

VilNews

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VILNIUS ARCHITECTURE



AN UŽUPIS COURTYARD, APRIL 2010

Photo: Aage Myhre

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Text and photos: Aage Myhre

Did you notice the cover photo? Maybe you just asked yourself: What on earth has such an image to do with architecture? Let me admit, that when I began my studies to become an architect, 36 years ago, I also believed that architecture was about buildings and structures.

But, after I received my Norwegian master degree in architecture, and also had studied architectural psychology in France, it began to dawn on me that architecture is mostly about something else. I started realising that architects are creating constructions, but, more importantly, they are designing frameworks and environments for genuine human life and activities - being it at work, with family, during leisure time, travelling, at a restaurant table, or while simply seeking inspiration in some sort of environment.

The cover photo shows real life in one of Vilnius' many hidden courtyards. You will understand the magnificent architecture of Vilnius Old Town only if you also visit these courtyards and the many ancient, vaulted cellars.

The mother art is architecture. Without an architecture of our own we have no soul of our own civilization.
[Frank Lloyd Wright](#)

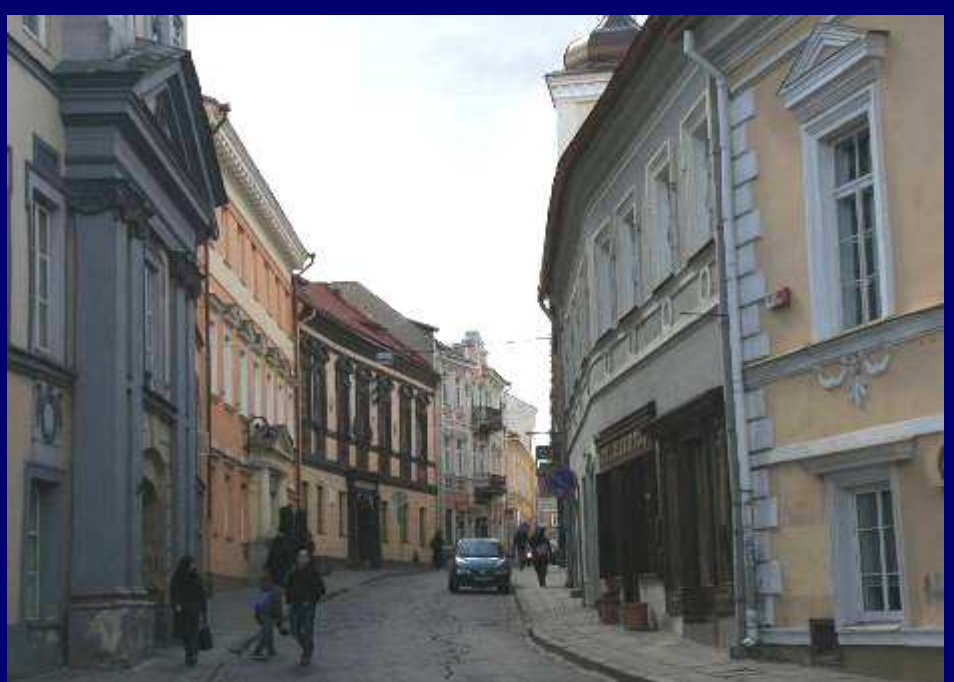
From the architectural point of view, Vilnius is a unique city of world format. Unfortunately, there are not many reasons to mention the city's new suburbs with modern architecture; they are mediocre. Vilnius Old Town is the only outstanding jewel in the crown. But what a jewel! It is here you should come to observe the amazingly strong expressions of a whole people's ancient soul; regardless of nationality, religion or cultural background.

It is when you come here you will fully understand why Vilnius once was given names like the 'New Babylon', 'Jerusalem of the North', 'the world's most Italian city outside Italy' and 'the most Baroque city north of the Alps'. It is here you fully can understand what the terms multiculturalism and multi-nationalism really implied in ancient Vilnius. It was to this very place architects and builders from Italy and other Mediterranean countries came to develop the international Vilnius nearly 700 years ago, along with experts from Central Europe. The city's huge Jewish community also played an immensely important role.

When it comes to ancient architectural planning and roots, Vilnius is probably the world's most international city.



A place to fall in love with...



Vilnius Old Town is the largest in Eastern Europe

HOLISTIC THINKING AND PLANNING

Architecture is a mirror of the development level and maturity for any nation. Today's best example of precisely this is the new Dubai architecture that is created to tell a story about wealth and prosperity. Similarly, the architecture of Vilnius Old Town tells us about wisdom and multiculturalism in this country during hundreds of years. Vilnius reflects European styles, be it from the Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque or Classicism time periods because Lithuania's former leaders knew how to seek advice and expert assistance from outside. Vilnius of those days was fully on par with cities closer to main stream Europe. But the styles represent only one side of the case. Equally important is the fact that the then leaders, city planners and architects followed holistic planning ideals. The areas between the buildings were as important as the buildings themselves and the human dimension was given crucial importance. To pave the way for good and interactive human life and expression was a most important clue in all planning and development. Old Vilnius was a good and vibrant city to live in.



The areas around the new skyscrapers are dominated by asphalt and cars. What has happened to the wise and holistic planning ideals from ancient Vilnius?

Outdoor rooms

When people ask me what style I use when I design buildings, my answer is usually: 'The type of style that makes people happy'. A little flippant answer maybe, but it is my belief that good architecture always should be based on the human dimension and the view that buildings are parts of a greater whole and context where interiors, exteriors and the outdoor spaces between the houses are playing together in harmony and mutual affinity.

Vilnius Old Town is a shining example of a holistic approach in planning. The buildings are often to compare with napoleon cakes where the basement is usually from 1400-1600's, while the floors above are of increasingly younger 'vintage'. Still, the buildings appear as genuinely well designed and planned. We see clear signs of famous international styles, but the end result is still something exceptional: A genuine Vilnius style!

