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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the architectural diversity in Catholic churches in Lithuania during the post-Soviet transition period following five decades of occupations that disrupted the church-building tradition: the first Soviet occupation (1940–41), the Nazi German occupation (1941–44), and the second Soviet occupation (1944–90). For five decades, the construction of Catholic churches was forbidden under the totalitarian regime, and the attempts by the faithful to organise were impossible until *Perestroika*. Changing political dynamics after 1988 facilitated the emergence of new churches (including chapels and monasteries), with over one hundred constructed in the subsequent three decades of Lithuania's independence. This research, based on different types of sources — archival material from the Archive of the Curia of the Vilnius Archdiocese and Soviet governmental agencies, empirical data, and oral histories with architects and priests — delves into the efforts to establish new churches within religious communities and the development of new ecclesiastical architecture during the transitional period in post-Soviet Lithuania. Key areas of investigation include the origins of innovative architectural styles, the diverse inspirations of architects, and preferences in architectural language. Through analysing three case studies, the paper sheds light on the specific challenges and provides valuable insights into Lithuanian ecclesiastical architecture.

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Architectural Diversity in Lithuanian post-Soviet Catholic Churches (1988–91)

INTRODUCTION

In the latter half of the 20th century, ecclesiastical architecture underwent significant transformations, modernising in response to an increasingly secular and indifferent society. The Second Vatican Council, which emphasised changes in liturgical practices, played an important role in reshaping architectural norms for religious buildings and profoundly influenced modernist architecture in general. However, the impact of these changes on Lithuania's Catholic church architecture became pronounced only after the fall of the USSR.

The religious upsurge in Lithuania during the early 1990s marked the re-emergence of Catholicism, with the mass construction of churches symbolising both faith and the breaking of Soviet constraints. However, the chaotic organisation of church construction resulted in randomly chosen plots and architectural design taking precedence over function, exacerbated by a lack of resources and expertise. The design of the first churches lacked architectural coherence and a shared understanding of

how church architecture should respond to the needs of the present day.

Despite extensive interest in modernism,¹ Lithuanian diaspora architecture,² and social transformations,³ sacred architecture constructed after the Soviet era — remain understudied. In contrast, Polish scholars have contextualised ecclesiastical architecture, emphasising its role as a religious and political statement. This community-driven church construction, symbolic of resistance during Communism, became a tool for spiritual revival and political assertion after 1989.⁴ Lithuania's experience is similar to this broader post-Socialist trend, as in Croatia and the post-Yugoslav context, where the mass construction of churches paralleled the reestablishment of national identity and sovereignty.⁵ Public space is demarcated by religious affiliation, i.e., a religionisation of public space is in progress, emphasising how religion continues to shape cultural codes and moral authority in post-socialist societies.⁶ In all these cases, religious architecture became a tool for

reclaiming cultural space, often sparking debates about quality, design, and symbolic meaning.

This historiographical gap in Lithuania contrasts with trends in countries like Italy, where scholars explore the tension between the community's role in shaping parish church architecture and diocesan supervision over these buildings,⁷ or, more generally, a broader analysis of imperfect modernism and liturgical reform.⁸ Throughout Europe and beyond, 20th-century church architecture remains a focal point of scholarly debate, extending from design practices to mass church construction, a trend evident in both post-socialist regions and places like Britain.

In post-Soviet Lithuania in the 1990s, as church construction gained momentum, debates arose between artists, architects, and clergy over the ideal design for churches. However, public discourse was often critical and lacked deeper analysis of the motivations behind decisions made by architects and priests. Common critique included concerns over the aesthetic value of the new designs and whether they met the community's needs. This limited approach and the lack of in-depth research highlight a theoretical problem in this area. Architectural accounts of Catholic churches focus on description rather than criticism, neglecting assessments of architectural quality, the causes of landscape change, the conflicting legacies, and the agency and influence of all those involved in the process.

The diversity in architectural styles of Catholic churches built in post-Soviet Lithuania (1988–91) reflects the broader cultural transition from traditional to modernist expressions, influenced by religious freedom, community needs, and varied interpretations of liturgical reforms. At the same time, tradition was often perceived as an expression of continuity and stability, and architects often combined modern methods with traditional elements.⁹ This diversity resulted from self-organising church-building processes shaped by interactions among architects, church communities, and the shifting aesthetic and functional requirements of sacred spaces. The paper examines how these dynamics influenced architectural outcomes, focusing on selection processes, collaborative efforts, and integrating contemporary design elements in church construction - reflecting broader socio-political changes in post-Soviet Lithuania.

The three case studies – the Vilnius Blessed George Matulaitis Church, Vilnius St. John Bosco Church, and the Elektrėnai St. Virgin Mary Queen of Martyrs Church – illustrate the efforts of religious communities to establish parishes and secure building permits from Soviet authorities, despite bureaucratic obstacles during this transitional period. While the architectural styles differ, all final designs departed from traditional ecclesiastical architecture, suggesting that stakeholders in new socialist-era neighbourhoods favoured modern designs. However, this raises critical questions: did all stakeholders expect modern architecture, or was the shift towards modernity influenced more by circumstances and individual preferences? These cases, which garnered

significant public attention in Lithuania, also offer insight into the motivations behind the architectural choices made by architects and church commissioners in the post-Soviet period.

This historical analysis examines the nature of Catholic ecclesiastical architecture and the processes of church construction in post-Soviet Lithuania through the prism of social history. The aim is to explore the church construction process during the Revival period, focusing on the involvement of the religious communities, clients and architects. Each case is analysed from several perspectives: the formation of religious communities and parishes; the interaction between architects and clients; and architecture and construction processes. Although the three cases are similar in structure, each highlights different challenges, shedding light on the complex influences that led to the outcomes. The study employs archival sources and a critical historiographical approach to examine the stages of church construction and the historical and cultural context behind the construction of new churches. The study also employs oral history through semi-structured interviews to fill gaps in the archival materials.

REVIVAL OF CHURCH BUILDING: SOVIET ERA RESTRICTIONS AND LATER MASS CONSTRUCTIONS

Lithuanian sacred architecture reflected European historicism at the turn of the 20th century, but significant struggles under the Russian Empire preceded this. After the 1863 Uprising, Catholic church construction was severely restricted as part of Russification policies, with many churches closed or converted to Orthodox use. The imposition of these restrictions on Catholic churches following the 1863 Uprising hindered the development of religious architecture until the first wave of liberalisation.¹⁰ In 1905, the first liberalisation boom lifted many of these restrictions and led to a surge in church construction.¹¹ This period saw the first modernist touches in church architecture, such as the reinforced concrete Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Vilnius, though it was never completed (designed by architect Antoni Wiwulski).

In the interwar period, architects shifted toward modernist elements, beginning to shape a distinct Lithuanian Catholic church architectural identity. A key example is the Church of the Resurrection in Kaunas, which embodied this tentative move toward modernism, even as historicist styles remained dominant.¹² At the time, debates over a Lithuanian national architectural style gained momentum, and churches continued to be designed and built in this spirit until the first Soviet occupation. This gradual evolution was abruptly interrupted by the wars and occupations, which not only stifled architectural innovation but also severed the cultural and spiritual continuity between religious communities and sacred spaces.

Before the Soviet occupation in 1940, Lithuania had a thriving religious community. With 84.1% of its 3.2 million inhabitants nominally identified as Catholics, the

ecclesiastical province thrived, boasting 717 parishes, 1,047 churches and chapels, and numerous monasteries.¹³ Upon occupation, the Soviet regime pursued atheisation policies to suppress religious practices and influence the Catholic Church. The Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) controlled religious matters, including church construction and renovation. Believers faced severe restrictions and the inability to organise, manage property, or open new churches without state approval – a control mechanism employed throughout the entire USSR.

The occupational authorities during the Soviet era systematically targeted the Catholic Church, leading to the seizure of church properties, the closure of churches, and a ban on new church constructions. This was not merely an administrative issue; it represented a calculated effort to dismantle long-standing religious traditions and erase Catholic identity from the public sphere. A notable example was the near-completion of Klaipėda's only legally sanctioned church project during the Soviet era, which, despite being almost finished by 1961, was repurposed into a secular cultural space – the Philharmonic – by the authorities.¹⁴ Despite numerous appeals and petitions, including direct requests to Moscow starting in 1972, the church remained inaccessible until its eventual return in late 1988. While it was among the first to be restored, some clergy viewed the act as a symbolic gesture rather than a genuine restoration of rights.

