

The Construction of Commodity-Signs upon Medieval Heritage Architecture: Spatial Approach

Aleksandr Michelson
Department of Public Economy
Tallinn University of Technology
Tallinn, Estonia
e-mail: amichelson@hotmail.ee

Katrin Paadam
Department of Public Economy
Tallinn University of Technology
Tallinn, Estonia
e-mail: katrin.paadam@tseba.ttu.ee

Abstract—The creation of modern urban space through the involvement of entire buildings or their construction parts with medieval characteristics into the use in daily activities is seen as deeply interconnected with the production of symbolic spatial values and hence the construction of symbolic capital applied in city branding at the international tourism market. The aim of this research paper is to understand the constitutive process of commodity-signs as of symbolic value and as a combination of multifarious socio-economic activities making use of medieval architecture in urban heritage space. The research takes qualitative approach by applying methods of direct observation, photo recording and text analysis. The focus of this paper is on the commodity-signs in the function of symbolic capital and, in particular, on ways they are constituted within a multi-fold combination of socio-economic activities and medieval heritage architecture in the urban space of Tallinn Old Town, Estonia. It was found that medieval heritage architecture as an object open to the gaze is by far a function to the construction of commodity-signs.

Keywords—place marketing, heritage architecture, symbolic capital, public space, openness, Tallinn

I. INTRODUCTION

Historic sites with heritage architecture are regarded as important assets for the tourism industry and as added value in everyday experience. Symbolic capital that comprises signs and meanings produced upon heritage architecture is applied in city branding in order to attract visitors, investments, industries and residents [1]. For the latter symbolic capital denotes an essential component for self-perception and hence a significant frame of reference for identity building.

The research is conducted in the Old Town of Tallinn that has been attributed the international heritage status in the World Heritage List since 1997 because it is recognized as '(...) an outstanding and exceptionally complete and well preserved example of a medieval northern European trading city (...)' [2,3].

Medieval heritage architecture embodies heritage value through the entire buildings or separate construction parts. The physical presence of medieval heritage with explicit medieval characteristics in the urban space enriches the range of signs connected to things in modern use. The urban

heritage space thus appears as a continuous becoming of a place where the modern commodities (i.e. products and services) are consumed inextricably with the signs of the past.

This is the aim of this research paper to understand the constitutive process of commodity-signs as of symbolic value and as a combination of multifarious socio-economic activities making use of medieval architecture in urban heritage space.

The research attempts to meet the following set of objectives: 1) to identify the functions of open exterior and interior public space of buildings in the study site; 2) to identify the functions in use pertaining to the medieval heritage that comprise both entire buildings and separate architectural constructions as well parts of the building, i.e. the structural components that signify the continuous presence of the medieval past in modern urban space; 3) to identify various combinations of medieval architectural qualities with agents' activities.

The methodological approach applied in this paper is based on classical and more recent considerations on the production of space, the construction of symbolic capital and heritage consumption. The second chapter describes the scale of research, applied research methods and techniques, the study site and data. The findings of the research are presented in chapter 3 followed by the concluding remarks that also indicate future steps to be taken to complete the study.

II. PROBLEM FORMULATION

A. Theoretical approach

As argued in Graham [4], heritage as a social construction, imagined, defined and articulated within cultural and economic practice is also contested along several different axes – the temporal, the spatial, the cultural-economic and public-private. Conceptualizing the heritage in terms of profitability for providers disposed to satisfying the demand for heritage experience in its economic uses, Graham conceives of the idea of 'external' and 'internal' cities which at the first notion refers to the promotion of the international performance of a city and at the second notion the cultural dimension of heritage [4]. The external city poses a threat of commodification of heritage for tourism

consumption that could result in the emergence of the milieu for predictable urban activities (restaurants, specialist retailing etc), while internal city is connected to the living environment in which people ground their everyday lives [4]. Graham's considerations of heritage in economic terms are interconnected with the use of space due to the capacity of heritage to generate benefits to users through enhanced historicity and the physical presence of people who are attracted to them [4].

