

Place Brand-Building. *Urban Empathy* as an Evaluation Method

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Abstract. The image of urban areas created by an appropriate urban branding attracts population, when cities compete for inhabitants and businesses. Experience shows that not only the positive visual and spatial features attract people, but also hard to define “atmosphere”, mood, city narrative, related to activities, events and history. Author proposes a new method of urban assessment to define features that are important, but difficult to capture - the method of *urban empathy*. The empathetic perception of urban space is a broad-spectrum experience: it can be lived through learning the city’s history, narrative, events in a relation to physical urban space. Emotions mapped on urban plan create the emphatic image of the city.

Keywords: Place brand-building · Urban empathy

1 Introduction

The diagnosis of contemporary spatial phenomena in architecture and urban planning taking under consideration changes in cultural, social and economic impact caused by the development of the information society should form the basis for creating new strategies in urban branding. De-industrialization of cities in developed countries, significant mobility of workers, development of information and communication technologies and creative industries cause changes in settlement preferences. New, image of urban areas created by an appropriate urban branding can attract additional population, when places compete for inhabitants and businesses. In order to do that effectively, it is necessary to understand the potentials of place to be presented to the target groups. Experience shows that not only the positive visual and spatial features attract people, but also hard to define “atmosphere”, mood, city narrative, related to activities, events and history. The choice of a place/neighbourhood to live in, is often based on emotions and impressions. Author proposes a new method of urban assessment to define these features that are important, but difficult to capture. The method proposed is urban empathy. The empathetic perception of urban space is a broad-spectrum experience. It can be lived through learning the city’s history, myths, legends, social relations in a relation to urban space. Furthermore, the approach takes under consideration the view of specific groups of inhabitants.

In a *place brand-building*, urban empathy can be used to evaluate:

- predominating emotions connected to the place: curiosity, awe, boredom, distaste and irritation for place marketing and place promotion
- city narrative: history, legend, combined with particular elements of city structure for urban branding
- events contributing to brand-building
- mapping emotions and presenting them on urban plan
- assessment how to create a powerful city brands.

2 Quality of Urban Structures - Assessment

The beauty of urban structures, which through the centuries was derived from the spatial order and quality of life within it, has been moved into the back row of interests of the town planners and spatial planners. Its place was taken by the values based on predomination of rational functionalism strongly related to technology and economy. Urban tradition of the first Athen's Charter introducing division into functional zones continues to be the basis for shaping modern city structures. City space was assigned with functional and economic values, with no regard to emotional values directly related to a sense of beauty or ugliness of the surrounding area. Contemporary idea of a balanced development refers mainly to the issues of nature, economy and sociology; the problematic issues of beauty are pushed to the back of the hierarchy of strategic objectives.

The reason for this are difficulties in defining and assessing beauty, both at the stage of recognition of determinants of spatial development, as well as in the phase of creating scripts for the development of the city structures. However, diagnoses, which do not encompass all significant needs of the residents (including the inbred need for beauty and harmony), imprint themselves negatively on the quality of urban planning.

It is believed that harmony of urban structures has an impact on social order and lack of appreciation for beauty is one of the reasons of urban disintegration and fading identity of cities. In the Beijing Charter of the XIX Congress of the International Union of Architects - UIA, held in June 1999, among the tasks facing the architects of the XXI century there is a postulate of bringing back the soul of cities and towns which characterized them and invoked awe of its inhabitants and visitors during the past centuries.

In modern urbanization, the development of planning procedures based on functional and technological, social and economic analysis significantly outdistanced methods of diagnosis of compositional quality, order and harmony, which may become an object of admiration. The author believes that the ability to find beauty in an urban space is just as important as knowledge of the state of the environment, its physiographics, methods of land use, access to public transportation etc. Our feelings have an objective quality in forming our relationship with our surroundings. The beauty of a city evokes specific feelings providing a sense of order. The ability to recognize beauty is an art in itself. In this case the author suggests to use the method of empathy based on Husserl's cognitive theory (Husserl 1929). Husserl's idea of "feeling empathy", "looking within"; (introspection) was an object of inspiration for many specializations, which treated empathy as a cognitive action method (empathic awareness).

