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**“From Post-Soviet to Post-Capitalist City – Development of Riga over the Last 20 Years”**

(„Von der postsowjetischen zur postkapitalistischen Stadt - Stadtentwicklung in Riga während der letzten 20 Jahre“).

Riga, the capital of the Republic of Latvia, is situated on the Baltic seacoast, at the mouth of the River Daugava. Its spatial structure reflects its more than 800-year-old history with the traces left by German, Polish, Swedish, Russian, Soviet and Latvian rules creating a diverse urban fabric consisting of various interwoven layers. A unique urban landscape has formed over the centuries via the interaction between local and external powers.<sup>1</sup>

Most important processes in the development of the city centre of Riga occurred in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when the Russian Emperor Alexander II issued an order that relieved Riga from its status of a military fortress of the Russian Empire and allowed the city to demolish its medieval fortifications, facilitating its development into a modern city and thus keeping up with other European cities.<sup>2</sup> A project was developed for the transformation of the fortification walls and the Esplanade area, and the Boulevard Circle was established where perimeter blocks alternated with parks and freestanding public buildings.<sup>3</sup>

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the industrial revolution in the Russian Empire (which then also included the Baltics as its Western province), Riga changed from a commercial city into an important manufacturing centre.<sup>4</sup> With the rapid development of the industry, capital was accumulated and credit societies were actively issuing mortgage and other loans spurring a construction boom. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, up to 1914, Riga experienced even more extensive construction works and fast development of the utility networks, allowing Riga to turn into a cosmopolitan city in a very short time. The buildings constructed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century determine the shape and architectural image of the present-day centre of Riga.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Bunkse, E. V.* The Role of a Human Environment in Soviet Urban Planning. // GR, Vol. 69, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> *Bākule, I., Sikсна, A.* Rīga ārpus nocietinājumiem. – Rīga: 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Krastiņš, J., Strautmanis, I.* Lielais Rīgas arhitektūras ceļvedis. – Rīga: 2002.

<sup>4</sup> *Grava, S.* The Urban Heritage of the Soviet Regime. // JAPA, Vol. 59 No. 1, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> *Krastiņš, J., Vasiļjevs, J.* Rīgas izbūve un arhitektūra 19. gs. otrajā pusē un 20. gs. sākumā. // Rīga 1860-1917. – Rīga: 1978.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century begins with a movement of the National Revival in Riga and a political struggle for liberation from foreign hegemony. World War I and the ensuing battles for independence radically changed the political system. The population loss during the war and emigration had resulted in the decline of Riga's population below 200,000. After acquiring the status of a capital city in 1918, the development of Riga and its architecture became monumental in character what was reflected in urban planning, in architecture of governmental and administrative buildings, and in symbols of national self-confidence – monuments and memorial sites. In 1934, after Kārlis Ulmanis' coup the Saeima (Parliament) was dissolved and significant changes were introduced in the political system. In the late 1930s, the concept of *Latvian culture* dominated the cultural scene.<sup>6</sup> The efforts began to build *the Latvian Riga* as opposed to *the German Riga*. The *Latvian Riga* and architectural criteria were reassessed and set against the international and cosmopolitan character of Riga.

World War II and its outcome along with political changes also led to dramatic changes in the spatial and social structure of the city. In 1945 Latvia was occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union. After the war the number of population in Riga had decreased below 200,000. The future development of the city of Riga was determined by two main factors: central planning and rapid and massive population growth. Thanks to the favourable location of Riga, it was regarded as an outpost on the USSR's western border and an administrative centre. The Soviet policy facilitated a massive migration of workers, civil servants and military officers and their families to Riga from other Soviet republics, at the same time people from the rural areas of Latvia were not permitted to register their place of residence in Riga.

The lack of housing was the main urban problem of the Soviet period. In various historic stages of the *socialist* Riga there had been different strategies for residential construction. After World War II until the mid-1950, the works were still carried out for elimination of the damage caused by the war and restoration of the existing housing stock in the central part of the city.<sup>7</sup> However, the construction of the real *socialist city* began with the launch of the massive housing construction programme initiated by Khrushchev. Between 1960 and 1980 a large-scale state programme had been implemented aiming to provide as many square meters of the living space as

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<sup>6</sup> *Lejnieks, J.* Rīga, kuras nav. – Rīga: 1998.

