

Urban Image Analysis Through Visual Surveys. Craiova City (Romania) as a Case Study

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Abstract

The cities were affected by the processes of urban revitalization, aiming to be included in the global market competition where they try to attract more economic resources and to achieve an important position, thus transforming their perceptual urban representations. Some cities opted to reshape their urban spaces, projecting an image that attracts the visitor and the resident, while at the same time they try to manage the issues and tensions associated with this process of urban transformation.

Thus, the city image is increasingly exposed to recent progresses and transformations of infrastructures and land use. This article aims to outline the perception of the urban image at micro- level scale with the help of data analysis resulting from the VPS- Visual Preference Survey, conducted in Craiova town, Romania. A new urbanistic approach to measure the urban image, avoiding the classical Lynch model of analysis, is the VPS, developed by Anton Nelessen, which is a process that allows the residents to take part in the urban assessment and to create a new development vision for the future. By ranking different images of places, people from Craiova express their perception on the urban image, taking into consideration four urban aspects: public spaces, built environment, transportation and socio-cultural environment, and building in this way the community they want to see in the future. The results show that the city image needs some major urban interventions in terms of design, architecture and functionality of the public urban spaces. Consequently, some principles are proposed to public actors for improving the four main sections discussed in the survey.

Keywords: *urban image, visual preference survey, urban perception, urban analysis, Craiova*

Rezumat. Analiza imaginii urbane prin intermediul sondajelor vizuale. Studiu de caz: orașul Craiova

Orașele au fost afectate de procesele de revitalizare urbană, dorind să fie incluse în competiția globală de piață unde acestea încearcă să atragă mai multe resurse economice și să-și consolideze o poziție importantă, transformându-și astfel reprezentările urbane la nivelul percepțiilor. Unele orașe au optat să-și remodeleze spațiile urbane, proiectând o imagine care atrage vizitatorul dar și rezidentul, dar în același timp, acestea încearcă să gestioneze problemele și tensiunile asociate cu acest proces de transformare urbană.

Astfel, imaginea orașului este din ce în ce mai expusă la progresele recente și la transformările infrastructurilor și utilizării terenurilor. Acest articol își propune să contureze percepția imaginii urbane la nivel de micro-scară cu ajutorul analizei datelor rezultate din VPS – Visual Preference Survey, realizat în municipiul Craiova, România. O nouă abordare urbanistică pentru a măsura imaginea urbană, ce nu are în vedere modelul de analiză clasic al lui Lynch, este VPS-ul, dezvoltat de Anton Nelessen, acesta este un proces care permite locuitorilor unui oraș să ia parte la evaluarea urbană și să creeze o nouă viziune de dezvoltare pentru viitor. Prin acordarea de scoruri diferitelor imagini, oamenii din Craiova își exprimă percepția asupra imaginii urbane, luând în considerare patru aspecte: spațiile publice, mediul construit, transportul și mediul socio-cultural, și creionează, în acest fel, comunitatea pe care doresc să o aibă în viitor. Rezultatele arată că imaginea orașului are nevoie de unele intervenții majore urbane în ceea ce privește designul, arhitectura și funcționalitatea spațiilor publice urbane. În consecință, sunt propuse câteva principii actorilor publici pentru îmbunătățirea celor patru secțiuni principale discutate în studiu.

Cuvinte-cheie: *imagine urbană, sondaj vizual de preferință, percepție urbană, analiză urbană, Craiova*

Introduction

The perception of cities as places for innovation and economic development determined a change of the city's image perception which started to be seen as a valuable asset in the global market competition. The public actors saw the economic benefits of thinking locally, drawing attention to the benefits that appear when activities and people are gathered together. In the era of the knowledge economy, cities must attract new influences and act as places for the exchange and development of new ideas.

Thus, the cities were affected by the processes of urban transformations, aiming to be included in the global market competition where they try to attract more economic resources and to achieve an important position, transforming their perceptual urban representations. Some cities opted to reshape their new urban spaces, projecting an image that attracts the visitor and the resident, while at the same time they try to manage the issues and tensions associated with this process of urban transformation.

The meaning of urban image was often mistaken with the notions of urban space, with the city itself or even with the urban architecture. However its significance proved to be much more complex and it is important to understand its definition.

In the literature many authors tried to define the term, conducting to the following definitions: an urban image is the simplified, generalized, stereotypical, impression that people have of cities. It is impossible to know a city entirely, so people reduce the complexity of reality to some selective impressions, basically some place images that represent the physical, social, cultural, economic, political features. In the world of perception, the image is more important than the reality, thus an urban image can be cleverly transformed by city marketers without having to affect actual change in that urban space (Hall, 1998, p.78).

