



ARCHITECTURE OF  
**OPTIMISM**

The Kaunas Phenomenon, 1918–1940



# ARCHITECTURE OF **OPTIMISM**

The Kaunas Phenomenon, 1918 – 1940

Edited by Marija Drémaitė

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This book is published as part of the traveling exhibition

## **ARCHITECTURE OF OPTIMISM**

### **THE KAUNAS PHENOMENON, 1918-1940**

#### **EXHIBITION CURATORS**

Marija Drėmaitė

Giedrė Jankevičiūtė

Vaidas Petruolis

Edited and published in collaboration with  
the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO



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Lithuania 100

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#### **EDITOR**

Marija Drėmaitė

#### **CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS**

Vilma Akmenytė-Ruzgienė

Norbertas Černiauskas

Marija Drėmaitė

Giedrė Jankevičiūtė

Paulius Tautvydas Laurinaitis

Viltė Migonytė-Petruilienė

Vaidas Petruolis

#### **PHOTOGRAPHY**

Gintaras Česonis

Norbert Tukaj

#### **TRANSLATED FROM**

#### **LITHUANIAN BY**

Darius Sužiedėlis

#### **ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDITOR**

Jeremy Hill

#### **DESIGN BY**

Linas Gliaudelis

Jurga Dovydenaitė

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# FOREWORD

This book is more than just the story of one city and its architecture. It is about the perpetual birth and death of hope, about creative endeavour and inspiring productive optimism, about the migration of ideas and forms, about the local and the global, about art and freedom, war and oppression. It is about changing forms and ideas and their relationship with the present day. This book is part of an exhibition entitled *The Architecture of Optimism: The Kaunas Phenomenon, 1918-1940* held to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the restoration of Lithuanian independence.

The modern architecture of Kaunas reflects the political, social, economic and cultural optimism that flourished in the capitals of newly proclaimed or re-established European countries in the wake of World War I. After Kaunas suddenly became Lithuania's provisional capital in 1919, the city's subsequent transformation was nothing short of miraculous. Kaunas' identity changed radically: in less than twenty years, its residents transformed the city into a modern, elegant and European capital. Architecture played a particularly important role in that transformation, which is why its significance endured even after the loss of Lithuanian independence in 1940. During the years of Soviet occupation that followed World War II, the modernist architectural heritage of inter-war Kaunas became the embodiment of lost statehood and a memorial to its legacy, as well as a symbolic window to the West and an exemplary standard of quality for Lithuanian architects. Today, this legacy is an important source of Kaunas' identity and an expression of the city's *genius loci*.

This book highlights the transformation of inter-war Kaunas into a modern capital city and illustrates the challenges confronting that city and the efforts to overcome them. In Chapter One, three curators of the exhibition *The Architecture of Optimism: The Kaunas Phenomenon, 1918-1940* seek to provide a perspective of Kaunas within the broader context of the architecture of optimism (Marija Drémaitė), an understanding of how modern architecture helped create Kaunas' identity (Giedrė Jankevičiūtė), and insight into why the legacy of inter-war architecture is so important to the city's identity today (Vaidas Petrulis).

In Chapter Two, historians Vilma Akmenytė-Ruzgienė and Norbertas Černiauskas consider two important problems facing inter-war Kaunas: the impact of its provisional capital status on the development of its urban space and the challenges of urbanisation faced by new residents of Kaunas as they became true city dwellers. Marija Drémaitė examines the backgrounds of the city's builders, migrant modernist architects, engineers and technicians. Paulius Tautvydas Laurinaitis and the artist Liudas Parulskis close the chapter by exploring the futuristic visions once contemplated in inter-war Kaunas – how did residents and newcomers imagine their city's future?

Chapter Three is devoted to an analysis of architectural sites that emerged as symbols of political power and national statehood. Although Kaunas was a multicultural city, the Lithuanian state adhered to an ideology of nation-centric development. Giedrė Jankevičiūtė and Vaidas Petrulis examine the creation of

**LEFT:** Vienybės (Unity) Square in Kaunas, photo: Vytautas Augustinas, 1935-1939, LNM

the country's representational architecture, the shaping of the nation's image, and the fostering of a common national identity.

Kaunas was not only Lithuania's political centre. It was first and foremost a lively, growing city – lacking in modern conveniences, it needed to rapidly modernise its engineering and social infrastructure. Chapter Four examines how the problem of the city's functional modernisation was addressed. Paulius Tautvydas Laurinaitis analyses urbanist theory and the planning process in the spontaneously emerging new capital. Vaidas Petrusis explores the modernisation of the city's educational infrastructure and architecture. Marija Drėmaitė reviews the development of industry. Giedrė Jankevičiūtė discusses how architecture was influenced by modern trends in recreation, sports and entertainment, while Viltė Migonytė-Petrulienė explores the creation of a health care and social welfare infrastructure that was so vital to the city's modernisation and surveys the exceptionally vibrant balance between city, nature and leisure in the resort areas of inter-war Kaunas.

The final chapter takes a look at the many faces of modernism and the diversity of Kaunas' architecture displayed so distinctly in the architecture and interiors of residential housing. Articles by Vaidas Petrusis and Giedrė Jankevičiūtė are followed by a collaboration between Vaidas Petrusis and photographer Gintaras Česonis and their exploration of the modernity of the rear façades of Kaunas residential buildings and the relationship of the inter-war heritage with the present day.

The material for this book was assembled from various Lithuanian archives, libraries and museums with assistance provided by the dedicated professionals working in these institutions. We wish to personally thank Gintaras Dručkus, Director of the Kaunas Regional State Archives and archival specialist Nijolė Ambraškienė; Kaunas City Museum Director Gabrielius Sužiedėlis; Alvydas Surblys from the Kaunas Regional Public Library; Giedrė Zuožienė from the Kupiškis Ethnographic Museum; Jūratė Katilienė and Ramutė Vaikšnoraitė from the Lithuanian Central State Archive's Department of Photographic Documents; Juozapas Blažiūnas, Director of the Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art; Rūta Chlomauskaitė and Rūta Eglinskienė from the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania; Žygintas Būčys, Ramunė Brusokienė, Evelina Bukauskaitė, Vitalija Jočytė, Dalia Keršytė and Kęstutis Stoškus from the National Museum of Lithuania; Živilė Ambrasaitė and Regina Jackūnaitė from the Lithuanian Theatre, Music and Cinema Museum; Daiva Šaranauskaitė and Vilma Petrikienė from the Maironis Lithuanian Literature Museum's Children's Literature Department; Nijolė Adomavičienė, Miglė Banytė, Raimonda Norkutė and Vaida Sirvydaitė-Rakutienė from the M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum; Vilma Karinauskienė from the Šiauliai Aušros Museum; Danguolė Graibuvienė from the Vytautas the Great War Museum; and the staff of the Kaunas Regional Public Library Kaunas Studies Department, the Vilnius Regional State Archives, and the Ninth Fort Museum in Kaunas. We also thank our colleagues abroad who shared their knowledge of the history of Kaunas: Mait Väljas from the Museum of Estonian Architecture; Jolanta Gromadzka from the Wrocław Museum of Architecture; and Ilze Martinsone, Director of the Latvian Museum of Architecture. We also

wish to express our gratitude to those who generously shared items from their personal collections with the authors of this book: Antanas Burkus, Antanas Liukaitis, Adomas Miliauskas, Daina Lozoraitis, Jonas Palys, Alfonsas Švipas, Saulius Kulakauskas and Audra Marija Stanišauskaitė-Kiltinavičienė. We thank Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis for sharing his memories of his childhood in Kaunas. We are also very grateful for the assistance provided by Ieva Mazūraitė-Novickienė from the National Gallery of Art, historian Raimonda Rickevičienė and historian Arvydas Pakštalis in the verification of information.

