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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ilchenko, M. (2018). "Socialist cities" under post-Soviet conditions: symbolic changes and new ways of representation. *Europa Regional*, 25.2017(2), 30-44. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-59091-8>

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“Socialist Cities” under post-Soviet Conditions: Symbolic Changes and New Ways of Representation

MIKHAIL ILCHENKO

Abstract

The construction of so-called “socialist cities” (*sotsgorods*), implemented in the USSR in the 1920 and 1930s, proved to become one of the most radical and large-scale urban experiments realized in the 20th century. That project was aimed at creating a completely new urban space which embodied a concept of an ideal social living and utopian dream of the “cities of the future”. The fall of socialism turned all “socialist cities” into “devastated” spaces which had lost their functional meaning, symbolic significance and any clear narratives.

This article tries to reveal how these “socialist cities” have been integrated into the current urban reality and symbolic contexts of the post-Soviet period. It seeks to explore whether spaces of the former “socialist cities” are able today to acquire any new symbolical meanings replacing previous ones and, if so, how these meanings are reproduced under current conditions.

The author focuses on the case of the Uralmash district in Yekaterinburg (Russia) which was established in the 1930s as exemplary socialist city and became one of the fast-growing urban settlements in the USSR. The paper analyses the symbolic representations of the Uralmash district in the post-Soviet period and, traces the shifts of major narratives which have outlined new symbolic boundaries of this urban area in the last decades. It is claimed that transformation and changes of “socialist cities” under post-Soviet conditions depend not only on the new urban city-planning initiatives, but also on the new symbols and meanings that give a clear vision of these spaces in current social and cultural contexts.

Post-Soviet urban area; “socialist city”; narrative, utopia; Uralmash; symbolic boundaries; urban space; representation practices

Zusammenfassung

„Sozialistische Städte“ unter postsowjetischen Bedingungen: Symbolische Verschiebungen und neue Darstellungsarten

Der Bau der sogenannten „sozialistischen Städte“ (*Sotsgorods*), der in der UdSSR in den 1920er und 1930er-Jahren vorangetrieben wurde, hat sich als eines der radikalsten und größten urbanen Experimente des 20. Jahrhunderts erwiesen. Dieses Projekt sollte einen komplett neuen urbanen Raum schaffen, der das Konzept eines idealen sozialen Lebensraums und eines utopischen Traums von der „Stadt der Zukunft“ verkörperte. Mit dem Fall des Sozialismus wurde aus allen „sozialistischen Städten“ eine Art „zerstörter“ Raum, der seine funktionelle Bedeutung, seine symbolische Relevanz und jegliches klares Narrativ verloren hatte.

Dieser Artikel versucht aufzuzeigen, wie „sozialistische Städte“ in die gegenwärtige urbane Realität und die symbolischen Kontexte der postsowjetischen Zeit eingebettet werden. Aus diesem Grund soll untersucht werden, ob die Räume der früheren „sozialistischen Städte“ heutzutage in der Lage sind, neue symbolische Bedeutung zu erlangen und dadurch die vorherige Bedeutung zu ersetzen und, wenn ja, wie diese Bedeutung unter den gegenwärtigen Bedingungen wiedergegeben werden kann.

Der Autor konzentriert sich auf das Beispiel des Uralmash-Bezirks in Jekaterinburg (Russland), das in den 1930er-Jahren als exemplarische sozialistische Stadt errichtet wurde und eine der am schnellsten wachsenden urbanen Siedlungen der UdSSR wurde. Die Arbeit untersucht symbolische Darstellungen des Uralmash-Bezirks der postsowjetischen Zeit und zeichnet dadurch die Verschiebungen bekannter Narrative nach, die in den letzten Jahrzehnten neue symbolische Grenzen dieses urbanen Raums definiert haben. Es wird geltend gemacht, dass die Transformation und Veränderung der „sozialistischen Städte“ unter postsowjetischen Bedingungen nicht nur von neuen Stadtplanungsinitiativen abhängig sind, sondern auch von den neuen Symbolen und Bedeutungen, die eine klare Vision dieser Räume im gegenwärtigen sozialen und kulturellen Kontext vermitteln könnten.

Postsowjetische urbane Räume; „sozialistische Stadt“; Narrativ; Utopie; symbolische Grenzen; städtischer Raum; Darstellungspraktiken

The establishment of urban modernist settlements in the 1920 and 1930s proved to become one of the largest and most powerful experiments in architecture and social engineering which were implemented over the past century (LE CORBUSIER 1970; CURTIS 1996; COHEN 2012; URBANIK 2016). Their development was aimed not only at the introduction of radically new urban planning principles but at the formation of the new social living standards and value systems in general. In fact, such new types of urban settlements as “Siedlungen” in Germany, company towns in Czechoslovak Republic or so-called “socialist cities” in the USSR represented full-fledged instruments of a modernizing policy which ensured the promotion of new values, social practices and modes of behaviour in various cultural and political contexts (SZCZERSKI 2010; ŠEVEČEK and JEMELKA 2013; HENDERSON 2013; COHEN 2012; FORGACS 1997). A contribution of these urban planning experiments to the formation of the new cultural identities and social symbols were, thus, no less important than their architectural innovations and technologies. Modernist urban settlements fostered a sense of belonging to the new cultural achievements and at the same time produced strong local identities based on the specific notions of space, principles of everyday life and social goals. In this regard, it is important to understand how these areas are adapted to current conditions not only in terms of urban spatial networks, but also in terms of symbolic structures: whether they still keep any special identity in the urban space and whether they are able to produce new symbolic meanings today.

The case of “socialist cities” seems to be especially illustrative here. Among all types of urban modernist settlements “socialist cities” proved to become one of the most radical experiments. Firstly, their development demonstrated the strongest ties with ideology ever experienced. “Socialist cities” were designed to embody the concept of an ideal social living of the Soviet time and, thus, their construction was initially highly dependent on symbolic representations and public discourses

(MILJUTIN 1930; VIKTOROV 1930; SSSR NA STROJKE 1932; ANDERSON and ROMBERG 2005; TIMOFEEV 2016). Secondly, the construction of “socialist cities” became one of the major urban planning campaigns in the first half of the 20th century that covered huge territory of the USSR and therefore shaped one of the essential parts of what is usually called today the Soviet urban heritage (VEREZUBOV 1930; O SOCIALISTICHESKIH GORODAH 1934; KOSENKOVA 2010; MEEROVICH et al. 2011; DE HAAN 2013).

Still now territories of the former “socialist cities” continue to remain a place of residence for millions of people and play a significant role in the spatial structure of the post-Soviet cities. Under new conditions most of “socialist cities” found themselves huge residential districts within the larger city areas, with new functions and location in the urban system.