Until the 80's, the industry played a major part in urban planning, influencing the city image. The post-industrial economy was based on the service sector activity that became dominant and involved fewer investments in factories. Therefore cities have redeveloped and regenerated their economies, landscapes and images had to cope with the de-industrialization stage (Hall, 1998, p.81).

The cities are keen to promote themselves as good places to live as well as good places to work, emphasizing not only their business opportunities, but also their lifestyle activities (Watson et al., 2003).

How an area is perceived and its physical or environmental desirability will affect the investments by developers and companies, on the one hand, and the desire of employers and employees to work and live there, on the other hand (Watson, 1991, p. 63).

An important contribution for the study of urban image was brought by Kevin Lynch in 1960, in the book "The Image of the City", where he tries to underline the importance of a city image as something to be seen, remembered, offering a visual form to a city. His analysis method is based on five basic elements: districts, edges, nodes, paths and landmarks, which people use to construct their mental image of a city.

Within the city, there lie many connotations, memories, experiences, smells, hopes, crowds, places, buildings, affecting each person according to his particular predilections. From his environment each person constructs his own mental picture of the parts of the city in physical relationship to one another which overlap with the others, thus there can be assumed a collective picture of what people extract from the physical reality of a city, the latter being actually the image of the city (fig. 1). It is largely formed by many works of architecture put together or being in chaos (Spreiregen, 1965).

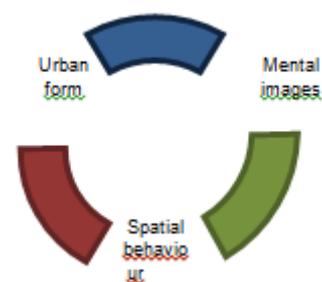


Fig. 1 An integrated approach of urban image analysis (according to Lynch and Spreiregen)

Spreiregen was among the first authors that proposed a new analysis of the city in a form of diagnosis, i.e. a visual survey, appeared in urban design as an examination of the form, appearance, and composition of a city—an evaluation of its assets and liabilities, actually being based on Lynch method. A visual survey also enables the urban

designer to see where the city needs reshaping, being able to present the urban form with clarity.

A model developed by Anton Nelessen and Associates of Princeton, New Jersey in 1970 brought new contributions to the Spreiregen visual survey, and it was called VPS (Visual Preference Survey). It represents the process that allows the residents of a city to participate in the urban assessment and to develop a new development vision for the future. By ranking various different local or international images of places, spaces, and land uses people express their perception on the urban image and also what type of community they want to see in the future (Nelessen, 1994).

The theoretical arguments of this “visual preference survey” have been often criticized in terms of too much image over bodily experience, the exclusion of socioeconomic, historical and political specificity, the modification of places and the lack of texture, sound, weight, and bodily measure (Crisman, 2006), but nevertheless it has become a major tool in city-planning and urban-marketing policies.

Thus, this study aims to present Craiova’s inhabitants’ perception towards the city image, using the model developed by Nelessen which proved to be a very useful tool for a further vision, concept design and redevelopment plan and it can be applied in any type of study ranging from urban, planning, design or development study.

Method

Questionnaire design

The VPS is an urbanistic and architectural model which analyzes the urban space characteristics. It was created on the basis of a visual procedure that is used by architects to observe and identify environmental features of a place, basic and specific elements and forms of buildings and to analyze and conclude their significance, by comparing different features and by identifying styles on a walking tour of a city.

Thus a VPS model is formed of several stages that need to be followed in order to build the exact questionnaire, which is formed only of images, grouped on different topics that need to be scored. The VPS acts as a link between two main elements: the city assessment, which is a fieldwork stage of observing the urban configuration of the city space,

and the public input of the residents, both elements put together determining a detailed urban analysis and a final vision plan, underlining some urban design guidelines as well (fig. 2).

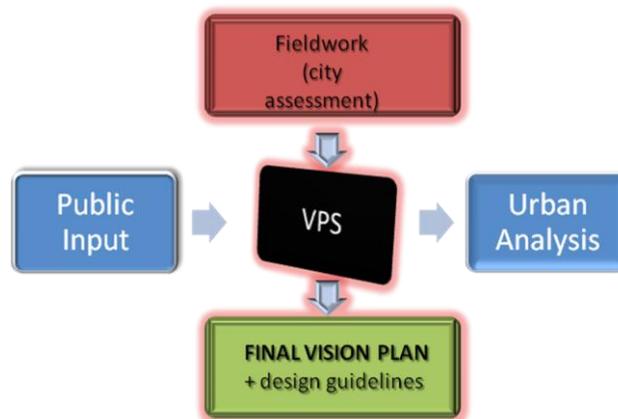


Fig. 2 The stages of a VPS analysis (adapted after ANA -A. Nelessen Associates)

The main characteristic of this survey is that it uses images instead of regular questions to describe the places. It is addressed to people that want to understand better the crucial planning elements and to make more informed, proactive decisions about creating places where they want to live, work, shop etc.

