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Utilisation of the potential of urban spaces during the winter period (using the example of revitalisation and humanisation in the town of Zvolen)

Využívanie potenciálu urbánnych priestorov v zimnom období (na príklade revitalizácie a humanizácie námestia v meste Zvolen)

Abstract

The paper deals with the potential of urban space management in Zvolen during the winter period. The urban spaces provide the opportunity for diverse and wide-ranging activities that are organised by the town authorities for its citizens. The way they are used, as well as their form and function, depend on several factors that include the microclimatic and geographical conditions. Within this context, the paper deals with the transformation of urban spaces, namely the main square, and the activities that the city offers its citizens during wintertime. The starting point for the paper is the concept of Smart City and other urban space concepts: their functions, the revitalisation and the humanisation. The paper is based on the long-term ethnological research on the town of Zvolen, located in central Slovakia, focusing on the present time.

Key words: public spaces, Smart Cities, transformation of urban spaces, winter period, Zvolen

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Predkladaný príspevok poukazuje na využívanie potenciálu verejných priestorov mesta Zvolen počas zimného obdobia. Verejné priestory poskytujú možnosť pre rozmanitosť a pestrosť aktivít, ktoré mesto organizuje pre svojich obyvateľov. Ich využiteľnosť, forma i funkcia závisia od viacerých determinantov, medzi ktoré patria aj mikroklimatické a geografické podmienky. Príspevok sa v tomto kontexte venuje premenám urbánneho priestoru – námestia a aktivitám, ktoré mesto ponúka obyvateľom v zimnom období. Východiskom pre štúdiu je Koncept inteligentných miest a názory na verejné priestory: ich funkcie, revitalizácia a humanizácia. Príspevok vychádza z dlhodobých etnologických výskumov mesta Zvolen, ktoré sa nachádza na strednom Slovensku, s dôrazom na súčasnosť.

Kľúčové slová: verejné priestory, inteligentné mestá, premeny priestorov, zimné obdobie, Zvolen

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to draw attention to the determinants that influence the form and function of public spaces and at the same time look at the utilisation of these spaces by the inhabitants of town. I will focus on the changes of urban spaces, specifically the square during the winter period. My interest is how the town has been utilising its potential in the past twenty years and how the abovementioned season changes, determines, binds and creates these urban spaces. The paper is based on long term ethnological research that I conducted in the town of Zvolen. In the research my main focus is on issues of social and cultural diversity¹, professional anthropology² and changes to urban spaces³. In my research I used combined methods and techniques of urban ethnology, especially in-depth interviews with individual respondents, observation and study of the regional and local media.

I considered the concept of smart cities, as well as various approaches to the research of revitalisation and humanisation of urban spaces as a starting point for this paper. In Slovak ethnology, regarding issues of urban spaces, as well as historical views of socio-culture and social phenomena⁴, plus the processes and transformations in the post socialist era⁵ and current issues of globalisation and cultural acceleration⁶ are being researched. At the same time researchers` attention is drawn to transformations of town districts and suburbs and a perception of these spaces by their inhabitants⁷. *Public Spaces and Applied Anthropology*⁸ is one of the recently published and inspirational theoretical studies by Alexandra Bitušiková, in which the author addresses the characteristics and concepts of urban public space from the perspective of several fields of study and she points to the possibilities of applying anthropological methods when researching and planning public spaces.

The Smart City concept and public spaces

Urban living conditions are changing under the current influence of the acceleration of globalisation, technological advancement, communication relations and links. In this context lately, the concept of intelligent cities (Smart City) has emerged, which shows the way to a sustainable development of cities. The primary objective of Smart

¹ E.g. Košťalová 2007; Košťalová 2009a; Košťalová 2010; Košťalová 2014.

² E.g. Košťalová 2009b.

³ E.g. Košťalová 2015.

⁴ E.g. Bitušiková 1995; Falfánová 2006; Luther 2005.

⁵ E.g. Beňušková 2007; Falfánová 2007; Luther 2009.

⁶ E.g. Bitušiková 2009; Bitušiková 2010; Janto 2014; Luther 2010; Luther 2015.

