Marija Drėmaitė
Vilnius University

Artists' Dwellings in Soviet Lithuania as an Architectural Expression of Privileged Creative Classes

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The social stratification of society is usually defined by income and profession, but social rank in the Soviet Union was guaranteed rather by power and privilege. The socialist 'market', as a politically regulated field of social relations, is the sociologist's guide to study of the various social groups and the elite in the supposedly classless Soviet society.[1] Three types of housing tenure existed in the Soviet Union: state-owned (whether communal or associated with a particular state agency), private, and co-operative. However, each group held a huge variety of types of housing and amenities. Within the state-owned group, for example, types of apartments ranged from the houses of the Communist Party's elite, privileged nomenclatura to the apartments in standard, large panel-built blocks, which were provided to the masses for free, after a wait in line. In the 1960s a new group emerged: owners of cooperative flats. They were privileged to use their own income to acquire flats of better quality, usually without waiting in line. Thus, in the context of the standardization and industrialization of housing in the USSR as of 1956, the class structure looks completely different when viewed through the lens of housing consumption.

Among the various dwelling forms in late Soviet society, the housing of artists in particular invites study. The greatest range of privileges in

[1] E. Lankots, Classes in a Classless Society: The Elite Housing Model in the Estonian SSR and Apartment Buildings in Tallinn for the Communist Nomenklatura 1945–1955, Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi [Studies on Art and Architecture], 2004, no. 13, p. 11–41.

terms of non-traditional and non-standard apartment design was enjoyed by members of the academic and artistic elites, who benefitted from the exclusion of artistic studios or offices from calculations of overall living space.[2] As early as 1953, artists and sculptors were permitted to include art studios adjacent to residential apartments in newly designed housing projects in Vilnius and Kaunas.[3] In later years, members of other artistic organizations were also allowed to apply for larger living space arrangements, justified by the need for a creative studio or study room. After 1962, members of such organizations could form housing co-operatives and had the right to apply for land plots on which to construct a house or group of houses, and to request permits for custom-designed plans based on the special-purpose designation of such buildings. Needless to say, architects supported such arrangements, which were almost the only field where they could practice non-standard housing approaches. As socialism progressed, creative organizations seized the possibility of building cooperative flats with studios, which meant highly desired extra space. Individually designed cooperative flats and multi-flat houses were made possible by the rather privileged position of creative organizations in Soviet society.

The Composers' Village as a Pioneer of the Creative Approach to Housing

Artistic unions in the Soviet Union were established primarily as a means of ideological indoctrination and control, but they also functioned as trade unions that promoted better domestic and creative conditions for their members. Most artists and creative professionals were not em-

[2] Regulations approved in 1955, known as the Construction Norms and Rules (*Stroitelnie normy i pravila*, or SNiP), served for years as a means to control residential housing planners. In the period from 1955 to 1991, the SNiP rules dealing with mass housing were thoroughly revised only four times – in 1957, 1962, 1971 and 1985. One resident was to be allocated 9 m^2 of living space, with most buildings made up of 1–4 room units, the 2-room unit being the most popular. The average residential unit floor space was approximately 35.9 square metres, and the limit was set at 60 square metres.

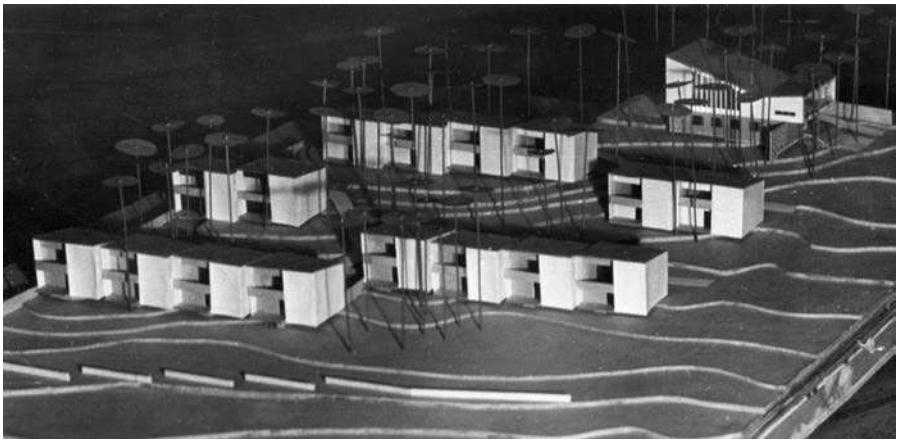
[3] Lithuanian SSR Council of Ministers 1953 04 07 decision No. 428-p 'Regarding designs of creative studios for artists and sculptors'.

