

# CITY and IDEOLOGY: Soviet Kaunas of 1945–1965

---

Vaidas Petruolis

This article will present the Lithuanian architecture of the first two decades after WWII. Although speaking about architecture, the paper also discusses cultural history, stressing the influence of cultural background on the process of city development. While talking about the Soviet period, one of the most important aspects is the relatively strong influence of politics on culture. Thus the concept of cultural background will be investigated as a form of disseminating the political ideology of the state.

My aim is to offer a structural analysis of interaction between politics (ideology) and architectural development. Such a structural approach explains the use of the word ‘ideology’ in the context of Soviet architecture.

## **Ideology and architecture**

In recent works about the Lithuanian architecture of the Soviet period the opinion that the political situation of the time forced Lithuanian architecture towards unnatural development is predominant. The natural progress of architecture, understood as the continuation of inter-war modernism in a narrow sense, or the local interpretation of the western architectural tendencies in a wider sense, was blocked. The reason for this was the ideology-based understanding of state development, and at the same time, the problems of urban and architectural development. Although this point of view can be accepted as correct, it requires some deeper explaining.

First of all, let us clarify the notion of ‘ideology’. *The Dictionary of Ideas* explains that ideology is ‘the system of ideas, beliefs and opinions that form the theory how people should live, and how society is or should be organised. The ideology of a nation usually reflects in its politics.’ (Norton 2000: 197.) Consequently, the concept of ideology in architecture means that the government takes

upon its shoulders the prerogative of an artist, intrusively suggesting the 'right' ideas of how architecture should be understood in the light of the political line of the Party. Naturally, it leads to the diminishing of the architect's role as an artist. Ideology appears as the basis for a subjective decision of choosing one or another architectural form, which otherwise would not have been chosen.

### **Political and ideological preconditions for architectural development**

After WWII, the Lithuanian Communist Party attempted to set up a control mechanism over a wide range of spheres of life, covering such fields as art and architecture as well, and forcing them into the strict frames of political ideology.

In trying to understand how such a situation changed the face of the city in general and its certain buildings we should, first of all, find the basic factors in the construction sphere which would provide us with the main guidelines for understanding the process of architectural development. These are macro-influences, superior to other influences.

**Ownership of land** was one of the most important legislative instruments that influenced the development of a Soviet city. In the Soviet period, private land ownership was abolished. This led to the situation where all the construction-related problems were solved in a complex way. In some cases it allowed quite a progressive way of planning, especially concerning the positive examples of residential micro-districts, such as Lazdynai in Lithuania. In other cases, the large-scale changes in urban structures based on the theoretical approach sometimes led to mistakes. Old city centres, where the already established structure based on private plots of land was violated, offer clear examples of such cases. As an illustration we can name the residential houses for the *Pergalė* factory, which were built in the central area of Kaunas. Private plots of land in the centre of Kaunas used to be small or middle-scale, but the new buildings opened up large-scale spaces in this area (Fig. 1).

Lack of free competition was another essential precondition of Soviet architectural development. The birth of modern architecture in the inter-war Lithuania was inseparable from the free practice and competition of architects. After the war, all the projects were assigned to governmental institutions. Architects became the employees of governmental offices. A forced situation appeared where the architect became a bureaucrat with a restricted freedom of

decision, and also with a diminished weight of personal responsibility.

In Lithuania, as well as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the development of cities was prejudiced by the **central planning economy**. First of all it meant that industrial architecture started to wield an extremely harmful influence on the city (Fig. 2). Here we can speak about specifically planned industrial enterprises and new residential areas or even towns constructed around such industrial giants (such as Naujoji Akmenė, Elektrėnai, Visaginas, Didžiasalis, etc.), which are in many cases almost deserted now. Besides being the result of central planning, the mass building of residential districts can also be understood as an official promotion of industrialisation in architecture.

In addition to political and economic decisions, **artistic propaganda** also acts as a direct source of architectural manipulation. Architectural and aesthetic progress became the subjects of politics. Articles about the culture of private interiors and the development of good taste very didactically and successfully explained the right understanding of beauty to society (Šepetyš 1965; Mackonis 1956; Peras 1961). The most flourishing examples of the government's 'knowledge' of art were demonstrated during the Stalinist period and the following period of the 'economical economy'. In addition to its theoretical importance, propaganda also acts as a visual component of the city (Fig. 3).

