

## Commons: Public Spaces After Socialism



Friday, April 28 - Saturday, April 29  
Harriman Institute, 1219 International Affairs Building  
Columbia University

For a century or more, citizens of the Eastern Bloc viewed public space as the primary setting for urban life. Socialist architects and planners envisioned common space as a transformative cultural force, deploying “social condensers” meant to break down inequitable hierarchies and foster a sense of the collective. Private property effectively disappeared from view. But just as the nationalization of property transformed cities at the opening of the twentieth century, so too did privatization at the century’s close. This two-day colloquium on “Commons: Public Spaces After Socialism” will explore the cultural, political, and socioeconomic implications of post-socialist urban transformation.

## Friday April 28

Opening remarks, 10:20am

Alan Timberlake, *Director, East Central European Center*

Session I: 10:30am - 12:30pm

Global Forces, Local Spaces

*Anar Valiyev, ADA University, Baku*

### State Spectacle in Baku

The First European Olympic Games in Baku could be considered an instance of urban boosterism. In Baku, active promotion of the city has evolved into large-scale urban development schemes, from constructing iconic new buildings and revamping local infrastructure to creating a new “image” for the city. But the speculative building that was once justified by the post-Soviet “free market” is increasingly driven by top-down, state-sponsored plans that have less to do with freedom than with concerted urban transformation. Urban planners in closed countries compete to create new images for their cities and states through grandiose urban development and hosting major international spectacles. While urban boosterism in liberal democratic settings is also used to solidify the position of “growth machine” elites, the unprecedented eight billion dollar price tag for Baku’s Olympic Games shows that resource-rich, closed states are positioned to develop such projects on a dramatically larger scale. The “Sochi syndrome” that prevailed in urban development after the 2014 winter games paved the way for other countries to use global entertainment events to consolidate systems and to promote state-dominated, elite financial interests. The boosterist agenda in Baku served three purposes: (1) distributing financial and political patronage; (2) promoting a positive image of the state for international and domestic consumption; and (3) creating a sense of unity in society. Moreover, elites have been able to also use these projects in their state-making efforts - using resource wealth, to cultivate the credit for transforming the country and setting it on track for a new era of “modernity,” all the while painting this development as a “gift” to the people from the state.

*Angela Wheeler, Harvard University*

### Innocents Abroad: Transnational Gentrification in Tbilisi

Few scholars have examined gentrification transnationally. But the aesthetic and political preferences of both expatriates and tourists to Tbilisi have increasingly reshaped the city’s public space in ways that mirror the more familiar dynamics of gentrification in western metropolises like London or New York. Although the foreigners are few in number, their relative wealth and status have enabled them to have an outsized impact. Recognizing the role played by such groups in transforming urban life not only enlarges the cast of characters in the story of changing post-Soviet space but also obliges a reconsideration of gentrification as a transnational force. Foreign gentrifiers have both a spatial and ideological impact on Tbilisi. Meeting the consumerist market ushered in by this group erodes urban public resources in Tbilisi—even as these urban interlopers invoke the rhetoric of grassroots community placemaking. Evangelizing the urban lifestyles they’ve been priced out of at home, expats and “post-tourists” have introduced such pop urbanist concepts as “co-living” and “co-working” that recall early Communist social experiments but are now stripped of their social agenda. Pitched to Georgian millennials desiring a “community lifestyle,” recent projects like

Fabrika and Garage offer luxe versions of Soviet communal facilities, with exclusive pricing in the place of an equalizing state.

*Maia Simon, Yale University*

#### Khan Shatyr as Instructive Public Space

While shopping malls across Astana have emerged as social spaces, the Khan Shatyr's position in the main axis of the city—opposite the Presidential Palace and aligned with other prominent governmental, cultural, and economic structures—codes it as not just mall but monument. Through both the design of the building and its relationship to its surrounding context, the Khan Shatyr becomes a modern Crystal Palace, functioning simultaneously as a public space and an exhibition of new economic models of consumption.

