

The regeneration of the historic city centre in Vilnius

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Summary

Vilnius' historic centre – the Old Town – occupies 359 hectares, making it one of the largest historic centres in Europe. The number of inhabitants living in the Old Town is currently 19,000. As a heritage complex of an outstanding cultural value, the Vilnius Old Town was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1994. The Revitalisation Strategy for the Vilnius Old Town was prepared in 1995-1996 including the creation of new management and co-ordination institutions – the Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Fund and the Old Town Renewal Agency. The integrated approach to the revitalisation encompassed involvement of residents and the business sector in the renewal process, co-ordination of revitalisation works funded from the state/municipal budget, co-operation with international organizations, harmonisation of legal documents relating to investment in the Old Town, data collection, information campaigns and monitoring of progress.

Historic introduction

Vilnius is one of the most easterly of the historic Central European cities. The city was founded in 1323 as a capital of the Duchy of Lithuania. Lithuania accepted Christianity in 1387 and thereafter Vilnius became a leading regional centre. Its position at the crossroads of eastern and western cultures, as well as its high level of religious and racial tolerance brought about the fast social, cultural and urban development of the city between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. The melting pot of many cultural influences, Vilnius has acquired a distinct cultural character, and traditional European architectural styles have taken on new features here. The city reached the apogee of its growth in the Baroque period when the Vilnius Baroque school made an impressive impact on a wide Northern-Central European area. Although Lithuania was incorporated into Czarist Russia in the 18th century, Vilnius managed to safeguard its rich historic and artistic heritage, both tangible and intangible. To this day, Vilnius' historic centre (the Old Town) occupies 359 hectares (887 acres), making it one of the largest historic centres in Europe. The number of inhabitants living in the Old Town is currently 19,000.

The safeguarding and conservation of cultural properties in Lithuania started in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the time of Romanticism, with its interest in the revival of national history and culture. The movement of the local cultural and scientific communi-

ty led to the foundation of the Archaeological Commission which, between 1855–1865, undertook to preserve important architectural and archaeological remnants of the country's history. The Commission succeeded in rallying a wide range of well-known intellectuals and representatives of the business community and persuading the Russian czar governor not to destroy several Roman Catholic churches and noblemen's palaces in the Vilnius historic city centre. The Lithuanian Science Society was founded in 1907, which also took care of cultural properties. The famous Gothic St. Anne's Church in Vilnius was then restored according to the scientific approaches and principles of the time. The restoration of the church was the first case of work on a historic building undertaken with the intent of conserving its architectural and historic value.

More recently, after the Second World War, the protection of historic and cultural properties was responsibility of the Board of Museums and Cultural Monument Protection, established by the Ministry of Culture of the Soviet Republic of Lithuania and active from 1963 until 1990. After independent statehood was reinstated in 1991, the Department for Cultural Heritage Preservation at the Ministry of Culture of the Republic was set up.

Preservation of the historic city center of Vilnius

During the Second World War more than 45 percent of the historic city centre of Vilnius was destroyed. After the reconstruction and urban renovation of the area, approximately 25 percent of it was left without having been reconstructed. Remains of several former town blocks were pulled down and newly planned public squares and parks installed. The Institute of City Development in cooperation with the Scientific Centre for Restoration commenced preparation of the reconstruction plan for the Old Town of Vilnius in 1956. The plan was completed in 1958 and approved by the Council of Ministers in 1959. It was the first project in the field of urban reconstruction-restoration. This Lithuanian experience had a great impact on the whole Soviet Union, stimulating professional debates and cooperation between city planners and heritage preservation experts. Although Soviet political doctrine on urban planning and development basically disregarded historic properties, the Vilnius urban reconstruction project of 1959 became the main argument safeguarding historic urban patterns and architectural heritage in the main periphery cities



