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**TRANSFORMATIONS OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN  
CULTURAL LANDSCAPES.  
BETWEEN CIRCULATIONS AND ICONOGRAPHY**

**ABSTRACT.** Urban cultural landscape is often interpreted as the visual scheme illustrating the relationship of powers, as well as needs and lifestyles of local and national societies. Cultural landscape of post-socialist cities can be seen as a living laboratory of transforming meanings and forms. Circulation and iconographical metaphors are used to present the contemporary global and local trends. During the period of socialist supremacy, the centrally steered circulations had been enforced to every urban and regional landscape. Since 1989 another kind of circulation appeared, dominated by unified and Western-styled liberalism, and represented by neo-liberal fraction of the society, in opposition to traditional and territorially anchored icons and allegories.

**KEY WORDS:** Cultural landscape, post-socialism, urban form, representation, Central Europe.

**INTRODUCTION**

Visible changes of urban appearance represent deeper and much broader social, economic and cultural trends and processes. The representing landscape mirrors the history, aspirations, needs and powers of local society as well as global inclinations and movements. Two major cultural forces of external circulations and locally embedded iconographical structures (as defined by Gottmann, 1990, and Bonnemaïson, 2005) shape the signifier and the signified of contemporary urban. Present practices of cultural landscape management are divided between rapid “modernisation” and “westernisation”, following the global currents as well as historical and indigenous ideas and icons.

The struggle between circulations and iconography is always most visible in transitional cities and societies it is nowhere more visible as in post-socialist urban areas. The paper is aimed to interpret contemporary cultural landscape of Central Europe, using icon vs. circulation dialectic. Sixteen years of diverse conversions and alternations has changed many of the post-socialist cities remarkably, while most of the cities still hold the stigmas of 45 years of communist regime and urban management. The ongoing processes are illustrated by various case studies form variety of Central and East European cities, like Warsaw, Moscow, Bucharest, East Berlin and Sofia. Similar processes in various urban settings are modified by different local structures and articulated by distinct qualities of cultural landscape.

### REPRESENTATIONS OF LANDSCAPE

Contemporary social, economic, and cultural transformations can be analysed by various methodologies and aspects. One of the most effective and valuable ways to conceptualise spaces of post-modernity relies on holistic and interpretative synthesis based on cultural landscape approach. The methodology is deeply anchored in new cultural geography and can be tremendously beneficial in holistic and structural studies on urbanised world. Cultural landscape investigations can employ an assortment of research paradigms, including structuralistic and textual, while the most frequently used include constructivist approach and theory of representation (Winchester, Kong, Dunn, 2003; Black, 2003; Cosgrove, Daniels, 2004; Hall, 2002).

The term landscape can be interpreted in a number of ways, which are not mutually exclusive, although of different emphasis. The most common concepts include landscape as a countryside, total regional environment, land use, topography or landform, a heritage or historical artefact and, probably the most commonplace usage, scenery, as the overall visual appearance. Cultural landscape is usually understood as a compromise between the visible and the hidden, between reason and emotion, between morphology and functions. The landscape is a product of human values, meanings and symbols and embodies the culture of both the creators, as well as the percipients. In the broadest sense, and most commonly used, cultural landscape can be defined as vibrant melange of aesthetic form, economic functions, and social meaning. The compilation of cognitive objects and affective meanings forms the basis of new cultural geography, and are most crucial for the interpreting cultural landscape (Ashworth, 1998; Winchester, Kong, Dunn, 2003; Black, 2003; Czepczyński, 2004A; Hall, 2002; Zukin, 1993).

Since the main features of culture landscape represent power, social and cultural relations, the study will be concentrated on landscape as iconographical

representation of supremacy. According to iconographical methodology, urban scenery reflects powers, needs, aspirations, as well as a glorious and tragic history, written into the symbols and signs. Landscapes reveal, represent and symbolise the relationship of power and control out of which they have emerged (Zukin, 1993; Robertson, Richards, 2003; Czepczyński, 2004B; Cosgrove, Daniels, 2004). Cultural landscape can be seen as being among the main composers as well as vivacious transmitters of culture. Landscapes are the bodily expressions of the ways of thinking, the experience, and the hierarchies of values and culture of each of the group as well as of each individual. Cultural landscape is one of the main representing languages of modern society, which signify the spiritual dimension of the investors, architects and users. The surrounding is central to understanding the landscape in that they frame and embody economic, social and cultural processes. The aesthetic form is never neutral – the power is written into the landscape through the medium of design, usually used and overused by rulers to stress the authority and legacy (Markus, Cameron, 2002; Czepczyński, 2004A).

