

# Unfolding Authenticity within Retail Transformation in Novosibirsk, Russia

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## Abstract

The goal of the article is to describe the transformation of retail and to reveal how representatives of retail turn to the idea of authenticity. The study focuses on 3 areas in the city of Novosibirsk: the city center, Akademgorodok, and Zatulinskiy residential area. This research is conducted by a mixed-method involving quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach is an analysis of interactive map data (2GIS): the information about all businesses in Novosibirsk's districts in 2007 and 2023 years. The qualitative approach is visual analysis of the commercial fabric of the districts using the authenticity concept. The main findings of the research. During the period from 2007 to 2023, there was a significant increase in the number of retails in the selected areas. Moreover, in the case of the city center and Akademgorodok, the proportion of the HORECA category, primarily catering establishments, has increased. The retail in Zatulinskiy residential area is mainly represented by chain establishments, among which various grocery stores and supermarkets stand out, and the HORECA sphere is not expressed vividly. At the design level, establishments can refer to the authenticity of the place in various ways: by indicating official, expert evaluation of the age of the building, through names that refer to the roots of the place, or through images that would be associated with cultural symbols of the place. However, it is also typical for situations when symbols of places located in other countries are commodified, or when the only concern in the design is the visibility of the establishment. The results of this study may be of interest to business representatives who apply local symbols in their design.

## Keywords

Authenticity, retail, transformation, commodification, gentrification.

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## Introduction

Retail is one of the most important and flexible spheres in the urban landscape. On the one hand, it reflects global trends, local policies, and economic situations. On the other hand, it depends on the tastes and lifestyles of city dwellers. This part of everyday life represents the space where individuals and large-scale transformation processes intersect. One of these processes is the commercialization of a place's authenticity. The massive blurring of distinctions makes the marks of authenticity valuable – family-owned shops, ethnic restaurants, and old buildings – and the demand for these marks makes them an expensive commodity, which symbolically and economically forces people who create authentic spaces with their own hands to leave their usual places of residence (Zukin, 2010). Some researchers define this process as gentrification (Benz, 2015; Guimarães, 2021), but they differ in their conclusions about the driving force of this process. For example, the study "Unfolding authenticity within retail gentrification in Mouraria, Lisbon" examines the process of retail gentrification in the historic district of Lisbon. The conclusion is that retail business owners are aware of the role of authenticity in attracting consumers, but their efforts are aimed more at attracting a certain category of consumers – tourists – while the interests of

local residents are secondary (Guimarães, 2021). In the case of China, empirical evidence further proves the uneven intervention of globalization in the Global South that shaped gentrifiers' tastes and preferences, and the so-called "new middle class" is driving this process (Cao, 2022, p. 515). It is important for this category of city dwellers to live in a stylish, authentic environment. Is it possible to call the changes that are happening in Russian cities gentrification and use theoretical frameworks that are relevant to Western cities in relation to them? This is a controversial issue. In M. Bernt's study, it is stated that «gentrification is not made impossible in this context, but it is a sideshow, rather than the main act» and he emphasizes «the importance of property relations» (Bernt, 2016, p. 18).

In cities, different localities coexist: hipster neighborhoods for young people with columns made of weathered bricks and designer tricks; state institutions, dwelling in walls that still remember their Soviet past; residential areas on the outskirts with three beer shops in one building. All of them are formed and exist under the conditions of conflicting interests and ideas of what is proper and authentic. In this study, authenticity is understood as a construct that is created and maintained by various forces, and one of the forces shaping the urban landscape is retail. The city of Novosibirsk was chosen as a research case. It is examined how retail has transformed in different areas of the city and how businesses use authenticity, based on the example of Novosibirsk.

After this introductory section, Section 1 is devoted to the theoretical framework, which is divided into two subsections: 'Retail change tendencies in Russia' and 'Authenticity in retail'. In Section 2, the methodological design is constructed to support Section 3, which is devoted to the presentation of the results.

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. Retail change tendencies in Russia

Retail, in this study, will be understood as the aggregate of commercial entities involved in trade and providing services to the city dwellers (Aksenov, Zinovyev, Morachevskaya, 2019).

This sector has had an atypical development trajectory in Russia. It is characteristic of the Soviet era to have consumer infrastructure facilities placed in accordance with planned principles. As a result, in residential areas, retail was mainly represented by points satisfying basic needs, such as grocery stores, and almost all objects of episodic demand were located in the city center. Nowadays, everything has changed.

