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Horacio Torrent

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Santiago de Chile, 2024

M O D E R N SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY F U T U R E S

Editor

Horacio Torrent

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VILNIUS CONCERT AND SPORTS PALACE – TRANSFORMATION OF THE PRESERVATION APPROACH

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#08

ABSTRACT

The text examines the dramatic transformation of evaluation and preservation approaches for one of Lithuania's most widely-known concrete heritage icons—Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace. In the last twenty years, the approach has led to a change from a concrete monster to an appreciated heritage object by the public. During these years, different scenarios for the Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace have been considered: demolition, adaptive reuse with extensions, and conservation as a monument. The latter scenario raises more questions than answers, especially considering the global climate crisis and the urgent need for responsible energy use. However, despite the public's and experts' attention and appreciation, the Palace remains abandoned in the city centre.

A multi-layered holistic value analysis, represented in a text, reveals arguments as to why it should be adopted rather than conserved as a monument and left to become a fenced concrete ruin in the middle of the city centre.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many dismissed landmarks of concrete long-span buildings of the 20th century worldwide face functional obsolescence and have become a puzzle for heritage specialists and city governments. On the one hand, the dilemma of preserving buildings is maintaining their authenticity and leaving them as “distinct signs of modern,”¹ and on the other – adapting them to the changing needs of modern society and the challenges posed by both the global climate crisis and “inspiring creativity.”² The Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace is one such case in Europe. It is an icon of modernist planning and brutalist aesthetics in Lithuania, which has lost its functional relevance. Besides all that, the Palace faced an extra challenge—dealing with the negative and brutal consequences of the Soviet regime, which complicated its sustainable future all the more so.

The Palace is notable for its hanging cable-suspended roof covering an ample interior space of 60 x 60 metres. It was designed as a part of a newly formed sports complex in the centre of Vilnius as a universal arena of international standards for an ice hockey rink to host 6000 spectators (Fig. 1). It was built from 1965 to 1971 in Soviet-occupied Lithuania in the historic part of Vilnius, next to the old town and in front of the medieval Gediminas Castle in the bend of the river Neris. The group of talented architects Eduardas Chlomauskas, Jonas Kriukelis, Zigmantas Liandzbergis, and engineers Henrikas Vytautas Karvelis, Algimantas Katilius, Aleksandras Kamarauskas and Sofija Kovarskaja designed the Palace. The structural solution of the elegantly curved roof – the inverted arch – was recognized as the invention of engineer Karvelis, and the authors were awarded the Prize of Lithuanian SSR in 1973.³ The Palace was built as a part of the larger cultural-sport complex with Žalgiris Stadium and an Indoor Swimming Pool (both were demolished and replaced by new developments).

Ironically, the Palace never hosted ice hockey. Instead, it hosted essential basketball games in 1987-89, and “basketball became one of the catalysts for the national revival movement.”⁴ The Palace also hosted the first National Liberation Movement “Sąjūdis” congress in 1988, which was a strong catalyst for Lithuania’s restoring independence, achieved in 1990. Additionally, the victims of the independence struggle in 1991 were honoured there.

A more significant concern for preserving the Palace did not occur until the first decade of the 21st century when real demolition threats appeared. Despite its vital contribution to the restoration of independence, the Palace was primarily criticised by the public because of its grey aesthetics and was treated as a concrete monster. Further pressure was applied by developers to replace the Palace with new contemporary buildings. In 2006, due to the threat of demolition, the Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace was listed on the National List of Cultural Heritage. The inscription was determined by heritage experts not only because of its significant architectural and structural solutions but also as a result of its historical value related to events of independence, which played a crucial role in listing the building.

The future or adaptation of the Palace would not be so complicated if it were not for the history of the location where the building stands. The

1. Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books LTD, 2012), 12.

2. Marieke Kuipers, and Wessel De Jonge, *Designing from the Heritage. Strategies for Conservation and Conversion* (TU Delft -Heritage & Architecture, 2017), 23.

3. Marija Drėmaitė, *Baltic Modernism. Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania* (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2017), 291.

