

The cultural value of public spaces in Timișoara

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Abstract Timisoara is a city in the western part of Romania, with a built history of three hundred years. All urban spaces of the settlement were designed on table in different periods of time, and there are no areas which appeared as the result of a spontaneous development, as it happened in the case of many medieval towns. As a result, today we can find a variety of squares, parks, boulevards and other spaces, which generally reflect the style and the ideas of the century in which they were created. Some of these developed in time a specific cultural identity, while others remained less important for the settlement. In the collective thinking of the population certain places are connected to different events of the past, or reflect values about which local people believe that they are important for the city. In connection with this, parks and gardens also play an important role, and they are part of local identity.

Key words

Squares, parks, gardens, Timișoara, culture

In this paper we will try to present some of these important places of local culture, and explain how they are connected to the events of the past. We will analyze the way in which collective culture shapes the city, and confers meaning to different places.

Material and Method

Generally speaking the Banat is a region that takes much pride in its heritage. This heritage is connected to the culture of the ethnic groups that live here and the influences of the states and empires that ruled the region. [1]

Traditionally Timișoara is a place where you can find nice gardens and public squares. The first park of the city was **Scudier Park (today Parcul Central)**, which is situated next to the main square of the settlement. Even if the square did not exist at that time, the park was in the neighbourhood of the old city walls. In the XIX' th century people were coming here especially on Sundays. They were walking in this green area situated next to the old city centre, and were listening to music played in a kiosk by the brass band. Gradually the place became more and more important for the inhabitants, monuments were built, and cultural events began to take place regularly. On the occasion of elections, or the visits of political leaders from Vienna or Budapest there were meetings in the park, and there were often cultural activities for young children, or for other purposes. In 1879 the statue of Anton Scudier, a former commander of the city - fortification, was placed in the park. [2]

It was obvious that local leaders and the population wanted to introduce cultural elements in these central areas of the city. The statue was demolished after 1920, when Timișoara became part of Romania. This old green space in the XX'th century was still considered a place of memory. After World War II the statue of the unknown soldier was placed in the centre of the park, and the whole green space was rebuilt. The monument, which originally was commemorating mainly the memory of soviet soldiers, today is dedicated to all those who died in wartime as heroes. Not far from the above mentioned monument during the last twenty years an alley of personalities was created. The statues commemorate all those people who at a certain time did something important for the city in the fields of politics, arts or science. The park is becoming an important place where the values of the past and the present are commemorated. As we can see in this case, even if certain statues were demolished after the year 1920, in great lines the successive administrations of the city did not change profoundly the urban image and the strategies for the development of Timișoara. [3]

The main public place of Timișoara- **Victoriei Square** is neighbouring Central Park (Fig. 1.). The area became completely pedestrian in the year 1989. [4]

At the two ends of this pedestrian area, two important monuments of Timișoara are located, the Opera House and the Orthodox Cathedral. These major monuments of the city define the place as the cultural centre of the settlement, but there are some other cultural symbols and events that are also important for the place. In the middle of the square, on a high

obelisk, there is the bronze statue of Mother Wolf with the children Romulus and Remus, a present offered by the city of Rome in 1926 for Romania.[5]

There is valuable vegetation in this area, especially the old *Taxus baccata* sp. trees, planted a long time ago, modelled to grow in round shapes. When weather is good, there are concerts and other festivities organized in the square. The open space stage is built usually in front of the Opera House. In the same place people gathered in December 1989, on the occasion of the revolution which began in Timișoara, and succeeded in the end to overturn communist dictatorship in Romania. Situated not very far from Victoriei Square, the **Rose Garden** of Timișoara (Parcul Rozelor) (Fig. 2.), is an attraction for many people, especially in warm weather. The place has many values that are worth mentioning. More than a century ago two members of the famous Timișoara based Mühle gardener family, father and son, had a connection to the park. [6]

The father organized a great flower exhibition, while the son later coordinated the first project, when the area was transformed into a park. The structure of the park alleys is strictly geometrical, which gives the place a certain value, according to the tradition of Geometric Style. [7] The present image of the place is due to the reconstruction that took place in the 1930 years. [8]

An impressive rose collection can be visited today and vegetation is valuable (old trees, nice cultivars, *Taxus baccata* sp. individuals). *Taxus baccata* trees, are considered monuments of nature, are protected and can be easily shaped. [9] The garden has an important cultural role also, because in the middle of the park is a great open stage, where concerts and festivities are held regularly. The furniture is composed of white benches and pergolas. Such elements can change the visual value of the place. [10] This green space is special, compared to all other parks of the city.

