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MYTH OF BEAUTY IN ARCHITECTURE

MIT PIĘKNA W ARCHITEKTURZE

Abstract

The matter of beauty in architecture has been studied by scholars from many fields of science and academia since the most ancient times.

Various canons of beauty have been observed throughout the history of architecture. Despite certain principles of their interpretation, it has not been possible to create a universal set of precepts for rating aesthetic values that would be universally accepted. They are understood differently to this day, which directly depends on an individual's specific preferences and their sensitivity to beauty.

This paper presents the findings of studies and personal observations made by the authors on the beauty of the architecture of the city, perceived as a place and an area of residence.

Keywords: beauty, city, urban analysis, workshops

Streszczenie

Problematyka piękna w architekturze od najdawniejszych czasów jest rozwijana przez badaczy wielu dziedzin nauki.

W historii architektury obowiązywały różne kanony piękna. Mimo pewnych zasad ich interpretacji nie udało się stworzyć akceptowanych przez wszystkich uniwersalnych zasad oceny walorów estetycznych. Do dziś rozumiane są one w różny sposób, co wprost zależy od indywidualnych preferencji jednostki oraz stopnia jej wrażliwości na piękno.

W pracy przedstawione zostaną wyniki badań oraz spostrzeżenia własne autorów odnoszące się do piękna architektury miasta postrzeganego jako miejsce, obszar zamieszkania.

Słowa kluczowe: piękno, miasto, analiza urbanistyczna, warsztaty

1. INTRODUCTION

The desire to feel the beauty of the city is a need that all of us have. It is individual and can depend on many factors. One such factor is the citizen's preferences concerning lifestyle. These feelings can also be influenced by events happening in the space of the city or by interior arrangement. Determining the impact of individual factors on the reception of visual experiences produced by urban spaces, which is the main goal of this study, can be of significance to the rational and generally acceptable spatial development. Apart from academic value, which is the investigation and application of research methods in academic research, comparing findings and presenting conclusions, pre-defined goals also have applicative value. The conclusions from this analysis enable determining the elements that build the image of the city and are especially significant to its visual reception; the degree to which they are objective and to which they remain myth.

The findings of this study shall be significant not only to the users of urban space, but also cities themselves. It should be noted that the desire to experience beauty is not merely the need of people – the users of space – but also a pursuit of contemporary cities which align with their development strategies. The beauty of the city brings to mind high aesthetic value, a high standard, improving the liveliness of spaces, including public ones. Accounting for the fact that the city is the primary place of residence of contemporary people, the pursuit of preserving its beauty has become a priority. Furthermore, society desires to live in beautiful places, places that are liked, and with which communities want to identify.

The history of cities shows that matters of improving their aesthetic values have often been neglected. This merits that the discussion on the beauty of the city can be perceived in the category of myths; this applies particularly to industrial cities, where living conditions of workers were difficult during the revolution and the poor quality of the spaces they inhabited, and their beauty inspired negative feelings. Modernism improved this situation, and this period left us with numerous public and residential buildings that we marvel at and in which we see beauty. Another period that left its clear mark on the cityscape is the time of large panel block housing estates. They triumphed primarily in the 1970s. However, in an earlier period – the 1950s – major ideas of industrial construction were implemented due to wartime destruction. This resulted in the building of increasingly large block estates and standard houses dedicated to those who migrated to cities. This had its consequences for the spatial structure of said cities – they became cramped, which led to their constant growth and sprawl.¹

Over the years, the view on the beauty defined by a given period's canons would change. The markers that define high standards also changed, which was a direct consequence of increasingly greater possibilities of shaping the spatial structure of cities and demands concerning areas in use and architecture. This was combined with the impact of the spatial structure on the perception of a space's quality, a given population's preferred lifestyle, etc. The age of various social groups, their preference and capabilities concerning the use of space were not without significance in this respect.