Several researchers have shown that since the collapse of the USSR, Russian cities have increasingly become similar to those of originally capitalist countries, adopting their development trends. (for example, Axenov *et al.*, 2018). One of the global trends is related to the role of retail in territorial development projects. While planning the development of public spaces, an important role is given to financial flows - the sale of souvenirs, coffee, toys, etc. This process can be called the commercialization and unification of public spaces in both visual and substantive senses (Zukin, 2010). One manifestation of unification is the development of chain retail. In the late 1990s-early 2000s, global chain retailers appeared in Russia, attracted by the growing purchasing power of the population. Domestic companies gradually began to join the format as well. By 2012, the Russian chain food market had matured, and the "properly Russian specifics of this process, associated with strong differentiation of the socio-economic space, as well as local, including ethnocultural, features of people's consumer behavior" (Baranov and Safronov, 2019, p. 101) became more apparent there.

Thus, the starting assumption is that there is a connection between the nature and structure of retail and the characteristics of the place and lifestyles of the people inhabiting it, which are formed not only as an individual behavioral strategy but also as a reaction to the authenticity of the place.

### 1.2. Authenticity in retail

The term "authenticity" is increasingly mentioned in both media and academic texts. Journalists often use it to refer to a place that is worth visiting to immerse oneself in the atmosphere of a certain time or culture. Researchers of historical heritage carry out expertise, thereby justifying the authenticity of places and examining design techniques for its actualization. Tourism studies researchers consider how staged authenticity in places is created and maintained, where a kind of spectacle portrays real life specifically for tourists' consumption (Karelina, 2021). It is considered that the idea belongs to MacCannell, who in the 1970s described the tourist experience as a search for authenticity. Everyday life, in his view, does not give people a sense of authenticity, and they are drawn to places where they believe to find it. But they are confronted with a spectacle created specifically for tourists (MacCannell, 1973). If initially staged authenticity was seen as a tool for homogenizing the world, where each landmark is equipped with a standard set of tourist "lures," over time, perceptions of it have transformed. It is no longer necessary that

the staging is inherently artificial, and therefore, by definition, "bad." Supporters of the existential approach to authenticity place great importance not on the material objects themselves but on the audience and the feelings people experience during the process. The study of N. Wang (Wang, 1999) has had an impact on tourism studies, largely due to the idea of existential authenticity. In this interpretation, authenticity in the tourist experience is separated from the actual places and is placed in the person's perception. Thus, it is argued that a place that is objectively not authentic can evoke an authentic feeling. Studies and theoretical essays on authenticity in relation to spatial experience in the field of urban sociology are quite rare, but they also demonstrate the ambiguity of the concept (Guimarães, 2022) and the shift of the focus from what authenticity *is* to what it *does*. Taking this into consideration, a constructed nature of authenticity is adopted as a theoretical proposition. It is invented and reinvented, mobile, and subject to the influence of various forces.

At an expert level (often supported by the authorities), authenticity is considered an objective characteristic that can be identified, documented, and should be legally protected. At the level of ordinary citizens, authenticity is more of a feeling, with a spatial localization and an aesthetic pleasure of being in contact with something unique. Both aspects manifest themselves not only in abstract representations but also in the physical space as community practices. "The formation of authenticity is related to the spread of stable social practices and models of behavior. Clothes drying on the street, sheep wool laid out on the sidewalk, breakfast on the street in front of the house - these are everyday practices that the community adopts" (Artemenko and Yücesoy Eda Ünlü, 2019, p. 169).

In terms of actualizing authenticity, business is an important actor. Places considered authentic attract not only tourists but also local connoisseurs of a unique atmosphere, snobbish aesthetes, and hipsters who transform them beyond recognition. This is a common situation in the West, where a district becoming popular due to its "authenticity" guarantees a unique urban experience, attracting certain types of residents and entrepreneurs. However, this popularity eventually turns into a downside: new, more affluent residents with their privileged tastes form a new consumer landscape, in which there is no place for companies and establishments catering to the needs of the original residents (Zukin, 2010).

