

## **Moscow – From a Comfortable towards Just City?**

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### **Introduction**

Moscow has changed dramatically in recent years. Where cars used to make life hard for pedestrians, people now walk on purpose-built sidewalks. Not long ago the city's big parks were in a sorry state, mainly serving as collection ground for trash and meeting point of the many homeless that had nowhere else to go. Now, Gorky Park prides itself with prize winning outdoor installations and attracts the city's hippest crowd. Moscow is also investing in extending and modernising public transportation to reduce its severe traffic congestion. In the words of current mayor Sergey Sobyenin, Moscow is becoming a 'city comfortable for life'.

Since the start of this transformation, Moscow's planners and urban activists are embroiled in a debate over it. Some see the upgrading of public spaces, the extension of pedestrian zones and cycling lanes that Moscow's Mayor Sergey Sobyenin promotes under the agenda 'Moscow, a city comfortable for life', as necessary steps for a sustainable future. Others, most notably those who oppose that agenda, lament that these changes represent nothing but new avenues for corruption. Still others argue that the attempt to transform Moscow into a modern European city represents a strategy of authoritarian modernization, aimed at strengthening the power of the mayor.

Missing from all this back-and-forth: the effects these changes have on Moscow's socio-spatial urban fabric. In this contribution we want to shed light on an often-neglected topic – the question of socially equitable urban development. Towards this we briefly recount urban development in post-socialist Moscow, presenting it as a development from neoliberal *laissez-faire* (Luzhkov) towards neoliberal comfort (Sobyenin). Then we discuss why the current urban development paradigm will not contribute to create a socially just Moscow. Finally, we outline existing potential and starting points for a truly progressive and just city development in Moscow.

### **From neoliberal *laissez-faire* to neoliberal comfort: Urban development in post-socialist Moscow**

In a previous study (Büdenbender & Zupan, 2017), we explored the causes and meaning behind Moscow's urban transformation, presenting it as a quintessential case of neoliberal restructuring. To capture Moscow's urban trajectory from 1992 until today we developed a conceptual framework. It comprises three dimensions characterizing key functions of neoliberal urban policies:

- a) *place-making*: The neoliberal city directs 'all its energies to achieving economic success in competition with other cities' (Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007, p. 4). Operat-

ing on the level of discourses and images, place-making concerns the way a city is presented and represented vis-à-vis other cities in its quest for capital and recognition. Urban planning and design are strategic instruments to position a city in the global scenario of ‘competitive urbanism’ (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 395).

- b) *space-making*: This aspect is concerned with the way the city administration regulates urban development to make space for capital. Whilst city politics is increasingly driven by pluralistic modes of governance, involving non-state actors that seek to promote their particular class interests in and through the city (Grubbauer, 2011), neoliberalism depends on the use of state power in that the state assists capital by selectively both re-treating and intervening on its behalf (Aalbers, 2013; Brenner & Theodore, 2005; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Purcell, 2009). The sphere of urban planning is increasingly geared towards creating conditions for the circulation and accumulation of capital in and through the city.
- c) *scripting*: The neoliberal city is a place where citizens bear the responsibility for their own successes, failures and welfare. In this sense they are expected to be responsible, entrepreneurial and prudent (Leitner et al. 2007). Urban planning and design can be used to mediate and shape the relationship between institutionalised political power and the urban population. Besides fostering a growing ‘responsibilisation’ of the neoliberal self, this aspect includes the containment or rechanneling of political discontent through changing instruments and strategies.

This framework underpinned our analysis of Moscow’s urban evolution over the past two and a half decades, highlighting how the tools aimed at achieving the identified objectives have evolved in response to diverse global and local processes and challenges (see fig. 1; for a detailed account see Büdenbender and Zupan 2017).

