

From Traditional Soviet Microdistricts towards Lively Neighborhoods

Yana Golubeva, BNTU, Belarus

1. Traditional Soviet Microdistrict

1.1 Typology

Microdistrict, so called «Mikrorayon» is a basic urban planning unit in the soviet and post-soviet cities. The unit is defined by the arterial roads, no through streets run through the lot only the internal driveways. The buildings within the given plot are usually formed according to the compositional idea; they kind of flow in the space, the borders between the public/private/semi-private are blurred.

The scale of the unit itself, the scale of the buildings, absence of transitional objects/spaces and overall typization dissolve the sense of belonging; make «Mikrorayon» the generic unit, where individual is not taken into account.

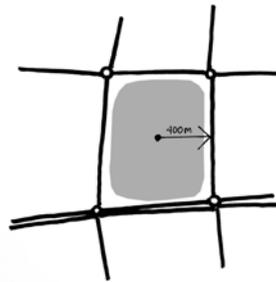


Figure 1: Microdistrict Unit

1.2 Perception Shift, Why the Typology Does not Fit into Current State of Society Development

Today it is understood that individual leadership is a driving force for economical/social etc. development. Good cities serve as incubators for generating individual and public activity; they are designed and managed in a way to create and support active community.

The neighborhood community is a basic unit in the structure of the society. It is a place for people of different age groups and interests to mix and interact. It is the place for each city dweller to express himself/herself.

The idea is to work with the Microdistrict as a widespread urban unit in Russian and neighboring countries and adapt it to the current societal needs. Microdistrict should be understood not only as the physical unit but also the platform for neighborhood community.



Figure 2: Microdistrict. Street Art.

2. Lively Neighborhoods

The good and lively neighborhood is a place with the strong sense of community. The place one feels belonging to, the place one wants to activate.

2.1 Principles of Good Neighborhood Planning

There cannot be generic guidelines of how to make a good neighborhood, each project is a unique and special case, but there are several well established basic principles that are worth to be taken into account [1]:

- a good neighborhood is a place with **identity**, it can be easily distinguished from the surroundings, it has a more or less perceptible physical edge, but also clear mental image;
- a good neighborhood has a **block structure** with a network of through streets;
- a good neighborhood is **mixed-use**;
- a good neighborhood is **diverse**, is has a variety of dwelling types, so that the young and the old, singles and families, the poor and the wealthy, can all find places to live;
- a good neighborhood has a **center**, a common neighborhood public space is needed to unite all community members;
- a good neighborhood is **pedestrian friendly**;
- a good neighborhood is **child friendly**, incorporates facilities and spaces for children;
- a good neighborhood is **green**;

2.2 Microdistrict Reloaded – the evolving movement towards rethinking the space between buildings in search for neighborhood identity and sense of belonging

There are a number of initiatives in Russian cities today that can work as the showcases for neighborhood redevelopment strategies. Some of them are very simple bottom-up actions; some illustrate the possible top-down approach. These are just the first steps which can start the whole movement for making our cities better.

The Roof Garden by Alla Sokol – The Bottom-up

Alla Sokol is a St. Petersburg resident who has engaged her neighbors in the work on their common rooftop garden, where they now have all kinds of plants. Her goal is to spread her practical knowledge and make the city greener through the work of every citizen.

This project is among the initiatives included in the «Do It Yourself» marathon, which is now a platform to promote active public engagement in city redevelopment/adaptation throughout Russia.



Figure 3: The Roof Garden by Alla Sokol. <http://www.the-village.ru>

Marfino, Moscow – The Top-down

Marfino is a newly constructed microdistrict, but the scale and the method of construction are inherited from the Soviet tradition. The district is composed of 14-17 storey typical prefabricated buildings, which form 6 courtyards.

The district was finished at a time when the Crisis started, so it turned out that in order to sell the flats it is necessary to do more than it was done before in promoting the neighborhood.

