

Brade, I. and Neugebauer, C.S. (eds.): Urban Eurasia – Cities in Transformation. Berlin, DOM publishers, 2017. 288 p.

The book invites us to a journey across the cities of the former Soviet Union, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok, from Baku to Almaty, and intends to show us how urban space and society have changed and are still changing during the time of transition.

The album-like publication is the 58th volume in the “Basics” series of DOM publishers, a series featuring a wide range of topics in architecture and urban development. This format addresses a broad audience with short texts, informative diagrams, and plenty of photographs.

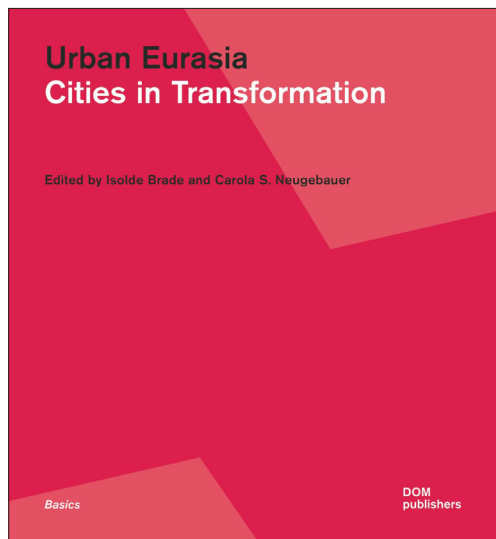
The volume heavily draws on the scientific results of “ira.urban”, a 4-year-long international research project conducted by the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig. The “ira.urban” or “Urban re-configuration in post-Soviet space” project aimed to investigate how cities in the former Soviet Union answer the challenges of economic and social changes generated by the emergence of new nation states and globalisation. The research project was supported by an international scientific network, the participants of which also contributed to the current volume.

The latent question whether urban development in cities east of the former Iron Curtain after the socialist, or Soviet, regime is still influenced by past practices, heritage and settings, or whether the new trends of globalisation, individualisation and, for example, neo-liberalisation are more significant factors, has long been of concern to urban researchers. Numerous

publications have been released analysing the political, economic, and social changes, and in some cases their consequences in the urban spaces of Central and Eastern European post-socialist cities (cf. edited collections of ANDRUSZ, G. *et al.* 1996; ENYEDI, G. 1998; HAMILTON, I. *et al.* 2005; TSENKOVA, S. and NEDOVIĆ-BUDIĆ, Z. 2006; STANILOV, K. 2007). But the other, much larger part of the former Eastern Bloc, namely the ex-Soviet states and their cities, were hardly studied by urban researchers, at least till the 2010s. Since then, the work of urban anthropologists in particular has come to the forefront in post-Soviet urban society and urban space research (cf. ALEXANDER, C. *et al.* 2007; GDANIEC, C. 2010; DARIEVA, T. *et al.* 2011; SCHRÖDER, P. 2017). This body of research examines primarily the appropriation and use of public urban spaces by different social groups, mainly in the form of case studies.

The benefit of the current collection is that it takes a comparative approach: it tries to make comparisons in time, including pre-socialist and socialist times as well as the period during and after transition, and also to compare cities in the post-Soviet space, besides giving insights into several urban topics such as housing, infrastructure, economy, planning, and the social perception and appropriation of urban space. The major questions are, among others, who the winners and losers of the transition are, who can be identified as key actors, and to what extent are forces driven (still) by the state?

The first chapter outlines the context by taking a macro-scale view of the urban network. It presents the characteristics of the Soviet urban system and the challenges that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR, such as the growing competition among cities. Firstly, FROST investigates spatial changes in the post-Soviet city system, claiming that the urban network is being transformed from a relatively balanced structure (as an outcome of spatial equalisation) to a polarised system. Urban shrinkage heavily affects both medium- and small-size towns, and especially monocities (mono-functional cities). Meanwhile, capital cities, large urban centres and their satellite towns, and cities close to specific natural resources like gas or oil, keep growing in significance. The process of polarisation is confirmed by ZUBAREVICH as well, adding that it is not accompanied by significant changes in the urban hierarchy or in inter-urban ties: “a classical centre-periphery model is a privilege in this space” (p. 39). Although polycentricity will grow within the post-Soviet region, and the role of Moscow as primary centre is gradually eroded, there are no other cities that can be considered as strong alternative poles. The contribution by SGBINEV and TUVIKENE



raises issues regarding the maintenance of urban infrastructure, with a special focus on public transport, as well as the social consequences of the termination of subsidised provisions, e.g. in housing. “The end of infrastructure provision sounded the disintegration of society” (p. 55) and sometimes may have enhanced the nostalgia for the Soviet Union. That is also why the two authors suggest to “draw attention to social and cultural aspects of infrastructure, their role for identity formation and power relations” (p. 60).

The second chapter deals with urban housing and how planning, construction, and maintenance have changed during the transformation in the three main types of residential areas: in the inner-city, on large housing estates, and in suburban areas. GOLUBCHIKOV, BADIYINA and MAKHROVA report on inner-city reconstructions, ranging from less violent forms such as *kommunalki* (shared homes) resettlement and renovation to newly-built gentrification, often at the site of destroyed urban heritage, or at the expense of public and green spaces. Due to weak regulation or the improper application of rules, construction developments, e.g. high-rise housing, could also result in highly eclectic urban landscapes. Nonetheless, these phenomena are similarly known in post-socialist countries (HIRT, S. 2012). The study by NEUGEBAUER provides a good overview of the ideological background, urban design concepts, socio-political dimensions and the social appreciation of Soviet mass housing, while making comparisons with their Western European counterparts. NEUGEBAUER also scrutinises the legal and informal changes in housing practices. A revival of mass housing on the urban fringes of growing cities, either as private investment or as national housing programmes is also noticeable. GOLUBCHIKOV and MAKHROVA describe housing processes in exurban areas: previous urban-sprawl in Soviet and early post-Soviet times by *dachas* (second home for non-permanent use), and more recently, often at the site of these dacha areas, by *kottedzhi* (cottages, villas), or even by gated, elite settlements. At the same time, city edges are also characterised by newly-built mass housing, giving home to less well-off families, and even the informal settlements of migrants are present. As a result, “the periphery has also emerged as a territory where social inequality is spatially most visible” (p. 178).

