

**AESTHETIC POLITICS IN SAINT PETERSBURG:  
SKYLINE AT THE HEART OF POLITICAL OPPOSITION**

*An NCEEER Working Paper by*

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## **Executive Summary**

This working paper focuses on the plans to construct a skyscraper in St Petersburg, Russia, known originally as Gazprom-City and recently renamed into Okhta Center, and on the controversy that developed around these plans. The paper uses the skyscraper debates as a lens to discuss a particular “aesthetic politics” of St Petersburg, the meaning of “world cities” and “global architecture” in Russian and international contexts, post-Soviet forms of political and corporate governance, the mobilization of civic opposition to such projects and the ability of such urban protests to translate into a more unified and politically oriented opposition than has been possible in other contexts in Russia.

## **St Petersburg's Unique Identity**

The city of St Petersburg, Russia stands out among contemporary metropolises not only with its striking architectural beauty but also the unique political meaning accorded to its urban aesthetics. As Russia's first modern capital, St Petersburg was built according to an architectural and ideological plan. Its construction was ordered by the emperor Peter the Great in 1703 with an explicit goal: to break with Russia's perceived backwardness and deliver it into Europe and the future. In other words, in Peter's grand royal plan, urban aesthetics was to play an explicitly political function. The city was to be built by invited Western European architects -- Italian, French, German, Dutch -- according to a Western European architectural tradition, and later by Russian architects trained in Europe in that tradition. Ever since that origin, the aesthetic identity of St Petersburg has been a terrain of confrontation – over Russia's identity, over Russia's past and future, over the canon of its culture, over the role of this city in the Russian world, etc.

Of course, the debates about urban aesthetics are not unique to St Petersburg. But in this city they acquire a very particular historical dimension that makes them unique. While in popular imagination St Petersburg often figures as “the beautiful city,” what constitutes this beauty and where its limits are is highly contested. Usually, the claims about this city's beauty are limited to select areas of the city and periods of its history – today, these are areas and periods that refer to the city's embeddedness in pre-Soviet imperial history and culture.

“St Petersburg” according to this popular imagination is the city -- mostly large city center -- that was built in imperial times, before the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Soviet era buildings, streets and districts -- including a few of those in the city center, but especially large residential districts built after WWII beyond the center -- are not part of that St Petersburg.<sup>1</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps with the exception of a few avant-garde buildings from the 1920s

short, what “St Petersburg” means and what makes it exceptional tends to be understood in aesthetic terms that are temporally limited to pre-communist historic periods. This is why one may speak of a meaning of aesthetics of the “beautiful St Petersburg” that is shaped by an implicit symbolic and political claim to having a pre-Soviet and Western European identity.<sup>2</sup>

Although this understanding of the urban aesthetics of St Petersburg is widely shared, it lends itself to different and often contesting interpretations. According to one extreme interpretation, the city of St Petersburg as an aesthetic whole had been completely achieved in the past, and today’s urban policy should be directed at preserving that achievement. According to another extreme interpretation, to remain a future-oriented “world city”, which was the original plan of Emperor Peter the Great, St Petersburg should continue developing and evolving, even in its historic center. I will call the proponents of these two extreme positions, *preservationists* and *transformationists*. Transformationists accuse preservationists of treating St Petersburg as a “city-museum” frozen in the past and ignoring questions of governance, maintenance and development of a large industrial city with 5 million inhabitants. Preservationists, in turn, accuse transformationists of destroying a world-recognized historic city out of their own political and business interests, and using the rhetoric of governance and future-orientation as a smoke screen that conceals these interests.

The two sides of the debate often refer to similar examples and arguments to make opposite claims. For example, each side often refers to Paris (unlike, for example, London) as a successful example of what they advocate. Paris is described as a world-recognized beautiful city that is successfully preserving its aesthetic identity according to its unique historic tradition, or conversely, successfully transforming its aesthetic identity in the changing conditions of the

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<sup>2</sup> In other words, common references to St Petersburg as “Venice of the North” are not politically neutral.

globalized economy. Transformationalists mention the Parisian district La Défense is an example of the correct future-oriented and business-minded urban development, according to which a district with modern skyscrapers can be successfully incorporated into a beautiful historic city. Preservationists also mention La Défense as a success story, stressing instead that it represents a historically responsible urban planning – the district’s skyscrapers, they point out, are located far from the city center in order to avoid interfering with its classical aesthetics.

### **Aesthetic Politics**

As this example suggests, in order to be taken seriously both sides in the debate must argue that St Petersburg should change, but its unique aesthetics should be preserved. It may appear, therefore, that the debate is not real, that it is about questions of degree rather than substance. But this is not the case. The debate over St Petersburg’s aesthetic identity is real and substantive, and the main reason for this is that this debate is not about aesthetics per se; aesthetics is employed here as a *political* category. The debate reaches far beyond questions of urban beauty and architectural style to a deeper confrontation over power -- over who has the power to define and dictate what this city is, how it looks, for whom it exists, and who can benefit from living in it -- in short, *who owns the city*.

This is why, while the protesters oppose plans to construct several major modern architectural landmarks in the city – most prominently the 400-meter Gazprom skyscraper – they argue that these landmarks would destroy the city’s unique aesthetic identity. The main slogan that they use is the phrase, *This is our city* (Eto nash gorod).<sup>3</sup> Clearly, this slogan cannot be reduced to merely aesthetic concerns. While references to aesthetics remain central in the debate,

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<sup>3</sup> “Echo Peterburga” also distinguishes itself from “Echo of Moscow” by stating in its jingle: *Eto nash gorod* (This is our

aesthetics functions here as a proxy for politics. We should understand this use of aesthetics, therefore, as *aesthetic politics*.<sup>4</sup> Aesthetic politics as a form of politics plays an important role in Russia today and is particularly prevalent in St Petersburg.

