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'To entirely recreate its authenticity': the transition in Lithuanian urban conservation in the 1980s–1990s

Viltė Janušauskaitė[1*]

Abstract

This article examines urban conservation in Lithuania during the transformative 1980s and 1990s, a period characterised by significant socio-political changes preceding and following the restoration of Lithuania's independence. Initially regarded as a key achievement of Soviet-era heritage protection, the urban conservation system faced increasing criticism by the mid-1980s. It emerged because of ineffective implementation but was later attributed to inappropriate methodological principles, e.g., sanation, undermining the distinctiveness of historic urban areas. In 1987, the second Vilnius Old Town Regeneration Project was initiated, which coincided with Lithuania's declaration of independence in 1990. This case study encompasses the interplay between Soviet-era heritage conservation approaches, emerging civic rights, limited regulation on newly re-established private property, and romantic reconstruction ideas. The oxymoron 'recreation of authenticity' captures the high symbolic meaning of cultural heritage as a symbol of national society, representing the period during which replicas were promoted as adhering to international heritage doctrines. Although centralised conservation practices collapsed following the state's withdrawal of support, some principles, such as reconstruction, were redefined. A pivotal goal was the inscription of the Vilnius Historic Centre onto the World Heritage List, achieved on the second attempt in 1994. This event symbolised the international recognition of the value of the urban heritage of the Lithuanian capital, of the re-established independent state and, paradoxically for critics, of previous urban conservation practices. By exploring these links, this article contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the role of heritage and conservation practices in the context of a post-Soviet landscape.

Keywords Urban Conservation, Authenticity, Reconstruction, Re-evaluation, Post-Soviet Transition, Vilnius, Lithuania

1 Introduction

Urban heritage in the context of the Soviet regime can be considered more impervious to ideological influence than, for example, religious architecture; therefore, its conservation was less vulnerable to shifts in the political climate. However, it remained susceptible to unfavourable attitudes towards the past, social and economic transformations and the general trends of urban planning. Therefore, Lithuania's urban heritage protection system, which was already well established and regarded as the most significant achievement of Soviet Lithuania's heritage protection in the 1970s, operated under socialist state control and was obliged to balance conservation with 'adaptation for contemporary needs'. Moreover, as early as the mid-1980s, preceding and later coinciding with the National Reform movement, it became a target for critique. Initially, it emphasised the system's inefficacy but soon questioned the fundamental methodological principles of urban regeneration. While representatives of the formal heritage protection system maintained

*Correspondence:
Viltė Janušauskaitė
vilte.janusauskaite@if.vu.lt
[1] Faculty of History/ (Post)Authoritarian Landscapes Research Centre, Vilnius University, Universiteto G. 7, Vilnius 01131, Lithuania

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the discourse of success, a notable increase in community engagement and professional self-reflection led to a shift in discourse. What had been regarded as old town adaptation for contemporary needs was now titled the liquidation of the city's distinctiveness. Following the re-establishment of Lithuanian independence in 1990, transformation and evaluative processes unfolded across many cultural, academic and educational domains. Two positions regarding the Soviet-period heritage protection system emerged: a negative position, which emphasised the destruction of national heritage, and a positive position, which argued that specialists contributed to Lithuania despite the political framework. These two positions were not reflected in the international outsider's perspective, which regarded the entire process as a more or less continuous evolution. Thus, this article aims to present this tumultuous internal discourse for the international audience.

This research employs an interdisciplinary approach and involves complex historical analysis, comparison, synthesis and interpretation of various sources to determine the context and development of the phenomenon researched. This research is essentially historical; thus, a chronological descriptive method is chosen as its principal framework. Numerous historical-archival materials from the Vilnius Regional State Archives, Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, Lithuanian Central State Archives and Cultural Heritage Department Archives, including drawings and explanatory reports of the analysed urban inventories, reconstruction and regeneration projects designed by the Monuments Conservation Institute, personal notes and sketches of the architects who worked in the Institute, etc., and published sources, such as press articles and conference proceedings (including drafts preserved in the archives), provide most of the information for analysis. These foundational data are augmented by the scholarly literature on heritage protection in Soviet Lithuania, including studies on the history of urban heritage protection during the Soviet period (Janušauskaitė 2019) and a comparison of this urban heritage protection with regional and international trends (for example, Janušauskaitė 2014; 2021). The Reform Movement of Lithuania, heritage protection NGOs and networks that emerged during that period are seen through various lenses, including Salvijus Kulevičius' perspective on heritage protection (Kulevičius 2010; 2011) and Valdemaras Klumbys' examination of the cultural elite within Soviet Lithuania (Klumbys 2009; 2015). Riin Alatalu's comprehensive study of the Estonian context, accurately entitled 'From Nation's Conscience in the Estonian SSR into the Harasser of Private Owner', summarises the transitional experiences prevalent in most post-socialist nations (Alatalu 2012). This comparative analysis is particularly relevant because the heritage professionals in the two respective countries regarded themselves as leaders during the Soviet occupation and thus underwent similar re-evaluation processes during the transition.

Several conservation concepts, discussed in more detail in the relevant parts of the text, are particularly important for this study: authenticity, restoration, reconstruction, regeneration, revitalisation, and *sanation*. When addressing these approaches from a contemporary perspective, the umbrella term used in this article is urban conservation. The term 'reconstruction' is used in two ways: first, as in the original documents of the 1950s and 1960s, it was an intervention in urban or architectural monuments, encompassing conservation, restoration, partial demolition and new construction to adapt the site to contemporary needs (hence, the Vilnius Old Town Reconstruction Project), or, second, it was the volumetric alteration of an existing building. When describing the processes from a contemporary perspective, reconstruction is used as a synonym for rebuilding or recreating lost buildings or urban structures.

This article explores how the transformation of urban conservation principles and practices in Lithuania during the 1980s and 1990s reflected the broader socio-political changes accompanying the restoration of an independent state and the development of a paradoxical concept of authenticity, contributing to a nuanced understanding of heritage practices in a post-Soviet landscape. By explicitly focusing on Lithuanian urban heritage conservation during the transitional period, represented by a case study of the Vilnius Old Town, this research deepens the knowledge on its transition from the pride of the system to the object of critique and efforts to combine international doctrines with post-Soviet trauma, society's expectations of historical reconstruction and the risks and opportunities of the free market and private property. This study explores the nature of processes and the motivation behind critiques—were they inspired purely by the (changing) political climate, or did they merely reflect evolving international conservation ideas? Why and how did these radically different approaches and the division of society that defined the transitional period emerge, and how, assuming they did so, did they affect further urban conservation efforts in independent Lithuania when the system, in general, collapsed and had to be reinvented? In this context, this study also reveals and explicates characteristic discrepancies with prevailing international trends, notably regarding the concept of authenticity, encapsulated in the oxymoron 'recreation of authenticity'. It also explains how some principles, including reconstruction, were redefined and how the goal to inscribe the Vilnius Historic Centre onto the World Heritage list was achieved, thus connecting the Soviet past

and the independent future and elevating the relevance of this study to the international level.

