

ACTIVE CITIZENS AND THE HISTORICAL IDENTITY
OF A CITY: THE CASE OF BRATISLAVA- PODHRADIE**DANIEL LUTHER**

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Social changes after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 and the emergence of foreign companies, investors and development groups led to the rapid building development of the city, which offers an opportunity for an urban-ethnological analysis of the transformation of urban spaces. The author of this paper studied a case related to the transformation of a space considered by the city inhabitants as historically important. He discusses the issues of civic activism in the context of preservation of the historical identity of the city. He seeks answers to the following questions – What kind of processes are in conflict at the macro-level? What is the role of cultural aspects in these processes? What kind of collective identity do active members of a civic group share and demonstrate? The author seeks to grasp the issues of active citizenship through motivations and reasons, particular areas of interest, actual results, and effectiveness of civil activism. He concludes that interventions to preserve the historical identity of urban spaces have mobilised a part of the public and have become one of the incentives of growing civil engagement in the post-socialist period.

Key words: city, space, memory place, civic activities, new social movements

Common issues of people's interest in urban spaces include the quality of residential areas, the preservation and revival of historic, cultural and architectonic values, increased attractiveness and functionality of public spaces, and the protection of public areas (parks, squares, children's playgrounds, etc.). Such citizen activities require communication with the local authorities, and are often confronted with investors' and developers' interests, as well as decisions of competent authorities. This study aims to summarise individual and group activities related to the protection and renewal of the historic values of the city. Through an example of a particular urban space, this paper reveals the social reflections of the processes which have accompanied the development of the city during the post-socialist period.

The topic of this paper is based on the processes induced by social changes after the fall of the Communist regime after 1989. Bratislava, just like other Slovak cities and towns, went through a complex post-socialist transformation in all areas of the



The bridge and the road at the demolished Podhradie zone. Photo: D. Luther, author's archive.

organisation of the society – political and economic system, legislation, property-related issues, self-governing institutions, civil society, etc. This transformation process also entailed extensive privatisation of state properties. Many industrial, production and business facilities, buildings, flats and lands within the city were privatised. Older buildings built before the beginning of the socialist development of the city (1948) returned to their original owners or their heirs through restitutions. Buildings with major or minor historical value were thus transferred into private ownership. The general lack of funds led people who were restituted to sell their assets or to seek investors or new functions for their buildings. Strong domestic investment groups also joined these processes, yet the majority of privatised companies and their assets were sold to foreign businesses. Bratislava became a part of the global market.

The emergence of foreign businesses, investors and development groups was accompanied by fast building development of the city, offering an opportunity for an urban ethnological analysis of the transformation of urban spaces. In this study, I focus on a particular case related to the transformation of space considered by the city inhabitants to be historically important. The activities of investors and developers raised citizens' reactions. One group considered them a contribution to the modernisation of the city, the other one was formed by citizens protesting in public. The civil activities of the latter group can be viewed as a form of a social movement with a common objective – to preserve and revive the historical identity of the city.



*The vacant area of former Vydrlica with St. Martin's Cathedral in the background.
Photo: D. Luther, author's archive.*

CIVIC ACTIVISM AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

In general, social movements are defined as groups of people involved in different types of collective activity with the aim of accomplishing their objectives. Through these objectives, they can influence local policies or the identities and opinions of their supporters, or both (Jacobsson, Saxonberg, 2013: 1). Following this definition, activities aimed at preserving the historical values of cities represent new social movements. J. Habermas designated them defensive and described them as alternative forms of cooperation and community life by means of which they “fight against the aggression of money and power of the economic, political and administrative subsystem” (Habermas, 1981, quoted by Znebežánek, 1997: 57). The aim of new movements is to manifest an attitude towards commonly perceived problems concerning the quality of life and to emphasise the importance of culture. The ideological framework is direct democracy where citizens demand major participation in matters concerning their life. The organisational structures of such movements are not complicated, and are based on weak formal relations (network, non-hierarchised supporters) and stay outside the institutionalised policy framework (Znebežánek, 1997: 38–39). A. Pichardo (1997: 411, 425) states that the theory of new social movements puts emphasis on macro- and micro-historical elements. At the macro-level, he focuses on the relation between the expansion of current social movements and major economic structures and on the role of culture in such movements. At the micro-level, he analyses the links between identity and personal conduct within a social movement. He

sees the main benefits of new social movements in emphasising the identity, culture and role of the civic sphere.

