ABSTRACT

Paper deals regional identity as crucial part of as part of environmental assessment within social and cultural sustainability. In the contemporary era of globalisation and unification in material culture, it is very important to maintain and apply elements and concepts that are special and unique for single localities and regions. Cultural identity and tradition are inseparable parts of every society and can influence the character of local built-environment and its elements. This “DNA” of society indirectly affects the typology/morphology and semiotics of crafted products and architecture, and it creates the basics of the design language of a country or region. Local identity can be understood as the essence of a cultural heritage and genius loci and plays a very important part in self-identification. This is unfortunately very often misinterpreted in the design of contemporary building or products. Although there exist many research studies in field of ethnography, cultural anthropology, history and archaeology, they are very rarely available and understandable for architects, designers, investors, producers and services providers directly in the regions.

Maintaining the social and cultural sustainability through maintaining and creating local identity in the built environment and in the lifestyle - this means to bring back local materials, principles, concepts, stories into material culture – architecture, housing, habits, performance in daily life, connected with using of products. Preserving local identity is a big challenge also for local industry and can be massively supported by new forms of responsible and sustainable tourism, thus it has to be experienced, explored and shared, to be alive. Here we can speak about potential of agroturism, eco-tourism, etnoturism that need also infrastructure with its built environment and its elements – products to use during the experience or to bring home for reminding and to display, connected also with attachment to some objects.

Paper shows examples how to preserve the regional and local identity, transform, interpret it and to refer to it on the first results of project IDENTITY SK - common platform of design, architecture and the social sciences, in form of regional concepts for products and services, coming from interdisciplinary literature and field research and storytelling. First of all it is necessary to research about it, respect it, having a lot of respect and empathy by adding something new, use it with the context and telling stories, not to embed in misinterpretation and be stranded in many form of kitsch.
INTRODUCTION-SOCIO-CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In this study we deal with the topic of role local identity reflected in built environment and overall material culture for maintaining socio-cultural sustainability and regional development.

To meet the basic human needs, natural materials such as wood and stone to build shelters have already been used for thousands of years. Textiles, clothing, and fashion, such as with kimono, have been used as traditional garments worn by men, women, and children, for protection as well as a form of cultural expression. In modern times, our daily life is so much immersed with artefacts made out of diverse materials that even the term “material culture” has been coined in the early twentieth century referring to the intensive relationship between artefacts and social relations, while current discourses about material culture often refer to consumerism and throw-away culture [1].

According to Hawkes (2001) knowing where we have come from helps us to discover where we want to go. Our social memory and our repositories of insight and understanding are essential elements to our sense of belonging. Without a sense of our past, we are adrift in an endless present. The role of the museum and the protection of built heritage are obvious aspects of this area (both benefit from creative initiatives concerning their current use, for example, outreach programs, active community interaction). But there is much more that can be done. Perhaps most important is the acknowledgement of the extraordinary diversity upon which our present is founded [2].

What we do in the breaks between the struggle to survive is profoundly important to our wellbeing, to our sense of belonging and connectedness, to our understanding of ourselves and our relationships – to our culture. Tradition and regional-local identity can be seen as something that is special for a place, or was spread in the region and has been transferred, used and popularized through many generations. At the same time, it is a socio-cultural and socio-economical process.

The search for tradition and coming back to roots leads very often to “folk kitsch” a misinterpretation of tradition. To find solutions that satisfy this need for continuity is interrupted in post-communist societies but also in other strongly modern-postmodern societies, where human beings need to be surrounded by something stable and known as a reaction to the constantly changing forces in society. This contemporary strong “thirst” of the market for traditional and regional solutions is clearly based on the rupture of cultural continuity that feels the need to be healed by something traditional and stable, something that we can rely on. It is also an obvious reaction to strong social transformations in late modernity societies.

