WOODEN ARCHITECTURE IN KAUNAS: HOPES OF PRESERVING

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ABSTRACT

Construction with wood has been common in Lithuania since olden times. Most wooden houses were built during the first half of the twentieth century, there are also older ones built since the end of the nineteenth century. A lot of valuable wooden buildings from the mentioned period such as small manor and garden estate houses, villas, cottages, summer homes, residential rental units and military and railway complexes have survived in the second of largest city of Lithuania (historical capital of Interwar period) – Kaunas. Representative buildings of all these types need to be preserved in all areas of Kaunas, because they are exceptional for conveying local identity. The article is meant to reveal the diversity of fragile wooden architecture in Kaunas and describe the prospects and significance of one of the conceivable and one incoming way of its preservation – digitization method.

1. DIVERSITY OF KAUNAS WOODEN ARCHITECTURE

Wooden construction is a unique hearth for the urban heritage of Kaunas: buildings made of wood also reflect the professional architecture involved in the brick structures that followed and the transformed forms for ethnic architecture. Homes of wood were being built on spacious land lots and they were surrounded by small orchards of fruit trees and gardens. Cultural traditions of the city, the village and the manor intertwined in such garden homes and villas. Wooden and brick constructions blended into natural, organic harmony in Kaunas during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The oldest surviving wooden buildings are located on the edges of the historical Kaunas centre. These were built by the more affluent residents. The poorer strata of the society were concentrated in the southern district of Šančiai and on the right bank of the Neris River, in Vilijampolė. Wooden buildings were also built in Žaliakalnis, which is situated on the upper terrace of the city, as well as in Panemunė, an area zoned for recreation (Fig.1). Žaliakalnis was considered a prestigious district, where administrative workers and military officers, intellectuals and those in the creative arts of the city resided. Solely Lithuanians lived in this district, differently from other areas of the city. Houses were built on spacious lots of land with gardens. Wooden buildings of all types were built in this residential area: traditional garden homes with and without mezzanines, asymmetric villas, and two-storey buildings intended for rental flats.
1.2. Wooden houses and features of their construction and style

Ethnic traditions and professional architecture solutions were so intertwined in the nineteenth century that it is difficult to strictly subdivide buildings into separate groups according to their formal architectural expressions. The buildings in the city generally have no distinct traits of stylistic architecture; therefore they could appropriately be termed as local prior to searching for the more definitive tendencies they reflect. Local traditions ground the qualification of architecture in wood as being local, thereby preventing any degrading of this architecture, simply because the criteria for analysing and assessing professional architecture do not apply to it. The concept of vernacular architecture, as defined by the ICOMOS Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage (1999), applies to this phenomenon as well.

Urban buildings in the nineteenth century were constructed from hewed logs, and the external walls were planked with small boards placed vertically and horizontally. Roofs were covered with shingles or plates. The walls of the houses built during the interwar period are either of log or skeleton construction, planked, and less decorated on the outside than the buildings constructed at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (Jurevičienė, 2002, p. 14). The so-named Swiss style, which was prevalent in other European countries (Ross, 1971, p. 151-172), was also part at the decorative structure of Kaunas buildings. Iron as well as clay tiles were used for roofing during the interwar period.

Professional architects designed wooden houses in advance of construction and coordinated with the municipal buildings division.

2.2. Earliest examples

A look at the plans of Kaunas during the mid of nineteenth century shows that the historical core of the city consisted of numerous wooden houses. Residences, estate buildings and outdoor stairways were constructed of wood and yard hoardings were so equipped and erected. Unfortunately only one or another wooden building from those times has survived in the Old Town. As per the 1847 plan approved by the administration of Czarist Russia, the Old Town was recognized as a zone of brick constructions, a locale where construction of wooden residences was no longer permitted. The territory of the City Centre, Naujamiestis (Newtown) area, which was a specific subdivision of streets planned in 1847, had several farmsteads standing since olden times. (Fig.2) The best-known is the former Kartofliškes Folwark Manor Estate. Here Stanislaw Dobrowolski (chief officer of school of Kaunas district) had a wooden house built with a porch of columns in about 1828. A half-closed yard surrounded the residence, outbuilding and wing. The walls of the building were raised above the vaulted semi-cellar with its kitchen and rooms. Its
Jerkinhead roof is shingled in wood. Such small manors in a Classicist expression no longer exist in Kaunas.

