

# Chapter 9

## Living in a Large Housing Estate: Insider Perspectives from Lithuania



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**Abstract** This chapter explores the concept of a particular type of living environment—a large socialist housing estate—and its daily life in Soviet times through the memories and narratives of its residents. The analysis compares experiences of those who moved into and lived in three Vilnius mikrorayons: Lazdynai (awarded the Lenin prize in 1974), Žirmūnai (awarded the State prize in 1968) and Karoliniškės, built when the euphoria of getting a new apartment of one's own was already dampened by increasing general criticism of mass housing. The research relies upon 29 in-depth qualitative interviews with people who, at the time, were newcomers to the newly built districts and who still reside there. Findings suggest differences in opinions about living environments between residents of Lazdynai and residents of the other estates, the former being strongly influenced by the Lenin prize and its echoes in public discourse. The analysis examines the shift in attitudes over time concerning this model of living environment together with particular aspects of it, starting with the earliest, often highly optimistic impressions back in the late 1960s and culminating in the defensive nostalgia prevailing in contemporary opinions.

**Keywords** Housing estates · Mass housing · Mikrorayon · Soviet daily life · Vilnius, lithuania

### 9.1 Introduction

Mass housing, a specific and unusual type of living environment at the time of the construction of the first *mikrorayons*, imposed a completely new way of organising everyday life. It is therefore of great importance to understand how the ideas of urban and architectural design incorporated in mass housing estates affected and

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influenced their residents' way of life while on the other hand, the strategies newcomers employed to make themselves feel at home in their new apartments.

Mass housing was a large-scale enterprise in Lithuania: Vilnius' housing stock multiplied nearly five times between 1945 and 1990 (Miškinis 1991: 92). At the beginning, these estates presented models of socialist living, but today housing estates are subject to growing criticism and an image of urban ghettos is taking hold (Caldenby 2010: 5, 16). Yet, the foundation of nearly all discussion concerning this topic is professional opinion that lacks consideration of resident attitudes. A similar trend afflicts contemporary research analysing Soviet-period housing in Lithuania or in other parts of the former Soviet Union. The scholarship can be classified into the categories of urban (Caldenby 2010), architectural (Drėmaitė 2006) and design (Crowley 2002; Buchli 1997; Lakačauskaitė-Kaminskienė 2011) analysed from the perspective of professional outsiders (architecture, art and cultural historians) (for example, Drėmaitė et al. 2012 covers all three categories, including relevant social and political contexts).

On the contrary, this chapter analyses the built environment and residential space of socialist mass housing estates and daily life lived within them through memories and narratives of residents. The research presented herein has similarities with other relevant studies based on ethnographic methodology and data, including research about the Soviet housing experiment as experienced by residents (Buchli 1999). Gullestad (1984) explores democratic welfare state societies with a focus on living environments and the home-centred realm with relevance to large housing estate of the 1960s and 1970s around the Baltic Sea. The material aspects—for example, DIY and manual craft, of 'making a home' in the former Soviet Union—are richly explored by Reid (2014). This chapter both contextualises and extends previous scholarship by relying on qualitative interviews and emphasising material culture.

Representing the first attempt to enlarge the scope of scholarship about experiences in centrally planned housing within the Lithuanian context, this chapter compares experiences in three Vilnius *mikrorayons*: Lazdynai, which was the most praised (constructed between 1967 and 1974 and awarded the Lenin prize in 1974), Žirmūnai, less renowned but still well respected (constructed between 1962 and 1969 and awarded the State prize in 1968) and Karoliniškės (constructed between 1970 and 1976). Completion of the last of these occurred when the initial euphoria of acquiring a new apartment was already dampened by growing criticism both of centrally planned housing in general, and particular aspects of the style, such as poor building quality, incomplete construction and uniformity: 'Žirmūnai, Lazdynai are like the peaks of mass housing in Lithuanian cities. Meanwhile other complexes are still far off that level' (Miškinis 1991: 86).

In all three mikrorayons, newcomers were assigned to new apartments equipped with modern conveniences. Shops, schools and kindergartens designated for the inhabitants' daily needs were located nearby. Plans for public transport and new roads existed to connect the estates—proclaimed as being quiet and green—with the city centre and industrial areas. It might have seemed as if the newcomers were living out a dream, but they faced significant challenges. It is therefore important to represent memories of daily life from the perspective of insiders and to compare

variations in the living conditions and opinions of residents of Žirmūnai, Lazdynai and Karoliniškės. This research exposes a shift in attitudes over time concerning standardised housing, beginning with the first, often optimistic impressions in the late 1960s and culminating in rather negative or, conversely, defensively nostalgic contemporary opinions (Janušauskaitė 2015).

## 9.2 Data Collection

The research presented in this chapter employs a qualitative approach. It consists of two techniques: in-depth interviews with fragments of participant observation and archival research (especially fonds No. 1036 and 1070 in the Vilnius Regional State Archive, where information concerning design and construction processes is preserved, and relevant press publications of the period). Two strictly quantitative pieces of sociological research conducted immediately after the construction of the districts, completed in 1974 in Lazdynai and in 1980 in Karoliniškės (Vanagas 1992), proved also to be a valuable source of information. A detailed survey, designed by urban planner and researcher Vanagas (1973), was intended to elicit feedback from new tenants and suggest guidelines for future mass housing projects. Respondents were selected using probability sampling based on the type and size of their apartment with responses generated from interviews. The survey covers a broad range of questions from urban design to the size of the kitchen or residents' preferred ways to spend their leisure; its data complements and confirms contemporary findings.

