

# KURNĖNAI SCHOOL

## A Unique Example of Interwar Lithuanian Modernism and Its Preservation

Margarita Janušonienė

**ABSTRACT:** This article presents the history of the funding, construction, and restoration of Kurnėnai School in the Alytus district—an exemplary project of interwar Lithuanian architecture. In 1934, Laurynas Radziukynas, a Lithuanian American born and raised in Kurnėnai, donated 160 thousand litas for the construction and furnishings of an elementary school in his hometown. The project for the school was drafted in the U.S. Most of the construction materials and furnishings were also bought in the U.S. and brought to Lithuania by sea. The school was equipped with highly modern plumbing for its time, including central heating, a biologically processed sewage system, and a shower. Next to the school, a wind turbine was built, with a pump that pumps water from an artesian well (97 meters deep) up into a water tower reservoir. The school tower was adorned with a ceramic Vytis (Lithuanian coat of arms) designed by Vytautas Brazdžius (1897-1969). There was also a schoolyard for physical exercise and a garden. Against the architectural backdrop of interwar period educational facilities, the school of Kurnėnai stood out as exceptionally modern. In 1990, the school's architectural ensemble was entered into the Register of Cultural Properties of Lithuania and is considered a protected heritage piece of regional significance. The school was closed in 2008, following a demographic decline. As the building fell into disuse, its condition steadily declined, and it was restored from 2019 to 2020. This article discusses the construction, use, and restoration of the school in a chronological manner, in line with the principles of formal and historical analysis, as well as the factors enabling the preservation of this school as a time capsule with perceptible interwar optimism and maximalist pursuit of modernity.

**KEYWORDS:** Lithuania, Kurnėnai school, Laurynas Radziukynas, interwar architecture, restoration.

**INTRODUCTION** Following the introduction of compulsory primary education in Lithuania in 1928, there was a serious shortage of suitable facilities for teaching purposes throughout the country. During the interwar period, much attention was paid to the design of new schools and their network development. Construction particularly intensified after 1932, when Lithuania was recovering from the global economic crisis. In a couple of decades, many new schools were built in independent Lithuania. The development of the school network and the architecture of educational buildings underwent dynamic changes. The school network gradually became denser and more regular, and the school buildings themselves evolved in at least a few aspects: size, materiality, planning and spatial arrangement, technological and functional equipment, as well as architectural expression of façades and interiors. During the two decades of the interwar period, efforts were made to replace the traditional vernacular

architecture of wooden farmhouses with brick schools designed by professional architects with a rational layout of the premises. Most of the schools were built with public funds, but there were also exceptional cases when private persons financed the school construction. One such rare case is the history of the construction and provision of the Kurnėnai School with modern technological equipment, which was funded by Laurynas Radziukynas, a Lithuanian American. This article aims to present the history of the construction, use, and restoration of this privately funded school, distinguishing and analyzing three main stages: interwar, Soviet, and the ongoing present (after the restoration of independence in 1990).

The main source of information about the construction of the Kurnėnai School and its builder Radziukynas is a booklet prepared by the former school principal Antanina Urmanavičienė: *The Laurynas Radziukynas school in Kurnėnai is 60*. Other publications about the

Kurnėnai School are mostly based on the data presented in Urmanavičienė's text. In 2017, the author of this paper published a detailed article about the historical and cultural value of the Kurnėnai School, but back then the restoration works hadn't been carried out. The current article provides a detailed description of the restoration of the School building, carried out in 2019-2020, based on approved exterior and interior renovation projects.