During the late 1980s, the Soviet Union began to undergo political changes, characterised by the implementation of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*. Simultaneously, relations between the state and the Catholic Church gradually normalised, prompting informal and formal changes within religious life. In 1988, the authorities granted permits to reclaim nationalised church buildings, establish new parishes, and appoint priests to parishes. These developments were more than mere bureaucracy; they indicated a religious and cultural renaissance.

On March 11, 1990, Lithuania regained its independence. Soon after, the Act on the Restitution of the Catholic Church in Lithuania was passed. All Soviet-imposed restrictions on religious activities were nullified. Religious freedom was guaranteed, and the system for registering religious communities was abolished. Consequently, internal Church affairs were subjected to canon law. With the removal of constraints on religious freedom, church structures began to grow, and religious communities experienced internal revitalisation. This situation catalysed a new wave of Catholic church construction. Despite economic and political hardships, around 60 ecclesiastical buildings (churches, chapels, monasteries)¹⁵ were built or adapted during the first decade of independence, physically reshaping the post-Soviet landscape.

Still, this revival sparked debates within the Church. Some clergy and laypeople questioned the emphasis on constructing physical churches – the so-called “brick churches” – over nurturing a spiritually grounded faith community or “spiritual church.” As church historian Paulius Subačius noted, this dichotomy reflected a deeper

tension between material representation and spiritual essence.¹⁶ Nonetheless, many priests justified the focus on construction as necessary to restore parishes as active, unifying community centres.

This revival of church construction was perhaps both ideological and geographically pragmatic. Urban centres previously lacking churches became natural focal points for architectural and social renewal. New industrial cities Elektrėnai, Naujoji Akmenė, and Visaginas, constructed during the socialist period, as well as socialist mass housing estates in large cities of Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, or Alytus, could have been seen as practical sites for introducing a religious presence, filling gaps left in urban landscapes shaped by Soviet planning.

It can be argued that constructing churches in Lithuania represented more than mere religious renewal. It was a form of symbolic reterritorialisation – a concept developed by scholars like anthropologist Katherine Verdery – where physical structures reclaimed space once dominated by secular ideologies.¹⁷ Churches were reintroduced into the visual and spatial fabric of towns and villages. Yet, this resurgence of ecclesiastical architecture brought practical challenges for architects. During the Soviet era, most Lithuanian architects were trained in secular design – residential blocks, civic buildings, and industrial complexes – but not in religious architecture. Post-independence, they had to rapidly adapt to a new paradigm: designing spaces not just for function, but for liturgical function.

Historically, the Catholic Church played a significant role in commissioning and shaping the arts, but as architectural historian Duncan Stroik notes, 20th-century ecclesiastical architecture increasingly mirrored secular trends.¹⁸ The liturgical reforms further pushed for innovation, emphasising open spaces and direct lines of sight between the altar and congregation.¹⁹ Architects designed open spaces that brought the community closer to the altar, reshaping layouts to align with the new way of worship. These often featured large rectangular or square halls with pitched roofs accentuating the presbytery and main liturgical objects.

In Lithuania, ideological and stylistic changes were slower due to the occupation, but post-liberation efforts sought to establish an authentic architectural language. Like in the broader European context, contemporary Lithuanian churches blend tradition with modern innovation, reinterpreting classical forms and materials to suit contemporary sensibilities. While incorporating traditional features such as symmetrical floor plans and basilica-style interiors, these churches adapt these elements to modern contexts. Lithuania's historical context, marked by periods of occupation, influenced this fusion, as architects drew on earlier models to address disruptions in the continuity of religious buildings' architectural development. In contrast, modern church designs increasingly diverge from traditional Latin cross plans, adopting unconventional shapes such as oval or asymmetrical plans²⁰ and incorporating materials like concrete and glass, signalling a departure from conventional ecclesiastical architecture.

1
The Church of Blessed George Matulaitis in Vilnius
(personal archive of the author, 2025).

2
The interior of Blessed George Matulaitis Church
(personal archive of the author, 2025).

3
The Church of St. John Bosco in Vilnius
(personal archive of the author, 2025).

CASE STUDY 1. THE FIRST POST-WAR CHURCH IN THE LITHUANIAN CAPITAL: BLESSED GEORGE MATULAITIS CHURCH Initiative of Religious Community

During the Soviet era, residents of new residential areas in Vilnius could only visit churches in the historical areas: believers had to attend Gothic, Baroque, or historicist churches, which were not closed during the Soviet era (there were only 10 working Catholic churches in the city). Still, during the entire period of occupation, the city almost doubled in size. As soon as the opportunity arose in the late 1980s, Catholic communities took the initiative to build churches in the newly constructed mass housing areas. Two completely distinct cases of church construction in two areas of Vilnius require more detailed attention: the districts of Viršuliškės and Lazdynai. These new mass housing districts, typical of the Soviet-era territories, were built without a church.

The history of the Blessed George Matulaitis church began in 1975 when the faithful of the new districts attempted to register a parish, but the Soviet authorities ignored their request. By the late 20th century, with the evolving political landscape under Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika*, which relaxed many Soviet-era restrictions, the faithful reconsidered the construction of churches in new districts. Official statements in the press encouraged believers to take action. In 1988, the CRA Commissioner stated that "no new

churches are being built in Lithuania because nobody asks for them," "believers are free to practice," and "if necessary, new religious communities are being registered."²¹ These statements, as well as other Soviet slogans, were intended to show that the influence of religion was diminishing. Nevertheless, this public discourse misrepresented the situation, confirming that the authorities had systematically ignored previous Catholic initiatives.

From 1988, the creation of the Viršuliškės district parish was overseen by priest Medardas Čeponis. The initiative for a new parish received support from Bishop Julijonas Steponavičius, who was then in exile in Žagarė, a city near the Latvian border, and served as the Apostolic Administrator of the Vilnius Archdiocese.²²

When the idea of building a new church emerged, the community submitted numerous petitions to the soviet authorities. This process resembled a prolonged back-and-forth exchange with the believers – represented by the priest – addressing various requests and letters to the relevant authorities, who responded with delays and attempted to avoid making a favourable decision. Several letters exemplify the efforts of this religiously marginalised community to achieve its goals during the occupation. For instance, in the spring of 1988, a petition was submitted to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, with a duplicate delivered to Moscow.²³ The petition articulated the necessity for a new church because there were no



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churches in the new districts, and the number of believers was huge. This issue was pervasive across all newly developed towns and neighbourhoods. Such arguments, reflecting the catholic reality, were not considered a serious factor in granting a permit. The petition stressed that churches would be built at the faithful's expense. The financial burden may have influenced this, as authorities could halt construction for spurious reasons, as in the case of the Klaipėda church.

After receiving a negative answer, the religious community persisted in their efforts, but their rhetoric became increasingly pointed. They attempted various methods and alternative phrases to achieve their goals indirectly, a practice that was quite common at the time. In one petition, the believers sarcastically noted the bureaucratic inefficiencies, suggesting that delays unjustly punished the government officials, saying: "The committee staff have many important things to do, ... the decision on our request has been delayed for more than 3 months. We would want your unfaithful subordinates to be punished for such bureaucratic delays."²⁴ These remarks reflect how the believers strategically engaged with political discourse, drawing on public speeches and media articles that emphasised freedom of religion and conscience.

They notably referenced Gorbachev's reforms, which they saw as offering hope. They compared their struggle to similar efforts in other Soviet cities, using these examples

to bolster their claims for a new church, they compared the 1000th anniversary of the Baptism of Russia with the 600th anniversary of the Baptism of Lithuania, and expectedly, they suggested that it should be commemorated with a new Catholic church in the capital city, Vilnius.

After submitting numerous requests, one letter stood out: the pastor gathered 1,460 signatures to register a religious community. Eventually, local officials approved the parish's establishment on November 10, 1988, followed by Moscow's approval two weeks later. Despite lacking legal authority at the time, the Bishop spearheaded the establishment of the parish for religious communities.

