

Iași. A guide of local history

Ramona Costea^{1*}, Tiberiu Teodor-Stanciu¹

¹–“Gheorghe Asachi” Technical University, Iași, Romania.

*ramona.costea@academic.tuiasi.ro

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Abstract

This local history guide is an unconventional monograph or an alternative journey which offers an immersive experience in the cultural universe of the city of Iași, guiding the observer's mind through successive landscapes of culture and identity, through history, stories and testimonies, accompanied by invitations to discovery, interpretation and observation exercises, while addressing challenges to the reader's memory and contemplation. The guide launches the invitation of transcending space and time, understanding history in its place of origin. The guide bears the immersive quality of a game. Each chapter is made up of lessons, sometimes extending in various directions through case studies, which offer a welcome respite to reflect or deepen a particular history or detail, a beautiful deviation from the well-known history. Dedicated and freely provided by local authorities to 6th and 7th grade pupils from the schools of Iași, this project represents a means to empower local knowledge, having as a cult drive the belief that a deeper understanding of the local cultural genealogy, in which history is interwoven with its places and architectures, will lead to much more responsible attitude towards the built environment of Iași, its heritage and memory.

Keywords: immersive, architecture, education, unconventional monograph

Introduction

The usual school curriculum includes history hours dedicated to knowledge which refers to national and international culture. Yet, is it the local traces of history which act as memory landmarks and appeal to one's understanding of the identity of a place. Emotion is largely connected to human cognitive activity, able to render information as essential or insignificant, while ensuring or dismissing its way to the space of long-term memory. Approaching history learning as a complex process which appeals to many levels of perception and memory, including logic and emotion, has also been proven to lead to better educational results. As such, this proposal of a local guide of history is based on the fact that learning about history as a guided tour through the places encompassed by the events will consolidate two main endeavors: the first one refers to a better sedimentation of knowledge and facts and the second one relies on the fact that attaching meaning and emotions and their historical representations to the local built environment will lead to a more complex understanding of the identity of the city, the impact of changes and lack of changes and a more relevant vision, capable of enhancing and putting the values of the past in the service of contemporary and future development.

When it comes to heritage, an evident problem in matters of vision today in Iași and not only is the fact that occurring debates are regarded as a matter of either opposing evolution or regarding investment as a corrupt process. This disruption and communication fracture when debating about the perception on the built environment of Iași has a strong root in the lack of knowledge about how the various historical and cultural avatars of the city juxtaposed and sometimes more than often overlapped and what is the meaning of their intersections throughout history.

The guide is divided into three parts corresponding to the historical periods which translate into the city's main historic ages - all three are accompanied by maps that address memory through well-known landmarks, street furniture specific to every chapter, street names and

characters (Fig. 1.). The first part is dedicated to the Medieval city of Iași, ranging from distant times up until around the 1800s. The latter limit of the Medieval period presents a city between the two centuries, deeply marked by natural disasters and armed conflicts –, building the premises of a forced growing and evolution, which brings the observer to the second part of the city's history: the Modern city of Iași, leaving the patriarchal appearance through a general mobilization, aiming to modernize the city and its old buildings, as many foreign travelers in the Romanian Countries take note. Although heavily altered by the Two World Wars, the city steps masterfully towards, perhaps, its most glorious form, as it even gains the title of Capital War of Romania.

The Contemporary city of Iași, its third avatar and chapter of history bears, as a watermark, an identity kaleidoscope of built landscape, culture, history and, sometimes, myth.



Fig. 1. The three maps corresponding to the three chapters of the guide

Literature Review

The chapters of the guide constitute an impressive work of synthesis, as well as a genuine exegesis of historical convolutions, presenting facts and their perceived image, as well as rhetorical reflections. Accessible in language, the book presents updated re-weavings from

an impressive number of sources, relying, in part, on the research, studies and works of its authors, which joined a team of historians, teachers of history and Romanian language from both University, High-school and Gymnasium level, Architects and representatives of the Iași City Hall. The guide relies on the consecrated works of historians of Iași, as well as other works that have proved their value in time. A large number of written and illustrated works has been consulted: works of the most important historians, historiographers, journalists, writers, geographers, engineers, painters and lithographers, the biographical notes joined together in the volumes entitled *Călători străini în Țările Române* [Foreign travelers in the Romanian Lands] to name a few. N.A. Bogdan's monograph, *Orașul Iași. Monografie istorică și socială ilustrată* [The city of Iași. Illustrated historic and social monograph] is one of the reference works in rendering a history guide of Iași, the outstanding synthesis of 2854 documents which define the historiographer's archive, today available at the Central University Library of Iași and constructing an in-depth analysis of the city from its medieval origins and its prehistoric descend (Bogdan, 1904). In addition to N.A. Bogdan's work and on a more scientific note, C. Ciuhodaru and Gh. Platon's work entitled *Istoria orașului Iași* [History of Iași] provides the academic overview of the history of the Iași from almost 80 years later, relying on important studies and historical sources unveiled in more recent years. As any other work published in the communist years, its bibliography encompasses titles which were understandably necessary to meet the communist requirements of being published and provides a crucial insight of the regime's view on historical, social and political changes during the XIXth Century (Ciuhodaru, 1980). The works of engineer I. Mitican offer a more recent perspective on the past two centuries of history, backed by the author's archive of documents and photographs, written in a slightly nostalgic note, but completing the scientific literature with a subjective layer meant to grasp an alternate "history" of the perceived history.

