

The Local text of a city and public art: in search of a post-Soviet identity

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Abstract

This article describes an interdisciplinary effort among scholars, street artists and curators around a public art project, "Tales of the Golden Apples" (almetpublic.art), in the industrial Russian city of Almetyevsk. The project included research, analysis and translation of the city and region's local identity into the language of art. The project's location determined the terms for a new methodological approach. Through survey research, a group of folklorists, religious scholars, ethnographers and urban anthropologists collected oral folklore beliefs and historical topics characteristic of the region. Anthropological study based on more than 40 in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Almetyevsk region. Street artists were then asked to create works based on the oral histories and material gathered by the scholars. Through this interdisciplinary approach, using local folklore and historical materials, an important step was made towards the formation of a post-Soviet identity for an industrial Russian city.

1. Introduction

Informal knowledge of residents about their city became the basis of the concept of a 5-year public art project in the Russian city of Almetyevsk located in the majority-Muslim region of Tatarstan. World-famous artists of various genres have created public artwork using local folk culture gathered and described by anthropologists and folklorists. Differing from the resource politics of the Soviet model in which Almetyevsk was seen as a city of oilmen, this is the first project of the post-Soviet space to take as its starting point the stories of city residents for representing national and cultural text in the city.

The purpose of this article is to show how the "Tales of the Golden Apples" art program is implemented in the Tatar

city, to show how specific folklore narratives realized in public art on the walls of the buildings help overcoming the depressive economic situation of the city. Due to the public art program, Almetyevsk can be perceived not only as the oil capital of the region, but also as a city with a rich past and peculiar cultural and folklore traditions.

The walls and streets of the city should tell the audience the stories that its inhabitants know. There are a number of problems with the intersemiotic translation of texts collected by researchers into the language of customers, artists, and then residents. One of the most difficult tasks is to explain authenticity and national and urban specifics to the artists who often have not been to Tatarstan or even to Russia.

During the writing of the article, the authors studied the corpus of existing materials on the topic though many sources that were only partially relevant for describing a public art program implemented in the space of the post-Soviet industrial city. This literature review contains only the most relevant research for this article.

The work of Rafael Schacter "Graffiti and street art as ornament" describes the mural as a new genre of street art that "remodel not only our physical environment, but also the perception of one's world" (Schacter, 2014). This idea runs like a thread through the text of the article on the public art program "Tales of Golden Apples," as one of its main goals is to form the unique cultural identity of the city and its people.

Javier Abarca, in the text "From street art to murals: what have we lost?" (Abarca, 2016), also reflects on the impact of street art on its surroundings, with an emphasis on the specific perception of various types of street art. In particular, the text articulates the distinctive features of such types as the mural, an example of custom-made legal street art.

As "Tales of the Golden Apples" is a commissioned art project in our article we not only show how commissioned street-art projects are organized by studying the mural features, but also explore the boundaries of muralism as part of a custom-made public art program in the post-Soviet city.

In the article mentioned above Javier Abarca describes the isolation of the artist-muralista from the local context in which he works. As an example, the author describes street art festivals where the artist creates his work in a short period of time and sometimes does not even have time to get acquainted with the culture of the venue. According to Abarca, in such works "we are missing the most crucial element of street art. There is still little space for the artist to get to know the context and play with it, there is no network of human-scale pieces encouraging the viewer to explore, and there is no possibility of playing with time." To prevent this kind of situation while creating the project "Tales of Golden Apples" a different method of interaction between the curatorial, artistic, and research aspects of the project was chosen, which is described in more detail in the section 2.

Also, in the article "Curating street art" (2017), Javier Abarca describes curatorial practices applicable to street art. The author states that the question of creating a curatorial statement in the context of street art remains open to reflection. The study of curatorial practices in street art has also been developed in the article "post-Soviet identity". The public art project described in the present article is the first curatorial project of street art in Russia, where the city serves as a platform for a single artistic statement.