Ethnographic data has been collected using semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted between January 2013 and September 2017. Participants were selected according to the following criteria: they moved into the *mikrorayons* Žirmūnai, Lazdynai or Karoliniškės when newly built, and have resided there ever since, i.e. they identify themselves as 'original tenants'. There was no intention to study social circles within the framework of this research, but because the first interviewees who themselves were found through personal social networks provided further information on their neighbours or friends, and snowball sampling was used onwards to enlarge the interview base and to compare several attitudes towards objectively identical conditions or events. There were 29 interviews conducted in total, five with two interviewees (such as spouses or neighbours). For a detailed account of participants and their living conditions, see Table 9.1. All participants received information about the goals and methods of this research and gave their consent to participate. In addition, all the names mentioned in this text are pseudonyms and personal details, such as addresses and work positions, remain concealed.

The majority of the research participants have lived in the *mikrorayons* for more than 40 years. Residents belong to two generations: they either received the apartments as working people or they moved in with their parents. Most of the residents are now elderly, causing many of the interviews to take place in the setting

**Table 9.1** Participants and residential characteristics

Housing estate	Interviewee				Apartment size and storey							Building type						
	Male	Female	1st generation	2nd generation	Number of bedrooms			Storey				5th–9th	10th–12th	5-storey	9-storey	12-storey		
					Studio	1	2	3	Ground floor	1st	2nd						3rd	4th
<i>Žirmūnai</i>	4	7	6	5	–	6	2	1	1	4	1	2	1	–	–	8	–	1
<i>Lazdynai</i>	2	13	10	5	1	6	4	3	4	2	1	1	2	4	–	10	2	2
<i>Karoliniskės</i>	1	5	3	3	–	3	3	–	1	2	1	–	–	–	–	3	3	–
Total	7	25	19	13	1	15	9	4	6	8	3	3	3	6	–	21	5	3

*Note* In Žirmūnai, 4 of the 6 one-bedroom apartments are an older type with a walk-through room

of their home, which provided additional non-verbal information concerning their living environment and daily routines. Conversations covered various topics (in chronological order), reflected in the organisation of this chapter: 'getting an apartment', moving in, settling in and dealing with defects and deficiencies, relations with neighbours, living conditions and daily life in Soviet times, opinions of various housing estates (including their place of residence), and finally changes in attitude over time as the socialist system collapsed and both people and buildings grew old.

### 9.3 Acquiring a New Apartment

'One family in one apartment', was an official goal established by the USSR Communist Party in 1957 (Drémaité 2006: 323). Yet getting a private, modern apartment was considered an immense achievement throughout the 1960s and 1970s. As Laima from Lazdynai emotionally recalled: 'When you don't have anything and you get an apartment, you feel as if you're in heaven'. There were three ways to get an apartment through the state-regulated housing allocation system: first, people could wait in a general housing queue; second, they could get an apartment from the organisation where they were employed (depending on the type of organisation: retail staff stood no chance in comparison to construction workers) and third, they could join a building cooperative. Waiting lists were long (though considerably shorter for cooperative housing), and the housing distribution system was never transparent causing many people to join cooperatives and pay for a new apartment themselves. Paying for cooperative housing was also the only officially permitted way to acquire more square metres per person than could be allocated according to the rules.

The most popular apartment type was a communal one-bedroom apartment (with a typical size of approximately 45 m<sup>2</sup>), which constituted 42.9% of all the apartments built in Lazdynai, and 50.7% in Karoliniškės (Vanagas 1992: 44). These apartments were never referred to as 'one-bedroom apartments' but were instead known as two-room apartments because the rooms did not differ significantly in size or other qualities and usually served as multifunctional spaces. In Indrė's opinion, this practice had a negative impact on the demographic composition of residences: 'virtually the whole block consisted of two-room apartments, so all the families on this staircase were single-child families'. Yet, a 1974 survey of the then prestigious Lazdynai revealed that in almost one-third of three-bedroom apartments, someone was regularly sleeping in the walk-through living room. In one-bedroom apartments, this number increased to nearly two-thirds (Vanagas 1992: 79). Therefore, design professionals promoted convertible furniture which was highly desired by tenants.

Most of the apartments were identical: thus, the main distinguishing feature, except for the apartment number, was its vertical location in the building. The first and second floors were almost uniformly recognised as the best options as they

were elevated from the ground level but not too high, considering that five-storey buildings for economic reasons were still designed without an elevator. In the higher blocks, which were usually regarded as inferior for many reasons by those who lived in the lower buildings, opinions were divided between the lower and the upper floors, which offered stunning views (except for the very last floor which was notorious for its coldness in winter, heat in summer and constant leaking). There was common agreement that the ground floor was the worst for having no privacy (security issues emerged only a few decades later). It was possible to swap between floors, but this happened only in exceptional circumstances such as a sick or disabled person in a family needing to live on the ground floor. In cooperative buildings, the procedure of drawing lots was adopted to ensure a fair distribution process, but in many cases it introduced possibilities for corruption: ‘it was discrimination because we all paid the same money but we drew different lots: all the philologists and teachers drew a lot with the ground or the fourth floor and a bad layout’ (Elvyra, Žirmūnai).