We can say that the central part of the city, which includes Victoriei Square and Central Park, is a very important place for the cultural identity of inhabitants, but there are many other important places also. All these public squares and green areas became important in time, as the ideas connected to modern urbanism spread in the XIX' th century among professionals and local leaders. [11]

The central part of Timișoara also includes some other important squares, which are strongly related to the history of the city. Libertății Square and Unirii Square, are the pedestrian areas which were in the interior of the old fortifications of the city. It is obvious that in old times, these places were the heart of social life in Timișoara. In **Unirii (Union) Square** (Fig. 4.) which is bigger, one can see the old Baroque Palace, which used to be an administrative building, and nowadays is the Fine Arts Museum of Timișoara. On the other parts of the square, facing each other, there are the two important churches, the Catholic

Church, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. On the left of the Orthodox Church, there is the palace of the Serbian Orthodox Bishop. In the middle of the place, one can see the statue of the Saint Trinity, which was built after 1739 to remember the great plague that killed a part of the population. [12]

The statue commanded by Anton Deschan de Hannsen, was manufactured in Vienna, and brought on a ship on the Danube. In the middle of the square a baroque style green space was created after 1980, following the plans drawn by IPROTIM, local design institution. The baroque design fits well the general atmosphere of the place. As in the past, people gather in the square when weather is fine. In the summer there are many terraces most of them filled with people great part of the day. Unirii Square is one of the main meeting place in open air for the inhabitants of the city. The second open area of the former fortress, **Libertății (Freedom) Square** (Fig. 5.), is smaller, and is surrounded by many public buildings, most of which belong traditionally to the army (originally the Habsburg Imperial Army, today the Romanian Army). Between these we can mention the House of the General, the Military Casino (today art center), office buildings etc. The most important building in the square is the Old Town - Hall, built at the beginning of the XVIII' th century, which used to be the center of town administration for two centuries. There are concerts and other festivities organized here and open air markets (for example flower markets in May). Before the pavement in the square was remade a couple of year ago, there was a green space in the area. People were sitting under the trees on benches in the shade. After the reconstruction there are only few small trees left. Most inhabitants regretted the loss of the trees, and they do not stay any more there in summer, because it is too warm. There is an important sculpture in the square also. The monument of Saint Mary, known as the monument Saint Nepomuk, is situated in front of the old Town - Hall. The construction includes the statues of many saints, between which the most important are the above mentioned Saint Mary and Saint Nepomuk. It was built in 1750, being ordered by the Congregation of Saint Nepomuk. [13]

All these above mentioned spaces are connected in the central area of Timișoara, and create a continuous open space which traditionally is much appreciated by tourists and by local people. The transformation of all these squares, into a continuous pedestrian area, began after the year 1980. In time cars were eliminated in all this part of the city, and the squares were repaved.

Another place which has importance for local culture and traditions is on 16 Decembrie 1989 Boulevard, at the intersection with Gheoghe Doja street (Fig. 3.). It is an important place for the city, because tradition says that this is the place where Gheorghe Doja (in Hungarian Dózsa György), the leader of the peasant revolt of the year 1514 was killed. The place,

which is not too far from the centre of Timișoara, remained a place of worship. More than a century ago a monument was built here, a small decorative construction designed by architect László Székely, in which the statue of Saint Mary was placed. Another important event, that marked this place, is the fact that the revolution of the year 1989, started in Timișoara in this area. Priest Tókes László, who was living very near, was speaking openly in December 1989 against the communist regime. People gathered to defend him against authorities, and the revolution started. The monument of Doja is an important place for catholic worshipers, but also for those who want to pay their respect to a prominent figure of Central European history. In Plevnei Square which is near to this place one can find the iron statue of the peasant leader in a small green space.

Another area with cultural role in Timișoara is **Traian Square**, situated in Fabric District. It is another historic part of Timișoara. In the square there are many old buildings, between which a small Serbian Orthodox Church built two centuries ago. The pavements of the square were renovated ten years ago, and the leaders of the city declared that this place will become a beautiful square and a local attraction. Today the facades of the surrounding buildings are not repaired and people are not spending here any time. Very near, on 3 August 1919 Boulevard a beautiful Neo-Romanesque catholic church can be observed, built in the year 1900 (Architect Ybl Lajos from Budapest), and at a distance of 300 meters a nice synagogue, (masterwork of Budapest based architect Baumhorn Lipót in 1898). After more than two centuries of existence, the area is full of meaning for those who are interested in the old values of Timișoara. Near to this Square on Boulevard 3 August 1919, following the above mentioned buildings and some more nice houses, on the left hand there is **Regina Maria Park**. It is a nice green space [14], that has been restored a couple of years ago. The original name of the place was Coronini Park in the XIXth century. [15]

There are some statues in the park that commemorate a famous singer, and another one of Queen Mary of Romania. Three hundred years old Quercus Sp. trees can be seen here. The green space was designed more than a century ago by architect László Székely. Some elements of this original design were preserved, especially the built fence, and one of the entrance gates.

Another historic place in Fabric District is the Beer Factory, founded originally as a brewery in the XVIIIth century. The old building parts that were preserved and a restaurant terrace are local tourist attractions. All these elements contribute to the cultural and historical value of Fabric District.