Irena Wojnar (1976) calls upon Arnheim's opinion, "as perception is based on the interaction between the properties of an object and the nature of the entity of the observer, each act of perception is simultaneously an intellectual action".

Steiner Kvale in his work on the effectiveness of research interviews states that empathy is a very sensitive interpretive method of acquiring information. The author emphasizes that "the use of...interviews for research shows the possibilities of applying empathy and emotional interaction to obtain significant knowledge..." (Kvale 1996).

These methods are effective tools in acquiring research material; however, "the outcome of an interview depends on the knowledge, sensitivity, and empathy of the interviewer." (Kvale 1996).

The objective of this work is to present the possibilities of expanding existing urban diagnostic methods by adding urban empathy as a new research tool. In urban planning, empathic perception is a new approach to diagnostic research. It seems that it corresponds well with modern urban planning challenges but also with the necessity of creating the brand of the city.

3 Urban Empathy as a Study Method, Case Study City of Catania, Italy

In direct ties between a man and a city, urban interiors have basic significance. It is they that decide about perception of beauty of the streets, city squares, and housing blocks – designating contact with space. It is not hard to notice, that these components of municipal fabric play a double role. First of all, they have a specific functional designation: to meet the requirements. Secondly, their appearance evokes defined aesthetic experiences related to the form, composition, colour, etc. We can experience certain emotions while contemplating only a view of a part of the city and independently experience different feelings using its functional attributes. Thus, if we like some element of municipal space because it looks pretty, it is still not known as to whether we will be satisfied with its practical usefulness to meet defined needs.

An example of this study is Catania – a city located in the central part of the east coast of Sicily, at the foot of the Etna volcano. This choice is not incidental. A city of ancient origin in a region marked with social and economic problems yet with innovation and ideas for further development. Catania is full of contrasts and contradictions, and the line between beauty and ugliness, free composition and spatial disorder are particularly fragile. Finding an answer to a question what sort of city Catania is will provide a challenge to test the chosen research method. Contrasts resulting from periods of its development and fall marked by the eruption of the volcano Etna can be read in its urban composition. In the disposition of its inhabitants, one can see the love for temporary and substitutive solutions being in opposition to their unflinching faith in the survival after future attacks of nature's element. Their perception of the city encompass a feeling of admiration for the magnificent historical architecture, wonderful climate, but also aversion and fear ensuing from the high crime rate, lack of social and political order and organization. Currently, Catania is undergoing intensive urbanization. Modern building constructions, however, are quite often technologically and stylistically behind the

times. At the same time the city is a buoyant centre of science and industry. Innovative technologies are being implemented in a dynamically developing technology park called “Etna Valley”. Thus, the multi-layered, contrasting with one another qualities constitute an ideal base for a study allowing to define and systematize groups of qualities, that make an empathic portrait of the city.

Whilst perception of a city takes place only by means of sights, it has a contemplative characteristic; functional perception is dynamic, imposes action. It places a person under pressure of direct contact with specific people, situations, institutions, events - they provide specific experiences (e.g. looking for a parking space, taking care of a matter in a public office, finding a room at a hotel). Activity of an individual is then directed to a specific need related to part of the city’s fabric. Positive or negative experiences are related to this activity, combining into a general experience of beauty of the city. The said activity evoking specific feelings can be called “experiencing” the city. Lipps (1987) says that experience is the basis for knowing, it stimulates the human psyche.

