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CĂLIN-MUNTEANU MAXIMILIAN

# FROM CETATE WITH LOVE: REVISITING THE *TOWNSCAPE* METHOD

Until the 18th century, Timișoara developed, under the Ottoman rule, as an organic urban form, taking up the shape of the marshland, with winding and intricate streets. After the 1716 conquest, the new needs of the Habsburg military reordered the Oriental city and gave it a new orthogonal layout (fig.1). In its characteristic military fashion, a *decumanus* and *cardo maxiumus* were drawn, with a rectangular area, grouping the main military and administrative functions (todays Libertății square). Thus, unlike other Central-European cities, Timișoara was bereft of confronting its own stylistic evolutions and, also, from the varied image offered by the coexistence of the stylistic succession[1].
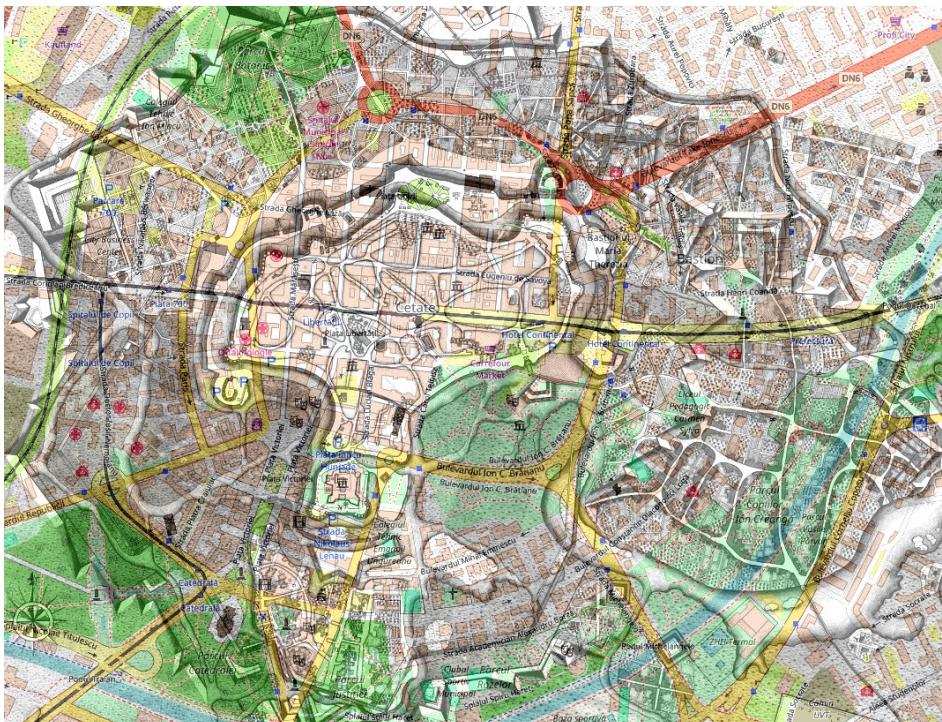


Figure 1 – Ottoman city laid over today's Timișoara - Credits (OpenStreetMap)

[1] L. Roșu. Aspecte compoziționale în barocul din Timișoara. *Revista Monumentelor Istorice* 1-2 (1993-4): p.52

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## Introduction

Over the centuries, the organic and spontaneous image of the city has been defined by two "attitudes": the *collage*, i.e. by adding new interventions, and the *palimpsest* – by replacing the existing with new interventions. The result has been appreciated by the romantic movement as 'picturesque'.

Austrian architect Camillo Sitte wrote in 1889 *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlichen Grundsätzen*, as a reaction to the outcome of the Viennese Ringstrasse, criticizing the so called "modern system" of the urban approach, for being, as he considered, poor and banal compared to the medieval heritage.