Data analysis

Performing the above stages of the VPS model developed by Nelessen and Associates, a visual survey on urban image was customized for Craiova town and was conducted during April 2012 on internet, 100 respondents answering it.

The survey is formed of three main sections:

- **section 1** - demographic data of the respondents- 100 residents of Craiova (7 questions)
- **section 2** – image rating – 48 photos grouped on four main areas: public spaces (18 images, 6 images per each sub-area: parks and open spaces, urban plazas and pedestrian area), built environment (18 images, 6 per each sub-area: building types, design elements, street level activity), transportation (6 images) and socio-cultural environment (6 images), had to be ranked on a scale of -3 (not appropriate at all) to +3 (very appropriate), with 0 being neutral.

Choosing the pictures for the VPS was a very difficult task because the architectural urban design elements from these images had to fit into the urban pattern of Romania’s cities or at least have some common elements.

Images chosen from Craiova and from other European cities (Rome, Lisbon, Amsterdam, Madrid, Berlin, Paris, were chosen due to their complexity and a more appropriate sense of place) were selected to demonstrate a range of design possibilities, starting from subtle to more exceptional styles.

- section 3 – open-ended question- provided participants the opportunity to indicate Craiova’s topophile and topophobe areas and the places where they feel the need for more urban development.

A mental map of the city was created using the software ArcGis 9.3

Results and discussion

The study area is represented by Craiova, Romania's 6th largest town and the county seat of Dolj, situated in the south-west of the country. It is located at approximately equal distances from Bucharest (300 km), Sofia (250 km) and Belgrade (400 km) and it is a political and commercial center, being the most important town of the Oltenia region. It occupies a surface of 32 sqkm, with an extension of 9.4 km on the north-south direction and of 5.2 km on the east-west direction. The neighbourhoods of the town are located on the 1st 4th terraces of the Jiu floodplain, on its left side. Pelendava Dacian fortress stands at the origin of the town, Craiova being mentioned for the first time as a town in 1582. Its location in a tabular relief does not offer spectacular scenery, but the presence of terraces determined the formation of small hills that border the town (fig. 3).

After analyzing the first section of the VPS, the following respondent profile was underlined (table 1):

Table 1 Respondent profile of Craiova VPS

Demographic characteristics	Structure	Residents no.
Gender	Male	48
	Female	52
Age	younger than 30 years	58
	31-50 years	28
	older than 50 years	14
Marital status	unmarried	50
	married	38
	divorced	10
	Widow/er	2
Education level	Primary	7
	Highschool	24
	University	69
Occupation area	Primary sector	-
	Secondary sector	39
	Tertiary sector	61
Income	less than 670 Ron	10
	670-1200 Ron	66

Years of living in Craiova	over 1200 Ron*	24
	less than 10 years	38
	10-25 years	48
	Over 25 years	14

