

SOCIO-SPATIAL TYPOLOGY OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES IN UZBEKISTAN: A SOCIO-PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS BASED ON EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a systematic analysis of the socio-spatial transformation in the social development process of small and medium-sized cities in Uzbekistan, based on empirical research. A five-tier criteria system has been developed for evaluating these cities. As a result of the empirical analysis, the studied areas are classified into three main typological models. The article analyzes the population's sense of belonging, the coefficient of collective solidarity, the functional transformation of the mahalla institution, and the desires to rationalize wedding ceremonies across gender and age dimensions. The findings of this research serve as a reliable methodological basis for improving the urban social environment and optimizing management decisions.

Keywords: Small and medium-sized cities, urbanization, socio-spatial typology, mahalla institution, collective solidarity, pragmatism, genealogical memory, mono-industrial cities, adaptive urbanization.

INTRODUCTION

Under the conditions of modern globalization and economic integration, the socio-spatial classification of the urban environment is not merely a geographical or statistical grouping, but a process of uncovering the hidden patterns among the structural elements of urban social space [1]. The dialectical nature of social space lies in the fact that it is not just a complex of physical objects, but a dynamic structure continuously produced and reshaped by the system of social relations and values [2]. Small and medium-sized cities serve as the most crucial links in regional development, the preservation of national culture and identity, and the maintenance of demographic balance.

The historical roots of urban planning culture in Uzbekistan are closely intertwined with the ancient Great Silk Road, where cities like Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, and Termez served as centers of transcontinental dialogue for centuries. However, the planned industrialization carried out in the 20th century fundamentally altered the structure of urban development. New cities were established around major raw material deposits and transport arteries, primarily to serve economic needs. A distinctive feature of Uzbekistan's urbanization network is that small cities constitute approximately 68.1% of all cities in the country, and they are home to nearly a quarter of the urban population [3].

Today, the small and medium-sized cities of our country are undergoing a phase of profound socio-systemic transformation, striving to find a rational balance between their rich historical-cultural heritage and the intense demands of the market economy. These changes are reflected not only in external architectural or infrastructural forms, but also in the worldview, values, social mood, and communication patterns of the population. The socio-philosophical aspect of

the matter lies in the fact that, against the backdrop of the clash between traditional values and modernization processes, unique adaptation mechanisms are emerging within the urban society. Systematically researching these processes, forecasting the development trends of small and medium-sized cities, and creating a reliable methodological framework for optimizing regional management decisions constitute an urgent scientific task.

RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a systematic approach, structural-functional analysis, comparative analysis, and empirical research methods.

To classify and comprehensively evaluate cities based on their socio-spatial ontology, a specialized “Five-Tier Criteria System” was developed. This system encompasses the following structural components:

1. Socio-Cultural Criterion. The level of the population’s national self-awareness, and the preservation degree of historical memory, traditions, and genealogical memory.
2. Demographic-Spatial Criterion. Population size, density, the compactness or dispersion of the urban territory, and the impact of the urbanistic environment on demographic processes.
3. Socio-Functional Criterion. The traditional-cultural role of local self-governing bodies, particularly the “mahalla” institution, and its current institutional-functional state.
4. Migratory-Adaptive Criterion. Social mobility of the population, the degree of connectivity with megapolises, youth motivation to remain in the region, or their migration strategies.
5. Digital-Infrastructural Criterion. The accessibility and convenience of urban infrastructure, pedestrian spaces, and the penetration rate of digital technologies and the internet into the daily lives of the population.

To collect empirical data, a comprehensive sociological survey was conducted throughout 2026 in the cities of Nurafshon, Yangiyul, Ohangaron, Angren, Almalyk, and Chirchiq in the Tashkent region, as well as Shirin, Yangiyer, and Gulistan in the Sirdaryo region. A total of 763 respondents participated in the survey based on random and quota sampling. The sample size was formed in proportion to the general demographic structure of the respective territories in terms of respondents’ gender, age, education level, and type of professional activity.

The obtained data were processed using mathematical-statistical methods to construct and generalize an empirical database. This enabled a profound measurement of internal social transformations through the subjective assessments of the respondents.

RESULTS

The results of the conducted survey revealed several important patterns regarding the population's adaptation to and social integration into the local urban space. The findings of the empirical study, titled “Transformation of the Socio-Cultural Space of Small and Medium-Sized Cities under Globalization: Synthesis of Tradition and Modernization,” demonstrated a high level of attachment of the population to the urban environment. The absolute majority of the respondents (80.9%) consider themselves an integral part of the city’s social life (56.0% fully, 24.9% partially). The indicator of alienation accounted for a mere 3.3%.

At the city level, the highest indicators of a sense of belonging were recorded in small and specialized cities – Shirin (64.3%) and Yangiyer (61.8%). The lowest indicator and the highest

rate of neutrality were observed in Yangiyul (37.7% had not thought about it), while the highest level of alienation was registered in Almalyk (7.1%).

