Saint Petersburg, Russia

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 1812, and was the site of the three revolutions (1905, February 1917, October 1917) that led to the overthrow of the tsarist regime. Most of the major development projects in recent years have either been infrastructural or residential. Other major projects include the 400-meter-high Okhta Center skyscraper, a second stage for the Mariinsky Theater, and a new football stadium. In the post-Soviet period, more than 150 historic buildings have been demolished. Many green spaces throughout the city have been built over. As the only large European city in the world with a population over one million, Saint 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 Saint Petersburg is 56 years.

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The New Metropolitan Mainstream in Saint Petersburg

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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 characteristists 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, disinvestment and tertiarisation going hand in hand with urban renewal (“renovans”) projects, flagship projects for upgrading purposes (attracting capital) or the festivisation of the city to attract tourists.

One of the most pressing issues is pollution, due to a neocolonial 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 Marinskiy theater or the new Kirovskaya station – all of them failed so far – or mega-events (the G8, International Economic Forum etc.).

Corruption and need breed low quality and new construction is not more than just built on the verges of illegality. Mega-projects eliminate the rare green spaces and deteriorate ecology and quality of life in the dense city. Disinvestment of height restrictions, 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, fuel-depleted, 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 neoliberal 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 Tomase

Legend

- Urban Region
- Central areas
- Areas of State-Led Reinvestment
- Areas of Private Reinvestment
- Areas of Intense Neighbourhood Upgrading
- Trendy Neighbourhoods
- Gated Communities / Exclusionary Zones
- Areas of Privatisation
- Areas of Investment
- Very High Income Areas
- Areas of Disinvestment
- Subcentres
- Strategic Urban Infrastructure Projects
- Flagship Projects
- Estates
- Failed and Grounded (large) Projects
- Informal Settlements
- Spaces and Zones of Resistance / Alternatives

Saint Petersburg, Russia

Russia 17'075'400Km² * Inhabitants 41.9 Mio.
Urban Region 800Km² * Inhabitants 4'500'000
Grassroots campaign against the infill building project ("Silver Horsehoe") on the square near to Pulkovskaya Street 1 (in southern Saint Petersburg)

This campaign against the Silver Horsehoe project on Pulkovskaya Street 1 (in southern Saint Petersburg) was a highly significant example of how a grassroots movement can successfully challenge the construction of a large-scale development project in a major city.

The Silver Horsehoe project was a high-profile development project that had been approved by the local authorities in Saint Petersburg. The project was to be built on a publicly owned plot of land that had been designated as a public green space. The activists who opposed the Silver Horsehoe project were a group of local residents, environmentalists, and community organizations who were concerned about the impact of the project on the city's green spaces and the quality of life for residents in the area.

The campaign against the Silver Horsehoe project was led by a group of local residents, environmentalists, and community organizations who were concerned about the impact of the project on the city's green spaces and the quality of life for residents in the area. The activists used a range of tactics, including protests, petitions, and legal actions, to challenge the project and to raise awareness about the importance of preserving public green spaces in the city.

Despite the opposition, the Silver Horsehoe project proceeded and was completed in 2010. However, the campaign against the project continued and has led to ongoing debates about the role of grassroots movements in challenging development projects in major cities. The Silver Horsehoe project serves as a reminder of the importance of community engagement and activism in shaping the development of cities and the protection of public green spaces.