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The second generation of post-socialist change: Gorky Park and public space in Moscow

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Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, public spaces in Moscow and in other post-socialist cities underwent dramatic changes in line with the wider adaptation to the market economy, epitomized in processes of privatization and commercialization. Most recently, however, these processes have been overshadowed by a “second generation” of post-socialist change that entails the recasting of the very conception of the public and public space. In this paper, we analyze these transformations in Moscow through a case study of the reconstruction of Gorky Park. The case study builds upon extensive empirical material collected through qualitative interviews, document and media studies, and on-site observations. It is shown that despite appealing to ideas of openness, livability and the public good, the park reconstruction in fact entails the production of socially divisive urban space that prioritizes consumerism at the cost of less-scripted and diverse public life.

Keywords: public space; post-socialist cities; neoliberalism; park reconstruction; Moscow; Gorky Park

Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, cities in Russia have undergone considerable economic, social, political and ideological transformations. However, despite a range of contributions to the field of post-socialist urban studies in recent years (e.g. Borén \& Gentile, 2007; Darieva, Kaschuba, \& Krebs, 2011; Diener \& Hagen, 2013; Gentile, Tammaru, \& van Kempen, 2012; Golubchikov, Badyina, \& Makhrova, 2014; Hamilton, Dimitrovská Andrews, \& Pichler-Milanović, 2005; Hirt, Sellar, \& Young, 2013; Light \& Young, 2010; Sjöberg, 2014; Stanilov, 2007a; Stanilov \& Sýkora, 2014; Sýkora \& Bouzarovski, 2012; Tsenkova \& Nedović-Budić, 2006; Wiest, 2012), there has been relatively little research on public space within this larger field, especially concerning Russian cities. This is particularly the case for the important issue of how conceptions of the public and public space are being discursively reworked today, which is a main focus in this paper. Public spaces, moreover, provide a useful focus of study for explicating the manner in which these transformations are recasting the urban fabric of post-Soviet cities. In this paper, we examine the Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure in Moscow in order to fill these gaps in the literatures on public space and post-socialist urbanism.

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Gorky Park is a centrally located “park of culture and leisure” in Moscow. Its origin dates to 1923 when the site was used for the All-Russian Agricultural and Handicraft Industries Exhibition. Gorky Park was officially opened on 12 August 1928 thus becoming the first park of culture and leisure in the Soviet Union. However, while it was once the epitome of the Soviet project of ideological and cultural betterment, the demise of communism has seen the transformation of Gorky Park into a space for entrepreneurship. By the end of the 2000s, Gorky Park was described as a kitschy urban space characterized by an anomalous mixture of Soviet-era architecture, decrepit amusement rides, and flagrant commerce (Shaw, 2011). By 2010, however, and with a new mayor and city government installed in Moscow, the vector of urban policy had noticeably shifted toward appeals to a “city for people” and a “livable city” ethos. Particular emphasis was placed on public spaces which were designated for redevelopment and reorientation toward European standards and examples. Gorky Park was to be the first major reconstruction project to this end, and reconstruction began in 2011. The redevelopment of a further 13 parks of culture and leisure in Moscow subsequently followed, as did the reconstruction of a number of other public spaces in the city—such as the conversion of streets into pedestrian zones.

These projects highlight the politically induced shifts in the urban regime and, importantly, how Moscow City Hall specifically utilizes public space rhetoric. Accordingly, the case of Gorky Park is illustrative of how the envisioning of public space is reworked under the current urban regime. In this paper, it will be argued that implications arising from the Gorky Park redevelopment are best understood as indicative of a “second generation” of changes to public spaces in post-Soviet Moscow. The “first generation” was epitomized in the sweeping commercialization and privatization of public spaces that took place during the 1990s following the demise of communist rule. The “second generation” of changes, it is argued here, suggests that neoliberal capitalism in Moscow is becoming more pervasive and includes an ongoing discursive recasting of the concept of public space and the notion of the public itself.

Although these issues have received considerable scholarly attention in the context of Western European and North American cities (e.g. Atkinson, 2003; Davidson, 2013; De Magalhães, 2010; Langstraat & Van Melik, 2013; Madden, 2010; Mitchell, 1995; Paddison & Sharp, 2007; Perkins, 2009), there is a relative lack of research within the field of post-socialist/post-Soviet urban studies. Some studies have undoubtedly endeavored to identify and analyze the processes involved in public space transformation in post-socialist/post-Soviet cities (Aksenov, 2012; Argenbright, 1999; Bodnár, 2001; Darieva et al., 2011; Engel, 2006, 2007; Hirt, 2012; Khokhlova, 2011; Makarova, 2006; Pachenkov, 2011; Pavlovskaya & Hanson, 2001; Poposki, 2011; Sidorov, 2000; Stanilov, 2007b; Ter-Ghazaryan, 2013; Voronkova & Pachenkov, 2011; Zhelnina, 2012, 2014) but these have only to a limited extent elaborated the periodization of the post-socialist era (but see Hirt, 2012, for a discussion of the development of architectural styles). Furthermore, existing studies have not considered how conceptions of the public and public space are being discursively reworked within the current framework of global neoliberalization. In this paper, we aim to address this lacuna by using the case of the reconstruction of Gorky Park to analyze recent transformations of public space in Moscow, with particular focus on the discursive logic behind the changes. The research question that has guided our study is: What are the prevailing discourses on the idea of the public and public space and how are they embedded in the visions and methods applied in the park reconstruction? Discourse is here broadly understood as a social system of relations that through communicative social practices create the fundamental parameters
of meaning in a given temporal and spatial context (Howarth, 2000). Hence, understanding urban change—such as the second generation of post-socialist change—means to interrogate the social system of relations with a particular focus on the changes in the communicative and social practices that can be empirically connected to particular cases of urban transformation (such as the redevelopment of Gorky Park).