Sitte appreciated the organic order of the medieval and ancient city: from the Athenian Agora and the Roman Forum to the streets and squares of the medieval cities of Italy and the German space. Assuming an aesthetic ideal – close to the original Greek meaning of *αἴσθησις* – the admiration of Italian and medieval cities betrays Sitte's attitude to be close to the contemplation of Stendhal, portrayed in his *Roman Walks*[2], namely the *ästhetische Wirkung* (aesthetic effect). In the whole pictorial baggage presented by the author, consisting in plans of medieval European squares, the picturesque resides through the irregularity of those squares and their combination, according to clear principles. Supported by vast resources of archeology and by the imaginary museum of urban design[3], accumulated from his travels, he intended, as stated in his *Introduction*, to fully sink into Aristotle's meaning, namely, combining the regular and irregular systems, as „it is well to combine the advantages of both plans, and not to lay out the whole city in straight streets, but only certain parts and districts, for in this way it will combine security with beauty." (Aristotle, 1330b)

Sitte would propose, based on the romantic aesthetic category, a model of urbanistic approach: by studying the `picturesque` in cities, he both resumed the romantic search of this aesthetic appreciation to the new designed cities, as well as expressing his concern for the loss of such approach. This further resonated with English architect Raymond Unwin and, later, German art historian Nikolaus Pevsner.

In his 1947 speech about *The Picturesque in Architecture*, read at the Royal Institute of British Architects, Pevsner shaped the 18th century idea of the picturesque as a critique of modernist architecture and its perceived monotony. However, he moved away from the simple picturesque solution, i.e. the formalism of an asymmetric or accidental arrangement, preferring to take its principles: variety in plan and elevation, contrast of texture and materiality, and the symbiosis of the architectural object with the site. Pevsner highlighted from the "lessons" of

[2] L. Jenny. *Viața estetică. Staze și reflexii* (Art, 2023), pp.80-81

[3] F. Choay. *Urbanismul: utopii și realități* (Simetria, 2002), p.43

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Strawberry Hill and Downton Hall, the complexity of a picturesque architecture, beyond superficial considerations:

"But it is not correct to confine it simply to free grouping, varied heights, and asymmetry. It is not simply a matter of building blocks in three dimensions; it is also a matter of surface, of roughness and smoothness of texture, and the play of light and shade."[4]

Its endeavor was a search for an empirical approach of urban design, that predates the late modernism critique, such as Schulze's *Genis Loci* or Alexander's *Pattern Language*.

*On Timișoara's grid, lacking an intricate street layout, the buildings erected in over two centuries - from the austere military architecture to the Baroque, and from the Neoclassicism to Secession – were the ones who gave an intricate street front. This very diverse architecture is being difficult to read, as the facades, which support their own compositions and plastic intentions, are sideways from the street's axis visual focus. More so, by working on the inherited grid, architecture was left little room for interacting with the surroundings.*

*Thus, this article proposes the exploration of this layout – apparently limited in its artistic expression as Sitte would consider – by emphasizing the possibility of the townscape approach over a functional urban fabric.*

## About townscape method

Throughout his collaboration at *The Architectural Review* (AR) magazine, Pevsner would confirm to English architect Huber de Cronin Hastings the operational plausibility of the landscape painting, such as the Chinese *Sharawaggi* style, attempting broadly to adapt the aesthetic theory of the 18th century picturesque into modern architecture.

Assuming the visual character of Pevsner's model, the *townscape* method implies the picturesque as its modus operandi. The picturesque, as Hastings believed, would transcend said 18th century art of landscape painting and gardening, being at the same time a regional variant of the international style[5], as well as a "human" face of urban design: "Townscape can thus be treated as the art of humanizing high densities after the engineers have made them hygienically possible."[6] The deterministic order of the design process recalls the same three stage process that architect Robert Castell was exposing in this 1728 treaty on T*he Villas of the*

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[4] N. Pevsner. The Picturesque in Architecture. *R.I.B.A. Journal* (1947): p. 58

[5] D. Gosling. *Gordon Cullen: Visions of Urban Form*. (Academy Editions, 1996), p.217

[6] H. d. C. Hastings. *The Italian Townscape*. (The Architectural Press, 1963), p.12

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*Ancients*. In other words, the picturesque visual aspect would come as a cover of, what Pevser called, the "subtle rule". Worried about the boredom of monotony, Hastings doubted the over-organization of architecture, seeing the picturesque as being the first step towards an abstract aesthetics[7], after the practical aspect would be resolved. Hasting even saw in this a 'revolt' against the idealism of Plato[8]. His reference to Plato is, however, intriguing, as Hastings was positioning himself near Lewis Mumford, who highlighted in *The City in History* (1961), the imperative aspect of the Platonic ideal city, proposed in the *Republic* or the *Laws*. In contrast, through his biological approach, the naturalism of the Aristotelian urban organism and its city included something that pertains of humanity, that would have been denied by Platonism. Thus, it is no coincidence that Sitte opened his *Städtebau* referencing the Aristotelian urban model.

