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Renegotiating Urban Memories in the European Periphery: the Case of Kaunas as a Laboratory

Abstract

Three decades have now passed since Lithuania declared its independence from the Soviet Union. Following the phenomenon of progressive distancing from the Communist past, the effects of post-Soviet transition are nowadays visible in the changing urban landscape understood as the bearer of memory. The city of Kaunas (Lithuania) is used here as case study as it looks forward to move away from the “temporary capital” label and play the role of European capital of culture in 2022. The main objective of this study is to explore how Kaunas’ urban transformation affects the collective memory of the local population and in turn shapes the cultural identity of the city. Based on original survey data, this study finds that even though multiple cultural identities can coexist, there is evidence to believe that the local youth is still divided about the city’s historical legacy of the 20th century. Finally, this article marks a step in the direction of integrating the study of urban areas into the discussion about historical memory and conflicting interpretations of the past.

Keywords: architecture, collective memory, cultural identity, heritage, urban space.

Introduction

In the last decade, a considerable number of urban centers in the Eastern European periphery have sought to distance themselves from pure replication of western models of remembrance in the attempt to break with the overly-saturated “catch-up with the West” narrative. In the realm of urban and marketing studies, city branding strategies have been adopted *en masse* within urban landscapes undergoing rapid transformations in order to achieve wider recognition. Inevitably, the question of how to best portray the city’s identity arises, turning cultural and historical heritage into crucial assets that should be exploited for the purpose of urban development.

In parallel with the upsurge of debates about the necessity to rethink heritage narratives in multicultural cities, the urban space intended as the bearer and displayer of collective (and often conflicting) memories is confronted with a twofold dilemma, namely how to reconfigure the very notion of heritage and how to include it into projects of urban regeneration. The struggle for renegotiation of historical memories is particularly evident in cities which hosted a crossway of cultures and histories cohabiting in the same place before going through Soviet dictatorship: besides the revealing semiotic practices from where it is possible to find out about the political nature of urban heritage, e.g. renaming of squares and streets, the toppling of statues and the

progressive distancing from places which can recall mournful chapters connected to the Communist era, the politics of cultural heritage and urban regeneration is functional to pursue nation-building projects.

Contemporary works of history focused much of the attention on Lithuania's capital Vilnius, narrated as a site of struggle between different cultural influences which shaped the urban memory of the city during the territorial displacements that it experienced¹. The same thing cannot be said of Kaunas, the former capital of independent Lithuania during the Interwar period (1919–1939): despite its more homogeneous urban landscape, it can offer many particular interpretations of its past, present, and future. If, from one hand, Kaunas is looking directly towards European integration, on the other it is dealing with a heavy past which often clashes with the new modern path it has undertaken. Exploring the way in which Kaunas urban transformations influence urban memories, this paper asks the following questions: to what extent is the urban landscape able to shape collective memory? Can diverse cultural identities coexist within the city? If so, do they participate or clash with urban syntaxes?

Theoretical framework

The collective memory of a social community and the urban space are closely intertwined: in Benjamin's studies of the topographic-spatial model of memory, he describes how traces of the past are visible in the urban space, where the present and past events are inscribed². According to the Italian architect and Pulitzer Prize Aldo Rossi, the architecture of urban artefacts represents the collective memory of citizens, which cannot be erased until new meanings are attached to it³. Because the urban landscape is generally subject to metamorphoses which alter functions and meanings of public spaces, cultural heritage becomes a paramount battlefield for collective memory⁴.

If we consider the act of preserving a site to be a statement of memory, then what the policies on heritage preservation are showing is that memorial practice is a field of overlapping interest to heritage and memory studies. However, the inescapable dualism of the tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage paved the way for discussions on dissonances⁵, thus problematizing the applicability of official definitions of cultural value to a comprehensive methodology⁶. Further complicating the picture is the thorny issue of how to scale cultural heritage into a common European framework in order to conceptualize the idea of "European significance" and promote a common European

¹ L. Briedis, *Vilnius: City of Strangers*, CEU Press 2009; C. Gibson, *History, Memory, and Urban Symbolic Geographies: Recent Contributions to the Historiography of Vilnius*, Review article, "Acta Slavica Iaponica" 2017, Vol. 38, Hokkaido University, pp. 145–152.

