



The New Metropolitan
Mainstream in Saint Petersburg

With a population of 4.6 million, Saint Petersburg (Sankt-Peterburg) is the second largest city in the Russian Federation and the northernmost city in the world with a population over one million. Founded in 1703 by Peter the Great, it was the Russian capital from 1712 to 1918, and was the site of the three revolutions (1905, February 1917, October 1917) that led to the overthrow of the tsarist regime. The city has a total area of 1,439 square kilometers: 650 square kilometers of this land mass is densely developed, and approximately 10% is occupied by water. The city's economy is mainly based on manufacturing (heavy industry and food processing) and tourism. Approximately 3 million domestic and foreign tourists visit the city annually. As the only large European city whose 18th- and 19th-century built environment has been almost entirely preserved and untouched by high-rise construction, Petersburg is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Environmental conditions in the city are poor: all its rivers, canals, lakes, and beaches are heavily polluted, the air is seriously contaminated by automobile exhaust. The average male life expectancy in Petersburg is 56 years.

Saint Petersburg is hostage to its existing built environment, the legacy of previous periods in its evolution. These include not only its foundation period, when the "imperial" historic center was built on marsh lands surrounded by villages or the period of its industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when this showcase city was ringed with factories and workers' districts and filled in with tenement buildings. The shortcomings of Soviet-era housing and planning policy are also still felt: massive new housing construction from the sixties to the late eighties led to the emergence of an enormous ring of "bedroom communities" on the city's outskirts, and planners failed to cope with the environmental and transportation infrastructure challenges that were generated by this expansion.

In the post-Soviet period, these problems have only been exacerbated. Most of the major development projects in recent years have either been infrastructural or residential. Other mega-projects include the 400-meter-high Okhta Center skyscraper, a second stage for the Mariinsky Theater, and a new football stadium. At present, many of these projects are only in the planning or permit-obtaining stages or have run into significant delays. A much greater impact on Petersburg's built environment and livability has been made by a multitude of more localized developments and planning decisions:

- Many green spaces throughout the city have been built over. The former public recreational areas on Krestovsky and Kamenny islands have been totally redeveloped to accommodate a large

number of high-end residential housing complexes.

- The publicly owned transport system has been curtailed to make way for private operators and a tidal wave of individual motorists. In 2001, Petersburg had the largest tram network in the world, but now most of the tramlines in the central districts have been de-commissioned.

