

**DAAD GoEast International Winterschool on
Mapping Post-Socialist Urban Spaces in Vilnius & Druskininkai**



Final Report

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“Mapping Post-Socialist Urban Spaces in Vilnius” was a two week DAAD GoEast winter school exploring dilemmas of contemporary urbanisation in Eastern Europe by performing a deep mapping of two districts of Vilnius: Lazdynai and Šnipiškės. It is now 20 years after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, and radical changes have occurred both in the social practices and urban forms of the cities of the region such as Vilnius. At the same time, however, the life of these cities is also shaped by the fact that large sections of their built environments are still comprised of infrastructure constructed to form the habitats of urban life under very different social paradigms. Thus, in Vilnius if you look beyond the city’s increasingly tourist visited UNESCO heritage centre, you encounter districts such as Šnipiškės, where early 20th century wooden housing sits back-to-back with post-modernist skyscrapers, or Lazdynai, where an acclaimed socialist modernist sleeping district now struggles to function in new configurations. The aim of the winter school is to perform a bottom-up exploration of how social practices are today emerging in relation to the material infrastructures and local historical perceptions of each of the two very different case districts, in order to build a fuller picture of the processes involved in post-socialist urbanism.

This winter school, organized by the European Humanities University’s Laboratory of Critical Urbanism and the Vilnius Center for German Studies in collaboration with Lithuanian partners, such as Archfondas, Laimkis.lt, the municipality of Lazdynai and the Museum of Technology and Energy, has brought together a group of German, Belarusian, Lithuanian, Czech and Estonian students from disciplines ranging from architecture to urban studies, cultural geography and anthropology in an intensive programme aiming to produce new modes of researching the development of urban forms and the transformations of the societies of Eastern Europe. In so doing the winter school has engaged with the potential and problems of mapping at a time when the spread of digital technologies is multiplying both the quantity and range of maps being produced. The final product of the students’ work is, thus, an experimental mapping project of one aspect of the life of either of the two case study districts which they will present in an open meeting in each of the districts and in a publication scheduled for autumn 2014.

After two intensive weeks of introduction, fieldwork, a soviet spa trip and group discussions five groups presented their mapping projects in Lazdynai and Snipiskes to the public. This short report lines out how we worked, what were the results and what will we change in a future edition of the winter school.

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Coordination: Ieva Motuzaitė & Ira Lunevich

Tutors: Dalia Čiupalaitė, Indrė Ruseckaitė & Jekaterina Lavrinėc

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1) Mapping as a process oriented learning tool

The aim of the winter school on Mapping Post-Socialist Urban Spaces was to perform a Mapping of two very different case studies in Vilnius, as a way of broadening the understanding of these districts and how they work. We stressed from the very beginning that we don't have ready answers – the question of how to map these 'post-socialist' spaces is a question that we are working on ourselves in different academic contexts and we invited students to take the opportunity to do some empirical work themselves in the framework of the winter school. Since mapping has only recently become a popular technique, during the introductory days we addressed the issue of the blurring of what counts as a map, as well as discussing how digital mapping technologies have made the measurement and representation of spatial data different and addressing a social critique of maps as ideological/power constructs. To frame how we worked with students during the Winter School we defined Mapping as the sum of the following interrelated dimensions:

a) Mapping as process: A process oriented exploration of spaces as products of social interaction.

The process of mapping (or navigation) as a concept for how we carry out anthropological, sociological and geographical fieldwork and how we relate data to spaces. Experimental approaches to ways data is perceived and conceptualized.

b) Map as technique: What are the elements involved in making a map: concept (deciding what is interesting to map), data (base), selectivity (serving a political purpose), organization (relating data items to one another), scale (synchronizing multiple time-space relations), iconography (choosing modes of representation), key (setting up a legend).

c) Mapping as source: Reading and interpreting physical and digital maps as a means of recording data discovered in research, existing (historical, geographical, tourist, administrative, urban-planning, mental etc.) maps as a source of complex information about various layers of time and space relations.

d) Mapping as critique: Reflecting upon the role of mapping as an active process involved in the social production of space with a particular awareness of the mapper's active role in it. Questioning the political frame in which both the academic *object* and *subject* are embedded. Discussing the limits of mapping and its recent rise as part of digitalization of diverse urban lifestyles.

e) Mapping as product: Maps as a visual representation of research results. The creation of a condensed version of complex arguments, which serve as a starting point for further academic & public communication.

