

Rachel Gyórfy

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest

Towards A Potemkin-City

A Critical Investigation of the Architectural Reconstructivist Trend in Central and Eastern Europe

Le Corbusiers envisioned the *Ville Radieuse*, Jacques Tati created *Tativille* outside of Paris, to have an ideal backdrop and filming location for his movies and the enthusiasm towards unchallenged technical development of the 1960s created the *Autogerechte Stadt*, the Car-Friendly City, which appeared to be an even bigger urbanistic failure than the separation of the four functions of dwelling, work, recreation and transport.

All of the above mentioned projects envisioned a collective future, a *mass utopia*¹, as Susan Buck-Morss calls it, which, arguably, has failed in both East and West. What currently is being created in Central and Eastern Europe (Berlin, Budapest, Skopje) is the *Potemkin-City*, the facadist town of scenery-like, retrograde architecture of hard to define neo-styles, established on the grounds of resentment towards late modernist architecture and underpinned by the demands of tourism with a total lack of recognition for the results of over-tourism and dissolution of social diversity in the city. The German architect's newspaper *Baunetzwoche* dedicated an issue to the North-Macedonian town of Skopje, where the results of such developments are already visible², but Berlin and especially Budapest are as well en route to the Potemkin-City. Regarded through the lens of another *en vogue* urbanistic trend, that of the smart city or big data driven planning, *reconstructivism*³ could even be seen as a kind of augmented reality⁴.

My dissertation is investigating reconstructivism under the aspects of nostalgia (reconstructivism and iconoclasm), tourism (tourism and the loss of porosity in the city) and the non-existent aesthetics of ugliness⁵ by comparing examples in Berlin, Budapest and Skopje.

¹ Buck-Morss, Susan: *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West.*, MIT Press, 2002

² *Baunetzwoche* Nr. 520, 27th September 2018.,

https://www.baunetz.de/baunetzwoche/baunetzwoche_ausgabe_5503673.html

³ I use the term of *reconstructivism* as established in the German magazine *Arch+* Nr. 204, *Krise der Repräsentation*, October 2011. The alternative term of *neo-historism* is also being used, but I prefer the firstly mentioned, because - although obviously having nothing to do with the Russian avantgarde movement of *constructivism* - it underlines the re-establishing, re-buildig character of this trend, whereas the latter implies the movement being question of style.

⁴ Hungarian architect and researcher in architectural theory, Samu Szemerey makes this remark in his online-article: <https://litera.hu/irodalom/netnaplo/az-anyag-akarasa.html>, last accessed: 29th August 2020

⁵ "Aesthetics cannot deal with ugliness, save as a negation and as a moment of beauty. Aesthetics is the theoretical knowledge of beauty and the subject's relation to beauty and it therefore follows that there cannot be an aesthetics of

A collective nostalgia towards a never-existing, idealized past seems to be heavily hanging over Central- and Eastern Europe in the recent years, both in the countries that were behind the Iron Curtain, as well as in Ex-West-Germany. My research hypothesis is, that the (late) modernist built heritage is regarded as *ugly* by wide parts of these societies, because of deeply rooted, unresolved collective traumas⁶ with the past, that manifest themselves connected to or resulting in a feeling of nostalgia for pre-modernistic years, times when the image of the city was undamaged and unfragmented. The cause of the non-acceptance of late modernist architecture by vast parts of society can not only be explained by the – disputed – failed utopia of modernity, but is rooted in the unresolved traumas with the past such as the elimination of the traditional city centers in Germany or the connotation with the Socialist regime in Eastern Europe. Most of these buildings are rejected by society and not even regarded as architectural heritage or built heritage worthy of protection and the buildings are regarded as being *ugly*, which is an aesthetic judgement. We argue that, psychologically, this aesthetic judgment is actually a projection of the feelings of society towards their own undisputed and unprocessed and therefore unresolved past.

Late modernist built heritage is bereft it's potential of adaptive re-use and is taken out of the fabric of Central- and Eastern European cities because the formal language of the buildings is connotated with the socialist past (that is the case is in countries of the USSR), their erection is often connotated or a direct result of the demolition of neo-historistic buildings, that were the representation of the bourgeois society of the past, and the abrupt, radical and painful loss of the built environment is closely connected to the traumas of the two World Wars⁷. As a result, reconstructivism should not only be regarded as a kind of neo-historicism, as can not only be understood as new eclecticism within architecture, or an arbitrary usage of the forms of architectural vocabulary: reconstructivism is the contrary of 'random', it is the last to be recalled architectural image of a still intact world. At least, as seen through the haziness of nostalgia⁸.

ugliness. (...) The judgement 'This is beautiful' does not have an opposite." Cousins, Mark: *The Ugly*, AA Files, Autumn 1994, No. 28. p. 62

⁶ "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.", Alexander, Jeffrey C.: *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*. In: Alexander, J. C.: *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*., as cited by: Fraisl, Bettina (Hrsg.) - Stromberger, Monika (Hrsg.): *Stadt und Trauma: Annäherungen - Konzepte - Analysen*., Königshausen und Neumann; 1. Edition, Würzburg, 2004, p. 36.

⁷ "The menace of physical destruction by war has since been buried deep in the collective psyche of the city and its inhabitants.", *Ibid.* p. 69

⁸ "The urban renewal taking place in the present is no longer futuristic but nostalgic; the city imagines its future by improvising in its past.", Boym, Svetlana: *The Future of Nostalgia*., Ingram Publisher Services Us, New York, 2002., p.75

This Faux-Utopia, established on the grounds of unresolved collective traumas, is the *Kulissenarchitektur*, the scenery-architecture of the Potemkin-City, whereby on the time-axis, the future lies already behind us.