Investigating the circumstances of the 'ideologisation' of city space, the changing **functional typology of buildings** should be mentioned as an important detail. The typology of buildings is also an important reflection of the socio-cultural situation in architecture. It is not surprising that during the entire Soviet period no sacral buildings were constructed in Lithuania. Instead, relatively new types of buildings emerged, such as 'houses of culture', buildings of 'ritual services' and houses of civil marriage.

These are the major factors that depended on the political situation of the country, and to a greater or smaller extent influenced the development of a particular location.

We could list even more specific factors, but let us rather examine the second important question. How did these factors come into force? An unquestionable fact is that the political and ideological influence was not an unchanging reality, leading the architecture of the Soviet republics to absolute invariability. Architecture is always a flexible process between the customer (the initiating institution, its technological, financial and functional needs), the architect (the creating

institution, its technological and creative abilities) and the state (the controlling institution, the regulator of architect–customer relations). If we analyse the factors of the so-called ideologisation using the customer–architect–state grid, we will find out how the ideological and political purposes were reflected in the city of the Soviet period.

In Table 1 we can see that, contrary to the inter-war Lithuania, almost all decision-making in the matters of architecture was concentrated into the hands of the government. Governmental organisations became the customers, and naturally, the variety of the functional typology of buildings reflects the political opinion on how society should operate. The architect passes his artistic competence over to the state, and becomes a bureaucrat of the state. The state, naturally, does not lose legislative competence.

Regardless of the fact that the political situation was quite similar throughout the country, the architecture of every major Lithuanian city had its own features. Thus, the picture of a specific city appears as a link between the state

<b>Independent Inter-war Lithuania (1920-1940)</b>		
<p><b>Customer:</b> a) Financial and technological resources b) Represents the needs of society</p>	<p><b>Architect:</b> a) Architectural-aesthetic decisions b) Technological abilities</p>	<p><b>State:</b> a) Building and other related laws controlling relations between the customer and the state, and the customer and the architect</p>
<b>First decades of Soviet Union (1945-1965)</b>		
<p><b>Customer:</b> a) State organisation b) Represents the needs of society filtered through state politics</p>	<p><b>Architect:</b> a) State bureaucrat. b) Lack of personal responsibility c) Lack of personal initiative in decision-making</p>	<p><b>State:</b> Additional functions: a) City development – a political decision b) Understanding of architectural form explained as artistic propaganda</p>
<b>Later development</b>		
<p><b>Architect.</b> Better architectural education. Sense of a deep background of architectural tradition</p>		

Table 1] Functional transformation of Lithuanian architectural decision-makers.

and the particular place, manifested in material form. This interaction between a place as a micro-factor and ideological power as a major factor is an interesting research area, helping to understand how the relations between architecture and ideology can be explained as an interaction of three key points (Table 2):

- (a) The state (in this case the Soviet Union) *versus* a particular place (in this case Lithuania and the city of Kaunas);
- (b) The state *versus* the architect as an independent artist.

This was a short overview of the main changes in the architectural situation which allows us to understand the architectural scene in the post-war Lithuania. Now I shall present the architecture of Kaunas as quite a small unit in the Soviet Union, and attempt to explain how these macro-factors influenced the architecture of a particular place.

