

A STRONG CITY IDENTITY AND PHYSIOGNOMY IS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR FOR ITS DEVELOPMENT. A CASE STUDY ON THE CITY OF ARTA, GREECE

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Abstract

The present article examines how a strong physiognomy of a city could play a key role in supporting its local economic development. As a case study, it will look closely at the city of Arta in Greece.

Initially the article will examine the elements that create the physiognomy and identity of an urban community. It will reference the studies and methodology used in determining the key ingredients that constitute the image that a city projects. Then it will analyse the model that connects the physiognomy of a city with its economic development by examining the English city of Bath-Spa. It will present the ways that one can utilise the key elements that constitute the image of a city so that the latter can create a strong oral and written literary tradition ("logos") and myth ("mythos") which will set it apart from the other cities in the United Kingdom and reinforce its distinctiveness. In addition, there is an extensive listing of the benefits that the local community is enjoying by the economic exploitation of the above elements.

Following that, the example of Bath is applied in a Greek context and the city of Arta is selected to conduct a closer examination and hypothesis on what are the opportunities and implications if a similar approach of empowering and strengthening the city's physiognomy was to take place. Within that framework, there is a study of the main cultural and historical elements of Arta, concluding with a set of proposals for the strengthening and potential development of the city's image to achieve a greater level of local economic development.

Key Words: *City identity, cities physiognomy, Arta*

A. Introduction

A series of key research reports have stressed how important is for a space to create a strong physiognomy and to continuously support it. In particular for the urban space, the pioneering research by the department of Urban Planning and Regional Development at the National Technical University of Athens under the guidance of its emeritus professor Joseph Stephanou has provided a strong system of criteria that reveal the coordinates of the physiognomy of the modern Greek city (from 19th century onwards). The framework of this system is constantly updated from further research, studies and doctorate thesis and it has reached a level of great thorough analysis that

incorporates different aspects of the image of urban space within its historical context and development¹.

The definition, preservation and support of the physiognomy of an urban community, of a city, influences in return many aspects of its life, its urban and economic development over the years and in relevance to its contemporary status. By accepting the urban space as a live organism susceptible to changes and transformations, the identification of these elements that compile the special physiognomy and image of the place is functioning very much like the process of self-realisation in a human's personality. A man or a woman feels within its social environment the need to be distinct and to follow their own path with different characteristics from its fellow humans, in order to define a strong individual personality and to take a special and unique role within the community².

Accordingly, a city, like an urban community, can also and should strengthen its distinct characteristics that create its identity. It is essential that it will be different from other cities and it will take its special place amongst them. In this way, it succeeds in having the ability to project a strong and defined image to those that live within it or visiting. This image is part of the realisation of its physiognomy and it has the same impact as having a photographic ID for a human³.

However, can the physiognomy of a space also become a tool for its economic development and how this can be achieved? In reality, the answer to the above question is also an excellent example of the practical applications of a theoretical body of research work. Let us suppose, for example, the different categories of cities that exist and could be hastily put together within the parameters of contemporary life: cities –metropolis/ cities – museums/ cities – financial centres/ cities – places for entertainment and holidays/ cities – agents of events/ cities with special natural characteristics/ cities – transportation centres.⁴

We can observe that the above draft categorisation is linked directly with the functionalities of the urban space and its interactions with the human life in both individual and collective level. Therefore we can conclude that the special image that characterises one city can also create the appropriate conditions so that it can have an important and variable influence on its local economic and social development.

