

Kaunas Forts Join the International Family

Rūta KANOPKAITĖ

Europe grants a prospect to the desolated tsarist buildings

Today the three day partner conference under the project “Baltic Culture and Tourism-Route Fortresses” hosted by the city, has ended. Over two dozen of actual and potential partners from the states surrounding the Baltic Sea are taking part in this project. It addresses the problem of conversion of former military fortresses of Baltic region into the attractive tourist route with a developed network of culture and recreation services.

From fortress to fortress – across several states

Project participants from Poland, Germany, Latvia and Russia came to Kaunas. Partner conferences are scheduled twice a year till 2007. The launch session was organised previously by the Leading Partner – city Kostrzynie nad Odrą (Poland), followed by the second conference in Kaunas.

Hartmut Röder (Germany), the project coordinator, told that the derelict European fortification structures can be upgraded into an attractive tourist product. In his opinion, forts located in Baltic States, as well as in Poland, Finland, Kaliningrad Region, are all very captivating and can make a perfect tourist route networking countries around the Baltic Sea. “Development of the fortress network in the project should contribute to the regional development, to the balance between the Eastern and Western Europe. It maps out the key moments of culture, history, architecture, ecological attitude towards nature”, - H. Röder told.

Different panel teams were organized. One of them has a task of stocktaking and documenting the condition of fortification constructions, another is focusing on providing the blueprints for restoration and reconstruction, and the third is approaching the design and development of tourist routes. By the way, the Kaunas tourist agencies are already promoting the visits to military and underground Kaunas, and they gained great popularity.

Fortresses anticipate the ideas and money

Kaunas has nine forts in total. One of them, the eighth, is completely underground. The construction of forts commenced in the nineteenth century, following the edict of Tsar Alexander II of Russia, - and as a result Kaunas, situated in the Western borderland of the Empire, was turned into the first class military fortress. The entire city was encircled by the ring of defence fortifications, and construction of taller buildings was outlawed, to prevent them from becoming the targets for enemy’s artillery.

At the moment the forts 1, 2 and 4 are empty; the Fort 3 is rented to the automobilists. Lithuanian Army has plans to open the museum of martial technique in the Fort 6, and the Fort 7 hosts warehouses of the National Defence Voluntary Service. The Ninth Fort became famous already in Soviet era when the museum dedicated to Holocaust victims was founded there. Flow of numerous visitors, especially Jews, is continuing up to these days, the museum also organizes various events and exhibitions.

The experts acknowledge the first and fourth forts to be most applicable for cultural and artistic needs. Several years ago, the Action-Occupation “Pulse in Fort” was encouraged by the architect Audrys Karalius at the Fort 1, in the attempt on focusing the attention of public and authorities to its condition and prospects of recovery.

“Forts of Kaunas fortress have different hosts – Ministries of Culture, Defence, Kaunas Municipality, State Property Fund. Fort 8 is in a problematic situation – it does not belong to any entity as there are no overground constructions, thus it is treated merely as a land plot. Fort 1 is virtually within the lands

of the Municipality of Kaunas Region. As a result, we still have numerous outstanding bureaucratic formalities”, - told Rimvydas Strazdas, the chief specialist from the Division of Development Programme Management of the Municipality.

First step is important

In this INTERREG program project, Kaunas is represented not only by the Municipality but also by the Centre of Military History of the Vytautas Magnus University, and the Institute of Architecture and Construction of Kaunas University of Technology. Budget of the project totals to 2,4 million euros. Kaunas' share of this project will receive 150 thousand euros in funding. Over two thirds of funds are granted from the European Community, whereas the Municipality is also co-financing.

“The funds will be used for implementation of the trial project in one of the forts. This is just the starters, the springboard. The most important outcome is that the successful implementation of the INTERREG project facilitates an easier building of the direct financing streams from the EU Structural Funds. Affiliation of private structures in the regeneration of Kaunas forts is very welcome”, - noted Rimvydas Strazdas.

As he said, while taking forward the project of Baltic military fortresses, Kaunas needs the support and consultations from qualified specialists - project partners, as we still lack the necessary experience. “Former military fortresses in Germany have already a lasting experience of arranging the festivals and art events. This is a favourite place for clubs of historical costume fans for their pageants and re-enactments, providing an excellent authentic background”, - told R. Strazdas.

The most numerous group of partners in this project is from Poland – cities of Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki, Gdansk, Kostrzynie nad Odrą. The latter city is a Leading Partner of the Baltic fortress project. The old fortress in this city, built by Germans, is half-ruined. But Dr. Andrzej Kunt, the representative of Kostrzynie municipality, says Poles expect its successful restoration while implementing this international project.