These formulations form the basis for issues that I seek to analyse with regard to civic activism and historical identity of cities: what processes are conflicting at the macro-level, what role is played by the aspect of culture, and what common identity is manifested by engaged members of a civic group. The issue of active citizenship can be grasped through motivations and reasons, actual areas of interest, and actual results and effectiveness of civic engagement (Višňovský, 2010: 56).

THE PLACE OF MEMORY AND LOCAL IDENTITY

The willingness to preserve the historic form of urban spaces can be derived from the local attachment of one's identity. It is formed since early childhood by gradual identification with the spaces of the house, backyard, street, neighbourhood, etc. in which people grow up and establish social links. Each neighbourhood speaks its own language of symbols which entail the composition and toponymy of space, important buildings (sacral, public, residential or factory buildings), their architectonic style and aesthetic look, memorials, cemeteries, parks or playgrounds... The character of space is shaped by its inhabitants, perceiving its social and cultural characteristics, habits, life-style, street life, verbal and non-verbal communication, noises and the rush of the city. What we perceive is the local identity of space. As highlighted by Margaret C. Rodman, place is a unique reality for each inhabitant the importance of which is shared with other people (Rodman, 2003: 208). D. Lawrence defines place as a space which acquires meaningfulness through human acts or adoption, and represents a certain cultural concept which is essential for describing the existential relationship of people with their environment. How and why individuals and groups bring emotionality and emotional meanings into space and how a certain place evokes feelings is manifested in the awareness of identity (Lawrence, 2008: 360–361).

In the case of the transformation of urban space, every new element is confronted with the identity of the given space and with the identity of the inhabitants living in it. Modernisation activities raise traditionalist reactions, which are considered a clash of the on-going globalisation of the city and of local identity. It is represented by local symbolism, but also by the local identity of inhabitants and historically created identity of the space, usually called *genius loci*. In urban ethnology, it is viewed as a place of memory in which history meets memory, and the past meets the present (Nora, 1984/1996: 64). Places of memory are unquestionable objects of history, but also common places – preserved, changed or completely removed objects present in the recollections of inhabitants.

OBNOVME PODHRADIE CIVIC INITIATIVE

One of the examples of history oriented civic activism in Bratislava is the initiative *Obnovme Podhradie* (Let Us Restore Podhradie). Podhradie is an area under the Bratislava castle built on a hill, the city landmark. Historically this area comprised of independent settlements of Zuckerman, Vydrice and Schlossgrut (former Jewish ghetto). In 1850, these settlements became part of the city and were integrated into



*The vacant area of former Vydrice with St. Martin's Cathedral in the background.
Photo: D. Luther, author's archive.*

the Theresienstadt neighbourhood, which later got the Slovak name Podhradie. In 1948, the Danube riverbank started to be rebuilt into a four-lane road, which resulted in the demolition of many buildings. At the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, during the building of a new bridge over the Danube River, most remaining buildings in Podhradie were also demolished.¹ Several buildings with the highest historical value in the western part were preserved, but the rest of the area remained undeveloped. Yet, the picturesque character of the former Rybné námestie (Fish Square) with a neologic synagogue, small streets and recesses of the former neighbourhood left their traits in the memory of the city's inhabitants. These memories are still intensive, nurtured not only by local press, but also by various civic activities. The pictures of the old Podhradie on postcards, photos, drawings or paintings provide a good background for interiors of bars and restaurants or in advertising and tourist brochures. They are widely shared on the internet and maintain the picture of the former city neighbourhood.

Official plans to restore the historic buildings emerged right after the change of the regime in 1989. The author of the urban study of Bratislava-Podhradie Alexander Németh stated: "After the Velvet Revolution, the restoration of Podhradie became a programme for the local self-government. The public which cared about how Bratislava looked like... also welcomed the nascent programme of restoration of Podhradie."²

1 In 1967, 112 houses, the synagogue, a conservatory, public library, brewery and other buildings were identified for demolition (Bútora, 2011: 192).

2 Source: <http://www.old.bapodhradie.sk/>.



Preserved buildings of former Zuckerman. Photo: D. Luther, author's archive.