Figure 2: Demolished Kartofliškes Folwark Manor Estate (photograph from the collection of V. Chomanskis, towards 1925).

2.3. Urban residential houses of the Guberniya period

Homes on the regular street blocks of the Naujamiestis were required to be built in brick facing the main streets. Nonetheless, small wooden houses sprang up more deeply within the blocks as well as at their edges. They also predominated in the neighbourhood close to the railway station. Simply because a home was built in wood did not necessarily mean the owner had limited resources to invest – often it reflected a preference for the traditionally built abode. Owners would sometimes have a two-storey house along the street laid in brick for rental purposes. Meanwhile they’d build a wooden house in the yard for their own residence. A good number of wooden, single-family homes from the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries have survived in Naujamiestis and still existing. (Fig.3) Few lots for houses in Naujamiestis area belonged to Login Ščerbakov, the subcontractor of the Garrison Orthodox Cathedral and later to his son, Fadej. The Ščerbakov family, who were members of the Old Believers Russian faith, acquired this domain in 1895. The facades are battened with small, laid out, slanted wood panels and decorated in carvings reminiscent of crochet that are characteristic of Russian architecture. These cover the socles of the houses and encircle the garrets and window cornices in several rows. These homes were built and decorated by master woodworkers from the Chernigov Guberniya. Three wooden houses stand next to them and were built around 1860. Wooden buildings from Czarist times can still be found everywhere along the edges of Kaunas City.

The Jewish people who settled between the narrow pathways in Vilijampolė district used to build small homes containing little stores. The sides of some of them face the street, whereas the rears of other houses are towards the street. Their cottage roofs are covered in tin, and they are devoid of mansards and mezzanines. Doors face the street directly, and the windows have shutters. There is an occasional two-storey building earmarked for rentals. Since construction is dense, the entrance archways are made heading into the yards. This does not happen in Žaliakalnis or in the other neighbourhoods of the city.

The outskirts of Žemieji (Lower) Šančiai were forming in 1862. Factories were being established and labourers settled here once the railroad had been laid. The little streets that appeared on the shores of the Nemunas River were built-up in stages with wooden cottages on small lots. The first ones sprang up in the beginning of the twentieth century; however, many of them were built during the interwar period. Small, singularly-structured garden cottages were the most widespread in Šančiai; some had open porches or verandas and contained shutters. An occasionally home is more decorative boasting jerkinhead roofs and decorative carvings.
2.4. Houses for railway workers and military personnel

It is natural that tracery in a characteristic Russian style was adapted to the buildings of the military fortress in Kaunas. Large barracks and smaller houses containing flats for officers in the military site in Šančiai (1895-1899) were built of red bricks, whereas oblong, one-storey houses for non-commissioned officers were built of wood. Low gabled roofs were covered with roofing iron, and similar carved bands surrounded the garrets. Standard variants of décor are common in military architecture. Another group of military houses (in Freda district) are smaller, and some display the Swiss style motifs of décor. The houses built at the end of the nineteenth century close to the railway station for railway employees contain a modified Russian style décor.

Quite frequently wooden buildings with several apartments earmarked for rentals were being built. (Fig.4) A residential facility for railway workers was built in a district of Naujamiestis periphery by Gustav Lechel, the supervisor of railway buildings on the St. Petersburg - Warsaw line, in 1897-1899. The elongated, symmetrical building was planned for six, single-room rental units with kitchens having private entrances through porches along with two more of the same type of units in the mezzanine. The house is especially plentifully decorated with Swiss style elements – wide, profiled window casings, plank-shaped frontons, rear facades and garret gable boards on the porches and in the mezzanines. Along homes were built for employees and labourers of the railway. These were single-storey and lengthy (sufficient for several apartments) complete with porches and décors of pierced carvings.