The uniqueness of the St Petersburg situation is that it is around the aesthetic politics of the city, more than any other political issue that a broad and united civic movement has been able to mobilize. In other words, lived urban space, or lived space more generally acquires a particular political salience in the city. This is also true in Russia as a whole. As St Petersburg sociologist Boris Gladarev has recently pointed out, popular movements of citizens advocating certain measures or protesting certain government actions tend to form in contemporary Russia around “common places” (*obshchee mesto*) rather than “common ideas” (*obshchee delo*). Examples of such mobilization in the past several years include the popular protests against plans to cut Khimki Forest, a large natural park in Moscow, against government mismanagement of large forest fires in central Russia in the summer 2010, and, perhaps most prominently, against plans to building the 400-meter skyscraper in St Petersburg. While the sociologist does not focus on the reasons for or the historic roots of this focus on “common places” in Russian civic mobilization, our discussion of St Petersburg may suggest them.

Political mobilization around the aesthetics of urban space has a long history in St Petersburg. It can be traced, for example, to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century’s debates about Singer House – the Russian headquarters of the American *Singer* sewing machine company that were built in 1904 on Nevsky prospect, St Petersburg’s main street. Singer originally proposal to build a high-riser in St Petersburg as a reference to the company’s skyscraper that was being erected around

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city).

<sup>4</sup> “Aesthetic politics” is a political notion that stresses that arguments about aesthetics can be employed to make *political* demands. This notion is decidedly different from Ranciere’s “politics of aesthetics” which is concerned with the political meanings inherent in works of art (Ranciere 2004).

the same time in New York.<sup>5</sup>

However, the company encountered vehement opposition in St Petersburg. The city's development was shaped by such legal constraints as the "height code" (*vysotnyi reglament*) – a rule that functioned in the city since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and continues to function, in a modified form, today. According to the height code in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, buildings built in the city center could not be taller than 23.5 meters -- the height of the Winter Palace, the residence of Russian tsars. This political meaning of the "height code" has been long replaced with aesthetic concerns. To protect the city's unique skyline, the current height code does not permit buildings higher than 48 meters. However, the height code is not simply a fixed rule, but an element of aesthetic politics. What the height code should be and how the existing height code should be interpreted (e.g. whether and which spires, belfries and towers may be allowed to ignore it) are questions of vehement political confrontation.

Faced with the height code of 23.5 meters, the American company changed the plans to build the first Russian skyscraper in central St Petersburg. However, it still managed to partially evade the regulation by adding to the building a high tower and topping it with a large globe made of glass with the pictures of the continents encircled with the large word SINGER. The tower and globe served as a transparent reference to the company's global dominance. Also, having failed to build a skyscraper, the company used the tower as a reference to its other, New York skyscraper (Pic. 1, all pictures are available in public domain).<sup>6</sup>

The building became one of the highest in St Petersburg at that time and provoked public criticism from preservationists who claimed that it had destroyed the city's magnificent skyline with its height and supposed ugliness. How could such towers be built next to the beautiful

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<sup>5</sup> The New York building was completed in 1909 and was 187 meters high.



Kazan Cathedral and the Savior on the Blood church, asked one St Petersburg in a letter to a popular newspaper? An architect asked in 1908 on the pages of another popular newspaper: "it is really true that more ugly giants in the *moderne* style like House of Singer will be built" in St. Petersburg?<sup>7</sup>

Today Singer House is viewed as one of the most beautiful and important trademarks of St Petersburg. A major reconstruction of the building in the mid-2000s was met with popular opposition in the city that argued, in a reversal of the protests a hundred years previously, that Singer House was part of the magnificent historic skyline of the city and cannot be changed.

Of course, such changes in the popular view of urban symbols are found in many cities. Perhaps the most famous example is the Eiffel Tower, once popularly despised by Parisians but today seen as the city's ultimate emblem. In St Petersburg, this change in popular outlook underscores that at issue is not an aesthetic image per se, but the right to determine it and interfere in it or, aesthetic politics.



Left: Singer House in St Petersburg, completed in 1904.  
Right: Singer Building in New York, completed in 1908 (186.5 meters high)

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<sup>6</sup> "Posredi Nevskogo 'Singer' wanted to build a skyscraper," *Delovoi Peterburg*, February 6, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted on the research website for the research project "Mapping St Petersburg", University of California, Berkeley. Available at: [http://petersburg.berkeley.edu/olga/olga\\_singer\\_arc1.html](http://petersburg.berkeley.edu/olga/olga_singer_arc1.html) (last accessed, March 23, 2011). See also Match 2010.

## **Late-Socialist Alternative Politics and the City**

The link between the aesthetics of urban space and civic mobilization which is traditionally strong in St Petersburg has become even stronger since the final years of the Soviet state. The reasons for a particular politicization of urban aesthetics lie in the peculiar historical conditions of Soviet “late socialism.”<sup>8</sup> In the Soviet Union during the late period of its history (in the 1970s-80s), all forms of recognized politics – both, participation in the parties registered by the state and in the organized political opposition to that state – tended to be popularly met with a complete lack of interest. This aversion to anything explicitly “political” cannot be understood simply in terms of popular apathy, cynicism or underdeveloped political consciousness. Rather, it points to the emergence of alternative political forms, identities and action -- forms that are not immediately recognizable as “political” within the parameters of the dominant political discourse.