## 9.4 Moving In

Newcomers were usually full of curiosity and excitement, so they tried to pay a visit as soon as possible. However, their initial impressions often proved to be somewhat controversial in all three housing estates as illustrated by the following conversation of a married couple:

Margarita recalls: ‘I came here, it was still under construction, it was mud, it was a quagmire’.

Vladas retorts: ‘And I could hear a cuckoo calling. As a country man, I really liked it’.

In fact, many residents drew a distinction between city people and ‘rural children’ as they called themselves. Apparently, those who came from a rural background more often appreciated nature and its benefits, which were obvious from the very first visits to all three estates, while others were horrified by the muddy surroundings that ‘looked like trenches after the war’ (Elvyra). Trees, which were later promoted as one of the most prominent features of effective modernist planning, were still very young or not even planted (see Fig. 9.1). Ona recalled how her elderly mother complained about Lazdynai: ‘it was so empty, there wasn’t a single tree, nothing... it was such a desert’.

Ironically, residents of Lazdynai, the estate proclaimed to be ‘the most fully completed in the republic’ (Vanagas 1973: 8), complained the most. The situation was so bad at one point during the autumn that a construction worker in big rubber boots had a special task: help remove people stuck in the mud near the central avenue. This was inconvenient since newcomers had to be quite creative to avoid material loss. For example, Nijolė lost one of her shoes in the mud, and then someone told her to wrap her shoes with plastic bags. Her neighbour, Laima,



**Fig. 9.1** Beginning a new life in Žirmūnai. *Source* V. Janušauskaitė family archive

created a paved path from her entrance to the completed sidewalk using concrete tiles stacked nearby, but by the evening the tiles had sunk into the mud.

The new housing estates were still considered to be located somewhere far away and this image was reinforced by inadequate or incomplete transport connections that depended on bridges which had not yet been built. No ‘main street’ existed in Žirmūnai in 1965, and to reach public transport, newcomers travelled on foot approximately 1.5 km to the west to Dzeržinskis street. Aronas recalled that the first day he made his way home from school was horrible: it was far away, a long walk through puddles, and all he knew was the general direction (no accurate city maps were publicly available in the Soviet Union at the time, only very distorted, small-scale diagrams). On the other hand, there were two ferries from Žirmūnai to Antakalnis on the opposite bank of river Neris. The ferries only operated during the summer season, and thus the opening of Žirmūnai bridge in 1967 (for the jubilee of the Revolution) is remembered as ‘a huge improvement’ by Liudmila. Valakampiai bridge was completed later, but the time saving was so significant that Alma used to ignore the danger and cross this bridge while it was still under construction in order to get to her collective garden. The initial lack of asphalt also made journeys complicated. For example, at the beginning, the last bus to Lazdynai left at 9:00 PM and ‘after that, you’ve had it. Taxi? Taxis didn’t go to Lazdynai because of the bad roads; it was quite possible to get stuck’ (Laima and Nijolė).

Built on the sites of former suburban villages, the new residents of the three housing estates could see remnants of the villages that were incongruent with the current socialist reality: an abandoned Jewish cemetery in Karoliniškės, overgrown orchards in Lazdynai, wooden cottages (Fig. 9.2) and the almost invisible remains of Calvary chapels marked with brick-lined flowerbeds in Žirmūnai. Children



**Fig. 9.2** Housing blocks drive out the Giedraičių street slums. *Source* Statyba ir architektūra, December 1968, used with permission

eagerly explored these places. The sites of the future—that is, large unfinished structures that surrounded already inhabited blocks—also peaked the interest of children. Every element of the new environment transformed into a resource. For example, ‘playing home’ required children to ‘build’ an apartment ‘to live in’, arranging the layout of it on the ground using paving slabs from nearby stacks of building material. Other popular activities included frequent visits to abandoned cottages or construction sites. Marius and his friends managed to climb onto a diving platform to look down upon the empty unfinished Lazdynai pool. Incomplete housing blocks became sites of play: it was fun for children to throw sticky black insulation material (for building panel joints) at other children. In Karoliniškės, children tried to wash the material to produce chewing gum, mostly unavailable in the USSR. Meanwhile, the adults had to deal with issues that are more practical: initially, the elevators in nine- and twelve-storey apartment buildings remained (intentionally) out of order to avoid possible damage from large furniture items, forcing residents to climb the staircases with all of their possessions.

