



TWENTY YEARS OF NATIONAL SURVIVAL

**The phenomenon of Kaunas Interwar period architecture.
1919 – 1939**

MSc Architecture History Thesis
Delft University of Technology
Aiste Rakauskaite, 5347912
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Content



Abstract	4
Introduction	5
Chapter 1: The feeling of temporariness and hope	8
1.1. Historical context in Europe	
1.2. Independence of Lithuania	
1.3. Kaunas – provisional capital of Lithuania	
1.4. Living conditions in Kaunas city after the First World War	
Chapter 2: Creating a Kaunas modernistic view in 1930s	12
2.1. Kaunas in the '30s	
2.2. Relation to Western Europe architecture tendencies	
2.3. Architecture as a symbol of changes	
Chapter 3: The end of the most culturally prosperous period	28
3.1. Soviet occupation	
3.2. International recognition and nowadays approach	
Conclusion	33
Bibliography	34

Abstract

Ten new countries were formed after World War I in Europe. One of them – Lithuania – got independent from the Russian Empire in 1918. More than 100 years of occupation left deep scars in Lithuania's history. A revival became both an opportunity and a significant challenge. Two years after Lithuania got independent, the capital Vilnius was occupied by Poland and the second-largest city Kaunas was announced as the provisional capital. This significant historical moment determined radical transformations of Kaunas city. Restoring the Lithuanian identity, especially without Vilnius, became one of the major priorities. Therefore, trying to create Lithuanians' architectural style served as a tool for inspiring society and for showing the advanced progress of the newly reborn country to the rest of Europe. These modernist buildings of Kaunas were named as the Architecture of Optimism. The positive feeling about Lithuania's future was prevailing at that period because the country has not seen such radical progress of living environment in ages. In just 20 years Kaunas from countryside looking area became a modern, competitive city: the centre of academic, economic and political life. The city's number of residents increased from 92 to 155 thousand (Vaitekūnas, 2021). This situation strongly influenced the architectural and urban identity of the city. From newly built individual art deco style houses to an art museum – distinctive modernist architectural style reflected the search for national identity and the turn towards the West. Architecture students that were coming back from abroad to independent Lithuania affected these searches drastically. The mix of modern Western approach and traditional values influenced previously mentioned distinction of architecture.

Introduction

In 2020 October, one of the few remaining modernist art deco style villas, built during the Interwar period, was illegally demolished in Kaunas city. While accordingly, a national news portal published an opinion with the title "For people being proud in their national heritage". The author Vikutauskas (2020, October 7) argues that having pride in the past decades hinders the path to progress. In other words, being nostalgic about the past correlates with weak future vision. Vikutauskas (2020, November 11) believes that the demolition of the art deco villa was not a bad thing at all; after all, it was just an old abandoned building, occupying valuable space for the new one. Meanwhile, a collective movement began in Kaunas city that was mainly driven by architects and architecture enthusiasts. This movement started a petition, protests, and was blocking the way to bulldozers (Bružas, 2020). Discussions about the interwar period in Kaunas architecture have become very active in recent years. It seems that there are two distinct camps; while one states that "modernism for the future" (Šepetys, 2018), the other thinks that heritage is only for the past.

This study will investigate the birth, development and preservation of the unique modernist architecture style in Kaunas city during the interwar period (1918–1940). Moreover, it will explore how the historical circumstances (especially the occupation of the capital Vilnius) determined the dramatic architectural changes in Kaunas. At the beginning of transformation, Kaunas looked very much like any other countryside town; however, due to the newly acquired status of provisional capital, this city became a modern and competitive centre of academic, economic, and cultural life. These circumstances and prosperities were translated into an extraordinary modernist architecture style. Kaunas architects were thoroughly mixing Lithuanian identity together with the latest architectural trends in Western Europe. This paper mainly discusses one hypothesis: because Kaunas city became a provisional capital of Lithuania, a radical architectural environment progression was possible in just 20 years.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. In order to informatively analyze the topic, each chapter reflects on each decade during the interwar period. In the first chapter, a discussion starts with the provided historical context of the early 20 century and the consequences of the First World War. It is the overview of the re-established European countries: their national identity searches and the reflection of that on architecture. This period can be defined by the feeling of temporariness, obscurity about the future and searching for national identity in the '20s. The chapter analyzes Lithuania and specifically Kaunas as one of the examples of these re-established European countries. The second chapter investigates the most significant period for Kaunas modernist buildings. It analyzes how the feeling of temporariness turned into determination, optimism and faith in the bright future in the early '30s in Kaunas. The third chapter overviews how the occupation of the Soviet Union influenced Kaunas modernist architecture. This chapter is concluded by the transition to nowadays and the current approach to the modernist architecture.

To understand Kaunas modernist architecture and the radical economic and cultural progression in 20 years, various reference sources were used. They include books, articles, filmed material, and many more. The diversity of sources also includes different publishing time, foreign and local research approaches. In order to expand the knowledge further, the interview with a tour guide of Kaunas modernist architecture Jučinskienė was conducted. They answer essential questions and broaden knowledge about the thesis topic. Analysis and examples of iconic modernist style buildings share authentic information about the Interwar period architecture and help to understand the uniqueness of modernist architecture in Lithuania.

Before analyzing Kaunas modernist architecture, it is significant to emphasize the meaning of “modernism” itself. According to Merriam – Webster’s dictionary (2021), modernism reflects “a self-conscious break with the past and a search for new forms of expression”. In general, the modernistic approach was an output of the post-war period (Tafari, 1980, p. 141). Kaunas modernist style did not have intentions to entirely break with the past; it is about national identity searches and combining that with a new modern approach. It is one of the reasons why we could call Kaunas modernist style a unique phenomenon (Jankevičiūtė and Petrulis, 2018, p. 73–76). A Lithuanian architecture historian Petrulis (2015, p. 111–112) states that there are two main paradigms of Lithuania’s Interwar period architecture: the aspiration to create national modernism and modernism as a creation of modern European mindset. The post-war period left Europe in disorder. Therefore, economic and physical rebuilding and political regrouping were crucially needed (Hisour, 2021). However, this post-war period for Lithuania was a new step and opportunity after more than 100 years of occupation and First World War aftermath. Kaunas modernist architecture reflected the optimism and became a phenomenon. Drėmaitė (2018, p. 15) accurately named it “The architecture of optimism”. This definition will be widely used throughout the thesis.

By studying Kaunas progression and the architectural environment in the Interwar period, I want to answer the following question:

- How does the interwar period reflect Lithuania’s architectural identity?

The other questions that have arisen in the research are:

- How did the Soviet Union occupation in 1940 affect the heritage of modernist architecture in Lithuania?

- Is the modernist architectural style of Kaunas modernism still relevant today?



Figure 1. The picture represents an urban development of Kaunas city. Improving infrastructure and quality of living – newly installed water and sewer supply systems, covered sidewalks.

From “*Berniukas laisto gatvę*”, by B. Buračas, 1930 (<http://www.archyvai.lt/exhibitions/albumas/v081199.htm>)

Chapter 1. The feeling of temporariness and hope

1.1. Historical context in Europe

The First World War had a massive influence on the social, economic and cultural progression of the city of Kaunas. Permanent residents of the Kaunas region have abandoned the city or have been transferred to other areas after Kaunas became a war zone. For this reason, massive protecting fortifications were built. In 1897, there were 70,9 thousand residents in Kaunas city, yet the numbers drastically decreased to 18 thousand during the First World War (LSAMTI, 1991, p. 20). Since all the constructions stopped during the German occupation (Kaunas.lt, 2016), Kaunas architectural advancement was affected. The economic activity and improvement nearly stopped until the announcement of Lithuania's independence in 1918.

Before analyzing the post-war Kaunas development, it is essential to emphasize the post-war context in Europe. In 1919 on 28 June, the Treaty of Versailles was signed. It marked the official end of the First World War between Germany and the Allied Powers. In the same year, the independence of Lithuania was announced. However, these dates may not be the most accurate representation of the actual changes of the political and social context. According to Weeks (2014, p. 77), "in Eastern Europe, the armistice declaration marked the beginning of new armed struggles that would only end in the early 1920s".

