Dynamics and Aesthetics of Urban Change in Post–Socialist Osijek, Croatia

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Abstract

There are significant differences between urban changes affecting large, medium and small size cities in the post-socialist world of Eastern Europe. The regional centre of Eastern Croatia, the city of Osijek, is one of the examples of shrinkage showing declining trend and the most concerning demographic one. This paper introduces the dynamics and processes of change that have affected the urban area of Osijek, defined as functional shrinkage of the Osijek city core since the arrival of the new economic and political system. It combines an overview on the structures of decision making and quantitative indicators of changes in construction industry. It charts intensive reconstruction and new aesthetic of central public places and degradation of the street areas with the intensive housing emanating from the power of free market. The study is based on data obtained from a review of the literature on shrinking city studies as a platform for critical review. Official documents, statistical censuses, maps, authors’ and historical photos have also been utilised in the field work. The paper brings forward some key challenges facing the urban planning profession in post-socialist Osijek: how to ensure balanced and coherent changes in urban fabric among misbalanced interests.

1. Introduction

The cities of Eastern Europe are facing the same kind pressures as their Western instances such as environmental pressures, globalization, deindustrialization, privatization, gentrification etc. They are under the same risk to become alike all the other cities in the world, to lose their identity. Inertia of the spatial changes puts them behind political and economic shifts so the turbulences in the first ones are presented as abrupt changes in city space and the city identity. What kind of identity is post-socialist city searching for? What are the values of the post-socialist city that should be emphasized and remained? And what is the period and dynamic within post-socialist city can accomplish goals that are so fuzzy and blurred?

The literature clearly claims that the new structure of economic activities has an impact on a new spatial order; a new urban hierarchy is no longer based on territorial or national boundaries, but based on networks and connectivity. Some authors advocate the theory that material aspect is no longer the core issue of the city and that the digital networks and hyper mobility of markets become more dominant over the physical space [1-3]). Castells [1] ascribes to the city changes shift from ‘a space of places’ to a ‘space of flows’, a concept in which flows of capital, flows of information, and flows of organizational interactions are taking place through electronic circuits, that are connecting between nodes and hubs ‘cities’. Sassen [3] claims that older hierarchies of scale are destabilized and are going through dramatic rescaling. As the national scale loses significance along with the loss of key components of the national state’s formal authority over the national scale, other scales gain strategic importance. The Western “planning culture” [4] accepted new actors and roles in planning so urban development decisions are not solely made by local government any more, but in association with other private organizations, public arena and individuals [5]. Local governments are no longer playing an
exclusive role as the leading policy-maker; they are merely one of the many actors involved in the multi-actor policy-making process [6]. The actors involved in planning the Eastern city are trapped with its endeavours and goals [7] in the gap between frozen image of the developed western city and the western city that already made a shift to globalization and network society. There has always been competition between cities, but today, under the growth-oriented economic demand currently followed by most European countries, competition between cities in Europe has become more intense than ever. The city is accepted as “the frontier zone” of the world [8] as “engine of the economy, as place of connectivity, creativity and innovation, and as centre of services” [9] or more dramatically “city is all we have” [2] so its role in a global sense has much importance so the continuity of rethinking the changes of the post-socialist city is needed (see [7, 10-14]) after the vast literature on socialist city [15-16].

This paper focuses on new appearances in urban fabric of the post-socialist city of Osijek as the representation of different actors and interests through the critical analysis of its identity and discontinuity. It will be concentrated on urban morphology and urban design of two most construction productive socialist period as well as post-socialist period trying to depict the dynamic and aesthetic of the changes of the main city squares and city streets in the peak periods. In the first part of the paper some most influence processes on urban fabric of Osijek will be discussed – functional, morphological and aesthetic changes and actors involved in urban planning.

2. Contemporary realities and trends: What is and what it should be

In final texts of the “Cities of tomorrow: Challenges, visions, ways forward” [17] one can find comprehensive vision of the future European city elaborated and explained. The preferred urban territorial development pattern is, among other demands, characterised by a compact settlement structure with limited urban sprawl through a strong control of land supply and speculative development and by improvement of the urban scene, landscape and place where local residents identify themselves with the urban environment.

The other discourse is the pressure pulled or pushed by growth or the decline [18]. As contributing factors for the negative dynamics might occurs in economy crises, deindustrialization, strong centralization, natural or human-induced disasters, an ageing or low-fertility rate population, or additionally as in the cities of Eastern Europe war and the dissolution of socialist systems. Among other things, it is about the way of looking at issues - a positive mark of spending the new, and a negative mark of reducing demands, are something that planners will have to overcome. Reconstruction and reuse will have to be a sufficient challenge to satisfy the appetite that seeks progress. A few authors have called for a shift in paradigm when it comes to planning for shrinking cities [19].

