

## THE POTENTIAL OF NEW URBANISM IN VILNIUS

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**Summary.** In the wake of post-Soviet privatization, Vilnius has embraced westernized models for growth and development. The city is changing rapidly in a backlash against Soviet planning practice and with an influx of funding from the European Union and private investment. City plans aim for sustainable growth and development while tackling the revitalization of Soviet-era residential districts and control of suburban sprawl. This paper examines how planning efforts in Vilnius can benefit from the principles of New Urbanism as the reach of these popular American planning fundamentals provide convenient remedies to challenges in the redeveloping city.

**Keywords:** New Urbanism, Neighbourhood revitalization, Sustainable growth

The mark of Soviet planning is apparent in Vilnius, but the period of Lithuanian independence, beginning in 1990, has seen a different approach to planning. In a backlash against Soviet planning, Vilnius is looking to western planning models to address challenges such as uneven distribution of jobs, traffic congestion, poor connectivity, and an overburdened public transportation system, to name a few. Residential districts are isolated in the outskirts, old industrial districts are too close to the city center, and suburban development is appearing in areas with insufficient infrastructure.

Over a half century of modernist planning in many ways makes Vilnius the anti-New Urbanist city. New Urbanism, an American planning paradigm founded in 1993, supports “the restoration of urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions and the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts” (Charter 1997). New Urbanist principles are being integrated into local planning and development policies across the U.S. with form-based codes. The principles of New Urbanism can help guide public policy and development practice in revitalizing cities like Vilnius to achieve sustainable growth and improve the quality of life for its citizens.

### The Foundations of Planning

Before Lithuania restored national independence, centralized Soviet planning reflected the goals of the 1933 Athens Charter, which strictly separated land uses and encouraged high-density development. The city center was the hub of urban social and political life surrounded by a belt of housing and green spaces, followed by industrial and agricultural uses

(Bater 2004). Garden city clusters around the city were inspired by Ebenezer Howard, with regard to the horizontal, and Le Corbusier, the vertical.

The early years of independence focused on land restitution to eliminate the centralized land ownership structure, but without land use regulations in place, development at that time occurred inefficiently. In 1995, Lithuania adopted the Law on Planning of the Territories, which mandated an evaluation of the conditions of the country and created preliminary solutions (Lietuvos Respublikos 2004). Coordinated with the goals of this national comprehensive plan, the Vilnius City Council adopted the Vilnius City Official Plan in 1998 (Vilnius City Council 2000) and a financially supported counterpart, the Vilnius Strategic Plan 2002-2011 (Vilnius City Municipality 2002). With membership in the EU in 2004, Lithuania signed on to EU planning policy coordination, but today its planning documents are not yet fully coordinated with EU strategies. While Lithuanians may not know New Urbanism by name, the principles rooted in Independence-period planning documents share many common goals.

### The City Center

Vilnius planning documents prioritize internal urban development to most effectively utilize existing infrastructure. The city is building a new modern downtown along the Neris River in the Šnipiškės neighborhood, creating a special setting for important civic buildings within this centrally-located, mixed-use area. The widened main arterial road to this new downtown accommodates increased vehicular traffic, but also features pedestrian promenades with bike

lanes, street trees, and under-ground pedestrian crossings and includes a public square and park.

While the landscape design fosters pedestrian activity, the commercial and residential architecture in the new downtown falls short. The ground floors of new skyscrapers do little to entertain the pedestrian, and the opportunity to include retail and restaurant spaces opening up to sidewalks was overlooked. Additionally, Constitution Avenue, with six lanes of bustling traffic, is too wide for pedestrian comfort. The need for under-ground pedestrian crossings could be eliminated with a more balanced design between the pedestrian and vehicular traffic as opposed to diverting their interaction entirely. The new downtown skyscrapers, up to 33 stories, form an iconic skyline, but have brought skyrocketing land values and overpriced apartments. Leon Krier argues that limiting building heights to five stories can help to avoid “inflating the cost of buildings in the center,” which devalues other areas (Salinger 2001). A lower building height restriction in the new downtown district could have provided more human-scaled architecture and better preserved historic landscapes across town.

