
”Socialist Cities” Under post-Soviet Conditions: Symbolic Transformations of the Urban Space

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Abstract

The space of so-called ”socialist cities” (”Sotsgorods”) [1] has shaped one of the essential parts of what is usually called today as ”the Soviet urban planning heritage”. These experimental areas of public housing embodied the concept of an ideal social living of the Soviet time and, thus, not just contributed to the formation of the new patterns of behavior but also developed a sense of belonging to the advanced urban culture for several generations of people.

The current research is focused on their symbolic transformation after collapse of the Soviet system.

The fall of socialism found all ”socialist cities” as a sort of ”devastated” spaces which had lost their functional meaning, symbolic significance and any clear narratives. Nevertheless today they continue to remain a place of residence for millions of people and still play a significant role in spatial structure of the post-Soviet cities. Thus, it is especially important to explore whether they managed to acquire any new symbolic meanings replacing the previous ones and, if so, how these meanings can be reproduced under current conditions.

The *Avtozavod district* in Nizhnii Novgorod, *sotsgorod of Magnitogorsk* and the *Uralmash district* in Yekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk) give illustrative examples of such transformation.

Found as exemplary ”socialist cities” in the early Soviet period they all turned into a typical ”lost” space in the 1990s being completely marginalized both in functional and symbolical senses.

However during the recent years these areas started to receive increased attention from various social groups: urban activists, architects, artists, volunteers, scholars etc. As a result, today the space of the former socialist cities more often appears in a public discourse in the new forms: as a historical monument, ”open-air museum”, new urban symbol, ”memory site”, ”promising area for building development”, or even as a place for a ”new cultural revolution”.

How strong and sustainable are all these discourses? Are they capable to replace the previous symbolic meanings? Do they change and transform existing symbolic boundaries of the socialist cities’ space?

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The answers to these questions might help to understand the key issue: what kind of space "socialist city" actually represents today and how it is embedded in the existing post-Soviet spatial structures.

Research is based on the analysis of various materials: town-planning projects, city-building strategies, documents on urban development, national and local press, memories and notes by architects and ordinary workers, public debates on architectural issues in the periodicals and newspapers, catalogues of artistic projects and other.

"Socialist cities" are viewed as experimental areas of public housing which were constructed in the form of separated urban settlements near the huge industrial centers of the USSR in the late 1920s-early 1930s and embodied the concept of an ideal social living in the Soviet ideological framework.

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