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Students' Awareness of the Local Cultural and Historical Heritage in Post-Communist Regional Centers: Yekaterinburg, Gyumri, Timisoara

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Abstract: The article presents an analysis of students' awareness of the local cultural and historical heritage in post-communist countries, taking the examples of Yekaterinburg (Russia), Gyumri (Armenia), and Timisoara (Romania). A multidisciplinary methodology was applied, including a sociological survey, visualization of city places, and assessment of the respondents' capacity to engage with the identified historical and cultural items. The provided data visualizations demonstrated the preferences of young people for certain spaces, and allowed assessment of young people's awareness of selected instances of historical and cultural heritage. An attempt was made to estimate critically how historical and cultural objects are included in youth consciousness. An attractive image of the city and its positive perception can be used as a basis for engaging youth participation in the development and promotion of the city. Results can be useful for city managers and administrators, to promote better engagement with this age group and its involvement in promoting the city brand and in place production.

1. Introduction

Scientific research on the preservation and actualization of historical and cultural heritage is retrospective, as a rule, for understandable reasons. Historians are concerned with the recreation of a period, accuracy of data, and the reliability of sources, links between data, and personalized information. Scholars of cultural studies typically explore the uses of heritage and the meaning of its cultural forms to interpret the present and the past. Heritage, however, deals not only with the past. It is constantly re-assessed, re-considered, and re-interpreted, endowed with new values and meanings [1]. As defined by UNESCO's World Heritage Center, cultural heritage "is the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from the past generation, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations" [2]. UNESCO further develops that idea in the Memorandum on "World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture" [3], stating that "historic areas and their surroundings should be regarded as forming an irreplaceable universal heritage", and urging "governments and the citizens of the States in whose territory they are situated (. . .) to safeguard this heritage and integrate it into the social life of our times". Heritage is a prerequisite for consideration in the development strategy of a place, integrating its qualitative characteristics in the direction of preserving the uniqueness and identity of the past, while maintaining stability and ensuring the productivity of that place. Places of considerable historical significance

still need to live and allow development, otherwise they may become endangered and lose their chance of a future. The major crises of the 21st century, first the economic one in 2008 and more recently the health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, opened new perspectives for viewing historical heritage. Therefore, this research aims to explore how stated preferences of youth retain and value places and spaces in cities of choice for pursuing higher education.

National capital cities usually receive particular attention, due to their international exposure, significant budgets, and privileged situations, and traditionally have harbored the main centers of power in political, financial, cultural, and symbolic terms. Other cities, however, need skilled effort to gain a place on the world map. Regional centers, which are the focus of this study, must find ways to be competitive, visible, and efficient in pursuing their development and branding goals, using less resources than capital cities and relying on more innovative solutions. This research team selected regional centers of three post-communist states—cities where universities are concentrated, which attract young people from all over the region—aiming to identify how the younger generation perceives the attractiveness and unique features pertaining to these cities, to illustrate with examples awareness of the valuation of different cultural goods, and to identify how this generational group is ready to engage in cultural and economic strategies rooted in local cultural and historical heritage.

Several issues are specific to the selected type of cities. First, to preserve themselves and secure their sustainable development, cities that are regional centers have sought to retain young people through a variety of means, including cultural policies, often at the expense of nearby smaller settlements [4–7]. Second, in a more difficult situation, international experience shows that the involvement of young people in urban development projects brings significant gains in terms of cost-reduction and, even more importantly, in attracting residents to the place, leading them away from alienated indifference [4,8,9]. Third, the urban landscape, including historical objects and spaces, can be built while considering the social activities, patterns of behavior, and trajectories of young people, on which consideration the choice of new functions and new meanings of historical and cultural objects and public spaces depends [2,8,10].

Each generation brings its unique understanding of physical, social, economic, political environments [11–13]. The current generation of young people, typically referred to as "Generation Z", is described as globally focused, digitally socialized, and overwhelmingly visually engaged [11,12]. The study of their movement patterns around the city can benefit from an approach bringing together sociologists and specialists in visual technologies. Such research can take place when using visual models of urban space, since 21st-century architects actively use possibilities of information technology (IT) in search for new architectural forms, thereby proposing new approaches in design and construction, in line with UNESCO's recommendations on architectural interventions in historical sites [3].

The questions addressed by our research were: Q1: What architectural spaces or historical–cultural (historical–architectural) objects are retained by young people and shape their (positive) perception of the city?

Q2: Are these spaces or objects integrated in the places students prefer for gathering and socializing?

2. Literature Review

Scholars in a variety of disciplines have explored the issues of urban landscapes, cultural heritage, and identity, focusing on different aspects. Understanding the city as an individualized place of intersection of territorial settlement, socio-communal, and mental structures [3,5], we assign decisive importance to the latter. In search of an appropriate frame for analyzing the contemporary city, its heritage, and residents' engagement with the space, this research team builds on works relating to the sociology of the city [14] that allow the city and its citizens to be considered in a single research plane, without reducing the first exclusively to the totality of architecture and infrastructure. Park, for example,

wrote that Chicago is "something more than a collection of individuals and amenities... The city is rather a mindset, a body of customs and traditions . . . , a product of nature, especially of human nature" [14] (p. 1). Culture, in such an interpretation, is the fourth and final factor in the social organization of citizens and at the same time represents their competition. The city "comes to life" and receives individuality, due to the actions and faces of citizens [8,9,15,16]. At the other end of the spectrum, super-modernity produces "non-places" inside places, i.e. areas in which habitual relational and social purposes are lost, the free movement of individuals is supervised and, at times, regulated and channeled, and identity is diluted. In his seminal work, *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai discussed the need to "produce locality" as a contextual and relational outcome of the effort to maintain a sense of place in the flow of globalization [17]. Groups and individuals need to apply the notions and resources of heritage and memory in confirming identity and reducing uncertainties enhanced by globalization. This is a ritual process, and a deliberate act of production, involving local knowledge, local subjects, and physical objects existing in the geographic space. He warns that "without reliably local subjects, the construction of a local terrain of habitation, production, and moral security would have no interests attached to it" [17] (p. 181). For him, locality is an ever-changing construct that emerges from the practices of local subjects in specific neighborhoods. The possibilities of its realization as a structure of feeling are, in this respect, as variable and incomplete as the relationships among neighborhoods that constitute its practical instances [17] (p. 199).