During late socialism, considerations of aesthetics played an important role in shaping these alternative forms of politics. For example, intense socializing within milieus of friends in private apartments or in the streets and parks of the city, that often involved collective pursuits of intellectual and artistic activities and forms of knowledge, became prominent at that time. These informal practices contributed to creating alternative identities, lifestyles, social groups and urban spaces that the Soviet state could neither control nor make an account. In other words, such informal milieus of friends often focused their activities on pursuing the kind of lifestyles and interests that marked them as “non-Soviet” persons, as people living not just in the Soviet Union but also “elsewhere.”<sup>9</sup>

The unique aesthetics of St Petersburg -- with its material references to and mythologies

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<sup>8</sup> On “late socialism” see Yurchak 2006.

about classical European architecture and pre-revolutionary culture and literature -- provided a particularly rich context for such “non-Soviet” pursuits. These groups of friends treated the space and materiality of the city not just as a static backdrop to their lives, but as a living participant with whom they interacted and who contributed to shaping their alternative existence and subjectivities. The feeling of intense affinity with buildings, courtyards, facades, roofs, colors, smells and panoramas of the old city acquired in the lives of these people a decidedly political meaning.

And so did such “apolitical” pursuits as unraveling hidden histories of buildings, organizing societies for the protection of monuments, spending hours with friends on collective walks through the city, and discovering previously unknown passages, views, and aesthetic details. For these social milieus, urban aesthetics was not static – it was intensely lived, explored and appreciated in ways that were not common in the accounts of the city in official architectural histories and booklets for foreign tourists.

In short, urban aesthetics provided these people with means of becoming “non-Soviet” persons, who inhabited a kind of city that was “external” to the normative Soviet public space. Although these practices of “non-Sovietness” were not predicated on an explicit struggle against the Soviet system, they were nevertheless subversive of that system’s wholeness. They contributed to creating persons who were not quite caught in the official political space and were therefore partially invisible to the state. This is why the lifestyles of such people had an alternative political dimension, despite these people’s insistence on their lack of interest in politics.

The meaning of urban space and aesthetics in St Petersburg today is genealogically

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<sup>9</sup> See a detailed discussion of this point in Yurchak 2006, especially chapters 4 and 5.

linked to this alternative political identity that they acquired during the late Soviet period. The importance of this alternative history became evident in the final years of the Soviet system, when the focus on preserving urban aesthetics was instrumental in mobilizing large groups of common citizens into a unified oppositional movement, which later, during the reforms of perestroika, gradually acquired a more explicit political agenda. One of the first examples of this process was the 1987 protest against the demolition of Hotel Angleterre in St Petersburg.

### **Hotel Angleterre**

In 1987, during the reforms of perestroika, out of the milieu of young people who studied St Petersburg urban history and advocated the preservation of its buildings and monuments, the first popular oppositional movement emerged. One of the movement's formative events was the protest against the demolition of Hotel Angleterre in the city center. According to the city administration, Angleterre had to be demolished because its structure was at risk of collapse. In place of the demolished building the city administration planned to build another hotel of the same name, with a façade that was almost identical to the original one, but with new modern infrastructure.

The protests against the hotel's demolition and rebuilding were articulated in terms of the need to preserve an authentic historic monument. This debate, however, was not so much about a concrete building, but about the understanding of urban aesthetics. The original hotel was materially *authentic*, the new replica would not be; the city administration cared more about the business function of a hotel; the protestors cared more about the historical materiality of a building. This was the first classical confrontation of preservationists and transformationists.

This difference in their understanding of urban aesthetics became particularly salient

because of the hotel's connection to the famous Russian poet Sergei Yesenin. For the protestors, it was important that the original hotel contained a room in which Yesenin committed suicide in 1925. Even if the hotel was rebuilt according to the same design as before, they argued, the room where Yesenin's life ended would no longer exist.<sup>10</sup> For the city government it was more important that the new façade was the exact replica of the old one.

The difference was palpable: for preservationists, urban aesthetics was rooted in the *lived materiality* of the city and in the identity that this material trace conferred on its inhabitants; for transformationists, urban aesthetics was about *design* and therefore it could be delinked from concrete materiality and reproduced as a new imitation of the past. While for preservationists authentic materiality is the very content of urban aesthetics; for transformationists, it constitutes a problem (it contains old infrastructure, it can decay, it is in risk of collapse).

An activist of the group *Era*, a group seeking the preservation of historical monuments, who organized the protest later remembered that the gathering on the square of thousands of like-minded people produced an unprecedented experience of euphoria among not only the participants, but also those who witnessed the event from afar and people who lived near that square. Several thousand people remained in front of the hotel for three days, while others “who lived in the neighboring streets, constantly brought us tea in thermoses and buns.”<sup>11</sup> According to another activist of that movement, the importance of “the Angleterre episode” was in that it brought together many people “who joined us at that time, ... worked together and stayed. We spent all the evenings together, drinking, walking, talking, and constantly working.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Sostoialas’ aktsiia protesta u gostinitsy Angleter” [A protest action took place near hotel Angleterre], *Nevastroyka*, March 19, 2008. Available at: <http://nevastroyka.ru/1/88483/> (last accessed March 17, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Aleksei Kozev, “Sostoialas’ artsiia protesta.”

<sup>12</sup> Alexei, an activist of *Gruppa spaseniia* (Salvation group) that protested Hotel Angleterre demolition, quoted in Boris Gladarev, “The formation and functioning of milieu (on the example of Archeological circle of LDP-DTIu, 1970-

Despite the protests, Angletterre was demolished on March 18, 1987 and rebuilt in the next several years. But the popular movement that first emerged around the goal of protecting this historic monument, by the end of the 1980s transformed into a civic movement with much broader political demands. While the protest did not succeed in stopping the demolition of a building, it did succeed in bringing about something considerably bigger – an experience shared by several thousand people who gathered on the square for many days, of being mobilized together as a *counterpublic*<sup>13</sup> that opposed the meaning of the city dictated by the bureaucrats in the government. This counterpublic had a political identity without first seeing itself in political terms.

