

TRENDS IN THE FORMATION OF THE SEMANTIC IMAGE  
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## ABSTRACT

*The urban space of every city is full of cultural symbols that can be found throughout the city in different symbolic places, streets, etc. All these symbols are parts of a specific cultural matrix, which forms the base for the identification and self-identification of the city. Symbolic activities like mythology, religion, ideology, art, film, advertising, and virtual realities are clearly reflected in every big city's image. Despite the fact that the capital of Kazakhstan was transferred from Almaty to Astana, Almaty continues to be the largest city, as well as the scientific and educational, international tourism, high-tech manufacturing, financial and business center of the republic. The semantic image of Almaty was formed by many factors. Some of these factors were dictated by global issues, while others had characteristics that were specifically related to this urban space.*

**Keywords:** capital city, Almaty, semantics, trend, historical narrative, synthetic narrative

TENDENZE NELLA FORMAZIONE DELL'IMMAGINE SEMANTICA DI UNA CAPITALE  
(SULL'ESEMPIO DI ALMATY)

## SINTESI

*Lo spazio urbano di ogni città è colmo di simboli culturali che si possono trovare sparsi in vari posti simbolici, in strade eccetera. Tutti questi simboli compongono una specifica matrice culturale che costituisce la base per l'identificazione e l'auto-identificazione della città. Sebbene la capitale del Kazakistan sia stata trasferita da Almaty ad Astana, Almaty continua ad essere la città più grande, nonché il centro scientifico, d'istruzione, di turismo internazionale, della produzione ad alta tecnologia, finanziario e commerciale della Repubblica. L'immagine semantica di Almaty è venuta a formarsi sotto l'influenza di molti fattori, alcuni dettati da questioni globali, altri specificamente legati allo spazio urbano in questione.*

**Parole chiave:** capitale, Almaty, semantica, tendenze, narrativa storica, narrativa sintetica

## INTRODUCTION

The development of the city and its adjacent areas is a complex and multi-layered process, which involves not only architects and urban planners, but also experts in the field of environment, transport, communications, and environmental design. Under the rapid development of urban construction and saturation of the city environment with objects of design (graphics, advertisements, lighting and landscaping, etc.), another serious problem of modern cities appeared – providing urban space with necessary information media and their organization into a coherent structure of the city. The urgent need to streamline the system of visual communication and the randomness of the formed informative space in the city of Almaty determines the relevance of the study.

The hypothesis of this study is that the information function of images, signs and text in the structure of architectural objects influences the formation the city image, and by reflecting the social, ideological, navigational, and commercial tasks of social development, actively changes the image of the city, and forms a new architectural and spatial phenomenon – a visual information and communication field of the city.

## METHODS

The methodological basis of the work includes the systems approach and historical-evolution method of detecting regularities in the transformation of the visual information and communication field of the city's architecture in combination with the graphic analytic methods of modelling its space planning characteristics.

The research methods are based on a comprehensive approach to studying the architectural environment of big cities: systematization of information from contemporary and historical sources, correlation, comparative analysis, consultations with leading specialists. The research also uses visual and photometric methods of studying architectural environment, comparative analysis of the internal structure and construction peculiarities of objects of the information and communication field, based on photo images and spreadsheets.

Theoretical and practical results of the study consist in the conduction of an analysis of Almaty's semantic structure, suggestion and testing of the method of semantic analysis of Almaty's development scenarios, suggestion of methods for adjusting the informational content of Almaty's architectural environment.

Studies of the cultural myth of the city (as a generalized image of the populated area at the present level) begin with the activities of the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics. The comparative analysis of individual myth components of such cultural capitals as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Rome is contained in the works of Lotman (2002), Toporov (1982), Ivanov (1982) and et al.