### **Neighborhood Revitalization**

Large-scale, Soviet-era residential districts outside the city center defy the New Urbanist principles of mixed-use, diversity, and connectivity. High-rise residential buildings of uniform design, most with easily mass-produced concrete exteriors, stand like dominoes throughout the districts. The continual repetition of standardized housing leads to a lack of sense of place and fails to create defined neighborhood centers. While the Soviets’ goal was to coordinate services and jobs to relocate to new micro-districts, the implementation was incomplete and residents were left without basic consumer and public services near their homes (Brumfield & Ruble 1993). Today, new shopping centers and offices in these districts feature street-front surface parking lots and the architecture leaves much to be desired.

Urban theorist Jane Jacobs criticizes the standardization of buildings for hindering diversity of population and business. While density is efficient, there should be a limit to standardization and an emphasis on diversity in product types to create dynamic neighborhoods (Jacobs 1993: 282). The efficiency of standardization brought to Soviet cities small apartments, poor construction materials and hasty building methods, and today many buildings are in very poor shape and lack sufficient insulation.

A major challenge in Vilnius is retrofitting Soviet-era residential districts. Similar American developments like Cabrini Green in Chicago are being demolished and re-

placed with new mixed-use projects (Chicago Housing 2008). The Vilnius population needs inexpensive housing opportunities and could not afford a similar redevelopment and relocation project, and therefore these buildings must be retained.

The limited street frontage and massive density in these districts creates a lack of access. New buildings of equally high densities constructed in these districts create some income and aesthetic diversification, but many infill projects appear just as poor in aesthetics and construction quality as their Soviet-era predecessors. District plans remain gardens of high-rises that lack variation and a human scale.

Filling in Soviet residential districts with thoughtfully designed community spaces and a range of building types could solve some of the city’s problems by making these districts more desirable places to live. Green spaces could be developed to increase density with varied housing types, and new streets could be built to increase connectivity and provide additional spaces for street-front infill and parallel parking. With the organic placement of buildings, there are opportunities to create bending streets with terminating views, which create visual interest for the pedestrian. New underground parking would allow surface parking lots to be replaced by parks and deemphasize the automobile. New construction would aim to add variety and provide opportunities for sidewalk cafes and shops.

### **Suburban Sprawl**

Vilnius is experiencing a flight to the suburbs, where automobile-dependent developments, isolated from the city center, offer higher-quality housing opportunities without significantly more expense than aging, inner-city, concrete-panel apartment buildings. Residents trade a pedestrian commute to the city center from Soviet-era buildings for long drives on congested roads from more attractive suburban houses. Unfortunately, what is prescribed in the plan to curb suburban sprawl and create sustainable development is quite different from application, as peripheral expansion compromises defined city boundaries.

With a focus on sustainable growth, the national Ministry of the Environment aims to control suburban growth by limiting development areas to locations with adequate infrastructure. Similar to the New Urbanist model, Vilnius aims to reconfigure existing growth patterns in suburban areas to create sustainable communities, compact areas with identifiable centers and mixed uses. Transit stops in the center of these suburban clusters would have adequate parking for commuters to park and ride to the city center, but jobs would

also be distributed in these districts so residents could walk or take local transit to work.

### Transportation

With an astounding 40% increase in private cars in 2008, the city's priorities include eliminating traffic congestion, improving public transit service and creating alternatives such as bike lanes and better pedestrian connectivity (Vilnius City 2008). Freeway bypasses are under construction and will guide traffic around the city instead of through the city center. While building freeways seems contrary to a New Urbanist instinct, these connections are paramount to creating connectivity and keeping un-necessary traffic out of revitalizing urban centers. In lieu of freeway construction, Vilnius could create connectivity through parkways and boulevards and lessen the negative impacts on adjacent areas. Parking garages planned for the city center will undoubtedly increase traffic congestion in the center and discourage mass transit ridership (Duany 2000).

The city must remedy road capacities not by widening but by creating better connectivity that prioritizes pedestrian comfort and safety with good streetscape design and gives public transportation precedence over private vehicles. With proposed density increases in city districts, there is a priority on creating new modern transportation opportunities. An approved tram system would connect the most densely populated residential districts to the center, making transit a viable alternative to private cars. However, it is uncertain if tram service will be constructed since a change in political administrations has shifted the city's focus to an elaborate and fiscally unfeasible underground metro system.

### Parks and open Space

The city plan aims to provide green areas and recreational infrastructure for all its citizens. Many Soviet-era residential districts feature expansive park areas, which have since been informally and formally converted into parking lots. According to Jane Jacobs, Le Corbusier envisioned a network of streets and freeways but failed to account for volume or parking; "his vision of skyscrapers in the park degenerates in real life into skyscrapers in parking lots. And there can never be

enough parking." (Jacobs 1993: 446). With proposed density increases, green spaces in these areas are increasingly threatened. Recreational areas should be re-configured in these districts to support a stronger sense of identity for their communities, facilitate local social connections and define social centers.