⁷ E.g. Beňušková 1999; Beňušková 2001; Beňušková 2009; Janto 2007; Janto 2008; Janto 2012a; Janto 2012b.

⁸ E.g. Bitušiková 2016, p. 42–69.

City is to build and implement the plan that will enable cities to establish a sustainable development model, outstanding quality of life, security and maximum energy efficiency. Smart City is presenting itself as an urban concept in six “smart” building attributes and their combinations and concurrences: Smart Economy, Smart Governance, Smart Living, Smart People, Smart Environment and Smart Mobility⁹. Quality, in terms of Smart City, is at present discussed in connection with supporting of synergy effects of metropolitan networks, technologies, economic, environmental, ecological, energy and transport solutions. However, Smart City is not just state-of-the-art technology. Technology features as one of the tools to ensure a good quality life for its citizens¹⁰. Predominantly it is a strategic approach to a better functioning city that can manage resources better, communicate with its inhabitants better and increase the quality of life and services for its citizens, with the aim of creating *smart living in smart cities*. This is to be implemented in tandem with state-of-the-art technology and environment protection. Smart city users are citizens who interact with different types of intelligent systems. According to Miroslav Svítek¹¹, the meaning of the word “smart” can only be perceived as the balanced relationship between a man and technical systems, therefore intelligent solutions must make the city more human, and not only technologically advanced. When addressing the issues of smart cities, interdisciplinary teams should naturally evolve, that include social, artistic and other scientific fields of study¹². For ethnology, it is both interesting and inspirational to study Smart City in the context of:

- town or city – citizen (mutual communication – including new forms of communication, participatory governance, acceptance of citizens` viewpoints, active use of public spaces, creating city image);
- quality of life (for all its inhabitants – with regards to age, gender, social status, social group, cultural leisure time);
- co-existence of smart city – smart region (their mutual support, development and local products and their producers interconnection).

The concept of intelligent cities is no longer the domain of metropolises only¹³, but it is coming, albeit very slowly, to the forefront in some Slovak towns, for example, Poprad and Banská Bystrica.

⁹ Lombardi, Giordano, Farouh, Yousef 2012, p. 2–4.

¹⁰ Lom, Přibyl 2016.

¹¹ Prof. Dr. Ing. Miroslav Svítek is a president of the association Czech Smart City Cluster (CSCC).

¹² From the lecture of prof. Dr. Ing. Miroslav Svítek, dr. h. c: A concept of smart cities and regions which took place 10th Nov 2016 at the Faculty of Natural Sciences UMB in Banská Bystrica

¹³ In Europe, e.g. Barcelona, Dubrovnik, Vienna; in the Czech Republic Prague, Písek, Tábor, Pardubice, Brno

According to the community organization reSITE, 21st century cities firstly need to develop local economy, politics and approaches that support the growth of city life. The young generation want to live in cities with high-quality architecture, high quality and active public space, complete services and alternative ways of transport. These features increase the value of property in the area and the overall competitiveness of cities¹⁴. Revitalisation and humanisation of public spaces is one of the most important aspects of a sustainable city, which contributes to the improving quality of life, to active and cultural free time activities, as well as to developing interpersonal relations. Alexandra Bitušiková presents the following view:

[...] the public space and social processes, relationships and interactions are closely linked and fluid. In a variety of situations, in different historical, political, social and cultural contexts, the importance and the “weight” of public space and social processes can be different, because it is affected by many different factors [...]. Therefore, it cannot be unambiguously asserted that public space determines social processes or vice versa. It is always a two-way relationship¹⁵.

Furthermore she states that the main key to a quality public space are the people who use this public space¹⁶. For this reason also, when observing urban space, I look not only at the physical area (square) that the city has and modifies, but I focus mainly on the “living” space, the social and communication space, where the social processes take place and people meet. These views influence each other and interact. As the physical space changes, “living” space also changes, and vice versa. Since smart cities should serve both residents and visitors, public spaces must be the places that provide interesting activities to different groups of people in a safe and healthy environment. The places, where people like to stop, spend time, meet others, talk to other people, do or experience something interesting, and they choose from a great variety of things. For a public space, it is essential that people stay there and look for new feelings, experiences and social connections¹⁷. The gardening landscape architect Zuzana Ambrožová deals with the issues of public spaces in small towns and she focuses her attention on the importance of squares. According to her, they represent the key space of small towns. Most of them are town-owned premises that serve as meeting places and are an important factor in the formation of the local citizens` identity¹⁸.