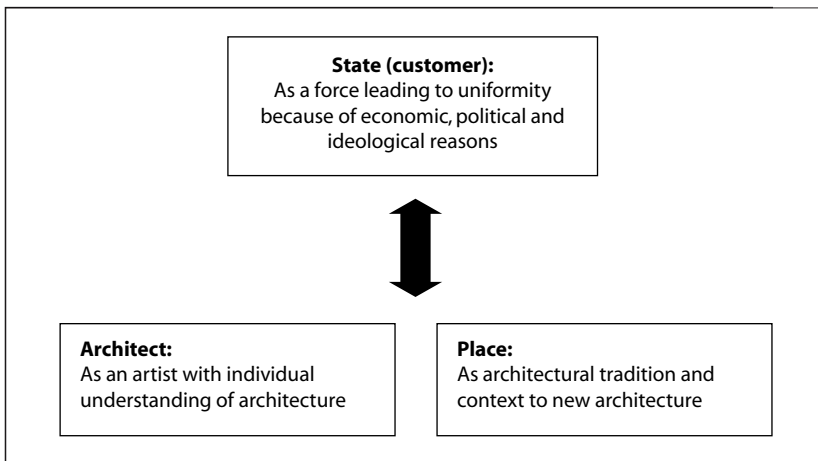


Table 2] Tensions in Lithuanian architecture (1945–1965).

### Stalinist monumentalism

The first post-war decade was very hard because of a serious lack in every sphere, starting from architects up to building materials. But in spite of this, Stalin's notion, conceived before the war, that architecture ought to be emotionally elevating, was developed further until 1955. 'The architects tried to make Soviet architecture superior to the art of the previous époque, and to adorn buildings more than usual, by using expensive materials and various decorations which very often were quite irrespective of the main idea of the building' (Statkevičiūtė

1973: 179). The composition of such architecture was based on a system of 'order', with details (such as stairs, doors, windows, entrances, height of interior spaces) interpreted in a monumental manner and decorated with elements of applied art with Soviet symbols. The only reason for this eclectic style was to emphasise the pathos of Soviet power – it was political, and at the same time ideological.

While speaking about Kaunas, we should mention that here the situation was slightly different from that of Vilnius. After the war, the Lithuanian architects mostly remained in Kaunas, the pre-war capital of Lithuania, while in Vilnius almost all architects were invited from Leningrad (Mikučianis 2001: 79–80). In such a way we can notice some kind of continuation of the architectural tradition in Kaunas. Naturally, architecture in Kaunas did not escape the Soviet architectural developments, but in many cases the architecture is less elaborate, less stressed and more free of the constructive aims of the 'order' system, its decorative elements often closer to vernacular motives.

The residential buildings of the *Pergalė* factory can be examined as one of the examples of the trend. In 1949, the project was ordered from Leningrad. We can see that the architectural forms reflect the point of view of Leningrad (KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b. 30–40; Fig. 4). The later project, designed by Lithuanian architect Jokūbas Peras, is distinguished for its much simpler interpretation of order, and for its contextual building methods and proportions more fitting to the space of Kaunas. Nevertheless, we can still find the attributes of Communism there, such as the five-angle star, etc. The complex occupies an unusually large area in the central part of Kaunas. This situation reflects freedom from the problems of private land ownership (Fig. 1). It is also clear that such monumental interpretation of the entry arch and gates also speaks about the composition close to the official understanding of architecture (Fig. 5).

A residential building on Laisvės Avenue with a bookshop on the ground floor can be taken as another example. Its flower-based ornamentation is close to Lithuanian folk tradition (Fig. 6). The same could be said about the project of the Academic Drama Theatre (architect Kazimieras Bučas; KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b 105). There are some Soviet attributes as well, but the cement sculptures adorning the façade depict artists in Lithuanian folk costumes (Fig. 7a and 7b).

The railway station built in 1953 by architect Piotr Ashastin is one of the most important buildings in the post-war Kaunas (Fig. 8). Its architectural composition is based on the principles of classicism: strict symmetry, separate

and large-scale inner spaces, horizontally continued shape, massive walls and centrally oriented stairs witness a clear effort to continue in the classical understanding of architecture. 'However, the moderate decorations and quite good proportions make this building more or less characteristic and familiar in the city.' (Jankevičienė *et al.* 1991: 339.)

The projects of municipal baths for 200 people (KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b. 10; Fig. 9), and the Kaunas Hydroelectric Power Plant administrative building (KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b. 80; Fig. 10) are two other examples of this period, being quite good illustrations of Stalinist monumentalism. In case of the administrative building, the council of architects decided on April 15, 1959 that 'regardless of its primary function as a power plant, this object will also act as a point of propaganda agitation' and suggested 'a richer ornamentation of façades' (KAA f. R-1126, ap. 1, b. 26, p. 6).

