The Intended Breakaway: The Case of Recreational Architecture in Soviet Lithuania

Key words: Soviet, recreational architecture, ideological changes, changes in architectural expression.

The Soviet period is one of the most problematic in the history of Lithuanian architecture. Almost fifty years of Soviet rule imposed great changes on its natural development. The brutally changed structures of traditional towns and cities, the large-scale, standard buildings - all are part of an uneasy heritage that today challenges both architectural life and the nation's life in general. After the re-establishment of Lithuania's independence in 1990, a new social, economic, cultural, and architectural reality came into being, raising questions and demanding answers about this recent and troubled past. These questions are by no means easy to answer, meaning that they reveal a multifaceted reality despite the uniformity of the Soviet regime and ideology. The article focuses on the specific case of recreational architecture in Lithuania during the Soviet period: it seeks to disclose its peculiarities and causality in the context of the general architectural climate of that time, and centres attention on the artistic expression of particular examples and their meaning.

It is not possible to analyse architecture apart from its interaction with politics, ideology, and power,¹ at least not in the case of an authoritarian system such as the former Soviet Union. Architecture, like many creative activities in Soviet Lithuania, could not escape from the imposed dogmas of the totalitarian regime. The Soviet authorities subordinated architecture, a vehicle for the expression of the most important national, ideological, material, social, cultural, and aesthetical values, to the strategic designs

of the Soviet empire. This not only interrupted the natural development of Lithuanian architecture as it had emerged in the interwar period but also caused it to lose much of its creative freedom, individuality, and autonomy. Architecture had to become a part of the planned and projected state system, and architects were turned into drawers and builders. They were expected to help materialise the Soviet way of life while dissolving national individuality and identity. However, from the very beginning of the Soviet occupation its repressive policy and ideology provoked an intellectual and spiritual reaction, a patriotic, cultural, and architectural resistance. Therefore, stereotyped methodical schemes are not enough to conceptualise and evaluate the ambiguous and multi-layered situation of architectural creativity at that time and in that context.

Recreational architecture in Soviet Lithuania is notably different from other types of public building from that period, be they administrative, educational, or cultural. It exhibits a kind of breaking away, an otherness from the general planning and building circumstances or the architectural and expressive style peculiar to that period. Despite the fact that the recreation and tourist areas in Soviet Lithuania were built according to certain normative documents and typical projects, many of the structures in the rest zones and resort areas were fashioned according to individual (not typical) projects. This should be viewed as something exclusive, varying from the norm in the context of the times. "Individual projects



Fig. 1. V. Ulitka, Balneological health resort in Druskininkai, 1960. A decorative stone mosaic called Nemunas (Lithuanian boy in national costume, left) and Ratnyčėlė (Lithuanian girl in national costume, right) are placed in the plane of the main entrance risalitas. Photo by the author

were rare exceptions to the rule that dissolved in the sea of mass standardised buildings".2 The general architectural climate was constrained by the compulsory standardisation of buildings of various types (residential, cultural, industrial, etc.) on the public scale. On the one hand, unification of buildings was grounded on economies of scale; on the other, it indicated an obvious intolerance of any individuality by the totalitarian regime. "The inescapable result followed in successive order: urbanisation- standardisation-invariability, all in all eliminating any signs of genius".3 Nevertheless, the same political situation prevailed in the whole country: almost each major city or town in Lithuania showed off its own architectural features. Each particular place revealed the picture of its specific link with the state in its material form as in the case of resort areas. It is impossible to deny the creative potential, individuality, and expressiveness of recreational buildings or buildings built in recreational zones that existed in those days. The architectural qualities, expressivity, and stylistic diversity of those buildings were evidently superior to those of residential as well as

other public buildings. Several reasons for this are closely intertwined here.

What made recreational architecture rather exceptional those days was first of all its special mission. Functional typology of buildings is an important circumstance characterising most of the 20th century architecture. It is particularly important in the case of Soviet architecture, as it discloses the close interaction of the functional typology of buildings with the particular social function, which in a way is the essence of the Soviet attitude towards spatial development.⁴ The building type is an important reflection of the societal being or a way to organise the way of social being. Recreation or rest culture in the former USSR stood in the main line of the political strategy. As a counterpoise to the absolute idea of work, a rather unique phenomenon of recreation – a pure form of mass rest and relaxation - was created in the "ideal" Soviet world. The special attention devoted to the creation of a rest and recreation system in the former Soviet Union was formally based on public concern about labour health actively propagated during the 1960s and 1970s. It was the for-

