

FROM SOVIET PARK TRADITIONS TO NEOLIBERAL AMUSEMENT PARKS

An evolutionary portrait of green public spaces in Yekaterinburg, Russia

Simon Prenner

Under the direction of Prof. M. Müller
and codirection of Senior Researcher D. Gogishvili



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КТО МЫ, ОТКУДА, КУДА МЫ ИДЁМ?

(“Who are we, where do we come from, where are we going?”)

These words are written in a neon sign on a rooftop in central Yekaterinburg and fascinated me every day on my way to university during my 4 months there. Especially since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, I have been thinking a lot about these words.

нет войне. мир в мире.

DEDICATION

To Natalie, who made me smile on grey days at university.

To David, who taught me to believe in myself and that I can do this.

To Olga, without whom this work would never have been written.

To Paul, my travel companion I met in the depths of Russia.

To Gino, the world’s best journalist who proofread this work.

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Abstract:

This master's thesis examines the complex research issue of urban space which evolved during the Soviet Union, and which continues to change drastically since the birth of the Russian Federation. In particular, this work considers green public space in the city of Yekaterinburg, the fourth largest city in Russia, situated close to the Ural Mountains. The thesis investigated the development of two parks, one of which was created in the early 1930s under the Soviet Union and the other as a result of 2010s modern Russian urban planning. The research is of a qualitative nature, having implied semi-directive interviews and on-site observations in my research.

The findings of the thesis show how green public space is symbolic of the unprocessed grievances of the Soviet era and what was left behind from that time in Yekaterinburg. Simultaneously, the city has already faced new challenges and green public spaces in particular struggle for their survival. A complex constellation of actors such as real estate developers, the city administration, and local politicians are in an effective battle with the less assertive actor: the city's population. Perhaps surprisingly, Yekaterinburg's residents do fight for the right to their city and to have access to sufficient and well-planned green spaces, despite such zones being few and far between.

The development of green public spaces in the capital of the Urals has turned bleak in recent years. Strong top-down planning of public spaces enacted by Moscow makes it difficult for the population to keep Soviet heritage alive whilst fighting for good quality new parks that take important environmental aspects into account. Often, decisions are made with only profit and not the general public or sustainability taken into account.

Key Words: Soviet cities, post-Soviet cities, public space, green public space, urban activism, park of culture

Abstrait:

Ce mémoire de master examine la question complexe liée aux espaces urbains qui ont évolué pendant l'Union soviétique et ont radicalement changé depuis la naissance de la Fédération russe. Ce travail de recherche porte sur les espaces publics verts de la ville de Iekaterinbourg, la quatrième plus grande ville de Russie, située à proximité des montagnes de l'Oural. Ce mémoire se concentre en particulier sur le développement de deux parcs, l'un qui a été développé au début des années 1930 sous l'Union soviétique, et l'autre est le produit de l'urbanisme russe moderne des années 2010. Cette recherche de master est de nature qualitative, notamment des entretiens semi-directifs et des observations de terrain menés par l'auteur.

Les résultats de cette recherche montrent comment les espaces publics verts sont symboliques des griefs non traités de l'ère soviétique et de ce qui a été laissé de cette époque à Iekaterinbourg. La ville fait face à multiples défis, notamment la survie des espaces publics verts. Une constellation complexe d'acteurs tels que l'administration municipale, les promoteurs immobiliers et les politiciens locaux sont en bataille contre un acteur moins affirmé : la population de Iekaterinbourg. Étonnamment, les habitants se battent pour les droits de leur ville - pour avoir accès à suffisamment d'espaces verts qui soient bien aménagés, malgré leurs raretés.

Le développement des espaces publics verts dans la capitale de l'Oural est devenu sombre ces dernières années. La planification urbaine des espaces publics édictée par Moscou rend difficile pour la population de maintenir le patrimoine soviétique tout en luttant pour de nouveaux parcs de bonne qualité et durables. Les décisions sont souvent motivées par le profit à défaut de tenir compte de l'intérêt public et d'un développement respectueux pour l'environnement.

Mots clef: villes soviétiques, villes post-soviétiques, espace public, espace public vert, activisme urbain, parc de la culture

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1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH ISSUE

*“The morning beautifies with tender light
The walls of the ancient Kremlin,
The entire Soviet nation
Wakens with the dawn.
Beyond the gates streams cool air,
The noise on the streets is stronger,
Good morning, dear city,
Heart of my motherland!”*

If one were to believe the above excerpt from the famous Soviet song “*Moscow in May*”, written by Vasilii Lebedev-Kumach in 1938, you would believe that Soviet cities (in this case Moscow) were central to economic and political power and carried heavy symbolic meaning. In fact, such songs were written to inspire Soviet workers to build socialist art and to further socialist values, particularly through the sweeping modernisation of urban space and upheaval of pre-revolutionary Russian urban heritage (Khapaeva, n.d.). The Soviet city thus played a crucial role in the establishment of socialism, through which architecture and urban planning played key roles in the transformation of the Soviet society. This was achieved by eliminating all conditions for individualism through the creation of housing communes (дом коммуна) and the breaking of the patriarchy. As were the private company and peasant household economy broken and replaced with new labour collectives (Humphrey, 2005). This makes clear that the political ideology of the Soviet Union took material form in its cities and left a lasting mark on the Soviet era and even continues to influence modern Russia and its cities today.

The establishment of the Soviet Union¹ occurred as result of long years of dissatisfaction with Tsarist reign over Russia. This historical turning point in the early 20th century was mainly provoked by the struggle for dominance in Russia’s urban centres, notably the

¹The country’s official name was *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)* and it forcefully occupied most of Eurasia from 1921 to 1991, consisting of 15 member republics that were all governed by the *Communist Party of the Soviet Union*.

former capital Saint Petersburg (Andrusz et al., 1996). The Soviet Union's urban settlement strategy was of quantitative character, giving birth to many new cities and the industrialisation as of the 1930s, which transformed the country from an underdeveloped agrarian state into an industrial nation (Brade & Neugebauer, 2017). It is of no surprise then that the end of the Soviet system (December 1991), came with an emphasis on the industrialisation of cities, which again took place in these very urban centres (Andrusz et al., 1996).

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union many political and economic transformations have occurred within the newly post-Soviet republics. According to Sýkora & Bouzarovski (2012, p.44) in the so called "Global West" it is still hard to grasp what has become of the post-Soviet urban space under the many incessant and relentless structural transformations since Communism. What is clear so far is that post-Soviet cities are today under transformation and while on the one hand today they follow a market-oriented development under officially democratically elected governments, on the other hand they still are not fully neoliberal cities either (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012). Many cities with a Soviet past have had their own physical and societal structures for centuries and can thus not transform into neoliberal cities all of a sudden.

In order to understand what happened since neoliberalism arrived in Russia, we have to define the concept. Neoliberalism is a concept based on the theory that political and economic practices produce well-being at best when liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom inside an institutional framework with strong private property rights and a free market. The state should only create an institutional framework that guarantees the success of neoliberal practices. This means interventions in the market by the state have to be kept at a bare minimum (Harvey, 2007)

Research Issue

In this research the focus is being laid on the evolution from Soviet space to post-Soviet space. Müller (2020) defines this space the “Global East(s)”, enclosing those parts of the world that have developed in the shadows of the often cited rich “Global North” and poor “Global South” and do not belong to either of the other two. The Global East includes those countries in which the communist regimes vanished between 1989 and 1992, but not only. From that moment on, in these countries new political and economic systems have been implied whilst undergoing drastic institutional, social as well as urban transformations (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012) so that they could become liberal democracies with a free market, private ownership under neoliberalism based on the model of Global North. With the fall of the Soviet Union the ideological East-West division disappeared too (Müller, 2020). And so whilst the first world became the “Global North” and the third world the “Global South”, the second world vanished as it is too rich to be part of the South but too poor to join the North (Müller, 2020). In order to understand why the “Global East” and its cities are still today in the void between the North and the South, we have to dig into the past and understand the relevance of historical events because only by looking at a country’s path-dependence we can understand the present circumstances (Andrusz et al., 1996).

Research Question

In this research in order to obtain meaningful results within the given time, the focus was narrowed down and put on the investigation of the evolution of green public spaces² in in the post-Soviet city of Yekaterinburg, Russia. Since the perception and definition of the public and the private has drastically shifted from Soviet times, green public spaces are an interesting example to understand what has happened to the post-socialist city over the last 30 years. For instance, the term “public space” was not used for urban planning in the Soviet Union since no difference was made between what was public and private

²In the context of this work the notion “green public spaces” stands for freely accessible places in public space, which are used for recreation and contain characteristics of nature and ecological diversity. The term includes both classic open spaces such as parks, promenades and waterfront paths, but also neighborhood greenery, green courtyards and residential green areas.

by the Soviets (Engel, n.d.). All open space was public and the ban of private property allowed radical change in urban patterns (Andrusz et al., 1996).

In the early 1990s many post-Soviet cities suffered a drastic population decline which left a lot of undeveloped land within the cities. However, as re-urbanisation started again, post-Soviet cities had to learn how to balance urban regrowth and new construction whilst preserving and improving green public spaces and green infrastructure (Tuvikene et al., 2019).

Therefore as part of this research I chose two green public spaces in Yekaterinburg as case studies for analysis. The existing scientific literature around this topic suggests a rather controversial image of the development of green public spaces in regards of being really “green” and “public”, which led the author to the following central research question that guides this research:

To what extent have green public spaces in Yekaterinburg changed since the collapse of the USSR in order to suite the Neoliberal system?

In order to obtain results that may answer the research question, the author decided to study one historic park of culture called Mayakovsky Park, which was opened in 1933. This park was created in Yekaterinburg during Soviet times and is still existing today. As a second case study, I decided to study the Iset River Embankment Park³ which was created in recent years under neoliberalism and opened in 2019. By choosing these two parks as examples, it was possible to study the differences between green public spaces created in Russia during the Soviet times and today. In addition, the evolution of Mayakovsky Park represents changes that have taken place in Soviet Union-era parks beyond Yekaterinburg and can thus be used as a representative of other parks and give an idea of how they developed over time.

³The so called Iset River Embankment Park in this work does not have an official name. It was created by the author for facilitating the comparison.

The research question of this work unfolds in the following sub-questions that allow the author to clarify his questioning and find more detailed answers to the main research question:

- 1. What factors triggered the transformation of green public spaces in Yekaterinburg after the fall of the Soviet Union?*
- 2. How do both green public spaces from the past adapted to today's new needs and new green public spaces handle needs on the material and immaterial level?*
- 3. How are public spaces perceived by the inhabitants of Yekaterinburg today?*
- 4. Does the population of Yekaterinburg actively want to be part of the planification of green public spaces?*

Since the literature around the evolution of Soviet green public spaces is limited, the sub-questions have been thought of as questions for people's perception of the changes of Yekaterinburg's green public spaces who lived in both the Soviet Union and modern Russia to answer about their perception of the changes in Yekaterinburg's green public spaces. This way the best possible results could be obtained for the research issue.

HYPOTHESIS

With the guidance of the existing literature and the various theories regarding the subject of this work, I was able to develop the following hypotheses that takes into account social, political, economic and planning aspects related to the post-Soviet city:

“The transformation of central green public spaces is primarily part of a process of territorialisation of urban policies to make Yekaterinburg an attractive and competitive Russian city whilst peripheral green public spaces are relegated and designated for entertainment for the local public.”

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review introduces the major theories that guide the different approaches that frame this work. The literature review provides an overview on the existing studies on the ideas and concepts contained in this work while also pointing out the shortcomings of the latter.

The chapter was divided into three main topics that will later be mobilised again for the discussion. Firstly, since this thesis concerns the Soviet city, a section is dedicated to the development, existence, and role of cities as the Soviet ideology's backbone. The focus is laid on the importance of the role of green public spaces in the Soviet city. Secondly, a section is dedicated to the post-Soviet city that helps understand the changes that happened in the 1990s in Russia, again focusing on its green public spaces and the transformations they have gone through. Finally, in a third part of this chapter, some important phenomena defining urban planning in today's Russia are described. The explanation of these phenomena will later help us to better understand important findings of this master's thesis.

2.1 The Soviet city

URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOVIET CITY

“Socialism could not be built overnight, and nor could its cities” writes Andrusz et al., (1996, p.72), underlining how historical cities (e.g. Moscow, Kyiv) underwent drastic changes in the early 20th century and over several decades in order to start resembling what the new ideology wanted its cities to look like. Nevertheless, many new cities emerged in the USSR and were nearly always entirely dedicated to one industrial function. These cities are the purest and closest examples of what a Soviet city was supposed to look like.

In order to be able to implement the Soviet way of urban planning a very institutionalised and centralised setting was needed (Golubchikov, 2004). Therefore, all land was

incorporated into the state and the development of cities was organised around the ideological machine that forced new social and economic regulations through the Moscow-based central government (Golubchikov, 2004). Especially the idea of Howard's "garden city" was popular amongst Soviet urban planners, and so planting more trees and shrubs as well as dividing the city into smaller areas so it would transform into a big village were pursued (Budantseva, 2007).

Whilst American and Soviet systems were completely different styles of urban planning based on opposing political and ideologies, the two opposing systems produced urban environments that had many similarities. Additionally, whilst city planning was done in quite a narrow minded way in both countries, which resulted in a landscape that did not always fulfil citizen's needs in any way (Bunkse, 1979), the Soviets worked hard on creating a different kind of city from their American competitors. For example, one remarkable advantage of the Soviet planning system in regards to the American and European models was the total absence of planning legislation, meaning Soviet territorial development did not require any legal rules for planning at all, simply because no concept of planning and building law existed (Golubchikov, 2004). In addition to this, Soviet urban planners did not have to think about economising space. Since the state had a monopoly on urban land, Soviet public authorities could develop space as they wished. Unlike urban planning in Western societies, the aspect of land prices and arguments concerning private-property conflicts did not exist at all (Hirt, 2013).

For the Soviet regime, living in a city had a particular significance since it encouraged the creation of a collective rather than individual identity (Andrusz et al., 1996). And so, Soviet cities attracted many people in need of work. In order to accommodate the high demand of new homes in Soviet cities (cf. figure 1) from the early years of the Soviet Union's existence onwards, so called "mikrorayons"⁴ (micro districts) were introduced. These districts consisted of very basic building blocks that became the Soviet city's landmarks, housing people in flats, providing basic services and green public spaces for about 5'000 to 15'000 people per district (Andrusz et al., 1996). New urban planning

⁴ Mikrorayons are "a residential ensemble conceived so as to constitute an organic unity, aimed at connecting its inhabitants through the everyday use of shared social and cultural institutions (among which schools and day-care centres figure prominently) and of parks and green spaces." (Zarecor, 2018)

inventions such as the “mikrorayons” were also important means to achieving political and societal goals.

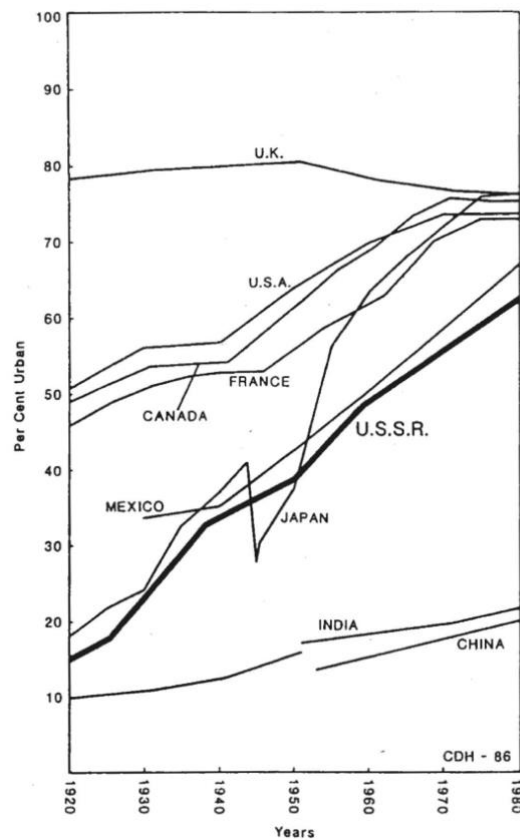


Figure 1: percentage of the urban population of the USSR and other nations. (Medvedko, 2017)

According to Andrusz et al. (1996) providing housing by the state was the most important means of the Soviet regime to ensure satisfactory and more or less equal living standards for all. And so endless apartment blocks (cf. figure 2) were built and have been giving up to today a special character to the Soviet/Russian urban landscape (Andrusz et al., 1996)

In central areas of cities so called “communal houses” were established in existing buildings, of which the owners got expropriated in order to accommodate more people and to satisfy a big demand for living space at low cost (Lebina, 2000). They also offered infrastructure like child care facilities, repair shops and sometimes club rooms (Körner, 1980). The main idea behind the communal houses was to relieve women from housework so they could work more intensely in factories and for civic activities (Budantseva, 2007).