### **Gazprom Skyscraper**

This transformation of a popular protest that advocated the preservation of a single building into a counterpublic with a shared oppositional stance has a direct bearing on the current situation in St Petersburg. In the current political situation in Russia, the focus on urban aesthetics as a proxy for alternative politics is again common in St Petersburg. Like in the past, the rhetoric of organized political opposition is met again with popular skepticism and disinterestedness. Openly oppositional political parties, such as Yabloko and SPS, have lost much of their previous public support. New movements of political opposition, such as The Other Russia [*Drugaiia Rossiia*] or United Civic Forum [*Ob"edinennyi grazhdanskii forum*] enjoy very little support among Russian population. And yet, it would be again inaccurate to

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2000)." [Formirovanie i funktsionirovanie milieu (na primere arkheologicheskogo kruzhka LDP-DTIu, 1970-2000 gg.)]. Center for Independent Sociological Research, St Petersburg.

<sup>13</sup> Warner 2002.

interpret this situation in terms of political apathy and non-participation.<sup>14</sup>

Like in the previous case, the public protest that focused on the plans to significantly change the aesthetic look of the city – in this case, to build a large skyscraper – eventually has started developing into a civic movement with an oppositional identity and broader political demands. Also like before, the persistent focus of the movement on the government and corporate plans to build a few spectacular structure of “global architecture” in the city that would change St Petersburg’s skyline and aesthetics, functions as a proxy for political action.

Furthermore, the movement’s focus on aesthetics that deemphasizes the possible political content of its demands, makes it possible for different oppositional groups, including those that usually refuse to cooperate on political grounds, to participate in the movement side by side. In other words, aesthetic politics is again enabling the rise of a broad and relatively unified civic movement that is able to articulate common demands that had failed to be articulated in other contexts.

Before discussing this oppositional movement any further, we must consider the history and significance of the main project against which has been directed -- the proposed 400-meter high Gazprom-City skyscraper near the center of St Petersburg, to house the Gazprom headquarters. As the sole monopolist of gas production and delivery (it controls 98% of Russia’s gas exports) Gazprom is the richest corporation in Russia and one of the richest in the world.<sup>15</sup> With the Russian state’s share in this company exceeding 50%, Gazprom is a prime example of the merging of state and corporate interests and property in Russia.

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<sup>14</sup> Jessica Greenberg (2010) makes a similar point discussing the context of post-conflict Serbia. According to her, such normative concepts of the “democratization” theory as “non-participation” in politics and political “apathy” should be rethought. These phenomena may signal not a withdrawal from all politics, but an alternative political stance and mode of engagement.

<sup>15</sup> Gazprom occupies the 22<sup>nd</sup> place in the 2009 list of “Fortune Global 500.” Available at (last accessed on April 6, 2011): [http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/global500/2009/full\\_list/](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/global500/2009/full_list/)

Like in the cases that I discussed earlier, the confrontations over the plans to build this skyscraper must be considered within a broad context of political, financial, legal, and aesthetic regimes that dominate not only urban life of St Petersburg, but also the increasing embeddedness of this life in other local, national, and global contexts. The Gazprom skyscraper and the debates around it serve as a perfect lens through which these multiple governing regimes become visible.<sup>16</sup>

Today, in the context of transnational economic ties and tensions a whole new style of “global architecture” has emerged. Any city that aspires to enter the exclusive league of “world cities” – cities which are intensely involved in the global flows of money, commodities, information, and people, and are connected to global constellations of power (Amin 2002; Brenner 2006, Massey 2005; Sassen 2007, 2001; Short 2004) -- must construct a number of internationally recognized buildings in that style. What does “global architecture” signify aesthetically? According to the famous Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, first of all, structures built in this style tend to have much more in common with similar structures in other “world cities” than with the local architecture, history and culture of the place where they are built.<sup>17</sup> Many cities around the world - from Barcelona, to Shanghai, Berlin, and now St Petersburg - are involved in this process of constructing such global architectural projects.

According to Koolhaas, himself a famous practitioner of global architecture, the context of global capitalism has introduced new pressures on every architect involved in designing projects in this style. The first kind of pressure he calls a snowballing effect: for any project to be recognized as “global” its design must be seen as “more extravagant, more special, and more

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<sup>16</sup> See also Dixon 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Koolhaas 2007. In the past decade many articles in mainstream media have also addressed the issue of the relationship between global architecture and local context. For example, see also Roger K. Lewis, “Will Forces of



unique than any previous” (Koolhaas 2007). Second, projects of global architecture must be chosen through a highly publicized international competition among several famous architects of the global caliber. The list of these architects is limited and guarded by those who belong, meaning that the same architectural firms tends to participate in such competitions in different parts of the world.

Members of this exclusive group of architects, which Koolhaas compares with a “medieval guild,” experience pressure to build buildings that refer to other global architectural projects around the globe. One effect of this pressure is that if an architectural design that had been developed by a global architectural firm in one geographical context does not win the competition or otherwise fails to be implemented, it is often “lifted” and reinserted into a different place in the world.

