



Destruction of the city's architectural landscape and its memory (on the example of Kharkiv)

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ABSTRACT:

Using the example of the city of Kharkiv in Ukraine, the evolution of the architectural environment of a historical city and its destruction during military operations is considered. It is shown that during social cataclysms, significant changes occur in the structure of the urban environment and architectural language, which is reflected in the appearance of buildings, ensembles and the landscape as a whole. To describe these processes, such new concepts for architectural theory as "architectural landscape", "cultural memory", "traces" and their "layering" are proposed. It is emphasized that in the process of forming the authentic landscape of the city, both positive and negative changes occur, which need to be investigated. Identifying their features will allow the development of modern strategies for urban planning interventions in the historical city. Fixing the main structural features of the authentic multi-layered landscape will prevent the destruction of the bright artistic compositions of cultural heritage created over the centuries and help in developing modern strategies for urban planning interventions in the historical city.

KEYWORDS:

evolution of the city; architectural landscape; cultural memory; architectural language; city identity

1. Introduction

The current situation, which has developed as a result of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, has brought to the forefront the problem of the destruction of urban environments. The moral degradation of the population of the aggressor country and its aggressively destructive actions cause the opposite reaction in Ukrainian society. The growth of patriotism, self-awareness, and understanding of our identity give rise to pride towards one's environment. What was previously not noticeable and not discussed is now emerging in our consciousness. Our gaze begins to capture not only the horrific destruction of buildings and structures in the city, but we also begin to reflect on the value of the objects and environment that are being destroyed and are disappearing before our eyes (Figs. 1 and 2).

And here the following begins to come to mind:

- the history of the origin and creation of the destroyed object itself,
- reflections on the value of the object (whether it was an architectural monument or not, what was in it, who lived there),
- and if it is a monument of cultural history, then the characters and events associated with it,
- the history of the district or street and the events that took place on it,
- the surrounding environment and the stages of its formation,
- the significance of the object or ensemble for different periods of history,
- the features of nature and much more (Figs. 2-5).

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Fig. 1. Mural on Sumska Street, where artist Hamlet Zenkovsky wrote: "I see everything", Kharkiv, 2023, photo by O. Remizova



Fig. 2. Myronositska st. 32-34. Kharkiv, 6.10.2023, photo by O. Remizova



Fig. 3. Svobody st. 8. Kharkiv, 11.07.2022, photo by O. Remizova



Fig. 4. Sumskaya st. 43. Kharkiv, 1.01.2024, photo by O. Remizova



Fig. 5. Sumskaya st., 64. Kharkiv, 20.07.2022, photo by O. Remizova

This raises a pressing question: what resources do architects have to preserve the authentic environment of a historic city? Can we preserve memories and at the same time create a new image of the city?

2. The concept of architectural landscape and architectural memory

The concept of the architectural landscape will help us understand the dynamics of changes in the architectural environment. It includes a number of very important aspects for the city: geographical or natural landscape, morphology and architectural structure, its semantics and symbolism, functional or scenario transformation of city streets and squares, time as a process of change of all the listed aspects and much more.

The language of the urban landscape is architecture, and it in turn is an expression of the social processes occurring in historical time. The scale of cultural designs dictates the architect's range of possibilities.

In the process of evolution, the city undergoes a number of changes, which are caused by social cataclysms, one of which is war. For Kharkiv, such turning points in history are:

- the opening of the University in 1804 and other educational institutions,
- the appearance of the Kharkiv-Mykolaiv Railway in 1871,
- the First World War of 1914-1918 and the October Revolution of 1917, the Civil War of 1918-1922,
- the establishment of Soviet power in Ukraine in 1918,
- the capital period of Kharkiv and its withdrawal from it (1919-1934),
- the Second World War (1941-1945),
- the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the establishment of Ukraine's independence,
- the attack of the Russian Federation on Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

All these cataclysms were reflected on the face of the city and were imprinted in its memory not only in the form of memoirs and recollections, photographs and artifacts in museums, but also physically. This is most notably seen in the changes of the spatial structure of the city at each of the listed stages, and the stylistic changes that accompany ideological changes in the country and is reflected on the face of buildings, ensembles and the landscape as a whole.

The problems of urban destruction make the analysis of the landscape of a historic city relevant. To describe how the architectural landscape preserves cultural memory, the concepts of trace and layering are important.

The historical landscape of the city preserves traces of the past, which are gradually layered. Over many years and centuries, overlapping each other, traces of human activity create the mix that we perceive as the authenticity of the city and the features of its landscape. These layers, which appeared for various ideological, social, functional, climatic and technical reasons, tell us about the moods and features of their historical period. Mixing and entering into dialogue with each other, they form a special authenticity of the place (Figs. 6 and 7).



