

BRIEF INSIGHT INTO HISTORICAL URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS - DESIGN OF PUBLIC SPACES VS. MYTH, RITUAL AND IDEOLOGY

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Since ancient times the city and its public spaces have been used in different ways: as a stage for all social processes, as an expression of culture and urban needs, and, above all, as a manifestation of power - divine, human or economic. According to this role, urban patterns, urban elements and buildings, used as urban scenery, were influenced by their historical, mythological and ideological background necessary for their sustainability and social acceptance.

Today, the city is loosing its traditional values and the lack of urban identity brings new problems to the city life and to its physical structure. Inhabitants usually reject urban spaces that do not respond to their rational and irrational demands and do not fit into inherited archetypes. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to explain the relation between urban environment (especially public places - squares, main streets and buildings around them) and its mythological and ideological base incorporated in ritual behaviour.

Different examples (especially from central Europe) could help us to examine urban design and transformations through various historical periods, identify urban patterns, position and shape of public spaces and surrounding buildings, and to determine morphological elements - their identity, rhythm, directions and materialization. At the same time, the historical connection of urban space, its activities and ritual values for the community will be established and used as a standpoint for a new cognitive process. Gathered in unique synthesis, this 'sustainable circle' could be used as a method for planning and architectural practice. Its application could enable us to review and re-evaluate the inherited urban space and its built environment, improve its activation according to society's objective needs and ensure its integration into psychological codes of mankind. Consequently, urban space will keep its continuity and determine its future - the future within a sustainable frame that does not exclude people, their memories and individualities.

Keywords: *city, public space, ritual, myth, continuity, society, and sustainability.*

INTRODUCTION

The city, as a result of social processes, represents the actual condition of the society. At the same time, this amalgam of people, space and buildings should be a secret well from which the primeval human need for ritual behavior derives its strength, meaning and validity. Unfortunately, the contemporary city is loosing its traditional values and the eternal duality between 'secret' and 'profane' becomes, in our modern world, just an intellectual phrase without the necessary metaphysic foundation.

Caught in the web of new technologies, strong economic forces and intrinsic elements of every day's life, urban space can no longer respond to the rational and irrational demands of its consumers. It is almost impossible to recognize and decode inherited archetypes, to enjoy discovering their mystical meanings and find the well-hidden power of inherited memories and self-sustaining life. Consequently, the lack of urban identity brings new problems to the city and its physical structure incapable to respond at twists of fortune created by nature and people. Therefore, the historical connection between

urban space, its activities and ritual values for the community could help us to (re)shape our built environment and improve its human dimension, which is important for its existence.

THE ROLE OF MYTH, RITUAL AND IDEOLOGY IN THE CITY LIFE

Urbs - the city - is usually defined as a significant concentration of people, wealth, power, buildings and open spaces. At the same time, the city should be a historical and multiscalar product. Depending on time, space and human

factor *urbis* has a twofold role in our lives. It can be used as a stage for our everyday or extraordinary rites and/or it can be a major participant in them.

The city as a social artifact radiates unique energy and commitment. It has a strong impulse for surviving and a need for eternity hidden deep inside its urban being. Due to the fact that all architecture provokes an effect on the human mind it is not surprising that through centuries, the ritual was an inseparable element of its creation. Every cityscape and every building shaped by a ritual do not just have an every day's purpose - they are expressions of one time and one society.

Evidently, the mythical role of the ritual is very important for the community. Through its basic characteristics - violation of the established prohibitions and liberation from negative and socially unacceptable impulses, the ritual supported by acceptable mythological background represents a unique force. A person involved in ritual ceremonies is able to perceive its being from a different perspective and a group becomes aware of its strength and coherence. Consequently, the ritual participant transforms the temporary and profane state of mind into a secret and universal condition.

Rituals and celebrations, as repetitive and periodical events, remind us of life cycles and the eternity of the Universe. Unfortunately, the personal feeling of immortality could be used as a device for ideological manipulation, especially in autocratic systems. However, every system follows a basic ritual pattern that includes sacrifice, catharsis, exaggeration, act of giving and constant presence of authority. At the same time, the most important ritual principles are formalization, traditionalism, archaic and game elements and, often, spectacular features. All of them are usually incorporated in the urban space that should provide the scenery for ceremonial events of the community.

The background of surrounding ideology, its myths and rituals always accompanied the act of creating places for different human purposes. Therefore, through a proper understanding of the act of planning, designing and creating urban places and settlements, we could easily understand ourselves. Sometimes these urban rites had a very important mundane and cosmic role, but sometimes they were just routinized events. The perfect shape of the city matrix usually ought to reflect a divine ruler and always assuming an ideal society. Founding rituals and myths of propitiousness follow its inauguration,

but after this moment of divine generosity, the city becomes an inseparable part of human history. Finally, it offers its physical structure as a place for every aspect of life - from symbols of the power and eternity to everyday needs, from divine glory to human dust.