² W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band V. Das Passagen-Werk*, Frankfurt am Main 1982, p. 1046.

³ A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, Chicago 1982, pp. 130–131.

⁴ J. Lotman, B. Uspensky, G. Mihaychuk, *On the semiotic mechanism of culture*, "New Literary History" 1978, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 211–232.

⁵ J.E. Tunbridge, G.J. Ashworth, *Dissonant heritage. The management of the past as a resource in conflict*, Chichester 1996, p. 6.

⁶ V. Petruelis, *Conflicts of Heritage: Mapping Values of Immovable Cultural Heritage in Kaunas Downtown Area*, "Art History & Criticism" 2016, Vol. 12, Kaunas University of Technology, p. 21.

identity⁷. This aspect is especially important when referring to many cities in Central and Eastern Europe that went through major geopolitical and historical displacements which have marked the urban tissue. As a consequence, traumatic events in the physical/social environment can be at the origins of memory loss.

With the advent of the “spatialization of memory” turn (that is, the way in which the intangible is translated in cities and public spaces in general), the intersection between heritage and memory studies started to be explored, signaling a wide array of common grounds that are at the heart of contemporary political debates, such as the diffusion of transnational languages of memorialization and commemoration which contribute to the mythologization of historical narratives and selective retelling of collective memories⁸. It is undeniably true that urban studies scholarship has been saturated by empirical studies reusing already-existing theoretical concepts, first and foremost Nora’s notion of *lieux de mémoire*⁹; however, when it comes to research about the Baltic states, cities/towns other than capital urban centers tend to be slightly understudied. Yet, the way in which the urban landscape of a city evolves is the mirror of the current interpretations of the history of its nation. If these interpretations are conflicting, the city too will have many different faces.

Article relevance

The city of Kaunas, at the dawn of its preparations for transforming into the “European capital of culture” in 2022, can be taken as the perfect example of this. Examining the way in which the “Europeanization”, or “European globalization” is affecting Kaunas’ urban space is the most direct way to understand what this new identity will mean for Lithuania in a global context, especially taking into consideration its peculiar cultural position at the crossway of Europe. This essay attempts to unpack the dynamic relationship between the cultural identity of the city, expressed through its urban structure, and the collective memory shared by Kaunasiens. This analysis is based on original survey data (2021) and captures a screenshot of the local population’s individual perceptions of the city “in flux”. Against this background, I was particularly interested in testing the receptivity of youth to Kaunas urban historiography and the built environment-urban memory connection. Accordingly, my inquiry into Kaunas urban memory adds to the existing body of literature that focuses on the empirical study of the heritage-memory nexus. Moreover, it contributes to the nascent strand of academic research focused on the future of public spaces, heritage consumption and city-branding strategies. The research was expected to confirm or disprove the following hypothetical statements:

1. Kaunas urban space is responsible for shaping the collective memory of the city dwellers. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that individual subjectivities approach the city’s past in the same way.

⁷T. Lähdesmäki, S. Thomas, Y. Zhu, *Politics of Scale: New Directions in Critical Heritage Studies*, New York 2019, p. 39.

⁸D. Viejo-Rose, *Cultural heritage and memory: untangling the ties that bind*, “Culture & History Digital Journal” 2015, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 1–13.

⁹P. Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, 7 vols, Paris 1984–1992.

2. Architecture is a powerful transmission vehicle that acts as the bearer of collective memory within a city. Hence, the intersections of spatiality and temporality in the urban imaginary can result in the reorientation towards a certain cultural identity. In the case of Kaunas, the nation-building project which saw its materialization in the design of a new urban space represents the common element which influences today's cultural identity of the city.
3. Life experiences and shared traumas definitely shape our attitudes towards our surroundings. Bearing in mind that individual relationships with the city's past may differ, young generations (>30) will tend to have a less fragmented/conflicting approach toward Kaunas urban landscape than those who experienced Communist domination.
4. Although Kaunas Interwar architecture was awarded a European Heritage Label (EHL, the instrument at the heart of the EU cultural heritage policy), the idea of "European significance" that is taken as official measure for the evaluation of cultural heritage is generally misunderstood, thus associated with tangible distinctive elements rather than intangible concepts such as "unity", "democracy" and so on.

