

## PUBLIC SPACES IN HISTORIC TOWNS OF LITHUANIA: REHABILITATION AND DECLINE OF CULTURAL VALUE

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**Abstract.** The present paper aims to reveal present tendencies of changes in the public spaces of urban heritage sites in Lithuania. Decline of former social relations, depression of local communities and commercialization of building activity are highlighted as the main reasons of dramatic alterations in traditional spatial forms and design of historic streets and squares. The contradictions in the system of listing, indeterminate responsibility of the authorities, and inadequate role of local communities contribute to low efficiency of preservation of authentic streets and squares. Conservation in this sense is presented not as safeguarding the fragments of urban environment, but as preserving the major spatial rules - the 'spatial spirit', which enabled continuation of the traditional formation of urban environment. Evaluation of recent changes in the public spaces of listed urban sites is urgent for further development of legal system of cultural heritage protection. Democratization of the valuation process and involvement of the local communities into processes of protection are regarded as the fundamental direction of expected revitalization.

**Keywords:** urban heritage, public spaces, cultural value preservation.

### 1. Introduction

An extension of the built heritage concept from listed individual buildings to an urban pattern and townscapes is considered as the second wave of policies of cultural heritage preservation (Tiesdell 1996). The understanding that the initial conservation policies were significantly limited in effect, and a particular concern was the damage caused by inappropriate development close to listed buildings was necessary for this change. This second wave of conservation policies has led to the so-called 'area-based conservation policies' throughout Europe during the 1960s (Larkham 1996).

The list of urban heritage monuments under protection of State was signed in Lithuania in 1969, and the public spaces of the most of these sites then were determined as particular features of their cultural value. In opinion of Algimantas Miškinis, who is still the most famous researcher of urban heritage in Lithuania, 287 urban settlements of our country could be regarded and preserved as urban heritage sites.

During last two decades the streets and squares of many historic cities and towns of Lithuania suffer essential alterations. Present decline of national economics has double influence on urban heritage: diminishing of danger of new visually aggressive buildings and worsening of physical condition of existing valuable structures. In-

fluence of new structures to silhouettes and panoramic views of historic centers of the cities was accepted as the main problem of urban heritage protection in the period before the crisis. However tension of historic urban tissue and inappropriate forms and materials is often increasing.

Spatial characteristics of historic squares and streets, their forms, textures and colors are still under change, new functions appear and traditional ones decline. Intrusion of large-scale shopping centers and decrease of small trade in the listed historic areas, construction of high-priced dwellings and recreational centers on picturesque banks of the lakes and rivers, and disappearance of small trade in the historic centers are the features of many historic settlements in nowadays. The danger for cultural value of these sites is evident, and recent changes or urban heritage features do not look positive. Safeguarding of urban cultural value could be evaluated as one of the most problematic fields of cultural heritage preservation in Lithuania nowadays.

### 2. Problems of listing

Safeguarding of cultural value of public spaces in urban heritage areas is directly related with data of records of these sites. It is impossible to preserve all aspects of value if listing data are not enough concrete and detailed. The features of urban heritage sites on the national List of

Cultural Properties in the most cases are much poorer in comparison with the determined features of archaeological, architectural or historic properties. This situation reveals urgent shortage of fundamental investigation of urban heritage sites. During last few years former systematic and thorough research of cultural values was finally replaced by simplified procedures of approval of record data by the Board of Cultural Heritage Valuation at the Department for Cultural Heritage at the Ministry of Culture. The territories and buffer zones of the most of urban heritage sites still remain without definite determination and legitimating.

Every record of public space under protection should describe and depict cultural value based upon thorough historical research of all components. However comprehensive record should reveal the opinion of the local inhabitants of cultural value of the site. Record of urban heritage area should be enough concrete and detailed for presentation of every feature of streets and squares to be preserved, e.g. it must cover its spatial structure, design, appearance and materials of valuable elements, and other important characteristics.

Compulsory documents of urban territorial development (comprehensive, special and detailed plans) are not sufficient for proper management of cultural value preservation. Completion of special recommended documents for cultural heritage preservation (individual regulation) is almost impossible because of insufficient financial potentiality both of state institutions and municipalities.

