



“Green” Utopia of the Uralmash: Institutional Effects and Symbolic Meaning

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Abstract: *This article examines the ideological and institutional role of the “greening” policy of Soviet urban planning practices of the 1920s and 1930s. Relying on the example of the socialist city of Uralmash in Yekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk), the author traces how this idea of a “green city” affected the development of the urban settlement in terms of its functional mechanism and symbolic transformation. By analysing the logic of the Uralmash “green” policy and its main narratives, one can argue that the successful improvement of post-Soviet green zones depends not so much on new urban city planning initiatives as on the new symbols and meanings that could provide these spaces with a clear vision in the current social and cultural context.*

Keywords: socialist city; urban planning; post-Soviet; narrative; “green city”.



Introduction

The idea of creating so-called green cities proved to be one of the most influential concepts of Soviet urban planning of the 1920s and 1930s. Along with a clear ideological message, there was a strong institutional purpose for the new urban settlements: Green zones were a significant mechanism aimed at regulating the various spheres of urban life. Green spaces not only contributed to an “ideal image” of socialist cities, but also contributed to the formation of new urban identities and practices of interaction. In fact, the green policy of the Soviet period eventually formed an essential part of what is typically today termed as “Soviet urban planning heritage”. The fall of socialism found these numerous green cities in a “devastated” state of sorts where their functional meaning, symbolic significance and any semblance of clear narratives had been lost. The socialist city of Uralmash in Yekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk) provides an illustrative example of such changes, enabling us to trace the logic of the decades-long Soviet green policy and to reveal its main impact on current urban processes.

Theoretical Framework

It is generally accepted that ideology is a crucial factor in explaining the origin and development of Soviet urban planning experiments. The Soviet ideological project is typically seen as a general symbolic background to the narrative of Soviet architecture (Paperny, 2002); it is an effective instrument when subjecting the urban space to political aims (Meerovich, 2007) or a sort of emotional impulse for the utopian search of Soviet architects (Kopp 1985 and 1970). However, the direct regulatory function of ideology is rarely the focus of research associated with the urban planning experiments of the 1920s and 1930s. Such a situation appears at odds, because if it is generally accepted that the ideas of Soviet urban planning “became actions and state projects became programs” (DeHaan, 2013), then ideology represented for architectural practice something more than just a driving political force or a simple part of the “social and cultural context”. The ideological impact on Soviet urban policy was so significant that it has proven extremely difficult to differentiate between ideas as a factor determined by institutions and those as full-fledged regulators. In fact, ideological meanings are so deeply embedded in current architectural practices that they have finally become virtually inseparable from other institutional elements.

This close link between the “institutional” and “symbolic” has particular importance for understanding the development of new urban settlements in the early Soviet period. The ideas of social change not only provided a new look at the urban space, but also were directly involved in the very process of its institutional transformation. In point of fact, these very ideas contributed to the formation of the practices through which they were themselves reproduced. This implies that the functional role of ideas appeared to be no less important than their meaning and symbolic message.

This feature of ideas in politics is highlighted by the research tradition of contemporary institutionalism which views institutions as “codified systems of ideas and the practices they sustain” (Hay, 2006). Such approaches are typically united under an “umbrella concept” of



“discursive” or “constructivist” institutionalism. On the one hand, they aim to analyse “the interactive processes of discourse that serve to generate the ideas and communicate them to public”, while, on the other hand, to explore “the institutional context in which and through which ideas are communicated” (Schmidt, 2011). Generally speaking, ideas are considered to be “the fundamental media through which agents interpret the world and construct stability in it” (Blyth, 2011). This framework appears especially useful when analysing Soviet urban planning policy as it allows us not only to map the correlation between ideological and institutional components, but also to see how symbols and discursive practices can affect the development and transformation of urban areas constructed during the Soviet period.

“Nature’s” Role in the Uralmash Narrative

During Soviet times, Uralmash was considered to be one of the greenest cities in the country. Seen as an exemplary socialist town located near the Ural Heavy Machine Building Plant in the north part of Sverdlovsk, it completely embodied the classical Soviet mythology of urban planning: it was a “child” of the first five-year plan by being constructed in an extremely short period of time (1928-1933); it was living proof of Soviet man’s power; and it was an ideal building platform to create a new civilisation “without a past” and in an “empty space”.

Since the very beginning, the development of Uralmash was characterised by a twofold attitude towards nature. On the one hand, the building of the plant embodied one of the key notions of the Soviet ideological project – the idea of “victory over nature”. A typical narrative of Uralmash history usually started with the phrase: “Amid dense forestry and swamps a huge plant was expanding just over the span of a few years...” (Унпелев, 1960 and Макаров, 1960). The building of the plant and adjoining settlement was intended to demonstrate the power of human will, victory over time and, what was especially important, the ability to subject nature to any social aim.

