

THE STATE OF CONSERVATION OF THE HISTORIC CENTRE OF VILNIUS
Report of the Mission 20 - 25. January 1994 Panu Kaila

1. GENERAL

The mission was carried out from 20 to 25 of January 1994. To the credit of the Vilnian hosts, I was able to be thoroughly acquainted with the Historic Centre of Vilnius, all the way from a helicopter ride in the sky to the underground medieval cellars and archaeological excavations. My indefatigable guides were Mr Jonas Glemza, the Vice-Chairman of the Lithuanian National Committee of ICOMOS and Ms Grazina Juknevicienė, the Head of the Division of Monument Conservation of the Town of Vilnius. Ms Elena Maceviciūtė, the General Secretary of the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO was also most helpful in many meetings.

1.1 Discussions

There were a series of meetings with representatives of the state and the town about the preservation of the Old Town and other historical areas of Vilnius. In the Parliament there was a meeting with the Chairman of the Parliament, Mr Jursėnas and the cultural advisors of the President of the Lithuanian Republic, Mr A. Gaizutis and Mr R. Gudaitis. Mr L. Telksnys, the Chairman of the National Commission for UNESCO, was also present.

In the Ministry of Building and Town Planning there was a discussion with the Minister, Mr A. Vapsys and the Vice-Minister, Mr A. Luksas, the Minister of Culture and Education, Mr D. Trinkunas, the General Director of the Department for Monument Conservation, Mr V. Zubovas and the Head of the Section for Foreign Affairs, Mr R. Pranaitis.

In the Town Council I met the Chairman of the Town Council, Mr V. Sapalas, The Mayor of Vilnius, Mr A. Jasulatis and other officials. The Minister of Culture and Education, Mr D. Trinkunas, was also present.

The National Commission for UNESCO Working Group for the Old Town of Vilnius organized two meetings, presided over by the Chairman of the National Commission, Mr L. Telksnys, with several Lithuanian officials and specialists, among them the Chairman of the Commission of Old Town of the Town Council, Mr S. Urniezius. Also, there was a discussion in the Lithuanian National Committee of ICOMOS, presided over by the Chairman, Mr E. Zilinskas.

In the discussions I presented my views of the Historic Centre, and introduced the book Feilden - Jokilehto, Management Guidelines for World Cultural Heritage Sites, ICCROM 1993.

1.2 History of Vilnius

Vilnius was founded in the 12th century in a place which had already prehistoric settlements. The town grew around a complex of castles. From the 14th to the end of the 18th century it was the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In the 16th century there were about 500 houses built mainly of brick. A defensive wall with 10 towers was built at the beginning of the 16th century, and the University was founded at the end of the century. The medieval town with the castles covers 113 ha.

In the 16th and the 17th centuries ecclesiastic building flourished in Vilnius; there are 25 churches and 17 monasteries in the Old Town in addition to many palaces and mansions. In the 18th and the 19th century many old buildings were restored to Classical architecture.

Vilnius suffered considerable damage during the Second World War. From the 1960's onwards there has been an active period of building, reconstructing and protecting the Historic Centre of Vilnius. (fig. 1., fig. 2.)

2. PROTECTION OF THE HISTORIC CENTRE

2.1 Legal instruments and administration

The law of protection and use of historic and cultural monuments dates from the Soviet era, 1977, and it is acting till now with the new temporary law for the inspection and protection of cultural heritage, which was adopted in 1990. It created the situation where inspection belongs directly to the Parliament, and protection to the Government. The first is managed by the Inspectorate of Monument Protection and the latter by the Department of Monument Conservation. This Department, which was in the Ministry of Culture and Education, was moved some months ago to the Ministry of Building and Town Planning. As it is very difficult to define clearly and logically the areas of activities and the administrative responsibilities of these two bodies, this dualism may easily cause some problems.

A new law concerning the protection of immovable cultural property and another concerning the movable cultural property are currently under preparation. According to Mr Jursenas, the Chairman of the Parliament, these laws will be on the agenda of the Parliament during this spring.

