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visiting, photographing, and filming the
Vilnius Sports Palace**

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The resonance of abandonment: visiting, photographing, and filming the Vilnius Sports Palace

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Abstract:

The Sporto rūmai, the Vilnius Sports Palace, is an indoor arena in Vilnius, Lithuania built in 1971 and a remarkable example of brutalist architecture. The arena was closed in 2008 for safety reasons. Plans to renovate the building have so far failed leaving the site as a modern ruin.

In my visual art practice, I engage with modern urban space, looking for and exploring sites that resonate with collective memory and utopian promise. I use, and experiment with, audiovisual documentation of these sites. Cities and architecture are experienced perceptually — how we see and hear and how we move through them. My attraction for the Vilnius Sports Palace stems from what I see as its resonant qualities. It demands our attention, but we are not sure why. This resonance is expressed by the site's own vulnerability as a tragic ruin or an abandoned opportunity for community participation. It also resonates through the visitor who might be sensitive to the Palace's architectural and social potential seemingly rendered obsolete. The uncanny familiarity of the structure leaves the visitor uncertain in what they might consider meaningful in their experience of the site.

This essay reflects on a photo and video exploration during which I captured and recorded digitally the site of the Palace. These files are inscriptions of the visual, aural and temporal presence of the site at two moments in time (in 2012 and 2023). They capture moments of the changing site in the recent past that will resonate into the future.

Keywords: Resonance, Architecture and Memory, Soviet Modernism, Urban Flânerie, Photographic Encounter

Paul Landon explores in his research and visual art practice the neglected spaces of modernity. These explorations are transcribed through processes of recording, editing, and reconstruction. His work is structured through the physicality and perception of architecture and landscape, positing these as sites inscribed with forgotten promise. He completed a DFA at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. Landon works in Montréal as a visual and media arts professor at UQAM.

Flânerie and Serendipity: Encountering the Palace

Walking through the city, we make use of indicators recognized in the natural and built environment to navigate. Hills, rivers, bridges, church spires, historical buildings, street signs and prominent advertising help us know where we are and where we are going. While our attention is focused on these elements to find our way, the peripheral vision of our wandering eyes will be drawn to elements of the landscape that beckon us. Our unconscious attention will take note of architectural and urban details that resonate with our imagination and with our collective and individual memories.

Elina Mikkilä, researcher in creative-critical writing, while developing a concept of "creational writing," notes how the (creative) thought process is influenced by the bipedal mobility of the author. Mikkilä suggests that this moving thought process opens up a metatextual understanding of the author's surroundings: "the metatextual engagement mirrors the insights gained by many prominent authors and philosophers while taking their thoughts for a hike, stroll and/or a city flânerie."¹

In the historic centre of Vilnius, the familiar European cityscape of medieval buildings and new developments under construction is interrupted by the crumbling Sporto rūmai (Vilnius Sports Palace) on the north bank of the Neris river. When I unexpectedly came across this structure in the summer of 2012, its curved roof and its glass façade recalled to me the USSR Pavilion that I saw when I visited Expo 67 as a child in Montréal.

While in her essay "The Art of 'Creational Writing': Unlocking Insights Through Creative-Critical Fusion," Mikkilä focuses on textual contradictions and revelations in the urban environment, the manner in which these discoveries are manifested and present themselves serendipitously to the urban walker coincides with the unexpected appearance of the Palace during my first visit to Vilnius. The sighting was, to quote Mikkilä, "the unintentional observation of something not sought for; a random occurrence that turns out to be a novel and surprising discovery."²

Memory, Meaning, and Political Conflict

The Vilnius Sports Palace, built on the former site of the Sznipiszok Jewish cemetery, was opened in 1971 and closed in 2008. It is remarkable for its striking modern architecture and innovative wave roof shape. Still standing when I returned to Lithuania in the autumn of 2023, its future is uncertain, a structure that I understand to be threatened by the all too familiar colliding forces of capital investment and cultural preservation. The site occupies a historic place

1. Elina Mikkilä, "The Art of 'Creational Writing': Unlocking Insights Through Creative-Critical Fusion," *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* 9, no. 1 (2024): 541.

2. Ibid., 539.

of memory for the Jewish community who wish that its inviolability be respected. Also, in the specific context of Lithuania, an uncomfortable relationship with Soviet era architecture would also seem to be a challenge to the Palace's preservation.