We wish to thank the initiator of this project, architect Julija Reklaitė, and the representatives of the project's organiser, the Secretariat of the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO: Secretary-General Asta Junevičienė, Renata Vaičekonytė-Kepežinskienė and Aida Baliūnienė. As editors, we were inspired by discussions emerging from the Kaunas 18+18 project, organised by Jūratė Tutlytė, and by our collaboration with a vast exhibition and publication production team: the eloquent Žygimantas Kudirka; architects Ieva Cicėnaitė, Matas Šiupšinskas, Vika Pranaitytė and Jomantas Padgurskas; designer Linas Gliaudelis; sculptor Lukas Šiupšinskas; filmmakers Jurgė Pridotkaitė, Svetlana Gužauskienė, Rytis Titas and Vytautas Aukščiūnas; lighting artist Linas Kutavičius; photographers Norbert Tukaj and Gintaras Česonis; designer Jurga Dovydenaitė; translator Darius Sužiedėlis; editor Dangė Vitkienė; and publisher Ūla Ambrasaitė.

Finally, we thank Kaunas modernism, the principal source of inspiration for this book.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ČDM – M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art  
 KAVB – Kaunas Regional Public Library  
 KEM – Kupiškis Ethnographic Museum  
 KMM – Kaunas City Museum  
 KRVA – Kaunas Regional State Archives  
 KTU ASI – Kaunas Institute of Technology, Institute of Architecture and Construction  
 LCVA – Lithuanian Central State Archives  
 LLMA – Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art  
 LNM – National Museum of Lithuania  
 LNMMB RKRS – Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division  
 LTMKM – Lithuanian Theatre, Music & Cinema Museum  
 ŠAM – Šiauliai Aušros Museum  
 VDKM – Vytautas the Great War Museum  
 VRVA – Vilnius Regional State Archives  
 VVGŽM – Vilnius Gaon Jewish State Museum



CHAPTER 1.

# **THE ARCHITECTURE OF OPTIMISM**



# THE ARCHITECTURE OF OPTIMISM AND THE KAUNAS PHENOMENON

Marija Drėmaitė

Optimism is not a new architectural style or one more 'ism', nor is it another modernist movement among the many that emerged and took shape in post-World War I Europe. Optimism is a state of mind. It is an outlook – an expression of faith and hope that the outcome of one's efforts will be both positive and desirable.

There was no shortage of optimism in Europe between the two World Wars. Indeed, it was a distinguishing characteristic of Europe's newest countries. After the collapse of the great European empires in the wake of World War I, nine new independent states appeared on the European map between 1917 and 1918: Austria, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Yugoslavia. These countries shared an optimistic vision of a more promising future – one based on hopes of self-sufficiency, democracy, prosperity, social equality, physical and social mobility, academic and technological progress, and the comforts promised by urbanisation. They became enthusiastic participants in the race to modernise, hoping to keep pace with global trends and become more European in the process.<sup>1</sup> Optimism drove them to work, create and change. The multitude of avant-garde experiments embarked upon in this period testifies to the fact that the construction and modernisation of independent states in Central and Eastern Europe was a multifaceted and multidimensional phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

On 16 February 1918, the founders of the newly proclaimed independent Republic of Lithuania declared Vilnius as their capital. By January 1919, however, geopolitical tensions and territorial conflicts forced Lithuania's government to quickly relocate to the country's second largest city, Kaunas, in the face of imminent attack by Bolshevik forces. Later, by 1920, Vilnius was under Polish military control. Kaunas took on a unique status – that of provisional capital, a designation that led to the city's radical transformation. As the provisional capital of Lithuania from 1919 to 1939, Kaunas became an example of rapid urbanisation and modernisation and an expression of the values and aspirations inspired by an optimistic belief in an independent future – an attitude shared by many cities in inter-war Central and Eastern Europe.



1. The former home of painter and photographer Veronika Šleivyte, photo: Veronika Šleivyte, c. 1935, KEM

1 For more on this subject, see *Races to Modernity. Metropolitan Aspirations in Eastern Europe, 1890–1940*, edited by Jan C. Behrends and Martin Kohlrausch, Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2014.

2 For more, see Andrzej Szczerski, *Modernizacja. Sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 1918–1939*, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2010.

**PRECEDING PAGE:** Panorama of Naujamiestis in Kaunas, photo: Vytautas Augustinas, 1935–1939, LNM

**LEFT:** Balcony overlooking Naujamiestis, c. 1937, photo: Veronika Šleivyte, KEM

2. Table. Construction statistics for Kaunas, 1918-1939. Compiled in 2017 by Vaidas Petrulis based on archival material and publications

	RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS			NON-RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS		
	BRICK	WOODEN	TOTAL	BRICK	WOODEN	TOTAL
1918-1921	8	46	54	4	9	13
1922	67	113	180	29	74	103
1923	88	108	196	37	60	97
1924	78	216	294	35	127	162
1925	83	224	307	22	166	188
1926	102	165	267	13	103	116
1927	88	198	286	38	117	155
1928	119	310	429	33	119	152
1929	131	305	436	42	168	210
1930	159	289	448	39	177	216
1931	215	659	874	104	479	583
1932	121	461	582	148	418	566
1933	88	311	399	89	298	387
1934	75	216	291	109	225	334
1935	85	220	305	128	239	367
1936	86	301	387	161	324	485
1937	86	243	329	128	123	251
1938	172	255	427	164	185	349
1939	297	253	550	135	132	267
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>7041</b>			<b>5001</b>

**MODERNITY AND RADICAL URBAN TRANSFORMATION.** Renewal was the central goal of many European cities, particularly those that had recovered their status, or been newly designated, as administrative capitals, such as Warsaw, Tallinn, Riga, Helsinki and Belgrade.<sup>3</sup> In their role as representing both a state and a people, these cities were faced with similar challenges: the need to rid themselves of their imperial pasts and architectural legacies and symbols, change their urban environment, create new political centres, and construct new government facilities. Kaunas was an old provincial city, founded in the Middle Ages, which underwent an industrial revival of sorts in the nineteenth century. In 1919, the city had approximately 90,000 inhabitants.

Over the next twenty years, Kaunas took a rapid territorial and demographic leap forward. The city boundaries expanded seven times and the population grew to 155,000 residents. Though it was seen as the capital of an ethnically Lithuanian state, inter-war Kaunas was a multicultural city. In 1937, the city's population was 61% Lithuanian, 25.5% Jewish, 3.9% Polish, 3.3% German and 3.3% Russian, with all of its communities actively participating in diverse ethnic, professional, creative and civic societies and organisations. Residents built schools, banks, neighbourhoods and houses of worship that left an enduring mark on the city's architectural space. During this period, some 12,000 structures were built around the city – all of them incorporating elements of modernity recognisable throughout the world, such as a concern for hygiene,

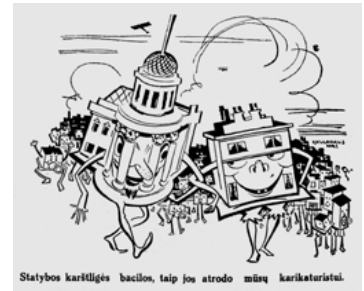
3 For more, see Andreas Fielberth, *Tallinn-Riga-Kaunas. Ihr Ausbau zu modernen Hauptstädten 1920-1940*, Köln/Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2005.



openness and adequate light. The city's engineering infrastructure, its improved transportation network and the construction of comfortable residential housing helped Kaunas cast off its previous image as a provincial Russian imperial town and present itself as a modern metropolis.<sup>4</sup>