1.2. Independence of Lithuania

Afterwards the Paris Peace Conference, lengthy negotiations and final agreements drastically reshaped the map of Europe. The new national borders were formed, and ten new European countries – including Lithuania – announced independence. These huge cartographic shifts were observed by geographer Alexander J. Kent, who described hope as one of the most defining feelings in the newly established European countries. After more than 100 years of occupation by the Russian Empire (Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth was divided and occupied by Russian Empire, Prussian Kingdom and Austrian Empire in 1795), the Baltic states were hoping to reestablish cultural, economic, political and social life, and architecture had a significant role in this. Mansbach (2014, p. 235 - 239) states that each newly formed country created a distinctive expression of modernist architecture: "one that often creatively blended traditional references and universal claims, or that inventively adapted new building methods to canonical construction materials". Among the three Baltic states, Lithuania aspired to the most distinctive architectural decisions because of the need for "national survival". National self-awareness was mainly influenced by losing the capital Vilnius – the most Lithuanian identity-forming city with deep historical background, architectural and cultural heritage.

1.3. Kaunas – provisional capital of Lithuania

In October 1920, the historical capital of Lithuania, Vilnius, was occupied by Polish troops. After an exhausting period of Germans and Bolsheviks invasions, Lithuania did not have sufficient military and diplomatic resources to protect the historical capital Vilnius from Poland (Kančienė, 2017, p. 6). Although many Lithuanians kept fighting against the annexation of Vilnius (with a chant "we will not calm down without Vilnius") (True Lithuania, 2021), Lithuania needed a provisional capital. This title was given to the second biggest city Kaunas. It was the only one provisional capital in the world at that period (Visit Kaunas, 2020).

1.4. Living conditions in Kaunas city after the First World War

Status of provisionality and uncertainty determined that temporary settlers and politicians were investing more in the plans to get Vilnius back than improve the quality of living in Kaunas city during the first years of independence. Kaunas lacked any conveniences for a living, but it was full of hope to get the capital of Vilnius back. This hope, however, slowed down Kaunas economics, political and cultural progression (Ruzgienė, 2018, p. 38). Nevertheless, representatives of many professions like doctors, lawyers and engineers started coming to live in provincial Kaunas after the announcement of provisional capital status (Černiauskas, 2018, p. 47). They were welcomed by unpaved sidewalks, mud on the streets, no water supply or sewerage, wooden houses in the city's centre with a massive Orthodox church contrasting among those houses. (Kančienė, 2017, p. 6) While visiting Lithuania, Finn Niemi described Kaunas as "<...> scarce, a small town impoverished by the hell of the War" (Skrodenis, 2002, p. 8).

As Steven Mansback (2014, p. 235) states "for many of the new republics that emerged in the wake of World War I, modern architecture served two principal purposes: first, to provide much-needed housing for those dislocated in the shift of national borders and to replace governmental buildings destroyed during the conflict and ensuing civil strife; and second, to assert architecturally the political aspirations of the emergent new states". The relocation of political institutions was chaotic and disorganized during the first years of independence. There were few suitable buildings and spaces to offer to the political institutions (Ruzgienė, 2018, p. 37). In addition, many new settlers kept coming to Kaunas, and it drastically increased the need for new accommodation and workspaces. In summary, there were approximately 1600 new buildings constructed in Kaunas (LSAMTI, 1991, p. 22) (Table 1).

Year	Number of new buildings constructed
1922	290
1923	313
1924	464
1925	526

Table 1. New buildings in Kaunas in 1922 - 1925

1.5. Urban development in the '20s

Mostly uncontrolled, unregulated constructions influenced the expansion of the city. A new masterplan was needed to regulate this growth. These urban plans were prepared by Danish engineer M. Frandsen and Lithuanian A. Jokimas and reflected the Garden - city movement ideas (LSAMTI, 1991, p. 22) (Figure 1.1). Interestingly, the municipality fully confirmed these urban plans in 1923, ignoring Frandsenas warnings about these plans being still in the sketch stage (Lingys, 2016, 0:04:15 – 0:05:40). Lithuania was rushing to be recognized in Europe by creating its own distinctive national identity. For example, newly formed squares, streets, schools got names related to significant national heroes like Lithuanian duke Vytautas The Great. It helped to emphasize the national awareness and remind the great Lithuanian history before the occupation (Petruolis, 2015, p. 60). In the late '20s, a vast urban planning progression was noticed: bureaucratic procedures became easier to solve. Additionally, the quality of living improved: more and more houses were connected to sewer and water supply systems (Laurinaitis, 2018, p. 158).

National-self image formation was a priority at that time. It was the key to existence (Mansbach, 2014, p. 238). As Petruolis (2015, p. 59) states, the search for national identity became Lithuania's cultural project, in which architecture played a significant role. Building the new capital from scratch while competing with time is a challenge that Lithuania's intellectuals and creators eagerly accepted. In the late '20s, the national self-awareness related to the prosperity of getting back Vilnius changed to a hope to be recognized as a nation with provisional capital Kaunas. From being a provincial Russian gubernia city, Kaunas started a slow transition to a modern capital (Kaunas in, 2018). A decade after the First World War showed that nothing lasts forever – absolutism does not exist anymore, anything totally new can be built from scratch (Hernandez, 2015, p. 372).



Figure 1.1. Urban plan proposal by architect Peter Marius Frandsen and engineer Antanas Jokimas in 1923.

From LNM (1923). Found in: Drėmaitė, M. (2018). Optimizmo architektūra. Kauno fenomenas, 1918 – 1940. (pp. 155). Lapas.

Figure 1.2. The most iconic public modernist buildings built in '20s

1920s



Jewish bank
arch. G. Mazelis, M. Grodzenskis 1925
photo: (3)



Kaunas sports medicine centre
arch. Krečmeris, Šragenheimas, G. Mazelis. 1926
photo: Ž. Rinkšelis, 2020 (2)



Bank of Lithuania
arch. M. Songaila. 1929
photo: M. Plepys, 2020 (1)



Ministry of Justice and the Parliament
arch. E. A. Frykas, 1929
photo: M. Plepys, 2020 (1)

Images from:

(1) *Modernist Kaunas. Architecture of Optimism 1919–1939. Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list,* 2021 (<https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Modernist-Kaunas.-Nomination-Dossier-2021.pdf>)

(2) Rinkšelis, Ž. (2019). House of Jewish organization OZE [Photograph]. <https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/en/zydu-dragijos-oze-namai/>

(3) Unknown (n.d.), <https://datos.kvb.lt/en/kaunas-views/>

Chapter 2. Creating a Kaunas modernistic view in the 1930s

2.1. Kaunas in the '30s

In 1923, Giuseppe Salvatori, a journalist from Italy, visited Kaunas city. At that time, he shared his memories:

"When I got off <...> at Kaunas station, my heart sank. Can it be, I asked myself, that this small town will from now on have to be a capital of a European state, however modest?" (Salvatori, 1932, p. 16-17).

After eight years, in 1931, Salvatori revisited Kaunas. This time, he was surprisingly shocked by the drastic changes in the city:

"Now, when going from the station, one passes a shady cemetery and ends up at a huge paved square in front of the former Orthodox church. A harmonious row of new city villas goes up to Vytautas Park along the street from the square. Two very high radio masts can be seen above the park's oaks. At night, these technically perfect constructions beam powerful spotlights, which assist the landing Lufthansa planes, and shine over Kaunas like a new constellation" (Salvatori, 1932, p. 16-17).

Salvatori's memoirs describe how Kaunas changed unrecognizably in almost ten years. The '30s were the most significant period, forming the unique modernist style in Lithuania. Although Kaunas still was a provisional capital of Lithuania, residents faced up to the idea that Vilnius was occupied by Polish troops and it was not part of Lithuania anymore. The hope to get Vilnius back as the historical capital gradually faded away. Even though it was a significant loss, it helped to focus on the economic, cultural and political life of Kaunas city. Moreover, this hope encouraged concentrating on the city's international recognition and prospects. Kaunas' drastic economic progression and growth in the 1930s manifested themselves as massive construction sites spread throughout the city: "the hammers were knocking in the city day and night, or the new houses were springing up daily" (Naujasis žodis, 1930, p. 44)(Figure 2.1, 2.2). With regards to these changes in Kaunas, an architectural historian King (2005, p. 1) claims that buildings and their surroundings were heavily influenced by social aspects, namely the pride of re-established national identity, economic, cultural and political improvements, and prevailing beliefs and values. The aforementioned factors were creating the identity of the building even more than some physical parameters (e.g., size, location, form). By changing those social aspects, changes in the building environment occur. Consequently, Kaunas city became an example of how social activities and unique historical circumstances have to a certain extent influenced the city's environment. While there were more than 6000 buildings of different functions built during the Interwar period in Kaunas city, most of them were constructed during the 1930s (Lingys, 2016, 0:05:20 – 0:06:40).

