

**Identification**

<i>Nomination</i>	The Old Town of Vilnius
<i>Location</i>	City of Vilnius
<i>State Party</i>	Lithuania
<i>Date</i>	17 October 1989

**Justification by State Party**

From the 13th century to the end of the 18th century the Old Town of Vilnius was the political centre of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a role that it retains in the present-day independent Republic of Lithuania. It has been a centre of learning and culture since the 16th century. The town, which grew up at the confluence of the Neris and Vilnia rivers, is an outstanding example of the blending of the cultures of eastern and western Europe, and also constitutes one of the most easterly examples of Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque architecture in Europe. It played an important role in cultural developments in Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine.

It is proposed for inclusion on the World Heritage List on the basis of criterion ii.

**History and Description***History*

On a site that had been intermittently occupied from the Neolithic period onwards, a wooden castle was built around AD 1000 to fortify Gedimino Hill, at the confluence of the Neris and Vilnia rivers. The settlement did not develop as a town until the 13th century during the struggles of the Baltic peoples against their German invaders. By 1323, when the first written reference to *Vilnia* occurs, it was the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, founded by Prince Gedymis, ancestor of the Galitzin family. At this time some brick structures had apparently been erected on a small island formed when the Vilnia changed its course.

Lithuania was the last great pagan state in eastern Europe to be converted to Christianity, in 1387, when Grand Duke Jagaila was baptized. This opened Vilnius to the western world, since in the same year it adopted the Magdeburg Statutes. However, it was not until 1410 when the Teutonic Order was destroyed at the battle of Tannenberg that it became safe from marauders and invaders.

The rapidly expanding town was struck by a disastrous fire in 1471, when the first religious establishments (the cathedral, the parish church of St John, and the Franciscan and Cistercian monasteries) were destroyed. The only surviving remains from the earliest period are therefore the walls, some sections of which survive beneath the defences built in 1503-22 against Tatar incursions. The town was partially reconstructed after another major fire in 1530, when an attempt to rationalize the medieval street pattern was largely unsuccessful. This was a period of commercial and cultural development. Close trading links were established with both western and eastern Europe, and these trading links led to the spread of western culture into Byelorussia and the Ukraine. A printing works was set up in 1522 and a university in 1579.

Yet another fire in 1610 saw the destruction of the newly built Lower Castle and the new cathedral. The subsequent reconstruction included extensive church building: the churches of St Michael, St Stephen, St Casimir, All Saints, and St Theresa all date from this period. At the beginning of the war with Russia (1654-

67) Vilnius had no fewer than forty-one religious buildings, though many were lost during the conflict. Most of the older buildings in wood were lost in a series of fires (in 1715, 1737, 1748, and 1749), but it was the successive reconstructions that gave the town many of the buildings which give it its special character, including the Cathedral, the Town Hall, the Arsenal, and the Tyzenhauzai, Rensai, Pacai, and Masalskiai Palaces. Many of the surviving earlier buildings were rebuilt or refurbished in Baroque style.

Annexation by Russia in 1795 led to the Lithuanian capital gradually losing some of its distinctive character. The fortified enceinte and the Lower Castle were demolished in 1799; in 1837 Cathedral Square was laid out in strict academic style and St George Avenue was constructed, cutting across the old town fabric.

In World War II over eighty old houses were destroyed but reconstruction was put in hand with the end of hostilities. Major rehabilitation projects for the historic town centre were drawn up in 1956-58 and 1970-74.

#### *Description*

The historic centre comprises the areas of the three castles (Upper, Lower, and Curved) and the area that was encircled by a wall in the Middle Ages. The plan is basically circular, radiating out from the original castle site. The street pattern is typically medieval, with small streets dividing it up into irregular blocks, but with large squares inserted in later periods.

The historic buildings are in Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical style (with some later additions). Nearly 40% of them are adjudged to be of the highest category of architectural and historical importance. They constitute a townscape of great diversity and yet at the same time one in which there is an overarching harmony.

### **Management and Protection**

#### *Legal status*

Protection of the Old Town of Vilnius is governed by the Law on the Protection and Utilization of the Lithuanian Historical and Cultural Monuments (1977), the Provisional Law on the Inspection of Cultural Monuments (1990), and the Byelaws on Historic Towns (1969)

The buildings in the historic centre are in public, ecclesiastical, and private ownership. The area that is the subject of the nomination was designated the National Park of the Vilnius Castles by a Resolution of the Republic of Lithuania on 17 August 1994. The whole area is enclosed by a viable buffer zone.

#### *Management*

Practical town planning control is handled by the Monument Protection Department of the Vilnius City Board. The Department has the support of a number of state and public organizations, including the Monument Protection Department of the Ministry of Construction and Urban Planning, the Research Centre for Lithuanian Heritage, the Inspectorate of Cultural Heritage, the Institute for Monument Restoration, the Lithuanian National Committee of ICOMOS, and the Union of Lithuanian Architects.

