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Problems of originality of small historical cities of Russia

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Abstract

Small Russian cities are characterized by the fragility of mass development. Being relatively late, it inherits the traditional characteristics of an old town and, together with dominant structures, defines its image. Conservation of traditions and the image of the city in the context of inevitable replacement of a large portion of housing stock is a difficult task. The contemporary transformation of the development is analyzed on the examples of Gorodets, Suzdal and Zaraysk.

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1. Introduction

The article is dedicated to the issues of conservation of the originality of small Russian historical cities. The problem is the poor condition of traditional ordinary development of these cities, which is predominantly wooden and shabby. The predominance of this type of housing in these cities makes it impossible to apply methods of conservation. Apart from this, if you take any single house, it would not present any significant artistic or historical value, and contemporary regulations dictate the necessity to transform the urban tissue of cities.

Carrying out such transformation by standard means of new construction is to lose the old city as a cultural phenomenon. The world’s experience shows that the originality of a historical city is equally connected with the

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presence of prominent dominant structures and the character of ordinary development. Not only it creates a favourable background for the dominants, but also it itself carries a significant cultural content. Only the interaction of the dominants and the context forms a historical city as a valuable object of heritage.

In the Western European practice, where in small towns, just like in big cities, permanent stone buildings are prevalent, and the task could be restricted to adaptation and modernization of the existing urban tissue. In Russian small settlements, it is often required to gradually substitute a significant part of housing stock that has lost its operational qualities. The recognized by international acts necessity of preservation of architectural, spatial and landscape qualities should be applied in such cities not only to genuinely historical material, but also to its substitutes (complying, of course, with historical regularities of form-building and the peculiarities of local lifestyle).

2. Main part

The admissibility and sometimes necessity of such an approach was long ago included into international acts dedicated to historical cities. The famous 1987 Washington Charter states (paragraph 10): “When it is necessary to construct new buildings or adapt existing ones, the existing spatial layout should be respected, especially in terms of scale and lot size. The introduction of contemporary elements in harmony with the surroundings should not be discouraged since such features can contribute to the enrichment of an area”.

Later documents support and elaborate the theses brought forward in the Charter. Similar ideas can be found in the Valetta Principles (2011). In the documents dedicated to the conservation of heritage, the problem receives a much more detailed examination. A conviction has appeared that material and immaterial heritage are closely interconnected and that the scholars’ views on the importance of heritage and the system of values of urban society complement each other. Today, heritage cannot be a passive carrier of cultural values created in the past. It should “provide the tools and framework to help shape, delineate and drive the development of tomorrow’s societies”. It is acknowledged that now preservation of heritage is connected with inevitable changes of historical environment, and it is important to determine which changes are acceptable and which are not.

The criteria of acceptability can vary, but two of them seem to be the most important: preservation of the historical image of the settlement and guaranteeing the conditions for its present-day life. The second criterion is relatively easy to meet, because the range of the basic demands of a small city dweller is well studied and can be formalized.

It is much more difficult to determine what is necessary or admissible in the area of conservation of the historical image of the settlement. First of all, because of differences in various concerned parties’ perception of the image of the settlement, which has to be taken into account. These are, on one side, the population of the city, the carriers of local mentality, and, on the other side, those who see the city from without – the educated community of art and architecture scholars, but also businessmen investing in the city and a large stratum of tourists of different levels of education.

It is easier for the author to evaluate the image of the city from the point of view of a concerned specialist or even an ordinary tourist, because the tourists’ perception is rather stereotypical and well described in literature. As for the perception of local citizens, they can show unexpected attention to local peculiarities that are unnoticed by an external observer and, at the same time, disregard for some reason certain values that are obvious to the professionals. However, the experience tells us that, in general, the system of values of the local community is also predictable. Until special research is carried out for every particular city, we can take as a point of reference the opinion of the professionals who specialize in conservation of architectural and, looking more broadly, cultural heritage of historical cities.

Surely, it is important to determine the limits of admissible changes to historical urban environment. It is important to distinguish the area of the monument of the past proper, which requires all the possible conservational measures to be applied, and the complex historical urban tissue, where the culturally important qualities of the environment are formed not only by monuments, but also by ordinary buildings.