Many urban designs in St Petersburg today are proposed in the style of global architecture with the explicit goal of marking it as a “world city.” As a result, the city is subjected to the same effects of global architecture that Koolhaas described above. For example, the proposal for the Apraksin Dvor project in St Petersburg, that the famous London based architectural firm *Wilkinson-Eyre* submitted to the architectural competition in St Petersburg in 2008, contained many architectural designs that had been developed for competitions in other parts of the globe.<sup>18</sup>

The Gazprom-City Skyscraper was to become the most internationally visible instance of global architecture in St Petersburg.<sup>19</sup> In the words of the city governor Valentina Matvienko, it was to signify the city’s entry into the global world. It would also signify Gazprom’s status as a

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Globalization Overwhelm Traditional Local Architecture?,” *Washington Post*, November 2, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Author’s interview with a leading architect at *Wilkinson Eyre Architects*, January 2008, London.

<sup>19</sup> Several other projects of global architecture in St Petersburg include The Second Stage of Mariinsky Opera and Ballet

leading world corporation. In other words, the project was viewed by Russian political and corporate elites as a means for increasing their local and international legitimacy.

Considering these plans it was not surprising that in 2006, Valentina Matvienko, the governor of St Petersburg, and Alexei Miller, the CEO of Gazprom announced that six megastars of global architecture, all from “the West,” will participate in the competition for the design of the Gazprom skyscraper. The invited participants included: OMA architectural bureau of Rem Koolhaas (the Netherlands), Daniel Libeskind (U.S.), Herzog and De Meuron (France), Jean Nouvel (France), Massimiliano Fuksas (Italy), and RMJM architectural bureau (Great Britain). It is also not surprising that the project was given an anglicized name, *Gazprom-City*.<sup>20</sup> The invited architects were presented with a few requirements: the building was to be constructed on the site close to the city center allocated by the government, it had to be designed in a daring global architecture style, and it had to be 400 meters high. The six futuristic designs proposed by the participants in the competition were publicly unveiled in November 2006 in the St Petersburg Academy of Arts (Pic. 2).<sup>21</sup>

The aesthetic requirements set up for the competition were extremely controversial for St Petersburg, the city known for its low skyline of majestic classical palaces and mansions. Almost immediately, the Gazprom skyscraper became a focal point of the aesthetic politics in the city and a site that enabled an unprecedented level of oppositional civic mobilization. Many institutions in the city also voiced their opposition to the project. St Petersburg Union of Architects, whose members were not invited to participate in the contest, protested in an open letter to the governor that the proposed skyscraper would destroy the unique low skyline of St

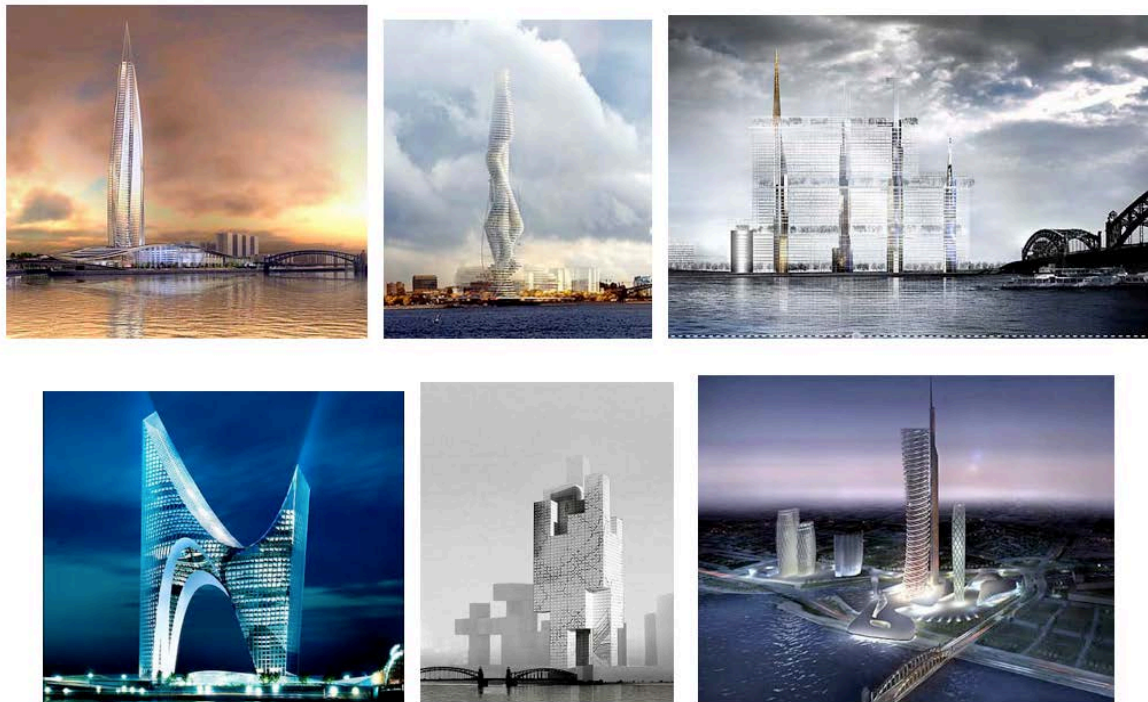
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Theater, Apraksin Dvor district, New Holland island, European Embankments complex, and a few others.

<sup>20</sup> *Delovoi Peterburg*, August 9, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> “Bashennoe mestorozhdenie. Otkryvaetsia vystavka proektov ‘Gazprom-City’, *Kommersant SPb*, November 8, 2006

Petersburg with its silhouettes of palaces, spires, and domes. The preservation of this skyline, asserted the letter, was the task “of the greatest spiritual importance for city planning.” In a gesture of support for the opposition three foreign architectural stars who were invited to participate in the jury of the competition -- Kisho Kurokawa (Japan), Norman Foster (UK), and Rafael Viñoly (U.S.) -- withdrew from the selection committee.



