. Towns and cities contain many more brick, stone and concrete constructions, along with a variety of eclectic and modernist buildings designed not only by Lithuanian architects but by builders from Russia, Poland, Germany, and as far away as Italy. But, overall, it is the respect for nature exhibited by rural structures that has inspired modernist architects to work with a particular Lithuanian genius loci.

The era of Soviet rule, which began for the Baltic states in 1945, brought massive changes to the country and its population, 80 percent of which still lived outside of cities and towns as late as 1940. Incorporation into the Soviet Union brought a wholesale program of modernization, urbanization and industrialization. As one local observer noted in 1990, “more than three times the number of buildings were built during the fifty-year Soviet period as were built during the previous several centuries.” In the face of such change, and with a history of only fragile national independence, Lithuanian builders and architects clung to the sense of a building “tradition” that evinced a noticeably hybrid character. Features of this tradition include respect for nature derived from vernacular builders, local inflections of selected foreign styles and planning influences, and a determined effort to reflect the latest trends in Western modernism. In particular, the effort to participate in the evolution of Western thought has formed an integral part of Lithuanian architects’ self-definition. Both during the first period of national independence in the 1920s and 1930s as well as during the Soviet period, leading architects have equated the expression of Western architectural sensibilities on Lithuanian soil with two important, linked ideas: distance from Russian dominance; and participation in a Western community of democratic nations. Hence, modern architecture has served in part to symbolize a measure of psychological and cultural freedom — and, of course, political independence.

In spite of experiencing two complete and opposing paradigm shifts in the last half century (first of incorporation into the Soviet Union, and then the sudden arrival of post-Cold War independence), Lithuania’s hybrid building tradition has proven remarkably resilient. And since the end of the Cold War the characteristics of this tradition — which cannot be taken too literally, but which is more like a set of common tendencies — have been finding expression in a new and still-transitional democratic, capitalist political culture. But what may be most surprising to readers unfamiliar with the internal cultural politics of the former Soviet Union is that some of the most Western-oriented, independent-minded impulses of the hybrid Lithuanian tradition were able to surface in works of Lithuanian architects even during the most trying years of Soviet domination. After looking at current changes in Lithuania’s architectural culture, this article attempts to establish the sense of a continuity between present-day production and several architectural works of the Soviet era. The intent is to show how elements of Lithuania’s hybrid tradition have persisted in spite of the intense redirection of political, economic and ideological impulses from the Soviet era to the present day.

TRENDS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE LITHUANIAN ARCHITECTURE

Immense material and cultural challenges face architects, planners, and architectural educators in Lithuania today. This is immediately clear to anyone who tours the two major schools of architecture in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, a city with a population of 570,000. The major items on the architectural agenda
conform to the cultural and political policies being pursued by the nation as a whole: namely, to integrate the country into a larger Western European cultural and economic community. Western European countries—Lithuania’s Scandinavian neighbors, in particular—with their high standards of living, capitalist systems, and variations of socially conscious democratic governance, represent a gamut of possibilities to which Lithuanians have not had access since the 1920s and 1930s.

Today’s situation in architecture, however, as in many other fields in the Baltic states, is dictated by extremely limited financial resources. Following their disastrous experiences in Russia (and to a lesser extent in other Eastern European countries), Western investors have recently been proceeding with considerable caution. This has meant that Lithuanian architects and planners have been forced to operate within a climate of severe constraint as they attempt to modernize, enlarge and improve the ubiquitous Soviet-period housing projects to alleviate the country’s ongoing shortage of urban housing. Their results have so far been mixed. But at the close of the first decade of post-Cold War independence, there are now causes for optimism. Perhaps most significantly, newly formed public-private organizations such as the Lithuanian Housing Credit Fund are today beginning to broaden the process of privatizing housing, raising these efforts from the scale of individual apartments to the level of whole buildings and entire neighborhoods. Such privatization trends are now making it possible to achieve economies of scale that will in turn promote the emergence of viable private housing-management companies. The complete absence of such companies to this point has proven the main obstacle to successful completion of large-scale housing privatization and modernization projects by local investors, building contractors, engineering consulting firms, and developers. A further positive development today is that the Housing Credit Fund is participating in the drafting of new legislation to replace outdated laws governing housing, property ownership, and property management to better reflect the conditions of a growing market economy.

