

Sociological research perspectives of urban symbolism

Gabriel Nicolae Pricină^{a*}

^a University of Craiova, Craiova, Romania

Abstract

This article is based on a research conducted within an European project aimed at developing a strategy for the promotion and fruition of cultural heritage in Dolj county, Romania and the district of Vidin, Bulgaria.

Urban area research in the conditions of the globalized societies is limited by the alternation between the general phenomena encountered in all cases in cities and the problems affecting the evolution of cities. The general features eliminate the possibility of an identity profile of the cities, and the solutions offered result from the gross comparison of certain development indicators. Differences between them become dimensions of urban development strategies. But reality has shown that imitation of successful models without a minimum of adaptive effort is not enough. Successful recipes do not provide guarantees for multiplication in different contexts from the point of view of the level of urbanism and different historical experiences. In most cases, the measures and investments made do not bring an increase in the life quality and do not favor social cohesion. The adverse effects are perpetuated over time, and the costs of rebuilding cities as communities become considerable.

The study of possible alternatives to understanding the urban environment also brings to the attention of completing the significance of statistical data with meanings resulting from a more complex understanding of the processes specific to the urban environment, as the city represents more than a simple demographic agglomeration.

Keywords: *urbanization; sustainable development; symbols; population; tourism; architecture.*

1. Urban development planning

The main objectives of urban development are related to economic development and poverty reduction. These key objectives include strategies such as (Kaganova 2011): central elements of the urban system, anti-poverty policies, urban economy, urban land and housing market, sustainable urban policies and issues related to the urban area.

Moving from one historical stage to the next, changes and the dynamics of the modern world require constant efforts by the local government to keep the city as a productive, inviting and attractive space for investment. On an administrative level, investments are geared towards acquiring new assets or repairing and replacing existing ones (Kaganova 2011: p. 3). These investments are made through government development programs or local development initiatives. Investments in new assets or

*Gabriel Nicolae Pricină. Tel.:004-0727447425. E-mail address: gabrielpricina@gmail.com.

maintenance of old ones can also be achieved through public-private partnerships (Kaganova 2011: p. 3).

Investments and the correlation with the needs of the cities are circumscribed to aspects that require the attention of the authorities (Kaganova 2011: p. 3):

1. Capital demand for investment is always higher than available, which forces local authorities to take decisions in the interest of the city by prioritizing objectives and carefully planning investments. Early development of a set of criteria that support the need for investment can also add value to the investment, expressed in terms of positive effects on the city;

2. There is an "intrinsic challenge". Certain projects are carried out through annual planning, being dependent on local and government budgets, while other projects involve multi-year investments due to the complexity and scale of investments that can be achieved through activities that last for more than a year. The effective preparation, planning and organization of such a system requires a period of careful and lengthy preparation so as to produce the best financial estimates, to contract additional sources of income either through private investment or through subsidies or loan contracting;

3. There are complex projects whose implementation exceeds the technical capacity of local authorities;

4. There is no standard model of public investment planning. Managers of public institutions are trying different approaches to identify feasible solutions.

These aspects are based on five principles that outline a strategy for the development of the city (Kaganova 2011: p. 4):

1. Public authorities must avoid "frivolous" investments in projects in other spheres of activity such as commercial speculation in the real estate market;

2. All the needs of the city are objectively compared;

3. Adopt a prudent fiscal policy in the long term;

4. Innovative solutions for any project are considered;

5. The population or individuals have effective channels to make their opinions known.

Development indicators include many aspects of social and economic life in a city, generally classified into the following major categories (European Communities 2004: p. 3): demography, social, economic, civic involvement, education, environment, travel and transport, information society, culture and recreation, indicators of perception. These major categories include sets of indicators and sub-indicators of a complex and variable size. It is also noted that each category contributes to the development and maintenance of the life quality in a city. Compared to the general framework described above, a new challenge arises: the hierarchy of investment areas or balanced investment methods in their development. Preferences for a certain area will not lead to an increase in the life quality in the conditions of neglecting the other dimensions. Moreover, exaggerated investments in a given framework will have limited positive effects due to the negative effects generated by the lack of a strategy for other areas of activity. There are several connections between the categories of indicators presented so that the implications of the investments made are complex.

The experience of the communist countries has shown that certain aspects of the urban environment indicators have been treated differently. As a result of the urban audits carried out by the pilot project "Urban Audit" (National Institute of Statistics 2018: pp. 10-19), a series of public policies aiming at increasing the attractiveness of urban areas have been neglected. Thus, urban population continues to decline, as does

the population of urban functional areas (FUAs). Also, the age group ratio indicates a decrease of the young population compared to the elderly population, which reveals the existence of a slow aging process. Consequently, this demographic dynamics will generate a high degree of economic dependency, increasing the economic burden on the working-age population. As for the urban area, the solution would be to increase the attractiveness of cities by investing to attract the young population.

