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URBAN LANDSCAPE: AESTHETIC AND IDENTITY VALENCES

PEISAJUL URBAN: VALENȚE ESTETICE ȘI IDENTITARE

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In the 20th century, the notion of urban landscape, which originally meant a species of artistic landscape, takes on a new color from an anthropological perspective, is seen as part of the socio-cultural reality of the city, the aesthetic aspect of the landscape being integrated into its identity dimension. The aesthetic dimension of the urban landscape largely depends on the visual aspects of the city, of the correspondence between the function and form of urban spaces, of their distribution and composition, while the identity character of a space gives the urban landscape unique valences of perception and meaning.

By analyzing two emblematic urban sites of Chisinau, referring to the identity and aesthetic aspects, the article shows the evolution and reconfiguration of the urban landscape, by integrating the identity and aesthetic diversity of the sites, creating an attractive image of the city both for its inhabitants and for tourists, contributing to increasing the quality of life, social cohesion and sustainable development.

Keywords: urban landscape, place identity, aesthetic value, tangible heritage, collective memory, urban site

În secolul XX noțiunea de peisaj urban, care însemna, inițial, o specie de peisaj artistic, capătă o nouă conotație din perspectivă antropologică și este privită ca parte a realității socio-culturale a orașului, aspectul estetic al peisajului fiind integrat în dimensiunea lui identitară. Dimensiunea estetică a peisajului urban ține, în mare parte, de aspectele vizuale ale orașului, de corespondența dintre funcție și formă a spațiilor urbane, de distribuția și compoziția acestora, pe când caracterul identitar al unui spațiu conferă peisajului urban valențe unice de percepție și semnificație.

Prin analiza a două situri urbane emblematice ale Chișinăului, cu referire la aspectele identitare și estetice, articolul prezintă evoluția și reconfigurarea peisajului urban prin integrarea identității și diversității estetice a siturilor, creând o imagine atractivă a orașului atât pentru locuitori cât și pentru turiști, contribuind la creșterea calității vieții, coeziunii sociale și dezvoltării durabile.

Cuvinte-cheie: peisaj urban, identitatea locului, valoare estetică, patrimoniu material, memorie colectivă, sit urban

„Identity to place is like light to colour”.

Ali Cheshmehzangi. *Identity of Cities and City of Identities*. Springer, 2020

Introduction

Seen as a classic trans-disciplinary concept, the landscape as an object of study has revealed its many facets, making it impossible to define it univocally and universally. If the first sense of the landscape is “an area of land that is beautiful to look at or that has a particular type of appearance” [1], its current use as a cultural landscape, media landscape, political landscape and other indicates an expansion of the meaning of this concept.

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In the twentieth century, with the development of human and cultural geography, emphasis is placed on the social and cultural dimension of the landscape, on the relationship between society and its living environment. Thus, the notion of urban landscape, which initially meant a kind of artistic landscape, took on a new color from an anthropological perspective, the aesthetic aspect of the landscape being integrated into its identity dimension.

Urbanization and globalization are obviously two major phenomena that affect our social, economic, cultural lives as well as our physical environment. Today more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas, a proportion expected to increase to 68% by 2050[2].

The expansion of urban areas, the increase of the urban population and deterioration of both natural and cultural resources raise the concerns about the image and identity of urban landscapes. UNESCO Global Report on Culture for Sustainable Urban Development „Culture: Urban Future” provides a wealth of insights and concrete evidence showing the power of culture as a strategic asset for creating cities that are more inclusive, creative and sustainable [3]. The aesthetic and identity properties of urban landscape express what connects material practices, social relations, symbolic representations and everything that contributes to shaping a local culture. In this sense, research on the aesthetic qualities and identity of the urban landscape will highlight their importance for sustainable urban development.

Urban Landscape and Place Identity

The urban landscape constitutes a space of representations, of the accumulation of codes and meanings over time, being a space made up of images and symbols that accompany physical representations, according to the philosopher, urbanist and sociologist Henry Lefebvre [4 p.39]. The lived space thus appears as a social and imaginative one, and urban landscapes, and not only these, also possess a symbolic meaning, being full of meaning and identity.