Land Acquisition Struggles

Once the parish was established, a church competition was launched. Although a specific plot of land was specified in the competition, parishioners proposed several potential sites to build a new church. Their aim was practical: to acquire a plot in the district's central area, ensuring accessibility across the growing residential zones. Gediminas Baravykas, the chief architect of Vilnius, rejected these suggestions and proposed Kosmonautų Avenue (now Laisvės Avenue) as the site, on the neighbourhood's outskirts next to a large transport highway.

The religious community's request for a central church location was rejected in favour of a more elevated site, justified by the architect's reference to Lithuanian church-



building traditions, which emphasised national and symbolic significance. In the post-communist European context, this stance reflects a broader cultural effort to reclaim religion's presence in the urban landscape. The revival of religious architecture in post-socialist countries serves not only spiritual needs but also asserts regained cultural identity and institutional power.²⁵ In this context, the choice of site becomes more than a matter of tradition; it acts as a political statement, reasserting the church as a dominant civic symbol in a newly re-Christianized public space.

However, in this case, local authorities did not change their position regarding the land for the new church, despite the believers' insistence. There was considerable confusion over the choice of location – the residents of the nearest district stated that “we might as well not build the church” because it would be situated at a distance like the old churches in Vilnius.²⁶ Despite numerous petitions, no progress was made. In retrospect, there was a rush to announce the site and initiate the competition, but prolonged debates over the site location significantly delayed the construction of the new Catholic church. It demonstrates that city authorities held substantial influence and disregarded the congregation's needs, the Archdiocese's preferences, and the architect's vision, which ultimately had a greater impact in determining the plot of land.

The Search for the Church Design:

Competition and Two Different Architectural Ideas

The design process for the Viršuliškės church was hindered by the failure of a national competition, where none of the 15 submitted projects met the jury's expectations.²⁷ This failure was seen as a reflection of talent scarcity and post-Soviet institutional disarray, particularly a lack of clear ecclesiastical and architectural guidance. Many competitions were marked by chaotic organisation and vague criteria. Although often fuelled by spiritual optimism, these events were frequently undermined by client interference, insider favouritism, and poorly defined expectations.²⁸

In the case of the Viršuliškės church competition, one jury member famously remarked, “We were bursting with laughter; there was no church there. We joked about the ‘vacuum cleaner,’ the ‘tunnel,’ and other absurd designs.”²⁹ Such reactions highlight a deeper disjunction between liturgical function and architectural form, as many architects lacked familiarity with ecclesiastical needs, reducing churches to abstract symbols rather than functional ecclesiastical spaces. Similar reactions to the new forms of churches have been seen across Europe. For example, an influential Italian art critic, journalist Angelo Crespi, ironically noted that contemporary churches resemble a wide range of public buildings, such as industrial warehouses, swimming pools, bars, and parking garages.³⁰ Comments after the Viršuliškės church post-competition suggest that several rejected projects were dismissed for unclear reasons, despite their conceptual merit. The only projects remembered were those that shocked and clashed with the traditional, conservative view of what a church was then.

After the unsuccessful competition, the parish priest turned to Vytautas Kazimieras Jonynas, a sculptor and stained-glass artist, to develop the church design. Jonynas, an interwar-generation artist who had emigrated to the United States and had a great success on the Lithuanian Chapel in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, offered a church design. Despite some resistance and a willingness to cooperate with Lithuanian architects, the Archdiocese ultimately approved Jonynas' design. It is seen that there was a wish to implement, let's say, a more traditional project, which was more similar to those designed by Lithuanian emigrants in America for the Lithuanian diaspora, with more Lithuanian-style features.

However, design did not continue after Jonynas' return to the USA. The church project took a new direction. On January 22, 1991, a priest requested that “Lietprojektas,” a state-owned architectural bureau, proceed with their church design. The project was led by architects R. Krištapičius, G. Aperavičius and V. Balčiūnas, under the supervision of G. Baravykas, known for his modernist and post-modernist works.³¹ In the early 1990s, he also worked on the Old Varėna church, showcasing regionalist architecture in his portfolio.

Inspired by 20th-century Polish church architecture, the architects employed reinforced concrete and metal, materials commonly associated with industrial modernity, to integrate the building into its post-Soviet urban surroundings.

Fig. 1 These choices signalled an intentional departure from nostalgic historicism, establishing a new architectural vocabulary for ecclesiastical space. On one side of the church, seven buttresses elegantly transform into arches – a reference to the Gothic traditions of Vilnius that also introduces a dynamic visual rhythm: one of the creators said, “We incorporated seven buttresses that transform into arches, establishing a connection with the Gothic style of Vilnius while producing a stunning visual effect.”³²

In addition to historical allusions, the architects incorporated symbolic elements into the building: ten elongated windows on the southern façade represent the Ten Commandments, and the interior was designed to be bathed in natural light, reinforcing the place's spiritual function. **Fig. 2** However, this modernist reimagining of church architecture initially met resistance from conservative segments of society, unaccustomed to abstract forms in religious contexts.

The church was designed to harmonise with the natural landscape and the irregular geometry of the surrounding Soviet-era housing. Rather than adopting a monumentally detached stance, it embeds space within the rhythms of everyday urban life. Its asymmetrical, trapezoidal plan – occupying 1,235 m² – mirrors the fragmented urban context, while the floor plan guides movement and attention through a nave that subtly narrows toward the altar. While the location of the presbytery was decided, its detailed design remained incomplete during construction, highlighting a focus on architectural expression over liturgical precision.

Despite its innovative features, the design faced criticism from some cultural figures, including Jonynas, who

compared it to utilitarian building. He likened it to “a farm building in southern Germany” used for livestock, sarcastically questioning whether the wall of buttresses would play a liturgical role.³³ He viewed the asymmetrical layout — praised by some as innovative — as more fitting for a railway station than a Catholic church, describing it as a “revolutionary innovation” misplaced in religious architecture. Jonynas dismissed the prominent buttresses as mere decoration, contrasting the architects’ intent: they were conceived as structural elements and enhancements to natural lighting. His comments showed a broader divide within Lithuanian society, where some viewed the modernist approach as inappropriate for a sacred space. In contrast, others saw it as essential in revitalising religious architecture in the post-Soviet context.

The structural and compositional aspects of this church’s project elements can be considered innovations in contemporary Catholic church architecture. Still, the project also incorporated traditional, recognisable Christian symbols and stylistic solutions. One of the most essential elements is the unrealised 56-metre-high bell tower at the front of the church.

Construction and Presbytery

The construction of new churches involved contributions from various individuals and organisations, primarily financed through donations from the Archdiocesan Curia. Although it was among the first congregations to obtain a building permit, construction began only after independence. The parish house with a chapel was built first, but financial constraints delayed the church’s progress, requiring several fundraising campaigns. Strategies to collect donations included appeals to the Lithuanian government and organisations like the German Catholic Relief Fund “Kirche in Not.”

Construction began in mid-1991, but was hindered by rising costs, financial challenges, and delays. The parish priest noted that during the church’s construction, he encountered an interesting attitude from the workers, who said, “We have built the [Communist Party of Lithuania] Central Committee building, and we will build a church.”³⁴ This pragmatic mindset reflects the era’s emphasis on construction rather than the building’s symbolic or spiritual significance. From the priest’s perspective, the architects may have held a similar viewpoint. Church builders — priests — collaborated with individuals lacking ecclesiastical architecture experience. Consequently, the prevailing attitude of “we’ll build it regardless” may have led to concerns about compromising both the building’s quality and its spiritual meaning.

The church opened with an unfinished interior. The interior solutions and landscaping were closely integrated with construction. Baravykas supervised the project until he died in 1995; there is no record of why the other architects on the team did not work on the interior programme. After that, the priest installed the temporary altar on the south wall of the central nave, deviating from the original design. Later, this decision faced criticism, noting that the architects “forgot

the liturgical functions.”³⁵ However, the architects designed the presbytery at the back of the church, and the pastor decided to place the temporary altar there.

