

Identity of the Russian Small Historical Towns as the Object of Study and Preservation*

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Abstract—The issues related to the identity of small historical towns have become particularly relevant in Russia over the past decade. In accordance with the Quebec Declaration, the identity pertains to the relations between population and a town or a village, appearing when the inhabitants perceive the settlement as something of their own, as a place, with which they have become intimately linked by their life style, memorial sites, various material and non-material ties. Given that the identity is based on both material, and non-material heritage, a threat to its preservation is posed by both the substantial changes in daily life, and the loss of valuable cultural heritage. The identity is psychologically important for the population; it determines the consolidation of the inhabitants, the stability of social structures. The anthropological studies show that, as in many small towns of eastern and southern Europe, the identity of settlements is quite high in the Russian small towns, despite the unfavorable living conditions existing in many of them. The specific problem of the small historical towns in Russia consists in a great deal of deteriorating wooden stock of valuable housing development, the loss of which, and the respective change in the town structure, imply the dispersion of the settlement's identity.

The social and anthropological studies, as well as design works carried out in recent times, point out the presence of various parts of the identification problem. For effective work on preservation and upkeep of the identity of the historical

settlements, there is a necessity to comprehend the interrelation between the particular cases of identity expression and to structure them. For such comprehension, it is important to consider the works of such predecessors as Pierre Nora, Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann. This article relies, to a considerable extent, on the results of the performed domestic social and anthropological studies and, mainly on the analysis of the pre-project materials of the All-Russian Competition for creating a comfortable urban environment in the small towns of Russia conducted from March to May 2018.

Keywords—Russian small historical town; identity; structure of identity; distinctiveness; historical memory; collective memory; anthropological studies; project studies

I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of identity of a historical settlement as an important subject for preservation has gained relevance rather recently along with the problem of comprehensive safeguarding of material and non-material cultural heritage. Of great importance was its mentioning in the Declaration of Quebec 2008. For the small towns of Russia this issue is particularly important, because the life style that is practiced in such towns is traditional in many ways, and there is a very close relationship there between the everyday life skills and the cultural representations, the peculiarities of a specific place. Preservation of these foundations of identity is psychologically important for the population, and it determines the consolidation of the inhabitants, the stability of social structures. Besides, the material heritage of the small towns of Russia is very fragile, because not only the monumental remnants constitute its foundation, but also the

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old mass building, which is wooden, for the most part, rapidly becomes dilapidated and disappearing. And the image of an old town often goes away with it, its distinctiveness gets lost, and many things that have been making the basis of urban identity disappear.

In national practices the issues of identity have acquired particular relevance over recent years. By identity we mean the relations between population and a town or a village, appearing when the inhabitants perceive settlement as something of their own, as a place, with which they have become intimately linked by their life style, memorial sites, various material and non-material ties. The social and anthropological surveys show that, in the Russian small towns, as in many small towns of eastern and southern Europe, the identity of settlements is very high, despite the unfavorable living conditions existing in many of them.

In recent years, the risk of losing the sense of “what is one’s own” has increased, therefore, in support of the small settlements and in order to preserve the historical and cultural foundations of their existence in recent years, it was decided to adopt the Decrees of the President of Russia dated September 7, 2017 and February 23, 2018 and the subsequent decision of the Government of the Russian Federation dated March 7, 2018 on implementation of a priority project “Creation of a comfortable urban environment.” Under this project, in May 2018 a competition has been carried out, the results of which are remarkable not only for the specific project outcomes, but also for identification of the problems demanding consideration. [1] This article will be devoted largely to analyzing these results of the competition.

II. THE DISTINCTIVENESS AND THE IDENTITY IN THE NATIONAL SURVEYS CONDUCTED IN THE PAST DECADE

At the outset, it is necessary to overview the social and anthropological surveys on the problems of living in the Russian small towns. Over the past decades a great number of such surveys have been conducted, and the scope of the article does not permit a more or less comprehensive presentation of them. Most of these studies are not specially focused on the architecture and town planning, yet they are important for an architect. It is necessary to point out a few most relevant results in a generalized way. The small towns are characterized by a historically created life style, mainly, supported by family and family traditions, (which is seen in Poland and Bulgaria as well [2]). Love for home town, the local patriotism, is inherent with almost all of them. [3] It is common for people of all ages to participate in traditional agricultural work; even the evening gatherings of the youth in summer are timed to coincide with the completion of watering the gardens. [4] Strong is the memory of the historically-created peculiarities of a place — a settlement and a landscape. Among the disadvantages of the established social structure, along with the problems of employment is, as a rule, unavailability of locations for communal leisure activities. Commuting from town to workplace or place of study is often seen as a necessary evil, and the elder generation sometimes views it as a tragedy. [5]

