

DECODING THE SIGNIFICANCES OF BUILT LANDSCAPE PROFILES

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Abstract

Perceived from a distance, any built landscape emits a specific energy personified by the silhouettes of its profiled buildings on the background of the environment. Overall images of human settlements have appeared in medieval artwork, being further perfected. These representations had a symbolic value, contributing to strengthening the respect for tradition and the local history. Towards the middle of the 20th century, architect G.M. Cantacuzino created several sketches of built landscape profiles, both historic and modern. The theme of this paper is based on these sketches. The research aims to argue that by elaborating certain built landscape profiles and then by decoding, analysing and by comparative assessment of the meanings transmitted by silhouettes, valuable information can be obtained about the essence, identity, personality and specificity of those human settlements. Research has been made on the basis of selected sketches of Cantacuzino and on the basis of the creation of original profile sketches of historical settlements. The arguments in this paper on decoding the profiles of built landscape contribute to highlighting a valuable tool useful for landscape researches and urbanism studies.

Key words: decoding, features, landscape, profiles, settlements.

INTRODUCTION

It is important to understand that human settlements can be considered as "the most conclusive possession" of a natural space and its transformation according to the aspirations and needs of the respective human society (Gheorghiu, 2002).

Analysing the history of an epoch and its influence on the evolution of urban tissue and the built framework, we observe that some important political-social-economic-religious-cultural processes in the local history are imprinted in the volumetric silhouette of human settlements.

Perceived from a distance, any built landscape emits a special message, personified by the building's overall silhouettes.

Based on judicious documentation, studying stamps, manuscripts, frescoes, paintings, photographs and old maps, we can sketch or draw the outline of built landscape profile, extracting and deciphering certain characteristic features, essential for the respective human settlement, such as identity, personality, specificity and value.

We can also discover synthetic features of the environmental elements involved in historical

evolution: the natural environment, the built environment, and the socio-economic-cultural environment (Dascălu and Cojocariu, 2016).

The idea of this work has its roots in the historical and modern built profiles, drawn by the architect George Matei Cantacuzino in his youth. Sketching the silhouettes, he tried to characterize the historical personality of human settlements he visited and loved. His creations were impregnated with great passion for the built landscape, nature playing a very important role in his life (Dascălu, 2017).

In one of the volumes of Art and Criticism Dictionaries entitled Symmetry, written between 1939 and 1946, the architect manages to define the profile in general, either in art or in architecture, urbanism or landscaping: „The profile is the line that includes the appearance of an object (or a settlement) ... It is a line that expresses its self schematically ... The profile suggests forms without expressing them ... and tends to ideogram” (Vasilescu, 1993).

So at first glance, a built landscape profile transmits a synthetic idea about that human settlement and its inhabitants.

In this context the paper aims to demonstrate that certain features specific to historic cities, such as defensive or aggressive aspect,

dominant or peaceful ambience etc., can be clearly decoded by drawing the general profile of a built landscape, outlined on the sky and on the background of the natural setting.

In order to extract more detailed information from the silhouette of a profile, it is necessary to study the history of the places but also to analyse the environmental elements involved in the evolution of those human settlements. Besides all this, on the basis of written documents and old images, it is necessary to create several profiles on successive periods. The information extracted through sketching and through correlated and comparative research can finally reveal unexpected features that could be necessary in the contemporary studies of urban and landscape development of localities and territories.

The ideas and the research in this work are original. No other similar research is known.

Different studies about city abstraction as icons or lines and its skylines have been aimed at either clarifying certain aspects of aesthetic or psychological perception of the urban or natural landscape, or pursuing certain socio-spatial aspects.

Of these studies we mention Gassner's (Gassner, 2009) specifying the difference between his study and ours. Gassner-type studies and sketches aim to improve the city's current silhouettes, impacting cognitively and socially.

We underline that our research aims to provide a tool useful for deciphering the study of historical evolution of human settlements, correlating the local history, the natural chosen location and the historical silhouettes offered by different authors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Two profiles outlined by G.M. Cantacuzino for the cities of San Gimignano and New York-Manhattan were selected for analysis.

The analysis investigate the correlation between the historical truth based on the documentation and the profiles drawn by Cantacuzino.

Based on the documentary material, the reality and the veracity of the synthetic features declared by the architect and decipherable in his drawings, were analyzed and substantiated for these profiles.

The demonstration continued with the researches of two case studies of historical cities from France, chosen as a result of documentary research: the city of Carcassonne, which has some resemblance to San Gimignano and the small settlement of Castelnaud-le-Lez.

For these settlements were studied historical frescoes, paintings and engravings representing eloquently the built frame and their natural landscape. The old images have been checked and compared with current photos and images. In order to complete the decoding of these settlements personality it was necessary a documentary on the history of places and on environmental elements.

The elaboration of original profiles, based on selected paintings and photographs, was the most important part of the research, contributing to the deciphering of the personality of the studied settlements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first analyses were made on the basis of selected silhouettes from G.M. Cantacuzino's drawings and on the basis of the elaboration of historical settlement profiles, after the research on the history of the places and on the environmental elements.

