



Palace Square, St Petersburg

‘AN EMPTY SPACE CREATES A RICHLY FILLED TIME’

INTRODUCTION

A wide open space, a big city-centre square. When you stand in the middle of it the wind lashes ruthlessly at your face. Surrounding you are buildings, huge things of granite and concrete on a strict axial plan, governmental offices no doubt. You are probably being watched — your presence registered by a bored CCTV operative nursing a coffee in a nearby office — but you know that just over twenty years ago you might have been watched instead by a secret police force. Which can give you a frisson, if that kind of thing is to your taste. The square itself has some movement in it — people are smoking under some awnings in their lunch break, someone else is begging, the kiosks of ‘informal’ commerce have a bustle around them. If you’re in the former East Germany or the former Soviet Union, there’s also something more inanimate — an exhortative statue of Marx or Lenin may be keeping you company, or gesturing aggressively at you for your sloth. Elsewhere, the punctuation is provided by more traditional monuments — a warlord, a Corinthian column, a bewhiskered general. But the feeling of immense, unused space still endures, and that’s the source of that wind, the biting wind that sooner or later will force you back indoors. Oh the square is interesting, for sure, a three-dimensional survivor from a dead age, a museum piece. But it’s a mistake, nonetheless. You certainly couldn’t *learn* anything from it.

There are few things in urbanism today so unfashionable as that wide open sense of space. Looking round the subjects of this text — at the likes of Berlin-Alexanderplatz, Warsaw's Plac Defilad, Katowice's Rynek — the first response of most contemporary urban planners would be a feeling of disgust, followed by thoughts as to possible amelioration. What are we to do with this disaster? On this, traditionalists and modernists can unite. Whichever form it takes, the square will exemplify that principle at its apparent worst — the classical principle of the axis, the formal composition with everything in its right place, nothing left to chance, or the modernist principle, now usually disavowed (though often deployed in other contexts), of the object in space. In both instances, the function is the same: to frame, to create distance, to conjure cheap games with scale and perception. No planner — whether a New Urbanist, one of those Disney-sponsored enthusiasts for the eighteenth century, or a piazza-fixated urbanist of a more high-tech stripe — would want anything to do with these giant, authoritarian creations. But is this just aesthetics, or does their hostility have any specifically political justification? Could it be the case that the uncanny uselessness of space potentially has certain subversive uses? Could it even be that these empty spaces are in fact more genuinely suited to public action and militancy than the overdetermined, 'vibrant' bustle of neoliberalism?

To answer these questions, we need to fix what sort of spaces these are, and what objects they contain. Let's take a modernist example, one easily disassociated from any direct affiliation with Sovietism: the Kulturforum in the former West Berlin. Here we have first of all a series of architecturally extremely highly wrought products: the insular, finely detailed, obsessive modernist classicism of Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie, whose various plinths,

platforms and columns seem to encourage supplication, placing the building at an elevated remove from its surroundings; then a marooned neo-Gothic church, a mildly modernist café and, facing this, three buildings whose design was led by Hans Scharoun — the Philharmonie, Chamber Music Hall and State Library. Scharoun's attention-grabbing, demonstrative, expressionist structures sit at the corner of a vague expanse whose indeterminacy draws attention to the drama of the architecture, but does little to make the area feel like a social space. The vague, temporary feel is increased by the gravel paving. Surely it is only the prestige of the buildings, and of the exalted names of great Weimar Republic modernists like Mies and Scharoun, that has stopped planners from filling up the space with malls, housing and kiosks. As it is, the Kulturforum remains one of those last places in the contemporary city where you can still get a blast of the bracing air that once accompanied modernist city planning.

