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DES3332 Urban Cultural Ecology

Tsar's Square: Construction of a National Identity

Nineteenth century presents a radical change in the development of Sofia as the capital of Bulgaria. Up until 1878, Bulgaria had been under the rule of the Ottoman empire for five centuries, which suppressed any concept of traditional self. Naturally, the Liberation brought with it a cultural revolution expressed through the strive for national identity. As borders opened to the West, Bulgarians expanded their horizons both physically by travelling abroad and intellectually by getting involved in global discussions[1]. Events and approaches in the rest of Europe such as the Haussmannization of Paris, the subject of the flaneur and the discussions on progress by Viollet-le-Duc greatly influenced local thought about physical and social space. Sofia's design became a metaphor for the break with the oppressive regime and the establishment of a progressive environment for the nourishment of Bulgarian spirit. The Tsar's square, formed at the heart of the city, embodied the processes of reimagination and westernization of the urban scene. Tracing its functions as a space of symbolic meaning, elite style, leisure, circulation and merchandise, one can construct an understanding of Bulgarian national identity during that time.

To better grasp the local development, one must first take a look at the more global context, specifically at events in Western Europe. Hausmann's plan for Paris executed between 1853 and 1870 was "one of great importance to the history of town planning.[2]" It brought a dramatic switch in the understanding of the city as a well-organized system of circulation. The surgery in the urban fabric produced a new perception of people towards the organized and open environment. The notion of *flaneurie* as "the act of strolling" is captured in multiple artworks from the time as for example Paul Gavarni's painting "Paris, Rainy Day" (1877)[3]. The city became an arena for leisure and social interaction. In addition, conversations about the dialectic between past and present further influenced the field of planning. Viollet-le-Duc's text *On Restoration* (1875) suggested a look towards change and progress suitable for the contemporary world[4].

With the Treaty of San Stefano from 1878, Bulgaria became an independent country and the doors opened towards the rest of the world. Rejecting the oriental markers left over from the Ottoman rule, Bulgarians searched for the westernization of simultaneously culture and environment. The need to break with the past and find a new identity is reflected in literature from that time. Ivan Vazov's novels *Epic of the Forgotten* (1888) and *Under the Yoke: A Roman of Bulgarian Liberty* (1888) capture the struggle during Ottoman rule

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[1] Ward, Philip. *Sofia: Portrait of a city*. Cambridge, England ;New York, N.Y.: Oleander. 1993. p. 86.

[2] Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture*. New York: Praeger. 1960 [1927]. p. 237.

[3] Wikimedia Foundation. "Flaneur". 2013 [cited 10/27 2013]. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fl%C3%A2neur.

[4] Viollet-le-Duc. *On Restoration*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low and Searle. 1875.

and the spirit of liberty. Aleko Konstantinov's texts *To Chicago and Back* (1894) and *Bai Ganyo: Incredible Takes of a Modern Bulgarian* (1895) depict themes of finding one's identity within a global world. The newly studying-abroad Bulgarian elite brought back ideas as well as professionals from the West that reformulated the culture and the space.

The intellectual exchange with the West is apparent in the first master plan of Sofia from 1879 by French engineer Amadier[5]. What used to be a small organic town of 18,000 people spread over 3 sq. km. was to become a city with boulevards and urban blocks resembling other European cities[6]. Architect Tashev wrote that the city had to reference Western style cities with straight roads and large boulevards with clearly defined property lines of urban blocks and architects from Austria, Czech, Poland, and Germany were to participate in the creation of Sofia as an intellectual capital[7]. Similar to Paris, a radial city with gardens and squares, concentric Sofia marked its first central plaza. Named the "Tsar's square", the urban space was infused with symbolism about the liberation and transformation of culture.