Our empirical evidence is based on 17 semi-structured interviews conducted in Russian by Alexander Kalyukin in March and April 2013. Additional data were obtained from field observations and from official documents and mass media sources, especially published interviews with Park Directors. Further, 21 shorter interviews with randomly selected park visitors provide contextual background material, although they are not separately cited in the analysis. The majority of the 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees or associates of the Moscow Department of Culture and the Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design. The reason for this selection was to gain a deeper understanding of the different aspects of Gorky Park reconstruction, for example, conceptualization, management, execution, economics, sociology, etc. Six informants were affiliated with neither organization and these were selected to provide independent expert perspectives. It should be noted that despite the Strelka Institute not being officially affiliated with Moscow City Hall, it has played a significant role in strategic and management consultation and has also provided the platform for panel discussions pertaining to the Gorky Park reconstruction.

The park’s total area is 120 hectares, half of which is Gorky Park proper, while the remainder comprises Nesuchny Garden—a landscaped garden dating back to the eighteenth century. This study focuses on Gorky Park proper and the adjacent Pushkinskaya Embankment which functionally forms a part of Gorky Park proper (see Figure 1). Although the park reconstruction is still nominally ongoing, most of the changes were completed for and during the 2011 summer season. In July 2013, when the main changes were already in place, the conceptual framework for further park development prepared by London-based LDA Design consultancy was unveiled.

The paper consists of three main parts and a conclusion. Part one considers the largely Western-dominated theoretical analysis of public space whereas part two discusses conceptual perspectives in the post-socialist context. The following empirical section—part three—underpins the arguments for what we call the second generation of post-socialist change and how this articulates with the neoliberalization of public space.

**Theoretical background**

In line with a relational understanding of space, public space is here conceived as being constituted through the interaction of social and material relations that are constantly negotiated and reconfigured. Public space is accordingly posited as a medium of politics and power and spatialized social practices and relations, which account for its relative degree of openness and closure (Massey, 2005, p. 166) or ultimately inclusion and exclusion. Similarly, Deutsche (1996, p. 278) argues that “urban space is the product of conflict” and hence public space can be envisioned as a terrain for processes and struggles that make specific spaces more or less “public.” Contestation of public space is, according to Henri Lefebvre, an exercise of citizens’ “right to the city”; the right to be involved in the process of decision-making in regard to the organization of the public sphere (Henri Lefebvre, as cited in Trubina, 2011, p. 348). Public space, conceived of as being constructed through the “dialectic of inclusion and exclusion” (Poposki, 2011, p. 715), is hence potentially constitutive of democracy as it allows for marginalized social groups.
to challenge the established normative construction of “the public.” The definition of “the public” itself, moreover, cannot be posited as “universal or enduring,” but as produced through the “constant struggle in the past and in the present” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 121). Also, as maintained by Mitchell (1995, p. 115), public space is a space for representation, that is, a space which can be publicly appropriated by social and/or political groups who can thereby become visible to a larger population. Mitchell (1995, p. 115, emphasis in original) claims that “[o]nly in public spaces can the homeless, for example, represent themselves as a legitimate part of ‘the public’.”

In the Western context, the shift since the 1980s toward increasingly pronounced neoliberal urban policy and management regimes has motivated a rejuvenated focus on the fate of public space in the realms of urban studies, planning and policy. This neoliberal shift, including processes of gentrification and private-sector lead urban (re-)development, has been widely interpreted as having led to increasingly fragmented cities (e.g., Davis, 1992), rising levels of urban social polarization (e.g., Dear, 2000), and a hollowing-out of the social and political functions of public space in favor of commercial functions and interests (Perkins, 2009). These processes go hand in hand with the neoliberal imperative of urban restructuring with its logic of commodification and establishing order and control of urban space through privatization (Paddison & Sharp, 2007). Neoliberal urban
restructuring, however, does not take the same spatial and social form everywhere around the globe. Neoliberalism as it “actually exists” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002) is not placeless but contingent on a number of factors within the local social system of relations, such as particular traditions and cultures, the resources at hand, the regulatory regimes and the various strengths of local resistances. Nevertheless, privatization of common resources is a core element in neoliberalization processes and, it has also been argued vis-à-vis cities, leads to the “destruction of the sense of shared ownership” (Poposki, 2011, p. 714) of urban space. Social interactions, Poposki continues, become carefully planned, scripted, and mediated by commercial interests and entrepreneurs around notions of the consuming individual. This means, as Miles (2009, p. 137) puts it, that “[t]he unplanned and appropriated is replaced by the designed and prescribed.” In this sense, the “right” kind of product is introduced to attract the “right” kind of public to specific urban spaces in order to maximize the volume and efficiency of commercial and consumption activities. Urban redevelopment, moreover, is also often driven by the notion of the “fear of the Other” (Sandercock, 2003), especially among White middle and upper classes, resulting in “revanchist” redevelopment projects that often endeavor to return public spaces to these more affluent groups (Smith, 1996).

