

URBAN SPACE AS AN IMAGE OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

UDC 316.334.56

Dijana Brkljac, Aleksandra Milinkovic, Milena Krkljes

University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Technical Sciences, Serbia

Abstract. *From the very beginning of urban settlements, cities have had a very clear expression, because urban elements bear with them the symbolism and messages tied to relevant points in history, changes in function, characters etc. These messages, carried through a range of urban elements, have been changing in respect to lifestyles, which, ever since the rise of capitalism, predominantly meant with respect to economic conditions. Such a free-market impact has become particularly evident in the light of contemporary totalitarian capitalism that has equated urban space with commercial and exhibition space, thus moulding it into an urban market.*

This paper is intended as a critical review dealing with the analysis of urban spaces in respect to urban image creation, all in relation to relevant socio-economic influences and conditionalities. It also considers new symbolic meanings to the existing urban form, which affect urban life and its inhabitants.

Key words: *city, capitalism, socio-economic context, global city, branding*

1. INTRODUCTION

If the interactions between architecture, economy and social relations are considered as a postulate in the process of shaping an urban landscape, it is imperative that the implications of acting in each and all of these professional fields are considered, e.g. an urban planner needs to carefully consider the habits of a community before proposing a change; none could challenge the fact that, once created, a place affects the lives and experiences of its users and inhabitants. Society of the 21st century, has been transformed under the influences of numerous very important factors of the modern world. The everyday tempo of life, availability of different information, strengthening of personal identity are all terms that modern man identifies with and that have been presented as an axiom of everyday life.

Received December 14, 2015 / Accepted February 3, 2016

Corresponding author: Milena Krkles, University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Technical Sciences, Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Serbia

E-mail: milenakrkljes@gmail.com

In that sense, we can accept that architecture and urban spaces cannot be just simple physical mapable things, but much more they are products of many social activities [1]. Furthermore, the interaction between society and space is realized through design of the environment that involves the organization of space, time, meaning and communication, with the architectural space seen as playing a critical role in the preservation of specific components of culture, its qualities which vary from culture to culture [2].

Beside the cultural influences, there are expanding globalization interests and new economic trends that are “changing traditional roles and relations between public and private sector in governance and city building processes, since the role of private sector is increasing in the realization of own interests in particular projects as well as influencing creation of public urban policies in European cities from 1980s.” [3, p.12]

All of undergoing rapid and intense transformation in contemporary cities has caused various urban problems around the world and requires new future-oriented approach to anticipate future transformations, effectively prepare for their consequences and deal with complexity, like “the use of scenarios techniques, which have already been used successfully in the business world, and might be used in the field of urban planning for the reduction of uncertainty by creating and identifying possible alternative paths of future urban development”. [4, pp.81-82] Simultaneously, the application of creative concept that is used in economic and urban geography, “withering away the “fordist“ capitalism and rising of a new cognitive-cultural economy” [5, p.566], “focused on the interplay of new digital technologies, advanced forms of human capital, the logic of process and product innovation, and intellectual property, greatly intensified creative performance over a wide range of economic and social relations” [6, p.566] and could be a positive way for solving the rising problems of contemporary cities.

The paper analyses the way in which the city manifests itself and urban image, created under the influence of contemporary social system that forms the urban image today. This topic was chosen with the aim to dismantle social and economic forces that shape the contemporary urban landscape. The goal of this paper is to consider the character of urban elements in order to provide insight into the extent to which the city image is a representation of economic power in respect to the image created by spatial organization and character of urban elements.

2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

Providing there is awareness that contemporary societal relations are based on work as a category, one of the main sociological traits of urbanization i.e. secondary human relations can be fairly easily traced. As “another aspect of urbanism is in the creation of societal organization dominated by secondary human relations, lacking in family relations, neighbourhood, traditional solidarity and human interactions becoming impersonal relations” [7], every human being build his/her personal and collective identity, in the course of personal growth and regarding surrounding environment. The space that person inhabits should express his/her opinion of the surroundings as well as a wider social context. A sense of connection between a city and its inhabitants fulfils a personal need for identification with one’s surrounding, rather important for building a sense of belonging, a need innate to human beings as units of society.

The aforementioned dimension of urbanism has led us, under the rise of financial might and, thus, transformation of social organization, to an almost absolute alienation of inhabitants, in respect to each other. If we add to this an evident cyclic nature of the capitalist societies that, after every iteration return with a clearer message of the importance of economic power in the life of a modern man, one may question the extent to which the alienation might escalate in the modern society.

Modern market has another trait as a relevant factor in forming a city image. Privatization of space has enabled the corporations to have an intensive effect on the image of urban spaces and on a city's architecture.

