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Commemora- tive Plaques In Lazdynai

To begin with, here we have a metaphorical story. On the screen you can see a picture by Matthew Shepperson, one of the 19th century's copyist. At that time thousands of such copies were painted. But in reality it can be called a worthless piece of garbage. Such "works of art" can be found in almost every corner: in private homes and smaller museums. Museologists hate them because they cannot trade hundreds of similar copies into at least one decent picture. Owners do not usually offer them up for auctions, and if by any chance they do, their price is low – just 400-600 pounds.

Here you can see another work. This is a portrait by the famous Spanish Baroque painter Diego Velasquez. It is a masterpiece desired by many collectors and the most important museums of the world. Three months ago it was sold at Bonhams for three million pounds following extremely competitive bidding.

As you can probably guess, this story is fairly conventional; in 2011 alone a few dozen of such stories – on suddenly discovered masterpieces – did actually happen. The picture offered to Bonhams auctioneers for the before mentioned 400 pounds was noticed by an expert, explored in more detail and, after his article in a specialized magazine appeared, the cheap and ugly artistic waste of the 19th century all of a sudden turned into an expensive masterpiece of the 17th century.

In this story we should pay attention to the price that was finally



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paid – 3 million pounds. But other works by Velasquez, which did not wait until somebody discovered them... their price is much, by up to ten or even more times higher than the one that recently had three million pounds spent on it. Why is this? I think it is because of a certain caution. Because at any time some other expert may appear to write another article for another specialized magazine proving that it is not Velasquez, but the same copyist Matthew Shepperson, as it had been known for over 200 years.

What will happen then? Will it turn into the same work I showed in the first slide? No, it will become something else and be no longer known as some dross by the copyist Shepperson for 400 pounds, but rather the work which for some time had been mistaken for Velasquez, lost its title and maybe eventually will regain it. The price for this particular Shepperson will differ from the price of the first Shepperson. Of course, nobody will pay millions as for real Velasquez but they will pay much more than the initial pathetic 400 pounds – probably even in the hundreds of thousands of pounds.

I told you this story because I wanted to illustrate a statement that a value – any value – is created by a narrative. The older and more conventional the story is, the clearer and more acceptable is its value. A new narrative initiates some to-be-value of an object – as in this particular case the difference between 400 and 100,000 pounds – and its continuity will depend on other narratives. The narratives which may never be told...

Speaking about the modern architectural heritage of Vilnius the narrative issue also becomes important, as there is no other regulation for the emergence of architectural heritage. To simplify the process, I am going to tell you the provisions of the Law on the Built Heritage of the Republic of Lithuania in my own words: the built heritage is considered to be the building or structure declared as such by the decision of the Department of Cultural Heritage. No other chronological, genre or aesthetical criteria exist. An old, even very old, but derelict building may never become built heritage, but a classy postmodernist building can.

By the way, when reading the laws on the regulation of heritage, you can notice one paradoxical and therefore a slightly disharmonious thought. As I mentioned before, the built heritage is almost unregulated but very clear rules apply to movable heritage. According to such rules, every design item more than 50 years old becomes an antiquity. Thus, the radio set *Spidola* designed by Adolf Irbič and first produced in 1962, this year becomes a piece of such unconditionally protected antique but the box of chocolate sweets *Bočių Likeris* designed by Jadvyga Laurinavičiūtė can be boldly taken across any border or sold on *eBay* because it will still take eleven years for this box to get antiquity status. And, finally, all these things and many others that have just been declared antiquities or soon to become such may still be present in thousands of flats built in the same year as this fresh antique was first produced.

Of course, I have started speaking about prefabricated housing of Vilnius on purpose. By no means am I saying this is or may any time in the future become heritage but it is an object which we have to reckon with. I've chosen Vilnius on purpose because in the Lithuanian context modern heritage is by far a much wider concept. Expanding on the entire Lithuanian case I would be obliged to talk about the architectural modernism of the interwar period, especially about Kaunas that still hides real treasures. And this would mean that being a complete dilettante, an amateur, I would have to speak about the area which has been analyzed by all kinds of experts – historians, art critics, construction specialists and others. This would have been wrong. Nevertheless in Vilnius everything is less complicated.

