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IV

Barbarians in the ‘City of Poets’

The Modern Movement in the Public Architecture of Vilnius in the Interwar Period

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present the process of penetration of modernist avant-garde ideas into the public space of interwar Vilnius and the role played by the architects of the younger generation – the graduates of the Faculty of Architecture of Warsaw University of Technology. Vilnius gained independence as part of the Second Polish Republic. It was perceived as a mysterious ‘city of poets’, the cradle of Polish Romanticism and a picturesque ‘city under the clouds’ whose enchanting landscape included numerous historical buildings. This somewhat mythical image of Vilnius, captured in Jan Bułhak’s mood-setting photographs, has influenced a rather conservative attitude towards modern architecture. The community of architects, formed around the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University and supported by local art historians, represented a current of conservative traditionalism promoting the idea of following historical patterns. The first modernist projects aroused vehement objections and people spoke of a so-called ‘factory form’ spoiling beautiful Vilnius. Despite the critical approach of the local community, the ideas of the modernist movement found resonance mainly in Vilnius’ public architecture in the 1930s. The most important projects included the halls of residence of the Stefan Batory University, the building of the Bank of National Economy, the headquarters of the Social Insurance Institution, the primary school in Lipówka, the complex of buildings of the municipal cooling plant, as well as the new pavilions at the Northern Trade Fair. At the same time, the preserved designs of buildings planned for construction in the coming years indicate that the forms of functional modernism became firmly rooted in the architecture of Vilnius in the 1930s. They show ambitious and interesting urban concepts, including the buildings of the bus station, the Social House, the school complex at Tartaki Street in Vilnius, and the public school at Subocz Street. Those projects were mostly created by the graduates of the Faculty of Architecture of Warsaw University of Technology (e.g. A. Forkiewicz, I. Heilman, K. Biszewski), many of whom decided to pursue their careers in Vilnius. An important role in promoting the idea of modernism in Vilnius was played by Romuald Gutt who headed the newly established Urban Planning Studio. He created a team of co-workers, with S. Bukowski, J. Kobzakowski and L. Dąbrowski to name a few, who quickly became involved in the city’s social life. The paper presents selected works and also non-implemented conceptual projects that show the process of penetration of the ideas of the modernist movement into the public architecture of Vilnius in the 1930s.

Keywords: Vilnius, interwar architecture, modernism, functionalist architecture

INTRODUCTION

The architecture of the interwar period in Vilnius creates a multifaceted, diverse image, in which the modernist narrative is not a dominant thread, but is crucial for a full understanding of the direction of changes taking place in the urban space. The subject of the article is to show the Modern Movement’s the gradual penetration of the idea of the public architecture of the city, and the participation in this process of the designers of the young generation, mostly graduates of the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology, who came to Vilnius in the 1930s. This issue, considered in a broader socio-cultural context, reveals the inevitability of the modernization changes taking place in interwar Vilnius, regardless of the distanced attitude of the local artistic community. The deliberations adopted an interpretative and historical method, making a critical analysis of source materials: newly acquired archival materials and printed sources. The research covered both architectural objects and the environment of Vilnius architects in relation to local opinion-forming bodies (artists, historians, monument conservators).

In recent years, the issues of architecture of the interwar period in Vilnius have been the subject of numerous studies by Polish and Lithuanian researchers. These publications are of a review or synthetic nature,¹ or concern selected issues in the field of urban planning, monument protection, housing architecture and public utility architecture.² The subject of the mythologized image of Vilnius and its confrontation with the realities of the present, has been taken up twice so far – in an artistic and urban context.³ This work is an extension of the issue with a strictly architectural aspect.

DEFINING IDENTITY

The first years after the end of World War I were difficult and turbulent for Vilnius. The city’s fate was determined by the oppressive experiences of the Russian partition, the changing status and uncertainty of national affiliation, and the turbulent events of the Polish-Bolshevik War. From the first moments of regained independence, despite the complicated political conditions and many social and economic problems, Vilnius

¹ Drėmaitė, M., Leitanaitytė, R., & Reklaitė, J. (Eds.). (2019). *Vilnius 1900–2012: Naujosios architektūros gidas*. Baltų lankų leidyba; Architektūros fondas; Dolistowska, M. (2017). 'Mile miasto' między tradycją a awangardą: Architektura Wilna w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym. Zarys problematyki. In W. Walczak & K. Łopatecki (Eds.), *Stan badań nad wielokulturowym dziedzictwem dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* (Vol. 8, pp. 87–149). Instytut Badań nad Dziedzictwem Kulturowym Europy; Butvilaitė, R. (2019). Vilnius 1919–1939 metais: Naujo architektūrinio tapatumo kūrimas. *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis*, 94, 84–119.

² Stravinskienė, V. (2016). The territorial expansion of Vilnius: Plans and their realisation (1916–1940). *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, 20, 127–150; Povilaitytė–Leliugienė, E. (2020). Architectural heritage investigation in interwar Vilnius: Problem and methods. *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis*, 98, 212–261; Butvilaitė, R. (2020). Tarpukario Vilniaus visuomeniniai pastatai: Institucijų, funkcijų ir architektūros įvairovė. *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis*, 98, 180–211; Drėmaitė, M. (2022). Housing-based urban planning and new housing standard in Vilnius, 1919–1939. *Architecture and Urban Planning*, 18(1), 139–147; Drėmaitė, M. (2023a). Rozwój urbanistyczny. In G. Jankevičiūtė & A. Szczerski (Eds.), *Wilno, Vilnius, Vilne 1918–1948: Jedno miasto – wiele opowieści* (pp. 129–135). Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie; Drėmaitė, M. (2023b). Architektura mieszkaniowa. In G. Jankevičiūtė & A. Szczerski (Eds.), *Wilno, Vilnius, Vilne 1918–1948: Jedno miasto – wiele opowieści* (pp. 141–147). Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie.

³ Konstantynów, D. (2023). Międzywojenne Wilno w sztuce: Wyobrażenia i rzeczywistość. In G. Jankevičiūtė & A. Szczerski (Eds.), *Wilno, Vilnius, Vilne 1918–1948: Jedno miasto – wiele opowieści* (pp. 189–194). Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie; Dolistowska, M. (2023). Wilno wyobrażone: Romantyczna wizja 'polskich Aten' a proces modernizacji miasta w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym. In W. Walczak & K. Wiszowata-Walczak (Eds.), *Stan badań nad dziedzictwem wielokulturowym dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* (Vol. 16, pp. 83–123). Instytut Badań nad Dziedzictwem Kulturowym Europy.

revealed a great determination to build a new city space and restore the identity of places.