<sup>7</sup> *Valeskalne, V., Viksna, Dz.* Sociālistiskās Rīgas rajoni, tās izbūve un labiekārtošana. // Rīga Sociālisma Laikmetā, 1917-1975. – Rīga: 1980.

possible. Soviet planners adapted ‘the neighborhood planning principle’ used in the West and formally incorporated it into their formula of a housing estate (mikrorayon).<sup>8</sup>

In 1985, the population had increased to 900,000. This dramatic growth of population signalled that the urban situation had become critical. These tendencies can be easily discerned in the urban structure of Riga. The *socialist* city of Riga forms an almost uninterrupted wide circle. Today, more than a half of the total number of city dwellers lives in these housing estates.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike in the *socialist* housing estates, in the central *capitalist* part of Riga only a few new buildings appeared. They served as infill to fill the gaps in the perimeter blocks. The buildings constructed in this area stood out with their exceptional architectural and construction quality. Without exception these buildings were built for the representatives of the privileged class, i.e. members of the Communist Party, managers of plants and factories, the intellectual elite of the society that was loyal to the Soviet regime, prominent writers and musicians.<sup>10</sup>

According to Gentile and Sjöberg, despite the ambitions of the Soviet system to create a classless society, *the socialist city* had certain qualities of the physical urban space leading to inequality. It mostly pertained to the number of dwellings and their availability, quality and accessibility, a distance from places of residence to jobs and exposure of housing estates to industrial pollution. The impact of the pre-socialist city can partly explain it, yet the cities, which have been built quite recently, also show a significant socio-spatial differentiation. It means that a socialist model of central planning could not cope with the most typical problem of a *bourgeois* town, namely, social segregation.<sup>11</sup>

In 1991, the Republic of Latvia regained its independence and put an end to the 50-year-long Soviet occupation. The city of Riga once again had to become a capital city of an independent state. Less than two years after the restoration of the proclaimed independent state in 1991, the work on the Riga City Development Plan for 1995–2005 began, which was the first development plan elaborated after the restoration of independence. According to Roze, the author of this plan, it was the time of *metamorphosis* when changes were affecting the entire way of life and social structure established over the previous 50 years.<sup>12</sup> The first years in the urban development showed transition

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<sup>8</sup> Grava, S. The Urban Heritage of the Soviet Regime. // JAPA, Vol. 59 No. 1, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Grava, S. The Urban Heritage of the Soviet Regime. // JAPA, Vol. 59 No. 1, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Roze, A. Rīgas telpiskās kompozīcijas attīstība. – Rīga: 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Gentile, M., Sjöberg, Ö. Intra-urban Landscapes of Priority: the Soviet Legacy. // EAS, Vol 58, No. 5, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Roze, A. Rīgas telpiskās kompozīcijas attīstība. – Rīga: 2004.

from central planning to the market.<sup>13</sup> The City Development Plan was elaborated at the time when the process of denationalization was in full swing, the number of population was decreasing, types of ownership and laws changed, and there was a quest for an appropriate structure of city administration.<sup>14</sup> For the most part, a socialist city was an industrial city, and Riga like other dynamic cities evolved from a traditional industrial city into a post-industrial agglomeration, which triggered off inevitable structural changes.

The transition to new democratic governance and a model of liberal capitalism took place. Commissions from state and government enterprises passed over to private companies and corporations. This could also be described as the time of the narrative of *retrospective sentiment* when the changes affecting politics and social structures were also reflected in the built-up environment. The development and future of state, municipal and communal structures were associated with “restoration of the seemingly successful models of the past”. So, as regards the urban environment, the aim was to restore the urban and cultural scenery of Riga as it was in the pre-socialist era. It was quite easy at the micro-symbolic level: the names of streets were changed, the monument to Lenin was dismantled, the star was removed from the top of the House of Collective Farmers, the museum of the Latvian Red Riflemen was renamed to the Occupation Museum and so on.<sup>15</sup>

Different stages of development can be clearly seen in the spatial structure of Riga. (According to Grava, its spatial structure is almost a textbook example of the (post) socialist city.)

The post-socialist city is a hybrid city combining in itself the still existing Soviet and new capitalistic spatial and social structures.<sup>16</sup>

The transition from modernism to post-modernism is most evident in Old Riga. The monumental ensemble of the Latvian Red Riflemen Square, which was built in modernist traditions, was reconstructed by incorporating a network of medieval streets and a parcelling pattern, and restoring the historic Town Hall Square. The area was reconstructed creating the replicas of the historic buildings as well as using postmodern interpretations. The RTU laboratory block, which was designed in a modernist manner, and the wing of the Latvian Red Riflemen Museum were

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<sup>13</sup> *Gentile, M., Sjöberg, Ö.* Intra-urban Landscapes of Priority: the Soviet legacy. // *EAS*, Vol 58, No. 5, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> *Roze, A.* Rīgas telpiskās kompozīcijas attīstība. – Rīga: 2004.

<sup>15</sup> *Naweatek, K.* Contemporary capitalism and post-socialist city: the bankruptcy of neo-liberal Riga. – 2011.

<sup>16</sup> *Naweatek, K.* Contemporary capitalism and post-socialist city: the bankruptcy of neo-liberal Riga. – 2011.

partially demolished to make room for the reconstructed House of the Blackheads, the Town Hall and the Town Hall Square, as well as for a number of buildings creating a medieval background. The result is a fragmented and contradictory postmodern cityscape which according to Naweatek (2011) “tells a lot of different stories, loosely connected to each other and creating a magnitude of chaotic micro narrations”.

