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Humanistic Idea of a Micro-District in the XX Century

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The article presents a retrospective view on the development of a 'micro-district' social-planning conception in the XX century. Comprehension of humanistic ideas of Soviet society about residential environment at different stages of development is given a special focus. Rate of science branches development influencing residential environment formation has been growing since the middle of the XX century. Combination of ethic, scientific, political and legal discussions about urbanization influence on the environment, scientific achievements in philosophy, sociology, ecology as well as modern population's informative and intellectual awareness growth result in search for a micro-district improvement adapt to modern conditions of an individual's existence in urbanization environment. Russian and foreign scholars have come to the conclusion that a person's modern habitat must develop within the limits of a deep "interdisciplinary" approach with the purpose of its persistent perfection. Philosophic understanding of a micro-district as a residential place determines social importance of future micro-districts design and existing micro-districts reconstruction. The article provides theoretical grounds for the tendencies of residential environment transformation by the beginning of the XXI century.

Keywords: urbanization, micro-district, residential environment, humanism, community, need, availability.

Point

The majority of Russian population's dissatisfaction with their *residential environment at the beginning of the XXI century proves that the problem of residential environment humaneness is severely impeding the country, society and an individual's development and that its solution has been pushed into a set of the state's priority tasks¹.*

Being regarded as the world-outlook based on philanthropy and an individual's self-respect, humanism is connected with a wide range of

human activities. One of humaneness maintenance conditions in the society is formation of moral-and-ethic forms of existence. The concept of *residential environment humaneness* changes simultaneously with the society development, thus reflecting the state's policy, the society's level of economic development, social processes (Kuvakin, 2002).

The cities' growth, worsening of the housing problem in the XX century resulted in search for the principles of the population's comfortable housing environment. Both socially important

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problems such as the problem of cheap houses for the working class meeting sanitary and hygienic comfort requirements and the problems of *residential environment's* functional, rational, technical, esthetic, economic and ecological tasks solution were faced (Krainyaya, 2009, Kiyanko, 2009).

In this regard the experience of transformation of humanistic ideas of residential territories planning in Russian urban design applied to form future development strategies is of great interest. The object of this research is a micro-district as an established principle of residential territories formation in Russian urban design.

Example

At the beginning of the XX century, a period of urbanization process development in the USSR, the problem of safe and comfortable urban life organization was urgent. The goal of urbanization was heavy engineering construction that was carried out at the cost of the population's living standards decline. Temporary "barracks settlements" with the population up to hundreds thousands people quickly grew around factories. Their existence period extended over decades. The housing problem was defined by urban population's growth accompanied by "strained" living standards and the objective of consecutive improvement of residential conditions for working people. Cities' old districts were the system of private houses and grounds with household effects with such a density when the population was deprived of recreation places, non-ventilated yards appeared, and residential areas lacked light and air. The solution of housing and social as well as socially important everyday problems was also urgent (Meyerovich, 2009). The idea of humane residential environment at that period was close to the idea of "survival" – that is the population's deliverance from insanitary urban residential conditions for working people.

Prehistory of a "residential" quarter formation in Krasnoyarsk started in 1929 when they considered the issue of well-appointed houses for the working class, the so called "a stone quarter", destined to replace existing wooden constructions with stone ones. The adopted resolution stated that "burning housing crisis (especially in working class districts) forcing to build private houses that do not meet hygienic and everyday life requirements is one of the reasons of private property development, overgrowth and non-planning that lead to ignorance, disorganization and narrow-mindedness but not to the working class's cultural upbringing and organisation"². A set of measures was suggested for the quickest implementation of a stone quarter building issue into practice. These were "working class involvement into building the houses by means of monetary funding into the a stone quarter building" and leading explanatory discussions "among the working class on the importance of building stone quarters for the working class that switch from narrow-mindedness and private property to cultural upbringing and organisation of people and to women's emancipation from cooking and old mode of life" (Tsarev, Krushlinsky, 2001). The idea of culture and everyday life organization in the cities changed radically. That led to a historical quarter extension due to the inclusion of social and everyday service objects. The whole vital activity process (an individual's everyday life, labour, rest) became common. Humanism meant the unity of an individual and the society on the way to maximum satisfaction of their demands. Desire for everyday life "socialization" manifested itself in kids' co-upbringing in the society, public catering and combination of an individual part of the house with common premises. These had to satisfy personal everyday life needs and lead to the society members' harmonious physical and intellectual development. Thus, new functions and objects non-peculiar to a quarter structure