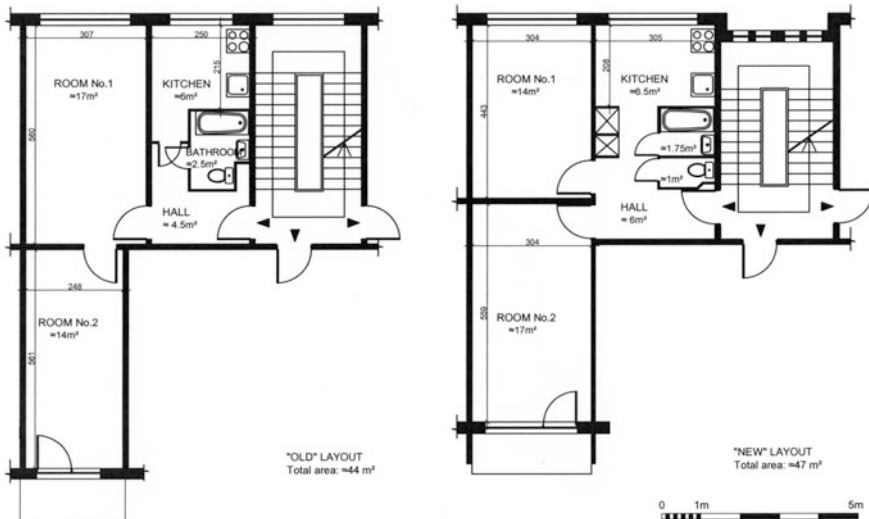
## 9.5 Deficiencies

Most of the interviewees had never had their own personal apartment before, so almost any level of quality was still an improvement. Yet, there is a distinction between Lazdynai and the other two *mikrorajons*. Residents of Žirmūnai and Karoliniškės demonstrated a moderate attitude towards the quality of their apartments and instead emphasised their feeling of joy. One issue that bothered a significant part of Žirmūnai residents was the poor design of ‘older type’ one-bedroom apartments, containing two main living spaces, a larger walk-through room and a



second very narrow room, ‘like a corridor’ (see Fig. 9.3 for the layouts of ‘old’ and ‘new’ one-bedroom apartment). Liudmila called this type of apartment the ‘worst possible option’. Elvyra felt particularly disappointed because she had paid for new panels (with separated rooms) but was assigned to the older type apartment and only received reimbursement of one hundred roubles. It was a rather small sum of money: Antanina recalls that a two-bedroom apartment in Karoliniškės was worth 8,000 roubles in the early 1970s. Many immediately attempted to address the issue of walk-through room through ‘do-it-yourself’ efforts or hiring illegally paid labour. For Alma this attempt ended up in court: ‘I found out that there was a workshop where Jewish people were working. They made walk-in closets which separated one room from another. When they were delivering the closet to me that I ordered, they were stopped by the militia. I was summoned to the court for interrogation and I was told that they were doing everything illegally and the material was confiscated. Later on, I got it back because it was already paid for’. Another sensitive aspect that is still highly contentious is bathroom layout. Some consider that a separate toilet is convenient for larger families while others argue that it is simply unhygienic with no sink for hand washing in a tiny toilet room. Indrė’s grandfather, who often came for the winter from a rural area, complained that it was too close to the kitchen: he felt that the proximity of food and toilet was inappropriate.

Despite the fact that there were similar small issues in all three estates, it was Lazdynai newcomers who immediately noticed and listed a series of defects of varying importance: bad quality of windows, doors, flooring and wall paint, residual dampness from the construction, even rotten wood under the linoleum flooring and ‘not a single perpendicular wall’ (Bronė). However, there was one



**Fig. 9.3** Plans of ‘old’ and ‘new’ one-bedroom apartments. *Source* Drawing by V. Janušauskaitė (2018), based on original plans

defect on which all the interviewees uniformly agreed. Prefabricated apartment buildings were well known for their poor sound insulation: inner concrete walls were only 14 cm wide; consequently, Alma could hear her drunken neighbour snoring. These walls required residents to adapt various noise mitigation strategies: for example, Indrė's father in Žirmūnai wouldn't allow her to begin her piano practice without first covering all the electricity sockets in the room with cushions to muffle the sound.

Officially the certificate of building completion could not be approved without the signatures of all residents, confirming that all the defects had been resolved (this also suggests that defects were expected), but after Elvyra refused to sign, her signature was forged. Frustration due to constant shortages and poor quality of nearly all the elements of the living environment resulted in two opposite attitudes. For example, Petras considered it of no importance: 'I must confess, I'm not a craftsman myself. Those trivial things...' This is reminiscent of the spiritual ideal of the 1920s, described by V. Buchli in *Narkomfin* (Buchli 1999: 132) and revived in the second wave of modernisation (Buchli 1997: 161). This attitude was quite widely shared, because even those who chose the other extreme—'hunting' for better quality items and ordering individually made furniture—adopted this modernist aesthetic. Categorisation of taste even served to define the 'other': 'you can immediately distinguish the residents of these apartment buildings. They prefer colours such as bright yellow, green, pink...' (Nijolė).

## 9.6 Neighbours

The Soviet housing allocation system was found on social and ethnic mixing: a university professor should comfortably live beside a factory worker in an identical apartment. This tool intended to create an equal society but in reality, it did not encourage people to interact with neighbours with whom they did not share similar interests and values. This trend had been identified in the above-mentioned Vanagas' 1970s survey, when only 13% of respondents attested to spending their leisure time with neighbours, compared to 39% spending time with family and relatives and 22% with colleagues (Vanagas 1992: 60).

