FUNCTIONAL AND AESTHETIC LANDSCAPE QUALITY: URBAN SQUARE CRITICISM – FOCŞANI

CALITATEA FUNCŢIONALĂ ŞI ESTETICĂ A PEISAJULUI: STUDIU CRITIC PRIVIND PIAŢA URBANĂ – FOCŞANI

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Abstract. Middle size provinces reflect in a dramatic manner the gap between Romanian landscape culture and the European urban standards. Environmental culture lacks, the shallow civic involvement, the lack of management and administrative culture and the shame toward national and local models are only some of the symptoms of a crushed society with major landscape impacts. This paper analyses urban square designs in a representative town using aesthetic, environmental and social criteria, in an attempt to trace specific responsibilities for landscape architects targeting urban sites. In the end it is concluded that stronger landscape architect's professional ethics is needed to suSLort cultural development, urban life quality and social wounds healing.

Key words: cultural identity, landscape education, landscape quality, social program, urban open space

Rezumat. Oraşele medii de provincie reflectă într-o manieră dramatică decalajul dintre cultura peisajului din România şi standardele urbane europene. Lacunele în domeniul culturii peisajului, slaba implicare civică, lipsa culturii manageriale şi administrative şi ruşinea asociată reperelor naţionale şi locale sunt doar câteva dintre simptomele unei societăţi strivite, ce gerenează impacturi importante în peisaj. Această lucrare analizează designul unor pieţe urbane reprezentative după criterii estetice, ecologice şi sociale, într-o încercare de a identifica responsabilităţi specifice ale peisagiştilor ce abordează situri urbane. La final se concluzionează că o deontologie profesională întărită a arhitecţilor peisagişti este necesară pentru susţinerea dezvoltării culturale, a calităţii vieţii urbane şi pentru vindecarea rănilor sociale.

Cuvinte cheie: calitatea peisajului, educaţie peisagistică, identitate culturală, program social, spaţii deschise urbane

INTRODUCTION

The Romania's municipal administrations concern for landscape begins in the 19th century, in the dawn of the modern state (Toma, 2001), as it was anticipated by the historical reforms carried out by the suzerain empires – Austrian-Hungarian policy in the west and the Russian protectorate Organic Regulation in Moldova and Muntenia. The historic moment haSLens at the same moment with important collective mental changes, mainly induced by

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Illuminism inspired reformative policies. This development, tardy started as regarding the Western Europe, instead of constantly consolidate the cultural and social local values has suffered major swerves, associated with the scales of history. The soviet occupation in the 20th century, the deepest ever national catastrophe whose impacts remain unfaded, has induced ideologically justified structural and functional landscape changes (*ideology is the smatterer's refuge* - Pleșu, 2013). As a high social impact, wide-targeted cultural expression medium, urban landscapes have been seized firstly by invaders' propaganda, followed later by the new socialist-nationalist propaganda of the 1970-1980's: the landscape's elements relevant for the local/national identity have been distorted, replaced or simply wiped off the landscape to rebuild their carried message in the spirit of the occupation ideology, thus loosing the old connections between landscape, territory and urban functionality.

The glaring contrasts between the Romanian urban landscapes and their Western European counterparts' development since the second half of the 20th century emphasize the need to analyze causes, anticipate tendencies and straight up further developments. Historic fracture moments have caused radical changes of urban landscaping – regarding its drivers, the way the (re)forming pressures are exercised, the focus shift regarding the change targeted elements, the impact of the development policies and programs on landscapes and the urban system's reaction to change.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The paper investigates the connection between the urban square's identity function and the urban system's sustainability, starting from the hypothesis that square landscapes are a factor determining the town's social, cultural and spiritual identity, thus decisively contributing to the settlement's development or decay.

The research method aSLroaches the functional-aesthetic development analysis of mid-sized towns' illustrative squares, concerning the cultural-aesthetic, social and economic urban development impact upon squares' landscape.

