

The Old Siberian City in New Media

In Search of Cultural Codes

A city on the »map of new media«

In late 20th century, the well-known German sociologist Niklas Luhman wrote: »What we know about our society and even about the world we live in, we know due to mass media« [Луман 2005:8]. However, over the last decades, »Luhman’s media reality« has undergone profound changes. Nowadays, in the epoch of the internet’s total expansion, when new media, as an aggregate resource of the world wide web (Web 2.0), as well as multimedia and digital communication formats, have leveled off state, geographical and social borders and activated intercultural links, every web user regards himself or herself as an inhabitant of the »global village« [Маклюэн 2003]. New media technologies, on the one hand, have made the world familiar, accessible and desirable, but, on the other hand, have led to »virtual competition« of cities as places of residence or business transaction activities. When planning travel or looking for a place of study, we strive to get an idea about countries and cities by means of the Internet, and this idea, undoubtedly, exerts an influence on our choice.

Why does a contemporary person in search of reliable and complete information prefer new media over traditional mass media? »Old media« can no longer impose their reality as the only true description of the world – new media technologies offer a multitude of realities. The interactive character of communication in new media gives rise to the possibility of independent information selection, and, therefore, of constructing one’s own special – *unique* – reality. New media are faster than the »old« ones; they promptly deliver information. New media are brief and symbolical: they prefer a picture rather than a text. New media are open: any internet user has an access to them [Стинс, Ван Фухт 2008]. Thus, such characteristics of the new media as their multimedial nature, interactivity, efficiency, accessibility, economical use and openness have made for their popularity as contemporary means of mass communication.

In this connection, the necessity of having a presence in new media for any city aspiring to draw the interest of potential guests is without doubt. Therefore, nowadays, the formation of a favorable idea about a city in the on-line format is as important for city image strategists (first of all for the local administration) as the realization of social and investment policies in practice. The city image is formed today not only by its airport, roads and developed infrastructure, but also by the official city portal, by the work of the electronic government and the content of social networks and forums.

The problem of creating the city image on-line (digital or electronic image) is particularly vital for relatively small cities of Siberia (with the population under one million people), whose geographic remoteness from Europe and the central part of Russia is, in itself, a barrier for the development of their tourist and investment attractiveness. Here, there is often a gap between a claim for international integration and insufficient attention to the positioning of the city in new media: authorities set up typical sites for unique cities, ignoring the importance of English language versions of the official city portals. The pace of developing social networks is slow, the need for working with thematic forums is underestimated, and multimedia resources on the web for creating and promoting the city image are not used in full measure.

At the same time, some of these cities have a significant economic, science-educational, and cultural potential that would allow them to become a center of attraction for entrepreneurs, and creative and intellectual elite. Against this background, those cities that have not been built in the epoch of socialist utopian architecture aimed at solving the problems of the country's industrialization, have an old history and retain original architectural aspect. Among them, there are such Siberian cities as Tyumen (1586), Tobolsk (1587), Irkutsk (1661) and Tomsk (1604). In the context of the problem under consideration, the available digital image of Tomsk is a good illustration of the fact that new media as *universal* means of communication can come in conflict with the *uniqueness* of the objects they promote.

From the perspective of European history, the 16th and 17th centuries are not really considered ancient. However, within the thousand-year old history of Russia, the mastering Siberia belongs, without doubt, to »The lore of ages long gone by,/The hoar antiquity compounded« (Alexander Pushkin, translated by Jenni Blackwood). Tomsk is older than Saint-Petersburg (1703) by a hundred years; however, Russian tsars never visited this city. The only Russian Emperor who passed through Tomsk by way of transit was Nicholas II (as tsesarevich). Daunted by thousand-mile distances, Russian rulers became acquainted with their domains from the reports of their couriers and graphic sketches of forts and settlements. At present, due to air travel, the President of Russia makes regular working visits all over Siberia and the Far East, and, within the framework of the Russia-Germany summit in 2006 with the participation of the German chancel-

lor Angela Merkel, Tomsk was mentioned in the news reports of all world information agencies. Those news stories, however, played a bad joke on the city. Despite the fact that governmental delegations remarked that they had met with a warm reception, and the German chancellor found Tomsk an interesting city, its image in news reports was formed under the influence of the tense political context of that meeting, and news headlines frequently mentioned the cold Siberian weather.

