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Original article

Urban regeneration in the context of post-Soviet transformation: Lithuanian experience



Indre Grazuleviciute-Vileniske*, Vilius Urbonas

Kaunas University of Technology, Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Department of Architecture and Urbanis, Studentu 48, 51367 Kaunas, Lithuania

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ABSTRACT

Our research concentrates on the countries, which had emerged after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and the possible distinctive influence of the social and institutional environment of these countries on the process and outcomes of city center regeneration. The theoretical section includes the definition of the main concepts used in our research. First of all the countries undergoing the post-Soviet transformation were defined and then the concept of “urban regeneration” was explained. Here we also distinguished the main features of societies and institutional environment of the post-Soviet countries including the collision of different sets of values and lack of conscious value orientations and value systems, lack of individual initiative and personal responsibility, low level of participation in public domain, tendency towards non-transparent decision making, culture of complaint, climate of mistrust, increasing uncertainty and pessimism. In the section of results we had elaborated and discussed the hypothesis that these features affect the image and treatment of the historic built environment and especially of historic urban centers. Further we distinguish three dimensions – features of urban space, governance structures, and social milieu – and, based on literature and Lithuanian experience, distinguish what features of these dimensions and how make it easier or inhibit the urban regeneration. In the concluding sections we outline the basic findings and further research proposals and present the summary matrix of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of urban regeneration in the context of post-Soviet transformation. The matrix could be useful both for the future research and for the decision making in practice of city center regeneration. From the preset outcomes of our research, we conclude that social and institutional context is crucial in the city center regeneration and in heritage preservation in general and the ideas and principles widespread in Western Europe and the United States cannot be directly and straightforwardly imported into the context of post-Soviet transformation.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Relevance of research

The contemporary situation, in which urban regeneration and management efforts must be implemented, is quite different from the post-war era. It is often described using the terms globalization, pluralism, consumer society, decentralization, regionalism, diversity, multiculturalism, individualism, competition between cities etc. Paradoxically, these aspects of contemporary economic and cultural development can be particularly significant for the group of countries, which had attracted the world’s attention after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and, since then, had experienced rapid

political, sociocultural, and socioeconomic changes. These countries, before the fall of the “iron curtain” brutally affected by the Soviet realities, had hastily adapted to the ideological, cultural, social, and economic trends and these shifts and repeated interruption of cultural continuity certainly had influenced the perception of cultural heritage and the treatment of the built historic environment including the historic urban centers.

1.2. Research aims

This study is aimed at outlining the peculiarities – threats, obstacles, and potential benefits – in the urban regeneration in the post-Soviet space based on the example of Lithuania.

1.3. Methods of research

In order to accomplish this aim, the use of the terms “urban regeneration” and “urban revitalization” was discussed

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +370 37 300456; fax: +370 37 451546.

E-mail addresses: indre.grazuleviciute@ktu.lt, grazuleviciute@europa.com, grazuleviciute@yahoo.co.uk (I. Grazuleviciute-Vileniske), vilius.urbonas@gmail.com (V. Urbonas).

and clarified, the definition of the country undergoing post-Soviet transformation was formulated and its specific features were distinguished, and, as a result, the peculiarities of the post-Soviet space, including the features of urban space, the governance structures, and the social milieu, affecting the urban regeneration were identified and discussed. This theorization was made based on the literature review, the previous research [1], and the Lithuanian experience. The analysis, comparison, generalizations and the distinguishing of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, i.e. the SWOT analysis, were used as methods in this research.

2. Concepts and theory

2.1. Countries undergoing post-Soviet transformation and their peculiarities

Various terms exist to define the group of countries that had emerged after the collapse of the Soviet bloc: “transition country”, “post-Communist”, “post-Soviet”, or “post-Socialist country”, country undergoing “post-Soviet transformation” etc. Terms post-Communist, post-Soviet, or post-Socialist indicate the shift of conditions and the condition after the Communist or Socialist reality or after the Soviet rule has ended. These terms denote some stable condition and do not imply the further political, social, cultural, economic, and other changes and their importance. The terms “transition” or “transformation” put the emphasis of the undergoing process of change, which in itself is important as has some effects on socioeconomic and sociocultural context and consequently on urban regeneration. Moreover, according to D. Polanska [2], the concept of “transition” denotes one condition replaced by another, i.e. that the post-Communist societies would reshape themselves in the image of the leading societies of the West. Meanwhile in reality the process is much more complex due to the inherent differences between the post-Communist countries and the West, the fact that the Western Europe and the United States are not in the stable condition and are undergoing constant changes etc. Considering this, in our research we use the term “post-Soviet transformation”. “Post-Soviet” denotes the particular group of countries and “transformation”, according to D. Polanska [2], refers to the processes undergoing in these countries noting the concept’s open ended disposition and turning the attention towards the complexity of this process. The focus of this article is the group of countries including Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Czech Republic etc., which can be characterized by the high degree of economic liberalization and democratization; however, the main attention is devoted to Lithuania.

