

Mapping Visaginas:	International Summer School on Sources of Urbanity in Post-Industrial Cities
Organization:	Laboratory of Critical Urbanism, European Humanities University
Date & Place:	20.9. – 3.10. 2015, Visaginas, Lithuania
Target group:	Students in Architecture, Urban Planning, Cultural Studies, European Studies, History, Urban Studies, Communication, Design, Sociology, Anthropology, Geography and Communication Design from Germany, Lithuania, Belarus and beyond
Certificate:	A 5 ECTS certificate will be provided after handing in a final paper
Application:	CV (1 page), Letter of Intent (1 page), recommendation
Fee:	International participants 975€, from Lithuania & Belarus 60 €
Scholarships:	DAAD provides 12 GoEast scholarships for participants from Germany
Info & Contact:	www.criticalurbanism.org , Dr. Benjamin Cope: urbanism@ehu.lt
Deadline:	31.5.2015

Mapping Visaginas

International Summer School on Sources of Urbanity in Post-Industrial Cities

This Summer School is organized by the European Humanities University's Laboratory of Critical Urbanism in order to bring together students from Germany, Belarus and Lithuania in a two-week course on mapping social practice in relation to the built environment of the Lithuanian post-industrial town of Visaginas – a former satellite of a nuclear power plant erected in 1975. The school will be composed of a mix of lectures, seminars, excursions and supervised fieldwork, during the course of which the students will be guided in the process of how to research the social and spatial relations of contemporary Central- and Eastern Europe. The product of the students' work at the school will be to create an exploratory mapping project of a particular dimension of Visaginas and to develop a scenario of its future development.

In many respects Visaginas can be taken as a showcase of the risks involved in the transition from a town reliant on an external top-down allocation of resources and work force, to a town compelled to survive in a competitive environment of a multilateral and multi-scalar determination of resources and workplaces. The urban structure and services of Visaginas were planned and built from scratch in the context of the short-term economic abundance related to the project of the adjacent Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (1975-2009). For this reason, Visaginas was considered to be one of Soviet Lithuania's best examples of a centrally planned mono-functional urban unit, highly successful in terms of architectural decisions, quality of living and human capital. From the 1990s – due to the gradual shutting down of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant as a consequence of Lithuania's EU accession, largely determined by the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 – the town has stopped growing, with concomitant social phenomena of growing unemployment, dwellers' anxiety about the future and around 20 percent population decline.

This situation is made even more troublesome by the combination of the town's ethnic and professional composition. Because of rapid Soviet-mode urbanization, Visaginas' population historically consisted principally of nuclear scientists, engineers, construction workers and their family members brought from right across the Soviet Union. What was then perceived as a Soviet elite, today primarily leads to Visaginas being labeled as a problematically Russian town. For inhabitants of the town, meanwhile, the prestige of the former nuclear power plant and the fact that the town's housing blocks were collectively constructed by inhabitants in the 1970s facilitated local belonging and an identification with place. However, it is not clear what role the engineer's habitus and a collective identification with place can play in the new context of the present. From this perspective, Visaginas today can be treated as a perfect case for defining and developing sources of urbanity in shrinking cities in post-socialist conditions, as well as beyond.

How to map Visaginas?

The identification of sources of urbanity is a key task for a variety of locations in different regions of today's world in which relations of production, recreation and welfare are being radically transformed across multiple scales. The use of an existing built structure and applying new social technology for keeping urban areas alive and well-integrated depends on two major variables – a town's infrastructural and industrial history, on the one hand, and the major structural vulnerabilities a particular location encounters on the other. This Summer School's aim is to qualitatively scrutinize and confront these two variables as manifested in Visaginas and to present them in the form of conceptual maps. And, further on, to propose future scenarios for the town in a form of soft planning interventions and community projects.

