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Report re Vilnius Old Town

22nd December 2004

- 1.0 I was requested by the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO and the Organisation of World Heritage Cities [OVPM] to undertake a mission to Vilnius, Lithuania, to study the ‘Draft Detailed Plan of the Old Town of Vilnius’ that has been drafted by the Vilnius Municipality.
 - 1.1 The mission took place between the 5th and 7th December 2004.
 - 1.2 During the mission meetings were held with all the relevant authorities including the Mayor, officials of the Ministry of Culture¹, Department of Culture², OTRA³, the local UNESCO Commission, ICOMOS Lithuania and also NGO’s and the general public.
 - 1.3 Particular thanks must be made to G. Ritauskas, Director of OTRA for his time and assistance during the mission.
 - 1.4 The mission was very well organized. I received all the requested information.
- 2.0 Lithuania is at the moment undergoing rapid economic growth. There is a demand for new office space and for new, more modern, apartments.
- 3.0 There is also a general request for the reconstruction of buildings that were destroyed during the recent history of the country. Vilnius is a city with 98 quarters.
- 4.0 The new ‘Detailed Plan’ outlaying what can and what cannot be done in the city is an attempt to better management and planning

¹ Ministry of Culture, Centre of Cultural Heritage

² Department of Cultural Heritage Protection

³ Vilnius Old Town Renewal Agency

of these developments in the historic core of the city. It does not however meet the expectations of most heritage NGOs.

4.1 One of my main concerns is the fact that at the moment there are a number of different agencies and authorities responsible for the protection of heritage. There is not a well-defined legal responsibility. There are conflicting national and municipal regulations. To be fair the Detailed Plan is supposed to address this difficulty.⁴

4.2 At the moment one needs permission from both the Municipality and the national Department to be able to do structural changes. The legal framework is however quite complicated due to the existence of different laws and to 'special regimes'. One of the most detailed plans is that presented to UNESCO in 1992 when the dossier for World Heritage was made: this was later supplemented by a number of plans. The plans catered for two buffer zones with different levels of protection.

5.0 The main issues facing the town are:

- New high rises.
- Reconstruction.
- Building of open spaces.
- Changes in historic buildings.

5.1 The main preoccupation of all concerned is with regards to the new high rise tower blocks that are being erected and which are planned for the future. These are all in the buffer zone of the historic core. The main area is on the other side of the river. There is no doubt however that these new high rises have altered considerably the skyline view of the city. It is difficult to take photographs from many parts of the city and block the appearance of the high-rise buildings. The Mayor assured me that there will be no attempt to make any high rises within the historic core but will concentrate beyond the river: this area includes historic timber structures, some of which will be destroyed.

⁴ The main document is the Vilnius Old Town Protection Regulation.

- 5.2 There is the general view that historic buildings should be reconstructed. This has already taken place to a considerable extent.
 - 5.2.1 The most important project is the reconstruction of a Palace next to the cathedral: however there is hardly any criticism of this project, which is in any case reaching its end. It is certainly the case that the view of the upper castle, such a prominent feature of the city, is hampered when viewed from the square next to the Cathedral.
 - 5.2.2 The other main project is regarding the reconstruction of the Jewish area, including the Synagogue. I was informed that this reconstruction is not being requested by the Jews themselves [now numbering around two thousand] but by others. The eventual use of these buildings is doubtful.
 - 5.3 As part of this reconstruction policy it is being considered to reconstruct buildings that had been destroyed and which had been turned into green public areas. The general public is naturally much against the loss of these small green spaces and the reconstruction does not seem to be justified in any way.
 - 5.4 Changes are also being done to historic buildings. The main changes relate to the use of modern materials in restoration projects. Some of these materials are not of the original type and render some of the houses as too modern. In the adaptation for modern use of buildings, under the guise of the need to adapt old buildings rather than leave them abandoned, new structures are being proposed in the internal yards of open spaces, such as gardens, around these buildings: this is particularly the case of abandoned monasteries or other religious buildings.
- 6.0 All of these matters are supposed to be discussed and answered in the Detailed Plan. The fact remains however that at the moment it is still not clear who is responsible for the safeguarding of the world heritage status of the city and thus for a Plan that ensures

that the original proposals are maintained. It must also be stated that a public consultation procedure was followed and NGOs and other groups are very active in the discussion of the plan: as is usual in such cases there is a lot of criticism but the amount of persons who actually participated in the debates was very limited. However some groups are maintaining pressure and have even created web sites to discuss what is happening.

- 6.1 The main criticism of the Detailed Plan is that it is not detailed enough. It allows for changes to be made in too large an area of the city without there being enough detailing of what can be done. Though the 'shading' of the blocks in the Plan is very specific there is considerable overlap in many areas. In general there are far too many areas that allow changes: I requested but did not get a percentage of the area that will allow changes. Furthermore the text itself is simply too generic and allows for interpretation that can lead to undesirable proposals or projects.
- 6.2 On the other hand it is clear that the Plan is a serious attempt to regularize the level of permissible interventions in the city. The problem is that that which is being allowed may be too much.
- 7.0 There is no doubt that Vilnius, like any living city, has to go through changes. There is a demand for more residential and commercial space within the city center and even more in the WH buffer zone. The problem is how to find the right balance that protects the historic core and at the same time allows for changes.
- 8.0 Certainly the only way to make sure that the basic principles of point 7 are maintained is by making sure that the protective law, in this case the Detailed Plan, gives clear guidelines and indicators of what is acceptable and what is not. The Detailed Plan must:
 - Have clear information. For instance it must clearly show all the relevant information such as in the inner courtyards and any other traditional

architectural features. It must also clearly identify the religious ensembles both as built or as originally built and including the spaces around them and which form an integral part of such ensembles.

- It must clearly indicate which are the areas that are considered to be historical and which are the areas considered untouchable and which are the areas that are less historic and in which some interventions can be done.
- It must clearly identify what kind of interventions are allowed, that is whether extra floors to existing structures, full demolition, reconstruction or new buildings. In the case of full demolition it must outline the archaeological constraints and what action is to be taken for the safeguarding of any possible remains.
- In the case of the reconstruction of historic structures the Plan must state the reason behind this reconstruction and must identify the need for such a reconstruction.
- With regards to the open spaces it must be valued whether the City will gain with the construction of these areas or whether it stands to gain more if it maintains these green open spaces.

9.0 In conclusion it must be stated that Vilnius is undergoing a process that many historic cities have gone through. On the one hand there is an increase in awareness of the heritage value of the city and on the other hand there is a growing demand for new accommodation and office space. Vilnius is however a World Heritage site and as such must adhere to the principles and expectations of the international community. It must also listen to the requests of the locals as after all it is within their own interest to maintain the heritage values of this important town. Above all it is the importance of the town that must convince its leaders to protect it in the best way possible. The Detailed Plan must reflect this entire complex situation. In view of the above and

in view of what I have seen and was told there is a need for clarifications to make sure that the Detailed Plan is indeed an effective document in favour of heritage protection and at the same time allow for the city to grow.