Vilnius entered the borders of the Second Polish Republic, shrouded in the legend of the ‘city of poets’, perceived as the cradle of Polish Romanticism and a picturesque ‘city under the clouds’. The memory of the past splendour of the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the ever-present Romantic legacy – created the foundation of the Vilnius genius loci. The cultural code of Vilnius was defined earlier, at the beginning of the 20th century. Ferdynand Ruszczyc and Jan Bułhak played a key role in this process. Ruszczyc’s activity has restored to public consciousness many places and buildings important for the city’s heritage, while the atmospheric photographs of Jan Bułhak encoded them in the collective memory.⁴ An extremely suggestive image of Vilnius was then created – captivating with the beauty of its historic architecture, picturesque alleys and the beauty of its natural landscape. It was accompanied by a deep conviction about the uniqueness of the city, ‘which is scarred by wars and fires, disfigured by the barbarity of invaders (...) has as much specific expression as probably no other Polish city, except for ancient Krakow’.⁵ This image, fixed by the narration of the popular sightseeing guide authored by Juliusz Kłos, became a ‘heartfelt key’ to the interpretation of the city.⁶

Restoring the former splendour of the historical space, reclaiming the historic heritage, and – as was particularly emphasized – shedding the ‘foul shell’ of the Russian gubernatorial Vilnius, were considered priorities. This position was of fundamental importance in consolidating a conservative attitude towards contemporary architecture and was decisive in determining the future directions of urban development.

In the initial period, the main role in shaping the urban space of Vilnius was played by the architectural community centred around the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University (USB). It was a small group (Juliusz Kłos, Ludwik Sokołowski, Otto Krasnopolski, Jan Borowski, Stefan Narębski), but with strong support from art historians and conservators (Marian Morelowski, Jerzy Remer, later Stanisław Lorentz, Ksawery Piwocki). In light of the huge needs of the backward region and the chronic lack of specialist staff in state and local government institutions, inaugurating an extensive programme of architectural education was seen as apriority task.

Architectural studies commenced in the 1920/21 academic year as one of the two fields of study at the Faculty of Fine Arts. The Department of Architecture was to promote young artists who, ‘brought up in the tradition of Polish art, illuminated by the beauty of Vilnius architecture’, would carry out the mission of ‘reviving Polishness in architecture in the Borderlands’.⁷ The education program emphasized that graduates are to receive extensive knowledge in the field of architectural history as well as thorough technical

⁴ More on various aspects of the activation of cultural memory in Vilnius on the threshold of independence: Krupowies, W. (2018). Rok 1919: Pamięć Wilna – pamięć w Wilnie. *Acta Baltico-Slavica*, 42, 90–94.

⁵ Kłos, J. (1921). Żywotność inwencji w architekturze Wilna. *Południe*, 3, 18.

⁶ Bułhak, J. (1937). Przewodnik po duszach ludzkich: Przedmowa. In J. Kłos, *Wilno: Przewodnik krajoznawczy Juliusza Kłosa* (p. VIII). Wydawnictwo Oddziału Wileńskiego Polskiego Towarzystwa Krajoznawczego.

⁷ Krasnopolski, O. (1927). Felczerstwo w architekturze. *Alma Mater Vilnensis*, 6, 9.

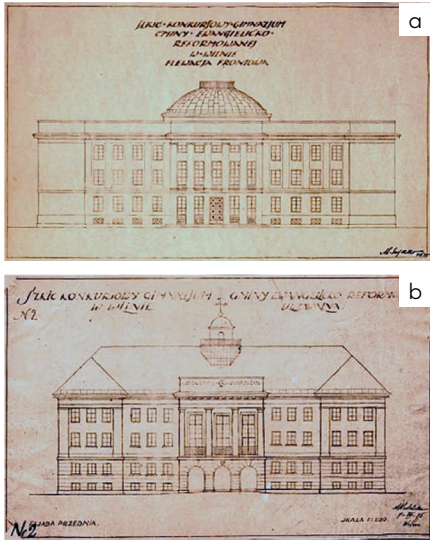


Fig. 1. Two versions of the competition design for the front façade of the Evangelical Reformed community gymnasium in Vilnius, 1925: a) design by architect Mieczysław Szyszko; b) design by architect Anna Kodelska; source: LMAVB RS, ref. nos. F 229–579 and F 229–562.

and practical preparation. In the future, this will enable them to design activities and work in building supervision in state institutions.⁸ Students actively participated in the life of the region, among other things by participating in architectural competitions announced by local governments. Few preserved works reflect the attitude of conservative traditionalism on which the education focused, but also show formal diversity, alternating between academic classicism and native historicism⁹ (Fig. 1). Bold spatial solutions, with the use of modern reinforced concrete structures, are presented in two published projects from 1926: by Ignacy Widawski (Department Store) and Aleksander Kodelski (Vilnius Railway Station)¹⁰ (Fig. 2).

The architectural studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University were not the disapproval of the ministerial authorities, and its curriculum based on the integration of science and the arts was not approved. As a result, the recruitment of new students in the academic year 1926/27 was suspended and the field of the study was gradually phased out.¹¹ In 1929, the Department of Architecture was finally closed – thus

⁸ Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas [Lithuanian Central State Archives], LCVA, ref. no. 175-1(1)A-110, fols. 31–32.

⁹ Kronika. (1926). *Architektura i Budownictwo*, no. 7, 31–35.

¹⁰ Kronika. (1926). *Architektura i Budownictwo*, no. 7, 33–34. Aleksander Kodelski’s design was a diploma project prepared under the supervision of Professor Ludwik Sokołowski and defended in 1927 at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology.

¹¹ In 1926, a total of 77 students were enrolled in architecture at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Technology. In order to obtain a diploma, final-year students had to transfer to Warsaw or Lviv, or change their field of study. By 1931, six students had received diplomas from the Warsaw University of Technology and three from the Lviv University of Technology.

