Reaching out and reining in: Four proposals for planning community

Alexandra Staub
Penn State University, University Park, Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT: This paper compares two sets of planning paradigms in the Soviet Union and the United States. The projects analyzed are Mikhail Barshch and Moisei Ginzburg's Zelenyi Gorod (“Green City”) of 1930, Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City of 1935, the anonymously planned Soviet mikrorayon, and William Drummond’s competition entry for a neighborhood unit in Chicago, completed in 1913. The first two projects both propose dissolving the large city and dispersing the population across the land, while the second two envision cities composed of hierarchically structured communities with shared facilities. The paper highlights both the striking similarities and differences between the projects created in two very different national contexts.

Conference theme: Urban design studies
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INTRODUCTION

Worlds apart in both ideology and space, two parallel sets of planning ideas developed within only a few years of each other. The first set included Mikhail Barshch and Moisei Ginzburg’s Zelenyi Gorod (“Green City”) of 1930, which proposed distributing Moscow’s population into the countryside and letting the big city fall to ruin, and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City of 1935, which envisioned the dissolution of major urban centers and the redistribution of the U.S. population across the land. Set two contained the anonymously planned mikrorayon, a neighborhood unit that first appeared in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, and William Drummond’s encompassing vision for a similar neighborhood unit, proposed for Chicago in 1913. This article examines how the social aims of the projects – freedom from societal constraints in the first two cases and the creation of an ordered community in the second – are expressed by their physical configurations. Projected for countries that defined themselves as diametrically opposed, the two sets of ideas nevertheless point to similarly focused visions: the first, reaching out to let space loose with wild abandon; the second, reining space in to create hierarchy and a shared order.

1. REACHING OUT: BROADACRE CITY AND ZELENYI GOROD

In 1930, Mikhail Barshch and Moisei Ginzburg’s won a competition for a new resort town to be built outside Moscow. Called Zelenyi Gorod, or “Green City” it radically proposed distributing Moscow’s population into the countryside and letting the big city fall to ruin. Garden city ideas were certainly known in the Soviet Union – Ebenezer Howard’s texts had been quickly translated into Russian – yet Zelenyi Gorod went far beyond the idea of a self-contained green-town satellite for the big city. Five years after the publication of Zelenyi Gorod, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City envisioned the dissolution of major urban centers and the redistribution of the population across the United States. While Wright’s Broadacre City has been compared to Le Corbusier’s urban plans of the 1920s, which glorified and concentrated the large city (Alofsin, 1989), to date no comparison has been made between Wright’s disurbanist ideas and those of Barshch and Ginsburg. Both Broadacre City and Zelenyi Gorod were created in the 1930s, yet the social and economic context for them could not have been more different. The U.S was in the midst of the Great Depression, with many unemployed and homeless. Under these circumstances, the thought of “returning to the land” and a more basic economic existence must have seemed comforting to many. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was trying to overcome a backwards, rural legacy. Economically, it was a time of optimism, as Stalin began forcefully industrializing the country and creating new factory centers in remote areas of the empire. Soviet architects had not yet been compelled into membership in the conformist Union of Soviet Architects (this happened in 1932), and idealistic planners were still looking for ways to build a new, socialist world.

Physical expression of this order proved difficult to realize. In the writings of Marx and Engels – the
foundation for socialist thought – no guidance was given on how a socialist city would actually be organized.

With the only theoretical guide for architecture and urban planning being Friedrich Engel's *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (published in German in 1884 and translated into Russian ten years later), Hugh Hudson makes the point that throughout the 1920s, the new architecture forced into the public arena issues that had received scant attention within Marxism-Leninism: the emancipation of women, the nature of the socialist family, the form of housing most conducive to socialist consciousness, the interaction between town and country, and the relationship between the individual and the collective (Hudson 1994). In Zelenyi Gorod, we see Barshch and Ginzburg struggling with these very issues.