4. More about the events in the article: Liutauras Nekrošius, “Soviet Era Architecture and the Meaning It Holds for the People of Lithuania,” *Place Meaning and Attachment. Authenticity, Heritage, and Preservation*, ed. by Dak Kopec and AnnaMarie Bliss (New York: Routledge, 2020), 35.

Palace was built on the old Jewish cemetery dating back to the 16th and 18th centuries. Despite the neglect of the old cemeteries, their location during the construction was hidden from the public, and it shows the strategy of the former Soviet regime to introduce new, massive buildings in or near essential and sensitive historical and religious sites in order to erase memory. The territory of the old Jewish cemetery was included in the national heritage list several years after the Palace in 2008. The difficulty lies in the fact that the Palace, as immovable cultural property, has territorial boundaries with the land under the building, while the protected boundary of the cemetery territory is the delineation of the land on which the Palace stands (Fig. 2).

Such demarcation of territories raises many questions and conflicts. If the Palace is not within the territory of the Jewish cemetery, can it be adapted for cultural purposes? How can the territory of the cemetery be marked while maintaining the modernist principle of open public space? How can a vast area in the city centre be arranged so that respect for the Jewish cemetery is maintained, but it does not become a closed and inaccessible public space?

2. APPROACHES TO REVIVE THE PALACE

Three scenarios are commonly used to preserve concrete heritage: *conservation*, *upgrade*, and *adaptive reuse*.⁵ The first scenario – *conservation* – is primarily described in recent international documents as a strategy for preserving highly significant concrete buildings recognized internationally and nationally.⁶ In the case of conservation, interventions and minor additions are allowed to ensure the proper functioning of the building, and the purpose should be to replicate the original as possible. Suitable methods to keep fair-faced concrete surfaces and structures as authentic as possible are to be employed. The second scenario – *upgrade* or *renovation* – is mainly used to improve engineering systems, usually for residential housing objects or as a temporary solution for public buildings to solve urgent problems. The third one – *adaptive reuse* – is the most widely used scenario suitable for significant concrete objects with an outdated, no longer relevant function, which needs a major transformation to fit a new purpose. It combines conservation and reconstruction approaches to concrete surfaces and structures, prioritizing methods that keep fair-faced concrete surfaces as authentic as possible. The scenario of adaptive reuse “gained more popularity in Europe than strict conservation, except for the small number of iconic objects.”⁷

Considerations for the preservation of the Palace began as early as 2008 when the Vilnius municipality announced an architectural competition to transform the territory of the Palace and the adjacent Žalgiris Stadium into a multi-purpose centre. The Architectural Studio of Sigitas Kuncevičius won the contest. The reconstruction project of converting the Palace into a Congress Centre with an extension volume was prepared in 2016, preserving all specified valuable attributes.⁸ However, the implementation of the reconstruction was stopped by the Jewish community, which claimed that there could be burials under the Palace and that such an entertainment purpose as the congress centre was unsuitable for this historic place.⁹

5. Three scenarios for post-war concrete heritage are analysed in more detail in the article: Aušra Černauskienė, “Preservation Scenarios for Post-War Concrete Architecture: The Case of Lithuania,” *Architecture and Urban Planning*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2023): 217–229. <https://doi.org/10.2478/aup-2023-0020>

6. Based on recent documents: *Cádiz document* by ICOMOS (2021) and *Conservation Principals for Concrete of Cultural Significance* by GCI (2020)

7. Theodor H. M. Prudon, *Preservation of Modern Architecture* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), 13.

8. More about the conversion project of the Palace to Congress Centre: <https://www.vas.lt/portfolio/items/sporto-rumai/>

9. More about the Jewish cemetery court decision: “Teismas atmetė del koncertų ir rekonstrukcijos Statyba ir architektūra” in May 03, 2024. <https://www.teismas-atmete-del-koncertu-ir-rekonstrukcijos-statyba-ir-architektura/>

10. Prime minister's decision on the conversion of the Museum of Jewish History in publication: “Vilniaus miesto savivaldybės taryba galėtų tapti muziejumi,” 15min.lt on May 04, 2024. www.15min.lt/na-lietuva/i-simonyte-sporto-rumai-gale-zydu-istorijos-mu-memorialu-56-16/

