

REVERSE GRAND TOUR

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Abstract

In the past, the aim of the grand tours was not only to increase travellers' knowledge, but to enrich their whole cultural and aesthetic attitude and even the philosophy of life. For ages, grand tours gave architects unique opportunities to re-examine architecture and landscape as the foundations of culture. Consecutively, such travels affected architecture and fertilized architects' minds.

On the other hand, in many countries local gentry travelled abroad to study. For example, as early as in the 16th century, young rich men in Poland undertook long travels to Italian universities in Padua or Bologna. Nowadays, there is a similar but bidirectional students' flow related to the *Erasmus+* programme, as the programme itself acts as a contemporary framework for young people grand tours.

This fact creates also the new opportunity to re-examine the contemporary *grand tour phenomenon* from the young architect's viewpoint. This is also the author's case.

Streszczenie

Slogan „podróże kształcą” jest już aksjomatem – istotnie bowiem od wieków tak zwane „grand tours” (w wolnym przekładzie: podróże życia) kształtowały światopogląd elit, wpływając też na postawy estetyczne. W przypadku architektów podróże służyły dogłębnyemu twórczym przewartościowaniu postaw względem architektury, krajobrazu czy po prostu kultury. Podróże architektów twórczo zapładniały ich umysły, a w ostatecznym rozrachunku wywierały wpływ na twórczość architektoniczną.

Istotnym aspektem powyższego fenomenu kulturowego było kwitnące ongiś zjawisko podróży uniwersyteckich: już w XVI wieku młodzi polscy żacy z co zaniejszych rodzin peregrynowali do włoskich uniwersytetów w Bolonii i Padwie. Dziś nieoczekiwaną kontynuacją tego zjawiska stały się podróże w ramach programu wymiany studenckiej Erasmus+, niekiedy postrzegane jako odpowiednik również dawnych „grand tours”.

To właśnie podróże w ramach programu wymiany studenckiej Erasmus+ są okazją i przesłanką do ponownego przyjrzenia się wpływowi podróży życia na subiektywną jednostkową percepcję architektury, krajobrazu i obcej kultury z perspektywy architekta (co jest celem niniejszego artykułu ujętym z dość specyficznego punktu widzenia – z autopsji, jako że autorka była uczestniczką wymiany studenckiej w ramach programu Erasmus+ w Polsce).

Keywords: grand tour; architectural heritage; architectural heritage assessment; Polish architecture

Słowa kluczowe: *grand tour*; dziedzictwo architektoniczne; wartościowanie dziedzictwa architektonicznego; architektura polska

INTRODUCTION

One of the most impressive stories from the first half of XIX century related to a blind gentleman, who despite his many physical restrictions could circumnavigate the whole globe: “I am constantly asked, and I may as well answer the question here once for

all, what is the use of travelling to one who cannot see? I answer, Does every traveller see all that he describes? – and is not every traveller obliged to depend upon others for a great proportion of the information he collects?”¹

That case shows us the clue: the importance of “social filter” in gaining knowledge, experience and wisdom. Travelling shapes one’s world outlook not only by delivering and acquiring information, but also by broadening that “social filter”.

But what does it mean to be a traveller? And what did it mean in the past? A traveller is not necessarily a person with strong nomadic instincts; instead, he or she is a guy who just follows his or her intrinsic curiosity. Probably, the curiosity that brings us instinctively out of our boundaries to discover the appealing diversity of other culture and spaces did not change at all through the centuries.

What influence has such an attitude of mind upon our life? Does travelling still influence our aesthetic preferences? And in a wider scale, do “grand tours” affect architecture and fertilize architects’ minds nowadays? These questions are justified by the fact that through the centuries travels were parts of professional education of architects, artists and art historians. Actually, travels fertilized their minds. Think about John Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice* (1851-1853), being the result of his visits in Venice in the winter of 1849-1850 and 1851-1852.

Thus, the article is a preliminary research contribution to the issue of cultural and architectural significance of “grand tours”, with the focus on their influence on young architects and on their perception of architectural and urban space, either globally or locally. The pretext to the subject matter re-examination (or rather to the subjective reflections based also on the author’s travelling experience) is a new phenomenon of the 20th and 21st century, namely, the *Erasmus+* programme

that is also a framework for the contemporary versions of “grand tours”.

The formal hypothesis claims that, in cases of students of architecture, consecutively, modern “grand tours” still give them new opportunities to re-examine the space.

1. GRAND TOUR CONTEXT

The grand tours phenomenon originated amongst the British nobility in the 17th century, but this custom soon spread out all over Europe, being relatively popular among the upper-class European young men. The aim of the original grand tours was to increase travellers’ general knowledge; especially, to enrich their cultural and aesthetic attitude and even philosophy of their lives by comparisons among their homeland environments and Mediterranean culture, looking also for the remnants of the antiquity, which was perceived by them as roots of the Western civilisation. Secondary objective was to look for new “exotic” experiences or even adventures.

On the other hand, in many countries local gentry travelled abroad to study. As early as in the 16th century it was the case in Poland, where young rich men undertook long travels to universities in Padua or Bologna.

In the 19th century travelling became much easier and safer, but only now it is widely accessible and suitable for all: it is also easier to cross country borders, information is always available on internet, travels are fast and cheap. Thanks to that, modern “grand tours” have many flows and are not only one-way.