Regarding deciphering the meanings of the lines and forms, there is a wide range of aesthetic studies correlated with the psychological ones. According to these studies, the sharp, agitated, angular lines can be the result of either conflicting states or dynamic tendencies (from natural, artificial or human environment), while the sinuous, with quiet curves unfolded suggests situations of stability and peaceful development (Reid, 2007).

There were chosen two silhouettes for which the architect Cantacuzino finds similarities in terms of styling of the profile line and the size scale of the constructions: San Gimignano from Italy (Figure 1) and Manhattan the heart of New York USA (Figure 2).

In the dictionary *Symmetry - Books and Criticism* Cantacuzino draws attention that „San Gimignano preceded by several centuries the American ambitions... By comparing the two profiles, we can be convince that it is both ambition and pride” (Vasilescu, 1993).



Figure 1. The profile of San Gimignano city, sketched by G.M. Cantacuzino (source: processed from Vasilescu, 1993)



Figure 2. The profile of New York City, sketched by G.M. Cantacuzino (source: processed from Vasilescu, 1993)

San Gimignano is a medieval Italian town whose historic nucleus is protected by UNESCO. The purpose of the documentation was to check why San Gimignano might have a proud and high-aimed profile.

A first observation, extracted from the history of architecture and urbanism, is the fact that, in general, ascending architectural volumes suggests ambition and pride (Gheorghiu, 2009). Despite this fact, history demonstrates often that ascending features are chosen to be expressed because impressive and massive volumes can demoralize any attacks of enemies (Gheorghiu, 2009).

Related to these two possibilities, studying the conditions for choosing the location of the early urban core, we noted the special defense possibilities were offered by the local relief, proving their importance. The city is located on one of the hills of Tuscany, therefore the site have a good natural defense. As a result of the research, we discovered a painting of George Howard at the end of the 19th century, clearly distinguishing the territorial strategic location, the city's silhouette being legible on the impressive hillside (George Howard's watercolour „La città della belle torre-San Gimignano”, 1877, exhibited at London, Grosvenor Gallery).

Analyzing the representations of San Gimignano over time, we find that characteristic features such as massive and ascending volumetric trends have been perceived and presented similarly from Renaissance time to the 20th century, indicating that the city has always developed in the same architectural and constructive manner. The following images were selected and compared: the frescoes of the saints Gimignano and Fina, who both hold and protect the town of San Gimignano in their arms (exhibited at Pinacoteca of San Gimignano Palazzo Comunale); a Benozzo Gozzoli's Renaissance fresco (exhibited at the apse of the Sant Agostino-San Gimignano chapel); a picture in the Cubism manner of 1912 by Pyotr Konchalovsky (exhibited at State Russian Museum of Saint Petersburg).

As mentioned above, the fortified volumetric expression of the city could suggest a defensive attitude. But, investigating the history of the city we discover that during the medieval period there was a rivalry between two noble families that dominated economically the city. This conflict has generated the competitive construction of buildings with higher towers, more and more grandiose, in the egotic attempt to leave a trace in the history of the city.

In connection with Cantacuzino's comparison of San Gimignano and New York, we examined many artistic representations of the two cities and selected two artists whose works, in Expressionist manner, crystallize the essence of the profiles: San Gimignano by M.C. Escher painted in 1922 and Manhattan by Howard Cook painted in 1930. The comparison of their drawings is eloquent to distinguish the same ascending traits in which the message of ambition and pride is transmitted.

Research has continued with the study of New York history, which has highlighted that over time the city has tended to play an increasingly important economic role in the USA. Consequently, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the first skyscrapers in New York appeared to be the tallest, in competition with Chicago buildings for example.

The tendency to build upright has increased over time, making Manhattan the heart of New York and the symbol of USA economic power. Unfortunately, this trend is tragically linked to

the 2011 attacks that aimed at destroying the volumetric symbols of New York at the time - the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

In conclusion, these researchs on the San Gimignano and New York-Manhattan silhouettes demonstrates the veracity of G.M. Cantacuzino's assertion. The message of both profiles is aggressive, revealing the desire for domination in a competition of economic power.

In order to deepen the argumentation about the sketching and deciphering of built landscape profiles, the analyses were completed by two original case studies, with the extraction and verification of the characteristic features of some historic French cities.

The settlements selected on the basis of the documentation were Carcassone and Castelnaule-Lez. In order that analyzes can be compared as clearly and without confusion, the most important criterion of the selection was that the two cities must be different as human settlements personality, in terms of environmental, volumetric and urban tissue elements.

An examination of characteristic images for these cities was made and as a result, a few vintage paintings, photographs and aerial images were selected. The old images were checked and compared to the actual photos and on their basis the profiles of the two cities were sketched. It was also necessary a documentation regarding the elements of the environment and on the evolution of the historical stages.

The first case study is the historic city of Carcassone, which has some resemblance to San Gimignano because it is fortified and has a massive volume dominated by many towers.

It is a city located in southern France on the hills of Languedoc. In contrast to the San Gimignano evolution, Carcassone has a rather agitated history with tragic episodes.

