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The role of abstract (immaterial) values in projects of urban area regeneration: a case for literature

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1   INTRODUCTION

During the last decades there have been significant and prolonged attempts to regenerate urban areas, aiming in reducing degradation and economic decline, revamping their natural environment, improving quality of life for its residents and generating sources of financial rebirth, either by providing activities traditionally associated with this area, or by capitalizing on its potential as a tourist destination.

Regeneration projects are currently observed mainly in Europe[1] around cities with significant cultural history. They can be separated into two types: those projects that involve regeneration of the historical city centers and those that involve regeneration of former industrial areas outside the main residential clusters[2].

Projects aiming in the regeneration of specific urban areas, irrespective of their socio-economic targets, should always take into consideration the preservation - if not the reinforcement – of the physiognomy of these particular areas. Sometimes this could even involve the restoration of functions and activities that in past times contributed in creating a special characteristic 'vibe' for these areas.

2   DEFINING THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF AN URBAN BUILT SPACE

Research in defining the content of a concept such as physiognomy has led to the conclusion that it is very much linked with the human experience. Physiognomy, when used in relation to environment, is a term that describes the identity of a certain space, in other words the sum of those characteristics that register this space unique in the way that it is inhabited, recognized or understood by people. However, urban space is primarily created by people and it is also registered as a characteristic part of its culture. Human activity is the measure for the development and appearance of the urban built space, whereas in the countryside, the natural element is the primary one. Therefore, the urban built space is being transformed through human intervention into the concept of 'topos' (the place)[3] as expressed by Socrates in Plato's Dialogue of 'Timaios'. Since the beginning of historical times, human activity identified in the development of cities a natural improvement in their quality of life and the perfect environment to create their culture. From antiquity to contemporary times the city has been the main point of reference for defining human progression and cultural growth.

Due its significance in defining human progression, the city has been naturally the subject of many research projects and studies; amongst those, key are the studies regarding the image of the city and the ways that this image is being projected. In every circumstance, city space or the city itself projects a mixture of its eternal and temporary elements, as they are defined by the behavior of its inhabitants collectively as well as individually. The orientation of those characteristic elements is a constant quest, since life in the city is ever changing, unstoppable, progressing in fast pace. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the facts that the very elements of the physiognomy of a city are established and documented as necessary knowledge for the smooth running of one's life. Simultaneously, the physiognomy of an urban built space produces certain impressions that lead to the formation of opinions regarding the space that determine the attitudes or actions that people will take towards this particular environment. Finally, the elements of the physiognomy of the city will also create to the individual a set of concepts, which in return manifest the different ways they experience the city through all their senses. [4]

As 'topos' the city always had the ability to evoke images and stimulate people's intellect and emotion. Through processing that stimulation and those images, each person determines their position towards their urban environment, either as an individual or through collective conscience, as a group of citizens. On both occasions the human position, either as an individual or a collective response, can create actions that will impact the physiognomy of this particular city. Therefore, researching and studying these human positions and actions towards a city is of double importance for examining the physiognomy of a city: on the one hand they can research which characteristics of the city are the ones that have greater influence in the individual or the group of citizens in forming an opinion towards the city; on the other hand, they can also observe the consequences and impact of the human actions which were developed through certain images and other stimulation from the city.

The '**logos**' (the written artifacts) and the '**myth**' have been recognized[5] by the those involved in the physiognomy of the urban landscape as those factors primarily connected with the human intellect. The city is also the place where people from different classes and backgrounds congregate with the expectation that they will benefit from urban life; so the city becomes a 'social space' where relationships, laws and obligations are developed, wealth is created and certain historical events take place. All these are connected with the urban landscape in different levels and measures.

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[1] MITOULA, R., Urban Regeneration as Tool of Conservation of the Physiognomy of the City in EU Countries, 10th Pan-Hellenic Architectural Congress, Athens 2002.