2.5. Wooden public buildings

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, there were various wooden buildings related to entertainment and recreation within the urban environment of Kaunas. Unfortunately, with needs and the level of comfort changing, they were rebuilt or demolished. We only know about those buildings from old photographs. (Fig.5) A splendid restaurant with an open terrace (1866) had stood in the Naujamiestis area, in the forthcoming place of the City Theatre. It was frequented by a colourful public that appreciated entertainment and dancing. Close to restaurant in 1883 a wooden pavilion for concerts was built. It had an elongated hall with a stage and covered side galleries. A park designed for amusements and leisurely walks was established in Žaliakalnis in 1871. Here there were a wooden inn-type of pavilion, stage platform, tennis courts and swings. Not a single of these structures has survived.
2.6. Wooden Interwar heritage

Wooden houses were the most plentiful and the most interesting in the Žaliakalnis and Panemunė districts during the Interwar period. Žaliakalnis was only annexed to the city in 1889; however, the Czarist army had been using this area previously. Development of residential blocks only began after the First World War. The Žaliakalnis neighbourhood currently has been declared a protected area due to its unique character. A few historical locales of this district has been entered into the List of Cultural Properties in 2004 and 2007.

One of the block in Žaliakalnis, with it network of panning streets and pre-planned landscaping system, appeared as a consequence of a grandiose 1923 plan for Kaunas. The city plan was arranged by an engineer invited from Copenhagen, M. Frandsen, along with a local Kaunas citizen Antanas Jokimas. Although the project was unrealistic and utopian, it met with success in accurately planning the empty plot of pasture land in Žaliakalnis by building garden cottages. The urban structure is reminiscent of the idea for a city-garden. However, here, each owner built in accordance to individual taste and means – there was no effort to achieve the stylistic integrity characteristic of the city-gardens in England and Germany. Additionally some of the homes were built with several rental units. The buildings in this area were 80 percent wooden until 1940; currently about 70 percent of such houses still survive. Technically it is impossible to save them all, although the small wooden homes are the soul of this locale. Eleven of the more valuable, authentic houses selected for protection represent architecture in wood (Lukšionytė-Tolvaišienė, 2005 p. 24-31).

The most popular garden homes in this area are single-storey with tin cottage roofs. These are rectangular, single or double-unit apartments. Some are heightened with mezzanines and mansards, and others have glassed-in verandas. The open porches contain profiled, wooden columns. An occasional veranda contains geometrically-drawn widow frames with coloured glass panes. The shutters, frontons, chambranles, small pediments, pilaster imitations and pierced work panel decors provide the house with its expressiveness. The structures of the houses are related to Lithuanian ethnic traditions; however, some of the decor details happen to be professional, architectural pieces – simplified neo-Classicist, neo-Baroque and art déco motifs. Villas were also built in asymmetrical compositions. (Fig.6) Kaunas architects were obsessed with the idea of an original national style in the 1920s. Modernistic brick cottages appeared in Kaunas in the 1930s. They were two-storey structures with a one-piece volume and tile roofs. Modernism is a less frequently used architectural style for wooden buildings.

During the Interwar period, all of Žaliakalnis was ethnically the most integral – nearly all its residents were ethnic Lithuanians. Garden-style homes with yards, orchards and gardens predominate here even today. (Fig.7) Villas of an impressive structure are rarer.

When Aukštotoj (Upper) Panemunė gained official status as a resort in 1933, a plan was drafted for a zone of summer homes and villas. The wooden summer homes in this resort were only adapted for the warm season. There were mineral water and mud health treatment centres and two beaches. Many of the common, one-storey houses with mezzanines have survived in Panemunė. Some are graced with carved window casings and small veranda pediments, others – with ornate mezzanines and still others – with open porches and bay windows. The sizeable, two-storey, asymmetrical-structured summer houses and modernistic wooden cottages are distinctive.
Sadly, neglected wooden buildings were demolished during the Soviet years, and their demise continues even now. Today’s unkempt wooden houses can be said to be living their last days. Others are carelessly renovated – decorative ornamentations are removed; the profiled wooden batten facing, roofing and wall materials are substituted and plastic windows also doors added. Appropriate maintenance and restoration of wooden buildings are still not the norm in Lithuania. Owners are not interested, and there are a lack of woodworkers and architects who are sufficiently knowledgeable in the specifics of this craft. The restoration of wood calls for reproduction of the former forms and elements using the same materials and finishing techniques. A new material can only be considered authentic when its type, structure, texture and colour correspond with the characteristics of the former, primary material. This way, although the reproduced parts are new and do not contain signs of patina, the reconstructed structure is recognized as authentic in the maintenance practice for safeguarding heritage (Lukšionytė, 2011, 129-140).

