Research article

Speaking territories in the cultural landscape: Challenges of transformation in the Central Europe

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Abstract: Cultural landscape is a concept that characterizes the diversity of forms, urban structure, historical value and symbolic function, reflecting the fact that a cultural landscape is a materialized system that carries a variety of verbal, visual and physical aspects of human existence. This scientific paper is based on a definition of cultural landscape that consists of cultural layers which are often associated with the memory of place, and our research is based on Taylor's definition and exploration of cultural landscapes. In terms of the linear dimension of human history, cultures interact, sometimes destroy and forget, but at the same time, the cultural layers are stacked, layered and acquired in various forms and features. The methodology is based on a qualitative case study with focus on challenges connected with transformation and recovery of area that carries traumatic legacy of the past. In the conclusion, the state of historical revitalization is presented.

Keywords: speaking territories; cultural landscape; cultural memory; transformation; Central Europe

1. Introduction

In theory, our research is based on Taylor's [1–3] definition of cultural landscape. Every cultural landscape is authentic and culturally distinctive. It consists of tangible and intangible components. The material parts are relatively easy to recognize and define. The intangible component is much more complex because it relates to cultures, practices and processes that take place in a certain community. In this sense, cultures include a much larger set of manifestations. They also include a way of life, a value system, traditions and spirituality. The manifestations of culture are realized in time and space,

therefore an important component of the identity of the cultural landscape is also the memory of the place. Collective memory helps to create and maintain the importance of cities.

In the research on speaking territories, we can use data and technology, but equally important is understanding what "software" lay behind, i.e., the culture that explains why and how cultural landscapes are transformed. According to Oevermann [4], culture is increasingly recognized as a driving force for urban development. At the same time, it is the diversity of cultures that makes cultural landscapes different, specific and distinctive, and it is the culture that allows and prevents many interventions in a historically valuable environment. It is also the culture that transforms the landscape by placing objects and creating speaking territories [5]. Speaking territories are not just memorials, monuments and other significant architectural elements located in the landscape. They are often places whose character is associated with intangible significance and non-material importance for a given culture. Therefore, there is a fundamental difference in the application of procedures for the transformation of such sites, which are "non-transferable" and take different forms in different cases. It is true that what is unacceptable for one culture may not attract any attention in another culture.

However, what is happening and can happen in any cultural landscape without distinction is the disappearance of the objects that create the layers of the cultural landscape. This occurs either naturally or as a result of adverse circumstances (disasters, climate change, armed conflicts, etc.). Nowadays, this is gradually and persistently happening more and more, due to cultural amnesia, i.e., when we no longer see and know the connection among objects in their functionality but also their cultural value. This phenomenon is characteristic to Central Europe, connected with an effort to modernize rapidly and catch up with large metropolises, meaning many previously characteristic urban units must give way to new ones. They are becoming easy prey for developers and the removal of the old urban units devalues the "spirit" of cities, which leads to a loss of authenticity and even a tragic "formlessness".

In the novel *The Memory Police*, the Japanese author Yoko Ogawa [6] writes about how objects of common necessity disappear from people's lives and how they gradually and naturally forget about them. This dystopian novel was created in 1994, but today, even in the context of transforming the cultural landscape, we can take from it the message that things disappear very quickly, and people forget very easily; these processes are almost unnoticed. For this reason, a place of heritage in a cultural landscape is very important for cultural memory.

The character of speaking territories is associated with the historical identity of place, which is directly related to the collective memory. It is very often linked to events or personalities that had a significant impact on the inhabitants of the territory. It is easy and obvious for them to understand the cultural codes or symbolic forms that are kept at a place. A new phenomenon that we are perceiving is a weakening of the collective memory, which is no longer based on facts (real events, personalities, etc.), but on the meaning that we keep in our memory [7]. These memories are presented and preserved by various events, activities and traditional ceremonies which help keep "content" alive.

Another essential question today is who remembers and what we keep in memory. We encounter the concept of cultural amnesia, where we can no longer assign a piece of content to a place. Collective cultural memory is a construct of past reality, so the communication with one's own past requires working with tangible and intangible cultural heritage, its reception and knowledge. The building of living generational memory is replaced by inanimate memory, which is based on a repository of knowledge in external form. Speaking territories help to preserve cultural heritage; they are composed of complex time layers, i.e., the memory of a chain of generations, kept in architecture, sculpture, painting and art. One of the most common forms are spaces of remembrance.

