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From Palisades Interstate Park by Robert L. Dickinson, published by the American Geographical Society of New York, 1921.
Public and Private Space in Soviet Cities

Kathryn H. Anthony

BEYOND the veneer of what Soviet tour guides show visitors lie great discrepancies between public and private environments. Erving Goffman divides human environments into front-stage and back-stage regions. He argues that on the front stage people try to convey a favorable impression and conform to standards, while back stage, where they carry out their private activities, they can be more relaxed and even contradict their public behavior. Soviet attitudes toward public and private places correspond closely to Goffman’s concepts.

Bearing in mind that in the Soviet Union the government owns all operations, the usual distinction between public and private places on the basis of ownership does not apply. Instead, public and private spaces can be defined by the number of regular users, ease of access, display, and function. Public areas accommodate large numbers of users who may come irregularly; these places are readily accessible free or for a small fee; they are not hidden from the public; and they function as display areas. They include squares, parks, roads, stores, museums, theaters, stadia, concert halls, exhibition halls, and parts of the public transportation system, such as subways, buses, trolleys, airports, and train stations. These public spaces are often pointed out to tourists.

By contrast, private areas have a small number of regular users. These spaces have limited access; users need either permission or a key to enter. Private spaces serve as settings that screen activities from the public. An apartment, a restaurant kitchen, and a restroom are private places. Tourist contact with private spaces in Soviet cities is rare. Only by daring to peer behind the facade of public environments or by receiving a special invitation is a visitor able to glimpse the private spaces in Soviet cities. On a recent visit to Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev I was invited into a few homes where I had the opportunity to observe private life and the setting in which it occurs.

Several criteria differentiate environments in capitalist societies according to social class of the users. These standards can also be used to distinguish public from private environments in the Soviet Union. This list includes choice, size, design, physical condition, and symbolic function. In all these aspects, Soviet public places rate high, and private spaces rate low.

Choice

Many large public spaces are available to Soviet city dwellers. Muscovites may visit over 40 theaters and concert halls, 100 cinemas, and 150 museums and exhibition
Davydkovo is Moscow's new residential district. The large scale and high density are typical of Soviet housing developments. 1978, Tass from Sovfoto.

lls. Residents of Leningrad, the second largest city, visit over 50 museums. The availability of public transportation is also impressive. Moscow's metro uses 116 stations and runs 96 miles. Trains run quite frequently according to a reliable schedule. Extensive bus and trolley systems abound and fares are astonishingly low. A ride on the metro, bus, or trolley costs only five kopeks (about six nts). Admission to cultural centers is rarely more than five rubles (about five dollars).

The number of choices of private spaces is extremely limited. Rent is equal to less than five percent of an individual's income, but despite the incredibly low cost of using the selection is minimal. Private houses are rare, cause their construction is discouraged by the government. Apartment living is the rule rather than the exception. Housing in the Soviet Union is standardized, because apartment units are prefabricated. The result is monotony in floor plans and building designs.

Although Russians are nearing the end of their housing shortage, they have little selection in the location of housing they want. Government officials decide who needs new housing, establish a priority list, and let people wait their turn. When a family's turn comes up, they are assigned a place to live based on the number of people in the household. Furthermore, the amenities provided in each unit are minimal. Gas, water, and electricity are connected, but the installation of extras, such as telephones, is rare.

Size

Public and private spaces in Soviet cities differ dramatically in size. Many public areas are remnants of prerevolutionary Russia, and the scale of these areas is overwhelming. Moscow's Red Square is the largest public square in the world. This spectacular open space contains the tomb of Lenin, and the onion-domed St. Basil's Cathedral. The enormous red brick walls of the Kremlin line one side of Red Square, and the country's largest department store, Gum, borders the other. The Winter Palace Square in Leningrad, containing the Hermitage museum, general staff buildings, the admiralty building, St. Isaac's Cathedral, and the palace garden, is also immense.

Other public spaces from the prerevolutionary period also carry on the tradition of great size. The subways, called metros, are vast. Escalators to Moscow's metro plunge at a forty-five degree angle to 200 feet below the city streets, and the underground passageways resemble large concert halls or museums. Many of Moscow's newly widened streets
carry twelve lanes of traffic and must be crossed using tunnels beneath the street. Some major thoroughfares have a reserved lane without speed limits for the black limousines of political officials. Kiev's main street, Khreschatik, was reconstructed after bombing in World War II. It is now 215 feet wide and features three sidewalk levels: one beside the shops for window-shopping, another for strolling, and a path for express walkers. The same scale applies to Moscow's sports stadium, which holds 100,000 spectators. In short, to describe Soviet public areas, particularly squares and transportation systems, as colossal is conservative.