Research methods

To test the hypotheses outlined above, I used sociological survey structured according to Crinson's notion of urban memory¹⁰ and Petrulis' empirical study on conflicts of the heritage in Kaunas¹¹. The questionnaire consisted of a set of closed (yes/no/not sure) and semi-open questions, redacted both in English and Lithuanian, which targeted three main clusters (or categories): individual attitude towards the city's past, the cultural identity of the city, and finally the heritage-memory nexus. To facilitate the distribution and the collection of the results, I decided to work with Google Forms. Thus, this instrument suited just fine when using a snowball sampling method to recruit participants. Indeed, the respondents did not have to match any specific criteria but to live/have lived in Kaunas sufficiently enough to know the historical legacy of the city. The survey involved a total of 116 respondents, where 71 of them declared to have lived also elsewhere other than in Kaunas, both inside Lithuania and abroad. In order to connect with Kaunas local population, I mostly relied on already existing social media (Facebook) groups and personal contacts. Although the survey was initially intended to mirror the public opinion across multiple generations, those aged between 18–30 happened to be very receptive; therefore, they became the primary recipients of the study (table 1).

Table 1. Total number of respondents divided according to their age

Age	18–30	31–43	44–56	57–69
Total (No.)	95	7	9	5

¹⁰ M. Crinson, *Urban Memory — an Introduction*, [in:] "Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City", ed. M. Crinson, New York 2005, pp. xi-xx.

¹¹ V. Petrulis, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–30.

Research results

The first question focused on individual perceptions of Kaunas urban space and was intended to mirror what distinctive traits could best describe the urban identity of the city. Departing from recent findings about the subjective identity of Kaunas cityscape¹² and accounts of the urban landscape¹³, I selected recurring themes in order to provide some empirically-grounded options to the respondents. These are visible in the left column in figure 1; however, it was also possible to provide additional options as well as selecting multiple answers. The majority of respondents agreed on the heterogeneous character of the city, thus giving resonance to the symbiosis of spatiality and temporality in Kaunas urban imaginary. Such element finds a correspondence in Huyssen: *the strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias*¹⁴.

In the context of this first question, the adjective “heterogeneous” has a positive/neutral connotation that is easily understandable when compared to the “confusing” option, which was not a very popular pick together with “polyphonic” and freely-added keywords, such as “nostalgic”, “historical” and “green” (7 in total). Concerning the remaining options, i.e. “modern”, “inclusive” and “multicultural”, Kaunasians were generally inclined to choose one/more than one of those adjectives: on average, 50% of respondents selected at least one of them. Arguably, each one of these features is perceived differently, most probably influenced by individual experiences and the more or less vivid urban memories.

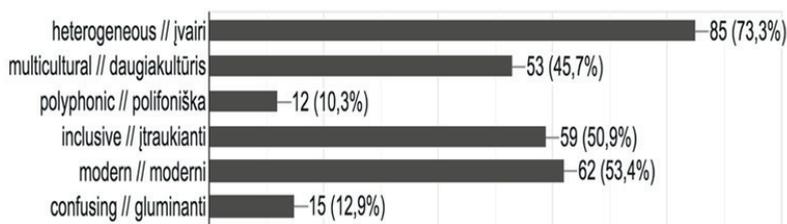


Figure 1. Individual perception of Kaunas urban space

On a more general level, figure 2 shows how the respondents reacted when asked about urban space’s ability to shape collective memory. Unsurprisingly, the almost totality of them found a direct correlation between spatiality and temporality. However, we must contextualize this question in order to understand its relevance for the study. In the last couple of years, Kaunas Modernist architecture has entered the European cultural scenario through the EHL initiative, which emphasizes the ideological rele-

¹² R. Ribelytė-Knistautienė, J. Kamičaitytė-Virbašienė, *Subjective Identity of Kaunas Cityscape: Research Results and Their Relation with Objective Indicators of Urban Structure*, “Journal of Sustainable Architecture and Civil Engineering” 2016, Vol. 4, pp. 5–14.

¹³ E. Aleksandravičius, *Post-Communist Transition: The Case of Two Lithuanian Capital Cities*, “International Review of Sociology — Revue Internationale de Sociologie” 2006, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 347–360; M. Drėmaitė, *Architecture of Optimism: the Kaunas Phenomenon, 1918–1940*, Vilnius 2018.

