

IMAGINED RESIDENCE: REPRESENTATION OF RIGA'S RESIDENTIAL APARTMENT IN SOVIET MOVIES

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Abstract

This study contributes to the field of the human geography by conducting a content analysis of a vast number of Soviet movies with focusing on development and spatial organization of living spaces in Riga. In this article, the author sheds light on the construction of meaning of space and cultural politics, where relation of dominance is defined and contested in visual representation of Riga's residential apartments. The aim of this article is to examine the portrayal of lived space of Riga through the movies of the Soviet period. During this research, the author has used a qualitative research methodology based on the best practices of human geography data transcription and coding.

The research consists of the analysis of 290 movies. The main findings show that living spaces are frequently portrayed in the Soviet cinema and they form an integral part of the Soviet urban perception. However, state-imposed censorship throughout the Soviet period strictly regulated geographical disposition in representing living spaces through intensifying or neglecting particular areas of Riga. The images of Riga and of living space found in films are often ideologically charged.

Keywords: *mikrorajons, communal apartment, the Soviet Period, cinema, representation, interior.*

Introduction

Cinema developed at a time when our relation to space was undergoing important changes: the 19th century colonialism; the development of ethnography; the emergence of travelling leisure class and of tourism; and most importantly, the discovery and aesthetic appreciation of novel locations [Lefebvre 2006: 12]. Landscape as text is the dominant metaphor in film geography because it provides a means to explore the intersection between narration of films and geography

[Lukinbeal 2005: 3]. For the great Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, film landscape is very much like film music. Both film landscape and music share the ability to express, what is otherwise inexpressible [Lefebvre 2006: 13], thus telling a story about surrounding and referring to the location where the narrative is supposedly set.

In studying cinematic landscape, acknowledgment of cultural values and historical background of particular geographical location is important, that allows to understand and interpret a place of residence [Kennedy & Lukinbeal 1997: 36]. Moreover, visual representation of a city creates perspectives that allow researchers to interpret the built environment and enables to understand a space, which is culturally created and territorially organized. Geographers' interest in film arose simultaneously from two streams of thought: firstly, humanism and landscape studies, and secondly, sociocultural studies [Kennedy & Lukinbeal 1997: 34]. In addition, analysis of visually represented city-space is one of the main approaches in human geography, where systematisation of geographical motifs, classification of sights and identification of urban signs are considered [Kraftl & Horton 2009: 97].

Riga's residential space with large-scale panel housing, a typical imprint of the Soviet time, has changed Riga's urban environment significantly [Marana & Treija 2002: 50]; at the same time influencing people's perception of lived space in general. Moreover, sociopolitical connotation and spatial arrangement of living spaces are changing continuously, which in result challenges geographers to undertake new research methods in describing living spaces. There is no coherent framework within which to discuss cinema in its entirety. In addition to that, several theoretical and methodological approaches are used in studying cinematic landscape [Kennedy & Lukinbeal 1997: 34], for example, author-centred or text-centred study approach, movie content analysis or connotation of representation and politics.

Representation of the Soviet past is ambivalent and contradictory [Shcherbenok 2011: 145]. In a study of Soviet history and design, historian Susan Reid found that the domestic life has hardly been the dominant angle from which to study the Soviet Union [Reid 2009: 466]. Neglect of human comfort was also one of the questions that was hidden from official ideology but coded into the movies. Few researchers have addressed the problem of urban development processes of Riga. However, no previous study has investigated how living spaces were depicted in the movies of the Soviet period.

Research methods

The mixed method approach has been used in this article, which exposes different elements and processes about the formation of Soviet Riga's cinematic landscape. Spatial analysis of Soviet Riga interrogates which sites were transformed in cinematic places but also acts as an archaeological tool that explores hidden residential setting

during the Soviet period. Features of residential development and living space of the socialist city were identified through extensive analysis of literature, especially studying residential complexes of the largest Soviet Latvia cities – Riga, Daugavpils and Jelgava.

Content analysis of movies was accomplished, in which each movie was divided into five-minute intervals [Hazan et al. 1994]. Cinematic content analysis consisted of two genres – fiction and documentary – movie stratified sampling; establishment of informative, comprehensive and exclusive categories for five-minute movie interval study; and comparison and analysis of results achieved. Movies were divided into three main groups depending on their geographical location of residential structure: city centre of Riga, suburb *mikrorajoni* and other area of Riga or countryside.