Figure 2: Microrayon in Yekaterinburg, Russia (S. Prenner, 2021)

Although the construction logic of Soviet cities was entirely based on the logic of complying with the plan that was mandated by the government, it turned out to be an unproductive logic. Way too often the plans for building projects in new settlements in the Soviet Union underwent endless changes and adjustment, which led to an “unrealised utopia” (Ilchenko, 2017). Bunkse (1979, p.384) emphasises that in urban planning processes *“the involvement of numerous organisations and the need for approval at many levels of bureaucracy produce further division as well as delay so that plans are frequently changed, fragmenting unified development schemes”*. This incompleteness can rightfully be understood as one of the main concepts through which Soviet urban planning is remembered today (Ilchenko, 2017), with the USSR’s very existence significantly determined by the approval of endless plans and the setting of all kinds of goals that were never achieved (Ilchenko, 2017).

Nevertheless, Soviet urbanisation was successful in a way because the country underwent deep and rapid changes that allowed it to become a world superpower. As did the image of an old tsarist Russia as a country mainly populated by peasants disappeared quickly (Medvedko, 2017). In the Soviet city, the strength of the country in form of factories, well-trained labour and military power was established thanks to urban planning being subject to economic planning. This means that Soviet urban planners did mostly nothing

other than translating state ordered economic instructions into the design of residential settlements, a particular city, or a part of a city (Golubchikov, 2004). Here the focus was laid on the production of collective needs, which meant for urban planners that their focus needed to be on servicing industrial enterprises whilst social infrastructure, such as housing and green public spaces were created based on norms of minimum individual needs. This approach unfortunately limited the openness and contestability of Soviet urban planning (Golubchikov, 2004).

PUBLIC SPACE AND ITS ROLE IN THE SOVIET CITY

Public space is arguably an urban phenomenon defined by the meeting of morally remote city dwellers within physical proximity to one another (Bodnar, 2015).

Since Soviet ideology driven by the Russians did not recognise privacy as a necessary condition for public living, it should be of no surprise that there is no translation for the word “public space“ in the Russian language (Engel, n.d.). Soviet urban planning did not use the term “public space” since this term differed in the USSR from what it was (and is) in Western societies. Engel (n.d.) also argues that the Soviet city did not differentiate between private and public open spaces because all open spaces were at the same time public spaces. In addition to this, public spaces were not really meant for public living in the way one would define it in Western societies, since freely chosen activities in public were limited or only partly allowed. Thus public space often ended up being of very limited use, due to the severe political control and surveillance that effectively turned the ideal of “everyone’s space” into “no-one’s space” (Neugebauer & Rekhviashvili, 2015).

What was meant with the term “free” or “open space” in the Soviet Union instead is pretty simple. Basically, all spaces without buildings on it (for the exception of agricultural cultivated spaces) were defined as such open spaces. The term “social space” was introduced to underline the meaning of these space as the centre of social life (Engel, n.d.). Public spaces were therefore very important in Soviet urban planning because they illustrated the new way of living for the socialist society. Despite public space often not having been very attractive for leisure time, Soviet city dwellers spent much time in them because their private spaces were in general not very spacious and their conditions often

not exceptional. And so Soviet citizens spent much of their lives in their impressive and monumental, but not very practical, public spaces (Becker et al., 2012).

Public space was thus a space heavily influenced by ideology and politics. In the centres of Soviet cities prestigious squares and streets were built to represent the leadership of the strong state by showing the power of the Communist Party, but more importantly to illustrate the importance of the community. Public space was meant to make people understand that the community was all, whilst the individual was nothing (Engel, n.d.). The further one distanced oneself from the centre, the more public spaces suffered from budget shortfalls which for instance caused that many planned green public spaces remained just muddy expanses for many years (Zarecor, 2018). The chain reaction of under-resourced public employees who were incapable of maintaining parks or public spaces to acceptable standards was caused by the lack of financial resources provided (Andrusz et al., 1996). Between public and private there is a no man's-land, such as common spaces in residential buildings where responsibility for these spaces is unclear. The problem with Soviet society was that 'what belongs to all belongs to no one', and through this statement often nobody felt responsible for the care and financing of public spaces (Andrusz et al., 1996).

Last but not least it is also important to mention that public space in the Soviet Union was planned specifically so it could be easily monitored (Engel, n.d.). Since public life generally consists of disorderly masses and all kinds of groups of people, lots of bars, restaurants and other free time activities in a very dense urban set up, individuals could not be easily surveyed. Therefore, Engel (n. d) claims that the Soviet regime abolished any leisure activities and created public spaces with no other use than being monumental. These spaces were kept very clean, so that undesired groups of people such as the homeless, alcoholics and drug abusers did not have anywhere to go without getting removed (Engel, n.d.). This shows that public space is nothing more than a medium of politics and power as well as spatialised social practices and relations, which account for openness and closure or ultimate inclusion and exclusion (Kalyukin et al., 2015).

GREEN PUBLIC SPACES IN THE SOVIET CITY

In Soviet planning logic, public spaces were subdivided into three main groups: social centres, streets and public green spaces (Engel, n.d.). Through urban design, especially influenced by the idea of the “garden city”, the Soviet regime worked on finding a way to provide for city dwellers with activities for their fitness and health. Kalyukin et al. (2015) writes that such recreational activities were considered an important means to educate and enlighten Soviet citizens. Therefore, green public spaces did not just have to fulfil aesthetic functions like most other public spaces did, but had an important purpose to enhance the Socialist feeling of belonging together (Kalyukin et al., 2015). Green public spaces were thus supposed to represent the relationship between the individual and the community by hosting political parades, festivals and public celebrations (Engel, n.d.). In order to be able to accommodate such large amounts of people so called “parks of culture and leisure” were created in all major Soviet cities and equipped with sports facilities and other infrastructure (Kalyukin et al., 2015).

Generally, because of strongly hierarchical and non-democratic societal structures that were combined with very limited financial budgets, green public spaces in Soviet cities were planned in a very strict top-down planning structure and rarely included participatory elements to hear the needs of the population (Tuvikene et al., 2019). The planning of green public space was embedded in the hierarchical system of Soviet city planning which provided regional and local leaders with the aesthetics required of major green areas, squares and streets as well as smaller details for little yards with green elements (Engel, n.d.). This way green public spaces in the Soviet city often gave the impression of a ‘postcard’ that represented the official and neat way the city wanted to promote and not the living city and its people (Zhel'nina, 2013). This way the city was perceived as a space to be observed, but never touched or lived. This idea of a decorative city suited the Soviet ideal because the Communist party’s demonstrations and rallies could be held and give a good impression, making city dwellers feel like the parks and squares did not ‘belong’ to them (Zhel'nina, 2013).

2.2 The fall of the Soviet Union: the post-Soviet city

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the foundation of the new state of the new “Russian federation” (along with 14 other independent post-Soviet republics) in 1991 were accompanied by a total political collapse and a deep and prolonged economic depression. Russia along with all other new post-Soviet republics underwent many transformations and reforms (cf. figure 3), of which most notably is the political shift from Socialist totalitarianism to democracy and the system change from Socialist central planning to free market neoliberalism (Brade et al., 2006). In Russia, these reforms shifted the control over enterprises from the state to individuals who were well connected inside the government, leading to the rise of the oligarchs.

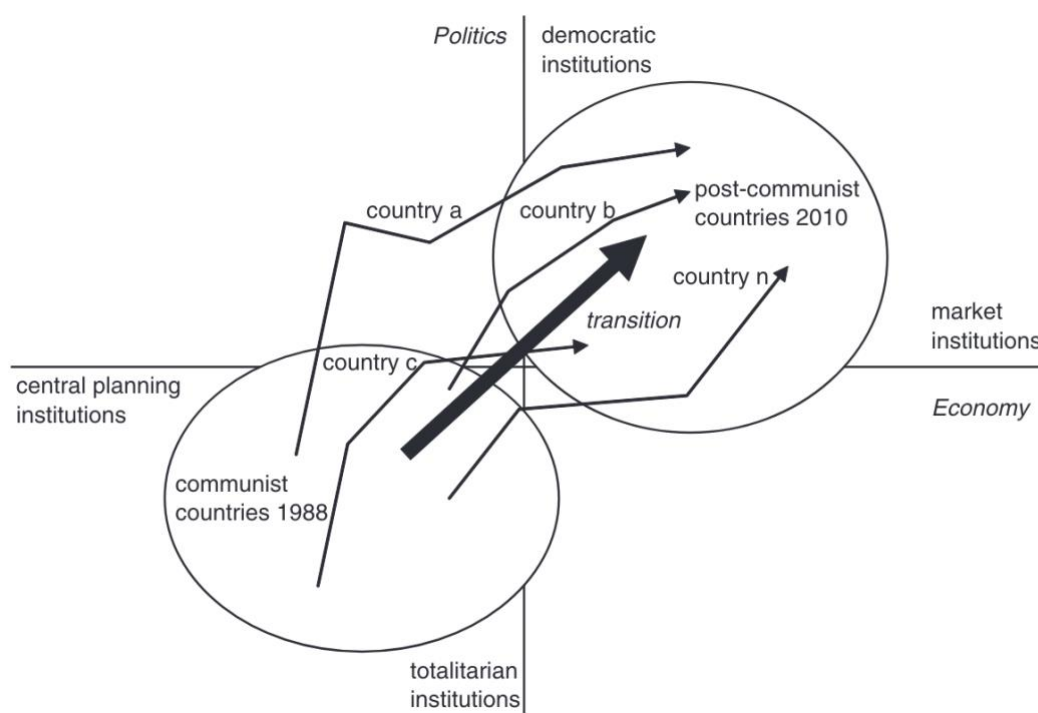


Figure 3: institutional transformation: multiple country trajectories. (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012)

These big reforms are often referred to as ‘shock therapy’, meaning the country got turned upside down by introducing from one day to another a new economic system, mass privatisation, price liberalisation and a less powerful public sector. Nevertheless, the

shock therapy was successful in breaking the old political regime. On one hand however, it brought new problems for Russia's unstable economic situation of which the country still suffers today (Golubchikov, 2004). As a result, the economy stagnated, the population became impoverished and crime rate rose drastically (Golubchikov, 2004). Of all Soviet living spaces, cities were better at coping with the crisis that came with system change. This was in part thanks to the cities being the country's economic nerve centres and the bearers of regional development (Brade et al., 2006), which allowed them to adapt quickly to the changed demands of society.

URBAN PLANNING IN MODERN RUSSIA

Post-Soviet cities at their birth entered the stage of transition from industrial to a post-industrial system. Despite this shift, still in 2007, 10 % of the built-up areas in post-Soviet cities are covered by industrial lands from the past (Brade et al., 2007). This shows that somehow the strive for progress in technology and science and the shift towards creating cosmopolitan cities has not entirely worked as planned, leaving the post-Soviet city in a stage of transition on multiple levels (cf. figure 4) between its unwanted past and desired future. The profound impact of the new competitive environment amongst post-Soviet cities had an especially strong impact on the economic and urban development. Therefore, cities that used to be closely linked to industrial structures entered a crisis and were suddenly without importance. Thus, certain people had to leave for more promising places in order to survive, leaving behind their homes to an elite that has been shaping Russian cities ever since (Brade & Neugebauer, 2017).

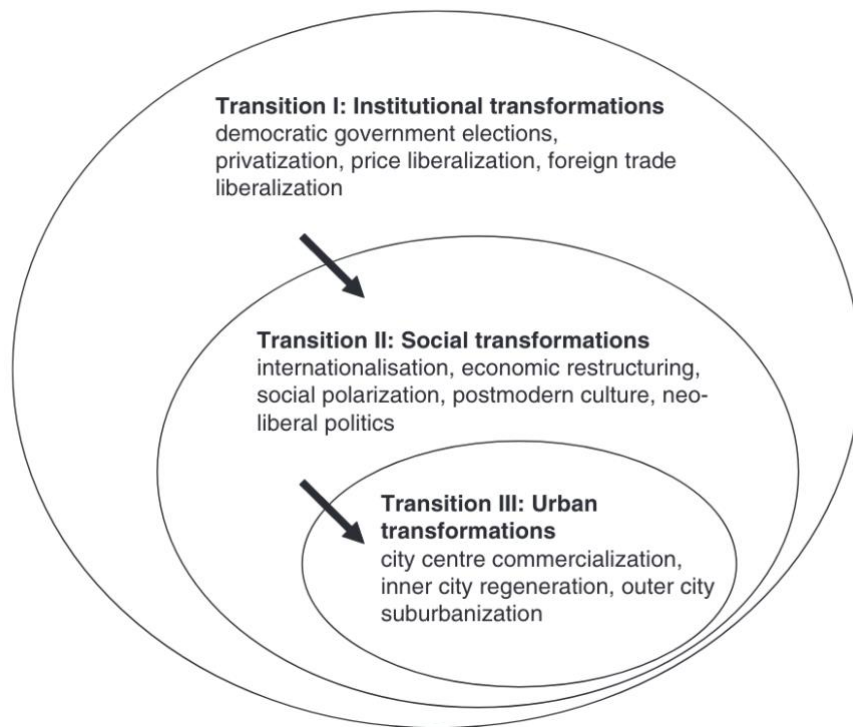


Figure 4: Multiple transformations under neoliberalism. (Šýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012)

According to Golubchikov (2004) changes in post-Soviet cities have been slower than expected since urban planning as a public service had to be re-institutionalised. A new legislative framework had to be created in order to develop a new relationship within the different institutions of the public sector, the public and the private as well as to legalise public participation (Golubchikov, 2004). This big challenge of internal reorganisation was accompanied by additional external pressure on Russian cities. All of a sudden regional and national factors influenced the country's urban centres but also transnational and international factors were present (Brade et al., 2006). Post-socialist cities have been all of a sudden competing for foreign investment and for closer ties to the Western economies. Since foreign investors and international companies want high-quality infrastructure, good business-orientated services and an institutional framework that ensures success, only very few cities have been able to compete on this level (Brade et al., 2006). A period of "laissez-faire"⁵ public policy in the 1990s, when the Russian government withdrew from many spheres, had a strong impact on urban planning.

⁵Laissez faire: the absence of leadership and the avoidance of intervention, or both (Skogstad et al., 2007).

Urban planning had to take new forms to survive in the new Russian state. Ideally, a balance of power between social interests, private interests and the interests of neighbourhoods would have been established, but in order to reach this, the new planning system had to be respected, transparent, democratic and oriented toward finding compromises (Golubchikov, 2004). This was not the case. Instead, significant social disparities were created by urban spatial reorganisation and the segregation of the population into two social groups: on one hand marginalised people who lost most of what they had and thus lived in crowded small apartments in the periphery or even self-built houses, and on the other hand the post-Soviet upper-class élite, living in gentrified downtowns and modernised urban neighbourhoods (Hirt, 2013).

After the period of stagnation and “laissez-faire”, finally, in recent years an increased interest in urban regulations and urban planning has appeared. Newly introduced regional and city managers have begun better coordination of the socio-economic processes throughout Russia’s cities and the land and building legislation as well as urban planning have been started to be seen as effective policy tools again (Golubchikov, 2004). And so the arrangement of urban space in Russia has started to follow more precisely the trends noted in Europe and accelerated the transformation of urban space in modern Russian cities (Brade et al., 2007).

GREEN PUBLIC SPACES IN TODAY’S RUSSIA

Post-Soviet cities today are still working on creating their identities. Green public spaces that have been created in the Soviet Union often got forgotten, whilst new green public spaces begun to appear. The negative attitude towards Soviet green public space was mainly based on the fact that individuals could not use them, since they were often planned as monuments and nothing more. Today, Russian society wants to influence, transform and fix the urban environment and demands that this is incorporated into their city development, for a better life quality can be reached (Bach & Murawski, 2020).

Many new challenges since the arrival of neoliberalism in Russia have appeared. First of all, all spatial features of the Soviet city have undergone intense erosion since its fall (Hirt, 2013). For instance, today the mass-housing estates from Soviet times are often

undergoing changes. Especially green spaces around houses have started to disappear through the arrival of a different population taking over green spaces by building new structures for retail on them, for example (Hirt, 2013). This is typical for all post-Soviet cities, not only Russia, and so very ambivalent but relevant trends for public space in post-Soviet cities emerged. The loss of “publicness” due to new hierarchies and privatisation caused fundamental shifts in the political, institutional and economic perception of green public spaces (Neugebauer & Rekhviashvili, 2015). This is why many of the Soviet Union’s achievements in creating green public space has disappeared in the post-Soviet city. The number of greenbelts, agricultural lands and urban green public spaces such as gardens and parks has decreased dramatically (Hirt, 2012). On a smaller scale green public spaces like gardens and playgrounds in Soviet neighbourhoods have also disappeared. In Moscow, for instance, about 750 hectares of forests in its green areas disappeared between 1991 and 2001 (Hirt, 2012).

In more recent years, the greening of post-Soviet cities has started to be understood as an integral component of their competitiveness. And so post-Soviet cities together with national authorities have begun new city planning strategies that imply or mandate the creation of green public spaces. This has been mainly in order to fight urban heat islands, reduce air pollution and reduce storm water runoff (Coulibaly, 2012). Green public spaces are therefore now seen as more than just a way of improving city dwellers’ life quality, but also to manage environmental problems. The concept of green infrastructure in cities has mainly become important since it became a discussion point in global urban policy. Therefore, today green public spaces are understood as a strategic approach to develop cities that provides benefits to its dwellers and nature (Tuvikene et al., 2019).