2.2. Relation to Western Europe architecture tendencies

A new political approach and regulations influenced drastic changes in the city's environment. In 1929, permission to demolish buildings that are illegally built or in bad condition was given. Additionally, in 1935, financial bonuses were provided by the municipality to the architects who created buildings enriching the Kaunas environment (LSAMTI, 1991, p. 23, 25). Many incentives attracted architects and creators from various places of the world to work in Kaunas: municipality's regulations, which proved national-level interest in a high-quality architecture; a variety of different competitions for a public building, helping architects to be recognized; and a construction boom that ensured the financial



Figure 2.1. Vytautas pr. in Naujamiestis area in 1921.

From *Lietuvos tarpukario architektūrinis palikimas: materialumo ir nematerialumo dermė* (pp. 94), by V. Petrulis, 2015, Kaunas, Technologija. Copyright [1921] by ČMD set.



Figure 2.2. Šv. Gertrūdės st. in Naujamiestis area in '30s.

From *Lietuvos tarpukario architektūrinis palikimas: materialumo ir nematerialumo dermė* (pp. 94), by V. Petrulis, 2015, Kaunas, Technologija. Copyright [unknown] by photographer I. Girtis, LSVa archive.

stability for creators. According to historian Drėmaitė (2018, p. 51), none of the most famous Interwar period architects or engineers was born or grew up in Kaunas city. She states that the unique architecture of optimism style in Kaunas was created by settlers coming from foreign countries who were influenced by international ideas. While architects of the '20s got knowledge in Russian Empire universities, creators in the '30s were educated mostly in Western architecture schools (Drėmaitė, 2018, p. 56). This generation of architects and engineers determined the uniqueness of Kaunas modernist architecture style and brought in the Western influence.

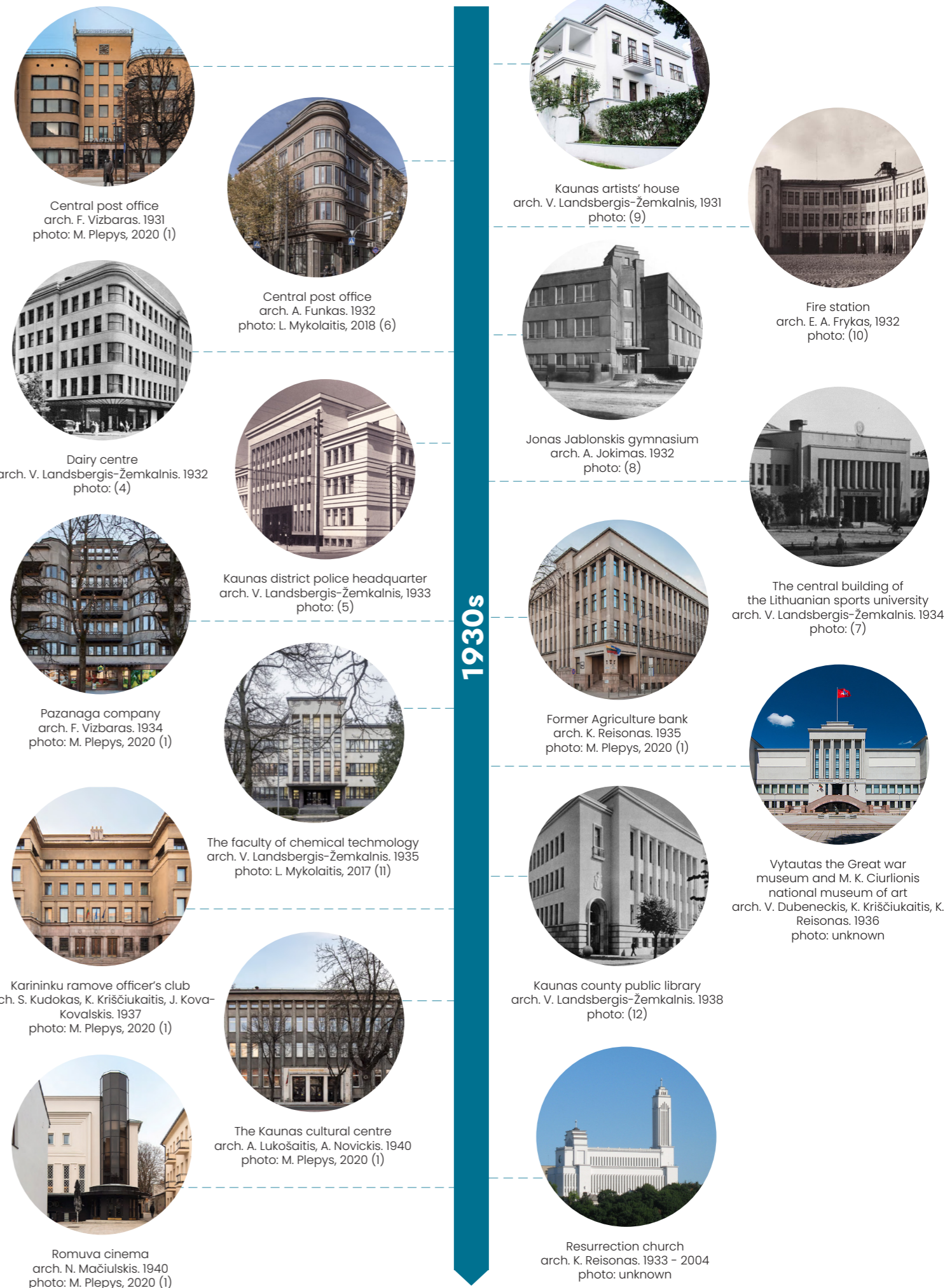
In the '30s, graduated architects coming back to Lithuania from West countries were mainly influenced by the "Form follows function" (Jet, 2019) approach and CIAM (Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne) provisions. Therefore, architects were encouraged to prioritize social aspects of architecture and functionality. This approach was also influenced by industrialism and increased technical possibilities (LSAMTI, 1991, p. 45). Embracing minimalism, reducing ornamentation, rational using of materials and incorporating innovations into the building became one of the main aspects for modernist architects (RIBA, 2021).

The aforementioned trends were promoted in Lithuania: Lithuanian architecture reviews encouraged local architects to follow Western trends and prioritize function as the main aspect of architecture (Petrulis, 2015, p. 99). However, Kaunas architecture took its own unique shape. The dark history of 100 years of Russian occupation led to an elevated longing for national ideals and symbols. Therefore, the national aspects, such as self-awareness and identity were prominent and prioritized by the new generation of architects in Kaunas. Kaunas was a blank canvas for all these ideas to be expressed.

2.3. Architecture as a symbol of changes

The urban plans have not changed since the early '20s. However, in the '30s, many new buildings began filling in the voids of the empty areas in the city (Figure 2.4). Kaunas gradually became more similar to the other capitals in Western Europe. Even though its economic and cultural progress cannot be compared with the main economic centers in Western Europe, Kaunas still began being called a "metropolitan city" because of its radical built environment changes in such a short period (Zinghaus, 1938, p. 67). Some would even compare the urban atmosphere of Kaunas with Paris: "when the weather is good and it is sunny, the main alley turns into a version of Champs Elysees, full of the latest Parisian trends." (Kartukas, 1931, p. 3). The newly built modern buildings became the background of active and cultural Kaunas city life (Petrulis, 2015, p. 123). Important to mention that Kaunas modernist architecture style – known as the architecture of optimism – significantly evolved through mainly two Kaunas areas: Naujamiestis and Zaliakalnis (Green Hill) (Kaunas 2022, 2021). While the Naujamiestis area had a concentration of cultural and political modern buildings, the Zaliakalnis district was well known for Art Deco style residential houses. Naujamiestis became a contrast to the peaceful residential Zaliakalnis area.