¹⁴ A. Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford 2003, p. 7.

vance of a certain site for the promotion of European integration¹⁵. Parallely, it seeks the inscription into the prestigious UNESCO World Heritage List based on its tangible authenticity. Opposite destiny has been reserved for many soviet buildings, such as Buitis Shop on Vytauto prospektas and the never finished Britanika Hotel on Kęstučio gatvė, the first being completely remodeled and transformed accordingly to the standardized window-glass fashion, while the carcass of the second is still looming over the city in a tragic state of neglect. Although oversimplified, the picture we get from the ongoing process of urban regeneration is extremely worrying when the absolute majority of respondents confirmed my hypothesis in the previous section. Having this said, I speculate about the risk of generational memory loss when a targeted alteration of the urban space is operated.

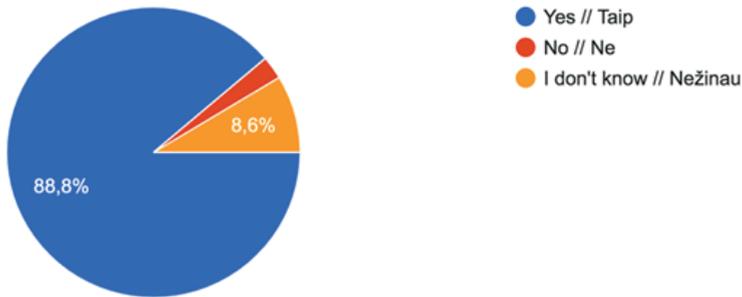


Figure 2. Do you think that changes of the urban space can affect collective memory?



Britanika Hotel on Kęstučio gatvė. Photo of the author

¹⁵ European Parliament, Establishing a European Union Action for the European Heritage Label. Official Journal of the European Union L 303, Decision No. 1194/2011/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council dated 16 November 2011, p. 4.

Moving forward, the next question targeted the heritage-memory nexus and followed the agree-disagree structure. In order to make the survey more relatable and potentially less far from everyday life experience, I formulated a statement using Kaunas architecture as the main object of reference. Instead of architecture, it could have been replaced by public spaces, e.g. squares and monuments; however, local architecture is emblematic of the city's historical developments, stretching from the national revival during the Interwar period, passing to the Sovietization of Lithuania, then to the semiotic revolution which started in the 1990s and finally arriving to present days. Nevertheless, the abuse of selective remembrance for different purposes led to the parallel diffusion of a plurality of inheritance policies which have failed to create a sense of unity around Kaunas architectural legacy. For instance, it is common knowledge that there is a mismatch between the preservation of the Interwar heritage and the lack of interest for the restoration of soviet heritage¹⁶. Because of this sensitive and yet topical issue, I preferred to purposely avoid any reference to a specific type of architecture when finalizing the questionnaire.

On a general note, the results are consistent with the answers submitted to the previous question, signaling the communicative function of architecture. In other words, architecture plays a significative role in keeping the layers of the collective memory of Kaunas' citizens alive. Within the same group, i.e. those who answered affirmatively, it is possible to distinguish between two almost equal sub-groups, namely those who agree and those who partially agree with the statement. Although there is no reason to think of underlying motives behind the last tendency, the heritage-memory exploration inevitably touches on the question of subjectivity, which implies a much greater chance for various external factors to come into play, such as place attachment (biographical, ideological, narrative, etc.) and place experience.

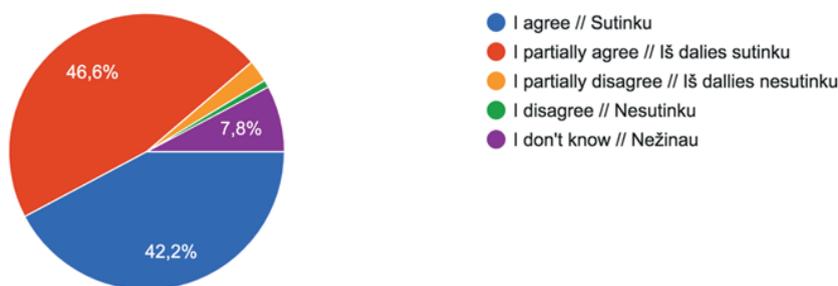


Figure 3. Reactions to the statement “Kaunas architecture reflects the collective memory of its inhabitants”