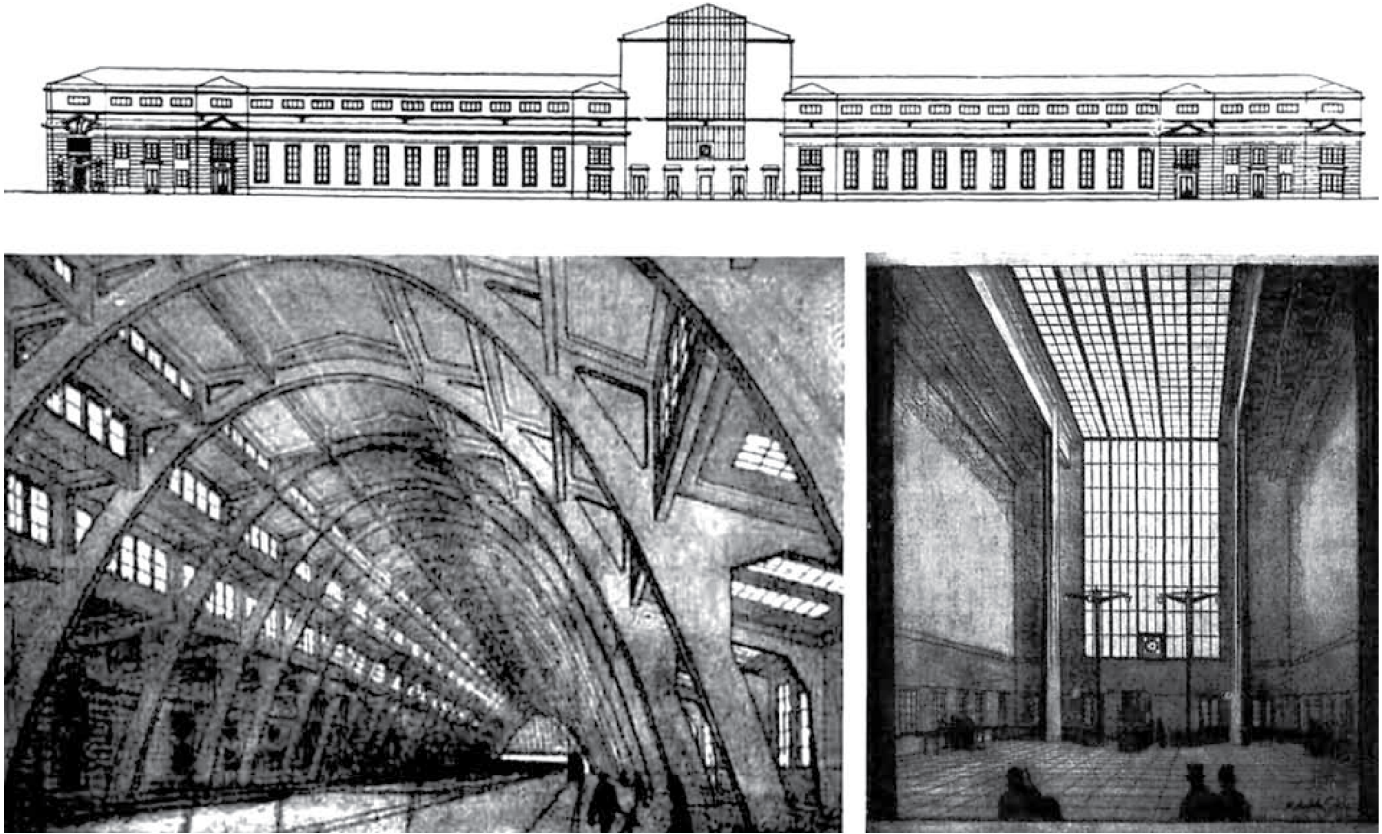


Fig. 2. Design for the Vilnius railway station, architect Aleksander Kodelski, 1926; source: *Architektura i Budownictwo*, no. 7, 1926.

the ambitious project of creating a new architectural ‘Vilnius school’ based on the city’s historical heritage ended in failure.

FACING CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

In the popularized vision of Vilnius as an inspired ‘city of poets’ and the inheritor of the grand-ducal legacy, the urban space was a set of picturesque, atmospheric frames abstracted from the real context. The actual image, however, as it emerged in reportage and many memoirs, was far more prosaic. ‘Vilnius, a beautiful and gloomy northern city,’ wrote Czesław Miłosz in 1933. ‘Through the window you can see bumpy cobblestones, puddles and heaps of manure. Further, a chipped wall and wooden fences (...) Poor capital!’¹² At the beginning of the 1930s, Vilnius was a neglected city mired in apathy, about which it was written that ‘it bears the burden of its splendour with difficulty.’¹³ Despite its status as a regional capital and an important university centre, it was devoid of all the attributes of modernity and urgently required modernization in many fields. Meanwhile, the city’s conservative community of ‘old residents’ resisted any kind of innovation, irritated by ‘every little house even slightly tainted by the influence of Le Corbusier’.¹⁴ In addition, the hostile attitude toward av-ant-garde art and architecture was intensified by the belief in its extreme left-wing character. The Dziennik Wileński reviewer, describing the Constructivist exhibition opened in June 1923, called it ‘Bolshevising’, bluntly commenting: ‘And it will not help to exhibit a few French or German books about Picasso. This is not the 'decadent West'. It is the eastern wind that brings us this barbaric clownery’.¹⁵

The first modernist housing estate erected in Vilnius aroused an equally critical reaction. The residential colony of the cooperative of employees of the Ministry of Public Works was built in Antokol, in the immediate vicinity of the church of Sts Peter and Paul. The design signed by architect Franciszek Wojciechowski was approved in 1928; three years later, the first houses were handed over to the users. The modernist, Bauhaus-inspired form of this small-scale estate, composed of minimalist cube-shaped, arranged in terraced buildings, aroused great controversy. Commentators wrote explicitly about the ‘disfigurement of Vilnius’ and the lack of reference to the manor-house tradition of the district, stating that the estate fit into ‘the Antakalnis background like a factory chimney added to a palace. (...) Beautiful Antakalnis is being defiled with ugly things, and no one in authority will defend the charms of the district. Where is the government conservator? Where is the city architect?’ a *Słowo columnis*^{#6} asked rhetorically.

