

Comparative Study of Late Stalinist Airport Terminals in Kharkiv and Vilnius Focusing on Architectural Expression and Conservation Strategies

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative study of late Stalinist airport terminals in Kharkiv and Vilnius, examining how a shared Soviet typology generated locally differentiated architectural expressions. Using archival sources, field survey and comparative analysis, it identifies two conservation logics, namely heritage-core preservation through load reduction and adaptive reuse under infrastructural pressure, and argues that architectural value and ideological burden are not mutually exclusive in shaping conservation strategies for dissonant heritage.

Introduction

On 1 December 1987, the Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe entered into force; it was later ratified by Lithuania in November 1999 and by Ukraine in September 2006 [1], [2]. The Convention marked a qualitative shift in approaches to safeguarding architectural and urban heritage, defining it as an integral part of the dynamic urban environment. It called for the protection of heritage within ongoing processes of urban development, planning, and the construction of towns and villages.

Despite these principles, the number of buildings that preserve the historical memory and identity of cities continues to decline. This makes research into historic sites and monuments, together with contemporary approaches to their conservation and rehabilitation, particularly urgent. The task of preserving architectural heritage is not limited to professional communities alone. It is a broader societal responsibility that concerns architects, historians, cultural scholars, policy makers, and local communities alike. It involves not only the protection of individual monuments but also the safeguarding of those architectural ensembles and public buildings that shape the spirit and character of the city.

Each historical period encodes culturally significant information that is retained in architecture. Built form

operates as a material carrier of historical memory, preserving traces of social organisation, technological development, aesthetic norms, religious beliefs, and political worldviews. Over time, this encoded information is partially erased, forgotten, or reinterpreted, and architectural objects are assigned new meanings that may diverge from their original symbolic content. This process corresponds to what O. Remizova defines as architectural memory, understood as a cultural language through which societies negotiate continuity, rupture, and reinterpretation of the past [3].

History offers numerous examples in which buildings were temporarily stigmatised or ideologically rejected and later re-evaluated as cultural heritage. The Roman Colosseum, once condemned as a site of pagan rituals and violence and therefore targeted for destruction, is now recognised as a monument of universal value. This process can be interpreted through the same mechanism of architectural memory as a form of historical re-signification [3].

Within this context, airports occupy a special place. Emerging as a building type in the early twentieth century, they evolved within a few decades from purely utilitarian transport facilities into representative public buildings that function as symbolic air gateways to the city. Over time, airports changed in appearance from modernist glass parallelepipeds to distinctive icons of cultural identity and

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symbols of technological progress and national prosperity. In many countries, they came to be perceived as representative public buildings and symbolic air gateways to the city, a shift that has been widely discussed in the literature on airport architecture and cultural history [4]–[7].

This transformation of the airport terminal as an architectural type has attracted sustained scholarly attention. A cross-disciplinary study by L. Mironova examines this evolution from early transport space to spectacle-oriented environments, engaging both architectural and philosophical perspectives [4]. A. Gordon interprets the airport as a cultural artefact and traces its role as a building type within the broader history of modernity [5]. H. Pearman offers a richly illustrated account of the origins and century-long development of airports, highlighting their architectural and social meanings [6]. R. Stewart follows airport design from 1919 to the present, analysing where, why, and how design solutions emerged that later came to be seen as self-evident [7].

Another strand of research treats the airport as architectural and urban heritage linked to place identity and addresses the intellectual and material resilience of city gateways, with particular attention to the symbolic and cultural role of terminals within the urban fabric [8]. American scholars have proposed reading airports as historical artefacts laden with meaning. In parallel, recent research in environmental psychology and transport studies has introduced a conceptual framework for evaluating airport spaces through the lens of passenger experience, including perceived safety, stress, and anxiety [9].

Alongside historical and interpretive approaches, the environmental agenda has become increasingly significant. Ukrainian scholars O. Zaporozhchenko and K. Anikunova analyse ecological trends in the interior architecture of contemporary eco-terminals, identifying eco-construction, eco-modernisation, and eco-rehabilitation as factors of successful operation [10]. Today's ecological interior environments rely on non-standard layouts, bionic forms, eco-materials, and daylight; colour, texture, phyto-design, and aqua-design are also treated as equally important components [10].

Another important body of research concerns the preservation of Soviet-period architectural heritage, including airport terminals. The integrity and conservation of such buildings, often burdened with ideological symbolism, have been discussed by I. Kreizer [13], [14].

Lithuanian scholarship has also contributed to the reinterpretation of late Stalinist architecture as a complex stylistic and cultural phenomenon rather than a purely ideological artefact, notably in L. Vaitys's monograph *Eklektika* (2013) [19]. In Lithuania, Soviet architectural heritage has been systematically studied by Marija Drėmaitė, Vaidas Petrulis, and Jūratė Tutlytė. Their monograph *Architektūra sovietinėje Lietuvoje* (2012) offers a clear lens for understanding public buildings of the 1950s

as unified works of architecture and art, understood as a synthesis of the arts that combines sculpture, reliefs, mosaics, stained glass, plasterwork, and lighting [20]. V. Petrulis has analysed controversies surrounding Soviet heritage and the formation of conservation practices in Lithuania [21], while G. Oržikauskas has argued that integrated artistic cycles, including reliefs and mosaics, must be protected as heritage in their own right and not merely as adjuncts to walls [22].

In the post-Soviet space, Soviet-period architecture is increasingly interpreted as dissonant or unwanted heritage due to its association with authoritarian ideology and imperial domination. This reassessment has intensified in Ukraine in the context of Russia's full-scale military aggression. At the same time, the case of the Kharkiv airport terminal reveals a reverse dynamic. Direct war damage inflicted on the building has mobilised public solidarity and reinforced local commitment to its restoration and future preservation.

