

**Ecclesiastical identity in a nuclear
monotown.
Faith in Visaginas**

ORTHODOX AND CATHOLIC CHURCHES AS AN INSTRUMENT OF
POST-SOVIET IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION

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PART 0.

0.1 Introduction

The religious environment of former Soviet states, including Lithuania, was deeply affected by the Marxist-Leninist ideology, which aimed at eradicating religion to support the broader socialist transformation (Froese, 2008). However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a religious revival emerged even in places where urban planning was predetermined by communist ideologies - monotowns. This research will focus on one such case - a Lithuanian nuclear monotown, Visaginas, and ecclesiastical Churches established between 1992 and 1996.

The investigation in this paper attempts to answer the question: “How do the ecclesiastical Churches in Visaginas uncover the post-Soviet religious revival and identity reconstruction?”. It aims to shed light on the various approaches of the case studies to reclaim spiritual and cultural identity. Beyond the physicality of the buildings - from the adaptive reuse of Soviet infrastructure to symbolic architectural expression, the writing offers the conceptual lens of comparison based on the power dynamics included in the development processes. Based on top-down and bottom-up theories, the research explores how power and identity were negotiated throughout the revival of religious practices and spaces in a post-Soviet urban landscape.

Historical background

The Soviet government saw religion as an obstacle to establishing a secular, collectivist society. It actively pursued a suppression policy based on beliefs that religion's extirpation would advance the socialist revolution (Dunn, 1977). According to Michael Bourdeaux (1990) in "Gorbachev, Glasnost and the Gospel", the Soviet government considered the Catholic Church one of the most critical enemies in the post-war years, perceiving its members as potential agents of the West; however, according to him, Lithuania was affected less by Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign than other regions of the USSR. Looking at the case of Catholicism in Lithuania, the efforts of the regime to weaken the influence of the religion included confiscation of Church property, repression of the clergy, and widespread atheistic propaganda (Streikus, 2002). However, these actions were not powerful enough.

In 1954-1957, Lithuanian political activist B. Pušinis heavily advocated and protected the Catholic Church of Lithuania through mediations, suggesting not only the reconstruction of existing Churches but also the construction of new ones. However, the Communist Party of Lithuania, with First Secretary A. Sniečkus, strongly opposed the proposals (Streikus, 2002).

Orthodox movement in Soviet Lithuania was considered a lesser threat than Catholicism. The new government expected the Church to follow already conformed to the regime Moscow Patriarchate and convert into a bastion of the fight against Catholicism (Melianas, 2012). With every step of the new archbishops being controlled by authorities and with the consolidation of the Soviet system in Lithuania, authorities experienced no issues with the loyalty of the Orthodox Church (Laukaitytė, 2002).

Monotown urbanism

Designed as a showcase of socialist urban planning and values of collectivism and secularism, based on single-industry monotowns were constructed all across the former USSR (Strange, 2019). Correspondingly, the construction of religious buildings could not be executed in these new settlements - the most striking manifestations of Soviet ideology. Instead, cultural centres, administrative buildings, and facilities promoting Soviet values were featured (Ackermann, Cope, Liubimau, 2016).

One of the examples of the monotown phenomenon is Visaginas (former Sniečkus), a Lithuanian town developed alongside the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant. In 1975, Visaginas was established, envisioning the Soviet nuclear model city. The master plan of the town followed the standard monotown urban approach to deliberately exclude religious spaces, reflecting the Soviet strategy of eliminating religion from newly developed settlements (Baločkaitė, 2010). However, as the Soviet regime was losing control, closer to the collapse of the USSR, religious expressions began to unfold in social and cultural environments. The emergence of new Churches became a breath of fresh air, a symbol of cultural and national revival, signifying the resilience of communities' identity.

Dynamics in post-soviet religious architecture

The decades of repression could not erase the religious institutions and beliefs in Lithuania and other former Soviet states. As a result, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a revival of spiritual practices (Ališauskienė & Schröder, 2016). While part of existing monotowns continued to grapple with inherited Soviet legacy, some embraced the new narratives by integrating religious heritage into their evolving identities (Dovydaitytė, 2022). This post-Soviet transformation became a complex and important step of the process, as it fostered the dynamic interplay of urban planning, ideology, identity, and religious revival.

The selected case studies of Churches erected in Visaginas - the Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist (Orthodox), St. Martyr Panteleimon Church (Orthodox), and St. Paul Church (Catholic) - illustrate the incorporation of traditional elements, the “upcycle” of the existing urban elements, and contemporary adaptations, manifesting the redefinition of urban space in a post-Soviet context.

o.2 Theoretical frameworks

This research explored the intersection of religion, architecture, and identity in the phenomenon of monotown within a specific regional context. It included a review of existing literature, a site visit, and several interviews with the local archive worker - Andrey Safronov, architect - Ramūnas Beinortas, and the religious leader of orthodox community - Iosif Zeteishvili. Due to the limited existing research, the interviews and the site visit achieved a more in-depth understanding of the topic providing the insider perspective.

The collected data was processed by analysing selected case studies and fostering a conclusion based on documented findings.

University research ethics and regulations were considered throughout the research, and HREC Approval and Informed Consent (IC) processes were completed.

The analysis was supported by quantitative and qualitative approaches for the information gathering and idea definition. The strategy endorsed the discussion about the influence of religious spaces' re-emergence on monotowns' urban identity.

“Part 1. A town without memory, a people with alien identity” explores the urban, social, and cultural evolution of Visaginas as a nuclear monotown in the broader context of Soviet urban planning and post-Soviet transformation. It investigates the political and social shifts that happened after the collapse of the USSR and strongly affected the monotown. Additionally, this part of the writing looks into the existing landscape of the town, focusing on the loss of its identity, demographic composition, alienation, and industrial decline, which resulted in the construction of selected religious case studies.

“Part 2: Setting the Foundations of Faith. Familiarisation” presents the investigation and analysis of three selected case studies of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches based on the conducted interviews. Ecclesiastical religious branches were the first to be established in Visaginas and were chosen for this analysis as the most common and popular among the town’s demographics (fig. 1)(Ališauskienė 2002). St. Apostle Paul Church is the first and only Catholic Church erected due to the formation of the first parish in Visaginas. A second case study is the Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Saint John, located in the reused structure, tucked tightly between two apartment buildings, and initially owned by the INPP. The latest built case study is Orthodox St. Martyr Panteleimono Church, erected on the foundation of the residential multi-storey building, which was also gifted to the parish by INPP. Direct observations of spatial configurations, material conditions and symbolic elements were possible due to the site visit and provided access to archival photographs.

“Part 3: Tracing tradition, reclaiming space” presents a comparative analysis focused on the decision-making and construction processes of each case study discussed in Part 2. The writing looks into built spaces as a product of the influence of power dynamics, institutional and community-based reinforcement, historical narratives, and social practices through the lens of top-down and bottom-up theories.

Overall, despite the limits of the academic literature on this topic, based on first-hand experience of being an inhabitant of Visaginas, this study contributes by providing focused research on the unique approaches and circumstances, fostering the transformations of Visaginas and the influence of three case studies - religious spaces established there between 1992-1996. This study expands the understanding of the monotown phenomenon, focusing on its ability to reclaim identity on different scales (local and national) through the revival of religious practices and redefinition of preplanned urban space.

No.	Religious community	The number of members in 1999	The number of members in 2001	Percent
1	Russain Orthodox	8000	8000	40.2
2	Roman Catholic	7000	7000	22.8
3	Old Believers	no data	200	no data
...

Fig. 1: Religious communities of Visaginas and numbers of their members in 1999 and 2001. Created by Anastasija Grigorjeva, 2025.

PART 1. A town without memory, a people with an alien identity.

Surrounded by the stigma, controversy, and criticism, the phenomenon of monotown stands out as a valuable subject for research due to the unique combination of standardisation and artificiality applied to its urban planning. The urban environment of monotowns reflected planners' desire not only to foster industrialisation but also to promote Soviet norms and unification of the built environment across the republics, thus weakening the traditional cultures and contributing to denationalisation (Ackermann, Cope, Liubimau, 2016).

By the 1970s, new energy programs in the Baltic states had sparked the formation of another 'atomgrad' in Lithuania (Högselius, 2006). Visaginas was founded as a satellite city of the Ignalina nuclear power plant (INPP), just 6km from the atomic giant. Since the location for Visaginas was established as a tabula rasa with no previous urban inscription, it drew the town closer to a socialist welfare utopia (Baločkaitė, 2010). Thus, the memory of the monotown had no historical reinforcement.