For their part, architects have thus far concentrated on small-scale renovations of housing blocks that involve new joinery and insulation, structural stabilization, and modernization of water and heating systems. The strategy of adding an extra story of apartments beneath newly built sloped roofs has also been popular. In the city of Vilnius an architecture firm known as Jungtinės Architektų Dirbtuves (United Architects’ Workshops) has taken this approach to renovations of both two-story Soviet-period construction and larger, five-story apartment blocks (FIGS. 1, 2). The resulting projects make the most of existing building structures, while attempting to enliven formerly bleak, gray, square-paneled facades through a variety of geometrical, structural and ornamental elements.

Responding to Lithuanian overtures in the West, meanwhile, an array of German architectural firms has begun testing the waters to see if they can apply the same methods in the Baltic states that they have been practicing in neighborhoods of former East Berlin and in the territories of the former German Democratic Republic that today...
comprise Germany’s “new federal states.” For example, a private firm known as HoPro, Inc., which re-formed from the ashes of the planning wing of the East German socialist Wohnungsbaukombinat (Apartment Building Combine), has joined with the Lithuanian Housing Credit Fund to launch a pilot project in Vilnius. Its goal is to systematically renovate Lithuanian prefabricated apartment blocks within present German cost parameters of DM900 per square meter (approximately US$500 per square meter), the minimum cost at which the company has found it can profitably carry out this work. And as the Lithuanian Parliament and state planning agencies gradually render the country’s legal framework and market environment more transparent and congenial to Western investors, the number of companies working with Lithuanian architects and developers in this way appears poised to increase, possibly dramatically, in the opening decade of the twenty-first century.

The field of Lithuanian architectural education has undergone a similar level of radical reorientation during the 1990s. At institutions like the Vilnius Technical University, located a short distance outside Vilnius, administrators introduced a Master’s of Architecture degree program in 1992. Modeled along Western lines, this two-year professional degree program is meant to follow four years of undergraduate study toward a bachelor’s degree in architecture and to replace the Soviet system in which architects were prepared solely to serve in state planning and construction offices. Another significant development, dating to 1994, is the conversion of one of the three fifteen-student sections of the Master’s program to English-language instruction. There is a strong push as well, through a combination of fellowships and foreign aid, to place Lithuanian students in accredited foreign architecture schools and exchange programs. To date Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Germany have hosted architecture students from Lithuania.

A similar reorientation can be seen in the architecture program of the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts, an older school whose newest building, the architecture and applied arts facility by faculty member Vytautas Bredikis, is tucked into a forested, stream-side site in Vilnius’ historic city core. The content of studio assignments at the Arts Academy also reflects a Western reorientation by facing the implications of privatization head-on. Increasingly during the 1990s, students in design studios here have been presented with assignments for commercial adaptive-reuse projects within Vilnius’ sensitive historic urban fabric. At 300 hectares, this area resembles the historic centers of Poland’s Krakow, Slovenia’s Llubljana, and (at a smaller scale) the Czech Republic’s Prague. But in contrast to these cities’ experiences, Vilnius appears to have begun its boom in restoration, renovation, and new construction only during the second half of the 1990s, in part reflecting the increased transitional lag time for a country that was not just in the former East Bloc, but which for 45 years was officially incorporated in the Soviet Union as one of its fifteen constituent republics.
One such adaptive-reuse project — this one given by professors Brėdikis and Vytautas Čekanauskas — presented students with the design of a new, privately owned Minolta camera and photocopy store. From a pedagogical standpoint, such a project challenged students to interrelate new private commercial premises with a downtown core that retained the scale and character of its many Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque buildings. But the instructors, both also veteran architects, were also striving to make the issue of contextualism an explicit on-site concern. Thus, while students were left free to explore currently fashionable high-tech and postmodernist approaches, as published in such popular journals as *Werk, Bauen und Wohnen, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, and *Bauwelt*, they were also required to accommodate a hypothetical client’s main request: to retain and integrate an existing large Renaissance staircase into the design of the new store.¹²

At the Fine Arts Academy projects for advanced students have also included preparation of submissions to a competition for a new bank in Kaunas, Lithuania’s second city (and its provisional capital from 1920 to 1939). And other related courses have tried to introduce students to the practical aspects of running an architectural office in the new private-sector environment.

