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The City of the Sensitive and the Brave. Personal Stories, Art and Place-Making in Cluj, Romania

Abstract: The City of the Sensitive and the Brave. Personal Stories, Art and Place-Making in Cluj, Romania

Cluj, the second largest city in Romania, undergoes a process of defining its identity, whereat cultural heritage could be a major resource in the process. In order to support this, we realised research on visual materials using an album of original works about Cluj, artists' drawings about the city – Clujul meu și Clujul tău [My Cluj and Your Cluj]. The project from which the album developed started in February 2013, as an initiative of a store for stationary, arts, and graphics supply, and it developed into a community project, where initatiors, contributors and society created together a compendium of original works. The album is an innovative product, offering an alternative image of Cluj, focusing on spatial and cultural connections, merging the features and the essence of the city and its people, It could be used as a planning tool, or an instrument in the process of placemaking, a special souvenir and an information source for tourism.

Keywords: *visual art, place-making, place identity, geographical knowledge, Cluj.*

1. Introduction

Cluj, the second largest city in Romania (with more than 300,000 inhabitants) and a big university centre with a rich history, undergoes a process of redefining its identity. The aim of this paper is (1) to advocate that the preserved cultural heritage is a major resource in the reinvention process of this post-socialist city, and (2) to emphasise the relevance and the chances of involving the society in an authentic participative city-planning. To support this approach, we realised a research using visual materials and we employed a visual methodology focused on an album of original works about Cluj, artists' drawings and stories about the city: *Clujul meu și Clujul tău* (My Cluj and Your Cluj). We also employed discourse analysis to underline artists' perceptions of the city and one interview was conducted.

Owing to its creation process as well as to the community involvement in its funding and promotion, the album is an innovative product, while offering an alternative image of Cluj, focusing on spatial and cultural connections, and, because of its place-based drawings of the city, it may be used as a planning tool, and an information source for tourism and city branding.

2. Theoretical background and methodology

Memory, wider experience, high geographical mobility and the drawing ability are all factors influencing our spatial mapping skills, more precisely our drawing of cognitive maps (Murray, Spencer, 1979). Nevertheless, visual artists posses trained observation capacity and attention, revealed in their drawing skills.

Rich scientific literature explores how to use images and visual art to "read" place identity and people's complex relationships to their living environment, involving methodological approaches (Bartram, 2010; Doroftei, 2016, 2017; Rose, 2012), the concept of *place* in contemporary art (Bartram, 2010) and the affective dimension of *landscape* and the sense of *place* for depicting *genius loci* in Geography (Doroftei, 2016).

Images are considered significant for the organisation of knowledge (using signs and symbols), they are mediators providing the audience with one or more interpretations and gazes and they are also a powerful means to create worlds. Through all these processes, the visual mediation of spatial experiences makes reality comprehensible (Schlottmann, Miggelbrink, 2009) and informs and spreads geographical knowledge (Zimmerman, 2007).

In addition, the expressive selectivity of visual art may be considered a form of data, which, due to the invocation of *genius loci*, through the artists' responses to physical and cultural landscape, can inform geographic inquiry by reiterating certain "insistent signifiers" (key visual elements) and creating a landscape of feeling (Balm, 2000).

Art enables us to see things in new ways, to think about and understand places differently, it is inspirational, gives information and records it (Fox, 2005, p. 10).

Geographers have highlighted recently the appearance of a 'neo-visual turn' in cultural geography (Hawkins, 2013), where visual culture is «a catalyst for dealing with identity», empowering voices and people (Tolia-Kelly, 2012, pp. 136-138), arguing that «contemporary research collaborations between a visual culture and geography represent almost a new orthodoxy within the discipline».

In this context, Hawkins argues that art is «a mode of critical exploration» (2012, p. 53), involving landscape, identity, space, home, and memory (*Ivi*, p. 54). Geography's creative (re)turn consists in our discipline's «evolving valorization of the visual» meant to intervene «in the becoming of places» (Hawkins, 2015, p. 252).

Hawkins (2011, p. 464) also distinguishes between «'dialogues' whereby geographers interpret and analyse art works, and 'doings' in which geographers become exhibition curators, collaborate with artists and even become creative practitioners in their own right» In this first stance, we find our research, analysing drawings about «the city as a sensous realm that is imagined, lived» (*Ivi*, p. 465).

Considering images as either reliable or deceptive, slippery, occupying liminal states where the distictions between objective or subjective, fact and fiction, are blurred, Roberts (2012) argues for a nuanced encountering of visual images and of their study, proposing the hauntological approach. Following the same idea, she points out that «a hauntological approach takes into account the capacity of the image to take us by surprise, to resist interpretation, to appear to mean nothing (naturalized) and deceive us, examining our ability to invest images with meaning» (*Ivi*, p. 397). Nevertheless, although having «'a mind of their own'» images «cannot reproduce themselves without human participation» (*Ivi*, p. 394).