The streets, squares and courtyards are planned in the same holistic manner. One minute you find yourself in a narrow alley, so narrow that even daylight has trouble reaching down to the cobbles. Then suddenly the street opens into a small square. You hear music and feel the good smell of food from one of the small sidewalk cafés. Other streets are wider. Widest of all is Didžioji gatvė (meaning the big street), which finally ends up in the City Hall Square (Rotušės aikštė) in front of the city's former council-house. In Vilnius Old Town you will find joy and adventures, whether you're indoors or outdoors, in a narrow street or in an open space. A complete, excellent feeling of harmony.

I wish the newer parts of the town had been planned similarly well, with the human dimension in mind and with harmonious integration of outdoor space and building. Unfortunately, it's mostly the car that rules over the outdoor spaces in the city's new districts.

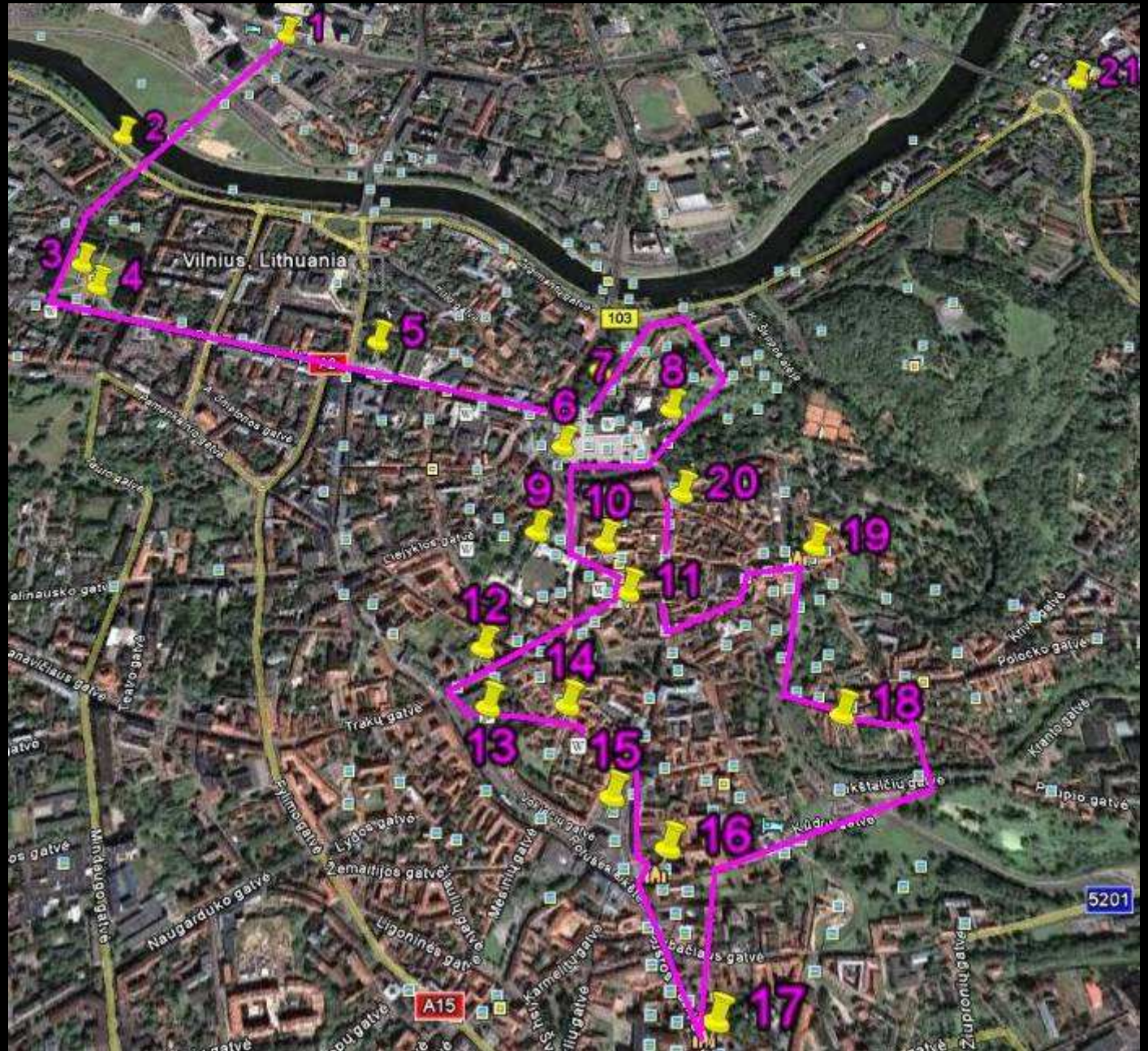


Vokiečių gatvė (German Street) in Vilnius Old Town is a good example of how to plan for outdoor life; something today's architects, urban planners and political leaders should pay much more attention to.

MY ARCHITECTURE ROUTE THROUGH VILNIUS

This is my personal architecture route through Vilnius. It follows far from historical order. It focuses not only on buildings, but is all along also touching a bit of general history and partly political events. For, as I said already at the very beginning, architecture is so much more than just structures. Architecture is art, frames for human life, politics, economics, prestige, happiness, sorrow - for better or worse. Or as a friend of mine tends to ask: 'Do you know the difference between a doctor and an architect?' The answer is that doctors can always bury their mistakes...

Vilnius, however, is a fully ambulatory 'patient'. Let me show you.