In cultural anthropology, the core of cultural memory is the memory of the dead, which obliges other members to keep them in memory (at least their names) and to show them esteem/honor/piety in the next generation. This memory is tied to the memory of the living, so in addition to reflecting reality, it can turn into a rumor about the ancestor which may not be objective or true. If we look at human history, we remember historical figures not only for their exceptional deeds but often for military achievements or for death in combat. This applies to both individuals and whole groups. The paradox of this remembrance is the fact that it is the culturally conditioned meaning of death as a sacrifice for the community that has guaranteed "glory" in the form of preservation in the national memory. Thus, we come to the original idea of the remembrance monument, which becomes a materialized symbolic form of this sacrifice in space.

The question of what is preserved in the collective cultural memory is often connected with how the so-called fame appreciates over time. Some actions come to be seen as negative, and therefore the "glory" associated with the place is suddenly the opposite, i.e., shame. Many memorials and monuments have become a source of tension, where political and ideological views stand against each other [8]. However, the main message of the monument remains preserved in its essence; it is a return to its original function, which was to commemorate the deceased, their actions and the events that cost them their lives.

Apart from the glory in the form of a monument, much of the human effort is also focused on making the important personality and their work unforgettable. The so-called philosophy of "make history, leave a mark". This has led and often leads to the transformation of the cultural landscape through "power". Having power means that you can interfere in its appearance much more easily than one who does not have power. In history, we see many attempts to inscribe something forever in the memory of cities through a variety of architectural experiments, often in line with political ideologies. In the example of Central and Eastern Europe, we see power in public spaces where it has unambiguous attributes. These spaces are magnificent, stable and seemingly indestructible [9]. Authority has been materialized and visualized in this sense.

Historical changes are directly related to the identity of cities, which take on new meanings in connection with the political and cultural boundaries between countries or cultural landscapes. According to Assman [7] cultures, stories and gods come into historical context. This leads to an interest in oral history, based on the sharing of collective memory, which has many times been complemented by the missing context of scientific knowledge. This approach has led to the linking of "cities" with "content", which may not always correspond to the city's official version of history. The risk of oral history is that the return of memories affects the relationship between memory and personal identity because memories of the same event may differ depending on interpretation. It is also important to take into account the link between memory and history as in some European countries, "dangerous" ideas have been suppressed for a long time. Content is also the link between memory and the nation, influencing how we construct the nation's history, shaped by historical milestones, heroes and cultural patterns. For this reason, the understanding of the content in speaking territories is influenced by the interpretation of history. It is also a fact that in many cases, a "spirit of patriotic reminiscence" is associated with the creation of a new collective identity that revives shared history. Its basis is in the unforgettability of certain people and events. This is a process called the monumentalizing of memory, where events are aesthetically condensed and graded into impressive images in national myths.

But today, we return to the fact that it has not been taken into consideration that places of remembrance themselves serve as a storage medium when people remember why they were created. Sometimes, however, speaking territories transform into "silent territories" and the remnants turn into "footprints" in a landscape that sometimes ends up as "insignificant waste". This is the fate of many memorials to which no one has paid attention. So paradoxically, what was supposed to serve as a reminder ends up being forgotten. Another problem with cultural memory is that it lacks clear boundaries and infinite storage capacity. Accelerated technologies, the obsolescence of storage media and in particular the fact that we are talking about places that belong more to the analogue world than to the digital world, have a direct consequence, i.e., forgetting.

Although the written word acts as a memory backup, writing to memory today replaces written memory. However, scripture is not just a way of storing memory, it is part of space. Many inscriptions, i.e., written monuments, are directly integrated into the cultural memory. In a cultural landscape, the written word becomes a clue. It retains semiotic readability, but it is also a representative feature.

Places have the power to awaken memories. A place can be of great importance for the construction of memory, although it has no repository of memory. Thanks to the place, we can anchor the memories in space; we can assign them to the place. It is often a symbolic connection that has to do with the perception of cultures, its traditions or rituals. And this direct materialization in space makes it possible to grasp a given real landscape (place, space, territory). In terms of cultural traditions, such important places have been associated with the generations of people who have lived there. The modern way of life no longer leads to staying in one place, but in the past, it was the other way around. Generation chains were closely linked to a specific place that was reminiscent of ancestors and passed on to descendants. The place as such had an important position in the cultural structure of their lives; it can be said that they were tied to it.

But the cultural landscape around us may not always be of a physical nature. There exists a mythical, fantastic and sacred landscape [10]. They are landscapes to which symbolic, spiritual significance is ascribed, composed of images, myths, legends and symbols. We often talk about sacred or spiritual topography, which is related to the ideas of communities, whether they be ideas of polytheistic and monotheistic religions or pagan deities, or even various legends linked to a territory. Perhaps these places really do not exist, but the memory of the place is rather of a fictional fantastic nature. The events that are supposed to have taken place there cannot be empirically verified. From a cultural point of view, they are often more permanent than real landscapes and maintain continuity of preservation in the collective memory through the stories that relate to them. If we move to the present, these places are popular destinations for tourists and travelers, those who desire not to get knowledge from scientific research but to obtain an experience associated with an interesting story that brought them to the place. Cultural landscapes often characterize an indescribable charm that gives them the status of a contact zone with the past. People come to contact the past by being in this place. This bond is not based on generational memory but on the feeling of inaccessibility to the "fantastic landscape".

