

Advances in Black Sea Studies in Architecture

Preliminary structuring of research

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Abstract

Retgression of research in Black Sea studies due to the political isolationism promoted during the past decades makes the unique cultural area of the Black Sea region to be an obscure topic of knowledge and understanding for its inhabitants. Its cities and ports, its history and heritage remain largely unknown. The gradual deconstruction of the Black Sea identity effected during the Cold War divided the coasts into ideological antagonists, with the regrettable impregnation of research in all its fields of study. Growing efforts to reaffirm the Black Sea as a meaningful entity after 1990 signals the need to replace the old mental map with a new structuring of research, as new contributions of the topic of place identity in the Black Sea region are increasingly called for. This article proposes a preliminary structuring of the research directions in Black Sea studies of architecture in a new, cross-coastal perspective. Chronological, geographical, cultural and architectural criteria discussed in the methodology of inquiry advance a prospective uncovering of a heterogeneous, cosmopolitan identity of the Black Sea. The long-range aim of research pursuits in Black Sea studies is to help define a strategic cultural positioning of the region by means of uncovering its architectural narratives of the build heritage, with the direct consequence on place vitality and durability of the Black Sea coasts.

Rezumat

Regresul ceretărilor în studiile de Marea Neagră datorat izolationismului politic promovat de-a lungul ultimelor decenii face ca aria culturală unică a regiunii Mării Negre să fie un subiect obscur petru cunoașterea și înțelegerea locuitorilor săi. Orașele și porturile sale, istoriași patrimoniul sau rămân în mare parte necunoscute. Deconstrucția graduală a identității Mării Negre efectuată în timpul Războiului Rece a divizat coastele sale în opozanți ideologici, cu impregnarea regretabilp a cercetării în toate domeniile sale de studiu. Eforturile în creștere de a reafirma Marea Neagră ca o entitate semnificativă după 1990 semnalizează necesitatea de a înlocui vechea hartă mentală cu o nouă structurare a cercetării, pentru a răspunde cererii în creștere de contribuții științifice noi la subiectul identității locului în regiunea Mării Negre. Articolul propune o structurare preliminară a direcțiilor de cercetare în domeniul studiilor arhitecturale ale Mării Negre în o nou perspectivă intercostală. Criteriile cronologice, geografice, culturale și arhitecturale discutate la metodologia cercetărilor înaintează descoperirea anticipată a unei identități eterogene, cosmopolite a Mării Negre. Ținta în perspeactivă a cercetărilor în studiile de Marea Neagră urmăresc definire unei pozitionări culturale strategice a regiunii pe

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calea relevării narativelor sale arhitecturale ale patrimoniului construit cu consecințe directe asupra vitalității și durabilității locurilor de pe coasta Mării Negre.

Keywords: The Black Sea, historic architectural heritage, cultural geography, narrative, ethos, cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity, local and regional brand, place identity.

1. Studying the Black Sea. Research context

The Black Sea is a unique area for the peoples of South-Eastern Europe, but surprisingly, for the inhabitants of the area, the knowledge of the Black Sea is limited to its own borders. The global context of recent decades makes the association of overviews of the Black Sea to start from a vague position, or to be formed by negative media coverage about the instability of the region on the political and military scene. The Black Sea remains largely an obscure topic for understanding and the imagination of the inhabitants of the area, and its cities, ports, history and heritage sites remain largely unknown.

The political isolationism promoted during the Cold War and almost half a century of communist ideology significantly contributed to increasing this situation by building a set of geographical bias, which prove lasting until today.[1] The Black Sea, a meaningful geographical area, was deconstructed gradually over several centuries and already at the end of the 19th century, the Black Sea no longer functioned as a connecting unity between the riparian states, but it was a clear-cut boundary between the adverse territories. By the middle of the 20th century, the boundary between the divided coasts of the Black Sea becomes more pronounced, by the ideologies of the new forms of governance (on the one hand totalitarian, on the other hand democratic).[2]

A regrettable consequence of the policy of the last half of the 20th century was the ideological impregnation of research in the Black Sea region, which was simultaneous with coast division on different lines of study, such as the East European, Balkan, Oriental, and Russian Studies. The logic (or lack thereof) of structuring the research of the Black Sea region according to the convention of national and continental borders leads to a reimagining of the relationship earth-water-culture, in a reflection of the older conception of the world of the ancient Greeks, who had at the centre the inland waterways and the horizon bordered by the land coasts. Thus, the Black Sea is no longer a body of water systematically divided between political ideologies and antinomic continental cultures; the sea and its coasts become the significant socio-politico-cultural entity which was for a large part of its antic, medieval and modern history[3], restoring the aquatic element as the defining aspect of the culture and the identity of the region. The Mediterranean Sea, the ancient term of comparison for the Black Sea, is a good example of a region which has unique and memorable associations relative to the identity of the place. The Mediterranean Sea has become a significant place, and its image was constructed programmatically through a number of regional studies that have highlighted the Mediterranean heritage, such as Fernand Braudel's work on "The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II" [4].

