

EUROPEAN CITIES IN THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING AND TRANSMITTING OF THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL HERITAGE. INTERNATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR UNDERGRADUATE AND MASTER STUDENTS.



POSTMEMORY IN THE CITY AS A STORY OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Postmemory, a topic that deals with the trauma of the “generation after” is described and explained in the work written by M. Hirsch (2012). Postgeneration becomes the bearer of captured memories and expressions, e.g. in art or literature.¹ The trauma that has been experienced is manifested at the personal, collective and cultural level, and transmitted through life stories and memories that, based on the narrative, reconstruct past events. Although postmemory is primarily associated with the Holocaust and the period after World War II, here we are applying this concept in a wider context to the area of the cultural landscape. Even places can carry trauma and speak without words. The research area of cultural landscapes is very wide, but we want to point out that some parts have been shortened and simplified due to the scope of the contribution. We believe that our contribution will provide a good basis for further research.

CITY – MEMORY – CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Combining the city, memory, and identity issues we open up a new perspective of perceiving a particular place as a cultural landscape. Even in the world’s metropolises, we often use nicknames (e.g. Paris – the city of love) that seem to be based on cultural stereotypes, but often come from something important, intellectually interesting and motivating which defines the nature of the cultural landscape. The city can serve as a space where cultural changes and their institutionalisation as well as specific cultural phenomena can be observed. It is associated with creating an identity that reflects the state of revitalisation or sometimes of targeted political oblivion, or preserving some elements of the

¹ M. Hirsch, *Generation of Postmemory*, Columbia 2012.

memory contents more than others.² The city's memory and identity can be manipulated and used in any way the current social-political leaders want.

*The city is a complex of time strings. It is a chain memory of generations of its inhabitants, a memory built in architecture, sculpture, painting, landscaping, and so on. At the same time, it presents a complex of images that existed and exist in ethnic, generational, social, opinion, local and other modifications.*³ The city reflects how an urban space has been remarked by the past. The modern European city was predominantly pluralistic in the 19th century and before World War II. After the war (1945), this trend was maintained only in the western part of Europe. The Eastern bloc was characterised by a strictly unified space, from which the characteristic identity and identification with the environment disappeared. The new city, which has been built since 1989, is the next chapter of transforming the living space. It moves life from the city centre to the marginal parts, creating large satellite homes, accompanied by the revitalisation of housing estates and the construction of business areas where international business companies are based. Changing the character of the city is linked to its functionality, but also to the perception of the public space as such, or to the purpose of creating a city identity.

*The city is not only buildings with a variety of practical functions, but it is also something more. It is a historical form of the human world. It is a framework within which and in the light of which a person is planning life and meaningful fulfilment.*⁴ If we mark the city as a cultural landscape, apart from other factors, it is necessary to see the wider cultural character of the site as well as its cultural potential. In addition to the above-mentioned facts, we look at the city as a separate cultural entity that reflects events, personalities and influences that shaped its identity. Such a *landscape can be the text to which generations write their repetitive ideas.*⁵ The cultural landscape is a product of shared culture. The task for all who want to improve it is to reveal its story in richness and intricacy by overlooking conventional ideas.

Christian Norberg-Schulz, a Norwegian historian, eco philosopher and architectural theorist, is the founder of the concept of 'cultural landscapes' which has its own classification of cities, landscapes and architectures. Clarifying the notion of cultural landscapes, it is necessary to define the place which, in his opinion, is not an indication of an abstract location but hides a character or feeling in itself. The place can be perceived through respective

² Havelka in B. Soukupová, *Město-identita-paměť*, Bratislava 2007, p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci*, Prague 2010, p. 8.

⁵ S. Schama, *Krajina a paměť*, Prague 2007, p. 11.

identity. *It is therefore important. Our environment does not only have a spatial structure that facilitates orientation, but also it contains specific identification of objects. Personal identification assumes the identity of the place.*⁶

The place, whether natural or man-made, is in constant interconnection. *In general, the earth is the 'scene' on which our everyday life takes place. It can be transformed and controlled to a certain extent, which results in a friendly relationship. From the natural landscape, it becomes a cultural landscape, that is, an environment where one has found his meaningful place within the whole.*⁷ If we perceive the place as a cultural landscape, bearing a link to the local culture which also manifests itself in public spaces, we will adopt an interesting image of synergy between cultural traditions, symbols and meanings that are rooted in the deeper layers of the community and the city.

In his work Norberg-Schulz (2010) devotes much attention to the concept of *genius loci*, thus referring to the spirit of the place. As it is understood today, it is more about a feeling, a specific environment that acts authentically and at the same time undergoes changes due to the passage of time. And if we try to develop his ideas, the creation of any cultural landscape involves a characteristic *genius loci*, which is a formation of the cultural environment. A cultural landscape can be composed of more than one cultural landscape, the examples being big cities, such as Paris, London or New York, in which the visitor goes through different segments, cultural landscapes that jointly form one large compact landscape.