In 2004, the consensus definition of a shrinking city was coined by Shrinking Cities International Research Network (SCIRN) that said it is a densely populated urban area with a minimum population of 10,000 residents that has faced population possess in large parts for more than two years and is undergoing economic transformations with some symptoms of a structural crisis [19]. The definition for shrinking cities by Pallagst [19] states as follows: “A ‘shrinking city’ is defined as a densely populated urban area with a minimum population of 2,500 residents that has faced a population loss in large parts of it for more than two years and is undergoing long-term or cyclic economic, societal or cultural transformations causing symptoms of a structural crisis. The qualities of place are often ascribed to physical characteristics as size, scale, and relative proportions of various elements. Understanding the physical complexities of various scales, from individual buildings, plots, street blocks, and the street patterns that make up the structure of towns helps us to understand the ways in which towns have grown and developed. The question is for what purposes? Why do we need to look back or at the present situation if we need and plan new structures in the city?

The city structure has always been somewhat dynamic, expanding and shifting, with certain elements disappearing over time making place for the new one, presenting economic and social shifts in physical appearance. The architecture of a city includes not only the visible image of the present built environment, but also traces of its construction over time (Table 1). Aesthetic continuity and strive for better living conditions are permanent characteristics of urbanism, which remind us of the close relationship between the form and history of cities.

3. Dynamics of urban changes in Osijek

City of Osijek, the regional centre of Eastern Croatia, with 83,496 inhabitants and area of 169 km², located longitudinally along the Drava River, is the fourth largest city in Croatia. Demographic trends during 60s and 70s optimistically predicted a large expansion of the city to the other bank of the Drava river, but the current negative balance as well as the qualitative structure of the population do not predict population growth of the city [20] (Figure 1). According to Pallagst [19], Osijek can be defined as shrinking city for the declining demography and structural changes that will be presented here.
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Table 1: Overview of the main urban processes, agents and land management and planning tasks following different periods
Source: Authors compilation based on Cavrić [7]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERIOD</th>
<th>URBAN PROCESS</th>
<th>KEY AGENTS</th>
<th>LAND MANAGEMENT AND PLANNING TASKS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963-1976</td>
<td>urban renewal, fast urbanization, illegal individual</td>
<td>urban planners at the national level, individual</td>
<td>deep spatial analysis, master</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>houses at the urban fringe, rural-urban migration</td>
<td>construction, adaptation</td>
<td>planning, city core planning, district planning, construction permit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977-1990</td>
<td>urban development, development of public facilities,</td>
<td>urban planners at the national and local level,</td>
<td>master planning, public building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>city districts shopping malls</td>
<td>architects</td>
<td>construction permits, not illegal but unrecorded residential building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-1995</td>
<td>war devastation, exodus, rural-urban migration, ethnic</td>
<td>civil engineers, architects</td>
<td>renewal construction permits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>decomposition</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996-2008</td>
<td>urban renewal, decomposition of the city street,</td>
<td>real estate companies, landowners, building</td>
<td>all level planning (national, regional, local, urban, detailed), building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>scattered residential high building infill, unbalanced</td>
<td>companies, regional and local government,</td>
<td>construction permit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>demand, deindustrialization</td>
<td>architects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2014</td>
<td>economy crisis, city shrinkage, gentrification</td>
<td>regional and local government, architects, IT</td>
<td>public squares renewal, infrastructure investments, building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>experts</td>
<td>construction permit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Osijek, as a whole, emerged by linking functionally dependent but physically separated settlements of Fortress, Upper and Lower Town, whose focuses were

Figure 1: Number of Inhabitants in the City of Osijek during the period 1961-2011
Source: compiled from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics Censuses, http://www.dzs.hr/default_e.htm

the main squares. The development of the urban fabric of the three original nucleuses took place around transport links – Strossmayer Street, Martin Divald Street, Vukovar Street and Vinkovci Street for the newly established urban areas (Figure 2). Authors Pegan and Jukić [21], and Njegać et al. [22], [23], distinguished themselves with the integral scientific researches on changes in the spatial organization of Osijek, among other sector, thematic or historical period specific works on issues concerning Osijek [e.g. 24-26]. Current urban trends in Osijek have been associated predominantly with the following four processes:

(1) Social and functional shrinkage of the Osijek urban area followed by inter-urban growth of brownfields and retail developments at the fringe;

(2) Reconstruction and new aesthetic of central public places, squares;

(3) Decomposition and degradation of the street areas with the intensive housing and mixed land use;

(4) The status quo of the intra urban green infrastructure conservation as well as existing socialist housing neighbourhoods.
The aim of this paper is to show the basic morphologic changes in the urban fabric of the city, with special reference to the squares and the main street between the Lower and Upper Town.

