

The World Heritage Potential of 20th Century Urban Heritage in the Former Soviet Union

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The identification and assessment of urban World Heritage potential in the former USSR are presently complicated due to several objective factors:

- The disintegration of the Soviet Union, exacerbated by a strong politicisation of Soviet cultural heritage and quite a schematic and cliché vision of its evolution more or less until now;
- Still insufficient research on Soviet architecture and urban planning in the context of the past decades, although there are some very important new publications that have significantly broadened the knowledge and assessment;¹
- As a result, there is an underestimated resource of 20th century architectural and urban heritage in general;
- Low public appreciation;
- Evident need for re-assessment and re-evaluation of this heritage layer based on new facts and a de-politicisation approach;
- Low protection status for the majority of the 20th century cultural resources in general; lack of state will for proper preservation;
- As a consequence, there are degradation and fast destructive processes linked with redevelopment and direct mechanical demolition.

Therefore, there is a specific dilemma: the existence of a gap between the history of architecture and urban planning as an academic field of research and the preservation of 20th-century built structures as cultural heritage. Thus, it is easy to define the historic and cultural values of the Soviet urban heritage at different development stages, but it is difficult to present them as ‘cultural heritage sites’ due to the lack of sufficient protection status, legal tools or to being materially neglected. As a rule, redevelopment processes or degradation are more frequent than conservation. Within this context, World Heritage status could be a preservation tool.

All these problems were presented in the previous years, climaxing in the international conference ‘Heritage at Risk’ in Moscow in 2006, followed by publications and conferences, including the St. Petersburg Memorandum of 2008 on ‘Avant-garde and World Heritage’.² Several urban complexes were defined in this document as potential World Heritage sites, including Ekaterinburg, Uralmash, the Moscow metro and post-war skyscrapers. Since then, practically nothing has changed, and both national and international efforts have led nowhere. In 2014, only one 20th century structure – the monumental War Memorial Complex in

Volgograd (former Stalingrad) – was officially inscribed in the Russian WH Tentative List. In 2017, the Russian Ministry of Culture elaborated the national expert WH Tentative List. Only two urban complexes were included from the whole country: ‘The architectural ensemble ‘Chekists’ Settlement’ in Ekaterinburg (1929–36) and ‘The architectural ensemble ‘Quarter No 1, Sotsgorod Magnitogorsk’ (1930–36).

Soviet urban planning, the impact of which went far beyond the country’s borders, is usually associated with a stable system of principles. Among them are the state regulation of urban development in the absence of private property (first of all, of land); the significance of the master plan as a legal document; the fragmentary preservation of historic city structures within urban reconstruction, and the ‘ensemble’ principle of development, an integrated design approach to residential areas, etc. However, it is evident that there was no structural unity of urban thinking and approaches at the different development stages.

Usually, Soviet/Socialist architecture and urbanism are said to consist of three chronologically and stylistically homogeneous consecutive periods: the avant-garde (1920s–early 1930s), the so-called ‘Stalinist’ retrospective architecture (early 1930s–mid 1950s), and post-war Modernism (end of the 1950s–1980s). The WH potential of urban structures in the former USSR could be defined within these development layers:

I. The avant-garde period (1920s – early 1930s)

The early ‘avant-garde’ period was marked by attempts to establish general planning laws, define the major differences between the ‘Socialist’ and the ‘Capitalist’ city, as well as by the formation of a new type of ‘Socialist’ city (Sotsgorod) on the basis of rational planning and within the confrontation of urban-deurbanisation concepts. Among the main values and characteristics that could form the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), it is important to name the following principles (some of them also played an important role in later periods):

- Abolishment of private property, including land and all real estate, also historic buildings;
- Innovative social demands in light of the destruction of the traditional social stratification after 1917; ambitious plans for social levelling, unification of private life, promotion of the commune-house principles;



Figs. 1a and 1b: Ekaterinburg, ensemble of the 'Chekists' Settlement' (Gorodok Chekistov), 1929–36, I. Antonov, V. Sokolov et al (2010)

- Intensive discussion of the problems of settlement aimed at erasing differences between 'city' and 'village';
 - Rapid industrialisation leading to vivid urban expansion and construction;
 - Professional competition basis (including international contests); unique merge of local and foreign professionals arriving in the USSR;
 - Rational principles for planning schemes and pragmatic approaches, etc.
- This layer may be illustrated by former Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg), the Russian 'Capital of Constructivism', which was connected with an enormous concentration of financial/human resources and a bold industrialisation pro-



Fig. 1c: Ekaterinburg, the Print House, 1929–30, G. Golubev (2010)

ject. It has the biggest cluster of early modernist buildings in the former USSR, with a rich variety of architectural typologies. Among them are the ensemble of the ‘*Chekists’ Settlement*’ (Gorodok Chekistov, 1929–36, I. Antonov, V. Sokolov et al); the *House of Industry* (1931, D. Fridman et al); the *Print House* (1929–30, G. Golubev); the *sportive complex ‘Dinamo’* (1929–34, V. Sokolov), and other central monuments in the capital of the Urals. These constructivist clusters have the federal and the regional level of protection and possess WH potential for serial nomination, though there are significant threats of neglect, primitive reconstruction and chaotic urban development (Figs. 1a, b and c).

