

## WHAT MAKES HISTORIC TOWNS IDENTIFIABLE; WHAT TO PRESERVE AND WHAT TO TRANSFORM?

The case of Ljubljana

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### Abstract

*The city is a living organism, a system, which embraces social, economic, technical and symbolic subsystems and interacting amongst them. It is not a concrete system, anchored in a specific time period, but a dynamic system, which changes constantly. The city can subsist for centuries, even millennium and it survives also when its original concept and meaning changed or expired. The city is constantly in the process of transformation, it is willing to accept new contents and a new formal character. A series of cities proves this: e.g. Florence as the birthplace of the Renaissance and is medieval in its original urban form, Rome is perceived as a baroque city today, but a series of monuments points towards its antique origins, medieval and renaissance traces can be unearthed. Baroque Ljubljana, which also has a medieval urban form. In short, as Mumford states: »Cities have an endless capability to adapt to new living conditions.«*

*Ljubljana is a specific case, which derives its identity from its situation, its natural conditions and its turbulent history. This makes debates about preservation and transformation very difficult. The debates are not only academic; they are closely connected with the concrete transformations of historic towns and mainly concern two different problems:*

*What makes the identity of a historic city, what should be preserved and what can be transformed?  
Is the ability to adapt to new living conditions purely an advantage, or is it also becoming a threat?*

### Introduction

The concept of the preservation of historic towns was included in the Venice charter, adopted in 1956, which emphasised that “the sites of monuments must be the object of special care in order to safeguard their integrity”<sup>1</sup>. This concept was furthermore developed in the Washington charter for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas, adopted in 1987 by ICOMOS<sup>2</sup>, which concerns “historic urban areas, large and small, including cities, towns and historic centres or quarters, together with their natural and man made environment” and also the values of traditional urban cultures. The charter defines the city as a physical and social structure, which expresses community life and the memory of mankind. Its identity consists of its material and spiritual elements and qualities. Another vital document was the Declaration on the Conservation of Historic Landscapes (Paris 2005)<sup>3</sup> which also recognized the changes and transformations as qualities to be preserved, which express the diversity of societies throughout history.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/towns\\_e.htm](http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/towns_e.htm)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/towns\\_e.htm](http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/towns_e.htm)

<sup>3</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activities/documents/activity-47-3.pdf>

»Continuous changes in functional use, social structure, political context and economic development that manifest themselves in the form of structural interventions in the historic urban landscape may be acknowledged as part of the city's tradition, and require a vision of the city as a whole with forward-looking action on the part of decision-makers, and a dialogue with the other actors and stakeholders involved.»

### ***Changes as the essence of cities***

Many authors compare the city with architecture. Alberti wrote in his book of *De re aedificatoria*<sup>4</sup> about this point: "If a city, according to the opinion of philosophers, be no more than a great house, and on the other hand, a house be a little city; why it may not be said, that the members of that house are so many little houses; such as the court yard, the Hall, the Parlour, the Portico and the like?" In a way we can describe the city through architecture, because it also defines space and organizes it into interdependent sections, but on the other hand the city cannot be perceived like a house from one point and at one time, where once built it does not change anymore. It is not created in a definite span of time, and it is never completed. A city is not a concrete system, anchored in a specific time period, but a dynamic organism. It grows and changes constantly and its image is never definite or final. Unlike a house, a city has the ability to adapt constantly, it can subsist for centuries, even millennium and it survives also, when it's original concept and meaning is changed or expired. The city is also more complex and embraces the social, political, cultural, economic and symbolic subsystems and interacting amongst them.

Many urban planners felt the temptation to create a city as that of a work of art, with a final form. During the renaissance for example city planners from Filarete to Scamozzi, impressed by the invention of a central perspective, calculated from the viewpoint of a single static observer, designed cities as ideal forms in the shape of a star or circle, surrounded by a wall.

#### **Figure 1**

The ideal city as a final definite form challenged urban planners throughout history; many urban plans for new towns were designed as ideal structures, from the renaissance period to our own time, including Ebnazar Howard's Garden city or Tony Garnier's Industrial city.