Physical integration served to increase psychological segregation. Liudas even pointed out that one of the advantages of a nine-storey building is that 'you can run away. You don't need to meet a neighbour and greet him'. Neighbours or even entire blocks were described according to nationality (Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, Jewish), social background (people of rural origin versus intelligentsia) and social position (white-collared employees versus workers). Interviewees in Lazdynai and Žirmūnai, who regarded themselves as members of the intelligentsia, emphasised that 'cultured people' populated their neighbourhood, thus classifying themselves too as 'special'. In particular, inhabitants of Žirmūnai strongly contradicted the stereotype of the blue-collar *mikrorayon*. This confirms that the social utopia of mixing different people was not successful: most of the residents made friends only

with ‘birds of the same nest’ (Bronė). There were some exceptions in apartment buildings of more homogeneous social composition: whether the one in Žirmūnai populated by intelligentsia or the one in Lazdynai where people, mostly blue-collars, who relocated from the Naujininkai suburb had retained a sense of micro-community. The latter example confirms Vanagas’ survey findings from the 1970s, showing that less educated people were usually more involved in neighbourhood-based relationships—up to 23.4% compared with only 8.3% among those with higher education (Vanagas 1992: 62).

It is therefore not a coincidence that the most important attribute of a good neighbour (for 56% of residents in Lazdynai and 47% in Karoliniškės in the 1970s Vanagas 1992: 64) was and continues to be, being quiet and polite. The issue of poor sound insulation became especially sensitive when people working for the KGB or similar secretive organisations inhabited any number of apartments. Regard for these residents was a mixture of dislike and fear, and sometimes self-created. For example, Bronė recalled how her neighbour, after getting drunk, used to tell them: ‘I’ll have you all like this’ (clenching his fist). Vladas was certain that the KGB controlled their building in Žirmūnai, because many KGB employees lived there and ‘behind our pantries in the basement there was a corridor with an eavesdropping device’.

Having a different ethnic and linguistic background seldom presented challenges. However, it was nearly always an attribute mentioned when discussing neighbours. The question whether there was a dominant daily language in these multilingual environments is worth further research. Many of the interviewees from all three *mikrorayons* mentioned what Indrė and Sonata’s discussion of their childhood communications stated succinctly: ‘the Polish learned Lithuanian very quickly but the Russians never spoke it. Therefore, we [Lithuanians] learned Russian but not Polish’.

Overall, each person acknowledged that respectable and ‘generally good’ people populated apartment buildings, and/or staircase, with whom, in most cases, one had little contact. This was emphasised despite the fact that nearly everywhere there were several apartments that were or had been occupied by people who departed from socially appropriate behaviour patterns. Most often, excessive alcohol consumption and its consequences, sometimes murder, caused these patterns. Yet, there were stories of even more unusual crimes: for example, Vladas in Žirmūnai said ‘there were graves of Napoleon soldiers... many were buried there with gold teeth... he used to bring [home] their skulls and pull out the teeth’.

## 9.7 Daily Life

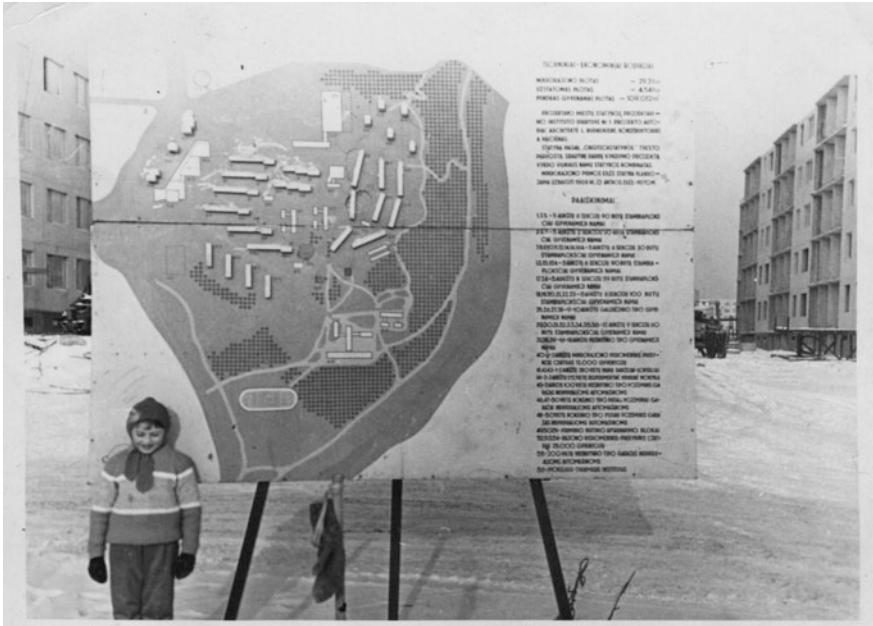
All three housing estates resembled Scandinavian-type suburbs. Despite the fact that nearly all residents worked elsewhere, there was planning for various services according to a three-level system: a primary service centre within the distance of 150 m, a secondary centre within 500 m and a third-level centre (designated for the

entire estate) within 1200 m (Drėmaitė et al. 2012: 166–167). Built first were the living quarters, due to the housing shortage, and new residents usually moved in while public and commercial buildings were still under construction. This situation resulted in many schoolchildren commuting back and forth on a daily basis to finish their school year in their previous schools in the city centre.