2 The system of urban conservation in Soviet Lithuania: principles, timelines and results

The beginning of systematic and professional urban heritage conservation in Lithuania is generally linked to the first Vilnius Old Town Reconstruction Project, initiated in 1956 and approved in 1959. It emerged as a response to destructive transformations within the historic district, which were driven by the prevailing Soviet planning and architectural paradigms. These practices began to attract public criticism from both emerging and established architects in the mid-1950s after the fear of repression began to ease under the Khrushchev Thaw. Following the precedent set in Vilnius, similar conservation projects were conceived for three other significant historic towns—Kaunas, Klaipėda, and Kėdainiai—by the mid-1960s (for more details, see Janušauskaitė 2021). These historic districts were designated as zones of restricted construction by the LSSR State Committee of Construction and Architecture, and the supremacy of urban conservation projects over general plans was confirmed.[1]

This period marks the foundational stage in the development of urban conservation practices in Lithuania, during which the first cadre of professionals—including architects, urban planners, and historians—entered the field (a specialised institution, named the Scientific-Restoration Workshop under the State Committee for Construction and Architecture, had already been established in the 1950s based on the 1948 decision of the USSR Council of Ministers). This period is also characterised by the formulation of a methodological approach and continuous balancing between conservation principles and the standards of socialist urban planning that emphasised so-called contemporary needs and accordingly required significant interventions within the authentic urban fabric (for a broader exploration of the evolution of the Lithuanian urban conservation system, refer to Janušauskaitė 2019, 2021).

No analogous projects existed throughout the entire USSR during this period. Therefore, local specialists, under the guidance of renowned professor and urban planner Kazys Šešelgis,[2] adapted the reconstruction methodology of historic towns in Czechoslovakia to local conditions.[3] The project provided a detailed analysis, including demographics, the state of conservation, building materials, building heights and the number of floors, building density and intensity, the value of the buildings (not only architectural but also urban and economic), architectural style, historic development, greenery, pavements, etc. One of the most distinguished features of this approach was the concept of *sanation* or *sanitation*, which refers to the demolition of less valuable buildings, thereby liberating space within inner courtyards and enhancing the influx of fresh air and light (Fig. 1). In the decades after WWII, it was applied in many European countries and, through the Czechoslovakian experience, became a key feature in Lithuanian urban conservation practices.

Notably, the old towns in Lithuania were classified as residential areas; thus, hygienic-sanitary regulations were obligatory. The suggested solutions included decreasing the site coverage ratio, improving transportation systems, and enlarging green areas. The proposed measures included the demolition of certain buildings, the eviction of industrial and commercial enterprises, the widening of streets and the regulation of new construction. The approach also depended on the values and state of conservation of a specific old town. In Vilnius, for instance, the strategies favoured the preservation of the authentic building stock. In contrast, the same heritage professionals in smaller old towns proposed prefabricated mass-housing panel infills to replace old wooden buildings (for more details, see Janušauskaitė 2019).

The principles of urban conservation or, more specifically, intervention into the historic urban fabric evolved over time: only a decade later, in 1969, the LSSR Council of Ministers sanctioned the initiation of the new generation of heritage planning documents—regeneration projects. In the same year, the Council approved the Statutes for the Historic Old Town of the Lithuanian SSR (State Protected Area).[4] The document provided general principles of conservation and modernisation and an institutional framework, with regeneration projects remaining the most important documents. By 1975, these projects had been completed. Regeneration projects, for the first time, aimed to define buffer zones or, as they were called then, influence zones around the old towns, where regulations were set on the height and type of new construction.

[1] For example, Lithuanian Central State archive, f. R-754, ap. 2, b. 1660, p.156; Cultural Heritage Department Archive, f. 3, ap. 1, b. 120, l. 8.

[2] Kazys Šešelgis (1915–1998)—Lithuanian architect, urban planner and professor. Head of the Urban Planning Department (1951–1980), PhD in 1954 and Dr. Habil in 1968. Author of more than 200 publications on urban and regional planning and vernacular heritage. Head of many awarded urban planning projects (new towns and quarters, interventions into historic fabric, general plans). Author of the Lithuanian regional development model.

[3] VRVA, f. 1019, ap. 11, b. 4385; interview with architect Justinas Šeibokas, 2013.

[4] LSSR Council of Ministers, Decree No. 353, 22–08-1969.

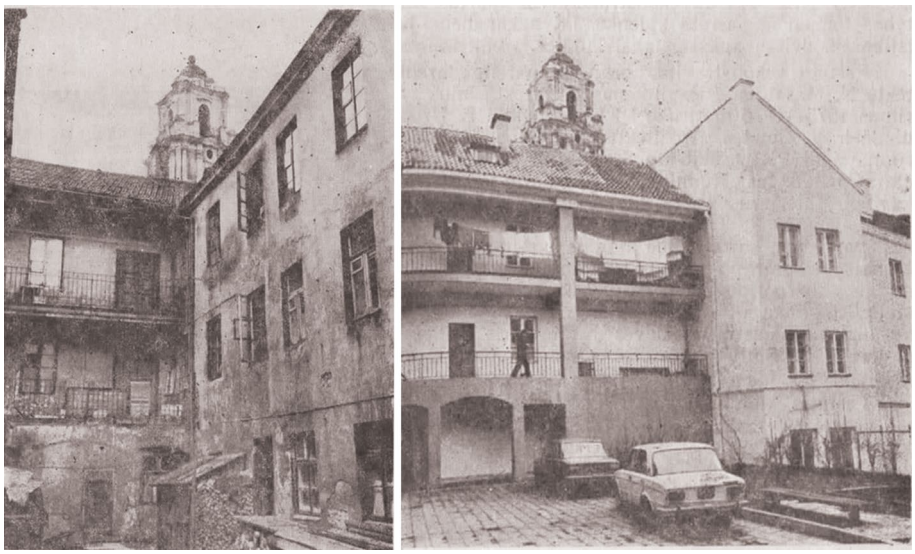

Fig. 1 Before and after sanation. Vilnius Old Town, quarter No. 54 (Source: Architektūros paminklai 1984, vol. IX)

The renaming from reconstruction to regeneration was not only a figure of speech: the approach, the concept of values to be preserved, and the concept of suitable intervention had shifted. It was argued that the essence of the regeneration process is not limited to mere protection; rather, it should also involve a desirable transformation (improvement) of the historic urban fabric.[5] Analysis of the conservation principles reveals not a dual- but a triple-layer background: history-heritage, aesthetics and technical-engineering. The new methodology by architect Vytautas Jurkštas,[6] who was well acquainted with the renewed Czechoslovakian practice, also renamed from reconstruction to regeneration, primarily concentrated on the complex aesthetic and historical value of buildings: 'in the old town it must be preserved not what is old but what is valuable' (Jurkštas 1972). Even *sanation* in regeneration projects was regarded not only as a measure to improve hygienic conditions but also as an instrument for the perfection of the environment's aesthetics. Buildings were divided into four categories, permitting the transformation or demolition of those deemed to possess the least value.

Consequently, by 1969, Lithuania's legal, administrative and practical system of urban heritage protection was firmly established. It consisted of two distinct protection models and the consequent division of administrative responsibilities among the two research and design institutes. This duality was a notable feature within the regional context. Detailed conservation projects for historic old towns of republican significance (five areas, including Vilnius) were prepared by specialists from the Monuments Conservation Institute,[7] who relied on a methodology inspired by the highly valued and recognised Czechoslovakian experience. No USSR-level methodology was prepared at that time, and none was followed until the end of the occupation. For example, in 1978, methodologies by Moscow and Leningrad design institutes were analysed, and it was concluded that they were of 'too general a nature' to be adapted in Lithuania (Miškinis and Purvinienė 1978, 19). Conservation projects for the most valuable quarters and buildings granted monument status were also designed and implemented by this specialised institute (it was still an exception in most Soviet countries except Estonia). Other quarters and contextual buildings were renewed by different organisations that did not specialise in heritage. All conservation, construction, renewal or demolition works within historic old towns that were proclaimed protected areas in 1969, according to the Statutes for the Historic Old Town of the Lithuanian SSR, were allowed only after approval by the Inspection for the Protection of Monuments under the executive committee of the local municipality or, where such inspections were not established,

[5] Regeneration was understood as a broader concept and can also be compared to urban renewal.

