



The (de)construction of urban identity – counter-image as symbolic capital

Ivana Podnar¹, Iva Kostešić², Feđa Vukić³

¹ Lecturer, School of Design, Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb, ipodnar@arhitekt.hr

² Research and teaching assistant, School of Design, Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb, ikostesic@arhitekt.hr

³ Full professor, School of Design, Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb, fvukic@arhitekt.hr

Abstract

The research that gave rise to the following text is part of the institutional research project at Zagreb's Faculty of Architecture entitled "Rebuilding Zagreb after 2020 Earthquake" with the sub-topic: „Earthquake (non)resistance and housing estate in Zagreb". One of the aims of this research is to analyse the resymbolization of Zagreb that took place after the earthquake. Images of sheer devastation and demolished buildings are viewed as counterimages of previous symbols with news media representation giving them new senses of the city's identity. We endeavour to reach the most damaged places and those that attracted more news media attention as images of the Zagreb earthquake to illuminate the underlying dynamics of urban symbolics construction and deconstruction and to discuss the roles of a wide range of actors involved in these processes. Residents made spontaneous and personal interventions with an aim to make their living space fit for humans. Collecting the visual data of these interventions brings into focus bottom-up actions, in other words, civil society activism as a robust mechanism and/or a corrective for identity politics coming from the top. The images of collapsed buildings will be regarded as symbolic capital and its impact on Zagreb's new identity cityscape will be analysed asking the question whether destruction without material reconstruction could also have an affirmative character. The aim is to investigate the correlation between Zagreb's symbols before and after the earthquake and to use this data to compile a list of new symbols as a new collective memory of the city. We are going to re-examine the notion – of an enduring architecture, of the continuity of the city's image, and of longevity of spontaneous interventions whose temporary nature becomes a lasting legacy. The outcome of this re-examination will open our minds to new interpretations of the city's timeless appeal. Is it possible to look at resilience not only as a building's constructive feature but also as a transfigured concept of our flexibility to accept demolition as an inevitable part of urban vitality?

Key words: Zagreb, counterimage, re-symbolization, city identity, urban iconography, earthquake

1 Introduction

The earthquake measuring 5.5 on the Richter scale that struck Zagreb on 22 March 2020 with an epicentre about 7 kilometres north of the city centre has led to devastating consequences. Especially hardest hit were buildings in the historic downtown that was predominantly constructed by the last quarter of the 19th century and was mostly defined by the mid-20th century. The immense scale of the catastrophe is evident in almost all parts of the Lower Town, where many residential buildings suffered significant structural damage, widespread collapse of brittle chimneys or retaining walls and partitions.

However, the city centre is facing a double deconstruction – the material structure of the city has been damaged with the most prominent landmarks stripped bare of their most conspicuous parts such as cathedral spires, façade gables and architectural decoration. At the same time mental imagery is shifting, changing the basic concept associated with the identity of the cityscape [1]. These symbolic representations are not pictures but they are inextricably linked to them with dual impact: a transfigured searing image of the city affects the symbolic values attached to it. The importance of images including the power attributed to them raises our dual awareness about the images: if we accept technocracy as the prevailing social order of Western civilization, being rational about it prevents us from indulging in animistic worship of the image. However, as we witnessed the 9/11 attacks in New York, images remain to be the subject of iconoclasm. Images are still the victims and the cause of conflicts, and even though we do not bow down to images of the city, they are more than pure matter. The images of Zagreb in the aftermath of the earthquake's devastation were a desperate cry for help, fostering solidarity, a sense of belonging, pride, love... The snapshots of the ruins with residents in shock standing in front of the buildings have become vital signs that live a life of their own independently of the photographer's will or the figures they represent. If we follow Barthes' theory of photography [2], the punctum is a detail that transcends the limits of human perception based on cultural conventions in dialogue with the emotional, the personal and the irrational... In a sea of images that have been broadcast and then scattered across virtual spaces at an incredible speed, new city landmarks have resurfaced that do not come as an upshot of planned identity construction of tourist branding and official visual site identification. They merely capture a moment taken by distinguished as well as unknown photographers without any previous agenda or a clear vision of their future fluctuation. Some of these photographs establish entirely new iconographic patterns while others are counterimages to previous images. The concept of the counterimage [3] is based on the idea that every image has its own past, present and future, that is to say an image from which it emerges, a present moment in which it exists and an opportunity to open up for the future. For example, the Cathedral spires photography features the image of their demolition as they give birth to a new image with reference to the counterimage whose potential is yet to be seen.