Mapping and analysing filmed sites reveals stratigraphy of texts written across residential living space during the Soviet Riga. Collected quantitative data was stored in a spatial database (QGIS software), in order to employ geographical information systems methods on analysing and visualization of data. Various geographical information system methods, including cartographical approach and spatial autocorrelation, were used to acquire more precise and data-based results.

Soviet apartment: a semi-private living space

City planning in the Soviet Union was a political process where the city growth complied with normative locational guidelines. The 1940s were years of limited urban growth and starting only with the beginning of the 1950s urban growth took place more rapidly [Bater 1980: 63]. The first apartments of socialism cities were centrally located small and arranged in small clusters among already existing urban structures [Gentile & Sjöberg 2010]. During the Stalin era Soviet cities experienced a shortage of living space. Moreover, apartments were granted only for privileged citizens – engineers, industrial managers and award-winning workers – whose enjoyment of material perquisites was supposed to inform the behaviour and redeem the privation of everyone else [Reid 2006 a]. The time-frame during which an attempt to implement Stalinist stylistics in architecture in Latvia took place was too short. In many cases, it was either organically synthesised with local features, or was introduced as a foreign body [Rudovska 2012: 80].

Even though initially residents were forced to live in crowded apartment blocks, a new cultural revolution began in the wake of Khrushchev's "secret speech" to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 that set the goal of resolving the housing shortage [Bunkše 1979; French 1995; Grava 2007]. The decade of the Thaw signalled a decisive rupture with the aesthetics of everyday life of the preceding, Stalinist era, a purposeful search for new socio-aesthetic ideals, and a conscious attempt to form a contemporary style, both in "pure" art and in

the applied arts that organize real life [Gerchuk 2000: 98]. During this period the configuration of private and public changed: prefabricated mass blocks with apartments for separate families were constructed, ownership of private transport increased, and orientation towards circles of friends that led to rebirth of friendship intensified [Gerasimova 2002: 210].

Subsequently, starting from the mid-1960s, the five-story housing model was replaced with nine to twelve floor residential slabs in many urban outskirts, also termed as *mikrorajoni*, causing architectural simplicity, horizontally and equalization of forms and functions [Alexandrova et. al. 2004; Varga-Harris 2008]. Buildings of these areas were regularly organized, with parallel or perpendicular spatial structure and identical apartment conditions. The fact that representatives of various strata of the Soviet society lived in a particular *mikrorajons*, in the same apartment building, did not necessarily result in social interaction between members of those various strata [Bater 1980: 111]. Moreover, the hasty process of construction led to the decline of living standards by the end of the Soviet period [Grava 2007].

The main unit of the Soviet society was the family and its primary dwelling cell – the apartment [Reid 2006 a: 231; Reid 2006 b: 147]. In order to advance sociospatial homogeneity, each living space was provided with equal supplies. This resulted in neglecting basic human needs and demands [Reid 2009: 466]. Moreover, the Soviet Union home was an antipode to official Soviet values of the idea of progress and contentment [Grava 2007; Roth-Ey 2007]. Yet Soviet culture, especially of the Khrushchev era, became obsessed with the idea of homemaking and domesticity. The domestic interior was presented not only as a place to carry out everyday reproductive functions, but also as a site for self-projection and aesthetic production [Reid 2006 a; Reid 2009].

Studies of the Soviet living space also show the importance of domestic-spatial arrangement and qualities of appliances. Thus, the central domestic spatial unit of the Soviet period was the kitchen. The kitchen became mythologized as the heart of private home life and the site of authentic social relations. It was an *ideology-free zone* of sincerity and spontaneity [Reid 2005: 289]. Moreover, kitchen propelled Soviet citizens into modernity [Harris 2006: 172]. By contrast, the symbol of socialism's ability to deliver the *good life* was a television set in a Soviet apartment. Radio has also been shown as a *necessity*; however, it was not a new technology and did not change the life of Soviet individual [Roth-Ey 2007].