If we look through any photo album of Vilnius, 90% of the pictures would show buildings built by someone else, not us. Because we, as the citizens of modern Lithuania rather than of the pagan or Grand ducal state, appeared in 1883 when the first Lithuanian newspaper *Aušra* was first published. Thirty-nine more years had passed since the emergence of the newspaper and its 70 subscrib-



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ers until we, as modern Lithuanians, built our first public-purpose building. I am not sure, but I guess it was the Art School building in Kaunas designed by Vladimiras Dubeneckis in 1922. Before WWII in Vilnius we had not constructed anything and only started doing this in the late postwar years. The most distinct buildings of this period can still be seen in the town, especially if you take along the *Vilnius Guide to the City's Architecture*. Modern constructions in Vilnius gained real momentum in 1957 when the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR passed its resolution on *the Development of Housing Construction* in the USSR. In 1958 the Factory of Housing Construction (for making prefabricated structures) started to function and in 1959 the first *khrushchovka* – the first prefabricated house – was erected in Vilnius in Daugpilis Street. This was our biggest, most numerous contribution to Vilnius architecture.

I often compare two photos – the one from the album and another with my childhood view looking out of our kitchen window in 1969 – and ask myself if there is a story, any narration which could turn this kitchen 400 pound-worth view into a more valuable (at least by a thousand times) view without actually changing it?

Actually, there are many such stories without having to even make any attempts to remember them. Since 1959 about 80 percent, or perhaps even more, of the city's cultural, scientific, sporting and political elite have resided or still reside in these prefab houses. These people have formed the foundation of our country, on which our contemporary state was built and still stands. Many of them are still alive; nonetheless this is a temporary state. This state is so temporary that you could even foresee now the coming boom of making commemorative plaques in the residential districts of Vilnius. Some have been installed already, for example, a museum of our legendary herbalist Eugenija Šimkūnaitė was recently founded in Lazdynai and, of course, it has a commemorative plaque at its entrance. Memorial plates also mark the buildings in one or another way connected to the events of January 13th, 1991. So, we have plenty of narratives and such narratives have started to appear in literature also. While our most famous Soviet literature authors – both, official and dissident – developed their plots in the old town of Vilnius with only the most radical ones daring to stroll to the railway station area or Užupis, those men and women of letters, who grew up, spent their youth and sometimes even later years in prefabricated houses, also accommodate their characters in them. As proof I would suggest you read the first text of Laurynas Katkus' book *Sklepas ir kitos esė (the Basement and other Essays)*.



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Nevertheless, such a solution – to tie every prefabricated house to some story and thus provide an additional and therefore to-be-protected value to it – would be too simplistic. Once I heard this kind of story about one of my friends who resides in *Šiaurės Miestelis* and commutes daily only to the city centre and back again, one day she decided to visit the places of her childhood. The journey was not long – she just had to turn her ordinary route round by 180 degrees and go along the same *Žirmūnai* street from the bus stop *Rimi* to the final destination stop near the *Šaltinėlis* grocery shop, approximately 1.5 kilometres. It was the place where she spent the first ten years of her life (now she is thirty five) and she had

never been back. Her reasoning for not going back there was not because of ideological or emotional motives, but rather because of pure pragmatism: what could you do at the end of *Žirmūnai*, if you didn't live there? So she took a trolleybus and set off. While passing by the former cookery school she started trembling. When this friend of mine got out near the *Šaltinėlis* grocery shop, tears appeared in her eyes and when she approached the house where she had spent her very formative years, she was finally taken over by her childhood sentiments and started openly crying. But after a few minutes when she was able to pull herself together, my friend doubted whether she had chosen the right object to cry over. She went to some other entrance, walked by the path going across the yard and took a good look at the other, absolutely identical house. Everything in all the nearby yards was the same: the same sidewalks that were used to play elastic games, the same twisted frames for hanging clothes and dusting carpets. No doubt, all this could be chosen as objects for lamenting over her childhood home as well. Thus, failing to find any relative oak tree which she could have folded in her arms, this acquaintance of mine just turned round and in ten minutes returned to her usual *Žirmūnai* and *Šiaurės Miestelis*, where one can always find something to do because one lives there.

