

**Тиит Ремм**  
**СУЩЕСТВУЕТ ЛИ ЛОТМАНОВСКИЙ МЕТОД**  
**СЕМИОТИЧЕСКОГО АНАЛИЗА**  
**ПРОСТРАНСТВЕННЫХ ТЕКСТОВ?<sup>©</sup>**

*Тартуский университет, факультет  
философии и семиотики, Тарту, Эстония,  
e-mail: tiit.remm@ut.ee*

*Аннотация.* Пространственная организация рассматривалась Юрием Лотманом как основная система моделирования в культуре. Представления о пространстве и городе в культуре, а также пространственная организация в текстах широко изучаются в семиотике культуры, но сама пространственная среда остается менее изученной. Концепции, которые Лотман предлагал в отношении семиотики пространства, во многом остаются на уровне общекультурных моделей. Цель данного исследования – наметить методологические подходы и собственно метод анализа городского пространства как пространственного текста в соответствии с работами Лотмана по анализу художественных текстов. Предлагаемые методологические подходы проиллюстрированы на примере ряда недавно (ре)конструированных центральных площадей небольших городов Эстонии.

*Ключевые слова:* Юрий Лотман; семиотика пространства; городское пространство Эстонии.

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Tiit Remm<sup>1</sup>

**Is there a Lotmanian method for semiotic analysis of spatial texts?**<sup>®</sup>

*University of Tartu, Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, Tartu, Estonia,*

*e-mail: tiit.remm@ut.ee*

*Abstract.* Spatial organisation has been seen as a primary modelling system in culture by Juri Lotman. Conceptions about space and the city in culture as well as spatial organisation in texts is widely studied in the semiotics of culture but spatial environment itself remains understudied. Conceptions that Lotman offers for the semiotics of space remain largely at the level of general cultural models. The aim in this study is to outline methodological steps and a possible method for analysing urban space as a spatial text following Lotman's works on the analysis of artistic texts. The outline of the method is exemplified with a case study of a series of recently (re)constructed central squares of small towns in Estonia.

*Keywords:* Juri Lotman; semiotics of space; urban space Estonia.

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Juri Lotman's works have been widely discussed in the framework of the theory of semiotic of culture and applied in a variety of case studies. This article is concerned with the usefulness of Lotman's ideas for the semiotics of space, particularly as regards the analysis of material spatial environment. The focus is on the applicability of Lotman's analytic tools in discussing the built environment, rather than spatial meaning making and modelling in a wider conceptual framework.

Spatial concepts can be considered central for Lotman, however, as Alexandros Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou point out that no semiotics of space as such appears in Lotman's works, as these deal with *space in text*, but rarely with space as text [Lagopoulos, Boklund-Lagopoulou, 2014]. Rather than being an object of study, spatiality in Lotman occurs in models and conceptual structures. Lotman studies spatial structures in artistic, mainly literary texts (e.g. [Лотман, 1968, 1977, 1990, p. 171–202]) and in cultural models [Lotman, 2012] and employs spatial concepts for the semiosphere, a model of the structure and functioning of the semiotic universe [Lotman, 1990, 2005]. When he focuses on the city and elements of urban space, he primarily ob-

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serves the concept of the city and representations of the city in culture [Лотман, 1984 а; Lotman, Uspensky, 1984 б], while material spatial environment or spatial objects are not in the focus of his discussion – even architecture is discussed [Лотман, 2000] as an artistic language in the context of culture and not with the focus on the architectural object itself. Nevertheless, Lotman uses material spatial objects and geographic space as examples and his concepts have been applied in the analysis of architecture, landscape, monuments and urban space but mostly focusing on their appearance and dynamics in culture (for a focus on the urban space itself, see e.g. [Чергов, 2020; Cervelli, 2008]). It can thus be asked if Lotman's works offer a method for semiotic analysis of space and what steps would be involved in it.

