

WHAT IS HERITAGE? THE DILEMMAS OF AN URBAN PLANNER.

URBAN TRANSFORMATION

Three words: concentration, diversity, centrality are commonly accepted key words defining the city. All the definitions widely discussed in literature elaborate and interpret these three simple words either in the context of physical territory or of social relations and activities. There is, however, one more characteristic of the city significantly present in the definitions, studies and (the most important!) reality, in every day urban life. This is change, transformation, flux. Beaujeu-Garnier and Chabot (1971) note precisely that: „*the city is in constant adaptation to the civilizational model; it is in fact a physical expression of this model*”. There is therefore no one universal model of the city, there is no one omnipresent urban form. There is a variety of models and forms produced by the different civilizational formations.

Metamorphosis of the city can be seen as a process inherently embedded in its very nature. It is evident that constant social transformation has to influence the structure of the city inhabited by this changing society. An important (but not always recognised) fact is that, at least in the long run, nobody can control social evolution. This is why identification and understanding of these powerful developments is so important for urban planners.

Technical opportunities are probably amongst the most significant factors determining social change. Both social and technical change are impossible to foresee. Both are impossible to control, regulate or dictate in long periods of time. Both are dynamic. Together they form the foundations of the „civilizational model” described by Beaujeu-Garnier and Chabot.

Until now, in our (European) civilizational circle, three fundamental urban transformations have contributed to making the new model of the city (Mumford, 1961).

The first transformation happened in the middle of the 4th millennium BC and produced the city as a new (and indeed innovative) form of territorial control.

The second, initiated by Indo-European civilisation formed a classical ancient (Greek/Roman) pattern of the city.

After the dark (urban) ages following the collapse of the Roman Empire, the new and essentially European medieval model of the city as a central point of territorial organisation of the regions, emerged and proved its structural strength.

Then the industrial revolution, building more on the technical component of „civilizational” adjustment, generated unique and extremely dynamic social transformations. These changes unavoidably provoked the emergence of the new urban model. The medieval model of the city did not form anymore a physical frame to this new society.

The result of this fourth urban revolution - the new model of the city - is still not completed. However, clear trends like, for example, polycentric urban structure, development of the agglomerations and metropolitan areas or polarisation can be observed.

Many urban professionals (not only planners) still do not fully recognise and acknowledge this fundamental turn, insisting that the (historic) model completed in the 13th century for the towns of a few thousand inhabitants is still suitable for contemporary cities of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants or even for the whole city-regions. Ignoring reality does not, however, change reality itself. Similarly, looking backwards does not help us perceive the future.

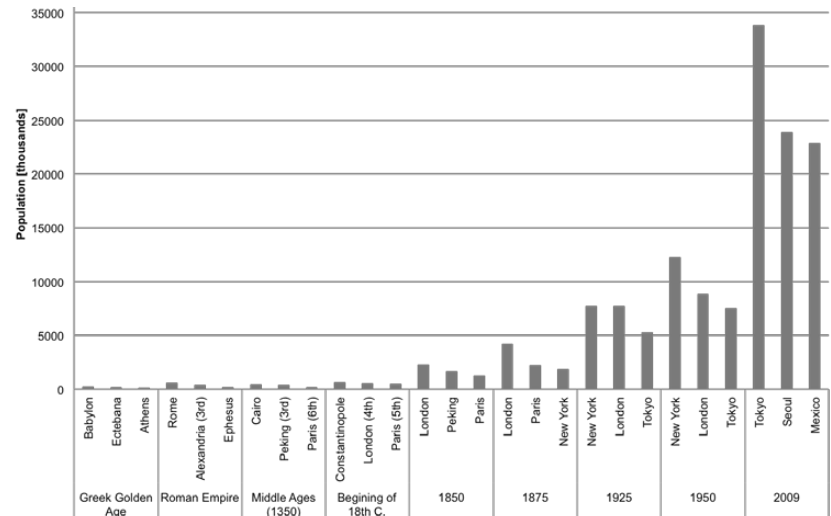
The urban transformation we are experiencing has been lasting for only two centuries. This is not a long period of time compared to the time needed for completing the past models of

the city. Being in the course of metamorphosis, it is especially difficult to identify and understand the very nature of the present processes essentially influencing cities. Without this understanding, the new model of the city cannot be discovered and defined.

