

Re-Tooling Knowledge Infrastructures in a Nuclear Town

edited by
Siarhei Liubimau & Benjamin Cope



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in a Nuclear Town**

Siarhei Liubimau and Benjamin Cope (eds)

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Acknowledgments and Afterword

Re-Tooling Knowledge Infrastructures in a Nuclear Town is the result of a steered, long-term, diversely contributed to course of EHU Laboratory of Critical Urbanism work, consisting of research, educational, ‘soft’ urban planning and artistic efforts. The principal node of these efforts was consecutive editions of an applied urbanist summer school, funded among others by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the European Humanities University (EHU), Brno University of Technology (BUT) and participants’ fees. In this regard, the authorship of the whole book and of individual chapters has emerged out of the efforts of a broad range of not yet named contributors involved as faculty, students, guest critics, research and social partners in the field, as well as those who have supported the project administratively both in Visaginas and beyond.

Among contributors who did not co-author any of the chapters, but were significant in the process of the generation of the book are the following lecturers and guest critics: Felix Ackermann, Rasa Baločkaitė, Eglė Bazaraitė, Žemartas Budrys, Paulina Budrytė, Inga Freimane, Giedrė Godienė, Tomas Grunskis, Marcela López, Gintarė Norkūnaitė, Eugenius Kaminskis, Jan Kristek, Łukasz Połuszny, Daryna Pyrogoва, Anthony Roberts, Indrė Ruseckaitė, Olga Sasunkevich, Anika Schmidt, Maryna

Taiberman, Radek Toman, Vladyslav Tymynskyi, Asta Vonderau and Gert-Rudiger Wegmarshaus. The contribution of Dalia Čiupailaitė, co-author of one chapter, deserves special mention, as she delivered a number of research-based lectures on recent changes to libraries which were one of the backbones of the summer schools and made valuable contributions to early stages of editing this book.

A central role in the process of developing the ideas out of which the book grew was also played by not yet mentioned summer school participants: Veronica Andres, Oleksandr Anisimov, Isabel Apel, Sophie Aue, Tunca Beril Başaran, Roman Brandt, Constanze Burbach, Lea Caminero, Aleksandr Chaplya, Elizaveta Chepikova, Euan Crispin, Goda Cicėnaitė, Elena Diadikova, Lucie Fojtová, Lisa Gallian, Giliam Ganzevles, Mara Haas, Jennifer Jackson, Vova Ionov, Yauheni Kalinouski, Andrei Kallaur, Daryna Kapatsila, Marie Koehler, Verena Kramer, Kamilla Kreice, Maksim Kryvanos, Agnese Kušnerė, Jude Macannuco, Augustas Makrickas, Yuliya Palamarchuk, Adrian Pedrazas Profumo, Drew Rickard, Roberta Ridolfi, Alina Samko, Jan Schmidt, Tereza Sedláčková, Tatsiana Shchukina, Andreja Siliunas, Emilija Škarnulytė, Olga Srstková, Yuliia Surova, Jan Tesárek, Andre Thiemermann, Ivan Trunov, Igor Tyshchenko, Tautvydas Urbelis, Julija Vaitiekūnaitė, Maryia Vouk, Chen Wang, Simon Wellisch, Nils Werner, Kateryna Yakovets and Job Zomerplaag.

The summer schools' real-world involvement and epistemic lens would not have been possible without research and social partners in Visaginas that we had an opportunity to return to repeatedly: Elena Busko, Ludmila V. Denisova, Gintautas Dervinis, Anton Evtiuchov, Lina Kadžiulytė, Algimantas Lapėnas, Agata Lavrinovič, Olga Mazniova, Inga Medvedeva, Irina Morozova, Sergej Okulov, Dalia Sargūnienė, Marija A. Ščerbakova, Viktor N. Shevaldin, Jevgenij Shuklin, German Skripnichenko, Galina T. Udovenko, Alex Urazov, Andrejus Vergejenko and Vladimir Vlaskin. Interlocutors from beyond Visaginas, Semion Bukchin, Vladimir Krupskij and Galina Orlova, were valuable guides to the wider settings of Soviet nuclear geography.

