



Modern Russia and Urban-Planning Reality of Post-Soviet City



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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%. 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-storey 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”.

Negative aspects of described type of urban settlements were identified by urban professionals and city dwellers a long time ago. 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.

Obviously, after the collapse of Soviet system of economic management and living its basic components, which included Soviet city, also fell into a deep crisis. But as the city is by far more rigid construction than economy or political system, its transformation was much more slower.

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.

Unpleasantness of most Russian urban settlements is most vividly characterized by migration trend when school graduates and young professionals are constantly leaving 95% towns and cities. Such situation is caused not only by territorial disproportions in economic development between different Russian regions but, more importantly, by lack of urban environment of decent quality. Overwhelming majority of urban settlements are still not able to provide their citizens with comfortable living conditions – there is no historical city centers, level of cultural,

leisure and infrastructure development is low. As a result cities are doomed to be in a vicious circle: reliance on Soviet legacy – conservative economic policy — weakness of creative and innovative social groups – fragmentary and spontaneous development on city infrastructure instead of strategy-based urban environment development.

Established negative situation is a result of two basic problems:

1. 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).
2. 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 projects in sphere of city transport, engineering and urban infrastructure.

But this positive changes are insufficient to reverse overall negative trend as they are not characteristic for 70% of Russian urban settlements (mostly small ones). Moreover, those changes often have low quality and in longer perspective could reduce towns appeal in terms of living and business.