Semantic boundaries of the “city” concept

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Abstract. The article presents the problem of constructing the “city” concept at the current level of urban studies development. The authors proceed from the position that the existing approaches to the analyzed phenomenon do not allow to formulate a concept that can cover various types of socio-territorial organization of people's lives, referred to as the word “city”. Various researchers offer different grounds for constructing the desired definition: production-economic, territorial, cultural, etc. The authors believe that the definitions used in science are outdated, and the content of the “city” concept requires revision. The article does not claim to be an exhaustive solution to the problem, but rather accentuates the spatial and temporal lines of analysis of the city phenomenon.

1 Introduction

What is a city? Researchers’ interest in the phenomenon is determined not only by the urgent needs of the authorities that organize and manage the life of the city and citizens, i.e. representatives of political elites, but also by purely scientific aspirations: scientists want to understand the logic of the city development and its place in the life of modern civilization. It would seem that the concept that we encounter in everyday life should be extremely clear, but we do not have a clear answer to the question of what a city is, what constitutes its key characteristics.

The problem can be predetermined by the following circumstances:
1. The modern concept is often blurred. It is used as a generalizing concept that pulls together a variety of meanings. A city is an environment, a conflict, a community, a utopia, “the hard”, “the soft”, etc. [1]. Increasingly, the word “city” is used not as a definition, but as a marker of special environments and processes, referring the researcher not to essential characteristics, but to a cloud of meanings.
2. Speaking about the city as an object of study, we imagine a coordinate system where there are both vertical directions associated with socio-economic processes and political development, cultural prosperity, as well as horizontal sections – location, geography. Each of the directions affects its specific areas of research, which makes it difficult to perceive the city as such.
3. Scientists from different fields, such as economics, sociology, political science, philosophy, etc., are trying to define the city, while the formulated definitions are often based on diametrically opposed grounds.

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All the issues described above reveal the need to revise the intellectual baggage of the concept of “city” and identify the main features that form its core. In this regard, the reader should be reminded of the original question, what a city is?

2 Materials and methods

It seems promising in the analysis of the city to focus on two fundamental approaches. The first is based on the statement that DNA, the primary matter of the city, should be sought in the act of constructing the city. In other words, studying the history of the first cities’ organization will enable the researcher to identify the underlying characteristics of the phenomenon. The second approach is based on empirical results, which represent numerous practices of studying the size of a city, production volumes, architectural appearance, etc. [2].

These approaches lead to completely different interpretations of the object of study. In the first case, we get a picture of the solar pattern city, where there is a clearly defined center and multiple rays emerging from the center. In this case, the center should be understood not so much as a geographical point, but as a semantic beginning, joining together the architecture, history, and identity of the location. In other words, the center is the “face”, uniqueness, and culture of a particular city, while the rays are the lines, the prospects of development of this place and its inhabitants. Guided by this concept, it is possible to analyze many cities with a long history of existence: Paris, Barcelona, Rome, London, etc. The solar pattern city seems to be preserved in itself. Its historic background determines its development, forcing it to work out the plot of its uniqueness again and again both in the production of things and in the production of meanings.

Fig.1. Diagram of the solar pattern city

The city of the second type is a fractal city. Such a city does not have a historical and cultural core that would hold and determine its potential forces of reproduction, this entity strives for unrestrained expansion, and absorption of other locations. Most cities in North America follow this scenario: existence and prosperity over attachment to the past, with no cultivation of uniqueness – their identity is growth and absorption. In this city, the center is both everywhere and nowhere at the same time. For each separate section of the fractal, the center exists in itself, but exactly until the moment the fractal begins to expand, reproducing the fractional metric symmetry [3, p. 121].
Fig. 2. Diagram of a fractal city