[2] STEFANOU, J., CHATZOPOULOU, A. & NIKOLAIDOU, S., Urban Regeneration, TEE Publications, Athens 1989

[3] URBAN DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT LABORATORY, National Technical University of Athens, The Physiognomy of the Hellenic City, National Technical University of Athens Publications, Athens 2000.

[4] BASSILARA, A. & STEFANOU, J., The Non-visual Dimensions of the Landscape, International Conference on Landscape, Aristotle University of Thessalonica, Thessalonica, 2005

[5] URBAN DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT LABORATORY, National Technical University of Athens, The Physiognomy of Landscape – The Physiognomy of the Hellenic City in the 21st Century, National Technical University of Athens Publications, Athens 2001.

Similarly, the intellectual and social activities that develop are an extension of the same **social space**. A structure of values, habits, customs, communication methods, ideologies, religions and cultural creations is devised in order to support the co-existence of all these people in the urban environment. All these manifest the importance of the city as a centre of **culture.**

The social and cultural reality that is formed in the urban built space produces a series of stories that are delivered through different mediums, either in the form of written manifestations or as part of the oral tradition. The stories do not usually follow the linear development of historical facts, but, while in general terms they are unique in the way that they develop their plots and themes, they are similar on the importance of the role played by the city in their development. The stories with the above characteristics form what we will call the '**myth'** of the city. The myth could create a positive or negative influence in the general atmosphere of a city and 'put a good or bad spell' on it. In the majority of cases it either becomes **'logos'** (written artifacts) – the sum of many narratives connected with the city – or contributes to other forms of written speech, whose focus may be different, but they will use the myth of the city in order to promote other elements of their narrative.

At this point we should not overlook the points made in the theories of Rossi[6] as well as Hiller and Hanson[7] who advocate that the architectural space is a primary element in the social environment. They view the city as the theatre stage; they urge us to examine it from the point of view of the actors and the stage set, instead of the performance that the audience witness. It is the former that produces elemental living statements and experiences that can influence the image of the city. Those living testimonies and their subsequent experiences create meanings and feelings that haunt the space and create the first material for the myth and the narrative of the city to take place.

In particular, we should also examine the function of 'logos' (the written narrative) of the city in the process of its mapping and memory. Through the narrative new elements and forms are developed in the city that go beyond the common understanding and they map the space by giving it a certain characteristic. Through the narratives of the Italian immigrants in the USA at the beginning of the last century the Statue of Liberty was 'mapped' – it was the first image they could see in the entrance of the harbor and it was a sign of hope and a new life; a similar case is Ellis Island, the place where they were obliged to go through for the Immigration Authorities and the necessary quarantine. The 'mapping' of those two spaces in people's conscience happened through different types of narratives: those of the older to the younger generation, written documents, films, etc. At the same time, those two characteristic spaces of New York were kept alive in the memories of the Italian community in the USA, through – but not just – the narratives. In particular, the memory of the use of Ellis Island remained even after 1974, when it ceased. However, this memory and the fact that it was now a characteristic symbol not only of the physiognomy of the city of New York but of the whole country contributed to the decision of the civic authorities for its future use – as museum and touristic landmark/attraction.

The power that both the myth and the narrative of a city hold is very important because both elements target the human intellect and emotion. The performances that they produce are carried through the collective and individual conscience for a long time and there is always the possibility of rekindling the interest for them. There are many examples where the myth and narrative of the city prove stronger than the hard reality. An urban residential area in Athens, Kallithea, had been in the past a place preferred for residence by wealthy, upper middle class citizens and, as a result, there was an air of contentment and quality of life associated with that place. Nowadays this reputation of Kallithea remains, even though the circumstances and the facts have changed. Though the area has lost most of its characteristics, due to the myth and the narrative of the area, it has maintained its 'good name'. In addition, a city like Venice, which nowadays is faced with many and serious problems regarding its physical environment – the pollution of the water in the canals, for example - still remains in the imagination of those planning to visit the city as an idealistic place projecting positive messages.