2 New Iconographic Patterns

An earthquake is a traumatic event that happens unexpectedly. We have no control over its actions. It has an intensely negative portent of things to come and can leave an indelible mark on an individual's life changing the image that a person has of the world and himself [4]. If we were to accept the proposition put forward in Mitchell's Image Theory that images have a life of their own [1], it only seems legitimate to investigate how images, in this case those of Zagreb, react to a traumatic event. In other words, how completely new identity systems crop up alongside already established ones [5] which bring into focus previously hidden faces of the city. Indeed, as part of the doctoral dissertation entitled "Urban Icons of Zagreb within the Period of the Former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Independent Republic of Croatia", a study on urban symbols was conducted according to the criteria of the frequency of their appearance on the covers of monographs and city guides, postcards and Internet portals, as well as a sociological study carried out involving 300 participants [6].

The results of these studies indicate that Ban Josip Jelačić Square and the Cathedral are the most prominent urban icons, followed by the Croatian National Theatre, St. Mark's Square and Nikola Šubić Zrinski Square. Immediately after the major earthquake that hit Zagreb on March 22, 2020, photos of a devastated city were posted on Internet portals and social media. According to the research, the most common leitmotif of the earthquake in the first 60 photographs that were published on browsers such as Google.hr and Google.com pointing to a high frequency of certain images that had not previously manifested as urban symbols at all. Along with the photo of the Cathedral, which is exemplified in ten different snapshots, there is a photograph that we consider to be epitomizing the Zagreb earthquake iconically: a building at the corner of Đoriđićeva and Petrinjska streets (Fig. 1) with a graffiti mural on a brick wall portraying a seashell by the well-known street artist Lonac. The top part of the façade was completely destroyed by the quake and reduced to rubble making the interior of the apartment visible. How did this image come to be so recognizable in a vast array of photographs? The corner itself does not have any notable features that would in other circumstances enable it to become a symbol. Moreover, its façade had already been dilapidated and neglected. It gained individual recognition only after the intervention of the street artist, but not the status of an urban icon as well.

The moment when the earthquake struck set off the image's deconstruction, which much like the image of destruction itself, reveals not just the full extent of the earthquake but also intimate lives of random people, turning us into voyeurs who invade their living space as we find ourselves peep into their privacy. The victims of the earthquake thus become actors on stage watched by the whole world, exposing scopophilic pleasure on the part of media audiences not only in ceaseless observation of general earthquake motifs. It is precisely this motif that in a bizarre twist brings voyeurism and empathy together into an unlikely alliance. The image of the house at the corner of

Petrinjska and Đorđićeva streets are a vital sign because it strikes the viewer with a poignant force demanding a reaction. It rapidly materializes the idea of mock splendour and misery that lurks behind the scenes of historic façades on the tourist routes of the Lower Town. Similar potential can be seen in the photograph of new mothers distressed in nightgowns evacuated from a maternity ward of a hospital in Petrova Street (Fig. 2). This one stands out in a plethora of other disturbing motifs (people wrapped in blankets on the street, brick debris scattered all over, crashed cars, crumbling rooftops and wall cracks...). With an equally gathered momentum, this image leaves the viewer with an intense feeling of discomfort and an urge to protect the mother and her newly born baby from the freezing cold but also from the stares of onlookers passing by. This image has become a prime example of how the system neglects the most vulnerable social groups.



Figure 1. Building at the corner of Đorđićeva and Petrinjska streets. Photo: Mehkek, G./Cropix



Figure 2. New mothers at Petrova Street hospital. Photo: Šuvar, R./Cropix

New iconographic patterns have been showcased in Mladen Ožič's book *Pukotine* ("Cracks") [7] and in the exhibitions hosted during the post-earthquake months: *The city that needs our love* was staged in September at the European Square, *Earthquake in Zagreb* in October at the Modulator Gallery. The Arts and Crafts Museum blogged the results of the photography competition on their website launching their online exhibition *Shaken MUO: From earthquake to earthquake 1880-2020*. These exhibitions represent the images of a shaken city: people wrapped in blankets gathered on squares, Lower and Upper Town streets strewn with bricks, collapsed roofs, toppled chimneys, firefighters and alpinists peeping through the holes of rubble, empty spaces, excavators, trucks, yellow and red tags that seal the fate of damaged buildings... In sum, these photos also possessed considerable cathartic power because confronting them could also serve as an expression of accepting the traumatic event as a collective experience of the city and its residents.