The transformation of urban structure within this new model manifests itself in two (interlinked) ways.

Firstly, cities have significantly changed their size. Longer term urban growth is evident, even if sometimes local shrinkage and decline can be observed. Comparison of the size of the ten biggest cities in the World (Chandler, Fox, 1974) presented in Chart 1 proves that the quantitative shift must have caused the qualitative change. This kind of growth cannot simply be accommodated in the old structure. There are also no signs of a significant reverse of this trend of growth, therefore it has to be taken into account that it would remain. Even if the dynamics of growth would not continue, the significant impact on the urban structure has already been generated.

1. Biggest cities
source: author



Secondly, there are constant transfigurations of internal urban structures. Sometimes they are very small, sometimes they stretch to the broader territory. However they are always territorially insignificant compared to the entire city. They are also permanent - small adjustments, changes of land use, planned big urban projects... They change the functions in the city, they change the meaning and importance of places in the city.

Both ways of transformation influence significantly existing urban structure and in this sense both relate in a specific way to urban heritage.

If the transformation of the internal urban structures can be seen as a constant process, then the natural conclusion can be drawn that the cycle of *'development - optimisation - decline - transformation into the new structure'* can be somehow identified. Such a process is basically constant, only the length of time of the particular phases varies.

This urban change can be autonomous or self-organised, that is to say, not planned. In the context of systems' theory, a city belongs to the Complex Adaptive Systems, and therefore (like all the CASes) endeavours to reach a (dynamic) point of equilibrium, which can be described as optimisation of its structure at a given stage of evolution.

If we - as an urban community - would like to influence somehow the development goals to be achieved and the process leading to them, we can, to some extent, control this process of permanent transformation. We need however to understand that full control over the process of transformation, in the sense that we can achieve defined aims using the fixed methods, is impossible. This process is dynamic and both goals and methods can be adapted to the changing situation. This is why the very nature of the process and its possible consequences must be grasped (if not identified).

Typically, an intervention in a specific area starts when the process of decline is being observed or foresighted. Normally, the general goal is to improve the place, and to attribute (or sometimes restore) a value and a logical sense of that place in the urban structure. The identification of the degradation process is therefore the first step in the controlled process of transformation (the clear assumption here is, of course, that the task of improving the places that work perfectly well is not typically the case). And already here the first problem arises, because the definition of an urban degradation is neither simple nor objective. This step is however crucial because, if the problem of the place is not identified and described properly, the answer - in the sense of defining the goals and methods of transformation - would be totally inadequate.

The second step of the transformation is the clarification of the goals. The general aim of improving the place and attributing the values and logical sense of that place in the urban structure requires recognition and understanding of the role of that place in the urban structure. This means that the entire urban structure must be described, recognised and diagnosed. And, in consequence, the general goals of urban development must be formulated. Even if these general goals can be commonly agreed (which is not usually the case) - including for example increasing quality of life, protection of the heritage and sustainable development - their operational implementation may be not only done in different ways, but it may also reveal an inherent internal contradiction between these goals.

To discuss these problems this paper will therefore focus on two issues: the denotation of the degradation and exploration of the relationship between heritage and urban development.

DEGRADATION IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF URBAN PARADIGMS

Urban degradation can be simplistically defined as a 'process of worsening the state of the place'. Yet, to evaluate whether and to what extent this process has taken place, a point of reference must be indicated. Consequently, the state of „no degradation” must be defined. The decline (i.e. worsening of the state) can only refer to this condition of „no degradation”.

The word „worsening” can suggest that in the analysed place, the initial, desirable and somehow ideal set-up once existed, but since has been badly affected and the basic goal is to restore this former glory. Would this past magnificence be our preferred point of reference?

In some cases it could, however, not necessarily be the only choice. For example, a neglected theatre can be restored both in its form and its function; however it cannot be proved that this would be better solution than, let's say, a cultural centre, artistic school or good bookshop as far as the place somewhere in the city centre is concerned. Also a new form would not probably harm very much the quality of the place. In many (or probably even majority of) cases, the reinstallation of the former function would be doubtlessly considered as completely disastrous.