## THE SCHOOL DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD

Knowledge about the life of school founder Radziukynas (1881-1966) in Lithuania and his years of studies and emigration to the United States is scarce and fragmented. Radziukynas was born on April 22, 1881, in Kurnėnai, Alytus County, to a peasant family. There was no school in Kurnėnai, so Laurynas attended the elementary school in Miroslavas, a ten-kilometer walk away. Later, Radziukynas studied at the Warsaw Institute of Technology and acquired a speciality degree as an engineer. After his studies, he moved to the U.S., worked in zinc mines and smelters in Sondoal, Illinois, then in Russia, in the Ural Mountains, before returning to the U.S.. From 1922 to 1966, he ran a family business in Chicago. The school's founder died in 1966 and was buried in Florida. In America, Radziukynas changed his first name to Laurent V. Radziukynas and acquired the Hindu Incense Mfg. Co in Chicago in 1923, which continues to operate on behalf of Genieco Inc.<sup>1</sup> The factory produced incense for the home and hotel market. Business went well, yet Radziukynas did not forget his homeland. In the 1930s, Radziukynas visited Lithuania and learned that there still was no elementary school in his native village, and decided to build a modern school in Kurnėnai. Radziukynas's determination to devote everything that was most advanced and of the highest quality to the education of his young, emerging country was a sign of patriotic optimism. In his personal vision, the future held an opportunity to consolidate and expand Lithuania's statehood; the threat of imminent occupation was not yet felt at that time.

Radziukynas donated 160 thousand litas (16,000 USD at the time) for the construction and installation of the Kurnėnai school, and the county board contributed another 11 thousand. Construction of the school began in the summer of 1934. Most of the data about the construction process is known from the memories of Vladas Leščinskas, who led the timber construction work. According to him, the project for the school building was developed in the United States in the English language and included two apartments for teachers and two classrooms. Drawings were made on green paper in white ink, very detailed, even with human figures, and clear detailing.<sup>2</sup> This project could not be found in the Lithuanian archives, and it is not



01 The Kurnėnai School, 1936. © Unknown, from Urmanavičienė, 1996.

clear whether it has survived. In the file *Project approved by the Kurnėnai Primary School of Alytus County* in the Lithuanian Central State Archive, there is a Lithuanian version of the project, which contains only a general layout plan of the buildings on the plot, plans of the basement and the first and second floors of the school building, façade drawings, and a section of the building.

All the materials and inventory needed for the construction were purchased in the U.S., transported from Chicago to New York, and then by sea from New York to Klaipėda. From there, they were transported from Klaipėda to Alytus by train, and from Alytus to Kurnėnai by horse. Three sizes of school benches, doors, window frames, and pieces of glass of complex construction, parquet, school boards made of special wood fibreboard, a wind turbine including its metal constructions, finished wall panels imitating ceramic tiles, radiators, furnaces, and all plumbing equipment (toilets, sinks, baths, taps, etc.) were brought. Bricks and roof tiles were purchased in Marijampolė. The construction of the school was led by American architect Pranas Medziukas, woodwork by carpenter Leščinskas, and other works planned in the project were carried out by craftspeople from the village of Balkūnai.<sup>3</sup>

Construction of the school was completed in 1936 [FIGURE 01]. In October, 51 students started to learn there. It was distinguished from other schools by its amenities, with a large gymnastic hall installed on the ground floor and a buffet operating nearby for students to have lunch. On the first floor, the classrooms were spacious, with large windows, lined with parquet. On the second floor, there were three classes, teachers' apartments, a bathroom, and a kitchen. The school was equipped with advanced technological equipment purchased in the U.S., including central heating, biologically handled sewerage, showers, washbasins, and baths. A wind turbine—a pump used to pump water from an artesian well 97 meters deep into a reservoir in a water tower—was built next to the school building. At that time, the Kurnėnai School was the most modern in Lithuania. Near the school, a site for the development of physical culture was built, and a garden was planted.



02 The main façade of the school. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2024.

The school tower was topped by a colorful, ceramic Lithuanian coat of arms (Vytis), designed by Vytautas Brazdžius [FIGURE 02, FIGURE 04]. In the post-war years, the coat of arms became a target of destruction and was repeatedly shot at. A weathercock with the added function of a lightning conductor had the shape of a sailing ship; a reference to the fact that the Kurnėnai School was not just an ordinary building, but a school that had crossed the Atlantic [FIGURE 03].