In the 1980s, architectural scholars conducted semiotic studies, which developed the following areas: "linguistic" interpretation of architectural phenomena (Ikonnikov, 1986, 288), (Lejava, 1987, 19), (Ageev, 2002, 215), (Fedorova, 2005); signs and symbols studies (Glazichev, 1970, 318), (Bokov, 1986, 14-16), (Cassirer, 1996, 234), (Morris, 1983, 412) socio-behavioral approach to the study of the construction of living space (Krashennikov, 2004, 374), (Lync, 1986, 435), (Eco, 1986, 597).

The activities of the International Association for the Semiotics of Space, headed by A. Barabanov, are aimed at solving this important task under modern conditions (Barabanov, 1999, 688). Specific practical developments, aimed at the identification and development of the semantic structure of the urban environment within a certain region, are studied by teachers and students of the Ural State Academy of Architecture and Arts Laboratory of Architectural Semiotics, under the direction of A. Raevsky (Raevsky, 2007, 57), E. Koneva (Koneva, 2003, 235) and others.

The legend is as important a factor in the city semantics as the architectural and artistic style. Interesting urban space is always intriguing, and the distribution of information therein cannot be local (Belyaeva, 1977, 28).

"Communication cannot be successful if you do not know who you are talking to. The listener's biography, his cultural background, sex, age, abilities and style of education have a great impact on the way he perceives information, processes and understands it" (Jan Lorenc et al, 2010).

Modern cities are significantly less recognizable than old ones, since nowadays it is difficult to find a certain recognizable building in each district, which could become a landmark of a specific territory for residents. Since the wayfinding system requires the availability of a landmark, residents of modern cities construct a symbol-sign system, proceeding from the functional properties of specific territories, rather than their non-existent architectural peculiarities. For example, Almaty residents denote certain territories by syntactic expressions, such as "flea market district", "central department store district", etc. If residential areas have original and architecturally specific structures or buildings, in most cases, they become the nucleus for the generation of a code symbol. Sometimes, the artwork on the flanks of buildings (for example, in the "Zhetysu-2" micro-district) are enough to become the symbol of the district and be a basis in the wayfinding system.

"The sense of loss of place, which designers encounter, is not new – it is not too different from the sense of disorientation, which appeared when the cities grew so big that people stopped feeling comfortable and required additional visual means to help them orient in space and bring back the sense of belonging" (Craig Berger, 2005).

In most cities, the informational content of the environment is best shown by public centers. The formati-



**Figure 1. Decorative sculpture in Ablai Khan Avenue**



**Figure 2. "City Center" shopping mall façade in Tole Bi Street**

on of public centers as pedestrian streets is historically predetermined. In most cases, the main communication space of any city, the center of its public life is the central business street with small stores. It forms the "face" of the city and concentrates within it almost all the areas of public activities. The informational capacity of the space-planning environment and its elements is important for the creation of the architectural and artistic distinctiveness of city pedestrian spaces. The more diverse the morphology of city spaces, the higher the esthetic qualities of the city environment.

The legend can start developing urban space from any type of content: a historical event, the mission of the city, commercial development, social needs, etc. Any of these facts can give meaning to the urban space (Rozenon, 2006, 101). The city legend is part of the development project of Almaty. The objectives of the General Plan for Almaty city include a set of city-building measures to facilitate the formation of an ecologically safe, secure and socially comfortable environment. The main idea of the architectural and city-building plan is "to preserve and continue forming the current image of Almaty – the Garden City" (Baimagambetov, 2006, 34).

The idea of the city legend originates from the name of the city (Alma-Ata, Almaty). The image of an apple was widely used to create a commonly recognized image of the city and evoke a sense of nostalgia. The best example of such an apple image can be seen in Ablai Khan Avenue, in front of the "Capital Center" housing estate. According to the authors of the sculpture, the apple image should be associated with the name of the city, thus echoing the name of the housing estate (Figure 1). The apple image is also used as a graphic sym-

bol, in printing, and in outdoor advertising (Figure 2). The images of traditional Kazakh symbols also can be attributed to the city legends. The image of the camel that became very popular as a national souvenir is also reflected in the city's symbols (Figure 3). Graphic and easily readable semantic elements of the Golden Man decoration from the Issyk barrow are frequently used in all areas of Kazakhstan contemporary art. In the urban environment, it is used for decorating the sculptures or small architectural shapes (Figure 4). Such elements of traditional Kazakh life as "asyk" (an element of the traditional Kazakh children's game, in which a bone that falls on its edge is considered a lucky sign), (Figure 5) and "zhauyryn" (mutton shoulder) (Figure 6), depicted in the sculptures of Kazakh designer S. Narynov, also became part of the urban semantics.

