



Pedestrianisation in Cluj-Napoca. An Economic (Re)Development Tool?

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ABSTRACT

Pedestrianisation is seen by many as a saviour of downtown areas, a powerful tool in combating services peripheralisation in urban areas. My intent, through the article at hand, was to see whether the recent pedestrianisation of Cluj-Napoca's old town had managed, so far, to reclaim, to reform, from an economical point of view, the city centre, thus making it better, not only for business, but also for all people. Therefore, I employed a series of criteria, from retail diversity to the number of social-cultural events, in order to examine the situation on the ground. However, the outcome of this endeavour does not paint an auspicious picture, which means that Cluj-Napoca's pedestrianisation process, the conversion of streets into car-free areas, did not generate a comprehensive revitalisation of the city centre, lacking the capacity to create a strong economic environment on its own.

1. INTRODUCTION

From the start, I would like to emphasize the fact that this paper intends to address issues crucial to Cluj-Napoca's city centre and to the entire city, and to bring to light, from a geographical and economic perspective, a subject that has been mostly tackled by architects, designers and urbanists. Raising questions (not pointing fingers) is the main objective, namely about the issue of walkability and about one of its most crucial components, pedestrianisation, more precisely what both of these concepts genuinely mean and how they fit together, what pedestrianisation means for a city centre (in our case Cluj-Napoca), for its economic revitalisation and redevelopment, for the return of retail and people from the ever so ruinous road towards the mall. Furthermore, it provides readers with the tools necessary for applying similar research to other city centres, enabling them to find the state of their downtowns, the relationship between pedestrianisation and economic resurgence, and giving them a place to start discovering new and better urban management ideas.

In short, it plans to find out if Cluj-Napoca's scheme of pedestrianising its old town, started in 2006 by the local authorities, managed to attain its objective, which is renewing and improving the economic microsystem that is Cluj-Napoca's historic city centre.

2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Walkability can be an economic development tool. This is the gist of one of Kaid Benfield's article in *The Atlantic Cities* [2], where he presents the example of Lancaster, a city situated in Los Angeles County, California. Like many downtowns across America, Lancaster's city centre has been in decline ever since the late 1980s. Most shops and retail services closed down or migrated to malls further away in the suburbs, while main street and the adjacent older neighbourhoods suffered.

The city decided to act in order to rejuvenate and redevelop the area. Thus, a new form-based zoning code was adopted, basically a regulation which manages building types and sizes ('forms'), and their relationship

to the street, rather than traditional 'Euclidean' zoning that segregates land uses from each other [1]. An architecture and planning firm was also employed to turn the fortune around for the battered main street and attract business and people back to the downtown. What they created was a boulevard (named THE BLVD), whose key elements include wider, pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, arcades, outdoor dining, single travel lanes, enhanced zebra crossings, additional trees, thus better shading, added lighting, gateways and public art.



Fig. 1. Main Street of Lancaster, California, after conversion.

With all these elements in place, the results were impressive. In two years, 49 new businesses opened along the boulevard and the revenues generated almost doubled compared to the previous period. Property values went up by 10%, 800 permanent and 1,100 temporary construction jobs were created, 800 homes were set up or rehabilitated, while road safety dramatically improved, with fewer traffic collisions and collisions with personal injury.

This article intends to find out if the case presented by Kaid Benfield is not alone in its application and if there is a causal relationship between pedestrianisation and economic redevelopment in the city of Cluj-Napoca and in its pedestrian areas. Are our streets better economically after being pedestrianized? Did the creation of pedestrian zones and complete streets help us regain our city centre?

Before going any further with our views on the relation between pedestrianisation and economic development, a short stop is in order to properly discuss a minor blemish in Benfield's train of thought.

