

Public spaces as a factor of the quality of the urban environment (on the example of the city of Irkutsk)

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Abstract. The article describes the relevance of the study of public spaces as an important element of the quality of the urban environment. Successfully functioning public spaces are called upon to solve a number of urban problems, including the social isolation of citizens caused by urbanization processes. The characteristic of public spaces of a particular city is based on an assessment of a set of attributes and related criteria developed by placemaking specialists. It is proved that this complex should reflect not only the general requirements for public spaces, but also the features of the city: the diversity of the socio-ethnic structure of the population, cultural and historical heritage, and the specificity of the existing urban environment. The characteristics of the four most visited public spaces of the provincial Siberian city of Irkutsk are fulfilled: the Kirov square; historical and memorial complex "Jerusalem Mountain "; Municipal Park "Yunost Island"; shopping and entertainment complex "130th quarter". The results showed that the public spaces of the city perform a number of functions with varying degrees of success: best recreational and entertaining, partially creative and the function of storing the "collective memory" of the city. At the same time, the city does not have public spaces that fully meet the objectives of the development of urban society; this applies to both historical and newly created. Their main drawback is the inconsistency with the modern challenge for Irkutsk, namely, the solution to the problem of social inclusion of new citizens. Some measures have been proposed for City management to purposefully strengthen the elements of public spaces that implement the function of involving residents, especially migrants, in the public life of the city.

Keywords. public space, urban environment, placemaking, urban space functions, attributes of an assessment of urban space, urban space assessment criteria, City Management.

1. Introduction

In the modern post-industrial period of urban growth and transformation, the need to ensure the quality or level of comfort of the urban environment sufficient for residents is increasing. Researchers and practitioners in many countries have noted such problems caused by the global process of urbanization and the growing problems of cities, such as the physical fragmentation of urban space as a result of the industrial construction of new areas, the transport infrastructure and the underdevelopment of transport

communications, the social isolation of residents of the areas and the psychological discomfort connected with such isolation.

To mitigate these problems, it is proposed to create “open and hospitable public spaces that all categories of citizens would like to regularly visit and willingly share” [1, p. 50]. And R. Rogers, one of the classics of the humanistic approach to the study of cities, directly points out: the city is primarily a public space convenient for humans [2, p. 160].

Currently, in Russian cities, the zoning model is being reproduced during the construction of new residential areas, which many cities in other countries have already abandoned. It involves the construction of “sleeping” areas, whose residents leave for work in other parts of the city every day, and then return. As a rule, there are practically no public spaces there. As a result, the urban environment breaks up into fragments that are not united by a common idea. According to O. Pachenkov, in large Russian cities “in some 5-10 years, some new buildings will turn into an absolute ghetto” [3]. Our study of the comfort of the urban environment on the example of the city of Irkutsk also showed the importance of social and psychological factors of residents' satisfaction, along with functional (general living conditions in the city, conditions for studying, working for hire, for doing business, playing sports, getting various services, etc.) [4].

These quality problems of the urban environment can be solved, at least in part, by creating and successfully functioning public spaces. Studies of the state and problems of the development of urban public spaces will provide results for a more informed development by the City management of current and future plans for improving the comfort of the city.

2. Materials and Methods

The logic of our article includes:

- a review of literary sources on the functioning and role of public spaces in the context of developing a comfortable environment in a modern city;
- a description of the state of public spaces of the city of Irkutsk;
- identification of problems of their functioning.

Researchers interpret the term “public spaces” as public places specially prepared and intended for visits by citizens for different purposes. Russian researcher A. An defines public space as a territory “free from transport” and created for “public use by an unlimited circle of people for leisure and free access to public facilities” [5, p. 175]. These include squares, parks, squares, embankments, playgrounds, places of recreation in shopping centers, stadiums, etc. Often public spaces serve as a gathering place for citizens to participate in citywide events. In addition to traditional publicly accessible public places, other locations may claim the role of public spaces. For example, a very close understanding of this concept is contained in the concept of the so-called “third place” proposed by the American sociologist R. Oldenburg [6]. “Third place” is a part of the urban space that citizens use for hanging out (“first place”) and outside work (“second place”). “Transit spaces”, ensuring “the movement of citizens from one object to another” should be excluded from the sphere of “third places” [7, pp. 6, 8]. The “third place” space consists of public places intended for informal meetings, where people “at any time convenient for them can freely and easily communicate” [6, p. 2]. According to the author of the concept, it is these places of recreation, entertainment, exchange of opinions, etc. “are the most important part of the everyday life of citizens and form the urban environment” [6, p. 2].

