

**Lagodina E. V.**

## The Present and the Future of Russian Public Places

*The article deals with the main problems of Russian cities, a place of public spaces in the fabric of the modern city. The present state of public places and the present-day problems concerning both local specificity and global trends are analyzed. The author makes an attempt to reveal characteristics of a successful and attended public place and to define necessary factors for achievement of this effect and a group of persons concerned.*

**Key words:** city space, public space, public place, city planning, cultural development, marketing of places.

The theme of planning and administration of cities becomes more and more urgent and discussed today. A growing number of problems, being aggravated every year, conspicuously indicate the necessity of elaboration of a new approach to the organization of the city space. Russian cities pine with the same difficulties:

- lack of the complex development of territories;
- domination of a new “architecture” (minimalist modern buildings of shopping centers, business centers, highrise buildings);
- problems with the organization of transport streams;
- depressivity, criminological character of dormitory suburb;
- lack of expressive, remarkable elements of design of the urban environment.

Except problems of the infrastructure character, many researchers note visual colourlessness of Russian cities that is in many respects connected with their Soviet past. The majority of Russian cities appeared during the Soviet period. The intensive urbanization of the USSR generated tens, hundreds identical settlements built by a single pattern. The cities having the authentic historical center underwent serious changes too. During existence of the USSR they increased the sizes at the expense of new residential quarters, endured re-planning. Panel high-rise buildings became one of recognizable symbols of the Soviet era. Starting from the fifties there was a mass housing construction, thanks to which we have the appearance of our cities. Progressive for the time, these houses appeared to solve a problem of settling families; now they look unimpressively and sadly, towering above dormitory suburbs row upon row. The idea of functional zoning propagandized by town-planners of that time, seemed incredibly logical: differentiation of working, recreational and dwelling zones. This principle is still used, despite an obvious imbalance which it brings in the urban environment. The downtown is overloaded because of high concentration of cultural, tourist, public and commercial objects, and, on



the contrary, dormitory suburbs choke with shortage of variety. Besides a solid remoteness of a place of residence from a work place, in conditions of growing automobilization, provokes daily traffic jams. The process of movement to the city from the silent housing estate becomes a real ordeal. City planning of the Soviet period was directive and leveling, however it was characterized by the integrated approach to the territory which now, unfortunately, is not present. Actually today the shape of the modern Russian city is defined by the large developers realizing point building, not interested in the development of city spaces.

Construction of large shopping centers increases the load of the transport infrastructure, some buildings simply don't have a capacious parking, so all nearby small pedestrian streets are jammed with cars. Esthetics of constructed facilities and their compatibility with the other architectural environment often raise questions. The unsystematic character of city processes generates total discomfort and impersonality of cities.

The system of public places is one of the most important components of the image of the city. They form a unique image of the city among its guests and inhabitants.

This article is an attempt of aggregation and analysis of the existing points of view on city public spaces, and also aspiration to understand what public places in Russian cities should be and also who should be responsible for their functioning.

Jürgen Habermas considers public space, first of all, as a platform for formation of public positions in key questions, the territory for communication and exchange of opinions. For Habermas such places are cafes and tea houses in the European cities of XVIII and XIX centuries. Hanna Arendt sees the beginning of the culture of public places in the antique Greek agora and the Roman forum. In the Middle Ages the market square becomes the center of diverse human streams. During modernity public spaces "are disciplined", "officialized" and lose a sudden nature of appearance.

Western researchers attach great importance to the public space in the city's full-fledged life (D. Jacobs, W. Whyte, R. Sennett, K. Nivenheys, L. Lofland, K. Lynch, etc.) In Richard Sennett's opinion public space is place which will implicate certain types of activity. These may be squares, main streets, theaters, cafe, lecture halls, ensembles of governmental buildings or exchanges – the spaces where one may meet "Another".

As the public space main criteria Sharon Zukin (Zukin, 1995) mentions: "1) public administration, 2) free access for everyone, 3) in its framework many people are directed towards social (not private) target" [21, p. 32–38].

From the point of view of Jane Jacobs, safety, accessibility and variety of possible kinds of activity are the main important characteristics of a public place [5].



Safety of public places is extremely important, since this is the space where the most various representatives of the urban environment are met. Thus there is no need to support safety in successful public spaces from the outside. People control everything that happens by themselves; the openness of a public place dictates the necessity of a tolerant relation. Such is the mechanism of functioning of this space.

