

Water Vision. A View on Waterside Development in Lithuania

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There is a curious episode in the West European historiography that happened approximately one thousand years ago when missionaries were baptizing the local pagans by pouring water from the lake onto their heads. It was the way Bruno baptized the Prussians, one of the many extinct Baltic tribes. Compare it to another episode from a very different context: a Shingon Buddhist enters a round-shaped pond full of lotuses in bloom. At a first glance, this parallel seems to reduce the meaning of water to a sacrum element. However, I feel it also has a deeper dimension – or a shallower one, if you like, which is harder to notice). The image of Lithuanians as the vikings of the dry land has become common for our national culture. The expansion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the continent in 13-16 century means a certain indifference that the Lithuanians showed to the areals of the Baltic sea, which is quite paradoxical in the historic point of view. Meanwhile, in the context of architecture theory, one can speak of the minimalistic and rather poor relations between the Lithuanians and the water, resulting in the vacuum of water architecture in this country. But even if I can prove the latter as true by comparing the situation with one in the neighbouring countries, especially Scandinavia, still I will argue with the former. In the eyes of a Lithuanian, water has always – even before the christening – been an element of the unconscious expressing its true meaning on the mental level rather than physical. Nowadays influences from all over the world have become routine, so the attention to comfort and hygiene, as well as the architectural forms that have been managing them automatically, is especially visible. Nevertheless, it is just the surface, the conscious that one may always change and form as easily as throw pebbles to the water and count the circles.

Traditionally, Lithuania has always been the land of agriculture. Even though our lake landscapes are rather well developed, like the Aukštaitija National Park, our fluvial trade from Kaunas to Gdansk and Klaipeda has been abandoned; we proudly introduce ourselves as a sea-power nation, but have always seen water as an object whose attraction only grows at a distance, or whose power lies in being a visual landmark. There are facts from historians and anthropologists proving that Lithuanians have not just taken over the ancient Baltic worldview, but also adopted the traditional practices of neolithic communities that inhabited the region long before the Baltic tribes. However, the facts have one remarkable aspect: the cultural tradition of the local tribes – domicile or conquered later – were adopted, including even separate elements, while the Curonian traditions were not, even though this extinct Eastern tribe was also known as the vikings of the Baltic sea. True, both the Curonian Lagoon and the Curonian Spit have formed a unique region, and it is the Curonian architectural heritage that makes it especially attractive today. However, it is a potential of a cultural character that could and should matter on the regional level. Meanwhile, on the geopolitical level, the status of Lithuania as a sea-power nation can only be legitimized by giving a new shape to global urban networks. This means not just the competitive ability for the port in Klaipeda, but also the quality and diversity of the economic, social and cultural potential of the West Lithuania region. But this is yet another story. Coming back to water architecture, I should at least briefly introduce its types, as well as mention some notable examples of Lithuanian architecture.

a | Landscape Architecture

This type identifies the landscapes that have been rebuilt or rearranged to meet the new human requirements, as well as artificial landscape formations whose major element is water: a lake, a river, a lagoon or the sea. In my opinion, those new anthropogenic patterns include not just those designed or planned by architects: they may also result from the long-lasting natural miscellaneous activities done by many human generations. Their second essential aspect is their scale and the level of urbanization, which should be minimal. Lithuanian culture traditionally sees the land as either the countryside or the town. Therefore, the countryside belongs to the landscape type. As to the scale, the landscape architecture, as well as the urban type, will always have a complex size, which means the dominant presence of at least several natural or anthropogenic element groups in those projects. Finally, the third aspect is

contextuality. The projects may be unique in the context of a separate region, but a typical case in the area as a whole. Therefore I believe that the evaluation of the object as a unique one can only make sense on the regional scale. However, it is also important to avoid fragmenting the region to preserve its structural integrity, so that we always have a possibility to check the exceptional features in a wider context.

There are not many significant objects of this kind built in Lithuania. First of all, I must mention the Master plan for preservation and development of the Curonian Spit, 1968, by a group of authors headed by Vladas Stauskas. It was the first project of this kind in the whole Soviet Union, whose status was equal to a national park. A logical extension of this project is the inclusion of the Curonian Spit to the World Heritage list by UNESCO in 2000. Another rare example of natural human activities is Minge (Minija) village and the surrounding area. The village in the low reaches of Minija river is sometimes called the Lithuanian Venice. Even though it is not very common in Lithuanian culture to have a river as the major axis of the economic and social human activities, the regions of West Lithuania and the low reaches of river Nemunas are used to long-lasting floods, so houses on high foundations are a quite usual thing there, as well as boats.

b | *Urban Architecture*

Urban architecture makes one of the most complicated types. It is easy to see that all over the world, the appearance of most cities and towns is related to larger or smaller water reservoirs: a source, the mouth of a river or the coast of a sea. The main reason for this complexity hides in the answer to the following questions: can we recognize these water reservoirs in the structure of the city/town today? And if so, what is their importance for the urban development? There are many examples of a minor role that the essential elements of urban structure serve in the life of a city. Even though the three largest cities in Lithuania have a ready access to water, they have not yet taken advantage of this opportunity. Their quays are concrete and are covered with busy highways. The inner spaces of city quarters are isolated from the water, while the most popular pedestrian zones are concentrated in the parts of the city that are most remote from the water. But the situation is not so hopeless as it might seem.

Vilnius has been preparing a vacancy for the quays and access to the river Neris. Uzupis is one of the most unusual areas in Vilnius whose inhabitants can enjoy an active social life near water in all the seasons of the year. In early spring, they organize canoe hiking, while in the summer and spring, artistic events are held. There, I have participated in outdoor bathings in the wintertime – a very uncommon event in Lithuania. It is paradoxical that the Independent Republic of Uzupis, which is symbolically related to Montmartre in Paris, instead of the seaside is home to the only mermaid in Lithuania.