When the school was opened in autumn 1936, it was filled with life: the story of the Kurnėnai School began. Until 1957, the principal of the school was Motiejus Ražanskas, who devoted his life to environmental management and greening. The school was built on a bare field, so Ražanskas immediately started to grow a garden near the school and planted the site with trees. With the help of students and their parents, a large number of fruit trees, spruce trees, and poplars were planted over several years. By 1940, the planting of a large sports field near the school was completed.

### THE SCHOOL IN THE SOVIET ERA

There is no evidence that the Kurnėnai School building was significantly damaged during World War II. During the post-war years, under Ražanskas' leadership, strict discipline was maintained. Students were taught to respect the school inventory and environment, and to protect and cherish the school benches brought by Radziukynas from America. The principal tried to make the school a center of Kurnėnai's culture. All the area's youth gatherings and evenings took place here. Teachers and students were active amateurs and staged numerous performances.



03 The weathercock. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2020.

During the Soviet era, the school was subjected to ideological dictates just like other educational institutions. It was transformed into a Soviet school with an eight-year education. The teaching process was ideologized, making it safer not to discuss the school's founding history and its founder. American benches were removed from the classes, and standard Soviet ones were installed. The wind turbine with a pump ceased to be used in 1975. In the same year, an order was received from the local authorities to dismantle the Vytis relief. Thanks to the efforts of Urmanavičienė, the principal of the school at the time, funds were received for major repairs to the school, and the entire building was re-plastered. The Vytis was hidden under a layer of plaster. Minor functional changes made during the ongoing repairs did not cause substantial damage to the building. Around 1978-1979, the intention was to cover the clay tile roof of the school with common, red Soviet asbestos slate, but due to the opposition of the parents' committee, only a few tiles were replaced where there were leaks.<sup>4</sup>

Despite ideological constraints, the teachers' team tried to continue the tradition, which had already begun in the interwar period: to treat the school as a precious gift and try to preserve as many authentic details as possible. The teachers brought together the local community for cultural activities, focusing on local history studies, and in 1979 established the Museum of Nature, which exhibited stuffed animals and birds, herbaria, and interesting rock samples. A lot of attention has always been paid to fostering the environment (planting trees), sports, and developing a sense of community. Students collected exhibits for the school museum, studied the flora and fauna of the surrounding area, and took care of the food supplies of wild



animals and birds in the winter. This attitude was crucial for preserving the school spirit. At that time, the only course of action was to remember the school's founding legend and resist the destruction of its authentic elements through accessible forms of resistance.

The change for the better began in the days of the liberation movement *Sąjūdis*. In 1988, the plastered-over coat of arms of independent Lithuania, Vytis, was uncovered on the school tower [FIGURE 04]. The American benches returned to school, having been stored in the attic until then. Unfortunately, there were only enough for one class [FIGURE 05].

## THE SCHOOL IN THE PERIOD OF RESTORED INDEPENDENCE

With the restoration of Lithuania's independence, there were hopes for reviving the Kurnėnai School, but emigration and the challenges of the demographic situation also affected Kurnėnai. After a significant drop in the number of students, the school closed in 2008.

Kurnėnai School was not included in the official list of architectural monuments until 1990. Although the school was undoubtedly unique both in its construction history

and advanced American technological equipment from the time of its construction, it was not included in the lists of cultural monuments during the Soviet period, probably for ideological reasons, as during the Soviet period attempts were made to ignore and decontextualize the heritage of independent Lithuania. The building complex of Kurnėnai School, consisting of the school and the wind turbine, was entered into the Register of Cultural Heritage in 1990 and declared a state-protected object of cultural heritage in 2005 [FIGURE 06, FIGURE 07].

