

Theming Urban Spaces in Post-Socialist Cities

1. Introduction – the concept of theming

The concept of theming public urban spaces can be defined in many different ways. This stems from the variety of situations in which Polish, Western European, and North American cities find themselves as well as the multidimensionality of the phenomenon itself. This concept can refer strictly to architectural as well as social and cultural or economic issues, and finally to the theory of historic preservation

Regardless of different interpretations of the concept of theming public spaces, it should be understood as **the conscious and intentional application in a given space of architectural forms from another era or civilization that may be related to creating an urban spectacle for the masses**. Theming space is thus related to building public space as a **particular type of urban scenery** and, in some instances, **to introduce a particular narrative (nearly literary) using architectural means in order to interest viewers and attract their attention**.

Within architectural and urban planning categories, theming (in the literal meaning of the preceding definition) is often confused with eclecticism (characteristic of the nineteenth century), regionalism (contemporarily understood as the conscious good of continuing to employ the traditional forms typical of a given region), or with postmodern architectural forms. This occurs when architectural concepts characteristic of these types of building are often employed in the creation of themed space. At the same time, the creation of a formal costume of urban scenery for a given space can only be considered as a tool of theming.

Equally as often, classicizing urban forms and the accompanying creation of detailed urban planning regulations to control the shape of urban spaces are categorized as theming. It cannot be denied that many contemporary architectural and urban planning concepts employ certain forms of stylization. This also refers to applying the “old style” to rebuild old town complexes devastated during WWII despite the fact that this is not connected to creating an urban spectacle.

This is also why it is necessary to differentiate between **themed spaces *sensu stricto***, which contain all of the aspects of the definition, from **stylized spaces**, which do not meet the requirement of creating an urban spectacle or conveying a spatial narrative. It is possible to identify a third type of themed space based on just one of the aspects of theming presented in the definition, namely the criterion of creating an urban spectacle that targets a mass audience. Such spaces are thus devoid of attempts at architectural stylization and are created using the language of contemporary architecture. These can be referred to as **animated spaces** that are enlivened by the appropriate arrangement of social behavior without any attempt to build specific urban scenery. It does seem that the creation of such complexes refers more significantly to the problematics of shaping contemporary behavior and social needs than to urban planning or architecture. This is also why this type of themed space is not discussed in the current work.

Theming is a concept that far exceeds the range of interests of either architecture or urban planning; it is a cultural phenomenon typical of the postmodern epoch. Contemporary people are continuously tempted with opportunities to purchase various types of goods, including stylized ones ranging from dining in restaurants that look like they were transplanted directly from far corners of the world to outfitting one’s living space in a particular “spirit”. This is why the issue of theming, and some of its aspects in particular, is of interest not only to architects and urban planners but also to cultural historians, sociologists, and geographers.

Theming (which is also referred to as Disneylandization) has come to be viewed as the manifestation of kitsch or bad taste which should be treated with condescension as something undeserving of reflection or significant interest. Only a very few postmodernist designers have incorporated theming as a foundation for their design work, which has provoked much discussion and argument. At the same time, the tendency to employ wide ranging stylization is growing. This can sometimes lead to the unintentional theming of a space and consequently to the disruption of authenticity. Theming space is thus becoming more and more common and can be seen encroaching on the closed interiors of a variety of spaces and shopping-entertainment centers in the public spaces of cities. Simultaneously, the nature of public space is being redefined and is evolving along with social and cultural changes, of which theming is just one example.

In the discussion of the phenomenon of theming public space, the architectural context is particularly significant since it is mainly through the façades of individual buildings and the architectural urban interiors created by them that the cityscape is perceived. Of equal importance is identifying the energy that fuels the development of the contemporary city and impacts its architecture. Such factors include globalization, the changing role of the public sector, as well as the changing criteria of choice, including those connected to lifestyle [Marcuse, van Kempen, 2000]. The analysis of such phenomena is one of the keys to understanding the phenomenon of theming as not just a by-product of contemporary pop culture but rather a natural consequence of the evolution of contemporary consumer culture and its materialization in the spaces of cities of the postmodern epoch.

The problem of theming can refer to architecture (in which case we can speak of themed architecture) as well as to urban planning since the foremost issues are the creation and transformation of contemporary public urban space. Currently, these issues are of interest to many researchers. They emphasize unanimously that the character of public space is impacted enormously by the architecture and utilization of the buildings that form the walls of squares or streets as well as the type of community that utilizes the space itself and the surrounding buildings that create it. Thus, the character of public space is largely defined not only by the “positive” (the surrounding buildings and structures that create the space) but also by the “negatives” (the way in which space is managed).