Meanwhile, Kaunas today has been focused on a very thorny issue about city development: the plan is to build a huge sport arena, one of the largest in Lithuania, in the island of the river Nemunas. However, it is a really acute problem: the area is joined with the historical Old town, their natural environment of the rivers Nemunas and Neris in confluence is a unique situation, the island proper is one of the rare elements in the Lithuanian landscape, while the danger of their urbanization is enormous. Still, the city of Kaunas, famous for its culture of river ports even from 17th century, has some attractive water architecture.

The history of Pazaislis Convent near Kaunas is fascinating. The convent, one of the most prominent examples of Lithuanian Baroque, was finished in 1712 as the centre of Camaldoli monastery, and, by the way, has still preserved a picture in a door fragment showing the process of baptizing the pagans with water. However, in 1959, the valley of Nemunas with some villages was flooded in order to build a water-power plant for Kaunas, which formed the Kaunas Lagoon. In other words, the object remained while the environment was totally rearranged, so that the convent appeared very close to the water. True, I can also ascribe this extraordinary case to the landscape type. Still, in my opinion, we should not ignore the level of urbanization: today, the area marks the Northern boundary of Kaunas city, especially with a yacht-club and the dam of the water-power plant situated nearby.

Klaipeda is not an exception from the case. The "Memellanders", according to their German name, are used to going to the seaside just a few times a year, since the city has been separated from the water

by a massive buffer of the port for more than six decades. However, the image of the city is still related to the sea: not just with the symbol of the city – the old Meridianas ship, but also with respect paid to the marine culture, which is reflected in the material collected in the recent vacancies, as well as in the term papers by students.

After all, some of the most successful urban projects were carried out here, in the Curonian Spit: the quay and the park of sculptures in Juodkrante by architects Ricardas Kristapavicius and Rolanda Kristapaviciute in 1996-2001, as well as the reconstruction of quay in Nida, including the exposition of weathercocks of Curonian Lagoon, arranged by these authors in 1996-1998.

c | *Engineering Architecture*

Lighthouses, piers, dams, water-towers, bridges and other engineering installations can also serve as proper objects of water architecture, whether they interfere in the landscape or urban environment, or are integrated into the rich cultural heritage or the dense urban fabric. Bridges are probably the most attractive objects of water-related engineering architecture that have been built in Lithuania. By the way, in the opinion of symbologists, a bridge is nothing but a boat turned upside down. In the engineering point of view, the most significant are railway bridges: the bridge in Baltoji Voke near Vilnius, 1862; the Lyduvenai bridge across river Dubysa, 1918, reconstructed in 1947; the only moving bridges for marine navigation found in Klaipeda: the Birzos drawbridge, 1878, to be reconstructed in 2007 and Grandiniu, the Swing Bridge, 1855; finally, the dam bridges: in Pakruojis estate, 1821, reconstructed in 2001, and Astrava estate, 1860, reconstructed in 1996. Meanwhile, the popular bridge in Palanga is appealing rather as an urbanistic accent to the recreational town, bearing a symbolic meaning as well. One of the most prominent projects recently carried out is Karaliaus Mindaugo bridge in Vilnius by a group of authors headed by Vladas Treinys, in 2003.

d | *Architectural Objects*

Coming back to the subtle relations between the Lithuanians and water, I cannot help but remember the image of one of the most original architectural conceptions realized in Lithuania in the recent decade. I mean the Saules clock – the clock/calendar of the Sun, as well as the Moon clock at the top of Parnidis dune in Nida, built by architect Ricardas Kristapavicius and sculptor Klaudijus Pudymas, with astronomic calculations made by Libertas Klimka, in 1982–1998. Even if I cannot recognize this object a piece of water architecture – although it is obviously related to nature, which may be illustrated by its main stela broken by hurricane wind in 1999 – it still includes a very significant element: an absolute aquatic horizon. The Sun is counting the time by rising and setting in the water. In this view, the choice of location was really wise: Parnidzio dune is the only place in Lithuania where this kind of trick is possible to do. On the one hand, one could hardly call it a rational piece of architecture. On the other hand, it might be a better illustration for the unconscious plan of the relations between the Lithuanians and water, mentioned in the first part of the text: a mental level where the architectural ideas have been evolving.

Lithuania has certainly had many objects of contemporary architecture where the topic of water has been successfully and inventively dealt with by following the Western tradition: the outdoor fountains at Opera house in Vilnius by architect Nijole Buciute, 1974, or the Marine museum and Dolphinarium complex that replaced the former defences system in Klaipeda in 1979, by architect Petras Lape and constructor Tautvydas Tubis. Some memorable objects may be found among the fountains built in the residential units of Lithuanian towns and cities back in the Soviet times and having served as the formants of public space. Since the restoration of independence, some exciting projects have been carried out as well: SBA Furniture trade centre in Justiniskes neighbourhood in Vilnius, 2000, by Sigitas Kuncevicus and Arturas Jakutis, or the Recreation and Entertainment park in Belmontas in the outskirts of Vilnius, 2000-2006, by Nijole Zuboviene and Ricardas Stulpinas.

Post Scriptum

In the 18th century, the seven bridges across Prieglius in Karaliaucius, the capital of Prussia, served as a basis for the theory produced by Leonar Euler, a Swiss scientist, who proved the impossibility of crossing the same bridge one time and coming back to the same starting point. As it was already formulated by the ancient Chinese in their proverb You cannot enter the same river... At that moment, the Prussian people had been christened and conquered, while Tadao Ando had not yet built his Water Temple. At that moment, the author of these lines, three years old, was climbing out of Pempininku fountain, soaking wet.

Translated by Aleksandra Fomina