However, due to the operational risks, after prolonged requests by the Lithuanian Green movement and considerations, newly independent Lithuania agreed to decommission INPP in 1999 to become a member of the EU (Baločkaitė, 2010). This decision was made following the disaster of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant (1986), and the INPP was supposed to shut down by 2009, putting the town's short-existing memory and legacy to the ground.

Visaginas' population mainly consisted of young professionals with different backgrounds recruited from across the USSR. (Šliavaitė, 2005) The priority of new inhabitants was to follow the socialist agenda - provide and improve the energy structure. As a result, assimilation and the formation of families came second to this day, causing a sense of cultural displacement. Nowadays, residents of Visaginas - an 'ethnic island' - remain socially and culturally distinct from the rest of Lithuanian society, reinforcing the alienation (Fig. 2) (Baločkaitė, 2010).

Nationality	1979	1989	1995	1999	2001	
Lithuanians	5,8	7,7	14	15	14,96	
Russians	66,2	64,2	59,4	55	52,43	
Others	28	28,1	26,6	30	32,61	

Fig. 2: Nationalities in Visaginas. Author: Algirdas Kavaliauskas, 2003.

Weak historical and cultural ties to Lithuania contribute to the isolation of the inhabitants caused by unique demographics and unaddressed multiculturalism. Thus, most inhabitants remain Russian-speaking (Balockaitė, 2010). The nuclear past is usually perceived as a problem rather than a techno-cultural identity and also contributes to the disintegration of the population (Poškienė, Denisenko, Lokšová, Fashchanka, Haltner, 2016).

Trying to root itself, Visaginas faced the challenges of redefining its cultural and social landscape. One deliberate attempt to introduce cultural and national identity was the establishment of both Orthodox and Catholic parishes in the 1990s. This marked the crucial transition period of monotown due to Lithuania's regaining of independence and a major political, economic, and cultural shift.

Newly established religious practices were in demand due to the spiritual vacuum left by the Soviet era. They also manifested in social cohesion, which provided emotional and social support to the community (Kuznecovienė, 2020). The Orthodox Church helped the Russian-speaking community establish a sense of belonging within a town, while the Catholic Church set ties with national identity.

PART 2. Setting the Foundations of Faith. Familiarization.

The information in this section was primarily drawn on first-hand narratives from the local newspaper articles - Laimonas Abarius, the orthodox parish newspaper – Ustimenko, Galina Novikova, the local archive worker – Andrey Safronov, architect – Ramūnas Beinortas, and the religious leader of orthodox community - Iosif Zeteishvili. All interviewed people were directly involved in the Church's design and construction processes. Due to the limited archival documentation and localised nature of the subject, these few sources provided essential, in-depth, insider perspectives.

2.1 Belonging and isolation – a sacred outsider. *Visaginas St. Paul Church (1995)*

The history of the Catholic parish of Visaginas took place in 1988, founded through the dedication, perseverance, and chance partnership of Jadvyga Rinkevičiūtė and Leonarda (Lionė) Petkievič, who met while attending masses in Dūkštas. With the effort of residents, the parish committee, and priest Petras Tarvydas, 45 signatures were collected the following year to secure the official registration of the Catholic religious community in the settlement of Sniečkus (now Visaginas). This process granted approval for the construction of the first Church in the town (Abarius, 2006).

Sniečkus Catholic parish was officially established on November 15th, 1989, and the first Holy Mass was celebrated on December 10th of the same year. However, it was set up by parishioners in a very unconventional space - the small modest hall of the dormitory of local Vocational Technical School (Abarius, 2006). The space was inadequate to accommodate the growing community, and religious services were relocated in July 1992 to the current city council meeting hall (Abarius, 2006).

The construction of Visaginas' first Catholic Church began under the leadership of the newly appointed pastor, priest Vytautas Rapalis. Looking for the most suitable location, several sites were in his consideration - a wooded area near the town's library on Taikos Street and the area dedicated for the 14-storey residential building on the same street in the 1st microdistrict (current site of the Orthodox Church); however, both were deemed unsuitable. The final choice was made following the persuasion of the mayor of Visaginas. The intersection of

Sedulinos and Veteranų streets was chosen for its central and elevated location within the town's urban structure (fig. 5). Based on the original urban plans made by Soviet architects, this location was initially designated for civic functions, intended for a central park, an alley, and a cultural centre (fig. 3, 4). The decision to introduce religious landmarks in a space not intended for sacred architecture under Soviet planning was a bold and symbolic statement, reinforcing the Church's presence as a cultural and spiritual focal point (Beinortas, 2025). A natural disaster determined the Church's location. In 1992, a severe storm devastated the planned recreational area, uprooting the pine forest and, in effect, clearing space for construction. That same year, the Visaginas Catholic parish was given the name of St. Paul the Apostle. (Abarius, 2006).

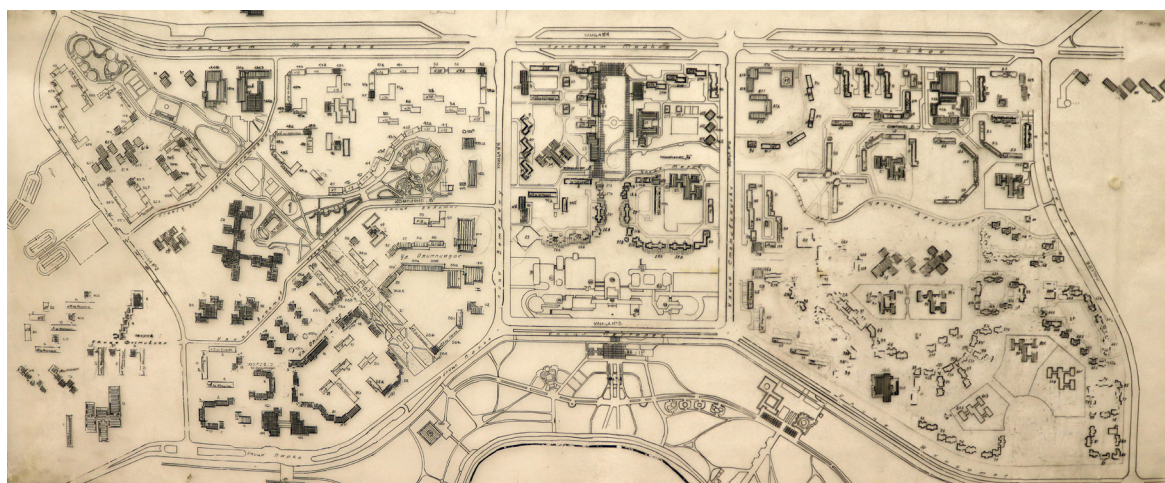


Fig. 3: Proposed urban plan of Visaginas. Visaginas museum archive. Author n.d., n.d.

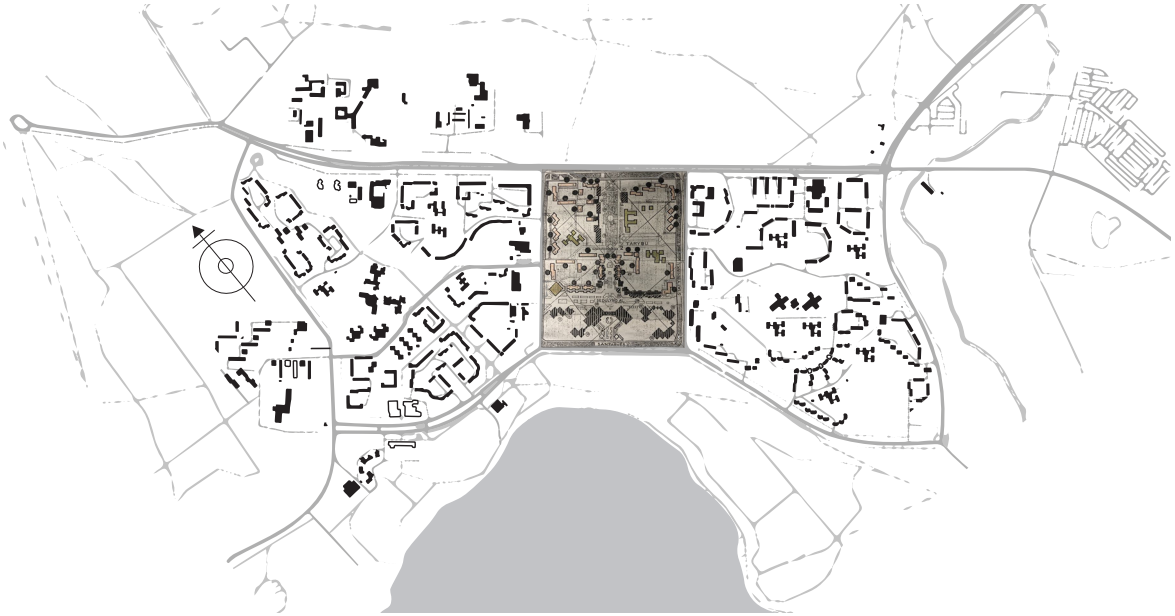


Fig. 4: Proposed urban plan of Visaginas. Edited by Anastasija Grigorjeva, 2025.



