

Housing-based Urban Planning and New Housing Standard in Vilnius, 1919–1939

Marija Drėmaitė*

Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

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Abstract

Housing modernization played one of the most important roles in the modernization processes of interwar European cities. In this context, the development of housing in Vilnius, which belonged to Poland in 1919–1939, is researched. The research is based on the theory of “housing-based urban planning” developed by Yael Allweil and Noa Zemer. This theory conceives urban structure and urban housing as one single problem rather than disconnected realms of planning. Based on new findings and revised study of available sources, three planning processes by which policy makers, planners, and dwellers in Vilnius (Wilno) engaged in this housing-based urban vision are investigated: (1) the city as a housing problem; (2) the city as social utility for reform and reconstruction; and (3) housing-based urbanisation as self-help. The result is a new historiographic perspective on Vilnius’ modern urbanism focusing on the planning and construction of new housing.

Introduction: The Problem of Housing-based Urban Planning in Vilnius

In the processes of modernization of interwar European cities, housing modernization and mass housing solutions played one of the most important roles. As a result, the architectural, structural, technical and social innovations that appeared in the field of housing best reveal the modernization of the 20th century architecture. As a key arena for the modernisation of the discipline of architecture, as well as for the consolidation of the discipline of urban planning, housing is studied here as the intersection of sociopolitical, formal, aesthetic, and structural elements of the city. The research is based on the theory of “housing-based urban planning” developed by Yael Allweil and Noa Zemer in their research on planning Tel Aviv in 1925 [1]. This theory conceives urban structure and urban housing as one single problem rather than disconnected realms of planning.

This article examines residential architecture in Vilnius as a central issue of functional zoning and urban planning. In this context, the aim is to reveal how the construction of modern housing affected urban planning. The case of

Vilnius becomes relevant, because the city limits from 1919 until 1939 did not increase – the city area covered 10 400 hectares, confirmed in 1919. Although Vilnius was the second Polish city in terms of area during the research period (only Warsaw was larger, occupying 12 100 ha), it was an extremely sparsely built-up city (in 1937, almost 60 % of the city’s area was still undeveloped). This means that the modernization of urban housing and the urban planning related to it had to take place differently than in the rapidly growing cities of Central and Eastern Europe, where the growth of the urban area was stimulated by newly built residential suburbs.

Planning changes began in Vilnius in the 19th century, when the city became the administrative centre of the Northwest Region of the Russian Empire. It was then that the expansion of Vilnius to *Naujamiestis* (New Town) was planned, and these urban planning principles remained until the mid-20th century. The tsar’s administration prepared master plans for Vilnius in 1817, 1834 and 1837, but they were not used because the territory of the city did not expand [2]. Only when the number of Vilnius residents grew from 60 000 in the middle of the century to 155 000 at the end, a new master plan was approved in 1875, which

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: marija.dremaite@if.vu.lt

envisaged the construction of a new regular grid of planned districts and extensive construction around the railway station.

In 1914, the number of inhabitants in Vilnius increased to 203 000. With the expansion of construction in new territories, the structure of the city began to change – more and more state and public functions moved to *Naujamiestis* (New Town). In 1911, a decision was made to prepare a new master plan for Vilnius and a special Department of City Measurements and Planning was established, but the intentions were interrupted by the First World War. In 1915, during the occupying government of Kaiser Germany, the city’s borders expanded to 9800 hectares [3].

By the end of the war the great European empires collapsed and new nation states appeared on the European map. The independent state of Lithuania was proclaimed in Vilnius on February 16, 1918. However, territorial conflicts with Bolshevik Russia and Poland resulted in drawing new borders, and between 1922 and 1939, Vilnius belonged to Poland. The city lost its primary status and faced economic decline, but its population grew by 60 000 residents making around 200 000 people by 1939 (60 % were Polish, 30 % Jewish, and the rest were Russian, Belarusian or Lithuanian). In 1919, the Polish government approved the new boundaries of the city that covered the area of 10 400 hectares [4].

