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Art into Everyday Life



The exhibition *Art into Everyday Life* was commissioned by the Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, in 2006. It presented a series of paintings and tufted wool carpets in which moments from the history of modernism are both juxtaposed and intertwined: Lithuanian Soviet-era architecture and the fabric and wallpaper designs of the nineteenth-century English designer William Morris. They are worked together in *Art into Everyday Life* to form dialectical montages, where ‘third meanings’, abstractions resulting from simultaneous fusions and juxtapositions of the separate representations, are produced.

Lithuania

The exhibition is named after a movement that occurred during the Kruschev thaw known as Art into Everyday Life. After Stalin's death, the Soviet authorities relaxed their control of art and design. Artists were given the opportunity to collaborate with textile, carpet, glass and ceramic factories, as well as organizations such as publishers, to create one-offs or designs for their product ranges. The resulting objects departed from official Socialist Realism, in which Soviet heroes and boys on tractors were the staple ingredient, and looked to local traditional or international modernist influences such as the English Festival Style. Architects were also able to look around for influences from Scandinavia and the rest of Europe. Many of the buildings constructed at this time are light and airy, and incorporate some of the best elements of International Modernism. They can be considered as much a part of the history of modernity as the earlier modernist buildings photographed by Richard Pare (2007) and discussed in David Cunningham's Afterword to this book.

Because many of the buildings from this era remain associated with the Soviet occupation, they have been threatened with destruction through redevelopment. The artists Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas from Pro-test Lab, an organization that campaigned to save Vilnius's Lietuva Cinema, describe the processes behind the redevelopment of buildings from the Soviet period:

Since independence in 1991 Lithuania has been caught in an insane period of privatization, property development and demolition. Like a Wild West land-grab or a gold rush, speculators and real estate tycoons have joined forces with corrupt municipal bureaucrats to redevelop the country at a mad pace. Profit has been their only motive. Public space, landmark buildings, cultural life, and public opinion have been the principal victims. Their method is simple: tell the population that economic development is good for everyone. Convince them that Capital is King. Remind the public that making Lithuania look like the pale shade of a Western European city is the best way to scrub the Soviet past: and make the country attractive to even more investment and development. (Lovink, Urbonas, Urbonas 2005)

The exhibition focused on four of Vilnius' Soviet-era buildings, two of them cinemas.¹ The Lietuva Cinema (1959–1965) was an important cultural centre for people in Vilnius during the Soviet period. It has a long modernist-type glass pavilion that fronts the ground floor of the whole building. The 1,000-seat cinema auditorium with a screen size of 200 square metres is spread behind, tucked beneath the hill at the back. The title of the cinema, 'Lietuva' (Lithuania), was also an important signifier of national identity. Even in its empty dilapidated state, the complex generates a feeling of serenity and calm.²

The United Colours of Benetton Mega Store previously housed the Vilnius Cinema (1963) before its conversion in 1996. The concertina-like frontage of the building has become the victim of facadeism and is intact. The interior has been completely gutted and no trace of it remains. The shop faces onto Gedeminas Prospect (formerly Lenin Prospect), Vilnius' main shopping street, and to walk around it now is to be transported into any other of the 5,000 Benetton stores anywhere in the world.

The Sports Hall (1971) was controversially built on top of the old Jewish cemetery and cemetery headstones were used in building the entrance stairs. The roof sweeps upwards towards the sky and is quite an imposing presence on the north side of the Neris River when viewed from the opposite bank. The foyer has walls of glass on three sides and hence is an open, brilliantly-lit modernist space with an extraordinary fluted organic, plant-like wooden sculpture installation on the walled side. The open-air swimming pools next to it are derelict and overgrown. The building is no

- 1 More than fifteen cinema theatres disappeared in Vilnius, including such urban landmarks as *Ausra* (Dawn), *Zvaigzde* (Star), *Spalis* (October), *Pionierius* (Pioneer), *Pergale* (Victory), *Tevyne* (Motherland), *Kronika* (Newsreel), *Aidas* (Echo), *Planeta* (Planet), *Neris*, *Vingis*, *Lazdynai*, Vilnius, *Maskva* (Moscow) and *Lietuva*. In replacement, by 2006 two multiplex cinemas had been constructed: the suburban *Coca Cola Plaza* and exurban *Akropolis Cinemas*.
- 2 At the time of writing (March 2012) the cinema is still standing, its original sale having been challenged in court. However, it is due to be demolished and replaced by a multi-storey apartment building.

longer in use as a sports hall and is mostly empty; it was being used to house a film set for a British film company when I was there.³

The National Art Gallery (1980) stands on the north bank of the Neris overlooking the centre of Vilnius from a low hill. Built in 1980, it was formerly the Revolutionary Museum of the Lithuanian Socialist Soviet Republic. The building became in 1991 a Museum of Resistance and was then converted into a gallery for contemporary art before closing in 1995 and remaining unused and derelict until the beginning of substantial rebuilding. It has now reopened as the new National Art Gallery of Lithuania.

These buildings constitute part of a history of Soviet modernity. In Vilnius, the buildings dominated the city and aspects of everyday life towards the end of Russian occupation. They continue to do so, either empty and seemingly abandoned or in newly reconstructed forms. Their spectres continue to haunt Vilnius.