### CIRCULATION/ICONOGRAPHY DIALECTIC

Contemporary processes of cultural landscape transformation are integral elements of the geographical divisions of space. Jean Gottmann (1990) had identified two major bundles of opposing forces, which animate geographical space: circulation and iconography (iconology).

- **Circulation** de-partitions space, opening it for the best and the worst through the churning together individuals, goods and ideas. It engenders universalism and cosmopolitanism. Circulation brings about changes, generated by global flows, movements and so called modernity. The concept of circulation is based on Aristotelian idea of expanding Greece and pluralist system and the power of multilevel communication. Dynamic development, economic priorities, expansion rather than equilibrium attracted many societies and presently seems to dominate the globalising landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe.
- **Iconography** resists movements and partitions the space. This force, more abstract than material, resists on identity and symbolic links. Through their iconography, groups share the same representations, visions of the world and values, uniting them within common space of belief. Iconography creates stable identities and helps to maintain these identities by resisting generalised circulation and by partitioning the space. Icons carry a meaning, which they bestow on those places where they provide roots to people. Icons offer an image of the world as much as they make of the individual self in the world: they are a worldview from a particular standpoint. Inspired by Platonian thoughts iconographical communities tries to protect itself from

foreign influence or any force that could engulf it and keep itself well balanced, protected and safe (Bonnemaison, 2005: 43).

The circulation/iconography dialectic facilitates the understanding of many of the tensions and controversies currently occurring worldwide: opening vs. closing, universalism vs. localism, cosmopolitanism vs. isolation (Bonnemaison, 2005). European nations are balancing between the need to build a greater entity and the resistance of established national and regional iconographies. New cultural geography looks at the construction of collective identities and their spatial “territories”, while cultural landscape studies decode, interpret and elucidate the relations of forms, functions and significance.

The struggle between flows and icons are extremely visible within transitional society. The change imposes and generates choices to be made, and prioritise one paradigm over another. Post-socialist societies and countries are probably among the best modern examples of that tussle. The circulation and iconography discourse has been a part of the ideological conflict. The cultural landscape was employed and manipulated as tool and weapon by most of the dictatorships, especially by “the dictatorships of people”.

## **SOCIALIST UNIFICATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF LANDSCAPE**

Cultural landscapes of Central European socialist regimes resulted from the historical context, social and economic structure of the region, as well as the Marxists’ vision of an ideal and “politically correct” landscape, infused by various efficiencies and modes of implementation. Planning, visual arts, and landscaping, were seen as significant and powerful modes of expression and exemplification of “peoples’ power” over the ruled masses. Centrally planned and controlled urban landscaping procedures created advantageous environment for circulation and dissemination of few, chosen and representing “urban projects” over all Central European dominia.

Totalitarian single and omnipotent communist party ruled not only over economic, social, cultural life of specific society, but also over the visualised and aesthetic expressions of everyday existence. Usually inspired or/and enforced by Kremlin styles were implemented in every major city of the Eastern block. Architecture, planning, fine arts, as well as mass media, music and literature were considered as important part of the “clash of classes” arsenal and implementation of the concept of “people’s power”. Communist linguistic discourses and philosophical debates over the role of means of communication, including cultural landscape, as communicative combination of form and meaning, created the significance of landscaping in its intensely philosophical context. Marxist and structuralistic dilemmas on the category of language as base or superstructure had absorbed soviet and socialist theorists, apparatchiks and Stalin himself for

decades. Joseph Stalin's personal taste, prejudiced by his education and milieu, predisposed entirely East European architecture and urban landscape in late 1940s and early 1950s. His admiration of pompous building, kitsch and neo-classical decoration, marbles and crystals, columns and sculptures was copied by numerous followers in almost every country on the Eastern Block. Stalinist vague copies of Moscow Lomonosov University building appeared in Riga, Warsaw, Bucharest, Sofia and many other cities (Tarachanow, Kawtaradse, 1992).