Thus, this paper focuses not on the post-Soviet city as a whole but on its large and important part. It seeks to explore whether the areas of the former “socialist cities” are able to acquire today any new symbolical meanings replacing the previous ones and, if so, how these meanings can be reproduced under current conditions.

The Uralmash district near the Ural Heavy Machinery Plant in Yekaterinburg (formerly Sverdlovsk) gives a good example of how an urban area which was founded as a model “socialist city” in the early Soviet period then turned into a typical outskirts residential district of the huge megapolis with uncertain symbolic status and urban identity. In this sense, Uralmash district will be viewed as a unique architectural area facing challenges of integration into current urban dynamics and changing cultural context.

“Socialist city” in urban and social studies

Modernist urban districts which were originally designed and conceived as complicated social urban organisms are still mainly analyzed in a rather segmented way. They are either examined as mostly architectural phenomenon in a

conventional way of the history of urban planning and related approaches (see e.g. CURTIS 1996; URBANIK 2016; KOSENKOVA 2010; MEEROVICH et al. 2011; KONYSHEVA 2015) or they become an object of a cultural analysis with an accent on their aesthetic features and utopian implications in isolation from the current urban issues and spatial development (see e.g. HALL 2014, COLEMAN 2005; ERSHOV and SAVITSKIY 2008; BELOVA and SAVITSKAYA 2011).

The studies of “socialist cities”, in this sense, follow the same tendency and face similar methodological problems. It is important to emphasize that the very term “socialist city” has a dual use in the scientific literature. Its initial meaning comes from the debate over the socialist resettlement which was initiated in the USSR in the late 1920s and, thus, launched the very concept of “socialist city” or “sotsgorod” that described a new model of public housing areas based on the communal living practices (MILJUTIN 1930; SABSOVICH 1930; BARSHH et al. 1930; OSOCIALISTICHESKIH GORODAH 1934). Since then, in a strict sense the term “socialist city” usually refers to a special type of experimental residential communities which started to be built in the USSR in the interwar period (SOZGOROD 2008; TAFURI 1975; KOTKIN 1997; FLIERL 2012; MEEROVICH et al. 2011; KONYSHEVA and MEEROVICH 2012; KONYSHEVA 2015). At the same time, in the Western tradition the use of the term “socialist city” acquired a wider scope, going far beyond the time frame of the 1920s and 1930s, any geographical boundaries or concrete model of socialist settlement. In fact, it was generally used in relation to any special features of the urban structures which had been developed in the countries of the socialist world in general (FRENCH and HAMILTON 1979; BATER 1980; ANDRUSZ 1984; FRENCH 1987; SMITH 1996). The studies which were conducted within the “extended” interpretation of “socialist city” made a serious contribution to the investigation of the “sotsgorods” as well, but their main focus was put not so much on the unique features of these areas, but on the general tendencies in the socialist urban planning.

In this sense, this work follows the original meaning of the term “socialist city” which comes from the 1930s.

In general, “socialist cities” have a specific tradition of analysis established in the post-Soviet research practice. On the one hand, their experience is usually in a strong demand among the scholars engaged in the study of the early Soviet years with a particular emphasis on the issues related to the urban planning policy and living conditions of the newly-appeared settlements (see e.g. MEEROVICH et. al. 2011; MEEROVICH 2015, pp. 171–222; MALININA 2015; KOSENKOVA 2009). On the other hand, the problem of the development of “socialist cities” as a specific spatial urban organism remains little-explored and poorly understood. Most studies on “socialist cities” usually follow rather narrow theoretical frameworks, focused on such aspects as housing policy, daily life or architectural changes and, thus, generally miss the complete picture of their development as full-fledged urban mechanisms. Moreover, such studies are commonly concentrated on the period of the 1930s–1960s when “socialist cities” were founded and developed intensively, paying no or extremely little attention to the period of their transformation in the 1980s and 1990s, and especially to their current state. As a result, this leads to a situation where the space of the districts which has been seriously changed in the recent decades still continues to be considered through the lens of historical phenomenon which no longer exists. Huge residential areas with their specific dynamics and changing characteristics appear to be taken out of the current urban context and viewed either in the framework of the “socialist city” concept or out of any concept at all – just as a simple anonymous part of the larger urban organism.

Because of the lack of studies into the recent changes, it is especially important to trace how these areas have been changing not only in terms of territorial growth or institutional regulations but also in terms of the shifts in their symbols and narratives.

Symbolic representations of “socialist cities”: research data and way of analysis

The idea that representation of architectural objects or city areas could play a critical role for urban development was reflected in various forms by different authors, including theorists of architecture (LE CORBUSIER 1970; JENCKS and BAIRD 1969; TAFURI 1976) or social thinkers (JAMESON 1991; HARVEY 1992; BAUDRILLARD 2005; PROTO 2006). But research direction where this idea acquired real methodological justification is primarily presented by tradition which tends to analyze space in terms of “social product” (see e.g. LEFEBVRE 1991; SOJA 1996). If space is produced by social activities as well as by the ways of its perception which dominate in a public discourse in certain period (LEFEBVRE 1991), then representations of the space appear to be one of the constituent elements providing its development. In this sense, in order to understand how the space of the former socialist cities is represented in the public rhetoric of the post-Soviet period, this paper follows the Foucauldian tradition of discourse analysis aiming *a*) to reveal dominating ways of thinking on these urban spaces and meanings they reproduce (“discourses”); *b*) to define what coherent and sustainable modes of representation they shape (FOUCAULT 1972; FOUCAULT 1980; FOUCAULT 1981; TAMBOUKOU 2008; LIVHOLTS and TAMBOUKOU 2015).

Thus, the main data for the research consists of local press and media sources which represent the major discussions on architectural issues and debates around the city-building strategies and cultural heritage; presentation materials on various building projects and development strategies; conceptions and announcements of artistic projects and catalogues of the art exhibitions devoted to the Soviet architectural heritage – or, in brief, of all those sources which allow to examine and evaluate dominating ways of representing the spaces of “socialist cities” in a public discourse determined by the “expert community” (LEFEBVRE 1991).

One of the main tasks here is not only to explore and describe representation

practices of “socialist cities” but also try to view them in the interconnection with various social activities and urban changes. It must be stressed that symbolic representations and discourses exist only in close correlation with sociospatial practices and, therefore, demonstrate their mutual functional interdependence (FOUCAULT 1972; MELE 2000, pp. 629–634). In this sense, symbolic representations should be viewed as sort of regulative mechanisms capable to promote certain forms of social activities and contribute to formation of the new urban identities.

