TIMISOARA: THE HISTORIC CITY AS A STARTING POINT FOR POST-COMMUNIST SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present Timisoara as a case study of urban planning models in post-communist cities, especially as they relate to the issues of environmentally sustainable development and historic preservation. It will focus on what Timisoara is currently doing right in terms of these fields, as well as additional steps that need to be taken to ensure that the city continues to lead the way in establishing a progressive urban planning model for Romania. In doing so, the paper will argue that the establishment of a community based, long range oriented, comprehensive approach to urban planning will produce the best results from a sustainable development and historic preservation perspective.

Key words: Post-communist cities, sustainable development, historic urban preservation

Timisoara has always been at the leading edge of progress and change in Romanian society. In the 19th century, the city was among the first in Europe to install horse-drawn trams and electric street lamps. In 1989, the Romanian Revolution that overthrew communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and set Romania on the path to freedom and European integration began in the streets of Timisoara. Recently, Timisoara has shown it is ready to lead Romania in another area: urban planning and sustainable development.

The purpose of this paper is to present Timisoara as a case study of urban planning models in post-communist cities, especially as they relate to the issues of environmentally sustainable development and historic preservation. It will focus on what Timisoara is currently doing right in terms of these fields, as well as additional steps that need to be taken to ensure that the city continues to lead the way in establishing a progressive urban planning model for Romania. In doing so, the paper will argue that the establishment of a community based, long range oriented, comprehensive approach to urban planning will produce the best results from a sustainable development and historic preservation perspective.

Timisoara is not the most interesting case study in Romania for historic preservation issues alone. That honor belongs to Sighisoara, Sibiu, Brasov and the other well-preserved Saxon cities in Transylvania. Timisoara is also not the center of the environmental movement in Romania. Cluj-Napoca, with its large student population and proximity to controversial projects such as the Rosia Montana gold mine, is more active in that regard. However, Timisoara does possess certain characteristics that put the city in an excellent position to develop in an environmentally sustainable and historically conscious manner. These characteristics, and the activities that are underway to take advantage of them, are detailed below.
Background

Timisoara is a city of about 400,000 residents located in the western part of Romania, in a region known as the Banat. It is closer by distance to Budapest than to Bucharest, a fact that is important in understanding the city’s history and character. As the city changed hands as European borders shifted over the past few centuries, Timisoara accumulated an ethnically diverse, open-minded population. Today, Timisoara is a major economic and cultural center, and is widely regarded as Romania’s “second city”.

In the two decades since the end of communism, Timisoara has faced multiple urban development challenges. Rapid economic development and uncoordinated urban planning policies at the municipal level have led to an uncertain and chaotic urban development climate. The character of the city’s urban fabric has changed rapidly as communist era industrial spaces become outmoded and neighborhoods designed in the communist era require redevelopment. The city is undertaking major restoration efforts in key historic neighborhoods, as well as developing and implementing a revitalization plan for the Bega Canal, which runs through the city’s historic core. Timisoara’s response to these challenges will determine the quality of life of the city’s residents for decades to come.

What Timisoara is doing right

Historic preservation efforts

The Timisoara City Hall is engaged in multiple high profile historic preservation efforts. Several buildings surrounding the city’s historic Piata Unirii (Union Square) have been restored after decades of communist neglect; more restorations are planned for the future. The City Hall’s Heritage Department has also undertaken a major restoration of Timisoara’s surviving bastion. These efforts, taking place in the historic core, demonstrate a sincere and serious commitment to historic preservation on the part of the City Hall.

Historic preservation efforts are also occurring on a more neighborhood scale level. Piata Trian and the surrounding area are a historic neighborhood that has fallen into neglect and disrepair during and after the communist period. Although it is located just outside the historic core (to the east), the neighborhood is well connected to the rest of the city by public transportation, and to the historic core by good pedestrian routes. A major planning effort is underway to revitalize this neighborhood. Restoration of the neighborhood’s many historic buildings will be part of this effort, as will be finding new uses for abandoned and underused spaces that will be restored. By focusing on policies of revitalization and historic preservation that include densification in areas well served by public transportation and pedestrian facilities, Timisoara is demonstrating how historic preservation and sustainable development best compliment each other. A similar effort is underway for the Iosefin neighborhood, located just south of the city’s main railway station.

Timisoara and European Union structural funds

Romania’s entry into the European Union in 2007 has also given Timisoara an opportunity to lead in the fields of historic preservation and environmentally sustainable development. Designated as a major “growth pole” for Romania, Timisoara and the surrounding region will be receiving approximately 70 million euros in EU structural funds over the next few years for infrastructure and urban development projects. Timisoara’s plan
for spending these funds is still in the proposal stage, but potential projects that specifically advance positive change in the areas of historic preservation and sustainable development include: revitalization of historic quarters of the city (some overlap with projects mentioned above), the creation of dense, mixed-use districts at strategic points in the city such as the main railway station, and the installation of bicycle lanes and infrastructure that will be used for both recreation and commuting. These policies are intended to limit the investment that will be required for new automobile infrastructure, keeping carbon-emitting cars off the road, limiting environmentally damaging urban sprawl and new green-field development on the urban fringe, and preserving the city’s historic urban core.

Current planning initiatives

Timisoara is engaged in several other urban planning initiatives that will be important for encouraging historic preservation and sustainable development. The City Hall has undertaken partnerships with German and Dutch urban planning organizations on several topics, displaying openness to new ideas that will serve the city well. Additionally, the City Hall has developed a strategic master plan for Timisoara’s development, and is beginning the process of developing a new general urban plan. The general urban plan is the most important legal document in the city’s urban planning framework, guiding all aspects of urban development. The fact that Timisoara is focused on all of these different planning activities shows promise, but the way the process has worked in practice has caused chaos and sown confusion. The next section will address steps that Timisoara’s decision-makers should take to achieve its urban planning potential.