Obviously, it is difficult to imagine the characteristics that would be inherent in each city without exception. However, we believe that the basic statement in the construction of the “city” concept is the moment of its occurrence. In this case, it is not the specific circumstances of founding a particular urban settlement that are important, since the history of specific cities is often evoked by myths and legends, but the intention that underlies people’ activities to create a specific space, to reformat socio-economic, cultural and political processes of human life. [2, p. 262]

3 Results and discussions

The emergence of a city is the birth of a special living space, unlike everything that surrounded a person until a certain time. The most important feature of the urban environment was the discovery of temporality. The villager knows the time: he performs agricultural work in accordance with the annual, daily or other cycle and even measures the processes in a particular way, but does not seek to manage it. But the city dweller opens the cycle, he calculates the time, realizes its value, therefore one of the characteristic features of the “city” concept design, in the researchers’ point of view, is the syncretism of the spatial structure and a special chronological axis [3, p. 253]. In this sense, it is possible to speak about urban life only when there is a split of the already existing calendar cycle, according to which a non-urban person lived, dependent on nature. For an urban person and for the city as a whole, the entire nature-weather cycle is just another series of technical problems to which a technical solution must be found. [4, p.788]: development of a drainage system in case of rains, fortification of banks from river floods, snow removal, etc. According to the semantics of the word, the village is concerned about dimensions, sequence, but not measurement of time: the rural way of life is associated with plowing (in the Proto-Slavic “selo” originates from the word “arable land”) and a settled way of life. With such an approach, there cannot arise the idea of time as a resource which must be calculated, and even more so, by means of which a person and his activity must be evaluated. The village chronotope is a closed time cycle with a clearly fixed space of life limited by tradition and strong social ties.

With this approach, the emergence of the city should be described not as an evolutionary process, but as a socio-cultural revolution, accompanied by shock processes. At a certain point in history, there is a firm and ubiquitous transition to the urban way of life, as the city becomes sly and omnivorous, it gradually absorbs everything with itself or strives to do it. It gives a person all essential things, concentrating in itself production, trade, security (the city may even appear as fence walls that defend and protect residents), entertainment, etc. At some point, the space surrounding the city loses its significance, the villages cease to perform the role of manufacture footing, yielding this role to the cities, and eventually are completely included into its space [5, p. 33].

The question arises, what turns out to be the “space” of the city when the time loop unswitches? The space of the city, spreading out into the horizontal line, becomes fundamentally “insatiable”. This means that, developing and expanding, the city aims to
capture more and more new geographical territories, transforming them into an urbanized space of production and reproduction [6, p. 11]. In small settlements, the number of resources and people is limited, which means that it is necessary to clearly set goals and objectives for which these resources should be used. This imposes certain prohibitions on the hyper-expansion of space and the logic of people's interaction with each other – close contacts, constantly fueled by live participation, were previously established between the inhabitants of small settlements. The city, like a machine, begins to accumulate in itself the resources produced by the environment, and use them in accordance with ever-increasing production volumes, calculated by means of temporary labor costs. The local level of “city – village” opposition ceases to set the logic of coordinates for spatial and structural differentiation [7, p. 39]. Thus, space becomes not so much a dependent element, bearing a territorial difference from the countryside, as a predetermining geographical and semantic matrix of the city.

The space in the process of expansion inevitably encounters a symbolic boundary of the territory, despite the fact that the space of the city itself does not have such a boundary. This boundary serves to distinguish what is outside the urban space from what is included in it. The territory, as a radical inversion of space, stakes on exclusion, while the city stakes on inclusion [6, p. 40]. It is the territory that needs a border that enhances its own homogeneity and identity, while space rejects the very notion of a border, emphasizing an increase in its own density and heterogeneity.

If we approach the spatial issue of the city from this perspective, then the conclusion inevitably arises that there is no single and continuous history of the city from ancient times to the present day. Helmut Berking writes that the argument from the point of view of the space theory suggests that, for example, the medieval city existed before spatial-structural division, inclusion and exclusion, and cannot be considered as an issue in the field of spatial-structural differentiation [6, p. 39].