These modern and future oriented policies stand in conflict with the ongoing processes of corrosion of the generous public spaces inherited from Soviet times. Public space is constantly taken to develop commercial spaces in the city. Public green spaces of all sizes, from large parks to neighbourhood gardens, have been shrinking and lost in the transition of the post-Soviet city (Hirt, 2013).

The parks and green public spaces that manage to survive in the new system are subject to so called “neoliberal urbanism”, which implies that parks today are not only seen as material urban infrastructures performing a variety of urban functions such as recreational

and environmental needs, but are obligated to become a means to help expand neoliberalism further (Zupan & Büdenbender, 2019). In this context, neoliberal urbanism presents itself as “green neoliberalism”, with development opening up new ways of capital accumulation. Deeper issues surrounding the commodification of nature and human-induced environmental degradation meanwhile get depoliticised (Zupan & Büdenbender, 2019).

2.3 Struggles of the post-Soviet urban development

PRIVATISATION AND COMMERCIALISATION OF PUBLIC SPACE

The privatisation and commercialisation of public space in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union has been a widespread phenomenon. An example to show this is Gorky Park, Moscow’s former Soviet park of culture. When it opened its gates to the public in 2011 after being reconceptualised and reconstructed, a new public was targeted. Kalyukin et al. (2015) writes that a public with a “European lifestyle” was targeted, meaning the young, creative, hip and cultured Muscovites. In order to attract them, illegal street vendors, unauthorised construction and amusement facilities in and around the park got removed to make space for a new visual design and new services were tailored for the new public’s needs (Kalyukin et al., 2015). Therefore a park for “hipsters” (progressive educated middle class) was created. A new social order was also established by the policing of certain types of consumption and behaviour, with activities associated with a “European lifestyle” effectively promoted, thereby causing the “purification” of public space and the exclusion and arrest of people who did not behave accordingly (Kalyukin et al., 2015). And so despite the park being a public space, meaning it is officially open to all visitors, this “safe and modern” space has actually become inaccessible for certain people due to its unofficial privatisation and commercialisation. And so “revanchism”, a concept showing how urban policies clear the path for gentrification, has arrived in post-Soviet Russia too. Revanchism proceeds through corporate investment and by doing so it clears the city from undesirable and unwanted populations (Aalbers, 2011).

Studies about Saint Petersburg show that the problem of the privatisation of public spaces in the post-Soviet city is a complex phenomenon (Zhel'nina, 2013). After having been a no man's land for several decades, public spaces in the centre of Saint Petersburg all of a sudden turned into uncontrolled market spaces, writes Zhelnina, (2013). From small businesses like kiosks to shops, street traders and vendors occupied all kinds of available public spaces. In other cases, privatisation occurred in the form of a reduction of public space in Saint Petersburg. However, in it remains difficult to compare modern Saint Petersburg to its Soviet past because there were no real public spaces that could have turned into lively interactive places in the central squares and streets. Public space back then was not used by the public in the same way as today, whilst in the Russia of the 1990s, people started conquering space back by supporting the new street retailers (Zhel'nina, 2013).

In the small city of Vsevolozhsk on the outskirts of Saint Peterburg, the privatisation of public space has also been a product of the arrival of neoliberalism. The quasilegal means used by powerful businesspeople to acquire exclusive access to lakes, protected forests and parks, and even sand quarries have damaged Vsevolozhsk's public space recreation possibilities (Becker et al., 2012). This phenomenon does not only effect urban dwellers but also the rural population. The sudden arrival of rich newcomers who take over public space creates gated communities and is often the order of the day (Becker et al., 2012).

The above mentioned examples show that "urban space is the product of conflict" (Kalyukin et al., 2015. pp.3) and therefore it can be envisioned as a platform for processes and struggles that can make specific spaces under specific circumstance for specific people more or less public. The appropriation of public space can be seen as an exercise of citizens' "right to the city", meaning the right to be involved in the process of decision-making in regard to the planning and organisation of the public sphere (Kalyukin et al., 2015).

URBAN ACTIVISM AND GREEN PUBLIC SPACES IN RUSSIA

Today, in the western public a simplified image of weak, passive and scared citizens in post-Soviet cities dominates people's minds, ignoring the fact that a big variety of urban

actors, initiatives, activities and claims to space have developed since the fall of the Soviet Union (Darieva & Neugebauer, 2020). Ever since the foundation of post-Soviet Russia, civil society has been under difficult and infelicitous political conditions that give citizens a hard time to express themselves freely. It is therefore quite astonishing that in spite of these circumstances many social organisations have been created and continue to persist although many obstacles are put in their way (Henry, 2010). Soviet state property underwent extreme levels of privatisation in modern Russia and made citizens owners of apartments which made them feel as if they were stakeholders in society (Fröhlich, 2020). This boosted their sense of civic responsibility for the development of their city (Darieva & Neugebauer, 2020). All kinds of protest from small-scale activities to big mass movements (cf. figure 5) thus emerged to fight neoliberal urbanism and authoritarian regimes (Darieva & Neugebauer, 2020). The arrival of the Russian authoritarian neoliberal urban regime has entailed and has even expanded its political authoritarianism and the exclusion of citizens from decision-making processes (Fröhlich, 2020) today. This way of urban governance shapes how the city administration takes control over everything, such as control over public space in housing environments out of economic interests (Fröhlich, 2020). For the inhabitants of post-Soviet Russian cities this is a very frustrating situation, as they are not only excluded from political decision making but are considerably constrained in their right to express dissent and participate in the development of their city.



Figure 5: the spectrum of urban activism (Darieva & Neugebauer, 2020)

In many cities just like in Yekaterinburg, the city studied in this work, people have found ways to establish some kind of participatory urbanism which allows activists to express their desires regarding specific urban problems in front of officials (Golovátina-Mora et al., 2018). In the case of Yekaterinburg the Centre for Applied Urbanism⁶ took the role of mediator between communities, activists and city officials thanks to which important achievements and compromises could be obtained

⁶ The Center for Applied Urban Studies is a Russian network of urban teams united by common values and a vision for the development of post-Soviet cities. It is not an organisation in the classical sense, since it does not have a physical institution and employees. In Yekaterinburg, the local team worked on several projects for years however, all of a sudden members did not show up anymore. Despite certain members of the local network keeping in touch, the Centre does no longer exist in Yekaterinburg. (Interview 3)

2.4 Shortcomings in the literature

Despite the vast existing literature about the Soviet city and even more so about the post-Soviet city, topics like public space and green public space do not seem to have been very widely studied and taken into account. It was thus difficult to find a big variety of sources regarding the development, the use and the evolution of green public spaces in transition from Soviet times to modern Russia's context.

Especially in regards of my case study Yekaterinburg, it was impossible to find research papers that have been conducted in the field of urban planning or green public spaces. Nevertheless, the broad literature review available (mainly focusing on Moscow and Saint Petersburg) was of generic character but of sufficient quantity so that I was able to draw conclusions and new theories from it in relation to Yekaterinburg and its green public spaces.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Choice of case study and justification

Before introducing the chosen method for my thesis, it should be noted that this research work was carried out during a semester spent abroad in Yekaterinburg, Russia at the Ural Federal University (UrFU) in the period of September to December 2021. It has always been my dream to spend some time in Russia, since one hand, I am interested from an urban planning point of view in the Soviet planning system and Socialist urban planning from that time and on the other hand have always been personally attracted and interested in many aspects of Russian culture, language and lifestyle from an early age.

For my research abroad I needed preparation time and started two years in advance to take Russian classes, so that I would be able to communicate with people during my stay of 4 months in Yekaterinburg. Having learned the language helped me to emerge faster and deeper into daily Russian life and to get to know the city of Yekaterinburg and its inhabitants. Thanks to my status as an exchange student I was able to take some university courses related to my research and connect with students and other people in the scientific and activist scene. This turned out to be hugely important for my research later on. Whilst living in Yekaterinburg, I was also enrolled as an intern at the “Centre for Global Urbanism⁷”, an institution within the Ural Institute of Humanities of UrFU. I was supervised by the director of the research centre, Doc. Prof. Elena Trubina.

It turned out that the initial plan of focusing on on-site resources such as studying official documents and interviewing official public and private stakeholders of Yekaterinburg’s

⁷The Centre for Global Urbanism is an interdisciplinary research centre that was established in 2017. The Centre was created to bring together research projects devoted to the aspects of socialist and post-socialist urban development. The centre was founded by Martin Müller and Elena Trubina and is based on a horizontal research collaboration arrangement and it is determinations of the collective’s members and not directives from a lead authority that the actual participation is based on. (*The Centre for Global Urbanism*, n.d.)

green public spaces was unrealistic and inaccessible. In Russia, official data is extremely difficult to access, and desirable stakeholders such as the city administration were not able to be reached. Furthermore, if such data was obtained, it would most likely not be of high validity, as officials try to optimise their image and only tell what they want people to know. Therefore, the focus of my approach needed to be slightly altered: through contacts established during and after my time in Yekaterinburg, I was able to find competent interview partners, mainly from the local academic and activist spheres. In addition, on-site observations and photo documentation was carried out. The information I obtained could then be compared not just with each other, but also with the existing related research literature. To investigate, I also conducted online research as a further source. Information could be found in different languages I can speak. Of main importance were Russian, English and French.

For my research I also decided to study one Soviet park through which I wanted to learn how the urban planning of green public space was implemented during the Soviet time. I also wanted to understand how this green public space had changed through time, especially as a result of the system change that occurred throughout the former Soviet Union as a result of communism's collapse and neoliberalism's rise. For this study, I chose "Mayakovsky Central Park of Culture and Recreation", officially called "Центральный парк культуры и отдыха имени В. В. Маяковского" (cf. chapter 4.2).

As a counterpart to the historic Soviet park, I decided to study a green public space of the latest generation that opened to the public recently, so that I could understand how such spaces are being planned in today's Russia under completely different circumstances and compare it to the Soviet park in different aspects. As my case study for the park of the new generation I chose the central "Iset river embankment" which does not officially carry a name yet (cf. chapter 4.3).

And so, since this thesis takes the form of a qualitative study aimed at observing how Soviet green public spaces have changed over time and how new green public spaces are designed in today's Russia, semi directive interviews with partners who have lived in both times, the Soviet Union and Russia, were the appropriate main method to gather information. As a secondary method to gather information, on-site observations have been conducted and complete the research.

3.2 Semi-directive interviews

Semi-directive interviews are a type of interview that makes it possible to orient the discussion with the respondent around specific themes and questions, while leaving them a great deal of freedom in their response in order to encourage responses that are rich in information. Since semi-directive interviews imply a weak directivity, an interview guide was needed to prepare for them (cf. appendix 1) however, I allowed the conversation to take its own course. The questions were therefore composed in a mainly open-ended manner so that the interlocutor can express their perceptions freely. The goal, through this method, was to bring out sincerity on the part of the interlocutor in order to test the hypotheses of the work (Van Campenhoudt et al., 2017). The collected data was then processed in the form of a content analysis.

A separation of the speakers into different categories was not necessary, as they were all of similar academic backgrounds. Nevertheless, each interview partner had information to share that regarded their specific field of study which enriched the work and allowed me to collect several different points of view of the same two case studies and to compare the different discourses.

During my research period spent in Yekaterinburg, mainly thanks to my supervisor at the Centre for Global Urbanism, Elena Trubina, I was able to receive the contact information for different people that potentially could agree to give me an interview. However, it soon turned out to be quite hard to convince people to talk to me, as the Covid-19 pandemic was still ongoing and my Russian language skills were limited. Additionally, many of the candidates did not consider themselves as relevant interview partners or knowing enough about the subject. Certain people who were suitable turned out to be too occupied or disappeared even after having agreed to give an interview. Luckily, in addition to the contacts received by Professor Trubina, I was also able to make some acquaintances whilst living in Yekaterinburg thanks to whom I found more interview partners.

Ideally, 10 interviews should have been conducted to make sure to have a wide variety of views and answers to my questions. In the end I was able to do 11 interviews which each lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. Because of my limited knowledge of the Russian language as well as the limited level of English of most interview partners, it was necessary to have a simultaneous interpreter. In the end I was able to conduct 3 interviews in English language whilst the other 9 interviews got simultaneously interpreted by a Russian friend who studied and works as an interpreter. All interviews were transcribed and handed in to my thesis supervisor and co-supervisor.

In the end I was able to establish 11 contacts that each agreed that I could record the interview and use their names in my thesis. Their names and professions are as follows:

- ***Elena Borodina*** (Бородина Елена Васильевна)
Living in Yekaterinburg, Russia; Associate Professor of the Department of Russian History of UrFU
- ***Elena Trubina*** (Трубина Елена Германовна)
Living in Yekaterinburg, Russia; Associate Professor of the Department of Social Philosophy UrFU and Director of the Center for Global Urbanism
- ***Alyona Tsorik*** (Цорик Алёна)
Living in Yekaterinburg, Russia; professor at Ural State University of Architecture and Art in Ekaterinburg, architect, urban activist, focusing on historic preservation projects, including green public spaces
- ***Artem Berkovich*** (Беркович Артём)
Living in Yekaterinburg, Russia; historian, urban researcher, Curator of the Center of Photography Mart, ex director of scientific research at the Museum of Yekaterinburg History and the Museum of Photography Metenkov House
- ***Evgeny Rabinovich*** (Рабинович Евгений)
Living in Yekaterinburg, Russia; Author of the book “Mayakovsky Central Park of Culture and Recreation” (Центральный парк культуры и отдыха имени В. В. Маяковского), Professor at the department of Cultural Studies and Socio-Cultural Activities at UrFU, currently studying the parks of Ural, engaged in the studies of Soviet green spaces in the Ural region and their transformation in the post-Soviet epoch
- ***Anna Gurariy*** (Гурарий Анна)

Living in Yekaterinburg, Russia; Associate Professor and head of the Department of Applied Sociology, Faculty of Political Science and Sociology, associate Professor at the Department of Social Work at UrFU

- ***Mariya Vorobyeva*** (Воробьёва Мария)
Living in Yekaterinburg, Russia; professor at the Technical University of Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company, research interest in the concept of ideology during the late Soviet period starting from 1960
- ***Elena Kochukhova*** (Кочухова Елена)
Living in Yekaterinburg, Russia; Associate Professor at the Ural State University of Economics, Scientific Associate at the Institute of Philosophy and Law of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences
- ***Natalya Antonova*** (Антонова Наталья)
Living in Yekaterinburg, Russia; professor at UrFU, Habilitated Doctor of Social Sciences
- ***Oleg Golubchikov*** (Голубчиков Олег)
Living in Cardiff, Wales (UK); reader in Human Geography, Director of Postgraduate Research at the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University, special interests in urban geography and sustainability studies.
- ***Anna Baltina*** (Балтина Анна)
Living in Yekaterinburg, Russia; urban activist and organizer of the urban community called 'Parks and Squares', curator of the forum 'The Iset River' and curator of the festival 'Isel Fest'

3.3 On site observations

The observations on site complemented the semi direct interviews. Indeed, these two methods are very often combined (Van Campenhoudt et al., 2017). Observations are useful in order to be able to relate the spoken of the interview partners and the realities of the field through this method. For my two case studies I spent two half days on site, observing the chosen terrain (cf. appendix 2). By doing so, different aspects of what has been discussed during the interviews could be verified or completed.

I noted the gathered information in form of voice memos on my phone whilst conducting the observations. Then, right after having returned home, notes were taken and reworked on the computer as well as interpreted and preliminary analysed. This was done right after each observation so as not to forget details that would not necessarily have been noted at otherwise. During my observations, I took photos that are particularly helpful for the analysis and understanding of the collected data. They show in a detailed way the different observations and dynamics of the territory.

3.4 Difficulties and limits

Before having been able to do my research, it was already challenging to make it to Russia, as the Visa application procedure is very complicated and I was not sure if the country would allow students from Europe to enter because of the pandemic. In addition to that, as a researcher in an authoritarian field gathering data in places that are under authoritarian rule can be unsettling and dangerous (Glasius et al., 2018). Since Russia has shifted in the direction of authoritarianism, it was hard for me to assess how to behave, with whom to talk about what and how without getting into trouble and not putting others into trouble themselves.

My methodology was not always easy to apply and turned out to have several limits. First of all and in regards to the interviews, the Covid-19 pandemic made people less approachable and so it was hard to find interview partners. Once I had found enough interview partners, I had already returned to Europe and needed to conduct the interviews online. Because of a 3 hour time difference with Yekaterinburg, and with my interview partners working full time and nearly always needing an interpreter to be present, it was tough finding time slots that worked for everyone. Secondly, my sample of interview partners is not representative of the population and its general opinion, which is an important bias that must be taken into account.

As for the observations, less people probably used the green public spaces I observed because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the fact that by the time I was able to conduct them, winter had arrived. The temperature during the observations was between -10 and -20 degrees which made it difficult to remain on site for several hours. In addition to that during my observations my phone turned off occasionally due to the cold temperatures and certain voice memos were therefore not saved. Because of the season it was also hard to imagine how the two case studies would be used during summer and special traditional celebrations.

