

Карповець Максим В'ячеславович  
викладач кафедри культурології та філософії  
Національного університету «Острозька академія»  
[maxkarpovets@gmail.com](mailto:maxkarpovets@gmail.com)

## THE PROBLEM OF URBAN IDENTITY IN PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

*This paper considers to extent in which aspects we can describe and explore the urban identity as a philosophical and anthropological problem. It is focused on the human body tactics and strategies in the everyday space, active practice and experience of the subject, text and tradition of the city.*

**Key words:** urban identity, philosophical anthropology, the experience of the city, urban practices and tactics, project of identity.

### Introduction

The question of urban identity is raised in the various types of research: from political philosophy to geography, social anthropology and gender studies. The growth of cities in the Modern era actualizes the importance of understanding the human identity in a complicated multicultural urban area. On the one hand, this creates an unprecedented interest to the phenomenon in humanities; on the other hand, it produces many interpretations, whereby the concept seems to be losing its meaning. Philosophical anthropology is not an exception in its numerous attempts to identify, understand and connect the problem of urban identity with some semantic connotations. Moreover, anthropological precondition of the problem of urban identity perception should not only absorb various measurements of reflection (very often conflicting with each other), but also be self-sufficient sections of culture, pretending to have integrity and versatility in its conceptual field. Such perspective

avoids an excessive unnecessary turning to social, political or cultural types of mind, but makes your own reflection in the phenomenological sense, where only particular practices and tactics of urban identity are constituted. In this sense, it is important to outline the map of main citizen practices that separate them from others, thereby clarifying the problem of identity. It is clear that this ambitious goal cannot be fully achieved in this exploration, but it is possible at least to point out the main problems and issues in the phenomenon of urban identity.

### **The Urban Identity as a Dynamic Reality**

The transition from sedentary and cyclic time in traditional society to a nonlinear time in industrial life had completely altered the human existence. Not only is man separated from the usual rhythm of nature, but a symbolic border between *our* and *their* space has also been made. In this simple archaic determination began the basic canonical cultural and anthropological ritual of saving one's *own area of existence*. Furthermore, people in the first ancient cities saved not only areas of their lives but also the senses of their co-existence. The other thing is that urban culture becomes a tyrant of man, unifying and reducing the space of freedom. In this case, Georg Simmel is absolutely right when talking about the sovereign powers of society at the beginning of his well-famous essay *The Metropolis and the Mental Life*: «The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life» [12]. The figure of Another plays a decisive significance that may be expressed by the citizens of the same city and “external” unfamiliar figures. Then, Georg Simmel wrote in detail about the foreigner as a stranger. In particular, he stressed the concern of citizens for their own identity and the projection of these concerns in the shape of Another, where its own territory plays a dominant value.

This archaic principle of protecting “one's own place” is available in splintered

sectors of the city, where neighbourhoods and districts unite into one cumulative image of urban identity. In this case, it is appropriate to recall the representations of identity and its meanings in the texts of culture, especially in literature and art. A text is a fixed field of human senses that were buried in urban identity. Anthropological philosophy is working to remove those senses from the text to the area of intellectual reflection. An additional difficulty is that a researcher has to keep the balance between speculative philosophical thinking and clear empirical reality that is filled with facts and details of city life. That is why, such cultural configurations of the urban identity as style of life, language and slang, traditions and food are also important. These components are often more helpful in anthropological understanding than context of representations, where an image breaks the connection with a concrete sense.

Jane Jacobs argues that in most cases an identity is made not by government authorities, but the citizens' body practices, proximate facts of reality where various declarations and manifests do not actually work: «A city sidewalk by itself is nothing. It is an abstraction. It means something only in conjunction with the buildings and other uses that border it, or border other sidewalks very near it... Streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs» [5,p.37]. The author correctly indicates the lack of interpretation of the “the sidewalk by itself”, because without human practices the city becomes only the inane monument. It is important to stress out the concept “practices” (also the main concept of Henry Lefebvre), that is described in Jacobs' vision as «active participants in the drama of civilization versus barbarism in cities» [5,p.37-38]. The philosophical and anthropological emphasis in this thesis is that people are *active subjects* of their lives and identities. Thus, urban identity cannot be described and analyzed as a blocked reality. It is always a dynamic, unpredictable and often irrational strategy of human behaviour in different forms of urban life.

What's more important in Jane Jacobs' major book *Death and Life of Great American Cities* is the double anthropological strategy of interpreting the urban identity. The first concerns the design of comfortable space where the figure of

Stranger is liquidated by citizens. That activity not only unites people with a common purpose, but also constitutes each active subject of a microdistrict and at the same time of a macroarea. The second tip is to try to separate one's own world from the other, which defines your own identity space through appropriate signals, landscapes and scenery, points of observation. Interestingly, the surveillance extends not only on Stranger, but also on Own. Indeed, we have a mirror effect when through surveillance citizen unconsciously beholds in his own reflection.

