

# ICOA867: THE GREEN BRIDGE: COMING TO TERMS WITH VILNIUS' SOVIET LEGACY

## Subtheme 02: The Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation

**Session 1:** Heritage as Peace Builder, Tying and Benefitting Community

**Location:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 13, 2017, 12:30 – 12:45

### **Author: James N. Ferguson**

*James Ferguson is an architect living and working in Vilnius. For the past 12 years he has worked for Senjo miesto architektai, a collaborative that specializes in architectural reconstruction and preservation projects. He was a lecturer at Vilnius Gedimino Technical University from 2001-2004. He has been a contributor to numerous symposiums on sustainable design and architectural heritage. Before coming to Lithuania, he worked for the US National Park Service and Historic American Buildings Survey for ten years.*

**Abstract:** During the summer of 2015, the new Vilnius mayor had the Soviet-era sculptures removed from the Green Bridge. Yet, much of this legacy remains in buildings throughout the city. Some of these buildings are even protected under the Department of Cultural Heritage because of their architectural uniqueness or role they played in the independence movement, known as Sajūdis, between 1988 and 1991.

This paper addresses the approach the city has taken with regard to its Soviet legacy. Municipal officials, architects and historians have tried to determine what place these immovable objects have in the UNESCO world heritage city, as well as the ramifications of the city's post WWII history. The Green Bridge and several key buildings will be examined, as they have served as lightning rods in this often heated debate. Vilnius' Russian-speaking community will also be studied, as parliament members representing this group voiced their opposition to the removal of these sculptures and other actions by the city.

As Lithuania approaches its centennial as a modern state, these are questions that define its national identity. Vilnius is at the centre of this discourse, as the city has often found itself divided in opinion, wrestling not only with its Soviet past, but Polish and Jewish past as well. The author, who has been living in Vilnius for 20 years, provides a dispassionate voice to these contentious debates, which have often spilled out into the international media casting unfavourable light on the city.

In conclusion, this paper will demonstrate that reconciliation is possible when the conflicting parties choose to bury their ideological differences, rather than use incidents like the removal of the Soviet-era sculptures from the Green Bridge as a means to highlight these differences.

**Key words:** *reconciliation, conflict, identity*

## The Green Bridge

In the early morning hours of July 20, 2015, city workers began removal of the four bronze sculptures that anchored the corners of the Green Bridge spanning the Neris River in central Vilnius, Lithuania. Mayor Šimašius had declared the statues a safety risk and had them transported to an undisclosed location. When pressed by the media, he stated that the sculptures represented <<big lies about the Soviet system>>, but didn't elaborate (East 2015).

The sculptures had survived the initial wave of removals after Lithuania reinstated its statehood in March 1990. The reason being they were not overtly ideological in nature. The statue of the two soldiers holding a flag with a Soviet symbol, referred to as Guarding Peace, had however generated controversy, but no action was taken. In 1993 and 1997, the bridge followed by the sculptures was placed on the Register of Cultural Properties (Kultūros vertybių registras, kodas 8048).

A long history surrounds the location of the bridge, dating back to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century when a wood bridge first spanned the river. It was rebuilt several times and came to be known as the Green Bridge in 1739, at the time of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It suffered heavy damage during Napoleon's invasion of Russia, and was subsequently repaired. In 1894, a metal truss bridge was erected at this strategic point. The bridge had survived WWI but suffered heavy damage in WWII. It was subsequently rebuilt in 1952 with four sculptures that represented the pillars of Soviet society: agriculture, education, industry and defence (Ramonienė 1988: 126-127).



Fig.1- Green Bridge: agriculture sculpture (L. Ciunys).

The new bridge was part of the first major urban ensemble implemented in Soviet Lithuania, and subsequently named after General Ivan Chernyakhovsky, who led the Soviet army into the city in 1944 (Drémaitė 2017:p. 39). The ensemble encompassed a broad area of *Naujamiestis* (New City) stretching from the bridge to Lenin Prospect (Gediminas Prospect today) where it terminated in a small square with a statue erected in his honour and his remains interned near the site. The general had been killed near the end of the war.

Vilnius underwent a major transformation during the Stalinist era, 1945-1954. Large scale projects were undertaken by Vladislovas Mikučianis, who served as municipal architect from 1945-1962. Sections of the city that had been heavily damaged during the war were reconstructed in the Socialist Realism style (Drėmaitė, p. 17).

Soviet Modernism emerged after Stalin's death in 1954 with buildings cleansed of the ornament associated from his era. The highly decorative proposal for the Republican Library, designed in 1952, was stripped of all ornament upon completion in 1965 (Drėmaitė 2017:p. 55-56). This made it easier to reconcile these buildings after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as they had very little ideological baggage.