3.5 Ethical principles during the research

To behave ethically in geographical research it is important that one knows how to act in accordance with the notions of right and wrong. Ethical research means that I, as an author act thoughtfully, am informed and am a reflexive observer who is able to act honourably because it is the right thing to do, not just because someone makes me do it (Clifford et al., 2010). This means that it is important to receive full the consent of the respondents of interviews, which I had for each, including the recordings. In addition to that it is important to keep a researcher–respondent relationship, even if the interviews take place in sometimes less professional contexts, professional. As all my interviews were conducted online, so I was able to keep personal interaction at a minimum. It is also important not to use people to gain information without giving them anything in return. The interview partners all agreed to talk to me without wanting anything in return. The interpreter was compensated monetarily for her assistance during the interviews.

Regarding the on-site observations it was an active choice not to talk to people spending time in the parks as I observed, since the language barrier could have caused misunderstandings, scare people or spark unnecessary debates and attention.

3.6 Data analysis method: the grounded theory

As for the procedure of data collection, the “grounded theory” (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 2017) was applied in order to construct our questions, hypotheses and issues, which form the guidance through my work. This widespread meshing tool method is often used in the social sciences. It is most often applied to systematically analyse qualitative data, such as the interviews and observations of this research. The theory was created in Chicago in the early 1960s by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss and follows the logic of abduction. The term ‘grounded’ implies the principle of building a theory through collected empirical data instead of a theory itself.

The analysis of the data, as presented in chapter 5, is being performed by coding the data and their categorised analysis. In order to obtain the right results, it was important to pay attention to words and language specifically, so that the correct meanings and theories could be identified and emerge (Walker & Myrick, 2006). However, it is important to note that the obtained results remain “relative” since they have a strong link to the existing theories presented in the literature review (Guillemette, 2006).

4. CONTEXT AND CASE STUDY

4.1 Historic portrait of the City of Yekaterinburg

In order to better understand the context of this thesis, a short historical overview of the city of Yekaterinburg is given. This seeks to help understand the development of the city as well as its importance on a national scale.

Yekaterinburg is Russia's fourth biggest city, located on the border of the European and Asian continents about 1'700 km east of the capital and 7'600 km west of Vladivostok. In January 2022, the city counted a population of 1,493,600 inhabitants (Statdata, 2022). Officially, Yekaterinburg is the capital of the Ural Federal District and the Sverdlovsk Oblast. However, the special geographical position of the city, its political, economic, cultural and scientific superior significance in central Russia gave the city the official status of the "Capital of the Ural Federal district" (cf. figure 6). Being the major city in the Urals, Yekaterinburg is home to a lot of significant functional institutions, such as the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, as well as the Headquarters of the Central Military District (Belyaeva, 2016).



Figure 6: the seven federal districts of the Russian Federation. (Butler, 2021)

The city was founded in 1723. The need for its construction was due to the presence of a variety of natural resources in the territory of the Urals. Yekaterinburg itself was originally conceived as an iron-making factory city as well as the capital of the mining and manufacturing region, built on the banks of the Iset River and surrounded by a fortified defensive fortress (Ekburg.Ru, 2018). The industrial character of the city is reflected in its layout and appearance. The city plan was based on strict regularity – a progressive principle of urban planning of the 18th century. The city was in addition constructed around a dam, which forms the heart of the city, especially as it was used for providing the iron plant with cold energy (Kotzinets, 1989). The Iset floodplain forms the main compositional axis of the city, along which it developed for three centuries. The rational rectangular layout was not just a geometric device. It was connected with the natural conditions and functions of the factory town. The layout was based on the intersection of two mutually perpendicular axes of the Iset River and the dam (Kotzinets, 1989). From here the city began its growth and development.

Yekaterinburg became notable for the fact that the first gold deposit in Russia was found in the immediate surroundings of the city in 1745. Therefore, an active extraction and processing of precious stones for the manufacture of jewellery of the imperial court in Saint Petersburg started (Ekburg.Ru, 2018). A favourable combination of a number of socio-economic prerequisites led to a high economic strengthening of the administrative status of the city. And so the county town of Yekaterinburg in the vast Perm province became the centre of the mining industry in the Urals (Kotzinets, 1989).

Further, in the second half of the 19th century, the construction of the Siberian Highway, which connected the western part of the country with remote territories, contributed to the development of the city. In 1878, the connection of the city to the large-scale Trans-Siberian Railway boosted the city's economy (Ekburg.Ru, 2018). Subsequently, thanks to the developed road network, permanent economic ties were established with different regions of the country, which gave the city an unspoken status of “the window to Siberia” (Belyaeva, 2016).

The beginning of the twentieth century marked the city's active participation in the civil war after the revolution, as well as the place where the family of the last Russian emperor

was murdered in 1918. With the rise of the Soviet regime, Yekaterinburg was renamed Sverdlovsk in 1924 in honour of Yakov Sverdlov, one of the Bolsheviks and organizers of the execution of the royal family (Ekborg.Ru, 2018). During the 1920 and 1930s, Sverdlovsk experienced a boom in large-scale construction of social infrastructure and new industrial enterprises. Here it is worth noting the historical uniqueness of the city, which consists in the fact that there are few similar examples in the world where a city was built up in such a short time and according to a single plan (Belyaeva, 2016).

During the Second World War, Sverdlovsk played a key role in evacuation processes, as it became the location of plants and factories evacuated from the western part of the USSR, which influenced the development of urban dynamics (Belyaeva, 2016). In the post-war period from the 1950s until the 1980s, the defence, aerospace and instrument-making industries began to actively develop their production in the city, which led to its closure to foreign visitors. In 1967 the city was among the first Soviet cities that reached a million-plus inhabitants.

In 1991, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the city regained its historical name Yekaterinburg, and its status as a closed city got removed. Furthermore, at the beginning of the 21st century, Yekaterinburg adopted a strategic development plan for the city until 2025. In 2011, the city was included in the list of "City-600" by the international consulting company McKinsey among other cities that are assigned a leading role in global development (Belyaeva, 2016). The global image and recognition of the city was influenced by the organisation of large-scale events, such as the summits of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRIC countries in 2009. The city also hosted several matches of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Compared to other cities in Russia, Yekaterinburg began to actively demonstrate its spirit of independence from the capital. Moscow, gaining the status of a "hipster" city and even a "rebel" city, which was influenced by the election of the only opposition mayor from 2013 to 2018. In addition, in May 2019, the city became famous throughout the country because of a mass protest against the construction of a church in a central green public space (Müller & Trubina, 2020).



Figure 7: view onto the centre and the historic dam of Yekaterinburg, Russia (Prenner, 2021).

The relatively young city of Yekaterinburg celebrates its 300th anniversary in 2023. Due to its geographical location, natural resources and rich history, modern Yekaterinburg is a dynamically developing city and has potential for development. Despite its importance for Russia, participation in events of international scale, and for most foreigners, Yekaterinburg still remains a “blank page” with a hard-to-pronounce name (Müller & Trubina, 2020). However, for the Russians themselves, the city is growing in its attractiveness, thanks to its rich cultural life, educational and business institutions and projects, an independent and to some extent protest character and peculiar metropolitan ambitions. However, in order to satisfy its ambitions, Yekaterinburg needs to quickly and effectively cope with the difficulties that arise and even be ahead of the modern global trends, especially those related to the development of urban spaces (Vlasova et al., 2020).

4.2 Case Study One – Mayakovsky Park

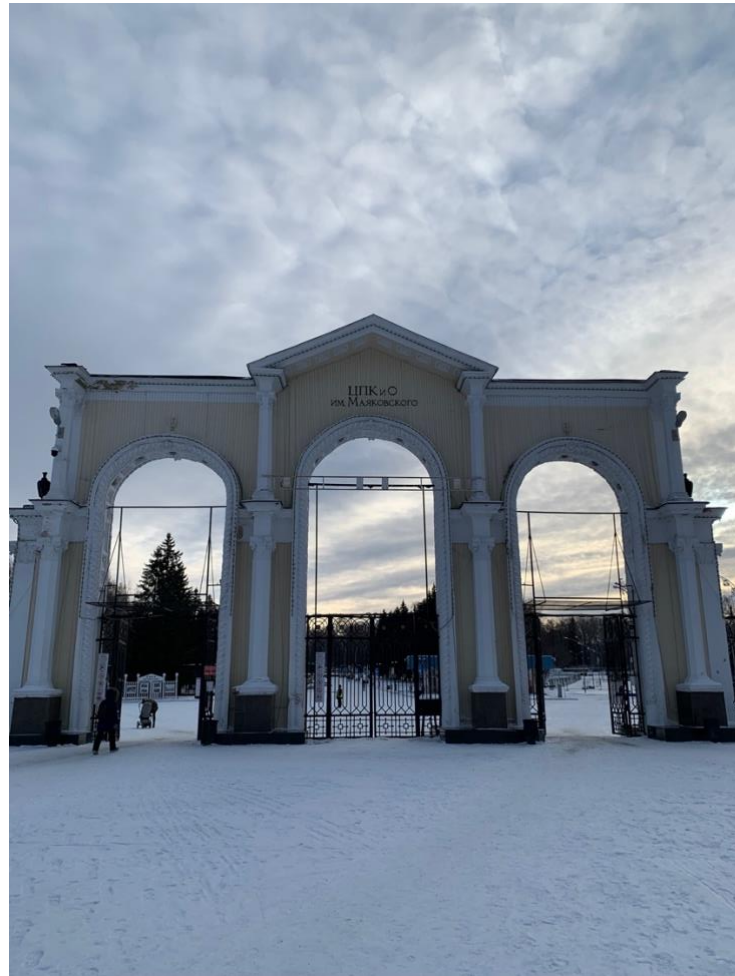


Figure 8: entrance to Myakovsky park (Prenner, 2021)

Mayakovsky Park, Yekaterinburg’s biggest park located in the Southeast of the city centre on the shores of the Iset river (cf. figure 9) is a famous and loved place by the city’s inhabitants. Constructed during the early Soviet times (1933) it is a historical park that has evolved to suit the neoliberal system. In this chapter a brief overview of the park from its very beginnings to nowadays is being given.

In the 1930s, the idea of urban parks underwent significant changes in the Soviet Union. Urban parks underwent major changes across the Soviet Union from the 1930s, when so-called “main parks” appeared in all major cities (Rabinovich, 2019). Often, such parks were based on Moscow’s “Gorky Central Park of Culture and Recreation”, and Yekaterinburg needed such a "park of culture and recreation" too. The purpose of the

park was educational, thereby raising the level of culture among citizens writes Rabinovich, (2019. pp. 1001). Soviet leaders believed the new park should promote recreation and keep people from consuming alcohol and gambling. At a secondary position the park was also supposed to promote culture. And so, this idea determined the development of parks in the USSR for the decades to come.

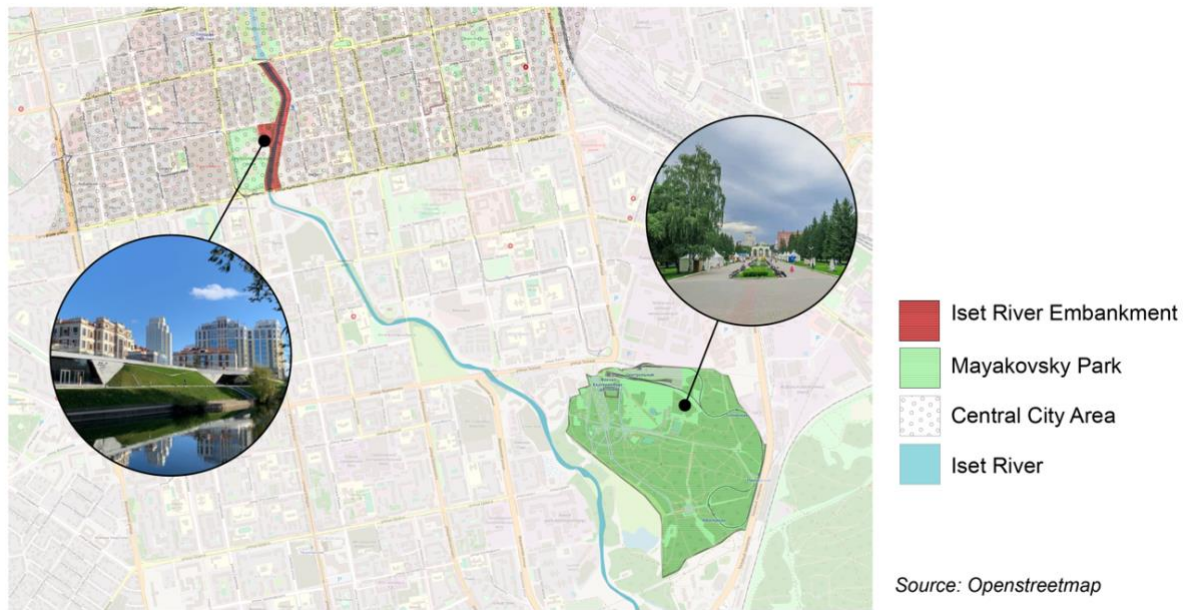


Figure 9: map with geographic position of the two case studies (Prenner, 2021).

As Sverdlovsk⁸ grew under the Soviet regime into the capital of the Ural region, the few and modest parks the provincial capital had, started to feel embarrassing under the ideas of Soviet urban planning. As one of the main cities of Soviet industrialization, Rabinovich (2019. pp. 1001) writes that the city’s desire to increase the size of parks and the number of their visitors to be on par with other major Soviet cities. And so the city needed its own main park of the Urals (analogue to the Moscow Gorky Central Park) which was integrated into the park system with superior status in regards to all other Ural parks. Creating a central park was as much part of the new Soviet policy as the creation of a central market, central grocery store, or central hotel was, emphasising the centralisation of all spheres of life (Rabinovich, 2019. pp. 1001). Until the construction of Mayakovskiy park, Sverdlovsk had a dozen of parks but only one main one. The introduction of

⁸ During the time of the Soviet Union (1924 – 1990) the City of Yekaterinburg was renamed “Sverdlovsk” (Свердловск)

Mayakovsky park, officially called “Sverdlovsk Central Park of Culture and Recreation (СРКиО)”, the word “central” established a new hierarchy by defining the parks as “central” and above all others by importance.



Figure 10: walking path in Mayakovsky park, (Prenner, 2021)

The park’s architect Sigizmund Dombrovsky (Сигизмунд Домбровский) suggested as a location for the park a common suburban grove covered by pine forest on the banks of the Iset river (cf. figure 8), where folk festivals were sometimes held (Rabinovich, 2019. pp. 1002). The location of the new park was part of a new plan that would establish a fundamentally new Socialist city in the spirit of the avant-garde urban construction theories of that time, with the concept of the "garden city" at its heart (Rabinovich, 2019. pp. 1002). Parallel to this, the plan would also create a new green public space along the entire river embankment. This was not realised however.

The size of the park is 1,440 hectares and whilst it was planned for an attendance of 150,000 visitors per day (half of the total population of Sverdlovsk back then) was expected (Rabinovich, 2019. pp. 1003). The concept consisted of a main entrance in the

North, from which the entire park had to be accessible by the main path. The park contained a sector dedicated to children, a meeting square, an exhibition area, and a space for quiet recreation. Some attractions were also built at the centre of the park (Rabinovich, 2019. pp. 1003), whilst water installations were created near the river, as well as sports facilities. In the near surroundings of the park a children's theatre, a nursery, and a physical education sector were also built. This shows that the park not only consisted of loads of possibilities for people to spend free time there, but that the park had a huge impact on the entire surrounding city area.

The construction of the park began in 1932 and its gates officially opened to the public in 1933 with approximately 20'000 people attending the opening (Rabinovich, 2019. pp. 1003). Despite the many activities in that the park offered, the park did not function as it had been intended and city leaders realised that it could not cope with the educational and cultural tasks assigned to it (Rabinovich, 2019. pp. 1007). As the financial aid for the park got cut, the park could only provide its visitors with sun, clean air, pine trees and a pond.

In 1940, the park finally changed name in honour of V. V. Mayakovsky. The choice of the dedication of the park to Mayakovsky, a famous Russian poet, was due to the poet's obvious connection with the sphere of d (Rabinovich, 2019. pp. 1017). Later in the Soviet period, the ideology surrounding the ideological purpose of the parks shifted towards its natural aspects. In the wake of perestroika⁹, the park began to adapt to new trends that started the transformation of the park into an amusement park. A set of 14 attractions including roller coasters were brought to Sverdlovsk (Rabinovich, 2019. pp. 1053). In the very last months of the Soviet era, a "Fairy Tale Town" with additional attractions was built in 1991. This marked the end of the Soviet project.

After the fall of the USSR the park lacked staff and other resources to change itself. In the meantime, the areas surrounding the central park started to change rapidly. As new business centres and residential complexes were being built neoliberal attractions and gastronomy business flooded the park selling ferry wheel tickets and ice cream that only

⁹ Perestroika means translated reconstruction and was introduced by Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s. The goal was to reconstruct the Soviet political and economic system since the country stagnated. Several economic reforms were foreseen under Perestroika (Sakwa, 2005)

widened the gap between the visitors' new needs and the old park (Rabinovich, 2019 pp. 1053). In response to these new demands of Yekaterinburg's citizens, a structurally and qualitatively new space should be formed.