Until the mid-1930s, most of the public buildings erected in Vilnius represented the trend of native historicism, simplified classicism, or displayed no clearly defined stylistic

¹² Miłosz, C. (1933). Wilno czeka. *Żagary*, 1, 3.

¹³ Wyszomirski, J. (1934). Miasto kontrastów. *Wiadomości Literackie*, no. 33, 8.

¹⁴ Jasienica, P. (2007). *Pamiętnik* (p. 104). Prószyński i S-ka.

¹⁵ Wystawa 'nowej' sztuki. (1923). Dziennik Wileński, no. 125, 2.

¹⁶ Mikoluszko, A. (1930). Szpeccenie Wilna. *Słowo*, no. 215, 3.

features. The few early modernist forms and modern constructions that appeared were concealed beneath classicizing facades, as in the Collegium Anatomicum building (architect Konrad Kłos, 1928) or were mitigated through the addition of simplified historical elements—such as arcaded porticoes in the Chamber of Industry and Commerce (architect Zygmunt Tarasin, 1931–1932) and the Health Centre at Kijowska Street (architect Stefan Narębski, 1930). Exceptions were two buildings located on the outskirts of the city—the broadcasting station of Polish Radio at Lipówka and the Civil Airport at the airfield in Porubanek. The broadcasting station was designed by Antoni Dygat and the airport building was designed by Józefa Mrówkowa-Ochmańska; both men were members of the Warsaw architectural community. However, due to the buildings’ considerable distance from the city and the specific functions of both facilities, their functionalist architecture did not, however, become the subject of broader discussion.

The first modernist building in Vilnius to be positively evaluated in the local press was the Academic House of the Stefan Batory University. The decision to entrust the project to Aleksander Kodelski was symbolic – it was one of the first projects of the young architect,¹⁷ one of the first graduates of the architecture department at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University. For financial reasons, the investment was divided into several stages; the first part of the building was opened on February 21, 1932, with the remainder of the project schedule for completion over the next eight years. During the construction, the original concept of the building's form was corrected, resulting in a modern building with a high standard of utility. In 1935–1936, the extension by a second, symmetrical part, designed by Irena Heilmanowa and Franciszek Wojciechowski gave the architecture its final modernist form. The housing conditions of university students, particularly those of limited means, had hitherto been very difficult. The new dormitory building, equipped with all modern amenities – where ‘one could even wash in hot water several times a week’ – was therefore received with great enthusiasm.¹⁸ The modern form and interiors of the building were positively assessed and were the subject of considerable attention in the press: ‘The power of wide large windows’, lyricised a reporter for The *Kurier Wileński*,‘ shiny doors. The grey colour of the smooth construction. Straight lines, right angles. You open the doors, walk up the wide stairs, lean against the smooth handrails (...) You don't even want to leave the divine locum.’¹⁹

The Academic House quickly became part of the landscape of Vilnius and became an outpost of modernist architecture; a few years after its opening, it was written about with pride and a certain exaggeration that ‘at first glance it resembles a miniature of a

¹⁷ After graduating from the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology, Aleksander Kodelski (1898–1972) settled in the capital. Together with his wife, Anna Kodelska (1901–1944), who had also studied architecture in Vilnius and later graduated from the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology, he pursued architectural practice. Both entered the history of twentieth-century Polish architecture as the authors of numerous modernist projects, most notably the cable car station on Kasprowy Wierch and the High Mountain Meteorological Observatory.

¹⁸ Bujnowski, J. (1932). Dom akademicki. *Kurier Wileński*, no. 42, 2.

¹⁹ Bujnowski, J. (1932). Dom akademicki. *Kurier Wileński*, no. 42, 2.

skyscraper in Warsaw. Maybe that’s why it was built on the Bouffalová Hill (...) so that it wouldn’t get lost among the average Vilnius buildings?’.²⁰

THE VILNIUS ARCHITECTURAL COMMUNITY

The architectural community of interwar Vilnius was relatively small, considering the size and status of the city as well as the region’s vast needs. In the 1920s, only a dozen or so architects were professionally active, often combining their private practice with work in government offices and institutions, as well as with academic teaching.

Many public building designs were created in the design office of the District Directorate of Public Works, headed by August Przygodzki and his team (Franciszek Wojciechowski, Wilhelm Markiewicz, Władysław Pietraszewski, Stefan Siestrzeńcewicz, and Jerzy Paprocki). Railway facilities were designed by Hipolit Hryniewicz and Henryk Genello from the Vilnius Directorate of State Railways, and Wacław Syrtowtt was employed in the technical office of the university.

The educational activities, in addition to the previously mentioned individuals associated with the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University, were also conducted by, among others, Wacław Hołownia and Leon Dubiejkowski, lecturers at the Marshal Piłsudski Technical School in Vilnius. In 1928, Stefan Narębski from Włocławek was appointed to the position of urban architect by the Vilnius city council, a position, he held until 1939. Most of the architects graduated before 1914. The deans, Tadeusz Rostworowski (1860–1928) and Antoni Filipowicz-Dubowik (1865–1930), had already passed the peak of their professional activity. The generational gap was further deepened by the closure of the Department of Architecture at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of St. Andrews. The development of the community was also not helped by ‘the chronic reluctance of architects to settle in the provinces and the use of unqualified labourers by the clientele’.²¹

This difficult situation slowly began to change in the mid-1930s. At that time, a group of graduates of the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology and the Faculty of Architecture of the Lviv University of Technology (from 1932 to 1936) began their professional activity in Vilnius. Irena Zatorska-Heilmanowa, Antoni Forkiewicz, Tadeusz Jasiński, Bogusław Świecimski and Kazimierz Biszewski were from Warsaw, and Wacław Hołownia and Przemysław Grodzki were from the Lviv University of Technology. The young architects quickly made their mark in the social and cultural life of Vilnius, especially through their active participation in the work of the local branch of the Association of Polish Architects.²² The second group of young architects from Warsaw appeared in Vilnius after the Municipal Urban Planning Office was established in May 1936 as part of the Technical and Construction Department of the Vilnius City

²⁰ Bodak, W. (1935). Dom akademicki. *Słowo*, no. 85, 6.

²¹ Oddział w Wilnie. (1938). *Komunikat S.A.R.P.*, no. 6, 8.

