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Abstract

Vilnius Old Town has found itself in a complex situation after restoration of Lithuania's independence. On the one hand, many opportunities emerged with civil liberties and market economy; on the other hand, urban conservation was jeopardised by strong entrepreneurial spirit of developers. Inscription of the Historic Centre of Vilnius onto the World Heritage list triggered various legislative initiatives to strengthen protection. At the same time, Old Town Renewal Strategy was created and adopted by the City and the Government. A dedicated institution - Old Town Renewal Agency – was created to promote revitalisation. In 10 years after inscription, Vilnius Old Town has changed dramatically. What is the gain and what is the loss? What problems have been resolved, and what new problems emerge? The ICRROM case study, based on discussions with the stakeholders, reviews the experience.

Key Words: Vilnius, revitalization strategy, market economy, authenticity

...The story

The safeguarding of cultural heritage in Lithuania has always had a strong ideological underpinning – the popular movement of 1980ties takes its source in the movement for stewardship for Lithuania’s heritage. In the “Law on the basics of national security” cultural heritage is declared one of the basic objects of the national security. Vilnius as the
capital of Lithuania and symbol of Lithuania’s statehood is especially important in this context; the cultural heritage of its Old Town has a very special meaning for Lithuania.

The provisions for safeguarding and management of cultural heritage prominently threads through Lithuania’s legal system. The approach to safeguarding is built on a strong notion of providing protection by laws, regulations and plans and enforcing it through appropriate planning procedures and permits, emphasizing the role of the authorities in this endeavour.

Herb Stovel notes: “The situation of countries like Lithuania whose current institutional frameworks have grown up in the abrupt transition from the centralized planning of the Soviet Union to an evolving and often chaotic western-style economy offer opportunities to compare efforts and results among those moving through similar transitions. The successes and frustrations of managing heritage in the last 15 years in Vilnius can be linked to the effectiveness of these efforts to reshape applicable legal and institutional frameworks to respond in a balanced way to perceived market pressures.”

The centralised, administrative approach of heritage management has been strengthened during the 15 years of Republic by the need to interact with processes of socio-economic development. After a long period of planned and state-run economy, the first manifestations of the free enterprise in urban development - however desirable in terms of creating economic wealth – were resting on reckless entrepreneurial dynamism, with emphasis on private initiative, interests and property, thus striving to rapid development to achieve results. In this endeavour the new private owners and developers have often disregarded heritage, viewing requirements of heritage protection and calls for safeguarding the heritage values as orthodox interference and creation of unnecessary obstacles to business. Ideological notion of free enterprise as creator of wealth became stronger to many than notion of heritage as carrier of identity. Hence the whole heritage management system built in the independent Lithuania made strong emphasis on protective measures over dialogue, seeking to enact, maintain and enforce strict regulations of preservation. In the need to defend the importance of heritage protection, to safeguard meant to conceive the right, to forbid the wrong, and to correctly implement the conservation visions by competent professionals – from researcher to planner to administrator to contractor to workman. “If everyone obeyed the laws the heritage would be safe” – some say even today.

The Old Town of Vilnius – besides richness of cultural heritage - has always played an important role in the economy of Lithuania and Vilnius, both as a symbol of prominence

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1 This and other quotes by Herb Stovel taken from his after-seminar reflection paper, 6 March 2006
and a playground for real estate development. At the outset of new private enterprise the availability of properties for development on the market was uneven as a legacy of the Soviet system of ownership and subsequent mass privatisation of housing and business, including their premises; this multiplicity of owners in a building rendered the assembly of whole buildings for refurbishment nearly impossible. In the first years after 1990 only a minor proportion of the former housing stock and commercial premises in historic buildings turned to the hands of the relatively wealthy and heritage-conscious owners having means and willing to spend on refurbishment of historic properties. Those able to invest in the properties they already had or newly acquired prioritised increase of facilities and comfort or adapting properties to new functions over safeguarding their heritage values.