ployed in government agencies but instead earned their living from fees paid for commissioned work. Thus the leadership of the various artistic unions concerned itself with such matters as publishing and the provision of artistic workspaces, and quite often with ensuring leisure time and housing for members. Writers, considered the most important artistic group in the Soviet Union and known as 'engineers of the human soul' had enjoyed considerable privileges since the early days of the socialist revolution, particularly during the Stalinist period. The first apartment house built especially for those working in the creative arts was the Writers' House in Vilnius, completed in 1958. The building was a spacious, four-storey brick structure with 28 apartment units (ranging from 3 to 5 rooms), constructed adjacent to the Lithuanian Language and Literature Institute.

Composers were less privileged and went without union premises or special dwellings until 1966. Julius Juzeliūnas, then the vice-chairman of the Composers' Union, proposed a comprehensive solution to the issues facing the union and its members, namely the construction of an administrative building for rehearsals and organizational affairs, with an adjacent complex of residence cottages for renowned composers. The project is of interest primarily from a social perspective, as a uniquely designed agency campus, but also as a modern architectural solution in pursuit of a harmonious combination of environment, composition and materials.

The Composers' Village in Vilnius was a unique event in the history of housing construction in the Soviet Union. Through their connections to the Communist Party's Central Committee and the Vilnius Executive Committee (equivalent to a municipality), Juzeliūnas and his colleagues managed to acquire an empty plot of land by the Neris River in 1958 and get approval for a custom design from the senior city architect (architect Ignas Laurušas, senior artist of the Executive Committee and a brother of composer Vytautas Laurušas, an influential member of the Composers' Union, helped to secure the land plot).[4] Juzeliūnas also succeeded in securing initial funding from the All-Union Music Foundation,

[4] Author's interview with architect Vytautas Brėdikis, Vilnius, 13 October 2011.



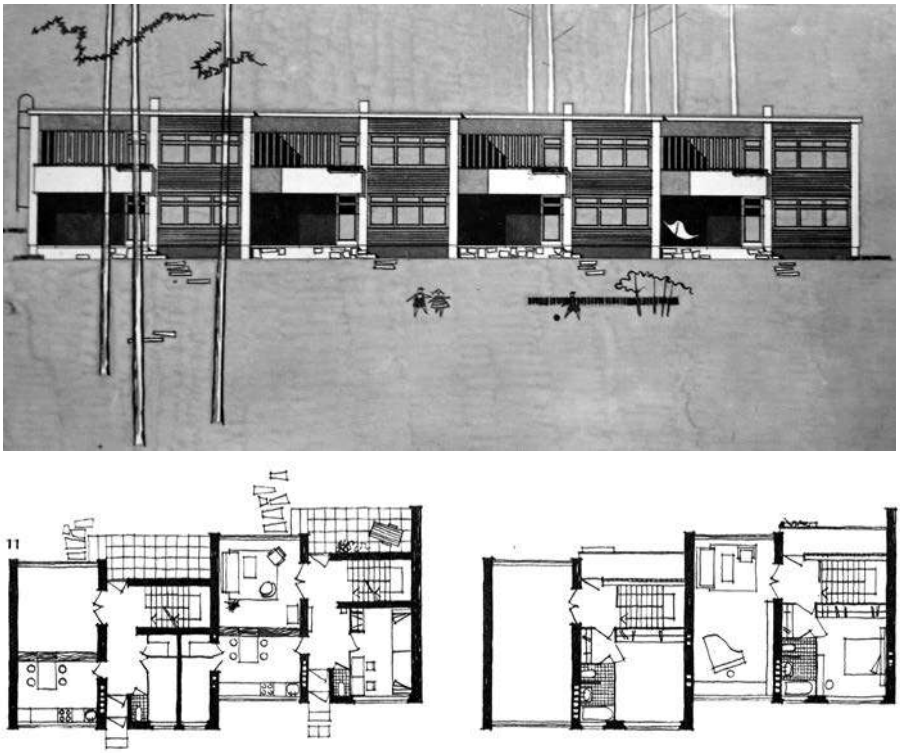
1. Model of Composers' Union Village. 1965