The appearance of the volume *Senses of Places*, published under the auspices of the prestigious American School of Advanced Research in 1996, can be considered as the birth date for what has since been openly called „place anthropology”, an independent branch of cultural anthropology, concerned with the complex relation of people to places. Thus, Patricia A. Stokowski, University of Vermont, professor shows that „places are more than mere geographical locations with explicitly defined physical and textual characteristics — places are also fluid, changing, dynamic contexts of memory and social interaction” [5 p. 369]. In addition, places are interconnected to identities; their symbolic force resides precisely in the ability to connect individuals in society, to create and impose socio-cultural meanings, to raise a community, strengthening its identity. Moreover, places structure a normative landscape — the way in which notions of what is good, right and appropriate are transmitted in society. But values and meanings are not inherent to space or place — they must be created, reproduced and defended” [5 p. 369]

Rhiannon Mason from Newcastle University connected the cultural heritage and the cultural identity through the expression „sense of the place” creating an emotional rapport between the urban heritage and the local community. Mason said: „Feeling strongly and positively attached and connected to a place is an important aspect of people’s identity” [6]. The identity of a given place arises from a combination of social and cultural characteristics of the related community which reincarnated in physical shapes and forms of the urban locality.

Through reviewing the previous researches in fields of urban landscape in the past half century, it is evident that discussions about aesthetics in this field have gone through changes from a visual-artistic standpoint into an issue with perceptual-meaning tendencies. It is the interaction between landscapes and human viewers within the perceptible realm that gives rise to landscape aesthetic experience. In the 20th century, there are two main paradigms of landscape aesthetics theory. The subjective paradigm perceives landscape quality in the eye of observers and has dominated in land-

scape preference and perception research. The objective paradigm assesses the visual quality inherent to landscape properties and has gained considerable attention in landscape design, planning, and management. Eventually, urban aesthetics is not only a combination of individual beautiful elements, „urban aesthetics is related to creating a context and applying it to the whole public life” [7].

According to A.R. Sadeghi, the urban landscape can be analyzed from two major perspectives: taking into account the visual and cognitive-conceptual elements [8]. Visual-form elements include the quality of landscape and its factors, the quality of urban buildings, of public spaces and their elements, continuity, enclosure, diversity of forms, the quality of views and coordination with the context. Cognitive-conceptual elements include identity, concept, perceptibility, coherent mental image, customizability, social and cultural environment, and richness of activities [8]. Urban aesthetics is mainly related to the external image of an object and place in a given urban context, the position of buildings, the harmony and suitability in composition, but the intrinsic connection between the aesthetic and the conceptual-identity elements of the urban landscape ultimately determines the image of the city.

Comparative Case Study

Referring to the identity and aesthetic aspects of urban landscape, the synergy between the cultural heritage and contemporary creativity we used the comparative case study, analyzing two different emblematic urban sites of Chisinau: The *Stefan cel Mare* Public Garden, historical and heritage monument, and Digital Park, resident of the Tracom Industrial Park, a technology and innovation park, based on the concept of developing the entrepreneurial ecosystem for the IT industry.

In order to carry out the study, we identified a set of criteria, among which: location, general description, historical — important architectural and urban transformations, historical significance, present perception of the inhabitants, the image from a qualitative point of view, the functionally characteristic image type, current use, uniqueness and conclusions regarding the identity dimension of the spaces. We used the documentation and observation methods to perform the analysis.

The *Stefan cel Mare* Public Garden also called *Stefan cel Mare* Park, which is part of the national heritage, is the oldest park in Chisinau designed and decorated in a classic way (**Image 1**). It is considered that it was planted in 1818. It's the final form that The Public Garden acquired in 1835.

Image 1. Stephen the Great Monument, 1928, sculptor Alexandru Plămădeală/
Stephen the Great Public Garden. Main Entrance.



Source: Afisha.md [9].

