



VISUAL POLLUTION OF URBAN SPACE IN LVIV

WIZUALNE ZANIECZYSZCZENIE PRZESTRZENI MIEJSKIEJ LWOWA

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STRESZCZENIE

We współczesnym intensywnie cyfrowym świecie „wizualne zanieczyszczenie” skutkuje przestrzenną homogenizacją. Jest to zjawisko globalne przyciągające uwagę planistów. W ostatnich latach „wizualne zanieczyszczenie” krajobrazu miejskiego stało się powszechną cechą post-sowieckich miast. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje zjawisko oraz poszukuje sposobów łagodzenia skutków zanieczyszczenia wizualnego.

Słowa kluczowe: zanieczyszczenie wizualne, homogenizacja, środowisko miejskie.

ABSTRACT

In the modern intensively digitized environment visual pollution results in spatial homogenization – global phenomena attracting attention of spatial planners. Recently, visual pollution of the cityscape became a common feature of the post-soviet cities. The article investigates the causes and possible ways of mitigating the consequences of visual pollution by planning professionals.

Key words: visual pollution, homogenization, urban environment.

Urban space is a fundamental component of the city. Usually, being located between the buildings and parcels, the term *urban space* is referred to streets, squares and other public places owned by a municipality. Residing on the property border, urban spaces possess complex properties, which are regulated by the multiple urban factors. This enormous complexity of the urban space and wide range of its users makes it vulnerable to the impact of different kinds of pollution. In chemistry, pollution or contamination describe a minor component in the solution. In urban planning these terms are related to redundant objects, side effects of human activities. Beside the traditional pollutants as chemicals or toxic odors, visual contaminants look less harmful, but according to numerous researchers, visual pollution offends our vision, spatial orientation, and psychological state, damaging many aspects of human lifestyles and economic health of the communities. [1]

Human primary perception of places is normally visual. People perceive their living environment as a collage of images. The quality of visual environment is noticed on the sub-conscious level. Images we see become more or less obstructed by the '*visual garbage*' observed in the contemporary city. [2] The particular cases of visual pollution outline the contaminants, which can be classified into the following patterns:

- Media surfaces and various advertising (billboards, banners, signatures, commercial sculptures, flags etc.)
- Transportation vehicles (congestions, parking, even bicycles in some intensive places)
- Crowd (business, education, tourism)
- Soft temporary architecture (retail, entertainment, politic, religious, event oriented)
- Visual buffers (property fencing, transportation architecture, brownfields etc.)

Visual pollution is the result of oversized and unjustified consumption, which makes it one of the most important issues in the field of spatial planning. European Planning Charter of 2012 says that planning professionals nowadays have to deal with identity loss and homogenization of urban space. [3]

Nowadays, every city in post-soviet countries experience social transformations from planned to the market economy. These transitions have triggered spatial changes in urban fabric: streetscapes, squares, public places etc. During the times, when budgets are tight, hence municipalities are weak, streets are self-organized by locals. The picture, observed today in Lviv, capital of West Ukraine Region is typical pattern for numerous cities of Ukraine, Russia or Moldova.

For example, the downtown of medieval Lviv, the single Ukrainian township which is preserved entirely is the Walled City, which was changed significantly in recent years because of tourist commerce proliferation. Kiosk, terraces, advertising surfaces and numerous entertainment events turned the historic Market Square into a shopping mall. (Fig.1) Tourist boom and consequent commercialization led to the identity loss of the medieval environment. Today there is no difference whether the observer is currently located in an ancient downtown or at the suburban shopping mall. However, visual pollution by indicating places of intensive use becomes a primary interest for the planners.

Visual quality is an important aspect in urban planning. Is there a way to evaluate it? The good places are characterized by their clearness and compositional balance. From the other side, entropy law breaks city spatial hierarchies causing disorder. The urban environment is an indicator of life quality. It reflects a lot more than just an image: society structures, their strengths and weaknesses, economy situation or social cohesion, as well as inequality. Robert Venturi had described spatial transformations caused by the use of automobile in everyday life. Speed jump from pedestrian 5 km per hour to automotive 60 to 120 km per hour re-organize city elements and their scale. Roman *caryatides* moved

from the balconies to superficial billboards. [4] Commercialization in its turn transforms cityscapes. Advertisement expressed by graphic design and lifestyle, focused explicitly on utilitarian things expressed by product design, completely obscured the street elements: buildings, greenery and sidewalks.



Fig. 1 Visual contaminants contribute to the urban homogeneity. Historic Market Square of Lviv (left) is barely different from shopping mall King Cross located in the Lviv suburb (right). Photographs of the author, 2012.

One of the local urban design projects dedicated to the Euro 2012 Football Championship, activated by the Lviv City Council was looking for the alignment of

advertisement along the bazaar commercial street located across city regional railway station. Municipal and bazaar authorities were hoping to introduce policy which would limit the use of visual advertisement. However it was extremely complicated to apply any rules for about 200 small stores owners, while everyone believes in sufficiency of the signature or advertising banner. Instead of finding 'appropriate' graphic design and justification policies, we proposed to plant a tree every 12 meters along the street in order to improve the streetscape and additionally creating regulated parallel parking spots, helping to solve two planning issues simultaneously. Trees were supposed not only to prevent motor contamination but also to diminish visual pollution caused by advertisement obstructing up to 50% of streetscape. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2 The fragment of the Bazaar Street before and after (design proposal) introducing the trees. Photographs and design material of the author, Lviv, 2011.

Mentioned visual contaminants accompany almost every given aspect of human activity. How does it work? It might be the question of quantity. In accordance to biological analogy, thousands of viruses and bacteria species are constantly present in the human body, but to cause the disease they need to reach higher concentrations. Similarly, urban pollutants need to exceed certain levels in order to distort human perception, causing negative consequences.

How will streetscapes of tomorrow look like? Long time ago Fra Carnevale pictured utopian noble street at his painting of *The Ideal City* (Fig.3) where nothing obscures Revival architecture on the square. Considering contemporary multiple actors mentioned scenario have a little chance to be implemented. On the other hand, dystopian movie *Idiocracy* presents its highly contaminated, homogenized and commercialized city of tomorrow, which shows us the possible result of contemporary 'Disney Land Urbanism' in some 2053. (Fig.4)



Fig. 3. The Ideal City by *Fra Carnevale*, between 1480 and 1484. This extraordinary panel exemplifies Renaissance ideals of urban planning and offers a model of the architecture and sculpture that would be commissioned by a virtuous ruler who cares for the welfare of the citizen



Fig. 4. Cityscape from *Idiocracy*, movie by Michael Judge, Fox, 2006

Nowadays, in the highly mediated and digitized city, when the number of the objects affecting urban image had multiplied significantly, planning control became more complex and less predictable. The mentioned method to calculate visual pollution levels is applicable for computing the acceptable limits of contamination within urban space from particular viewpoints. This will help to estimate regulating parameters of the protected environment for municipal spatial planning and urban design policy. For an example, the maximum amount of advertisement may be limited relating to street frontage and according to the storage of the particular building. Using this method planners would control the acceptable 'pollution levels' from one district to another.

According to the contemporary standards, quality of the visual environment has the same importance as quality of drinking water or air. Subsequently, the future highly decentralized city will depend on a good local spatial planning policy and urban design for its every fragment.

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