Thus, theming public space means the connection between its management (both “positive” and “negative”) and a defined “theme” and the use of elements of spectacle in the animation of this space. The “theme” could be ancient Rome, an existing old Tuscan village, or a story told in the pages of a novel. The “theme” can also be futuristic and drawn from literary fantasy, scientific predictions, or prophecies [Lorens, 2004].

The phenomenon of using a particular “theme” in the construction or reconstruction of a given public space gives rise to a certain dilemma: when are we dealing with the theming of a space and when are we simply dealing with its creation? The answer to this question should come from a set of criteria based on the characteristics of the authenticity of a given urban space. Thus, the question of theming a particular space is fundamentally a question of its authenticity (or rather its lack thereof). An authentic public space is one that was created in a specific historic period and in an architectural style (both “positive” and “negative”) characteristic to the period in which it was built, or else the creative rebuilding of historic forms that have clearly been given traits characteristic of the epoch in which they were originally created. Thus, spaces considered to be authentic include the Krakow Market Square, ul. Świętojańska in Gdynia with its modernist origins, as well as the socialist realism Constitution Square in Warsaw. Other contemporary, postmodern creations, although often stylized, are also considered to be authentic provided they are not recreations of previously destroyed buildings or imitations of other urban structures. Spaces that have been shaped through subsequent layers and transformations are also considered to be authentic despite

the incongruity of the various elements that comprise the space as they are products of their own epochs.

However, themed spaces are elements of the city structure that, although lacking historical ties, attempt to imitate bygone eras or far away places and relate to history or variations of it. Their exploitation is also specially animated. Thus, this is a concept in which the architectural form and the manner of exploitation do not fulfill the criteria of “uniformity of the time and place of creation”. Independently of the reasons leading to the decision to impart a given space with a given character, whether it is to rebuild fragments of an authentic structure destroyed by some cataclysm or it is to consciously and intentionally give a space a certain style in order to maximize the profits of an undertaking, such spaces must be considered to be unauthentic (and as such as stylized or, in extreme cases, themed.)

The theming and stylization of space can also refer to a variety of urban complexes that are rebuilt from the ruins of war or in buildings that are based loosely on the original structures of such regions. Currently, however, we mostly see manifestations of these in newly designed spatial complexes whose architecture is based on originals that are temporally and spatially distant from the time and place in which they were created. These include complexes built from scratch such as amusement parks or shopping centers as well as existing structures that are rebuilt. In such cases there is no question of any justification from the point of view of historic preservation or the desire to return destroyed urban structures to their original state; these are “theme parks” built from scratch whose principle function is to generate profits for developers.

2. Reasons for theming urban public spaces

Why theming? Why create illusions and images of non-existent realities, or imitations of bygone eras? The answer appears to be simple: **the contemporary, modern day is often unable to offer anything that competes with the safer, more attractive public space of its traditional definition** [Lorens, 2005a]. The degree to which culture is being privatized and the inability of authentic spaces and forms to compete are also significant factors that did not exist in previous epochs. This is why attempts are made to create substitutes or illusions of traditional space. Once the decision to take this step is made, why not go even farther and create fantasies and illusions of reality? Spaces such as these are built primarily by private entertainment or retail corporations. Since retailing or spending free time has become either unsafe or unattractive within the confines of traditional public space, a substitute is created. Although, this results in **the commercialization of architectural and urban planning forms**, and theming stems from the attempt to link designed forms directly to the economic results of department stores, theme parks, and the corporations building new housing developments.

The phenomenon of theming urban public spaces emerges from a wide variety of social and economic changes, among which globalization must be mentioned. These have a significant impact on the evolution of the structure of contemporary cities and alter them to meet the needs of the global economy. Another group of factors that contribute to the development of themed spaces are the changes in recent decades in architectural and urban planning theory and the development of the post-modern style. This process is related to much deeper cultural changes, such as the rapid growth of many forms of popular culture and the phenomenon known as MacDonalidization.