2) Introducing Lazydai and Šnipiškės

On the second and third day we started to explore both Lazdynai – an earlier Soviet housing project in the south-western periphery of Vilnius granted the Lenin Prize for architecture in 1974 – and Šnipiškės, an intersection of Soviet development of the right bank of the Neris River, which constantly threatens the still existing pre WWII settlement of wooden houses. During these two days we had in-depth walks though both districts with our Lithuanian partners, who carry out academic research there. Here you find some photo impressions from the very different parts of Vilnius.



1970s Soviet housing project and the Vilnius TV-tower © Max Hellriegel



Mapping Lazdynai © Max Hellriegel



First impressions of contrasts in Šnipiškės © Max Hellriegel



Exploring Šnipiškės © Max Hellriegel



Benjamin Cope in Lazdynai © Max Hellriegel



Working at the Museum of Technology and Energy © Max Hellriegel

3) Asking questions

During the first days, we started from asking questions about the specifics of both post-socialism and the production of urban space in Vilnius together with students. We problematized the temporal connection of post-socialism with the soviet past, since it leaves little space for concepts dealing with the role of the future, and we collected a broad range of issues which might be addressed by groups:

- Shifting modalities of ownership of urban space and their impact on the modernisation of infrastructure
- The role of infrastructure for solving economic and political problems
- Individual and collective strategies of appropriation of urban spaces
- The relationship between the planning process and those whose spaces are planned
- Usage of colors and the relationship between materiality and surfaces in public spaces
- The relationship between buildings and their environment, perceived as nature
- A changing relationship between private and public and practices of opening and closing spaces
- Generational patterns of space usage
- The impact of invisible labour migration as the absence of one generation
- Accessibility of public functions shaping everyday life
- Religious, linguistic and local identities and their role for community building
- The dynamics between self-perception and the public perception of non-locals
- Local practices of negotiating heritage and their impact on space productions
- Temporalities and their impact on changing land use patterns
- Spatial Overlap of temporal layers such as Urbanisation in the Russian Empire, Soviet modes of forced industrialisation, Post 1991 neoliberal investments

This list was used as a basis for further inquiry in small groups, which were set up by the students themselves. In each district, three tutors having both in-depth knowledge about the history and presence of the problems at the spot and working in academia provided input, guidance and feedback for the group work process.

We asked each group to discuss the following questions during the first days of their fieldwork: 1) Which problem you wish to address? 2) Which methodology you will apply with the human resources you have? 3) Which academic questions are relevant for your project design 4) Who do you address / how to relate to them? 5) how to visualize / map to fix the results.

As a general rule, we decided that a group should consist of : one person fluent in Lithuanian, another person fluent in Russian, one person with a background in architecture, urban planning, landscape design etc., one person with a background in sociology, anthropology, human geography etc. and generally there should be no more than five persons.

In the course of the fourth day, five groups addressing different issues were set up by students themselves – 3 working in Lazdynai and 2 in Šnipiškės on different issues.

5) Summing up: What did we map, what we did not map

The winter school was a great opportunity to get an insight into two districts of Vilnius and their recent developments. We addressed challenges emerging for inhabitants through the processes constantly reshaping these districts, and named in particular a changed role of material ownership on the one hand and participation in public planning and spatial management processes on the other, as particularly significant features. The group established modes of internal discussion and reflection on the specific situation of this short-term experience with a large amount of non-locals in the group.

A particular strength of the winter school's setting, with an intensive introduction part, a long fieldwork part and the final presentations of a mapping result, was the ability of most student groups to go relatively deeply into their chosen subject (particularly given the short time span) and to work on the specific meanings of the problems they raised through substantive and genuinely innovative mapping projects.

As a result of our ongoing discussion process we came to the conclusion that „post-socialism” as a term includes too many problematic notions because of its strong emphasis on the Soviet past and an inability to link it connect it meaningfully with future challenges of urban spaces in the region. Therefore, we would try to redefine the terms of reference for a future edition of the winter school in a way that would seek to reintroduce the future as an important dimension of the temporal setting of urban spaces in Central and Eastern Europe. To enable the comeback of the future into our academic work, we would also more strongly encourage architects to go beyond mapping the problems of today, and to visualize their ideas and concepts for future production of public space.

One of the high-points for all concerned was the great variety of spaces visited over the course of the Winter School, such as the restaurant at the top of the TV tower in Lazdynai, the late Soviet era planetarium in Šnipiškės, the museum of Soviet era public monuments in Grotas Parkas, the spa resort of Druskininkai, the museum of technology in Šnipiškės or the café Klasika in Lazdynai. This wide variety of spaces in which to work, eat or relax were both memorable in themselves and gave the participants a sense of the wide spectrum of configurations that might be termed “post-soviet”.