In 2003, the new pastor reorganised the church’s interior, with sculptor Vladas Urbanavičius proposing a design for the presbytery, which was approved due to its alignment with liturgical reforms. The project received mixed reactions from the congregation, but the support of the parish priest helped the faithful accept the modern design. The altar sits on a five-step platform, with the tabernacle column and altar made of granite and brass. After completion, a wooden cross was added. The cardinal criticised the presbytery project, saying:

I am unhappy with the result, the altar is too small for such a church. In a word, better than an altar against the wall, at least a normal service has begun, in my opinion ... especially the tabernacle, which was built, I was told, like a cigarette.³⁶

Lithuanian architects suggested completing the church tower to honour Baravykas’s memory. However, the church construction faced financial struggles, delays, and deviations from the original design. The lack of interior design and the selection of a non-standard plan presented additional challenges. One architect noted that the church resembled a transformer station without the tower.³⁷ This criticism reflects a broader trend in contemporary European architecture, where many new religious buildings have adopted minimalist, utilitarian forms that resemble secular structures. The church never achieved the architects’ intended form, which would have provided an ecclesiastical character and additional functionality.

The construction of the Blessed George Matulaitis Church illustrates the multifaceted challenges faced by post-Soviet Lithuania in ecclesiastical architecture. Amidst financial constraints, shifting political landscapes, and evolving religious freedoms, this project highlights the broader struggle for religious expression and architectural identity during Lithuania’s transition to independence. The difficulties in location selection, the clash of architectural visions, and the eventual reliance on external financial support underscore the complexities of rebuilding religious infrastructure in a post-totalitarian society.

CASE STUDY 2. LAZDYNAI: THE MODEL SOCIALIST DISTRICT WITH NEW SAINT JOHN BOSCO CHURCH

The Needs of Religious Community and Legends of The Parish Name and Church Land-plot

The Lazdynai mass housing district in Vilnius exemplifies Soviet residential construction designed in the 1960s by architects Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas and Vytautas Brėdikis. Recognised for its innovative integration of nature and concrete, the district became a model of socialist urban planning, and its designers were awarded the Lenin Prize.³⁸ Nevertheless, like other Soviet-era districts, it was initially designed without provisions for a church.

The newcomers raised the issue of the lack of a church

relatively early, as with the religious community in the Viršuliškės district. The Archbishop founded the parish on March 12, 1990. It was decided that the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB) would look after the parish.³⁹ The faithful who took care of the religious community registration had foreseen the church's location.

According to tradition, the location for the new church had already been set. The faithful expressed that the district architects had intended for the church to be situated in the most picturesque and prominent location, as indicated in their blueprints. Other testimonies support this claim. According to one priest, Čekanauskas provided a plot for a church, highlighting in the district plan the "undevelopable territory." Also, there is a story that the architect considered naming the church after St. John Bosco, drawn to his character.⁴⁰

In the context of the churches built in the settlements created during the Soviet era, the location of the Lazdynai church is exceptional because it was built in the district's centre. This choice reflects continuity between the new church and the historical role of churches as central landmarks in town development. The central location was selected for its symbolic importance and practical accessibility, with the church positioned for easy pedestrian access. The parish received a 2-hectare plot of land amid a cluster of apartment buildings, establishing the church as a notable element in the urban environment, even with its relatively low height.

Two Church Projects: The Power of the Client

On 11 March 1991, the Archbishop J. Steponavičius commissioned architect Čekanauskas to design a new church, blending modern forms with Lithuanian national motifs. This approach drew inspiration from diaspora architects who, during the 20th century, sought to integrate national identity into ecclesiastical design. This broader European trend saw architects balancing modernity with tradition in response to changing religious and cultural landscapes.

Čekanauskas's design embraced a small scale and simple forms, with easily recognisable symbols, and followed a traditional cruciform layout, complete with a tower and spires. While contemporary architects praised the incorporation of traditional motifs, Čekanauskas's resistance to the rising trend of "cubist" churches, which were often criticised for resembling secular structures like sports halls or markets, highlighted his commitment to maintaining the church's spiritual and architectural integrity. This approach can be seen as an effort to assert national identity and religious continuity. However, in 1992, following the appointment of a new pastor, the Salesians rejected the project, leading to its postponement and a shift in focus toward constructing a parish house.

In 1995, Čekanauskas revisited the new church's design, working alongside co-author architect Vytenis Gerliakas. This time, the project was based on the client's specifications, and their input was sought on the arrangement of the liturgical objects and spaces. The second project differed

significantly from the first, offering increased versatility. Still, these changes did not satisfy the architect, who said, "When designing the church in Lazdynai, I abandoned the 'folk' style. The priests didn't like this architecture; they needed the current design, but I don't like it myself."⁴¹ The architect wanted to design a church in a traditional style, but the clients limited his creative expression. Conversely, the Salesians, having more experience in church design, may have aimed for a universal architectural design suitable for all believers, nevertheless of their specific style, as the parish had to coexist with Lithuanian and Polish Catholics. The final design of the St. John Bosco Church features an asymmetrical layout with a total area of 1,400 m². The design emphasises the bell tower, which is positioned on the left side of the building rather than the main façade. Interestingly, the first project placed the church on a horizontal base. In contrast, the second integrated it into the site's natural relief, reflecting the Lazdynai district's architectural style that considers the surrounding landscape.

Fig. 3 An examination of the plans and projects shows that considerable attention was paid to planning functional spaces. A separate annexe was designed adjacent to the church, featuring two meeting halls, a chapel, and a baptistery with a small dome. The architects prepared the interior design and layout for the project, including sketches of the central church hall's interior. They considered every detail of the interior finishes, materials, lighting, and interior details such as railings and stair treads.⁴²

When architects organised the interior space, the most attention was paid to the main space – the nave, which was formed by round columns (five on each side). The design focused heavily on natural lighting, so three round windows were incorporated, symbolically placed in the parish house, and an octagonal window was positioned above the altar. An analysis of this project revealed that some architects in Lithuanian architecture sought to adhere to the tradition of traditional forms of ecclesiastical architecture. Still, at the client's request, they had to choose a prayer house design that reflected more modern trends.

Construction and Interior Development

The construction of the Lazdynai church began in 1996, primarily funded by the Salesian Order, with additional contributions from parishioners and private companies. This project reflected a broader trend of churches founded or maintained by monasteries, built with minimal Archdiocese support. For instance, the construction of the parish house, which took place between 1993 and 1995, saw the Salesians contribute 87% of the funds, with the remaining 13% coming from parishioners. On the one hand, the stable funding from the diocese should have guaranteed the success of the construction; still, there were other concerns – the company carrying out the construction went bankrupt during the construction.

On 28 January 2001, Bishop Juozas Tunaitis consecrated the temporary altar. While the church's architectural design remained unchanged, the interior evolved with contributions from both the Salesians and the faithful. At that time, Church



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Art Commissions had already begun operating in Lithuania, established by the Archdiocese of Vilnius and Kaunas. Hence, priests consulted with commission experts before undertaking construction or design work. In the Lazdynai church's case, the experts recommended a minimalist approach, proposing a long, thin cross without the figure of Christ, which was in line with contemporary artistic solutions for religious interiors. However, the community's preference for traditional sculpture revealed a resistance to minimalism and a preference for classical representations in liturgical elements.

Salesians commissioned the presbytery project from their Polish Salesian brothers. **Fig. 4** Their design included the Crucified Christ on the Cross, radiating light.⁴³ Interestingly, the Salesians collaborated with Polish rather than Lithuanian artists in the design process. This choice may also indicate a preference for a recognised religious art experience over local artists, which can be seen as a positive recognition of foreign excellence or a rejection of local talent.

Similar problems and misunderstandings arose when designing the stained glass windows for the church. In 2011, the parish priest presented stained glass designs to the Commission, supported by parishioners through donations. However, the artists quickly expressed dissatisfaction, criticising the stained glass for being too dark, chaotic, and primitive, and arguing that it undermined

the architectural aesthetics of the oval-shaped windows.⁴⁴ Despite objections, the Salesians defended the designs, stating they resonate with parishioners and have already received approval from the hierarchy.⁴⁵ After considering the projects, the Church Art Commission was more concerned about the lack of coordination between the projects than about the artistic value. One commissioner said, "It has become customary to invite the Commission when work on the church has already begun or is even halfway through."⁴⁶

After all the discussions, the project was approved. This situation suggests that the Salesians approached the Commission not for help but to confirm what they had already created. As the researcher-architect notes, the conceptual and stylistic relationship between the architectural whole and the iconography was not maintained in this case.⁴⁷

This parish, unique for belonging to a monastery, had fewer financial issues than other post-Soviet Lithuanian churches. The Salesians rejected the initial design and opted for a universal style. This choice showed that, on the one hand, the architect was constrained to realise his original ideas (the idea of traditional Lithuanian style churches). At the same time, he was allowed to create a church project for a specific district, which he and his colleagues had been designing.



