

Challenges of Contemporary Town-planning and Outlines of New Ideology for Urban Planning in Russia

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- How come in most Russian cities there is no environment for living but, in the best case, there is a random activity aimed at urban beautification?
- How come in Russia there is no necessary activity and quality processes for development of urban areas at lower/ local level?

Answers to these questions will help us to form a context of basic requirements for the transformation of the sense of the profession of urban planner in Russia.

1. Current Urban Development Situation in Russia. Problematization

Contemporary town planning situation in Russia was formed on the combination of several factors, most of which were negative per se. A complete analysis of all factors requires more detailed article, therefore I'll focus just on the factors which influence quality of Russian cities urban environment the most.

1.1 Genesis of Soviet Urban-Planning Model

Russian Federation is undoubtedly the main world center of Soviet urban-planning model. This is due to historical peculiarities of country's development, when during 74 years the state was trying to conduct and experiment of building a new Communist society. During the Soviet period not only 62% of all urban settlements were founded but also a great leap in urbanization was made – from 1920s till 1960s the number of citizens raised from 15% up to 70%.

Urban planning was one of the most important tools of building communism in one-sixth part of land. All of USSR urban population was supposed to work and live in a communist or at least socialist way.

As a result in 1990 95% of Russian population lived in urban settlements of different kind. Nowadays we have to admit that after 20 years of post-Soviet development overwhelming part of population still lives in the urban-planning reality which was formed by means of planned economy.

What was the typical Soviet city? It was not only the complex of typical multi-stored apartment houses but more importantly – the model of urban structure which was created entirely for the needs of working class and industrial economy. Russia owns hundreds of millions of square meters of apartment houses and thousands of square kilometers of urban landscape which are characterized by dominance of typical urban-planning and architecture decisions, strict approach to functional zoning and strong bond between living areas and industrial sites. Such kind of non-dynamic and industrialized settlement forced citizens to live in a simple circle "apartment-job-apartment".

The model of Soviet city on the 1st stage of its development (1920 – 1930) had plenty of certain advantages in comparison with predominant western urban-planning practice was perceived as indisputable innovation. However, later on soviet urban-planning model stagnated while European urban-planning met economic and social challenges of time.

It's important to admit that by the end of 1960s soviet urban-planning model lost its flexibility and stepped into regression. Central planning, planned economy and constant lack of capital

investments (which were redistributed for the purposes of military and industrial sectors) led to excessive standardization (which soon became a single option) and increasing ignoring of local geographical, cultural historical and socioeconomic peculiarities.

By the 1980s socialist model completely degraded methodologically and came to providing people with primitive accommodation including water supply, heat supply and sewerage. All other problems were left to further generations.

It seemed that 1990s led to complete collapse of planned socialist urban-planning model but the reason of that was not change in attitudes but tough economic crisis. It in its turn led to shutdown of housing development beyond big or oil-mining cities.

During 2000s fast growth of economy in Russia gave an impulse to a construction boom in the country. This situation formed a possibility for transformation of Russian city from industrial strictly-planned state towards dynamic and creative centers for work and living. After 10 years we can say that opportunity of cities positive development and transformation was almost completely lost, even if you take into consideration huge negative Soviet background.

Unfortunately Russian urban-planning practice of last 10 years became a service element of old-fashioned urban-planning model. In 2000s in Russia a lot of elements of soviet urban planning were restored while no qualified staff were available, legal nihilism and developers dictate were common practice.

As result millions of square meters of residential and commercial housing appeared which were even of lower quality than soviet large-scale housing construction. In the end of crisis residential housing failed to fulfill its last purpose – providing people with relatively good and cheap accommodation.

Only in the period of 2005-2010 housing affordability index in Russia doubled. Low quality real estate became a tool of speculation which carries risks for the economy. Thus the strongest decrease in Soviet urban planning model efficiency happened not in 1980-s but in 2000s.

The most of state resources allocated to city development in 2000s were indeed spent on mass projects of beautification and providing only formal quantitative indicators. Given dilapidation of key assets, such situation can lead to new turn of urban environment crisis.

1.2. Factors and Consequences of Low Attractiveness and Competitiveness.

Assessment of convenience and demand of urban space in Russian cities (founded back in planned Soviet economy) has already been characterized by urban professionals and city dwellers a long time ago. And this assessment clearly describes industrial cities as uncomfortable for life of modern generations.

Negative aspects of described type of urban settlements were identified Such simplified kind of a city was designed for a simplified model of urban life. In terms of planned Soviet economy, when people were not allowed to change their place of work and living freely, Soviet city played a role of penal colony for its dwellers.

Let's name main characteristics of Soviet urban-planning model.

How can we characterize an industrial city?

- “Tough” functional zoning
- “Tough” factors of planning for the future;
- Dominance of centralized control schemes of city management systems for city operation
- Total ignorance of local features when planning and urban development. In contrast to standard – a priori, marginal, regressive.

- Dominance of economic priorities over social ones;

Consequently, this is a simplified representation of a city as an industrial and not a dynamic object with even more conditional representation of dominating ways of life of its citizens. Simplified models of cities were an expression of a simplified way of people's lives. In terms of a command system of economy where people were tied up to the place of residence registration and place of work, a city played a role of a certain penal colony for its dwellers.