In the northern part of the Old Town of Wrocław, in medieval times, there was a quite big slaughterhouse built on the riverbank. It used to serve as a main source of meat traded at the market stalls located nearby. Today this kind of - previously historical - arrangement would have never been allowed. The same applies to the former hospitals, prisons, orphanages and many other activities. Restoration of the functions, especially in their historical forms, would have been a civilizational mistake.

The same applies to bigger urban areas like, for example, industrial or military sites. There

is no rationality in producing goods which are no longer needed or bearing the cost of the barracks of an army which no longer exists. Here again, restoration of the former function and form would have been irrational.

In the cities of today, quite big installations of yesterday can be still found: raw sewage fields, fortification systems, remains or mines. The fact, that they were useful long ago (like medieval silver mines near Olkusz in Poland) does not justify their restoration today.

All these examples clearly prove that former use of the place cannot be a point of reference while defining urban degradation. The fact that a specific state of the place had been identified in the past does not create a rational base for its use today. The restoration of the previous use and arrangement of the place is actually a matter of present opinion and evaluation, not a matter of historic fact.

This argumentation leads to an important conclusion. The point of reference of an urban degradation is not PAST arrangement and use, but the state which is NOW being considered as the most suitable to the place on the basis of the set of present convictions, which can be described as an urban planning doctrine (or paradigm?). This doctrine, taking into account the predispositions of the place, especially its location in the general urban structure of the city, defines what kind of use and arrangement of the place is the most appropriate. For example, it cannot be stated that hypermarkets per se are a form of degradation of the place. Typically, they would be considered as an important factor of the degradation if located in the city centre, not out of the town, where according to the present planning doctrine is an acceptable place for hypermarkets. The important remark here is that the state of degradation is not perceived only because urban structure has changed (for worse), but - more importantly

- social expectations towards the space have changed. And the urban planning doctrine follows them (or precedes them!).

Urban planning paradigms and doctrines diagnosing, evaluating and conceptualising urban structure are not only subjective, but they also evolve. It is clear that urban planning doctrines represent the present civilizational system and in this sense reflect not only the ideological position of the professionals (urban planners) but also of decision-makers and broader civil society.

Consider the case of post-war Poland. In the second half of the 20th century, following modernistic urban planning doctrine, based on the idea of progress and in tune with the communist ideology, the 19th century urban blocks in the city centres have been considered, especially by the planners, as completely degraded areas, which ought to be erased and replaced with functional, modernistic, clean, full-of-sun and healthy blocks of flats affordable for everybody. In some cities, especially those destroyed during Second World War, this idea has been efficiently implemented.

Then, the historical turnaround in planning came and the evaluation was reversed. In the late 20th century the modernistic order was questioned, while historical sentiment attributed new values to the „traditional” urban blocks. Today, again, the previously „cursed” modernistic order is being re-evaluated... More and more planners acknowledge affordability, functionality, technical innovation, clear urban form... There are even requests to protect modernistic neighbourhoods and areas as historic heritage. Society in general does not necessarily share this opinion; however, the same was happening before. The opinion of professionals is slowly but surely affecting more and more wider civil society, including residents, business, and decision-makers.

This kind of debates are taking place, for example, in Warsaw (Ursynów), Cracow (Nowa Huta), Gdańsk (Przymorze) or Wrocław (Plac Grunwaldzki). They clearly mirror the unstable nature of the urban planning doctrine and evaluation of the spatial processes.



2. Plac Grunwaldzki, Wrocław

photo: Thomas W. Fiege



3. Nowa Huta, Kraków

photo: Tulio Bertorini

The perception of urban degradation can be also affected by our belief in what kind of investment would be suitable for the specific

territory (which is again under the influence of an urban planning paradigm!). For example, sometimes it is believed that an old factory can be re-used for new activities (Zollverein Coal Mine in Essen, Old Brewery in Poznań, old textile factory „Manufaktura” in Łódź) and sometimes, on the contrary, it is believed that the old activity should be totally erased to give space for new development (Solvay in Cracow, Lyon Confluence). In many cases there is no proof that one solution would have been better for the urban structure than the other.

The conclusion of this discussion should be that the point of reference in evaluation of an urban degradation could be both PAST and FUTURE. In other words degradation can be only noticed in relation to the specific potential of the territory. This potential depends on the localisation of the place within the PLANNED urban structure, which of course has been designed on the basis of the present urban planning doctrine.