In 1919–1939, urban and residential development in Vilnius was modest and could not be compared to Kaunas, where seven thousand residential building permits were issued during the same period [5]; whereas in terms of social and cooperative housing construction innovations Vilnius was lacking behind Warsaw [6]. Therefore, it is important to examine if/how the housing processes in Vilnius were affected by the modern processes that took place in Warsaw.

This paper examines how this type of densification/modernisation was planned and carried out and what kind of new housing was built by Vilnius residents. Based on archival findings and revised study of available sources, three planning processes were investigated by which policy makers, planners, and dwellers in Vilnius engaged in this housing-based urban vision: the city as a housing problem; the city as social utility for reform and reconstruction; and housing-based urbanisation planning. The methods applied were archival research of architectural and planning documents, contemporary

press, and analysis of planning reports. The archival studies include the Lithuanian Central State Archives, Vilnius Regional State Archives, Lithuanian National Museum, Lithuanian Academy of Sciences Wróblewsky Library (all in Vilnius), and *Archiwum Akt Nowych* in Warsaw. The result is a new historiographic perspective on Vilnius’ modern urbanism focusing on the planning and construction of new housing.

I. New Typology of Residential Architecture

During the 1920s, new construction of houses was not especially widespread. The Polish administrative establishments and national institutions paid more attention to removing signs of the Imperial Russian occupation, restoring historical and religious buildings and Polish historical memorials [7]. During the 1930s, construction and expansion began to gather pace thanks to the improving economy, and Vilnius started undergoing modernisation [8]. However, the area of the city did not grow, therefore, the city became denser and internal growth took place – modernization of new streets, quarters, and districts took place mainly in *Naujamiestis*, *Žvėrynas* and *Antakalnis*. A total of 1283 new residential houses were built in Vilnius during 1925–1939 (Table I), so the question can be raised whether this residential construction affected and how it affected city planning.

Residents of Vilnius built houses mainly on their own initiative and with their own funds. There were several municipal actions or the campaign “Affordable private house” initiated by the state-owned National Economy Bank (*Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego*), during which a competition for individual wooden single-family house projects was held in 1928; however, its results did not affect the housing issue in the city. Single-family houses, known as modern town villas, began to be built in *Naujamiestis*. Private villa of Antoni Kiakszto, commandant of the *Antakalnis* military hospital, at 34 *Pamėnkalnio* St. (archit. Jan Borowski and Izak Smorgoński, 1938), is characterised by modernist aesthetics. The apartments in such villas were spacious, the rooms on the first floor were arranged around a central hall, intended for public (living room, dining room, office) and household (kitchen, maid’s room, WC) use; and the bedrooms and bathroom were located on the second floor.

TABLE I

The Number of Newly Constructed Residential Buildings in Vilnius [Source: *Rocznik statystyczny Wilna 1921–1928 rok*, s. 11; *Rocznik Statystyczny Wilna 1931*, s. 9; *Rocznik statystyczny Wilna 1937*, s. 8; Data about the new houses in Vilnius, 01 01 1940 [manuscript], Vilnius Regional State Archives (VRVA), f. 761, ap. 4, b. 605, p. 112.]

Year	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Number	54	113	115	76	93	146	189	82	145	102	124	211	37	67	87

However, for the sake of economy, most of the villas in the New Town were intended for living for two families. Traditional layout of a family house on two floors was not common. Instead, each floor housed separate identical apartments. The rooms were grouped around a hall, and the service space was connected to a staircase at the back, as in the house of Witold Żemojtel at 4 *Suvalkų* St. (archit. Antoni Forkiewicz, 1938) or the house of Jan Sterło-Orlicki (Fig. 1) at 44 *M. K. Čiurlionio* St. (archit. Antoni Forkiewicz, 1936–1937).

In the mid-1930s, a new type of house spread in Vilnius – a small 2–3-storey house with three to six apartments. It was bigger than a villa, but not yet equal to a rented apartment building, so it became popular as a cosy and modern type of town house with a spacious plot for a garden. The owner usually lived in the most spacious apartment of such a house, while the other apartments were rented out, as in the Dr. Alexander Libo house at 3 *K. Kalinausko* St. (archit. Izak Smorgoński, 1938). There could also be several owners, such as in a modernist house of Anna Hansenowa and Stanisław Bagiński at 32 *Pamėnkalnio* St. 32 (architect Jan Borowski, Izak Smorgoński, 1938).