Contemporary socio-economic situation has initiated a shift in value systems in private-sector-dominated market societies. In "Society of the Spectacle", as Guy Debord refers to the modern society, each aspect of life is portrayed through its material value, while "the first phase of the domination of the economy over social life brought into the definition of all human realization the obvious degradation of being into having". [8] This fact is evident in the lifestyle of the modern man, whose awareness of the need to own material goods has led him to become controlled solely by work and commodity on a daily basis. Technological advances that have enabled production growth, market expansions, free information flow and conditioned the development of the modern city, bears with it a contradiction that a "postfordist" society had to overcome in order to survive. In line with these remarks, as Scott stated, "the term "postfordism" should be abandoned and replaced by the more affirmative designation "cognitive-cultural capitalism"" [9, p.570], the term "that has the advantage of positively reflecting the foundations of much contemporary economic activity". [6, p.570]

Entering a period marked by a distinctive third wave of urbanization based on cognitive-cultural capitalism, contemporary urban landscapes are directly conditioned by the development of labour as commodity. New labour market systematization and restructuring of economies have vicariously affected the morphology of cities at the beginning of the 21st century and it is certainly the case that more and more large cities in North America and Western Europe are taking part in this trend, as well as cities in the Asia-Pacific Region and elsewhere (New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Sydney, Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangkok), as well as many smaller cities or rural areas that are increasingly subject to transformation within this cognitive-cultural order.

2.1. Urban image under capitalist influence

Since the early beginning of the capitalist society, economic factors have become major influences in urban planning and programme distribution. Capitalism has gone through several development stages and has become a completely totalitarian system on a global scale. The manner of conquest of space changed with time and, in neoliberal capitalism, it became a need for a larger concentration of spatial power symbols in specific urban quarters, whose role is to symbolize the economic potential of a society on the local, regional or global level, glorifying its global prosperity.

For a long time in history there was a distinction between cities of industry and commerce, on the one hand, and cities of art and culture, on the other, widely seen as being quite incompatible with one another. Changes occurred with a number of important transformations that have come about in the shift from "fordism" to "postfordism" that occurred over the 1980s and 1990s and that have a strong bearing on learning, creativity

and innovation. Contemporary cities are much more seen as “the “creative city”, where production, work, leisure, the arts and the physical milieu exist in varying degrees of mutual harmony.” [6, p.569] There were also changes in urban governance modes due to “a new policy of European integration, the impacts of globalization on the relative importance of the nation state to sub national regional and local levels of government, the dynamics of local economies, changes in the patterns of social welfare distribution and changes in social expectations of creating social policy and implementation of policy instruments.” [10, p.12]

The original sociological function of public urban spaces had transformed into a space of economic battle, moulded by elements of marketing instead of urban elements. Public space has become a decorated arena, whose gladiators are companies and influential production systems shaping the urban platform, aware that the “audience doesn’t find what it needs, but in fact needs what it sees”. [8] Due to the availability of information and the ubiquitous nature of merchandize, city shaping in accordance to market principles has led to the situation that Thomas More describes in the 15th century: “...who would know one city, he would know them all, for they are all the same...”. [11] In the light of contemporary circumstances, it is clear that the “sameness” does not refer to the image of the city itself; it is, rather pointed towards the ideology shaping the urban tissue in a manner that accentuates the market-relevant urban elements.

Technological enhancements have enabled the shaping of urban elements in accordance with capitalist society’s requirements, putting an accent on expression of power through the form of materialization of an edifice. The city skyline changes significantly, as the urban tissue grows vertically, induced by the socio-economic factors, globally subordinated to financial centres of power. An accentuated verticality, according to Christian Norberg-Shulz “is a direction of ascension” [12], through which a city skyline implies the economic potential of its community. If the present moment is “supermodernity” [13], as defined by Marc Augé, the main form of this concept can be identified as important influences on the perception of existential space. The author states that “supermodernity” is actually the result of three forms of exaggeration, where each one directly influences the character of a space, and thus the physical environment of modern man.

3. GLOBAL CITY PHENOMENA

A global city is an urban space with a largest concentration of financial power, which is also confirmed in the fact that the level of urban progress is always a direct or indirect reflection of its economic status. Accumulated economic potential enables it to create a power image to be distributed worldwide, via mass media and market mechanisms. A seemingly widely advocated social heterogeneity, is reduced to an image – a (re)presentation of homogeneity. Organic solidarity, portraying the global community, is mirrored in the urban space. Throughout the course of human history, the development of a city and its character always seemed to be closely intertwined with the state the society was in; today, this is mostly evident in the control that the market has over the biggest part of our lives. It is well known that global environmental changes influence transformations in form and function of urban systems, requiring “radical, systematic shifts in values, patterns of social behaviour, and multilevel governance and management system”. [14, p.274]

Well-coordinated and efficiently executed action mechanisms in economic and social spheres greatly contribute to strengthening the dominant image of these cities. Practical means that successfully realize a global city are:

- City branding activities,
- Mass media,
- Public spaces as market promoters.