A. Zhelnina defines public places, as "open, public spaces adapted for stay of people, for "communication of strangers", anonymous meetings of citizens.

From the point of view of V. L. Glazychev, an obligatory existence of a "considerable number of people (in public spaces) not engaged in the production activity" [4, p. 9] is one of the most important signs of city life. Empty public spaces or their absence indicate the absence of a city community that characterizes the level of development of the given settlement as rural. Using scientific classification: "before the city", "city", "almost city" and "not city", – V. L. Glazychev specifies that in "before the city" public spaces are impossible, since there are no free spaces deprived of the utilitarian sense; in "almost city" (or the settlement) the city community is absent, respectively, there are no places for gathering of citizens; in "not city" (or the megalopolis) there is no such a uniform community, though public spaces exist.

In other words, public places are parks, squares, public gardens, those spaces where everyone can get and be there without hindrance.

Public spaces have a considerable functional load. Thanks to these places the city community forms and realizes itself; such "neutral" territories are a necessary source of information and communication for certain inhabitants of a large city. The places free for everyone concentrate dissimilar life patterns, various representatives of the urban environment, various "subcultures". Thus citizens may observe each other, and, studying each other, develop tolerance towards "another". Public spaces are also an indispensable condition of the city's identity formation.

The majority of modern public places in Russian cities are the Soviet heritage. Huge squares and parks became the most characteristic public places of the Soviet period. In the modern context, squares intending for meetings and festive demonstrations of workers have lost their ideological, utilitarian and visual prevalence. Parks stand empty in absence of efforts on their re-equipment. In order to create a public place, it is insufficient to create a certain space formally opened for everyone; public place is formed by people. How to attract them?

On the example of Manezhnaya Square A.F. Filippov illustrates how the same space, depending on its filling, becomes an unpopular place from the center of public and political life. These changes generate material objects located on the square. The objects without sense guidelines for possible behavior, limitation in a number of places where it is possible to have a rest and spend time, turn rather attractive, from the point of view of location, space into the lifeless one.



Russian public places are under authority of administrations, are created and transformed most often on the initiative of power bodies. It is interesting that, despite the importance of public spaces in the big city's fabrics, their status in Russian normative and legal field remains uncertain.

According to section 1 and 2 of article 20.20 of the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offenses, social and public spaces are defined as "children's, educational and medical organizations, all types of public transport of the city and suburban traffic, culture organization, sports and health-improving installations, streets, stadiums, squares, parks".

In in the majority of cases city authorities have no strategy of development of public spaces and the efforts are incidental and unsystematic. For private investors public places are no interesting since possible ways of deriving benefit from investments to such objects are still unobvious.

In the western tradition there is a placemaking concept; it is development of public spaces. Municipal management is the main driving force in this process. However, as many researchers emphasize, there won't be any city space without participation of citizens, people for whom this space is intended. From the point of view of western experts, the development of a public place may be started with small short-term actions; at a correct planning the effect will be immediate.

At organization or development of public space it is very important to consider needs of citizens, inhabitants of a quarter or a district where this space is located. It helps to solve a large number of problems still at the beginning. Working with public spaces point efforts are not enough, a public place must have a development prospect.

Cultural planning - one of kinds of marketing of territories - is an example of such approach focused on the dialogue of administration or private companies with a local community and focused on the long-term prospect. Cultural planning presupposes the analysis of resources of a concrete place, formation and implementation of the strategic cultural plan (it is a concept of the long term local cultural development, containing a concrete plan of action, namely projects and actions aimed at the development of space).

The strategic cultural plan includes:

- cultural mapping (audit of cultural resources and needs); the analysis of a material and subjective field of culture, the analysis of a non-material symbolical space;
- plan formation, its coordination, acceptance and realization, creation of a system of control over results.

Implementation of the cultural plan takes from a year to one and a half years. Concrete results are always unique that confirms the thesis about inapplicability of standard decisions for public spaces.

Standard decisions kill the sense of public spaces. Except the functionality of their organization, the public space should have individuality which is formed



by unique objects. The historical center is such an attractive place for walks just because of its visual various.

Research of inhabitants' relation to a concrete place gives a lot of diverse information concerning the prospects of its reconstruction. Inhabitants have a certain history of relationship with this space, associations, feeling of this space, certain cultural and figurative references.