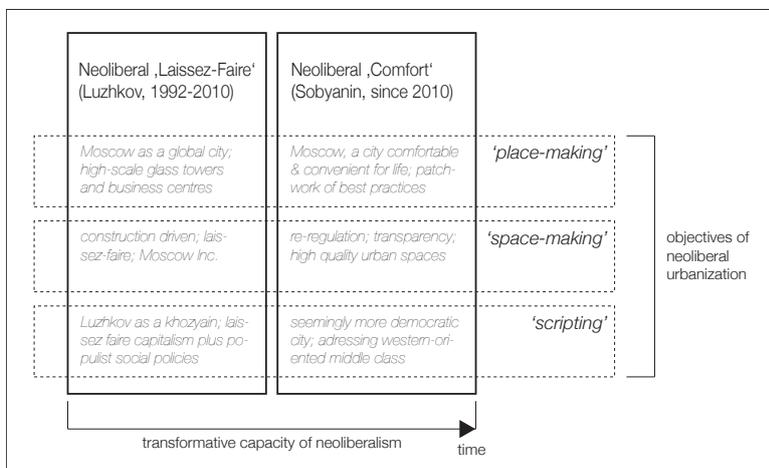


Fig. 1: Evolution of neoliberal urbanism in Moscow, 1992-today

Under Luzhkov the dominant *place-making* strategy sought to create and project an image of Moscow as a global city, as embodied by high-scale glass towers and business centres such as Moscow City. Yet, towards the end of the last decade, the lack of a comprehensive urban development vision and highly disorderly and unregulated construction began to undermine the image Moscow. Responding to increasing contradictions between Moscow’s aspirations as a global city and its actual chaotic development on the one hand, and changing socio-economic conditions locally and globally on the other, the new mayor Sobyanin has sought to maintain Moscow’s global competitiveness. He promoted an image of a city that is comfortable for life, by relying on a patch-work of international urban planning models and state-of-the-art best practices.

Luzhkov followed a construction-driven *space-making* strategy, based on a system of patronage between big business, Moscow Inc., and the city administration. This economic model benefitted from the specific context of transition and the opportunities emerging from privatisation and commercialisation. In addition, rising oil prices and a wall of money searching for yields in the booming early-2000s turned Moscow's real estate into an attractive home for international capital. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, capital dried up and investors became much more selective. In this context, Sobyenin sought to retain expats and capital through a space-making strategy, which relied on re-regulating the urban economy (e.g. construction ban in the city centre, infrastructure projects), increasing transparency (e.g. open competitions) and improving the quality of urban space (e.g. public spaces).

Luzhkov liked to see himself as a *khozyain* – the poignant Russian term for the leader of any social sphere, a home, village or enterprise, who is in charge of business but also takes responsibility for his people (Hoffman, 2011, p. 246). In the chaos and poverty of the 1990s this was more than people usually expected from politicians. With the 'Luzhkov compromise' Muscovites traded transparency and democratic accountability for relative economic stability and well-being. This was a successful strategy of scripting the relationship between the city's official political structures and its population. Responding to Muscovites' changing priorities and a different economic context at the local and global level, Sobyenin *rescripted* Moscow's relation to its citizens from a populist megacity to a seemingly more open and democratic city reflecting the taste of the Western-oriented middle class.

Whilst this development might at first glance look like a departure from neoliberal urban development, it presents, on the contrary, a deepening of neoliberalism. The policies promoted under Sobyenin create the conditions for continuing commercialisation of urban space, international competitiveness and the de-politicisation of authority. In the following sections we put forward and discuss two questions that directly challenge Moscow's current urban development model, namely: 1) *comfortable for whom?*; and 2) *comfortable at what cost?*

### **The Comfortable city is not a Just city**

When Sergey Sobyenin was appointed in 2010, his administration developed a five-year programme called 'Moscow: a city comfortable for life' (Pravitelstvo Moskvyy 2014). Since then the city's image has been transformed from chaotic to comfortable, from authoritarian to democratic, and from construction-oriented to human-centred. However, a closer look at policies and agendas such as Sobyenin's 'Moscow, a city comfortable for life' showed, that they further commodify urban space and polarise society. Indeed, the current urban development strategy fosters the creation of communities that further social exclusion and fragmentation of the urban fabric.