The example of BATH-SPA: the promotion of the physiognomy of the city as a model of economic local development

A characteristic model of how to establish and develop the urban physiognomy is the small provincial city of Bath (Bath-Spa, its full name) in Great Britain. Bath during the Roman conquest of Britain was a famous spa town called Aquae Sulis, where eminent Romans built their villas and received visitors from the western provinces of the Roman world, those closer to the English

¹ Laboratory of Urban Development and Planning, NTUA, *The Physiognomy of the Greek City*, publ. NTUA, Athens 2000, p. 13

² Athanassios K. Balermipas, *The contribution of the modern Greek Literature in the physiognomy of the Greek City*, PhD Thesis, NTUA, Athens 2015, p.18

³ Athanassios K. Balermipas, *ibid*, p. 22

⁴ A. Vassilara – J. Stephanou, *The unseen dimensions of the landscape*, International conference for Landscape, AUT Thessaloniki 2005, p.31

channel. Today it has survived in fairly good condition the complex of the public baths and also two roman era villas and a small part of the roman walls of the city. Near to the archaeological sites mentioned above there are the remains of an altar from the indigenous, non-Roman citizens of the city. Another archaeological space of some importance is the Abbey which was built by the Saxons in the 10th century and it was place of coronation of some of their Kings⁵.

Since 1987, Bath-Spa has been included in UNESCO's list of World Heritage Status cities as an archaeological space. The main reason for that were the roman monuments, the 18th century architecture which includes public building as well as private development projects (terraces, squares in the formation of half moon, etc), the Georgian era city plan, and the social and cultural scene that was created at the same time as the city became the spa capital in Britain.⁶

In this case, the dominant element of the physiognomy of this particular city is its archaeological past and the baths, created by a natural hot spring. According to the local legends, the muddy hot waters of the town healed from leprosy King Bladud, also known as the father of King Lear. This is why he established the city in 863 BC. Regarding the baths we ought to point out that the thermal springs of the late ancient time are being preserved in some way in the present but not marketed for their healing powers but as offering the opportunity of an immersive experience of the ancient world ("use the springs, like the Romans did" is their key marketing invitation). Today still functioning are the King's Spring, which is situated near the roman archaeological space, the Hetling Spring and the Cross Spring.⁷

As it can be easily deduced, Bath's fame and reputation is based on the above mentioned elements, which also direct the local economy towards traveling tourism. Indeed, the tourist industry of the city can boast that it attracts every year more than one million visitors who stay for more than one day in the city and four million visitors who come just for the day. According to the city of Bath Chambers of Commerce, the tourist and entertainment sector generates for the local society 15,000 jobs.⁸

The development and utilisation of the archaeological monuments has been achieved in a model way and it is within the parameters of an archaeological park. All the monuments of the ancient world are connected with walks and organised in a way that they offer a very vivid experience of revitalising the historical past within the contemporary every day experience, as well as reliving key historical events that took place at this city. There is wide use of technology in the promotion of the archaeological monuments and in enhancing visitors' understanding of them. The technology and the media used are regularly upgraded and updated as the Municipality is using a large part of the income generated by the sale of tickets and souvenirs for the upkeep and marketing of the monuments. In reference to the souvenirs on sale, it is worth noting that there is a uniformed approach in the commercial setting of the pricing structure. The interested visitor could buy souvenirs from special shops located within the archaeological park as well as in other places within the city at the same price. The sale of souvenirs is organised in such a way so that there is a variety of prices which are targeted at different groups of visitors.

⁵ Southern, Patricia (2012) *The Story of Roman Bath*, Amberley, ISBN 978

⁶ "Cultural and historical development of Bath", Bath City-Wide Character Appraisal. Bath and North East Somerset Council. 31 August 2005. Retrieved 2 May 2015, pp 16 – 17

⁷ Municipality of Bath, *An extended Guide of the City*, London 1998, pp.21-22

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 44

The city of Bath did not just utilise the primary elements of its urban physiognomy, but it also tried to promote the secondary elements too under the prism of growing its tourism. In particular, there was a concentrated effort in refurbishing some of the 19th century houses in the suburbs and the fringes of the city and turning them into Bed and Breakfast (B&Bs) guest houses which also introduce visitors in the life experienced by someone in a city of the Georgian or Victorian England (18th and 19th century). In this way, apart from the large hotel units which are located primarily in the city centre, the tourist industry is also enriched with about 120 guest houses in the southeast neighbourhoods and the suburbs. The aforementioned points within the archaeological space create a triangle, within which there is excellent transport connectivity, and in its heart is the historical centre. Another remarkable fact is that in both the big hotels and the smaller B&Bs there is an abundance of local products which are promoted and sold as part of the general strategic approach of the experiential introduction to the place. A characteristic example is the offer of roman, medieval or victorian meals, where the recipes and ingredients used are the same with the ones used in the equivalent roman, medieval and victorian age.⁹