This indicates the dependence of spatial theory on the conditions and historical context of the process of city formation. If the moment of emergence of the city as a separate and unique form of life organization has the general character of radical exception, then further development is entirely and completely subject to external and internal conditions. This statement makes impossible the classical definition of the city (as interpreted by Weber) as the progressive development of forms of social life from the village to the metropolis.

As mentioned above, the spatial expansion of urban space is based on the idea of "densification". The very categories of size, density or heterogeneity cease to be quantitative in nature, turning into a qualitative ones [6, p. 41]. In this sense, the spatial logic of the inclusion of new territories is the logic of a systematic increase in the intensity of contacts between city inhabitants and other elements of the city, with a low level of obligations in the interaction. This means that collecting and accumulating the most diverse objects the city inevitably pushes them against one another, causing a state when their interaction leads to the emergence of new interactions, not always coordinated with one another. So it is the urban environment that becomes a source of progress and socio-technical innovations, on the one hand, and the cause of many man-made technic disasters and epidemics, on the other. [8, p.47].

In a certain sense, urban space can be called “densification in motion”. Constant expansion and engagement of the new aspects and things takes place both at the material level, and at the intentional and institutional levels: the dynamic of compaction based on permanent expansion accelerates the processes of heterogenization and pluralization. In other words, the urban space erodes and negates such concepts as “familiar”, and “one's own”. In this connection, the emergence of stable centers (semantic, geographical, cultural) poses a great problem.

There happens what Berking calls “urbanization of basic knowledge about the world life” [6, p.39]. A special form of experiencing the city life is brought out into the sphere of the
most fundamental ideas about the world. What we may classify or label as urban has resulted in formation of the “new state of the body” of a big city through densification. Densification becomes relevant when certain conditions are met, such as when certain margins are overcome, and when certain effects start to occur. Only due to this clarification it can be said that something new arises from density, and not just that it becomes filled up.

Summarizing the above said, it can be noted that the “city” concept is based on a special kind of spatio-temporal characteristics. It is these two axes that give a unique status to the city and determine its own logic of development. The urban researcher Steve Pyle specifies three key points that distinguish cities as spaces. [10, p. 291]:

- City density, i.e. concentration of people, things, institutions, etc.;
- Heterogeneity of life;
- Potentially endless streams of communication and transformation.

The city is not influenced by location, since it does not have a clear geographic reference. Instead, the city is in a process of constant expansion and inclusion. This lack of space leaves its mark on urban life itself, forming a specific mix, not reducible to one vector (economic, social, cultural, etc.). Even elementary contacts between the inhabitants of the city in the process of urban development have been transformed, losing intimacy and closeness. With the subsequent technologization of cities, this growth in distance increasingly leads to formalized distanced interactions. That is why modern approaches to the phenomenon of “the city” focus on “transnational” urbanism, i.e. they offer an understanding of the city as a "node of transnational connections", which again disputes the classical definition.

The life of the city is characterized by the absence of a single temporal line. Urban life is cut off from any natural cycle, since it is more independent of them – moreover, it is able to launch a new time section. The Romans counted the time “ab urbe condita”, i.e. “from the founding of the City”: the city (in this case Rome) becomes the first model of the European chronology. This means that from now on, city life does not depend on material essence – large cities were destroyed more than once, but each time they were rebuilt – but on a multitude of time lines, the carrier of which is a great number of citizens who have a special understanding and view of the world. Since the city loses its protective character, its spatial structure and stability over time are set not by external conditions, but by internal content [4, p.789].

Western cities tried to preserve the unity of their temporal axis by rethinking the concept of "monumentality". This phenomenon has several meanings. Firstly, it is a living personification of the “centrality” of the city [4, c.789]. It is no coincidence that a large number of attractions designed to help a person identify the city are concentrated in its historical part, which, as a rule, is the center. This thesis is applicable to many modern European cities: the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Colosseum in Rome, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, etc.

