

## THE PROTECTION OF URBAN HERITAGE: THE SOCIAL EVALUATION OF THE SPACE IN HISTORIC TOWNS - LOCAL INTANGIBLE VALUES IN A GLOBALISED WORLD

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In the study of the spatial structure of historic towns and their protection many important and useful motives have been disclosed by the development of the social sciences. A very powerful, though not generally acknowledged incentive came from social ecology, a young, interdisciplinary branch, which applies results of geographical, psychological and sociological research in the studies on the natural environment of human life, including urban space. In Poland this trend was initiated by Florian Znaniecki's texts: "Miasto w oświadczeniu jego obywateli" [The town in the consciousness of its citizens], published in 1931, and "Socjologiczne podstawy ekologii ludzkiej" [Sociological foundations of human ecology], published in 1938. Both of these texts, fundamental for their own discipline, proved equally important for urban structure studies. They drew researchers' attention to the extensive semantic potential of the town, to urban space viewed as a specific 'spatial value', to the rich and varied meaning that can be attached to a fragment of urban space by its users; to values created by inhabitants, termed '*the humanistic factor*'. It was not a coincidence that Znaniecki's works appeared in the 1930s, when the social problems in the city were widely discussed. They voiced a reaction against the pathologies of the industrial era and public concern about the 'social collapse' connected with over-investment and the uncontrolled urban growth.

In spite of those early attempts, it was only in the early 1960s that the general disappointment with functionalism and modernism introduced urban space evaluation and social attitudes as crucial issues into social sciences. Modernism, which in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had been looked at as a way to purify urban structures, instead of bringing a long-awaited antidote to social problems proved to be another trap. <sup>1</sup> The 'charter of modern town-planning', the very popular so-called Athens Charter, turned town-planning into a technical discipline with unlimited creative possibilities, totally overlooking inhabitants of towns. The omnipotent modernism reduced space exclusively to its functional, practical aspects, reserving the privilege of its evaluation (valorising) for a limited circle of professionals turning inhabitants into a mass of anonymous users.

The doctrine was undermined by new trends in social ecology and environmental psychology, initiated in Europe and the USA in the 50s, and continued until today. These have been focused on the social perception and valorisation of space,

from urban structure to the natural and anthropogenic environment. Research in this field, developed systematically since the 1980s, has greatly enriched our knowledge of the complex problems of historic towns. In Poland its results became especially significant at the beginning of the 90s, after destroying the "Berlin wall", when towns regained their sovereignty and self-government. They mark a vital, though not properly recognised yet, area to be explored in interdisciplinary town-planning process - project of historic town protection in the global approach to urban structures.

One of the most important issues here is the social evaluation of town space, a process concerning the identification of cultural values of towns heritage by local communities, inhabitants. In democratic and self-governing communities no efficient conservation can be undertaken solely by town-planners and conservators without involving the inhabitants of the areas to be protected. It is local communities that are real owners and users of space. Therefore, the identification of socially significant values has become as important as the professional evaluation of the area in question, which was the only procedure applied in previous practice.

Studying the social valorisation of historic town space has become indispensable today not only because all over the world we are witnessing a constantly growing interest in the value of the past and a strong social identification with it. It is also stimulated by the free-market rivalry, inducing a reverse selection of social values – "the winner is the one with less scruples". Socially significant values are eliminated, perish - as pointed out by the famous economist George Soros, who investigated the relation between the values promoted by the free market and those that determine people's decisions in the social, political and personal sphere. The 'most successful investor of the world' and a great philanthropist concludes that overlooking the importance of social values and basing on monetarist values exclusively impairs the efficiency of management and the democratic system itself. Such a situation results in an escalation of negative processes: "free-market fundamentalism" undermines the democratic political system, making it deficient, which in turn produces new strong arguments for "free-market fundamentalism". Although Soros relates this vicious circle to macro-politics, it may be equally dangerous at a local scale, for instance in historic towns, where, as is well known, the dynamism of the market often depends on external, non-local factors. This

mechanism, in combination with the inefficient system of spatial-planning and town-planning that we have in Poland at present, poses a serious threat to the future of historic urban structures – this authentic and good preserved. So, an economy lesson tells us about a need to protect and strengthen the cultural identity of people and sites (places). This goal should be pursued by studying socially significant values of historic towns, which should take their place among the cultural values of historic urban structures covered by protection programmes, as well as be taken into consideration in management strategies.

### **Cherished values and socially significant places**

In a civil society, a model that we are undoubtedly aiming at, opinions expressed by the community should be specially cherished. The town and its fragments, streets, squares are loaded with certain values, significant for the local community. They are treated emotionally, and as such they become ‘our own places’, linked with personal imagery and experiences. From the perspective of protecting historic towns such values are worth identifying, preserving and promoting, because of their significant social functions. They contribute for instance to the inhabitants’ - the satisfaction with everyday life, to their identification with the native place, to individual and collective memory, to local traditions. Thus, they play an important role in cultural transmission of values through generations. Socially significant values connected with places in town constitute its unique individual features in the shared experience of the inhabitants and build the balance of its material and social structure. As such, they are an important element of heritage, disregarded by the methodology and practice of the protection of historic towns until very recently.

