MANIFESTATIONS OF SYMBOLISM IN A CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPACE

GODA SŪDŽIŪTĖ

Vilnius Tech, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Architectural Fundamentals, Theory and Art, Pylimo st 26, 01141 Vilnius, Lithuania
Tutor: Prof. dr. Almantas Liudas Samalavičius
ORCiD: 0000-0003-1057-7084
E-mail: g.sudziu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Contemporary urban design practice often focuses on addressing physical and physiological human needs without emphasising the symbolic dimension of the space. However, built environment can be regarded as a system of signs simultaneously functioning in both the material order of reality and the symbolic one. The option to address both aspects leads to creating spaces that are not only attractive but can also be interpreted by their hidden meanings. The paper addresses the issues of the symbolic dimension of a city in the urban and social contexts while using the notion of “spirituality in place” to seek out the qualities of the built environment that, through its physical design, allows users to find greater meaning in their surroundings. The objective of this research is to make these invisible qualities more understandable by exploring the relationship between the material form and the symbolic meaning.

KEY WORDS: Square, the city, semantics, public space, symbols, urbanism

Introduction

In architectural theory and practice, symbolic manifestations do not have a unified classification or interpretation. Both the function of symbolism and the principles of conveying the symbolic meaning in the built environment can take various approaches and represent different goals. As described by Professor J. Lang, symbols link material reality to intangible ideas, values or phenomena that are not directly related to the material form itself (Lang 1987). By adding a symbolic meaning to the space, the architect can manip-
ulate its development or preservation, appropriate it, or even create a unique identity. In order to distinguish the aspects of symbols encoded in a specific space, one has to answer the question of how it is regarded in urban and architectural design as a whole.

This text presents an analysis of the symbolic dimension of urban design and addresses the distinction of public space based on the symbolic expression. The focus remains on the correlation between space, material form and intangible ideas. Based on the methodology of semantic analysis, the text presents the case study of project proposals for Lukiškių square in Vilnius and the relation between urban design elements and collective memory.

**Perception of a space**

Urbanist N. Salingaros notes that it is important to understand that a unique feature of a human being is a set of sensory and perceptual tools that allow the person to interpret the information in the environment and immediately react to it. Yet, human cognitive abilities cannot accept unorganised information (Salingaros 2015). Thus, each design element should be composed while addressing human scale, movement, and in response to the psychological and emotional state in all of the spatial scales.

The significance of added meaning is also addressed by A. Berleant, who treats space perception as a combination of sensory and psychological experience. He asserts that the perception of the environment includes all senses that connect the body to the place. The environment has become an ecosystem, a set of objects and processes that are functionally tied together using the context of interpretation (Berleant 2012). Observation and interpretation make it possible to create complex spaces, unified by elements that are connected on the basis of similar design properties, and on perceived meaning, assigned function, etc. A. Rapoport adds to the idea with a notion that the human brain always tries to impose a meaning on built forms that are based on cognitive taxonomies (Rapoport 1990).

As a characteristic feature of the spatial structure of European cities, squares and plazas confer historical identity and symbolic values upon the city (Faye and Le Fur 2012). Although perceived as separate elements, these spaces are not independent. Both the square and its environment are connected by physical, aesthetic, and contextual ties so the shape, size, design elements and function are an integral part of a bigger structure. Even if we perfectly copy the totality of the forms of a square, we will not be able to “move” it to another place, because the square is not only its internal content but also a unique physical and spiritual context of the environment, which cannot be “moved” (Tiškus 2016). Thus, the search for meaning starts by addressing the broadest scale – ties to the surroundings of the space.
Architect R. A. Dineika writes: “Each architectural form (building) is visually perceived in a specific environment. Just as the relationship between the parts and details of the building defines the large form of the building – expresses the architectural scale of the building, so do the elements of the architectural environment – the volumes in space with their different division systems – expresses a certain mutual relationship” (Dineika 1996). He discerns three levels of integrated architectural scale perception: the correlation between zones on a surface; the parts of the object or structure, and objects standing separately in the space. Based on these levels, the paper presents a case study of project proposals for Lukiškių square in Vilnius and the comparison of their symbolic expressions.

