

Dynamic Cityscapes: Contesting the Soviet City

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Abstract

Even in the Soviet period, Russian cities were negotiated entities, emerging from the complex intersection of institutional, social, and political interests. As seen in Nizhnii Novgorod in the 1930s, despite the Stalinist government's overarching economic and political power, no truly centralized program for the city's growth emerged. The conflict-ridden interplay of planners, municipal leaders, industrial interests, Politburo demands, and common residents determined the city's actual, as opposed to planned, development. In effect, as Soviet-era planners complained, the city built itself.

The Limits of Planning

Visitors to Nizhnii Novgorod in 2010 will discover a city transformed by new construction projects, which have gradually replaced the low-rise wooden buildings of the late Imperial and early Soviet period with up-to-date residential and commercial complexes. Popular reactions to this change have been mixed, ranging from an excited embrace of such symbols of prosperity to regret for the homogenizing, destructive power of post-Soviet capital. The more architecturally attractive and creative buildings naturally inspire more appreciation than those of weak design or execution, but all—to citizens' chagrin or delight—push the landscape higher. Such upward mobility of infrastructure, coupled with the economic mobility of citizens, has garnered all of the dirt, noise, congestion, and air pollution typical of busy metropolitan life. For better and for worse, as Marx might have predicted, all that was once solid (and stubbornly so, in Soviet opinion) now melts into air.

Of course, even in the Soviet period, the urban landscape—and the forces within it—proved to be quite dynamic, in ways that Soviet leaders often rued. At the height of the Stalinist 1930s, after Nizhnii Novgorod had been christened “Gorky” in honor of the eponymous Nizhnii-born Soviet proletarian writer, the city's growth reflected not the singular force of Stalin's will, but rather the tense and confused operations of state power, as mediated by various social, economic, and political groups. Industrial managers, common citizens, competing planning bodies, as well as municipal leaders thwarted city planners' attempts to design and build the city according to a scientific plan. Even when these planners opted for an overtly monumental Stalinist urban design, they failed. For then, as now, the cityscape was not simply an extension of central power, but a medium of power—something negotiated, contested, made and unmade. Behind the sameness of the Soviet Union's seemingly drab cityscapes lay vital battles for power and resources, as imbedded in urban form.

Some Soviet planners implicitly acknowledged this reality, but most initially operated as if they could sim-

ply monopolize development, imposing their rational-scientific technologies on an unruly urban landscape. In seeking to achieve this coherence, they conceptualized all competing claims to resources as manifestations of urban functions, to be rationally accommodated and controlled through scientific planning. After all, to planners the city was an organism defined by the circulation of goods and people, the elimination of waste, the consumption of energy, the inhalation of fresh air, and rapid growth. Roads provided the skeleton of the whole, while architecture offered a sense of style, a fashionable costume to clothe the urban body with identity and grace. According to this vision of the city, all conflict could be resolved through function-harmonizing urban plans.

These professional illusions collapsed almost immediately, thanks to the Soviet Union's limited human and material infrastructure. Its lack of educated foremen, its shortage of funding for housing and municipal construction, its lack of such effective “technologies of rule” as updated maps, as well as the Soviet penchant for popular spontaneity challenged the technocratic systems that planners had hoped to impose. Given so many shortages, neither Soviet law nor the “command economy” could enforce planning standards or ensure that funds and goods allocated for planners' purposes reached their destination. In such a setting, planners found themselves compelled to step out of their ivory towers and into the socio-political fray, where they might negotiate support for their initiatives. The people of the city, as they discovered, were not merely functions, but willful individuals.