The experience of the art project "Tales of Golden Apples" in Almet'yevsk shows how public art can on the one hand present a city with its national color and original identity in the space of Russian cities. On the other hand, public art increases awareness among residents of Tatar narratives related to folklore, the past and the oil industry, in which the majority of Almet'yevsk residents are involved. This is the process that can be called after Maurice Halbwachs (1992: 31-33) the actualization and reconstruction of collective memory, which turns out to be "socially constructed, contained spatiality - a society memory is the reconstruction of the past". Thus the public art creates a new look at the industrial city.

2 Geographical, historical and urban context in the post-Soviet era

Almet'yevsk is located in the center of Almet'yevsk District in southeastern Tatarstan. The Romashkinskoye oil field is located 70 km from the city and is the largest oilfield in the Volgo-Ural oil and gas region. As of January 1, 2016, the population of Almet'yevsk district was 204 thousand people, out of whom 151.4 thousand live in the city of Almet'yevsk. According to the 2010 census, the city population consists of Tatars (55%), Russians (37%), Chuvash (3%), and Mordva (2%).

Tatarstan is an area with a stable religious identity, best understood by the concept of "Tatar Islam". Tatar Islam today has been influenced by specific historical and sociocultural factors. First of all, while Islam came to the region in 922, it was not fully realized as an institution until the 15th century. As a result, there is tolerance towards other religions. Second, after the capture of the region by Russia under Ivan IV, Orthodox Christianity was imposed

as the official religion. This set of circumstances had the result that the people of Tatarstan were both protective of their culture and its origins in Islam and open to the modernizing influence of Russian culture.

The mutual cultural and linguistic adaptation of both Tatars and Russians is a hallmark of Almetyevsk, which is both due to geographic proximity and to mixed marriage. Both ethnicities are acquainted with each other's religious holidays; e.g., Tatars may dye eggs and eat kulich (a traditional Russian bread) for Easter, while Russians may participate in Tatar wakes.

The economy of the region is largely based on the oil industry (81.4%), while other sectors include utility and social services (5.3%), retail and wholesale trade (5%), processing industry (3.5%), transport and communications (2.25%), construction (1.3%), agriculture (0.15%).

The first mention of Almetyevsk appeared in the late 18th century; until 1953 it was a village with Tatar and Bashkir majorities. After the industrial revolution of the 1940s, when the oil companies of the Soviet Union began to actively extract oil in that region, many Russian workers arrived and the town grew. The urbanization of the space we focus on started during World War II. The villages were turned into towns in the 1950s and were built like many other Soviet cities, according to a unified urban development plan. It included a standard set of spatial features: a massive monument to Vladimir Lenin on the square in front of the administration building, ruler-drawn streets and prospects. This layout did not take into account the local relief and terrain of the surroundings.

In the period from the 1940s to the 2000s, Almetyevsk was a typical Soviet monotown, with a regular layout of streets, typical buildings, and an overall depressing urban environment. An arterial ring road framing the residential, cultural, and commercial center along a grid-like street network, with Soviet-era wide roads, characterized the city's plan.

In the Soviet resource city, life was subordinated to a scheme approved and forced by the government. One's time and energy were supposed to be sacrificed to work, and belonging to the team is the only form of existence. According to the Soviet urban development plan, recreational zones were designed for parades and

demonstrations, and scenic viewpoints were not for retreat but for honoring the memory of heroes approved by Soviet rhetoric.

In the period of the 1950-1990s, one could say that Almetyevsk was a typical Soviet oil city without a rural and cultural past, where the main inhabitants were oilmen. The average resident of Soviet Almetyevsk had his pantheon of Soviet heroes and the moral norms of a consumer of the socialist system.

Art was given a special role in the system of Soviet propaganda. All street-scale art was officially called monumental. Its single goal was to glorify the state, its official heroes and achievements. By the 1970s there was already a shortage of heroic characters, but the system continued to multiply the same heroes, bringing the situation to the sort of absurdism that was seen in pop art.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many depressed cities began to return to a pre-Soviet identity. Local historians worked in the archives and published facts about the pre-Soviet past. Some cities built during the Soviet era were either in a state of depression or invented a new identity, trying to create a new dominant that would make the city extraordinary, different from others. The process of searching for post-Soviet identity is described in the book *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities* (Bassin, 2016). In the 2000s, active searches for identity continued in the post-Soviet space, and the main role in this process was played by culture — the totality of all elements of human actions that are called the meanings of social life (Alexander, 2003).

