



## **SOVIET MODERNISM 1955 – 1991. UNKNOWN STORIES**

Exhibition Texts: The Baltic, Eastern Europe, The Caucasus and Central Asia

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### **THE BALTIC**

#### **Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania**

Although Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania together form a geographical entity, each of the Baltic countries has its own linguistic and cultural roots. The ways in which the states were formed also differ greatly. Whereas Estonia and Latvia, as Livonia, were successively under German, Swedish and Russian rule, Lithuania was a huge empire in the Middle Ages. In the 20th century, however, the residents of the Baltic countries all shared a similar fate. Following the German occupation, the enforced integration in the Soviet Union was also regarded as an occupation; the Holocaust, the repressions under Stalin and the Second World War claimed large numbers of victims. From the Russian viewpoint the Baltic was always regarded as a single region which within the Soviet Union stood for highly-developed agriculture and industry, but above all for the 'European'.

As regards Baltic architecture, too, the orientation towards Europe, or more precisely Scandinavia, is very evident. Simple, functional forms, precise details and a relatively high quality of execution have little in common with the kind of buildings generally dismissed as 'Soviet'. Interior design played a special role, above all in Estonia, but in Latvia and Lithuania, too, interiors were designed and created that aroused admiration among visitors from other Soviet republics. The way the Baltic region dealt with its historic building fabric had an exemplary effect. Early Soviet urban development plans envisaged making major interventions in old city centres that had developed gradually over the course of centuries. But instead of this, like in Leningrad (today: St. Petersburg), it was attempted to erect modernist buildings outside the city or in what were called new urban centres. Of all the regions modernism was probably most successfully implemented in the Baltic, but, above all in Latvia, post-modernism also flourished there.



## **EASTERN EUROPE**

### **Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus**

This area, which until the beginning of the 20th century was dominated by agriculture, forms part of the East European Plain that extends as far as the Urals. While of all the former Soviet republics Ukraine and Belarus are most closely tied to Russia in linguistic, cultural and historical terms, Moldova is far closer to Romania, although before the October Revolution (apart from Bukovina) it belonged to the Russian Empire as the Governorate of Bessarabia. Alongside Russia and the Trans-Caucasus, Ukraine and Belarus signed the founding charter of the USSR in 1922. West Ukraine and western Belarus, which after the First World War formed part of Poland, were, alongside the Baltic countries, the first states to be annexed by the Soviet Union as a consequence of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939. Bessarabia also fell within the Soviet sphere of interest and was occupied by the Red Army in 1940.

In the Second World War all three countries suffered enormous losses of human life, along with widespread destruction of the building fabric. Consequently in the second half of the 20th century reconstruction was one of the most urgent tasks that confronted architects and urban planners. The almost complete lack of historic buildings that could have served as reference points in establishing a specific identity and the destruction of large areas of the cities made it possible for the kind of architecture proclaimed by Russia to be implemented in a far more extensive way than in other regions. In line with the Russification policy local tendencies were to be eliminated as far as possible: making use of the International Style perfectly suited this concept and from the 1970s onwards a certain tendency towards Brutalism levelled out any special local qualities still in existence.



## **CAUCASUS**

### **Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia**

Strictly speaking Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are in the Trans-Caucasus, i.e. seen from Europe they are beyond the Caucasus. Over the course of thousands of years this strategically important area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea – at the interface between Christian Europe and the Islamic Orient – was occupied by different conquerors from Rome, Byzantium, Mongolia, Persia and later Russia. Armenia and Georgia are among the oldest Christian nations in the world, whereas the history of the Muslims in Azerbaijan is very closely linked to Iran. Although the differences between the various ethnic groups and the potential for cultural and political conflict are greater in the Caucasus than in almost any other region, in 1922 these three countries, as the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (with Tiflis as capital), signed the treaty that established the USSR.

The acceptance of the new regime was relatively great and, especially in Armenia and Georgia, membership of the Soviet Union was not seen as a defeat but on the contrary as a further step in the direction of an independent state. Similar to the situation in the Baltic the proportion of native architects was relatively high. Trained in different architecture schools they took up local traditions and connected them with the ideas of modernism. Throughout the Caucasus from the early 1960s onwards outstanding – and generally minimalist – buildings were erected that reflected a general mood of optimism. From the mid-1970s large projects were also increasingly carried out in the Caucasus that emphasized ‘national’ aspects and that reinterpreted various forms found in traditional architectural such as the pointed arch, dome or stalactite-like ornament in a modern way. The historically developed national consciousness always formed an important point of reference and even at an early stage the treatment of the architectural legacy played an important role in the debates on urban planning.



## **CENTRAL ASIA**

### **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan**

The landscape of central or middle Asia is marked by the contrast between enormous areas of desert and steppes and urban oases. The latter formed important hubs on the Silk Route that led through this ancient cultural region. This largely Islamic area was absorbed by the Russian empire in stages during the 19th century and the land was made available to settlers from Russia. Under the Soviets this colonisation policy was continued and between 1924 and 1929 led to the artificial division of the region into five Soviet republics. This division was based on ethnic and linguistic principles, while at the same time the proportion of Russians in the population, above all in the cities, grew continuously.

In addition to efforts to deal with the difficult climatic and geological conditions (hot summers, droughts, and danger of earthquakes) the 'search for the national component' was, also in architecture, a central theme throughout the entire Soviet period but was often limited to the use of imitative 'oriental' ornament. Unlike in the Caucasus or the Baltic most of the architects who worked in Central Asia did not come from the region. Trained in Moscow or Leningrad the intention was that they should bring the new socialist way of living to the 'backward' peoples of Central Asia: apartment blocks with sanitary facilities were built in place of yurts and traditional dwelling houses, narrow lanes were replaced by wide boulevards. With the emergence of the first locally trained skilled workers and academics a local intelligenzija developed that identified with the new republics, and in a number of cases it proved possible here – far away from Moscow – to build outstanding examples of modern architecture.