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Signs and Emotions as the Experience of the Urban Explorer (A Psychogeographical Approach Using Infographics)

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Abstract

Although we have the impression that we understand the urban texture in which we live, the city still holds surprises in the way it communicates everyday aspects, situations, and cultural history. The experience of the urban explorer, that flaneur/stroller mentioned by Guy Debord (1955) and the Situationist school, was until recently only a literary experience. The emotion of discovering the unusual in the urban daily life was communicated only in the form of textual narratives (Sinclair, 1997).

Recently the psychogeographical approach to the city has become again a topic of interest. Although contemporary design transposed the behavioural codes of urban life into signs, it did not propose emoticons for the phenomenological experience of one who experiences the city.

The original purpose of this paper is to translate the phenomenological experience of the urban explorer into infographics (which translates complex concepts into signs with condensed meaning) and to quantify and communicate emotionally and visually, the experience of the "invisible" [out of sight] cultural details to the hurried passerby.

This paper will discuss the phenomenological (psychogeographical) experience of the city transferred into visual signs will be presented. The authors insist on the communicative value of infographics in making visible the hidden beauty of the city, the historical and esthetical details that are not seen by the passersby on the street, proposing a new urban visual language accompanied by visual design theory and cultural history explanations.

Keywords: *psychogeography, emotions, infographic, visual design, augmented reality, urban experience.*

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1. The Research Problem

During the last decades, the urban space has become a source of advertising information to the detriment of art and culture. Building facades are covered by advertisements urging us to buy various consumer goods, promising a better life. Vision, the primordial sense, is dethroned by other senses such as Smell and Hearing:

> "Reality assaults the knowledge of change so quickly that the individual, with sight, as the first and favourite perceptual form, wakes up in a visual orgy [...], which favours a certain artificiality of the production of the universe, a falsity of reception, an illusion" (Panea, 2013, p. 186).

What the City once offered through imposing buildings and monuments laden with history, now seems to no longer exist, people no longer stop to see the beauty expressed through architecture and art. For this traveller the City remains invisible.

2. Method

The experience of discovery, the awareness of space and the emotions produced in our own body, lead to a total immersion in the urban space, revealing another vision of the City. This immersion deeper and deeper in the attributes of the details in order to discover the surrounding world represents the psychogeography of a place, a method chosen for the urban experiments presented in this paper. The term Psychogeography was invented by the writer, theorist, and filmmaker Guy Debord in 1955, inspired by the concept of aimless walking or *Flâneur* (Fr. urban explorer or street connoisseur), Debord taking this concept from the well-known French writer and poet Charles Baudelaire. The flâneur, Baudelaire's symbol of modernity, is the art of strolling and looking at the urban crowd, the anonymous man drifting through strolling as a detached observer, part of the crowd yet also aloof from it. (McGarrigle, n.d.). Guy Debord defined Psychogeography as "[…] the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." (Debord, 1955, p. 8) and suggested inventive ways to navigate the urban environment and at the same time re-imagine it.

Art movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism have proposed ways to re-imagine the city through urban exploration involving the subconscious imagination (Coverley, 2010, p. 73). Beginning in the 1990s, Psychogeographic theory became popular in artistic and academic circles,

allowing various avant-garde and revolutionary groups to develop psychogeographic practice in various way (Coverley, 2010, pp. 111-114).

The experience of the urban explorer involving a detached exploration of the city, as proposed by Guy Debord (1958) and the Situationist School (Internationale Situationniste), was until recently only a literary experience. The emotion of discovering the unusual in everyday urban life was communicated only in the form of textual narratives by writer and filmmaker Iain Sinclair (1997) considered the walking writer and a significant representative of modern psychogeography that has managed to document and provide evidence with the political scene of the time (Coverley, 2010, p. 26).

„According to De Certeau (1984), who emphasizes the importance of space as a place to practice, the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers." (Sylaiou et al., 2018).

Walking without a determined purpose in exploring the City, is specific to psychogeography and is an essential factor for understanding the urban landscape. From this perspective, Tina Richardson (2015) believes that a psychogeographic experiment should not be complicated. Psychogeographic exploration follows the curious nature of the explorer in an unsystematic, random urban discovery.