The historical unit of Fortress is not included in this paper since it has not experienced significant transformations of tissue during the period of social regime. The contribution of this paper is a comparison of planning approaches during the ’60s and ’70s and contemporary planning documents as well as the presentation of the medium city.

The method of independent field research, photography and mapping, analysis and processing of maps and analysis of statistical data was used. The paper dealt with the spatial framework set of Osijek area of the Master Plan for Osijek in 2006. Reviews on presented urban changes are to be found at the end of the paper in the context of previous introduction.

3.1. Public squares and tangential urban fabric in socialist and post-socialist regime

The identity of the whole city is often marked by aesthetics and content of the town squares and their perimeter. The three main squares of Lower and Upper Town in Osijek: Ante Starčević Square and Square of Freedom in the Upper Town, and Josip Jelačić Square in Lower Town were the focus of transformation during the two observed periods. During the socialist regime these areas experienced different levels of transformation.

Ante Starčević Square (Figure 3) was defined by a peripheral structure during the 18th and 19th centuries, and the reconstruction of the area in 1976, that was carried out under the authorship of the city’s urban planner Radovan Miščević, involved its surface and underground, without interfering in peripheral historically valuable edge. Construction of the bi-functional - shopping and sheltering underground space beneath the square potentiated the pedestrian shopping zone. Another situation occurred on the territory of today’s Liberty Square (Figure 4) which underwent a wide reconstruction of the entire area of the centre replacing small structures by new forms of housing and building of business commercial facilities on nationalized land. The area went through an infrastructural reconstruction, traffic regulation was introduced, and a world’s trend of pedestrian zones was implemented in the very centre of Osijek. Lower Town Square Josip Jelačić Square (Figure 5) in Lower Town followed the Upper reconstructions but the reconstruction has not been as consistent as in the first two cases. The square was partially redesigned according to the 1975 plan, while the peripheral structure discontinuously changed. Nevertheless, the square fell behind in significance compared to the Upper squares with its park decoration and late joining of the shopping centre. The peripheral urban structure changed along the eastern part of the southern part
while the north side has been kept until today. The urban design plan Vladimir Nazor Square from 1965, planned activating the historical part of the city with a small morphological structure of ground-family houses, and to create micro-rayon structures. In the area southwest of the square, a residential area with skyscrapers and ground service peripheral function facilities was built during the '80s, as well as a reconstruction of the northern block and part of the east block, and even wider, was made.

The urban-architectural competition for the main square held up during 1997 but it was repeated in 2004. It redesigned the public place and introduced several controversies around financial and symbolic features but did not bring the revitalization of the city core. Today the main city square is the point for occasional city music concerts, trade festivals and daily pedestrian and tram traffic. Present prevailing empty commercial spaces dominate by the main public city space in spite some innovative urban accessories and aesthetics.

One of the processes in East European capitals that occurred in the historical core since 1990 has been commercialisation – the increase of commercial functions such as business offices, retail, restaurants, hotels, etc. in the total and use of the area [11]. Sykora [11] defined the most common mechanisms of
commercialisation as (1) the change from residential to commercial use within the existing building stock; (2) demolition of existing structures with residential and commercially less intensive uses and their replacement by new taller and larger buildings and; (3) land use intensification through new commercial developments on vacant land and densification through additions, such as filling in the court yards within blocks of buildings. In 1996, the following urban and architectural competition for the central square in the Lower Town was carried out, and with the following objectives: decorating the surface, proposing contents for the north side of the square, as well as for the north and south street structure surrounding the square. Accidental fire that took part in 2009 in the shopping mall, forced the reconstruction of the building but it’s still remaining empty for the half of its area. The pedestrian zone is vital while upper floors remain underused.

In Osijek, post-socialist and post-war time brought the need for a redevelopment or better say, redesign plus renewal of obsolete infrastructure in a manner of reaction to the former periods and events. Furthermore, the public places were the land that still had clear public domain in a new free-market economy and blurred public-private interests and responsibilities. During the period of 15 years after the war, the three squares in Osijek went through redesigns and infrastructure renewals invoking modern, viable, inclusive city centres as they sometimes existed, hoping that new look will attract excluded people with their public opinion as well as economy sector with whom communication was not established and control vanished with former regime. The lack of strategic planning and the weak economy of the medium, shrinking city at the periphery of the country were presented in a worse sense when shopping malls grew up at the city fringe and absorbed all of the potential retail infill from the city cores. In developed countries, the decision makers are increasingly becoming aware of the importance of enhancing the resilience of city cores and streets to eliminate this domination, thus relevant retail planning policies are in effect [27].

