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Naming city objects in Russia: from ideological concepts of Soviet time to new nominative practice[1]

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the problems of naming objects of urban space. Urban toponyms (urbanonyms) are considered verbal signs of the language landscape and symbols that support national and sociocultural identity. Historically developed, balanced urban toponymic landscape in Soviet times was subjected to the total pressure of ideological nomination. Current practice shows a tendency to strengthen the regional component of naming, but nominative solutions are performed in a limited range of models. The development of modern official urbanonymy may follow the path of active use of local linguistic material and the coordination of urbanonyms with the semiotics of the architectural landscape to create a harmonious image of the location.
Keywords: urbanonym, naming, urbanonymic landscape, semiotic code.

1. Introduction

Urbanonyms (urban toponyms, urban place names)[2] are the focus of interest in different areas of humanistic knowledge – linguistics, cultural studies, urban sociology, semiotics, cultural geography. This is due to the close connection of urbanonyms with the realities of urban life, with mentality and the specificity of life in urban settlements.

From the viewpoint of sociocultural values, we appreciate names of urban places phenomenologically as verbal marks or symbols, which are important for the perception and human understanding of space as habitable place, living environment with corresponding activities. As O. Lavrenova (2010: 3) states, "Culture re-structures the space of the habitance, and perceptions about the environment are transformed into a symbolic system. The area of direct contact between culture and geographical space – a layer of semiosphere, signs of which are the toponyms and called geographical objects".

Upon characterizing the onomastic specificity of urbanonyms, we note their similarity to the generic class of toponyms in the implementation of the dominant

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[2] The term *urbanonym* is used as a general designation for the proper names of streets, avenues, parks, embankments, squares and other spatial objects of the cityscape.

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orienting function. By observing the inclusion of urbanonyms in the discourse of landscape and culture, we recognize behind them the property of a kind of mirror that broadcasts information about the traditions, sociocultural values and attitudes that characterize a particular community.

As linguistic signs fixing the image of space, urbanonyms form an important part of the linguistic landscape of a city and thus participate in the formation and maintenance of national-ethnic and local identity: "Our relations to place and culture become elements in the construction of our individual and collective identities" (Entrikin 2006: 5).

The toponymic landscape of a city retains the features of its historical development, but the processes of changing the urban environment have an inevitable impact on it. This is due to the expansion and reorganization of the territory of the city, the changing sociopolitical conditions, and the dynamics of the perception of urban space by its population. Therefore urban toponymy cannot be considered in isolation, but should be analyzed in a broader context, referring to language in society and to language changes in a transforming society. "Denumirea străzilor nu poate fi înțeleasă ca autonomă, ci trebuie examinată într-un context mai larg, vizând limba în societate sau, mai precis, schimbarea lingvistică într-o societate aflată în transformare" (Felecan 2013: 319).

In the history of Russian urbanonymy the impulses for radical renewal were twice served by the causes of the external order, namely the change in the sociopolitical system, the restructuring of socioeconomic life and the establishment of new values and meanings of social development. The first impulse for numerous changes was deliberately created by the policy of Soviet power and Soviet ideology. The second impulse was set by the country's transition to democratic governance and a market economy.

In this article we attempt to show the influence of Soviet ideology on urban toponymy as a result of the introduction of ideological concepts and to assess the consequences of this influence on urban landscape. The current practice of naming urban objects and some actual trends of the modern nomination will be described based on the urbanonymy of the post-Soviet period (1990–2017).

Our reasoning lies in the general line of linguistic and semiotic approach, according to which proper names are treated as marks that are involved in the transmission of multidimensional sociocultural information and affect the perception of urban space. As material for observations, we make use of new urbanonyms of Russian cities used in different regions of the country – Moscow, St. Petersburg, Arkhangelsk, Ekaterinburg, Kazan, Krasnoyarsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Tver, Tyumen, etc.

2. Urbanonyms and the semiotics of space. Semiotic codes in naming urban places

Modern semiotics describes space as a sense-making form and emphasizes the anthropocentric nature and the subjective component of space perception. The

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meaning of space is created by the human interpretation of the objective world. As Yi-Fu Tuan (2001: 139) states, "Space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning".

