URBAN REGENERATION AND ITS SURPRISE DUE TO THE DISCOVERY OF XVIII-TH CENTURY ARCHITECTURAL ARTEFACTS

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Abstract.

Introduction: Situated in Romania’s westernmost corner, Timisoara is a typical Central European city, completely restructured after it was conquered by Austrians in 1716. The city was surrounded by a large-scale stellar shaped Vauban fortification endowed with a moat. On the historical city’s west side an urban regeneration project started recently.

Developments: On the site of this project, following foundation works, a number of artefacts emerged: defence walls including a XVIIth century sluice used in the defence system around the bastion. Built by the Habsburg administration, the weir was intended to drain the moat of the fortress. The entire defence system present on site was altered previously, during the communist era. Still, a large part of the artefacts conserved are challenging the development process of the urban regeneration project.

Remarks and Conclusion: The entire weir with all the fortifications nearby - approx. 400 sq. m - were proposed to be moved and exposed on the urban plaza offered by the project strategy. This particular example of an environmental control device is the proper symbol for a technological innovative city. It will generate a fragment of an open air museum, but it will also enhance the whole atmosphere of the pedestrian gallery and plaza, a surprise with all the walls and artefacts, with the controlled layer of water and a small exhibition dedicated to it and to Timisoara’s modern history. The final design was preceded by intense debates and polemics in the local/national media, public opinion, professional and political circles. Various arguments were proposed, but finally The National Commission for Heritage had the upper hand, retaining the architect’s strategy, ensuring a proper valorisation of the architectural cultural heritage.
1 INTRODUCTION – URBAN AND HISTORIC CONTEXT

Timisoara is one of the largest cities in Romania, the capital city of the Timis County, and a candidate to become the 2021 European Capital of Culture. As an old medieval strategic citadel, Timisoara was conquered by the Ottoman Empire (1552-1716) and played a crucial role as a military outpost for the Austrian-Hungarian Empire during the XVIIth and XIXth Century. The City’s core – the Citadel - was heavily defended by a complex, Vauban style fortification. Inside the city walls, the urban pattern was defined through the use of a rational grid of city blocks and open spaces which then generated the three main plazas that we can still see today - St. George Square, Liberty Square and Union Square. At the end of the XIXth century, during the expansion of the city, a major part of the old defense wall was demolished as Timisoara opened itself towards a modern industrial future. The Bega Channel’s use was changed from being part of the defense system to being part of the transport system, thus connecting different parts of the city and the city itself to Europe.

Today, only a few parts of the old city wall remain standing, namely The Theresia Bastion in the east and a few others which are located on the western limit of the old city wall. These were later listed as part of the architectural heritage of Timisoara. In the last century, after the implementation of the Von Ybl urban strategy and before The Second World War, the old citadel was connected to the other parts of the city – Fabric, Josefin, Elisabetin - by large boulevards, esplanades and bridges over the channel (east to south-west direction). After the war, most of the development happened in the southern district (Girocului quarter and the University Campus). Thus from the initial linear development, the city slowly became radial and ultimately faced a rapid and chaotic expansion. Today, the two main directions in which the city is developing are to the north and to the west, both being crossed by the railway, which passes through and separates the city. The west side of the citadel, which is now called “700 Square”, is the site where in the last decades a new urban regenerating strategy begun with the City Business Centre project. The idea of a “Gate to the centre” came to life with the purpose of regenerating the whole western area including the old citadel walls, the Military Church, the huge old Military Hospital, the old Synagogue and other buildings along the west-east path that is crossing the entire citadel. There is an important counterpoint at the east edge of the citadel, this being the most important old wall, which was saved in the sixties and was recently restored and reconverted – The Theresia Bastion – an important cultural and public space of the city.
For the last two centuries, Timisoara has been facing a complex challenge in urban planning and development due to the problematic connections between the historic centre and the surrounding areas. Consequently, various strategies were put forward during the last century which ultimately led to the “Gate to the Historic Centre” principle. The opening of the south-east gate at the beginning of the XXth century had generated one of the most emblematic and monumental public spaces of Timisoara, which is the Cathedral - Opera House Promenade, which today is called Victoria Square.