Graham's economic and cultural interpretations of heritage are conceptually connected to the work of Hall [5] claiming that culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meaning and their real, practical effects as Graham summarizes on Hall [5] [4].

The concepts of Graham and Hall are supported by the notion of symbolic capital conceived by Bourdieu and his identification of buildings as the symbolic goods of a two-faced reality, a commodity and a symbolic object [6] by asserting that buildings are especially exposed to the general gaze betraying social relations [7]. Another important conceptual contribution is from Baudrillard, which relates the function of a sign with exchange value as well as with use value [8] exerted in the amalgamation of signs [9] and emergence of commodity and sign into the commodity-sign as avowed in [9] on Baudrillard [8,11].

The consumption of these commodity-signs in urban space is spatially defined. Symbolic capital drawn upon buildings of heritage value participates in the construction of the urban heritage space of signs - the representations of space in Lefebvre's terms [12]. Or as it is argued in [10], the historical parts of buildings having lost its original functions in urban space serve the interests of the picturesque aesthetics. Alternatively, the produced space is consumed by its users in certain built environment with identifiable spaces for various conduct, as observed by [13] there are spaces for walking and places for staying (standing, sitting and seeing as well as hearing and talking). Research on 'life between buildings' [13] has been emphasizing the importance of also an understanding of the availability of a view in the choice of a place.

Though space is also defined by the public-private device of buildings and areas, private properties potentially communicate to the consumers of the space as a space for living and hence these properties are involved into the social life [14]. The accessibility of public space is connected to the notion of openness that has been defined as a product of physical character as well as a product of access, ownership and management and it refers to the capacity of the space to permit freely chosen actions of its users [15].

The concepts concerning the consumption of commodity-signs constructed upon heritage, hence of the past, and the production of space as well as public-private duality are subjects for the following study performed in the heritage site of Old Town of Tallinn.

B. Scale of research, methodology and data

The research of the urban heritage space is conducted in a fairly limited scale. The investigation is confined to open exterior space and interior public space as spaces freely

accessible to its users and actively involved into daily activities. Furthermore, the study site is limited to one street in the Old Town of Tallinn, Estonia, - Pikk tänav (in English "Long Street", and hereafter referred to as "Pikk Street"). The reasoning behind this selection is that the street in focus is the oldest main street having been preserved since the Medieval Ages; the continued importance of this street today is emphasized in the persistency of heritage buildings - the guild houses - in their original locations: the Great Guild, the Guild of St Canute, St Olaf's Guild and the Brotherhood of Blackheads [16, 17]. As such the historical street unfolds on a dense presence of the medieval architectural heritage and its components in the modern urban spatial realities.

The research applies qualitative methods and makes use primarily of the direct observation of the functional spaces and functions of medieval heritage and photo recording conducted in August 2010. Text analysis has been applied in order to identify medieval architectural heritage in the study site with the results presented in the current part of the paper hereinafter.

The study site presents the architecture of the 13th-16th centuries [18] comprising the built environment having been investigated within the context of archaeological and topographical research on the former surface landscape on the site of the town: town wall with towers and gates, churches, guild houses, stone dwellings, storage houses, earthworks [17].

The data represent the qualitative attributes of functions of open exterior space and interior public space in the study site and of the functions of the medieval heritage.

According to experts in the field of architecture and history, the entire buildings that are considered good examples of the medieval architecture in Pikk Street are the buildings of the Great Guild, St Olaf's Guild and the Brotherhood of Blackheads, also St Olaf's Church, the buildings (former medieval merchant dwellings) at Pikk 7, 15, 29a, 30, 34, 43, 44, 46, 47, 51, 53, 55, 60, 66, 69, 71, and the cannon tower Fat Margaret [19-24]. The former medieval merchant dwellings in the study site represent the fifteenth-century merchants' houses [18,25,26] and are listed in the National Register of Monuments [27].