Cinematic apartment: representation of living space in Soviet movies

Russian revolutionary Anatoly Lunacharsky has noted that “communist who is not able to dream, is unreliable communist” [Hurina 2015: 106]. This idea exemplifies that socialist realism depicted reality of imagination. The purpose of socialist realism

was to limit cinematic representation to a specific and highly regulated faction of creative expression that promoted Soviet ideals. Moreover, tragedy and negativity were not permitted in urban representation. Instead, sentiment about flawless living standards was created, by presenting common images, such as satisfied factory workers, youth, industries, new technology and standardized living space [Prokhorov 2001]. Throughout the Soviet period, both urban and rural areas were passive and distracted from the main cinematic character, and Soviet cinematography did not reveal genuine urban space with historically controversial objects, marginalized communities, untidy courtyards or garbage on the streets, but cities were portrayed from above or a distance, idealizing the space and prohibiting arbitrary representation of dwellings [Nāripea 2003; Nāripea 2004].

Living space in the cinema of the mid-1940s and during the 1950s is depicted monotonous, continuing Stalin's artificial *grand style* with submissive crowds and enormous buildings [Matvejs 2017: 55]. A great number of movies from this period interpret the heroic scenes of the World War II [Kaganovsky 2013: 237]. By contrast, the intention to maintain national identity is depicted by the activities that are taking place in the countryside (*Mājup ar uzvaru*, A. Ivanovs, 1947) [Nāripea 2012: 255]. Cinema supports the main policy of Stalin's regime of the 1940s, rejection of the class struggle within the country and declaration of the creation of the united Soviet people, who had no ethnic, national, race or class problems (*Padomju Latvija Nr. 17*, A. Jevsikovs, 1949). Genre modification of this period: generally, a war or historical drama and news-reel.

The movies of the 1960s aim to illustrate the living space as anti-monumental [Prokhorov 2001]. Starting with the 1970s, cinematography brings harmonious representation of the Soviet urban space to the end and creates a metaphor of *enclosure* by contrasting historical buildings of the Old Town with newly-built modern architecture in the suburban areas [Novikova 2015: 196]. The living space also turns into a social epicentre where characters feel both secure and create mutual friendship by forgetting material and mental damages caused by the war [Mazierska 2008]. Genre modification of this period is more diversified, including historical drama, tragic comedy, melodrama and news-reels.

Soviet movies of the 1980s depict city in a manner of a dystopic representation outlining aimless movement through the city [Nāripea 2003: 422]. Cinematography increasingly declines the portrayal of living spaces into monotonous architecture of the Soviet city and diverts its attention to the forbidden forms of living spaces: run-down neighbourhoods, waste-lands and wooden houses [Nāripea 2003; Novikova 2015]. The main themes of this period are gradual rejection of the censorship and free exchange of people and ideas. This tendency of portraying everything negative in everyday life, along with imperfect dwelling space, is described by

Russian term *chernukha*, popularized in the late 1980s. This genre was perceived as quasi-documentary portrayal of life as it really was (Šķērsiela, I. Seleckis, 1988) [Shcherbenok 2011].

Research results

The research about representation Riga's living space consists of the analysis of 290 movies. The data for this study was collected using the database of the National Film Centre of Latvia. Moreover, classification of reviewed movies is based on periodization of residential area construction processes and geographical location of apartments. The content analysis was developed based on movie review approach of A. R. Hazan et al., where movies are coded into five-minute intervals and each interval is described by nine indicators, such as geographical location, social description, furnishing, appliances, spoken text and others.

City centre of Riga experienced large construction processes, especially in the war-destroyed Old Town. In addition, during the Soviet times living space of the city centre was considered as an undesired location by the official ideology. One of the main residential structures in Soviet Riga was communal apartment (*kommunalki*). From the mid-1940s the number of such apartments had increased due to improvement of industrialization and rural-urban migration. *Kommunalki* were created in apartments that had belonged to middle-class and aristocratic families, situated in city centres in tenements. Usually they consisted of 3 to 6 rooms [Gerasimova 2002].