In the meantime, beyond the walls of academia, considerations of real property, commercial rents, and other common characteristics of a market-driven economy are now being factored into the production of designs for such real structures as hotels, department stores, and parking garages. Private investment and public funds are also beginning to reshape Vilnius (a city whose population is 54 percent Lithuanian, 19 percent Russian, 19 percent Polish, and 8 percent a mixture of Byelorussians, Jews, and other minorities) into a diverse, increasingly lively capital.¹³ Also indicative of efforts to rejoin a Western-style European urban community has been the appearance of the inevitable struggle between such businesses as Benetton and McDonald’s (in 1996) and those who advocate the retention of local urban character. Politically, the election of President Valdas Adamkus in January 1998, signaled another turn to the West. As a refugee from World War II and a well-traveled, prolific Lithuanian architect who was responsible for influencing the direction of expanded professional peers. Thus, among his goals is a desire to curb situations in which “architects perform as consummate servants to their clients to the detriment of the quality, scale, and energy-efficiency of house designs.”¹⁴ Nasvytis hopes that the participation of President Adamkus and former Lithuanian Republic President Algirdas Brazauskas (who, like Boris Yeltsin, is a former construction manager) in Lithuanian Architects’ Union meetings will result in increased attention to the quality and character of Lithuania’s built environment.


As elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, the glasnost period saw a remarkably rapid flowering of new ideas within Lithuanian architectural circles. Construction and design standards were criticized with increasing frequency during the 1980s, and “postmodern” decorative accents emerged as a fashionable means of achieving more open architectural expression. However, a revealing change in Lithuanian architectural discussions both in international settings and in the national press emerged around the time of independence. International audiences before independence were often told, for example, how Lithuanians had studied Western examples and taken them into account in their attempts to grapple with local issues and traditions. But press accounts soon after independence placed far greater emphasis on evaluating Lithuanian architecture in light of a problematic Soviet legacy.

On both sides of this national and international divide can be discerned the figure of Gedeminas Baravykas, a well-traveled, prolific Lithuanian architect who was responsi-
sible for the design of numerous buildings and monuments after graduating from the architecture program at the Vilnius Arts Academy in 1964 (Fig. 5). Before his untimely death in 1995 at the age of 54, Baravykas perceptively and critically analyzed the historical influence of Western architecture in Lithuania in presentations in the U.S. in 1989 and in Estonia in 1990. Significantly, these presentations focused on the problematic nature of Lithuanian efforts in the 1970s to “quote” famous contemporary Western buildings while attempting to remain true to notions of a Lithuanian and Baltic genius loci. To illustrate the ways in which architects took on these challenges, Baravykas cited prominent buildings such as the Supreme Soviet (now Parliament) building in Vilnius, designed by Algimantas Nasvytis and his brother Vytautas and completed in 1982 — a building that owed an obvious debt to the Boston City Hall. Baravykas also praised another Nasvytis brothers’ project, the Lithuanian Drama Theater in Vilnius (1981), as an exemplary design representing a certain fold-art-influenced, modernist Lithuanian originality that had even managed to attract the praise of Western architects (Figs. 6, 7). The design of this building sets a dramatic, highly sculptural brick, granite and bronze facade among the older buildings of Gedeminas Prospect (formerly Lenin Prospect), a strongly axial avenue connecting Vilnius Cathedral to the Parliament building. In articles and interviews, Baravykas maintained that his own works were deeply indebted to the preceding generation that had produced works like these. These older architects, he explained, had opened the door for younger Lithuanian architects by securing a significant degree of creative independence from Russian officials in Moscow.

