



Art Nouveau Style as a Discursive Strategy for Tourism Promotion. The Case of the City of Oradea

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Abstract: *The paper analyzes how the Art Nouveau style has become a primary element of tourism promotion and the brand of the City of Oradea, a city with a rich history and cultural tradition located on the western border of Romania, as well as the importance it occupies in building the image of this tourist destination and the city's identity. With a unique architectural heritage, the city of Oradea has become the most important Art Nouveau city in Eastern Europe, currently competing with famous cities such as Nancy, Barcelona, Brussels, and Vienna and aspires to the status of a predilection destination, to become a place tourists dream of. The speech that outlines the image of this destination is impregnated with marks of subjectivity; it appeals to elements of history, tradition, culture and music, creating bridges between people and building an effective relationship with potential tourists.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Art Nouveau was an important art movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that emerged as a reaction to neoclassicism and assimilated traditional art, enriching it with innovative ideas and inspiring modern art. This art movement manifested itself, especially in the fields of architecture, decorative arts and design, bringing beauty, elegance and the combination of “art & utility” into everyday life. It spread mainly in Europe, with different names from one cultural space to another: France and Belgium (Art Nouveau), Germany (Jugendstil), Austria and the Czech Republic (Secession), Italy (Liberty), England (Modern Style), Spain (Modernismo) but also in the United States (Tiffany).

The most famous architects following this style were Hector Guimard (France), Victor Horta (Belgium), Venri Van de Velde (Germany), Antoni Gaudí (Spain) and Ödön Lechner (Hungary). In their memory, the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest proposed celebrating World Art Nouveau Day on June 10 every year, starting in 2013.

Art Nouveau aesthetics is characterized by a wealth of shapes and ornaments, curved, sinuous, fluid lines, asymmetric compositions, natural, warm and gradient colours, a sense of dynamism, and the continuity of space. The worship of nature, female silhouettes, or Japanese art are sources of inspiration for architects and artists. The buildings, decorations and furniture items are decorated with motifs borrowed from the plant and animal world (flowers, leaves, birds, feathers, insects, shells), having symbolic meanings. The artists use the most diverse materials, traditional and modern: carved wood, wrought iron, stained glass, mosaic, ceramics or concrete. The richly ornamented facades, bas-reliefs and murals of palaces built in the Art Nouveau

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style make the historic centers of many European cities a special attraction for tourists who love culture, history, art and beauty.

The first Art Nouveau buildings were erected in Brussels, following in the footsteps of the great European capitals, but also in cities that aspired to an artistic identity to build such palaces, residences and hotels.

2. ART NOUVEAU OR ART OF THE 1900s IN ROMANIA

At the end of the 19th century, in Romania, especially in the region of Transylvania, under the guidance of Austrian and Hungarian architects and their Romanian disciples, imposing richly decorated buildings began to be erected, where classical elements (columns, capitals, frames, geometric ornamental motifs) were combined with historical, romanticism elements and elements of the new style in vogue at that time in Europe. Most of the Art Nouveau palaces are in Oradea, a charming city on the western border of Romania, nicknamed “Little Paris” in the early 20th century.

The architects of the Viennese School (Valer Mende), the graduates of the Budapest Polytechnic School (Jakab Dezső, Komor Marcell, Vágo László, Vágó József, Löbl Ferenc) and the graduates of the Polytechnic School from Berlin (Rimanóczyi Kálmán jr.) born in Oradea left their mark on the architectural projects, so that the Art Nouveau style of Oradea also has its own characteristics, a very specialized iconography, combining plant, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements with geometric elements, while maintaining the dynamism of fluid, elegant and rhythmic lines and adopting new construction techniques with modern materials (concrete).

The numerous palaces built at that time in Oradea represent unique heritage assets which, together with buildings and monuments erected in previous centuries (in the Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic, and Classical styles), make the city one of the most important cultural and historical and tourist centres in the Transylvania region. Among the main Art Nouveau buildings and monuments built in Oradea are: Black Eagle Palace (1907-1908) with its famous stained-glass passage, the Adorján I House (1903-1907), the Adorján II House (1903-1907), Stern Palace (1908-1909), Fuchsl Palace (1904), Gulliver Store (1906-1910), Bihor County Savings Bank (1909), Moskovitz Palace (1912), Vágó House (1905), Apollo Palace (1912-1914), Ullmann Palace (1913), Astoria Hotel (1902), Poynar House (1911) and Transilvania Hotel (1903-1904).

According to the data available on the website of the City Hall of Oradea, 77 of the buildings are listed by the National Commission for Historical Monuments.

