

Opponent Opinion on Master's Thesis

The Change of Morphology and Function of Public Spaces. Case Study of Latakia since French Mandate till 2010.

Author of the thesis: Yara Issa

Thesis Supervisor: Prof. PhDr. Luďa Klusáková, CSc. and Dr. Melania Nucifora

Thesis Opponent: Ing. arch. Eva Špačková, PhD., Department of Architecture, Faculty of Civil Engineering, VSB-TUO

The topic of the thesis is urban public spaces and their development and function in the urban structure. The author deals in detail with the urban form of the square. The square is analyzed from the perspective of historical development, architectural form as well as social function and importance for the city itself. The thesis analyzes in a greater detail the development of public space in Middle Eastern cities. A case study of five squares in the Syrian port of Latakia follows upon the theoretical background. The Latakia square analysis and evaluation constitutes the practical part of the research carried out in situ. The results of this research serve to formulate recommendations for possible future arrangements of individual squares. The conclusion of the thesis generalizes requirements for public urban spaces in Latakia.

The thesis clearly demonstrates keen interest of the author for the topic presented. I appreciate her personal commitment in conducting surveys at selected locations in situ, which in the context of the current volatile political and security situation in the country certainly required courage in addition to research interest.

The Master's thesis is clearly and logically divided into three chapters. The first chapter is devoted to theoretical concepts of public spaces as presented in the literature in the field of architecture and urbanism, history and sociology. After a rather extensive introduction and clarification of each term, the subsequent section of the introductory chapter deals with squares in respective historical periods starting with ancient Greece. In description of the development phase of medieval squares the author emphasizes the role of the church as a key element of the square (from the prospective of Christian Europe at the time), however she uses the photo of Piazza del Campo in Siena with no church in it to illustrate it (the dominant square tower belongs to the secular authority – the City Hall). Given that the thesis was compiled while studying in Prague, I miss references to Prague or Czech examples, which can also very well document the appearance of the square in individual time layers.

The most recently described developmental stage of the square is the concept of "garden cities" by Ebenezer Howard. Here I miss at least a basic reference to urban public spaces in the architecture of the 20th and 21st century – the functionalist theories (Athens Charter, Le Corbusier) and subsequent criticism of modern urbanism and its concept of public space.

The third part of the first chapter is devoted to the criteria for the evaluation of the square in terms of their spatial formation and function. These criteria are used later in the third chapter to evaluate the quality of the selected square in Latakia. Also, Jan Gehl is cited in this section, but I was not able to find a publication that is cited in the List of References. If the author wishes to further pursue the

given issue an additional list of quality criteria for pedestrian movement in urban areas as defined precisely by Jan Gehl, could be recommended.¹

The second chapter of the thesis deals with the history of Syria and the development of settlements in its territory. In her description of the nature of urban public space in the Middle East, the author mentions the influence of the Ottoman Empire and modernization during the French Mandate in Syria. In the Ottoman Empire period, there was a strict separation of public and private space; the centre of social life was a mosque. Islam also clearly separates the possibilities of movement of men and women. Urban public areas are only accessible to men. Women are subject to stay in inner courtyards of residential buildings separated from the public space. Given the focus of the thesis I would welcome a more detailed description of the characteristic urban spaces of Islamic cities and the specification of morphological and functional differences, which has had and still have an influence on their character and appearance. This comparison would be useful for the reason that in the first chapter the historical development of urban spaces is only illustrated with European examples. Spiro Kostof², an architectural historian, also refers to this difference in relation to the history of architecture and development of urban forms. The influence of European urbanism describes in detail in the section of the chapter devoted to urban development of Damascus during the French Mandate.

The third chapter of the thesis focuses on the Syrian port of Latakia and accounts for half of the contents of the thesis. The introductory section of the chapter provides a detailed historical development of the city complemented by a great number of illustrations. The next section is a description of methodology selected by the author for evaluation of morphology and functions of selected squares in Latakia. The declared objective is to assess the squares from the prospective of their users and those with decision-making powers ("decision makers"). The survey tools used (observation, analyses of maps and photographs, evaluation charts) did not allow the author to obtain neither public opinion (the opinion of square users) nor the persons who decide on the form of these spaces. As the author notes in the conclusion, it was not possible to address a wider sample of users (e.g. using surveys, questionnaires). In the case of the squares in Latakia who the "decision makers" are is not specified, and so I assume that in order to identify and approach this group specific tools would need to be chosen. I consider an objective defined in this way (and in the context of a thesis only a partial one) to be very difficult to achieve. Therefore I evaluate the following review of five squares in Latakia as a site analysis using predetermined criteria (which is commonly used in urban planning and architectural processes), which of course does not diminish its value in any manner.

For her analysis, the author has selected five squares. It is quite a large number for the city of the size of Latakia. European cities of similar size usually have one "main" square and then other specific squares, which were formed in different ways and serve different functions. The criteria for the selection of specific squares in Latakia are not specified, so we can only assume that the author, for various reasons, has found these significant. There is a small map on page 68 to illustrate five squares, however I only found four of these listed. The location of Mar-Taqla Square is not marked there.

¹ Gehl, Jan. *Cities for People*. Island Press, 2010.

² Kostof, Spiro. *The City Assembled*. Thames and Hudson, 2010.

Historical development is sometimes noted for individual squares (Sheikh Daher Square, Ugarit Square). In case of the other three squares, there is only a short description of the location, functions and appearance of the square attached. The table evaluating the form, shape and design (Table 1 being a template) is attached to all the squares. The table evaluating the function and use (according to Table 2) is only available for Sheikh Daher Square. The Ugarit Square's function and use described in a separate paragraph. The Old Municipality Square contains a description of the social function (which in fact describes the use of the square), and the other squares have a description of the function and use included in the text. If the quality of functional use was defined as an evaluation criterion (Table 2 even specifies it in detail as social, economic, political, and symbolic functions), these tables, including the assessment, should have been uniformly included in the overall analysis of all the squares.

I very much appreciate the drawings of Sheikh Daher Square on page 76, which very clearly illustrate the morphological and functional characteristics of the space. It is a pity that the author has not processed similar graphical analyses for the other squares as well.

The author gives final recommendations for all the squares. I appreciate her efforts to supplement the analysis with positive recommendations on how to improve the squares. In the event of practical use of such conclusions it is necessary to take into account the wide range of interests and possibilities. I was surprised with the recommendation to change a function of the historically significant (and probably still functional) Jool Jammal School, which was recently renovated, into a cultural centre.

The conclusion summarizes the general recommendations for improvements of urban public spaces. The thesis ends on page 105 with the square division based on their functional use. This text, I believe, should have rather been included in chapters 3-6, where it would complement the range of square characteristics. It is not clear that it was the conclusion of the analysis of the squares in Latakia.

From the formal aspect, the thesis is written clearly and in a logical structure. The scope and formal arrangement corresponds to the thesis criteria. The numbering of figures in some sections of the thesis does not match the references to figures in the text.

I read the thesis with great interest and I share the author's obvious enthusiasm for the topic of urban public spaces. Due to its rich history, perfect location and multicultural tradition Latakia has most of the prerequisites to become a rich and eventful public space. One can only keep hope that its residents will one day enjoy in the societal conditions that allow creation of a safe and free public space for all. Due in part to this thesis, Yara Issa will be prepared to understand the urban life and environment as an expert and thus participate in its creation.

I hereby recommend the submitted Master's thesis for defence with a preliminary mark B and wish Yara success and happiness in both professional and personal life.

Ostrava, June 2014