Along similar lines, Augé discussed the results of place production practices leading to the place–non-place dichotomy [18]. Augé cautions against the romantic vision of places, seen in traditional anthropology as timeless, unchanging, "rooted in the intact soil", maintained by archaic and exotic indigenous rituals, with reference to the "totality temptation" according to which culture is imagined as holistic and accurately represented by randomly selected individuals, artifacts, places, and practices. While localities (places) come to existence by virtue of being relational, deeply historical, and intimately connected with social and individual identities, non-places are transitory places, which human actors pass through as anonymous individuals and do not relate to or identify with in any intimate sense. Airport terminals, hospitals, movie theaters, and shopping malls are some of the most salient examples of such public spaces, where social action does not take place, residues from human practices do not accumulate, and concrete and artificial surfaces tend to dominate. However, the field research carried out to analyze the selected cases for this study was able to identify both "places" and "non-places" recalled by respondents in their descriptions of the cityscape.

As far as the post-socialist features of the cities selected for the analysis, it is important to refer to Diener and Hagen's analysis of the entanglements of ideology and identity in the urban landscape of (post)socialist cities [19]. According to their research, the socialist period laid a strong mark on urban landscapes, entire cities being seen as "symbolic texts that reflected social, economic, and political relationships of power and resistance though their aesthetics, function, layout, and scale" [19] (pp. 490–491). Post-socialist urbanism, evolving in the context of globalization, supranational cooperation, and cultural hybridity, invites new narratives of the urban landscape, where local identities co-exist with broader global ones associated with modernity, transparency, and progressivity. Such new narratives, however, can lead to conflicting interpretations [1], especially for places and city objects that bear heavy political loads.

The main concepts underlying the above-mentioned literature are culture, heritage, and identity. Traditionally, this triangle was assumed to be the foundation of societies [20] and although some parts of this model may be subjected to critical scrutiny, it still lies at the core of most research and even policy development, especially in the field of soft power. Cultural policy is increasingly used as a tool of soft power in a geopolitical sense. Countries, and also sub-national-level subjects such as regions or cities, resort to cultural policy to wield soft power based on attraction, created by policies and opportunities of the country (or region, or city). From this point of view, cultural–political factors, such as

sustainability, authenticity, inclusiveness, networks, and economic effect are considered strategic components that play a significant role in defining place identity and enabling all stakeholders to organize around shared cultural values and vision [4,9]. Hence, specific instances of such soft power potential were considered in the cities selected for analysis by this research. In addition, the identified objects or spaces were presented in a visual form, to allow for qualitative analysis.

The visualization of data allows accurate assessment of preferences and degrees of development in urban spaces, putting historical and cultural heritage in the perspective of its inclusion in the field of visibility and activity of young people. The visual representation of certain places of the city is realized in this study in accordance with the position set out in the work of Lynch, objectifying the understanding of the image of the city as a set of object–spatial elements by which a person correlates themselves [21]. The introduction of this information into scientific discourse is legitimized by Latour's theory [22]. The transition to the study of urban and everyday culture based on the analysis of images occurs in the works of Bachmann-Medick with her concept of performative and visual turn in culture [23], and the work of Mitchell [24]. The researchers authoring this current study consider that the respondents' attitudes towards the cities are an indicator of the cities viability.

Pirogov identified four grounds for the sociological typology of attitudes to the city. These include a motivational basis associated with the need for self-realization, which acquires special features in cities of different states and scales and determines the value orientations of a person; a dispositional basis as a system of attitudes in relation to perceptions of the city; an intentional basis that specifies personally significant objects to which human activity is directed; and a subcultural basis that determines the attitudes to the city of people of different social groups [25]. Accordingly, underestimation or misunderstanding of certain objects or of the whole city is fraught not only with passivity, but also with all sorts of negative actions, from vandalism to departure [4].

Attitudes towards the city depend significantly on its manifestation of a "human scale" [26]. This scale involves physical and visual spaces commensurate with the person and the possibilities of their perception, including the presence of many pedestrians (not cars), greenery, and visual landmarks. Furthermore, attitudes towards the city are not static. They can change during different cultural practices, as highlighted above [1]. To involve young people in urban development and promotion, it is necessary to understand their readiness for action, their degree of attachment to a place, and so on. Research results capitalize on the responses of a generation that might not have the actual power to determine change [12], but whose presence ensures the viability of the investigated cities and their capacity to maintain relevance on a regional, national, and even global scale [8].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Methodology

To achieve a balance between empirical data and theoretical constructs, we included as main components in the methodology a sociological survey, the visualization of urban areas, and axiology, which gives priority to explaining people's actions through the lenses of their attachment to certain value attitude; in our case, attitudes towards historical and cultural objects and urban spaces.

The survey was conducted in the form of an online questionnaire. The questions were open-ended, respondents being invited to freely nominate places in the city that they find interesting to show or describe to visitors or friends, and places they prefer for their leisure time activities. In each case, respondents were asked to indicate whether they are indigenous, newcomers, or in temporary residence in the city, and their degree of familiarity with local history and heritage. No incentives were used to attract participation in the survey. The link to the questionnaire was proactively placed in thematic groups in young peoples' social networks, uniting students from different cities and universities. Data were collected in a manner ensuring the anonymity of respondents. Hallmarks identified by

respondents to the questionnaire were visualized on maps and explored from the point of view of their historical and cultural load. Conclusions were drawn from the results from an axiological perspective.

