

ROMANIAN SOCIETY: ACTUALITY AND CHALLENGE

DEFINITORY ELEMENTS OF CRAIOVA IN THE OPINIONS OF CITIZENS

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Abstracts: Analyzes regarding the urban spaces were carried out according to the principles established by the local mayors, according to the recommendations of the specialists or the imitation of the success of other urban communities. The present study reveals the characteristics that influence the opinions of the citizens of the city in accordance with certain aspects. The recommendations and the appreciation of certain representative objectives are correlated in subsidiary with the valorization of certain areas of the city according to the real estate interests or the social status. Living close to the symbolic objectives of the city and the neighborhoods associated with well-being and social success are aspects that cannot be neglected in urban planning.

The need to expand the public spaces of cities involves investments in all areas of cities, in order to initiate the idea of crystallizing the community spirit around public spaces of general interest. In such situations there are rejections of investments from personal residence.

This article is based on exploratory research conducted in Craiova on the population's assessments of identity objectives and city areas.

Keywords: urban sociology, gentrification, neighborhoods, architecture, urban symbolism.

INTRODUCTION

The study of urban communities is a challenge given the diversity of cities in contemporary societies. The complexity of the study of the urban environment is an obstacle in the way of standardizing the methods of research and urban planning, there is always the need to adapt to specific realities. Cities have emerged and developed in parallel with the industrialization of modern societies, which includes them in the research object of several disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, geography, political economy, etc. The conclusions of research resulting from the application of methods specific to each scientific discipline have a double perspective: when viewed from the perspective of each discipline reveals

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certain features depending on the objectives of the scientific discipline, while when viewed as a whole, will allow integrator dependent on the ability of the researcher or research team to collect and correlate knowledge from multidisciplinary sources. The consequences of such a heterogeneous approach and the proposal of a relational principle by using the flexibility of independent scientific results was put forward by architect Gordon Cullen¹ in order to create attractive cities, full of life and that pleasantly impress visitors.

The development of cities is influenced by the economic system, sales markets, investments made, the level of education of the population, etc. Periods of economic growth or decline manifest themselves on cities, economic crises affect each city, with more or less extensive effects. Thus, the study of cities involves the establishment of objectives that include architecture, engineering, class structure, spatial distribution of the population, environment, quality of life or crime. We are currently witnessing the multidisciplinary training of specialists working in the field of urban development and planning: „some architects today are well versed in engineering, the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, as well urban planning”². Given the multitude of perspectives on approaching the urban environment, the term *urban theory* is already a generic term that includes a diverse and complex set of approaches. It can be considered a branch of social theory, given the distinction between urban and non-urban social life³.

The urban space corresponds to the needs and expectations of the population, and the correspondence is determined by their defining elements. The population structures its opinions according to several criteria, affected by subjective attitudes, determined by the specific way of conducting urban processes. We are witnessing a permanent dynamic of structuring and restructuring the attitude of the population depending on the city or the residential area.

The analysis of the urban space reveals the connection between the culture and the structuring of the local space. Kevin Lynch pointed out that the physical shape of cities is irrelevant outside the city (apart), the effects on the city are dependent on local culture, which plays a key role in preserving, modifying and developing value systems. Thus, the material elements do not have a direct influence on society. For example, intervention to change the environment has no effect on society, but where values and society have changed, there have also been changes in the environment. The aesthetic values of the population of a city are not explicit. They are formed over time, being influenced by multiple factors that contribute to the social hierarchy. Starting from the conclusion of the predominance of society and values over physical dimensions, such as the form of Kevin Lynch is that a city cannot be designed⁴.

¹ Gordon Cullen, *The concise townscape*, Architectural Press, Taylor&Francis Ltd., 1971, p. 7.

² Mattei Dogan, *Sociology among the social sciences*, in E. Borgata, R. J.V. Montgomery, *Enciclopedia of Sociology- Second Edition*, MacMillan Reference USA, 2000, p. 2922.

³ Simon Parker, *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience*, Taylor & Francis, 2004, p. 4.

⁴ Kevin Lynch, *A Theory of Good City Form*, The MIT Press Ltd, USA 1981, pp. 99–108.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF KNOWLEDGE OF URBAN LIFE

The effort to explain the opinions of the urban population will reveal specific elements of the city. The heterogeneity of the urban population will favor the permanent reconfiguration of attitudes, values and the way in which certain areas of the city are valued or devalued. The existence of identity landmarks, such as buildings with special architecture, full of history, built by people who influenced the permanence and development of the city, complemented by other landmarks with symbolic value such as monuments, places of leisure is the guarantee of a value system that guides the opinions of the population.