In addition, a few buildings identified as 'extended spots' in this paper enter the space of the Pikk Street with their medieval characteristics [19,18,23] from their location in other streets due to the open landscape: Town Hall, Church of the Holy Spirit, Tallinn City Theatre.

The spatial layout of the buildings is presented in Fig. 1, where the extended spots are marked by black quadrangles.

The structural components that are associated with medieval architecture are porch stones [26], stone carvings [28,29], decorative forging [30], the art and works by different craftsmen and artists [31], staircases with limestone slabs, pictorial decorations, interior decorations (portals, window pillars, staircases and fireplaces), decorated tiled stones [32], painted décor of dwellings (ceilings and furnishings) [33], crest tiles, weather vanes, winch beams, niches on the front, goods hatches, wall ties etc [23,25,26].

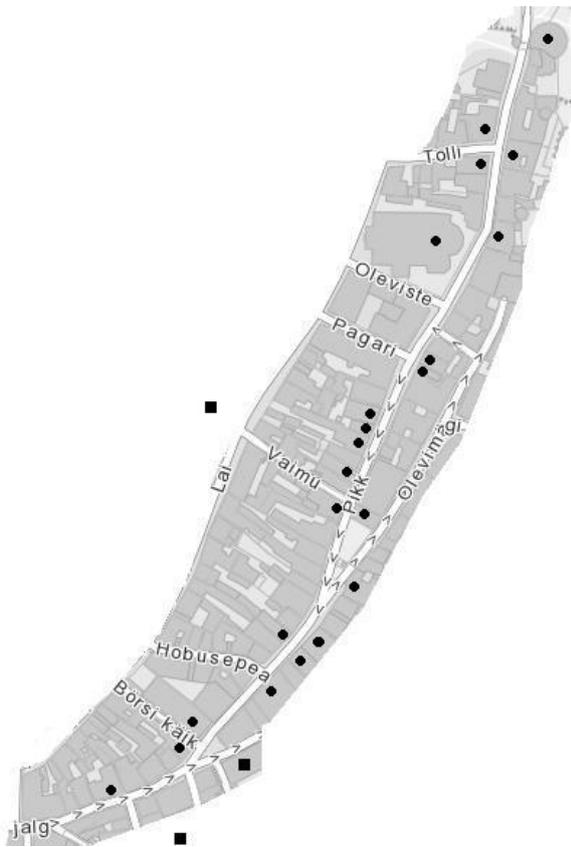


Figure 1. The spatial layout of the buildings in the study area. Source: Web Map Server of the Estonian Land Board; author.

III. PROBLEM SOLUTION

The research has focused on buildings evaluated as well-preserved examples of medieval architecture by experts (see chapter 2) as well as on buildings with medieval construction parts identified during the observation. Public functions applied to the converted interior space of the buildings are multifarious. Mostly cultural functions, premises for the consumption of services of shops or restaurants dominate in the given buildings. Other functional use of space in these buildings concerns accommodation (hotel) and religious services, semi-public office space as well as private residences. Moreover, two empty properties, two buildings in the stage of conservation and five buildings with sole private functions were found in the study site. The observation shows the presence of private space in almost all buildings as an indication of the domination of hybrid functionality of the heritage site in focus.

Five open terraces owned by restaurants were found in the public space exterior to the buildings offering functional consumable space for staying outside in the medieval milieu of the town. The differentiation between inside and outside spaces for staying on the extended restaurant space of terraces provides another insight into the concept introduced by [13]. It is also argued upon this observation that the space for staying allows a time-wise functional specification:

spaces for short-term (e.g. shops) stay and spaces for long-term stay (hotels, restaurants, offices, various other services).