The development and promotion of parts of the elements of the city is also exemplary. The municipal authorities of Bath have set a series of “walks” for the city’s visitors. The variety of the characteristics on show in these walks present to the visitor many options. The main walk and introduction with the city, irrespective of the archaeological space, is focused mainly on the historical centre and its architectural heritage evident in a series of buildings of the classic Georgian era, like the Town Hall, the Palladium Circus, the Assembly Rooms – rebuild following the devastating bombardment during the second World War – the Guildhall, the gothic church of St Peter and St Paul and some of the aristocrats’ residences from the same period. It also includes Great Pulteney Street, designed by Thomas Baldwin, which is an avenue of three hundred and five (305) metres long and thirty (30) meters wide and which is recognised by the Georgian terraces running on both sides of the street. It is also characteristic that all the buildings from that era were built with key ingredient the local golden-coloured Bath Stone, which adds to the buildings a unique honey color.

Other attraction points, as part of the architectural tourist walk, are certain urban planning elements from the same historical period and in particular three squares: the Queen’s, the Royal Crescent and Lanstown Crescent. They are designed according to the Georgian urban planning which points to a transformative revival of the “palladian” architectural style. This particular walk also includes the famous Pulteney Bridge which was designed by Robert Adam based on original but unused plans from Andrea Palladio for the bridge of Rialto in Venice. This particular arrow bridge with its three arrows is not only used for access to a crossing of the river Avon, but also as a commercial street.¹⁰

In parallel, other secondary walks are running across the topography of the city – Bath is built on both sides of the river Avon and it is surrounded by picturesque hills where the builders get the famous Bath stone – and even its literary history and its urban legends in the form of its famous ghosts. Finally, the local community does not exclude from the development plan the fact that, though a small provincial city, Bath has one of the best rugby teams in Great Britain and its

⁹ Ibid, pp. 8 - 10

¹⁰ “Cultural and historical development of Bath”, Bath City-Wide Character Appraisal, Bath and North East Somerset Council. 31 August 2005. Retrieved 2 May 2015, p.67

grounds – the emblematic Recreational Ground – is also another urban monument and therefore something to promote.

In conclusion we have seen the ways that the physiognomy of the city of Bath-Spa provides a central factor to focus the local economic development.

Applying the example in the Greek Context

Greece has a series of provincial urban centres that present some similarities with the provincial English city of Bath in relation to their opportunities to construct a strong physiognomy and economic development. For example, we could reference the cities of Edessa, Giannitsa, Nafplio, Rethimno, Arta and several other cities. Initially what we are looking for is to define the elements that can paint the image that the city will choose to project and promote. This image will have to have a central/primary element and secondary elements. Following that, we enter the phase of support and preservation of the physiognomy of a particular urban community. If there is no appropriate planning, temporary actions and measures can likely fail in projecting the city's image, or even to weaken the essential elements of the image of place. A classic example is the change in the use of land in an urban space, which could on one hand serve demographic needs, but on the other it leads to the reduction of open free spaces in a neighbourhood; this in turn is a cause for the gradual abandonment of activities that would have usually taken place in such free spaces and would have contributed to adding a special local 'colour' in that part of the city.¹¹

Finally, there is also the phase of the holistic development of the physiognomy of a city in a way that it contributes substantially to its economic local development. The varied sectors for this development could include tourism and recreation activities, the production of local quality products, the increase of the local permanent population due to increased business and other opportunities available [education, research, innovation, etc]. A key challenge in this case is achieving co-ordination and interaction amongst the different sectors, which will also greatly support the successful outcome of local economic development. At this point it is worth noting that Bath embraced for this reason, not only its important archaeological spaces within the limits of the city centre, but went beyond to promote its architectural heritage and city plan as a whole from the Georgian era, as well as its urban legends created via its literary and oral tradition. Even the provincial character of the 19th century city was preserved and developed so that its many B&Bs could offer to the visitor a vivid recollection of that era and an immersive experience. The local authorities developed also a strong partnership with the main educational institute in the area (University of Bath) and the Bath Chambers of Commerce. This was essential in order to achieve the appropriate co-ordination and the best possible result in their efforts to support and strengthen the physiognomy of the city and the local economic development.