[6] Vytautas Jurkštas (1930–1984)—Lithuanian architect, PhD in 1966. Author of more than 100 publications on urban regeneration and new architecture in historic environments and several urban and architectural conservation projects.

[7] Lithuanian abbreviation PKI, named Scientific-Restoration Workshop (Lithuanian abbreviation MRGD) until 1969, and Monuments Restoration Design Institute (Lithuanian abbreviation PRPI) since 1987.

by the Board for the Protection of Museums and Cultural Monuments under the LSSR Ministry of Culture.

Smaller historic towns—urban monuments of local significance (the list of 61 was approved in 1969; Miškinis 2005)—were managed according to a different scheme. The (scientific) Institute of Construction and Architecture[8] evaluated and planned these areas according to the methodology compiled at the institute. It involved an in-depth analysis, yet the level of protection was low and generally did not encompass historic buildings. The control was weak, and in many cases, other design organisations carried out projects commissioned by local stakeholders without the required formal approval by the institute (Janušauskaitė 2021). Therefore, the transition revealed below did not affect this type of urban heritage to the same extent that it affected more significant old towns.

The regional ICOMOS symposium held in Vilnius in 1973, organised by the USSR and Czechoslovakia ICOMOS National Committees with the involvement of local institutions and specialists and dedicated to the protection of historic centres in socialist countries and organisational problems related to their revitalisation,[9] is considered a seminal event in the introduction of Western conservation paradigms to professionals from various Soviet-era countries (Alatalu 2012). The conference attendees positively evaluated the results of Lithuanian urban conservation efforts (Fig. 2), although the impact was not widely recognised beyond the local context.[10] Following the symposium, an active discourse on urban conservation persisted in the media and among heritage practitioners. However, the foundational regeneration principles were not criticised, and the authority of local specialists was reinforced by international recognition, marking the period of maturity and stability (Janušauskaitė 2021).



Fig. 2 ICOMOS symposium in Vilnius in 1973. A model of the Vilnius Old Town Regeneration Project is being presented to attendees, including the President of ICOMOS, Piero Gazzola (Source: Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art)

3 Questioning the success story (part 1): ineffectiveness and quality issues

Ironically, the final resolution of the symposium stated that the accomplishments of urban regeneration were intrinsically linked to socialist governance, e.g., the relocation of residents due to nearly absolute state ownership or a good balance between the old and the new (ICOMOS 1976). However, reality diverged from this vision: state ownership, coupled with the inefficiency of the socialist economic model, was a primary contributor to the challenges associated with urban conservation and maintenance. Therefore, the perceived success of Lithuanian urban regeneration began to experience significant challenges, which particularly developed in the 1980s.

Following the completion of reconstruction or regeneration projects for old towns, it was anticipated that detailed projects for individual quarters would be advanced. The first such project in Vilnius was completed in 1961, but in practice many suggestions remained unimplemented. By 1977, the first quarter in which works had been completed was still named 'an experiment' (Kaminskas 1977). Therefore, slow implementation became the first—and, for some period, the only—aspect that was publicly criticised. Notably, calculations from 1980 indicated that the restoration of a mere 86 buildings within the Vilnius Old Town had taken 12 years. At this rate, projections suggested that an additional 170 years would be required to restore all 1,244 buildings situated in the area (SA 1980). Another issue was common to the Soviet economy, not specifically to conservation. Even the ICOMOS symposium of 1973, which, while otherwise emblematic of refined diplomatic discourse, acknowledged the pervasive low quality of the executed projects (Janušauskaitė 2019).

In 1984, a new Instruction on Complex Renovation and Restoration of the Quarters of Historic Old Towns of the LSSR was jointly approved by the Ministry of Municipal Economy and the Ministry of Culture to address these issues. This comprehensive document delineated procedures, timelines, and responsibilities

[8] Lithuanian abbreviation SAI. Later renamed the (Lithuanian) Scientific Research Institute of Construction and Architecture). The abbreviations SAMTI and LSAMTI were often used interchangeably.

[9] Revitalisation is the most abstract concept among those used during the analysed period. It emerged in the mid-1970s and was never used to describe any particular measures. Rather, it was used to address a general revival or positive change in the area. In the last decade of the 20th century, it could be compared with regeneration (in the sense of improvement) or renewal.

[10] Lithuanian Literature and Art Archive (LLMA), f.638, ap.1, b.16; LLMA, f.638, ap.1, b.85.

among the participating organisations (SA 1983). However, tensions regarding the allocation of responsibility predated the document, as conservation architects, engineers, art historians, and restorers often engaged in extensive critical discussions about urban conservation. Although conservation specialists themselves proposed ideas such as new buildings, demolitions, and street widening, they typically aligned their views against those of 'others': engineers, urban planners, and architects from the Communal Design Institute, which was responsible for designing interventions in buildings of lesser value and was known for its more radical utilitarian approach (Janušauskaitė 2019). This division contributed to the initial underestimation of public criticism in the mid-1980s, which restorers perceived as directed primarily at 'others'.

The first well-documented case of critique regarding intervention principles within the historic urban fabric emerged in the 1970s. However, it was still very specific, case oriented, and inspired by complex reasons, not necessarily all deriving from heritage awareness. It concerned the same 'experimental quarter' No. 34 and the plan to construct underground garages in the green courtyard formed in the 1950s at the site of the former Jewish quarter. The courtyard was bordered by large buildings erected in the 1950s in Vokiečių (German) Street (Fig. 3), which housed members of the Soviet intelligentsia. This context significantly influenced the 'not in my back yard' sentiment, particularly among more affluent and influential complainants, who ultimately played a pivotal role in a protest.

The critique was directed not at the regeneration principles but at construction practices that did not align with the Old Town Regeneration Project, which had received approval just a year prior in 1975. Similarly, it did not concern a broader context outside of the particular location. However, it both revealed some changes and possibilities and inspired future protests. First, there was a shift in the intelligentsia's thinking, values, and behaviour. The prominent Lithuanian architect Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis,[11] who in the early 1960s had formally extolled the virtues of reviving Vilnius' Old Town—characterising it as 'not Pompeii but, rather, a live organism of the Lithuanian capital'—had, by the late 1970s, shifted his argument to a discussion of supranational responsibilities, thereby forfeiting the opportunity to establish a 'Vilnius' Pompeii under the open sky' (LLMA 81 1972–1978, 35). Another person from an activist group recalled that a decade or two earlier, witnessing the excavation of trenches and the destruction of old cellars in Vokiečių Street had elicited little more than a passing sense of resignation, encapsulated in the thought that 'there is nothing we can do'. By the early 1980s, this individual was already compiling a list of neglected Vilnius Old Town buildings (Klumbys 2015). Although this list remained private and was never handed over to any institutional authority, it indicates an evolving attitude.

The successful outcome of protests that effectively halted construction—despite being sanctioned by various institutional bodies and already underway—demonstrated the capacity to contest and overturn decisions related to urban heritage. It became a symbol of 'something greater'—the excavation was linked to (urban) heritage, heritage to (Lithuanian) culture, and culture to the nation. By 1978, claiming that institutions were neglecting and destroying heritage was daring but already possible. However, it remained inconceivable to make such a critique of the entire Soviet system. Thus, this metaphor served to express the opinion (Kulevičius 2011). Inspired by this successful outcome, members of the cultural elite engaged in several other successful campaigns aimed at defending heritage. Although these were separate cases, each can be defined as some 'courage training', affirming the possibility of effecting change and fostering confidence (Klumbys 2015) until the new wave of conceptual critique would emerge nearly a decade later.