Since restoration of Lithuania’s independence, various planning documents were developed, reacting to the emerging new circumstances, as the private ownership was reinstituted and land ownership became a decisive factor and instrument. At the same time, as a consequence of the underdeveloped economy in transition, the state and municipal authorities had little means to spend on maintenance and repair of the infrastructure and many properties still owned by the state at the time. Whilst the minds behind the conception of the new system of cultural heritage legislation understood the need for complementing restrictions with incentives, financing different supportive measures to the owners and developers of the buildings of heritage value – from contributing to costs of restoration to upgrading public infrastructure - by the state, the means in the public purse were scarce and seldom made available to anything beyond the symbolic contributions such as restoration of the most prominent monuments and landmarks of heritage.

Hence the development in the first years after 1990 was a haphazard picture of small, fragmented, privately funded projects, predominantly inside the buildings. Whereas Lithuania had a strong school of preservation and restoration of cultural heritage properties and the expertise has never been lacking or inferior, there has been no experience of enforcing control in the transition to free market economy, and consequently the control of heritage protection of the large numbers of small projects in the Old Town has proven to be an almost insurmountable task.

This experience of the first five years of safeguarding the cultural heritage in Lithuania has certainly strengthened the emphasis on developing effective mechanisms of protection enabling the authorities to cope with the rapidly developing situation in the historic towns, first and foremost in Vilnius Old Town. This had to go beyond protection and develop new mechanisms of governance.

The ambition of the state and society to achieve international recognition to the cultural prominence of the Historic Centre of Vilnius has been successfully accomplished in 1994 when it was inscribed on the UNESCO’s World Heritage List. This triggered yet another review of legislation.

During these years, the legal system underwent many changes, reacting to emerging needs to protect heritage values in the dynamically developing society and economy. The management of cultural heritage in the Vilnius Old Town and other historic towns is regulated by several laws. Responsibilities were shifted back and forth from the state to the municipality, multiplicity of laws needed to be harmonised, institutions that had to collaborate, yet a fully cohesive legal system has never been achieved in full.

Otherwise than legislative proposals, the Governments of Lithuania and Municipality of Vilnius made a good use of this recognition of universal and outstanding heritage value.
of Vilnius Old Town, primarily in finding collaboration partners to develop various proposals for solutions of governance of Vilnius, including its Old Town among the foreign colleagues and international organisations.

In 1995, the World Bank has part-financed Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Strategy, which has been developed by a joint Lithuanian-Danish-Scottish team in close collaboration with UNESCO World Heritage Centre. The Strategy has been approved by Vilnius City Council in 1996 and adopted by the Government of Lithuania in 1997. It has been presented at an International Donors’ and Investors Conference in Vilnius, arranged under aegis of UNESCO.

The Strategy brief encompassed comprehensive management plan for revitalization in the Old Town, analysis of sustainable local mechanisms and institutions to finance/raise funding and implement such strategy and plan, and proposal on how to organize and set up an institution for these activities under specific Lithuanian conditions.

The Old Town Revitalisation Strategy addressed issues that have not yet been resolved by legislation and institutional structure in Lithuania.

The strategy started from the vision of the Old Town, which was offered for the first time. Among other, it predicted that the growth of economic activity and prosperity may provoke conflicts between competing functions and warned that whilst tourism and recreational uses may be important levers for economic development, they must not be allowed to dominate the Old Town.

In 1996, The Strategy suggested in the Vision: “The harmony and integrity of the city resulting from the synthesis of people’s creative activities and its natural environment; the structure of the city lay-out and space as a reflection of its evolution – from an embryo at the establishment of the state of Lithuania until the beginning of the 20th century; a high density of old and individually valuable buildings and works of art, as well as groups of buildings; the wealth of structures and localities significant for the history of culture and the spirit of the Lithuanian state and society, as well as for the whole East European region: the historically accumulation of important administrative, cultural, religious and also everyday objects, the heritage of the state’s capital and the city centre.”