The expert view of a designer, an architect or a planner is always superficial since it is torn from the sense values which this place possesses. Professionals may create the image of the place from the point of view of modern or own esthetic views; however this place may remain lifeless if it does not meet expectations and needs of the people daily using it.

In order to form the public space one needs observance of a number of conditions. Western experts having greater experience in design of public places and their development distinguish the following factors:

- initiative from the city community;
- functionality priority over a form;
- lack of restrictions and discrimination;
- emphasis on creation of the centers of gravity;
- awareness of cultural traditions;
- sensitivity to a context;

The following factors are unacceptable for development of public spaces:

- directive planning "from above";
- application of standard decisions;
- limitation of access;
- privatization;
- dependence on the state control.

Except the lack of interest to development of public spaces from administrations and investors, there is such an important problem as commercialization and privatization that assumes transformation of public space in a private or commercial one. The access to space becomes limited. More often shopping centers play the role of public places. However, as A. Zhelnina notes, actually it is a substitution of public space, than its transition to a new quality. Shopping centers are intended not for everyone. The public of such spaces is formed by the criterion of consumer ability. Shopping centers do not provide a variety of activity; they are focused on consumer practices. People have an opportunity to watch each other, to be together in one space, but all their behavior is limited; generally it is shopping, cinema and cafe visit.

Here visitors almost do not have a chance to express themselves, to interact with each other. The person in shopping center does not behave spontaneously; the place sets rather strict rules of behavior; besides he/she comes here not to have a rest, but having a certain specific goal. Shopping center is more like a street, than a public space. It is transitive in its essence; this is the territory of continuous movements, instead of a stay place.



A. Zhelnina defines shopping centers as a “space of voluntary restriction of city experience in favor of safety and comfort, relative homogeneity of the middle class” [6, p. 67].

As a result really open and public space is substituted for “semi-public” places. This “semi-publicity” is a publicity for certain groups. Theaters, football stadiums are also places opened only for a part of public.

In discussing the present and the future of public places it is impossible to ignore a growing gadgetization and communication virtualization. Social networks became indispensable part of everyday life as well as a wide circulation of mobile devices. Some researchers say that we are on a threshold of disappearance of public places as we know them today. The era of promptly changing information stream, instant news and impressions forms a new psychotype. The modern citizen, especially the inhabitant of the big city, needs a constant variety, change of activities, the emotions, new experience. The same ideals are supported by total consumer culture. Wi-fi availability in parks and cafe automatically increases their popularity. Will public spaces lose their functions and importance? No, most likely. However a Gorky Park example in Moscow demonstrates the necessity of their transformation and openness to current trends rather eloquently.

One more interesting trend is a boom of temporary, spontaneously appearing public spaces which we see in both capitals. This phenomenon, according to the author, indicates the lack of public places and dissatisfaction with current state of the available. On the other hand, such trend may be considered as tactics of the city space development. Inhabitants cannot give commands about official public places. All types of activity assuming any mass character have to be regulated and coordinated by administration. One-way communication with the power, fixed in the Soviet period, continues to be defining. Inhabitants dialogue unwillingly; instead of the statement of their right to public spaces they create the alternative ones. It is interesting that firms providing a place or organizing these most mobile public platforms are often mediators in this difficult war of the statement of own right to publicity.

Territories of shopping centers become a place for expositions and fairs, parks are a place for festivals. Creative spaces: Moscow Winery, Art center Floors, ART-PLAY, Weavers, Torch, Flacon etc. played a great role in this “movement”. They were the embodiment of a new trend of modular spaces, spaces of the maximum variety combining offices and shops, creative studios and event-platforms.

Simple, easily read, clear, always identical monofunctional spaces are not interesting anymore: speed, intensity, variety of modern city life impose other requirements to public urban areas. Transforming spaces are in demand. They may not have own stable identity of a “place”; they are defined by the activity which they contain, turning into “places of process” about which Doreen Massey wrote [19].

Recent political events on Tahrir Square in Cairo, on Bolotnaya and Triumfalnaya squares, Sakharov Avenue in Moscow showed that public places are still



perceived in their initial functional signification, as the instrument of political demonstrations. It confirms the necessity of classical public spaces. However the repertoire of forms of public life extends. Thus the spaces should be transformed. To be filled and consequently, viable, they should meet demands of the public. Considering high mobility of big cities, eventfulness, heterogeneity of city publics and rather a short interval of the average citizen's free time, classical public spaces should become action spaces; these actions should be various, replacing each other, being focused on various audiences.

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