Although large apartment complexes are common, units within each building are small by Western standards. The current goal allows every citizen only twelve square meters (about 130 square feet) of space, excluding the bathroom and kitchen, but even this minimum is far from being realized. In American public housing at least twice as much space is allocated for each person. Even in Holland and Japan where land is scarce, standards for living space are higher and more flexible than in the Soviet Union. A two-room Soviet apartment contains two bedrooms. Any room that is a luxury, such as a study, den, living room, family room, or dining room, does not exist. The bedroom is a multipurpose room where sleeping, studying, relaxing, entertaining, and eating take place.

Design
The building materials and design of public areas in Soviet cities are rich and varied. Many public areas that have been preserved from prerevolutionary days feature building techniques advanced for their time. Elaborate combinations of brick and stone abound, as do the famous onion domes of Russia's churches. City parks are full of structures for entertainment and eating, elegantly designed in traditional styles. Moscow's metro, built after the revolution, is a dazzling combination of stainless steel, bronze, porcelain, marble, and mosaic; and each station is done in a different motif. Chandeliers and statuary add to the extravagant design of the metro. The wedding-cake structures of the Stalinist era—the Hotel Ukrainia and Moscow University, for example—boast building technology of extreme sophistication. At Moscow's Exhibition of Economic Achievements, an extensive collection of unusual structures publicizes the nation's engineering feats. The exhibit is highlighted by a soaring glass monument to Soviet accomplishments in outer space.

The variety of building materials and creative design used in private areas is just the opposite. Prerevolutionary neighborhoods maintain traditional Russian-style architecture with intricate ornamentation, but the facades of most postrevolutionary residences are bland. Virtually all housing is produced from prefabricated structures of reinforced concrete. Around-the-clock operation of at least one prefabrication combine in each Soviet city has enabled many housing units, complete with doors and windows, to be produced in a short time. Moscow's three prefabrication combines each produce 15,000 to 30,000 apartments units annually. About seventy-five percent of the work is performed at the prefabrication plant, and the remaining twenty-five percent, which includes installation of gas, water, and electricity is done on the construction site in Moscow, 1957.
about twelve days. The strength of construction materials is currently under scrutiny, because many structures that were built quickly and cheaply are deteriorating rapidly.

Soviet planners make little attempt to differentiate among buildings, so almost all apartment complexes look alike. Colors of new buildings rarely vary; most are gray or white. In each complex stretch long rows of identical windows, and entrances are indistinguishable from one another. Every new apartment building exudes anonymity.

**Physical condition**

Blatant differences between public and private spaces in Soviet cities can be seen in their physical condition and level of maintenance. Maintenance is a behavior trait that is a source of information about behavior in and attitudes toward environments. From this perspective, Soviet decision makers and users clearly value public over private environments.

In general, public areas in Soviet cities are impeccably maintained. Every morning at 2 o'clock, all the streets in Moscow are washed by machine. I also saw teams of women sweeping city streets with small hand brushes. Subways, parks, squares, and outdoor exhibitions, are nearly litter-free. Not only are maintenance personnel abundant and conscientious, but residents seem to feel guilty about throwing trash in inappropriate places. Some students in Moscow told me that if a bus rider accidentally drops a fare receipt, the rider is tapped on the shoulder and asked to pick it up. Although few benches are provided in subway stops, train stations, and airports, the floors are so clean that people do not hesitate to sit on them.

A strong national movement for historic preservation has succeeded far beyond American efforts to upgrade urban areas. Preservation programs protect monuments of historic, architectural, and ecological value. Old churches, especially in Kiev, are being restored. In addition, many streets and commercial areas have been completely reconstructed. Moscow's streets were widened so much that buildings had to be set back. This was part of a major effort to recover from the destruction of World War II. During the war, many historic monuments in Leningrad were packed in wooden cartons and hidden in the Hermitage. Colossal statues of Lenin and other revolutionary heroes, which seem to be situated at almost every major intersection, were also preserved. The fabulous museum of Petrodvorets, the former summer palace and gardens of the czar outside Leningrad, was rebuilt after almost total devastation during the war.

The contrast between the condition of public and private areas is remarkable. Private spaces are not well preserved or maintained. Rather than restore old housing, most effort has been channeled into constructing new housing. In many instances the condition of new housing has deteriorated rapidly. The inexpensive construction materials often cannot withstand heavy use.