3. Cultural code of Almetyevsk

3.1. Russian Almetyevsk and Norwegian Stavanger

Since the 2010s, the above-mentioned search for a post-Soviet identity has also affected industrial Almetyevsk. The city has been developing and becoming more attractive for living. In 2016, a 50-kilometer network of cycle paths appeared in Almetyevsk. It was designed by the Danish Copenhagenize Design Company and was widely reported in the local and national press. The development of a bicycle infrastructure put the city on the international urban agenda of Europe (Almetyevsk Bicycle Strategy 2015).

The public art project “Tales of Golden Apples” was begun in 2017 and is already changing the image of the city and the perception of its inhabitants' identity. This is not a unique case in the history of the industrial city. At first glance Almet'yevsk can formally be compared with the Norwegian city of Stavanger, but this is not quite so. The Nuart Festival, which Martin Reid has been conducting in Stavanger since 2001, has made that city famous for its high concentration of de-institutionalized street art. In Stavanger, there are works by such important muralists the 2000s such as Blu, Heracut, Ericailcane, Roa and Vhils; many other large-scale works; a sculpture park; and countless interventions, stencils, posters and tags. The festival began as a grassroots initiative with a minimal budget and was later supported by the Norwegian Art Council. Artistic statements here often illustrate the depressive realities of an industrial city: they play with themes of oil and black colour and often appear on abandoned buildings.

3.2. Public art program “Tales of the Golden Apples”

The Street Art Research Institute was invited to Almet'yevsk by the initiative of a local oil company "Tatneft" whose leaders are inhabitants of the area. By investing in the city, they pursue both economic and idealistic goals of preserving and reviving the traditions of their people, creating new values and a dream city.

It was decided not to call the project a festival. The festival movement that emerged in the West in the 2000s, which led to the flourishing of neo-muralism, on Russian soil turned into a mockery of the very idea of free artistic expression. Unexpectedly, neo-muralism was often the only form of art in Russian cities of the post-Soviet period. Usually during so-called festivals only commissioned works were featured. In Russia, any legal work goes through many rounds of approval, which made it almost impossible for any work of a provocative, or even sad or sarcastic, nature to legally appear in public. In Europe, as researcher Javier Abarca writes, there was also a crisis of festival culture, but in Russia this is especially pronounced (Abarca, 2016: 60-67).

At the same time, there are dozens of outstanding young muralists in Russia whose style was formed in the current conditions. In addition, while the Western festival culture often served to redevelop non-residential areas, in Russia

as a whole, and in Almet'yevsk in particular, public spaces made available for art were the main urban residential areas that included the standard housing of the area, where thousands lived.

The public art program “Tales of the Golden Apples” was begun taking into account that the works would be custom-made and would most likely remain in the city for a long time. All the murals, sculptures, media art, small interventions and works created together with the inhabitants were to be connected thematically into a single epic based on folklore and the history of these places united physically by a single cycling route. Those planning public art for Almet'yevsk faced a surprising contrast between the dry and scanty official data and the fabulous and fascinating stories of the inhabitants of the city and neighboring villages, which led back centuries into the magical world of folklore, full of the symbols of Tatar domesticity, to the heroic feats of the first oilmen.

A dialogue with local journalist and archivist Sofia Gafiatullina became the turning point in formulation of an artistic concept. She told about her conversation with one of the first female drillers, village women who worked in the oil fields during the *Great Patriotic War*:

“Young women started working instead of men in the first years of war. Every day they walked deep into the forest and came back home in darkness and undertook the heaviest burden of almost hand labour, the work of drilling workers, derrick hands, and miners. Wolves attacked them and not all came back. In order to recognize the dead ones, mothers used to tie scraps from pillow cases to our lapy [bast-shoes or traditional shoes made of birch or other tree bark], overshoes and slippers. Wolves are known not to eat splint and rubber, which means that your shoes were the only thing that would help recognize your bones if you'd have a hard knock. One of those girls told me: "We came back through the forest with torches, when wolves surrounded us. Intuitively we turned back to each other and stayed this way for a while. The torches almost burned out. Suddenly the giant white wolf Aq Büre came out of the forest. The wolves calmed down, turned back and followed her into the forest ”.

