Individual “Beautification” as Protesting versus Aesthetic Language

“Do-it-yourself Urban Design” in the Provincial Environment of Belarus

Elena Ivanova

Associate Professor of Research University Higher School of Economics, Grodno, Belarus

The idea of “do-it-yourself” is usually considered in the context of resistance and contestation either as a part of the functional necessity of this kind of action. A feature of countries like Belarus is a strict regulation of the public sphere. Local authorities regulate any activity, including amateur creativity. Citizen journalism is trying to circumvent these limitations by using of amateur internet broadcast from other countries, mainly from Poland. But everyday practices are not limited to creating access to information. Radical actionism is not popular. It should be noted that direct political protests and demonstrations in Belarus are more covert than an open confrontation. But even such innocent practices as homemade bike lanes, street signs or guerrilla gardens can be seen as an attempt to undermine the foundations of the state system.

This paper presents a particular type of unauthorized intervention, which we define as individual beautification in provincial towns of the western region of Belarus. Gordon C. C. Douglas call this phenomenon “do-it-yourself urban design.”

The essence of this kind of project is the decoration of houses’ adjoining areas with homemade pieces of debris. Sculptures can be very diverse and placed not only in the courtyards of private houses, but also in the courts of the hostels, university hall of residence etc. At first glance, such items could be appreciated in an ironic way, mostly like kitsch. At the same time, they can be seen as a representation of cultural identity and even a kind of protest against the dominant aesthetics.

The report will present the results of visual research and analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with two groups of respondents. The first group (N 8) - “do-it-yourself urban designers” and the second group (N 22) - the audience. Using the data gathered I will highlight issues such as motivation, perceptions of urban space and the aesthetics of a provincial town.