

It Is Necessary to Highlight Kaunas Colours

Interview author Vaida Milkova (daily "Kauno diena")

"We are spreading the mycelium of ambassadors to cover Kaunas as much as possible," architect Audra Kaušpėdienė vividly explains her current occupation upon becoming a president of ambassadors "Kaunas 2022".

Architects as Mediators

Ambassadors of the project "Kaunas, European Capital of Culture" (or "Kaunas 2022") are prominent artists and other actors of the cultural field disseminating information about the project, looking for the ways to enhance attractiveness of the city.

From among a group of 27 ambassadors, Mrs. Kaušpėdienė has been elected as president almost unanimously. Probably, upon discerning the ability characteristic for architects to find common ground with a variety of people, ambassadors entrusted a peculiar mediator's role to her.

"Architects, as true mediators, have united the whole creative and not only creative community of the city since a long time ago. They are able and can find common ground. Maybe this is due to the fact that we, architects, simply must communicate, work in teams, prove the importance of our ideas; otherwise, we will not see them realised," notes Mrs. Kaušpėdienė. According to her, the role of a mediator capable to unite fits architects very much.

It is symbolical that the president of ambassadors represents Kaunas architects since this community here is exceptional. "Our community has always been very vibrant and capable of maintaining friendly relationships among ourselves. This is not always the case with professional guilds as competition kills friendship". According to Mrs. Kaušpėdienė, the Day of Architects celebrated in Kaunas on 1 July is a powerful phenomenon when architects go into the streets, display their works.

The president of ambassadors of the Kaunas European Capital of Culture is elected for one year. Until 2022, his annual role, like the most important objectives and works of the year, will change. In Mrs. Kaušpėdienė's words, now one of the priority objectives is the designing and installation of the house or office for the project "Kaunas 2022" planned in the autumn. The former premises of Kaunas Tourist Information Centre (Laisvės al. 36) will have to change its robe. The terms of reference currently prepared for the interior tendering procedure could be best described by the word "contemporary". The office for the project "Kaunas 2022" will currently become an important venue to login and make a KAUNTact," the prominent architect is convinced.

The Number of Ambassadors Will Grow

It has been planned that the number of ambassadors will grow; new, young, and talented people will be searched who will look for the ways to integrate culture, business, technologies, and other fields for a common goal – to create a new face of Kaunas city and accelerate its cultural pace.

"The number of ambassadors should be finite, though – such as to enable to communicate. Besides, it is important for us to have communication media, actively express ourselves orally and in writing, constantly communicate lively. At the stage of ideas, each ambassador has

namely to put forward three proposals how he is prepared to contribute to the project, however, all of them may become contact lines, mediators between the “Kaunas 2022” team and the sphere they represent,” the interlocutor shares her vision. “When making a list of ambassadors, it is most important to knit the broadest possible net of culture, whereas ambassadors are the knots of that net. So far, the cultural action is taking place in Kaunas in a small area of the city. Decentralisation of culture and assurance of cultural rights for everyone is one of the most important project goals”.

According to Mrs. Kaušpėdienė, the net of cultural venues and events will expand its boundaries, move into yards, urban districts, and reach everyone willing and capable to contribute.

The Temporary Contemporary Capital

Why has the architect who has much work joined the net of ambassadors “Kaunas 2022”? “I joined this project because I liked the key idea of this programme “From Temporary to Contemporary”. It sounds better in English and encompasses much more. The game of words in constructing the conception in the English language has undoubtedly contributed to the victory of Kaunas! The second reason why I am here is hope to change the point of view at life in the city,” vigorously tells the interlocutor. “Architects always live a little ahead of time, whereas Kaunas seems to stay comfortable in the glorious past”.

A great number of projects associated with the return to the water went down the river, figuratively speaking. Mrs. Kaušpėdienė expects that values of the city highlighted by UNESCO will be realised and recognized by Kaunas residents themselves. “Deserted buildings of Kaunas modernism are a disaster for the city. It is uneasy when academic communities abandon historical spaces, although it is clear that the easiest way to preserve them is to use them, simply live in these houses. Actualisation of the modernistic architectural heritage is also recorded in the programme of the cultural capital. Inhabitation and culturisation of forgotten historical, industrial spaces is one of the objects of our project.