2. DIGITIZATION INITIATIVE IN THE FIELD OF LITHUANIAN ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

As long as preservation of wooden heritage in Lithuania alike in Kaunas is happening complicated the specialists of architecture and heritage are looking for the alternative ways, which could be the meaningful input solving the problems of preservation. One of them is the initiative of digitization. First of all it performs the function of communication also it is related with the vision of the information society. ‘In a context of nowadays the information society express the idea of constantly expanding universal access of knowledge’ (Kligienė, 2004, p. 82). Whereas the cultural heritage as a symbol, which gives meaning to tangible and intangible values, is one of the most important collective instruments of humanity to provide the basis of creating the richer forms of communication. In this way we can assume that the heritage artefacts actualized in a digital medium (by making documentation, researches, interpretation etc.) can become an active factor promoting the general development of the society models and in future integrating values of preservation of cultural heritage and innovative requirements of information society. Therefore the digitization of Kaunas wooden architecture in this paper interpreted as the specific form of heritage preservation also as a useful method looking for an answer to the relevant question of the contemporary heritage preservation – how the processes of communicating society must or can influence the processes of inheritance.

2.1. Lithuanian cultural heritage digitization policy and financing sources

The Charter of Parma states that digitization is the principal step for the memory institutions of the European countries seeking to preserve cultural and academic heritage permanently, contribute to the improvement of tourism and development of digital content of cultural heritage and facilities (MINERVA, 2003). Memory institutions has the common aim – to protect the heritage seeking to ensure and stimulate its usage for culture (Laužikas, 2009, p. 10).
Nevertheless, digitization as a tool of accumulation of information and preservation is not a new phenomenon and is quite widely spread in a various practice of the European Union experience, while in Lithuania, especially in the system of cultural policy sectors, it is still in a stage of development. Although such projects as www.paveldas.lt submit a huge flow of information, still there is no clear strategy how this material could upgrade the actions of specific sectors of cultural heritage, eg. inheritance of wooden architecture. Formally the questions of digitization started to be raised in 1999 – 2005 in The Strategy of Lithuanian Information Society Development. Later, on the basis of the mentioned strategy, the most important document of digitization (The concept of Lithuanian digitization of cultural heritage) was formed (2005). The main goal of this document is to preserve and actualize the Lithuanian cultural identity that is linking the inherited and general European cultural values, to ensure its continuity, open access and competitiveness in the conditions of the contemporary EU and world’s cultural diversity, to develop an integral and united information system of the Lithuanian cultural heritage which could help to contribute to the creation of general space of European cultural heritage (SEIMAS, 2005).

It is important to mention, that the vision of converting valuable cultural heritage objects and the information about it into the digital form is based on EU strategic documents and were formulated on the basis of The Lund Principles and Lund Actions Plan on Coordination of Digitization (IST, 2001). Whereas, the support aspect, in a view of competitiveness of the content and public-private partnerships, is actualized in the EU recommendations as well as in The Lund Principles 'to encourage in creating new methods of funding the digitization of cultural material and of its usage (...) if the member states will not increase the investment in this field, there is a danger that the cultural and economic benefit of the transition to the digital content will be taken over by the other continents, not by Europe’ (DIGITAL AGENDA, 2006).

