

URBAN DESIGN IN THE BALTICS: STUDIES, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Urban design is a component part of the art and science of architecture as well as an indispensable field of architectural activity. After the Baltic states regained their independence and planning as well as urban design of towns and districts could be conducted in a democratic way, an inevitable evolution of concepts and even the way of thinking in this field took place. Two decades of independence have passed but one still cannot say that everything is clearly and uniformly perceived by all players involved in the activities of urban design. There is still a clear lack of common understanding of what actually is the object of the art and science of urban design.

The three neighbouring Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – are almost identical in their geographical situation, size of the territory, population, traditional life-style and Western-oriented mentality. Their 20th century history and fate are also very similar. All three lost their independence in 1940, while their paths back to liberty was analogous as well, ending successfully in 1990 with the restoration of independence. In spite of these similarities, there are quite fundamental differences in the field of spatial organization. The sizes of cities, character of urban network, situation and typological character of the capital city, length of the seashore and so on can all be referred to here (Vanagas *et al.* 2002). Urban evolution in the Baltic States can be divided into three major phases: pre-Soviet (till 1945), Soviet (1945–1990) and post-Soviet (since 1990). As far as the present urban transformations are concerned, the Soviet and post-Soviet periods are of great importance, as they had a crucial impact on the current form of the Baltic cities and represent conceptually opposing urban development condition in action, namely, state-led centralised and free-market driven decentralised planning systems (Cirtautas 2015). Despite the above differences between the Baltic States and similarities of their development in the Soviet time, urbanisation processes taking place today are already signs of a subsequent, qualitatively different urbanisa-

tion phase – suburbanisation and rural-urbanisation. These processes are not recent; their evolution has been determined by the economic situation and the degree of automobilisation. As a result, cities have opened up and the objective need for concentrated inhabitation has disappeared. This reflects the conflict between the real (or maybe necessary) suburbanisation and the concept of classical (or sustained), traditionally perceived city (Juškevičius 2013). Although efforts are still being put to find the best concept, the countries and towns are divided on this matter because traditions, economic power and country-specific planning system features play an important role here.

When looking at the results of scientific conferences in the field of urban design which have taken place in Lithuania in the past few years, it becomes evident that attempts are being made to purify/define the field of professional activity and the relevant areas of urban form analysis because nowadays this professional activity is stuck in the phase of formation of procedural documentation of territorial planning, legal labyrinths of interest coordination, etc., although all the necessary conditions and, most importantly, demand and need for the studies, science and practical systemic activity of urban design are in place.

On 6 November 2015, the Faculty of Architecture of Vilnius Gediminas Technical University organised a scientific conference under the title analogous to this thematic issue's title – *Urban design in the Baltics: studies, research and practice* – at which emphasis was placed once again on the relevance of urban planning and design issues.

The event attracted a wide interest of national and international audience, with its members ranging from academics to practitioners in the field, including experts and principal architects from the municipalities of a big number of Lithuanian towns and regions, officials from ministries, chairman and lawyer of the Chamber of Lithuanian Architects – in total over 100 participants. Conference discussions focused on critical aspects

of the urban design concept, professional education of urban design specialists, and areas of research of modern urbanised environment. In addition, scholars presented results of the latest research, while speakers representing urban planning and design companies shared insights from their practical expertise.

The conference was divided into three sessions. Speakers of the first session, called *Studies*, emphasised that urban design, like any other systemic activity, must be assessed applying three criteria: practical activity, studies and research. It was concluded that the conception of urban design in Lithuania differs from the classical conception and it results in the central object of urban design being not yet identified (A. Vyšniūnas). This session looked back at the underlying tradition of the urban design science – morphology of a town. Also an answer to the question what is the Lithuanian tradition of town morphology and what is our perspective of urban research and modelling was sought (I. Alistratovaitė-Kurtinaitienė, D. Dijokienė). Two other speakers were comparing urban design and planning study programmes and processes in Lithuania and European countries (namely, Norway and the United Kingdom) and spoke about the interrelation of science and practical activity (E. Archipovaitė, S. Mozūriūnaitė). The speakers of the session *Research/Theory* focused mainly on the aspects of urban form analysis. A speaker from Tallinn Technology University (S. Sultson) presented the analysis of Estonian towns' urban form during the period of 1940–1960. Another speaker presented a historian's assessment of the urban planning projects from Lithuania's Soviet period and the period of independence. The speaker pointed out an important task of capturing the territory's identity, its "spirit" when drawing plans, which, however, is not always taken into account (R. Čepaitienė). This session also dealt with such topics as the problems of suburban territories formation (T. Grunskis, G. Baleišytė), compactness of cities and methods of their analysis in the context of the Baltic states (M. Cirtautas). The session was closed by a presentation emphasising the need for expert assessment in the process of urban planning and designing (V. Dapkevičius). The session *Practice* was devoted to discussions on challenging issues related to practical activity of urban planning and design. Concrete architectural and urban design projects were used to illustrate such issues. Presentations were made by practicing architects and urban designers. They described a number of problems in this field, such as: development of towns where the number of inhabitants is decreasing and effects it will have on Lithuanian towns and their system in the future (M. Pakalnis); de-

teriorating quality of the urban process; diminishing presence of the true urban genre of town planning (V. Rudokas); liberal tolerance of unregulated development in general terms (G. R. Skačkauskienė). Also brighter aspects were mentioned: initiatives stemming from conscious self-governance could be used to analyse parameters of urban form and to elaborate on development concepts, urban planning policy, expectations and visions of municipalities (S. Motieka); there are still architects and urban designers in Lithuania who seek to apply holistic approach to urban territories that they analyse and to find solutions hinted by territories themselves (E. Neniškis).

Thoughts expressed by Lithuanian scholars and practicing experts of urban planning and design on topics discussed in this edition of the magazine are published on the website of the scientific conference of 6 November 2015 at the following address <http://www.urbanbaltic.vgtu.lt/index.php/urban2015/urban2015/schedConf/presentations>. To complement discussions on the topical issue, this edition provides articles of foreign researchers – Estonian, Latvian and Czech scholars.

The authors describe tendencies of urban planning and design prevailing in their respective countries. In his article, the Estonian researcher assesses the urban design of Estonian towns from the post World War II period. He concludes that the central parts of towns were formed using overly grandiose key compositions, although attempts to preserve an optimal plan structure can also be seen (S. Sultson). Latvia has a strong school of landscape architecture that is why landscape architecture is inseparable component of urban planning and design subjects. This also becomes evident when reading articles of Latvian authors (N. Nitavska, D. Zigmunde, M. Markova, U. Īle, and A. Ziemelniece). Scholars of this country consider qualitative formation of historical urban environment to be important. This aspect is assessed in the analysis of urban architectural competitions in the territory of urban heritage that took place during 2004–2014 (I. Mikelsone). There is also an article by an author from a non-Baltic but post-soviet country, who is architect and urban designer, which reviews actual changes in the system of urban planning in post-socialist city (the case of Prague). According to the author, all the Czech cities stay in front of the biggest change of city planning philosophy in last two decades. The article presents a completely pioneering methodology for quality commissioning of land use plans and innovative system of city planning prepared by the municipality in cooperation with the Faculty of Architecture CTU in Prague and with the new Institute of Planning and Development (F. Landa).

Scientific presentations of conferences and published articles form a fundament to lean on when making further steps. The set of articles plays an important role in forming scientific discourse in the field of urban design. It would help not only to find high quality solutions when dealing with town formation tasks but also to reasonably integrate reflections on notional assumptions into the existing legislation and technical regulations.

References

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