The **Village Museum** of Timișoara is situated on the limit of the city, on the edge of Pădurea Verde forest. The place has a double cultural function. The buildings are traditional peasant houses with historical

value, brought from different villages of the western part of Romania. In the middle of the area there is a stage where cultural events are organized each year: concerts, festivals for minorities, programs for children etc. The above mentioned areas, have a double role in the existence of the city, the cultural importance and another fundamental one connected to ecology. In public urban spaces culture, ecology and biodiversity are today elements that cannot be separated. [16]

The fact that development came slowly but constantly helped Timișoara in time not to lose its cultural heritage, but to conserve it. This was much more difficult in great European cities, where development came quickly. This is why in those days thinkers like Patrick Geddes tried to save urban values. [17]

The city also escaped great destruction during World War II, which helped to preserve local values that in other countries had to be reconstructed with great difficulty, as it happened in many cities of Germany. [18]

Results and Discussions

Timișoara is today a city with a built heritage of three hundred years, with old buildings, parks and other places that bear the memory of the past. In time buildings and green spaces were connected with events and became symbols of certain values that are important for the inhabitants of the city. Some of the cultural values of today Timișoara are linked to the history of the settlement, while others are connected with events that take place regularly in our period of time. It is obvious that the central part of Timișoara is the place to which most cultural traditions are connected. Most public monuments are situated in this area, and many cultural events take place in the three squares and in the parks of the central part of the city.

The fact that the streets have become pedestrian transformed a lot Cetate District during the last forty years. This was a long process, that implied the transformation of public transportation in central Timișoara, and in the end the exclusion of all vehicle. Today a great part of the population spends time in the squares and parks.

The presence of many churches, the Opera House building, which is also the local theatre, the Capitol Concert Hall, occasional concerts in open space, the terraces in Revolutiei and Unirii squares, shops, all attract people to this area that has accumulated cultural values during the last centuries. In the meantime other historic districts also preserve local values, traditions, nice buildings, churches and other monuments. Such a place should be Traian Square, the centre of historical Fabric District. In this case transformations that took place did not have a great effect. The repaved area is not regarded as a place where people would like to spend time, and buildings around are not repaired.

Another place that does not attract people, is the courtyard of the Theresia Bastion, though the monument is well restored, and there are a museum, a restaurant and terraces.

Conclusions

Timișoara is a Central European city with many historical values. Some areas are already restored, and people tend to spend time in warm season in the squares and parks of the city centre.

Local spiritual values are linked to historic events, places of religious worship, or simply local traditions. Some cultural and sports events are newer, but became part of the life of the city. Flower beds and flowering trees, planted in recent years attract many local people in the spring.

Most important public places of Timișoara are properly taken care of, though a little more innovation would be appropriate. Many places are regarded by the population as being important for local culture and traditions. If more historic buildings of the city will be restored and a better function will be created for some urban areas, the city can become even more attractive

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Fig. 1. The Opera House in Victoriei Square
(Photo Gabriel Székely)



Fig. 2. Rozelor Park
(Photo Gabriel Székely)



Fig. 3. The monument of Saint Mary (arh. László Székely)
(Photo Gabriel Székely)

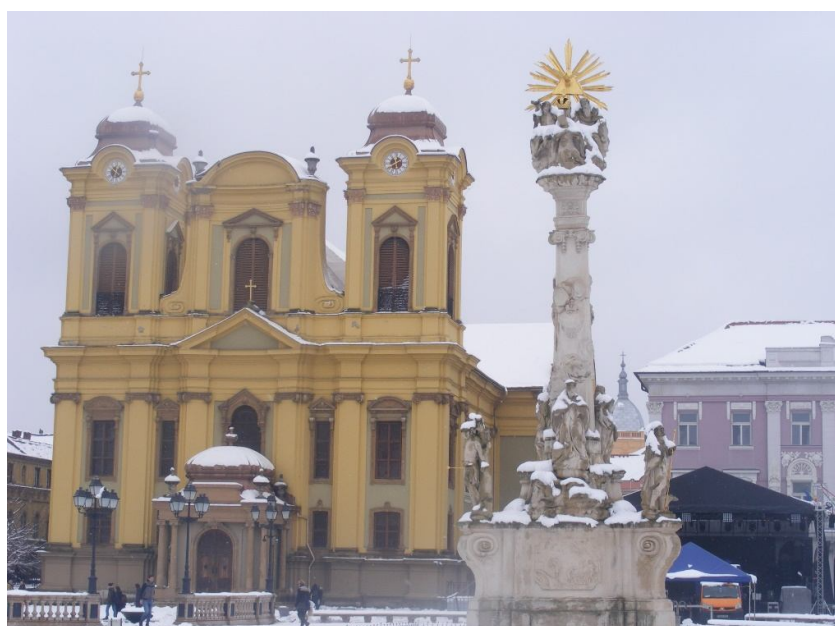


Fig. 4. The monument and the Catholic Church in Unirii Square
(Photo Gabriel Székely)



Fig. 5. The monument in Libertății Square
(Photo Gabriel Székely)