

UDC 711

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## **SMALL HISTORIC TOWNS OF RUSSIA. PRESERVING ORIGINALITY AND IDENTITY**

**Abstract:** *The peculiarity of small Russian towns is in the predominance of old buildings, mostly quickly disappearing wooden ones. Nevertheless, they remain the basis of the construction fabric of settlements, predetermining preservation of a lot of features of the historically formed appearance of towns. The traditional features of life are preserved in small towns, adapting to a changing socio-cultural situation. Material and immaterial features form the basis of small towns' identity. It is important not only to maintain the material heritage, but also additional features in the forms compatible with the tasks of preserving the "spirit of the place". In small historic towns, the requirements of modern times are directed not "from traditions", but, conversely, to them.*

**Keywords:** *Russian small town, construction, originality, identity, spirit of the place, structure, maintenance, development.*

### **Introduction**

Nowadays issues of uniqueness and identity are relevant to a lot of historic towns. The core of the problems arising in relation to small Russian settlements lies in the predominance of a significant proportion of dilapidated old buildings, mainly wooden ones, which rapidly disappear due to their ramshackle state. A long period of program orientation of the country towards settlements agglomeration and the mass industrial house construction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the almost complete disappearance of the construction base to maintain and update the traditional buildings, which, gradually dilapidating, remain, nevertheless, the basis of the construction fabric of settlements. It is this fabric that predetermines the preservation of many features of the historically formed appearance characteristics of towns and their look, which the inhabitants are linked to, and which still charms visitors who find themselves in these towns.

New construction opportunities that appeared in the country in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century caused serious transformations of the existing environment of small towns, but only in rare cases this was aimed at maintaining the historic urban fabric. The quite seemingly legitimate process of settlements evolution turned out to be quite painful for their historically formed cultural content.

The problem of preservation and renewal, which is relevant for historic settlements all over the world, is becoming particularly acute for small Russian towns due to the above circumstances. Moreover, it is not only about preserving the endangered valuable historical objects of material heritage. The task of maintaining the important features of the structure and the appearance of a town, associated with ensuring the socio-cultural identity of urban communities, comes to the fore.

The issue of local and regional identity, which became the subject of close attention in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, acquired its relevance due to the ongoing processes of globalization. The difficulties of solving both the geopolitical and socio-cultural aspects of the problem became obvious. In the field of cultural heritage protection there is a danger for settlements to lose their identity. This was discussed by specialists in the 1990s, and later stated in a number of international documents, in particular, in the ICOMOS Declaration "Heritage as a Driver of

Development”, adopted at the 17th Assembly in Paris in 2011. The specificity of the current situation, as shown by G.S.Knabbe, is the presence of internal inconsistency of the identification problem. On the one hand, it was manifested as the psychologically demanded, “anthropologically and genetically defined ... property of the historical existence of humanity”, and on the other hand, the “socio-cultural basis of identification” is inevitably eroded today (Knabbe, 2006). This conflict commonly generates energetic efforts to maintain the historically formed cultural tradition and to preserve identity, but, at the same time, it generates simulacra, i.e. schematic imitations trying to compensate for a disappearing cultural phenomenon that is psychologically necessary for humanity.

The “fear of identity loss” (Ptichnikova, 2015) in the architecture of large cities forces to turn to regional and local architectural features, sometimes supporting them rather artificially. “Hybrids of globalization” aimed at rethinking the ideas of identity in the spirit of globalism are becoming attempts to maintain the tradition: thus, it is stated that “not locally determined differences and cultural identities, but artistic forms that are able to assert their own identity and stability equally and everywhere” are of relevance today. In such a formula, one topic is clearly replaced by another and the problem of identification, as an anthropogenetically given human need to associate themselves with a society of a certain scale and with the environment that is recognized as their own, is forced out.

In small towns the problem of globalization is still minimal, there is commitment to one’s place of residence and a sense of community with fellow citizens. It can be stated that this is typical for the European region as a whole, although the place of small towns in the settlement structure of Western Europe differs significantly from Eastern Europe. Having noticed this, the author will not turn to the Western European material. In Eastern Europe the situation is relatively homogeneous. The anthropological research (M. Draganova et al., 2002) showed that in small urban settlements in Poland, Bulgaria and Russia there is a persistent social identification of the population, in Poland and Russia (in lesser degree in Bulgaria) there is a strong emotional commitment to the place of residence.