which oversaw all the composers' unions in the Soviet republics.[5] Once final approval was obtained, the Urban Construction Design Institute announced an in-house competition in 1959 to design sixteen single-unit houses and a concert hall building. The winners were the young architects Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas and Vytautas Brėdikis, who developed a low-rise group of buildings, thus preserving the surrounding historic area by preventing the intrusion of a standard five-floor building.[6] (fig. 1)

Čekanauskas recalls that whereas the main idea of constructing single-flat block homes with apartment units extending over two floors was part of the initial concept, it was only after a trip to Finland in 1959 that he decided to use the predominantly traditional, natural, locally available building materials (red brick, rough plaster and timber) and incorporate the buildings into the natural landscape, preserving surrounding

[5] A. Ambrazas, *Julius Juzeliūnas: gyvenimo ir veiklos panorama, kūrybos įžvalgos* [Julius Juzeliūnas: Overview of His Life, Activity, and Creativity], Vilnius, 2015, p. 109–110.

[6] Lithuanian SSR Composers' Union houses and concert hall in Vilnius, design, 1960, Vilnius County Archives, f. 1036, ap. 11, b. 228, l. 2.



2, 3. Design of the four-apartment duplex house and the apartments. 1965

pine trees.[7] The architecture of the complex has much in common with the houses in the Helsinki suburb of Tapiola, for example those on Konti Street designed by Kaija and Heikki Siren in 1955. Like the buildings in Finland, the composers' flats in the Vilnius suburb of Žvėrynas were efficient, simply furnished, and functional. The complex included two types of apartments: three-room (totalling 55 m² of living space) and four-room units (66 m²). Each unit had a kitchen with an adjacent pantry, a living room, one or two bedrooms, a den, two bathrooms (one with a bath), and a spacious balcony and terrace. Balconies looked out on the forested banks of the Neris River. The dividing wall between kitchen and living

[7] Author's interview with architect Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas, Vilnius, 11 December 2006.

4. Julius Juzeliūnas' home studio (designed by Vytautas Čekanauskas) as showcased in the Czech design magazine *Domov,* 1968, no. 2

room was a uniquely designed partition and shelving unit with a window open in the middle to allow food to be passed from the kitchen to the living room. (figs. 2, 3)

Though Čekanauskas was not permitted to exceed the 60-square-metre living area limit, he did devise different ways to utilize that space. He designed a rather large cellar that could be used for different purposes according to the needs of each family. Juzeliūnas helped secure permits for solutions that pushed at the boundaries of existing restrictions. The creative partnership between Čekanauskas and Juzeliūnas continued, with the former designing a minimalist home office interior for Juzeliūnas, accented by wooden bookshelves running the entire length of one wall. Local Lithuanian media covered the architecture of the Composers' Village, and the entire complex, including the interior of Juzeliūnas's apartment, was showcased in the prestigious Czech design magazine *Domov* (1968, No. 2). (fig. 4) The individualism and innovative planning in the design

of the Composers' Village, including the incorporation of outside decks beside each house, clearly spoke to the superior quality of the new housing development.