The town of Focșani was picked for study, as it was found to be representative through dimension, the national grade historic significance and the mid-size towns' development perspective: former capital city of the newborn Romanian state, included under the reign of Carol I in the defensive line Focșani-Nămoloasa-Galați (Stroea and Băjenaru, 2010), it used to be a national pole of geo-strategic, politic, economic, social and even cultural significance. Architecture monuments and landscape elements that have been kept and valued within urban landscape are significantly fewer today compared to their inter-war based potential, representative fact for Romanian provinces, and indicating landscape vulnerabaility in occupation times.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Considering that public squares have been traditionally imposing maximum impact on collective counscience in relation to other features of urban landscape, this study follows their evolution from the mid 19th century up to present times, mutual relations in historical production of urban squares' landscapes (**SL**) and society thus being aSLroached on a DPSIR framework (table 1). The three major today's city squares have been conventionally called **PU** (*Piaţa Unirii* – The Union Square), **PM** (*Piaţa Moldovei* – The Moldova's Square) and **PG** (*Piaţa Gării* – The Railstation's Square).

Table 1

DPSIR landscape evolution analysis (functional-aesthetic) of the squares in Focşani in realation to the urban system

Historic moment	Drivers (external and within the urban system)	Pressures (exerted upon the SL)	States (functional and aesthetic landscape state)	Impacts (upon the SL)	Responses (urban system reaction to SL changes)
February the 5th, 1859 (between the prince's elections in Moldova and Muntenia)	The one-night visit of the 2 principates' common election candidate, in the 2 mirrored towns – Focşani Moldoveni and Focşani Munteni	People's enthusiasm; local administration political lobby targeting the raising princes (a still living tradition actually)	Middle Age urban tissue, set mainly along the Iaşi-Bucureşti road (Uliţa Mare, then Strada Mare and Strada Mare a Unirii), including: **PU –** civic, commercial and spiritual southern town's center (Focşani Munteni), dominated by St. John the Baptist's monastery belfry, on the southern shore of the Milcov canal – former border mark between the first 2 Romanian principates – and **PM** – civic, spiritual and comercial center in the northern town, dominated by Cuvioasa Paraschieva church	Torches have been diplaced to light up the streets, triumph arcs have been placed along the north-south axis on the lane connecting the two sections of the town for the great people's celebration **PU** – has been hosting the first *Union's* hora, perhaps circling around the bell tower; **PM** – the *Cuvioasa Paraschiva* church bells have been also involved in the people's celebration	Urban tissue regulation and landscape change in response to the settlement's new-found national calling; **PU** – the Milcov canal gets diked; On the former borderline there is set up a small memorial (1931), later to be replaced with today's *Union Memorial*; the *Union's hora* becomes a central theme of the square's systematization, established as civic center in the new town (1862) thus containing the town-hall side by side with the old St. John's church, turning it into a *landscape of power* (Lazăr-Bâra A., 2012); **PM** – commercial pole and informal civic center

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1863: the secularization of the cloistral properties	Priesthood influence drops, state power grows	The new state's consolidation in relation to the foreign powers (Russian orthodoxy)	There were over 20 churches and monasteries brandig the 1789 urban landscape (Austrian-Hungarian map), former tools of the tsarist propaganda	Laic monuments – state insistutions mainly – raise above /replace the monuments of cult	**PU** – dominating laic architecture: Admin.Palace (1913) și *Union Memorial* (replacing old belfry, demolished in 1905) **PM** – market hall set-up; the church is outshined than lost forever in 1977
1880	Railstation set-up – along the Court House, the building represents the new state's authority	King Carol inspects the town coming by train	The strategic importance of the town, set on the anti-Russian defense line Focșani-Nămoloasa-Galați is acnowledged and valued by the monarchy	**PG** – axial composition, monumental architecture, electric light; **PU** – consolidated civic pole; adjacent garden and theatre (Neorom.)	**PG** – buffers the social demand while PU turns inaccessible; **PU** – *Unirea* hotel, 10 storeys high, sows up in the 70's to serve high ranked guests; **PM** – church decay
March the 4th, 1977	The Great Earthquake provides a reason for a radical urban reconfiguration	Ideology and political obedience	Functionally refurbished ciry following Soviet occupation (industrial.), but keeping inter-war landscape	**PU** –old city hall is lost; **PM** –most of the pre- and inter-war houses are replaced by communist architecture	**PM** – functionality preserved: identity connection with neigboring villages; **PU** – Middle Age tunnels are lost; the square hosts national grade solemnities