#### **Figure 2**

Even Le Corbusier viewed as one of the pioneers of modern planning couldn't resist the idea of designing a city as a work of art, which once created doesn't change anymore, which is proven through his Radiant city or Plan Voisin for Paris.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Figure 3**

It is difficult to say, whether it is a good or bad thing, that cities are never preserved unchanged from their original form, but they do change constantly. Would Rome be a more beautiful city without the transformations ordered by Pope Sixtus V or would Paris be more attractive without Haussmann's interventions. The changing of cities is steeped in the historic process itself and the change is its very essence. Generation after

<sup>4</sup> Alberti, L.B. (1986) »The ten books of architecture«. Dover, Book 3, p.13

<sup>5</sup> Le Corbusier, Oeuvres completes 1929-34, p. 93

generation, individuals and groups build, alter, destroy and replace artefacts and all these interventions make cities identifiable.

The changing nature of cities led many theorists to describe the city as a living organism and compared cities to human beings. Maks Fabiani for example wrote: "Again and again we encounter the question, when the final arrangement will be attained? When the image of the city will be final? Never! A living organism constantly grows and changes. Just like a man it is not finally shaped at birth."<sup>6</sup>

Hans Blumenfeld in his famous book *The Modern Metropolis*<sup>7</sup> compares the city to a living organism, and its elements to the genes of a human being, which are in permanent interaction with each other. He also thinks that a city cannot be compared through architecture or as a work of art, as it is in a constant state of flux: "If the undeniable beauty of cities cannot be understood as the beauty of a work of art, perhaps it can be understood as the beauty of a natural organism.« He believes that like a human being a city has an identity, and this identity persists even if not one single stone of its original buildings can be found and when its original concept and meaning has changed or expired completely. Changes are the very essence of its existence and Athens is a very good example of this. Despite the fact that the original hilltop city disappeared and that people moved into more convenient locations at its foot, the rock still identifies Athens from everywhere both from land and on the sea.

### ***What is the identity of a city, where does it come from?***

Speaking of identity in general terms, means the establishment or search for characteristics, which make a person, an object, an architecture or a city distinct, different from others. In the case of the city it means identifying its general and particular characteristics, which are legible in its physical forms or its functions, or which are expressed in its cultural, spiritual or symbolic background.

The general and particular characteristics of a city result from its natural environment and its social conditions.

Natural conditions (climate, relief, geomorphologic characteristics) are the most stable factors of its identity. Climate creates favourable or less favourable conditions for the creation of settlements and cities. Alberti was aware of the importance of climate in the creation of cities: "How great the influence of the air (climate) has in generation, production, aliment and preservation of things, is unknown to nobody. It is even observed that they, who draw a pure air, have better understanding than those who breathe a heavy moist one: which is supposed to be the reason that the Athenians had much sharper wit than the Thebans."<sup>8</sup> Similarly Tomáš Valena<sup>9</sup> believes that climate, the fertility of land and forms of landscape influence the character of people and their mentality and consequently also the form and the lifestyle of cities. The mild climate of Mediterranean cities encourages people to live outside in public squares and open spaces, which where the centres of

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<sup>6</sup> Fabiani, M. (1988) *O kulturi mest/ On Culture of Cities: Selected writings 1895-1960*, Trieste, p. 61

<sup>7</sup> Blumenfeld, H. (1972), *Continuity and Change of urban Form*, in *The modern Metropolis*. M.I.T.Press, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Alberti, L.B. (1986) »The ten books of architecture«. Dover, Book I, p.3

<sup>9</sup> Valena, T. (1990) *Stadt und Topographie: Die europäischje Stadt im topographischen Kontext unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der bayerischen Stadt (Berlin)*

urban life and therefore spaces of particular care throughout history, while in northern cities civic life developed more or less inside. One can see the difference between life in Southern and Northern European towns even today<sup>10</sup>.

#### Figure 4

Relief has a decisive role in the creation of the image of the city. Originally the shape of the surface was an important security factor and security was of primary importance in the formation of historic cities. The hilltops, the islands and capes or sites, which were well protected by steep slopes and by water, were often selected as the most suitable places for urban settlements. These strong natural features in turn determined the original shape of cities and gave them their permanent identity (Athens, Salzburg, Ljubljana, Koper, Venice ...). The growth of cities and urban transformations could increase or reduce the importance of these natural features. The building of the quays on the Seine in Paris, which opened a vista onto the river, gave more importance to the river in the city's landscape. The subordination of new urban developments toward the dominant natural features (Ljubljana, Salzburg...) exposes to a greater extent the castle hill as the dominant landmark and the symbol of the city itself. On the other hand man made changes and the growth of cities often modify or hide the original site's real identity. Many island cities lost their identity when in the process of growing and when the surrounding waters were filled in, thus tying the island to the mainland. (e.g. Koper)