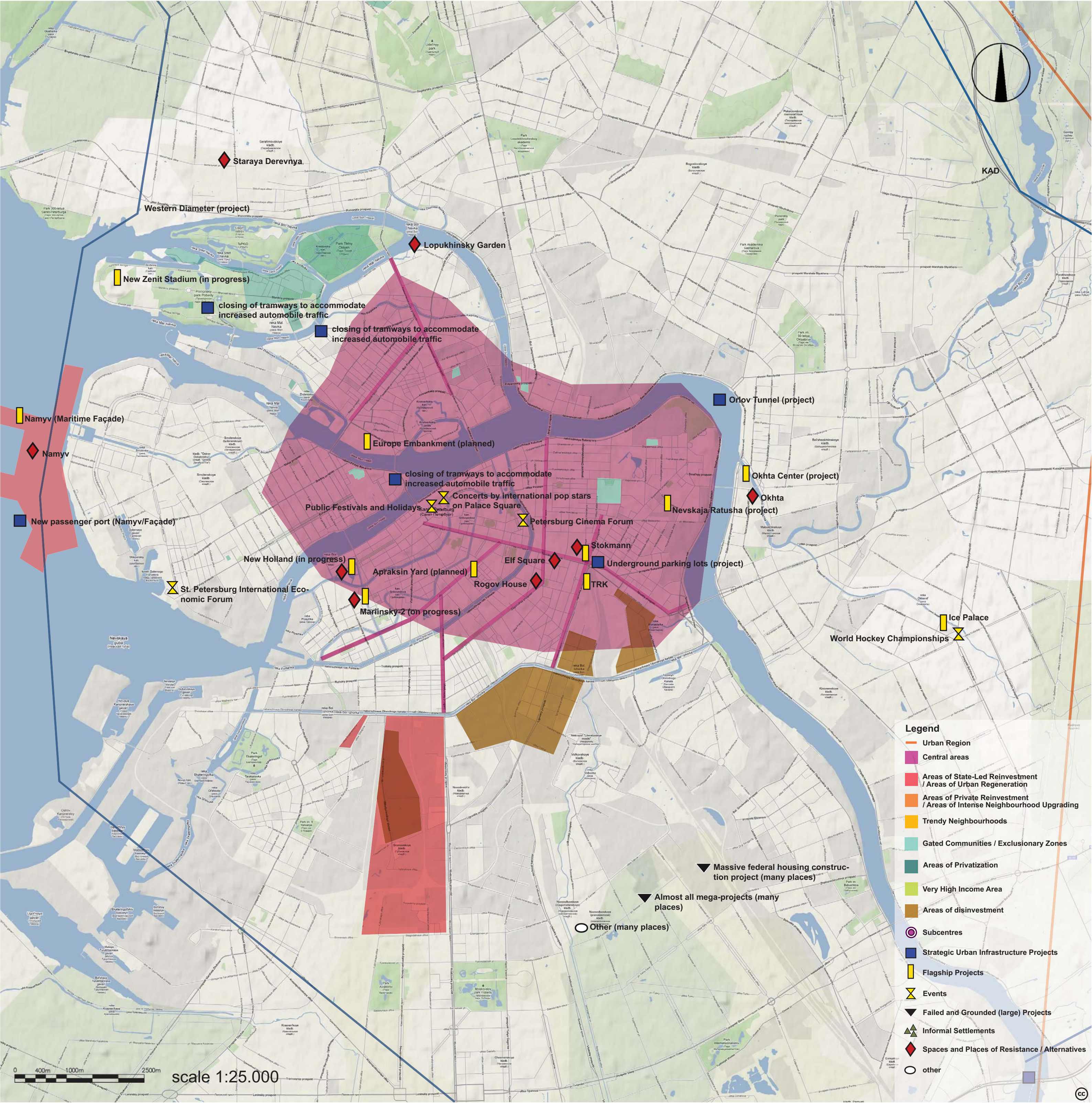
- Since the perestroika period, more than 400 of the city's kindergartens have been closed and their premises turned over to other tenants, mostly commercial.

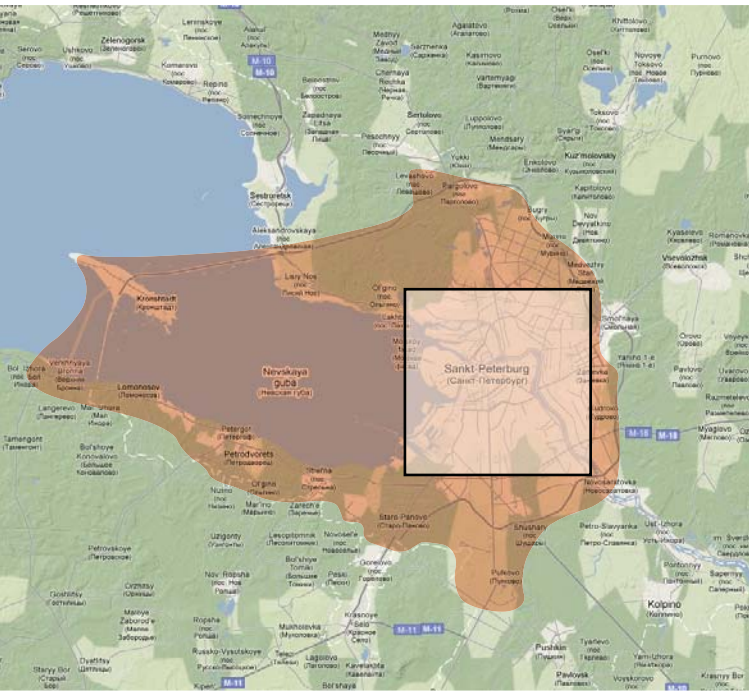
- Since 2005, more than 150 historic buildings have been demolished in the city center. In many cases, they have been replaced by unsightly faux-neoclassical or neo-functional buildings.