The urban semiotic sphere is represented by means of a complex of intercrossed sign systems, which dynamically evolve in human activity. The basic one is the system of language; it is no coincidence that the very notion of language as a means of coding has easily entered the terminology of cultural study, architecture and ethnography. The verbal material describing the spatial perception of a city forms one of the fragments in the linguistic picture of the world, and a special role among denotation means belongs to proper names. The very categorial semantics of a proper name excellently corresponds to the logic of prioritizing in viewing reality because, by virtue of its functionality, a name serves as a marker of the individual significance of the item to which it refers. Taking into consideration this property, nomination of urban space items can be represented, in terms of content, as space comprehension and structuring by means of special verbal symbols of its pragmatic value (in a broad sense). As Bertie Neethling (2016: 146) notes, "It is quite obvious then that there is a strong link between street names and semiotics and from this viewpoint they become the means through which urban space becomes authoritative which elevates common life to the sublime. At this level street names appear to have a transcendental dimension elevating them above the mere mundane or the referential function".

A complex of urbanonyms is a text (in terms of semiotics); its content creates a certain semantic space in which the city image appears in different modalities. The interpretation of semantic space takes place according to certain cultural norms via elements and structures that are responsible for conveying meanings and via norms establishing interpretation. This is how the semantic code implemented by linguistic means is set. As all the other codes, the one in question is based on a conditional relation between the form of expression and the form of content, where the form of expression refers to material elements of urbanonyms and the form of content, to semantic components in the content of name. Considering the abovesaid, several semantic codes interpreting urban space with proper names can be outlined: the landscape-distinctive, social-functional and social-symbolic codes.

The landscape-distinctive code corresponds to the modality of the definition and verbal description of a place – the identification and ranking of its constituent objects, the establishment of connections and relations between them. This function is primarily performed by nomenclature (*street*, *lane*, *square*, *park*, etc.), which are connected in the urbanonymic complex with an individualizing component, for example, *Beregovaya* street. The terrain characteristic in the individualizing component is realized as an indication of its individual distinctive properties.

Although this is more significant for marking natural space, it is nevertheless quite common that among urbanonyms there are always names that explain the natural, physical or planimetric properties of a city's places: for example, the names of streets like *Dalnyaya*, *Krutaya*, *Okruzhnaya*, *Podgornaya*. However, no less significant for the

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city as a special settlement is the naming of objects, carried out in the modality of their sociofunctional comprehension.

The social-functional semantic code is conditioned by the links with the social infrastructure of the city, with its economic, administrative, production, recreational activities, property rights, etc. Sometimes these characteristics are transparent for interpretation (*Torgovaya* square in old Ekaterinburg). Such characteristics often indicate the characteristics of nearby objects of activity (*Zavodskaya* and *Hospitalnaya* streets). They can provide information about subjects of social activity (*Thyganskaya* Square) or about the object of practical activity (*Drovianaya* – the seasonal trade in the forest was conducted there). The social-functional code actualizes information slots and extracts them from the virtual scheme *who? – what? – do? – where?*. However, only one slot is usually explicated in a name – the others are added from the cognitive script during perception. The social-functional code operates within the historical-cultural environment; it is supplemented by information on stable stereotypes of social and speech behavior that steers the rules of interpretation. Therefore, nominative references to personalities, implying the existence of the right to own private property (*Arhiereyskaya* street – leading to the house of the bishop), are easily read in light of the norms of social interaction and work for a social-spatial orientation in the urban environment.

Thus, orientation becomes the main and general function for urbanonyms realizing the landscape-distinctive and social-functional code, with the difference that in the first case physical and natural qualities of the landscape are accentuated and in the second, its social characteristics.

Another aspect of the interpretation of space involves interpreting it through the prism of religion, ideology, aesthetics, morality, or fashion. In many cases, the existence of an urbanonym as a social symbol involved in the range of ideas developed by some form of mass consciousness is no less significant, but may be even more so. Such a semantic code can be defined as social-symbolic.