The beauty of cities is shaped by form and space that have different characters. The form is not merely the shape of a structure, but it is also its colour, detail and material. It is an entire spectrum of phenomena, including natural ones, and conditions that build an

¹ W. Kosiński, *Miasto i piękno miasta*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2011.

image that is subjective in its reception; it is also mood that directly affects human psychological states.

The impact of the colour of forests in autumn on the perception of landscape beauty, discussed by Zi Wang, Mingyang Li, Xiubong Zhang and Livi Song,² is an interesting problem. These authors presented the results of a survey study performed on a group of tourists who described their experiences with the perception of the beauty of a forest's autumn colours during a visit to the Purple Mountain National Park in Nanjing. The elements that were rated included: the average height of trees, the size of the site, the number of seasonally changing colours and shades, the number of colour categories, terrain incline, etc. The ratings of the landscape beauty of the city forest park during autumn were given based on a quantitative model. It was found that colour shapes the beauty of not only the anthropogenic environment, but also other environments. It also undoubtedly affects our psychological wellbeing. The impact of individual factors and elements of the natural and built environment on people's psychological and mental states were discussed by the authors in earlier works.³ G. Schneider-Skalska investigated this problem in detail⁴ and pointed out the immense significance of the presence of water layouts and greenery in the housing environment on human psychological health. She also discussed beauty on numerous occasions, seeing it as one of the most crucial values of cities. She also focused on an austere and healthy environment.⁵

The authors of this paper strived to not only compare individual elements as factors that affect the beauty of the city, but also included them in urban and sociological studies conducted in different towns and cities of Subcarpathia (Dukla, Iwonicz Zdrój, Jelicz, Kołaczyce, Lesko, Rymanów, Ustrzyki Dolne, Zagórze).⁶ Another study of the perception of cities, but by children, was performed by the authors in 2020 as a part of the *Młodzi Architekci* project.

2. METHOD OF ASSESSMENT

Research on the assessment of the aesthetic values of cities was performed in 2012. It was a part of a broader analysis of subjects within the field of the assessment of housing environment quality. The methods used were based on desk research, which enabled an analysis of historical sources available in archives and that concerned the development and image of the cities and towns under study, and an urban analysis which, in reference to assessing the beauty of cities, included an investigation of the functional-spatial conditions that determined the compositional assets of selected areas. Specific elements and the aesthetics of

² Z. Wang et al., *Modeling the scenic beauty of autumnal tree color at the landscape scale: A case study of Purple Mountain, Nanjing, China*, Urban Forestry & Urban Greening, 2020, no. 47.

³ J. Kobylarczyk, D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, *Jakość środowiska mieszkaniowego a dziedzictwo kulturowe na przykładzie wybranych miast województwa podkarpackiego*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2018.

⁴ G. Schneider-Skalska, *Kształtowanie zdrowego środowiska mieszkaniowego*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2004.

⁵ G. Schneider-Skalska, *Zrównoważone środowisko mieszkaniowe. Społeczne, oszczędne, piękne*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2012.

⁶ J. Kobylarczyk, *Ocena jakości środowiska zamieszkania w wybranych miastach województwa podkarpackiego po okresie „transformacji”, w pierwszej dekadzie XXI wieku*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2013.

solutions were identified, and an analysis of architectural continuity was performed. In terms of identifying and rating specific elements, the authors chose those which attracted observer attention, shaped place-based identity and enhanced identification with the surroundings. When assessing the aesthetics of solutions, the authors accounted for the technical condition of buildings and spaces, their state of maintenance and their compositional features. The research on architectural continuity accounted for matching characteristics and harmony.

The next research method was a survey study that employed questionnaires. The questions included in the questionnaires were assigned to specific problem groups. These included: one's relationship to their place of residence, rating comfort of living and rating safety.

