

URBAN REGENERATION AND AFFECTIVE CONNECTIONS TO PLACE IN BUCHAREST CITY CENTRE

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Abstract

“Place” represents an important issue for human geographers. This paper deals with the process of urban change that has affected the historical centre of Bucharest over the course of the last decade. The urban regeneration process could transform the cultural meanings of the ‘sense of the place’ and contribute to a reinvention of an urban identity dimension. The aim of the paper is to contribute to the formulation of a critical perspective on urban regeneration, by highlighting the absence or otherness of cultural urban meanings in creating a place identity among the citizens during the (post)communist period. The authors advance and test the hypotheses that the historical importance of the city and the regeneration process in the sense of place construction are different among the residents.

Keywords: sense of place, historical city centre, place identity, urban regeneration, Bucharest.

Introduction

Places are all over the world. They may be unique spots embedded in everyday human life experience. This paper deals with the process of urban change that has occurred in the historical centre of Bucharest City over the past decade. Over the time, these places acquire their own identity and history, depending on certain elements: historical context, urban changes, functionality, and different events that are engraved in the collective memory.

Our investigation focuses on the following objectives: 1) to identify new elements and places in the areas with historical importance; 2) to visualize all the representative events of the city centre, as well as its transformations, alterations and redesign themes; 3) to explore the current identity of the places or “world of places” among citizens in a particular place i.d. the city centre.

Social scientists, researchers and humanists have long been focused on notions like “place” and “sense of place”. The human geographers consider place an important issue for their field of study (Tuan, 1977; Relph, 1976; Cosgrove D., 1978, 1994; Buttimer, 1980; Jackson P., 1989; Jackson P. and Penrose, 1993; Harvey D., 1993; Sack, R.D., 1997, 2004; Creswell, 2004;

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Massey, 1993, 1994). Likewise, the anthropologists investigate the relation between place and culture (Lamb, 1993; Feld and Basso, 1996).

Environmental specialists explore the human behaviour and the place (Altman and Low, 1992), while architects and planners are concerned with social control and space (Cuthbert 1995b, Cuthbert and McKinnell, 1997) or inhabited places (Lyndon, 2001).

Related to the sense of belonging is the place attachment. Scholars studied the connections between environmental and community psychology literature on subjects like place attachment (Manzo L., Perkins, D, 2006,) and mobility (Gustafson, 2001), the relations between communities and place (Hargreaves, 2004), place branding and “place selling” (Anholt, 2006; Dinnie, 2008; Kearns and Philo, 1993; Kotler *et al.*, 1993; Ward, 1998; Warnaby, 2009, Campelo *et.al*, 2009, Kaltenborn B. & Williams D., 2002), and the “cultural power” (Zukin, 1992, 1993, 2010).

According to Creswell (2004), people transform the spaces into meaningful places through personal experience and specific activities. Those experiences are very important in creating relationships among individuals, creating a bond called ‘topophilia’, a term coined by Yi-Fu Tuan (1974b, 4). Tuan constructively summarizes Lowenthal (1961) and Gendlin’s (1962) ideas on the sense of place.

The places could be located everywhere within films or other cultural products forming a cultural geography ‘all over the place’ (Shurmer-Smith, 1994). The place is a construction ‘carved’ out of space of human culture (Sack, 2004), or the place could be constituted on three parts: ‘location, locale and sense of the place’ (Agnew and Duncan, 1989).

People are living in communities and are sharing their experiences and activities of everyday life. These connections are articulated through a personal experience based on emotional attachment. The people ‘define themselves through a sense of the place’ (Crang, 1998:2). All the meanings resulted by interactions with a place are revealed by the sense of the place.

The sense of place is started to be appraised with the well-known cognitive mapping developed by Kevin Lynch (1960) that used people perception of the connectivity between space, place, social, physical or built environment. The sense of place is often related to cultural landscape or lived landscape. The “lived landscape” (Seyer-Ochi, 2006) is understood in relation with the built, historical layers and the natural landscape.

The role of political dis(interest) is important for explaining the building of the sense of place. The new political elites have sought to create a breach in the local government strategy by embracing a new master plan in the second half of the 1990s. In the last ten years, Bucharest has tried to get out of the anonymity of a postsocialist city, through a slow and contradictory regeneration process, which over the time has entailed economic and social changes and mutations. These changes have emerged in a delicate context, depending on the dis(interest) of all urban stakeholders. Thus, the city has developed and has

been re(built) according to the policy regulations issued after 1989, beginning with the slow privatization process of communist enterprises, relocations, financial investments and the interest of real estate developers.