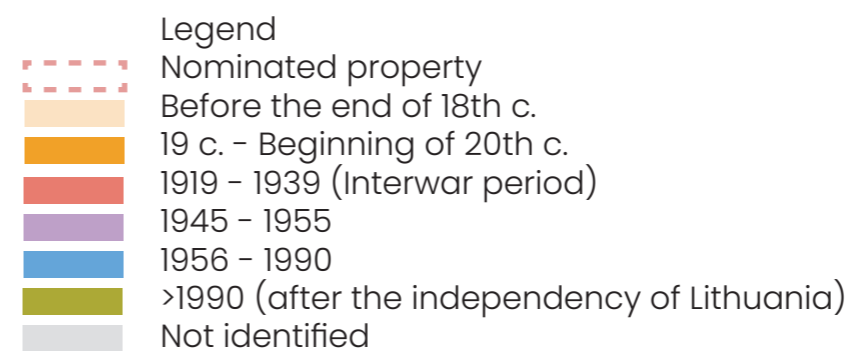
Figure 2.3. The most iconic public modernist buildings built in '30s



Images from:
 (1) *Modernist Kaunas. Architecture of Optimism 1919 - 1939. Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list,* 2021 (<https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Modernist-Kaunas-Nomination-Dossier-2021.pdf>)
 (4) Unknown (n.d.). The headquarter of milk processing company "Pienocentras" [Photograph]. <http://www.autc.lt/en/architecture-objects/1027>
 (5) LLMA, f. 81, ap. 1, b. 1451 (1933). Kauno apskritys savivaldybės rūmai Kaune [Photograph]. <https://archivesofculture.com/zemkalnis/>
 (6) Mykolaitis, M. (2018). House of businessman R. Polovinskas [Photograph]. <https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/en/versliniko-r-polovinsko-namas/>
 (7) Unknown (n.d.). Lietuvos sporto universitetas [Photograph]. <https://visit.kaunas.lt/lt/aplankykite/lankytinos-vietos/tarpukario-architektura/lietuvos-sporto-universitetas-buve-fizisko-auklejimo-rumai/>
 (8) Unknown (1930 - 1939) Istorija ir tradicijos [Photograph]. <https://jablonskis.kaunas.lm.lt/istorija-ir-tradicijos/>
 (9) Eikevičiūtė, A. (2018). Nuo rezidencijų iki kultūros infocentro: atsinaujinęs Kauno menininkų namų veidas [Photograph] <https://visit.kaunas.lt/lt/naujienos/nuo-rezidenciju-iki-kulturos-infocentro-atsinaujines-kauno-menininku-namu-veidas/>
 (10) Unknown (n.d.). Ugniagesių rūmai Kaune [Photograph] <http://www.autc.lt/lt/architekturos-objektai/905>
 (11) Mykolaitis, L. (2017) Tyrimų laboratorija [Photograph] <https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/tyrimu-laboratorija/>
 (12) Unknown (1938). Prekybos, pramonės ir amatų rūmai [Photograph] <http://www.autc.lt/lt/architekturos-objektai/1048>



Figure 2.4. Naujamiestis area: historical development.



From "Modernist Kaunas. Architecture of Optimism 1919 -1939. Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list," 2021 (<https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Modernist-Kaunas.-Nomination-Dossier-2021.pdf>), (pp. 72).

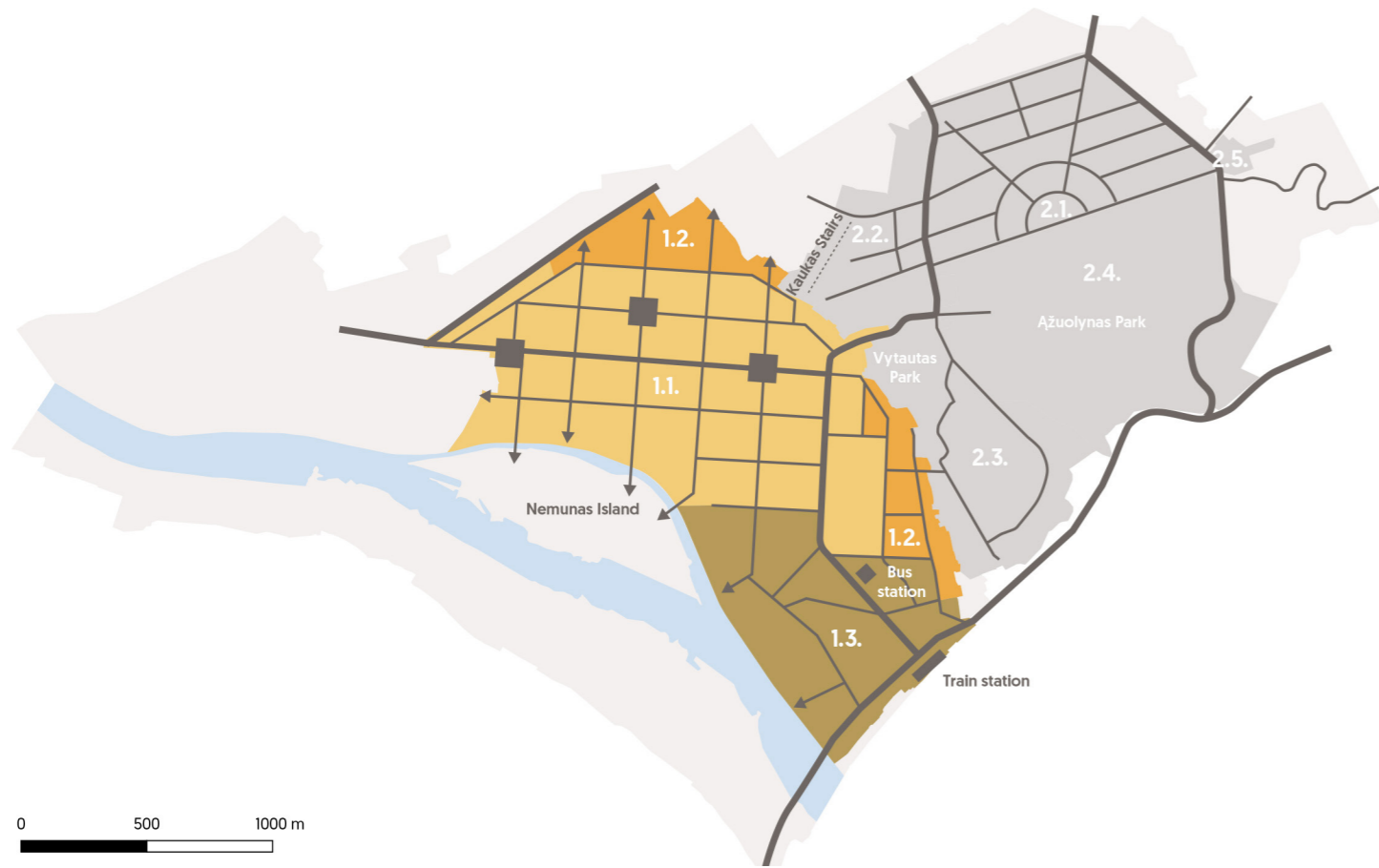


Figure 2.5. The Naujamiestis area.

From "Modernist Kaunas. Architecture of Optimism 1919 - 1939. Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list," 2021, (<https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Modernist-Kaunas.-Nomination-Dossier-2021.pdf>), (pp. 66)