Formed from Pevnser's urban model, architect and illustrator Gordon Cullen shared with Hastings and AR the interest in avoiding monotony, and the importance of the visual element in outlining his method, fundamental to the perception of space.

Beyond the approach of visual experience, Cullen contoured his writings based on two influential ideas of the mid-20th century architecture: the first is **Gestalt** psychology, whose terms were developed at the beginning of the century, facilitating the reproduction of visual form. The second is the notion of **space-time**, described by the historian Siegfried Giedion, in his 1941 work, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, which in turn gives the *townscape* method two spatial concepts: space as a *neutral continuum* and space perceived by a *freely moving observer*. By graphically combining the analysis of these concepts, the *townscape* method was a manifesto of urban art, which (re)confirmed, as architect Norman Foster put it, the value of urban space as something more than the space between individual buildings, isolated and independent.

Cullen saw the city through the artists eye, promoting the architectural-urbanistic space, designing it with attention to small details, which could improve the quality of a given place[9]. Thus, he exposed three "concerns" of the method: about *optics*, *content* and *place*.

As the city shows itself through a series of sudden revelations, Cullen introduced the concept of *serial vision*, an analytical tool designed to manipulate urban elements in order to arouse, in the process of disclosure, impressions of excitement and drama. Regarding the *optical* concern, the city consists of two

[7] C. Hussey. *The Picturesque. Studies in a Point of View* (Routhledge, 1927), p.17

[8] A. Powers. Townscape as a model of organised complexity. *The Journal of Architecture* (17:5, 2012): p.698

[9] C.M. Serrano. A City with a Sense: Back to Kevin Lynch's The Image of the City. *disegno*. 5 (2019): p.209

elements: **existing** and **emerging view**. This dynamic leads to Cullen's preoccupation with the *place*: by entering or leaving it, the relation to the view of the place would be formulated by a HERE (or the known space), which also implies a THERE – or the unknown space. If these two concerns would be the method's syntax, the "concern" for *content* would be the morphology, namely the function and details of urban spaces: color, texture, style, scale and uniqueness. Thus, the operative elements that Cullen put together aim to establish the visual relationship between spaces – what can be seen and read from one space to another.

Similarly, the Swiss sociologist Lucius Bruckhardt would propose the science of walks – *strollology* – a variation of the *townscape* method, which would deal with the sequences through which the observer lives the experience of the urban space. The perception of the city becomes a dynamic process involving the passage of time[10]. The space-time concept of Giedion is recognized in this relationship, to which the oriental philosophy would add, as affirmed by the architect Arata Isozaki, the idea of the **interval** (*ma*, 間) – the natural distance between several objects that exist in that continuum[11]. Thus, Cullen suggested a theory, encompassed by the term "urban navigation". Paying attention to the connections between the framed spaces, by applying this theory would facilitate a coherent urban structure. He lists among the criteria of his method, the second theory: *accidental* and *intentional memorability*, namely, to create a sense of identity and sympathy for the surrounding space.

In short, townscape method deals with the kinetic experience of the city, by virtue of the sequences of spaces in which the observer moves. Cullen's method is, also, seductive. Unlike the more analytical research of Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City*, Hastings, Cullen and the AR provided an urban philosophy, that was as sentimental as thin its critique of urban challenges would have been.

## Observations on a walkthrough

*As the baroque character of Cetate implies a global image, simple and with distinctive landmarks, its subtle, but rigorous organization along an axial system, make some compositional and visual particularities: several detailed solutions bring variation. Those were highlighted by architect Liliana Roșu, in her article about the compositional aspects of the Timișoara baroque. Therefore, by applying a visual method, like townscape, as a cover over today's image of Cetate, the ideal image that sprung out of a functional urban design is being exposed: what happens after the functional aspects have been fulfilled, followed by the emotional reaction of the urban scenography always produced, whether it is intentional or*

[10] Gosling. *Gordon Cullen: Visions of Urban Form*, p.222

[11] A. Isozaki. Ma and the Raving Eye. *Japan Architect*, (262: 54, 1979): p.96

*not:* "For a city is a dramatic event in the environment (…) And yet…if in the end of it all, the city appears dull, uninteresting and soulless, then it is not fulfilling itself."[12] This passage contains the essential idea from Sitte to Cullen: the city as a work of art.

