Urban identity as a sense and spur of development

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1 ABSTRACT

The article elaborates the issue of urban identity as an important factor for raising urban attractiveness and spurring urban development in general. The elements of urban identity, such as the nature, culture and economy, are emphasized as basic and dominant, but their harmonization is crucial for achieving the objective of urban sustainability. The governance has the most important role in harmonizing the three elements by defining and implementing an integrated strategy, with all the challenges in transitional societies where administration is challenged with financial temptations of emerging free market and private investments. The public goods, cultural and natural heritage and assets are being threatened by private interventions thus endangering urban identity and its potentials for the future. The specific case is with big cities where multifarious identity is expected in particular city areas, with their geography, history and human activities, and prudent strategies are indispensable to identify specificities and orient urban development in proper directions. Careful coordination of social, cultural, environmental and economic facets asks for smart governance if big city is expected to succeed and sustain in terms of development.

The article elaborates the issue of human perceiving the identity, its dynamics and changes due to changes in a value system, as well as the relation between urban identity and urban economy. The final consequence of harmonized elements making urban identity is sustainability of towns and cities.

2 INTRODUCTION

The quality of life in towns and cities in Europe attracts attention not only as an ecological issue but as cultural and ethical issue as well. The environmental quality and elements influencing the human health such as noise, air and water pollution, etc. are still dominant but some other impacts are also being under surveillance. The intensive processes of globalization, especially visible in cities (engines of development), progressively warn to the phenomena of loosing urban identity by constructing unification, transforming urban structures and, consequently, by changing human behavior and weakening the urban culture and pride. The financial reasons, in transitional countries in particular, are progressively threatening the quality of urban structure and inherited system of urban values, changing basic elements (built elements, public space, urban matrix, etc) of urban identity. The authoritative European document pays attention that "*urban development measures have often diminished the historic fabric of many cities and eroded their identity. This not only has a negative effect on the quality of life and the health of their inhabitants but can also have an economic impact due to loss of attractiveness and reduced investment, employment and municipal financial resources*" (ESDP 1999:66).

This implies very sensitive phenomena of interconnections between economic activities, health of people, physical transformations and city governance, generally sculpturing the changeable value system. The one-dimensional approach to the city development, without controlling the mentioned interconnections, can result with severe long-term consequences to the sustainability of an urban system, its quality, attractiveness and the long-term prosperity. The relevant European document therefore warns that Europe's "*towns and cities must be revitalized, must be attractive, healthy, high quality places to live in, that allow their communities and their economies to flourish*" (Towards a Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment 2004:4). The basic endeavor, as cities and towns are concerned, is oriented towards "*built environment that...creates beautiful, distinctive places people to live and work in, that foster a strong sense of community, pride....and identity respecting and enhancing cultural heritage*" (Towards a Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment 2004:46).

3 URBAN IDENTITY AND HUMANS

The initial notes bring us to some basic queries referring to the idea of urban identity and its relation to humans in urban areas. The urban identity is an aggregating mental process and practically inseparable from human comprehension of their urban environment and directly corresponding to their system of values. Several basic elements determine urban identity such as physical forms and structures, symbols (historic, spiritual) and landmarks, natural elements, geographical position and economic activities. Some of them are fixed (geo-position) and the rest are changeable. By this the urban identity could be defined as changeable in time, whereas people living in town or city build their social and cultural profiles and personality by the mentioned elements. „*It is often argued that individuals need to feel a sense of belonging to a collective entity or place*" (Oktay 2006:1/2). The same author is citing Norberg-Schulz and his statement that „to be inside is the primary intention behind the place concept", and concluding that „*identity, thus, is closely connected with the experience of place*" (Oktay 2006:2). The dynamic of an urban place is depending on its activities and communications and therefore it is closely related to the dynamic of urban identity. The built elements, architecture and engineering products have the strongest impact to the urban image and urban landscape thus creating urban identity and, consequently, delivering and breeding its attractiveness for investors, tourists and inhabitants. The feeling of prestige is the reason why investors prefer to invest in very expensive but identifiable London and not in much cheaper but not as recognizable Shefield. The feeling of pride is the reason why inhabitants of Xanti enormously contributed to restoring their cultural heritage that added crucial value to its urban identity, by which they attracted investors and tourists in this peripheral and formerly neglected town of Greece. Prestige and pride are two psychological results of urban identity based either on urban activities and social magnetism (London) or cultural and historic restoration (Xanti). The feeling of place makes people comprehending the reason of their common being, living, working or enjoying, and urban structure and architecture are two of several crucial elements for this. The urban patrimony deeply contributes to this but incorporated and interconnected with everyday compatible activities and not as museum pieces only. Writing on urban identity D. Oktay makes distinction between character and appearance, saying that character has more than a purely "*visual or spatial dimension, and it cannot be instantly achieved following the implementation of a new urban design scheme*" (Oktay 2006:2). The idea behind is that urban identity asks for time to be developed. Of course, some fresh and exceptional examples of tremendously impressive architectural pieces, such as Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, overwhelm all other cultural or natural assets and produce instantly the new urban identity of the city, enormously contributing to its economic prosperity.

