

The Danube, a Major Natural Element of the Traditional Urban Landscape

Maria URMĂ*

Abstract

The landscape is one of the factors that define the characteristic image of a settlement. The natural settings represent the major and primary features of a site. Highlighting them is a method of revealing its traditional image, given that the relationship between man and nature used to be more significant in the past. Watercourses are almost always adjacent to the historical city centres and water is the natural element along which traditional human settlements were built. For this reason, in the revitalization process of historical city centres, the riverside or maritime site should play important roles. The development of urban watercourses should be a principle of urban renewal. The Romanian section of the Danube River has favoured the development of representative urban structures. The development of the Danube Cliffs in Galați, which restored the connection between the historical centre and the Danube, the street network in the historical centre of Brăila, characteristic of the traditional settlements along the riverbank, and the urban structure of Sulina are examples of traditional settlements in which the major natural element dominates the urban landscape. This paper argues that the traditional principles, by which historical settlements were established, emerging naturally and gradually as a result of the communion between man and nature, should be reconsidered and applied as principles of urban regeneration, through characteristic procedures. These procedures may range from the preservation or reconstruction of traditional urban silhouettes to the introduction of works of art in coherent ensembles, based on projects that complement contemporary studies of urbanism.

Keywords: urban regeneration, urban landscape, traditional settlements, historical centres, artworks

The landscape, the characteristic image of a settlement

The landscape is crucial for establishing the characteristic images of a settlement. The natural site reveals the major features of the site and its predominant characteristics. There are situations in which the natural setting gives specificity to the place more than the built surroundings do.

* "George Enescu" National University of Arts, Iasi, Romania. urma3@yahoo.com

Highlighting the natural site is a procedure for revealing the traditional image of the place. This return to nature goes in the spirit of preserving tradition because the relationship between man and nature used to be more accentuated in the past.

A principle used in traditional Mediterranean zones was the positioning of a natural element as the head of perspective. It is the perspective with void in the axis, a void that makes space for the natural element, as the final element, the theme of the composition.

The most beautiful spaces in the world have been established through their orientation towards the major natural element of their site: market squares with open sides towards the sea, streets that lead to the sea, a river or a hill, the acropolis that one climbs, finding the sky as the head of perspective.



Figure 1. St Mark's Square, Venice. Opening to the sea

https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piazza_San_Marco#/media/File:Venezia_piazza_s.Marco_2.JPG



Figure 2. Praça do Comércio, Lisbon.

Opening to the river

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lisbon_main_square_\(36622604910\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lisbon_main_square_(36622604910).jpg)

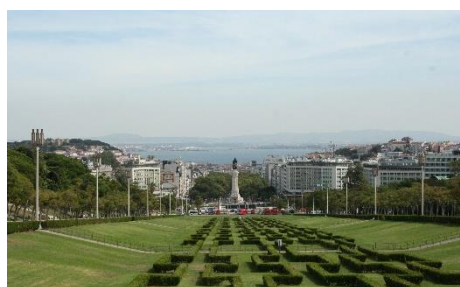


Figure 3. Lisbon, View from Eduardo VII Park, with Lisbon and the Tagus River in the background

The market square has one of its sides open towards the sea and from this square, the main pedestrian arterial thoroughfare leads in a perpendicular direction towards the seafront.

This connection with the sea was masterly expressed in the composition of the city of Lisbon, through the orientation of the main visual axis towards the sea. The dominance of the natural element, the sea, can also be found in Romanian cities situated on the seashore.



Figure 4. Plan of Constanta
1881/1910

<https://www.historia.ro/sectiune/general/articol/pagini-din-istoria-orasului-constantapartea-a-vii-a-1859-1896>



Figure 5. Constanta, a street that leads to the sea

Streets, which run parallel to the seashore, are intersected perpendicularly by short streets which lead to the sea.



Figure 6. The Acropolis of Athens

On the Acropolis of Athens, the void in the axis appears in a surprising way, after passing through the Propylaea, a “breath of air” after climbing up, after making such a significant physical effort.

Almost always, watercourses are adjacent to the historical centres of towns, water being the natural element along which traditional settlements were established. For this reason, in the revitalization of the historical centres,

there is a need to highlight the riverside or maritime site, each human settlement being born on the edge of water. The development of watercourses, present within or on the edge of historic centres, should be a principle of urban regeneration.