Small modernist apartment buildings were also built by various agencies or companies that often had to provide housing for managers or specialists who came to Vilnius from Warsaw. An example of a beautiful and modern office building with garages is the house of the State Insurance Company (*Ubezpieczalnia Społeczna*) at 2 *A. Jakšto* St. (archit. Stanisław Murczyński, Jerzy Sołtan, 1938), built together with the institution. The entire second floor was a luxurious and spacious manager's apartment, and the first

and third floors were occupied by smaller apartments for employees. In the modern house of the M. Deull company at 14 *A. Jakšto* St. (archit. Stanisław Bukowski, Mojżesz Cholem, 1939), a five-room apartment with a large terrace occupied the entire second floor.

Tenement houses in interwar Vilnius were not much different from the blocks built at the beginning of the century in terms of their size and plan. They were usually not very large (three to five storeys), with a single stairway, two comfortable apartments per landing and shops on the ground floor. Since the level of the rent depended on the location, the more luxurious buildings were built around *Gedimino* Avenue. Their modern facades showed the clear axis of the staircase, the rhythm of the windows, and the proportions of the volumes (see, for example, a House of Abram Strugacz, 3 *A. Stulginskio* St. (archit. Mojżesz Cholem, 1938) or a House of Dawid Strugacz, 10 *Tauro* St. (archit. Mojżesz Cholem, 1938). Construction of these houses developed slowly in Vilnius due to the lack of funds.

At the end of the 1930s, the Military Accommodation Fund (*Fundusz Kwaterunku Wojskowego*) was established in Poland in order to provide apartments for the military. This foundation started building typical apartment buildings in the Polish cities. Several such houses were built in Vilnius. One luxury five-storey, fifty-flat (all three-room flats) house for officers (*Dom oficera polskiego*) was built in 1930–1931 at 9 *Vilniaus* St., designed by the Polish army captain Władysław Polkowski, who also designed the officer's houses in Warsaw.

In interwar Poland, and especially Warsaw, a great many experimental innovations were introduced into