Having outlined the problems, we will take as an example some old cities to illustrate what was said above. One of the most successful examples is the city of Gorodets on the Volga River. The city is known from the 12th century and, starting from the 14th century, it was a large settlement with a developed planning structure and two lines of

fortification. In 1408 it was destroyed by Mongol-Tatar forces led by Edigey. Some remains of medieval earthwork and wooden fortifications and the most important features of planning structure survived to the present day. The revival of the city took place in the 17th – 18th centuries, and some objects of monumental architecture remained from that time (some of them were lost in 1930s). The housing of the old city is dated mid-19th – early 20th centuries with certain buildings from early 19th century.



Fig. 1. Gorodets. Revolutsii Embankment.



Fig.. 2. Gorodets, Lenina st.

This example can be called successful because the city has a considerable fragment of fully preserved historical development supported by restorative activities and all the necessary urban amenities. This fragment defines the face of the city, conveys the image of a small old provincial settlement. Certainly, the «genius loci» is not fully conserved: the colour pattern has changed to meet the contemporary tastes. Such changes, however, should be acknowledged as inevitable as long as we speak about a modern living city and not a model in a museum.

We should, however, pay attention to two circumstances. First, the described part of the city is not big and, as some researchers propose, it can be regarded as a conservation area, i.e. an inviolable museum complex. It occupies less than a fourth part of the historical city that needs attention to its historical and cultural content. Second, it is a fragment that is formed by stone or mixed stone and wooden buildings, which are a priori more rich and impressive. The problem of a traditional small wooden city is not touched upon and still needs a solution.

Undecided is the fate of many streets with ordinary wooden buildings, which sometimes include remarkable fragments. If the issue of renovation of such a development is not addressed, it is likely to be gradually destroyed and only the abovementioned local conservation area will remain of the city. For a long time we have been losing the old wooden buildings, which are being replaced either by multi-storey buildings or by newer and simpler houses. A significant part of the city loses its originality, its cultural image.

The nature of transformations is illustrated by a small part of the city around Proletarskaya square. An early 1970s photograph depicts an early 20th century two-storeyed building and a row of small wooden houses with gabled roofs. The street in front of them naturally bends round a small front garden with apple-trees. The Intercession church with a cemetery is seen in the distance. The same place on a contemporary picture looks very differently. The same two-storey stone house is still there, as well as the church. A single large building grew up in place of smaller ones; the street straightened and was covered by asphalt, the other side of the passage is now occupied by a five-storied building. The transformation is very characteristic. Another traditional street, a picture of which was taken in 1970s, is completely unrecognizable today. The 20th century utilitarian houses prevail everywhere, sometimes neighbouring with particularly large public buildings.



Fig. 3.— Gorodets. Proletarskaya Square. Photo by A.S. Shchenkov, 1970s.

One could think that the described situation doesn't have much to do with the problems of a small city: it is easier to admit that the heritage is mostly lost and the task is to maintain the remaining fragment. However, such erosion affected the buildings inside ramparts (which are partly intact and partly remaining only at the archaeological level). The planning inside the ramparts is medieval, irregular, naturally connected with the uneven terrain. This means that this territory belongs to the historical part of the city both objectively and subjectively. In 2009, restoration specialists from Nizhny Novgorod proposed that the whole area should be given a conservation status. It should not be a theatrical stage set, imitation of old objects. It is necessary to find modern architectural means complying with historical truth, the specific character of the place.

The appropriateness of modern architectural means depends on the level of damage done to the objects of heritage, on the characteristics of spatial structure, on the relations of new buildings with this structure. We will review some of the results of introduction of new buildings on the example of a city very well known for its heritage – Suzdal.

The historical Suzdal is characterized by two types of ordinary development. These are small individual houses, often wooden, compactly stretching along the street and two-storeyed stone buildings framing the main street of the city. Typological homogeneity is an important characteristic of the city. That is why new objects harshly break into the urban tissue and destroy the integrity of development. Let us pay attention to a fragment of Suzdal territory at the bend of the river Kamenka including one of the biggest architectural complexes of the city, the Intercession Monastery. In the place where the two traditional streets, Pokrovskaya St. and Schmidt St., meet two new buildings appeared bringing a sharp contrast with traditional city estates. One of them is a big brick building rising above a fence without openings. The neighbouring building is also rather big for Suzdal. It is located in an open place, in the back side of a land lot without any connection with the main axis of the street. The building with a complex combination of volumes, with the ground floor made of stone and the first floor made of wood seems to be intended to follow the traditions of Russian residential building. But there no similar structures in Suzdal, neither in size, nor in design. It is an alien form for the city, an alien type of structure. (6,7)