Case study

One of the notable public spaces that address the symbolic meaning on different scales in the Lithuanian urban landscape is Lukiškių square in Vilnius which since the 19th century has served as the city’s main square. In 2008, a competition for a new design of the square and the creation of the symbol “Freedom” took place, but the winner wasn’t announced. In 2017, the competition was renewed and garnered five project ideas. Further in the text, the two projects that have gained the best responses are discussed in detail.

Figure 1. Lukiskiu square project by A Labasauskas

In the winning project, sculptor A. Labašauskas suggested looking at the square as open urban space. Labašauskas proposed to form a hill that would merge with the square and extend the green zones, diversifying the landscape. The frontal slope of the hill would be finished with a vertical relief serving as a memorial wall – an element that is associated with the creation and protection of human order as opposed to obelisks or monuments that represent power by dominating the space and (usually) take the central position in the
composition (Cirlot 1971). For the relief of the wall, an image of trees was chosen which is related to the bunkers of the forest partisans and the forest itself – a sacred and protective place. The aliases of the freedom fighters would be carved into the trunks of the trees. The space formed between this terrain and the Museum of Genocide Victims in front of it (and the names carved on its plinth there) extends the symbolic expression past the limits of the site (Figure 1, 2). Consequently, the symbolic meaning that creates the identity for the place is formed by an object placed near the perimeter of the square and is regarded as one of the oldest traditions of forming a public space. This notion was addressed by C. Sitte, who described such spaces as more sensitive to the environment, in the historical and urban context (Sitte, 1889).

A different approach is taken in the realised project by the team of G. Čaikauskas. The architects suggested forming a split between the representative and recreational zones and then connecting them into a unified composition. The divide is accentuated by a sharp symbolic cut in the space that highlights two areas: the representative “hard” zone meant for public events and the green recreational “democratic” zone. On the symbolic border between the two zones, as a unifying element, a monumental sculpture of Vytis – a symbol of the nation – would be erected. This approach forms different zones – centres that function in several scales and, with the use of a compositional axis, create a coherent system. The space itself, with the use of hard and soft forms on the plane, creates the juxtaposition and the symbolic tension. However, the central dominant figure creates a sense of a closed, completed space. The connection with the surrounding area is formed only by the use of a visual line between the aforementioned museum and the central sculpture (Figure 3, 4). Additionally, the paths formed in the square were later presented as a symbolic form of the Tree of Life which connects to Lithuanian lore.
Results and discussion

A set urban context and a given goal for the implemented meaning of a space are not the only conditions that influence the connection between the material form and the symbolic meaning. Varying understanding of what represents the intended allusion and what elements are necessary to express the symbol can lead to drastically differing results. Therefore, the process of analysing the symbolic dimension entails a subjective interpretation that can vary based on the creator’s intentions and the perceiver’s understanding.

As demonstrated in the case study, even if the contextually more inclusive project has garnered a more positive reception, the practicality of the second project has led to its realisation. Yet, the necessity to create meanings leads to a huge part of the concept having additional ideas added to the already existing forms.

Conclusions

A symbolic dimension is an invisible but fundamental aspect of a well-functioning space. It is human nature to focus on the perception and instinctual interpretation of our surroundings, which leads to the necessity to implement meanings to the space and the elements that form it. Different interpretations create a certain psychological impact on our understanding of the purpose of the space.

Contemporary public space does not shy from the use of traditional approaches such as centre- or perimeter-oriented compositions with a dominant accent such as a sculpture.
Yet, the symbolic meaning is often revealed in the entire spatial arrangement and different scales. Notable aspects of adding a symbolic meaning to public spaces are the creation of visual and contextual links between the site and its surroundings, individual elements of the composition, and different details or material characteristics. The arrangement of compositional elements creates either unified or isolated wholes.

Figure 4. Lukiskiu square project by G Caikauskas, sculpture of Vytis

References


