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Summary of PhD Thesis

A Soviet City in Siberia.

Between the Project of Modernity and Utopian Consciousness

The dissertation is devoted to the utopian nature of Soviet urbanization in Siberia, developing between the poles of uncompromising planning and the human element. On each of the two levels – whether driven by the reason of a theoretical idea or its encounter with reality – the modern dimension of the Soviet experiment is revealed.

The work consists of four chapters and conclusions.

The first chapter deals with methodology. It is divided into three parts coming from the studied subject (*Siberia, City, Utopia and Modernity*).

In the first part of the methodological chapter, the analytical usefulness of the term Siberia was justified. Attention was paid to complex issues of the region's identity as well as ambiguity of the area's borders, supporting the view that Siberia is the territory of the Asian basin of the Arctic Ocean, thus covering the disputed area of the eastern slopes of the Urals, but not including areas of the Russian Far East.

The area of Siberia in the dissertation is the spatial boundary of analytical procedures, because here the development of the Soviet city can be observed in its „cleanest” form. This was

achieved by the small scale of urbanization before the revolution and the availability of large rivers and mineral deposits needed for the development of the industrial city. In addition, Siberia, in connection with the nature of its historical development, generated a semantically rich system of cultural associations (distance from the center, human struggle with nature, space of freedom / space of enslavement, wildness and danger, hardship, potential, passivity, challenge, etc.). A separate section is devoted to the concept of the frontier and the issue of colonization (both Siberia by Moscow, and more broadly: the problem of internal colonization of Russia) – both issues are of great importance for the description of the Soviet experiment as an expression of modernity.

The tension between the landscape of North Asia and European civilization (in its Russian version) was considered the most accurate *definiens* in Siberia. The subjugation of Siberian nature and the „civilization” of local cultures was an important element of Soviet propaganda, and urbanization was one of the central fronts of action here. The dissertation treats this perspective as one of the manifestations of a modern project: rational and aggressive constructing of a new reality in the pathos of subjugating nature and traditions with the power of human reason and centrally controlled collective effort. The second part of the methodological chapter is devoted to urban issues.

The state of research on the city was presented, including analyzes of Soviet and Siberian material. This part of the dissertation also discusses the applied methodology. Attention was paid to the potential of inter- and transdisciplinary research combining the perspective of the humanities with the achievements of sociologists, architects, economists, geographers and others. Semiotics of the city was chosen as one of the main methods of analysis, but with an emphasis on newer approaches (social semiotics).

The prospect of this study is defined by the triad: urban space, official discourse, the city's creators. The city is analyzed in its spatial aspect, understood, however, not as a separate, independent object but as a manifestation of architectural culture. This is related to the proposal to look at the Soviet Siberian city through the prism of official discourse. In the first place, the analysis concerns the perspective of power and architect – the official Soviet culture. The inhabitant appears in the analysis on the one hand as „human material” created on a par with the space of the city and the home, but on the other hand we are interested also in the uncontrollable spontaneity of the city. This second aspect is a kind of gap through which the complex character of the Soviet culture, so different from its official image, is revealed.

Two factors: diversity, as a city's own feature, and the cross-sectional character of this dissertation (concerning the entire Soviet period and various manifestations of Soviet culture, if related to the issue of modernity and the space of the Siberian city) encourage to reach for elements

of bricolage („tinkering”), and thus the use of available, diversified material and the associated multiplicity of perspectives and languages of description. In addition to the basic material of the analysis, such as the official statements of the authorities (resolutions, industry discussions, propaganda publications) and periodicals (especially magazines), in the dissertation we reach for visual material, selected examples of literary and film works, memories from the era (by architects working in Siberia), the author’s own interviews with the inhabitants of Igarka and the daughter of the architect Kuzmin. No less important was the author’s personal experience of the post-Soviet city space.

The third part of the methodological chapter is devoted to the concepts of utopia and modernity as well as their mutual relationships, especially the issues of totality, centralism, rationalism and uncompromisingness, and the focus on drastic and revolutionary change. Utopian consciousness is what connected thinking of Eastern and Western Europe, for both these circles became a space of social, political and moral experiments, in both places attempts were made to put it into practice. However, while its model projects were created in the West, the East was the largest utopian experiment.

The dissertation drew attention to disputes regarding the Eurocentric definition of modernity and doubts whether the Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet culture can be considered modern. The perspective of this dissertation draws a lot from the theory of the multiplicity of types of modernity, trying not to lose the essence of the term „modernity”, which threatens to focus attention only on the differences in its manifestations.

Without avoiding the issues of local specificity, colonialism and the possibility of distinguishing different types of modernity, we propose in this work to analyze the Soviet city as a part of the essence of the European project: both in the cultural plan (modernity, Russian: *модерность*), aesthetic (modernism), and economic (modernization). All these three levels are interesting in the urban material of Siberia – a region in an impressive scale urbanized over the last hundred years. We should pay attention not only to architecture or urban planning (both theories and practice), but above all to the philosophy of the Soviet city, that is, theories and practices defining its essence, ways of its existence, formation, development, and also the city as a space activities of various „actors”: power, industrial lobby, residents.