The interest of environment, culture and history oriented civic activists arose after calling an architects' competition for the development of this area, the results of which were presented by the city management in 2002. The winning design comprised modernist buildings without any links to the historic structure of the space. As a response, the civic initiative *Obnovme Podhradie* was founded with the aim of convincing local authorities, with public support, to give the "Lost Town" back to citizens through the reconstruction of Baroque palaces, historic landmarks and original streets and through the restoration of the overall look of Podhradie. They launched a civic campaign, having organised public discussions with the representatives of the self-government and inhabitants; together with the Bratislava Community Foundation, they created a financial fund and ran a massive media campaign using their own website, billboards, newspaper articles, posters, interviews and exhibitions, and organised a petition and a discussion forum for citizens. In their call they highlighted the essence of the problem: "They intend to build a mega-complex within an area with high historical value, similar to the monolithic buildings of the socialist period"; "how come that our experts do not have a sense of *genius loci*"?; "they systematically destroy the atmosphere of the old Bratislava which now only lives through old photos" (Vagač, 2013). The new building plans became a public cause and led to the cancellation of the result of the public competition.

In the meantime, the city management unexpectedly sold a part of the lands in Podhradie to a private investor. The civic initiative *Obnovme Podhradie* asked to consult the sale contract, but the city management refused to disclose it. The suspicions



Preserved buildings of former Zuckermandel. Photo: D. Luther, author's archive.

about the city management and the mayor acting in a non-transparent way for the benefit of the investor grew. In addition to the campaign, the activists also focused on controlling the activities of the local authorities. They raised their comments on the new zoning plan and filed a petition signed by 2,500 inhabitants (Huba, 2003). The building plans in Podhradie were also discussed by the Municipal Committee of the Slovak Association of Nature and Landscape Protection, the Sustainable Development Society and by other civic associations, but the city management did not invite them to cooperate more closely.

The results of the second public competition for the Vydrlica zone were published in 2007. In this competition, foreign architectural teams (Italy, Poland) were more successful than the domestic ones. None of the winning projects considered the historical context, and all of them contained a modern design. The results of electronic voting of citizens contrasted with the architects' visions. According to Mikuláš Huba, member of the civic association *Obnovme Podhradie*, around 93 percent of respondents who joined their survey (Huba, 2003; Vagač, 2006) favoured construction in a historical style: "This is a proof of how they go blindly against the majority will of the citizens. I consider it terrorism by developers."³

The massive public discussion showed how collective memory influences the attitudes of the persons involved in the debates. The negative opinions of experts (architects, urban planners and others) and the public published by the media suggested

³ TASR 5. 1. 2008. In: Aké bude bratislavské podhradie? Retrieved from: <http://www.dobrodruh.sk/>.

that the majority of the citizens were against the plans of the investor and of the self-government:

“In my opinion, modern-style construction would desecrate the overall atmosphere around the castle.”

“The castle and the area under the castle in Bratislava is a place, the core of the city, where Bratislava always was. This was the genius loci of the city. We have more than enough of sterile modern glass facades with window washers embarrassingly waddling on ropes. This needs to be preserved or restored.”⁴

Most people who joined the debate argued for historical-style buildings, providing examples of European cities where it was possible to sensitively reconstruct buildings, squares or entire neighbourhoods destroyed by wars. But then the chief architect of Bratislava Štefan Šlachta declared in public that the future look of Vydrica in Podhradie could not be historical anymore because it was not possible return to the past.⁵ The citizens active in the debate took the view that the investor and the city council acted against the interests of most inhabitants and that architects did not consider local history important because they were not born in Bratislava, for which the chief architect was blamed to the largest extent. In discussions, the identity of the inhabitants of Bratislava became part of the argumentation.

In 2010, the investor group presented another project in which, according to its statements for the mass media, the historic space was respected by partly preserving the street structure and by the building material used (stone). The reaction of the civic initiative was represented by the appeal: “We can’t tolerate it!” The next construction project was presented to the public in 2012. The city council with a new leadership organised a public discussion on the project, in which civic activists argued again for a replica of the former Vydrica, with no success. Most participants, however, agreed at least about the fact that the new construction should resemble the former neighbourhood. The project was also published in the mass media and raised a broad public discussion, the content of which can shortly be described with the following statements:

“We haven’t come to any conclusion throughout all these years. It’s the same story all the time.”

“Again, it’s just about cubes and blocks. Bleak, boring and without life....”

“I think buildings should be primarily constructed for people living in the city, and just then for the jury of some kind of architects’ competition.”

“It’s embarrassing how stubbornly the ‘competent ones’ reject the idea of replicas of the original buildings that used to stay there... Yet, I don’t demand the building of replicas of all houses...”

