

LITHUANIA: URBAN HERITAGE IN IT'S SETTING CHANGE

Jonas Glemza & Giedre Miknevičienė / Lithuania

The theme of ICOMOS 15th General Assembly Scientific Symposium “Monuments and Sites in their setting - conserving cultural heritage in changing townscapes and landscapes” became particularly topical in the recent decade in the State of Lithuania.

The main cause is a sharp boom of economy after Lithuania regained its independence and joined the European Union. It resulted in more active processes of urban-architectural development that are changing a traditional setting of urban heritage and even the urban monuments themselves.

Another reason of the onset of large scale modern constructions as close as possible to the historic centres of cities is profitability of investments: the closer to the centre, the higher the buildings are, the more profitable investment.

Undoubtedly, these processes are influenced by worldwide tendencies and short-lived fashions to build high rise buildings in city centres, also, by a wish to avoid provinciality that is often improperly understood.

In contemporary Lithuania the problems of urban heritage and its setting protection are most topical in those areas where tendencies of development became more active before anywhere else, and at present - most vivid, namely, in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania and in Palanga, the resort on the Baltic coast. In other largest towns of Lithuania – in Kaunas and Klaipėda analogous processes have also started already. With a future rise in economy they are predicted in the whole State of Lithuania, too.

But the most topical and dangerous problems of the changing setting of urban heritage for the heritage preservation are found in Vilnius, because of it's value (In 1994 the Historic Centre of Vilnius was inscribed in the World Heritage List) and the largest scale of architectural-urban development there.

Of particular importance when defining the value of Vilnius Historic Centre – are the elements forming a panoramic townscape:

- a landscape situation: the city is located in the valley of two rivers - Neris and Vilnia surrounded by green hills,
- the historic, political and compositional nucleus: the Gediminas Hill near the rivers Neris and Vilnia confluence with the upper and lower defensive castles,

- densely built-up Old Town of the 14th-19th centuries,
- to the southwest – the New Town of the 19th –20th centuries, built up by very human scale buildings – 3-5 storey houses,
- territories around the Old town, former historic suburbs, located alongside historic tracts, smoothly integrating into greenery of the outskirts of the town,
- a picturesque panorama of immense beauty with a plentitude of church steeples.

In Vilnius, the most extensive architectural-urban development in Lithuania was conditioned by objective causes:

- Vilnius has become the capital of the Member State of the European Union, development now is propagated by political motives, it is necessary in a functional aspect,
- in Vilnius the highest economic effect is obtained from constructions, here the price per square meter in a newly constructed apartment is the highest, the most rapid rises in real estate costs,
- in the territories of historic suburbs surrounding the Old Town there are many wooden houses in a poor physical condition, they need to be renovated,
- a significant influence is also made by the human factor - the Mayor of Vilnius is young and active who aspires to fulfil a political aim – prosperity of the capital of Lithuania.

Due to these reasons new constructions became more abundant in the central part of the city, located in the visual impact zone of the Old Town.

A majority of works performed in the Historic Centre of Vilnius - in the territory of urban monument are aimed at the application of buildings to present-day functions, being coordinated with a conservation-restoration work. A direct process of the intrusion of new constructions into the territory of cultural monument is being under control: there are built (or a possibility of construction analysed) only those objects whose construction as urban restoration of war time wounds had been planned before Vilnius Old Town was included into the World Heritage List. At present, the conception of reconstruction of many objects is being revised, some are rejected: discussions are going on only about exceptional cases of reconstruction. Unfortunately, we must mention some errors already made, the most evident is the hotel “Novotel” on Gedimino prospect. A 9-storey, large

volume cube of the building causes a dissonance with the lay-out of Gedimino Prospect where 3-5 storey houses are built. The Hotel was criticized by the Associations of Restorers and Architects and the city public.

For poor quality of architecture, stylistics there was also criticized the newly built hotel “City Park” near the Cathedral Square, although by its volume the building was satisfactorily integrated into the historic context.

It is worth to remind the history of ICOMOS: when ICOMOS 3th General Assembly Scientific Symposium was held in Budapest, a topical issue “Contemporary architecture in historic ensembles” was discussed. New constructions, architecture in historic environment was, is and will be a topical issue in the context of urban heritage conservation and development of our cities and towns.

It is more complicated to handle the intrusion of new architecture into the buffer zone and adjacent territories behind the Historic Centre of Vilnius as they were not located in its buffer zone but in the panoramic sights of Vilnius they are perceived together with the Old Town.