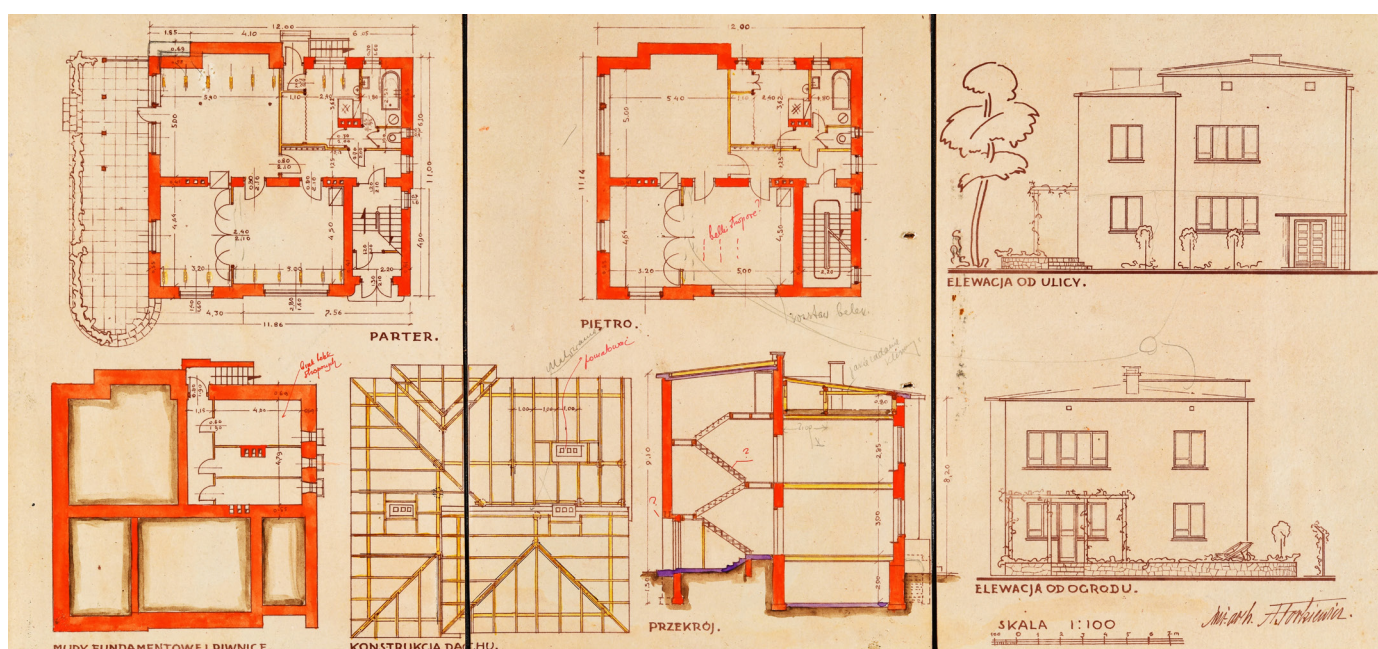


Fig. 1. Design for the house of Jan Sterło-Orlicki at 44 *M. K. Čiurlionio* St. (archit. Antoni Forkiewicz, 1936–1937), [Source: Lithuanian State Central Archives].

residential architecture: communes, colonies and housing cooperatives. They became popular in the 1930s, as they allowed people to buy comfortable apartments and become homeowners for a comparatively small price. In order to speed up and make housing construction cheaper, Vilnius residents also gathered in house-building cooperatives. The style and comfort depended on the economic capacities of the funding collectives. In 1931–1933, a cooperative organised by postal workers built six identical modest six-apartment wooden houses in *Antakalnis* (16 and 18 *Antakalnio St.*, engineer Ryszard Strzeszewski from Warsaw), whereas a cooperative of bank employees in 1932 built one of the first modernist five-storey, three-section, 30-apartment building at 7 *Tilto St.*, the construction of which was led by the cooperative manager architect Wacław Syrtowt.



Fig. 2. Design for the housing cooperative of the Ministry of Public Works: site plan (archit. Franciszek Wojciechowski, 1929) [Source: Lithuanian State Central Archives].

The most modern from an urban, social, and architectural point of view was the complex of 25 two-storey terraced houses in *Antakalnis*, built in 1929–1931 by the cooperative of the Ministry of Public Works and financed by a loan from the State Agricultural Bank (Figs. 2–4). It was designed by the construction engineer Franciszek Wojciechowski who was a member of the cooperative. Each section was planned as a separate terraced house, with an apartment across two storeys. The blocks consist of a number of pairs, rhythmically lined up in short rows. The simplicity of the forms is generated by functional means: flat white facades, small, rectangular windows divided into small squares and flat roofs [9].

The garden-city concept reached Vilnius at the beginning of the 1930s. A suburb named *Jagiellonów*, covering 535 hectares in the area of present-day *Paneriai* (*Ponary*), was designed in 1938 by a young modernist architect Antoni Forkiewicz. It was a modern resort suburb, conveniently and quickly accessible by train from the city centre, with parks, squares, detached houses and the modern conveniences of running water, electricity, a post office and a telephone exchange [10]. It was planned to build a village magistrate, a fire station, a shopping centre, a church, a hotel-boarding house, two schools, a gas station, a new railway station, a slaughterhouse, a sports complex, a hospital and a sanatorium. When planning this city-garden, the focus was on the attributes of a modern society's lifestyle: wellness (sanatoriums and clinics), sports (water and winter) and holiday (part of the houses functioned as summer houses, it was planned to hold children's summer camps). In 1938, *Jagiellonów*