After independence in 1991, as Lithuanian architectural professionals and critics reevaluated their country’s architecture, a pronounced shift appeared in the emphasis of such architectural discussions, however. The very title of a 1992 article in the national press, “Architecture of the Soviet Period Weighed on the Scales of History,” contributed to a new sense of finality with which Lithuanians viewed their participation in the Soviet sphere of influence. The article, written by Jonas Minkevičius, opened with a dramatic quote by Baravykas to the Lithuanian Architects Union. “We are not at all ashamed of our works from the Soviet period,” Baravykas declared. “I do not reject a single one of my creations.” Sympathetic to this sentiment, Minkevičius nonetheless characterized it as barely relevant to the task of establishing which projects had contributed to the nation’s sense of itself, and which had helped destroy valuable parts of the country, its landscape, and heritage. Every period and generation establishes its own criteria with which to judge architecture, the author noted, and in the post-Soviet era the task of establishing criteria — beyond simply assigning blame or guilt — had yet to be properly addressed.
WEIGHING THE HISTORICAL LEGACY: A BALTIC WINDOW ON THE WEST

An important implication of this article was that, while such projects as grand Stalinist apartment blocks and ubiquitous statues of Lenin were clearly part of an ideologically driven urbanist program in Soviet-era Lithuania, other projects had managed to pursue a different agenda. Today it is possible to ask to what extent, and with what force, such a legacy of “Western influence” can be detected in Lithuanian architecture of the Soviet years — that is, between 1945 and 1991. And if such influence existed, when and how did it begin, and how was it negotiated in a Cold War atmosphere in which Soviet rule, at least to Western eyes, was perceived as unequivocally opposed to Western “capitalist” and “bourgeois” design? Archival and journal evidence indicates that independent gestures of resistance were made by Lithuanian architects as far back as the Khruschev thaw of the mid-1950s. These declarations were followed with guarded applications of Western ideas, realized in projects in the 1960s and 1970s.

As a recent graduate of the Lithuanian Academy of Arts at the time of Josef Stalin’s death in 1953, Algimantas Nasvytis was among the first to protest Soviet design policies. In a still-celebrated defense of Vilnius’ old town to the Russian-appointed heads of the Lithuanian S.S.R. Architects’ Union at their Second Congress in Vilnius in 1955, Nasvytis compared the buildings of the Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque periods to postwar interventions in the urban fabric. “If construction in the center of Vilnius continues to follow its present path, then without exception it can be maintained: In a few decades society will judge us — the architects of today — to have been barbarians, the despoilers of our capital.” To protect this heritage, Nasvytis and design colleagues of his generation, notably Brédikis and Ėkanauskas, pushed for policies that would allow new construction to be located far outside the old center of Vilnius, preferably beyond an insulating greenbelt of forests. Their concerns were particularly directed toward the large-scale, industrially manufactured housing blocks that then formed the cornerstone of a Soviet housing policy, as defined by Khrushchev in the mid-1950s.

Available evidence suggests that such Lithuanian architects succeeded in resisting the lockstep advance of housing policies from Moscow as early as the late 1950s and early 1960s. The key contribution of architects such as Brédikis, Ėkanauskas, Balčiūnas and Valtuskis from this period was Vilnius’ second mikraion, or residential satellite city of prefabricated concrete panel-block buildings, built at Lazdynai (Figs. 8, 9). A typical project

FIGURE 8. Aerial view of Lazdynai outside Vilnius, designed by Vytautas Ėkanauskas and Vytautas Brédikis (constructed 1964-1972; twenty-story towers added in 1982). (Source: author’s collection.)
for 40,000 residents, built within the framework of a tightly organized Soviet command economy, Lazdynai must also be understood as one of a few trail-blazing attempts to break with the bureaucratic rigidity of large-scale central planning.22 The architects themselves, however, are the first to admit that their tactics could do little more than provide a buffer against the tightly controlled, hierarchical program of Moscow-based central planning. Their input could not, for example, prompt a complete redesign of housing schemes, only lead to changes in site planning and housing-block design that challenged the existing order of things.23