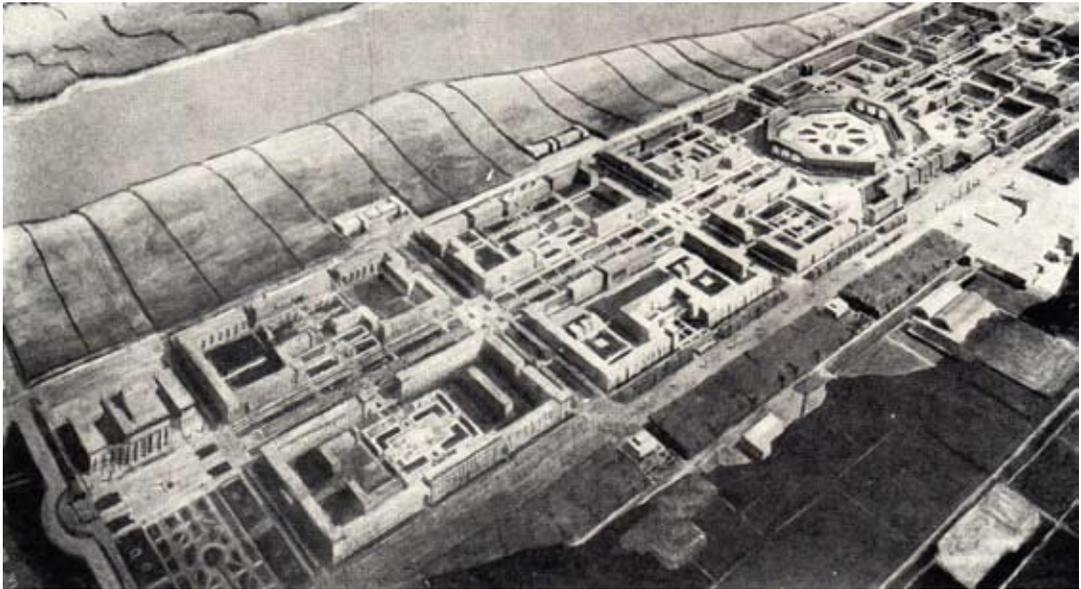


Fig. 1. The planning scheme of an extended residential quarter of a machine building plant on Krasnoyarskiy Rabochiy Av. (the architect – Gokhlib). (The illustration is taken from “Architecture in the USSR” – №1. – M., 1936. – P. 15))

such as educational, public catering, trade and public space institutions, sports areas and quarter kindergartens were introduced to extended city quarters.

Little by little the issue of people’s private and social life planning organization turned up in an extended quarter conception. The search for functional content of a planning unit nucleus and its main constituents began. A.M. Mostakov (1936) differentiates “public space” into “interdistrict” and “intradistrict” ones in which a public centre formed a space between residential quarters with schools’ physical training areas, canteens, active recreational areas and preschool institutions and passive recreational areas inside residential quarters³. It became obvious that it is impossible to efficiently organize a well-developed system of public everyday services in an extended quarter. As for perimeter building, it can’t provide a favourable orientation of all the flats regarding sun exposure and noise (Fig. 1).

“Micro-district” planning conception was implemented as an alternative to a “quarter”

structure of an industrial city. Professional community started their creative search for optimum volume-planning solutions improving the level of cultural and consumer services for the population. “They ran the experiments from simple schemes of a micro-district theoretical pattern implementation to design of residential territories full-value plannings which were improved in accordance with the society’s scientific and technical and economical development”⁴ (Kukina, 2006) (Fig. 2).

After the Great Patriotic War it was vital to provide a high percentage of the population with individual flats in the shortest period of time. So, the concept “demand” became the main one. At that time the humaneness of the environment was understood as equality in demand satisfaction and reduction of “waiting for one’s own flat effect”. They began searching for more efficient residential formation in urban constructions satisfying the population’s demands in guaranteed socially important objects within physically accessible boundaries. In the 1950-s