Methodology

The guide permanently connects events with their spatial context, which is a genuine action of investing the architecture, urban fabric, toponymy and even landscape of the city with meaning and coherence. This process resembles the Method of Loci, in which the Memory Palace is the city, mostly represented through its landmarks, while the associated items are the historical facts and events.

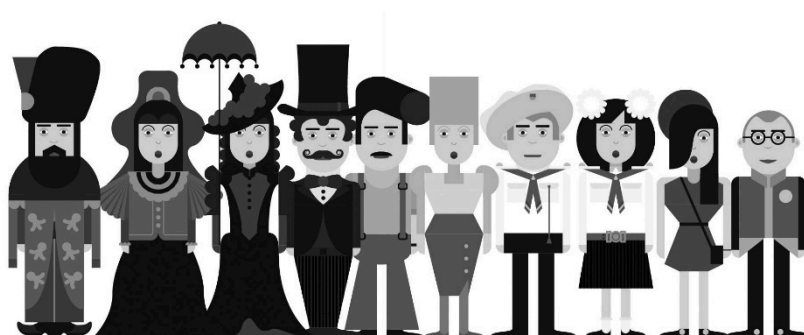


Fig. 2. Characters of the different ages of Iași, illustrated by Tiberiu Teodor-Stanciu

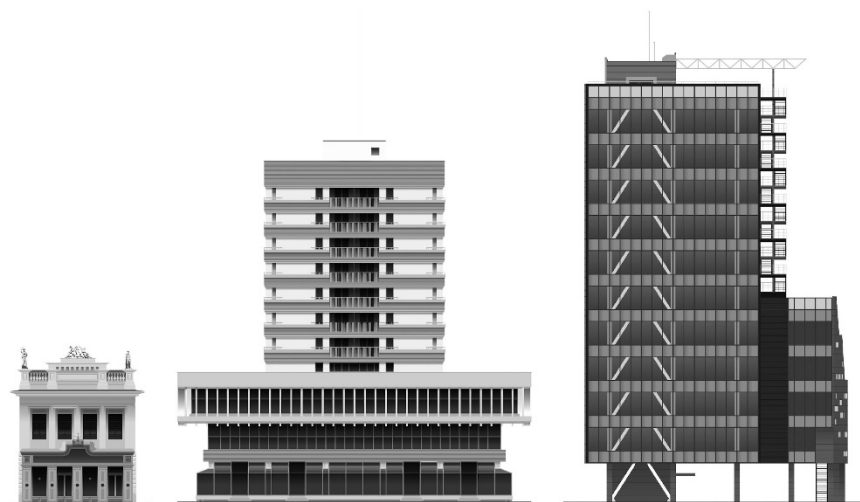


Fig. 3. Architectures of the three ages of Iași, illustrated by Tiberiu Teodor-Stanciu

Throughout the guide, illustration of architectures (Fig. 3) and characters (Fig. 4) expressing the associated fashion and looks are meant to immerse the reader into grasping the sense of place. Alongside the text, interactive extensions place the reader in context. The "*Historical text*" valuably complements the information with testimonies from the earliest times, as recorded by specialists and personalities, in light of historical realities. "*Key terms*" explain archaisms, neologisms, regionalisms and, at times, obsolete words, organized in alphabetical order. "*Did you know that...*" carefully addresses short-term memory which can retain (on average) approximately 7 linguistic units, plus/minus two, according to statistical data. Here, the text extends fluidly with details and curiosities, playfully complementing facts and realities. "*History in the street*" invites the viewer to see the tangible testimony in the current landscape, in order to enhance the sensorial experience of history. The reader becomes an inhabitant of history in the place to which it refers to, as an anchor of memory in discovery. "*Who said...?*" presents quotes that have persisted in collective memory, amplifying the affective dimension of the presented facts. "*Urban myths*" discreetly ponder upon stories transmitted by word of mouth, yet having their specific role in the kaleidoscope of identity, augmenting the imaginary of the city in a particular way, while making the logical separation between the text backed by historical facts and information which is yet to be proven. The "*Quiz*" trains readers to become players in a general culture contest, making the act of learning history and interactive and social experience. "*Meanwhile...*" explores parallel realities and connects local history to the broader context of general knowledge and universal history. This enhances the reader's ability to make connections and even reach a better understanding both of the broader perspective and the particular one. "*Felinarnia*" is another means of contextualizing the presented facts through literature fragments which contribute to the immersive experience of appropriating historical facts. What is more, through the literary layer, the reader will train the mental muscle of building a visual image, which eases the passage towards long-term memory. Nevertheless, the visual experience of history relies on more than descriptive