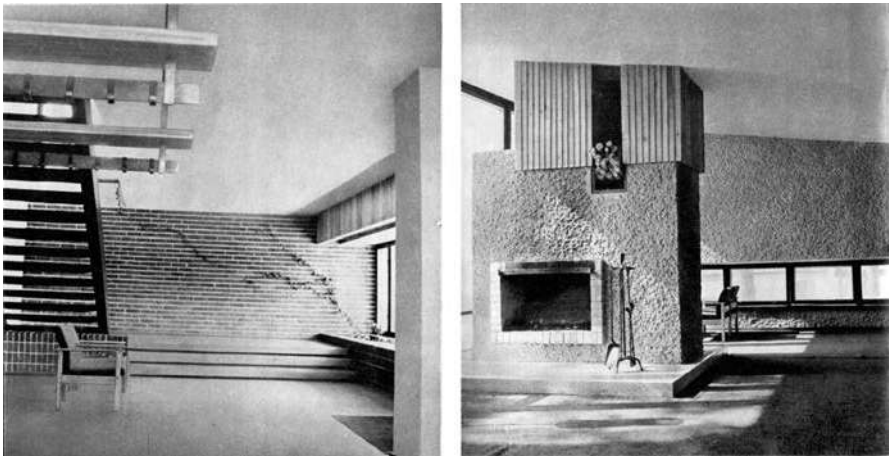
The Composers' Union building, completed in 1966, also featured unique and original design solutions, showcasing the special sensibility of, and thorough representation of, Čekanauskas' fondness for Finnish architecture, particularly the work of Alvar Aalto. The building's exterior silhouette is distinguished by a stylish element of 1940s international modernism: an inward-sloping concrete roof (also known as a 'butterfly roof'), with walls finished in an array of natural materials such as wood, red brick and a combination of decorative plaster and glass. Terraces with low-rising stone walls enhance the surrounding landscape. (figs. 5, 6)

Facilities within the small building are cleverly arranged: administrative offices and one apartment take up the first floor, while the second floor, featuring a large open reception room, an equipment room and a hall, is set aside for public events. The interior displays a wealth of motifs characteristic of Finnish regionalism: narrow, vertical shelving, a wall of unfinished red brick extending into the interior space from the outside, a wide staircase without railings, a monumental stone fireplace, and large windows joining interior and exterior spaces on both the first and second floors. (fig. 7) The ceiling of the main hall, finished with undulating wooden sheets, is nearly identical to Aalto's Viipuri (Vyborg) Library lecture hall, completed in 1935, where considerable attention was also focused on the room's acoustic properties. The modern globe-shaped light fixtures, meanwhile, were modelled after the casing of the Saturnas vacuum cleaner manufactured at the Vilnius Electric Welding Factory. Other details likewise testified to the architect's eye for the building's interior design: 'I loved the Composers' Union building very much. I even brought in my wife's cactuses, to suit the style. I bought a large flower from the coat check woman at the Design Institute, brought it over, and hung it [at the Union building.]'[8]

[8] Author's interview with architect Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas, Vilnius, 11 December 2006.

5. Composers' Union concert hall. 1960. Drawing by Vytautas Čekanauskas

6. Composers' Union concert hall and houses. 1968



7. Modernist and open interiors of the Composers' Union concert hall as showcased in the Czech design magazine *Domov*, 1968, no. 2

The Composers' Union Village, designed and built between 1959 and 1966, integrated the emotional and social features of modern Scandinavian architecture, evidenced by the functional planning of interiors and creation of unique residential spaces. These factors were clearly shaped by direct exposure to Finnish architecture, but it should also be noted that the informal relationships that helped ensure the realization of original concepts was also crucial. The incorporation of such structures into their natural surroundings and the modernist use of local materials came to be regarded as an expression of a unique Lithuanian national architecture. The complex became renowned throughout the Soviet Union for its unique typology and integrated architectural expression.

Artists' Private Houses

Isolated examples of custom-designed single-family homes were also built for members of the cultural elite in this period. Building a private house with a studio was a traditional aspiration of the artist of the time. In the post-war Soviet Union individuals were allowed to build private housing. After they got building plans approved and obtained credit to finance construction, they would be assigned a plot of land. But by 1958 industrialized

mass construction had begun, and single-family home construction was declared an ineffecient use of urban land and prohibited in large cities in 1958. Allocation of land plots ended that same year in Vilnius and Kaunas, and from 1975 onward in Klaipėda and the resort cities of Palanga, Druskininkai, Neringa and Birštonas of the Lithuanian SSR. The size of single-family homes was strictly regulated and limited to 60 square metres of living space. Over time, the private housing sector lost significance as it was largely replaced by mass housing, except in rural areas, where it continued to be the predominant residential option. One could say that in Soviet Lithuania, private home construction was permitted but not encouraged.