**Pic. 2:** Six proposed project of Gazprom-City skyscraper;  
*first row:* RMJM (left), Herzog and de Meuron (center), Jean Nouvel (right)  
*second row:* Daniel Libeskind (left), Rem Koolhaas (center), Massimiliano Fuksas (right)

These protests, however, did not affect the competition. In December 2006, the British architectural firm RMJM won it with a proposed 400-meter glass tower designed in the shape of a burning flame of gas – a reference to Gazprom’s source of wealth and power, according to the designers.

While the debate that quickly emerged around this project was part of the broader aesthetic politics of St Petersburg, it was also more confrontational than before. Over the years

the debate intensified, with many new actors and movements joining from both sides, especially among the opposition. New arguments and forms of protest have developed, as well as new tactics for neutralizing that protest. Focusing on these developments will be central in the larger manuscript based on this research. In this working paper, however, I do not intend to follow these complex developments closely.

Instead, in the final section of this paper I will focus on several important practical and rhetorical strategies that have developed among the project's supporters and those who oppose it in the past several years. I will also discuss one of the main outcomes of this confrontation – the emergence of a unified oppositional movement with a clear political identity and demands that has taken the form of the marches in the defense of St Petersburg. I will conclude with the analysis of the curious engagement in the debate by President Medvedev in 2010, the unexpected outcome of this engagement, and the light this development sheds on the aesthetic politics of St Petersburg today.

### **Skyscraper Confrontation**

As mentioned above, both sides of the debate over St Petersburg's architectural future argue that this city has a unique identity that must be protected. However, how they interpret this claim differs. Transformationists accuse protectionists of treating the city as a museum, of living in the past, of being excessively conservative. Their central argument is that St Petersburg must become a "world city" of the globalized era. Invoking forward-looking plans of Peter the Great, the city's founder, they argue that Gazprom tower would signify Russia's "revival from chaos and decline" (RMJM Interview 2007).

Even St Petersburg architects disagree about the role of the proposed skyscraper.

Architect Andrei Yudin, of *Yudin and Novikov* architectural studio in St Petersburg, calls Gazprom skyscraper “an optimistic project that clearly represents development and movement forward.” According to him, “the main reason for the protests against this project is the conservatism of [Russian citizens]. People are simply afraid of changes, they are afraid that their city will transform, even if it will transform for the better». <sup>22</sup> Filipp Nikandrov, a Russian-born architect now working at RMJM, the firm that designed the skyscraper, describes the debate in St Petersburg as “the choice that the city has to make: does it want to experience development or museumification in the 21 century?”

Many other architects in St Petersburg, however, take issue with this position. Leonid Yakushevskii responds: “Posing the question as the choice only between skyscrapers and museumification is absurd,” adding that “height is not a criteria of architectural sophistication.” <sup>23</sup> According to protectionists, the real reason for the project is not to make St Petersburg better, but to serve one’s own business interests. They accuse transformationists of treating the city as their corporate headquarters and of ignoring the city and its inhabitants. The claim - *This is our city!* - as the central slogan of the opposition clearly demonstrates that at issue is not aesthetics per se, but aesthetics as a proxy for politics.

The most explicit manifestation of this aesthetic politics has come in the form of large and well-organized public protests by the city’s inhabitants known as “Marches in Defense of St Petersburg.” The first Marches took place in the spring and summer 2007 (March 3, April 15, June 9). At first, relatively small and spontaneous, they soon became bigger and better organized. They have continued regularly since 2007, with the latest march happening recently, on April 3,

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<sup>22</sup> Andrei Yudin, a comment submitted to “Ruki proch’ ot Okhta Tsentra” [Hands off Okhta Center] – a Live Journal blog of Okhta Center supporters. Available at: [http://community.livejournal.com/meri\\_pro/5409.html](http://community.livejournal.com/meri_pro/5409.html) (last accessed march 17, 2011)

2011.

The organizing slogan of the movement, “This is our city!” does not explicitly mention any political issues, while lending itself easily to political interpretations. Because of the open-endedness of the rhetorical theme, it could accommodate diverse oppositional parties and groups, many of which had avoided participating in a common cause and often had been openly hostile to each other. Many marches, for example, included members of the democratic Yabloko party side by side with members of the outlawed NPB (National Bolshevik Party), who often visibly marked their presence with symbols and flags, which invariably provoked the police to confront them. One of the biggest *Marches in Defence of the City* on September 8, 2007 was marked by the unprecedented participation of two famous political leaders of oppositional movements who had continuously refused to cooperate or form a coalition and vehemently criticized each other -- Grigorii Yavlinsky, leader of the united-democratic party Yabloko, and Garri Kasparov, leader of the United Civic Forum (OGF).

Their joint participation became possible precisely because the march provided a context in which the explicit call to protect the unique aesthetics of a beautiful city could be connected with broader political critiques. Both leaders gave speeches at the march, albeit carefully navigating the timing of their appearances in front of the crowd in order to avoid direct encounter. Despite this careful choreography, the emergence of a united coalition of oppositional forces at that march was not lost on all those present at the event, nor was the explicit connection of aesthetic demands with broader oppositional politics. Despite its focus on the seemingly local and apolitical problem the march produced the most concerted and trenchant critique of Russia’s authoritative government to date.

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<sup>23</sup> Tatyana Likhanov. “Otets Kukuruzu” [The father of the corn cob]. *Novaya Gazeta*, June 24, 2007. Available at: <http://www.novayagazeta.spb.ru/2007/24/6> (accessed on April 7, 2011).