- In 2008–2009, the city's height-zoning regulations were amended so that so-called pinpoint dominants (i.e., high-rise structures) could be legally built in or near the (low-rise) historic protection districts.

Russia 17°07'540Km2 * Inhabitants 41,9 Mio.
Urban Region 1'439Km2 * Inhabitants >5'000'000

Text: Dmitriy Vorobyeb/Thomas Campbell





An awakened northern beauty –
St. Petersburg

St. Petersburg with its 5 Mio. inhabitants is not only the most northern Mega-City in the World – it is a most beautiful one, too: the “Northern Venice” with its baroque city centre – entirely protected by UNESCO as a “World Cultural Heritage” – attracts more than 1.5 Mio. tourists every year. At the same time it is the most polluted Russian city besides Moscow, due to its industry (above all food processing, machinery and car industries).

With the crash of the Soviet Union not only Russia, but also her cities underwent a deep “transition” towards a neoliberal system. While Moscow showed the more chaotic laissez faire characteristics of the new model of urban development, St. Petersburg was the blueprint for a new system drawn after the global cities of the new world.

That’s why St. Petersburg shows all characteristics of a globalised city: An increasingly segregated social structure with gated communities and gentrified areas on one hand and urban decline on the other, deindustrialization and tertiarisation going hand in hand with urban renewal (“renaissance”) projects, flagship projects for upgrading purposes (attracting capital) or the festivalisation of the city to attract tourists.

All these signs of the NMM overlay a communist (and a bour-

geois) past. So there is a certain social intermix in the gentrified city center, where communal apartments still exist. Mixed income groups are also a consequence of the privatization of own flats, spatially representing the anti-segregation policy of the Soviet Union. That’s why gentrification processes aren’t as obvious as in the Anglo-Saxon world. Nevertheless gated communities and a big sector of luxury apartments in the most beautiful spots of St. Petersburg prove a growing gap between rich and poor.

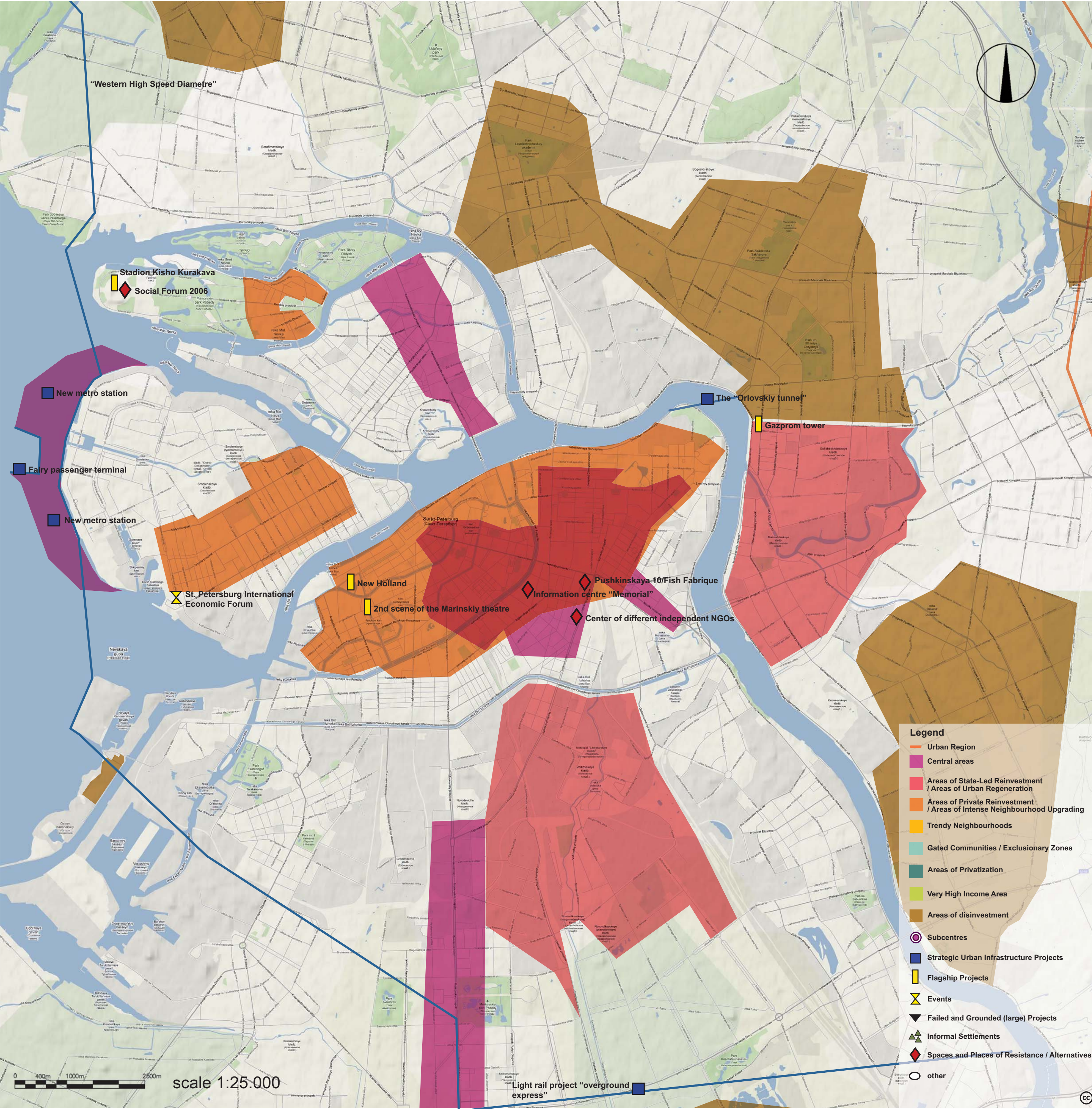
One of the most pressing issues is disinvestment due to neoliberal refusal by the state to renovate buildings and, on the other side, lacking funds of the population. Nevertheless, the state tries to attract investment through flagship projects like the Gazprom tower, the second stage of the Marinskij theater or the new Kurokava stadion – all of them failed so far – or mega-events (the G8, International Economic Forum etc.). Money is scarce and the rapidly erected, partly low quality houses from the communist past turn slowly into slums; even the historical centre was falling into decay.