The idea of improving the urban environment, including public spaces, is largely consistent with the concept of sustainable development of R. Rogers, the goal of which is expressed in the desire to “make cities more human-friendly” [2]. The implementation of this concept is based on the complexity of using economic, environmental, social principles. Historically, beautification pursues primarily economic and environmental interests. This indicates that the improvement of the urban environment should provide, first of all, the convenience, comfort, environmental friendliness and aesthetics of urban spaces. However, this is not enough for a modern city. We agree with the opinion of O. Pachenkov, according to which traditional beautification provides residents with only “passive use” of

urban space [8]. Public space is called upon and should be able to unite many interests and hear different “voices” of residents. R. Rogers defines this possible activity of people as “a new form of citizen participation in the management of urban processes” in the framework of “creative and social activities”, or citizen / creative partnership [2]. O. Pachenkov, discussing the role and importance of public spaces, notes their ability not only to “turn a person into a citizen”, but also to form “public” from the mass of inhabitants (population) of the city. By “public” this researcher understands “responsible citizens who are able in their thoughts, concerns, actions to rise above private, family, corporate interests and think about what is good for the public good” [8].

Thus, a public space becomes such if a “public” is formed in it, the appearance of which is associated with the culture of participation (activity) of citizens in solving the problems of the city, responsibility and care of citizens about the public good. S. McQuire believes that the traditional culture of publicity, which existed in the previous era, is now supplanted by the "mass" exodus "of people into the house, into private life." [9]. From this "obsession with oneself" a modern resident of the city can be "turn out" by organizing public spaces. The value of their reconstruction for post-Soviet cities was revealed, in particular, in the results of an empirical study of the social well-being of students in Minsk (the capital of Belarus): those who actively spend their free time in public spaces more often describe themselves as a happy person and to a lesser extent complain about bad mood [10, p. 89].

We list the functions that public spaces are called upon to perform in the context of ensuring the quality of the urban environment, based on a review of literary sources [6, 10, 11, 12]:

- communication, social, socially inclusive function – the function of the “mixer” through the interaction of the townspeople with each other: getting to know representatives of different social, cultural, ethnic, demographic groups (through personal communication and observing behavior), involving citizens in public life, forming feelings "Affiliation" and responsibility for their city;
- civic – the function of involving citizens in political life, is necessary for the formation and development of a healthy civil society, is realized through the formation of space for political discourse and the interaction of people with the government, to express the views and demands of different urban communities;
- the function of storing the “collective memory” of the townspeople, enclosed in an atmosphere of historically and culturally significant places, is necessary for the successful transmission of city-wide values and ideas of patriotism to children, youth, new residents;
- organizational, creative – involving citizens in joint activities of a different nature and forming an active life position of citizens: arranging urban facilities, providing assistance to certain categories of citizens, organizing and conducting holiday, children’s, games, sports, music, other events, etc.;
- recreational, entertaining – creating conditions for leisure activities: a pleasant and interesting vacation of various categories of citizens.

In the aggregate, the functions, thanks to such “layering”, create a synergistic effect, contributing to the preservation and improvement of the quality of the urban environment.

However, for the implementation of functions, public spaces must meet certain requirements, or, in the context of the concept of placemaking [13], have certain attributes:

1. The correct location (accessibility for different categories of citizens due to good connections – transport, pedestrian, visual – with other crowded places).
2. Comfort (safety, cleanliness, arrangement and convenience for different categories of visitors, provision of catering services, etc.).
3. Opportunities for the activities of different people (including the organization of various events).
4. Attractiveness (pleasant atmosphere for different social groups and certain categories of citizens: youth, adults and seniors, men and women, ethnic and other groups). This attribute includes the architecture and design of the space, other aesthetic elements, such as beautiful natural and artistic objects. In our opinion, this attribute should also include cultural and educational elements, which include historical, cultural, ethnic buildings, structures, ensembles, etc.

How can one determine to what extent a particular public space meets these requirements and, therefore, fulfills its functions? Placemaking experts offer a number of questions, the answers to which may reflect the success of one or another side of the space [13]. We believe that the completeness of such a complex of issues, or, more precisely, the criteria, depends not only on the general requirements that public spaces must satisfy as such, but also on the characteristics of the city: the diversity of the socio-ethnic structure of the population, cultural and historical heritage, and the specifics of the existing urban environment.

3. Results

We briefly outline the features of the city of Irkutsk that are significant for characterizing the requirements for the quality of public spaces.

Irkutsk is a provincial Russian city with a population of 623 thousand people, which has relatively strong cultural traditions. 100 years ago, it was one of the largest administrative, commercial, cultural and educational centers in the Siberian region; during the time of socialism, it became a city with developed scientific and educational potential. Currently, many visiting students of higher and secondary specialized educational institutions are studying in Irkutsk, for whom the problems of adaptation to the urban environment are relevant. In recent years, the share of students in the total population of about 11%, which, along with the city of Tomsk, is the highest indicator in Siberia [14].

