Microurbanism: In the Search of Analytical Tools for the Study of Transformation Processes in Urban Spaces. Khabarovsk Example

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Abstract. The article discusses the analytical capabilities of microlevel research in comprehending transformations taking place in urban spaces essence. According to authors, the key to success in such research lies in the organic synthesis of different scientific disciplines achievements. Selected results of field studies of Khabarovsk urban environment, a large post-soviet city, in the context of the locations of informal trade are demonstrated.

1. Introduction – on urban studies and microurbanism

It would be wrong to say a city is overlooked in the area of scientific community. Quite the opposite: different aspects of urban activity research by different scientific disciplines. It would not be exaggeration the statement that urban science has a fashion aspect. It’s necessary to mark two circumstances. First one: urban science is the object of macro analysis, mostly, and publications that refer particular city (besides provincial towns). Second: in case we deal with publications that refer exact city results, as a rule, it mostly refers to search the development city strategy. It’s unlikely to look for the explanation or describing everyday activities of citizens in this publications. Our task is to show that without taking into account the behavior of different population groups, located in different areas of the city, it’s unlikely to understand urban space changes. So, we are interested in informal social (particularly economic) practices of city population in intercity areas level.

2. The nature of transformational processes in post-soviet urban space

First of all, lets note that nowadays “the city cannot be conceptualized in terms of our present disciplinary structures. Yet there is very little sign of an emerging interdisciplinary framework for thinking, let alone theorizing, about the city” [1].

Restrict ourselves to a few short theses. First thesis accords that increasing global processes (global cities etc.) have result the research focus displaces to macro level analyses and neglecting microlevel analyses. Although Russian geography had always inherented in “scale gaming” [2]. However, scale gaming as a way to change the relationship between researcher and real-life researched object is not foreigner for sociologists.
Second thesis is recognition (far from self-evident) about urbanization with globalization that accompanied by overcoming local types of culture (differently – local spatial socio-economic systems). If it’s true, microlevel of urban analyses is truly going in history nature.

So, microruralism situation (with many clauses) reminds microeconomic situation in modern economic theory. But there is one principal difference: microruralism as a research program involves interdisciplinary. When urban space stands in research focus, including the fact it’s in radical transformational changes (modern Russian cities still in this phase), the interdisciplinary synthesis requirement increases.

Speaking about urban space transformation factors it should be highlighted becoming of market institution. “This process was to a great extent an inevitable outcome of the release of the entrepreneurial energies following the crash of the socialist system” [3, p 274], it is accompanied by sectoral and size structures business. The massive appearance of small and medium-sized enterprises in service industries accompanied not only with reformatting sectoral composition of city’s economy, but with opening new fields of employment (including informal employment) in different areas of the city.

Another factor – the increase of population mobility (appropriate concept in [4]). Main reason of geographical (or spatial) mobility is motorization which was made possible because of market reforms. Situation in Russian cities does not differ from situation in central and eastern Europe in this regard: “Since the early 1990s, the growing fleet of private automobiles was joined by the pickups, vans, and small trucks needed for the operation of thousands of new private businesses supporting the daily operation of the post-socialist city” [3, p 277]. As a result, we observe not only city boarder changes, but it’s nature. City boarders become more and more insightful and explicit pulsating nature. This circumstance gives a reason to some scholars to say it’s impossible for city to be theorized as a whole – “the city has no completeness, no centre, no fixed parts” [5], and we cannot agree anyway.

But market relations standing also accompanied by increasing social inequality level in Russian post-soviet cities. This phenomenon has clear manifestations of urban space [6]. Urban space transformation has been conditioned by high-income population groups which seek to settle in quite closed “settlement” as in urban periphery (and in suburb) as in core of the city.

Suburbanization and gentrification processes in most Western countries went sequentially, but big Russian cities have overlay of this processes. Rather, high-income population groups in big Russian cities increase their presence by displacement of low-income population groups in core of the city. Gentrification in Russia as in Western countries is limited to some areas (frequently city blocks), even in most successful cities. But it’s necessary, because acute gentrification is a symptom of urban success [7]. It’s true in case to accept that gentrification assumes “the movement of rich, well-educated folks, the gentry, into lower-class neighborhoods, transforming a “declining” district into an expensive neighborhood with historic or hipster charm” [8, p 8]. The question arose, of course: what to do with low-income population groups? Our research gives a reason to agree with R. Florida that concentrated urban poverty is a far bigger problem than gentrification, because the worst consequences for the less advantaged occur in the far more disadvantaged neighborhoods [7].

But gentrification appears not only in segregation on the basis of the economic status, it is also creating “a cultural barrier between rich and poor, young and old” [8, p 9]. Of course, gentrification has its proponents (a majority) and opponents, who express discontent that commercial gentrification is destroying the local authenticity [8, p 81].

If we speak about suburbanization features in post-soviet big agglomerations, two main trends explicitly are observed. First trend relates to the appearance out of urban space bedroom community in suburban cottage villages. Second trend may not be clear identified, but relates to citizens that buy (or inherit) houses in countryside (“second houses” using time by time).

