

LITHUANIA

Wooden Architecture of Vilnius Historic Suburbs

In the 2001-2002 edition of *Heritage at Risk*, the Lithuanian National Committee of ICOMOS mentioned wooden architecture in historic suburbs as the most endangered of several groups of cultural heritage items in Lithuania.

The historic centre of Vilnius – Old Town – is inscribed on the World Heritage List, but the survival of the wooden architecture of the historic suburbs of Vilnius remains problematic. For the Vilnius historic suburbs – Užupis, Žvėrynas, Antakalnis, Šnipiškės, Markučiai – have grown as separate residential areas in the configuration of the town's centre. Wooden architecture has survived there unevenly. Old wooden buildings still dominate in large areas of Žvėrynas, Šnipiškės and Markučiai. In Užupis and Antakalnis, groups of wooden buildings or individual ones are interwoven with brick buildings surrounded by a new urban environment.

The wooden architecture in Vilnius has survived from the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, but it is very diverse typologically as well as stylistically. We possess a broad spectrum of historical architectural trends and influences which have been reflected in the architecture of the wooden buildings. In the suburbs domestic residences were built among abundant vegetation. The architecture of the houses was unusual: there are elements of vernacular architecture, Russian *dacha* (summer-cottages), Swiss resort or Polish Zakopan styles. Modest, functional homes for one or two families predominate. There are quite a few more sumptuous villas, rental properties for some families and some complexes of wooden manors. In the Vilnius suburbs, the character of wooden architecture varied because of different developments, the cost of land and the wealth of that area's inhabitants.

For some centuries, Žvėrynas and Markučiai have been recreational places for the inhabitants of Vilnius. Summer residences, villas, and restaurants were built. In the middle of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries wooden residential areas were built. In Žvėrynas, members of the rich and middle class built more sumptuous and rental houses. Buildings in Žvėrynas distinguish themselves by their abundance in décor and architectural elements – turrets, verandas, mezzanines, and gable dormers. After the St Petersburg-Warsaw railway was built, Markučiai became a residential area for poor people. There are few old villas left, but the newly built houses, being small and of modest architecture fit well into the vivid, hilly landscape. Single and unique wooden buildings have survived in Užupis and Antakalnis.

Wooden architecture is the oldest in Šnipiškės. Unfortunately, it is in very poor condition and finds itself in the most intensive development zone of the town centre. The Šnipiškės quarters are part of that area's cultural heritage. It is a significant historic suburb dating to the second part of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. The suburb possesses a characteristic urban plan of streets and narrow quarters where low-storeyed wooden houses predominate. Most houses have vernacular traits; an unusual cultural building type is characteristic of this suburb, reminiscent of buildings in small towns or villages. It is a residential area where poor people lived.

In recent years development processes have been very active in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. The political, social, and economic situation encouraged development by new investments, an increased cost of land in the town centre and the council's ambitious plans. Possibilities are sought to make more intensive use of the area in the town centre. One or two storey wooden buildings in poor condition have become an obstacle to new construction and



House in Pavasario Street

there are attempts to destroy them. But these areas are very close to the Vilnius Old Town World Heritage area and its environment falls under the visual protection zone of Vilnius urban heritage. New construction is regulated by the cultural heritage laws. Unfortunately, in reality only unique buildings are protected.

For example, the Šnipiškės area is an unusual complex of Vilnius historic urban suburb and architecture. The cultural value of this complex is obvious, but the buildings are in a poor physical state. There are sub-standard sanitary conditions, which do not correspond to present requirements. In addition, on the right bank of the Neris river, south of Šnipiškės, a new Vilnius centre has grown up, possessing the potential to develop further. Twenty to thirty-three storey buildings make up this new centre. We are therefore faced with evident contradictions. On the one hand, the area's obvious cultural heritage which has poor physical condition and poor living standards, on the other hand there is the rapidly growing contemporary town centre.

Taking account of the area's location and its problems, it is necessary to carry out an entire review of existing buildings from a cultural heritage perspective. The area's protected zone, established twelve years ago, must be revised and could be reduced. The selected portion of the area for further preservation should be the most characteristic one as cultural heritage is involved. This part should be suitable for not only restoration but also for its future integrity, survival and use.

Wooden architecture is gradually being lost to natural timber decay, fires, incompetent repair or building renewal. Wooden houses that are covered by bricks and contemporary additions grow in number. Old decorative details, authentic elements of buildings, doors, window frames, the patterns of the boards are gradually being lost. Society and house owners do not value the wooden buildings sufficiently; they do not know how to maintain them. It would be useful to have an exemplary restoration of one house. It might be organised with the help of restorers from other countries. It could be an effective example and stimulus in the right direction to save this wooden architecture. It goes without saying, a special program, supported financially by the state or municipality, would be of great help. It would be better if such programs were worked out for every Vilnius historic suburb. Of course, today the proper restoration of a wooden house is very expensive for most owners. State support could be expected only for the most unique buildings.

Due to the reality of this problem, the Vilnius council is initiating the development of a 'Strategy to protect the wooden architectural heritage in the central area of Vilnius' and an inventory of wooden buildings. The aim of the strategy is to present concrete

proposals, having evaluated the present range of wooden architectural heritage and their physical situation. Many wooden buildings are in a critical state now, but unfortunately, developing and implementing strategic plans are a long process.

G.Miknevičienė, J.Glemža
ICOMOS Lithuania



Wooden houses in Giedraiėiu Street



Wooden house in Antakalnis suburb

Another view of Giedraiėiu Street

Old wooden house and modern constructions in the background