A theoretical approach to the urban environment is hampered by the current complexity of cities and the problems generated by the very existence of this type of human settlements. Theoretical approaches are the result of the involvement of different researchers and thinkers “engaged with the urban complex, and how cities can best be conceptualized as integrated economies, as sites of social and political identity, as territories of conflict, and as incubators of innovation and creativity is vital if the long term future, not just of urban communities, but of global society as a whole is to be secured”⁵.

Architectural visions are organized according to structuring elements of urban planning. For example, G. Cullen issued a theory according to which urban space must be structured according to optical dimensions, place and content⁶. The three dimensions involve the development of an *art of relationship*, which is in fact the art of architecture, which involves taking over all the existing elements and transposing them into a story that unfolds before the eyes of citizens and visitors. Cities are researched from several scientific disciplines, and in the development of cities work a series of specialists who work hard. However, in Cullen’s opinion, if the city “appears dull, uninteresting and soulless, then it is not fulfilling itself. It has failed”⁷. The scientific approach is based on obtaining environments, which will not solve particular problems. It is at this point that we can talk about the flexibility of scientific solutions, given the fact that science cannot relate all components, which allows the orientation towards different values and standards. Sight is the sense that has both a practical and a psychological utility: it evokes memories, experiences and other sensitive emotions, whenever this sense is stimulated⁸.

The optical vision is based on the fact that pedestrians are exposed to a succession of images of the city landscape, which reveals their identity. This succession of streets, spaces, monuments and buildings is called *Serial Vision*⁹. The meanings of this sequence create emotions that are fixed in memory. The goal of

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Gordon Cullen, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–11.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

urban planning is, in Cullen's opinion, to manipulate the elements of the city in a structure that creates the image of a lively, attractive and pleasant city for visitors and tourists. Monotony sets in quickly in the case of long streets, which have a low impact on emotions due to the repetitiveness of the urban landscape. The human mind reacts to contrasts, differences and juxtaposed images that create a meaningful image of the city. This chain of successive images involves an effort to transform into a story (drama) that reveals the emotional identity of the city. Cullen's creations were aimed at ensuring the connection between urban spaces in a *coherent drama*¹⁰.

The second dimension analyzed by Cullen is *the place*¹¹, understood as a way of positioning the passer in the environment. The reactions to the environment and the position that an individual occupies in space is important in terms of the sensations it can have. The design of buildings, the city, design elements, green spaces, etc., must include aspects related to the instinctive reactions that people have in certain situations. Open, narrow, high or low spaces have a consistent influence on people's feelings. The way the city is distributed in the natural environment, its exploitation according to the place that the individual has in relation to different elements of the city is a permanent effort to structure the city.

The third defining dimension¹² is the content, which is defined by several aspects: colors, textures, sizes, styles, features, personality and uniqueness. The mission of harmonization is somewhat difficult in the case of old cities where we discover old elements overlapping architectural elements and styles specific to different periods of time, which gives the contemporary look of a mix of styles, materials and sizes.

Approaching or moving away from identity areas greatly influences the positive or negative attitude of citizens. However, this distance can be offset by other characteristics of the area or neighborhood, such as comfort, the quality of housing, the association with the image of luxury and elitist standards and, last but not least, the idea of an exclusive area.

The rationality of the labels and definitions assumed are questioned by certain authors¹³ due to the relationship between the gentrification process and the accumulation of capital that ends with the stigmatization of certain areas, neighborhoods or city streets. Even in the comparison between cities we can identify the appearance of stigma related to a radical form of "local patriotism". Research conducted in urban areas has revealed that behind the scenes of these opinion-forming processes are interests related to capital accumulation, profitability of investments and ensuring a level of growth of real estate markets by exploiting price and rent inequality. This relationship is less highlighted as a result of research in Romania, but the regeneration of urban space also results from the processes of

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹³ Kirsten Paton, "Beyond legacy: Backstage stigmatisation and 'trickle up' politics of urban regeneration", *The Sociological Review Monograph*, 2018, Vol. 66(4) 920.

demonization of the population in certain neighborhoods, following which the land is prepared for future investments.

In the case of Craiova, it is found that the most frequent investments were made in marginal areas of the city, where land prices were lower. We are witnessing assessments built on several criteria, complemented by points of view resulting from investment planning. Following a study carried out in July–August 2021, it was found that the city's areas are assessed according to living conditions, personal safety, proximity to key city institutions, quality of neighborhood, etc. Economic opportunities are also landmarks that ensure the attractiveness of the city, contributing greatly to the quality of life.

Urban development plans are largely defined by two perspectives: the first refers to the specific objectives of urban development strategies, such as attractiveness, quality of housing, economic development, education systems, health and a high level of sense of security of citizens. The second perspective results from the diversity of cities and defining features. Although the general objectives are common to all urban communities in the world, the way to adapt the strategies to the existing conditions requires a sustained effort of specialists familiar with the local specifics. The evolutionary differences of cities in each society are due to differences in financial, economic and social capital, which are interdependent and combine in countless ways. The success of development policies is conditioned by local factors, even if the successful models of other cities are applied.

