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The Role of Urban Squares in the Spatial Concept of Being

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Abstract. The goal of the study is to identify the phenomenological values of the city squares and their role in spatial concept of being. The methodology of the study is based on principles of the phenomenological approach in architecture that infer two directions of the relationship between man and place in the spatial concept of being: human identification (identification with the place) and spatial orientation, capable of delivering a sense of contentment, fullness of everyday experience with existential meanings. City squares always play leading roles in the spatial concept of being, serving as nodes and spatial landmarks. Squares play an exceptional role in shaping the landscape, opening the quality of place, collecting and structuring it.

1. Introduction

The functional and spatial aspects of the creation and use of urban squares traditionally belong to the fundamental problems of architecture and town planning, since their landscape predetermines the architectural appearance of the important parts of the city. The social relevance of the problem is caused by the increased social activity of the population, which generates the need for new forms of urban open spaces. The scientific relevance of the problem is explained by the need of updating the architectural and design theory by means systematically comprehending the newest technological changes and shifts in human behaviors.

The object of the study are public spaces of city squares. The goal of the study is to identify the phenomenological values of the city squares and their role in spatial concept of being.

This study is based on works of theorists devoted to problems of town square as architectural and urban-planning phenomenon. The problems of the form and stylistics, symbolic values, and ideology of town squares are broadly discussed in critical and theoretical researches of such authors as Brinkman [1], Sitte [2], Rowe [3], Ikonnikov [4], Lynch [5, 6], including comprehensive historical study of cities undertaken by Bunin [7]. A number of 21st-century researchers deal with sustainability [8] and social aspects revisions [9] of urban squares, including case studies of some cities: Melbourne [10] Kuala Lumpur [11], Isfahan [12], Malang [13], etc. This research is developing some provisions made in earlier works of author [14, 15].

During the experimental part of the research, 120 mental maps compiled by students of Far Eastern Federal University Architecture and Urban Planning Department during the last 5 years within the framework of such academic disciplines as Architectural Semiotics and Semiotics in City Planning were analyzed and summarized.



2. Methods

The methodology of the study is based on principles of the phenomenological approach in architecture founded by Christian Norberg-Schulz [16, 17] and developed by Juhani Pallasmaa [18], and also on spatial perception studies made by Kevin Lynch [5, 6].

Chr. Norberg-Schulz introduced the concept of *existential place*, comprising 'the basic relationship between man and his environment' [16, p. 5]. He emphasizes that 'place is evidently an integral part of existence' [19, p. 3]. He says that architecture "may satisfy the need for dwelling, in the existential sense of the word" [17, p. 7]. 'To dwell means to belong to a given place, and furthermore to possess a house where the heart may blossom and the mind muse' [17, p. 12].

The concept of *existential place* is 'divided in the complementary terms "space" and "character", in accordance with the basic psychic function "orientation" and "identification" [Ibid.]. The term *identification* means the experience of the natural and artificial environment as a comprehensible and meaningful space. Author links orientation with the spatial order, and identification – with the qualities of things: 'Man's being-in-the-world comprises a *how* as well as a *where*. While identification intends the qualities of things, orientation grasps their spatial interrelationship' [17, p. 15].

Identifying the significance of squares in urban planning culture is associated with one of the important aspects of human existence - the need to compare and, to a certain extent, even the identification of person and his spatial environment, the differences between one's own and another's territories. 'Although the world is immediately given, it has to be interpreted to be understood, and although the man is part of the world, he has to concretize his belonging to feel at home' [17, p. 20].

Another aspect taken into account is orientation. In order to live and act, we must orient ourselves in space. 'With all the diversity of private functions inherent to individual urban spaces, they all share one common function, which can be called orientation. Generally it can be represented as a person's need for understanding their place in this space and in the city as a whole. N.A. Ladovskiy noted that the results of architectural work, in final, "should be rational and serve the highest technical need of man to navigate in space" [20, p. 145].

The more understandable for a person is the environment, the easier it will not get lost in it: 'a clear image enables one to move about easily and quickly' [5, p. 5]. K. Lynch in his studies focuses on the visual quality of 'clarity, or "Legibility" of the cityscape. By this we mean the ease with which its parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern' [5, p. 2]. The researcher proposes to classify the contents of the images of the city, correlating them with subject forms, such as paths, edges, districts, nodes, landmarks.

