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# Modernism and the Phenomenon of Kaunas

Huriye Armağan Doğan\*, Paulius Tautvydas Laurinaitis

*Kaunas University of Technology, Kaunas, Lithuania*

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## Keywords

Heritage,  
Kaunas, language,  
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## Abstract

The representation of modernism in architecture was affected by various determinants which were related to the technical, economic, and social circumstances of the period. The decade when modernism began to be seen in the architectural sphere was marked with aims to create new building forms associated with the ambition for a more socially balanced and egalitarian form of society in which the ideals of equal rights and liberation would be realised. However, establishing equality-based communities, adjusting the housing problem, and creating new universal values dismissed the connection with the tradition. This paper aims to analyse the dialect of modernism in Kaunas, Lithuania, and its characteristics by investigating its various physical nuances and invisible social context, which makes it distinguished when compared with the modernist language in the same period. Furthermore, it focuses on the experimental architectural language and the urban planning trends of the interwar period Kaunas through analysis of values in local architecture and urban planning levels to conduct its integrity.

## Introduction

As architectural theorist Nikos Salingaros states that along with the many other changes that occurred with industrialisation, traditional form languages were lost worldwide in the architecture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [1]. Developments in construction technology, engineering and building materials such as steel, iron and plate glass culminated in a functional style, which changed the way people perceive the design. Therefore, the form languages that was used in the previous approaches were subjected to a transformation. However, one of the most important motivations of avant-garde architects of the 1920s was the ambition to establish modern architecture for modern industrialised society. Furthermore, the aim of modernism in architecture was not about establishing an architectural style but more about revitalising the influences in the design itself, and as a result, developing a language that can be implemented universally. However, the most significant intention of modernism was to change society by a social reform that would determine different rules and a lifestyle by offering a secular and progressive approach and a new language both for the society and the architecture.

When buildings began to arise in the cities with the language of modernism, they were not readily accepted or approved right away among the architects and the architectural critics. The buildings were blamed for being austere and identical to each other. Furthermore, the structures and the façades of the time were criticised brutally. According to architect, critic and historian Kenneth Frampton, the cartoon published in 1911 suggested that the façade of Adolf Loos's building in Vienna was not that different from a manhole cover on the street [2]. Furthermore, according to historian Robert Weldon Whalen, the same building, which is an example of Viennese modernism, was accused by the Austrian emperor to have no eyebrows due to not carrying ornamentation on top of its windows, which was common at the time [3]. However, the criticism of the artefacts of the modernist architecture did not only occur when they were first built, it continued until the present day.

According to architect Miriam Gusevich, modernism was based on the elimination from the illiterate society of the bourgeois culture that applied pretentious ornament and kitsch to architecture, which took the form of eclecticism [4]. Therefore, the usage of ornaments from different architectural periods in an eclectic approach motivated the

\* Corresponding author. E-mail address: [armagan.dogan@gmail.com](mailto:armagan.dogan@gmail.com)

architects of the time to work towards a new architectural language. Creating a universal language required changing of the existing language of architecture that had been in use for centuries. As architectural historian Bruno Zevi states, the classical language in architecture contained various invariables such as symmetry, perspective, and proportion [5]. However, the language of modernism was based on variables, and even if the function was the same, it was possible to express the characteristics of the same function in various ways. Therefore, the new architectural language established in this period was formed by creating an inventory that helped to produce free mass, free surface, and free plans. However, the new approach of expression changed all the inheritably tried-and-true solutions which were proven previously.

As German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas states, modernity and modernism assumed that the present is a new era, therefore, it is not a continuation of the past, and it grows out of the rupture with the past and traditions [6]. However, when modernism is analysed in architecture regarding different cultures, climates, and geographies, it is possible to state that even modernism, in some places, developed and improved individual forms to their ability and cultural memories that they have inherited from earlier generations [7]. Therefore, society can create a direct impact on the expression of architecture and how it represents itself. Nevertheless, it might not always be easy to detect this impact. As a consequence, due to the traditions that arose regarding the vernacular architecture and point of view of the ideal beauty, even the expression of the same architectural style can differ related to the language architects used, which is connected to the traditional patterns and the conditions of the environment. Therefore, the regional, traditional and national influences in the formation of architecture can be expected in different cultures, including in modernism.