Unfortunately, this regeneration process has occurred quite chaotically, without a coherent and visionary plan, without a harmonization of the decisions and know-how elements of the urban stakeholders. For several decades, the historical centre could not accomplish its role as central place for social and civic life within the city.

Historical Background of the City Centre

The higher headland on the left side of the Dâmbovița River represents the core area of 'Târgul Bucureștilor', the old Bucharest market city. In the second half of 14th century, here was a brick fortress on which developed the new settlement. At that time, Bucharest resembled a 'castrum', as is mentioned in most documents of the time (Mănuclu-Adameșteanu, 2002).

On the edges of the Royal Court, 'târgul din lăuntru' ('the inside market') came into existence as the first commercial centre of the city, with merchant shops or sails booths (Giurescu, 2009:101). Today, the ruins of the Princely Palace (The Royal Court) represent a protected archaeological site, which shelters the Old Court Museum.

According to the archaeological discoveries, the oldest medieval dwellings in this area belong to the second half of the 15th century. At the same time, the remnants of some furnaces used for iron and copper processing seem to suggest the intensity of craft activities. In 1659, the city became the capital of Wallachia and, before long, began to spread and develop. Fortified churches and inns were erected and many craft workshops were established on the main streets: Gabroveni, Șelari, Covaci, Lipscani, Băcani etc.

From the urban morphology standpoint of the pre-modern period of the city (according to the Borroczyński Plan, 1852), the city centre was a compact commercial and residential area, with inns lying on the east side of the present day Victoriei Avenue. The main axis of the area was the Lipscani Street. Later on, the Jews gradually insinuated on Gabroveni, Lipscani and other streets, replacing the Bulgarian, Romanian and Greek merchants. In the beginning, they had rented the commercial spaces, but in a short while, they came to own them.

The modernization process of the inner city started with the promulgation of the Organic Regulation (1831), which had significant effects on the core area. Thus, the street network around St. George Inn was retraced (in the aftermath of the big fire of 1847), avenues were built near the University building (the present shape of the University Square was completed between 1906 and 1911), while the Dâmbovița channel was straightened (1880-1883) (P.U.Z., 2002). Because of the accelerated urban sprawl, several inns were replaced by imposing public buildings like the National Bank, Post Office

Palace, Dacia Română Insurance Company (today BCR Bank), Colțea Hospital, Colțea Church and Ministry of Agriculture.

In the first half of the 20th century (according to the City Plan of 1911), the inner city developed and altered substantially due to the construction of the Hristo Botev Avenue and the North-South axis, which connects the Unirii Square to the University Square. At the same time, the administrative and banking area was completed (Marmorosch Blank Bank, Romanian Credit Bank, Crisovelloni Bank, the new building of the National Bank).

After 1945, the political, economic and social context affected the territorial development of the city. Most of the buildings, erected in neoclassical and baroque style, were nationalized in 1948. Urban sprawl continued and collective housing emerged. Human interventions in the historical area were considered by specialists to be minor; nevertheless, they changed the architecture of the relations with the adjacent area (the metro South section, the enlargement of the University Square junction, the building of the civic centre etc.).

The emergence of commercial urbanism in the 1970s was felt in particular by the construction and extension of the large commercial spaces (Cocor and Unirea stores). After 1990, the historical city centre has continuously degraded, and its patrimonial value spoiled, even though most of the urban texture has been preserved.

After 1989, the local authorities and the architects have been increasingly concerned with the future of this place. Consequently, they have come out with many initiatives aimed at preserving and revitalizing the area.

The new political elites pursued a different strategy by adopting a new master plan in the second half of the 1990s. The historical city centre was defined by the Government Emergency Ordinance 77/2001, as an area of 34 hectares, comprising 436 buildings, of which 240 were historical monuments, and about 1.5 ha inbuilt surfaces. The process of rehabilitation is a very complex one. For that reason, the historical centre circumscribed by Calea Victoriei (West), Carol and Elisabeta avenues (North), Hristo Botev Avenue (East), Corneliu Coposu Avenue and Spaiul Dâmboviței (South) has been identified as a pilot area. The Urban Zone Plan (PUZ) was developed in partnership with the Ion Mincu University of Architecture and the General Council of Bucharest Municipality.

The urban governance raised special and delicate issues. The coherence and aestheticized landscape challenged the urban debate behind the city planning rules, the haziness of legislation and the contradictions regarding the historical monuments and the preserved area.

