8. Perceptions and Constructed Marginality in Soviet and Post-Soviet Large Housing Estates: The Case of Saint Petersburg, Russia

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Introduction

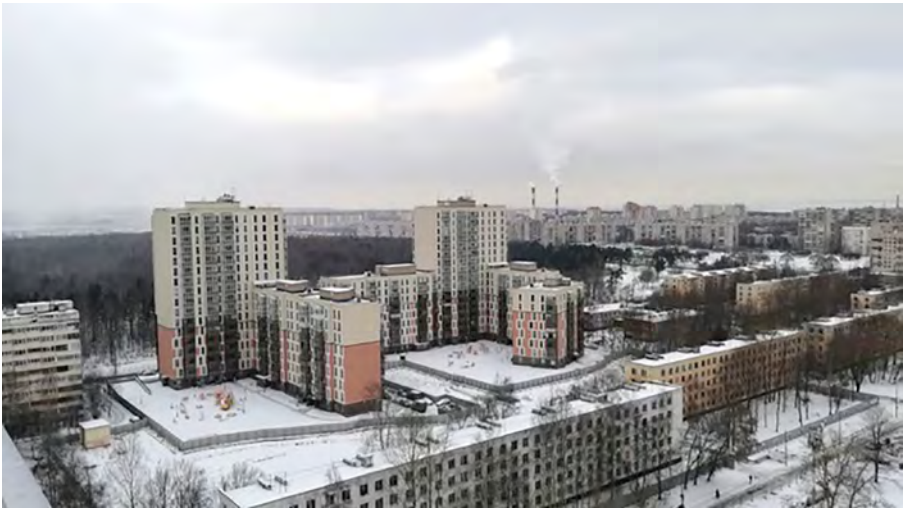
Post-socialist housing estates face a number of considerable challenges. At the same time, little is known about the actual character, causes, and appropriate solutions for dealing with these challenges beyond singular context. The same is true for the resources and the approaches applied when dealing with them (Urban 2011; Hess, Tammaru, and van Ham 2018). The comparative research project Estates After Transition[1] studies recent urbanization processes in post-socialist housing estates and is conceived as an in-depth observation of the dynamics underlying the development of six neighborhoods in Estonia, Germany, and Russia. The project deliberately focuses on post-socialist cases, thus breaking free from dominant "Western" perspectives on housing estates. It takes stock of the variety of post-socialist conditions and seeks practical solutions that are adaptable to diverse constellations and conditions.

In this paper, we share some findings from the two Russian case studies explored within the project—two Large housing estates in Saint Petersburg, Russia: socialist microrayon *Sosnovaya Polyana* and post-socialist greenfield project *Severnaya Dolina*. Built at different times, within different institutional arrangements, the neighborhoods remain examples of large microrayons of mass-produced prefabs. They provide a fruitful ground for comparison

1 *Estates After Transition* is run by the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS) in Germany, the Center for Applied Research (CeAR) at the European University at St. Petersburg in Russia, and the Centre for Migration and Urban Studies (CMUS) at the University of Tartu in Estonia. estatestransition.org

because, despite their differences, both areas have been subjects of marginalization by exterior actors such as media, experts, and officials, and both induce discourses on demolition.

Figure 1: Renovatsiya in Sosnovaya Polyana.



Source: Photo by a local resident; used with the author's permission.

In our study, we engaged in governance analysis of the area development, held over twenty interviews per case with various actors—from residents to developers and city officials—and, in the last leg of the project, conducted focus groups with local residents to shed light on the "interior" perspective of life and urban environmental quality, as well as the neighborhood image, within the two large housing estates.

Case 1: Sosnovaya Polyana

Sosnovaya Polyana is a green and well-developed area in the southwest of Saint Petersburg dominated by *khrushchevki* estates. Khrushchevki [singu-

lar: *khrushchevka*] is a popular nickname that refers to five-story buildings[2] made of prefabricated concrete panels built between 1958 and the 1970s. These usually contain 80–100 apartments and house around three hundred people (Gunko et al. 2018). Named after Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971), the Communist Party leader of the USSR from 1953 to 1964, khrushchevki were developed as a solution to the acute postwar housing crisis and as a means to raise the living standards of Soviet citizens and provide them with single-family apartments. There has been a perpetuated notion about khrushchevki as a "temporary solution" with an estimated service life period from twenty-five to fifty years depending on the series (Erofeev 2014), but this notion has been disputed by various experts (Linov and Ivanov 2018). Nowadays, these buildings are home to about 9 million Russian citizens. In Saint Petersburg, about 9 million m^2 of khrushchevki make up for about 8 percent of the housing stock and provide shelter for 12 percent of the population.