Such processes of discursively and materially tailoring spaces to specific publics have been considered in a number of studies. Dixon, Levine, and McAuley (2006, p. 191) argue, for example, that there exists a “dialectical tension between freedom and control that defines public space” in which a distinction is formed between acceptable/appropriate and unacceptable/inappropriate behaviors and hence between admissible and inadmissible publics. A further example of “purification” practices is Mitchell’s (1995) examination of the contested envisioning of public space in the redevelopment of People’s Park in Berkeley, California. Political activists and homeless people saw the park as an unconstrained public space whereas the private owner and city planners envisioned it as a place for “legitimate” public activities only, that is, “recreation and entertainment, subject to usage by an appropriate public that is allowed in” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 115, emphasis in original). Mitchell refers to this practice as the “disneyfication” of space which acts to close-down unmediated social interaction. Privatized public and pseudo-public spaces foster the “illusion of a homogenized public” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 115) that filters out the social heterogeneity of the urban crowd—thereby creating a placid and comfortable realm for the White middle class. Madden (2010), in a study of Bryant Park in New York, in turn argues that under the neoliberal urban regime the public becomes “decoupled from discourses of democratization, citizenship, and self-development and connected ever more firmly to consumption, commerce, and social surveillance” (2010, p. 188). The private management of the park embraces the concept of what Madden refers to as “publicity without democracy” which implies both openness and control. However, this is not to say that the vision for the renovated park was an inclusive one; some park users were deemed as desirable while others were undesirable. This “problem” was addressed in the park’s design and programming, which, on the one hand was based upon the Jacobsian notion of self-surveillance (i.e. “eyes on the street”), and on the other hand was attractive for the revenue-generating middle-class audiences since “the best way to handle the problem of undesirables is to make a place attractive to everyone else” (William H. Whyte, as cited in Madden, 2010, p. 199). As a result of this approach, the public realm is to a certain extent strengthened due to increased accessibility, while at the same time “non-mainstream” users are ‘tolerated’ but closely watched” by the desirable public (Madden, 2010, p. 200). The renovated park is described by the author as a “quasi-universalistic public space that is oriented toward reproducing neoliberal urban power relations” (2010, p. 202) that
determine not only spatial exclusion but also (or more so) affect the discourse of publicity in which the political subject shifts from citizen to customer/consumer. The case of the renovation of Bryant Park is thus an example of how the envisioning of the public and public space is reworked under the neoliberal planning paradigm.

Some commentators have interpreted these contemporary processes as portending “the end of public space” (Mitchell, 1995; Sorkin, 1992). However, such arguments have been criticized both for idealism and for invoking reified narratives of loss and reclamation. In this critique, the notion of an ideal public space is thus understood as unattainable for two reasons. First, different social groups have different conceptions of inclusiveness and openness (Langstraat & Van Melik, 2013). Second, an ideal public space is rendered impossible by the emergence of new and less state-centered types of governance of public space which go beyond any singular envisioning of publicity (De Magalhães, 2010). Consequently, it might be argued that a truly public space is an “abstract spatial form” or “simply a topographic category” (Massey, 2005, p. 165) employed by those who overlook the fact that space is constituted through heterogeneous, unequal and often conflicting social relations. Massey argues, “[t]he very fact that they [public spaces] are necessarily negotiated, sometimes riven with antagonism, always contoured through the playing out of unequal social relations, is what renders them genuinely public” (2005, p. 153, emphasis in original). These arguments are echoed by Paddison and Sharp (2007) who see the idea of “the end of public space” as misleading since “there has never simply been public space”; it is rather always “in the process of becoming through struggle and debate” (2007, p. 102, emphasis in original). Therefore, instead of positing the demise of public spaces, developments in public space are better seen as indicative of changing social and political relations. In the case of Moscow, we argue that changes in the public space of Gorky Park are indicative of, as well as a result of, the new social and political relations in the city. It is, we argue, a second generation of post-socialist change.

Public space in a post-socialist city

It has been argued that transformations in public space in post-socialist cities are to a large extent driven by the imperatives of privatization and commercialization (Bodnár, 2001; Hirt, 2012; Stanilov, 2007b). Argenbright argues (1999, p. 18) that transformation is driven by global processes of commercialization and consumerism at work also in other world cities, hinting at a trend of convergence in the development of Moscow and Western European and North American cities. However, the assumptions underlying this notion of convergence can be challenged from several standpoints and need to be nuanced in accordance with the local system of social relations. As noted, neoliberalisms must be seen as locally contingent (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Regarding the post-socialist world, Hirt et al. (2013) discuss how neoliberalism, often introduced by way of “shock therapy” in the early 1990s, was actually received in the region and show a number of place-specific alterations and modifications over space and time. These included the elite manipulation and appropriation of the term within the global–local networks of the transition “industry” to purified forms that are more neoliberal than were perhaps intended by the shock therapy. The particular post-socialist legacy, nevertheless, is still prevalent in the region in the form of path-dependent institutions and power structures that shape neoliberal capitalism in the Russian context (see e.g. Badyina & Golubchikov, 2005; Golubchikov et al., 2014; Olimpieva & Pachenkov, 2013; Pagonis & Thornley, 2000; Pavlovskaya, 2013).
Echoing critique from other global contexts (e.g. Crossa, 2009; Qian, 2014), Sýkora and Bouzarovski (2012) have insisted that cities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are still in transition and therefore should not be approached from perspectives that dominate Western debates on urbanization. They argue that while the institutional transition entailing the transformation of basic political and economic principles is formally over, the processes of more fundamental societal shifts and restructuring of the urban morphology are still ongoing in CEE cities (2012, p. 45). Further, as Wiest (2012, p. 840) explains, Western-centric spatial concepts are derived from certain semantic contexts which may not pertain to the specific socioeconomic and cultural contexts of CEE cities. A number of studies explore these differences, for example concerning the relation between the “public” and the “private.” These studies show the “interiorization” and insulation of private spaces from the outside world (Makarova, 2006), that private life has “turned inwards” (Bodnár, 2001), and a disbelief in the public that has led to “privatism” as a cultural condition (Hirt, 2012). Thus, a more careful and self-reflective approach is needed when translating Western notions and concepts in post-socialist/post-Soviet contexts.

Writing about the conceptualization of urban public space in the Soviet Union, Engel (2006, p. 162) argues that not only is there no direct translation of the term in Russian but also that analogous terms (“free space,” “open space,” or “social space”) do not internalize the same meaning or import as in English. Soviet planning literature, she stresses, made no distinction between private and public space since the former did not exist de jure in the Soviet city for the reason that all land was owned by the state. Research on post-Soviet St. Petersburg reveals that the idea of “public space” in official discourse is formulated in a more neutral sense as “open urban space” which carries almost no social connotations (Zhelnina, 2012, 2014). In turn, the Moscow Town Planning Code from 2008 contains the terms “public space” and “common area” both of which designate spaces for use by the general public, yet the “use” itself is not clearly defined. Therefore, public space is perceived mainly as an aesthetic and visual concept rather than as denoting functional or political attributes enabling civic and political activities.