### **The Urban Identity and Everyday Life**

The issue of urban identity criterion plays a primary importance in anthropological philosophy. What are the external and internal criteria for identifying a citizen? Is it possible to confidently talk about the complete image of identity? These directly philosophical questions connect with anthropological problem of urban identity. Alfred Schutz uses the concept of "typing" as a way of referring to a class that operates in the space of everyday life. It is important to distinguish two levels of questions: "How do others see me?" and "How do I see myself?". These questions illustrate the outside level of the definition that tends to be objective and the inside level of self-identification, more subjective and prejudiced. Helmut R. Wagner, in his introduction to the Schutz' *On Phenomenology and Social Relations* emphasizes the main goal of analysis to find the identity that is rooted in everyday rituals and experience: «The strength of the phenomenological approach lies in its point of departure: the experience of the world of everyday life. In making this world the basic subject matter of sociology, Schutz did not deny the existence of other realms of human experience; he merely asserted its inescapable ascendancy over them» [10,p.40].

These two levels of problem (perception on the part and autoreflection) essentially differ from each other because the first is more inclined to design an integrated and sustainable image of identity, while the Another is closed enough to

understand the phenomenon that is associated with the identification that is no similar to identity. Alex Scott, commenting about Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another*, writes: «To be identical to someone in some quality or characteristic is to have the same quality or characteristic as that person. To be identical to something in some quality or characteristic is to have the same quality or characteristic as that thing. Identity may be viewed as either a state of being the same as someone or something, or as a state of being oneself or one thing, and not another» [11]. However, the cultural and ontological basement of citizen's existence absorbs both identification (how to be with others) and identity (how to be myself).

We can aggravate the problem and ask the next question that leads us to the field of philosophical anthropology: is the citizen similar to urban identity? In fact, many people live in a city but do not identify themselves with its world, values and history. That is not enough to live in the urban area for being accepted in representational and empirical discourse of identity. Paul Ricoeur indicates them as “narrative” and “personal” identities: «The equivocality of the term “identical” will be at the center of our reflections on personal identity and narrative identity and related to a primary trait of the self, namely its temporality» [8,p.2]. All these intentions depend on everyday life, but each – in a special way. The narrative identity exists mostly outside of the urban activity, because it is writing the text of city life and it must distance itself from the spectre of human everyday stories. At the same time, the personal identity is often inside of the discourse of banality because it is a unique unrepeatable experience of life.

Surely, everyday rituals also constructed our relation to the world, specifically to the city word. However we would set the question, it always affects the basic philosophical issues of the relation between a man and the world, personal and collective. In this way, Alfred Schutz is trying to recall Husserl's idea of belief: «In our everyday life, or, as Husserl says, “from the natural standpoint”, we accept as unquestionable the world of facts which surrounds us as existent out there. To be sure, we might throw doubt upon any *datum* of that world out there, we might even distrust as many of our experiences of this world as we wish; the naive believed in the

existence of *some* outer worlds, this “general thesis of the natural standpoint” will imperturbably subsist» [9,p.58]. Transferring the concept into the city everyday life, we see that the process of constructing the urban identity similar to the *mapping of existential area*. Therefore, there is no surprise that the main theorists of urban theory have focused their attention on the issue of space and place as well.

### **The Project of Urbanity and Human Activity**

The process of constructing urban identities is rooted in space, so it is not surprising that most studies are concentrated in urban topography / topology. At one time, Kevin Lynch noted that «like a piece of architecture, the city is a construction in space, but one of vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time» [6,p.1]. This construction project is a shelf of history and then the urban identity is fully rooted in the historical experience of the city. Lynch continues his reasoning saying: «Moving elements in a city, and a particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary parts. We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns» [6,p.2]. The same thing Jane Jacobs said, but beside that we can remember the leftist theory. In this case, the theory of Guy Debord about *the Society of the Spectacle* can be recalled. Moreover, this idea would assimilate more accurately with reflections of Michel de Certeau.

Whereas the main theorist of New York urban school mostly sceptically said about the perception of the city and oneself in this space, where identity is always fragmented, divided and elusive, Michel de Certeau sees clear cultural logic in everyday urban practices. The French philosopher offers specifically to look at the city, predictably choosing New York in this intention. He suggests reading the urban text from the highest point of metropolis: «To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp... When one goes up there, he

leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators» [3,p.92]. It is clear that the World Trade Center doesn't exist any more, but the watcher can find any other highest point for observing. The Lynch's idea of fragmentation is not something that was cancelled by de Certeau, but dialectically grasped by the view from the highest point, because there are chaos of city life saved (for those who are inside the crowd) and order (invisible text that becomes visible only from a distance) in city life. Interestingly, in *the horizon* of urban life the meaning of "magical city world" could not be grasped; it is eroded in spots, human flows and infinite change of events. Instead, *the vertical* is a climb to the maximum point of defining a vital map of the city, not a cold abstraction.