A close link between the “institutional” and “symbolical” has particular importance for understanding development of the modernist urban settlements founded in the early Soviet period. The ideas of social change not only took a new look at the urban space but they were directly involved in the very process of its institutional transformation (see e.g. PAPERNY 2002; DEHAAN 2013). In this regard, the tradition of “discursive” institutionalism gives a good opportunity to emphasize the functional role of symbolic meanings in the process of spatial and social changes (HAY 2006; SCHMIDT 2011; BLYTH 2011). In considering institutions as “codified systems of ideas and the practices they sustain” (HAY 2006, p. 58), this tradition aims to analyze “the interactive processes of discourse that serve to generate the ideas and communicate them to public” and, at the same time, – to explore “the institutional context in which and through which ideas are communicated” (SCHMIDT 2011, pp. 47–48). Such framework seems to be especially useful for analysing symbolic components in the development of the Soviet urban planning heritage, as it allows us either to trace the changes of its major narratives and discursive practices or to see how they can affect the development and perception of these areas in the longer term.

The Uralmash narrative as a symbol of the era: from “ideal city” to “urban outskirts”

The district of the Ural Heavy Machinery Plant experienced all the significant

phases of a Soviet urban settlement’s transformation: ideologically-fuelled founding of the city as a place of “new life” in the 1920–1930s, extension of the urban organism as a new growing residential district moving far beyond initial regulations in the late Soviet period and, finally, general decline with the loss of functional and symbolic meaning in the post-Soviet time. All this makes Uralmash an especially illustrative case to trace general symbolic changes which occurred with “socialist cities” in the last decades.

In Soviet times, Uralmash was perhaps an ideal object of mythological interpretation. It was a giant of heavy industrial engineering springing with record speed out of the forests and marshes; a “child of the first five-year plan” that stimulated the whole city and shaped the lives of several generations of Soviet citizens (see e.g. MAKAROV 1960). The narrative of Uralmash history had all the components required to construct an image of a model Soviet city: victory over nature, conquest of an “empty space”, unlimited boundaries of human will and mastery over time, building a civilization “without a past” and establishing new traditions (see e.g. MAKAROV 1958; MAKAROV 1960; UNPELEV 1960). On top of this, the “socialist city” of Uralmash offered an idealized image for every historical period. In the 1930s, it was a future space, a “new city of workers” growing up in the “in the giant ‘clearing’ of the primeval Ural forest” (SSSR NA STROJKE 1932, p. 23). (Fig. 1) After the war, it became a blooming garden city with “streets enveloped in greenery” (MAKAROV 1958, p. 128). From the 1960s to the 1980s it was an advanced, fast-growing urban settlement of the expanding “multi-storied” Sverdlovsk (BURANOV et al. 1973, p. 84).

During Soviet times, this historical narrative of the “socialist city” was orderly and coherent, shaped by the system of symbols that presented itself as all-embracing and exhaustive.

As a result, the collapse of the Soviet system meant for Uralmash more than the loss of its functional and ideological

role. The loss of former symbols meant the loss of language of description as such – essentially, an act of symbolic disappearance.

In this respect, the spaces of former “socialist cities” faced rather a peculiar situation. In the Soviet era, their position was ambivalent: on the one hand, they were seen as independent urban entities; on the other, they were linked territorially to large industrial centres. In post-Soviet times, this ambivalence made their position highly uncertain. After they had lost their former role, the “socialist city” identity became vague, and the vast spaces that used to serve as places of radical social and architectural experiments, turned into ordinary localities – typical “remote districts” on the outskirts of large urban agglomerations. However, their distinctive character was manifested in spatial logic, external shape and urban planning.

This distinction was particularly obvious at the symbolic level. The “socialist city” had no other history beyond Soviet history – therefore, it could not reach back to the pre-revolutionary past in search of new symbols and images. Its space itself looked hermetic and self-contained, hindering any effort to include

it into differing contexts of meaning. On top of that, in the general atmosphere of widespread rejection of the Soviet past, the “Soviet” had become a target of angry backlash – the kind that was faced, for example, by the central city squares saturated with Soviet symbols. The space of the “socialist city” had only been weakly associated with politics and ideology. In popular perception, this space was experienced as a space of everyday life, daily routine and a way of life whose loss was accompanied more by nostalgic longing than by sharp rejection or irony.

As a result, the space of the “socialist city” became devoid of any tools of representation – devoid of language that could be used to talk about this space. The “socialist city” was either a territory of habitual projection of historical meanings, or it simply became “invisible”.

In the 1990s, Uralmash became a typical new outskirts of the post-Soviet city. Its former glory, its urban-shaping significance, and its status of an advanced district had all receded into the past, while the past itself was too short to stimulate production of any new symbols that could compensate, even if temporarily, for the loss of the previous ones. With the decline



Fig. 1: Panoramic view of the Uralmash “Socialist City”. 1930s.

Source: Photograph from the Archive of the Museum of the History of Uralmash Plant in Yekaterinburg

of industry, the binding role of the plant that had served as a symbolic center of the “socialist city” disappeared as well, while the development of transportation networks and the construction of a metro destroyed its characteristic insularity. The blurring of the “socialist city” identity became a natural consequence of general structural, economic and social change.

At the same time, unlike many other Soviet landmark spaces, Uralmash did not experience any noticeable ideological inversion or “reversal” of meanings: its symbols were too neutral and too mundane to serve as objects of the express rejection of the Soviet past. The resulting vacuum of meaning was, to some extent, filled by the image of Uralmash as a highly criminalized and depressed district of the 1990s. However, in this narrative both the city and its architecture were not only turned into a background – they became an invisible part of daily life. That is, they simply ceased to be objects of attention.

Discourse of “heritage” as a new way to look at “socialist city”

It is particularly telling that it was architecture that gradually facilitated the emergence of a radically new perception of the “socialist city” in the mid-1990s. Growing interest to individual buildings and to whole urban areas of the Soviet era marked the start of one of the most significant tendencies which finally determined serious changes in symbolic attitude towards the “socialist cities”. For that reason, this process deserves a special research focus.

Generally, all the expert talks, public discussions and statements by rare foreign tourists visiting Uralmash in the 1990s had been repeating, with increasing frequency and clarity, one key idea: that many buildings of this district possessed a unique aesthetic and historical value, while the “socialist city” itself was nothing less than “one of the major monuments of urban architecture in the country” (STARIKOV et al. 1998, p. 222). It should be emphasized that this knowledge was never a secret for a narrow circle of experts. But for the population at large it became a true revelation. Suddenly,

it turned out that those grey and insignificant looking buildings that shaped the look of the not particularly well-to-do district of an industrial city possessed an undeniable architectural value, that they claimed to become an official part of historical heritage, on par with medieval churches and classicist architectural ensembles, and, on top of this, that they stood a good chance of becoming a part of a “global cultural context”. In popular perception, this resulted in the clash of two seemingly completely incompatible realities: one – mundane, routine and insignificant, the other – universally important, valuable, belonging to the historical heritage.