Walkability is the concept and term that is mentioned frequently in the first mentioned article, including its title. However, what transpires from the article is far from the concept, as a pedestrian-oriented street or boulevard does not infer 'walkability', but

rather a feature of walkability, pedestrianisation. According to Walk Score®, a popular website and iOS application, which offers public access walkability index that assigns a numerical walkability score to any address in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, walkability means more than just creating extra space for pedestrians, also calling for:

- *a centre*: walkable neighbourhoods have a centre, whether there is a main street or a public space;
- *people*: enough people for businesses to flourish and for public transit to run frequently;
- *mixed income, mixed use*: affordable housing located near businesses;
- *parks and public space*: plenty of public places to gather and play;
- *pedestrian design*: buildings are close to the street, parking lots are relegated to the back;
- *schools and workplaces*: close enough that most residents can walk from their homes;
- *complete streets*: streets designed for bicyclists, pedestrians, and public transport [12].

Furthermore, the goal of walkability requires a quantitative and qualitative assessment of pedestrian mobility, for example:

- *quantified* in terms of the walking environment: the presence of safe and attractive streets and paths, maximum block lengths or street connectivity, and the location, diversity and frequency of destinations - shops, parks and schools;
- *qualitatively*, walkability is the extent to which the built environment is friendly to the presence of people living, shopping, visiting, enjoying or spending time in an area [4], [6], [10].

In short, not every pedestrian area is walkable, and one cannot claim that Lancaster Boulevard can be defined as the latter at this point. It is simply a complete street, meaning it is a street for everyone, designed and operated to enable safe access for all users. Pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and public transportation users of all ages and abilities are able to safely move along and across a complete street. Such a street makes it easy to cross the street, walk to shops, and bicycle to work. Moreover, it allows buses to run on time and makes it safe for people to walk to and from train stations [5], [7], [11]. Nevertheless, as much as it excels at pedestrianisation, it fails to include the rest of the features associated with walkability. Thus, the title of Benfield's should have read as follows: 'The Case for *Pedestrianisation* as an Economic Redevelopment Tool'.

I do not intend to go into any etymological debates, therefore I will proceed with a brief presentation of the changes that took place in Cluj-Napoca, between 2000-2012, especially in the city centre and at the city's edge.

At the start of the 21st century, the old historical town was the central business district (CBD)

of the city, with great concentrations of retail and other businesses on King Ferdinand Street, in Mihai Viteazu and Unirii squares, while Eroilor (Heroes') Boulevard retained its status as the sole main street (high street) of the city. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, two phenomena that would change the face of Cluj-Napoca's urban, social and economic subsystems manifested themselves.

The first one was the *shopping malls*, erected at opposite sides of the city in 2007 (Polus Center and Iulius Mall), which attracted the existing retail from the city centre, in the same manner the enclosed shopping mall had been emptying American downtowns since the 1950's.

The second phenomenon, simultaneous with the first one, was the establishment of *pedestrian areas*, starting with Muzeului Square and Eroilor Boulevard in 2006-2007. Centripetal in nature, the pedestrian area initiative of Cluj-Napoca aimed to offer a better, more pleasant walking environment, reduce pollution, congestion, traffic and accidents, and retain businesses.

The City of Cluj-Napoca currently has roughly 20,644 square metres of pedestrian and semi-pedestrian areas (car-free zones), all of them situated in the old historical centre of the city. These areas, even though concentrated between the walls of the old town, are discontinuous, marked by breaks and interruptions (table 1) (fig. 1).

Table 1. The surface area of Cluj-Napoca's pedestrian zones in 2012.

| No. | Street/square name | Surface area (m ²) |
|-----|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Bulevardul Eroilor | 7.682 |
| 2 | Potaissa | 1.835 |
| 3 | Fortăreței | 594 |
| 4 | I.M. Klein | 1.258 |
| 5 | Ioan Bob | 1.222 |
| 6 | Ioan Rațiu | 912 |
| 7 | Vasile Goldiș | 459 |
| 8 | Piața Muzeului | 2.323 |
| 9 | F. D. Roosevelt | 825 |
| 10 | Georges Clemenceau | 522 |
| 11 | Matei Corvin | 1.038 |
| 12 | Andrei Șaguna | 1.974 |

Note: Unirii Square was excluded from the count, as the surface allocated for cars did not change.