Within the 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural theory, various approaches were shaped due to the distinction between polar opposite ends, such as traditional versus modernity and national versus international styles. According to architects Robert Venturi and Denis Scott Brown, the main aim of modern architects was actually demolishing the historical buildings so that they could replace them with modern ones; therefore, they can adapt them to the rapid technological development [8]. On the other hand, architect Didem Çaylan states that the industrial culture, which is the result of modernism, established an urge to preserve the cultural and local diversities that manifested itself either as a reconsideration of the national, traditional and historical modes of a building or as a critical architectural language formed by sensitivity towards the physical, social and environmental factors of a specific locality at the beginning of the modernist era [9]. When the approach of the early modernist and architectural critics of the time, including Le Corbusier, Sigfried Giedion, and Lewis Mumford, are

analysed, it is possible to state that they introduced sensitivity to local and regional context as a particular characteristic of any successful modernist practice. In its heart, modernism was foremost an endeavour to fix the problems caused by massive urbanisation and the outcome of industrialisation. However, it generated alienation for people from their traditional communities as well as their traditional lifestyles, which created a reflection in the sense of identity. The era between two world wars was characterised by the struggle between the camps of radical modernist ideals that did not reflect the local identity, and those whose ideas were modern in many approaches, but tried to find new interpretations of traditional forms of architecture and communities and even integrate some classical tendencies. Therefore, it is possible to trace the regional and national influences in different interpretations of modern phenomena in local urban planning and architectural styles.

In that regard, this paper investigates the evaluation of the dialect of Kaunas modernism in the interwar era from various aspects and focuses of the experimental architectural language and urban planning trends of the period. Furthermore, it emphasises the physical nuances and the invisible social context of modernism in local architecture and urban planning. The paper begins with the definition of modernism and modernity in both social and architectural contexts. This is followed by the definition of the characteristics of modernism in the architectural language of Kaunas and an explanation of the roots of the phenomena of Kaunas modernism and its interpretation.

## I. Modernism and its Reflection in Architecture

Modernism is a reflective and intellectual movement that had a substantial impact on both social and physical life, including art, politics, and philosophy. Modernism is defined as a radical break with the past, which was influenced by the research that was simultaneously taking place worldwide on new forms and expressions, particularly in the years following WWI [10]. Furthermore, according to historian Steven Mansbach, the fixation on modernism was on rationality and economy as a counteracting agent towards spiritually and materially miserable conditions after the war [11]. The terms modernism and modernity mostly describe the changes that establish the clash between modern and traditional values by newly constructed worldviews. The new human form in the society contained artists and philosophers who were rebellious and against the long-accepted doctrines by their strong ambition. Furthermore, in this era, society experienced an advanced human form which was active and exhilarant towards new interventions and changes

while developing the social and physical life by the impact of science and technology.

However, as political scientist and philosopher Stephen Bronner states, in the era of modernism, the process of social and political changes did not involve any practical program, which led to merely conceiving a new community where individualism would develop by itself [12]. Thus, the era of modernism is frequently criticised for being a utopian project rather than being rational; furthermore, it was blamed for shattering the existing values. According to Habermas, *“modernity was a project which included the efforts of developing objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to the inner logic. Furthermore, it was also intended to release the objective potentials of each of these domains from the esoteric forms”* [13]. However, the approach in this period also tried to establish a universal and rational attitude in people’s social lives.

As architects Han Vandevyvere and Hilde Heynen state, focusing on modernism’s belief merely in science and technology can disregard the other aspects and its legacy [14]. Modernism was not just a movement influenced by science’s changes by a utopic aim but also a social movement and program. According to art historians Christoph Mohr and Michael Müller, Ernest May believed that rationality in the modernist sense referred to the idea of a rationally organised future that involves a conflict-free society of people with equal rights and common interests [15]. Therefore, while constructing the new way of the world, it had a focal point on constructing a different society that emphasised the well-being of every individual. However, urbanisation and industrialisation, which accompany modernism, generated alienation for people from their traditional communities as well as their traditional lifestyles and their environments.

According to architectural historian Sarah Williams Goldhagen, when people define modernism in architecture, the most common keywords recur to them are flat roofs, transparency, reinforced concrete, and lots of glass: glass windows, glass doors and glass partitions [16]. However, most of these elements were not used in the vernacular or traditional architectural forms. Therefore, the changes in the built environment also started to affect the sense of place attachment for the people, since in ordinary circumstances people tend to reflect their identity to the places they inhabit for the feeling of continuity and familiarity.