On many occasions, we were positively surprised by the flexible and constructive attitude demonstrated by Visaginas public institutions and private companies, including: Visaginas Public Library, the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant Information Center, the House of Creativity, UAB Seknija, Prestorante, Visaginas Business Incubator, UAB Vilkaragis, Visagino Parkas, the House of Culture, Rendez Vous, B&B Idile, Ona Šumanaitė's Café and Visaginas Municipality. On an individual level, Airida Drus, Tatjana and Nikolaj Goloskokov, Aleksandra Grigienė, Daivita Jackevičienė, Sergej Mickevič, Olga Rozhkova, Svetlana Šadčeneva and Ona Šumanaitė have warmly welcomed LCU activities on behalf of

Visaginas institutions and/or have made our logistics much smoother than it might have been.

Re-Tooling Knowledge Infrastructures in a Nuclear Town is a result both in the sense of the research and design arguments it generated, and in the sense that its long-term tested mode of merging academic and non-academic work processes is itself also an outcome. Firstly, the book presents a conceptual and applied response to the condition of Visaginas as a nuclear town after nuclear power. And secondly, it suggests a way to organize long-term urbanist work as systematically triangulated: as legitimized simultaneously for a community of professional researchers, for students engaged in the process of learning and for social partners in the field. The two dimensions of the result are closely interconnected: the triangulation on which it is based amplifies an awareness of and sensitivity to the possibilities, hindrances, pains and hopes out of which urbanist research settings are composed.

In the mid-2010s, the choice of Visaginas as a setting for long-term urbanist research looked unusual, for the town was largely perceived as an exotic exhibit from the Soviet past with its initial purpose in course of ruination and, at the same time, as a clean slate posing no constraints for outsiders to fill it in with new

ideas, objects and activities. The first lens stemmed from the popularity of the visual and narrative discourse of ‘failed Soviet utopias’, and was widely cultivated mainly by photographers and visual artists. The second lens was part of an urban animation and informalization movement, which prioritized creation over research (Visaginas was an appealing target for this, on account of its abundance of open space and the decrease of its population density). The EHU Laboratory of Critical Urbanism approach formed an alternative to these two lenses: our purpose was not to represent or to fill in the site, but first of all to understand how it hangs together. This is why the 2016 book documenting the initial step of LCU work in Visaginas was designated as mapping “sources of urbanity in a former mono-functional town”. This angle prioritized attention to what constrains urban form and processes over attention to the to-be-filled niches of the town’s urban form and processes.

In a conceptual sense, the prioritization of constraints over niches is one of the features of the ‘infrastructural turn’ in urban studies as a research agenda and in urbanism as an applied agenda. Instead of public space as the main arena where urbanist work is expected and where spontaneity is the main value in urban processes, the focus is increasingly shifting to the not immediately visible provisions and measures that connect

different sites, and thus relationally pool and discipline these sites (along with the practices inherent in them). In this respect, Visaginas 2015–2020 turned out to be a highly rich setting to study the infrastructural dimension of urban processes. Firstly, this period was marked by Russia’s war in Ukraine, which made the issue of shared infrastructures among former Soviet states especially acute. In Lithuania, the war has accelerated the ongoing, uneasy process of disintegration from the Soviet-made power grid. Second, the construction and launch of the Astravets Nuclear Power Plant in Belarus, in the close vicinity of the Lithuanian border, has made the issue of nuclear technology one of the key dimensions of international politics in the region. Third, this period was also marked by a strengthening understanding in Visaginas that the end of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant’s productive phase is not the end of the town, and hence by attempts to re-use different INPP related assets in new conditions. Fourth, these years were also marked by the growing prominence of the climate change issue and hence by an increasingly central role of energy and energy infrastructures in discussions about possible and desirable socio-political futures. Finally, the late 2010s also saw an increasing fragility of modern welfare states’ knowledge infrastructures vis-à-vis digital platforms and a strengthening of digital profiles as a new

revolutionary form of knowledge formation and of structure-agency relations in general.