1. The new skyscraper district of Vilnius
2. River Neris and Stalinist architecture
3. Lukiškės Square, where Lenin's statue once stood
4. The KGB Palace (today's KGB Museum)
5. Gediminas Avenue - Lithuania's parade street
6. Vilnius Cathedral and the Cathedral Square
7. The Vilnius Castles - Gediminas Tower
8. The Royal Palace
9. The Presidential Palace
10. Vilnius University
11. Sts Johns' Church
12. Church of the Holy Spirit
13. The Jewish Quarter
14. Stikliu gatve (Glassblower Street)
15. Rotušės Square - the old City Hall
16. St. Casimir's Church
17. Gates of Dawn
18. Užupis
19. St. Anne's Church - Bernadine Church
20. Pilių gatve (Tower Street)
21. Sts. Peter and Paul's Church

1. VILNIUS' NEW SKYSCRAPER DISTRICT



To the right in the picture above you can see the Reval Hotel Lietuva. The hotel was, with its 22 floors, until a few years ago Lithuania's only skyscraper. I lived there for half a year, in 1991. Where today's skyscraper district is located (to the left), there was just a dusty strip of land with lots of kiosks of good old-fashioned Soviet brand. Today's skyscrapers are taller and more modern. Glass and steel have in the 2000s made their triumphant entrance to Vilnius and Lithuania.

The new buildings are not bad. They are actually among the better in terms of recent, modern architecture in Lithuania. The two buildings I think most of, are; a) The Europa Tower, and b) Swedbank's new headquarters, both designed by architect Audrius Ambrasas. These two buildings have, in addition to a lot of glass and metal, also added a little warmer colours, which means a lot to an otherwise cold district. The shopping centre within the Europa Tower is also, in my opinion, the best in the whole of Lithuania in terms of architecture. Simple and understandable, yet elegant in its expression.

But, as the critic I always tend to be, let me be allowed to present three query target categories for this new glass-and-steel complex that has been raised over the past 10 years, only a stone's throw from the Vilnius Old Town:

1) Where is the holistic thinking behind this new district?

It seems that the Vilnius Municipality has not done much more than dividing up a large land area into land plots where each developer has been left free to build without regard to public facilities, outdoor space or a common architectural concept.

2) Why has one not assumed a design concept related to the centuries-old architecture of Vilnius Old Town?

The skyscraper district in Vilnius differs little from mediocre areas of similar character in the west, while the city's own proud history of architecture seems to be completely forgotten.

3) Why is it that asphalt and cars have been allowed to completely dominate all outdoor areas?

The only attempt made to create an outdoor area seems to exist between the Europa Tower and the new City Hall building. But also this yard chemically free of greenery and life-giving activities, with the result that it is used very little by people. The new skyscraper city is also isolated from good contact with the Vilnius centre by a busy street. Why not put a lid on it, so that traffic could be hidden under the earth surface and human life could flourish on top of the lid?

PS: The new skyscraper district of Vilnius is located on the so-called right bank of the Neris River that runs through and forms the city of Vilnius. Now we will cross 'the white bridge' and move into the city centre.

2. RIVER NERIS - AND A TASTE OF STALINIST ARCHITECTURE



The Neris River flows slowly and beautifully through Vilnius. Unfortunately, the river banks are rarely used for human activities. Here you see no dynamic waterfront projects, outdoor restaurants or full set riverboats. This is not Prague, Paris or Rome. But there is so much more that could be done to make this beautiful river to a far more active element of city life here, and I hope one day we get a city planner who sees some of the many opportunities Neris provides the city that through 700 years has been growing large along its proud historic riverbanks.

Stalinist Architecture, also referred to as the Stalinist Gothic, or Socialist Classicism, is a term given to architecture of the Soviet Union between 1933 and 1955, when Nikita Khrushchev condemned 'excesses' of the past decades and disbanded the Soviet Academy of Architecture.

But while buildings from the Stalin period remain as very solid and thoughtful stylish monumental buildings, in Vilnius and other cities that belonged or were forced to obey Soviet rule, the buildings erected during Khrushchev's time in the Kremlin, and later, have been left standing as uninteresting and weak symbols of a recession which in reality defined the Soviet Union from the moment Stalin died in 1953.

A few Stalinist buildings were erected in Vilnius after the war. You see one of them to the right on the picture above. Church symbolism is obvious even here, although this is just an ordinary apartment complex. Still, this building is the beginning of our 'evil axes' part of the route, leading us from the Stalin building to what 20 years ago was called the Lenin Square and the KGB Palace where unbelievable gruesome treatments took place - of thousands of Lithuanians who dared to resist their unwelcome rulers after WWII.

3. LUKIŠKĖS SQUARE - THE KGB PALACE



Lukiškės Square has been Lithuania's symbol of terror since the 1800s, when public executions of insurgents took place here. This is also the place where hundreds of opponents of the Soviet Union were interrogated, tortured and executed during the years 1944-1956 in the infamous KGB Palace, facing the square (ref above picture).

The square was reconstructed according to the design of V. Mikučianis in 1949-1952. During the Soviet era, the square was renamed Lenin Square and a statue of Lenin was built in the middle of it in 1953. The statue, which used to be the largest of its kind in the Lithuanian SSR, was removed in 1991, after the restoration of independence of Lithuania. Gathered crowds celebrated the fall of the statue; its upper part was lifted using a crane and broke off at the lower legs attached to the pedestal. The reassembled Lenin statue is now on display in [Grūtas Park](#) near Druskininkai in southern Lithuania.

Today, the evil is gone. Children are having fun at the site that during two centuries represented death and destruction for Lithuania. The statue of Lenin, that stood here during the period 1953 - 1991, is also gone. Forever.

It is estimated that 22 000 Lithuanians and 70 000 KGB and Red Army soldiers were killed during the time of the post war guerrilla wars in this country between 1944 and 1956. When will we see a monument here, at the Lukiškės Square, to honour the many brave Lithuanians who were killed by the evil forces for the sake of their beloved homeland?

3. THE KGB MUSEUM



The KGB museum director E. Peikstenis and Lithuania's president D. Grybauskaitė

Set up in the former KGB Palace, the museum is the only one of its kind in the European Union. For Lithuanians, this building symbolises the 50-year-long Soviet occupation. During World War II it was the site of Gestapo headquarters and of the KGB later. Between 1940 and 1991 people who resisted the soviet occupants were arrested, killed or deported to Siberia. You will see a lot of the names of anti-Soviet resistance fighters carved into the stone walls of the building.