3.2. The Sample

During the study, 1013 respondents self-reported their opinions by answering the online questionnaire dedicated to collecting the views of young people regarding their awareness of the history and culture of their cities, to assess the experience of social participation of young people, and the readiness of young people to join "direct actors" or engage independently in various practices. The sample was targeted to include student youth of universities in regional cities in the compared countries: Yekaterinburg (Russia, N = 465), Gyumri (Armenia, N = 268), and Timisoara (Romania, N = 279). Russian, Romanian, and Armenian variants of the questionnaire were distributed. Responses are discussed for each country, and in a comparative perspective.

3.3. The Cities

The present article discusses the data obtained via a sociological survey carried out in three regional capitals in three post-communist countries: Yekaterinburg, the center of the Sverdlovsk region (Russia); Timisoara, the administrative center of the county Timis (Romania); and Gyumri, the regional center of the Shirak region (Armenia). The choice of survey regions in the declared countries was motivated by several characteristics:

- The cities share a common cultural and historical background, associated with their socialist past.
- They fulfill similar functions in their respective regions (economic, administrative, cultural life criteria)
- These cities attract young people from their respective regions for studying at respectable universities, the presence of skilled labor being a pre-condition for ensuring the sustainable development of a city or region.

Otherwise, these cities have very different histories and different cultural landmarks. They were each established in different historical periods, information about which remains apparent in their layout and mentality.

The million-plus city of Yekaterinburg in the Urals in Russia is a classic "factory city"—an industrial settlement, one of many created in the 18th century [27]. Founded in 1723 on the small Iset River as a fortress city, and forced to defend itself from raids by the local Tatar and Bashkir population, this city has a compact regular structure, and a high density of buildings, which was expanded in later periods. The center of Yekaterinburg, once a production centre, is today a post-industrial place, with sports and cultural facilities, administrative buildings, and public spaces. The architecture of earlier periods has rapidly been absorbed by office and residential skyscrapers, and the visual environment of the city is chaotic and eclectic, although initially it had many architectural ensembles.

Gyumri was founded in the 8th century BC, in the area that is now Armenia. Throughout its history it has experienced many influences and renaming initiatives, and withstood the earthquakes of 1988 and 1998. According to the 2007 census, the population of the city was 147 thousand people. However, the population is decreasing, primarily due to economic reasons. The city lies in a valley with a slight slope, surrounded by mountains. In the middle of the 20th century, it was a center for mechanical engineering, the textile industry, and food production, which suffered greatly after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Currently none of those enterprises are functioning, and the city is not under continued construction. The buildings destroyed in the last earthquake have not been restored, and housing stock has not expanded. The development of the city center can be characterized as "regular vernacular" and displaying "freedom inside the grid" [28]. Planned quarters of low-level buildings were created by local master masons, almost without the participation of professional architects, and today continue to serve as an urban center. The city has retained its authenticity, has a high degree of recognition, and its environment is aesthetic.

The third biggest city in Romania by population, Timisoara is the historical center of the Banat region and the administrative center of Timis County. It lies in the west of the country, close to the border with Serbia and Hungary. The area of the city is 130.5 km^2, its population is more than 300 thousand people. The first settlement dates to 1019, but the city was created at the beginning of the 13th century as a fortress. The fortress passed from Hungarian to Turkish and later to Austrian rule. It has flourished as a cultural centre and university city since 1919, when the Banat region entered the componence of Romania. For 2021, Timisoara was selected to be one of the European Capitals of Culture [29], however, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the planned cultural events to 2023. In the center of the city was previously a citadel surrounded by a canal. At the end of the 19th century, during the expansion of the city, most of the old defensive wall was demolished. The canal turned from part of the city's defensive system into an element of its transport system, connecting different parts of the city, and the city itself with Europe.

While the cultural and historical heritage of these cities may be itself a topic of interest, the present study analyzes only those landmarks that appear in the memory and active life of young people, thus exposing the link between the past, present, and possible future of the city through the lenses of students' experiences and memories. The collection of data was carried out in March–May 2021, when students were studying remotely, due to COVID-19 restrictions. Therefore, they had to recollect their places of interest and preferred places for gathering, using experiences or knowledge accumulated before the disruption brought by the pandemic [30].

4. Results

This section builds upon the results of the survey and socio-cultural assessment of urban spaces, presented in the order indicated by city selection. It unfolds responses to various questions: What architectural spaces or historical–cultural (historical–architectural) objects are retained by young people; what load of stories, legacies, or functions the identified tangible objects carry; which places students find attractive for gathering and spending leisure time.

The research focuses on the intentional component that determines the specifics of reference of the city and its objects. Judgments such as "In the city it is important for me . . . " or "This city is for me . . . " set the direction of activity. Students were asked to freely nominate the architectural objects and spaces they felt familiar with, proud of, and worthy of showing to potential city visitors. The research team retained a list for analysis, based on the frequency of appearances in the responses. Nominations are presented in the larger context of historical information, with geographic coordinates, accounting for the "local knowledge" that, even if subconscious, influences young people' image of the city, forming a positive perception, and causing the interaction of students with the nominated places.

4.1. The Historical-Cultural and Historical-Architectural Heritage of Yekaterinburg

The results of the survey indicate that young people listed eight objects among the places most beautiful and worthy of special attention in Yekaterinburg, which included seven buildings and one square, all in the city center, on its main streets (Figure 1).

The objects identified by respondents to the survey are not connected by transportation routes. They do not determine the trajectories of movement and activity of youth communities within them, thus do not overlap with the patterns of movement of youth around the city. Nevertheless, they set a specific visual framework for the central part of Yekaterinburg. The buildings include the residence of the President of the Russian Federation, as well as the former house of Sevastyanov, the Vysotsky skyscraper, and the city administration building.

Figure 1. Visual model of Yekaterinburg with an indication of buildings that young people find attractive and interesting.