In Ukraine, the problem of preserving historic airport buildings has become dramatically acute in the context of the ongoing war. Many runways and airport structures have been damaged or destroyed. N. Pylypenko has reviewed camouflage techniques for aviation complexes using tools of urbanism, architecture, design, and engineering [12]. During the Russian drone attack on Kharkiv on the night of 11 March 2024, the historic airport terminal was damaged. Windows of the historic building were blown out, and doors were destroyed (Fig. 24) [15], [16], [17]. These events have further underlined the fragility of modern transport heritage and the urgency of its documentation and protection, particularly in the context of military conflict and large-scale infrastructural destruction [12].

The comparative framework used in this study is not limited to identifying similarities and differences. It is designed to test whether a shared late Stalinist typological model, derived from standardised Soviet design practice, could generate locally differentiated architectural expression. By establishing which elements are typological constants and which are locally authored, the analysis provides an evidence base for conservation strategies. Elements identified as typological constants require protection as carriers of the type, while locally specific features, including artistic programmes and regional motifs, require targeted conservation as the primary source of cultural and architectural distinctiveness.

This study, therefore, treats both airport terminals not primarily as ideological symbols, but as works of architecture possessing artistic, spatial, and compositional qualities that merit conservation. While acknowledging their ideological origin and symbolic burden, the paper proceeds from the premise that ideological load and architectural value are not mutually exclusive and that

conservation strategies must be grounded in architectural merit rather than political desirability alone.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship on airport architecture and Soviet-period public buildings, no study has yet conducted a systematic comparative analysis of the historic airport terminals of Kharkiv in Ukraine and Vilnius in Lithuania, both constructed in 1954, as parallel architectural and urban heritage objects. Their shared typological origins, similar post-war ideological context, and subsequent trajectories of conservation and functional adaptation make them a particularly revealing pair for comparative analysis.

This article aims to examine how a shared late Stalinist typological model, implemented in different Soviet republics, generated locally differentiated architectural expressions in the airport terminals of Kharkiv and Vilnius, and to use this comparative evidence to substantiate appropriate conservation strategies for ideologically burdened modern transport heritage. To achieve this aim, the study employs a comparative analytical framework based on archival research, field survey, and morphological analysis of spatial, volumetric, and compositional features, as well as a review of legal protection regimes and functional transformations.

The originality of this research lies in the fact that it represents the first systematic comparative study of the Kharkiv and Vilnius airport terminals built in 1954. By bringing together architectural analysis, heritage studies, and contemporary conservation challenges, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of Soviet-period airport terminals as urban monuments and symbolic gates of the city whose cultural significance extends far beyond their original transport function.

Sources and Methods of Analysis

This study is based on a comparative case study of two late Stalinist airport terminals constructed in 1954 in Kharkiv, Ukraine, and Vilnius, Lithuania. The research draws on three groups of sources: archival and documentary materials, visual documentation, and published architectural and historical research.

The archival and documentary corpus includes architectural documentation from different stages of reconstruction and modernisation, planning schemes, and historical photographs from regional archives, as well as official heritage registers and legal acts defining the protection status of both buildings. Published sources comprise architectural and historical studies of Soviet period airport architecture and of public buildings of the 1950s in Ukraine and Lithuania.

Visual documentation consists of archival photographs, published images, contemporary media records, materials from online archival collections and digital archives, and

the author's photographic documentation of the Vilnius terminal.

A comparative morphological framework is applied to both terminals using a common set of architectural parameters. These parameters include urban composition and siting within the city structure, spatial organisation, volumetric and spatial configuration, plan typology and circulation patterns, facade composition, and the integration of artistic and decorative programmes.

A structured qualitative comparison of the two case studies is conducted across the above parameters.

I. Comparative Analysis

A. Historical Context of Construction. Kharkiv

The development of aviation and aircraft construction attracted public interest in Kharkiv as early as the 1880s. The institutional beginning of civil aviation in the city dates to 1923, when the society *Ukrvozdukhput* was established in Kharkiv, then the capital of the Ukrainian SSR. At that time, the Kharkiv airfield consisted of an undeveloped field used for the take-off and landing of biplanes.

On 25 May 1923, the first regular air services were opened in Kharkiv. All-metal six-seat German Dornier-Komet aircraft, purchased with funds raised by Ukrainian industrial enterprises, were handed over to *Ukrvozdukhput* on 18 November 1923. The aircraft were named after the enterprises that financed their purchase. At that time, the airport operated six aircraft, with regular flights to Kyiv and Odesa twice a week.

In the summer of 1924, regular services were introduced on the Kharkiv–Kyiv (via Poltava) and Kharkiv–Odesa (via Dnipropetrovsk) routes, and the first international route in Ukraine, Kharkiv–Tehran, was launched. The growth of air traffic necessitated the construction of a new airport on the southern outskirts of the city near the Osnova railway station. Between 1928 and 1930, one of the first airports in Ukraine was built at this site. Surviving images indicate that the terminal building was executed in the Constructivist style (Fig. 1).

During the Second World War, the building was completely destroyed. Reconstruction began after the liberation of the city in 1943. In 1954, a new air terminal was constructed according to the design of Moscow architects G. Elkin, G. Kryukov, and G. Litnevich (Figs. 2 and 3). Contemporary newspapers linked the construction to the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the reunification of Ukraine with Russia. The interiors included plafonds entitled *Friendship of Peoples*, reliefs depicting abundance, and ornamental friezes with Ukrainian motifs. Graduates of vocational schools participated in the interior decoration, while young Moscow artists executed the plafonds in the main halls.