When you enter the building you feel more like whispering instead of talking as the gruesome reality of the past exhibited over a few floors is often too hard to handle. The building of the museum is intact as it was after the KGB left the premises in 1991. Amongst many other exhibited items you will see the authentically furnished rooms and KGB equipment that was used for the secret listening of private conversations and many more.

On the ground floor of the museum the authentic photographs of the partisans, original documents, personal belongings are displayed. The photographs depict the life of partisans, who were struggling to re-establish Lithuania's independence. It is truly sad to look at the immortalised faces, as many of them were so young, barely 18 years old. The courage, sacrifice and love for their country of those young people is truly moving. You start understanding that Lithuanians, even though a small nation, were gallant and dignified people.

The exposition on the first floor displays dramatic black and white photographs depicting and awful working and living conditions of the people sent to the hard labour camps. The scenes look so grim with wiry fences and armed guards. Among the prisoners there was a great number of priests and women, arrested for publishing underground anti-Soviet papers. I couldn't believe it when I saw that many of them had to wear signs on them that read: 'Extremely dangerous criminal.' Clothes and footwear of the prisoners and some personal items like hand made books are on display.

The basement prison is the most sobering part of the building. Here a lot of prisoners were brutally killed in the execution chamber for participation in the anti-Soviet resistance.

When you enter the prison, there are two about 1.6-square-metre dark cells called boxes, where prisoners were kept while the duty officer processed their documents. It's sickening how small the cells were where you can hardly sit or stand. Among other cells you can see solitary confinement rooms which were used to break down the prisoners and make them confess. Prisoners had to stand in the ice-cold water or to balance on a small platform. Every time they got tired they fell down into the water.

The horrific padded cell sends chills down your spine. The walls are padded and soundproofed, made to absorb the cries and shouts for help. The straitjacket on the back wall was used for those who resisted or were demented from torture.

The execution chamber is the grimmest place in the museum. On display there is material, which shows the procedures of sentencing people to death and the inhuman treatment of dead bodies. Under a glass floor some personal belongings of the victims are displayed: shoes, buttons, glasses and engagement rings.

4. GEDIMINAS AVENUE



The Gediminas Avenue (Lithuanian: *Gedimino prospektas*) is the main street of Vilnius, where most of the governmental institutions of Lithuania are concentrated, including the government, parliament, Constitutional Court and ministries. It is also the place of cultural institutions such as Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, Bank of Lithuania, Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre and Martynas Mažvydas National Library.

Nowadays it is also a popular shopping and dining street. It is partially a pedestrian street in the evenings when the traffic is prohibited.

Named after the Grand Duke of Lithuania Gediminas, the street terminates at the Žvėrynas Bridge over the Neris River near the Seimas (Parliament) Palace on one end and at the Cathedral Square and Vilnius Castle Complex on the other, passing the Lukiškės Square. It connects the Old Town with Žvėrynas.

The street, started built in 1836, was initially known as St. George Avenue, Mickiewicz Street (Polish: *ulica Mickiewicza*), when Vilnius was under Polish rule (1922-1939) and Adolf Hitler Street during the Nazi Germany occupation. At the beginning of the Soviet occupation in 1940 it was called Stalin Avenue, later renamed to Lenin Avenue. The avenue carries its present name from 1939 to 1940 and since 1989.

A portion of the avenue from the Vilnius Cathedral to Municipality Square was thoroughly reconstructed before the celebration of 750th anniversary of King Mindaugas' coronation in 2003. The reconstructions included building an underground parking facility - the first such in Lithuania - under the Municipality Square and renovation of all kinds of pipelines and communication cables under the street. Over 100 new trees were planted. During the excavations a few archaeological findings were found and are now on display in the parking garage. The reconstruction was completed in 2009.



5. VILNIUS CATHEDRAL - THE CATHEDRAL SQUARE



The Cathedral of Vilnius is the main Cathedral of Lithuania (Roman Catholic). It is situated in Vilnius Old Town, just off of Cathedral Square. It is the heart of Lithuania's Catholic spiritual life.

The coronations of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania took place within its confines. Inside its crypts and catacombs, many famous people, among them Vytautas the Great (1430), his wife Anna (1418), his brother Sigismund (1440), cousin Švitrigaila (1452), Saint Casimir (1484), Alexander Jagiellon (1506), two wives of Sigismund II Augustus: Elisabeth of Habsburg (1545) and Barbara Radziwiłł (1551), as well as others, are interred.

Inside, there are more than forty works of art dating from the 16th through 19th centuries; including frescoes and paintings of various sizes. During the restoration of the Cathedral, the altars of a presumed pagan temple and the original floor, laid during the reign of King Mindaugas, were uncovered. In addition, the remains of the cathedral built in 1387 were also located. A fresco dating from the end of the 14th century, the oldest known fresco in Lithuania was found on the wall of one of the cathedral's underground chapels.

It is believed that in pre-Christian times, the Baltic pagan god Perkūnas (god of thunder) was worshiped at this location. The Lithuanian King Mindaugas built the original cathedral in 1251 after his conversion to Christianity. Remains of the archaic quadratic church with three naves and massive buttresses have been discovered beneath the later layers in the late 20th century. After Mindaugas's death in 1263, it again became a place of pagan worship.

In 1387, the year in which Lithuania was officially converted to Christianity, a second Gothic style Cathedral with five chapels was built. The Cathedral burnt down in 1419. During the preparation for his coronation as King of Lithuania, Vytautas built a significantly larger Gothic Cathedral in its place; the Cathedral had three naves and four circular towers at its corners. Flemish traveller Guillebert de Lannoy noticed its similarity to the Frauenburg Cathedral.

