

Limits of change: changing character of Lithuanian small towns during the XX – XXI c.

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Abstract

With the process of globalisation and integration in the world, the convergence of the nations of the world and their cultures is inevitable, but at the same time the identity of nations may be lost. This process affects many areas, but has a particularly strong impact on the cities and towns, which are gradually losing their character of town form [1].

Contemporary problems of town form are inseparable from the assimilation processes in towns that have intensified in the 20th century. Soviet planners formulated the concept of socialist urbanism in the 1930s, which fundamentally shaped urban development in Eastern Europe in the later decades and led to functional segregation between industrial and residential areas and elongated green spaces. After the collapse of communism at the end of the 20th century, the political and economic context changed dramatically in the Eastern Europe, and the forces of global economy became apparent [2]. In general, urban development in post-socialist countries can be described as free market concentration in the sector of private property, which has affected not only urban sprawl processes but also overall uncoordinated external and internal urban development [3, 4, 5]. Under such conditions, the overall visual appearance of town form becomes a non-priority issue and presupposes local drastic changes or, conversely, the neglect of significant structures in towns.

Although forms of towns are constantly changing, changes may have a major impact on town character. Changes of town form can be caused by several main factors: natural growth; catastrophes; globalisation, internal forces. Town form is a physical, built form of a town. Fundamental elements of town form are blocks, spaces associated with them and streets [6]. Town character is: peculiarities of a place; models of development, townscape and use; a combination of all aspects that sets a town apart from others [7]. Town form character reflects the essential features of a physical structure of a town and there is a risk that town may change unrecognisably.

This issue is particularly close to small towns, which characters are especially fragile. Shrinking small towns are experiencing a decline in public services and a resource-based economy, abandonment of the cultural landscape, increasing areas of unused land and emptied housing, social exclusion and lack of political vitality, an aging population. On the other hand, small towns are like an oasis in a rapidly changing world, away from noise and pollution. They can offer a small close community, a sense of attachment to a place, and a less standardised, homogenised environment. Small towns can suggest a sustainable future by reaping the benefits of their cultural, economic and natural environment. Counterurbanisation processes began emerge in the 1960s as opposed to globalisation and intensive urbanisation. One-fifth of people live in small European towns, and in more intensively urbanised, metropolitan regions, as many as a third or a half in some cases [8]. Due to the development of technology, better travelling conditions and opportunities to work and receive services or goods remotely, small towns are emerging as attractive living environments, which can offer slow life and exceptional character.

Lithuanian urban settlement system consists of mostly small towns, so the research of changes of town form character is extremely important. The small town has a population of up to 20 thousand in the context of Lithuania [9]. The significance of small towns in Lithuania was strengthened in 1970s by the scheme of development of a unified urban settlement system in the territory of Lithuania. This scheme presented the polycentric urban settlement system in Lithuania, emphasised role and importance of smaller towns, and gave an impulse for further and more intense transformations in small towns: redevelopment of central parts of towns, development of industrial areas, multi-storey complexes, etc. [10] However, there are no analysis of the transformations of the whole town form during the socialist period and their impact on the town form character.

A general idea of the research is to identify peculiarities of changes of town form of Lithuanian small towns after the World War II in relation with town form character: what is the extent of changes in towns; did those changes transform the essential features of town form and some actions are needed; is it possible to identify the model as a prototype of specific town form character or a model could be the same for more than one town. The concept of the research presents changes of the town form as a process and searches for the limits of change beyond which the town form character completely distorts. The analysis allows to identify the model of town form character which presents the essential features of town form and how they changed during the second half of the XX c. This base could play not only a role in finding principles how to nurture the character in particular cases, but also as a tool of survival and growth. If the changes of town form and their impact on the character of the town form are not studied, towns may continue to change unknowingly or disappear from the map of the country. Therefore, especially in the regard that most towns of Lithuania are small, the establishment of town form character model as a prototype in the context of changes are vital for small Lithuanian towns.

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Design Driven Research

Object of the research is based on the list of 67 urban monuments of Lithuanian SSR settlements defined in the second half of the XX c. [11] 29 out of 67 are small towns and considered as primary potential objects of the research. At least 1 case study is planned to be presented comprehensively.

First of all, historical urban development of towns is analysed considering political background (e.g. ideology, orders, plans), cataclysms (e.g. war, flood, fire), vitality (e.g. economics, culture). Historical maps are digitalised and layered using the QGIS. Secondly, changes of street network, structure of blocks and their form, building principles, structure of urban public spaces, urban composition are measured in comparison to their original form (mostly formed till World War II) and relation with natural environment. Complex analysis presents town form as a process. Changes are comprehensively categorised into different levels. As a conclusion, key findings are structured in a form of schemes, models, which present town form character before the World War II and now. Results show was the town form character distorted during the second half of the XX c. or not. Finally, recommendations for the nurturing of town form character are presented.

As research evolves in future, there is a wider aim to be able to compare town form character models as prototypes not only of all Lithuanian towns, but in a wider context as well.

Keywords: town form character, urban transformations, limits of change

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Example of the research material prepared by Agne Vete