In a parallel with the first strategic attempts to establish the concept of digitization of cultural heritage in a legal system of cultural policy, the new plans of digital heritage, protection laws of cultural heritage and the visions of practical activities have intensified (The Strategy of Digitization, Preservation of Digital Content and Access of Lithuanian Cultural Heritage and Plan of Tolls of its Implementation (2009-2013) in 2007 prepared, Regulations of Lithuanian Cultural Policy (2001) approved, The Act of Protection of Movable and Immovable Cultural Heritage (2004) formed etc.). The last mentioned are based not only on the EU legal sources but on digital monitoring results and analysis of the problematic aspects in Lithuania as well. Substantial focus was made on the appropriation of co-financing projects to ensure the proper promotion of cultural heritage. That demonstrates not only the actualization of necessity of increasing digitization as an innovative tool of communication of cultural heritage but also 'marks the recognition of openness and clarity, as reference values which foster scientific openness and growing public needs to perceive and control tangible benefits of researches funded from the budget' (Laužikas, 2009, p. 17).

Lithuania's return to the map of Europe and the accession to the European Union have opened up new opportunities for the country's security policy, social development, economy and culture. The new and wide perspectives to assimilate the support of EU structural funds started as well. Meanwhile, as long as this practice only speculate momentum, the organizers of the projects of digitization of the Lithuanian cultural heritage, are in the snatch of the country’s funds granaries. The main state authorities in coordination of digitization of cultural heritage is Lithuanian Ministry of Culture with Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science, Information Society Development Committee and Lithuanian Department of Archives under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania (Varniené, Kvietkauskas, 2005, p. 116). An example of such practice is reflected in the statistics of the year 2010-2012: just only 13 projects were funded from the state budget according to the program of Digitization of cultural heritage. As an alternative for funding the projects of digital cultural heritage, the submission programs of The Culture Support Foundation and immovable cultural heritage, knowledge dissemination and revitalization projects of Department of Cultural Heritage could be mentioned. However, the allocations of such projects are rather symbolic and signify the fragmentation and inconsistency of digitization of cultural heritage.

So most probably this was the reason for more than one significant initiative of digitization of cultural heritage to disappear in Lithuania after the first phase of the implementation of the project activities and further data storage and collection of such projects were not resolved, for instant: one-off initiative The Strategy of Vilnius Wooden Heritage (VILNIUS, 2002), at the time inventory of wooden buildings were made, or the project of Fixation of Trakai Wooden Architecture (TRAKAI, 2010).

In this case, the brighter perspectives for digitization of cultural heritage can be seen in competition of funding program arranged by Research Council of Lithuania also Ministry of Culture.
However, there are more negative aspects in the financial processes that determined the inconsistence of the projects of digitizing of cultural heritage. In today’s Lithuania the ongoing process is basically apprehended as a field of practical activity. This approach leads to a position that digitization does not need special knowledge. For this reason, ‘some of the digitization projects of smaller resources and being carried our by poorly trained people transform into a simple scan of analogue documents and without further visions of what to do with the images’ (Laužikas, 2009, p. 41). For this purpose, the other EU member states (Sweden, Austria, Belgium, Denmark and others) started installation of digitization as a method of evaluation and the establishment of the centres (DPE, 2006-2007).

2.2. Case of good practice

Despite the circumstances of inconsistency of funding and fragmentary stored data, there are several meaningful initiatives of cultural heritage digitization in Lithuania. One of them is specially dedicated to Kaunas wooden architecture. The project is conducting the transmission of the important historical information about wooden buildings as well as implementing the essential mission of social communication and above all – functioning as intermediate connector between heritage specialist, authorities and citizens.

A database of Kaunas wooden architecture was installed in 2011 with the support of the Kaunas City Municipality. It is available for free access at this time through the website, www.archimede.lt. (Fig.8) Till this moment database being supervised by technical specialists and the content filled systematically by professional researches, that’s why digitization is proceeding consistently and methodically. The 2012-2013 database development is being sponsored by the Research Council of Lithuania. Moreover, in 2014 project started to expand its’ geography of investigations. Research Council of Lithuania supported the next stage of the project about wooden architecture of two Lithuania balneological resort towns: Birštonas and Druskininkai.