4 Condemning the established approach (part II): reform and re-evaluation

In 1983, Justinas Šeibokas, co-author of the first Vilnius Old Town Reconstruction Project, published a critique of the then-prominent trend of exposing/restoring the oldest, particularly Gothic, layers of buildings and thus 'artificially making the old town look older' (Šeibokas 1983). This critique was followed by a polite and professional yet open and diverse discussion that revealed divergent perspectives between heritage-driven or heritage-romanticising ideas and modernist architectural approaches. Notable quotations from this period include assertions such as 'both active and passive buildings are monuments and must be preserved', 'the Old Town must be reconstructed as it was', and 'new buildings for new development' (outside of the old town) juxtaposed with claims that heritage 'charters should be applied with much creativity' (LM 1984, 6–7). This contradiction is significant because it illustrates the clash evident in Western European post-WWII contexts, wherein conflicts between developers, modernist architects, and heritage professionals peaked. Meanwhile, in socialist countries, owing to their specific political and economic system, such enmity was never clearly expressed; instead, a formal

[11] Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis (1893–1993)—Lithuanian architect, graduated in Rome, professor, Vilnius Chief Architect (1939–1944). Author of many public and residential buildings in Lithuania and Australia. Returned from emigration in 1959 and contributed to the first detailed reconstruction project of quarter No.61 in the Vilnius Old Town.



Fig. 3 The inner courtyard in Vokiečių Street, where underground garages were planned in the 1970s (Source: the author, taken in 2025)

stance was taken to endorse the harmony between the two. Therefore, it can be suggested that more intense discussions and the binary division between 'good' and 'bad' emerged later in Lithuania, coinciding with or deriving from broader societal shifts towards increased freedom and (even if limited) democracy.

By 1986–1987, there was a rapid transformation in attitudes and the tone of discussions surrounding heritage, as it increasingly became a symbol of national identity, acquiring heightened symbolic significance. As described in the Estonian case, 'nostalgia for the past, claims for injustice, nationalism and readiness to change the situation made up a combination of intriguing messages' (Alatalu 2012, 238). Before 1986–1987, informal networks for heritage protection were established to address specific concerns and, thus, were short lived. In the transitional period, formally registered heritage protection societies (clubs) began to sprawl.[12] Leveraging the relative freedoms afforded by Perestroika, they expressed critical opinions and ultimately related the (poor) quality of heritage protection to the state of culture or the nation itself (Kulevičius 2011, 189, 209).

This stage can be defined as an essential transition, marked by starkly contrasting attitudes that emerged in a condensed timeframe, resulting in societal polarisation. Community involvement increased markedly, as did emotional and populist rhetoric in press debates that undermined constructive dialogue, as entire professional groups faced collective blame, with only limited exceptions. Consequently, open hostility emerged between 'heritage lovers' and 'professionals responsible for everything wrong' who cannot or do not want to understand (Kulevičius 2011, 203–204).

Initially, restorers either failed to understand or underestimated the scope and possible impact of this critique. Instead, they commonly attributed shortcomings in heritage conservation to the deficiencies of the Communal Design Institute and poor implementation quality, as they had done before in the press and at conferences. This narrative persisted for more than two decades into Lithuania's independence (Glemža 2002). However, this justification no longer worked in the late 1980s. During this period, the previously clear demarcation between systemic and anti-systemic memory lost relevance. External observers and insiders within the state-organised heritage protection system increasingly turned to unsanctioned historical narratives. The fragmentation among heritage professionals became apparent, and as evident in the press, increasing criticism came from esteemed experts in the field, many of whom were more focused on research than on practical design or implementation. This trend also indicates that (ideological)

[12] The timing was identical in Estonia, where the Estonian Heritage Society was established in 1987 and lost its relevance by 1992, as the main goal—restoration of the Estonian Republic—was achieved (Alatalu 2012).

state control, which was already rather flexible in the field of urban conservation, had decreased even further (probably with the exception of the highest positions of various institutions and Ministry of Culture officials) because various specialists were not afraid to openly confront institutional politics and/or results. The most well-known among them was art historian Vladas Drėma,[13] who in 1988 authored an open letter to the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR, Lionginas Šepetys, which was later followed by a series of critical articles in the press. Drėma labelled Lithuanian heritage professionals no more than dilettantes, which was later repeated by others (Drėma 1988; 1989; Stulpinas 1991). A notable instance of formal critique emerged from a document signed by the LSSR Minister of Culture, which also criticised all levels of the heritage protection system and other institutions for wrong priorities, indifference, a lack of competence, material shortages, etc. (Kulevičius 2011).

Criticism of urban heritage conservation questioned the fundamental methodological principles of urban regeneration, which had previously been regarded as an achievement, particularly *sanation*. The fact that similar interventions were widely accepted in most of Western Europe during this period was ignored. Only certain professionals striving to defend certain practices argued that not every decision deemed erroneous by contemporary standards could be attributed solely to communist ideology; instead, many were influenced by international trends of previous decades (KB 1991). There are two main reasons for this ignorance: first, most critics did not possess sufficient knowledge of recent urban conservation practices in other European countries; second, built heritage (event if only its very romanticised image) had been recognised as an important symbol of national identity and the nation itself; thus, any intervention that was carried out during the Soviet period now represented the Soviet system and was evaluated with the same negative attitude as any other activity that threatened society, such as mass deportations. For example, what was regarded as an old town adaptation to contemporary needs was now publicly titled the liquidation of the city's distinctiveness. Regenerated urban areas were called 'taxidermied quarters', and the importance of historic building plots was emphasised with an assertion that 'destroying building plots in the name of regeneration is the same as cherishing society by killing people' (Levandauskas 1990, 6). The increasing influence and information flow from the West is evidenced by the early use of the term 'Disneylandisation' in the Lithuanian context to emphasise the contrast between the uniqueness of the authentic urban fabric and the transformation and neglect of its genius loci (Čepaitis 1987).

The establishment of a dedicated section within a specialised journal titled 'Construction and Architecture Discussion Club: Vilnius—My City' confirms the relevance of urban heritage conservation issues and reflects the changes within an increasingly free and daring society, where critics could already have levelled accusations of purposeful eradication or falsification of history. In the very first article of the discussion mentioned above, sarcastically titled 'Blind Love or How We Will Destroy the Vilnius Old Town', these critics were portrayed as mere enthusiasts (chemists, physicists, doctors, writers, etc.), who, while led by romantic visions, had no knowledge of architecture and whose efforts would turn the old town into a 'conglomerate of ruins and pseudo-patriotic falsification', a museum and not a 'live yet unchanging [sarcastic oxymoron] reserve of the heart of the city' (Anuškevičius 1989, 2–3).

This polarisation culminated around 1990, the year of the restoration of Lithuanian independence. During this period, the 'Talka' society and the Youth Monuments Protection Club disseminated a list of persons responsible for the damage to the Vilnius Old Town during the Soviet period. The list included numerous bureaucrats, Stalinist-era and modern architects, and many other employees of the Monuments Restoration Design Institute (formerly the Monuments Conservation Institute).[14] The anonymity of the list prompted those implicated to reprimand the anonymous accusers for employing Stalinist repression methods and for fabricating and distorting facts (KB 1991).