I have exactly the same feeling while reading essays by Laurynas Katkus. Although he is younger than me by at least ten years, the environment he writes about has never changed: the games, the routes, even the fears – the fears you have when playing in the yards of prefab buildings – are exactly the same, his and mine.

Here we start doing a puzzle. The districts of prefabricated houses constitute the homeland to us. But this homeland is so large and so dense that it makes no difference, when you lived there or where exactly your house stood. Even the flats don't make a difference. But, as with any other homeland, prefabricated areas generate their own stories, a part of which is of a very high quality and value. They are valuable enough to turn a prefab house into a piece of heritage of memory. And in so much that it is a building, it automatically becomes a part of modern architectural heritage.

When one overviews the entire puzzle, a further thing is revealed: such objects of memory with claims to architectural heritage should not be too numerous. In order to achieve the goal, we should collect a certain set of the memory block: just “sample houses” of the first two series No. 118 and 1605, then another two from the improved series No. 318 and 464, then their nine-storey variants, one redbrick and another yellow-brick twelve-storey,



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then a monolith 16-storey and two dormitory-type buildings. And that's it.

Commemorative plaques in such a block would perform a slightly different function. In great numbers they would be attached to many façades thus showing the exact house and flat where the persons worth our memories once lived rather than just indicating where and when they lived. The text on such commemorative plaque could sound something like that: "Mr or Ms [name and surname] lived and composed his/her greatest works within the period of 1967–2003 in the first section, third floor, two bedroom flat located in the residential five-section house with the typical number 1-464a-14LT". This is all the information one needs to know because the exact place in Vilnius (Žirmūnai, Lazdynai or Karoliniškės) where the house was built or the date when it was built is absolutely irrelevant.



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Of course, it would be necessary to renew such a half-memory and half-urban formation – to eliminate glazing on the balconies, replace the plastic windows with wooden ones, remove satellite dishes, replace steel doors with plywood, with some of them being covered in fake leather. Or to behave more consciously by maintaining certain features of the changing times – leaving one house with satellite dishes and glazed balconies – in such already formed enclave, as this could illustrate the 1990s. And in order to complete the exposition, an appropriate place should also be given to the turn of the century when different shops and hairdressing parlours were first seen on the ground floors of many prefabs. This element, by the way, may soon disappear because Vilnius Municipality has already declared its plan on the removal of such "transformers".

A sceptic may say that this is impossible, and, secondly, such a block would soon turn into an ugly imitation of a Soviet Disneyland, which has a place in Grūtas Park but not in Vilnius. I would not argue a lot with such imaginary sceptic. The districts of such residential prefab buildings in Vilnius may be left in their present condition for a very long time. The renovation programme for residential high-rises is being implemented at a slow pace; densification of development is still very popular inside such districts because it is cheaper. But at some point in time Vilnius will reach its critical state, when it will become more efficient to destroy old apartment houses and invite their residents to take part in the financing of new ones by gaining a profit margin by increasing their height or by using some other real estate developers' tricks. Soviet high-rises will disappear – this is proven by the experience

of larger Eastern European cities – and other, non-Soviet high-rises will take their place.

I have no special counterarguments to the second reproach concerning the Disneyland issue but instead I am going to share some of my considerations on this, illustrated by another story that is not related to Vilnius.

In 1920 after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, Poland lost almost its entire Baltic Sea shore. They got only a small piece of land in the North West, wedged between two German ports Stettin and Danzig. The newly formed independent state decided to develop a harbour and a city there. The Poles succeeded and the founding of this new city – Gdynia – was maybe the most significant object of national pride during the interwar period. They built the city in a modern way – architects were looking around borrowing the most fashionable of the time architectural trends, starting with the Bauhaus on to ocean liners and Art Deco style.