11. Conversation with city chief architect Kairienė about the Vilnius Concert and Palace, recorded on 2024: <https://www.vilnius.lt/watch?v=6Fgn0p6i>

12. Randall Mason, *Values in Conservation: Methodological Issues and Choices in the GCI Report “Assessing the Cultural Heritage,”* (2019)

After several years, the government put forward another use for the Palace—converting it into a Jewish Museum, proposing the Polin Museum in Poland as an example.¹⁰ The Jewish community rejected this idea based on the same argument – that no cultural purpose should be introduced for the building, in order to avoid large gatherings of people for entertainment. To solve the complicated situation, in 2023, an international workgroup of experts was established under the order of the LR prime minister. The experts were asked to find a suitable solution that included respect for the Jewish cemetery and the Palace's contribution to the Lithuanian Liberation Movement. The expert group completed their work this February, and the government will announce the final resolution soon. According to the latest expert reports in the media, only minimal adoption of premises for the Palace has been considered for a memorial purpose.¹¹ A memorial will be dedicated to Jewish historical memory and the struggles of the Lithuania Liberation Movement "Sajūdis." In such a way, historical justice will be restored.

It must be noted that the most realistic scenario now is to conserve the giant concrete building as a monument, with the ancient Jewish cemetery being physically fenced off. The proposed revival of the Palace involves *conservation without use*. This is seen as a political action to acknowledge and take responsibility for past mistakes made by the Soviets in Lithuania, a democratic country. The primary focus is on preserving historical values and restoring historical justice. Other important features of the Palace, such as its iconic modern design, innovative roof construction, or rare brutalist aesthetics, are considered less significant. Moreover, the public was not consulted or included during the expert work, which contradicts the principles of holistic evaluation of heritage objects.

It appears that the appropriate time for adaptive reuse of the Palace has already passed, and now it could be treated as a concrete ruin in the middle of the city telling its own complicated story. A new architectural competition will be held to meet the new requirements established by the working group and approved by the government of the Republic of Lithuania.

Considering the context of Baltic states, the Palace could be compared with LinnaHall in Tallinn, Estonia (1975-1980, arch. Raine Karp, Riina Altmäe). LinnaHall is also a listed object, built for the Olympic games, but it is still next to an old town and is ill-suited to new life.

3. HOLISTIC EVALUATION OF THE PALACE

Before selecting the appropriate preservation plan, it is essential to conduct a multi-layered assessment of value, identify unmet contemporary social and technical needs, and evaluate the physical condition—this overall process could be considered a holistic evaluation.

Value is a constantly changing dimension describing an object's relationship with a broader context, "*values and other forms of meaning are produced out of the interaction of artifacts and their contexts, not from the artefact itself.*"¹² It means that various social and economic relations, exchanges, and acts of "local agents" circulate in or close to the heritage

9. More about the lawsuit of the Jewish community and the court decision in publication: "Teismas atmetė litvakų ieškinį dėl Koncertų ir sporto rūmų rekonstrukcijos stabdymo," *Statyba ir architektūra*, accessed in May 03, 2024. <https://sa.lt/teismas-atmete-litvaku-ieskini-del-koncertu-ir-sporto-rumu-rekonstrukcijos-stabdymo/>

10. Prime minister in relation to the conversion of the building to the Museum of Jewish History in publication: "Vilniaus sproto rūmai galėtų tapti žydų istorijos muziejumi," *15min*, accessed on May 04, 2024. <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/i-simonyte-vilniaus-sporto-rumai-galetu-tapti-zydu-istorijos-muziejumi-ar-memorialu-56-1633762>

11. Conversation with Vilnius city chief architect Laura Kairienė about the destiny of Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace, recorded on March 26, 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Fgn0p6EXDg>.

12. Randall Mason, *Assessing Values in Conservation Planning: Methodological Issues and Choices in the GCI research report "Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage,"* (2002), 16.

itself, creating new values over time. In addition, cultural objects, especially large-scale cultural ones, shape the identity of the cities, contribute to the economic value of the surrounding environment, and form part of "territorial capital."¹³ Therefore, evaluating heritage objects is a multi-layered process in which expert and non-expert evaluation¹⁴ is essential.

