Historical Centers of Small Cities in Slovakia – Problems and Potentials of Creating Livable Public Spaces

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Abstract. Public spaces in the historic cores of cities need to adapt to changing requirements for their use, reflecting the current needs of their users. High-quality public spaces provide a safe, accessible, suitable and pleasant environment for various types of activities and meet the needs of residents - users. Based on their good functioning, cities are generally evaluated by their inhabitants as more or less attractive for life. Within the project “LIVA - The concept of livability in the context of small towns” we have examined public spaces in the historic city cores of selected small cities in Slovakia, to identify the problems and potentials of forming environmentally and people-friendly public spaces. The research shows, that today’s architectural-urban forms of public spaces in the historical centers of small towns in Slovakia are burdened with many problems, the most serious of which are usually their unsatisfactory functional content, unsatisfactory organization of transit transport, the poor state of public greenery, or unsatisfactory conditions of the physical environment – pavements or equipment with urban furnishings. The public spaces reflect the overall problems of small towns, remoteness, lack of investments, departure of young people and aging of the population, resulting in a lack of basic infrastructure and underdeveloped amenities for providing public services. In many cases, the historical centers of small towns do not provide sufficient attractiveness for businesses and cultural and social facilities in the parterre of buildings, nor variability of functional use of the public space. On the other hand, public spaces in the centers of small cities show the potential to offer a better quality of the environment. The central zones, the amenities, and public services, green infrastructure or recreation and sports areas in small cities are usually accessible within walking distances, which supports pedestrian movement and reduces the use of cars. The historical cores of small towns in many cases successfully preserved their cultural heritage values, their historical identity, and their character.

1. Introduction
Small cities in the context of European cities are regarded those which have less than 50,000 inhabitants. In Slovakia, 131 cities, out of a total number of 141 cities, have less than 50,000 inhabitants. In Slovak conditions we can consider that small towns are those with population up to 20,000 inhabitants. The vast majority, 102 cities of the total number of cities in Slovakia, have less than 20,000 inhabitants (according to 2018 census). In the past, there were numerous small towns in
Slovakia, e.g. in the middle of the 19th century, only Bratislava (46,540 inhabitants in 1869) and Košice (21,742 inhabitants in 1869) were considered to be larger cities of that time, and only a few others had more than 10,000 inhabitants, such as Banská Štiavnica and Banská Belá, Komárno, Prešov, Nitra, or Detva with its surrounding [1, 2]. While the times of industrial urbanization and the influx of people into cities have changed the demographic characteristics and urban structure of some cities, other cities have not experienced rapid growth and, in many cases, have retained the original character of their urban structure, especially in historic centers. Urban nuclei of a large part of today's small towns in Slovakia have been historically formed as craft and trade centers in the Middle Ages, others evolved from rural settlements with predominantly agricultural character, some in the era of socialist industrialization, which is reflected in the forms of their urban structure and in the types and forms of their public spaces [3].

The quality of public spaces is closely related to the overall quality of life in cities. High-quality public spaces are regarded those spaces, which provide a safe, accessible, suitable and pleasant environment for various types of activities and meet the needs of residents - users. Based on their good functioning, cities are generally evaluated by their inhabitants as more or less attractive for life [4, 5]. Within the project “LIVA - The concept of livability in the context of small towns” we have examined public spaces in the historic city cores of selected small cities in Slovakia, to identify their specific problems and potentials to become people-friendly and environmentally friendly, adapt to changing requirements for their use, reflecting the current needs of their users, while at the same time preserving their cultural heritage values, their historical identity.

2. Methods
The research focused on the assessment of the current state of public spaces in historic cores of selected cities from least-developed districts and lagging regions – Bardejov (32,449 inhabitants according to 2018 census), Rimavská Sobota (23,888), Levoča (14,757), Revúca (12,087), and Jelšava (3,219) and on identifying their problems and potentials for revitalization. Research has concentrated on circuits which are regarded the pillars of creating livable, people-friendly and environmentally-friendly public spaces:

- assessment of the availability of public amenities, services and facilities (objects with a cultural, educational, social and residential function),
- assessment of transportation space (regulation of car traffic, accessibility, application of the rules of traffic calming, parking, pedestrian zones),
- assessment of green infrastructure provision and pro-ecological solutions,
- assessment of the physical state of public spaces and their equipment with street furniture, recreational, sports and pro-health facilities, and conditions for enabling social integration of various groups and inclusion of elderly, young, or disabled.

The public spaces of selected case towns were studied using online sources from web pages of studied municipalities, literary sources, historical and current maps and planning documents, and by on-site research visits.