Corruption and need breed low quality and new construction is more often than not built on the verges of legality: Infill constructions eliminate the rare green spaces and deteriorate ecology and quality of life in the dense city. Disrespect of height restric-

tions, destruction of cultural heritage or social infrastructure (like kindergartens, schools and hospitals) or re-profiling of projects are some of the other problems influencing the built environment. Another problem is growing private traffic, which is congesting the city despite an efficient, if out-dated, public transport. Public private partnerships like the Western Rapid Diameter or the new airport Pulkovo 3 should improve a collapsing transport situation.

Despite an authoritarian regime, there is a variety of urban initiatives struggling against in-fill constructions, infrastructure projects, mega-projects, the privatization of social infrastructure, displacement from dormitories or communal apartments, for more green spaces, trams or public uses. Many of these groups are ad-hoc initiatives, but since 2005 there is more organizing effort and some institutionalized networks like the ecologically oriented EKOM institute, the preservationist “living city” network or the “movement of civic initiatives”, which is mostly focused on social issues.

Text: Vesna Tomse



Purpose	Grassroots campaign against the infill building project (“Silver Horseshoe”) on the square next to Pulkovskaya Street 1 (in southern Saint Petersburg)
Dimensions	Residential tower block, with underground parking and “playground
Developer	RosStroi (SU-151) to be completed in 2010



Public protest

Like many other such squares in Petersburg’s late-Soviet new estates, the square at Pulkovskaya Street, 1, was laid out and planted with trees in the 1970s. The green spaces in these estates were an essential part of their planning: Leningrad residents used to living in cramped communal flats in the relatively treeless central districts were given not only their own apartments, but improved environmental and recreational conditions. The construction boom of the past decade, however, has targeted these green spaces in great numbers, with city officials and developers claiming (falsely) that such squares and parks are in fact “lacunae” that Soviet-era planners simply never got round to building up. In reality, those planners had intended to fill these spaces not with commercial housing, but with social infrastructure projects (kindergartens, medical clinics, etc.) that in many cases were not realized then. In the early part of the present decade, however, developers received permits to develop these spaces, but for the most part the city government made little effort to inform ordinary residents about these plans. Very often, they have found about them only when builders have surrounded their squares with high fences and begun preliminary construction work.

