

Post-Socialist Urban Furniture



Fig. 1. Veteranu gatve, Visaginas (phot. Maximillian Koenig)

This text lays out some considerations regarding socialist urban furniture with a view to better understanding the context in which post-socialist urban furniture functions. The argument is that understanding this changed context is a key challenge in developing propositions for hacking urban furniture in the context of post-socialism.

Part 1. Socialist Urban Furniture

In his work on the Paris Arcades, Walter Benjamin analyses the city of the Restoration era as a new coming together of the bourgeoisie, state power, technology and construction materials under the aegis of the commodity.¹ This analysis is significant for the consideration of socialist urban furniture for two reasons. Firstly, the *Arcades Project* constitutes a sustained engagement with the material forms of the city: examining various details of the Paris built environment is essential to Benjamin's reconstruction of the deeper logic of the society that lived in it. Secondly, it is significant since, notwithstanding the historical and geographical specificity of various incarnations of socialist urbanism, the arcades, the epiphany of the modern transformation of the street into a display space for the commodity, appear to be what socialist urbanization most clearly opposes.²

¹ Walter Benjamin (1999) *The Arcades Project* (Camb. Mass: Harvard University Press)

² For debates on the socialist city, see: Gregory Andrusz; Michael Harloe, and Ivan Szelényi (eds.) (1996) *Cities After Socialism* (London: Blackwell).

In a sense, our job is easier than that of Benjamin piecing together various fragmented elements in what he calls “convolutes” to reconstruct the deeper logic of nineteenth century Paris. For, as in this example of this photo of a bench on Veteran (of World War 2) Street in Visaginas, the anti-bourgeois ideology of the socialist state was writ large in the forms of the street. And large generally is the operative word. The over-sized scale of this bench implies the joining of the individual not in intimate groups of conversation, but in a wider social collective (even if, as here, this would rather render communication impossible). This sense of over-scale, repeated in the wide boulevards for May Day or Victory Day processions, in giant arches or vast parade squares, is particularly evident in Stalinist era Soviet urbanism. However, it also remains a feature of later socialist urban plans such as this one from Visaginas, a town built to house the workers of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in north-east Lithuania in the 1970s.



Fig. 2 School Entrance, Minsk (author's photo)

The effect in encountering such elements in the city space was to emphasise the individual as a part of the collective. The effect of over-scale was to posit this relationship as quantitative rather than qualitative: the “I” as one of the many, and thus as a statistical unit within the socialist state. Such a feeling of the deference of the individual to collective institutions is manifested in the steps and over-effusive arch framing the entrance to a school in Minsk.



Fig. 3 Rytas Statue, Lazdynai, Vilnius (archive photo)

The primacy of the role of the socialist state meant that objects in the built environment were to be read both metaphorically as imbued with a political message and metonymically in their relation to the wider scheme of the given urban plan and, by extension, to the social whole. The Rytas (Morning) Statue erected to decorate a neighbourhood centre of Lazdynai, a prize-winning socialist modernist district built in the hills on the west side of Vilnius, illustrates both tendencies. Metonymically, the statue's position decorating a district sub-centre underlines the significance of this point as part of the wider plan of the district and, by extension, of the socialist state. Districts and cities were planned on a quantitative basis so that inhabitants had access to retail and social welfare institutions on a basis of numerically calculated equality of access. Thus, the local centre of welfare marked by the statue expresses the connection of this point, through a simple process of extension, to the rest of the social whole. Metaphorically, the sculpture is ideological and pedagogical: it expresses the leaping out of bed joy that inhabitants of this new socialist modernist sleeping district should feel on greeting the morning. On a further level, like the many statues of Lenin all gesturing towards Moscow or the future, it is also significant that the sculpture is in movement: it leaps with the dynamism of a society that is in process, that is working on the path of developing the ideal communist society.



Fig. 4 Linnahall, Tallinn (phot. Miodrag Kuč)

In her work on Russian novels, Katarina Clarke describes a paradoxical temporality also applicable to the socialist city. The socialist state was a work in progress: a state that prioritized the industrial labour necessary to construct the utopian space of leisure of a future communist society, the realization of which was constantly deferred to some mythical future.³ On the level of urban design, this sense of a work in progress was conveyed by the predilection for collective staircases, such as those on Linnahall in Tallinn. In the case of Linnahall, a huge sports venue and concert hall on the seafront built as part of Tallinn's hosting of the maritime events of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, the massive steps are combined with an epic scale and a walkway drawing you towards the building and leading along its flat roof. While the emphasis is on movement towards the space and the transition of moving up the steps, the steps and walkway do not actually lead anywhere, but rather symbolically, constitute an end in themselves. The steps and the horizontal walkway on top of the building provide the best public view out over the ships coming in and out of the port of Tallinn and are still actively used as an informal gathering space.

