SYMBOLIC NATURE OF PRACTICES OF APPROPRIATION OF URBAN SPACE AS A FORM OF CIVIC ACTIVISM

Maxim Gorshenin
Kazan Federal University
General and Ethnic Sociology Department
E-mail: gorsheninmaxim@gmail.com

Abstract

In this article, the author attempts a symbolic interpretation of the practices of urban space appropriation. The focus is on individuals' interpretations of the nature and purpose of using different urban spaces. Understanding the appropriation of urban space as a form of civic activism, the author conceptualizes the methodology of constructing an "active urban dweller" by referring to the personal experience of individuals' interpretations of places.

INTRODUCTION

Considering the practices of individual use of urban spaces, we can conditionally classify them according to the criterion of intended use. The majority of spaces are used by residents according to their original purpose. In this case, the meaning embedded in the space is interpreted by the citizens in its original form. This can be described as the equality of connotations of a place and its reflection in the social consciousness. For example, by visiting a grocery store, residents satisfy their need for food, but not their desire to organize a literary circle there.

In practice, however, we can face the opposite situation, when the connotation of space is interpreted by individuals or social groups in a slightly different or completely opposite way.

These situations can be caused by a variety of reasons: lack of alternatives for citizens, socio-economic situation (staying in a target space is more unprofitable than in a non-target space), social and normative environment (staying in an alternative target space is legally or informally prohibited), and so on. In this paper, we believe that the main reason for the misuse of urban space, in the course of which its appropriation by residents takes place, is their symbolic perception of this place.

The starting point of our thinking was the work of V. Vakhshtayn "Sociology of Everyday Life and Frame Theory" (2011). The sociologist distinguishes the everyday human experience into its background and context. The background is the various infrastructural components of a person's life, his entire environment - the "stage" and "props", if we use the language of I. Goffman (2000). The context is the individual perception of this background, based on a person's previous experience. It seems appropriate here to extend the interpretation of context by adding the category of affective perception, since it contains subjective experiences and emotional saturation from the perceived and subsequently used space. Based on these theoretical assumptions, we can relate the symbolism of a place for a particular citizen or group of citizens to its appropriation by them and its further positive or destructive use.

Also important to our theoretical framework is the concept of "spirit of place". In his work "Keys to the city: how is development organized?" Michael Storper (2018) positions it as a particular identity of place. It consists of the symbolic capital of space and its institutional and microeconomic significance. Here, we deliberately leave only the symbolic capital of space in our field of vision as the basis of the spirit of place, because we believe that it is the public value, the recognition, the reputation and a kind of trust in the space included in the massive field of the city that determines all kinds of strategies of its use - both targeted and not.

In order to fully understand this issue, it remains for us to determine how this appropriation of space is linked to the civic activity of the population. First of all, we need to define what we mean by the appropriation of urban space. In our opinion, the appropriation of urban space is the realization by individuals or groups of people of their right to modify, reconstruct and change the functional and interpretative meaning of various places on the territory of the city. This appropriation can take different forms: practices of "guerrilla" urbanism (Safarova, 2019), street art (Sudakova, 2018), participation in workshops and public hearings on the future of different spaces in the city, and so on. Speaking of civic activism, we will not touch upon its political or managerial component (as S. Abramova and N. Antonova (2022) did), but will focus our attention on the symbolic foundations of this activity.

In other words, in our understanding, urban civic activism is an everyday activity of residents aimed at improving their experience of being in urban spaces by saturating them with new social meanings (Andreeva & Polyanina, 2023; Bondarenko et al., 2023; Fokina & Logunova, 2023). Within the framework of this interpretation of activism, we distinguish the action aspect of appropriation (saturation with new social meanings to change the established practices of using a place) and the interpretation aspect (saturation with new social meanings to change the perception of a place) (Gimranova et al., 2023; Kirillova et al., 2023; Loseva et al., 2023). The action aspect is realized in the physical, infrastructural environment, while the interpretive aspect is most often based on the online activities of city dwellers (Manuylenko et al., 2022; Nakisbaev & Dugalich, 2022; Vilkov et al., 2023). Despite the significantly different environments in which these activities take place, we believe that they are all based on the subjective everyday experience of individuals, which causes the disparity between the connotation of a place and its use by residents. We positioned this thesis as a hypothesis on the basis of which we conducted further research.