3. Results

3.1. Historical centers of small towns with good quality of public spaces (Bardejov, Levoča and Rimavská Sobota)
Historic medieval squares of Bardejov and Levoča, with their churches, city halls and surrounding burgher houses represent ensembles of exceptional cultural heritage values, listed in the UNESCO
World Heritage List and are highly visited by tourists. The requirements to protect the cultural heritage values of urban fabric and architecture of buildings and tourism influence the functional use of buildings surrounding the public space. They are used mainly for cultural, administration, residential and accommodation functions, in the parterre of the buildings usually cafes, restaurants, bars, and few shops are located. While the main square in Bardejov (figure 1) is a pedestrian zone where access of cars is limited, in Levoča parking places are offered directly at the main square. This arrangement reflects the fact that Bardejov is a city with 32,449 inhabitants, and Levoča only 14,757, so the access of cars to the main central public space of the historical core of Levoča does not represent a problem. The forms of green infrastructure in public spaces of historic city cores are subjects of discussion, as historically the green spaces and trees were not present in these spaces [6-9]. The historical environment and requirements of preserving its cultural heritage values and historical identity limit the use of “nature-based” solutions for example green roofs, green facades or water infiltration and retention. Adequate attention is given to design and maintenance of public spaces, and to enabling the use of spaces by disabled and inclusion of all social groups.

**Figure 1.** Public space of the main square in Bardejov, reflecting the priority to preserve cultural heritage values and historical character of the architectural and urban form. Photo by K. Kristianova.

The main public space of the historical center of Rimavská Sobota – the main square of rectangular shape (figure 2) is surrounded by well preserved historical buildings, with cultural, administration, and residential functions, with cafes, restaurants, and shops in the parterre. Automobile transport is not excluded and the square offers parking places for cars, too. Similarly as in Levoča, the access of cars does not represent a problem.

**Figure 2.** The main square in Rimavská Sobota, the part of green park area. Photo by K. Kristianova.
The space of the main square in Rimavská Sobota is adequately equipped with street furniture, which is in good condition and is sufficiently maintained. The pavement enables access for elderly, or disabled, and the public space offers a safe, accessible, attractive and pleasant environment. The open paved area of the square is suitable for organizing events and the green – park area, with mature large trees, offers rest in shadow. The square enables various types of activities and use by various groups of users. The specific feature, which is characteristic for public spaces in historical cores of many small cities in Slovakia, is that their important components are elements of sacral architecture \[10-11\], and thus they represent spaces where profane and sacral dimensions are mixed.

3.2. Historical centers of small towns with unsatisfactory public spaces (Revúca and Jelšava)

The architectural and urban qualities of the public spaces of the historical center of Revúca (figure 3) are marked by the disruption of the original spatial arrangement of the historic urban fabric by construction of the multi-storey mass housing estate in the second half of the 20th century. The civic amenities, services and commercial facilities moved from historical center to these newly built parts of the city. Transit traffic passes through the public spaces of the historic core. There is also a watercourse flowing through the area of the historic core, but its potential to offer attractive spaces and revitalize the historical core of the town is not exploited. Although the square in front of the Reduta building is revitalized and equipped by elements of street furniture, the physical state of the rest of public spaces in the historical city core is not satisfactory.

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3.** The historical core of Revúca on the map of the Second military survey of the Habsburg Empire – Hungary 1819-1869 (left) and its current development (right). Source: Mapire and ZBGIS.

The public space of the historical core of Jelšava has a form of street, lined by row of houses, with a church in the middle extension of the street. The historical urban form of this small city was partially disrupted by buildings built in socialist period, which did not respect the scale of historical setting. The public space shows several problems. It is seriously burdened by transit transport, the offer of public and commercial services is unsatisfactory, and the physical environment is in a poor state, the street pavements are in bad condition, public space is not equipped by street furniture and does not offer possibilities to sit, or rest. The public space reflects the problems of a small city in the least-developed district and lagging region.

4. Conclusions

The results of the research show, that today's architectural-urban forms of public spaces in the historic centers of small towns in Slovakia are burdened with problems, the most serious of which are usually
their unsatisfactory functional content, unsatisfactory organization of transit transport, the poor state of public greenery, or unsatisfactory conditions of the physical environment – pavements or equipment with urban furnishings. The public spaces reflect the overall problems of small towns, remoteness, lack of investments, departure of young people and aging of the population, resulting in a lack of basic infrastructure and underdeveloped amenities for providing public services. In many cases, the historical centers of small towns do not provide sufficient attractiveness for businesses and cultural and social facilities in the parterre of buildings, nor variability of functional use of the public space. The results of the research indicate that these problems are manifested especially in the group of cities with the smallest number of inhabitants (Revúca, Jelšava), where the values of historical urban fabric of city cores were disturbed and where public spaces are burdened by transit transport. On the other hand, there are small cities found, which historic centers offer a good or high quality sustainable and multifunctional public space. Studied cases (Bardejov, Levoča, Rimavská Sobota) show that cities in this category were successful in preserving their cultural heritage values, historical urban fabric of their core and their identity. They created pedestrian zones or created possibilities for coexistence of pedestrian and car traffic in public spaces, using the advantage that the central zones, amenities, and public services, green infrastructure or recreation and sports areas in small cities are usually accessible within walking distances, which supports pedestrian and cycle movement and reduces the use of cars. They succeeded to balance the competitive requirements for use of public space, apply the principles of universal design to create an environment without barriers for all, regardless of age or health, and enhance the urban vitality and livability of public space. The studied examples of public spaces in small towns in Slovakia also show that the potential of nature-based solutions to improve the quality of environment is usually not implemented in public spaces of the historical city cores.

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