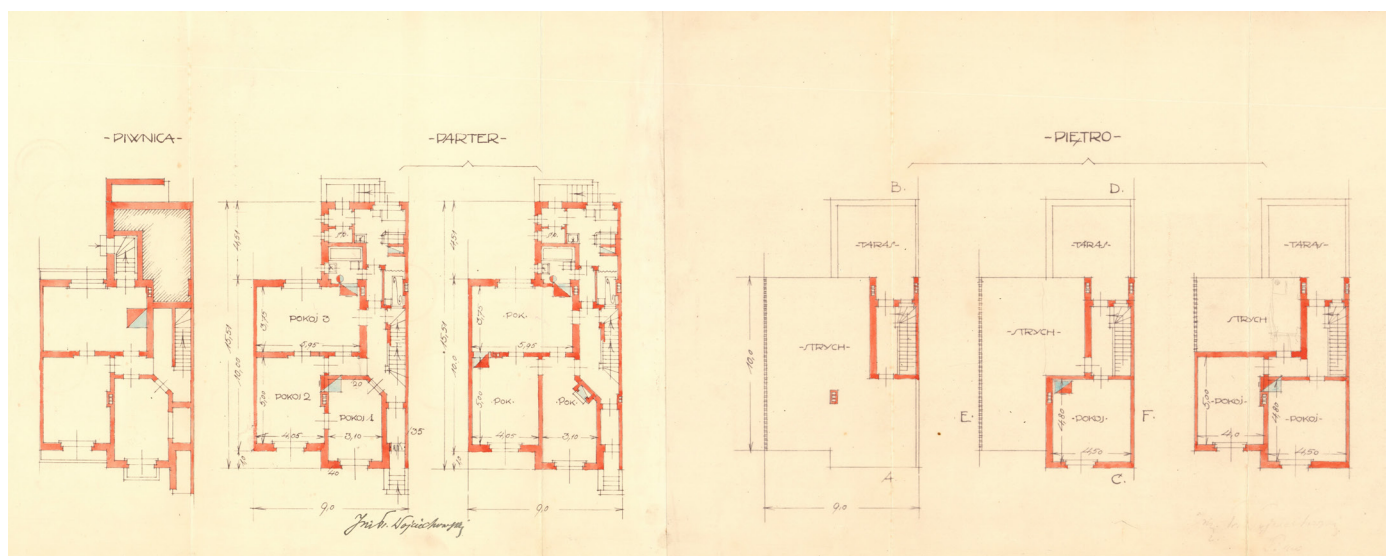


Fig. 3. Design for the housing cooperative of the Ministry of Public Works: three types of floor plans (archit. Franciszek Wojciechowski, 1929) [Source: Lithuanian State Central Archives].



Fig. 4. A photograph of the housing co-operative by Mečislovas Sakalauskas, 1985 [Source: Cultural Heritage Centre Heritage Library].

already had ca. 600 inhabitants, and ca. 200 simple wooden private single-family houses with modern amenities (such as water supply and electricity) were built (Fig. 5).

It is evident that new residential housing in Vilnius reflected all the latest typology and residential urban planning fashions only in small scale and slow development, which points to the secondary status of the city and lack of economic capacity.

II. New Urban Planning Vision for Vilnius in 1938

Although the area of Vilnius did not grow during the interwar period, it urgently needed a planning document to regulate industrial development, transport system and the spontaneously growing housing districts. The development of *Naujamiestis*, covering the western areas next to the historic centre – Old Town, was actively developed in the 19th century following the master plan of 1875. In the 1930s, *Naujamiestis* saw a growing of residential quarters of the middle-class. A closer look at a couple of cases reveals how the rapid development took place in the 1930s.

In 1932, the municipality took over a large area of several hectares between the streets of *Wielka Pohulanka* (now *S. Konarskio*), *św. Jaceka* (now *Jovaro*), *Zakretowa* (now *M.K. Čiurlionio*) and *Rzeczna* (now *P. Klimo*). The area was bought from Alexander Bozherianov, a well-known figure of the local Russian community and the owner of many plots and houses in Vilnius. The former estate land was divided into two zones with 7 and 8 building plots [11]. According to experts, this area was a perfect place for a “garden-city” residential development, modelled after Warsaw’s *Żoliborz* district. The area was flat, nicely wooded, and there were no buildings that would make it impossible to plan the whole neighbourhood. Meanwhile, the area was simply divided into construction plots for individual houses without any special urban design.