Fig. 6. Mixing the past and the present. Chornoglazivska Street, Kharkiv, 18.09.2025, photo by O. Remizova



Fig. 7. Constitution Square in Kharkiv, 26.09.2025, photo by O. Remizova

One way to understand the dynamics of transformation is the concept of urban memory, an extremely complex and still underdeveloped concept. It was first introduced by the Italian architect Aldo Rossi in his book *The Architecture of the City* [1, 2]. It can be interpreted in different ways, as an individual manifestation in the personal memory of a particular person living in his city, and as a collective memory [3], which is imprinted in generalized stories or, as it should, on the architectural fabric of the city. Architectural memory has many shades and manifests itself in many diverse forms of professional consciousness. One of the important forms of this manifestation of memory in architecture is the dialogue of eras and styles, reflected in the diversity of the gradually developing urban environment [4-7].

The process of forming an authentic urban landscape involves the simultaneous layering of new structures and artifacts, and the erasure of old ones. Both of these processes leave their marks on the body of the city.

For example, the city of Kharkiv in the 17th-19th centuries gradually complicated its landscape, forming a complex silhouette on a rather expressive relief. The beds of the rivers Uda, Lopan, Kharkiv, Nemyshlya, Netch and others divided the Nahirny (on the elevated relief) and Podolny (in the lowland of the river beds) districts with their specific characteristics. On the hilly terrain, dominant vertical formations arose (Pokrovsky, Uspensky cathedrals and monasteries, fortresses), on Podol – the Annunciation Cathedral, the Dmitriy Church and others violated the horizontal skyline of the buildings with their dominant structures. Connections between different objects in the city are established partly thanks to the silhouettes of panoramas – visual accents on which our memories are superimposed, sometimes thanks to a multitude of comparisons.

The establishment of a socialist regime of government after the 1917 revolution dramatically changed the ideological orientations of the city's development and radically disrupted the historical structure of the city. The demolition and destruction of a huge number of churches (there were more than 100 – reduced to 10) affected the urban landscape, impoverishing it in artistic terms. This was an artificial process of erasing the old, which remained in people's memory. The establishment of Kharkiv as the capital of the Ukrainian Republic within the USSR led to a revision of the entire structure of the city, the emergence of a new ideological and compositional center and the formation of a new image, opposed to the old, which was considered "ideologically backward". Having created a new spatial center – the Government Complex on Dzerzhinsky Square (now Svobody Square) on the edge of a high hill, which is beautifully viewed from the Lopan River, a layering of new structures and artifacts took place on the old structure. New streets were laid, residential quarters were formed, and a search for a new style was underway. The multifaceted and diverse eclecticism and refined modernism were replaced by strict constructivism. Its inherent asceticism of forms was spread over a large territory, and the density of development was manifested in the displacement of natural freedom. Such streets as Mironositska, Chernyshevska, Alchevsky were filled with 4-5-story residential buildings, which formed a dense perimeter development of quarters with open spaces in the middle. The Zaderzhpromya district also formed a special landscape thanks to its radially circular structure with bright features of constructivism. All this was imprinted in the memory of Kharkiv residents as a special period of building a new society and, accordingly, a new spatial landscape. Let us add to this the fates of prominent figures who lived here and were sent to the GULAG ("Main Administration of Correctional Labor Camps") or shot. Natural elements of the landscape, such as ravines, were smoothed out by cities and used for communications (Klochivskyi Descent), and sometimes filled in (Internationalist Soldiers' Square), which reduced the features of the natural relief. Thus, the urban landscape acquired a larger scale, dense structure and clear structuring. But it should be noted that a peculiar mix took place. Eclectic and Art Nouveau buildings began to be perceived as artistic gems against the background of multiple constructivist buildings that formed the general background.

The avant-garde architecture of the 1920s brought its constructivist spirit and added a new feature to the authenticity of the city of Kharkiv. However, now, when there is a war with Russia, this layer of history is assessed as negative, because at that time Ukraine lost the chance to become an independent country. Now it has been called a "negative heritage", although it has not lost its artistic qualities [8].

There were many such layers. In the following Stalinist period of the 1930s-1950s, a pathos layer of architecture of the historicism of the "victor's country" was added [9]. Asceticism and rationalism were replaced by the "Stalin Empire" with Italian reminiscences, as well as the "monumentalism of the victors" in the form of angular spires and triumphal propylaea (Central Park). The buildings destroyed during the war were replaced by even larger and taller structures, which again enhanced not only the large scale of the development, but also added monumentality and emphasis to the key places.

After the "Khrushchev thaw" and attempts at neo-brutalism, a period of stylelessness began. During the period of independence, Kharkiv also began to lose the features of its historical past. Commercial values took precedence over cultural memory, and the demolition of monuments or violation of the accepted norms of their protection led to the destruction of the historically established structures. A negative example of such destruction is the construction of the Palace Hotel on Svobody Square, which contradicted the original design of the central square (Figs. 8-10) [10].