Many foreigners who visited Kaunas in the 1930s took note of the city's rapid and radical transformation. In 1938, German journalist Viktor Zinghaus described Kaunas as a metropolis changing as quickly as cities in America: 'The national and city governments, together with private initiatives, have expanded the scope of construction, building new representational buildings – ministries, hospitals, schools and museums – which give this city the air of a capital.'<sup>5</sup> Describing his impressions of Kaunas in 1935, Estonian architect Hanno Kompus said that 'construction in Kaunas is proceeding rapidly, diligently and with little regard to cost. Everything newly built is made of brick – no one can even imagine building wooden buildings in a capital city. [...] One can only envy colleagues in Kaunas and their architectural freedom to choose construction forms that satisfy modern expectations of beauty. There is nothing old in this city. [...] Modern Kaunas imbues the panopticon of old, plaster ornamentation with functionalist sobriety, vitality, simplicity, clarity and material honesty.'<sup>6</sup>

**PROVISIONAL MODERNITY.** The status of provisional capital did not just present provincial Kaunas with an opportunity to transform itself rapidly into a modern metropolis – it was also a chance to dream about utopian projects for the future.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however, the impermanent nature of the city's official status acted as a damper, inhibiting progress. Segments of the Kaunas elite felt that investing in construction in the country's second city would signify that they were resigning themselves to the loss of Vilnius. Museum curator and art historian Paulius Galaunė recalls one line of thinking, prevalent in Kaunas in the 1920s, that erecting costly government buildings in the provisional capital was not a worthwhile undertaking and that the country should wait for the return of Vilnius and prepare to build its capital there.<sup>8</sup> Although by the 1930s the national government had resolved to invest in Kaunas and proceeded with the construction of nationally significant sites there, façades and interior decor designs had tell-tale signs of provisional solutions and references to the acute



3. A cartoon about the spread of building "germs" during the Kaunas construction boom, *Vapsva*, 1931, No. 7

4 For more, see *Kaunas 1918–2015. An Architectural Guide*, ed. Julija Reklaitė, Vilnius: Architektūros fondas, Lapas, 2017.

5 Viktor Zinghaus. *Fuehrende Koepfe in den baltischen Staaten*, Kaunas/Leipzig/Wien: Ostverlag der Buchhandlung Pribačis, 1938, p. 67.

6 Iš senos rusų įgulos gūžtos išaugo moderniškias miestas: labai įdomus svetimšalio architektoriaus žodis apie Kauno statybą [A Modern City Emerges from the Remnants of an Old Russian Garrison Town: A Foreigner's Interesting Comments on Construction in Kaunas], *Lietuvos aidas*, 24 June 1935.

7 Andreas Fuelberth. Kaunas als provisorische Hauptstadt Litauens bis 1939 / Kaunas – laikinoji Lietuvos sostinė iki 1939 metų [Kaunas as Provisional Lithuanian Capital until 1939], *Lietuvių kultūros institutas (Hrsg.), Jahrestagung 2008 / Suvažiavimo darbai*, Lampertheim, 2009, p. 89–110.

8 Egidijus Aleksandravičius. Modernizmo link arba prie šiuolaikinio Kauno meninės kultūros lopšio (1918–1940 metai): recenzija [Toward Modernism, or at the Cradle of Kaunas' Artistic Culture], *Kauno istorijos metraštis*, 2002, vol. 3, p. 352–353.

question of Lithuania's territorial integrity. The deliberate official display of the coats of arms of Lithuania's three main cities – Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda – was more an expression of hope than reality: in the period between 1918 and 1940, there was never a moment when all three cities were simultaneously under Lithuanian jurisdiction. While the government hesitated, Kaunas was rebuilt by its new residents: intellectuals, businesspeople and civil servants, all with family roots in the rural provinces, who had taken on the task of shaping the new nation. The Republic of Lithuania recovered control of its historical capital Vilnius in 1939 but, over the preceding twenty years, the nation's collective consciousness had come to view Kaunas as a proper, and no longer provisional, capital city.

**NATIONAL MODERNITY AND THE NATIONAL STYLE.** Though Europe's new countries adopted modernism as the foundation of their new national architecture, they were faced with the dilemma of reconciling modernity with the pursuit of unique national identities.<sup>9</sup> The creation of unique national styles based on folk art or historical references became a central component of the effort to balance modernist aspirations with national state ideologies.

Lithuania's history had a profound influence on the creation of the modern Lithuanian state.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it was emphasised in official communications that Lithuania had not created a new state in 1918, but had merely restored its historical statehood – the thriving medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania which, together with the Kingdom of Poland, had been erased from the map of Europe in 1795. Historical Lithuanian territories which had been incorporated into the Russian Empire underwent profound changes over the course of a century and the Republic of Lithuania proclaimed in 1918 was essentially a new country with a significantly diminished territory. What was once a multilingual and multicultural entity was now to be developed as a nation state. Thus, throughout the period of the so-called First Republic (1918–1940), the shaping of Lithuania's national identity was oriented toward a modern future, even as it rested on a foundation of two contradictory ideas: the grandeur of a medieval, aristocratic state and the heritage of a rural, ethnically Lithuanian culture.

Tradition and the priorities of the new state bureaucracy restrained the more avant-garde social and architectural experiments in Kaunas which, instead of emerging as a centre of radical modernism, eventually embraced an intermediate path between modernism and classical tradition. Proponents of the

9 David Crowley. *National Modernisms. Modernism: Designing a New World*, London: Victoria and Albert Museum, p. 341–360.

10 Giedrė Jankevičiūtė. *Dailė ir valstybė: dailės gyvenimas Lietuvos Respublikoje 1918–1940* [Art and the State: Artistic Life in the Republic of Lithuania from 1918 to 1940], Kaunas: Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus, 2003; Steven Mansbach, *Modernist Architecture and Nationalist Aspiration in the Baltic: Two Case Studies*, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians [JSAH]*, vol. 65, No. 1, March 2006, p. 92–111; *idem.*, *Modernism and Nationalist Architecture in the First Lithuanian Republic*, *Neue Staaten – neue Bilder? Visuelle Kultur im Dienst staatlicher Selbstdarstellung in Zentral- und Osteuropa seit 1918*, Arnold Bartetzky, Marina Dmitrieva, and Stefan Troebst, eds., Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2005, p. 47–55.

Lithuanian national approach criticised the International Style as being incapable of expressing the national spirit. As a result, Kaunas saw the gradual proliferation of the art deco style, which was seen as both sufficiently modern and receptive to individual stylisation – with multiple examples of the Lithuanian national approach appearing particularly in interior designs.

Lithuanian politicians avoided excessive intrusion into architecture, but President Antanas Smetona felt the need to voice his doubts about such a posture in 1937. 'Are we not seeing too much of a rise in so-called modernism, with our engineers taking so much from Italy and other Western countries? After all, we admire and take pride in the heritage of our Lithuanian farmhouses, crosses and chapels. Why don't our architects create something Lithuanian? We mustn't lose Lithuania's national identity in our effort to modernise.'<sup>11</sup>

Only through the efforts of a generation of young, foreign-educated architects did the view take hold in the 1930s that the national style was, in fact, what was being created there and then. This process of urban development, inspired by modernity but steeped in tradition, shaped distinctive features that make Kaunas a unique example of regional architecture.<sup>12</sup>

**MIGRANT MODERNISTS AND MULTIFACETED MODERNITY.** The nearly four hundred specialists who designed inter-war Kaunas constituted a powerful, collaborative force of architects, construction engineers and technicians from different generations, with different experiences and trained in different countries. Kaunas was created by migrant modernists: in 1918, the city had virtually no local architectural talent and not a single architectural school existed in Lithuania after the closure of Vilnius University by the Tsarist regime in 1832. By the 1920s, Kaunas began to see the return of Lithuanian-born architects trained in Russian universities and young specialists who had used state-sponsored scholarships to study architecture in Berlin, Rome, Brussels, Paris and elsewhere, bringing new trends home with them. By the 1930s, the architecture school established at the University of Lithuania in 1922 had begun to shape unique local traditions influenced by Western modernism. Kaunas was predominantly built using traditional construction methods and local materials, such as wood, brick walls, granite plaster and pitched roofs – all of which led to the emergence in 1930 of a unique Kaunas style that manifests both regionalism and decentralised modernism within the larger international context.