Attempts to “fill” these “lacunae” in the present decade have led to serious grassroots counter-mobilizations. From 2003 to 2005, there were around 150 such “hotspots” throughout the city. The conflict over the former square at Pulkovskaya Street, 1, was one of the most exemplary in terms of the tactics employed by developers and city planning bureaucrats, on the one hand, and by grassroots activists, on the other. When local residents learned about plans to build a new tower block on their square, in 2004, they formed a working group and began holding regular meetings with their neighbors. For its parts, the developers held a “public hearing” to which only residents of a nearby dormitory were invited; they were promised flats in the new building. On the basis of this hearing, the city issued a permit for construction. In response, activists attempted to make their case in the courts and by appealing to the city administration. That this “legalist” approach would be insufficient was made clear to them on the early morning of March 13, 2006, when developers cut down 104 trees in the square, despite the fact that it was registered as a publicly protected green space.

This flagrant assault led the activists to switch tactics and caused activists from other neighborhoods to join them in the defense of Pulkovskaya. The square became a focal point for discussions of the overall approach to new development in Petersburg, as well as a testing ground for media-savvy protest actions that included blocking a nearby highway and holding a flash mob at which a puppet of the city’s vice governor in charge of building policy was launched into outer space. It was in large part thanks to these protests that city lawmakers began discussing the possibility of imposing a moratorium on infill construction in Petersburg until a new law on protected green spaces was passed. Nevertheless, despite promises made by city officials and further lawsuits and appeals by activists, construction of the new tower block on Pulkovskaya began in 2007 and was completed in May of this year.



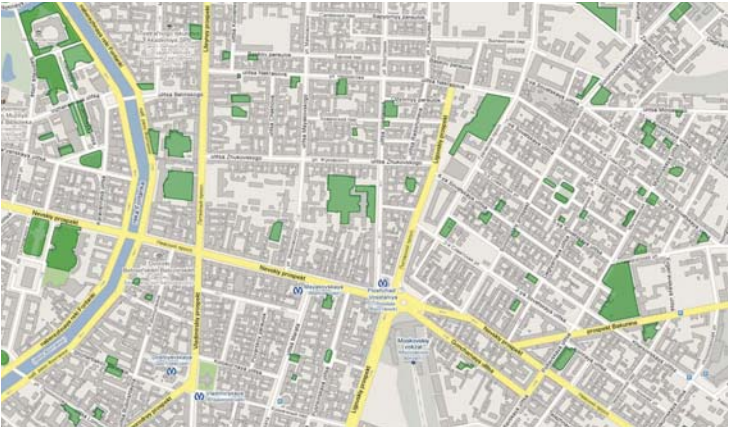
On the ground

Purpose	To catalogue and map the city’s green spaces (squares, parks, courtyards) and decide which of them should be officially protected against redevelopment and new construction
Authors	Local environmental NGOs, Saint Petersburg Legislative Assembly, and relevant municipal departments



Infill construction

This law has its origins in 2004, when activists and local residents began to notice that a wave of infill construction was devouring Petersburg’s parks, squares, and courtyards. That the city has a deficit of such spaces is illustrated by a simple statistical comparison: whereas in the largest neighboring metropolitan area, Helsinki, residents enjoy 135 square meters of green space per capita, the citywide average for Petersburg is 17 square meters, with this figure shrinking to as little as 5 meters in the central districts. At the time, development in Petersburg was still regulated by the long-outdated General Plan of 1980, and so activists and ecologists began making a detailed inventory of actually existing green spaces and determining their current legal status. This working group of volunteers identified approximately 1,500 such spaces and relayed this information to lawmakers in the city’s legislative assembly, who in 2006 began drafting a Law on Common Use Green Spaces, usually referred to by its Russian acronym, “ZNOP.” After a serious lobbying campaign by activists, the law was passed in November 2007 and included 2,240 such parks, squares, and courtyards. However, the Petersburg building lobby and Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko immediately set to undermining the new law by suggesting that the listing was only “approximate” and thus not legally binding. Nevertheless, the new law was considered to be a significant victory for Petersburg grassroots activists, who had not only practically authored it, but also successfully saw it through the legislative process.