Another indicator used in urban auditing (NIS 2018: pp. 20-25) refers to housing. Their number has risen steadily due to the demand for housing in the urban area, as well as the surface of the dwellings. However, these indicators are not correlated with the correlated expansion of utilities and public infrastructure. Thus, the increase in the number of newly built dwellings as a consequence of city development and population requirements can be understood as a response to the housing needs of the population, but it does not have a significant impact on the life quality. Moreover, there are areas where residential overcrowding has exceeded the capacity of the existing infrastructure: water supply, sewage, electricity, places in hospitals, schools, parking places, etc. In addition, the Romanian cities have grown more horizontally, preferring to invest in individual dwellings. Vertical expansion is slower, and where it has been achieved, a number of issues have remained unresolved.

Education is affected by the demographic decline on the one hand, a visible process with the increase of the educational level, while at the young age, 0-4 years, it is found that the number of children is much higher than the ones in the educational units. This is due to the lower number of nurseries and kindergartens than necessary, as well as other causes, such as those of an economic nature or systems of particular values, by which children of this age are raised and trained in the family.

Demographic trends that have negative values for many years will in lead in the future to a drop in the school population to alarming levels (NIS 2018: pp. 25-32).

Tourism is a profit-making activity for business, population and local authorities. In Romania tourism is focused on the natural landscapes and the possibilities offered by the traditional areas: the Black Sea coast and the mountain area. As a result of urban and other research, it is noticed that Romania's tourism potential is not fully exploited. Tourist importance is evidenced by the approximately 500,000 jobs, which account for about 5.8% of the total number of jobs (NIS 2018: pp. 33-37).

The increase in the number of overnight stays in the last four years shows an increase of 8.61%, which shows both an increase in the number of tourists and a prolongation of the periods of stay.

The current challenges in the tourism area relate to the expansion of tourist offer in all areas of the country as there is a rich natural environment and an attractive history for a larger number of tourists than the current one. All this also implies the development of services offered to tourists, so as to ensure increased attractiveness of the area. Tourism is not just an economic activity in the tertiary sector. The economic benefits generated by tourism are linked to maintaining an ecological social space, as the level of pollution due to tourist activities is very low. Moreover, it provides sources for preserving the cultural and historical heritage of a region.

2. Theoretical perspectives of urban space analysis

Neighborhood organization was the subject of W.M. Rohe and L.B. Gates (1985: pp. 24-29) who studied how the urban environment is developing by planning the development of neighborhoods in American cities such as Atlanta, Cincinnati, Huston

and others. Their research was based on the role of the urban planner and the analysis of relations between administration and neighborhoods, be it citizen associations, committees, tenant associations. From this perspective, the neighborhoods become partners in identifying local issues, attracting citizens to solve community problems of general interest in their free time, developing lobby groups that can get involved in raising funds to improve infrastructure, public services, increase solidarity and social cohesion, increasing confidence in local government, etc.

For Herbert Gans (1976: pp. 153-173), planning must become a social planning. People have to be analyzed from the perspective of their aspirations, desires, life styles, values and specific issues due to age or social status. For example, poverty in certain urban areas should generate economic or job creation in an area. Generational conflicts involve investing in creating institutional spaces where young people can express their opinions and values. Criminality involves the intensification of activities and actions to ensure physical and social security. From this point of view, planning must result from knowing the needs and opinions of citizens, their needs. Investments in the physical organization of the territory must be subordinated to the needs expressed by the citizens, and not for reasons of a different nature. From this perspective, urban conflicts resulting from the overlapping of material investments and the different value systems of the population are avoided. Lack of interest due to value incompatibility renders material investment unnecessary and its objectives unattainable.

The oldest city theories appeared long before the cities were what they are now. The increase in the complexity of the cities has also led to the multiplication of human relationships. The study of urban communities requires orientation to understand changes in human behavior under the impact of urban processes. The emergence of economic opportunities and the emergence of the feeling of freedom through the disappearance of normative rural communities created an analytical balance that individuals do when choosing where to live (Still 1974; Davis 1955: pp. 128-130). But economic opportunities do not mean everything for human individuals. Human nature implies a psychological and social space that favors the expression of one's own personality.

Adaptation to the environment is an approach that analyzes the mechanisms that people develop for adaptation to the environment, resulting in more behavioral patterns (Niță and Ilie Goga 2017: 9). Also, population distribution within cities and criteria that influence population movement between different areas of the city is of interest in analyzing urban planning methods (Reiss 1970: pp. 27-37). But a more complete understanding of the city results from its approach as a community. The focus is on the functionality of society and the way functional differences affect individuals (Berger 1978: p. 9).