²² The Vilnius Branch of the Association of Polish Architects was founded in 1931. Its first chairman was August Przygodzki; after his death in 1932, he was succeeded by Professor Ludwik Sokółowski. In 1938, the Association of Polish Architects (SARP) had 25 members active in Vilnius.

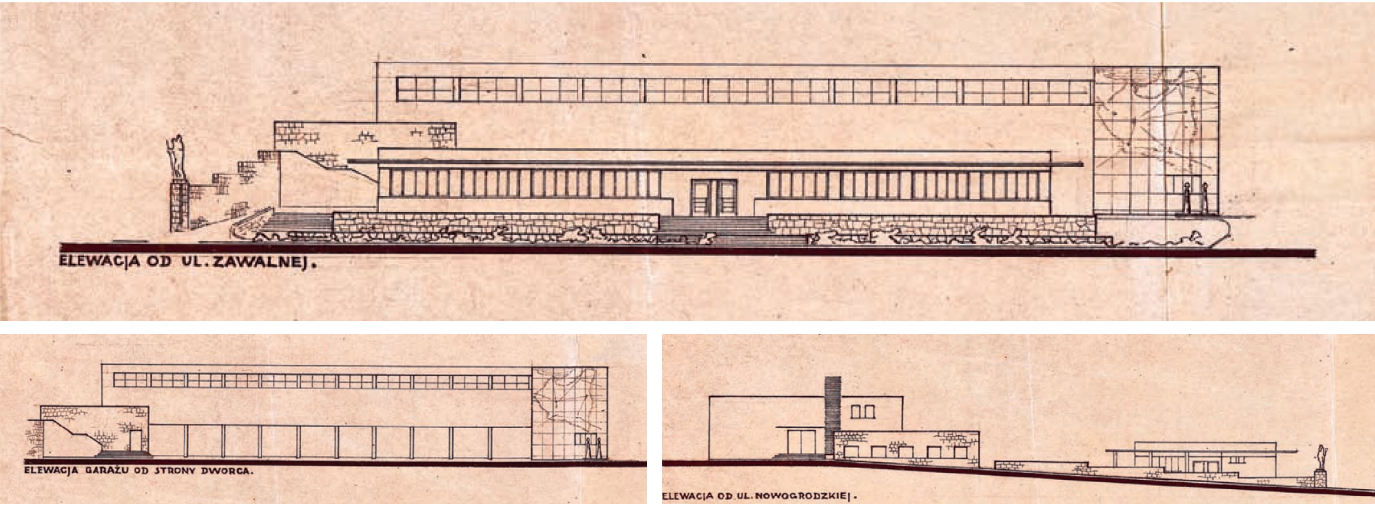


Fig. 3. Design for the bus station on Zawalna Street, undated, architects Antoni Forkiewicz and Stefan Narębski; source: LCVA, ref. no. 154-1-2651.

Administration. The organization and management of the office were entrusted to Professor Romuald Gutt, and the team consisted of graduates of the Warsaw Faculty of Architecture: Jerzy Kobzakowski (deputy head of the office), Stanisław Bukowski, Leszek Dąbrowski, and Jan Peksza.

CITY MODERNIZATION PROGRAM

The establishment of the Municipal Urban Planning Office was fundamentally important for the future development of Vilnius and marked the end of a long-standing stalemate, especially in the face of the city’s new challenges. In 1936, the Vilnius municipal government submitted to the voivode of Vilnius what in essence was a modernization program for the voivodeship’s capital. The office’s primary task was to prepare a general spatial development plan for Vilnius and to create detailed specifications for key sites: Cathedral Square and Łukiszki Square, the banks of the Neris River, the area surrounding the railway station, the reorganization of the Timber Market, and the construction of a Sports Park. The city also planned the construction of schools in every district, a network of community centres, and numerous smaller projects that required cooperation between architects, investors, and the Urban Planning Office.

Between 1936 and 1939, three prestigious buildings were built on the main thoroughfare, Mickiewiczza Street: headquarters for two banks, PKO Bank and BGK Bank, and the Social Insurance Company building. Their creators were architects from the circle of Warsaw modernists: Juliusz Żórawski, Zbigniew Puget (PKO), Stanisław Gałęzowski, Jerzy Pańkowski (BGK); and Jerzy Sołtan, Stanisław Murczyński (Social Insurance Company). Modern buildings became a visible sign of the changes taking place in Vilnius, and their style confirmed the inevitability of the transformation of the city’s architectural iconography.

This tendency is confirmed by projects that ultimately remained unrealized. In 1936, the City Board announced a competition for the reconfiguration of Cathedral Square