Thus, the study is organized in several main stages:

1) Identification of typical spaces of the city in which the practices of misuse of space can be expressed at the level of its symbolic interpretation;

2) Observation of these practices from the outside, description of the strategies discovered;

3) Interviews with the participants of the practices to discover the causal relationships of such misuse.

The result of this study will be descriptive concepts of the symbolic essence of such practices for their possible use in the planning of urban spaces.

METHODS

The purpose of this empirical study was to determine the mechanisms of formation of symbolic meanings in interaction with urban space during its misuse. In the analysis, the citizens of Kazan were defined as the object of the study, and the subject of the study was their experience of misuse of urban public spaces. The main method was a case study, which included a series of 30 semi-formalized interviews with city residents (11 women and 9 men), as well as a series of 10 informalized non-inclusive observations. The interviews were aimed at exploring the causes, factors and opinions regarding the practices of misuse of urban space realized by individuals, while the observations captured the essence of these practices, as well as the

mechanisms of their formation and flow. The interviews and observations were carried out from 01.08.2023 to 01.10.2023.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Within the framework of this study, we have identified the following 3 categories of spaces in which the processes of their misuse are active

1) Children's playgrounds;

2) Shopping centers;

3) Abandoned objects;

Let us look more closely at the practices in each of these categories.

Playground as an affordable alternative to bars

Children's playgrounds are an integral part of almost any residential area. The social design of each apartment building takes into account the factor of children's development, which implies active play activities. Each playground is also equipped with the necessary infrastructure for parents in the form of benches from which children can be controlled and supervised. They also provide the necessary communication between parents and build closer social relations among the residents of the buildings.

However, this space does not fulfill its direct function in all cases. Observations have shown that the most common practice of misuse of playgrounds is the consumption of alcoholic beverages of various strengths. The subjects of these practices are citizens between 25 and 50 years old, mostly men. As a rule, social groups of three to six people - 2 to 5 men and 1 to 2 women - gather at playgrounds.

Since in this case we were dealing with the practice of deviant behavior, the interview was scheduled for the period when the subjects of this practice only gathered at playgrounds and did not consume alcohol beforehand. First, we were interested in the motives for misusing this space. These include the proximity of the space to their place of residence, the convenience of the playground infrastructure, and the small number of people around (the time frame of these practices was approximately from 20:00 to 03:00 Moscow time):

So what, why go far away... We got some beer, something to eat... And we sit, there are no people, there are benches... - Male, 36 y. o.

However, we were more interested in the non-infrastructural components that determine the presence of alcohol consumption practices. When specifying the questions with a focus on the everyday experience of the respondents, we found that childhood memories were also an important reason for choosing a playground as a meeting place:

We all grew up here, we used to run around this yard as little kids, we used to play here, hide there... There are garages over there, we used to run around them too... - Male, 34 y. o.

Despite the age of the informants, the social memory of past practices that took place a long time ago is of great importance. In other words, the playground becomes not only a space of growing up for children and adolescents, but also an environment of being when they reach adulthood. The informants do not want to separate their everyday life from the places that have a great meaning for them.

We believe that this phenomenon can be linked to the phenomenon of delayed adulthood. As an individual's social life becomes more complex, the number of spaces in which everyday life takes place increases. However, in a situation in which an individual links his present with past social experiences, the expansion of practices, as we can see, occurs without a significant increase in the number of spaces in which they take place. The experience of the informants shows that throughout their lives they have tried not to move away from the places that were "native" to them:

Why go somewhere else... I can sit here comfortably, my friends are here... I don't need anything else... - Female, 28 y. o.

At the same time, none of the informants practicing alcohol consumption on playgrounds consider moving their practices to specially created spaces for this purpose:

Why should I go to bars when I can buy vodka at the store and sit here with a high?! - Male, 48 y. o.