The lustrous emptiness, coldness and paranoia of this new kind of space is fervently romanticised in John Foxx's sweeping 1980 hymn to the modernist public square, 'Plaza': 'On the Plaza / We're dancing slowly, lit like photographs ... / Across the Plaza / The lounge is occupied by seminars ... / Down escalators, come to the sea view / Behind all the smoked glass no-one sees you ... / I remember your face / From some shattered windscreen'. It gets to the heart of what makes the plaza, and the Kulturforum, so interesting, and so unlike the tamed urban congestion of contemporary planning — its paradoxical official *otherness*, its sense of uselessness and formalism, its enjoyment of the sinister. The Kulturforum was once adjacent to the genuine wastes of the 'death strip', the lethal empty space where border guards shot at anyone trying to escape East Germany. To see what follows this approach to urban space, we need only take a short

walk to the place that now fills that stretch of death strip — the new Potsdamer Platz.

An interesting urban mistake in its own right, Potsdamer Platz is an attempt to conjure up the metropolitan ‘culture of congestion’ of interwar Berlin, to recreate a busy commercial/traffic intersection (this was the location of Germany’s first traffic lights) in the spot where by 1989 there was only windswept wasteland. The buildings, especially those by Hans Kollhoff, are finely detailed, expensive reinterpretations of Weimar-era expressionism, while the surrounding malls and cinemas try to programme bustle, refuse to let space fall empty. Potsdamer Platz strains every sinew to create movement, activity, mix of uses; that its ultimate impression is one of great coldness, seldom inspiring affection, is an enduring irony. The difference between its strained attempt at metropolitanism and the Kulturforum’s quiet is fascinating; but the politics of this are more complicated than they may at first seem.

At this point, a brief prehistory of these showpiece squares is in order. If it comes from anywhere in particular, the post-war urban plaza emerges from a peculiar and often disavowed modernisation of both Prussian militaristic planning and the super-European programmatic plan of Tsarist St Petersburg, which was, it should not be forgotten, an eighteenth-century Dubai — a geographically improbable project in a brutally hostile climate constructed on the orders of an absolute monarchy by the labour of serfs. Its most famous architects, Rastrelli, Rossi et al, were stars from abroad. When these Italians came to designing on this lethal, pestilent marsh in the Gulf of Finland, they took the formal devices of classicism and the baroque and pushed them to unheard of extremes. The cities of Italy or France still had an existing medieval bustle to remove before they could fit the planners’ mathematical prescriptions; so too did

Moscow, where Red Square's salutary enormousness gave way disappointingly to a tangle of medieval alleys. In St Petersburg no such impediment existed. Accordingly, the salient feature of the city is a boulevard of still-astonishing width and expanse, Nevsky Prospekt, leading to a Palace Square that is similarly unbelievable in its sheer size and flatness. It's as if the steppe outside this city had to be recreated at its core. Its buildings — Carlo Rossi's General Staff, for instance, with its colossal archway-entrance framing the Winter Palace — are on an outrageous scale. From here as far as the eye can see stretch buildings of an almost-uniform height, except for those considered worthy of superelevation: the golden dome of St Isaac's Cathedral, or the cruel spire of the Admiralty, the origin of a thousand Stalinist towers two centuries hence.

This is, in theory at least, an authoritarian form of urbanism. Search 'Nevsky Prospekt' on Google Images and one thing you will most certainly find is a photograph of the 'July Days' in 1917, when the Provisional Government shot at a workers' demonstration. People are fleeing across the oversized road, with no means of self-defence, no alleys to hide in, nowhere to build their barricades. And yet, when these same workers organised the Military-Revolutionary Committee three months later, they consciously turned the city's axial planning against itself, channelling power from the boulevard to the Winter Palace. For the next few years that Palace Square, the centre of the Communist International, became the focus of unprecedented street festivals, as the oppressed of Petrograd celebrated their new power. Futurists decorated those columns and those axial office blocks with instant architectures that disappeared as soon as the festivals were over. What is curious is that later communist governments replaced this new form of ad-hoc urbanism with one that directly aped the old St Petersburg.

