*Letter of Eero Kangor to Project partners, October 7, 2021*

Dear friends and colleagues

When I look back on the seminars in Riga, Vilnius and Tallinn, it must be said that with the first seminar Aigars set such a high standard, which I first intended to maintain. It turned out differently and our colleagues in Riga and Vilnius had a chance to see the great job that has been done during the last 20 years under the guidance of Boris Dubovik and by numerous of his colleagues, architects, restorers, but also owners and entrepreneurs. Without leadership and vision it would have been difficult to achieve anything more than just regrets and endless stories about what we had before but have lost. It takes a great effort to change people‘s mindset, the „old“ way of doing things or rather – the Soviet yearning for replacing all ancient that is used to cover up cynical greed and self-interest. We have seen in all Baltic capitals that the Soviet occupation has devastated our heritage and has sometimes left irreparable wounds to its core values. However, in many places the Soviet times have left the Old Towns deteriorating more rapidly but intact and it has been the immediate post-Soviet liberation and lawless decade that has destroyed more than the indifferent decades before. Even on our Town Hall square there is a house that has remained in disrepair up until now and only 30 years after the re-establishment of our independence the owner has decided to restore it. Similar cases can most probably be made in Riga and Vilnius.

A lot has been achieved in Tallinn to uncover medieval, renaissance and baroque interior details in the houses in the old town as it was possible to witness during the seminar in Tallinn. These houses belonged to merchants in the Lower Town. In the Upper Town, where houses belonged to noble families, the Fire of 1684 destroyed the older heritage. Differently from Estonia and Latvia, Vilnius was the capital of a vast and powerful state which resulted in the concentration of great wealth and enabled the promotion of fine arts and architecture. This magnificent heritage has remained underground for a couple of centuries but has been rediscovered, unearthed and presented to the public in the reconstructed Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. In my opinion this has been one of the greatest achievements of our colleagues in Lithuania. Its importance for the local identity cannot be underestimated.

However, with every grand project, there is a danger to neglect and forget smaller and less „shining“ undertakings which have to be reminded again and again with unwavering consistency. Otherwise we are witnessing a more and more widening gap between the modern „strongholds“ of Scandinavian investors and the deteriorating and shabby wooden houses next to it. On the other hand, the deteriorating heritage offers still many opportunities to rediscover, uncover and learn from the untouched past and to restore with a better knowledge, technology and care that the future still has to offer. This makes it possible to plan and discuss more thoroughly and find better solutions. In my opinion there is a lot of potential and Gediminas and his colleagues have wisely understood that they have to contribute to heritage education and contacts with the youth when at the same time changing the general laissez faire-mindset remains a challenge.

But in the end, the material changes can only be achieved with material means and probably an effort also has to be made to acquire them for the realisation of good ideas and intentions. Unfortunately, I did not achieve an understanding of the institutional structure and interconnections, responsibilities and legal instruments for conservation of heritage in Vilnius and therefore it is difficult to assess the hindrances this might affect.

Riga that gathered great momentum during the 19th century and was to become a Baltic city with million people during the Soviet times has a magnificent heritage from both pre-modern and modern eras, especially from the art nouveau period. The UNESCO WHS area extends over 400 hectares and the buffer zone almost 1600 hectares which makes it the biggest in the Baltic WHS capitals. The bigger area and diverse heritage, complex ownership relations, tax regulations and perhaps sometimes contradictory legislation and a complicated institutional structure, has made it more and more difficult to manage. The theory of complex systems states that the law of entropy effects a constant growth in the complexity of systems until they develop to a certain level that brings forth a crash of the system, resulting in a less complex structure. To avoid such a crush and keep the complex system manageable, it has to be simplified all the time. This is a great challenge. When the rules to restore the heritage become to simple or too robust, the result might also be unsatisfactory. We all know how skilful architects are to bend the rules according to their customers‘ wishes which most often do not coincide with a sustainable management of heritage and the protection of historic values. But if the discussion is left too loose then in most cases the officials are left alone with their ideals which are efficiently buried under fluent and eloquent explanations of the impossibility and expense to achieve the ideals. Most often the compromise in heritage conservation means the destruction of some part or even most of the heritage. What can be done? As I understood the Riga municipality has concluded that the best solution for managing a vast heritage would be to start from a re-evaluation and differentiation of heritage. You have a better picture of the whole and have determined what is more important to preserve and what is less. Concentrating on the most valuable heritage is probably difficult but necessary action.

I hope this cooperation will continue with same fruitfulness, will gain maturity and have valuable and long-lasting results for all of us.

Yours sincerely

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