The growing organizational effort to reaffirm the Black Sea as a meaningful entity (through organizations such as Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization, International Centre for Black Sea Studies, Forum of Architects of the Black Sea Region etc. signals the need for new contributions in the field of architecture of the Black Sea, a subject little covered until now. Because the Cold War period promoted a mental map of the region which today is obsolete, a return in time is required for an accurate reflection of the original character of the Black Sea places: namely the character of places connected in a vital network from one end to the other of the sea. The research pursuit of places of the Black Sea coast in relation to its historical context brings about

the articulating of a new identity of the place, dismissive of the ideological impregnations of the past century. Acknowledging the entire spectrum of architectural diversity of the region, our research aims at revealing a Pontic architectural narrative, as a means of understanding and development of the Black Sea past by way of the built heritage. Our research comes under the wider goal of strategic cultural positioning of the region, contributing to enhance the sense of belonging to coastal communities and nations at the Black Sea region.

2. Developing a frame of research and narrowing down the research topic

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Black Sea was opened to global travel circuits, embracing the consumerist and capitalist culture, and subsequent development of coastal cities started from a position at least ambiguous in relation to *what is* or *what should either be* the Black Sea region. In addition, the exposure of the Black Sea to global mass tourism has put this place in direct competition with other destinations around the world and makes the question of the identity of the region to become problematic. The importance of defining the identity of the place (or lack of a defined identity) is strategic and is given by the direct consequences of this on the vitality and durability of that place, on the grounds of a growing global mobility.

Anticipating objections claiming inability to imagine a homogeneous Eastern Europe and some common feature between the two continents bonded by sea, history give us the opportunity to reaffirm that the Black Sea has long been a distinct place, defined by the relationships across the shores, both cooperative and conflicting, as portrayed by historians such as Gheorge I. Bratianu, Charles King, and Neil Ascherson[3][5][6]. The profile of maritime port of coastal cities set in motion the migration of people, goods, ideas, and cultures between communities that have influenced each other in a sustainable manner, creating a cosmopolitan society with a culture specific to Pontic port cities. The Black Sea coasts were brought together into a network of mutual influence which is visible if we look beyond the national uniqueness narrative that dominated the last century. In its long history, the Black Sea became the site of a unique multicultural mix in the world.

The Black Sea is placed on an uncertain position in terms of the identity of the place. In an increasingly competing world, the question of place identity becomes vital for any location,[7] in search for its unique local characteristics that define it, makes it representative and differentiates it from other world destinations. The subject of research would therefore consist of landmark buildings of the historical heritage built around the Black Sea, one of the major elements of identification and differentiation of a place, based on the power of the historical heritage to reify the most concrete form of identification of a place: its past, as proclaimed by headmost theoreticians of place identity.[8] Research aimed at the main historical periods of urban development of the Black Sea, and the case studies, would include architectural landmarks of every age, that are framed by historical summaries of the period in which they were built. The outcome would be the writing of chapters on the history of the ancient Black Sea, around 5-7 centuries BC until the time of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. The investigation needs to include places of heritage with an undeniable value that entered the collective memory. These are shared and widely recognized in the community as the representatives of the culture of the place, or conversely, heritage sites that have been abandoned or forgotten.

3. Research methodology and limitations

The broad topic makes it compulsory to implement as a methodology the complexity theory

borrowed from exact sciences and to apply it to architectural and urban studies. This method was explicitly and implicitly embraced by other researchers in the field of architecture, tourism theory or the theory of branding. In the study of sites, complexity theory appeared particularly compatible with the approach of the narrative in social sciences, which allows the representation of multiple, multi-causal and multi-agent actions in a given location, admitting on the same time the concept of flux and change of place. Complexity theory, applied to the study of sites, uses a multidisciplinary basis, which circumscribes domains such as architecture, history, cultural geography, cultural studies, tourism, history, economics etc.

The extensive use of the case study method is recommended as it involves an in-depth examination of subjects and of contextual conditions in which they are found, and constitutes an observational study of space and place, selecting information on the entire diversity of specimens in the region. Criteria selection of case studies needs to favour, the criterion of the value as an architectural and cultural landmark of identity, for each of the proposed categories.

On the time axis, the subject requires a macro-historical approach, dated after the main stages of urban development and decline of the Black Sea coasts. The usual method by which studies are operable over extended periods of time is called *la longue durée* and it was developed by Fernand Braudel in the 60s. Until today this remains the dominant method in historiography. A preliminary chronological delimitation for a 'historical' period of the Black Sea spans between the first centuries of ancient Greek colonization (7-5 centuries BC) and reaches the turning point in the history of the Black Sea marked by the Second World War (1941-1945), and the beginning of the Cold War (1947).