Still concentrating the attention on Kaunas architecture, its cultural identity is a distinctive element that permeates the entire urban tissue, eventually returning the image of a more or less complex cultural environment. Figure 4 below illustrates the

¹⁶R. Baločkaitė, *The New Culture Wars in Lithuania: Trouble with the Soviet Heritage*, Jena 2015, pp. 1–9; V. Petrusis, *Manifestations of Politics in Lithuanian Architecture: Examples of Architectural Dehumanisation during the Transition from a Soviet to a Post-Soviet Society*, “Meno istorija ir kritika” 2007, No. 3, Kaunas, pp. 209–216.

predominant cultural character(s) that Kaunas architecture transmits according to the local population: most respondents have chosen all three characterizations to describe the cultural identity of Kaunas architecture, i.e. unique, Lithuanian and European. Although we cannot ignore the individual indications of a single identity, the answers revealed that cultural identification is a highly complex and multi-layered phenomenon. Despite the promotion of local and/or national cultural narratives for political purposes is reflected in the planning of contemporary buildings as well¹⁷, respondents are most likely to think of Kaunas architecture as communicating several cultural identities.

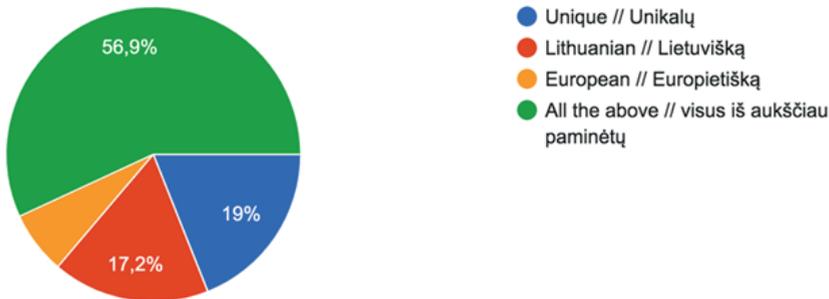


Figure 4. Cultural identity of Kaunas architecture

The last straight-forward question within the heritage-memory nexus' cluster originates from the problematic theorization of the areas of intersection between the two concepts. In addition, the inflation of heritage protection initiatives and insistent mediatic attention about what is to be remembered from society has made the line of separation even more blurred. Departing from this, I simply asked whether the terms “cultural heritage” and “cultural memory” can be considered synonyms based on the participants' own knowledge and personal experiences. What emerges is not far from expectations: looking at figure 5, the absence of an absolute majority is what stands out at first sight. Breaking down the results into groups, on one side we see that a slight majority of respondents would not use the two notions interchangeably, while on the other side we see an almost equal vocal response from the affirmative proponents. Finally, a considerable number of respondents declared that they did not have an opinion on the issue (23), thus highlighting the need to bring the discussion on the relationship between heritage and memory either out of the academia and accessible to a wider audience.

¹⁷ E. Fantoni, *The interpretation of the Soviet past of Kaunas in its post-socialist urban identity: promotion of the interwar period's architecture and western influences*, Bologna 2019, p. 81.

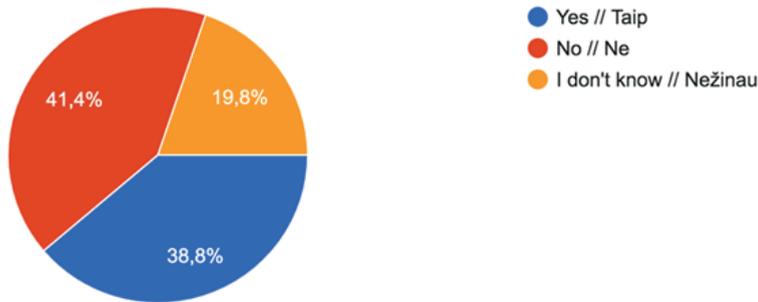


Figure 5. The line of separation between cultural heritage and cultural memory.
Are they synonym?