Compared to verbal artistic texts, the semiosis of spatial objects can be considered more inseparable from their conditions of production and use and the life of the society in general. Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou [2014] criticize Lotman for not involving the social dimension in semiotic analysis. The point can be made more specific by pointing out that Lotman's focus is not on production processes of the sociocultural world and the role of semiosis in these, but on the role of cultural models in structuring social life – on the level of relative autonomy of cultural models that in turn organise social life (see [Lotman, Uspensky, 1978; Лотман, 2000 б, p. 394–395]). Asking for a Lotmanian method for semiotics of space thus means asking for an outline of the interrelations of the life of the community, its cultural models and their realisation in particular texts, including the design of spatial environment. Conceptual spatial models (*semiosphere* or *cultural space*, for example) are not directly applicable to the description of spatial environment as a semiotic system.

In order to move toward a possible method, I will first outline the possible object for Lotmanian semiotic analysis of spatial environment; secondly, point out some methodological premises and, thirdly, contextualise main analytic categories provide more specific categories for the method. This is followed by a discussion of an example of semiotics of public space in recently (re)constructed central areas of small towns in Estonia.

The spatial object of study for a semiotic analysis along Lotmanian lines could be found either at the level of culture or of a particular text. Thus, rather than *space in text* and *space as text*, it would be *space*

*in culture* and *space as text* – whereby the material is the same but the scale is different. *Space in culture* is a realisation of the cultural space, a spatial model of culture. In this perspective, physical space can be an object of study (a) as a sign system or a cultural language (significant organisation of material differences), (b) as an expression of a cultural model (spatial environment is thereby a cultural text), or (c) as a part of a wider cultural phenomenon (the text of a place in culture). The latter perspective would emerge from a particular place conceived of as a spatial text. While there are many starting points in Lotman's works for studying semiotisation of space in culture, there is less of guidance for practical analysis of particular spatial texts – what can be used is more often a method for interpretation of spatial organisation in relation to cultural processes rather than a method for data collection or primary analysis. Therefore, a methodological link between the material, the data and analysis should be developed.

### **How can spatial environment become analysable along the Lotmanian lines?**

A first step in organising the field involves considering the multi-layered character of the study object. Lotman started his studies in the field of verbal artistic texts and moved toward a more general level of cultural processes. At the same time, artistic texts provide models for analysis of cultural processes, which involves the methodological problem of whether and how analysis of texts can be extrapolated to the analysis of culture. A step towards extrapolation is the application of models of artistic texts to everyday texts – artistic languages belong among other cultural languages (such as law, social norms, architecture) and artistic texts and everyday cultural texts function in a similar way. While there are specific features of artistic modelling, structures of both types of texts and their functioning in culture are comparable. In addition, it is possible to ask what are the specific steps and premises that enable the application of models of artistic texts, for example principles of artistic composition, in «real life».

Another methodological puzzle would enquire how the models of cultural space are applicable to spatial texts and spatial environments that are not necessarily texts. *Cultural space*, *semiosphere* and respective smaller concepts (e.g. the boundary, the core, periphery) are de-

scriptive tools concerning organisation and functioning of cultural self-models, cultural processes and semiotic space, having no direct and necessary relationship with the material space. In practice, the relation is still there and it needs to be elaborated for each analysis. There are two main aspects in this relation. 1. Material space and its organisation is a manifestation of models, a sign-vehicle used for (self)descriptions – that can engage the stability of spatial semiosis (*sensu* [Tchertov, 2002]) in designing respective spatial texts. In turn, the particular combination of expression and interpretation starts to function as a semiotic text. 2. Material space is engaged in cultural processes and in a part of semiotic space – meaningful activity engages with meaningful space that affords it and those affordances and their carriers become significant.

In addition, semiotic processes are not abstract relations, but leave traces and also organise material space. Symbolic marking in material space needs a material act that can influence the world that can support, be in conflict with or remain neutral towards the respective semiotic universe and can be reinterpreted by different subjects. In this sense, material-spatial *sign residues* [Rossi-Landi, 1992] of a past process can be involved in future processes and (re)semiotised – as will happen in the case of reconstruction of urban space that is a result of symbolic processes, everyday practices as well as physical processes.