Some attempts at integrating social valorisation of urban space with a system of protecting the cultural values of historic towns and with management strategies in Poland were made in 1997 within the Government Programme - “Saveing Historic Towns” in the beautiful small Silesian town of Niemcza, I was involved in.

### **Hierarchy of values**

Research on the social valorisation of space, undertaken within the government programme of “Saveing Historic Towns”, has shown that the professional evaluation of urban space usually differs from its common perception. And what is more – the two perspectives have a full right to diverge, because they are based not only on different criteria and knowledge, but also, perhaps more importantly, on different emotional attitudes to the area in question. A place perceived as socially significant may happen to seem worthless from a purely scientific, historical, professional point of view. Nevertheless, it will be important for the local community for various emotional, even irrational reasons. It may function as a place with which a certain group identifies, or as a symbolic sign. It may represent its own created reality, which we have no right to destroy, because it is an element of

heritage, a signal of the town’s identity.

The world of local values must be protected. Ignoring them by professionals will usually lead to strong protests of the local community and to destroying the unique characteristics of the town structure. Acknowledging them, on the other hand, helps to gain support for the idea of heritage protection, which requires not only interest, but also true co-operation on the part of the inhabitants. After all, we know very well that for protection guidelines to be implemented and not to remain only an element of the so-called ‘current state of research’, they must be accepted “in the minds and hearts of everyone, not only of the researcher”. Showing respect for emotionally rooted values it is easier to win local communities for protection actions. It is also easier to build cultural identity in places where the inhabitants’ feeling of belonging to a town was destroyed. Finally, on the basis of emotional attitudes it is easier to promote new values, rooted in historical studies and scientific research.

The identification of town heritage values and the evaluation of urban space from the perspective of both inhabitants and professionals, as well as the following negotiation of a common hierarchy of values to be protected are processes whose import for the effectiveness of protective undertakings cannot be overestimated. The mutual acceptance and public approval for the values in question results in their consolidation and entering the sphere of the so-called current commonness. A need for a system of urban heritage protection based on such principles was confirmed by the experience gained in the course of implementing the above-mentioned government programme in Niemcza in 1997.

### **Heritage protection of historic towns**

It is worth stressing that protection of historic towns, which applies equally to their material and social structure, has recently been redefined as widely understood protection of cultural values, which, in turn, have replaced the notion of ‘historical monument’. ‘The protection of values’ is a key phrase here. It means much more than the term ‘renovation’, for a long time used in the context of historic towns, which meant primarily ‘restoration of past values’, because it refers to both the past and the present time, to elements of heritage preserved until today, to values retaining current social significance. Although obviously the preserved values originated in the past, they are still present in the life of the town, they are still perceived as significant and indispensable. They lay foundations for the present reality, therefore they should be precisely identified.

In view of the above, the question about the unique value of a given site is a fundamental one in constructing a system of protecting historic towns. Obviously, we want to protect what is valuable or what is ascribed a special value, what is useful or may prove so. The criteria of value and utility link the socially accepted necessity of protecting heritage with responsibility for its survival. What has survived from the past should be subject to two-fold interpretation and

valorisation for the sake of the present, because only socially accepted values will survive.

The process of identifying heritage and socially significant values can easily be supplemented with education actions promoting the historical, artistic and scientific merits of towns, which are often disregarded by both their inhabitants and local authorities. Social consciousness should be shaped in such a way that heritage and local tradition could be perceived as a foundation for future expectations, and also as a certain economic potential capable of facilitating the town's development.

### **Interpreting the heritage of towns**

The cultural heritage of the past is subject to constant reinterpretation and evaluation. The principles of protecting and shaping historic towns formulated by conservators as guidelines and postulates for spatial development plans are in fact a method of interpreting heritage in which the old values of an area are preserved and new ones are created. Ideally, the new values should be those desired by the inhabitants and necessary for the contemporary functioning of the town. This explains the core of social valorisation of urban space and the role of the public attitude and criteria in creating a system of historic town protection. The interpretation of heritage means recognising its validity and utility for present-day needs.

Such an approach calls for specifying adaptation requirements, so that no valuable elements are changed or destroyed haphazardly. Adaptations, both of larger areas and individual objects, should result in a carefully selected function for the structure, suited to its character. As we know, the 'functional capacity' of historic objects is limited, and it has to be clearly defined, because their preservation is contingent upon the manner in which they are used. A thorough analysis is particularly important in the case of urban structures, where adaptations influence the value and scale of various sites, interiors and areas being integral parts

of a town. If the size of a building naturally limits its functional capacity, similarly urban space has to be regulated in many aspects crucial for its composition, while its expansion and development dynamism have to be controlled.

The objective of contemporary town-planning is sustainable development of towns. In a modern approach to shaping urban structures heritage protection considerations should play an important, and sometimes even a leading role. According to Toledo Charter, "*all towns are historic*", which means that all represent values which can be drawn from and enriched at present. It is worth remembering, however, that although "*all towns are historic*", some are "*more historic*" than others. In those 'more historic' ones the role of heritage as a regulator in harmonising contemporary structures should be decisive. Obviously, such towns can be neither 'reserves' closed to any usual and modern activity nor Disneyland parks forging history. It is necessary to find a way of sustained development for them. Undoubtedly, however, the choice of values to be protected must be conditioned by the authenticity of heritage and its value, subject of both professional and public evaluation.

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