The above mentioned phenomena are entangled in a 'conflict', the stake being the retail base and the people of the city. The battle is not over, but the question remains, who is winning? Did the pedestrian area and the city centre attain their goal and recover their former glory? Can pedestrianisation be used as a universal economic (re)development tool?



Fig. 2. The pedestrian areas of Cluj-Napoca's old town in 2012.

In order to answer these questions, I intend to apply several assessment criteria, which are:

- *variety*: the diversity of commercial establishments in pedestrian areas and number of 'clone spaces' in such areas [3], [9];
- *number of 'ghost spaces'*: number of unused or underused spaces [8], [9];
- *interest in space renting*: number of failed or successful auctions for spaces in pedestrian areas;
- *rent level*: rent rates per square metre;
- *debt level*: money owed to owners by commercial establishments in pedestrian areas;
- *luxury stores*: number of high end retail establishments in pedestrian areas;
- *social-cultural events*: number of festivals, competitions, fairs, street performers and art, etc. in pedestrian areas.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first thing that should characterise a successful commercial area is diversity, not only in terms of types of retail establishments, but also product diversity and customer diversity. This can be easily ascertained by how diverse or, on the contrary, *bland* an area or a street is at a given time, what some call the *clone street (town) phenomenon* [3].

Eroilor Boulevard, with the largest commercial surface area in the old town, is the best place to observe such a process. In 2011, for example, it hosted 37 places that can be defined as 'clones' (out of total of 101 shops) [9], such as mobile phone repair and sale shops, second hand clothing stores, pawnbrokers, fast food and gambling establishments, branches of foreign banks, cheap trinket and jewellery stores (some falsely advertised as traditional souvenir shops) and even copy-paste, lacklustre bars and cafes. Although the situation is not critical, local authorities and planners must not overlook the high percentage of such spaces on Cluj-Napoca's main street (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Example of a 'clone' space on Eroilor Boulevard, Cluj-Napoca, in 2011.



Fig. 4. Example of a 'ghost' space on Eroilor Boulevard, Cluj-Napoca, in 2011.

Alongside 'cloning', the existence of ghost (empty) streets and spaces is one of the best indicators for an area's economic turmoil. In the case of Cluj-Napoca, this phenomenon, a manifestation of the recent retail flight towards shopping malls and downtown ruin, is highly evident on Eroilor Boulevard, but also on other pedestrian streets, such as Andrei Șaguna. However, I will again point out Eroilor Boulevard as an example for this process, as it has the largest retail surface area, the most significant number of 'ghost' spaces and was pedestrianized in 2007, thus offering the best perspective on the pedestrianization-economic dynamics relation.

In 2011, the street had a total number of 8 ghost spaces [9], an insignificant number when compared to the total number of retail spaces (109), but quite a substantial change from 1990, when it had none (see figure 4).

One of the reasons for the exacerbation of the ghost street phenomenon and another indicator of pedestrian area listlessness is the lack of interest from different entrepreneurs in renting retail space on Cluj-Napoca's downtown streets. One again, I will use 2011

as a reference point. Even though areas such as Eroilor and Muzeului Square have plenty of rented space, other pedestrian streets are empty, in part because no one was interested in opening any establishment in that particular area. For instance, the city hall had 9 places for rent on Andrei Șaguna Street in early 2011. Only one firm was interested, for only one space, but later backed down. What followed was a series of auctions, in June, July and August, all unsuccessful. Similarly, Potaissa, Fortăreței, Ioan Rațiu, and I.M. Klein streets still remain unoccupied.

Rent levels in the historical centre of Cluj-Napoca are unusually high, especially for commercial spaces, reaching 38 euros/m²/month and 456 euros/m²/year, in 2010, on streets like Eroilor Boulevard, Napoca or Memorandumului, almost on par with similar streets in Israel, Denmark or even in the United States.