How, through this understanding, can one describe the relation between the view of a place and its designated function? It seems that the best cognitive tool here is the concept of empathy. Empathy, for the purpose of further analysis can be defined as the ability to sympathize, imagining the feelings of other people functioning in the observed by us environment. It means placing oneself in the situation of another individual and becoming aware of not only one’s own emotional states relating to, for example, admiring an interesting façade but imagining how the people behind the façade live and what they feel. Urban empathy pertains to both: the current moment and to historical retrospect. It therefore means seeing a romantic, picturesque narrow street through the eyes of its impoverished residents, for whom the said picturesqueness is associated with the lack of resources for the repair of plaster falling off, patching up roofs, or replacing old windows and doors. In such case, one is beginning to perceive the picture of the city through the eyes of “another” human being. The concept of empathy was founded on the basis of Edmund Husserl’s philosophy. In his speculations, empathy is subjective; it is a multilayered and complex act. For empathy, it is vital to go beyond the boundaries of one’s own feelings. Urban empathy is a mutual dependency between my own perceptions and an experience and the ones of the other people living within the landscape admired by me. It is a very specific type of synthesis of aesthetic experiences and functional/utilitarian qualities of the place.

Urban empathy requires careful observation, perception and knowledge. Eyesight carries information about the external state of the observed surroundings; knowledge enables to identify with the mentality and habits of the inhabitants, their culture, and history.

Urban empathy is a specific type of “listening in” to the city. Into what it communicates to us with its appearance, history, tradition, culture, diversity of functions. It is a mental entrance into the world of the residents with their joys, sadness, aspirations, and problems. It also allows to understand places marked with unusual events. In order to see a city, all you need is eyes. In order to understand a city, empathy is vital.

3.1 Mapping of Dominating Emotions

An important factor of our emotional experiences pertaining to Catania is the feelings of relationship with the city and sensations accompanying it. They ensue not only from social relations but also from our bonds with the city space – houses, sidewalks, walls. Gradually interpersonal elements come into play, a specific form of sympathy and antipathy. Such anthropomorphism of emotional experience, assigning human traits to houses and streets is well known to psychologists. Thus, we have cheerful and joyful streets, serious and laughing facades, sad and gloomy courtyards, and tenement houses evoking pity, pathetic, funny, and anguished houses. Specific emotions ensuing from associating with a city, harmony and disharmony, city myths, fashionable and cult places, style of living related to various parts of the city – those are examples of relationships, in which Catania shapes our emotional approach to its space. In a wider sense, this emotional structure of the city tissue builds a bond between a man and the space. Stanisław Ossowski (2004) points to social reaction determinants towards works of art, evoking their communication function. Through analogy, one can risk a statement that in the urban environment emotional relation towards the space also has a social function. It is based on the emotional “interlacing” of social relations, which impact the valorisation of municipal space. Thus, in Catania it is possible to distinguish places evoking different emotional states: curiosity, awe, boredom, distaste, and irritation.

Curiosity. In the narrow streets of the Consolazione district, one finds a romantic ambiance, a fairytale quality of the remarkable former Catania. Consolazione was built in 1669 by the earthquake survivors, inhabitants of the Catania’s city centre - hence its



Fig. 1. Catania, Consolazione road. Traditional tenement houses. Drawn A. Bonenberg

name¹. Single and two storey tenement houses in colours of golden brown and grey, oleander and bougainvillea flowers decorating the balconies, laundry hung up between the buildings create the special atmosphere enhanced by mystery of dark courtyards. A frequent sights here are street stalls with fresh products such as tomatoes, lemons and figs placed in wooden boxes laid out on the street, men involved in discussions standing in front of house entrances. The black volcanic tuff with which the streets were paved reminds of the many eruptions of Etna. The picturesqueness of cosy urban interiors, neglected buildings, awakens our interest, draws us deep into the shadowed courtyards, mysterious alleys and winding streets (Fig. 1).