SHAPING THE URBAN PUBLIC SPACES

According to one of the possible classifications, this time given by Fernand Braudel, we may well define three major city types - the open (ancient Greece and Rome), the closed (medieval) and towns from the Renaissance onward, controlled by the state or a powerful ruler. Their urban structure was shaped by different historical conditions and the role of rituals was subordinated to the society's highest power.

At first, cities represented a divine prototype made by rulers in order to create their own microcosm. Therefore, this manifestation of the supreme ruler's will was used every time as the highest authority, as a representative of the official ideology, which had to be approved and imposed on the society. It was a kind of an initiation ritual for the new system and it has been performed up to our time, especially in new towns and capitals (for example in conquered or colonized countries or when they became independent). From Khorsabad, Constantinople, Rome, St. Petersburg to Versailles and Paris, from totalitarian experiments - Berlin, Rome and Moscow to democratic capitals Washington, Chandigarh and Brasilia, the same principles have been applied, although under the different circumstances. The main aim was to emphasize a new ideology and its validity, but the stands opposed each other completely.

This celestial model, used by ancient regimes, was transformed later to the *polis*, a concept preferred by ancient Greeks and later reused during the Middle Ages. Such a populist city created by the will of ordinary people (citizens) does not have monumental ceremonial complexes shaped for an absolute ruler. Instead, it contains democratic places suitable for everyday rituals and ceremonies, profane activities, and every eligible member of the urban community has shared the decision-making process. The rituals differed too. The glamorous epiphany, triumph and imperial adventus, as represented by the inherited absolutist ritual system, together with more civil ceremonies melted into a very interesting symbiosis of archaic inheritance, pagan rites and new Christian chronology. Different ceremonies,

games, triumphs, coronations, funerals, carnivals, season holidays, mysteries and feasts are true metaphors for the social reality - the mixture of cultures, traditions and medieval society's dynamism.

Depending on the supreme ideology, public spaces and public buildings derive their logic from rituals too. Created under the radial, concentric, orthogonal or completely organic patterns, those spaces connect and, hopefully, dignify different town districts that usually have administrative (ruling), religious, commercial or residential role.

The Square

Perceived as a civic center and/or market place, the square played an important role in the urban ritual. Usually combined with a ceremonial axis, it was a place where citizens could freely speak and express their independence and self-awareness. Unfortunately, as one of the main ritual points in the city, the square is usually an object of manipulation. Considering the potential threat of a gathering mob to the ruler, the size and functions of squares are changeable. Whether too small or too large, the result was the same - it was difficult to gather a critical mass of people able to dethrone the ruler.

The city square has many functions. However, as a place of everyday rituals - shopping, traffic and communication, or as a stage for special celebrations, games and even extreme events, like a revolution, this element of city's tissue always offered an exciting surrounding for physical and psychological human needs. One of eternal questions for the architects and urban planners remains how to determine the right scale of its space, the proper combination of functions and, finally, how to breath life to this social creation, whose importance for urban survival is incontestable.

The Street

As a line linking urban sites that are important to one society, the street, beside its practical function, presents strong political statement. There is no celebration without the street. Its urban frame, materialization, proportion, regulation, and even function, expresses the accepted way of life or the ruler's strong intention to impose and mould a desirable social attitude.

The ceremonial streetscape is especially important along the ceremonial axis - the most important direction in every city. It usually

stretches from the main urban gates to the most important public buildings representing the community's structure and sources of power (religious, political or economical). Buildings along such a route could be a palace, a temple or cathedral, a town hall, a parliament, a court of law, or other important cultural institutions like a library, a university, a theater - depending on the period or ideological demands. But, the most important factor for every public space is to be recognizable and readable, adjusted to human scale. Otherwise it could become just a fancy drawing on a flat surface.

THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

The towns in the northern part of Serbia situated on the Pannonia plains, are part of a long thread of continuity - since the ancient times until now, the many centuries of their existence may be traced. This fact confirms the thesis that throughout history, towns were always built in the same places. They develop for quite pragmatic reasons. The locations are often along the rivers or at the crossing of the "main market roads". They were either founded as market places for the exchange of goods or as fortresses since on the boundary between the Ottoman Empire and Medieval European countries.

The main streets and squares are part of the longest thread of the continuity, as they appeared before the towns were completely established. The streets in these old towns usually followed the most natural routes. The squares were established at the crossings of the main directions or inside the fortress in front of the church and surrounded by principal buildings. The width of the streets became related to the quantity of use and importance. Consequently, the dimensions of the squares and the concentration of the principal buildings were related to their importance in the urban pattern and urban rituals.