As the name suggests, Tsar's square represented the freedom from Ottoman Rule. It occupied the site of a previous Turkish Konak and consisted of a plaza with a newly built palace and gardens[8]. The Royal Palace was constructed between 1880-1882 for Knyaz Alexander Battenberg, the first ruler after the Liberation, by Austro-Hungarian architects under Viktor Rumeplmayer. It was later finished by Viennese architect Friedrich Grunanger[9]. Clearly, the influence from the West was captured and projected by the iconic Viennese-looking building. The readaptation of Ottoman markers of the past was carried further by the transformation of the Grand Mosque (Buyuk Camii) at the edge of the square into a National Museum in 1893[10]. The reprogramming captured the newly emerging intellectual elite in the country. Education, sciences and art became important fields in the new daily practices. The spirit of freedom and novelty was further manifested in the naming of the streets surrounding the plaza. A map from 1908 captures titles such as boulevard of the Liberator, Dondukov boulevard, Graf Ignatiev Street, Shipka Street, Levski street and more. All names are references to people and battles against the Ottomans. The area, thus, became a politically and socially charged urban space.

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[5] Tashev, Petŭr Angelov. *Sofiia˘–rkhitekturno–gradoustroĭstveno razvitie* . Sofiia˘: Teŭnika. 1972. p 26.

[6] Hirt, Sonia. "The Compact versus The Dispersed City: History of Planning Ideas on Sofia's Urban Form." Journal of Planning History, Vol. 6, No. 2 (May 2007): 138-165. p. 146.

[7] Tashev, p. 26.

[8] Ward, p. 86.

[9] Wikimedia Foundation. "National Art Gallery (Bulgaria)". 2013 [cited 10/27 2013]. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Art_Gallery_%28Bulgaria%29.

[10] Wikimedia Foundation. "National Archeological Museum (Bulgaria)". 2013 [cited 10/27 2013]. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Archaeological_Museum_%28Bulgaria%29.

Studying maps from the 1920s and 1930s, one can trace new systems and layers of meaning to the square. The population of the city exponentially grew to 20,500 people in 1881, 46,493 people in 1893, 82,187 people in 1907 and 103,000 people in 1910[11]. Modernised water-supply infrastructure was introduced in the 1890s and electric lighting in the 1900. The city became more and more westernized and its role as a cherished environment for social and cultural exchange grew. The map from 1919 showcases how Sofia evolved into a network of clearly defined neighborhoods with parks. Tsar's square became part of a group of gardens that were defined as areas of leisure in the capital. The notion of a flaneur applied in this context strengthening the national pride in the urban environment. The city became a setting for public enjoyment.

In addition, the square became a space of dynamic circulation of people and goods. The map of 1930s outlines the tram system in the city that passed through the plaza. Photographs of the site capture the carefully organized integration of vehicles and people. The previous separation of places due to distances was no longer relevant as Bulgaria became not only locally but also globally connected. Movement whether within the city or between the city and other foreign locations brought additional exchange of values, ideas and objects that defined daily life. New street names around the square such as Targovska Street (Merchants' Street) captured in postcards from 1930s reflected this development. In addition, new programs began to pop out; hotels represented the new dynamic patterns. Union Palace and Hotel Imperial were built in the 1930s around the square. Once again, they manifested a westernized style whose look further emphasized the relationship of Bulgaria to the rest of Europe. By that point, as Tsar's Square showcased, Sofia had progressed into a cultural and intellectual westernized capital city.

It is important to also note the role of the plaza as a space for collective national celebrations. In 1904, Bulgarian heroes were gathered there for public appraisal. The event once again featured the spirit of freedom after the fall of the Ottoman empire as well as the unification of Bulgarians into one nation. In addition, cultural holidays such as 24th May, the day of education and Bulgarian language, were regularly marked by public gatherings and performances on the square. The spectacles in the urban space would continuously emphasize the new national identity.

As a conclusion, Tsar's Square in the 19th century reflects the freedom of Bulgaria from a long Ottoman rule and the creation of a Bulgarian national identity. The space is charged with symbolic meaning captured in iconic buildings (Royal Palace and National Museum) and street names (Boulevard of the Liberator). The square manifests a break with the oriental past and an embrace of the western lifestyle and environment. It reflects a development of the city as a network of systems. Circulation of people, goods and ideas outline the dynamic qualities of everyday practice and the search for continuous intellectual growth.

[11] Ward, p 53.

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