

STRELKA MAG

A SELFIE BY THE FACTORY: WHAT DO A MILLION PHOTOGRAPHS FROM MONOTOWNS SAY?

17.02.2017, Cities

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Researchers collected 1.1 million photographs from social networks to figure out how to improve Russian monotowns.



Photo: [Istockphoto.com](https://www.istockphoto.com/)

The Center for Urban Anthropology at KB Strelka analysed the quality of life in 32 monotowns through 1.1 million photographs on social networks,

content-analysis, and GIS. The studied cities included Miass, Kanash, Norilsk, Naberezhnye Chelny and Kaspiysk. The main criteria for the evaluation of the quality of life included: availability (how and what streets people choose to walk on), activity (how people spend their time outside of their homes), and the development of cultural life. The research was conducted as part of KB Strelka's urban development program launched together with The Foundation of the Single Development Institute in the Housing Sphere, and initiated by the Agency for Housing Mortgage Lending..

In order to figure out how selfies by local residents and photographs of sports fields can help architects make cities more comfortable, Strelka Magazine interviewed the Deputy Head of the Center for Urban Anthropology at KB Strelka, Daria Radchenko, Senior Analyst at KB Strelka, Andrey Perminov, and the head of the Spin Unit lab, Damiano Cerrone, who participated in the research process as well.



The largest amount of photographs per citizen were registered in Volodarsk, Navoloki, Kameshkovo, the urban-type locality Nadvoitsy, and Gorokhovets. The number in these towns is at least twice as big as in others. Based on the ratio of residents in each of 32 monotowns, it is most probable that this

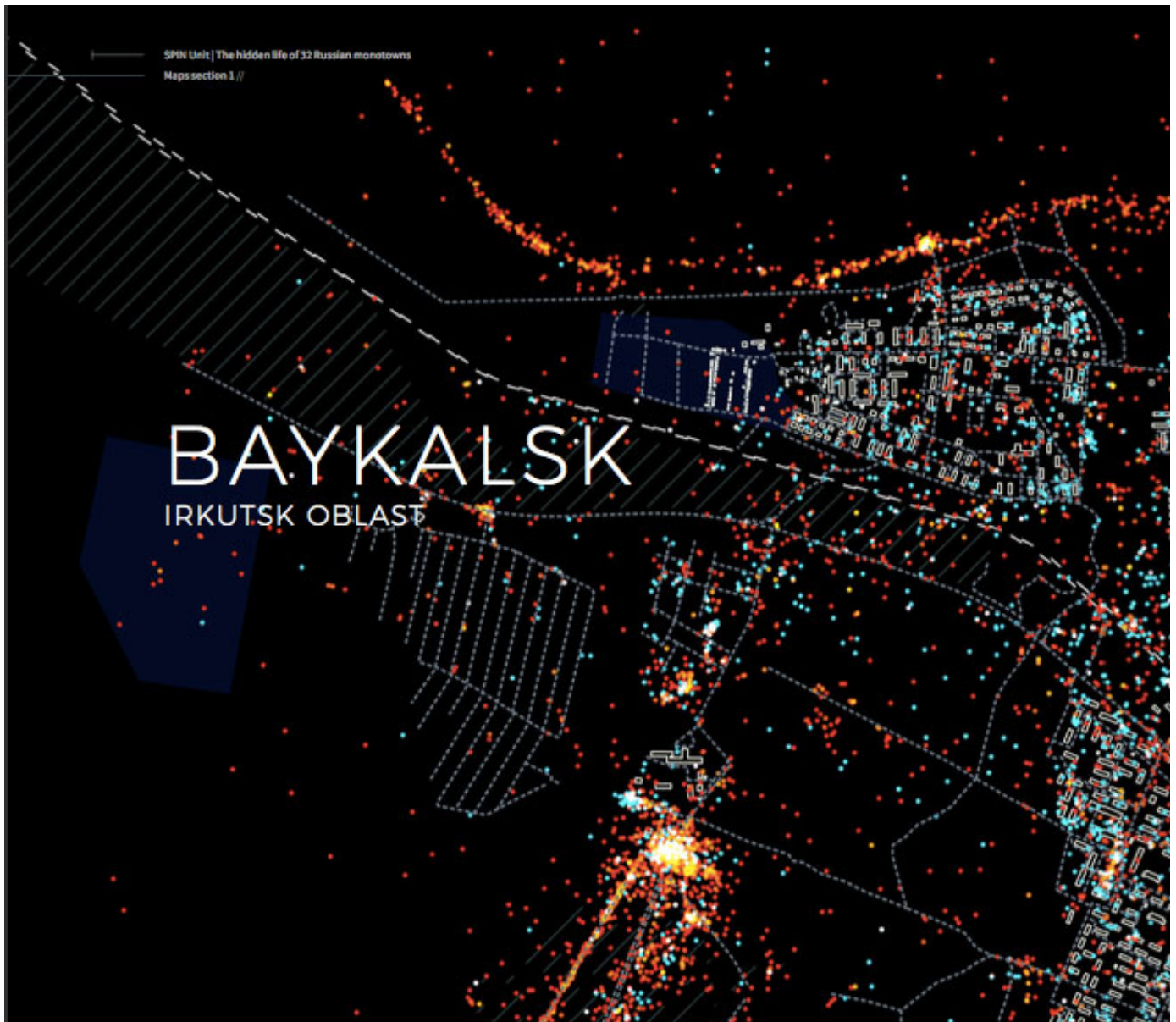
activity is largely caused by the surrounding nature, architectural heritage, and tourist activity. For example, Nadvoitsy village is located near a picturesque lake, Voitskoye; Gorokhovets, Vladimir Oblast, is a bright example of eighteenth-century Russian architecture: the town has the Nikolsky Monastery, Shorin's estate, and other remarkable sites.