Modern urbanization inevitably results in the perception of the city as a place of active interaction of its development scenarios.

"In the making of urban places, planners and designers mainly focus on the quality of the physical components of place and often disregard the importance of place meaning and association developed between people and places. A place is seen as the way it is experienced by people who have a strong connection to time, senses and socio-cultural expression" (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981). Meaning is with the perceptual and the psychological aspects of environmental experience (Punter, 1991). In this regard, people associate different meanings to similar places for various reasons. However, changes in the existing physical and activity patterns may erase what is significant and meaningful to them. This implies that place meanings that are em-



**Figure 3. Decorative sculpture in Bogenbay Batyr Street**



**Figure 4. Fountain in front of the "Issyk" restaurant in Bogenbay Batyr Street**

bedded in the existing social and cultural setting can be disintegrated as result of unfit physical development" (Norsidah Ujang, 2014).

A consistent approach to the analysis of historical and cultural content is required to highlight the key po-

ints in developing the city image, revealing its potential and the scenarios of its realization. The recreation of historical events, the introduction of their retrospective models into the modern urban space requires an appropriate method, which would consider most spatial, space-planning, and objective elements of the city and interactions between them (Hilgenherst, 1998, 73).

In order to work with the historical-cultural content of the environment, one should speak in distinct structural concepts. The concepts of "myth" and "legend" that were previously used in this text have too many parallel connotations; therefore, the authors suggest introducing the concept of "narrative" as the most suitable term for working with historical events that form a certain text material, which can be interpreted from the perspective of architecture and city-planning (Syrov & Surovtsev, 1998, 367).

In the 1960s, modern esthetics and philosophy almost lost its power, while by the 1970s, the rejection of its dogmas was virtually declared. In 1994, German critic W. Amsonait made the suggestion, that "postmodernism, brought to life by the desperate dullness of functionalism... is only one of the many "animating" actions that express the urge for rediscovering emotional values..." (Amsonait, 1994, 10).

Garrison Keillor offers a different perspective: "In the 1950s, we looked to the future, which we imaged to be rationalized, bright, modern, and then suddenly Modernism died. The past was preserved and reproduced everywhere – historical buildings popped up like weeds, old street lamps, Victorian alleys... the past was copied, quoted, constantly brought to life, until one day the country started looking like it never did, even in the



**Figure 5. Decorative sculptures in Jeltoqsan Street**

old days. Enough, I tell you. Time to end this. The future is ahead of us, go and live it".<sup>1</sup>

When global environment changes place values, place identity weakens. Place meaning determines the socio-cultural value of a place that form self and community identities (Shuhana & Ahmad Bashri, 2002). However, self or group identity can be disintegrated as a result of the loss of elements that reflect the people's identity. It is imperative for placemakers to identify how meanings defined places to users, who in most situations, vary in their socio-cultural characteristics, economic status and length of association (Norsidah Ujang, 2014).

By using the method of historical and city-building analysis, which was developed at the Ural State Academy of Architecture and Arts Laboratory of Architectural Semiotics, headed by E. Koneva, the authors carried out an analysis of the city of Almaty and developed stable narrative constructions of two types: historical and synthetic (Koneva, 2003, 235). With a view to forming the image of the city and evaluating the potential of a concrete narrative, the authors determined the basic principles of their scenarios of urban development and the evaluation of the scenario-forming potential (the content of scenarios and their evaluation is provided in tables 1 and 2).