Starting from the ideas that images are products of perceptual and cognitive faculties (i.e. reality is humanly constructed) and also of specific historical, social and political conditions, then city images are sensual, human ideas, where researchers may explore people's sense of place (Phillips, 1993). We realised this through an art-based approach.

The research material is an art album of original works about Cluj: *Clujul meu și Clujul tău* (My Cluj and Your Cluj). We used visual methodology to investigate the drawings (their representational discourse produced through cognitive and affective mapping) and discourse analysis to study the artists' statements from interviews conducted by coordinators of the project. We used also the written and visual material on the descris.ro/blog, on the facebook.com/DeScrisPenshop, on the crest-emidei.ro, and on the site of the *I Love Cluj Community*. Moreover, in 2017, we interviewed one of the initiatiors of the project.

3. The project: production and authors

The project started in 2013, as an initiative of *DeScris Penshop* in Cluj. The online version of the DeScris Penshop was newly launched and the owners wished to promote it and the high quality stationary products. To the call of the initiators "Please show us how Cluj-Napoca looks through your eyes", responded over 50 artists from Cluj and from other parts of Romania, living in Cluj or having spent some years there, and who dedicated to the city a personal portrait of how they saw it. Firstly, the initiators approached acquainted artists and, due to word-of-mouth promotion, the movement increased and in four months they realised numerous drawings, illustrations, even caricatures, all very different in style.

30 works of this collection of around 100 pieces were included in the art album, which according to the editors did not contain «pretty pictures of well-known landscapes [...], or familiar, postcard like images of Cluj. But [...] its most personal stories, most hidden traits and personal adventures that will make you smile, make you sad or that will awaken your nostalgia». The chosen works of the album show «not the Cluj of the bored, the tired and the blasé, of lukewarm landscapes and pink sunsets. This is the young Cluj: the city of the sensitive and the brave» (DeScris PenShop, 2013).

The works commissioned by the shop had the same production frame: a Moleskine notebook and Faber Castell crayons and pencils, which enabled a unitary format, but allowed the artists freedom of creativity and personal style.

The images, selected by a jury (collaborators of the shop), were assembled in an album and published in one edition of 1,000 pieces. The works presented in the album were accompanied by the artists' basic biographical data, artistic background, and by a short interview, underlining the relation of the artists with art and with Cluj.

The authors were – with one exception – in their 20s and 30s. Most of them came from Tran-

sylvania and, according to them, they all studied arts, many of them at the Universities in Cluj and Bucharest.

When asked about their story with Cluj, they emphasised on positive and negative urban features. The positive aspects mainly stressed out social qualities, such as the open minded people, the diversity the city offered, the numerous artistic projects and cultural events it provided, its vitality and dynamics, where one could not be bored: «Cluj is a lively city, dynamic, explosive, culturally speaking, but Cluj has something others lack (not only just Romanian cities): a rather high audience that is well read and educated, who appreciates what they see and hear. It is an involved audience: going to the cinema, to the opera, to the theatre, ballet, exhibitions and street art» (DeScris PenShop, p. 109).

Furthermore, some considered Cluj as another home, which provided freedom of creation and evolution: «To me, Cluj is home, a secret combination that I have yet to learn the key, between people and the atmosphere. Various people are mysteriously attracted here and make the city a live being. Cluj has much to offer culturally and I am thankful for that» (*Ivi*, p. 13).

The old architecture, the cultural heritage was also appreciated: «My Cluj is nostalgic for its past, but also enthusiast for its future. This is visible in buildings and architectural styles. My Cluj has a healthy architectural balance, which I need in order to live here, to look at the things around me and to be inspired» (*Ivi*, p. 77).

Personal connections (friends, partners, studies) played a major role in assessing the city: «Cluj is about friends, atmosphere, lifestyle, Ardeal, excellence and another home» (DeScris PenShop, p. 89) or «[I am] here because I don't run away from what is mine» (*Ivi*, p. 73). Memories and nostalgia emerged from their statements: «I don't like the enclosed shape of the city as a fortress, but I like how every day I find new holes in the wall, through which I am able to discover a new piece, a new Cluj. I like to overlap my own memories, from my neighbourhood, in Gheorgheni, with other people's stories and memories, which I happen to meet and who happen to speak to me» (*Ivi*, p. 65).

