

## The end of Lietuva cinema, the death of community culture

Jun 08, 2005

By Nell Harrison

VILNIUS - How do you measure, in a non-monetary sense, the value of a cinema to the community it serves?

How would you quantify its contribution toward the well-being and social development of a community and its positive knock-off effects to the economy? Such questions have always been fiendishly difficult to answer, but if there was ever a pressing need to do so, it is now.

By the end of the summer, if property developers get their way, the iconic Lietuva cinema will disappear from the Vilnius landscape altogether. In a city that has already lost 15 cinemas in recent years, the theater's demolition will effectively signal the end of independent film screening in Vilnius. Not only does this mean that the viewing choices of thousands of filmgoers will be severely limited, but valuable cultural and economic benefits will also be lost to the so-called European Capital of Culture 2009.

Designed to "contribute to bringing the peoples of Europe together," the European City of Culture project was launched by the Council of Ministers on June 13, 1985. Since its initiation, the prestigious name, granted to deserving EU member cities, has become ever more popular with the citizens of Europe, and has seen its cultural and socio-economic influence grow through the many visitors it has attracted.

The European Cities of Culture are decided each year by the Council on a commission recommendation, which takes into account the view of a jury comprising seven prominent independent members, each of them experts in the culture sector.

Lithuania has been elected to host the event in 2009 - thus the importance of keeping alive artistic venues such as the Lietuva cinema. If the cinema is lost, the heart of Vilnius' film culture will go with it.

However, none of this is about to happen without a fight. At the core of this controversy is an initiative called Pro-Test LAB, a well-organized and articulate network of people representing all aspects of the arts and cultural community. Formed with the express aim of stimulating debate and positive action against the creeping loss of public spaces to private property development, they see the impending loss of the Lietuva cinema as particularly disturbing.

"Apart from everything else, this cinema has great symbolic significance for many people in Lithuania," says Nomedas Urbonas, a media artist and one of the initiators behind Pro-Test LAB. "When it was built in 1965, naming it Lietuva was an act of bravery and it's still incredible to think that they managed to get away with it. When people said 'Let's meet in Lietuva' it meant much more than 'Let's go to the movies.'"

Situated in the cinema's former ticket office, Pro-Test LAB is working against the clock to initiate multiple protest actions in support of saving the movie theater and other public spaces.

"We are a production house of creative protest when it comes to the issue of losing public spaces," says Urbonas.

So how does this all relate to measuring the social and economic impact of such cultural institutions? In

the modern world of networking, partnerships and cultural diversity, the Lietuva plays a significant role in the promotion of all three practices.

Through its partnership with Europa Cinema, the Lietuva networks extensively within Europe and internationally with independent film-makers, programmers, producers and directors. It provides a forum to explore and debate the world of film and culture, and through these networks, is able to schedule a culturally diverse program of films.

Indeed over the last three months, the Lietuva has successfully scheduled four international film festivals from Japan, Africa, Italy and the U.K., and is host to "Kino Pavasaris" (Spring Cinema) the biggest annual international film festival in Lithuania. Moreover, there is a clear demand for such films.

Vida Ramaskiene, director of the Lietuva, has seen the demand for mainstream films drop significantly over the last five years. So much so, that the scheduling program is now equally balanced between independent and mainstream films.

"For 15 years now, I've been coping with the threat against the Lietuva," says Ramaskiene. "In previous years, we underwent several other initiatives to close down the cinema. I feel terribly exhausted from the theater's undetermined status, it makes it very difficult to plan ahead when arranging film events."

The other detail worth mentioning is that the ticket price at the Lietuva is half the price of a ticket elsewhere in Vilnius, thereby making it more accessible to more people.

"We sense tremendous support from Vilnius residents - dozens of filmgoers approach me personally offering help in every possible way, and some 5,000 people have voluntarily signed a book of protest," the cinema's director adds. "All of this leaves us optimistic and gives us the strength to continue fighting for the Lietuva."

Of equal importance but much harder to quantify, are the knock-off economic benefits of such a cinema and the value of its network on the Vilnius community. There is little doubt that such relationships help to raise Lithuania's profile in the European business and cultural community as an independent, progressive, creative and culturally tolerant society. Such traits are now widely used by investors as positive economic indicators.

It is also now widely accepted in the business community that a city rich in artistic diversity and supportive enough to encourage the emergence of diverse artistic talent will bring investment. More importantly, it has been proven that a population stimulated and challenged through art and culture is happier, more motivated and creative, and has a better sense of pride in their city.

This is a different kind of bottom line. It is one that has to be measured beyond the short-term financial gain of a few private individuals. It is an issue that requires long-term vision and imaginative thinking because ultimately, the benefits to Lithuania will be incalculable.