of the Soviet Lithuanian Republic. After the success of this Vilnius project, allocations from the annual state construction budget for the maintenance and restoration of historic buildings started to be regularly planned. From 1970–1980, the amount of such allocations gradually increased, ensuring the growth of the whole state heritage preservation sector. It is necessary to stress that the Soviet era, marked by intensive urban renewal and development, had a generally negative climate in respect to the safeguarding of heritage properties and caused some lasting problems. The Vilnius Old Town Reconstruction Project became a crucial stimulus for the developing of a tolerance and respect towards history in urban development planning. It also indirectly provided a basis for principles of sustainability and integration (in the sense of new construction) in the sphere of urban planning development. Even ideologically based and politically ambitious urban design projects of the 1980's and the early 1990's took into consideration a respect for history and traditional values in urban and architectural planning. In 1974, the Vilnius Old Town Reconstruction Project was radically revised and improved according to substantial data from historic, archaeological and architectural investigations. It was renamed the Regeneration Project of the Vilnius Old Town. The project implementation was quite slow and was primarily directed towards the restoration of several of the oldest surviving residential houses and palaces. The growing economy and significant improvement of social life in the 1990's again forced the updating of the regeneration project from 1992–1995. The project progressed gradually, from the strictly architectural-urban sphere towards covering a wide range of elements of city life, such as traffic, parking and pedestrian area planning, greenery (park and square redevelopment), public services planning, etc. This last version of the regeneration project, in spite of its lack of a sufficient groundwork of economic and social analysis, became the first sample of application of an integral approach to urban conservation in Lithuania.

The Heritage value of the Vilnius Old Town

The following features determine the value of the Old Town as an urban and architectural *ensemble*:

- The harmony and integrity of the city, co-habited by people of various nationalities and religions.
- The structure of the city's layout and space as a reflection of its development from the establishment of the State of Lithuania to the beginning of the 20th century.
- A high density of old and individually valuable buildings and works of art, as well as groups of buildings.
- A wealth of structures and sites that are significant for the cultural history of the country, as well as for the Lithuanian State and society and for the whole Eastern European region.
- The historical accumulation of important administrative, cultural, religious and other objects, being the heritage of the state capital and the city centre.

Due to these universal features, the Vilnius Old Town was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in December 1994.

Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Strategy

Over seven years have passed since the Old Town of Vilnius was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. During this period, the renewal of the Old Town has been a primary focus of funds and technical assistance from the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, the Vilnius Municipality, UNESCO, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other international and local partners.

The Revitalisation Strategy for the Vilnius Old Town was prepared in 1995-1996 at the request of the Prime Minister and the Mayor of Vilnius, with the support of UNESCO, the World Bank, the Governments of Denmark and Norway, and the Edinburgh Old Town Renewal Trust. The Strategy proposed an integrated approach to revitalising the Vilnius Old Town, including the creation of new management and co-ordination institutions – the Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Fund and the Old Town Renewal Agency (OTRA), supervised by the Supervision Council.

Since the implementation of the Strategy many significant renewal and restoration works have been implemented in the Vilnius Old Town. In the course of the last five years, for example, the amount of public funds allocated to the renewal of the Old Town has totalled more than 27 million USD. The money was used for investigation and design work, for renewal of exteriors of buildings, main streets and pedestrian areas, public squares, parks and courtyards, and for

new street lighting. At the same time, the private sector has contributed the equivalent of five times the public contribution (approximately 100 million USD).

There have been differences between the renewal work undertaken by small private owners, by large investors and by the State. Private owners have usually only improved their properties, whether these be houses, offices, or shops. Large investors, on the other hand, have attempted to adapt buildings to new functional needs, while paying due respect to the conservation and preservation of the building's authentic features. State and municipal resources have been focused on the renewal and maintenance of public areas, such as the facades and roofs of the buildings on main streets, the public squares and streets, street-lighting and the lighting of heritage buildings.

The citizens have evaluated these public works very positively. The quality of work carried out in the Old Town is constantly improving, and more attention is being given to the conservation of heritage. Special plaster has been used for plinths in order to prevent moisture penetration into buildings. The hydro-isolation of foundations has been carried out at the same time as repair to facades. New sewers have been installed, and cables hidden under facades. Research into the stratigraphy of paint layers has also been undertaken, and exterior painting conserved and exposed on several buildings.