This effect was particularly amplified in the discourse of the “socialist city” of Uralmash as part of global artistic trends. For example, in the early 2000s, the initiative launched by German experts brought to life the collaborative Russian-German project “Bauhaus in Ural” (Bauhaus na Urale), with the goal of finding the traces of works that the graduates of this famous school had produced for the Ural industrial construction projects of the 1930s (see e.g. BAUHAUS NA URAL 2008; TOKMENINOVA 2010). In Uralmash, this project was mainly associated with the name of Béla Scheffler, a German architect who participated in the construction of the “socialist city”. After the exhaustive archival research, it was discovered that Scheffler was not only invited to work for the Uralmash project department in 1932 – he had also contributed to the construction of almost all the landmark buildings of the “socialist city”, played an active role in the interior decoration decisions, and was involved in discussing all significant urban development issues. Later his real impact, as well as the degree to which he had contributed to the design of the “socialist city”, became a matter of disagreement between architects. However, all these questions were completely overshadowed by the main fact: the evidence that the Bauhaus brand was symbolically tied to the “socialist city” of Uralmash. In the early 2000s, simply being made aware of this connection was enough to produce a powerful emotional impact. “A Bauhaus architect working here in our

Uralmash?”, “Did a graduate of this famous school really work in Uralmash?!...” – these are the typical reactions of the residents in response to the newly discovered historical evidence (see e.g. RASTORGUEV 2011, p. 206; DZHAPAKOV 2002).

This amazement and surprise were extremely important. They helped to wrench and liberate the space of the “socialist city” from its habitual perceptive context. The whole district that used to invoke associations only with the “Soviet” and the “industrial”, and later claimed the title of one of the most criminalized localities in Russia (see e.g. KOMMERSANT-URAL 2014), unfolded before the wider audience in a completely new light. Familiar buildings that used to be nothing more than a background of ordinary urban existence were now presented to the public as examples of a unique aesthetic possessing undeniable historical and artistic value. Half-desolate marginal space was becoming a “constructivist preserve”.

Among the general wave of rejection and renunciation of everything Soviet, the “socialist city” space suddenly became a globally important “heritage” (KIAER 2005, pp. 264–265). This change of language and perceptive angle is well captured by the text of the 1999 brochure published to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Pyotr Oransky, the main ideologue behind the construction of Uralmash. Describing the architect’s achievements and emphasizing the visionary nature of his ideas, the author of this article noted, almost in an exculpatory tone: “Of course, these buildings reflected certain stylistic trends in the development of Soviet architecture, and their construction was a part of the realization of the socialist state’s social programs” (TOKMENINOVA 1999, p. 4). However, immediately after this, the author added: “But they managed to create a unique architectural image of an industrial city, with a cosy and functionally comfortable microclimate resonating emotionally with its residents” (TOKMENINOVA 1999, p. 4).

The “heritage” discourse provided the first means to talk publicly about the Uralmash city space out of any ideological and

political context. The new rhetoric was soon accepted by the post-Soviet society: city-building experiments and avant-garde constructions were turned into “monuments”, “cultural heritage” and “protected objects”. They now became not only “historical examples of style”, but a part of “global heritage”. Numerous experimental urban areas of the early Soviet era were described in detail, catalogued, and included in various protection lists and registers (see e.g. ZVAGEL'SKAJA 2007; STARIKOV et al. 1998; TOKMENINOVA 1999; ELAGIN 1999).

Yekaterinburg saw the first non-socialist publications on the architecture of the “socialist city” of Uralmash; its buildings were more and more often featured in photobooks and on postcards; the public sphere exploded with discussions of projects like Uralmash as “open-air museums” and “constructivist Meccas”; even the expression “avant-garde heritage” gradually became one of the city’s brands – in large part, thanks to the former “socialist city” district (see e.g. URALMASH 2016; STARIKOV et al. 1998; BAUHAUS NA URAL 2008; KROPOTOV 2014). All of this meant that the Russian regional society had been somewhat belatedly accepting the main approaches to avant-garde city-building heritage established in the West (BALLESTER 1994, pp. 6–9).

It is hard to overestimate the importance of the “heritage” discourse in the popularization and symbolic renewal of the Soviet urban districts built in the 1920s and 1930s. Ultimately, this discourse opened these areas for the general public and made them a subject of increasing attention in terms of the new cultural, artistic and economic initiatives. However, on closer inspection, the potential of this discourse is quite limited. It is built on a very simple logic: if an object possesses a cultural / historical / artistic, or some other value, then this value has to be proved and confirmed by giving this object an appropriate status. In other words, to become a part of “heritage”, an object has to be singled out and excluded, as it were, from the range of ordinary objects. And, most importantly, it has to be officially recognized. In this respect, all “socialist

cities” are potential “monuments” – the only question being what this status is and whether it is possible to prove it.

Of course, the proof itself cannot have an exclusively formal character – to recognize an object as “heritage”, it has to be conceptualized within the broader cultural context and evaluated through the lens of historical experience, politics of memory, ideological value etc. (LEHNE 1994, pp. 11–16). But this does not change the main logic that is particularly evident in the policy of “museumification” of the past, a “tagging” process of sorts, ranking buildings and urban areas according to how well they fit a concrete style, or an author, or an era – and, as a result, transforming such buildings into “monuments” and “artefacts”. It is hardly a coincidence that the discussions of the Uralmash heritage popularized such rhetorical figures as “open-air museum”, “city-monument”, “collection of constructivist monuments”, “avant-garde preserve” etc.

However, it became obvious very quickly that, by declaring Soviet architectural areas “museums” and adding new items to “protected buildings” listings; we do not solve the problem but, rather, take only a first step towards defining it. It is obvious that, in the context of an urban district with several hundred thousand residents, where avant-garde buildings determined the very fabric of its architecture and the look of all major streets, this space required new interpretations and new approaches.

“Future that never happened”: Uralmash as a space of utopia

The heritage discourse opened up “socialist cities” to a wide audience and gave a new impetus to the study of the Soviet urban areas in general. But at the same time this discourse had inherent limitation: it suggested too narrow frames for their interpretation. The discussions on unique style, unusual aesthetics, bold urban planning decisions, names of forgotten architects: all of this was new; it captivated and intrigued. However, all of this not only did not exhaust the debates, but, on the contrary, alluded to something larger, some

source of deeper meanings hidden behind the individual building, and architectural ensembles, and entire districts. Something that could not be captured by the available language of description.