Another specific feature of suburbanization in post-soviet cities relates to suburban villages as phenomenon which massively appeared in late 50’s, early 60’s. The phenomenon of Russian dacha usually connected with suburbs [9; 10], but it’s possible another situation. So, Khabarovsk dachas are located not just in urban area, but in some cases they are part of urban areas.
We adhere to more traditional way about urban and spatial planning nature. First, city is a spatial system. Second, urban space is a intermingling subareas with different features (or economic, cultural, nature, power aspects). Third, urban space transformation processes have not only national specific, but regional specific. Finally, specific cultural features are formed in cities, which relied on specific identity [11], which based on urban and its districts features clarifying.

From the one hand, our opinion with understanding the city and urban space in this way, gives an opportunity to identify specific features of traditional objects in macro analyses as urbanization, suburbanization, gentrification and market (including market as exchange location), mobility and social justice, which closely and mutually related. From the other hand, theoretical concepts in modern macro analyses listed above about social phenomenon, allow for better understanding and explaining social groups behavior (common) inside urban space, meaning exactly these commons are active participants of area conversion (transformation).

3. Microurbanism: analytical tools

According to researcher’s opinion [12] which we completely share, refusing of rigid and fixed definition of “microurbanism” discovers opportunities of using analytical tools in different scientific studies, which helps to increase chances to understand urban space nature in permanent transformation. In our opinion, according to this approach at least we can bridge the gap in part between micro- and macroanalyses of urban space, and break some barriers between different disciplines.

Choosing and agreeing problem of different researching approaches presents for authors as fallows.

First, urban space like any space should be studied in parts, mean by districts. In this case, it is appropriate to use zoning tools, primarily socio-economic micro-zoning, which should be supplemented with vernacular zoning. However, it should be noted that urban space usually is not completely covered by districts grid. Lacunas always stay in, like wastelands in ex-residential development or abandoned industrial zones and agricultural lands.

Second, urban space is in the process of permanent changes, it becomes necessary to use the tools of microhistoric researches.

Third, due to the fact that urban space is an ensemble of social spaces (fields), there is a natural need to attract the tools of sociological research (primarily field research).

Fourth, if we want to understand the everyday life of residents in the context of urban space, hardly we can do it without using anthropological methods. Lifestyle and behavior of various types of citizens, urban communities identify and their inherent socio-cultural environment are analyzed by using exactly anthropological methods.

Fifth, social space of the city is based on natural or physical space [6]. Therefore, we will have to admit that any large city (and often medium and even small) has rather complex landscape structure. And if it is the case, it is necessary to use landscape research tools.

Finally, traditional methods of economic and statistical analysis should not be neglected. First of all, we are talking about zoning urban spaces, but not only them. Obviously, one should also remember about commercial researches, as well as place marketing tools. Otherwise, it is unlikely to understand co-evolution of business strategies and transformation processes in urban space, including behavioral patterns of local consumers. After all, in the increasingly competitive environment of large cities, companies are caught “between terms of contradictory alternatives: on the one hand, they must play the card of proximity, “stick” to the territory, that is to say the grid to respond to residential and employment locations, and transport focal points, on the other hand, they must respond to the practices of “commercial vagrancy”, of consumers’ wandering” [13, p 18].

However, following to M. Storper, we have to admit the problem of combining a complex set of research techniques and knowledge about urban economy, people and urban spaces. And it is possible to achieve “that can only be brought together using a lot of good sense to combine the partial insights from different specialized tools” [14]. In addition to common sense, study of complex social relationships that construct urban spaces requires a high level of disciplinary flexibility.
4. Khabarovsk as a model object
The study of Khabarovsk was interested to us in two aspects. The first one is how the urban space was transformed, and the second one is how the space of informal street trade in the city is organized.

Obviously, in order to understand the space of a city like Khabarovsk, first you need to determine its place in Russian cities typology, at least. The fact that there are many typologies of urban settlements does not mean that we cannot try to adapt certain typologies for the purposes of our research. Let's start with the fact that Khabarovsk can be attributed to a number of large cities (i.e. with populations over 500 thousand people), but Far Eastern macro-region scale identifies Khabarovsk with Vladivostok to the largest cities. No doubt, it is also (especially by the standards of the Far East) a historical city, and also a capital city [15].

First, we should describe Khabarovsk's urban space as a “socialist city”. Main aim of “socialist city” (and Khabarovsk is not the exception) was to organize a production; the criteria for its rationality were determined by enterprise tasks (industrial in the first place) which were located in the city. Therefore, the urban space was organized in a way to provide the most favorable conditions for industrial (production) enterprises. It is not a huge exaggeration to say that Khabarovsk is also an “industrial city”. A typical situation about forming settlements around a large industrial enterprise or group of enterprises was used to. Urban space can be described as follows: “center” – the concentration of administrative functions, “periphery” – factory settlements, mainly built up by barracks. It is curious that in close-to-factory towns used the same “center-periphery model”.