“The lack of effective public administration and consistent urban policies has delayed the realization of winning urban design projects from several competitions, leaving downtown Bucharest as a vacant playground for consumerism.” (Ioan, 2006:346)

Some of the buildings in the historical centre of Bucharest City are already notified (they have an unclear juridical situation) and therefore they should return to their owners. The representatives of the Real Estate Administration argue that municipality has not finished yet the notification of all the buildings, in order to see exactly which ones can be returned and which not, so that to be managed by the local authorities.

According to the Real Estate Administration representatives, about 60% of the estates are notified and only 40% belong to the State housing stock and may be the subject to renovation and conservation, based on the decisions of municipal counsellors. However, municipality representatives argue that these works may not be accomplished in a short term, because at this moment there is no legal basis for them. A solution for the restoration of the historical centre, as suggested by experts, is that the buildings with clear legal situation be auctioned and leased with the detailed clauses, i.e. the new owners/managers could be obliged to royalty payments to the municipality.

For most inhabitants, the historic centre of the city means “the old centre”, i.e. the place lying on both sides of the Lipscani Street. For this reason, subsequent investigations will focus on this space.

But beyond the urban regulations and divisions, and leaving aside the inconsistencies of the town planning documents, the historical centre (the “old centre”) remains in the consciousness of the inhabitants as a small-size area associated with Lipscani and some adjacent streets (the left side of the map) (Fig. 1).

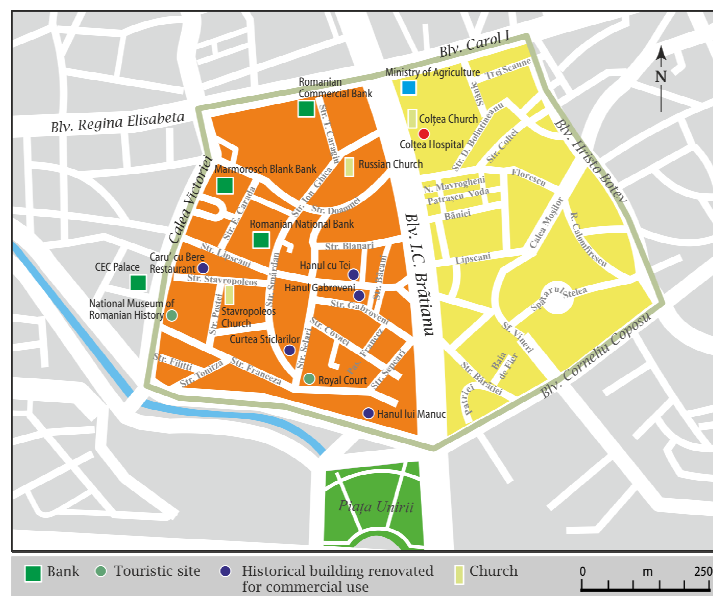


Fig. 1. The historical city centre of Bucharest

Interpreting the Built Environment as Visual: the Commercial Streets and the Inns

The identity of a place is therefore grounded in a supposed relation between the physical and the mental based on intersubjective and subjective orientation towards space. Therefore, regeneration projects based on a “viable” perspective have to be seen as social production of space in a double sense.

Following this idea, from the functional perspective, the historical centre and the Lipscani commercial axis were intended for service and banking activities. Today, some people call this area with the demanding attribute ‘the City’, because the historical centre is particularly based on the visual interpretation of the built environment. The area includes several buildings that used to be the headquarters of some of the banks built during the interwar period (Marmorosch Blank, the Romanian Credit Bank, Crisovelloni Bank). Today, they shelter financial and management institutions, ministries, firms and multinational companies with high patrimonial value according to CNMASI (1992).

From the architectural point of view, many buildings in the area bear the imprint of the eclectic French school, because they were erected either by famous French architects or by Romanian architects who had studied in Paris, who were perfectly capable of recreating the image of the metropolis in its faithful “colony” (Boia, 1997). The most important of these buildings are the following: the National Bank, 1883-1885, designed by Cassien Bernard and Albert Galleron, and decorated by sculptor Ioan Georgescu; Ministry of Agriculture, 1896; the CEC building, 1896-1900; the new building of the University, 1921-1934, designed by Nicholas Ghika-Budești and the National Museum of Romanian History, 1900, designed by Alexandru Săvulescu.

The architect Augustin Ioan reinforced the idea that ‘in the inner city, the residential quarters built with stucco and bad plasters are eclectic as well, but “carneavalesque” reflections of the original French eclecticism (Ioan, 2003).