Another unusual fact is that there is *no difference between the rent level of a semi-pedestrian street and the rent level of a street with high traffic*, which could mean that property values and rent levels do not increase when a street is pedestrianized, the rent curve remaining unchanged.

More unfortunately, expensive rents keep or drive businesses away from downtown, leading to 'street cloning' and 'ghost spaces'. Another sign, pointing to a not so auspicious economic situation, is the debt accumulated by the many outdoor pubs and cafes. In 2011, the debt owed to Cluj-Napoca City Hall by such establishments amounted to over 370,000 lei (roughly 86,000 euros) for the areas leased in Muzeului Square and over 230,000 lei (around 53,500 euros) for those on Eroilor Boulevard. I do not possess any information on whether private owners face the same problems for the space that they rented and city hall's account sheets are sketchy at best, preventing me from obtaining any useful data (for example, until 2012, there was no separation per economic activity, everything being bundled as street commerce).

Still, the debt of these firms and the fact that many establishments have an economic short lifespan (some fail, move out or are forced to change their activity in less than a year) paints a rather pessimistic picture of the state of our downtown pedestrian streets.

Pedestrianized, main streets often hold a wide variety of luxury or mid-range stores, primarily apparel and shoes, not to mention fine dining and cafes, interior design, watch and jewellery stores, stationeries, bookstores and boutiques, confectionaries, etc. Kärtner Straße or the Graben in Vienna's Innere Stadt are prime examples of such streets.

Cluj-Napoca's main street has none of the above mentioned establishments, migration towards malls and the economic downturn having emptied the existing retail and replaced them with ghost and clone spaces. Even though the pedestrian areas of Cluj-

Napoca did not fare well when subjected to the criteria enumerated and presented so far, there is one area where they demonstrated moderate success, on the social-cultural scene, leading to *temporary revitalization*.

In 2010, Unirii Square became the focal point for *TIFF (Transylvanian International Film Festival)*, when the official opening of the festival was held in this same public space. Moreover, events like Cluj-Napoca Days ("Zile de Cluj"), put live jazz and folk concerts, opera, photo, painting and culinary exhibits, street theatre, costume parades, etc. on the pedestrian areas of Eroilor Boulevard, of Muzeului and of Unirii Squares, of Potaissa Street and of other streets, both at the first 2011 edition, as well as a year later, at the second one.

The temporary pedestrianisation of Unirii Square, of Napoca Street and of Eroilor Boulevard, during the summer weekends of 2012, brought several events to the downtown area, like *'Man.in.fest'*, *The International Festival of Experimental Theatre*, and *I.O.I-The Interactive. Original. Unpredictable Festival*.

According to data provided by the City Hall's Media Office, from 2008 to 2012, the pedestrian streets as well as the plazas of Cluj-Napoca's old town hosted 698 events, while a further look at the figures revealed an undeniable increase in the number of social and cultural events, from 115 in 2008 to 171 in 2012.

Unfortunately, some car-free streets (Andrei Șaguna or Ioan Bob-Ion Rațiu area, for example) were omitted, receiving little attention from local authorities and event organisers.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In short, pedestrian areas are brilliant ideas. They give us cleaner air, fewer accidents, healthier and more pleasant environments. However, I believe that this article has managed to convincingly demonstrate the fact that the pedestrianisation phenomenon, although a premise for economic (re)development and revitalization, does not lead to an economic overhaul of downtown or old town areas, at least not by itself and not everywhere.

Correlation does not equal causality, as such a model will not function or yield results under any circumstances. What may be true, applicable or successful in some places, may fail or lead to poor results in others.

Even though I consider pedestrianisation as an integral part of rejuvenating city centres, it must not be implemented separately from other actions and must be accompanied by careful, comprehensive, and multidisciplinary planning (do not involve solely architects and engineers, but include environmental psychologists, sociologists, geographers, economists, designers, etc. as well).

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