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Thinking about Beauty

Images in the essay: Tanya Kravtsov



CITYSCAPE OF SYKTYVKAR, KOMI REPUBLIC, RUSSIA, MAY 2018

Wandering on the streets of Syktyvkar, I realized how similar the cityscape is to my hometown of Omsk. I tried to capture with my camera the beauty and the ugliness of the surroundings, based on my memories and personal views. I found the wooden colourful houses to be beautiful, which unfortunately have not been restored and preserved for decades. Indeed, many of them are considered to be unsafe for living and will be soon destroyed. In my vision, these wooden houses are an integrated part of the cityscape in Syktyvkar, as in many other Russian cities, connecting the present with the past, keeping people's memories and stories alive. Those houses have cultural, historical and aesthetic value. In con-

The article is based on interviews, notes and observations during the visit in Syktyvkar.

trast with the grey concrete high-rise buildings, they have individuality and charm, looking pleasant in their size, material, texture and colour, even their age. However, the aesthetics of the concrete housing blocks, which were built to answer social needs, can be argued over, while beauty can be found in their functionality and practicality: "the convenient place where one lives" (Bigell 2018, 191).

I grew up in a small neighbourhood with similar wooden houses in blue and green, surrounded by ash-leaved maples, linden trees and lilac bushes. The houses do not exist anymore, but I still remember the creak of the wooden stairs and the smell of linden trees. For me, as maybe for many others, the beauty of these wooden houses is 'easily communicated', having a nostalgic character (Bigell 2018, 193).

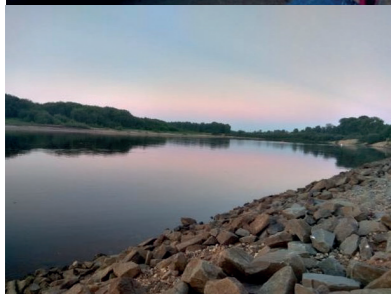


What I found not so beautiful were the parking garages. I never liked them, even as a child. I understand the need and functionality of these constructions; however, I consider them to be aesthetically ugly. Garages are common across Russia, mainly made of metal, concrete or brick with metal doors locked to protect their contents from theft. As a child, I remember that those garages were an attraction for kids in the neighbourhood. We jumped on the roofs of the garages, making a horrible noise and endangering ourselves. Adults were always angry and screamed at us

when they caught us jumping on them. Now, I understand why. Another negative memory that I have related to the garages is alcoholism. Garages were considered to be a place where a man could drink alone or with friends, under the pretence of fixing the car. It became a joke, which was based on the dark side of reality. On the other hand, it was a safe place to leave the car and provided a personal space for men, where they could keep their tools and fix their car even on cold, dark winter days by heating and lighting the garage.

I was lucky to have company on the way to the ethnography museum: namely, Anelia, one of the participants in the summer school, a young, ambitious woman who worked as a lecturer at Syktyvkar State University. The stories she told me about the city, accompanied by emotions and feelings, touched my heart. She told me that the municipal authorities have neglected the area. For a long time, there have been no investments in the development of the city: "No one cares what the city looks like. Once it was a cosy place, but now I feel emptiness in my soul", she said.





Images above: Elena Chuprova.



The locals cannot influence or change the situation. “Russia is a centralized state, and it is a commonly heard complaint that local people have little power” (Bigell 2012, 24). Many trees have been cut down and the ones that are left are cropped very short, without any thought to their aesthetic value. When we passed near to a metal fence and benches, Anelia pointed to the benches as an example of an ugly element of the cityscape. She said that, in winter, they look like sharks when they protrude out of the snowdrifts. I would argue about the beauty of the benches, as it is a matter of taste. However, I cannot ignore the fact that the fence, rubbish bins and benches look rusty and require renovation and paint.

I had a chance to talk about the cityscape of Syktyvkar with Elena, a student of ecology at the University of Syktyvkar. I asked her to describe what is beautiful and ugly in the cityscape. She said that she likes the Sysola River embankment of the city. Sysola in the Komi language is ‘Siktyv’, while ‘kar’ means city; therefore, the name Syktyvkar can be translated from Komi as a city on the Sysola River. The beauty of the river is captured in a few photos given to me by Elena. According to her, the embankment is a great place to observe sunsets. From there, the open space and water reflection make it possible to experience sunsets in their full magnificence.

LANDSCAPE OF ONEZH’YE VILLAGE, KOMI, RUSSIA, MAY 2018

In Onezh’ye Village, I talked with a local young woman called Uljana, aged about 30. I asked her if she would prefer to live in the village or in the city. Her confident answer was the village, and she added that her dream is to build a house near the church; she pointed to the place and I took a picture of it. I also asked her what is beautiful and ugly in her eyes in the rural environment she is living in. She considers her surroundings as beautiful: people, nature and the sky, which is low and magnificently beautiful. The ugly element in her eyes is manifest in the ruins left after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which no one has taken care of. She also mentioned one challenging aspect of living in the village: the lack of work. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the collective farms were closed and nothing new has been developed in their place. This situation is one of the local landscape features, based on the ‘economic frame’, revealing the invisible to the visitor’s eyes about the ‘rural idyll’ (Bigell 2012, 24)



One local woman from Onezh’ye Village told me that the earth is alive and that people should respect and treat it with care and soul. Conversely, there is the ugliness, which is associated with disconnection and carelessness, and visible in the ruins left behind by the Soviet era, as well as the abandoned old houses, cut-down trees and the lack of attention and care by municipal authorities. I got the feeling that the people there are emotionally connected to the place based on the memories of how it looked and was maintained in the past, but not anymore.

I agree with Uljana, that the sky has a unique beauty there. In this area, people settled on the hills along the River Vim. Being on the hill gives a feeling of low sky, which is dominant in the local landscape. The sky embraces you in its arms, while the endless space around gives a feeling of freedom and the immense power of nature. I tried to capture the sky in its unique appearance in the villages we visited: Onezh’ye, Osla and Kozlovka.

CONCLUSION

During the trip I was thinking a lot about beauty, and how we define what is beautiful and what is not. A sense of beauty can be very general and commonplace, depending on our cultural, social and educational background. However, it can also be highly personal, relating to our memories and perceptions of the world. During the trip, the word “beautiful” was heard many times, in reference to the landscapes we saw, the food we ate, the people we met, and the handicraft works we created. The interviews with locals and my personal observations revealed a recurrent theme, which is bounded to beauty in both rural and urban areas: connection and care.

REFERENCES

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