³ Katerina Clarke (1981) *The Soviet Novel. History as Ritual*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. It is interesting in the context of this text to note that this utopian future is generally depicted, as in the murals by the Oktyabrskaya metro station in Minsk, as a bucolic idyll of family picnics on a rug rather than in an urban scenario involving furniture.



Fig. 5 Courtyard Bench, Minsk (author's photo)

Thus, while it is possible to witness in socialist cities a rejection of the commercialized spaces of streets, it is important to consider that the communist city was also a never realized utopia. Socialist cities were founded on the primacy of industrial labour as the essential element in building the communist future. This awkward relation is indicated in the juxtaposition of a typical courtyard bench with a mosaic of an oil-refinery around a staircase entrance in Minsk. While socialist cities applied the zonal separation of spaces of work and those of leisure, this separation was predicated upon an unusual privileging of industrial labour, a labour which, in the case of Minsk, as in many other cities around Eastern Europe, was very much needed in the Soviet rebuilding of the destroyed city in the aftermath of the 2nd World War. Thus, while living quarters were centred around the relaxation space of the open-form courtyard, the separation of labour and rest was undermined by a given housing block often being assigned to workers of a particular firm, thus extending the relations of workplaces into the urban fabric outside the workplace. A place for (temporary?) rest is set against a backdrop of industry, while industry is also that which will make possible the communist utopia.



Fig. 6 Courtyard, Minsk (author's photo)

The focusing of furniture of relaxation around open courtyards in the vicinity of housing blocks provided a space of relaxation and social reproduction that was part-private, part-public, but that often literally seemed to turn its back on the notion of the street. This was a space that mixed domestic activities, a space for keeping an eye on children and apparatus for child-play, with often, as in this example from Minsk, rather explicit reminders of the subordination of such welfare to the wider social whole. However, this rejection of the street perhaps also played its part in interesting further evolutions in socialist urbanism. Maria Dremaitė pinpoints a turn in Soviet planning in the 70s that led to such places as Lazdynai or Visaginas emerging as spaces which achieve a highly successful privileging of pedestrian movement.⁴ The existence of open spaces between buildings and limited space for cars are among the assets of such urbanization, which in the changed context of today emerge principally as problems.

⁴ Indrė Ruseckaitė (2016) "Visaginas- A Zoo of Soviet Architecture? An Interview with Marija Drėmaitė" in Ackermann, Felix; Cope, Benjamin and Liubimau, Siarhei (eds) *Mapping Visaginas. Sources of Urbanity in a Former Mono-Functional Town* (Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla).

Part 2. Post-socialist Fate of Socialist Urban Furniture



Fig. 7 Neighbourhood Sub-centre Lazdynai (phot. Aiaksei Barysionak)

At the south neighbourhood sub-centre in Lazdynai, the wind-vane sculpture and accompanying fountain once promised the fresh air of a new, more modern socialist living district. Now, the wind-vane and fountain lie abandoned, while decorative elements of the landscape are focused on the Rimi supermarket that has taken over the site. There are three effects of this transformation. Firstly, the district sub-centre is now no longer primarily situated within the frame of the plan of the district, and thence to the wider social whole, but is now a consumption oriented node in global retail supply chains. Secondly, the public space no longer functions as a place for the community to congregate: its air of abandonment indicates the drop in the district's prestige and reinforces an alienation of the local population from the social changes currently underway. And finally, rather than pointing in the direction of a movement towards a communist future, this dilapidated public sculpture indicates that the wind has changed and what is now felt are the icy gusts of a painful past. The concrete that enabled the quick and cheap construction of districts that were the shining promise of a better future for collective habitation is now falling apart: the material itself seeming to reveal the frailty of the social system within which it was constructed.



Fig. 8 Abandoned Fountain, European Humanities University, Vilnius (phot. Alesia Kameisha)

As Owen Hatherley explores, these *Landscapes of Communism* form vast swathes of the environment of Eastern Europe and it is not easy to know how to address these “spectres of Marx.”⁵ On the one hand, it is important to consider that Soviet urbanism itself often involved the creative destruction of urban forms and the concomitant social relations that preceded it.⁶ In addition, in various contexts around Eastern Europe, Soviet urbanism was often perceived as, and indeed often enacted as, violent imperial repression rather than social equality. On the other hand, it is equally important not to overlook such features as kiosks, dachas and markets that throughout the socialist period remained thriving elements of urban lives – many of which still in one form or another function today – and that do not fit so comfortably into the main lines of socialist urbanism that I have briefly sketched out above. Thus, while the disappearance of the social whole framing socialist urban forms is the most traumatic transformation of the post-socialist period, a real and open question remains as to how watertight this frame was: how did inhabitants actually make use of socialist urban spaces,

⁵ Owen Hatherley (2015) *Landscapes of Communism* (London: Allen Lane). On this kind of literal interpretation of Jacques Derrida’s *Les Spectres de Marx* in relation to the built environment of Minsk, see Benjamin Cope (2014) “Marx Gespenster” in Artur Klinau (ed.) *Partisanen: Kultur Macht Belarus* (Berlin: fototapeta), available in Russian at <http://dironweb.com/klinamen/point11.html>.