¹⁴ reSite, 17.11.2016.

¹⁵ Bitušiková 2016, p. 50.

¹⁶ Bitušiková 2016, p. 64–65.

¹⁷ Ambrožová 2010; Gehl 2000; Rusnák 2014.

¹⁸ Ambrožová 2010, p. 14–15.

Site characteristics

The town of Zvolen is situated in central Slovakia, in rugged territory surrounded by mountains on all sides. Zvolen, which is one of the top five oldest towns in Slovakia,¹⁹ has 43,000 inhabitants. It is a district town, part of the Banská Bystrica region and an administrative centre of the region, where several regional institutions are based.

The climatic conditions of the town are mainly determined by its geographical location and the conditions of the Zvolen basin and the surrounding mountains. The town and its surroundings belong to a climatic zone with an intense, but not very long winter. In the district of Zvolen, the highest temperature measured was 37.8 °C during the period 1931 – 2010, and the lowest temperature measured was -32 °C. The average number of summer days is 63, the average number of tropical days is 12 and the average number of freezing days is 127 in a year²⁰. The threat of the climate change and its negative consequences on people currently present a very serious problem. In the locality of Zvolen, the climate is expected to change in next few decades. Average annual air temperatures will continually rise, with an increase in annual air temperatures slightly more pronounced in the winter than the summer season. A number of days with snowfall as well as a number of days with snow cover will gradually decrease²¹.

Winter outdoor activities and winter sports in the vicinity of Zvolen are provided by Kráľová sports and recreation centre²², an ice-hockey stadium, a mobile ice rink at the SNP (Slovak National Uprising) Square. There are numerous winter ski resorts in the vicinity of Zvolen and when the snow conditions are favourable, cross-country skiing tracks are provided and maintained in the outskirts.

The Town of Zvolen and the Changes to the Square in the Winter Period

According to the general terms and binding regulations of the town of Zvolen²³, public spaces are defined as places, which are accessible to a number of people, and are to be used in the customary way, unless this usage has been restricted by the town. These are, in particular, squares, parks, pavements, local roads, parking areas, footbridges, bridges, public steps, public green areas and waterfronts. A publicly accessible place is any place permanently or temporarily open to the public that was established for that purpose and is accessible free of charge or in exchange for a payment²⁴. Regarding the

¹⁹ In 2013 it commemorated 770th anniversary of the reinstatement of privileges for the town of Zvolen by king Béla IV.

²⁰ Střelcová, Jakubis 2013, p. 22–23.

²¹ Program hospodárskeho rozvoja a sociálneho rozvoja mesta Zvolen na obdobie 2014–2020 s výhľadom do roku 2025, 04.11.2016.

²² Kráľová is a part of Zvolen town according to the Land Registry.

²³ General terms and binding regulations no. 135 about public order in the town of Zvolen.

²⁴ Všeobecne záväzné nariadenie č. 135 o verejnom poriadku na území mesta Zvolen, 06.11.2016.

content of public spaces mentioned in the binding regulations are thus defined in the same way as above.

The central town zone represents the core of the town – it is declared as a listed town area, which is formed mainly by the SNP Square leading to the hillside on which Zvolen castle stands. Zvolen square with its area of approximately 48,000 m² is one of the largest in Slovakia. The current visual appearance of the square is the result of a long and demanding reconstruction which took several years to complete. In Zvolen there is no significant functional differentiation – the square represents the multifunctional space, the reconstructed square is fully utilised by the citizens for social, cultural, business and other activities²⁵. It is a ceremonial, administrative and meeting space. By revitalising the square, by diverting the traffic, an active communication mechanism has been created. Currently, business, sport, political rallies, religious ceremonies; concerts, theatre, festivals, cafe seating outside, exhibitions, games and dance can coexist together there. The appearance of the square, its usage, types of activities and events change according to both the weather and seasons and it relies on the creativity of the town and its inhabitants to actively use it all-year-round.