We want to finish this book by briefly suggesting directions for further cooperative work of the EHU Laboratory of Critical Urbanism, informed by the results we have obtained from our Visaginas projects. First, we expect more urbanist attention to cases where knowledge infrastructures are fragile: in the sense of spatially embedded material facilities for knowledge production, maintenance and exchange not anymore sufficiently coinciding with current social processes of knowledge production, maintenance and exchange. Second, we expect more urbanist recognition of the ‘infrastructural turn’ as resulting from military strains worldwide: i.e., not only from the privatization of resources and unbundling of large systems inherent in neo-liberal restructuring. Third, we expect more urbanist work on sites considered unconventionally ‘urban’, in terms of their purpose, growth/decline history and their relations to the outside, as well as on the dynamics underlying such sites. Fourth, we expect a greater prominence of the dimension of power grids, among other aspects of recent urban history and future-oriented urbanist thinking; as well as a more detailed understanding of the conditions of possibility and long-term effects of the integration and disintegration of power grids. And, fifth, we expect further

diversification and expansion of the range of ‘stakeholders’ acting as ‘tuning forks’ to triangulate the purposes and results of academic applied urbanist research.

Information about the Authors:

Johanna Betz studied Human Geography in Berlin, Frankfurt am Main and Bogotá. Currently, she is working as a research assistant at the University of Tübingen. Her research interests include critical urban geography, housing and infrastructure politics. In the meantime, she is trying to develop playful, activist or artistic approaches that aim to reconfigure established relationships between local communities and scientific knowledge production.

Benjamin Cope, PhD, is a co-founder of the EHU Laboratory of Critical Urbanism. As a researcher and lecturer, he focuses on topics of critical cartography, localized cultural industries and gender/space relations.

Dalia Čiupailaitė got her PhD in Social Sciences from Vilnius University in 2014. She is a sociologist working at VU and collaborating with non-governmental institutions. Her main interests and fields of expertise as researcher and educator are urban and architectural sociology.

Oksana Denisenko is a freelance cultural manager, founder of the NGO Urbanistinės istorijos (Urban stories), member of the Regional Council for Culture in the Utena region and chairman of the Visaginas Municipality Culture and Arts Council. She has acted as co-producer of the Visaginas Sound Map (www.vsgsounds.lt) and a Guide to Visaginas Architecture (www.visaginas.guide). Her interests include urbanism, heritage and the creative industries, and she is currently studying for a master's degree in Creative Industries at Vytautas Magnus University (Kaunas).

Lívia Gažová gained her BA in Architecture and Planning at Slovak Technical University, and her MA in Urban Studies at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate in Urban Sociology at Masaryk University in Brno, working on the topic of architectural publishing in socialist Czechoslovakia. She is interested in the relationship between media and urbanism, and leads a radio show on cities on Slovak National Radio FM.

Martynas Germanavičius holds a BA in Architecture. In his practise, he works with a range of methods and tools, including designing, writing, curating and performing. Currently, he leads the Architektūros Fondas, a non-governmental organisation disseminating ideas about architecture culture in Lithuania and abroad. He has initiated and co-produced a Guide to Visaginas Architecture (www.visaginas.guide).

Bogdan Kapatsila is a PhD student in Urban Planning at the University of Alberta (Canada). Prior to this, he accumulated planning experience in public and non-profit settings: at the CANactions School for Urban Studies (Ukraine), the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) in New York, the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Oregon Metro Regional Government. His most recent work has been focused on the transparency of data-based decision-making, public transit customer satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic and bridging the gap in knowledge of how women travel.

Mažvydas Karalius holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology from Vilnius University. In his bachelor thesis, he focused on the concept of place attach-

ment in the context of the rapidly changing Visaginas urban environment. Currently, he is a researcher at the NGO Diversity Development Group, carrying out applied research in the field of migration, migrant integration and human trafficking. His research interests include qualitative research methods, cultural and urban sociology and anthropology, and human rights.