The latest changes in the architectural landscape of the Nagorny district of Kharkiv resemble chaotic interventions in the free spaces of the established structure, because they occur against the background of the destruction of small-sized architectural monuments, or the construction of public squares with 20-25-story point buildings that violate the established structural order. They form a new silhouette of the development, but do not take into account the historically formed landscape system.



Fig. 8. Svobody Square in Kharkiv, bird's eye view, 2000, photo by V. Bysov

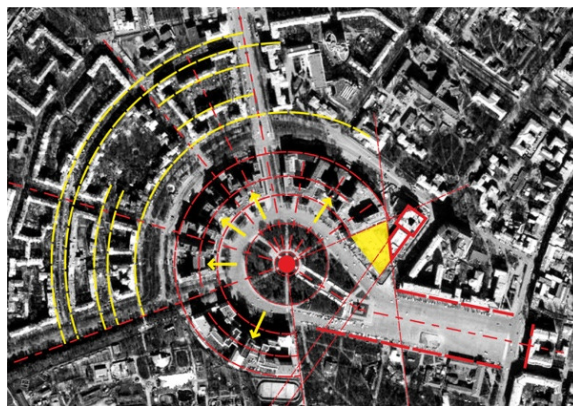


Fig. 9. Scheme of the compositional construction of Svobody Square with the Palace Hotel in Kharkiv, 2013



Fig. 10. Panorama of the northern side of Svobody Square, where it is clear that the Palace Hotel (blue cube) is not tied to any axis of the historical ensemble, 2013, photo by O. Remizova

The need to restore destroyed structural connections can and should lead us to rethink architectural and urban planning, including new approaches to city design as a special integrity of nature, architecture, and compositional symbolism.

In fact, wartime destruction becomes a significant factor in the forced renewal of the architectural environment of a historical city, because the chaotic nature of the destruction forces us to rethink the role and significance of a particular element (from a single object to an entire district) of the city from the historical, cultural, social, symbolic, structural, compositional, stylistic, functional, and other aspects. All of the above factors create the need for a comprehensive approach to understanding the ways and strategies of city renovation (Figs. 11 and 12).



Fig. 11. The Derzhprom House from the side of Nauki Avenue at the beginning of the war. Kharkiv, 11.07.2022



Fig. 12. Derzhprom house after rocket fire and its destruction from Pravda Ave. Kharkiv, 18.11.2024, photo by O. Remizova

3. Conclusions

The challenge in defining a recovery strategy is to avoid losing the history, traditions and symbols that form the collective memory of a community. Architectural objects and landscapes define the visual image of a city. The destruction of the urban landscape can change the perception of the area, creating a sense of disconnection from the past and a loss of a sense of belonging to a particular culture or community. New narratives and cultural symbols should enter into a dialogue with the old ones in a way that ensures the revitalization of the urban environment,

stimulating discussions about what is important for cultural identity and how the city can be preserved or reconstructed.

Thus, it should be noted that in the process of forming the authentic landscape of the city, both positive and negative changes occur, which should be investigated using such concepts as "architectural landscape", "historical memory", "trace", and "layering". They will allow the development of modern strategies for urban planning interventions in the historical city. Fixing the main structural features of the multilayered landscape will allow the preservation of valuable qualities and the elimination of negative errors, preventing the disappearance of bright artistic compositions of cultural heritage that have been created over the centuries.

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Zniszczenie architektonicznego krajobrazu miasta i jego pamięci (na przykładzie Charkowa)

STRESZCZENIE:

Na przykładzie miasta Charków w Ukrainie rozpatrzono ewolucję środowiska architektonicznego miasta historycznego oraz jego zniszczenie w wyniku działań militarnych. Wykazano, że w okresach kataklizmów społecznych zachodzą istotne zmiany w strukturze środowiska miejskiego oraz w języku architektonicznym, co znajduje odzwierciedlenie w wyglądzie budynków, zespołów urbanistycznych oraz krajobrazu jako całości. Do opisu tych procesów zaproponowano nowe pojęcia z zakresu teorii architektury, takie jak „krajobraz architektoniczny”, „pamięć kulturowa”, „ślady” oraz ich „nawarstwianie się”. Podkreślono, że w procesie kształtowania autentycznego krajobrazu miasta zachodzą zarówno zmiany pozytywne, jak i negatywne, które wymagają badań. Identyfikacja ich cech umożliwi opracowanie współczesnych strategii interwencji urbanistycznych w mieście historycznym. Utrwalenie głównych cech strukturalnych autentycznego, wielowarstwowego krajobrazu pozwoli zapobiec niszczeniu wyrazistych kompozycji artystycznych dziedzictwa kulturowego, tworzonych na przestrzeni wieków, oraz pomoże w opracowaniu nowoczesnych strategii interwencji urbanistycznych w mieście historycznym.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

ewolucja miasta; krajobraz architektoniczny; pamięć kulturowa; język architektoniczny; tożsamość miasta