The neglect of private activities is apparent when waiters and waitresses bring their customers dirty glasses or silverware from the kitchens tucked behind restaurant dining rooms. Tablecloths, when present, are often soiled. The poor maintenance of restrooms is also an indication of the lack of concern for private spaces. Hotel bathtubs are often
dirty when the guest checks into the room, and toilets often malfunction. Providing toilet paper, soap, and towels seems to be unimportant. When toilet paper is provided, it is usually scattered all over floors and sinks, even in the most luxurious hotels. Soviet decision makers do not give high priority to personal hygiene, sewerage, and refuse disposal. Shared areas in apartment buildings—entrances, elevators, and corridors—are often dark and dingy.

Symbolic function

The key difference between public and private spaces in Russia can be explained by the symbolic value the Soviet government gives to each. Public areas represent showcases of Soviet society. Large squares, such as Moscow’s Red Square and Leningrad’s Winter Palace Square, were built to accommodate large military gatherings and parades—conspicuous displays of military might. The vast number of people who recently participated in the activities and parades commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution demonstrate that this function continues. The body of Lenin is preserved in a monumental structure in the middle of Red Square where thousands of Soviets pay their respects daily in queues of three hours or more. The ritual is another example of the symbolism ingrained in this public square.

The grandiose, solemn atmosphere that emanates from most public buildings in the Soviet Union symbolizes a trust in the efficiency, grandeur, and power of the Soviet government. Moscow University, for example, was constructed during the Stalinist era in the imposing wedding-cake style of the day. The university sits on a hill overlooking the city so its silhouette dominates the skyline for miles. Seven other Stalinist-styled skyscrapers were erected in other prominent locations to publicly assert Soviet strength and power.

Huge statues of Soviet political figures dominate the urban landscape. Cemeteries, memorials to unknown soldiers, and monuments to Lenin serve an unusual function for newlyweds. Immediately following their courtroom wedding ceremony, couples are driven in a special wedding car to the cemeteries or statues. Still clothed in their wedding garments, the couple leaves the car and places a bouquet of flowers at the foot of the monument. This common ritual manifests the strong social role of the public environment in private life.

Planners regard the city center as the city’s most symbolic area. Here museums exhibit Soviet heritage, theaters display local talent, and government officials formulate and execute decisions. Parades and speeches also take place in the city center. Enormous political banners, especially red ones, hang in public open spaces.

The lack of importance placed on the private areas of the home—the kitchen and the bathroom, for instance—may be inferred by their absence from the Soviet definition

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A typical floorplan of four units (A, B, C, D) on one floor of a modern residential highrise. The plan is for a building in a large residential district near the center of Kiev. Each prefabricated concrete building is from five to sixteen stories. The figures indicate square meters of floor space in each room. Apartments are cramped, and layouts are utilitarian, but all four units have balconies on the front of the building.
of living space. Soviet officials consider housing solely as shelter and add no unnecessary amenities. Privacy is not respected as an inherent human need, and space is not provided for it.

Because the government controls the design professions, environments created by city planners and architects mirror the nation's political ideology. Planning practices in the USSR subordinate private to public environments. The purpose of Soviet architecture has been to answer the needs of society as a whole, rather than to satisfy the individual. At another level, Soviet city planning has been perceived as a means to restore the political, economic, and social structure of the nation—a tool to transform society by giving citizens a new outlook on Soviet life. In the public realm, historic preservation, elaborate architecture, wide variety, and the high level of maintenance reflect the Soviet concern for the quality of communal life. By contrast, the preoccupation with standardization, quantitative definitions, and efficiency demonstrate the relative lack of concern for the quality of private life. Ada Louise Huxtable has written eloquently on this topic:

"Creative individualism is the 'cult of the personality' in the Soviet Union; its probing and frequently critical explorations are considered to be against the general interests of the state. Art is warped into ideological service... There is a surprising pleasure in conformity, a contentment with regimentation in the Soviet system and philosophy, that militates against the variety, human scale, and individualism that is desirable to the western mind. There is also a surprising pride—so much has been struggled for, so much is hard won—that makes Soviet cities and public spaces, in spite of monotony or shabbiness, well kept."

Critique and comparison

Soviet concern for public environments has been more effective than that in the United States, partly because a centralized political system is used to implement all planning programs and has enabled planners to maintain powerful roles. As a result, Soviet planners have been able to preserve historic places, improve public transportation, and curtail urban sprawl. Nonetheless, the uniform treatment of private Soviet spaces implies a lack of concern about the relationship between environment and behavior.

The Soviet public environment, the front stage, is the area where a performance is given. The Soviet private environment, or back stage, is where, as Goffman explains, "suppressed facts make an appearance... where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course." Viewing the Soviet people as performers and the public environment as the setting for government presentations, we find ourselves watching a performance that is impressive, but not entirely convincing.

Further Reading