mal constitutional right of every citizen to have an annual vacation almost for free: 70% of the cost of going to any of resort in the territory of the former USSR was covered by the trade-unions. Similarly, health resort and wellness facilities were funded by the state, and also by various enterprises, higher educational institutions, and Soviet and collective farms. This worked indeed as a closed "happy" system (as we might rather literally if not ironically call it). Based on the trade-unions' control and financing, it stimulated the rise of health resorts in the whole territory of the former Soviet Union, including Lithuania. In the 1970s, health resorts such as Palanga, Druskininkai, and Birštonas were assigned the status of republic-level importance: that means they were developed to welcome vacationers from the whole USSR (there were resorts of three categories: those of all-union, those of republic-level, and those of local importance). Such a degree of subordination provided a certain order and measure of the development of health resorts.5

They were well funded and therefore could afford to give special commissions to artists and architects. However, each case depended on very specific and even quite unique conditions. As the case of the Palanga resort architectural development reveals, its process was very much determined by certain personalities that administered the place, the officials or the so-called head architects. Palanga, a former countryside locality (with between 5000 and 6000 residents in 1952), turned into a famous resort area of local importance primarily in the early 1960s (with more than a hundred thousand guests each year) and grew into one of the most popular health resorts in the USSR in the late 1960s and 1970s (hosting more than a quarter million guests). Accordingly, the whole architectural and spatial structure of the territory changed dramatically. All this was done at a higher speed than in many other cases. Just in six seven years of the first postwar decade Palanga grew significantly, gaining its present spatial character (more accurately that of the late 1980s). Mostly thanks to the head architect of those days, Alfredas Paulauskas, the main official figure of the architectural bar in Palanga from 1952 till 1964, Palanga's architecture experienced great changes. On the basis of the so-called general plan of Palanga made by architect Benicijanas Revzinas just after the end of World War II, Paulauskas implemented functional zoning of the place and created the main city facilities for public use: a certain street network, green public spaces, zones, and avenues. What was so specific about the work method was that most of the works were implemented without any prepared or certified projects. Proceedings took place straight in the course of building based on drafts prepared by Paulauskas himself. This was a real exception to the rule then in effect of strict architectural bureaucracy and documentation and was possible only because of the special relationship between the head architect and the upper officials in the Ministerial Council in Vilnius.⁶ The special mutual understanding or trust between them made it possible for architects and artists to enjoy a privileged status in Palanga. The regional authority would close its eyes to the bypassing of routine procedures and provide extra financing for special projects that Palanga needed. Sculptures such as Eglė Žalčių karalienė by Robertas Antinis and Jūratė ir Kastytis by Nijolė Gaigalaitė are good examples of an unprecedented situation where financing for them came not from the Ministry of Culture of the Lithuanian SSR, as would have been routine, but from the Ministerial Council of the Lithuanian SSR, as an exception to the rule. The Palanga health resort gained its quite unique aesthetic appearance under the management of Paulauskas. Due to his strong leadership, Palanga achieved its contemporary image with an optimal balance of buildings and green spaces, new colours, sculptures, and other forms of small architecture that were executed after his personal sketches. Looked at from one side, this is evidence for quite an autocratic way of management within a privileged layer of the Soviet bureaucracy; on the other hand, it shows how it was possible to override certain norms and restrictions in order to overcome the threatening monotony while trying to preserve and enhance the genuine attractiveness of the locality.

Over time, projecting and building in Lithuanian resort areas, especially in Palanga, became a matter of the architect's image and prestige in pursuit of an over-all intention to create an environment different from that of everyday life. In a way, resort areas

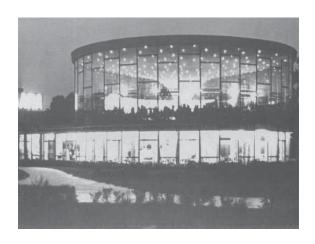


Fig. 2. Aleksandras Eigirdas, Restaurant Vasara in Palanga, 1967. Photo by the author

as places of privileged status became platforms for the explosion of artistic expression within the constraints of Soviet-period architecture. The greatest and most valuable part of Soviet recreational architecture consists of examples of original and peculiar structures. They send us a message of the course of architectural ideas and aspirations of Lithuanian architects living uneasily within the Soviet system generally marked by mass construction, standardisation, a limited stock of constructional and building materials, etc. Individual examples of recreational buildings presented in chronological order help to reveal the course of ideas at the time and in that context.