Czech architect Šilhánková has called a square a “city’s living room”²⁶. It is as if the town’s officials literally took over the idea, because in 2015 the town of Zvolen set up a Fun Zone at the SNP Square as “the town’s living room” – an area for relaxation and refreshment, physical activity, performances and games²⁷. As the inhabitants’ public needs and activities change according to the weather, as I have mentioned previously, so does the form and function of “the living room”. In winter, this space changes into an ice rink. Zvolen borough council were one of the first in Slovakia to come up with the idea of creating an ice rink in the square. The movable ice rink was introduced for the first time in 2002 and since then has been available to the public free of charge every winter²⁸. The installation takes place in November and then it is open to the public from November to March, depending on weather conditions²⁹. The ice rink creates a living space from the square, not only for the skaters themselves, but also for casual passers-by. Friends, classmates and neighbours meet on or at the ice rink. On school days it is used for PE (Physical Education) classes by local schools and in the evening after 6 o’clock, it can be hired by groups or teams for hockey matches, and there is a high demand from Zvolen’s amateur hockey teams every year. Tournaments are played by not only boys from the suburbs, but also by middle-aged men. For those interested in learning ice-skating the courses are also available. Zvolen is a small town where pupils and students

²⁵ Gehl 2000.

²⁶ Šilhánková 2003, p. 9.

²⁷ Palette-seating area, soft drinks, library, piano, climbing frame, exercise and performance stage or area, large chess and Ludo game.

²⁸ The cost of running the seasonal ice rink is appr. 35 thousand EUR.

²⁹ Ladová plocha na Námestí SNP už od piatka, 15.05.2017.



Photo. 1. Ice hockey match: Hockey team Zvolen against Fairy Tale Beings, Zvolen, 2016, photo K. Košťalová



Photo. 2. Christmas Village at the Square of the Slovak National Uprising in Zvolen, Zvolen, 2016, photo K. Košťalová

often know each other. At the ice rink, the space is created not only for sport, but also for building social contacts, which is evident amongst local teenagers. Here are some of their testimonies.

When my mum asks me who am I going skating with and I haven't arranged with anybody, I say on my own. But it's never like that, because at the ice rink I always meet friends (male, 18 years old).

It's a place where people come to be seen. The girls go there all dressed up and checking out everyone else (female, 17 years old).

The ice rink in town is a totally relaxing place, you can switch off from the Internet, Facebook, social media and mobiles (male, 17 years old).

The ice rink is supported also by the hockey players of HKM Zvolen, who make personal appearances which motivate children to participate in sport. They are the organisers of an event named *Meet your Star* as well as entertaining matches between *HKM Zvolen and a team of Fairy Tale Creatures*.

The function and appearance of urban spaces, is determined by their history, magic, being a sacred place, architecture and atmosphere itself. These are the places where different people can meet on a variety of occasions, everyday or at festive moments. The difference is in the emotional perception of this space. For instance, the perception of the square is different for a man hurrying from work, for a pensioner during his afternoon walk, for a small child awaiting arrival of St. Nicholas or for a Christmas market visitor. All these activities create opportunities to strengthen the citizens' identity with the town and urban community. The revitalisation of urban spaces symbolically presents opportunities for new forms of events and city ceremonies. An essential part of the pre-Christmas period is St. Nicholas' arrival at the square, when it is crowded with people. In 2009, the organisers planned his arrival to coincide with the arrival of a "Christmas Coca-Cola truck" with Santa Claus at Zvolen (as well as fifteen other towns and cities in Slovakia). Thus children could meet St. Nicholas and Santa Claus at the same time. For children and adults alike, there was also a cultural and sporting event called 50 St. Nicholases, which took place in 2016 with runners in St. Nicholas costumes running across the whole square. They were giving out sweets to children and after the photo session the Christmas tree was lit.