In fact, the protection of the heritage is being used as a tool of successful development in the future, not as a „container” of inherent, independent values.

For example, only a few years ago in many European cities, local authorities following the advice of urban planners, have been removing trams from the city centres to open pedestrian streets and make the space accessible. Also, they were hoping that the tram lines separated from the pedestrian paths would make public transport more efficient and safe. It didn't take long for the local authorities, following the advice of (the same?) urban planners, started restoring the trams in the centres, closer to the pedestrians than ever to increase the attractiveness and accessibility of the city centre...

Analysis of the degradation of particular areas in the city can be only done in this (discussed above) wider context.

It has also to be accepted that the analysis cannot be absolutely objective, because each assessment is formulated in the perspective of predilection, suitability of the place to the particular activities, and - as it has been discussed before - is therefore deeply rooted in the paradigm we believe in. Scientific research, however, requires that, in the case of the qualitative analysis with a subjective component, at least clear criteria of this analysis must be defined. It seems that in the case of study of degraded areas in cities, four criteria can be useful:

- material degradation - which embraces technical state of the buildings and technical equipment of the place;
- functional degradation - which reflects transformation of land uses and activities,
- “moral” degradation - mostly linked to the image of the place and attitude of the local stakeholders to the present use of the place;
- spatial degradation - linked to the physical structure of the place.

These criteria clearly contain economic, social and environmental components.

Material, or technical degradation is probably the most objective part of the analysis. The technical state of the buildings and urban technical equipment could be easily measured; the costs of the modernisation, rebuilding, equipment and the like can be precisely estimated.

It is important to notice that the technical state of the place influences the image of this site, thus it has a strong impact on the “moral” degradation. Additionally it affects the functionality of the place because some activities require specific technical conditions. These interlinked relationships are not easy to measure, especially in quantitative terms.

The second criterion is far more complicated because here the connection with the urban planning paradigm is especially strong.

It could be assumed that the measure of the functional degradation might be inadequacy of the functions, land uses and activities of the particular location. This generates implications of two kinds.

First, there should be a common agreement concerning the role, arrangement and functionality of the particular place in the general urban structure and that the present state of that place does not fit to this concept. This implies that there is an agreement about the general form of an urban structure and that each function, land use and activity should somehow fit into its place as defined in this general concept. So the point of reference here would be planned, future, general urban structure. Therefore in this perspective, the functional degradation of the place can be defined as inadequacy of the existing functions, land uses and activities of the location in the context of the functions, land uses and activities defined as suitable for this place in the planned urban structure. And there is no doubt that this planned general structure is the product of the present urban planning paradigm.

Secondly, **functional degradation** can be associated with destructive relationships and might mean that the activities carried out at a specific place affect negatively the surroundings or, oppositely, that these surroundings have a harmful impact on the activities of the place.

This negative impact of the surrounding on the place could actually be sometimes very positive for the general structure of the city (in the sense that the present urban planning paradigm considers it positive). For example, in many cities there has been significant number of big industrial companies located in the 19th century in the city centres. In Poland this has been especially the case of the city of Łódź. In the course of time, the surroundings evolved into a pedestrian-oriented commercial, cultural and leisure centre and the

increasing rents and taxes along with the limited accessibility for the trucks had a negative impact on the factories in the sense that this activity had become economically unprofitable. The industry needed a better, accessible and cheaper location. From the point of view of the present urban paradigm, this unquestionably negative impact on the existing activity (leading at the end to its economic degradation) happened to be very positive to the general structure of the city. Therefore functional degradation is never evaluated in absolute terms. On the contrary, it always refers to the existing urban planning model.

The previous two kinds of degradation have very clear economic context. The next one, **moral degradation**, is associated more with the social component of the city, because it refers to images, opinions and feelings. Obviously these images, opinions and feelings could be and usually are subjective. However, they might be studied, measured and analysed by objective tools. In short, moral degradation can be observed when the image of the place in the mentality of the people and institutions is negative.

For example, the majority of people, including urban planning professionals, has a generally negative image of industrial zones or big prefabricated housing estates and, at the same time, a generally positive image of the old town, no matter whether it is really old or it is only the historical stylisation.