The town's infrastructural and industrial history is characterized by the following features:

- A high density built area projected predominantly for residence and service uses, with larger sources of employment located beyond the town;
- An extensive presence of planned contact zones in the town, such as Soviet style public art, small plazas, micro green areas, a pedestrian avenue, and forest areas and the Visaginas lake used for leisure activities;
- A rich investment in terms of materials into residential buildings, buildings for public services and public space facilities;
- An 'Engineer's habitus' (pro- natural science, scientific progress, nuclear power, detraditionalization, etc.) as a dominant identity mark of the local population;
- A multiethnic and multilingual population with a broad common use of the Russian language;

The following features constitute the major structural vulnerabilities Visaginas encounters:

- The lack of a large employer such as the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in the near future;
- A decline in the uses of the infrastructure of educational institutions' (schools and kindergartens) as the major sign of depopulation and the major threat to urban structure;
- Mall solutions for the allocation of retail and services in the town, characteristic of Lithuania's urban economies;
- Labor migration and the growth of the number of empty flats in the town;
- A gradual hollowing out of local identity based primarily on professional belonging and the short-term history of the town's construction, rather than on national culture and tradition.

What to map in Visaginas?

Based on the specificity of the case, the Summer School proposes to focus on four distinct, yet intertwined dimensions, which perform crucial roles in the development trajectory of Visaginas' urban structure and can serve as keys for re-tooling this trajectory.

1) Mapping the Nuclear Dimension

The Ignalina Nuclear Power Station and its various links with the Town

Although at a distance of 10km from Visaginas, the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant was fundamental to the town's development both in terms of providing work and pride for inhabitants, and directly or indirectly supporting many of the town's institutions. Now the plant is in the process of decommissioning, a dual process of disconnecting the town and the power plant can be witnessed: on the one hand, the plant is no longer able to support the town's infrastructure as it once did and, on the other, there is also a tendency to treat the plant and the town as separate entities requiring different political strategies.

This group will reverse this tendency by performing a multi-dimensional mapping of the town's relations to the nuclear power plant. It will analyse the town's connections to the power plant in social, administrative and infrastructural terms and examine how these have changed through time. It will explore the changing role of the power plant in creating social identities in the town, and how local attitudes to the power plant contrast with those imposed from other spatial levels. On this basis, the group will develop an alternative proposition for commemorating the role of the plant in the town's heritage, beyond that of its radioactive legacy.

2) Mapping the Cultural Dimension

Infrastructures of Culture in a Context of Shrinking

One of the remarkable features of Visaginas today is the conversion of social welfare institutions, such as schools and kindergartens that due to shrinkage no longer serve their intended function, into sites of a variety of cultural initiatives. This phenomenon raises questions of what are the conditions, potentials and challenges of culture in the particular context of the town, and also of whether the models of functioning of culture observed in Visaginas might form tendencies that will also be deployed in other locations.

In this group, we will map different cultural initiatives in their relation to the social, political and built environments that have emerged as a result of Visaginas' geographical location, history, shrinking population and current political situation. We also investigate how different initiatives understand culture in different ways, and thus seek to develop a fuller sense of the potentials and limitations of culture functioning as a tool for change in the town. On this basis, we develop a proposition for the development of the role of culture in Visaginas.

3) Mapping the Public Dimension

The Central Pedestrian Street: Sedulinos Alėja

The central pedestrian walkway, Sedulinos Alėja, that runs right through the heart of Visaginas is at the same time both a key element in the town's well-designed, even decorative planned structure (a high-quality public space and the 'main stage' of the city, connecting important institutions and merging social groups) and, with its empty commercial premises, never completed shells of buildings and now partially functioning public spaces also a dramatic sign of the town's interrupted urban development. As such the avenue constitutes both a unique case of modernist urban design and also poses wider questions as to the future roles of such central pedestrian walkways in contemporary urban contexts in which commercial functions have largely been displaced to out-of-centre shopping malls and socialising has to a great extent moved on-line.

This group will map the central pedestrian walkway of Sedulinos Alėja to explore the details of how it was planned, and the changing configurations that have led to its current form. Within the frame of this, the group will examine how the street was planned as a public space, in comparison with the places in which people actually meet in Visaginas today. On the basis of these mappings the group will develop propositions for alternative ways to engage citizens, especially youth, in future activities in this space.