The next step was reassessment and clear articulation of what the perennial values were. The work developing the strategy included thorough analysis of preconditions, including property ownership structure and resulting problems, heritage protection and management, system of approvals and permits and public and private investment practices in the Old Town. Extensive public consultations and opinion surveys were carried out, including issues such as Visions of Old Town, Living and Working in the Old Town, Problems of the Service Infrastructure, Streets and Squares, Traffic and Parking, Parks and Green Spaces.
The strategy itself suggested long term principles, strategic goals, desired short term results and set out preconditions and instruments to attain them. It comprised a wide thematic scope beyond heritage protection including governance and offered an approach integrating multiple concerns and goals of different fields into a single document. Most importantly, it recommended integrating preservation and development concerns and seeking cohesive action of the authorities, community and private enterprise.

During elaboration of the Strategy, survey of European and USA experience of institutional solutions for revitalising inner city areas has been carried out by the project team. Building on the conclusions of this survey, the Strategy proposed to introduce a single institution – Old Town Revitalisation Agency (OTRA) – with a broad mandate and multidisciplinary set of skills to coordinate production and implementation of an annual action plan including activities of the state and municipal authorities and the private sector. It has also put forward a proposal of a unified financial mechanism of incentives and support to revitalisation through the Old Town Revitalisation Fund.

Developing and legitimising an ever better defined system of requirements and regulations was also supported by the investors who felt lost in the complex world of requirements to protect cultural heritage values.

At that time, State Department of Cultural Heritage Protection struggled to carry out the legitimised fields of activity such as control of planning and issuing permits for works, and organised state-funded restoration projects, as there were few investment projects in deteriorating cultural heritage in the private property market. Diana Varnaite, the former director of the Department recalled that “Seeing the scale and pace of development today, it is difficult to believe, that back in 1997, we actually had a rather desperate meeting at the Department of Protection of Cultural Heritage, discussing means of attracting investment to the Old Town.”

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2 Interview by Paulius Kulikauskas at OTRA, December 2005
Aleksandras Luksas, the City Architect of those days recalls: “There was no wizardry in the Strategy. Neither anything in it was new to us. Yet it was a concise, cohesive document, and that was what was desperately needed. Once it was approved and adopted by the local and national authorities, it became possible to use it as a lever, demanding more focused attention and funding to the Old Town as all the essential provisions for this were in it.”

Having a strategy was important; but to use it as a lever it had to be properly legitimized. The strategy was approved by the city council and adopted by the Government and this helped mobilising massive funding from the State.

The Government of Lithuania demonstrated a firm commitment to supporting the Strategy by giving a special 5 million USD grant to Vilnius Municipality for face-lifting the Old Town in 1998. Strong message was given to the community and investors as many facades were repaired and repainted and street pavement renewed or re-established in historical character. This started the tradition of Vilnius Old Town Renewal Programme that has continued ever since, while the special subsidy from the Government in 3 years was gradually replaced by increasing municipal funding to maintain a similar scale of 4-5 MEURO per annum.

In the management of the Old Town, some of the proposals of the strategy regarding integrating heritage protection and management into the urban development management were implemented without delay, such as better integration of the system of

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3 Interview by Paulius Kulikauskas at Architects Association of Lithuania, December 2005
building permits and joining up the action planning into an annual Programme document. The foundation of OTRA took a more profound discussion.

At that time, the City of Vilnius had quite a few subsidiary, quasi-private companies carrying out works on behalf of the Municipality, two of them – in the Old Town, one taking care of maintenance of properties and open spaces, and another one managing construction contracts paid by the public funds. On the one hand, the policy of the City was to reduce the number of such companies by privatising them and setting them out to work on free market conditions, keeping only the most needed companies to carry out tasks of urban planning and contract management. On the other hand, OTRA was a completely different model of organisation. The politicians considered this type of operation - including management of public funds - precariously untied from the administrative powers of the City Hall, yet completely dependent on municipal subsidy.

The Ministry of Culture and the City of Vilnius have co-founded OTRA, and instituted a Supervisory Council co-chaired by the Minister of Culture and Mayor of Vilnius and representing a broad array of stakeholders in revitalisation of the Old Town. However, it took a long time for the Agency to find its place in the institutional framework of responsibilities, as neither the Ministry nor the Municipality saw it possible and desirable to decentralise decision making to some organisation that was beyond their direct administrative control.