Fig. 1. Kharkiv Airport terminal building in the Constructivist style, 1928–1930. [State Archive of the Kharkiv Region].



Fig. 2. Kharkiv Airport terminal, the main facade facing the forecourt, 1954. [Photo from the private archive of A. Saratov].



Fig. 3. Kharkiv Airport terminal, the facade facing the airfield, 1954. [Photo from the private archive of A. Saratov].

B. Historical Context of Construction. Vilnius

The civil airport Wilno–Porubanek (now Vilnius, Kirtimai district) began operations on 17 August 1932. Initial services were operated on the Vilnius–Warsaw

route, followed by an international connection to Riga. On 15 April 1939, a route to Kaunas was opened. Between 1934 and 1936, the first three-storey terminal building was erected. It was designed by the Polish architect Józefa Mruwková-Ohmańska and included a restaurant with a



Fig. 4. The first air terminal building in Vilnius (Wilno–Porubanek), 1934–1936. [Photo from kvr.kpd.lt].



Fig. 5. The new air terminal in Vilnius. The main facade facing the forecourt. Arch. D. Burdin and G. Elkin. 1954. [Photo from kvr.kpd.lt].



Fig. 6. The new air terminal in Vilnius. The facade facing the runway. Arch. D. Burdin and G. Elkin. 1954. [Photo from kvr.kpd.lt]

terrace, a passenger hotel, a kiosk, customs, police, and postal facilities (Fig. 4).

During the Second World War, the Vilnius airport was used as a military airfield, and civil operations resumed on 17 July 1944. Between 1949 and 1954, a new passenger terminal was erected on the site of the pre-war building. It represented a typical Soviet airport terminal of the early 1950s, designed for approximately twenty aircraft movements per day. The facade was decorated with sculptures of soldiers, workers, and aviators, while the interior incorporated wreaths, laurel garlands, and stars. Until the early 1990s, Soviet symbols were also present.

Some sources identify the post-war architects as Dmitry Burdin and Gennady Elkin. The authors of this study assume that Gennady Elkin and the G. Elkin listed as a co-author of the Kharkiv terminal are the same architect. There are also references to the use of prisoners of war during the construction of the 1954 terminal. In 1993, the building was included in the Register of Cultural Heritage of Lithuania (Figs. 5 and 6).

In both cities, the development of civil aviation followed a similar trajectory, from primitive airfields and the establishment of regular routes to the construction of

purpose-built terminals. In Kharkiv, the pre-war terminal (1928–1930) was executed in the Constructivist style, while in Vilnius, the first terminal (1934–1936) represented a Modernist architectural approach.

C. Urban Composition. Kharkiv

The air terminal building in Kharkiv was conceived as the dominant element of a formally organised access ensemble. A wide esplanade led to the terminal, designed and constructed simultaneously with the building itself (Fig. 7). The esplanade was oriented toward the central tower and the monumental portico of the main entrance, terminating in a ceremonial forecourt that served as the final stop for city and suburban transport.

The central strip of the esplanade was occupied by a parterre composition of flowerbeds and lawns, reinforcing the representational character of the main approach to the terminal. The dimensions of the esplanade and the forecourt deliberately exceeded the scale of the surrounding pre-war residential development, producing a visual enlargement of the terminal building and ensuring its dominant position within the medium-rise urban fabric (Fig. 8).

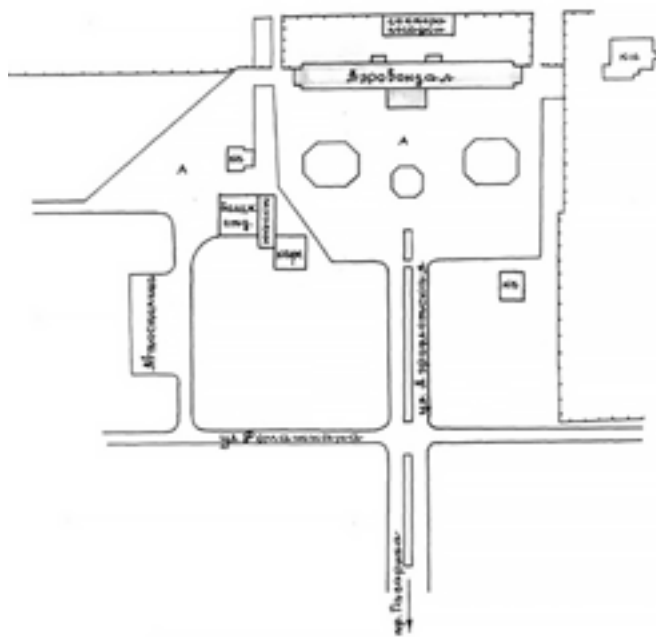


Fig. 7. The diagram of the esplanade, the air terminal building, and the forecourt in Kharkiv [Materials of the State Archive of the Kharkiv Region].

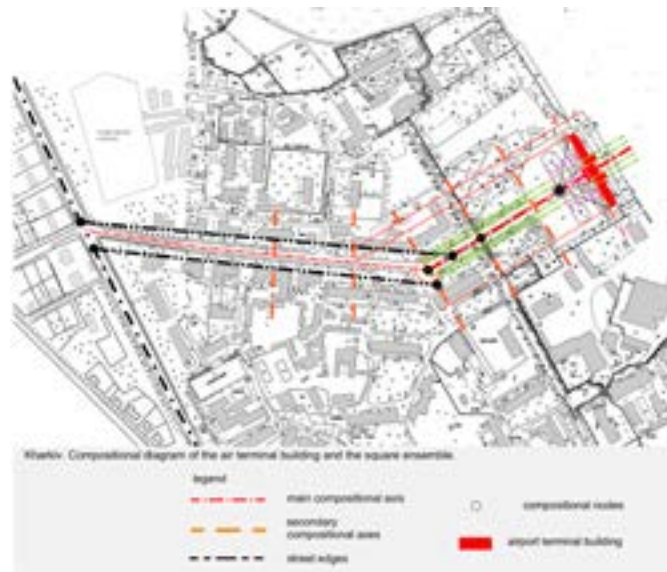


Fig. 8. Kharkiv. Compositional diagram of the air terminal building and the square ensemble, prepared in connection with the reconstruction of Kharkiv Airport for EURO 2012 [developed by the authors].