**SPONTANEOUS AND UNFINISHED MODERNITY.** Kaunas was built spontaneously, without an approved plan – a phenomenon that was not unique in inter-war Central and Eastern Europe. The new Kaunas arose on the regular grid plan first developed in the nineteenth century, renovating two-storey Tsarist-era structures, demolishing single-storey wooden homes and building skyward.

11 J. E., Lietuvos Respublikos prezidentas rašo [Commentary by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Lithuania], *Technika ir ūkis*, 1937, No. 2, p. 1.

12 Vaidas Petrulis, Architectural Ideas in Post-World War I Lithuania: Between 'National style' and the Modern Movement, *Centropa*, vol. XIV, No. 2 (May 2014), p. 209-217.

4. The Kaunas Regional Municipality and Chamber of Agriculture buildings on Vytauto Prospektas, 1937, LCVA
5. The Bank of Agriculture on K. Donelaičio Street, c. 1935. Private collection of Saulius Kulakauskas

Though plans called for new squares, parks, sports complexes and residential districts to be constructed on the garden city model, Kaunas never developed a unified modernist cityscape. The city had no modernist functional zoning or socially transformative, modern workers' neighbourhoods, but it did develop in harmony with its natural surroundings. As has been observed by architectural historian Vaidas Petrusis, the modernisation of Kaunas was not the result of a deliberate modernist plan, but the product of spontaneous functional modernisation: improvements in sanitation, hygiene, the introduction of social and engineering infrastructure, and the construction of new housing.<sup>13</sup>

Such was the state of affairs in Kaunas in 1939, when the decision had to be made quickly whether to move business and construction operations to Vilnius. Kaunas was left with a host of unfinished projects: construction was still pending for the new City Hall, the Opera House, the Presidential Palace and the Hall of State. Vacant lots created gaps between buildings along the city's main avenue and between entire city blocks. Kaunas continued to modernise during the Soviet era – albeit no longer as the capital, but as a centre of heavy industry.

**MODERNITY REBORN.** Kaunas lost its status as a capital city after the onset of the second Soviet occupation in 1944 and the end of World War II. The city was then developed as a centre of heavy industry, but its modernist architecture and urban core survived as a living and enduring testament to the legacy of an independent Lithuanian state. The city's inter-war architectural heritage transformed into the legend of inter-war Kaunas, sustained by durable structures of lasting symbolic significance. The buildings of inter-war Kaunas served as testimonials to a culture and way of life that differed from the imposed Soviet system, helping to sustain the cultural identity of the city's inhabitants.

Though the majority of modernist architects had left the country, Kaunas could still count on the expertise of a sufficient number of specialists who had remained and, most importantly, on a school of architecture that retained its ties to the inter-war generation even during the Soviet era, inspiring new architects studying and working in Kaunas. The substance and form of inter-war modernism proved essential to the emergence of urban planning and new, high-quality modernist architecture in the 1960s. Dismissed as bourgeois and formalist in the immediate post-war years of Soviet rule, acceptance and appreciation for Kaunas' modernist architecture gradually took hold in the late Soviet period. Decades of oppression led to the emergence of patriotic stereotypes and the romanticising of the inter-war period but, after the re-establishment of Lithuanian independence in 1990, the restoration of the city's symbolic buildings became an important sign of renewal.

The inter-war heritage has become the optimistic foundation of the identity of a reborn Kaunas.

<sup>13</sup> For more, see Rasa Bertašiūtė, Vilma Karvelytė-Balbierienė, Arvydas Pakštalis, Vaidas Petrusis, Kastytis Rudokas, *Lietuvos tarpukario architektūrinis palikimas: materialumo ir nematerialumo dermė* [The Architectural Legacy of Inter-War Lithuania], ed. Vaidas Petrusis, Kaunas: Technologija, 2015.



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# A TRIP TO KAUNAS

Giedrė Jankevičiūtė

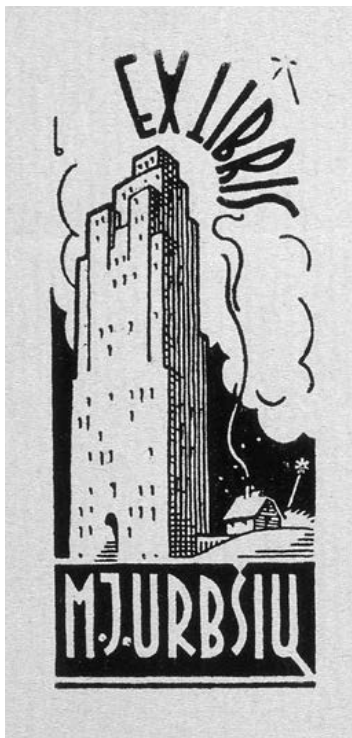
‘When I first came here in 1923, from the moment I stepped onto the platform at Virbalis Station, I realised that I was no longer in a world of German culture and order. But now, eight years after that first trip, I see that nearly everything has changed.’ So wrote Italian journalist Giuseppe Salvatori in 1931. In his words, ‘in just a few years, old Kaunas has thrown off the gypsy garments of a large Russian settlement to become like a Western, almost American city.’<sup>1</sup>

Before his very eyes, Salvatori watched Kaunas transform from a border town of the Russian Empire into a modern capital city in a new Europe – a city whose growth, which started in the late medieval period, was interrupted in the late eighteenth century by the Russian occupation which would last more than one hundred years. But Salvatori also observed Kaunas through the eyes of his Lithuanian friends, with whom he shared a belief in the creative spirit still thriving in rural Lithuania – a force that emerged after World War I to help transform a city decimated by Tsarist rule into the capital of a young country in a very short period of time. This romantic image of Kaunas was promoted to Lithuanians and foreigners alike, but for the people living in Lithuania’s villages and small towns, Kaunas, above all, offered the promise of a different way of life: some came looking for work, others to build their careers, while yet others arrived in pursuit of knowledge. Lithuanian-Americans came to Kaunas, drawn by the prospect of profitable investment in their ancestral home, as did the occasional Russian intellectual or artist fleeing the Bolshevik regime but still wanting to remain close to their lost homeland.

But Kaunas had little to offer to travellers in search of memorable experiences. Few foreigners ventured to Kaunas without a specific reason to do so. The city served as a brief stop-over for travellers in transit to communist Russia or for curious visitors, like Georges Simenon,<sup>2</sup> intrigued by the opportunity to see first-hand the contested international border between Lithuania and Poland, or the occasional tourist interested in visiting the newly established Baltic countries. Like Salvatori, these travellers felt as if they had arrived in a border land – nominally still part of Europe, but not entirely within it. Kaunas’ Old Town had a German look to it, but it was hard to ignore the city’s unpaved streets or the imposing Orthodox church looming over the centre of Naujamiestis, or New Quarter.

