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Conflicting urban identities: the multiple images of Sarajevo

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Abstract

This paper discusses the urban transformation of Sarajevo as a controversial process of identity making and reshaping; in particular, it shows how the East-West dichotomy, along with its stereotypes and imposed imaginary, can be acknowledged by looking at the city's architecture.

Particular attention is addressed towards two diverging trends concerning the urban transformation of Sarajevo: on the one hand, the progressive construction of new buildings reproducing the architectural feature of western metropolises; on the other hand, the growing diffusion of huge mosques as the result of a strong economic and cultural linkage with Islamic countries, especially Saudi Arabia. Insisting on such elements this contribution discusses the extent to which the East-West divide still affects the collective imaginary both within the city and from the western European standpoint.

Skyscrapers with glass surfaces, fashion shopping malls and luxury apartments represent the physical expression of the city's attempt to emerge as a modern western capital. As such, consumerism and economical prosperity appear the most desirable values within the imaginary related to the process of "Europeanization". Nevertheless such representation harshly clashes with the real situation as the standards required by European Union for the integration of Bosnia-Herzegovina are still far from being reached and several public structures, such as the National Gallery, are progressively closing due to the lack of funding.

The image of Sarajevo as a prosperous western European capital is further challenged by the public debate - occurring both at national and international level - about the progressive Islamisation of the city. Indeed, the sumptuous mosques built with the economic support of Saudi Arabia significantly connote the urban landscape in religious terms contributing to foster the East-West dichotomy and encouraging discourses that exclude Sarajevo from the western civilized world.

As yet, a smooth synthesis between such conflicting urban identities appears still controversial and problematic.

Key words: Sarajevo, Urban identity, Architecture, Westernization, Islamisation

The present contribution moves from two major assumptions. Firstly, it takes into consideration the influence exerted by the western cultural imaginary in reproducing the negative stereotype about the Balkans and imposing Europeanness as a desirable value. Moreover, adopting an urban analytical perspective, it assumes that the changing identity of a city can manifest through its physical and visible transformations as urban architecture can be read as a political and cultural landscape.

As widely explained by Todorova (1997), the Balkans represent a geographical areas strongly connoted by negative stereotypes. By analyzing a wide amount of written documentation the author shows how the western cultural standpoint have built an image of the region as a context of political instability characterized by primitive manifestations of violence. In her reflection Todorova recalls the notion of Orientalism elaborated by Said (1978) who refers to a precise academic approach emerged among western scholars involved in Oriental studies. The term indicates a detached analytical perspective that often judges, labels and stereotypes the "Orient" simplistically excluding it from the western world ignoring its cultural specificities.

Following this reasoning Todorova identifies the same rhetoric within the western discourse on the Balkans. Such discourse portrays the region as the "European powder keg", where political instability and atavistic hatreds manifest through unsolvable manifestations of racism and nationalism. In contrast with the western European world, the cultural and religious heterogeneity of the Balkans is evoked as a further indicator of instability, danger and savageness (*Ibidem*). As Todorova argues, the negative stereotype about the Balkans has consolidated so much that the term "Balkanization" has been progressively employed to portrait in negative terms other contexts often culturally and geographically distant from the original spatial reference.

On the other hand, Europeanness is portrayed as the correct political, economical and cultural model and the imposition of the western European pattern has often eclipsed the cultural peculiarities of other contexts. Visual

manifestations of such a process of adaptation can be retraced by looking at the symbolical and political connotation of cities' urban landscape. Indeed, the architectural feature of a city doesn't simply entail an aesthetic matter, rather it represents a means to produce and diffuse an specific image of the city. As such, the shape of urban space can be read as a mix of symbolic elements that constitute and promote the city's political and cultural heritage.

Urban architecture represents a tool to symbolically celebrate a specific collective memory reinforcing the citizens' sense of belonging. Therefore a city is not just a specific form of social organization on territory, but also a complex of symbols collected throughout time and expressed both through physical structures - such as squares, streets and monuments - and practices, ceremonies and rituals of daily life (Mela 2006). The symbolical dimension of urban architecture can be particularly manifested in capital cities, where it reflects the attempt to promote and consolidate a shared national identity (Wagenaar 2010). Governmental buildings, museums, squares and even streets' names are never neutral, but rather express the self-celebration of political power. Through urban architecture power not only celebrates itself, but also elaborates its strategy to foster a shared sense of belonging among its citizens since urban public space represents the most appropriate place where people sharing the same interpretative codes can foster their common collective identity (Dell'Agnese 2004).

For such a purpose the symbolical dimension of the city can be shaped in different way: physical elements of urban space can be put in the foreground or hidden in the aim at celebrating or denying specific identity elements. In this sense physical space is always the reflection of an intentional and selective process of identity celebration. Single urban artifacts can be built in sumptuous and ceremonial features, furiously destroyed, or simply ignored, becoming unseen elements of the landscape (*Ibidem*).

