Urban development and historic preservation in Vilnius

In March 2010, the National Cultural Heritage Commission of the Republic of Lithuania assessed the restructuring of Vilnius’s Old Town. The document, which was authored by the commission “Concerning the World Heritage Site,” surveys a period that started in 1995, the year when Old Town Vilnius was declared UNESCO World Heritage site. It states that during those fifteen years the Old Town was subject to major restructuring projects that destroyed valuable historic heritage, and summarizes the disputes between preservationists and the Vilnius Municipality after 1998, the year when the first Vilnius development plan after 1990 was introduced.

This plan had projected the urban development until 2005. Its major goal was to convert a former industrial city into a modern center of science, culture, business, service, and tourism. Vilnius was to become a “European city... (with) an explicit economic and social environment, communication and technological infrastructure, and values of natural and cultural heritage.” The most important task, according to the plan, was the preservation of Vilnius’s Old Town as a World Heritage site. The plan also declared the necessity to rebuild important monuments that were destroyed over the last two hundred years, such as the Palace of the Lithuanian Grand Dukes or the medieval city walls.

An integral part of the plan was the “Revival Strategy for Old Town Vilnius” (Vilniaus senamiesčio atgaivinimo strategija), which had been prepared with the help of international consultants. It foresaw some important administrative and legal steps, such as the incorporation of an independent management agency for the Old Town, which was to coordinate public and private interests, and which was to be supported by local civic associations. The plan also proposed the establishment of a “revival fund” to support economic growth and at the same time watch over the proper management of the urban development. The management agency was supposed to preserve and develop the Old Town’s functional mixture that included spaces of government, finance, religion, culture, and education.

The authors of the strategy emphasized that all resources should be directed towards the revival of the Old Town, while at the same time preserving its unique urban features, such as the relics of the city walls, the narrow medieval streets, and the scale and details of the buildings. They mentioned that in time of economic growth conflicts between competing functions may arise. At the same time they pointed out that while tourism and entertainment were important, they should not prevail in the Old Town. According to the strategy it was essential to preserve the Old Town as a place of resi-
The most productive period of the Agency was 1998–1999. During these two years it had the significant budget of 42 million litas (approximately 10.5 million US dollars at the time). These funds were mostly used to paint facades, repair roofs, and to remodel streets, sidewalks, squares, courtyards and street lighting. These works fundamentally improved the impression of the Old Town for its visitors and, as the Agency noted in its report, increased the real estate value.

In the decade before the Agency started its activities all restoration work had been suspended. There had been an Old Town regeneration program under Soviet rule that was started in the 1970s and stopped in 1988 during Lithuania's struggle for independence. Its aim had been to convert the Old Town into a kind of architectural park for tourists from the entire Soviet Union. Its most important part was the conversion of former palaces and secularized churches into museums and concert halls. The residential districts of the Old Town were renovated in batches. The residents were moved out, then some research was undertaken and decisions about preservation, reconstruction and the use of the restored premises were made. Restaurants, cafés, and craft shops in a historic style were opened in the Old Town. Renovated and modernized apartments were preferentially given to members of the artists and writers associations and to representatives of the nomenclatura. The unrenovated portions of the Old Town continued to lack even minimal sanitary facilities and were inhabited by the most underprivileged.

In 1988, the Lithuanian Independence Movement (Sajudis) declared the restitution of property to religious communities. The respective regulations started to be implemented in 1992. Many buildings were returned to the catholic, orthodox, and protestant churches, and the number of active houses of prayer increased significantly in the Old Town. Some religious communities returned to their historic convents that had been nationalized and secularized after 1945. Many former religious buildings should nevertheless have been adapted to a different function, since the return of property to the churches created another set of problems. The restituted buildings were mostly run down, and their renovation was often beyond the respective congregations' financial capacities. As a consequence, the congregations increasingly rented out their property for commercial purposes: converted into hotels and restaurants. The permission to privatize residential buildings led to the privatization of large parts of the Old Town. Properties were shifted and buildings changed their function. However, at the end of the 1990s, the Old Town was little attractive to investors because the buildings were crumbling and in need of substantial repair.
A big effort was undertaken to restore government buildings. The municipality took back the old town hall, and presidential offices were moved to the palace that since the end of the eighteenth century housed state authorities but during Soviet times was used as a culture club.