### The New Urbanist Solution

Vilnius planning documents do share common goals and strategies with New Urbanism, but a major obstacle is the actual implementation of the city's plans, which are muddled by politics, weak urban policies and lack of coordination between planning agencies. As a result, new developments have more in common with the automobile-centric, late-twentieth-century American development style which has proven to be unsustainable. The city and national urban policy need to be revised to improve clarity for developers and planners, and the government at all levels must improve transparency.

New Urbanist principles establish clear policies to support sustainable development goals and can assist Vilnius in looking not only at piecemeal detailed plans but also focusing on coordinated regional planning efforts. Following the New Urbanist concept of the urban transect (fig. 1), a regulating plan could be formulated to include specific street types for the different areas such as the urban core, urban center, urban general, urban edge, suburban and rural, each with its distinctive form-based zones to strengthen the relationship of the metropolis, city, district, neighborhood and block.

New Urbanism is a global model for planning and development where cities work to restore existing urban centers and articulate the metropolitan region (Congress 2008). Steadily gaining popularity in Europe, the Council of European Urbanism (CEU) - a sister organization to the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) - held its Third International Congress in 2008 (Climate Change 2008). In September 2008, the CNU joined efforts with the CEU in "promoting practical measures in urban and regional development to reduce the effects of climate change" (European Urbanism 2008).

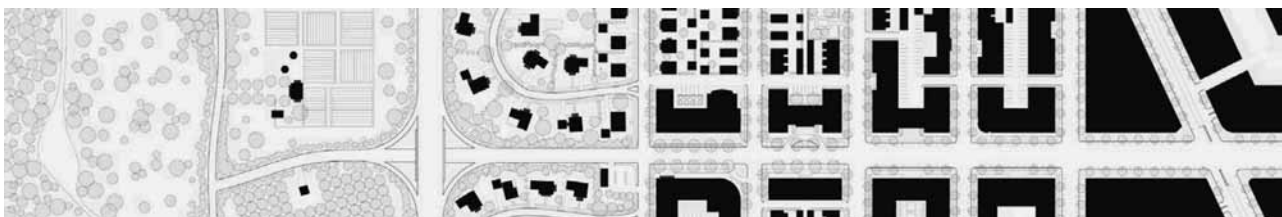


Fig. 1. Washington Rural to Urban Transect (Thadani 2008)

This partnership will strengthen the worldwide movement by including green design and construction.

Vilnius is working to establish itself as a major player among other EU cities and a leader in the Baltics. Given the current global credit crisis, new development has already lost momentum, presenting an opportunity for the city to refine its processes and policies to better promote sustainability and efficient growth.

## Conclusions

In summary, the New Urbanist remedies for Vilnius include:

- Reconfigure sprawling suburbs to create compact districts with clear boundaries and identifiable centers
- Distribute jobs throughout the city
- Encourage walkable, mixed-use districts
- Increase diversity in Soviet-era districts with human-scaled architecture
- Provide parks and open spaces in every neighborhood and district
- Increase connectivity of Soviet-era districts with new roads
- Prioritize public transportation and the pedestrian over private cars
- Create sensible street and transit connections (without road widening)
- Define neighborhood centers to support social connections

New Urbanism can help Vilnius reach its goals of sustainable urban development and regional growth, and provides convenient remedies for the city to improve the quality of life for its residents.

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## NAUJOJO URBANIZMO POTENCIALAS BESIVYSTANT VILNIAUS MIESTUI

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Santrauka

Augant postsovietinei privatizacijai, Vilniaus augimui ir vystymui taikyti vakarietiški raidos modeliai. Miestas keičiasi greitai, paneigdamas sovietinio planavimo praktiką ir išnaudodamas Europos Sąjungos ir privačias investicijas. Miesto planavimu siekiama darnaus augimo ir vystimosi sprendžiant sovietinių gyvenamųjų rajonų ir padrikos priemiesčių plėtros kontrolės problemas. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip Vilniaus planavimo srityje galėtų būti pasinaudota populiaraus amerikietiško planavimo – Naujojo urbanizmo principais kaip tinkama priemonė, atitinkanti kintančio miesto iššūkius.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** naujasis urbanizmas, aplinkos atgaivinimas, darni plėtra.