The walls and pillars of this cathedral have survived to this day. In 1522, the Cathedral was renovated, and the bell tower was built on top of the Lower Castle defensive tower. In 1529, Sigismund Augustus, was crowned Grand Duke of Lithuania in the Cathedral. After the fire of 1530, it was rebuilt again and between 1534 - 1557 more chapels and the crypts were added. The Cathedral acquired architectural features associated with the Renaissance.

After the fire of 1610, it was rebuilt again, and the two front towers were added. The Cathedral was damaged during the war of 1655. It was renovated and decorated several more times.

Between 1623 - 1636, at the initiative of Sigismund III Vasa, the Baroque style Saint Casimir chapel by royal architect Constantino Tencalla was built of Swedish sandstone. Its interior was reconstructed in 1691-1692 and decorated with frescoes by Michelangelo Palloni, the altar and stucco work by Pietro Perti.

In 1769, the southern tower built during the reconstruction of 1666 collapsed, destroying the vaults of the neighbouring chapel, killing six people. After the damage, Bishop of Vilnius Ignacy Jakub Massalski ordered the reconstruction of the Cathedral. The works started in 1779 and were completed in 1783, and the interior was completed in 1801. The Cathedral was reconstructed to its present appearance according to the design of Laurynas Gucevičius in the neoclassical style; the church acquired its strict quadrangular shape and the plan inherent to local public buildings. The main facade was adorned with sculptures of the Four Evangelists by Italian sculptor Tommaso Righi. Some scholars point to the architectural resemblance of the cathedral to the works of Andrea Palladio or see the influence of Gucevičius's tutor Claude Nicolas Ledoux. The influence of the Palladian architecture is evident in side facades of the building. The lack of 'purity' of the Classical architecture due to incorporation of Baroque style sculptures and other elements was later criticised by academical architects, notably Karol Podczyński.

6. THE LOWER CASTLE - GEDIMINAS TOWER



The **Vilnius Castle Complex** is a group of cultural and historic structures on the left bank of the Neris River, near its confluence with the Vilnia River in Vilnius. The buildings, which evolved between the 10th and 18th centuries, were one of Lithuania's major defensive structures.

The complex consisted of three castles: the Upper, the Lower, and the Crooked. The Crooked Castle was burned down by the Teutonic Knights in 1390 and was never rebuilt. The Vilnius Castles were attacked several times by the Teutonic Order after 1390, but they did not succeed in taking the entire complex. Its complete capture occurred for the first time during the 1655 Battle of Vilnius. Soon afterwards, the severely damaged castles lost their importance, and many buildings were abandoned. During the Tsarist annexation, several historic buildings were demolished; many more were damaged during the fortress construction in the 19th century.

Today, the remaining Gediminas Tower (above right) is a major symbol of the city of Vilnius and of the nation itself. Annually, on January 1, the Lithuanian tricolour is hoisted on Gediminas Tower to commemorate Flag Day. The complex is part of the National Museum of Lithuania (above left), one of the largest museums in the country.

8. THE ROYAL PALACE



The **Royal Palace of Lithuania** (Lithuanian: *Valdovų rūmai*) was a palace built in the 15th century for the rulers of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Royal Palace in the Lower Castle evolved over the years and prospered during the 16th and mid-17th centuries. For four centuries the Palace was the political, administrative and cultural centre of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was demolished in 1801. A new palace has been under construction since 2002 on the site of the original building. It is expected to be completed in 2010.

9. THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE



The **Presidential Palace** (Lithuanian: *Prezidentūra*), located in Vilnius Old Town, is the official seat of the President of Lithuania.

The Palace traces its history back to the 14th century, when Jogaila, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, issued an edict donating land in the city to the Vilnius Diocese, for this reason the palace is sometimes referred to as the Bishops' Palace. Construction of the Palace took place in the late 14th century under the auspices of the first Bishop of Vilnius, Andrzej Wasilko, and over succeeding generations, the building was gradually enlarged and renovated. During the Renaissance the Palace was once again renovated, and parks and gardens surrounding the building were expanded.

As the 18th century unfolded, a number of dramatic events in the Palace's history took place: the last Bishop of Vilnius lived in the Palace, Lithuania was annexed by the Russian Empire, and the building itself was badly damaged by two major fires in 1737 and 1748. The Palace was reconstructed in 1750 under the supervision of the architect Laurynas Gucevičius. After its reconstruction the Palace was used as a residence for Emperors, Kings and noblemen. During 1796, Tsar Paul I lived at the Palace. During the course of the 19th century the Palace served as a residence for several Imperial Russian governors, such as Mikhail Muravyov, nicknamed "The Hangman". It was also visited by the future King of France, Louis XVIII in 1804.

In 1812, both the Russian Tsar Alexander I and the French Emperor Napoleon used the Palace as their residence. During Napoleon's invasion of Russia, he organized military operations and Lithuanian army units from this Palace, including five regiments of infantry, four cavalry regiments, and the National Guard of Vilnius. He received Lithuanian noblemen, newly appointed officials of the administration, and other dignitaries in this Palace as well. After Napoleon's defeat in 1812, the Palace was used for ceremonial purposes; it was here that then-general Mikhail Kutuzov was awarded Russia's highest military award - the Order of St. George. During 1824-1834, the Palace was reconstructed by the prominent St. Petersburg architect Vasily Stasov in the Empire style, under supervision of Karol Podczaszyński. Stasov's reconstruction of the Palace has remained to this day.

After Lithuania regained its independence in 1918, the Palace housed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ELTA news agency until it ended up in Poland in 1920. It was restored in the 1930s by Stefan Narębski. After the Second World War, the Palace served as the Military Officers' Centre; later it housed various Lithuanian artists. The Palace was gradually adapted for use as a presidential residence, and since 1997 it has served as the official and since 1997 it has served as the official office of the President of Lithuania. A flag displaying the coat of arms of the President (top image) is hoisted when the President is present in the Palace or in the city.