However, conservation specialists have also criticised some aspects of the recent renewal works. Over the centuries, historic buildings develop a surface patina, which gives them a feeling of authenticity and leaves the imprint of historic craftsmanship. An old building should preserve its old, curved walls with their soft edges and rough brush strokes on painted lime surfaces. Unfortunately, the walls and vaults of the restored buildings often have a very thick and plain layer of new plaster with sharp edges, and have been painted using synthetic paints.

Traditionally, lime mortar has always been used as the main material for binding stone and bricks in Lithuania. Lime was also used for artificial decorative and protective finishing layers and for painting facades using various techniques. Indeed, lime painting was used for centuries for both exterior and interior surfaces, always corresponding to requirements for material compatibility and reversibility. The use of cement-based mortars and synthetic paints, on the other hand, can result in the destruction of the walls. Unfortunately, cement mortars and synthetic paints were used in the restoration of buildings during the 1970's. They are still sometimes used, even though conservation specialists in other countries refuse to use such modern materials in the restoration of historic buildings.

Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency (OTRA)

The City's revitalisation, based on dynamic changes in the economy and social structure, required the introduction of new management methods and structures. The Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency (OTRA) was established in 1998 as the main instrument for the implementation of the Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Strategy. The Agency operates under the control of the Municipality and the Supervision Council, the Joint-Chairmen of the Council being the Mayor of the City and the Minister of Culture. The Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency's main tasks include the development and implementation of the Old Town renewal programmes, the involvement of the local community and business sector in the revitalisation process, promotion of investment in the Old Town and co-ordination of State, public and private needs, and the promotion of co-operation with international partners. The Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency is a new institution intended to become the bridge between the government and the local community.

Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Programme, 2000–2002

Developed by OTRA and approved by the OTRA Supervision Council and the Government of Lithuania, in the years 1999-2002 the Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Programme includes the following elements:

1. BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY:

- Involvement of residents and the business sector in the renewal process; co-ordination of private and public funds.
- Raising awareness within the Old Town community.

2. RENEWAL AND MAINTENANCE OF THE HISTORIC URBAN FABRIC:

- Co-ordination of revitalisation works funded from the State/municipal budget (investigation and design work, renewal and maintenance of streets and pedestrian areas, public squares, parks, courtyards and buildings).

3. REGIONAL CO-OPERATION:

- Co-operation with international organisations.
- Co-operation with other World Heritage Cities implementing common programmes.
- Planning and participation at the European Commission programmes.
- International promotion of the Vilnius Old Town.

4. LEGAL AND ECONOMIC MEANS:

- Harmonisation of legal documents relating to investment in the Old Town; simplification of the approval process for conservation activities.

5. DATA AND EVALUATION:

- Data collection on Old Town revitalisation and investment opportunities; presentation of information to the local community, potential investors and the public.
- Publication of information booklets and organisation of exhibitions.
- Monitoring changes in the Old Town and the Environment Impact Assessment of the Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation.

Building community capacity

New groups of residents coming to the Old Town seek to adapt the environment to their purposes, sometimes failing to take into account the specific characteristics of the existing urban context and as a result ignoring issues regarding the conservation of the Old Town's historically-shaped character. A minority of those residing or basing their businesses in the Old Town have sufficient knowledge of the history, culture and heritage value of the area or of its conservation.

Raising awareness within the Old Town community is thus one of the Agency's most important goals. Raising community awareness forms part of the Old Town Renewal Programme, and it will be a priority for activities being developed for the Agency's Information Centre.

Since 1998, the Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency has been seeking to involve private funds in the work of improving the Old Town's buildings and surroundings. However, no appropriate legal mechanism for this existed in 1998–1999. In 1999–2000, however, financial support for a Community Development Project was provided by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Lithuania. The aim was to involve Old Town residents in the maintenance of Old Town buildings and their surrounding areas, and to encourage the setting up of home-owners' associations for residential buildings. At public meetings, specialists introduced the Old Town Renewal Programme to residents, dealing with issues regarding the renovation and maintenance of buildings and yards, energy conservation and heating issues, and opportunities for long-term subsidized loans. Special attention was paid to the problems of home-owners' associations. Information handouts on how to set up a home-owners' association were prepared for the owners of each building.