3. ORADEA – TOURIST DESTINATION

In recent years, the municipality has invested large sums of money in renovating heritage buildings and restoring the historic city centre. The City Council has been actively involved in promoting the city as a cultural tourism destination, by attracting European funds for the rehabilitation of infrastructure and major historical monuments, creating bodies whose main objective is tourism promotion, by supporting small local businesses in the field of tourism and handicrafts and by organizing numerous trade fairs. All of this has encouraged investment in the construction of accommodation units, with significant growth in this sector.

As noted by [Demiraj et al. \(2022\)](#) tourism is an important economic activity that can generate significant income, jobs, and social and cultural development, therefore all efforts to promote the city as a tourist destination would bring benefits on multiple levels.

According to the information published by the National Institute of Statistics, in Romania, in 2022 there was an increase in the number of Romanian and foreign tourists compared to 2021. And the tourist accommodation capacity was higher by 3,7% compared to 2021. There were 12696,8 thousand arrivals of foreign visitors in Romania in 2022, of which 75,2% used road transport. The upward trend was maintained throughout 2023, so that in September 2023, compared to September 2022, the arrivals of foreign visitors increased by 15,8%. The average length of stay in September 2023 was 2,2 days for Romanian tourists and 2 days for foreign tourists. The city of Oradea can attract many foreigners, especially those who prefer city breaks and road transport, not only because of the tourist attractions and the many organized events but also because of its geographical position.

4. METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS

If for many years the city of Oradea and its surroundings were known especially as a spa destination, the city gradually became a cultural tourism attraction, and its architectural heritage is currently one of the central themes of the tourist discourse, an element of the brand identity. [Manfredini \(2019\)](#) defines the brand image as the reputation of a destination based on a territorial identity whose components are history, heritage, symbols and representations, adopted by residents and recognized by tourists. We subscribe to both [Lebrun and Corbel's \(2019\)](#) view that the development of destination brands becomes essential for the survival of cities. For Oradea, it is therefore important to create a specific identity, diversify the tourist offer and transform the city into a real tourist destination.

The work aims to trace how Art Nouveau has managed to become an emblem of the city, being an essential element of the identity discourse and the discourse of the promotion of the city and giving them the imprint of a distinctive and exceptional character. We hypothesize that the main promotional strategy of the different players (public and private) is to carry out communication campaigns centred on the exceptional character of the city's architecture, in which the "informative function" of the discourse harmoniously combines with the "capturing function" ([Charaudeau 2005](#)) and the texts are impregnated with marks of subjectivity.

Analyzing a corpus made up of websites of public institutions and bodies promoting Oradea as a tourist destination, we will show that one of the main discursive strategies is to select, focus and reformulate information about the city's architecture, with an emphasis on real estate dating back to the end of the 19th century. We will show that the Art Nouveau style is both an argument of the destination promotion discourse, a red thread of the visit itinerary, an indication of the exceptional character, an element of the city's identity and a true brand of the destination Oradea.

We will describe the thematic construction of the discourse on the websites of some Romanian public and private institutions and bodies, more precisely the page layout, titration, selected information, their arrangement and ranking, using an approach specific to the French school of discourse analysis ([Floreau 2007](#)). We have chosen as discursive support the website, which is not only a physical entity, "a single cluster of files", but is also "a semiotic entity" ([Stockinger 2005](#)), more precisely "a meaning-construction" device ([Meunier 1999](#)). The website can host a lot of information that can be constantly updated and that comes from many advertisers. We believe, as [Rouquette \(2017\)](#) does, that the website can give very good visibility to the work of the organization.

We will show that some of the sites we have analyzed have many features in common with the tourist guides. As [Seoane \(2013\)](#) points out, the functions reserved for the tourist guide have spread to other discursive media, just as the new media have influenced the discursive practices of tourist guides. We will also mention the languages in which the websites can be consulted, as these are relevant for the reception of information by as many tourists as possible. For space reasons, we will present only a few of the sites we have analyzed.

Recent linguistic analysis studies of the tourist discourse, which, according to [Yanoshevsky \(2021\)](#), constitutes a “privileged object” for this field of study, have focused on the description of discourse genres, the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy and the concept of “ethos”.

Many of the papers had tourist guides as their object of analysis: the evolution of tourist guides from a comparative perspective ([Bălăuță 2019](#)), the qualitative and quantitative analysis of some corpora consisting of tourist guides ([Skëndo, 2021](#)), the evolution of the guides against the background of “contamination” phenomena by the internet, print media, television ([Seoane 2013](#)). This type of discourse attracts because it conveys a multitude of texts, images and interactions, it is characterized by interdiscursiveness and interdisciplinarity. However, we consider that not only information from tourist agencies and bodies or brochures and tourist guides is relevant for the study of tourist discourse, but also information from non-tourist sources.

5. THEMATIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE DISCOURSE PROMOTING ORADEA AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

Oradea is mentioned on international tourism platforms. Thus, in 2012 the city was included in the Art Nouveau cities network, and 2022, the European travel website Best Destination awarded Oradea the title of the most beautiful Art Nouveau destination in Europe, creating a special page entitled “Oradea - Art Nouveau - Life Nouveau”. The city is on the list of recommended cultural destinations and has a comprehensive description on a dedicated page. Being a multilingual site (43 languages), the tourism promotion speech reaches a very large number of online tourists. The website also promotes destinations in numerous travel magazines (Forbes USA, Condé Nast, Geo, Corriere Viaggi, National Geographic) and has been featured in many of the world’s leading travel magazines.

The information was picked up by the press, so that important national daily newspapers (Adevărul, Ziarul Financiar) and local daily newspapers (Crișana, Bihoreanul) dedicated a series of articles to the city of Oradea, mentioning the title awarded by the European Best Destination website and the fact that the city was included among the 10 cities worth visiting in 2022.

This information has also been picked up by national and local televisions and is featured on the website of Oradea City Hall, which describes the city as “the gateway to the central and western European world”. Therefore, the awards received by the city are an important argument for its choice as a tourist destination.

On the City Hall’s website, www.oradea.ro, along with sections dedicated to legislation, organizational structure, development programs and strategies, and financial information, a special section dedicated to cultural tourism has been created, named “Cultural and touristic Oradea”. The town hall’s website is bilingual, available in Romanian and Hungarian, and is mainly addressed to the local community. In this geographical region, the main minority is the Hungarian one.

The section „Cultural and tourist Oradea” includes pages with information about the history of the city, the Oradea Autumn Festival, Tourism in Oradea and pages devoted to the main monuments of the city: the Fortress, which dates from the 13th century and the Darvas La Roche House (Art Nouveau Museum) built between 1909 and 1912. The selection of an Art Nouveau building (Darvas La Roche House) from among the many monuments and architectural ensembles, which has an extensive description and a photo gallery, indicates the importance of the Art Nouveau movement in the creation and development of the city’s identity. Along with the descriptive text and the photo gallery, you will find practical information (visiting times, fares), just like on the pages of tourist guides. Thanks to this section, the town hall can increase the visibility of the town as a heritage tourist destination.

Another important player in promoting the city is APTOR, the Association for the Promotion of Tourism in Oradea and the Region (Visit Oradea), a destination management organization created through a public-private partnership between the city hall, the industrial park, shopping centres and hotels. The organization’s website can be consulted in Romanian, English, German and Hungarian so that a larger number of internet users have access to the information they provide.

As for the thematic construction of the site, the Home Page opens with a photo representing the central square of the city and the Black Eagle Palace. At the top left, we find the graphic symbol of the Oradea brand, created in 2019, the Supercrown, “a metaphorical transposition through drawing of the stature, uniqueness and prestige of the city”, which refers to the historical past, the Art Nouveau architecture of the city, nature, cults, the multicultural community and inhabitants. Among the first sections of the site is the ‘What to see’ section, which contains photos of the main monuments and streets with Art Nouveau buildings. By selecting a photo, the visitor is directed to a detailed page dedicated to that monument. They can choose the order in which they consult the information relating to the tourist destinations. Of the 89 Art Nouveau buildings, the Darvas La Roche House is widely described. This museum, along with the Black Eagle Palace, is also mentioned on the “Top 10 Oradea” page and the “Guided Tours” page. The ‘What to do’ section dedicates one of the pages to excursions and guided tours. The very names of the routes are representative of the importance of museums and monuments for the beauty-loving tourist: “Oradea, Architectural Treasures”, “Oradea, Art and Culture”, “Oradea, Multicultural City”. “The Cultural Oradea” page offers lovers of art, architecture and culture routes through the areas of the old city centre, where most of the heritage buildings are located. The site contains a wealth of practical information, such as restaurant and hotels addresses, making it a true city guide.

The slogan of the city “Art Nouveau – Life Nouveau” and the way the city is named indicate the high degree of subjectivity of the discourse on this site. Oradea is called “the capital of Art Nouveau”, “a museum city”, “an architectural jewel”, “a welcoming, fresh and lively city”, “a city of relaxation and health”, “a paradise of thermal waters” or “a SlowLivingCity”.

Each year (since 2015), APTOR publishes official documents, such as activity reports, on its website. According to the APTOR 2022 report, after the decrease in the number of tourists due to the COVID-19 health crisis, the number of tourists has steadily increased but has not yet reached the pre-crisis level. In general, it is about Romanian tourists. In 2022, only 10,5% of the total tourists were foreign tourists from European countries. According to the same report, the average degree of occupancy rate was 36%, increasing compared to 2021, excluding accommodation rented through platforms such as Booking.com or Airbnb.com. The report presents the projects in which APTOR has been involved and the events organised during the year (31 events in 2022). Moreover,

the city is well known nationally and internationally for the cultural events that take place annually and attract many tourists: the festival celebrating the anniversary of the municipality of Oradea (FestiFall), the international theatre festival (FITO), the music festival (Sounds of Oradea festival), the film festival (Oradea Summer Film), book fairs. According to the APTOR 2022 report, the Art Nouveau Days (June 9-12) were attended by around 4000 persons who appreciated the guided tours, the film screenings, the exhibitions and the concerts.