Whereas we can talk about important changes in international modernistic architecture in the period from 1950 to 1960 that provoked the shift to new movements, the corresponding decades in most of the countries of the Soviet Union meant passing from post-war rebuilding to the domination of the so-called retrospective7 architectural trend, showing continuity of historical styles. The tendency was imposed on Lithuania as part of Soviet ideology, a symbol of a new social culture. Not organically fitting into their architectural context, retrospective buildings were mainly designed and built in Lithuania by architects from other Soviet Republics (e.g., the Russian architects Viktor Anikin, Piotr Ashastin, and Vera Furman). Fortunately, the post-war period retrospective tendency was not pervasive in Lithuanian architecture. Only a few buildings of this type were built in Lithuanian resort areas during the post-war period. The Žuvėdra

Sanatorium in Palanga (Aleksandras Eigirdas, 1954) exemplifies the spirit of the romantic neoclassical tradition. It is characterised by symmetrical composition, dominated by the elevated belvedere and the rotunda entryway surrounded by a balustrade. All this recalls the spirit of Italian representative villas and residencies.8 The Draugystė Sanatorium in Druskininkai (Vera Furman and Jonas Gerulaitis, 1956) is one the sharpest examples of the full-dress neo-classical style: it is characterised by pompous symmetry, clear rhythm, and the use of classical order. It falls into the general trend of architectural policy of the first post-war decades when a symbolic image of classical palaces was adapted to represent the power of a new social culture. The return to the architecture of antiquity is felt in the Druskininkai Balneological health resort (V. Ulitka, 1960) [fig. 1]. The building composition is less pompastic than the previous example and therefore is in less opposition to the town's environment and landscape. A decorative stone mosaic called Nemunas (the name of the largest river passing Druskininkai) and Ratnyčėlė (the name of a stream flowing there) (Boleslovas Klova, 1960) are placed in the plane of the main entrance. These are the silhouettes of a Lithuanian girl and boy dressed in national costumes as a literal example representing the main idea of Soviet cultural policy: "socialist in content, nationalist in form," which meant using what was valuable in classical cultural heritage to develop and disclose the spring of national folk art. As noted by Alexei Tarchanov, elements of national folk art remained politically correct, reflecting the expectations of the proletariat.9

Soon after new Soviet resolutions called "reforms of Khrushchev" that conditioned ideological and aesthetical changes in the architectural program were passed – architecture from now on had to be effective, rational, and standardised for the good of society – a kind of *modernistic/functionalist* architecture made its way into the country. This resulted in a boom of building standardisation and typical projects seeking high aims of the social program during 1960s and 1970s. At that time many standard recreational buildings were built in Lithuania's health resorts. In many cases, mass structures violated the existing scale and building traditions of the territories, ig-

nored landscape features, made the general view of health-care localities uniform and made them look similar to residential settings. Especially noticeable in this regard were the high-rise rest houses, the so-called dormitory buildings (high-rise spa hotels). At the same time, in 1966 such high-rise spa dormitories were built in the Palanga and Druskininkai resorts: *Neringos kopos* in Palanga and *Nemunas* in Druskininkai (Enrikas Tamoševičius).

Along with typical, standardised buildings, a number of individually designed objects were built in resort areas in the 1960s and 1970s: rest houses as well as other public buildings in recreational zones. The buildings of Aleksandras Eigirdas reveal the shift from one ideological program to another. After almost ten years (after building the retrospective Žuvėdra sanatorium) he changed his style dramatically, thereby illustrating the reality of the ideological and aesthetical modifications in the architectural program in the 1960s when the governmental resolution declared that from now on architecture had to be effective, rational, and standardised for the good of society. One of his later buildings, the Vasara restaurant in Palanga, built in 1967, was no doubt one the most modern buildings in Lithuania at that time; it embodied principles of module architecture of bionic form, matching the basic shapes of circle, rectangle, and square and creating an illusion of dynamic transparency and original art synthesis inside - works of stained glass, metal, and ceramics (Poilsis, a sculpture by Konstantinas Bogdanas, and Žuvytės by Laimutė Cieškaitė-Brėdikienė) [fig. 2]. Vasara was a real event in Lithuania - irradiating transparent structure with original interior lighting and a brave constructive so-