In his book entitled *Post-Modernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Frederick Jameson argues that postmodernism is related to the privatization of culture in the post-industrial capitalist era. Culture has thus become just one of many products [Mortensen, 1996]. A similar process applies to space and the way it is shaped. One effect of this process has been the creation in recent decades of new fashions and customs. These include

spending time at large shopping centers, shopping in renovated downtown areas, or even revamping local identity through the staging of a variety of shows or cultural-entertainment events. The beginnings of this process can be traced to the 1960s when new or refurbished urban shopping centers were copied by suburban malls. They created safe spaces that were devoid of either unpleasant or unpredictable factors, and the architecture corresponded to a given visual motif employed either in part of or throughout the complex. Since this time, the most desirable world of urban culture is no longer that of the bourgeoisie; instead, urban consumer culture has become entertainment aimed at attracting a mobile consumer public. This process has led to important changes in the way cities and their public spaces function; they have become commercialized and their traditional role as a forum for the exchange of ideas or opinions and a place to confront lifestyles has been destroyed [Zukin, 1995]. It has been observed, however, that people want to spend time in traditional public spaces, albeit, they do search for the most attractive one. Thus, themes are being sought; stories whose narratives will be able to attract customers bored with the monotony of look-alike shopping centers.

Unfortunately, the creation of attractive contemporary public space has proven to be a task that is costly and difficult for municipal authorities to realize. This is why, in many instances, it has been taken over by private corporations who seize the opportunity to realize their own goals. Among other factors, the interest of the private sector stems from the recognition that spending time in traditional urban spaces is an attractive prospect. This is particularly true of the idealized contemporary equivalent from which all negative aspects of the multi-functional street have been removed (such as a low level of safety) and to which vivid entertainments have been added to increase attractiveness, including street spectacles, spending time in a colorful crowd, and enjoying the "city life". The attractiveness of these spaces can be linked directly to profits from sales and the lease of retail and service space, and in extreme cases, from the sale of entrance tickets to these spaces.

One of the challenges currently facing urban planners, politicians, and developers is to provide a universal feeling of safety for people spending time in public spaces. In urban planning, this problem has appeared relatively recently as the traditional ties that bound local communities have frayed leading to increasing levels of spatial oppressiveness. However, instead of taking steps to improve this situation and to solve problems, municipal authorities often relinquish the responsibility of ensuring safe shopping and entertainment environments to commercial companies interested in developing only one type of space. As a result, city residents are spending increasingly larger amounts of time in commercial environments, which draws them into a life based on consumption [Ritzer, 2003].

Today's commercial spaces are no longer just places where retail exchanges occur, they have become a source of entertainment. Residents of cities no longer limit themselves to the passive consumption of what they are offered; they want to be entertained actively in themed spaces, which, in turn, compete for customers. As the theming process develops, new city spaces are created that are concentrated and systemized and provide a mental escape. They are characterized by such traits as high levels of interactivity, the direct reference to a given esthetic, theatricality, multi-sensoriality (as they attempt to reach all of the human senses) and continuous variety (as they are constantly monitored and changed to reflect the results of studies and the behavior and reaction of the public). In such spaces, the impact of the imagination and fantasy of the designer - the space's creator - on the choices made by the customers is the foundation for the economic success that is expressed through profits.

The privatization of culture, however, is not a new phenomenon; its origins date back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. According to Amin and Thrift, what *is* new is the spatial scale and the systemization of the body of knowledge which permits producing a consistent product (including space) that meets the demands of the customer. This is why theming not only refers to space as an active ingredient of the product but also to the creation of a script

that enlivens it and contributes to a particularly unique experience. The most vivid example of this is the amusement park, which is becoming an important component of urban entertainment [Amin, Thrift, 2002].