**LEFT:** A photograph by Vytautas Augustinas, depicting wooden crosses – traditional symbols of Lithuanian devotion to the Catholic faith, against the backdrop of the Kaunas Old Town. This single image combines elements of the urban and rural heritage, two central components of a new Lithuanian civic identity. The precise arrangement of the image suggests it may be a photomontage. 1938, LNM

- 1 Giuseppe Salvatori, *I lituani di ieri e di oggi* [Lithuanians of the Past and Today], Bologna: Capelli, 1932.
- 2 V. Gustainis, *Nuo Griškabūdžio iki Paryžiaus* [From Griškabūdis to Paris], Kaunas: Spindulys, 1991, p. 54–55.



1. An ex libris designed by Juozas Levinsonas-Benari for Marija and Juozas Urbšys, depicting a rural wooden home alongside an American-style skyscraper, symbolising the battle between old and new, a hallmark of life in inter-war Lithuania. LNM

It was local Lithuanian visitors, drawn to the city by agricultural and industrial exhibitions held on Vytauto Hill and by celebrations in Petro Vileišio Square, who really shaped the list of sights to see in Kaunas. On their arrival in the provisional capital, provincial Lithuanians would take walks down Laisvės Alėja (Freedom Boulevard), sit on benches in the City Garden, or visit the War Museum and its surrounding square with its monuments to Lithuanian independence. They would walk past the churches in the Old Town and look out at the confluence of the Neris and Nemunas rivers. As the city developed, the number of actual tourists grew with it. Tours of the provisional capital were organised by schools, scout troops and the Lithuanian armed forces. Excursions now included Ažuolynas Hill, where the country's first art museum, the Čiurlionis Art Gallery, was opened in 1925. The Lithuanian Tourism Society was finally established in 1929, although it only assumed a visible, active profile in 1935, after the Society was admitted to the International Tourism Union. A campaign to promote tourism was accompanied by the establishment of a network of country-wide travel bureaus.

In 1937, Lithuania presented itself at the International Exposition in Paris as a country open to tourism. Colourful posters and promotional brochures in various languages invited travellers to come to Lithuania to see its natural beauty and historic landmarks. Pranas Barkauskas and Aleksandras Vabalas, authors of the first Lithuanian language travel guide, *Vadovas po Lietuvą* (Guide to Lithuania, published in 1938), asserted: 'Nowadays, one might say that the whole world travels. In these days of mechanised life, we are compelled to move incredibly quickly – whether by automobile, train, airplane, radio, or telephone – like tiny machine parts.'<sup>3</sup> Tourism, they claimed, was not only a form of recreation, but a pastime essential for every civilised person.

Their optimism, however, had an air of wishful rhetoric about it – getting to Kaunas was not easy, despite the fact that, as the same travel guide asserted, it was served from three different directions by rail: from the west via Kybartai and Alytus (for trains arriving from Germany and other Central and Western European countries); from the north and north-west via Klaipėda, Mažeikiai, Riga (for travellers from Latvia and the Soviet Union) and Daugpilis (Latvia) via Radviliškis; and from Vievis (near Vilnius) in the east, via Kaišiadorys. Trains remained the most convenient and popular means of transportation. Travel by air was a luxury few could afford, since tickets were expensive and routes were limited, though Deruluft, a joint Soviet-German airline, had started regular service out of Kaunas in 1922. Lufthansa opened its first route to Kaunas in 1937, followed by LOT Polish Airlines and Lithuanian Airlines in 1938, with the latter offering service from Kaunas to Palanga on the Baltic Sea, but only in summer. Another innovation introduced to assist travellers in the 1930s was the opening of an information bureau at the Kaunas railway station. In the city itself, information for travellers was provided by the Lithuanian Tourism Society and the Automobile Club.

3 P. Barkauskas, A. Vabalas, *Vadovas po Lietuvą* [A Guide to Lithuania], Kaunas: Lietuvos turizmo draugijos leidinys, 1938, p. 5.



The *Guide to Lithuania* recommended beginning one's visit to Kaunas at the top of Laisvės Alėja. The first building described in the Guide was the Kaunas Regional Municipal Building at the corner of Laisvės Alėja and Vytauto Prospektas. Visitors were then encouraged to visit the Catholic and non-Catholic churches and other houses of worship, the city parks and all of the more prominent new buildings in the provisional capital, including the Vytautas the Great Museum, the Central Post Office and automated telephone exchange, the Bank of Lithuania, the headquarters of the Pienocentras dairy cooperative union, the Parliament (Seimas), the headquarters of the Pažanga corporation, the Higher School of Technology, and the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Crafts. In other words, there was a discernible sense of pride in the new Kaunas, which was now considered essential to the identity of both the city and its inhabitants. Modern Kaunas made a lasting impression on many visitors.

The Russian artist of international renown, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, who was invited to work in Kaunas by the Arts School and the State Theatre, noted that Kaunas 'had become a clean 'modern' city with an international look', though that image, in Dobuzhinsky's opinion, could have been more 'unique'.<sup>4</sup> The Estonian dramatist, art critic and graduate of the Riga Polytechnical Institute, Hanno Kompus, took note of Kaunas' modernisation, comparing it to other cities in the north-west of the former Russian Empire. 'A few years ago,' he wrote, 'it seemed to me that Lithuanians were firmly convinced that the only style suitable for representational buildings was Greek or Roman classicism. Buildings from that time include the Bank of Lithuania and the Ministry of Justice. [...] But then came a sudden change: modernist functionalism took hold in both private and official construction.'<sup>5</sup> Kompus did, however, bemoan what he saw as a lack of originality in Kaunas' architecture.

There were also voices among Lithuanians themselves asserting that it was 'premature to speak of a Kaunas style or fashion', despite the existence of several buildings, such as the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Crafts or the Vytautas the Great Museum, which 'were fairly successful'.<sup>6</sup> The number of such 'fairly successful' examples among the buildings in Kaunas which Lithuanians could take pride in, both at home and abroad, continued to grow rapidly. Newspapers and magazines printed photographs of the modernist icons, and postcards with images of the city's most prominent buildings were sent to Lithuania's diplomatic missions abroad as promotional material. While the choice of selected sites changed periodically, the core always consisted of the buildings featured in the *Guide to Lithuania*. A compact, folding leporello souvenir guide to Kaunas, small enough to fit into a suitcase carried by a little boy on a promotional postcard (see illustration 3), featured images of the Vytautas the Great Museum, the



2. A Lithuanian Tourism Society bus waits for tourists in front of a travel agency on Laisvės Alėja. LNM

4 M. Dobužinskis, Be reikalo naikinama [Needlessly Destroyed], *Lietuvos aidas*, 1933 07 26.

5 Iš senos rusų įgulos gūžtos išaugo moderniškias miestas: labai įdomus svetimšalio architektoriaus žodis apie Kauno statybą [A Modern City Emerges from the Remnants of an Old Russian Garrison Town: A Foreigner's Interesting Comments on Construction in Kaunas], *Lietuvos aidas*, 1935 06 24.