The Agency set up an office for the agency in the Old Town, as suggested by the Strategy to serve as a source of information for local people, potential investors and the general public. It had exhibition and meeting space, used to build local community, political and official consensus over the renewal of the Old Town.

The Agency has initiated and continues supporting Traditional Fine Crafts and Fairs Programme, manifesting its involvement in local development. It has given support to restoration works using desirable accepted methods of restoration of unique elements, and it has arranged publications and seminars on correct technique of restoring traditional building elements.

The role of Agency in defending heritage values otherwise has been limited as it remained very dependent on Municipality by being directly funded and administratively controlled by the City. The transfer of status from municipal agency to public non-profit institution did not change OTRA’s effective subordination to the municipality. The same dependency affected OTRA’s ability to lobby: on the one hand, opening opportunity of taking part in discussing decisions, on the other hand, being bound by the status of insider to municipality.

Old Town Revitalisation Programme, funded by the special grants of the Government, mentioned above, has been annually drafted by OTRA and amended and approved by the City of Vilnius. Whereas OTRA has an important role in proposing the programme, neither the Agency nor its Supervision Council exercises any powers in having the Programme approved, and OTRA has only a limited role in Programme’s implementation. Because of this reason, the members of the OTRA’s Supervision Council - that initially worked as a remarkable forum of various Old Town stakeholders - have gradually lost interest in meeting as they perceived that they had not been given any powers to decide and that their proposals had not been taken up by the responsible authorities.

In the light of this situation, OTRA chose to focus on working with the community, on the information centre and on international collaboration, expecting that this work will help in changing the centralised management attitude prevailing in the authorities. These have become the main fields of Agency’s work, and it has been done with dedication and
ingenuity. OTRA organised many thematic meetings for the members of the Old Town community and published a number of publications as guidelines for conservation, investment, building components and the like. OTRA’s office in the Old Town and its information centre serves as an important point of service to the community both arranging targeted information activities and responding to enquiries of the residents, property owners, local businesses and potential investors. Giedre Miknevičiene, the President of ICOMOS Lithuania, says: "The main benefit of having the Agency is in its work with the community, as before it came into existence no one was doing it at all. As the state institutes no longer exist, everything moved over to the private sector where minutes and cents are counted. The Agency can still be asked to do some work for common benefit. Hence its consolidating role has become of utter importance. The Revitalization programmes significantly influenced the increase in private investment. We also need more of educational programmes, as a good example inspires other to do the same."4 Ray Bondin, the President of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Historic Towns and Villages, however notes: "In its origin OTRA had a much stronger community participation element with the involvement of many stakeholders but over time the original idea was watered down considerably."5

The Strategy was followed up by international organisations’ work with training and facilitating discussions provided necessary basis for accepting and leading the change.

OTRA has become the main agent of productive practical collaboration on Vilnius Old Town with the intergovernmental organisations, such as ICCROM, UNESCO, and UNDP. ICCROM’s programme of Integrated Urban and Territorial Conservation for North-East Europe has been implemented in close collaboration with the Agency. OTRA participates in a variety of European projects, funded by the Structural Funds and EU Research Framework. The Agency and its staff have spread out the experience in the region, participating and involving colleagues from the neighbouring countries in various international events, sharing experience, training specialists and discussing problems.

...Today

Today, Vilnius Old Town is a completely different place from what it was in 1995.

The visible increase of a recent affluence is so tremendous that it comes as a shock onto an unsuspecting visitor. Some tend to attribute the incredible change to “UNESCO” and “European” funding. This is not so, hardly one euro from Brussels’ public purse, let alone UNESCO’s coffers, has ever been granted to repave a street or to remodel a building. For many visitors, this striking increase of prosperity reflected in the Old Town in only fifteen years of independence is simply incredible. In fact, the massive change only started in 1998, so we are rather speaking of 7 years of actual development on the ground.