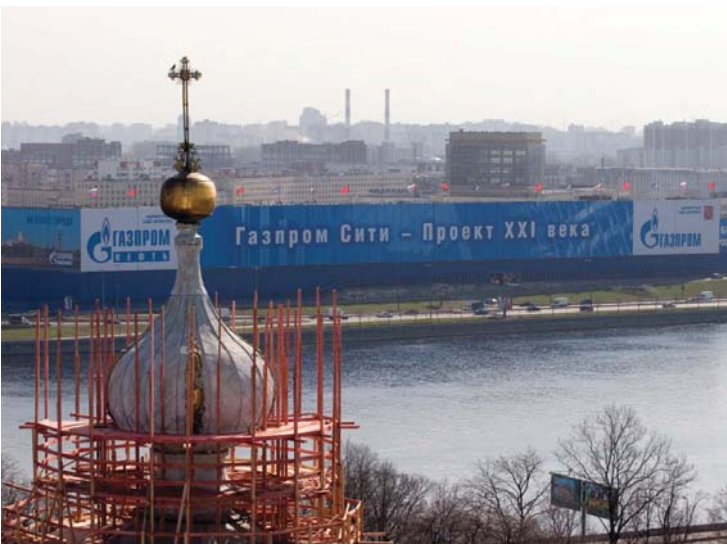


Mapping of green spaces initiated by activists

In 2008, however, the building lobby, via its friends in the legislature, proposed an amendment to the law that would have struck approximately half of the newly protected green spaces off the list because they conflicted with draft versions of the city’s new zoning regulations and general plan. The proposed exclusions would have mainly affected inner courtyards, seen by developers as perfect sites for infill construction, in large part because they can construct new buildings on these sites without having to develop basic infrastructure (sewerage, electrical lines, etc.) from scratch. However, a vigorous media campaign by activists forced lawmakers to reject these amendments.

In 2009, the city administration again proposed striking approximately 160 sites from the protected list, arguing that these were either not real green spaces (because they had already been developed or were in poor condition) or because the lots were needed for the construction of sorely lacking social infrastructure (kindergartens, schools, medical clinics). (Here is it worth noting that activists have discovered that one reason for the deficit, for example, of kindergartens was that approximately 400 of them had been converted to commercial uses since perestroika.) After a careful analysis, lawmakers agreed to exclude or reduce the size of 137 sites. This, however, was not enough to satisfy the appetites of developers and their allies in city hall. In February 2010, the administration proposed a reinventory that would exclude 240 squares, parks, and even parts of city forests from the protected list; in April, this figure was increased to 680 sites. In response, local activists have launched their own “people’s” reinventory, which has involved ninety volunteers carrying out detailed surveys of sites on the list. This and other similar recent grassroots campaigns (around the new zoning laws, the city’s general plan, the redrawing of its historical preservation districts and lists of protected landmarks) have shown that civil society, despite the odds and operating in difficult sociopolitical circumstances, can not only mobilize for protests, but is capable of producing well-researched, professional critiques and analyses of how the city is being redeveloped.

Purpose	Mixed-use development with corporate offices and cultural/sporting facilities
Dimensions	66.5 hectares, with 4.6 hectares given over to high-rise construction, resulting in 1 million square meters of usable built space; Gazprom and Okhta Center will occupy 16% of the office space subsidiaries
Projets costs	2.6 billion USD
General Contractor	Arabtec Construction
Architects	RMJM London, Ltd.



Gazprom City at the Neva river

Originally called Gazprom City, this project was conceived as a public-private partnership in 2004 between the Gazprom corporation and the municipal government of Saint Petersburg. Sited in the Krasnogvardeisky District on the confluence of the Okhta and Neva rivers, the centerpiece of the project will be a 400-meter-high skyscraper surrounded by a number of other multifunctional buildings.