According to the thesis of the work, we treat Soviet urbanization as a European project of modernity, and in it we see a source of utopian element of Soviet culture. The key to understanding the phenomenon of the Soviet Siberian city – and through its prism and the entire Soviet culture – is, according to the author, the tension that arose at the junction of rational planning with the utopian character of this culture, but not in its autarchy, and in its Europeanness. In order to analyze

this phenomenon, both specific Russian and universal sources of utopian awareness and design thinking were tracked.

Critique of modernity in the humanities of the world mainly concerns Western culture, while the Soviet culture has created its own modern project, its own great narrative. It was based on the conviction of the possibility of a comprehensive, rational arrangement of reality at its various levels: from political, economical and social to anthropological. An expression of this belief was the Soviet urban project – assuming that the city will be the main space of the new man's functioning (the idea of „overcoming the contradictions between the city and the countryside” de facto aimed at the liquidation of the latter). Despite the drastic changes in the Soviet urban-architectural discourse (periods of avant-garde, socialist realism, late modernism), its main paradigm did not change. Thanks to this, despite the aesthetic and ideological differences seen in these three periods, we can talk about the unity of Soviet culture, essentially rationalist, centralistic, total, and therefore utopian. A look at the phenomena created in the area of the Soviet Union by this prism, allow to discover new aspects of the functioning of the undemocratic state, the issues of propaganda, and utopianism.

The following chapters contain an analysis of selected urban spaces. Each case study presented takes into account the individual and unique fate and structure of the city, on the other hand it gives the opportunity to discuss the phenomena that made up the Soviet culture, and more broadly – the modern design. Thus, the selected cities were treated broadly in the dissertation, as laboratories of various socio-cultural phenomena that make up the character of Soviet modernity.

The first case study concerns the mining town of Anzhero-Sudzhensk, located on the route of the Trans-Siberian railway (Chapter II *The personal is political – A Communal House for Siberian Miners*). The architectural design is being analyzed, but it is supposed to be a quasi-city: communal house by Nikolai Kuzmin, a Tomskian student who at the end of the 1920s proposed a radical architectural and social project that grew out of the Bolshevik concept of radical socialization of life. In Kuzmin's project, the sphere of services was not only socialized, but so was privacy: the inhabitants are grouped depending on their age and sex, the family in the traditional sense is replaced by a collective shared sleeping quarters, bathrooms, cafeteria, education and relaxation spaces. This project stands out against the background of similar proposals from the era by the replacement of the ownership element into functional space.

Through the prism of this project, a number of important phenomena have been shown, creating the specificity of Soviet modernity. First of all, it is about a new anthropology of work – and its strong interference in private life (the impact of Taylorism on the Soviet culture, the activity of Alexei Gastiev), but also deep cultural and anthropological changes, connecting with the new concept of time. A separate place was devoted to the new model of family and the position of

women in Soviet society expressed in Kuzmin's project. Finally, new relations between the individual and the collective were discussed, as well as the social engineering attitude of the citizens, resulting from the conviction of the „flexibility” of human nature, the impact of the projected space on individual and collective consciousness, and the possibility – and necessity – of rational transformation of society.

Kuzmin's project is analyzed not as a distortion of the ideological disputes at the time, but their embodiment. However, as the project itself is just as important as its collapse – the communal home was never realized and its author became one of the objects of harsh criticism by Soviet architects and decision-makers.

Chapter III *Igarka – „City of the Sun” on Permafrost* is devoted to the issues of Soviet urbanization of the Arctic. The example of the Yenisei port shows the relationship of this culture to the landscape, the superficial nature of its propaganda, the place of avant-garde visions in the history of the city (exemplified by Ivan Leonidov) and the problem of cities in the Far North and monofunctional cities in post-Soviet reality. The dissertation confronted the idea of the city and the „fly in fly out” model of work and life (city and non-place) and also showed the problem of the impermanence of human presence in the Arctic.

The fate of Igarka is in many respects typical for its time, however, the specific geographical conditions of the Far North (isolation of already urbanized areas) and climate make the problems of the emergence, development, and fall of Soviet city experiments possible to be traced here with exceptional sharpness. Igarka – the city built on the unstable ground of permafrost – is the fatal feature of temporariness and variability. In the Soviet times it was the window of Siberia to the world, a showcase of the country, every year many foreign ships visited it. Today it is a city on the edge of an inhabited world, without success trying to attract Moscow's attention. The caprice of power to build an Arctic city in a short time hid this danger in its source: at any time, the demiurge's hand may abandon it.

The analysis of Soviet Igarka takes place through the prism of not only sources and studies, but also research carried out by the author in the post-Soviet space of the city, in accordance with the assumption that the observation of the effects may lead to the sources of phenomena.