Fig. 3. Aleksandras Eigirdas, Guesthouse Kastytis in Palanga, 1967. Photo by the author

lution: the arch of the restaurant is supported by only one column. Eigirdas was the architect distinguished among others by his creativity and abilities either to ignore entirely or to handle more freely the normative architectural rules that constrained an architect's creativity. It was also true that building such as Vasara was enjoyed by the public very much and is still remembered by almost everyone who visits Palanga these days. It could be built because in Palanga the financing of buildings was more generous. 10 Another outstanding work of Eigirdas is the Kastytis rest house in Palanga (1967) [fig. 3]. The building is distinguished by its pure and equable modernism, the neat composition, harmony, and simplicity, and the relation between inside and outside, comparable to the cubistic manner of the Holland group De Stijl or Le Corbusier. The interior was created following the national theme script: original design, composition of various pieces of wood, textile, brass, metal, and plaster - all appealing in the stylish modernistic manner with a sense of national culture.

What was so special about these Eigirdas buildings is the artistic synthesis – the union of fine arts, sculpture, and architecture – in creating scenarios based on themes of national literature, including folk legends about fairy-tale heroes (thus name "Kastytis" was taken from a tale about the water-nymph Jūratė and the fisherman Kastytis). Old national story lines here went side by side with the ambitions of extreme modernity (extreme modernity, naturally, in terms of the closed structure of the Soviet world).

One more example of fine modernistic architecture is the Žilvinas rest-house by architect Algimantas Lėckas (1969) [fig. 4]. It is characterised by its innovative constructive solution - three interlocked bodies are uplifted on three poles or landings, i.e. it was a "house on the poles" after one of the five principles of Le Corbusier. The result achieved is a rectangular building face hanging down from the tree leaves. For the first time in the history of Lithuanian architecture denuded monolithic concrete was used not only for constructive but also for decorative purposes. In 1980 a sociological survey was done questioning architects and trying to determine the best examples of Soviet Lithuanian architecture. 11 Žilvinas was selected as one that Lithuanian architecture should follow. The question of national identity of Lithuania's architecture

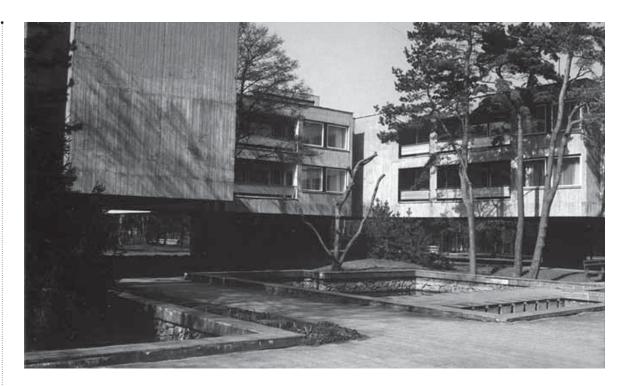


Fig. 4. Algimantas Lėckas, Rest-house Žilvinas in Palanga, 1969. Photo by the author

was very much emphasised at this reunion of architects. What was so national in this advanced building, we may ask? Its modernistic approach and pure geometric form have literally nothing to do either with regional folk architecture or the historical tradition of villa building in resort areas of the 19th century (what is characteristic of those historical villas is the romantic approach, decorativeness, affluence in details, and complicated form). Looking at Žilvinas we find little in common with this type of architectural expression. However, the tradition is continued here indirectly. The building is distinguished not only by its progressive architectural and constructive solution but also by its respect for the regional context and natural environment: it seems as though the structures of the vacation house were hanging in the air and drowning and almost dissolving in the leaves of the trees. This rather directly continues the pre-war tradition of villas merging into the surrounding greenery. (In Palanga most of these villas used to be quite spread out and virtually disappeared among the green trees.) All this may also be seen as an attempt to create an identity with nature, to grasp the genius loci, the "spirit of the place," based on the idea of Christian Norberg-Shulz.12