Popular and semi-official resistance to the project became especially fierce after the design commission for the project was awarded to UK-based firm RMJM in late 2006. Critics claimed that the planned tower would spoil the city’s historic skyline, thus threatening Petersburg’s UNESCO World Heritage status. Another objection raised by critics and urban activists was that construction of the buildings would destroy the ruins of two Swedish fortresses, Landskrona (14th century) and Nyenskans (17th century) located beneath the site. Opponents also objected to the original financing scheme, which would have seen the city paying the entire cost in view of the allegedly increased tax revenues it would receive from the Gazprom subsidiaries that moved their headquarters to the city. Under pressure from the political opposition, this scheme was later revised so that Gazprom would split the costs with the city, but as a result of the world financial crisis, the city finally withdrew its financial stake from the project altogether.

Nevertheless, the support for the project from high Petersburg officials, especially Governor Valentina Matviyenko, has been enthusiastic from the outset. Although at this date the final architectural/engineering project has not been approved by the appropriate state agencies (and now, in May, President Medvedev has obliquely indicated it might be worth altering the project so as not to antagonize UNESCO), the city government has done everything in its power to promote the project, from (perhaps illegally) granting it a height-zoning waiver in autumn 2009 and smoothing the permissions process (although this involved the use of paid extras – “tower supporters” – at two “public hearings”) to advancing it as a material symbol of the economic and social “modernization” that has become all the (rhetorical) rage in the past year amongst Russia’s ruling class. In reality, even if the project is not built (as seems remotely possible now) it will have served the interests of the political class and its business “partners” well by establishing and testing mechanisms for bypassing and ignoring historical preservation regulations, environmental impact studies, and grassroots resistance.



St.Petersburg’s skyline with the planned GazpromTower

As in the case of other important recent mega-projects in Petersburg (most of which have also run into considerable delays or controversy), the importance of Okhta Center is that it serves as an illustration of the ruling class’s slogan that “the city has to develop.” Such mega-projects are a recipe for this development: they allow the city to “modernize” (gentrify) “depressed” neighborhoods (such as, allegedly, the Okhta district) and thus generate income for the further museification (and gentrification) of the “historic center.” Which in reality has also fallen prey to this same process of capture by private developers (supported by corrupt planning and preservation bureaucrats), whose “vision of modernization” seems to produce only endless “business centers,” “elite housing,” and shopping malls.

We believe that Petersburg is now approaching a point of no return. Most of the faux-utopian projects proposed by the ruling elite and developers have not been realized. On the other hand, the green light has been given for a total reconstruction of the city to meet the needs of this elite. An alternative, positive development scenario is imaginable only if activists are able to take their struggle to a new level where they are capable not only of providing professional analysis, but also of articulating their own, alternative vision of urban development.

Main Venue	July 15–17, 2006 Constantine Palace, Strelna (suburban Petersburg)
Projets costs	40 billion rubles (approx. 1.5 billion USD)
Architects	Vladimir Putin, Valentina Matviyenko



After an event

Like all such global political and sporting events, the 2006 G8 Summit was first and foremost a major infrastructure and redevelopment project. The main summit venue, the Constantine Palace in the southern Petersburg suburb of Strelna, had already been transformed into a “Palace of Congresses” for the massive city tricentennial celebrations in 2003. This transformation involved not only a “reconstruction” of the palace itself, but also the building of a five-star hotel, a “cottage village” for VIPs, a “pavilion for high-level negotiations,” and a state-of-the-art press center. (During his term as president, Petersburg native Vladimir Putin used the complex as his semi-official “northern residence.”) Preparations for the summit itself included improvements to the city’s international airport, the roads used by the delegations, and the facades of buildings along these main routes (at an estimated cost of 500 million USD).

A “counter-summit” held in the Kirov Stadium (demolished a few months later to make way for another mega-project, an as yet unbuilt and unnamed football stadium) attracted only a few hundred, mostly local, activists. Activists from other Russian regions and other countries were effectively prevented from making it to Petersburg by Russian security forces. Aside from discussions on various social and political topics, activists made a few unsuccessful attempts to bring attention to their causes: police made certain that these were either well hidden from the public and the media or were quickly crushed. In turn, the “alterglobalist international” that usually turns such international political gatherings into massive protest actions also mostly



Anti-globalisation activists at the Kirov-Stadion (Foto AFP)

failed to mobilize for the Petersburg summit, discouraged both by Russian visa requirements and the efforts of its police state, and by the weak infrastructure of the alterglobalist movement within Russia itself.