Figure 11: view from Mayakovsky park onto a changing urban landscape

4.3 Case Study Two – Iset River Embankment

The second case study of this thesis regards the Iset river embankment (cf. figure 12 & 13) that was reconstructed from 2017 until 2019. The embankment park is limited to the section between Malyshev Street and Kuibyshev Street located in the centre of the city (cf. figure X). The urge to develop and reconstruct the shores of the Iset river has been a wish for both citizens and the city administration for a long time. Especially, since further North of the new Iset river embankment a historic industrial dam was reconstructed between 1962 and 1963. The reconstruction of that historic site was crucial for a concept that foresaw a 30-kilometer walking route along the Iset river passing through the entire

city of Yekaterinburg (Bulatova et al., 2021). The section of the river this study refers to is the Iset river embankment (between Malyshev and Kuibyshev street) was built – a small part of the initial ideas for the Iset river that were not realised.

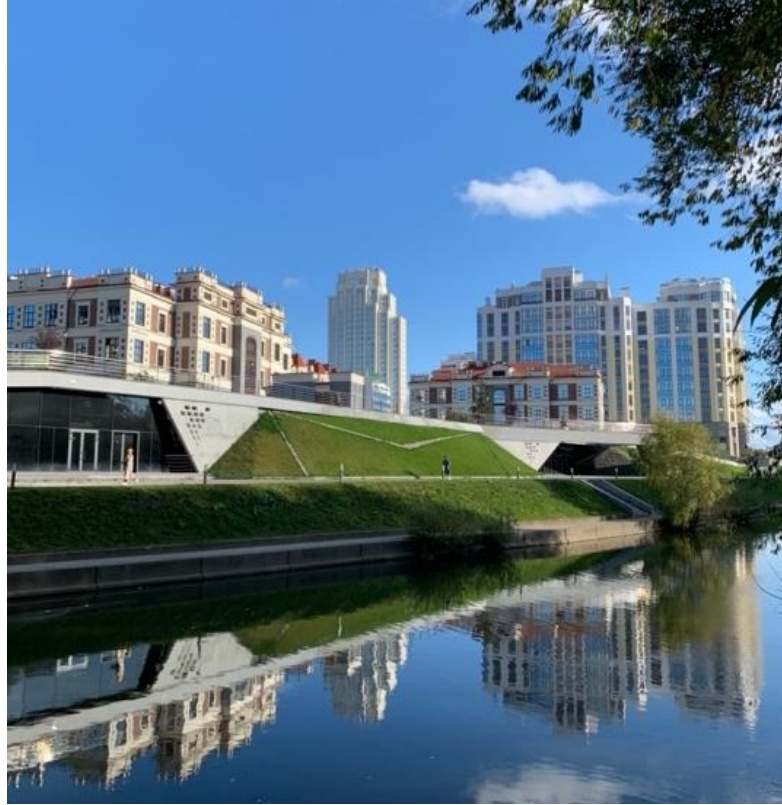


Figure 12 & Figure 13: view onto the Iset River embankment park (Prenner, 2021)

The concept for the new Iset river embankment intended according to Bulatova et al., (2021) towards new environments that allowed the public to have contact with the river water, pedestrian walkways and fishing bridges, the creation of terraces and walking areas, and different lighting installations allowing for nocturnal use of the embankment. As were pedestrian and bicycle lanes built on Karl Marx Street and passing along the embankment. Ecological aspects such as the regeneration of the shoreline was carried out by planting new trees and shrubs and by using wooden and stone paving along the shore of the river. A children's playground, new benches and small architectural platforms have been installed along the river embankment too.

The new park improved the nearby city area by allowing barrier-free access to the riverbank, the creation of new pedestrian river crossings thanks to pedestrian bridges and new leisure infrastructure such as benches, flower beds, new trees, aquatic plants and perennials. On the artistic level a new State Center for Contemporary Art (NCCA) as well as two monuments - "the Beatles" and the "Keyboard" - were installed in the park. Bulatova et al., (2021) also says that the concept provided by the Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design based in Moscow foresaw space for the placement of street traders and outdoor cafes, pavilions, trade stands, etc. In order to implement the principles of landscape urbanism and augment the attractiveness of the Iset river embankment the project included measures to eliminate unauthorized discharge into the Iset River and the expansion of the perimeter towards the South, allowing reconstruction of the embankment from Kuibyshev Street all the way to Mayakovsky park. A consequent replacement of the previous vegetation and perennial grasses along the riverbank saw them replaced with tree and shrub species that are ecologically valuable and have a pleasant aesthetic appearance (Bulatova et al., 2021) (cf. figure 14). The project also implemented the use of ecological methods of water purification to restore the flora and fauna in the Iset river.



Figure 14: Aerial photos of the Iset river embankment, 1998 and 2009 (Форум Екатеринбург+Свердловск, 2010)

Nevertheless, the new Iset river embankment has also been criticized since its construction required several dozen of old trees to be felled and removed, while the repaving of a recently retitled walking path with a new surface that cost five times more than a usual path (Evstafyev, 2018) enraged local urban activists. The official explanation was that *"in accordance with the project, forced demolition of green spaces is being carried out to ensure the technological accomplishment of works on landscaping that are consistent with the concept,"* (Evstafyev, 2018). According to unconfirmed data, in total 193 maples and 98 willows, have been cut down. The new project on the other hand only

envisaged to plant a little more than 90 trees and several hundred shrubs. Thus the area covered with large trees has been reduced by around half.

Yekaterinburg's inhabitants saw the development by the Moscow Strelka Institute partly problematic as the institute thinks that Russian cities that have been shaped under the USSR require rapid updating (Evstafyen, 2018). Activists claimed that Strelka would not respect the architectural appearance of the Urals' capital city, which is heavily shaped by the Soviet era having today one of the biggest Soviet architectural heritage reaching from constructivism over modernism to brutalism. The criticism continues by arguing that for the Moscow based Strelka institute, Yekaterinburg is being considered a "big village" with the installation of a wooden bridge and a wooden terrace cutting into the river as well as another rural bridge to give the river embankment a rural character (Evstafyen, 2018).

5. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In this chapter the author will recite the collected data and analyse it at the same time. Whilst the interview partners have been mainly asked to respond to the development of my two case studies (Mayakovsky park and the Iset river embankment), they often went further and talked about Russia's green public spaces in general or other examples of parks in Yekaterinburg and other cities. This additional information was also included in the analysis and led to a more broad and generic analysis than initially planned.

Four main topics were identified during the analysis of the interviews and observations, after which they got regrouped in the following categories that make up the red thread of the research:

- *Soviet parks – a heritage in evolution*
- *New parks - quick and visible solutions*
- *Destruction and lack of funding of green public spaces*
- *Changing urban systems, participatory urbanism and urban activism*

As a brief introduction, I want to give an overview regarding the perception of (green) public space of the interviewed experts, in order to better understand what it means for them when they speak of such places in their city. During the interviews when mentioning the perception of public space in Yekaterinburg, the participants agreed that generally speaking Yekaterinburg is a city that “got lucky” during the Soviet period since quite some big public space infrastructure projects were implemented during that time, a majority of which survive up to today. Especially during the 1960s and 1970s Yekaterinburg received a gift of long-lasting duration, the so-called “green belt”, which includes 14 forest parks and two inner rings of parks, squares and boulevards. Many other Soviet cities did not get equally as lucky. This positive city development of the Ural's capital during the Soviet period ensured that its' citizens can still today find a sufficient amount of public space available in their city centre as well as in the more residential neighbourhoods. As a result, the Soviet character in public space still today dominates the cityscape of Yekaterinburg.

When asking about new and recently created public spaces the interviewed experts repeatedly mentioned that *“the Iset river embankment is an example of one of these newly emerged and immensely popular public spaces”*. In contrast to the Soviet period, the experts are pleased about the positive trend of public space in regards of becoming barrier-free accessible and agreed that it should be at all time free of charge and preferably combined with greenery in order to suit the needs of today’s citizens.

It also emerged from the discussions that public space in Yekaterinburg has become an extremely monitored space, with people taking to the streets or manifesting their disagreement with political decisions get taken away and detained more quickly by the police because of harsh and frequent controls. One interview partner went as far as saying *“it would be inaccurate to speak about public space using this very term because it is not completely public. It is controlled by the government. The citizens are deprived of their right to the city and so it is with the green public spaces.”*

5.1 Soviet parks – a heritage in evolution

In general, the outcome of the interviews shows that cities constantly change and therefore they are not only a projection of transition. Cities also become the actors in these processes of change themselves. This means that urban space just like green public space sets off social transformation and reflects social change and ideological change. During the Soviet period, all cities were part of a holistic system of cities *“meaning that each city had a role within the Soviet urban system”*. Major cities (like Moscow, Kiev, Tashkent) were of superior importance, whilst cities like Yekaterinburg took on the role of important regional centres. At the lowest scale, there were what one of the Interview partner called the *“foot soldiers of economic urbanisation”*, by which smaller towns with a single industry economy were meant. After the dissolution of the Soviet state, this holistic system lost its purpose completely leaving each city on its own in the newly introduced neoliberal system. All of a sudden, many industry goods started being exported to the West. The purpose of post-Soviet cities therefore changed drastically overnight and whilst some cities managed to be successful in this new system, others fell by the wayside. During these odd times of overthrowing a system in order to introduce a

new one, also green public spaces also underwent drastic changes and needed to be readapted to newly emerging needs and possibilities.

Talking specifically about Yekaterinburg, during the interviews it emerged that in the early Soviet times of 1930 all orthodox churches got destroyed in order to create green public spaces on the land instead. An example of this is the centrally located Labour Square (площадь труда), where there used to be the church of St. Catherine before the Russian revolution. In fact, during the Soviet period green areas in Yekaterinburg were also built on unused and undeveloped land, of which there was plenty in the city. The need of these green public spaces was in addition to propaganda purposes the providing of opportunities for social reproduction for citizens. The thought was as simple as *“when factory workers finished work in the evening, they went to the public amenities where they could walk and get some fresh air.”* And so big investments into mass planting of new trees and green areas in order to ensure enough green public space for everyone was undertaken by the Socialist government. The creation of green public spaces back then was not incrementally but holistically designed and implemented. *“Everything in Soviet cities was planned not simply according to its urban plan but as part of something bigger. This big and holistic thing was the Soviet city. So whether you look at green areas, transport or housing, everything was done because there was a purpose of coordination between them”*. The idea back then was one that is becoming again famous today: *“the city of 15 minutes, which is now advertised in many cities. And so the Soviet city was supposed to offer at a distance of 15 minutes a pedestrian access to green areas as recreational areas”*. A lot of bigger parks, such as our case study Mayakovsky Central Park of Recreation and Leisure located in the South-East and Pobedy park (Парк победы) in Uralmash located in the North-West were established in the early Soviet years, following Moscow’s example of Gorky park.

In post-Soviet Russia, cities had to be repurposed and needed to evolve. The spectrum of outcomes of the consequences of this process ranges from totally neglected and even erased heritage to the active repurposing of heritage and investing in it at the other end. The repurposing of places and spaces was often done very aggressively though, so that an urban space initially created for a different means and ends in the Soviet Union could now fit into the new system. Finally, in between these two extremes of the spectrum there are a wide variety of in between results. The same phenomenon of repurposing or neglect

can be applied to green public spaces. *“Central green public spaces had advantages during the repurposing of cities, whilst peripheral ones went through more neglect and kind of deconstruction and so on”* emphasised one of the interview partners. A public space with a defined purpose during its Soviet past, in the world of post-Soviet cities often no value can be extracted anymore. That is when green public spaces get neglected.

One of the major pieces of information gathered during the interview process was regarding the case study of the new Iset River embankment which now is most likely the most attractive park in the city. This is in contrast with the Soviet period, when it was completely ignored and abandoned. An expert I interviewed suggested this happened because *“probably it could provide little space only for non-ideological activities. There was no chance to install sculptures or hang banners and posters with mottos at the embankment so the main focus of development was placed on the parks”*. At the beginning of the 20th century, the daily routine of Yekaterinburg residents was still very much connected with the existence of the Iset River. This is especially since the city was founded in the Tsar era on the river to use its water energy for industry in the city. However, when the Soviets took over, the new era *“was marked by mere brutal exploitation of the Iset. Meanwhile the river itself turned into an abandoned neglected and even dangerous area. The city was gradually destroying the river. In the 1990s and post-Soviet period the city turned its face to the Iset again by developing a more humane attitude to it”*. The interview partners made clear that the attitude of the city to its river is the main marker of its evolution so far. One interview partner specified *“look at how the city treats the river and you’ll understand what kind of place it is”*. And since the Soviets only saw the river as an energy creating machine, no one would come up with the idea of creating a public space on that strip of land, especially since the concept of ‘river embankment’ was far from having been created. And so the period under communism was marked as a time when the city had turned its back to its river.

And so, whilst gigantic and monumental parks were created such as the case study of Mayakovsky Park during the Soviet period, other areas just like our second case study, the Iset river embankment, vanished from the cityscape. The experts were asked what happened to Yekaterinburg’s green public spaces after the end of the Soviet Union. One said that essentially, during the 1990s the parks inherited from the Soviet Union did *“partially decay, lose parts of the infrastructure, get neglected but did not disappear.*

They still perform their public space function today". Whilst in the Soviet past green public spaces were created with the thought of embodying ideological importance, people were constantly involved in ideological gatherings and other activities that fulfilled some kind of ideological functions. In the newly created state of Russia however, this ideological function has lost all sense of purpose because Russian authorities have not clearly determined an ideology to be passed on to the population. Therefore, in political and ideological terms the importance of green public spaces has significantly decreased. An example of this is Dendrologicheskiy park (Дендрологический парк) which emerged in the Soviet period in the heart of Yekaterinburg with the purpose to teach citizens botany, meaning the park had a state-ordered educational purpose. *"Today it's just a lovely park with a greenhouse and some apple trees and nicely arranged flower beds"* one of the experts said during their interview.

The big challenge therefore was for Yekaterinburg and its vast majority of green public spaces of Soviet heritage to be transformed from public places composed of ideological structures and created for the purposes of propaganda and indoctrination into places *"for young people to go out on a date and kiss on the bench. So the primary goal is to revitalise the old-fashioned heritage that doesn't correspond to the current needs, demands and recreation norms of the modern society"*, one expert explained. Thus, the city tried different methods to adapt to the new world, and in the case of Myakovsky park, there have been three major trends in trying to develop the park:

1. Firstly, aggressive commercialization, which meant that the park surface needed to get financially exploited in order to make a profit.
2. Secondly, use the park as a place of ideology by turning it into a space of commemoration of military victims of war (cf. figure 15). Appropriate activities were organised in order to make the concept work.
3. Thirdly, a try of so-called "new commercialization" or "cultural commercialization" was tested. The target group was young people (under 50) who come to the park both for spending quality free time as well as consume at concerts and festivals, which brings profit to the park.



Figure 15: commemoration monuments in Myakovsky park (Prenner, 2021)

These three trends of giving the park a new purpose and identity resulted that the park today *“seems to have much more attractions now”* than it did during the Soviet period. According to the interviews, improved green public spaces in Yekaterinburg and particularly Mayakovsky Park today have at their disposal many amenities including *“new places for flirting and places for showing oneself off. They exist straight next to basketball grounds, volleyball grounds, jogging amenities and so on. I like how naturally leisure time and sports activities have merged. This is a really delight for me”*.

In summary, the interview partners all agreed that one can say that from the consumer's point of view the main purpose of recreational zones has remained the same as it was during the Soviet period, despite more fences having been installed which often limits access to green public spaces often.

5.2 New parks - quick and visible solutions

Regarding the parks created in modern Russia since 1991, the observations and interviews showed that generally speaking, one cannot claim that people have more access and time to spend in green public spaces than in the past. Especially, because the population is now much larger than it was during Soviet times and the quantity of green public spaces hasn't risen a lot since. In regards of activities conducted in parks and other green public spaces many are today the ones already practiced during the Soviet period: walking, dancing, intermingling, kids meet ups families picnicking and general usage of designated attractions in the parks.

In today's Russia of neoliberalism, green public spaces underlie a long list of state-financed activities that they are obliged to fulfil. The carrying out of these activities then needs to be reported to the kremlin in order to prove things are being done as wished so that they can get further funding. Through this system *“a huge amount of money is being spent although the outcome does not correspond to the needs of the population”*, one of the interview partners expressed. This means that the development of green public spaces in Russia today corresponds to a top-down procedure, making the local park and public space administration slaves of the Kremlin's wishes. What developers and city authorities do, is that they sell to clients existing green infrastructure, rather than creating new ones. Moreover, this is, of course troublesome, because trees have a limited lifetime. A major change since the Soviet Union has been the strong wish to exploit existing assets rather than investing into new green public spaces. As a result, in all kinds of cities all over Russia, authorities tend to put their available money where it is *“more profitable to invest into. Something that gives quick and visible results, such as concrete and granite. Existing wild parts of riverbanks are being dressed in concrete and granite it is a very convenient*

way to provide reports to authorities in order to receive more fundings". By doing so, new improvement are mainly obtained by creating sidewalks and other concrete surfaces, opposed to what people would actually like, such as planting trees and creating more green spaces for activities. And so, even though local authorities often try to create and improve existing green public spaces, they lose a lot of quality in the process of being improved. This phenomenon according to an interview partner can become as extreme as *"parks ending up lose their green function"*.