10. VILNIUS UNIVERSITY

Vilnius University (Lithuanian: *Vilniaus Universitetas*, formerly known as *Vilnius State University*, earlier - *Stefan Batory University* and before that *Almae Academia et Universitas Vilnensis Societatis Jesu*), is one of the oldest universities in both the Baltic states and Europe. It is also the oldest and largest university in Lithuania.

In 1568, the Lithuanian nobility asked the Jesuits to create an institution of higher learning either in Vilnius or Kaunas. The following year Walerian Protasewicz, the bishop of Vilnius, purchased several buildings in the city centre and established the Vilnian Academy (*Almae Academia et Universitas Vilnensis Societatis Jesu*). Initially, the Academy had three divisions: humanities, philosophy, and theology. The curriculum at the College and later at the Academy was taught in Latin. At the beginning of 17th century there are records about special groups that taught Lithuanian speaking students Latin, most probably using Konstantinas Sirvydas' compiled dictionary. The first students were enrolled into the Academy in 1570. A library at the college was established in the same year, and Sigismund II Augustus donated 2500 books to the new college. In its first year of existence the college enrolled 160 students.



The University's main entrance

On April 1, 1579, Stefan Batory King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, upgraded the academy and granted it equal status with the Jagiellonian University of Kraków, creating the *Almae Academia et Universitas Vilnensis Societatis Jesu*. His edict was approved by Pope Gregory XIII's bull of October 30, 1579. The first rector of the Academy was Piotr Skarga. He invited many scientists from various parts of Europe and expanded the library, with the sponsorship of many notable persons: Sigismund II Augustus, Bishop Walerian Protasewicz, and the Marshal of the Crown, Kazimierz Lew Sapieha. Lithuanians at the time comprised about one third of the students (in 1568 there were circa 700 students); others were Germans, Poles, Swedes, and even Hungarians.

In 1575, Duke Mikołaj Krzysztof Radziwiłł and Elżbieta Ogińska sponsored a printing house for the academy, one of the first in the region. The printing house issued books in Latin and Polish and the first surviving book in Lithuanian printed in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was in 1595. It was entitled *Kathechismas, arba Mokslas kiekvienam krikščioniui privalus*, and was authored by Mikalojus Daukša.

The Academy's growth continued until the 17th century. The following era, known as The Deluge, led to a dramatic drop in both the number of students that matriculated, and in the quality of its programs. In the middle of the 18th century, educational authorities tried to restore the Academy. This led to the foundation of the first observatory in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, (the fourth such professional facility in Europe), in 1753, by Tomasz Żebrowski. The Commission of National Education (*Komisja Edukacji Narodowej*), the world's first ministry of education, took control of the Academy in 1773, and transformed it into a modern University. Thanks to the Rector of the Academy, Marcin Poczebutt-Odlanicki, the Academy was granted the status of *Principal School (Szkoła Główna)* in 1783. The Commission, the secular authority governing the academy after the dissolution of the Jesuit order, drew up a new statute. The school was named *Academia et Universitas Vilnensis*.

11. STS JOHNS' CHURCH

This church was built as a Gothic chapel in 1387. In 1570, Lithuania's Grand Duke Sigismund Augustus gave the chapel as a gift to the Jesuit Brothers who by then were developing the nearby college that later became Vilnius University. The Brothers immediately built a bell tower that still today is the highest in Vilnius. The tower stood ready in 1571.

It was in a direct decree from the Pope that the Gothic chapel was expanded to a glorious house of God and given the name Sts. Johns' Church. It has happened only twice in Christianity's history that a church has been named after both John the Baptist and the Apostle John. First time was when the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the first among the four major basilicas of Rome was built by Constantine the Great in the 4th century. This church is also the cathedral of the bishop of Rome, the Pope, and is thus known as *Omnium urbis et orbis Ecclesiarum Mater et Caput*: "Cathedral of Rome and of the World."

Despite a number of restorations the church remains Gothic. Since 1773 it has been the official church of Vilnius University, located within the university territory and also sharing 'The Great Courtyard' with the university (picture).



12. CHURCH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit Church is a late Baroque church. It is also called the Dominican Church as it long belonged to a Dominican monastery. The church has one of the oldest organs in Lithuania. It is today a Polish Catholic church, and all masses are held in Polish language.

The first church in this place was built in 1323. Later, Grand Duke Vytautas ordered the construction of a Gothic styled Holy Spirit Church here.

In the 16th century the church was rebuilt and the Dominican Monastery settled in the nearby buildings. In the 17th century the church was twice on fire and rebuilt again. In 1844, the monastery was closed and its buildings occupied by different institutions and inhabitants, including a prison.

Pope John Paul II visited the church in 1993 during his visit to Lithuania.

The Holy Spirit Church has an amazing underground maze of catacombs, as it for decades was a burial place where plenty of plague and war victims were buried. Their coffins and remains are still here, in the church's cellar. In 1943 students of Vilnius University tried to clean and explore the catacombs. They also guided excursions to catacombs.

There are many stories about the ghosts living in the catacombs; the most outstanding is the one about the ghost of a knight who was buried alive here.



13. THE JEWISH QUARTER



Today: Rather empty



Then: Filled with vibrant life

The pre-World War II numbers are staggering: Vilnius' Jewish population was nearly 100,000, about forty-five percent of the city's total. The country was strewn with some two hundred Jewish communities sustaining the lives and livelihoods of about 240,000 people. Vilnius had 105 synagogues and prayer houses. There were six daily Jewish newspapers. Yiddish was the language of choice. Indeed, the city was aptly named The Jerusalem of Lithuania.

The post-war numbers are horrifying: Only 24,000 Jews survived. Or, shall it be said, that 90 percent of the Jews had been murdered. Vilnius' Jewish population today is 5,000, a mere five percent of what it once was. The country is home to but 6,500 Jews, some 200 of whom are Holocaust survivors. Most of the two hundred pre-war communities were decimated, wiped off the map entirely. There is only one Jewish newspaper. Few people speak Yiddish anymore. Today, there remains only one synagogue in Vilnius (we will later this year make a special VilNews issue about the Litvaks - the Lithuanian Jews - and their exceptional role in Lithuania's history since the 1300s).