The relationship between the authenticity of a place and retail, which is intertwined with people's everyday practices, has been the subject of research by specialists in different fields. In the Seoul study, the following character of the relationship is indicated: «authenticity is not only an object of consumption, something that the subjects can have, but also a fantasy that veils their irreducible lack and motivates the endless desire for an elusive something more. In other words, longing for authenticity is more-than-consumption, which is inculcated in gentrification as a habitus for distinction» (Ji, 2021, p. 234). Retail in the context of the commodification of authenticity was also examined, for example, in the case of the Australian city of Brisbane. In this study, authenticity is considered from the perspective of representatives of "new" and "old" businesses, their narratives about changes in space in connection with gentrification, stimulated by large capital. The conclusion was drawn about the transformation of retail trade along a trajectory that includes the aestheticization of authenticity, followed by its commodification (Molnar and Walters, 2021).

Authenticity can manifest itself in visual techniques that can be captured. In a study dedicated to Lisbon, several approaches are highlighted. The first is to refer to "antiquity", that is, the desire to emphasize the age (date of foundation) of the establishment or the building in which it is located. The second is the use of elements that were used in the space before, even if the current business has nothing to do with the past functional content. The third is a reference to local cultural symbols and traditional crafts (Guimarães, 2022).

One of the central topics that researchers address when considering authenticity in retail is the transformation of urban localities. Authenticity can be manifested both in the form of expert opinions and objective data, which are used as one of the ways to make the urban experience more valuable, and in the form of people's subjective perceptions of a place, which manifest themselves in the practices they undertake in certain areas of the city. These practices lead to the formation of behavioral patterns in certain urban locations, in which businesses can identify opportunities for commodification.

## 2. Research methodology

At the first stage, two data sources were considered to identify the areas for further analysis:

- The Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Objects (Monuments of History and Culture) of the peoples of the Russian Federation. This information source allowed us to assess which areas of the city have a concentration of authentic objects based on expert evaluations.

- Results of the joint work of students and teachers from the General Sociology Department of Novosibirsk State University. The development of the research tools and surveying were conducted from November 2018 to April 2019 as part of the project "Urban Space: (Subjective) Perception, Daily Mobility, Living Conditions, and Social Activity of City Dwellers." The survey was conducted using a semi-structured interview format. Respondents were selected as residents of the city of Novosibirsk and its nearest suburb aged 18 and over. The sample size was 63 respondents. This information source will allow us to assess the places in the city that stand out based on subjective perception.

The main part of the research is conducted by a mix-method involving quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative approach is an analysis of interactive map data (2GIS\*): information about businesses in Novosibirsk's districts in 2007 and 2023 years. Specific retail typologies, which are representative of the evolution of urban localities are used: HORECA<sup>†</sup>, goods, services, and food retail. Qualitative approach is a visual analysis of the commercial fabric of the districts using the authenticity concept.

### 3. Results and discussion

As mentioned above, there are two perspectives in identifying the authenticity of a place: expert and subjective. According to the expert perspective, authentic places in the city can be those that are recognized as official cultural heritage sites. The subjective perspective, on the other hand, can be expressed in how residents consider certain places as "theirs," corresponding to their identity. Based on the analysis of cultural heritage sites and local "favorites," the most representative districts with a concentration of authentic places have been identified: the city center and Akademgorodok. In addition, another district that was not highlighted earlier but still had a well-developed retail system was also included in the detailed analysis. The Zatulinsky residential area was selected as such a district (Figure no.1).