When asking the interview partners about why green public spaces in low quality are being built they always referred to the "agenda for liveability of cities", which has become quite an important political instrument in the past years. The implementation of the first project started five years ago in Moscow with a large scale reconstruction of streets and other infrastructure in order to make the capital city more liveable and above all greener. The most notable project of the agenda is a new park created in the heart of Moscow right next to the Kremlin, called Zaryadye Park. And today this place is not simply a park. There are all sorts of things there, even an underground concert hall, restaurants and a viewing platform that stretches over the road to the Moscow river. The general wish to make cities more human centric in Russia was the motivation for the creation of this park in Moscow. Such big infrastructure investments combined with new innovations has led Russia to jump into the "smart city" development.

New parks are important for the city population. However, if you look at a higher level of hierarchy, things like more comfortable streets or new parks do not matter, but population satisfaction does. And population satisfaction can be reached through such projects. *"Therefore I believe Putin decided that the need of having a green park in the heart of Moscow was going to boost his support"* said an interview partner, meaning that green public spaces are being instrumentalised and politicised. The creation of Zaryadye Park was a classic top-down ongoing. The centralised government forced a signal of taking action on building the park on the city government. The result is therefore a classic example following today's Russian development through a *"combination and integration of urban infrastructure into a kind of neo liberalised way with restaurants and attractions, but also bringing the new idea of human centric and people oriented cities on board"*.

Outside Moscow, Russia is changing rapidly too under the agenda of liveability. Several actors are entangled in it. First of all, when a city district or a neighbourhood is being developed and buildings are constructed in proximity of a green public space, the actor of developers will make sure to sell properties at a much higher price, using the presence of green public spaces as the justification. The interview partners agreed that the presence of green public space contributes to the attractiveness of a neighbourhood to the extreme of contributing to gentrification which puts the actor of the population in a difficult situation. In one interview the actor of the city authorities as a promoter of propaganda was brought up: *“A park forms part of propaganda work. I have discovered that memorial complexes are being actively installed in parks nowadays which destroys the park itself turning it into something like a cemetery”*. The fourth and last actor of urban development processes is the city government. It finds itself in a difficult position because it has to satisfy the demands for propaganda coming from the superior authorities on one hand and to deal with influential developers who can't be ignored as well as needy citizens that request more green public space without any strings attached.

From the interviews emerged that the transition from socialism or neoliberalism was not the only change that happened regarding green public spaces. With the Soviet Union the end of an evolution which progressed over 70 years had come. A lot of things changed in those decades and so the change went on with the birth of Russia. One result of the ongoing change is the Iset river embankment that *“from the historic point of view from the moment of the city foundation, it had never been thought for entertainment”*. Nevertheless, a few entertainment purposes in the past such as activities connected with Christmas and New Year celebrations were conducted on the frozen city pond and river. During summer few people would go boating on the river too. All of this started even before the revolution. This shows that Yekaterinburg's current trend of using the river for entertainment and leisure activities is not new to the city however, *“it's just a revival of the old tradition”*.

Regarding the recently opened Iset river embankment park, the interview partner only partially agreed on its popularity in the city and beyond. Whilst some said the opening of the embankment happened so recently that *“the river is still not acknowledged as a powerful resource for attracting people. The official symbols of Yekaterinburg today are either pre-revolution buildings or Soviet buildings. Yekaterinburg is thus still not*

perceived as a space containing spots of nature”, despite the new centrally located new Iset river embankment. Other interviewed specialists say it has become an immensely popular place and that the park is always full of people, particularly on sunny days. Therefore, the only 4 year old park has already become one of the most popular places in the city open to public.

When asking about why the place has become so popular many people pointed out that the result is simply impressive. *“I believe the money was well spent with an obvious positive outcome, not only for billionaires, but also for most citizens”*.

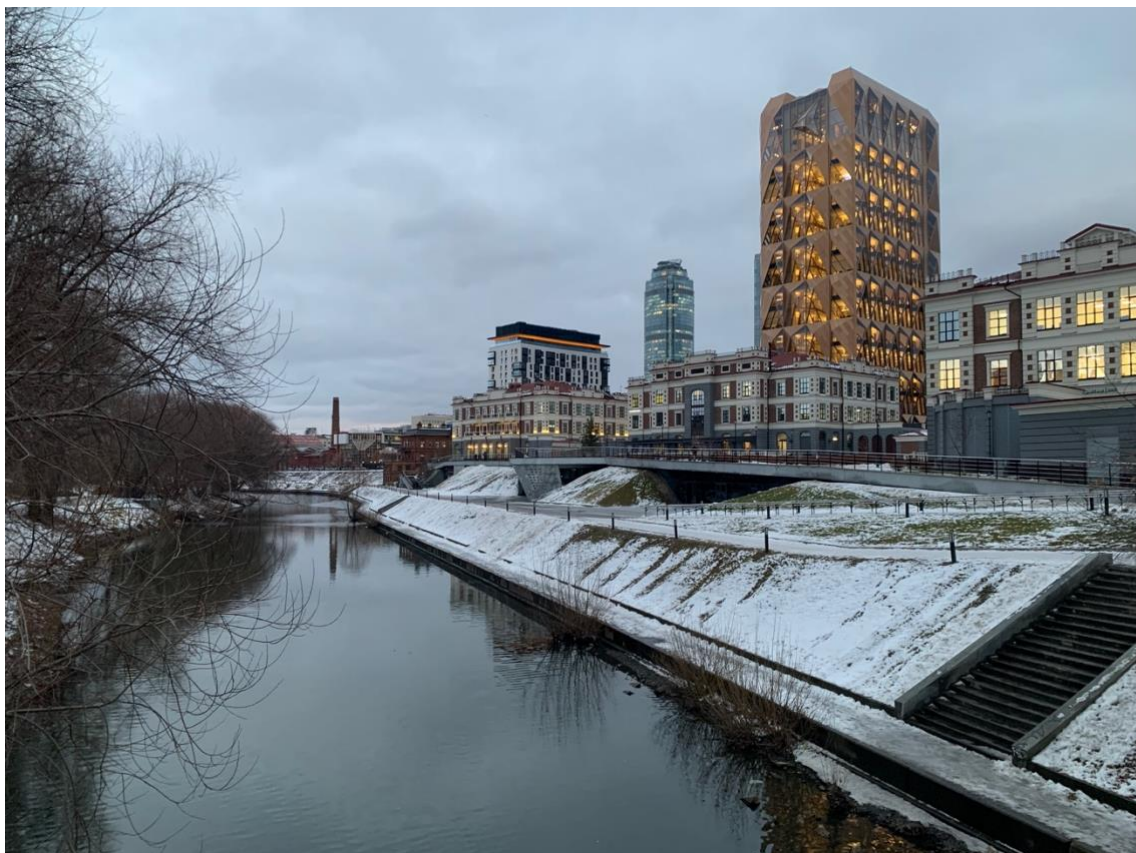


Figure 16: “Millionaires park” and the Russian Copper Company headquarter (Prenner, 2021)

Despite the perception of the space as a space for everyone, the unofficial name of the embankment park is “Millionaires park” (cf. figure 16). This because the Russian copper company headquarter sits right by it but in addition to that a lot of other recently emerged buildings around the park with gorgeous views are being bought or rented by the most well of people of the city. The area around the park is probably so attractive because of its greenery, central location and the absence of noisy roads. This makes one think that

the park is a success through and through however, one interview partner pointed out the importance of the Iset river itself, that was not taken into account in the project. They said that *“the Iset is not just a river, but a complex hydraulic structure. It has no natural water level, because it is always controlled by dams. I want to say that the landscaping was done well, but it does not take into account water safety, it does not take into account that the Iset is a hydraulic structure and in some places it was done for the sake of showing off and not for the sake of creating a real interaction between the nature and the people.”* It is very important to take into account the hydrotechnical nature of the river in order to be able to deal with future unforeseen problems. If more federal funding can be obtained by Yekaterinburg, there is a project proposal to prolong the embankment towards the south. Despite the project proposal being good and having been conducted by world known experts, such as the landscape architect Eva Radi, social activists are concerned about the lack of regulations for the Iset River. According to Russian norms 20 meters from the river’s edge, the existing flora and fauna should be preserved. However, developers cover this part in concrete. *“If we continue with this development, we will lose the Iset River. Why? Because there will be no filtering natural green shores”*. The developers' lobby is so strong that it even manages to make norms and standards disappear. According to several interview partners, this will impact the city’s inhabitants’ health, if nothing will be done to save the river. *“We need to take into account the mistakes made, learn our lessons and continue to improve the embankment further”* should be the way to go.

Another issue with the current park is that although people have access to the river on its eastern side *“they can’t actually interact with the river. By the term interact I mean a very important emotional feeling of proximity when one can come close to the water to feel and hear how it splashes under one’s feet”*. On the western bank on the other hand it is possible to walk down very closely to the river and interact with the water. It’s the only place in the city not aggressively dressed in concrete that provides access to nature surrounded by quite a natural environment. This combination of proximity to water, the presence of the park and the distance to the noisy traffic makes this place unique.

And so, one can say that a park with quick and visible improvements for the city of Yekaterinburg has been created and is of big popularity. However, there are some analytical reports *“proving how the outcome of the new Iset river embankment differs from the initial plan because the contractors cut down on quality materials and part of*

the budget was stolen. Based on this, the authorities have demonstrated just the imitation of care” and actually wanting to give a new green public space of quality to its citizens (cf. figure 17).

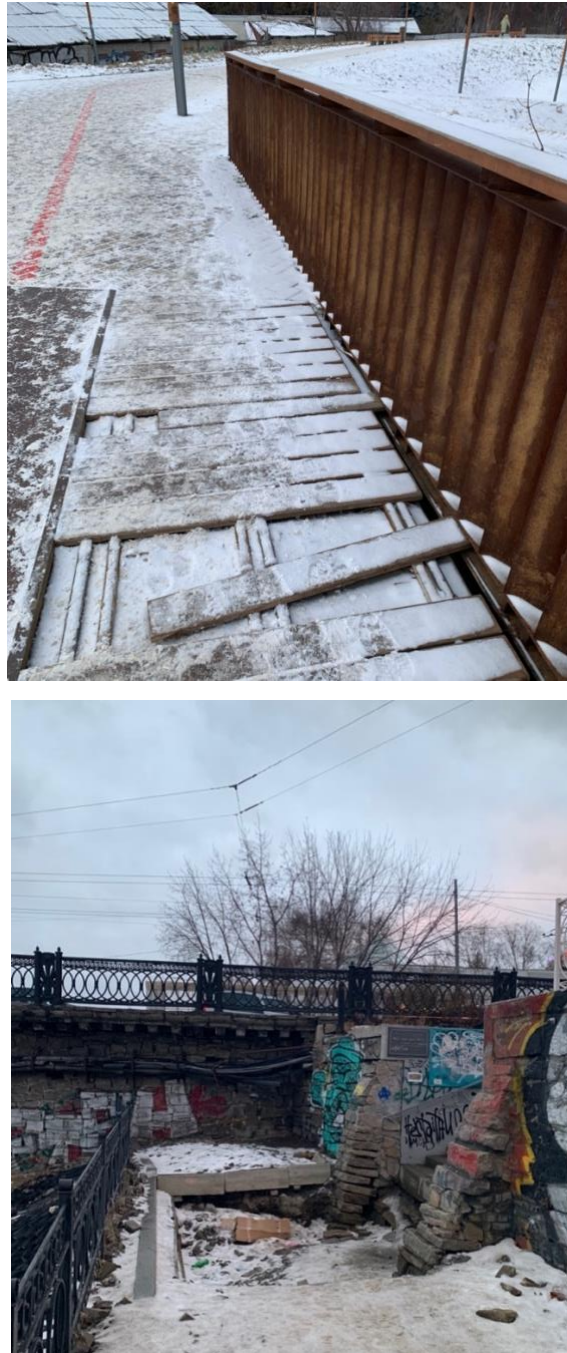


Figure 17: broken bridge and broken staircase at the Iset River embankment (Prenner 2021)

5.3 Destruction and lack of funding of green public spaces

Parks and other green public spaces created during Soviet times in Yekaterinburg mainly survived during Russia's chaotic 1990s period. However, the city has been growing a lot and the need to create more green public spaces has emerged. In the interviews I understood that besides the new Iset river embankment, no other green public spaces of a certain size have been created recently however. *"I would not say that this topic is on the political agenda. I think the major's tendency is always the one prioritizing the destruction of existing green public space in order to build something that promises profit and sales"*. This quote by one of the interviewed experts shows that the importance of green public space is not taken seriously.

The park Zelonaya Roshcha (Зелёная роща) close to Yekaterinburg's centre is today surrounded by beautiful high-rise buildings. During the construction of these buildings the advertisement said "Do you want to have your personal park?". It is clear, that the developers are aware that the park is a public space but they want to pretend the future inhabitants of the neighbourhood will have it all for oneself. *"This is a kind of notorious blurring of the boundaries between public and private spaces. At the same time, it is playing with people's emotions because people do want to have everything for themselves, including the city park"*. And so, whilst green public spaces remain open and freely accessible to the public the quantity of these spaces is stagnating or even decreasing, especially the green public spaces that are frequented a lot because of their comfort and safe environment. In order to keep parks safe, at certain ones gates and walls have been erected. Sometimes and without any notice in advance to the public people would arrive at closed park gates. *"Often, when I go with my children to the park I see a note saying that it remains closed but without any further details"*, I was told in one interview.

When asking during the interviews about examples of the destruction and vanishing of green public space many examples were given. One quite shocking example was the one concerning the "House Park", which was located at an attractive spot where developers wanted to build a new shopping centre in Yekaterinburg. As an excuse, the developers

said it would be necessary to cut quite some trees in order to be able to construct the shopping centre. Once the trees were cut, parts of the building ended up covering what actually is the park's land. Developers can get away with this since there are no clear regulations for small urban square parks. Therefore, developers do not face persecution for stealing public space and can walk away freely after having appropriated parts of such parks.

Another yet famous example is concerning Oktoberskaya Square (Октябрьская площадь), a green public space of big popularity by Yekaterinburg's city pond. Two local copper oligarchs wanted to buy and develop the park in 2019. The plan was to build a cathedral. This really upset the inhabitants of Yekaterinburg who took to the streets and protested for several weeks until Putin himself said the project has to be stopped. *"This is a good example of oligarchs and developers considering public spaces as their own amenities. There is a culture of grabbing whatever is left in Russia"*.

A final yet sad example for the city's green public spaces is a proposal from the past that intended to create a swamp park by the Iset river right by Mayakovsky park. The motivation for creating this park was of environmental and ecosystem nature. The proposed project foresaw an area with swampy environment, appropriate vegetation and animals which could be crossed over by the city dwellers on a glass bridge. From there visitors could have observed wildlife in its natural habitat right in the city. The project proposal caused a lot of negative excitement and did not resonate with the city authorities. In fact, the project was immediately scuttled. Such a reaction from the authorities appalled local environmental activists and nobody understood why the project was not even looked at. Several years later it turned out that the area, where the swamp park was suggested to be installed had at the time of the project proposal already been allocated to a developer company called "Clever" which is now constructing a new residential area right there. The entire vegetation along the river has been removed for this, so that the future residents will live close to the river and will be able to look at Mayakovsky park from their apartments.

During the interviews, whilst asking if Yekaterinburg tries to go global and wants to get attention by hosting large events so that international companies are being attracted through the city's urban improvements, the interview partners claimed Yekaterinburg

would not be able to attract such an international public with new offices etc. Instead, a new interesting theory emerged: *“Russian cities think more about what they have to do in order to get money from the federal government and if big events help, they’ll apply to host them”*. Yekaterinburg hosted quite a few football matches during the “2018 FIFA World Cup” and applied to host the “EXPO 2025” but without success. With the money cities in Russia receive for hosting large events, they are able to realise projects they otherwise would never be able to implement. And so the competition is enchained between Russian cities, following the traits of neoliberalism. This leads to a lot of uneven urban infrastructure development at which’s head is always the capital Moscow, where a lot of resources are being concentrated.

Besides trying to get as much as possible money through governmental funds, modern green public spaces have to ensure their sustainable and financial functioning through other means. Most of the times this implies making profit out of what they have to offer. This is a major change from the Soviet system to today’s Russia’s system. Green public spaces have to changing if they want to survive. During the Soviet regime under the planned economy, they all got equal financial support by the government and so recreational parks profited from financial stability.

Another major change from the past to today’s situation is according to the interviews the fact that the city government is largely dependent on big influential financial companies. *“The major part of the developed area in Yekaterinburg belongs to two companies that extract and sell copper. They are the Russian Copper Company and the Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company. So their opinions have to be taken into account as their political and economic influence is much more significant than the one of the city administration”*.

We understood that green public spaces in modern Russia have to fight for money in order to be able to get developed or improved. In the case of Mayakovsky Park, the park director tried in the past to gain additional money through an aggressive commercialisation of the park which even implied an entry fee of 200 rubles to simply get access to the park. For all additional attraction installed one had to pay extra. This rule was dropped at some point again but for quite some years only paying guests were allowed in. In winter 2021, an artificial ski slope (cf. figure 18) got built in Mayakovsky park. In order to use it one has to pay 500 rubles, which shows a tendency of returning to

the commercialisation of the space. Nevertheless, since the collapse of the Soviet Union the park has already been flooded by private businesses like cafes, food stands (cf. figure 19) and amusement park style attractions (cf. figure 20).