### **Conservation and Authenticity**

#### *Conservation history*

The earliest restoration projects were carried out at the Upper Castle at the end of the 19th century. In the early years of the 20th century the churches of St Anne and St Michael were restored, followed in the 1930s by work at the University, the Town Hall, and several other churches. However, the first systematic

restoration and protection programme based on scientific analysis of the surviving structures was not drawn up until 1940-3.

The first post-war reconstruction plan began in 1958, as a reaction to the driving of a new road through badly damaged parts of the Old Town without respecting the historic town fabric. This resulted in protection being extended to the entire street pattern and a programme of restoration and reconstruction of certain important buildings.

The second regeneration plan was prepared by the Institute for Monument Conservation in 1972-4 and was based on further scientific studies of the surviving historic buildings and the needs of the residents in the area. It aimed at the reduction of the population within the historic area from 30,000 to 20,000 (the current figure is c. 26,000).

Some modifications were introduced in the third plan, developed in 1988-90, influenced by further archaeological and historical studies. This defined the historic centre (see above, "Legal status") and the buffer zone and prepared a programme of progressive restoration, reconstruction, and (in the case of certain buildings of inferior quality) demolition and replacement by modern structures that harmonize with the historic townscape.

A programme of urgent regeneration work was prepared in 1993. It is proposed to develop a programme for the implementation and funding of these programmes during 1995, based on the experience of the Edinburgh Old Town Trust.

#### *Authenticity*

The overall authenticity of the historic urban fabric and surviving historic buildings is high, in terms of design, materials, techniques, and setting. It represents the often turbulent history of the Lithuanian capital and its evolution, in political and cultural terms, over several centuries.

#### **Evaluation**

##### *Action by ICOMOS*

At the request of the World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS nominated an expert to visit Vilnius in January 1994. Professor Panu Kaila (President, ICOMOS Finland) spent a week there, holding many discussions with those responsible for management, conservation, and restoration as well as carrying out a detailed examination of the historic centre.

##### *Qualities*

To quote Professor Kaila's report, "the historic centre of Vilnius is a rich collection of buildings from different ages and full of everyday life ... Personally I am convinced that [it] 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." Having studied the documentation provided by the State Party and Professor Kaila's report, ICOMOS fully concurs with this view.

##### *Comparative analysis*

Vilnius forms part of the extensive network of medieval and early modern trading towns that stretch from Ireland to Russia. It is of especial importance in that it is situated in the pivotal trading area of the Baltic states. The only comparable towns in this region are Tallinn (Estonia) and Cracow (Poland). However, Tallinn is significantly different, in that it is a seaport, and also because of its important role in the Hanseatic League. It thus followed a different historical and cultural trajectory from Vilnius, which is manifest in its present-day form. Cracow has more similarities with Vilnius, but its history and urban fabric demonstrate significant differences, due to its divergent historical and cultural evolution.

### *Additional comments*

At its 14th Meeting in June 1990 the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee referred this nomination back to the Soviet authorities to provide additional information on the town planning schemes which exist in the immediate vicinity of the historic centre and called upon ICOMOS to provide an additional evaluation of the property. This information has been provided and has been evaluated by ICOMOS (see above, "Action by ICOMOS"). ICOMOS has also had the opportunity to study the additional data provided by the Lithuanian authorities in September 1994.

### *ICOMOS recommendations for future action*

In his report Professor Kaila draws attention to the lack of a tradition of continuous maintenance of non-monumental historic buildings in Vilnius, a situation that has been exacerbated by a change from collective ownership to private ownership of individual apartments following the recent political changes in Lithuania. As a result there is no obligation on the new owners to carry out repairs or maintenance. ICOMOS recommends that the State Party should be requested to examine this anomaly as a matter of urgency.

### **Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria ii and iv:

- ***Criterion ii*** Vilnius is an outstanding example of a medieval foundation which exercised a profound influence on architectural and cultural developments in a wide area of eastern Europe over several centuries.
- ***Criterion iv*** In the townscape and the rich diversity of buildings that it preserves, Vilnius is an exceptional illustration of a central European town which evolved organically over a period of five centuries.

ICOMOS, October 1994



### Monument preservation zones of old town

1. Piliu (Castles) park
2. Zone of the old town. Historical kernel of the old town (area surrounded by the fortification wall in the past)
3. Zone of the old town. Historical suburbs (formed during the epoch of the Grand Lithuanian principality) located close to the historical kernel of Vilnius

Vilnius : zones de conservation des monuments de la vieille ville /  
monument preservation zones of Old Town



Vilnius : vue panoramique de la vieille ville depuis le château haut  
panorama of Old Town from Upper Castle



Vilnius : Eglise Saint-Michel / Church of St Michael