In their speeches, both leaders described the skyscraper as a metaphor of the authoritarian system of power in Russia. Yavlinsky described the tower as “a monument to Russian new authoritarian regime” (Yavlinsky 2007). Kasparov went even further, connecting the movement’s slogan with the political call for the country as a whole. He suggested: “the Gazprom tower in St Petersburg is a symbol of the victory by cynical, insolent, corrupt power over the whole of Russia. This skyscraper is an arrow directed at the heart of Russia, and struggling against it is the duty of every Russian citizen, not only every Petersburg dweller.” Kasparov concluded by rearticulating the local slogan for the country-wide context, making it explicitly political: “We should make this impudent power hear our words – *this is our city* and *this is our country*” (Kasparov 2007).

As these examples illustrate, the demand to stop the construction of a skyscraper and the demolition of various architectural sites in the city were increasingly linked with broader oppositional politics. Among new political slogans that appeared at the Marches, were: “Topple the tower, topple the regime” (*Svalim bashniu, svalim rezhim*) and “Matvienko, go away!” (*Matvienko ukhodi*) and others.

The unique ability of the theme of protecting the city to bring together different oppositional forces has increased with time. The picture below (Pic. 3) shows different oppositional parties, associations, and movements (represented by different flags) that participated together in the recent March in Defense of St Petersburg, on April 3, 2011:



**Pic. 3:** April 3, 2011, March in Defense of St Petersburg (Pioneer square, Saint Petersburg). The march was organized by a united front consisting of the following parties and movements (represented by different flags on the photo): democratic Yabloko party, Communist Party of Russia, Fair Russia party (*Spravedlivaia Rossiia*), Living City (*Zhivoi Gorod*) movement, Solidarity (*Solidarnost'*) movement, Defense (*Oborona*) movement, Green Wave (*Zelenaia volna*) ecological movement and others.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to slogans, many new visual and artistic messages have emerged in the context of the Marches. Some provided an explicitly political interpretation of the themes, *This is our city* and *March in defense of the city*. On the following posters (Pic. 4) the skyscraper and Gazprom corporation are represented as “invaders” from whom the city inhabitants had to defend the city. Strikingly, these “invaders” were most frequently represented as the Nazi armies that attempted to conquer Leningrad during WWII. Having failed to do so, they kept the city blockaded and bombed for three years, causing it incomparable suffering and over one million deaths. Not surprisingly, “The Blockade of Leningrad” -- as that devastating experience and the heroic defense of the city are known in Russia – is an important element of St Petersburg’s identity today. By equating the proposed skyscraper with the attempted invasion by the Nazi army, this rhetoric attempts to endow the demands of the opposition with a profound political,

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<sup>24</sup> Available at the Living City site: <http://www.save-spb.ru/index.html>



moral and heroic meaning and popular support.



The first poster (on the left) is among the most popular. This is the official poster created by the oppositional democratic party Yabloko, one of the active organizers of the Marches. The remarkable aspect of this poster and all the following examples is that it visually connects Gazprom with invaders who tried to occupy the city during the war. The Gazprom tower is portrayed as a large canon shell against the background of the classical St Petersburg skyline. The words reading “Stop Gazprom-City!” crisscross the image. The shell and the crisscrossed strips are easily recognized references to the blockade of Leningrad (crisscrossed paper strips were put on windows at that time to prevent them from breaking during bombing). The message is powerful and clear: the invaders are approaching and need to be stopped, just like it happened during the war.

Another popular poster at the marches continued that theme. It makes a more explicit link with the Blockade: “All for the defense of Leningrad from Gazprom invaders!”. This message is identical to the appeal to civilians during the Blockade: “All for the defense of Leningrad!” (*Vse na zashchitu Leningrada!*). Gazprom appears in this message in the place where “the Nazi”

would appear in the original version. The golden medal on the poster is the medal awarded to soldiers and civilians “For the defense of Leningrad” from the Nazis. The crisscrossed metal beams are an iconic image of anti-tank defense structures that are easily recognized in Russia. In this context, the Gazprom Tower in the background is again directly associated with the invading enemy.

The next poster also makes an explicit reference to previous wars and invaders (Pic. 5).



The image on the left is an iconic Soviet poster from 1920 by artist D.S. Moor. It calls for popular mobilization into the Red Army during the Civil War: “Have you signed up as a volunteer?” A different version of this poster produced in the 1940s, during WWII (image in the middle) calls out: “How have you assisted the front?” Finally, the image on the right was used during the Marches in Defense of St Petersburg. It reads “Have you voiced your protest?” On this image the invaders are shown in the background as the Gazprom Tower crossed out with red lines.

The final two examples are the flyers that were posted around the city in preparation for the September 13, 2008 March in Defense of St Petersburg (Pic. 6):



The fist clutching and breaking the Gazprom Tower is another iconic representation, again easily recognized in Russia. It is taken from a Cold War propaganda poster of the late Soviet period. It also refers to invaders who will be defeated. The message on the original flyer that appeared that September (image on the left) reads: “Our city, saved during the years of the Blockade at the expense of millions of lives is once again in danger. Before it is too late we are calling everyone to join the March for the Protection of St Petersburg, against the construction of ‘Okhta-Center’ [the new name of the Gazprom Tower].” A different version of that flyer, on the right, reads: “The city will not give up.” Dollar and Euro symbols complete the association with international corporate invaders.

### *President Medvedev and Abrupt Change of Plans*

In the evening of December 9, 2010, St Petersburg Governor Valentina Matvienko announced in a live TV broadcast that the Gazprom skyscraper would be moved to a different location than originally planned. Now it would be built quite far outside of St Petersburg. This

decision, she stressed, is final.<sup>25</sup> The news came as a thunderbolt. What prompted the governor, the staunch supporter of the skyscraper, who always claimed that nothing could stop its construction, suddenly change her mind and so emphatically stress the finality of her decision? Mass media came ablaze, coming up with different theories and speculations. Most newspapers and TV programs agreed that the governor's decision was influenced by Russian president Dmitri Medvedev, who had recently voiced his doubts about the skyscraper. According to several "anonymous sources in the Kremlin," it was that implicit message from Medvedev that changed Governor Matvienko's opinion.