Thus we can conclude that the situation during the first post-war decade strongly depended on the understanding of the state of how architecture should develop, but still, in some cases the local traditions and the local architects made this influence less pronounced.

### **Turn to functionalism**

The second decade of the Soviet period started with the Communist Party decree of November 4, 1955, where it was admitted that 'the works of many architects and designing organisations very widely emphasise the external, demonstrative side of architecture, which is rich in exaggerations; this does not correspond to the line of the Party and Government in architecture and building'. (TSKP 1955: 1.) This decision was a political precondition to a change in architectural development. Architecture radically changed from Neo-classicism to pure functionalism. The efforts of architecture suddenly became concentrated toward mass construction, ensuring the rapidly escalating construction of flats and social centres, and the development of rural settlements. Ideological attitude was added to the natural development of architectural technology.

The real changes appeared in Lithuania and Kaunas only in the beginning of the 1960s. The first public building in the functionalist manner, the Institute of City Planning, was constructed in Vilnius in 1961 by Eduardas Chlomauskas (Fig. 11).

In Kaunas, one of the first public buildings was the Baltija Hotel, built in

1965 by architects Jonas Navakas and Janina Barkauskienė. The site, the exterior (Fig. 12) and interior (Fig. 13) of the hotel fully reflect the functional, economic and aesthetic needs of this period. The main façade is almost plain, grey in colour, divided with an equal rhythm of wide windows and narrow dark colour lines between the windows. Almost no architectural adornments were used to decorate the first hotel of the Soviet period in Kaunas. The same simplicity can be found in interior spaces of the building.

A few years later, the same spirit appeared in some other public buildings in the centre of the city. The projects of this architecture had to follow strict regulations; houses were mostly built using industrial ferro-cement materials, typical to the period of their construction; almost all the buildings are distinguished for their simple purist forms, and the lack of architectural exaggerations. The most important examples of such architecture in Kaunas are the Buitis furniture shop (arch. Vytautas Dičius; Fig. 14a and 14b), the building of the Kaunas Polytechnic Institute (now Technological Institute, arch. Vytautas Dičius; Fig. 15) and the project of the Juliaus Janonio Square with the buildings of the Institute of Industrial Design (1965, arch. Algimantas Sprindys, Vladas Stauskas; Fig. 16) and the Institute of City Design (1970, arch. Algimantas Sprindys).

Most of the new projects were constructed in close contact with the architecture of the inter-war period. In some cases it added to the particular scale, but generally, this decade felt a lack of architectural composition. Kaunas gradually lost the continuity of the modern architectural tradition.

Thus the period of intensive industrialisation in Kaunas reflects the stronger position of the state in comparison with *genius loci* and the creativity of architects. Conditions for a certain cultural resistance in the sphere of architecture were immature yet. Only in the next decade, a new generation of architects started operating in Vilnius and became familiar with the rich architectural heritage of the city. A favourable environment laid the foundations for architectural developments known as the ‘rebirth of the Lithuanian school of architecture’. In the client–architect–government chain, architects gained relative independence. The Vilnius Art Centre by architect Vytautas Čekanauskas, built in 1966 (Fig. 17), can be considered one of the first prominent examples of the new architecture.



## Conclusions

- (1) Architectural development cannot be evaluated separately from its cultural background. In Soviet Lithuania the key aspect of this background is the general line of the development of the state based on Communist ideology.
- (2) The concept of ideology in architecture can be understood in a direct way, i.e. as a government privilege to suggest the 'right' ideas and regulations on how architecture should be understood, and in an indirect way, i.e. as a specific architectural development resulting from an ideologically based legislation system. In Soviet Lithuania both were important.
- (3) However, the situation existing in a Soviet city should not be understood as purely ideological. Even in the first two post-war decades, when state regulations were at their peak, architectural manifestations of ideology were quite diverse.
- (4) When speaking about ideological aspects of architecture, it is very important to evaluate the whole complex of relations; (a) relations between architecture and the customer, the architect and the state; (b) relations between the state and local factors (*genius loci*, architect).