Historical narratives are messages, stories or texts, related to the events that actually took place in the city's history, supported by evidence (architectural objects that relate to the context of or belong to a particular era that became the scene of certain historic events, etc.). Urban planning scenarios of such historical narratives are based mainly on the idea of preservation or reconstruction of historic buildings, protection of architectural objects and historically important places of the city. The scenario-forming potential of the historical narrative depends on how well it is known to the citizens.

Synthetic narratives are ideas that are actively promoted by administrative bodies and media (often in the form of slogans or policy statements). These narratives are to some extent related to historical events. However, the nature of interpretation of these events can be quite unexpected and often depends on the political, ideological or economic statements of the declared slogan. The scenarios for the development of the city that are based on this form of text cause an intensification of development, the construction of new, modern facilities, improvement of social welfare, and engineering support, i.e. the future-oriented transformation of the urban environment. The scenario-forming potential is less dependent on common knowledge (since such texts generally are known to most citizens, given their large-scale propaganda). The evaluation of the potential of synthetic narrative depends on how well the scenario

coincides with the historical foundation of the city, its long-term development prospects, and the socioeconomic aspects of its realization.

## RESULTS

The data, obtained from the analysis of the semantic landscape of Almaty (the data are provided in the tables), show that despite the original purpose of the analysis – to distinguish and explore the most extensive and well-known constructions of the city – there are narratives with a scenario-forming potential that is unimportant for the general urban planning, and narratives, which can form powerful storylines within the city for long periods of time (Ivanova, 2009, 34).

It is now almost impossible to conceive of a nature outside of the frame of culture. This position is alarming to many environmentalists, since it permits the construction of everything as "natural" and excludes the notion of "wilderness". However, the flip side of this argument, which preserves the notion of wilderness through a radical separation of humans and nature, is similarly problematic. Nevertheless, this uncritical ecological naturalism is a position that has dominated within environmental discourse (Ceridwen, 2008).

The analytical approach was used to determine the scenario-forming potential of the selected texts. As a result, two general storylines of the semantic development of Almaty were distinguished. They were conventionally called "Cultural Capital" and "Sports Capital". The image of the "Cultural Capital" can be developed through the interaction between the historical origin of the city – "The Garden City" – and the prospects for the development of its scientific and technological capacity, innovation, transport and logistics systems, environmental infrastructure (see narratives: "Trade and Transportation Center", "Financial Center", "Arts Center"). The image of Almaty as the "Sports Capital" focuses on its geographic location (the foothills and mountains of Trans-Ili Alatau), on the fact that Almaty was a host city during the 2011 Asian Games, and the possibility for developing new types of sports.

This approach makes it possible to develop a new understanding of the problems of developing the area, preserving its historical and cultural content, and incorporating the elements of the past and the future in the present image of the city.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research results allow making the following conclusions:

1. The use of archetypal and nature-figurative shapes, signs, and symbols to form the corresponding ideas

<sup>1</sup> The New York Times, 3. 1996: The Next One Hundred Years, 36.