The competition was organized to give the touch of uniqueness to the place. The winner of the competition, PlanAr studio has developed the following:

- wayfinding system linked to the iconic sculptures (giraffe, rhino, elephant, camel, kangaroo, antelope) inserted into each of the courtyards; thus promoting a sense of belonging to the particular courtyard;
- number of unique public spaces for children and adults, thus providing the good quality attractive environment and encouraging active public space use;
- the central place for the neighborhood, which was not realized to the full extent, but still is a symbolic point in the structure;
- series of small scale pavilions, which link to the central place, these that can be freely used by local residents, thus encouraging local meetings and providing potential for future pavilion use interpretation.
- circular cycle route, running through the 6 courtyards, thus physically uniting them into the neighborhood, also promoting child friendly environment;

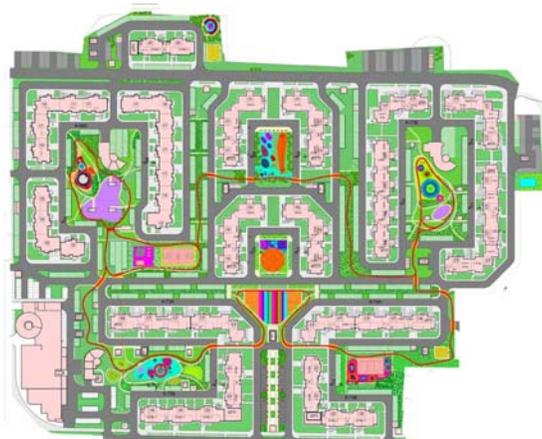


Figure 4: Marfino Landscape plan. PlanAr Studio



Figure 5: Marfino Wayfinding. PlanAr Studio



Figure 6: Marfino Iconic Sculpture. Personal photo



Figure 7: Marfino Pavilions. Personal photo

3. Case study Microdistrict Kamennaya Gorka, Minsk, Belarus

The tradition of microdistrict typology is still very strong among the planning institutions in Russia and neighboring countries. It is supported by the housing production industry, governance, existing land management. As there is still demand for housing stock people go for square meters regardless of the quality of the environment. And bulk cheap prefabricated high-rise are being constructed in Greenfields.

It might not be realistic to change the working scheme of mass housing construction today, but there should be mechanisms that would allow existing and newly constructed dwelling districts to change and evolve over time into more lively neighborhoods. The individuals should be invited to actively inhabit and adapt such places.

My interest is to investigate one particular microdistrict and offer site based solutions. This is work in progress, which is my personal initiative, included in the study process at the Belarusian National Technical University.

The area of the case study is the newly constructed microdistrict Kamennaya Gorka 1 in Minsk, Belarus.

3.1 Analysis of the Current Situation

Kamennaya Gorka 1 is a microdistrict 0,7 km x 1 km in size. It is declared to have the block structure, but no streets intersect the district. There are 8 housing groups placed around the central green, where there is space for kindergartens. The southern part borders main city avenue and there are 4 free standing towers and space for a hypermarket.

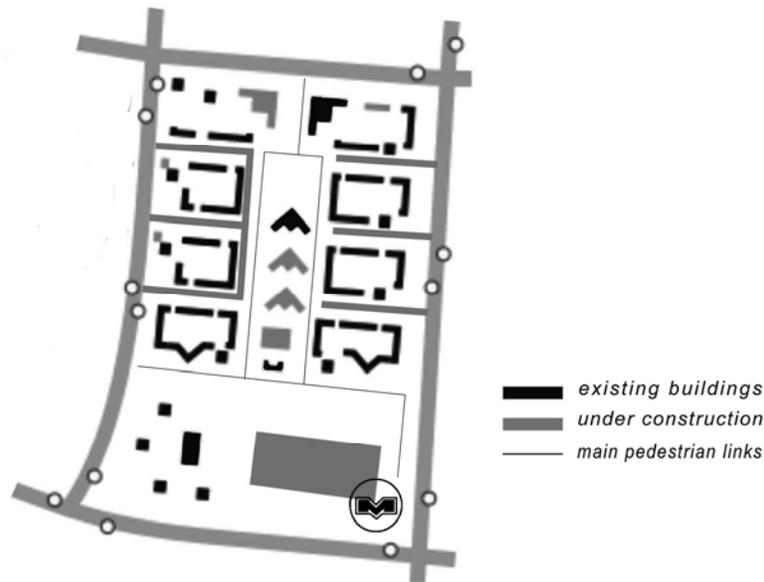


Figure 8: Kamennaya Gorka 1. Today



Figure 9: Parachute jump from the roof of a 25-storey building in Kamennaya Gorka [5]

The analysis of the Kamennaya Gorka 1 district has raised a lot of issues: The district is constructed according to the **architecture of quantity principle**. The main criteria – the square meters of housing is fulfilled. Currently Kamennaya Gorka 1 has about 400 000 sq.m. of housing, it is home to approximately 16 000 inhabitants. There are only two types of dwellings: towers of up to 25 storey height and sectional buildings of the average 9 storey heights.