Cities on the Danube

The Danube River, which crosses Romania for the most part, has favoured the development of important urban structures. The old street plans of these cities on the banks of the Danube reveal their orientation towards the dominant natural element: the river.

Through their orientation towards the Danube, the two cities of Galați and Brăila have a comparable development from a visual point of view. Both retain, more or less, an older area and both keep a permanent conversation with the Danube, through their spatial composition.

In Brăila, where the urban street structure is more coherent, the traditional connection of the town with the Danube is more evident.



Figure 7. The development of the town of Brăila according to plans from 1789, 1834, 1867 and contemporary plans
http://brailadealtadata.blogspot.com/2011/06/strazile-au-amintiri_24.html

The historical core of the city of Brăila reveals a radial concentric structure orientated towards the course of the Danube, like a handheld fan. This type of structure has allowed for the expansion of the city without affecting its original core, the structure of Brăila being a model of continuity and balance.

The radial streets that intersect with the concentric, ring streets, lead to the banks of the Danube. The concentric streets embrace the Danube as an amphitheatre. Similarly, the main street, on the route of which the market square is located, connects the outskirts of the city with the bank of the Danube, from the west to the east. Traian Square, with its balanced, human scale

composition, extends with the street that leads towards the river, transformed into a pedestrian route.

In Brăila, the Danube embankment, less visually coherent than in Galați, reveals, nevertheless, valuable perspective views towards the town. Here, the developed cliff of the Danube, which is shorter than in Galați, should be continued with pedestrian routes in the old part of the city.

In Brăila, the side of the city which faces the Danube, whilst presenting architectural heritage objectives, loses its impact due to the absence of a coherent composition. This side of the city should be connected with the protected area of the historic centre of the city, thus achieving a better way of highlighting the valuable connection between the town and the Danube.

The city of Galați, without preserving the same coherence in its built historical core, maintains, however, a connection with the river via the main structure of its streets. Still, in Galați, there is not a wide opening of the historical centre of the city towards the Danube in the same way as there is in Brăila. In Galați, the modern city has developed along the Danube.



Figure 8. Galați, the modern city
https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Galati_-_zona_portului_vechi.jpg



Figure 9. The Danube Cliff in Galați, prior to development
<https://arhiva.uniuneaarhitectilor.ro/arhiva/foto-diapo?pag=1>

However, Domnească Street, the street that connects the old city with the Danube, preserves old buildings of architectural value which can form the core of a historical area. Esplanade Park connects this zone with the Danube even more clearly. The development of the Danube Cliff, with green spaces and pieces of art, allows the possibility of an even stronger connection between the historic centre and the Danube, preserving an important characteristic of the traditional site: its orientation towards nature.

The city of Galați, more coherent in its pedestrian route, links the landmarks into an easily perceived loop: Brăila Street, the centre, the esplanade towards the Danube, the Danube Cliff and the Botanical Gardens, situated close to Brăila Street. The city earns value through the connection that exists

between the centre and the Danube, made possible by Esplanade Park, which has as the head of perspective a sculpture, from the end of which remarkable views are revealed: Precista Church, Navigation Palace, sights of the Danube.

Another city on the Danube is the city of Tulcea. Although in the past it had periods of stagnation, at the time of the opening of the Sulina Canal, its development restarted. Tulcea, with its dominant core construction being from the modern period, still preserves architectural objects of heritage value and, partially, a traditional street network, which respects the same principle: the orientation of the city towards the dominant natural element. Now, through the development of the cliffs, one of the traditional characteristics of the city is highlighted: its connection with nature.

The town of Sulina, situated at the end of the course of the Danube, has structured its street network in accordance with the two major natural elements: the sea and the Danube. The town constantly follows the arm of the Danube with its long streets being parallel to the Danube and its short streets, perpendicular to the shore. The structure of the street network in Sulina has common points with the structure of the old area of the city of Constanta: streets that are parallel to the water's edge, intersected by short streets, perpendicular to the shore. The main roads in the town of Sulina head towards the sea. This way, Sulina preserves the basic traditional features which are specific to settlements at the edge of the water. The town, although small in terms of the area that it covers, contains buildings of architectural and historical value. The restoration or rehabilitation of these buildings, even just those on the Danube embankment, would reveal the true level of this settlement's cultural and touristic value.