> "One of the basic situationist practices is the *Dérive*, a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll." (Debord, 1958, p. 62).

In the paper *Theory of the derive* published in *Internationale Situationniste #2* in 1958, Guy Debord mentions that the lessons drawn from the *Dérive* allowed the first psychogeographical articulations of a modern city. Beyond the discovery of environments, the main components of the environment as well as their spatial location, perception is the main axis of urban exploration (Debord, 1958, p. 66). Recently, the psychogeographical approach to the City has once again become a topic of interest (Bruno, n.d.). The act of walking is studied today as an art form. Walking is considered by contemporary artists, practitioners of psychogeographic explorations, an aesthetic experience and an artistic act that involves an interaction between the human body, space, and other bodies it encounters while walking (Blake, n.d.).

> "The explorers are in a constant dialogue with the space they walk, are stimulated by a wide variety of images, meditate on the surrounding human activities, create meanings and, sometimes, are able to incorporate their walking experience and transform it into art." (Sylaiou, 2018).

Walking, especially on the streets of an urban space, can be experienced as a reconceptualization of a man-made environment.

Alexandru Calcatinge, the author of the book *Visions of the Real*, sees the city as a mental construction. He analyzes the human abilities to abstract the information perceived in the urban environment and he considers that the imagination has the power to transcend space and time, giving man the ability to create mental images (Calcatinge, 2011, p. 15). In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger talks about the concept of *eye-opener*, the way in which the work of art is perceived. Berger says: "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we befieve. [...] We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves." (Berger, 2018, p. 8). In other words, each person has a different way of seeing the same phenomenon. However, images are somewhat different for different people, and also different for the same person in different contexts, depending on perception. For the authors of this article, drifting through an urban environment is a kind of artistic research, because the emotion of discovery involves a state of mind that requires the reception and mental transformation of a fragment of reality, letting the imagination to transcend appearances. An image is all that is present in front of us and can be seen, such as a window, a decorative element on a building, an object, a painting, or a symbol. Several people can recognize the same characteristics and can distinguish the same shapes. Sometimes an image can be the product of our imagination (in the form of mental images) that state of reflection or dreaming that is stimulated by the act of looking. The succession of images and emotions experienced in the act of walking, perceived as puzzle pieces, are generated in our minds in the form of *mental maps* (Buzan & Buzan, 2012), so the act of walking is not only a mechanical action, but also a way of discovery, analysis, contemplation, meditation and assembling urban information.

3. Original approach

The experiment combines urban exploration with visual representation techniques. The original approach of this paper is to translate the phenomenological experience of the urban explorer into visual codes, using Psychogeography as a metaphor for the artistic gaze, revealing subtle messages, stories loaded with history through photography and infographics. The urban details meant to be observed by the hurried passerby will be translated into visual signs with the help of infographics (the graphic method that translates complex concepts into signs with condensed meaning). *Infographics* combines words with images, symbols or signs to effectively communicate a specific message which transmits complex information to an

audience in a way that can be quickly consumed and easily understood. (Smiciklas, (2012).

This phenomenological experience of the city quantifies and communicates emotionally and visually, the experience of the "invisible". Compared to contemporary studies which discuss visual engagement using mobile eye-tracking (Simpson et al., 2018), the present study insists on experientiality by highlighting the phenomenological experience of the observer. The study will influence the perception of both the public and the scientific community (urban psychologists and anthropologists) in perceiving the urban space in relation to the psychological and cultural experiences of the inhabitants.

4. The urban experiment

The hidden beauty of the cityscape is a project proposal aimed at obtaining a broader perspective on how the urban space is perceived and understood and propose a new visual language. Presented through photography and infographics, the artistic experiment transforms the street into a museum setting with informative, cultural and educational diversity. For the urban experiment, the streets of Bucharest were selected, where the old buildings are still standing and can be admired. In order to make as visible as possible the details on the facades of buildings that reveal the art of the past, such as: a neo-Romanian style window, a veranda with carved wooden pillars, a balcony with stone ornaments, a wrought iron railing, or a bas-relief on the facade of an Art building Nouveau, we will use pedestrian surface (sidewalk) as a support for accessing visual and textual information.