In December the southern part of Zvolen Square changes into a Christmas village³⁰. It is a closed, circular, smaller square surrounded with stalls selling Christmas goods, souvenirs, Christmas decorations, punch, wafers and a seasonal themed and regional assortment of products. According to the town's spokesperson: *It is our intention*

³⁰ When creating the Christmas village the town of Zvolen co-operated with the Regional organisation of tourism of Central Slovakia and Ministry of Transport of the Slovak Republic.

*to make the Christmas Village festive and cosy and to create an atmosphere of mutual closeness*³¹. Visitors enter this space through an illuminated gate next to where a pen with real sheep and a wooden Bethlehem (nativity scene) are located. The whole space is closed off by a raised stage used for a variety of music, theatre and other artistic and social performances every day. Members of Friends and Supporters of the Deserted Castle (Pusty Hrad) Association regularly organise a pig-slaughtering event in “the village”, where people can taste and buy special pork products.

Small wooden stalls at the square selling hot punch, mulled wine, bread with lard and onions, strudels and traditional small savoury “pagace” are an inevitable part of the Christmas Village. Their sale has a socio-cultural dimension. For instance, The Rotary Club and Lions Club Zvolen make a donation to children with disabilities from their sale proceeds, Friends of Pusty Hrad Association supports the funding of archaeology research at Pusty Hrad. The square fills with people in the last hours of the year, when the Borough Council organizes the New Year celebrations. The communal welcoming of the New Year’s represents the unification of an individual and urban community. It includes the mayor’s speech, fireworks from Zvolen Castle, performances by music bands, a disco, plus skating on the ice rink.

On the basis of respondents’ testimonies it is possible to say that the previously mentioned events are viewed in a positive way by the community, they strengthen the local identity and relations of the citizens to the town, they support communication between citizens and, in particular, they deepen Christian and humanistic understanding of the Christmas period. Also their entertainment and aesthetic function cannot be ignored.

Zvolen is my town. It is a beautiful town, because it has a castle, The Deserted Castle, it has a beautiful square. [...] In the summer with my chums we have a regular walk at the square and what about the winter? So we go for a hot punch or mulled wine. It is unthinkable without that. We have a chat, I meet people I know [...] (male, 70 years old).

This period is so hectic, shopping, housework, Christmas presents. But before Christmas I meet my friends from the 6th Form College. We have a hot punch or tea or something. We had agreed that we have to do this and meet in town before Christmas. It is so Christmassy, such a Christmas atmosphere, darkness, fairy lights, Christmas music. It’s good to realize that it isn’t about the rush, about the shopping, but about the people (female, 51 years old).

Fountains, whether small or big, and water features are desirable features of public spaces. Water has a symbolic power to bring life to these spaces. Fountains are multi-functional works of art and during warm days they provide welcome refreshment. In our weather conditions, however, they are operational only for a minor part of the year and

³¹ Erika Laššanová.

their winter use often presents an open question³². Within this context it is possible to point to the good example of “wintering” of Zvolen fountain at the square, which completely changes its form and function. A metal structure covered in pine branches is installed inside the fountain, on which a wooden Bethlehem is positioned. Because of its artistic and decorative design, as well as lighting effects, it enriches the winter square by giving it a different visual appearance.

Public spaces represent at their physical, cultural and symbolic level also a significant economic value to the city. Apart from the basic essence of their value, a good quality public space sells itself, and at the same time it is a place that is sold and it co-creates the city image. It is also a place for concentrated trade, mass consumerism and therefore for growing consumer infrastructure. Zvolen Town Council have been organizing a Christmas Market at the square since 1994. Its function is mostly cultural, social, psychological, commercial and charitable³³. During the Christmas Market the square fills with people buying commercial goods, Christmas products or traditional regional products. There are also food stalls with their fried sausages, roast pork on the spit, mead, mulled wine, etc. on offer.