The practical town planning, like the new regeneration plan for the Historic Centre of Vilnius, is carried out by the Institute of Monument Restoration, which belongs to the Department of Monument Conservation. On behalf of the Municipality, there is a Commission of the Old Town within the Town Council, which organizes and finances the planning and realization of restoration projects in the Historic Centre.

One of the current problems is linked with the new structure of ownership of the houses. Earlier the houses were owned collectively; now the apartments have been privatized without giving the new owners the responsibility for their house. Thus no one is willing to carry on the repairs and maintenance of these buildings. This inconsistency needs to be solved as soon as possible.

2.2 Early history of protection

The first restoration works were carried out in the Upper Castle as early as the end of the 19th century. In 1901-1906 the churches of St. Anne and St. Michael were restored, and in the 1930's a few other monuments like the University, the Town Hall and some churches. The first victory in a fight to protect a monument for its historic significance was gained in 1911, when the plan to rebuild the tower of the Upper Castle converting it into a water tower was prevented.

The first plans for the preservation of the Historic Centre of Vilnius were worked out during the war in 1940-1943. This was a scientific study and recommendation for investigation and conservation.

In 1949 the first list of the important historic towns of the USSR was published; it included 20 towns and Vilnius was one of them.

2.3 The first reconstruction plan of 1958

When the post-war reconstruction was started, a new wide road was opened through the badly damaged quarters of the Old Town without respect to the historic integrity of the street pattern and the small volume of the old houses. To prevent this direction of development the project for the protection of the Old Town was created in 1956-1958 under the direction of Prof. K. Seselgis. This was the first protection plan for a historic centre in the USSR.

The original structure of streets and squares was protected. Historic buildings were identified, some reconstruction recommended and buildings which were considered worthless were indicated for possible demolition.

The first project of reconstruction and revitalization of a site was worked out in 1961, but realized much later in 1980 - 1989, in the quarter of Vokieciu, Mesiniu and Sv. Mikolojaus Streets.

In 1969 the Lithuanian Government ratified the Old Town of Vilnius as an urban monument of republican significance.

2.4 The second regeneration plan of 1974

The second plan, the project of regeneration of the Historic Centre of Vilnius was prepared in 1972-1974 in the Institute for the Conservation of Monuments under Architect A. Pilypaitis, who presented it to me in the Institute. This plan was based on revised research of the existing buildings, the different functions and the needs of the residents. The population was planned to be reduced from 30.000 to 20.000 people - now it is about 26.000 people. The preservation of historic buildings and reconstruction of demolished ones were indicated in the plan.

In 1972 a project of a badly damaged site was implemented in the quarter of Didzioji and Stikliu streets according to the new plan. In 1973 an international symposium of ICOMOS was held in Vilnius, with the theme

"Protection of historic centres of towns and problems of their application for new purposes".

In 1989 the Historic Centre of Vilnius was proposed by Lithuanian SSR to the Tentative List of the World Cultural Heritage Convention. The second regeneration plan was attached to the application. In April 1990 ICOMOS recommended the application to be deferred for additional information. The additional data was sent to the World Heritage Centre in October 1990.

2.5 The third revitalization plan of 1992

In 1988 some changes and adjustments were seen to be necessary for the plan of 1974. One detail was the new transit road planned to be opened through the western edge of the Old Town, which was found to be dispensible. Also new data had been collected by archaeological and historic research during last 15 years. Thus the third revitalization plan was worked out in 1988-1992 in the Institute for the Conservation of Monuments under the direction of architect A. Gucas. This plan was also presented to me in detail in the Institute.

In the third plan the Historic Centre is deemed to consist of three zones: the Old Town (the area surrounded by the wall), the historic suburbs, the natural and archaeological sites (the territory of the castles). In addition to these there is a buffer zone adding to the protection of the Historic Centre.

In the Old Town some buildings deriving from the Tsarist era and most from the Soviet era are to be regenerated, which means the possibility of historic reconstruction. The other buildings are preserved with restoration or conservation.