The medieval citadel was built on the basis of a preconceived urban plan being at present protected by UNESCO.

It was erected in the thirteenth century in order to be an intangible fortress to defend the ever-changing regional medieval frontiers, attacked by infighting regional.

The analysis of the historical pictures of the citadel highlights the fact that the ascending characteristic features were similarly

represented over time, from the 13th century to the 19th century, with small variations due to the construction of new buildings, but raised in the same style to keep the city's personality. The most representative images are the following: „Expulsion of the inhabitants from Carcassone in 1209” image from *Grandes Chroniques de France* 1415; „La Délivrance des emmurés de Carcassone” painting of Jean-Paul Laurens 1879; old maps of Carcassone. The elaboration of the profile was based on several selected, compared and overlaid photos (Figures 3 a and b).



Figure 3a. Drawing the Carcassone profile by overlapping the picture. Graphics Cojocariu M. (source: <https://www.blog.thelittleprince.com/a-little-prince-shop-in-the-medieval-city-of-carcassone-franc>)

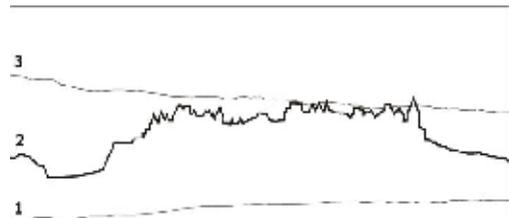


Figure 3b. Final profile of Carcassone (source: Graphics Cojocariu M.)

The energetic line of the silhouette highlights features characteristic of a defensive urban organization. This strategic feature it is certified by historical documents and is confirmed by the qualities of landscape elements: the city is located on top of the hill, with a significant difference in level compared to the rest of the unfortified settlement, located to the left and right of the fortress (Figure 3b). The three important lines of the profile are: 1- the line from which the perception was made; 2- the citadel profile; 3- the background of the hills. The image of the profile on the background of the surrounding hills makes a valuable asset of the medieval settlement,

namely its adaptation to the natural environment. The line no. 2 stands out through the multitude of defense towers, visible in the density of the zigzags lines that evokes anxiety of the defensive status.

The second chosen case study is the small settlement of Castelnaud-le-Lez, located also in southern France, on the river Lez, in the Occitan region.

Research on the evolution of the site shows that, dating from antiquity, the settlement was a village with a quiet history and a continuous economic development.

In terms of the natural environment, the landscape is hilly with rich vegetation.

The overall image of the old area is picturesque both as buildings and as a natural landscape. From the historical images were selected, as the most representative, two paintings done by the impressionist artist Frédéric Bazille in 1864 and 1868 (Figure 4a). Both paintings have on their background a gentle image of the quiet settlement. Checking and comparing paintings with current photos revealed that the old 19th century core still retained its appearance.



Figure 4a. The final selected painting of Frederic Bazille - View of the Village of Castelnaud-le-Lez, 1868 (source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/frederic-bazille/view-of-the-village-of-castelnaud-le-lez-1868>)

The profile sketch was created by overlapping the 1868 painting (Figures 4b and 4c).

The three major lines for the basic features are: 1-the river line; 2-the built profile; 3-the natural

landscape with hilly relief, the river and the vegetation (Figures 4b, 4c).

The final profile reveals the harmonious integration of all construction into the landscape, suggesting both the beauty of the peaceful life and the attachment to nature. These are the most important features that have contributed to the development of the locality, keeping a tradition of respect for history and the natural environment.

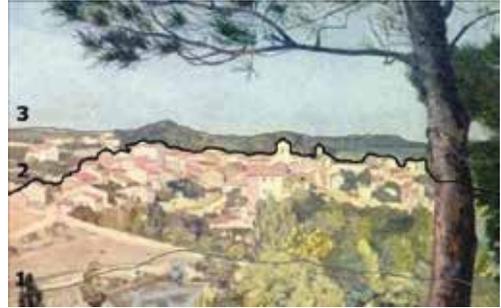


Figure 4b. Drawing the Castelnaud-le-Lez profile by overlapping the picture. (source: Graphics Cojocariu M.)



Figure 4c. Removal of background paint for profile decoding. (source: Graphics Cojocariu M.)

These studies and researches revealed that by analyzing only the old images and the present photos as a whole we cannot decipher all subtle features.

Consequently, it was necessary to draw some original profiles based on scientific documentation.

These analyze, in their entirety, highlighted the features of the personality of the studied settlements, impregnated by the history of the places and their natural landscape.

CONCLUSIONS

The sketching and deciphering of built landscape profiles must be based on comparative studies and analyses of the natural environment, of the built and of socio-economic-cultural environment.

Elaborating silhouettes is especially useful if it is created by following the succession of various historical periods.

The decoding, analysis and comparative evaluation of the meanings transmitted by them, generates valuable information about the essence, identity, personality and specificity of human settlements.

The research in this paper provides an original and particularly useful tool for studies of urban and landscape evolution of human settlements.

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