After this story the idea to create works of art based on the texts of oral tradition and folklore emerged. The project curators decided on a route along which the public art

would appear, connecting with the city's bike paths. At the same time, a team of experts – researchers in Tatar culture, ethnographers, folklorists, and specialists in ancient Tatar manuscripts helped in preparing information for artists, who for the most part had never been to Tatarstan and sometimes even Russia generally. But the most important source of subject matter was the anthropological research of Almetyevsk, from which narratives were transferred to the wall or given to the artists at the design stage.

4 Religion, Folklore and Oral History: The Research

A group of folklorists, religious scholars, and anthropologists, collected folklore and stories from Almetyevsk's past and presented them to artists who were often not familiar with the culture of the Tatar people and the peculiarities of the oil industry. The researchers conducted an expedition, analyzed the results, and created a report describing a local identity of Almetyevsk residents, previously unrecognized within a culture of socialism and oil production. The applied nature of these disciplines made it possible to clearly present the cultural meanings of the region.

Applied anthropology and folkloristics is the branch of social anthropology and folkloristics concerned with the study and use of anthropological data, folklore and traditional cultural materials, theories, and methods to identify, assess, and solve real social problems. The term "applied folklore" was coined in 1939 in a talk by folklorist Benjamin A. Botkin with Alan Lomax and widely used in the mid-20th century (Botkin, 1945; 1953; Dorson, 1971; Jones, 1994; Shuldiner, 1998).

Projected planners concentrated on the basic idea of "folklore - as the basis for constructing local identity," not least because Almetyevsk has a favorable geographical position, being far away from big cities, with their stormy events and loci of power. In its remoteness, both the folklore and oral histories of Tatar culture were preserved as well as the areas status as both rural and urban settlement.

4.1. Methods

Anthropologists and folklore researchers worked in archives and libraries and provided media analysis, created a questionnaire for fieldwork. There were three kinds of

sources: online publications, books about Almetyevsk and oil production facilities, and materials from private libraries in Almetyevsk. Researchers synthesized publications about the folklore of Tatarstan, Almetyevsk and the nearby regions.

Before and during the expedition, 15 publications containing fairy tales and mythological folklore texts were reviewed as well as oral history narratives of Almetyevsk. Sources offering information about the employees of the city's oil production facilities, about Almetyevsk and the oil production itself were considered. Based on a preliminary analysis of the cultural context of Almetyevsk and Tatarstan in general, a questionnaire was developed, which was later amended during the comprehensive folklore expedition to the city of Almetyevsk. The survey was distributed from May 10-15, 2018. The principal methods used to collect field materials were audio recording of interviews (brief, on-the-spot conversations as well as in-depth interviews).

As a result, a total of 46 interviews were obtained, out of which 30 were in-depth and 16 were brief interviews taken at the places where street art objects are planned. Finally, we kept field records with brief annotation of the recorded materials and processed the information, encoding and entering into a databased the texts, subjects, and city landscape objects.

4.2. Conceptualization

Theoretical and practical folklore studies have a toolset for defining and designating this locally-based lore and its representation in the urban space. The concept of "city's local text" includes a system of stable subjective approaches, stereotypic statements, explanatory models, reputational texts, narrative motifs and plots, mental and conversational clichés, emblems and symbols, cultural practices that are used in local tradition. Through them, the communities that associate themselves with a certain place build up an image of it, characterizing it in terms of temporal, spatial, socio-cultural and other parameters. Through our expeditions that included in-depth interviews and collecting oral narratives, we managed to stipulate the components of this view of the world, to-wit: 1) the logic and structure of local lore; 2) the uniqueness of local realia and their existence in the national cultural context; 3) the role of urban and rural folklore in the creation of an internal

and external image of the city; 4) the role of institutionalized and vernacular practices in the city's life that is invisible to official institutions; 5) how urban cultural institutions like libraries, theaters or cultural centers form and influence the local self-determination and texts of the city.