The urban identity is something in connection with personal or collective identity where one influence "*the other and vice versa. A. Haapala points that the identity of the city bears on the identity of those living in it, and vice versa: the urban environment reflects human needs and values*" (Haapala 2002:10). Therefore making decisions on urban development a dominant collective identity should be taken into account if it has any meaning to decision makers. The same author says that "*relationship between areas and humans, and the effect the urban environments have on our identities*" (Haapala 2002:8) should not be forgotten. The collective identity ignoring, i.e. forgetting identification of urban population with their town or city, means forgetting collective feelings of belonging to their place of living, and henceforth jeopardizing urban prosperity and sustainability.

Emotional links between humans and socio-physical environment spur an urban identity feeling, i.e. identification of people with the environment where they live and work. Every city has a kind of urban identity more or less recognizable on the local, regional, national or international level. The urban identity depends on afore mentioned elements (culture, nature, geoposition, economy, etc), but identification could be founded on one or combination of several elements. As many elements are in the combination as closer the city is to the idea of sustainability. Sustainability is achieved when culture, nature and economy of a city are in harmony, and the „*sense of development*" is founded on the urban identity.

4 DYNAMICS OF URBAN IDENTITY

The Udine Declaration introduces the idea of „*identity as a constantly shifting and changing phenomenon*" (The Udine Declaration, Assembly of European Regions, Udine 2007:1), following Derrida`s philosophy of identity based on unity and totality as an illusion (Ivic 2010:2). The permanent changes of urban identity, so present in nowadays cities, bring us to serious dillema whether urban identity has to be saved as given or

inherited, or should be more or less carefully adapted to all social, economic and cultural changes within an urban community. The Udine Declaration tries to give an answer to such a dillema: *The challenge for Europe and its regions today is to develop this advantage by nurturing strong identities, on a regional and European level, whilst at the same time respecting existing national identities, and adapting flexibly to shifting identities* (Ivic 2010:2). The same could be discussed when urban identity is on stake, i.e. its relation to regional or national levels. The multi-layer identity, where one layer has its dynamics different from other layers, is constantly generating changes, sometimes even conflicts, resulting with either permanent adaptations or confrontations of identities. The historic fabric of a city, with inherited built heritage coming from other cultural milieu in the past, could be in harmony or in confrontation with nowadays national or regional ideology for many reasons. S. Ivic discuss this topic in her article pointing that "*the logic of homogeneity constitutes one of the basic traits of modern political theory, emphasizing unity, totality and universality*" (Ivic 2010). But, on the other side, the concept of fixed identity "*is contradictory to the idea of identity as dynamic phenomenon*", as presented in section A of the Udine Declaration (Ivic 2010:2).

Dynamics of population and its ethnical and cultural shifts, changes in economy and technology, and changes in political ideology in particular, reflect on urban identity, i.e. human perception of physical, social and even natural environs. The scale of values inevitably get changed with changes in a political system, where demographic restructuring contributes to different perceiving the urban structure with assets and symbols being in the foundation of urban identity. The built heritage is usually at stake during such changes because it carries certain messages from the past compatible or incompatible to the actual ideology.