The most vivid example of the current strategy is the way a more differentiated housing supply is introduced. Under Luzhkov the main distinction in residential construction was between luxury mansions for Moscow's super rich and monotonous micro-districts for the masses. Today developers offer a more diversified supply for the wide spectrum of middle and upper-class households (Puzanov 2013; Medvedkov & Medvedkov, 2007). Elite blocs with stone facades in the city centre are aimed at the upper class, whilst colourful bloc neighbourhoods located in Moscow's periphery cater to middle income households. Chief architect Sergey Kuznetsov (2015a) presents this strategy as 'ideological modernisation', away from the ideal of societal equality towards catering to the needs of the individual. However, it is not 'need' but rather the ability to pay that determines the location and type of housing one can access. This type of differentiation of housing supply in terms of type and location furthers socio-

spatial segregation, and Kuznetsov (2015b:70) makes no secret of this fact. When asked by Russia's planning journal, Project Russia, about the possibility of building affordable panel façade houses in the city centre, he responded, 'If a man has put on a proper suit but does not speak the language of high society, what will he do here? This is of no interest to him, nor is it to high society.'

The upgrading of public spaces offers another example of the negative socio-spatial effects of Moscow's current development model. Moscow joined many cities worldwide, in following the new doctrine of so-called human-friendly and sustainable urbanism propagated with great success by the Danish planner Jan Gehl. Gehl's firm worked out a report 'Moscow – Towards a great city for people' in 2013, in which they gave recommendations for the city's makeover, amongst others, how to achieve a reduction of private cars through creating walkable and liveable cityscapes. The recommendations focus on an improvement of Moscow's already most vital parts in the city centre, like selected streets, waterfront and parks. The strategy of upgrading public spaces in Moscow was spearheaded already in 2011 by the renovation of Gorky Park of Culture and Leisure. Sergey Kapkov, then director of the park, and the Strelka postgraduate research school of architecture, design and media transformed Gorky Park from a derelict public area into the meeting point of the city's middle class youth and expats. The renovation of public spaces in line with the tastes and preferences of a certain group is part of what has been referred to as aesthetics politics, one element in the toolbox of neoliberal scripting (Walks, 2006, p. 466). Concrete politics are concealed through the adoption of an aesthetical language that reflects the values and identification of the opposition—the Muscovite youth, creative and middle class. At the same time the “uncultured” masses are made unwelcome, thus contributing to a wider process of socio-spatial segregation (Kalyukin, Borén, & Byerley, 2015, p. 681; Zhelnina, 2014). The model of low investment/high-effect upgrading of public space combining international state of the art design, attractive commercial spaces and free Wi-Fi is currently replicated for the Krymskaya embankment, or the high profile Zaryadye Park.

In this context, city-led initiatives of interactive and participatory development appear to be little more than tools to legitimize neoliberal urban policies. Indeed, Moscow's city administration has taken a particular interest in introducing participative modes of urban planning. However, instead of offering genuine participation tools, it creates a mere semblance of accountability. Initiatives in this field span from websites where citizens can complain to their neighbourhood representative, to interactive strategies such as the social media campaign “Ya ♥ Moskvu” (“I love Moscow”). The portal “Aktivny Grazhdanin” (<http://ag.mos.ru/>) on which Moscow residents can publish complaints is copied from Navalny's successful internet portals, which investigate cases of corruption and draw attention to dilapidated infrastructure. And whilst Strelka's “Chego khochet Moskva” (“What Moscow wants”) website on which “Ya ♥ Moskvu” is modelled explicitly asked for criticism and suggestions, the latter is tightly managed with critical feedback being deleted from its Facebook and V Kontakte (Russian Facebook equivalent) pages (Roberts, 2013). The only form of activism that is actively encouraged is apolitical, civic and patriotic in tone. This resonates with works that find the mimicking of democratic processes to be a key tool in neoliberal urban governance and planning (Purcell, 2009, p. 141).

The creation of socially segregated enclaves – be them housing estates, green spaces or other public spaces – excludes the majority of the population, who are not considered part of this 'new comfort'. In the light of these developments Moscow's current urban policies should be subject to public scrutiny. In particular, they raise the question: comfortable *for whom* and *at what cost*?