The same was revealed by the large-scale socio-anthropological domestic studies of small Russian towns (‘We Live Here’, 2013; ‘Small Towns, Big Problems’, 2014). With the difficult economic situation of many of them, residents almost always are distinguished by their love for their town, they are proud of its history, monuments and landscape features. Older people often state that it is difficult for them to think about leaving their town. Young people also often admit that they are forced to leave the city due to the lack of a place to study or work.

### **Characteristic features of a small Russian town**

It is safe to say about the commitment of small town’s residents to their native settlements. It is important to understand what underlies such a commitment, how and in what way the problem of preserving a small town’s identity imposes its own requirements on architectural and town planning work in it. It should be mentioned that the anthropological and geographical studies, that the author of the article relies on, did not pursue architectural goals. The material presented below gives a different systematization and other, important for the architect, priorities in understanding the material.

The specificity of a small town is in its special position between the city and the village. The traditional way of life, with a slow pace of life and with stable kinship ties (as repeatedly noted by anthropologists) dominate in it. The value orientation of a small town’s community with its life modernization is largely based on the established traditions. This is a way of life that has absorbed a lot of common features of modern culture but has preserved its historically established features and its originality.

Having proposed such a general characteristic of the cultural situation in a small town, the author will try to analyze it in more detail. The available for analysis material gives an opportunity to present the situation in the following way. The social and cultural value of small

towns is associated with the traditional features of their life and with the complex of rooted historical and cultural values of their residents. The perception of these values of a town is manifested ambiguously depending on the observer's position. The key measure for a town residents is recognition of a town as "their own", i.e. the measure of self-identification; for outside observers the main value is in the external manifestation of the "spirit of the place" and in the image uniqueness of a settlement.

The research material indicates that all the aspects of a town's values (pragmatic, socio-cultural, historical and cultural) are interrelated. At the same time, the established lifestyle conditions affect the assessment of a town, but they are not of defining nature. Residents of towns without modern conveniences, which are in decline, still almost always love their towns and feel committed to them. Residents do not identify themselves on the basis of pragmatic values, but rather on the basis of the established historical and cultural traditions, although their life is organically linked with the characteristics of modern life.

The important for the local population components among the signs of "one's own" are, of course, architectural and natural sights, moreover, in their close connection with historical tales and legends, along with the features of urban morphology that have little meaning for outsiders. Trying to understand the essence of the phenomenon of small towns residents' self-identification, it is necessary, first of all, to repeat that this phenomenon includes both pragmatic and mental values. In most cases, residents love their town, regardless of its livability. A wide range of field studies of socio-geographical nature, presented, for example, by M.P. Krylov (2009) evidence that people love (or do not love) their land and their town, regardless of their well-being. The works of social anthropologists evidence of the same (in particular, the study by N.A. Antropova, 2014).

What turns out to be important for self-identification, what determines the perception of a town when looking "from the inside"?

First of all, the *psychological atmosphere* and the type of residents' behavior. Surveys reveal "the existence of a specific *Northern Russian* and *South Russians* self-consciousness usually denied by Russian ethnographers." This is superimposed by the awareness of the regional spatial component of identity ("Ryazan", "Tambov", etc.). And finally, the types of character prevailing in a particular town (noticed by M.P. Krylov and N. A. Antropova). The pace of residence characterizes psychological atmosphere. The statement of one resident is indicative: "I love Nizhny Lomov for nature and for being born and raised here, and for silence".

The next factor is *historical self-awareness*. A lot of respondents emphasize the "oldness" of their town. This, naturally, concerns not only small towns, but also settlements. There is an indirect evidence of recognition of the importance of "old". If a resident of Novomoskovsk, speaking of her love for the towns, says: "Though it is not old, but for 70 years it has its glorious history," she thereby recognizes the importance of the category "oldness". A resident of Plavsk says: "I do not want to move from Plavsk. But if I had to move, I would choose an ecologically clean area, a small old town." Concerning the problem of historical self-consciousness, N.A. Antropova notes the importance of the socio-cultural level of the first settlers, or those who constantly live in the territory. The significance of this circumstance, in her opinion, is determined by "stability in the behavior patterns transmission and ways of assessing the surrounding reality from generation to generation." It is quite obvious that the "sustainability of patterns" is essential for the formation of not only historical self-consciousness, but also the aforementioned types of behavior.

Cultural heritage plays an important role in shaping the psychological attitude of residents. Researchers noted that "residents of towns with a long history demonstrate a generally higher adaptation potential and higher social and cultural activity than residents of young towns" (We Live Here, 2013).

Historical consciousness has a significant mental component but is sensitive to the material signs of the presence of the heritage of the past. These are architectural and historic monuments, as well as local crafts, traditions of artistic creativity, etc.

