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Hannah Corlett

My Kind of Town: Kaunas is a place of harmonious contradiction



Words
Hannah Corlett

Recently returned from Kaunas, I am newly converted to its by no means 'textbook' appeal. Not quite picture-postcard and falling short of bohemian, Kaunas is like its people: both understated and richly eclectic. You can feel its history in the air, the fabric and

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the cracks. Yet it is not melancholic, it's a celebration.

As Lithuania's second-largest city, Kaunas played a key role in developing the country's statehood in the 1920s and 30s, when local red rebels took Vilnius. It continued as the de facto capital until 1940. In those decades Kaunas morphed from a Russian periphery into a refined European city, with the New Town's dominating rationalist geometry set within a geographic bowl earning the nickname 'Little Brussels'.

After the war, the political thaw under Khrushchev and the repudiation of the cult of personality redefined the city's architectural direction. Historic imitation was discarded in favour of standardised design, whose rigidity eliminated aesthetics. During the Soviet era Kaunas expanded dramatically, with bleak conglomerates of anonymous apartment blocks that still stare down upon the city centre from the headland. These reflected a utilitarian approach to humanity, and embodied the aesthetics of poverty. But while the five decades of Soviet occupation altered Kaunas significantly, the inter-war core was not fundamentally altered.

“Historic imitation was discarded in favour of standardised design, whose rigidity eliminated aesthetics.”

Kaunas is a place of harmonious contradiction. It feels bygone and contemporary, 'Scandi' and Eastern, familiar and alien. Period architectures exist hand-in-hand. The Modernist architecture that only slightly dominates is not afraid of ornament or colour. The New Town, where my attentions



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concentrated, is a collage of building types in every respect: different periods, massing, materiality, construction and function (both between and within buildings) exist with no clear zoning pattern in hugely oversized Russian city blocks.

The heavily gridded plan plays between two normally opposed conditions: the massing of buildings to shape urban space, and individual sculptural buildings understood 'in the round'. Most buildings are separated from their neighbours, but only just, creating narrow lanes to the inner blocks behind. Taken together the buildings successfully hold the frontage alignments so the spatial forms of streets remain distinct. At the same time, the detachment of each building permits it its own distinct architectural voice, creating a coherent sculptural object.

Differing heights also allow views into the otherworldly inner blocks and, at the edge, up through to the hillside. There is a beautiful moment on Putvinskio Street where the crystalline simplicity of Christ's Resurrection Church can be viewed past a derelict and graffitied timber cottage.

“The Modernist architecture that only slightly dominates is not afraid of ornament or colour.”

Another memorable occasion exists at the corner of the square containing St Michael the Archangel church, where a single-storey pink bungalow sniffs the air of Orthodoxy. The bungalow and the corner of the opposite block, chamfered by Žaliakalnis Hill and lined with wooden houses like a surgical reveal of the interior, talk of the vivid contrast between interior and exterior in many of

these blocks. Inside, both chickens and children are raised in a primitive green wilderness.

Kaunas is the European Capital of Culture 2022 and was recently nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. I was there to lead a workshop that attempted to strike a balance between the preservation of the city's historic character and its need for sustainable development. The current rejection of the centre is manifest in the site of the workshop: the abandoned Dairy Centre – still owned by Kaunas University of Technology which has moved onto greener pastures, spurning the economics of refurbishment. But although Kaunas is experiencing a declining population, unlike many other European cities it can meet the needs of future generations as discussed in the UN's New Urban Agenda. And while the centre's most evident occupant is currently the car, with so many empty blocks and vacant buildings supported by a rich tapestry of styles and massing, the city is fertile ground for architectural intervention.



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