Michel de Certeau indicated many important ways for anthropological investigation of urban identity. The researcher pointed to the unconscious writing of the text of urban identity, so despite our projections and plans, some territories and areas of our life are still open. The culture also presents many resources for creating our identity, but largely it also happens unconsciously. The urban identity starts before our birth and it looks like preliminary a sketch of our life. But what makes Michel de Certeau's theory so original is that he proposed to add one more useful cultural way of understanding the urban identity – tactics. For Walter Benjamin the most appreciable way of writing is an unplanned trip through arcades, but for de Certeau making rational strategy is more helpful for discovering urban place. Consequently, tactics is a rational map of perception and creation the city that strongly determines the specificity of urban identity, «but what distinguishes them at the same time concerns the types of operations and the role of spaces; strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces» [3,p.29-30]. That citizen knows in what street it is better to pay and where it is better to buy cheaper foods; he knows secret places and clubs, unexpected landscapes and mysterious buildings. That is all called tactics which are fit perfectly into urban identity.

## The Experience and the Process of Adaptation

Besides absorbing the identity as a set of tactics and practices, the city also includes the intention of creating the experience of the city. Specifically, this intention represents itself not only in citizens' life that is planned and organised into some goal, but also in the basement of urban culture. It happens because culture, despite its dynamical nature, must always have a stable complex of values and meanings. Moreover, the urban experience and the experience of the city world are an extremely significant starting point for self-knowledge. Moris Merleau-Ponty commented on the complex nature of experience: «The whole system of experience – world, own body and empirical self – are subordinated to a universal thinker charged with sustaining the relationships between the three terms... Now, if one's own body and the empirical self are no more than element of the system of experience, objects among other objects in the eyes of the true *I*, how can we saw with our eyes what we in fact grasp through as inspiration of the mind; how is it that the world does not present itself to us as perfectly explicit; why is it displayed only gradually and never 'in its entirety'? In short, how does it come about that we perceive?» [7,p.208]. Perhaps, the main precondition of perception in the urban world might be the human *openness* or believing in *potential semantic appropriateness* of the city. There is no other way of getting the experience without your *own* intention to have it.

The characteristic feature of gaining the experience is also the fact of impossibility to get the knowledge without adaptation to cultural space and time. Ernest Cassirer clearly states that «to describe and analyze the specific character which space and time assume in human experience is one of the most appealing and important tasks of an anthropological philosophy. It would be a naive and unfounded assumption to consider the appearance of space and time as necessarily one and the same for all organic beings... Yet it is not easy to account for this difference if we merely apply our usual psychological methods. We must follow as indirect way: we must analyze the forms of human culture in order to discover the true character of



space and time in our human world» [1,p.48]. However, if there any traditions in the city where many people blur the regulatory principle of human experience? What is expression of the tradition in the big city?

The form of the tradition in the city is a cultural institution that remains the human experience in codes and symbols. The transmission of human experience through cultural institutions has both synchronic and diachronic manners. In the first case, it is about the simultaneity of transmission the knowledge between people and their communities as well. As for diachronic way, it includes two special principles: the consistency and the historicity. Consequently, the transfer of individual experience closely relates to the future (as emphasized by Paul Ricoeur in his book *Time and Narrative*) and therefore provides the duration of perception and learning cultural skills in the urban environment. In this way the cultural institutions becomes certain transitions of individual adaptation in the city and therefore completely absorbs in its environment all functions of culture: beginning from regulative and ending with compensatory function.

It means that despite the openness of human existence in the city (the main concept in Arnold Gehlen's philosophical anthropology), the *subject is determined* by the city in some (un)known way, registered in its cultural and historical coordinates and obviously depends on them all his life. That is exactly the problem of philosophical anthropology that has the intention of understanding the meaning of this predetermination. But this openness strongly depends on Another, and Max Scheler has an absolutely logical idea, that «our life is completely dependent on the changing opinion of another person» [9,p.42]. For that reason the behaviour and thinking of individuals perfectly represent the logical-semantic content of urban culture. Max Scheler purely notes a negative character of this influence, eliminating any possibility of “positive program”, such as adaptation and self-realization through creative resources of society. One of the first who spoke about the inclusion of individuals in the structural field of social identity was Kurt Lewin, who felt the need to be involved in group or local identity in order to preserve “inner calm”.