In 2008, the Saint Petersburg administration launched a public-private renovation program called Renovatsiya, or the Built-Up Territories Development Program, that with private investment, aimed to demolish about 1,095 khrushchevki on over two thousand acres in twenty-four areas around the city[3] that were homes to around 65,000 families, and to replace them with 8.5 million square meters of "modern and comfortable" housing at least three times as dense.

The program generated a peculiar discourse about khrushchevki estates—they were painted as "aged, soon-to-be-dilapidated, [and] morally and technically obsolete." Within the Renovatsiya paradigm, a welfare state and a benevolent developer were coming to relieve the plight of suffering khrushchevki residents that lived in "degrading and inhumane conditions." As one of the focus group participants states: "You know, I feel that there is some sort of campaign to paint our houses as obsolete and inadequate to make it easier to demolish them."

2 More rarely, *khrushchevki* were made of brick or blocks or had a different number of floors (three, four, or nine).

3 Ten of the areas actually included not khrushchevki but lower-density housing. In a way, it is symptomatic that in the media, the term khrushchevki was used to describe poor-quality, ageing housing in general.

Figure 2: Enovatsiya stagnation in Sosnovaya Polyana.

Source: Authors.

Figure 3 + 4: Sosnovaya Polyana.

Source: Photo by Sergey Cheperis.

While the implications of the Renovatsiya program were massive, its implementation faced major obstacles, and after ten years, only 3.5 percent of the program was completed. No khrushchevka was actually demolished until 2020, after the program was prolonged. Among Renovatsiya controversies was that the program was built on questionable premises about khrushchevki condition, and promulgated by an underdeveloped legislature at a time of a powerful city/business coalition that significantly weakened during the program's course. Fragmented building ownership also served as a factor that impeded implementation. Because of all that, the program zones have been frozen in uncertainty without proper maintenance or renovation and, indeed, have started to turn unsafe, depressing, and dilapidated.

In a research interview, a resident of a khrushchevka in a Renovatsiya zone described the situation as follows:

> "We cannot properly renovate our apartment, invest money in this way, because it has been many years of us being 'about to be relocated.' Up to this day we have no certainty whether we will move or not. [. . .] Nothing is being done. [. . .] If the fate of our house was clear, I would of course keep improving it".

Questioning the initial premises of Renovatsiya intervention, we conducted five focus groups with khrushchevka residents in Sosnovaya Polyana whose buildings were affected and unaffected by the program, paying attention to different age groups, ownership types, and levels of engagement in local activism. Among the findings regarding the life and urban environmental quality in Khrushchev-era large housing estates were the following:

- Residents assess the neighborhood higher than the buildings themselves (green, spacious, low-density, great infrastructure, well-connected, possibility for guerilla gardening, cozy atmosphere, peace and quiet, etc.)
- Among the disadvantages of the neighborhood: underdeveloped pedestrian infrastructure (non-inclusive environment), 24/7 liquor stores in apartment buildings, lack of modern infrastructure for youth leisure
- Within the buildings: overcrowding, poor condition of engineering networks, lack of prompt major overhaul, poor energy efficiency and sound insulation, inconvenient apartment plans, lack of elevators and spaces to store bikes and strollers

Curiously, describing the neighborhood residents of different ages brought up the image of a "*babushka*'s[4] district," which appears two-fold: When applied to a housing estate, the image of an old lady may refer to something negative—*old, old-fashioned, in poor physical condition, not moving with the times*. But on the other hand, the image of a *grandmother* is *warm, homey, caring, approachable*, and *nostalgic*. Living in such a neighborhood might not be for everyone, but it is a lifestyle of its own that cannot be found in the historical center or in the high-rise periphery. Despite the perpetuated stereotypes, local residents see the environment in their estates as more humane compared to the environment in other parts of the city:

> "We moved here when I was 14 and I thought it was the end of my life! I thought they brought me to a village, and everything here is like. . . people are growing flowers, everything will be terrible, I will grow old and die here. But after only two or three years I felt this was the best place! It is peaceful and quiet and people are growing flowers! That actually appeared to be the main advantage. And it is, I do not want to move any longer!"