Altogether 73 buildings were subjected to observation, with 14 buildings on the right-hand side of the Pikk Street (at 44-70) of nearly continuous private function, except a souvenir shop, a publisher's building and a religious institution. Evidently, this part of the street space is unable to enthrone longer staying; rather it creates a space for walking and is regarded a place which produces consumable signs only for the gaze, albeit of relevance as part of the medieval attraction.

As consumed by the users of spaces for walking as well as for staying, extended spots with explicit medieval characteristics signified by their fronts potentially supply the space with added value appearing as signs of alternative significance. As such they become functional connecting points between spaces of distinct nature and are inherent in the production of commodity-signs in the Old Town.

The presently empty interior space - unoccupied buildings with courtyards - is endowed with a great potential for further functional advancement of medieval heritage space by introducing new practices within the context of the picturesque aesthetic and allowing this way maximization of the symbolic capital - the indispensable asset for city branding.

IV. CONCLUSION

The detailed research on the functionality of medieval heritage buildings performed on a limited scale of a site in Pikk Street in the Old Town of Tallinn allows us to conclude that: medieval heritage architecture as an object open to the gaze is by far a function to the construction of commodity-signs. The picturesque aesthetic of separate parts of medieval architectural constructions and whole well-preserved medieval buildings present in the exterior spaces and displayed in the interior spaces open to the public adheres symbolic capital and significant power in the production of space attractive for consumers. The 'extended spots', the fronts, especially eloquent of the past present in the modern urban space offer agents - visitors and service providers - added value in the production and consumption of symbolic goods and enhance opportunities for identification with the valued signs.

The production of space with commodity-signs within the context of medieval heritage architecture is enabled through the interaction of spaces for short-term and long-term staying and spaces for walking which involves 'extended spots' with medieval characteristics. Conversion of unoccupied buildings and closed courtyards into consumable public space would increase the spatial qualities, reinforce the symbolic power of the heritage architecture and thereby the branding potential of the city.

The perceived presence of private spaces in a number of individual buildings and in also the buildings of hybrid functionality bespeaks the multiple use of heritage architecture and low level of commodification in the study site. Though the subtle nature of the notion is debatable and will be part of future theoretical discussions based on also an

advanced and enlarged investigation of the production of space in the Tallinn Old Town.

The practical benefits of the approach applied as well as methodological experiences might be of interest for local authorities concerned with place marketing. The results of the research indicate that urban planning decisions should enable to produce more powerful signs of the past in the strategic construction of the symbolic capital used in the city branding.