3.1. City branding

City branding encompasses a number of various creative activities that are undergone by a city's management structures (Figure 1); all of these have a goal to construct a city image with the aim of promoting it as a desirable destination for numerous visitors on a global scale, thus creating a construct disseminated to the world in a carefully controlled manner. Cultural policies promote this approach with the motive to ascertain a city's social and cultural existence in a best possible manner. This principle also inadvertently creates and accentuates the city's economic status. The whole branding process and its outcome, in that way ensure a specific kind of familiarisation with city without physical experience.



Fig. 1 City branding activities in Amsterdam

(left: http://www.rtkl.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/I_am_Amsterdam.jpg;

right: <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/67/ec/cd/67eccdc2c452c5adcf45da59bd55040.jpg>)

Such an approach through organised and continuous campaigns and extensive media coverage exposes a city to a wider range of potential visitors and users. A city in that way broadens its influence beyond its physical limits or perimeters of the native country and globalizes its image through carefully constructed actions, often through aggressive media policy. Results of such a branding approach send across clear message of the portrayed space even to the public that has not created a subjective image of the space itself and that will eventually appropriate this information as personal knowledge and positions. Branding a space is conducted by diverse means, resulting in a city as a product and merchandize promoted with specific characteristics that are presented to a potential consumer through various media. It is very often the case that there is a clear image of the city's character, its prominent places adopted by people prior to having visited it, that might lead to abstraction of certain urban values not chosen to be aggressively promoted.

3.2. Media impact

Mass media, which structure the global image, have greatly contributed to creating the contemporary “bigger picture”. Accesses to multitude of information has broadened the views of people, which in turn enabled critical thought in numerous aspects of daily community life. The mass media phenomenon and technological advancements that enabled easy access to information in every circumstance has had both positive and negative impact on the life of the contemporary man. The tempo of life, as an influential factor in modern times, is emphasized through sequencing of events that take place in different, very remote places. It is evident that not every event has an impact on the life of an individual who receives information about it, and the fact that the information comes and stays in the mind of men affects his perception of himself and the space in which he exists.

A form of exaggeration manifests itself through public space, where new technologies and global networks allow “the accumulation of images” [13]. Commercialization of American cities has been very successfully realized through media; specifically through film production, which distributes a redesigned city image in the context of the story and the film plot, promoting only specific and desired urban aspects. In this way, entire cities and urban quarters are being promoted as “family”, “high criminal rate”, “luxurious” districts etc. Data shows that the City of New York has been, throughout the 20th century, subjected to or integrated in a range of visual arts, with the aim of interpreting a clear city image and urban profile.

3.3. Urban space as a market promoter

With the rise in economic power, public spaces of the city took the role of market promoters. One of the most prominent indicators that the urban space is colonized would be in the new primary role of different urban elements. Once constructed out of elements that indicated its culture, tradition, historical and community value, the urban structure becomes a series of facades that are turned into commercial oversized billboards (Figure 2). The existing, conservative commercial space proved insufficient and the urban fabric itself had to become a commercial backdrop, a scenography for a carefully devised brand mania.



Fig. 2 New York City urban public spaces as market promoters

(left: http://opentravel.com/img/TravelGuide/broadway-new-york-city-united-states-578_4.jpg;

right: <http://renaissance-ny.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Chinatown-Manhattan-New-York-apartment-buildings-3.jpg>)

There is also another market promoter of cities, the central business districts of major global cities with new forms of aestheticization, represented through idiosyncratic buildings signed by star architects, amplifying the individuality and visibility of the urban milieu. The same role has “historical and cultural patrimony of cities as the basis of lucrative heritage and place marketing efforts”. [15, p. 570]

One might question the extent to which such a phenomenon might develop, eroding the urban tissue and degrading the quality of public urban spaces. The evident domination of commodity over public values imposes an expansion of alienation, because the urban space renders an ambiguous base for the processes of supply and demand, rather than socialization or promotion of culture. A wide variety of cleverly positioned visual marketing tools dominate human perception, thus rendering quality urban spaces and the human dimension of the city redundant.

