

## POST-SOVIET TRANSFORMATIONS OF URBAN SPACE IN VILNIUS

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**Abstract.** This article attempts to establish the main trends of post communist transformation of urban space of Vilnius in the context of development of the country. The author tried to find out how new developments of free market economy meet with the old Soviet and pre-Soviet structures of the city. The author identified the main areas in the city, which are under most active change and the parts where there are almost no changes. The biggest attention was paid to housing market and office developments, which were booming during the few last years. These new structures and the impact of geographical contexts on them are the most important themes of the article.

References 12. Figs 7. In English, summary in Lithuanian.

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### Introduction

All post-communist countries and three East Baltic States in particular have experienced quite similar social and economic development during the post-Soviet period, which is related to their fairly similar social, economic and political conditions of development during the transition period. Of course timing and scale of changes were different but in general processes were the same and general economic outcomes were quite similar. On the other hand, the geographical context of these processes was different so one could expect different spatial outcomes on regional and local level. Different spatial structures of societies and economies, differences of socio-cultural heritage, different geographic location and other factors have caused different spatial outcomes from similar processes in different countries and, of course, in different cities. Some scientists have already spotted these trends. It has been stated that although the fastest economic development in Central European countries has been concentrated in capital cities agglomerations of all countries, the degree of concentration is different (Bachler and Downs, 1999).

This paper is devoted to the specific processes taking place in Vilnius, which cause main changes of its spatial structure. It concentrates not on the general trends, which are quite similar in all post-Soviet countries but mainly on the specific Vilnius context. It tries to reveal the impact of drastic changes of social structure on the spatial structure of the city. The relatively even spatial structure of communist city serves as a background for new processes. The new economy and the new society need new developments, which appear on or near the old structures. Suburbanization, new residential neighbourhoods in the city, gated communities, business centres, shopping malls and new industries – all these new processes take place on the limited and highly expensive space. The previous relatively even special structure of the city becomes more and more fragmented. In many cases this new development raises social conflicts, damages heritage and environment or spoils the image of the city. Though new developments are easily noticeable, the true scale of these processes and their consequences on the city and society are not clear yet.

## 1. Vilnius in the Context of Economic Development of Lithuanian Territory

Analysing the trends of development of one city, one must always keep in mind the spatial structure of the whole society, which actually serves as a context of development of capital cities and makes an inevitable impact on its development. Lithuania was a relatively evenly developed country at the beginning of the 1990s. The urban system of Lithuania was artificially designed during the Soviet period according to a scheme and ideas devised by W. Christaller and A. Lösch. The idea was adapted to Lithuania's urban scheme and later modified by local architects led by K. Šešelgis in the 1960s and 1970s. The attempts to regulate the development of Lithuanian urban system reducing its concentration continued until the end of the Soviet era. Some authors involved in regional studies argue that this was the beginning of scientifically-based regional policies in Lithuania (Kavaliauskas, 2000). Hardly any other country in Europe had such a large top-down redevelopment of urban system. As a consequence of the implementation of these ideas and Soviet ideology, Lithuania did not have one big main city (though the "central place" existed in the schemes of the aforementioned geographers); rather, it had a relatively dense and even network of big and medium sized cities (50 000 – 600 000 inhabitants) and did not have a network of separate farmsteads in agricultural areas. In fact, Lithuania became a polycentric country in the sense of its socio-economic relations. Persons living in the west of the country had very weak relations even with the capital city Vilnius notwithstanding that the size of the country is very small. Such an idea of development of Lithuania meant that the development of Vilnius was artificially slowed. Neither its size nor its economy was as big as they could potentially be in a free market-based population system.