These distinctions of sociological and psychological nature bring to attention the way in which the human being is transformed under the influence of specific urban processes. A complete research of an urban space in search of the most effective urban planning measures involves completing statistical analyzes, oriented to the city's material infrastructure, with the analysis of human characteristic value systems, symbols and perspectives through which individuals understand the city. The implementation of urban development policies is dependent on the involvement of the population in their realization. The yield is guaranteed and ensured by the correlation between citizen participation and urban development.

3. Symbolic analysis of the urban environment

The functioning of the city as a community implies the emergence and implementation of some functions specific to the functioning of the urban environment (Berger 1978: pp. 30-31). It is about generating and maintaining rules and solidarity of members, providing goods and services, socializing, behavioral control, locations where community members can interact to maintain mutual support.

By analyzing the symbols of the population between different areas of a city one can identify the main features of the city. Identity is not given by economic, housing, or other dimensions that do not involve human individuals. Even the architecture of a city is the result of a certain attitude towards living and living space. Thus, the differences between urban spaces result from the symbolism specific to those communities to a greater extent than differences that include material aspects.

Urban area research is limited by the tendency of each city to be unique in terms of socio-economic and symbolic characteristics. The power to generalize studies in a particular city is limited in analogy with processes running in other cities.

Choosing research methods becomes difficult given the complexity and diversity of city problems. Moreover, the size of the city is directly proportional to the problems that the administration has to solve. Domestic diversity of cities involves the adoption of different methods for studying and understanding some of their different aspects.

A unique research model and perhaps unused on an extended plan is proposed by Peter Nas (2011) and his colleagues, who believe that addressing the cultural characteristics of cities in terms of symbols and rituals is little used in relation to the potential of knowledge which this approach holds. The perspective of urban symbolic ecology allows identification of the distribution and significance of symbols and rituals in relation to the environment. It is possible to know the social processes of production and consumption of symbols and rituals, which are standard recurrent facts in the process of building the meanings. The symbols specific to the different categories of inhabitants of a city are due to the specific ways of manifesting extrinsic values. Analytical perspectives allow us to understand symbols in terms of identity, structure and meanings of urban elements (Kevin Lynch 1960) or the distinction between real city and Hypercity (Nas et. al, 2011: p. 8). The two dimensions comprise the material and visible characteristics of the city on the one hand and, on the other hand, their meanings, which in most cases can constitute hyperreality, with much more powerful influences than the reality itself. Through such an analysis, the symbolic part of a city breaks out of material reality, allowing the transgression of the space defined by the parts.

The cultural approach of the city as a whole, including symbols and rituals, has been rarely used. At present, one of the contemporary research and analysis trends in urban anthropology is the urban symbolic ecology, which aims at studying the cultural dimension of the city, aimed at establishing the distribution and significance of symbols and rituals in relation to the environment (Nas 1998: pp. 545 -622). This approach is central to the social process of producing and consuming symbols and rituals, which are standardized recurrent facts in meaning-building. A symbol is more than just a sign, as it refers to extrinsic values. Hypercity theory implies that the symbolic part of a city can be seen as detached from reality. The symbolic dimension contributes to the formation of a hyperreality or hypercity that has its own life and allows the transgression of the

space defined by the component parts. This involves marketing and branding cities because they want to be differentiated from each other.

Urban symbolism is expressed by various phenomena such as the appearance of a city, architecture, statues, street names, poems, and rituals, culture (music, poetry, local literature) websites, all of which are considered to be symbols. Cities have multiple symbol bearers, one of which is usually the most dominant. There are four types of symbol bearers: material, discursive, iconic, and behavioral (Nas 2006: pp. 1-9).

4. Research direction of urban symbolism in Craiova

In this study we propose to advance a methodological adaptation of this perspective to the knowledge of the specific hyperreality of the city of Craiova, the most developed in the Oltenia region. For this reason we adapted the theory advanced by Peter Nas to the specific elements of the city of Craiova, or be rolled out in the near future.

Starting from the old architecture of the city and the spatial layout of the institutions, two research objectives were developed:

1. Orthodox religion. The most numerous historical buildings preserved to this day are the places of worship, some of which are of considerable length. Understanding the symbolic factors that have substantiated the investments in the construction and preservation of Orthodox churches for long periods of time, in conditions of utmost hostility and influence of the Ottoman Empire, will reveal the main elements of identity of the people of Craiova. The symbols that have integrated the spiritual and identity of the inhabitants will reveal elements that can be integrated into the urban development strategies.
2. European vocation. Although the historical geopolitical context reveals the pressure of the great powers of departure from the West and the European world, however, the Romanians remained faithful to their beliefs. The cultural and architectural heritage of the city of Craiova testifies to the efforts of the inhabitants to preserve themselves in the Western cultural area. The education of the majority of the elite of Craiova has been perfected in major European schools, regardless of the historical age.