The historic suburb Uzupis on the other side of the small river Vilnia is for the most part perfectly authentic traditional housing area, and it is in the immediate vicinity of the eastern part of the Old Town. Uzupis thus certainly deserves to be protected for its own value, as well as for its harmony with the historic centre. The idea of a real estate company to develop Uzupis as an area for hotels is not good, as it will necessarily destroy the authenticity.

The third zone includes the natural park of the valley of the Vilnia river and the two mighty hills on its banks. The eastern Three Crosses Hill had an early wooden fortification, while the western one carries the ruins of the Upper Castle. Beneath there are some buildings and the archaeological remains of the Lower Castle.

The buffer zone stretches along the town wall around the southern part of the Old Town. This zone thus protects the Old Town for the proximity of unsuitable modern buildings.

The third plan is developed from the second one. It comprises also the analyses of the history of the boundaries of the building lots, the identification of traffic problem areas and a new questionnaire for the inhabitants.

As this third plan of 1992 seems to be a positive reformulation of the previous protection plan, I suggested that it be added to the documents of Vilnius Historic Centre sent to the World Heritage Centre.

3. CONSERVATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

In the Historic Centre of Vilnius various treatment strategies are applied, according to different aims and situations. The following examination is illustrated with examples of particular buildings; however in the same building several treatment approaches could be found.

3.1 Reconstruction

The rebuilding of the war damage was started in Vilnius, also in the Historic Centre, with the aim of modernizing the town. As a reaction to this, the first protection plan was drafted and called "reconstruction plan". Ever since, the reconstruction - building a copy of a lost house or a part of it - of important historic buildings has been one part of the preservation programmes.

The reconstruction of particular buildings started in the 1960's, and is still playing a very active role. It is not limited only to the buildings destroyed during the Second World War. The following are some important examples of reconstruction in the Historic Centre of Vilnius.

- The Great Radvilu palace in Vilniaus street consisted of four three-storied corner pavillions connected with three two-storied wings. Only the northern half of the palace is seen today. The north-western pavillion was reconstructed in 1986, the northern wing and the north-eastern pavillion were restored in 1991. Part of the long eastern wing is still waiting for restoration. In this case, the reconstructed pavillion does not differ from the restored parts, and easily results in misinterpretation. This could be easily helped by placing a signboard with the date on the facade.

There are plans to rebuild also the other half of the palace, of which some remains of the south-eastern pavillion and the southern wing have been preserved as a part of an apartment house of Jugend style built in 1912. The rebuilding will result in reconstruction of this house. 2/3 of the palace will then be a reconstruction. The reconstruction of the palace is considered to be important for town planning aspects. (fig. 3.)

- There are plans to reconstruct another important historic palace, the Oskerkai palace in Klaipėdos street, of which only the wall of the first floor remains like a fence along the street. The motivation for the reconstruction are the important role of this palace in history and the need to preserve the authentic part of the wall in a context of a building and not as a fence of the site. In a similar situation, with only remains of the first floor walls left, the reconstruction of a house in Didžioji 8-10 has already started.

- The Arsenal is a vast building by Vilnius river below the Upper Castle hill. The upper part of it was destroyed in the 18th century. In our

century it was used as garage for tanks. The building was restored in 1983 and houses now the Museum of Applied Arts. The upper half of the walls were reconstructed, like almost all of the structures inside. The preserved part of the ground floor is now shown as an archaeological excavation, and the few original arches or parts of them are shown as "windows" in the new structures. In the gable facade, a line marks the extent of the authentic wall. (fig. 4.)

Near to the Arsenal there are ongoing works of reconstruction. A long two-storeyed building across the Arsenal yard is a reconstruction, save the gate in the center. The defensive wall between these two buildings, of which only small parts exist, is planned to be reconstructed. The reconstruction of the supporting wall of the hill is under way.

