



The Hidden Enclosure: Design for an Underground Palace-Square in St. Petersburg.
СКРЫТЫЙ ГОРОД: ПРОЕКТ ПОДЗЕМНОГО КОМПЛЕКСА В САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГЕ

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INDEX

- 0. Preface.
- 0.1 The Hidden Enclosure: Design for an Underground Palace-Square in St. Petersburg.

- 1. An introduction.
- 1.1 Presenting St. Petersburg. The rising of Northern-Palmyra.
- 1.2 St. Petersburg. A bird eye-view of the city: from the Zar to the Post-Soviet -Era.
- 1.3 The city-scape: typologies and morphologies of the city-patterns in St. Petersburg.
- 1.4 Towards 2025. Land-use Scenario and Local Regulations: the Development of a Settlement Strategy.

- 2. St. Petersburg-Petrograd-Leningrad: Archetype-Prototype-Type in St. Petersburg Urban Design.
- 2.1 The dwelling along the Neva-river: Archetype in Baltic Architecture.
- 2.2 Arranging the City: Newsky prospect and Palace-Square Prototypes.
- 2.3 Settlements in the Heavy-Industrial Soviet-times: Industrial compound types.
- 2.4 Towards 2025. Land-scape for Transit Zones: the study-case of Obvodny Channel.

- 3. The Grey Horizons: Design-Topics
- 3.1 Obvodny Channel area on global-scenario: Accessibility and other topics to the Plotting-Area.
- 3.2 Investigating the phalisesst. Geographies and Morphologies as frame-work at local scale.
- 3.3 Referencing the city-scapes: Typologies and technologies in using.
- 3.4 Towards 2025. Performing a Land-scape with void-using.

- 4. The Hidden Enclosure.
- 4.1 The Morphology of the site: applying a functional-program.
- 4.2 Typologies: The Palace-Squares as enclosure.
- 4.3 Technologies in the wind: Setting Seasonal changes in architecture
- 4.4 Towards 2025. Anatomy of a void.
- 5.Sources.

PREFACE

Saint Petersburg has had many names: Northern Palmyra, as it was called during the XIX century for its beauty compared to the Caravan-City of Palmyra. Leningrad, as it was named after the firing of the Aurora cruiser and known world-wide throughout Soviet times. And simply “Peter”, as it’s known to me and others that call the city our home.

Thousands of times I walked along its canals, roads, boulevards, and narrows. Thousands of times I have been along the Nevski Prospect, facing the Winter-Palace, finally understanding the master-piece of Peter The Great, which is not housed in the esthetic for itself, but in using of the esthetic as poetic to enrich monuments and strong-points.

I was born in St. Petersburg and lived there my entire life. I always considered it one of the best models of world architecture and town-planning design. It’s a unique city. Since its founding, St. Petersburg was built according to a unified concept of urban development. I would even say that the city was originally designed with a consideration of the future, as if Peter the Great foresaw the appearance of road transport.

A city born to overlook the future thanks to its road-network connected to the Palace of the Imperial Institutions. Urban structures were involved in and supported the growth of the metropolitan area along the ending of Modern-Times, the beginning of The Industrial-Era, the rising of the Soviet Revolution and the re-birth of the City in the Post-Communist Decades.

In today’s times, it is a city no more, but a Capital of a metropolitan region, which holds around 5 million inhabitants of a population that is becoming year-by-year more dynamic than ever. The ending of the Soviet Kingdom, on one hand, means the ending of a massive planning based on very strict zoning, and on the other, a focusing of the attention of the City on the problems connected to its geography (a sea-side along the Baltic sea, the strong-winds, and the very low-temperature), its history (the huge number of vacant areas next to the city centre, addressable to Soviet Industrial Plans) and its recent past (the growth of the population).

In just few years, Saint Petersburg has newly found its heritage of being a Northern Capital-City, but at the same time, it is facing the contemporary meaning of being a Metropolitan-City, otherwise being physically connected to its region, and virtually with the rest of the Nation and World.

Looking at the Official Municipality documents concerning economical, social and Town-Planning improvements, it seems that Saint Petersburg is starting to establish a developing-strategy based on the value given by the Real Estates of land-use: areas are usually reserved to set-up headquarters for Companies – in a kind of zone-making. These areas are normally not connected to the rest of the ur-

ban structures but are able to work for themselves only. Settlements, compounds and plants are placed without a metropolitan strategy. An urban structure hierarchy is created without strong-points or hubs for the arranging of the city

Due to the previous considerations it seems that Saint Petersburg has lost its own identity made by Peter, the All-Russia Emperor. An identity based on a unique design, using the infrastructures as back-bone of the city's urban-structure. A city where the single element of architectural decoration expresses typologies made as a device to show the morphology of different places. In this way the city is one organism working in relation of its connection. Today there is a situation where the suburbs are totally disconnected with the rest of the city. Same with the business-parks, urban utilities, and towns/neighborhood facilities not designed as part of metropolitan idea of settlements, but fragments: Satellites without a cosmology.