Of the studies, which are more closely related to the architectural and town-planning issues, it is needed to mention, above all, the survey of Strelka KB Center for Urban Anthropology devoted to assessing the quality of life in 32 single-industry towns (a high percentage of which are small historical towns), which has been carried out using “Big Data” analysis method. [6] The analysis of more than one million photographs in social networks was aimed, among other things, at shedding light on the activity of inhabitants (how people spend their time outdoors) and the level of their cultural life (visiting museums, cultural events, etc.). The abundance of photographs confirms earlier observations that the inhabitants of the small towns pay special attention to the family life. The genre photographs prevail, while little attention was given to the local historical sites. This being said, the kind of background for photographs, in many cases, is still important. When revealing the most-visited places, the researchers come to the conclusion that the inhabitants of the towns under consideration prefer a more urbanized center or its places of historical interest.

The greater attention to the local attractions is paid by non-residents, which is quite clear. The difference of inside and outside perspectives is manifested, as well as the non-residents’ perception of a town’s distinctiveness or the local people’s perception of its identity. It is interesting that the difference in views is specific for each town. Thus, in the town of Tutaevo, the difference amounts to 23%: the tourists are clearly interested in the ancient temples, which do not make the scene for the photographs of the townspeople. Whereas, in Gorokhovets, which is equally rich of historical monuments, this difference is only 9%: the residents of the town do not pay attention to the architectural monuments by force of habit, and the visitors are attracted, mainly, not by historical landscape, but by the “monotonous” ski complex, where they take photographs of each other.

The overview of the wide range of photographs, which is briefly defined above, is quite informative, but it is necessary to keep in mind the important specific feature of its methodology: only a layer of the material of immediate relevance has been taken into consideration, and of such kind that needs to be designated by the word “party.” In their daily life, people do not spend their time making photo sessions.

But the daily perception of a town also requires analytical re-evaluation. This is usually done using more traditional methods involving surveys and in-depth interviews. However, getting such interviews sometimes requires a special preliminary work within an urban community. We will focus on a survey conducted by V. Postolaki in Yuryev-Polsky in 2017. In response to the question what makes their town different from the others, the majority of the respondents held a long pause and tried to find an answer. After which, nearly a half of the respondents replied that their home town was distinctive for the rich cultural heritage, while often making gesture with their hand towards the historical mound and the architectural objects situated there. The other half of the surveyed described their town as quiet, cozy and peaceful. What is more, the respondents, who said

their town was “small, peaceful, quiet and cozy,” for the most part, didn’t mention the historical heritage as an important distinction of Yuryev-Polsky as compared to other towns. By contrast, the respondents, who commented on the importance of the historical heritage and the historical center didn’t use in their responses such characteristics as “quiet, cozy and peaceful.” Moreover, to the question of where they would take a friend or a guest, who came to Yuryev-Polsky for a visit, all respondents unanimously answered that they would take him to the town center to see the monuments of the past. That is to say, that all of them keep in mind the heritage, but for some people the daily level — “cozy” — is important above all, whereas the others are willing to speak only of a more general, “higher” layer of the local identity.

The identity emerges as a phenomenon, which is complex in its structure. Here is the relevant layer of assessment of the settlement as “one’s own,” and “one’s own” in different settings — in its mundanity and in festivity. And there is another layer, which affects more general, important sides of perception of a town. The former resident, who occasionally visits his relatives in Yuryev-Polsky, noted in the framework of the mentioned survey that “the locals take all this beauty as people who live at the seaside. For such people the sea is not something extraordinary or appreciable. And the natives of Yuryev-Polsky are calm and casual about their historical heritage.”

It can be concluded that the sense of affinity with the heritage, the peculiarities of the local landscape is oftentimes present in the consciousness of the residents, but it does not always re-considered or brought up to date. It can be recognized that the values of such kind form a deep layer of identity, it “floats up” in mind by force of various circumstances: I have to see the town after a long absence; I have to show it to the guests. And, of course, this layer gets actualized, if its values are menaced. Furthermore, it turns out that not only the apparent cultural rarities are important for a person, but also the artifacts, of the value of which the resident himself was, maybe, unaware. The following example is characteristic, although it has no bearing on the small towns, but it fits into our discussion about the traits of identity of an urban space.