The builders of Cetate wouldn't have had, at the beginning of the 18th century, those aesthetical intentions. Thus, the geometrical approach denotes more of a cadastral rationale; the relationships between the architectural object being determined more by the property limit, than by any further consideration on visual impact, or how the space is being perceived (fig.2). The buildings seem to remain static on their lots, refusing to participate in a total work of art.
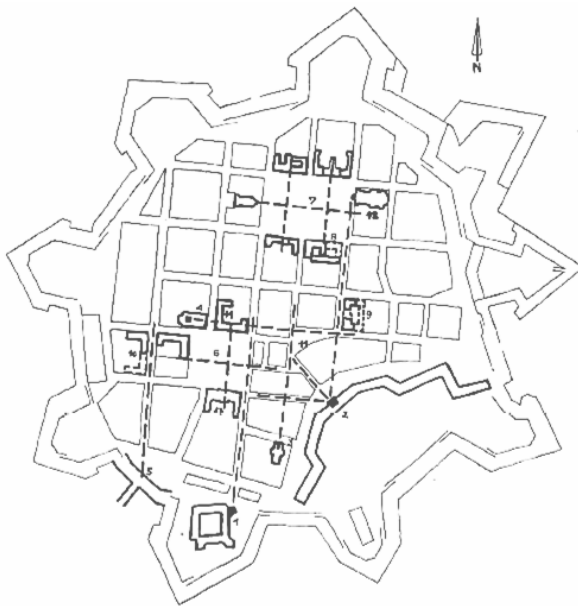


Figure 2 – Compositional axis of the Timișoara's baroque - Credits (arch. Liliana Roșu)

Timișoara-based architect Albert Kristóf-Krausz was blaming, in his *Analiza planului de sistematizare a orașului Timișoara* (1943), the authority of the systematization plan for ignoring the ideas of Sitte, in the layout of the extra-muros extensions. In this sense, Timișoara was losing on a fruitful moment to accomplish an intricate urban design.

On this note, *townscape* method comes in searching of a different Cetate. In viewing the Cetate neighborhood based on Cullen's criteria, there to account for the *places* and the *content* from Cetate. Furthermore, the fundamental aspect of the townscape method can be reached, by sewing those two criteria together, towards a coherent urban narrative vision: *serial vision*, that is looked for through the grid of Cetate.

A particular aspect of today's Cetate is the joining of its 18th century grid system with the radial layout of the interwar extension and the 1st Ring. Those generate several deviations in the urban space, making the architectural object visually

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[12] G. Cullen, *Townscape* (The Architectural Press, 1961), p.10

present into Cetate's spaces. Thus, what would be perceived as an assemble of Cetate, coherent historical and stylistically, stands in *juxtaposition* with the object from outside. A striking example is the building from Mărăști Square, looming over the norther front of Unirii Square. Another, more subtle example of extra-muros buildings, stands out as head perspective of Cetate's straight axis. Being visually adjacent to the front of those streets, these `foreign` buildings are *closing the vista*, thus participating into Cetate, like the tower from Ionescu Avenue closing Coșbuc Street eastwards.

Regarding the "concern" for the *place*, understood in contrast to the rather general idea of space, Cetate neighborhood presents some peculiarities. It begins from the deviation from the straight streets, that are the general rule. As the straight-line streets becomes more of a stretched version of the wide-open squares, like Unirii and Libertății, exactly those corners create the urban events. The straight-line streets, like the east-west axis of Savoy Street, puts visually together two object far apart (the Military Hospital and the Bastion fortress), the same way the Dome and Serbian Vicarage stands together in Unirii Square. In this case, the streets of Cetate could hardly build a sense of place, as the known *here*-ness extends its whole street length, thus canceling the unknown of *there*-ness. At the same time, the likewise straight north-south axes are being cut at the geometric median of the Cetate by a subtle change in topography, producing, in Cullen's terms, a *truncation* that maintains a subtle *here and there* duality. Regarding the *townscape* preoccupation for *place*, the neighborhood of Cetate presents several deviations in its urban fabric, that produces urban events marked with a place-making concept as their defining element.

