Rivers, urban community and production of space

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Abstract. The article studies the characteristics of a river in a city as a special type of an urban environment object, which defines a special type of spatiality. The access of the community to the production of city space through the production of river space is considered. The authors analyze whether the river can be a catalytic space for the urban community, which allows it to better cope with this role than other spaces do, and how the potential of rivers can be used in the production of urban space.

Key words: production of space; formation of/building the urban environment; urban community; rivers in the city

Over the past few years, the topic of interaction between rivers and cities has been raised in a number of works and projects, the purpose of which was to conceptualize this interaction. Four examples of this will be analyzed in this essay. The authors of the examples use a direct approach to study the belonging of the river to the city and try to define those relations that determine the characteristics, properties, belonging, and identity of the river. And through this understanding, as well as through spatial practices, the authors enter the role of a subject, whose position, even if they took it before, they did it unconsciously.

In this essay, we consider rivers in the context of access to the conscious production of space, expanding the awareness of citizens' agency through interaction with rivers. Thus, the object of our study will not be the classical examples of the improvement of the areas, closest to the water, carried out by the executive power or at its initiative. That is, we will not consider the already established ways of representing space [1]. Rather, we are interested in non-standard practices of comprehending and mastering space and grassroots initiatives that are not the dominant way of producing space. We are interested in studying the space user’s possibility of becoming a subject in the context of interaction with rivers.

To do this, we will consider 4 examples of the implementation of such practices. Two of them are studies aimed at understanding the interconnection between a city and its rivers, a river in the context of a city and a city considered through a river. The first example is a study by the Civil Engineering laboratory conducted by Petr Ivanov in Krasnoyarsk, examining the connection between the city and the Yenisey [2]. The second is a study of the interaction between Kharkov and its rivers, conducted by the students of the "Kharkov School of Architecture" under the leadership of Dmitry Zaets [3]. The two remaining examples can be
attributed to the civil initiative and appropriation of the physical space of rivers by the city people. This is the project "Let's return the rivers to the city", within the framework of which it is planned to improve 22 rivers of the city of Izhevsk. The project is being implemented by the city community, by local residents, volunteers, business representatives, experts [4]. We will also consider an example of an urban planning conflict which occurred during the reconstruction of the Vologda River embankment and which consolidated the city community during its discussion and solution, the conflict, which still continues with varying degrees of intensity and is not fully resolved [5].

These examples demonstrate different types of interaction between the citizens and the urban environment through the rivers. The first two examples are closely connected with the spaces of representation. The citizens worry and try to understand the spatial practices that have developed around the respective rivers. If we study these rivers in the context of interaction with the urban community, it turns out that neither in the first nor in the second case do these rivers completely belong to it, are subordinate to it, or appropriated by it. But in each case, the reasons for this are different. In both cases, the subordination of the river to the urbanized world took place, and it is no longer perceived as an exclusively natural object. However, in the case of Kharkov, this subordination is associated primarily with formal power, transferring the characteristics of environmental degradation to the management system, which causes a desire to maintain distance in relations with the river. The representations of space here still remain in the hands of all the same formal institutions, which do not worry that the townspeople are not involved in the spatial solutions. In case of the Yenisey, the non-appropriation of space by the city people is more likely a consequence of the river’s scale. As Petr Ivanov notes: "The variety of disparate meanings associated with the river and the city is not united in simple, clear and easily translated cultural codes. [2]" The plurality of the Yenisey, the impossibility to subjugate it completely, also include its common belonging to the community. By setting the urban background, denoting its presence, giving rise to various spatial practices, the Yenisey remains included in the life of the urban community. An attempt to comprehend it in the context of research sets out a transition into the representation of space as its goal, although it is still difficult to implement it here in a unitary way.

The examples of Vologda and Izhevsk demonstrate an attempt at a more articulated transition of the community to representations of space. The similarity of goal-setting in these cases lies in the awareness of this transition. And the difference is that in the case of Vologda it is associated with an overabundance of formal power represented in the space, and in the case of Izhevsk, a lack of it. Thus, in both cases, the community, guided by different motivations, is trying to find a replacement for the governance institutions, traditional for Russia.

In all cases, we study the interaction of the community with the space of the city as a whole urban environment. Rivers, in this case, act as a mediator of such a connection. Therefore, the following questions become relevant: Can a river be a space-catalyst for the activity of the urban community? If so, what allows it to handle this role better than other spaces? How can the potential of rivers be used in the production of the city space?

How can a river form social connections?
In order to qualify for the position of a space catalyst for urban activity, a river must form social bonds. Here we will try to determine this property of a river and its predisposition to it. A river can be considered as a unique object of the urban environment. Historically, the properties of this object made it possible to classify it as an infrastructure object, namely transport routes with their inherent transit qualities. This made it possible to endow rivers with purely utilitarian properties, because of which rivers acted as “non-places”. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of this object in the urban environment, formed in the intersection of its natural characteristics and their anthropogenic use and transformation, allows the rivers to act as a space-forming object. And most often at present this type of spaciousness is perceived by the community as public. The
examples that are being studied demonstrate that the contradictions between the official and desired status provoke activist practices of the community aimed at appropriating this space.