5 Reconstruction of authenticity? Vilnius old town regeneration project II

The correction of the Vilnius Old Town Regeneration Project, initiated in 1987 under the direction of architect Augis Gučas[15] at the Monuments Restoration Design Institute and completed in 1992, represented a paradigm shift in the approach to urban heritage conservation (Fig. 4). The protected area also expanded from approximately 163 ha in 1958 (encompassing the medieval town core (No. 9 in Fig. 4) and the territory of the ruined castles (No. 8 in Fig. 4)) to nearly 360 ha, including a wider archaeological area and historic suburbs (No.

[13] Vladas Drėma (1910–1995)—Lithuanian art historian, artist, and museologist. Author of several important studies on Vilnius architecture and urban history. Between 1970 and 1985, worked at the Monuments Conservation Institute.

[14] Lithuanian Literature and Art Archives, f.650, ap. 1, b. 718.

[15] Augis Gučas (b. 1940)—Lithuanian architect and urban planner, active public figure, and co-author of many general and detailed plans, as well as heritage protection planning documents, including the second Vilnius old town Regeneration Project.

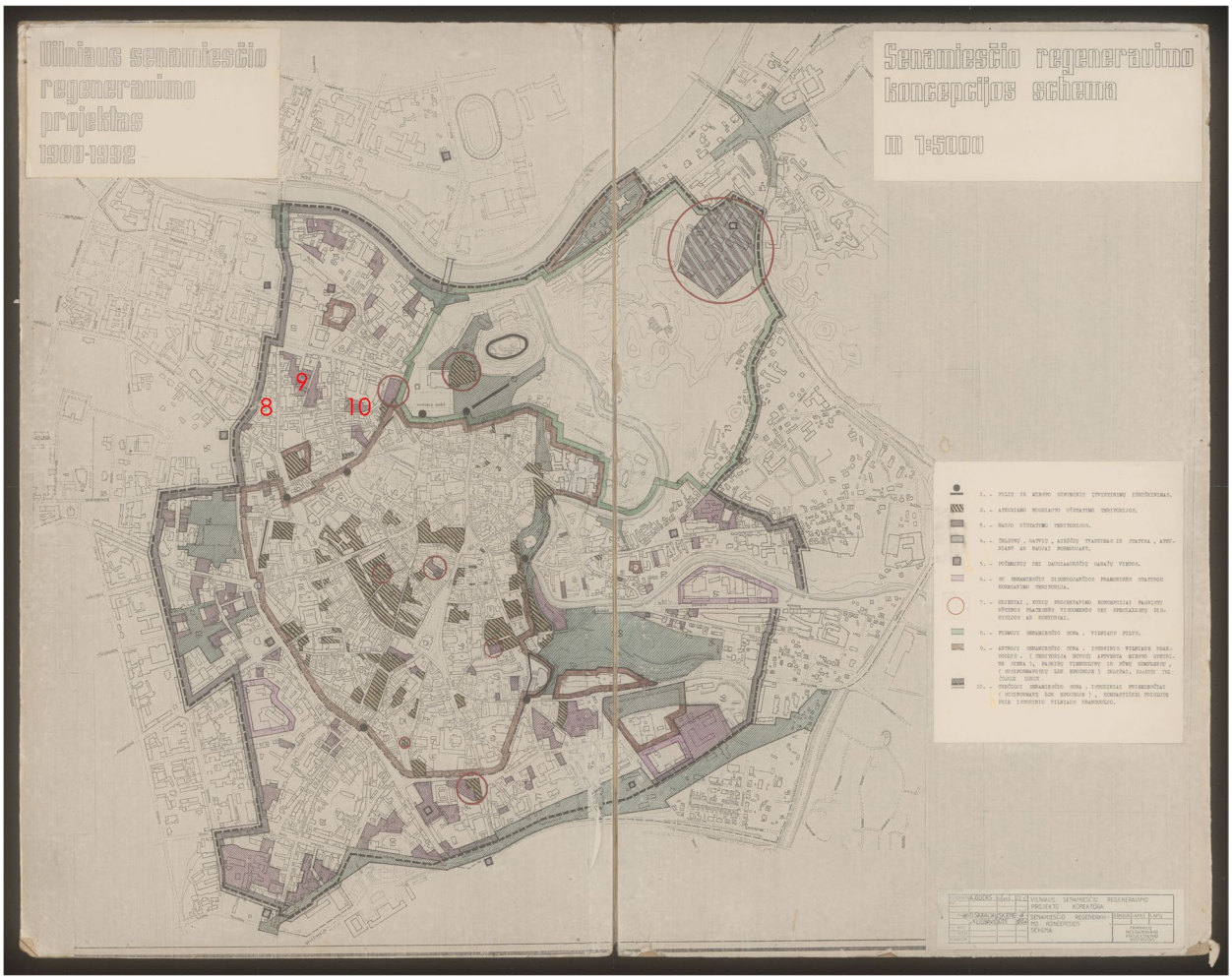

Fig. 4 Correction of the Vilnius Old Town Regeneration Project. Concept Scheme. Augis Gučas, Diana Sabaliauskienė, Irena Kliobavičiūtė (Source: Paminklų restauravimo projektavimo institutas, 1992, digital copy)

10 in Fig. 4), some of which were constructed as late as the 19th century. In the core area, there were 159 architectural monuments, representing various architectural styles (Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, etc.) and typologies: 21 churches, 4 Orthodox churches, 17 convents, many palaces and other residential buildings (Glemža 1989). The number of residents continually decreased from more than 40,000 before WWII to less than 30,000 in the late 1980 s (Janušauskaitė 2019).

The new project sought to balance a new approach and extended values with evolving political and economic circumstances. The general attitude towards heritage and the opportunities to obtain relevant information from abroad were much more favourable than they had been in previous decades. However, the situation was more complex with respect to public participation and diverse, now freely expressed opinions, and the authors did not underestimate this complexity by including 'architectural sketches and street sections of conflict zones' (locations encircled in red in Fig. 4) in the content. While the previous approaches were generally based on advanced yet socialist Czechoslovakian practices, in 1989, for the first time, a leading project architect could learn directly from a Western example by travelling to Mannheim, Western Germany, to become personally acquainted with the planning documents for historic areas (as recalled by Gučas). However, the impact of this visit is not similarly significant because the aim was not to copy or adapt the entire methodology and because the ideas were not disseminated as widely as they had been decades ago. A completely new goal was established for the first time—it was no longer the mere improvement of living conditions but, rather, the conservation and even reconstruction (recreation) of the old town as a whole. This new paradigm was predicated on the notion of restoring historical land plots and reconstructing numerous replicas of

demolished buildings as of 1940 (Gučas 1992) (selected areas marked No. 2 in Fig. 4). *Sanation* was no longer to be applied because the methodology, which implied the division of buildings into those that were valuable and those of no value, was rejected and because the city was understood as a complex urban fabric. Another shift in approach was the type of intervention that was prioritised: maintenance and repair were highlighted, rather than the structural renovations and partial reconstructions in earlier documents.

Despite these advancements, numerous connections persisted between contemporary urban conservation ideologies and the attitudes prevalent in previous decades. Notably, reconstruction remained a common practice, albeit with altered justifications. Although there was a transition from an emphasis on individual buildings to a broader urban perspective, the prevailing focus on the material aspects of heritage remained largely intact. Even more revealing of the difficult mindset of the transitional period is the paternalistic attitude towards residents and other stakeholders. They were frequently perceived as objects rather than subjects, as in the socialist 1970s. A particularly illustrative case is the often stereotyped and marginalised portrayal of residents in the old town (Januškis 1989). The authors of the regeneration projects acknowledged the critical importance of the old town's authentic function and expressed apprehension about the declining number of residents. Controversially, following the 1960s idea of 'suitable residents', their proposals still included the relocation of 'harmful users from the most valuable buildings' (Gučas 1992, 7).

