

# *Anthropological Measurement of Modern City Space*

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**Abstract**—The article tackles the problems of transformation of modern city space (based on the data acquired as the result of sociological research of "subjective wellbeing" of residents of the megalopolis, Nizhny Novgorod being taken as an example). The supposition is made that authorities and professional town-planners should not ignore opinions and interests of ordinary residents of megalopolises as well as tourists during the planning and design of the urban environment. We can observe some major tendencies in development of large modern cities as a special form of space organization of something/someone. The idea is proved according to which the anthropological vector of the analysis in the research of logic of change of space of the city has to be considered along with the political one. The provision is revealed consistently that the model of city and human development does not suit any existing definition: space for people or people for space. The article shows that examples of development of megalopolises can serve as methodology for the analysis of the ratio "urban" and "corporal".

**Keywords**—city space; European cities; cultural space; modern megalopolis

## I. INTRODUCTION

Designers and architects working with the "material" city map according to F. Jameson [1] and M. Foucault [2], follow the voice of the political power. Bearing such logics in mind, the town planning is considered as a phenomenon of political discourse, as the necessity to construct the building or to pave the way is not usually dictated by the will of the citizens, but by the strategy of the city space development approved by the

head of the concrete city. However, we should not ignore the fact that the city is, first of all, a spatial association of people of a certain type (the citizens). The organization of space is intended to meet the needs of the citizens as to organize and decorate their environment, and, therefore, the transformation of the urban environment shouldn't be contrary to actual desires of people living in that city. The giving article based on the analysis of the degree of citizens' satisfaction with the quality of life in the megalopolis (indicators of "subjective wellbeing") is aiming at formulating the recommendations for town-planners and authorities how to optimize urban environment viewing it as the space of living, communication and self-realization for its inhabitants and guests of the city.

## II. HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

From the middle of the 20th century the space of the European cities has begun to change thoroughly, the ideas of "convenience" of the distribution of people and topological improvement of their activity have served as the reason for that. The starting point was the desire to force city space to work as much as possible for the person. Thus, the city began to become similar to man and adopt his mental features. In this aspect, the urban environment has become more anthropological, and the human need to endow everyday life with cultural meaning has consolidated the idea of merging a person and a city at the level of everyday consciousness of a citizen.

Ranking the city into districts and neighborhoods not only determines the specifics of the activities of their inhabitants,

but also becomes a social marker, which is taken into account in urban planning. As a result huge residential areas were built for the citizens of average (below the average) income – accurate, walk-through and unified. New areas actually became “new slums” [3] – “the samples of boredom and regimentation”. The slums of the post-industrial cities, as well as slums in the past, are deprived of life, but it is not because they don’t correspond to the basic needs of the modern person.

The standardized quarters occupy the restricted area preserving social groups within the concrete territory and minimizing thereby contacts with the representatives of other social groups and layers. The space seems to resume functioning as the segregation mechanism, but not as a platform for interaction that is contrary to the general logic of development of the western civilization. So, the research conducted by Jung Fund in 2011 showed that people strive to make contacts with each other in terms of extreme heterogeneity. The market in East End of London, which has become a good public place of meetings [4], is a striking example to this. The modern civilization has laid the foundation for history of diffusion of social space that is widely revealed in the organization of public platforms, initiative groups, the success of which depends not on their geography or social and economic uniformity, but on real needs of people.

The provisions, stated above, can be logically supported by the situation with blocks for wealthy people. Generally, this situation quite traditionally, reveals the other aspect: architectural concepts of these areas don't enrich city space with either the new design or any esthetic ideas today. Magnificent blocks are built using the same principle, as areas for middle class: clearness and predictability of lines, pragmatism of decisions, and unification of images. It is remarkable that the same logic is also traced in construction of cultural and entertainment centers: from a convenient and multipurpose core, they turn into a drive-through one where attention of the visitor is not held on a concrete object for a long time. It should be noted that all mentioned groups of buildings are visually extremely simplified and laconic, i.e. they fail to attract attention. Speed becomes the key category in form-building processes of the modern large city. The speed, with which the resident of the modern megalopolis moves significantly, reduces a distance between the congested center and the less congested outskirts. The most important function of a city nowadays is not so much the question of location or ranging, it is rather the question of freedom of movement. The individual begins to measure the city space with the easiness of its overcoming. In other words, for the modern city person it is important to get from point A to point B quickly and comfortably. Such expansion of borders inevitably leads to neutralization of city filling, and traffic safety on roads demands maximum simplification [4] from the environment. Unified road surface marking, uniform road signs and unification of roads as well as the adjacent spaces – everything is designed to concentrate attention of the driver on the logic of movement. This leads to minimization of sensual (corporal) experience of the person concerning city space, and the development of the urban environment follows the way of creation of high-speed roads and highways, multi-level

interchanges, accurate zoning of pedestrian parts and traffic area. The idea of simplification of the movement in the city is about two thousand years old: in that time the desire to make compact and inconvenient streets of Ancient Rome less congested led to reforms made by the emperor Hadrian who approved grid structure in the imperial capital. The grid of streets has been designed to direct flows of people along the planned routes, having excluded their congestion in one place. The attempts of use of the grid principle took place while designing of Paris, London, etc. However, most consistently this principle has been implemented in New York.