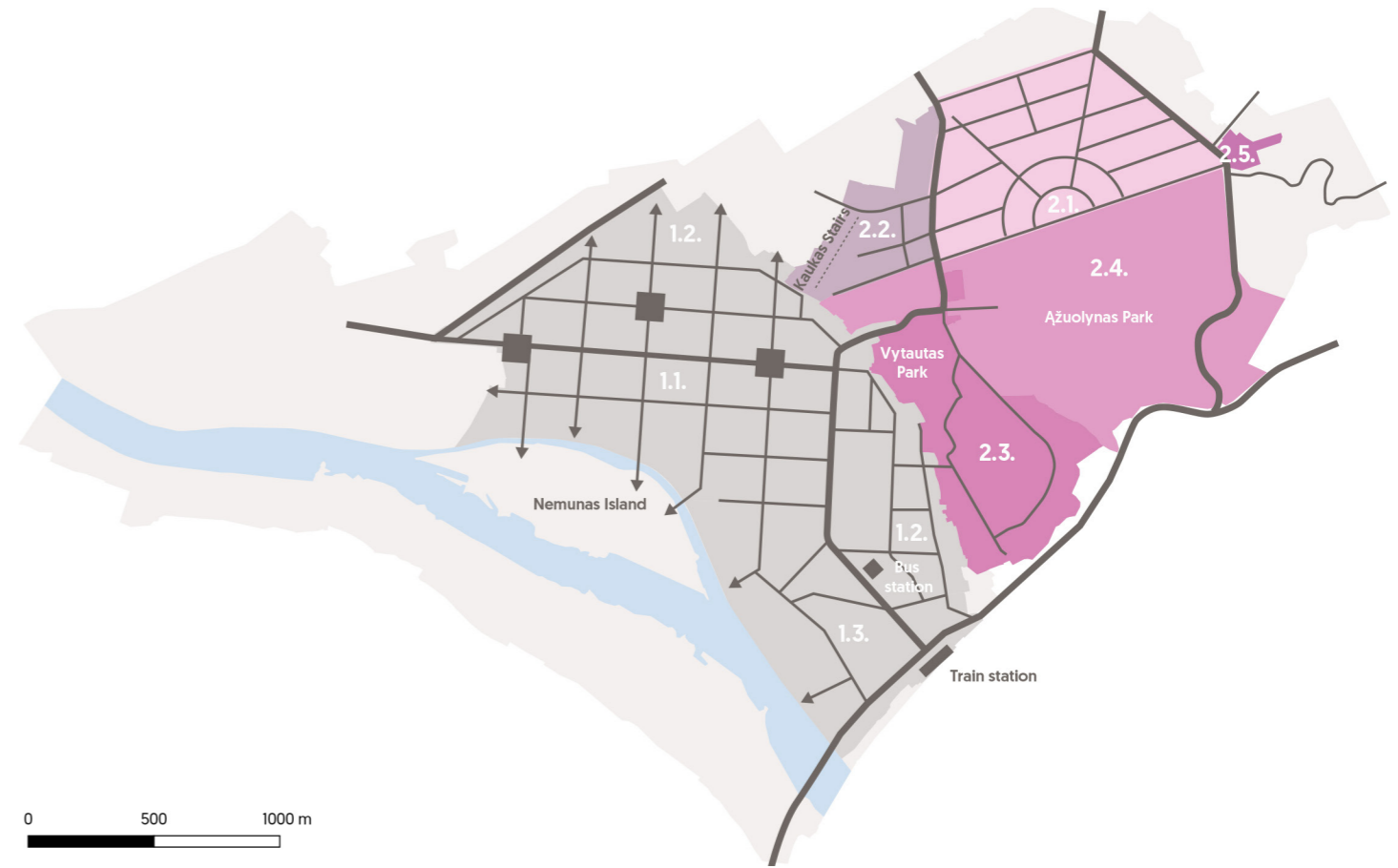
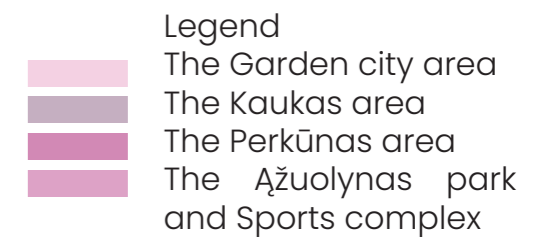


Figure 2.6. The Žaliakalnis area.

From "Modernist Kaunas. Architecture of Optimism 1919 - 1939. Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list," 2021, (<https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Modernist-Kaunas.-Nomination-Dossier-2021.pdf>), (pp. 168)



Analysis of Naujamiestis district

Naujamiestis district is considered to be the most representative area of modernist style buildings in Kaunas. The area was mostly built during the Interwar period and remained relatively unchanged until nowadays. As it is stated in the nomination for Kaunas' inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list "the entire district <...> retained both its authenticity and integrity as an open-air museum of interwar Kaunas modernist residential architecture" (Municipality of Kaunas, Nomination Dossier, 2021, p. 127). While smaller scale (two to three-storey) residential buildings formed the main urban fabric of Naujamiestis district, the massive dominants broke down this regularity. The Central Post Office (built in 1931), marked the beginning of the iconic Kaunas modernist architecture decade, and Vytautas the Great Museum (1936) formed the national pride and awareness of Lithuanian architecture identity.

Analysis of Žaliakalnis district

The first chapter mentioned that Kaunas urban plan reflected the Garden - city concept ideas. Žaliakalnis (Green Hill) area was heavily influenced by that. One could notice that even though the Kaunas architecture style resembled modern European capitals, the "agrarian mentality" (Petruolis, 2015, p. 99) remained. Instead of creating multistorey housing complexes (which was typical in West Europe at that period), a single-family house as a sign of wealthiness was idealized. That explains why Žaliakalnis was divided into equally-sized plots for individual houses (Municipality of Kaunas, Nomination Dossier, 2021, p. 170). Those small-scale villas are known for the original application of the Art Deco style. This style in particular liberated architecture from standardized rules and allowed architects to "ornament everything": from massive buildings to the smallest interior decor details (Chicago architecture foundation, 2014, 0:00:42 - 0:01:10).

More in-depth analysis of previously mentioned buildings of Naujamiestis and Žaliakalnis areas helps to understand the significance of national self-awareness in architecture in the 1930s:



Figure 2.7. Central Post office in early '30s. Unknown (early '30s). Kauno centrinis pastas tarpukariu [Photograph]. <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2019-05-04-kauno-centrinio-pasto-rumai-musu-istorine-atmintis/>

Central Post Office . Arch. F. Vizbaras. Built in 1931

Historical circumstances. The central post office became the symbol of a modern approach, life-style, and improved infrastructure in Europe in the early '30s (Jankevičiūtė and Petrulis, 2018, p. 129). A centralized modern post office helped Lithuania to keep pace with other European countries and provide all communication services under one roof.

Location and architects. The plot was chosen next to the longest pedestrian boulevard in Lithuania. It marks the edge of the Naujamiestis district. There was no architectural competition organized, and the administration of the board asked the engineer Feliksas Vizbaras to prepare the project (LSAMTI, 1991, p. 155). The new central Post office was built in 1931 and immediately became the symbol of *Laisvės alėja* (Freedom Boulevard). A massive six-storey height building was an exceptional urban object surrounded by tiny smaller scale houses.

Identity of national self-awareness. After the building was finished, a huge memorial plaque was installed on the wall. On it, the visitors could find the names of architects and engineers. Moreover, it listed various Lithuania's technology firms and craftsmen (AUTC, 2021). The wish was to show that Lithuania was capable of building unique buildings from its own resources economically and professionally.

Modernist architecture style. The main entrance to the building was emphasized by symmetrically curved volumes on both sides. The interior was full of national symbols: tile floors, forming national Lithuanian folk ornamentation; ceilings of the hall, illustrating Lithuanian postage stamps; stained-glass windows, creating sublime atmosphere (LSAMTI, 1991, p. 155). Central Post office represents the combination of national identity searches and a modern approach.



Figure 2.8. The interior of Central Post office.

From "Modernist Kaunas. Architecture of Optimism 1919 - 1939. Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list," by M. Plepys, 2020 (<https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Modernist-Kaunas.-Nomination-Dossier-2021.pdf>), (pp. 90)