Fig. 5: Current urban plan of Visaginas - Visaginas St. Paul Church highlighted. Author Anastasija Grigorjeva, 2025.

Pastor Petras Tarvydas launched an architectural competition in 1990, collaborating with the Lithuanian Union of Architects, and received four design proposals, each awarded 1,000 rubles. Due to decades of state-imposed atheism under Soviet rule, this was the first religious (Church) project for all participating architects. A committee of priests, including Petras Tarvydas, A. Čeponis, M. Savickas, and K. Kindurys, selected the winning design of young brothers' architects Ramūnas and Jaunius Beinortas. However, as the parish's leadership changed, the design underwent significant modifications. Since 1992, the concerns of building the new Church fell on the shoulders of the new pastor, Vytautas Rapalis. The architects, lacking prior experience in religious architecture, sought guidance from Lithuanian artist Vytautas Kazimieras Jonynas, a specialist in Church architecture who had worked extensively in the United States and pre-Soviet Lithuania (Beinortas, 2025).

The selected project reflected a balance between modernity and Soviet urban inheritance, embodying the innovative industrial character of Visaginas (Beinortas, 2025). The standard Catholic Basilica layout can be recognised in the ground floor plan (fig. 8, 9). The basement-level excavation (fig. 6, 7) allowed to elevate the structure further, enhancing its monumental presence within the urban landscape (Beinortas, 2025).

Following both practical needs and financial constraints the design was changed multiple times. However, the master plan of the Church always envisioned a ceremonial hall, a parish residence and a funeral hall since none of these facilities were available in the town (fig. 10).

The construction process encountered several challenges. Following Lithuania's declaration of independence, the economic blockade in 1990 affected the supply and accessibility of construction materials (fig. 13). Additionally, the frequent changes of pastors in some cases led to unauthorised alterations in the design (Beinortas, 2025). Notably, interior design modifications included concealing construction beams behind plastic panelling and altering central lighting arrangements (Beinortas, 2025).

The construction works began in 1992, relying on funding from the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, local businesses, and private donors. The INPP took the role of the general contractor, and the Construction and Installation Board No. 2, led by Mr. V. Suchkov, became the executor (Abarius, 2006). This collaboration guaranteed high construction standards and performance based on experience. While most materials were available locally, the metal framework was imported from Finland, as the Soviet-era Lithuanian industry lacked the necessary technological precision for its production (Beinortas, 2025). Four years forward, in 1996, the first Christmas Mass was celebrated in the newly built, though still unfinished, St. Paul the Apostle Parish Church (Beinortas, 2025).

Additional changes were introduced over time. The first of them, dated to 2003, under the initiative of priest Vidas Smagurauskas, included a bell that had arrived from Vilnius Cathedral. To this day it is calling the faithful to Mass and celebrations. Further, the Church's liturgical and musical experience was enhanced with the installation of the organ by the efforts of priest Vidmantas Rudokas between 2008 -2010 (Abarius, 2006).

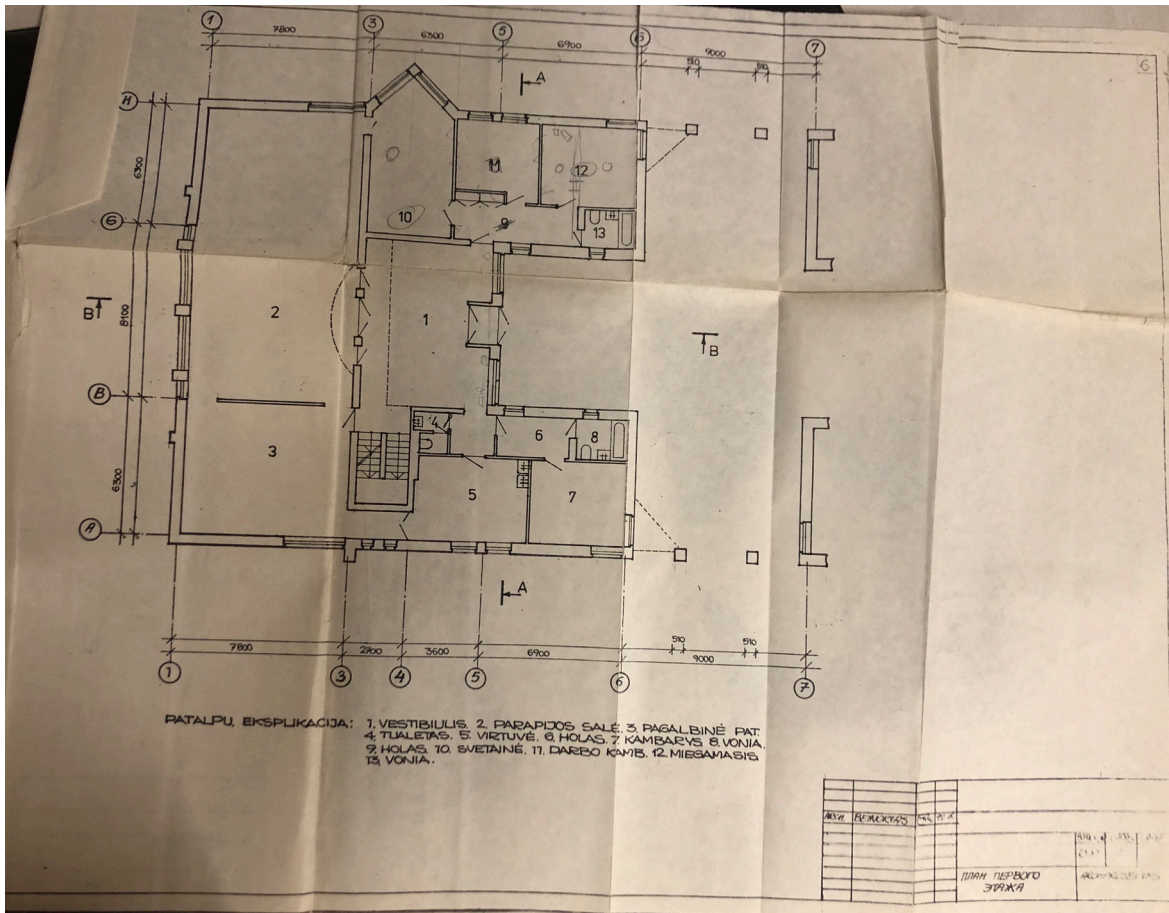


Fig. 8: Ground floor plan of Visaginas St. Paul Church. Author Ramūnas Beinortas, 1990.
 1 - Common use space, 2 - Living room, 3 - Bedroom, 4 - Bathroom, 5- Balcony, 6 - Double height space.