Regional development is a official priority of every progressive democratic government, especially building of infrastructure, civil facilities and public spaces, and some support for SME’s, but this top-down approach is missing efficiency. Centrally planned industrialization of Slovakia has massively collapsed after the regime change in 1989 and many workers had to change their occupancy and way of life. Phenomena of workers abroad having families at homes and high unemployment are changing social atmosphere in regions that are distant from capitol and from cities with strong economy. They are suffering with bad infrastructure, skepticism, equalitarianism and demotivation. But there is in the same time very strong potential and challenge to attract the curious visitors and new inhabitants that are searching for fascinating, interesting and authentic place to visit or to live.

The bottom-up approach visible on local improvements done by different stakeholders, activists or NGO’s are a real contribution for regional development even when in less planned and more organic way. It is usually good mark that the vivid human energy is there and it is also very useful to respect these initiatives also some changes on a strategic governmental or municipal level.
THE NOTION OF IDENTITY

National identity tends to be described as a phenomenon covering nation’s area, common language, customs and culture. With many approaches to approaching this phenomenon, all of them agree on its fluidity. An identity of a particular cultural and socio-historical environment as a vivid, a historic and evolving phenomenon.

Global society challenges all areas of our life, let alone regional understanding of self or belonging. How can we not lose our roots in the era of unification and monopoly? In the context of the globalisation several theoreticians agree on the importance of identity: french sociologist Michel Maffesoli presents the term dynamic rootedness (in French „enracinement dynamique“): the bond to the past is the bond to the future - past supplies present with the vitality [3]. Believing that we are bringing innovations according to Maffesoli we are only subconsciously bringing up previous inspirations.

Are “the roots” and “the customs” the only guarantee of future collective and individual continuation in the era of technological clutter. In his book on self-sufficiency of cities the chief architect of Barcelona Vicente Guallart claims, similarly to Maffesoli, that the best way to preserve the heritage is to augment it. Every object has its material history and shape genealogy [4] - therefore he sees the continuation of regional identities as a strong tool of sustainable development of communities. Similarly, in his book We-think Charles Leadbeater refers to “mass innovation” taking over “mass production” [5].

Cultural identity is an integral part of every society and has fundamental impact on (not only) society’s material culture. This “DNA” directly or indirectly influences the morphology and semantics of country’s craft products, it shapes local architecture and becomes the base of regional design language. We can perceive identity as the essence of a country's cultural heritage. Several states are able to get most of their regional specifics and have turned their country’s cultural heritage and identity into competitive advantage [Scandinavian product and furniture design, Dutch typography, German automotive design etc.]. In the case of Scandinavian countries we can track the roots of the design culture in the activities of local state institutions. For example the credit in spreading and establishing the well-known “democratic design” links to the national Swedish Society of Industrial Design, that was proactively promoting the concept of the “beautiful, but affordable” products already since the 60s and before.

Identity of the Central European material and building culture is as complex as the character of the region itself. Twentieth century of changing regimes has repeatedly redrawn borders of local states and regions - and this experience significantly influences local identity up till now. We can find several examples of projects focused on integrating or discussing the identity of the CEE region - the following text will present a selection based on socio-historical background comparable with the context of Slovakia.

One of the project, which ambition was to map the common identity of the CEE region was collective exhibition project Common Roots: Design Map of Central Europe, initiated by the Design museum Holon in Israel. The main topic of the project (based on the hypothesis that contemporary designers of the CEE region are impossible to sort by nationality) was to create a map of individual designers and uncover connections caused by the common socio-historic experience and cultural belonging to the CEE region as a whole [6]. The project proved remarkable similarities, parallel developments and search for the answers for the same questions.