The process of landscape management in communist countries can be seen in two main phases. The early totalitarian and Stalinist period was mainly characterised by the strong belief in centralised and omnipotent planning, as the main tool of modernisation of the ruled societies. This modernisation was meant to be reached by rapid industrialisation, concentrated on heavy industries. The triumphalist landscape of that early period articulated the victory of the newly established system, as well as deep belief in a better world, it was supposed to represent (Simons, 1993). The cultural landscapes, as the major part of social and economic life, were strictly controlled and administered by the communist party. Nationalisation and elimination of unwanted features, including royal, bourgeois, religious, ethnic minorities were deeply coded into the 1950s cultural landscapes, as well as education and aspirations of the Party's strongmen. The meaningful landscape was split up between the official landscape of the new cult, "the wedding cake architecture", landscape oases of limited freedom, and the scenery of oppression and terror. Limitation or elimination of private ownership rights makes the State or the Party the only real power over the landscape. The landscape was managed by a number of central decisions, usually inspired and approved by political leaders. Ad hoc and off the cuff steering was the most common practice, while the permanent fear and a certain level of admiration of Soviet Union policies and expectations made the early socialist landscape management both difficult and repeatable. Triumphalist landscape management was a practical visualization of the victory of socialist – Stalinist ideas and practices. The repetitive model of heavy industrialisation, nationalisation and overall control of the Party was practically implemented in all Central European countries before 1956 (Domański, 1997; Czepczyński, 2005).

Since the late 1950s the system lost some of its worst and most terrifying aspects, and was characterised by a careful loosening of the tight knots of the early period. Post-Stalinist liberalisation introduced International Style of Corbusier favourite constructivist blocks. The new fascination quickly became a new imperative. Global circulation of modernist ideas turned out to be the only appreciated and accepted form. The landscape became somehow less ideological and more functional in the 1970s. The invincible and more and more abstract decision-makers were hidden behind central offices, planning desks and regulations. Many rulers implemented many rules, while the landscape management power occurred was often divided between territorial vs. sectoral

planning and decisions. The overregulated system created the rather popular practice of circumvention, obeying the set of laws, making many exceptions, forced or persuaded by the grand power of the “red barons” of socialist industry and party. The 1980s found the communist system quite corrupt and hardly functional in most of the socialist counties, especially in Poland (Basista, 2001; Leach, 1999; Czepczyński, 2005; Domański, 1997).

## POST-SOCIALIST ICONOGRAPHY

The social, political and economic transformations of the socialist block were practically started by Gorbachev’s perestroika and the Polish “Round Table” negotiations of spring 1989. Free elections and first non-communist governments in the region in summer 1989 followed these transformations. After socialism, cities faced vast legal, economic and social conversions. The changes have been accelerated by the explosion of free market and flow of capital, reintroducing of land rent, privatisation, as well as appearance of new actors on the scene of landscape, including local governments, free media, private owners and investors, as well as inhabitants and NGOs. The post-socialist “landscape swap” is most clearly visible in large cities and metropolises. The accumulation of needs, capital and powers made this swap most dramatic in sizeable urban settings. Many smaller towns and villages are characterised by generally more stable scenery, slowly interacting with the grand but distant events and powers.

Post-socialist resolutions of the early 1990s were characterised by a fairly spontaneous understanding of freedom on both personal and institutional levels. After more than 40 years of oppression and restrain the control mechanisms almost disappeared. Communist Party and “industrial barons” vanished from the landscape management scene, as well as quite omnipotent central planning bureaus. The procedure of landscape supremacy has been mostly seceded to local self-governing bodies, frequently somewhat unprepared for the new challenges and responsibilities (Czepczyński, 2005).

After 45 years of enforced communist circulations, the post-socialist societies turned into the local, regional and national icons, myths, histories and symbols. The drive of de-communisation of cultural landscapes was particularly strong in Poland, Romania and Hungary. Newly achieved freedom allowed creating, using, developing new icon or reusing (sometimes also “recycle”) old ones. Special role was played by new right wing, nationalistic parties and governments, which anchored their identities by glorious, pre-communist past and allegories. The affirmation of historical glory was followed by reconstructing of national icons, like Jabłonowski Palace in Warsaw or Bogorodica Church in Moscow.

