

# Changes and evolution of the urban landscape of Timisoara and its Metropolitan Region

Szekely G.<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Banat University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine “King Michael I of Romania”, Faculty of Horticulture and Forestry, Calea Aradului 119, Timisoara 300645, Romania

\*Corresponding author. Email: gabi.szekely@gmail.com

**Abstract** During the last twenty five years, the city of Timișoara has grown and developed during a continuous process of transformation. The old historical districts and those built during the communist period were completed with additional areas, mainly occupied by family houses which spread in all directions on surfaces of land used previously for farming. Lately, an important development began in the central areas of Timișoara, mainly in the places where industrial plants were situated formerly. The new high-rise buildings are beginning to change the existing urban landscape. This urban system will not only have a new appearance, but also a new way of functioning. The city is being transformed following the methods which changed all growing middle size towns during the last sixty years. It is possible that not only the positive, but also the negative characteristics of Western urban centres will be present in Timișoara in the future. The main issues which should be dealt with are: traffic, transport, the problem of green spaces, the distribution of public institutions. If not attended in time, these problems will probably become nearly impossible to solve, and will seriously effect the life of the population.

## Key words

Timișoara, metropolitan area, urban landscape, green spaces

## Historical evolution

During two centuries, in the time of the Habsburg Empire, Timișoara was a polycentric settlement, with a fortress in the middle, and three outside districts. In time the districts grew, and at the end of the XIX' th century the walls of the fortress were demolished because they became useless for the defence of the place. The outside districts united with the centre. Along the boulevards and in the central square of the town new apartment houses were built which contributed a lot to the modified appearance of the settlement. The new buildings were decorated generally in Art Nouveau style. The boulevards were circular, built around the centre, or radial, in order to link the former fortress to the districts. Their dimensions and qualities were very appreciated in those days. Around the town centre, the space formerly occupied by the walls and the empty areas near them were partly transformed into green spaces, which created a kind of green belt around the former fortress. The area situated inside the former fortifications became the central district of Timișoara. The town was rebuilt at the beginning of the XX' th century in accordance with the newest ideas in urban planning, presented at the time by young German architects. The urban system considered ideal by them had a green belt

of parks around the urban centre, followed by districts of houses, offices and other buildings. It can be considered that Timișoara a century ago was a modern settlement with large roads, much vegetation, nice views and many public buildings, some of which quite impressive. The Interwar period did not change the existing urban plans, but some new districts appeared in certain parts of the town where no constructions existed before. Along the boulevards the new buildings were high, mainly offices, apartment houses, hospitals. The town extended with new areas occupied by small houses, owned mainly by industrial workers and people belonging to the middle class. The urban system which was created and developed in those days functioned well for nearly a century, till it became overloaded recently. The green spaces formed a nice chain of parks around the centre, along the Bega Channel, with an important role in the ecology of the place. Vegetation grew in time creating nice views. In the town centre, in the former outside districts and along the boulevards buildings were higher, but not very high, normally two or three stories, while in the other areas constructions were smaller. The urban system was characterized by unity and was well balanced. It succeeded to satisfy the needs of the population for a century in good conditions. During communism, mainly four story apartment blocks were

built on large scale, on free land or demolishing small houses. Industrial plants were built inside the settlement in certain areas, mainly on the limits of the town.

### **Traditional urban landscapes and green spaces**

The present urban landscape of Timișoara is dominated by the historical quarters, built during a period of time of two centuries till the end of World War I in 1918. The built areas are characterized by unity because of the strict town planning regulations used during the two mentioned centuries. Practically all built areas are compact, the houses being arranged in continuous compact lines on the two sides of the streets (so called urban corridors), because infrastructure was expensive, and the streets had to be short, and strictly ordered. There was an important control of the styles of the facades, which were mainly decorated in classical styles (Neo- Renaissance, and Neo - Baroque). As a result, all historical areas of Timișoara are harmoniously built, with aligned buildings, one, two or three level high. The unity of the built urban areas is a very important element of the general image of the settlement. There are of course accents in the old urban fabric, which are church towers, some public buildings, or monuments.

This image is completed by the presence of parks and green spaces of all kinds. These are mainly situated around the old town centre, aligned along the Bega Channel. They form a nice green belt, with an important positive ecological impact. Similar to the centre as urban image, the old secondary town centres are situated in the exterior of the old fortress: Fabric, Iosefin and Elisabetin. To these urban centres in time were added vast districts of family houses built in the Interwar period, and large areas covered with apartment buildings built during communism (1945 - 1990). There were also important surfaces of land used for the many industrial plants of the city. The whole urban structure that existed in the year 1990, was rather compact, well ordered, and efficiently interconnected with lines of urban transportation (tramways, busses, trolleybuses). The land was efficiently used, while the system offered normal living conditions for the people who were moving daily between their homes and their work places, mainly in factories. With the development of vegetation, the existing green spaces, especially those situated in the central area, became more and more valuable, because of their ecological role and beauty.