An information brochure, 'How to Participate in the Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Programme', was published. Included in the brochure were opportunities and conditions for residents to participate in the maintenance of the Vilnius Old Town and criteria for the evaluation of Vilnius Old Town sites, including a ques-

tionnaire for Old Town residents. The list of Vilnius Old Town properties to be renovated was drawn up based on the evaluation criteria and the principles for their application that had been approved by the Vilnius City Board. These criteria encompassed:

- The heritage-conservation characteristics of the property.
- The property's function and use.
- The financial or social profitability of the property.
- The ratio of financial support to the applicant's investment.
- The applicant's effort to maintain the property and protect its cultural value.
- The physical condition of the property.
- The ownership status of the property.

These criteria should be taken as the precondition and guarantee for the development of relationships of mutual trust and co-operation between the Vilnius City Municipality, the Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency (OTRA) and the Old Town community. Their main goal is to create the right conditions for the maintenance and renewal of the Old Town, the preservation of its cultural value, and transparency in the use of State and private funds.

Discussions taking place in the Working Group of the Old Town Renewal Programme involve applicants for funds. The Supervisory Council and competent investment experts may also be called upon for additional reviews. Decisions of the Vilnius City Board are made public.

In accordance with a Resolution of the Vilnius City Board of January 25, 2001, concerning the relationship between State (municipal) and private funds, the following principles have been applied. Up to 50 per cent of the renewal costs for street facades and building surroundings, up to 40 per cent of the renewal costs for yard facades and landscaping, and up to 50 per cent of roof-renovation costs will be covered by State and municipal funds.

Following the approval of the 2000 Vilnius Old Town Renewal Programme by the City Board, intensive negotiations with the chairmen of the home-owners' associations of these buildings and the representatives of the owners started with the objective of making agreements regarding the joint financing of building renovation work. Not all owners managed to come to an agreement regarding financing, since many complained of the worsening financial situation; as a result, agreements with seven home-owners' associations were made covering the renovation of their buildings and yards. As many as 35 home-owners' associations submitted applications to participate in the 2001 Old Town Renewal Programme, accepting

an obligation to make a 50 per cent contribution to the renovation of their buildings and surrounding areas.

Co-operation with the Old Town community is thus little by little resulting in raised awareness, increased participation, and improvements in living conditions by joining private and public funds. This will gradually increase the quantity and quality of conservation and restoration work in the Old Town. Cultural heritage should be a recognised and valuable object of community interest and an indicator of the quality of life in the city environment.

Database development and information

In recent years, with the growth in the rate and volume of Vilnius Old Town renovation work and with more active resident and investor participation in the process, the need for information, education and training in the area of management, maintenance and use of immovable cultural properties has increased significantly. The Agency develops and updates the Old Town database, which is accessible to the public.

The Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency Information Centre started operations at the end of 2000 and provides consistent and regular information updates for residents about the Old Town Renewal Programme and its activities. It also provides information on development plans, investment or renewal work and the conservation and management of heritage properties. The Centre also prepares and implements training programmes in integrated heritage conservation for schoolchildren, investors and other stakeholder groups, in order to increase awareness and interest in the value of the Vilnius Old Town, methods of its preservation and the regulatory legal framework. Seminars for property owners and contractors on specific issues of heritage building renewal and renovation have been organised with specialists from the Lithuanian Monuments Restoration Institute. Here, restorers and conservation specialists explain the value of traditional materials and technologies, as well as the qualities of new techniques. These seminars have directly influenced further renewal work.

The Information Centre should gradually become a centre for the raising of awareness in the field of heritage conservation and renewal and for specialised exhibitions, discussions and other public events on this theme. The involvement of children and young people in the Centre's activities should – in the course of time – become a priority.

The role of international co-operation

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cul-

tural Organisation (UNESCO) have provided support for the revitalisation of the Vilnius Old Town. In 1999, the World Heritage Centre approved the UNESCO/WHC-UN/UNDP Technical Assistance Programme, which included the promotion of public involvement, the dissemination of information among the population and investors, and the improvement of management processes within the Vilnius Old Town Revitalization Agency. A feasibility study for a pilot project (a block of the Augustinian Monastery) was prepared. Two seminars, 'Safety of People and Property in the Vilnius Old Town', and an international seminar, 'Investment Environment in Historic City Centres' have been held.