## **Cappuccino is Comfortable, but Cities are not**

The ability of programs focussing on inner-city-development, e.g. by making urban spaces ‘comfortable’, has come under recent scrutiny in Western Europe. Indeed, tendencies of growing socio-spatial polarisation in Western European cities call much-celebrated development paradigms, such as the trend towards re-urbanization – an effect of the principles of the compact European city model, into question (e.g. Jessen and Zupan 2017). It appears that one key assumption underlying these policies is flawed, namely that targeted improvements to the city centre will spread out to the rest of the city, which in many ways re-produces the notion of trickle down economics. Gehl for example proposes for Moscow that the upgrading of inner city spaces sets an impulse that leads to the diffusion of similar initiatives to other areas of the city: a high Cappuchino Index in the inner city will in the future lead to a high quality of the urban environment in the whole city – we just need to be patient. It is interesting, that his claim resonates strongly with neoliberal doctrine in general, according to which ‘market processes produce the most efficient allocation of resources, provide incentives that stimulate innovation and economic growth, reward merit, and consequently are conducive to the greatest good of the greatest number’ (Fainstein, 2014, p. 6). Besides the narrowly bourgeois understanding of urbanity underlying many contemporary planning paradigms (as propagated for example by Jan Gehl), this logic of ‘maximizing the greatest good for the greatest number’ (Fainstein 2014:6) completely fails ‘to take into account the impacts of policies on minorities and its blindness to questions of distribution (Campbell & Marshall, 2002; Rawls, 1971, cited in Fainstein 2014:6). While these policies are legitimised by the promise of comfort and well-being for *everyone* in the *future*, they immediately consolidate the position and wealth of the few that are already better-off.

A second issue with the current focus on ‘comfort’ is the fundamental disregard of the inherently political, conflictual and thus, uncomfortable nature of cities. Cities are spaces of conflicts, of tensions, of political negotiation processes – this is where their strength, their productivity, their role as centres for innovation stems from. Thus, using urban paradigms that support the creation of comfortable enclaves for a few (e.g. through focus on inner city development and superficial beautification strategies) will not only have consequences for the majority of the population, who are not considered part of this ‘new comfort’, but in the long run for the entire city – long-term-innovation will not come from like-minded upper class citizens or the hype of the cultural few (Florida, 2002). Similarly, the above mentioned half-hearted and a-political initiatives to engage the population in discussions about the city, cannot accommodate the type of political encounter and debate that makes cities what they are, political organisms. While comfort may be a nice-sounding policy aim it is deeply problematic, because it ‘suggests the possibility of a conflict-free consensus on policies whereas, in fact, vital interests do conflict; it will take more than simply better knowledge and a clearer understanding to produce change’ (Marcuse, 1998, p. 104).

## **Outlook, what is to be done**

To enable progressive and equitable change, urban planning in Moscow needs to be re-balanced. This requires, first of all, a profound shift from favouring certain segments of the population (middle and upper classes) toward providing equal conditions for all people, and zooming out, from the city centre to its periphery. This involves cutting back spending on the beautification and aesthetization of central Moscow. Instead the city should invest in less sexy but important services such as public healthcare, education, rental housing and job creation, primarily in Moscow’s outlying neighbourhoods. Also, a balanced social mix should be considered as the aim instead of social polarization as promoted e.g. by Kuznecov.

| Neoliberal ,Laissez-Faire'<br>(Luzhkov, 1992-2010)   | Neoliberal ,Comfort'<br>(Sobyanin, since 2010)   | Steps towards<br>a Just City?   |                       |
|--|--|---|-----------------------|
| <i>Moscow as a global city;<br/>high-scale glass towers<br/>and business centres</i>             | <i>Moscow, a city comfortable<br/>&amp; convenient for life; patch-<br/>work of best practices</i> | <i>Moscow, a city that serves<br/>all its inhabitants; endo-<br/>genous potential</i>         | <i>'place-making'</i> |
| <i>construction driven; lais-<br/>sez-faire; Moscow Inc.</i>                                     | <i>re-regulation; transparency;<br/>high quality urban spaces</i>                                  | <i>re-regulation; ,differen-<br/>ce-principle'; ,Keynesian'<br/>counter cyclical policies</i> | <i>'space-making'</i> |
| <i>Luzhkov as a khozyain; lais-<br/>sez faire capitalism plus po-<br/>pulist social policies</i> | <i>seemingly more democratic<br/>city; addressing western-ori-<br/>ented middle class</i>          | <i>acknowledgement of the<br/>urban as a conflictuous,<br/>political arena</i>                | <i>'scripting'</i>    |

Fig. 2: Departing from neoliberal urbanism: Steps towards a Just City?