The memory of the prominent personalities who lived in a town – artists, writers, and military leaders is always very significant. There are museums devoted to them, and streets and squares are named after them. One of the examples is street-alley of Kramskoy in Ostrogozhsk, where a small square in front of the Kramskoy museum was made, and a monument to the artist was put in the square. Researchers note that I.N. Kramskoy is the main name associated with the town, but residents also mention other people born in the town or associated with it. “Voronezh Athens” – residents like to repeat this name, describing the state of the town in the 18<sup>th</sup>, and especially 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Literary Square in the distant Cherdyn, with the memorial signs devoted to D.N. Mamin-Sibiriyak, O. Mandelstam and local poetess S. Volodina are worth mentioning.

Recently, Cherdyn has become a town of pilgrimage, as the place of the Perm Kraibaptism. A. Ivanov’s novel “The Heart of Parma or Cherdyn–the Princess of the Mountains” about the historical events of the 15<sup>th</sup> century became the story that enriches the residents’ identification. A kind of “mythological space” started to be formed in the town on the basis of this novel (We Live Here, 2013).

Along with the signs of historicity or antiquity, *the landscape properties* of the place are very important. If the resident of Lomov says that she loves the town “for nature”, this is still a rather vague statement. Sometimes during surveys this is specified as a commitment to a landscape. Often, they talk about the importance of the river in a town. Moreover, the river can be valued not only aesthetically, but as a monument to a town history. A number of urban legends is associated with the Mstoy River in Borovichi, its role as an important transport artery is kept in the memory, one of the symbols of the town is the old bridge on the river. The Sosna River in Ostrogozhsk is also important for the residents, it is connected with the history of the town and often mentioned in verses and memoirs.

In some cases, the landmark of a town may be located far from it. In Cherdyn, the main landscape landmark is Polyud Mountain, towering above the river panorama of the town and located 30 km from it. Legends are connected with it, it can be seen from any place in the town, and people forecast the weather on the basis of its visibility. Two hills in the town are also of importance. One of them is Troitskoe Gorodishche (the Trinity Settlement), where the wooden fortress was located, and next to it is Viatskii Holm (the Vyatka Hill), apparently, the place of the pagan sanctuary. Both hills are famous local landmarks. Landscape features are closely connected with history.

Signs of historicity are closely related to the perception of *aesthetic features* and *the beauty of the place*. In Borovichi, for instance, residents emphasize the beauty of their town, noting its recognition by other people. They love to say that “due to the places and buildings that have preserved its old provincial style, the town was the site for a number of films.”

However, the perception of the beauty of the place is not always associated with its age and its heritage. We have already mentioned the statement of the resident that she loves Novomoskovsk for the fact that this is a new developed town.

The theme of development and well-being dominates in the assessment of Voronezh Oblast by the residents of the town Liski, neighboring to the above-mentioned Ostrogozhsk. This is a young industrial town. The residents who support the image of a modern and developing town, which favorably differs from virtually all other regional centers of the region, are not at all confused by its young age. The researcher notes that there is no “golden age” in Liski’s historical identity, to be precise, its role is played by the present (Small Towns, Big Problems, 2014).

The comfort of the town is often mentioned, and it is supported not only by the utilitarian assessment. The comfort is not just convenient, it pleases the eye, it evidences of the welfare of the hometown. An uncomfortable living conditions, on the contrary, is a sign of backwardness. “Backwardness”, of course, can be seen in other things. M.P. Krylov provides data that the negative attitude to the general perception of a particular town as a symbol of “province” dominates among the respondents. The historical town is a positive assessment, but the “province”

and “outback” are perceived as a characteristic of backwardness. Although not always: there are statements that “our town is really provincial, and that is good.”

Studies, the author is familiar with, gives an opportunity to conclude that the same features may appear in a different light. It is generally difficult to capture some parts in the local value system. It is not by chance that many respondents emphasized that if you can explain why you love, it means that this is not love. It is apparent that generic connection with the place is important: “I was born here”, “My parents are here”, as well as marked by Antropova “the socio-cultural level of the first settlers or those who constantly live in the territory”. The paradox, however, is that among those who love their town, as shown by Krylov, a half of the residents recognize themselves as local “by birth”, and another half – “by conviction”. These are newcomers who loved this town and recognized it as “theirs”. Hence, the generic connection is important, but its consequences: the nature of behavior, the established system of values that turned out to be close to the newcomers, are also significant. The material features mentioned above are also of importance.