The symbol is a sign with double signification; it is connected "with the idea of some content, which in turn serves as an expression plan for another, usually more valuable content" (Lotman 1992: 191). The social-symbolic code in urbanonymy is secondary to the subject-distinctive one. Therefore, the name of a temple serves to distinguish the building in a general sense as a 'place', but a place which is perceived as sacred. Its symbol is a name reminiscent of events of religious history. Assigning a street name in honor of a real person becomes a symbol of respect, expressed in accordance with current ideological or social assessments. In any of the variants, the social-symbolic code is a kind of statement, which affirms any form of priority of social consciousness.

Semantic codes can partially overlap and complement each other as some stable formulas that allow us to distinguish the different aspects of the perception of space. According to some of these, space is perceived as a) the objective reality that forms the image of a familiar landscape, including the architectural environment; b) the place

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and area of current activity, dictating behavioral stereotypes; c) in a certain way, an organized form, directing interpretation into the field of ideological, religious, aesthetic and other representations.

We observe a sufficient balance and diversity of semantic codes in urbanonymic landscape of those cities that have undergone a long historical path of development.

3. Symbolic ideological naming

One variant of implementing the social-symbolic code is nomination with ideological meaning. The ideological motives of the nomination have very deep historical roots. Imposing toponymic names from above, renaming influenced by political, religious or national ideas, as well as renaming aimed at praising rulers, monarchs or leaders are specific to empires, and the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union do not constitute an exception. B. Uspensky and Y. Lotman equate assigning official ideological names or ritual renaming to the modern mythology of the state (Lotman and Uspensky 1992: 70). In Soviet times, ideological naming reached an unprecedented scale. The formation of a new, socialist state was accompanied by a new toponymic policy. The general ideological function of the new names presupposed the consolidation of the priorities of the new social and cultural policy. We can outline a set of concepts forming the core of Soviet urbanonyms with ideological connotations.

The concept of 'time' transformed under ideological influence into the notion of 'the new Soviet time' and finds application in names that reflect epoch-making events as special starting points in the new history, for example:

– *Rrevolyutsii, Oktyabr'skoy Revolyutsii, Oktyabrya* – streets, squares, embankments. Such urbanonyms had superior connotations marking a "sacred" event. Certainly, these were attributed to the most important items of urban space. Generally, these items were situated in the central part of a city or town and played an important role in the infrastructure and social life.

– *The 22nd Comunist Party Congress* street, *the Komsomol 40th Anniversary* street, *the First Five-year plan* street and others.

– Instead of religious holiday names, city maps were diversified with names of proletarian holidays: *the 8th of March* street, *the First of May* street.

The concepts of 'leaders' and 'heroes' were implemented in a great number of commemorative names connected to the names of ideologists and experts of revolutionary activities, party and economy construction. In truth, the 'new-world construction leaders' concept has demonstrated the highest popularity in the nomination process (in the presence of the generally high popularity of memorial nomination in the toponymy of the 20th century). In turn, the active introduction of the principle of memorial nomination and promotion of a certain group of politicians in the public conscience brought about a number of similar names in the cities and towns of the Soviet Union (see *Lenin, Stalin, Lunacharsky, Plekhanov, Sverdlov, Kirov, Frunze* streets and squares; naturally, Lenin's name was assigned to central streets and squares in many Soviet cities and towns).

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The concept of 'social values' is represented in ideologemes of the new social order and is clearly seen in such names as *Sotsialisticheskaya* street, *Communisticheskaya* street, *Sovietskaya* street, *Internatsional'naya* street, *Druzhby* street, *Truda* street, *Mira* street and others.

The concept of 'Soviet person' is implemented in the names reflecting a respectful attitude towards working people. Here, a wide range of urbanonyms connected to jobs can be mentioned: *Gornyakov* street, *Shakhterov* street, *Metallurgov* street, *Stroiteley* street, *Tkachey* street, *Medikov* street and others.

Obviously, more details can be added to the conceptual worldview represented in official urbanonyms of the Soviet times. Yet the very core of the considered semantic field shows that this view was comprehensive, ideologically systematic and unified. The result of its copying was the abundance of similar names that tend to be ideological clichés. The end of the Soviet social project and the collapse of the Soviet Union finished the epoch of "great ideologies". Russia took the path of market economy and the state ideology was abolished by the country's Constitution.