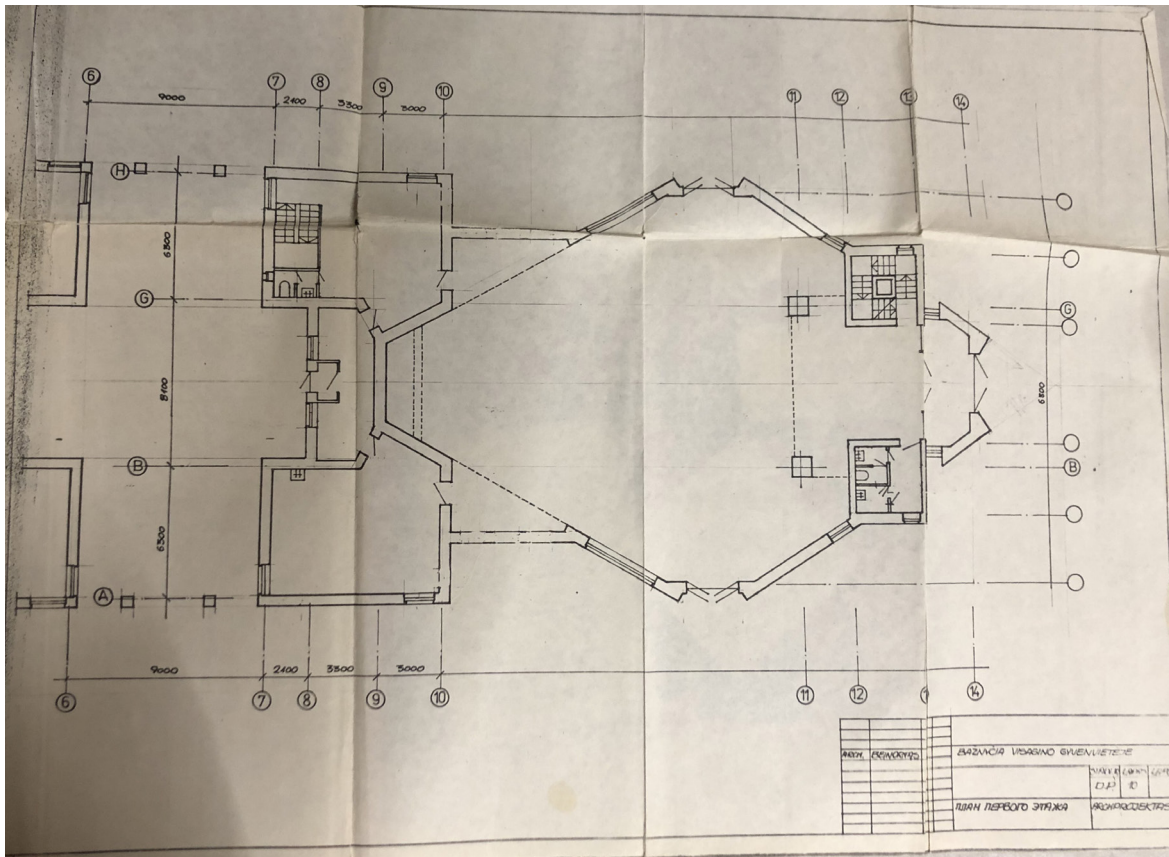


Fig. 9: Ground floor plan of Visaginas St. Paul Church. Author Ramūnas Beinortas, 1990.

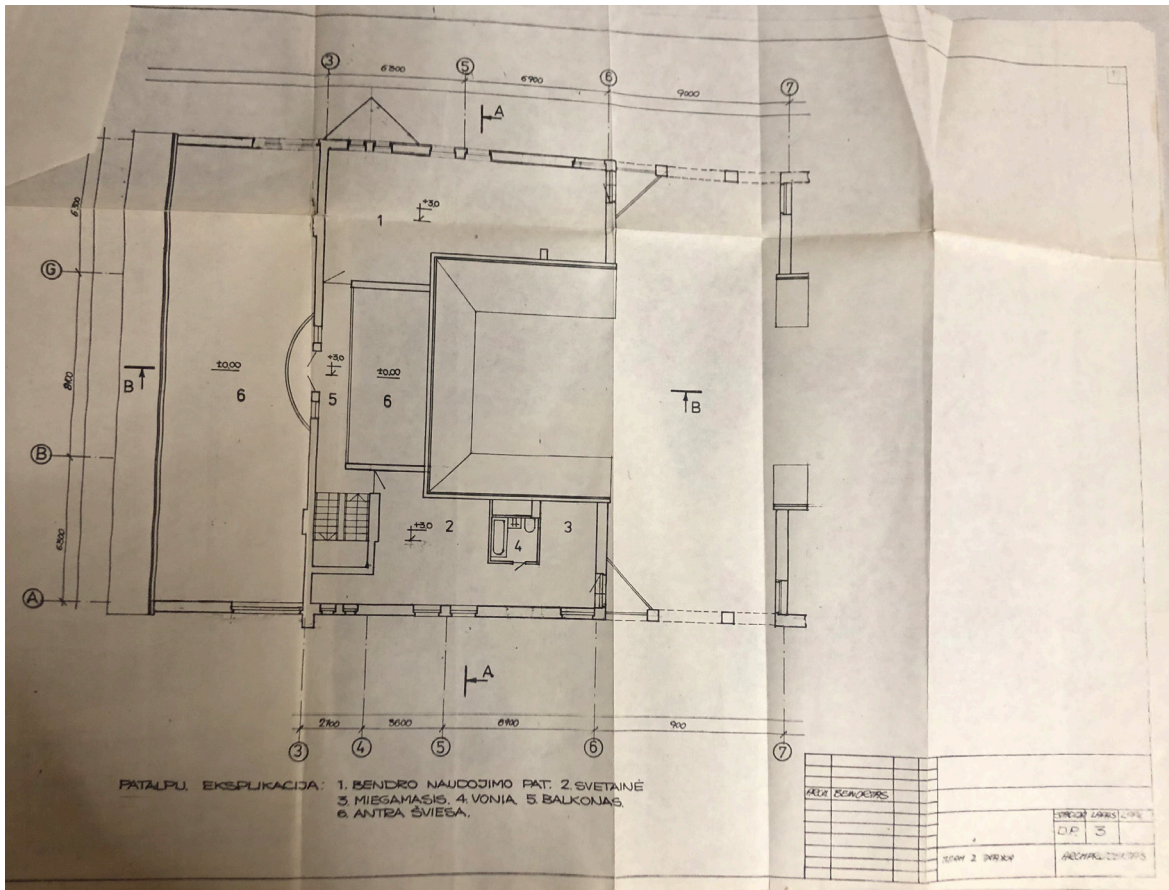


Fig. 10: First floor plan of Visaginas St. Paul Church. Author Raamūnas Beinortas, 1990.
 1 - Common use space, 2 - Living room, 3 - Bedroom, 4 - Bathroom, 5- Balcony, 6 - Double height space.

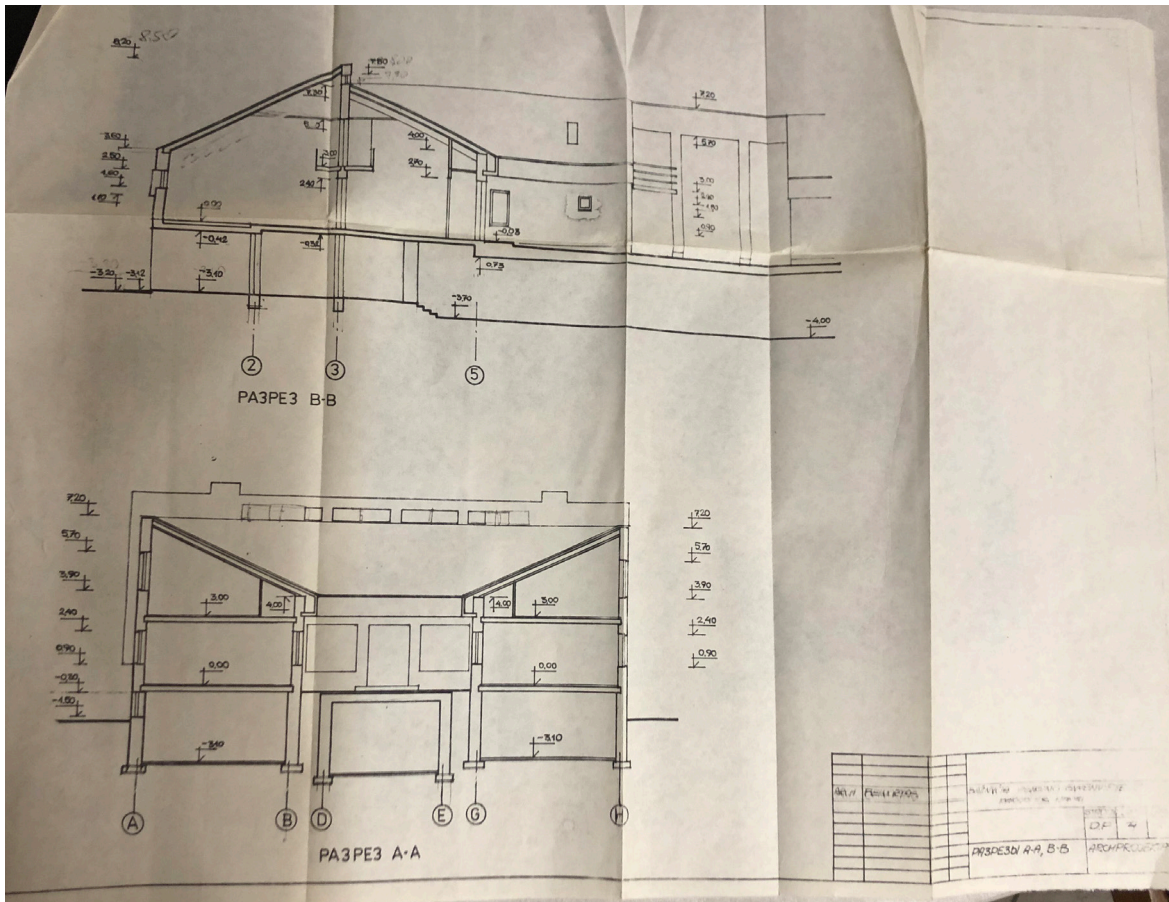


Fig. 11: Sections of Visaginas St. Paul Church. Author Ramūnas Beinortas, 1990.

