

## Visual integrity of historic urban landscapes

Urbact II is a European exchange and learning programme aimed at fostering integrated approaches to sustainable urban development. Integrated approaches promote economic competitiveness, growth and job creation alongside social cohesion and environmental issues. The programme is jointly financed by the European Union and member states.

With the slogan 'connecting cities; building successes', Urbact II is directed at sharing good practice among policy makers and practitioners. It promotes partnership working to develop tools and recommendations of general relevance to European cities.

Urbact II projects are grouped under nine thematic areas. The Heritage as Opportunity (HerO) project falls under 'cultural heritage and city development'. It is part way through its implementation phase.

HerO is a network of nine cities across nine member states, led by Regensburg (Germany). The partners include the capital cities Valletta and Vilnius, the port cities Liverpool and Naples, and the provincial cities Poitiers and Lublin.

HerO's focus is on the development of innovative management strategies for historic urban landscapes. Its objectives are to facilitate a favourable balance between preservation and development, manage conflicting functional requirements, strengthen the attractiveness and competitiveness of historic cities, and capitalise on the socio-economic and cultural potential of their heritage assets.

The theme of the network's meeting in the Lithuanian capital in May was the visual integrity of historic urban landscapes. The meeting focused on the protection of monuments and enhancement in the public realm; the safeguarding of views, silhouettes, townscape characteristics and panoramas; and the preservation and reconstitution of visual relationships to the surrounding landscape.

Protecting visual integrity was expressed as fundamental to the protection of heritage values, the aesthetic impression and identity of a historic area both from within and from a distance; for strengthening civic pride and sense of community; and to attract skilled people and investments in today's globally competitive marketplace.



*Views of Vilnius from the Gediminas Tower: north-westwards, to the modern business quarter on the northern bank of the River Neris (above), and southwards, across the multi-denominational skyline of the historic centre (below)*

The HerO representatives at the Vilnius meeting spoke of the common challenge of integrating contemporary architecture which respects the spatial, townscape and panoramic characteristics that define the distinctiveness of a city's setting and sense of place.

Since its re-establishment as a state capital in 1990, and entry on to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1994, Vilnius has proved to be a test case for the challenges facing urban conservation in Europe. The Old Town Revitalisation Agency has overseen countless restoration and enhancement projects in Vilnius's historic core.

At the same time, as speakers from the city apologetically noted, a controversial new high-rise business centre immediately facing the old town on the opposite bank of the river Neris has challenged the visual

integrity of the setting, and of views into and out of the historic core.

The HerO network is making a compelling case for the untapped potential of cultural heritage as a catalyst for sustainable urban development. It asserts the importance of a holistic approach to the management of historic cities.

As one of the workshop speakers suggested, this encourages the view that the UK mantra of heritage-led regeneration should be substituted by a focus on cultural continuity as the vector for sustainable development. This more embracing concept discourages, for example, those of today's architects who seek to justify conflictual, 'iconic' interventions as the heritage of the future. *Dennis Rodwell is a consultant in cultural heritage and sustainable urban development.*