As we can see, the informants try to organize their leisure time independently in places that are comfortable for them. The memory of past social experiences, delayed adulthood, and built associations with space transfer these deviant practices to places that are not intended for this purpose.

Shopping malls as theaters for teenagers

Shopping centers are spaces with a fairly wide range of possible social practices, which ultimately imply the construction of market relations between visitors and retailers. However,

we found that not all social groups are included in these processes, but create their own, which contradicts the original social meaning of the mall:

We come just to watch... It's interesting! - Female, 15 y. o.

Teenagers position the social space of the mall as a platform for gaining new visual experiences. Based on the results of our observations, we determined that they visit these places in groups of 3 to 8 people, and the gender and age composition of such groups is almost always homogeneous. They gather on the basis of common interests or activities:

We are classmates, we've been in contact since 6th grade, - Male, 17 y. o.

Well, we originally met at a standup, now we go out sometimes, and so in VK [VKontakte] we mainly contact each other, - Female, 16 y. o.

Further observations showed that such groups of teenagers visit shopping centers without the purpose of purchasing goods or services. They are interested in getting new impressions not only from visual perception of goods on counters, but also from how other users of shopping centers purchase goods and services. Teenagers discuss among themselves the choices of other individuals, discuss their actions, claiming to be experts:

Sometimes we go and look at what someone is wearing, criticize and laugh at some people. Some people have no taste at all [laughs], - Male, 17 y. o.

At the same time, there is no criticism from female groups of teenagers - they show more tolerance towards other visitors and prefer to concentrate on their own appearance. Common trajectories of visits to shopping centers are shopping trips in which teenagers get new emotional experiences. At the same time, their communication can be completely distracted by being in the malls.

Such adolescent practices can be compared to an individual's visit to the theater. The products studied by the informants act as a backdrop that allows them to immerse themselves in the social field of the shopping center, while other visitors become actors for them, whose actions and consumption strategies they observe as if they were playing a game. Teenagers do not feel that such places are designed for the compulsive spending that any shopping enterprise implies:

Why waste money? Come, walk around, leave, everyone is happy. It's just a place, just like a park, but there's a lot here," - Female, 15 y. o.

As we can see, teenagers see shopping malls as platforms for receiving emotions and impressions. It is not important for them to buy goods or services, but to feel like spectators of the scenery and the life of other people. For them, the shopping center becomes a symbol of a new social experience, of collectivity and competence. Other people's consumption strategies

are important to them, and they have to express their point of view within their own narrow social circle. The mall space is appropriated by them as a place where they can develop their critical thinking and communicative behavioral skills in large crowds of people from different social groups.

Abandoned objects as a source of new urban aesthetics

The next object of study was ruined objects on the territory of the city. An interesting study in this area is the work of V. P. Chumakova "Aesthetics of ruins in vernacular photography of Russian-language social media: setting the research problem" (2018). Through the analysis of the aestheticization of everyday life in the form of content of one of the communities in VKontakte, it was revealed that this process occurs through a special kind of games with photos. As this study shows, the popularity of the aestheticization of ruins in contemporary online culture is largely related to the identity crisis and the rethinking of relations with the past in the post-Soviet space.

However, it is not the representation of such objects in the online environment that interests us, but the reasons for their aesthetic appropriation by the residents of Kazan. Ruined objects attract informants because of their dark and mystical background:

Well, there must be some spirits and ghosts here... Just like in the movie... - Male, 20 y. o.

The motive of thrill is present in the formation of aesthetic perceptions of this place. It is the realization that they can be obtained and satisfied here that gives the citizens the opportunity to call this place aesthetic. The presence of the ugly gives the space the meaning of the beautiful. This seems to contradict simple cultural laws: the ugly should be condemned and minimized. But if we remember the concept of relativity of cultural values, which is characteristic of postmodern society, such a paradox is quite acceptable when defining space as aesthetic.