Collective events (such as hashar and public holidays) evoke a sense of solidarity and unity in 68.7% of the respondents. However, among youth aged 18–25, the feeling of solidarity was the lowest (53.9%), and the level of indifference was the highest (16.2%). In the city of Nurafshon, 22.2% of the respondents evaluated these events as "mere formality and obligation."

Regarding neighborly relations, 76.1% of the respondents rely on their neighbors' help in difficult situations. While absolute trust in neighbors is above 63.5% among those aged 56 and older, the indicator of individualism and self-reliance reached its peak at 34.6% among respondents aged 36–45. Across the analyzed cities, the highest rates of individualism and distrust toward neighbors were recorded in Yangiyul (47.2%) and Ohangaron (34.2%).

The socio-philosophical analysis of the empirical data revealed five fundamental systemic problems within the society of small and medium-sized cities:

1. Increasing social alienation and pragmatism. Sincerity in interpersonal relationships among the population is declining, while conflicts of interest are rising. Of the respondents, 20.5% noted the dominance of indifference and suspicion in society, a figure that is particularly high in Ohangaron (34.1%) and Yangiyul (32.1%). In sociological literature, this phenomenon is explained by the process where secondary ties, characteristic of the urban lifestyle, replace primary relationships [4].

2. The functional crisis of the "mahalla" institution. The mahalla institution is increasingly perceived as an administrative management apparatus rather than a traditional community center. Indeed, 43.5% of the respondents consider the mahalla merely an "official governing body," while 25% evaluate its effectiveness as either a relic of the past or imperceptible. Notably, 54–55% of the population over the age of 46 view it as a formal administrative office.

3. Infrastructural imbalance. In urban planning, the balance between pedestrian accessibility and traffic flow has been disrupted. Approximately 39.1% of the population is dependent on transportation for essential services, while in Nurafshon, nearly 10% of the residents consider the infrastructure "completely inconvenient and dangerous" due to incomplete transformation processes.

4. The negative impact of environmental factors on mental health. Every fifth urban resident (20.2%) lives under mental discomfort due to environmental nuisances such as noise, dust, and poor air quality (where 12.7% experience irritability, and 7.5% are under absolute negative impact). Women's sensitivity to noise and dust (14.8%) was found to be higher than that of men (10.6%) [5].

5. Coercion in collective events. In events designed to fulfill a social integration function, 13.2% of respondents experience a sense of "formality and obligation." This indicator reaches its peak in Nurafshon (22.2%), indicating that administrative pressure mechanisms still persist.

As a result of the study, the analyzed cities were classified into three main categories based on their development characteristics:

- Industrial-Monoindustrial Model (Angren, Almalyk, Chirchiq, Shirin). The city's economy and social life are concentrated around a single large industrial enterprise. The population's lifestyle and professional values are directly tied to the production cycle, fostering a strong sense of "corporate patriotism." However, due to a lack of economic diversification (for

instance, the small business sector accounts for a mere 1.6% in Shirin), there is a noticeable migration trend among the population, particularly the youth.

- Administrative-Communicative and Socio-Cultural Model (Gulistan, Yangiyul). Since trade, services, and administrative functions have replaced industrial giants, the mahalla becomes the primary link of social connectivity. For example, the growth of information services in Gulistan indicates that the population is transitioning toward post-industrial values.

- Dynamic-Adaptive Model (Nurafshon, Ohangaron). These are rapidly changing cities with high migratory attractiveness under the influence of large agglomerations. The population adapts to the life rhythm of a major city, reshaping their identity based on a synthesis of rural traditions and modern urban culture (glocalization).

There is a distinct “dichotomy” in the population’s migration strategies: while 39.1% of the residents are prepared to move to a larger city if their financial conditions improve, 38.1% prefer the peace and tranquility of their current city. The fact that 78.1% of the population supports abandoning extravagance in weddings and ceremonies confirms that society is transitioning toward a rational consumer culture. The impact of globalization on clothing and communication was evaluated as moderate (within normal limits) by 40.6% of the respondents, indicating a complete departure from the closed society model.

CONCLUSION

The process of social development in the small and medium-sized cities of Uzbekistan is moving closer to an organic model of urbanization. The five fundamental problems hindering this development (social alienation, the crisis of the mahalla, infrastructural and ecological imbalances, and administrative coercion) highlight the urgent need to transition the management style from “coercion” to “cooperation.”

In urban planning, it is essential to abandon the forced application of standardized templates and instead develop differentiated models (industrial, administrative, adaptive) based on each region's unique social capital and local identity. The design of urban development models in Uzbekistan should not be based on a detachment from national identity, but rather on an “adaptive urbanization” model that envisions a symbiosis of traditional values with modern urban forms. Small and medium-sized cities represent the convergence point of national mentality and global modernization, and their balanced development remains the primary guarantee of social stability.

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