Shabby temporary wooden kiosks served initially as grocery stores. Later, modern buildings and self-service supermarkets replaced these. Žirmūnai residents also appreciated the Dzeržinskis market, where people went on foot or using trolleybus No. 5. There were several cafés in each of the estates, which served coffee (often remembered as of quite poor quality) and pastries. They are now long closed and older residents consider the lack of meeting places as one of the main disadvantages compared with the past. A restaurant on the first floor of the Minsk shopping centre in Žirmūnai was atypical, serving meals prepared according to special dietary requirements and for which patrons needed a doctor's prescription. The cream of the crop was Erfurtas, a restaurant and nightclub in Lazdynai, renowned in Lithuania and promoted to foreign guests, including official delegations (Liutkevičienė 2012: 94, 143–144). Locals too enjoyed being near it in various ways. Petras and Aldona, who lived in front of it, listened on their balcony for free to concerts of famous Lithuanian stars of the time, audible through the bar's open windows. Otherwise, it was not easy to get in unless one knew how to skip the long queues: 'If you took ten roubles and showed it through the window, you would get in immediately' (Nadia). Meanwhile, Marius used to go there after school because it offered a menu of the day for 'one rouble and you could eat more than enough for that'. It seems, however, that people from Žirmūnai and even from Karoliniškės seldom visited this famous place.

Interestingly, neither adults nor children from neighbouring Lazdynai and Karoliniškės interacted in their immediate natural surroundings—the former went down to the river and the latter favoured Lake Salotė in the opposite direction or the same river bank but a little bit further away. Even more significant is the fact that people from different parts of Žirmūnai also identified themselves with their respective neighbourhood (unofficially called lower, middle/central and upper Žirmūnai). Indrė professed that a grocery store ten minutes' walk away was already considered 'not ours'. Nevertheless, leisure activities in all the *mikrorayons* appeared very similar—hiking around all year round, cross-country skiing in winter (see Fig. 9.4), camping, cycling, and bathing and sunbathing in summertime. Liudmila even managed to go down to the Neris River for a swim in the mornings before work. The surrounding area also provided natural resources: Laima pointed out that 'the forest was full of good things—mushrooms and berries... My husband used to get up early and pick fresh mushrooms for breakfast'.

Children used the neighbourhood surroundings for games as well. In all the housing estates, climbing on the roofs was a common activity. In Karoliniškės, the apartment building junctures allowed children to jump from the roof of one nine-storey block to another. The commonality of this behaviour and different perspectives on the limits of safe behaviour caused Sonata to recall: 'As for me, I too jumped... My mum was hanging out the laundry on the balcony on the sixth



**Fig. 9.4** A construction information sign and skiing in Žirmūnai before apartments are occupied. *Source* V. Janušauskaitė family archive

floor. She just looked up and said nothing’. Nadia and her friends in Lazdynai often explored the underground labyrinth of corridors containing heating pipes, with entrance from the basements of their apartment building. Adults allowed children and teens to play alone in the surrounding grounds (Fig. 9.5), and most parents had no idea where or how far kids went. However, the teenage boys experienced the situation, described as very peaceful and secure by adults, somewhat differently.



**Fig. 9.5** Unattended children playing in the courtyard. *Source* Statyba ir architektūra, May 1968, used with permission

Marius from Lazdynai and Liudas from Karoliniškės talked about gangs forming on a territorial basis by teenagers, mostly Russian speaking, who were ‘not capable of continuing their education and engaged in drinking, smoking and stealing kopecks’. Liudas was sure that many of them were delinquents relocated away from Russian cities in advance of the 1980 Summer Olympics: however, there has never been any official confirmation of this popular urban myth.

## 9.8 Comparisons and Evaluation

‘Lazdynai—the outpost of the new Vilnius’ was the title of an article by Jurgis Vanagas (Vanagas 1973: 8–9), in which the author praised the district as a benchmark for the ideal future socialist city. Many similar publications followed. Sociological research statistics were used to bolster perspectives of housing estates; it was shown that 92% of residents declared that they would choose to live in Lazdynai, even if they had been offered an apartment in any other part of the city (correspondingly, 77% in Karoliniškės) (Vanagas 1992: 69). After award of the State prize in 1968 to Žirmūnai, the reaction there was much more modest. An article in the professional press only briefly mentioned this achievement and instead elaborated on the predicted future glory of Lazdynai (Statyba ir architektūra 1968: 3–4).