When modernism started to be seen in the architectural sphere, the approach towards it and the structures which do not contain ornaments were dubious by the critics as it was by the society itself. This sentiment is also true today among the public. As architect Kim Smith states in the documentary *“Coast Modern”*, ninety percent of people do not want to live in or relate themselves to a modernist house [17]. One of the reasons for that can be explained by

the fact that people cannot establish the bond they need with modernist buildings or with the environment these buildings are in. Nevertheless, they can be considered as more human-friendly and more closely connected with the outside by design. While traditional houses are more akin to shelters that separate people from the outer world, the primary focus in these structures was expanding the inner space to the outside by large apertures. The aim of the architects was to create a feeling of spacious design for the users. However, this characteristic only establishes an impact on the user of that building, but not on the people who are inhabiting that environment.

However, in the development process of modernism in architecture, it was not expressed or understood the same way all around the world due to traditional roots and continued usage of older trends that were mixed in. As Anne Bony states, modern architecture had been predominantly national initially, but in the late 1920s, primarily with the effect of International Congresses of Modern Architects (CIAM), it became international [18]. However, even though all the different variations of modernism had one common aim, which was establishing an architecture that is functional and away from eclecticism, there were still diverse approaches after this date. Therefore, it might be possible to state that modernism in architecture had multiple characters with their own particular approaches in two main divisions. The first one is modernism which was born as the social reform and aimed at all people universally, and the second one is the dialects that were developed from specific circumstances of the conditions that reflected an existing society. However, the first approach threatened the second approach and the values it represents by the claims of universality and standardisation. As architect and historian Alan Colquhoun states, different approaches are represented by different terms generated from the common claims to restore the core or essence ruined by the increasingly abstract and homogenised world of the post-industrial society aiming to discover how difference and variety could inhabit modern architecture [19]. However, there was also a firm belief that modern architecture is influenced by universalism and rationalism, which is involved in the first approach, totally ignored traditions. Therefore, artefacts that were the product of the first approach were not directly related to the region or the environment they were situated in.

One of the consequences of not significantly being connected with the existing built environment might result in not creating much of an impact on people’s lives. Therefore, the buildings designed by modernist criteria might not easily occupy a place in the collective memory of societies. However, this can also be the result of the fact that the extant buildings do not contain age-value, as modernism only started to be seen in architecture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But, on the other hand, it might be inaccurate to generalise its perception, especially in its



different dialects, and ignore the regional and national influences in its formation. Therefore, it is viable to expect variations due to societal differences and local traditions. In that regard, Kaunas modernism is one of these variations, which is invaluable to analyse due to its distinctive characteristics.

## II. Characteristics of the Phenomenon of Kaunas Modernism

The phenomenon of Kaunas modernism, which created its own language both in architecture and urban planning, started to be seen in the interwar period. At its nature, it was an experimental attempt for the provisional capital of Lithuania, the dialect of which was established and defined by the inherent optimism and civic initiative. Like most similar phenomena in post-imperial Europe, the Lithuanian national revival movement employed a wide variety of nation-building. Likewise, it continued on a larger scale when the goal of creating an independent nation-state was reached in 1918. As one of the most visible material manifestations of culture, architecture was not forgotten. From the early days on, like in many other European countries, the question of the so-called national style was raised. The definition of national style in modernism involved the usage of traditional patterns and forms, including traditional plan schemas, while trying to implement the new ideals to the design in various examples [20]. However, in the case of Kaunas, the subject of employing the traditional elements was problematic to start with, as the historical groundings of the national narrative largely ignored the professional architectural traditions of the period of Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, with the exception of Vilnius baroque. Apart from that, the idealised forms came from both Lithuanian ethnographic tradition and the heavily romanticised medieval period of Lithuanian Duchy [21]. To various degrees of success, experiments in national style were carried out throughout the 1920s. However, the number of these buildings was small, and their forms were criticised as either too eclectic or oddly trying to appropriate the forms of traditional wooden architecture.

Surviving examples of this peculiar episode in Lithuania are almost entirely concentrated in Kaunas, which became the provisional capital in 1919. The combination of circumstances – mainly, that the city was not ready for its new role, the difficult institutional and economical situation of the new state and the looming lack of architectural specialists meant that the grounds for the birth of national style were not very suitable. Most of the new construction in Kaunas were architecturally utilitarian wooden buildings that were only built for the ever-increasing demand for living space. The brick-

constructed buildings were mainly built in the city centre and morphologically continued the tsarist-era practices.