Chapter IV is devoted to the analysis of two cities: Novokuznetsk and Magnitogorsk (*Model Cities: Novokuznetsk and Magnitogorsk*). This justifies their similar fate and structure, as well as, at one time, a strong interdependence.

Both Magnitogorsk and Novokuznetsk can be regarded as model instances of the formation and development of the Siberian socialist city: they were created almost from scratch, completely subordinated to the aims of industrialization and widely used in propaganda (V. Mayakowsky, V.

Kataev, I. Ehrenburg and others). Both of these projects were planned in the 1920s and their ideological and functional structure reflected all three stages of the development of Soviet urbanization and architecture: constructivism, socialist realism and post-war modernism. This allows their examples to follow these changes, especially the moments of breakthrough.

Thus, while in the case of Igarka and Anzhero-Sudzhensk the accent was put on the specificity of these cases, Novokuznetsk and Magnitogorsk were selected for analysis as the closest to the ideal type of the Soviet city. They were model cities in two senses: in the official Soviet discourse, as cities posed as models, but also for the researcher, as they depict the real dimension of Soviet urbanization. Their example shows the nature and significance of planning new cities, the participation of Western ideas – but also specialists and capital – on the massive construction sites of the first five-year plan, subordination of the city to industry and the resulting problems, complicated relations within the Soviet administration, dependence of chaos on the plan's meticulousness, utopian projects of the new socialist city and its actual structure. Particular attention was devoted to the reconstruction of the play between various actors in the social space of the city, especially in the bosom of power, which was by no means a monolith. The game of influences and complicated relations between the central and local authorities, power and industrial structures were one of the elements of this reality that the theoretical utopia had to clash with. As it turned out, the Soviet experiment did not mean for architects the possibilities that could be deduced from the initial assumptions (small urbanization, centrally planned economy, no land rent, monopolistic position of the client, direction – declarative – for a social purpose).

At the beginning of both cities, there were bold spatial and social ideas (e.g. a garden city, linear city, and social city), but in reality they were completely subordinated to industrial goals. A special place in the analysis of cities was devoted to the clash of the ideal plan and reality, the uncompromising nature of the discourse and spontaneity of the actually developing city, as well as the relationship between the issues of plan's minuteness and chaos (decision-making, spatial, and social). The clash of utopia with reality was shown, among others on the example of the activities of Western architects during the first Soviet five-year plan, especially Ernst May and his group. The initial enthusiasm of foreign specialists, the reasons why they placed so much hope in their contracts and finally the final disappointment perfectly illustrate the character of Soviet modernity – uncompromising, and therefore inflexible. The dissertation shows the modern and utopian dimension of both the attitudes of the Soviet authorities and German specialists.

A separate section (*Conclusions*) is devoted to the character of the breakthroughs in the Soviet urban discourse – and through it, and the entire Soviet culture – and the relationship between these rapid revaluations and the modern and utopian character of the Soviet experiment.

Despite the rapid changes in the Soviet urban-architectural discourse (various formal languages of the avant-garde, socialist realism, modernism), the main paradigm of Soviet culture did not change: it was a project of modernity. It illustrates the following scheme. Utopian assumptions of the project underwent forced modifications in contact with reality. The inability to implement an uncompromising perceived plan required a lie that would become an institution. The separation of the official urban discourse from the real housing situation gradually became clearer. In order to bring the discourse closer to reality, its rapid reconstruction followed, which was reflected in radical formal and aesthetic changes within the urban space. The main goal of radical changes in discourse was to maintain the mobilization character of culture. The changes of the discourse within the paradigm of Soviet culture allowed to expose the atmosphere of an incessant beginning. Initially, the linear line of cultural development took on a cyclical character over time.

Siberia was chosen for this analysis as a true laboratory of Soviet modernity. Its non-urbanization could be seen as a space of potential, unlimited by the burden of the past. This was particularly true of the large scale of construction of new cities deprived of pre-revolutionary urban traditions. However, despite the „immaculate” starting point of these cities and at this point the abstract idea collided with the resistance of reality. Even in the most ideal and detailed plan – concerning human communities – there is no way to predict all the elements that will work in the future. This can be seen from the Siberian landscape with an uncompromising modern European project.

The Soviet urban project in Siberia is an expression of a comprehensive approach, covering all spheres of human activity and life, and thus inherent in a totalitarian formation. Rationalism and materialism of the modern worldview, rooted in Enlightenment thinking, puts the hierarchical and centralist decision-making process on the first plan (regarding the “five-year,” centrally controlled economy), and faith in the possibility of completely predicting the development of various levels of reality (from economic to anthropological changes) gives rise to aversion of natural and grassroots activities.

In this dissertation, the culturally-historical sources of the Soviet modern project have been highlighted. It was a phenomenon of universal roots, growing from the centuries-long development of Western socio-political and philosophical thought, and not only the local conditions of Russian culture.