### 3. Present tendencies of treatment

The Charter for the Protection of Historic Towns, as adopted 1987 by the International Commission on Monuments and Sites, indicates, that in a historic town or district the elements that lend the townscape its specific character, such as construction materials, colors, roofs and inner courts and all decorative elements (statues, grilles, the pavement, street furniture, etc.) are to be preserved (Charter 1987). But until nowadays famous researchers of urban heritage and preservationists of architecture emphasize, that public spaces of many historic towns, including ones in the old member countries of EU, are heavily influenced by the tourist industry, in the result of which development historic streets and squares demonstrate attributes that may not have actually existed in that place, and the authentic elements are altered for economic purposes. The elements, which could exist for centuries after their restoration, are replaced. It could be named as “marketing of pieces or versions of the past for export” (Walkowitz 2009).

Lithuania has joint basic international documents, obligating protection of urban heritage. The Granada Convention (ratified by Lithuania in 1999) contains statutory measures, amongst which is the requirement to adopt integrated conservation policies. 10<sup>th</sup> article of this convention requires signatories “to include the protection of the architectural heritage as an essential town and country planning objective and ensure that this requirement is taken into account at all stages both in the drawing up of

development plans and in the procedures for authorizing work” (Convention 1985).

However many problems of the treatment of historic environment in the historic centers of the towns and cities Lithuania still differ from the basic ones in the old members of EU. For example, development of bicycle accessibility and pedestrianisation of city centres in the past three decades are still considered as very important trends in UK and other Western European historic city centers. Few pedestrian streets were formed in the centers of Lithuanian historic cities, towns and even villages (Kernavė) in the Soviet period starting from the seventies. However pedestrianisation, creation of separate roads for bicyclists and other essential changes of spatial and functional structure of public spaces are very seldom and miserable even after two decades of national independency.

Present dispersion of the investments into public spaces of our historic towns reflects new territorial dispersion of different groups of the society. Prestigious dwellings mostly are built on the outskirts with valuable natural environment or in the most beautiful plots of the old towns. Semi closed and fenced areas on the outskirts and quarters of listed buildings with closed yards in the old towns appeared during last two decades. Spatial isolation of prestigious dwelling areas is still growing. Many banks of the lakes and rivers in the most attractive small historic towns were built up by the private houses of rich newcomers. Meanwhile entire quarters built up in soviet period and inhabited with low-income people spaces are declined, their physical and esthetic condition is getting worse. The municipalities are not able to finance equal territorial maintenance of historic urban areas. The pavement, greenery, engineering equipment of the most public spaces in these sites remain shabby, except of representative squares at local government buildings as in Utena, Anykščiai, Plungė, Alytus, etc.

The main historic squares and streets of the towns and cities are losing their former inhabitants, who were belonging to different strata of the society in the soviet period. Functional structure is under change also: various private and municipal institutions, small shops disappear or are shifted by dwellings of high income inhabitants, boutiques and expensive hotels. These sudden alterations of urban structure interfere continuation of traditional way of life, sustained neighborhood, local building traditions. Former long-lasting local building materials of these areas are rapidly changed by fashionable imported ones: polished granite blocks, street lamps and other typical street furniture from catalogues of foreign companies. Choice of new materials and architectural details often is based upon understanding of social prestige. In many cases kitsch in design of refurbished prestigious public spaces manifests itself as a rule. However durability of the materials, which were never used before, could be examined in rather short period. The cracked rainwater pipes, worn pressed concrete pavement of sidewalks or courtyards, cranned ceramic tiles of the steps of the entrances were applied during last two decades as common elements of street engineering. After few years they demand necessary replacement.



**Fig 1.** Contrast of new and historic materials in architectural details in Užupio street, the Old town of Vilnius

For example, ceramic tiles in the streets and squares of our historic cities were started to be used in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century in the period of Art Nouveau style, but only for emphasizing the main surfaces of the façade walls of the buildings. The samples of these high quality tiles remained until nowadays in the stylish historic facades of the dwellings and commercial buildings of Vilnius city in Gedimino avenue, Kražių and Pylimo streets.



**Fig 2.** Inadequate details of engineering equipment in the Square of Angel, the Old town of Vilnius

Field stones and dressed stone blocks, iron and timber details, lime plaster covered with lime paints and even concrete slabs should be treated as long-lasting traditional urban design materials of our historic squares and streets. During centuries they obtained universal use and accumulated variety of meanings, from served for pavement of streets and sidewalks, supporting walls, fences, benches, details of water supply and sewerage, sculptural monuments and memorial crosses.

Glazed or polished surfaces, bright colors, rich textures in the public spaces could be easily achieved with use of new equipment. Variety both of architectural forms and building materials was uncommon in historic public spaces of our towns and cities. Even very general analysis of historic development of any urban area may answer the

question, are the proposals of reconstruction not in conflict with traditional features of the site.