On the other hand, non-professional stakeholders were quoted to justify specific design solutions. Thus, romantic reconstruction ideas were not merely the authors' opinions; they were confirmed by sociological surveys[16] that revealed that the respondents wished to see the old town reconstructed and its spirit recovered. Many of these ideas, such as the reconstruction of the greatness of the Grand Dukes' town, received social acceptance, inspired by the patriotic ideas of the Reform Movement of Lithuania. The period until 1795 was predominantly chosen as a template for reconstruction because the legacy of the 19th century was tainted by negative associations with tsarist Russia and the Soviet period. The survey also revealed a stunning (mis)understanding of the concept of authenticity, even among experts: nearly 90% of them promoted the oxymoron 'recreation of authenticity', which required the rebuilding of replicas[17] and notably contradicted the critique of the previous interventions for falsification of history and damaging the authentic fabric. This perspective diverged from the previously established approach of Lithuanian heritage professionals and architects alike, who favoured the integration of contemporary architecture, created according to the principle of contrast, into the historic fabric.[18] It is also characteristic of the transitional period that the concept of reconstruction became so important because, according to the report on WWII damage produced in 1944, only approximately 10% of the buildings in the old town were irreparably damaged, while 65% were intact or needed only routine repair.[19] Thus, even with demolitions due to *sanation* or street widening, the overall losses or new inserts were less significant than those in other Lithuanian historic urban areas or the more damaged cases in the wider region were.

The Venice Charter, the most widely recognised and influential international document of the period analysed, emphasises the material authenticity of monuments and their importance as historical documents with all their layers (Venice Charter, articles 3, 11, etc.). Thus, the idea of replicas raises critical questions of compliance between these reconstruction ideas and international doctrines. This trend was notable in earlier decades as well: the Lithuanian approach to restoration in the Soviet period preferred to either uncover the oldest layer, recreate or create missing parts, or both methods, often exceeding the principles 'it must stop at the point where conjecture begins' or 'the valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected, since unity of style is not the aim of a restoration', expressed in articles 9 and 11 of the Charter, respectively (ICOMOS 1964). The approach was analysed in detail and criticised for its high level of interpretation and personal subjectivity by Jolita Butkevičienė, who named it 'between science and creation' (Butkevičienė 2014, 75), and was accurately summarised by Kulevičius—'the name of the charter was used, but not the content' (Kulevičius 2010, 159–160).

However, despite sharing common ground in revealing and restoring Lithuanian history and connections to Western culture, the architectural conservation efforts of the earlier decades focused solely on individual buildings, and none were demolished to ground level. Thus, they constituted a (heavy) restoration, not a complete reconstruction. In preceding urban conservation projects, the prevailing position was to promote contemporary architecture and/or greenery in place of destroyed buildings. During the transitional period, it was estimated that many buildings that were completely lost were reconstructed. Reconstruction was planned based on historical

[16] VRVA, f. 1019, ap. 11, b. 4444.

[17] VRVA, f. 1019, ap. 11, b. 4444.

[18] For example, VRVA, f. 1019, ap. 11, b. 4385.

[19] VRVA, f. 1011, ap. 5, b. 23.

data and/or stylistic interpretations of the selected period up to 1940 (Gučas 1992).

Nonetheless, local specialists and governmental bodies alike continued to emphasise that Lithuanian urban conservation principles complied with regional trends and international principles. Criticism due to improper intervention principles remained a local perspective that was never transmitted to the international level. In contrast, the narrative promoted internationally—paralleling that of Estonia—portrayed the Lithuanian approach as an advanced system, ahead of its time, even compared to its Western counterparts. Jonas Glemža,[20] who served as the vice-president of ICOMOS during this period, noted in an article on the Vilnius Old Town Regeneration Project published in ICOMOS Information (Glemža 1989) that the Vilnius Old Town Reconstruction Project of 1958 was the first in the USSR, and he stated that the latest regeneration project, which suggested 'even the recreation of historic buildings' (Glemža 1989, 28), complied with the Washington charter adopted in 1987. For example, referring to article 10 on new construction, which explicitly states that although the 'spatial layout should be respected, especially in terms of scale and lot size', 'the introduction of contemporary elements in harmony with the surroundings should not be discouraged' (Glemža 1989, 32), Glemža did not oppose it to local ideas to reconstruct many buildings or entire areas in their historic style. Moreover, he broadly interpreted the concepts of regeneration and reconstruction, asserting that even the urban conservation initiatives undertaken in Lithuania during the 1970s adhered to 11 of the 16 articles of the charter (Glemža 1989). This idea was repeated in his later texts, confirming that it was a professional position rather than a political order. However, historical losses, namely, the loss of a majority of Jewish and Polish residents in the 1940 s and, subsequently, the limited possibilities for reviving intangible aspects of city life, were not reflected in accordance with the prevailing national heritage discourse.

The most accurate case study illustrating the idea of reconstructing entire areas is Vokiečių (German) Street in the very heart of the old town, heading west from Town Hall. Many of its buildings were damaged during World War II. In the 1950 s, the street was transformed into a broad pedestrian boulevard in place of the ancient quarters. The buildings on one side were completely demolished and redesigned in Stalinist architectural style. The result was criticised just a few years after completion, and the idea of reconstructing destroyed buildings or marking them in other architectural forms had emerged several times during the Soviet period but did not attract much attention within society (see more in Pimpytė 2010). However, full reconstruction (along with several other areas that were transformed into squares after WWII) was included in the regeneration project, and by then, the idea had become so natural that no further public consultations were planned on this issue (Janušauskaitė 2019). Therefore, Vokiečių Street is a direct reflection of urban heritage protection during the Soviet period: it began as a reaction to the demolition of the site and ended with the proposal to reconstruct romanticised replicas (Figs. 4, 5, and 6).

Consequently, the correction of the Vilnius Old Town Regeneration Project serves as a testimony to the contentious ideologies prevalent during the transitional period. It encompassed and widely interpreted both the remnants of earlier thinking and international trends as well as the romantic grandeur of the Independence movement. Ironically, it is also a symbol of the ephemeral nature of this period, as most of its solutions remained unimplemented. According to the project leader Gučas, who reflected on it a couple of decades later, it was 'a very optimistic, romantic, maximalist and altogether rather utopian project' (Gučas 2009, 178).

6 The other end of the transitional period: general changes and idea(l)s lost in the process

Lithuania re-established its independence in 1990. Immediately thereafter, changes and evaluative processes began in many areas of culture, academia and education, including urban conservation. Two perspectives regarding the heritage protection system of the Soviet period unfolded: a negative perspective, which emphasised the destruction of national heritage, and a positive perspective, which relied on the now infamous statement that during that period, 'we were still working for Lithuania' (Janušauskaitė 2019). The administrative and legislative heritage protection system underwent substantial reform. Ironically, many of the young critics of the late 1980s subsequently ascended to positions within newly formed governmental institutions by the early 1990s, thereby becoming targets of critique themselves. This also meant that former heritage protection NGOs lost their ideological foundations and human resources, thus

[20] Jonas Rimantas Glemža (b. 1935)—Lithuanian architect and heritage professional. Since 1958, has held various administrative positions related to heritage protection, including Vice Minister for Culture, Chief Architect at the Monuments Conservation Institute, etc., where he actively promoted international cooperation. Professor at the Vilnius Art Academy.