It became clear to all participants that mapping is not about the production of a final result called a map, but rather about using mapping as a process oriented tool, allowing one to bring together conceptual work, and the discovery and analysis of empirical data in a visualized form. Mapping the unusual configurations of post-socialist spaces is by necessity experimental, and we are pleased with the results that the participants produced this year. However, to make this process work better in a future winter academy, we will develop a framework of introducing more concepts and giving more workshop experiences on different modes of mapping before we start to go into fieldwork. We will strengthen therefore the cooperation with designers and architects asking them to introduce into their way of working at an earlier stage of the project to those participants with a humanities background.

All participants profited from the presence of very different perspectives during the two weeks – both in terms of input by Vilnius based academics and students themselves. In particular, the presence of Lithuanian and Belarusian students during the school made it an intensive experience of Vilnius as a city on the crossroads of Central- and Eastern Europe, of Soviet experience, post-socialist strategies of coping with new challenges and the very specific setting of the city vis-à-vis Belarus, where it would not be possible to organize a winter school in such an open way, carrying out research on the public space of the Belarusian capital.

Thus, all participants of the winter school learnt how challenging and productive the constellation with students from different cultures – geographically, linguistically and academically – can be. We

had a lot of fruitful discussions about differences in approaching urban space, project design and discursive cultures when students and tutors from very different backgrounds come together for a short period. And we experienced some borderlines between disciplines, some language barriers between different modes of knowledge production and finally different understandings of bringing theory and practice together.

It is a challenge to bring together people of different backgrounds over a short space of time, and this year, after the intensive introductions, we put the emphasis on group fieldwork and map production. In many ways, this approach bore fruit as the information uncovered and the maps produced are impressive. However, in a future school on Mapping urban spaces we would endeavor to pay more attention to the technical skills for drawing a map and provide more theoretical foundation on the underlying theoretical discourses of critical urbanism and methodologies of fieldwork during the introductory phase. This will enable architects to learn more about the social production of space and non-architects about drawing based ways of thinking and working, prior to engaging in the fieldwork activities.

A practical way to do this would be to make mapping more consequently part of the group work from the very start of the winter school – that is, from the introduction onwards, to draw maps of own configurations of knowledge and interest, moods, ideas and comments. To be able to carry out this mapping more intensively as a tool to bring participants of different background closer together we would need a single shared spaces, which would be available throughout the whole winter school, a feature which, for logistical reasons turned out to be a limitation in Vilnius this year.

On the basis of this year's experience, we also believe it would be helpful to have a tighter geographical focus, thus making logistics and the context less complex. Lazdynai and Snipiskes are both valuable districts for mapping and the groups learnt a lot in both districts, but two weeks are not enough to set up a frame in which a comparison between them can be meaningful for all participants. Vilnius in itself is a larger and more complex city than one might think, so we are currently investigating the possibility of focusing next year on a smaller settlement, such as Visagyna, a town that grew up around a former nuclear power plant. We are currently carrying out preliminary research into this case study location, and also seek to make contact with groups of potential participants who are familiar with the location in order to have more prior access points into the field and to intensify the field work aspect.

As a particular challenge we will have to further address an outcome of the funding scheme of the GO East Program, which allowed us to bring together a larger number of German participants together with students from Lithuania, Belarus, Czech Republic and Estonia. We observed an asymmetrical situation of discursively skilled German participants and local students from Lithuania and Belarus, who often were architects trained primarily in drawing and project development. As far as large parts of the research had to be carried out in the Lithuanian and Russian languages, but the meta discussions on concepts, methodology and structure were held in English, a large disproportion emerged: German participants – in particular those who added a lot to raise critical questions about how we work – often implemented their agenda, their discourses and their needs on multilayered groups. The very different discursive and practical needs of architects were much less often and deeply addressed –both by the winter school design and in the group constellations. This asymmetrical situation was deepened due to the fact that the project work became meaningful to the degree participants were able to gather knowledge about the districts' meaning for its inhabitants – a task carried out particularly by those with Lithuanian and Russian language skills. While work in small groups was specifically designed to allow different competences to contribute, and to share and mutually challenge their knowledges, the disparity of modes of articulation of ideas and workloads is something that will need further thought.

The maps produced by the participants at the Winter School were on view to the public as an exhibition that hung for the week thereafter in the Museum of Technology in Vilnius, and they will also be presented as part of an exhibition of mapping projects to be held at the European Humanities University, Vilnius, at the time of the annual student conference in mid-May. Thus, we are delighted that the Winter School also functions as a productive element in the ongoing discussions of the place and possibilities of mapping within the post-socialist context. To this end, we also await written texts by the participants describing their mapping projects in more analytical terms, which we will work to turn into a publication of the Winter School's results.