

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.

#### *About the author*

Heather D. DeHaan is Assistant Professor of History at the State University of New York at Binghamton.

#### ANALYSIS

## Chinese Developers and Russian Urban Planning

By Megan Dixon, Caldwell, Idaho

### 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-

tional large Chinese projects or, to date, the inclusion of the Chinese architectural design community in further development projects in St. Petersburg. However, examining the Baltic Pearl brings the growing pains of post-Soviet planning into sharper relief.

### Relationship to Local Planning Apparatus

While it was described as an investment project, the Baltic Pearl received close supervision by architect-planners from NIPiGrad, the privatized version of the former city planning apparatus. As related to me by Sergei Nikitin, the lead Russian architect who worked with the Chinese, NIPiGrad served as a mediator between initial Chinese-authored visions of the actual construction and Russian building codes and norms; Russia's vast "construction norms and rules" (*stroitelnye normy i pravila*, or SNIPs) presented many obstacles to the swift implementation of practices that the Chinese development firms used in China on a regular basis.

As part of the evaluation of the project's compliance with local Russian code, each iteration of the overall design had to pass examination by the *Gradostroitelnyi Soviet* (*Gradsoviet*), or Urban Planning Council, of St. Petersburg (a group of officials, architects, planners, and specialists who offer expert advice to the City Governor and the Committee on Planning and Architecture). While the Gradsoviet cannot bind the city administration, a negative assessment of any project by this body generally entails redesign. The Gradsoviet repeatedly returned the design proposals to the Baltic Pearl firm and demanded changes. This dissatisfaction led to attempts by the Chinese firm to bring in Western architects and expertise; the Chinese contributions were seen as too sterile (and often too "soviet"), while Russian firms were perceived as having lost the ability to design such a large site. In 2005, a Chinese subcontracting group from Tongji University managed an International Proposal Collection that gathered design ideas from several prominent Western firms and architects, including HOK and Rem Koolhaas's OMA. In 2006, the continued dissatisfaction of the Gradsoviet led to the temporary employment of the British firm ARUP for a design book produced that fall.

Initial objections to the Baltic Pearl design involved the geometry of the housing layout and the transportation (especially pedestrian) infrastructure. Officials and planners continue to hold the Baltic Pearl to high standards or expect it to meet their highest aspirations for bringing contemporary global architecture to St. Petersburg.

### Urban Planning Background

Urban planning as a discipline experienced a lull in Russia during the 1990s, when it was perceived as a holdover

from the control economy of the Soviet regime. While resources for building were scarce enough that massive new construction was avoided, Russia's major cities still underwent some haphazard building that contradicted previous strict planning principles.

St. Petersburg created the first City Master Plan after the passage of the federal Law on Construction in 2004. Specialists in the Committee on Architecture and Construction (KGA) had been working on a vision for the city's development since the early 2000s; the Leontief Centre was contracted to produce a written vision. This vision document (*Kontseptsiia/Conception*) emphasized that St. Petersburg was an "open European city." It also set out various principles of development, such as maintaining the distinctness of historic "nodes" around greater St. Petersburg (Pavlovsk, Pushkin, Peterhof) and preventing sprawl-like development that would cause these areas to meld into one another. The Conception represented a more control-oriented type of planning that would carefully manage new development to fit in with St. Petersburg's historic appearance. For example, the historic preservation area was initially designated by a line that entirely enclosed much of the central city. By the fall of 2006, this approach had changed to protecting individual buildings with a buffer area of a few meters.

Concurrently with the development of these planning documents, stakeholder interests arose which put pressure on the idealized planning vision of the Conception, particularly greater citizen participation in hearings and public demonstrations, and greater pressure from developers to release land and permit independently-designed structures. A particularly contentious issue that brought these two groups into conflict was infill, or in its much more expressive Russian term '*uplotnitelnaya zastroiikal uplotnilovka*.' Building new commercial structures in previously green courtyards or in parks (such as Olimpiia Park along Moskovskii Prospekt) irked residents, who had become attached to certain spaces that in some cases had long historic standing and in others were lacunae created by a lack of resources for development in Soviet times. Developers desired to find open sites near existing lines of transportation and pedestrian (consumer) traffic. These struggles eventually affected the tidy vision of the Conception.