Fig. 5 Sketch of construction. Part of the old town encompassing Vokiečių Street. Vokiečių Street is in the centre, coloured in yellow. The buildings to be reconstructed are coloured in brown, the existing building stock is coloured in black, and buildings in need of 'correcting their architectural features' are in stripes (Source: Correction of the Vilnius Old Town Regeneration Project, not signed, digital copy)

ceasing to exist (Kulevičius 2011; a similar trajectory is observed in Estonia, as noted by Alatalu 2012).

Despite all the changes, one overarching objective persisted: the inclusion of the Vilnius Historic Centre on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The initial attempt to secure this designation was initiated immediately after the USSR ratified the World Heritage Convention in 1988. The nomination file was prepared by experienced heritage specialists—Glemža, Miškinis[21] and others—in September 1989 and was signed by the LSSR Minister of Culture. The description of its value and history reflected the general societal context and lessened censorship

[21] Algimantas Miškinis (1929–2015)—Lithuanian architect and urban planner, researcher, PhD in 1968 and Dr. Habil in 1994. Most of the time, held various positions at the Institute of Construction and Architecture, collected information and prepared the list of the urban monuments of local significance, the methodology for their protection, etc. Author of many studies on Lithuanian urban heritage (namely, small towns and villages).



Fig. 6 Hotel Europa building on the corner of Vokiečių Street. Photos of war damage and later modernist buildings on the site, along with a drawing of the reconstruction proposal (Source: Correction of the Vilnius Old Town Regeneration Project, not signed, digital copy)

(Gorbachev's policy of glasnost ('openness')). It included attributes such as the cultural centre of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, European culture, churches and other religious buildings and even national revival at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as critiques aimed at interventions implemented in the early Soviet period. Otherwise, the interventions conducted in the 1960s–1980s were described positively as having improved the general view of the old town and enriched historic values with new qualities.[22] However, as recalled by Glemža in 2016, despite his best efforts and his status as vice-president of ICOMOS, the documents were detained in Moscow, first under the argument that the file was not comprehensive enough and later on a reserve list, should the nomination files for the Russian properties fail to be completed. Eventually, although that nomination file was sent, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, no legal applicant remained (Glemža 2015). Thus, for some professionals, namely, Glemža, it also became a symbol of the capacity of an independent state and a step towards international recognition, not only for its heritage but also for the state itself and the justification of these professionals' lifetime efforts (despite the local critique, it was the generation of specialists established within the system before the transition who actually accomplished the goal of inscription). After receiving comments on the first nomination file in 1992, a new dossier was presented. ICOMOS expert Panu Kaila from Finland evaluated the site, and although he noted that one of the problems in Vilnius was 'the tendency to recreate the lost past by reconstruction and by stylistic restoration', the general conclusion favoured the site's outstanding universal value, sufficient authenticity, and appropriate recent interventions, including regeneration plans and new construction. He saw the new regeneration project as a 'positive reformulation of the previous protection plan' and suggested adding it to the nomination documents (Kaila 1994, 3–10). The property was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1994 under criteria ii and iv, as suggested in the first nomination. Characteristic of the transitional period, Lithuanian representatives could not attend the World Heritage Committee session in Thailand because of financial constraints (Glemža 2015).

The regeneration project, which continued until 1992, together with the inscription onto the World Heritage List, became a symbolic bridge between the two periods because its documentation served as the foundation for the nomination file. However, after Lithuanian

[22] VRVA, f. 1019, ap. 12, b. 5.

independence was achieved and heritage protection lost its primary position as a symbol of resistance, the inscription was not covered in the media or discussed within society as much as the previous critique. Even more symbolically, the project also lost relevance under the new circumstances because the area now needed regulation, and no project could compel private owners to implement any solutions against their will or in the absence of financial resources. Finally, only one drawing—a land plot plan delineating historic properties (Fig. 7)—was approved in 1995.[23]

Somewhat paradoxically, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, general interest within the general society decreased, and the focus of critique turned (an external system of oppression could no longer be made responsible for damaging national heritage) towards the lack of adequate regulatory mechanisms in the newly embraced free market environment and private property (KB 1990). However, private ownership, especially property restitution, symbolised a shift towards the West and the pursuit of compensation for Soviet injustices (Alatalu 2012). Observations were made that the economic deficiencies of the socialist period, coupled with a centrally controlled system in which historic buildings lacked genuine ownership, were significant contributors to the deteriorating state of old towns. Gučas predicted that 'if all the old town continues to belong to the whole city, it will continue to decay' (KB 1991, 12). Initially, the option to sell or restore the property rights of entire buildings or comprehensive land plots was considered. However, the process resulted in the privatisation of separate apartments or parts of apartments, creating further complications and ineffectiveness in property management and conservation.

At a conference commemorating the 20th anniversary of the inscription of the Vilnius Old Town on the World Heritage List, ICCROM representative Joseph King articulated the gravity of the 'sharp transition from Soviet state-driven, centralised planning to Western style, free market-driven forces', marked by many key challenges: the lack of relevant administrative and legal instruments, the lack of clarity within the institutions regarding responsibility for conservation, the lack of clear responsibility for newly privatised owners, and the lack of financial capabilities of the private sector to invest in conservation of buildings and infrastructure that were often in poor condition. In short, the assessment by international and Western experts did not align with internal views and aims, and the shortages persisted after the collapse of the Soviet Union (King 2014).

[23] Vilnius City Board. Decree No. 775 V, 23–03-1995.



Fig. 7 The land plot plan, approved in 1995. A fragment with Vokiečių Street. (Source: Correction of the Vilnius Old Town Regeneration Project, digital copy). The black lines indicate historical properties, and numbers indicate suggested regulations (1—preservation of current buildings, 2—correction of current buildings, 3—reconstruction, 4—new construction, 5—demolition, 6—conservation, and 7—preservation and regeneration of greenery)

Nonetheless, the desire for reform and alignment with Western and international standards remained robust among local professionals. Thus, an 'unprecedented partnership' among national stakeholders, international heritage professionals and institutions was established in the mid-1990s. Initiatives such as the UNESCO-UNDP Technical Assistance Programme and the ICCROM-ITUC North-eastern Europe Programme were launched, and the Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Strategy was completed in 1996. Over this period, the focus shifted from



Fig. 8 The reconstructed Grand Duke Palace on the right, with the cathedral and bell tower on the left, and the castle tower (partly reconstructed before the transitional period) in the background, right (Source: the author, taken in 2025)

design and implementation to regulation and planning. However, as noted by the UNESCO expert in 1999, the latter was still regarded as Soviet and therefore 'became unfashionable' (Rodwell 1999, 13). Consequently, the lack of rigorous enforcement of conservation regulations led to further losses until a more balanced approach was eventually established in the early 2000s.