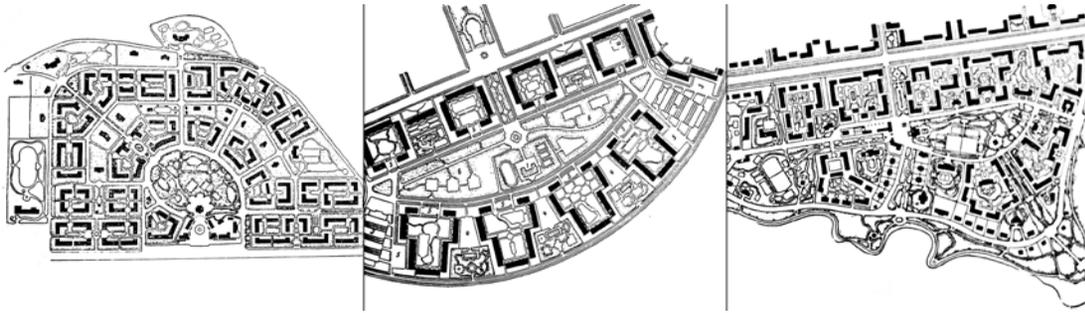


Fig. 2. Experimental projects of micro-districts in 1947 (from the author's archives)

there followed an original hailstorm of party-and-state resolutions and meetings devoted to residential environment problem (“On further industrialization, quality improvement and building cost reduction measures” dated August 23, 1955; “On elimination of design and building extravagances” resolution dated November 4, 1955; “On residential building development in the USSR” resolution dated July 31, 1956; the third All-Russia builders’ meeting in April, 1958, Khrushchev’s speech on the necessity to speed up reorganization in architecture). The key moment in micro-districts planning was unification and standardization of residential environment design process. Khan-Magometov in his article “Khrushchev’s utilitarianism: pluses and minuses” mentions that Khrushchev’s methods in design and building spheres drew a wide response and led to many positive results including fundamental ones and helped to solve many housing problems. “Khrushchev tried and managed to stop sliding down to abyss under the conditions of a growing housing crisis. That was one of a few social problems that party-and-state structure of the Soviet power period not only declared in its resolutions but managed to achieve positive results. From the end of the 1950-s a continued increase in the number of houses that were being built began. Initially the decline of residential areas standards was

stopped, and then their growth began” (Khan-Magomedov, 2005: 25). In the 1960-s public building of economical houses started. The search for the reserves to cut off the cost of one square meter of a residential area to its cost in the houses with a room settlement inevitably led to a lesser residential comfort (the storey height became lower, thorough-passage rooms appeared, bathroom units included a toilet, sizes of subsidiary premises became smaller). Moreover, the citizens stopped being their residential environment creators, industry system was totally isolated from the future residents depriving them of any possibility to participate in planning-and-building process or influence its results, thus turning an individual into an uncomplaining, passive “consumer”. Industrial lodging didn’t answer to the inhabitants’ diversification, their demands, mode of life, cultural standards and forced to accommodate to this discrepancy at the cost of serious social and psychological side-effects. According to Yu.L. Kosenkova’s research, letters to architects and government were one of the means to become aware of the population’s opinion during the period of heated discussions about an industrial method. For the Soviet urban design that was one of rare cases of “the reverse relationship” with the population. Lively voices of millions of people were not heard, as a rule. It was the state that formed a social order and



Fig. 3 The scheme of “Predmostniy (Bridgehead)” micro-district planning in Krasnoyarsk. (from the archives of Krasnoyarsk Civil Project)

decided what the population needed and what they could do without. The discussed issues worried all the social layers from housewives to higher education institutions’ lecturers and professors. The letters displayed ordinary everyday common sense that made the authors of the letters be on alert regarding a new housing policy introduced by the government. “Common feeling running through the letters, that is false technical-and-economic criteria in the base of a new house model, was actually far away from the advanced “conveniences for an individual” slogan, and it will cause new problems in the nearest future”⁵ (Fig. 3).

Industrialization epoch is the time of system-and-structural, hierarchical and standardized models of society and culture supremacy when a public consumer was taken into account. Practical tasks of communism formation formulated in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Programme defined social demands and Soviet urban design orientation. The society, demographically presented as “the population”, was dismembered into the groups with supposedly similar housing demands. The society was seen as a clear typological

society organization. As a result, this model led to meeting the construction industry’s requirements and their dominance over an individual’s interests and society’s humanistic interests (Kiyanenko, 2009). The ideas of residential environment humaneness were “verified” and “studied” in numerical indices. Residential environment of industrialization epoch didn’t reflect a phenomenological essence of a “humane” space that springs up from a definite situation: place-and-time, society and an individual’s isolation. The reasons of psychological discomfort consisted in breach of stable ties of a micro-district’s “inner” nature with a spatial system of a site development. Besides, in micro-districts formation practice most types of services are not connected with active social contacts (except rare cases of kids’ “social” upbringing). Humanism became a “physically” needed quality and manifested itself in the desire for residential environment humanization, making it more individual and focused on individuals’ participation in its formation (Fig. 3a).