#### Figure 5

Nevertheless natural features represent the most stable element of urban identity, while the social conditions, which embrace the historical, political, economic, cultural, intellectual and technological factors, are more flexible; they change more rapidly and give rise to more radical and continuous transformations. Many authors believe in social determinism toward urban planning and architecture. For Giedion for example, the city is the expression of the diversity of social relationships which have become fused into a single organism<sup>11</sup>. Each period gave to the cities and architecture a specific character and "we recognize the character of the age as easily as we identify a friend's handwriting beneath attempted disguises"<sup>12</sup>. The character of historical periods is always closely connected with the political power. Tommaso Campanella in his book *City of the Sun*<sup>13</sup> comprehends a city as a monumental expression of the organisation of society. Many examples demonstrate that there is a close relationship between political power and urban forms, and that stronger power more decisively shapes cities identities. Pope Sixtus V transformed Rome in just a little more than five years, giving the city a completely new identity, Napoleon III transformed Paris in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the centre of Europe, and many other European cities followed this model. The Habsburg family, which ruled the Austrian monarchy for more than 700 years, left its imprint not only in the imperial centre of Vienna but also in other urban centres of the monarchy, so that still today one can recognize the borders of the ancient monarchy by observing the architecture of government buildings, museums, hospitals, schools and other public buildings.

<sup>10</sup> Zucker, P. (1959) *Town and Square. From the agora to the village green*. New York

<sup>11</sup> Giedion, S. (1954) *Space, time and architecture*, Cambridge, p.41

<sup>12</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.19

<sup>13</sup> Campanella, T. (1623), *La città del Sole*.

**Figure 6**

Changes in political power are often followed by transformations within cities, which may cause the loss of the historical identity. Like Orhan Pamuk writes in his book on Istanbul how many signs of the Ottoman identity were lost to the city when the political regime and the social system changed: “When the Empire fell, the new republic while certain of its purpose was unsure of its identity; the only way forward, its founders thought, was to foster a new concept of Turkishness, and this meant a certain cordon sanitaire from the rest of the world. It was the end of the grand polyglot, multicultural Istanbul of the imperial age; the city stagnated, emptied itself out, and became a monotonous, monolingual town in black and white.”<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 7**

The same is true for many other cities in Europe and beyond. Rulers always wanted to express their power by imposing new identities to the cities, pulling down old symbols and erecting new monuments, symbols of their own power. This holds true throughout history and also for the times in which we now live in. We just need to remember the impoverishment of many eastern European cities after WWII, which before the war actually presented important artistic, cultural and also economic centres (e.g. Prague). And after 1990, after the fall of the iron curtain it happened again; that all the political symbols of the socialist period in Eastern Europe were pulled down.

**Figure 8**

Cities derive their identity also from their economic power, trade and industry. Cities were trade centres from their very inception. Most European cities were founded as trade centres or have been granted the designation as a town by law, mainly because of their trading activities. During the end of the 18th and the whole of the 19th century cities changed their identity due to industrial development. The size of new industrial plants, which encircled old cities, completely changed the scale of traditional cities. In quickly developing countries, take as an example England, industry with its “thousands of smoking chimneys”<sup>15</sup>, completely transformed traditional English urban landscape.

Until the end of the 19th century industrial development caused many problems in cities (hygiene, overpopulation, bad living conditions ...). But on the other hand the development of industry and commerce made many cities also very rich. Those in particular, which made their money from industry and trade with their colonies, completely changed their identity and became important centres for new art: for example the Catalonian cities of Terrassa, Barcelona and Reus and also Brussels or Glasgow, just to mention a few.

**Figure 9**

Industrialisation, the rapid growth of cities and demographic changes caused by industrialisation, called for new solutions in the field of housing, transport, sanitation, hygiene etc. which contributed to the rise of new ideologies. New ideas in city planning promoted by people such as Gropius, Le Corbusier and also CIAM, again transformed the traditional cityscape based on

<sup>14</sup> Pamuk, O. (2006), *Istanbul: memories of a city*, Faber and Faber, London, p.215.