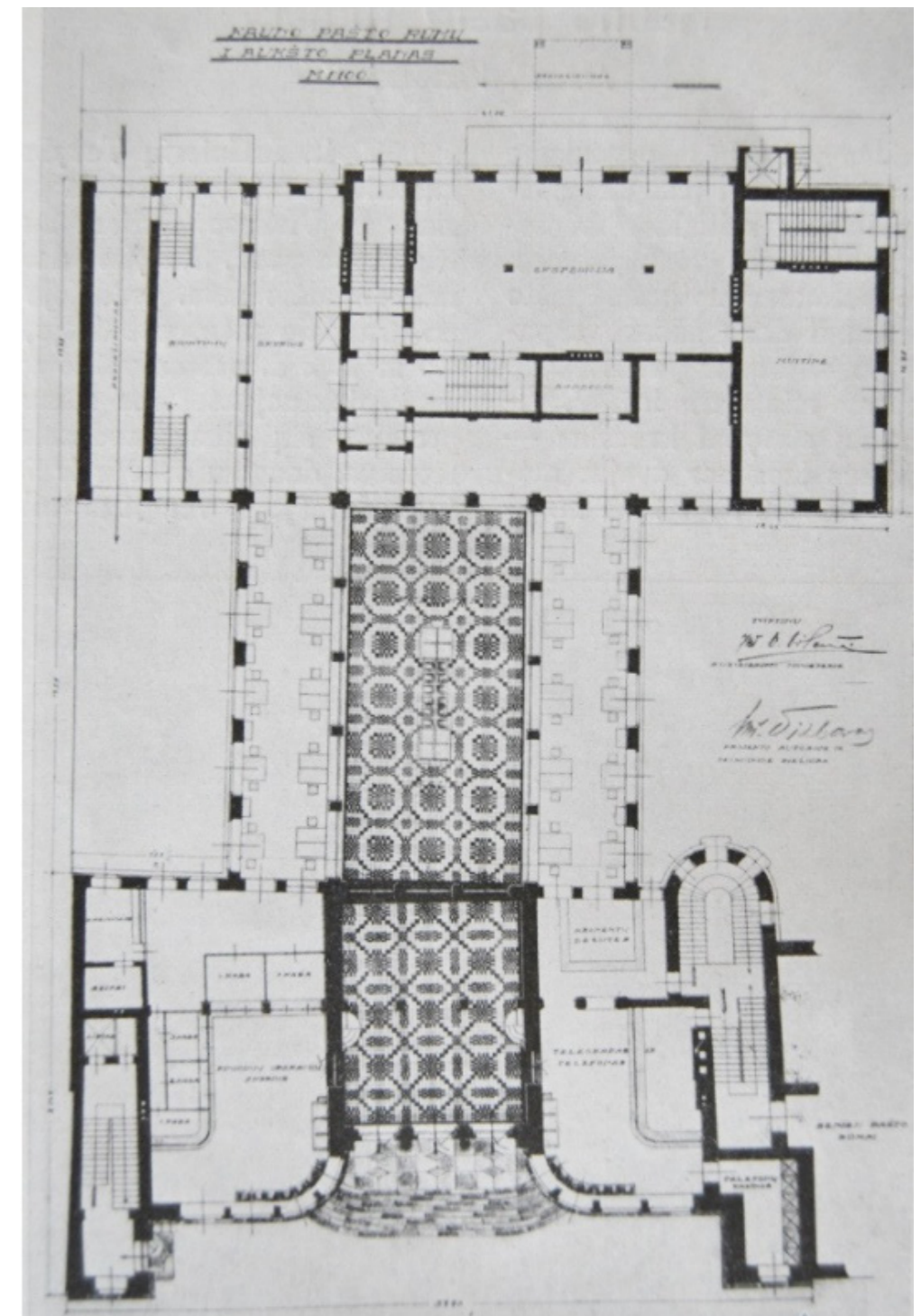


Figure 2.9. The ground floorplan.

From "Technika ir ūkis", 1933, (<http://www.autc.lt/lt/architekturos-objektai/64>)



Figure 2.10. Unity square and Vytautas the great museum.

From personal archive, 2020.

**Vytautas the Great Museum and M. K. Ciurlionis National Museum of Art.
V. Dubeneckis, K.Reisonas, K. Kriščiukaitis. Built in 1936**

Historical circumstances. The idea to build a national museum came up before the First World War and after the death of a famous Lithuanian painter Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis. A museum was needed to exhibit his works but unexpectedly, plans were disturbed by the war (Jankevičiūtė and Petrulis, 2018, p. 73). In 1918, after Lithuania got independent the national museum idea was understood differently than before. It had to be a place symbolizing the significance and proudness of the Lithuanian nation.

Identity of national self-awareness. In the early '30s, there were two groups of Lithuanian national museum enthusiasts: the first one believing that the museum had to reflect on European museum tendencies and authors should prioritize the function instead of national self-awareness (Gelaunė, 1932, p. 52 - 55). The second group, which at the end influenced the project more, stated that the National Museum had to be "a monument for nationality" (Jankevičiūtė and Petrulis, 2018, p. 76).

Location and architects. The scarcity of financial resources determined that the idea to build a grand National Museum came back only in the early '30s (VDKM, 2021). Architect Vladimiras Dubeneckis (who passed away in 1932, the project was retaken by architect Karolis Reisonas) won the architectural competition (Architektūros fondas, 2017, p. 68). Being the most representative building of that time, Vytautas the Great museum was located next to the main newly formed Unity square in Naujamiestis district.

Modernist architecture style. Vytautas the Great museum is an extraordinary example of modernist architecture style. The symmetric floor plan combined the War Museum on the southern part while on the opposite (the northern) side the Museum of Culture was located. "Each of these institutions required their façades to reflect their focus" (Architektūros fondas, 2017, p. 68). While the façade of the War museum was static and more representative (high stairs were used as a tribune), the exterior of the Museum of Culture was more dynamic (LSAMTI, 1991, p. 307). This building became a historical Lithuania's symbol. Even the rocks used for the foundation were brought from the fields related to the great historical Lithuanians' fights (Jankevičiūtė and Petrulis, 2018, p. 78).



Figure 2.11. The facade of Vytautas the Great War museum.

From personal archive, 2020.



Figure 2.12. The facade of M. K. Ciurlionis national museum of art.

From "Restauruotas Nacionalinio M. K. Čiurlionio muziejaus pastatas praveria duris" (<https://www.delfi.lt/kultura/naujienos/restauruotas-nacionalinio-m-k-ciurlionio-muziejaus-pastatas-praveria-duris.d?id=73095690>)



Figure 2.13. Construction of Christ's Resurrection Church. Iconic modernist style building with an urban context of Kaunas city.

Unknown (1941). [Photograph]. <https://www.facebook.com/SenasisKaunas/photos/1413167315446401>

Resurrection Church.
K. Reisonas. Building process 1933 - 1940

Historical circumstances. During the Interwar period, Catholicism was one of the most influential powers in political and social life in Lithuania (Pruskus, 2000, p. 99). Therefore, it was common to think that the Church should be the best object to represent the revival of the Lithuanian nation (Jankevičiūtė and Petrulis, 2018, p. 93).

Identity of national self-awareness. The architectural competition was held in 1928. One of the main conditions of the projects was to emphasize "the spirit of Lithuanian construction". Only architects and engineers who had Lithuanian nationality could participate in the competition (Bičiūnas, 1929, p. 3).

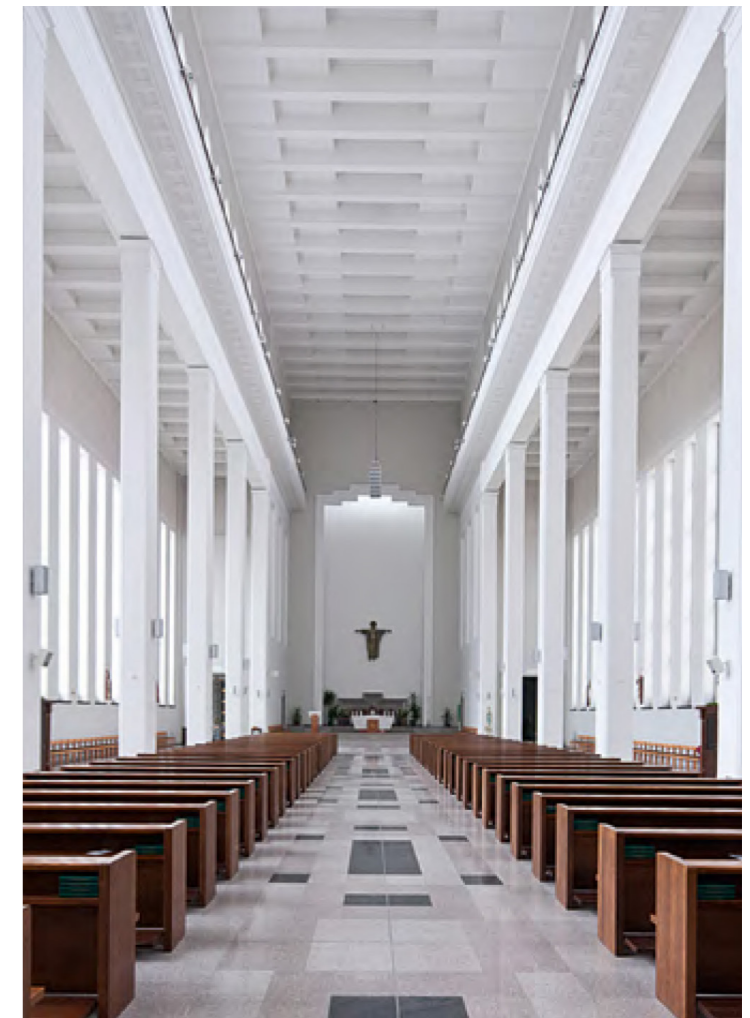
Location and architects. For such a symbolic and meaningful building a location on the top of Žaliakalnis hill was selected. The massive building had to become a dominant of Žaliakalnis area and at the same time an accent of Kaunas city. The third-place winner of the architectural competition was chosen to continue the project due to financial circumstances (LSAMTI, 1991, p. 350).