- The Lower Castle was constructed in the 16th century and levelled to the ground in the end of the 18th. It was the palace of the Lithuanian Grand Dukes and thus has an immense symbolic value to the Lithuanian nation. Today the site of the palace is an archaeological excavation which is very well organized for tourism and didactic purposes. The area is protected by a temporary sheltering building provided with lights, a visitors' path is set across the area along bridges and through the excavations, and an auditorium is built overlooking a well visualized part of the excavation. This archaeological part of the palace is directly linked with a building, where the cellars of the palace have remained and which houses now a museum for the archaeological material.

There are three alternative plans to rebuild the Lower Castle: the reconstruction according to the old graphics, the rebuilding of the original volume without the details, and the building of a modern shelter to the excavations. The reconstruction must necessarily base much on conjecture. The presence of many reconstructions will also diminish the value of authentic old buildings. I think that a building of good modern architecture, which could be found by an architectural competition, would be the best solution.

3.2 Restoration

The restoration in Vilnius Historic Centre is in most cases stylistic or period restoration, the recreation of the visual form of the building at a given time, mainly in the Gothic period. The Gothic era which lasted here to the middle of the 16th century is seen as more purely Lithuanian than the Baroque time, which had plenty of links to Italian architecture. As the great monuments, like most of the churches and monasteries are Baroque, it is considered important to show the very strong Gothic presence in the smaller buildings.

- In Didzioji 24-26 two houses are being adapted for museum use. In projects like this it is common to recreate the oldest period of the building. In some parts the Gothic structure is rather well preserved - in the cellars and in the attics, where two Gothic gables were found. In other parts, like in the wings around the yard, the old form is reconstructed starting from small fragments.

- Gothic houses in Pilies 12 and Pilies 11. The damages of the war revealed that the Neoclassical facade in Pilies Street 12 had Gothic details behind the renderings and square windows. The house had been rebuilt behind the facade, so only the red brick facade was restored to its Gothic form in 1960. The high gable was at first reconstructed only in form and built of wood, but later it was made of brick. On the opposite side of the street, in Pilies 11, there were three similar Neoclassical facades. The one in the middle was occasionally found to have Gothic bricks, and it was recently restored to its Gothic looks. In both of these cases, like in many other Gothic facades, the filling of lost parts is distinguishable from the original but not too much, as it is done with new bricks of the original size. (fig. 5.)

The Gothic facades bring back a hidden feature of the Old Town and visualize its long time dimension; on the other hand they often break the uniform 19th century street scene. In rather many facades there are small openings in the rendering which have been made in the search for Gothic bricks. These facades are meant to be restored to Gothics. I think that those already realized examples, like the beautiful facade in Pilies 12, or the house with important Renaissance sgraffitto frescoes in Ausros Vartu Street, are sufficient testimonies of the period, and that the rest should keep their facades as they are, with all their historical stratigraphy. Such houses are e.g. Bernardinu 6, which ought to preserve its peculiar Baroque rendering, and the Renaissance house with Neoclassical front in the complex of St. Michael's Church in Volano Street. (fig. 6.)

The restoration of facades has also created the problem of preservation of the unprotected original bricks. The salt chrySTALLIZATION is turning the old bricks into powder, and the rendering which has been cut off was an old means of protecting the brick.

Another case where the restoration policy could be discussed is the re-opening of Renaissance arcades, like in the University or in the Jesuit Noviciate. These arcades were built by Italian masters, but as they soon were deemed impractical for such a northern climate they were closed. A closed arcade is characteristically a Vilnian feature and tells a more interesting story - contains more history - than the original open one.

There are also cases of 'facadism', where only fronts of buildings are conserved in restoration, like the block in the corner of Vilniaus and Liejyklos Streets and the bank building in Jogailos Street. Here this is not done for profit reasons, but only when the buildings have been in very bad repair, often due to long neglect or to badly executed repairs of war damage.