At the end of the 1940s and during the 1950s only two fiction movies illustrate living space in the Old Town of Riga (fig. 1). Both movies shed light on wealth and

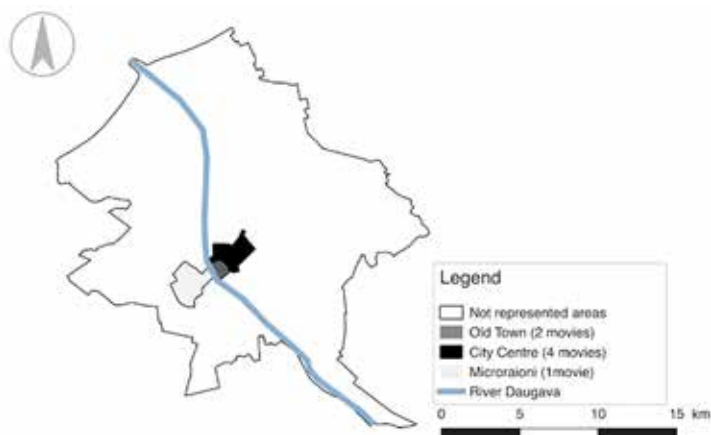


Figure 1. Represented living spaces in reviewed movies from 1945 to 1957
[Image: J. Matvejs].

everyday life of inter-war *intelligentsia*. Also, four documentaries from this period depict satisfied residents and residential building construction process. In news-reels, apartment scenes are characterized by spoken text that highlights anniversaries and accomplishments of Five-year plans. For example, in *Padomju Latvija Nr. 16* (M. Čardiņina, 1948) building process is idealized: “the first 56 apartments will be ready at the day of the Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution”. An apartment in the Old Town is portrayed as a socially uneven space, contrasting living spaces for persons in different occupations or marginalizing living space by divergence of scenes of elegant Old Town with neglected worker area in suburbs (*Kā gulbji balti padebeši iet*, P. Armands, 1957).

At the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s representation of living space in the city centre and Old Town is dichotomous. While interior is spacious and splendid in the movies that portray inter-war period (*Latviešu strēlnieka stāsts*, P. Armands, 1958), living space is narrow with limited appliances in movies that illustrate Soviet time. In contrast to the previous stage, starting with the mid-1960s depiction of the Old Town decreased and the space is rather identified with poor people. Moreover, interior in the apartments of Old Town is narrow, dark and with limited household objects (*Divi*, M. Bogins, 1965). Also, representation of the city centre experiences sociospatial transformation. The idealized living space of *intelligentsia* from the previous period, now transforms into a communal apartment, where all residents share the use of the kitchen, hallway, bathroom and telephone. Sociologist Katerina Gerasimova states, that communal apartments associate with the institutionalization of the spatial structure brought about a system of horizontal control [Gerasimova 2002: 214]. The movie *24-25 neatgriežas* (A. Brenčs, 1968) emphasizes that neighbours of the apartment do not know what happens around them, however, they always hear everything. This phenomenon suggests crucial quality of the Soviet living space: synthesis of public and private spaces.

Period between the 1970s and the mid-1980s is characterized by an increased depiction of living spaces in the centre of Riga (fig. 2). Fiction movies show obstacles related to space-sharing and neighbouring in the communal apartments (*Tās dullās Paulīnes dēļ*, V. Beinerte, 1979). From the end of the 1980s, representation of private space of the city centre has decreased. The research of Soviet cinema has also shown that the central space of apartment is the kitchen. It is worth noting that kitchen is depicted as an ideology-free zone where woman arranges the space (*Dubultnieks*, R. Pīks, 1986; *Svītas cilvēks*, A. Rozenbergs, 1987). The kitchen of one-family apartment becomes mythologized as the heart of a private home life and the privileged site of social relations in the Soviet period [Reid 2005: 289].

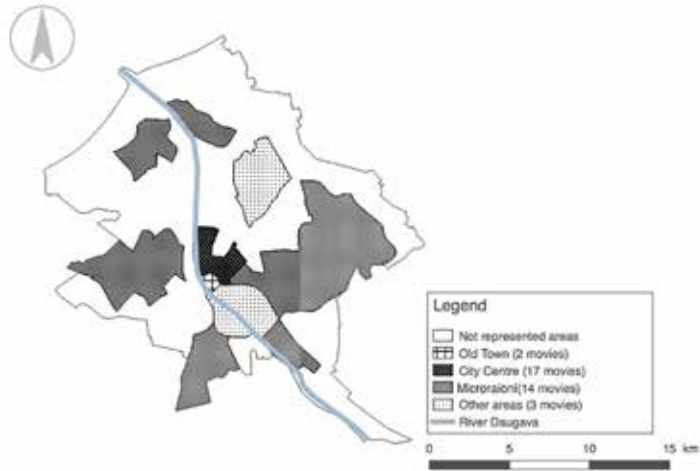


Figure 2. Represented living spaces in reviewed movies from 1972 to 1985
[Image: J. Matvejs].