The economic philosophy that Broadacre City and Zelenyi Gorod express may be closer than one initially suspects. Wright's scheme was repeatedly called "socialist" for its abolition of rents and speculative income (Grabow 1977). Although he vehemently denied this charge, he did not offer conclusive arguments as to why his concept was particularly capitalist. Land would be "given" to those who used it and resided on it. Individual growth through science and communications, industrial co-ownership and nationalization, social credit, public ownership of utilities and transportation, free education and health care – these were some of the aspects of the Broadacre plan, and although they reflect the thinking of progressive economists and sociologists of the time, they were not that far from what was being discussed in the Soviet Union. Physically, most of the inhabitants in Broadacre City lived in smaller single-family houses or in apartment towers, with little room for economic extremes. This physical expression is similar to the one in Barshch and Ginzburg's scheme, which was clearly non-capitalist and part of a program to restructure the Soviet Union along a new, socialist order. In their system, everyone lived in the same type of unit, with both class and gender differences having been decidedly abolished.

In Wright's scheme, each family would be given an acre of land to farm, while in Barshch and Ginzburg's version, individual workers lived in little housing units – one-room "living cells" – that snaked in 250-meter-wide swaths through the countryside. Both projects were basically linear, and organized along a major thoroughfare – a superhighway in the Broadacre scheme, and a country road and railway lines in Zelenyi Gorod. While Broadacre City was orthogonally laid out, Zelenyi Gorod ambled over the topography.

Transportation in the two schemes was quite different and expressed the economic realities of the two countries involved. Broadacre City assumed that each adult would have a car, a vehicle that could turn into a little helicopter for larger distances. Zelenyi Gorod relied on public transportation. While workers could walk from their one-room "living cells" to the collective canteens and cultural facilities located nearby, they rode the bus or a train to their farming or factory jobs. As in many Soviet projects of the time, this one spatially presented the idea that the individual was free but would be subjugated to the community, since individual spaces were so minimal. In Broadacre City, families lived together and the parents worked at home. Schools and cultural facilities were located in each four-mile square. In Zelenyi Gorod, cultural facilities were located by the bus stations and thus close to the housing units, but children of all ages were removed from their parents to be collectively taken care of in central boarding schools.

Both Broadacre City and Zelenyi Gorod stressed the idea of "freedom", albeit in different ways. Barshch and Ginzburg saw the dissolution of the traditional family structure, which in Russian culture of the time usually...
consisted of three generations, as an expression of socialist freedom. In this, they followed ideas very prevalent among the Soviet avant-garde: the patriarchal family unit would be dissolved, and each man and woman would live in an individual space just large enough for sleep or individual study. Study and bettering oneself was seen as important because socialism needed educated workers. Adults would use cultural and recreational facilities such as clubs, movie theaters and sports facilities collectively; these and the workplace would provide one’s social life in lieu of family life. The avant-garde generally stressed that all relationships were to be on a voluntary basis. Nothing was to prevent couples or groups of friends from living near one another; one could even have a door between housing units, yet one could just as easily dismantle one’s house and move it elsewhere. This was usually presented as a key to ending the subjugation of women, who would be free to lead their own lives,unsaddled by having to care for their husbands, parents or children.

Women perceived this new freedom quite differently from how it was presented by male planners. Women still did “women’s work” in the new economy since typical “female” chores, such as childcare and social welfare, were generally transposed to the macro-level (Voronina 1989). Freedom from relationship constraints took a similar turn. Liberalization of the divorce laws had led women to bitterly complain that men were now exploiting women more thoroughly than ever through the acquisition of one wife after another and through a reluctance to shoulder any responsibilities for their children. Single women complained of being called “petty bourgeois” if they didn’t go to bed with any man who wanted to (Evans 1981). Despite their best efforts, the concept of freedom expressed in socialist lore remained written by and for males.

Although socialist writings usually saw children cared for under the expert guidance of professionals, Barshch and Ginzburg went one step further. Children were removed from Zelenyi Gorod’s adult world. Infants up to the age of three were to be cared for in “infant homes”, where “mothers could visit them”. Preschool children lived in groups of 15-20 children and were employed as help on the farms, to teach them self-sufficiency and movement skills, and introduce them to production processes. Older children were to be housed in a type of boarding school. Each school was specialized in an area of practical training in agriculture, forestry, construction industry, or home economics, with a central education board deciding which school a child would attend based on the child’s aptitude. Essentially, this meant that children began practical training from preschool on, with children and adults later working side by side in production industries. Although Barshch and Ginzburg described the children’s facilities in a 1930 article on their project in the Soviet journal Sovremennaya Arhitektura (Contemporary Architecture), it is telling that there are no illustrations of these spaces.