In addition to the obvious worldly advantages, orientation can give a person special satisfaction, add additional meanings to everyday experience. Instead of the fear that comes with disorientation 'a good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security. He can establish a harmonious relationship between himself and the outside world' [5, p. 5]. Moreover, from philosophic point of view, 'Man's being-in-the-world is structured, and the structure is kept and visualized by means of architecture' [17, p. 29].

3. Results

On the one hand, city squares, along with a system of vertical dominants, bridges and other significant elements of orientation, always play leading roles in the spatial concept of man's being. The main meaning of the square is *node*, square usually appears at crossroads, and its original essence is the connection of routes and spaces. Another aspect of square's meaning is the communication of individuals: square traditionally is a place of gatherings, demonstrations, meetings, dates. Large contemporary squares are complex town-planning objects, literally serving as transport *nodes*, and often they are lack of human scale and place for people communication.

On the other hand, the squares are one of the most outstanding and especially important elements, in the terminology of Gestalt psychology - *figures* on a less structured *background* and, due to these characteristics, they are able to serve as identification objects.

We can regard the square as a work of art, an expression of the triumph of human possibilities, the embodiment of the very essence of the place. In the religious, mythopoetic and other irrational representations of the world *square* means much more than merely empty place. For example, from the esoteric point of view, the square is a bunch of multidirectional energy flows.

Squares play an exceptional role in shaping the landscape, opening the quality of place in space, collecting and structuring it. The central square and its elements often carry the significance of the city's symbol. At Vladivostok City some of the key symbolic elements are 18-storey Administration building and Monument to Fighters for the Soviet Power, located at the central square (officially it is called square of Fighters for the Soviet Power).

As a strong organizing element in the landscape structure, the square imparts the order to the surrounding space, serves as literal starting points in the city or country coordinate system, sometimes getting the status of the center of the world. Vladivostok central square is located at place, where the city's history began, and symbolically it indicates the very end of Russia territory. From the Vladivostok residents' point of view, it is the very beginning of Russia, the place, where the sun rises and day begins.