The Sevastyanov house is an object of cultural heritage with federal significance. It is a vivid example of the eclectic neo-Gothic style of the second half of the 19th century (reconstruction in 2009, UralNIIproekt under the leadership of A. V. Dolgov). The building is on the main street of Yekaterinburg, next to the dam from which the city planting began. Part of the embankment is contained within the architecturally organized space in front of the object, where there are viewpoints and places of leisure, from which a beautiful view opens onto the building itself, the pond, and several architectural objects of different periods. The attractiveness of the Sevastyanov house lies in its unusual appearance, combined with its location that allows one to be inspired and to appreciate the beauty of this object of architectural heritage erected at the end of the 19th century.

Second on the list was one of the tallest buildings in Yekaterinburg—the Vysotsky skyscraper (2011, architects A. Gavrilovsky, V. Grachev). Its modern style has several features, ranging from the atypical height for Yekaterinburg to an interesting composition, including external glazing. The entrance area is reserved for parking, not leaving room for recreation.

Third was the building of the city Duma (city administration), also located in the city center. Designed by architect G. A. Golubev as a constructivist building, it was refurbished in 1954 in the Stalinist Empire style. The entrance in the arched niche is decorated with a monument panel made in the sgraffito technique on the theme "Salute to Victory". In front there is a small round platform with benches.

The marked figures are explained below, the numbers reflecting the order of nominations for the given place in the students' responses. The answers to the question "What historical building in your city do you consider the most beautiful, deserving of special attention?" scored as follows:

1. House of N. I. Sevastyanov (architect A. I. Paduchev, year of construction 1860)—20 nominations.
2. Skyscraper "Vysotsky" (architects V. Y. Grachev and A. Gavrilovsky, year of construction 2011)—11 nominations.
3. The city administration (city Duma) building (architects G. A. Golubev and M. V. Reisher, year of construction 1954)—eight nominations.
4. Temple on the Blood (Temple Monument on the Blood in the Name of All Saints, Shining in the Land of Russia) (architects G.V. Mazayev, Likina I.D., Morozov V.P., Efremov V.P., Grachev V.Yu. year of construction 2003)—five nominations.
5. Rastorguev–Kharitonov Estate (Kharitonov House) (architect M. P. Malakhov, year of construction 1824)—five nominations.
6. Presidential Center of B. N. Yeltsin (Yeltsin Center) (architect B. Bernasconi, year of construction 2015)—four nominations.

7. College named after I. I. Polzunov (arch. I. A. Grushenko, year of construction 1954)—four nominations.
8. The Square of 1905 (founded in the 18th century, acquired its modern appearance in 1957)—four nominations.

Commenting on the differences in age, styles, functional purpose of the objects chosen by students, we echo the urban sociologist Suttles who, in the 1990s, spoke about the "characterological unity of cultural representations" [31]. If the center is valuable due to its location, then the qualities of the objects outlining it play almost no role, and become simple markers of the territory.

While identifying mainly buildings as landmarks worthy of showing to potential visitors of the city, students preferred other places for gathering and spending leisure time. Squares, parks, and open spaces take the leadership in the latter category, and the respective maps do not necessarily overlap. Only three nominations were to be found in both lists (the lists of attractive or notable places and of places used for socializing and leisure time, respectively), i.e., the Yeltsin Center, the Temple on the Blood, and the Square of 1905. In Yekaterinburg the main places of attraction for youth are in the central part of the city—Plotinka (the place where the city was founded) and the Square of 1905—the main city square, as seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Visual model of Yekaterinburg with indication of places and spaces where young people gather.

The answers to the question "Near what places of your city do young people most often gather?" returned the following nominations:

1. Plotinka (founded 1723)—42 nominations.
2. The Square of 1905 (founded in the 18th century, acquired its modern appearance in 1957)—12 nominations.
3. Monument of Tatishchev and De Gennin (sculptor P. P. Chusovitin, year of opening 1998)—seven nominations.
4. Passage (architect V.V. Hromada, year of construction 2015)—five nominations.
5. Presidential Center of B. N. Yeltsin (Yeltsin Center) (architect B. Bernasconi, year of construction 2015)—five nominations.
6. SEC Greenwich (architect V.V. Hromada, year of construction 2004)—four nominations.
7. Temple on the Blood (Temple Monument on the Blood in the Name of All Saints, Shining in the Land of Russia) (architects G.V. Mazayev, Likina I.D., Morozov V.P., Efremov V.P., Grachev V.Yu, year of construction—2003)—three nominations.
8. Weiner Street (formerly Uspenskaya Street, renamed in 1919)—three nominations.

Plotinka and the Historical Square located next to it are favorite places for rest and walks for most citizens, and provide a venue for events of urban scale. The attitude towards the architecture of the place is not unanimous. Conservators emphasize the destructive nature of the works for repurposing the factory that historically attracted settlers to Yekaterinburg. Some parts have been demolished, others that remain currently host museums. However, the repurposed space is actively used by citizens and acknowledged by young people [27].

Second on the list by frequency of mentions is the Square of 1905, the city's central square. In a previous study of markers of urban identity, it also appeared as one of the most mentioned: "The younger generation singled out as a symbol of Yekaterinburg the central square of the city—the Square of 1905 (56.0%)" [32]. It can be noted that the area is relatively small, surrounded by proportional buildings, and free from the spirit of gigantism sometimes characteristic of the central squares of Soviet cities.

Consistent with the data of other urban researchers [7,10], the list of attractors includes mainly designated places that provide opportunities for meeting in large groups, which are open and accessible at any time (except for shopping centers), located in the city center, and are uniquely identifiable within urban spaces. At the same time, these places represent increased intentionality; the building or territory merges with the space of relations to itself and to other people, and this in some cases is layered with the symbolism of the place (not always, but only if the audience is informed in due measure). Almost all the identified objects are included in lists of significant places for Yekaterinburg recommended to tourists by various sources on the Internet (bloggers, travelers, tourist portals) [33].