Clearly, the social parameters of Broadacre City and Zelenyi Gorod were at opposite ends of the spectrum: Wright’s plan emphasized the family as a basic social unit, while Barshch and Ginzburg’s plan saw the family’s dissolution, with childhood no more than a short phase of training and socialization. This did not mean that family was not important in Soviet culture of the time – on the contrary, socialist strivings can be read as an attempt to break down the strong family unit in an effort to replace its cultural domination through that of the state.

Wright’s Broadacre City has been called prescient for its portrayal of an auto-centered lifestyle. Although Wright saw people as working from home, thus avoiding a daily commute, the sheer distances between everything in an era before mass electronic communication mandated some form of transportation system. Wright’s answer was one of individual mobility, while goods would be moved by truck. His plan included areas that strongly resemble today’s shopping malls, although strangely enough without the sea of parking that as come to characterize such structures. The backbone of his Broadacre Scheme was a series of superhighways that would allow unimpeded traffic flow, while gas stations received prominence through a loving attention to their situation and design detail.

Barshch and Ginzburg were more realistic about what the Soviet Union could offer in terms of transportation. Their plan saw light-rail and busses as providing transportation for workers between their homes, work, and cultural institutions. In this scheme, no one would have more than a ten-minute walk to a bus stop. In this, they foresaw what would become an identifying aspect of the Soviet Union: a widely meshed and well-used public transportation system that included light rail, metros, and electrically and diesel powered busses to move the population.

Both Broadacre City and Zelenyi Gorod show a national preoccupation with the concept of “freedom” as expressed through spatial expanse. In Wright’s version, a man living on his family’s own acre had the feeling of looking out of the window of a modest home and being the lord of all he could see. In Barshch and Ginzburg’s version, the careful placement of the housing cells away from the road, and the floor-to-ceiling folding glass doors – a perplexing idea for the Russian climate – show the preoccupation with taking in the visual expanse of virgin lands.

Historians have frequently compared Russian spatial perceptions and ideals with those found in the West and especially the United States. The openness of land in Russia and some of the neighboring republics is certainly comparable to the mythos of the American West. Elena Hellberg-Hirn describes the “ever-moving open frontier” (Hellberg-Hirn 1999: 52) while Jeremy Smith has noted that, "the desire to expand and control physical space has become an integral part of Russia's character" (Smith 1999: 9). Both attitudes characterize the American experience as well. Blair Rubel has analyzed that the Soviet debate of the 1920s boiled down a demand for the urbanization of rural areas into nodal points (concepts broached by the theorist Leonid Sabsovich and others) against proposals to disperse cities along continuous linear communities adjacent to
transportation and power corridors (concepts that include Zelenyi Gorod, but also other proposals by Nikolai Milutin, Ivan Leonidov, and others). The former group decried the latter as offering “automobile socialism,” with services and employment extending along efficient road systems linked by fast, flexible, and individually operated transportation, a concept that Rubel calls, “the Californiaization of the Soviet hinterlands.” (Rubel 1990: 112).

Despite these far-flung ideas of occupying virgin lands – or building on greenfield sites – urban sprawl in the Soviet Union never materialized. Although Barshch and Ginzburg provided an extreme method of overcoming the urban-rural divide, in the end, it ran counter to a cultural view of both family and space. Hellberg-Hirn has compared the Russian idea of homeland to the matrioshka doll, a set of concentric circles that forms, “a play with identity, boundaries, and the contraction or expansion of space.” (Hellberg-Hirn 1999: 64). The national centricity, as represented by the Kremlin, is overlaid by a private identification with the home - one’s family house, home city, district, and landscape. Dismantling this cultural idea would prove to be difficult.