“I’m glad that most Bratislava inhabitants are against modern-style buildings. And we must do everything possible to prevent having just cubes there. Just let them remember forever that cubes do not belong to the centre and to conservation areas. And absolutely not under the castle. There are other neighbourhoods where they can build them.”⁶

People’s reactions that I have collected from 2002 until the present show that the look of the former Vydrica is deeply rooted in the historical awareness of Bratislava citizens. The efforts to restore the original buildings met mostly with sympathies of the

4 Ako si predstavujete budúcnosť bratislavského Podhradia? Retrieved from: <http://www.tema.pravda.sk/>.

5 Source: <http://bratislava.sme.sk./c/>.

6 Source: <http://bratislava.sme.sk/diskusie/>.

citizens who joined the public discourse. They expressed their positive attitudes also towards the activities of the civic activists:

“I’m happy about the activities of the civic initiative *Obnovme Podhradie* for two reasons: firstly, this activity can help improve the aesthetic and functional look of Bratislava; and secondly, because it is one more informal platform which points out the lack of transparency in decision-making on public affairs – not only in our city.”⁷

The activists of the initiative *Obnovme Podhradie* managed to highlight the conflict between the commercial interests of developers, allied architects and city officials on one hand and the citizens’ cultural interest in preserving the historic values of the city on the other hand. They mobilised part of the public by engaging them in several protest activities, promoted their common interest in preserving the historical identity of Podhradie, and demanded that the citizens’ opinion is respected. The public opinion forced the developer to modify the project which, however, has not been implemented to date.

ACTORS’ COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The text above suggests that the cultural value of the urban space played a unifying role in this movement. It forms the core of the actors’ collective identity and became a part of their consciousness, and was also perceived by the surrounding social environment (Diani, 1992: 9, quoted by Znebejánek, 1997: 28). Such view draws attention not to the entire virtual group of supporters of the idea of restoring the historical values of the space, but to the small group of civic activists. Their motivations, reasons and objectives brought together an informal community which demonstrated its feelings of belonging.

The group of culture, history and environment oriented activists in Bratislava dealt also with other cases which they considered detrimental to cultural values or environment of the city. According to Matej Vagač, an activist from *Obnovme Podhradie*, had dealt with so many Bratislava cases that he considered activism as his life stance. In the municipal elections of 2006, fourteen civic activists decided to run for the city council and councils of city districts under a common name *Bratislava Otvorene* initiative (Bratislava Openly). They explained the decision to enter municipal politics with words describing their motivations and objectives, as well as decision making at the municipal level: municipal deputies did not represent citizens’ interests and needs, but those of parties and groups; gave in to financial pressures of investors; self-governments were non-transparent, did not accept petitions and citizens’ expert opinions. They presented to the public a picture of the powers of the city self-governing bodies and emphasised the need for civic participation. In the next municipal elections (2010), eleven activists from *Bratislava Otvorene* initiative ran for offices. In their civic view, the municipal politics did not change at all: party deputies do not meet and do not communicate with citizens; they do not explain their often anti-civic attitudes when voting at municipal council meetings; they give in to investors’ pressures; and ignore the public opinion. In their programme, they also mentioned the need to preserve monuments and public spaces of the city in the interest of the city inhabitants.⁸ Eight allied activists ran in the last municipal elections (2014) “with a common vision of open and transparent politics on the basis of clear and observed rules, implemen-

⁷ Source: <http://www.old.bapodhradie.sk/>.

⁸ Source: <http://www.bao.sk/>.

ted not only for the benefit of citizens, but also with their active involvement".⁹ This vision is an expression of their collective identity.

SUMMARY

The building of a new neighbourhood within the area under the Bratislava Castle manifested a conflict between the interests of business and allied political circles and the civic community which was enthusiastic about the idea of restoration and preservation of the historical values of the city. Many other similar cases (e.g. demolition of former industrial buildings because of planned building projects) raised a preservationist reaction of civic activists. In a confrontation with the new owners of the buildings and lands, they highlighted the unlimited power of development groups, the failure or inactivity of competent institutions, the lack of transparency in the work of municipal authorities, the subordination of political parties to financial groups, and the unwillingness of the city management to respect the public opinion. These opinions became a part of criticism of the uncoordinated architectural development of the city the rapid growth of which was due to the social changes after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989. The interventions for preserving the historical identity of urban spaces mobilised a part of the public and became one of the incentives for growing civic engagement in the post-socialist period.

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⁹ Source: <http://www.sm5.sk/>.

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