But it is the perception of a river as a public space (or rather, not the river itself, but the space that is assigned to it, but for brevity the term “river space” will be used below) that opens up the potential for building new subject-subject relations through the functional use of a river.

However, the river stands out from other similar spaces. And, first of all, this uniqueness stems from the combination of the exceptional natural qualities of rivers and their anthropogenic subordination. A river belongs to both the natural world and the human world to the same extent. Therefore, the river space is filled with many meanings. And on the one hand it has the properties of environmental friendliness, ecosystems, geography belonging, purity and nature. On the other hand, the river is used as an infrastructure facility, and, at the same time, as a space with recreational potential. Due to this, a river combines the functions and values of different worlds, it suggests immersion in the context of completely diverse spatial practices. The river can be present both as a subject and as an object, and even demonstrate its agency in these interactions. The described multidimensionality of the river makes it, on the one hand, commensurate with the urban community from the point of view of the multidimensionality of the values contained in it, and on the other hand, commensurate with the city space, due to its functional multidimensionality. These properties allow a river to take the position of a mediator in the interaction of the community and the urban environment. And they define a river as a fluid object that defines fluid spatiality [6].

Getting into a given space of flows, other subjects acquire the ability to follow the rules they establish, to fit into the production of this space by using new practices, modifying the space, transforming it without destruction. This increases the potential of interaction, opens new opportunities, not defined by the formalities of relations.

How can a river build trust?

But for a full entry into the role of a mediator, to increase the degree of awareness in the production of space, for the transition of the urban community to the status of a subject, involved in the representations of space, in addition to the contexts of interaction set by the multidimensionality (pushing a dialogue about the various states of the urban environment), the rules for this interaction should be created, taking into account the possibility of transition to real changes. And speaking of public participation, this format of interaction implies a dialogue between “different people about different things”. And its transition into a constructive channel presupposes trust as the basis of this dialogue. And it is the trust, primarily institutional, that the Russian society traditionally experiences a deficit of, which freezes all spheres of social interaction [7].

Openness, honesty and equality contribute to the formation of trust. And a river has the potential to build a dialogue taking into account such qualities. Through the multidimensionality, through the intertwining of different functions and values in the context of discussing the river space, it becomes possible to switch to topics sensitive for the community (topics sensitively perceived by the urban community, which have a high potential for transition into an urban conflict), to access them through topics that are easier for perception and dialogue, eliminating (or minimizing) the possibility of a conflict.

By translating participatory/involved design into the format of federal-level tools (for example, the federal project "Formation of a Comfortable Urban Environment" (http://government.ru/projects/selection/649/) considers "the involvement of citizens in the implementation of the improvement projects" as one of the key performance indicators, and the Moscow program "My District" declares the participation of residents as one of the main values (https://www.sobyanin.ru/districts), we have learned to build a dialogue with the urban community in the process of renovating public spaces and courtyards. And within the framework of the application of this tool, the city people take the position of a subject more and more often when gaining access (albeit limited)
to the tools for representing space. But this option is only available in the context of spaces and functions for leisure and everyday life. When focusing on other types of spaces, the transition to the subject position often means entering the conflict zone. Such spaces and related topics include environmental (for example, the construction of incinerators), housing (renovation and demolition of the Soviet housing stock), retail and entertainment (both the construction of new and the demolition of old objects), etc. Thus, with the general focus on "controlled" involvement, there remains a whole gray zone of taboo city functions, the access to discussion and management of which is not available to the community.

A river has the potential to bring these topics together in a single space for discussion, and to make the transition from the “simple” topics (for example, public spaces) to sensitive ones (for example, to the environmental agenda), gradually introducing them into public understanding and improving the skill of discussing and developing joint solutions of these problems.

How can the potential of rivers be used in the production of urban space?

All the examples considered here, which served as the basis for this reflection, demonstrate an escape from everyday spatial practice, entry into the subject position of the participants, both through comprehension and through the action corresponding to it. In other words we can document not only the fact of actors' transition to an attempt to contemplate the spaces of representation, but we can also document move to the representation of these spaces, the ones, that now allow their full-fledged production.

But, the difference from the formal practices of the production of space here is the expanded public access to it. And this becomes possible only if the following conditions are met: (1) involvement of as many opinions as possible in the dialogue; (2) a dialogue based on a discussion of real issues; (3) a respectful dialogue, built on mutual trust between the participants.

Rivers have the potential for constructing such an interaction, due to their properties of multidimensionality, fluidity, which we tried to describe in this essay.

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