More recently, however, the debates about urban public space in Russian cities have become more politically charged. The mass protests that followed both the parliamentary elections in December 2011 and the presidential elections in the spring of 2012 stimulated interest in how urban public spaces are conceptualized. As a result, a “Europeanized” concept of public space gained attention as the debates included discussions on the limitations and opportunities for using urban space for public gatherings (Zhelnina, 2012, 2014). In Russia, “Europeanness” is perceived as connoting democracy, freedom, creativity, and public life that is independent from the dictates of the state (Pachenkov, 2011, p. 203). “Europeanized” urban public space is, in turn, conceptually characterized by “openness, free access for anybody, potential for interaction and communication, and at the same time freedom from control of oppressive authorities (and from the private concerns of business as well)” (Pachenkov, 2011, p. 202). These debates address the right to appropriate public spaces for political manifestations and raise issues of democratic provision for and access to public space given its role to provide room for the expression of personal and political diversity.

However, the discourse of “Europeanness” maintained by urban developers and investors often differs from this somewhat “idealized” vision and is instead selective or elitist in character, aiming to attract certain publics and structuring public behavior in definite, appropriate ways. Moreover, it has been argued that there is a confluence of interests among city officials and private business in promoting “civilized,” “Europeanized” urban public spaces that celebrate consumption (Zhelnina, 2012, 2014).
As exemplified by the case study of New Holland Island redevelopment in St. Petersburg in 2011 (Zhelnina, 2012), its exclusionary nature somewhat resembles previously mentioned projects in Western cities. Despite the fact that New Holland Island is formally open to everybody, the public is still filtered in terms of those who identify with or follow a certain lifestyle (“hipsters,” “creative class,” etc.) and who are able to afford a certain level of consumption (including cultural consumption). Thus, while the term “public space” may appeal to Western ideals of diversity, openness, and tolerance, in practice the rules and activities limit diversity thereby turning it into a space “for ‘people like us’ without ‘bydlo’” and alcohol addicts from the neighboring residential area” (Zhelnina, 2012, p. 15).

The case of Gorky Park reconstruction

Background

In the 1920s, rapid urbanization coupled with industrialization presented the new Soviet authorities with the challenge of how to inculcate norms of social behavior among Soviet workers. The subsequent “acculturation” imperative was approached partly through urban design, which was influenced by the garden city ethos of developing workers’ fitness and health, but also through the notion of “leisure culture” (Kucher, 2012). Recreational activities were considered an important means of educating and “enlightening” citizens. The political and ideological functions of Soviet public space were not only a focus for the expression of ideological values but also served the need for public recreation which was deemed an important aspect of “socialist culture that had to support the wellbeing of each socialist citizen” (Engel, 2007, p. 289). In this context, urban green areas fulfilled not only an aesthetic function, but also served to support social communication as a collective pastime for the purpose of strengthening socialism (Engel, 2006, p. 170).

In line with the Soviet acculturation imperative, the concept “park of culture and leisure” was introduced in 1921. Shaw (2011, p. 329) argues how “with its green space, modes of leisure time use, and specific activities to act as ‘cultural intermediaries’, the park of culture and leisure intended to promote the production of the “Soviet man” which among other things prioritized sobriety, literacy, and physical fitness. The first park of culture and leisure, Gorky Park in Moscow, opened in 1928 and became a role model for other parks of this type both in Moscow and in other cities in the Soviet Union: by 1973, 1,100 parks had been constructed (Shaw, 2011, p. 343). Gorky Park was envisioned as a “culture combine” that integrated mass political, educational, artistic, theatrical, sporting, and recreational activities (Kucher, 2012, p. 218). Parks of culture and leisure were accordingly equipped with sports facilities and infrastructure for cultural activities such as pavilions for reading and playing chess, theater stages, and cafés (Åkerlund & Schipperijn, 2007, p. 59).

However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and as the twin imperatives of ideological and cultural betterment faded away, Gorky Park became an arena for commercial activity (often intertwined with criminal activity). By 2010, just before the reconstruction project began, Gorky Park was described as a “kitsch monument to the Soviet era, with its odd mix of rickety American-style amusements, blaring pop music and Soviet monumental architecture” (Shaw, 2011, p. 343). At the very beginning of the 1990s, the public square in front of the main entrance to the park was often used as a site for political rallies. However, with the advent of market forces economic aspects became most salient. Entrance fees were introduced; amusement rides were installed, small
business kiosks opened and commercial advertisements appeared in the park. Like other public spaces undergoing transition, parks of culture and leisure embarked on commercial activities in order to compensate for the lack of municipal funding for maintenance purposes (Åkerlund & Schipperijn, 2007; Stanilov, 2007b).

By March 2011 when reconstruction had begun, Gorky Park “symbolized a run-down urban territory with low-quality commerce and catering, low-quality cleaning and garbage disposal services, poor-quality lawns, rundown amusement rides etc.” (Respondent G, personal communication, March 11, 2013). Sergei Kapkov, who was appointed Director of Gorky Park in March 2011, emphasizes the fact that the park was not popular among Muscovites; 80% of park visitors were non-Muscovite tourists from the Moscow region and from other regions of Russia who visited this “Disneyland for the poor” primarily because of the amusement rides and cheap entertainment (Kapkov, 2011). Criminal activity was also present in the park. Some respondents pointed out that gang wars during the 1990s made the park an unsafe place to visit, relating incidents of nighttime shootings in restaurants. Commercial activity in Gorky Park was to a great extent informal and legally questionable. The park’s property was supposed to be leased on the basis of trilateral agreements between the Department of City Property, the park, and the renter (Respondent G, personal communication, March 11, 2013). However, former tenants instead signed short-term contracts (i.e. valid only for 11 months) with only the park directorate to avoid official registration with the Department of City Property (Respondent M, personal communication, March 25, 2013). Such practice was to the detriment of quality control of services in the park. For example, the majority of the 150 amusement rides in the park did not meet the stipulated standards or norms (Respondent A, personal communication, March 21, 2013).