Following the rise of public interest in the Soviet city-planning heritage, 1920s–1930s architectural ensembles have been targeted more and more frequently by projects focusing not so much on their stylistic, aesthetic or architectural features, but on the era that they symbolize. Thorough the photographs shown at the numerous exhibitions, through the images of art installations and TV broadcasts, avant-garde urban areas gradually reveal an entire historical epoch, with its hopes, expectations and the feeling of breakneck changes. In the geometrical shapes of buildings and ascetic lines of dilapidated facades, artists, designers, historians and journalists strive to see the contours of the past, to experience its spirit and atmosphere. “Socialist cities” become windows into the past, allowing one to capture the zeitgeist of that era when the “new world” was under construction. It does not really matter that this world had ultimately never materialized, and that this era had ended suddenly, after barely beginning. On the contrary, this exudes a particular kind of charm: to talk about the future that never came.

Thus, gradually, the discourse of “unrealized utopia” has emerged, offering an alternative way to talk about the “socialist city” space. And Uralmash fit this discourse almost perfectly.

In 2006, Uralmash, together with two constructivist districts of Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, became a venue of the “Walks for Art” (Progulki za iskusstvom) project¹. Its backyards and quiet streets were filled with artists, art historians and curators – all of them seeking to find new meanings and images in the empty space of the “vanished Soviet civilization”. This is reflected directly in the statement of the project’s goal: “to discover artistic tradition within the

¹ The project was organized in September 2006 by PRO ARTE Institute and Ekaterinburg Branch of the National Center for Contemporary Art.

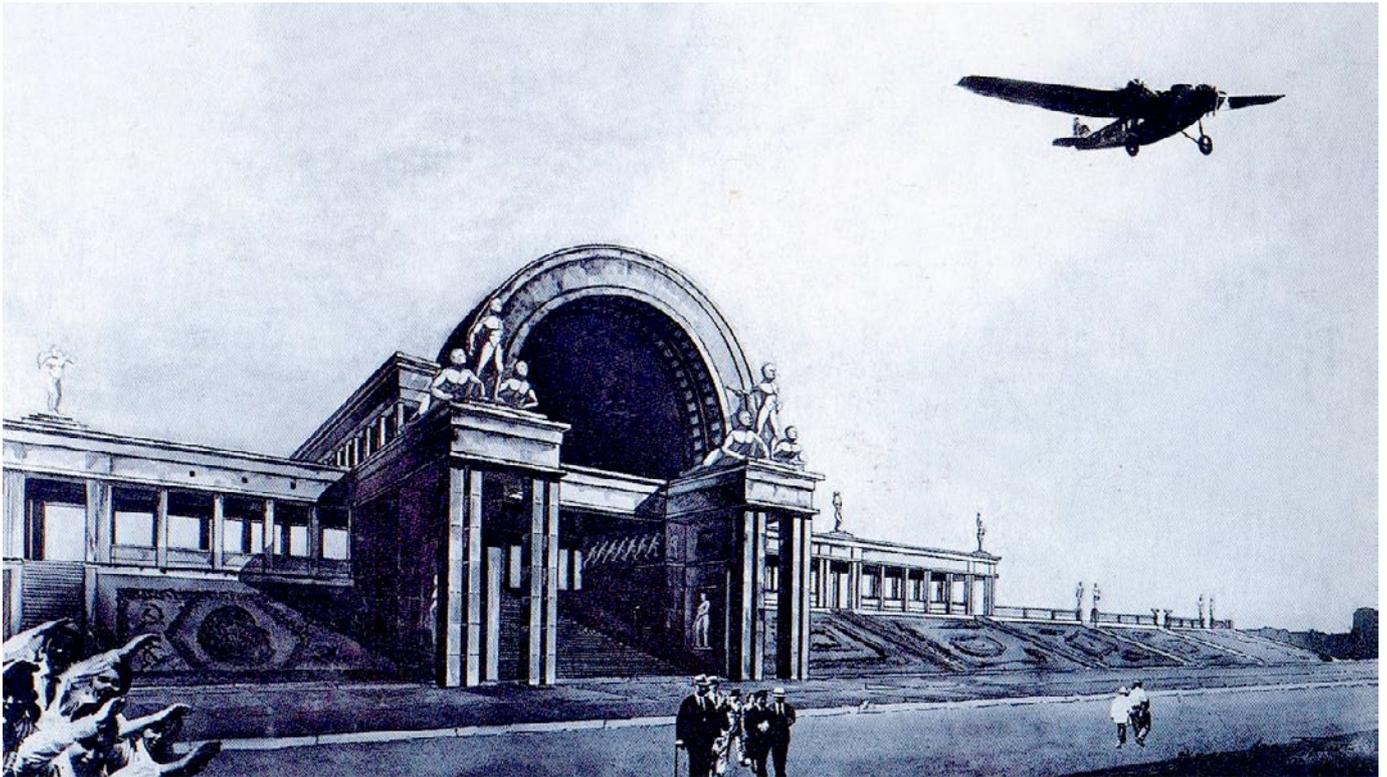


Fig. 2: Unrealized project of the “Avant-Garde” stadium in the Uralmash “Socialist City”, designed by P.V. Oranskij, V.V. Bezrukov
Source: Archive of the Museum of the History of Uralmash Plant in Yekaterinburg

Soviet experience” (ERSHOV and SAVITSKIY 2008). The Uralmash plant appears to the project’s participants as “fragments, ruins, remnants of the once hyper-intensive life; of the Soviet civilization that vanished into the past”; these ruins still preserve a “superhuman drive, power, a take-off into the future that never came” (ibid., p. 75). And the “socialist city” itself becomes a “ruin, desolate outskirts, backwater”; a place where the Soviet past is experienced in a different way, as something “that harbours the energy of the future” (ibid., p. 77).

A “utopian” discourse completely changed the optics we used to approach the “socialist city”. Uralmash becomes not only a unique cluster of buildings – it is an era that these buildings symbolize and refer to. This helps us to discern, behind the numerous constructivist ensembles, not only the “bold experiments in urban planning” but the outlines of a genuine “dream city” – a large-scale utopian project whose shape even today can be easily distinguished within the urban space (Fig. 2). In this

interpretation, avant-garde development areas fascinate us not so much by their aesthetics and their unusual shapes, but by their signs of belonging to a certain era – by symbols and marks of time. Because of this, the object of study becomes the source of inspiration: Soviet urban districts turn into spaces not only of “archaeological” research, but, simultaneously, of fantasy and flight of imagination accompanied by overtones of distinctive romantic feelings.