## References

- B r a z a i t i s, A.; G a l k u s, J.; M i k u č i a n i s, V. (Eds.) 1965. *Vaizdinė agitacija*. [*Visual Agitation*.] Vilnius: Mintis
- J a n k e v i č i e n ė, Algė; L e v a n d a u s k a s, Vytautas *et al.* (Eds.) 1989. *Vilniaus architektūra*. [*Architecture of Vilnius*.] Vilnius: Mokslas
- J a n k e v i č i e n ė, Algė; L e v a n d a u s k a s, Vytautas *et al.* (Eds.) 1991. *Kauno architektūra*. [*Architecture of Kaunas*.] Vilnius: Mokslas
- M a c k o n i s, J. 1956. Suraskime bendrą kūrybinę kalbą. [Let's find the common language of creation.] – *Literatūra ir menas* [*Literature and Art*], May 19
- M i k u č i a n i s, Vladisovas 2001. *Norėjau dirbti Lietuvoje*. [*I wanted to Work in Lithuania*.] Vilnius: VDA leidykla
- N o r t o n, Annie-Lucia (Ed.) 2000. *Idėjų žodynas*. [*Dictionary of Ideas*.] Vilnius: Baltos lankos
- P e r a s, Jokūbas 1961. Architektūra ir būsto kultūra. [Architecture and culture of house.] – *Statyba ir Architektūra* [*Building and Architecture*], June
- P u t n a, Jonas 1965. Viešbučių statyba Kaune. [Building of hotels in Kaunas.] – *Statyba ir Architektūra* [*Building and Architecture*], October, pp. 12–14
- Š e p e t y s, Lionginas 1965. *Daiktų grožis*. [*The Beauty of Things*.] Vilnius: Mintis

Statkevičiūtė, Irena 1973. *Estetinis auklėjimas*. [*Aesthetic Education*.] Vilnius: Mintis

TSKP 1955 = TSKP Centro Komiteto ir TSRS ministrų tarybos nutarimas dėl projektavimo ir statybos nesaikingumų pašalinimo. [CPSU Central Committee and USSR Council of Ministers resolution on planning and the elimination of exaggerations.] – *Literatūra ir Menas* [*Literature and Art*], November 12

### Unpublished sources

KAA f. R-1126, ap. 1, b.26

KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b.10

KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b. 30–40

KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b. 80

KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b. 105

KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b. 139

KAA – Kaunas Vicinity Archive

Figure 1] *Pergalė* factory residential buildings, Kaunas. Arch. Jokūbas Peras, 1956 (photo by author, 2001).



Figure 2] Industrial architecture in the very centre of the city of Kaunas (photo by author, 2002).



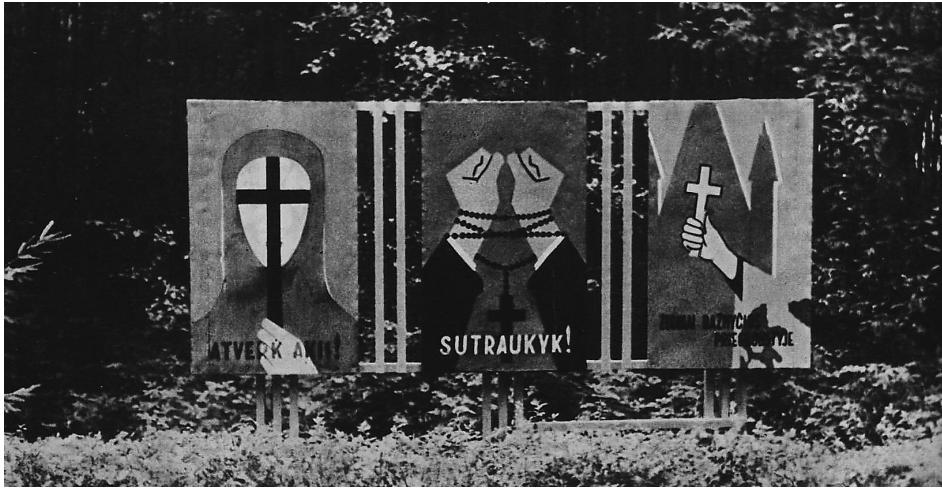


Figure 3] Stand in vicinity of Rietavas (Brazaitis *et al.* 1965, Fig. 28).