Clearing the ground

In September 2010, Yuri Luzhkov, who had been Moscow’s mayor for almost two decades, was dismissed by then-president Dmitry Medvedev. Luzhkov’s name was associated with corruption, extensive and controversial urban redevelopment, but also with a welfare system that gave him broad support from pensioners and recipients of social welfare allowances. His successor, Sergei Sobyanin, aimed to redirect urban development policy by deploying “city for people” and “livable city” policy discourses. In doing so, he expanded his support base by explicitly appealing to new socioeconomic groups, primarily middle-class citizens. The growing middle class had become sufficiently affluent to raise the demand for new aspects of their lifestyle such as trendiness, creativity, civility, etc. In accordance with this urban ethos, the redevelopment of public space was deemed a relatively economically effective means to create “a new environment which would be positively perceived by the citizens” (Respondent I, personal communication, March 13, 2013). Moreover, an associate at the Strelka Institute maintains that the political and social returns from public space redevelopment are extremely high since it is “a relatively quick-to-solve issue compared to, for example, traffic-jam problems” (Respondent N, personal communication, March 29, 2013). This strategy had a positive impact on the public image of the new mayor and his team as it appeared to demonstrate both the efficiency of the new Moscow government and a will to target the interests of the community. In this context, the choice of Gorky Park seems to be rather logical as it is centrally located and at the time was mainly frequented by a non-mainstream public. Under the imperative of “city for citizens” the park was deemed to have been “returned to Muscovites.” The economic viability of this project was guaranteed by the participation of Russian
billionaire Roman Abramovich and, in order to move the changes forward, Abramovich’s aide Sergei Kapkov was appointed director of the park in March 2011. The new park director aimed to have the park refurbished and ready for opening on May Day 2011. May Day is not only a public holiday but it also marks the opening day of the summer season in Moscow’s parks. Kapkov and his team explicitly aimed to attract new publics when rebranding the park as a “space for a new audience focused on the European lifestyle” (www.park-gorkogo.com). Kapkov argues that:

the park should just offer an opportunity for the people to do what they want to: equipped picnic areas, lawns to play football and frisbee, high-quality asphalt for roller skating, wireless internet for those who would like to work outdoors. (Kapkov, 2011)

Active pastimes were thus encouraged in the park by including a jogging club, facilities for Nordic walking, beach volleyball, cycling, skating, yoga, etc., and educational programs including lectures, culinary workshops, public speaking and singing courses, and plein airs (outdoor painting). In sum, the park activities were tailored primarily to suit a young middle-class audience in accordance with the new political imperative.

The first stage

In order to move the park reconstruction project forward as quickly as possible, the Strelka Institute proposed what they called the “First Wins” concept. This was designed and aimed to achieve fairly rapid improvements during the primary stage of the renovation without the need to implement radical changes to the physical environment itself (especially taking into account the park’s legally protected status as an architectural landmark). One of the first steps undertaken by the park authorities in transforming Gorky Park was the removal of informal street vendors, amusement facilities, and other unauthorized permanent constructions. According to a Strelka Institute employee, the “First Wins” concept not only implied changes to the physical environment but also a rethinking of the park’s image and its program and services (Respondent E, personal communication, April 22, 2013). The “utilitarian standardized approach” that dominated during the two decades of underfunding following the dissolution of the Soviet Union was substituted by a more sophisticated approach. This new approach was based on accessibility, functional usability, and visual design requirements as well as procurement standards defining the level and quality of services and products made available to park visitors (Respondent G, personal communication, March 11, 2013).

Interestingly, no planning or detailed research or investigations were made during the primary stage. According to a former employee at Mosgorpark, a subsidiary of Moscow Department of Culture:

Based on an elementary understanding of users’ requirements, timelines were drawn up so that the design stage could be skipped and any substantial problems in connection to that fact could be avoided, and so that the positive effect could last for a couple of years while the conceptual framework is being chosen and elaborated. (Respondent G, personal communication, March 11, 2013)

Another former associate at Mosgorpark states that Gorky Park was an experimental case because the absence of any coherent vision for the redevelopment meant that the initial measures were of a “chaotic” character (Respondent D, personal communication,
March 19, 2013). Talking about the methods used, this respondent was rather animated, claiming that the park was “restarted” using “manual mode” methods (Ru. rutnoi rezhim). This term is specific to the Russian context and refers to Vladimir Putin’s style of rule—how, during his travels around Russia, he imposes solutions to local problems which are officially the responsibility of local administration. In a somewhat similar manner, Sergei Kapkov, the park director, would stroll around the park literally pointing his finger at what should be dismantled, moved, or retained (Respondent K, personal communication, March 29, 2013). Noteworthy here is that these rather impromptu and improvised methods are, according to the current park director, Olga Zakharova, still used in the post-initial stage of Gorky Park’s reconstruction (Zakharova, 2012a). The conceptual framework for further park development prepared by London’s LDA Design consultancy was only unveiled in summer 2013.

A former Strelka Institute employee believes that although the “First Wins” start-up entailed many “commonsensical measures,” these were nonetheless “very important” (Respondent K, personal communication, March 29, 2013). Another anonymous Strelka Institute associate corroborates this idea, arguing that by “simply creating a space where people can come to relax,”—by abolishing entrance fees, permitting people to lie on the grass, dismantling amusement attractions and fast-food kiosks, installing new benches and enabling walks along the river embankments—“the city achieves a greater effect than if the park had to be closed for renovation,” and adds that it has been quite positively perceived by the people (Respondent I, personal communication, March 13, 2013).