Figure 10. Sulina, Buildings on the Danube Cliff

Moreover, Sulina develops its historic centre right along the Danube, which gives this town its distinctiveness: the watercourse is exposed as the nucleus of this human settlement. The link between the town and the sea should be highlighted with the positioning of art pieces which would connect the landmarks in a coherent ensemble. The development of the coast should take into consideration the dominant character of the major elements of the site: the Danube and the sea. Currently, the development of the seashore blocks

important views from the main route towards the sea and the disorderly, random arrangement of amenities disrupts the magnificent image of a unique seashore in Romania.

Of course, in all these situations, the development of the banks of the Danube should not take place only on the side where the towns are situated but, on both sides, the views from the water allowing panoramic, characteristic perspectives.

In conclusion, in the case of rehabilitating the old centres of the cities, a fundamental principle of urban regeneration is the development of the water banks and the creation of coherent links between them and areas of historical interest. In this way, a traditional feature of human settlements would be reestablished: their reconnection with nature.

The positioning of pieces of art in these coastal areas ensures a necessary visual coherence, contributing to the enrichment of the urban space with new landmarks and meanings.

Urban regeneration through artistic interventions

A form of urban regeneration or rehabilitation involves the addition of pieces of art to the urban fabric in the form of unitary, coherent compositions, either in city centres or other urban zones. These projects could contribute to contemporary urbanism studies.

Usually, the installation of such pieces of art is carried out at isolated urban points or in restricted areas. There are cases, though less recommended, when first of all a piece of art is produced and then a suitable location is found for it to be installed. Inserting pieces of art into the structural ensemble of the city, in the form of unitary compositions, takes shape as a process of realizing the cohesion of the urban landscape. It is a method that can be applied in an urban ensemble that is already established, such as a historical centre or traditional site. Over time, the most beautiful urban spaces took their shape when the overall vision prevailed.

In situations in which unitary artistic ensembles are integrated into historic centres, with major axes of composition and with a coherent theme, the specific character of the site is accentuated, enriching it with new meanings. Works of art, as unique objects, become landmarks, with a symbolic value, to which both visitors and local people can relate. These historical or traditional zones, whether they are more or less homogeneous from a stylistic, environmental or historical point of view, can achieve unity by organizing the coherent artistic compositions from within, as a red, integrative thread.

Inserting the artistic objects needs to be accomplished in accordance with the characteristics of the spatial composition, the style of the space and the architectural objects, and the existing or desired meaning of the space.

Coherence can be found at stylistic, thematic and ensemble levels (axes and centres of composition, hierarchy of the component elements). The works of art may include sculptures, decorations (pavements, picture murals), and surrounding objects (wells, furniture, urban signalling). They may become unifying elements by placing them in unitary compositions.

In this way, in Galați, by installing objects of art on the banks of the Danube, a new axe of development has been created, making an extension of the city centre possible, easy to integrate into a pedestrian circuit, unifying, linking the historical zone with the major natural element, the Danube.

In the contemporary period, the integration of art, architecture and urbanism is necessary if we take into consideration the austerity, the simplicity of the materials, finishings and details, and the departure from the human scale of some new urban ensembles.

In the new centre of Paris, the district “La Defense”, for example, several objects of art have been installed, which are made from natural materials (water, stone, wood, ceramics) with figurative forms, compensating for the artificiality of the materials and abstract character of the contemporary forms.



Figure 11. Paris, La Defense Center, Igor Mitoraj, *Le Grand Toscano*, bronze, 1983

This method could also be applied in the embankment areas of the cities along the Danube, where the historical ambience of the traditional site has not been preserved. For example: in Galați and Tulcea.

The level of urban development aiming to achieve two major objectives (the harmonious organization of functions and the establishment of coherent urban structures), the action of introducing works of art at the level of the urban ensemble, is established as an urban cohesion factor. These location studies come to support some principles that are applied in urban planning:

Intervention in areas with maximum development potential. At this level, the integration of artistic objects, in unifying compositions, may contribute to emphasizing the specific character of the settlement.

Structuring the urban space according to major development axes. The identification of urban development axes leads to the idea of arranging the artistic compositions on the route of these axes, as axes of visual composition.