Figure 4] Project for the Kaunas *Pergalė* residential building made in Leningrad. Arch. Jeremejeva, 1950 (KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b 30, p. 6).



Figure 5] *Pergalė* residential building. Arch and gates, Kaunas. Arch. Jokūbas Peras, 1956 (photo by author, 2001).



Figure 6] Bookshop on Laisvės Avenue, Kaunas (photo by author, 2002).

Figure 7a] Kaunas Academic  
Drama Theatre. Arch. Kazimieras  
Bučas, 1956 (KAA f. R-1702,  
ap. 2. b. 105, p. 34).

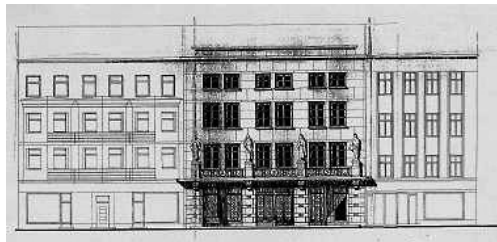




Figure 7b] Kaunas Academic Drama Theatre. Arch. Kazimieras Bučas, 1956 (photo by author, 2002).



Figure 8] Kaunas Railway Station. Arch. Piotr Ashastin, 1953 (photo by author, 2001).

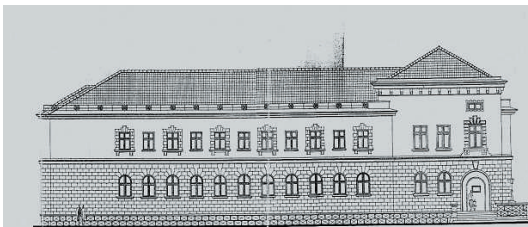


Figure 9] The project of Kaunas municipal baths for 200 people. Arch. Jonas Putna, 1953 (KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b. 10, p. 6).

Figure 10] Kaunas Hydroelectric Power Plant, administrative building. Arch. Benician Revzin, 1956 (KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b. 80, p. 2).

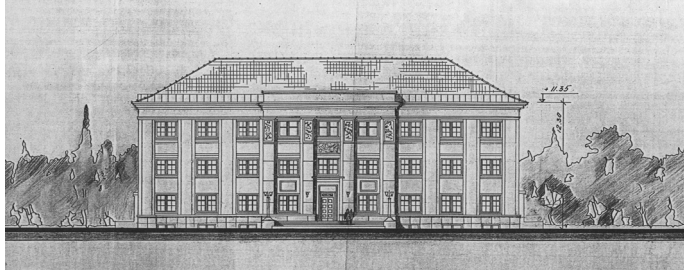


Figure 11] City Building Institute, Vilnius. Arch. Eduardas Chlomauskas, 1961 (Jankevičienė *et al.* 1989: 258).

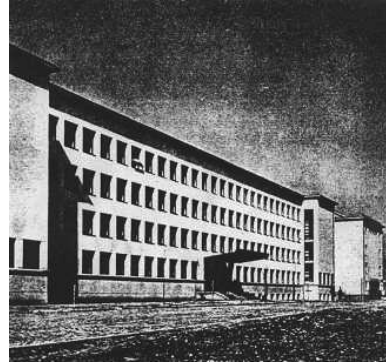


Figure 12] Baltija Hotel, Kaunas. Arch. Jonas Navakas and Janina Barkauskienė, 1965 (photo by author, 2002).

Figure 13] Baltija Hotel, interior, Kaunas. Arch. Bronislavas Zabulionis, 1965 (Putna 1965: 14).

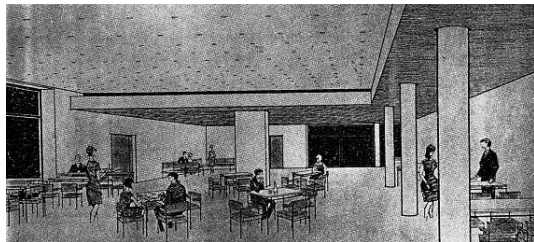




Figure 14a] Buitis furniture shop, Kaunas. Arch. Vytautas Dičius, 1969 (photo by author, 2002).