Awe. Curiosity gives up to awe as we approach the centre of Catania. Going in the direction of the heart of the city we become engulfed in the world of Sicilian baroque. Piazza San Francesco: volcanic blackness of the sidewalk, light yellow façade of the church, pulsating cornices, decorative balconies, pilaster strips, friezes, and plinths. Grid divisions are enlivened by relieves and bas-relieves. Contrast is the main determinant of composition: the still, massive black plinth of San Francesco d' Assisi church, which is contrasted with the light sandstone shade façade with imaginatively formed partly architectural, partly borrowed from theatrical stage design details. Everything vibrates, creating an illusion of movement. Cornices repeat the façade's hollows. Decorative pillars emphasize the corners. The capitals of pilasters peculiarly bend under the solid cornices. Restless surfaces are torn by weaving lines intertwining with each other. Urban interiors are filled with an atmosphere of loftiness and Baroque temperament. The façades of houses, in certain fragments overly expressive, dazzle the viewer and at the same time surprise with the richness of form, the lack of moderation. Overly excessive ornaments in some places border on kitsch. The unique combination of disharmony, dynamics, and contrast evokes the feeling of awe.

Boredom. Completely different emotions are evoked by the development of the Nesima and Monte Po districts. This development started at the beginning of the 70s of the 20th century according to the design made by Federico Gorio and Marcello Vittorini and is a typical example of great suburban apartment complexes constructed according to the ideals of modernism. It is dominated by boredom and monotony: simple concrete forms of high-rise apartment blocks, horizontal windows, flat roofs, and the balconies in repeatable rhythms. The space between buildings is filled with parked cars. Bored groups of adolescents sit on scratched up benches.

Distaste and Irritation. Moving away from the city centre, we come to the Catanian *urban sprawl*. Boundaries of the city are hard to grasp, housing development spills destroying the beautiful landscape. The feeling of boredom is replaced by distaste brought out by chaos in composition of dynamically developing building sites. New developer-made housing estates are located next to warehouse bases, small factories and shopping centres. It is difficult to notice any pedestrians. Roads leading in the direction

¹ Consolazione (it.) - consolation, alleviation of misery or distress; comfort.

of the city are overflowing with thousands of cars. Exhaust fumes and noise fill the picturesque valleys of the Catania's suburbs.

Catania provides us with a wide scope of diversified feelings. It evokes curiosity, awe, boredom, distaste, and irritation. Those feelings are transposed unto the spatial structure of the city creating its unique map of emotions (Fig. 2).

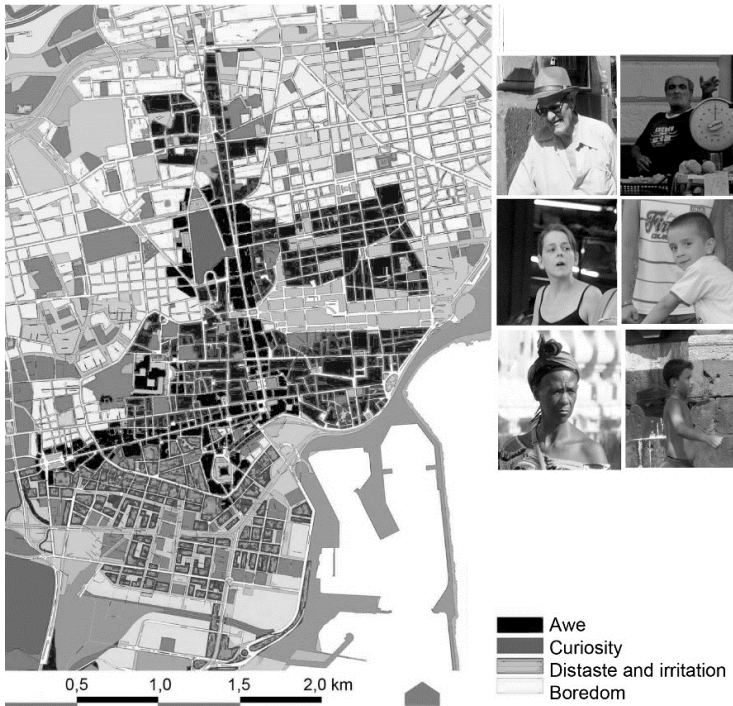


Fig. 2. City of Catania. Mapping emotions in relation to the city structure to support city branding concepts.