Another quickly modernising and densifying area where new modern housing was built was *Žvėrynas*, a wooded picturesque suburb of Vilnius, which officially

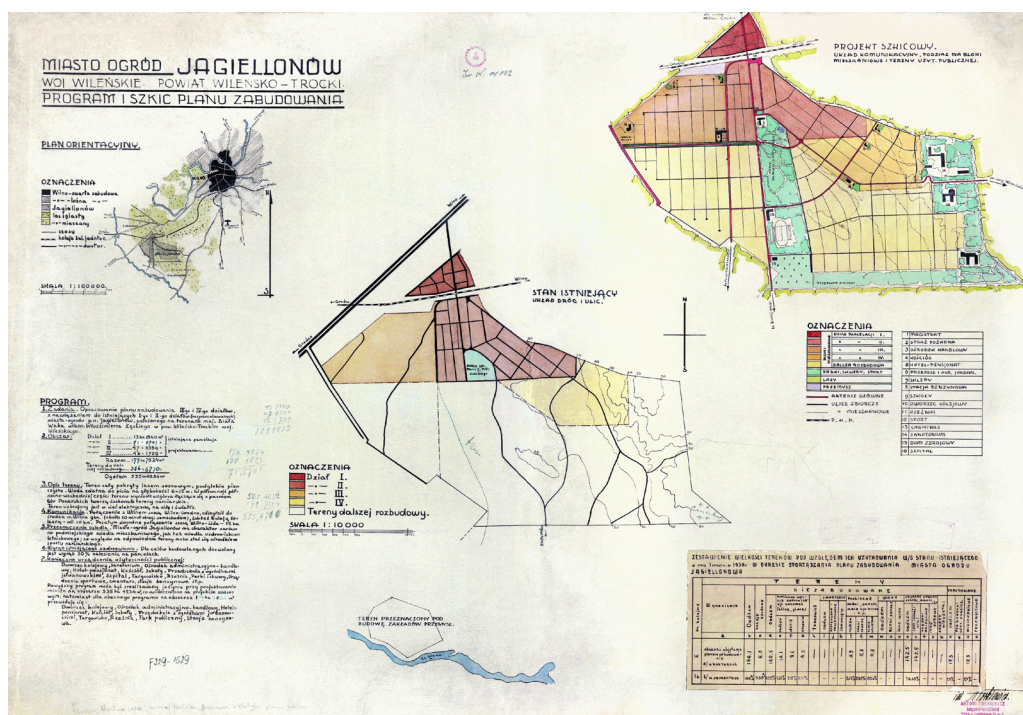


Fig. 5. Design for the garden-city suburb *Jagiellonów* (archit. Antoni Forkiewicz, 1938) [Source: Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Science Academy].

became a part of the city of Vilnius in 1901 as a recreational district with wooden summer houses by the Neris River. In the interwar period new modern housing sprawled up. Modern villas prevailed, such as a two-storey two apartment house built by siblings Janusz Zasztowt and Irena Herholdowa (17 A. *Mickevičiaus* St., archit. Izak Smorgoński, 1939), whereas Konstantin Swolkien and Jan Zawisza built modern villas at 14 and 16 A. *Mickevičiaus* St. (archit. Daniel Rozenhauz, 1930, 1932), experimenting with new composite construction materials (Fig. 6) [12]. However, most of the new residential houses were still built of wood, and in 1938, only 20 percent of buildings in Žvėrynas were built of bricks.

These spontaneous processes of urbanisation were critically reflected by modern urban planners as chaotic, disorderly, and unhygienic construction. Jerzy Kobzakowski described *Naujamiestis* as “district with about 35 000 inhabitants, which has now chaotically built 1–4-storey brick houses and 1–2-storey wooden houses. From a functional point of view, it is a very mixed district – next to apartments, offices, hospitals, and scientific institutions, there are various warehouses and industrial companies, which are harmful to health”. He also described the subdivision of *Žvėrynas* into too small plots and unregulated construction as “a negative example of

plots and development in all respects” [13]. This rhetoric reveals the modernists’ belief that similar problems can be solved by urban master plans and functional zoning.