Keeping in mind the methodological premises, it is possible to look for more specific categories available for semiotic analysis of spatial environments.

### **Categories for a Lotmanian semiotics of space**

Lotman provides useful distinctions and categories in several works, but a more comprehensive and systematic outline of categories related to the analysis of the semiotic space can be found in a chapter on the composition of an artistic text and semiotic space in the text [1977]. The chapter is not focused on spatial texts, but on the text as a space and space in text or, in other words, the space of the world generated by the text. However, Lotman does not discuss exclusively artistic texts, but broaches more broadly texts in cultural languages. Natural language is the primary modelling system that literature as a secondary modelling system employs to generate artistic texts. Spatial organisation is another primary modelling system used for artistic as well as practical

everyday texts (see [Lotman, 2012]). This suggests that Lotman's analytical approach is directly applicable not only in the analysis of places in (verbal-language-based) culture or as metaphoric applications of the concept of *semiosphere*, but also in the semiotics of material space. This applicability, however, presumes a delimitation of the respective language and text – in other words, it will be necessary to define levels of modelling and respective cultural subject.

Based on cultural self-descriptions that engage spatial concepts and on spatial distinctions and categories in artistic texts, some basic analytical categories of semiotics of space can be proposed. These are elements of significant worlds of the culture. Spatial environment itself as material for a semiotics of space can occur either as a text in which the observed category exists, or as being represented in a text – that is, a text in another kind of sign system marks spatial-semiotic elements as categories in its semiotic space. The premise is that spatial organisation is a modelling tool [Лотман, 1986]. Therefore, it is possible to identify relations between spatial organisation (as text or in text) and cultural world image in general, or in particular cultural models as apparent in particular artistic or everyday texts. These relations point out the semiotic functioning of spatial a spatial text, but do not provide specific tools for analysis. The required elementary «tools» focus on the demarcation of the whole (or the external boundary) and the internal organisation that can include binary relations, hierarchies, internal boundaries and viewpoints or orientations pointing at interpretation options of the text.

### **Frame or external boundary**

Starting from the most general level of analysis, the first step concerns delimiting the whole as a meaningful unit, from language to text, by establishing the external boundary or a frame. The organisation of elements and their relations into the meaningful text depends on where the demarcation line is drawn and on the modelling principle that claims: «being spatially limited, a work of art is a model of an infinite universe» [Lotman, 1977, p. 209–210]. By establishing the spatial text, the frame is related to the mythologising aspect of the text – it creates a closed semiotic universe [Lotman, 1977, p. 211]. The boundary is the distinction between the external and the internal in which the focus is initially on the binary relation itself. At the level of the practical func-

tioning of the text the boundary also appears as a marked element – the frame, the beginning and the end, the enclosure. In parallel with it being the frame of an artistic text, Lotman claims the boundary to be the elementary distinction for cultural (self-)models [1975] as well as the semiosphere [2005] – these involve further levels of abstraction and semiotisation of space and spatial conceptualisations and remain beyond the scope of the present discussion.

### **Organisation of internal space**

In considering the spatial object as a text, the next step involves identifying its internal structure. According to Lotman, «the structure of the space of a text becomes a model of the structure of the space of the universe, and the internal syntagmatics of the elements within a text becomes the language of spatial modelling» [Lotman, 1977, p. 217]. With an abstract conception of space focusing on relations between a given set of objects, spatial modelling can be applied also to non-spatial concepts [Lotman, 1977, p. 217–218]. There are two aspects to be cautious about here. First, Lotman focuses on artistic texts in which limited artistic space in its finitude reflects the indefinite outside world; in contrast, a non-artistic text does not necessarily model the world in a similarly holistic way, it is less iconic and the formation of a specific spatial language can therefore be problematic. However, the spatial language of the text and of the world image are also present in these texts, according to Lotman: «Even on the level of supra-textual, purely ideational modelling, the language of spatial relations turns out to be one of the basic means for comprehending reality [...] The most general social, religious, political, and ethical models of the world, with whose help man comprehends the world around him at various stages in his spiritual development, are invariably invested with spatial characteristics [...]» [Lotman, 1977, p. 218].