The case of Serbia is symptomatic for harsh dynamics of urban identity during a few last decades. Changing the state status several times from 1991 to 2006[1], coming out from socialist ideology, over nationalistic to democratic, the relation to built heritage has been changed as many times. From the emphasis given to socialist symbols and built heritage from former communist times, with rather neglected built patrimony, the attention has shifted to national symbols and national historic landmarks, to be later continued with „*laissez faire*" behavior of the free market and weak administration, endangering cultural values due to missing a new value system up to date. In this turbulent transitional phase, not yet completed, towns and cities have lost the large portion of their identity, but also lost the articulated value system that could help them either to restore the identity from the past or to construct the new one. The dynamics evidently exists but with no clear direction where and how to go further. The urban landscape in towns and in cities, if exceptions are excluded, is proof for such a statement.

5   URBAN IDENTITY AND ECONOMY

The actuality of urban development is evident in European discourses for years and decades. Cities are pushed to compete with other cities, measured by precise criteria and indicators, and ranked by their size, functions and performances. In the competition they are using, and sometimes abusing, their resources, assets and even capacities. The urban economy is becoming highly actual, and infrastructure as prerequisite is becoming a paramount issue, especially in less developed and transitional countries. The territorial capital of cities is mainly treated and analyzed from its „hard" side (tangible capital, financial indicators, etc), with its functional capacities, and physical and geographical measures to be applied as basic factors to promote and pursue the urban development. But taking into account the idea of sustainable development local governments are obviously in the mouse-trap. The investments are urgent and investors are more than welcome with their fresh money. The readiness to attract them is so intensive that some direct costs are hidden and indirect costs are not calculated. The fact in less developed European countries is that the interest of investors is always a step afore the public goods and interest, or even opposed to the same. Such a situation brings the built heritage into defending position but with very weak armament. On one hand side is the temptation of fresh money and on the other side is story about values and beauty of cultural heritage, urban memory, matrix, ambiance, etc. The battle usually ends with demolished or spoiled built heritage, destroyed urban matrices, pretentious bastard-architecture (imitation, replicas), lost urban identity and, consequently, diminished or even succumbed urban attractiveness. The economic effects of such a results are evident in many cities in transition pretending to be more competitive in terms of attracting investors.

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[1] Republic of Serbia had belonged to the Socialist Federal Republic Yugoslavia till 1992, to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia till 2002, to the Union of Serbia and Montenegro till 2006, and has become Republic of Serbia after 2006

The case in many European cities, with urban identity and dignity, proofs that developers and tourists are generally attracted by urban symbols, landmarks, identifiable urban landscape and image of city/town with cultural or historical pedigree. Complying, or even enhancing urban identity, clever developers contribute to their own brand or performances. The case of the most valuable, distinctive and attractive building in Subotica, one of 23 cities in Serbia, and much wider, the City Hall, is paradigmatically in that sense. The American modern and global company, with profane production of fast food, wanted and acquired ground floor position within the building to open its restaurant. The money came to the city, the company fit into the building and started making profit out of it, but the cultural and historic identity has been weakened. The continuity of such model could hamper the saving of urban identity with long-term economic consequences. Clever government will understand that spurring city development means protecting elements that save urban identity but prudently combined with compatible (in terms of use and size) and harmonized (in terms of architecture and style) activities. Of course, some exceptions could be forgiven if the new value is of such a high rank that it alone could become a visual or functional symbol. Some attempts in European cities have different results in terms of that. The case of Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is a paradigm of positive embedded some cultural function dressed in avant-garde form, into historic tissue of the city. On the other hand one could doubt if incorporating white modern building with profane functions (restaurant, shops, offices) in front of medieval cathedral in Ulm, in spite of the name of architectural celebrity, could result with negative effects. Not as a building per se, but as a model within precious medieval urban context that could provoke other investors and city administration to continue with such a praxis.
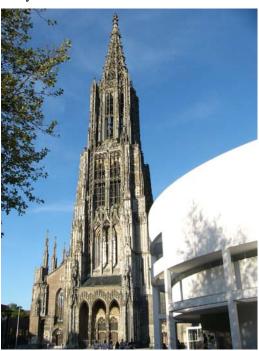

Fig. 1: Conflict between identities ? (R.Meier, City Hall and medieval cathedral in Ulm)

Urban dweller should not be forgotten in the whole story. "*Urban dwellers build their emotional links versus social and built environment. This makes a feeling of identification with their living environment*" (Subotic 2009:75). The urban economy definitely depends on the feeling of identification preserving long-term sustainability of a city. D. Oktay points that "*urban identity is closely bound up with urban sustainability, an important factor to enhance the quality of urban life in cities, which embraces environmental, economic* (sic!!!) *and social aspects*" (Oktay 2006:2).