This example shows that a city's »presence« in itself in the content of new media is not sufficient. What is important is how Tomsk is presented on the »map of new media«. On the geographical maps of Russia, all not-so-big Siberian cities appear as tiny circles of a certain size and color: their names are different but their representations are identical. »A new media map« allows a city to express its uniqueness, to convey the city's special atmosphere, and present its people and tourist attractions. With that said, it is important to keep in mind that this image is formed in the conscience of diverse social groups under the influence of various contexts: geopolitical, climatic, cultural-historical etc. In this situation, the task of image-makers is to construct the mosaic of images into a single symbol that would incorporate the key positive connotations connected with an idea about the city. Here, one cannot do without relating communicative practices to theoretical interpretation of the communication process. Taking into account the fact that image communication prioritizes such values as understanding and dialogue, the communicator's most relevant methodological perspective appears to be a »semiotic turn« on the problem.

»Keys« to the city

In the Middle Ages, European cities used a coat of arms as a symbol, replacing in the process of communication the »denotation« or »signifier« – the specific city. Not only was the problem of identification solved in this way, but the problem of conveying a sufficiently large amount of information about the city, including an emotional attitude to this information (connotation), was also addressed. The representativeness of a coat of arms in the area of electronic communication is dubious, particularly when multicultural communications are involved, where the interpretation of symbols takes place under the influence of national-historical and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, in spite of the multimedia resources of the internet, even today communicators stake too much emphasis on the representativeness of visual signs. Visualization of an object in the epoch of the »screen culture« is considered as the most reliable tactics of image formation.

The visual dominant of the new media is determined also by the need to select from the capacious and laconic transmission of information.

This allows us to withstand the informational noise and follow the path of a »lazy« (Roland Barthes), rapid, economical, capacious way of information transmission.

Visualizing a city is simple in a certain sense – a photograph and a video recording allow us to see a multitude of unknown places around the world. However, if purposeful visualization and the need to form a city's uniquely recognizable image are considered, the question arises: *what* and *how* is to be visualized? One must look for the »texts« that convey positive connotations necessary for the city's image. Of no less importance is the need to determine contexts into which these additional positive meanings will be transferred on the image's object (the city).

In search of such »texts,« we have turned to architecture as a form of mass communication and expressive art form. An architectural construction has the potential of a polysemous symbol with a complex system of codes. Architecture, in spite of a multitude of interpretations in various discourses (professional, artistic and everyday) and a dichotomy of primary and secondary (symbolic) functions (Umberto Eco), is that very form of city's atmosphere representation that the recipient is able to perceive by means of photography and medial accompaniment of the internet resource. In this connection, those buildings whose esthetic value prevails over their utilitarian function are of greatest interest. An architectural construction, as an artistic »text«, is capable of conveying a much greater amount of information than simple language structures. Besides, artistic texts due to their complexity are capable of retaining the memory of their contexts, that is, they can perform the cultural memory function [Лютман 1970]. Thus, architecture is a city's visiting card, which narrates its history and reflects its contemporary mood.

Nowadays, we observe that architects and specialists in social communications form an effective professional tandem: the efforts of both professional groups are directed towards the creation of a city's »recognizable« image, to the establishment of a positive emotional link with it, to ensuring its attractiveness in the eyes of the most different audiences. In fact, there are numerous examples of enlivening a city's tourist life as the result of erecting a single architectural construction. One of the most known examples of this kind is the case of Bilbao, the capital of the province of Biscay in Spain, which became a popular tourist destination after the construction there of a Museum of Modern Art (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum designed by architect Frank Owen Gehry).¹ Thus, behind the depiction of the Statue of Liberty, we discern New York, and behind the Eiffel tower, we see Paris. However, what matters is not only the uniqueness and dimensions of these artifacts. The representativeness of these constructions as symbols consists in properly »guessed« culture codes.

¹ Official web-site of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum: www.guggenheim.org/bilbao.

This evasive code ...