Visualizing the Past using Augmented Reality

Augmented Reality (AR) is a technology that allows the overlapping of informational content, over directly perceived information. AR uses digital visual elements, sound, or other sensory stimuli delivered via technology (Hayes, 2020).

> "As a technology, AR refers to different technical means to overlap the simulated content on top of a real worldview, in an interactive manner, with the purpose to provide missing and explanatory information. By unifying the real and the added information, a new and information-richer reality is created having a higher cognitive impact, i.e. the understanding of the reality being thus much improved." (Gheorghiu et al., 2020, p. 357)

Augmented Reality technology has several types of applications: a) *projection-based applications* - they use digital objects projected over physical

space; b) *recognition-based applications* - they detect and recognize a certain object, then replace it with a corresponding object; c) *applications based on location detection* - the GPS and accelerometer of the device on which the application is running are used to give relevant information about the location; d) *applications based on contouring or highlighting elements* - this type of application is used in architecture and engineering; e) *overlapping applications* - they use object recognition to replace all or part of it with an augmented view (see https://www.igreet.co/the-5-types-of-augmented-reality/). Augmented Reality technology can be used to make the public aware of the destruction of monuments (Gheorghiu et al., 2020, p. 357).

How to access the information of the Past?

Starting from a study conducted by a group of English researchers shows that the edges of streets are an important component from an experiential point of view in the urban space. Using a mobile eye-tracking device (SMI Glasses 2.0 Mobile Eye-tracker), the researchers found that when the edges are interesting and stimulating, they encourage people to linger and experience what they have to offer (Simpson et al., 2018). As a conclusion of this study, the pedestrian space, more than its complexity and character, allows its use for experiential actions. In order to involve the hurried passerby in the action of discovering the beauties of urban details and to pay due attention to them on the side of the streets in the vicinity of an old and architecturally valuable building, informational graphic markings will be placed.

These visual markings, such as outdoor sidewalk stickers, will highlight the importance of some architectural elements in that place. The stickers will contain graphic signs with stylized shapes that will indicate the details to be discovered. Graphic signs will function as visual clues, so with the help of *Augmented Reality* technology, the symbols contained in these visual markings will reveal architectural styles, details of decorative elements on the facades of old buildings or their hidden meanings.

Figure 1. Visual markings/sidewalk stickers (left); Scanning code with QR Scanner application (right).
Graphic concept and pictograms for sidewalk stickers: © Cornelia Moţăianu;
Photo credit: © Mihaela Moţăianu

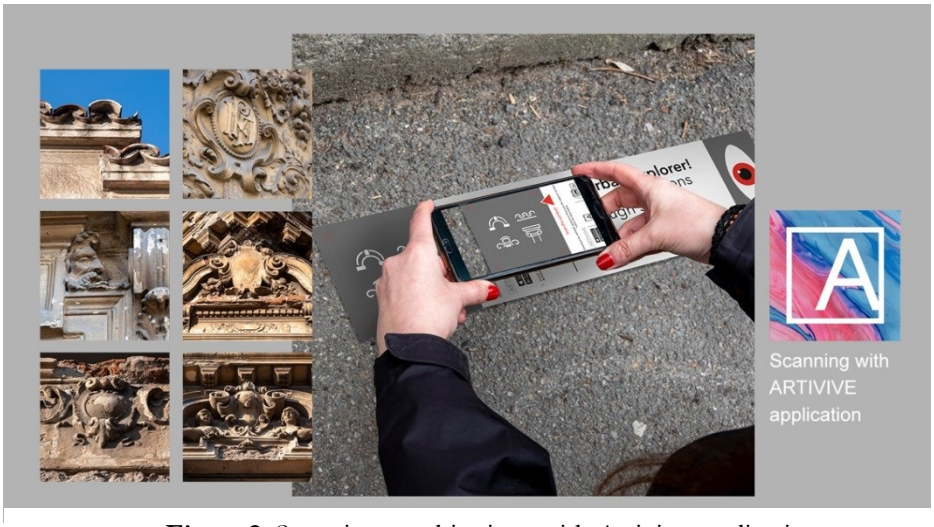

Figure2. Scanning graphic signs with Artivive application.
Pictograms and Sidewalk stickers: © Cornelia Moţăianu; Photo credit: Mihaela Moţăianu and Cornelia Moţăianu; Artivive application logo – www.artivive.com.