In East Berlin, in Warsaw, in Kiev, in dozens of cities east of the Elbe from Sverdlovsk to Belgrade, the salient features of St Petersburg — the long, wide boulevard, the gigantic square — were invariably reproduced in some form or another, only bigger, grander and more overwhelming than ever before. Berlin had its own precedents, Prussian planning being almost as militaristically monumental as Peter the Great's. The most obvious example is the parade ground-cum-boulevard that is Unter den Linden, though its width and length are paltry by Tsarist standards. Much more convincing than Unter den Linden, or for that matter the fumbling objects-in-space of the Kulturforum, is the route from the Karl-Marx-Allee into the Alexanderplatz. As local scorn has it, 'the steppe starts here'. These are the poles of the East European square, between Prussianism and Tsarism, or later, more horrifyingly, between Stalinism and Nazism.

So why, other than sheer morbidity, would anyone want to spend their time in such places, still less make apologies for them? Current urban planning orthodoxy holds that the problem with these spaces is that they are wholly a product of authoritarianism — whether that of the Kaisers, the Tsars, or the General Secretaries. As far as it goes, this is true. They are the product of extreme centralisation, the central pivot of urban and architectural ensembles explicitly designed to instil a cowed respect for power. They are expressly designed for the mass spectacles of dictatorship, for the waving of banners, for the synchronised movements of marshalled bodies. Yet we should not forget how much those spectacles borrowed from the genuine, democratic urban spectacles of revolutionary workers' movements — the early experiments in Palace Square in Petrograd, for instance, were adopted to the letter, if not in spirit, by later 'socialist' regimes. Besides, with capitalism, we should always be very careful what we wish for. It can very easily contain, even excel at, decentralisation,

disurbanism and withdrawal from the showpiece, authoritarian urban space — it has been doing so for decades. But the result is that power now resides in the exurban business park or the wholly immaterial computerised network as much as (if not more than) the central square. That's not to say that the plaza has no political power left in it. Quite the contrary.

Two remodellings of large urban squares offer some hints that the elimination of empty space has a politicised meaning. The ready-to-be-filled space of Alexanderplatz, irrespective of its top-down provenance, was the site where mass demonstrations brought down the Honecker government. It was as if the phantom public that the mass spectacles simulated had suddenly been brought to life, something no doubt rather terrifying for the DDR leadership. Over the last two decades, several plans have been visited upon Alexanderplatz, ostensibly to 'solve' the problem of its empty, allegedly unused and unusable (or more to the point, non-profit-making) space. In one of them, Potsdamer Platz architect Hans Kollhoff was asked to produce plans for skyscrapers to fill the emptiness. This plan was never officially abandoned, but instead something clumsier and more incremental happened to much the same effect, albeit without Kollhoff's formal discipline. The DDR futurism of the Platz's department store was clad in sandstone, and a series of neo-Prussian masonry-clad retail buildings have been scattered around at random: classical kitsch next to space-age kitsch. The effect is to make the place *busy* — to keep it shopping, to keep it consuming, rather than loitering in an unproductive and potentially politically threatening manner.

This can be seen even more abruptly and dramatically in the remodelling of Maidan Nezalezhnosti, in the Ukrainian capital, Kiev. This square was variously known as Soviet Square, Kalinin Square and

Square of the October Revolution before being given its current name, using a Ukrainian term derived from the Persian for public square, *Maydan*. It focuses itself on a steep hill (Kiev is so replete in natural topography that the city feels almost out of place here) upon which was placed the Hotel Moskva, originally intended as a neobaroque behemoth of a skyscraper on the model of Lev Rudnev's Moscow State University or Warsaw Palace of Culture and Science. It was never completed to the original designs, so is a strange, stripped Stalin skyscraper, still with the usual gigantism and axuality but without ornament or spire. On the other side are a series of miniature towers, which also veer from full-on high-budget Stalinist opulence to something more minimal. All this remains, although the once-compulsory statue of Lenin is absent. This typical, if reduced beaux-arts Stalinist plaza (which connects to the obligatory vast boulevard, the Kreshchatyk) was the centre of a series of protests around 2000 called 'Ukraine without Kuchma', against the neoliberal-populist strongman who had been president since independence. The protesters were obstructed by the reconstruction of the square to the point where they could barely use it as a site of protest.