To implement the goals of the Master Plan in codes and ordinances, city planners and colleagues at NIPiGrad developed the Rules for Land Use and Construction or PZZ (*Pravila Zemlepolzovaniia i Zastroiki*), which sought to define land use throughout the city and also to expand zones for commercial development. The PZZ were slated for public presentation and legislative endorsement by the end of 2006. Angered by the spread of infill projects, citizens brought their frustration to public hearings on the PZZ in each of the 18

city districts in October 2006. Many residents feared that their residential areas would experience the intrusion of commercial structures, overtaxing old infrastructure for electricity and water and increasing competition for space around buildings—frequently between residents and parked cars. By contrast, developers hoped for greater flexibility in the approval process for individual projects (especially for securing exceptions to the codes).

### The Baltic Pearl's Special Features

Through its location far outside the historic city center, the Baltic Pearl avoided many of these conflicts; it is built on a greenfield site, in part on land reclaimed since 1990. In its explicit connection to the city administration, the Baltic Pearl recalls Soviet-era state-sanctioned projects; local construction firms consider that the project received special patronage, including a low “price” for the site (instead of purchase in an open tender) and the option to lease for 49 years once construction is complete.

In other ways the Baltic Pearl seems set to introduce new planning practices to St. Petersburg that will help the city make the transition forward from less efficient central planning. The city still faces the difficulty of improving and updating, or adding new elements to, its aging infrastructure, and must work on requiring developers to devote a certain portion of their sites to city needs. In a gesture that possibly was aimed to set a precedent as well as take advantage of Chinese experience and practices, the Baltic Pearl firm agreed to construct infrastructure in its district, including arterial roads, schools, and infrastructure for sewage, heating, and electricity.

Further, the Baltic Pearl has not drawn the kind of sustained opposition provoked by other high-profile projects. While some anti-Chinese outbursts occurred when the project was publicly announced (early 2005), the most virulent and simplistic of comments on the blog site of a local newspaper covering construction (*Nevastroyka*) peaked in early 2006 and then seemed to taper off entirely. The project has maintained steady progress, avoiding the limelight as well as bad press. Initially the city administration spoke of the project in terms that heralded it as almost the savior of the city's prospects for investment, but this language also disappeared as Russian-generated projects (such as Gazprom's Okhta Center) began to dominate the public discussion and bear the city administration's hopes for urban revitalization. The Baltic Pearl in effect does not prompt the same resistance or controversy that many other centrally-located pres-

tige development projects have aroused (Okhta Center, a replacement for the demolished Kirov Stadium, the new stage for the Mariinsky Theater, the renovation of New Holland), which seems to indicate that timely and reliable development is possible in the city and will produce tacit acceptance even when completed by foreign developers and investors. In fact in July 2010, the *Real Estate Bulletin* published an article entitled “Petersburgers trust the Baltic Pearl.”

The Baltic Pearl broke ground at a moment (June 2005) when certain ideals of the Soviet-era planning regime were regaining a vigor lost in the cash-strapped 1990s. In 2006, interviews with former Chief Architect Oleg Kharchenko and NIPiGrad architect Sergei Nikitin indicated that the Baltic Pearl focused the planning desires of many officials and Soviet-trained specialists in St. Petersburg; they saw this project as a chance for large-scale planning to work, free from the obstruction of miserly Soviet-era bureaucrats, buttressed by the considerable financial resources of the Baltic Pearl firm with its sponsorship by the Chinese central government.

These discourses of ideal planning may be deployed in order to control and/or slow unwanted (or politically uncooperative) development, as well as to compel the production of a more livable city. In the case of the Baltic Pearl, as sites within the district are developed and vetted by the Gradsoviet, the district has received the attention of planners who ostensibly hope to see the Baltic Pearl forward certain cherished ideas in planning. For example, its “Pearl Plaza,” formerly called the “Southern Square” when it was a Chinese-only design, was labeled as “banal Europeanism” by a city official after the presentation of a new design by the Baltic Pearl firm and a Finnish partner, SRV Group. For its part, the Baltic Pearl firm continually insists in its publications and public self-presentation that its district will offer the best in modern European living. Its representatives have publicly criticized the city administration for its lack of support for developers, with the implication that China has much more effective policies in this area. In the local press, the Baltic Pearl has acquired the reputation of a residential district that serves a more affluent group of Petersburgers who value a quieter “green” district further outside the city center (the website displays photos of a crowded showroom taken at an exhibition of housing units). At the very least, the Baltic Pearl demonstrates that local consumers of housing increasingly do have quite a varied choice of places to live beyond the sleeping districts of Soviet times.

#### *About the author*

Megan Dixon is Instructor in Geography at The College of Idaho and the author of “Gazprom versus the Skyline: Spatial Displacement and Social Contention in St. Petersburg,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34.1: 35–54 (January 2010) and “The Baltic Pearl: Chinese Interscalar Investment Strategies in the Russian Context,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (forthcoming 2010).