Similar attempt to map the common cultural heritage and roots can be recognized by exhibition project Central Values – Common Heritage in Contemporary Central European Design. However the aim of the project, organized by Hungarian Intellectual Property Agency, was to spread the awareness of design as a factor of competitiveness - and therefore the project brought series of practical workshops and conferences.
A great example of a project that attempts to go beyond the ordinary borders of practical use of research outcomes is Polish innovation platform Design Silesia - the organisation actively promotes the transformational power of design in the specific south-polish region of Silesia. The platform has a wide portfolio of activities from field research (f.e. the mapping of past iconic products manufactured in the region - Design Icons of Silesian Voivodeship), publication activities to organising exhibitions, conferences, training courses and popularization events.

Interesting point of view on regional overlaps was brought by the project Wool Design. Carpathians, led by Polish organisation Zamek Cieszyn Design Center. The project focused on creating a platform for knowledge exchange in the field of traditional processing of wool - focusing on the Carpathian region witch rich (both economic and cultural) tradition of pastoral farming. The project was again an attempt to bring the practical transformation by design. After the very first step of establishing a new wool processing workshop in Jaworzyńska, group of designers participated in a hands on workshop and learned the principles of the traditional craft. Following product development integrated the essence of the traditional craft in a contemporary way, creating innovative ready-to-market product solutions.

When mentioning Poland we can’t skip the projects developed by the Ethnographic Museum in Krakow. Focusing on the concept of Open Source and knowledge publicly shared on the internet, the museum has produced several projects that serve as great example of merging innovation and tradition, such as the “Release project” (which created an online database with open source products inspired by traditional pieces), “Craft 2.0” (that created a networking platform for designers, architects and consumers, in search for custom production possibilities) and last but not least the project “Ethnographic pattern book” (online pattern book with more than 800 regional motifs accessible to wide public).

EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY IN CEE REGION

Slovakia has diverse identity that dynamically develops in time. Slovak creative ecosystem has - in spite of common roots with V4 countries - its own specifics. According to the president of Slovak Creative Industry Forum Zora Jaurová [7] it is evident, that the fastest growing element of local economies are businesses based on individual creativity. According to the latest research of local entrepreneurship ecosystem [8] the Slovak business sector is dominated by micro companies (49 440), followed by small enterprises (10 831) and medium enterprises (2 296) - and exactly these businesses, active on regional markets, are important actors in preserving local identity through their production program.

Based on the recently realized quality research in the frame of the Made in CEE project [9], whose objective was investigation of the conditions of local production in V4 countries, we can list the following statements:

“Lot of creativity and little business”
“Start-up boom excludes product design and the success depends on expanding abroad”
“The promotion of Slovak design depends on independent initiatives, lacking state support”
“The awareness of intellectual property regulations is low”

During the soviet era, innovation was considered a unique case, or rather an exception - not a fundamental part of the process of creation. As well from this reason our country shows evidence of the same symptoms of creative industry in post-socialistic countries defined by John Hartley [9] as inability of including creative industries into the complex of all industry segments, the inability to identify of the creative industry by itself or the inability to form coordinated industry associations [10]. The importance of small and medium enterprises is still a subject of reconsidering, while active communication between designers and producers or advancing creativity in entrepreneurship is still not a common practice.

In spite of the fact that there were several attempts to study regional material and building identity in Slovakia before, this topic was never before addressed with the right priority and application focus. Recently running or presented projects engaged with similar topic (f.e. the project VEGA No. 1/0655/15 at the Institute of Social Studies and Ethnology at FF UMB in Banská Bystrica titled Cultural Heritage as an Identity Phenomenon or
Kotradyová et al, Kotradyová et al, Regional and local identity in built environment and material culture as important part of social and cultural sustainability and wellbeing
7 November 2019, Bratislava, Slovakia

recent conference Creative Heritage: Identity, Continuity, Tradition, Innovation, Memory that took place at the Slovak National Gallery in June 2016) had always theoretical focus - our project would like to use the outcomes of their research and pass them to practice through applied research. Only manuscripts in the English language will be accepted. The technical program committee reserves the right to reject any manuscript based on the final submission, even if the abstract was previously accepted.