Residents’ evaluations mirror this trend. Most interviewees made a comparison between Žirmūnai and Lazdynai, usually in favour of the latter. Liudmila from Žirmūnai recognised that ‘Lazdynai is an exceptional neighbourhood while Žirmūnai is functionally good but otherwise just rows of housing blocks’. Meanwhile, Nijolė from Lazdynai pointed out that ‘they [the architects of Žirmūnai] also had a lot of space available but didn’t do so well’. Raminta even assumed that the materials and equipment for the streets in Lazdynai had to be of better quality because it had to match the standard of the higher level award. The difference is also well illustrated by the fact that nearly all interviewees from Lazdynai mentioned the Lenin prize and often the names of the architects, despite the fact that today the award is considered controversial, because of its connection with the former regime. Interviewees from Žirmūnai needed prompting to recall the award (with the exception of Raminta). Most of them pointed out that they knew about it but that it was not important or wondered why this type of building district received an award. Only Elvyra mentioned the name of the main architect, Birutė Kasperavičienė. Finally, no one from Karoliniškės mentioned the urban design or the architects, if one excludes Liudas’ remark about ‘houses grouped in crosses in a very silly way’.

In a sense, Lazdynai residents were living in a showcase and that undoubtedly had an impact. Nothing similar ever happened in the other two *mikrorayons*. There were no tours for tourists, no public events on the occasion of the Lenin prize (see Fig. 9.6), no monument commemorating it, no documentary where people could recognise their apartment buildings or even family members and no pressure to



**Fig. 9.6** People gather in Lazdynai on the occasion of the Lenin prize. *Source* Liudas Ruikas, *Švyturys*, 1974 No. 10

keep the representative appearance. Meanwhile, along the main avenue in Lazdynai, even the laundry visible on the balconies could ‘damage the aesthetics of the façades’ (Vanagas 1992: 93)—a situation similar to mid-1950s Warsaw (Crowley 2002: 185–186). Genutė remembers this rule being observed: ‘just put your laundry outside and someone from the local authorities comes and asks you to remove it’. The owner could even have been fined. Lazdynai residents thus learned by heart the positive public comments about the mikrorayon and after a while assimilated them as their own thoughts; today, they still argue that ‘there is no better district than this one’ (Laima).

In a sense, Lazdynai residents were living in a showcase and that undoubtedly had an impact. Nothing similar ever happened in the other two *mikrorayons*. There were no tours for tourists, no mass meeting on the occasion of the Lenin prize (see Fig. 9.6), no monument commemorating it, no documentary where one could recognise one’s estate or even one’s family members and no pressure to keep the representative appearance. Meanwhile, along the main avenue in Lazdynai, even the laundry visible on the balconies could ‘damage the aesthetics of the façades’ (Vanagas 1992)—a situation similar to mid-1950s Warsaw (Crowley 2002). Genutė remembers this rule being observed—‘just put your laundry outside and someone from the local authorities comes and asks you to remove it’—the owner could even have been fined. Lazdynai residents thus learned by heart the positive public comments about the mikrorayon and after a while assimilated them as their own thoughts, nowadays still arguing why ‘there is no better district than this one’ (Laima).

## 9.9 Temporal Dimensions

More than 50 years have passed since the first residents moved into Žirmūnai and nearly 40 since the last residents got their apartments in Karoliniškės. Naturally, the standards of the living environment have changed, and yet most of the interviewees would not like to move out of any of these three *mikrorajons*: some of them have actually returned after spending some years away. This echoes the results of previous sociological research (Vanagas 1992: 69). However, one may assume that the reasons behind this statement are somewhat different. Most of the interviewees make a distinction between the housing estates of the past rooted deeply in their memories and the housing estates of today criticised in public discourse: ‘of course, we were young then, but the estate also grew old’ (Janina, Lazdynai).

Today, almost no one describes mass architecture as ‘nice’ (however, 34% of respondents formerly did, according to the Vanagas survey 1992: 72). This suggests that the concept of well-designed housing and the general idea of beautiful architecture have changed over time, even among the most enthusiastic original tenants. Even in Soviet times, it was recognised that residents’ dissatisfaction had shifted from ‘easily corrected defects (construction quality etc.) to permanent features which were impossible to improve, such as the size of the apartment, its layout etc.’ Respondents particularly wished to have larger kitchens (approximately ten sq. m) because up to 99% ate their meals there daily (Vanagas 1992: 77). Today, this issue is even more prominent: in some cases, mostly in Karoliniškės, it has evolved into the need for a bigger apartment. Vilma justified it by referring to a refrigerator attached to the wall at a particular height, so that a family of four could squeeze under it into the tiny kitchen and have their meals together. In a similar way to the reactions towards material culture during Soviet times, another group adopts a defensive attitude to make this issue psychologically easier: ‘I just sleep here, all my activities are outside’ (Dalia).

The perception of the distance to the city centre is one of the criteria that actually changed for the better. Initially, distances between housing estates and the city centre seemed far but today residents consider it close, not only because the original tenants are accustomed to the daily commute but also due to urban sprawl that appeared in later decades. Lazdynai and Žirmūnai, in particular, receive the proud description of, ‘as good as being in the centre, only with fresh air’ (Aldona). This is not the case with Karoliniškės: Liudas recalled that, when he moved to his wife’s place in Žirmūnai, ‘it was central. In Žirmūnai you go out and you can go where you want on foot. When my wife came to me, she said that she had moved from the centre to the periphery’. Nevertheless, the expression ‘going to the city’ remains used by most of the interviewees, thus maintaining the distinction between the city centre and ‘dormitory estates’.