In addition to its informative and promotional function, this site has what [Seoane \(2013\)](#) calls a “teaching vocation”. Like tourist guides, it contains the description of monuments and recommends itineraries, activities, hotels and restaurants. The weight of information on Art Nouveau monuments is greater than that of other information and it is found in almost all sections and pages of this site.

The website of the Foundation for the Protection of Historical Monuments of Bihor County, oradeaheritage.ro, dedicates two of the five sections to the palaces of Oradea and the International Art Nouveau Day. The home page contains colour photos of the most beautiful Art Nouveau buildings. The website has a page layout where photography predominates. The home page has more of a capture function than an informative one. The “Heritage” section devotes a page to each important palace (mostly Art Nouveau palaces), where the presentation text blends harmoniously with the photos. The website is in Romanian and it is not available in other languages. Instead, the first page presents a three-volume album entitled “The Story of the Palaces from Oradea” created in three languages: Romanian, Hungarian and English, which tourists can purchase when visiting the main sights of the city.

In recent years, the city has benefited from promotion at international tourism fairs. In 2023, Visit Oradea was present at the World Tourism Fair in London and the Polish Tourism Fair, aiming to promote Oradea as a “perfect city-break destination”, “a first-rate tourist destination” and to attract more foreign tourists. Also, due to the area’s natural resources and wellness and spa services, Oradea was promoted at the European Medical Tourism Fair 2023 as a spa tourism destination.

The exceptional architecture of the city, the particularly rich cultural agenda, the local cuisine and numerous spa centers make the city a favorite destination for this part of Europe. The promotional speech of this destination aims to raise the profile of a destination which, although in the second half of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th century experienced strong development, had a long period of stagnation due to the events of the time and after the two world wars.

After the 1990s, cultural tourism became a growing phenomenon, and Oradea aligned itself with this trend. The way in which the discourse about Oradea is constructed on the websites of public and private urban institutions, the efforts to rediscover and revalue the architectural and cultural heritage, the numerous articles dedicated to the city which appeared in the local and national press, the promotion on an international level thanks to tourism fairs, the awareness of the quality and diversity of the tourist offer, all this leads to the creation of an image of a tourist destination that is worth visiting, with a reputation as a cultural city.

The analysis of the thematic construction of the sites described above allowed us to identify discursive strategies staged to create the image of a special tourist destination, to include it among the world reference destinations and to identify the place and role that cultural heritage, especially in the Art Nouveau style, has in shaping this tourist brand.

In short, the Art Nouveau style is:

- a component of the discourse of building the identity of the city of Oradea;
- an element of meaning;
- a symbol of history, art and culture;
- a mark of distinction and authenticity;
- an indication of the exceptional character and how a destination can differentiate itself from others;
- an indication of the quality of tourist and cultural experiences;
- an added value for the notoriety and reputation of the city;
- an image-building strategy for a cultural destination;
- a territorial marketing strategy;
- a favorite theme of the discourse for the promotion of tourism in the city;
- an element of subjectivity, with emotional impact among tourists;
- a brand of the destination.

6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The present study has selected websites as a corpus, but discourse analysis offers the possibility to study the most diverse corpora, such as print media, online media, messages on social networks, blogs, television programs, brochures and guides tourism, reviews made by tourists, etc.

It would also be relevant to continue this study on a corpus of websites of European travel agencies to see if this tourist destination is included in the list of tourist offers, what is the importance of the destination in relation to the other European cultural destinations, which rank in the top of the preferences of customers.

Last but not least, the study of tourism discourse can focus on the experiences of tourists visiting the tourist destination of Oradea and their interactions with the local community; the role and involvement of the local community in the preservation of cultural heritage is also important.

7. CONCLUSION

We believe that the perspective of discourse analysis can contribute to the understanding of tourism communication, along with the studies of specialists in economics, management, marketing, and tourism. The analysis of the thematic construction of the discourse on the support of the websites of some public and private bodies showed how an art movement, in this case, the Art Nouveau art movement, can become an element of a city's identity, a marketing tool, a brand of the destination.

Also, given the speed and complexity of changes in society, we cannot help but reflect on the need to protect cultural heritage, to take into account local interests, as well as the challenges that cultural tourism will have to overcome in the future:

“Looking towards the future, the challenge is to develop cultural tourism in a way that is resilient to crises and at the same time contributes to long-term sustainable destinations and heritage protection” (Calvi et al., 2020, p. 35).

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