In the scope of the study on beauty, and as such aesthetic features, the elements accounted for included the rating of the area's state of maintenance, a rating of the impact of historical buildings on the attractiveness of a place of residence, and a view of greenery from one's window.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first covered four problem groups. These groups included questions directed to the respondents who were residents of housing areas selected for study. In the second section, twenty-eight elements and factors that affected the quality of the housing environment were to be rated using points. The respondents assigned a specific number of points to a given factor (the number of points had to be unique) and rated its weight by defining a hierarchy of elements and factors that affected the quality of the area they lived in to different degrees. The survey was carried out in small cities of the Subcarpathian Voivodeship in the following areas: the centre proper, the border of the central zone where housing blocks were the predominant type of housing, as well as the areas where detached houses in private gardens predominated.

The authors performed a second study on how children viewed the city by organising a workshop. The workshop was an essential part of the *Młodzi Architekci* project, carried out as a part of the NCBiR. The project lead was Professor G. Schneider-Skalska, while the section under study was headed by Professor Justyna Kobylarczyk. The subject of the workshop was a panorama of an ideal city. Its beauty was to be a fundamental value. The workshop was based on using an artistic technique of choice (collage, manual drawing using coloured pens, crayons or a pencil) to present a city panorama. The workshop projects were prepared by children who attended primary school.

The workshop began with a lecture that introduced the subject to the children; afterwards, there was a presentation that presented an overview of the workshop project. In addition, the participants were handed out sheets with definitions of key terms, so as to familiarise children with the terminology of architecture and urban planning, and to explain the subject matter that was the main theme of the project.

In this study, the beauty of the city was visualised by workshop participants. The graphical works were supplemented by the children's presentations, during which they commented on and explained their proposals.

3. ANALYSIS RESULTS

Historical research showed that the selected small cities of the Subcarpathian Voivodeship have historical origins, which undoubtedly affects their beauty. Their spatial structures were not always found to feature a historical and well-defined urban layout in their respective

centres. Among the cities investigated – Dukla, Iwonicz Zdrój, Jedlicze, Kołaczyce, Lesko, Rymanów, Ustrzyki Dolne and Zagórz – two cities lost their market squares as a result of spatial development. This applied to Jedlicz and Zagórz. This has affected the functioning of these cities and their image. Only two cities – Dukla and Lesko – had town halls in their market squares. This is important because such structures are some of the most formal buildings of historical cities and their presence shows the rank that a city had had in the past. In Kołaczyce, Ustrzyki Dolne and Zagórz, no castle/palace/manor was highlighted as seats of the owners of the land belonging to the city.

The urban analysis of the cities selected for study confirmed the findings of the historical analysis and showed that distinctive elements included historical elements of interiors that acted as their dominant elements and accents. In the case of areas where housing blocks or single-family houses formed the basis of housing development, distinctive elements were typically found to consist of views of the natural landscape with the outline of individual buildings that blended with the panorama of the city, or accents in the forms of shrines or crosses. Unfortunately, in many cities there were deficits in architectural continuity, harmony with the surroundings, and adherence to the precepts of good continuity. These negative phenomena were particularly prevalent in the central areas of cities, where architectural cohesion is especially crucial.

The vicinity of historical buildings featured housing blocks or buildings from various periods and of different scale. This phenomenon could be observed in, among others, Lesko. The technical condition of buildings and spaces was also often found to require intervention. However, it should be noted that such interventions have been made for many years. Renovations included the town hall in Dukla or the palace in Łańcut. Public spaces, including the areas of market squares, have been and continue to be modernised.

The survey study allowed the authors to analyse resident opinions on the state of maintenance of the surroundings, their assessment of the impact of historical buildings on the attractiveness of one's place of residence and the view of greenery from one's windows. It was found that the conditions investigated affected the perception of beauty. The state of maintenance of each city was rated highly by the residents. Likewise, the majority of respondents expressed an opinion that the proximity of heritage sites has a positive impact on the perception of a city's beauty. The lowest rating in this regard was noted in Rymanów, where less than 70% of respondents gave a positive rating. The highest ratings were given to the effect of heritage site proximity on a city's beauty. In Dukla, 90% of respondents reported that historical buildings were significant in the visual reception of cities. A clear result was also obtained in the case of rating the weight of a view of greenery from one's window, which had a direct impact on noticing a space's aesthetic features. This element was reported as significant by 90–100% of respondents.