On the other hand, the negative attributes emphasised pragmatic facets regarding the lack of efficient urban planning, considered incoherent or chaotic and disregarding the beautiful old buildings mainly in the Old Town and city centre. They also pointed out the problem of not enough green spaces and the overloaded traffic, as well as the crowded urban space: «I like the old city ar-chitecture and the fact that efforts are made to provide bicycle lanes. I think there will never be enough green spaces» (DeScris PenShop, p. 29). Not all expectations were being met: «When I arrived here, I was expecting a more dynamic city, culturally speaking. It would be great if people could put their enthusiasm into more tangible things» (*Ivi*, p. 85).

Despite all these, Cluj was still presented as a familiar place, enhancing strong place-attachment: «Cluj is like an ugly girl that you secretly have a crush on. After classes you walk her home and you talk to her about life, and future, and meeting parents, but at the same time, you hope none of your friends see you with her» (*Ivi*, p. 25) or «Cluj is the perfect dose of diversity and inspiration» (*Ivi*, p. 4).

To the question "What about art?", their answers were diverse, but one could trace the strong relationship between the opportunities that Cluj offered for artists and art world, their passion and the role of art both for themselves and for their audience: «Art is a way of life that means to be honest with yourself and free» (DeScris PenShop, p. 101), «I have days when I draw in my studio for 10 hours and then I rush home and draw some more» (*Ivi*, p. 108), «Dealing with serious matters by pretending to play. I prefer to do it the other way around» (*Ivi*, p. 89), «I wish my art to be a present – something valuable beyond price – full of meaning for whoever receives it» (*Ivi*, p. 112).

Besides the commercial gain, this art album promotes an aesthetic and dialogic engagement with space, welcoming questions of what art does or claims to do, «in terms of building communities and places» (Hawkins, 2012, p. 59).

These artists offered an «occupation-specific reading of the urban landscape» (Bain, 2004, p. 419), while also exhibiting themselves, because the initiative of the album offered them an opportunity for visibility (to each other and to the public) and validation, thus maintaining their artistic identities (*Ivi*, pp. 420-424).

4. Audience

The production circumstances and promotion approach of this project defined partially its audience, where we could identify several categories. The *I Love Cluj* community, *created on Facebook with the aim of promoting a positive image of Cluj and by that encouraging the inhabitants to cherish the values of the city*, supported the project by advertising it in the social media network. Several creations were exhibited as

enlarged photographies of the originals in the show-case of the shop, like a temporary exhibition of a one-piece gallery, by that raising public' awareness. The initiative was advertised as well on the blog of the shop (*descris.ro/blog*) and on their *Facebook* social media account (*facebook.com/DeScrisPenshop*).

Further audience was approached in co-oper-ation with *TIFF (Transylvanian International Film Festival)* in 2013, where the collection of enlarged photographies of the originals was presented to the public as an exhibition at one of the festival's main locations. The audience for this visual text included, among others, universita students, ge-ographers, architects, artists, and urbanists.

Social media networks and the citizens them-selves played a decisive role in publishing the se-lected works. The *crestemidei.ro* crowdfunding site supported the project and advertised for raising funds (http://crestemidei.ro/ClujulmeusiClujult au?locale=ro). 54 supporters raised the large part of the needed amount to publish the album. The shop contributed the rest. The initiators wanted to promote the talented artists who participated at the project, but also to offer an unconventional or free-spirited city-album with *Amintiri de suflet. Amintiri din present* (Memories of the soul. Memories of the present), which could serve also as a present or sou-venir, as they stated in the short presentation video on the *Crestemidei* platform (http://crestemidei.ro/ ClujulmeusiClujultau?locale=ro).

Multiculturalism, one of the main features of Cluj, was reflected not only in the artists hosted, but also in the arrangement of the album, hav-ing the text in Romanian and Hungarian. Adding also an international language, English, enlarged its audience.

The relation produced between the image and the viewers is one of familiarity, due to the depic-tion of symbolic and emotional places and land-scapes, anchoring people's identity and the urban territorial identities. The interpretation of the im-ages, decoding the cultural meanings of this visual imagery could be affected by the relation of the au-dience to the city and the knowledge about its mul-ticultural history, symbols, cultural background, and socio-political discourses. According to these, one could identify or overlook certain details load-ed with multiple meanings and symbols or recog-nise emblematic elements of the cityscape.

Some of the illustrations, of their details, were recreated as bookmarks and one as postcard, cre-ating new assessment possibilities through a new format, another function of the product, the fre-quency of use and contact with it.

Another aspect which influenced the audience

was also the limited distribution possibilities of the album, which could be purchased at the on-line shop, at the stationary shop, at one bookstore and at a souvenir store in the Old Town, as well as at the souvenir stands of the *TIFF* during three editions (2013-2015).