To sum up, the main consequences of such situation are:

- Costs of maintenance of a Soviet city per capita are already higher than in analogue Western European cities.
- Migration outflow of population from almost all the cities where there is no economic function of resource rents service, meaning cities are too simple in terms of structure. They are no dynamic systems and incapable to create a necessary variety of functions and opportunities.
- Russian cities do not play a role of boosters for structural transformation of Russian economy due to the factor of migration outflow of economic and socially active population which deprives them of the source for successful development.

2. Outlines of New Ideology of Urban Planning in Russia

Taking the heritage of the past and current development features into consideration, Russia is facing a necessity of creating a unique mechanism to “reload” its urban planning politics. It is through this mechanism it is possible to make master pulse of qualitative transformation of Russian cities, and, consequently, development of many important social-economic processes. This is especially important taking current social economic forecasts for the nearest 5-10 years into account. These forecasts demonstrate that should expect high-rate economic growth and customer's activity which we could witness in the in the first decade of the century.

To be able to formulate the outlines of politics of the future we have to start out from limitations of existing activities (they are not systematic and cannot be qualified for “politics”) Urban planning crisis in Russia, has become a consequence of the burden of the past and two systemic problems of social economic life of the country:

- absence of well-defined state policy in the sphere of urban development regulation: both at lower level (lack of municipal management mechanisms) and upper level (lack of measures to stimulate priority urban development issues).
- rigid orientation of private and state investors on highly profitable construction projects with higher rate of return and at the same time – low effect from state investment into capital-intensive infrastructure construction projects.

As a result, in the majority of Russian cities where population exceeds 50 000 citizens (30% of Russian urban settlements) the only positive result was primary consumption and leisure sector revolution. Retail sector was booming, leisure, office and hotel infrastructure were also developing in a decent speed. Rapid growth of budget revenues gave an opportunity to fulfill some local improvement and modernization of engineer and transport infrastructure.

But these changes are insufficient to reverse overall negative trend since they do not affect 70% of Russian urban settlements (mostly small ones). Moreover, those changes are often often of low quality and in a longer perspective could reduce towns appeal in terms of living and business.

Taking these circumstances into account, the country needs to reload the mechanisms of urban space development; otherwise, otherwise, ineffective costs and low tempos of economic growth will not allow creating well-developed and attractive urban centers even in ten years.

New urban politics means setting a concrete goal and it [politics] has to be based on solving those specific issues which are being stagnated at the current stage of urban development in Russia.

The goal of urban development of the Russian Federation can be described in the following way:

The country needs to create an effective and world-competitive chain of cities along all the inhabited territory. Those cities have to be a core source for domestic and outward investment. Domestic investment can be produced by educated and gainfully occupied local population. Outward investment will also be brought through labor resources and available basic infrastructure.

Basic methodological foundations for new urban planning politics are:

- Transition from planning of administrative units in the planning of naturally formed socio-economic conformations, e.g. agglomerations;
- The most important task of a general plan is to initiate co-operation and interaction of a wide range of stakeholders of urban development. That will provide a greater stability of the urban system, compared to rigidly centralized and hierarchical management format.

The major performance criteria for urban planning should be:

- taking into account existing development processes;
- not just planning of projects but launching of new positive development processes;
- openness of all supported and launching processes for the future transformation in different stages.

To be able to make the goal true, the country needs to intensify actions in the following directions:

- Including citizens into the control process in the field of urban development. Lack of feedback from citizens (who appear to be the main customers of the service “city”) actually means the continuation of the centrally planned urban planning model when the decision-making center is outside the urban community. Such situation leads to predominance of urban projects aimed on getting only short-term commercial or political dividends against public interest
- Modernization of the building complex of the country. 90% of all the construction facilities have been created in the Soviet time and they are designed to copy typical architecture and urban planning decisions. The growth of real estate development volumes in Russian cities in 2005-2008 has not led to increasing the level of affordable housing and the used technologies have not provided the new level for the building complex. Further copying of the typical urban planning projects of high rise apartment buildings has shaped new considerable volumes of energy-intensive and short-life objects.
- Improvement of effectiveness of state investment in basic infrastructure and transport infrastructure of cities. Soviet cities were designed and built following the logic of low level of motorization and mobility of population under conditions of non-market value of energy resources. The building boom in the first decade of the century has only exacerbated those problems. The state could not increase the pace of the infrastructure construction in the proper amount. The government expenditure race in the absence of new modern solutions, technologies and cutting of products costs has led to lagging behind the needs.
- Long-term private investment in developer’s projects. Situation when a developer will take responsibility for further maintenance of a building and bear all reputation risks caused by property future costs decrease will be able to motivate adjustment of the technologies of a better quality for private co-financing of infrastructure projects. In case the existing

situation continues, it might lead that Russian cities will be built-up with buildings that have a maintenance cycle less than those in the Soviet past.

- Modernization of the system of education and project activity in the field of urban planning in construction. Research, urban planning and engineering schools in Russia following the logic of gaining quick profit have finally lost the ability to generate brand new ideas and strategic solutions. Ten years of a building boom allowed multiple increase in the production volume but did not allow making this production up-to-date and suitable for international challenges of urban development. The system of education has also come down since it is focused more on quantitative but not qualitative criteria to professional training.
- Including goal-setting practice into the field of urban development. There is no clear state approach towards the cities of the future, therefore, there are legal opportunities for realization ineffective and, quite often, harmful urban projects.

It is clear that realization of all the approaches mentioned above is impossible without making investment climate in the country better (which is a certain condition for long-term investment). Though the situation of further lack of goal-setting practice in the field of urban development will unavoidably lead to step by step creation urban systems which are even more ineffective than those used in Soviet time.