Almaty	Physical infrastructure	Scenario semantics	Scenario of urban development	Evaluation of the scenario-forming potential
Ancient Almatyk as a trade center on the Silk Road	Archaeological excavations at the Kuldja tract	Stylization of a medieval settlement – the city of merchants and artisans, the city, representing all types of art and folk art	Construction of a tourist center, which will include the “Verny fortress” museum, (19 <sup>th</sup> century), fragments of historic buildings of Minor Villages (19 <sup>th</sup> – early 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries) and the Ethnographic Open Air Theatre	The scenario has no independent meaning and can be used in combination with the “Homeland of the Golden Man” and “The historical center” scenarios
Homeland of the Golden Man	Archaeological excavations of the Sak’s mound	Focuses on the unique history and culture, associated with it	Construction of the National Historical and Ethnographic Park of the “Sak’s mounds” and development of historical, educational and entertainment functions	This scenario cannot become the dominant one in the formation of a new city image; however, it can be used as a secondary scenario for the story of “Ancient Almatyk as a trade center on the Silk Road”
Capital of the State	Old and new administrative buildings	Establishment and nation building, the center of a multi-ethnic culture. The search of the visual image of national identity	Construction of a unique architectural and urban complex, development of national symbols to enhance the informational content of the urban environment	Since the functions of the administrative center of the state were transferred to Astana, this story became less important; however, it can serve as one of the main themes in the development of the “Cultural Capital” scenario
Garden City	Apple orchards in the foothills of Trans-Ili Alatau	Formation of a specific type of natural environment – the “urban nature”. Focus on the need for the development of the citizen-nature relationship	Preservation, reorganization and development of the city parks. Restoration of orchards within the urban area	The scenario has high potential for providing a favorable and safe environment for all residents of the city, and for each individual
Sports Center	“Medeu” high-mountain skating rink, “Shymbulak” mountain-sports base, sports facilities of the Asian Games 2011	Support and improvement of citizens’ health in terms of both individual initiatives and national political objectives	Further development of ski resorts. Designation of main areas for the development of new suitable types of sports and formation of logistics in these areas	The potential of this scenario is especially relevant at the present day due the adoption of the policy of developing sports tourism in Kazakhstan
Mountaineering Center	Peaks of various categories in Trans-Ili Alatau	Support and improvement of the health of citizens and guests of Almaty. The history Kazakh climbers’ victories at international competitions, international promotion of Trans-Ili Alatau nature	Restoration of the logistics infrastructure for further development of mountaineering, establishment of international-standard comfortable service	The scenario has high potential. The story can be implemented as an independent scenario (with a focus on professional sports), but it is more reasonable to develop it in two directions – professional sports and popular sports

Arts Center	International festivals “Voice of Asia”, “Eurasia”, “Stars of Shaken”	Active role of the city in the cultural life of the state and propaganda of the country’s image at the international level	Development of the systems of urban and suburban spaces, focused on the organization of international events	Taking into the consideration the fact that cultural leisure for different parts of the population within the same urban environment should be provided in different ways, the scenario has high potential. The scenario can be used as a secondary one to the “Cultural Capital” main scenario. It is limited as an independent storyline; therefore, its potential is local
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**Table 1. Characteristics of historical narratives of Almaty**

Almaty	Physical infrastructure	Scenario semantics	Scenario of urban development	Evaluation of the scenario-forming potential
Cultural Capital	Museums, theaters, libraries, unique architectural monuments	Socio-cultural internationalism. Diversity of urban meanings and ways of their expression	The establishment of a creative urban environment by the building new constructions, reconstructing and renovation areas that ceased to be functionally relevant. Support of festivals and competitions in various art branches	The scenario has high potential. Integration of international cultural processes, while maintaining ethnic phenomenology of the location. The development of urban planning approaches that take into account the multi-polarity of interests, multiplicity of scenarios
Historical Center	Sak’s mounds, part of the Silk Road	Focus on unique objects of national history, culture and traditional crafts: jewelry art, ceramics, leather, wood and metal	Preservation and interpretation of historical and cultural monuments, establishment of historical, ethnographic and landscape parks, centers of culture and crafts on their basis; development of programs and infrastructure for regional and international urban tourism	This scenario cannot become the dominant one in the formation of a new city image, since there are places in Kazakhstan that have a more profound history and famous monuments. However, it can be used as a secondary scenario
Trade and Transport Center	International airport, transport networks and their service objects	Improving the connectivity of the settlement structure across the country – Almaty as a connecting point for countries around it, like China, Russia and Central Asian countries. Maintaining the historical role of the city as a transport hub on the Silk Road	Construction of new overpasses, further development of air transportation, reconstruction and expansion of the existing transport junctions (stations, airports, etc.), development of the business infrastructure (hotels, business centers)	The potential of the scenario is average. Unresolved problems, such as poor environmental management and acquisition of territories adjacent to the city due to increased traffic, introduction of new transport technologies and different types of ecological transport (metro, monorail)