Competing Interests

For all the planners' blindness, some of their troubles could be attributed to Moscow itself—not simply to its economic system (which often takes all the blame), but to the state's insistence that all initiatives, including all plans, win Moscow's approval. Had Moscow been the only contender on the local political scene, this might not have posed a problem. But, planners also answered to municipal and provincial leaders, whose priority was

to alleviate the city's housing and service crisis. Industrial bodies, threatened by planners' attempts to regulate emissions, remove them from the city center, or claim their reserve lands, also merited attention, particularly insofar as they controlled the resources upon which municipal construction depended. Indeed, funding and supplies for urban development tended to be channeled through industrial bodies. Planners therefore had to accommodate everyone.

In theory, given Moscow's total authority over all dimensions of urban development, planners' need to please several varied institutions would have posed little challenge. However, within the overall program of building socialism, individual institutions advanced particular agendas. Industry sought maximal space and resources, while local government sought to build the greatest amount of infrastructure and housing in the least amount of time, using minimal resources. Although both theoretically answered to the Politburo, in practice these institutions answered almost exclusively to their distinct, function-defined overseers in Moscow, such as the Commissariat of Heavy Industry or the Commissariat for the Municipal Economy. The self-interest of such commissariats generally overrode the sort of compromise upon which planners' success depended.

Ideals v. Functionality

The Scientific Technical Council of the Russian Commissariat for the Municipal Economy, which was responsible for approving all city plans, also tended to prioritize purely institutional interests. Displaying little concern for the social and budgetary problems facing most municipal governments, the Scientific Technical Council limited its scope of vision to the analysis of planning proposals' theoretical and scientific validity. Tending to abstraction, this agency looked askance at the various compromises that planners inserted into their designs, as they sought to cut costs and facilitate short-term expansion. As a result, the agency initially rejected each of the city plans that it received, including that submitted for Nizhnii Novgorod.

A similar problem, which also appeared in the 1930s, derived from Moscow's other abstraction—not pure science, but pure aesthetics. Although Soviet authorities instituted many sensible and enduring approaches to urban design in the mid-1930s, the imposition of Socialist Realist aesthetics interfered with functional, pragmatic plans for urban growth. Monumental to the extreme, the Socialist Realist vision of the cityscape made no compromise with local economic and social limitations. Such planning symbolized the vast potential of socialism, projecting the image of an alternative,

not-yet-realizable world. Of course, because it featured a vision whose implementation depended on yet-undiscovered technologies, resources, and engineering feats, Socialist Realist design did little to solve the problems facing industrial and municipal leaders. The disjuncture between on-the-ground realities and the abstract utopias envisioned in Moscow could hardly have been more stark.

Working Out Central Plans in Nizhnii

Mandated with addressing the real needs of real cities, planners in Nizhnii Novgorod did not neglect their socialist commitment to equal services and housing for workers in all industries and all regions. Yes, they officially conformed to Moscow's newly imposed aesthetic, if only to win state approval for their work. At times, they comforted themselves with the assurance that all plans envision a place-yet-to-be and are, in that sense, utopian. At the same time, however, they did not forget the city's economic limitations. In fact, when drafting the annual construction plans purportedly designed to achieve their more monumental, long-term vision for the city, planners effectively sustained the very patterns of growth and construction that predated the new plan and had been advanced by planning experts well before the advent of Socialist Realism.

Such inability to garner agreement between the locality and the center was exacerbated by the Soviet Union's lack of a stable and coherent urban vision. In the First Five-Year Plan, authorities advocated the construction of housing combines, which offered fully collectivized living, as made possible (at least in theory) by the industrialization of domestic chores. These combines released women from such domestic duties as cleaning, food-preparation, and child-rearing by assigning these tasks to specialized facilities. Unfortunately, economic and administrative failures, coupled with popular preference for familial life, soon shattered this vision, spawning so-called "transitional combines" that permitted for some degree of family life. A few years later, when Soviet authorities rehabilitated the family, these, too, fell by the wayside.