Political attempts to rewrite the historical events are realized through operations of restyling and redefinition of public spaces' aesthetic. The memory of a city, its past and tradition, can be celebrated but also erased or reinvented through interventions on urban space; thus political and ideological strategies implicit in operations of urban space shaping can celebrate but also neglect collective memories (Mazzucchelli 2010). Therefore urban and architectural transformation can be interpreted as attempts to redefine the urban symbolical patrimony (Mela 2006). The city represents the place where the attempts to manipulate the collective memory are most strongly carried out. Political redrawing of cities manifest not only through the construction of celebrative monuments, but also in the transformation or elimination of specific representative places reflecting the attempt to affirm a new historical identity (Mela 2006).

Such a selective celebration or erosion of collective memory can reach tragic manifestation as cities can be not only reshaped, but completely destroyed in the light of what they represent. Nevertheless, power is never completely able to manipulate historical memory, as the latter has to be conceived as a process of constant evolution and negotiations. On the one hand, the city represents a *space of memory* that reflects a self-celebration of power and the selective affirmation of collective identities; on the other hand, its symbolical dimension is flexible and changeable, as meanings and representations are recurrently negotiated and redefined through daily practices and interaction (Mazzucchelli 2010). Culture, politics and subjectivities are elements that constantly intertwine in shaping and reshaping urban landscape, both in material and in symbolical terms (Dell'Agnese 2004). Indeed, the sorting out of urban symbolical elements throughout time is not just a spontaneous and natural process of accumulation; on the contrary, the social construction of places' symbolism often entails conflicting interpretations and visions (Mela 2006). Different audiences are able to negotiate different interpretations of the past and elaborate different interpretations related to the same places, buildings and ruins (Dell'Agnese 2004).

The relation between the city's symbolic dimension and the social identity is mutual and reciprocal. Urban symbolism intertwines with social life and daily experiences of the city's inhabitants, contributing to shape identities at individual and collective level. On the other hand, symbolical meanings can be reproduced but also negotiated and redefined through social interaction. Thus social identity emerges from material and non-material urban elements—

buildings, folklore, etc. - but rather than being passively acquired it is actively adopted through constant processes of negotiation and interpretation (Mela 2006).

By discussing the visual changes of Sarajevo's architectural landscape this contribution aims at pointing out the contradictions and controversies underlying the city's transformation. Considering the influence of the East-West dichotomy over the collective imaginary the paper illustrates how the city's urban identity appears harshly contested; indeed Sarajevo's transformation is not the result of a shared and common picture, but rather entails different and conflicting views of what the city should be.

The argument discussed in this contribution is mainly based on an ethnographic fieldwork conducted between May 2011 and January 2012 as part of a PhD research. Further direct observations have been also carried out during shorter stays between 2012 and 2013.

The urban transformation of Sarajevo contributes to produce an image of the city that largely reflects the feature of western European capitals; moreover, new buildings in a western fashion style, skyscrapers with glass surfaces, luxury apartments and shopping malls may suggest that the city is undergoing a period of economic prosperity. The visual impact of such environment shows how the city proudly promotes its image of western capital: luxury constructions and huge placards advertising new apartments and shops contribute to reinforce an imaginary where economic prosperity, comfort and consumerism are portrayed as desirable and positive values. Such a trend reflects a progressive adaptation towards the cultural model of capitalist societies and its imaginary based on economic wealth and increasing material consumption. In this perspective, the East-West dichotomy strongly influences the local collective imaginary as Sarajevo openly welcomes Europeanness as the cultural model to reproduce.

On the other hand, such transformation is progressively leaving on the background the traditional cultural heterogeneity of the city and its peculiar urban identity that connoted Sarajevo as the Balkan's Jerusalem. As widely described by Karahasan (2012), the multicultural environment of Sarajevo produced an exceptional mix of languages, religions and traditions making the city a unique contact point between the western and eastern cultural world. Such exceptional feature is gradually vanishing while the city is increasingly being shaped reproducing the feature many other western capitals.

The image of prosperous western capital that such urban transformation produces paradoxically diverges from the real circumstances affecting the context. Despite the wide celebration of Europeanness, Sarajevo is still far from being included among the western European capitals, since Bosnia – Herzegovina scarcely fulfills the standards required by European Union for the country's integrationⁱ. Paradoxically the new urban identity of Sarajevo is inspired by the cultural world from which is excluded. Despite the new construction of business offices, real estate properties and consumption places, the economic situation of the city – and of the whole country - appears seriously difficult; indeed, behind the fast urban transformation several public structures are being closing due to lack of fundingⁱⁱ.