One stimulus for Lithuanian departures from Soviet norms, lingering from the period of independence of the 1930s in which Nasvytis, Bredikis and Čekanauskas had spent their youths, was the difference between the role of the architect in the Lithuanian and Soviet contexts. Opposing the Soviet tendency to subordinate the architect’s role to that of economists, policymakers, and planners in charge of all-encompassing five-year plans, Lithuanian architects (to hear Nasvytis describe it) clung to notions of a duty to their profession that was “higher than simply drawing,” and extended to the organization of spatial experience, the promotion of harmony between buildings and the landscape, and the consideration of inhabitants’ and users’ needs.24 By contrast, the extreme top-down nature of the Soviet housing system has been vividly described by Italian housing scholar Romano del Nord:

Like a series of bureaucratic pyramids converging toward a single vertex, central building committees, economic planning offices, regional institutes, and republican branches take part in a vertical flow of orders and guidelines. This structure permits almost no communication horizontally, and no constructive feedback between administrative branches.25

If the subordination of the architects’ creative role is not obvious from the rigid appearance of ubiquitous urban housing blocks that earned protest even in the heartland of Russia, then del Nord’s description helps capture the institutional obstacles to creativity built into the Soviet planning system. In Lithuania, although designs for Lazdynai were ready as early as 1962, construction was delayed to allow for the coordination of different building phases. Ultimately, these delays allowed local architects and planners to concentrate on developing alternative housing models, even if these had to be worked out within the strictures of the prefabricated 3x3-meter panel construction system developed by Gosstroi, the Soviet planning ministry (which, in turn, had been a revival of methods introduced by German architect Ernst May in the early 1930s).26 Lazdynai today differs noticeably from typical Soviet housing sites primarily in that it consists of a series of stepped, forested terraces running parallel to the river Neris. Whereas standard Soviet and East Bloc procedure was to level a site to make it easier for cranes to set up on either side of a building, Bredikis and Čekanauskas argued that building with the hillsides would soften the effects of such a massive development, distributing it across the landscape.27 The Lithuanian architects were driven not simply by a desire to build at variance with the Soviet system. Rather, they were attempting to follow lessons derived from Finland, whose rolling hills, forests, and general landscape character resemble that of the Baltic states. Bredikis and Čekanauskas, in particular, had both been part of official delegations of Soviet architects on visits to Finland in 1959 and 1960.28 Bredikis’ observations of Finnish architecture prompted several of the departures from Soviet design doctrine that the Lazdynai project would come to embody. And both he and Čekanauskas acknowledged the strong impressions left by such examples of Alvar Aalto’s projects as Sunila, Kauhtua, and Tapiola from the late 1930s to the 1950s. Aalto’s quest to humanize modernism was perhaps most evident in his designs for housing, in which he acted on the belief that large concrete structures did not necessarily have to project an ethos of domination over the sites on which they stood. Thus, his plans were laid out so as to fit large housing blocks in the best way possible to the existing contours of the hilly, wooded Finnish landscape. For example, many of his large buildings at Sunila and Kauhtua were fitted into the folds of hillsides and along ridgelines, while others climbed up through forested areas in a stepped or terraced fashion (fig.10).29
The humanizing potential of Aalto’s designs for large-scale housing was not lost on the Lithuanian visitors. Back home, when ordered to design mikro-raioni for an average of 30,000 residents, they proposed to Russian officials that they be allowed to develop their own block-and-panel system, one that would add variety to existing Soviet models. Initially, this request did not get very far. Permission was denied when Gosstroi planning officials from the local Lithuanian branch informed the architects that, in the view of central authorities in Moscow, such variant panel systems were unnecessary and impractical. Living at the Soviet periphery had its advantages, however. One was that of 130 housing combines in the Soviet Union during the 1960s, three were at work producing prefabricated panels in Lithuania. Working with Lietprojekt, the Lithuanian Ministry of Construction, a portion of a housing combine outside the city of Kaunas was quietly retrofitted to produce a different variety of housing block. This building would use the same concrete paneling system, but would be broken in plan to allow it to follow existing relief lines on a terraced site.