Both Broadacre City and Zelenyi Gorod present a markedly non-hierarchical use of space that erases differences between rural and urban life (in itself usually perceived as a value hierarchy). In this idealized world, large social inequalities were erased, with only a distant government regulating whatever processes needed oversight. While this social leveling was certainly an aim of the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union, such thinking was regarded as utopian in the United States, where ideas of economic competition and the “self-made man” were so determining. Central to both Broadacre City and Zelenyi Gorod was the idolization of an unspoiled type of “back to nature” existence that nevertheless made ready use of modern-day technologies. Thus, we see transportation as well as mechanized and efficient production processes central to Zelenyi Gorod, while cars, telephones, and high-speed freeways determine Broadacre City. Technology and the machine, commonly associated with the ascent of large urban centers in the nineteenth century, were now to find a new home far from the big city. While this may be seen as expressing the Soviet belief of diminishing the urban-rural divide, in 1930s America this idea must have seemed quite radical. Ironically enough, it is in the United States that the city’s edge has so obviously blurred, folding into suburbs and now exurbs, while in today’s Russia urban and rural landscapes have remained more distinct.

2. REINING IN: THE “NEIGHBORHOOD UNIT” AND THE MIKRORAYON

Both the Soviet Union and the United States have a rich history of thinking on urban theory; more than can be covered in a short article. What ultimately came to dominate the Soviet landscape over the course of sixty years of building was not disurbanism or even the Garden City, but rather the mikrorayon, an anonymously planned administrative and spatial neighborhood unit that in one form or another rippled across the peripheries of existing cities and determined the fabric of new ones. The culture of centralized planning in the Soviet Union allowed for such standardized solutions, yet the concept is far from being uniquely Soviet. On the contrary, the idea of neighborhood units in one form or another continues to surface in projects proposed for the United States, with one of the earliest examples – a 1913 project to restructure Chicago – reading like a blueprint for what would be built in the Soviet Union several decades hence.

The Soviet city was a hierarchically organized administrative structure based on a neighborhood unit. “Superblocks” accommodated 1000-1500 people. Kindergartens, playgrounds, and schools were embedded within this unit so that they were within easy walking distance. Several blocks together comprised a mikrorayon of 8000-12,000 inhabitants, the next step in the hierarchy. Facilities such as a service center (containing shops), and recreational and cultural facilities such as libraries, movie theaters, and a “cultural palace” with an auditorium and space for clubs and other recreation, provided infrastructure at this level. Several mikrorayons made up a rayon, which comprised anywhere from 30,000-50,000 inhabitants. A rayon was a fairly autonomous unit, providing a polyclinic and government services as well as recreational facilities, such as district parks. Finally, planning regions, of which Moscow (in a 1971 plan) had eight with a projected population of one million each, and Leningrad (in a 1966 plan) proposed 14, with a population of 200,000-300,000, were the largest planning unit under the Soviet system. This size was considered to be an ideal population size for newly planned cities as well (Shaw 1978, Bater 1980, White 1980, Ruble 1993).

While rural housing in the Soviet Union centered around small, single-family structures, urban housing consisted of apartments. From the 1930s through the 1950s, these were located in quite grand buildings built conventionally brick-on-brick and with richly decorated facades, and, when that became to costly to sustain, in apartment houses made of prefabricated concrete panels hoisted into place in assembly-line fashion by large rolling cranes. While individual units were small by Western standards, they were now “regular” apartments designed for a nuclear family, with a kitchen and bath per unit. Gone were the experiments with individual living cells for adults and collective boarding homes for their offspring. In their stead, the traditional family of parents, children, and often grandparents had returned.

The quality of building was usually marginal, especially after 1959, the year that Nikita Khrushchev initiated the enormous Soviet prefabricated housing programs, yet that is not the issue here. After the bout of experimental housing that tried to eradicate the hold of the Russian (peasant) family on everyday life, the arrangement of the superblock and mikrorayon shows how Soviet society settled into a compromise between collectivism
on the one hand, and a familiar family culture on the other. The nuclear family, now urbanized, sent its children to local daycares and schools, rode public transportation to work, shopped at the nearby groceries on the way home in the evening, and relaxed in parks, cinemas, and “cultural palaces” on the weekends. All of these facilities were located in close proximity to the apartments they served, while a network of streets and the placement of the buildings provided a spatial hierarchy that defined the framework of the neighborhood itself. The spatial idea was most purely expressed in the early projects from the 1930s through the 1950s, when the apartment buildings were set on the perimeter of a large block with a large verdant courtyard within. This courtyard contained everyday facilities such as daycares and schools, playgrounds, as well as services such as laundries. The mikrorayon’s shared facilities, such as a small shopping center, movie theater, cultural center, and sports facilities were located on the wider streets at the edge of the blocks. The mikrorayon as a whole was usually defined by wide arterials that wrapped it into a tidy package and provided a fast-paced exterior to contrast the pedestrian interior.

