



Transformation of Urban Form through History (Based on the Example of Vilnius Old Town - World Heritage Site)

Dalia DIJOKIENE, Associate Professor
Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Lithuania
dijokai@takas.lt

European towns have come into existence and formed together with Europe and in their own way have shaped this region. Over millennia towns like magnets have attracted business, science, culture, politics and innovations. However, this force as well as achievements of civilization of the 20th century are constantly putting urban heritage into danger of destruction. It is hard to imagine a European town without an old town. Historical centers of most towns are several centuries or even millennia old. Over time urban forms of many old towns have undergone radical changes, while in others transformations are less dramatic. The old town of Vilnius (capital of Lithuania) has been chosen for the study of transformation of historically determined urban forms.

The plan and spatial structure of the old Vilnius is a good example of a naturally developed organism of a town - Vilnius' old town has a typical medieval street network structure. From the 13th century until the middle of the 18th century Vilnius' old town had a strong influence on architectural and artistic developments of the entire region (Lithuania, Belarus, the Ukraine and Poland) and is the most East remote town of Central Europe, in which a strong interaction of the cultures of Eastern and Western Europe took place. In 1994 the historical centre of Vilnius was included in the World Heritage List - it is thus recognized as having an outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art, science, aesthetics, ethnology and anthropology and is classified as a living, developing and changing town.

Every town has a unique urban structure regardless of whether it has developed spontaneously or in a planned way. Some researchers of the urban phenomenon emphasize importance of certain elements in the formation of townscape, while others emphasize other elements. Some consider the street to be the key element organizing urban space, while others speak about the block (or a set of land plots) as the instrument shaping streets and squares. Still another school of thought views the built-up as the determinant of towns' panoramas and silhouettes. All these considerations are valid. However, in order to understand the entirety and to analyze uniqueness of each urban object it is necessary to analyze distinctive features of the plan, built-up, size-and-space composition. This study reviews the development of each of these urban form elements in the old town of Vilnius in the course of history and analyses which elements of plan, built-up, size-and-space composition have proved to be most stable (e.g. street network has undergone least changes; structure of land holdings and blocks, complexes and ensembles of constructions, and natural environment have also preserved a majority of original features) and which of them have undergone most radical changes (e.g. built-up type, panoramas and silhouettes have changed most).

Uniqueness and visual originality of towns are highly important in the context of globalization, because they constitute cultural identity. As time passes, transformation of urban forms becomes inevitable but it should not be drastic. Historical environment can be preserved on condition that life there creates dialog, not conflict.

KEY WORDS: Heritage sites, urban form, urban space, urban heritage, plan, built-up, size-and-space composition.