The local urban text is therefore fairly stable: it is constantly being censored by the community. Thereby, some elements are washed out, while the stable ones are kept and represent the cultural and historical memory of the urban and rural communities, which, on the one hand, helps people recognize themselves in urban objects ("see, it's us"), and, on the other one, allows them to represent themselves in the public space ("see, this is how we are"). Depicting identity through verbal culture and any culture in general is a very complicated process, similar to the work of a surgeon transplanting skin from a patient's thigh to his arm. The skin can fail to take if the work is not performed ideally. Architects, artists and other people changing the urban space appear to be interacting with the cultural and historical memory of the local community. Therewith, recent studies in this field show that this memory does not need to be authentic: in general, heroism and fiction can replace historical reality and become one of the factors that consolidate the community.

4.3. Most significant verbal narratives of local urban text

After holding our survey interviews, we did not come to the conclusion that Almet'yevsk has a one-stop set of folklore texts with clear references to Tatar and/or Russian culture and forming a cyclical plot involving significant characters or images. At the same time, the texts we included can be divided into stable thematic groups, including memories about the birth of the oil industry, creation and optimization of oil production, oral texts about oil industry workers, memories of life in the period between the 1930s and the 1980s, mythological texts, texts related to parts of the city, and slogans. In general, one can separate specific sets of narratives appealing to the following conceptual blocks:

- nostalgic texts romanticizing the beginnings of the oil industry and the way of life back then;
- informal texts characterizing the vernacular (unofficial) content of the city and its surroundings;
- cultural and historical narratives appealing to collective

memory, romanticizing and marking the ancient times in the area and the founding of Almet'yevsk;

- texts of the city and in the city (slogans), establishing relationships between the space and the conceptual fields of "paradise", "the cycling capital", and "the oil industry lands";
- texts connected to the material culture of Almet'yevsk and the local peoples (Tatars, Russians, Bashkirs, Chuvashes, Kazakhs, etc.);
- ambitious discourse about the significant professional communities, outstanding cultural events and objects, anything that can be called "the pride of Almet'yevsk";
- narratives about cultural luminaries, enlighteners and heroes from among the oil workers;
- folklore texts not related to oil industry but reflecting the cultural background of schoolchildren and rural people in the region.

Thus, we can clearly see an urban epic consisting of blocks that are interconnected by traditions involving Islam in Tatarstan; collective memory, oral history, culture; oil and folklore heroes; nostalgia; and ambitions. This division is purely speculative and is made for our convenience; in general, oral narratives intersect and form a single semantic space.

5. Initial results of the public art program "Tales of the Golden Apples"

Artists read the researchers' report and formed their view of Almet'yevsk and Tatar culture, which became the basis for the works they contributed to the project. The public art objects which have appeared in the city translate verbal texts associated with local identity into visual language. In this section, we show the collected texts and artistic works based on them. They can be divided into several themes:

- religious and material culture of the Tatars,
- folklore and oral history,
- literary texts based on folklore,
- texts related to the beginning of the oil field.

Elements of traditional Tatar life - kettles - are depicted on the wall of the house (Fig. 1)



Figure 1 Agostino Iacurci (Berlin). Five Teapots, or Isanmesez, 2017.

The heroic work of oil production, along with the fairy tale of the golden apples is embodied in the painting the Gold of Tataria by Haris Yakupov and depicted in "The Land" mural (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 Hoodo (Moscow). The Land, 2017



Figure 3, 4 Artem Stefanov (Moscow). Theories of Oil Genesis, 2018.



Figure 5 Basil LST (Irkutsk). Nadyr Urazmetov. Heritage, 2018.

According to survey respondents there are several theories of the origin of oil: the organic theory: oil occurs when sediment-containing layers of organic matter reach the so-called “oil window”: that is, several kilometers underground, at high pressure and temperatures; inorganic theory: oil come from deeper layers, for example, condensing from rising gas fractions; space theory: oil was brought to Earth with meteorites (Fig. 3, 4).