The author created the 5+5 evaluation matrix (Fig. 3) to examine the objects of concrete heritage in Lithuania holistically. In the case of Vilnius Concerts and Sports Palace, it is used to reveal why the Palace should be repurposed for cultural purposes concerning all layers of history and culture rather than left as a fenced concrete ruin, conserved as a monument.

The matrix comprises five aspects of cultural value: urban, artistic-aesthetic, social-anthropological, historical, and technological.¹⁵ In addition to aspects of value, five factors have been identified that either strengthen or weaken the object's cultural value. These factors are: TT comparative analysis (comparing buildings of the same technology and typology), authenticity and integrity, physical condition and possibilities of reuse, sustainability and economy, and non-expert evaluation.

Certain matrix elements are widely used in the evaluation of heritage sites. Among these, we can single out historical, aesthetic, and technological aspects and strengthen factors such as authenticity, integrity, and physical condition. They are commonly used to describe the valuable features of heritage objects in Lithuania. Other aspects such as urban and social value aspects and factors of sustainability, economy, and non-expert evaluation, are used less frequently and affect the incomplete realisation of potential values.

While holistically analysing the Palace's values, in addition to historical, aesthetic, and technological, an urban value revealed itself that contributes significantly to the identity of the capital, Vilnius, and the district of Šnipiškės. It raised the value of the surrounding territory and brought about new development. Moreover, the open public space surrounding the Palace, created by terracing the relief, is a vital and valuable attribute of modernist planning, which could be easily destroyed by enclosing the territory of the Jewish cemetery. This is also closely related to social value – a public place important for local communication.

Evaluation of sustainability and economic factors are also missing, which are essential in choosing a suitable preservation scenario. Heritage objects work well when used and visited, arouse curiosity, express past innovations, are educationally engaging, and reveal various layers of history and renewal methodologies. In addition, the Palace is a large concrete building spanning 14,750 square meters featuring raw concrete surfaces that will require heating, ventilation, constant maintenance, and monitoring.

Finally, it is important to include a non-expert evaluation as part of a more comprehensive evaluation process. In recent decades, the evaluation of the Palace has dramatically changed from that of public neglect to appreciation in Lithuania. The Palace has been recognised as an essential part of modern heritage, as evidenced by the Open House Vilnius festival, during which the Palace has attracted many curious visitors for several years

13. Heritage as an important part of "territorial capital" was analysed in the recent book: Mariusz Sokołowicz, Aleksandra Nowakowska, and Blazej Ciarkowski, *The Ambiguous Legacy of Socialist Modernist Architecture in Central and Eastern Europe* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023), Chapter 2 and 3.

14. Expert and non-expert evaluation of the heritage is emphasized by Rodney Harrison (2013) and Janet Stephenson (2008).

15. Five aspects of value were selected after examining a wide range of theoretical works (Riegel, Alois (1902), Lipe, William (1984), Mason, Randall (2002), Keene, Edward (2005) and others) and evaluation criteria applied by international heritage institutions UNESCO, ICOMOS, DOCOMOMO.