However, the UNESCO/WHC-UN/UNDP Technical Assistance Programme also has had a very positive impact on the implementation of integrated urban-conservation management principles under the conditions of an economy in transition and major changes in social life. The implementation of the Technical Assistance Programme has had a positive impact not only on Vilnius City, but also on the whole of Lithuania and the surrounding region, improving the common understanding of the society and the importance of World-Heritage maintenance and preservation.

The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), through its ITUC (Integrated Territorial and Urban Conservation) Regional Programme in North-East Europe (Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Ukraine), has also committed its support through ensuring access to appropriate training. Since 1997, ICCROM's NE Europe ITUC Programme, frequently in co-operation with the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, has organised a series of training workshops and seminars in Lithuania. These seminars were designed specifically for managers whose decisions could have an impact on the cultural-heritage value of historic settlements. These activities have demonstrated the importance of understanding the integrated approach to urban conservation, and they have equipped managers with negotiation and conflict-resolution skills, which are necessary to achieve heritage objectives in diverse economic and social environments.

Assessment of the implementation of the strategy

Since 1998, the Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency has monitored changes in the Old Town and made an Environmental Impact Assessment of the Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Programme. Each year, data is evaluated from social-economic, heritage conservation and technological perspectives. The conclusions of the Environmental Impact Assessment serve as a

basis for the preparation of the Programme for the coming year.

One of the results of changes to the environment stimulated by Old Town revitalisation activities is that the opinions of both Lithuanian citizens and foreign guests of the Old Town have generally improved. The town's new image has given people the confidence to instigate further improvements to development processes both in Vilnius and in the country as a whole. In securing improvements to the quality of such processes, special attention to the Old Town remains an important and indispensable strategy.

The preconditions for the attainment of the long-term objectives of the Strategy have been established and partially achieved. These include:

- The involvement of residents and businessmen in the renewal process and the co-operation of private and public funds.
- The more consistent and effective utilisation of public funds in managing cultural properties and in encouraging owners to protect them.
- Increasing residents' and entrepreneurs' confidence in the municipal authorities and transparency of the use of public investment for the benefit of the Old Town and its residents.
- During the international conference 'Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Strategy Implementation: Co-operation, Results, Vision', held in Vilnius on September 15-16, 2000, the results of the Old Town management process were evaluated as important, well-timed and effective. Participants at the Conference emphasised the significance of the common efforts of Lithuanian and international partners to revitalise the Vilnius Old Town. They recognised that the Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Programme was one of the most successful investment projects of the 1998–2000 period, and that it had been an important example of successful co-operation between the Lithuanian Government, the Vilnius Municipality, foreign donors and private capital.

Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency's participation in the European Commission project

On February 1st, 2002, the Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency joined the EC 5th Framework Programme ENTRUST – Empowering Neighbourhoods Through Resource the Urban Synergies with Trades. The project includes partners from Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Scotland and Lithuania in the field of integrated urban development and local community involvement. The project will last for 26 months.

All across Europe, cities face the challenge of deprived, mixed-function neighbourhoods in recession, where the social problems of the disadvantaged residents intertwine with the economic difficulties of declining businesses. The ENTRUST thematic network is financed by the 5th Framework Programme for European Union research, technological development and demonstration.

The problem of urban regeneration is extremely acute in mixed-function neighbourhoods, where multinational and multicultural communities commonly experience life with different attitudes and social interaction. In Lithuania, it is even more challenging, due to the political and economic transition. Therefore, a gradual and complex analysis of the changes and growth of neighbourhoods, in view of finding appropriate management methods and tools, is one of the most important long-term tasks in the field of integrated and sustainable urban development. As a pre-access country, Lithuania has the great opportunity of taking part in the challenging urban research taking place in the highest-ranking European Union countries.

At the first meeting in Lisbon, 18-19 February 2002, after the introduction of the overall project framework and introductory presentations, its very high importance was recognised in its use of direct experience exchange and common work. Advanced approaches were debated and management methods applied to solve integrally a range of urban issues.

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