This wavering urban vision extended to the broader cityscape. In the late 1920s, authorities favored garden cities over large metropolises, which were deemed corrupt and unhealthy. By 1935, however, the highly centralized, mega-city was once again in vogue. Along with this, authorities rehabilitated traditional city quarters, which were delineated by a rectangle of housing-lined roads. The older meridian construction, whereby all homes stood on a north-south axis to permit a maximum of sunlight to enter via East- or West-facing windows, was deemed to be a waste of urban space.

The People Decide

For all the disruptive impact of such elite disputes, these arguably had less impact on development than urban residents, whose battles for power and resources were waged in and through the space of the city. In collusion with industry, for instance, workers circumvented the state's passport and regulatory system, shifting from one job to another without state authorization. In need of housing, these workers frequently squatted on state lands, even building homes on vacant lots (usually with supplies offered by local industry). To complicate matters, when planners or construction trusts tried to evict these workers so that they might tear down a building and make space for new construction, workers often refused to vacate. Because Soviet law required that ousted residents be granted alternative dwellings, which the state could not always provide, officials were loath to remove workers, whether or not they were legal occupants.

Industry, too, proved a powerful contender in the urban arena. Soviet authorities in Moscow channeled construction resources to the localities through industrial commissariats, which forwarded such resources to municipal leaders via their local industrial subordinates. For industrial leaders, however, supplies designated for municipal use were simply too tempting a resource. Industry itself was poorly supplied, and "excess" materials (i.e. goods initially designated for urban development) made valuable bartering tools, in exchange for which local industry might be able to obtain much-needed goods. So, taking advantage of weak Soviet accounting practices, industry generally neglected to transfer supplies meant for municipal development to city leaders. To the contrary, by threatening to withhold funds or supplies, industry attempted to assert control over city planning, thereby reclaiming the valuable lands from which planners and sanitary officials had hoped to ban it. While land was plentiful, developable land—with flood protection, drainage, as well as transportation, sanitary, and energy systems—proved rare, as was waterfront land. Wielding its economic clout, industry fought to retain its control over these scarce resources.

Everyday foremen and builders also exercised tremendous power. In theory, all their work should have conformed to preapproved, expert-produced architectural and engineering designs. But, the construction trusts for whom these figures worked generally encouraged building crews to take expert authority somewhat lightly. As all knew, because of the shortage of skilled administrators in the city planning office, plans were long in coming and often defective. A construction trust that awaited an officially approved design might stand idle throughout the summer, when construction should have been progressing rapidly. Besides, even when timely

and accurate, architectural designs often called for the use of deficit, excessively costly, or unavailable construction materials. With tight deadlines and limited budgets, Soviet construction trusts therefore preferred to launch construction prior to obtaining official designs, as well as to exercise the freedom to make alterations to designs as needed, without seeking official permission. Such *ad hoc* changes, made by poorly educated foremen and builders, account for many a defective or strange-appearing Soviet building. Ironically, then, in seeking to beautify the city with elaborate construction—or rather, elaborate designs—experts in the city planning office merely increased the chance that a new building would be defective or clumsy in appearance.

Politicking Constrains Stalin's Power

Clearly, the cityscape was more directly shaped by intra-city competition for resources than by Stalin's dictates or the constraints of ideology. Not that ideology or Stalin were irrelevant. Both set the parameters of what was possible and acceptable, even mandated. Every agency and individual acted in accordance with both. Managers of local factories answered for the successful fulfillment of their production plans, deemed vital to building socialist industry. Similarly, common citizens defended their right to housing, deemed essential to their role in production and reproduction. Planners, too, defended their authority on grounds that the socialist city should be lovely and beautiful. All of these figures operated within ideological bounds. However, as planners discovered, within this framework there was much scope for competition.