SELFIES AGAINST SHOPPING

According to the results of the study, the residents of monotowns pay special attention to family life. Spin Unit researchers emphasise the abundance of photos taken during family celebrations and events: birthdays, weddings, and graduations. In contrast, there is a shortage of other forms of activities – the locals rarely visit restaurants and cafes or go shopping. It is fair to say that the lack of cultural events, such as concerts, exhibitions, or plays, forces the residents of monotowns to organise their leisure among family and friends. Despite the fact that these conclusions are not directly related to urban planning, they may encourage the search for new ideas and the creation of new projects.

Curiously enough, the largest variety of cultural and sports practices and, what is no less important, their equal distribution throughout the town, was registered in Kumertau. This means that there is no clear division into “cultural” and “non-cultural” areas in the city: there's always something to do everywhere. The monotown of Svetlogorye, Primorsky Krai, turned out to be the opposite of Kumertau: it had the smallest number of pictures of cultural events and sports activities.

CITY CENTER VS. SUBURBAN AREA



1 / 3 The materials from the report are presented by KB Strelka and SPIN UNIT lab

Based on the data received, the residents of monotowns prefer either the urbanised centre of the city or remote, often marginalised micro-districts. The younger generation rarely go to natural areas or to the country, but prefer to stay in city limits. The activity tracked there is mostly concentrated in the closest suburban areas. However, there are exceptions. For example, in Baykalsk, the highest concentration of photographs on social networks is registered in the town centre and in the ski resort in the suburbs. The amount of photos taken there is so big that it raises the town's "active leisure" ranking. It can easily be called the most athletic of the 32 monotowns. In contrast, the citizens of Kiselyovsk, Kemerovo oblast, prefer spending time indoors.

URBAN SYMBOLS VS. FACTORIES

Factories and plants, traditionally considered the core of monotowns, are almost never captured in photographs on social networks. On the one hand, this may indicate that the establishments are closed, abandoned, or just don't attract social network users, as factory workers don't always want to take pictures at work. On the other hand, if there are some photos of a factory, it tends to be a city landmark left by predecessors from the pre-revolutionary and Soviet past. However, the development potential of these spaces is much bigger than their solely symbolic meaning. Renovation may lead to a renewal of their status and can transform these spaces into cultural and social centres.