4. Urbanonymic nomination in modern times

The change in social conscience during Perestroika and afterwards has certainly influenced the attitude towards former ideological names. On the cusp of the 20th and 21st centuries, the issues of renaming urban items or returning to the pre-revolutionary names triggered active public interest. The process of renomination and change of urbanonyms took place in many cities and towns. However, this tendency was not drastic and the complete rewriting of Soviet names did not take place[3].

The life of modern large and small Russian cities is included in the context of a new era with its social and cultural realities. We observe a change in the ways of production, storage and transmission of sociocultural information. There is a transformation of norms, goals and models of life and interaction.

The territory of cities is also changing, ideas about architectural and planning arrangement of locations are changing, and the language landscape of the city is changing. In this respect, one only needs to consider how semantic nominative codes are implemented in present-day nomination.

The landscape-distinguishing code partially returns to the practice of notation. For example, when naming or renaming peripheral streets, the indications used for

[3] This fact can be explained by means of several reasons: 1) it is important to mention the economic reasons related to the costs of producing a huge amount of new guides, maps and documents for companies and individuals; 2) many citizens do not perceive the ideological meaning of Soviet urbanonyms as topical but, in general, consider such names are symbols of the old epoch, which represents an essential part of the country's complex and dramatic history; 3) the very conventional nature of a sign contributes to the fact that motivating semantics takes a back seat being forced out by spatial and visual understanding of the denotation image and location. Thus, the old urban toponyms establish the understanding of the habitual urban space and partially contribute to the local identity.

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settlements that are located in the spatial proximity to the city may be as follows: *Naboloki* street < Navoloki village (Rybinsk), *Aleksandrovka* street < Aleksandrovka settlement (Moscow), *Gorelskie* street and lane < Gorelyka village (Tula), *Pervouralskaya* street < Pervouralsk (Ekaterinburg), *Nevyanskaya* street < Nevyansk city (Ekaterinburg), *Antipinskaya* street < Antipino village (Tyumen) and others.

Ubranonymy indicating the nearest water forms are also greatly sought after in the systems of modern city names (Razumov 2012: 168): *Boldov Ruchey* street (Moscow), *Latin* street < Latin stream (Tula), embankment of the Okkerville River (St. Petersburg), *Yazvinskaya* street < Yazva river (Perm), *Shatskaya* street < Shat river (Tula) and others.

Metonymy, which often underlies the names of the landscape-distinctive code, helps to strengthen the orientation function of toponyms and connect the objects that are semantically located in space: *Yacht* bridge – in the alignment of *Yachtnaya* street, *Serny* bridge over the Malaya Neva and Sulfur Island, *Ledovy* bridge near the Ice Palace, *Oboronny* bridge is in the alignment of *Zavodsky* prospect and *Oboronnaya* street (St. Petersburg).

The natural properties of objects are reflected in the names of the landscape themes associated with local micro-toponyms: *Berezovaya Roshcha* alley, *Sadovaya Polyanka* street (Arkhangelsk), *Solovinaya Roshcha* street (Moscow) and others.

However, it should be noted that at present local micro-toponyms are not taken into account enough in the creation of names for peripheral parts of the city, but it is precisely this language material that can significantly enrich the palette of urbanonyms. Specialists in the field of the linguistic landscape of a city have already paid attention to this:

> There are some principles of the new urban names creation (…). One of the key principles, in our view, should be the thematic one – the creation of systems of names, given according to the geographical and historical realities of space development. For instance, a new residential estate is in the process of construction in Aleshinskaya river-valley near the old village Nikolskoye. So the hodonym *Aleshinskaya Dolina* is a former microtoponym (*dolina* means 'river valley'), hodonyms *Bukvitsa* and *Tavolga* reflect the characteristics of plants of the valley, *Stolnik Potemkin street* leads to the temple, built by his efforts in the 17th century (Potemkin is a famous old noble family, the word *Stolnik* means 'a courtier rank below the boyar in Russia in 13th–17th centuries'); hodonym *Kolchevskaya* retains the name of an ancient village *Kolchevo*, known since the 15th century. (…)
>
> On the one hand, such a complex is a local system of street names reflecting the history and landscape features of the ancient village Kolchevo and non-recurring in modern Moscow. On the other hand, it complies with the existing urbanonymic system (Sokolova 2016: 163).