<sup>15</sup> This is how F. Schinkel described English landscape during his first visit in England in 1826, in: N.Pevsner, *Factories, History of Building types*, London, 1986, str. 277

traditional urban elements such as the street and the square enclosed by the walls of surrounding buildings. Wide roads and large crossings, without reference to the surrounding architecture completely transformed traditional relations between urban form and architecture, which shaped the very essence of the city.

### **Figure 10**

#### ***ELEMENTS OF IDENTITY***

And what exactly creates the identity of a city? Which elements make cities identifiable and those that should be preserved?

According to Hans Blumenfeld, these elements are the name, the situation, the site, the pattern and the memory.

The Washington charter defines them as urban patterns as defined by lots and streets, relationships between buildings and green and open spaces, the formal appearance of buildings, the relationship between the town or urban area and the various functions that a town has acquired over time

And the UNESCO Declaration on the Conservation of Historic Urban Landscapes (Paris, 2005) recognised also the changes and historic transformations to be an element of identification.

### ***The case of Ljubljana***

Following these definitions we can define also the identity, which make Ljubljana a distinct city. It was created gradually and derives from the situation of the city at the crossing of different cultures, from its strong natural features and from its turbulent history.

#### **Situation**

The Ljubljana basin was already settled during the prehistoric era. It has a very advantageous position on the crossroads from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean, the famous caravan "amber route" and the passages from Western Europe with Asia. The situation was also a meeting point of different cultures, northern and southern, German, Romance and Slavic, which are leasable in the form of the city as well as in the character of its architecture from the medieval period until today.

Ljubljana is one of the best examples of the continental type of a feudal city with its castle on the hill, which dominated the well protected city at its foothill. The origins of the continental type of medieval cities can be found in the feudal tradition of northern European towns. The oldest urban continental towns developed in Carinthia, i.e. the Slovenian region on the northern side of the Alps. Development of the feudal town of Ljubljana is related to the big and powerful feudal family of Habsburgs, of German origin, who founded the towns as their feudal estate. The feudal castle dominated the city both administratively and economically, and it also granted the city its civic rights. Urban life in the city was under the direct control of the feudal family and the city did not have autonomy. The social structure of the inhabitants was differentiated. It consisted of craftsmen, free workers, clergymen and the secular aristocracy and those inhabitants who lived partly through the cultivation of the land. The number of merchants here was relatively small in comparison to those of Italian towns on the coast and other European cities because most trading activities took place at the weekly markets and involved foreign merchants, without a

permanent residence in the town itself. To become fully entitled to be a citizen one had to apply to the city authorities for citizenship.

**Figure 11**

**Natural features**

The well protected site, the water and fertile plane presented favourable conditions for settlement, which was continuous from prehistoric times until today.

The castle hill, which dominates the city is well recognizable from different parts of the town and is visible from all entering motorways. The height of the castle hill defines the scale of the city even today.

**Figure 12**

The medieval city developed under the shelter of the castle hill and the Ljubljanica River, which represents another vital natural element of the city. Strong natural features and the dominating power of the feudal castle are manifest in the form of the urban settlement, in the orientation of its street network, location of urban squares and the morphology of building plots.

**Figure 13**

Up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the city developed within the city walls, and only at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did it actually start to expand outside onto the new vacant land of the former suburbs and along the 5 main roads that connected it with the hinterland. It developed the star shape form, which later became the basis of all urban plans. The first regulation plan was designed and adopted at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after a strong earthquake which struck the city. The plan was designed by Maks Fabiani. The starting point of his plan was a morphological analysis of the city, which put the castle at the centre of the new design. The new plan subordinated the street network and the arrangement of open spaces of the new town quarters in relation to the castle hill, which was viewed as most important symbol of the city. Since then the preservation of vistas on the castle hill and the adaptation of its urban form towards it, remains the primary and most important requirement and the most important constant in the development of the city.

**Figure 14**

**Historical facts**

From the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the city developed under the power of the Habsburg family for more than 700 years, which considerably influenced its development. Unlike in the form of the city, in the architecture of Ljubljana one can recognize mixed German, Italian and also Slavic influences. During the baroque period for example the Italian influence was very strong. "Academia operosorum", the first scientific academy on the model of contemporary Italian academies was founded (1693). Its goal was the improvement of the sciences and the arts. The Academy invited to Ljubljana important Italian architects and artists, (Andrea Pozzo, Giulio

Quaglio, Francesco Robba etc.) who created during the 18<sup>th</sup> century the new central core of the city and gave it a completely new Italianate image.