Elaborating upon the absence of any clear predefined strategy during the primary stage of park redevelopment, the same respondent refers to the concept of “First Wins” as a self-evident form of “urban hygiene,” which facilitates alterations to the range and quality of services, activities, programs and design and, thereby, also the types of publics frequenting the park. In other words, it involved making tactical steps and short-term adjustments in order to be able to work strategically on the further conceptual development of the park. “If we were to draw up the strategy of park development beforehand, it would make no sense, since we would have missed the moment” (Respondent I, personal communication, March 13, 2013). This echoes the argument by another Strelka Institute associate who concedes that if comprehensive conceptual and design stages had been conducted first, “the city would have had to wait three years for the completion of the park renovation” (Respondent N, personal communication, March 29, 2013). The speed of change, it can be argued, was a result of the pressing political imperative. However, the emphasis on rapid change gave rise to certain short-cuts and attendant side-effects. One employee at Gorky Park cited the example of the construction of the so-called Olive Beach (see Figure 2). In this instance, planks cut from a particular type of larch tree had not been properly weathered before being varnished and were hastily installed so that the beach could be opened in time for the start of the summer season (Respondent O, personal communication, March 27, 2013).

“Reprogramming” for the public good

Although parks of culture and leisure are no longer infused with communist ideology, they still build upon Soviet park traditions and are thus considered locus points for acculturation purposes. An employee at Mosgorpark emphasizes the social function of parks of this kind:
Parks of culture and leisure find no similarities with parks in the West, where there are either theme parks (for instance, Disneyland) that have purely amusement and entertainment functions, or promenade parks (such as Central Park in New York or Hyde Park in London). Parks of culture and leisure offer a mixture of these services: attractions, catering, and promenade space. But above that, their main function is community outreach, i.e. organization of clubs, events and activities. (Respondent A, personal communication, March 21, 2013)

The park of culture and leisure is, therefore, referred to as a public good that should function for the benefit of society. Current Gorky Park director Olga Zakharova insists that “while traditional Soviet mentality is gradually changing, the new mentality can and should be formed, and this is one of the major tasks of the renovated Gorky Park as a new public space” (2012b). One of the respondents sees the renovated Gorky Park as a successor to the Soviet “machine for transforming people” but one with solely positive connotations:

People come here and consume or learn how to consume high-quality culture, services etc. and it positively affects their worldview. . . . Maybe not everyone is ready for it, and we face it here at Garage [an art space] that not everybody from the audience is prepared for contemporary art, but we try to change it, to kick-off this process [of changing people’s sentiments]. . . . Gorky Park is an arena of social change; it is an institution that really changes and educates people. (Respondent B, personal communication, March 21, 2013)

Projected as a “cultural institution,” the park is envisioned as an arena for the promotion of new European worldviews and lifestyles which are implicitly fostered and inculcated in the visiting publics. This process can be referred to as “reprogramming” and
is threefold: the adoption of a new event program, the introduction of new consumption patterns, and the implementation of new norms of propriety.

**Program for a new audience**

The new event program is closely tailored to attract new key audiences such as the so-called hipsters—progressive educated middle-class urbanites that embrace certain global trends. Hipsters as trendsetters are perceived as positively instrumental in attracting wider audiences to the park. A Strelka Institute employee claims that without targeting the most active, responsive and trend-conscious publics it would be impossible to attract others to Gorky Park (Respondent I, personal communication, March 13, 2013). Attracting a new audience was considered a key to the success of the project: “All changes in Gorky Park are temporary, but this entails further change of the audience, its sentiment; a paradigm shift” (Respondent N, personal communication, March 29, 2013). Sergei Kapkov, the former park director, in turn maintains that his task had been to turn the park into an interesting, safe and clean place as a precondition for attracting “proactive people” (2011). The event program now includes the participation of contemporary artists and popular music groups. Creative activities have been introduced including lectures, workshops, and plein airs. “A great deal of what is happening in the park is free of charge and this is the city’s participation in the formation of cultural politics. . . . Thereby people get used to something good” (Respondent M, personal communication, March 25, 2013). The provision of “genteel” and sophisticated services and activities such as exhibitions of contemporary art, a pétanque café, or an arty ice-rink suggests a certain elitism in the new park’s image. Using the example of the ice-rink, one of the respondents claims that sports carried out in the park (which during the Soviet era had been for the masses) have now become exclusive (Respondent O, personal communication, March 27, 2013). Gorky Park drew further attention, in line with the trend of cultural consumption, when the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture recently relocated there. Interestingly, one of the Center’s employees claims “it is not only the creative class or so-called hipsters that visit Garage; pensioners are another important category (accounting for up to 50% of visitors) since they have plenty of free time and are entitled to free admission” (Respondent J, personal communication, March 21, 2013).

The reconstruction of Gorky Park has yielded a substantial increase in park attendance. Whereas 3.7 million entrance tickets were sold during the whole of 2010, the park received 5 million visitors during the 2011 summer season alone (May 1 to October 1) and a further 3 million visitors in the subsequent winter season (Strelka Institute . . . 2012: 62). According to a Mosgorpark associate, “the public comes to the park not only at the weekends but also during weekdays and the average visit duration increased from 1–2 hours to 3–5 hours, that is, the park becomes a place to stay, which is of vital importance” (Respondent A, personal communication, March 21, 2013). Now that Gorky Park has become one of Moscow’s hotspots, its director says the park is becoming overcrowded with the daily number of visitors during weekends and holidays reaching 100,000 (Zakharova, 2012a).

Current Gorky Park director Olga Zakharova admits that the park’s target audience changed significantly after the reconstruction, particularly with the influx of young progressive people for whom the renovated park is “the space of freedom” (2012b). However, she believes that middle-aged and elderly visitors do not now feel marginalized in the park. To support this claim she raises the example of the diverse publics that frequent the ballroom dancing at Pushkinskaya Embankment. Apart from an arguably unequal age-group distribution among park visitors, a certain narrowing-down of park visitors in regard to social strata is evident due to the up-scaling of the park as a result of its renovation. The proclaimed
orientation toward European standards and examples fashioned the park into a trendy and hip place, which to a certain extent put off former park frequenters—mainly low-income families. Interestingly, low-income visitors are often attributed with low cultural levels implying that their consumption patterns are no longer satisfied in the renovated Gorky Park. According to a Gorky Park employee, the new atmosphere in the park has attracted people with “healthier preferences in leisure” (Respondent O, personal communication, March 27, 2013). In turn, a Moscow Department of Culture associate argues that “people with lower income do not find the park an attractive place to visit since it no longer provides the desired services which in most cases are low taste junk food stalls and cheap beer stands” (Respondent M, personal communication, March 25, 2013). Olga Zakharova, the park director, in turn acknowledges that the park has become both less interesting and inviting for people with cultural demands that differ from those held by the desired target publics. However, she adds that this does not equate to a narrowing of the park’s audience as “well-mannered, cultured and educated people are by no means a narrow audience” (Zakharova, 2012b). Another respondent also insists that no one is really excluded from Gorky Park; on the contrary, it is believed that the spectrum of visitors has widened since active young and middle-aged people have started frequenting a park that they previously avoided (Respondent C, personal communication, March 28, 2013).