> "Well, everyone says "babushka's district," "babushka's district," as if only old ladies lived there! But living there was actually cool: there was a park, people took walks, fewer cars, friendly neighbors."

> "Young people these days—they want to fly! They want those modern 16- to 15-floor high-rises. And our neighborhood is more babushka-style: the green, the flower beds, the quiet! Younger people may first need some partying."

The general sentiment was that the neighborhoods could be great if properly maintained. And many of those who supported Renovatsiya simply did not believe in the possibility of the buildings' overhaul or fixing of the maintenance system. Describing the estates, local residents do not use the terms *depressing, uniform*, or *ugly*—they describe them as *neglected, abandoned, not taken care of, run-down, in decay*. Therefore, residents formulate the issue of estate maintenance as the central one. However, their attempts to engage in neighborhood management appear disheartening, and the heads of house councils describe their work as a constant battlefield.

4 In Russian: *grandmother, old lady*.

The Renovatsiya program, however, does not address the issues of overly complicated and failing house management. At the end of the program's initial term in 2019, its underlying premises were not reconsidered—the program was prolonged for ten years more and new legislation was issued to facilitate demolition. In that way, khrushchevki problems are now being reproduced at a larger scale.

Case 2: Severnaya Dolina

In the past decade, the commissioning of apartment buildings in Russia significantly increased and approached the rate of the first decades of mass housing construction in the twentieth century: about 43.5 million m^2 in 2019 compared to some 40 to 55 million m^2 in the 1960s and 1970s. In light of this, new large housing estates started to mushroom in the peripheries of most Russian big cities.

Figure 5: Severnaya Dolina masterplan.

Source: https://parnas.siava.ru.

Severnaya Dolina is an example of modern housing development in Russia and one of the archetypical newly built large housing estates that provide affordable housing to low- and middle-class inhabitants. It is one of the first and largest integrated urban development (IUD) projects in the country. Situated in the north of Saint Petersburg, it occupies 270 hectares and consists of 33 buildings of 29 stories with 900 to 3,500 apartments each. The development

of the estate started in 2009. Now it is inhabited by about 60,000 residents, and when finished it is supposed to accommodate about 100,000 occupants.

Severnaya Dolina belongs to the so-called "economy class" residential sector. Most flats (about 60%–70%) are bought with mortgage loans. With the exception of a minor share of social housing (about 1.5%), the vast majority of apartments in Severnaya Dolina are privately owned by individual residents. But about 30 percent of dwelling units are so-called investment flats: the owners do not live there but rent them out.

It is noteworthy that in Saint Petersburg, IUD projects that Severnaya Dolina exemplifies were meant as an alternative to strongly criticized infill development projects in which new residential buildings densified the built and already developed urban fabric. The developer in IUD projects takes responsibility for planning and building not only residential buildings but also an integrated and comfortable living environment, including roads, schools, kindergartens, and other social infrastructure.

Figure 6 + 7: Severnaya Dolina.

Source: https://www.novostroy.su/.

Such projects also have a very complicated governance structure in which the city owns the land but leases a large plot (667 acres in the case of Severnaya Dolina) to a private developer, for the purposes of constructing the residential complex, until completion of construction of the entire project. Therefore, the developer has a right to manage, use, and extract profit from the plot—it sells apartments in a free market and through this means, individual buyers acquire ownership rights to the apartments. With the lease agreement in force, the city and apartment owners have very limited instruments to influence the area's

development. Because of that, there is a significant lag in the commissioning of social infrastructure—so far in Severnaya Dolina, only three out of ten schools, six of thirteen kindergartens, and not even one hospital have been built.