In addition to coffee shops, art galleries and various workshops, which are found here, the tourist encounters all around stalls with breathtaking goods or different warehouses selling building materials. The remnants of the old inns (Zarafi, Șerban Vodă, Grecilor and Constantin Brâncoveanu), the medieval houses on the Franceză Street and a wall belonging to the Royal Palace standing on the Gabroveni Street, all were returned to the public.

Lipscani Street, also known as the *Ulița Mare* (the Main Lane), was an important axis lying in the neighbourhood of the Old Princely Court. From it, one could easily reach the neighbouring commercial streets; but it also ensured the connection with the entire city, as far as the road leading to Târgoviște, the former capital of the country. Architectural styles are different, from classical to baroque and neoclassical facades.

The street was named after the German tradesmen born in Leipzig (called Lipsca), who in 1750 gave up using the Saxons as sales agents and began to sell themselves their merchandise here. The merchants were organized in guilds, paid some taxes, but also enjoyed some special exemptions. The small shops, which used to be called *bolta*, had facades of about three meters high and, more often than not, they possessed cellars. The tiny shops lining the street were grouped according to their specific activity on guilds: merchants with beads, accessories, with cloth, linen drapery and tissues.

One of the most important inns, now in ruins and under restoration, is the *Gabroveni Inn*. The construction was erected in 1739 on a piece of land belonging to the merchant Hagi Teodosie Gabroveau. On the onset of the 20th century, the inn was turned into Gabroveni-Universal Hotel. During the communist period, it was used primarily for commercial purposes. The name of the inn comes from the Bulgarian merchants, who brought goods and products from Gabrovo (hence the name of Gabroveni Street). The edifice, which is now in the administration of municipality, is currently under restoration: the interior will shelter the City Hall Center for Cultural Projects (ARCUB), while near the inn a new building will be erected, which will possess a Performance Hall.

Hanul cu Tei (The Lime Trees Inn) was built in 1833 by two merchants who had their own shops. It was conceived to have two entrances: one on the east (with 14 shops) and the other on the west (14 shops), the access being possible from two streets (Blănari and Lipscani). The first renovation of the inn dates back to 1970. Since then, it has been turned into an art gallery, coffee shop and exhibition. The eclectic façade facing the Lipscani Street is presently renewed.

Another landmark of the old centre is the *Manuc Inn*, which was completed by Manuc Bei in 1808; it was built according to a new architectural style and in the early 19th century, it had the following composition 15 vaulted cellars, 23 shops and 1 tunnel that could host 500 people. Upstairs, there were 107 guest rooms. Today, (after having been returned to the Cantacuzino family) the inn is renewed and turned into a privately owned restaurant.

The Difference that Place Makes...

Generally, the city has more or less been forced to develop and regenerate from the outskirts to the centre, which generated lots of malfunctions. But the city centre has somehow escaped the forced renovations and rehabilitations, thus remaining a little bit behind the rest of the city.

What has happened so far? Why the historical area of the city has not been of any interest to the investors? There could be several causes, but the most likely ones seem to be the lack of regulations, the uncertainty of the ownership regime, the lack of cooperation and coordination between the local

authorities, and the unattractiveness of the area. Further, we will try to understand the economic and social context that has determined and foreshadowed the involution of the area.

The historical centre of a city is an important milestone in the process of building a (new) identity. This complex process is determined by several factors and it requires time, strategies and vision. The centre needs to be revived and restructured. In the past 20 years, we can speak of an agony of the historical centre.

Under the municipality management, it became *an anonymous space*, an obsolete area thrown into oblivion. Today, the centre changes continuously, turning into an urban area full of Balkanic type contrasts: from in vogue consumption precincts, with various bohemian cafes, to the desolated and derelict places, with stray dogs. How and where are we looking for an authenticity of urban design taking into account the shrinking of the urban space during the (post)communist period?

Many studies reinforced the authenticity of urban design focusing on urban conservation and heritage revealing its tourist vocation. Authors and specialists claimed that this authenticity could not be mixed with the creation of new historical illusion such as the disneyfication. A good urban design concept in the older city districts might be the creation of sense of place as an imageable physical setting with a strong meaning, which affords several urban activities (Ouf Salah, 2001:87).

The idea of authenticity and symbolic representation are closely linked to the urban design, to idea of place and placemaking based on identity and self-identity (Carter *et. al.*, 2007, Massey 1994). All the elements which construct the authenticity and symbolic representation are tied to the place and placemaking and to the space of everyday life.