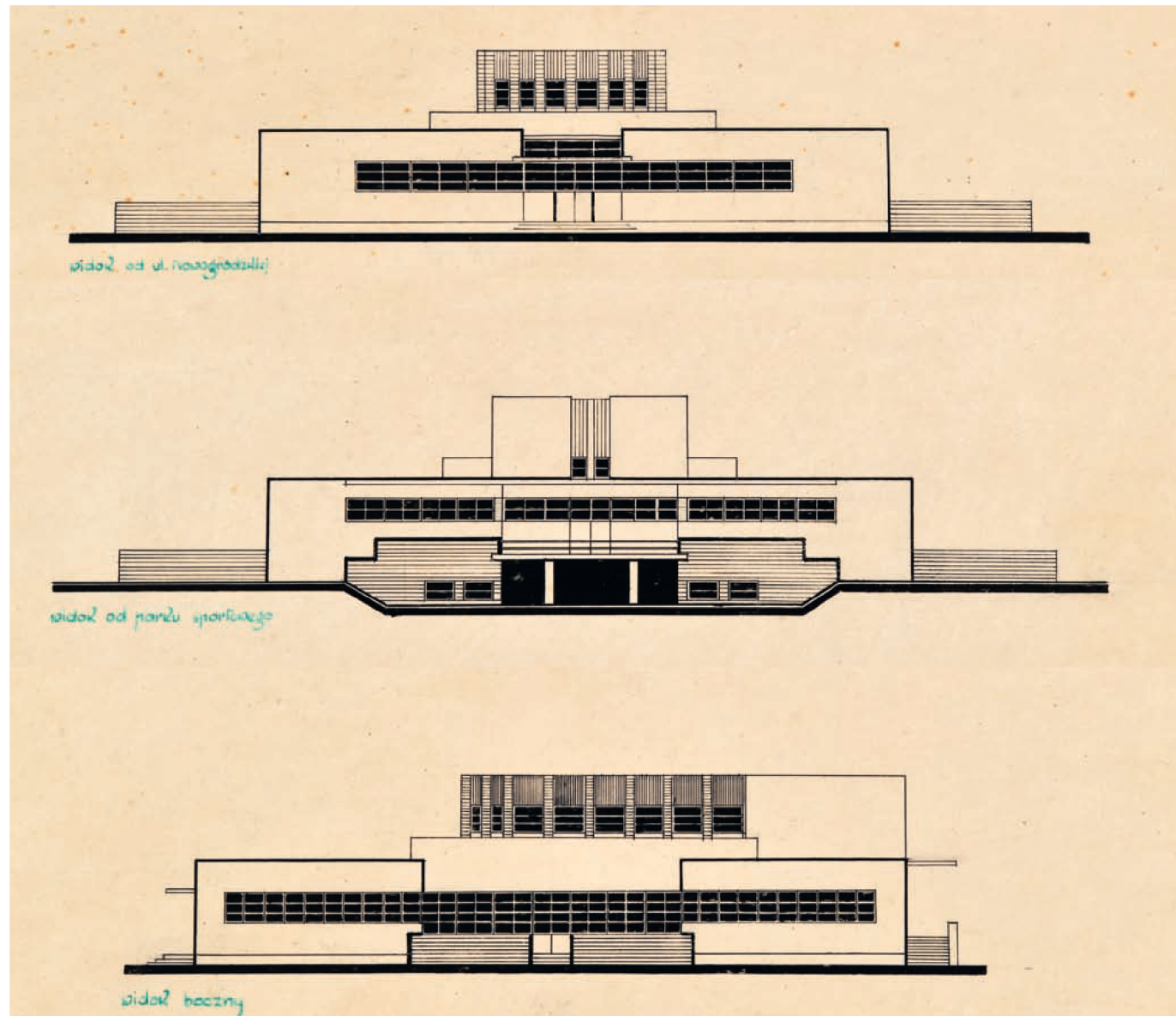


Fig. 4. Design for the Social House in Vilnius, architect Michał Sławiński, undated; source: LCVA, ref. no. 154-1-2657.

and the Timber Market.²³ At the Timber Market, located on Zawalna Street, the plan was to build a long-distance bus station—an investment that had long been a priority and whose location had been changed several times. Presumably as a result of this competition, a preserved preliminary design of a bus station and market hall, signed by Stefan Narębski and Antoni Forkiewicz, has survived (Fig. 3).²⁴ The collaboration between an experienced architect, who had previously favoured conservative forms of the national style, and a young advocate of functionalism, produced a well-planned concept in a modern form. The proposed architecture maintained the street's scale, while its character was enhanced by varied materials (stone, concrete, glass, and mosaics).

²³ Konkurs urbanistyczny. (1936). *Kurier Wileński*, no. 71, 9.

²⁴ Lietuvos centrinių valstybės archyvas [Lithuanian Central State Archives], LCVA, ref. no. 154-1-2651.

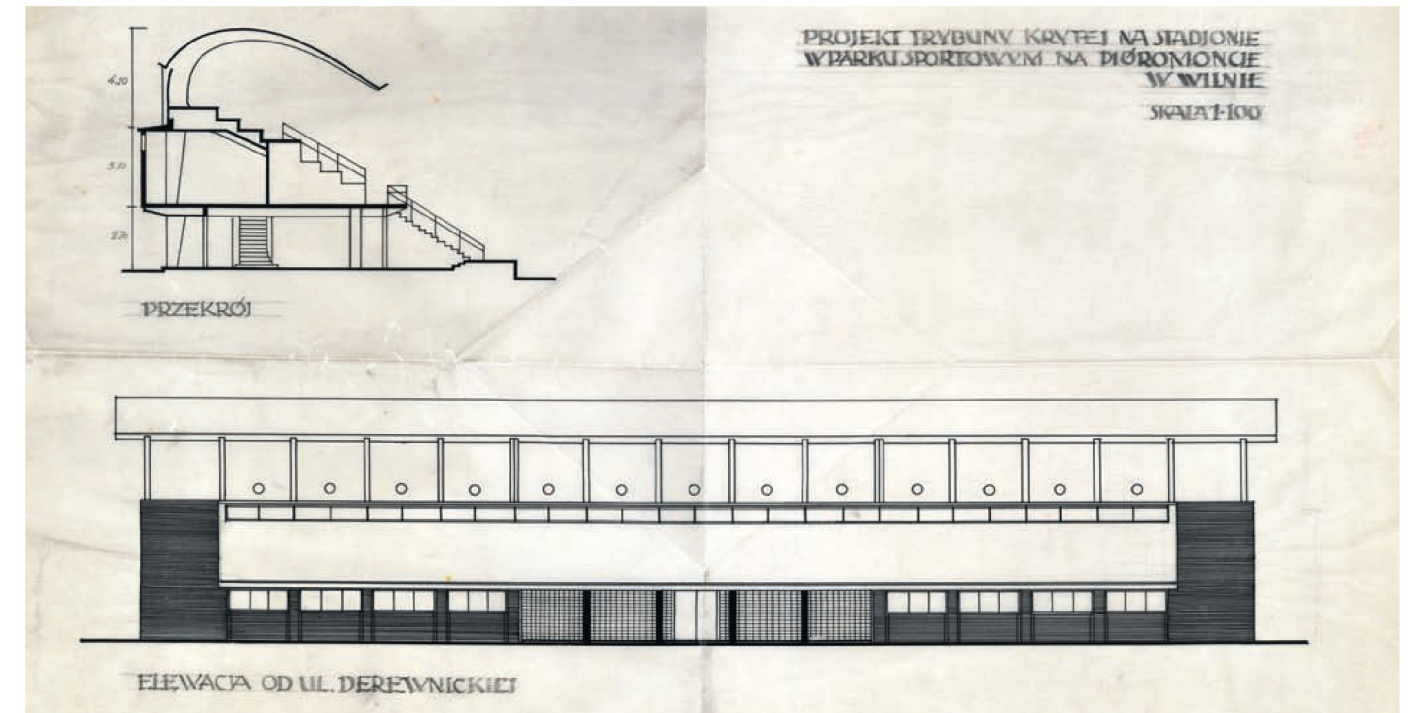


Fig. 5. Design for a grandstand at the stadium in the Sports Park in the Pióromont district of Vilnius, architect Romuald Gutt, 1938; source: LCVA, ref. no. 154-1-2580.