Urban spaces are being subjected to commercialization, which stems from their perception as a consumer good. Consequently, traditional urban spaces are disappearing and being replaced by new ones with altered forms and functions. This is seen as the loss of something significant, and the reaction is the birth of a need to create new urban spaces. This is expressed according to the specific requirements of a given product. Thus, the market for urban spaces develops and along with it the "industry of place". These spaces are described as placeless places (places that are not rooted in any place). Such non-places are spaces that visually reproduce (imitate) cityscapes of either real or invented cities. They are a physical, three-dimensional urban stage set. The most significant raw material for building these imagined places are images of existing real cities and their important buildings, constructions, streets, and squares. Entire city complexes are even imitated. A new industry has also sprung up; known as Cultural Mining, a type of cultural archeology, it seeks out spectacular details, but above all urban images. The resulting products are non-cities that are dressed up as cities. Although these cities do appear physically, they remain independent of their physical location. They are the depiction of the thesis that in the modern world everything is everywhere simultaneously. They are socio-spaces that are the precursors of a new type of community, one that is primarily disposed to receiving impressions, sensations, or experience. Descriptions of these transformations in contemporary society, from industrial era society that was guided by common sense to post-industrial society that is dominated by emotion and experiencing events en masse, can be found in a variety of sociological works. The authors of these works emphasize the growing importance of such factors as urban atmosphere, aura, and other elements that impact the senses. No longer is Ford functionality, effectivity, productivity, or objectivity sufficient. The impetus behind the blurring of the borders between everyday life and art and the tendency towards superficiality, stageability, and the disappearance of the original can be found in the shift from a "rational" to an "emotional" way of thinking. Today, anything that may represent some value is engaged in the process of creating a spectacle and ensuring entertainment. People have even begun to employ the services of special agencies that propose a certain lifestyle or at least a vacation (lifestyle agencies) in painstakingly chosen and especially arranged interiors. Traditional ways of utilizing urban spaces are replaced by an atmosphere of consumption in which a special type of spectacle is created. This show, however, is not played out on a theater stage, but becomes a natural element of the idealized lifestyle played out in an urban space. This spectacle creates a specific mix of chosen elements from the traditional functions of the street and embodies the characteristics of citytainment [Hassenpflug, 2003]. The consumption of such themed urban and rural spaces (this process is also noted in rural areas) is becoming a basic need for all those who live in anonymous, uniform urban-rural spaces. Thus, there is a direct relationship between the practice of staging spatial images and the lack of atmosphere in our so-called cities, which have been transformed into machines for business with a sprawling residential structure, enclaves of social welfare housing, and a patchwork of the fragments of traditional urban fabric [Hassenpflug, 2003].

This growing interest in the consumption of places and experiences (including participation in interesting cultural events, e.g., different types of short-term events) is one of the consequences of prosperity and the expansion of the middle classes in countries with high levels of economic development. This dominating class has influenced the appearance of at least two trends in the creation of urban space: the first is the conscious consumption of "cultural" experiences and the second is the conscious avoidance of confrontation with so-called alternative or "foreign" city life. The link between these two mutually conditional trends appears to be especially significant with regards to public space. The trends impact the production of increasingly inventive "experiences" and events. This is in the interest of the

municipal authorities who try to relegate any of the negative aspects of city life to the margins of society [Hołub, 2002]. In order to create a variety of spectacles it is very helpful to have different types of implosions, especially those which are related to time and space [Ritzer, 2001].

These phenomena are also linked to the disappearance of many of the authentic cultural values of western civilization, especially with regard to architectural culture. Many contemporary architectural critics, such as Diane Ghirardo, maintain simply that the contemporary architectural culture of the United States and Western Europe is suffering a serious crisis, and that one of the causes can be found in the elements of commercial mega-projects as well as the “Disney vision of the systematic commercialization of reality”, which is of an identical character [Ghirardo, 1999].

Thus, we are not only faced with the development of the phenomenon of the commercialization of space but also with the disappearance of authentic values and architectural culture. Naturally, this leads to the creation of substitutes that compensate for the decline in the authenticity of urban spaces through the creation of historic narrative and the privatization of the cityscape [Zukin, 1995]. This is manifested in the process of theming, the aim of which is to ensure that all aspects of a given consumption space are associated with a defined motif. This aim is the natural expansion of the idea of simulating authentic urban spaces. Although the creation of a totally new simulation is an extreme case, simulation alters (at least to some degree) the majority of “authentic” tourist attractions. What leads to such transformations is the fact that “real” places are no longer spectacular enough to attract tourists and their money. However, the most important reason for creating simulations, which is transforming “real” phenomena into imitations, is that they can be more entertaining than their authentic counterparts, thus they are more attractive to consumers, including tourists. Their creation and development is linked inseparably to the development of the modern mass media such as television or the cinema [Ritzer, 2001]. A good illustration of this thesis was formulated by Morris Lapidus:

*“...People are seeking illusion. They don't want to face the real world. However, my question is this – where can the world of illusion be found? Where are public tastes formulated? In the schools? In museums? Perhaps during trips to Europe? No. There's only one place – the cinema. People go to the movies. And to hell with all the rest...”*¹

3. Importance of the issues to the post-socialist cities

Theming public space (in reference to the preceding definition) is not yet a common phenomenon in Polish cities although stylization is seen increasingly often. This also regards the negatives of public space. The precursors of theming are rather seen in the interior design of restaurants or the appearance of suburban shopping centers whose interiors are based on a particular theme, and even the creation of pseudo-public space principally in the way large shopping complexes are organized.