The main streets in our old towns always present the direct communication between the main square, the market street and the principal buildings. The proportion and scale of town blocks shape the length of streets and dimensions of squares. The length of the blocks, the width of the pavement and the materialization of its surface dictate our experience of a street. Also, the relationship between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of streets and squares are crucial to our perception of the urban environment (Cathorpe, 1993). The proportions of our squares are

represented by a ratio between 1:2 and 1:3. The relationship between the horizontal and vertical line (pavement and buildings) is between 1:3 and 1:10 for squares and between 1:1,5 and 1:5 for streets (illustrated in Figure 1. The examples are towns in Province Vojvodina, northern part of Yugoslavia: Zrenjanin, Kikinda and Pancevo. The proportion of squares and streets were changing through the history, but in the same rhythm for all shown towns. The most of the changes occurred in the second half of 19th century). Along the main streets there are only a few blocks, usually one to three blocks.

An appropriate sense of scale, distance, proportion, masses, landscaping and even architectural detailing are interwoven into our culture and the town pattern. In most of our towns (which were reconstructed in the 19th century), the streetscape is composed of a continuous line. The visual rhythms established by building line façades, the style, scale and condition of the buildings, the construction materials, and the placement of windows and doors are important attributes in defining a street elevation (Jacobs, 1985). The visual rhythms established by the building line in our main streets are in numbers: 10, 14, 16, 20, 26, 28 and 32. The materials of construction are the same, and the rhythm of the placement of the windows and doors is uniform. The secondary division of the buildings' façades is in the numbers 2 or 3, dependent on the position of the buildings in a street. The width of the pavement and the number of the stories in the building condition the visibility of an entire façade of a building from either side of the street and square. In most of the cases the façade of a building is visible and harmonized with the width of a street and square, and the buildings are visible from different angles of view.

A lot of our main streets have trees lining them. These trees, planted along the pavement (the first appeared in the 19th century), dramatically affect our perception of the environment giving a different picture of the urban environment throughout the seasons. Seasonal changes thus affect the light and shade patterns during the year. This depends on the species of trees, but also on the height of the buildings and the proportions between the width of the pavement and the number of the floors in the buildings. The quality of light and changes in atmospheric conditions also affect the transformation of appearance along the streets and squares and make them more dramatic. Street furnishings, including street-

lights, benches and kiosks, also define the character of the street scene. These elements are changeable through the seasons often relating to fashion and trend in urban design.

During the 20th century the erosion of the cultural symbols in the towns as well as their correspondence to urban activities was evident. Roads without 'urban spirit' are replacing streets and the social role of urban spaces is being replaced by the commercial. The main street and the square were nothing but a memory. They have lost their important role in urban life. A lot of public spaces were 'demolished' by inappropriate buildings. The image of the town was seriously damaged.

Throughout the centuries, the image of the towns has been created both by the visual repetition of elements as well as by their uniqueness. The churches and principal buildings contributed to the powerful images of towns by their outstanding position and height, but the repetitiveness of the towns' pattern, explicit in the 19th century buildings along the main street plays a decisive role as much as does the uniqueness of elements. Repetitive elements are components of the true urban form that expresses the way of life and the culture of the community (Lozano, 1990).

We could easily discover similarities between towns in Central Europe, because they were established at the same time and under similar conditions. If we compare our towns with those in Hungary, Germany, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Italy, we might notice the main similar elements in morphology and urban pattern. In our traditional towns, urban spaces were attractive and inviting and they followed the principle "buildings define the space". This makes a significant contrast to a philosophy that considers towns as a collection of buildings (which was the philosophy of the mid 20th century). Therefore, a very important task in the future will be to rescue towns (especially their historic central parts, like main streets and squares) from 'demolition', greed and temporary fashion. The reconstruction of these parts has to consist of the elements we can learn from the past. It can help the urban designers to convey to citizens and consumers the attraction, harmony and "the sense of belonging to the space" of the open public places. Obviously, we have to learn again how to build for a temporal horizon of centuries.

SQUARES			STREETS			periods towns elements
Zrenjanin	Kikinda	Pancevo	Zrenjanin	Kikinda	Pancevo	
						18th century
						First half of 19th century
						Second half of 19th century
						First half of 20th century
						Second half of 20th century

Figure 1. The morphology of the basic urban elements - the street and the square (examples from the northern part of Yugoslavia)

CONCLUSION

The sustainable circle of historical urban context could offer very interesting lessons for contemporary planners and architects. At the same time, the continuity of the cityscape and the respect for inherited codes of our existence should be the starting point for our new urban investigation. However, the well-known fact that the city should be used as a medium of human expression has to be observed from different angles. It is not enough for the urban space to be just a manifestation of someone's power or an answer to everyday needs - it should be a transmitter of progressive ideas and a decoder of symbolic messages that

could awake our forgotten sub consciousness. This brief insight into historical urban transformation of public spaces in the cities of Central part of Europe can help urban designers to create codes for more human spaces, where the citizens and consumers have "the sense of the belonging to the space". The only question is are we ready for this intellectual adventure?

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