The images of resistance coming from below as a sign of civil rights activism and disobedience in the face of the current situation are the graffiti which through mediation not only on social media but also on the abovementioned exhibitions and publications, established as new iconographic patterns and recognized as a different power position. *Heads up* (Fig. 3), *Everything will be fine* - The mural that was painted before the earth-

quake gained a new meaning in the media photography. (Fig. 4), *We're short on bricklayers* (Fig. 5), a crocheted broken heart by the designer Ivona Martinčić embroidered along the cracks of a wall in Habledičeva Street (Fig. 6) show a different, witty, emotional capacity for identity politics which, especially under radical circumstances such as earthquakes, demonstrates the helplessness of politics from above.



Figure 3. *Heads up* ("Glavu gore"), Ožić, M



Figure 4. *Everything will be fine* ("Sve će biti u redu").
Photo: Tadić, D./Cropix



Figure 5. *We're short on bricklayers* ("Fali zidara"), Ožić, M.



Figure 6. A crocheted broken heart by the designer Ivona Martinčić embroidered along the cracks of a wall in Habledičeva Street. Photo: Todorov, M./Cropix

3 Counterimages

The transformative potential of images poses the question of their elasticity as well as of their perception. The willingness to accept the fluid nature of the image is more apparent in virtual reality, while the notion of the city implicitly includes identification with supreme symbols, which have not only been carved in stone, but they have also stood the test of time. Urban icons are those symbols that possess an added value and are generally accepted in the community as something that is preserved such as relics. Any intervention can be regarded as a threat to holiness. This challenge is faced by any kind of change, no matter if it is planned or spontaneous in a historical setting.

The greater the symbolic capital of a picture, the more its integrity is perceived as a primordial condition, that is, unchanging. The two prominent spires of Zagreb Cathedral have been confirmed as an indisputable urban symbol [6], which circulates both as a graphic and as a mental image not only of old Zagreb but also of a metropolis in its prime. Knocking down the top of the spire due to the quake is slightly reminiscent of one of the most significant iconoclastic images of modern times when the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center collapsed. This comparison is valid in the context of the notion of the counterimage where the image of the entire cathedral or skyscraper of the World Trade Center works as a highly symbolic image that incorporates the potential of another image, in this case an image of destruction, whose symbolic and identity value exert the same force as the image it originated from. In order for the counterimage to come to life as a new image, it requires mediation, or in other words representation that will undoubtedly give guidance to the way it is interpreted. The Cathedral tower, first the southern spire that tumbled during the tremor, followed by the northern spire whose demolition was planned due to disrupted stability (Fig. 7), thus become double symbols of the earthquake because they had been constructed 140 years before precisely because of the collapse of the Cathedral in a quake that struck their fate once again. In urban memory these towers were a sign of perpetuity, but these symbols demonstrate remarkable strength and resilience. Their destruction became a new sign, which was in turn defined by adding enormous crosses in place of the previous ends. Temporality with a potential for permanence?



Figure 7. The Cathedral towers. Photo: Markičević, N./Cropix

The pictures of the ruins of two churches, the one of St. Catharine in the Upper Town and the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Palmotićeva Street, do not share the same symbolic capital for several reasons: in the overall image of the city their presence was less evident than the cathedral and their destruction is not visible in public space but in the interior, so it can be experienced only through the mediation of the media. However, they can also be interpreted exactly as counterimages whose collapsed vaults, which

vividly evoke the celestial vault, communicated the image of trauma and became symbols of the damaged cultural heritage. The Mirogoj cemetery arcades, together with damaged tombs lend an exhibitionist feel to the counterimage of an important monument of 19th century Zagreb, laying bare what should have remained hidden forever. Apart from the Cathedral, the most prominent urban icon of Zagreb is Ban Jelačić Square whose startling transformation occurred with the general lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic that cut off the lifeblood from the hustle and bustle of the city. This culminated in huge damage to the façades that used to make the image of the Square so recognizable. The stone platforms of the Square are sprawling empty, but then they get strewn with bricks, gables, towers... Next, soldiers and firefighters come and clean them up... (Fig. 8). These counterimages have become new postcards (the frequency of the Square motif is ranked fourth on Google.com and Google.hr as an earthquake topic). Some of the mentioned images are testaments to a temporary condition, but many of them will remain as new long-lasting symbols of fragmented façades whose restoration will take decades.