For many Russians, the mikrorayon is uniquely Soviet, although Western Europe certainly had its share of similar, but smaller, programs, such as the series of 1920s social housing estates in Vienna, Austria. Yet the United States has also had its transit-oriented planned communities with a focus on walkable neighborhoods, even if the status of such projects in a car-centered culture remains fraught with discord. Well before the automobile took over (but during the same era that Henry Ford was building his assembly-line factories in Dearborn, Michigan), William Drummond’s 1913 competition entry to restructure Chicago presented an encompassing vision that was close to what would be built by the Soviets only decades later.

“Can the suburban extensions to the great city of to-day be made to bring about the realization of a more ideal residential neighborhood than we now have?” asked Drummond in an article describing his plan for reorganizing the outskirts of Chicago in 1916. The ideas he proposed as part of a competition and housing exhibition held by the City Club of Chicago in 1913 were comprehensive and developed at several scales. Drummond’s plan, the basis of which he called the “neighborhood unit” saw the city divided into six or seven boroughs, each of which would be subdivided into neighborhoods roughly ½ mile by ½ mile in area (a “quarter section”). Each unit was to have at its heart an “institute” to provide intellectual, recreational and civic services, as well as “local business requirements” at its corners. This would create an alternate series of centers, either cultural or commercial. The space between these was mostly residential in the form of both apartment buildings...
The neighborhood unit was thus linked both to the cost single dwelling (“always in the greatest demand”), the low-movement, and the low-movement.

Drummond recognized that a project such as he envisioned required administrative restructuring, and he proposed local community ownership and control instead of individual ownership, citing the successes of the English garden city in this regard. He saw the large sweeping measure of an uncompromised master plan as essential to the success of his scheme, assessing that, “if half-way or superficial measures only are to be tried, no general improvement need be looked for” (Drummond 1916: 39). The neighborhood plan was thus to be comprehensive, and Drummond envisioned all of Chicago realigned to fit it.

Drummond’s concept was not merely organizational, he also took great care in the aesthetic properties of his project. While the competition itself did not seek entries following City Beautiful ideals, Drummond’s combination of art and science gave his project close following City Beautiful ideals, Drummond’s project. While the competition itself did not seek entries following City Beautiful ideals, Drummond’s combination of art and science gave his project close following City Beautiful ideals, Drummond’s project. While the competition itself did not seek entries following City Beautiful ideals, Drummond’s combination of art and science gave his project close following City Beautiful ideals, Drummond’s project. While the competition itself did not seek entries following City Beautiful ideals, Drummond’s combination of art and science gave his project close following City Beautiful ideals, Drummond’s project. While the competition itself did not seek entries following City Beautiful ideals, Drummond’s combination of art and science gave his project close following City Beautiful ideals, Drummond’s project.

Drummond also saw these spaces as harboring, “common dining-rooms, children’s play space, garden space, etc.,” in short, spaces that were similar to the collective spaces so central to much Soviet thinking (Drummond 1916: 41). The “institute” that was at the heart of each neighborhood was analogous to the Soviet “cultural palace”, and served to coalesce the neighborhood unit. Located roughly at its physical center, it contained, “schoolrooms, workshops ... a large assembly hall ... smaller halls for rotated use by classes, clubs and societies, for reading, music, drama, dancing, and lectures ... [while sports facilities assured that] wide and varied popular recreation would be available” (Drummond 1916: 43). Drummond saw the institute as fostering participation in civic life, and while the Soviets used their clubs as a forum for disseminating cultural propaganda, Drummond envisioned his institute as encouraging voluntary participation in the community spirit. While the Soviet mikrorayon did not include single-family housing or much opportunity for shopping – the Soviet Union could afford neither – the concept of a tapestry of administrative units that could be knit into a larger urban area remained similar to both schemes, as did the idea of strong central planning required to put the pieces together. Both the neighborhood unit and the mikrorayon were highly ordered, greenfield-site ideas. The unquestioned authority of the Soviet state made implementation much easier in that context, of course, and thus from its inception, the mikrorayon quickly advanced to being the ubiquitous Soviet planning paradigm. The American idea of the neighborhood unit had a more limited application; even considering the long history of U.S. attempts to foster such middle-class versions of community (see Silver 1985). Drummond’s plan was not realized, but a series of later new-town projects, including Clarence Perry’s famous Radburn, N.J. plan, incorporated very similar ideas of the “neighborhood unit” as a social and administrative basis of urban or suburban life. In both Soviet and American versions, such plans stirred up a concentric ripple effect in which one’s home was the center of a world that expanded into a neighborhood, a city, a region, and ultimately a nation.