The third chapter addresses urban economic transformation, primarily the change in the institutional environment (transition to market economy) and the structural shift due to the growing importance of the service sector and consumer goods industry, and their impact on urban structure. KUZNETSOV, CHETVERIKOVA and BARONINA give evidence in their study that de-industrialisation is not an overarching tendency in the post-Soviet space, and there are some successful examples of industrial modernisation in metallurgy

and car production. These developments are financed either from state investments or from private capital, which often means foreign, especially Asian, direct investments. Some of the monotowns were effectively turned into *naukograds*, science cities – again, with the help of state subsidy. However, in (mono)cities where unsuccessful industries are present (e.g. agricultural machinery, civil electronics), social problems are not analysed. AXENOV discusses the retail evolution in the post-Soviet urban space, first the flood of kiosks and ground floor capitalism (see also TOSICS, I. 2006), and later on the more regulated, but at the same time also more exclusionary and exclusive shopping centres. These commercial space developments are responses to the insufficient supply during the Soviet era and to the high demand in post-Soviet times. Moreover, petty vending as source of (additional) income was and still is a response to the impoverishment of the population. TURGEL and VLASOVA give examples in their contribution to tertiarisation in the cityscape, based on experiences from Yekaterinburg and its region. The restructuring of the economy affected both inner city areas and the urban edge. The function of buildings has changed, former industrial headquarters have been turned into banks, offices, or commercial buildings. Retail suburbanisation took place especially through international retail chains.

In the final, fourth chapter, cities are studied as “material stage to display and means to negotiate societal diversity and conflicts” (p. 234). Its essays deal with micro-scale urbanity; social and cultural aspects are considered. The study by REKHVIASHVILI and NEUGEBAUER focuses on the use of urban public space. On the one hand, citizens use urban public space as a stage for (pro or contra) protests, and they use it in their everyday life, in the routines and practices they have partly inherited from pre-Soviet or Soviet times. On the other hand, the state utilises urban public space to foster nation building, which might also be a form of how political power is still being projected on urban space. Materialised forms of nation building and memory policy are the main topics of the contribution by KINOSSIAN. In former Soviet member states built Soviet legacies, architecture, and monumental art have been handled in various ways in the post-Soviet period. In some places they have been destroyed or removed (e.g. in Ukraine, Azerbaijan), while elsewhere they remained untouched. They are either intentionally kept in the absence of other unifying symbols (Russia), or are simply neglected (for the Central and Eastern European context see CZEPZYŃSKI, M. 2008). In addition, built heritage from pre-Soviet times in historic cities is in danger of economic transformation and marketisation.

The cultural landscape “has become a battlefield of preservation values and interests of profit extraction” (p. 262). This phenomenon, profit maximisa-

tion, is also explained by APPENZELLER in the section “Urban planning and governance”. He argues for “engaging citizens more actively and reducing the hierarchical system that is vulnerable to corruption and all too easily hijacked by the political or economic ambition of individuals” (p. 273). Western European planning tools, however, can only be adapted to post-Soviet countries to a lesser extent. Low civil activity, especially towards urban issues, and the weak institutionalisation of civil society are discussed by MEZENTSEV, NEUGEBAUER and MEZENTSEVA as well. These shortcomings and a “disbelief in any effectiveness of public activism” (p. 276) (similarly to HIRT’s notion of ‘privatism’, HIRT, S. 2012) are claimed to be the heritage of Soviet times. Nonetheless, proactive and counteractive activities are present in post-Soviet cities too. Counteractive activities are aimed mainly at the protection of built heritage, memorials, public and green spaces, and at opposition to demolition and new construction.

Based on these studies, it is striking how the role of state is constantly changing in urban planning and development, and, consequently, in terms of its influence on living and residential forms as well. During the Soviet-era, as urbanisation had key relevance, planning extended even to the organisation of everyday life, for instance in the ‘*Socgoroda*’, which were laboratories “for socialism’s ideal interaction between working, living, and recreating” (p. 219). At the dawn of the post-Soviet era, the “almost lawless environment” (p. 183) could not prevent the “violation with existing plans, norms and heritage” (p. 87). Later on, the state regained its role in both regulation and investment, supporting, among other things, social housing, the modernisation of heavy industry, and the conversion of some monotonies into science cities.

It should be noted that although the book was not intended to give a comprehensive overview, the cases of Russian (large) cities are well stressed (especially in Chapter 4) through the examples selected by the authors. Instances from other ex-Soviet states are less numerous and are generally limited to capital cities. However, the images and short texts provide a broader view. Notwithstanding, extending research to small and medium-size cities would still be desirable in post-Soviet urban science (BORÉN, T. and GENTILE, M. 2007).

The current volume, as a medium for raising awareness, is informative and manages to give an insight into the diversity of post-Soviet cities. From a scientific point of view, especially valuable are some of the highlighted aspects, which could be further used in research: the abandonment of the *transitological* focus and the consideration of social and cultural aspects. These are mentioned in the book in connection with studying infrastructure (p. 60) and housing (p. 72), but they are applicable in more general terms

as well. All in all, the volume fulfils its purpose and indeed offers an intriguing starting point for further exploration.

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