According to I.T. Berend and A. Vaitkuvienė, the main feature characterizing the countries undergoing the post-Soviet transformation is the sharp collision of traditional values and the values introduced by the Communist regime with new values and social behavior requirements such as the entrepreneurship, risk taking, efficiency, and pluralism [3,4]. These capitalist and liberal values were not only suppressed by the Communist regimes, but actually were in many aspects alien to the pre-Communist agricultural and noble societies of the Central and Eastern European countries. The abovementioned collision of values and increasing uncertainty caused by the globalizing processes has led to the social and cultural confusion. Other features of post-Soviet transformation societies identified by the researchers [1,3–6], such as lack of individual initiative and personal responsibility, low level of participation in public domain, non-transparent decision making, culture of complaint, climate of mistrust, increasing uncertainty and pessimism about the present and future economic situation, are also at least partially related to these collision of different sets of values, lack of conscious value orientations and value systems.

2.2. Urban regeneration or revitalization?

The idea of urban regeneration should be seen as much more complex than the direct and indirect socioeconomic impact of one or several heritage restoration projects. This strategic process consists of many interrelated projects and activities mutually reinforcing one another and continuing through time. The terms “urban revitalization” or “revitalization of historic urban environment” and “urban regeneration” can be found in scientific literature. The analysis has demonstrated that the term “revitalization” in the context of urban environment is mainly used in the post-Soviet space and rarely in other contexts. Good example of such use of the term “revitalization” is the research by D. Polanska [2] on the urban decline and revitalization in the post-Communist Poland using the example of Gdansk. R. Radoslav et al. [7] describe the revitalization of the city center of Timisoara in Romania as a three level process: refunctionalizing of buildings, recreating public spaces and reorienting events. J. Temelova and N. Dvorakova [8] describe the revitalization of the historic neighborhoods in Prague more as negative process with undesirable effects of massive touristification and commercialization. It can be seen that the term “revitalization” can imply physical and social, cultural, and economic dimensions. Meanwhile the term “regeneration” is widely used in other countries, and especially in Western Europe to denote both physical interventions and social, cultural, and economic processes. Take for example the book entitled “Urban regeneration in Europe” edited by C. Couch et al. including the case studies and focusing the physical regeneration of former industrial city-regions in Western Europe [9]. The study of the impacts in urban waterfront regeneration by R. Sairinen and S. Kumpulainen [10], where they distinguish such social aspects as resources and identity, social status, access and activities and waterfront experience, is also worth noting in this context as representing the social dimension. The collection of essays “Cultural policy and urban regeneration: the West European experience” edited by F. Bianchini and M. Parkinson [11] presents the wide array of regeneration examples (Glasgow, Rotterdam, Bilbao, Bologna, Hamburg, Montpellier, Liverpool, Rennes) highlighting sociocultural and socioeconomic aspects including community involvement, economic regeneration, development of desirable image of the city, boosting city competitiveness and attracting investment. Literature demonstrates that the terms “revitalization” and “regeneration” have similar meanings. The difference in terms probably has originated due to the separation by the “iron curtain”. The increasing use of the term “urban regeneration” in the context of former Soviet countries can be seen as well. For example, the special issue of the journal *European Planning Studies* focused on Central East Europe was entitled “Urban change and urban regeneration strategies in Central East Europe”. Thus in our research we have decided use the term “urban regeneration” instead of “urban revitalization”. Our choice reflects the research aim: to highlight the peculiarities of urban regeneration in the context of post-Soviet transformation compared to practices of Western Europe and the United States.

3. Results

We make the hypothesis that the features of the societies and institutional environment in of the countries undergoing the post-Soviet transformation affect the image and treatment of the historic built environment and especially of historic urban centers as the clearest and the most important examples of valuable built historic fabric. The analysis of literature has demonstrated the relevance of such research. For, example, M. Murzyn-Kupisz notes that the sociocultural and socioeconomic dimensions of the built environment are up to this day little explored in this group of countries [12].

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