Second spatial configuration reviewed in Soviet movies is residential complexes or *mikrorajoni*. Around 40% of Riga's housing stock is multi-storeyed panel block apartment buildings that were surrounded by public service structures, such as pre-school establishments, secondary school, grocery stores, personal service shops, playgrounds and building maintenance offices [Pedece et.al. 2004: 9]. To name a few of residential structures: Ķengarags (built between 1961–1971), Imanta (built between 1965–1975), Purvciems (built between 1965–1975), or Mežciems (built between 1977–1985).

During the 1940s and 1950s, only three documentaries (*Padomju Latvija Nr. 52*, N. Karmazinskis, 1946; *Padomju Latvija Nr. 43*, V. Šeļepeņš, 1949; and *Padomju Latvija Nr. 14*, H. Šuļatins, 1949) portray construction of five-storey residential apartment. Each movie emphasizes the necessity of apartment allocation for industrial workers. Starting with the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, for the first time, private space of *mikrorajoni* is depicted in two fiction movies (*Šķēps un roze*, L. Leimanis, 1959; *Kārkli pelēkie zied*, G. Piesis, 1961). Soviet residential structures are represented more spacious, with more than one room and the newest appliances. Moreover, these living spaces are resided by progressive young adults who conform with Soviet ideology. For example, when Daiga, the main female character in the movie *Šķēps un roze*, moves in a new apartment, located in Āgenskalna priedes, she declares that “we should live so well now as no one has ever lived before”. Representation of private space is avoided in documentaries from this period. Filmmakers rather portray construction process of five-storey dwellings in newly-built factory workers' residential areas of Āgenskalna priedes, Ilģuciems

and Jugla (*Padomju Latvija Nr. 9*, 1960). All five documentaries from this period illustrate both satisfied residents who appreciate infrastructure of *mikrorajoni* while meeting friends, visiting cafes and walking around streets near dwellings (*Padomju Latvija Nr. 28*, 1961), and idealized house assemblage where gender-equal, diverse and multicultural labour force builds “better future for the Soviet citizen” (*Padomju Latvija Nr. 13*, 1959).

From the mid-1960s the focus was set on the continuous expansion of prior enterprises in order to reduce deficiency of commodities and services. Accordingly, these conditions advanced construction of residential houses. Living space of *mikrorajoni* is portrayed in four movies (*Četri balti krekli*, R. Kalniņš, 1967; *Meldru mežs*, E. Lācis, 1971). However, due to limited information about filming location and fragmented depiction of these spaces, it is impossible to determine exact districts in Riga, where the interiors were recorded. The current study found that *mikrorajoni* already make an integral part of the city, where courtyards and front entrance to the living space becomes a space of social conflict. Moreover, movies illustrate new sociocultural tradition – housewarming party or *sālsmaize* (fig. 3). Housewarming is an important component in representing living space of *mikrorajoni*, and it plays a key role in a mutual communication in the Soviet period. Apartments of *mikrorajoni* are represented as something desired for a long time. For example, the main character



Figure 3. Housewarming party in the movie *Četri balti krekli*
[Image: Riga Film Museum Archive].

in the movie *Karalienes bruņinieks* (R. Kalniņš, 1970) asks her husband, “when do you think we will get our own apartment?” On the contrary, documentaries during the mid-1960s and beginning of the 1970s, tend to portray interiors in combination with other private and public structures: balconies, kindergartens, schools and stores (*Padomju Latvija Nr. 3*, 1971).

Between the early 1970s and mid-1980s, lack of apartments was gradually decreased, however, there was an increasing concern about the quality of living (fig. 4). Depiction of living space in *mikrorajoni* was increased. Besides interior, movies also represent interrelated and complex groups of spaces in these neighbourhoods: courtyards, playgrounds and parks, that supplement portrayal of home-room (*Dāvanas pa telefonu*, A. Brenčs, 1977). Moreover, it is possible to compare the interior in Soviet movies with French philosopher Michel Foucault’s social theory of panopticon, where the main character acts as a watchman, who rationally observes the external space (*Laika prognoze augustam*, L. Ločmele, 1983; *Pēdējā indulgence*, A. Neretniece, 1985). However, at the end of this period, residents in interiors of *mikrorajoni* are depicted dissatisfied. It is related to several flaws in the living space, such as narrowness of rooms, uniformity of the space and the poor quality of construction materials (*Novēli man lidojumam nelabvēlīgu laiku*, V. Brasla, 1980).