What Timisoara must do in the future

Urban Planning Practice in Timisoara

All effective urban planning frameworks follow a logical order. First, legislation is implemented that establishes baseline requirements, processes, and clear chains of command and responsibility. Next, an umbrella planning strategy (such as a master plan) is developed to establish a community vision. Finally, supporting plans and strategies are developed to focus on specific issues, such as land use plans, design guidelines, and programs for making investments (such as the EU structural funds mentioned above).

Unfortunately, urban planning in Timisoara does not yet follow this model. The process of handling the EU structural funds is an illustrative example. To access the structural funds, Timisoara was required to develop an Integrated Plan for Urban Development (PIDU), which would follow a format specified by the EU and by the Government of Romania. In an ideal world, the PIDU would have been developed only after the Timisoara community had established its vision for development in a master plan and a general urban plan. Instead, due to conflicting requirements from different levels of government and a weak urban planning framework, all of these efforts are taking place at the same time with little coordination. In addition, the general urban plan remains a weak document, subject to easy modifications that render moot any comprehensive approach that was taken at the time of its adoption.

A comparison of communist and post-communist urban planning practices in Timisoara may help to explain how the city arrived in its current situation. During the communist era, the City Hall had an Urban Planning Department (Serviciul de
Sistematizare) under the supervision of a Chief Architect. There was also an Institute for Planning and Architecture (IPROTIM). Like every other city level institution (the mayor and other departments), the planning institutions were under the command of the County Prime Secretary of the Communist Party, who received direct orders only from Bucharest.

Under this system, general urban plans, strategies, and development proposals were designed by IPROTIM and approved by the Urban Planning Department, under the strict supervision of the county party officials. This structure led to Bucharest having strong power over development in Timisoara, but the strong urban planning institutions did lead to a comprehensive approach to the city’s development.

In the twenty years since the fall of communism, Romanians have looked with vehemence at anything related to the former regime. The common citizen generally associates socialist planning with the gray and uniform neighborhoods of collective housing. This attitude has led to an inability to consider the possibility that some aspects of the old planning model, such as strong planning institutions, might be beneficial in today’s fast moving development climate.

Today, IPROTIM has been privatized and functions as a small architecture office. The City Hall has more autonomy, and the Urban Planning Department is still responsible for development review, but the lack of a public department to draw urban projects has caused problems. The City Hall must now rely on subjective public tendering for such projects. The Chief Architect has become influential because of the boom in the construction market, but this influence has been challenged by the Director of Development and European Integration, who has additional and overlapping urban development responsibilities (such as the proposal for spending the structural funds). This conflict and competition between departments of the City Hall is counterproductive and contributes to the uncoordinated and weak urban planning framework in Timisoara.

Solutions: The Atelier de Urbanism and Integrated Urban Planning

Timisoara, on its own, is powerless to change some of the factors contributing to its chaotic urban development climate, such as weak and confused legislation at the national level or European Union deadlines. In general, changes such as making the adoption of a master plan mandatory, increasing the strength of the general urban plan and making it more difficult to modify, and mandating collaboration among public institutions responsible for planning functions (regardless of which particular politician is in power) would be helpful. However, the focus of this paper is on what Timisoara itself can do to improve its urban planning framework.

The most important action that the Timisoara City Hall can take to improve the urban planning framework in the city is to provide better coordination of its planning functions. Fortunately, the first step towards this goal has already been taken: the creation of the Atelier de Urbanism. The Chief Architect’s vision for the Atelier de Urbanism is of an office of the City Hall that will coordinate the development of all plans and strategies for the city. In a sense, the Atelier de Urbanism is a reinvention of the communist era IPROTIM, but serving the interests of Timisoara’s citizens, rather than those of distant bureaucrats in Bucharest.

To ensure that the Atelier de Urbanism serves Timisoara’s citizens and facilitates their participation in the urban planning process, it is prominently located on one of the main squares of the city, adjoining one of its busiest pedestrian pathways. Its large windows allow a literal transparency that represents the openness that the Atelier can bring to
Timisoara’s urban planning process. The Atelier and its staff have been involved in the planning initiatives mentioned above, but it has not yet achieved the coordinating function that would allow it to lead an integrated approach to urban planning. Until the internal conflicts and capacity issues that limit the scope of the Atelier’s activities are resolved, Timisoara will remain a good but imperfect model for urban planning in post-communist cities.

Conclusion

An integrated, comprehensive, community-based approach to urban planning will provide Timisoara with the best opportunity to create positive outcomes in terms of environmentally sustainable development and historic preservation. This paper has argued that the best way to implement such an approach is through the strengthening of the Atelier de Urbanism as an urban planning institution. Timisoara has made some important steps in this direction, but more must be taken for the city to become a better model for a historic city as a starting point for post-communist sustainable urban development.

Focus on Timisoara’s Strengths

Despite the work left to be done, the future of urban planning in Timisoara is bright. The integrated approach, once it is implemented, will focus on Timisoara’s strengths to provide positive historic preservation and sustainable development outcomes. These strengths are numerous. Timisoara’s strong community identity of progressivism and open-mindedness is what makes the creation of the Atelier de Urbanism possible in the first place. It also increases the chance of meaningful contributions to the planning process from the general public. Timisoara’s attractive, vibrant, and dynamic historic urban core provides a perfect starting point for development policies based on preservation, revitalization, and densification. The traditionally strong Romanian sentiments for the countryside and an agricultural lifestyle promote respect for agricultural land. Ultimately, these policies and sentiments will allow Timisoara to preserve its historic heritage while avoiding environmentally damaging new development on the urban fringe.