This is about the unfinished television tower in Ekaterinburg. [7] The construction of the tower began in 1983 according to a standard design. For several decades the tower has been considered a Soviet-era “*dolgostroi*” (a construction project that dragged on for decades and was never completed), which did not correspond to the building system of the city center. But people got used to it. It had become an integral part of the urban landscape. In 2018, a decision was made to demolish the unfinished television tower. It provoked the objections of a number of city residents, engineering and artistic community of the city, and many famous people. A group of members of the Ekaterinburg City Duma issued a statement: “Such buildings, existing in countries around the world, are the sightseeing attractions that create a massive flow of tourists... The buildings of this kind will never again be constructed in Russia. ... This tower, without exaggeration, could be not just a landmark of our city, but also a symbol of the region

and the whole Russia.” The tower became known outside Russia. A French World Expo expert, Laurent Antoine LeMog, made a bold comparison between the Ekaterinburg tower and Eiffel Tower and said, that a modernized television tower could increase the chances of Ekaterinburg to win EXPO-2025.

The behavior of the ordinary residents of Ekaterinburg in this movement was characteristic. [8] The activists projected the speaking slogans onto the tower: “My tower.” “We love her.” “I am alive.” “Don’t demolish.” “Putin, save me.” All this, especially the wording of the slogans, which have been projected onto the tower, demonstrates how accustomed the residents have become to the existence of an extraordinary object in the city, how they have identified themselves (personally) with this object, and how painful it has been to get over losing it. And such intense expression of self-identification attracted the attention to the city, and not only in Russia.

In concluding the first section of the article, it can be stated that the identity as a specific form of relationship between inhabitants and a settlement is characterized by a rather complex internal structure, which connects the relevant and the underlying, the festive and the mundane. A number of components of this structure are quite steady and homogeneous for Russian small historical town. But alongside this, there are the rarities and their interrelations, which are specific for each town and cannot always be grasped by an external observer, but which have a decisive significance for one settlement or another.

III. THE DISTINCTIVENESS AND THE IDENTITY IN THE SUBMISSIONS OF 2018 COMPETITION “CREATING A COMFORTABLE URBAN ENVIRONMENT”

The materials submitted to this competition allow us to further assess the many-sidedness of the topics of the distinctiveness and the identity of small historical towns. Above all, it should be noted that for perceiving the architectural and spatial peculiarities of a town as part of what is one’s own, which is close to one’s heart, the association of a memorial place or the whole town with well-known historical events, and especially with bright personalities, is important. The submissions of the competition showed that, for the residents of Ostrogzhsk, the important thing is their connection with the artist N. Kramskoi, for the residents of Ples — their connection with I. Levitan, whose paintings are still captured in the urban landscapes.

The connection to the history was very apparent in choosing the design location and in the focus of the project “Solvychevodsk. The success story of the Stroganov dynasty” [9]. The competition project showed how the idea of the distinctiveness of a small town was defined by its history, the work of famous people, whose names were associated with the town history. (As a matter of fact, the issue here is not only the history as such, which is known through the books, but the cultural memory, the historical facts and persons, the memory of whom is being preserved, as noted by J. Assmann, in the living culture of a country, a

region or a town [10]). In the project, submitted to the competition, a site in the town center was chosen as object, where, in 1515, the first Stroganov's saltworks was built. The territory lied next to Lake Solenoe, which preserves the original salt-lifting pipes of the end of the 17th century. The project implies restoration of the historical environment in the lake area and the residential blocks surrounding it, upgrade and museumification of the historical sites of the salt works and creation of museum pieces — "brine-lifting pipes;" "saltern bloomery furnace and saltery," the merchants' rows and the refectory. The design solution, as a whole, was subordinate to the same objective of preserving the cultural memory of a place. It's individual and it includes recreation of lost artifacts. The brutal log structures, reminding of the nature of construction of the 17th century, prevail. It is planned to build wooden walkways with access to the water and observation deck near the salt-lifting pipes, which allows for including the lake in the historical and cultural framework. It appears that the focus of the project is approved by the citizens.

Unconditionally-important connection of the architectural space with the long local history is almost always amplified by the memorial material of the recent past ("cultural memory" is enriched with what is alive in the memory of the latest generations and with what M. Halbwachs called "the collective memory" [11]). Sometimes, the residents relate better to the latter. Understanding it, the authors of some projects, in particular, focused on transformation of the Kremlin Hill in Borovsk tried not only to uncover the traces of the historical events of the 16-17th centuries, but also to resuscitate the culture-specific elements of the recent urban history — the orchard, which had existed on the ground of where an old castled was once located, the stage, which had been popular in 1960s, etc. The newest building did not allow the designers to implement the idea to the full extent, but preserving the memory of the recent past is apparently important for the society [12].

The reflection of historical rarities in the contemporary scenic art appeared to be a specific form of combining the antiquity and the recent past. It was reflected in relief in a competition project for landscaping in Yuryev-Polsky. In explanatory note for the project, the following emphasis was made: "The identity of a cozy provincial town, that is Yuryev-Polsky, is defined by high concentration of the cultural heritage objects, unpretentious facades of the residential houses on the noiseless little streets, as well as by the bright events, which are remembered by the townspeople, related to the filming of the universally-liked movie — "The Golden Calf." [13] In the description of the competition project, no less attention was given to the filming of this comedy, than to the Battle of Lipitsa of 1216, one of the biggest internal battles of the Ancient Rus. It is fairly obvious that the residents identify themselves in a greater degree with the recent events that have been taking place in living memory.