The result, unveiled by Kuchma in 2001, is largely a by-product of Globus, an underground shopping mall carved out of a pedestrian underpass. Its mirrorglass domes protrude onto the square in several places, where fountains and benches once were. Facing the former Hotel Moskva (now 'Ukrainia', of course) is an even bigger, axial extension of these mirrorglass structures, lined up with the hotel; billboards for the Orthodox church are placed at each end. But that's only the half of it. What really dominates the remodelled space is a series of neobaroque objets d'art — Rastrelli via Rudnev via Végas. These fibreglass and gold structures — Corinthian columns, triumphal arches — are examples of an unmistakeable but seldom-investigated

neo-Stalinist style that is extremely prevalent east of Poland: take the Cossack or Mother Ukraine off the plinth and plonk a Worker or Mother Russia in its place and you have exactly the sort of structure that would have been there fifty years ago. Officially, as with Alexanderplatz, this is to make the space more festive, more jolly, less bleak; but the aim to deter protest on this open space seemed at least implicit. Yet somehow, in winter 2004, a tent city was squeezed onto the newly congested square and Maidan Nezalezhnosti became the site of the ‘Orange Revolution’ that brought down Kuchma’s successor, ballot-rigger and current freely elected Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich. And protests do continue here, although demonstrations on the square itself were briefly banned after Yanukovich’s re-election. The attempt to tame the space’s possibilities for political organisation failed, at least on some level; the hope of the authorities may be that sooner or later the consuming rather than protesting public will become dominant.

So it is instructive indeed that the greatest revolution for several decades — the Egyptian people’s overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, and the continued demonstrations that have occupied the space ever since — has been centred on Cairo’s Midan at-Tahrir. This ‘Liberation Square’, largely constructed under Nasser, is a classic piece of Soviet-style socialist realist planning, even to the point where its most prominent government building, the aggressive ziggurat of the Mogamma, was a ‘gift from the Soviet Union’. It is exactly the hugeness and emptiness of this square, and its proximity to a centre of genuine power, that has made it such a suitable place for insurrection, for being appropriated by the public in its own interest. It is also, it must be noted, the source of an enduring misapprehension that any given square can be ‘turned into Tahrir Square’, but a comparison with a less centralised urbanism makes clear exactly how

useful the space of the square itself has been. As the revolts across the Arab world have spread, the continuing public occupation of Cairo's Soviet centrism stands in glaring contrast to, say, the difficulty of organising in an exurban, non-planned, centreless space like Bahrain. When we condemn the empty space, we should bear in mind that emptiness is often in the eye of capital and power, and that the simulation of consumerist bustle isn't much better than the still monumentalism of dictatorship.

This text forms part of a longer work entitled *Really Existing Urbanism*, an itemised gazetteer of Soviet and post-Soviet urbanism, of cities that for desperate want of a better term could be described as 'post-communist'. The former Soviet Union and its former western 'buffer zone' are the territory of this book. The title draws a continued link, scandalous as it may seem to some, not just between countries that no longer see themselves as part of a (coerced) 'socialist camp', but also between the system of ideological legitimisation they once had and the system they have now. Geographically, this may seem dubious enough. These countries might once have had their own east-EU in the form of Comecon, but there is very little in the way of direct connections between them anymore, especially past the Schengen zone. Kaliningrad or Minsk may be as close to Warsaw as Edinburgh or Newcastle are to London, but the border is far from permeable. Politically, too, the conflation of these places may seem perverse, twenty-two years after 1989, akin to their leaders and business chiefs' claims that only 'remnants of the socialist system' impede their march into the neoliberal future. Yet they all retain something in common: an all-pervasive sense of broken-down *realism*. 'Really existing socialism' was the term introduced in the 70s to describe the de facto system in the Eastern Bloc. It was a deliberately deflating term, as if to mark itself against an imagined

socialism that might have had some room for democracy and freedom of speech; it forcibly declared that the socialist dream was over, indicating that its claims to ‘socialism’, as conceived elsewhere, were never worth taking seriously. The post-1989 system also enforces a ‘realism’ that prohibits alternatives; if, before, October 1917 was the last permissible revolution, now November 1989 is the last word. That this prohibition continues to work despite the obvious systemic crisis of neoliberal capitalism is especially tragic.