The authenticity is closely linked to the origins. Zukin underlined that 'a city is authentic if it can create the *experience* of origins. This is done by preserving historic buildings and districts, encouraging the development of small-scale boutiques and cafés, and branding neighbourhoods in terms of distinctive cultural identities' (Zukin, 2010:3).

Despite some efforts to rebuild some historical inns, the central area is struggling with *the endless rehabilitation of infrastructure, sewage system and monuments' façades*. To begin with, how is the history to be represented? And whose history should it be? In the absence of a genuine cultural and symbolical capital, the historical centre has become too fast a "space of consumption".

In other words, the rapid turn of the central area into a consumption space has adjusted to the rules and laws of the financial capitalism and to the fashion of consumerist societies (fancy cafes and bars), which is only a substitute for a successful urban regeneration.

The symbolical capital is tied on added value and investment and the production of symbolical capital is closely related to the production of cultural capital.

“This means to capture some aspects of historical or cultural development and the desire to package this for sale as some kind of new experience that retranslates or transcends the old.” (Cuthbert, 2006:190)

But, in our case, even this approach failed!

The historical centre has been turned into a space of consumption, thus becoming a space in vogue. The rental prices have soared and the business environment thrived. Gentrification is at the beginning. Regeneration and renovation processes have determined entrepreneurial initiative.

Thus, according to the Entrepreneurial Association, 30 pubs were opened in the area in 2008 and only one year later, the number was twice as large. If we take into account the number of tourists who came by with the occasion of different events (musical concerts), the same association appreciated that in 2010 the number of people who entered these pubs amounted to 60,000. The record was established in June, when the AC/DC rock band performed in Bucharest.

Posh cafes are found everywhere. According to press articles releases, the rental prices (from 2,700 to 23,000 euro per month) are very high for an area under a continuous transformation and renovation. From this point of view, the historical centre is more expensive than the Dorobanţu area, which is another “fancy place” of the city.

Towards the Construction of a (New) Identity of the Historical Centre? Research Findings

Does the historical centre still preserve its own identity? Does it (still) keep those representative symbolical attributes that create the sense of place? Are there (still) any identity landmarks that define this space and are valued by people? Does the regeneration process alter the meaning of place? What are the effects of urban regeneration on the meaning of place? In order to answer these questions, we used both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data were gathered both through participative observations (in March 2012), which consisted in 15 in-depth interviews and 5 focus groups (with 3-6 participants), and through informal and unstructured interviews with the citizens (in April 2012).

Participative observations allowed us to collect information on urban environment: the presence of patrimony edifices and other buildings that are in various stages of physical degradation.

At the same time, we administered a questionnaire to the people we found in the area, residents and non-residents, shop employees and bar tenders. The questionnaire (N = 250) included both open and closed questions, which focused on visual and symbolical interpretation, on the attachment to a certain place and on the effects of urban regeneration.

The respondents were asked which are the buildings or the historical monuments that are genuine landmarks of the built-up area, which are the buildings that impress the people and lend personality to the historical centre and which are the positive and negative elements induced by the urban regeneration process. The data were processed with the SPSS 17 software.

At the same time, we tried to analyze the opinions expressed with the occasion of the interviews, in order to discover the narrative perspective that creates the sense of place.

According to Stedman (2003: 826-827), 'a more robust and more useful theory of sense of place will require descriptive research into the specific meanings that places have for different people and groups, how these meanings are created and evolve, the relationship between sense of place and behaviour, and the influence of the physical environment on sense of place'. The qualitative content analysis is a legitimate methodology based on epistemological and ontological elements. The qualitative content analysis have an advantage that the 'research lens is appropriately focused on the people involved in message creation and consumption since these involve power relations' (Baxter J., 2009:278).

Despite the contrasting landscape, the landmarks that articulate the meaning and identity of the place can be grouped into three categories: architectural landmarks with strong "public icon" character, as is the case of the banks' headquarters, identity historical landmarks, like the site of the historical fortress (Royal Court) or the former inns, and religious landmarks, such as the old churches, which are included in the UNESCO patrimony (e.g. the Stavropoleos Church).

The National Bank of Romania is cited by respondents (29%) as being the building with the most historical significance.

Undoubtedly, it plays the role of 'power architecture', a public icon meant to capture popular imagination. The objects may have a dual significance, a "double focus", according to Maurice's Halwachs or "double movement" (Roland Barthes), "where architecture is always dream and function, expression of a utopia and instrument of convenience" (Barthes 1964: 239). We are interested in the symbolic dimension of public buildings, social memory and identity. The respondents have chosen this building given its importance in construction the national identity following its own criteria: representativeness, wealth, power, and prestige.

