CHAPTER 12

Architecture and Urban Development Harnessed by the State

When dealing with the subject of architecture in the nineteen-thirties, it would be hard to disregard the current view of that ‘devil’s decade’, as Franco Borsi describes it in the introduction to his work ‘l’Ordre Monumental’.\(^1\) Borsi describes the emergence of this order, deployed to serve national identity, as a reaction against the cosmopolitanism of the avant-garde of previous decades. It all points to architecture also being tasked with shaping the nation, and Borsi’s account reminds one of the rhetorical values of architecture, which led to its identification with the values of the state.

In this area, Ulmanis did not have the same artistic pretentions as other heads of State, but the constructively proactive approach displayed by certain European leaders of the era did raise his awareness of the potential of architecture.

It was not difficult for Kārlis Ulmanis to make an aesthetic and political choice in favour of neo-eclectic monumental architecture, given that Latvian society had already opted in this direction. The new aspects of the 20th century’s international architecture had been rejected, due to the movement’s social dimensions. Latvia had not seen the construction of the kind of massive apartment blocks erected in the USSR, Scandinavia and Germany. In Riga, the bourgeois parties\(^2\) discontinued the construction projects launched by the Social Democrats, although after 1934 these endeavours were replaced by the construction of official buildings.\(^3\)

Given this, it is hardly surprising that the era’s architects were viewed with respect and that \textit{ad hoc} organizations were created to support the projects then underway. Around these issues – and the theories underlying them – stances were taken and projects were developed. Not all of these projects were


\(^{2}\) A term that corresponds to the German \textit{büergerliche Partei} (citizen’s party), as opposed to the workers’ parties in the centre and on the left.

\(^{3}\) Lejnieks, Jānis, Nacionālā kategorija arhitekta Eižena Laubes darbos (National particularity in the works of Eizens Laube), \textit{Arhitektūras vēsture}, Latvijas zinātņu akadēmijas vēstis, 2002, 56 N° 2/3, pp. 75.
realized due to hostilities between the parties involved, to lack of resources, and to the dramatic historical events that followed.

A Strengthened Institutions

This area is the subject of many historical records, both contemporary – with the era’s professional reviews producing relevant documentation, the archives of which survive to this day – and modern, with articles on the history of architecture produced by respected Latvian specialists such as Jānis Lejnieks or Jānis Krastiņš. It is worth noting that a French researcher, Eric Le Bourhis, made a significant contribution with his study ‘Riga, construction d’une capitale 1890–1940’.

With highly-controlled institutional organization, architectural and urban development projects were discussed, imposed or condemned to abandonment, but whatever their fate, they received close attention from the Latvian State and public.

1 The National Construction Committee

Founded on the 14th January 1936, the National Construction Committee (Nacionālās celtniecības komiteja) had as its main objective ‘Strengthening the Latvian national spirit in works of construction’ and was set up at initiative of Kārlis Ulmanis. The opening speech made by Ulmanis on the 29th April 1936 is informative, demonstrating the orientation to be followed by this committee, with a continuing, overt drive for Latvianization:

We must remain vigilant and determined that our buildings contribute to a new face for our towns and countryside. An expression that is more beautiful and more spiritual, a face that is ever more Latvianized; so that our land is in unity, in its face and in its expression...with the fruits of this country, with what has grown and been formed here for centuries and millennia.

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4 Eric Le Bourhis, urban engineer, Master’s Thesis 2, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (School of Higher Studies in Social Sciences), June 2010.
5 Point n° 8 of the law passed on the 14th January 1936 creating the Committee, Latvijas Architektūra, 1938/1, p. 40.
6 Latvijas Arhitekšūra, 1939, 6, pp. 165–170.