These examples reveal that in the 1970s and 1980s quite an open and loud concern was voiced among

architects about the national identity of Lithuanian architecture¹³ and the shift from the literal reflection of nationality to a more sophisticated and professional understanding of identity and true traditional values in architecture through a respect for the landscape and the architectural context. In this search it is possible to trace the influence of Northern Europe architecture. The 1970s and 1980s are outcomes of what was set already in the 1950s and 1960s. Architects then working testify to the fact that they were especially fascinated by Finnish and Swedish architecture. Eager for any source of information about life outside the "iron curtain," they unearthed it from various hidden resources and spread it among colleagues.14 What fascinated Lithuanian architects most was the simplicity of Finland's architecture with its balanced relation of nature and building, the social and the functional aspect, and the search for aesthetics in industrial construction. Many of the things they saw could at that time be realised in Lithuania, meaning that no special technology and materials were required. Lithuanian architecture at that time was very much limited by a shortage of building materials and poor engineering possibilities. It is important to emphasise that in 1980, based on such ideals, the notion of the national identity of Lithuanian architecture was clearly named and stated: new technologies, use of

traditional materials, a balanced relation to nature and urbanism, and overall moderation and quality.

It might seem to be a simple idea to somehow trace the parallel between the new brutalism and what was happening during the next period of the 1970s and 1980s in Lithuanian resorts. It had surely something in it rather brutal. After the 1970s the special structure of health resorts changed dramatically: buildings were built higher that in the 1960s and there was a movement from separate buildings to huge spa complexes. This changed the visage of towns greatly. What is also evident in certain cases is that architectural expression turned to a quite different paradigm. Rational forms were changed by expressive dynamic compositions, sometimes too complicated, plastic, and intimidating (e.g., the Banga coffee-house in Palanga by Gintautas Juozas Telksnys, 1982). The culmination of this trend was reached in the complex of physiotherapy convalescent homes in Druskininkai (architects Romualdas and Aušra Šilinskai, 1981) [fig. 5]. It was exceptionally original, expressive, ornamented, organic, sculptured, but extremely non-functional and all in concrete. Is this beton bruit? Or beton charmant? Undoubtedly it has something to do with Soviet-like irrationality, monumentality, pomposity, but at the same time it hides in itself something of an uncontrolleable desire to break away from the dangerous monotony of the surroundings; in that way it can be perceived as something open and honest (in the very specific meaning of being behind the "iron curtain").

Recreational architecture in Lithuanian health resorts during the Soviet period takes a specific place in the context of Lithuanian architecture as a multi-layer structure of different sources; it is distinguished by a clear creative potential.¹⁵ It reflects the main architectural trends, conditions, and problems of the whole Soviet block; reverberations of innovative global architectural ideas; and the search for an original national architectural character. This search for individual forms and a relation to the local spirit essentially reflects a new stage of modern architecture that solves the problem of space identity and that may be treated as a consequence of the peculiar Lithuanian architecture and its resistance to the levelling monotony of socialist realism in specific Lithuanian spaces of that period. In some cases, the

flight of the architectural fancy overtook contemporary technical possibilities.

It is also obvious that the special mission of recreational architecture, the forced myth of mass rest and relaxation, the encoded intention to create something different from the ordinary living environment actually opened the door for artistic creativity to break outside certain limits, to go into more spirited experiments, to free itself from the tight restrictions by profiting from the situation of being under the wing of a special commission, thereby revealing the ground of true artistic aspirations. The pulse of world-wide architectural movements was echoed here quite often in vitro and with its own specific inherence. Copying even directly was not a shame but meant advanced progress in the closed world behind the iron curtain.



Fig. 5. Romualdas and Aušra Šilinskai, Physiotherapy Convalescent Home in Druskininkai, 1981. Photo by the author

Notes

- ¹ Fredric Jameson, 'Is Space Political?', in: *Rethinking Architecture*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 258-268.
- ² Jonas Minkevičius, 'Šiaurė́s Lietuvos sovietmečio architektūros prieštaringumai' ('Contrasts of Soviet Architecture in Northern Lithuania'), in: *Žiemgala*, no. 2, 1992. http://www.ziemgala.lt/z/1999_02_02.html
- ⁴ Vaidas Petrulis, Sovietmečio visuomeninių pastatų architektūra Lietuvoje: stilistinė raida ir sociokultūriniai kontekstai (Architecture of Public Buildings in Lithuania of the Soviet Period: Stylistic Development ad Socio-cultural Contexts), doctoral dissertation, Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2005, p. 26.
- ⁵ Jūratė Tutlytė, Rekreacinė architektūra Lietuvos kurortuose (1940-1990): kompleksinis kokybės vertinimas (Recreational Architecture in Lithuanian Health-resorts (1940-1990): The Integrated Quality Evaluation), doctoral dissertation,

Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2002, pp. 43-46.