The problem of the moral degradation embraces also the ability of “understanding” the place in the sense of being able to “read” the meanings and symbols representing specific values. This element is really important, as places losing their meanings (ability to represent the values) are usually suffering from moral degradation.

It could happen that the same place represents different values to different people. A good example of this case is Praga - part of

the capital city of Warsaw located on the left bank of the Vistula river. Residents of Praga have very strong identification with the place and they accept it as “their own” socially and territorially. For them the image of the place is characterised by high moral values and it generates a lot of positive associations. For the rest of the residents of Warsaw however, the place is legendarily unsafe and represents low moral values. It can be therefore proved that moral degradation is always associated with a particular group of people representing a specific set of notions.

It could be interesting to note that the moral values of places usually do not relate to their economic values. Normally people do not connect places representing (for them) high moral values with the costs of their maintenance. This applies both to direct costs (for example paid through taxes) and indirect costs (for example paid through higher costs of using the place associated with the specific moral values).

Paradoxically, places of high moral value typically have very little practical use. A lot of people would attribute high moral value to the Royal Palaces in Cracow or Warsaw, while both cannot be really properly used in the practical way. They are residences of the past and using them for example as a museum is extremely inconvenient and generates a lot of additional costs, for example to equip the interiors with a specific air condition installation in order to protect the historic paintings. Both castles can be characterised by educational, tourist or historic values, but definitely not economic values or convenience of use (modern museum buildings would be both cheaper and more efficient; they might be even more beautiful...). Maybe actually the low „practical” value is exactly the reason why the symbolic values of the places of that kind are especially high. The same, which is

rather not typical because of the function of the place, can be said about Gdańsk Shipyard, the birthplace of Solidarity, the movement, which at the end led to the transformation of the post-war order in Europe.

The last criterion is linked to the **spatial aspect** of an urban structure. Degradation in this case may mean that structural components (for example streets or squares, urban tissue) and relations between them (internal hierarchy) are not clearly defined or even do not exist at all. This of course results in the worsening of both functionality and perception of the place.

Understanding of the nature of an urban degradation leads to the further exploration of the meaning of the heritage.

URBAN HERITAGE

Earlier in this paper, it has been demonstrated that both social and technological changes are out of planning (and actually any) control. Therefore urban planners, within their competence and responsibility, should be responding to social needs by:

- forming/modelling urban structure,
- setting up opportunities for development,
- protecting the values.

This last goal is, of course, subjective in the sense that it is shaped by the set of values recognised and dominant in that specific society. It does not have absolute, universal characteristics. For example, the concept that „old” might be better than „new” is surely not universal (for example it does not apply to smart phones), it only represents social judgement about specific urban forms.

It would be interesting to notice that the act of conserving or preserving urban structures, functions and forms is against the very nature of the city, which is in constant transformation. The phenomenon that modern societies (at least

in the majority of European countries) hold historical (or historic) urban structures in high regard is relatively new. Yet, it seems important to realise what the essence is of this social appreciation of the past. It does not require the preservation of the material substance (however it may seem so) but it strongly relates to the sphere of values and symbols. It also reflects the many different ways of using “the past”.

An excellent example illustrating this situation is the completely reconstructed Old Town of Warsaw, destroyed during the Second World War by the Nazis. The objective age of this place is relatively „young”, however the values transmitted by this structure are rooted in the past, national tradition, pride and identity. These important associations are therefore not generated by the „real” old structure but only by the structure which has power to represent them. The real heritage is hidden in this ability to generate valuable associations, not in the structure itself.

In Poland, like in many European countries, typical practice in urban planning is an arbitral decision about protection of specific buildings or places taken by a group of experts representing a specific set of convictions concerning values attributed to the physical forms which have survived from the past. This decision, however, is clearly not objective because it represents only the beliefs of this specific group of experts. This is not objective knowledge, this is autonomous, personal „policy”. For example, two fundamental aspects justifying the opinion of the experts on the (legal) protection of „the heritage” are linked to historical and artistic values. In other words the mixture of „revealing/preserving the truth about the past” and giving testimony to the times with beauty of the specific physical form will argue the choice. This may suggest, that these two values - historical and artistic - are

explicitly recognisable and that they are not controversial. In fact it is not the case.

