

About the Issue of the Urban Composition Concept.

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Summary

A city nowadays has become a really complex and multi-layered structure containing the features of a phenomenon. It is a formation that has transformed or forced to rethinking many “standardized” urbanistic theories and approaches. By its shape and content it is a dynamic, constantly changing and multiple system related to other larger urban structures forming larger-scale urbanized networks. Due to such peculiarities, the city and its aesthetic qualities can no longer be judged and defined by the categories of the 19th and 20th centuries. Its issues and problems have long ago trespassed the boundaries of a single scientific discipline. Nevertheless, the issue of urban aesthetics and composition still remains very relevant, especially bearing in mind recent global socio-cultural conditions and the related urban unification, as, following the intense wave of urbanization, many Lithuanian towns, with the capital Vilnius preeminently, have changed a lot, both on “the outside” (cityscape) and “the inside” (local visual perception) within the last decade. Many examples of such recently transformed towns in Lithuania just testify the fact that the issue of aesthetics and composition has been almost or totally ignored in further developing or newly shaping the centers of such towns. By exploring quite a large number of foreign and Lithuanian sources of urban theory and examples of urban space and composition analysis (these are presented in the attached bibliography), the article author aims at reviewing and analyzing the categories of urban composition, its theoretical approaches and insights. This text is a presentation of interim results of the larger research. Some theses and concepts have been also presented in different scientific conferences and publications, in the Lithuanian and English languages.

Generally speaking, the urban composition issues are directly related to the aesthetics of both urban layout structure and spatial structure. With varying sizes of cities and their separate parts, means and laws of composition applied in the cities are recognized in different ways, too. Yet, speaking about the city structure by aesthetic categories, questions of different levels (or scales) and character must be solved really often. As urban composition encompasses all these levels, its different concepts and handlings exist. They can be subjective and objective. The larger the scale of the object (urban, architectural or design piece), the less subjective aspects it contains, and vice versa, the smaller the object, the more artistic features may be found in it and thus subjectivity. Only on the urban-level scale (see Fig. 1) a clear element of artistic creation appears and subjective evaluation criteria could be applied.

The other side of the problem of the urban composition notion also rests upon the fact that a city has not always been treated as a result of some artistic creation. This is especially true

when speaking about the early and medieval towns, which were developing spontaneously and naturally. Signs of artistic formation are very rare and can hardly be found in the spatial structures of such towns. Particular compositional – artistic laws or canons had any influence on the formation of such towns, with functional, utilitarian requirements and the site location and socio-cultural characteristics in respect of the natural framework, socio-economic conditions, etc. standing in the first place. But could such examples be defined by the category of urban composition – this question still remains open. The key argument in discussing this issue could be the relationship between aesthetics and composition in such towns, or, in other words, how much the naturally arranged layout and spatial structure in this kind of towns is or may be aesthetical, when any artistic compositional laws have been applied to such development. Similarly, an urban structure in compliance with clear compositional laws is not necessarily aesthetical in layout and spatial structure aspects.

It is noteworthy that the relationship of composition and aesthetics so far has not been analyzed in complex. More works tackling this issue may be found in the post-soviet area, especially among Russian urban scholars. Such authors as Z.N. Yargina, Stepanova, G.I. Zosimov and Beliayeva are worth mentioning. In Western theoretical urban design works the relationship between urbanism and aesthetics has been failed to analyze in complex or at least in some broader perspective. This urban tradition relates aesthetics more to the cognitive and aesthetical perception and evaluation of space.

In the most general case (on the macro-scale) the urban composition relates to the concept of the city as an object of artistic work. This approach was developed a long time ago and relates to the city formation as preplanned activities focusing on exclusive parts of the town or ensembles. This approach is two-fold: on one hand a town and its spatial and layout structures are developed as completed piece from the beginning to the end. On the other – aesthetical composition laws are applied to the development of already existing layout and spatial structure for its reconstruction or adjustment. In both cases urban composition is a constituent part of the multiple town development program, which, inter alia, contains also some aesthetical features. Alongside the aesthetical – compositional issues, this developmental process, however, covers the functional, technical – utilitarian and social problems. Therefore urban composition is usually an integral part of some larger complex of city formation problems. Analyzing the literature sources of different periods related to this question under research, a few essential traditions of the concept could be seen. Especially noticeable is the difference between the Western and post-soviet urban traditions. The notion Urban Composition could be found really rarely in Western urban literature, and usually in art criticism texts about the urban space formation on the scale smaller than the entire city. Most often the concept of Urban Composition is used speaking about the layout and space compositional regularities of architectural and urban complexes, as well as urban public spaces. In Western tradition of urban design, aesthetical issues of a city and its parts usually