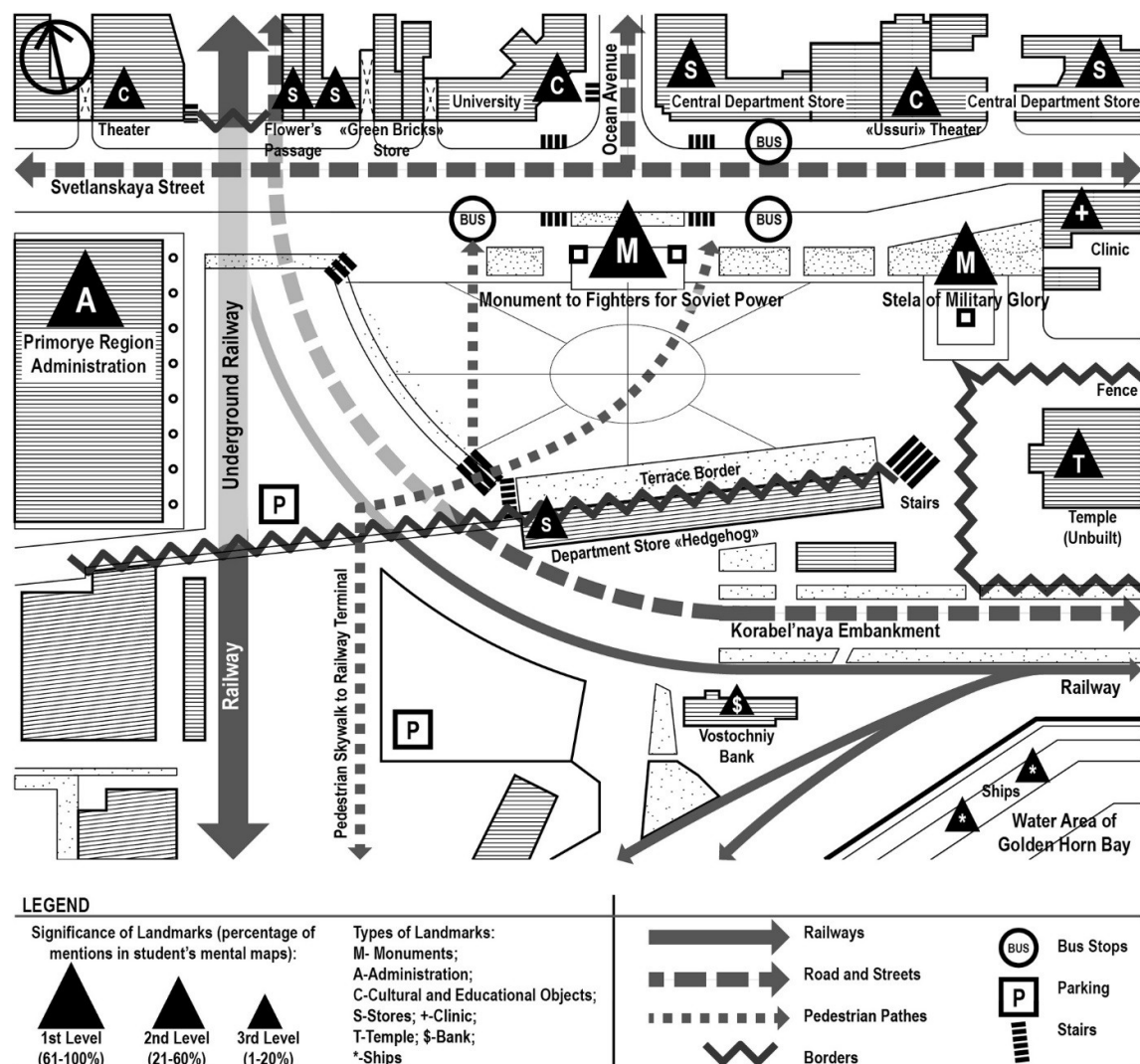


Figure 1. The main elements of the Vladivostok square of Fighters for the Soviet Power.

4. Discussion

The open space of square organizes environment, arranges its meanings as the center. As M. Heidegger writes: 'In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting. Thought of in reference to what is, to beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open center is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know' [21, p. 51]. Thus, the square acts as an ordering track in the impenetrable and abandoned chaos of the urban landscape. It reveals the quality of place in space, structures and arranges it.

The history of Vladivostok central square place began simultaneously with the history of the city, in 1860 not far from there the transport "Manchzhur" was landed, some trees were felled and small piece of ground was cleared, flagpole was built and flag was raised - was founded a military post, which was later renamed Vladivostok. However, until the middle of 1960s this place did not get the significance of central square. Only the construction of the Monument to Fighters for the Soviet Power in 1964 and accompanying measures for territory improvement made this space the central city's place. Monument made square the genuine place, because, as we can say in according with Heidegger: 'things themselves are places and do not merely belong to a place' [22, p. 11].

The central square and its elements carry the significance of the city symbol. The main elements of Vladivostok central square are 18-storey Administration Building and Monument to Fighters for the Soviet Power. Both of them label the idea of power. However, idea of fight is even more important. It is identified not only and not so much with the events of 1917-1922 October Revolution and Civil War, as with the idea of fight in general. The square gathers demonstrators, here rallies against unpopular decisions of city and region authorities are held. Thus, the name of the square and the monument emphasize the theme of civic activity traditionally inherent for the square.

As a strong living element in the landscape structure, the square imparts the order to the environment, transforming the chaos of disparate spaces and elements into a systematized space. The Red Square is not only the main square of Russia, but, in accordance with the statement of Russian historian Alexander Mozhaev, - the starting point of the universe, the center of civilization, the beginning of time and the most historically diverse territory of Moscow. In some cases, square's elements serve as literal starting points in the country coordinate system: Kilometer Zero or Mile Zero Markers, taking their origins from *Milliarium Aureum* of Ancient Rome. In 2012 during preparing to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit the schematic world's map was depicted in the middle of the Vladivostok central square, and it still exist to remind about that important event.

Based on the principles of K. Lynch, let us consider the square as a structural element of the image of the city.