The attention the project received in 2013 boosted the image of the online shop, so the ini-tial purpose of the initiators was reached. Further on, it ignited sporadic collaborations with some of the involved artists. The artists themselves re-ceived a discount for life on certain items. Even though the album was an unplanned product of the promotion action, the initiators were disap-pointed by the shallow echo the album had for the public. That could be linked to the limited distribution channels they used.

5. The images

We interpreted the drawings according to the following questions: What do the different com-ponents of the image signify? What knowledge is being deployed? What are the symbolic elements of the visual image? How does the image relate to other cultural images and ideas? What is the colour, composition, atmosphere (emotional tone and mood), angle of view, perspective, speed and rhythm, sound and narrative? (Rose, 2012).

Even though the creations were part of a series, they had the same production frame, they did not affect each other's meaning, depicting personal and individual perceptions. Each work and art-ist occupied two double pages in the book. One double page presented the drawing and the sec-ond displayed a detail of the illustration and the interview with the artist in three languages. Fur-ther on, each illustration had a caption reflecting a short definition of Cluj by the artist, also a photo of the artist and his/her contact details or links to their portfolios. Photos gave also some insight in the creation process, showing the work in pro-gress.

Each art work has a headline that captures the essence of the drawing: *Cluj takes you for a walk; Cluj is a whistling tune; Cluj has its head in the clouds; Cluj has its socks out to dry; Cluj is fashion; Cluj is to-gether; Cluj has green leaves; Cluj is the place where we cannot meet; Cluj is number one; Cluj is inhabited with living legends; Cluj is a folk heritage; Cluj seen at high speed; Cluj is the city that makes you feel like a lady; Cluj is enchanted; Cluj is a lovely view from the hot air bal-loon; Cluj sees enormously and feels monstrously; Cluj makes you dizzy; Cluj tells you 7 stories in one; Cluj*

seen by Superman, etc. (DeScris PenShop, 2013).

The art works were not accurate reproductions of reality, they were artists' personal images of Cluj, enhanced by the fact that the producers were not regular people, and they were responding to a call of showing their own ideas of the city. The work presents an intimate perception of the urban landscape; the artists are narrating Cluj through drawings, revealing their occupational based practice of looking and creating an "emotive geography" of the city, able «to capture the hearts and minds» (Jansson, Lagerkvist, 2009, pp. 25-26).

The urban structures appeared idealized, denatured or very close to the reality of the captured moment, concrete or abstract, presenting the city how it was at that moment and how it should be. The details of the urban landscape that appeared the most were the followings: the Old Town, certain buildings, churches, statues, and the Central Park. Some creations underlined the functions of the city: providing services for culture, shopping, dwelling, communicating, entertainment,

which altogether assured the urban life style. The unique and original visions and interpretations of the city recreated the versatileness of Cluj.

The colourful or monochrome drawings in the album approach diverse features of Cluj (e.g. symbolic connections between the various ethnic groups living and shaping the city; nature, lacking green areas), they are visions of the city, some tell a story, others show features of mind maps, yet with artistic touch.

Most images beared strong sensory impact, creating a sensory urban image. Thus, the audience experienced not only the obvious visual sensation, but perceived movement (Fig. 1), rhythm, touch, smell, taste, noise, and atmosphere. Vantage points of the images were various: from a balloon, at high speed, with lots of green spaces, and immersed in tranquillity.

The Old Town, the socio-communist residential areas (Fig. 2), and the Central Park were the main represented sites. Monuments with different cultural and ethnic background (e.g. churches,
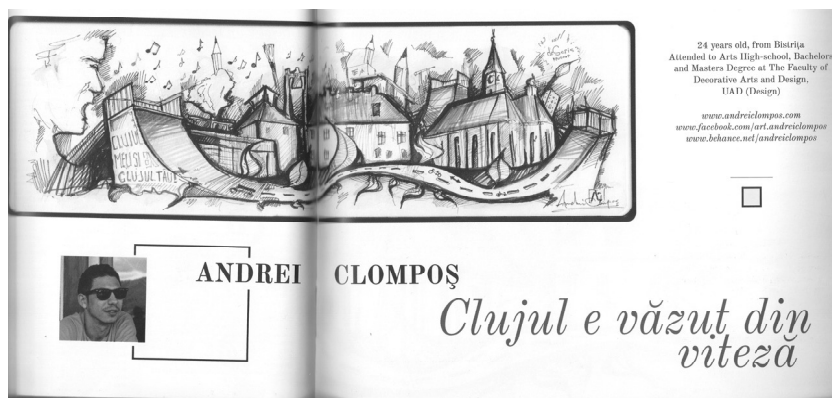

Fig. 1. Cluj seen at high speed (by Andrei Clompoş, 2013; reproduced with permission). Source: DeScris PenShop (2013, pp. 66-67).