*1 Ron= approx. 0.22 EURO

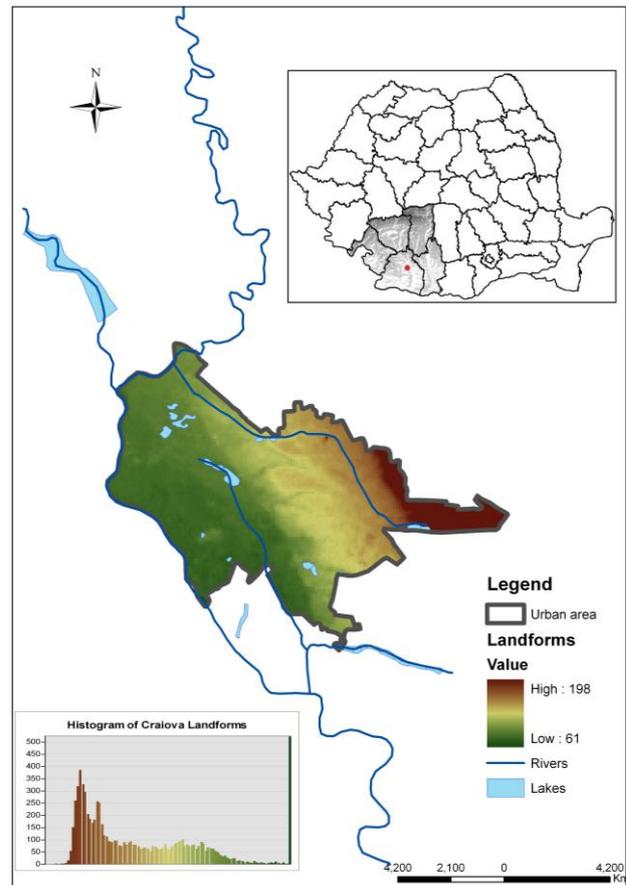


Fig. 3 Craiova city- geographical location and features

According to the above data, approx. 50% of the VPS respondents are men, 50% women, the majority (60-80%) is under 30 years old, unmarried, having a Bachelor degree, is working in the tertiary sector and is having a medium income level.

The data from the 100 surveys (section 2 of the VPS) were combined and assessed to reveal similarities, differences and trends.

The images of this VPS present either spectacular, futuristic architecture, suggesting a progressive, dynamic city on the move, or historic architecture that suggests civic tradition. Sixteen images are presented below (fig. 4) selected from the total of 48, revealing the highest and the lowest scores (ranging between +2.88 to -2.67) in the four main analyzed categories: public space, built environment, transportation and social & cultural environment. Their analysis emphasizes some common characteristics:

- the average ratings above +2 present spaces with many people, who are actively engaged in (outdoor) activities or events, classical architecture in urban plazas, green spaces and foliage, well-lit spaces and colourful, modern and bold design and architecture, preference for brick and glass materials, outdoor activities, street theatre etc.

- the lowest scored images, below zero and down to even -2, include almost deserted streets and lifeless open spaces, glass-clad office buildings with walls in cold colours that lack ground floor activity or visual variety on wall surfaces, or very colourful buildings that do not fit into the local architecture, parking areas and sidewalks that lack landscaping, attractive fencing and adequate width.

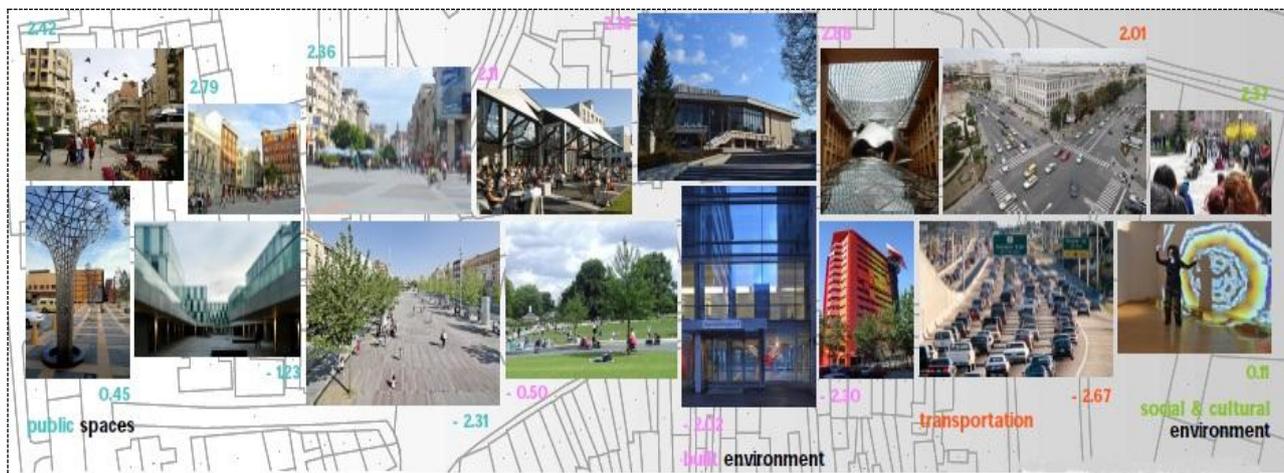


Fig. 4 VPS results- 16 selected images with the highest and the lowest scores (according to the four categories: public space, built environment, transportation and social & cultural environment)

Section 3 of the survey was based on a study conducted during 2010-2011 regarding the attractiveness of some urban places in Craiova municipality (Bădiță, 2011, 2012), in which there were identified the topophile and topophobe areas of the town, the latter needing some interventions in the urban space to become more attractive.

One of the open questions asked respondents to indicate where in Craiova they feel the need for more urban development in order to transform the topophobe images of some place into topophile images; 83% identified the same areas of major urban interventions (Fața Luncii neighbourhood-photo 1, Craiovița neighbourhood-photo 2 and Train Station area - photo 3- fig. 5) as the respondents of the previous questionnaire leading to a mental map of the urban image perception of the town.