Figure 1. Vilnius Chlomauskas Svitajaus, 197

Figure 2. Topographic map of Vilnius (blue line) and Vilnius (green line) ©

Figure 3. Matrix

Figure 4. Vilnius Festival © Nor



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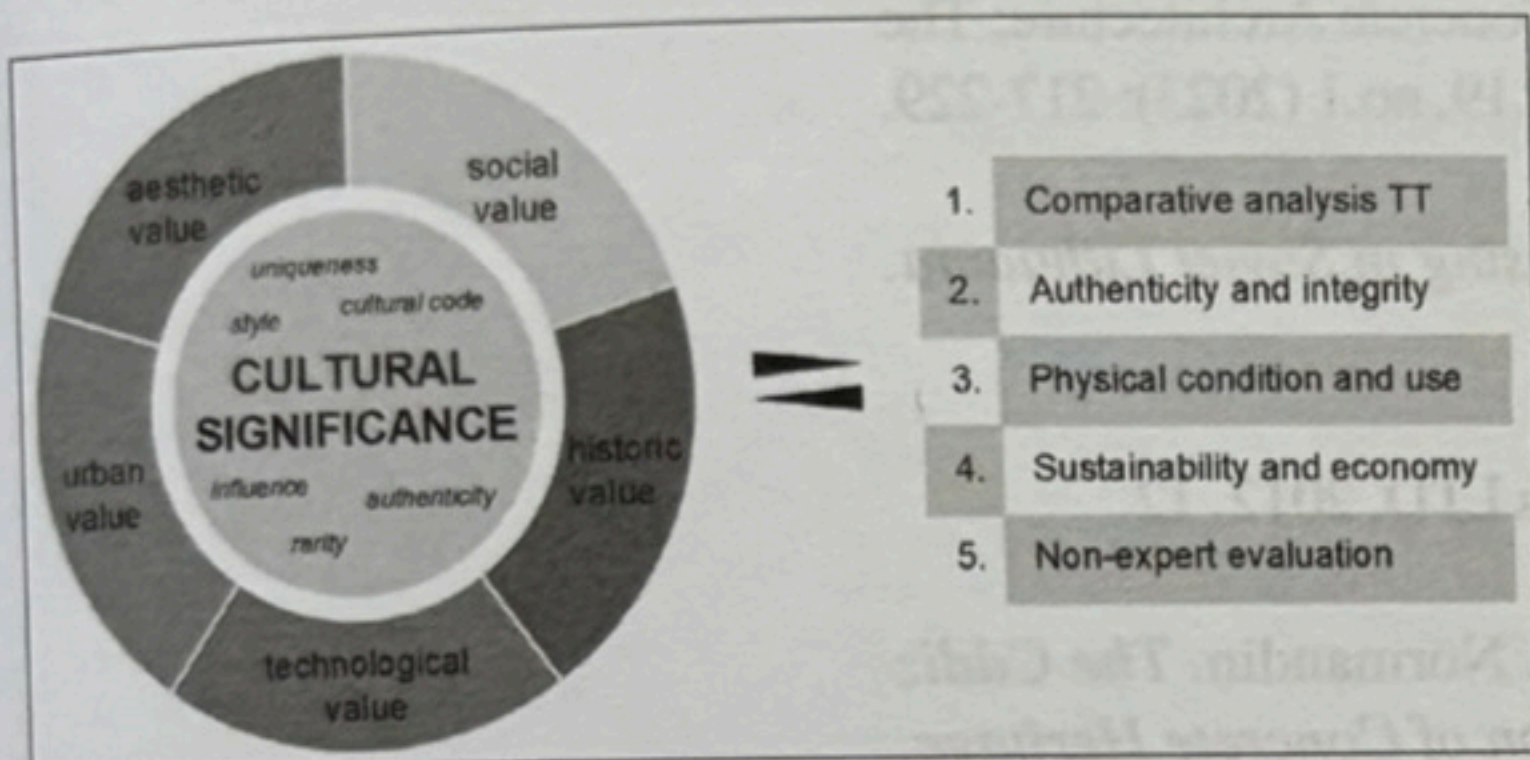


Figure 1. Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace, arch. E. Chlomauskas, J. Kriukelis, Z. Liandzbergis © Photo by Gediminas Svitojaus, 1977, LCVA

Figure 2. Topography with Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace plot (blue line) and marked territorial boundaries of Jewish cemetery (green line) © Aušra Černauskienė, 2024

Figure 3. Matrix of holistic evaluation © Aušra Černauskienė, 2024

Figure 4. Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace during the Open House Festival © Norbert Tukaj, 2019



(Fig.4). The significance of the building is also proven by international databases such as “100 from the 20th” or “SOS Brutalism,” which included the Palace as an iconic example of concrete heritage objects in Lithuania.

However, despite the public’s and experts’ attention and appreciation, the Palace remains abandoned in the city centre, awaiting a political decision and new architectural competition. Meanwhile, raw concrete surfaces rapidly deteriorate because of lack of maintenance, graffiti, weathering, and biological coating.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Over the past few years, the approach to preserving the Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace has changed dramatically from considering adaptive reuse with additions to now conserving it as a monument, without using the building for even cultural purposes. From a holistic assessment perspective, the chosen scenario does seem the most appropriate for a building of this size and brutalist aesthetic. The Palace holds significant value in a number of aspects, and deciding on its future preservation should not be a mere political decision or a model based on expert assessment and historical value.