In 1969, in the Moscow journal Novy Mir (New World), Russian journalist Alexander Nezhny recounted the official response to Lithuania’s construction of an independent housing model. “When the secret came out while the building was under construction, the republic State Construction Committee supported the institute, though it resented the lack of confidence in it shown by the architects.” Other researchers of housing in the Baltic states have shown that the Soviet Union did tolerate a certain amount of what it called “democratic centralism” — a principle by which local and central policies were allowed to differ. But these differences were usually limited to the relative the amount of expenditures on items like education and other services. In this instance the architects had clearly taken matters into their own hands, reappropriating important aspects of planning and construction control from their proper place in the Soviet hierarchy.

Nezhny’s article also made the significant point that it was the republic level of the State Construction Committee that resented, but eventually supported, the architects of Lazdynai. And he explained how, after support became official on the local level, the architects gradually revealed six more designs for different types of housing blocks that they had been developing for the Lazdynai project. Bearing in mind that there were only eight panel-housing designs in existence in the entire Republic of Lithuania, it was significant that stepped, terraced housing blocks and five other alternative designs were now under consideration for a single mikro-raion. As the architects explained, they gained local support for each of their alternative designs over a long period, introducing them one at a time and convincing officials that the designs were sound and, more importantly, buildable within the limits of existing Soviet construction capabilities. Gaining this support on the local level proved easier as time went on, for after it became clear that residential organization, traffic patterns, and quality of life would be improved by the project, local officials had less trouble granting their approval.

Eventually, the ability to draw on local Lithuanian support from the Building Ministry and from the heads of the Lithuanian Communist Party also proved crucial in the arduous negotiations to gain approval for construction changes from officials in Moscow. By the end of this process, when accountability came to rest back on the shoulders of officials in Lithuania who had already been convinced of the merits of the project, seven different house-block designs for buildings between five and nine stories were approved to accommodate the complex relief lines of local topography at Lazdynai. Besides the broken-plan buildings that followed hillside contours, another type climbed slopes of up to 15 percent grade in a stepped fashion. The architects also dispersed housing blocks among the hills while leaving sections of forest intact, and new plantings were added once construction had been completed. The architects took these measures in the hope that “nature would be a partner to the architecture, rather than a victim” (an observation that again showed Aalto’s influence). Both block types also afforded views into the surroundings for the greatest number of apartments. And, further reflecting the influence of the Finnish achievements in accommodating nature, architects Brédikis and Cekanauskas wrote at the time:

*The view through a window has a profound impact on an individual’s psychology. . . . This view is the spatial continuation of the interior, an inseparable part of the surroundings in which a person lives. A real visual connection with one’s surroundings is a fundamental part of designing for an apartment’s overall comfort.*

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**FIGURE 10.** The sole example of stepped, terraced panel-block housing in the Soviet Union, reflecting the influence of Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. (Source: W. Rietdorf, Neue Wohngebiete sozialistischer Länder, Berlin, Verlag für Bauwesen, 1975, p.246.)
The construction delays which had lasted through years of negotiations also allowed the architects and planners of Lazdynai to depart from Soviet housing practices in their integration of infrastructure, site planning, and circulation networks. For clues on recent Western thinking in these areas, Brėdikis and Čekanauskas used information available from early 1960s French architecture journals about the efforts of Team X architects to rework the street in modern architectural contexts. Influenced by the way Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, and Shadrach Woods had reconceived Toulouse-Le Mirail along the lines of “new urban units,” Brėdikis, in particular, pushed for an analogous separation of pedestrian and automobile street networks in the plan of the mikroraion.35

Such integrated planning, attention to users’ subjective experience, and the separation of vehicular from pedestrian traffic are, of course, far from revolutionary in a Western architectural context. Their significance at Lazdynai lies instead in their contribution of previously unacknowledged and unwelcome approaches to Soviet mikroraion design. Where recent Western scholarly accounts document in increasing detail a history of Soviet housing that revolved around reductive calculations of square meters of living space per person, it is notable that the designs for Lazdynai by Brėdikis and Čekanauskas directly opposed this policy.36 Their project for the terraced site at Lazdynai was a direct contravention of the Soviet centralized bureaucratic structure, carried out on behalf of a more successful architecture.