Figure 14b] Buitis furniture shop, Kaunas. Arch. Vytautas Dičius, 1969 (photo by author, 2002).

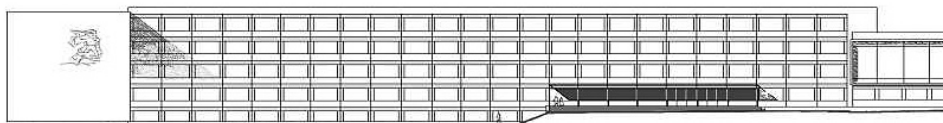


Figure 15] Kaunas Technological University, Faculty of Building. Arch. Vytautas Dičius, 1962 (KAA f. R-1702, ap. 2. b. 139, p. 49).





Figure 16] Institute of Industrial Design, Kaunas. Arch. Algimantas Sprindys, Vladas Stauskas, 1965 (from personal collection of the author).

Figure 17] Art Exhibition Palace, Vilnius. Arch. Vytautas Čekanauskas, 1965–1967 (photo by author, 2000).



## Linn ja ideoloogia: Nõukogude Kaunas 1945–1965

### Kokkuvõte

Nõukogude perioodi arhitektuuri seostatakse tavapäraselt poliitilis-ideoloogiliste ettekirjutustega. Artikli eesmärgiks ongi selgitada, kas seosed poliitilise ideoloogia ja arhitektuurilise arengu vahel eksisteerivad ning millised on nende avaldumisvormid. Sügavalt sotsiaalse nähtusena tuleks arhitektuuri käsitleda mitte ainult kui kunstiloo objekti, vaid laiemalt, kui kultuuriloo objekti. Kultuuriloolase positsioon võimaldab arhitektuurset vormianalüüsi ideoloogilisest vaatenurgast, lootuses leida nii vastust eeltoodud küsimustele.

Esmalt tuleks ideoloogiliste kaastähenduste idee kui tervik taandada üksikfaktideks ning mõjusfäärideks. Välja peab selgitama need arhitektuuri arengufaktorid, mida võib nimetada ideoloogilisteks. Artiklis on toodud rida tegureid, millest moodustub arhitektuuri arengut reguleeriv aparaat. Olulisimal kohal on maa riiklik omandivorm; vaba arhitektuuriprojektide konkurentsi puudumine; tsentraliseeritud plaanimajandus; esteetika-propaganda, aga ka aset leidnud muutused ehitiste funktsionaalses tüpoloogias. Need tunnused iseloomustavad nõukogude perioodi ning on kahtlemata mõjutanud ka meile nõukogude ajast pärandiks jäänud arhitektuuri struktuuri.

Artikli teiseks eesmärgiks on seadusandlik-poliitiliste tingimuste ning tegeliku arhitektuuri arengu eristamine. Riigi kultuurilis-poliitiline struktuur ei saa olla arengu ainsaks käivitavaks jõuks. Kaunase näide osutab, et teised traditsioonilised arhitektuuri arengut mõjustavad asjaolud, nagu *genius loci* või arhitekti enese loominguline potentsiaal on vahendid, mille abil oli võimalik vähendada poliitilis-ideoloogilist survet arhitektuurile. Kaunase sõjaeelse arhitektuurikoolkonna olemasolu tingis selle, et nõukogude monumentaal-arhitektuur sarnanes pigem maailmasõdade vahelisele kui stalinistlikule traditsioonile. Hiljem, nõukogude funktsionalismi õitseajal, võib näha Vilniuse tähelepanuväärse arhitektuuripärandi ning uue arhitektide koolkonna ühisvilju.

Niisiis tuleks nõukogude arhitektuuri vaadelda eeskätt arhitektuuri puudutavate otsuste lähema analüüsi kaudu, et paremini mõista riikliku arhitektuuri ja konkreetse koha rolle.