The relation between the old city centre and the eastern area, towards the Fabric district, was made possible in the same period, through the construction of the Revolution Boulevard, which passes the Decebal Bridge and is flanked by Lazlo Szekely’s Neptune Baths. Both the northern direction, which presents a great potential - after the transferring of the ex-military area into the West University’s property - and the western one are about to be developed further. To the north, the edification of the Iulius Mall also represented a major step towards the contouring of this main development axis while to the west, the current works that are being carried out for the City Business Centre in 700 Square are speeding up the regeneration of the whole area.

The site on which 700 Square along with the CBC are located is on the western side of the old fortification walls and is juxtaposed over the walls built by Maria Theresia after the banishment of the Turks in 1716. It was no coincidence that after most of the wall was demolished and the railway set in place, this area’s character became a vague, undefined one and started to be perceived as the city’s outskirts. While it was gradually transferred from the military administration to civil administration, there were a few buildings which remained as witnesses of the area’s history, such as The Military Hospital, The Military Church and The Mercifullness Church along with a few parts of the old city wall.

Later on, between 1944 and the early 60s – during the Soviet occupation - the military presence re-flourished within the area. After the retreat of the Soviet army, this area became part of the industrial framework of Timisoara, which started with the construction of the Modatim Textile Factory and the Civil Engineering High School and continued with the building of more and more interventions such as the Aquatim, Alcatel and Public Finance
headquarters after 1990, all developed in the absence of a coherent urban planning system or strategy.

In this context, the “Gate to the Historic Centre” principle was put forward in order to lead the way towards a long-term urban development strategy which would bring benefits to the whole area and the city. The main strategy revolved around creating a new public landmark that would serve both as a symbol for the city’s developing business sector and as a gateway connecting the historic centre with western Timisoara while also enriching the existing east-west axis. Moreover, considering that the rehabilitation of the Theresia Bastion at the eastern end of the axis had created a cultural pole for the old city, it is obvious that this connection along with the future rehabilitation of the Military Hospital – by turning it into an administrative, public and cultural facility - would be a gesture of great urban value. Especially when the CBC’s aspiration is to become a micro-scale lively city itself and bring office spaces, gallery space for exhibitions and outdoor public plazas together.

2 CITY BUSINESS CENTRE, REGENERATOR FOR THE WEST GATE TO THE CENTRE

The City Business Centre office and service building complex, which is currently in construction, has gradually replaced an industrial site and covers an area of approximately 65,000 square meters.

The densification study which generated the phased development of the micro-city was informed by many different factors such as the site’s limits and proximities, the project brief and investment plan and the expected urban outcome:

2.1. Location: the proximity to the city centre determined an intervention characterised by a height classification and land use typology which are complementary to the traditional urban tissue; the contiguity with the railway on the northern side, which separates the centre from the rest of the city and which, in the following years, will translate from being a limit and become the new development spine of the city.

2.2. The project brief and the possible phasing within the site of the Modatim plot: As a speculative investment, the development’s main goal was to build and rent class A office and service spaces, while the financing system which was available in this case, a progressive development of the built objects during the phased demolition of the factory, resulted in the relocation of the second. (the factory relocation took place in April 2009).

2.3. The preoccupation and strategy at the urban level was characterised through:

2.3.1. Opting for a “building blocks” pattern, which, as a whole, would generate a coherent ensemble and not interfere with the height and scale of the surrounding area and would
establish a relationship based on continuity with the rest of the surrounding buildings within the 700 Square. The organising principle was that of a mass from which clearly defined public and semi-public spaces were cut out in order to reflect the traditional urban tissue of Timisoara’s city centre. Finally, by 2015, when the fifth building will be in place, the result will be a stratified, terraced ensemble in which the mineral character of the ground level plaza will be compensated by the mostly vegetal character of the business centre’s higher levels.

2.3.2. Generating powerful urban spaces on the four sides of the site in relation to the exterior area, the city and the site itself:

There is a new street which is parallel to the railway and connects the two main roads – C. Brediceanu towards the south and Gheorghe Lazar Boulevard to the north. In this “sector”, the City Business Centre ensemble’s proximity to the north is the newly built Financial Administration building. Between the two, an “urban plaza” type of space is born, having two underground parking levels and leaving room for a possible access towards the urban railway access belonging to the 700 Square. This investment has been made recently, defining a great step within the wide process of modernisation and regeneration of the whole area.

Towards the east, the frontage of the two buildings leaves room for the possible development of the whole area in favour of a generous concept – 700 Square – “Gate to the Centre”.