From a historical point of view, the completion of the project led to a juxtaposition of ironies. After years of bureaucratic opposition, Lazdynai was awarded the Lenin Prize for All Union Architectural Design in 1972. And, following this award, the project became something of a standard bearer for “socialist” design excellence, and was featured on the cover of the East Bloc’s most comprehensive international survey of modern panel-block housing developments, Werner Rietdorf’s New Residential Developments of the Socialist Nations (fig. 12).37 To the casual observer, Lazdynai represented a socialist housing scheme, a set of new and badly needed apartments churned out according to an industrialized panel-block building system. But for those familiar with the numbing repetitiveness and drab features typical of East Bloc mikro-raions, the project signified direct Western influence through its appearance and underlying organization.

TRENDS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE LITHUANIAN ARCHITECTURE

In their work, the Lazdynai architects had sought to make a linkage with Western architectural currents that was entirely consistent with the efforts Baravykas later highlighted in his discussion of the Lithuanian Parliament building and the Drama Theater. The recurrence of this “Westward gaze” among leading architects reflects, in fact, the fusion of a Soviet-era Lithuanian historical longing with a practical strategy on the part of Lithuanian cultural and political leaders to support expressions of independent nationhood through culture. In so doing, these leaders underscored the geographical and historical realities that have, more often than not, consigned residents of this Baltic “mini-nation” to life as part of a Russian- or Polish-dominated conglomerate state.38 Projects like Lazdynai preserved and expressed the same will to independent action that resurfaced when Lithuania became the first republic to secede from the Soviet Union in 1990.

**Figure 11.** View of Lazdynai development’s separate vehicular and pedestrian streets. (Source: author’s collection.)

**Figure 12.** International socialist housing survey featuring stepped, terraced housing of Lazdynai. (Rietdorf, Neue Wohngebiete sozialistischer Länder, front cover.)
Today, after almost a decade of independence, Lithuanians are still struggling to fashion a stable young republic with a society and economy that more closely resemble those of their Scandinavian and European neighbors. But in a part of the world where traditions of democratic public debate have had comparatively few opportunities to come to full flower, the Lithuanian built environment provides valuable clues as to the ways that architects sought to contribute to international discussions of architecture — discussions which, even during the Cold War, transcended simplistic and totaling East-West divisions.

Facing increasingly powerful forces of global commercial investment, architects in Lithuania, as elsewhere, are today seeking to balance what is international and contemporary against what is local, unique, and worthy of preservation. It is unclear what the future holds, though Western investment, local economic development, and living standards are gradually increasing — and with them the disparities of wealth common to capitalist societies. The Lithuanian hybrid architectural tradition will undoubtedly be challenged by the forces of economic globalization in ways now seen in most other parts of the developing world. Whether local architects can withstand this new onslaught of outside influences is, of course, unclear. Yet one thing appears certain: at the core of Lithuanian identity has been the experience of interacting with, accommodating, and adapting to the cultures living around Lithuania. If historical experience is any guide, then Lithuanians and their architects will again find ways to inflect their hybrid tradition and define their built environment in dialogue with the influences arriving from near and distant shores.

REFERENCE NOTES

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9. New housing, by comparison, can only be built at a cost of DM2,500 per square meter, drawing many firms to the prefabricated housing renovation market. Interview with Bernd Fohgrub, Business Manager, HoPro Bauplanung GmbH Berlin, June 18, 1999.