The message of public commitment to the Old Town through the Revitalisation Programme was well received by the business community. The public investment triggered private investment by pushing up the market value of the buildings. The business community knew little of the strategy but appreciated the message transmitted through Government paid rapid face-lift of the buildings, streets and open spaces on the main tourist tracks. Steven Segal, manager of a chain of foreign-owned bars and hotels in Vilnius Old Town, said in 2000: "We have never heard of this strategy. What we noted was that suddenly there were lots of public works in the Old Town - repaving streets, ameliorating public

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4 Intervention at the seminar, OTRA, Vilnius 10 February 2006
5 A post-seminar reflection paper, March 2006
spaces and the like. This was exactly what we need to channel more investment in our business in the Old Town.”

Investment in service infrastructure such as catering and hotels set off, usually combined local and foreign funding, expertise and ownership. Many sites purchased through privatisation or assembled post-privatisation from several owners to whole building and converted into hotels, offices, or improved apartments, with the ground floor usually occupied by catering or retail. Number of residents is said to keep falling and it may even more radically alter the character of the place. The prices of real estate in the Old Town increased tremendously once the development took off. During the past ten years, on the most prestigious streets the prices have increased tenfold and seem to keep rising. It has become fashionable for foreigners to own an apartment in Vilnius Old Town, considered a good investment, and sometimes purchased during a weekend trip.

What changed in the Old Town depends on criteria applied to measuring change, and what aspects of the change are looked at. Many buildings have been repaired; catering, leisure and retail services of variety and style common to European cities abound in the Old Town. Irma Grigaitiene is a Head of Division for Protected Territories at the Ministry of Culture, suggests: “Let us look at the qualities for which Vilnius was inscribed on the WHL. According to urban and landscape criteria, Vilnius suffered no radical loss, at least not without a reason. For instance, some roof views changed when attics were converted to living space, but only because the increase of housing was desirable.”

From the view point of a conservationist, much of the former original “authenticity” of ambience and detail is gone as the Old Town becomes rather “Westernised”, and the repair of the buildings with modern materials and technologies creates a touch that sometimes feels rather a replica than an aged original. Augis Gucas, the former Head of Heritage Protection Division of Vilnius Municipality, thinks that: “The lack of attention to the authentic detail is caused by peasant mentality of the new urban residents who worship free enterprise and things shiny and new over the old patina. Investors are pleased with new look and press on authorities by using bad examples found in many Western countries believing they are positive. [...] High-rise buildings around the Old Town did much damage, as the Old Town is not enclosed in itself, it is rooted in the wider landscape and that is one of its major values and strengths. New high-rise buildings on the right bank have changed the scale of relationship of the Old town and the surrounding landscape, and in this change Old Town is a loser. It is a pity that politicians and architects succumbed to the pressures of developers. The Strategic plan of Vilnius 2000 emphasised the hierarchic relationships of the common system of nature and culture, and called for defining boundaries and creating respective regulations. It has been forgotten, yet it must be followed.”

The Old Town has certainly become a much better place to visit for leisure, and probably a better place to live for some categories of its residents, yet it still suffers from excessive car traffic. Those with cultural and romantic disposition are lamenting the loss of charming, romantically decaying streetscapes, and once throbbing local life is still missed as it slowly vanished in the decades before. The streets still suffer from excessive through-traffic. The Old Town is certainly a safer place to be. For a tourist, there is a wide choice of accommodation and catering varying in price, style and comfort. It has certainly not regained its distinctive multi-national character which is only present in memorial boards on the walls.

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6 Private interview with Paulius Kulikauskas and Freddy Avnby, May 2000, at Shakespeare hotel, Vilnius
7 Intervention at the seminar, OTRA, Vilnius 10 February 2006
8 Intervention at the seminar, OTRA, Vilnius 10 February 2006
9 A post-seminar reflection paper, February 2006
Herb Stovel evaluates: “The record is mixed. While the survival of the physical layout of the city can be seen as a strong positive reflection of a continuing commitment to retention of macro-level fabric and patterns established in Soviet times, the loss of authentic fabric in building transformations for modern use, the out of scale and out of context quality of some prominent examples of contemporary infill design (City Park Hotel, Novotel), and the growing tendency to ring the historic core with high rise constructions suggest that the protection system as a whole has trouble resisting the demands of investors for upgrading and intensification of land use, and managing projects which take place in this context.”