Firstly, „the older - the better” cannot be proven. Following this kind of doctrine, one should demolish say the baroque extension of a renaissance palace. At the end of this logic gothic cathedrals shall be pulled down just to reveal older foundations of the roman remains... Therefore it is not the age of the building being considered, but the arbitrarily defined „historicality”. The response to the question about the „adequate” or „appropriate” age of the object is a matter of consensus. If the (heritage) experts would follow the historical example from the past, they should allow each building to be modernised and rebuilt constantly (as they used to be in the past). The experts, however, would rather prefer to decide what is „appropriate” for the particular object and what is not. This of course does not necessarily mean that their decision is stupid or incorrect, this only means that they are no better than the decision of planners, builders, architects or owners. Urban planners in the process of their education have to learn a lot about the spatial development of places, they know the history of the cities and territories and their knowledge is absolutely relevant to adapt the remnants from the past for the good of the present users. On the contrary, conservation officers are typically art historians not having deep knowledge of urban development, technical infrastructure and social needs. Not to mention the costs of adaptation and maintenance of the historical structures. Not questioning the qualifications of the heritage conservation officers in general, it should be accepted that they do not represent any „objective” knowledge but they express their own point of view on the subject. And of course this point of view can change (and indeed it does), because it is framed within the conservation doctrine.

The „objectivity” of the historical justification is also badly affected by the completely accidental selection of the material objects from the past. This is not a representative set of objects delivering the artefacts representing each period of time. This is simply an accidental set of objects which survived natural disasters, wars, accidents, reconstructions... This is not a representative selection of the past forms and structures.

Secondly, artistic value is even more questionable. Each age is looking for its answer to the question what beauty is, therefore the opinion on the artistic value is even more subjective than just discussed the representation of the past.

This discussion leads to the social aspect of the protection of values. In many European countries, there is a social need to keep and preserve some physical forms from the past. However, there is very little public discussion about what and at what costs is worth to be preserved. In fact this question is important because at the end of the day, it is the tax payers who deliver the means to preserve historical structures. And the latter are selected by the group of experts without any public discussion. However, this is crucial to understand what is the reason for social appreciation of specific forms from the past and what social values are in fact associated with them.

The need of recognition and understanding of „the roots” seems to be inherently embedded into human nature; surely it influences the processes that shaped a city. Lewis Mumford (1961) has been convincing, anticipating the meaning of cemeteries and shrines as urban archetypes. The features of these two items has been directly transferred to the early cities, overstepping thousands of years of Neolithic settlements. Between these important features of the cemeteries and shrines is certainly tradition, i.e.

transfer of knowledge about oneself and his/her relatives who created the foundations of social relationships. In cities, this knowledge has been used and transformed into history. *Nota bene*, the use of writing and beginning of written history are directly linked with the very first cities. In this sense, the need of referring to the past is somehow basic in the cities. Yet referring to the past does not mean restoring the past. Today we can interpret these characteristics as a need to legitimise social rules and relations, thus representing social values. In this sense the past in a way justifies the present.

In urban forms and structures representing the past, we should therefore rather focus on the values and meanings they convey than on the physical objects.

These deliberations lead us to the following description of heritage. Urban heritage is not the material object from the past, but a set of meanings and values associated with this material object and referring to specific present society. In other words, heritage needs an heir, a beneficiary, who would take it over and use it. In any other case, material objects representing the past have no value. This is clear as the value is attributed to the object by the heir, receiver, beneficiary - in other words society - appreciating the past and the values and meanings associated with it. That is to say that heritage has no value per se, but the value is added to it externally.

From the point of view of urban planning, it seems to be quite clear that „preserving” the heritage should not be the goal. The heritage instead should be used for the good of present society. This is because heritage is not the set of material objects, the relicts from the past but it is „a raw material which is selectively quarried and used in accordance with contemporary requirements” (Ashworth, 1993).

In other words this is „a contemporary created phenomenon which is re-created anew by each generation according to prevailing attitudes to the past” (Ashworth, 1993).

Such an understanding of heritage supports urban planning, because the past is not represented by untouchable, „frozen”-in-the-past-form, protected objects but it creates a resource to be used by the present society according to the expectations and needs of this society. This perspective gives a unique opportunity to interpret heritage as the precious potential of values, not as a set of limitations for the future development.

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