Another unrealized project, prepared as part of the investment plan, was the Community House in the New Town, located on Nowogródzka Street (Fig. 4). Michał Sławiński's project demonstrates the expanded functions of a community centre, including a large auditorium, a reading room, a dining hall, and smaller rooms for various functions.²⁵ Modernist architecture is characterized by a regular composition of stacked blocks, extensive glazed facades, and a pure, geometric form. These features can also be found in another work by this architect: the design of a twin elementary school at Subocz Street, whose construction was planned to begin in the autumn of 1936.²⁶ In the same year, the construction of a large complex of trade schools on Tartaki Street in Vilnius, designed in the spirit of functionalism by Bohdan Lachert and Józef Szanajca, was also set to begin.²⁷

In August 1939, the only completed modernist school building in Vilnius was put into use: the elementary school on Beliny Street, Romuald Gutt's flagship project in Vilnius. Less well-known is the fact that Gutt was also the author of the new concept for the Sports Park in the Pióromont district, which he developed at the request of the Municipal Committee of Physical Education between 1937 and 1938. The new, two-level stands of the stadium he designed could accommodate two thousand spectators, while the ground floor housed the entire training facilities and offices of the Physical Education

²⁵ Lietuvos centrinių valstybės archyvas [Lithuanian Central State Archives], LCVA, ref. no. 154-1-2657.

²⁶ Dolistowska, M. (2017). 'Miłe miasto' między tradycją a awangardą: Architektura Wilna w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym. Zarys problematyki. In W. Walczak & K. Łopatecki (Eds.), *Stan badań nad wielokulturowym dziedzictwem dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* (Vol. 8, pp. 87-149). Instytut Badań nad Dziedzictwem Kulturowym Europy.

²⁷ Lietuvos centrinių valstybės archyvas [Lithuanian Central State Archives], LCVA, ref. no. 154-1-2621.

Center (Fig. 5).²⁸ Although work on the project began, it was interrupted by the war construction.

Beginning in 1938, the Northern Fair was held in a new location and with a modified exhibition format, and it subsequently underwent a complete reorganization. Rościśław Kapliński and Kazimierz Biszewski, young architects from Vilnius, won the nationwide competition for the design and construction of the exhibition grounds announced by the Association of Polish Architects (SARP).

Their bold, expressive designs for the three pavilions remained only in the realm of concept. The outbreak of war in 1939 meant that only the main Pavilion of Industry and Trade saw any use.²⁹

Other modernist projects for public buildings in Vilnius, designed in the last years before the outbreak of the war, also remained unrealized. These included projects as important for the city as the new headquarters of the Department of Combating Cancer of the University of Vilnius (architect Irena Heilmanowa) (Fig. 6) and the building of the Central Fire Brigade on Rydza-Śmigłego Street (architect: Jan Borowski).³⁰ Borowski was also the author of the design for the church in Porubank, which, if built, would have been the only modernist sacral building in Vilnius constructed in the interwar period (Fig. 7).³¹

Symptomatic indication of the definitive implantation of modernist forms in the public architecture of Vilnius were three successive versions of the design for the building of the Provincial Directorate of State Forests, developed in the construction office of the Regional Directorate of Public Works. The first was built in the 1920s, and the next two a decade later. Their author was probably Jerzy Paprocki (Fig. 8).³² The stylistic evolution visible in these projects, running from academic classicism through monumentalism to modernist stylistics, is a reflection of the path taken by public architecture of interwar Vilnius went through.

NEW FORM IN VILNIUS PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE: OPINIONS AND ASSESSMENTS

The reactions to the modernization of city spaces wavered between cautious support, distrust, and strong criticism. These attitudes led to the establishment of the Social Urban Commission in January 1936 within the Association of Friends of Vilnius, serving as an alternative body to the Municipal Urban Commission.³³

The Commission was only an advisory and opinion-giving body without decision-making power. It was composed of the university's Faculty of Fine Arts professors L.

²⁸ Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas [Lithuanian Central State Archives], LCVA, ref. no. 154-1-2580.

²⁹ *Targi północne w Wilnie: Czy były – czym są – czym mają być.* (1939). Towarzystwo Targów Północnych w Wilnie. Retrieved July 8, 2025, from <https://polona.pl/preview/302ff5a4-2c33-4b7e-82ba-b8fcb1c78aa8>

³⁰ Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas [Lithuanian Central State Archives], LCVA, ref. nos. 51-10-965; 154-1-2604.

³¹ Lietuvos mokslų akademijos Vrublevskių biblioteka, Rankraščių skyrius [Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, Manuscripts Department], LMAVB RS, ref. no. F 229: Jan Borowski, *Projekt kościoła na 700 osób (...) na Porubanku pod Wilnem*, 1936.

³² Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas [Lithuanian Central State Archives], LCVA, ref. no. 154-1-2586.

³³ *Komisja Urbanistyczna Towarzystwa Miłośników Wilna.* (1936). *Kurier Wileński*, no. 13, 6.

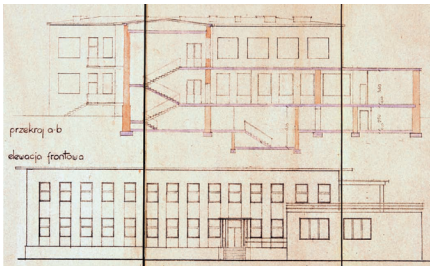


Fig. 6. Design for the Cancer Control Department of Stefan Batory University in Vilnius, architect Irena Heilmanowa, undated; source: LCVA, ref. no. 51-10-965.