The same way that a square, a river or a church had their particular meaning throughout the history, there are structures today that bear the message of commodity, in or using the urban space:

- Accentuation and promotion of the location in its broader context, of the prime importance of traffic, rising of the different activity levels and the quality of ambiance etc. dictates its development dynamics and the boundaries of its relevance.
- Some of the means of expressing the economic aspect of urban activities would be through positioning buildings, accentuating verticality and use of expensive materials and modern technologies – clear indicators of financial might, as well as a method of “elitisation” of particular urban spaces. The first element of articulation, also one most prominent in a wider sense, is the verticality of corporate architecture, building the well-known city skyline. Today, the skyline is a clear indicator of financial potential and status, as the concentration of activity in an urban district invariably means the presence of dominant programs. Another method of direct communication of economic power is accentuation by use of luxurious materials and new technologies. Mirroring of power in the glass-panelled structural facades, also mirrors the might of organization settled in such a stylized edifice; the attractiveness of the light effects becomes a firm direction for urban remodelling.
- Occupation of an open urban space by commercial market messages to consumers, who, by having embraced the market, have allowed the escalation of its impact, is a clear interpretation of the economic conditions and its impact on the urban tissue, unequivocally usurping the public spaces in the name of a range of market representatives. Covering of the facades that close an open space is one of the most frequently used methods of space usurpation. The presence of advertisements and other marketing forms has engulfed the city so much that it represses every other aspect of urban life, human contact, visibility of urban structures, movement through engaging spaces, open views and many other instances that make and break a city; they have become unnoticeable in comparison to a cacophony of information spread over the city.

As it is proved that global environmental changes trigger evolutionary shifts in form and function of urban systems, and that there is “a need for a “future-proof” planning strategy that would be adaptable to the changing external and internal conditions” [14, p.284], it is necessary to find solutions in urban planning that would meet the requirements of contemporary cities. It might be achieved by application of “responsive

design, a purposeful physical expression of space, time, meaning and communication in such a way that their implications for any given culture are clearly understood and incorporate two components: the contextual content that makes place legible to the user and the experience and motivation for using the space". [1, p.171] Trying to change traditional methods of thinking and planning the cities, imaginative and innovative approach scenario planning method could be an effective tool that involves and understands influencing factors for forming conceptions of an uncertain and complex environment future, overcoming the limitations of thinking in the process of urban planning [4].

4. CONCLUSION

Economic factors affecting the shaping of urban landscapes are a historical moment, a constantly present influence that changes only its form and its modus operandi in the (urban) space. Besides the need to form an identity, a modern society has a highly present need for public space to express the capacities of a modern man. If profit becomes the sole authority in urban planning, the city will lose the battle; economic principle in a totalitarian system, subjected to free-market conditions, are much more dominant in comparison to the urban planning principles led by human needs, led by quality principles; then, one should not be surprised that we are witnessing a rising of a new typology of urban spaces, created in accordance to free-market society principles.

The thirsts for power over space and resources has become so evident, contemporary citizens are led by consumerism. It is because of the fact that the inhabitants do not notice they are being denied of urban and public spaces ever more rapidly, usurped by the profit-driven private structures. The question is, if and when will such megalomaniac structures be returned to public ownership and what will be the course of their later development?

Therefore, as a possible answer we might accept an approach in urban planning with strategic and open process-oriented decisions, that might minimize negative impacts on the inherited urban spaces within the process of globalization in contemporary urban society [14]. Thinking about urban planning for contemporary city, we should bare in mind that cities are results of human thoughts and ideas, lifestyles and values sublimated in the cultural and social system that should be structured and organized with its own identity.

City branding implies creating, developing and demonstrating values through appropriate "on brand" actions (investments, physical and economic plans, attraction programs, events, communications...) without changing their traditional morphology and typology. All partners in the city brand strategy development process need to understand and decide on what the future of their city will look like, what it will offer of value to consumers, how it will be experienced and what it is they can jointly do to make that future a reality, with the main purpose to make the city better, a more sustainable and a more competitive living place.

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URBANI PROSTOR KAO SLIKA SOCIO-EKONOMSKOG KONTEKSTASA VREMENIH GRADOVA

Od samog početka urbanog razvoja, gradovi su imali veoma jasan izraz, jer urbani elementi nose u sebi simboliku i poruke vezane za relevantna trenutke istorije, promena funkcija, karaktera, itd. Ove poruke, prenošene kroz niz niz elemenata urbane sredine, menjale su se u odnosu na način života, koji je još od pojave kapitalizma, uglavnom bio u neposrednoj vezi sa ekonomskim uslovima određene sredine. Takav uticaj slobodnog tržišta je postao posebno izražen u svetlu savremenog totalitarnog kapitalizma, koji izjednačava urbani prostor sa komercijalnim i izložbenim prostorom, pretvarajući ga u urbano tržište.

Ovaj rad ima za cilj analizu i predstavljanje kritičkog osvrta na urbane prostore u odnosu na stvaranje slike grada, u kontekstu relevantnih socio-ekonomskih činilaca i uticaja. Takođe, u radu su razmotrena nova simbolička značenja postojećih urbanih struktura i njihovog efekta na građenu sredinu i njene korisnike.

Ključne reči: grad, kapitalizam, socio-ekonomski kontekst, globalni grad, brendiranje