Till 1863 the park was surrounded by a wattle, replaced by one made of wood, then by a stone wall, and, finally, by an iron fence, designed by Alexander Bernardazzi¹. During its history, the park had several names - Alexandrovskii Park, the *A. Pushkin* Public Garden. Its current name dates back to the 1990s. It has an area of 7 hectares. The *Stefan cel Mare* Public Garden is a beloved place for recreation, rides, and meetings for all of the Chisinau residents. In 1885, here was installed the bust of Alexander Pushkin, and in 1928 — the monument of Stephen the Great, which replaced the monument to Tsar Alexander II [10 p.20]. Later there were permutations of the statue of Stefan the Great, determined by political changes. Flower-laying ceremonies are regularly performed at the pedestal of this monument on each national holiday and on days of official top — and high — level visits. In 1958, was fitted the Alley of Classics with 12 busts of the classics of Romanian literature, to which, in 1990, were joined the busts of the great Romanian writers of the twentieth century. Today, 31 busts are located on the Alley of the Classics. In the park, there are 50 species of trees, some of them reaching the age of 130-160 years, lots of decorative flowers and a few species rarely encountered in Moldova. The park occupies seven acres in the center of the city and is one of the most picturesque places of Chisinau. The public garden is a cultural, leisure space for outdoor concerts, festivals, holidays, ceremonies. The park has a complex historical significance of two centuries, and is relevant for all social groups, regardless of ethnicity, age, gender etc. The park's uniqueness consists in the concentration of numerous emblematic monuments for the Chisinau residents and the country's population, being the oldest park in the country.

In the recent years the image of the public garden is in a state of increased degradation, due to both the illegal intervention that have taken place here over the years, and the lack of proper maintenance. Now the garden needs renovation. However, it has a positive image and remains one of the most popular parks of the city. The strong historical charge, which is found in the collective memory, determines the patrimonial identity values of the *Stefan cel Mare* Public Garden.

Digital Park (resident of the Tracom Industrial Park), located in downtown, is an emerging alternative urban center, built on the territory of the former Tractor plant of Chisinau (*Image 2*).

Image2. Digital Park



Source: Facebook.com [11].

1 Alexander Bernardazzi is the architect who changed the face of Chisinau in the second half of the 19th century.

The construction began in 2013 and was put into operation in December 2019. It is planned to extend the project with four other buildings. The industrial identity of the place is important; the Tractor Plant had been active in this territory for 3 decades (1961—1991).

In the current perception of the inhabitants the Digital Park is an innovative project for young people, a business center. The IT ecosystem has become the country's business card, with a mixed function (economic, cultural, event organization-conferences, trainings, forums, business project launchings, creative events, festivals, fashion shows, concerts etc.). The uniqueness of the place consists in the modern architecture, which combines aesthetics with unique finishes, with open workspaces — the first in the country, and the destination of the building — as IT Park. The Digital Park is a new vision of a workspace, based on sustainability and environmental improvement, giving priority to modern eco-technologies and green spaces. It is a space that offers a lot of warmth, hospitality and a lot of comfort for professional activity. The concept of the Digital Park is to create an atmosphere and a „Silicon Valley” infrastructure in Moldova [12]. Through its unique character, modern aesthetic aspect, multipurpose destination, the created business ecosystem represents an innovative urban site, with an emerging identity in step with global trends.

Both sites, the *Stefan cel Mare* Public Garden and Digital Park are emblematic urban spaces of Chisinau, despite the fact that one is about two centuries old and the other has existed for only a few years. Although from an aesthetic point of view they are very different, one classic, the other modern, and reflect urban visions of the eras in which they were conceived, then the identity aspect, linked to the memory of the place, makes them particularly attractive and important as landmarks of the image of the city where the past and history are part of urban life in perpetual development.

Conclusions

The modern aesthetic aspect of the urban landscape is an important feature for developing the place identity, for creating positive, friendly public spaces and for the capitalization of the tangible heritage. Understanding the local identity, the factors that determine it are the essential conditions for the elaboration of urban development strategies.

The evolution and reconfiguration of the urban landscape involves the integration of the identity and aesthetic diversity of the sites and the creation of an attractive image of the city for both its inhabitants and tourists, contributing to increasing the quality of life, social cohesion and sustainable development. The local community is a fundamental tool of managing the urban landscape, strengthening its cultural identity and the sense of belonging, in coordination with the urban governance, the investors and the citizens.

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