A collage/composition of structures representing different periods, narratives and identities creates an appealing background for the growing number of tourists, while for the permanent residents of Riga this scenery implies schizophrenic environmental perception and a schematic chaos of interpretations. Many people feel confused between the official anti-communist propaganda and popular memories and meanings<sup>17</sup>, postmodern replicas of the architecture of different eras, monuments, memorial signs and makeshift advertising installations set up in the urban environment.

The beginning of the new millennium can be described as the time of the *global* narrative, especially, the period from 2004 when Latvia joined the European Union and NATO, and welcomed the expansion of global capital, foreign capital and loans from foreign banks which aimed here for the *debt-free* society spared by the market economy. Latvia experienced a short economic growth caused by the speculative real estate market. At the beginning of 2006 a new Riga City Development Plan came into force. Characteristic features of this period are opportunist handling of *global* money and assertion of the interests of individual influential persons over the interests of the society. Taking advantage of the weakness of the democratic control and deficiencies in the laws and regulations, individual investors were provided with very favourable conditions in the plots of land in their possession, increasing the building density and the number of floors for those plots and interpreting the guidelines of the Development Plan. The end of this era was marked by several corruption scandals when several officials who were responsible for the implementation of the City Development Plan were convicted on corruption charges.

During this period, Riga was trying to be like all other cities<sup>18</sup> and the architecture of public buildings constructed in the city centre reflected the tendencies of internationalization and Westernization.

Riga followed the lead of other big cities and invited world-renowned architects to design extraordinary buildings in the city centre, which might boost the prestige of the city and its appeal to

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<sup>17</sup> Czepczyński, M. Cultural landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities. – 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Naweatek, K. Contemporary Capitalism and Post-socialist City: the Bankruptcy of Neo-liberal Riga. – 2011.

tourists. As regards the city centre, several projects can be mentioned, e.g. the Museum of Contemporary Art, the administrative centre of Riga in Torņakalns, the Acoustic Concert Hall, the Latvian National Opera, bank buildings and a high-rise district on the left riverbank of the Daugava or the so-called 'new centre of Riga'. Unlike in other Central European cities such as Berlin, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, which underwent similar processes, only some of these projects were actually implemented in Riga.

Intensive construction of public, office and residential buildings and industrial complexes continued until the 2008 global financial crisis that struck Latvia particularly hard. As the issue of mortgage loans stopped, the real estate bubble burst and the *global* narrative lapsed.

The post-crisis period can be regarded as a recession period. The number of population is dramatically decreasing in Latvia. People are migrating abroad and to the agglomeration of Riga. A lot of offices and flats in residential houses become unoccupied. There are many unfinished buildings in the city and the implementation of the ambitious projects for construction of grand public and cultural buildings has been postponed for an indefinite time. In the centre of the ongoing change of the paradigm are reconstruction and regeneration projects, modifying and transforming the existing industrial territories and unused buildings.

As regards the urban development of Riga over the past 20 years, when it was changing from a post-socialist city into a post-capitalist city, its *socialist* and *capitalist* nature should be evaluated critically. Similarly, the Soviet central planning model could not establish an egalitarian *socialist* city and avert the most typical problem of a *bourgeois* city, i.e. social segregation.

The post-socialist city cannot become a *capitalist city* and provide the most typical characteristic feature of a *bourgeois city*, i.e. accumulation of local capital. Instead the urban and public structure is exposed to unrestricted arbitrariness of the external global financial capitalism which makes it possible to designate it as a (post) colonial city.<sup>19</sup> Over the last 20 years, moving from an industrial economy to a (more unstable) service economy, the city could not establish preconditions for the emergence of a strong middle class. Therefore, it seems that the post-industrial, creative, neo-liberal model of a city can still be useful and applicable to Western European cities, while it would not work in the city located on the outskirts/periphery of the European Union.

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<sup>19</sup> *Naweatek, K. Contemporary Capitalism and Post-socialist City: the Bankruptcy of Neo-liberal Riga. – 2011.*

A model of democratic governance and the lack of policy vision could not restrict the liberal Freedom and neo-liberal urban development based on the dogma of sacred private property, and protect its citizens from the chaos caused by the global financial capitalism.

Riga, like other former post-socialist cities, is torn between the Soviet colonial past and the Western/global colonial present.<sup>20</sup>

Over the last 90 years, there have been several attempts to transform Riga by means of a homogeneous narrative. Today these narratives do not work anymore, and Riga has to find a new post-Soviet and (post) colonial narrative.

The spatial and social structure of Riga is unique and provides good preconditions for successful development in the conditions of modern capitalism. Yet at the same time, the reasons why the city of Riga cannot realize its immense potential derive from its inability to recognize its distinctive hybrid identity, and therefore in future refrain from repeated attempts to adopt imitative models of development and policy, which disregard the high potential of the hybrid solutions of this city.

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<sup>20</sup> *Lisiak, A. A.* Urban Cultures in (post)colonial Central Europe. – West Lafayette: 2010