It is not enough to tackle these issue by relying on an arbitrarily selected work of international best practices, especially as those practices are coming under increasing criticism in the West itself, as we indicated above. Instead, policymakers and planners should focus on local assets and re-evaluate existing endogenous potential. Soviet Moscow could, for example, serve as reference point with regard to strategies that further social equality and avoid economic segregation. This would require putting an end to deregulation and laissez-faire urbanism, a key characteristic of post-socialist cities. The city should not sell off its land — public landownership is a Soviet legacy — and instead develop a long-term strategic land reserve policy. Cities like Vienna show that ideals like solidarity and equality do not have to be thrown overboard in a global world, controlled by financial markets and ad hoc funding. Instead, these aims can still serve today as fundamental backbones of urban development. Moscow has all the assets needed to take this path.

In Moscow, several practical steps can be taken to start a more just urban development. The critical deconstruction of Sobyanin's comfortable city (for whom and at whose cost), for example, can be a starting point to work toward alternative visions for a future Moscow.

Research, education and journalism are crucial outlets for such debate. Strelka, a Moscow-based postgraduate research school of architecture, design and media, could play an active, and most importantly, critical role in this process. When Strelka was founded in 2009 it was the first educational platform in Russia exploring questions of urban development and design. But then, Strelka became one of the city's key collaborators and central actor in shaping Sobyanin's urbanism. Indeed, Moscow's administration was very successful in appropriating non-governmental initiatives. This approach provides three important advantages. First, it gives the city bureaucracy, not exactly a trendsetter, access to state-of-the-art critical discourses, debates and practices. Second, it creates the semblance of transparent, bottom-up urbanism, reflecting popular demands for more openness and accountability. Third, it enables the city administration to take control over these initiatives, undermining their critical potential whilst simultaneously using their popularity to promote its own goals. As one of our interviewees explained, 'it became clear to politics that urbanism is a form of realisation of politics [...] it allows the channelling of critical energy in a constructive direction' (Interview III 2014). Whilst this means that 'the city scape really becomes better', Strelka's transformation from 'from dissidents (...) to protagonists (...) also means that the institutions that had a certain freedom [Strelka] exchanged that freedom for influence...political influence and political success' (ibid.). Thus, in our opinion, in recent years ties between the city and Strelka have grown too close; the school has a contract worth 13 million Euros to develop a guideline for Moscow's beautification.

The same holds true for planning journal Project Russia, which was founded in the 1990s to spur international exchange of ideas and practices. The journal has become increasingly commercialized, relying on political backing in the determination of its focus, thus losing the potential to bring up other agendas or inspire alternative discourses. Instead, there are growing number of issues dedicated to political projects like the upgrading of public spaces including parks, embankments and streets (3/2013, 1/2015, 1/2016) or the block city and housing supply (3/2014, 3/2015). Mostly these issues, however, lack a critical examination but act as promoters of these strategies. To ensure that they can provide an outlet for critical and innovative debates — a necessary condition for progressive urbanism — platforms like Strelka and Project Russia must regain their independence from official politics and commercial interests.

Making Moscow a more equitable city is a complex and delicate process. We understand that each specific political context plays an important role in setting the frame, within which change can be pursued. For example, we find that cities with strong government institutions and active state-involvement produce the most equitable outcome for their citizens. We are well aware however, that this depends crucially on the nature of a specific government, the interests it represents (as opposed to the ones it claims to represent) and the legal and institutional environment within which it operates. We are therefore hesitant to put forward a to-do list, concerning Moscow's urban future. Instead, this piece is an attempt to foster a debate about exactly these issues, whilst cautioning against the uncritical adoption of practices and paradigms from the West. No matter what form the specific policies towards a more just city will take, they should depart from the trickle down assumption, promising future improvements at the cost of current pain, and should instead be governed by the 'difference principle', whereby policies should only improve the situation of those better off when 'doing so is to the advantage of those less fortunate' (Rawls, 1971, p. 75).

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