In this context “Kaunas 2022” even with temporary actions, among which is the establishment of HUBs (co-working hubs where representatives of different fields get together and work), may show a new way to live and act”, the president of the ambassadors project is convinced. The emergence of such centres is expected to slow down emigration from the city of young specialists who do not find a place for the implementation of own ideas here.

“They say that Kaunas is an eternally young city as it is full of students. Young people replace each other: they come here for a couple of study years, get diplomas, and leave. Visas of foreign students expire with the award of diplomas. The development of creative industries, assistance to small creative organisations at the beginning of their activities should change their vector of movement,” hopes the interlocutor.

City near the Water

One of the objectives of “Kaunas 2022” is an endeavour to use the unique geographical position of the city, natural resources (rivers, lagoons, parks, valleys, etc.). “Rivers and their confluence, one of the most unique values in the city, are waiting for the better times, though. A number of projects associated with return to the water went down the river, figuratively speaking. Kaunas has twice as much water than cities crossed by only one river. There are cities that do not have any river at all, no lake, and nevertheless they manage to make water pools. Meanwhile, us

having two rivers and a confluence in the same city, live with our backs turned towards them. Of course, this requires investments and nobody knows when they will pay off.

Bringing back of the rivers to the scenario of the city life requires huge willpower and investment resources, however, willingness and initiative of residents themselves in changing their environment in the city is great power. Communities have expressed themselves more strongly recently and the results have surprised even us. What is identified in the project as the revival of public spaces, places for people's creativity, free time, communication, sports, games, and family leisure has already been taking place here and now". According to the interlocutor, a pick-nick on the grass on the Nemunas Island or the revived Vytautas Park illustrates this very well.

The project "Kaunas 2022" is intended for the whole community of the city and its results are expected to be felt for a number of years. "All activity by 2022 is aimed to ensure that all this will not end up with this date – that all of this will persist, that the project will open up Kaunas and after the year 2022 the city will already be different, that people will look at it with different eyes and use it in a different way. That people will learn to live in the city in general, to the extent there is a city," the interlocutor is convinced. "I see in the context of the project "Kaunas 2022" a number of artistic, non-artistic, and other links. This project should link an ability to create, willingness to be in the city, be with others, and contribute. Now a person in the city frequently lacks a field for expression. The project "Kaunas 2022" is an excellent opportunity to be noticed, become involved".

Minimum and Maximum

According to Mrs. Kaušpėdienė, in Kaunas it is necessary to strengthen an ability to live in the city. "Now there is a number of people who leave to a suburban homestead on weekends. Maybe the city does not offer anything to keep people away from leaving? Apart from the supply of cultural life, a habit to have a coffee with a neighbour in a cafeteria, not in one's own kitchen should come up," the woman is convinced. "Courtyard Festival in Laisvės Avenue shows that people are learning this: they come out from their snugs and try to make friends. Of course, people complain that coffee costs much in cafeterias, whereas the cafeterias state that taxes are too high and it is difficult for them to survive. The Courtyard Festival has demonstrated that it is possible to have a coffee in the city space, not necessarily in the cafeteria – it is possible to set a table in the city. Even before some people already brought out a coffee table outdoors for a general klatch and now simply the scale has changed".

The maximum programme is that the shift of Kaunas from temporary to contemporary would really come true.

The project is also aimed to change the attitude, show forgotten and unnoticed until now places of the city. "Besides, a long-term goal of "Kaunas 2022" is to change everybody's self-worth, attitude towards the environment and oneself. This project should help Kaunas find its position, image, absolutely not associated with the place of the city in various ratings," expects the architect. According to her, this is taking place gradually – young people travel a lot and come back from London, Paris, New York, or Rome with a greater mindset of a city dweller than they left: "If earlier a person was slightly apprehensive, suspicious, with all doors closed, upon coming back s/he lives a much more open life. For example, in Paris, in many cases people live, to be more exact, sleep, wash up, and change clothes in a space of several square meters and live in the city: in stress, cafeterias, parks, theatres, and concerts. The city offers all that what makes it worth living in that city".