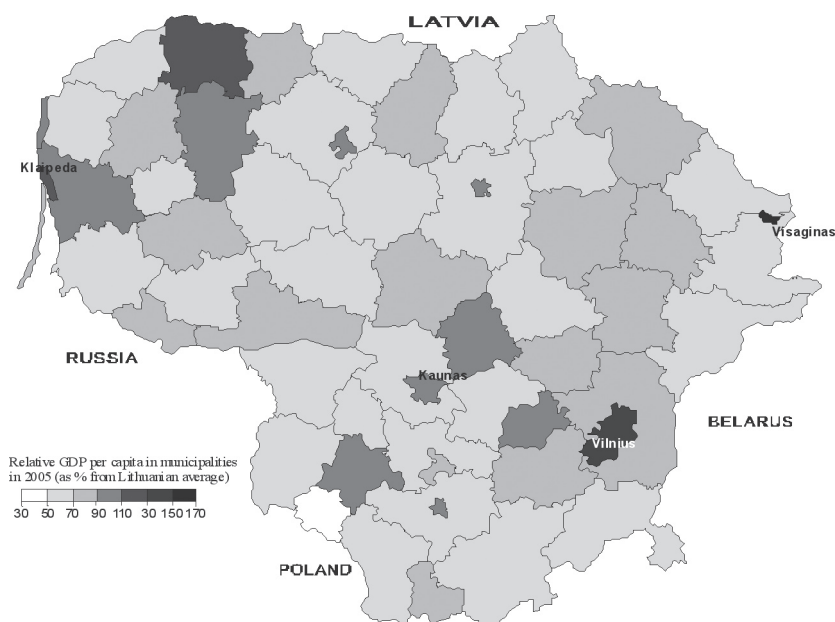
The inner structure of all Soviet cities also was very much influenced by the main ideology of the regime. The absence of private property and domination of collective ideology meant absence of neighbourhoods consisting of new (with some exceptions) private detached houses and as a consequence absence of suburbanisation. Soviet economy with domination of industrial sector and weak services, which constituted only 1/3 of added value in the Soviet economy also made an influence on the structure of the city – office buildings for example were not the dominant element of the central parts of cities.

Finally we could expect that such an artificial urban structure, which was possible under command economy, should start to collapse or at least to transform in democratic free market economy. Actual processes and their pace then should depend on the pace of economic reforms and development as well as on abilities of regulatory structures in particular city. The existing cultural, political and social contexts together with the peculiarities of urban space make the framework which impacts the spatial outcomes of these processes.

Although the pace of economic development in Lithuania has been one of the fastest in Europe, its inner spatial effects are still not understood well enough. Some studies have tried to evaluate regional differences of economic development in the post-Soviet period in Lithuania. These studies mostly revealed substantial differences in development of different economic indicators in Lithuania, but it was quite difficult to understand the spatial trends of development of the whole economy from them (Baubinas, 2000; Burinskiene, Rudzkiene, 2004). There has been much speculation in various publications concerning the much faster economic development of big cities, especially Vilnius, however there are no data illustrating the actual differences of pace of economic growth.

Previous studies of spatial development of the economy in Lithuania revealed huge and still growing disparities in GDP per capita in different municipalities in the period until 2001 (Burneika, 2004). Almost all the territory of Lithuania went into economic depression, and growth of economy was concentrated in the very few points, which included the capital Vilnius, the port Klaipėda and, on a smaller scale, just a few smaller cities. The country went through deep depression, which reached its maximum in 1992–1993 and was followed by

a growth period. Another recession related to the Russian financial crisis of 1998 struck the Lithuanian economy once again at the end of the last century. As a consequence, the spatial differences in GDP per capita between municipalities increased again. The difference of GDP per capita in the best and the worst developed municipalities reached five times in 2001 and this misbalance has retained the same level since then (Burneika, Kriauciūnas, 2005). Despite some new trends (faster development of rural municipalities, for instance), the great imbalance between Vilnius and the remaining territory of Lithuania still exists (Fig. 1). Although according to the Department of Statistics of Lithuania approximately 16.5 % of the Lithuanian population lives in Vilnius (Counties of Lithuania..., 2006), the economy of Vilnius is so important that the absolute majority of other municipalities can barely reach the average GDP per capita of Lithuania. Anyway, it is quite obvious, that development of the capital city was very fast and experienced no major recessions but just slowdowns during the post-Soviet period. Such situation permits to expect concentration of not only the financial capital in the city but also, as a consequence, the physical one, which mostly is expressed in a form of new buildings or newly developed spaces.



**Fig. 1.** Differences in GDP per capita in the municipalities of Lithuania in 2005 (of Lithuanian average). (Authors elaborations on the data of Statistical Department of Lithuania, Counties..., 2006)

**1 pav.** Vienam gyventojui tenkančio bendrojo vidaus produkto skirtumai Lietuvos savivaldybėse 2005 metais (% Lietuvos vidurkio) (autorius remiasi Lietuvos statistikos departamento duomenimis; Counties..., 2006)