Lunch break 12:30pm - 2:00pm

Session II: 2:00pm - 4:00pm

Sociability

*Milya Zakirova, independent scholar*

#### Urban Courtyard as Common Good: Paradoxes of Local Protest in Russian Cities

Soviet urban housing aimed to create domestic collectives that would be freed from traditional neighborhood, attachment to place and local identity - housing was discursively transferred from the private sphere to the broader realm of relations between the state and its citizens. The privatization of housing that began at the end of the Soviet period was controversial, specifically the ambiguous legal status of the common area surrounding houses, making it virtually impossible to legally solve conflicts if there were other candidates for its usage beyond residents of the adjoining houses. To defend their common areas, residents unable to prove their rights to the land in court resorted to Soviet rhetoric, defining that territory broadly as a public space, a common good, and its loss as an expression of the state's mistreatment of its citizens.

*Serhii Tereshchenko, Columbia University*

#### A District For Creative Brains: Rusanivka (1959-1972) in Kyiv

In the 1950s, the Soviet Union officially declared a trajectory towards becoming a technocracy. The ideologists behind this idea were cyberneticians who promised to replace mundane manual and intellectual work with machines. Like today's Silicon Valley elite, midcentury scientists imagined a future worker's utopia with much less work: the new Soviet citizen would do only dignified creative labor and govern over machines. The cyberneticians began preparing a city for such a historical transformation—public housing wired with telephone lines and connected through high-speed trams and metro. Human time was the most precious capital to preserve. In this utopia, the special place was home, the place that provided a human with privacy for quiet time but also public space for interactions with neighbors. This presentation examines Kiev's Rusanivka district, the first prototype for the home of the future, where intellectual workers would think, dream, and create together in their district to then go to their different jobs and advance the Soviet society.

*Christina Crawford, Emory University*

What is to be Done with Socialist Spatial Fluidity?

Prototypical of Soviet-era mass housing schemes was a spatially fluid ground plane. This type of porous site planning, in which shared open spaces flowed between residential, cultural, and service buildings, was made possible by the socialist land regime. What happens to these spaces after privatization? Analysis of the current state of Soviet-era housing settlements in Kharkiv, Ukraine, and Baku, Azerbaijan, will demonstrate the difficulty of maintaining this situated spatial condition, but will also make an argument for the continuing social potential of fluidity.

## Saturday April 29

Session III: 10:30am - 12:30pm

Informal Economies

*Tamta Khalvashi, New York University (Fulbright)*

Towers for Troubling Times: Speculative Futures and Transformation of Public Space in Postsocialist Georgia

Using the Georgian Black Sea city of Batumi as an example, this paper explores how the speculative building of postsocialist cities can be understood as a machinery to enact the future into the present, that, within an unstable economy, distributes a neoliberal optimism that dampens public desire to protect the commons. I specifically focus on Trump Tower, an unrealized project proposed in 2011 but canceled in the aftermath of Trump's election to the US presidency, as well as a number of other half-finished skyscraper projects. Through this case, I demonstrate how even unbuilt or unfinished projects help the construction industry (and political elites) to turn public support away from the commons. I argue that the future promised by skyscraper projects, presented as a kind of ideological infrastructure, provides the frame for other kinds of urban structures that endanger communal integrity and sociality. Paradoxically, it is an excess of optimism (rather than the usual specter of post-Soviet pessimism), emerging from both the built space and social practice, behind the political visions that promise to install neoliberalism and western modernity as opposed to Soviet modernity.

*Milica Iličić, Columbia University*

Privatization, Occupation, Enterprise: a Case Study of Belgrade's *Zvezda* Cinema

This presentation reports on the occupation of a movie theater (which had been neglected in the rampant conversion of common space to capitalist ventures in Belgrade) by activists. I focus on the different ideologies and discourses that informed the instigators of the cinema's revival—communism/socialism, right to the city, Occupy Wall Street—and explore the nature of their final product, as well as the potential for future developments.