### Figure 15

The 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture of Ljubljana was guided more under the auspices of the imperial centre of Vienna, which gave it a German character.

During the nineteenth century the city developed outside its medieval walls and up until the end of the century its image was completely subject to the imperial town. At the end of the nineteenth century the central government in Vienna strived hard to preserve the unity of the multinational state by creating a universal style of state funding and official buildings. This gave cities all over the monarchy a strong identity, which is recognizable even today.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and particularly at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when national tensions increased between the Slavic and Germanic population of the city, many Slavic architects came to Ljubljana to work on the reconstruction of the town after the earthquake, which barely damaged the city. Like in other Slavic countries within the Austro Hungarian Empire, this was the period of increased national awareness and the search for national identity was present all over the monarchy also in art and architecture.

### Figure 16

After the fall of the Empire, when Ljubljana became the capital of Slovenia, a region within the Yugoslav monarchy, contacts with German culture almost completely stopped and the connections with other southern Slavic nations within the new state of Yugoslavia increased.

Two key architects are particularly meritorious for the development of Ljubljana as national capital, Maks Fabiani and Jože Plečnik. Thanks to Fabiani Ljubljana achieved a totally new look at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides the regulation plan he made the plan for Slovene Square and he designed a series of private and public houses, which are now recognised as pinnacles of Slovenian modern architecture from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the Krisper, Hribar and Bamberg houses, girl's lyceum Mladika, the Jakopič art gallery etc.

Through his urban design and his architecture, which shows his artistic development from a pure Secessionist stage through to strict modernism, Fabiani left an indelible imprint on Ljubljana at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was also recognised by Plečnik, who in 1910, commended Fabiani's work as the "best modern works in Ljubljana". (Marco Pozzetto, 1997)

### Figure 17

Plečnik, who started to work in Ljubljana after the WWI applied himself as an urban designer working to transform the city into a modern national metropolis with a personal quality derived from the needs of the population and evolved from its historical foundations. In twenty years he gave the city his own imprint, and it is quite usual today to call Ljubljana from the period between the two world wars Plečnik's Ljubljana. If Fabiani had tried to make of Ljubljana an efficient and well functioning city, Plečnik managed to give the city a symbolic value.



**Figure 18**

***Conclusion***

It is generally accepted also by politicians that the historic, medieval city of Ljubljana has to be preserved and also Plečnik's Ljubljana is generally recognized to be worth to save. Mainly in last years, vast sums of money have been invested into the improvement of public spaces and the renovation of buildings in the historic core, which strenhten its identity.

**Figure 19**

But on the other hand it is still not generally accepted that the historic town extends over the onetime medieval walls and that the concept of the historic town is broadening and that in recent years new towns and new suburbs of the late 20th century were recognized to represent important episodes in national history.

There we face every day the pressures and argumentations in favour of transformations. One of the recent examples in Ljubljana, which encountered a large response was the attempt by a private investor to pull down an important public building from the middle of the 19th century, (albeit in a poor state), which has statutory protection as a local monument. The investor bought the building, opened an international architectural competition for the project of a new building, which would replace the old protected one, invited 6 foreign architects to contribute, and appointed a jury, with the head of the municipal urban planning department and a representative of the Ministry of culture as members, responsible for cultural heritage. The awarded winner proposed a 100m high skyscraper in place of the actual monument. After that the developer started to pressurise for the modification of the planning document and a repeal of the act of proclamation. Finally he was successful, and it seemed that Ljubljana will soon have a new landmark, which would predominate over the castle hill. Fortunately the current economic crisis has halted the whole action, but nobody knows for how long.

**Figure 20**

The question as what to preserve and what to transform is not easy to answer, but certain principles have already been adopted since the time, when interest in historic cities arose. They are written down in different international charters as well as in laws and regulations and a number of best practices show that historic cities can comply with the need of the actual life style required by its inhabitants.

The identity of a city derives largely from its history. Its material evidence is an extraordinary source of information. In its physical form we can read the history, it represents the spatial context of all the economic, demographic and social processes. Understanding of the historic environment is, therefore, crucial to our lives: it tells us what is important and why, it explains how our towns and cities have evolved, and it helps people to define what to protect, to care for and to appreciate the special qualities of the places where they live.