A good example of this approach, among others, can be found in another Uralmash-centred artistic project, “Communal Avant-Garde” (*Kommunal’nyi avangard*)². Within this project, the “socialist city” is again turned into a space for walks, creative explorations and contemplations. However, the project organizers went even further in their artistic

² The project “Communal Avant-Garde” (*Kommunal’nyi avangard*) was organized by Volga and Ural Branches of the National Center for Contemporary Art. The project took the shape of an exhibition showed at the 1st Ural Biennial of Contemporary Art in Ekaterinburg (September 10–30, 2010) and in Nizhny Novgorod’s Arsenal (November 9, 2011–January 10, 2012). A catalogue/guide book was also produced (Nizhny Novgorod 2011).

and emotional momentum. In the preface to the guidebook of the “socialist city”, printed as part of the project catalogue, we can find: “Today Uralmash is a fascinating ruin where the traces of the real and the utopian are difficult to discern. This article strives to help you locate the main objects of *sotsgorod* [...] but you, dear reader, will have to follow one basic rule: add the word ‘probably’ to every one of our recommendations. For example, on the right-hand side you will [probably] see this, or you would [probably] like to turn to that alley. Probably, you are going to explore the space that doesn’t exist, but whose shadows and echoes you will probably manage to find” (BELOVA and SAVITSKAYA 2011, p. 35). Here Uralmash is not a space to be seen, but the space to be created, a place constructed through imagination. “The remnants of Soviet civilization”, taking a form of decrepit buildings, become less the objects of archaeological study than the cause for meditating on the “future that never came”. Each building is seen as a sign and a symbol. Therefore,



Fig. 3: Neglected fountain in the old quarter known as “Noble Nest” situated in the historical part of the Uralmash district (Mikhail Ilchenko 2016)

the descriptions of “ruins and remnants” reveal a secret pleasure provided by such imagery, rather than an anxious desire for preservation or a question of the building’s uniqueness (Fig. 3).

“Utopian” discourse was inspired by artistic explorations – therefore, it very effectively filled in the holes and empty spaces left by the “heritage” discourse in the ways to interpret and experience “socialist cities”. The new discourse has expanded the borders of the subject itself, replacing “monument” and “protected object” with the focus on the bygone era, with its zeitgeist and atmosphere. This discourse also offered new interpretative possibilities, making artistic images as valuable, as the search for new historical evidence. But, probably most importantly, the “utopian” reading brought a new sentimental note into the discussions of the early Soviet architectural areas. “Socialist cities” became the objects of experience – as well as the Soviet past looming behind them.

In this situation, many areas and buildings of “socialist cities” that once stayed under the radar, even after being given the status of “monuments”, were appreciated anew. Communal-style residential ensembles used to attract attention by the urban stories and tales about the “first elevators”, “two-tier apartments” and “remarkably well-lit spaces”. Now

these stories have acquired a coherent narrative, mythology and additional emotional force. Tour guides and guidebooks have discovered a new topic for their stories and descriptions: the “possible”, the “might-have-been”, and the “unfulfilled”. It is one thing to talk about visually unattractive grey two-storey “boxes” using stock textbook phrases about the new revolutionary type of residential space. It is a different story entirely to picture this building as part of a huge unfulfilled vision, an unrealized dream of its era.

This discourse has largely helped to create an image of Uralmash that is today again attracting interest and is being discussed vigorously by the public, intellectuals and urbanists. Through this approach, the district’s space has been imbued with entirely new meanings: all components of its historical building development have come to be seen as parts of a gigantic project – a project unfulfilled, uncompleted, but even more attractive because of this. It has brought to the forefront the objects that used to hold only a peripheral interest, even for specialists. Every decrepit dilapidated building was presented as a part of city-planning urban project; every clump of trees – as a piece of “green utopia”; while neglected backyard spaces came to be seen as components of a giant system of social communications. In the process of

this construction of meaning, Uralmash district re-acquired its coherence and symbolic boundaries, and its viewers developed a particular optics for seeing it. An act of walking across the industrial socialist city, instead of being seen as an ordinary tour around the “monument of urban architecture”, became “time travel”, where every ruin and each dilapidated building hid the traces of the bygone era.

A singular metaphor of this approach to Soviet architectural space can be found in a small detail of the recent exhibition “Uralmash: Backyard Entrance” (Uralmash: vkhod so dvora) shown in the Museum of the History of Yekaterinburg³. This exhibition project, which generally had a very traditional structure, featuring archival photographs and memoir excerpts, concluded with a very unexpected piece. The project organizers decided to highlight the situation with deteriorating Uralmash architectural monuments, gradually “vanishing” one by one. They did it using the example of the “Temp” building – a former cinema and one of the most interesting and unusual buildings in the district. For this purpose, the glass show-case featured pieces of broken bricks of one of the building’s wall, as well as parts of the peeled-off plasterwork. If these pieces were just lying on the street, they would hardly have attracted attention among the numerous Uralmash ruins. Being showcased as a museum exhibit, however, the fragments of the still-existing building barely 80–85 years old produced a very strong emotional impact. The glass that separated visitors from the bricks symbolized distance and closeness at once: it exhibited a recent past that has not yet gone, but, being put in the showcase, has become distanced from the viewer. This introduced a new emotion into the recognition of the exhibited object’s value, creating the perceptive angle that, in the end, found its voice in the discourse of “unrealized utopia”.

³ “Uralmash: Backyard Entrance” (Uralmash: vkhod so dvora) exhibition took place in the Museum of the History of Yekaterinburg in June 28–December 2, 2016.

Uralmash as a territory for “cultural industries”: opportunities and challenges of the new rhetoric

An emphasis on “cultural” aspects in regard to the prospects of work with the Soviet urban heritage seems perfectly natural: it logically follows the major trends of “creativity” and introduction of “creative industries” into the urban space (see e.g. FLORIDA 2005; LANDRY 2008; PONZINI and ROSSI 2010; COMUNIAN 2011; EDWARDS and IMRIE 2015, pp. 149–176). But for “socialist cities” this “cultural” rhetoric has a particular meaning.

It may seem that these two approaches – the “heritage” discourse and the “unrealized utopia” discourse – are based on totally different assumptions, follow different logic and perceive reality in mutually incompatible ways. But, surprisingly, they are very similar in one key aspect: they cannot contemplate the *present* of the “socialist city”. For the “heritage” rhetoric, all areas of “socialist cities” are potential monuments – therefore, they seem to belong to a timeless space that exist in something like a parallel reality, with zero connections to the routine course of life. The “utopia” discourse imagines the “socialist city” as an abstract future that will never come, associating it with a hope that will never become a reality. Taking this into account, the next logical question would be: how are we going to make the “socialist cities” a part of the actualities of today, if even our language of description has already separated these areas from reality?