1 / 3 The materials from the report are presented by KB Strelka and SPIN UNIT lab

The researchers studied residents' attitudes towards the spaces surrounding them. Analysis (often manual) of the photographs, and the places, people, and events captured by them, allowed the researchers to see what emotions are triggered by certain places in the city, and to find out their location. It was determined how pleasant each city is for its residents. Baykalsk was the leader in the "quality of space" category: people often take photos of the picturesque views and city spaces there. The town of Belebey, in the Republic of Bashkortostan, comes last on the list. as people there don't feel the need to take pictures of various objects, like tourist attractions, for example.



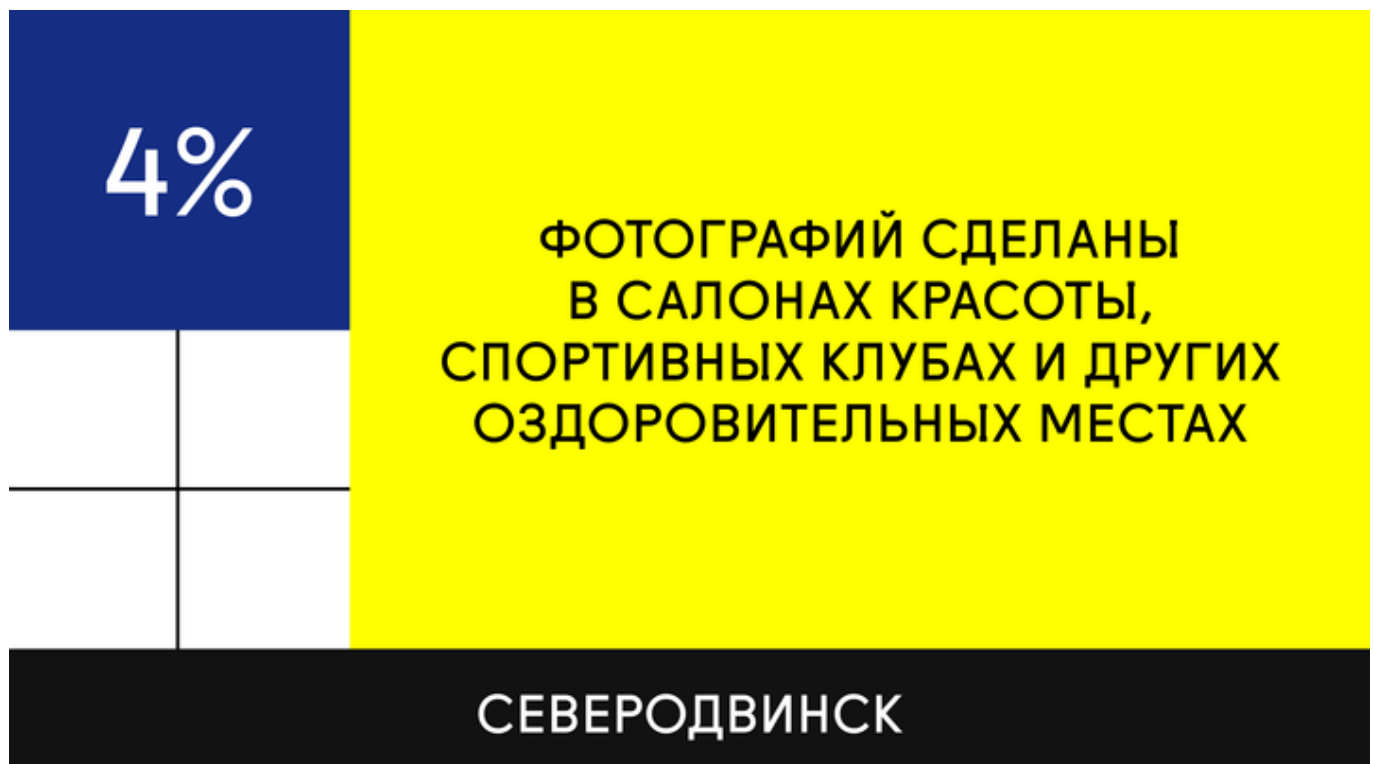
HOW TO ESCAPE ADULT SUPERVISION

Where do people relax? Mostly, the choice depends not on the place, but the time: young people usually meet in the evening. Public spaces are filled with families and the elderly during the daytime, but they are replaced by young

people in the evening. City holidays mostly attract family audiences; the younger residents are in the minority there. There are a shortage of leisure centres for young people in a lot of cities. Their social activity takes place either at home, in the yards near their homes or universities/schools, or in the areas that are inaccessible to adult supervision, from roofs to poorly maintained green zones. There they can avoid their parents' oversight. One of the obvious solutions, which has been implemented in many cities, is to provide sports facilities that are popular among young people.