The other aspect concerns the similarity of the textual space and the material space (or even perceived space) in the case of a material-spatial text. Elements and relations of the physical and perceived space can serve as material for the formation of the semiotic space of a spatial text – perceived space can be a primary modelling system regarding textualisation as the secondary modelling. The spatial text is established by framing and by selecting, organising and coding the material of ex-

pression through several layers of textualisation. Therefore, the built environment can be studied as a spatial text for which the formation of the text defines the semiotic whole and its spatial language; the articulation in material-spatial objects and relations is a question at the next level.

To make a comparison, an approach based on discourse analysis would ask about possible elements and relations in a particular material, recognising some as engaged in practices and some as present in the material as traces of former semiosis or potential semiotic resources for further semiosis [van Leeuwen, 2005; Scollon, Scollon, 2003]. An approach based on Lotman's concepts concerning the text and modelling outlines the reality of a particular text and leaves aside environmental objects and relations that are not directly involved into the textual whole as insignificant or even nonexistent from the perspective of the particular text. Actualisation of these elements and their new meanings is already a process of cultural dynamics, translation and dialogue outside the immanent analysis of the text.

While for a literary text the structure of a text's *topos* arises from the description of the things, objects and personae located in their environment [Lotman, 1977, p. 231], the semiotic space of a material-spatial text can merge the two levels and generate an apparently objective semiotic reality. Therefore it is crucial to consider the perspective of the text as the condition of this reality.

In practical analysis, this spatial language consists of various elements and relations – buildings, urban furniture, trees, birds, people, posters, pavement, spatial relations such as distance and height, but also non-spatial relations actualised in space such as colour, lighting, temporal organisation and rhythms etc. The relevance and interpretation of these depend on the framing of the spatial text and its spatial language, respectively. The spatial continuum of the text engages these elements and their relations. They become significant in relation to the structure as a whole (oppositions, hierarchies, repetitions) and in relation to the domain of reference of the spatial text, its semantic universe. The exact reference depends on the point of view which can vary in spatial texts due to the multitude of subjects and cultural systems engaged with it.

While **spatial elements** can provide an easily accessed starting point for description, their selection and limitation (marked units) poses challenges that can be solved through the perspective of the whole text.

**Structural categories** to be looked for are binary oppositions that make up the structure. If the opposition takes the form of ‘closed vs open’, the structure involves sub-spaces and the internal «**boundary** becomes the most important topological feature of the space» [Lotman, 1977, p. 229]. It links the interpretation of a spatial text to spatial behaviour and to cultural models. Dividing the internal space into sub-spaces, an internal boundary turns movement in space into a qualitatively significant, transformational act in space, an event. And as cultural models are expressed in various empirical texts, including material-spatial texts, and boundary is the basic structuring principle [Lotman, 2012], those boundaries help to relate spatial texts to the structure of cultural models.

A part of the internal organisation of the semiotic space is the opposition between the **centre and periphery**. According to Lotman, semiosphere is characterised by its internal heterogeneity and the distinction between the centre and periphery is a direct realisation of this [Lotman, 1990, p. 127]. A *text*, however, is not a *semiosphere*. Is it then appropriate to look for centre–periphery relations in a text? In the case of spatial text – demarcated as a whole, internally organised, involving various languages in dynamic hierarchies, subtexts and semiotic processes of sociocultural life – it might be. On one hand, the centre–periphery distinction describes the organisation of the semiotic space, hence it is a structural distinction pertinent to any text. On the other hand, it rather describes the dynamics of semiotic processes of self-descriptions and the point of view of a particular system. In an analysis of an empirical example there can be multiple points of view and respective organising models. As regards conceptualisations of the city in culture, Lotman distinguishes cultural models based on either concentric or eccentric orientation [Лотман, 1984]. This might help to clarify the relationship of centre and periphery to the semiotic space. In the case of simple texts based on concentric models the relationship appears simple: the centre is marked as spatially central, it stands out as clear and dominant in descriptions, while the periphery appears to overlap with the boundary. In case of an eccentric model, the structure is different and less univocally organised; its models and functioning process can be contradictory, and it becomes clear that the boundary does not overlap with the periphery, but is (in case of both cultural models) defined from the centre. In case of this model the culture is