However, from the examples we can observe in the cities of Western Europe or North America, the development of this type of urban space awaits us in the future. Of particular interest are examples from across the ocean where public spaces are dominated by a given motif, or theme, and a narrative is communicated by them. The phenomenon that guides the creation and development of new forms of public space, or themed space, can be best followed in the evolution of these cities over the past half century. In the American city, or rather in fragments of it that are dominated by the themed space phenomenon, the viewer not only participates in public life in a space that is traditionally dedicated to this but also in a

¹ Cited in: Venturi R, Brown D.S., Izenour S (eds.), 1997, *Learning from Las Vegas*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

characteristic spectacle designed to encourage viewers to remain in the space for as long as possible. This is not done, however, in consideration of the quality of public space, the development of social ties, or participation in community life; the aim of this is to attract clients ready to spend money [Lorens, 2005b].

4. Typology of themed spaces

As described in the preceding chapters, the concept of theming can be applied literally to creation of the entirely “new worlds”. This refers to commercial and entertainment complexes that are inaccessible to the outsider as well as to entire micro-communities. An extreme example of this is the concept of *New Utopia* – a model community and a new nation living in an artificially created world on a man-made Caribbean island. The laws of this place are developed by the interested parties, and the architecture is a collection of forms from different regions of the world [Steller, 2000]. This concept, which will likely remain in the planning stages, is appealing enough that projects of a similar nature can be found, for example, in the Persian Gulf region, where entire towns are being created in a chosen style and offer a specific “product” to those who can afford it.

The concept of theming urban spaces is not only a consequence of cultural and economic change. It also stems from combining various urban planning traditions which influence the creation of a new paradigm for building cities. This paradigm encompasses the visual and artistic approach to shaping space (which concentrates on visual and esthetic quality), a community understanding of the processes that shape space (based on determining the ways space is shaped and used by the community), and the tradition of “creating places” (something that has been developing over the past two decades and has established the function of design as the means to create “places for people”) [Carmona, Heath, Oc, Tiesdell, 2003].

The analyses of a variety of examples can be used to formulate a typology of themed spaces. This can only be accomplished if, during the definition phase, it is recognized that space can be categorized into that which is themed *sensu stricto* and that which is stylized. This can be done through the classification of numerous, varied elements such as the size of the group (at this stage it merits taking into consideration whether we are dealing with one closed building, a group of different buildings, or even a wholly separate town), the type of theme applied (*e.g.*, the imitation of spatially and temporally distant history, references to fantastic motifs, an imitation of the traditional urban fabric), or the relationship between theme and function (*e.g.*, either theme is secondary to function or it is the driving force behind the complex whose function is secondary). It is also possible to segregate complexes into those which were themed at the design stage (at which point we can speak of theming as being integral with the initial architectural concept) and those which existed previously that were only later rebuilt in the spirit of theming (thus “re-themed”). The functional criteria can also become significant, *i.e.*, the way in which a designed complex will be exploited (this refers to retail and entertainment complexes as well as those which fulfill a primarily residential function).

Taking into consideration the preceding criteria, the following five basic types of themed space were identified based on the analyses of outstanding groups of themed spaces:

- a) within themed spaces *sensu stricto* (meeting all of the requirements of the definition, thus referring to consciously and intentionally shaping space that is culturally or temporally alien to the period in which it is built and which is related to the creation of an urban spectacle as well as to conduct a narrative that will pique the interest and attract the attention of the viewer);
- **historic groups and complexes** - revitalized and adapted to the needs of new functions, including so-called historic parks (theses are often “re-themed” and the

- approval of a given project is related strictly with the approved program for exploitation);
- **contemporary commercial complexes – retail and entertainment**, created “from scratch”, both as suburban “regional centers” and casino complexes, with lay-outs located within the framework of the existing urban structure (themed at the design stage, although the designated theme does not impact function);
 - **theme park complexes** are created from scratch mainly as tourist attractions and for entertainment, they are subordinate to a chosen theme (also themed at the design stage, and the type of design chosen is of little consequence to the creation of the functional program);
- b) those included in the group of stylized spaces (thus not meeting the requirements for the creation of urban spectacle or of conducting a narrative within the space):
- **new urban structures built on the pattern of historic ones** (a significant share of which are residential buildings), planned based on defined “guiding motifs” that are already built into the urban principles visible in its creation (theming is evident at the design stage, and the chosen theme is usually subordinate to the functional program);
 - **rebuilding historic groups**, which is an attempt to revitalize historic spatial patterns that were destroyed by war (groups that are “re-themed” during their rebuilding and the theme type is subordinate to the functional program).