D. Urban Composition. Vilnius

The 1954 air terminal in Vilnius was likewise integrated into the urban structure as the dominant element of an axial access composition. The main facade is oriented toward the longitudinal axis of the forecourt, which incorporates a turnaround for city transport and forms a formal arrival space in front of the terminal (Fig. 9).

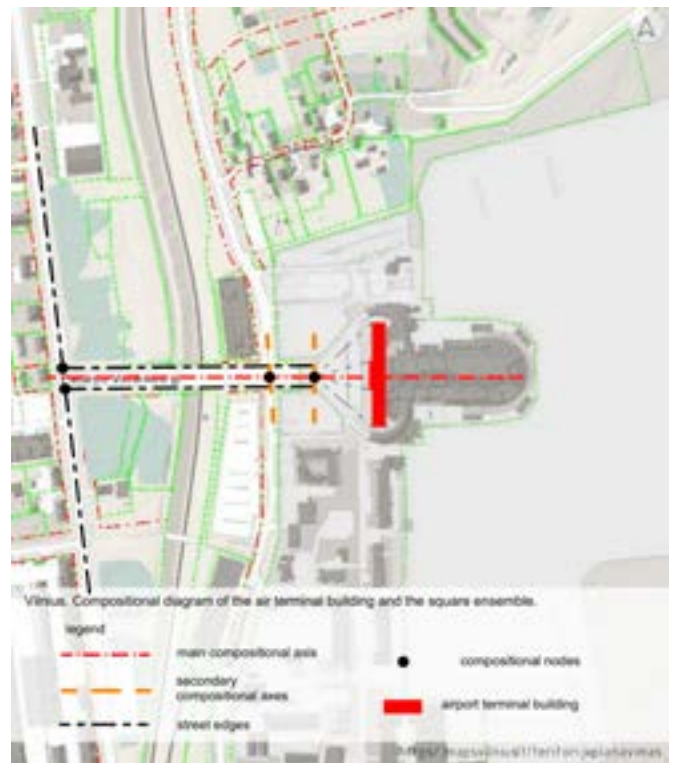


Fig. 9. Vilnius. Compositional diagram of the air terminal building and the forecourt ensemble [developed by the authors].

A clear perspective frame is created by the symmetrical wings of the building and the landscaped fronts in front of them. As in Kharkiv, the principle of strict axial symmetry governs both the spatial organisation of the ensemble and the architectural articulation of the facade. The central risalit with an arcade and niches containing sculptures closes the main visual axis, while the flanking wings balance the composition on both sides.

The scale of the facade elements, including the span of the arches, the height of the cornices, and the rhythm of the pilasters, was calibrated for distant visibility from the access road. As one approaches the terminal, the plastic reliefs and sculptures in the niches unfold progressively, functioning as visual markers of the entrance axis. The setback of the building from the street front and the geometry of the forecourt reinforce the visual dominance of the terminal within the open-airfield setting.

In both Kharkiv and Vilnius, the terminal buildings are conceived as axial and symmetrical compositions, set back from surrounding development to emphasise their dominant urban role. In each case, the approach sequence is structured through a ceremonial forecourt and a clearly articulated entrance axis directed toward a monumental central element, namely the tower in Kharkiv and the arcade in Vilnius. These solutions correspond to the post-war modernisation of the standard Soviet airport terminal design and its adaptation to local urban conditions.

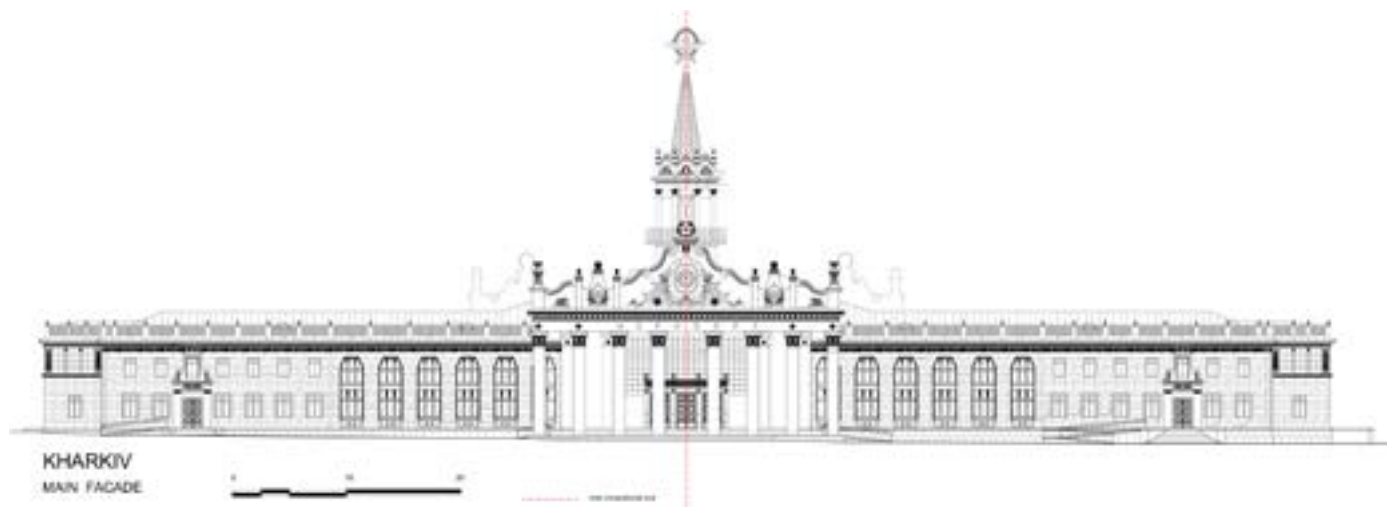


Fig. 10. Kharkiv. The main facade of the air terminal (1954). Reconstruction of the old terminal of Kharkiv Airport by "Arcstone" (2012) [27].