3   ELEMENTS THAT DEFINE THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF THE CITY AND THEY CAN BE TRACED IN ITS LITERARY TRADITION

M. Tafuri, as well as Joseph and Julia Stefanou[8] pointed out that a very important element in the physiognomy of a city is its socio-economic and political system; that system influences the city's image, its size and development. Following this point we seek in the human actions and ideologies the foundations and causes for the physiognomy of a city.

A. Rossi[9] proposes two main parameters to help us understand the development of the city: the city's planning blueprint and its monuments; he promotes as the most important elements in a city its historical continuum and the memories that it creates in its citizens. Rob Krier[10] emphasizes the functionality and importance of the city's periphery.

G Cullen believes that the city is like a theatre stage where different scenarios are enacted between the two main protagonists, the people and the environment. He explains that the environment provokes human response in three levels:

- The visual, that experiences the city as something to look at
- The one referring to the space, and
- The one referring to the context

For K. Lynch[11], most important is the collective image of the city and he concludes in the following quality measurements regarding its appearance:

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6 URBAN DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT LABORATORY, NTUA, The Physiognomy of the Hellenic City, National Technical University of Athens Publications, Athens 2000.

7 ibid

8 STEFANOU, J., & STEFANOU, J., Description of the Image of the City, University Publications, National Technical University of Athens, 1999

9 ibid

10 ibid

Its uniqueness or its transparent form; the simplicity of its form; its continuity; the dominance of its characteristics; the clarity of its links; the way you find its orientation; its visual observation point; how conscience one is of its movements; the chronology, the names and their meanings. He puts all these measurements together and explains that the collective image of the city is built on these 5 elements:

1. Points of references
2. The Routes and Landmarks
3. The Nodes and Junctions
4. The Boundaries
5. The Districts

A series of studies published by the National Technical University of Athens, also examines the development of the physiognomy of a city. They all conclude that in order to define the physiognomy of a city one has to go through a process of 3 stages. In the first stage the natural characteristic elements of the city are the main objects of its study. We look at the physical space, its climate and the fauna that one encounters around and within its urban spaces. Next, we study the elements that have been created by the human intervention, like cultural and intellectual achievements, activities and proposals; architecture and city planning; social activities and manifestations. In the third stage all the facts gathered in the previous stages are put together to record the organization of the city and the city is mapped horizontally and vertically in order to research the framework (civil and aesthetic) that will promote and guard its special physiognomy[12].

4   THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERATURE AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

 Literature is probably a rather more powerful influence than history in the development of the myth of a city. According to Wilhelm Dilthey[13] a socially structured meaningful reality, what he calls 'Lebenswelt' – the world of the intellect – is comprised by laws and obligations invented by humans, objects and consciousness that come from a variety of sources, from architecture to moral systems and the arts, including literature. Based on the above theory we could validate the participation of literature in the social reality.

In particular we can point out that according to this conclusion, works of literature are arranging life in a orderly and meaningful way; Dickens, for example, gave hope and meaning in the abominable living conditions of the 19th century metropolis. In that respect, individual works of literature, like Dickens' novels, are parts of the greater framework of literature, in which we can include the actual novels and the lives of their creators, the study of literature and in general all the elements that are part of the literary reality. The world of literature represents a great part of human activity, that of the written artifacts, and it directs us towards a wider social activity – the creation of an acceptable society of knowledge.

Literature gains social visibility and presence in the world through its interrelation with politics, law, technology, language, education, property, individual creativity and many other cultural elements and thoughts around important human issues. In this way, literature is accepted in those mechanisms and codes that transform simple acts in socially meaningful facts.

Literature is also very flexible in retaining those elements that establish the memory and conscience of a place, because it can transgress boundaries of the past and present. The myth of a work of literature demands the existence - each time – of a special scenography, or series of different sets (landscapes, districts, neighborhoods, houses, shops, interior spaces) that will serve its purpose. In particular, the writers of the realism and naturalism literary movements are trying to capture the myth with clarity and detail regarding the novel's environment and then try to portrait it as realistically as possible. The naturalists, in particular, emphasize the environment because according to their school of aesthetics, the environment together with heredity determines the human fate.