This issue is particularly important for Uralmash – a district with many thousands of residents covering a territory huge even by the standards of a million-plus city. When a building, or even a block of buildings, becomes a “heritage” or an “area of artistic experiment”, these approaches may indeed provide efficient ways for a long-term treatment of such objects. However, if we apply similar logic to the building development that determines the look, the structure and the spatial logic of an entire district, the limits of such interpretations become blindingly obvious. Surely, if the historical

architectural area forms an organic living urban environment, it should be treated as existing within the actual context of the present.

It is only in recent years that we have seen some parts of the old Uralmash space find new roles that resulted in the emergence of new images. Such cases are few; they are all different, determined by different circumstances and hardly provide grounds to generalize them into a trend. However, in showing different spatial approaches, they nevertheless display many common traits and, while not fully bringing to life certain patterns, allude to them.

The first persistent demands to create a “new life” for a Uralmash historical building were applied to the famous White Tower: a landmark building, probably the most famous one in the entire district, and the district’s main architectural symbol (Fig. 4). Discussions on the conversion possibilities for the former water tower started as early as the late 1960s, immediately after the tower had ceased to serve its original function. These discussions were largely initiated by the tower’s architect himself, Moisey REISHER (see REISHER 1977). After this, the White Tower became an object of projection of architectural ideas and fantasies – which, in due course, raised its symbolic status even further: numerous projects imagined the tower either as a restaurant, a theatre, or as a radio station. Becoming from time to time an object of artistic dreams and a place of guided tours, the building meanwhile remained completely abandoned, until a new wave of discussions about conversion emerged a few years ago. The eventually approved project of the tower’s “metamorphosis” was developed by the “Podelniki” group of young architects. The project envisioned the tower converted into a museum space. After opening in August 2016 in its new role, White Tower immediately became a kind of city venue, featuring numerous cultural events: performances, festivals and lectures. However, the main result of this campaign is probably not so much White Tower’s external transformation,

as the attempt to conceive it outside the limits of “conservation” and “heritage preservation”. Characteristically, the project’s official presentation listed among its main goals not only restoring the tower but “giving it a new role and meaning” (see BELAJA BASHNJA 2015).

Another remarkable site of Uralmash that has been transformed substantially in recent years is one of the most interesting and unusual constructivist buildings in the district, its old Palace of Culture (see e.g. KROPOTOV 2014). It was initially designed as a communal kitchen, later acquired a new shopping extension, and essentially became an entire architectural complex. Béla Scheffler was directly involved in designing some of its parts, and this contributed to the interest taken in the building by some foreign experts, who were the first to initiate the discussion about the possibilities for its reconstruction (during the “Bauhaus in Ural” project). Throughout its history, the building had already undergone several renovations and suffered a fire; at the same time, its legal status as an architectural monument remained uncertain for a long time. The complex was officially listed in the registry of cultural heritage objects in 2014; simultaneously, one of its wings became a home for an educational institution – the Ekaterinburg Academy of Contemporary Art (see e.g. KROPOTOV 2014). This move accomplished two tasks: the young academy received a new space, while the building and the district acquired a new centre of activity and point of meaning. At the same time, an educational institution moving into the former Palace of Culture served as an act of symbolic historical continuity: the building resumed its cultural and educational role, according to its initial purpose.

Finally, another significant transformation of the “socialist city” targeted not an individual building or a complex, but an entire public space: the area of the Boulevard of Culture (*bul’var Kul’tury*) located at the heart of the historical Uralmash district. Within the “Boulevard 33” project, an action group of the local cultural centre based at the “old Palace



Fig. 4: Water tower of UZTM (“White Tower”), architect M.V. Reisher, 1929 (Mikhail Ilichenko 2013)

of Culture” building and supported by district officials, decided to give this territory “a new life and a new momentum” (see Interview with V. BELOUS 2016) by making it a place of social, cultural and creative activity – that is, they decided to essentially turn this area into an urban public space (Fig. 5). Virtually within one year, the Boulevard became a venue for several large-scale public events, musical festivals, fairs and city festivals among them. As a result, a space that once carried considerable public significance in Soviet times and afterwards was left almost “lifeless” throughout the past twenty

years, acquired new practices of use and symbolic meanings.

If to sum up, the word “culture” is arguably that linking element which holds together all these emergent examples of “socialist city” appropriation. Each of these cases focuses on “cultural functions”, “cultural activities” or a special “cultural importance” for the district’s development. And for each of these cases “cultural” rhetoric plays a role of an instrument which allows to introduce this heritage into the present and to put it into the current context, filling it with relevant meanings. “Culture” here appears to be

synonymous with the present, whereas the “cultural” discourse becomes a way to imagine the former area of Sotsgorod as existing “here and now”; to mark it as a part of a living urban environment.

Unsurprisingly, in recent years numerous public discussions focusing on restoration and revitalization of the Uralmash “socialist city” historical district have increasingly often interpreted its territory as a “new cultural space”: sometimes a space of “new historical initiatives”, sometimes a place of “cultural experiment” – or even of a “cultural revolution” (MOSKVIN 2016). The image of Uralmash – renewed and dynamic, and a part of contemporary urban patterns – is inevitably conceived, phrased and represented through the categories of “cultural development”, “cultural potential” and “cultural space”.

All of this could have been described as yet another variation on a theme of “ideal future” and “new utopia” – if the “cultural” discourse were not appropriated and reproduced by official public rhetoric. The talk about establishing a new “cultural cluster” and efficiently employing a unique “cultural resource” have rather quickly penetrated and become entrenched in presentations, concepts and documents discussed by local officials, development companies and the business community. Moreover, many development problems faced by the district – such as the preservation of a number of architectural monuments, the use of public spaces, and the reclamation of green areas – were publicly articulated for the first time through such forms of presentation. By raising the discussions of the future of the Uralmash historical district to the level of general urban development, “cultural” rhetoric has essentially become the first way to engage among public activists, officials and business in a meaningful dialogue about the fate of the “socialist city’s” territory. By appealing to the “cultural practices” and “creative industries”, city public and intellectuals managed to more clearly enunciate their projects and visions for the historical urban area and avant-garde heritage, while the authorities became open to their ideas precisely



Fig. 5: Square in front of an “Old” Palace of Culture of Uralmash (Complex of the Communal Kitchen and Trade Corpsus) during the Beatles Festival in August 2016 (Mikhail Ilchenko)

because they were expressed in this manner and this language.