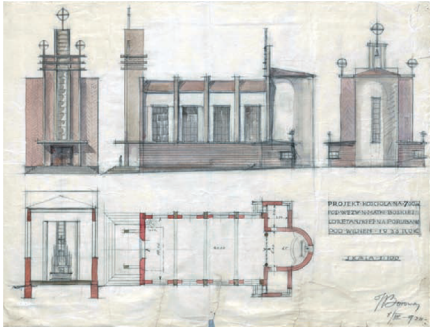


Fig. 7. Design for the Cancer Control Department of Stefan Batory University in Vilnius, architect Irena Heilmanowa, undated; source: LCVA, ref. no. 51-10-965.

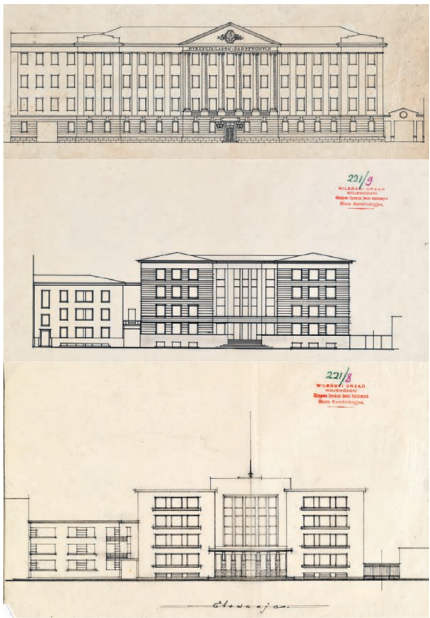


Fig. 8. Designs for the State Forests building in Vilnius on Wielka Pohulanka Street, architect Jerzy Paprocki [?], undated; source: LCVA, ref. nos. 154-1-2586 and 154-1-2587.

Sleńdziński, M. Morelowski, J. Hoppen, and M. Limanowski, the provincial conservator Ksawery Piwocki, and I. Heilmanowa, J. Borowski, J. Paprocki, T. Jasiński, A. Forkiewicz from the Vilnius branch of the Association of Polish Architects.

The members of the Commission, together with representatives of another important body – the Council of Vilnius Artistic Associations – often participated in the public debate, frequently criticizing the spatial solutions proposed by the city. They also issued declarations about the unsuitable transformation of the historical image of Vilnius, which they believed was ‘a bastion of the Republic of Poland and had a duty to proudly represent the tradition and role of the capital of vast lands’.³⁴

One of the most active members of the Social Commission and a strong opponent of modernism in Vilnius's public architecture was the art historian and Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Vilnius, Professor Marian Morelowski. A distinguished researcher of Vilnius Baroque art. He expressed his emphatically negative assessment of the BGK bank building, which he described as having the appearance of a ‘factory depot’. He wrote directly about the confrontation of two architectural communities: ‘Vilnius is a city with certain social ambitions and an artistic life led by a group of artists and architects who (...) closely observe how Warsaw artists are entering the framework of local life. The construction of buildings in Vilnius by the capital's forces, when not only bread is taken away, but also the field for the local forces to perform, must be combined with an outstanding artistic result.’ After a detailed analysis of the architectural form of the BGK building, he concluded unequivocally: ‘I express a serious concern that the building will provoke critical questions, so this is the creative thought of the architects of the capital?’.³⁵

The decisive confrontation, which determined the further direction of Vilnius's development, took place in 1937 in the heart of the city, at the cathedral square. Two diametrically different concepts of the square were proposed: a modernist project prepared by a team from the Urban Office and signed by Romuald Gutt, and an alternative, ‘pathetic’ vision of the ‘Jagiellonian Forum’ proposed by Professor Ludomir Sleńdziński, supported by the Social Urban Commission and the ‘artistic circles of Vilnius’.³⁶ Despite numerous protests expressed in the press, the City Council approved Gutt's project and forwarded it for implementation. Jan Bułhak bitterly summarized it: ‘The people of Vilnius have already become accustomed to having no decisive voice in matters concerning their city, and that Warsaw will do whatever it wishes.’³⁷

³⁴ W sprawie niebezpieczeństw grożących Wilnu na polu urbanistyki: Deklaracja Nadzwyczajnego Walnego Zgromadzenia Rady Wileńskich Zrzeszeń Artystycznych. (1936). *Kurier Wileński*, no. 101, 6.

³⁵ Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas [Lithuanian Central State Archives], LCVA, ref. no. 51-10-258, fols. 37–40.

³⁶ The regulation of Cathedral Square in Vilnius has been discussed in numerous publications; see: Dolistowska, M. (2020). Upamiętnić Marszałka: Wilno i Kresy północno-wschodnie w hołdzie Józefowi Piłsudskiemu. In W. Walczak & K. Wiszowata-Walczak (Eds.), *Stan badań nad wielokulturowym dziedzictwem dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* (Vol. 12, pp. 383–420). Instytut Badań nad Dziedzictwem Kulturowym Europy. The article includes a bibliography on the subject.

³⁷ Nasza ankieta urbanistyczna: Odpowiedź Jana Bułhaka. (1937). *Kurier Wileński*, no. 123, 5.

SUMMARY

Rather than a real city, Vilnius, the ‘city of poets’, was a construct of collective imagination woven from romantic tradition, picturesque photographic frames, Baroque architecture, and atmospheric backstreets. The inevitable confrontation with the challenges of modernity was bound to result in a polemical debate, especially since the new solutions originated elsewhere and met with Vilnians’ deeply ingrained distrust of outsiders – in this case, newcomers from other regions of Poland. Yet the dispute over the form of Vilnius’s urban space transcended such simple animosities; it was a significant and profound conflict between the idealized vision of the city as a depository of the past and the concept of building a modern centre for a large region.

The modernists, with their pragmatic and arbitrary approach to space, were initially perceived as intruders — invaders who oppressively entered the subtle urban fabric of Vilnius. Their activity, however, accelerated the process of modernization, which was an unquestionable necessity for the further development of the economically underdeveloped city. The examples of unrealized projects presented here indicate that Vilnius’s architects actively participated in these actions. It is noteworthy that they were not only young graduates of the Warsaw school but representatives of all generations of architects.

The long-term investment program adopted in the second half of the 1930s remained mostly in the planning phase, and its implementation was interrupted by the impending events of World War II. We do not know today to what extent the ‘city of poets’ would have been modernized and to what extent the ambitious and wide-ranging plans of the ‘barbarians’ would have changed the city.

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