One of these axes is the area of cultural location and action, as an element of identity, urban affirmation. In some existing historical centres, the possible extension of the centre along development axes may be controlled by the positioning of art objects, as a natural connection between tradition and modernity. In Galați, by positioning art objects on the banks of the Danube, a development axis has been created, which makes possible the connection with the historical area of the city.

Strengthening the centre and ensuring urban vitality in other complementary centres (as elements of local identity, urban continuity and balance). Intervention with personalized artistic ensembles contributes to accentuating the structure by centres of the city, conferring identity and meaning of the location. In adjacent zones, elements of visual continuity can be introduced, in the form of artistic compositions, resulting in paths of visual identity.

Highlighting the qualities of natural sites. In structuring the city, it is possible to rely on the natural element, as the common, unifying element. The natural site may be highlighted by the integration of art-nature, placing objects of art in key, characteristic places, (as elements of accent, attraction), choosing the natural paths of the site as locations. The site of the riverbank or seashore should be highlighted, each settlement having been born on the banks of a waterway. The installation of pieces of art along the length of the water always contributed to the enrichment of the settlement with new meanings, the areas being developed and becoming reference points for the city. Coherence given by the permanent nature of the water may be underlined by the coherence of the artistic locations. Usually, the watercourse is adjacent to the historical centre of the city, water being the natural element along the length of which traditional settlements were established.

The principle of synergy, which aims to mobilise the potential of the entire territory by optimally solving the connection between the territories, is realized in the highway system. It is supported by the overall vision in the placement of art objects. The arrangement of artistic ensembles on travel routes must be done according to the particularities of urban perception: as roadway images or as pedestrian images.

At the urban studies level, the insertion of pieces of art into the urban fabric also goes along the lines of identifying the main functions of the town, receptive to this implementation.

The cultural function has pre-eminence in shaping urban images and identities. The integration of artistic ensembles may be done in areas where cultural amenities and actions are concentrated. These areas are formed in a relatively coherent structure, becoming one of the axes of the city. The integration of art pieces contributes to emphasizing the significance of these spaces, passing through them being a history lesson, an applied school.

The touristic function may develop by creating both pedestrian routes and road circuits for tourists, which highlight the principal heritage objects. Filling out these routes with art pieces enriches the urban landscape with new meanings, outlining new areas of attraction, ensuring necessary coherence. Each settlement has as a tourist asset, to a larger or smaller extent, the natural setting. In the cities on the Danube, the water is, of course, the main element of tourist attraction.

Commerce, with its specific features, is a factor of public attraction. The commercial line, as a vector of urban movement, can intersect with cultural routes, doubled by the tourist line. Mixing commercial functions with other urban functions, on culturally relevant pedestrian routes, as well as road routes, can be done in parallel with the insertion of objects of art.

Leisure and sport function is taken into account by identifying the main natural and leisure places, as the practice of revealing nature. At the level of artistic object, insertion into the natural or urban landscape can be done by using local natural materials and other symbolic elements.

At the urban planning level, following the harmonious organization of the functions and the establishment of coherent urban structures, the integration of art pieces at the urban ensemble level creates a unity of urban cohesion.

Conclusions

The principles of establishing traditional settlements, which appeared naturally, over time, as a result of the communion between man and nature, should be reconsidered and applied as the principles of the regeneration and rehabilitation of historical centres.

These principles, together with those currently applied in urban planning studies, can highlight the fundamental cultural and visual characteristics of traditional, old urban areas. The valorization of traditional images of the towns can be attained by highlighting the importance of the natural site, most human settlements having developed on water banks. The natural site can be highlighted by inserting art pieces in key specific places.

An urban regeneration method involves the insertion of art pieces in coherent, unitary compositions. Inserting art pieces in the overall ensemble of the city, in the form of unitary compositions, emerges as a process of achieving cohesion of the urban image. This method can be applied to urban ensembles which have already been formed, such as historical centres or traditional sites. The integration in historical centres of certain unitary artistic ensembles, with major axes of composition and a coherent theme, accentuates the specific character of the site by enriching it with new meanings.

In the context of the rehabilitation of the historical centres of the cities, it is necessary for the water banks to be developed and a coherent link made between these areas and those of historical interest, thus highlighting a traditional feature of human settlements: their relationship with nature.

In conclusion, during the rehabilitation process of old areas in the cities located along the Danube River, the development of the watercourse and its surroundings becomes a primary objective.

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