For the project, two applications will be used, the *Artivive* application that uses technology based on recognition allows the visualization of the

urban details selected and indicated by the graphic signs and the *QR Scanner* application that will make the transfer to the project site for detailed information about the history of the place. Both *Artivive* and *QR Scanner* will reveal the points of interest in the stratigraphy of the place.

The two applications *Artivive* and *QR Scanner*, can be used on any mobile device (mobile phone or tablet) and can be downloaded from Google Play and App Store using the internet connection.

Visual markers (stickers will also contain information about using applications with instructions on how to access historical data. Encouraged to discover the beauty of the urban fragments behind the infographic clues, after downloading the applications, passersby will be able to scan the graphic signs to see what the clue reveals and will also be able to access detailed information.

Various digital and printed materials will be developed for the dissemination of the project.

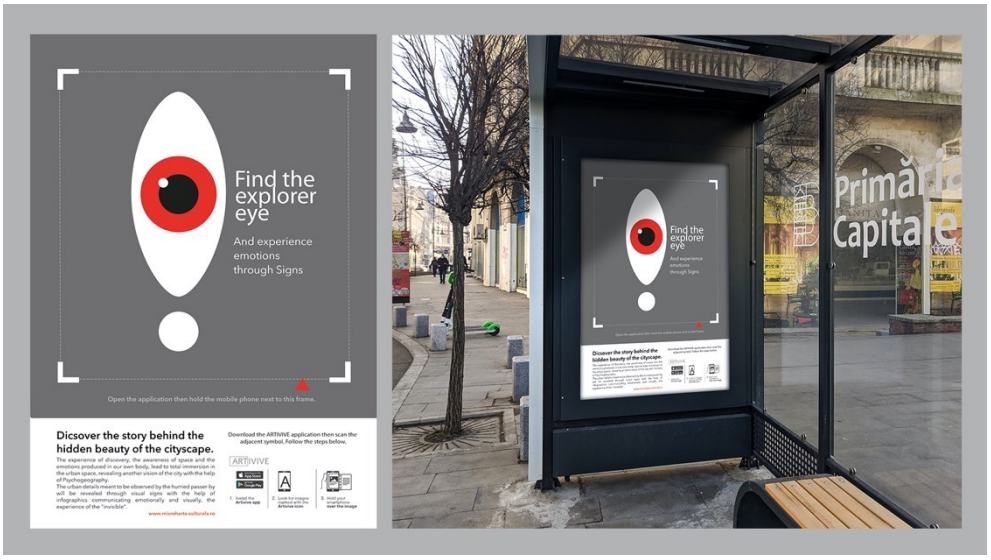

Figure 3. Poster of the experiment (left); Backlit banner for bus station (right). Poster design and project logo: © Cornelia Moţăianu; Photo credit: © Mihaela Moţăianu

5. Conclusions

Psychogeographic exploration, the power of Infographics and the use of *Augmented Reality* technology are the main tools used in the present approach, highlighting with their help the complex history of each place. The playful component of the project, specific to the psychogeographical

exploration of the city, introduces a new approach to urban exploration, allowing a development of new methods to raise awareness among urban residents.

The project *The hidden beauty of the cityscape* tries to highlight the art blurred and disturbed by the intrusion of modernity, and tries to recover the past and invite its inhabitants to rediscover the beauty of the city. The project is also a wake-up call to raise awareness of the danger of destruction, in which there are architectural treasures in the urban landscape.

Not only a work of art, such as painting or sculpture, can give us access to beauty, but even the city we live in also has hidden spectacular details, and to see their beauty, we must let our eyes discover them.

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