



Station Square, Minsk. New station (right) opposite Stalinist apartment building.



Minsk's central railway station reflects Stalinist towers.



Living with constant renovation: Komsomolskaya Street.



Independence Square being transformed into garden.

View from Minsk

Still politically isolated on the eastern edge of Europe, the Belarus capital of Minsk is slowly coming to terms with a new world order.

'Minsk is to be turned into a European-model city where people feel comfortable, the president says.' (*Pravda*, 29 August 2002, Moscow)

The rapid pace of change in the post-Communist countries of Central Europe has been closely followed in the Western media. But 13 years on from the collapse of the Soviet Union, comment on their emerging urban condition is sparse. Aside from progress reports on Luzhkov's latest projects in Moscow, news rarely reaches us of activity in any of the major cities. The Republic of Belarus is a case in point. Stiff border controls and the conservative isolationist policies of president Aleksander Lukashenko ('Europe's last dictator') have proved a barrier to engagement — and a temptation to ignore or to caricature. The capital city of Minsk has been dismissed in weekend newspaper supplements as a 'Soviet theme-park'. In the world newly redefined by the Phaidon *Atlas of Contemporary Architecture*, Belarus doesn't even make it on to the contents page.

Yet there is much to investigate as Belarus recovers from decades of inadequate investment and struggles with new internal realities and its own identity and place in the world. Having lived for nine months in Belarus, studying in the south-western border city of Brest, I returned in 2003 looking for the physical evidence of Lukashenko's campaign, announced in summer 2002, to make Minsk a truly 'European' city. I certainly wasn't prepared for the extent of the facelift in progress.

Caught between Catholic West and Orthodox East, close to the geographical centre of Europe, Minsk has for centuries been on the fault-line of opposing socio-economic philosophies and competing empires. But its urban fabric today was almost entirely defined in the first few years after the Second World War. The city lies on a direct line from Berlin to Moscow and successive waves of destruction in Nazi conquest and retreat resulted in almost entire devastation, presenting postwar Soviet planners with a tabula rasa upon which they hoped to create a model city for a model republic. Artefacts from the pre-Soviet eras were subject either to deliberate destruction as part of the systematic erasure of Belarusian national culture, or simply to neglect and abuse. A small exhibition of black and white photographs in the foyer of the Baroque Catholic Church of

the Virgin Mary bears silent witness to past outrages. At first glance the images appear to be a collection of surrealist montages - basketball hoops and a gym horse in bizarre juxtaposition with stacked wooden pews and portraits of Lenin and Stalin above a stone pulpit. In fact they record the state of the church interior after it had been used as a sports hall for Soviet officers.

Yet the city centre has poise. Elegant boulevards and parks make it a very attractive place to walk around, though currently it is quite difficult to do so. Around every corner, pavements and roads have been lifted. The word '*remont*' (repair) has become a familiar sight. Lukashenko's recent declaration signalled the first coordinated and intensive upgrading of Minsk since Belarus became independent in 1991. In addition to general infrastructural improvements, an ambitious string of projects at key points in the city centre is well under way.

The first of these, the central railway station by the state architecture and construction bureau Minskproject, has been open since 2002 and has proved highly successful. Forming the major gateway to the city for passengers from Novosibirsk to Berlin, this building represents in microcosm the challenge of establishing a new formal and material vocabulary within a deeply Soviet context. The



National library poised on its windswept site at the end of the Metro line.



Even lottery tickets celebrate library.



Compact form of library is functional as well as iconic.

tinted glass of the curtain-walled facade acts as a faceted mirror to the Stalinist towers opposite, replete with freshly decorated hammer and sickle.

One block away, vast and desolate Independence Square is being transformed into a landscaped garden and underground shopping mall. Inspiration for this has surely come from both the Manezh Gardens scheme adjacent to the Kremlin in Moscow and, more immediately, the exuberant Independence Square in the Ukrainian capital Kiev. All these projects employ the strategy of bringing commercial activity into juxtaposition with space previously reserved for ideology. Whether resources exist to construct and sustain this scheme is open to question. But the intervention is welcome in a space which has throughout its history been an uncertain mixture of car park, parade ground and shabby formal garden.

Detailed information about construction works in progress in the city is hard to obtain. But a project that the Government seems more than happy for us to know about is the new \$90 million National Library of Belarus, due to be completed in September 2005. Designed by Viktor Kramarenko and Mikhail Vinogradov, architects of the Central Station, this single building, disengaged from the city on a greenfield site at the end of the Metro line, will replace Georgiy Lavrov's

original 1921 Modernist building on Red Army Street. During the design process, the architects took a trip to Paris, and they cite the Bibliothèque Nationale (ARJuly 1995) as a key influence. Whereas Perrault divided his bookstacks among four glazed towers, they have designed a single glazed globe on a circular podium of reading rooms. Kramarenko writes: 'It was our conviction that a thousand years of priceless knowledge of mankind deserved a special architectural form'. What the realization lacks in subtlety it arguably makes up for in clarity. The 'crystal' is now a familiar form around the city - even claiming its own special edition lottery ticket.

The national library as a typology invites overt expressions of origins. But in an interview, Kramarenko preferred to discuss the building in technical rather than what he called 'poetic' terms - as a solution to the problem of book-delivery. The target set is an ambitious fifteen minutes from order to receipt. Even if this proves hard to achieve, the mere fact that the efficient delivery of information to people is even a design principle represents a positive step forward for a society which for fifty years was denied free and fair access to knowledge. An expensive scheme for a nation still heavily dependent on World Bank loans, the library has been publicized as a matter of patriotic duty. Funds have been

gathered from 'voluntary' donations from student stipends, private business and extraordinary taxes. There is little doubt that this building will become the primary icon of Minsk if not of Belarus. Its very ambivalence offers an eloquent expression of identity, in a country still coming to terms with an independence achieved by default rather than force of revolutionary will.

The political motivation for the ambitious programme of works in Minsk is not even thinly veiled. Though Lukashenko is approaching the legal conclusion of his presidency, he is seeking a third term of office. As resources are summoned to ensure that the national library meets its ambitious completion date, the quality of life and the economic development of the nation are making at best halting progress (Belarus was ranked 154th of 155 countries listed in the Heritage Foundation/Wall Street Journal 2004 Index of Economic Freedom). Lukashenko is not the first national leader to engage in the re-presentation of a city to the world and its own inhabitants against a backdrop of deprivation. The contemporary Belarusian project and the architecture arising from it deserve investigation. But recent events in neighbouring Ukraine prompt us to ask: what might the city become under a post-Lukashenko administration? SIMON BUSS