14. STIKLIU GATVE (GLASSBLOWERS' STREET)



The narrow Stiklių gatvė (Glassblowers' Street) in the Old Town of Vilnius began its history in the 15th century, when merchants and craftsmen, invited by the Lithuanian Grand Dukes, started their businesses here.

Many of the settlers were Jews who had immigrated from Germany, and Stiklių gatvė became in many ways the most central Jewish street in Vilnius.

The construction of most of the current buildings at the street was started at the end of the 15th century by different merchants, both for living and trading purposes. Over the centuries, many of the original Gothic cellars changed owners and got new constructions above street level. There were shops, taverns and beer-houses. In 1972, the still existing hunters' restaurant, Lokys, was opened here. This restaurant, in Medieval style, has an atmosphere of a real medieval castle - medieval castle - and when the abundant food and drinks take the edge off the guests' thirst and hunger, you really start understanding what Vilnius is all about. In the 1990s, the famous Stikliai Hotel and Restaurants started their activities here. Today, this is the most luxurious hotel in Lithuania, and the restaurant as well as the cellar beer pub is truly worth a visit!

Stiklių gatvė is one of the most interesting and unusual places in the Lithuanian capital. The once vibrant Jewish flavour is unfortunately and sadly gone due the horrors of Holocaust in this country, but I am still asking you all to join me for a stroll down this amazing, narrow, winding street.

15. ROTUŠĖS AIKŠTĖ - THE OLD TOWN HALL SQUARE



The Old Town Hall in Vilnius was mentioned for the first time in 1432. Initially it was a Gothic style building, and has since been reconstructed many times. The current Vilnius Town Hall was rebuilt in neoclassical style according to the design by Laurynas Gucevičius in 1799. It has remained unchanged since then. Its Gothic cellars have been preserved and may be visited. Nowadays it is used for representational purposes as well as during the visits of foreign state officials and rulers, including George W. Bush and Queen Elisabeth II.

The Town Hall Square (Lithuanian: *Rotušės aikštė*) is a traditional centre of trade and events in Vilnius. Major annual fairs, such as the Kaziukas Fair, are held in this square, the main Christmas tree is decorated here, various concerts and other attractions are organised as well as celebrations of important dates of the state.

16. ST. CASIMIR'S CHURCH



The beautiful St. Casimir's Church is one of the most interesting churches that you can visit in the capital city of Lithuania. Touted as one of the main attractions in Vilnius, the church got its name from the patron saint of the country, Prince Casimir Jagiellon.

Having been founded by the Jesuits in the year 1604, the church is known to be the oldest Baroque-style religious structure in the city. It is as frequently visited as the other splendid churches in Vilnius.

St. Casimir's Church, however venerated as it now is, was not spared by abuse and persecution in the past. The church was made into a grain store in the year 1812 by the troops of Napoleon. Some twenty years after this, it was converted by the Russians into an Orthodox Church and into a cathedral in 1864. The Germans made it into a Protestant temple between the years 1915 and 1917. However, it was the Soviets who made more shocking use of the church. They converted it into an Atheist Museum.

St. Casimir's church is one of the finest Baroque churches in Vilnius, although it also displays Gothic and Renaissance elements. It was built according to the style of Il Gesu church in Rome, although it differs in having two main frontal towers. The church is constructed in the form of a Latin cross. Where the central nave and transept meet, a majestic cupola of forty meters rises. Seventeen meters in diameter, it is topped on the outside by the crown of the grand duke of Lithuania. The central nave and transept are twenty-five meters wide. On the inside naves are placed six unconnected chapels.

17. THE GATES OF DAWN



Inside



Outside

The Aušros vartai (Gates of Dawn) are one of the main symbols of Vilnius. Pilgrims from the entire world come here to see the dark face of the Vilnius Madonna, hoping for consolation from the Mother of Compassion. The painting is the only one of miraculous images in Lithuania that is so widely renowned for its healing power. The Holy Virgin is considered the patron of Lithuania and a symbol of harmony. People of four nationalities and two religions worship her - Lithuanians, Poles, Byelorussians, Russians, Catholics and Orthodox. Residents of Vilnius began to worship the painting in 17th century during the war with the Russians. The saying is that an image of God's Mother from the Gates of Dawn would appear in the sky at night.

The chapel is located above the former gate. St Teresa's Church and the Holy Spirit Orthodox Monastery are nearby.

18. UŽUPIS

Užupis is one of the oldest districts of Vilnius, mentioned in historical sources as far back as the 16th century. Once it was called the “salt road” to Polock. In olden times it was the suburb where the poor and mainly craftsmen, lived. There were many mills and at one time it was even known as a brothel district.

The district contains the Bernadine Cemetery, one of the oldest in Vilnius. Most of the district's Jewish population vanished during the Holocaust, and later even the old Jewish Cemetery would be destroyed by the Soviets. The houses left empty by the Holocaust were occupied by marginal elements of society, the homeless, and prostitutes.

Until Lithuania's declaration of independence in 1990, it was one of the most neglected areas in the city, containing many run-down houses, many without utilities.

Today the district houses art galleries, artists' workshops, and popular cafés. On April Fools Day in 1997, the district declared itself an independent republic (The Republic of Užupis), replete with an army of 12 personnel.

Užupis is a unique republic. A colourful and alive island, separated from the city by the Vilnia River that once gave name to the city itself. Užupis is a recognised district for artists and has won the name of the most mysterious and romantic district of Vilnius. Užupis is the artists' republic, which has its own constitution, national anthem, calendar and map. The district is often compared to Montmartre in Paris due to its bohemian atmosphere.