The Palace, as an icon of modernism and brutalism, is worth being used and adapted for a cultural purpose while maintaining respect for the Jewish cemetery and honouring the Lithuanian Liberation Movement. Inspiring creativity and open dialogue with the public is urgently required to prevent the Palace from becoming just a fenced-in concrete sculpture that will require high maintenance costs. All value aspects and factors such as sustainability, the economy, and the public's opinion must be considered when formulating new competition conditions for the Palace. ■

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BIOGRAPHY

Aušra Černauskienė is a post-doc researcher at Vilnius University, Faculty of History, Lithuania. She holds a PhD in Humanities (2021). Her research is focused on the preservation of concrete-based architecture of the 20th century. Since 2009, she has been a certified practising architect and co-author of public and residential buildings, projects, and workshops. She currently works as a freelance architect and is a member of the Architect's Chamber of Lithuania and ICOMOS Lithuania.

itself, creating new values over time. In addition, cultural objects, especially large-scale cultural ones, shape the identity of the cities, contribute to the economic value of the surrounding environment, and form part of "territorial capital."¹³ Therefore, evaluating heritage objects is a multi-layered process in which expert and non-expert evaluation¹⁴ is essential.

The author created the 5+5 evaluation matrix (**Fig. 3**) to examine the objects of concrete heritage in Lithuania holistically. In the case of Vilnius Concerts and Sports Palace, it is used to reveal why the Palace should be repurposed for cultural purposes concerning all layers of history and culture rather than left as a fenced concrete ruin, conserved as a monument.

The matrix comprises five aspects of cultural value: urban, artistic-aesthetic, social-anthropological, historical, and technological.¹⁵ In addition to aspects of value, five factors have been identified that either strengthen or weaken the object's cultural value. These factors are: TT comparative analysis (comparing buildings of the same technology and typology), authenticity and integrity, physical condition and possibilities of reuse, sustainability and economy, and non-expert evaluation.

Certain matrix elements are widely used in the evaluation of heritage sites. Among these, we can single out historical, aesthetic, and technological aspects and strengthen factors such as authenticity, integrity, and physical condition. They are commonly used to describe the valuable features of heritage objects in Lithuania. Other aspects such as urban and social value aspects and factors of sustainability, economy, and non-expert evaluation, are used less frequently and affect the incomplete realisation of potential values.

While holistically analysing the Palace's values, in addition to historical, aesthetic, and technological, an urban value revealed itself that contributes significantly to the identity of the capital, Vilnius, and the district of Šnipiškės. It raised the value of the surrounding territory and brought about new development. Moreover, the open public space surrounding the Palace, created by terracing the relief, is a vital and valuable attribute of modernist planning, which could be easily destroyed by enclosing the territory of the Jewish cemetery. This is also closely related to social value – a public place important for local communication.

Evaluation of sustainability and economic factors are also missing, which are essential in choosing a suitable preservation scenario. Heritage objects work well when used and visited, arouse curiosity, express past innovations, are educationally engaging, and reveal various layers of history and renewal methodologies. In addition, the Palace is a large concrete building spanning 14,750 square meters featuring raw concrete surfaces that will require heating, ventilation, constant maintenance, and monitoring.

Finally, it is important to include a non-expert evaluation as part of a more comprehensive evaluation process. In recent decades, the evaluation of the Palace has dramatically changed from that of public neglect to appreciation in Lithuania. The Palace has been recognised as an essential part of modern heritage, as evidenced by the Open House Vilnius festival, during which the Palace has attracted many curious visitors for several years

13. Heritage as an important part of "territorial capital" was analysed in the recent book: Mariusz Sokołowicz, Aleksandra Nowakowska, and Blazej Ciarkowski, *The Ambiguous Legacy of Socialist Modernist Architecture in Central and Eastern Europe* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023), Chapter 2 and 3.

14. Expert and non-expert evaluation of the heritage is emphasized by Rodney Harrison (2013) and Janet Stephenson (2008).

15. Five aspects of value were selected after examining a wide range of theoretical works (Riegel, Alois (1902), Lipe, William (1984), Mason, Randall (2002), Keene, Edward (2005) and others) and evaluation criteria applied by international heritage institutions UNESCO, ICOMOS, DOCOMOMO.