The Republican Library was rechristened the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania, serving as the principal repository for all texts produced in the country. Books purged during the Soviet era had been returned to the shelves, such as Mažvydas' *The Simple Words of Catechism*, the first book published in Lithuanian in 1547. A massive book restoration and digitization project was begun that not only included key books and manuscripts from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Varnienė 2005:50-57), but also the extensive Edward Blank YIVO and Matisyahu Strashunprewar Jewish library and archival collections (YIVO 2017).

The national library, like many buildings and structures from the Soviet era had been placed on the Register of Cultural Property. The Republic of Lithuania Law on Protection of Immovable Cultural Heritage, first written in 1994, had been strengthened by amendments in 2008, further protecting the status of these structures (UNESCO 2017).

However, Soviet monuments were another matter. The former Chernyakhovsky Square had undergone major reconstruction from 2002-2007 and was renamed Vincas Kudirka Square after the author of the Lithuanian national anthem, with a new statue raised in his honour in 2009. The statue and remains of the Soviet general had been returned to Russia in 1993 before the law was enacted.

The Green Bridge sculptures went through a period of cultural ambiguity. In 1995, Gediminas Urbonas placed mirrored boxes over the heads of the agriculture sculpture, entitling it *Coming or Going?* (Bienale 2017). For the most part, Vilnius city residents appeared comfortable with the statues, especially if they were allowed to engage with them in this way. However, a contentious new law



Fig.2- *Guarding Peace sculpture (I. Galūnas)*, that banned Soviet and Nazi symbols was passed in July 2008 (Loc.gov 2017). This called the status of the “Guarding Peace” sculpture into question, as it had a direct representation of the Soviet hammer and sickle on the bronze flag post.

Local Russian-speaking and Jewish communities were upset that the two regimes could be equated. Many Russian-speakers still saw the Soviet army as having liberated Lithuania from Nazi Germany in 1944, and didn't view such symbols as inherently evil. The local and international Jewish community felt Lithuania was diminishing the Holocaust by taking a <<double genocide>> approach (Freedland 2010). Most Lithuanians regarded the Stalinist deportations of 1941 and 1945-1952 as similarly horrendous events.

The new law prompted Mayor Navickas's request to the Cultural Heritage Department in 2010 to withdraw the bridge sculptures from the Register of Cultural Properties so that he could remove them from the Green Bridge. The Cultural Heritage Department refused to take the sculptures off the register. Instead, the department head sent a letter warning the mayor of possible penalties for not maintaining state-protected heritage (Baločkaitė 2015).

This sparked a tumultuous debate over what is cultural heritage in Vilnius with strong advocates both for the restoration and the removal of the Green Bridge sculptures. The liberal viewpoint argued for pluralism and diversity in historical representation, whereas the traditionalist viewpoint was one of reaffirming national identity by removing all symbols of the Soviet past (Baločkaitė 2015). However, this was mostly an internal Lithuanian debate, driven largely by memories of the deportations.

In 2013, Mayor Zuokas sought to mitigate the controversy by placing a plaque on the Guarding Peace sculpture to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the occupation army's withdrawal from Lithuania in 1993. Gitenis Umbrasas, the author of the iron plaque, saw it as a small measure toward reconciling Lithuania's Soviet past (Ereminaitė 2013). Mayor Zuokas also announced plans for the restoration of the bridge and sculptures (Kanter 2013).

Events in 2014 conspired against these restoration efforts. The Russian annexation of Crimea in March, followed later that year by President Putin's comments on the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, shattered any discussion of restoring Soviet era monuments. The latter is probably the big lie referred to by Mayor Šimašius, as President Putin struck to the core of Lithuanian identity by interpreting the infamous 1939 Soviet-German pact as a <<non-aggression treaty>> (Parfitt 2014).

The cornerstone of the Sąjūdis liberation movement, 1988-1990, was Soviet recognition of the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that led to the forceful annexation of Lithuania in 1940. For decades, the Soviet Union denied such protocols existed, claiming Lithuania had willingly sought annexation in the USSR by referendum in 1940. When these secret protocols came to light in the late 1980s, former Soviet President Gorbachev was forced to recognize them (Fein 1989).

What made President Putin's comments odd is that he had flatly rejected the notorious pact in 2008, citing the 1989 Soviet resolution by Gorbachev (Coalson 2015). A resolution that had also been upheld by his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who was posthumously awarded the Cross of the Order of Vytautas for his personal contribution to Lithuania's statehood. President Grybauskaitė said <<Yeltsin had changed the mindset of Russians and opened the door for international recognition of the Baltic States>> (Moscow Times 2012).

The Green Bridge once again became a hot topic of discussion with debate spilling over into numerous English-speaking periodicals. Experts from the National Cultural Heritage Commission were asked to reassess the value of these sculptures. Gražina Drėmaitė, the commission chairwoman, called for an international conference to address the issue more broadly, stating that <<heritage is not politics>> (Baločkaitė 2015). Planners and architects also spoke out against removal of the sculptures. Audrius Ambrasas suggested steel enclosures, treating the figures as artefacts in the city museum of Vilnius (Ambrasas 2014). However, the Minister of Culture announced in November that the cultural value of the statues would be reviewed by the heritage commission (Vadovaujantis Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ministro 2014-11-12 įsakymo Nr. ĮV-813).