An ideal/artistic landscape meets the "ideal" of the time, taking into account the requirements of style. Artists show memory in a remarkable way in their creations. Art is not meant to be reminiscent but to arouse emotion. Artists remind in cultures what should stay remembered. Unlike other objects, works of art are inherently useless, but despite the passage of time, they remain not only as physical forms, as in the case of ordinary objects; works of art preserve images of the past in their visuality and originality. The increasing material production in today's European society (among others) leads to a shortening cycle between production and liquidation. This trend is very strong and also affects the

cultural landscape. It is made up of objects of different appearance, structure and material, but at the same time, they are not resistant to the effects of time. However, the creations of culture, with their original character, try to survive in time.

2. Study area overview and research methods

The connection of place, memory and identity opens up the possibility of a new view on speaking territories in the context of a cultural landscape. The place serves as a space where cultural transformations in the contexts of their development can be observed. This not only reflects the state of historical revitalization but also targeted forgetting. In fact, memory and identity can be purposefully manipulated and used as needed.

In our case study we focus on cultural landscape transformation in a selected urban territory, the small Slovak city, Zvolen. We follow the Taylor [1] methodology of cultural landscapes research. We assume that many places in Central and Eastern Europe to this day are characterized by remnants of the past, which formed a strictly unified space, austerity and greyness, a space in which vitality has been lost. Even after the regime changes, public spaces in these countries have not been revitalized according to urban planning, but rather have fell victim to developers. Therefore, a major chapter in the transformation has been the large-scale construction of satellite homes, the revitalization of housing estates and the construction of commercial areas. The research question we set is if the change of the city character is associated more with functionality and less with the perception of public space as such, with a link to the re-creation of the city's identity? In our case study, we will neither focus on example from such transformation. We would like to point out the current situation in a small to medium-sized city (town) that carries a trace of the past and is trying to deal with it.

In Slovakia, we observe a transformation of urban space which is diametrically opposed to monument protection and architectural creativity. Intervention into historical structures is a challenging conceptual activity that carries many risks. In particular, the problem of the unsuitability of the intervention, the incorrect perception of space, the devastation of cultural values, the loss of the originality of space, the violation of authenticity, etc. But what is the right way to proceed in places that carry a memory of trauma? Is it possible to reshape the cultural landscape without compromising the authenticity of the space?

Through a selected example of a cultural landscape, the Podborova city district in Zvolen, Slovakia, we point out how this challenge of dealing with the remnants of the past can be handled in different ways. We do not claim that the example we have chosen is the best or worst way to revitalize the space in terms of its history. On the contrary, we want to present the real situation as it is.

3. Results and discussion

The city Zvolen, located in central Slovakia with a population of 43,000, was the scene of many historical and social events in the 20th century from both world wars and the Slovak National Uprising against fascism in 1944 to the Soviet (Russian) occupation from 1968 to1990. Violent deportations of Jews and Roma to concentration camps hit the region; there are places that literally disappeared from the map as well as places where many innocents lost their lives during World War II.

Podborova as a speaking territory is connected with events that may not have involved large numbers of victims but nevertheless fundamentally affected the city. Zvolen was marked by the entry

of Warsaw Pact troops crossing the borders of Czechoslovakia from 20 to 21 August 1968 in order to occupy and suppress democratization processes. One of the most important centers became Zvolen, which was advantageous in terms of strategic location, as well as proximity to the airport and railway. Soviet soldiers settled in the Podborova district, and although Hungarian, Polish and German soldiers left in November 1968, the Russian soldiers in Podborova stayed much longer [11].

In 1969, Podborova became a temporary residence of the Russian army, which was accompanied by the construction of new houses and apartments for soldiers and administrators. The Russians used Russian construction materials, which they brought directly from the USSR, to build three 12-story buildings called bashnie. Alongside the construction, cultural life also developed. The House of Officers was opened for Russian officers and soldiers in 1971. Later, they built their own cinema, school, kindergarten, gym and medical center. The complete families of Russian military officers moved to Podborova. Ordinary soldiers lived in barracks and had limited access to the so-called higher society.

The inhabitants of Zvolen did not agree with the presence of the Russian army in the city. Many knew the soldiers were there but had no contact with them. As one said, "And even though we saw the Russians from the windows, we could never talk about them. It was like they did not exist". The problem with the Russian occupiers was not just that they created their own city within a city. Soviet soldiers had only limited contact with the domestic population, maintaining their own customs and traditions. They basically existed in an area that did not belong to them, but they adapted it to their own needs.