are not solved on especially vast scale. This object is more often related to the visual perception and composition of larger architectural ensembles, and the notion itself is used in a quite narrower sense than in post-soviet and Russian tradition. It is likely that such absence of more general approach to urban composition in modern Western urban design tradition has been determined by the long-term city formation practice with private property being one of the key conditions of such practice and participation of many subjects in the urban planning and formation processes. Only in exclusively rare cases a city is developed as a finished compositional entirety. Merely upon the occurrence of some special precedents or conditions, the city is being developed as a completed artistic piece, but this step is necessarily preceded by some special and fast changing socio-cultural urban development conditions or circumstances (such as rapid acceleration of economic growth, real estate development, social order transformations or some other special events and/or factors changing or influencing global city development conditions). Even in such special cases, the city is rarely perceived and formed as a completed compositional unit in Western urban design tradition. Usually, this is due to the fact that more intense formation and development is concentrated in the existing metropolises, which by their size and structure are complex and fairly restricted private ownership institutions with restricted global (general) development facilities. It is noteworthy, however, that in this tradition urban composition and its object and elements are defined in fairly diverse ways (Rob Krier, Cliff Moughtin, etc.). Western urban design tradition simply has no general term for this notion, and this issue has never been raised as a problem.

Different concept of urban composition was characteristic for modernist and soviet urban design tradition. The same approach still remains today in some post-soviet geopolitical areas – Poland, Russia, a little bit less in Czech Republic. The concept of urban composition is used more often here. Moreover, this term is fairly poly-functional, covering not only public spaces or urban districts, but also the entire city and even its agglomerates. This particular tradition pays a lot of attention to composition as an expression of artistic creation. The notion of urban composition covers the issues of visual perception and even formation of macro-scale urban structures. Such approach in this tradition has been formed by the socio-cultural context conditions, where the model of social order (denying any private property) allowed for the pre-planned and intense urban development, as these activities were not restricted by private property and/or other limitations present in a traditional Western European city. Alongside the political and ideological influences, the dominant aesthetical ideology and utopian brand-new city images (presenting the social life or other anthropological ideas as an objective) were considered important and realized following the Modernistic concept of the city and its space formation. Whereas in this urban tradition the main stream's relationship with a traditional city was quite ambiguous, the 1970ies saw the wave of historical core regeneration ideas, the realization of which alongside the partial solution of some aesthetical issues in this city part has formed a fairly peculiar approach towards historical values and urban composition. This regeneration process was managed and financed by the state, so

the issue was tackled in a fairly complex way, therefore the exploration methods for historical core's volumetric-spatial composition were developed accumulating the methods of structural, cognitive and even emotional analysis into one whole in order to evaluate and regenerate the urban tissue and view of historical cores destroyed during the World War II. But most often, as the city modular network – morphotype influenced by traditional form of ownership simply did not exist, regeneration and harmonization problems were confined to insertion of new architecture into the traditional urban structure of the historical core. On such scale urban composition was applied to solve aesthetical – qualitative issues of architecture and urban tissue.

In summary it is noteworthy to emphasize that the concept of urban composition is still wide and remains unconcrete. It is used in different ways and for different purposes by theoreticians, as well as professional architects and urbanists. The aforementioned different urban design traditions handle this term differently, in the aspects of scale and importance within the urban development process. Such differences in the approaches have been determined by treating the city as an object of artistic creation and overemphasizing the author's powers, as well as concentrating the number of urban development instruments and solution powers in "single hands". This is a contradiction between the Modernistic and Traditional approach, which manifested differently in urban development practice, in different periods of time. The Western urban design tradition has been evolving in such a direction, where a single modernistic approach towards urban development has been essentially denied. It is significant, however, that cities in this context developed uninterrupted by any radical changes of the social order. The modernistic approach is still vital in the post-soviet urban tradition, although some signs of continuity and transitional period are obvious. Lithuanian examples of downtown developments show that urban concepts created back in the soviet times were applied and implemented in these activities, and such concepts were not always correlating with traditional city structure and/or cityscape.

Why upon such drastic transformation of conditions within the socio-cultural context urban development and image formation concepts did remain unchanged - is not fully clear. It is most likely that a transformation of social order still does not mean mental transformation. The key professional code applied for solving the urban development problems was not changed at the right moment, and a shortage of ideas and approaches was noticeable (it is noteworthy that solution powers were still left with professionals of the same generation and same urban school).

It is also significant to emphasize that:

(a) A number of different concepts of urban composition exists, and they vary by the scope and boundaries of their object, as well as aspects of presentation of their qualitative content.

The term and definition are more often and broadly used by post-soviet urbanists, whereas in the West this concept is narrower;

(b) A few different urban traditions may be distinguished, which treat the same object of urban composition and research backgrounds differently. The key are the Western and post-soviet traditions of urban design. Due to certain city development peculiarities and socio-cultural conditions, the first has developed a more local approach towards the aesthetical formation of the city as entirety. The second urban design tradition influenced by absolutely different urban development experience has formed much broader (and sometimes overall) concept of urban composition.