In this respect, the limitations of “cultural” discourse were already inherent in its advantages. After being reproduced at the level of official rhetoric, it became overly meek and accommodating, prone to excessive replicating and at risk of turning vivid language capturing fresh ways of looking at the “socialist city” into dry clichéd phrases which gradually lose any actual meaningful content. “Creative industry” rhetoric in regard to Uralmash was increasingly used just to emphasize the correspondence of local initiatives to the modern trends, when all “creative” and “cultural” was associated with the “most progressive” and “most modern” but, in fact, meant no more than a new “symbolic wrapper” for already existing urban planning strategies in a way typical for neoliberal political discourse (PECK 2005; PECK 2009; SCOTT 2006; KRÄTKE 2011).

For example, over the past year, just about every cultural institution in Yekaterinburg has managed to come up with events and exhibition projects connected

to the development of Uralmash district. The majority suddenly presented Uralmash as a unique venue for “cultural experiments” and the focal point of “cultural resources”. It has become fashionable to talk about the district’s new “cultural image”. This trend is capable so far of producing new ideas – but, at the same time, it could seriously devalue the meaning and significance of many ideas that came before.

It is quite probable that the “cultural” interpretation will become only a transitional way of talking about the “socialist city”, serving only to delineate a future space for discussions. However, right now and within the present context, “cultural” rhetoric can discern in the “socialist city’s” space something that no other rhetoric could. It can discover the previously concealed or non-evident meanings of its architecture, urban development, spatial structure and general symbols. With the change of context – social, architectural, economic and intellectual – this space will most likely require new meanings and interpretations; or, maybe, it will

turn to the existing ones, resurrecting the past symbols (Fig. 6).

Conclusion: “socialist city” in search of new symbols and languages

The shifts in the language used to describe architecture and historic urban areas are perfectly natural: it is as important for their development and embeddedness in the current patterns of life, as their physical renovation or change of the environment. Such districts require new languages and symbols in order to be included in the ongoing urban processes and current social dynamics. Under the present conditions the ways of speaking about the Soviet urban heritage seem to be no less important than the practical mechanisms of its implementation. And it is quite likely that just this new symbolical view will provide a basis for the development of a coherent urban planning strategy and, probably, will help to shape a new attitude towards these spaces in the current social, economic and cultural context.

For the “socialist cities”, this is crucially important. Indeed, both their origins and



Fig. 6: Panoramic view of the First Five-Year Plan Square, Uralmash 2018 (Mikhail Ilchenko)

gradual anchoring within the public space had been largely shaped by their symbolic representation. It can be even said that “socialist cities” acquired their position of “exemplary cities of a new era” not with the beginning of their construction, but with the appearance of their discourses. In the early 1930s, Uralmash, like many other “socialist cities”, was a giant construction site drowning in mud and barely fit for human habitation. In fact, there was no “socialist city” at all – only an idea and an aspiration. But Uralmash “socialist city” had already existed on magazine pages and in newspaper articles lauding the achievements of Soviet urban development – there, it was already functioning, developing, and becoming the subject of discussions and the model to emulate (see e.g. SSSR NA STROJKE 1931, pp. 10–11; SSSR NA STROJKE 1932).

The Soviet urban planning and architecture were phenomena of words and symbols as much as they were of new construction technologies and city building ideas. Rhetoric and context of meaning were their natural conditions of existence in the 1920s and 1930s – and they continue to shape these conditions today.

Therefore, symbolic approaches to the Soviet urban planning heritage remain an important part of the efforts to preserve it and ensure that it functions effectively – and such approaches demand both close attention and thorough reflection and analysis.

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Резюме

МИХАИЛ ИЛЬЧЕНКО

«Социалистические города» в постсоветских условиях: символические трансформации и способы репрезентации

В статье рассматриваются символические трансформации пространства «социалистических городов» в постсоветский период. Утверждается, что распад советской системы привёл не просто к потере функционального и идеологического значения этого пространства, но фактически означал для него потерю языка описания как такового. В представленном материале предпринимается попытка выяснить, какое именно пространство репрезентируется сегодня понятием «социалистического города», каковы его границы, и какие изменения эти границы претерпевают в современных условиях.

Опираясь на пример Уралмаша как одного из образцовых социалистических городов своей эпохи, автор прослеживает логику формирования и изменения основных нарративов, определяющих новые символические границы этой территории в последние два десятилетия. Автор полагает, что в современных условиях характер трансформации бывших социалистических городов определяется не столько градостроительными инициативами, сколько постепенным утверждением новых символов и значений, которые в состоянии формировать новые ракурсы восприятия этого пространства в текущем социальном, культурном и экономическом контексте.

Постсоветские городские районы; «социалистический город»; нарратив; утопия; Уралмаш; символические границы; городское пространство; практики репрезентации

Résumé

MIKHAIL ILCHENKO

«Villes socialistes» dans les conditions post-soviétiques: changements symboliques et nouveaux modes de représentation

La construction de «villes socialistes» (sotsgorods), mise en œuvre en URSS dans les années 1920 et 1930, s'est avérée être l'une des expériences urbaines à grande échelle les plus radicales réalisées au 20^e siècle. Ce projet avait pour but de créer un espace urbain entièrement nouveau concrétisant le concept d'une vie sociale idéale et du rêve utopique des «villes du futur». La chute du socialisme a vu des «villes socialistes» se présentant comme une sorte d'espaces «dévastés», qui avaient perdu leur signification fonctionnelle, leur importance symbolique et la clarté de leurs récits.

Cet article tente de montrer comment les «villes socialistes» sont intégrées à la réalité urbaine actuelle et aux contextes symboliques de la période post-soviétique. C'est la raison pour laquelle, il cherche à voir si les espaces des anciennes «villes socialistes» sont à même de prendre aujourd'hui de nouvelles significations symboliques en remplacement des précédentes et, dans l'affirmative, comment ces significations peuvent être reproduites dans les conditions actuelles.

L'auteur se concentre sur le cas du District Ouralmash d'Eka-terinbourg (Russie), qui fut créé dans les années 1930 à titre de ville socialiste exemplaire et devint l'une des implantations urbaines à croissance rapide de l'URSS. Cet article analyse les représentations symboliques du District Ouralmash au cours de la période post-soviétique et retrace ainsi les décalages des grands récits qui ont mis en évidence les nouvelles limites symboliques de cette zone urbaine au cours des dernières décennies. On prétend que la transformation et les changements des «villes socialistes», dans des conditions post-soviétiques, dépendent non seulement des nouvelles initiatives de planification de villes urbaines, mais encore des nouveaux symboles et significations qui pourraient apporter une vision claire de ces espaces dans les contextes sociaux et culturels actuels.

Zone urbaine post-soviétique; «ville socialiste»; récit; utopie; Ouralmash; limites symboliques; espace urbain; pratiques de représentation