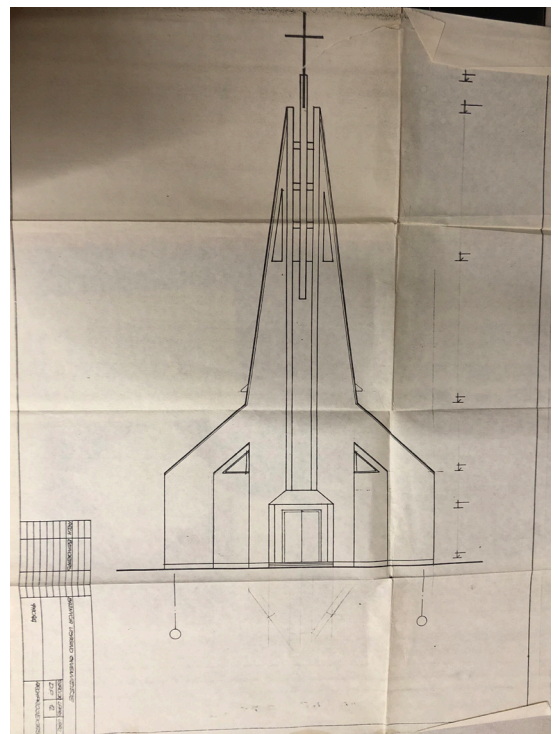
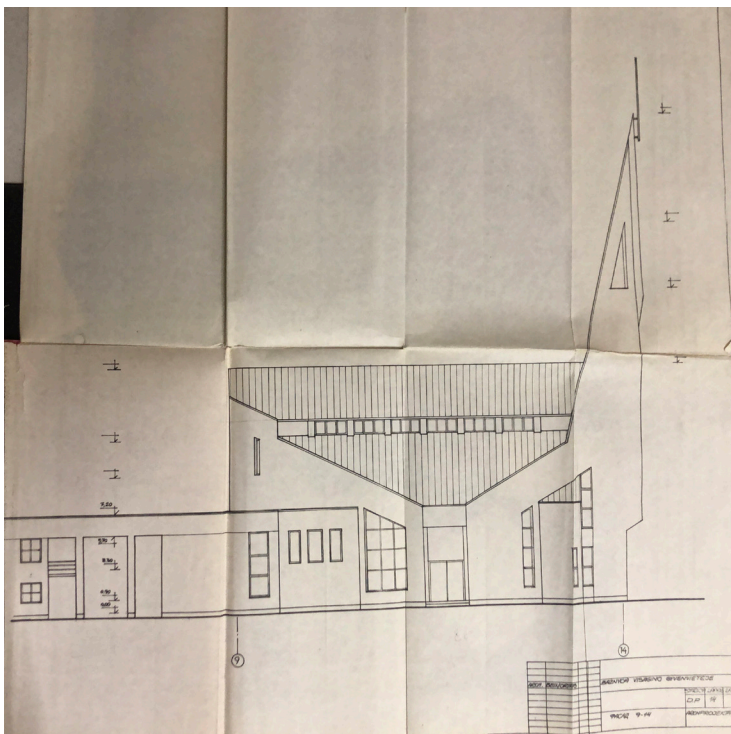
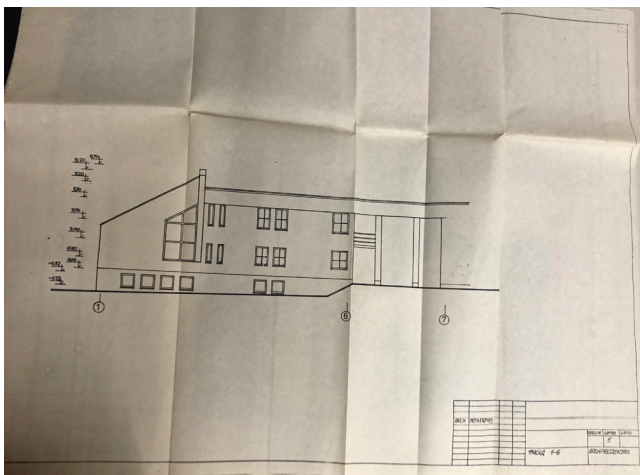
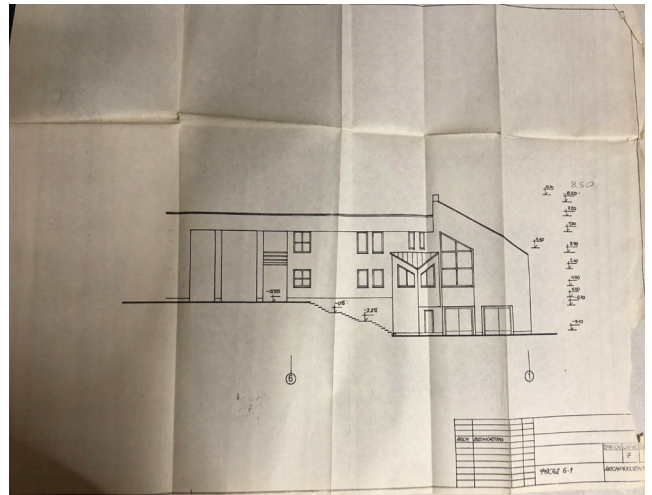
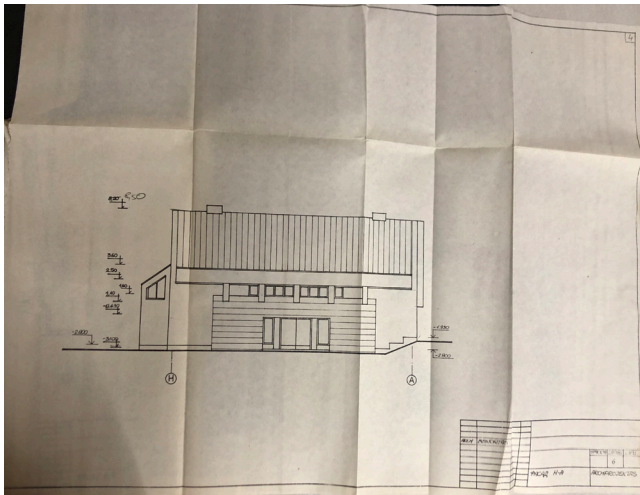


Fig. 12: Elevations of Visaginas St. Paul Church. Author Ramūnas Beinortas, 1990.



Fig. 13: Construction process of St. Paul Church. Visaginas museum archive.
Author Jonas Danauskas, 1992.



Fig. 14: Exterior view of St. Paul Church. Visaginas museum archive.
Author Jonas Danauskas, n.d.

2.2 Concealed sanctuary.

Visaginas Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist (1992)

At the same time frame, parallel to Catholicism taking root, Visaginas' Orthodox parish was carving out its own spiritual and architectural presence through the efforts of two women - Antonina Basheva and Anna But. Anna But, a migrant from Kyrgyzstan, was an active member of the religious community there; thus, after moving to Visaginas, she began gathering fellow Orthodox believers in her apartment and organising small liturgies and meetings. She longed for a spiritual life and the community she had left in her home country. These gatherings, conducted following the guidance of the rector of Zarasai Church, attracted a growing number of people seeking faith, comfort, and communal worship (Ustimenko, 1996).

A turning point of Orthodoxy in Visaginas was the visit of Bishop Chrysostom in 1990, after which the first Orthodox parish was registered in the nuclear workers' settlement of Sniečkus (Visaginas). To serve the needs of the newly formed congregation, priests from Vilnius began to visit Visaginas from time to time. The local technical school assembly hall was used for services and baptism ceremonies. However, the need for a permanent place of worship was strong, and with the community's growth, some members felt the need for constant communication and prayer.

