

THE REGIONAL WORLD HERITAGE CITIES' FORUM IN VILNIUS
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„Advance of Integrated Territorial Urban Conservation in Vilnius‘

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It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be an organiser and speaker at this important and regional Forum of the UNESCO World Heritage Cities. Many of us gathered here today know each other for many years and often are good comrades.

This Vilnius' Forum is dedicated to the 20th anniversary of Vilnius historic city centre's inscription upon to the UNESCO World Heritage List. What is worth to mention on such occasion is that already in the year 1581 when the World Cities' atlas was compiled by Gorg Braun and Frans Hogenber Vilnius already was among the most famous towns of that time.

This second part of the presentation is focused not on technical or statistic aspects of urban or architectural conservation, but rather on territorial management. I'll briefly review the essential steps we did to achieve current state of affairs. So, complex 'Vilnius Old Town Regeneration' program commenced in 1998 is the main instrument used implementing the Strategy for Revitalisation of Vilnius Old Town (approved in 1997). Though the Strategy defined systematic and complex way for urban revitalization of the site, the concept of „Integrated territorial urban conservation“ appeared and was revealed during the Regional training course for Heritage managers, planners and architects was initiated by ICCROM in 1996. The course provided corporate annual training for heritage specialists from the 3 Baltic states also Belarus and Ukraine for 4 years, and made a strong impact on professional perceptions of attendees.

In the years 1998-2000 the integral program for Vilnius Old Town Regeneration was financed from both national and municipal budgets and aimed intensive upgrade of public spaces and buildings' exterior. This efficient and speedy urban upgrade inspired arrival of private investors. Private activity rapidly changed quality of living environment and scope of service offer at the Old Town. Within this general upgrade the sub-programme 'Lost Vilnius' was initiated in the year 2002 that provided exemplary conservation and restoration of parts and decorative elements of major historic buildings. This sub-program was aimed to demonstrate investors and local communities richness and importance of heritage assets surrounding us. And the need to take care of these assets, indeed. Following this program exclusive complex research and reconstruction project on former living block was implemented in cooperation with local Jewish community. Then set of information stands was planned and started to be installed at the spots of the lost most important historic city objects.

The 'Community Capacity Building' sub-program started in the year 2000. It envisaged residents, property owners and local communities of the Old Town to get informed consulted and financially stimulated to restore and upgrade historic buildings and their environment. This work started by a mass meetings and consultations with home owners associations and separate residents, to explain them ways, conditions and regulations, in organising restoration or upgrade of living environment. At the beginning this dialogue was extremely complicated due to a general lack of trust of residents to public authorities, lack of proper experience of such dialogue. This swampy process lasted almost 2 years, but was fruitful and inspiring for majority of its participants. To make the process more smooth and friendly celebrations of 'Monuments' (ICOMOS) and

European Heritage Days was organised by the Agency annually in different parts of the city centre. The UNDP and UNESCO financial support for this urban regeneration warming-up was very timely and useful. Then the scheme of public-private co-financed restoration and upgrade works brought its first fruits the years 2002-2008. Application of this PPP practise grew slowly, not easy but efficiently. The importance of the Community Capacity building sub-program brought an evolution in communal initiative and social consolidation, as well as growing trust between private and public sectors.

So the image and appearance of physical urban environment/or the face got revived already in around 2003-2004, but communal and investors' perception and initiative to properly act upgrading the historic environment still remain weak. Such situation inspired review of implementation of the Revitalization Strategy. The Agency asked for assistance ICCROM and ICOMOS so to properly perform this task in 2005-2006. Also colleagues from Tallinn and Riga were invited to take part and provide comparative data in the debate on review results. This corporate work defined strengths and weaknesses of Vilnius Old Town Regeneration. Success and wide use of the quality renewal and restoration works was a dominant result. But parallelly same strongly the need of community awareness, engagement and support of its initiative was recognised. This major conclusion was and still is about the missing equilibrium between the 'hards' and 'softs' in urban regeneration process.

Arrival of the global economic recession in 2008 interrupted the emergence of the Community capacity building sub-program. Financing of it was cut-off. But, when looking for the bright, it created a favourable conditions for continuous work on awareness rising, consultation and debate performed by the Agency. Almost none partners left that were capable or in a hurry with the construction works. So it appeared as a tremendous time for a smooth shift from 'hard' to 'soft' action in the process of integrated territorial urban conservation. Hence Agency focused its work on the 'soft' investments: youth and residents awareness rising, and EU/ international cross-city exchange and cooperation. This work was nearly impossible at the rush of intensive construction works period.

And today, turning back to the first Regional OWHC Conference, when we proudly promoted and shared our success experience on urban regeneration of the WH site, we need to recognise current fragility and economic unpredictability of the regional situation. Again, as meeting economic challenges in 2007, today we need to search and find relevantly new priorities for our action, that could ensure sequent progress in the field of the Integrated Territorial Urban Conservation. Hence, resting on our experience in urban regeneration management we see and already target the following priorities:

1. STRENGTHENING AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE SOCIAL URBAN LANDSCAPE
2. REGIONAL CROSS-CITY CULTURAL HERITAGE COMMUNICATION THAT IS ABOUT CONTINUOUS SHARE OF THE ADVANCED EXPERINCE, NETWORKING AND CORPORATE ACTION

We hope the priorities we propose and an invitation to share them with regional WH towns, most of which are represented at the today's Forum, could inspire emergence of a new quality step forward in Integrated Territorial Urban Conservation management as well as consolidation of our limited capacities and recources.

Thank you for your kind attention and wish the Forum in Vilnius to inspire all of you for more efficient and corporate professional action.