Although in 1928 it was mandatory for all Polish cities to have master plans, in Vilnius there was a great lack of specialists for this kind of work. Only in 1928 a graduate of the Warsaw Polytechnic Institute, Stefan Narębski (1892–1966) began to head the design office of the Vilnius Magistrate and the City Development Committee, which carried out the construction policy and organisation of financing. In 1930, a decision was made to prepare a master plan for Vilnius. On September 8, 1938, the Council of the Vilnius City Magistrate (Municipality) approved the zoning project of the Greater Vilnius (covering the same 10 400 ha) [14], which was designed by the Office of Urban Planning (*Miejskie Biuro Urbanistyczne*), established in 1936 and led by Romuald Gutt, a well-known architect and urban planner from Warsaw. Its employees included Jerzy Kobzakowski and Stanislaw Bukowski, recent graduates of Warsaw’s Polytechnic University. The modern master plan divided Vilnius into three zones: the historic town, the green zones, and construction zone with six residential construction sub-zones.

The plan clearly demonstrated the principles of functionalist urbanism, echoing the International

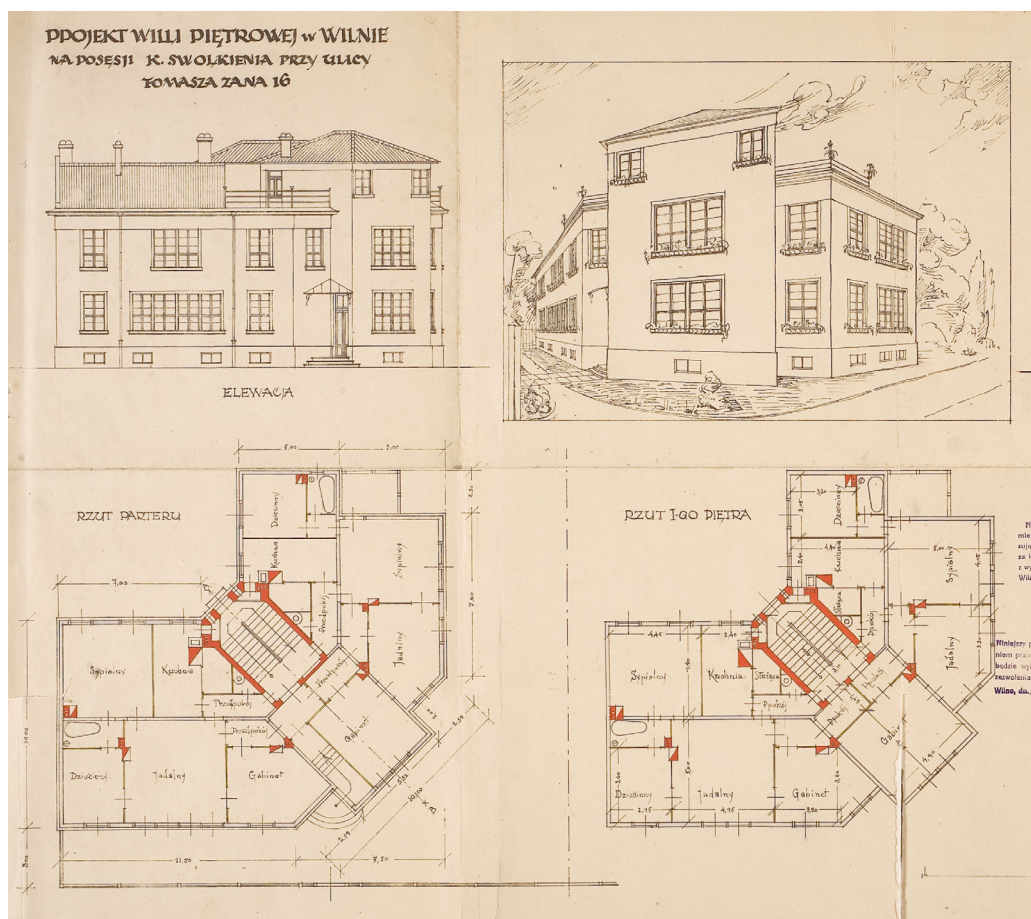


Fig. 6. Design for a villa at 16 A. *Mickevičiaus* St. (archit. Daniel Rozenhauz, 1930) [Source: Lithuanian State Central Archives].