Figure 18: Skiing slope in Mayakovsky Park (Prenner 2021)



Figure 19: Christmas Market stands in Mayakovsky Park (Prenner, 2021)



Figure 20: “Upside-down house” attraction in Mayakovsky Park (Prenner, 2021)

This situation is absurd as on the one hand, the park is a state-financed entity which means it receives financial aid from the government. However, the amount available is really little and barely sufficient to maintain the basic existing infrastructure. And so, in order to develop further *“the park has to make some kind of profit by itself. Moreover, the city government demands the park to make its extra money because its income is part of the spendings of the city budget. Altogether this results in a paradoxical park economy”*. Certain interview partners raised doubts about the government paying equal attention to all parks in the city. Mayakovsky park located on the South-East of the city is located rather peripheral. This leads means that *“Mayakovsky park loses the financial competition to the more central public spaces”*.

The required money to renovate the Iset river embankment in central Yekaterinburg came through the federal program launched by the agenda for better liveability in cities. This

implies the city had to apply for the project in order to obtain the needed federal grants. Not the entire project was financed by the federal program. In the case of the river embankment *“money had to come from two sources: the federal government, and the second funding source is the Russian copper company that wanted their headquarter right here and that wanted the surrounding area in impeccable conditions. Probably even the company owners live somewhere nearby”*. And so the Russian copper company took the role of the developer and agreed to partly pay for the improvements made in the green public space close by in order to be allowed to get the land for its headquarter in the very city centre. Regarding the federal financing, funding of such projects is often being used to increasing the loyalty to the local authorities to the Kremlin.

And so the case of the Iset river embankment *“is actually a brilliant project to analyse the dealings of neoliberalism because you see that public needs require private actors to be involved so that impressive urban improvement can be made”*. This raises the question of who exactly it is that is in charge in the city? Is it the mayor, the regional government or is it powerful men having immense resources who come up with iconic projects to advertise their wealth and their status with?

The Covid-19 pandemic was a reminder to show us the importance of green public spaces in cities. Their importance grew significantly during the pandemic because these were the places people went to in order to restore their energy and minds. *“Never in my life had I seen picnicking being so popular. I am really deeply attached to all of these spaces”* was said during the interviews. One would think that it is clear that such areas therefore must be preserved and protected at all costs, but it seems like in Yekaterinburg the trend goes into an opposite direction implying the environmental destruction of what is left of nature in the city. The recently built city district “Academichesky” (cf. figure 21) (Академический район) of Yekaterinburg built on the southern edge of the city is a good example of environmental destruction. Where the city district houses several thousand people today, a forest existed before. Barely any new trees have been planted and integrated in the district, leaving behind a concrete desert.



Figure 21: Academichesky District, built on land of a cleared forest (Prenner, 2021)

When examining the Iset river embankment project closely, one notes some beautiful old willow trees that attribute to the embankment's identity and are beautiful to look at. Some of them are over 100 years old, but only very few of them survived the construction of the new park embankment. Most willows got cut down as the financial investments into the embankment went nearly entirely into improvements on the infrastructural level. Therefore, no money was available to plant not even a single young willow. No attention was paid to the importance of making sure that the vegetation of the park can continue to exist.

And so, *“because of the requalification, the embankment has partially lost its green function protecting the environment. This factor has initiated discussions concerning what percentage of the embankment should belong to the people and how much must be left for the nature”*. Activists did emphasise that the embankment is also an important green channel connecting the city centre with the suburban natural parks and is therefore very important for migrating species of animals that seek ways into and out of the city in or near the river. Because of the new park, parts of the vegetation was lost and the few new

shrubs and trees have not grown enough yet to be considered to sustain an intact environment.

It is thus impossible to tell, if and when the lost parts of the natural environment by the Iset river embankment will be regained. Unfortunately, things are looking bad for nature in Yekaterinburg in general since developers know that the main criteria of citizens is to live and work as central as possible because public transport works well there, ways are short and green public spaces of good quality are accessible there. Obviously it is impossible to meet all the conditions people ask for. *“As a result, we have a dense and vertical building tendency, which requires the construction of new access roads that devour huge amounts of space. Thus, green public spaces are gradually shrinking”*.

5.4 Changing urban systems, participatory urbanism and activism

The creation of new green public spaces as well as the improvement of existing green infrastructure has an impact on the surrounding neighbourhood and sometimes a whole city district. In some major cases such green upgrades can even have an impact on a city in its entirety. City dwellers with immediate access to green public spaces are lucky because it makes their area more attractive simply by having green infrastructure in proximity. On the other side, when looking at this from the perspective of developers, they do not care as much about green public spaces as residents or the city administration. Developers follow the capitalist goal of profit maximisation and thus act in a selfish way in order to earn the most money possible. *“Access to green areas is definitely beneficial for property prices. Nevertheless, if developers have access to land, they just want to build as much as they can rather than planning green areas for better life quality”* emerged from the interviews. Certainly, developers must tailor their properties so that they correspond to their potential customers’ budget and ideas.

Normally, the more expensive a development, the more green spaces are included. If a multimillion-dollar project is being constructed, abundant green spaces around the property will typically be planned as part of the project. As an interview partner said

however, *“I don't think they would look at bigger scales and make a new parks. And if there is an already existing park, then of course that is a jackpot and you can advertise your product through the immediate access to the park”*. What can be an interesting solution to such considerations is having competing landscape businesses within the city, meaning that landscape designers always prefer to work on private clients, rather than on governmental orders because it gives them more freedom to be creative. And so, green public spaces sometimes survive the planning of a new development because the landscape designers can convince their client to combine the property development harmoniously with the green public areas around it. In an interview the necessity *“to combine the accumulated Soviet experience with the efforts of private owners and businesses”* emerged. This means that there is only a future for Soviet heritage, if the city works together with private owners who grow stronger and stronger.

The redevelopment of central neighbourhoods boosts a city's attractiveness, especially for wealthy people. In addition, wealthy people tend to be creative and have talents, since they grow up in a privileged environment. Every city wants to attract these people as they will create more value for the city. In particular, Moscow has been very keen to be seen in all sorts of ratings as one of the smartest and greenest cities in the world. Moscow therefore positions itself globally. On the other hand secondary cities cannot compete at a global level. Yekaterinburg simply follows the fashion that is being put forward by Moscow, a city which is however, competing globally. So in a way Yekaterinburg's urban dynamics still change and follow global trends.

Proximity of green public spaces to city dwellers in Yekaterinburg is crucially important *“because the level of air and noise pollution is rather high and park areas help to reduce it naturally”*. City dwellers and even developers start to be aware of this as a global trend of sustainability has been developing over the past years.

In regards of Mayakovsky park people do move into its surroundings (cf. figure 22) as it is of a certain attractiveness to live right by the biggest city park, especially if you have children or a dog.



Figure 22: Residential developments outside Mayakovsky Park (Prenner, 2021)

Regarding the Iset river embankments it is important to mention that there are many positive commercial aspects which were implemented in the city district around the park as it was constructed and started attracting people. The geographic position of the embankment running parallel to one of the most popular streets in Yekaterinburg called “8th of March Street” (улица 8 Марта), changed the urban dynamics drastically. 8th of March Street is a road running from the North to the South of the city and is constantly overloaded with traffic close to gridlock. Trams, buses and cars pass there 24 hours a day. It is a very unpleasant route to make your way through the city, especially if you’re walking or cycling. Therefore the new Iset river embankment allows pedestrians and cyclists to move faster and more efficiently through their daily routes through the city away from traffic and in an idyllic park setting. The river embankment park is bustling with activities in the summer and there are sports grounds which have become very popular too. Summarised, one can say that *“the Iset river embankment offers a nice balance between things you can enjoy for free, like sports and walking, riding a bicycle and things for which you have to pay like cafes and restaurants. In both cases, the attractiveness of the nearby city district grew immensely”*. Through this attractiveness

brought by the park, real estate prices near the embankment skyrocketed and wealthier people are more likely to be living there today.

Therefore for city dwellers in Yekaterinburg and elsewhere across Russia, growing polarisation and urban dynamics are changing for both the better and the worst. If that was not enough already, there have been other observations made, such as *“a lot of civil societies have been repressed in Russia lately. However, cities and their design are being improved, making things more comfortable for people and so on. But of course, do not forget about the interests of these improvements. Improvements are being made so people do not think they actually suffer”*. Nonetheless, people are critical by nature and not everyone is fooled by the illusion of a comfortable city. Many take responsibility for their homeland into their own hands and are committed to being an active part of urban development so that it can meet the needs of people today and look forward towards tomorrow’s residents.

Since a population angry about urban projects is not purposeful, many cities try to introduce new ways of participatory urbanism, allowing them to be part of the transition of the city they live in. For example, the polling website gosuslugi.ru has been used by the city administration of Yekaterinburg for a few years now, aiming at collecting people’s opinions about projects regarding the city development. In the specific case of green public spaces however, citizens have never been asked what new spaces should be created or which existing ones should be maintained and developed further. It is not possible because such bottom-up initiatives unfortunately cannot influence long term urban planning of which green public spaces are a part of. Decisions regarding the financing and realising of a project must be taken and approved by local authorities way in advance.

Whilst one could think that people are not happy with this situation, it was surprising to hear that people do not demand to be part of their city’s development except for a very few number of brave activists. *“I would say that the protests of 2019 when people fought for Oktjabrskaya square in the city centre is quite an exception. The growing oppression and detainment of activists, leads the course of things because nobody wants to risk having to go to prison for being politically active”* one interviewed expert said (cf. figure 23). This makes clear that people generally are very passive when it comes to taking the reins of the city's development into their own hands. When asking why this is, I was told

that Russians tend to have an attitude of *“if I want to walk my dog, I go to existing places. Why would I use my precious time to fight for new public space? This attitude is widespread regarding citizen mobilisation, and therefore already a lost cause”*. This shows that the population is fairly reluctant to participate in what does not concern their own private lives. According to an interview partner’s estimation there are maybe 5% of active citizens in Yekaterinburg. Yet, people are still able to rise-up when there is a bigger threat of being deprived of something. This principle works when the threat is happening right in that very moment but does not apply when the threat lies somewhere distant in the future.



Figure 23: Oktjabrskaya square (Prenner, 2021)

There are also national efforts to orientate cities towards the needs of the public through federal programs that aim to make cities more comfortable places to live in, following

the agenda for more liveable cities. Regional governments together with city governments must deliver and show the Kremlin that they implement what is expected from them. In addition, local governments must meet somewhere in the middle of developer's needs as well as the expectations of its citizens'. In addition, all this needs to be done in a way that does not anger the public. It is the mayor's task to avoid public protest, and if historical buildings or parks disappear, people do riot. This might somehow protect green public spaces in a way.

The example of Oktjabrskaya square shows that citizens of the Ural's capital do appreciate the green public spaces they have and are even determined to fight for their ongoing existence if necessary. Most of the conflicts between the authorities and the population that have happened in Yekaterinburg's past have so far been provoked by attempts to change or reconstruct differently existing public areas. *"Most people don't care about the future but they are really afraid of losing what they have now"* is the motto in this approach.

When asking about the case study of Mayakovsky park and participatory urbanism, I was told that the last director (Ekaterina Kelmann) of the park before the current one made an atypical decision to modernise the old Soviet park based on the citizens' opinions collected through surveys on social networks, mainly on Instagram. For instance, people could tell the park authorities their musical preferences, so that music could be played in the park that its visitors wanted to hear. Some people asked to organise a public kitchen garden which was implemented shortly after. Conducting these surveys on social networks *"means the views of elderly people were never fully considered. They are not actively present on social networks and even though they are not frequent visitors. Also young visitors' opinions like the one of children were never collected as they are not the ones to bring the profit and their wishes are being financed by the parents"*. This reflects on how new ways of doing participatory urbanism brought improvements to Mayakovsky park, but that such an approach was not flawless. Places like Mayakovsky park find themselves constantly in a difficult place because as mentioned already, in order to receive public financing they have to organise propaganda activities which do not bring any profit to the park itself. On the other hand, the park authorities have to arrange activities that citizens demand so that the park can make a profit. This makes it difficult

to implement participatory urbanism projects that really take into consideration people's wishes and still make the park function economically.

Regarding the Iset river embankment and participatory urbanism the interview partners referred to the so called "Iset Forum", which exists since 2021 and is to be held annually. The Kremlin issued orders to the Yekaterinburg administration and developers to not participate, because it is being organised by activists, who see themselves as the government's opposition. Despite this call by the Kremlin, the Iset Forum's first edition was supported by *Akon's Group* which is a local development company. Nobody expected this, but the forum turned into the starting point for changing the views of the city administration and architects towards project proposals for the Iset river embankment. Concepts such as an urban pond then began to appear. *"In the 2022 edition, it was even agreed that the Iset River Forum would be held with the support and participation of the administration, but something went wrong again, and they withdrew from the support of the event"*. However, the forum was held again with the support of the developer Akon's Group. The event committee invited non-profit organisations such as "Nurov Garden", "Civilians", the urban community "Parks and Squares" and some other independent experts. Despite the administration having withdrawn from the project, the forum took place and the activists want to continue organising it, because they have already accumulated a lot of competences that can help develop the Iset river embankment in the right direction *"despite the fact that some consider activists to be urban mad men"*.

When talking to the interview partners involved in urban activism in Yekaterinburg about their work other than the Iset Forum, they confirmed they generally make sure to always be actively involved in urban requalification projects and real estate developments. *"We are in contact with both developers and the administration"* and can often achieve something they proudly said. As a striking example the "Nurov Garden" project (cf. figure 24) on Chapaev Street 1 was named. This project is based on the concept that the population should not build backwalls but gardens by the Iset river. For five years now the garden has been renovated by volunteers, composed of a group of active citizens who are turning a place that used to be a landfill into a public garden. The urban activists want to continue this project by cooperating and asking for help from the city administration and developers. *"I would like to emphasise that in no case do we oppose ourselves to either the administration or the developers, since we are all residents of the same city"*

and we all need to negotiate” was mentioned when having asked about the motivation for trying such a cooperative approach when it comes to maintain green public spaces alive.



Figure 24: Nurov Garden (Prenner, 2021)

Since the Russian government has developed increasingly authoritarian traits, protests against what officials decide and implement are forbidden, and people get detained for protesting. This causes a certain fear within the population. Here, *“the Oktjabrskaya square case is quite a rare case because normally the authorities allow the population to express their views on ecological issues but not on the political ones”*. It is typical not only for Yekaterinburg but for all big cities in Russia to protest against the cutting down of trees or voice general disagreements with the federal government. Ecology-related activism is the only activism accepted by the authorities, because it does not directly attack or accuse the Kremlin for the wrong going of things. People are therefore trying a hidden way of activism *“to express their political views asserting their civil rights to the city”*. Since Yekaterinburg’s inhabitants do appreciate green public spaces generally, people protest in its defence, if there is a risk for them to be deprived of it. Chances of

success are also higher if a protest or demonstration is local and most importantly a non-political protest.

In summary, the interview partners who took part in this study agreed that at first glance, it seems that people do not want to be involved in the development of the city “*as they are rather passive which is conditioned by the current political regime*”. However, in Yekaterinburg a small group of people do participate in public discussions and internet polls on the matter. Chances to be heard by the government are unfortunately very low as citizens do not have any clear levers of pressure. “*The authorities always have more power. Even if they pretend to consider activists’ opinions, they feel free to play with fake care but in reality do what they want*”.

6. DISCUSSION

In this chapter I return to the results presented in the analysis in order to put them into question along with the perspectives of the existing literature. In order to do this, I divided this chapter into three topics:

- *From socialist Sverdlovsk to neoliberal Yekaterinburg*
- *Soviet park traditions: the example of Mayakovsky park*
- *Neoliberal amusement parks: the example of the Iset river embankment*

By dividing the discussion part of the thesis into three parts I will be able to compare the theoretical work done surrounding the topic in relation to different scales of analysis of my case studies, going from a bigger scale to a smaller one.

Through this I endeavoured to answer the research question in order to find out if the hypothesis can be confirmed or not:

Research question: *“To what extent have green public spaces in Yekaterinburg changed since the collapse of the USSR in order to suite the Neoliberal system?”*

Hypothesis: *“The transformation of central green public spaces is primarily part of a process of territorialisation of urban policies to make Yekaterinburg an attractive and competitive Russian city whilst peripheral green public spaces are relegated and designated for entertainment for the local public.”*

The data I collected demonstrates several important facts that agree at least partially with what the general literature says on the subject and what I considered the direction of development might be in the hypothesis. Of course, the answer is more complicated than that, which is why in the following paragraphs the ideas that emerged from this study and theories are linked whenever possible to the existing literature when comparisons are made. In addition, findings from the research that were surprising and do not go hand in hand with the general theories are explained as well.

6.1 From Soviet Sverdlovsk to neoliberal Yekaterinburg

The analysis confirmed important generic research achievements about the Soviet Union. Soviet Sverdlovsk was able to establish itself as an important regional centre and thus received a lot of investment by the Socialist regime. The switch from a private company and peasant household economy to new labour collectives (Humphrey, 2005) under tsarist reign helped the city's economy to grow further whereupon many people moved to Sverdlovsk to find work.