The social-functional semantic code has not recorded a noticeable development in new names, although examples of its use are observed in different cities: *Albuminaya* street – along the Albumin Plant (St. Petersburg), *Perevalochnaya* street – with the

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stevedoring companies engaged in transshipment of cargo (St. Petersburg), *Teplicnaya* street – next to a greenhouse (Tyumen), *Yarmarochnay*a square (Kazan). Perhaps, the employment of the social-functional code is objectively limited by the dynamic processes of redevelopment, the re-equipment of urban areas and the movement of industrial and social facilities.

The social-symbolic code has received the widest application in modern naming. It is implemented in several variants. First of all, we note the return of confessional naming on the maps of Russian cities. As a rule, in the case of linear objects it is connected with the metonymic transfer of the names of churches to adjacent parts of space: *Voskresenskaya* street (Arkhangelsk) – named after the Resurrection Church, built by order of Peter I; *Christmas* street (Nizhny Novgorod) – one of the central streets in the city, having as its main attraction the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin, or Christmas; *Ilinskaya* street (Nizhny Novgorod) – named after the church devoted to Ilya the Prophet and located on this street.

However, while the old designations are correlated in the semantic landscape, the new names do not always correspond to its organization: if old temple structures are not preserved in the territory, the new names do not receive the actual content in the semiotic ranking of space. Deprived of actual semantics, such names acquire the character of an external decoration and sometimes turn out to be in direct spatial connection with the names of the directly opposite, Soviet ideological themes: for example, *Novo-Sobornaya* square (Tomsk), whose old name returned on the city map in the absence of a cathedral – the square is surrounded by *Lenin* avenue, *Sports* lane and *Sovetskaya* street.

Another variant of the symbolic designation – commemorative naming which is no longer associated with ideological motives – demonstrates extremely high productivity.

The creators of new urban place names most actively use a personal model of commemorative naming. Urbanonyms formed according to the model "in honor of someone"/"in memory of someone" became the most popular in all Russian cities. There is no reason to reject completely the commemorative principle of naming, but its total pressure creates the risk of turning the urban landscape into a monotonous memorial list.

Another option for implementing the symbolic principle of designation is conditional-romantic or conditional-landscape toponyms: *Lovers'* bridge (Tyumen), *Ametistovaya* street (Perm), *Krasivinnaya* street, *Zarnichnaya* street (Krasnoyarsk), *Oblepikhovaya* street (Tyumen), *Zadornyy* lane, *Zvezdopadnaya* street, *Nebesnaya Romashkovo*, *Snezhnaya* streets (Ekaterinburg) and others. The fashion for such names was common in Soviet times and the desire of nominators to assign a good, positive, emotional-figurative name to a spatial object remains to this day. The decorative function of such names is beyond doubt. However, in connection with such names, questions arise in each specific case of naming: whether such names correspond to the arrangement of a spatial object, its appearance, landscape design, the specifics of the

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buildings located here, etc.; whether they correspond to the perceptions of the inhabitants about the character of the urban space or have only an extremely abstract imagery. In our opinion, a special examination should pay attention to the aesthetic, stylistic and semantic properties of abstract figurative toponyms.

Summarizing the results of our description, we can say that the modern naming of urban objects displays some problems:

– the marked violation of the balance of different semiotic codes in relation to symbolic commemoration;

– nominative decisions do not always take into account the semiotic ranking of space and lead to the fact that the name becomes an external decoration or a stylized old-fashioned sign.

Nevertheless, we draw attention to some positive trends emerging in nominative practice. The main trend is the desire for closer connection of new urbanonyms with the regional historical and cultural context and for the representation of local identity. We can see many examples of such naming in Kazan. Kazan is the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan. The city is one of the largest religious, economic, political, scientific, educational, cultural and sport centers in Russia. The fusion of Russian and Tatar culture, Orthodox and Muslim religious traditions are well represented in this multinational megalopolis. New names on the city map fully correspond to the promoted image: they reflect the links with the cultural background, including historical linguistic heritage. Russian and Tatar languages are used equally for the production of urban toponyms. For example: *Aulak* lane, *Imen* street, *Bajtirek* street, *Borset* street, *Yafraqli* street, *Tashayak* street and others (in Tatar); *Belokamennaya* street, *Brusnichnaya* street, *Vishnevyy Sad* street, *Divnyy* lane and others (in Russian).

