Chapter 7
“Bridges” and “Gaps” on Maps of Multicultural Cities: The Story of the South Russian Agglomeration

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ABSTRACT

The city is a sum of feasible expressions of social and historical evolution and space identity. The uniqueness of a place is formed not only by contemporary infrastructure, but by the cultural environment deeply anchored in the historical context. The object of the study is the South Russian agglomeration as a feasible example of ragged edges of multicultural history of the region and constantly challenged collective identity. Multicultural cities in Russia carry a burden of the pre-Soviet and Soviet urban policy, weighed down by complex historical environment. As a result, cities are closed in a coterie: reliance on Soviet and post-Soviet legacy – conservative economic policy — fragmentary and spontaneous development of the city architecture and infrastructure. The term of splintering urbanism coined by Steven Graham and Simon Marvin is focused on the historical circumstances and socio-cultural environment of urban communities in the South Russian agglomeration, describing symbolic forms of bridges and gaps in the collective urban identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Examining the present striving for a unified living standard, we assume that it leads to unification of the cities throughout the world. At the same time, a rocketing diversity of a society is reflected on the city map in number of symbolic gaps and attempts to build bridges with intention to connect distinct districts. It becomes even more urgent in the context of agglomeration process, which is considered as a result of urbanized economic development. The idea relies on the concept of clustering economies and network effects. The ultimate benefit of agglomeration lies in the city growing and, as a circumstance, economic efficiency, while cities are becoming large. The obvious disadvantage of agglomeration is the gaps dividing the city landscape into different parts poorly interconnected.

One of the well-known instruments to sew the city gaps is infrastructure which is considered today far beyond its technical components. Infrastructure is a reflection of our social and cultural identity, collective memory, and ties. It is equally important which are formal and informal rules for infrastructure functioning. Traditionally, such rules are considered to be systems requiring public regulation, so they add cohesion to an urban territory, often in the name of ‘public interest’. Infrastructure seems not identical to something systemic or structuring. It is something that mediates life through patterning social and cultural norms.

Usually the failure of infrastructure occurs in troubled spaces, such as states in war or devastation. But it is not the principle. Sometimes historical-institutional environment heavily influences urbanism dynamics. In conjunction of infrastructure and historical burden urbanism performs a complex socio-technical process, as it is mentioned by Graham and Marvin (2001). The complexity is presented through fluid interplay of identities, commodities flows, and labour movement mediated by networks of different kinds from bus-routes to mobile communications. This process reveals cities as a stage place for globalization with demands for constant innovativeness, economic efficiency, and identity elasticity. Therefore, cities are centres of capital exchange and goods circulation, articulation of identity, and human movement.

The constant stream of urbanization is constituted through a number of energetic landscapes and streets which are not separated from each other, but instead interconnected. In case of gaps physical or imagined in any of “scapes” the fabrics of the city are breached. As the chaotic city images are being stretched over the identity framework, its exploration in the context of multicultural agglomeration looks extremely relevant. How are city multiple identities made and re-made, imagined and narrated, expressed and projected? How do they flourish within the dynamic interactions of the axes of centre-periphery, old and new? As old-styled multicultural cities are becoming new capital accumulators, the challenges of maintaining state-driven
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