

## CANDIDATE TO THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Title: ‘**Modernist Kaunas: Architecture of Optimism, 1919–1939**’

Location: **Kaunas, Lithuania, Europe**

Type of property: **cultural, urban landscape, 20th-century architecture, Modernist movement**

<b>Timeline of the progress</b>	<b>Administration</b>	<b>Important initiatives</b>
<p><b>2013:</b> First capture of an idea about World Heritage status.</p> <p><b>2017:</b> Inscription on Lithuania’s Tentative List.</p> <p><b>2021:</b> Submission of the nomination dossier to the World Heritage Centre.</p> <p><b>2022-2023:</b> Inscription of the property on the World Heritage List (<i>expected</i>).</p>	<p>The <b>Active partners</b> are the Ministry of Culture, the Kaunas City Municipality, and the Secretariat of the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO.</p> <p>A <b>Group of experts</b>, led from 2019 by Prof. Marija Drėmaitė of the Faculty of History at Vilnius University, which prepared the nomination dossier (<i>ongoing body</i>).</p> <p>An <b>Interinstitutional Steering Group</b>, led by the Vice-Minister of Culture, monitoring the progress of preparation (<i>ongoing body</i>).</p>	<p><b>2015:</b> Award of the <u>European Heritage Label</u> by the European Commission.</p> <p><b>2015:</b> Status of <u>UNESCO City of Design</u>.</p> <p><b>2022:</b> Kaunas – the <u>European Capital of Culture</u>, with the city’s modernist architecture expected to play an important role as part of the ‘<u>Modernism for the Future</u>’ programme.</p>

### I. Details of the property (Statement of Outstanding Universal Value, (OUV))

Modernist Kaunas is situated in central Lithuania, at the confluence of two major rivers: the Nemunas and the Neris. This area was planned in the mid-19th century and developed in 1919–1939 when, after the declaration of an independent Republic of Lithuania in 1918, Kaunas served as the provisional capital of the state. The status of provisional capital was crucial for the city’s unprecedented growth and architectural development.

In less than 20 years, under the auspices of the new national government and civic initiative, Kaunas was transformed into a modern city based on the assimilation of modern urban planning and architecture with pre-existing natural, urban, and other local conditions. Architecture, specifically in the form of a local inflection of the international language of modernism, played a particularly important role in that transformation.

A rich architectural heritage of emerging modernism overlaid on the 19th century urban grid and a new garden suburb create a unique ensemble of two complimentary urban landscapes. The sensitive adaptation of the pre-existing 19th-century urban grid, implementation of a garden city residential suburb, the successful integration of the natural environment, and the assimilation of local and global interpretations of architectural modernism gave birth to Modernist Kaunas, that reflects a diverse and innovative response to Lithuania’s encounter with modernity and early 20th century European modernism.

1500 of the 6000 remaining buildings erected in Kaunas in 1919–1939 are concentrated in the nominated area and bear exceptional testimony to the multifaceted nature of architectural modernism in response to local conditions. The façades, streetscapes, and natural elements, combined with the pre-existing urban and geomorphological setting, create a unique sense of place exhibited through broad panoramas, open urban and natural spaces, and varied topography. *Unlike many experiences of urban and architectural modernity, Kaunas reflects an evolutionary rather than revolutionary process of and response to modernisation in early 20th century Europe.*

### II. World Heritage criteria under which the property is proposed

Criterion (ii) – exhibiting an important interchange of human values.

Criterion (iv) – being an example of a certain type illustrating a significant stage in human history.

**Criterion (ii):** Kaunas Modernism of 1919–1939 expands the concept of Modernism beyond the International Style by revealing a more diverse, complex fabric of numerous, often divergent, cultural, social, political, and artistic trends. Kaunas Modernism is an exceptional example of rethinking architecture as a

process of social, political, and cultural modernisation in the 20th century. Modernist Kaunas provides arguments for the decentralisation of Modernism not only in the geographical sense, but also in terms of stylistic expression. The Outstanding Universal Value of the Kaunas cityscape is its architectural diversity, represented through the plurality of modern architectural ideas, from modernised Neo-Classicism to National Modernism, which co-existed throughout the world in the first half of the 20th century. By integrating and locally interpreting the principles of the Modern Movement, Modernist Kaunas displays a bold plurality of modern architectural expression in response to local needs and conditions.

**Criterion (iv):** Modernist Kaunas is an outstanding example of a historic city subject to rapid urbanisation and modernisation, encapsulated by diverse expressions of the values and aspirations associated with an optimistic belief in an independent future amid the turbulence of the early 20th century, when national borders were changing fast. The creation of a modern capital city of an emerging nation state is an outstanding testament to people's faith in the future and their ability to be creative under difficult political and economic conditions. The gradual and sustainable modernisation of Kaunas, carried out through civic initiatives with respect to the urban context and natural environment, produced an outstanding urban landscape and modern architectural language serving the needs of a provisional capital and possessing functions, structures, and building typologies that reflected the modernisation of urban life in the 20th century.

### III. Territory and buffer zone of the property

The nominated property comprises two areas: Naujamiestis and Žaliakalnis. Naujamiestis (New Town), a generous grid planned in 1847, was attached to the eastern edge of the Old Town and extends eastwards along the valley of the Nemunas River. Naujamiestis was modernised and intensively developed in 1919–1939. Encircling Naujamiestis to the north and east is Žaliakalnis (Green Hill) – a distinctive natural plateau rising to an average of 35–40 metres. Žaliakalnis was developed as a garden city residential suburb in 1919–1939 and enabled a seven-fold increase in area and accommodated a doubling of the city's population to 155.000 over the same period. The territory of the property and its buffer zone are aligned with the boundaries and protection zones inscribed on the National Cultural Properties Register, *i.e., there is no additional protection or expansion of existing territorial boundaries*. The Nomination Dossier has been developed through in-depth dialogue with the local community and cultural operators.

### IV. Management Plan and Site Manager Unit

A draft Management Plan was prepared in cooperation with international experts with the aim of obtaining appropriate protection and management of the OUV of the property. It is a strategic document, integrating the preservation of cultural heritage with the urbanistic vision of the Kaunas City General Plan. Implementation of the Management Plan relies on the Action Plan connected with the Kaunas City Strategic Plan and other municipal plans.

The mechanism for operation of the Executive and Advisory Councils and the Site Manager Unit is defined. It is foreseen that the Site Manager Unit will be established in the Kaunas City Municipality.

### V. Comparative Analysis

a) Of the 46 properties inscribed as part of the 20th century heritage on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2020, 17 properties are listed for their outstanding contributions to the development of modern urban areas and cities (e.g., Brasilia, Tel Aviv, Rabat, Asmara, etc.). *Nevertheless, the dynamic construction and modernisation of European capital cities in the interwar period is not represented. In this context, Modernist Kaunas demonstrates an outstanding example of a new European provisional capital city, which has witnessed an optimistic and fundamental transformation of urban life in the 20th century.*

b) The properties, already inscribed on the World Heritage List, illustrate classic icons of the Modern Movement and International Modernism (e.g., Bauhaus and its sites in Weimar and Dessau, the Berlin Modernism Housing Estates, Centennial Hall in Wrocław, Ivrea, etc.). *However, the multifaceted heritage of modernist architecture is not sufficiently represented. A few examples only demonstrate the diversity of modernism, including Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai, Asmara, and the Pampulha Modern Ensemble. In this context, Modernist Kaunas fills a gap by representing the plurality of modernism that was characteristic of the global early 20th century.*

More information:

<https://lrkm.lrv.lt/en/international-cooperation/kaunas-modernist-architecture-and-unesco>