The geographical delimitation of the study area concerns the proximal zone to the coastline, with an area of 4340 km, but also including a number of major research locations which are exempt from strict position on the front of the Black Sea water, but which are on a high relative radius (Istanbul, Bakhchisaray, Akkerman, Licostomo, Sulina, Histria etc). For the geographic transversal study of the region have been used various cartographic materials, maps from different eras, cartographic plans for location etc.

Limitations of research on such a broad topic are evident. Even if the implemented methodology is effective for rendering the complex character outlining a location on a holistic level, research is not intended to provide definitive answers to complex questions about the identity of the Black Sea site, but rather seeks to provide a basis for critical discussions to this topic. On the other hand, an approach aiming to exhaust the study topic of heritage sites around the Black Sea is impossible to be pursued. The vastness of the subject of research makes it impossible to give equal attention to all buildings with patrimonial value on the Black Sea, but makes it compulsory to shift the focus on those places with a representation value in the cultural narrative of the Pontic space.

4. Preliminary structuring the research

A preliminary structuring of research on the Black Sea architectural waterfront results in an extensive repertoire of heritage sites located in the coastal region of the Black Sea, coupled with the questioning on the topic of branding elements underlying the discourse on the identity construction of the Black Sea, with conclusions aimed at the notions of cohesion and cultural divergence of the landscape heritage. Last but not least, research of the Black Sea Coasts makes fieldwork compulsory, that means round-trips around the sea and local workshops would be part of the fieldwork.

Historiographical and architectural structuring of the repertoire of sites follows the periodization of major stages of urban development on the Black Sea. Reference case studies for a period would be framed by an overview of the development and the decline of that age. The narrative periods include: (1) mythological era; (2) the height of ancient Greek colonies and of their contemporaneous Scythians; (3) the Roman Empire period; (4) the Byzantine Empire period; (5) the Genovese colonization period contemporary with (6) the migratory waves of Mongolian and Pax Mongolica centuries; (7) the golden era of the Ottoman Empire; (8) the feudal principalities period; (9) the early modern period of the Russian and Ottoman Empires, of the Romanian and Bulgarian Kingdoms, up to the Second World War. The documentation of case studies needs to include architectural analysis that comprises morpho-functional descriptions, stylistic descriptions, description of the relationship with geographical/ landscaping context, photographic documentation, tree-dimensional reconstructions, graphical documentation, historical aspects of the building and data about the architect, about the design and construction of the building, and not least the analysis of the symbolic value of the building.

Constructing the local cultural brand of the Black Sea provides a starting ground for fertile discussions on this topic and questioning elements such as the authenticity of the place, the living/experience of the place, the image, the signs, the history, the national and supranational identity, the thematization, the image and not the commoditization of places. Each of the themes of critical discourse is exemplified by a case study representative of the studied region, providing a model for targeted approach places.

5. Conclusions

The Black Sea before the Cold War tells a story of the place entirely different than the one built and popularized since the 50s. Throughout history, oversea connections have swung in tandem with changes in the political, economic and strategic medium of Europe and Eurasia, generating a historical cultural landscape that simultaneously reveals homogeneity and heterogeneity. The findings of the research provide a nuanced understanding of cultural catalyst complex processes of the Black Sea to build the historical identity of the place. The cohesive development of the coasts occurred during the period of relative continuity of the Greco-Roman-Byzantine urban development followed by the blossoming around of Genovese-Venetian colonies and finally followed by about three centuries of Ottoman rule over the sea. The heterogeneity of the historic landscape of the Black Sea is multifaceted and comes from archaic globalization influences, of cultural hegemony, processes of Orientalization, Westernization, Christianization, Islamization, representing aspects of the cultural geography of the Black Sea. In Homi Bhabha's formulation, a cultural "in-between" is to be uncovered in the Black Sea studies of place.[9] By this stratification is composed the multicultural character, or, using a more appropriate term, the cosmopolitan character of the region. The appropriateness of the last term – cosmopolitan – is conferred by the calling of port cities, operating as markets trade and interaction with otherness space, defined by a culture of change and embrace of the difference, of the foreigner. Beyond the elements of cohesion and divergence of historical cultural landscape, the Black Sea is revealed as a unique place on earth. In symmetry with the world of the Mediterranean Sea of Braudel, one can speak of a world of the Black Sea, with a distinct Pontic ethos. The character of the region can be customized by the historical regional subdivisions: the Balkan coast, the coast of Anatolia, the Caucasus coast, and the coast of Crimea, within which can be extended a research hypothesis of the traditional Pontic styles.

The research drawback on the waterfront cities of the Black Sea makes this a priority even more so important and relevant for current interdisciplinary research. Place identity research of the Black Sea would inspired by the enduring success of the policies and practices of the national branding in

other parts of the world.[10] Providing a deeper understanding of the culture and of cultural places of the Black Sea aims at covering a gap that exists between technocrats and professions of a cultural orientation and helping to create a coherent system of communication for the study of the Black Sea site. The research calls for an interdisciplinary reflection of the historical heritage of the Black Sea through the process of construction and dissemination of the identity of the place.

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