The radical changes in urbanised landscape administration resulted in spatial confusion and a certain level of anarchy. The newly elected self-governments,

both of regional and local levels, had to cope with repeatedly changing regulations, as well as high expectations of the local communities. The recently freed inhabitants, released from the ruthless chains of socialist regulation, were expecting to enjoy the rights of private ownership, to an extent seldom met in Western European countries. There was a popular opinion that “my plot would be my castle, and now I can decide what my landscape might look like”. Personal taste, as well as national heritage and financial recourses were mirrored in the features of the urban landscape of the early 1990s (Leach, 1999; Sármany-Parsons, 1998).

Another important landscape trait was connected to the developing of new features and aspects of landscape, unwelcome or simply forbidden in the socialist period. Those features included religion based qualities, especially in Poland and Russia, the revival of past bourgeois and aristocratic landscapes, anti-Soviet and anti-Russian features, as well as national and minority heritages. Many various forms and meanings have been constructed to represent the above-mentioned expressions of culture. The rapid development of new churches, minority institutions and regional heritage attributes symbolised the accumulated and long waited pleas. The restoration of 19<sup>th</sup> century houses and palaces meet the demand from the newly rich and owners who reclaimed their property. The “landscape in-waiting”, often for more than 40 years, erupted frantically as soon as it was possible. Huge, modern churches can be seen in almost every neighbourhood block of flats in Poland. Many derelict manor houses and palaces were turned into private residences or hotels. The glorious German, Russian and Austrian imperial landscapes are being rediscovered, appreciated and accommodated into the local heritages in numerous various locations around Poland (Cracow, Gdansk), Czech Republic (Prague), Ukraine (Lviv) and many other (Czepeczyński, 2005).

## CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPING CIRCULATIONS

Parallel to iconographical overreaction to post-communist heritages and landscapes, new type of circulation appeared. Since 1990s modern circulation occurred in every post-socialist country. Global economy, unification, worldwide rules, multinational companies and implementation of neo-liberal policy quite rapidly entered post-socialist economies and socialites. Hardly limited and controlled flows of capitals, thoughts and cultures noticeably and severely changed the local and national orders and systems. Liberal parties introduced liberal economies, while global markets created new modes of communication and new life styles. The cultural landscape is being transformed according to new, global expansions of means and money.

One of the first, quite minor, but very perceptible and visual rehearsals of post-socialist cities was the massive infusion of lights, colours and noise.

The socialist economy was not too keen on wasting the strategic resources (and almost everything was a strategic issue in communist times) on paint or illumination. Sad, rather miserably grey and dark after dawn cities of the 1980s have been steadily changed by supplemented brightness, glow and fresh colours.

Post-socialist transformation has been additionally enhanced by the global challenges, including deindustrialization, globalization, and Americanisation. The non-interventionist landscape management models and tools were often considered as the very best solutions to post-socialist administration procedures and have been widely applied in many post-socialist countries and cities. A brand new element appeared in the urban landscape, hardly present or practically missing in the socialist period. One of the first visible aspects of post-socialist landscape change was the wide spread of McDonalds' bars and other mostly American fast-food facilities, like Pizza Hut etc. These ventures symbolised the desired Western life style, and were very clearly visible in the landscape of many urban centres of Central European cities. For some municipalities and local societies the location of McDonalds' has been considered as a sign of prestige and development. The long queues waiting patiently in front of the first McDonalds' undoubtedly mark the rank and role of the features in local urban landscape. A similar meaning was given to large superstores, which mushroomed around main agglomerations since the mid 1990s. The other features of globalisation and westernisation apparent in urban landscape include fast growing banks and other financial institutions, hardly present or important in the everyday life of a communist city, large scale advertisements, and rapidly developing networks of shopping malls. In some cases, the openness and willingness of the socialism-tired society welcomed those features more enthusiastically than in some of the Western societies, thus the post-socialist landscapes can be sometimes even more westernised (or rather Americanised) than many Western cities (Sármány-Parsons, 1998; Czepeżyński, 2005).