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHS AS INDICATORS OF AN AREA'S HEALTH

The research results showed a clear division between locals and visitors. As expected, tourists focus more on capturing the city features. Locals take photographs of themselves and their acquaintances, not the city itself. It can be concluded that they don't consider the surrounding spaces interesting or worthy of posting.



4% of the photographs were taken in beauty salons, sports clubs, and other wellness / Severodvinsk

/ The materials from the report are presented by KB Strelka and SPIN UNIT lab

The amount of portrait photos taken in an area is another important indicator of an area's health. Generally, a higher share of pictures taken with a certain object in the background indicates users' higher interest in that object. That's how the visitors connect with the most symbolically significant sites in the city. Meanwhile, in Moscow, there's almost no distinction in the behaviour of locals and visitors in this criteria : both groups take photos in the same places.

WHAT THE "VIEWS TO REMEMBER" CAN SAY ABOUT CITIZENS

On the other hand, the amount of portrait photographs increases dramatically in "monotonous" territories: among standard residential developments, in poorly maintained parks, and other similar places. When nothing catches the eye, people take photos of their pastimes and each other. The areas themselves are considered "uninteresting", "common", having no aesthetic value, and provoking no desire to take a photograph "to remember".



1 / 2 22% of citizens consider the city unsafe / Norilsk /The materials from the report are presented by KB Strelka and SPIN UNIT lab

This situation turns out to be typical for monotowns: photographs of people predominate over urban landscapes by a large margin. Even the historical centre is not perceived as an attractive place: it's just an area for leisure. Tourists' interest in the city itself is slightly higher: they gladly photograph "postcard views" to remember (about 93% of the locals' pictures have an image of a person in them, in opposition to the visitors' 84%).