Thus the Old Town became yet another example of revitalisation through gentrification. By comparing it to other examples in the region, where heritage protection legislation was less stringent, one would probably be able to conclude that in Vilnius Old Town almost no damage has been done to the urban fabric by the new development; by comparing to the results elsewhere brought about by of approaches which rely on incentives and dialogue with the owners and developers one may speculate that the loss of authentic building elements and details may have been contained even to a greater degree. Sakalas Gorodeckis is a chairman of Uzupis local community organization in Vilnius: “There is a lack of clear philosophy of conservation and systemic approach, defining what should not be done. Community organizations were born from attempt to look for such system of values. They are not “people’s control”, there is little fun and reward in scrutinizing the work of the authorities, one would rather put a voluntary effort to organizing a festival. Is the state interested in having a civil society? We need to create strong awareness of the values. […] Gentrification is not the only solution. Certainly, it is easy to replace less affluent owners with more affluent owners in desirable areas. Yet there must be ways found also to retain original populations in the neighbourhoods.”

...Insights and future

How much of this awesome change in prosperity of the Old Town can be attributed to the planning documents, among them – Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Strategy, and how much to the market-driven development that owes to improvements of the general investment and business climate in the country, is difficult to judge. Herb Stovel says: “Without a cohering and proactively strategic policy framework, responsibility for deciding on projects affecting heritage values remains divided at best, and investors determined to push the limits can succeed in maximizing their possibilities without too much concern for possible negative impacts on heritage.” These documents have laid a firm background for decision making in urban planning and development. The legal system of heritage protection has been constantly developed and updated to cope with the emerging challenges. Certainly, the public administration on all levels and in different fields of responsibility has built up skills and developed solutions to deal with many issues brought about by the reign of free enterprise. Some part of this development has been facilitated through working together with colleagues from other countries and with the international organisations.

There have been various spontaneous initiatives to develop community-based organisations covering the whole of the Old Town, such as “Old Town Community - Let’s Save the Old Town”. Whereas they are an important indicator of growing responsibility for Old Town in the community, this organisation yet has to develop a representative participation across the whole variety of stakeholder groups. Initially, this organisation followed an attitude based on criticising the authorities; now the self-proclaimed “community” meets the authorities in so-called “Senate of the Old Town” – an institutional format for consensus building where Government and municipal authorities and this “community” are represented.

10 Intervention at the seminar, OTRA, Vilnius 10 February 2006
Architects’ Association of Lithuania notes that: ““Community” is a rather indefinite designation. Should we see community as all citizens who for any reason address the authorities, then the local government is the first tier to cope with their requests. Meanwhile, the state institutions try to keep the local government as intermediary. Should we see community as locally organised interest groups, they only take part in discussing the planning documents. As the local planning is organised by the municipalities, the state institutions often oppose the local government in these discussions, taking the side of those groups. This harms the image of the authorities and in the end protection of heritage. Following the new legislation, the state will have to organise planning, and may change their attitude towards the “community”. Architects also believe that profanation makes the chasm between the professionals and citizens deeper. Nowadays it is fashionable to think that “builder/investor” is something opposed to the “community”. Architects believe that investors and builders both are part of the community, and suggest that the main goal is to incite both parts comprehend this simple fact.”11

At the same time, an investor is seldom a true part of local community sharing its interest in retaining qualities of the place with a long-term view. A developer often seeks maximum profit short term, ignoring the needs of the local residents and businesses, engaging in “hit and run” projects. No wonder people revolt, and the authorities must ensure that their legitimate interests are safeguarded. This contradiction will not be reconciled until developers are brought to thinking long term and pursue inclusive practices in decision making.

Discussions with all stakeholders clearly indicate that collaboration between state and municipality in heritage protection has not yet fallen into place in a manner that would be acceptable to all participants of the process, and that at times the system does not perform because of the conflict between the two layers. Therefore, there have been attempts to introduce some non-governmental institutional mediation platform for both to meet, such as The Senate of The Old Town. Yet OTRA has not been a part of the Senate.