The post-socialist urban landscape policies and practices varied not only between different countries, but also from municipality to municipality. The long awaited freedom brought lots of expectations and hopes, for better, more independent and more efficient landscape management that would include local population needs, desires and even ambitions. The popular hopes were to be implemented by a new set of decision-makers, often influenced or/and educated through American institutions, like United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and others. The American influence on landscape management can be clearly seen in many cities, including Polish ones. American-style belief in personal freedom was quite often adopted and made as a significant landscape management canon. The development of Warsaw can be seen as a perfect example of such a practice, where tall office towers promptly grew at the western part of the city centre. The district administration directly applied the spatial liberty policy, and encouraged investors to build up practically



whatever they wanted on the plots they acquired. The area has been transformed into the landscape of a typical American city just in few years. The 20+ stories high office blocks neighbour on the late 19<sup>th</sup> century declined housing and post-industrial structures as well as some 1950s and 1960s blocks of flats. The typical American landscape blend, with vertical dominations of modern towers surrounded by rather dilapidated setting can be considered as one of the typical post-socialist landscapes, and a result of a specific and not always intentional, landscape management practice.

### TRENDS OF POST-SOCIALIST LANDSCAPES ADAPTATION

Difficult transformation and reorganization of post-socialist urban landscape express the obstacles, problems, and aspirations of the local society. New challenges of the rapidly transforming structures and their organization put lots of pressure on the decision makers. The assembly of urban landscape managers, defined as persons that influence the visual structure of the city, includes mainly architects and city planners, high city hall officials, and sometimes influential media or NGOs. Dispersion of the decision-making process brought new, powerful land(scape)lords, including historical preservation offices, city development bureaux and investors or employers, who could, for the sake of a few hundred new working places, often quite freely interfere with the landscape.

Foucault suggests that modern power is a dispersed set of micro-practices, many of which operate through the normalising gaze of surveillance regimes (Dovey, 2001). Often a single person or few colleagues enjoying power can make a real difference, based on their own beliefs, experience and knowledge. It is usually quite difficult to trace the genuine decision-makers and to analyse their personalised valuations. The hundreds of trivial practices implemented by hundreds of small-scale landscape managers fill the modern urban landscape jigsaw.

Urban landscape can be an important value of the local economy and society. The cultural landscape can be seen as a feature and function of a place, as well as a development option. The well managed and consumed landscape can enhance the quality of life, increase residential, investment and tourism attractiveness. The urban setting equally frames and creates the local milieu. Oscar Wilde, quoted in an office tower advertisement said, that "it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearance" (Dovey, 2001). The observer, who as much as he or she wants and can, decodes and interprets its meanings and structures, always judges urban landscape (Czepczyński, 2005). Cultural landscape of post-socialist cities can be seen as a living laboratory of transforming meanings and forms. The imprints of the socialism that are left in the urban landscape were unusually deep and frequently affect the present outlook and structure of many

cities. Setting of Central European cities carry the prints or stigmas of at least half a century of socialism. During the period of socialist supremacy, the centrally steered circulations had been enforced to every urban and regional landscape. Interestingly, after 45 years of Moscow dictated flows of styles and rules, the region jumped, often quite unconsciously, into another kind of circulation, dominated by unified and Western-styled liberalism.

## CONCLUSIONS

The long-established local/global dialectics feature many aspects of social, economic and civilizing verves, including cultural landscape fusion of forms, functions and meanings. Post-socialist cities have faced challenges and threads of rapid multi-level transformations, all of them more then visible in urban scenery. Locally embedded city icons, based on regional history and environment are transposed against universal and comprehensive circulations, external trends and forces. The difficult compromise between globally circulating inclinations and territorial icons and symbols create unique mis-a-scene, or operation milieu, where all the economic, social and cultural activities take place. Understanding the concept of iconology and circulation might helps to interpret and explain the contemporary transformations of cultural landscape in post-socialist Europe. The conversion and modification of cultural landscape is an ongoing and perpetual process, which reflexes generation change, new trends and fashions, as well as shifting preferences and attitudes of local residents and decision-makers. The urban scenery will be most likely constant combination of circulations and icons, coexisting or colliding on urban scene.

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