Financial Center	Business centers, offices of national and international banks	Focus on the financial capacity of the city, development of banking and its related network of sales agencies	Creation of favorable conditions for the development of the financial sector and the introduction of new technologies in the construction and operation of modern business centers	The scenario has no independent meaning and can be used as a secondary scenario to the "Trade and Transportation Center" scenario
Youth Center	City universities	Training of specialists in promising fields of science and culture. The active behavior of city and out-of-town youth is a high-potential energy, which, if left unattended, may transform into destructive kinetic energy	Development of the system of urban spaces (parks, squares, etc.) targeted at young and avant-garde culture (graffiti, street art, etc.) and urban leisure	The potential of the scenario is average, but it can be used as a secondary scenario. New meanings enrich the structure of urban context. The importance of the scenario in developing culture of the young population is undeniable
Extreme Sports Center	Mountain rivers and lakes, "Shymbulak" mountain-sports base	The active behavior of city and out-of-town youth is a high-potential energy, which, if left unattended, may transform into destructive kinetic energy	The execution of a part of the General Plan of Almaty for the 'Organization and development of tourism and sports within the recreational area of Almaty', developed by the "Gradinform" design agency	The potential of the scenario is average, but it can be used as a secondary scenario to the "Scientific Tourism Center" and "Youth Center" scenarios. It can visually enrich the urban environment with new forms and images
Scientific Tourism Center	Geological monuments in the Trans-Ili Alatau mountains, Maren Lake, artificial floods, seismic landslides in river valleys	Designation of key areas for scientific tourism. Focus on the unique nature of Trans-Ili Alatau, its flora and fauna	The execution of a part of the General Plan of Almaty for the 'Organization and development of tourism and sports within the recreational area of Almaty', developed by the "Gradinform" design agency	The scenario has no independent meaning and can be used as a secondary scenario to the "Mountaineering Center" and "Garden City" scenarios

**Table 2. Characteristics of synthetic narratives of Almaty**

and emotions allows harmonizing the connections between an individual and the architectural space at the semantic level.

2. The semantic approach to the study of the architectural image is predetermined by communicational and informational essence of architecture. The architectural

image of the city environment is formed by a system of visual signs that reveal in the human consciousness the semantic model of reflection of architectural objects.

3. The informational content becomes one of the main factors in the formation of the urban environment of a large city.



## TRENDI PRI OBLIKOVANJU SEMANTIČNE PODOBE PRESTOLNICE (PO ZGLEDU ALMATYJA)

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### POVZETEK

*Raziskava izhaja iz hipoteze, da informacijska funkcija slik, znakov in besedil v strukturi arhitekturnih objektov vpliva na oblikovanje podobe nekega mesta ter z zrcaljenjem družbenih, ideoloških, navigacijskih in pridobitnih nalog družbenega razvoja tudi aktivno spreminja videz mesta in tvori nov arhitekturni ter prostorski pojav – domeno vizualnih informacij in komunikacij mesta.*

*Urbani prostor vsakega mesta je poln kulturnih simbolov, ki jih lahko najdemo na različnih simbolnih krajih, ulicah itn. Vsi ti simboli so del specifične kulturne matrice, ki predstavlja osnovo za prepoznavanje mesta in njegovo samoidentifikacijo. Simbolne dejavnosti, kot so mitologija, vera, ideologija, umetnost, film, oglaševanje in virtualne resničnosti, se jasno odražajo v podobi vsakega vlemesta. Semantična sistematizacija in strukturiranje arhitekturnega in informacijskega okolja bosta omogočila posredovanje celovite predstave o arhitekturni podobi največjega kazahstanskega mesta – Almatyja, saj si je iz informacijske vsebine prostora mogoče pravilno in zelo natančno razlagati semantično zgradbo mesta.*

**Ključne besede:** prestolnica, Almaty, semantika, trend, zgodovinska naracija, sintetična naracija

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