On July 7th, 1991, Father Iosif Zeteishvili held the first service in the brick building allocated to the INPP (Ustimenko, 1996). Just a year later, the same building was officially consecrated as the first Orthodox Church in Visaginas with the blessing of Bishop Chrysostom and was consecrated in the name of St. John the Baptist (Ustimenko, 1996).

The Orthodox parish did not have the privilege of a central, elevated, visible site for its first Church, unlike the Catholic community. However, the unexpectedly generous gift presented by INPP forced an interesting phenomenon of upcycling and adaptation (Zetheishvili, 2025). Originally built as a cultural centre, the designated building is cramped between two nine-story residential blocks located on lower calm street, which gives the Church an oppressed and hidden presence within the urban fabric (fig. 15, 16, 17). Following the same street, two buildings with identical floor plans and architectural appearance continue functioning

as a registry office and art studio. They reflect the standardised Soviet approach to public infrastructure.

Despite the drastic change in function, the standardised interior layout of the building was barely modified (fig. 18, 19), possibly due to financial constraints. However, several interventions were still executed to improve the functionality of the space and bring it as close as possible to an operating Orthodox Church, with the support of the parish and the diocese. For example, the community members installed the iconostasis and the altar, along with the other essential Church furniture (fig. 16) (Zetheishvili, 2025). Additionally, the structural alterations included the demolition of the wall on the first floor to merge the hall and additional room (fig. 19) and the dislocation of the bathrooms on the ground floor preventing the direct position beneath the altar to ensure proper liturgical arrangement. The main ceremony hall was also expanded by adding a loggia (fig. 18,19) (Zetheishvili, 2025).

The exterior of the building remained similar to its original forms; however, it was visibly marked as a place of worship by one unique alteration - a unique small metal dome construction with a cross (fig. 20). It was produced and installed by INPP to create a recognisable Orthodox identity and was added to a standardised red brick building (Zetheishvili, 2025).



Fig. 15 : Current urban plan of Visaginas - Visaginas Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist highlighted.
Author Anastasija Grigorjeva, 2025.



Fig. 16: Exterior views and interior views of Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist.
Author Anastasija Grigorjeva, 2025.

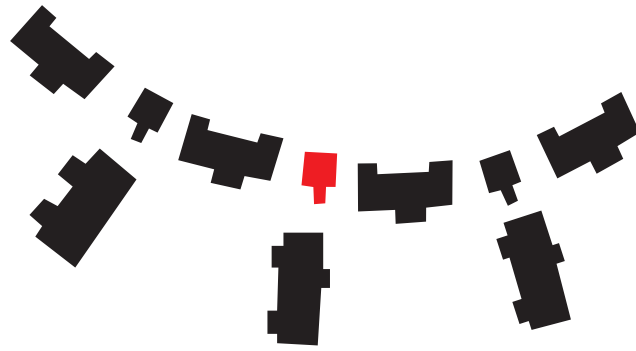


Fig. 17: Schematic view of Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist and standardised surroundings.
Author Anastasija Grigorjeva, 2025.

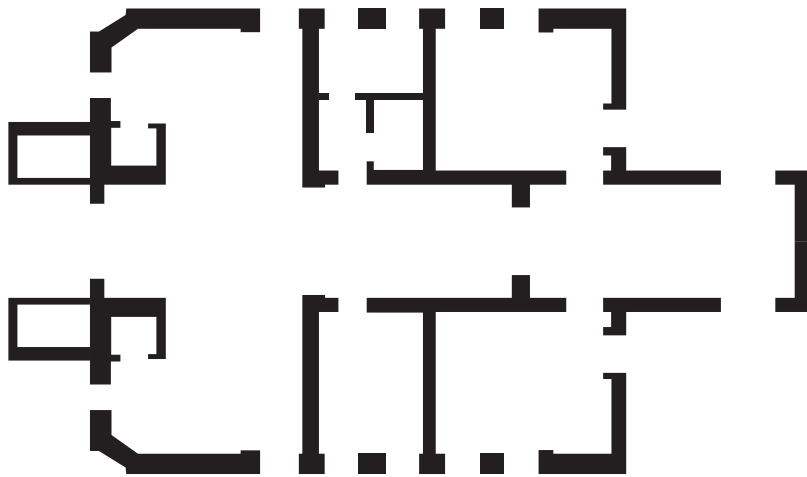


Fig. 18: Schematic ground floor plan of Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist.
Author Anastasija Grigorjeva, 2025.

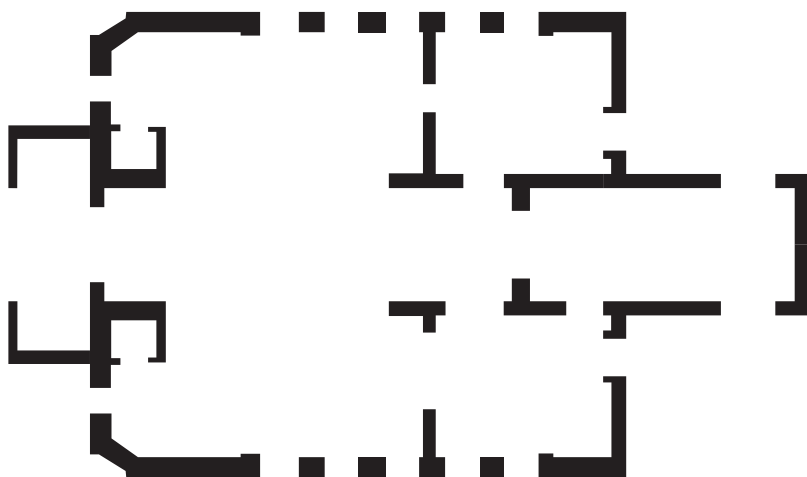


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Fig. 20: Archival images of exterior modifications. Archive of Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist.
Author n.d., n.d.

2.3 The heavenly and earthy doctor.

Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church (1996)

Due to the rise in religious interest among the inhabitants of Visaginas, Father Iosif Zeteishvili saw a need for spiritual healing, thus commenced the erection of the second Orthodox Church - St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. It was later referred to as "The ship of salvation" in the local Orthodox parish newspaper due to its function as a holy cure, a religious doctor for the visitors. The Church became a symbol of refuge, hope, and spiritual renewal for many visitors.

The site and foundation of the new Church were donated to the parish by the management of INPP at the request of the rector, Father Iosif, leaving little room for deliberation (Zetheishvili, 2025). Despite not having a central location, the site was previously considered for the Catholic Church due to several advantages. It is situated on a spacious plot close to the central alley of Visaginas – Taikos Street, offering high visibility and accessibility in contrast to the concealed Church of St. John the Baptist (fig. 20).

Regarding the design of the Church, there was no architectural competition. The first proposed option was approved by the Ministry of Medium Machine Building (the USSR government ministry supervising the nuclear industry). However, following the regain of Lithuania's independence, it was abandoned due to the cessation of external Soviet funding. (Zetheishvili, 2025).

A group of architects and designers, headed by Tatyana Nasledova, worked on the project of the Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church (Zeteishvili, 2025). The supervisor of the project - engineer Nikolai Khomishin - applied not only his diverse expertise but also participated personally in the construction works (Zeteishvili, 2025). The vision of the Church from the start was set to traditional Russian Orthodox architecture, reflecting the historical preferences of the parishioners. Despite the predetermined layout and floor plan, the Church manages to reference the Byzantine architectural styles by incorporating domes and iconographic ornamentations, rebuilding the connection to the Orthodox traditional Church silhouette (fig. 21). A team of specialists assisted Tatyana Nasledova-Spring, and the revised project was finalised in Kaunas with the help of experts before receiving approval for

construction in Vilnius (Zeteishvili, 2025).

The Orthodox parish expressed specific needs not covered by the Church of St. John the Baptist. The new Church had to be more spacious, accommodating as many visitors as possible (Novikova, 1995). The good acoustics were also an important aspect, allowing prayers and Church chants to be heard clearly. One of the requests included rooms for a Church school and choir classes, as well as for holding special Church services, an icon painting studio, a refectory, and household needs, which include the production of Church utensils and vestments (Novikova, 1995). (fig. XX??)

The construction works began in June 1996 and had another unique and symbolic upcycling twist to it. Due to the adaptation of an unfinished Soviet-era foundation originally intended for a 14-story residential building, the project was more oriented toward redesigning the unfinished (fig. XX). This unconventional site was suggested by Father Iosif himself as it was visible from the window of his apartment and inspired him – “God gave me the idea. Once, I came across this phrase from Gilbert Keith Chesterton: To build a Church, you do not need to find financial corporations, you do not need to collect funds, you need to start building.” (Zeteishvili, 2007).