Nadyr Urazmetov (1688-1758) was one of the founders of the oil industry. Urazmetov is deeply rooted in the national memory as seen in names of localities such as Nadyr’s Volost, Old Nadyrovo village, New Nadyrovo village. He is remembered as a pioneer of the oil business in the Ural-Volga region of Russia. He was the first in the Russian Empire to make the transition from small-scale oil gathering to industrial production and oil refining. In the local text of the city, the image of Urazmetov is represented as an outstanding personality (Fig. 5, 6, 7).

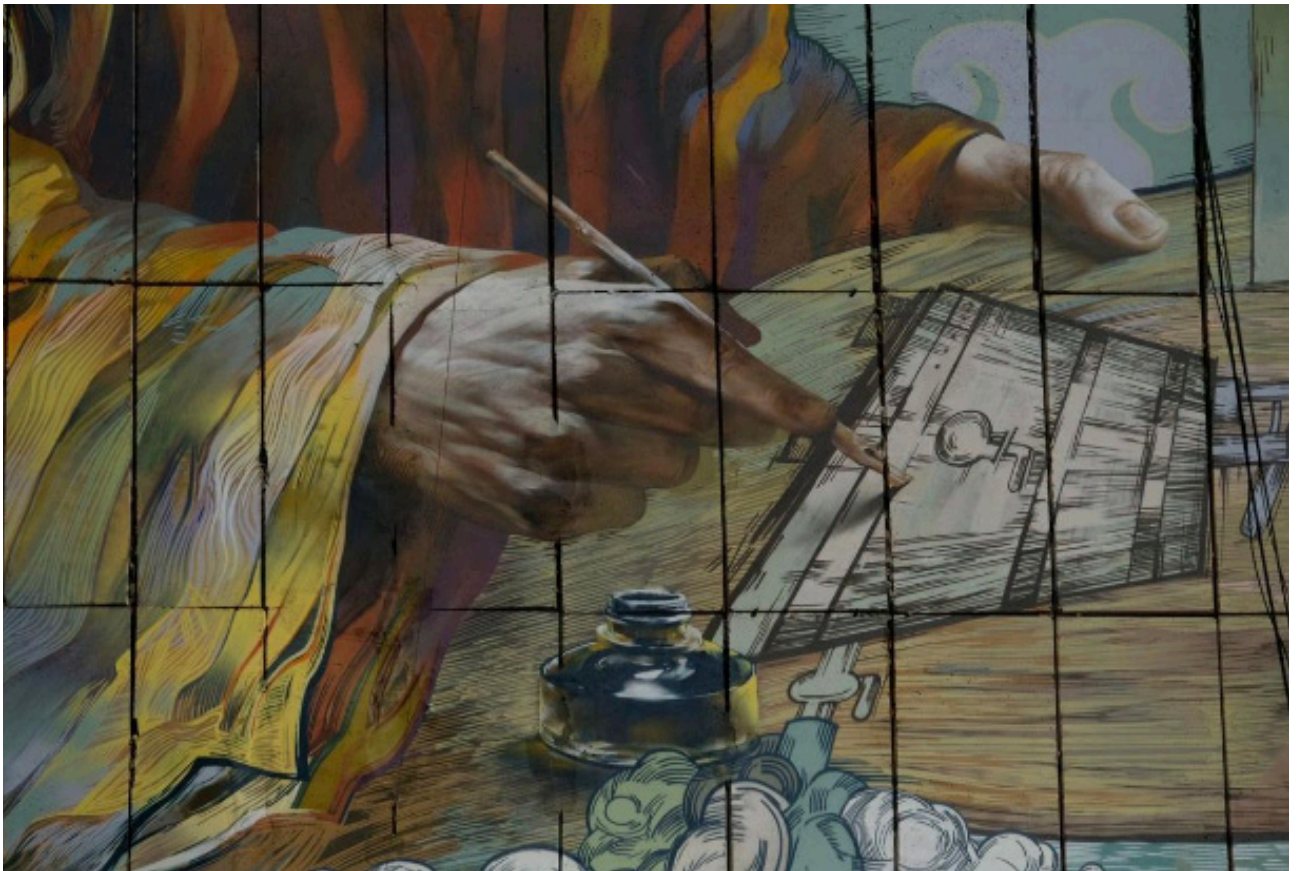


Figure 6,7 Basil LST (Irkutsk). Nadyr Urazmetov. Heritage, 2018.