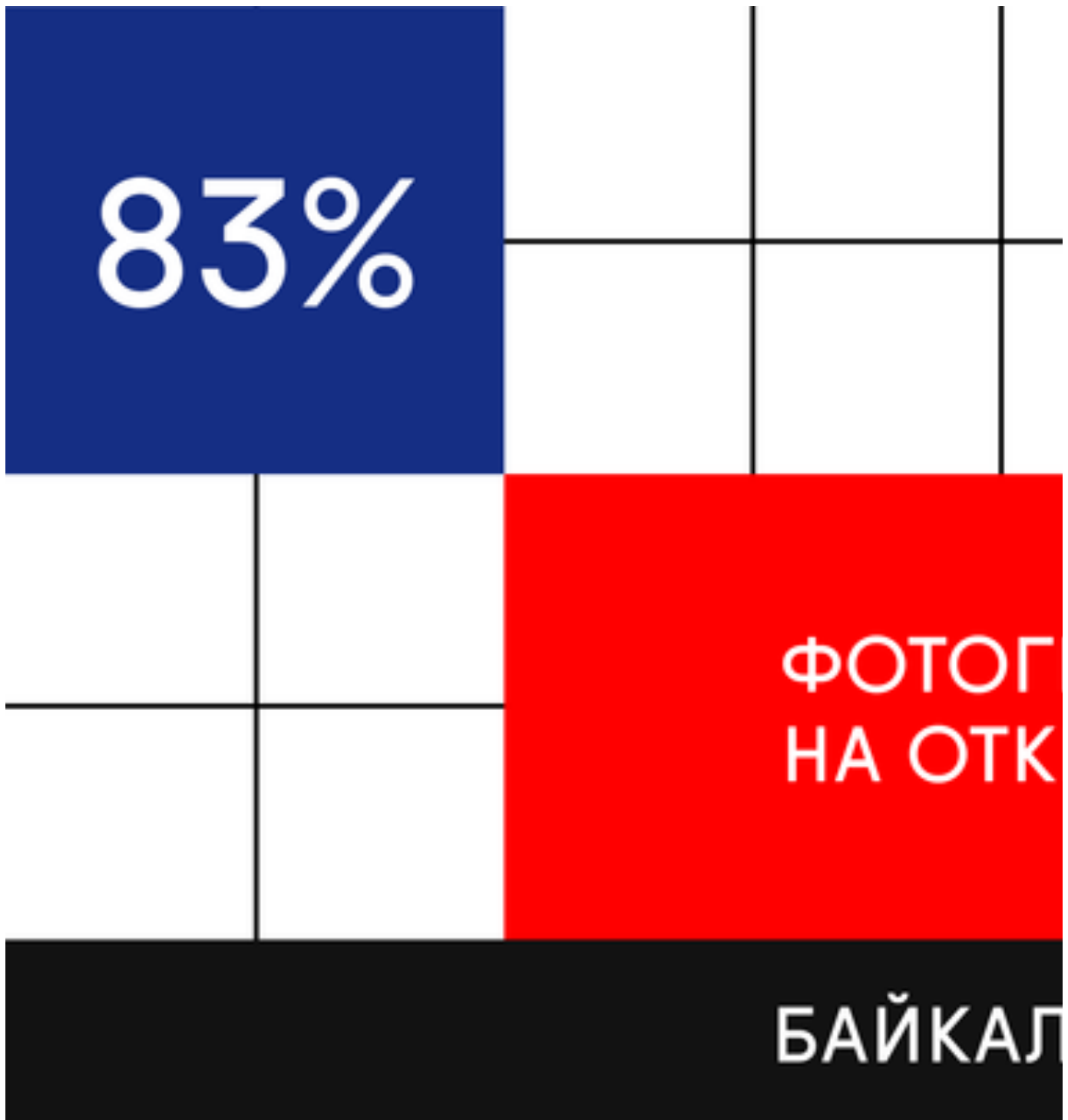
It is interesting that the difference in the locals' and the visitors' rates is unique in each city. For instance, in Tutayev the difference is 23%: tourists are definitely interested in old churches, but the residents are not attracted to them. Meanwhile, the difference is only 9% in Gorokhovets, a town that is filled with historical landmarks: residents don't pay attention to architectural landmarks because they are used to them, and tourists are mostly attracted to the "monotonous" ski resort, where they take photos of each other, not the historical landscape.

WHAT CITIZENS SAY ABOUT MONOTOWNS

An additional content analysis of messages on social networks during a 12-month period was conducted. Its goal was to analyse different aspects of living in a monotown: economic opportunities and the residents' social security, transport situation, ecology, safety and, finally, the cities' uniqueness, based on the amount of "sights" in them.

A large number of negative remarks concerning income opportunities, and problems regarding forced departures from the city, the provision of health care services, visual discomfort (associated with the condition of buildings, road surfaces, garbage etc.), and ecology were registered in most of the cities.

However, an extremely low interest in local identity was the most common observation for almost all the settlements. Residents rarely bring up issues concerning the preservation and development of the city's uniqueness, the maintenance of its landmarks, traditions, etc.



1 / 2 83% of the photographs were taken outdoors / Baykalsk / The materials from the report are presented by KB Strelka and SPIN UNIT lab

Also, people in almost all the monotowns complain that the condition of their city is worsening, the infrastructure is collapsing, and population outflow is taking place. Many admit with sorrow that due to the current state of roads,

transport, medical and educational services and leisure opportunities, their city now should be considered an “urban-type settlement”. Thus, the potential loss of the high status of the city, even though it’s solely formal, has become a painful point. So, on the one hand, the status and condition of the city are important for citizens, but on the other hand, they often don’t take the city as something unique and don’t see its development opportunities.



“The received data allows us to analyse monotowns and their problems at different scales. On one hand, you can access it in aggregate to monitor the practices of residents’ interactions with space: for example, based on their movements, and so search for popular places. On the other hand, you can