In her article "Ways of Seeing Architecture and Landscape in the Voids of Presence: The Case of a Health Resort on the Adriatic Coast of Croatia," Jasna Galjer writes of the photographic project undertaken by Wolfgang Thaler in 2011 of an abandoned resort in the former Yugoslavia. She notes how the deterioration of the building in the photographs echoes the erasing of a way of life that existed under a previous regime and the loss of the memories of that paradigm: "This deconstruction of visual portrayal is analogous with the disintegration of the system of former values, ranging from the loss of the social role of architecture, the destroyed beauty of architecture merged with the landscape, to the erasing of memories of personal experience of places."³

As Galjer remarks, this brings into question the dependence of certain types of architecture on precarious social structures and "the variable and unstable relationship between architecture and the social environment."⁴

My engagement with the Sports Palace stems from what I see as its resonant qualities. It demands our attention, but we do not know why. This resonance is expressed by the site's own vulnerability as a tragic ruin or an abandoned opportunity for community participation. It also resonates through the visitor who is vulnerable to the Palace's potential qualities rendered obsolete. The uncanny familiarity of the architecture leaves the visitor questioning what they consider meaningful in their experience of the site; to this North American, it resembles modern architecture from the Cold War West while at the same time seeming to exemplify tendencies of the late Soviet period in architecture and community planning in eastern Europe.

The architecture and landscaping of and around the Palace are emblematic of a Zeitgeist of a past in living memory of the 1970s and 1980s. The site, in the heart of historic Vilnius, resonates with a deeper time. The cemetery of Vilna Jews in Sznipiszok was in operation from 1592 until 1831 and the resonance of such a place of remembrance and spirituality is deeply felt by many.

Sonic Memory, Material Resonance

In his book *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, the media historian Siegfried Zielinski proposes a concept of deep time and considers how ancient developments in philosophy, theology and technology are undercurrents in the sea

of media we are having to navigate today.⁵ In the book's second chapter, Zielinski looks to the archaeology of technologies of musical intonation and amplification. Describing the massive pipe organs installed in the great cathedrals of Europe and the acoustic chambers inserted into baroque palaces, Zielinski claims that palatial and religious architecture is materially linked to early forms of sonic media and to developments in aural experience.

With its high roof and dense structure, the Sports Palace embodies the elements of aural resonance that Zielinski proposes. Built as an arena for presenting sporting events, concerts were also often held in the Palace. The resonance of these events could continue to be felt in the concrete, glass and metal of its architecture. Residents of Vilnius that I met in 2023 recounted their memories of attending events at the Palace before its closing, including a memorable concert by the American experimental rock group Sonic Youth held there in 1989.

The site also holds memories of more recent tragic events. A public funeral for the victims of the January Events (partisans who died fighting Soviet armed repression in 1991), was held there in January 1991. Also, perceptible from the site, looking across the Neris, are the traces of where a footbridge once abutted the shoreline. It was explained to me that these are the remains of a bridge that was under construction in the 1980s. It was reportedly used after an event before it was completed, and it collapsed injuring several people.

Geopolitical events condition our reception of architectural degradation. Lithuania's proximity to the ongoing Russian invasion of the Ukraine resonates in the architecture from what the locals refer to as the 'Soviet times.' The Palace's current state of degradation is the symptom of multiple forces at play including that of speculative capitalism. The Ukrainian poet Polina Baitsym's recent reflections on Soviet architecture in her homeland could help to inform our reception of this architecture today. Her poem "Non-Exigent Spaces" from 2022 reflects on the disorienting transformation of historically resonant architecture into sites of speculation:

"Enduring in their non-exigency, they grow covered in the ornaments of indifference.

With amplifying belligerence,

seekers of land to develop, of shopping malls to impose, ally with the government

for the property vengery

and thrive on the heritage of remissness.

'It's business par excellence,' many deduce in the universal parlance of bewilderment."⁶

3. Jasna Galjer, "Ways of Seeing Architecture and Landscape in the Voids of Presence: The Case of a Health Resort on the Adriatic Coast of Croatia," *Studies in Eastern European Architecture* 15, no. 2 (2023): 58.

4. Ibid., 42.

5. Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

6. Polina Baitsym, "Non-Exigent Spaces," *Ukrainian Poetry Review*, 2022.

Topoi, Memory, and the Photographic Encounter

The striking, yet seemingly obsolete, architecture of the Palace situates it in the “fluctuating and controversial” utopian paradigm of contemporary architecture.