Several weeks previously, on October 11, 2010, during his much publicized meeting with rock musicians in Moscow's "Rhythm and Blues Café" Medvedev, answering a question about the skyscraper, unexpectedly said: "For Piter [Petersburg] it is extremely important that some new centers of development emerge and new architectural dominants appear, a new down-town, if you will. But should this be done next to Smolny Cathedral [the proposed site for the skyscraper]? This is a very big question. I can offer you a dozen places that this skyscraper would beautify. And something could be developed around it there."<sup>26</sup>

Following this unexpected and much publicized articulation of the president's personal opinion, Governor Matvienko said, in her weekly televised program *A dialogue with the city*: "In my opinion it is quite feasible that we will offer Gazprom different solutions."<sup>27</sup> When on December 9, 2010 she announced a change of plan, she also emphatically added that earlier decisions of her government, that had allowed the construction of a 400-meter building despite

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<sup>25</sup> "Matvienko perenesla 'Okhta-Tsentr' iz-za Medvedeva" [Matvienko has moved Okhta-Center because of Medvedev], *Nedvizhimost'*, December 9, 2010. Available at: <http://realty.lenta.ru/news/2010/12/09/oxta1/> (last accessed April 7, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> "Kreml': Medvedev povliial na reshenie 'Gazpro,a' perenesti 'Okhta-Tsentr'." *Gazeta.ru*, December 9, 2010. Available at: [http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2010/12/09/n\\_1609277.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2010/12/09/n_1609277.shtml) (last accessed April 7, 2011).

the functioning height code of 40 meters and that had been controversially supported by the St Petersburg city court, would be now annulled. The skyscraper would be built in a new place, outside of the city, where the height code does not apply.

But what was the reason for Medvedev's unexpected interference? And why did it take such a cryptic form? Officially, the president's doubts about the proposed project were caused by his interactions with the UNESCO Commission that supervises the list of the "world heritage sites." St Petersburg, as one of the largest sites on that list had been in the center of UNESCO's attention ever since the plans for the skyscraper were announced. UNESCO frequently voiced its concerns that the skyscraper would destroy the city's beautiful skyline and would prompt UNESCO to strip St Petersburg off its status as a world heritage site. In a number of interviews that followed his meetings with UNESCO officials, in 2010, Medvedev suggested that Russia must honor its international commitments to preserve historical monuments. Russian prestige depended on this, said the president, adding that the government of St Petersburg, as a legal subject of the Russian Federation, should comply with this requirement.

However, there might have been other reasons for Medvedev's unexpected interference. While an exact analysis of the situation is impossible, since the dynamic of power relations at the top of the Russian government is anything but open to scrutiny, one should still consider this statement of the president in the context of other statements he has made in the past several months. It appears that Medvedev has been trying to articulate a position that is quite distinct from and sometimes slightly at odds with, that of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. The bifurcation of power at the top of the government and an allegedly growing competition between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin have recently become topics of intense discussion in the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Russian media. The main reason for this development, it is often suggested, is the beginning of the presidential campaign of 2012.

According to this view, President Medvedev simply tries to articulate an independent, somewhat different, and perhaps more liberal identity for himself before the elections.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Prime Minister Putin has been known as active supporter of the Gazprom skyscraper. For example, on October 18, 2010, one week after Medvedev suggested that there might be a better place for the skyscraper, the chief architect of RMJM (the firm that authored the original project) explained in an interview: “We regularly receive memoranda of support from Prime-Minister of the Russian Federation Putin, in which he encourages us to continue developing the Okhta-Center tower and is promising every support of his government.”<sup>29</sup>

It would seem that President Medvedev simply put to practice a strategy for creating a more independent and liberal image for himself, without causing an open confrontation with the Prime Minister. By carefully applying pressure on the governor of St Petersburg, instead of issuing direct orders, he caused the annulment of the skyscraper plans, enabled comments about himself as a liberal leader who is willing to listen to the opposition, and, simultaneously, avoided causing a loss of face by the St Petersburg governor or the President.

The spectacular end of the skyscraper saga, at least for now, has illuminated once again how complex the *aesthetic politics* of St Petersburg continues to be. It cannot be understood simply in aesthetic terms, or only in terms of political struggle, or only as an effect of the power relations between different government clans, or simply in terms of personal and corporate business interests. It must be considered within a broad and constantly developing context of

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<sup>28</sup> “Medvedeva i Putina okružhili namekami na vybory,” *Delovai Peterburg*, February 10, 2011. Available at [http://www.dpru/a/2011/02/10/Medvedeva\\_i\\_Putina\\_okružhi](http://www.dpru/a/2011/02/10/Medvedeva_i_Putina_okružhi) (last accessed on April 7, 2011).

overlapping international, national, political, financial, legal, and aesthetic regimes in which the city of St Petersburg is embedded. To repeat the point that was made in the beginning of the paper: the Gazprom skyscraper and the debates and developments around it serve as a perfect, if partial, lens through which these multiple regimes become visible.

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<sup>29</sup> “Soavtor proekta ‘Okhta-Tsentra’: Stroitel’stvo neboskriba podderzhivaet Putin,” *Grani.Ru*, October 18, 2010. Available at: <http://www.grani.ru/Politics/Russia/m.182731.html> (last accessed April 7, 2011).

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