The urban identity is thus contributing to urban economy, spurring it and actually becoming sense of development. But, on the other side, built heritage is heavily dependent on local and even national economy. The rationale of taking into consideration built and natural heritage and its meaning to local, regional or national economy, and vice versa, is therefore a serious challenge to planners, administration and investors. Does well preserved patrimony contribute to alleviate unemployment and by which means? Does strong industry can support to making the cultural identity of a city/town? Many examples in developed part of Europe offer precise and reliable answers to these and other queries.

6   URBAN IDENTITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The urban landscape of Dutch cities, from their golden era in XVII century, stand as a paradigm of harmonized structure compiled of four basic elements: natural, spiritual, economic and temporal. The natural element was introduced by carefully selected geographic position with water included and skilfully incorporated. The spiritual element was usually represented by cathedral located aside of the main square. The economic element was marked by wind-mill, the sign of urban prosperity. The temporal element was signed by town-hall as a mark of political power. The three landmarks: water, church and mill, dominated in their landscape as landmarks, formulating urban identity of these towns together with the fourth one, the town-hall as a mark of governing the urban system[2].

If the urban identity is understood as one of prerequisites for successful urban development and enhanced urban attractiveness, then the four mentioned elements should be carefully treated and maintained. The urban identity has to be prudently breaded on:
•   The nature and its elements within and around the town/city, with particular attention paid to specific geographic elements that are specific for the urban area: water, soil, greenery, and climate;

•   The social structure, ethnic tradition, cultural tradition, history, style of architecture and other elements that differ the particular town from others;

•   The economic structure, the production, mode of using local resources, infrastructure with its particular appearances, etc.

•   The mode of governing controlling the relation between the three afore mentioned in integral way, but also adapted to local circumstances.

The level of harmonization among these elements denotes the level of urban sustainability. The development of a town or a city with all elements in harmony could be attributed as sustainable. The built heritage has exceptional impact on city sustainability and "*a good heritage conservation strategy inherently takes into account the long term sustainability of the region.....Sustainability also starts with small, local actions that eventually help attain broad sustainable development goal*" (http://www.gdrc.org/heritage/heritage-07.html). This and even more could be attached to the meaning of urban identity and its relation to the nature, culture (built heritage, arts, food, traditional festivities, mores and habits) and economy as a complex and interconnected system governed by smart administration. Local people and their active participation in making and implementing the urban identity strategy are indispensable in opening way to sustainable development of their settlement as the Xanti example clearly proofs.

7   URBAN STRUCTURE AND IDENTITY – THE MULTIFARIOUS IDENTITY OF BIG CITIES

Promoting the idea of sustainability, related to urban identity, big city appears with its physical, structural and even cultural complexity, especially in multicultural environs. Different natural subsystems and their biodiversities in a big city have very strong and diverse impact to human activities and behaviors, making some big parts of the city recognizable by it.

The example of the City of Belgrade is well known by its three sides: (1)the Banat side with specific way of settling and agricultural activities, strongly dependent on the high underground waters, weak infrastructure and no patrimony, (2) the Srem side with high quality soil and agriculture on it but mixed with industry, the position on the European corridor and recognizable urban and rural identities, and (3) the Shumadija side with intensive urban development, industrial and service activities, multitude of built heritage and cultural activities, and specific natural (hilly) landscape. The nature on the three sides, with its diversity will dictate the way of living and working, different activities (agriculture, forestry, industry, building or transport industry, service activities, tourism, etc. The problem of sustainable development of such a big city is the lack of harmony between the nature, culture and economy. The most valuable natural habitats and resources, such as rivers Danube and Sava, are harshly attacked by improper activities jeopardizing its favorable habitat conservation status. Instead of being landmarks of urban identity the rivers and their banks are shame of the city. Cultural landmarks (museums, built heritage, etc) are in poor condition or closed for years thus endangering image of the City and its tourist potentials. Different big city zones are constantly loosing their

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[2] This looks quite similar to the actual integrated model of development planning to day: environment, economy, social dimensions interconnected and encircled by institutional system (governance).

profile and inherited landscape, transforming the city into anonymous mixture of anything, without the style or cultural identity.