On the other hand, a wooded area which surrounded Uralmash was initially perceived by the planners as a sort of natural extension of the settlement. The founders of Uralmash invariably noted the importance of its location and emphasized it as an essential link which existed between the urban and natural zones. Representing a new growing city, the journal “USSR in Construction” wrote in 1932 the following about Uralmash: “A forest that surrounds the plant and the city is turning it into an impressive park. And all of this is nearby: here is the plant, the settlement and the forest” (USSR in Construction, 1932). Nature, thus, was thought of as an integral component of the urban organism.

This contradictory attitude towards nature appears to be highly important in understanding the essence of the Uralmash “green” policy which combined certain utopian elements, symbolic strategies and practical regulatory mechanisms for the organising of urban life.



The Uralmash Green System: Symbols, Institutions, Practices

The significance of the green factor for the development of the Uralmash socialist city can be seen and analysed by three major aspects.

First of all, the green area was an inherent part of the urban settlement and significantly influenced city planning strategies. The green component was considered an essential element of the city's spatial structure. According to the initial project, gardens and parks were to occupy almost a third of the settlement's total area (29%) (УЗТМ – соцгород, 1933). Later, due to a dramatic expansion of the plant, this indicator decreased only slightly, while still maintaining a high level (20 %) (Уральский завод тяжёлого машиностроения. 1928-1933, 1933).

The implementation of greening policy in the Soviet Union was significantly influenced by the concept of city gardens which were extremely popular among Soviet architects in the 1920-1930s. Uralmash represented a very special case of such “gardening” strategies. The main concept of its city planners was to design industrial and residential areas as a unified spatial organism, where the territory around the plant's workshops would be conceived in the same way as courtyards and alleys. Thus, so-called green zones were not only intended as a dividing line between the plant and living area, but were to be primarily embedded in the very structure of its urban spatial network. Green areas undertook an essential regulating function: They took on an important focus within the city planning framework and, at the same time, maintained a balance and mitigated differences between the so-called “industrial” and “residential” as well as “working” and “leisure”.

For instance, Green Summer Park, a central residential area of Uralmash, was located at the city entrance and was designed in such a way that it was placed on the street axis leading to the gates of the plant. It left visitors arriving to Uralmash with the feeling that they were in a picturesque green zone as opposed to an industrial one; whereas for the residents it combined the resting area with the path that they took to the workplace (Летний парк – уралмашевцам, 2013).

Secondly, green zones in Uralmash proved to be an important ideological tool and mechanism for social communication. If the surrounding nature with a forest and lake was perceived as a kind of extension of the whole settlement, then the green yards served as a continuation of the internal space of the houses. By arranging a place for cosy and nicely-planted courtyards, the architects thereby sought to compensate for a lack of living space and the general poor living conditions of the people residing in social housing. Well-maintained green yards provided an opportunity to move an essential part of human activity away from the flats and simultaneously allowed people - namely during the summer season - to engage in different forms of social interaction. Thus, various initiatives on tree planting, flower growing and nursery building developed as one of the first social events regularly held in the early period of socialist city development (Анфимов, 1984a). For instance, according to witnesses, the improvements carried out on П'icha Street on the eve of the ceremonial opening of the plant in 1933, became one of the most extensive communal activities for those Uralmash residents who were involved in various greening projects (Анфимов, 1984b).



Thirdly, the greening policy substantially helped to form the prevailing image of Uralmash and thus played an influential role in the identity of its residents. For the settlement's inhabitants, the idea of a green city was associated with an ideal vision and proof that they lived in future times. Within the public's consciousness green meant not just a well-designed and comfortable area, but also a "modern" and "progressive" one. A special album book prepared in 1958 for the 25th anniversary of the Uralmash plant described the socialist town and declared: "This is a true city with a population of a hundred thousand people. It rolls in a sea of wonderful greenery. It has lawns, parks, flower gardens and avenues of poplars, lindens, maples, acacias... This is simply the city that the first Uralmash residents had envisioned! It's a great pleasure to walk the streets full of greenery and flowers..." (Макаров, 1958).

In fact, this green image of Uralmash contributed to the sense of belonging to an advanced urban culture. To some extent, the establishment of green zones offered a way to learn and get acquainted with an urban space as such. It is no coincidence then that the very first street in Uralmash was designed as a wide and richly-planted alley and was originally called "Garden Street" (Sadovaya).