Summing up the information about the problem of town residents’ identification, it is necessary, first of all, to note the complex and synthetic nature of this phenomenon, which complicates its analysis and the tasks of maintaining the properties of the settlements associated with it. In practical terms, the relevance of maintaining and developing the material features of the town, which are valuable for ensuring the comfort of life, but at the same time those qualities that form the visual image of the place, is obvious. At the same time, it is necessary, whenever possible, to understand the hidden mental components of self-identification, since the maintenance or disclosure of identity is one of the architectural design tasks. Indeed, in social terms, identity is a property that cements society; in the historical and cultural terms it is identity that forms the “spirit of the place”. It reveals the value of heritage in its peculiarity of material and immaterial.

Having outlined the issues of identity, it is necessary to say a few words about the correlative concept of a small town’s originality of and its “spirit of place”. From the outside perspective, the familiar signs of a traditional town, manifested both in historical and architectural works, and in normative documents on the cultural heritage protection, will be in the forefront. These are unique buildings, valuable landscape fragments, traditional features of old mass construction (its typology and stylistics), as well as structural coherence of the whole, panoramas, town views and landscape attractions. Historical value of monuments or spatial formations – memorable places and landscapes (however, the historical value from guidebooks markedly differs from that is preserved by local legends), are included in the picture of the place originality. Recently, the attention (infrequently and fragmentary) is paid to the traditional views and way of life, to the peculiarity of manifestations of local traditions of architectural creativity represented in the architecture and residents’ behavior. It should be admitted that the formalized features of *originality* in many respects are close to the characteristics that determine *the self-identification* of residents. But the latter one is much richer and more complex in its structure.

### **Issues of maintaining the historical and cultural value of small towns**

In practical work on maintaining the historical, cultural and social values of small towns today, one can largely rely on what is common for the perception of heritage from the outside and within the urban community. Taking into account, whenever possible, the peculiarities associated with the specificity of the vision of a town by its residents.

When considering the issues of maintaining the historical and cultural values of historic settlements, it is necessary, as can be seen from the material, to proceed from the fact that the key figurative characteristics of a town are represented unevenly and are concentrated in the center or some specific nodes, sometimes constituting characteristic spatial complexes (including architectural, landscape and historical and memorial objects), in addition, separate fragments of

common construction fabric are often filled with the motifs of architectural or architectural-decorative nature, that are close to the townspeople.

As a result, a compact or complexly structured zone of the identity properties crystallization, most clearly representing the specificity of this habitable space that are important for residents, is formed. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the socio-cultural influence of this zone extends far beyond its own borders; all town residents feel involved (all residents will tell “we have” instead of “they have” about a landmark located three or five blocks from their home). It can be assumed that the residents of the nearest suburban environment, connected with the town by their way of life, will also, albeit with a reservation, say “we have” (although they may have their own local nodes and identification marks).

This “crystallization zone” is subjected to cartography, it supplements and additionally structures what is described in international documents, for instance, in the Valetta Principles 2011, as a combination of monuments and genuine urban fabric, and in Russian legislation is qualified as a subject of the historic settlement protection.

Having conceptualized the structure of the identification framework, one should turn to the issue of modern reconstructive work in small towns, to its specific objectives related to the preservation of the abovementioned value characteristics.

The first and quite obvious objective is the preservation of material objects of cultural heritage, historical planning, specific connections of architectural dominants and other characteristics fixed in the list of the subject of historical settlement protection. To accomplish this task, a quite detailed methodological toolkit has been developed, but its weakness is that it is exclusively protective in its nature and is aimed at a detailed fixation of prohibitive and preservative measures.

Hence the need to clarify the possible directions of architectural and compositional work, taking into account the necessary regulatory restrictions and, at the same time, solving a number of architectural problems specific to a small town. The maintenance and development of the valuable features of the historically established social structure of a town; compensation for losses and overcoming construction deformations in the valuable historical core of a town; the inclusion of the necessary for a town new objects and elements of improvement in the forms compatible with the tasks of preserving the “spirit of the place” (differentiating the range of solutions in the historical core and beyond), are among them.