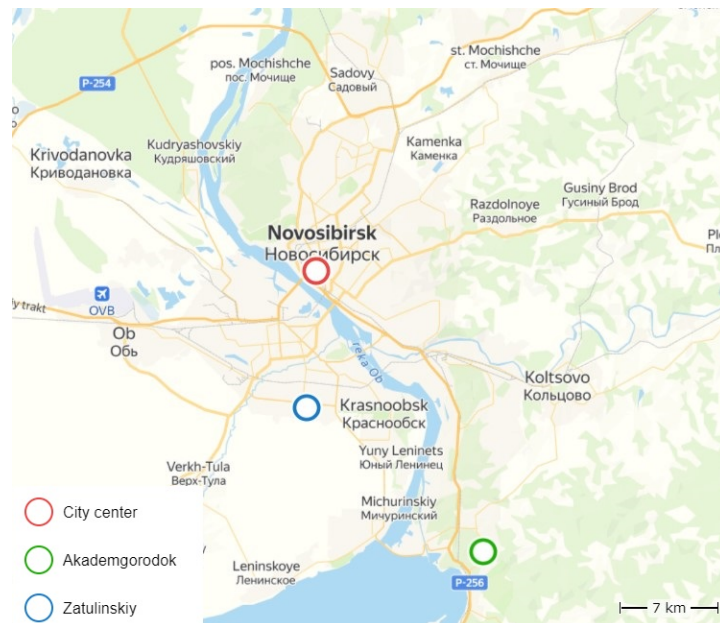


Figure no. 1. Locations of the cases

*The city center.* Since the beginning of the 20th century, this area has represented a concentration of business functions, combined with residential buildings. "At first, there were one and two-story merchant and bourgeois houses, mostly made of wood, but there were also stone ones. In Soviet times, many pre-revolutionary houses were demolished, some of the surviving ones were lucky enough to become architectural monuments. New buildings in the style of constructivism, Stalinist empire, and Soviet modernism of the second half of the 20th century were erected on the site of demolished houses. In fact, each era left its mark on the quiet center"<sup>‡</sup>. Modern times are no exception, and new times have also made changes. Old buildings are being demolished, and new luxury housing is growing. Nowadays, it is one of the expensive and prestigious neighborhoods in the city.

\* 2GIS is a free business listing with a city map.

<sup>†</sup> A short for hotel / restaurant / catering

<sup>‡</sup> Novosibirsk. Metamorphoses of the Quiet Center. URL: <https://d-popovskiy.livejournal.com/83309.html>.

The *Zatulinskiy residential area* is located in the left bank part of the Ob River where industry actively developed in Soviet times. By the end of the 1930s, there were already more than a dozen industrial enterprises in this area, and during the Great Patriotic War, their number almost tripled. In order to successfully operate such a quantity of industrial enterprises, workers were required, so it was decided to build a residential area, which began in the 1960s. By the 1980s, this neighborhood had earned a reputation as a criminal area. Currently, the *Zatulinskiy residential area* is being developed, and housing construction of various price levels is underway. In 2020, the *Zatulinskiy dispersed park* was opened. Despite the proximity to industrial enterprises, "according to ecologists, it is one of the cleanest residential areas in the city due to the prevailing southwestern wind rose in the city"<sup>§</sup>. However, on average, housing there is considered rather cheap.

*Akademgorodok* was founded in 1957, and its idea was to create a comprehensive environment in which scientists and students could live and work comfortably. Spatial solutions were designed to provide continuity: students learn from scientific staff to replenish their ranks in the future. *Akademgorodok* includes, in addition to residential buildings, dozens of scientific institutes, Novosibirsk State University, the House of Scientists, and a developed trade infrastructure. In Soviet times, a multitude of discoveries were made in *Akademgorodok*, however, in the 90s were a difficult time for science. There was a general decline in the prestige of the profession of a scientist and a "brain drain" abroad. At the same time, a parallel process of commercial development of the *Akademgorodok* space was taking place, which manifested itself in constant encroachments on its forests and Soviet material heritage, which did not go unnoticed by the public, and became one of the factors in the formation of a defensive community (Scalaban, Sergeeva and Lobanov, 2022). Today, residential construction is practically not being carried out within the boundaries of the *Akademgorodok*, and it is one of the most expensive and "green" areas of the city.

### 3.1. Retail structure changes

In general, the number of retail outlets has increased in each of the cases considered. In the city center it has doubled, in *Akademgorodok* - tripled, and in *Zatulinsky residential area* it has increased by a factor of 7.

If we look at the structure by generalized categories in the studied districts, the following trends can be identified: an increase in the number of HORECA establishments in the center and the *Akademgorodok*, with a more significant growth in the case of *Akademgorodok*. In both the center and *Akademgorodok*, the supply of household goods has decreased. This reduction may be associated with a global trend towards decentralization of retail trade and the opening of large shopping centers on the outskirts of the city (Guimarães, 2022). It is possible to note an increase in the number of grocery stores in the *Zatulinsky residential area*, where every fourth store today belongs to this category (Figure no. 2).