The American psychologist of French descent, Clotaire Rapaille, writes in his book »The Culture Code: An Ingenious Way to Understand Why People Around the World Live and Buy as They Do« (2006) about the fact that our attitude to an object (and this, in its turn, determines our behavior) is formed in early childhood under the impact of the culture in which we are raised. In this way, the memory of culture meanings is rooted in »the culture unconscious«. Like the way Carl Jung singled out the archetypes of the collective unconscious, Rapaille is searching for »culture codes« in the depths of individual experience. Rapaille put his methods at the service of marketing departments of largest corporations. His codes allowed corporations to sell successfully goods of American and European producers around the world. Rapaille claims that the knowledge of a »culture code« helps producers promote not only goods, but ideas and brands. Besides, a brand's success on global markets is possible only if it comes from a »certain village«, that is, if it is associated with a specific locality, and not only with the country of origin. It allows the brand to »survive« in unfavorable international political contexts and emphasize the culture uniqueness, which in the epoch of globalization has become one of the major human values [Rapaille 2006].

Rapaille's methods of determining culture codes appear to be interesting but are extremely difficult in application when the target audience of the brand (of the city's image) belongs to a multitude of cultures. As is known, Russian society is multicultural, just as multicultural as the population of the old Siberian city of Tomsk, and this makes us look for another approach to finding out its culture code.

It is not always necessary to submerge too deeply into the human unconscious in order to find culture meanings hidden there. An individual makes explicit his or her emotions, experiences and the attitude to the world in what is called the esthetic mastering of the world, and it is expressed in works of folk creative work and art. Cultures codify their meanings in symbol-signs, in behavior, in myths and other systems of modeling the world. The culture model of the world is transferred by humans onto everyday life and interrelations as well as projected onto their dwellings. After »Structural Anthropology« by Claude Levi-Strauss (1958), the »culture encoding« is understood exactly in such a way by representatives of the structural-semiotic approach. And even though many semeiologists, after Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Lacan, included the participation of the unconscious in codification of meanings, they looked for their explicated variant in the symbolic structures of cultural texts.

Thus, Roland Barthes said that cultural codes are contained in symbolic (connotative) messages, and it is the individual's idiolect as an aggregate of a certain cultural »vocabularies« that allows their decoding [Барт 1989].

Yuri Lotman considered that it was not enough to have an adequate translation of a text to understand the natural language of another culture: one must know its cultural code. Mastering a cultural code is possible through a purposeful immersion into a culture's »texts« and »contexts« in the process of studying traditions and history of a people [Лотман 2011]. »Language is a code plus history«, – wrote the Tartu semeiologist [Лотман 2000:15].

Umberto Eco singles out cultural codes as a special type of code. In his opinion, one may refer the etiquette and world modeling systems to the systems structured on the basis of the culture code. Codification in these systems is based on the *values* of this or another culture. If one follows Umberto Eco's differentiation of the notions of »code« and »lexicode«, cultural codes must rather be referred to as secondary codes (lexicodes), that is what imparts additional connotative meanings, »co-meanings« to signs [Эко 2004].

Culture codification takes place as a process of giving meanings to phenomena from the perspective of an esthetic attitude towards them, that reveals »meaningful/non-meaningful«, »valuable/non-valuable«, »cultural/non-cultural« pairings. All that is valuable enters into the system of culture, all that is non-valuable is opposed to it. Thus, a cultural identity is formed, and the identification of various cultures becomes possible.

Thus, a culture code is the aggregate of meanings and values of this or another culture, which take part in the process of meaning-giving (imparting connotative, symbolic meanings) to natural phenomena and artifacts, and make up the meanings core, allowing identification and interpretation of a given culture. It is a key to understanding the culture's meanings, values, »texts«.

In the process of confronting globalization and multiculturalism, the identification of unique cultural codes becomes just as important a principle of effective communication as the formation of universal codes (values). Even though Umberto Eco considers a quest for the pra-code, or the code of codes, utopian, Levi-Strauss's »structures« manifest uniformity in principles of meaning-giving and world modeling, common to all mankind. Therefore, apart from unique codes, one may speak about certain universal values common to all mankind, due to which a dialogue of cultures is carried out. To such universal values, without doubt, one may refer to the careful attitude people have towards their homes and to understanding the esthetic values of national and artistic styles in architectural artifacts. The recognizable denotation (home) and »connotative expectations« allow one to view the architecture of any culture as a »text« and to try to unravel its code, with the feeling that it is in this text that a key to understanding the meanings of its creator is concealed.