In 1995 the Cultural Heritage Inspection (Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros paveldo inspekcija) under the direction of the Seimas (national parliament) was abolished. This institution had been supervising the management of the country’s cultural heritage. Ever since, there was no institution that could formulate and implement conservation policies for the historic heritage. Issuing of permits and rules for implementation of regulations for the restoration of historic buildings was passed to the municipal department of heritage management. There was no comprehensive policy for the protection of historic heritage. All decisions were made ad hoc, and the owners and users of the buildings were given substantial liberties.

While the Old Town Revival Agency financed and implemented the restoration of Vilnius’s Old Town – or, to be precise, some cosmetic work, and even this made commercial activity impossible during the time it was carried out – there were no debates around historic preservation. The first conflict started around Novotel, a hotel that was built between 1999 and 2001 on Gediminas Avenue in close vicinity of the Old Town. The architect, probably pressured by his clients, took advantage of the unclear regulations and increased the building height. The hotel was erected on the site of a historic building that had been demolished with permission of the municipal heritage management department – the municipal authorities had argued that investment in the center was needed. Civic organizations and preservationists protested against this decision and harshly criticized the municipal heritage management department – in vain. The conflict around Novotel exemplifies the rising tensions between private and public interests in the Old Town, as well as the absence of a coordinating institution.

The Vilnius Old Town Revival Agency had the Vilnius Old Town restoration plan up to 2002. However, when the city government was replaced after the 2000 elections, the attitude towards urban development in the Old Town changed substantially. The Strategic Urban Plan was created. It brought forward an ambitious task: to make Vilnius a significant regional center until 2011 and increase the city’s international competitiveness. This strategy saw Vilnius’s Old Town as a resource for the tourist industry. The authors emphasized that the Old Town could “promote an interest in the city and improve its image.” To achieve this, the historic center was to “become attractive for life, business, and tourism.” The plan declared the necessity to revive traditional crafts and seasonal craft fairs and proposed to use heritage buildings for cultural events. A new general plan was adopted in 2007. It projected the possibility to increase density in the Old Town and to rebuild structures that for various reasons had disappeared over the course of the last centuries. Such reconstructions were to increase the residential space in the Old Town. Residential buildings in a historic style were to be built on open spaces that had not existed before 1945, when new squares and broadened streets were created when clearing rubble after 1944 bombings of the Old town.

In 2000, when the Strategic Urban Plan was adopted, funding for the Old Town Revival Fund was significantly reduced. The Old Town Revival Agency re-oriented itself towards the restoration of isolated monuments and declared its main function to be the education of the community. The municipality subsequently designated the largest part of the Old Town Revival fund for education. The fund was not very large – since 2000 it did not exceed two million litas per year, about half a million US dollars. Under the government of the Liberal Party the municipality considered restoration the task of investors; the Old Town Revival Agency merely was to educate them.

In 2001 the municipality started to develop large parts of the Neris River’s right bank across the Old Town with high-rises. The new development was called “the Vilnius architectural hill!” Residential and commercial buildings grew on the hills surrounding the Old Town.

In 2003 the municipality adopted the Old Town Protection Regulation (Senamiesčio apsaugos reglamentas) that evaluated the growing privatization and commercialization of formerly public property in a neutral way. It also set positive goals such as
the removal of industry from the Old Town. The Regulation summarized the development in the Old Town since independence. Due to the economic boom the number of hotels, restaurants, cafés, tourist shops and tourist-oriented clubs increased. The number of kindergartens decreased dramatically. All cinemas in the Old Town were privatized and converted into shops or restaurants. Most ground floors were turned into commercial spaces. The real estate boom raised the demand for accommodation in the Old Town.

The Old Town Protection Regulation envisioned the possibility to increase the density of the Old Town through the construction of new buildings and offered some possibilities to control the height of new buildings in the new town. It also projected a reduction of traffic in the Old Town by constructing an underground parking system near the former city wall, and declared the necessity to restore and regenerate historic green areas.

The Old Town Protection Regulation, like the municipality’s Strategic Urban Plan, aimed to increase private capital influx in the Old Town. A new Built Heritage Law, which was adopted in 2004, guaranteed state compensations for investment into the preservation of historic buildings. However, the funds in the state budget were very small and the influence on the preservation of privately owned historic buildings were very limited.