In winter, when the darkness is more predominant, the artistic design of the city, light decorations, distinctive colours, decorated Christmas trees and other art decorations prevail. Christmas lights are located everywhere at the square, with shop windows and office buildings being decorated as well. For the winter period various decorative elements are typical, “new” symbolic objects are also presented – English singing Christmas Trees in front of the shops, hanging or climbing St. Nicholases, Santa Claus with his reindeer sleigh, unconventional materials that do not always correspond with aesthetic criteria. Department stores and shopping centres in town are engaged in a intensive and active marketing of Christmas, which can be seen, for example, in their shop windows offering commercial products³⁴. Nowadays, the content seems not as important as the emphasis on form.

Conclusion

Enhanced competencies for towns and villages after 1989 had a greater impact on town planning schemes and development of villages and towns. This was reflected in almost every town and city in the rapid transformation and revitalisation of main squares and gradually of other public spaces. While in the first two decades after the collapse of Communism squares and streets` transformation was predominantly in hands of

³² Kováč 2003.

³³ During the Christmas Market there is a toy donation event for children from less privileged backgrounds and children's homes.

³⁴ Košťalová 2010.

investors, architects and town officials; public space projects that include public involvement have been increasingly emerging³⁵.

A similar opinion is shared by sociologist Ľubomír Faltán, who states:

[...] a good observer can recognise, on the basis of the public spaces, the overall level of politics and democracy in the country. Public space is a socially very sensitive phenomenon. Therefore, care must be taken to ensure transparency in its management and to lead a socially wider discourse in its transformation. The solution and ways of using public space is an important factor in development policies in towns and villages, but also within the country³⁶.

The town of Zvolen belongs to the category of small post-socialist towns that, as inspired by Mariusz Czepczyński, is still in the preliminary phase „liminal landscape”³⁷. Applying Victor W. Turner’s theory of rites of passage (*rites de passage*), it is the phase in which the city is vulnerable. It is vulnerable to new political, economic, developer activities and fashionable movements to which, like other post-socialist cities, it is not responding adequately. Pursuit for its image can be also seen in public spaces, in their “revival” and “living”. There is a visible transition stage in Zvolen, in the form of a shift from a socialist town. However, this transition is not completed yet. Examples of opportunities for further development are the revitalisation and humanisation of public spaces, the creation of an active square in every season, pursuit of environmental solutions, smart governance and support of local producers and their products, which can gradually bring it closer to a Smart City concept. Zvolen is evaluated by its citizens as a town which manages its budget well and is communicative and environmentally friendly. One of the weaknesses is a passive enforcement of a specific city image and it is even claimed there is a loss of the city image³⁸. For these reasons, the town ought to engage with citizens more with regards to “its” visions and strategies thus making “their” visions commonly shared ones. With such a participation, which is a part of Smart City concept, it is possible to use methods of mental and sensory maps that can generate creative ideas and ideas for town’s development and the use of public space. In addition, a significant fact is that citizens would become co-creators and would be responsible in their subsequent realisation. The public spaces must also be designed with the emphasis being on sustainability, microclimatic changes, awareness of city values, such as historic, economic, semantic, functional and symbolic coherence.

³⁵ Bitušíková 2016, p. 60.

³⁶ Faltán 2010.

³⁷ Czepczyński 2010, p. 69.

³⁸ Program hospodárskeho rozvoja a sociálneho rozvoja mesta Zvolen na obdobie 2014–2020 s výhľadom do roku 2025, 04.11.2016.

In the winter period spatial, functional and aesthetic demands on urban spaces change, activities people do and city events organized for their citizens change also. The public space, thanks to its openness and universal accessibility creates opportunities for people to meet, to establish contacts and it has a significant impact on creating and building social relations. At the same time it is also important in terms of building citizens relationship with the city³⁹. Therefore a city, that is interested in a good quality life for its inhabitants, must also create and support urban outdoor activities in winter time, innovate space for communication and social relations, create conditions for communal leisure time, cultural, social and sport events and activities. These are supported by the modification of public spaces and their lighting and decorations. The quality of public spaces within the context of Smart City should enrich the human aspect, ensure their sustainability, safety, cleanliness, winter maintenance, aesthetics and visual richness. A good quality public space is where *something is happening, because something is happening*⁴⁰, in every season.

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³⁹ Janto 2014.

⁴⁰ Inspired by Gehl 2000.

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