After these somewhat critical remarks I would like to stress that not at all and every restoration in Vilnius Historic Centre is stylistic. Most of the monumental buildings, like so many churches and monasteries still have their full richness of different ages. The Cathedral itself, which is a conglomerate of seven centuries, is a most interesting and well restored entity, from its underground archaeological excavation to its Gothic vaults with Neoclassical decoration and the imposing Neoclassical facade. The 17th century chapel of St. Kasimir has recently been structurally strengthened and its interior restored. (fig. 7.)

To name a praiseworthy example of an ordinary building, the 19th century apartment house with typical yellow brick facade in Stuokos-Guceviciaus 13 has been saved through a difficult strengthening of the foundations.

3.3 Non-restored buildings

In addition to the many recently restored buildings there are lots of others in the Historic Centre which are still intact. Most of them are at least in satisfactory condition, but some are desolated and some even in a ruined state. In the northern part of the Historic Centre, around Gedimino Street, there are public and commercial buildings and apartment houses from the 19th and the 20th century which generally are in fair condition. Among them there are listed monuments of the Modern Movement, like Vilniay Bankas from the 1930's in Gedimino 12.

Some buildings of the 1950's Stalinistic era are recommended for reconstruction in the preservation plan, because their volume does not correspond to and harmonize with the surrounding historic architecture. In my opinion such houses as Didzioji 20 and the whole length of Vokieciu street also tell a true history, and although they are one or two floors too high, in their historic architecture they become rather well merged in the Old Town.

The charm and richness of a living historic town is very strongly present in many small streets of Vilnius. Especially the back yards form a vivid accumulation of different small houses, a genuine collection of historic structures from the gothic into the modern age. Every one of them, regardless to its age, should be treated very carefully, respecting the honest and true picture of history and the way of living it presents. (fig. 8.) The same is true to the historic suburb Uzupis, which is a rich and fully authentic milieu. However maintenance is badly needed.

Among buildings at risk there are two small houses, Stuokos-Gucevicius 5 and 11, which ought to be preserved as rare representants of wooden architecture in the Historic Centre. The same applies to decorated wooden houses in Uzupis. (fig. 9.) Again the lack of maintenance is visible, and as wood is a very vulnerable material, it is important to organize proper maintenance as soon as possible. Outside the centre there are interesting areas of wooden houses, which are protected.

3.4 Maintenance

The lack of tradition of continuous building maintenance is one of the main risks for the historic value and the authenticity of Vilnius Historic Centre. Small repairs of leaking roofs, missing gutters, flaking paints, falling renderings &c are not done, so that a building will fall into worse and worse repair, until finally it will be totally restored. The heaps of refuse and rubbish in the yards make houses look bad and neglected and even cause some damage. The necessity to reconstruct parts that are beyond repair or even lost make the cost of the restoration high and means that part of historic authenticity will be lost. Also such parts which could have been repaired are changed into new ones.

To take an example: it is very very rare to see a repaired window. The existing ones, mainly dating from 19th or early 20th centuries, are replaced by new windows, which are not copies of the old but a stylistic restoration. As glazing putty is not available, the new windows have wooden glazing lists so that the water will soon penetrate into the mouldings; likewise the wood stains used in place of oil paints make the mouldings apt to crack. (fig. 10.)

The problem with the lack of maintenance of the houses is now linked with the new form of ownership, where no one is responsible for the building. Also there is a need for small building companies and teams of workers, which were able to do small repairs cheaply.

One means of helping the maintenance - as soon the ownership problem is solved - would be the editing of a manual to be distributed freely to the owners. The manual could contain articles of the history and of the cultural value of the houses making the owners proud of their property, practical information of technical questions and addresses of workshops, builders and shops for materials.

3.5 Conservation skills and materials

I visited the Laboratory of Chemical and Physical Investigation, which belongs to the Institute of Monument Restoration and to the Scientific Centre of Cultural Heritage in common. There were two skilful and especially enthusiastic researchers, Ms E. Telksnienė and Ms N. Rauckienė (who has been trained in ICCROM). The laboratory equipment is rather modest and in need of modernization. At present the conservation of bricks is studied.