In the novel, the writer is obliged to build the environment in order to create the foundation of his or her narrative. He or she, then, will choose either a large picture composition, like a big city which its squares, buildings, markets and traffic, or a relatively smaller picture composition. In both cases, when we talk about a realistic novel, the writer has to build a believable set for the environment. For this task, he or she does not rely solely in imagination but they will do some research and check the details in order to achieve an accurate description. The Greek writer Alexandros Kotzias describes the process:

"the writer knows well even the neighborhoods that his characters live or frequently visit – the writer has grown up, played or worked in those places, or else he or she has walked through them, he or she has somehow experienced them. Every novel is set on a specific district, a specific street. The writer, before writing begins, has clearly mapped everything in his or her imagination helped by eye witnessing the actual spaces." [14]

However, the urban environment within a novel can play multiple parts, beyond the one of the detailed stage setting; it can also be, for example, allegorical or symbolic for the narration of the myth. Different theories on narration can decode the relationship of the writer and the novel's environment. We can refer to the narration theory of the 'three', where we identify three possible narrative situations:

- The 'authorial' narrative, when the point of view is usually external
- The 'first-person' narrative, when the author and the character merge, and

11 ibid
12 CHATZOPOULOU A., The Framework for the Promotion and Protection of the Physiognomy of the Hellenic City, The Physiognomy of the Hellenic City, National Technical University of Athens, 2000
13 KERNAN, A., The Death of Literature, Princeton University, 1999
14 KOTZIAS, A. 'Alithomanes Chalkeion' – the Poetics of a Novelist, Magazine Grammata and Technes, issues 64 – 65, Athens, January-March 1989

- The personal narrative, when the point of view is that of the reader, the recipient of the story.

The novelist receives stimulation that creates the need to express themselves through the composition of the 'myth', a story. In the first instance we have the ability to estimate the impact of the image of the urban environment during the initial stimulation that in literature terms it has the romanticized name of 'inspiration'; we can then observe the development of the story that will become the 'vehicle' the writer will use in order to communicate. Especially during the formation of the story, the writer is interested in setting the space and time for it; as a result he or she will present elements of the urban space that could reveal characteristics of its physiognomy. In the novels of Charles Dickens, for example, the alternative movement of the story between the city and the countryside is part of the myth. The countryside represents tranquility, innocence, happiness and humanity. The city represents misery, violence, criminality and the struggle for life.

Following the composition of the myth, the writer then will need to progress with the narrative action and gather all the methods that they will use in order to communicate their messages to their target audience. The narrative action in turn, is also based on the author's experiences, memories, thoughts in the same level perhaps with that of the author's life determining the composition of the city's 'myth'. A characteristic example is the choice of appropriate places to set romantic love scenes. This happens based on the personal experiences of the author as well as the fashions of the time in which the writer is setting the novel. In the novel 'Yugerman' of the Greek author Karagatsi, whenever the hero wants to offer himself some moments of calmness or uninterrupted communication with his girlfriend, with whom he is really in love, he chooses the hill of Kastella in Pereas. Even in the 1980s, at a time that the neighborhoods on the hill were in decline, the area was still considered a suitable place for isolation and the meeting of lovestruck couples. Today, the area maintains the image of a place to meet and enjoy a romantic view of the coastline of Saronic bay. A series of small scale regeneration programmes carried out by the municipality of Pereas in the last decade of the 20th century have reinforced this aspect of the area's character.

To conclude, even during the narrative action we can identify the relationship of the writer with the space that he or she lives or chooses to inhabit as part of their world of the novel. In all the narrative actions the writer is being driven by their concepts, ideas and impressions which are directly or indirectly linked with their social and cultural background and position, and influence their choices – even when those choices are made unconsciously. As a result, in the novel we encounter the reflection of the social group that the writer belongs to and the social circumstances that they face while creating the novel. These elements can present us with some vivid images of the urban environment, seen through a series of prisms that add more interest, because they echo the ideologies and social situations that develop the appeal and physiognomy of a space.

