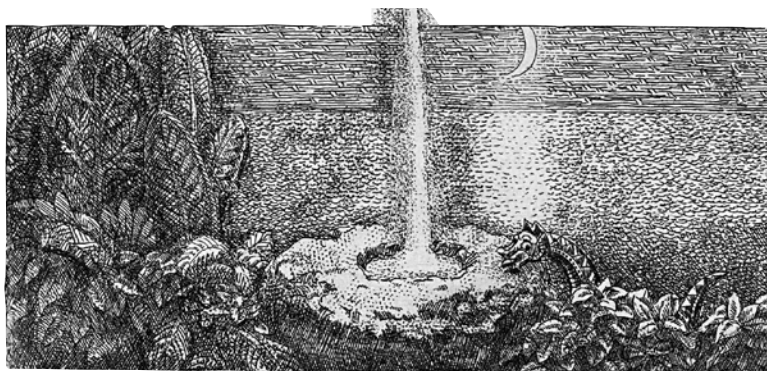


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# The Visuality of Cultural Memory: Urban Aspect

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Cultural memory is an effective aspect of the cultural system. The cultural system is the totality of co-habitation practices to specific a location and environment, thus cultural memory ensures cultural performance, supporting and consolidating all kinds of identities – individual, local communal, and national. Cultural memory on the basis of mother-tongue actualizes traditions, rituals, symbols and sign systems, social relations peculiarities, we-others differentiating practices. The embodied images are the primal substance for the formation of identities. National identity stems from the nation's cultural memory, which is then exposed to political identity consolidating and urban development guidelines. What is the role of the visual urban environment for the cultural memory forming national identity? The Lithuanian national revival took place in the second half of the 19th century responding to the tide of nation-states formation in Europe. The first wave of urbanization showed up in the thirties of the 20th century while creating an independent state. Later, a new, partly sovietized the urban environment imprinted into the cultural memory of the new urban communities. Only the Kaunas community cultural memory had kept its own visual urban heritage of the former independent state, helping to sustain their Lithuanianess under the conditions of sovietization. It is necessary to revive the visual signs and images of the lost urban communities, thus strengthening Lithuanian national identity and cultural memory of urban communities and enabling them to embed more firmly in a multicultural urban historical heritage.

**Keywords:** cultural memory, national identity, urban community, urbanization, visibility.

## Some preliminary remarks about culture and cultural memory

We see culture as a mother tongue based totality of historically developing practical ways and patterns, guaranteeing people a cohabitation with the natural, historical, cultural and neighboring environment. Cohabitation is of communal origin, thus coexistence implies strong communal

relations of the people, we feel ties as well as our and other people's difference and differentiating, in other words; clan, tribal, ethnic, and finally national identity assertion. Communal identity is a necessary stable form of social cohabitation. In our case – Lithuanian identity. All kinds of human activities, learning, communication and creativity can only be provided by way of culture, including a religious experience.

To be effective, culture functions such as a collective cultural memory “mechanism” structuring individual memory and allowing the coherence of individuality and communality and also nationality. Thus the primal task of cultural memory is to support and maintain various forms of concrete local communal identities. Culture is always locational. The embodied images are the primal substance for the formation of identities<sup>1</sup>. Two aspects of cultural memory can be detected – visual and narrative – as the main source of material for identity and worldview formation. The visual aspect is very elusive for conceptualizing, because we are accustomed to semiotize!! images and to translate images into signs and narrations<sup>2</sup>. I want to expose some insights in the formation of national identity with regard to urban communities and urban environment formation. National identity stems from the nation’s cultural memory, which is then exposed to political identity building and urban environmental redevelopment guidelines. What is the role of the visual urban environment in the cultural memory as this memory “creates” and strengthens national identity? This question also points to the role of urban communities.

### 19th century Lithuania: rural landscape

First we must go back in time. Lithuania in the 19th century was an agrarian coun-

try, western fringes of Tsarist Russia, the very periphery of the capitalist system. Europe in the 19th century goes through intensive capitalist industrialization and urbanization, which rapidly changed the landscape, but these processes were significantly delayed in the periphery. The primary impetus for urbanization could be associated with the Tsarist government’s imposed centralized regular way of urban planning. Many of the Russian Empire cities and towns were rebuilt in one way or another, with broader and straighter streets and with new blocks and avenues. Significant traces of such planning are visible in Vilnius, where new blocks arose by the new St. George (now Gediminas) boulevard. We can rejoice that the then city planners left the Old town untouched. So, the city is rich in its visual environment of continuous urban history, of the Grand Duchy, of the Russian Empire, of the Polish and Soviet occupation and of recent urbanization. The Lithuanian landscape began to change at the end of the 19th century with the development of new industries.