Another reason for choosing this building is the 'appeal to historical memory'. Memory plays a crucial role in representing and articulating identities. The recent discovery of the ruins of the Șerban Vodă Inn in front of the National Bank of Romania has entailed a clearer articulation of the social or collective memory. The ruins have been restored and are being preserved by the financial support provided by the bank. They have been considered spectacular, involving emotions and attachment, once again revealing the characteristics of a city-palimpsest.

Some occurrences emphasize the historical character of the centre, based on representative visual elements of the urban environment: eclectic architectural style, old buildings, relaxed atmosphere, old town, pedestrian streets, etc. Other opinions highlight its rapid transformation, through processes of gentrification and regeneration: posh pubs, coffee shops, street artists, young people, entertainment areas, etc (*Fig. 2*).



Fig. 2. The mapping of the meanings underlying the Sense of place for the historical centre of Bucharest City (using Wordle software)

The landmarks having an exquisite architectural value are less mentioned by the respondents. Not even the National Bank is brought up, which is definitely an imposing building, noticed by everybody who has known the area after 1997 (the year when renovation works began). For the younger generation (20 years old), the landmarks have changed. The answers point frequently to the monumental buildings, to those with architectural value (the National Bank), or to the old streets, but especially to the clubs and terraces, which proves beyond doubt that the whole place has turned into an *entertainment area*.

Today, the historical centre acquires other cultural dimensions: it becomes a space of consumption, dominated by all kinds of clubs and pubs, which lend it a cosmopolitan character.

The younger generation perceives the historical centre as being in a process of change, a blend of new and old. The people do not really know too many details about the history of the place, they are not aware of the important buildings. For them, the information plates on the historical monuments are nothing else but references to historical details. What really counts is the entertainment places, the fancy clubs, the atmosphere, because socialization is the most important value. If these entertainments are found within the patrimonial edifices, then the places are “cool”.

Adult generation has other perceptions of the sense of place, articulated around the memory and the history of the place. Symbolic representations originate in the identity of the place. Yet, it goes without saying that things are far more complex than that.

As E. Relph (1976: 63) said: ‘The most meagre meaning of ‘sense of place’ is the ability to recognise different places and different identities of a place’.

We are entitled to claim that for the adult generation the sense of place is more loaded with symbols, emotions and attachments, which pertain to interactions and affinities. The buildings with patrimonial value have a special significance, because they are not mere edifices, but buildings that render the place unique. Many people know a lot of things about their history, architectural style and patrimonial value.

Conclusions

The findings of this research support and contribute to the geographical literature on the ensemble of elements that help create a sense of place. The conclusion drawn is that the city centre is transforming in pace of regeneration process. The regeneration process may be an effective means of creating a sense of place that enhances the attractiveness and the entertainment. This is evident in the overwhelmingly positive opinions residents in 250 surveys conducted in the area.

Likewise, men and women have different perceptions regarding the sense of place and the urban identity. Scientific investigations show that women are more interested in the architecture of the place, paying more attention to the details and the overall image.

We started from the hypothesis that urban regeneration process can change the sense of place of this area. The opinions of the younger and the older generations differ significantly, depending on their cultural values and life experience. Without concrete urban regeneration policies, the sense of place of the historical centre may be lost or may suffer various alterations.

Thus, historical core may lose its personality and become placelessness. Unfortunately, the media can undermine the identity of a place. According to E. Relph, mass media is responsible for mass culture, mass communications, big business and the power of central authorities. The emergence of clubs and posh pubs has changed the collective image in favour of space consumption, entertainment and atmosphere.

Special or unique places are strongly connected to the patrimonial value and the memory of the place. They may become the targets of mass tourism. There is a risk of what J. B. Jakszon (1970:64-65) called “other directed architecture”, which is deliberately directed towards outsiders spectators, passers-by and all above consumers. The historical core may lose its authenticity under the impact of tourist activities and mass consumption. Newspapers and magazines like *Time out*, *Sapte seri* (Seven evenings), *Afterhours*, wikis and blogs underlined the must-see itinerary for anyone who wanted to be in the now about new cultural trends.

The present study has also some drawbacks. Additional questions would have created more correlations and relationships in the construction of the sense of place. More case studies would have led to a better understanding of the sense of place and attachment. Consequently, further research is needed to reveal the relationship between the sense of place and gentrification process.

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