The body of New York is an almost ideal embodiment of the idea of a grid as infinite geometry of identical elements [4]. However, this grid has an important difference from Hadrian: it has no fixed edge or center. The grid of New York is a constantly extending structure which growth based on occupation of the empty lands. It can be explained by the fact that the city had been designed long before the population arrived. Most likely, the design of New York was actually economically logical: the resurgent capitalism of the seventeenth century treated the individual lot and the block, the street and the avenue as abstract units for buying and selling, without respect for historic uses, for topographic conditions or for social needs." [5]. Identity of the certain land plots in New York allowed using them as bank notes as the cost of such sites was identical. The grid of New York became the hallmark of space without borders, without the center, without the certain places intended for people's meeting. The modern megalopolis defines the following issues: its inhabitants become more laconic, the contacts are short-termed, the interactions are fragmentary, and the meanings are situational. Streets, cafe and restaurants, shops and shopping centers, trains, cars and buses represent rather the space of glances than of talks [4, page 408]: each time it becomes more difficult to come into long discussion between strangers, people fail to feel sympathy with each other, and, therefore, they lack co-operating in the community [6]. The modern body of the city is the body without organs, virtualized, and at the same time simplified completely to stay there. The cities similar to New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Shanghai, etc. are the cities of the future, the dynamic development of which: the maximum decentralization and mimicry under requirements of inhabitants – make them convenient for "new" bodies of citizens. The bodies which appreciate the individual space, willing to move across this space at a high speed without paying attention, point to the "dirt" which was an inevitable part of the cities of the past.

In modern city space there is no accurate division line, and the space for people turns into the place where people act only as the background. This happens due to the fact that the central regions of the large cities lose the fixed points of public places (as it was, for example, in Ancient Greek policies or the medieval cities) and flows of people are replaced without delay there, justifying the "high-speed" rhythm of the city in general [3].

Spaces of megalopolises were formed by the racial, class and gender relations and eliminations. A city landscape - its streets and sidewalks, its public space, flows of people, transport infrastructure – has served as the place for dynamic

and situational meetings and impressions. In spite of the fact that strong social and corporal contacts collapse and new symbolical barriers are formed between the citizens, modern city life generates new subjects, solidarity and meanings.

### III. DISCUSSION

It is a controversial question whether it is comfortable for the new format of the person to stay in amorphous, diffusion space. It is no coincidence that the Jacobs street "ballet" has moved from the centers of the cities to its outskirts, suburbs and towns [3]. Small, dot geographical locations are organized by the principle of "city heart" where there is an identity basis (personal or group): city core – its cultural, historical, power center-the image. This is the place that included all completeness of life in previous years and where it is still possible to find corporal "bounds" of some inhabitants.

Despite the dynamic development of urban space, historical cultural monuments are the most important meaning-forming centers, which, on the one hand, are images of individualization of the city, but at the same time violate the logic of the modern urban environment and create a stable position of the city, preserving a different way of thinking, time, a different position of a person within the city culture. Thus, a modern city with a rich historical past is a complex system of cultural, ethical, aesthetic and ideological communications that affect the consciousness of a city dweller.

Architectural monuments affect the surrounding urban landscape, create cultural obstacles to a comfortable urban environment, and therefore we can say that taking into account its historical heritage the modern city is dependent not so much on human needs, but on the culture of the past.

The development of a modern city is connected not so much with the harmonization of the cultural space, as with endowing the space with valuable meanings that eliminate the shortcomings of the urban environment. In the process of cultural communication, when new value meanings arise, an over-city cultural space is created (for example, city nicknames: Bucharest – "Little Paris", Geneva – "Capital of the World", Prague – "City of Hundreds of Towers"), which is characterized by a special aesthetics and special expressive language [7].

The most important concept-spheres of a modern city are "hospitality" and "well-being" as necessary factors for the "merging" of a person with the body of the city. As the historical urban centers undergo the smallest change, in the cultural image of the city they actualize the opposition of the concepts of "hospitality" and "well-being". The concept of "hospitality" is associated with the uniqueness of the urban environment. This uniqueness goes beyond the ordinary everyday life, turning the urban space into a different world culture, into a culture of another era, into the culture of the Other. The concept of hospitality is aimed at the past and the possibility of this past living in the present when it comes to cities with a rich history. In the situation of modern atypical cities (for example, Las Vegas, semiotically going beyond the usual urban conditionality), the concept of hospitality becomes the leading city-forming feature. The conservatism of the

space of the historical part of the city creates the logic of the city development of and forms the value system of citizens. The concept of hospitality imposes on the city a certain responsibility associated with the violation of the logic of the urban landscape development, and simplifying access to historical values.