## **The Urban Identity as an Open Project**

Despite the severity of the transmission of knowledge rituals, a person has an interpretative orientation to the perception of knowledge. At the same time, the dynamic nature of culture can not be understood without the presence of certain constants or structures (both temporal/topographical and epistemological) that orient the individual existence to clear behavioural strategies. What is more, that assumption about the presence of common semantic field of experience of previous generations is a precondition for involving a common mode of being in culture. It is the impulsion for the formation of urban identity. But on perspective of the anthropological philosophy it is also important that the urban identity as a project depends on the subjective intentions and efforts, and also on factors that are independent from us: the tradition, cultural codes and patterns. The culture expert Barry Curtis proposes accurate thesis that «place is the product of a relationship – part subjective projection. Part internalization of an external reality» [2,p.55]. Really, it is possible to interpret the urban identity as a place connecting various types of cultures, realities and human practices as well. Moreover, the anthropological philosophy actualizes general configurations of meanings (and therefore configurations of urban contexts) what is also call *discourse*. So, even this trivial fact is a cogent proof of the dialectical nature of urban identity, which really becomes an open project of constructing yourself in the city.

We need to add that a condition of interpreting the urban experience includes the existential dimension of human freedom. Interpreting and trying to understand the experience (even the interpretation in the city not always completely means understanding senses of culture), people construct their own *image of the world*, not acting in mechanical or strictly regulated manner. The principle of interpretation of experience points to the special status of the individual in the system of collective existence. As Martin Heidegger wrote, the human being is determined by the

relationships we create with our fellow humans [4,p.156].

It means that subject *deserves* to be in the city as active citizen. In other words, an individual can pretend on receiving the status of urban identity. Still, “the status” is not the right word because people are not following some illusive urban projects. In fact, it is more than some unreal construction. People do really believe in their images of themselves, though most ways of constructing of urban identity have playful nature.

Once, the critics of Chicago school emphasized the diversity of experience and general descriptions of “urbanism as a way of life” (probably the first attempt to clarify the semantics of urban identity), which was postulated by Louis Wirth [13]. The criticism was based on the fact that there are different urbanisms which can not be reduced to a common structure. Indeed, what if the relationships between humans always have a common formation of social skills? Does the urban lifestyle really associate with the specific spatial and temporal forms? Are they always so significant for the individual? If we accept the fact of the conscious processing the urban experience and add the important fact of uniqueness (also including non-Western cities, that were included to anthropological discourse by Jennifer Robinson), it will conflict with some basic concepts of anthropological philosophy (such as openness to the world, self-sufficiency of human values, the unity of body and spirit etc.). It means that the generalization of urban reality cannot exist, because it is impossible to merge all various levels of human existence in the city. The scepticism is based on the preconception that the urban identity is blurred and fragmented in numerous urban practices (or if you want in urban tactics). As for anthropological philosophy, there is the only way to say something about these practices through its own vocabulary. Interestingly, but no reflection is going on in this similar way and there is nothing special in that methodological procedure. So, the main goal of anthropological philosophy stays on the line of accepting both conceptual and empirical levels of theorizing, not loosing the main ideas of these activities.

Thus, this analysis demonstrates in which way certain theoretical levels of

understanding the urban identity can be transformed in the focus of anthropological philosophy. From a conceptual point of view, our findings show that the urban identity is a dynamical processual reality that permanently combines the urban senses and practices. In this case, the everyday life and urban experience play the main role in analysis, which is also actualized in the phenomenological point of view. At the same time, there is a conflict with structural reflection because the anthropological paradigm absorbs and saves all different identities without any generalization. And the anthropological philosophy proposes that the urban identity becomes an open identity for all individuals. Accordingly, the main problem of analysing the urban identity is to keep balance between numerous cultural facts and abstract system of concepts.

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**Карповець М. В. Проблема міської ідентичності у філософській антропології.**

*Розглянуто низку перспектив, завдяки яким чи можемо описати і дослідити міську ідентичність як філософсько-антропологічну проблему. Фокусується увага на тактиці і стратегії людського тіла у повсякденному просторі, активну діяльність і досвід суб'єкта, текст і традицію міста.*

**Ключові слова:** міська ідентичність, філософська антропологія, досвід міста, міські практики і тактики, проект ідентичності.

**Карповець М. В. Проблема городской идентичности в философской антропологии.**

*Рассмотрен ряд перспектив, благодаря которым можно описать и проанализировать городскую идентичность как философско-антропологическую проблему. Фокусируется внимание на тактике и стратегии человеческого тела в повседневном пространстве, активную деятельность и опыт субъекта, текст и традицию города.*

**Ключевые слова:** городская идентичность, философская антропология, опыт города, городские практики и тактики, проект идентичности.

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