A similar function is performed by a phrase which is spoken all the time in this post-Soviet territory — the longing to become ‘a normal country’. The meaning of this on one level is clear enough. It means wanting to be free of posturing, populist governments (Hungary’s Fidesz, Law and Justice in Poland, among others), to be free of a legacy of poverty and ‘backwardness’, to no longer be the site of experiments, to escape from the weight of the past — to be more like the wealthy and residually social democratic nations of Western Europe, in short. But aside from the warped idea of what constitutes ‘normality’ (it would be news to most of the world that the affluence of France, Germany or Scandinavia are ‘normal’), what is striking about this rhetoric is its closeness to that of late Sovietism itself. ‘Normalisation’ was the watchword of the regimes of the 1970s and 80s, after the 1968 Prague Spring was crushed by Warsaw Pact tanks. Normalisation was technocratic, officially optimistic. Normalisation didn’t torture people, by and large; normalisation had no gulags, no dungeons, although it certainly had a very active secret police. Normalisation favoured the coerced recantation rather than the firing squad. Its aim was to depoliticise, to foreclose the brief possibility that socialism might have met democracy and intensified it. Normalisation promoted family values, promoted patriotism, calm, consumerism, staying in and watching telly. It is a short step

from normalisation to ‘there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families’ — either way, There Is No Alternative. And in most post-Soviet countries, there isn’t. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the communist parties (usually renamed with a combination of ‘Left’, ‘Democratic’ and ‘Socialist’) won resounding electoral victories across the region, only to embrace neoliberalism with all the zeal of the recent convert. With the organised left’s abdication, electoral politics here veers between a protectionist, patriotic and reactionary right and a socially mildly permissive but economically harshly neoliberal right, each equally frightening in its own way. The ‘Colour Revolutions’ of the mid-2000s had some laudable effects — a freer press, a culture of protest — but their direct outcome was merely to change the guard at the top from pro-Russian populists to pro-US/EU neoliberals, both of them sharing a penchant for corruption and money-making. There are live movements below the surface, but it remains a hard place for an optimist.

Really Existing Urbanism charts the space of what Mark Fisher calls ‘capitalist realism’ as it meets the former spaces of ‘socialist realism’. It registers the effects on Soviet space of two decades of a new normalisation and attempts to look a demonised landscape in the face, often finding it both more beautiful and more horrible than conventional wisdom might allow. It finds cities as they are, not as what we would want them to be. Depoliticised spaces full of harsh inequalities, strict social divides, grinding poverty and frequently hideous architecture. It also finds them full of layer upon layer of meaning, with unavoidable spatial and physical reminders that there were once alternatives, and there could still be. This part of the work, *Across the Plaza*, is centred on the spaces where the Soviet system was born, in a successful socialist revolution, which became the ceremonial spaces where the regimes that took the name ‘socialist’

displayed themselves; which were in turn the spaces where those regimes were brought down, where sometimes the regimes that followed them were brought down, and where something new could still take shape.