Some upper-echelon artists managed to obtain plots of land for such homes before the practice was prohibited in 1958. In 1956, for example, the composer and conductor Antanas Budriūnas built a modest, traditional single-family home in Antakalnis based on designs by Eduardas Budreika that in composition and expression resembled the traditional pre-war urban villas. (fig. 8) Additional space allocated for studios and workshops

8. Private home of Antanas Budriūnas (architect Eduardas Budreika, 1956) in Vilnius

9. Laimutė and Juozas Burneika's house and studio in Vilnius. 1959

allowed architects and artists to construct single-family homes of more interesting custom design. In 1959, architect Laimutė Bergaitė-Burneikienė and her husband Juozas Burneika, a sculptor, built an exclusively modernist Le Corbusier–style family home and workshop. The two-storey building had a ground storey finished in unpolished granite, while the upper storey was plastered in a contrasting white. The ground floor, with plenty of glass on the south side, opened onto a sloping backyard and swimming pool. The architect designed her own home with obvious references to Le Corbusier: the house featured open connecting spaces, ribbon windows and minimalist interiors, and was situated in close proximity to natural surroundings. It also contained Juozas Burneika's atelier. (fig. 9)

Jonas Kuzminskis, chairman of the Soviet Lithuanian Artists' Union, was given permission to build his own home and studio in 1961. The resulting compact, modern six-room house was situated on land that was later covered with high-rise apartment buildings. It is noteworthy that in Lithuanian cities architects themselves did not have the opportunity to build their own homes. Instead, they were offered a different kind of

privilege: the chance to obtain an apartment in the multi-unit buildings they were already designing. Several renowned architects established themselves in certain experimental apartments with improved layouts, but most had apartments in standard mass housing projects.

Cooperative Housing for Artists

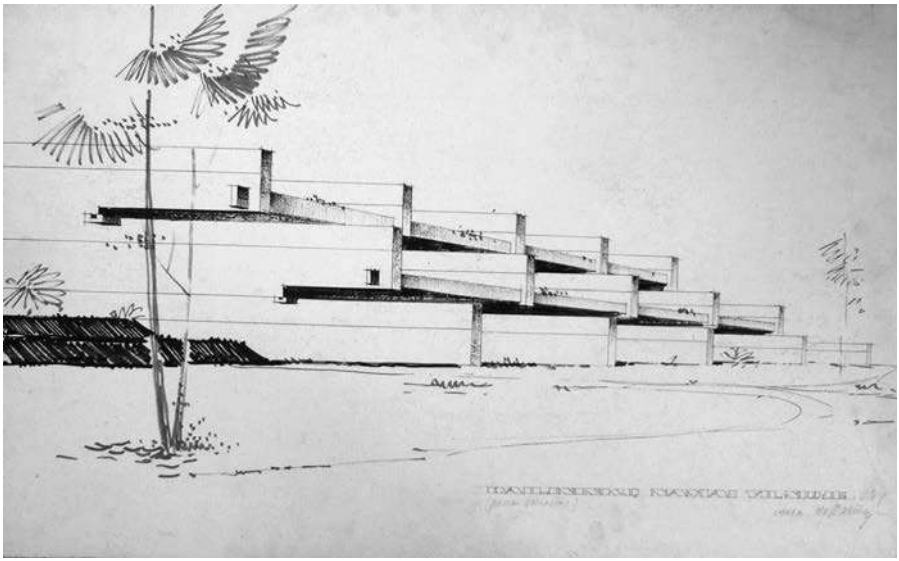
As socialism progressed, artistic trade unions turned the possibility of building cooperative flats with studios to advantage in the form of highly desired extra space. True to their name, artistic and cultural workers, together with architects, showed much more creativity than the Communist Party elite or the technical community. Their projects resulted in such highly improbable Soviet urban housing schemes as semi-detached houses of two or three floors with separate entrances, fireplaces and halls.

The prohibition of single-family home construction in the 1960s helped spark a revival in co-operative housing. Co-operative apartment arrangements meant that residents contributed their own funds to housing construction, thereby shortening their time on the waiting list and getting the chance to build an apartment larger than what may have been allocated to them according to regulations. Co-operatives operated simply: a group of households shared the cost of the down payment for an apartment block and took out state credits for the remaining 60 to 70 per cent, repayable over ten to twenty years at an interest rate of 0.5 per cent.[9] Such an apartment was seen as an indicator of material success.