England

The nineteenth-century English writer and designer William Morris thought that design had a fundamental role to play in the transformation of everyday life. This essentially political motivation – a commitment to the radical potential of design – is behind much of his work as a designer and craftsman and the setting up of Morris & Co. He was a founding member of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), the first building preservation society, which was established to protect buildings from Victorian redevelopers. In English political life, Morris was known firstly as a member of the National Liberal League. As he moved leftwards he became a leading member of the Social Democratic Federation, and in

3 At the time of writing (March 2012) the Sports Hall is still standing. It now has a preservation order on it. The owners, again after a court case, have proposed to restore and renovate the building as a National Congress Centre.

1883 he founded the Socialist League. This political work was an extension of his work as a designer as he increasingly recognized that social change could not be achieved by design alone but required a revolutionary transition, organised by the working class of capitalist industrial society.

Morris' designs for carpet, fabric and wallpaper constituted a radical break with the orthodoxy of neo-Gothic of his time. They are highly schematized representations of nature, where it is always summer and never winter; the plants are always in leaf, often flowering, with their fruits available in abundance, ripe for picking, and with no human labour in sight. This is a utopian vision, an image of Cokaygne, the medieval mythical land of plenty, easily acceptable to the middle classes. Today his work is seen as safe and comfortable, and his wallpaper and fabric designs are widely reproduced in machine-printed form. They can be found in an array of domestic environments and uses, furnishing the middle-class and conservative semis of England.



The Exhibition

For the exhibition, I made five paintings where elements of a Morris fabric design have been over-painted with an interpretation of a photograph of one of the buildings described above. Images of three of the paintings were projected onto backing material and made into large tufted wool carpets. In *Lietuva*, the cinema of the same name is juxtaposed with Morris' Willow Bough (1887). The design flows around the image of the cinema, with only the twigs, stripped of their leaves, intertwining with the building. Similarly, in *United Colors of Benetton* Morris' Fruit (1866) is depicted around the building. Again, only the twigs in the pattern seemingly appear embedded in the façade of the building. In both carpets, the fecundity of Morris' designs has died; where the patterns intersect the buildings, summer is turned into winter. In *The Sports Hall*, Morris' Honeysuckle (1883) surrounds the image of the building, but here only the honeysuckle flowers are represented over the image of the Sports Hall; isolated from the rest of the pattern, the flowers appear like the explosions of strangely organic fireworks bursting, floating, suspended forever. The combinations of buildings and patterns produce unstable spaces that are never fixed, where the Morris patterns and the buildings are unable to fully merge or separate.

AB Kilimai made the carpets, at Lentvaris just outside Vilnius, where part of the carpet factory survived the decimation of Lithuanian craft and manufacturing begun in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a medium, carpets are not a rarefied high art form like painting and are more part of the furniture of everyday life. As part of *Art into Everyday Life*, the paintings and carpets were hung in the Cinema Hall of the former Art Exhibition Palace, opened in 1968 and now the Contemporary Art Centre. The Hall, with its cast-concrete fluted decorative interior and its usually shuttered stained-glass window, formed an entirely appropriate context in which to view the work. The paintings were traditionally hung, but the carpets were hung from the ceiling, away from the walls, as three-dimensional objects, appearing to float, suspended in space. The images of the buildings appear like contemporary ruins, melancholic, transient and nostalgic.



It is now over six years since the exhibition opened. The carpets are in the collections of the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius, the National Museum of M.K. Ciurlionis, Kaunas and Paisley Museum and Art Gallery in Scotland. The paintings, made as studies for the carpets, were lost in Germany by the shipping company that should have delivered them back to London. The exhibition worked as a protest against the buildings' destruction and as a memorial to them, but in retrospect, this aspect was an exercise in premature nostalgia. The exhibition no longer exists, at least in its original form. But Lietuva Cinema and the Sports Hall still stand empty in a state of slow decline, with damp stained concrete, occasional boarded-up windows, left-over, out-of-date advertising and litter blowing against graffitied walls. The former Vilnius Cinema facade still fronts the United Colors of Benetton shop. They are still present as possible sites of social intervention and transformation, as alienated symptoms of the present and utopian signs of a possible future (Roberts 2006: 62).

References

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- Pare, R. (2007). *The Lost Vanguard: Russian Modernist Architecture 1922–1932*. New York: Monacelli Press.
- Roberts, J. (2006). *Philosophising the Everyday*. London: Pluto Press.

Figures

- 1 David Mabb. *Art Into Everyday Life, Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius (2006)*. From left to right: *The Sports Hall* (2005). Tufted wool carpet, 400 x 253 cm. Collection: Paisley Museum and Art Gallery. *United Colors of Benetton Shop* (2005). Oil paint on Fruit fabric mounted on linen, 114 x 94 cm. *The Sports Hall* (2005). Oil paint on Honeysuckle fabric mounted on linen, 142 x 90 cm. *Lietuva* (2005). Tufted wool carpet, 400 x 236 cm. Collection: National Gallery of Art, Lithuania. Photo: Paulius Mazuras.
- 2 David Mabb. *Art Into Everyday Life, Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius (2006)*. From left to right: *Lietuva* (2005). Oil paint on Willowboughs fabric mounted on linen, 142 x 84 cm. *The Sports Hall* (2005). Tufted wool carpet, 400 x 253 cm. Collection: Paisley Museum and Art Gallery, Scotland. Photo: Paulius Mazuras.
- 3 David Mabb. *Art Into Everyday Life, Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius (2006)*. *United Colors of Benetton* (2005). Tufted wool carpet, 321 x 264 cm. Collection: National Museum of M.K. Ciurlionis, Lithuania. Photo: Paulius Mazuras.