The division into themed spaces *sensu stricto* and stylized spaces made at the beginning of this chapter stems directly from the interpretation of the definition of themed spaces. In order to draw synthesized conclusions, however, it is necessary to identify the similarities and differences between the various types.

The first group refers to the relationship of the theming process to the design process. There are two key issues here; **to what extent is theming an integral element of the design process of a given concept** and **whether there is a link between the type of theme employed and the functional program of a given complex**. As discussed earlier with respect to the integrality of theming and the design process, there are two fundamental approaches: initial theming (when a complex is designed from the beginning with a given theme) and re-theming (when an existing complex is rebuilt according to a chosen theme). There are also two scenarios with regard to the relationship between the choice of theme and the functional program of a complex: the type of theme is strictly connected to the functional program or no such connection is noted (which means that nearly any theme could be employed). Comparison of those is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Relationship between themed space types and the criteria for their choice

<i>Themed space type</i>	Integrity of theming and the design process	Relationship between the theme and the functional program
a) themed space <i>sensu stricto</i>		
- historical groups and complexes	re-themed	strictly connected to functional program
- contemporary commercial complexes: retail and entertainment	integral part of design process	not strictly related to functional program
- theme park complexes	integral part of design process	not strictly related to functional program
b) stylized space		
- new urban structures built on historic patterns	integral part of design process	strictly connected to functional program
- rebuilt historic groups	re-themed	strictly connected to functional program

The next significant group of issues pertains to **identity** and **authenticity**. Here the discussion focuses on particular groups of examples and the impact theming has on both the identity and authenticity of place with regard to a given concept as well as to the city as a whole. There are examples in which theming regenerates (or even creates) the identity or authenticity of a place or an entire city, reinforces its existing characteristics, has no impact, decreases existing values or even destroys them. Considerations on this topic with regard to particular types of themed space are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Impact of theming on the identity of place and city

<i>Themed space type</i>	Impact of theming on the identity of place	Impact of theming on the identity of city
a) themed space <i>sensu stricto</i>		
- historical groups and complexes	reinforces	reinforces
- contemporary commercial complexes: retail and entertainment	creates	changes / reinforces
- theme park complexes	creates	creates / reinforces
b) stylized space		
- new urban structures built on historic patterns	creates	creates / reinforces
- rebuilt historic groups	regenerates	reinforces

Table 3. Impact of themed space on the authenticity of place and city

<i>Themed space type</i>	Impact of theming on the authenticity of place	Impact of theming on the authenticity of city
a) themed space <i>sensu stricto</i>		
- historical groups and complexes	threatens	threatens
- contemporary commercial complexes: retail and entertainment	no impact	no impact
- theme park complexes	no impact	no impact
b) stylized space		
- new urban structures built on historic patterns	no impact	threatens
- rebuilt historic groups	threatens	threatens

The analysis of the examples discussed in this chapter indicates that the tendency to theme urban public spaces has been indelibly etched into the framework of contemporary culture. However, the examples discussed also demonstrate that the topic of the “traditional city” is often employed in the creation of themed spaces, and, above all, designers endeavor to copy widely accepted solutions used in urban public spaces. Thus, regardless of our dependence on the automobile and our exodus to safe houses in the suburbs, we seek an escape to the world of the city, and since, in many cases, we cannot have the original, we content ourselves with substitutes.

As the discussion shows, the course of theming public spaces in Europe has a slightly different genesis than that observed in the USA. The phenomenon of the decaying traditional town center has not been as pronounced in European cities. Urban planning principles were also different, and the public sector played a significantly larger role in generating urban development. It can even be said that, while development in the USA was fueled by private capital, in Europe the key role was played by a variety of public institutions – local and national governments and many different public agencies and corporations. These differences were also reflected in the shape of public space. In Europe, there is not such a strong tendency to seek “intensified reality” since European cities, which usually possess well

formed and preserved historic centers, can offer the real authentic quality of traditional urban spaces.