3.2 Empathetic Analysis of Beauty

The presented analysis confirmed that urban empathy is an effective study tool of urban structures. It allows to effectively combine aesthetic evaluation relating to the picture of the city and its functional-utility assessment being a decisive factor of comfort and functioning of an urban structure. It enables better understanding of how historical preconditions, tradition and nature shape the face of the city. It makes it possible to prove that beauty of the city structure lies in harmonious integration of views of the city, impressions, values, emotions and symbols, the synthesis of which creates emotional and pragmatic image of the city (Fig. 3).

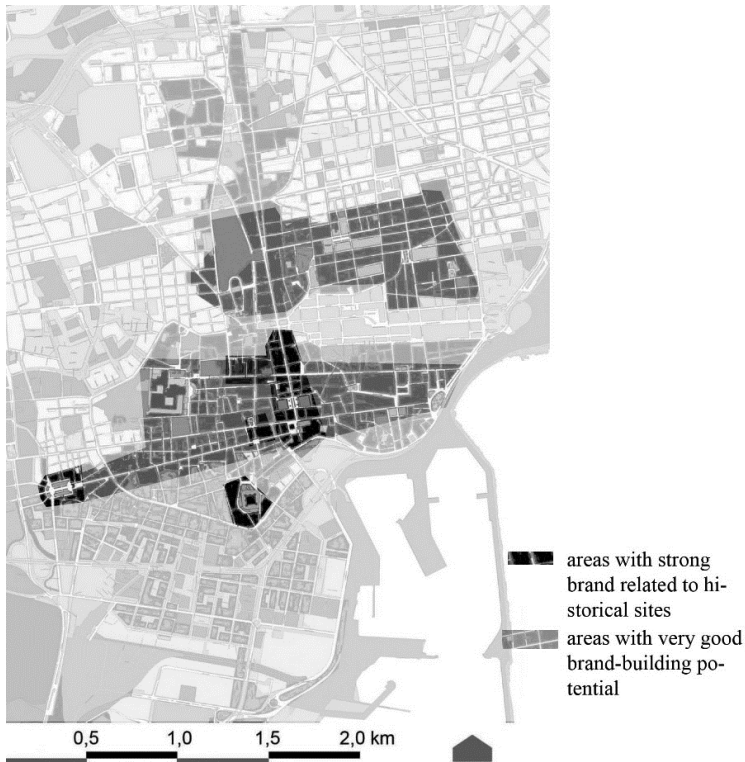


Fig. 3. Brand building: City of Catania. Mapping areas with strong brands (based on search-engine popularity rating) with relation to emotional map (Fig. 2.) Areas with strong brand, related to historical sites shown together with areas with good brand building potential (according to author).

Based on this type of comprehension of beauty, its picture becomes more realistic. Captured in such way the city is described in a language of perceptions which with the aid of a set of unique symbols that allow to shape the impression of beauty. The relationship of urban empathy and beauty of the city is based on the fact that thanks to empathy one can read and assess its beauty better. Of course this is not the sole method of perceiving beauty. Urban empathy enriches the existing cognitive methods of the city space, including factors difficult to measure, which have significant impact on urban developments within the space of a city.

3.3 Intersubjectivity of Urban Empathy

Urban empathy enables to recognize subtle dependencies between different interpretations of space. Due to similarities in reactions of different recipients to the defined spatial, social and functional situations, it has interpersonal aspect. Therefore it can constitute a basis for believable urban diagnosis.