Fig. 2: The making of lost identity – City of Belgrade. (L. Buergermeister, The Master Thesis, TUW, Vienna, 2009.)

The sustainable development of a big city and its structural units could be expected and achieved only if natural, cultural and economic elements are coordinated and adapted according to different specificities of these units (unity of diversities!). Economic activities must be based on local resources contributing to the well shaped landscape and supporting to sustainable use of cultural heritage (built heritage), for the sake of their activities and better competitiveness. And vice versa, the heritage conservation together with preserved and maintained natural assets should not hamper development of economy by strict rules of traditional object conservation but to help economy as specific resource, by applying contemporary high standards of conservation and sustainable development in general.

The challenge is how to transform diversity into developmental advantage of a big city. Shaping profiles of a number of city units, with their diversified appearances, the big city has to confront with multifarious identities and to set them into complex and compatible system. This also contributes to identity of a big city population since people in such a complex structure usually get identified with some part of a city and not with the city as a whole. City people usually build their emotional and social links on the local physical or natural milieu, identifying themselves through some elements which they recognize or understand. Citizens, no matter which social status they have, own their aesthetic image of a part of big city and that image is generally determined by historic built heritage with symbolic meaning expressed.

On this they build their conservative reactions, often fighting against some changes, transformations, reconstructions, etc. Therefore, the urban identity of a big city is becoming issue of understanding diverse identity of city humans and meaningful elements that make identity. That is why urban identity could be understood as a sense of development.

8   CONCLUSION

The important issue for nowadays cities in Europe is their competitiveness and ability to attract investments and tourists. Many cities try by constructing or adding something that could contribute to their attractivenes. As the Udine Declaration points out: *in today`s global market place, regions need to position themselves in order to achieve recognition and economic success. Regional difference remains a prime source of competitive advantage* (The Udine Declaration 2007:2) (the same could be applied to cities-B.S.). Cities with historic traces or natural assets use them to establish or to rehabilitate their urban identity. The success in making urban identity strongly depends on the quality and pertinence of mutual links between natural, cultural and economic features and appearances, level of their harmonization and of overall image recognizable in the network of cities in national or international milieu, pursuing the three elements with a prudent city policy to develop and harmonize.

The dynamics of urban identity is depending on the dynamics of the value system, and the dynamics of economy. This fact generates a set of substantial questions: (a) what is the urban identity in fact; (b) whether urban identity exists as reality or as a fiction; (c) is it possible to establish fixed urban identity and how? These questions ask for a longer study but some hints could be noted:

•   The urban identity is usually constructed over the set of characteristics making town/city to be whether what it is (absolute identity) or what it seems to be (relative identity)[3];

•   The urban identity exists as much as people conceive or perceive it;

•   The urban identity as aggregate (group, mass) perception could be established and developed by: education, information, awareness rising. On the other hand the most efficient way is by imposing idea of economic meaning and power of well protected and maintained natural and cultural assets as development resources.

It asks for the new treatment of culture in a city, new urban development concepts and new approach to city renewal. The cities in transition are in a very sensitive position, where actual financial performance dominates in city policies, in many cases jeopardizing cultural or natural appearance of city. But some attempts of benchmarking among similar cities in Europe evidently proof that successful efforts in pursuing harmonization of natural, cultural and economic features strongly contribute to the urban identity of cities and consequently to their economic flourishing, attracting new investment and tourists and, last and not the least, rising pride and affiliation of inhabitants to their city.

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[3] The Oxford dictionary explains, as one of definitions, the identity as the state of being like or same as something.

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