**Fig 3.** The view of southeast corner of Didžioji (Vilnius) market square in Kėdainiai in 1930-1935 m. (Photo from <http://www.miestai.net/forumas/showthread.php?t=9825&page=3>)

During centuries completely paved areas of market and other squares of Lithuanian towns were used for different purposes. The results of recent contest (fourth one during the last two decades) for design of Lukiškių square in Vilnius look like positive exception in the context of often neglect of urban traditions in nowadays. The decisions to pave the central part of this site were selected as the most appropriate. The concept to create multifunctional area could be treated as positive expression of common tradition of formation of our public urban spaces.

#### 4. Responsibility and role of local inhabitants

At present more than 80 historic towns of Lithuania, their parts (including historic parks) are on the list of national cultural properties. Unfortunately, most of them are yet not declared as protected. Despite of that even the responsibility for preservation of cultural value of protected sites still remains without clear definition. Safeguarding and maintenance of public spaces of these sites is more problematic in comparison with preservation built-up structures. Deficit of responsibility could be related with rapid change of social structure of society. Other countries base it upon long-lasting traditions. For example, in France, the Central State still holds a strong decision-making power in matters of area-based conservation. This is in contrast with some other European countries (the Netherlands for instance) where the development consent procedure within such areas is increasingly dealt with at the municipal level (Ashworth and Howard 1999).

Monitoring of changes of public spaces during enough long periods is necessary step to evaluate and to reveal best decisions of their design. The results of monitoring should be used for search of new decisions. The valuation process should be based upon such criteria as safeguarding of local tradition, lasting of the materials,

reduction of contrasts between prestigious and neglected zones of historic towns. Present legal regulation of monitoring of urban heritage sites in Lithuania is not sufficient. The instruction on cultural heritage monitoring, signed by the minister of culture in 2005, is hardly applicable for urban heritage areas. The criteria for listing of immovable cultural heritage are established, but their application can not result disclosure of territorial value of urban sites. Characteristics of urban tissue, which ought to be under permanent control, are not specified and not described (Nekilnojamojo kultūros paveldo atrankos ir vertinimo kriterijų aprašas 2005), and “boundaries of tolerance” for urban changes legally remain not limited.

Present legal requirements for monitoring the responsibility of public spaces in urban heritage sites define for municipalities (Nekilnojamojo kultūros paveldo stebėsenos taisyklės 2005). However many of Lithuanian municipalities still have no departments or even officers for cultural heritage preservation. They avoid completion the lists of cultural heritage of local significance, because they cause supplementary financial obligations and legal responsibility.

Listing process does not cover collaboration of experts and local inhabitants. The dialogue of these both participants of evaluation process and of creation of value is still not legally determined and not enhanced. Elimination of local people is one of the factors, which determine decrease of interest in heritage preservation. Respect to opinion of direct users of heritage sites, to aspects and details important for local communities could result more active processes of urban heritage protection.

Contemporary internationally accepted principles on cultural heritage preservation require evidence gathered through accepted scientific and scholarly methods as well as from living cultural traditions for acceptance of decisions for interpretation and presentation of cultural values (The ICOMOS Charter 2008). Democratic attitude towards the environment requires involving the public in preservation planning and saving elements of landscape that are significant to different groups of the society. In this kind of planning for preservation public decisions are made on what features will be preserved, and what changes will be allowed to take place (Teller and Bond 2002). Without enhancement of participation of local people the development of public spaces of our historic towns and cities with loose continuity of traditions.

## 5. Conclusions

- Public spaces of cities and towns constantly change, but when the changes are inconsistent and unconscious of the plurality of the old structure, they inflict damage on the principal rules which govern the urban structure, in spite of any partial survival of the traditional fabric.
- At present the most of historic towns of Lithuania their are yet not declared as protected. Legal responsibility for preservation of cultural value of both listed and protected urban sites still remains without clear definition.
- Dispersion of the investments into public spaces reflects territorial dispersion of groups of the society. During last two decades the most prestigious public spaces of many historic towns and cities of Lithuania were renewed with application of new materials, however physical condition and esthetic quality of the streets and squares in the areas inhabited by low-income people became worse.
- In many cases architectural decision and design of particular elements of recently reconstructed public urban spaces of the old towns and historic centers of the settlements do not fit their historic traditions. Local building materials are seldom used for their pavement and other elements of equipment.
- The regulations for listing of immovable cultural heritage of Lithuania and criteria of cultural value are determined and established, but their application is not sufficient for disclosure of territorial value of urban heritage sites. Collaboration of experts and local inhabitants could be regarded as necessary step in development of successful preservation of public spaces of our historic towns and cities.

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