This uneven development of Lithuanian territory resulted in many spatial social effects, though migrations are the most important one in our case. The proportion of rural population and population living in small towns of Lithuania was too high for a present state of development of the country. Such situation was artificially sustained by the Soviet command system in order to guarantee high level of agricultural production and some other reasons. One third of state population resides in rural areas and approximately the same portion in medium and small urban settlements. Collapse of this system and economic depression in the province should inevitably have resulted in the increase of migration from rural areas and smaller towns to major cities especially Vilnius, which was much too small for a central city of the country with 3.7 million residents. However an alternative of Western Europe appeared and main emigrational flows went to that direction. Obviously, substantial migration to Vilnius also exists, though there is no reliable information

concerning its characteristics. The actual number of Vilnius residents is not clear though obviously it is much bigger than the official 554 thousand. Having in mind 100 000 students studying at higher schools of Vilnius, who come to the city from the whole country, as well as the information from the State Tax inspection that approximately half of the taxpayers working in Vilnius have declared different residential places we can state that the actual number of everyday city and suburb dwellers is around 800 000 or even more. This also can be confirmed by the constant increase of the number of cars and bus passengers in the city and by some other indirect indicators (boom in housing market for example).

The deficit of labour force has caused migration from the eastern countries (mostly former Soviet republics, where earnings are substantially smaller), the actual intensity of which either is not clear. Finally, though no one could find reliable data, the population of Vilnius have not only increased but also have changed a lot. The most important change was the increase of social inequality, what means that the incomes and preferences (or in fact demand) for housing also changed a lot. New residents and accumulation of capital resulted in the fast development of new housing establishments. New economies required that new spaces as well and new business centres appeared. Increased importance of service sector resulted in new developments of that kind too. Changes of the structure of society inevitably resulted in diversification of requirements for housing quality and this resulted in development of new types of housing. All these natural processes have been taking place in the planned and regulated space of the city and as a consequence should have been influenced by the authorities of Vilnius and the whole country. The character of this influence is under the question and keeps bothering the minds of scientists, politics, media and wider population.

## **2. Space of the City – Background for Transformations**

It is quite hard to decide what type of a city Vilnius is, especially having in mind, that all classifications of cities are rather general and not very strict if we have in mind city structure but not its size as a main criteria for the classification. Savage and Warde distinguish “Cities in socialist countries” as a separate group (Savage and Warde, 1993). Though differences between post-Soviet cities are very big the distinction seems quite logical. Most of these cities were largely formed during the Soviet era when fast urbanization of most countries was taking place. The structure of society, which makes big impact on spatial structure of territory of a city, and main ideology everywhere were quite similar.

The space of the city is a product of history. In fact the structure of the city often can be regarded as a heritage of societies, which occupied it. Already almost 40 years ago R. Pahl argued - “spatial structure of the city reflects distribution of power in society. Spatial structure partly reflects partly determines the social structure” and sheer permanence of the built environment means that the distribution of economic rewards, which creates a social structure at one period of time becomes fossilized at a later period of time (Pahl, 1970). Geographical structure forms a “decision environment” as pointed out by D. Harvey and L. Chatteerjee. Attempts to change the structure can generate considerable social conflicts (Harvey, Chatteerjee, 1973). The spatial structure of post-Soviet cities is in many cases a consequence of structure of communist society, which used to be quite even. Notwithstanding many negative sides of the Soviet system, one should admit, that social differences inside the society were quite small at least during the last decades of its existence. As a consequence, Lithuanian cities also were quite even. Biggest cities mostly consist of vast areas of blockhouses surrounding smaller centres of the cities. At present, the social differences inside the society are much higher in Lithuania than in many western countries so one should expect that fast changes of the inner urban structure should start to take place. Social differences should start to produce new types of spaces inside or near the old structures. Conflicts of various types are inevitable in such circumstances, except the few cases, when new developments have only positive impacts on the surrounding environment.

The structure of Vilnius was quite typical for post-Soviet cities at the end of the Soviet period. The medieval core and its neighbourhood, built mainly during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, compose the centre of the city. It is surrounded by old suburban areas of very different type and quality, which were somewhat restructured during the Soviet era, but in general presented exceptional parts with prevailing detached single family housing. The centre and former suburban areas were influenced with new developments during the Soviet period but the degree of impact was not big – main developments took place outside these areas, or in parts, which were demolished during WW II. Some developments (especially industrial) took place at the edges of these areas. The remaining part of the city is represented by Soviet neighbourhoods consisting of quite “boring” towers of blocks or different many-storey dwellings or open spaces with forest type parks, mainly located on the slopes of Neris valley. This is of course a simplified view of the structure of the city but it permits understanding the general context or the background of processes taking place here since declaration of independence of Lithuania

As was pointed out earlier, the spatial structure of society in Lithuania was artificially created during the Soviet period. It is important to emphasize that the inner structure of the cities also was not a product of free market. The regulations of construction were very severe and needs and preferences of residents did not play an important role there. The result of such regulations was a specific residential structure of the city - huge proportion of population living in many-storey houses, very few private houses (particularly in Vilnius), and absence of suburbs. The collapse of the system should inevitable “release” natural processes and residential areas should start to change.