A first chapter of further research into urban features refers to the analysis of material symbolism, spatial distribution of material symbols, and how they are associated with the population with different identities.

The second dimension concerns the analysis of discursive symbolism. Identify elements that generate the city's image of visitors, tourists, or people in transit. Once the characteristic symbols have been identified, a strategy to promote the image of the city beyond its limits can be made.

The analysis of iconic symbolism has an influence on tourism. Images are the ones that will be kept by tourists. Linking some legends and completing the set of tourist services related to them creates the premises for a permanent tourist flow. Religious symbolism also helps to increase the degree of cohesion among community members.

Behavioral symbolism refers to rituals and customs that accompany various holidays. Their knowledge will form the basis for the decisions that the public administration can adopt in urban planning activities.

The analysis of emotional symbolism allows for the creation of mental maps of the city. The similarities and differences reveal the distribution of symbols throughout

the studied area and significant elements for the population. Urban planning can be done according to the symbols that the population gives them importance.

5. Conclusions

Real knowledge of a city results from knowing its symbolic structure. Knowing the symbols will identify the identity and image that their own citizens have about their own city, which is a source of unique information.

The architecture of the city and the significance of certain buildings play an important role in analyzing the urban environment and the importance that certain buildings have for their own citizens. Historical monuments offer more than the possibility of reminding historical events and some material symbols, paving the way for a history in layers, from the first vestiges to the contemporary. Extensions of the meanings symbolized by material vestiges are found in political, economic, social and cultural dimensions. City views may vary considerably, depending on the social category of the respondents. Symbols are emotional, with counter-symbolic meanings. The relationship between symbolic and counter-symbolic is equivalent to the relationship between official opinion and reality. Harmonizing official attitude with reality provides the tools for effective urban planning.

Urban symbols reveal how social class, ethnicity, gender or age contributes to society. Research based on development indicators on infrastructure viewers should be complemented by the perspective of symbolic and cultural analysis of urban space to get a balanced picture of the analyzed community.

References:

- Berger, A.S. (1978) *The City-urban communities and their problems*, Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers.
- Kingsley, D. (1955) "The Origin and Growth of Urbanization in the World", *American Journal of Sociology*, (61), 128-130.
- Gans, H. (1976) „Planning for people, not buildings”. In Bent A. E. and Rossum, R.A. (coord.) *Urban Administration Management, Politics and Change*, Port Washington NY: Kennikat Press.
- Kaganova, O. (2011) *Guidebook on Capital Investment Planning for Local Governments*, Urban Development Series, Knowledge Papers, World Bank.
- Nas, P. (ed.), (2011) *Cities Full of Symbols. A Theory of Urban Space and Culture*, Leiden: Leiden University Press.
- Nas Peter J.M., De Groot, M. and Schut, M. (2011) „Variety of Symbols”, in Nas J.M. Peter (ed.), *Cities Full of Symbols. A teory of Urban Space and Culture*, Leiden: Leiden University Press, 7-9.
- Nas, P.J.M., Jaffeand R. and Samuels, A. (2006) "Urban Symbolic Ecology and the Hypercity: State of the Art and Challenges for the Future". In: P.J.M. Nas and A. Samuels (eds.), *Hypercity: The Symbolic Side of Symbolism*, London: Kegan Paul, 1-19.
- Nas, P.J.M. (ed.) (1998) "Special issue: Urban Rituals and Symbolism", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 22, no. 4, 545-622.
- Niță, A.M. and Ilie Goga, C. (2017) "Cultural values of urban population. Case study: Cultural values of the Romanians in the regions South-West Oltenia, South-Walachia and West". *Sociology and Social Work Review*, vol. 1, no.1, 6-21.
- Rohe W.M. and Gates L.B. (1985) *Planning with Neighborhoods*, London: The University of North Carolina Press.

Reiss, A.J. Jr.(1970) "The Sociological Study in Communities". In Gutman, R. and Popenoe, . (Eds.) *Neighborhood, City and Metropolis*, New York: Random House.

Still, B. (1974) *Urban America: A History with Documents*, Little, Brown and Company.

European Communities (2004) *Urban Audit. Methodological Handbook*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications for European Communities.

Institutul Național de Statistică din România (NIS. National Institute of Statistics-Romania) (2018) *Audit urban 2018* [online] Available: http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/Audit%20urban/Audit_urban_2018.pdf [accessed 03 December 2018].