The concept of well-being is associated with the present and the value system under which the urban space is adjusted. The idea of well-being makes the city comfortable for living and reflects the economic, social and cultural specifics of the city. At the same time, well-being at the mental level becomes a point of attraction for a person to a comfortable cultural environment, which makes it possible to carry out the idea of a city in a city when all the conditions and needs that are important for comfortable human development do not arise in one neighborhood. At the same time, a large role as an organizing center is created not by historical objects, temples, as it was before, but by shopping centers, which concentrate on themselves all the necessary complex of human cultural and leisure activities.

As opposed to the "less congested" center suburban houses appear which are owned by separate families, who have no fear to lose this space among others. It is that point of "the native place" – zones of comfort which every person, bound to exist in this unified metastructure mentally tries to reach. Rapid destruction of the heart of the city has in large quantities displaced the "raging" life of people to suburbs, at the same time there was an infrastructure shift. It can be traced by the example of the capital of Texas – Houston [8]. The population being over two million people, the city center and its business core remain the empty zones as the general flow of inhabitants goes beyond these zones to the borders.

Thus, in large western and partly the Russian cities, the main tendency can be designated as decentralization of city space. The plan of streets represents a network of roads, both automobile, and pedestrian from certain territorial knots which can be scattered around the entire city, without being concentrated in one single point. In other words, in the cities there are places which represent concentration of financial, cultural or political force of the city. For example, in Moscow the role of such a center is played by the Kremlin and Moskva city (Moscow financial center). The same centers can be found in the European cities and partly in the cities of the USA. Nevertheless, as a number of researchers, for example Leo Hollis emphasizes, the need in such logical center is considered as secondary importance [8]. The space in the city has to be equal regardless of location. It is not an economic, but rather social and cultural equivalence when public places and objects of culture are in identical availability from any point of the city.

The second important tendency in transformation, however, of towns was highlighted by the Danish architect Jan Gehl who noticed during his practice that the cities have turned into a set of routes for high-speed movement of cars. His point of view is that the cities should be returned back to people. Gehl is supported by Hollis in his work "Cities are Good for You", showing Moscow as an example of domination of car drivers over pedestrians, as a result of which

the pedestrians have been excluded from using the city space [8, p. 9]. Considering the example of Copenhagen, Jan Gehl shows that revival to the city is not brought by the stream of transport, but by change of streets. Stroget and Norrebrogade have become the most popular pedestrian zones, decorated with green zones and cycling lanes [9]. The huge megalopolises without any particular center and towns connected with each other by means of multiband highways, like Copenhagen or Barcelona are the most important tendencies of formation of the modern cities: decentralization and speed in the first case – “copenhagization” and “improvement” in the second one.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, the modern megalopolis is a special existential continuum where, actually in the course of development of a postmodern/post-industrial civilization, there is a radicalization of the temporal component leading practically to annihilation of space. We believe that it is impossible to speak about “disappearance” of space, taking into consideration, first of all, the human nature. The corporal organization of the person demands localization on spatial measurement. But certain tendencies of decrease in the importance of a phenomenon, and especially categories of space take place, and they are not only political in character. It is remarkable that the sociological research conducted in 2014-2015 on the basis of Minin University aimed at the analysis of such indicator as “subjective wellbeing” of residents of the Russian megalopolis (Nizhny Novgorod was chosen as an example) has shown high degree of importance of temporal measurement in the choice of the residents of Nizhny Novgorod, for example, of leisure forms. The cultural institutions which were within walking distance from respondents were preferred by the residents of Nizhny Novgorod as well as destinations which were “convenient to reach” “that allowed one to save time.

The study also revealed that for a modern city dweller one’s ability to participate in decision making about changing the aesthetic and architectural appearance of the urban space in general and of its district in particular is of great importance, which indicates the importance of both the visual and the semantic environment for a modern citizen and his desire to take responsibility for the further development of the city.

The theoretical provisions, on which the sociological research has been based, as well as the results of the research, confirm the point that the existing ideas of city space need to be reconsidered as well as the place that the individual occupies in this space:

The concept “speeds” becomes a key concept of development of modern city space of European and partly the Russian cities.

Large cities influence the way the individual perceives the environment, forcing him to consider habitual things and locations in the new way: not always the economic or social status is the key to success and functionality of public space. However there is an opposite tendency: the anthropological factor itself (the acceleration of life, the requirement for convenience and simplicity of movement) demands transformation of the urban environment.

The corporal organization of the person correlates with a spatial location therefore, it is necessary to consider the desire of the personality to associate life with the concrete place, to designate a reference point of a life story in physical space, the personal world as existential requirement.

The research results contribute to formulating recommendations for city space designers: 1) to monitor on regular base indicators of citizens’ ‘subjective wellbeing’ and take them into account in city space designing; 2) to combine convenience of moving with significance of spatial characteristics preservation within new town-planning projects; 3) to design spatial location combining identity and difference focusing on situational updating.

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