Creation of a new administrative-commercial-public centre – “architectural hill” on the lower terrace of the city, in the river valley, not far from the Old Town had been planned in the Soviet times, about 40 years ago. Then there was built one high rise building, a 20-storey hotel “Lietuva”. At present an urban-architectural hill is growing up by its side. Unfortunately, during construction one of the new buildings – Hanner/Europa Building was elevated and had grown up to 33 storeys. Efforts are taken to propose some other projects where buildings evidently are too high.

Pressure of the investors to build high rise buildings is conditioned by merely economic motives – high cost of the land in the city centre must be paid off, the premises on the upper floors with the view of Vilnius Old Town are sold at the highest price. Protection of urban properties as entirety of cultural heritage objects, their silhouette and panorama is hardly in harmony with the construction of high rise buildings.

Similar processes have also started in other historic towns of Lithuania like Kaunas, Klaipeda and Palanga. It is regretful that even famous architects from Italy and Norway present their proposals for high rise buildings to be built in Vilnius and Klaipeda without considering the value of historic towns and the necessity to preserve them. It is good that so far these are only theoretical urbanistic proposals but, to tell the truth, they greatly strengthened the positions of investors.

Resorts on the Baltic coast, also, like Vilnius are very attractive for investors. Palanga is one of the most famous resorts in Lithuania. A historic border townlet, erected in an exceptionally nice landscape, in the second half of the 19th century was planned and formed into a resort by the family of the Counts Tiskeviciai. It was built-up by 1-2 storey villas, most of them wooden, of unique architecture sinking deeply in greenery. Historic Centre of Palanga is included in the Lithuanian Register of Urban Monuments. In post-war years, in order to conserve the unique features of Palanga and to avoid the abundant flow of holiday-makers coming from the whole USSR, within several kilometers there was formed a new centre of sanatoria and hotels where high rise buildings were constructed. At present, unfortunately, the historic resort is becoming more densely built up, during reconstructions the altitude of houses and their density increased. Development of the town Palanga is extended towards the park at the cost of greeneries. It is danger, that the urban architectural character and identity of Palanga may be lost. Large, brick 5-6 storey buildings grow over the old constructions, and the resort turns into the town.

Without doubt, in Lithuania there are taken efforts to regulate the processes of urban and architectural alterations. For instance, the Department of Protection of Cultural Heritage had not approved a new Detailed plan of Palanga central part, which reflected the interests of developers and investors rather than the preservation of the unique character of the Palanga resort.

The same in Vilnius - already ten years ago in Vilnius were fixed the boundaries of general protection zone of the Historic Centre of Vilnius together with adjacent territories of urban heritage. The emergence of this zone coincided with the new law of the protection of Immovable Heritage of Culture that was passed in 1994 and with the inclusion of the Historic Centre of Vilnius into the UNESCO World Heritage list. Unfortunately, up to this year the activities of construction in the protection zone are not specifically regulated.

When the problems of urban heritage conservation are solved a large influence comes from territorial planning documents such as Official City Plan that was prepared in 1998 and is partly devoted to heritage protection. In this Plan there are given recommendations for regulation of the visual protection of the buffer zone of the Historic Centre, the volume and altitude of buildings for the period 1998-2005. At the same time there were selected and fixed the most important points for viewing of the Historic Centre and there aimed not only at viewing the most typical panorama but also for urban-architectural control of development of the city. For two years the Municipality of

Vilnius has kept the fixed computerized sights of the most important panoramas and they are used to check all new buildings with larger volume or high rise buildings.

At present a new Official City Plan up to the year 2015 is under way.

In recent years the society of Vilnius has become more concerned about the preservation of the Historic Centre and its setting, its townscape and identity.

At the beginning of this year the public expressed its strong discontent and sharp criticism concerning the 14-storey administrative building of the commercial centre being constructed on the upper terrace of the city and visualized in the city panorama. This building would have made a negative effect on the sight of the city and the Historic Centre. Thanks to the public, the Association of Architects and heritage protection institutions, the Municipality of Vilnius succeeded to stop this construction, limiting its altitude by 6 storeys.

A growing role of the public in the planning process is a result of the implementation of provisions of Territorial Planning and Construction laws because they require that the public must have a preliminary acquaintance with new projects. The public, exactly, had played a significant role participating in the debates concerning the Detailed Plan of the Historic Centre of Vilnius when they requested to make additional expertise. In the aspect of cultural heritage preservation this project was subjected to the expertise made by a group of experts from ICOMOS Lithuanian National Committee and parallel ICOMOS experts from Malta, Finland and Norway. Owing to them the project was rejected.