The fast and little controlled growth of commercial activity in the Old Town raised the concerns of both preservationists and the general public. After 2004 a numerous civic associations were formed that protested against the structural modification and adjustment of old buildings for commercial use. These groups started to protest regularly against the municipality and called the Ministry of Culture to abide to the World Heritage Convention and ensure the protection of Vilnius’s Old Town as a world heritage site. Under this pressure the Ministry of Culture in 2004 invited international experts who were asked to evaluate the Old Town Protection Regulation and the alterations in the city.

These experts suggested determining the legal status and responsibilities of the institutions dedicated to the protection of the Old Town. They also called to form a protected Old Town area and to incorporate a council that should coordinate the different interests in the Old Town and inform the public. This council should consist of representatives from the Ministry of Culture, the municipality, and non-governmental organizations. The international experts also stated that the problems in Vilnius are typical for historic cities that have been going through an economic boom. In 2007 a new General Plan for Vilnius was passed which was to implement the municipality’s Strategic Urban Plan. This General Plan aroused even harsher discussions. The plans to build a high-speed tram through the Old Town faced strong resistance. Also the construction of an underground parking system in close vicinity to the Old Town was discontinued after public protests. Every large project in the Old Town provoked harsh debates, and the resistance against developments in the Old Town radically increased.

Nowadays almost everyone agrees that in the last decade the Old Town has been revitalized: it has become the city’s liveliest neighborhood – and one of the most expensive ones. At the same time preservationists increasingly oppose any form of new development in the city center, arguing that the growth of tourism in the Old Town decreases the comfort of local residents.

The recent assessment of the alterations of Vilnius’s Old Town, which was presented by the National Cultural Heritage Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, is very pessimistic. Although this document acknowledges some successful building restorations, it states that "because of high-rise buildings and multi-storey complexes the valuable structure and texture of the Old Town’s cultural landscape changed. Vilnius’s Old Town and the surrounding historic landscape, its panoramic view and silhouette were altered. The city’s space rapidly changed. Vilnius’s alleys and courtyards lost their traditional character. While the density and building heights increased, the traditional hierarchy of spaces and scales changed. The dominance of historic ensembles (churches and convents with gardens, palace complexes) vanishes; visually they were divided into smaller fragments and separated from their dominant buildings. The structure of historic building complexes is changed. The reason for this essential alteration is new
construction - modern forms, buildings that stand in contrast to the historic built environment, and historic imitations that are incorrectly called restorations."

Thus we can state that until now the national government and the municipality has not yet found a way to balance urban development and the protection of historic heritage in Vilnius’s Old Town. One of the reasons is the different position, on the one hand of the specialists and activists engaged in historic heritage, and on the other hand of the developers. The protectionists see Vilnius’s Old Town first and foremost as the city’s historic heritage, which should be protected by museological means. The real estate developers, on the other hand, see the Old Town mostly as a valuable resource for tourism. Because the municipality so far has mostly sided with the developers the National Cultural Heritage Commission of the Republic of Lithuania appealed to the national government “to incorporate a government institution or appoint an official who is directly responsible for the protection of Vilnius’s historic center.”

As a consequence from the 2008 financial crisis development in the Old Town was suspended – but at the same time also most restoration works have stopped. One can understand National Cultural Heritage Commission’s call for one single voice that would adequately speak for the preservation of the city’s historic heritage. Commission is convinced that such voice has to be voice not on the municipal but on the national level. Hence, according to Commission, one should by all means attempt to return to the centralized system of heritage protection, which was in place under Soviet rule, and which in 1995 was hastily dismantled and the dissolution of this system resulted in a patchwork of laws, institutions, and mechanisms of operations whose regulations often overlap, compete, and conflict with each other.

Annotations

(1) The National Cultural Heritage Commission of the Republic of Lithuania is an expert group that serves as a consultant on cultural heritage to the Seimas (national parliament), the president, and the national government.


(3) Ibid.

(4) Other buildings included the St. Joseph church of the Barefoot Carmelites convent, which was destroyed in 19 century; the Great Synagogue of Vilnius, which was damaged during the Second World War and later secularized, and certain Old Town neighbourhoods that were destroyed after the Second World War to create more green space in the city centre.


(7) See the webpage of Vilnius municipality: http://www.vilnius.lt/vmsp/, accessed on May 2010

(8) Ibid.

(9) See the webpage of the Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency: http://www.vsaaa.lt/tvarkymas.lt.htm, accessed on May 2010

(10) See the webpage of the Heritage department at the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture: http://www.heritage.lt/vln_regl/index.htm, accessed May 2010


(13) Ibid.