Pure architectural styles were dominant in Gdynia almost until the beginning of the war, but in about 1936 the local inhabitants became bored with such purity and constructed a few more eclectic buildings, although they did not impair the modernist aura of the city. During the war the architecture in Gdynia was not severely damaged, although many of its people were killed. Poles from the East came to such half abandoned city and many former residents of Vilnius also settled there. You could call it a miracle but not a single Stalinist building was constructed in Gdynia in the postwar years and the construction of prefabricated houses that started in the 1960s was somehow adapted to the local environment. Therefore, today the city looks perfect. Not by accident has it been suggested to designate Gdynia a UNESCO World Heritage Site (of modern cities) – alongside the White City in Tel Aviv, Le Havre in France and Brasilia in Brazil. In 2012 Gdynia hosted the third conference of the architecture of modernism and its preservation, in which Lithuanian scientists participated.

As soon as I discovered this message, which was new to me – that modernist cities are also protected by UNESCO – I paid a special attention to Brasilia. Not because I had never heard about the city of Brasilia before, I was so attentive because I remembered the subject we are discussing today. Here I have to remind you of something: Brasilia was built very fast, in just a few years. Officially, the capital was opened in 1960 – the same year that the construction of our Elektrėnai was commenced. A few years later the town of Elektrėnai was declared “a settlement of urban type”.¹



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¹ A common expression used in the Soviet times. It referred to a settlement that by its structure resembled more of a city rather than a village and usually accommodated one or a few factories providing jobs to its residents



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What is Elektrėnai? Does it have its own narrative adding some value? Yes, it does and even more than that. The narrative of Elektrėnai is a very expressive one. It starts with the general plan, with Birutė Kasperavičienė being a co-author of it. After Elektrėnai, working in cooperation with Bronius Krūminis and Vaclovas Zubrus, Birutė also designed a general plan for Žirmūnai. For the designing of this district its authors were awarded with the State prize of the USSR, which was the first State prize given for the implementation of a massive construction. It started the legend of Lithuanian architecture in the Soviet Union. So, in a way, Elektrėnai could be called a sketch of the best design project in the Soviet Union at that time. Elektrėnai also has its own song about the lights, it hosted the first jazz festival in Lithuania, formed the recreational area and was a cradle for the most exotic sport in Lithuania – ice-hockey. The Elektrėnai power plant was interpreted in the film by Deimantas Narkevičius and the town is also especially liked by artistic photographers.

Let us imagine the times when the old high-rises in Vilnius will be replaced by the new ones. In contrast to this, Elektrėnai, being quite an isolated town, does not feel this foreseen market boom – the town has as many inhabitants as the power plant needs. Even at the present moment everything is ok with Elektrėnai: I have checked the rental ads, there is neither surplus demand, nor surplus supply for this in the town.

Therefore in the future – let us say in thirty years or so – I can see very clearly architectural pilgrims arriving in Elektrėnai. They will no longer carry the load of rejection, which is so natural to us, and holding their breaths will open these staircase entrance doors finished in horizontal board strips with the same horizontal windows. When they get inside, they will make archaeological surveys looking for the original colour of the mailboxes or will rejoice at discovering graffiti in some weird language, or will touch lovingly the virtuoso wall plastering, or wonder at the metal bending capacities by the old craftsmen and the functional solution of covering handrail tops in linoleum, or try to decipher the meanings of the GOST ² marks on the power switches, or to find out the origins of the texture decorations of the lampshades, or consider piously the number of fonts used by a designer for flat numbering.

Strolling around Elektrėnai they will talk without any irony about the preindustrial functionalism, the landscape generosity of the plan, the intuitivism of the pedestrian routes, and the postmodern romanticism and organics of the industrial landscape. In the future, when the present narratives of this town are covered in the patina of time and supplemented with many other stories, the time will come for entering Elektrėnai on the UNESCO's World Heritage List of modern cities – slightly earlier than Visaginas will be entered on this list.

You may ask where this memorial Disneyland is incorporated in this vision. It is pure logic – commemorative plaques may be attached on every house, every flat in Elektrėnai, commemorating the famous persons who resided in prefabricated housing districts not only in Vilnius, but all over Lithuania.

² *Gosudarstvennyj standart* in Russian – the state standard – refers to a set of technical standards issued by the central standardization agency of the USSR.