Despite this, the traditional role of urban planning changed in the 1980s. Its main function until that time, which had been to regulate processes of spatial development, was shifted to stimulating growth, including generating new places of employment [Hall, 1996]. Thus, the planning aims became similar to those of the USA in the early 1970s. Simultaneously, the private sector gained a voice from the economic liberalization of the 1980s and became partner on equal footing with the public sector. Europeans and urban planners have noted the irrefutable success some North American cities have attained in revitalizing the traditional urban fabric through its commercialization.

In the case of Poland, these changes began to appear just a few years ago, and urban planning is still playing its traditional role. However, the position of state and local governments in steering investment processes is relatively weak and might be likened to the situation that existed two decades ago in the USA. If the current trend is maintained, one possible scenario would be development along American lines and a repetition of errors that originated across the ocean. It seems, thus, that the development of themed spaces is still a thing of the future in Poland, and this process will be stimulated by:

- the commercialization of space as a more generalized process;
- the currently noted withdrawal of the public sector from maintaining the quality of public space;
- the increasing difficulty of maintaining public safety;
- the escalating battle for customers being fought by developers and owners of various shopping and entertainment complexes.

Finally, regardless of the various characteristics of a given type of themed space, in all of them we encounter diverse interpretations of **city squares and shopping streets**. For many designers, developers, clients, and tenants, these are the archetypical spaces of the traditional city. A good example of this tendency is the widespread belief that the thinking of American architects is dominated by the idea of the Italian piazza – a public space, a square that is ideally suited in scale to the needs of the pedestrian [Venturi, Brown, Izenour, 1997]. This tendency is visible in all known cases regardless of the theme in question or the type of the group's spatial organization. Interestingly, this tendency is based on the models of European squares and city streets that were shaped historically. Unfortunately, however, the crisis of the European city has prompted a departure from this pattern in contemporary realizations, and in European cities, too, we are beginning to feel the effects of de-urbanization, which promotes the development of alternative methods of creating public space [Bodenschatz, 2003].

5. Consequences of theming public spaces – issues in identity and authenticity

One question worth posing is whether theming public space is an unfavorable, positive, or neutral phenomenon for the identity and authenticity of the city. The answer to this is not unequivocal and depends on the point of reference.

With respect to public space itself, theming presents many threats that result primarily from the falsification of authenticity. Theming values the traditional role of the street as a public space in the fullest meaning of the term, but it overestimates its romantic character and new structures lend a “pseudohistorical” character due to their commercial aspects. Thus, theming can be seen as leading to the violation of the historically shaped identity of the city. It is often precisely with this aim that various themed spaces are designed and realized. Concurrently, theming instills urban spaces with a new identity, even if this “newness” relies on “ageing”. The new identity is often indeed significantly more distinct than the original, extant identity, which results, above all, from the redrawing of architectural forms during the

process of theming. This new identity is sometimes artificially reinforced, including through the animation of the urban spectacle.

Theming also poses a distinct and perceptible danger to the authenticity of the city structure, which can be described as a disruption of the feeling of unity between time and place. Space and structures described as themed create the impression of spatial hyperreality, in the form of new, artificial worlds that imitate imperfect originals. This idealized impression of the “authentic, sometimes historic” city appears to be close to the ideal. If we consider the context of its creation, however, it is simultaneously far from the ideal, as far as this is justified by the desire to satisfy the needs of a wide audience comprised of customers seeking new experiences.

Although at first glance theming is primarily concerned with aesthetic questions, it does indeed lead to a counterfeit cityscape; this, in turn, can distort the evaluation of it by less expert viewers [Hannigan, 1998]. Theming also disrupts viewers’ preconceived models and stereotypes concerning the perception of surroundings. Aleksander Wallis introduced these concepts, linking models of permanent spatial forms derived from the domination of a specific function or by a social value of a bygone epoch (for example, railway station, city hall, church) and stereotypes, which are a set of applied and aesthetic criteria for the current evaluation of space (and which are unstable and subject to various trends). Wallis also introduces the concept of the archetype—a model of the original—which includes permanent and common cultural elements that are accepted somewhat unreflexively at the subconscious level [Jałowicki, Szczepański, 2002]. Based on the stereotype and archetype models, theming at once leads to the falsification of their significance in the imagination of the viewer as it disturbs the most basic of elements that determine the perception of surroundings.