In 1967, thirty artists, sculptors and designers formed a housing co-operative under the name Menas (Art) and organized the construction of artists' workshops with adjoining flats. The group managed to secure a land plot near a wooded area and a permit for a custom design by the architect Algimantas Mačiulis. Interestingly, artists received the narrow northern plot, while the southern plot across the street was reserved for housing the *nomenklatura*.[10]

[9] Lithuanian Communist Party Central Committee and Council of Ministers 1962 09 10 decision no. 592, 'Regarding Individual and Cooperative Housing Construction'.

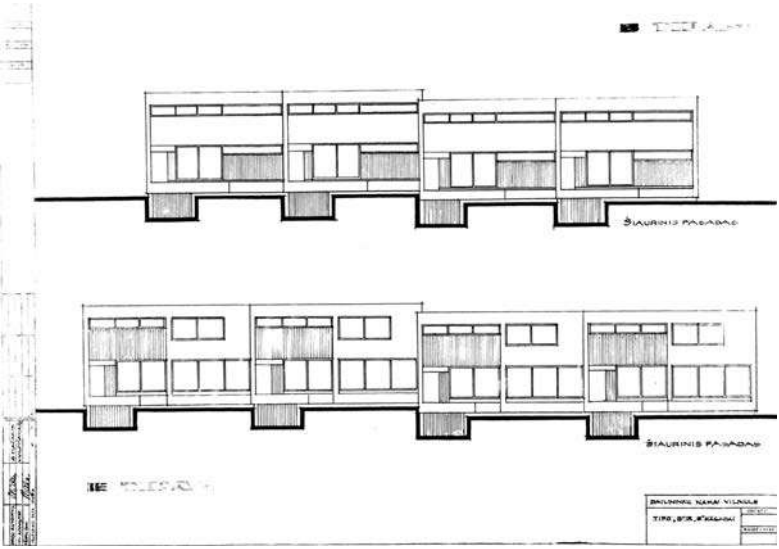
[10] Author's interview with architect Algimantas Mačiulis, Vilnius, 26 April 2016.



10. Algimantas Mačiulis. The first version of the design for Artists' housing cooperative. 1968

In the first version of the project, Mačiulis designed thirty semi-detached houses arranged in a row.[11] (fig. 10) The designs clearly drew inspiration from the Sunila residential area designed by Alvar Aalto in Finland. All the Lithuanian cottages had three floors and were available in three versions: a three-room unit with a studio (82 m²), or a four-room unit including either a small or a large studio (89.5 or 96 m²). Because it exceeded the limit of 60 square metres, however, the proposal was never approved. Mačiulis recalls that the project had to be revised in consultation with the Lithuanian Communist Party Central Committee. Some of the co-operative's members even visited the renowned Lithuanian poet and national Lenin Prize laureate Eduardas Mieželaitis at his home to plead the artists' case and request governmental permission to allow

[11] Design for Artists' housing cooperative, 1968, Vilnius County Archives, ATD–1127.



11. Approved design of the Artists' houses. 1968

larger, non-standard apartment units.[12] At the time, Mieželaitis was an influential member of the Central Committee, a delegate to the USSR Supreme Soviet (parliament), and also the chairman of the Lithuanian Writers' Union. In important official negotiations, though, not even such a 'voice for cultural workers' could change the government's decision. Orders were issued to limit apartment units to 60 m² of living space and an adjoining studio. The final version of the complex featured twenty-eight block cottages divided into several groups. A single home consisted of 56 m² of living space (four rooms distributed over the first and second floors), a 30 m² studio with a fireplace, and a kitchen, storeroom and garage on the ground floor. The southern face of each home had its own separate open yard, seemingly extending the studio workspace into the outdoors. (figs. 11, 12, 13)

[12] Algimantas Mačiulis, Permainingi metai. Architekto užrašai [Turbulent Years. An Architect's Notes], Vilnius, 2008, p. 225.