4) Mapping the Historical Dimension

Mobility, Migration & Museumification

Visaginas is often conceptualized as a city 'without roots', rapidly built during the Soviet times in a sparsely populated north-eastern corner of the Aukštaitija region in Lithuania. Such a conceptualization depicts the city as bounded and detached from the local Lithuanian context, and can serve as a source of political grievances over the question of who is entitled to 'ownership' of the city. At present, an important factor influencing the development of the town is a high level of mobility associated with Lithuania's accession to the EU and the opening of borders for labour migration.

This group will map various aspects of mobility and migration to and from Visaginas through time, attempting to trace the connections and disconnections with other locales across different scales (the region, the state, the Soviet Union, the EU). While drawing on the themes of temporal and spatial boundaries, it will focus on how such boundaries could be approached, represented and narrated in a potential museum of Visaginas.

The Team

Felix Ackermann is a historian and anthropologist trained in cultural and urban studies, since 2011 DAAD assoc. professor for applied humanities at EHU. In his research he focuses on the spatial dimension of the production of knowledge in different academic disciplines dealing with urban spaces.

Dalia Čiupailaitė is a sociologist interested in urban studies and architecture. She defended recently her PhD at the Faculty of Sociology at Vilnius University. In her PhD research she focused on the new housing developments and methodological approaches to phenomena of gated communities in Vilnius.

Benjamin Cope is acting director of the EHU Laboratory of Critical Urbanism. He teaches Courses on Localised Cultural Industries, Critical Cartography and Gender and Space at EHU.

Inga Freimane is a PhD student of the University Northumbria working on the Human Geography of Emotions. In her MA thesis she explored historical layers of memory in Visaginas.

Miodrag Kuč is an interdisciplinary artist and urban theorist trained as architect / urban planner in various cultural settings. His work explores the role of ephemeral structures in uncertain urban conditions and spatial appropriations of marginal social groups.

Siarhei Liubimau teaches since 2010 as a Lecturer in Sociology, Urban studies and Media studies at European Humanities University, Vilnius. Siarhei is also a former fellow at Bauhaus-Dessau Foundation, Weimar; Central European University, Budapest; and the Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna.

Alla Pigalskaya is head of Media Department at European Humanities University. In her PhD she focused on the representation of everyday life in Soviet poster art, which she defended at Vilnius Academy of Arts in 2013. At EHU she is responsible for the further developed of Design education of Belarusian students.

Simone Schöler & Steffen Schumann are designers. Steffen is a co-founder of the communication agency anschlaege.de. Together they teach visual communication and society at Kunsthochschule Berlin Weißensee. In their work they focus on the impact of design on the shape of public spaces.

Anna-Veronika Wendland is a historian focusing on the urban history of Central- and Eastern Europe currently working on a history of technology of Soviet nuclear towns. She is responsible for research coordination at Herder Institute's direction and is a lecturer at Justus Liebig University Giessen.

Partners:	Municipality of Visaginas, Herder Institut Marburg, Kunsthochschule Berlin Weißensee & EHU Center for German Studies
Support:	German Academic Exchange Service DAAD & Erasmus+
Language:	English and Russian are the common working languages. Some knowledge of Lithuanian, Belarusian or Polish will be helpful.
Workload per week:	15h lectures and seminars, 15h group work, 5h individual work
Fee:	participants from LT & BY 60 €, all other participants 975€
Costs covered:	Study materials, accommodation in hostel, joint breakfasts & dinners in Visaginas, weekend excursion to Vilnius
Application:	CV (1 page), Letter of Intent (1 page), short recommendation letter
Scholarships:	DAAD is funding 12 GoEast scholarships for German students or students enrolled in Germany (incl. 650€ covering fee, 140€ daily allowances and a 250€ travel grant). German students have to apply both via urbanism@ehu.lt and at DAAD directly by 31.5.2014