On the other hand the readers of the novel have in their disposal a series of options to choose from in order to 'communicate' with the work: they can choose the indifferent – also known as the unresponsive one – reading. The interpretive reading aims to decipher the writer's intentions. The critical reading aims to classify the novel in a certain hierarchy, which sometimes is very special to each reader. Lastly, in the 'biased' reading, when the reader starts with some preconceptions towards the text that he or she then imposes during the reading of the novel. This situation kick-starts a dialectic relationship with the novel where the reader compares the novelist's words with his or her own interpretation and their experience can be significantly different from that of the writer or any other reader.

Therefore, it is quite clear that the special characteristics of a space are increased by the fact that they will create in their turn emotional and aesthetic impressions. It is also evident that the physiognomy of a city will never cease to create aesthetic and emotional stimuli, which could lead to some form of artistic manifestation. This manifestation, since it also carries the very personal element of its creator, it has a great influence on the written artifacts and the myth of the city. This influence is great not only because this manifestation impacts on the formation of the city's special elements, but because it contributes in building continuation and sustainability for its space.

Based on the above approach, the relationship between literature and the combination of the factors that form the physiognomy of a city becomes now clearly significant. Therefore, every regeneration project that wants to maintain the physiognomy of the urban space that it attempts to reinstate, when considering the abstract (immaterial) values, one should also consider the presentation of this particular space in the works of literature.

This could be achieved following two directions simultaneously:

- By searching the elements of the physiognomy of the urban environment that have influenced the novelists in building and narrating its myth.
- By exploring the ways to influence the perception or the knowledge of the reader (audience) towards the characteristic images of a city while her or she is reading a work of literature which features the city.

So, during the planning stages of a regeneration or renovation of an urban space, one will have to develop a model that will include:

a) the stimuli that the particular urban space creates to the novelists

b) the way that those stimuli are developed into the myth and its narration

c) the influence that reading a certain work of literature has on defining the physiognomy of the city

The team that will undertake to design the regeneration and redevelopment of an urban landscape should first research the image in the city's myth and written artifacts that have been created for this particular area. The elder residents as well as the 'informed' visitors have certain expectations regarding this area. They will be prepared to see how the regeneration activity will enhance or otherwise contribute in reclaiming those certain characteristics that created the physiognomy of that space. This could be achieved in different ways:

- By promoting the monuments or characteristic architecture and city planning elements

- By supporting employment activity that is connected with the regenerated area
- By organizing events that support the above actions

5   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A series of abstract (immaterial) values comprises the myth and the written artifacts of the urban landscape, two important factors for defining its physiognomy. Such factors are the history evidenced in the written and monumental, physical form (it includes also politics, economic and cultural history), folk tradition, social anthropology and literature. The latter in particular is a very strong factor in mapping the city's image, since it involves rational and emotional elements. In addition, literature is essential in promoting to the reading audience this particular image that will create expectations, emotional involvement and sightseeing interests. Especially regarding sightseeing, a recent example demonstrating the power of literature in generating interest in specific urban areas is Dan Brown's popular novel The Da Vinci Code; since the novel was published and featured some of Paris landmarks, the number of visitors in these landmarks has increased significantly.

Considering all the above, it is clear that every design of an urban regeneration or renovation project should include as study of the image of the urban space in literature.

There is the opportunity to conduct a research on the stimuli that novelists have received from a specific space as well as the ways that they developed these stimuli in their novels. In the next stage it would be interesting to measure how much impact these novels had in the reading audience and record the emotional and mental expectations they generated to real and virtual visitors. The conclusions from this type of study and research would assist the architects and city planners in making decision towards their redevelopment and regeneration plans as they will understand not only the space's functionality and physical formations but also the social and psychological impact it has in the human collective conscience.

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39