### **3. The Newest Transformations in Vilnius City**

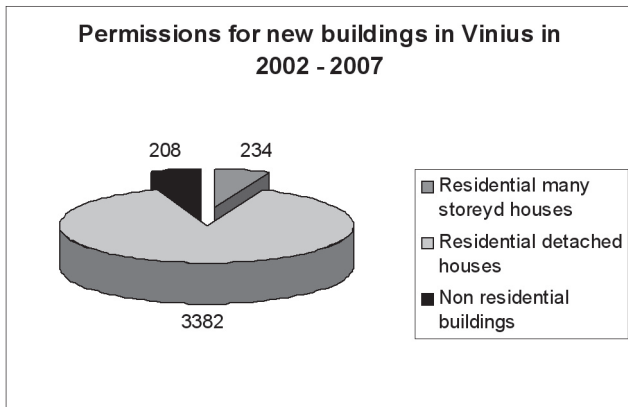
Transformation from communist society with the relatively even social structure and constant deficit of living spaces to capitalist society with the immense social inequalities, and permanent deficit of available land was the main driving force of transformations of urban space in the city. Transformation from command economy with dominant industrial sector to free market economy with dominant service sector was another cause of major urban transformations in the city.

Transformations in Vilnius are easily noticeable for everyone who lives or visits the city. However, the scale and spatial pattern of these changes are not as evident. Spatial planning documents present one of the possibilities to evaluate these processes, because most of them are related to actual transformations of land use in the city. Analysis of approved detailed plans in the period 1998–2003 illustrates that most significant changes happen in the central part of the city, where density of such plans is more than 5 times bigger than in neighbourhoods of many-storey block houses planned during the Soviet times (Burneika, 2003).

The average number of approved plans was less than 2 per year, what illustrates the absence of changes in these purely Soviet areas. Such situation is a result of uniform land use structure and lack of free or private land property in these areas. The centre and old suburbs were the areas with most rapid transformations, notwithstanding that the central part is the most fully preserved space. It is not strange, that according to the interviewed offices of municipality of the city, the most public conflicts and complaints appear in the central part of Vilnius. Old suburban areas in many cases consist of areas of individual houses and private land property prevails. This and their close location to the city centre are the causes of rapid changes inside them. A lot of buildings here also are under protection as a heritage of wooden architecture, but “accidental” fires happen and new developments appear even instead of preserved buildings.

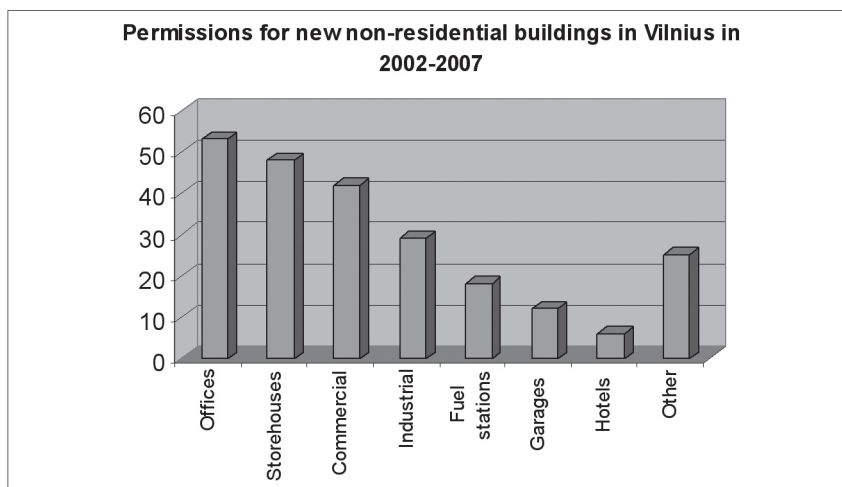
Though the density of approved detailed plans in other territories (local territorial units) is quite similar like in the Soviet block neighbourhoods but actual amounts of