To shed light on the residents' perception of environmental quality in the estate, we conducted five focus groups with residents of Severnaya Dolina, paying attention to different age groups, ownership types, and levels of engagement in local activism. Most of the focus group participants, regardless of their age and activity, chose housing in Severnaya Dolina based on a low cost, proximity to the metro station, location in the suitable urban area, and suitable apartment layouts rather than on a quality assessment of the housing. The criteria we mean by *"quality"* are mainly perceived and experienced by residents *after* moving into the area. So the quality of the living environment did not affect the initial choice of housing in a newly built area, but it does affect the decision of whether to stay there further or not.

We have discovered that inhabitants appreciate their district and housing because:

- It is well connected with the city center by metro
- A big historical park is located nearby
- The buildings and all infrustructure are new
- Plenty of businesses are situated on the ground floors of the residential buildings
- The planning is uniform and the facade design is discreet
- Buildings feature a high-rise aesthetic: there are spectacular views from upper floors and beautiful sunsets (some even called the district *"our Manhattan"*)

The *novelty* of the apartment and the area appeared to be a very important factor. On the one hand, it is associated with cleanliness and comfort, and on the other, with the economic liquidity of "fresher" housing. Thus, residents find in their new housing a positive contrast with the "old" buildings in the historic center and Soviet-era housing where engineering infrastructures are worn-down and the entrance halls are "dirty." They perceive their new housing as being "higher quality" because it complies with more "modern" construction standards (width of streets, number of parking lots, infrastructure for low-mobility groups, etc.).

The focus group participants perceived the urban environmental quality through problems, through the *mismatch between expectations* (nice renderings

by the developer) *and the actual living experience*. For example, the nearby Shuvalovsky Park is an important asset for Severnaya Dolina, but at the same time it has many problems: it lacks infrastructure, lighting, and a convenient way to reach it on foot, while the territory of Severnaya Dolina itself lacks greenery and comfortable green walking areas. Only a few participants articulated the height of the buildings as a clearly negative factor, noting the "pressing, inhuman scale of buildings." Most participants did not mention the building height as an important factor in their decision to buy an apartment in Severnaya Dolina. At the same time, people criticized the indirect consequences of the estate's scale and densely populated area: limited parking lots, many neighbors, social detachment, and too many cars.

Many participants positively assess the aspects of IUD projects: the uniform and discreet design and modes of governance. However, they point to design "mistakes" such as the lack of parking lots and incorrect positioning of buildings that causes strong winds, and they blame the developer for delays in the construction of social infrastructure. This problem reinforces the already existing sense of peripherality, the image of a "sleeping area."

Among the building and apartment disadvantages mentioned by the focus group participants are: low quality of construction and infrastructure, poor sound insulation, too many apartments per floor, and too many studios and one-room apartments. They connected this with a big share of rented-out apartments inhabited by people who (from the point of view of the owners) are "temporary" residents and care much less about the housing conditions.

Housing activists especially highlighted the importance of estate management for the future of the area and the housing, identifying three major obstacles: (1) the scale of construction and the total number of dwellings, particularly since inappropriate legislation on the management of such large buildings makes it impossible to form self-governing bodies; (2) low level of owners' involvement in self-governing structures; and (3) negligent attitude and poor work of the management company.

As a result, the quality of building maintenance of Severnaya Dolina is perceived as poor. Some activists fear future degradation because of the difficulties in organizing self-governing structures and in controlling the management company: "In the future, governance issues will play a specifically important role. And the easier it will be for residents to make decisions. . . Now it is extremely difficult."

Conclusion

Juxtaposing the cases of Severnaya Dolina and Sosnovaya Polyana in Saint Petersburg, we come to the following conclusions:

1. The "outsider gaze" perceives the large housing estates' quality through technical and material characteristics of the buildings, while the image from the inside is more diverse, nuanced, and subtle. For the residents, estate management is one of the key characteristics that defines life quality in large housing estates.
2. Each housing type constitutes its own niche in the market. The idea of replacing one housing type with another is problematic—there is a demand for different segments and morphologies. While the described housing types have their flaws, they should not become subjects of marginalization and sweeping generalizations as this can have a negative impact.
3. The study on the trajectories of large housing estates has already shown that their fate depends to a significant extent on the quality of governance and maintenance, not only on social structure and urban forms (Urban 2011). However, at the moment, the state promotes large-scale construction all around Russia, but does not design effective management infrastructures.

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