Fig. 1. A comparison between townscape of San Gimignano (Tuscany, in the province of Siena, Italy; photo by Alex Da Canal) and cityscape of Warsaw (Poland; photo by Sara Doriguzzi Zordanin): the difference in scale, materials and streets sizes in two countries; photo by Sara Doriguzzi Zordanin and Alex Da Canal, 2015

¹ J. Holman, *A voyage round the world including travels in Africa, Asia, Australasia, America from 1527 to 1532*, vol.1, Published by Smith, Elder & co., Cornhill 1834.

2. REVERSE GRAND TOUR

Nowadays, there is an intensive bidirectional students' flow related to the *Erasmus+* programme, as the programme itself acts as a contemporary framework for young people grand tours. As opposed to the grand tours in the past, contemporary young travellers do not look for the remnants of ancient or Mediterranean cultures which was perceived by them as the root of the Western civilisation, but instead, they are interested in cultural values which seem to them vernacular or exotic.

This change is essential if concerning mobility of students of architecture, as their travelling motivation strongly affects the cognitive results of their journeys and residence abroad. This is also the author's case, as the author was the participant of the mobility action in Poland.

3. MY GRAND TOUR (CASE STUDY: AN ARCHITECT'S SUBJECTIVE VIEWPOINT)

I come from south-west Europe (Italy), and for me, the eastern Europe was sort of an unknown world. At the beginning of my residence in Poland in 2014-2015, only differences were noticed without really realizing their reasons; then going through the culture background it was even possible to understand and be more aware of those differences, looking them with new eyes and respect.

The biggest dissimilarities referred to urban spaces. My first impression in Białystok, as well as in other Polish cities, included some astonishment with their over-dimensions. Even in the central square I felt something missing if compared to what is my experience of "piazza", like the small stores, craft workshops, ateliers, restoration and entertainment places. Streets seemed too huge, as I used to live in old-historical centres dimensioned before the car invention. My first spontaneous attempts to reason these subjective feelings started with conceiving an image of those streets before their World War II devastation, and then designing a scenario of their consecutive rebuilding and adopting to new post-war standards.



Fig. 2. A comparison between roofscapes of Białystok (Poland; photo by Sara Doriguzzi Zordanin) and San Gimignano (Italy, photo by Alex Da Canal) showing the difference in scale, forms and materials

Another thing that I noticed at the beginning was the shortage or even relative lack of mixed-use development, for example in residential zones, where huge containers for people are standing next to each other in a zone where other services like post, offices, entertainment, sport, culture are missing. This is not the case of all Polish cities, maybe; nevertheless, it is easily noticeable in most of the cities I have seen.

About the urban shape in general, I was impressed how in eastern Europe borders of the cities are so strong that you can clearly define that there is the city, and few meters ahead the countryside starts, and it goes on with any human manufactured until the next urban aggregate, without the sprawl phenomenon.

Then, reflecting on urban shape principles, it was more clear that, according to Kiril Stanilov, *“the structure of social relations (related also to a regime), the way in which urban space is organised has a strong impact not only in issues related to resources allocations and quality of life, but is a key element for economic well being of cities as well”*². So I started to ponder over it and I noticed more visible differences like the marks left by the culture and politic past, that were connected with economic interests, and consequently with urban spaces as well.

The exemplary difference in urban design is in the amount of public spaces in the city: in socialist cities the most of the space was public by default (the regime also used to take some private proprieties and make common use of them). In Western cities instead, the ratio of private space was reversed.

Another difference has been revealed in the pattern of public spaces: while capitalism wanted to concentrate them around the main square, with the exception of the huge parks situated far away, the socialist typical distribution was more uniform.

The last disparity was in the function given to public spaces: in the western European cities the main activity was the private retail. On the opposite, the private retail space, including the market-square, seemed completely missing in the previous socialists ideology that concentrated the estate-monopoly in some areas in the outskirts, with the result of a lack of some functions.

My final reflections refers to the recent, post-socialist impact on the city. It was indeed a radical change on urban scale that is work in progress still nowadays.

CONCLUSIONS

The History draws the scenario of a country and some factors like wellness, technology, wars and form of politic administration are directly linked to some visible features in urban shape that denote the space perception. Poland, for example, passed through a lot of critic points: the war, the communism, the post-socialism and it's obvious that with such a story there are nowadays visible differences compared with western Europe countries. In general, each mark has his own reason behind and if we try to discover what is hidden under the appearance, like a blind traveller has to do, our critical sense will grow if we use it on the basis of the study part.

This is also what the architect should do: to see differences in spaces, techniques and results if compared to the knowledge library already acquired; to be guided by the curiosity and wonder the reason of this visible outcome, analyse with critic sense if that solutions fits to the needs that generated them and put this reflection in the growing knowledge library.

To conclude, this poem that inspired the blind traveller almost five centuries ago can also be contemporary architect's inspiration.

*“Sightless to see, and judge thro' judgements' eyes,
To make four senses do the work of five,
To arm the mind for hopeful enterprise,
Are lights to him who doth in darkness live”*
(— Old poet).

LITERATURE

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² K. Stanilov, *The Post-Socialist City: Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism*, Springer 2007.