According to the language policy, the names of all the streets in Kazan are recorded on street signposts in Russian and Tatar, which makes it possible to have equal respect for the Tatar and Russian ethnos. In general, we can state that the urbanists of Kazan testify to the parity of Russian and Tatar culture, which is also found in the city's promoted brand.

Another positive trend is beginning to emerge in the practice of naming. It responds to modern demands in the semiotic harmonization of the toponymic landscape and in the establishment of a closer semantic connection between the name and the object of designation. An external impetus for this trend is the desire of commercial developers to create a holistic architectural image of the neighborhoods and coordinate it with a set of names for streets, boulevards and squares. For example, in Ekaterinburg, the new district of Solnechny has streets, boulevards and avenues with corresponding positive semantics: *Luchistaya*, *Yantarnaya*, *Neskuchnyy Bul'var*. Specialists in naming proposed for the three adjacent streets of the micro-district to bear the names *Very*, *Nadezhdy* and *Lyubvi*, respectively. In our opinion, the last example is interesting in that it introduces in a new way a religious theme in the portrait of a city. In our case, the reminder of the names of Holy martyr sisters and Christian virtues is integrated into the daily living space and, indeed, gives it warm emotional connotations.

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Another example of the embedding of a new name in the already existing toponymic landscape can be shown in the case of the residential complex Malevich[4] (Ekaterinburg). The choice of the name and design of the residential complex are associated with the theme of the Russian avant-garde, which is explicated by the motivating semantics of the names of the surrounding streets: *Tatlin* street and *Mayakovsky* street[5].

Commercial names of business companies, in turn, can also be included in the nominative game with existing street names, sometimes reinterpreting their original motivation in a new way. Here is a curious example from Krasnoyarsk: "In the street *Parizhskoy Kommuny*, in time, evidence of the Parisian chic appeared. Tiny little shops 'Gavrosh' and 'Haircuts of Paris', a café 'Bon café' (…). So from the meaning 'Paris Commune' there was only one 'Paris"[6].

Thus, on the one hand, we can observe in the newest naming practice the continuation of a memorial tradition that is stable for the 20th century, but now it is more closely related to regional history and culture. On the other hand, we see a tendency to create holistic image-complexes in which the architectural-planning image of a microdistrict or a part of a territory is consistently supplemented by the names of its linear objects. Undoubtedly, such integrated solutions give locations a great attraction in the eyes of local residents and external audiences.

5. Conclusion

The modern practice of urbanonymic naming – the creation and/or renaming of urban spatial objects – is of considerable interest to the common public and the expert community. The strong connection of names with the realities of their time gives urbanonyms the character of a valuable source of diverse information, turns them into one of the factors for the formation of local spatial, sociocultural and ethnic identity.

The diversity of the toponymic landscape is a natural consequence of urban development with a long history. However, the models of signification that were formed in Soviet times, firmly inscribed in the cultural, including the ideological, context of the era, often became clichés that were replicated throughout the country and destroyed the previous unique toponymic layer.

Currently, the renewal of urban toponymy is moving in the direction of greater attention to regional and local heritage. At the same time, the inertial pressure of the previous models of official naming has a certain influence on current practice, which leads to contradictory or semiotically unjustified decisions.

The perspective tasks of managing the public perception of the urban environment dictate the need, first, to use the local language material more actively and

[4] Kazimir Malevich – Russian avant-garde artist, the founder of Suprematism – one of the earliest manifestations of abstract art of modern times.

[5] Vladimir Tatlin – one of the largest representatives of the Russian avant-garde, the founder of constructivism. Vladimir Mayakovsky – one of the most famous Russian avant-garde poetry.

[6] http://www.kleshko.info/publent.php?id=2234 (access date 20.08.2017).

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creatively, including micro-toponymy; second, to closely associate the names with the integral image of the city and image features of fragments of the urban space.

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