It was not until 1990 that the Soviet army had to definitively leave Czechoslovakia after 22 years of occupation. Podborova was left abandoned, devastated and in total disarray. It became a ghost town, which only came back to life in 1998 through comprehensive reconstruction which continues to this day. As a place with a cultural footprint and memory, Podborova has undergone a process of demilitarization, revitalization and the gradual loss of its Soviet appearance, but it is a long process. This is greatly aided by civic activism and the interest of the people in successfully transforming the sad legacy that the region around them carries.

After the departure of the Soviet army, the settlement remained abandoned and destroyed. The soldiers left behind a destroyed cultural and natural environment. The apartments underwent reconstruction in the '90s, but the three bashnias were still the scarecrow of the place. The public and the experts were more in favor of their demolition than of the reconstruction that finally took place. The aim remains to change the character of the settlement, i.e., to revive it through the people, to change the militarized image of the settlement and to replace it by creating a new humane environment. However, this has been happening at a slow pace, now for almost 20 years.

However, dealing with the past and memory of this place is accompanied by another phenomenon. The most iconic building is the House of Officers, as the most distinctive element, reminiscent of the presence of foreign occupiers. The House of Officers was an integrative place where Soviet generals met regularly, festivities were held there, the children of soldiers in the hall took the vows of pioneers, discussions were organized and the most popular singers and bands performed [11]. For several years it was a house of ghosts, waiting for its fate (Figure 1).

Figure 1. House of Officers (Photo of author).

A new and fast trajectory in the transformation occurred after this property was bought by a developer. In 2021, the House of Officers was transformed into the Arbora multifunctional center, featuring new apartments. The House of Officers was forgotten, and it became more important for the investor to monitor the efficient use of space and resources. The building has been transformed into an apartment house which bears no legacy of the past (Figure 2). This represents one possible approach to the challenge of transforming a space that carried cultural-historical significance.

Figure 2. Arbora—former house of officers (Photo of author).

4.   Conclusion

Cultural landscapes are the places where human cultures are on display, where our human landscape is our unwritten biography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspiration and even our fears in tangible visible form [1]. When considering a cultural landscape, the place is important. A place can be a city, a part of a city, a borderless space, even a cultural monument that carries significance. Even though the tangible heritage has a major role in landscape development, we cannot

exclude and forget the landscape-rooted intangible heritage elements: places of memory, marking events, joy and suffering, commemoration of past events, festivals and rituals, traditional dance, music and performance, skill, arts and crafts. Tangible and intangible elements of cultural heritage have an important role to play in the study of cultural landscape(s) because the landscape is constantly being transformed, becoming a response to human values and ideologies that change in space and time.

The perception of cultural landscapes is largely dependent on access to memory. This concept reflects many cultural interpretations of the "memory landscape", in which memory is a characteristic aspect of a particular cultural group. An intervention into cultural landscape relates to a reflection of historical identity, but at the same time, it can be an obstacle when the cultural codes of the past do not have the same meaning. The memory of place is often based on stories associated with feelings of belonging, roots or heroism (remembering important dates and personalities). Speaking territories within cultural landscape(s) thus help to maintain the content. However, it is also important whether there are enough of those who "still" remember it. And the question is not only what we remember but also who remembers it and how cultural amnesia is manifested in society.

As we show in our case study, Podborova is an example of a place that has forgotten its past. The place is no longer spooky, it does not have a militarized character, but it has also lost its characteristic features, which are being replaced by the "formlessness" typical to trends in construction. Today, it is a part of a city whose identity no longer differs in significant expressions. From the point of view of an unbiased visitor, it may not seem exceptional. This speaking territory is now silent. As Czepczynski [9] points out, post-socialist cities still carry the stigma, and everyone copes with it in their own way. With an accelerated way of life, the key moments of history seem to be forgotten more quickly. For socio-economic reasons, this part of the city needs and is suited for more flats instead of a dilapidated House of Officers. From the cultural point of view, the visually materialized trace in the cultural layer has disappeared with these changes, but it remains inscribed in the memory of this city.

Zvolen is a typical example of a speaking territory characteristic of Central Europe and is associated with the effort to rapidly modernize and catch up with large metropolises. Many previously characteristic urban units have to give way to new ones. They become easy prey for developers, and thoughtless removal or indiscriminate replenishment of urban units devalues the "spirit" of cities, which leads to a loss of authenticity and even tragic "formlessness", as well as to the loss of a layer of cultural memory of the territory.

Use of AI tools declaration

The author declares he has not used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the creation of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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