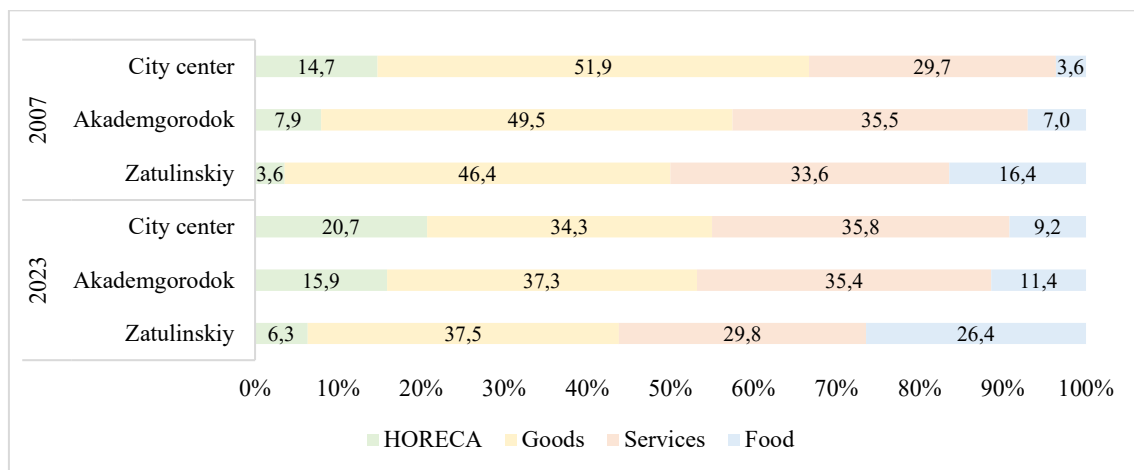


Figure no. 2. Structure of retail in districts in 2007 and 2023 (in %)

Among the HORECA establishments in the center in 2007, bars, nightclubs, and hookah lounges were notable, and by 2023, they still stood out, with their absolute value increased. The *Akademgorodok* and *Zatulinsky residential area* did not have a large number of HORECA establishments in 2007, but by 2023 their landscape had changed. In *Akademgorodok*, a significant share of catering establishments is occupied by coffee shops, pastry shops, and fast-food outlets. In general, the number of public catering estab-

<sup>§</sup> *Zatulinskiy residential area*. URL: <http://vseon.com/analitika/rajon/zatulinskij-zhilmassiv>.

ishments in Akademgorodok exceeded the norm 18 times. In Zatulinsky residential area, fast-food outlets and various food delivery services stand out today. In 2007, significant share of goods in all districts were related to repairs, but today the category "clothing and footwear" is notable and occupies a significant share in the center and Akademgorodok. In Zatulinsky residential area, pharmacies and beer stores prevail today.

If we consider the transformation of the chain store format, then in general, its ratio remained practically unchanged, with 57.6% of non-chain stores in 2007 and 56% of non-chain stores in 2023. The ratio of chains to non-chains is also reproduced in the districts as a whole, with only Zatulinsky residential area having a shift towards chains. In the Center, both in 2007 and in 2023, there are significantly fewer chains than in the Akademgorodok and Zatulinsky residential area. However, although the ratio remained practically unchanged, the scale of chains has significantly changed - about 35% of retail points in the considered districts are now chain stores with more than 18 branches, while in 2007 there were no more than 10%.

### 3.2. Visual dimension of authenticity in retail

The reference to the roots of the place can occur at a constructed level, for example, through modern elements that, however, are associated with antiquity, such as the name "Gastronom", which is typical of Novosibirsk in the early 20th century. In the case of commercialization of objective, expert authenticity, there is a reference to "antiquity" at the design level. For example, by combining the name of the restaurant with a sign indicating the age of the building.

However, when analyzing visual materials of the city center, a question often arises about the authenticity of the place that is being referred to in the design. On the example of Lisbon (Guimarães, 2022), it has been shown that local cultural symbols are commercialized to attract tourists, whereas in order to attract consumers to the center of Novosibirsk, symbols of other countries such as France and Italy are being commercialized (Figure no.3). The city center can serve as a kind of «journey» within a city, where residents act as flâneurs, or in fact take on the role of tourists.