Since the 17th century, Irkutsk has been forming as a multinational city, which is due to the history of its formation and development: the ethnic diversity of the indigenous people of Siberia, the colonization of Siberia through the resettlement of communities and individual families from the European regions of the Russian Empire, wide opportunities for economic activity, and finally, the status of a place of exile and hard labor. Since 1992, Irkutsk has been accepting a large number of migrants from the countries of the former USSR, as well as China, fewer from other countries: according to official data [15], in recent years, approximately 7-8 thousand people have arrived annually, according to expert estimates, even more. Despite the historical traditions of the national and religious tolerance of the inhabitants, this makes the task of assimilating the unspoken rules of communication, joint activity, coexistence in general by the new citizens of the city especially urgent.

Another feature of the city is that (unfortunately, only partially) material objects of a rich cultural and historical heritage have been preserved: unique wooden buildings, historical and architectural monuments, religious objects, parks. The city center is included in the preliminary list of UNESCO World Heritage. All this is a valuable resource for the implementation of cultural and cognitive functions: education, the transfer of knowledge about the city, the preservation of the “collective memory” of residents, as well as the creation of prerequisites for the preservation of historical and cultural monuments.

Thus, it can be argued that, on the one hand, the function of socializing new members of the urban community (children, youth, new residents) is highly relevant for public places in Irkutsk, and on the other, the city has sufficient potential for its implementation.

Currently, 18 public spaces actually operate in Irkutsk, of which the most visited are: the Kirov square with adjacent squares; historical and memorial complex “Jerusalem Mountain” (formerly Central Park of Culture and Rest); Municipal Park “Yunost Island” (located on the Angara, the main river of the city); shopping and entertainment complex “130th quarter” with an area of 6 hectares with recreated wooden buildings in the style of pre-revolutionary architecture. The first two spaces are historical, since there are more than 100 years; the last two are modern, built a few years ago.

To do this, we use a system of criteria that is based on provisions developed by placemaking specialists [13]

Table 1a. Description of the most visited public spaces in Irkutsk (according to expert judgment)

Criteria	The Kirov Square	Historic Memorial Complex "Jerusalem Mountain"	and Island "Yunost"	"130th quarter"
Location				
Location	city center	city center	city center	city center
The number of public transport routes that this space can be reached	41	26	27 (The location is far removed from public transport)	27
Walking distance	Good for all categories.	Good but not enough for people with disabilities	Good for all categories	Good but not enough for people with disabilities
External visibility	Good	Good	Very good	Satisfactory
Comfort				
Number of Seats	Sufficient	Sufficient	Sufficient	Not enough
Hiking opportunities	Satisfactory	Good	Very good	Satisfactory
Cleanliness and safety	Very good	Good	Very good	Very good
Saturation with historical and culturally significant objects	Average	High	Small	High
Food Service Facilities	Street trading	–	Cafes	Restaurants, Cafes, coffee houses, bars

Table 1b. Description of the most visited public spaces in Irkutsk (according to expert judgment)

Criteria	The Kirov Square	Historic and Memorial Complex "Jerusalem Mountain"	Island "Yunost"	"130th quarter"
Attendance and communication				
Categories of visitors by gender and age	Women and men are about the same. All age categories	There are more women than men. Mostly elderly and parents with children	There are several more women than men. All age categories	Women and men are about the same. Mostly young people, middle-aged people
Categories of visitors based on permanent residence	Mostly permanent residents, visiting students. On New Year's holidays, migrants with children	Mostly permanent residents	Mostly permanent residents, visiting students	Mostly visiting students and tourists, permanent residents
Nature of communication	Mostly in own group	Mostly in own group	Active in own group, weak with representatives of other groups	Active in own group, weak with representatives of other groups
Friendliness towards other groups	Average	Average	High	High

Table 1c. Description of the most visited public spaces in Irkutsk (according to expert judgment)

Criteria	The Kirov Square	Historic and Memorial Complex "Jerusalem Mountain"	Island "Yunost"	"130th quarter"
Activities				
Physical activity of visitors	Hiking	Hiking	Hiking, sports games (football, etc.), ice skating, skateboards, catamarans	Hiking
Participation in events	Mass celebration of the New Year (the main city tree); participation in flash mobs, concerts (as spectators)	–	Participation in sports competitions; in concerts (mainly as spectators)	Participate in the annual craft festival; in events organized by companies; in spontaneous concerts
Categories of event participants by gender and age	All categories by gender and age	–	Mostly children and youth of both sexes	Youth, middle-aged people. There are several more women than men
Categories of event participants on the basis of permanent residence	Permanent residents, visiting students. Migrants with children (in the New Year holidays)	–	Permanent residents, visiting students	Permanent residents, visiting students, tourists
Management presence	No	Yes (small office)	Yes (small office)	No