such plans exceed 10 per year. The low general density is a result of complexity of such territories. Industrial zones, private housing areas, Soviet block houses, and vast green areas compose them and the mere numbers of density, do not illustrate processes, which were taking place there. Analysis of recent permissions for new buildings does not precisely illustrate the changing land use of the city but it can show places of most rapid and intense developments in the city. Also it can illustrate main recent trends of transformations. Figure 2 illustrates main trends of development of Vilnius during the last few years. Obviously, the most intense are constructions of residential buildings, especially individual houses. As was pointed out earlier, the proportion of such housing type was very small, due to the preferences of planning in the Soviet period.



**Fig. 2.** New buildings in Vilnius municipality in 2002–2007 (according to the data of Department of City Development of Vilnius municipality)  
**2 pav.** Nauji pastatai Vilniaus savivaldybėje 2002–2007 metais (Vilniaus savivaldybės Miesto plėtros departamento duomenimis)

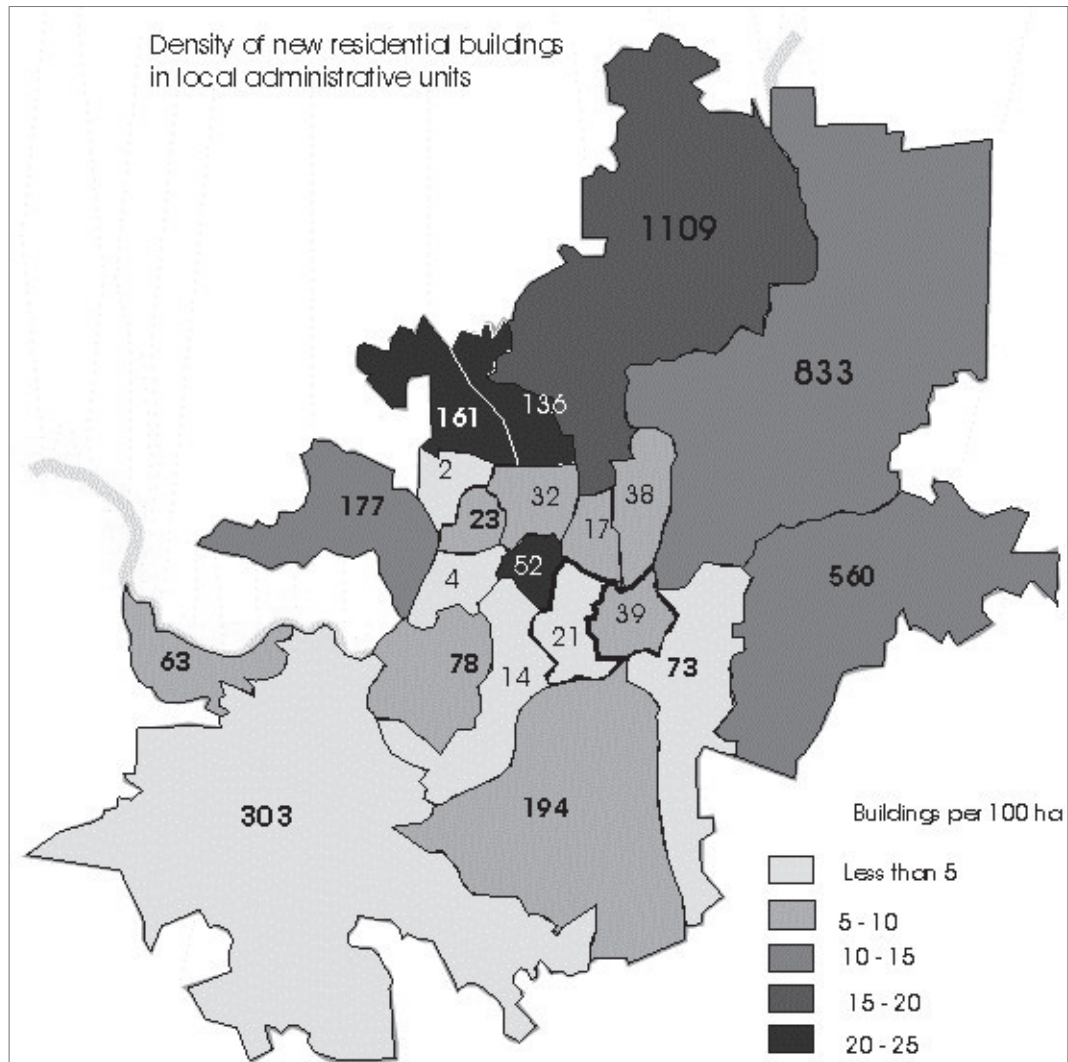
The fastest since 1991 developments devoted to service sector still prevail among non-residential buildings. The same trend is evident during recent years as well (Fig. 3.)