Documenting works are being performed by a group of lecturers, Ph.D. and postgraduate students from the Art History Department, Faculty of Arts of Vytautas Magnus University. Thereby professional documentation of Kaunas (survived and not preserved) wooden architecture is being accumulated. In database there are more than 1000 objects of wooden architecture from the period of XIX and XX centuries in the districts of Vilijampolė, Šančiai, Žaliakalnis, Panemunė, Naujamiestis and elsewhere: 7 manor houses, 173 local Kaunas citizen houses, 3 military and 15 railway complexes, 541 garden estate houses,
222 residential rental units, 19 summer homes, 23 villas, 8 modern cottages and 14 other objects. In a system they are divided according to the typological groups, by territory and preservation status. It is important to note, that this project presents the information available to house owners, district administrations and municipalities, thereby gradually developing an understanding of the value of wooden architecture. The nominations for the best managing of wooden houses are being implemented and consultations with specialists of heritage preservation for the owners of wooden houses being organized. Also it is available to get acquainted with previous mentioned legal documents and various relevant publications about wooden heritage and its’ preservation. The following actions stand out this access from the other because of its’ practical applicability of heritage preservation. The final expectation is that educative support could grow into a particular social solidarity program, whereby people would share their knowledge and experiences. That way a community interested in the preservation of wooden houses could come together and in some way could help to improve the preservation guidelines in order to alight building owners the refurbishment and maintenance procedures. Therefore, there are not so much digitization initiatives in Lithuania so far. While acting projects are going through a difficult financing processes (related with financing consistency), one way or another, they are supported by a various local funding sources, as exemplified by www.archimede.lt. It is important to emphasize that the former successful development of the projects of digitization of cultural heritage, especially dedicated to the most dwindling architecture with wood, could not only be a fruitful base for future scientific works and practical actions, but also perhaps add value to the development of a strategy for protection of cultural heritage as well as for the benefit of the Lithuanian society.

CONCLUSION

Wooden heritage, and two cultural traditions as its form of manifestation (professional and ethnic: city, estate, rural), embodies the historical and present day identity, skills and values of Kaunas. The abundance of types of wooden buildings and their localization in separate zones of town reflects the significance of wooden architecture in Kaunas from the period of nineteenth – twentieth century. Manor houses, local Kaunas citizen houses, military and railway complexes, garden estate houses, residential rental units, summer homes, villas and modern cottages remained in Kaunas. The most representative examples of wide typology and stylistic diversity of wooden houses in Naujamiestis, Žaliakalnis, Panemunė, Šančiai, Vilkijampolė and other districts should be preserved because it testifies the fact that wooden architecture in Kaunas is an original and characteristic phenomenon that is of great importance to the local culture and urban planning.

The official state policy declares the same tasks of preservation of wooden architecture for almost ten years (to organize the documentation of the objects, to legitimize the system of favorable crediting, to preserve the heritage by supporting the rural and urban communities etc). Although the ideas are appropriate, however almost because of weak funding system and lack of interested executors, the politics of preservation are incapable. Preservation of wooden houses mainly depends on understanding and motivation of the owners and initiatives of the heritage sponsors. Therefore one of the most important condition in this process is social communication and dissemination of information (consultations, seminars and other activities for owners, architects, representatives of municipalities and else), which not only gives the promise of economic benefits but also ensures the preservation of cultural heritage. Digitization method presents great opportunities for developing of all last mentioned communication aspects and at the time is an effective toll of preservation of wooden architecture. Digitization initiatives of cultural heritage are conditioned by the national cultural policy and its consistency. However, not all practices of development of such digital content in Lithuania can be called as successful. Although in the guidelines of the cultural policy of Lithuania the demand of digital cultural space is actively formulated, the national practice of implementation is sluggish so far. Probably the grater focus to the diverse experiences of the European countries in the process of developing projects of digital content might attain more positive results in the financial sector. This would lead to more real prospects of adapting innovate theoretical and practical approaches for the implementation of projects of the digitization of architectural heritage.

Nevertheless there is a promising project in Lithuania, especially dedicated to architecture with wood, www.archimde.lt. The online media of data storage of Kaunas wooden houses serves not only as a profesional platform for a researches of architecture (documentation, interpretation) but also play an
important role for a social actions related with preservation of wooden buildings. Moreover, a digital version of wooden houses may someday be the only record of an original object that deteriorates or is destroyed. Therefore the educational mission (stimulation of maturity of knowledge and self consciousness) is important as well as the maintenance of extremely fragile signs of Kaunas local identity as a meaningful part of national cultural idea.

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