However, if we evaluate the role of theming within the context of a city’s competitive position on the urban center market vying for customers, investment, or tourists, it often occurs to be the most effective and cheapest method for the city to achieve its desired market position. A single, large project is often sufficient. The alternative methods available for building the competitive market position of a city, which include such tactics as supporting cultural development, offering good investment opportunities, or providing tax benefits, are often very expensive and effective only in the long term. Thus, theming is a kind of short cut, or advertising ploy, that leads to experiencing spatial “hyperreality”. Obviously, this is done in hopes of the advantageous promotion of the image of a city as an exceptional place on Earth.

Despite all of the arguments regarding the significance of theming for building the competitive position of a city, this phenomenon poses more threats than it delivers benefits. The primary advantages are the competitive position of the city, economic influence, and the attractiveness of investing. The threats include the previously mentioned loss of authenticity and a reformulation of identity. Therefore, theming the space of a city improves the chances of a city or its districts attaining economic success at the cost of losing the authenticity of their structures and original identity.

Another phenomenon linked to theming, namely gentrification, is also worth mentioning at this juncture. This process, similarly to that of theming, has a similar foundation based on a utopian image of the street, which is considered to be the near perfect incarnation of urban space. The variety and color of the lively downtown street is the antithesis of the sterile, homogeneity of the suburbs. Concurrently, the process of gentrification is the negation of traditional ways of forging space and as it strives to create a “safe space” it annihilates anonymity, thus killing “publicness”.

Theming space also has an architectural dimension that is linked to the rejection of the modernist approach to forms. Postmodernist architects such as Venturi maintain that there is “no harm in giving people what they want”. They also argue that the spaces created in Las Vegas or those by the Disney Corporation are “significantly closer to what people expect than any of the propositions of the great architects”. At the same time, the world of Disney, the greatest “theme park” incarnation of all, is considered to be the “ideal contemporary city” as it combines perfection of form with entertainment and commerce at its best [Harbinson, 2001].

The postmodernist urban structure is instead based on the rejection of the modernist idea of creating rational, large-scale, technological structures. It cultivates the idea of fragmented urban space comprised of varied sections that overlap, and the way the space is utilized, often temporarily, emerges from this collage. Since it is obviously difficult to steer the development of huge metropolises in this manner, postmodernist design is thus cultivated on a local scale based on local traditions and images. This leads to the creation of a series of highly specialized spaces and forms frequently of an eclectic character. These postmodernist spaces are usually replicated many times over and, in their great numbers, comprise a kind of collection of a “maniac’s diary filled with multicolored entries”. This description also applies to architects who generously borrow from the forms of the past such as Quinlan Terry, Aldo Rossi, or Leon Krier [Harvey, 1995]. Therefore, the urban plazas (city squares built on a pedestrian scale) so celebrated by contemporary architects are becoming isolated, closed enclaves separated visually from “external grayness”. They are a superficial, albeit stylish, demonstration of wealth that corresponds well with the characteristic of postmodernism itself [Loukaitou-Sideris, Banerjee, 1998].

Today’s cities and public spaces are striving to create a positive image, and architects and urban planners are subservient to this aim. In effect, tried design solutions that guarantee results are repeated frequently. One of these solutions is to quickly create a range of spectacular urban spaces, which is guaranteed to attract both capital and an audience, ideally from the wealthy middle class. Different means are used to achieve this effect, the simplest of which is to apply scenographic techniques based on a mixture of styles, historic quotations, ornamentation, and instilling space with atmosphere. The contemporary creation of space is thus dominated by thinking that runs along the lines of unique, original architectural creations. The effect of this is the creation of monumental buildings that are isolated from their surroundings and the context of the place. Concurrently, the profession of the contemporary architect-planner is based increasingly not on the creation of new architectural or spatial values, but on replicating existing patterns or, in other words, urban “reproductions” such as Main Street USA within Disneyworld or Quincy Market.

6. Conclusions

Themed public spaces are especially visible in post-socialist cities, including ones facing rapid transformation as well as recovering from post-war destruction. But these space are more frequently than ever created nowadays, as in many cases theming is perceived by the societies as a “shortcut” towards gaining competitive position in the “market of places”. But the same reasons are in-behind application of this way of dealing with urban structures in the cases of other developing and rapidly-urbanizing cities, which seek international recognition and tend to attract the global capital and representatives of the creative class.

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Piotr Lorens
Gdańsk University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture