

VISUAL POLLUTION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE URBAN LANDSCAPE: A CASE STUDY OF BUCHAREST'S CITY CENTER

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Abstract

The downtown areas of major cities, through their rich cultural offerings represented by imposing buildings and long-lasting activities, are tourist attractions. However, the presence of billboards displaying content less suitable for all age groups or colorful graffiti with messages bordering on obscenity can compromise tourists' perception of the area. This study investigates the phenomenon of visual pollution and its implications on the urban landscape, focusing on the central area of Bucharest, Romania. Visual pollution encompasses various forms of unaesthetic elements in the urban landscape, not limited to litter, graffiti, large and aggressive billboards, and architectural degradation. The analysis method is empirical through interviews, with 98 Romanian and foreign tourists participating. The study's results highlight the influence of aesthetics/visual pollution on urban and cultural tourism in the Municipality of Bucharest. The measures proposed by the study are mostly suggestions from the interviewed tourists. They include sanitation and limiting advertising content, both in terms of billboard size and careful analysis of the exposed content.

Keywords: aggressive advertising, vandalism, street graffiti, urban environment

Introduction

Advertising represents an economic advantage, an image booster in the awareness of a product or service, and this drives businesses to increasingly engage in it on a larger scale (Dumitrescu, 2000). The benefits of advertising are well-known. It is a necessary phenomenon both for businesses and consumers (Grecu et al., 2018). Cities, especially large ones, where the population is dense (population density is also high), billboards represent means of advertising a product or service. Many of these billboards are placed in highly visible locations so that many passersby or residents come into visual contact with them. However, what attracts attention is the number of these billboards, their placement, and the accompanying text.

Street art also brings a burst of color and represents an artistic expression in the urban environment (Teodorescu et al., 2019). Large cities have a material cultural heritage represented by important buildings, whose cultural value deserves attention (Teodorescu et al., 2016; Szemkovics et al., 2018). This is precisely why the urban aspect is a concern for the quality of life. Attention must be directed towards the maintenance of constructions, avoiding deterioration in all aspects (Zeľňáková et al., 2017). Unfortunately, here too, the unpleasant interventions of those who vandalize building walls with graffiti are visible. It is necessary to establish a limit between advertising and aggressive advertising and street art and graffiti with inappropriate text or borderline obscene drawings.

Materials and methods

The methodology primarily relied on observation, involving the visual inspection of several such billboards, considering their placement and content. Additionally, the study is based on the descriptive method for the central area of Bucharest, which is currently the place with the highest visual population. Here, besides billboards and graffiti, there are also old buildings, many of them with unrehabilitated facades and others in an advanced stage of deterioration.

The empirical method of interviewing was applied to a total of 98 individuals. The questions addressed how much negative influence the billboards have in terms of size, content, and placement, as well as the graffiti on important buildings in the central area of the capital city, Bucharest.

Results

The visual aspect of historical areas can be preserved intact through the harmonization of urban environmental elements and advertisements with the visual identity of the area. Once again, the issue arises of competent approval of advertising projects for products and services.

Many of the iconic buildings located in the central area of Bucharest are vandalized with graffiti, which detracts from the overall urban appearance. "Hanul cu Tei" is one such construction, a meeting place for artists of yesteryear. It was built in 1833 and still maintains its initial aspect, displaying the visible "seal" of the first owners, along with other ornaments specific to the construction period (Image 1).

Today, wall vandalism has unpleasant visual effects (Image 3). The positive effects and historical significance of this beautiful place with stories that can enchant any tourist, passerby, or resident are diminished (Image 2). It is a place where many students from the University of Architecture and the University of Bucharest (Faculty of Letters, Faculty of Mathematics, and Faculty of Geography) meet, relax, and socialize.



Image 1. "The seal" of the first owners and the year of construction - 1833



Image 2. "Hanul cu Tei" Street - commercial area



Image 3. Vandalism in the central area of Bucharest - "Hanul cu Tei"

Another iconic building in Bucharest is the central headquarters of Banca Comercială Română. The walls at the lower level are continuously vandalized with graffiti, diminishing the beauty of the historical area and the urban landscape. Additionally, obscenity finds its way into the phrases written in an area where children and many tourists or residents find a place to relax or simply sit down (Images 4&5).



Images 4&5. Vandalism with graffiti in the central area of Bucharest - the headquarters of Banca Comercială Română

The history of this building is very important from a tourist perspective for those who want to discover the heritage values of Bucharest. It is known as the Palace of the Insurance Society, designed by the

German architect Oscar Maugsch. In this construction (palace), one of the first insurance companies in Romania operated (General Insurance Society). However, it was disbanded in 1948 following the adoption of the Nationalization Law. It then operated as Banca Comercială Română and hosted a series of cultural events over time, becoming one of the most famous and attractive buildings in Bucharest. Vandalizing it with graffiti and installing billboards whose content is not related to the temporary activities taking place inside diminishes its cultural value.

An attempt to vandalize with graffiti was also recorded at one of the most attractive and important heritage buildings in Bucharest: the Romanian Athenaeum (Images 6-8). This has outraged many who love art, culture, and urban beauty. The Romanian Athenaeum is one of the most beautiful buildings in Bucharest and has a cultural value that is hard to match. It is precisely for these reasons that vandalizing it with inscriptions or just drawings is an act of cultural immorality.



Images. 6-8. Vandalism with graffiti at the Romanian Athenaeum – Bucharest

The aggressiveness of advertisements, the multitude of billboards, and their content can have negative effects on traffic by attracting attention or obstructing traffic signs (Images 9&10). Additionally, the installation of billboards must consider their placement, as it is not suitable to have billboards advertising intimate clothing near schools or kindergartens. The content of these billboards must be constantly monitored by authorized individuals.



Images 9&10. Billboards and banners with aggressive advertising

Discussion

Vandalism predominantly manifests visually through graffiti, which can serve one or more purposes, including: obscene messages, offensive to the public. Many of these are positioned in plain sight. It is

discomforting for people of all ages, but particularly unpleasant for children and tourists, as guides or group leaders are forced to avoid these areas laden with graffiti containing inappropriate messages.

Taking these into account, among the 98 individuals with whom discussions were held, many referred to these messages with inappropriate content:

"It's embarrassing for us, the ones accompanying tourists from other European cities, to see such messages. Unfortunately, they are written in a way that can be understood since they are also in English. We try to avoid such areas, which, unfortunately, would be very attractive for the history of the place."

- Mihaela Crăciun, touristic guide, 53 years old

"Bucharest has buildings of rare beauty. It's no wonder it was called 'Little Paris'. The history of each building is particularly attractive! Each one has something to say and show. Unfortunately, many of them are drawn and written with inappropriate words exactly in the most important areas. Some consider it art, but they are the most grotesque expressions of incivility, recklessness, or simply lack of education."

- Cristian Georgescu, architect, 49 years old

Another form of expression is created for the advertising of anti-social activities. Many of the messages are written in this way on the walls of buildings. Although some voices discover artistic aspects in these manifestations, most of them are unpleasant due to their content (the message conveyed), form, and positioning.

Conclusion

Visual pollution exists and has effects that should not be overlooked. Visual pollution is generated by various sources and takes many forms of expression. People have become aware of the extent of this phenomenon and have taken action to counteract it. Unfortunately, many of these actions to reduce or intervene against graffiti vandalism or other forms of manifestation do not have a very clear legal framework. Those who suffer are heritage buildings and beyond, as their appearance can negatively affect both tourism and local economy. Additionally, it creates discomfort for residents and passersby.

Billboards, through their placement or their number, can have even more serious effects, such as on orientation and circulation. Clear measures need to be taken to stop this negative phenomenon of visual overcrowding.

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Souhrn

Hmotné kulturní dědictví a kvalita městského života představují pro moderní město orientační body. Vizualní znečištění má na tyto hodnoty stále větší vliv, což je třeba brát v úvahu. Agresivita zásahů prostřednictvím graffiti a nadměrné reklamy, prostřednictvím velikosti a umístění billboardů nebo jiných reklamních prostředků vytváří vizuální nepohodlí, které se promítá do psychické nepohody. Příliš mnoho reklamy může vyvolat odpor.

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