Between the northern and southern poles of the urban plaza, a covered pedestrian gallery emerges and generates a gate towards the first two buildings from the east and integrates the two atriums from the west; when the railway will seize to be a barrier, the western side of the site will stop being a secondary one and the pedestrian access will be possible along the C Brediceanu Street, through the two atriums and from the northern urban plaza. Thus, for the City Business Centre, the longitudinal gallery following the site’s north-south axis becomes the backbone of an ensemble where covered passages host lively landscaped spaces, urban art and glass funnels.

To the south and C. Brediceanu Street there is another “urban plaza”-type of space, this one being located within the site boundaries. Considering the existing level difference, this space will be an amphitheatre, an event space where the artistic material can be easily integrated. Although the initial project featured an emblematic work of art in this location, the archaeological surprise offered a whole new perspective and purpose for this particular space.

2. THE SURPRISE

The whole design process, authorization and management procedures for the construction of the City Business Centre took into account the possible discovery of the old fortification’s foundation yet was based on the idea of a total archaeological discharge, in accordance with all legal procedures. Yet, the archaeological research carried out during the summer of 2011, following the foundation works of the 5th building, revealed a part of the fortification which used to belong to the complex XVIIIth century defense mechanism of Timisoara.

The “Preemptive archaeological research report in the site Timisoara, 700 Square”, elaborated by dr. Alexandru Szenmiklosi, Ovidiu Bozú and Andrei Balarie revealed that the foundations found on site were part of the citadel’s weir walls and of the sluice ensemble. The report describes the artefacts that were discovered on site and the condition in which these were found.

According to the report, the counterscarp of the First Counterguard had been affected alongside with the rest of the fortification walls by the foundation piles of the ModaTim textile factory. Initially, both the scarp and the counterscarp wall were built out of brick and rested on a wooden pile substructure. The sluice was situated to the south of the First
Counterguard and it was used in regulating the water levels and flow rates within the fortification’s moat. It was mainly built out of stone blocks (granite and limestone) and presented brick interventions in some places. The dimensions of the granite building blocks varied from 1.5m by 0.50m to 0.45m by 0.50m, the bigger blocks being laid at the bottom of the sluice, which was made out of massive wooden beams of a rectangular section.

When the Preventive Archaeological Surveying was done, the sluice had already been affected by the dismantling works carried out during the late XIXth and early XXth century, but also by a concrete pipe which was built around the same period as the textile factory. The archaeological find determined the postponing of the construction works until an appropriate solution was found for dealing with the artefacts. In this context, the ensemble’s discovery generated intense public debate on the value of the artefacts to the city’s heritage and eventually led the National Heritage Committee, the archeologists, the architects and the investor to the consentaneous conclusion that the sluice ensemble should be placed in a public space in order to showcase its true value.
3 CONSERVING THE ARCHITECTURAL ARTEFACTS

According to the archaeological report, “the sluice represents an exceptional archeological discovery both because of its uniqueness and its construction method.” The same report concludes with the fact that “looking past the discovery’s unique character and the potential it holds from the tourist and educational point of view, the sluice also offers valuable scientific information about the history of Timisoara and the military hydrotechnical engineering works carried out in this area during the XVIIIth and XIXth century. Based on these arguments, the project proposes the conservation of the sluice and its exhibition within a public open air museum.” [1]

After taking into account the above mentioned, a few possible solutions were taken into consideration. The first solution was to continue the archaeological survey and the successive dismantle of the relics in order to gather additional data from the ground layers below the sluice and finally to clear the site and move the valuable remains into the Banat Museum. In this case, an explicit graphical representation of the sluice would have been presented on the basement floor of the fifth building at the exact location where the relics were found. Additionally, a permanent display of high quality pictures and models of the archaeological discovery would have been provided in the main hall of the building and within the urban plaza. One of the advantages of this approach was that the open air museum would have extended into the building along with the fact that the economical processes involved for the archaeological surveying and the construction process could have been managed separately, with the possibility of accessing European funding for further archaeological research. On the other hand, the major disadvantage would have been the loss of the original substance of the monument.