4.1. Square as a path

According to Lynch's definition, 'paths are the channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves' [5, p. 41]. While the essence of square is the connection, it gathers spatially and semantically. *Square* in Russian is *площадь* (Romanised: *plóshchad*). The open public space in French is *place*, in Italian - *piazza*, in Spanish - *plaza*, in German - *platz*. All of these terms have the common Latin (*placea* and *platea*) and Greek origin (*plateia*) that means open space in a city or adjective broad, wide. Thus, in the most original sense, square is a *wide path*. In some rituals, square concentrates the essence of the whole life path. For example, crossing the Maidan marks the end of the military activities of Cossack and his departure to monasticism.

Vladivostok central square is the place of passage of many transport types. Although the inner part of the square is pedestrian, under the square there is railroad track, along southern border of square there is a strained highway with heavy traffic and bus stops; and, finally, you can get to the railway station and ferry by several viaducts. Due to the intersection of these routes square become a node.

4.2. Square is a node

K. Lynch defines the nodes as 'the strategic foci into which the observer can enter, typically either junctions of paths, or concentrations of some characteristic. The junction, or place of a break in

transportation, has compelling importance for the city observer. Because decisions must be made at junctions, people heighten their attention at such places and perceive nearby elements with more than normal clarity' [5, p. 72]. The node is the main meaning of square because square is a key and a focal point in the transport and pedestrian network of the district or the city as a whole. Vladivostok central square is the core of Vladivostok city center, it is the center itself.

4.3. Square as a spatial landmark

When the position of the observer is not inside, but outside the square, we can speak of its function as a reference point. K. Lynch writes that 'landmarks, the point references considered to be external to the observer, are simple physical elements which may vary widely in scale. There seemed to be a tendency for those more familiar with a city to rely increasingly on systems of landmarks for their guides—to enjoy uniqueness and specialization, in place of the continuities used earlier' [5, p. 78].

Considering squares as landmarks, we artificially abstract from their meaning of nodes: the square becomes a reference point not at the moment of passing through it, but when the observer is in an external position to the square. As well we can attribute the landmarks meanings not to the whole square, but to its individual parts - the dominant buildings and structures, viewed from various points.

'Landmarks become more easily identifiable, more likely to be chosen as significant, if they have a clear form; if they contrast with their background; and if there is some prominence of spatial location. Figure-background contrast seems to be the principal factor' [5, p. 78-9].

If the dominant buildings and structures on the square are visible from a various points, the square itself may become one of the key landmarks. The meanings of square as landmark may be even more powerful if the square's ensemble is placed on the hill soaring above the city.

The Administration building at the Vladivostok central square is higher than Monument, but the last is more 'powerful' due to its meanings, aesthetic, and, finally, location at the end of the vista on the background of sea. The Stela is significantly losing because of its newness, low height and contrast to the background, the location below the street level and indent from facade's line.

The meanings of the square as a path, junction of paths – node, and, in many cases, as a landmark are quite clearly expressed. Then what relations are between square and functions of a border or a district?

4.4. Square and district

As the districts are 'the relatively large city areas which the observer can mentally go inside of, and which have some common character' [5, p. 66], the square in this connection often becomes the center of attraction, a core of a district that extends beyond its borders, but has something in common.

4.5. Boundaries of the square

K. Lynch defines the edges as 'the linear elements not considered as paths: they are usually, but not quite always, the boundaries between two kinds of areas' [5, p. 62]. The square itself is not a boundary, since its essence is in gathering, not in separation of spaces. However, sometimes, when squares are situated on the edge of the city, they mark the boundaries and symbolize transition between city and suburbs. In addition, the symbolic meaning of the square in some cases can be traced in its meaning of the transition boundary as in mentioned above example, crossing the line of Maidan by Cossack marks the end of his military activities and departure in monasticism.

The central square of Vladivostok City is located at the very end of Russia, however, vice versa, symbolize the very beginning – place, where the sun rises and day begins. The southern side of the square doesn't have visual boundary, vista is opened to the sea, and this openness emphasize the meanings of the city as a seaport.

5. Conclusions

The characteristics of identification and orientation, divided in the studies, really do not exist in isolation, together they establish the structural basis of the spatial concept of man's being. In the

language, the verbs *to lose oneself* (lack of identification) and *to get lost* (lack of orientation) also have some in common. Thus, the relationship between man and place in the spatial concept of being is realized in two directions: human identification (identification with the place) and spatial orientation, capable of delivering a sense of contentment, fullness of everyday experience with existential meanings.

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