Consistent with the official view of the 1970s, housing estates are praised by their residents for being spacious and designed not in a ‘window to window’ style as most of the newer parts of the city. The topic of increasing density over time is also germane. While neutral remarks were expressed about the housing blocks that



‘filled all possible gaps’ in Karoliniškės (Kotryna), the tall housing block close to Žirmūnai shopping centre was evaluated as being ‘out of place’ (Liudmila). In Lazdynai, a conspiracy theory was even developed: ‘city authorities waited until the prize was awarded and then allowed the district to be spoiled’ (Nadia). After all, the new construction erected in recent decades is widely considered to negatively impact urban design in housing estates: ‘today they are spoiling Lazdynai by cramming these buildings into it’ (Bronė).

Nature is another meaningful theme assimilated from official Soviet descriptions, which still plays an important role in many ways. Most commonly mentioned are the characteristics of fresh air, the greenery and forests around, proximity to the river and the stunning views from the windows of the upper floor apartments. Nature even serves as a means of comparison between housing estates: ‘the Neris River is clean in Žirmūnai. Here it enters the city and in Lazdynai it flows out of it’ (Juozas). Still, different opinions about housing estates are as dramatic now as they were forty years ago. ‘In a sense, I am a patriot of Lazdynai’ (Dalia); no such proud claim came from the other *mikrorajons*. On the contrary, Aronas expressed a more rational attitude using the same concept: ‘I am not a great patriot of Žirmūnai, I just like living here’.

## 9.10 Conclusion

This research confirms that, despite many negative opinions in contemporary public discourse and the significant change in housing standards, large socialist-era housing estates are still viewed as good places to live by their long-term residents. These findings also contradict prevailing professional view defining large housing estates as places constructed and lived in out of necessity and not embraced by residents. There are several reasons why. First, the then newcomers came to newly built modern neighbourhoods that were organised to impose a certain way of life and, over time, to become a standard model for residential environments. Furthermore, over many years, housing estates became vital parts of people’s lives and their memories. Even tenants who at the very beginning were longing for a socially and culturally vibrant Old Town atmospheres now describe a good housing estate as quiet and green; that is to say, they prefer the modernist model with separate work and recreational areas connected by convenient public transport. Highly appreciated green space in housing estates embodies the modernist ideal of an interesting mix of values and uses: in the very modern housing estate, most people welcome opportunities to enjoy ample nature. A key concern in all the housing estates is a possible increase in density (i.e. to make them less suburban and more ‘city-like’), since residents nearly always regard high-density living negatively and appreciate and seek to preserve another significant feature of modernist planning—open space.

On the other hand, tenants have become more critical towards design and construction quality, especially when it concerns individual apartments. This shift

of attitude applies both when considering the present and remembering the past. The incredible joy of getting an apartment is not forgotten but it is no longer sufficient. Construction defects or initial inconveniences, such as poor sound insulation or muddy surroundings, are reflected clearly in memories, especially in Lazdynai. In other housing estates, these memories accord less significance and tenants place more emphasis on clever personal solutions (for example, bookcases dividing shared rooms). It is the attitude towards defects and self-reliant improvement that positions Lithuania between the (replicated) Scandinavian suburbs and the grandiose and repetitive housing estates of the USSR. While DIY contributed to the creation of residential comfort in Nordic welfare society (Gullestad 1984), it was intrinsic in the context of constant shortages in the USSR. Still, it was hardly imaginable that residents should contribute to the construction of their housing block (by digging the foundation, etc.) as was practiced in Russia (Reid 2014).

One of the aspects that has not changed at all (though not regarded as either a positive or a negative factor) is the carefully measured relationship with neighbours: intentional social diversity has never worked as a socially unifying tool, and the relationship has now become even more distant and superficially polite, especially when new people move in. The social experiment of imposed mixing ended up in explicitly expressed segregation.

In conclusion, several distinctions exist between the past and the present and between Lazdynai and other mass housing estates. The long-term residents living in housing estates since they were established witnessed a gradual decline in their material environment due to natural wear and tear and to partial neglect caused by limited financial resources and changing priorities. At the same time, they also absorbed the official, usually very positive, opinions expressed in the Soviet press and elsewhere and maintained these adopted views even in the context of negative changes. This is quite understandable: they have remained in the estate (or even returned to it) and therefore have to find the means to create and maintain a certain local identity. Therefore, one special feature of the nostalgia the residents express stands out: declaration of the official discourse of the 1970s as a personal opinion when the interviewees are talking about and reflecting upon their district, which they still love. This defensive nostalgia is more apparent among the residents of Lazdynai; meanwhile, the local narrative or myth of the housing estate has never been elaborated to that degree in Žirmūnai and there are no traces of it at all in Karoliniškės. This has also resulted in different initial attitudes and different memories—compared to Lazdynai, there were fewer complaints about the previous inconveniences, probably due to lower expectations. Now there is less euphoria and the transformation of (self) judgment is less significant.

**Author's Note** This chapter is written in memory of my grandfather who, as a family man in his late 30s, was so overwhelmed with joy when he finally got the keys to his newly built apartment in Žirmūnai that he did a somersault in a still empty living room.

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