oriented toward change and brings in (antithetic) contact structures from the past and predicted future. This structure lies behind Lotman's note about St. Petersburg as a cultural centre positioned at the boundary – Peter the Great's transfer of the capital to St. Petersburg was a transfer of the centre to the geographical frontier and transferring the latter to the ideological centre of the state [Lotman, 1990, p. 141]. A similar bias toward a more dynamic semiosis and temporalisation of the relations between the centre and periphery can be found in the following examples that concern the central squares of Estonian small towns.

Closely related to the centre is the question of the **point of view**. A spatial text can involve viewpoints actualising the position of the author and suggesting preferred (or even normatively prescribed) locations for views and thereby varying the appearance of the structure. A spatial text involves a unifying viewpoint or multiple viewpoints; while these can be identified in the structure of the text, they are also starting points for relating the subjective experience of the user as a «reader» to the spatial text itself. The point of view emerges as the orientation of the text [Lotman, 1977, p. 278], the orientation of a particular text can be in further correlation with or deviate from the orientation of the more general cultural text as the cultural world view. As Lotman claims, next to more universal world images and conceptual models inherent in a particular type of culture, there are also more local models characterising a text or a group of texts [Lotman, 1977, p. 218]. In that vein, inquiries can be made about the relationship of a spatial text with a general cultural model, as well as the relationship of a spatial text with a local model (expressed, for example, in processes of community-making) and the relation of this local model to the general world image. In empirical research the focus «what?» could respectively be on the model and its inherent point of view expressed in a city square, its relation to the local text of the city and the world image prevailing in the local community, and further relations to the more general cultural context of the respective society. As a practical tool, identifying the point of view can help to determine the orientation of the text and therefore act as a key to identifying further significant elements and structures of the text.

These are the main elements to be paid attention to in an analysis of a text in the language of the design of material space. Based on these, also more complex and dynamic elements can be found. The case

of a programme for designing the central squares of Estonian small towns can serve as an example here.

### **An example of new central squares in the diminishing small towns in Estonia**

From 2014 to 2021, 30 central squares of Estonian small towns have been reconstructed or built from scratch. Most of them are conceptually, financially and by public communication related to the programme ‘Good Public Space’, launched on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic of Estonia<sup>1</sup>. Some, however, have been realised separately by the local communities (e.g. in Paldiski). Besides the increasing attention to the quality of public space, communities and participative governance, the context for the programme involves the recognition that a process of diminishing of the population can be detected in most regions of Estonia [Sooväli-Sepping, 2020]. The general aim has thus been to revitalise small towns through attractive central urban spaces.

As any other example of built environment, these cases are characterised by their physical space, by being expressed by designers, received by users, represented in media, by their relations to identity, social practices and culture of the local community, contemporary «culture of urban space» and wider sociocultural processes.

### **Spatial text**

In what sense is an urban square a material spatial text? It is a text expressed in a spatial sign system, whose authors can be the architect in the cultural context, the municipality as a collective subject, the local community, or even culture in a more general sense (e.g. Estonian culture or the culture of spatial design in the region in 2021). So, it is a particular text and also a variant of a cultural text. The context of the programme adds to the textual character of the squares – there is a collection of squares as texts that boast a spatial language that they share to a degree as a spatial genre supported by their realisation during a

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<sup>1</sup> Web site of the programme: [http://www.arhliit.ee/english/ev100\\_greatpublicspace/](http://www.arhliit.ee/english/ev100_greatpublicspace/)

relatively short time period and with a common ideological basis and shared media coverage. Due to their material form, these architectural texts persist in time but their textual distinctiveness might dissolve in the passage of time and as a result of the surrounding developments – thanks to the variations in the tempo of changes in the material environment and the flow of practical uses reinterpreting and modifying the space. The spatial texts of the present can thus slowly become dissolved in the general spatial language of the urban environment and the square need not form a significant text any more in ten years' time.