4.2. The Historical–Cultural and Historical–Architectural Heritage of Gyumri

The survey carried out in Gyumri revealed eight places that, according to young people, deserve special attention of citizens and guests of the city. Among these were a church, a square, one memorial complex, a park, a theater, a city hall, and a museum (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Visual model of Gyumri with an indication of buildings that young people find attractive and interesting.

Responses to the question "What historical building in your city do you consider the most beautiful, deserving of special attention?" indicated the following preferences:

1. Black Fortress (built in 1834)—18 nominations
2. Seven-Sorrows Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary (year of construction 1887)—13 nominations
3. Kumayri (Kumayr Museum Reserve) (built 1860 to 1920)—13 nominations
4. Gyumri State Drama Theatre (year of foundation 1929)—nine nominations

5. City Hall Building (Gyumri Municipality) (architect G. Kochar, year of construction 1933)—six nominations
6. House Museum of the Dzitokhtsian Family (built in 1872)—five nominations
7. Vardanants Square (architect. A. Tamanyan, built in the 1930s)—three nominations
8. Memorial complex "Mother Armenia"(A. Sargsyan, E. Vardanyan, R. Egoyan, erected in 1975)—two nominations.

The Black Fortress is a round-shaped fortification built in the middle of the 19th century, after the end of the war between Russia and Turkey. It features among the main architectural highlights of Gyumri. The fortress is a short distance from the city center, and is currently under reconstruction with the intent to create a museum space. From the side of the fortress there are panoramic views of the city and its surroundings. Inside the fortress there is a large room where entertainment events are held privately, including events for young people.

The church mentioned in the survey was built in 1882–1887 on the site of the chapel where the icon "Seven Sorrows of the Holy Virgin" was kept. The building of this Catholic Church is constructed of processed black tuff, and is located in Vardanants Square, the central square of the city. The central location and the presence of a square in front of the church, with places for leisure and a fountain, allows residents and visitors to appreciate the architecture of this object.

The buildings in the open-air architectural reserve "Kumayri" reflect the spirit of old Gyumri, and are of Armenian architecture. Today Kumayri includes about 1100 monuments of national architecture, some of which are known from the films of A. Mkrtchyan. They are well structured; their décor includes different levels of scale and is devoid of monotony. Such objects, according to video ecology, favorably affect all people without exception since they are devoid of aggression [34] (p. 25). In addition, the unique historical and architectural environment of the place largely determines the identity of the city, including its authentic quarters, which are well preserved and harmonious. All the objects selected by students are described in information material for tourists and are included in lists of significant places to visit in the city, according to various Internet guides and tourist resources [35].

The list of places where young people gather revealed two obvious leaders, i.e., Vardanants Square and Theater Square. However, shortcomings in the field of symbolic economy can be identified, since the historical and architectural potential of the place has not been fully put to value. It is no coincidence that the American city researcher Zukin noted that, "by the combination of architectural motifs, culture plays a key role in the redevelopment strategy, which is based on the idea of preserving the local historical heritage" [16] (p. 17). The results of this youth survey can serve as an additional argument in favor of working with the historical and architectural heritage of Gyumri. All the objects selected by students are presented in information materials for tourists and are included in lists of significant places to visit in the city, according to various Internet guides and tourist resources. Vardanants Square is the central square of the city, near which are located six of the eight cultural and historical objects selected by respondents. It is in this urban space that the city's main cultural events take place, and citizens gather for fairs, rallies, or holidays. In our view, the opinions of students about centers of attraction for young people in their city were largely determined by the central location of this meeting place for citizens for various situational recreational practices, as indicated in Figure 4.
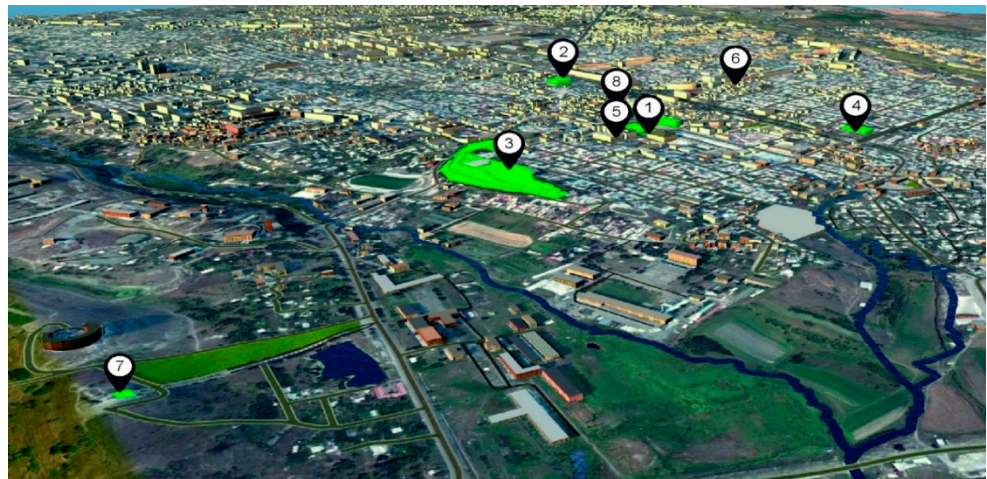
Figure 4. Visual model of Gyumri with indication of places and spaces where young people gather.