The presence of a context of danger is not the only factor in the aesthetics of ruins. During a conversation with one of the city's residents, we learned that they are able to evoke a sense of freedom that abandoned buildings radiate:

Look around, these buildings are free of everything in the world. They're dead but alive. They don't care about any of the city's problems. They're just there, that's all. And so when I come here, I feel free too... - Female, 22 y. o.

We observe the anthropomorphization of space. It is ascribed such characteristics and events that a person can pass through, but not a specific object. The building itself cannot

survive or be dead. It can only reflect in its form the social practices of the people who interact with it. Ruins are therefore a kind of sign. A sign that man does not stop his activity, that he goes to the end, that he preserves himself, even if not in an ideal form. Ruins are a sign of man's memory, a sign of man's freedom from problems. Therefore, when perceiving ruins, people transfer the "experience of the building" to themselves, attributing to themselves their freedom from the world. The informants strive to be like the ruins - to go through many problems, but at the same time to retain within themselves the core value that characterizes the individual as a free person.

This case demonstrates that even an urban space without a social purpose can be appropriated by its inhabitants in the context of the formation of aesthetic perceptions. No social practices take place in them, but they can be seen as a source of certain aesthetics and values that are appropriated by the citizens. The peculiarity of such objects is that they do not form collective practices - they only have an individual impact on each citizen and are appropriated at the level of individual value orientations.

Symbolic capital as a tool of civic activism

Having defined these mechanisms of interaction with the symbolic capital of place, we have also considered the forms of its appropriation. But this appropriation is not quite in the traditional sense of incorporating external social practices necessary for the individual in a particular space. In this interpretation, the city and the individual are seen as two separate but related systems. This study has shown that engagement with the symbolic capital of space incorporates it into the subjective world of the individual, essentially reproducing constructs of the meaning and necessity of place in everyday life. Such constructed abstractions may encourage individuals to preserve at least the appearance of a place that plays a certain meaningful role in their lives. Thus, the task of preserving the symbolic capital of space can also lead to various forms of activity in its reproduction and transformation. This, in turn, forms the archetype of the urban activist, who relies on his or her personal interests, bypassing the public ones.

CONCLUSIONS

Research has shown that the semantic saturation of a space is determined not only by its functional and infrastructural saturation, but also by its symbolic capital. Individuals focus on

three aspects of this: 1) social memory stored in the space; 2) strategies for using the place; 3) values transmitted through the mechanism of aesthetic perception. The presence of these elements encourages citizens to actively engage in the social space of a place, which contributes to the development of civic consciousness in them.

The practices we have studied are deviant to a greater extent, but the forms of interaction with space that they form can have a generally conformist character. Taking into account these parameters when planning the next urban space will allow to strengthen social activity in it. Thus, the social memory of a place can become the basis for the reconstruction or transformation of an existing place. Such accents will help to involve in the life of the space the inhabitants for whom this territory has a great symbolic meaning. References to the past, its revision and adaptation to modern urban trends will help to resolve conflicts arising in the co-creative design of a place related to its functional saturation. In this way, citizens will be able to feel unity with the place, which in turn will increase their motivation to include and appropriate the space.

The interest of individuals in the strategies of other citizens in using the place can help to increase not only the number of possible activities, but also the possibilities of inclusion in them. Creating a space that is seamless in terms of interaction design allows for the creation of a place that is accessible to all social groups. Such strategies are most wisely used in the creation of public spaces, as this will greatly expand the repertoire of actions of citizens within them. Active observation of practices greatly stimulates the motivation to reproduce them and incorporate them into existing ones.

Finally, the external aesthetic appearance of the space should convey certain social values to the citizen. The needs of an individual in different emotional states, as well as a kind of "instructions", form the processes of anthropomorphization of objects. It consists in attributing to it characteristics and patterns of human behavior and their further transfer to the subject of this mechanism. Taking into account this parameter, it is possible to construct the social space in such a way that a person receives spiritual saturation with values in the course of his practices. Thus, the social space created taking into account these three parameters will make the citizen not only a visitor of the place, but its active participant and active individual.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