The problems of maintaining and developing the social structure of a small town are quite numerous nowadays, but their solution is mostly beyond the direct competence of the architect (these are the problems of employment, vocational education, medicine, etc.). Issues directly related to the formation of towns’ originality and population self-identification are closer to the architect’s competence. First, it is development or formation of urban public spaces, the lack of which is often noted by sociologists. The organization of public and leisure places sometimes requires construction of specific facilities, which is associated with the issues of investment, and the architect is concerned only at the stage of the developed program implementation. At the preliminary stages, as well as in many other cases, the architect can only link such a program with the regulatory restrictions for the place. Location of the Tourist Center in Suzdal on the collection site, in a way that the new complex does not participate in the panoramas of the old town, can be recalled as an old example of a successful solution to this problem. From the new examples it is necessary to mention the sports complex in Galich, also visually isolated from the old town, although it is located in close proximity to its center.

Much more often, the objective is reduced to the spatial organization of the open spaces of a town, which for some reason lost its usual public places. Such spaces include the main street, embankment, or the town park, that have long been a favorite place for walks, but, in addition to that, the market, a visit to which links shopping and a special form of communication between residents. Maintaining or reviving such public places is an important objective for a small town.

Another characteristic feature of the social structure of small Russian townships connected with the preferred type of residential construction. Almost all researchers note the commitment of the population to individual farmsteads with household farms. Townspeople, including young married couples, consciously prefer not comfortable apartments in blocks of flats, but houses with their own land plot. There are certain economic considerations behind this, but there is something else: “Is it possible to exchange life in my house for a communal entrance hall? ... I can close the gate here, and everything is mine”. “Life in a big house is spacious. I have a yard, I have a basement, I have an attic, I have a main housing. I move between them, and I never get bored” (A Small Town, 2013). The habitual nature of the farmsteads structure is manifested, in particular, in the fact that not only mid generation, but young people as well perceive their inevitable participation in farm business and work in the garden as a norm (Nikitsky, 2010).

Of course, there are not only low-rise manor buildings in small towns. There are fragments of closed stone construction of urban centers from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century there appeared separate four or five-story houses or entire small areas of high-rise buildings. Today the urban planning heritage of small towns is sometimes quite complicated in structure and requires a specific solution in each town. But the importance of the traditionalism priorities should be taken into account.

The typological variety of construction in a lot of small towns affects the ways of possible solutions and their distinctive characteristics. At the same time, the main general challenge is the objective of maintenance and development of traditional low-rise buildings, which is the main characteristic of the current historical fabric of a small town. Today it is possible to distinguish several ways to meet this objective. First of all, it is necessary to indicate the tendency to support local traditions of residential construction in some towns. Researchers note occasionally persistent tendency to decorate houses with wooden carvings. The customary features of facades organization are consistently maintained. Local peculiarities of the manor houses are imitated by new developers, who arrived in the town. There are even standard projects aimed at distributing local types of manor houses (for instance, in Plyos) (Shchenkov, Antonova, 2017). Such examples are not numerous with inevitable schematism, and they may not be widely spread, but at the present stage they help to support the features of historical construction.

The construction development, naturally, cannot use only the path of imitation. However, the new should, of course, be linked with the established tradition and with the spirit of the place. As noted in “The Valletta Principles”, the new should be compatible with the spatial organization of the historic district and respect its traditional morphology.

One of the ways to ensure the interconnection between the old and the new is in maintaining the traditional typology of construction, meaning not only the functional type and dimensions of the house (manor, low-rise), but historically formed volume and spatial types of buildings. The types may differ by a compact or elongated plan, the presence of gable facade or finishing with a horizontal cornice, etc. Depending on their typological characteristics and on location of houses in the street space, the whole image of construction is formed differently. Attention to the typological features of construction helps to link the old and the new, to maintain the traditional morphology without resorting to stylistic imitations (Shchenkov, 2017).

It goes without saying that, the number of possible solutions allowing to introduce innovations that are organically combined with the traditional basis of construction, can be much wider. The traditional typology, iconography and peculiarities of materials and textures can be creatively interpreted in different ways by the authors of new constructions. However, the task of preserving such cultural value as the “spirit of the place” should always exist.

It is possible that the issue of the construction of a fundamentally new large structure, claiming to be a landmark object can be raised in a small town. This issue is not often raised and is rarely successfully solved. It is very difficult to connect it with the established image of a particular small town, with its way of life and with the image of a town, which is recognized as its cultural value. The issues of self-identification and the “spirit of the place” are so complex and, at

the same time, so socially and culturally significant that they can only be mentioned in this context within this article.

### Conclusion

The material proposed in the article is mainly of staged nature. The focus of this paper does not allow to present the available material on the practice of maintaining figurative characteristics of a traditional small town. It is partly presented in the above-mentioned publications of the author. The objective of this article was seen in illustrating the fact that in small Russian towns the requirements of present time are mainly directed not “from traditions”, but on the contrary – to them.

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