In the immediate vicinity there is an image of the Dolac Market (Fig. 9) – instead of people selling and buying local foodstuffs on the stalls, we see vast emptiness and then bricks, police and tents... Counterimages in this case as a transitory condition that give a dystopian vision.



Figure 8. Ban Jelačić Square. Ožić, M.



Figure 9. Dolac Market. Ožić, M.

4 Post-Earthquake Images of Zagreb

The vitality of an image implies the tenacity of survival not only through transformations of its structure. It also implies the viewer's ability to recognize its meaning and significance. Can this be understood as elasticity, resistance of urban images that require our flexibility in accepting new concepts, including the concept of destruction physical and mental, as an indispensable element of urban living? Media photography kept an appropriate track of the conditions in Zagreb for a month, three months, six months, ten months after the earthquake and in the midst of the scarcity of other contents (apart

from the Covid-19 pandemic) in the local and global context, images that make up not only our urban environment now through the screens they are entering our living rooms, representing a condition of temporality: scaffoldings, tarpaulins, nylon improvisations, metal fences, police tapes, wooden structures of safe corridors... (Fig. 10, 11).



Figure 10. Gundulićeva Street, Kostešić, I. F



Figure 11. Žerjavićeva Street, Kostešić, I.

Although these images represent an indispensable experience in a walk through the Lower and Upper Town as the most representative and for its identity most significant part of the city, the official communication channels of the Zagreb Tourist Board, Lonely Planet, TripAdvisor display only images of the city before 22 March 2020 – as if the earthquake had not happened. In spite of some expert analyses that continue to be communicated to the public, which undoubtedly conjure up the protracted nature of the reconstruction process in terms of 10 years or more, a new current face of the city in the sense of identity acceptance has not been rooted yet. This procedure could be variously interpreted ranging from resistance to the acceptance of destruction as a new reality with a long-lasting character to the inertia of structures in adopting strategies that would represent images of Zagreb after the earthquake.

5 Conclusion

The earthquake that struck on 22 March 2020 revealed one of the crucial problems in central Zagreb, which is inadequate maintenance of construction funds in correlation to the seismic characteristics of the soil. This problem arose as a consequence of a long-standing situation in which a combination of several adverse components led to devastation. These elements include unresolved (co-)ownership relations, economic degradation of the population, inappropriate interventions in the interior and exterior of buildings and, last but not least important, long-term strategies of the city administration towards the problem of the construction fund maintenance. The image of central Zagreb is far from something pleasant, but this is a stark reality. If new iconographic patterns and counterimages were incorporated into the complex, locally specific visual narrative, not only in media images, but also in a clear campaign of a new type of com-

munication between the city and external publicities, putting a different perspective on one's own city, potentially facilitating acceptance of the condition not only in the short run but also in the long run, turning previously unfeasible plans into feasible endeavours of a new life and not just about the survival of the city and its residents. Destruction also possesses an enormous symbolic capital that can ultimately be used as a trigger for new development, both in a therapeutic and entrepreneurial sense.

References

- [1] Mitchell, W. J. T. (2005): *What do Pictures Want*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, USA.
- [2] Barthes, R. (1981): *Camera Lucida*, 1st American edition ed., New York: Hill & Wang, USA.
- [3] Mitchell, W. J. T. (1986): *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, USA.
- [4] Profaca, B., Arambašić, L. (2009): Traumatski događaji i trauma kod djece i mladih, *Klinička psihologija*, 2 (1-2), 53-73.
- [5] Podnar, I., Vukić, F. (2010): An Identity Map of Modern Zagreb, *Acta Turistica Nova*, 4 (2), 151-174, 2010.
- [6] Podnar, I., Simboli Zagreba, [Online]. Available: <https://simbolizagreba.wordpress.com/2013/02/13/simboli-cijelog-zagreba/>. [Accessed 20 January 2021].
- [7] Ožić, M. (2020): *Pukotine*, Virtual, Croatia.