In the theoretical examples presented above we find that the city has been defined in different periods by specialists in several fields of activity through the prism of the social group, in which people are priorities in relation to urban space, being what values it through the system of values imposes urban development policies. Probably a phenomenon that may seem paradoxical adds to the complexity of the phenomena specific to the urban environment: “Despite the physical proximity of city people, social distance prevails”¹⁴.

SHORT PRESENTATION OF CRAIOVA

Craiova is the administrative center of Dolj County, being the largest and most developed city in the entire region of Oltenia. At the regional level it has the most developed economic, health, educational and cultural infrastructure. In January 2021 Craiova had 296,359 inhabitants¹⁵, being the sixth city in Romania in terms of population. The area of the city is 81.41 km² (position 109 as a national

¹⁴ E.S. Bogardus, *Social Distance in the City* in Ernest W. Burgess, *The Urban Community*, The University Chicago Press, USA, 1926, p. 48.

¹⁵ National Institute of Statistics, *Tempo Online* Database, <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, consulted on 12.09.2021

area)¹⁶, hence a density of 3640 inhabitants/km². The metropolitan area has about 420,000 inhabitants¹⁷. It is affected, like the entire Romanian society, by the demographic decline, losing between 2011–2020 4.9% of the population, due to the negative natural and migratory balances.

At the county level it offers professional opportunities for most of the county's workforce. The city's economy has a significant impact on the county and attracting labor, unemployment being totally different between county and city: at county level unemployment in June 2021 was 16171 people, while in Craiova were unemployed 1480 people.

The share of unemployment offers only an analytical perspective, but the economic environment is below the national average. The Oltenia region is characterized by a lower average salary than at national level, being only on the penultimate place. The share of employment in agriculture is high, but this is only an area of subsistence: wage labor is underused, with the lowest number of active enterprises in the field and the lowest wages. Thus, the low unemployment is due to the employment of a part of the labor force available in agriculture, an economic activity that offers only the possibility of a low standard of living.

The construction and real estate transactions sector, which plays an important role in boosting the processes of gentrification and urban regeneration, has a much lower dynamics compared to the national average. The number of companies in these fields of activity is lower and the salary incomes are lower than in the other regions of the country.

These statistics generally describe the specifics of the largest city in the Oltenia region. However, the city influences both Dolj County and the other five counties of the region, largely covering the needs related to the health system and higher education. Economic and social data reveal trends of positive development at a slower pace, which influences the critical or hopeful assessments of the population.

APPRECIATIONS OF THE POPULATION

Data on population assessments were collected in July–August 2021 through a sociological survey conducted online, to which 331 people responded. The approach was exploratory and represents a first stage in a series of extensive research.

The processing of the collected data revealed a predominantly optimistic attitude of the population: a percentage of 45.6% of respondents indicated that the city of Craiova is in the top ten cities in the country, and 35.6% indicated that the

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Dolj County Directorate of Statistics, <https://dolj.insse.ro/>, site consulted on 12.09.2021

city of Craiova is in the first five in the country. A percentage of 14.2% expressed negative opinions, appreciating that the city is not in the top ten cities of the country. This indicates that for a large part of the inhabitants the attractiveness of the city is high. The analysis of the data collected by gender of respondents showed that women are more optimistic about the attractiveness of the city, a percentage of 4.8% indicated that the city is in the top ten, and 38.0% that it is in the top five. Only 9.8% mentioned that the city is not in the top five. In contrast, men mentioned 42.5% that the city is in the top ten cities, a percentage of 33.3% mentioned that the city is in the top five and 22.5% that the city does not rank in the top ten cities in Romania. This difference highlights a high level of subjective interpretation of attractiveness.

Depending on the age, opinions related to age specificity were collected. Those over the age of 50 mentioned 58.8% in the top ten cities of the country, 29.4% placed the city in the top five attractive cities of the country, and 11.3% excluded it from the top ten. Similar options were put forward by those aged 40–49, who placed the city in the top ten at 52.2%.

The most optimistic respondents come from those aged 18–29, considering the 38.6% who mentioned that the city of Craiova is in the top five cities of Romania. It is found that as you get older, the percentage of optimists towards the city decreases: 36.2% of those aged 30–39 considered that the city of Craiova is in the top five of the country, an option indicated by 32.8% of those aged 40–49 years and only 29.4% of those over 50 years.

People living in suburbs and metropolitan areas tend to be more optimistic about appreciating the city's attractiveness.