Figure 4. Model of interior for the movie *Laika prognoze augustam* [Image: Riga Film Museum Archive].

For example, Ilmārs, the main character in the movie *Laika prognoze augustam* expresses: "There is no water again! Why is there no water?"

Period from the mid-1980s is characterized by the shift from centrally planned to market economy. Political reforms and the national revival movement also changed the perception of living space with emerging priorities of living standards and ecological solutions. During this period, filmmakers tend to depict neglected multi-storey apartment buildings from the distance, emphasizing the presence in urban structure of this type of dwelling. However, none of the reviewed movies represents interior of the building.

Third reviewed geographical area of cinematic landscape is *countryside*. Although starting with the mid-1940s part of the existing state resources was distributed between the construction of socialism architecture, living space in the movies is represented more as an important component of rural and not urban landscape. These aspects also appear in 11 reviewed movies between the 1940s and 1950s. Living space in the countryside is depicted as war damaged place with limited household objects in dwellings and older generation being the only individuals who reside on the property. In comparison, people in the rural areas are represented as humble and accepting ongoing political changes (*Dēli*, A. Ivanovs, 1946). Main spatial configuration in countryside of this period movies is dim living room with limited appliances.

Significant modification of depicting rural residential space came into view starting with the 1970s. Representation of rural spaces increased. Moreover, this study has shown that dwellings in the countryside are mostly portrayed together with episodes of Riga's centre or *mikrorajoni*. These movies emphasize the necessity of escape from the urban environment (*Trīs dienas pārdomām*, R. Kalniņš, 1980). In most movies that depict rural houserooms, central elements of the space consist of a large table in the guestroom, a loaf of bread and elders who arrange the space. This both defines a family and tradition space and becomes an antithesis to more advanced and modernized living space in the capital.

Conclusion

This research set out to determine the manner and practices of representing living spaces of Riga in the Soviet period. This study has found that living spaces have been frequently portrayed in the movies of the Soviet period and thus form an essential part of Soviet urban structure. The Old Town, city centre, *mikrorajoni* and suburban areas of Riga are an integral part of the Soviet urban perception frequently represented in cinema.

The analysis of movies has shown that between the mid-1940s and the end of the 1950s movies depicted living spaces of inner-Riga and rural areas. The themes

of war-caused damage and splendid interiors of Riga's centre apartments dominated throughout this period. *Mikrorajoni* began to be substantially represented at the start of the 1960s. A common character amongst these movies was the idealization of reinforced concrete panel residential apartments and depiction of progressive Soviet residents. Moreover, in this period, the portrayal of the Old Town decreased and apartments of city centre experienced change from wealthy properties to communal living spaces, thus *sovietising* apartments and erasing the border between public and private spatial realms.

Starting with the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, an apartment in a *mikrorajons* is a space where both to secure oneself from Soviet utopian everyday life and advance opposition to political control. During this period, residents are also preoccupied with the idea of cosiness, thus rearranging and improving the domestic space. At the end of the 1980s, representation of living space was dichotomous: while apartments in Riga were modernized and emphasized future of the communism, rural housing was a space where to escape from Riga's monotony.

The most obvious finding to emerge from this research is that *mikrorajoni* have been frequently depicted in fiction movies, thus becoming an integral part of visually represented space in the Soviet period. However, living space in *mikrorajoni* is not cinematic and portrayal of the Soviet apartments is limited. Filmmakers rather depict more spacious rooms in the countryside or luxurious interiors of the city centre. Moreover, this study has shown that although Soviet movies have not accomplished their primary goal of restricting perception of urban space and the fact that both residential districts and living spaces have experienced numerous improvements in the recent years, it can be stated that the Soviet cinema is a crucial evidence that illustrates achievements in home arrangement and cinematography, as well as qualities and expectations of society of that particular period.

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