MATERIAL CULTURE AND NEW FORMS OF TOURISM

Material culture is in general as the extension of society, community and individual Self. Considering this it is interesting phenomena not only in Slovakia how much misunderstanding, misinterpretation and folk kitsch is presented in material culture – in built environment. In the post-communist countries there exists the phenomenon of big housing projects constructed during the later communist era and considered to be cultural equalization. Sixty years ago there were enough traditional vernacular objects that were used for their original purposes. Now these are mostly objects in institutional care and under protection, but still there are “gatherings” of traditional objects – usually in more remote previously poor regions where, being in the lower part of social stratification, being attached to tradition and local identity was a matter of survival. Now these localities have become interesting for new forms of tourism and are often already protected like preserved memorial zones.

Regional or local identity can also be massively supported by new forms of responsible and sustainable tourism, thus the local identity has to be experienced, explored and shared, to be alive. Here we can speak about the potential of agro-tourism, eco-tourism, ethno-tourism that need also infrastructures with built environments and their elements – products to be used during the experience or brought home as reminders or displays connected with an attachment to certain objects. It is not possible to describe local identity without respecting the geomorphology together with the climate of the place, which essentially is a main creator of everything that ever happened to human beings. Only a connection with the nature and cultural signs and marks can bring a complex overview about a locality or region.

LOCAL IDENTITY AND WELLBEING

To explore the problematics of regional/local identity as part of socio-cultural sustainability and complex comfort - well-being, there was created research project IDENTITY SK - common platform of design, architecture and the social sciences, where in interdisciplinary team we try to find recommendations how to preserve the regional and local identity, transform, interpret it and to refer to it in form of regional concepts for products and services, coming from interdisciplinary research team, literature and field research and storytelling.

The issue of wellbeing is also part of the social sustainability agenda and is related to the sustaining of local identity. After evaluation of the relation between regional identity and wellbeing, we set four main issues for dealing with local identity as reflected in a material culture that contributes to the well-being of users during all kind of interactions with built environment - these include:
- attachment to place – building an identity for the self and the social group
- comfort from interaction with “the known” – shared cultural values and signs, archetypes, and stereotypes
- authentic experience
- wellbeing from own hands-on experience and from interaction with professionally crafted objects
These are the main issues of local identity that are related to the well-being phenomena and, together with a phenomena of local identity self, need to be explored further.

The main idea of the interrelation between local identity and well-being or socio-cultural comfort is the awareness of one’s own origin, roots and own role in it. Being surrounded by the marks of local identity creates support for this process – the process of coming back to the roots and the “Self”.

In describing the phenomena of “coming back to roots” or back to the “Self” we can build upon the theory of individuation coming from the father of psychoanalysis – Carl Jung. In the broadest possible way, individuation can be defined as the achievement of self-actualization through a process of integrating the conscious and the unconscious.

The tradition and the culture, as shared knowledge and preferences, is a part of both the conscious and the unconscious. The process of coming back to the “Self” is a main part of building one’s own personal identity and integrity.

FIELD RESEARCH ABROAD

Important for the project was to see positive examples of presentation of authentic regional culture and transformation of characteristic marks of local identity into modern design, architecture and services in developed countries with continuous cultural development. There as in Scandinavia, Austria and Japan reflected in material culture, built-environment and services connected to local businesses and tourism. It is created at many places in a very sensitive and tasteful way (Fig. 1,2).