The elements of attractiveness of a city, indicated from a theoretical perspective, are the places of leisure (23.37%), the architecture of the city (19.82%), the possibility of obtaining a job (13.29%). The existence of universities in the proportion of 11.11% was indicated on the fourth position, and the opportunities for the business environment were mentioned on the fifth position.

In relation to this theoretical hierarchy, currently the city of Craiova has as attractions the places of leisure (34.45%), the architecture of the city (28.30%) and the existence of universities.

This structure of the answers reveals the differences between the ideal situation and the one perceived as real. By referring to the opinions collected, we also deduce the difference between what the locals' value when analyzing the city, probably by comparison with other cities visited and the reality they find in the case of Craiova.

From these differences can be extracted principles that can substantiate urban development policies.

1. Comparison between ideal and real characteristics

The ideal characteristic	Percentage	The real characteristic	Percentage
Leisure places	23,37	Leisure places	34,45
Architecture	19,82	Architecture	28,30
Job opportunities	13,29	The existence of universities	15,82
The existence of universities	11,11	Job opportunities	5,62
Economic opportunities offered to the business environment	10,65	Economic opportunities offered to the business environment	4,75
The effervescence of cultural activities	7,45	The effervescence of cultural activities	4,75

Source: The authors.

The mentioned hierarchy is identical for the first two positions, where the leisure places and the architecture of the city are criteria that are also valid in the case of the city of Craiova. Higher percentages for actual characteristics indicate the appreciation of the characteristic even if it is not indicated in the respondents' evaluation grid.

In the case of higher percentages of the characteristics considered ideal, the differences between what should be and what the inhabitants of the city do not identify are highlighted.

The percentages of each characteristic reveal a concentration of them in the first positions, which denotes the existence of a small number of characteristics that contribute to the attractiveness of the city.

The first position is due to Nicolae Romanescu Park, considered the largest natural park in Eastern Europe. The following landmarks that contribute both to leisure and to the architecture of the city are the Botanical Garden and the Jean Mihail Palace. These are also the main objectives that are recommended to be visited by tourists or people passing through Craiova.

In connection with the gentrification process, which was mentioned at the beginning of this article, the devalued areas are highlighted by the recommendation to be avoided. In the first place in the hierarchy of negative evaluations is the area *Fața Luncii, Hanul Roșu și Mofleni*, mentioned by 25.91% of the respondents. In second place are the suburbs of the city, as stated by 20.12% of respondents, and in third place is the Brestei–Canal area, as indicated by 13.72% of respondents. A short distance away is the Romanești neighborhood, which met 11.28% of the options. In the other areas of the city, percentages not exceeding 10% were accumulated.

Land and housing prices are influenced by such views. Thus, the highest prices of land and housing are practiced in the city center, after which there is a downward trend in the periphery, but with certain exceptions in residential areas where new housing has been raised which has led to higher prices.

CONCLUSIONS

Through this study we sought to reveal how the development of the city follows a certain course, determined by rational phenomena, such as the economic environment, urban planning achieved through public policies and the perception of citizens. The optimism expressed by the citizens differs from neighborhood to neighborhood and is influenced by subjective points of view that do not always reveal the reality of the city.

The population's appreciations towards the city's identity elements are focused by a small number of objectives, which cannot fully cover the city's need for attractiveness. Moreover, as a local feature, various names are used for the same purposes, which causes confusion and decreases the interest of tourists: "Romanescu" Park is also mentioned as "People's", "Bibescu", and "Jean Mihail" Palace is also mentioned as "Art Museum", "Jean Mihail House" etc.

The promotion of unique names for the defining objectives of the city favors the creation of a unitary value system compared to the most valuable elements of the city.

Also, a special case is the Youth Park, appreciated by some respondents, but which is considered a dangerous area by some residents. A percentage of 4.27% of respondents indicated that they especially recommend avoiding this objective of the city, which makes public investment in an area adjacent to the area considered the most dangerous of the city "red zone" in accordance with the principles generating city maps: crime, insecurity, etc. Although violent events are not common in this park and there is no talk of aggression or theft, the negative references actually refer to the neighborhood considered threatening. The only constant in the area is not the violence against those in other areas of the cities, but the fact that it is inhabited by a poor population with a low level of education. From this point of view we find that we can talk about an area with "toxic properties" that influences the attitude towards a "common good". From this perspective we conclude that the references loaded with subjectivism related to the value of real estate are also transmitted on public spaces.

The analysis of the factors that generated the respondents' opinions are the opinions regarding the elements of attractiveness of a city, the recommendations and warnings they would make to a tourist and the appreciation of some buildings with symbolic value of the city. In correlation with the opinions expressed and the distribution of negative opinions according to the respondents' residence, we find that the "toxic neighborhood" is an element of demonization of spaces that over time can gain symbolic value and increase the attractiveness of the area.