Whereas it is usually helpful to have a format for discussing plans of development, including all levels of the authorities and the citizens and their organisations, the legitimacy and reputation of the Senate would further benefit from an open and more representative inclusion of various stakeholders of the Old Town, such as businesses, property owners and investors. OTRA has made an appropriate shift of activity towards collaboration with the citizens and exploiting opportunities of international collaboration. In the current situation, its effectiveness would be enhanced if in alliance with the developing Senate it became a format where authorities and other stakeholders debate values rather than react to project proposals. OTRA is recognised as an effective project manager and promoter of heritage values in public forums. This offers a significant opportunity -- by virtue of its location in the centre of public urban development debates, and its links to municipal and national level authorities -- for OTRA to play the role of coordinating agency which is so necessary at this stage with objectives to improve coherence and applicability of heritage policies and practices for Vilnius.

Many of the stakeholders in the Old Town development note that whereas the goals of the state and municipalities are articulated in the laws, plans, regulations and other documents there are quite many such statutory documents and it has become difficult to pursue these goals in practice. One of the main problems of heritage protection system mentioned by the stakeholders today is orchestration of work of various institutions and making the division of responsibilities clear.

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11 From the Architects’ Association of Lithuania response to the pre-seminar questionnaire, by Irena Kliobaviciute, Vice-president, 8 February 2006
A widespread belief among the professionals is that emphasis of heritage protection must be shifted from restrictions to incentives, from restraining notion of heritage management to encouraging. People believe that prohibitions always provoke negative reactions, they are a short-term measure, which works only as long as you apply the force, and encouraging measures may not bring quick results yet their effect is long-lasting. Whereas it proved effective to offer direct encouraging measures, such as subsidies or tax deductions to proper conservation, for opening sites to visitors, and the like in many countries, encouragement does not always provide enough incentive to the investors to carry out proper planning and works without having a stringent system of restrictions in place. Real estate in the Old Town has a higher market value hence it is understandable that development business must be able to bear higher costs of development paying more for the conservation measures and spatial architectural cohesion that supports this higher value. Dalia Bardauskiene, a former Director of OTRA, now serving as Advisor to Mayor of Vilnius on the issues of Strategic Planning, notes: “Developers and entrepreneurs can be named as active but silent part of the city. They do not take part in the discussions, traditionally they are not invited to training, education, do not participate in assessment of the Old Town, though usually they determine the quality of outcomes.”

Therefore, the system should not be limited to “stick and carrot” measures, but by ensuring a creative, productive dialogue of all stakeholders and authorities. Repeated reviews of the legal basis and the new Law on Protection of Immovable Cultural Heritage change many important legal provisions on the state level. It created a rigorous system of defining heritages values of the buildings, requiring that every such building and its parts has a detailed regulation. It will require years of meticulous research and formulation to complete. Recognition of importance of heritage in the legislation does not automatically translate into background for action. Participation of the community in Vilnius has helped authorities resisting excessive developmental pressures. Community concerns are directed at values rather than control of authorities. Consistent effort in dissemination of this awareness is needed on the practical level that can only succeed in long term if it is included in fundamental education of new generations.

Since the creation of the Strategy, other important documents, such as Vilnius Strategic plan, detailed and special plans for the Old Town, have been developed by the City of Vilnius and national authorities, enabling better legal and territorial management environment in the Old Town. The Strategy filled in the gap in 1996 and it gave a push to public investment but it may have had a larger institutional impact if closer integrated with heritage protection regulations and integrating suggested new institutional solutions with the existing institutions, even if changing some of them to a high degree. As a separate document, it does not need to be reviewed or updated. Instead, authorities and various interest groups may work on a mutual statement of values and principles in Old Town development to build a common platform for action. Once agreed upon in a broad collaboration, this platform should be included into appropriate planning documents.

The manifold increase of the market value of real estate in the Old Town, created by the public and private investment, enables the owners and investors to afford more costly preservation research and works. It is therefore very important that OTRA can continue and enhance advocating and giving support to proper restoration of the authentic details of buildings under the Old Town Revitalisation Programme.