The principle of vital activity formation based on tough functional division of a city territory



Fig. 3a. An industrialization epoch micro-district view: present state (the author's archive)

into zones and on a stage system of service that was criticized by professional architects in the 60-s already. The system of a three-stage service was criticized for its inability to “programme” an individual’s behavioral aspect. Numerous research at the beginning of the 70-s proved that the population used on-the-way-home or on-the-way-to-work services more willingly. That’s why transit junctions and public transport stops at the places of work more often determined the choice of sites for large trade and public structures. Speaking about a tough “everyday life – work – leisure” doctrine, the critics observed that in reality a city serves a single material-and-spatial environment in which complex industrial, cultural and everyday processes take place. Due to them people of different social and demographical strata are involved in various relations, in life of various groups and communities and do not isolate in one territory or a city’s functional zone. “The minimalist approach and a three-stage service in micro-districts at the end of the 50-70-s of the XX century resulted in a spontaneous formation of both social-business-trade and

suburban logistic territories on open territories” (Kukina, 2005)⁶ (Fig. 4).

At the end of the 1970-80-s the growth of construction industry capacities intensified again in Soviet architecture. A significant increase in the number of storeys led to the loss of a ‘human’ scale, space-and-meaningful residential environment structures destruction. The architectural science was undoubtedly conscious of the problem of house building aggressiveness with its monochromatic and monotonous nature and the problem of social contacts but nothing was overcome in practice. A special attention was given to improvement of industrial habitation typification methodology and planning composition of residential environment. The idea of a micro-district gave rise to the criticism against social life imperfection, inability to reflect the complexity of social, economic and technical problems causing unsatisfactory sanitary and hygienic conditions, transport difficulties, substantial waste of time, people’s dissociation at extraordinary dull site development.



Fig. 4. II “Predmostniy (Bridgehead)” micro-district in Krasnoyarsk. The scheme of functions concentration (the author’s archive)

Humane residential space is not only a comfortable residential cell. Residential environment is regarded as an outward, supplementary part of a habitat including the territory near the house and public gardens, streets, lanes, yards where people’s everyday and recreational demands are satisfied

(Krashennikov,1988; Anisimova,2002; Krainyaya,2009). Throughout the decades a yard territory had been an integral part of a habitat where an individual’s everyday life and leisure flourished. Industry development resulted in the fact that a yard gradually lost its original predestination and turned into a transit between a public transport stop and a private flat. A yard elimination is connected with side-effects in life organization, causing a set of severe social-and-psychological consequences for a subsequent generation. Vast and amorphous territories inside a residential area belong to all the houses and to none of them at the same time. A person’s consciousness is unable to visually identify any part of this merely non-differentiated inactive

territory with his own place of residence. As a result such areas remain no man’s and undeveloped areas and provoke vandalism. Moreover, such planning organization of a habitat often turns into thriftless use of precious city areas. It doesn’t form a person’s constant affection towards a definite place where he lives, where he was born and brought up (especially it concerns a person starting his life) (Pozdniakova, 2010). (Fig. 5)

“Starting from the middle of the 1980 many researchers formed alternative views on the residential environment development and the housing problem solution, focusing mainly on cultural diversities, the population’s mode of life, geographic, ethnographic and national peculiarities of this or that place”⁷⁷ (Kukina, Pozdniakova, 2010). The necessity of a different “everyday life – work – recreation” triad interpretation is realized as a very serious matter since a tough linkage of life to the place of work as well as precise “structurization” of everyday life and recreation reveal their imperfection. The increase in conversion percentage of industrial



Fig. 5 The residential environment site of the “Airport” planning district, Krasnoyarsk. Modern state (the author’s archive)

enterprises and “selectivity” towards work are observed. These result in substantial changes in the places of work structure. At the beginning and in the middle of the century “work” was mainly associated with industrial territories. Otherwise, by the end of the century the rate of the employees in the spheres of administration, service, science, recreation industry sharply grew in number. That involves the breach of working places proportions and consequently the population’s everyday inner migrations according to “working place – home” scheme. A micro-district connection with a working place turned out to be groundless, depriving a person of the right to choose. Urbanization is no more directly dependent on industrialization; scientific production, service, administration and cultural branches development is the most important source of large cities growth; a city’s multifunctionalism becomes its main feature. It is in the 1980-s when they started speaking about the necessity of the mechanisms that provide

harmonization of a city’s architecture and human expectations and preferences, cultural standards and values. The “environmental design” term had strengthened its positions. In Soviet architecture a public consumer’s consciousness was recognized as a real factor (studied non-thoroughly in many aspects) that had to be taken into account but not an object for manipulation (Krainyaya 2009).