19. ST. ANNE'S CHURCH - THE BERNARDINE CHURCH



The Church of St. Francis and St. Bernardine (right) is one of the largest gothic sacral buildings in Vilnius. It composes a unique architectural ensemble with St. Anne's Church (left).

One of the most impressive architectural masterpieces of the Vilnius Old Town is Saint Anne's Church, built in the late 15th - early 16th centuries. This is the most outstanding and enchanting Late Gothic building in Lithuania.

The Saints Francis and Bernardine Church, next door, commonly referred to as the Bernardine Church, was built at the end of the 15th century. It is one of the largest Gothic sacred buildings in Lithuania.



In 1469, the Bernardine monks that had recently settled in Vilnius built a wooden church that was later replaced by the brick one. At the beginning of the 16th century, the church was totally reconstructed. Originally, the church was a part of the city's defensive wall, and this, in fact, explains its modest decor. Since then the loopholes under the roof in the northern facade have remained. After numerous renovations in the 16-17th centuries the church acquired renaissance and baroque style elements. The baroque decor of the altars, pulpit, organ choir and tombstones softens the strictness of the gothic lines. During the Soviet occupation the church was handed over to the Art Institute. In 1994, it was returned to the brethren of St. Francis.

Now the Bernardine Church is being restored and soon it will acquire its former beauty. But even now the splendour interior of the church enchants the visitors. The dominants of the interior are fourteen rococo style altars decorated with beautiful wooden sculptures. The church features the oldest known crucifix in Lithuania, which dates back to the 15th century. The unique mural painting decorating the walls of the naves dates back to the 16th century and combines renaissance and gothic elements. The scenes on biblical themes are decorated with inscriptions in gothic character and floral ornaments. The church is famous for the plenty of the ornate tombstones. Among them one should mention marble tombstones of Stanislaus Radziwill in the north nave (1618-1623) and Piotr Wiesiolowski in the south nave (1634).

The Bernardine monastery that is situated near the church is the oldest brick building of the entire complex. It was constructed at the end of the 15th century. The monastery soon became one of the cultural centres of the medieval Lithuania. It was famous for its rich library, containing unique manuscripts and books. In 1864, the monastery was closed and the building was reequipped to soldier's barracks. In 1919, it was handed over to the art faculty of the university, later - to the Art Institute. Now the cloister houses the Vilnius Academy of Art.

St. Anne's Church is constructed from 33 different kinds of clay bricks presented an astounding example of the inventiveness and boldness of the master masons of the time. Legend has it that Napoleon Bonaparte was enchanted by the church's beauty, and he wished that he could magically transport it to Paris in the palm of his hand.

20. PILIES GATVĖ (CASTLE STREET)



Pilies gatvė (literally, "Castle Street") is the main street in the Old Town of Vilnius, running from Cathedral Square to the Town Hall Square.

Out of several locations across Vilnius used by market traders to sell the wares of folk artists, Pilies Street is the most popular. It has a natural advantage over the Town Hall Square as the street is generally busy and less likely to be interrupted by the political or cultural events commonly held at the Town Hall. Many people visit the street to buy gifts at Christmas or before going abroad to visit friends. The market is also popular with souvenir hunters. Souvenir shops offer amberware and amber jewellery as well as linen clothes. The street is also known for the Kaziukas Fair, when folk artists from all four corners of Lithuania gather here to display and sell their latest merchandise.

Speaking of festivals, if something is being celebrated in Vilnius, Pilies Street is usually an excellent vantage point - most processions will make their way through here at some point. This is true whatever the festival - be it Christmas, Easter, the day of Restoration of Independence, or just a spontaneous celebration following a major win for the Lithuanian basketball team.

The headquarters of Vilnius University are located between Pilies Street and University Street, (Lithuanian: *Universiteto gatvė*). The House of the Signatories where the Declaration of Independence was signed on 16 February 1918 is also located on this street.

21. STS. PETER AND PAUL'S CHURCH



St. Peter and St. Paul's Church (Lithuanian: *Šv. apaštalų Petro ir Povilo bažnyčia*) is a Roman Catholic church located in the Antakalnis neighbourhood of the city. Its interior has masterful compositions of stucco mouldings by Giovanni Pietro Perti and ornamentation by Giovanni Maria Galli of Milan, and is considered a Lithuanian Baroque masterpiece.

The church is a basilica built on a traditional cross plan with a lantern dome allowing extra light into its white interior. The freestanding columns of the main facade were used for the first time in Lithuanian ecclesiastical architecture.

The inscription surrounding the base of the dome (*Tu es Petrus et supra hanc petram edificabo ecclesiam meam et portae inferi non praevalent adversus eam*) is the same as that of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

The church is decorated with over 2000 religious depictions. The frescos are attributed to Johann Gotthard Berchhoff. The female heads opposite the St. Augustine Chapel represent two sister nations: Poland and Lithuania.

The church was commissioned in 1668 by Michael Casimir Pac, Grand hetman of the Lithuanian armies.

Well, dear VilNews readers,

I hope you have been able to follow me on this rather long stroll through the Vilnius architecture. If not, you have at least a text to lean back on the day when you yourself will be visited by people who want to know more about the irresistible architecture here in Vilnius.

Warm Regards,
Aage Myhre
Editor

VilNews

The "VilNews" e-mails from Vilnius International Club (VIC) reach around 1000 recipients worldwide, providing Lithuania-related news, articles and general information to expatriates and the diasporas. Since its founding in 2001, VIC has been a leading non-profit organisation and has created a dynamic forum for people from many nations. The club's mission is to support and encourage cultural, historic and economic vitality - in the capital city of Vilnius and in the outstandingly historic yet contemporary and cosmopolitan nation of Lithuania. Expatriates join the Lithuanian community in furthering diplomatic, business and cultural links, fulfilling VIC's mission through fellowship, monthly meetings and occasional charitable programmes.

Please feel free to forward our VilNews to your contacts around the globe, and let us know if you have friends or colleagues wishing to be included on our e-mailing list!

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