Secondly, the monument is a rift, a mark woven into the amorphous flow of time. Monuments (not always material) made it possible to coordinate in time [там же, с. 791].

Since the immediate temporal essence of the monument could not be realized in matter, it was transformed into the technical meanings of the monument: height, heaviness and solidity. This heaviness, or rather weightiness, was supposed to show the indestructibility of the European timeline and its unity. This explains why, with the development and expansion of cities, monuments began to be included in space everywhere: each new part of the city must be connected to the past and fixed in time. Ultimately, this practice led to the creation of squares [9, p. 650].

It must be also said that over a long historical period, stability and temporary firmness were realized in the city walls and fortifications, which themselves could have the character of monuments. With the development of military science and the natural expansion of cities, the walls became useless from a practical point of view, thus their symbolic task of ensuring
the continuity of temporary space inside the city merges with that of squares and monuments directly [4, p.791].

The displacement of the walls from the city boundaries to its center further confirmed the monumental and axial significance of the latter. It is on this notion that the logic of preserving historic value in modern cities is built, since the general spatial and temporal structure is set not by external boundaries, which may be completely indefinite or absent at all, but by the internal monumental mass and logic of interactions.

The main defect, i.e. lack of substantial legitimacy, lies in this attitude to the time axis. In other words, over time, the monuments lost their ritual as well as temporal functions, passing into the sphere of political perception and becoming a symbol of sovereignty. It is not accidental that in many socio-political upheavals, such as, for example, the Great French Revolution, many monuments were damaged or destroyed (as were attempts to break the entire usual time line, due to adaptation of the calendar, etc.). Simultaneously with such events, there was a further reconsideration of the city, and, consequently, the attitude towards monuments. Revolutionary and technocratic breakthroughs outlined a new look at the monument: they became the syncretism of technological effectiveness and functionality.

The birth of the capitalistic era finally fixes diversification of the temporality of the urban environment. It has already been noted above that the crowd becomes the bearer of time, and first of all people at large. [9, p. 652]. The urban researcher Sergei Romashko relates such changes to the development of tourism. In his understanding, impressions gathered during travel should be regarded as souvenirs that are collected, stored, and exchanged for other resources. The city, becoming part of the sightseeing route, is already acquiring a time axis split into many lines, since each person carries the memory of “their” foreign city and their stay in time. Romashko writes that “when a tourist arrives in a foreign city, for this period of time he falls out not only from the spatial, but also from the temporal structure of his own city: he is not there at that time, and he can only preserve “his” temporal organization in memory. Having taken with him souvenirs from his native city for a gift, the traveler can export his time axis. Joining other people’s time axes on a trip, he has the opportunity, along with a heap of souvenirs, to keep evidence of the trip in his home, thereby further entangling the situation of temporary structures: souvenirs standing on a shelf make obvious the multiplicity of time axes, to which a resident of a big city has been involved in one way or another over the past century” [4, p.792].

However, such a mass production of souvenirs, when quality turns into quantity, is a consequence of the less obvious problem of the collapse of the substantial core of the city, which has already been mentioned. With the transformation of the city into a fragmented space, due to the movement of both the human mass and information flows, there is also a transition to the heterogeneity of time within the city. When a certain “privatization” of time takes place, not only monuments, but also time itself become technological and functional.

4 Conclusion

Thus, the modern city exists exactly at the moment when time moves inside it. This movement, as already mentioned above, can be both diffuse in nature, anticipating the division of the city into many environments and streams, and accumulating forces for urban development (as is the case with historical cities). Both of the cases testify to the current crisis in the researchers’ perception of the life time of the city, and, consequently, of the urban space functioning. This is largely due to the fact that the development of modern cities often occurs much more rapidly than an adequate assessment of what is happening has time to appear. As a result, the processes that the leading world cities undergo (virtualization, fragmentation, flow and decentralization) turn out to be analyzed via outdated approaches. All this requires reconsideration of the concept of “city”.
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