12, 13. Artists' housing cooperative in Vilnius. Post-construction photos. 1975

14. Housing co-operative for architects, Kaunas. 1985

Artistic organisationizations were also observed taking ever bolder approaches in other Lithuanian cities in the late modernist period. In the early 1980s, the young architect Algirdas Kaušpėdas founded a housing co-operative for architects and designed a postmodernist complex of twenty-four cottages in Kaunas. The project was truly revitalizing for Kaunas in 1985, as it produced not only a new building but a new lifestyle as well. (fig. 14) 'It was an absolutely fantastic project, completely unthinkable for those times', Kaušpėdas remembers:

> I devoted my entire soul to make this happen. But many around me kept saying that it was a utopian vision and that everything would come to an end once someone eventually complained about it and had it shut down. Maybe we were lucky, or perhaps our smart strategy helped. We got nine architects to form a co-operative and invited several influence partners to join, including from the Kaunas Housing Construction Factory. We also took advantage of my father's connections, since he was already a fairly high-ranking official, the head of the Building Trust. He had a friend from the Planning Committee who was in

> charge of economic affairs. And we also recruited the son of a high-ranking official of the Building Committee. In other words, we engaged in bureaucratic lobbying from all sides. And we succeeded. Until then, we architects had been living in dormitories. Moving from a dormitory to a four-bedroom cottage was something else. It was quite an event! So, ironically, I can't complain about the Soviet system.[13]

Apartments like these, with living space distributed over two floors, were still unusual in the Soviet Union, and their construction was evidence of increasing liberalization and the growing search for Western quality in residential housing.

Conclusion

Any answer to the question of how these unique, modern artistic residential complexes could have emerged at the height of Soviet mass residential housing construction should take into account several aspects of Soviet life: the rather privileged position creative organizations enjoyed within the Soviet system; informal relationships fostered between artists and the cultural as well as Party elite that facilitated the adoption of non-standard approaches; and finally, the existence of the modernist element, a unique kind of momentum that by the late 1950s was encouraging the creative elite to liberate themselves from Soviet standardization. It also goes without saying that external circumstances alone were insufficient to produce such housing – without the contribution of creative personalities, bold solutions would never have materialized. The results clearly reflected the social advancement of artists as a group. Though the search for architectural uniqueness was important, co-operative housing's social aspect was paramount, since residents placed the most value on a good community and neighbourhood – that is, they avoided strangers in their housing co-operative and emphasized people over architecture.

[13] Waiting for a New Rebellion, Algirdas Kaušpėdas interviewed by Marija Drėmaitė, in *Subversive Opportunism*, ed. by M. Drėmaitė, V. Šiaulytė, Vilnius, 2014, http://www.archfondas.lt/leidiniu/en/alf-04/waiting-new-rebellion-algirdas-kauspedas-interviewed-marija-dremaite (09.02.2017) .

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Marija Drėmaitė

Menininkų būstai sovietinėje Lietuvoje kaip kūrybinio elito architektūrinė privilegija

Santrauka

Vėlyvajame sovietiniame laikotarpyje įvairėjančios būsto formos skatina atkreipti dėmesį į menininkų būstų įvairovę gyvenamosios erdvės standartizavimo kontekste, kaip į kūrybinio elito privilegiją. Kadangi menininkai galėjo pretenduoti į papildomą būsto plotą (motyvuotą kūrybinės studijos poreikiu), tai lėmė nestandartines gyvenamąsias ir kūrybines erdves, kurios išsiskyrė kasdienio apgyvendinimo aplinkoje. Nuo 1962 m., kaip visoje Sovietų sąjungoje buvo atnaujinta kooperatinių butų statybos galimybė, kūrybinės organizacijos taip pat turėjo galimybę burtis į būsto kooperatyvus ir inicijuoti statybas. Būtent kūrybinių studijų privilegija sudarė sąlygas projektuoti namus ir butus pagal individualius projektus (skirtingai nuo masinių standartizuotų projektų), pasižyminčius architektūriniu išskirtinumu bei nestandartiniais būstais. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojami du atvejai: Kompozitorių kotedžų gyvenvietė su perklausų sale Vilniuje, Žvėryne (architektas Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas, 1960–1966) ir Dailininkų sąjungos kooperatyvo „Menas“ sublokuotų namų kvartalas Vilniuje, Antakalnyje (architektas Algimantas Mačiulis, 1967–1970), kurie gyvenamosios erdvės standartizavimo kontekste yra išskirtiniai savo socialine ir architektūrine prigimtimi. Kiti, smulkesni atvejai taip pat aptariami, išryškinant kūrybinio elito architektūrines ir socialines privilegijas gyvenamosios erdvės atžvilgiu.