Just like in all other Soviet cities the political ideology of the Soviets took material form in Sverdlovsk: the construction of a "green belt" consisting of 14 forest parks and two inner rings of parks, many squares and big boulevards, to only mention some investments. This shows how much the city changed during that period. Sverdlovsk's development reflects approaches such as Howard's "garden city", which was generally a popular idea amongst Soviet urban planners (Budantseva, 2007). Of course Sverdlovsk was just like all other Soviet cities and was subject to very institutionalised and centralised urban planning based in Moscow (Golubchikov, 2004) and remains that in a way today too, with the city following standards and trends set in urban planning in Moscow. And so, speaking about the Soviet context, Sverdlovsk followed Moscow's example of introducing a "Central Park of Recreation and Leisure" because the government in the capital city decided so.

Big projects just like the parks of culture were easy to implement as Soviet urban planning did not require any legal rules because of the absence of laws and rules. Furthermore, the case of Sverdlovsk confirms that Soviet planners did not have to economise space since the authorities could develop space as they wished and there was plenty available (Golubchikov, 2004). Heritage like Mayakovsky park and Popedy park are good examples of big sized green public spaces located at what back then was the city limit.

Besides these large parks that were designed for recreation, there were many other green public spaces in which the Soviet regime abolished leisure activities which resulted in the creation of public spaces with no other use than being monumental (Engel, n.d.). These

spaces were kept clean and neat, so that undesired groups of people got removed when being there (Engel, n.d.). The analysis confirmed that in Sverdlovsk people mainly went to Mayakovsky park for walking and other recreational activities whilst the majority of the city's public spaces remained unimportant for city dweller's leisure time.

The abrupt change from the USSR to modern Russia meant Yekaterinburg (which regained its original name in 1992), entered a stage of transformation that would never be completed, even today. The Ural's capital now follows a market-oriented development model under an elected government, although the city has not fully become a neoliberal city (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012), with one foot stuck in its past dealing with problems created before the USSR ended in 1991. The analysis showed here that whilst certain public spaces in modern Russia have been invested in and received a new purpose, a lot of peripheral green public spaces got neglected. The thesis' two case studies confirm this claim: whilst Soviet historic Mayakovsky park is financially suffering and having an identity and purpose crisis today, the new Iset river embankment in the centre lived a transformed recently and big sums of money have been invested in it.

In my research it emerged that in the context of Yekaterinburg, Hirt's (2012) claims concerning the decreasing number of urban green public spaces such as gardens and parks since the implementation of the neoliberal system can be confirmed. The further you go away from Yekaterinburg's centre, the more green public spaces suffered from budget shortfalls since the 1990s. This means that many planned green public spaces at the city edge have remained muddy expanses for many years (Zarecor, 2018). This happened mainly because many Soviet green public spaces had no value in the new Russian system, interview analysis found.

The chaotic shift of politics during the establishment of the Russian Federation enabled individuals who were well connected inside the government to gain power and control over big state enterprises which lead to the rise of the oligarchs (Brade et al., 2006). This phenomenon is also very present in the case of Yekaterinburg where in an interview it emerged that *“the major part of the developed area in Yekaterinburg belongs to two companies that extract and sell copper. They are the Russian Copper Company and the Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company. So their opinions have to be taken into account*

as their political and economic influence is much more significant than the one of the city administration”. These two powerful businesses invest mainly in central areas. For instance, it emerged from the interviews that parts of the new Iset river embankment have been financed by the Russian Copper Company. This is an important point in my research as it confirms partially my hypothesis regarding money streams flowing into investments in the centre of the city to build a certain image of Yekaterinburg. And so, whilst on one hand local oligarchs today finance new green public spaces, they also are responsible for their disappearance since they invest in real estate developments that imply the destruction of Soviet housing with green spaces and the construction of new buildings with less greenery (Hirt, 2013).

Yekaterinburg’s general success since the system change is closely connected to the fact that cities and especially big cities were generally better at coping with the crises that came with system change. Yekaterinburg was and is part of Russia’s economic nerve centre and therefore a bearer of regional development (Brade et al., 2006). Today’s Russian society wants to actively influence, transform and fix the urban environment and demands this be an active part of city development because a better life quality can be achieved (Bach & Murawski, 2020). Yekaterinburg’s inhabitants protest in defence of their green public spaces, when a potential risk comes up, many examples such as Oktjabrskaya square and Nurov Gardens have proved this during my research. It cannot be denied though that Russian and all post-Soviet cities entered a crisis after the system shift, allowing the cities’ elites to shape the new images of post-Soviet cities (Brade & Neugebauer, 2017).

6.2 Traits of the Soviet past - Mayakovsky park

Mayakovsky park was created for the same purpose as most other major Soviet parks. After the work of Kalyukin et al. (2015) the purpose were namely recreational activities as means to educate and enlighten Soviet citizens, which is why green public spaces were designed to enhance the Socialist feeling of belonging together. The conclusion was thus the construction of new parks such as Mayakovsky park.

When Yekaterinburg found itself in a new country under a new market and political system it required great effort and innovation to find a new purpose for the green Soviet heritage. Primarily, Mayakovsky park needed to be revitalised in a way that responded to new standards of recreation and norms of a modern society. Many strategies were tried, from an aggressive commercialisation to transformation of the park into a memorial for military victims. Since nothing seemed to work well a cultural commercialisation finally took place, aiming to attract young people who demand cultural events and are willing to pay for them. This 360 degree turn from strict Soviet top-down park planning that never included elements of the needs or wants of the population (Tuvikene et al., 2019) to trying many new ways to meet the needs of the population and attract it to the park, again shows the transformation that got underway in green public spaces in post-Soviet Russian cities after 1991.

This development of trying to attract young people has parallels to Maykovsky park's big brother Gorki in Moscow which reopened in 2011 after major changes to suit the needs of a new public living a "European lifestyle", meaning the young, creative, hip and cultured middle-class Muscovites (Kalyukin et al., 2015).

Another surprising yet initially unanticipated discovery of my research was the financial aspect of parks. In order to ensure its survival, Mayakovsky park is obligated to make additional money to boost its budget. This causes a paradoxical park economy in which the rather than receiving more money from the government, the park has to make money to give back to the government. This discovery mainly concerns Mayakovsky park as according to this research the government does not pay equal attention to peripherally located and centrally located parks. And so "*Mayakovsky park loses the financial competition to the more central public spaces*", as was said in an interview, meaning that under current Russian policies green spaces of all sizes have been shrinking and even disappearing in the transition of the post-Soviet city (Hirt, 2013).

This discovery during this part of my research goes hand in hand with my hypothesis that suggests that peripheral parks such as Mayakovsky park are today relegated and mainly designated for the entertainment of the local public. Mayakovsky park also seems to take on traits of a pseudo neoliberal amusement park, constantly augmenting the quantity of

amusement park style attractions (cf. figure 25) and trying to find new ways of making money in order to ensure its survival.



Figure 25: dinosaur amusement park, Mayakovsky Park (Prenner, 2021)

6.3 Traits of the present - the Iset river embankment

Since Soviet green public spaces in Sverdlovsk always had to fulfil ideological purposes and thus were of very limited use for the city population, many public spaces turned into “no-one’s space (Neugebauer & Rekhviashvili, 2015). In addition, whilst the Iset river

embankment did not offer good conditions for ideological monuments like big sculptures and Soviet banners, it remained unnoticed by the Soviets. According to my interview partners this is probably why the new Iset river embankment park is so successful today. The population always considered it an important place even if the Soviet regime ignored this fact, with the embankment mainly used for water energy exploitation since the creation of the city and never for entertainment. The 20th century “*was marked by mere brutal exploitation of the Iset. Meanwhile the river itself turned into an abandoned neglected and even dangerous area*”, the analysis showed. In post-Soviet Russia efforts have been made to start treating the river and its banks in a more humane way again.

And so, whilst Mayakovsky park bloomed in the Soviet era, the Iset river embankment remained unnoticed. Today, the tables have turned and the Iset river embankment has become a flagship model of one of these newly emerged and popular public spaces whilst Mayakovsky park is struggling to survive. The Iset river embankment park follows the trends set by Moscow, which again follows the global trends of Europe and the world which accelerate the transformation of urban space in modern Yekaterinburg (Brade et al., 2007).

Since a desired balance of power between social interests, private interests and the interests of neighbourhoods that respects democratic values and is oriented toward finding compromises (Golubchikov, 2004) have not been able to establish in modern Russia, significant social disparities in the urban spatial reorganisation and the segregation of the population took place in the Federation. The post-Soviet upper-class elite won in this situation and finds itself now in the gentrified downtown areas (Hirt, 2013) of Yekaterinburg, such as the Iset river embankment neighbourhood (cf. figure 26). Another important discovery of my research was that the case of the Iset river embankment *turns out to be a brilliant example that shows the dealings of neoliberalism in Russia*. The park was partly funded by a national program and partly by private actors. This important information emerged from the interviews and shows that in Yekaterinburg and all of Russia today the public needs private actors to be involved in order to be able to make urban improvement for public good. Of course, this raises questions like who is in charge in the city? A handful of powerful oligarchs and business people clearly have a lot to say in Yekaterinburg’s urban development, meaning the city government becomes a slave to private funding. This is because investors and companies want high-quality

infrastructure, good business-orientated services and an institutional framework that ensures success. Only very few cities have been able to compete on this level (Brade et al., 2006) in post-Soviet Russia and Yekaterinburg definitely wants to be at that level.



Figure 26: view onto the Iset river embankment and its neighbourhood (Prenner, 2021)

The national authorities in Russia have begun new city planning programs that imply or mandate the creation of green public spaces following global trends such as becoming more environmental friendly and making cities more liveable (Coulibaly, 2012). This creates a certain paradox in the case of Yekaterinburg, as the city built the new Iset river embankment to improve the city but at the same time my research results show that the Iset river itself was not considered by the project. Water safety and other important environmental factors have not been taken into consideration at all whilst planning the project. However, the river and its shores remain the green backbone of Yekaterinburg, and it is thus crucial to take it into consideration in urban planning. The appropriation of public space can be seen as an exercise of citizens' "right to the city", meaning the right to be involved in the process of decision-making in regards to the planning and organisation of the public sphere (Kalyukin et al., 2015).

Local activists, despite the administration not participating, started organising events such as the “Iset Forum” which aims at gathering competences that can help develop the Iset river embankment into the right direction. This mobilisation of citizens is astonishing since in spite of these circumstances social organisations have been created and continue to persist despite many obstacles being put in their way (Henry, 2010). Yekaterinburg turned out in this research to be quite a rebellious city and groups of inhabitants thus actively fight for the appropriation of public space and the citizens’ “right to the city”. This strong activist community demands the right to be involved in the process of decision-making in regard to the planning and organisation of the public sphere (Kalyukin et al., 2015).

Even though the Iset river embankment does make it sound like urban green public spaces are being improved, besides this one project no other green public spaces of a considerable size have been created recently in Yekaterinburg. This goes against the Coulibaly's (2012) and other authors’ claims that post-Soviet cities are developing in favour of their inhabitants. In Yekaterinburg the major's tendency seems to be prioritizing the destruction of existing green public space whenever possible in order to build something that promises profit and sales and thus only allowing a development of green public spaces that creates promising economic attractivity.

This confirms my hypothesis that claims that the transformation of central green public spaces serves first of all as an instrument of urban policies to make Yekaterinburg an attractive and competitive Russian city in order to attract business and prosperity for its elite.

7. CONCLUSION

In this work, I studied the evolution of green public spaces created in the time of the USSR in the city of Sverdlovsk/Yekaterinburg and the spaces' evolution up until today, as well as the creation of new such spaces under the rule of neoliberalism in modern Russia. The research focused on different notions and ideas of urban and spatial development, sociology as well as environmentalism and activism so that new insights and perspectives could be obtained of the chaotic times of transitioning from Socialism to Neoliberalism. The focus of this research on green public space worked as a representative example of how society as a whole and thus Soviet cities evolved into post-Soviet new melting pots that continue to face countless problems since their arrival into a new world. Some might think that Yekaterinburg today has one leg stuck in the past, grappling with problems from the Soviet era, while its other leg in the present, trying to reposition itself and prepare for a competitive future.

More specifically this research was looking for factors that triggered the transformation of green public spaces in Yekaterinburg when the Soviet Union fell and how they adapted to new needs that emerged more recently. I also studied the arrival of new green public spaces and how they are perceived by city dwellers compared to the parks from the past. Finally, I was interested in finding out, if the population actively wants to be part of their city's green public space development.

In order to try to answer these questions, I undertook a qualitative study based on the grounded theory. As a data collection method, I used semi-directive interviews and observations. To facilitate the data collection and in order to better immerse myself in my case study, I undertook a four-month fieldwork trip to the Ural's capital. My study contributes to the existing literature on the subject of Soviet and post-Soviet urban development.

As already indicated by previous research on post-Soviet Russia, the case of Yekaterinburg reinforces the peculiar characteristics of the urban development processes in the post-Soviet context: Russia's politically centralised way of pushing urban

development and funding of the latter is very untransparent. Its success implies a cooperation with regional oligarchs which could be observed in the case of Yekaterinburg. Since the Ural's capital's arrival into the free market economy, it is competing with other Russian cities which generates a tendency to invest in more profitable areas such as centrally located green public spaces at the expense of peripheral ones. Fast urban improvements are wanted whilst sacrificing the quality of them. This leads to the creation of new parks by the water that paradoxically do not allow physically interaction with it. And with this rapid development environmental destruction is brought along too, as the city government cares more about the economic and financial wellbeing of the city rather than the environment and population. And so, whilst densification and gentrification eats more and more into Yekaterinburg's few available green public spaces, groups of city dwellers are getting mobilised, ready to fight for their right to an intact city with abundant green public spaces (cf. figure 27).



Figure 27: new apartment blocks at the edge of a forest park, Yekaterinburg (Prenner, 2021)

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Figure 28: “Мама, смотри, я живу в России. Сбылась мечта.” (Prepper, 2021)

9. APPENDICIES

9.1 Interview guide

For interviews held in Russian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the interpret to introduce herself and explain that she will translate everything being said
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce myself and my research in a few sentences • Ask the person if it's okay to register the talk and use their name
Interview partner profile (to break the ice)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you present yourself quickly? • Can you tell me what do you think of, when they hear the notion <i>public space in Yekaterinburg</i> and which one(s) do you frequent the most in your daily life?
Historical dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me about green public spaces that were created during Soviet times? • Which Soviet green public spaces survived and still exist in Yekaterinburg today? • What were those spaces mostly used for? Do you have personal memories of spending time in those spaces?
The in-between socialism and neoliberalism dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the big changes in the city that happened due to the system change? • Can you tell me more about the effects on green public spaces in Yekaterinburg that the system change from socialism to neo-liberalism brought with itself?
Current dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you know about today's creation of green public spaces in Yekaterinburg?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a pattern regarding the planning approach you can see in the city's transformation regarding the creation of green public spaces? • Do you think the changes in Yekaterinburg since the fall of the Soviet Union have been positive or negative for the city's population in regards to access to the city and its public spaces?
Case study 1 – Mayakovsky Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you know about Mayakovsky Park? • Do you have professional links to the park because of your job? • What was the park's role in the Soviet era? • Can you tell me what changes you have observed in this green public spaces over the past years? • Can you tell me something about the park's popularity in the past and today? What people are going to the park? • What changes have been made so that the Soviet park suits the neoliberal system? • Are green public spaces like Mayakovsky Park given less attention in regards of investment to improve the park? • To what extent has the creation and development of the park impacted the surrounding urban dynamics?
Case study 2 – Iset River Embankment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you know about the Iset River embankment? • Can you tell me something about its popularity and importance for the city today? • What does the city of Yekaterinburg want to achieve with the central river requalification? • To what extent have the creation of the embankment impacted the surrounding urban dynamics? • Have there been any innovative elements in these transformations of green public spaces that you know of?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think green public spaces like the Iset river embankment today are designed for a specific type of user or the broad public?
Population related dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you see the future of these two green public spaces? Does the population want them to be different or are people happy with the way they are? • Are Yekaterinburg's inhabitants asking to be actively part of the planification of green public space? • Are activists being heard by the city government and administration? • Are there any other things you'd like to tell me that you think could be interesting for my research?

9.2 Observation guide

Subject of interest	Sub subject
Environmental Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the environment healthy? • Are there any forms of pollution (noise, air, waste)? • Are animals and plants present? Do they seem in good health? • Is the environment rather natural or sealed and tamed?
Infrastructure Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What infrastructure is present in today's space? • Is the infrastructure used by the visitors? • Is the infrastructure easily accessible? • Is the place easily accessible for everyone? • Is public transportation close by?
Social Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the park's function? • Is it accessible at all times? • What kind of people are using the space?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do people generally think of the space? • For what activities do people come to the space? • Do people feel safe in the space?
Geographical Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what type of location is the green public space situated? • In what urban context does the park find itself today? • What is the surrounding neighbourhood like?

9.3 Transcription of semi-directive interviews

The complete transcripts can be found in the separate PDF appendix sent by email named “transcripts_interviews_SP_thesis”.