Or turning the scenario up-side-down, the same business-parks, urban utilities, or town/neighborhood facilities are peripheries without a center. Also Saint Petersburg is not immune to the gentrification process, which is as strong as in the rest of the Continental-Capitols. A process responsible for the vanishing of the mix-of-use typical for the City-Center in the European-City, as well as for the hybridization of the public-space. This situation could be considered to cause enormous damage for the heritage of the city, due to becoming just another business district in the "global" economic system.

A twenty year long debate is still unsolved. Meanwhile on the outskirts of the city, estates sprawl the town into low-cost housing but brown-fields are still available next to the city-centre. Demolishing Monuments from the Soviet Industrial Age, such as rail-parks, Heavy-industrial Plants, Ex-former factories or Civil Buildings, are involved in an urban restoration process which does not consider the meaning of "Industrial Archeology". In Saint Petersburg, these phenomena are forming a huge amount of areas establishing a land-bank, almost made by Transit-Zones, one step away from Winter Palace and its environs. Beside this metropolitan-scale, a local dwelling made by small-facilities, poor-quality dying old buildings (mostly rented for commercial needs), which operate in an attempt to survive the current economic crisis.

According to the situation, the priority is going back to the future, and:

01. Checking the topics of the City Council proposal for the General Plan;

02. Studying the architectural character of public space in Saint Petersburg;

Selecting an area to perform a study-case:

Briefly, according to the guide-lines of the Municipality Plan (towards 2025) the General Plan should be considered good-enough in infrastructures. The plan develops a road-traffic system (also projecting a Belt Motorway to shape the city apart from its satellite settlements), Metropolitan Area Rapid Transit (increasing network and stations in number) using connections as Bridges on Neva River for a new structure to the city. This would lead to a great improvement for the whole urban environment, also arranging new metropolitan-hubs to exchange and commuting city-users with the predicted street-level express line, for reinforcing underground network and to provide transportation for the South-side of St. Petersburg Metropolitan Area.

Totally different are the considerations regarding the public-space of Saint Petersburg, which has as topics the peculiarities common to many of the (international) architectural competitions: Using the architectural heritage of the Saint Petersburg as “old-style” for keep-in-progress a “city-like”, losing the organic approach supposed in Town-Planning.

The final result is an “old-style” patch-work looking basically to the facades for themselves, and not as an urban canvas able to produce relations in public-space, as is clearly recognizable in the Nevski Perspective, or in the Winter-Palace.

To resume what I should consider the wicked-point of this long-time strategy, looking to Saint Petersburg just for decorative reference for stylish architecture, I isolate a plot (Obnovdy-canal area) as a study-case having most of the topics mentioned before.

In fact, Obnovdy-canal area is a Transit-Zone, involved in road-infrastructure as well as in the rapid-transit system, next to the city water-network. A vacant-area displaced as a threshold between the city-centre and its south-side suburbs.

For all those reasons the area has been considered good enough to experiment a method focused on public-space.

The frame-work in adoption starts from Typologies, Dimensions, Morphologies, Land-Use, Weather-condition/Climate are the topics of the design linked to the today’s Urban-scape of the area - as early memory of the past. In the background of this approach, never forgotten are Russia’s master-pieces, as the Winter-Palace in its “technical distinction” – “Palace-Square” or the type born during Modernism as the “licht-hof” (XX’s Berlage Stock Exchange for Amsterdam).

All these elements become the main reference for a concept which has as its main goal the arranging of a settlement more than a building. A complex sized, onto proportion of the Winter-Palace, but styled with the typical rhetoric of the Soviet-Times Architecture. A construction intentionally underground to respect the flat-land of the Obnovdy area and allow winter-time use. Functionally the complex takes today's Saint Petersburg uses (mall, hub for transportation, shopping-units) according to the European trend such as city-users hotel or indoor/out-door flexible space, trying to restore Russian tradition for public-space using connections to the water (the inner-canal, it's predicted as thermal-bath/sun-bath/urban sea-side in summer-time or ice-skating pad in winter-time) or to the open-spaces (the roof-top as theater, open-air cinema, stands in summer-time or for bobbing/rest-area for winter-sports). An area supposed as a sequence of public-spaces included in the general system of the city, not only in terms of infrastructure, but also in terms of functionality.

A design recognizes in the Palace-squares its archetype: an enclosure, even if hidden.

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