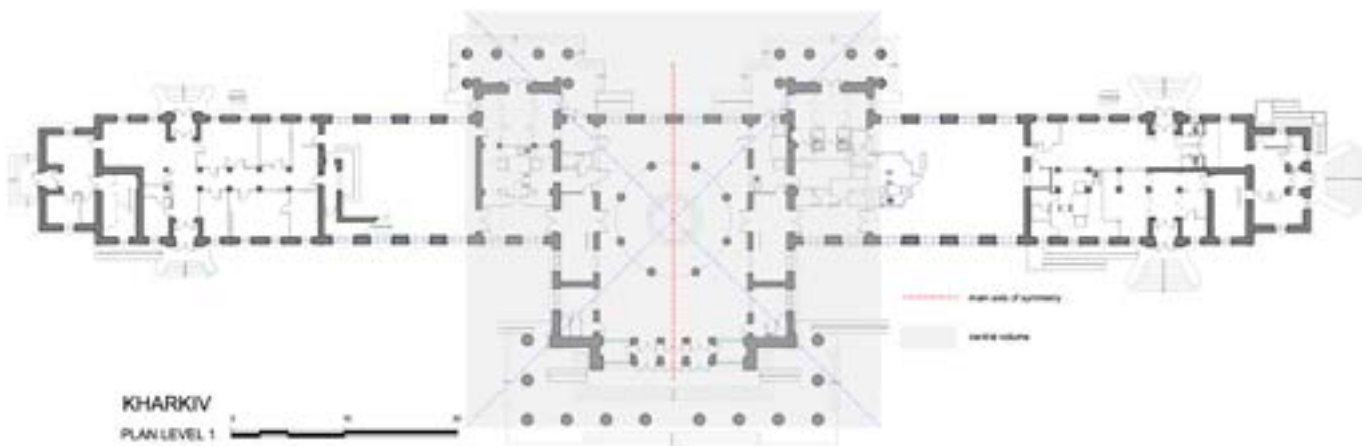


Fig. 11. Kharkiv. The plan of the air terminal, level 1 (1954). Reconstruction of the old terminal of Kharkiv Airport by "Arcstone" (2012) [27].

E. Spatial Organisation and Building Composition. Kharkiv

The planning structure closely follows the volumetric logic. The central vestibule occupies the compositional core and provides access to the principal circulation routes leading into the flanking wings. A distinctive feature of the building is the vertical accent formed by the rotunda with a dome, which rises above the central block and strengthens the axial organisation of both the plan and the facades. The strict bilateral symmetry governs not only the overall layout but also the placement of entrances, staircases and major interior spaces (Fig. 11).

F. Spatial Organisation and Building Composition. Vilnius

The Vilnius terminal (1954) is likewise organised according to a symmetrical, axial scheme with a pronounced central volume and two flanking wings. As in Kharkiv, the

core of the composition is a double-height central hall, to which two-storey lateral blocks are attached (Figs. 12 and 13). The overall volumetric structure follows a tripartite principle, but without a vertical dominant comparable to the Kharkiv rotunda.

The main facade is formed by a central risalit articulated as an arcade with niches intended for full-round sculpture. This risalit closes the main compositional axis and is balanced by symmetrical wings on either side. On the airfield side, enlarged portals aligned with the central axis mark the principal exits and reinforce the longitudinal organisation of the plan.

A key difference from the Kharkiv terminal is the rectangular form of the central volume, which gives the facade a more elongated and horizontally emphasised character. The absence of a domed rotunda results in a flatter silhouette, while the representational emphasis is transferred from vertical articulation to the rhythmic repetition of arches, pilasters and cornices along the facade (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Vilnius. The scheme of the facade reconstructed by "Vilniaus architektūros studija" (2018) [24].



Fig. 13. Vilnius. The plan of the old terminal, level 1. Reconstruction of the airport by "Vilniaus architektūros studija" (2018) [24].

Both terminals are based on a shared spatial scheme consisting of a dominant double-height central volume flanked by symmetrical two-storey wings. In both cases, axial symmetry governs the organisation of plans and facades, and the central hall functions as the compositional and functional core of the building.

The principal divergence lies in the treatment of the central volume. In Kharkiv, it is vertically accentuated by a domed rotunda, producing a landmark silhouette and reinforcing the monumental character of the composition. In Vilnius, the central volume remains rectangular and visually subordinated to the elongated horizontal mass of the building, with representational emphasis achieved through the arcade and sculptural niches of the main facade.

These differences reflect two distinct interpretations of the same late Stalinist terminal typology: one privileging vertical dominance and symbolic centrality (Kharkiv), and the other favouring horizontal extension and facade articulation (Vilnius).