The workshop with children during which primary school students prepared panoramas of ideal cities was an interesting experience. Most of the participants used the collage to prepare their projects. The works showed ingenuity and a great variety of colour. In the projects, the beauty of cities was shaped by structures with a variety of functions and forms, as well as clearly present green elements. Interesting transport solutions were also included. The image of the city as seen by children was multi-coloured, with undefined proportions that were not adapted to the human scale, and where the most-often-featured elements included churches or housing buildings. During the pandemic, hospitals became buildings frequently featured in the projects. This is proof that the reception of a city's spaces is largely dictated by changing

conditions. The study presented does not exhaust the subject matter; it can be studied from various angles while accounting for different sets of determinants. Interesting findings could be made when analysing the impact of a city's beauty on the frequency of visiting specific places, obtaining information about expectations concerning beautiful places or the impact of their arrangement on their visual reception.

Another matter could be an attempt to answer the question as to why a city's beauty can be perceived as a myth. It appears that this partially stems from changing trends. That which could be seen as beautiful in the past is now perceived critically. Individual perception and understanding of beauty mean that it is difficult to determine what is beautiful and what is an opposition to beauty. In addition, years of neglecting visual features have left an immense mark on the contemporary cityscape, in which buildings of the past remain high-impact forms. All this means that the discussion on beauty is not obvious, and it is very difficult to identify phenomena and factors that could define it. Most certainly, order, legibility, harmony, and attention to maintenance and the technical condition of buildings and spaces can contribute to enhancing aesthetic features.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The review of the literature and the authors' personal observations, combined with research using various methods, can be used as a basis for concluding that a city's beauty is dependent on many determinants. Based on the historical study performed, it can be surmised that historical cities were not always able to maintain their historical urban layout with a market square and a centre that acted as the place's cultural heritage and that shaped its beauty. Historical city centres do not always have distinctive structures such as seats of municipal authorities that are typically some of the most beautiful historical buildings within any city.

These conclusions are supported by the outcomes of urban analyses which further showed that, in the case of small cities of historical origin, distinctive elements primarily included heritage structures that, apart from their assigned functions, also played a significant role in a given city's composition, acting as their dominant elements (landmarks) and accents. In the case of areas distant from a historical centre, there was often a lack of distinctive elements that could attract an observer's attention and that could provide place-based identification. Such elements build the atmosphere, identity and image of a place, and it can be said that it is mostly because of them that the beauty of cities becomes a reality.

The fundamental problem to asserting the beauty of a city is a lack of architectural continuity and harmony with the surroundings. These observations can be useful in planned modernisation or renovation efforts targeting spaces of different characters, so that their outcomes can be aligned with resident preferences and the rational use of their potential, and so that they could shape positive visual values.

The results of the survey study can be used to conclude that proximity to historical structures and elements of greenery affect the visual perception of space. They are elements that we cannot affect. We are not able to change the city's historical origins or the degree to which it is developed.

The state of maintenance and technical condition of elements of space, irrespective of the time period of their construction, are certain constants that have an unchanging impact on beauty, and we can mostly affect these values.

Additional observations associated with the workshop with children showed that the manner of perceiving the city depends on the determinants of a given period. In a situation where the world has been struck by a pandemic, the graphical projects concerning beautiful and ideal cities drawn by children featured hospitals as some of the most significant structures. The colour schemes and a modern, atypical character were invariably presented as defining the beauty of ideal cities.

The beauty of cities is one of the most important pursuits of municipalities and is included in their development strategies. The possibility of being present in a city with high-value aesthetic features is also a desire of every person. It is difficult to clearly define the precepts of shaping and transforming space in alignment with the canons of beauty. These canons change over time and, as demonstrated by the findings presented, depend on numerous determinants and phenomena.

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