Lost Utopia: Green City Under Post-Soviet Conditions

The collapse of the Soviet system dramatically changed conditions for the development of Uralmash. The city appeared to have become a typical "lost" space of the post-Soviet era, deprived of its previous symbolical meanings and not yet having created any replacements. Therefore, the main problem the green area of Uralmash faced was not so much disrepair or poor maintenance, but the complete loss of symbolical and functional significance. The Uralmash district continues to be one of the greenest in the region, while all of its numerous green zones now seem to represent nothing more than simple parts of its territory. These green zones are simply a beautiful component of an ambitious urban project which no longer exists.

The integral green urban structure was broken up into multiple separate areas unrelated to one another: green squares located on street corners lost their function as essential links to the city's building structure; yards and parks were no longer a communicative space and fell into disrepair; and the idea of a green buffer zone became meaningless. Under this new situation, Uralmash has maintained its green image simply due to the amount of its green space; this space, however, lacks spatial and symbolic meaning. Furthermore, building initiatives which started to appear in Uralmash in the late 1990s largely ignored the green areas as a part of the urban framework. However, at the same time, such initiatives did not make any serious incursion into the existing green spaces. For the most part, these initiatives relied on infill construction and, thus, did not attempt to change the spatial structures of the district. The construction of a single building could do harm to any given green area and courtyard; however, this would not have any serious impact on the district's overall framework.



Over the last few years, Uralmash has gradually been becoming one of the most attractive areas for potential investors and developers due to its location and convenient transportation network. This situation has led to new development projects aimed at the fast construction of multistory housing in the historical part of the city. Most of these projects being proposed by building owners do not simply ignore the role of the green territory, but actually destroy all of the existing structures of the planting zones. Such projects usually have some common problems: they disregard the existing architectural environment; they scale disproportionately; they destroy the established spatial schemes; and, as a consequence, they completely ignore the green factor. For example, the development plan for the historic part of Uralmash approved by the Ekaterinburg City Administration in 2013, failed to mention the role of green zones as well as any projects associated with them (Project for the development of the Uralmash historic part, 2013). The measures identified in these projects for the provision of the surrounding territory and supporting infrastructure in practice led to a complete destruction of the old green yards and planting zones.

The problem is compounded by the fact that along with a lack of architectural continuity, the new building projects do not provide a clear strategy for the long-term development of the territory. The built-up area is not perceived by developers as a part of the entire urban mechanism and is typically viewed within a very narrow spatial framework. Whatever changes will be made to the territory - regardless of if they turn out to be positive - will have only a limited and short-term impact on general urban tendencies.

One of the potential ways to improve the situation could be a number of public initiatives targeting the maintenance and renewal of Uralmash's green zones. Projects such as "Revive the Summer Park" or "Give back life to the courtyards" proved to be rather successful and even managed to engage authorities in taking appropriate action on the issues. However, such a consequence was related only to sporadic and isolated cases having practically no chance of becoming commonly accepted practice. Moreover, even the effective result of this specific project (e.g. the project of revitalising the Uralmash Summer Park) was nothing more than an attempt to renew a specific green zone belonging to the "old" urban framework – a framework which is no longer viable in the present-day.

Green Uralmash: In Search of New Languages

Today, it is evident that a full-fledged recovery of the Uralmash green system is likely impossible without the ascribing of new meanings and symbols to the district. In fact, even today's modern public discourses relating to Uralmash exclude the green factor from their scope and rhetorical practices.

Furthermore, the green areas of Uralmash are relevant to the discourse on "heritage" – a discourse focusing on the preservation of Soviet avant-garde architectural sites – only to the extent that they can reproduce a historical urban context of specific architectural monuments. In this regard, they are usually represented as part of an "open-air" museum or a "city planning monument" (e.g. Bauhaus на Урале, 2010). To the so-called "utopian" discourse – a discourse addressing the artistic interpretation of Soviet industrial landscapes – the green zones appear as artifacts of a bygone era and typically become objects of "romanticisation"



(e.g. Белова et al, 2011). By employing either of these discourses, the neglected green zones may be at times even more useful and interesting than those well-maintained. The artistic effects, in such a case, tend to be much more important than the current urban issues.

Neither of these discourses takes green heritage into account in terms of the present-day nor attempts to put it in the current urban context. Nevertheless, green Uralmash requires new languages and symbols in order to be included in the ongoing urban processes and current social dynamics. Under the present conditions, the way in which we speak about green policy appear to be no less important than the practical mechanisms of its implementation. Furthermore, it is quite likely that this new symbolical view will simply provide a basis for the development of a coherent greening strategy and, most likely, will help to shape a new attitude towards nature within the current urban context.



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