Fig. 2. Cluj has its socks out to dry (by Paul Bucovesan, 2013; reproduced with permission). Source: DeScris PenShop (2013, pp. 22-23).

statues, buildings) were all built heritage elements which could contribute to the brand of the city. Key elements, unique features of the city in the shape of university, history, *TIFF*, and culture completed this inventory of distinguishing material and immaterial artefacts of the city.

Yet, several images had no trace of urban or architectural structures. In those images, people and/or animals were the main characters, addressing also the social and demographical aspects of Cluj.

Besides protecting the strong sense of place and a sense of local ownership, most of the drawings pictured places and spaces imbued with shared symbols and memories, pointing out a series of indicators of successful urban places which were characteristic of Cluj and its urban quality (urbanity), where the senses were heightened: «affection/friendliness/hospitality; a sense of belonging; historical and cultural continuity; a sense of fun/humour; opportunities for gossip; open-mindedness; vitality; fantasy; flamboyance; colour; beauty/aesthetic stimulus» (Montgomery, 1998, p. 95).

Cluj is fashionable and marketable, as reflected in Fig. 3, where another layer of meaning is attached to the city, while preserving the symbols of recognition (Dunn, McGuirk, Winchester, 1995, p. 159). This image, where Cluj portaits a young fashionable girl, but preserving architectural symbols of the cityscape, underlines that identity of place and «representations of place will always be partial in some sense» (*Ivi*, 1995, p. 164). From this image, we may understand that Cluj is a vibrant and progressive city, with a positive image, integrated in the "consumerist model" of urbanization (Young, Kaczmarek, 1999, p. 189), a cultural centre featuring leisure, quality of life, and tourism.

These drawings have an evocative function, fostering intimacy, as the artists have the power to create "both internal and external worlds" (McIntosh, 2008). Most of them tell a story or convey a particular message (with often strong visual impact), rather than proposing pure enjoyment (*Ivi*, p. 77).

6. Discussion and conclusion

Advocating alongside Anderson and Smith that «'real' geography be made with feelings (rather than without them)» (2001, p. 7), we underline that those drawings, which were mapping the young artists' feelings about Cluj, forward art as a language of belonging, creating an emotional geography of the city, and, at the same time, those drawings may be as many arguments supporting that «'relevant' policies may have to be small in scale, humanizing in intent, embedded in context, enacted through bodies and so on» (*Ivi*, p. 8).

The album is a cultural product, where the sense of place was re-constructed through artists' selective spatial understanding and emotiolising of space, thus affecting the viewers' perceptions. Such a process of a city's image promotion through art testifies for the existence of social capital in diverse forms (bonding and bridging). This capital could be used for (a) place-based, sustainable and resilient tourism development, where leadership, creativity, collaboration, and commitment are deeply involved into place-making strategies (Billington, Carter, Kayamba, 2008) or for (b) participatory city planning. Such strategies are shaped according to a certain vision and its sharing with the local community. Moreover, social capital is formed and needed for place promotion (for the purpose of enacting local economic development strategies) and for community attachment.
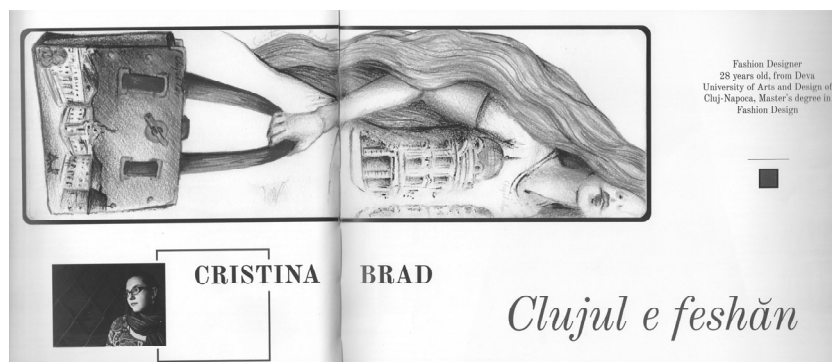

Fig. 3. Cluj is fashion (by Cristina Brad, 2013; reproduced with permission). Source: DeScris PenShop (2013, pp. 26-27).

To sum up, what actually started as an advertisement for an online shop and certain stationary products turned into a community project, where initiators, artists and the audience joined forces in launching an original product which represented them and whom they were proud of.

Acknowledgements

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