3.2. Streets

The residential identity of the city of Osijek presents two distinctive units: Art Nouveau street built in the early 20th century in the city centre, and a micro-rayon residential settlement Sjenjak built during the ‘70s and ‘80s. The first example finds its value not only in architectural assembly, but also in the integrity of the street space and preventability of its gardens in front of the houses, while the socialist settlement Sjenjak profiled its multifunctional structure and contents of public space. Built in the high construction wave, these spaces have their stable, unchanging structures and with their forms they confirm the value of a coherent constructed space (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Postcards from Osijek from 1980s, presenting socialist residential dwellings as spatial values
Source: National Archives in Osijek

According to the 2011 census, there were 41,384 apartments in the city of Osijek (www.dsz), 39,159 privately owned, and 2225 owned by some other party. Data from the Central Office for Housing point to about 1896 apartments in some form of state ownership, while 1531 housing facilities are the exclusive property of the Republic of Croatia. The low share of state ownership in housing indicates a small role and control of this important city function. The production of housing that reached its peak in the years after the adoption of the document used exactly this very determinant, while the law of the market marked spatial growth of the city. Apartment buildings have sprung up in altitude and density un-zoned city, in all its parts, not following communal, social and green infrastructure (Figure 7).

Criticism of the 1988 General Urban Plan points to lack of clear vision of urban development [21], and the same could be applied for the Master Plan from 2006. Architectural swing that took place before the crisis, on both, national and local level, was not used for the transformation of the city, but the degradation of the urban fabric primarily one of the streets, occurred. The lessons of morphological analysis of the socialist era have been forgotten, and urban design became the
architectural design. Parts of the city increased their density by creating a negative identity of discontinuous building. With such morphological characteristics, in terms of the shrinking city, a task scheduler for tissue reconstruction faces a difficult task that requires exceptional creativity and involvement of all stakeholders in the change process. The study of identity-morphological structure of the city represents a key to finding solutions.

4. Discussion

The question that emerges is how urban planners will deal with shrinkage of the city as well as with his deconstructed fabric. Two big tasks are set in front of them. The concept of “shrinking smart” [28] argued two key models for reconfiguring settlement patterns in response to persistent population decline—urban islands versus de-densification. The urban islands model is a more traditional planning framework that requires extensive land use regulations and public intervention to configure the city into a pre-conceived pattern. The authors find difficulties in distinguishing viable from nonviable areas within a city and public policies to direct resources and development to the nodes deemed to be viable. The benefit, however, would be the preservation of development densities and physical characteristics traditionally considered to be ‘urban’. Broadened view of population changes also implies that political goals
should not be defined in terms of population size, but rather, in terms of human capital available for providing the best possible quality of life for all citizens[29]. Having that in mind, we should consider revitalization of urban morphology to accomplish the city identity and indirectly the city potential lure. In “Planning shrinking cities” Pallagst [28] states that a healthy city always grows in population and that only unhealthy ones shrink, but it is not only the number of people that counts; it is also the skills, abilities and satisfaction status of the people that are the main actors of the city area.

Osijek obviously needs a new generation of analytical planning documentation to take back the control over urban development. The city of Osijek is going through population decline, abandonment of industrial places and faces the problem of empty new residential buildings, and at the same time develops as regional centre of different functions (trade centre, educational centre, sport centre etc.). The new set of functional and morphological analysis should rely on following:

- Determine zones of the city based on periods of emergence,
- Define zones of different residential identities and densities,
- Determine the typology and the building height less flexible within the zone,
- Define morphological structures that should be consider as a hole for deconstruction or new construction,
- Determine the main traffic streets and identity of their public places.

As a result, the urban development of the city should result in emphasizing existing spatial values as well as producing the new one not allowing the real estate market control (or better say not control) urban fabric and build city space without identity.

5. Conclusion

The evidence presented here indicates that a mid-size city at the Eastern periphery of Croatia has significant differences in urban post-social changes compared to internationally presented transition for post-socialist capitals. The economy based changes of the mid-size Eastern Croatian city put rather weak intensity of new appearances and links that did not create a new identity but deconstructed old ones or just put the new cover on it. The former main actor-public administrative presented their concentrated control and investments in limited areas. Forgotten public interest and responsibility for the city as a whole disintegrate city projects in two scales: large public investments in infrastructure and squares and small real estate scattered investments. The new post war generation of master plans of the city of Osijek lost a linkage between urban morphology and urban design what resulted in disintegrated structure of the city. New generation of analytical documentation should bring the transformation from the urban planning controlled by real estate market back to urban planners.

References


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