The textuality of the square is partly generated also by other (meta)texts, such as the architectural project, representations in the media (e.g. frequent use of night views of the squares), but also shared user experiences and metatexts regarding the programme of Good Public Space displayed at international exhibitions and at the squares themselves.

Beyond the immanent analysis of the spatial text, squares are intriguing also in the sociocultural context. As spatial texts they serve as ideological models for changing the world – for re-defining and re-locating the urban centre, for place making, for changing the course of the diminishing towns through better public space. How a spatial text works in these sociocultural processes constitutes an intriguing question concerning the cultural dynamics and its sociosemiotic process in the course of which material spatial qualities of the place become less relevant. The present discussion, however, aims to remain at the level of immanent analysis and focus on the composition of and the relations between the material space and the semiotic space of the text.

### **External boundary framing the central square**

The external boundary, the frame, is an element making the semiotic space of a text possible; it allows focusing on a unified meaningful object, symbolic space, and relations with cultural world models. The external boundary of town squares is often marked by spatial disjunctions, e.g. the surrounding houses or trees cutting the visual continuity. At the same time, these houses as objects involved in the text bring meanings of everyday living or symbolic institutions to the spatial texts. Or else the frame can be provided by a distinctive feature – the distinctiveness of the recent design and materials in the habitual urban

space. The demarcation of the spatial text also depends on the viewpoint – as given in representations, in the architect's imagination of the whole, as marked in the place itself or in relation to various uses of the space. In that vein the composition of the spatial text can tend towards being either more closed or more open, while unifying elements can go beyond the marked frame. For example, the distinctive pavement used in Kuressaare (stone blocks in a unified style in contrast to the variability of materials, forms and patterns used previously and around the place) generates spatial texts in several dimensions – it links nearby streets to the otherwise compact square, while Lossi Street, that was reconstructed as a part of the process, links the square to the historic castle in a distance (see figure 1). Squares are mostly bounded in the horizontal dimension, houses and other objects can provide an open vertical dimension for the space. In contrast, lights and ceiling-like constructions can be used to demarcate the height of the place and to make it a closed space as to both dimensions, at least when it is dark outside.



Fig. 1. Central square in Kuressaare with the historical town hall on the very left and a distinguished area with *the stone symbolising the centre of the city*.

## Objects filling the semiotic space of a spatial text



Fig. 2. Central square in Võru with playful design of oversized urban furniture.

Objects in the squares tend to be the first things to be noticed. Objects marked in space articulate different cultural languages and become significant either by cues regarding their possible uses or by symbolic reference as is the case with monuments (mostly inherited from the location, not erected specifically for the square). The elements used vary, but most common elements to be employed are figurative lamp-posts, seats, trash bins, vegetation, playground elements, flagpoles, and water in the form of a fountain, a stream or a lake. These elements fill in the semiotic space with particular semantics, creating worlds of social interactions where there are seats, worlds of children's play or of official ceremonies. Sometimes an artistic world is created by metaphoric design, for example, a giant toy box is suggested by seats, flower-beds and lampposts playing with the form of a ring in the otherwise empty square of Võru (the name meaning *ring* in Estonian, see figure 2). Most frequently, also houses can become elements of such a world but mostly in relation to their functional meanings and histories. For example, the house of culture is situated in the centre of the square in Elva as contrasted to the marginal location of the municipality building;

a bus station as a regional hub of travels is central for Tõrva; historical churches are present in Valga and Võru. Institutional buildings at the central square reflect the cultural model of the social world and pose the task to choose and locate current institutions and to reassess and recontextualise historical ones. These and other objects are engaged in the spatial text mostly by their semantics; even though spatial relations could be significant, they appear to be relatively less important in the design and reception of the examples, possibly due to the typically irregular form and heterogeneous style of the squares.