By the beginning of the 1930s, the situation improved in most fields and a significant increase of architecturally valuable buildings appeared in the cityscape. By this time, though, the quest for the national style was almost extinguished due to an emerging new generation of architects who graduated in various parts of Western Europe. These architects started to bring the new forms of modernism and other tendencies from across the borders, furthermore, some of the older generation architects gave in to the new trends too. As a result, new architectural tendencies heavily borrowed from the phenomena like New Objectivity or Italian Rationalism, since a significant share of most successful architects of the new generation were either alumni of German or Italian schools or were greatly influenced by the trends of those spheres.

The architectural forms associated with “modern” became a fashionable statement not only on behalf of the architects but also of their clients. While the two functional types diverged in the stylistic approaches, it became true for both individual housing and administrative buildings. When it is analysed from the perspective of functionalism, most of these buildings from the 1930s partly can be called superficial representations of the contemporary modernist ideals in the usage of some of the characteristic architectural elements that has been associated with the modern and rational, such as the bent corners, simplified shapes, strip and/or corner windows and light façades. However, according to the available means of budget and materials, strip and especially corner windows more often were imitated by a visual representation of the actual detail, simulated by the usage of differentiated colours in the context of the façade (Fig. 1).

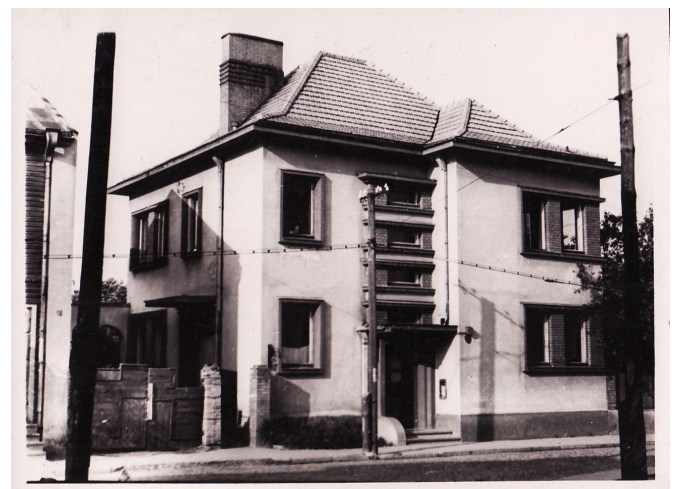


Fig. 1. House in Žaliakalnis district. Archive of the Institute of Architecture and Construction of Kaunas University of Technology [KTU ASI archive, photograph by Stanislovas Lukošius].

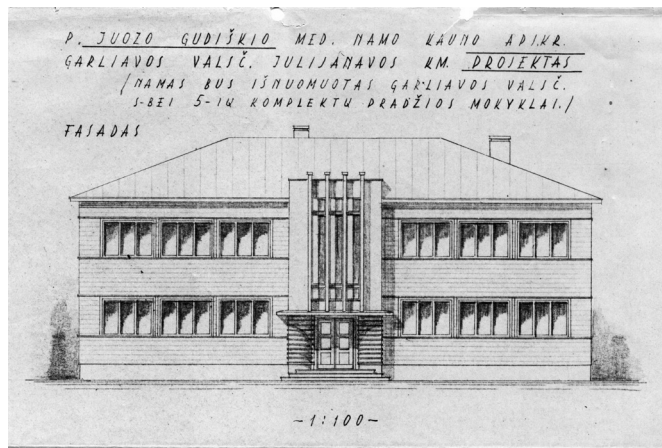


Fig. 2. Wooden primary school in the outskirts of Kaunas [blueprints from Kaunas Regional State Archives].

Furthermore, usage of these elements became so abundant that it was used in buildings that would not be otherwise considered modernist, such as in the wooden schools in the peripheral regions of the city (Fig. 2), that were lacking contemporary amenities.

Most of the buildings considered as examples of Kaunas modernism were built increasingly rational in their inner layouts and perspectives and hygienic standards but were adapted for the local conditions. It is worth emphasising that the owners of higher economic class first employed modernist forms in private constructions, and while adapting new types of floor plans, the most splendid examples of apartment buildings also had elements that were used from the 19th century onwards, such as the separate stairwells for servants (Fig. 3), which is not one of the characteristics of the modernist era.

Regarding urban planning, it is worth mentioning that districts in Kaunas at the time were morphologically divided into closed and open block types, which were common at this period. A large part of the planning in the already existing parts of the city contained the closed blocks, which were constructed organically into the existing street layouts. The open block districts were reserved for detached housing and often had peculiarities owed to the ongoing housing crisis. The ever-increasing population of provisional capital resulted in a lack of apartments and skyrocketing rent prices. This has manifested physically in these residential neighbourhoods through a fact that prevailing types of detached housing were designed to have more than one apartment, and this was often true even in upper-class family villas usually associated with single family use (Fig. 4).

