

IDENTITY AND LANDMARKS

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Summary

A place is defined by several elements. Built elements create urban spaces, with their spatial coordinates and volumes. These elements have, besides their urban functional meaning, a symbolic meaning, historical or cultural, and become thus urban landmarks.

Has the city of Iasi such qualities, such urban landmarks, revealed or unrevealed?

In this paper, we would like to draw attention to one of the values of the city of Iasi, namely to an important aspect of the urban organization of the ancient city.

A walk through the old city streets, wide or narrow, reveals an obvious fact: street perspectives are always marked by eye-stops, and these are usually churches – important cultural, spiritual, as well as spatial landmarks of the city.

The positions of churches in the city street network make them be perceived as important monuments, as architectural and spiritual landmarks in the citizens' life.

The aspects we have pointed out remind us of Camillo Sitte's words:

„There is no other means of fighting against the plague of inflexible geometrical regularity than rational theory. It is the only way towards reviving the freedom of thought of ancient masters and towards using, in full awareness, the means that they unconsciously followed in times when artistic practice was a tradition.

How could the permanent self-consciousness of our time and civilisation hope to replace the lost artistic innocence?"

Unfortunately, as supporters of modern „urbanization" , we are far from being students of the lesson the city itself has to offer; we sometimes even find ourselves in the posture of aggressors of these values.

Keywords: urban functional meaning, symbolic meaning, urban landmarks, old city planning



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1. INTRODUCTION

Man's sense of identity is closely related to the image of the places where his personality was formed. These places, ranging from home to district or town, form the environment that provides man with a feeling of safety and of belonging.

A place is defined by several elements. Built elements create urban spaces, with their spatial coordinates and volumes. These elements have, besides their urban functional meaning, a symbolic meaning, historical or cultural, and become thus urban landmarks.

Has the city of Iasi such qualities, such urban landmarks, revealed or unrevealed?

The great Romanian architect G.M. Cantacuzino stated, in an article entitled „The City of Iasi in Romanian Art”:

„Under the veil of mediocrity and of burocratic insensitiveness, under the dust of roads and of oblivion, there still is here a treasure that we must cherish all the more as it is unique in its kind in all of the country of Romania.”

2. IDENTITY AND LANDMARKS

In this paper, we would like to draw attention to one of the values of the city of Iasi, namely to an important aspect of the urban organization of the ancient city.

A walk through the old city streets, wide or narrow, reveals an obvious fact: street perspectives are always marked by eye-stops, and these are usually churches – important cultural, spiritual, as well as spatial landmarks of the city.

Could this be dismissed as simple coincidence? That is hard to believe. This aspect, at first noticed as a pleasant surprise, is so frequent and logically determined that appears as a rule of the old city planning.

For a built element to acquire the status of landmark, it needs to have some particular quality in volume or style, to be unique. In the case of most churches in the old parts of Iasi, the built volume is enhanced by the winding route leading to the building, which opens up different perspectives upon the monument.

Thus, the otherwise static, picturesque built volumes acquire a dynamic quality through the city walkthrough experience. Movement on a single flat plane is often replaced by a more complex movement that develops on the vertical axis as well, suiting the hilly environment.



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Further research reveals even more interesting aspects: many of the churches that preserve their location in the old street network are paired with an access course that appears on plans in the shape of letter „Z”. Following this type of course results in perceiving the monument through a rotation movement, and this allows the building to be visualised in a short time and in a highly dynamic and dramatic manner. Relevant examples are Biserica Alba („The White Church”) as approached from Alba Street, the Nicorita Church as approached from Nicorita Street and Bas Ceaus Street, Biserica Taierea Capului Sf. Ioan Botezatorul („Beheading of St. John the Baptist” Church), Biserica Trei Ierarhi as approached from the Trei Ierarhi Street and the Metropolitan Cathedral as approached from the Sf. Andrei Street and Colonel Ianga Street.

Some churches are perceived directly as eye-stops at road-ends from many of the city streets, sometimes from considerable distances. One such example is the Galata Monastery, seen from the Balcescu Street on the Copou Hill from a distance of approximately 4.5 km.

Thus, the positions of churches in the city street network make them be perceived as important monuments, as architectural and spiritual landmarks in the citizens’ life.

The aspects we have pointed out remind us of Camillo Sitte’s words:

„There is no other means of fighting against the plague of inflexible geometrical regularity than rational theory. It is the only way towards reviving the freedom of thought of ancient masters and towards using, in full awareness, the means that they unconsciously followed in times when artistic practice was a tradition.

How could the permanent self-consciousness of our time and civilisation hope to replace the lost artistic innocence?”

3. CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, as supporters of modern „urbanization” , we are far from being students of the lesson the city itself has to offer; we sometimes even find ourselves in the posture of aggressors of these values.

Protecting the architectural heritage cannot be confined to the physical preservation of a number of important buildings. We strongly feel the need of protecting the spirit of the city and its cultural values, all expressed in its physical form. The first steps to take are, therefore, analysing the architectural values of the city from a



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wider perspective by taking into account various aspects such as landscape design and even tourism.

Here are the words of a great cultural personality and a wonderful spirit, the architect G.M. Cantacuzino:

„The time has now come to analyse what we could learn from this city, what misteries could this priceless document, the city of Iasi, reveal.”

Why not make this „now”, start NOW!

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