The next question shifts from the individual dimension to the collective one, as it asks to provide a keyword to describe the attitude of his/her generation towards the city's past. Although unintentionally, the age composition of the respondents is skewed (most of respondents have less than 30 years of age), which means that it will not be possible to provide any evidence for the other generational groups (see table 1). However, youth engagement was the main prerequisite for the purpose of this exercise, i.e. testing my third hypothesis on potential differences in the generational attitudes between those who experienced life in Kaunas under Communist rule and those born in independent Lithuania. A set of reactions were already provided among the given answers (left side of figure 6), but it was also possible to indicate additional traits. Moreover, each person could select multiple options which for obvious reasons should have not been contradictory.

On a general outlook, a positive relationship happened to be the most representative feeling, the neutral approach follow suit, whereas negative descriptions were the least popular (only two additional personal contributions were indicated). Scaling down the analysis to each single age group, it can be stated that a neutral attitude towards the city's past characterizes the local youth, even though the short margin from the second preference communicates the overall positive orientation of their opinions. Despite the fact that the unbalanced group compositions did not allow a proper testing of my initial hypothesis outlined in the third focal point, youth responses alone can still provide food for thought: out of 95 respondents, 40 of them chose at least one negative concept to represent the attitude of their peers towards Kaunas' past, which is in contrast with the visions of more than half of respondents. From one side, this could be read as a simple coexistence of several individual evaluations that are then moved to the group level. At the same time, on the other side, it might indicate that there is a lack of mutual understanding which might grow into internal division in the future.

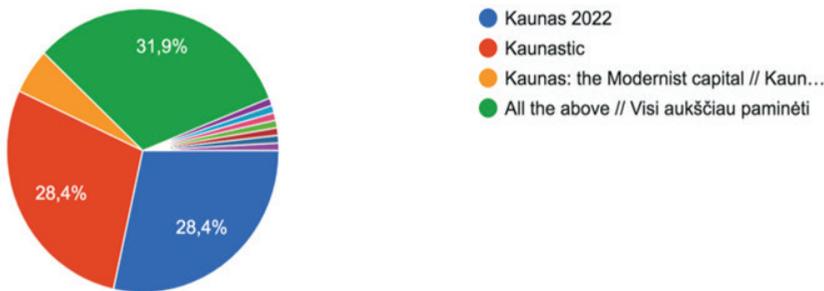
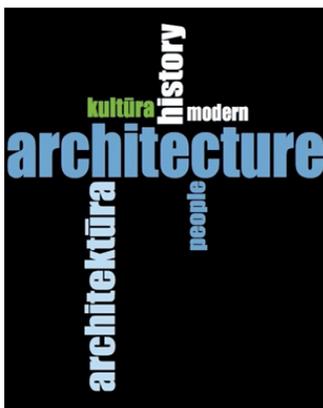


Figure 6. Generational attitude towards the city’s past

Table 2. Responses based on age groups

	18–30	31–43	44–56	57–69	Total
Healthy	32	2	6	1	41
Neutral	37	1	1	1	40
Confused	21	3	1	3	28
Conflicting	19	1	1	0	21
Other	2	/	/	/	2

Finally, the last semi-open question was meant to observe the different mental associations given a quite fluid value of reference, i.e. European significance. When asked about what makes the city of Kaunas “of European significance”, I did not expect them to necessarily know about the intertwining of several scalar dimensions in the construction of a site of European significance, from the local to the transnational. I used the qualitative software NVivo 12 to collect all the answers and then run the word frequency query for the first 6 most mentioned words: although this tool worked more than fine, both Lithuanian and English versions of the same word were included in the calculation, which resulted in the doubling of the most frequent given response highlighting Kaunas’ European significance, i.e. “architecture” (total word count including similar words: 36). The history of the city is then mentioned 12 times, followed by culture (*kultūra*, 9), people (9) and finally its distinctive modern aspect (8).



Word cloud showing the most frequent concepts mentioned to define Kaunas European significance
 Source: extracted from the query run on NVivo 12 program for qualitative analysis

Aware of the European significance of Kaunas architecture, the former temporary capital of Lithuania has been looking to global city-branding strategies with the twofold aim of achieving wider recognition abroad and attracting investments. As a result, many cultural initiatives were launched, the most active and popular definitely being “Kaunas 2022” and “It’s Kaunastic!”, always allowing Kaunas urban space to play a key role in each one of them. When asked about the most effective city-branding strategy so far, the majority of respondents either indicated one of the two initiatives or more generally recognized the overall success of local city branding strategies.