Christina Contandriopoulos reminds us that the term “utopia,” originally coined by Thomas More in the 16th century, connotes somewhere beyond place, “from the Greek words for no-place (ou-topos) and good-place (eu-topos).”⁷

The resonating elements of the Sports Palace could also function as other interpretations of “topoi” that have temporal rather than spatial connotations. The concept of the “topos” (plural “topoi”) come from conventions in literature that recur over time. Referring to Ernst Robert Curtius, the media-archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo identified in mass media “phenomena that (re)appear and disappear and reappear over and over again and somehow transcend specific historical context.”⁸ Wanda Strauven suggests that topoi could function like Aby Warburg’s concept of *Nachleben*, the “afterlife” or temporal unconscious of image types that have persisted since antiquity. This sense of seeing something new that is also anchored in the past is a symptom of our modern condition rooted in the “mix of optimism and anxiety that surrounds all forms of modernity.”⁹

Tom Gunning identified this phenomenon as a “(false) impression of experiencing a past experience.”¹⁰ According to Strauven, this sense of seeing something new that is also anchored in the past is a symptom of our modern condition rooted in the “mix of optimism and anxiety that surrounds all forms of modernity”.

The concept of the topos recurring over time also lends itself to a reconsideration of the photographic document. As a moment captured in time that can be shared and reviewed repeatedly and over a long period, a photograph possesses a temporal resonance. What is shown in the images that I captured of the site is not the Sports Palace as it was designed or when it first opened to the public, nor the ruin that could be seen at the time of this writing, but rather two moments in its history and in my encounters with it.

7. Christina Contandriopoulos, “Utopian Paradigms in Contemporary Architecture,” *Journal of Architectural Theory* 18, no. 3 (2013): 3.

8. Erkki Huhtamo, “From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd: Notes toward an Archaeology of the Media,” *Leonardo* 30, no. 3 (1996): 300, quoted in Wanda Strauven, “Topoi in Media Archaeology,” *Media History* 22, no. 2 (2016): 232.

9. Wanda Strauven, “Topoi in Media Archaeology,” *Media History* 22, no. 2 (2016): 232.

10. Ibid.

I photographed and made some videos of the site, not as documentation of it, nor as elements for a future artwork. I tried to capture the structure’s presence and resonance. In some ways these photos and videos were taken only for me, as notes about a place that remained (and remains) enigmatic. I now share a selection of these images in an attempt to consider the site as emblematic of a resonance of displaced potential and of a blurring of collective memory and cultural signification.

Stillness, Distance, and the Refusal to Enter

Cities and architecture are experienced perceptually; we see, smell, feel and hear them as we move through them. While photography and videography are limited to audiovisual form of perception, they offer the potential of capturing the temporal qualities of built space; moments capturing and freezing time become an archaeology of both the place and its buildings and the people who visit these.

I first visited Vilnius in 2012. In the photographs and videos that I made of the Sports Palace that summer, its initial state of degradation is captured; boarded-up windows and crumbling concrete are in evidence, yet the structure is intact and can be approached (but not entered). The photos and videos I shot in 2012 and 2023 bear witness to the emptiness of the no longer functional space; its architecture designed for a flow of spectators and participants is strikingly still. In the videos, that stillness is accentuated by the lack of human movement. Cars pass in the distance. The wind blows the leaves and birds sing. A solitary figure crosses the plaza.

In October 2023, I led a walking group of local and visiting artists and researchers to visit the Palace and to discuss its cultural and social resonance. By this time the Palace was surrounded by a security fence and wooden hoarding covered in graffiti. Windowpanes had been removed and vegetation had grown through the concrete.

Before the walk, I spoke to a younger resident of the city about my project, about leading a group to the site. She said that she knew of the building well and then asked me if we would be able to enter it during the visit. I replied that we would not. “Boring,” she responded, and declined to participate in the walk.

The photographs of the site are all taken from the outside. I made no attempt to penetrate the fence surrounding it. The architecture does not reveal its inner configuration and histories. Likewise, the photographs themselves are hermetic, revealing only the outside appearance of this building. The Palace is presented as it was experienced, as an uncanny apparition in a somewhat familiar landscape.

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