At present an interdisciplinary approach to a residential environment study is being formed in the urban design theory. A micro-district is becoming an object for the research by sociologists, engineers, ecologists, economists, philosophers and other scientists. Ecological-and-environmental approach to a micro-district design is gaining its force. The approach is based on a social identity restoration and biological identity preservation. Appeal to “real demands” and their variety is becoming urgent. Philosophic understanding of a residential space as the area for individuals’ existence raises social importance of a micro-district community. Residential

environment must be formed out of a definite programme of the residents' behaviour, that is in accordance with social processes in it. Thus, combinations of the space boundaries depend on social stages of behaviour: a personal space (an owner's territory) for independent "creative" self-realization development, physically closed but often visually looked through; private space (a group of owners' space) as a space for communication with close people demand realization, a controlled and open one; public space (common space) as a space where an individual is a mass events participant involved in the community's life (Iovlev, 2006). At present humanism is expressed in the desire to make a residential environment "social" by nature. Urban space forms must protect, give possibilities for self-expression, functional sufficiency of a space for each social group of the population as well as to facilitate contacts between them. In regard to the mentioned above, target and flexible design flourishes, that is civil building takes local peculiarities of a residential environment formation into account and promptly reacts to the changes that arise.

Resume

Ideas of social meaning of a habitat and residential environment humanism were introduced to the projects of elementary residential units planning at various stages of architectural conception of a micro-district.

At the beginning of the XX century, a period of urbanization process, the problem of equipping a place of habitation with elementary sanitary and hygienic devices was acute. Understanding of humane environment was close to the concept of "survival", that is deliverance of the mankind from insanitary living conditions.

In the postwar period understanding of humane environment moved to the concept of "equality" in satisfaction of an individual's private

residential place demands. Equality and sameness of residential places and residential environment was mainly provided due to typification and industrialization of architectural and construction activity that replaced the "embellishment" of the cities characteristic to "Stalin's empire style".

Industrialization development caused an opposite tendency – humanism became a "physically" needed quality that was expressed by the aspiration for a residential environment humanization and shaping its individual character.

At present the main residential environment problems of large cities manifest themselves in certain functional inconveniences, psychological and ecological discomfort: in complicated use of house-side territories, in complexity of transport means movement and parking, in visual aggressiveness and pollution of the environment, in absence of social contacts. With this regard a micro-district must be considered "a living organism" with continuous development and perfection when every individual has the right to creativity, self-realization and protection. The experience of earlier-built micro-districts functioning indicates the necessity of a residential environment "adaptive" planning in accordance with the population's real demands.

Generalized conception of a "humane" micro-district of the end of the XX – beginning of the XXI century must be based upon the revision of the relations between spatial-and-functional and social-and-economic aspects. Multi-functional residential territories development, shaping the interaction between people belonging to different circles in order to achieve efficient development, residential environment individualization, ensuring social and physical accessibility, pedestrian friendly areas formation, formation of informal communities of the citizens, aspiration for ecological stability and historical-and-cultural heritage preservation become vital.

- ¹ In accordance with the Russian Statistical Annual – 2010. [Federal Service of the State Statistics]. [URL]: http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09_13/Main.htm (entry date 30.10.2011).
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Гуманистическая идея микрорайона в XX веке

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Статья посвящена ретроспективному рассмотрению развития социально-планировочной концепции «микрорайон» в XX веке. Основное внимание уделено осмыслению гуманистических представлений советского общества о жилой среде на разных этапах развития. Начиная с середины XX столетия нарастают темпы развития научных дисциплин, оказывающих влияние на формирование жилой среды. Сочетание этических, научных, политических и правовых дискуссий о влиянии урбанизации на окружающую среду, научные достижения в области философии, социологии, экологии, а также информатизация, интеллектуализация современного населения приводят к поиску концепций усовершенствования микрорайона, адаптированного к современным условиям существования человека в урбанизированной среде. В ряде отечественных и зарубежных исследований сделан вывод о том, что современная среда обитания человека должна развиваться в рамках глубокого «междисциплинарного» подхода с целью ее непрерывного совершенствования. Философское понимание микрорайона, как места жизненного пространства повышает социальную значимость проектирования будущих и реконструкции сложившихся микрорайонов. В статье дается теоретическое обоснование тенденций трансформации жилой среды к началу XXI века.

Ключевые слова: урбанизация, микрорайон, жилая среда, гуманизм, сообщество, потребность, доступность.