Free-standing individual housing constituted a large part of the newly built housing stock of the time in Kaunas and had considerable variation in volume and architectural style (Fig. 5). The emphasis on individual housing that is seen in official planning documents reflected the ongoing trends that can be detected in the significant part of mainland Europe that derives from the evolution of garden city ideals. At the time, ideological outgrowths of the garden city concept were spreading in Europe, which included romanticised views of semi-rural settlements on the fringe of the cities. In Lithuanian case the heavy emphasis on developing lower-density neighbourhoods came through a big German influence on local urban planning. However, it should be noted that the garden city and following ideals that were developed in Western Europe as means of departing from the problems of the unsanitary and overcrowded industrial city had a peculiar overtone in the case of Lithuania. As the industrial development

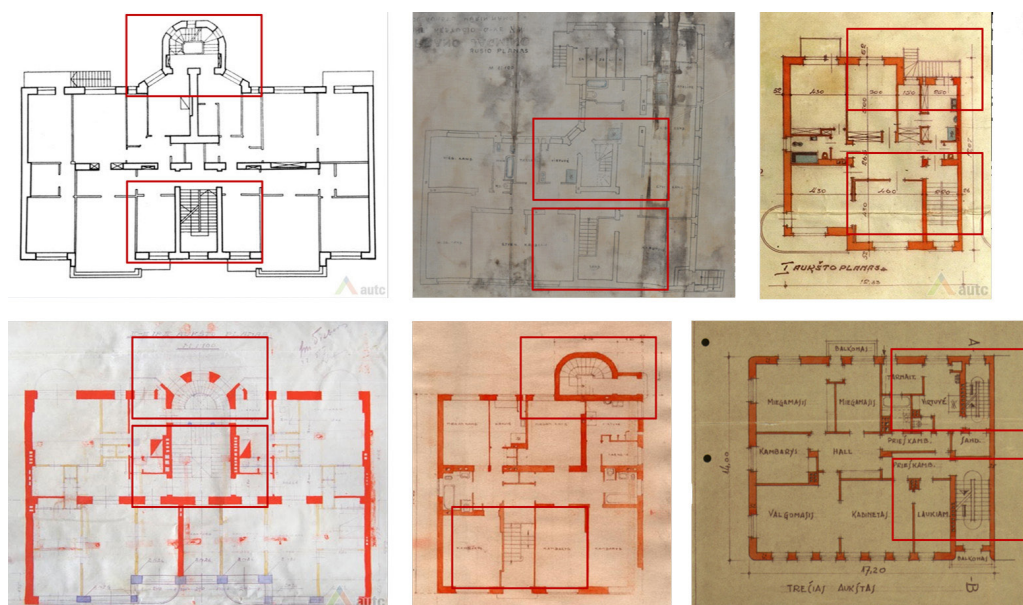


Fig. 3. Apartment houses containing two stairwells [blueprints from Kaunas Regional State Archives].





Fig. 4. House in Žaliakalnis district [KTU ASI archive, photograph by S. Lukošius].

was low and large cities did not exist, the pursuit of low density and emphasized natural context was rather seen as a continuation of then-perceived agricultural character of the state [22].

In the late 1930s, codification towards the maximal height of buildings was regulated and it became even more strict. Buildings of five stories were allowed only in certain parts of the city centre, meanwhile every project with greater height needed to acquire a special permit. This late development in height restrictions did not leave a significant imprint on the cityscape not only because of its late adoption, but because such structures (higher than 5 stories) were already a rare phenomenon. Thus, the new regulations rather codified already existing natural development. Contrary could be seen in another codification from the early part of the same decade: the city council adopted requirement for some parts of the central



Fig. 5. Individual house in Žaliakalnis district [KTU ASI archive, photograph by S. Lukošius].

districts to have new buildings built only with the ceramic tile roofs [23]. While it was one of the traditional materials used in the city, it was rarely used at the time because of the higher prices associated with it. Thus, the regulation was put in place to enforce this kind of construction both on the grounds of fire safety and aesthetics. While this regulation was important in the formation of typical 1930s building look, often it was not enforced strictly and when the owners' financial means did not allow the use of ceramic tiling, the red paint coated tin roofings were allowed to be used. It is worth to note that this requirement, in turn, influenced not only colour (and material, when it was available) of roofs that were most critical to the skyline, but also, indirectly, codified the roof forms. Flat roofs, which are often associated with more radical forms of modernism, were not popular in Kaunas due to their unacceptability for the local climate conditions. However, some of the examples of architecture of the time featured imitated flat roofs, in a form where the shallowly sloped roof is hidden behind (Fig. 6).