G. Artistic Programme and Synthesis of the Arts. Kharkiv

The artistic programme of the Kharkiv terminal is based on the late Stalinist principle of the synthesis of

the arts, integrating architecture, sculpture, ornamental decor and interior design into a unified representational composition. The building combines references to classical models with explicitly national motifs, forming a coherent visual language that reinforces the ceremonial and symbolic role of the terminal. The main portico constitutes the key external representational element. Its pediment is stylised in the spirit of Ukrainian Baroque and is flanked by decorative obelisks in the form of sheaves, which function as agrarian symbols of abundance and prosperity (Figs. 14 and 15).



Fig. 14. The main portico. Reconstruction of the old terminal of Kharkiv airport by "Arcstone" (2012) [27].



Fig. 15. The main portico. Detail. Reconstruction of the old terminal of Kharkiv airport by "Arcstone" (2012) [27].



Fig. 16. Facade detail. Reconstruction of the old terminal of Kharkiv airport by "Arcstone" (2012) [27].

The facade composition is further articulated by a rhythm of tall windows with chamfered corners. On the second floors of the wings, continuous glazing is divided by mullions shaped as slender columns, reinforcing the classical order system through abstracted vertical elements (Fig. 17). Side entrances are accentuated by

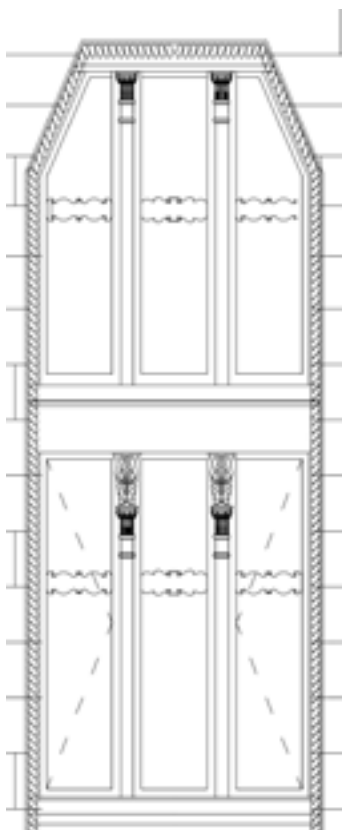


Fig. 17. Facade detail-window. Reconstruction of the old terminal of Kharkiv airport by "Arcstone" (2012) [27].

portals with stylised pilasters and cartouches bearing Aeroflot symbols, while the end walls are completed with profiled cornices with Ionic details. The pitched roofs are edged with ornamental balustrades, contributing to the overall silhouette and ceremonial character of the building (Fig. 18).

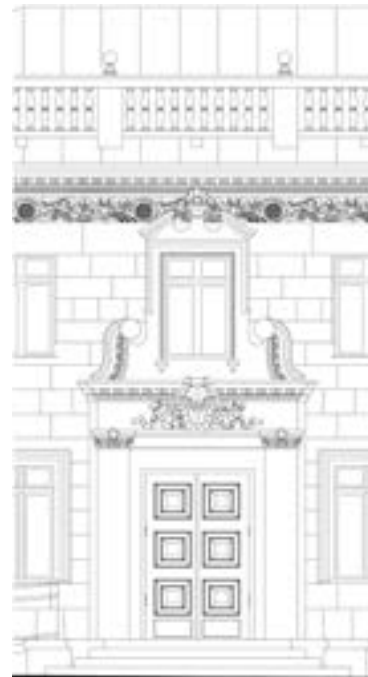


Fig. 18. Side entrances. Reconstruction of the old terminal of Kharkiv airport by "Arcstone" (2012) [27].

The interior decorative programme is equally elaborate. Coffered ceilings, decorative painting and ornamental friezes structure the main halls, while custom-designed chandeliers and wall lamps contribute to a unified lighting concept. Several orders are employed: monumental columns in the porticos and the rotunda; slender Pompeian colonettes in stained glass partitions; and wooden columns with gilded carved capitals integrated into window frames. All capitals are non-canonical and were specially designed for the building. Full round sculpture is placed inside under the rotunda dome, including statues of workers, peasant women and aviators, which form an ideologically charged but artistically coherent ensemble (Fig. 19).



Fig. 19. Interior photo of the central volume after reconstruction by "Arcstone" (2012) [27].

The material palette reinforces the representational character of the terminal. The building is constructed of brick and finished with decorative stone plaster containing white marble granules. At the top of the tower spire, the emblem of civil aviation originally crowned the vertical axis of the composition.

H. Artistic Programme and Synthesis of the Arts. Vilnius

The artistic programme of the Vilnius terminal is likewise grounded in the late Stalinist concept of the synthesis of the arts but is articulated through a different distribution of decorative emphasis. While the Kharkiv terminal foregrounds sculptural and ornamental expression in both exterior and interior spaces, the Vilnius building concentrates its decorative richness primarily in the interior.



Fig. 20. Vilnius. The main facade of the air terminal with arcade and sculptural niches (1954) [Photo by Maryna Pugachova, 2025].

The main facade is composed as an arcade with niches intended for full round sculpture, forming a solemn and classically proportioned external frame (Fig. 20). The composition is flanked by small stylised turrets that allude indirectly to the tradition of fortress construction and medieval city gates. Sculpture on the facade functions mainly as an axial marker, reinforcing the central compositional axis rather than constituting a dense ornamental programme.

The interior decorative system is more extensive and visually dominant. Coffered ceilings, columns and pilasters, plaster bands and ornamental panels structure the main halls and circulation spaces (Figs. 21–23). The ornamental vocabulary is restrained and classically oriented, relying on proportion, rhythm and surface articulation rather than explicit national motifs. As a result, the representational emphasis is shifted from the facade to the interior, where spatial experience is shaped through a continuous sequence of decorated volumes.



Fig. 21. Vilnius. Interior of the main hall of the air terminal (1954) [Photo by Maryna Pugachova, 2025].