**Fig. 3.** New non-residential buildings in Vilnius in 2002 – 2007 (according to the data of Department of City Development of Vilnius municipality)  
**3 pav.** Leidimai ne gyvenamosios paskirties namų statyboms 2002–2007 metais (Vilniaus savivaldybės Miesto plėtros departamento duomenimis)

Spatial distributions of transformations in the most recent period have generally quite different character from those analysed earlier (Fig. 4). Much faster changes appear on the edges of the city, but not in its centre. Constructions of individual houses first of all in the previous Soviet collective garden areas, which were primarily designed for agricultural but not for residential needs are the most important factor for such trends.

Though the intensity of new constructions is quite big during last decade, most of them were taking place inside old Soviet or pre-Soviet neighbourhoods instead of entirely new areas on the edge of the city. This used to happen mostly because of preferences of developers of real estate, who try to reduce the cost of new construction, which depends very much on the costs of creation of communication systems. Entirely new areas were built up only in some specific cases (for example in former military areas, Soviet collective garden areas, edges of the city, right bank of the river, which was cleared at the end of Soviet period....).



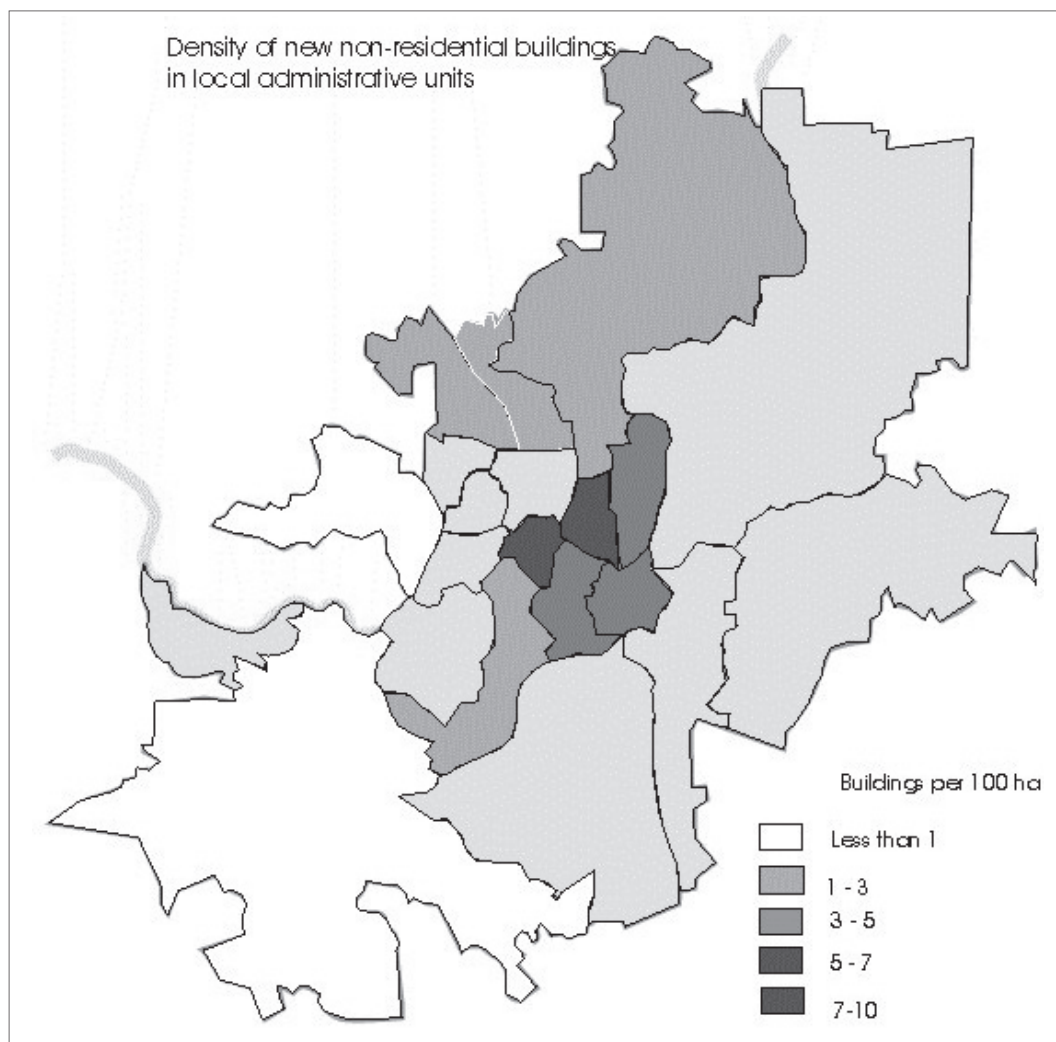
**Fig. 4.** Density of permissions for construction of new residential buildings (according to the data of Department of City Development of Vilnius municipality)