While individual private housing was more prone to architectural experiments, representative buildings of various official institutions maintained stronger classical influences, sometimes balancing on between stripped classicism and modernist forms. They also sometimes still carried stylised national elements, especially in interiors – this was especially true towards the second half of the 1930s, which coincided with the growing power of nationalist-oriented main political power at the time. A constant that usually defined the distinction between residential and representational architecture throughout the decade was established by the emphasised verticality in the latter (Fig. 7).

On the other hand, both individual and apartment houses and more utilitarian public buildings, such as



Fig. 6. Imitated flat roofed house in Žaliakalnis district [KTU ASI archive, photograph by S. Lukošius].



Fig. 7. Building of National Savings Bank [KTU ASI archive, photograph by S. Lukošius].

schools, in most cases were strongly dominated by horizontal elements (Fig. 8). With some exceptions, these latter buildings also rarely used the universalist, stripped-down ideals as envisioned by CIAM, but can be more attributed to parallel processes of more traditionalist-grounded modernist strains throughout the 1930s, that was, arguably, even more influential back then; those that used the concept of modernity as a tool of technological progress but strayed away from the all-encompassing internationalisation of architecture. As the 1930s progressed, modernist influenced style, the so-called Kaunas modernism became de facto national style in Lithuania.

Even though Kaunas modernism can be recalled as superficial in some ways, it nevertheless used the modernist approaches through which the provisional capital of the time was developing. Furthermore, it managed to establish



Fig. 8. Apartment buildings in Kaunas city centre [KTU ASI archive, photograph by J. Skeivys].

its own language as a phenomenon, which affected the people's perception when it first occurred, and in the city's contemporary evaluation.

## Discussion and Conclusions

When modernism is examined in various cultures and geographies, it is possible to identify nuances in their expressions concerning the different conditions. These conditions can be shaped by the political status of the time, as well as by the impact of society. For example, suppose the modernism which started to be seen in Kaunas during the period of its status of provisional capital is analysed. In that case, it is possible to state that the architecture and the functions which were given to the buildings were the direct outcome of the society and their needs in most of the cases. Furthermore, even though there were experimental designs, they were not firmly conflicting with the traditional understanding of housing or lifestyles for the people who lived in Kaunas. Therefore, these characteristics of its dialect give it the chance to be well received and used by society today, which makes it exceptional compared with various other languages of modernism.

The analysis of the architectural language in Kaunas suggests that the dialect of the modernism in Kaunas managed to develop an architectural expression in this era with characteristics of both sensitivity towards the region and the environment it is implemented in. Furthermore, it can be stated that the peculiarity of the modernism in Kaunas with all the implications of the reflection of the society managed to create an impact on their perception of it as a heritage object. Therefore, it is easier for society to evaluate these structures as valuable and at the same time connect with them. As a result, people who are currently living in Kaunas do not alienate themselves from this style which gives a unique character to the city. Although the phenomena of Kaunas had an experimental nature, it managed to balance the equality between tradition and modern lifestyle. In that regard, it is possible to state that the language that emerged in Lithuania's interwar period still has a reflection and a comprehensible interpretation for the people.

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**Huriye Armağan Doğan** (b. Turkey, 1983) received the degree of Bachelor of Architecture in 2008, the degree of Master of Restoration and Conservation of Cultural Heritage in 2011 and a PhD in History of Art and Architecture in 2020. She is currently a Junior Researcher with the Institute of Architecture and Construction of the Kaunas

University of Technology. Her research interests are adaptive reuse, preservation of cultural heritage, modern movement, early 20th-century architecture, cultural memory.



**Paulius Tautvydas Laurinaitis** (b. Lithuania, 1989) is a Junior Researcher with the Institute of Architecture and Construction of Kaunas University of Technology. His research includes fields of twentieth-century architectural and urban history and theory.

#### Contact Data

**Huriye Armağan Doğan**

E-mail: [armagan.dogan@gmail.com](mailto:armagan.dogan@gmail.com)

**Paulius Tautvydas Laurinaitis**

E-mail: [p.t.laurinaitis@gmail.com](mailto:p.t.laurinaitis@gmail.com)