Conclusion and further study

The following urban image features were identified through this VPS and should be taken into consideration by urban actors (designers, architects, marketers, local authorities) when creating an attractive urban image:

- *Public Spaces*: avoid flanking open spaces with blank walls, improve with visually and spatially interesting design; introduce more colour into the design of public spaces and buildings; improve functionality of sidewalks and alleys.

- *Built areas*: pay closer attention to materials, details, colour and texture, to functional facades; mixed-use parking structures are desirable.

- *Transportation*: pedestrian activity needs to be supported so that crowded traffic should be avoided; create bicycles lanes; "image corridors" should be designed across the town connecting transit nodes and attractive areas.

- *Social and Cultural Environment*: a more active city central square with cafes, retail and open spaces; more cultural events, outdoor activities, street art and fairs.

This VPS represents the basis for conducting further studies on the urban image of Craiova during the next period as follows: an urban image survey according to Lynch method and a questionnaire applied to residents in order to underline their perception at micro-scale regarding their dwellings, streets and neighborhoods image, as well as the overall image of the town.

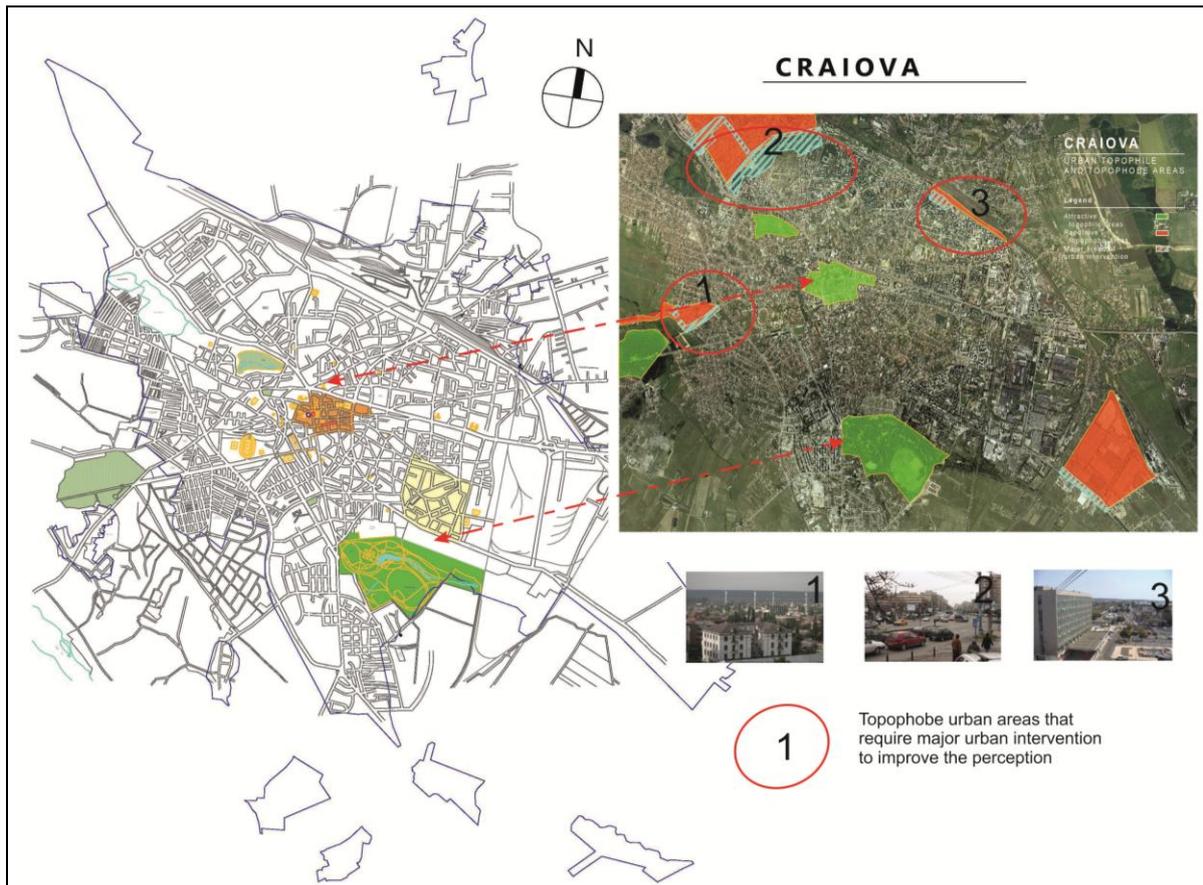


Fig. 5 Craiova urban image features based on the residents' perception

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