These spaces, with their sweeping scale, their now-inconceivable wastage of potentially very lucrative land values, are not capitalist spaces. That does not necessarily make them socialist spaces. Peter the Great also acted without the impediment of the market, capitalist relations of production or any need to take into account the needs of landowners, speculators or businesses, as Nevsky Prospekt and the Palace Square attest. That didn't make him a communist. Neither did the absence of these relations make the Soviet regimes communist in any positive sense of the term. At the same time, the dreamlike ambience of these spaces provides an attraction that is a counter to the chaotic pile-up of the capitalist streetscape. They constitute an experiment in redeveloping space according to the needs of human rather than exchange value, however 'inhuman' the results may seem — a glimpse, at times, of what we could do with cities when money is no longer a factor. The results can sometimes be merely compellingly horrible, purely cautionary; but many remain ambiguous spaces, spaces nobody is quite sure what to do with. Contestable spaces. Their exploration here will be followed by similarly itemised gazetteers on other components of really existing urbanism — the boulevard, the estate, the historical reconstruction, the social condenser, the post-industrial site, the skyline, the public transport network, the improvisation and the memorial. The eventual effect should be to build up a fragmentary, discontinuous picture of a fragmentary, discontinuous landscape.

Here, each of the squares is selected according to its particular properties, each an exemplar of a certain facet to the Sovietist

square. The first, Alexanderplatz, is an absolutely archetypal post-Stalinist Soviet square — modernist in its styling but still utterly monumental — which has been subject to intensive remodelling in recent years. We move from there to the former Dzherzhinsky Square in Kharkov, Ukraine, the first major planned square in the USSR and hence a good place to try to uncover its original intentions. This is followed by Plac Defilad in Warsaw, a sort of failed square, in theory the EU's largest, in practice a vast and dilapidated car park; then we go to the non-aligned urbanism of the former Revolution Square in Ljubljana, an attempt to design small-town *Gemeinschaft* in Łódź, and a sort of square-in-waiting at the centre of Silesia's vast industrial conurbation. The square's darker side is represented by an enduringly unnerving square in Kiev and a space in Moscow which feels like the afterthought to enthusiastic traffic engineering. We end with Potsdamer Platz, a space which is clearly a direct attempt to repudiate the likes of Alexanderplatz, replacing them with a different form of urban focal point altogether. This survey shows the square in its multivalence, both architectural and social. All have in common vast size and 'socialist' provenance, but their very different structure and very different fate suggest that we dismiss the plaza at our peril.

Given that I came to this territory from northwestern Europe — from the home of 'normality' and neoliberalism itself — this text is completely and irredeemably an outsider's perspective. I can't speak the language(s), I can't read the adverts, I only know the context from sources in translation, and I can only just buy a metro token or a drink without assistance. It would have been completely impossible to write any of this without the assistance, company, translations, perspectives and arguments of Agata Pyzik. For this she has my love and gratitude. She bears no responsibility, however, for whatever mistakes it contains or whatever sensibilities it offends.



Marx-Engels Forum looking towards Alexanderplatz, Berlin

THE STEPPE STARTS HERE

ALEXANDERPLATZ, BERLIN

If there is an archetypal Soviet-style square in Europe, it may be Alexanderplatz. Other contenders are either components of boulevards rather than squares in themselves, or they are pre-revolutionary in derivation (Red Square, most obviously). If we begin here, with a pure archetype, we can see how the others relate to it and how our final example dissents from it altogether.

Berlin-Alexanderplatz's reputation already precedes it, thanks to novelist Alfred Döblin and filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Its reputation is also strictly speaking inaccurate. The place that Döblin wrote of in 1928 was slated to be obliterated then, and by the time Fassbinder filmed it in 1980, it long since had been, to the point where location shots in the Alexanderplatz itself were completely impossible. Fassbinder's TV series is a succession of interiors — a seedy rented room in one of Berlin's notorious *Mietskaserne* ('rental barracks'), U-Bahn stations lined with glazed tiles, canvassing Nazis and communists, and peeling political posters. Neon shop signs just outside are all we ever see of 'Alex' itself, which makes it all the more striking how clear a picture there is of this absence. The name itself sounds ineffably romantic to a certain kind of English ear. And though the landscape doesn't even slightly resemble the one that Fassbinder's characters traversed, that ear creates a certain mental picture. *East Berlin*. The Wall. The Cold War. Post-punk. David

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