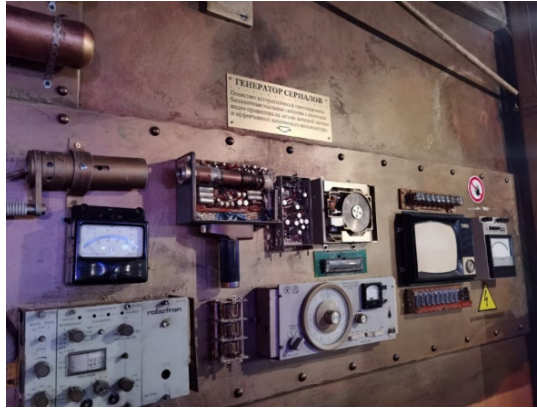


**Figure no. 3. Establishments in the city center**

In this sense, city dwellers are similar to representatives of the "new middle class" in China, where everything Western is considered more prestigious and status-oriented, and thus more in line with the identity of a young and educated person. (Cao, 2022). This is also reflected in the prevalence of foreign names in the linguistic landscape. At the same time, local features that could become part of the design are often overlooked. For example, Soviet neon signs.

Like the city center, Akademgorodok is characterized by high housing prices and a significant increase in the number of cafes and restaurants compared to other retail establishments. The scientific roots and the main functional orientation of the Akademgorodok are reflected in the visual components of retail and in the form of names (for example, the lounge café Flask, the Academic pharmacy), as well as in the use of

special design techniques. They refer not only to the scientific roots of the place (Figure no.4), but also to the image of Akademgorodok as a "green" place, represented by fauna, in particular, squirrels.



**Figure no. 4. An establishment decorated in a "scientific" style in Akademgorodok**

The description of the city center and the Akademgorodok suggests that if the experience of being in an urban environment is valuable in itself, its features tend to be commodified, and a balance between brand design and harmonious integration into the authenticity of the space needs to be maintained in order to look appropriate in this environment and take advantage of all the benefits that can be gained from being in this location. When analyzing visual data of Zatulinsky residential area, it seemed that the business does not fully realize the value of the environment, and the only goal of retail point designs is to be as noticeable as possible. The retail area of Zatulinsky residential area is dominated by grocery stores, supermarkets, an impressive number of beer shops, and goods and services for the population, with a tendency towards network format. Visually, this is manifested in a variety of colors, and each commercial point strives to occupy as much visible space as possible. However, the peculiarity of the retail is not only in its visual impact, but also in the fact that it is difficult to find any hints of the place's roots. There is hardly any effort to indicate that the establishment is located in Zatulinsky residential area. The exception was an unexpected representative of HORECA - a kiosk called "Zatulinsky-style cool shawarma" offering a "non-liftable" shawarma weighing 1 kilogram.

Of course, there are also chain retail representatives in the city center and Akademgorodok that do not hesitate to integrate themselves visually into the environment. This may be because the design code of Novosibirsk was only adopted in 2019 and its effect has not fully manifested itself. However, they at least have a few references to cultural symbols. The question is cultural symbols of which places they refer to. In the case of Akademgorodok and the Center, there are many establishments that strive to look "Western" and at the same time integrate more carefully into the existing fabric of the city.

If we use the analogy of a place and a person in considering authenticity, an authentic place is one that does not pretend to be something it is not. Zatulinsky residential area generally fits this description. Among the colorful signs, people perform their routine actions, walking from the bus stop to their homes, and on weekends they go to the city center or Akademgorodok to experience the staged authenticity that is offered by numerous establishments.

## Conclusions

The commercialization of the authenticity of a place has not yet become a widespread phenomenon in Novosibirsk, and its urban environment is not yet cluttered with signs of authentic restaurants. The problem of symbolic and physical displacement is not so acute. However, people strive to spend time in places that correspond to their identity, and one can already trace how, on the one hand, the tastes of the affluent and mobile class of people, and on the other hand, the efforts of businesses shape the image of points of attraction in the city, based on authenticity of places.

From 2007 to 2023, there was a multiple increase in the number of retail outlets in the areas under consideration. In the case of the city center and the Akademgorodok the share of HORECA category grew. This may be related to practices that are typical for subjectively authentic places, such as walking. The retail outlets of the Zatulinsky residential area are mainly represented by chains, among which various grocery stores and supermarkets are highlighted, the HORECA industry is not well represented. At the design level, establishments may refer to the authenticity of the place in various ways: by indicating the official or expert assessment of the age of the building; through names that refer to the roots of the place

or images that are associated with local cultural symbols. But typical situations also include when they refer to symbols of places located in other countries or when the only thing that matters when decorating is the visibility of the establishment.

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