The architectural monuments proper are represented through the lens of the scenes from the movie. It is considered that it will be interesting for the tourists to see the town mounds, the walls of the Monastery of Archangel

Michael, the Merchants' rows, the cobblestone road. The organizers believe that such captured recognition of the town's distinctiveness, which is being reproduced over and over in the product of the movie industry, highlights its peculiarity. Here is the description excerpt of the competition project taken from the explanatory note: "The final chord of the landscaping of the central square under this project is suggested to be the mounting of the sculptural compositions inspired by the legendary movie "The Golden Calf." Mounting of the sculptural compositions will be a perfect gift for the residents of Yuryev-Polsky town, many of whom remember the filming of the movie, and also for our guests." [14]

We see the desire that the residents and also the town authorities have for highlighting the chosenness of their town, making it stand out from the group of small towns, witnessing the recognition of its distinctiveness and a special atmosphere. The events that have made the town different from the others are becoming most deserving of reproduction in public space design.

There is a good reason for mentioning the town authorities. Their influence on the results of selection of the design object is noticeable in many cases, and quite obvious in Yuryev-Polsky. This is understandable, since the question under consideration really matters for the town. The Board is concerned about the competitiveness of the project proposal. In particular, the residents' personal interests (including self-identification issues) and touristic interests should be represented in a balanced manner and the traits of the town's distinctiveness should be expressed.

At first, the majority of the residents of Yuryev-Polsky favored another design object, the improvement of the square near the House of Culture. The object is on the main street, but quite far from the town center. The reason is, probably, that the lack of amenities in the old center made it unpopular with many residents. However, it was important for the town officials to improve the situation notably in the historical nucleus, which should present the town to the outside world, and they reached a decision, comprising the topics of exposition of the old town.

Finally, the example of Yuryev-Polsky brings us to the problem of synthesizing the historical-cultural and the mundane aspects of what defines the image of a town both for the residents, and for the newcomers. If the citizens of Yuryev-Polsky were willing to avoid the pragmatic problems of the old town, for the majority of people in Vyshny Volochyok the primary concern for the town was the provision of amenities for one of the most remarkable streets of the town, which had been in a serious state of neglect from a purely technical point of view. In substantiation of the choice of the public property presented in the project, it is stated that "Vanchakova Line is the pride of the town, its history, its face." [15] It is the oldest street with preserved parade frontage of abutting buildings of the 19th century with a length of more than 300 m. Currently despite being situated in the town center, the street ceased to be the place of attraction for the residents. "Like any other undermined place, the townspeople try to move through Vanchakova

Line as quick as broken roads and uneven sidewalks allow.” [16]. As can be seen from the sentences quoted, it’s not just about the utilitarian need for renovation of the street, but also about returning the essential component of its identity and its distinctiveness to the town. The majority of the citizens keep the memory of the significance of a place under consideration.

In Ples, the interrelation of the historical-cultural and the mundane elements turned out to be considerably more complex. While choosing the object of the competition design, the residents escaped everything that had been commonly associated with the distinctiveness of this town — the well-proportioned built-up environment of the old quay, the picturesque houses in complex terrain of Zarechye, everything that is captured in the canvases by Levitan. They preferred improving the pond area on the upper terrace of the terrain, where the natives live far away from the scenic surroundings of their town and the tourist flows. It’s true that they value the distinctiveness of the Levitan’s Ples and are proud of it, but they also value their local epichorial identity. [17]

IV. CONCLUSION

The foregoing brief overview of the materials concerning the distinctiveness and the identity of the Russian small towns convinces that the distinctiveness and, especially, the identity is a complex social and cultural phenomenon, which is multi-level and multi-dimensional. The identity is extremely important in the light of the problems of renovation of the historical towns, particularly small ones, which are extremely sensitive to the nature of changes that are taking place there. Of course, the competition materials are only a fragmented panorama of the phenomenon, which partially highlights some of its aspects. The scope of the article does not allow, for example, correlating the observations with the issues relating to historical, collective and cultural memory, which has been only partly touched upon. Whereas, J. Assmann, M. Halbwachs and others make a special focus on the issues of the relationship between memory and identity that need to be studied comprehensively in the view of the matters of our concern. Finally, it must be noted that the competition, the materials of which have been analyzed in the present article, is very instructive in terms the color range of specific project proposals. But that is, however, the subject of another article.

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