fragments. The guide is enriched with illustrations, photographs, paintings, lithographs, maps and drawings, augmenting the mental rendering of the historical episode. The recurrent image of the street lamp bears the metaphor of shedding light through history and is a direct reference to the interesting fact that the city has had, over time, more than 60 types of street lamp designs (as shown in Fig. 4), discovery which, in fact, enticed the City Hall into contemplating a project of a park populated by all the available designs of street lamps which once accompanied the streets of Iași. All of the three Chapters are accompanied

by characters – sometimes public figures, meant to depict the aesthetical particularities of fashion and apparel in an identical graphic manner, so that the reader will become aware of the conceptual differences between them, disregarding other altering factors which are inevitable when interacting with the past through means of recording that differ in quality and fidelity of representation.



Fig. 4. Drawings of over 40 different model of street lamps of Iași, illustrated by Tiberiu Teodor-Stanciu

Results

The interest of the public for the publication has been remarkable from the beginning, surpassing the book circulation number, even though the work is also available online, in its integrity, for free. The success of the project marked a very interesting intersection between researchers from different fields of study and academic sectors. What

is more, the book has reached not only its initial target audience – pupils of the 6th and 7th grade, but adults alike, buying and continuously requesting the book from libraries and the publishing house, which is a strong proof that there is a strong need of such cultural and educational initiatives, which should cover the general scarcity of local knowledge in yesterday and today's educational system. Participation in guided tours and requests from the community has been on an exponential rise in the past few years, which proves the interest of the public in connecting with local history and even general knowledge through local representations.

Discussion

From the architect's point of view, such a guide is crucial on both working on small-scale architecture as individual housing or large-scale architecture which comprises of intervention on an urban scale. Education gap in terms of architecture is a recurring reality which places architects, the community, investors and local authorities in divergent roles, at times. The convergent resolution to this equation is, unequivocally, investing in education. Initiatives supplying education with local history and architecture guides from early to higher academic sectors is, in all its entirety, a form of social convergence and cultural sustainability. Abundant illustrations of architecture, grouped by defined ages significantly contribute to training the mind of the young pupil in understanding architectural styles and later recognize them, while placing them in time, context and memory. This is a form of cultivating a responsible form of an education of architecture reflected on the general knowledge of the community, but also in a more fluent dialogue between architects and future clients.

Conclusion

The guide is an interesting way of approaching history as a detective exploring the imprints left in place, while being aware of possible altering and the arguments behind it. The guide is an invitation to the appropriation of the history of a place, viewing it not as a sum of

information, but as an experience which addresses memory through live connections to its contemporary context – thus, the guide bears the quality of a sensorial, semantic and affective anchor for the user. A community which is aware of the genealogy generating its built environment and architectural semantics will better appropriate its architecture and urban fabric, thus being able to formulate more relevant, adequate, enriching and nurturing ways of writing history onwards.

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Iași. Un ghid al istoriei locale

(rezumat)

Acest ghid de istorie locală este o monografie neconvențională sau o călătorie alternativă care oferă o experiență imersivă în universul cultural al orașului Iași, ghidând mintea observatorului prin peisaje succesive de cultură și identitate, prin istorie, povești și mărturii, însoțite de invitații la descoperire, exerciții de interpretare și observare, adresând totodată provocări memoriei și contemplării cititorului. Ghidul lansează invitația de a transcende spațiul și timpul, înțelegând istoria în locul său de origine. Ghidul are calitatea imersivă a unui joc. Fiecare capitol este compus din lecții, uneori extinzându-se în diverse direcții prin studii de caz, care oferă un răgaz binevenit pentru reflecție sau aprofundarea unei

anumite istorii sau detalii, o deviere frumoasă de la istoria bine-cunoscută. Dedicat și oferit gratuit de autoritățile locale elevilor din clasele a VI-a și a VII-a din școlile din Iași, acest proiect reprezintă un mijloc de împuternicire a cunoașterii locale, având ca motivație culturală convingerea că o înțelegere mai profundă a genealogiei culturale locale, în care istoria este împletită cu locurile și arhitecturile sale, va duce la o atitudine mult mai responsabilă față de mediul construit al Iașului, patrimoniul și memoria sa.