The data obtained allow us to draw some conclusions. All considered public spaces have good potential (judging by the criteria of a "physical" nature): they are located in the city center, have good transport and pedestrian access, most are perfectly visible from the outside and attract with their design, green spaces, historical and culturally significant objects. Almost all provide fairly comfortable conditions for visitors: equipped paths for walking, places for rest (benches, awnings), equipped areas for sports, festivals and other events, catering facilities. Everywhere a sufficient level of cleanliness, order and security is provided.

At the same time, the places considered only partially fulfill the functions of public space, since "physical" attributes (e.g. good arrangement) are a necessary, but not sufficient condition for its success. Attractiveness is extremely important for a wide variety of groups of citizens, and this is ensured by the quality of communication and interaction of people – both within groups and between different groups. Our initial review shows that the spaces are not attractive to all groups of citizens, even for the purpose of passive relaxation. So, migrants visit only one space - the Kirov square, and not regularly, but during one period of the year - on New Year's holidays. Most of them come with children, who are undoubtedly more adults involved in communication with the indigenous people, thanks to the school and other children's institutions. As for the nature of the communication between visitors, communication between people within their group clearly prevails, and communication with

representatives of other groups is more often characteristic of youth groups, especially in the process of participation in joint activities.

Thus, it can be argued that the public spaces of the city perform a number of their functions with varying degrees of success: it is best recreational and entertaining, partially creative, and the function of storing the “collective memory” of the city. At the same time, the city does not have public spaces that fully meet modern requirements, and this applies to both historical and newly created ones. The main gap here is the mismatch between the actually performed set of functions and the modern challenge for Irkutsk, namely, the solution of the problem of socialization, social inclusion of new citizens. We believe that the problem cannot be considered acute for visiting students. It exists and has been successfully solved for over 70 years. Much more concern is the problem of social inclusion of migrants, especially those who arrived from China. Migrants from the countries of the former USSR are adapting more successfully, as they to one degree or another speak the Russian language and, at least in part, have preserved the values of internationalism. At the same time, one can note the increasing role of ethnic diasporas in the life of migrants who have arrived and have already settled, which leads to their isolation, strengthening of barriers to inclusion in the city’s culture. Indeed, the domestic life of migrants (in the “first place”), life at work (in the “second place”) and cultural life (participation in religious, national holidays, etc.) are usually “locked” into narrow framework of ethnic communication. The exception is the education of children in city-wide schools and other institutions.

Also, one cannot fail to note the poor performance of such functions of public spaces as civil and organizational, especially in terms of the formation of an active life position of citizens, responsibility for their city and the future of civil society.

In recent years, City management has been actively improving the quality of the urban environment of Irkutsk, in particular, the arrangement of the largest and most visited public spaces. The positive results of this activity are obvious. Of course, the success of the functioning of public spaces is determined not only by their “physical” state, but also by the degree of social maturity of the city, which is reflected in effective communication and constructive interaction of all communities and groups. Nevertheless, City management can contribute to solving this problem, as it should be guided by the strategic goal of the city’s development - the formation of a prosperous and happy life for citizens. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to solve the problem of involving migrants in public life. Here public spaces can (and should!) play an important role as a “mixer”. For example, their arrangement should reflect the ethnic diversity of the city’s population, in particular, by placing cultural and catering facilities with national cuisines, presenting information on stands and signs in different languages, etc. The theme of mass events should be expanded by organizing national holidays, festivals, competitions of national games and types of traditional arts, educational events for children, youth, etc. To do this, we can recommend City management to work more actively with the leaders of national diasporas.

4. Conclusion

1. The creation and successful functioning of public spaces is a powerful factor of the quality of the urban environment. In this regard, in recent years, an integrated approach to the research, planning and management of public spaces of the city has been actively developing.
2. In the formation and management of public spaces, it is necessary to take into account the features and problems of the development of the city. Only in this case, the space can become a significant factor in increasing the comfort of the urban environment.
3. For the Siberian city of Irkutsk, the problem of social inclusion of new residents is relevant.
4. An expert analysis of the state of the most visited public spaces showed: despite the fact that the spaces have good potential (including cultural and historical), they do not quite meet the requirements for the development of urban society, especially in terms of solving the problem of social adaptation of new migrant citizens.

5. City management should purposefully engage in strengthening the elements of public spaces that realize a socially inclusive function – involving residents, especially migrants, in the public life of the city.

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