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CASE STUDY 3. ARCHITECTURAL AMBITIONS AND CHALLENGES IN THE ELEKTRĖNAI CHURCH OF THE VIRGIN MARY, THE QUEEN OF MARTYRS

Formation of the Religious Community

The emergence of new industries has been associated with the developing of new mono-industrial towns. During the 1960s, Elektrėnai – a new town built as a model socialist city – was established for workers of the nearby power plant, where young individuals without deep historical roots settled, who were distanced from Catholic traditions. Nonetheless, some residents who maintained their religious faith had returned from Siberian exile and had to adapt to practising their faith in remote churches during the Soviet era.

On December 16, 1988, a group of devoted individuals gathered in the school hall of Elektrėnai to discuss the formation of a parish and the construction of a new church. This initiative was led by a member of the Lithuanian Reform Movement, known as *Sąjūdis*. The believers took all the legal steps on their own – the proposal to establish a religious community was well-received, and the Commissioner of CRA also advocated for a parish and church in Elektrėnai to be sent to Moscow. Approximately a month later, a positive response from Moscow was received, leading to the official registration of the parish and authorisation to build a church.⁴⁸ Before the church was built, the priest decided to celebrate the first Holy Mass in the canteen and a temporary chapel

was erected next to the power plant, in the hall of the municipal utilities department. From that moment on, the priest took responsibility for securing a location and designing a church. It was initially proposed that the church be built near the highway so that it would be visible to everyone travelling on the Vilnius-Kaunas road. Later, this idea drew considerable criticism from various artists. The original proposal to build a church on top of the hill was scuppered by zoning rules, as the site was to be used for apartment blocks. Despite consulting two well-known architects, the director of the Elektrėnai power plant (and the Kruonis Pumped Storage Hydroelectric Power Plant) chose an alternative site. This highlights the significant influence of non-architectural stakeholders in shaping architectural projects.

Architectural Design and Selection

Priest Jonas Sabaliauskas, with the parish council's support, led the way for a new church, focusing on location and design. His interest in modernist architecture, influenced by his travels to Italy and Poland and his admiration for Le Corbusier's work, guided his choices. In the beginning, there was an idea to build the church designed by Antoni Wiwulski, which was intended to be built at the start of the 20th century, but due to the wars and the architect's death, it was never realised.⁴⁹

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The Church of St. John Bosco in Vilnius
(personal archive of the author, 2025).

4

The interior of the Church of St. John Bosco
(personal archive of the author, 2025)

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The Church of the Virgin Mary the Queen of Martyrs,
Elektrėnai (personal archive of the author, 2025).

6

The interior of the Church of the Virgin Mary the Queen
of Martyrs (personal archive of the author, 2025).

First, the priest commissioned several famous architects to undertake individual projects for the Elektrėnai church. However, their designs were deemed unsuitable, leading to a small competition that featured four projects. It showed that architects sought to express the spirit of the modern period in their work and attempted to relate the project to the city's newness. In a sense, it was not a space without any history, unconstrained by the surrounding historic buildings, but rather a new city, a new environment of concrete apartment blocks. This setting may have required a modern architectural expression in an ecclesiastical building.

Despite the interest, the jury was dissatisfied with the designs and ultimately decided to stick with architect Henrikas Šilgalis' project. It was also no coincidence that the parish priest favoured this project because of its modern forms, as the priest was fascinated by modern ecclesiastical architecture. The architect described the design of the Elektrėnai church as "unconventionally traditional." He explained that the geometric industrial form, softened by various design elements, recalled the essence of the old churches. It was noted that this non-stereotypical design aligned with the broader work of Šilgalis, although he did not provide specific examples. The article refers to the "powerful architectural bombs" that the architect liked to

drop on unremarkable towns or settlements;⁵⁰ although the architect had no experience in ecclesiastical architecture.

The new church in Elektrėnai is a single-nave hall with a unique composition and a plan area of 1000 m². The plan structure is intricate, with rectangular auxiliary rooms added to the main square plan. The standout feature of the exterior is the monumental, large, semicircular arched portal, comprising a rectangular arch with a cross and six vertical double crosses. The architect stated that this distinctive silhouette symbolises the seventh centenary of the baptism of Lithuania. The prominent portal underscores the sacred purpose of the church building, setting it apart from residential structures and creating a harmonious balance with the restrained volume of the building.

Interestingly, the architect opted for modern chandeliers over abundant lighting and designed the interior with a cylindrical vault featuring relief panels, transitioning to a stylised triangular vault supported by neo-Romanesque columns. The lighting was focused on the apse, with a recessed presbytery and skylight. The architect meticulously integrated sculptures, the tabernacle, and furniture, ensuring both the exterior and interior were richly detailed. Despite challenges, the architect maintained the project's integrity, paying close attention to every architectural and decorative element.



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Construction Challenges of Elektrėnai Church

The construction of the Elektrėnai Church began on June 30, 1990, with the bishop consecrating the cornerstone and naming the church.⁵¹ The project was funded by a combination of government sources, the power plant, donations, and parishioners, with an initial target of completing it within two years. However, several challenges hindered progress, including rising material costs, funding shortages, and contractor turnover. Additionally, the economic difficulties of the early 1990s, including the impact of Soviet-imposed sanctions on Lithuania post-independence, exacerbated the situation, disrupting the supply of essential resources like energy and raw materials.

Initially, due to financial uncertainty, the power plant in Elektrėnai, a key local infrastructure project, hesitated to take on the church construction. During the construction process, the artworks envisaged by the architect were being coordinated with the construction team. The architect was slow in the process and had not completed the design. According to the priest, this was one of the most significant problems during the construction.⁵² Structural complications also emerged due to the complex engineering involved. Notably, tensioned, overhanging roof structures — expertly designed by an engineer known for

similar designs in the Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace — added complexity to the build.

By 1992, the church's structural elements, including the walls and reinforced concrete towers, were completed, revealing the star-shaped layout from above. The ceiling and roof were finished, marking the end of the construction phase and allowing interior decoration to begin. **Fig. 5** The architect also designed the interior and presbytery furniture ensemble. Several prominent Lithuanian artists contributed to the church's interior and liturgical elements, with the altar sculpture, "The Risen Christ," a key feature. The Stations of the Cross, completed over seven years, were uniquely placed on the undulating balconies flanking the central nave. This piece, executed in sgraffito and fresco techniques, is considered one of the most important examples of contemporary Lithuanian sacred art. **Fig. 6** However, the church faced a significant setback when two towers collapsed in a hurricane on 4 October 1997. The towers were rebuilt with additional reinforcement. The collapse attracted the attention of artists and laypeople, who criticised the church's architecture while it was still under construction. This case illustrates the intricate balance between architectural innovation, community expectations, and traditional religious values in post-Soviet Lithuania. The architect made bold and creative



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decisions that reflected the spirit of the times, resulting in a large, expressive, modern church with a high-quality interior program.

RECEPTION AND CONCERNS REGARDING CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN THE 1990s

Due to the rapid proliferation of church buildings in post-Soviet Lithuania in the 1990s, various architectural expressions received considerable criticism. This chapter examines the concerns of four main groups: public, architects, architectural historians, and clergy. Each group's perspective comprehensively explains the new religious architecture's challenges and criticisms. Analysing these perspectives helps us understand the main problems. Following the principle of stakeholder involvement, it is necessary to examine the key issues and challenges of new church architecture and its reception in post-Soviet Lithuania. The criticism of these groups can be categorised into two main areas. The first issue is the size problem, specifically the choice of church sizes that are too large and do not meet the needs of the parishes or their financial means. The second issue is the problem of architectural expression and the shape of the churches, specifically whether they are too modern versus traditional, unoriginal, imitative, or kitschy.