A notable trend that has persisted from both the Soviet and transitional periods is the inclination towards reconstruction. This is exemplified by the political support and approval of a dedicated law in 2000[24] that facilitated the reconstruction of the Grand Duke Palace within the boundaries of the Vilnius Historic Centre World Heritage Site, even though the idea had been considered and promoted in the media since the 1980s. However, society did not make significant donations, etc. The original ensemble was already demolished in the early 19th century; therefore, its reconstruction significantly altered the central vista of the old town and its urban fabric (Fig. 8). Additionally, the Regional Riga Charter (Riga Charter 2000) was initiated and ratified shortly after the aforementioned legislation. This charter fundamentally legitimised the notion of reconstruction under exceptional circumstances, particularly in nations that have recently regained their independence. It can be considered a significant effort to formally acknowledge the supremacy of international heritage doctrines while simultaneously justifying the spirit of reconstruction, which, from the perspective of many local societies, was the most appropriate way to recover the cultural significance of the place. Indeed, the phenomenon of reconstruction was less of an exception and more of a trend in neighbouring countries. For example, following the resurgence of national consciousness and significant political transformations in Latvia, society accepted restoration-reconstruction as an opportunity to preserve national identity. Consequently, shortly after the re-establishment of Latvian independence, the Riga city council sanctioned the reconstruction of the medieval Melngalvju (Black Heads) House (Mintaurs 2017). International doctrines advocating for the protection of all historical layers were 'being seriously attacked in Warsaw, which is the reason behind an enduring longing for the reconstruction' (Nekanda-Trepka 2014) of various properties in their historic form. This trend also reveals that the more important a building is to national consciousness, the political agenda, and, thus, to the nationally authorised heritage discourse, the greater the likelihood that it will be reconstructed and that a justification will be drawn to explain it in light of contradictory international doctrines. This at least partly explains why, in the Vilnius case, the housing and commercial buildings on Vokiečių Street were never reconstructed (Fig. 9), in contrast to the Grand Duke Palace, which accumulated much symbolic meaning for the politicians seeking to legitimate the re-established state and



Fig. 9 Vokiečių Street, the central part of which was completely demolished after WWII and never reconstructed, while the side was redesigned in out-of-scale Stalinist architecture (Source: the author, taken in 2025)

[24] Available online (in Lithuanian): https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.E3CFBD4D9751. Accessed 28 March 2026.

leave their own legacy in the Vilnius post-Soviet landscape (Fig. 10). Thus, the latter serves as a perfect illustration of the authorised Lithuanian heritage discourse, as defined by Laurajane Smith: self-referential, privileging 'monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation building' (Smith 2006, 11) as well as the (re)creation of the national historic narrative.

7 Conclusions

The transition of urban conservation practices in Lithuania during the late 1980s and 1990s reflects a complex interplay between ideology, cultural memory, and socioeconomic transformation and is characterised by several paradoxes. In less than a decade, the previously recognised Lithuanian heritage protection system experienced a fundamental re-evaluation and rejection. Amid the Lithuanian Reform Movement, cultural heritage, notably the entire Vilnius Old Town and not any particular exceptional monument, became a symbol of national identity; thus, previous interventions were compared to societal repressions. Essentially, the transition constituted a fundamental questioning of conservation principles, and a rich diversity of opinions, inconsistencies, and prominent paradoxes defined this period of intense transition.

The first paradox lies in re-evaluating previous conservation tools. The damage to the historic urban fabric and contextual buildings was highlighted, as their authenticity was most affected by the various, often utilitarian, interventions made during the Soviet period. Although similar approaches (most notably, *sanation*) were employed at some point in most European countries, both Western and Eastern European, at the national level, they were criticised as incompetence or even purposeful destruction. Ad hominem accusations against specific professions and emotional critique fostered an atmosphere of open hostility that inhibited constructive dialogue, and paradoxically, counter-arguments against them were made that they constituted a very Soviet method of collective blaming.

The second and most prominent paradox reveals a stunning (mis)interpretation of the international conservation discourse concerning authenticity. Nationally, the transition was marked by a significant divergence in approaches and by a division of society. Alongside calls for authenticity, there has been an emphasis on rebuilding long-lost urban fabric. The second iteration of the Vilnius Old Town Regeneration Project included contentious propositions aimed at 'recreating authenticity' through the construction of replicas, which reversed earlier documents that prioritised contemporary inserts but resonated with the societal aspiration to associate the reconstruction of lost historic buildings with the protection and revitalisation of national identity. Another example of paradoxical contemporary thinking is embedded in the claims that these reconstruction ideas complied with the international conservation discourse. Therefore, the concept of reconstruction was reimagined and repurposed. This evolution mirrored a broader ambition among both professional and non-professional stakeholders to restore historical justice, reflecting the spiritual tumult of this transitional milieu and the desire to establish a new national heritage discourse. The prevailing discourse simultaneously critiqued the principles of heritage protection during the Soviet period for destruction and historical falsification and paradoxically neglected the potential for emotionally driven reconstruction endeavours to also distort historical truths, albeit from a different temporal context and to a larger (urban) scale. Most notably, to represent the once multicultural Vilnius Old Town through an exclusively Lithuanian (language-based) identity perspective, the general atmosphere in the transitional society not only supported

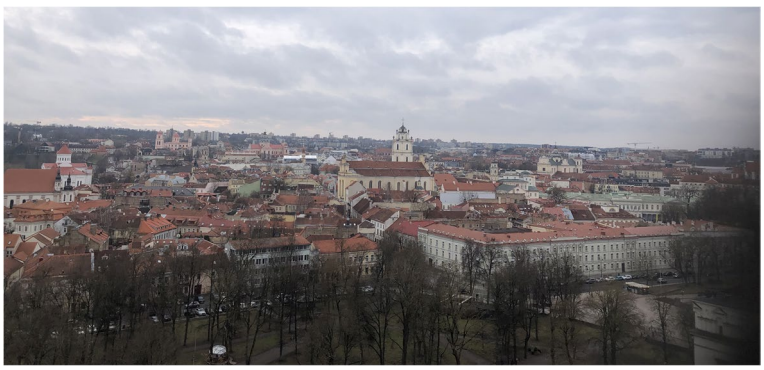

Fig. 10 Panorama of the old town from the castle, a fragment of the reconstructed Grand Duke Palace on the bottom right corner (Source: the author, taken in 2025)

but also actively demanded the application of a revised, even vengeful authorised heritage discourse.

This period has also witnessed a complex interplay between demands for the rights of various stakeholders and non-professional perspectives, juxtaposed with concerns regarding inefficient or insufficient protection and top-down control. The long-sought freedom brought uncertainty regarding civic and property rights, underscoring the complexities of a shifting ideological landscape. This ambiguity illustrates the difficulty of reconciling past experiences with emerging democratic values and free market conditions, and notably, the regeneration project exemplified the challenges of navigating the post-Soviet landscape, including the failure to secure final approval for the project itself.

However, despite national critique, the image at the international level remained successful and, paradoxically, indicated the continuation of conservation principles, as maintained by the personalities previously established in the now-criticised system. Moreover, despite internal conflicts and the tendency to reconstruct, as noted by the ICOMOS expert, the Vilnius Historic Centre was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, securing recognition of Lithuanian heritage, the newly re-established independent state, and continuous urban conservation practices. Paradoxically, (i) the inscription process was completed mostly by specialists condemned at the national level, and in turn, the critics became new bureaucrats and the targets of critique themselves; (ii) the nomination file included the regeneration project aiming to 'recreate authenticity' yet was never legally approved at the national level; and (iii) as societal interest had decreased, the fact of inscription did not seem to resonate as broadly within the society as the critique and idea of recreation of the old town had several years before.

Ultimately, reconstruction emerged as a defining act of the transitional period. This outcome suggests that the transitional period was not merely a discontinuation of past practices; rather, it was a complex re-evaluation and adaptation of heritage conservation strategies. The legacy of this complex era, marked with paradoxes such as critique vs. recognition, a new approach and new actors vs. continuation, reconstruction vs. authenticity, and, notably, gradually decreasing societal relevance and involvement, found a place in conservation practices in a post-Soviet landscape, as Lithuania transitioned into the new millennium as an independent state. Therefore, understanding Lithuania's approach to urban conservation requires a nuanced perspective that considers the historical context, the evolution of community discourse, and the shifting meaning of authenticity.

Abbreviations

ICCROM	International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property
ITUC	Integrated Territorial and Urban Conservation
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
KRVA	Kaunas Regional State Archives
LLMA	Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art
LSSR	Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VRVA	Vilnius Regional State Archives
WWII	Second World War

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