*Oleg Pachenkov, European University of St. Petersburg*

Every City Has the Flea Market It Deserves

In postsocialist cities where public space is eroded by haphazard privatization, the flea market functions as a public forum and reservoir of civic initiative. This presentation explores

flea markets in Berlin and St. Petersburg as social and cultural—not merely economic—institutions.

Lunch break 12:30pm - 2:00pm

Session IV 2:00pm - 4:00pm

Post-Socialist Alienation

*Angela Harutyunyan, American University of Beirut*

Video as a Painterly Medium: The Dialectic of the Ideal and Alienation in Contemporary Art in Armenia

The paper investigates artistic practices of the late 1990s and early 2000s in Armenia that used video as a privileged medium to render the post-Soviet subject visible. By the late 1990s this subject was as one borne out of the crisis of political subjectivization, that is, the crisis of becoming a political subject vis-à-vis political discourses and ideals. The paper situates select practices in the context of the turn of the century urban transformations in Yerevan that were symptomatic of the shifts within the local manifestations of global capitalism, resurgent nationalism as the political ideology of the state, and disillusionment with the political promise of democracy that characterised the immediate post-Soviet years in the early 1990s. The paper argues that video acted both as a screen that was believed to protect the vulnerable subject from undesired social identification and that which promised to deliver the “real” beyond social alienation. This double promise of the video, the paper argues, is due to its historical constitution in Armenian in relation to the fine arts tradition: as an artistic medium video was endowed with painterly qualities.

*Veronika Zablotzky, University of California, Santa Cruz*

Gendered (Re-)Publics, Grey Zones, and the Art of Queer Heterotopia in Post-Soviet Armenia

In 2012, a popular gathering place for critical thinkers of all stripes, a bar called DIY (Do It Yourself) in the city of Yerevan, the capital of post-Soviet Armenia, was firebombed while closed during off-hours. Coincidentally, the arson was filmed by a nearby surveillance camera, and the attackers soon identified and arrested. What followed, however, was not their trial and subsequent punishment, but a public endorsement of the act as a heroic defense of the nation. As the attackers went free, the owner of DIY bar, a young, openly queer woman, was forced into political exile. Three years later, in 2015, an experimental short film titled post-DIY was released in response to the bombing and its aftermath. I tell the story of post-Soviet publics, their transnational and geopolitical entanglements, as well as their irreducible grey zones through a careful reading of the 12-minute film itself - controversial even with sympathetic activists - and an (auto-)ethnographic account of three screenings of post-DIY in Yerevan in late 2016 - one at a gathering hosted by an NGO, one in private, and one at the art happening moving the (b)order curated by the filmmaker herself.

*Anito Szucs, Haverford College*

“(Not) Enough of the Colorful Revolution!”: Protesting the State-Curated Aesthetics of Kitsch in Skopje

As part of the “Skopje 2014” project, the Macedonian government radically rebuilt the capital: the crumbling walls of old ministries were covered by sparkling-white neoclassical plaster facades, and a number of gigantic statues and monuments were erected to celebrate

contentious national heroes, such as Mother Theresa and Alexander the Great. This paper investigates the performative actions in which anti-government groups have reclaimed public spaces by throwing colorful paint at government buildings and state-sponsored monuments.

*Mary Taylor, CUNY Graduate Center*

Publics, commons, and struggles over enclosure in turn of the millennium Hungary

In their important work on commoning, George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici present the act(s) of commoning as central to their definition of “the commons.” They also take pains to contrast “the commons” with “the public.” This presentation will draw on Caffentzis and Federici’s contribution to the question of commons/commoning to discuss various forms of enclosure and privatization that have taken place, as well as struggles around them, in late socialist/post-socialist context of Eastern Europe, particularly Hungary.