The summit thus became a template for the conduct of such global and national events in the city – for example, the annual Petersburg International Economic Forum or major citywide celebrations such as City Day, May Day, and Crimson Sails (a lavish, televised open-air party for newly minted school leavers). For the powers that be, task number one is to produce a highly attractive visual spectacle for local and global media and the domestic TV audience. When the events in question are international, the intended message is that Petersburg is a “world capital” of politics, economics, and culture that is eagerly visited by powerful players in these realms. When these mega-celebrations are local in character, the authorities communicate to Petersburgers that their (authoritarian/oligarchic/corrupt) administration of the city has led to a state of prosperity that allows them to “splurge” on such popular festivals. Meanwhile, more quotidian problems – for example, the depreciation of housing stock, the collapse of surface transportation (due to endless traffic jams), the city’s degraded ecology (which in turn leads to significant levels of chronic illness and high mortality rates), and the almost-total incompetence of municipal maintenance services (which this past winter were unable to cope with the aftermath of slightly heavier than usual snowfalls) – are marginalized in mainstream public discourse.

Second, significant public funds are outlaid for cosmetic improvements to transportation infrastructure, the construction of ven-ues (permanent or temporary), and the sprucing up of areas near these venues. Third, large parts of the city are subjected to a “state of siege”: roads and transportation terminals are temporarily closed for use by ordinary citizens, and massive numbers of regular and riot police are posted throughout the city, especially around venues and in the downtown districts. Fourth, this state of siege is preceded by preventive operations conducted by police and security services that are designed to limit or altogether eliminate opposition protests and other “disruptions.”

Combined with passive rejection of recent trends in the city’s development on the part of large numbers of Petersburgers, this might prove capable of overcoming the development mafia’s propaganda machine. As during perestroika, when the first large-scale protests materialized around environmental issues, the situation might change if thousands of localized right-to-the-city movements put urban development on the national agenda, or if a new catastrophe on the order of the Chernobyl disaster wakes Petersburgers and Russians up to the negative underbelly of the current trend toward aggressive redevelopment.

Synthesis over all four projects and outlook

In Petersburg, the new metropolitan mainstream attempts to solve these problems via mega-projects (many of which are never completed or suffer substantial delays) and propaganda about the need to shift the city’s image from that of an “open-air architectural preserve” to a city eager to attract major investors with tax breaks and high-end tourists with pricey hotels and Inturist-style excursions designed to keep them as far as away from the “real” city as possible. Petersburg’s most active citizens often attempt to block the mega-projects, but these efforts at research, criticism, and protest are so labor intensive that activists have no time left over to develop alternative projects that would make the city more human- and environmentally friendly. This impasse is also typical for other major Russian cities. On the one hand, it is relatively easy to mobilize one-off protests against a sudden, radical threat to a particular neighborhood, for example, the infill construction that has plagued many parts of Petersburg in the last decade. On the other hand, ordinary citizens have little experience of

collectively opposing the authorities and developers in the courts and legislatures (where in any case the odds are stacked against them).

All these factors affect the configuration of the new metropolitan mainstream in Petersburg. On the one hand, the city attracts a good deal of investment and is seemingly successfully developing its tourist sector. On the other hand, public and private funds are invested in mega-projects (where they often as not evaporate without a trace), in the development of high-end real estate that is inaccessible to the majority of city dwellers, in encouraging beverage and tobacco producers and western automobile manufacturers to build bottling and packing plants and assembly facilities in the city (which end up employing only a tiny fraction of the population), in telecommunications services, and in a fledgling “creative industries” sector. And yet the city’s infrastructure can only handle no more than three million tourists, mostly during the summertime – a figure that

pales in comparison with tens of millions who travel to London, Paris and Berlin every year. The number of Petersburgers employed in tourism and related sectors (the restaurant and hotel industries) is small. Most Petersburgers continue to work in relatively low-paying jobs at enterprises founded during the Soviet period (heavy manufacturing, food processing, radio electronics, scientific research institutes, etc.) and thus do not benefit from the new order.

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