Figure 8, 9 Fikos (Athens). The Guardian, 2018.



Figure 10 Kreemos (Podolsk). Be Happy! 2018.

The work of the Greek artist Ficos is inspired by the Tatar fairy tale about the golden bird, where the hero (batyr) fights and defeats an ophidian adversary (Azhdaha) (Fig. 8, 9).

A mural by Kreemos, Be happy!, shows an archaeological find - a coin - and the inscription in the form of the traditional well wish "Be happy" in Russian and "Kotly Bulsun" in Tatar (Fig. 10).

The image of a traditional Tatar house includes depictions of both interior and exterior portions. Integral parts of the exterior are thatched roofs, front yard, greenery and flowers, bright colors of the house paint (various shades of blue, green, yellow, white, brown), ornaments and open-work window decorations. Every house necessarily kept a vegetable garden and orchard (apples, cherry tree), and as well as livestock (sheeps, cows and horses) and fowl (chicken and geese) (Fig.11).



Figure 11 Dimitris Taxis (Athens). Dinner, 2018.

The construction of identity through folklore that started in the early 2000s and continues now can be defined as an attempt to create competitive, legitimate territory or a group through playback and invention of "local" and "national". Specifying the process of production of national identity through appropriation of cultural experience, described by A. Appadurai (Appadurai, 1996), it may be said, that the construction process of competitive identities takes place at a local level. Thus folklore, not least of all, appears to be the indicator for such a process, where the search takes place in mass, folk culture (where knowledge of the hero or story is criteria for identification) and information city space.

"Original" and "folk" in mass culture is cast in a rather distinct, but different form. In addition to historical personalities, religion, culture, life, industry, legends and traditions are used to identify the place that can be called folklore.

The interest to folklore in Soviet Union is connected to institutionalization of a national policy and recognition of the role of folk culture in this process. This process started in the middle of 50s, after the war. Researchers note that the peak of growth in palaces and houses of culture in the USSR took place in 1950s and 1960s, "when the country's leadership, firstly, in a hurry, sought to "normalize" a population that had run wild after the social disasters of industrialization and war and secondly, it built a "new historical community" called "Soviet people" with the leading and unifying role of the Russians. Then activities of these institutions were characteristically infused with "folk culture", with ensembles of "folk song and dance", "folk" choirs and "folk" orchestras, but with preservation of higher status academic institutions and groups focused mainly on high culture in the "intellectuals" version "(Ignatieva O., Lysenko O., 2015).

Thus the urban space creates value through transferring folklore narratives from person to person, a well-known phenomenon to folklore researchers who do fieldwork. When this knowledge becomes public, not private anymore, it appears to be an important constitutive element for post-Soviet local identity.

6. Conclusion

Almetyevsk was an example of a young industrial city, overcoming its post-Soviet identity crisis by means of a public art project. The construction of the new identity was made possible by oil industry leaders who chose to focus on regional development. In this example, urban development was based not only on improvements in a public space, but also usage of local context. This process had defined social goals: attracting a new population and reduction of the outflow of the younger generation the bigger cities.

After research, we have presented results to artists, who then created public art objects. It is important to underline two aspects of this pre-production work. The "architect-artist" dichotomy creates a certain balance, because architects suffer to unite space, while artists struggle to "break" the environment with their work. Sometimes this system created positive composition in typical construction. However the main challenge is interaction with artists. The artist's work is irrational by nature and information, transferred by researchers to artists, is passed through his own reflection. Cultural difference gives birth to the new interpretations that may be different from a citizen's perception. Sometimes citizens can not agree with images, but reflection is necessary, because it creates new dimensions for well-known narratives. Another issue is local visual code problematics, that recognizes "own" and "theirs" in its own way.

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