CONCLUSION

The two sets of urban ideas outlined above were formulated in the early part of the twentieth century and in their respective contexts have encountered vastly different fates. Expressing a yearning for an individualistic existence free from societal constraints, both Broadacre City and Zelenyi Gorod may be seen as struggles against the cultural system in which they were born. Wright’s urban ideas were often ridiculed in his lifetime, which did not hinder him from extensively championing them through articles, exhibits, and lectures. Barshch and Ginzburg’s scheme saw a different fate: with the mood ripe for social engineering – and despite the lunacy of building such exposed housing in a cold-climate zone – construction began soon after their entry won the “Green City” competition, yet the project was abandoned as the political mood shifted (Bliznakov 1993). Their concepts fell into disfavor soon after, with the major theoretician of the disurbanist movement, Mikhail Okhitovich, murdered by Stalin in 1937.

If Broadacre City and Zelenyi Gorod expressed a longing for virgin lands and the pursuit of liberty, then the mikrorayon and the neighborhood unit expressed the inverse of that far-flung dream. It was the concentric matroyshka doll slipping back together to roost, the road trip interrupted to rediscover a sense of local kinship. For the Soviet Union, it was most certainly a pragmatic end for a country whose economic reality meant a reliance on public transportation and a dearth of private resources; the mikrorayon was a way to organize the city that struck a balance between private life in one’s family space and the public sharing of services and recreational opportunities. For the Unites States, the neighborhood unit remained one option among many. The greater availability of private transportation, and the powerful images connected with the freedom of individualized travel helped unravel the ideal of community as quickly as it could be built.
neighborhood unit thus remained a niche apparition amidst the suburbs that circled the core city.

REFERENCES


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i The analysis of Zelenyi Gorod presented here is based on the project’s 1930 presentation by its authors in the journal Sovremennaya Arkhitektura (Contemporary Architecture). Wright refined his Broadacre City concepts over the course of many years and the project has been extensively discussed; the version taken here is that of 1935, when the well-known model of the scheme was built.

ii Planning in the Soviet Union was centralized, with ideas for socialist spatial order to be universally applicable to all of the Soviet republics. The Soviet Union, however, was both multinational and multicultural. When this article refers to concepts predominant in the Russian culture (as opposed to cultures in other Soviet republics), I refer to “Russian” as opposed to “Soviet”.

iii The competition held by the City Club of Chicago in 1913 was drawn up by the Illinois Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in order to provide a planning framework for areas of Chicago that were then being haphazardly developed. The site was assumed, so that results could be generalized. Submissions had to include street forms, public open spaces, spaces for business and social requirements,
and housing, including lot sizes, dwelling and garden types. Although Garden City principles were not a requirement, the City Club included a list of books and pamphlets with the guidelines that described Garden Cities and the garden suburb movement in both Great Britain and Germany.

iv Emily Talin (2006) describes the City Efficient movement as an offshoot of the City Beautiful movement of the late nineteenth century. City Efficient saw use and serviceability as important as esthetic beauty, with a civic center of grouped public buildings central to the plans.

v The concept of the neighborhood unit is often attributed to Clarence Perry for his Radburn, N. J. plan of 1929. Donald Johnson (2002) traces the idea of the neighborhood unit back to William Drummond. Because Drummond’s plan was never realized, Perry’s work remains a crucial early example of the concept.