⁶ Sheila Fitzpatrick (2015) “Almost Loveable”, *London Review of Books* 37(15), pp. 5-6.

for fun, for private ends or for uses not foreseen by the state?⁷ For example, while I lived in Minsk in the early 2000s, the foot of the Derzhinsky statue opposite the KGB building was a favourite space to congregate and drink beer, or as a friend in St. Petersburg put it: “In Russia the quantity of laws is only matched by the ability of the inhabitants to get round them.”

The abandoned fountain in front of our university illustrates some of these issues. The building on the edge of Vilnius inhabited by the European Humanities University, a small Belarusian university in political exile in Lithuania, is that of the former militia academy. Since we moved there in 2006, the fountain has remained derelict and is accompanied by a no-smoking sign. However, the spot continues to function even in the midst of winter as the most popular place for informal meetings, - and smoking. Despite 10 years of a new university’s presence on this site, it has not been possible to bring any physical improvement to this object standing at the university’s entrance. And, despite this, it is actively used, principally for the activity that is explicitly forbidden there.



Fig 9. Lady on Bench, Minsk (phot. G. Stasevich)

⁷ For more on the everyday life of Soviet cities, see David Crowley and Susan Reid (eds) (2002) *Socialist Spaces. Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Block* (Oxford and New York: Berg) and Lewis Siegelbaum (ed.) (2006) *Borders of Socialism. Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

The strategies of how to bring change to urban furniture in the wake of socialism seem problematic. Official post-socialist furniture tendencies reject socialist heritage by focusing on a kitsch, playful, half-fairy tale, slightly erotic (slightly childish) world of decorative pre-war bourgeois urbanity, such as this statue from a square in Minsk. In addition to this tendency in sculpture/furniture design, we can also witness an EU led creation of new smooth paving areas with greater accessibility for the disabled, elderly, etc., at the same time as overall car use in post-socialist cities greatly increases, shopping malls take over as quasi-public spaces and the design of spaces itself becomes part of a gradation of different parts of towns into winners and losers.⁸ This dislocation between citizens and spaces is reinforced by the arrival of global players providing bus shelters and advertising.

An interesting counter-tendency to be witnessed is project initiatives by urban activists to engage very local communities, such as that of one courtyard or school, to engage in a process of participatory planning: often of new playgrounds for children. These interesting experiments, mostly made possible by international, short-term grant funding, see the experiential journey of local spatial planning as a tool both for enlivening public spaces and community building at a local level. Such projects also resonate in some initiatives by individual inhabitants, who seek to recycle soviet era infrastructure by, for example, creating small garden areas near to block housing. In the post-socialist political context, the question of how this socio-spatial acupuncture can be spread more widely to urban or national levels in a context of changing forms of governance and planning remains an imposing question.

⁸ For an investigation of changing modes of accessibility in the context of Lazdynai, see Tomáš Samec and Aliaksandra Smirnova (2016) "Reframing Accessibility: Mapping Physical, Informational and Symbolic Access to Public Space in Lazdynai" in Ackermann, Felix; Cope, Benjamin and Kuč Miodrag (eds) *Mapping Vilnius: Transitions of Post-Socialist Spaces* (Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla).

Conclusion



Fig. 10 Steps in Lazdynai (phot. Aiaksei Barysionak)

The task of hacking urban furniture in the post-socialist context is especially problematic as hacking implies working against, or to break, an overarching context or code. In the post-socialist context, this code already cracked. The socialist state provided the frame in which the urban environment made sense, and in which it was no doubt hacked by many inhabitants. This frame collapsed. The scars left in the urban environment are those of how to deal with this failed promise of the collective past and bear witness to the difficulties of building communities after socialism, at a time when external economic, political and technological changes have an extensive impact on how spaces are formed. The grand steps of socialism now mostly seem out of proportion and out of sense: where are they leading? In addition, ageing populations and the deterioration of the materials from which they are constructed, as in the case of this overgrown stairway in Lazdynai, make these former assets emblematic of the problems of today's post-socialist urban environments. The challenge of hacking here, therefore, is intense. How can the question of urban furniture be posed to instigate new modes of gathering communities given the specific dynamics of the post-socialist context?