Everyone is influenced by the surrounding; the architecture of today is created in the spirit of unlimited freedom. *The problem of unlimited choice is that it is not so far from complete chaos.*⁸ In the past, buildings were designed in specific architectural styles, but now architecture is exempt from any rules. The aesthetic function of architecture is often omitted, and the authors experiment with a combination of styles. Modern and original architecture reflects the visible and direct coexistence of cultural values of the past and of today. Any intervention in the public space should preserve a certain *genius loci*. An architectural work expresses cultural values in the space as material and sign representations. Each building is essentially a part of the memory of a place, city or location. *The city is not just a concentration of buildings and facilities with various practical functions, but it also means a*

⁶ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci*, Prague 2010, p. 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁸ A. de Botton, *Architektura štěstí*, Zlín 2006, p. 42.

*lot more. It is a historical form of the human world.*⁹ A set of architectural works co-creates a cultural landscape.

Today we witness controversial realisations whose evaluations are diametrically different. Any intervention in historical structures is a challenging conceptual activity that brings with it many risks. In particular, it is the problem of an inappropriate intervention, a misconception about space, the devastation of cultural values, the loss of space and the disturbance of the authenticity of the territory. And if we come back to the concept of postmemory, we should ask how to deal with a place that is literally a memory of trauma.

POSTMEMORY AS A STORY OF CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The selected example of cultural landscape in our paper is Podborová, a section of the town of Zvolen in Slovakia. We would like to point out that trauma and presence of traumatic heritage can exist in the public space and form its vivid memory. At the same time, we stress that the remnants of the past can be taken differently. We do not claim that the example we have chosen is the best way to revitalize space regarding its history. On the contrary, we want to present the true state of affairs, the reality of the situation.

Central Slovakia was the birthplace of many historical and social events in the 20th century, whether it was the period of the strong influence of both world wars and the Slovak national uprising against fascism in 1944 or the Soviet (Russian) occupation from 1968 to 1990. The region was hit by violent deportations of Jews and Roma to concentration camps; there are places that have literally disappeared from the map and places where many innocent people died during World War II. In our case, we would like to focus on an event that did not take so many human lives, but it is alive in terms of postmemory. In 2018, we commemorated the 50th anniversary of the entry of the Warsaw Treaty troops, which crossed the borders of Czechoslovakia from 20 to 21 August 1968 with the aim to occupy the country and to suppress the democratisation processes. One of the most important centres was Zvolen, which was advantageous in terms of strategic location as well as the vicinity of the airport and railways. The Soviet soldiers settled in Podborová, and although the Hungarian, Polish and German soldiers left Slovakia in November 1968, the Russians remained there for ‘temporary stay.’¹⁰

⁹ P. Halík, *Architektura a město*, Praha 1996, p. 73.

¹⁰ K. Košťálová in: J. Darulová, *Kultúrna a sociálna diverzita na Slovensku V. Občania a priestory mesta*, Banská Bystrica 2015, p. 80.

Podborová became a temporary place of residence of the Russian army in 1969, which was accompanied by the construction of new houses – apartments and barracks for soldiers and administration (officers), also called Družba (Friendship), creating a unique microcosm like ‘a city in the city.’ The Russians used building materials brought directly from the USSR to construct three 12-storey buildings called ‘bashnie.’

Alongside the construction, cultural life developed. For the Russian officials and soldiers, the House of Culture was opened in 1971, complemented by its own cinema, school, kindergarten, gymnasium, and medical centre. The Russian military officers’s families settled in Podborová. The ordinary soldiers lived in the barracks and had limited access to the so-called ‘higher’ society.

The residents of Zvolen disapproved the Russian army’s presence in the city. Many of them knew about the army but did not want to have any contacts with the soldiers. As one resident recalls:¹¹ *Even though we saw the Russians from the windows, we could never talk about them. It was like they did not exist.* The problem of the presence of the Russian occupants was not only the fact that they created their own ‘city in the city,’ but it was the total interference with the social and spatial structure of the city, the constant presence of war material and weapons, the conquest of the city by members of another nation. The Soviet soldiers had only limited contacts with their homeland, they kept their own customs and traditions, basically existed in a space that did not belong to them, but which they adapted to their needs.

In 1990, the Soviet Army had to leave Czechoslovakia definitively¹² after 22 years of its occupation. They left the whole country within a span of 16 months: 73,500 soldiers and officers, 36,921 members of their families, 1,200 tanks; 2,505 military machines and transporters, 105 aircraft and 175 helicopters.

Podborová found itself abandoned, devastated and in great disarray. It had become ‘a city of ghosts’ that underwent a complex reconstruction in 1998 and which continues to this day. Nowadays, it is a settlement mainly for young families with children. It is a place with a cultural trail and memory that has gone through the process of demilitarisation, revitalisation, gradually losing the Soviet look, but it is a long process. This is greatly helped by civic activism and the interest of those who want to recreate the landscape around them.

¹¹ Interview given in April 2018.