According to the Chairman of ICOMOS Historic Towns and Villages Scientific Committee Dr. Ray Bondin (Malta) who examined the Detailed Plan, “it is essential to find precise balance between preservation and development of historic centre and its environment”.

In October 2004 the Public Enterprise Academy of Cultural heritage organised a photo exhibition in Vilnius Town Hall. It was devoted to new and renovated buildings in the historic centre of Vilnius in order to find both – positive and negative or problematic features of architecture in those buildings. A jury of specialists was formed to evaluate the objects at the exhibition. The visitors of exhibition also had possibility to select the objects and make their rating. By a general opinion the hotel “Novotel” was selected as the worst building, and the renovated hotel “Congress” as the best positive example.

New requirements of cultural heritage preservation came into force this year after the new Law on the Protection of Immovable Cultural Heritage had started acting, last year the Territorial Planning Law was passed, while in 2001- the Law on Preserved Territories. In their implementation seeking for harmonious development of towns and conservation of their unique character, it is necessary to have schemes of dislocation of high rise buildings in towns. In Lithuania nowadays the implementation of the laws mentioned is of great importance. These laws reflect the principles of European conventions in archeology and architecture.

At the same time it is urgent to promote a higher quality supervision and control of territorial planning and constructions which is carried out by the Ministry Culture, the Department of Cultural Heritage and municipalities. By the agreement between the Ministry of Culture and Vilnius Municipality a project is started to be developed for a closer definition of the boundaries of the buffer zone of the Historic Centre of Vilnius and for the regulation of constructions in the buffer zone. For a year already there has been functioning the Senate of Vilnius Old Town formed by the Ministry of Culture, State Heritage Commission (the expert institution of the Seimas, the President and the Government) and the city Municipality whose aim is to deal with the problems of the Historic Centre of Vilnius and for the evaluation of the most important projects.

Once more it should be accentuated that:

- conservation problems of the changing setting of urban heritage are vitally topical in contemporary Lithuania and in Vilnius, in particular;
- it is necessary to seek for preservation of urban heritage and for its co-ordination with a harmonious development of the city, to find ways how to turn the urban development to the direction favourable to heritage;
- it is very important to rely upon the approved international documents such as the 1996 Helsinki Declaration of the European Council “On the political importance of conservation of cultural heritage in Europe (it is required to harmonize the policy of heritage preservation, territorial planning and urbanistics), ICOMOS Charter on the protection of Historic Towns, etc.;
- it is of great importance to have the territorial planning documents where the field of heritage preservation is precisely defined. In the case of Vilnius it would be: Official City Plan, Preservation plan of the Historic Centre and regulations, a Scheme for dislocation of high rise buildings in the city, a location of the main points for viewing and urban control;
- one of the most important levers in the protection of

urban heritage is the public, therefore it must be educated and oriented.

Abstract

We think that if the agreement is reached between state institutions of heritage protection and the city self-government, with a participation and support of the public it will be possible to seek for the preservation old urban heritage as well as for a harmonious development of its setting.

Vilnius historic centre (the Old Town, the XIVth-XIXth centuries), the World Heritage Site (1994), is a part of Lithuanian capital in a picturesque valley of the river Neris.

The subject of the paper is conservation of urban properties as entirety of cultural objects, their panoramic and historic silhouettes in relation to new high building construction.

The problem that has sprung up recently because of the new architecture and currently significant growth of high-rise buildings (in Lithuania it is over 12 storey) and its negative visual impact on environment .

Although high-rise buildings that reach 33 storey in Vilnius are outside the borders of its historic centre and from the upper storeys a magnificent view opens to the Old Town, but the group of those buildings have a negative impact on the historic panoramas. It is the result of increasing investments and Vilnius development.

Now City Municipality has prepared and approved the scheme of likely construction sites of multi-storied buildings after consulting with the heritage specialists.

In resolving the problem the significant influence comes from territorial planning documents such as Official City Plan and special plans devoted to the heritage protection and regulation of the height of buildings.

The problem of preserving historic centre of Vilnius, its visual protection zone were actively discussed a year ago, when a new Historical Centre Protection Regulation, the key document describing requirements on preservation and management of cultural properties, was approved by the Ministry of Culture except the regulation in protection zone.

The main aim today is to find a precise balance between preservation and development of the urban heritage and its environment.

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Fig.1 Plan of the City of Vilnius. 1581. Bruynen G. van, Hoogenbergh F.



Fig.3 The same panorama of the Historic centre of Vilnius. 2005.



Fig.2 J. Bulhak. Panorama of the City of Vilnius. 1930.



Fig.4 Panorama of the City of Vilnius. 2005.