The second option was to keep only part of the archaeological ensemble within the building and to treat the remaining of it in a manner similar to the first solution, by imprinting it on the floor of the basement along with the provision of exhibition spaces for the
archaeological material such as photos and historical information. The advantage of this solution consisted in the in situ preservation of parts of the ensemble (approximately 160 sq. m), yet this would have implied lifting it by one meter, due to the thickness of the building’s foundation mat and would have brought along more overall disadvantages. Firstly, the destination of the containing space (private underground parking and mechanical rooms) wouldn’t have been an appropriate one for showcasing archaeological remains. Secondly, this solution would have led to the loss of 24 parking spaces, thus to the sub-calibration of the parking and violation of the Traffic Committee note stated within the Building Permit for City Business Centre. For these reason, the second solution wouldn’t have been a beneficial one for either the city’s heritage or the building process for the CBC.

Moreover, because of the terrain’s swamp-like character, in which the groundwater level is very close to the land surface and because of the incapacity of continuously pumping the water into the city’s already overloaded drainage system, a complete in-situ preservation of the medieval water gate could not be taken into consideration.

After a careful consideration of these facts, the final and best option in dealing with the relics was to disassemble and reassemble them within the urban plaza; while keeping their original orientation, they were translated to the east by 30 meters and lifted at a height of approximately 5m. Meanwhile, both the idea of imprinting the exact spot where the ensemble was found and the idea of a public display of the information gathered by the archaeology department remained among the project’s aims.
Some of the valuable artefacts will be displayed in the main hall between the 4th and the 5th office building while the exterior exhibition is to be perceived from different levels by the visitor, thus defining an open-air museum which will be illuminated at night and at the same time present information about the old city wall and its features through exterior exhibition panels, a floor plan imprint and scale models of the XVIIth century citadel.

This solution was the one approved by the National Heritage and Monument Committee, since the project was developed according to the 7th Article of the ICOMOS Venice Charter, which permits the relocation of monuments in some cases. In this case, besides the fact that an in-situ type of conservation would have been impossible, the advantages of this particular solution outweighed the disadvantages and overruled the other options. First of all, a major advantage was the fact that this proposal determined a wider area of conservation (approximately 450sq.m as opposed the others which would preserve 160sq.m or less). Secondly, in the context of proximity, where across from the City Business Centre there is another part of the old wall still standing, it made more sense to expose another part of the fortification for public display as it would serve as an educational device on the innovative technology of the XVIIth century and as a tourist attraction. Neither of these would have been possible if the monument would have been kept underground. Moreover, in “Principles of preservation – An introduction to the International Charters for Conservation and Restoration 40 years after the Venice Charter” Michael Petzet makes a case for the relocation of monuments in more cases than just “where the safeguarding of that monument demands it or where it is justified by national or international interests of paramount importance”. According to Petzet, a case can be made not only for the “removal of historic buildings for brown coal mining or the flooding of a village for a man-made lake, but also in the case of the approval of a new building on the site, regardless of why the permission was granted.” [3] In this case, as the City Business Centre is of great strategic value to the city, The National Committee for Heritage, as a part of the Ministry of Culture even considered the option of accepting the first option, that of completely clearing the site, since the project was partly sponsored by European Funding and any delay could cause withdrawal of funds. It was then that the investor and the architects militated for the safeguarding of the artefact. This action ended up delaying the project by 8 months and raising the cost by 650.000 euros. The subject of the sluice later generated lively debate which put forward another possible solution, in which the City Council would buy the artefact’s location back from the investor in order to create an archaeological park over it, yet, for economical and urban planning reasons, this never happened.

In the end, as Petzet puts it, “Considering the omnipresent threats to our cultural heritage, in all necessary struggles for the right solution, in every individual case there should not be any “dogmatic wars” about the principles. Instead it is important to save what can be saved within the range of our possibilities” [4]. Additionally, if we take the first principle stated in the 1989 Washington Charter for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas into account, “In order to be most effective, the conservation of historic towns and other historic urban areas should be an integral part of coherent policies of economic and social development and of urban and regional planning at every level”. Also, given the fact that chapter 4 of Heritage and Economics (ICOMOS Paris Declaration of the General Assembly) clearly states “To better understand the economic and social impact of maximising the value of heritage, which is an asset to development”[5], we believe that the adopted solution is the correct one. Moreover, through the use of ceramics in their natural brick-like colour within the office building ensemble, the dialogue between the materials used would generate a subtle message about the local spirit which embraces both the old artefact and the new construction.
The project was also developed according to the Romanian legal norms as stated in Chapter III of the Law no. 422/18 from July 2011 – Interventions over historical monuments, Art. 22(2)e regarding the relocation of historical monuments, since the relocation of the monument is done at a small distance from its original location. We also consider that this version of the project is also done in the spirit of the LIEPZIG Charter, which calls for the harmonious integration of monuments within public spaces and keeping them alive in their original location.