2015 was an election year in Vilnius. For the first time, the mayor's office was an open ballot, which resulted in a runoff between Mr. Zuokas and Mr. Šimašius. The Green Bridge frequently came up during the campaign with Mr. Šimašius calling for the removal of the sculptures, although the status of the bridge and sculptures was still under review. Mr. Šimašius won the election in March.

Mayor Šimašius issued his instructions in terms of public safety, stating the sculptures would be restored at another site, hoping to dampen any public protests like those that had occurred in Tallinn over the removal of the Soviet bronze soldier (Sputnik, 2015). Despite a strong showing by an alliance of Polish and Russian political parties in the 2015 city council elections, there was little backlash from the Russian-speaking community in the media. The sculptures no longer seemed to have much resonance among city residents. Thoughts shifted to what to put on the pedestals in their place, as the bridge looked naked without them.



Fig.3- Green Bridge sculptures (J. Kalinskas)

## Conclusion

The Socialist Realist sculptures were the last remaining tangible symbols of the Stalinist era. Unlike buildings from that era or even the bridge itself, the sculptures embodied the pillars of Soviet society. Liberal advocates saw them as part of the continuum of the city's history, even transferable to contemporary society, but traditional advocates saw them as having too prominent a place in the public space and should be removed.

The sculptures became a political lightning rod when Russian President Putin chose to readdress the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as a non-aggression treaty. Traditionalist advocates brought pressure upon the Culture Ministry to remove the sculptures from the Register of Cultural Property to purge the city of any remaining signs of former Soviet imperialism.

A heritage commission meeting was convened in March 2016. The mostly new members took a traditionalist viewpoint in declaring the bridge and sculptures had no inherent cultural value to Lithuania, and recommended that the object be removed from the Register of Culture Property (Kultūros paveldodėpartmentas-RM-VT/7.1). The Culture Minister has yet to act on this decision.

It has been suggested that they be made property of the Lithuanian Museum of Art and put on display at Grūtas Park in southern Lithuania, where many of the former Soviet statues are currently exhibited (Jačauskas 2017). The sculptures would become part of an encapsulated history detached from the current modern state, which appears to be the way most Lithuanians prefer to see the Soviet era.

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Fig.2- Guarding Peace sculpture (I. Galūnas).

Fig.3- Green Bridge sculptures (J. Kalinskas).

# ICOA867: LE PONT VERT: VENIR À BOUT DE L'HÉRITAGE SOVIÉTIQUE À VILNIUS

## Sous-thème 02: Le rôle du patrimoine culturel dans la construction de la paix et de la réconciliation

**Session 1:** Le Patrimoine En Tant Que Constructeur De Paix, Communautaire De Types Et De Bénéfices

**Lieu:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 13 Décembre, 2017, 12:30 – 12:45

**Auteur:** James N. Ferguson

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**Résumé:** Au cours de l'été 2015, le nouveau maire de Vilnius a fait retirer les sculptures de l'ère soviétique du Pont Vert. Pourtant, une grande partie de ce patrimoine reste dans des bâtiments de par la ville. Certains sont même protégés par le Département du patrimoine culturel en raison de leur caractère architectural unique ou du rôle qu'ils ont joué dans le mouvement d'indépendance, connu sous le nom de Sajūdis, entre 1988 et 1991.

Cet article traite de l'approche adoptée par la ville en ce qui concerne son héritage soviétique. Des fonctionnaires municipaux, des architectes et des historiens ont tenté de déterminer la place qu'occupent ces immeubles dans la ville inscrite au patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO, ainsi que les ramifications de l'histoire de l'après-Seconde Guerre mondiale.

Le Pont Vert et plusieurs bâtiments clés seront examinés car ils ont servi de paratonnerre dans ce débat souvent animé. La communauté russophone de Vilnius sera également étudiée, les membres du Parlement représentant ce groupe étant opposés à la suppression de ces sculptures et à d'autres actions entreprises par la ville. Alors que la Lituanie aborde son centenaire en tant qu'État moderne, ce sont là des questions qui interrogent son identité nationale. Vilnius est au centre de ce discours, car l'opinion publique de la ville a souvent été divisée, luttant non seulement avec son passé soviétique, mais aussi avec son passé polonais et juif. L'auteur, qui vit à Vilnius depuis 20 ans, apporte une voix dépassionnée à ces débats controversés, souvent repris dans les médias internationaux, qui ont jeté un éclairage défavorable sur la ville.

En conclusion, cet article démontrera que la réconciliation est possible lorsque les parties en conflit choisissent d'enterrer leurs différends idéologiques, plutôt que d'utiliser des incidents comme le retrait des sculptures de l'époque soviétique du Pont Vert pour de monter en épingle leurs différences.

**Mots-clés:** *réconciliation, conflit, identité*