Such a deviation creates two impressive spaces: Alba Iulia Steet and St. George Square (*fig.3*). Coming from Mărăști Square on Ungureanu Street, the axial drift from Alba Iulia Steet, reveals the *intricacy* of its layered front's *juxtaposition*: the blind walls rise above the lower building of "Casa cu Flori". As the view seems to be complete, *punctuated* by the colorful façade's highlight, a *closure* is being produced: the piazzetta with its small "Fountain-with-Names". Going through inertly, from the Opera, the sunlit facade of the Old Townhall hints the *anticipation* of Liberty Square, through the *narrow*, produced by the rotated position of the Garison.

Likewise, St. George's Square maintains the similar visual place-making characteristics. An intriguing square, resulting from the condition of the old mosque position, negotiates the meeting of the north-south Mercy Street, the east-west Proclamației Street and the short diagonal passage to the site of the formal military camp entrance.

Coming towards the "Punctele Cardinale" place, from Oituz Street and continuing to Ionescu avenue, one can experience the idea of *sequence* of visual revelations, respectively *serial vision*. Entering the grand place, the Cardinal Points fountain is the space's main *focal point*, but gliding along its round water wall, it reveals different view of the old fortress – the "Bastion". The *juxtaposition* of the Bastion and the buildings around, relate via texture and material of the brick and white plaster, with, for example, the three block-buildings from Hector Street. By virtue of

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its orthogonal layout, *serial vision* is, with few examples discussed above, absent from Cetate, as its open vistas hinders the creation of the place-making characteristics that form the optical concept.
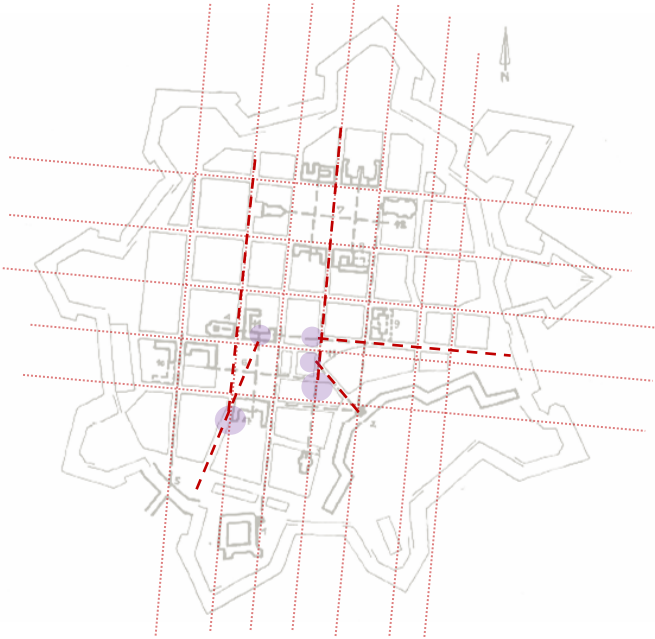


Figure 3 – *townscape* emphasized compositional axis of the Timișoara's Cetate laid over the orthogonal layout: each round area represents a *townscape* conceptual element for its correspondent view, marked by the straight line - Credits (author)

## Instead of conclusion

The lessons learned from Cullen's method are the attention to the walkthrough and to the ends of the perspective, as well as the importance of faraway elements, as every architectural and urban gesture of THERE can affect the visual comprehension of space HERE. Thus, the three Hector Street block-buildings should be attentively studied, in case of future projects, for preserving those visual qualities, that relate with the Bastion.

The exercise aims to be an exposition on the townscape operational method, which invites to see the city from a different point-of-view. What started in the 18th century, as an impressionistic approach of the city, has evolved into a method of urban design. Laying it over an orthogonal layout, like the Habsburgs grid system, a series of empirical aspects are revealed, that could be often overlooked by a rational approach. Cullen's *townscape* method is, nevertheless, an invitation to consider the impact the city, as well as our environment, have over our perception of space, and altogether, life itself.

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