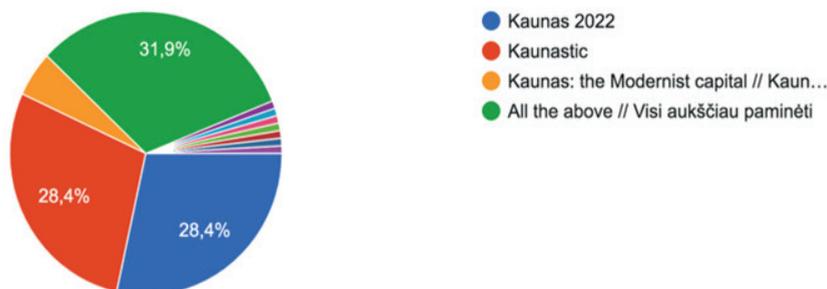


Figure 7. Most effective city-branding strategy targeting Kaunas urban space

Discussion

The findings indicate that transformations in Kaunas urban landscape, which is characterized by its multiplicity of histories, memories and interpretations of the city’s past, can possibly alter the collective imaginary of the city. Transformations do not only occur in a physical sense, e.g. the demolition of a building or the alteration of the outer/inner shape of architectural artifacts, but also in a semiotic perspective, therefore influencing the way in which a certain community understands and perceives specific symbols, eventually turning into what Czepczynski calls as “memory management”¹⁸. According to the respondents, Kaunas architecture communicates not just a local or national cultural identity, but is also fully integrated as part of the European cultural context. The results also showed that heritage and memory are certainly overlapping areas, often used interchangeably when referring to questions of remembrance; however, it becomes clear that the separation between the two concepts is not so easy to trace. Speaking of the EU’s cultural heritage policy when trying to describe the “European significance” of Kaunas, it was quite interesting to notice how most of respondents thought about a physical element, i.e. architecture, instead of an intangible valuable aspect for the common European cultural heritage, such as the architecture’s transnational value of interwar dynamics.

Despite the successful city-branding strategies adopted to promote Kaunas’ multi-layered cultural identity, there is evidence to believe that their implementation and the effective communication of the European system of value definition did not

¹⁸M. Czepczynski, *Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities Representation of Powers and Needs*, University of Gdansk 2008, p. 115.

proceed accordingly. Finally, we must reckon that the historical events that have shaped Kaunas urban space are felt and interpreted differently even from members of the same generation: in the case of those aged between 18 and 30, the absence of a common perception reflects the subjective character of how they experience and connect with the city's past.

Conclusions

The aim of this study in tackling the symbiotic relationship between spatiality and temporality has been to give an overview of Kaunas rapid process of urban transformation and to lay the basis for analyzing its effects on the collective memory of the local population. For the purpose of this study, a survey was conducted in order to test a set of hypotheses along three research clusters, i.e. individual attitude towards the city's past, the cultural identity of the city, and finally the heritage-memory nexus. The main findings can be summarized in the following points:

1. Modifications in the urban landscape, both tangible and intangible, are found to shape the collective memory of local dwellers. Kaunas architecture communicates the coexisting cultural identities by connecting several scalar dimensions that contribute to the positioning of its "European significance" in the definition of a common European cultural heritage. However, the results confirmed the hypothesis that the official interpretation of cultural value according to the EHL initiative was not properly understood by the respondents.
2. Considering the research results according to Tunbridge and Ashworth theory of "dissonant heritage", it can be stated that city-branding strategies alone are not going to shed light on the incompatibility between different official approaches towards value definition. Instead of applying a top-down standard practice of heritage recognition, priority should be given to the engagement of the local community in the individuation of values that are in line with specific socio-cultural aspirations.
3. Although respondents agreed on the heterogeneous character of the city, the interpretation of historical events that permeate the urban tissue is a divisive topic which in turn influences generational attitudes towards Kaunas' past.

Furthermore, the research also confirmed previous theorizations about the problematic separation between heritage and memory studies. Overall, these findings call for further empirical research on the long-term effects of ongoing urban transformation processes on the urban memory of city dwellers. Finally, this study stresses the importance of stimulating an interdisciplinary dialogue around the city-heritage binomial, and also points to the need to develop new theoretical approaches to the study of urban memory by looking to sites at the European periphery as sites of theory construction rather than sites where theory is tested.

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