Since the foundation of the building was physically present, the master plan was largely predetermined. The architect managed to efficiently reuse the residential building layout, with only a few minor adaptations, and make it functional for religious practices. Two walls were demolished to create a more spacious prayer hall on the ground floor. Two staircases leading to the first floor were added – one as the main access point and the other as an auxiliary staircase (fig. XX) (Zetheishvili, 2025).

The materials used for the construction were chosen mainly because of the accessibility aspect and primarily provided by the INPP, ensuring a cost-effective and efficient building process. The Church was officially consecrated on August 9th, 2000, marking the beginning of regular service (Novikova, 1995). (fig. XX).

The collective efforts of the diocese, the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, Visaginas Municipality, and private donors ensured that the Orthodox community had a fully functioning place of worship, reinforcing the Church's role as a spiritual and social centre for the town (Zeteishvili, 2025).



Fig. 21: Archival photograph of the site with a 14-storey residential building visible. Archives of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church, 2001.



Fig. 22: Current urban plan of Visaginas - Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church highlighted. Author Anastasija Grigorjeva, 2025.



Fig. 23: Archival photograph of the construction process of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. Archives of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church, 2002.



Fig. 24: Archival photograph of the construction process of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. Archives of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church, 2006.



Fig. 25: Archival drawing of the elevation of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. Archives of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. Author Tatyana Nasledova, n.d.

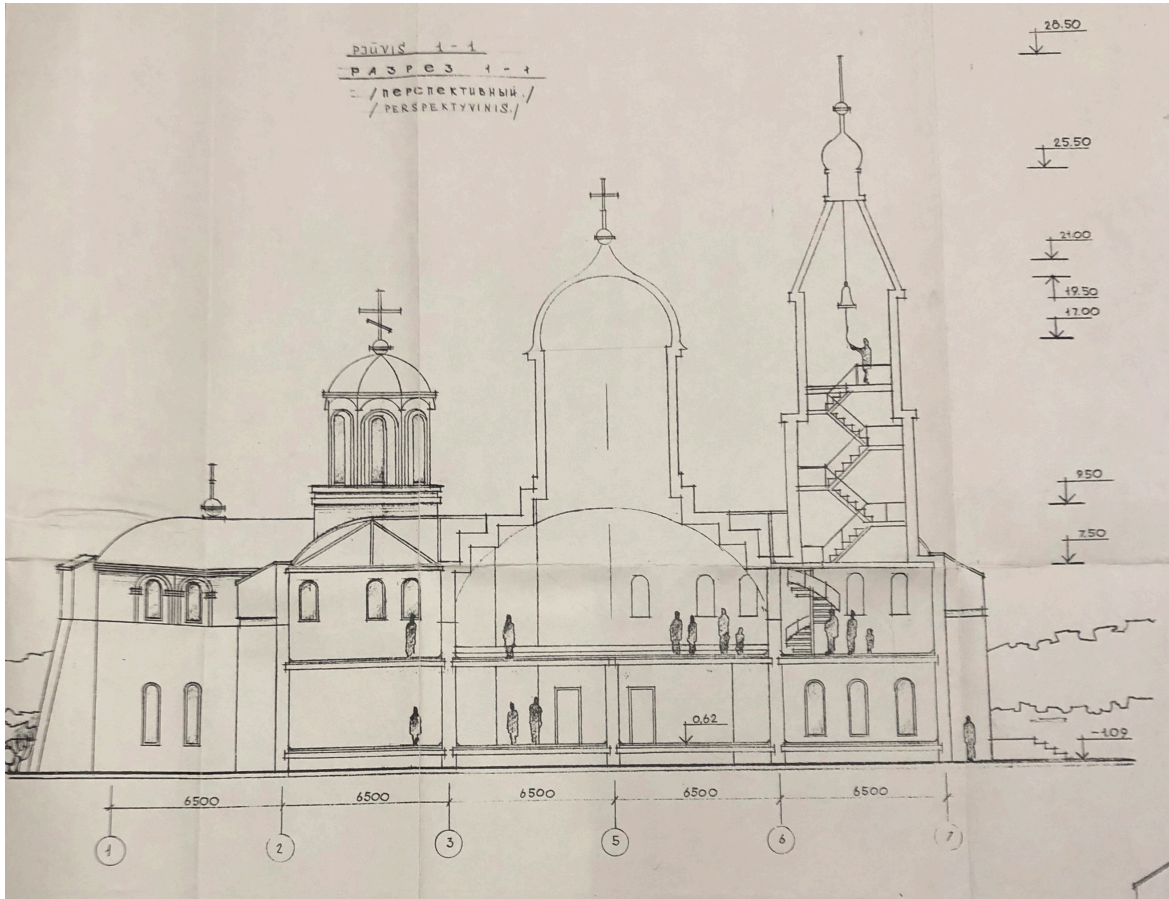


Fig. 26: Archival drawing of the section of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. Archives of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. Author Tatyana Nasledova, n.d.

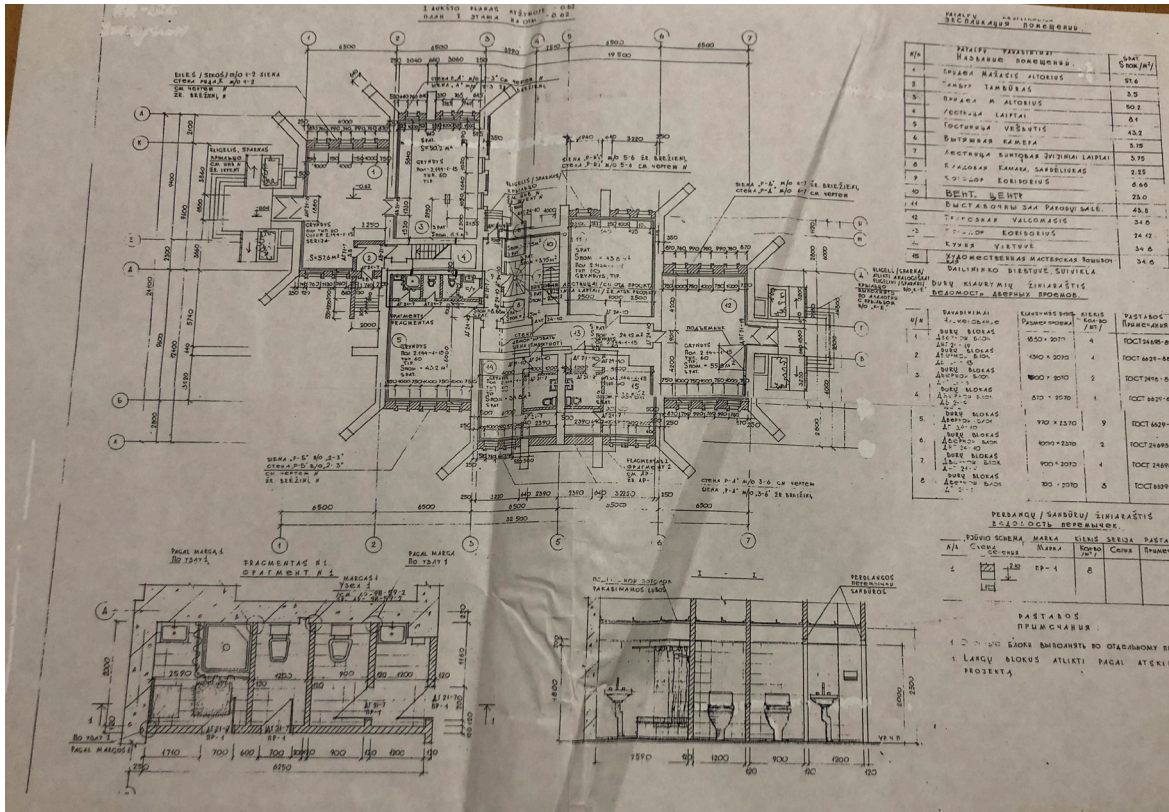


Fig. 27: Archival drawing of the ground floor plan of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. Archives of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. Author Tatyana Nasledova, n.d.
 1 - Small altar, 2 - Vestibule, 3 - Altar, 4 - Staircase, 5 - Hotel, 6 - Ventilation, 7 - Spiral staircase, 8 - Storage, 9 - Corridor, 10 - Ventilation, 11 - Exhibition hall, 12 - Dining room, 13 - Corridor, 14 - Kitchen, 15 - Workshop