Miodrag Kuč is an interdisciplinary artist and urban theorist trained as an architect and urban planner. He moves at the intersection of urban studies, performative-planning, artistic interventions and micro-politics. Currently, he runs the educational department of ZK/U (Centre for Art and Urbanistics) Berlin, exploring new modes of knowledge production through the lens of critical urban pedagogy. He is an EHU Laboratory of Critical Urbanism member from 2011.

Michal Lehečka is a social anthropologist at the Faculty of the Humanities, Charles University, and head of the Laboratory of Sustainable Urbanism that is part of the AutoMat NGO in Prague. He is currently finishing his PhD thesis focused on the socio-material (re)production of space in CEE socialist modernist housing estates. His main scientific interests lie in the areas of urban development, housing policies in CEE countries and spatial segregation.

Siarhei Liubimau is a co-founder of the Laboratory of Critical Urbanism (2007) and Associate Professor at the Department of Social Sciences at the European Humanities University in Vilnius (2014). He has been a fellow at the Central European University (Budapest), the Institute for Human Sciences (Vien-

na) and the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. In fall 2020, he is visiting lecturer at the Institute for Social Anthropology at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg.

Iryna Lunevich graduated from the European Humanities University with an MA in Critical Urban Studies and Maastricht University with an MA in Science and Technology Studies. Currently, she is a fellow at the DRIFT Institute at Erasmus University (Rotterdam, Netherlands). Her research interests include public engagement in urban infrastructural projects, policy and governance tools for renewable energy. Iryna previously worked as program curator of Moscow Urban Forum.

Paul Marx is doing a master's in Spatial Planning at TU Dortmund. His research focus is on housing market policy, land management and urban land use planning. He is a member of SRL (Vereinigung für Stadt-, Regional- und Landesplanung).

Till Mayer obtained a bachelor's degree (B.Sc.) in Urbanism at Bauhaus University Weimar, during which he studied rural development in the European Union (with a focus on former Socialist states). He is a member of the SRL (Vereinigung für Stadt-, Regional- und Landesplanung) and the German Social Democratic Party.

Miriam Neßler studied Metropolitan Culture (BA) and Urban Studies (MSc) in Hamburg, Paris and Weimar and is part of the initiative Kollektiv Raumstation. Her academic and non-academic activities are focused on housing and public space in a per-

spective of social and ecological justice; as well as on cities and contestations of EU border and migration regimes. She is a research assistant at the Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development in Dortmund.

Monika Pentenrieder studied International Cultural and Business Studies in Passau (Germany) and New Concord/OH (USA), and Human Geography in Frankfurt/Main, and has worked in the contexts of international cooperation, and transport and mobility. She now works as a mobility researcher at the Institute of Human Geography at Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, with a focus on the concepts of disruption, resilience and low-carbon transformation in transport and mobility.

Alla Pigalskaya, PhD, worked at the European Humanities University in Vilnius from 2006 to 2019. Her research interests include design studies, Soviet design history and everyday culture studies, as well as participatory approaches to design.

Thomas Rettig works at the Institute of History at TU Dresden, where he also conducts research for his PhD project. His research interests focus on perceptions of spaces and (built) environments, and on transnational entanglements in the histories and memory cultures of Central and Eastern Europe.

Andrei Stsiapanau got his PhD in Social Sciences from Vilnius University in 2010. He was a postdoc at the Centre for the Sociology of Innovation (CSI) at the Ecole des Mines in 2013 (Paris Tech) and associate professor at the European Humanities University

(2014-2019); and research fellow in the international research projects "Politics and Society After Chernobyl" (2008-2011); HoNESt (History of Nuclear Energy and Society, 2016-2019); Nuclear Legacies (Södertörn University, 2016-2019); and Swedish Institute senior scholar at the KTH, Division of History (Stockholm, Sweden, 2020). Currently he is a research fellow in "Atomic Heritage" at the Linköpings universitet (Sweden) and in the EDUATOM project, and associate professor at VMU (Kaunas, Lithuania).



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