6 I. Šeinius, Vilniaus dvasia ir stilius [The Vilnius Style and Spirit], *Lietuvos aidas*, 1939 11 11.

3. An accordion book of souvenir post cards with images of the new Kaunas, folding up into a symbolic suitcase carried by a modern-day tourist. The collection was an ideological response to the prevailing romantic veneration of antiquity and, judging by the face of the traveller, was primarily aimed at younger audiences. LNM

4. For a tourism poster promoting Kaunas commissioned by the Ministry of Communications, artist Mstislav Dobuzhinsky adapted the same approach to visual symbolism used by photographer Vytautas Augustinas, depicting traditional rural crosses against the panorama of the Kaunas Old Town. It was believed that Lithuania's historical heritage would attract more foreign tourists than a display of images of a modern city resembling any other European capital at the time. The poster was shown at the 1937 Paris International Exposition alongside similar promotional advertisements inviting tourists to Lithuania. ČDM

Central Post Office, the Pienocentras building, the State Theatre, the Metropolis Restaurant, and several panoramic shots of the Old Town and new sections of the city – in other words, everything that might support the view expressed by one authoritative *Frankfurter Zeitung* journalist in 1940:

'After the war, it was asserted that the Baltic region is where the East begins. Those countries made every effort to rid themselves of any Eastern traits. Looking at the city of Kaunas, one can see the drive to change the Eastern way of life over the past twenty years, which is why Kaunas has been called a city of contradictions. After seeing its modern construction, one could say that the Eastern influence is being eliminated. The elimination of Eastern traits encompasses more than just construction. The Baltic States were seen as the last region before the start of Asia. That view was incorrect.'<sup>7</sup>

Today, a journey to Kaunas takes us along the same roads travelled by the little leprello boy and along the same streets trodden by Salvatori, Dobuzhinsky, Kompus and the journalist from the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. The contemporary British journalist Owen Hatherley has little difficulty associating the inter-war modernist city with the canon of international modernism. 'Kaunas' architecture is dominated by the sort of architecture the Nazis regarded as 'Jewish' – flat roofs, smooth surfaces, economy and modernity. It doesn't look like the architecture of a parochial rural dictatorship,<sup>8</sup> wrote Hatherley after his visit to Kaunas in March 2017. In his view, Kaunas fits perfectly within the universal modernist canon, while also demonstrating a wealth of unique architectural features. Hatherley pointed to the Central Post Office, which contemporary commentators also like to present as one of the city's most successful examples of a Lithuanian interpretation of international modernism. 'Buildings that look from a distance like those of Weimar Berlin, like the Central Post Office, with its swooping corners and plate glass, have subtle ornamental reliefs and decorative interiors derived from Lithuanian folk art.'<sup>9</sup>

Hatherley also described the history of the Resurrection Church in Kaunas, from its conversion into a Soviet military industrial facility to its reconstruction, begun on the eve of independence, restoring its status as a house of worship. The Church was a true testament to the fact that inter-war Kaunas had succeeded in becoming a Western city – an achievement that its residents keenly felt. Indeed, the architecture of inter-war Kaunas helped its inhabitants resist the occupation and the restrictions of a foreign ideology and its imposed culture. It is a body of architecture that shaped and continues to fashion the identity of the people who live in and enjoy the environment it helped to create. The buildings of inter-war Kaunas are not merely a collection of shapes and sizes, materials and details – they constitute a local spirit expressed in tangible form.

7 *Frankfurter Zeitung* apie Kauną [The Frankfurter Zeitung About Kaunas], *XX amžius*, 1940 01 10.

8 O. Hatherley, Letter from Kaunas: Lithuania's interwar capital steps into the 21st century, *The Calvert Journal. A guide to the New East*, available at: [www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/7941/letter-from-kaunas-lithuanias-interwar-capital](http://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/7941/letter-from-kaunas-lithuanias-interwar-capital), published on 20 March 2017.

9 *Ibid.*



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# THE ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY OF INTER-WAR KAUNAS AND THE CITY'S IDENTITY

Vaidas Petrulis

Once identified with progress and modernity, the architecture of the first half of the twentieth century is experiencing a contradictory period of transformation. Stylistic and technical innovations which were once taken as evidence of change, momentum and dynamism have since lost their primary function and gradually become historical relics. Unlike earlier periods, however, the new heritage encompasses a constellation of potentially invaluable physical details and events that is difficult to define. Thus, the preservation of all of the authentic elements of the past is a difficult task. In an effort to bring new relevance and meaning to the heritage of the twentieth century, non-traditional strategies need to be found – approaches that interpret preservation as an active dialogue with the past, founded on knowledge and recognition. In Kaunas, this process can be seen as a long-term crafting of a city's identity, in which the legacy of a modern capital, and the different roles it has assumed, remains the focus of attention.

During the early Soviet period, the ideology of Socialist Realism failed to transform the established architectural traditions in Kaunas. The modernist forms prevalent in pre-war architecture continued to thrive for more than a decade in private home construction. Kaunas' main streets even saw the construction of outright copies of inter-war buildings, developing the urban fabric in the spirit of the 1930s. With the arrival in Lithuania of mid-century modernist trends, the inter-war heritage was considered both a part of the creative mindset and a source of inspiration for the development of a new city centre. These processes can be viewed as part of continuous evolution in which the city's architectural heritage is perceived not as a static monument, but as a dynamic feature of the local character that inspires new architecture.

The campaign to ensure proper preservation of the inter-war architectural heritage was based on deeply-rooted traditions. Certain representational sites of exceptional architectural value (the Vytautas the Great Museum, the Central Post Office, the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Crafts, the Bank of Lithuania, the former Chamber of Agriculture, the State Savings Bank, the Hall of Physical Culture, the Research Laboratory, the Šančiai Secondary School and the Kaunas mosque) and a few residential buildings (the six-storey Chaimsonas building, designed by Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis in 1932; the five-storey building in which Juozas Daugirdas resided, designed by Vladimiras Dubeneckis in 1930; the Lithuanian Catholic Women's Society executive board building, by Feliksas Bielinškis, 1939; and the villa once belonging to architect Stasys Kudokas) were designated as locally significant architectural monuments as early as 1972. Of sixty-nine landmarks protected as sites of republic-wide or local significance,

**LEFT:** Electrification, the paving of streets and the rapid installation of new water and sewer systems were undeniable signs of the city's modernisation. A boy spraying water onto Vytauto Prospektas illustrates the progress achieved in Kaunas engineering infrastructure in one decade. 1930, LCVA



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1, 2. Kaunas' urban spirit was not shaped by landmark public buildings alone. Several thousand residential buildings from this era survive today - all with a subtlety of scale, modernity and traditional design that attests to the comfortable way of life enjoyed by the residents of Kaunas. Shown here are residential buildings constructed in the 1930s. Photo 1: Stasys Lukošius, 1956, KTU ASI. Photo 2: Juozas Stanišauskas, c. 1935, ČDM

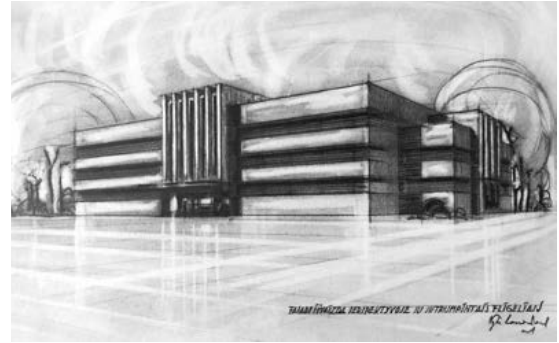
fifteen were from the inter-war period – more than twenty per cent of all designated architectural treasures. Though the selection of landmark sites may have lacked clear criteria or the semblance of a systematic approach, their official recognition shows that the people of Kaunas valued these buildings both as sources of inspiration and as integral parts of the official cultural memory – a legacy that retained its importance even under the complicated circumstances prevailing under the Soviet regime, when the so-called ‘bourgeois period’ was denigrated by various means. The official recognition of the inter-war architectural heritage demonstrates its exceptional significance to Kaunas and Lithuania as a whole.