Aside from such paradoxical situation, the image of Sarajevo as a prosperous and modern western capital doesn't represent a shared and uncontested imaginary. Indeed, the city's architecture simultaneously reflects a reverse trend that emphasizes the Islamic component of the Bosnian cultural tradition and produces a urban identity declined in mono-religious terms. The progressive diffusion of architectural elements ascribable to the muslim identity has to do with different circumstances. Firstly, the incidence of Bosniaks over the whole population of Sarajevo has constantly grown as a demographic aftermath of the war. Moreover, since the construction of new houses of worship was not allowed during the socialist regime, such urban intervention widely spread from the post-war period on. Finally, the strengthening of economical and cultural ties with Islamic countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, has played a consistent role in financing both the construction of new mosques and the restoration of damaged ones (Akšamija 2010).

As the prevalent financier of the new religious buildings, Saudi Arabia has imposed in Bosnia its architectural principles, leading to a strong alteration of urban landscape. The changed feature of the city's landscape is particularly

visible in Novo Sarajevo and Novi Grad, the western area of the city developed under the socialist period. The new mosques dominate the view with their spatial extension and high minarets reproducing the architectural feature of middle-east mosques (Akšamija 2010). As argued by several local architects the construction pattern of such mosques clashes with the building principles that Bosnia inherited from the Ottoman tradition (Lofranco 2008). Indeed, the new mosques are built in much more sumptuous and majestic features and are spatially set in the higher level of the city to be visible from several standpoints. This trend represents another difference with the ottoman tradition that privileged buildings gently and discretely integrated within the urban landscape (Akšamija 2010).

The strong influence of Islamic countries over the local context can be acknowledged not only by looking at the new mosques' architecture, but also considering the growing presence of Wehabis within the city, a religious group preaching a much more radical interpretation of Islam in comparison with the Bosnian religious tradition. Such current has been taking root in Bosnia since the war of the nineties, due to the arrival of foreign muslim combatants from Middle-East countries who settled in Bosnia after fighting in defense of Bosniaks. Moreover, the post-war period has seen the large involvement of Saudi Arabia in humanitarian aid operations fostering the permanent settlement of Wehabis in Bosnia (Akšamija 2010)

The progressive Islamisation of the city represents a controversial issue within the local cultural and political debate. Indeed, such a new trend has not been embraced by all Sarajevans who have raised many criticisms against the excessive celebration of a collective identity that doesn't represent the whole population. Indeed such a spreading tendency represents a crucial issue in the general political debate, as many inhabitants hardly accept the progressive connotation of Sarajevo's urban identity in mono- religious terms. On the one hand criticisms come from observant muslims who don't feel represented by the new religious tendency and its imposed architectural principles; on the other hand, non muslim population claim for the past multicultural urban identity where religion belonged to a more private sphere. In general terms, such criticism brings together radically different expressions of Bosnian society: observant muslims sustain a less drastic interpretation of religion and claim for the integrity's maintenance of local Islamic tradition while laic population supports a secular vision of Bosnia and regret the less religiously connoted identity of pre-war Sarajevo.

From the western European standpoint the progressive Islamisation of Sarajevo is pictured as particularly worrying and contributes to produce a negative stereotype. As the western European culture appears rather unfamiliar with the muslim tradition, it often emerges a widespread attitude of suspiciousness towards the Islamic world, superficially associated with religious extremism. Therefore the progressive Islamisation of Sarajevo, and Bosnia – Herzegovina in general, is often portrayed by international media and public discourses as a warning bell of a tightening link with religious extremism and terrorismⁱⁱⁱ. Such discourse reproduces the distinction between the western and eastern cultural world; thus the Islamisation of Sarajevo becomes a narrative strategy that leaves no chance for the city to be portrayed as a European capital.

In conclusion, while in the past Sarajevo represented the contact point between the western and eastern world, nowadays it can be pictured as a city where such cultural universes clash. Conflicting urban identities oppose each other imposing to the city their exclusive cultural imaginaries. While Sarajevo is definitely losing its peculiar multicultural tradition, it is still uncertain whether the city will manage to resolve its paradoxes and combine such different imaginaries. As yet these diverging urban identities still seem incompatible.

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ⁱ See the Progress Report of 2013 on Bosnia-Herzegovina issued by the European Union Commission on Enlargement, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2013/package/brochures/bosnia_and_herzegovina_2013.pdf

ⁱⁱ One of the most grave example is represented by the closure of the National Gallery.

ⁱⁱⁱ Flottau, Renate. 2007. "Balkan Mujahedeens: Fundamentalist Islam Finds Fertile Ground in Bosnia". *Der Spiegel*, November 9 <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/balkan-mujahedeens-fundamentalist-islam-finds-fertile-ground-in-bosnia-a-516214.html>

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