¹² K. Košťálová in: J. Darulová, *ibid.*, p. 86.

CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL LANDSCAPE – PODBOROVÁ NOWADAYS

After the Soviet army had left the country, the settlement in Podborová was abandoned and destroyed. The Russian soldiers left the mess, destroyed the cultural and natural environment. The apartments underwent reconstruction in the 1990s, but the three bastions (bashnie) were still a frightful sight. Both the public and experts preferred to destroy rather than to rebuild the blocks. Finally, they were able to reconstruct them, and now they are inhabited mainly by young families with children; older people are represented in a very small number. The aim is to change the character of the estate, to revive it, to change the militarised image of the settlement and replace it with the creation of a new environment. However, this has been happening at a slow pace for nearly 20 years.

The cinema built for the Soviet soldiers still functions and serves as a cultural centre.



1. Cinema ©Mikuláš Mališ photography.

The Officers' House is the most remarkable element, reminding us of the presence of the foreign occupiers. The House was *an integrating place where the Soviet generals regularly gathered, celebrations were held there; in the hall the children of the soldiers made the oaths of the pioneers, organised debates and concerts of the most popular singers and bands.*¹³ Today it is the house of ghosts and it is not easy to transform and bring to life. The question is whether it will be at all possible.

¹³ K. Košťalová in J. Darulová, *ibid.*, p. 82.



2. Officers' House. ©Mikuláš Mališ photography.

One of the proposals that offer a solution what to do with the dilapidated construction of the House is to change it into the Museum of the Russian Occupation. However, so far it has just been an abstract idea. Today, it is more important to the city to look for efficient space and resources. Therefore, the building may be demolished, and another multifunctional centre will be created. Instead of entertainment for the Russian officials, there will be shops and restaurants for residents. Similarly, the old barracks have undergone transformation, their exteriors and interiors have been changed and they can still be used.



3. Old barracks ©Mikuláš Mališ photography.

CONCLUSION

Podborová is an example of a place that is gradually forgetting its past, but still retains the features that reveal the past. Considering the large number of young people living there today, we see that the trauma and links to the occupation are gradually disappearing. The place is no longer scary and has no militarising character. It was once a separate cultural landscape, but today, it is part of the city. Its *genius loci* is specific, but from the point of view of an unbiased visitor it does not have to be extraordinary. Similar uniform residences have been built throughout the former USSR.

Czepczyński,¹⁴ claims that the stigma of post-socialist cities is still bearing today. In an accelerated way of life, it is possible to forget the key moments of history. These 22 years of occupation were not a short period of time; 22 years of facing the risk of a war conflict; 22 years of tolerating an enemy who built a settlement in your city. On the example of Podborová we can see that the young generation no longer looks at the past the same way as the generations before. For socio-economic reasons, it is a pity that such a convenient district cannot be used to construct houses and it is not surprising that a new multifunctional building should be built instead of the Officers' House. The past events are seen differently. It seems that the trauma is being forgotten; only a few buildings remind us of the trauma. Nevertheless, we note that the traces of the Soviet occupants have been permanently written in this city's memory.

¹⁴ M. Czepczyński, *Cultural Landscape of Post-Socialist Cities*, Burlington 2012.



4. Graffiti in Podborová 2018 ©Mikuláš Mališ photography.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Botton, de, Alain. *Architektura štěstí*. Zlín 2006.

Czepczyński, Mariusz. *Cultural Landscape of Post-Socialist Cities*. Burlington 2012.

Darulová, Jolana. *Kultúrna a sociálna diverzita na Slovensku V. Občania a priestory mesta*. Banská Bystrica 2015.

Eriksen, Anne. *From Antiquities to Heritage. Transformation of Cultural Memory*. Oxford 2014.

Gehl, Jan. *Města pro lidi*. Brno 2012.

Halík, Pavel et al. *Architektura a město*. Praha 1996.

Hirsch, Marianne. *Generation of Postmemory*. Columbia 2012.

Kasinitz, Philip. *Metropolis – Center and Symbol of Our Times*. New York 1995.

Krišková, Zdena, ed. *Kultúrne dedičstvo a identita*. Banská Bystrica 2016.

Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Genius loci (Krajina, místo, architektura)*. Prague 2010.

Pecníková Jana. Slatinská Anna. *Jazyk-kultúra-identita*. Banská Bystrica 2017.

Pecníková Jana. *Aktívne občianstvo – európske či lokálne?* Banská Bystrica 2017.

Schama, Simon. *Krajina a paměť*. Prague 2007.

Sitte, Camillo. *Stavba měst podle umeleckých zásad*. Prague 2012.

Soukupová, Blanka et al. *Město – identita – paměť*. Bratislava 2007.

Soukupová, Blanka et al. *Paměť-národ-menšiny-marginalizace-identity 1*. Prague 2013.

Živá kultura a pamiatky. Bratislava 2017.

Created by ©Jana Pecnikova (Matej Bel University)

All rights reserved.