Humans built their first dwellings and projected their world model onto the constructive and decorative elements of their constructions. The architectural connotative meanings grew more complex with the development of culture: with the emergence of states, architecture took upon itself the functions of reflecting various ideological directions. European architectural styles expressed esthetic ideas of various social elites, while contemporary architects »signify« an author's architectural decisions in terms of their personal world view. Regrettably, standard residential quarters of contemporary cities more often than not do not contain any »living« texts, referring to national artistic traditions. In this context, constructions of past centuries appear to be more valuable artifacts, whose »texts« contain strong cultural-national and regional codes. Returning to the problem of a quest for the culture code of the old Siberian city of Tomsk, one may clearly state that the city has such artifacts.

»A Siberian terem«²

Tomsk stands out among other not-so-big cities of Siberia in that it has retained about *seven hundred* wooden housing structures of the late 19th century/early 20th century. A little more than a hundred of them are registered as architectural monuments of federal and regional significance. For many years, a city target program has been implemented in Tomsk, aimed to maintain and revive wooden architecture.

In the early 19th century, the spontaneous building of town housing estates ceased, and the planned construction of wooden houses began. In the twenties of the 19th century, when classicism in Moscow and Saint Petersburg went into a decline, the construction of wooden houses began in Siberian provinces, whose volume-space composition tended towards rigorous symmetry. The influence of classicism manifested itself in ignoring décor in window platbands. Many houses of that period are demolished today, and modern functional buildings are erected in their place. Interestingly, the Tomsk townsfolk parted with the houses of that »classical« period easily and without regret. Probably, the reason for that was that no national-cultural specifics of the locality were expressed in them. Of greater cultural interest were houses, where the influence of eclectics was reflected in the architect's inclination for ornamentation (early 20th century; fig. 1–3). A return to old Russian traditions and the turn to folklore led to houses carved with decorations that became a volume-constructive solution, thereby turning the house into a »fairy terem«. The ornamental development of Tomsk's wooden architecture took place not only under the influence of Russian, but also local, for example, Tatar, folk creative work. The blending of all these traditions gives Russian art critics and culture historians the right to speak about the existence of a special »Siberian style«, a »Siberian neobaroque« [Герасимов 2010].

² Terem is a top tier of old Russian wooden or stone multilevel residential building with a lot of decoration elements, is used in Russian culture (and in the paper) as a symbol of collective image of imposing mansion in national style.

The wooden architecture is not only a cultural asset for contemporary Tomsk, creating a unique atmosphere of »ages long gone by«, but also a »symbolic capital« (Pierre Bourdieu). Promoting Tomsk as an old Siberian city with a distinctive brand of wooden architecture is combined today with such city strategies as creating the image of Siberia as an educational center (»Siberian Oxford«) and developing an innovation sector of economy by establishing the Tomsk special economic zone of technical-innovation



Fig. 1 Tomsk, Belinskiy street, 19. One of the Architectural monuments of federal significance. The Architect Stanislav Chomich (1904). Photograph: Pavel Andryushchenko.



Fig. 2 Tomsk, Tatarskaya street, 46. One of the Architectural monuments of federal significance. The Architect Stanislav Chomich (1902). Photograph: Pavel Andryushchenko.

type (»Northern Silicon Valley«). Image communication is carried out with various target groups, which, without doubt, calls for a competent placement of accents. Nevertheless, »the wooden heritage« as the city's competitive advantage is significant to many. Guests and Tomsk city-dwellers stroll along old streets and lanes of Tomsk, take pictures, buy gifts or sou-

venirs with pictures of carved houses. Entrepreneurs make investments in the restoration of wooden architectural constructions, and, subsequently, open elite-class hotels and restaurants there.