After the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990, Kaunas' inter-war architectural dimension began to receive ever broader recognition. Tours, articles in the mass media, exhibitions and internet websites began to shape a new, contemporary narrative about the city. The phenomenon also began to resonate within an international context. On 15 April 2015, Brussels conferred the European Heritage Label on ‘Kaunas 1919-1940’ as a testament to the importance of the provisional capital's role in the building of Europe. That same year, Kaunas was designated a UNESCO Creative City of Design, with the inter-war heritage acknowledged as a principal criterion for the designation. The architectural legacy was also mentioned in Kaunas' successful petition to be named European Capital of Culture for 2022. The cultural agenda for that year will include a programme entitled ‘Modernism for the Future’, interpreting the inter-war heritage within a broader artistic, social and cultural context. In 2017, Kaunas' modernist architecture was included in the provisional list of UNESCO world heritage sites. Clearly, the modernist heritage has been promoted and adopted as a central element of the city's identity – a testament to the modern Europe of the first half of the twentieth century and an emerging and sustainable part of the city's character, building a bridge from Kaunas' past to its future.

Today, the list of buildings completed in the inter-war years in Kaunas includes more than six thousand sites. Some, designed as representational landmarks, are of exceptional architectural value. The Vytautas the Great Museum, the Resurrection Church, the Lithuanian Officer's Club, the Bank of Lithuania and other emblematic structures continue to anchor and shape a network of urban landmarks. But the era of the provisional capital also lives on in echoes of the past that have become part of the city's daily life: the still operational funicular trams in Žaliakalnis and Aleksotas, residential homes, schools, industrial buildings and other sites help complete a sweeping urban fabric reflecting many different aspects. Kaunas' unique local spirit is shaped not only by building façades, but also by a host of surviving small environmental details: walking through the city, we come across hundreds of wooden doors custom-designed in the modernist style and interiors adorned with authentic banisters and other details. Thus, when we talk about Kaunas as a city in which modernism plays a central role in the local spirit, it is important to understand that this is a multi-faceted phenomenon, related as much to the daily routine of life as it is to monumental sites.



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The inter-war period is remembered and appreciated today not only for its historical significance, but also for its unique aesthetic. When we attempt to define the characteristic features of that style, however, we must also take note of that style's many sources of inspiration. In the early days of pre-war independence, the new architecture aspired to an ideal of constructing 'inexpensive, well-crafted, sanitary and fire-proof [wooden] homes'.<sup>1</sup> By the 1930s, key functional concepts in Lithuanian modernism – banded windows, flat roofs, geometric volumes and a harmony of flat surfaces – had adopted the modernist aesthetic recognised around the world. Architecture school graduates returning to Lithuania from their studies in Italy, Germany, France and other European countries brought with them solutions applied in other countries. Thus, although the hope of recovering Vilnius, Lithuania's historical capital, endured even as Kaunas was being developed, its residents proceeded to create a contemporary and modern city, expressed in a broad range of styles of well-constructed and durable buildings.

**3, 4, 6.** The Ministry of Defence Research Laboratory, designed by architect Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, 1933, photographs and rendering, LLMA

**5.** In the Soviet era, the Research Laboratory became part of the Kaunas Polytechnic Institute's Department of Chemistry, and construction of a new campus for the Institute adjacent to the former laboratory began in 1964. The architect of the campus, Vytautas Dičius, was inspired by the legacy of inter-war Kaunas modernism. Shown here is the KPI Department of Chemistry (built in 1970). Photo: Romualdas Požerskis, 1983

<sup>1</sup> Lietuvos atstatymo komisariato aplinkraštis [Lithuanian Reconstruction Commissariat Newsletter], 1923 m., LCVA, f. 377, ap. 8, b. 4, l. 64.



7. Efforts to create a unique “national Lithuanian style” in professional architecture also included naive imitations of folk art. The decor of the Tulpé Cooperative building (architect: Antanas Macijauskas, 1926) was a typical example of the national style seen in the 1920s. ČDM

An expectation of longevity could be considered one of the characteristics of the local spirit. Although new structures often incorporated innovative technologies, like reinforced concrete or glass, such modernist principles as minimum living requirements (*Existenzminimum*) and standardisation did not take root in Kaunas architecture. Instead, a restrained adaptation of foreign practices prevailed, influenced by traditional values whose principal concerns were quality and representational stature. Modernist aspirations, then, were infused with a conservative mindset, and classical architectural principles were taken into account even when progressive technologies were introduced. For example, as he was designing the Hall of Physical Culture in 1932, the architect Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis wrote that he aspired ‘to combine two things and two forms in one building: the classical – the first great pioneer of our physical culture (Greece) – and our own era’.<sup>2</sup> Such a monumental classical rhythm of modern forms aptly describes many structures built in Kaunas in the 1930s.

Kaunas is interesting in that the optimistic forward progress of the inter-war era – in step with a dynamic, modern world – did not hinder the simultaneous pursuit of a national identity. The framework of a so-called national style was defined as part of a drive to ‘cultivate a worthy and solemn Lithuanian soul’.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the dispute between conservative and modern architecture that characterised the first half of the twentieth century in Lithuania was often accompanied by rhetoric reminiscent of folk traditions. Though the search for a Lithuanian spirit in professional masonry construction was not a predominant phenomenon, ornamental details (and not only those crafted in the Lithuanian national style) that today we might associate with art deco, remained important features of Kaunas architecture throughout the entire independence period. Even in the late 1930s, the young architect Feliksas Bielinškis was convinced that ‘in its form, ornamentation must explain the significance and purpose of the entire building. It must express in miniature what the entire building signifies in all of its grandeur’.<sup>4</sup>

Kaunas derives its uniqueness not only from the wealth of authentic details within its historic space, but also from its natural surroundings. While the Old Town had developed on the relatively flat plain at the confluence of the Nemunas and Neris rivers, by the early twentieth century Kaunas was being designed to include development on the surrounding heights, thereby incorporating a vertical dimension into the overall urban composition. Of no less importance were the city’s ample green surroundings, which were perceived and deliberately developed as a significant environmental component. Within urban policy, this took the shape of discussions about ‘garden cities’, which officials often presented in the inter-war press as a feature of modern development and a qualitatively new step toward deliverance from the disorder that plagued Tsarist-era cities.

2 Vytautas Landsbergis, Fiziško auklėjimo rūmai [Hall of Physical Education], *Fiziškas auklėjimas*, 1931, No. 2, p. 113.

3 Adolfas Kelermileris, Prakalba [Speech], *Statybos menas ir technika*, 1923, sąs. 2 (5), p. 4.

4 Feliksas Bielinškis, Architektūros esmė [The Essence of Architecture], *Savivaldybė*, 1937, No. 2, p. 62.



The coexistence of new architecture alongside the legacy of nineteenth century Tsarist construction is another unique feature that shaped the spatial evolution of Kaunas between the two World Wars. After the capital was hastily moved to Kaunas from Vilnius, the need arose to shape a new environment adapted for a different function. Despite a boom in construction, most city offices and residents remained in Tsarist-era buildings, which were later renovated, expanded and increased in height. One essential principle endured throughout this period, however: life continued to flourish on the constantly changing and modernising streets of a Tsarist-era city. Although an urban development plan had been devised in 1923, the bulk of new construction work took place not in individual, newly planned blocks or neighbourhoods, but by inserting new buildings into existing development. Even the newly designed Žaliakalnis district was only partially completed in the 1930s and only attained a uniform style in the early Soviet era. The modernisation of the Kaunas environment proceeded not through dramatic urban reconstruction or the creation of strictly defined functional zones, but by a steady evolution of the urban landscape through diverse construction, with the 1930s aesthetic enduring as the most distinctive and inspiring feature. The architecture of the inter-war period prevailed not simply, and not solely, because of its physical presence, but because it continued to serve as the city's most important developmental vector and an essential component of its identity.