- ⁶ Jūratė Tutlytė, *Pokarinės Palangos rekreacinė architektūra* (*Recreational Architecture in Palanga during Postwar Period*), master thesis, Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 1997, pp. 16-17.
- ⁷ The Soviet architecture of the post-war period is characterised by various terms: "retrospectivism", "Stalinist architecture", "socialist realism", "superfluities in architecture". The term of "retrospectivism" in this context is chosen as the one best referring to transformations in architectural expression.
- ⁸ According to the telling of the personnel of the sanatorium, the project was indeed a copy of the example built in Georgia and until the reconstruction (in 1989) the building had all the attributes typical to Stalinist buildings long hallways, high interior ceilings decorated with gesso and clay plastic.
- ⁵ Alexei Tarkhanov, *Architecture of the Stalin Era*, New York: Rizzoli, 1992, pp. 49-50.
- ¹⁰ After the regaining of Lithuania's independence, during the difficult transition period, the building was left empty, the shining circle smashed into smithereens. It was reconstructed in 2003 but sadly lost its unique original appearance now there is a restaurant together with a residential complex around it.

- Algimantas Mačiulis, 'Architektūra kryžkelėje' ('Architecture at the Crossroads'), in: *Literatūra ir menas*, 17 March 1984.
- ¹² Christian Norberg-Shulz, *Roots of Modern Architecture*, Tokyo: A. D. A. Edita, 1988, p. 139.
- ¹³ 'Nacionalinė architektūra. Kas ji?' ('National Architecture. What is It?'), in: *Statyba ir architektūra*, no. 2, 1979, pp. 12-13.
- ¹⁴ According to the stories of celebrated architect brothers Algimantas and Vytautas Nasvytis, they looked for information in Moscow science libraries while taking part in preparing works for a Moscow exhibition. It was possible to find in special stocks publications on Northern Europe architecture, especially Finland with Alvar Aalto first of all. They copied what was valuable, made microfilms, and sent them to colleagues in Lithuania. Later, in 1959, a group of architects had the opportunity to go on a working trip to Finland and experience many things live. Teodoras Biliūnas, *Moderniosios architektūros savitumai Šiaurės Europos šalyse* (*Peculiarities of Modern Architecture in the Countries of Northern Europe*), bachelor theses, Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2000, pp. 24-26.
- ¹⁵ Despite the fact the some of most valuable ones have already been destroyed or changed dramatically.

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Užprogramuotas kitoniškumas: rekreacinės architektūros atvejis sovietmečio Lietuvoje

Reikšminiai žodžiai: sovietmetis, rekreacinė architektūra, ideologiniai, estetiniai architektūros pokyčiai.

Santrauka

Lietuvos sovietmečio rekreacinėje architektūroje juntamos to laikotarpio politinės, ideologinės ir estetinės nuostatos. Kuriant įsivaizduojamą "tobulą" socialistinę Sovietų Sąjungos visuomenę, poilsio sistemos formavimui buvo skiriamas išskirtinis dėmesys. Sukurtas savotiškas rekreacinės veiklos "fenomenas" – išgryninta veiklos ir gyvenimo sfera. Rekreacinė architektūra, kurortų statybos tapo socialistinės valstybės priemone visuotinai poilsio strategijai skleisti. Valingas, neretai ir agresyvaus pobūdžio planingumas, itin smarkiai paveikė Lietuvos kurortų architektūrinį vaizdą ir sąlygojo staigią kurortų plėtrą. Lietuvos kurortų architektūra užima specifinę vietą to laikotarpio architektūros kontekste, kaip viena kūrybiškiausių "erdvių". Skirtingai, nei daugelyje kitų Lietuvos miestų, kurortuose tuo metu daug statyta pagal individualius (ne tipinius) projektus. Originalių formų paiešką iš dalies sąlygojo funkcinė paskirtis ir užduotis – rekreacinę architektūrą siekta formuoti kitokią, nei gyvenamąją aplinką. Tuometinei Lietuvos kurortų architektūrai būdinga stilių, krypčių, architektūrinių idėjų ir sprendimų įvairovė – nuo istorinio retrospektyvizmo, funkcionalizmo iki savitų, susijusių su nacionalinio stiliaus paieškomis, modernizmo variacijų. Kurortų architektūros raidoje, rekreacinės architektūros raiškoje atsispindi tiek pagrindinės ideologinės nuostatos ir programos pokyčiai, tiek individualios pastangos nuo jų nukrypti.

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