4 SIMILAR EXAMPLES

One can find similar cases of moving and rebuilding large-scale monuments on different locations in Romania, with these interventions generated by important infrastructure works. In 1970, the Ada Kaleh isle was flooded by the waters of the Danube, after the large Iron Gates dam had been completed and the barrier lake had been formed there. A lot of artefacts belonging to the old Turkish citadel were then rescued, moved and partially rebuilt on the Şimian island a few kilometres downstream.

It is already a sad history for the Romanian people how many old orthodox churches have been destroyed during the communist regime, especially after the large earthquake in 1977. During the eighties, the Romanian engineer Eugeniu I. Iordanescu developed a system of translating buildings/churches with a number of monuments saved by this procedure of translation. The Mihai Voda church in Bucharest, dating from the XVIth century, was translated in 1985 horizontally 298m and lowered by 6.2 m from its original site, being moved following an oblique vector [6].

One interesting well-known example to mention is what happened with the ARA PACIS – The Altar of Peace – in Rome, which was reassembled with all its constituent fragments on a new site a few hundred metres away from its original location. It was integrated in the new urban context designed by Piacentini during Mussolini’s government and covered for the first time by a building designed by the architect Victorio Morpurgo. After approximately forty years, in the eighties, Morpurgo’s building was demolished and the Ara Pacis was covered and integrated into a new controversial building, this time designed by architect Richard Meier [7].

The artefact in this last example has been moved not once but twice: the sole surviving gate from London’s ensemble of city gateways - The Temple Bar. The old medieval gate was replaced after the Great fire in 1666 by Sir Christopher Wren. The gate was taken down in January 1878 stone by stone and it was reconstructed as a gatehouse for the new residence of Sir Henry Meux. The property was sold in 1929 and the gate became a ruin. In the late seventies Temple Bar Trust was formed with the scope to rebuild the monument for the second time. The site for it - between St. Paul’s Cathedral and Paternoster Square - was approved in 2001 and in 16 months it was removed, restored and re-assembled [8].

Figure 13: Mihai Voda church translation
Figure 14: Mihai Voda church translation
Urban Regeneration and its surprise due to the discovery of XVIIth century artefacts

Figure 15: Artefacts reconstructed on their new location

Figure 16: Artefacts reconstructed on their new location
5 CONCLUSIONS

- The case study of the XVIIIth century sluice found on the site of the C.B.C. ensemble clearly emphasizes the necessity of a nondogmatic approach of the principles included in the praxis and major documents concerning the triad conservation-restoration-renovation when dealing with concrete, complex situations arising in our contemporary cities. Anticipating and establishing a hierarchy of interests, both public and private, on a medium and long term can lead to non-orthodox solutions. While a multicriterial evaluation is mandatory, one should always place the social and ecologic pillars of sustenability in a just balance with the other two – the economic and the cultural. In an apparently conspicuous assemblage, by means of a creative scenography in which archaeological artefacts are placed in dialogue with contemporary ambiences, dialogue can generate an enriched atmosphere where both the old – exhibited – and the new – containing- ambiences are enchanced (a less common situation, usually the old contains the new). It is our belief that these two incarnations of ceramic – on one hand as old massive blocks, on the other as a „textile” in the shading baguettes of the modern facade, speak equally about the inovative-technical and the conservative-agrarian spirit so typical for Timisoara and Banat.

- On the other hand, the submitted case in which a site destined exclusively to commerce and profit such as the C.B.C. ensemble becomes a nexus in the network of museum spaces in the city, with the cooperation and assistance of leading private economic agents, can surely prove to be an interesting lesson.

- One should not forget nonetheless that in the beginning of the 70s this artefact has been partially uncovered, during the construction of an important production building of the textile factory. The fact that we – archaeologists, historians and architects- were all taken by surprise at the end of the construction process of the office buildings is indeed arguable. But one questions remains: what if the construction of the office ensemble started with the present no. 5 building and the sluice had been discovered from the early beginning – would we still have a textile factory on the site?

REFERENCES


[4] Ibid, p.28;