Figure. 1 Presentation of traditional north Sweden housing culture in direct expositions on sites, above farm Myckelgensjo origination from 18 century, below is room from year 1905 for workers from Sandslåns flottningsmuseum (museum of timber floating), photo: Veronika Kotradyova
Figure 2. Housing culture in Japan – (left) stage for sleep on futon with inbuilt storage space made from Japan spruce, Kyoto, dining room- traditional and contemporary in the same time, last one is an interior from 50-ties in modern wood stracture situated in the Architecture museum in Tokyo, photo: Veronika Kotradyova

Figure 3. Positive example of transformation of regional elements into modern architecture and design, documentation during field research left barn converted inot housing with inlayed passive modern building in Veličná- region Orava designed by architect Eliška Turanská, right is a iron wire pad done by tinkering in gift shop in Čičmany, photo: V. Kotradyová

FIELD RESEARCH- CASE STUDIES IN SEVERAL REGIONS IN SLOVAKIA

We decided to choose a different - comprehensive research and development methodology. This resulted in the series of experimental workshops entitled "Regional Product". The methodology consists in combining literary research, ethnographic field research (observation, mapping, interviews, case studies, oral history collections, content analyses) with local stakeholders - representatives of different groups of citizens involved in regional development, participatory design and development and prototyping regional products or products inspired by the region. The combination of research and "in situ" creation was, in line with the project's ambition, to bring inspirational and exemplary solutions for consumer products, gift items, souvenirs, furniture, entire interiors, and building constructions, referring to folk material culture.
Therefore, the project includes experimental workshops combined with field research in the regions. The first was a workshop in Pohorela, with the topic: “Regional product of Horehronie” with the participation of professionals and students from the field of ethnography, architecture and design. During field research, products and services were designed within the philosophy of research by design, and conceived with the aim of developing the potential to develop regional micro-businesses linked to eco-agro and ecotourism, with the possibility of production in the region and distribution to and from local tourist information centers. The concepts were further developed after returning from the workshop. Figure 6 shows the prototypes of products inspired by the Horehronie traditional culture in conjunction with modern design.

During field research, products and services have been designed within philosophy research by design, and conceived with the aim of developing the potential to develop regional micro-businesses linked to eco-agro and ecotourism, with the possibility of production in the region and distribution to and from local tourist information centers. The concepts were further developed after returning from the workshop. Figure 6 shows the prototypes of products inspired by the Horehronie traditional culture in conjunction with modern design.

A second workshop was placed in southcentral Slovakia, in the Hont region, with a base camp in the village of Hrušov. This had a very different climate and geomophology from Horehronie and thus very different available materials.

While in Horehronie is prevailing the use of soft wood, of sheep breeding with milk products and wooden objects used for their processing and home textiles production, in Hont there is a dominance of stone works, hardwood processing, and basketry, fruit and wine culture. This difference was also reflected in the products that were developed. A third workshop was established in Northeast Slovakia, in a region of north Šariš and Zemplín, with a base camp in the small UNESCO protected town of Bardejov. The region was special due to its multi-ethnicity, where Slovaks, Jews and several tribes of Ruthenians have lived side by side for hundreds of years. The culture has been influenced by a strong history of wars in the region, many heavy battles during the First and Second World Wars. A specialty of this region are also the wooden churches of the eastern rite.
Further workshop was placed in region Orava in village Zuberec, where is situated one of the most unique open air museum, built directly as a compact village on the meadow in the mountains West Tatras, where we have also designed and prototyped together with students wooden products inspired by the regional crafts.

The most recent one was executed in region Liptov including High Tatras – region with the most developed commercial tourism within Slovakia. There is visible direct impact of strong investors that reshape landscape with all kind of recreation and leisure objects. Still there is an effort to do this with marks of regional identity, which are strongly misinterpreted and market is covered with huge amount of regional products with different level of quality and authenticity. Within this trip we have visited also phenomena in material culture- Čičmany, where the characteristic white decoration painting on the wooden traditional market begin to be part of pop folk culture – they are used everywhere, including cloths of Slovak delegation on winter Olympic in Sochi in 2014. We can state in Čičmany, which is very distant village deep in mountains - the potential of being exclusive, interesting is being broadly used and developed and is in further progress thanks to local activists and businessmen. The next one field trip and workshop is planned in region Gemer in October 2019.