Grandiosity and Size

The construction of large churches in the post-Soviet period may reflect aesthetic preferences and symbolically

affirm the revival of religion and national identity. The sublime was an ideological tool to convey the Church's presence and moral authority visually. However, these ambitions often clashed with reality, with many churches criticised for being disproportionately large, exceeding the spiritual and financial needs of the communities they served. While symbolising ideological power, architectural gigantism often projected authority and permanence into the public consciousness.⁵³ The revitalisation of religion not only brought spiritual renewal but also increased religious influence and visibility in public life, especially in national identity and political processes.⁵⁴ Church size choices were pragmatic, based on the belief that post-repression freedom would turn Catholicism into a mass phenomenon, prompting designs for churches over 1000 square meters, often exceeding parish needs.

Considering that the three churches discussed above illustrate this, it is also worth briefly mentioning other churches that have drawn public attention for their monumental character. For instance, the Kaltinėnai church was criticised for its massive design that replaced a burned traditional wooden church. It was emphasised that the new structure distorted the town's landscape and alienated parishioners, some of whom found it emotionally disconnected from Lithuanian religious heritage.⁵⁵

Similarly, the Utena city God's Providence Church project, conceived as one of the largest churches in Europe, revealed a preference for size during the design

competition, which showed a clear preference for size: the modest, first-prize design was rejected in favour of a larger second-place entry — a 1,000 m², 54-metre-high pyramid-like structure. Later, the architect entered an architectural competition, stating that the tender dictated such scale, with clients demanding monumental dimensions. Despite potentially biased views from architects, impartial ones also criticised the project, likening it to a “gigantic pyramid of idolatrous sphinxes.”⁵⁶ Although construction began in 1992, it stalled due to financial constraints and was later scaled down in 2000, demonstrating a shift toward more feasible, scaled-down designs.

The Elektrėnai church further illustrates the complexity of post-Soviet church-building. It was criticised for its excessive size and location-driven visibility from the Vilnius-Kaunas motorway. Critics argued that three smaller churches might have better served local needs.⁵⁷ The project reflects how church size was prioritised over practical considerations and proximity to the faithful during the early transitional period.

However, after the first decade of independence, there was a noticeable shift in planning towards a more centrist logic — a perspective that emphasised centrality over grandeur.⁵⁸ This view reflected a broader recognition that churches should be located as centrally as possible within a settlement, whether a district, a city, or a village. Rather than reflecting a preference for symbolic scale or monumentality, centralism favoured accessibility and the integration of the church into

the everyday spatial and social life of the community.

Analysing the controversies and debates around church architecture from the past, it's clear that the clergy often prioritised how churches looked on the outside, sometimes opting for designs that were much larger than needed. Architects, in turn, usually went along with the clergy's preferences, assuming they reflected the actual needs of the parish, without thoroughly questioning them too much. Beyond the cultural and social shifts of the time, these decisions about size show deeper reasons at play. The clergy were often motivated by symbolism, while the architects wanted their designs to stand the test of time. In the post-totalitarian context, these monumental gestures also served as political and personal statements of regained identity. Even though this study has been established in this study, the construction of new churches was initiated by the faithful rather than by the desire of (arch)dioceses to immortalise themselves.

Peter Hammond's critique highlights that the struggle between creating monumental churches and ones that serve their purpose goes beyond just the post-Soviet context.⁵⁹ It's a conversation that has been happening within the Church for a long time, especially since the Second Vatican Council, which pushed for more accessible and human-centred spaces for worship. In the end, the size and design of these churches reflect a mix of spiritual, cultural, and personal factors that have shaped religious architecture in the post-Soviet world.

Contemporary Architecture:

A Reflection of Modern Society?

Modern architecture often mirrors societal changes, responding to social, economic, and technological shifts. In church architecture, these changes reflect shifts in religious practices. The Second Vatican Council promoted more inclusive and accessible religious spaces, although its impact varies globally. In Lithuania, Soviet occupation severely limited religious practices and church construction, distancing architecture from the Council's reforms. After the collapse of the USSR, architects faced the challenge of quickly adapting to new church design requirements. Some prioritised form over spiritual aspects, leaving priests to highlight the church's spiritual elements.

After Lithuania regained independence, there was a surge in new church construction, but no consensus on the direction of contemporary ecclesiastical architecture. Projects faced criticism for being either too modern, resembling shopping centres or garages, or too traditional and unoriginal. Despite these criticisms, it's essential to acknowledge that architects drew inspiration from diverse sources. The architects' choice of inspiration played a significant role in shaping the direction of their designs, as some, like the designers of the churches in Viršuliškės and Elektrėnai, embraced modernist principles. In contrast, others, such as Čekanauskas, drew from traditional influences, like his visits to old wooden belfries, for his first Lazdynai church project.

However, inspiration must not become a problem, nor should the whole process of creation become one of dictation or fulfilling one's desires. Lithuanian architects have often been criticised for creating expressive designs, and many have preferred traditional-style buildings. Church design is a complex interplay of communication and compromise, influenced by architectural trends, local context, and the priest's vision.

In Lithuania, clients had varying expectations: some sought the artist's work to be religious, while others valued contemporary artistic expression. For example, the priest Sabaliauskas emphasised that faith should inspire the artist, while the architect Šilgalis noted that even deeply religious people can create simplistic projects. Architect Kęstutis Pempė, who designed numerous new Catholic churches, stated that his discovery of sacral architecture inspired him to pursue a deeper spirituality.⁶⁰ However, some criticised his work for being too traditional:

In the 21st century, one would like to see a more modern expression... Interpretations of historical forms, such as the new church in Alytus, which appears to embody the spirit of Romanesque architecture, are not an example of a new era.⁶¹

Moreover, the new church in Alytus has been criticised for its "orgy of kitsch."⁶²

The adverse reactions to contemporary church designs can largely be attributed to the public's unpreparedness to accept these changes. While such projects were criticised locally, they aligned more with the broader trends of an

indifferent, atheistic, and secularised society.⁶³ The rejection of contemporary architecture in religious spaces was not only about aesthetics and the perceived failure of these designs to engage with the community's spiritual needs. Notably, the Elektrėnai church was criticised by artists who felt it lacked the beauty of traditional churches and had lost touch with the scale and spirit of the land, saying: "It is as if something had hardened their hearts, as if they had not seen the beauty of the old great churches. ... And what is a church? Is it the Lord's bus station?"⁶⁴ This sentiment reflected a broader reluctance, as many were unprepared to embrace modern architectural styles in religious spaces, influenced by centuries of traditional church design.

Many clergy and architects grew up under Soviet rule, where they had little opportunity to learn about religious architecture. As a result, they lacked the expertise to help guide architects in merging modern designs with traditional religious elements. While it's understandable that the architects were inexperienced, the clergy also faced criticism for not passing on the knowledge they did have. Their limited exposure to church design during the Soviet era played a significant role in this knowledge gap.

Internationally, similar debates arose around modernist church designs, such as Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel and Richard Meier's Chiesa di Dio Padre Misericordioso (also known as the Jubilee Church). These designs blend innovative architecture with spiritual symbolism but were criticised for deviating too far from traditional ecclesiastical forms. While praised for their alignment with today's society's needs, these projects also reflected a broader trend where contemporary sensibilities often clashed with traditional religious values.

The questioning of contemporary ecclesiastical architecture in Lithuania highlights a fundamental challenge of the transitional period: the mental struggle to accept modern architectural styles in ecclesiastical buildings. Critics argued that the large, modern designs discouraged the faithful from attending church, highlighting a disconnect between the architecture and the community's needs. As Lithuania transitioned from Soviet occupation to independence, church architecture became increasingly distant from the spiritual and cultural context, underscoring the difficulty of evolving architectural forms and the mentalities of the clergy and public.

CONCLUSIONS

The architectural diversity of Catholic churches in Lithuania, whose construction began in 1988–1991, reflects a nation undergoing profound social and political change as it emerged from decades of Soviet repression. These churches responded to religious and national renewal, with the architectural decisions revealing the complexities of transitioning from an atheistic state to an independent religious society. The disorganised approach and often hasty organisation of church construction led to varied architectural outcomes, with no unified vision of modern ecclesiastical architecture. This resulted in a mix of modern innovations and traditional elements but left a legacy

of eclecticism and incomplete interiors due to a lack of guidance from the (arch)dioceses and the inexperience of architects in church design. One of the main criticisms of this period was the lack of a clear, unified architectural vision. The inability to provide coherent directives and the architects' lack of training in designing sacred spaces have led to inconsistent designs that often favour symbolic (external) modernity over communities' functional and spiritual needs. Modern architectural features frequently stood in contrast to the longstanding traditions of Lithuanian Catholicism, highlighting the difficulties of reconciling new design approaches with deeply ingrained religious and cultural norms.