In general, the question "Near which sights of your city do young people gather more often?" received the following answers in Gyumri:

1. Vardanants Square (architect A. Tamanyan, built in the 1930s)—54 nominations.
2. Theatre Square (opened 1928)—30 nominations.
3. The Park (Central City Park of Gyumri named after Maxim Gorky) (opened in the 1880s)—four nominations.
4. House Museum of the Dzitokhtsian Family (built in 1872)—three nominations.
5. Ryzhkova Street (renamed after the earthquake of 1988)—three nominations.
6. Kumayri (Kumayr Museum-Reserve) (built 1860 to 1920)—three nominations.
7. Memorial complex "Mother Armenia"(sculptor A. Sargsyan, E. Vardanyan, arch. R. Egoyan, year of opening—1975)—two nominations.
8. Seven-Sorrows Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary (year of construction 1887)—two nominations

Five out of eight nominations overlapped between Gyumri students' preferences of most attractive buildings or places and places chosen for socializing: The Seven-Sorrows Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Kumayr Museum Reserve, Vardanants Square, Memorial complex "Mother Armenia", and the Gyumri Theater square. The two most frequently visited objects are open rectangular spaces, next to which there are places for recreation, a fountain, and a cafe. They are organized by enclosing buildings, and improved streets for pedestrian promenade. This is a habitable and at the same time open urban environment suitable for a traditional family holiday in Gyumri. Its frame is a low-rise building and mountains that do not obscure the visual perspectives of those who spend time in these favorite places. In the first square, ancient temples, coexist with buildings of the city administration, city cafes, and museums, as in many world cities. Also in the square there is one of the remaining operating cinemas, located in a building typical of cinemas in the Soviet period. The pedestrian street of Ryzhkov and the area of the Kumayri reserve are adjacent to it. The Theater Square, developed in the Soviet period and largely preserving the spirit of that era, cannot but be reflected in the minds of Gyumri youth. There exists a general love of the inhabitants of this city for theatrical art and the frequent practice of regular visits to the theater by the whole family. Student youth in Gyumri see themselves in landscaped spaces, spending time on those streets that have been improved to allow strolls, the meeting of company, and family activities. The organic urban environment, the connection of the central square with pedestrian streets, and the accessibility and proximity of the city park of the "Soviet period" allow the visitor to grasp the spirit of the city.

4.3. The Historical–Cultural and Historical–Architectural Heritage of Timisoara

　　Timisoara, Romania's third largest city, has a rich history. It began with a small fortress, which today is located in the historical center of the sprawling city. Respondents to the survey identified eight buildings (places) that young people consider to be the most beautiful in the city (Figure 5). Most of them, as in the two cities described above, are in the city center.
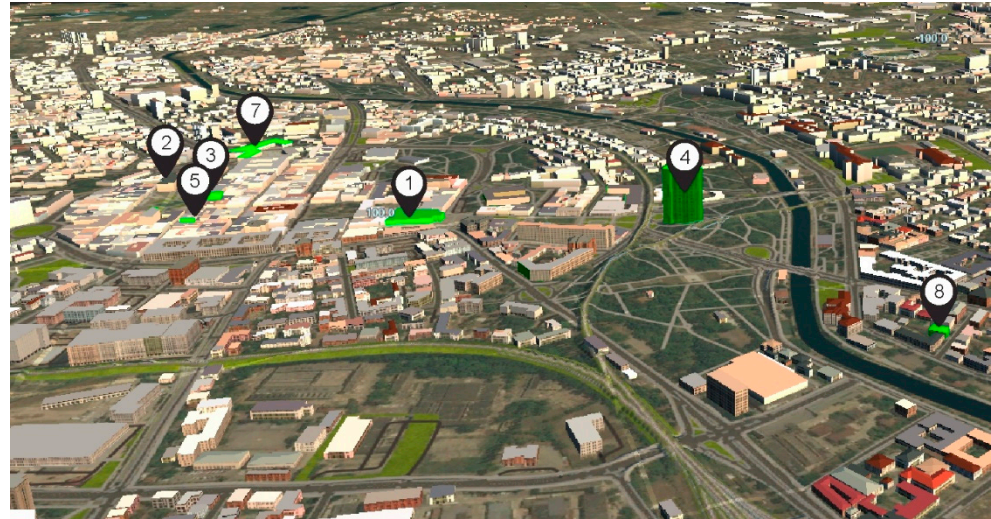

Figure 5. A visual model of Timisoara showing the buildings that young people find attractive and interesting.

　　In general, the question of which historical buildings in Timisoara people consider the most beautiful and deserving of special attention obtained the following nominations:

1. The Opera House (arch. G. Helmer and F. Fellner Jr., built between 1871 and 1875, reconstructed after a fire by architect D. Marcu, 1922–1928)—31 nominations.
2. The Roman Catholic Dome (also known as St. George's Cathedral) (designed by Joseph Emanuel Fischer von Erlach in 1736, finished by Johann Theodor Kostka and Carl Alexander Steinlein in 1774)—24 nominations.
3. The Metropolitan Orthodox Cathedral (Timisoara Cathedral of the Three Saints) (arch. And. Trajanescu, years of construction—1936–1946)—20 nominations.
4. Museum, Baroque Palace (built between 1725 and 1754 in the baroque style, renovated at the end of the 19th century, when some of the baroque elements on the façade were removed)—19 nominations.
5. Bruck House (arch. L. Szekely and A. Merbl, year of construction 1910, secession style)—seven nominations.
6. Water Tower (built between 1912 and 1914)—seven nominations.
7. Maria Theresa Bastion (built between 1732 and 1734, the largest preserved piece of defensive wall from the Austrian-Hungarian fortress of Timișoara)—four nominations.
8. Students' House of Culture (built in 1936 by arch. Michael Wolf in a style known as Wolf modernism. The building belongs to the Notre Dame complex and is currently under negotiations for restoration as a property of the Catholic church)—eight nominations.