**New consumption patterns**

In terms of new consumption patterns in the park, a theme that permeated a range of interviews pertained to how the provision of services affects the quality of the urban environment. One of the main imperatives of the new park directorate was to improve the aesthetic qualities of the park environment. According to one of the independent informants this principally concerned the removal of elements of what was termed “philistine Soviet life,” that is, beer stalls, cheap barbecue restaurants, and decrepit attractions. The respondent added that “All this was the entertainment for an unsophisticated low-taste public, for a specific social group,” implying low-income visitors (Respondent Q, personal communication, March 21, 2013). Hence, by changing the range of services and activities the park can regulate its audience even if there is no entrance fee.

According to an associate at the Strelka Institute, the “environment is programmable, and consumption is programmable, and the public is programmed by the environment itself; therefore, the changes [in Gorky Park] are intended to form the specific process of consumption and relevant community” (Respondent N, personal communication, March 29, 2013). Hence, the change in public catering and leisure activities brings about the change in the audience (see Figure 3). Moreover, according to Moscow’s strategic program “Leisure and Tourism Development 2012–2016,” the share of the city parks’ extra-budgetary revenues is forecast to increase from 8% in 2010 to 85% by 2016, while the number of services is expected to increase fourfold. In line with this rationale, in July 2011 Gorky Park was the first park to receive the status of a “State autonomous cultural institution of Moscow,” which means the park has gained significantly more operational freedom. A number of other parks followed suit. Their property can now be leased on the basis of concessions between the park and the operator or, alternatively, operated independently by the park with all generated income remaining at the park’s own disposal. Formally, leased or independent operations in the parks have to be run in accordance with both the park charter and the list of permitted business activities outlined by Mosgorpark. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that during the early stages of redevelopment, the park director Sergei Kapkov allowed entrepreneurs to operate in the park without having organized a proper tender process. Decisions were simply guided by “commonsensical” understandings of what was considered beneficial for the park.
ranging from small vending machines (see Figure 4a and b) to larger commercial operations and events. Two pertinent examples are the La Boule pétanque café and the PUMA Social Club sports ground (see Figure 5), both of which turned out to be very popular among park visitors (Respondent K, personal communication, March 29, 2013). In order to meet the new aims and image of the park, private investors were thus contracted to develop, form, and sponsor this type of new service infrastructure. Another example of this type of private entrepreneurial “acupuncture intervention,” as one of the park designers put it, is the Nike+ jogging club which, like the PUMA Social Club, also has free admission. Commenting on the activity program in the park, Kapkov’s successor Zakharova states that the park might lease its territory and facilities to private sponsors, but that any decision to do so will be guided by the “ideological relevance” of such events. By this she means whether or not they conform to the desired image of the park; she cites the example of the Faces & Laces festival which she describes as “street art, young designers, the right atmosphere” (2012a).

In essence, the idea of the public good is promulgated in such a way that it equates the public’s interests with the park’s interests, with the latter being the promotion of the “right” product for the “right” publics. In this regard, sponsored infrastructure is part of the public good of the park as its usage is free of charge, even if a name or logo is attached. Park design and programming are thereby linked with the interests of business, and this in turn means that the public becomes connected with commerce and consumption.

A new propriety regime
The adoption of new rules of propriety is another tool that is used to achieve and maintain the desired quality standards of culture and leisure in the park. Social order is to be
achieved through policing, which is considered to be beneficial for adjusting the practices of the audiences that had frequented the park before its reconstruction.

To ensure well-functioning public space an operator is needed that takes care of the territory, and also receives income from it. Then there is an order, then the space belongs to a decent audience, and even a potentially aggressive contingent can become one. If there is no operator, homeless or security guards become “masters” of such a space. (Respondent N, personal communication, March 29, 2013)
In accordance with the initial vision of a “park for everybody,” a Strelka Institute employee mentions the so-called “zero access threshold” notion, which means that one can belong to any social group and still be welcome in the park, as long as one behaves and follows the “rules of conduct” (Respondent I, personal communication, March 13, 2013). Noteworthy in this regard is that the park demonstrates what can be termed a selective tolerance. For example, one associate of the Moscow Department of Culture related:

[I]t is okay if one comes to the park with a bottle of wine and lies down on the grass to relax, but not if one comes with a bottle of beer and sits on the bench; in this case the security guards will have to stop this. (Respondent M, personal communication, March 25, 2013)

The respondent admits that the consumption of beer and strong spirits is prohibited in the park, but maintains that “it is okay to bring ‘bourgeois’ wine” (Respondent M, personal communication, March 25, 2013). In this regard, policing is carried out depending on the perceived level of civility and the degree to which the public performs in accordance with the espoused “Europeanness,” thus differentiating between “productive” and “destructive” drinking in urban public spaces—with beer signifying the latter (cf. Bylund & Byerley, 2014; Dixon et al., 2006).