The role of local communities and clergy in shaping the architectural outcome was important and problematic. Although the architects were primarily responsible for the design and its vision, the involvement of the clergy often dictated the final architectural decisions. This is particularly evident in the Church of St. John Bosco, where the Salesians sought a more universal, less traditionally Lithuanian design. In the case of the church in Elektrėnai, although there was a consensus between the architect and the priest on the design, the church's architecture was criticised for its scale and departure from traditional forms, demonstrating the constant struggle for a balance between innovation and cultural expectation.

Another critical problem revealed in the study was the lack of resources, which often led to construction delays and incomplete interiors. In many cases, the interiors did not meet the architects' original vision, often due to financial constraints. Arbitrary decisions made by parish pastors without expert advice on interior design frequently resulted in poorly designed spaces that did not fulfil the intended spiritual and liturgical functions. In contrast, when the experts were consulted, the results were usually more refined, both artistically and functionally. This highlights the importance of guidance in designing sacred spaces that meet liturgical needs and also reflect architectural integrity. The size and scale of new churches in post-Soviet Lithuania significantly influenced national and religious renewal. Yet, public controversy highlighted a rejection of overly large buildings. While monumental designs aimed to symbolise revitalisation, they often overshadowed local communities' functional needs. After initial enthusiasm for religious revival faded, a more balanced approach to symbolic grandeur and practicality emerged in church design.

The post-Soviet Lithuanian church architecture reveals the problems and deficiencies of achieving a harmonious synthesis or unification of modernity and tradition, in the years of national and religious revival. Lack of experience, tradition, and a clear concept; financial constraints, and divergence in aesthetic approaches have resulted in controversial architectural manifestations. As Lithuania forges its religious and cultural identity, the lessons of this era must be used to inform subsequent architectural design, so that religious space remains relevant and meaningful, and strongly connected to the traditions and needs of the community.

¹ Marija Drėmaitė, ed., *Architecture of Optimism: The Kaunas Phenomenon, 1918–1940* (Lapas, 2018); Marija Drėmaitė, *Baltic Modernism: Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania* (DOM Publishers, 2017).

² Vaidas Petruelis, Brigita Tranavičiūtė, and Paulius Tautvydas Laurinaitis, "The Architectural Legacy of Lithuanians in the United States during the Post-World War II Era: A Monument to the Cold War," *Buildings* 13, no. 12 (2023): 3138.

³ Almantas Samalavičius, *Lithuanian Architecture and Urbanism: Essays in History and Aesthetics* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

⁴ Izabela Cichońska, Karolina Popera, and Kuba Snopek, *Architektura VII dnia* (Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, Biuro Festiwalowe IMPART, 2016).

⁵ Siniša Zrinščak, and others, "Church and State in Croatia: Legal Framework, Religious Instruction, and Social Expectations," in *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe: Challenges since 1989*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 145–50.

⁶ Danijela Gavrilović and Dragoljub B. Đorđević, "Religionization of Public Space: Symbolic Struggles and Beyond – The Case of Ex-Yugoslav Societies," *Religions* 9, no. 2 (2018): 8.

⁷ Carla Zito, "Parish Churches, Patrimony of the Community or of the Diocese? Community Interventions and Supervision of the Dioceses," *Actas de Arquitectura Religiosa Contemporánea* 6 (2019): 182–93.

⁸ Esteban Fernández-Cobián, ed., *Architectural Actions on the Religious Heritage after Vatican II* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021); Jamie McGregor Smith, Ivica Brnić, and others, eds., *Sacred Modernity: The Holy Embrace of Modernist Architecture* (Hatje Cantz, 2024); Allan Doig, *A History of the Church through its Buildings* (Hardcover, 2021), 281–82, 288–90.

⁹ Robert Proctor, *Building the Modern Church: Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955 to 1975* (Routledge, 2016), 18, 40–1.

¹⁰ The boom in church construction at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and during the Revival shares key similarities, showing that the processes in the 1990s were continuous. Both periods saw sacred architecture linked to political changes, with some constructions supported by imperial or Soviet concessions, and others tied to national restoration and independence. Churches were built not just for emotional reasons, but also to address practical needs, especially in areas where churches had been destroyed or where reconstruction was restricted during the Soviet era.

¹¹ Skirmantė Smilingytė-Zeimienė, *Lietuvos bažnyčių dailė XX a. I pusėje* (Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2009), 18–9.

¹² Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, and Vaidas Petruelis, "The Nation's Shrine: Resurrection Church," in *Architecture of Optimism: The Kaunas Phenomenon, 1918–1940*, ed. Marija Drėmaitė (Lapas, 2018), 104–06.

¹³ Vincentas Brizgys, *Katalikų Bažnyčia Lietuvoje 1940–1944 metais* (Draugas, 1977), 6.

¹⁴ "The Struggle for the Klaipėda Church," *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, no. 41 (1980), <https://www.lkbkronika.lt/index.php/en/issue-no-41/6325-the-struggle-for-the-klaipeda-church>.

¹⁵ In the second decade, about 23 religious buildings were built, and in the third decade, 25.

¹⁶ Paulius Subačius, *Dvidešimt penkeri religinės laisvės metai 1988–2013: krikščionys Lietuvos visuomenėje po Atgimimo* (Lietuvos Katalikų Mokslo Akademija, 2015), 1079.

¹⁷ Concept of *symbolic reterritorialization* – the process by which physical structures reclaim space once dominated by secular ideologies – can be applied to the post-Soviet church construction in Lithuania, wherein the reintroduction of churches into the visual and spatial fabric of towns and villages represents a shift in both cultural and ideological landscapes, as discussed in her work *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (University of California Press, 1991).

¹⁸ Duncan G. Stroik, *The Church Building as a Sacred Place: Beauty, Transcendence, and the Eternal* (Ignatius Press, 2012), 60–2.

¹⁹ Anna Wierzbicka, "Modernist Architecture and the Sacred: The Change of Contemporary Architecture in the Perspective of Early Modernistic Sacred Buildings," *Challenges of Modern Technology* 5, no. 1 (2014): 45–8.

²⁰ Esteban Fernández-Cobián, ed., *Between Concept and Identity* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 7.

²¹ "Visuomenė ir religija. Pokalbis su RRT įgaliotiniu prie SSRS Ministrų Tarybos Petru Anilioniu," *Literatūra ir menas* 2153, no. 8 (1988): 2–3.

²² Religious Affairs Commissioner Petras Anilionis, "Request No. 92 to the Council of Ministers of the LSSR," 1987-03-09, LCVA, R-181, 1/290: 1–9. LCVA refers to the Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas [Lithuanian Central State Archives].

²³ It is important to emphasise that it was customary to appeal to the authorities in Moscow (if successful), as this meant that the requests of the faithful were taken more seriously by the local authorities, whose favourable decisions were awaited.

²⁴ Letter from the faithful to the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Vilnius City Council of People's Deputies, Vilnius, 1988-08-16. VAKA, XVII.4. VAKA refers to the Vilniaus arkivyskupijos kurijos archyvas [Archives of the Vilnius Archdiocesan Curia].