A hypothesis for a study: The city of Arta

In order to transfer the above mentioned model of local economic development as a hypothetical case study, we have selected the city of Arta. This particular city is characterised as a historical one, while also remaining an important commercial and agriculture centre for the prefecture of Epirus, where the city administratively belongs to, as well as the prefecture of Western

¹¹ Laboratory for Urban Synthesis NTUA, *The Physiognomy of spaces – The Physiognomy of the Greek City of the 21st century*, publs. NTUA, Athens 2001, p. 25

Greece, with which it borders with. At this point it is worth mentioning that both these areas – of Epirus and Western Greece – are listed in the ten poorer areas in the European Union because the median per capita income is around 50% lower with that of the rest of Europe.¹²

In terms of its physiognomy Arta is fortunate to have an emblematic monument, its famous “bridge”. It is of course the famous and legendary arrow bridge from the traditional folk song by the same name which was built over the river Arachthos in the beginning of the 17th century. According to the archaeological research the bridge is built on top of previous older bridges and there have been discovered traces from the classic ancient era, the roman era and the first centuries of the medieval times. The “bridge of Arta” is situated at the west of the city and it is surrounded by a combination of myths whose main building blocks are common amongst the Balkan folk tradition. The most characteristic of these common elements is the sacrifice of the wife of the Master builder inside the bridge’s foundations in order for it to stand and not collapse. In the left end of the bridge it has also survived the legendary plane tree, whose branches were used to hang those who opposed the rule of the notorious Ali Pasha of the Ioannina in the first decades of the 19th century. Naturally, the plane tree also plays a key role in many folk songs and popular stories from this unsettling historical period.¹³

Together with the legendary “bridge” of Arta, we should also consider in the formation of its physiognomy some other factors, such as:

- From a historical point of view the city has a series of monuments from the medieval-byzantine period, during which the city was very successful and it even became the capital of some of the feudal states of that age, like the Dukedom of Epirus (13th century AD). As an example we could reference for that era the church of Parigoritissas and the monasteries of Vlachernon, Kato Panagias, Saint Theodoras and Saint Basil near the bridge of Arta. Similarly we could mention the church of St Nicholas by the Pomegranate Tree with excellent frescos and the church’s design as built based on a cross outline with a dome. In addition, you can also find a Castle in very good condition which was possibly build under the Duke Michael B Duka (mid-13th century); inside the Castle one can find ruins of churches and houses.¹⁴
- The historical picture is completed later with some buildings from the Ottoman conquest (17th – 18th century) like the mosque of Faik Pasha, the imaret (inn) and the Ottoman clock – the only clock which was built in the Ottoman empire with a disc and it exists in counterpoint with the relevant Venetian clock of the neighbouring city of Preveza. There are also some traditional houses from the 19th century and specifically the house of rich merchant Zorba and the main store of Nicholas Xanthou, the commercial shop of one of the founders of the ‘Society of Friends’ (Filiki Eteria).¹⁵
- The topography of the city is built on the left side of the river Arachthos and its surrounding area is the plain that has the river’s name and which is primarily filled with agricultural spaces - mainly

¹² The above information has been gathered by the website: www.epirus.gov.gr/portal/index.php/epirus/genika-stoixeia/geografia.html Last visit was on 19/04/2016

¹³ Serafim Xenopoulos, “A Historical Study of Arta and Preveza”, published in 1884. Reprinted by the Skoufa foundation, Arta, 1986, p.24

¹⁴ Akropolitis G. Chronological Writings, publication Kanaki, Athens 2003, pp. 87, 93, 149

¹⁵ Charalambos Gouvas, “A History of the County of Preveza”, publication 2009, ISBN 978-960-87328-2-7, p. 52

groves of orange and apple trees – with a varied and rich production of many specialised local products.