There is a lack of good craftsmen in Vilnius like everywhere. It was said, however, that there are four masons who are capable to do Gothic brickwork.

The municipality will start a professional school for craftsmen next autumn. The representative of the Town of Vilnius presented also a very interesting plan to revitalize the old crafts guilds. One of them, the Jewellers' Guild is already implemented. It would certainly be useful to have also the guilds of the building crafts back, like those of masons' and carpenters'.

Some traditional materials are available, like bricks and mortars, but some like linseed oil are missing. During the few days of my visit it was not possible to visit any producers to discuss this aspect.

3.6 New buildings

There are some modern infill buildings in the Historic Centre which have been adapted to the traditional milieu, e.g. Pilies 17 and Didzioji 28. Their rhythm, volumes, proportions and materials are in harmony with the Old Town; they are contemporary but do not contrast excessively with the historic architecture.

There are also modern buildings which have been built regardless of the environment, like the gallery house behind the old Town Hall, the school building in the corner of Dominikonu and Vilniaus Streets and the Post Office in Vilniaus Street opposite the Radvilu Palace. These represent ordinary modern architecture. They are not too high and thus they do not dominate their surroundings.

The modern high-rise buildings in Vilnius are placed to the north of the Historic Centre on the other side of the Neris river, where a new centre is being built. It is not possible to see any of them when walking in the streets of the historic area. Only from high viewing points, like from the the Upper Castle, can these modern towers or the huge 19th century Ministry of the Railroads be seen at a distance behind the Old Town.

4. Summary

The Historic Centre of Vilnius is a rich collection of buildings from different ages and full of everyday life. There are problems, like the lack of the tradition of continuous maintenance, which ought to be solved. There has been some tendency to recreate the lost past by reconstruction and by stylistic restoration. However there is an immense amount of charm and authenticity in the hundreds of historic houses, churches, monasteries, public buildings and streets which form the Historic Centre of Vilnius.

The historic value of Vilnius has been stated in the documents sent to the World Heritage Centre. In this report I have studied the state of conservation of the Historic Centre of Vilnius.

Personally I am convinced that the Historic Centre of Vilnius has an outstanding universal value, that it sufficiently meets the test of authenticity and that it merits to be nominated to the World Heritage List.

Helsinki 22.2.1994



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References

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fig. 1. The Historic Centre of Vilnius from the south. The Castle Hill can be seen in the background on the right side, and far away in the middle there are the towers of the new centre on the other side of the Neris river.



fig. 2. Part of the defensive wall, on the right, and Ausros Vartai Gate, the only one which remains. Behind the gate there is the early Baroque church of St. Theresa. On the same side of the street there is the Medininku House, a Gothic warehouse with reconstructed gable and below it the Renaissance frescoes in sgraffitto.



fig. 3. The Great Radvilu Palace. In the foreground the reconstructed pavillion, then the restored northern wing and pavillion, and part of the eastern wing.



fig. 4. The restored gable of the Arsenal. The line in the facade indicates the preserved part of the wall. The window frames are of concrete, with small fragments of original sandstone.



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fig. 5. The houses in Pilies Street 13 and 11. Of the three Neoclassical facades, the one in the center was restored to its Gothic looks. The dark bricks are original, the light ones modern.



fig. 6. Building archaeological research openings on the facade of the house in Bernardinu 6. The decision of the restoration is not made yet.



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fig. 7. The Cathedral. On the left hand corner there is the Baroque chapel of St. Kasimir, on the right its Neo-classical pendant. In the foreground the temporary shelters of the archaeological area of the Lower Castle can be seen.



fig. 8. Backyard charm in the Old Town. Wooden porches, galleries and stairs - maintenance is needed!.



fig. 9. A richly decorated wooden villa in Uzupis.



fig. 10. A beautiful but neglected wooden window in Bernardinu 10. Some of the windows of this house have already been changed into new ones of inferior quality, possibly because oil paint and putty for restoration are not available.