Congresses of Modernist Architects (CIAM), where Le Corbusier presented his concept of a functional city dominated by rapid communication and the division of the city into functional zones: residential, working, recreation, and public transport. The famous plan *Warszawa Funkcjonalna* was developed and published in 1934 by the Polish CIAM members as an exemplary document of radical urbanism [15]. The graduates of Warsaw Polytechnic admired functional zoning ideas, as is obvious in the publication by Antoni Forkiewicz [16] and the detailed program of zoning of Vilnius by Kobzakowski [17]. The latter contained many ambitious ideas, such as building three ring roads and new bridges, converging the new expanding industrial zone, and designing six construction zones for residential architecture. These zones were regulated in detail – the program provided a certain building height (from 1 to 4 floors) and type (perimeter or free), density (in percentage) and construction material (brick or wood) for each zone. The program also revealed a modern, preservationist attitude towards the conservation of Vilnius' Old Town that should be preserved as a historically important monument by moving the new centre of the city to the top of the hill in the *Naujamiestis* (around the present-day *Mindaugo* street). Non-buildable green urban areas in the northern and eastern outskirts of the city, due to the extensive forestation and the connection with the rivers, had to be used for recreation (Fig. 7). Kobzakowski described his

project “Vilnius of the future” where “order and harmony of the hygienic residential quarters harmoniously match with the environment and play the role of the main cells of the city’s organism” [18]. Although the project was not realised, Kobzakowski indicated the directions of urban modernization of Vilnius, which remained relevant until the end of the 20th century.

During the Second World War, the authorities in Vilnius changed frequently, but construction was quite active. Municipal projects were drawn up at the same Office of Urban Planning, which changed its name but not its employees. After Lithuania regained Vilnius in October 1939, the office was headed by Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, the chief municipal architect, appointed by the Lithuanian Government. Most of the office’s Polish employees stayed, for they had been working at the office since 1936. This explains the continuity in urban planning and development between 1939 and 1944, during the first Soviet occupation (June 1940–June 1941) and under the Nazi authorities. V. Landsbergis-Žemkalnis continued the work with Polish architects who remained in Vilnius – Juliusz Dumnicki, Kazimierz Biszewski, Zbigniew Czech and Wiktor Espenhan, and at the end of 1943 they prepared a master plan for Vilnius for thirty years [19]. It was basically the same plan that had been developed by Kobzakowski, which solved the same problems with the same methods – transport, industry and residential zoning divided into six districts.



Fig. 7. The part of the Greater Vilnius master plan (1938) by Jerzy Kobzakowski with colour indication of different construction zones of central Vilnius [Source: Vilnius Regional State Archives].

Conclusions

In 1919–1940, the residential architecture of Vilnius experienced transformation through modernization, which was determined by both the economic situation and the political system. Although small-scale (1283 new houses of different size and typology), residential construction reflected various architectural trends of the time. Although the number of apartment blocks was growing, a family house or villa remained one of the most important types of residential building. Along with political power, most ideas came from Poland, so the materials and the architectural details used define a unique type of Modernist architecture for Lithuanian cities that is found only in interwar Vilnius. It was during the interwar period that the standard and foundation of modern comfortable housing was created, which is well illustrated by the fact that practically all these houses were expropriated by the Bolshevik government during the first Soviet occupation in 1940–1941. The Greater Vilnius master plan by Jerzy Kobzakowski (1938) is a clear evidence of functional planning for a comfortable city for living and working, with focus on industrial zone, transport system improvements and six zones designated for residential architecture with its own social infrastructure.

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Marija Drėmaitė holds a PhD in History of Architecture (2006) and is a Professor of the Faculty of History of Vilnius University. Her research is focused on the 20th century architecture, industrial culture, and cultural heritage. She published *Baltic Modernism. Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania* (Berlin: Dom publishers, 2017)

and co-authored and edited *Architecture of Optimism: The Kaunas Phenomenon, 1918–1940* (Vilnius: Lapas, 2018) and *Lithuanian Architects Assess the Soviet Era: The 1992 Oral History Tapes* (with John V. Maciuika, Vilnius: Lapas, 2020).

Contact Data

Marija Drėmaitė

E-mail: marija.dremaite@if.vu.lt

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6109-343X>