For the effectiveness of such a workshop, it turned out to be very important to have right from the early beginning a link to local activists in order to maintain regional / local identity and to promote regional development. Meeting local stakeholders and bringing them together around one table to discuss and be involved in the creative process also played a crucial role. All results of workshops and field research plus results of literature and database research are being processed into interactive database that will be working on website www.projektidentia.sk soon and it will serve as an inspirational source for designers and investors by an effort to create products and services with regional identity, plus for support of the new ways of tourism (Fig. 3,4).

DISCUSSION and RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Why there is so much kitsch in art, design and architecture that wants to interpret folk culture?
Discontinuity in the cultural development, misusing of folk art and culture for political purposes – for propaganda first by Slovak state (1938-1945) and later by communistic regime since 1948-1989
We can formulate strategies of socio-cultural sustainability based on field research in rural settings as:
- connectedness to nature, be prepared for its changes, living in symbiosis with natural settings and its climate
- using of local materials and traditional methods of their processing
- more homogeneous local communities – building local community, belonging, maintaining tradition and method of survival, but being different can cause an exclusion from community
In urban development:
- diversity of people living in a special collaborative model - different nations, religions and occupancy were living in symbiosis, having benefits from each other
- social advantages and cultural innovations are implemented in a rapid way

Successful contemporary regional development works in ability to transform tradition with modern technologies and social media, being opened but in the same time to maintain integrity. Directly in the authentic regions there is less understanding and support of modern design and architecture and the local inhabitants are more suspicious to the modern design issues.

In regions distant from capitals and cities with strong economy “the principle of survival” is providing traditional or new forms of tourism and creating small businesses based on traditional manufacturing of providing services, with the aim to maintain authenticity of the place.

Crafts are in general in a big tool for maintaining local identity and can support regional development, but they are transformed into commercial issues with aesthetical and technical quality. Institution ULUV (in Eng. Center for Folk Art Production) makes a lot of effort to maintain high aesthetical level of traditional Slovak craftsmanship, but the craftsmen that are under their guidance are in a minority and the majority is adopted to the market taste and as low price as possible. Master crafts, especially in interaction and transition with modern design can hardly compete with cheap products made with high rate of automatization or massively lowered quality.

To change this attitude it is necessary to make enlightenment, further education about authenticity connected with high quality and healthy local patriotism.

CONCLUSIONS
Maintaining the social and cultural sustainability through maintaining and creating local identity in the built environment and in the life style - this means to bring back local materials, principles, concepts, stories into material culture – architecture, housing, habits, performance in daily life, connected with using of products. Preserving local identity is a big challenge also for local industry and can be massively supported by new forms of responsible and sustainable tourism, thus it has to be experienced, explored and shared, to be alive. Here we can speak about potential of agroturism, eco-tourism, etnoturism that need also infrastructure with its built environment and its elements – products to use during the experience or to bring home for reminding and to display, connected also with attachment to some objects.

Even when we starstr from knowing that local identity is a construct that is in eternal evolution, the most important part of our research is questioning the ways of working with the local identity in Slovakia, with “the known”. How to preserve it, transform, interpret it, copy, refer to it? First of all it research about it, respect it, having a lot of respect and empathy by adding something new, use it with the context and telling stories, Not to embed in misinterpretation and be stranded in many form of kitsch.

How to define good taste and appropriate way of working with regional motives and features, how deal with it and not to copy literary? We can interpret it, refer to it, transform it and to question the process constantly and its result from the point of view of social sustainability and wellbeing.

For further research we are setting hypothesis that facing the elements having marks of regional identity create positive reaction by users - measurable with objective physiological parameters, observations and mapping and subjectively through interviews and questionnaires. The objects that are being developed in the workshop will be further explored and tested regarding the preferences of respondents. The measure of decorativeness or simplicity is one of crucial issue. Also the topic of physiological reactions with EEG sensors of respondents while facing elements with local identity and built environment that has marks of local identity through environmental simulations is being now further explored.
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REFERENCE