The community's sustainability – composed of governance, society – cutlure, habitation – built environment, economy, environment, services – transport and connectivity (Woodcraft et. al., 2011) is more affected by the main squares rather than the other elements of public space, because they include the most social sustainability parameters. They reflect governancea, also being one of its tools, they aggregate social life, propagate cultural identity, they contribute to habitation and built environment quality, reflect and support economy, they are parts of the urban ecologic infrastructure, promote services and rely on transports.

The three urban poles states are reflected in landscape as following: *Unirii Square* (former *St. John the Baptist*) is today identified with the town's civic center – the landscape mimics western spatial and functional composition principles; the identity landscape features are manipulated by circumventing, faking or distroying historic and cultural monuments. The square's aesthetics is less liable to criticism, but the unconsistent identity basis qualifies it for a *beautiful kitsch* (a moral issue according to Roger Scruton); the civic center's cultural and spiritual contribution could be evaluated by monitoring the fiction sales of the only two bookshops in the 73868 inhabitants' town in 2011, dropping

from 103219 in 2002. *Moldovei Square* (turned to market place) is today the most socially dinamic public open space (Colantonio et. al., 2009), but without affecting the town's landscape policy. *The Railstation's Square* remained a minor social pole, losing its cultural, national, economic and social representativeness.

The squares' responsivity on political pressures reflects their structural vulnerability – while power abuse prevention mechanisms are formal. This way public squares, subject to antidemocratic political propaganda, are a weak link of the urban system and of the society as a whole.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Despite recent landscape's details, the urban structure of Focşani reflects its political and administrative hardening in the half 19th century state, when for the first time in history, politics came before the merchant's and smuggler's economic interests. The identity landmarks shortcoming in the urban landscape is owed to political power abuses, to planning incompetence and to civic passivity.

2. The general value of the urban square is not only reflected in the sum of the services it provides to society, for there are chances that negative impacts might affect the town on the long run (depopulation, poverty).

3. As a central element of urban landscape identity, the square is subject to social manipulation pressures. Landscape involved specialists must deal with these pressures on ethical basis as well as on the basis of the urban landscape planning, design and execution technical rules:
- Critical analysis followed by the compliance with the existing urban development strategies or, if required, their sustainable amendment;
- The substantiation of any analysis on the holistic approach of the urban system, according to exhaustive, competently provided data – endorsed by certified specialists; giving up on any pressure that urban development actors might inflict – be they political, economic or social – determines sectorial, unsustainable landscape attitudes toward landscape, opposed to the missions and ethics of landscape architecture and urban planning.
- The use of cost-benefit analysis to test the promoted designs.

4. Civic passivity must bring in the public squares' propaganda control, starting from the very first fazes of their design.

5. Starting from the general principles of sustainable development, urban squares' landscape architecture must obey to sectorial performance criteria, subscribed to the systemic approach:
- The town's aesthetic identity, desirable to blend harmoniously with the territorial landscape (Peyrache-Gadeau V., Perron L., 2010), is determined by the squares' design to a large extent; this way, they would have to reflect the dominant territorial landscape models for the town's site through direct or indirect references, through manifesto-attitudes or through valorisation of some representative

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features of the territory within square's (small) landscape composition.

- The most important potential contribution of the urban square to the protection and conservation of natural heritage is through environmental culture; this design program's opportunities comes from the public presence quality and from the landscape representativeness.
- Urban squares are usually associated to social poles, thus, the mission for their planning and management must answer directly to present and prospect community issues; individual freedon, diversity, the freedom of expression, democracy and tolerance are reference values of the European cultural space, but promoting them in an emergent society requires educational methodology that assigns to landscape a specific sector.

6. In the following decades, urban landscape must respond growing pressures from consumerism, climate change and politic expansionism. The re-spiritualisation of the landscape concepts in local and national context, necessary to the cultural and identity site referencing, is thus an increasingly accute necessity.

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