### **Changes in the urban structure**

After the year 1990, in the new political and economic conditions, the urban structure began to change. The old industrial platforms changed their function, because most of the old factories stopped

their activity and were demolished. Others had to be moved outside the city because they were sources of pollution. In time, the old industrial areas were reconverted, and more and more office and apartment buildings were built in these places. Lately high-rise business towers have been designed, which are beginning to change the urban landscape. In the meantime many family houses appeared each year on the limits of the city, and on former agricultural land around the villages of Timișoara Metropolitan Area. The settlement is spreading in all directions, but without having a proper infrastructure in the new built areas. The phenomenon is getting more and more evident in time, as people want to move to family houses, and they have the means to do it, because local economy is growing. Development is normal, and the city needs to extend its territory in order to assure better living conditions, but Timișoara is lacking a general urban development plan for its Metropolitan Area. The new extensions of the built areas have been approved one by one, by the conversion of former agricultural land into built neighbourhoods. The process was permitted legally, but it should have been used for small additions to existing settlements, not in order to extend a city in the surrounding territory on a great scale. The new built areas lack urban transportation, green spaces, public squares, market places, commercial units, schools, while the road structure is not coherent, is not properly designed, and doesn't assure a quick access toward the city. These facts are not surprising, if we consider that the general development is done without a proper plan. The local town-halls, and all the institution of the state, have indulged into accepting this kind of urban development, which was not illegal, but was speculating the deficiencies of the law, and created a situation that will be very hard to correct in the future. Most of the new built surfaces are situated around the villages which are very near to the city. The villages have their churches, schools, town-halls and small shops, but can hardly provide services for the new great scale extensions that were built during the last years. The people who inhabit these areas work in Timisoara, and spend most of their time in the city. The problem is that at certain hours of the day traffic is becoming more and more difficult, while there aren't sufficient parking places, especially in central areas. The whole evolution is not sustainable on a long term. A circular highway around the city was designed some years ago, but was not built until now. Many inhabitants consider that it could solve a great part of the traffic problems of the present, but it will surely not be a general solution in itself. For the moment it is very difficult to get from one exterior district of the city to another, and traffic problems get in time more and more serious. The new family house quarters lack all public spaces and institutions, and depend only on their relationship with the city. It will become impossible to create in these areas the necessary squares, parks,

boulevards, public institutions, schools. The more the exterior districts extend, more people need cars in order to be able to get to their work places or schools. In these conditions traffic is becoming an even greater problem, for which nobody really knows the solution.

### **The new urban landscape**

Because of the changes that took place in Timișoara in the last period of time, the urban image began to transform during the last years. The old urban system includes the historical parts of the town and the apartment blocks built during communism become now gradually part of a greater system. In the central regions high-rise buildings appear, creating a new centre. This area is becoming conspicuous because of its high towers, and will concentrate in time many institutions and offices. The system will not only have a new centre of towers, but also it spreads around the city on great surfaces of land. Because of the new buildings and the new extensions the outline of the settlement is changing a lot. It begins to resemble the silhouette of western cities, especially American ones. This does not happen by copying the images of those cities, but a similar way of living and working is creating similar needs for society, similar buildings, and in the end similar urban images. The future silhouette will be probably nice, and more expressive then the one Timișoara had in the past, but it will create even more difficult problems for traffic and urban transportation. The lack of a functional project for the new great Metropolitan Area will create great problems that could last for decades. The city and its Metropolitan Area don't even have a common urban plan, because according to the law the city and the surrounding communes are different entities. There is no coherent common urban plan, and the extensions around the villages hardly have the characteristics of normal urban districts. Timișoara Metropolitan Area might have in the future the appearance of a great city with business towers in the central area and wide spread districts in all directions. Still the system might not function as it should because of its insufficient road system, poor transportation, missing public institutions in the outskirts, and few parking lots.

Another problem are the parks and green spaces in the future Metropolitan Area of Timișoara. If more than a century ago, when the walls of the fortress were demolished great surfaces of land around the town centre became parks, since then very few significant green spaces have been created in Timișoara. Even now, when important surfaces of land are urbanized around the city, no parks are created. Officially the new areas belong to the neighbouring communes, which do not have the means to create parks, or do not consider important to invest, because green spaces do not bring money to the town hall. Another problem is that practically the whole urban development is done on private land, and the owners want to sell each

square meter with good profit. The lack of green spaces is already creating discomfort in many areas that have been recently urbanized. Vegetation contributes a lot to the image of certain areas, and the fact that there are no real investments in park projects will have a negative effect on the landscape of future Timișoara Metropolitan Area. If very soon a global plan will not be created, there will be negative results for a very long time.