The material palette includes brick as the primary structural material, combined with plaster finishes, gypsum decor and stone in the plinth. In contrast to Kharkiv, where material texture and colour contribute to national expression, in Vilnius, materials function primarily as carriers of a sober classical aesthetic.

Both terminals embody the late Stalinist doctrine of the synthesis of the arts, in which architecture, sculpture, ornamental decor and interior design are conceived as components of a unified artistic whole. In both cases, decorative programmes are not applied superficially but are structurally integrated into the spatial and compositional logic of the buildings.

At the same time, the distribution and expressive character of these programmes differ significantly. In Kharkiv, national motifs, sculptural ensembles and ornamental detail are deployed across both exterior and interior spaces, producing a visually dense and symbolically charged representational environment. In

Vilnius, by contrast, the facade operates as a restrained architectural frame, while the richness of ornamentation is concentrated in the interior.

These differences correspond to two distinct artistic interpretations of the same typological and ideological framework. The Kharkiv terminal follows a model of external accent combined with interior sculpture, while the Vilnius terminal is based on an external architectural frame combined with ornamental interiors. Together, they demonstrate how a shared late Stalinist artistic doctrine generated locally differentiated architectural and artistic outcomes.



Figs. 22–23. Vilnius. Decorative column details [Photo by Maryna Pugachova, 2025].

I. Symbolic Interpretations

In figurative terms, both air terminals can be read as “gates to the city,” though with different symbolic overtones.

Kharkiv appears as a kind of “beacon for airships”: the domed rotunda functions as a vertical landmark; the facades convey a strong national character through references to Ukrainian Baroque and to embroidery and ceramic motifs, while full-round sculpture is placed inside beneath the dome.

Vilnius, by contrast, alludes to the tradition of fortress construction: the facade with arcades and niches, flanked by stylised turrets, evokes the stable front of urban gates, while the richness of ornamentation is shifted to the interior (coffered ceilings, plasterwork, columns).

These images emphasise different distributions of the decorative program: an “external accent + interior sculpture” in Kharkiv versus an “external frame + ornamental interiors” in Vilnius.

J. Major Alterations During the Building’s Existence. Kharkiv

In the 1990s, the facades were repainted with silicate paint, and many decorative details were lost due to erosion; the sheaves on the obelisks were replaced with plastic imitations. Interior changes included the insertion of partitions in the vestibule, the establishment of a cafe and a bank, and the renewal of murals, which in fact meant repainting over the original compositions [15].

In preparation for EURO 2012, the original plaster was replaced with a modern compound; the wooden window frames were substituted with laminated plastic units; the portal and the tower were reinforced. The interiors were restored in a so-called “1950s retro style,” which only partially corresponded to the authentic finishes [16].

Since 2022, the building has sustained damage as a result of military operations and now requires comprehensive restoration (Fig. 24) [15], [16], [17].



Fig. 24. Photo of the destruction inside the architectural monument – Kharkiv Airport VIP terminal [17].

K. Major Alterations During the Building’s Existence. Vilnius

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the building underwent operational modifications that did not entail the loss of its key architectural attributes.

In 1993, it was included in the Lithuanian Cultural Heritage Register, with officially identified values such as the coffered ceilings, arcades, columns, and niches [23].

In the 2000s, engineering systems and functional blocks of the historic terminal were gradually upgraded as part of successive infrastructure modernisation programmes aimed at adapting the building to contemporary operational requirements [24], [25].

In 2018, capacity was increased through the addition of new volumes and transport solutions, while preserving the historic core [24].

In 2025, a new departures terminal was opened, relieving the load on the heritage building [25].

In the same year, Zaha Hadid Architects won the competition for the arrivals terminal, with a declared commitment to preserve the historic context [26].

II. Discussion

The comparative analysis of the Kharkiv and Vilnius airport terminals indicates that late Stalinist airport architecture cannot be reduced to rigid standardisation or aesthetic uniformity. Although both buildings derive from a shared Soviet typological framework developed in the early post-war period, their spatial organisation, volumetric composition, and artistic programmes demonstrate locally differentiated architectural interpretations. This distinction is critical for heritage assessment because it shows that typological similarity does not imply an absence of authorship, local agency, or architectural value.

At the level of composition, both terminals employ a tripartite scheme organised around a dominant double-height central volume flanked by symmetrical two-storey wings. In both cases, axial symmetry governs the alignment of entrances, circulation, and facade articulation. Yet the same typological scaffold produces different architectural outcomes. In Kharkiv, the composition is vertically intensified through a domed rotunda and tower, resulting in a strongly articulated silhouette and a pronounced central hierarchy. In Vilnius, the central volume remains rectangular and is visually subordinated to an elongated horizontal mass, with compositional emphasis concentrated in the main facade through the arcade and sculptural niches. These divergences do not merely represent formal variation. They condition how the buildings function as urban artefacts, how their artistic cycles are experienced, and how their heritage components can be protected.

The artistic programme further confirms that Soviet airport terminals of this period operated as works of synthesis of the arts. In Kharkiv, ornamental and sculptural elements are strongly present in both exterior and interior zones, and the building integrates multiple registers of decorative work. In Vilnius, representational intensity is shifted toward interior spaces, while exterior articulation remains comparatively restrained. From a conservation perspective, this difference is not cosmetic. It defines what constitutes the heritage core in each case and where the principal risks of loss occur, whether through facade alteration, interior remodelling, or the replacement of integrated artistic elements.