- ²⁵ Mariusz Czepczyński, *Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities: Representation of Powers and Needs* (Ashgate, 2008), 166–68.
- ²⁶ Vilnius City Council of People's Deputies Committee, Chief Architecture and Planning Department, G. Baravykas, "Regarding the Location of the New Church," No. 177, 1989-05-05, VAKA, XVII.
- ²⁷ "Pal. Jurgio Matulaičio bažnyčios projektų konkursas," *Statyba ir architektūra*, no. 9 (1989): 17–8.
- ²⁸ Darius Linartas, "Kūrybinių konkursų reikšmė Lietuvos architektūros mene: disertacija" (Doctoral dissertation, Vilnius, 2011), 47.
- ²⁹ In the interview with Cardinal Audrys Juozas Bačkis, Sister Aldona Dalgėdaitė, who worked at the Archdiocesan Curia in the 1990s, was also included in interview with Cardinal Audrys Juozas Bačkis, 2023-01-23, recorded by K. Steponavičiūtė.
- ³⁰ Angelo Crespi, *Costruito da dio: Perché le chiese contemporanee sono brutte e i musei sono diventati le nuove cattedrali* (Johan & Levi, 2017), 11.
- ³¹ Rimantas Buivydas, *Architektas Gediminas Baravykas: Kūrybos pulsas* (Archiforma, 2000), 50–2.
- ³² Interview with architect Ričardas Krištapavičius, 2021-05-10, recorded by K. Steponavičiūtė.
- ³³ V. K. Jonynas Letter to M. Čeponis, 1991-11-28. LLMA, f. 626, 1/117: 1–3. LLMA refers to the Lietuvos literatūros ir meno archyvas [Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art].
- ³⁴ Polis Algimantas, "Išbraukti dešimtmečiai," *Statyba ir architektūra*, no. 12 (1991): 10.
- ³⁵ Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, and others, *Skulptoriaus dosjė: Vladas Urbanavičius* (Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus, 2009), 131.
- ³⁶ Interview with Cardinal Audrys Juozas Bačkis, 2023-01-23, recorded by K. Steponavičiūtė.
- ³⁷ Interview with architect Ričardas Krištapavičius, 2021-05-10, recorded by K. Steponavičiūtė.
- ³⁸ Marija Drėmaitė, "The Role of Architects in Fighting the Monotony on the Lithuanian Mass Housing Estates (Chapter 8)," in *Urban Planning During Socialism: Views from the Periphery*, eds. Jasna Mariotti and Kadri Leetmaa (Routledge, 2023), 142.
- ³⁹ Lithuanian SSR Vilnius Archdiocese Curia, No. 148, "Act of Establishment of the Parish of St. John Bosco in the City of Vilnius," Vilnius, 1990-03-12, VAKA, XVII.4.
- ⁴⁰ Edmundas Venslova, *Tarnystė Dievui ir žmonėms. Saleziečio kunigo Izidoriaus Sadausko 50 metų kunigystės jubiliejus* (Aušra, 2011), 20.
- ⁴¹ Algimantas Mačiulis, *Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas* (Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 2011), 136.
- ⁴² V. E. Čekanauskas, "Interior design of St. John Bosco Church," 1997-01-06, Čekanauskas family archive.
- ⁴³ Jacek Paszenda SBD, "Request," 2006-04-16, VAKA, IV.17.
- ⁴⁴ Lithuanian Artists' Union, "Appeal on St. John Bosco Church Stained Glass Windows," 2011-12-15, No. 443, VAKA, IV.17.
- ⁴⁵ Priest Jacek Paszenda, "On the Evaluation of the Stained Glass Project," Vilnius, 2011-12-07, VAKA, IV.17.
- ⁴⁶ Protocol No. 14 [discussed: stained glass window designs for St. John Bosco Church], 2012-01-09, VAKA, IV.17.
- ⁴⁷ Linas Krūgelis, "Tradicijų ir novacijų santykis šiuolaikinėje Lietuvos sakralinėje architektūroje: daktaro disertacija" (Doctoral dissertation, Vilnius, 2012), 159–60.
- ⁴⁸ Religious Affairs Commissioner Kazimieras Valančius. Certificate of Religious Community Registration and Permission to Build a Church, 1988-03-30. LCVA, R-181, 2/118: 25.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with priest Jonas Sabaliauskas, 2021-05-17, recorded by K. Steponavičiūtė.
- ⁵⁰ Gytis Gasperaitis, "Marijos Kankinių Karalienės Bažnyčia. Elektrėnai," *Archiforma*, no. 2 (1996): 9.
- ⁵¹ During the years of revival, several dedications, titles to the sufferings and to commemorate the victims of the Soviet era. The first symbol commemorating the exile was in Elektrėnai, later, the Lithuanian Martyrs' Church in Domeikava, Kaunas.
- ⁵² Interview with priest Jonas Sabaliauskas, 2021-05-17, recorded by K. Steponavičiūtė.
- ⁵³ The term "gigantism" refers to excessively large structures that, while symbolizing power and permanence, often exceed practical needs and become ideological statements rather than functional objects. In: Henriette Steiner and Kristin Veel, *Tower to Tower: Gigantism in Architecture and Digital Culture* (Routledge, 2023), 4–9.
- ⁵⁴ Dinka Marinović Jerolimov and Siniša Zrinščak, "Religion Within and Beyond Borders: The Case of Croatia," *Social Compass* 53, no. 2 (2006): 279–90.
- ⁵⁵ Vaidotas Žukas, "Laiškas redaktoriui: Kodėl Lietuvos kultūrininkai bijo Bažnyčios?," *Naujasis Židinys – Aidai*, no. 9 (1995): 622.
- ⁵⁶ In 1996, an émigré architect noted that many new churches were being built hastily and in competition to see which locality or parish could construct the largest or most elegant church. He pointed out that these churches were often situated in unsuitable locations, such as the outskirts of cities or in fields, with architectural designs that were out of harmony with the surrounding environment. In: Edmundas Arbas-Arbačiauskas, "Bažnyčios statomos ne turistams," *Lietuvos Aidas*, no. 167 (1996): 15.
- ⁵⁷ Subačius, *Dvidešimt penkeri religinės laisvės metai*, 647.
- ⁵⁸ There is a clear tendency to build churches of 400-600 square metres in Lithuania from around 2000 onwards, while during the revival period the most common choice was to build churches of 1000-1500 square metres.
- ⁵⁹ Peter Hammond, *Towards a Church Architecture* (Burns & Oates, 1962), 17.
- ⁶⁰ Aida Štelbienė, *Architektas Kęstutis Pempė: laikas, žmonės, darbai* (Standartų spaustuvė, 2009), 9.
- ⁶¹ Aušra Lėka, "Maldos namai šiuolaikiniam tikinčiajam," *Veidas*, no. 15 (2017): 28–9.
- ⁶² Algimantas Mačiulis, "Po dvidešimties metų. Stiliaus paieškos," in *Laisvės architektūra*, by Tomas Grunskis and others (Baltos lankos, 2012), 277.
- ⁶³ Sigita Maslauskaitė-Mažyliienė, "Šiuolaikinė bažnyčių architektūra. Keli pamastymai," *Bernardinai.lt*, January 31, 2017, <http://www.bernardinai.lt/straipsnis/2017-01-31-siuolaikine-baznyciu-architektura-keli-pamastymai/154860>.
- ⁶⁴ Ksenija Jaroševaitė, "Laiškas redaktoriui. Apie sąžinę ir bažnyčių statybą," *Naujasis Židinys – Aidai*, no. 7–8 (1995): 529–30.

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Diversità architettonica nelle chiese cattoliche della Lituania post-sovietica (1988–91)

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KEYWORDS

Lituania; società post-sovietica; architettura moderna; chiese cattoliche; diversità architettonica

ABSTRACT

Questo studio esamina la diversità architettonica delle chiese cattoliche in Lituania durante il periodo di transizione post-sovietico, che seguì a cinque decenni di occupazione sovietica (1940–90). Nel periodo sovietico, infatti, il regime vietò la costruzione di chiese cattoliche: è stata vietata, e i tentativi dei fedeli di organizzarsi furono impossibili fino alla Perestrojka. Il cambiamento delle dinamiche politiche dopo il 1988 facilitò la nascita di nuovi edifici (incluse cappelle e monasteri), con oltre cento chiese costruite nei successivi tre decenni di indipendenza della Lituania. Questa ricerca, basata su diversi tipi di fonti — materiale archivistico conservato presso l'Archivio della Curia dell'Arcidiocesi di Vilnius e presso agenzie governative sovietiche, dati empirici e testimonianze orali da architetti e sacerdoti — esplora gli sforzi per fondare nuove chiese all'interno delle comunità religiose e lo sviluppo di una nuova architettura ecclesiastica durante quel periodo di transizione. Le principali aree di indagine includono le origini dei nuovi stili architettonici, le diverse ispirazioni degli architetti e le preferenze nel linguaggio architettonico. Attraverso l'analisi di tre casi di studio, questo saggio offre uno sguardo indeito sull'architettura ecclesiastica lituana, nella specificità storica, politica e culturale del suo sviluppo post-sovietico.

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