10. Currently, about half of the English-speaking section is comprised of foreign students, many from the Middle East. Beginning in fall 1994, a transition was completed to a four-year Bachelor’s of Architecture and a two-year Master’s of Architecture at the Vilnius Technical University. Interview with Architecture Program Dean Vytautas Didzius at Vilnius Technical University, May 24, 1994.


12. Interview with architecture professors Vytautas Brėdikis and Vytautas Ėrublenas at the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts, May 25, 1994, and June 10, 1995. While Vilnius remains ethnically extremely diverse, the rest of Lithuania is made up of approximately 85 percent
Lithuanians, 10 percent Russians, and a 5 percent mixture of Poles and other minorities. Municipality of Vilnius, Vilnius Economic Profile 2, p.13.

14. Interview with Algimantas Nasvytis in Vilnius, May 22, 1994. A similar interview with Nasvytis was conducted in the summer of 1992, at which time Nasvytis was the Minister for Building and Construction in the government of Vytautas Landsbergis.


22. Others included the diversion of funds from urban construction projects in Vilnius Old Town to build Lithuania’s first freeway, connecting Vilnius to Lithuania’s second-largest city, Kaunas.


27. One is hard pressed to locate examples in the former East Bloc and Soviet Union of housing blocks built on sloping sites. See, for example, the authoritative survey of Soviet and East Bloc housing developments by G.D.R. author W. Riedert, Neue Wohngebiete sozialistischer Länder (Berlin: Verlag für Bauwesen, 1976).


29. Cekanauskas explained that Finland and the Finnish architects “left the greatest impression,” since to him Finland “felt like a country similar to our own . . . it had a very similar environment . . . and it obtained independence from the Russians in 1918,” roughly the same time period as Lithuania became independent for the first time. Cekanauskas interview in Vilnius, June 12, 1992. See also the discussion in H. Ginsberger, ed., Alvar Aalto (Zürich: Verlag für Architektur, 1963), pp.96-107.

30. Cekanauskas acknowledged that this retrofit of a production plant would have been impossible but for the cooperation and support of the plant’s forward-thinking manager, Samuel Lubeckis. Cekanauskas interview in Vilnius, June 12, 1992.


34. Quoted in Balciunas and Vanagas, Lazdynai, p.10.

35. “Toulouse-Le Mirail: City of 100,000 Inhabitants,” Architecture, Formes, Fonctions
In his 1992 interview, Čekanauskas recalled that he had been trained in the 1950s by some older teachers who had been active well before the World War II. In the prewar decades of independence, Lithuanian architects had prized architectural journals from France and Germany highly, and though they were forbidden under Soviet rule (rule that demanded assertions of socialist design free from Western influence), they still commanded great interest among students. Articles in the 1990s are again popularizing the achievements of architects during the last period of independence — especially those who strove to design in the tradition of European modernism. See the discussion in E. Guzas, “Gerų Pamatus Padejus: Apie 1918-1940 m. Lietuvos Architektūra ir jos Kurėjus” (“Having Laid Down Good Foundations: Lithuanian Architecture and its Creators From 1918-1940”), *Statyba ir Architektūra* 5 (1992), pp.14-15.


37. Werner Rietdorf’s survey of postwar socialist housing in the Soviet Union and East Bloc countries, *Neue Wohngebiete sozialistischer Länder*, featured the stepped, terraced housing of Lazdynai on its cover (depicted in Figure 12).

38. “Mini-nations” was the term adopted by scholars committed to a field of Baltic Studies in the West, which opposed Soviet occupation by continuing to chart the social, economic and cultural trends of the three Baltic states. See, for example, A. Ziedonis, Jr. et al., eds. *Problems of Mininations: Baltic Perspectives* (San Jose, CA: Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies, Inc., 1973). A more critical and recent evaluation of Baltic politics and culture can be found in Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution* (see note 1). Vytautas Kavolis updates cultural reworkings of historical themes in the 1990s Lithuanian national revival in his “The Second Lithuanian Revival: Culture as Performance,” *Lituanus: The Lithuanian Quarterly* 37 (1991), pp.53-64.