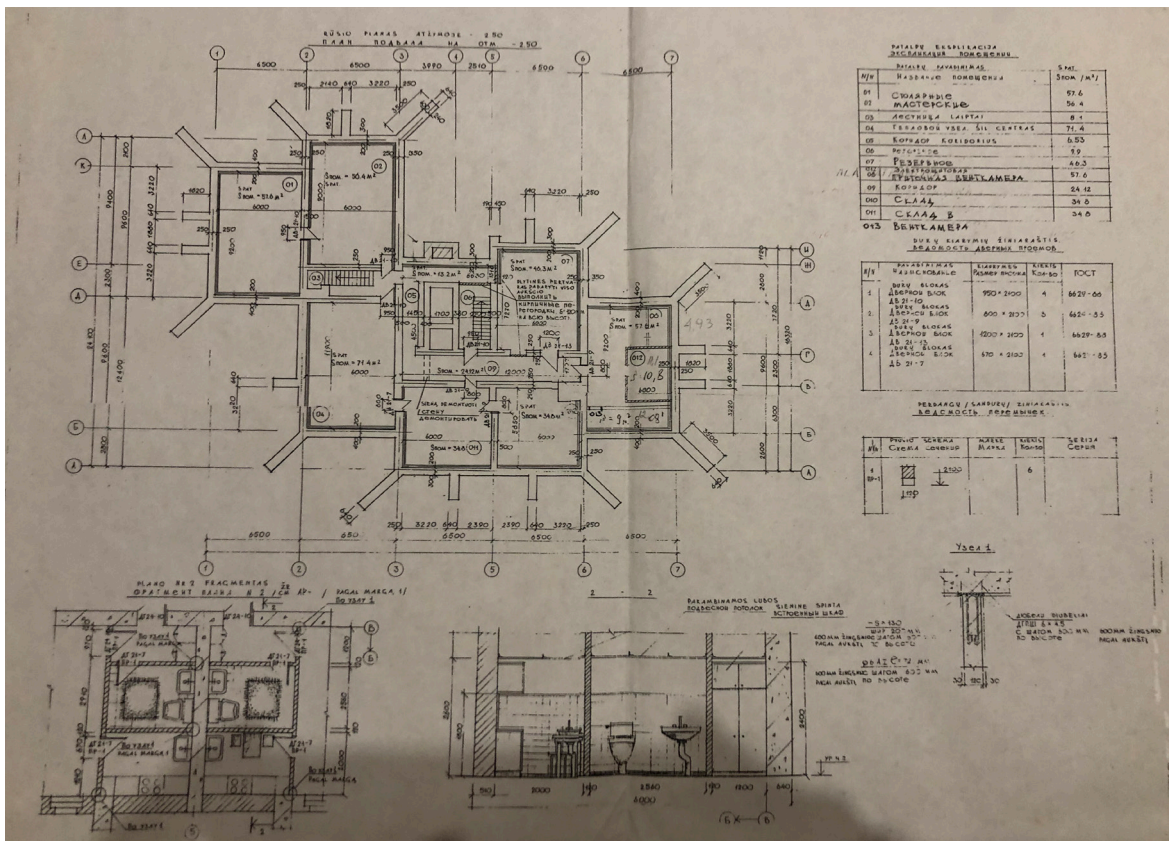


Fig. 28: Archival drawing of the ground floor plan of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. Archives of Visaginas St. Martyr Panteleimono Church. Author Tatyana Nasledova, n.d.
 1, 2 - Workshop, 3 - Staircase, 4 - Heating unit, 5 - Corridor, 6, 7 - Back-up room, 8 - Ventilation, 9 - Corridor, 10, 11 - Storage

PART 3. Tracing tradition, reclaiming space

The observations and conclusions drawn in this section are based on field research, site visits, and a series of interviews with local clergy and the architect conducted during the research period.

At the time of the formation of the town, the people of Visaginas (Snėčkus) were far from faith. Young builders formed the city and the INPP, while the nuclear power plant workers were engaged in its operation. Nevertheless, due to the atheistic education and widespread destruction of faith in God imposed by the state policy for 70 years, no attention was paid to the construction of their souls.

With the rapid decline of Soviet authority, Lithuania regained its independence. Urban spaces' architectural and spatial organisation was no longer centrally planned, and there was no legal framework for regulation (Hirt, 2012). As a result, integrating religious architecture into the urban context of the town manifested identity negotiation. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches reveal two distinct approaches to religious presence and its formation through historical, cultural, and social influences. Both movements function on a different scale. A national-level assertion is represented through the cultural and spiritual uninterruptedness of the Catholic Church, and the localised level is reflected through the efforts of the immigrant community to adapt their religious identity with the help of the Orthodox Church.

As a result of belonging to one or another ideological, political or demographical group, the divergent process of Church development illustrates contrasting power dynamics - some religious buildings are perceived as tools of influence. In contrast, others present the case of almost bizarre “upcycles”, manifesting how little believers need to practice their fate.

The Visaginas St. Paul Church, despite being perceived as antagonistic by Soviet authorities due to its alignment with nationalistic Lithuanian identity, was established earlier than the Orthodox Churches. It reflects a resilient national consciousness gaining strength during the country's transformation right before the independence recognition (Rothschild, 1989). Monumental form, central location, and attention to the design in the first case of the Catholic Church symbolise its meaning as an anchor in the spatial and cultural fabric of Visaginas. The historical importance

of Catholicism in the national identity of Lithuania is portrayed through the visibility and monumentality of the Church. The Visaginas St. Paul Church serves not just as a sacred space of worship but as a symbol of national tradition and continuity.

As a result, the Visaginas St. Paul Church acts not just as a place of worship but as a monument to national continuity, embodying stability and tradition. The longstanding foundation of Catholicism in Lithuania allowed a more institutionally backed approach to the erection of this Church and parish, following the top-down model.

In contrast, the Orthodox community takes a more understated approach - it formed primarily through migration, with many members arriving due to employment opportunities at the INPP (Ackermann, Cope, & Liubimau, 2016). The community relied on adaptability and reuse - grassroots efforts. With less support from the municipality, it followed the bottom-up theory and carved out its identity in an unfamiliar environment. The adaptive nature of this process included the integration of traditional Orthodox architectural elements within the upcycled existing structures left by the Soviet era.

The almost incidental, blended, hidden emergence of the Visaginas Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist speaks to the nature of less planned and more organic transformation. The second Orthodox Church - St. Martyr Panteleimono Church – despite being more visible and deliberate in its symbolism, was still a product of upcycling. It proclaimed the traditional look more confidentially than its predecessor by incorporating more recognisable traditional Orthodox architectural elements. However, both case studies did not seek to dominate the urban space compared to the Catholic Church.

Ultimately, both movements use different language and approaches to illustrate the same action - the gradual reclamation of space and identity through survival and transformation. Both movements were challenged to navigate the tension between visibility and acceptance while adapting to the new post-Soviet Lithuanian context.

PART 4. Conculsion

This writing looks into the two contrasting yet intertwined paths of religious identity formation in post-Soviet Lithuania presented by the selected case studies of Catholic and Orthodox Churches in Visaginas. The Catholic Church manifests as a top-down expression of state identity through the lens of religion, aligned with the national and historical narratives. The Orthodox Churches declare themselves through bottom-up theory by following the adaptive approach rooted in the lived experience of the immigrant community.

Looking at this juxtaposition, one can reach the conclusion that architectural forms act not only as a physical space but as a reflection of social positioning, historical legitimacy and the politics of space. The dominance can be asserted through monumentality, while negotiation and survival can manifest through makeshift and adaptive expressions.

4.1 Findings

Based on the analysis of selected case studies - Catholic and Orthodox Churches - it is fair to claim that ecclesiastical communities use built spaces in Visaginas to stimulate spiritual resilience and cultural integration using different strategies. Through the comparative analysis, the case studies demonstrated top-down institutional reinforcement versus bottom-up adaptive reuse.

A triangulated methodology (first-hand interviews, field study, and archival materials) was used to understand how the spatial environment is influenced by support structures and community.

4.2 Limitations

This study encountered several limitations due to reliance on a relatively small number of interviews and limited documented information. Due to the local nature of the subject, it was complicated to contact many key contributors and community members.

The symbolic readings of architecture are interpretive and may not reflect all community perspectives. Future work might consider a more participatory methodology to capture diverse voices and evolving spatial relationships.

Glossary

Monogorod	Monotown	- a town or city with a single industry or firm dominating the local economy.
Atomgrad "atom city"	Nuclear city	- monotown serving nuclear power plant.
Mikrorayon	Microdistrict	- a fundamental structural component of the residential architecture in the Soviet Union
INPP		- Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant

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