The two terminals also exemplify contrasting trajectories of transformation under infrastructural pressure. In Vilnius, the historic terminal has been physically absorbed into the contemporary airport complex. The part of the building that originally faced the airfield no longer opens onto an operational runway and

is now enclosed by later terminal volumes. As a result, the original axial and tripartite composition is only partially legible from the exterior. In Kharkiv, by contrast, the historic terminal remains spatially detached from later expansions, and its original volumetric structure and axial composition remain fully readable despite successive reconstructions and wartime damage. This contrast is essential for defining conservation strategies because physical integration into new infrastructure changes not only visibility and legibility but also access, circulation, maintenance regimes, and the risk profile of artistic components.

These observations support two distinct conservation logics. The Vilnius case illustrates heritage core preservation through load reduction, where intensive transport functions are transferred to new terminal buildings, allowing the historic structure to retain architectural and artistic integrity while operating as part of a larger ensemble. The Kharkiv case illustrates adaptive reuse under infrastructural pressure, where continued operational demands, incremental alterations, and emergency interventions shape the building within constrained heritage conditions. In practice, these logics imply different priorities. In a load reduction scenario, conservation work focuses on the long-term stability of the historic core and the regulation of interfaces with new volumes. In an adaptive reuse scenario, conservation work must define acceptable change, protect irreplaceable artistic elements, and manage cumulative transformations over time.

The relevance of these findings extends beyond the two case studies. Comparable late Stalinist terminal buildings, often derived from related standardised design principles, exist across a range of independent states that experienced Soviet occupation or incorporation. In the Baltic region, Latvia provides a close parallel in Riga, where post-war terminal architecture likewise raises questions of preservation, alteration, and public meaning. In the South Caucasus, Tbilisi offers another comparable case, where later expansions coexist with a historic representational terminal layer. In Central Asia, Almaty illustrates the same broader typological family and the same tension between heritage value and infrastructural modernisation. In Eastern Europe, Minsk presents a further parallel in terms of monumental terminal architecture and the long-term management of Soviet period public buildings. Within Ukraine, similar typological echoes can be identified in cities such as Lviv, Dnipro, Donetsk, and Simferopol, where late Soviet and late Stalinist layers of transport architecture have been subject to cycles of reconstruction, neglect, or politicised debate. This broader distribution shows that the issue is not local or exceptional. It is a regional heritage question affecting multiple national contexts, with recurring dilemmas about typology, authorship, public acceptance, and redevelopment pressure.

Finally, the findings can be framed through the concept of architectural memory as formulated by O. Remizova [3], who understands architecture as a cultural language through which societies negotiate continuity, rupture, and reinterpretation of the past. From this perspective, ideological meanings embedded in late Stalinist architecture are not fixed or permanent. Political symbolism may lose relevance or be rejected, while architectural and artistic value can persist and acquire new cultural significance. In this sense, both the Kharkiv and Vilnius terminals demonstrate how ideologically burdened architecture can be reappropriated as heritage on the basis of spatial, compositional, and artistic qualities. In Kharkiv in particular, the terminal is increasingly perceived not as an ideological statement but as an architectural monument and a repository of artistic value within the city's historical identity. This shift from ideological rejection to cultural ownership supports a practical conclusion for conservation policy: late Stalinist airport terminals should be evaluated and protected as enduring works of architecture, even when their original ideological framework is contested, because their heritage value extends beyond function and beyond the political context of their production.

CONCLUSION

This comparative study of the late Stalinist airport terminals in Kharkiv and Vilnius has demonstrated that Soviet standardised airport designs of the early 1950s functioned not as rigid templates but as flexible typological frameworks. Although both buildings derive from a shared design lineage and were constructed in the same year, their spatial organisation, volumetric composition and artistic programmes reveal locally differentiated architectural interpretations shaped by regional traditions, authorship and urban context.

The analysis has shown that typological similarity does not imply architectural uniformity or an absence of creative agency. On the contrary, both terminals exhibit coherent and internally consistent architectural concepts, expressed through distinct compositional hierarchies, facade articulation and the synthesis of architecture, sculpture and decorative arts. This finding challenges the widespread perception of standard projects as inherently non-creative and lacking artistic value.

The study has also identified two contrasting trajectories of transformation and two corresponding conservation logics. In Vilnius, the historic terminal has been preserved through a strategy of heritage core preservation via load reduction, whereby intensive transport functions were transferred to new terminal buildings, allowing the 1954 structure to retain its architectural and artistic integrity within a larger airport ensemble. In Kharkiv, the terminal represents a model of adaptive reuse under infrastructural

pressure, as the historic building continued to function as a VIP terminal and remained integrated into airport operations. As a result, successive reconstructions, functional adaptations, and, more recently, wartime damage have altered the building, while its heritage status has continued to impose formal and regulatory constraints on these transformations.

Beyond their architectural and urban significance, both terminals illustrate how ideologically burdened architecture can be reappropriated as cultural heritage. The original political symbolism of late Stalinist architecture has lost its relevance and is today widely perceived as a form of negative or dissonant heritage. At the same time, the architectural and artistic value of these buildings has persisted and continues to acquire new cultural meanings. In both cases, heritage value is grounded not in ideological content but in spatial, compositional and artistic qualities.

The relevance of these conclusions extends beyond the two case studies. Comparable late Stalinist airport terminals exist across multiple states that experienced Soviet occupation, and they face similar dilemmas of preservation, redevelopment and public acceptance. The Kharkiv and Vilnius cases, therefore, provide transferable analytical and practical insights for the conservation of modern transport heritage in post-Soviet contexts.

Taken together, these findings confirm that late Stalinist airport terminals constitute enduring works of architecture whose heritage value extends beyond their original ideological framework. Their significance extends beyond their original function and beyond the political circumstances of their production, providing a conceptual justification for their existing heritage status and for their continued protection as architectural and artistic monuments.

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