Another case of violation of the typology of urban development is the construction of a line of two-storeyed hotels inside of the city blocks adjacent to the monastery. These new buildings fell out of the main axis, failed to form a line with traditional residential houses, but they are seen from everywhere through the openings between old houses destroying the traditional image of the place. (8)

In the same bend of River Kamenka, where the Intercession Monastery is located, two blocks away from it, in Krasnoarmeyskiy Pereulok St., a complex of small new cottages appeared. They lack any features that address the architecture of the past apart from gabled roofs. They are built of contemporary materials; they have a contemporary shape of window openings. However, their modest facades, the abovementioned roofs and, what is important, a traditional location following the curves of the street make these new houses make a more successful inclusion in the development of the block. (it should be mentioned that they are situated in a distance from the monastery and only the river Kamenka divide them from the new tourist centre outside the old city). (9)

This brings to a thought that, first, the typological unity of the old and the new development is much more important than the attempts to discover their stylistic unity. Second, the importance of analysis of architectural and spatial structure of historical development and the importance of multi-level connection between the urban tissue and city's dominants becomes evident. If the hotels deep in the block near the monastery would not create such dissonance with the old street if they had the same size as surrounding buildings. As for the houses in Krasnoarmeyskiy Pereulok, they could be called a good decision because of their specific typological features and their location in a relative distance from the monastery and its surroundings.

Not only the interconnection of volumes is important for the structure of a development, but also the character of spaces and beautification. It was showed above that the two big new houses at the crossing of Pokrovskaya St. and Schmidt St. create dissonance with their surroundings not only because of different typology, but also because of non-traditional placement. Another example is Nizovaya St. in the city of Zaraysk. In 1970s, one-storey houses were built on both sides of the street passing along the fortress wall. It created a picture of a lively urban environment, in which old structures and contemporary city life intertwined naturally. Now the houses are demolished and the street turned into a park lane, distinguishing the fortress as some kind of rarity disconnected from the city life. The geometrical regularity of the new road emphasizes this alienation. (10,11)

3. Conclusion

The value of a historical city always dissociates, some of its important qualities localize differently, some areas that concentrate the merits of an old settlement are distinguished, which can be seen on the example of the city of Gorodets. Within the framework of our topic, our interest is attracted not to the concentrations of merits, but, on the contrary, to the areas of dissipation that require careful inclusion of new components. It is important to determine, which qualities should be supported by the new buildings. The provided examples outlined the idea, where the efforts should be channelled. It is clear that they will be different for each city and each case needs individual preliminary studying.

As it was stated earlier, the preliminary analysis is required for evaluation of a historical city from the perspectives of different groups of contemporary society and first of all – the local citizens. The researchers came to

the idea that the originality of small cities is in their intermediate position between large cities and rural areas. This influences the occupation of the population, the tempo of their life and, in cities with a long history, on the degree of their attachment to traditions.

Speaking about architecture, we can suppose that the majority of local dwellers would chose private housing with individual land lots and would not support the introduction of multi-storeyed buildings to the historical centre of the city. We can be sure that citizens value old buildings that carry stylistic marks of belonging to the past. At the same time, they seem to pay little attention to the violation of the logic of structural organization of the development. The locals, especially the younger generation, could gladly welcome the construction of amusement facilities that are unnatural for the traditional lifestyle and the existing image of the city.

It is appropriate to quote the director of Vladimir and Suzdal Open-Air Museum A.I. Aksyonova: “When you enter the city, the first thing that you see is an advertisement featuring a guy with a bath besom inviting you to a bathhouse. Should Suzdal be something like Las-Vegas (night-time illuminations, noisy discos, restaurants with names like “Lim-po-po”, “Robinson”, etc. have appeared recently) or a lively tourist-attracting area with proper Russian originality?” It is noteworthy that Aksyonova, knowing her city well, criticizing the new trends does not appeal to the opinion of local citizens, though in other cases she is eager to use her fellow-thinkers’ opinion as an argument. For example, in the same article she refers to Italian painter Tonino Guerra, who spoke for a careful preservation of local heritage.

All of this, of course, is just a draft concept on the perception of a small historical city, preliminary insight into the problem of the conservation of its architectural characteristics. The article is meant to be an introduction to a more detailed research of socio-cultural and architectural issues of conservation of a small historical city.

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