Modernist architecture style. Even today Resurrection Church looks like one of the most modern churches in Lithuania. Vertical lines of narrow windows go all the way up to the main upper slim volume. The roof has a huge terrace opened to an extraordinary Kaunas view. Up to 5000 people can attend the ceremonies in Resurrection Church (Architektūros fondas, 2017, p. 92).

Figure 2.14. The exterior of Resurrection Church.

Figure 2.15. The interior of Resurrection Church.

From "Modernist Kaunas. Architecture of Optimism 1919 - 1939. Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list," by M. Plepys, 2020 (<https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Modernist-Kaunas.-Nomination-Dossier-2021.pdf>), (pp. 130)



In general, the '30s was a radical progression decade for Kaunas. While Vilnius was still occupied by Polish troops, the rest of Lithuania emphasized nationality and the fight for survival and recognition in the European context. Full of hope and ideas, young architecture students were inspired by the Western culture and society. In the West, the society was mainly reflecting on two contradicting narratives: optimistic new generation, some promoting "hedonism and frivolity"; and experienced pessimistic part of society, understanding the adverse effects of political extremism (Open learn, 2021). Kaunas architects mainly reflect on an optimistic side of the society. This is because bright prospects of creating "The architecture of optimism" and a need to restore a newly reborn country was the main goal for them (Drémaitė, 2018, p. 15).

Architects were forming the face of the Lithuanian Interwar period. The need to have representative buildings, forming national self-awareness, changed the Kaunas city urban fabric. Small scale buildings context was interrupted by symbolic architectural dominants. In the late '30s, it seemed that the prosperity of growing Kaunas city was unlimited. It was the golden age for Kaunas as a metropolis (Drémaitė, 2018, p.17). Sadly enough, nobody could guess what a horrible and challenging 50 years period is mysteriously hiding around the corner.



Figure 2.16. Vytautas pr. in Naujamiestis area in 1921.

From *Lietuvos tarpukario architektūrinis palikimas: materialumo ir nematerialumo dermė* (pp. 94), by V. Petrulis, 2015, Kaunas, Technologija. Copyright [1921] by ČMD set.



Figure 2.17. Šv. Gertrūdos st. in Naujamiestis area in '30s.

From *Lietuvos tarpukario architektūrinis palikimas: materialumo ir nematerialumo dermė* (pp. 94), by V. Petrulis, 2015, Kaunas, Technologija. Copyright [unknown] by photographer I. Girtis, LSVa archive.

Chapter 3. The end of the most culturally prosperous period

3.1. Soviet occupation

In 1939, after the secret Molotov – Ribbentrop Pact, Germany and the Soviet Union (USSR) divided Eastern Europe into two parts. One week after the papers were signed, Adolf Hitler announced an attack against Poland. World War II, the most bloody and challenging period in human history, began (Anušauskas, 2013, p. 3). In the same year, the Soviet Union forced Lithuania to sign a mutual assistance treaty, which declares that Vilnius belongs to Lithuania. However, one of the conditions was that the Red Army could cross the borders anytime without any formal Lithuania's permission (Anušauskas, 2013, p. 9). Although Vilnius finally became part of Lithuania again, the country itself was erased from the maps for another 50 years.

The occupation drastically changed Lithuania's social, cultural and political mentality. The brightest people that were against the USSR regime had to either leave the country or were deemed political prisoners, which meant an exile to Siberia or being killed. Some of them were the founders of Kaunas modernist architecture (Klimčiauskaitė, 2017). Even though the Soviets stated that Kaunas modernist architecture is "bourgeois and formalistic", Lithuanians idealized modernist style as an independence symbol (Jankevičiūtė, 2018, p. 20). All the art pieces related to Lithuania's identity were taken down during the first years of occupation. For example, the buildings analyzed in Chapter 2 were altered – both in terms of function and style – by the Soviet system: the national elements in the Central Post office were removed, Vytautas the Great museum was transformed into a propaganda museum, and the Christ's Resurrection Church was converted into a Radio Factory (Municipality of Kaunas, Nomination Dossier, 2021, p. 90, 99, 130). Some of the modernist architecture buildings were demolished; they were replaced by massive building structures that changed the urban fabric. However, in general, the urban integrity of Kaunas did not change unrecognizable (AUTC, 2021). After Lithuania's independence was announced in 1990, Kaunas modernist buildings' restoration became a significant national symbol of resurrection (Jankevičiūtė, 2018, p. 20).

3.2. International recognition and nowadays approach

In 2015, Kaunas Modernist architecture got a UNESCO City Design nomination. Kaunas was the first city in Eastern and Middle Europe that got international recognition of such scale (Kaunas 2022, 2019). After becoming a UNESCO Creative City Network member, Kaunas had to commit to harmonious development related to social, cultural and economic factors (Unesco.lt, 2021). Receiving this nomination, however, was just the first step to prove the uniqueness of Kaunas modernist style. Since 2016, many experts from various world places have been working to prepare the Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The most important criteria for this nomination was that Kaunas modernist architecture "illustrates the important stage in human history" (Kaunas pilnas kultūros, 2021). This nomination has two focal points: Naujamiestis and Žaliakalnis. UNESCO status would open the ways for international recognition and would ensure the conservation and maintenance of the modernist architecture heritage and in these urban areas. The primary conception of the UNESCO Heritage List community is to preserve the most iconic heritage of human history for future generations (Kaunas 2022, 2021). "Will Kaunas modernist architecture stand next to the European Bauhaus?" (Pilotas.lt, 2020).

During preparation for the Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the Kaunas was announced as the European Capital of Culture 2022. The cultural programme focuses on Kaunas modernist architecture relicts and states ("From temporary

to contemporary") (Kaunas 2022, 2021). There are many events and excursions organized for people to learn more about the surroundings they are living in. Many culturally-minded people decided to contribute to the events and education on Kaunas modernist architecture topic before and during the Kaunas 2022 events. One of them is Sonata Jučinskienė, a shop owner, who had never been involved in cultural education before. She decided to contribute to Kaunas 2022 events and became the organiser of Kaunas modernist architecture excursions. Together with historians, architects, and various educators, she prepared excursions to Kaunas modernist architecture for residents and visitors. The following is an interview with Sonata Jučinskienė (2021, March 11, interviewer: Aistė Rakauskaitė):

A.R. (Aistė Rakauskaitė) *Even though you are not an architect or architecture historian, you are organising excursions about Kaunas Interwar period architecture. What are your interests in this specific topic?*

S.J. (Sonata Jučinskienė) First of all, it is a curiosity to know more about the environment I am living in. I was passionate about the stories of the Kaunas Interwar period. Especially the economic and cultural progression. It is a miracle that the city changed its face from a provincial city to modern capital so quickly. The 1919 – 1939 period economical jump left a deep imprint in the Kaunas architecture. My wish is to share the stories and knowledge about such a unique architecture period. Each modernist style building has its own unique story to tell and as a resident of Kaunas, I feel the responsibility to share those stories with others.

A.R. *Do you think that Kaunas modernist architectural heritage is an important part of Kaunas resident's identity?*

S.J. I think it is the uniqueness of Kaunas city – residents who understand that they are the ones who are responsible for Kaunas modernist heritage. While residents of Kaunas tried to emphasize the identity of Kaunas modernism, the Interwar period architects emphasized the Lithuanian identity in general. This is why we can find so many traditional Lithuanian elements in Kaunas architecture. <...> When we talk about uniqueness, we are not talking about individual buildings. We analyse integral districts of Kaunas Modernism, which nowadays are a significant part of Kaunas residents lives.

A.R. *As we know you grew up in a small town Jonava and Kaunas for a long time was unfamiliar to you. Are you interested in modernist architecture since you moved to Kaunas or the interest increased in recent years?*

S.J. After I moved to Kaunas, I was living in the Žaliakalnis neighbourhood before. This district is well-known for authentic modernist architecture and Art deco villas. Every time walking through the streets you can notice a lot of memorial tables on the facades, informing about famous people who lived in the Žaliakalnis during the Interwar period. I got interested in the stories behind those houses' walls. Me have been living in Žaliakalnis for 25 years now and I can say that I have witnessed this area's historical environment change.