Although the development of capitalism in these fringes have been in slow motion, the population in major cities was growing fast. Vilnius grew from 60 thousand in 1860 to 162.5 thousand in 1900; Kaunas from 23 thousand in 1857 to 71 thousand in 1897; Šiauliai from about 1800 in 1833 to 16 thousand in 1897<sup>3</sup>. Lithuania, however, moved into a new century as a rural community, with urban inhabitants composing mere 15 percent of the popu-

1 Tilley, Ch. Identity, Place, Landscape and Heritage, *Journal of Material Culture*. 2006. 11(1/2), p. 7–32.

2 Bollmer, G. D. Visuality in Systems of Memory: Toward an Ontology of Collective Memory, Ritual and the Technological, *Memory Studies*. 2011. 4(4), p. 450–464.

3 Merkys, V. *Развитие промышленности и формирование пролетариата в Литве в XIX в.*, Вильнюс: Минтис, 1969, с. 296.

lation. In the big cities most of the inhabitants were Byelorussians, Poles, and Jews. Of these, arose and a new layer of the working classes. According to historian Zigmantas Kiaupa, the Lithuanian urban population has always been multilingual. The early 19th century was dominated by Polish and Jewish speakers and in the beginning of the 20th century there were already clearly visible Lithuanian speaking dwellers, in small towns they might have been in the majority<sup>4</sup>. However, the new Lithuanian citizens still could not get together in efficient urban communities and build a Lithuanian citizens caste with its own cultural historical memory which could be traced from the the urban visual remains.

Cultural memory is always a certain community's memory. Memory's a symbolic system, content, and its scope is dependent on the peculiar features of the community's historically determined way of life. In the wake of new capitalist urbanization and the emergence of nation-states grew the importance of urban communities and their cultural creative power for the support and reinforcement of cultural memory. Why? Nation-state building is a many-sided political task. Cities are the special places for the creation of various civilizational "goods" including political and cultural institutions. Cultural "production" is fundamentally related to the creation of social relations, so cities spread all sorts of social "innovations". Rural areas are preserving folk culture, old traditions and the local collective memory. However, the historical cultural memory, with particular

4 Kiaupa, Z. *Lietuvos miestai*. Vilnius: Šviesa, 2007, p. 38.

reference to the evolution of statehood, needed for the strengthening of national identity is a matter of the city and its political and cultural institutions. To preserve and maintain historical heritage is also the task of these institutions. The cultural memory needed for national revival came from the peasant ethnic community with a mentality deeply set in rural landscape and environment images and stories. That memory lacked the urban images, imagination and abilities of urban ways of life. With this kind of memory the Lithuanian nation began to build a national state and national identity. Kaunas was the capital of the state.

The circumstances of the transition from ethno-cultural community to nation consolidating national identity, and cultural memory must be understood as considerable existential challenges that were successfully coped with. Some of these challenges can be detected in 1923 Census data (*Lietuvos gyventojai... / Population de la Lithuanie... 1924*). The population was 2 028 971. Of special importance are urban and rural communities ratio, as well as data of the ethnic composition of urban communities. Only 14.9 percent of the population were citizens. It should be noted key principle of the census by nationality clause: "national self-determination of the population – what each considers itself" (*Lietuvos gyventojai... / Population de la Lithuanie... 1924: XXXIV*). The ethnic composition was as if favorable for the strengthening of Lithuanian national identity: Lithuanians were in the majority of 83.88 percent markedly surpassing other ethnic communities – Jews (7.58 percent), Poles (3.23 percent), Russians (2.49 percent)

Germans (1.44 percent) and Latvians (0.73 percent). However, a different picture emerges by looking at the ethnic composition of the townspeople. Lithuanian citizens composed only 57.1 percent, and Jews 32.2 percent. In the towns, the distribution was far more favorable for Lithuanians with a 66.4 and 28.7 percent ratio. So, in cities dominated by different ethnocultural ways of communal living characterized by a distinctive urban visual expression. Because Jews have always been attributed from Grand Duchy of Lithuania times to urban estates, their collective cultural memory was deeper and urban life skills were much more elaborated than that of Lithuanian citizens. Important in this respect are the Kaunas ethnic composition data. Of the 92.5 thousand population to the Lithuanian community belonged 54.5 thousand people, to the Jewish, 25 thousand people. There were also smaller ethnic communities Poles (4 thousand), Germans (3.2 thousand), Russians (2.9 thousand). Panevėžys data: 19 thousand people, Lithuanians contributed slightly more than 10 thousand and Jews around 7 thousand. Šiauliai was a relatively Lithuanian city: from 21 thousand people the Lithuanian population was about 15 thousand and Jews almost 5.5 thousand. Thus, urban cities have a visible expression of the different communities life-styles, beliefs, calendar rituals and of course burial places, which are very important urban visual marks.