Although planners continued to pose as scientific experts whose vision was objective and therefore transcended politics, they fully recognized the degree to which their success depended upon politicking. In this regard, in 1936 planners in Nizhnii Novgorod opted to consult the population about their planning work. Their decision was not entirely voluntary; at the time, because the state wished to appear more open and accountable to society, it ordered state representatives such as planners to "draw closer to the masses." Nonetheless, planners' turn to public relations was not only avant-garde, being launched well before such consultation became widespread practice in the West, but also shrewd. Consultation made their plan appear to derive from the people, the heart and soul of the state. Granted, in this performance, "the people" were an abstraction. Popular feedback had little impact on the plan itself. But, the event did ground planners' authority in their "democratic" stance, indirectly acknowledging not only the theoretical power of the people, but also their real power to sculpt the cityscape. In fact, hoping to capitalize on

their democratic posturing, planners simultaneously tried to mobilize the population for garbage-removal, building repair, tree-planting, and other city beautification initiatives.

The Nizhnii Novgorod cityscape, then, did not emerge in accordance with a scientific, ideological, or centrally-imposed plan. Instead, thanks to incessant battles for power, resources, and influence, the city effectively “built itself,” eluding planners’ control. Both ideology and state oversight moderated this intra-city competition, of course. Nonetheless, even at the height of Stalin’s power, no central apparatus dictated the form

of the city. Even ideology failed to fully define urban form, for the precise meaning of ideology repeatedly morphed, reflecting the state’s ever-changing social, political, and economic concerns. As a result, planners could not behave as objective, all-powerful mediums of state or ideology; to the contrary, they had to negotiate for influence and resources. In fact, it was this highly dynamic struggle between state, planners, industry, and people that fostered stagnant, failed development. In this sense, the dynamism of the post-Soviet cityscape is not entirely new; only its visible bustle and rapid-paced physical change mark a departure from the past.

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ANALYSIS

Chinese Developers and Russian Urban Planning

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Abstract

The Baltic Pearl is a multi-use district under construction southwest of St. Petersburg, Russia. It is projected to occupy over 200 hectares and to include housing, commercial areas, and recreational facilities, such as hotels and water parks. In interviews for the local construction press, officials of the Baltic Pearl firm continue to insist that the financial crisis has not and will not affect the Baltic Pearl’s construction schedule. Today the firm and its partners operate with apparent independence from the administrative bureaucracy, but from 2003 to 2007 the city planning apparatus held it under close scrutiny. The development of the Baltic Pearl presents an intriguing window into urban planning in St. Petersburg over the years 2003–2010.

The Baltic Pearl Project

The Baltic Pearl is located just west of the Southern Victory Park, between Peterhof Highway and the Gulf of Finland. As of autumn 2010, the project continues to move ahead. By summer 2010, two residential complexes along the Peterhof Highway were completed; over 700 units in the lower-priced complex have been sold and keys delivered to new owners.

The project was conceived by Jiang Jiren, Chairman of the Shanghai People’s Political Advisory Committee, who came to St. Petersburg with a Chinese trade delegation in early 2003. The developer, the Baltic Pearl Company, is a subsidiary of a consortium of five large development firms from Shanghai, China, with the Shanghai International Investment Corporation (SIIC) as the lead member. (SIIC had had a small trading firm in Petersburg since the mid-1990s.) Both the Petersburg and Shanghai governments backed the project and Governor Valentina Matviyenko traveled to Shanghai in April 2004 in order

to sign an agreement with SIIC about the development of the Baltic Pearl district. In this way, the project was a large state-sponsored project much like large projects that had developed with state approval in the Soviet period.

In spite of the strong connections to both states and their desires for political rapprochement, the Baltic Pearl was also vigorously framed as an investment project. In St. Petersburg, in her first few annual addresses to the City Legislative Assembly following her election in 2003, Matviyenko repeatedly described the Baltic Pearl as a catalyst for increased overall investment in the city. In China, the designers of the district visualized the project as a profit-generating answer to St. Petersburg’s demand for “new good product” in the housing market, as their website explains. In the first years (2003–2005), the project was heralded as a saving grace for the city’s budget and future investment prospects.

In contrast to high levels of official enthusiasm for the project in 2004, this project has not entrained addi-