### **Internal unity and distinctions at squares**

The most common but also unnoticed element creating the space of new central squares is the paved surface, it provides the empty space and, besides demarcating the extent of the whole, it also marks internal distinctions. As the extent of the whole often does not cohere with the limits suggested by other means, a dissonance can occur between different elements (e.g. the surface and the houses), actualised viewpoints or orientations (spatial perception on the spot vs. the urban plan as a whole). Marked boundaries can thus turn out to be internal boundaries – the central square is a part of the centre, and entering it is an event in the process of moving around in the centre. There are also internal (antithetic) distinctions and subparts marked down in the squares. Most commonly, there is a designated part for pedestrians and another for cars, each providing specific perspectives in actions and in perception as well as interpretations of the square. An attempt in Kuressaare to break this binary model and design a visibly common area for both pedestrians and cars has failed in locally reversing the semiotic order of traffic based on distinctions, rights and affordances.

A common practice of internal structuring is also the demarcation of an area in front of a municipality building. Different models have been used in this regard: demarcation of an area in front of an historic townhall at the centre of the central square in Kuressaare (which is not dominant in its design, though); a historical, and somewhat marginalised, building from the 1930 s housing some state services, but not municipal power (which is instead located in the outskirts of the town) at the edge of the redesigned square in Võru; a relatively monumental building of the municipality that has its own ceremonial area at the edge of the larger

square in Otepää, Elva and Tõrva; only Valga lacks clear presence of political power at the central square. In contrast with expressions of the concentric cultural model with a clear and stable structure around symbols of the dominant power (typically realised for example at neoclassical town hall squares), these examples engage the dynamics of the centre and periphery in the organisation of the semiotic space.

### **The centre and periphery as temporalisation of space**

‘Centre–periphery’ is a binary structure of the semiotic space. Its manifestation in material space combines the orientations and declarative models expressed in space as a sign system, but also reflects the organisation of the processes of semiosis taking place in, and in relation to, the place. A common tendency in the examples is positioning the symbols of power on the edge of the square (with their own ceremonial sub-square) and presenting the functionally more open public space as being dominant in the spatial text. The twofold internal structure of the text makes the choice of viewpoint crucial – the municipality can be found in the periphery or it can be a different system not located at the citizen-oriented public space. However, the model emphasising social interaction and play in this new square often does not derive from the local community, but is essentially external. The square as a spatial text is a realisation of a cultural model and it reflects the world image organising the social life of the community – but it might also be the model for an imagined future way of life.

The temporal orientation towards an imagined future is exemplified in preference of new designs instead of reminders of historical forms and functions and in relocating the centre to a former green area or «wasteland». The process behind the squares has been a combination of the local political power (which has recently been disconnected from local communities and their spaces due to reforms in administration and the increase of online governance), of architectural language and design by architects (perceived as an external point of view), of a nation-wide programme of improving public space (applying its models of public space and empowerment of communities). Squares reflect this eccentric orientation toward changes in a design language prioritizing the tourist’s gaze and urban branding, that is perceived as external, in locating sym-

bolic city centres in new sites or leaving the institutions to the margins, and in targeting young parents with children as users and agents establishing new communal interactions. These processes, however, belong to a sociocultural dynamic beyond the immanent analysis of the spatial text of an urban square which was the focus of this discussion.



Fig. 3. Central square in Tõrva – a covered area with pavement using local folk patterns in the front, bus station and parking lot in the middle and the municipality building behind the trees in the background.

## Conclusion

It appears that also spatial texts can be analysed on the basis of Lotman's works on the analysis of (verbal) artistic texts. The basis for this lies in the common character of artistic texts and texts of everyday life, and in understanding that there are various modelling systems in culture, including natural language and spatial organisation. Artistic texts, but also other texts, form their own semiotic spaces that can be analysed. Such a semiotic space reflects cultural models, but as built material space is a coded sign system and a place can involve various models and languages in dynamic relations, relations between material space as a text and the semiotic space in that text require careful analysis. New central squares in Estonian small towns provide a seemingly

easy case for immanent analysis of spatial texts, yet pose complex questions about the premises of textuality of space and relations of a spatial text to cultural languages and societal processes, thus pointing at the dependence of categories of immanent analysis on the wider semiotic context of the sociocultural world.

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