In summary, we can surmise that Kaunas' spatial identity was not shaped by the destruction or creation of symbols, but through the overall process of the city's modernisation and the quality of the entire spatial environment. At the same time, the city maintained a preference for a traditional approach to ornamentation, symmetry and monumentalism over the clean surfaces, asymmetry and dynamism typically found in international interpretations of modernism. The emblematic inter-war architecture remained an essential component of the city's identity during the Soviet era, where individual symbols and quotidian spaces played equally important roles. Political change affected only the most prominent visual symbols, leading to the destruction of monuments and the removal of politically charged emblems from building ornamentation. But a city steeped in modernist architecture became an ideological centrepiece for an emerging creative mindset and urban identity. Today, the relationship between Kaunas' inter-war heritage and the city's identity is being revisited anew. As the coexistence of old and new is debated, conservatively inclined cultural preservation efforts collide with expectations of more vigorous urbanisation. Historical experience suggests that one of the most important objectives should be the combining of local traditions and the progress achieved during this era, with the modernist heritage serving as a source of creative inspiration for the future. In this way, the rich legacy of the inter-war period may survive yet another transformation, while still upholding a central principle: the conscious and simultaneously intuitive and spontaneous interrelationship between the city's identity and its modernist heritage.



**8.** Inter-war Kaunas was built using traditional methods and traditional materials: wood and brick. The interiors of public buildings, however, also revealed a bold use of new glass and concrete construction. Shown here is the lobby ceiling of the Lithuanian State Savings Bank (today the Kaunas City Municipal Building) in 1940. Photo: Vaidas Petrulis, 2012



CHAPTER 2.

# **VISIONS AND REALITY**



DE VILHIAUS  
MEMORIAM



KARO  
MUZEJUS



# LITHUANIA'S LOSS AND KAUNAS' GAIN: THE PHENOMENON OF THE PROVISIONAL CAPITAL

Vilma Akmenytė-Ruzgienė

We would view Kaunas entirely differently today had the city never served as Lithuania's provisional capital. It became the capital under very dramatic circumstances, after the government institutions of a young Lithuanian state, barely one year old, were forced to hastily abandon the historical capital, Vilnius. It was hoped that the move would be only a temporary measure, but it lasted more than two decades.

Surprisingly, Kaunas' status as provisional capital was never codified in any Lithuanian legislation adopted in the inter-war period. On the contrary, Vilnius' status as the historical capital of Lithuania was based on the Act of Independence proclaimed on 16 February 1918 and the basic law of the newly restored Lithuanian state – its Constitution. The Constitutions of 1928 and 1938 proclaimed that 'The capital of Lithuania is Vilnius. The capital may only be transferred to another location by specific law.'<sup>1</sup> Be that as it may, Kaunas was the only 'provisional capital' in the world at the time, and the opportunities arising from such a status were exploited to the fullest there. Lithuania's loss in 1919 became Kaunas' gain. Twenty years later, Kaunas mayor Antanas Merkys invited the country to 'come and see the enduring and yet very young city.'<sup>2</sup>

What symbolic values changed the face of Kaunas? How much of the 'provisional' was there in the provisional Lithuanian capital? The independent Lithuanian state was restored on 16 February 1918 in Vilnius, but its consolidation was achieved in Kaunas. Lithuania's central state institutions moved from Vilnius to Kaunas in early January 1919. The transfer was hasty and chaotic. A group of Lithuanian citizens arrived in a small, provincial city – the centre of the former Kaunas Governorate of Tsarist Russia. Many of the new arrivals had no personal ties to Kaunas, and while most believed their stay in Kaunas would be brief, complicated historical circumstances prevented their return to Vilnius. The first President of Lithuania was elected soon after, on 4 April 1919. The situation was delicate, since the Lithuanian government established in Kaunas (including the President, the Cabinet of Ministers and the Lithuanian State Council) had to share actual power with a German civil administration until the late summer of 1919. The Lithuanian Constituent Assembly, only elected

- 1 Lithuanian Constitution of 1928, see Mindaugas Maksimaitis, *Lietuvos valstybės Konstitucijų istorija (XX a. pirmoji pusė)* [The History of the Constitutions of the Lithuanian State in the First Half of the Twentieth Century], Vilnius: Justitia, 2005, p. 349; Lithuanian Constitution of 1938, see *ibid.*, p. 361.
- 2 Antanas Merkys, Foreword, *Kaunas: Europos miestų statyba ir tautų ūkis* [Kaunas: The Construction and National Economy of European Cities], ed. Antanas Jokimas, Praha: Státní tiskárna v Praze, 1938, p. 6.

## PRECEDING PAGE:

A Kaunas photomontage by Veronika Šleivyte, 1936, KEM

**LEFT:** Artist and photographer Veronika Šleivyte (third from left) with her friends in front of the Vytautas the Great Museum, still under construction, visible in the background. The women stand in front of Juozas Zikaras' sculpture *Freedom* (1928) and a painting by Irena Jackevičaitė-Petraitiienė entitled *Pavergtoji Vilnija* (Oppressed Vilnius, 1923). Behind the painting is an old museum tower, later demolished, with the banner *No Rest Without Vilnius!*. 1933, KEM

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**DR. VILMA AKMENYTĖ-RUZGIENĖ** is a historian who studies the political and social history of Lithuania in the twentieth century, industrial history, and the evolution of Lithuanian state institutions.

**DR. NORBERTAS ČERNIAUSKAS** is a lecturer at the Vilnius University Faculty of History, specialising in the study of the socio-cultural history of the first half of the twentieth century and the Lithuanian anti-Soviet partisan war of 1944-1953.

**DR. MARIJA DRĖMAITĖ** is an architectural historian and Associate Professor at the Vilnius University Faculty of History, specialising in twentieth century architecture, modernism, and industrial heritage. She is also the author of two monographs: *The Meteor of Progress: Industrial Architecture in Lithuania, 1918-1940* (published in Lithuanian in 2016) and *Modernism. Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania* (2017).

**DR. GIEDRĖ JANKEVIČIŪTĖ** is an art historian and exhibition curator, senior academic fellow with the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute, and a Professor at the Vilnius Academy of Arts. She studies twentieth century Lithuanian art, design and architecture and is the author of several monographs, including *Art and the State. Artistic Life in Lithuanian Between 1918 and 1940* (published in Lithuanian in 2003).

**PAULIUS TAUTVYDAS LAURINAITIS** is a doctoral student at the Kaunas University of Technology's Institute of Architecture and Construction, specialising in the history of twentieth-century Lithuanian architecture.

**DR. VILTĖ MIGONYTĖ-PETRULIENĖ** is an architectural historian, lecturer at the Vytautas Magnus University Faculty of the Arts, and serves as the curator of the Kaunas – European Capital of Culture 2022 project. She specialises in twentieth-century architectural history and the history of resorts, modern society, cultural heritage and its digitalisation.

**DR. VAIDAS PETRULIS** is an architectural historian and senior academic fellow with the Kaunas University of Technology Institute of Architecture and Construction. He studies twentieth-century architectural history and the legacy of Kaunas modernism. He is also the developer of the Lithuanian architectural history archive online resource [www.autc.lt](http://www.autc.lt). Dr. Petrulis is the co-author of two monographs: *Architecture in Soviet Lithuania* (published in Lithuanian in 2012) and *Lithuania's Inter-War Architectural Legacy: The Correlation of the Material and the Non-Material* (published in Lithuanian in 2015).

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After Kaunas suddenly became Lithuania's provisional capital in 1919, the city's subsequent transformation was nothing short of **miraculous**.

Kaunas' identity changed radically: in less than twenty years, its residents transformed the city into a modern, elegant and European capital.

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