**4 pav.** Leidimų naujų gyvenamųjų namų statybai skaičius (Vilniaus savivaldybės Miesto plėtros departamento duomenimis)

Developments of non residential buildings are taking place in the central parts of the city (fig. 5). This is quite normal, having in mind, that most active development occurs in the sphere of services and administration sectors.

Analysing the general situation in the city, it is quite clear, that most stable parts are mono-functional Soviet neighbourhoods outside the main transport corridors and southern part of the city, which have not lost its industrial specialisation (industrial areas in the centre

were transformed into service sector areas quite fast after restoration of independence of the country). The old Soviet many-storey building areas became “sleeping” zones in many senses.



**Fig. 5.** Density of permissions for construction of new non-residential buildings (according to the data of Department of City Development of Vilnius municipality)

**5 pav.** *Leidimų statyti negyvenamosios paskirties pastatus skaičius (Vilniaus savivaldybės Miesto plėtros departamento duomenimis)*

The role of managers of the city was discussed in the works of R. Pahl and D. Harvey almost half a century ago (Pahl, 1970, Harvey, 1969). These factors of urban development are very easily noticeable in Vilnius during the last decade or so. Their impact on the changes of city structure was quite noticeable, though the driving force was a huge demand for new spaces. In some cases the authorities of the city successfully operated as a facilitator of new developments but mostly they operate as a filter preventing new developments in green spaces or areas of public importance. However the pressure from real estate developers was very big and in some cases this filter was not successful. New residential developments appear in various parts of the city but public infrastructure was not adapted to serving the new residents. Authorities were not able to plan new residential neighbourhoods in suburban areas and Vilnius was surrounded by the belts of detach houses of absolutely different style and size, without proper infrastructure (central water supplying system or sewerage, without shopping centres or schools) (Fig.6.).





**Fig. 6.** Chaotic suburbanisation in Vilnius city  
**6 pav.** *Chaotiškas Vilniaus priemiesčių užstatymas*

Another case illustrating the negative impact of managerial structures on the space of the city is related to the activity of investors and banking sector on the development of the city. Loaning policy, which has come to the common practise, was quite interesting. Private persons were able to receive a loan if they were able to pay 1/3 of the price of the flat by themselves but in case of a new house this amount was reduced till 5 % notwithstanding the quality of a house. Very rarely young families were able to find 1/3 of a price of a flat especially when differences of prices of new and old houses were quite small. The result was appearance of new relatively cheap post-Soviet but “Soviet type” neighbourhoods in the outskirts of the city (fig. 7).



**Fig. 7.** New dense residential neighbourhoods on the edge of the post-soviet city  
**7 pav.** *Nauji tankiai užstatyti gyvenamieji rajonai posovietiniame mieste*

The density of buildings in these newly developed areas is much higher than in the Soviet blockhouse neighbourhoods notwithstanding that usually one could expect opposite trend on the edge of the city. These developments are not a result of preferences of buyers or residents. On the contrary, this is an outcome of policy of banks, real estate investors and poor urban planning. One could expect that the future of such neighbourhoods is very dark because big density, poor quality of buildings and environment and inconvenient location together will cause processes similar to these of ghetto formation, social exclusion etc. Rapid decline in real estate market will stimulate these processes cause the price will fall much faster here. There is a great possibility that present residents will find out that there is no sense to pay the contributions for the loan cause actual price of a flat is much smaller than the remaining loan. This would make prices drop even faster and abandoning of flats could cause very negative consequences for the whole neighbourhood.