A.R. *These upcoming two years are crucial for international recognition of Kaunas modernist architecture. Firstly, at the beginning of 2021, the Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List was prepared, and secondly, in 2022, Kaunas will be the European Capital of Culture. Did you recognize that Kaunas residents are more aware of Kaunas modernist relicts because of these events?*

S.J. Among my colleagues and friends, I can notice that people are more interested in modernist architecture. I think it was mainly influenced by social media and especially the incidents of the Žaliakalnis area. In the second half of last year, one of the nicest Žaliakalnis Art deco villas were destroyed. Together with the neighbours, we protested against demolition, but our efforts did not have any results, as you could see. At that moment, everybody understood how important and, at the same time, vulnerable the heritage of the modernist building is.

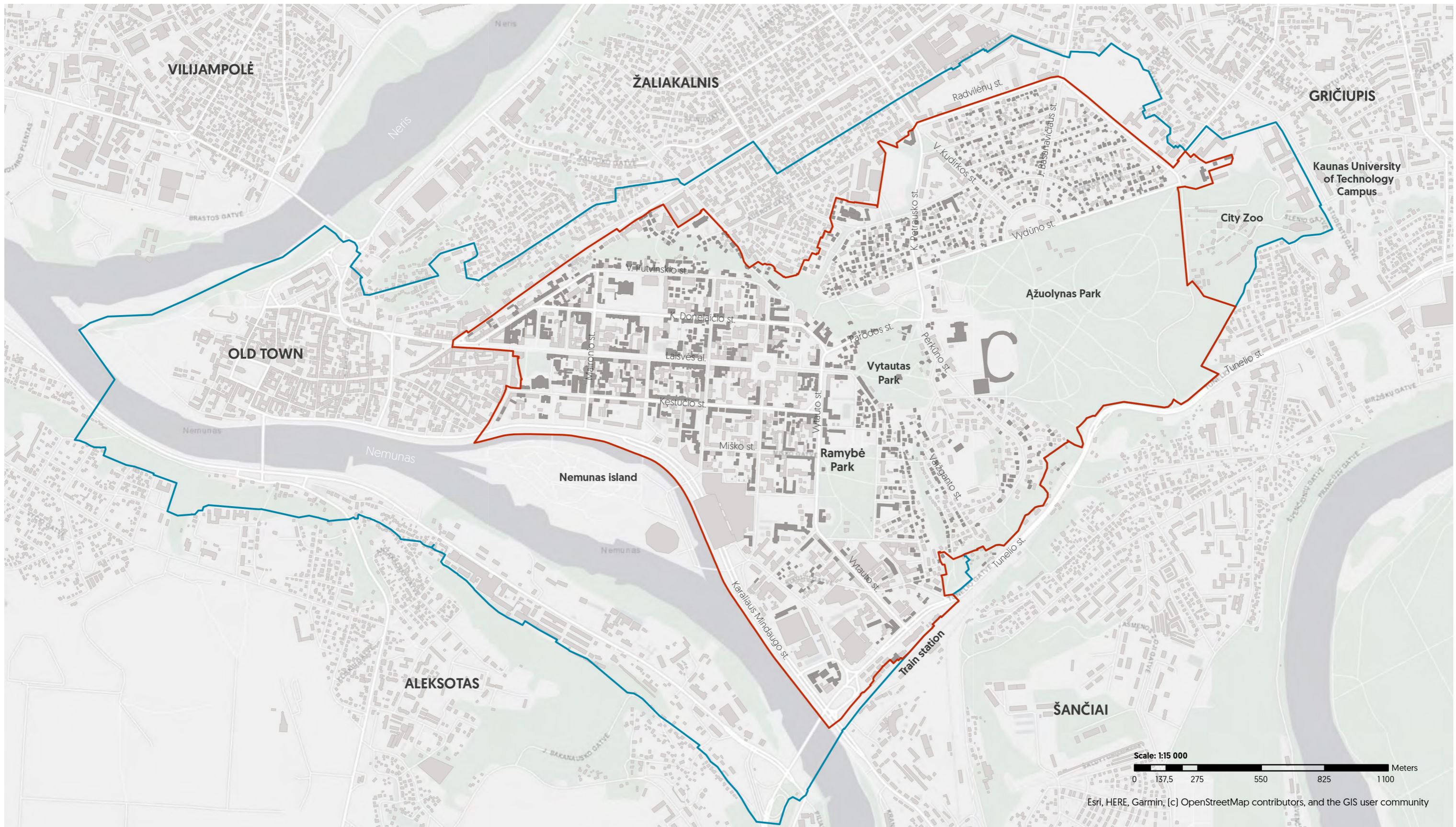


Fig. 3.1. Map of nominated property for UNESCO World Heritage list.

From "Modernist Kaunas. Architecture of Optimism 1919 -1939. Nomination for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list," 2021 (<https://modernizmasateiciai.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Modernist-Kaunas-Nomination-Dossier-2021.pdf>), (pp. 26).

Legend

- Nominated property
- Buffer zone
- Buildings in nominated property constructed in 1919 - 1939

Even though there are people like Sonata that are passionate about Kaunas modernist architecture heritage, it might not be enough to preserve the heritage. Maintenance and specific regulations are needed. As mentioned in the introduction and Jučinskienė's interview, in 2020 October, one of the remaining Art Deco villas was illegally demolished in Žaliakalnis (Green Hill) area. This incident emphasized the significance of the Department of Cultural Heritage in Lithuania and started discussions about modernist architecture heritage preservation. Even though the owner of the villa was required to rebuild what was demolished, the authentic elements were destroyed irreparably (Pilotas.lt, 2020). The media reported that the iconic Central Post Office, which was previously analyzed, will be transformed into a temporary vaccination centre (lrt.lt, 2020). It means there is a possibility that authentic interior details could be affected by the flows of people and the use of chemical substances.

Despite Kaunas modernist architecture currently being in the spotlight of the cultural life in Lithuania, many heritage experts still consider the remnants of this style to be at risk. A good approach to preserve it, according to them, is raising awareness about Kaunas architecture and the proper use of these buildings (Kančienė, 2020). However, these two noble goals may contradict each other. For example, there have been many ongoing discussions about the destiny of some of the most prominent modernist buildings, like the Central Post or Pienocentras offices. The institutions responsible for the maintenance of these facilities are facing an important decision: whether to privatize or to keep the location for public use. Privatization may ensure better maintenance but not doing so would keep the building open for the public and allow the residents to visit them.

Conclusion

In 20 years, Kaunas drastically changed his character from the countryside in the early '20s to a contemporary capital in the late '30s. The discussion and analysis of two main decades of the Interwar period showed that Kaunas development was heavily influenced by the annexation of Vilnius. The status of provisional capital led to necessary changes for the city. While in the '20s the hope to get back Vilnius was more significant than the prosperity of Kaunas, the decade of the '30s was the opposite. Residents focused on recognition in the European context, the quality of living, and Lithuania's future without Vilnius.

The improvement of Kaunas was visible in the architecture the most. First of all, the harmonious development of Kaunas influenced the integrity of the urban fabric. Secondly, it was clear that national self-awareness is the key element to create a unique architecture style. Lastly, it was understood that modern architectural language could be successfully combined with traditional elements. Even though Western architectural ideas influenced architects' and engineers' experiments, those traditional Lithuanian elements helped create a unique modernist style. In general, architectural identity became a tool that helped to be recognized as a nation after more than 100 years of dependency. Areas of Žaliakalnis and Naujamiestis became examples of radical urban and architectural changes, however, that progress stopped after World War II.

Even though the wish to get Vilnius back was finally fulfilled, the prosperities of Lithuania were challenging and vague. Some modernist style buildings were demolished, and the massive amount of important architectural details representing Lithuania's identity were destroyed by the Soviets. However, Kaunas modernist style survived the Soviet occupation and later became a symbol of Lithuania's independence and the most prosperous period in Kaunas' history. The story of Kaunas shows that history is an example of hope and the power of national identity. While UNESCO status proves international recognition, it is way more significant to understand the importance of Kaunas modernism locally. The protection of Kaunas heritage is relevant today because unique elements or entire buildings are being demolished even nowadays. It means education, the awareness of Kaunas residents and the approach of politics can help save and maintain Kaunas modernist architecture for future generations. Kaunas will be an example of how the desires to live in a better environment, national self-awareness and historical circumstances can influence the city's prosperities.

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