### **Results and Discussions**

Timisoara is growing quickly in the last years, and the city is changing its image rapidly. New investments tend to transform the city and its neighbourhoods thoroughly. It will become in short time a greater city than it used to be, with high buildings in central areas and great extensions on former farm land. New economic conditions tend to transform the city, and make it similar to other important urban areas of the Western World. Still, studies show that there are great problems concerning infrastructure, transportation and green areas. Development is transforming the place quickly, but there is no real overall plan for Timișoara Metropolitan Area, that could deal with the future risks and problems. There are no real solution for traffic, though more and more people move to the exterior districts, and many will work in the office buildings of central Timișoara. At certain ours of the day traffic is already blocked on the main roads that lead from the centre to the surrounding villages, where many people live. Considering the present investments in housing around the city, and in office buildings in central areas, it is obvious that the existing infrastructure will not be appropriate, and there are no real plans to transform it thoroughly. There are no projects for important parks in the new built areas, though the city is extending at a great scale, and in the future there will be a great lack of vegetation. This will influence profoundly the image of the city.

### **Conclusions**

Because of the present quick development of Timișoara Metropolitan Area, the whole image and structure of the city is changing profoundly. The height of buildings is rising in the centre, while the settlement is spreading over its limits on former farm land. New developments take place in central areas and in the outer districts around villages close to the city, and this should be followed by a radical transformation of infrastructure and the creation of new green areas. The fact that in the present there are no real projects for the renewal of the infrastructure of Timișoara Metropolitan Area, and that no important green spaces are created in the districts, will have a negative effect on the evolution of the city as a whole. A new infrastructure, large scale new green areas, and the evolution of urban

landscape, are issues that will create great problems in the future for Timișoara Metropolitan Area, if they will not be solved quickly.

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Fig.1 The map of Timișoara with the marked neighbouring communes

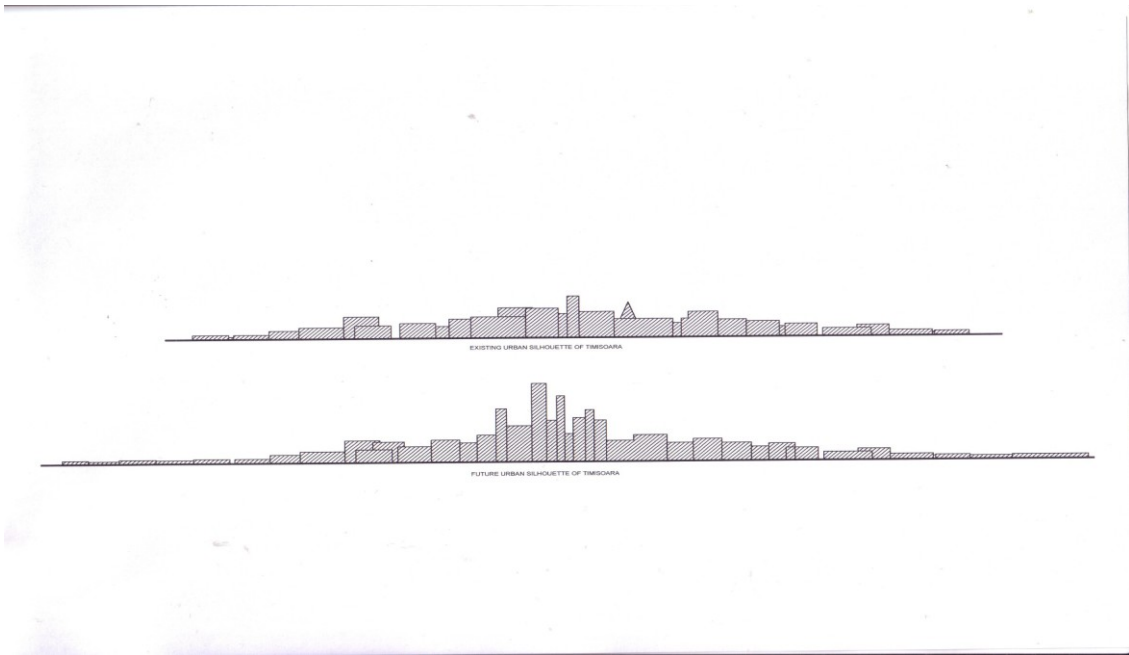


Fig.2 Existing and future silhouette of Timisoara