Tomsk's wooden architecture as the city's symbol conveys positive connotations: »Tomsk is a city with an old history« (old times have cultural attraction), »Tomsk is a city which values its cultural heritage« (a positive image of the city's authorities and city-dwellers is formed here), »Tomsk is a city of unique architecture« (exoticness, originality, ecology-friendliness attract tourists), »Tomsk is a city where you can create and value beauty« (an important connotation for attracting creative people). The next layer of connotations immerses the cultural interpreter to reveal the city's culture code: »Tomsk is an old Siberian city« (it transpires from the stylistics of constructions: people here honor their traditions), »Tomsk is a not-so-big Siberian city« (people live in small houses; there are narrow, cozy little streets, fairy wooden terems among the boundless forests of the taiga). This sequence of connotations that attaches »Russianness« (analogous



Fig. 3 Tomsk, Gagarin street, 46. One of the Architectural monuments of federal significance. The unknown architect. Early 20th century. Photograph: Pavel Andryushchenko.

to Roland Barthes' »Italianness«) to Tomsk's image works to maintain those stereotypes that have been formed in foreigners' ideas about Russia. Tomsk is also loved by Russian citizens themselves for this »Russianness«: here lives the fairy tale, on which they grew up. It is a combination of uniqueness and the stereotypic in the image of a »wooden« Tomsk that makes it attractive for at least a visit, and does not leave those who have stayed there indifferent.

Wooden laces in the new media format

Just as a virtual acquaintance with an interesting person, sooner or later, stimulates our real (sensual) communication with him or her, so a city attracts a traveler by a combination of unique architectural constructions, hand-made creations, cultural tourist sights, with which one gets acquainted in the reality of media.

Due to the representative properties of photography and video recording, a city's architecture can convey its meanings in the framework of image communication. Media representation (of the web and photography) can even amplify these or other connotations, because the architectural »text« can be placed in the specific context given by the communicator. A photograph of a wooden house torn out of context runs a chance of remaining simply a »message without a code« (Roland Barthes). Symbolic identification with a cultural code is determined the attitude towards the sign by the carriers of culture. The »status« of a sign as iconic (photographic) or symbolic (connotative, cultural) depends on where and how often, in what contexts, and in what »communicative circumstances« (Umberto Eco) the sign is used for conveying meanings.

In what new media contexts can Tomsk's wooden architecture become a symbol, and »work« for an attractive image of the city? In this connection, it is conditionally possible to single out three directions of professional image making. The first direction presupposes a »visual turn« in official internet resources of the city and Oblast administration. The second direction is connected with the content of social networks, Wiki tools and services, photo and video hosting services. The third direction is mastering the latest information technologies, such as QR-codes and augmented reality technology, for popularization of the city's cultural-architectural heritage.

A survey of internet resources in which Tomsk is presented visually, has shown that wooden architecture, this way or otherwise, appears in the photo and video content of official and public sites. However, it should be pointed out here that wooden architecture does not dominate in the general volume of visual information. Besides, most sites suffer from text overload, so that photo and video materials are presented as secondary, and it is sometimes difficult to find them on the site map. Photograph sizes and quality often leave much to be desired. Regrettably, the City and Oblast administration sites are quite outdated from the viewpoint of their design, as well as in what in the language of site designers is called »community« and »usability«.³

If we are concerned with a purposeful formation of the city's image, one should, without doubt, start with the official internet portals – »the main gateway to the city« in new media [Кужелева-Саган 2012]. Here, it is nec-

³ Official web-site of the Authorities of Tomsk: www1.admin.tomsk.ru.

essary not only to take into account the principles of electronic communication efficiency (openness, interactivity, topicality and accessibility of information), but also to consider the »symbolic« element of the non-verbal content of official sites. No one will look for a city's symbols in the web space: web users should encounter them literally at every step. The culture code, of which we spoke above, must be discerned in every visual element.

The image of the »Siberian terem« was actively applied to graphic subjects of the Tomsk brand as it was developed for the city's 400 anniversary (2004). However, it found practically no resonance in the new media format. The Tomsk Administration site interface, presented in brown tones, refers us rather to those objects of wooden architecture that require serious restoration work. Just as a decrepit house calls forth negative associations, so can an »archaic« design and site navigation bring to naught the culture code's entire connotative potential. Emphasis on Tomsk old architecture can become its manifest advantage in virtual competition between Russian cities only if the specific nature of new media is taken into consideration: a continuous search is needed for fresh creative solutions, original designer approach, understanding of esthetic dominant in perception of »texts« in the epoch of screen culture.