According to the interlocutor, an artists' community being more open leads more urban lifestyle. "Here, however, is a different problem: galleries and exhibition halls are crowded only during exhibition openings. After the opening they are empty. This should not be the case. It is necessary that one should find an artist in the exhibition display as long as the exhibition lasts: not only to inspect pictures, but also to make a selfie with the artist during the whole period of that exposition. An excellent illustration of that is rampage of Mindaugas Juodis and Audrius Gražys with their exhibition in the premises of the former footwear store Taurus in Laisvės Avenue. Over there, music was played day and night and people were having fun. This is a great example of cooperation between art and business". Mrs. Kaušpėdienė stressed that the owner of premises also benefited from that – a number of people even did not know that place before.

Asked what, in her eyes, the minimum and the maximum programme "Kaunas 2022" could be, the president of the project ambassadors replied, "The minimum programme is to implement the project programme. The maximum programme is that a shift of Kaunas from temporary to contemporary would actually come true. The implemented programme will establish premises for another sense of the city. "Kaunas 2022" must create infrastructure of culture and teach to use it. So that on expiry of the project the city would be different, that people would see it with other eyes, would create and live in it in another way. That they would live in the city".

Invited to the circle of "Kaunas 2022" ambassadors a year ago, the architect had to introduce her own vision of the city. Then she wrote, "Two decades as a capital of independent Lithuania changed Kaunas beyond recognition, however, left a sad sense of temporariness, nostalgia of those times that will never come back. The status of the capital of culture that we will seek in 2022 is the beginning of that time that never comes to an end. Since then we will count years of the new era for Kaunas. Kaunas forever".

"Today, the status of the cultural capital has already been achieved. It depends on us whether we will calculate years of the new era of Kaunas," the president of ambassadors urges everyone to assume responsibility for success of the project.

Idealists and Realists

Mrs. Kaušpėdienė discerns a chance for Kaunas also in the reconstruction of two theatres in Vilnius – the National Drama and the State Youth theatres. "As long as these reconstructions are going on or will be going on, performances will be held on different stages and this is a chance for Kaunas: to host these performances, the audience and not give it back. The same applies to the airport: take a part of passengers and not give them back. Would this be not natural? After all, Vilnius is being torn apart by such passenger flows," stated the interlocutor at a cup of coffee in one small restaurant of the Old Town.

Our conversation is joined by another ambassador of the project "Kaunas 2022", Birutė Letukaitė, leader of the Dance Theatre Aura, "It is still difficult for us to catch up with Vilnius in the sense of cultural developments – over there something happens all the time. Our foreign dancers say, "Oh, it would be great that Aura would be in Vilnius! As they go over there every weekend".

"To live in Kaunas, however, is much more convenient, much cheaper, and it is possible to get to the sea from here much faster than from Vilnius," Mrs. Kaušpėdienė emphasized the positive side of Kaunas with a smile. It is necessary to think well what the advantages are. It is convenient to live everywhere in Lithuania. Belgians, for example, go for work to France and

each day cover such a distance as across the whole Lithuania, however, they are not bothered about this at all”.

“We, residents of Kaunas, love Kaunas, attend events, but how to make Kaunas so attractive that people from other places would like to come here? Let us take two cities – New York and Washington – we would like it that Kaunas would be that incessantly bustling New York. Yet, how to make Kaunas find its peculiar colour?” wondered Ms. Letukaitė.

“It already has its colour, maybe it is slightly faded – it has to be brightened up. So far we have a two-dimensional Kaunas model and we have to make it three dimensional, the so-called 3D. All beauty of Kaunas will emerge,” Mrs. Kaušpėdienė is optimistically disposed. And she briefly mentions that upon becoming familiar with the team of the project “Kaunas 2022” she realized that all members thereof are idealists. “We will also need some realists who could help implementing a big programme – those who are able to put together, construct something, realise, and leave something lasting,” laughs the interlocutor.