　　The first place in terms of frequency of mentions was occupied by the Opera House, built more than a century and a half ago. The theater is in the center of the city, facing the facade of the main Orthodox church in Timisoara, the Cathedral of the Three Saints, which ranked third in the nominations. In between these two building lies Victoria Square (sometimes referred to as the Opera Square or the city center), mainly built in the historical secession style. The second most frequent mentions were for the Dome, located in the center of the "old town", which has been declared an architectural reservation of the

baroque, being one of the latest European squares to be built in this style. In front of it lies a large square—Unirii Square. The square is a very open, pedestrian zone. Since the 1990s the local administration has designated it as the place for open-air cultural events. Its unique harmony and its preservation of the late baroque is evoked in the phrase "Timisoara—the little Vienna", often cited with pride by locals when describing the city. Fourth on the list is the Baroque Palace, in the same square. The palace, built as a royal residence, currently hosts the art museum, and also has a beautiful hall used as a venue for a variety of events including musical concerts and literary festivals. The Unirii Square also contains the beautiful Bruck House, described by local guides as resonating with Gaudi's architecture in Barcelona (Spain). The Water Tower is an industrial monument quite visible from most places in the city, particularly so since the water tram on the Bega River has been operational (2018). However, it most probably received attention because media have intensively promoted the city administration's initiative to turn it into small cultural cafe, a coffee museum dedicated to Francesco Illy (1892, Timisoara–1956, Trieste, Italy), the inventor of an espresso coffee machine that bears his name. However, this initiative has not been operationalized. The tower can be visited, but only upon special appointment as part of the Architectural Tour. The Students' House of Culture remains in the minds of young people as the residence of a literary circle, of the students' theater company, and of important student festivals, but very soon they will have to move such activities to other locations, because the building is part of the Catholic heritage. Finally, the Maria Theresa Bastion, named after the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa, covers about 1.7 hectares of the city center. Restored significantly in 2011, it houses the administrative corpus and exhibition areas of the Museum of Banat, the regional touristic information center, commercial spaces, restaurants, bars, a disco, and a library, and also allows passage between the square in front of the Bastion and other important areas of the city.

In the history of the city, the center moved from within the walls of the fortress (demolished in the second half of the 19th century, to make room for the rapidly expanding city) to Unirii Square, later to be moved again to the Victoriei Square. However, the three places are in near proximity, at 5-min walk from one another. Interesting to note is that only one respondent nominated Lloyd Palace (1910–1912, architect Leopold Baumhorn, secession style) as a place of importance, although the building hosts the Politehnica Rectorate, is situated in the proximity of the Opera, and is represented in many postcards and promotional materials [36]. Equally surprising is the fact that respondents did not nominate any of the post-Communist architectural projects, even though, for instance, Iulius Mall, a mixed-use development at the city edge, is one of the preferred places for shopping and leisure time [37].

While some of the nominations for Timisoara may seem surprising, the mentioned buildings and places received unexpected visibility during the pandemic. The Spotlight Heritage Timisoara project [36] has aimed to provide information and stories related to the landmarks of the city in digital and physical formats, in preparation for becoming a European Capital of Culture. Since 2019, it has actively shared via Facebook and other social media platforms stories regarding the history, architecture, social functions, and memoires attached to these historical neighborhoods. Within the framework of the project each featured building or place receives a plate with a description, the information being mirrored in the digital format. Applications of virtual reality have been developed, and in addition to photographs of the landmarks the project included the organization of three thematic exhibitions, involving communities sharing "my story" of the city. However, the heritage of the near past, i.e., the socialist period, while continuing to be evoked for historical events, is hardly represented overall.

In Timisoara, the question of the most visited places showed that the cultural and historical sites that determine the attractiveness and form the image of the city differ from places of youth activity. The survey singled out Unirii Square, the city center, and its parks, of which there are as many as seven, as highlighted in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Visual model of Timisoara with an indication of places and spaces where young people gather.

In general, in Timisoara the question "Near what sights of your city do young people most often gather?" received the following nominations:

1. Unirii Square (Dome Square) (18th century, redesigned in neo-baroque style by architect S. Sturdza in 1989)—28 nominations.
2. City Center (also nominated as Victoriei Square)—27 nominations.
3. Parks, i.e., the Botanical Garden (architect S. Grumeza, year of opening 1966), Rose Park (architects W. Muhle and W. F. Nimitz, year of opening 1891), Central Park (year of opening 1890), Cathedral Park (behind the Metropolitan Cathedral)—26 nominations.
4. The Opera House (arch. G. Helmer and F. Fellner, Jr., built between 1871 and 1875 years, architect D. Marcu reconstr. 1922–1928)—18 nominations.
5. Water Tower (built between 1912 and 1914)—seven nominations.
6. The Dome (1736–1774)—four nominations.

Except for the Water Tower, which was surprisingly nominated, since there is very little space around it for any type of gathering, the two nominated buildings, the Opera House and the Dome, are integrated in the larger urban spaces of the preferred squares, with many cafeterias and promenade spaces, offering the possibility of spending a lengthy time. Unirii and Victoriei Squares both host city festivals and concerts, mass gatherings for electoral rallies, or other mass events. pecial attention should be given to parks; Timisoara brands itself as "the rose city" or "the city of parks". From April through to October, the weather in Timisoara allows strolls in the open. The Rose Park, located near the student campus and the city center, has a summer theater where various concerts are held and where large graduation ceremonies for students have been organized since 2017. All the nominated parks are used as venues for photo sessions on special occasions (birthdays, baptisms, weddings), so they are quite visible on social media.

5. Discussion

While the three analyzed cities have different histories and cultural landmarks, it is interesting to note the coincidence of so many characteristics identified during the survey of young people. Their choices of historical and architectural landmarks largely coincided with those mentioned in tourist information for visitors to the city [33,35,37] and/or present on various memorabilia. Despite the presence in the city of buildings belonging to the socialist modernist period, young people singled out mostly buildings and places of earlier times, prior to socialist urban projects, except for in Yekaterinburg. In this city, students identified as worthy of attention two buildings both inaugurated in 1954, the city Duma and the college named after I. Polzunov. Most probably this was due to the central location and the functionality of the places (the college being the main educational space for the

respondents). Three out of eight places worthy of showing to visitors belong to post-socialist times: the Yeltsin Center, the Vysotsky skyscraper, and the church erected in the memory of the last Russian Tsar, The Temple on the Blood. These places have undergone a process of "heritagization", as Gravari-Barnas has defined it [38], indicating that the demand for heritage (history, meaning, and transmission) becomes "increasingly pressing in the context of hypermodern societies" [38]. Gyumri and Timisoara, unlike Yekaterinburg, have shown a careful approach to historical sites, and socialist or post-modern buildings are not strikingly present in the hearts of their city centers. In Gyumri the only cultural object mentioned by respondents related to the socialist period was the Mother Armenia complex (1975), due to the high visibility of the monumental statue on top of a hill, and the forest and promenade space nearby. Respondents in Timisoara did not nominate any of the socialist-period buildings, although such references can be found in recommendations to tourists [37]. For their leisure time, students declared that they gravitate towards places with historical architecture or green spaces, allowing communion with nature, without travelling far. Students' awareness of the landmarks of the city represents potential that can be tapped by inviting young people to co-create meanings and branding for their native city or the city chosen for their studies.