The urban space was a conglomerate of poorly connected socio-economic areas with the “center”, which mainly were vernacular areas at the same time, which means the inhabitants of these areas fully aware their identity. Poor connection between districts was caused by underdeveloped road system, extremely low level of public transport organization, and almost without personal transport. There were often empty spaces between districts in urban space, occupied by wastelands, vegetable gardens, suburban settlements, and even agricultural lands (see details in [16]).

However, there was also some kind of closure of space within inner-city areas: most formed of them had their own cultural center, stadium, clinic, communication Department. Educational institutions were usually located in factory settlements, which studied personnel for the main enterprise. That’s why trips from the peripheral areas to the “center” of the city were a holiday. Trips to other areas (other than the “center”) of the city were extremely rare.

A special type of socio-economic areas was “military towns” (Bolshoy Aerodrom, Krasnaya Rechka, Baza KAF), which were some kind of enclaves in the urban space.

Khabarovsk was almost devoid of suburbs (suburbia) until the end of the Soviet period. At the same time, since the end of the 1950s, the mass creation of various gardening associations – “dachas”, including the city limits, has begun. Agricultural activities have become an organic part of urban space. In this respect, Khabarovsk (but not only this city) demonstrates some kind of inversion specifics of suburbanism, when non-urban activities are included in the urban space.

The analysis of historical documents, including cartographic ones, makes possible to trace the main directions of transformation in Khabarovsk urban space. The addition of traditional methods of spatial analysis (zoning and regionalization) with the results of anthropological and sociological research could provide an opportunity not only to describe, but also to explain the socio-cultural context of changes in Khabarovsk space. And landscape research allows to fit changes in urban space into the natural context. However, there is currently an extreme shortage of relevant research. Therefore, authors had to pay special attention to observations, because observation is an empirical confirmation, no worse than any other [17].

Cities and “commercial field” are linked by an extremely complex web of relationships [13]. However, both formal and informal trade generally perform the same set of functions (in addition to the actual trade – cultural, entertainment, etc.), and involve the same set of actors. It was necessary to clearly distinguish between formal and informal street trade in field researches, but that was not an easy target.
Along the entire route of the study, which was more than 80 km, the city streets were monitored for the informal markets location that mainly sell agricultural products. All administrative districts of the city were monitored, as well as the nearest towns and villages adjacent to the city borders. A thorough city monitoring identified areas that have large informal markets, as well as lacuna areas in informal trade case.

1.5 years monitoring allowed to determine the permanent locations of informal trade in the city, i.e. markets that are opened every day all year round and are not sensitive to the seasonality factor (only the number of sellers and product range changes). Monthly monitoring allowed to determine how informal markets respond to external incentives: which markets stop working in winter time and which continue to work, how sellers react to weather changes, how trade changes during coronavirus infection, and so on. Sellers’ behavioral patterns are influenced by various variables: involvement in a particular market or trading alone, they trade from a personal car or they are looking for a place in the informal market, and so on. The study also identified social connections between participants in informal trade to assess their nature and impact on the work of informal markets.

Informal trade locations are represented in all major city districts. However, number of such places of sale is very limited in the city center. Of course, this is due to the strict regulatory impact of law enforcement and other authorities, mainly aimed to prevent the reduction of the aesthetic value of the historical part of the city due to the presence of informal street vendors. Number of informal markets is much higher in other areas. Taking into account the sellers focus on maximum trading efficiency, it is not surprising that most markets are located close to public transport stops and transport hubs.

Various agricultural products are widely represented on the territory of the city, which is due to the presence of extensive agricultural land and a large number of dachas and subsidiary farms in the suburbs of Khabarovsk (at the peak value in July 2019, more than 40 markets of agricultural products were marked). As well as agricultural products such as seedlings, seeds, potatoes for planting, onions, etc., which creates a “market inside a market” for actors.

5. Conclusion
If we have a desire to understand and to explain changes in urban space structure, as any another social space, it would necessary to research in parts, meaning in districts, areas and another territory entity. Following to aim about understanding mechanisms of urban space transformation, inevitably we conclude delimitation problem. In our view, we should look for the balance between parameters, from the one hand, which describe main urban sub-systems (social, economic, political, spiritual), and, from the other hand, which describe external nature condition. Speaking about external nature, we mean not only place and role of particular city in society spatial organization, but the way how urban space is included in physiographic (landscape) space. In this way, fundamental importance is the awareness that carrying out urban space delimitation one should not look for exact boundaries for inner-city areas, districts etc.

Another problem is coordination of formal and informal development institutions of urban agglomeration. Perhaps, one should first understand what the system of socio-territorial communities is, that had developed inside agglomeration, or a set of vernacular (ordinary) areas. Here it is opportune to remind J. Jacobs: “formal public organizations in cities require an informal public life underlying them, mediating between them and the privacy of the people of the city” [18]. This is true not only for great American cities, but also for Russian ones.

6. References
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