The school suffered severe damage in December 1996, when radiators froze during the winter holidays due to improper operation. Some authentic American radiators burst, and were replaced with new ones (standard locally produced), and boiler room equipment was renewed.<sup>5</sup>

In 2016, commemorating the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school, its rapidly deteriorating state was made public and highlighted by the efforts of the public and by scholars in the Alytus region. The established society of Kurnėnai Laurynas Radziukynas School actively raised the issues of school abandonment, neglect, and the need to start work management in the public space, and initiated tours around the building. The proactive and civic attitude of the



04 The coat of arms of independent Lithuania (Vytis) on the Kurnėnai School tower. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2020.

05 The school desks and modern blackboard. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2024.



06 The school courtyard façades. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2024.



07 Southwest façade of the school. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2024.





08 The hall. Before (a) and after (b) the restoration. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2016 and 2024.



09 The school's staircase. Before (a) and after (b) the restoration. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2016 and 2020.



10 Parquet floor in the teachers' room. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2024.



11 The kitchen stove. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2024.

society's members led to a faster start in school management work. The school's management, the Alytus District Municipality Administration, took concrete steps and commissioned an assessment of the current condition of the school's façades and roof and the preparation of projects for heritage conservation works. In 2016, during the preparation phase, additional studies were carried out:



12 The washbasin. Before (a) and after (b) the restoration. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2016 and 2020.



13 The drinking water fountain. Before (a) and after the restoration (b). © Margarita Janušonienė, 2016 and 2024.

architecture (designed by Vytenis Zilinskas) and a chemical and granulometric analysis of the façade plaster (by Asta Grubinskaitė). Studies on polychromy in the school interiors were conducted in 2017 (by Indrė Valkiūnienė).

In 2018, during the preparation of the project of the school's internal conservation and restoration works (project manager Viltė Janušauskaitė), visual architectural studies were carried out, structures were investigated, microbiological studies were performed, the condition of heating system pipelines and cast-iron radiators, heating boilers, water supply and sewage pipelines, ceramic sanitary appliances and metal plumbing elements were assessed. The main heritage conservation works at the Kurnėnai School were executed from 2019 to 2020 under two separate—exterior<sup>6</sup> and interior<sup>7</sup>—projects.

Before the commencement of restoration work, the school was in a very bad condition. The greatest threat to wooden elements was posed by hazardous mold fungi, which began to spread on wooden surfaces on the ground floor. The microfungi genera *Penicillium*, *Mucor*, *Serpula*, and *Aspergillus* were identified, but the most harmful was the wide-spread *Serpula lacrymans*. The plan was to remove all infected wood, apply germ-killer to the remaining and newly used wood, and disinfect the plaster affected by mold to stop the spread of aggressive infection to other

floors. The leaking roofing caused rot in the ceilings: they were in an emergency condition and in danger of collapse. Humidity and biological pests caused significant damage to the plaster of both external and internal walls, as well as to the wooden and metal elements of fixed equipment. To preserve as many of the remaining authentic structures and elements as possible, different types of heritage conservation works were selected, taking into account the physical condition of the managed elements (preservation, restoration, repair, and elimination of the risks of accidents).

The school's exterior, interior, and all internal equipment restoration work was carried out by Paveldo sprendimai, a company headed by Rolandas Janulis. The most difficult task was to restore decades-old plumbing, ceramics, and chrome-plated metal plumbing parts, cast iron radiators, tile stoves, fragments of polychromatic wall décor, windows and doors, parquet and board floors, stationary furniture, school benches and impressive size class-boards made of special wood fiberboard (masonite) [FIGURE 08, FIGURE 09, FIGURE 10, FIGURE 11].

Most devices, including all sinks, baths, taps, and water systems, remained in the school, but nothing worked. Therefore, the restorers were concerned not only with restoring the appearance of the devices but also with ensuring their functioning [FIGURE 12, FIGURE 13].