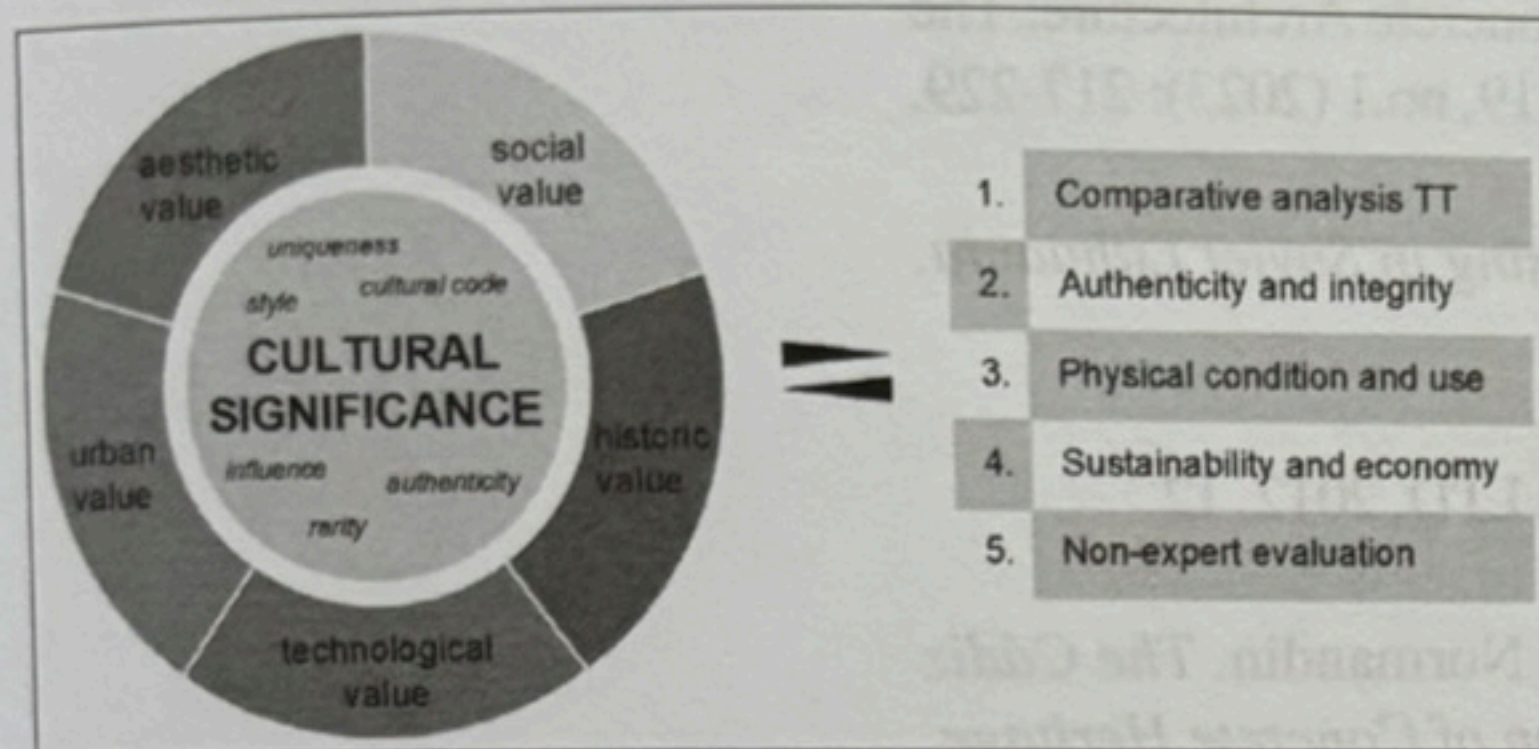


Figure 1. Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace, arch. E. Chlomauskas, J. Kriukelis, Z. Liandzbergis © Photo by Gediminas Svitojaus, 1977, LCVA

Figure 2. Topography with Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace plot (blue line) and marked territorial boundaries of Jewish cemetery (green line) © Aušra Černauskienė, 2024

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