REFERENCES

Abramova, S. B., & Antonova, N. L. (2022). Civil non-political activism of youth: A turn to digital local practices. *Caucasian Science Bridge, 5*(3(17)), 46-55. http://dx.doi.org/10.18522/2658-5820.2022.3.4

Andreeva, J., & Polyanina, A. (2023). Development of civic activism as a strategy of public regulation in the field of information security. *E3S Web of Conferences, 449*, 07009. http://dx.doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202344907009

Bondarenko, N., Agaltsova, D., Makushkin, S., Ponyaeva, T., Abizgildina, A., & Akhmetshin, E. (2023). Development of university campuses under the influence of city authorities, business, and urban community as an important factor in achieving the principles of sustainable development. *Journal of Law and Sustainable Development, 11*(12), e1913. http://dx.doi.org/10.55908/sdgs.v11i12.1913

Chumakova, V. P. (2018). The aesthetics of ruins in vernacular photography of Russian social media: Stating the research problem. *Nauka TV, 14.3*, 74-90. http://dx.doi.org/10.30628/1994-9529-2018-14.3-74-90

Fokina, L., & Logunova, N. (2023). Civic identity and values: Systemic view. *Lex Humana, 15*(1), 237-247.

Gimranova, R., Aimagambetov, Ye., Nevmatulina, K., Garipova, A., Mazhitova, S., & Kudaybergenova, S. (2023). Transformation of human capital as a driver of innovative economy. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 12*(6), 203-220. http://dx.doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2023-0164

Goffman, I. (2000). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Moscow: Kanon-press-TS: Kuchkovo pole.

Kirillova, E., Otcheskiy, I., Ivanova, S., Verkhovod, A., Stepanova, D., Karlibaeva, R., & Sekerin, V. (2023). Developing methods for assessing the introduction of smart technologies into the socio-economic sphere within the framework of open innovation. *International Journal of Sustainable Development and Planning, 18*(3), 693-702. http://dx.doi.org/10.18280/ijsdp.180305

Loseva, A., Balashova, I., Lymareva, O., Prikhodko, A., Gayazova, S., & Shelygov, A. (2023). Oportunidades y desafíos en la preservación del capital intelectual y humano: Estrategias para la preparación en un contexto socioeconómico complejo [Opportunities and challenges in preserving intellectual and human capital: Strategies for readiness in a complex socio-economic context]. *Nexo Revista Científica, 36*(03), 352-362. http://dx.doi.org/10.5377/nexo.v36i03.16457

Manuylenko, V. V., Ermakova, G. A., Gryzunova, N. V., Koniagina, M. N., Milenkov, A. V., Setchenkova, L. A., & Ochkolda, I. I. (2022). Generation and assessment of intellectual and informational capital as a foundation for corporations' digital innovations in the "Open Innovation" System". *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications, 13*(9), 1022-1032. http://dx.doi.org/10.14569/IJACSA.2022.01309118

Nakisbaev, D. & Dugalich, N. (2022). Introduction of digital platforms to state and municipal administration: Opportunities for regulation and transformation of social services for the population. *Revista Brasileira de Políticas Públicas, 12*(3), 133-144. http://dx.doi.org/10.5102/rbpp.v12i3.8612

Safarova, K. S. (2019). Graffiti phenomenon as a part of city culture (on the example of Smolensk city). *Bulletin of Science and Practice, 5*(1), 378-383. http://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2539806

Storper, M. (2018). *Keys to the city: How development works*. Moscow: Strelka Press Publishing House.

Sudakova, O. N. (2018). Sculptural street art as an artistic practice of appropriating urban space. In K. A. Kukso (Ed.), *Street art aesthetics: A collection of articles* (pp. 30-38). St. Petersburg: SPbGUPTD.

Vakhshtayn, V. C. (2011). *Sociology of everyday life and the theory of frames*. St. Petersburg: Autonomous non-profit educational organization of higher education "European University in St. Petersburg".

Vilkov, I. N. Liman, I. A., & Kiselitsa, E. P. (2023). Loan debt burden of the population in constituent entities of the Russian Federation. *Revista Relações Internacionais do Mundo Atual Unicuritiba, 1*(39), 174-195.