- The above factor, that the fertile plain which is being watered by the river Arachthos yields a substantial agricultural crop, is another element of economic growth as many small and large scale factories are operating in the area with their main purpose the transformation of agricultural goods into commercial products.

Conclusion

The above mentioned factors could create the coordinates of the main image that the city of Arta could project, and, together with its legendary “bridge”, create a set of key characteristics which will be the main ‘brand’ of the city and its surrounding area. This key action will play a part in the creation and strengthening of local economic growth as multi-functional events could enrich the city’s tourism and recreational industries. Moreover, there will be opportunity to open new horizons in the promotion of local products and services. The above will also influence the creation of more jobs in the area.

A PROPOSAL FOR THE STRENGTHENING OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

A. If we want the physiognomy of a city to play a key part in the growth of its economic activity or the broadening of the activity already in place, then the physiognomy will need to be strengthened. As it has already been stressed, the image that the city decides to project should be characterised by consistency and clarity. In the case of Arta, it is clear that its medieval – byzantine and ottoman past are the key coordinates for its physiognomy. The combination of its monuments of the above mentioned periods together with those from the classical and roman ancient times are enough to characterise Arta as a historical city. However, the architectural monuments are not enough for the development of the activities which will lead to economic exploitation of its physiognomy. It is essential that they should be connected with actions that will create opportunities for a more holistic - and therefore more attractive – experience of the past. The city and its local authorities should implement a strategic action plan towards this focused direction. It should be followed by partnership with the local educational and research institutes over an agreed programme in order to develop strategic plans and practically implement them. Every activity towards the promotion of the physiognomy of a place, should have both the theoretical analysis and scientific data adjusted according to each part of that place.

B. The means used towards the realisation of this aim - they could be:

- Publication of books – mainly in foreign languages – about the local history, local customs, products and other similar elements of its physiognomy. Apart from the publications, other ways of promoting the city can be through the encouragement of other types of communication (e.g. visual art, theatrical plays, music performances).
- Cultural and entertainment events, scheduled around the city’s annual calendar so that the whole area is promoted more thoroughly throughout the year.
- Infrastructure projects that could enhance accessibility and increase visiting potential, promotion and attractiveness of the monuments. The use of modern technology to achieve this is essential. Similarly important is the increase of experiential visit opportunities through immersive and interactive events and festivals. Other cultural events which combine folk tradition could bring further studies and interest in the promotion of the city’s and surrounding areas’ physiognomy.

C. The combination of the above characteristics for the physiognomy of an urban community strengthens the image that it is getting across. Moreover, it creates the parameters for urban transformation and further growth. In the case of Arta, we could suggest not only visitors' walks about the city but also developing the rich folk tradition background. Moreover, there is the opportunity for intensive involvement in agro-cultural activities and the production of named quality agricultural products which could be promoted to the market with the help of its famous characteristics (for example the usage of some of the city's monuments in advertising campaigns for the promotion of local produce).

Epilogue

The myth ('mythos') and oral and written literary tradition ('logos') of the urban space in conjunction with its distinct architectural and urban plan, and together with other key special characteristics that define its identity can become pillars to support local economic development and growth. This is not only because of their capacity to become part of a remarkable touristic product or attraction. Primarily they can strengthen a series of other economic factors and activities, either as marketing tools or as additional elements to its distinctiveness and therefore attractiveness towards whoever audience they are targeting.

In conclusion, we should also point out once more that the maximum contribution to the development of the urban physiognomy as part of the local economic development can be achieved, or not, based on how well coordinated and organized are the local private and public sectors responsible for this, such as the regional public administration, the local authorities, the local educational institutes and, especially, the business and goods-producing local communities. It is essential to have a study and careful planning of the appropriate actions for every urban space, according to the spirit dictated by the formation and strengthening of its particular physiognomy.

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