The state of Lithuania was created without the citizens of Vilnius and Klaipėda. Although the Klaipėda region was annexed to Lithuania in 1923, it retained strong German roots and cultural pat-

terns till the German annexation in 1939. Kaunas concentrated basic cultural forces that have taken the nation-state building and development, the strengthening of national identity and cultural memory, as well as the dissemination of Lithuanian ideology, national culture and its political consolidational force. Like the medieval cities and urban areas of capitalist modernization, Kaunas became the Lithuanian nation's "historical space center" (Henri Lefebvre), but Lithuanians deeply experienced the other, symbolic centre of Lithuania's historical statehood, that of Vilnius. State-building was seen as the visible urban transformation, so of especial importance was not only the work of political and cultural figures, but also of the architects and planners. Architects and engineers designing buildings somehow embodied a new visionary Lithuanianness in their plans, buildings and monuments. Architectural historians note that up to the 1930 construction has been going as of inertia and responding to the urgent state needs<sup>5</sup>, but later evolved a distinctive style based on the national ideology with a clear understanding of the task of strengthening national identity. One trend of national architectural design is characterized by the folk architecture stylistic "ornaments" and forms, and by other distinctive modern European rationalism and functionalism features. The representatives of the latter designed and built not only outstanding buildings in Kaunas, but also a wide range of public buildings in other cities and

5 Gūzas, E. Apie tautinę savimonę ir lietuvišką tarpukario architektūrą, *Archiforma*. 2012. 1/2(50), p. 66–74.

towns. These structures have changed the faces of cities and towns, and at the same time spread a new visible feature of Lithuanianess, which was entrenched in the cultural memory of the community. It was the design of the new urban space of Lithuania, which was already visible a real “social morphology”.

### **The Soviet urbanization: cities and city dwellers**

The Soviet occupation of Lithuania stopped the natural process of modernization and urbanization. The land has already been altered in accordance with the strict provisions of the Soviet ideology and in Moscow planned industrial development. The end of the war in Lithuania met in the deserted cities of Vilnius and Klaipėda, which first and foremost absorbed many rural residents. The peasants as well as people seeking higher education and their children became city dwellers. They lacked urban life skills, as well as the skills of supporting urbanized cultural memory. Under the rapid Soviet urbanization process Lithuania's 23 percent of urban people, according to the data from 1939, changed to one half of the total population in 1970. This trend has since intensified.

Vilnius and Klaipėda rendered former vilagers into city-dwellers. However, these major cities have been forming their communities on the basis of different ethnic grounds, Lithuanian and Russian-speaking newcomers. Vilnius lost its Poles and Jews, Kaunas only lost its Jewish community, Klaipėda just local Germans and Lithuanians. The only remains of former

vibrant communities and their ways of life were empty buildings and cemeteries. These remains were quickly redecorated and reformed, thus achieving almost the total eradication of “former” characters. Many cemeteries were also deleted for the Soviet ideological regime all kinds of the past were dubious because of its “bourgeois” and religious features. Although Soviet ideology has made efforts to create a new Soviet man internationalist, but the Lithuanian national identity and cultural memory with its narratives were deeply rooted in the mentality of rural people becoming city-dwellers. The Soviets failed to encourage denationalization and russification. A substantial factor of national identity and cultural memory was and is language. Lithuanians are lucky not only to preserve the native language, but also to withstand the attempts of russification of higher education, which by the way, were unique in the former Soviet Union. This helped to foster Lithuanianess by creative cultural and art forms.

As the peculiar example of the Lithuanian city planning and urban development project stand the scheme for the relocation of the productive forces prepared in the years of 1964–1967 and started to carry on. Under the ground of this plan emerged many urban-type settlements and connecting road networks. Urban planners clearly distinguished urban areas from other areas and used to think not only in strict design and industrial, but also in social and cultural categories. This kind of urbanization rapidly changed the landscape scenery and also derooted many local communities relocated them to new urban-type villages.

Looking back into Soviet held urbanization and urban communities from the perspective of keeping Lithuanianness we can distinguish Kaunas city-dwellers. Why? Kaunas has remained a historical city with the Lithuanian urban community and its cultural memory in a former urban environment loaded with this memory supporting urban structure, signs and monuments. There were many official, cultural institutions, buildings and monuments, certain areas that are associated with the independent Lithuanian historical stories. Neither Vilnius, nor Klaipėda had this kind of Lithuanian visual historical urban heritage to support and maintain urban cultural memory. These were strange cities. Kaunas citizens, at least a considerable part of them, retained the site-specific socio-cultural symbolic system forming an independence era for the maintenance of Lithuanianness. This system was charged with the political efficacy component. Visual historical urban areas belong to the place, and with it a certain identity has always felt and experienced rather than merely imagined<sup>6</sup>. Cultural memory's continuity, locality, and visible "materiality" was the distinguishing feature of Kaunas city community, particularly apparent when Lithuania began to live under the conditions of sovietized and urbanized regions.

In the 7–9 decades of the last century emerged aspirations of the new citizens to enroot more deeply in the historical urban heritage. This marked a certain shift in self-consciousness: urban communities started to deliberately strengthen Lithuanian historical roots absorbing historic urban heritage.

6 Tilley, Ch. Identity, Place, Landscape and Heritage, p. 22.

Vilnius, Klaipėda and Kėdainiai oldtowns made a recovery. Again, a great job was done by some urban planners and architects in the evaluation of urban heritage, preservation and management. Protection of this heritage has been developing in opposition to plain urbanization. The legal framework of protection was formed, the scientifically based list of protected monuments, as well as evaluation methodologies, which takes into account the spatial structure plan and the peculiarities of the interaction of urban constructs were issued. Old town regeneration projects expanded urban communities, self-consciousness and understanding of the visible civilizational importance of the urban historical environment.

As a symbolic sign of the shift in public consciousness under the conditions of sovietization, indicating the understanding of the need to strengthen the roots of Lithuanianness as well as cultural memory can be seen with the rebuilding of Trakai Castle in the year of 1962. With its rebuilding there were actualized some great historical origins and statehood narrative that depicts the Lithuanian nation as an important figure in European history. That work of town planners and architects motivated the wider society to be active in keeping urban and architectural heritage. This activity expanded in the 9th decade. From urban communities, arose the new liberational initiatives, since these communities matured in to urban political power and cultural art centers.

### **Urbanisation in liberated Lithuania**

Lithuanian liberation from Soviet occupation changed the economic, social and

cultural existence. The Soviet way of life, social relationships and links have been rapidly changed by the capitalist system, which is based on private property. The former strict urban planning system went in to fragmentation and the dependency on powerful financial and political groups. New housing estates and shopping centers changed the urban townscape, crashed into the historic urban heritage areas and began to overshadow valuable architectural structures. Lithuania did not adequately understand the new features of the capitalist system, thus it quickly succumbed to capital government. The moving force of the modern capitalism system is a speculative financial capital. Capital make gains by reterritorialization, thus it naturally encourages urban development, the so-called *urban sprawl*, accompanied by the “unmemorable landscapes, forgettable architecture”<sup>7</sup>. Urban developmental practices ensure reterritorialization of financial capital and capital accumulation thus the economy is inevitably subordinated to the real estate bubbles (see Rubavičius 2010; Rubavičius 2012). A major characteristic of current urbanization taking place in Lithuania is its developmental inequality. Urban expansion is evident in big cities, especially in Vilnius, and the other cities, towns and rural areas lose their population and contract. It is difficult to determine the real extent of urbanization.

Under new conditions urban planning is directed by the aim of profit maximization, so urban development in respect of national

7 Farrar, M. E. Amnesia, Nostalgia, and the Politics of Place Memory, *Political Research Quarterly*. 2011. 64(4), p. 723.

identity and cultural memory, the city's community-building developments were left to chance. New urban communities lack the necessary cultural memory of the city. Memory enhancement is particularly relevant in the largest cities, Vilnius and Klaipėda because these cities lack their historical urban communities with their respective cultural memory embracing the living habits and habitus of 3–5 generations. Thus the cultural memory of Lithuanian urban societies are very fragile, unstable and with weak historical roots. Thus the primal political task is to elaborate cultural means for the cultivation of cultural memory including the relations with other ethno-cultural communities and their visual urban heritage. The Lithuanian national identity: must embrace a visual urban heritage of the city restoring visible marks reminiscent of vanished ethno-cultural communities. And thus injecting a new creative power to the cultural system and nation's self-consciousness.

### Some concluding remarks

New economic relations, globalization, housing estate speculation and labour force migration have a huge impact on social relations loosening the social and cultural ties of urban communities. Many citizens have gone to new living places forming new communities. The former sovietized cultural memory system was refuted but there were no political guidelines established for new memory system forming. We are lacking consolidating long-term urban planning policy taking into account capacities of urban communities to take roots in living areas broadening their cultural



historical memory and thus strengthening their identities. New urban visibility chokes the urban heritage, although this heritage is giving relatively stable urban images for the cultural memory system. These factors weaken urban communities cultural historical memory and their cultural creative

powers. Of course there are significant exceptions while old blocks and buildings are restored. A unique example, the Palace of Great Dukes of Lithuania in Vilnius with a many-sided effect on urban structure, the urban visibility system and urban and national identity.

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