There is a more complex situation in the case of multi user sites whose content is formed spontaneously. But, nevertheless, there are tools for working with social media, and they must be used in forming the city's digital image in the designated key [Брекенридж 2009]. Social networks, forums, photo and video hosting services are popular among internet users because the »unofficial« nature of the information in them calls forth more trust. Networks offer an interactive format of communication and anyone can join a dialogue, including image-makers. In social media, an undesirable context may be created around the object image: discussing the housing problems of »wooden shacks«, and shocking photographs of burned down wooden houses in the web can have the effect of »washing dirty linen in public«. Regrettably, such problems exist. But, one cannot fail to notice that the restoration work in Tomsk is going ahead in a planned and systematic way, and whole city districts have regained their historical appearance. Part of the restoration work is carried out with the use of state funds, and another part – at the expense of private investors. These developments, no doubt, deserve attention and must be reflected not only in the newspapers and television programs, but also in the content of social media. The city and Oblast administration can set up its own internet resources on the platforms of social media. As an alternative, one can support interesting electronic projects started up by city-dwellers and develop such new media technologies via crowdsourcing (wiki tools and services). In any case, access to social media spaces will be seen as an invitation to a dialogue, which will facilitate image communication.

And, finally, a promising direction appears to be the application and distribution of such newest digital technologies as creating virtual 3D-tours, QR-codification of architectural monuments and augmented reality technology. Architecture and new media are so closely entwined in these progressive technologies, that it is no longer important, who solves whose problems: whether media popularize architecture or architecture »decorates« the new media content. These technologies appear as portals of a kind, which connect real and virtual worlds of social communications.

In Moscow and some other large cities of Russia, the QR-code technology, which can access huge amounts of information about an object by means of gadgets connected to special electronic programs or Internet resources, has been used in museums and urban spaces for a long time. For Siberian cities, QR-codification of architectural monuments has become possible with the support of one of the leading Russian cellular network companies. The same company actively develops the augmented reality technology, releasing special applications for their customers' telephones.

At present Tomsk has been »digitalized« in 3D-virtual tours and in 3D-cards. It must be noted that a virtual tour of the objects of Tomsk's wooden architecture may be found on the Tomsk Oblast Administration web site.⁴ The spread of the above enumerated digital technologies in the future will allow for the popularization of Tomsk's cultural heritage. Moreover, their use in itself may appear as a sign of the fact that Tomsk is not only an old, but also progressively developing city.

Thus, in »virtual competition« the city's symbol visualization, conveying its cultural code in new media formats, can become a »unique selling proposition« and make the city's image attractive for its townsfolk and guests. Here, it must be understood that the object's image uniqueness requires not only a successful symbol, but also the placement of that symbol in a »message«. New media can become a means of symbol mass multiplication, which is not bad for the recognizability of the referent, but harmful for the city's culture code, which »comes to life« only through an accurate context. The symbol significance determines the esthetic attitude to it; therefore, it becomes very important for the communicator to keep the city's image in the esthetic context: the »automatic« use of new media tools must give way to an artistic approach to electronic communication.

The wooden »media«

Any media, whether old or new, make up images of faraway unknown cities, and these images can be rather attractive, so that we would like to feel a city with all sensory channels: to breathe in its air, to roam along its narrow old streets and lanes, to catch the city's atmosphere with its sounds

⁴ Web-tour of the objects of wooden architecture of Tomsk: depculture.tomsk.gov.ru/ru/Senter/VIRTUAL_TUR/SS.html.

and noises, to get acquainted with its dwellers, to see unique architectural creations with one's own eyes.

In reality, Tomsk is a many-sided city: alongside its highly artistic buildings in the style of Art Nouveau, one comes across absurd architectural forms. The city center abounds in architectural monuments, but the »sleeping« microdistricts are entirely made up of standard housing structures. Nevertheless, both guests and city dwellers note that the city's culture code really »resides« in its wooden terems. To preserve them is to preserve the city's unique aura. New media, due to the wealth of technological resources present in them, are capable of maintaining a continuous interest of various target audiences to the city's culture code. But they cannot replace the real referent – the wooden architecture itself, whose loss will lead to the disappearance of the culture code.

Biographical Notes

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