Looking back at the creation of the Strategy and its implementation, one can reflect that its impact on the change has been both direct and indirect. The principles have been followed,

12 Intervention at the seminar, OTRA, Vilnius 10 February 2006
and the letter of adopted recommendations has been consistently implemented in the priorities of the Old Town Revitalisation Programme and other subsequent activities. The visible results of public investment that has been allocated following the approach suggested in the Strategy and other planning documents has helped attract business and investment to the Old Town. On the other hand, perhaps the strategy has been created with somewhat idealistic expectations of existing institutional ability to include democratic processes in public governance, as it assumed and anticipated development of society without due critical insight and thus shaped its recommendations to follow desirable rather than available prerequisites.

Herb Stovel analyzes: “The municipal and national level authorities seem not yet to have found a way to ensure decision making for heritage properties fully balances concern for these values with the need to attract and manage investment for the long term social and economic development of the city. The rush to define a new framework for heritage protection to replace the former Soviet system has resulted over time in a patch work system of laws, institutions and operating mechanisms, whose provisions often overlap, compete and conflict with each other. No successful effort has been made to identify an overall framework which would bring together these competing institutions around a shared policy and approach. Individual initiatives to improve co-ordination of the situation usually make things worse by addressing only a facet or segment of the whole, and compounding overall confusion. Well intentioned efforts to improve consultation within the system (such as the State Commission’s informal advisory Senate) do not improve the overall situation, as these have simply replaced or now compete with formal mechanisms designed to provide proactive leadership (e.g. OTRA Supervision Council) with reactive and ambiguously rooted advice which has no clear authority, which undermines the role of OTRA and which leaves a decision-making vacuum which investors can use for their own ends. In this partial vacuum, no one voice speaks for heritage and the goals of the heritage community can appear at odds with each other. As a result, there is no one single champion who can speak consistently and coherently for heritage, and bring public support to the heritage cause.”

More complex and diverse interests in the Old Town create a need for more sophisticated intervention than mere enforcement of laws and plans. It calls for adapting the management of the Old Town to the new circumstances. Whilst the lead of the public authorities needs to be maintained and stringent heritage protection rules must be enforced, the effectiveness of management and quality of its results would benefit if the decision making, including operational control of funding is decentralized, involving non-public actors in decision making according to the spirit and key principles of the Old Town Revitalisation strategy and enhancing the mandate of the experienced and internationally recognised organisation that OTRA has become.

Not everyone believes that the situation in 1995 has called for a new institution. Augis Gucas thinks, that “creating a new agency in 1996 was not necessary - one must always look at existing institutions and try to enhance their capacities and capabilities as needed, even if existing institutions need to be radically transformed, their leadership to be changed etc.. We must remember this when transferring our experience to other countries.”

Impact of OTRA’s work is difficult to measure by any quantifiable indicators.

The strongest aspect of the long term impact of OTRA’s work has been its influence to the attitudes and approaches to management of the Old Town in the professional community and the owners of properties in the Old Town. OTRA has become a model in the region, and it is widely known due to international recognition. Yet the expected shift from government towards governance in the management of the Old Town has not yet occurred to the extent envisaged in the strategy.
Dalia Bardauskiene concludes: “Direction of the Old Town revitalization needs to be changed. The Old Town is revived – it turned into the most active, expensive part of the city. A new direction must seek restoration of the Old Town, encompassing preservation of values through the support of communities, promotion of cultural tourism, public information, education and training. Focus of the conservation must shift from buildings to people.”

All pictures by Raimondas Paknys and Arunas Baltenas from the Vilnius Old Town Revitalisation Strategy, ISBN9986-830-03-6, 1997 Published by R.Paknys

All quoted interviews were held by Paulius Kulikauskas in Vilnius, December 2005 – January 2006; the seminar with experts took place in Vilnius, 10 February 2006

OTRA’s website is at http://www.vsaa.lt/index_en.htm

The Old Town Revitalisation Strategy can be found at http://www.vsaa.lt/strat/vilnius2/index2.htm

13 A post-seminar reflection paper, March 2006