14 The school classroom restored 'Silentite' window. © Margarita Janušonienė, 2020.

The restoration of the windows, which featured an extremely complex design, required a lot of patience and ingenuity since such insulated windows in Lithuania. 'Silentite' windows, produced by the Curtis Companies, were introduced in the U.S. in 1932 as a revolution in the window industry, and two years later, they were already installed in the Kurnėnai School [FIGURE 14].

Another challenge was that the tile-imitating wall panels were made of asbestos, the use of which had long been banned worldwide due to harmful effects on human health. During restoration, asbestos panels were replaced with non-hazardous special wooden panels that also imitate tiles. After the implementation of the project, not only were all authentic building elements restored, but a lot of valuable information about known and newly discovered artefacts during destructive research was revealed. Thanks to the efforts of the work supervisor, R. Janulis, the following information about the manufacturers of authentic elements has been identified and clarified: plasterboard (USG Corporation, or the United States Gypsum Corporation, a company that has been in operation for 119 years and still exists); plumbing (Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Company, now American Standard Company; the company is more than 140 years old, still in operation); asbestos panels (Johns-Manville Asbestos flexboard); parquet (J. W. Wells Lumber Company); locks, handles, door closers (all fittings, Reading Hardware Company); windmill engine with pump (Aermotor Windmill Company;

the company is 118 years old and is still in operation); windows (Curtis Company; the company closed in 1966); water tank (Hall-Woolford Tank Company was established in 1854; the company is 166 years old and is still in operation). The most advanced materials and technologies of the time were used in the construction of the school, and all of them were catalogued, and publications were issued.<sup>8</sup> It turns out that those companies whose materials were used for Kurnėnai School equipment more than 80 years ago are almost all still operating.

The restored school has been adapted for educational, cultural, and cultural tourism activities. Education, open-air happenings, conferences, various celebrations and cultural/educational events take place here, but the concept of the most appropriate uses is still being clarified, because much of the potential of this legendary school is still untapped.

## CONCLUSION

Kurnėnai Primary School, built in 1934-1936 on the initiative and with the funds of L. Radziukynas, a Lithuanian American, is a unique and significant object of interwar educational architectural heritage, distinguished from other Lithuanian schools of that time by the harmony of architectural forms, rational planning of premises, and modern technological equipment. Except for bricks and roof tiles purchased in Lithuania, all other materials used for the construction of the school and the wind turbine were brought from the U.S.A, so the school was often called the only school in Lithuania that had crossed the Atlantic. Kurnėnai School is significant and noteworthy in several aspects:

- It serves as an example of elevated and inspiring patronage;
- The history of the school's construction is special, using the most modern high-quality materials and equipment from the U.S. manufacturers of that time;
- The school always had a community that cared about keeping it as authentic as possible.

During the years of World War II and Soviet occupation, the school was not significantly damaged, and only minor changes took place during maintenance repairs. Paradoxically, the problems of the school building began after the restoration of independence. In 1996, a heating system accident occurred, during which some of the authentic radiators burst. The wooden parts of the ground floor became infested with mold fungi, causing significant damage.

The school underwent restoration work in 2019-2020. The restoration was carried out to a very high standard, following a professionally prepared project. The restorers

carried out research, identified the manufacturers of construction materials and equipment, and detailed the most significant aspects of the object. The result achieved was not only a sensitive and highly professional restoration of the individual, unique elements, but also the preservation of the architectural expression of the school as it had been at the time of its construction. Even today, the school still fascinates, with all its American modernity. Restoration rarely succeeds in revealing the *genius loci* of a building quite as well as in this case, but here it succeeded perfectly, and the restoration works must be considered a resounding success.

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## ENDNOTES

- (Indreika, 2016). Most of the information about Laurynas Radziukynas' life in the United States and his family was collected by Gediminas Indreika. G. Indreika is a volunteer at the Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, in Chicago, USA. He was the first to identify the descendants of the Radziukynas family. The owners of Kurnėnai school contacted them and invited to visit the newly opened school building. In the summer of 2024, Ben Radkins visited the Kurnėnai school.
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