When discussing the subject of the “reprogramming” of the park, one of the respondents admits that this has led to the exclusion of certain social groups, but thinks it is a normal practice:

Rules are implemented that “re-program” the audience; for example, one can meet here categories of people, so to say, which were impossible to be seen a few years ago: body-builders just like in Miami or Los Angeles, some freaks; girls that look like anime characters and who understand that here they would not be beaten up or harassed. Here in Gorky Park all these people feel comfortable, so I would say that a comfortable, tolerant broad spectrum of audiences is present here. (Respondent B, personal communication, March 21, 2013)

The same informant adds that these new rules of propriety are implemented softly—“based on mutual respect and tolerance”—which means that the park tries to be open-minded toward all needs and to communicate with all respective interested parties, including those who had frequented the park prior to the reconstruction. For example, a number of respondents mention the Paratroopers’ Day celebrations that traditionally take place in Gorky Park every August. One of the respondents insists that alcohol-free “programming” helped to “calm down” this event which was previously characterized by substantial alcohol consumption (Respondent B, personal communication, March 21, 2013; see also Ostrogorsky, 2011). Another respondent notes that this occasion was “reinvented” by organizing special activities (e.g., putting up banners with greetings, distributing free watermelons) thereby showing paratroopers that they are welcome in the park (Respondent E, personal communication, April 22, 2013).

In sum, the public space of Gorky Park is thus carefully planned, scripted, and controlled in order to promote specific types of consumption, admissible norms of behavior, and mediated public sociality—all according to the “Europeanization” discourse. This discourse, while appealing to Western ideals of openness, tolerance and “genteel” lifestyle, implies in fact a “purification” of public space affecting publics deemed as inappropriate or unacceptable (cf. Dixon et al., 2006). This can also be linked with the notion of “publicity without democracy” as used by Madden (2010) to denote how park design and programming can enable both increased accessibility and increased
control of undesirable publics. It should also be noted that the mass protests that followed parliamentary elections in December 2011, and especially the Occupy movement following presidential elections in May 2012, bypassed Gorky Park; these mobilizations were centered in other public spaces in Moscow such as Bolotnaya Square and Chistoprudny Boulevard. The case of Gorky Park reconstruction moreover seemingly echoes the New Holland Island redevelopment in St. Petersburg in 2011, a project that is also sponsored by Roman Abramovich. Zhelnina (2012, 2014) highlights how an up-scaling of this formally open urban space was deployed to foster a “civilized,” “Europeanized” lifestyle and types of consumption (including cultural consumption) that are inaccessible to non-mainstream publics.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have analyzed the recent transformations of public space in Moscow, mirrored through the case of the reconstruction of Gorky Park begun in 2011. Theories pertaining to public space from both the Western and Eastern literatures have been utilized as a framework for the in-depth case study. This study demonstrates that conceptions of the public and of public space have been discursively reworked in accordance with the imperatives of the project managers. The reworked conceptions have entailed both the introduction of new consumption-oriented publics who embrace a European lifestyle and the implicit eviction of previously existing publics who are now deemed no longer desirable in Gorky Park. The new “public space” of Gorky Park is both safe and depoliticized whilst being carefully planned, controlled, and ordered. This urban “public space” is characterized by the detailed mediation of public life and interaction by means of “reprogramming” which principally means enforced inscription of the content according to the prevailing discourses on what constitutes a public good. In essence, the renovated Gorky Park is a socially divisive place which sorts publics according to preconceived notions on what constitutes admissible and inadmissible behavior, activity, and propriety.

At first glance the story of Gorky Park reconstruction might suggest that this previously semi-public space was transformed into a public space (by cancelling entrance fees) and hence made amenable to being socialized by a wider audience. In this context, the “second generation” of public space transformations in post-Soviet Moscow which entails its re-appropriation by Muscovites, shows a somewhat reverse pattern compared to the “first generation” with its unabashed privatization and commercialization. However, in the second generation of changes it is the envisioning of the public that has changed in accordance with the social and economic imperatives of the reconstruction. In the case of Gorky Park, the previously dominant low-income publics were considered to be unrepresentative of the community and were, therefore, excluded from the new conception of the public promoted by the newly appointed City Hall. This new conception was accordingly recast around the idea of “returning the park to the citizens,” that is, mainly in favor of the middle-class Moscow citizens who were previously absent from this place. The vision of the audience of the renovated park was thus reworked in regard to the discourses on what are considered acceptable/inacceptable (Dixon et al., 2006), appropriate/inappropriate (Mitchell, 1995), and desirable/undesirable (Madden, 2010) publics.

The transformation of Gorky Park was undoubtedly a top-down process initiated by City Hall coupled with generous financial investments. However, the very idea of creating a public space driven by the confluence of political resolve and finance can be challenged from the standpoint that conceives of public space as necessarily being created by citizens, that is, in a bottom-up manner. The renovated Gorky Park should
also be referred to as a space of culture and leisure consumption. In this context, the Soviet park tradition was reinvented in order to match the modern demands of society and interested public and private parties. In line with Madden’s (2010) arguments, the park is touted as a public good while the idea of public good itself is discursively reworked so that consumption is envisioned as an integral part. What is interesting in this respect is also that not only are services and activities now subject to consumption but so too is the atmosphere that the renewed park offers to its visitors—ultimately, the ability to associate with the “creative,” “hip,” “cultured” Europeanized lifestyle that is promoted in Gorky Park, to be among “the people like us” (cf. Zhelnina, 2012, 2014).

The renovated Gorky Park which celebrates “civilized” and “cultured” consumerism is essentially a product of neoliberal market forces channeled through the discourses of powerful players such as those at City Hall. In this regard, public spaces in Moscow and, perhaps, also other post-socialist cities exhibit a convergence with their Western counterparts. It is, however, necessary to acknowledge the significance of the local context in this discursive work. Of particular importance in this regard are the different meanings and content attributed to “public space,” “open urban space,” and analogous concepts in Western and Russian contexts, respectively, as well as between various groups in Moscow itself—which, in a way, thus renders this space a contested and thus “public” character.

In the meantime, Gorky Park continues its acculturation project, building yet a new kind of man.

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Note

1. Pejorative, literally “cattle,” used to describe people perceived to be uncultured and/or badly behaved.

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