## **Conclusions**

Many different factors influence changes of urban structure of Vilnius, though most of them are similar to those taking place in other post-Soviet capital cities. However differences in the inherited inner urban structure of cities and urban systems of countries result in different spatial outcomes in every particular place. Seeking to understand processes of urban changes in one place inevitably one must analyse the local context in which processes are taking place.

The fastest development is evident in sectors, which experienced most pronounced transformations. These are the sectors, where differences between the Soviet command society and Western democratic capitalist society were the highest – private housing and spread of service economy were most important sectors in this sense. A differentiating society, which creates differentiated demand for housing facilities, was another driving force of changes. Even without changes of the number of residents new developments would have been inevitable because the Soviet heritage offered very low variety of housing estates.

New developments in Vilnius change the space of the city in many places. It appears inside, instead of near old structures, sometimes making positive sometimes-negative impacts. Sometimes they improve environment but more often cause more or less serious conflicts. New housing developments appear in the old environs designed for different number of population. The old infrastructure cannot support the new needs.

The city becomes much more fragmented like all society and social tensions inside the city attain a territorial dimension. It seems that city governmental and planning structures can hardly effectively regulate the changes inside the city and various private or group interests here play the most important role. The impact from different levels of authorities on the development of the city is very much one-sided. Mostly they work just as a filter forbidding development in some spaces. They seldom work as facilitator in some specific development cases but they hardly ever work as planners. Personal or group interests and fast profit expectations prevail in many cases.

Though the driving forces of changes of urban space are mostly related to increasing varying and fragmented demand for real estate, the actual spatial outcomes are more related to actions of “managers” of the city than to preferences of residents. In most cases, the interests of investors have made stronger impacts than the actions of city planners.

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## **Posovietinės miesto erdvės transformacijos Vilniuje**

### **Santrauka**

Straipsnyje aptariamos pagrindinės miesto erdvės transformacijos, vykusios Vilniaus mieste po šalies nepriklausomybės atkūrimo. Autorius siekė atskleisti mieste vykstančius pokyčius platesniame šalies vystymosi kontekste bei juos susieti su istoriškai paveldėta miesto struktūra, kuri yra naujų reiškinių pagrindas. Esminis miesto transformacijų motyvas – sąlyginai tolygios visuomenės tolygus sovietinio miesto virsmas suskaidytos kapitalistinės visuomenės fragmentuotu miestu. Iš sovietmečio paveldėta miesto ir visos valstybės urbanistinė struktūra darė didelę įtaką Vilniaus miesto vystymuisi vėlesniais laikais ir būtent šiame kontekste išryškėja unikalūs šiam miestui transformavimosi tempai ir jų erdvinės charakteristikos. Akivaizdu, kad miesto transformacijas lemia ne tik buvusi struktūra, bet ir ją keičiančios jėgos. Čia svarbiausi du motyvai – žmonių ir jų grupių interesai bei įvairūs juos ribojantys veiksniai. Taigi darosi akivaizdu, kad pagrindiniai miesto kaitos veiksniai yra besikeičiantys gyventojų bei verslininkų norai ir galimybės, iš vienos pusės, bei tuos norus ir galimybes ribojančios struktūros – miesto planuotojai ir tvarkytojai, iš kitos. Pagrindiniai kaitos varikliai – gyventojų skaičiaus ir reikmių kaita, keičianti gyvenamųjų rajonų sklaidą, iš vienos pusės, ir besikeičianti miesto ūkio struktūra, iš kitos. Pastaroji keičia ne gyvenamosios, ūkinės paskirties teritorijas, kur svarbiausias virsmas – mažėjantis pramonės ir augantis paslaugų sektoriaus vaidmuo miesto ūkyje. Šių procesų pasekmė – gyvenamosios paskirties pastatų plėtra įvairiose miesto vietose ir industrinių erdvių transformavimasis į komercines erdves bei pastarųjų plėtra naujose vietose. Kadangi suskaidytos visuomenės reikmės ir galimybės labai skiriasi, naujosios erdvės taip pat yra labai skirtingos tiek aplinkos kokybės, tiek gyventojų struktūros požiūriu. Nors akivaizdu, kad pagrindinis šių procesų kaitos variklis buvo auganti ir įvairuojanti nekilnojamojo turto paklausa, faktinės procesų pasekmės miesto erdvei dažnai lėmė miesto „menedžerių“ veiksmai, tarp kurių didžiausią įtaką turėjo ne miesto erdvės planuotojų, bet investuotojų preferencijos.