The survey method and the visualization of its results allowed us to critically assess how historical and cultural (historical–architectural) objects are included in the conscious-ness of young people, forming an attractive image and positive perception of their city. While the histories of the three cities are different, it is interesting fact that young people were found to value objects of cultural and historical heritage and architecture mainly from the pre-socialist past, but not older than two centuries. Secondly, in almost all cases the attention of young people was not focused on the architecture of the twentieth century's socialist period, despite its presence in the centers of the analyzed cities. Thirdly, the ratio of the visibility for objects of cultural and historical heritage and architecture favors the city center in all the three cases. This can be explained by the fact that resources invested in landscaping are usually applied in the centers of cities, so the urban infrastructure is better where public spaces such as squares were initially and historically formed. In addition, the convenience of location and its functionality for walks are superimposed onto the traditions of pastime, which have been formed by similar procedures for organizing mass events in different cities, including family traditions of organizing leisure activities. Fourthly, young people react in their representations to the information background, where objects attractive to guests in the city are reflected and especially promoted through various channels, aligning perceptions of the cultural and historical context of urban development. All the presented objects have a vivid presence in of their respective city's representation for tourists, being promoted in city maps, tourist information packages, proposals for tours, posters, postcards, and other memorabilia [33,35,37].

Heritage is a dynamic creative process that occurs in many dimensions, by which society unites, protects, enriches, and projects its culture [1,4,8,38,39]. The results of the current study confirm this standpoint, and encourage the adoption of development strategies that consider the emotional attachment of people towards urban places. In Montgomery's terms, all stakeholders should pay attention to how buildings, public spaces, and mobility systems influence the social lives of inhabitants [40]. Such an effort can foster development strategies in which the social city, the sustainable city, and the happy city are the pursued project. Happy, lively, and livable cities do not belong only to utopian or romanticized visions of urban life, but can be attained if enough energy and skilled innovation are put into the effort.

The potential resource of youth participation in the development of urban areas is huge, but work with this theme can only be based on engagement and sustained interest [4,8,9]. The involvement of young people in the development of urban spaces (as volunteers or brand ambassadors) should be aimed at the reorganization and improvement of places that are well known and significant for those young people, in a form where their interests and proposals can be considered. The participation of young people in the production of places

will allow the development of places corresponding to the ideas and expectations of the modern generation, and promote an increased attachment to it, increasing its significance, and contributing to a responsible attitude to the urban environment [17,21,39].

6. Conclusions

The direct link between a harmonious city environment and the positive attitude of the population towards their home city is becoming increasingly clear. This attitude serves as a source of sustainability for the city. It is determined not only by specific places and objects and their placement in the urban environment, but also by the kind of social interaction that these spaces create [9,17,20,21,41]. In each of the analyzed cities, the leading positions in the imaginations of generation Z students are central squares, which are open spaces surrounded by historical buildings. The urban interiors of these places have been developing for a long time and have become a hallmark of each city, one of the key elements of its individuality. These spaces are formed by buildings of different epochs, styles and materials, small architectural forms, as well as seasonal retail outlets, with elements of the landscape changing from year to year. They are of interest for young people as locations for meetings, social gatherings, and various leisure activities. Such a preference for a certain location increases the importance of the place in the eyes of young people (creating memories, increasing the degree of involvement in city life) and in the eyes of the city administration (as an obvious indicator of the popularity of the place). These places of action convert the cities we live in into living works of art, where all citizens can interact and fully engage in the process of urban design and development [4,21,40].

Regional cities need to work more actively with their symbolic capitals. At the same time, there should be no arbitrary decisions, because the responsibility is great. Today it is recognized that "replanning and redesigning the processes of life in our cities... is what worries both institutions and citizens. To be successful and meaningful, such processes must be supported by research . . . " [26]. Generation Z students live, pursue education, and plan to seek employment in "shifting times" [11,12]. Unless their voices are listened to, making room for their preferences, readiness to action, and energy [1,13,41], they may disengage and seek other places to satisfy their needs and aspirations [4,13]. The 2020–2021 pandemic created a disruption in "the way things are" and the announced "new normal" requires new ideas, fresh thinking, and processes and procedures that citizens will acknowledge as legitimate and "their own" [41,42]. Therefore, it is to be expected that post-pandemic urban planning will pursue humanistic goals, and at the same time consider the preferences and value priorities of young people, while engaging them and inviting them to take part in meaningful projects, including re-socializing cities and re-opening them to visitors and newcomers, as part of a steered (vs. chaotic) "place production" process [17,21,39,41].

7. Limitations of the Study

This study has several potential weaknesses. First, the study was conducted during the isolation period triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, relying on students' memories and recollections of historical heritage and places of gathering. Another survey might bring forth additional nominations and images. Second, these results can be complemented with investigation of students' actual behaviors and engagement in local projects for promoting and upholding the city brand through volunteering or other means of engagement. Last, but not least, further study will investigate the incorporation of city attractiveness in the educational marketing of universities, to grasp the engagement of universities themselves with the societal environments where they operate. Such extensions of the study can be beneficial to both universities and to city officials, fostering synergy between efforts to increase regional cities' attractiveness and their capacity to retain youth, and ensuring the sustainable development of the respective regions.

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