The microdistrict is a rational combination of **typical buildings placed on a surface**, there is no individual architectural design, so the spaces between buildings do not form an interconnected system, they are the leftover.

The housing dominates. But there are two more dominant features: **places and spaces for children and for cars**. These are the two main issues that are controlled by the planning standards, so they take over the microdistrict area leaving everything else aside.

The district is very plain. It offers **limited variety of urban environments**. The typology of an urban street, of an urban square, of a green boulevard and other is missing.

The neighborhood is big enough to support commercial activity, but there is no spatial expression for that. Pavilions for shops are distributed evenly on the outer border of the area; private commercial enterprises start to appear within the housing units.

There is a lot of green space, but **no qualitative green environments**.

In general, local residents are happy with their living conditions; their main concern is the absence of shops and services. But they do not communicate much with each other and do not really participate in any decision making process in their neighborhood. There is obviously a potential for individual action, we could find some artistic work within the housing blocks, which talks about the wish for a making a place more a «home».



Figure 10: Kamennaya Gorka 1. Local Art. Personal photo

3.2 Strategies

The task is to search for appropriate means to turn Kamennaya Gorka microdistrict into a lively neighborhood. There are a number of hard and soft strategies that can be implemented overtime with both the bottom-up and top-down approaches.

3.2.1 Hard strategies, which require planning and investment

As we are dealing with the built form that is already in place the task is to focus on the space in between and find the right way to structure and intensify this space.

The whole neighborhood requires a more **comprehensive navigational system**. There have to be clear pedestrian routes, which would link main destinations and main public spaces.

The leftover space along the pedestrian links should be redeveloped to accommodate **various types of public spaces**. It is not enough just to plan spaces for small children - youth, adults and elderly people have to have spaces within the neighborhood as well.

Within this navigational structure the main routes and places have to be intensified with function, thus achieving **different urban character**, the character of centrality (street with shops/cafes, meeting squares etc.)

There is a room **to work with scale**. The missing functional blocks (for example children centers, gathering places for the local residents) can be injected within the existing built form; these could work as a shift to a more human scale appearance.

The microdistrict requires the main central point, which has to appear in the form of **mixed-use pedestrian friendly centre**, which would be linking the district to the to the metro (tube) station.