REFERENCES

- [1] P. Kotler, C. Asplund, I. Rein, and H. Haider, *Marketing Places Europe: How to Attract Investments, Industries, Residents and Visitors to Cities, Communities, Regions and Nations in Europe*, 2nd ed., Harlow: Financial Times Prentice Hall, 1999.
- [2] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. World Heritage Committee. Twenty-first session. Naples, Italy, [Online document], 1997 Dec 1-6(WHC-97/CONF.208/17), [cited 2010 Aug 10], Available HTTP: <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/repcom97.htm#822>
- [3] WHC Nomination Documentation. UNESCO Region EUROPE. The Historic Centre (Old Town) of Tallinn, [Online document], 1997 Dec 1-6(WHC-97/CONF.208/17), [cited 2010 Aug 10], Available HTTP: http://whc.unesco.org/p_dynamic/sites/passfile.cfm?filename=822bis&filetype=pdf&category=nominations File: 822.pdf
- [4] B. Graham, "Heritage as Knowledge: Capital or Culture?" *Urban Studies*, vol. 39, no.5-6, May 2002, pp. 1003-1017, doi: 10.1080/00420980220128426.
- [5] S. Hall, Ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage Publications, 1997.
- [6] P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.
- [7] P. Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of Economy*, Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2005.
- [8] J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Saint Louis: Telos Press, 1981.
- [9] J. Baudrillard, "The Rise of the Object: the End of Culture," in *Mass Identity. Architecture. Architectural Writings of Jean Baudrillard*, Ed. F. Proto, Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2006, pp. 95-121.
- [10] C. O'Brien, "Form, function and sign: Signifying the past in urban waterfront regeneration," *Journal of Urban Design*, vol. 2, no. 2, Jun. 1997, pp. 163-179, doi: 10.1080/13574809708724402.
- [11] J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, Saint Louis: Telos Press, 1975.
- [12] H. Lefebvre, *The production of space*, Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996.
- [13] J. Gehl, *Life between buildings: using public space*, Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press, 2006.
- [14] A. Madanipour, *Public and private spaces of the city*, London, New York: Routledge, 2003.
- [15] K. Lynch, and G. Hack, *Site Planning*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984.
- [16] "Pikk tänav", in *Tallinn: entsüklopeedia*, Ed. J. Tamm, vol. 2, Tallinn: Preses Nams, 2004, pp. 67-68.
- [17] R. Zobel, *Tallinn (Reval) in the middle ages: town building in the 13th-14th centuries*, Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, 2001.
- [18] J. Maiste, *Eesti kunsti lugu*, Tallinn: Varrak, 2007.
- [19] M. Hallas-Murula, Ed., *Pool sajandit restaureerimist Eestis: 1950-2000: Restoration of architectural heritage in Estonia: 1950-2000*, Tallinn: Eesti Arhitektuurimuuseum, 2009.
- [20] "Gootika", in *Tallinn: entsüklopeedia*, Ed. J. Tamm, vol. 1, Tallinn: Preses Nams, 2004, pp. 93-95.
- [21] K. Kodres, and P. Ehasalu, "Avalikud honed – omavalitsuste arhitektuurne ja kunstiline manifest", in *Eesti kunsti ajalugu. 2, 1520-1770*, Ed. K. Kodres, Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2005, pp. 69-101.
- [22] "Kolm Õde", in *Tallinn: entsüklopeedia*, Ed. J. Tamm, vol. 1, Tallinn: Preses Nams, 2004, pp. 225-226.
- [23] V. Raam, Ed., *Eesti arhitektuur. 1*, Tallinn: Valgus, 1993.
- [24] J. Tamm, *Restaatorid vanas Tallinnas*, Tallinn: Perioodika, 1984.
- [25] V. Vaga, "Tallinna keskaegne elamu," in *Eesti NSV ajaloo küsimusi*, I, Tartu Riikliku Ülikooli toimetised, no. 87, 1960, pp. 41-88.
- [26] H. Üprus, "Keskaja elamutüüpidest Tallinnas," in *Restaureerimisalaste artiklite kogumik*, Tallinn: Valgus, 1976, pp. 94-122.
- [27] *Kultuurimälestiste riiklik register (2010, Aug. 10)* [Online]. Available: <http://register.muinas.ee/>
- [28] H. Üprus, *Raidkivikunst Eestis XIII-XVII sajandini*, Tallinn: Kunst, 1987.
- [29] H. Üprus, *Tallinna etikukivid*, Tallinn: Valgus, 1987.
- [30] V. Konsap, *Dekoratiivne sepis Tallinna arhitektuuris XVI-XVIII sajandil*, Tallinn: Kunst, 1971.
- [31] R. Kangropol and K. Kodres, "Linn kui tellija 16.-17. sajandil. Kunsti tootvad institutsioonid ja käsitööhärad. Tallinna näide," in *Eesti kunsti ajalugu. 2, 1520-1770*, Ed. K. Kodres, Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2005, pp. 28-41.
- [32] K. Kodres and E. Russow, "Kaunistatud elamu," in *Eesti kunsti ajalugu. 2, 1520-1770*, Ed. K. Kodres, Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2005, pp. 119-151.
- [33] K. Kodres, "Ruumimaalingud elamute kaunistajana 16.-18. sajandil," in *Eesti kunsti ajalugu. 2, 1520-1770*, Ed. K. Kodres, Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2005, pp. 152-164.