3.4 Phenomenology of Urban Empathy

Urban empathy is a method of perception primarily in the phenomenological sense. It stipulates that due to command of emotional states, evoked by the image of a city, its structure and genesis of its development can be recognized. By the same token, its uniqueness can become easily noticed and comprehended. The idea behind this method is a moment of transporting “oneself” into situations of local inhabitants (former and present) and observing their immediate surrounding through their eyes as if travelling together with them through the events which happen to them on a street, a square, in a house. It is the sight of the city “through the eyes” of their feelings, experiences and motivations.

This urban analysis method is conditioned by understanding of emotions of the people who have direct relation with a definite part of a city space. Feelings being a basis of the behaviour, the decisions concerning investments, systems of value and aesthetic sensitivity—all that contributes to building this, and not any other, type of social structure. Such knowledge, when obtained, should constitute significant message for undertaking urban decisions.

3.5 Sense of Municipal Community

Urban empathy on the emotional, historical, symbolic and existential level is a vital element in building a sense of municipal community. City events, experiences, emotions, social stances, cumulative memory of the inhabitants – are an inseparable part of urban science. Perceiving and recognizing them through empathy enables obtaining urban solutions which strengthen group ties and identity.

3.6 Empathy and Urban Context

Urban empathy is especially useful in comprehensive grasp of a context. The key issue here is the history of a place, its identity, ambiguity. In a city space we find various, overlapping levels of experience, which influence emotions and human behaviour. The effect of empathic analysis is, on one hand, discovery of unrecognized contexts, and on the other hand, provision of a critical record of interdependencies which are decisive in the uniqueness of a place.

3.7 Urban Empathy in Spatial Management Plans of Cities

Empathetic analysis is a reliable foundation for making decisions defining the scope of interference in the existing tissue of the city. Prior to undertaking project decisions a planner should ask himself the question: how the project task is going to be understood, and after formulating an answer, seek approval and confirmation within the local community.

4 Scope of Method Application

Empathetic analysis may be carried out for any part of each city. Urban empathy allows to draw out those values, which elude standard urban diagnosis. Analysis conducted in this manner shows that places at first glance unattractive may take on a sparkle, unique character, its own one of a kind individuality. This is the identification of emotional urban structure topography. From this point of view, both intriguing deformity and breathtaking beauty enrich experiences constitute a place's charm and uniqueness.

Empathetic analysis should be skilfully adapted to specific conditions of a location. Its various aspects may be deepened by adapting to the required accuracy of the studies. Using empathetic method in the field of urban studies introduces not only town-planner's imagination in the design process but also interpretive diversity of emotions in urban creativity.

5 Limitations on Method Application

There are some traps in the urban empathy method. For a researcher providing emotional diagnosis, empathy may become a dominant state and be used as an excuse for someone's even the most mistaken urban decision. Such decision, once the motives behind it are understood, may become (wrongly) emotionally justified, because it can be explained by some "discovered" reasons. Empathetic diagnosis without reflection may be a reason for wrong decisions, thus bringing damage to a city. When urban planner attempts to destroy a valuable landscape with an ill-considered decision, one can succumb to a temptation of justifying steps taken. This is the type of extreme subjective empathy that uses excuses such as: 'it was because of pressure', 'effects were needed urgently', 'the investor was impatient', 'people have to live somewhere', or 'the city has to grow'. One can list many such reasons used by architects and town planners to justify their reproachful actions and expecting "empathic" understanding of their conduct.

6 Conclusion

It is the author's belief that implementing urban empathy category into urban assessment would break away from a certain defined scheme of urban studies and the method can be used in creating urban branding strategies. Empathic analysis causes urban studies to become a process emerging from the life schedules of inhabitants, requiring constant effort to discover the city and to perfect its space.

Empathy helps to understand better the genesis of the city. In standard urban research, one makes use of contemporary set of concepts which hamper or make impossible to understand motives and circumstances that occurred long time ago. Due to emphatic analysis it is possible to reach the genesis of the city and to understand specific historical, political, social and economic conditions, which today may appear to be incidental and incongruous.

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