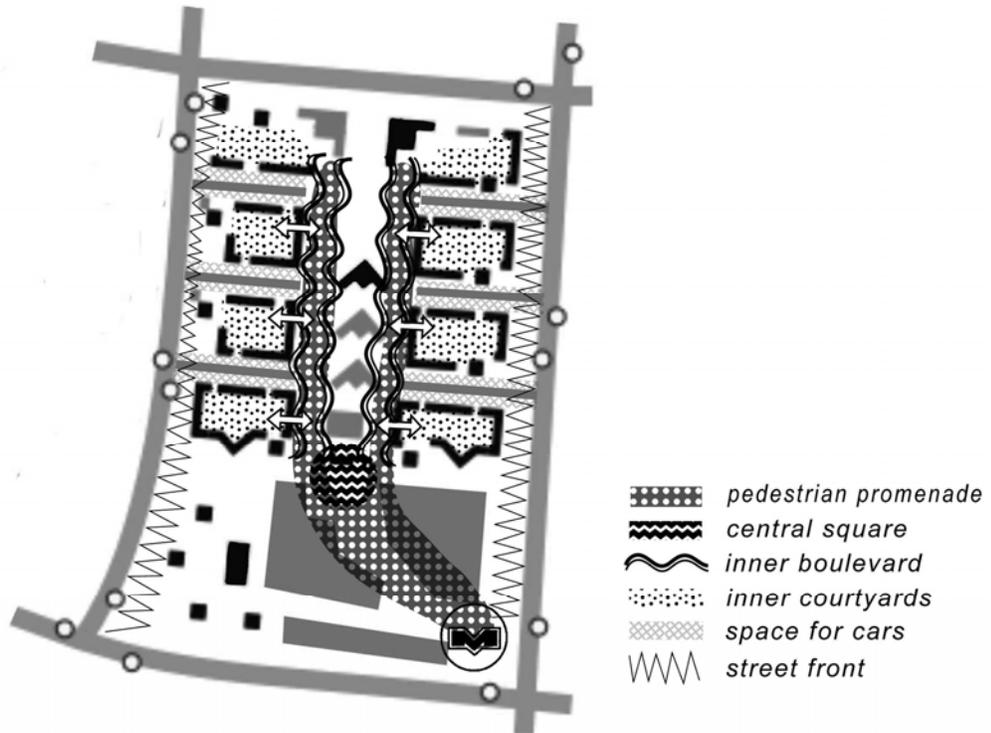


Figure 11: Kamennaya Gorka 1. Different Character Areas to Create



Figure 12: Kamennaya Gorka 1. The Inner Boulevard

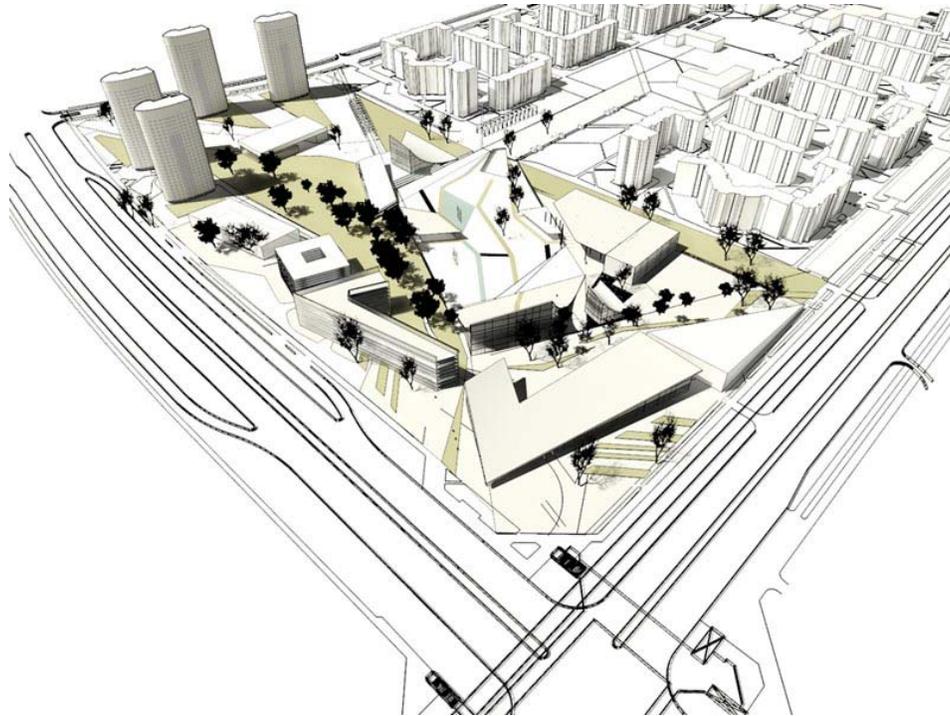


Figure 13: Kamennaya Gorka 1. The Design for the Microdistrict Centre.
Diploma work of Bozhena Hoida

3.2.2 Soft strategies

The soft strategies that would promote active participation of residents in their microdistrict development/adaptation could be multiple, for instance:

- website, which would serve as a platform for the residents to indicate what is there in the district, what is happening, could promote local service exchange etc.;
- public art strategy, the way of building the unique appearance of the place;
- festivals/events;
- activities for children.

Conclusion

The topic of this ISOCARP Congress is Fast Forward, Planning in the Dynamic Urban Context, but the true is that cities in Russia have reached their pick growth, the population is declining and it is now not about the pace of growth, but more about the quality to achieve. We enter the phase of redevelopment, which requires joint action of multiple urban actors and the goal is to raise the individual leaders starting from the viewpoint of the immediate surroundings – the microdistrict unit.

References

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5. *Parachute jump from the roof of a 25-storey building in Kamennaya Gorka* <http://realt.onliner.by/2012/04/27/jump-2/>, accessed 06 July 2012