Another option is a serial ‘Sotsgorod’ nomination, which could present the phenomenon of a new type of ‘Socialist city’ linked to industrial complexes and based on a rational planning structure with a hierarchy of public spaces, state-owned residential areas (including commune houses), new infrastructure and distribution system (laundries, baths, factory-kitchens, workers’ clubs, children’s institutions, sports facilities, parks, etc). All aspects of this urban system had a major goal: the formation of a new type of man and society.³

The ‘*Avtostroy*’ in Nizhny Novgorod was built for the Gorky automobile plant through international collaboration (1930, MVTU brigade, Austin Company, E. May). Rectangular quarters were combined with the main streets which were directed diagonally towards the automobile plant so that workers could get to their workplaces quickly. In the late 1930s, monumental residential quarters such as the ‘Grey Busygin’ House by I. Golosov or the ‘Radius House’ by N. Poludov and N. Krasilnikov significantly enlarged the urban scale. Another component was the exemplary collaboration between Soviet and foreign specialists at the *Quarter No 1, ‘Sotsgorod’ Magnitogorsk* (E. May, S. Chernyshev, Bauhaus brigade, 1929–36). Built near a metallurgical plant, the city became an experimental site for designing a comfortable, rationally organised living environment taking into consideration limited funds, building materials and engineering equipment. Minimal housing was combined with recreation facilities, sports grounds and social institutions. The European concept of ‘*Neues Bauen*’ was experimentally developed under the new social conditions and with a lack of private property. Both sites have federal and regional protection levels; however, there are numerous threats of degradation, neglect and redevelopment (Fig. 2).⁴

The *State Industry Building* (Gosprom, now Derzhprom, S. Serafimov, S. Kravets, M. Felger, 1925–28) in Kharkov⁵ represents one of the world-famous avant-garde manifestos of the 20th century consisting of several buildings radially arranged in the plan. It is a dynamic huge-scale urban composition with hanging bridges over the passages at different levels built on a rhythmic increase of masses declining in the centre; a kind of ‘city within a city’. In 2017, the Ukraine nominated this Socialist symbol for the WH Tentative List. Criterion (iv), the only criterion applied, states:



Fig. 2: ‘*Avtostroy*’ residential houses in Nizhny Novgorod, ‘Grey Busygin House’, 1936–38, I. Golosov (2015)

*Derzhprom is the world’s first state-level office building solved in modernist forms. The world’s largest building in the constructivist style was built at the beginning of the worldwide creative development of this style and had a significant impact on the development of not only Ukrainian but also world culture and architecture.*⁶ Although unique and state-protected, there are risks of authenticity loss and development projects in the near vicinity.

II. ‘Stalinist’ retrospective architecture (early 1930s – mid 1950s)

In 1932, when the vector of ‘avant-garde’ was politically suppressed and changed to the ‘Socialist Realism’ ideology, a master plan of 1935 for the reconstruction of Moscow aimed at creating a new metropolitan ensemble was turned into a model and killed an innovative ‘Sotsgorod’ concept. Foreign participation in urban planning was actually blocked, and urban development returned to the bosom of traditional ideas of ‘ensemble’, dressed in stylistic forms. Against this background, the active formation of the main city’s thoroughfares and focal compositional points spread anew, and simultaneously mass building urban concepts aimed at the fusion of classical planning schemes with industrial methods of housing construction were developed. At the same time, several ambitious technical projects with an urban focus were launched in



Fig. 3a: 'Mayakovskaya' deep-level metro station, Moscow, 1938, A. Dushkin (2014)

the USSR. The post-war period of the late 1940s–50s, associated with large-scale triumphal urban reconstructions as 'Monuments of Victory', continued the development of prestigious ensembles.

This heritage layer features several urban examples with World heritage potential, though there are quite different evaluations of this phenomenon: from the representation of Soviet/Stalinist architecture and town planning as one of the branches of totalitarian art (parallel to Germany, Italy or China) to an amusing fashion for 'Socialist Realism' marked by 'half-barbarian' Communist aesthetics. Assessed are numerous 20th century stylistic interpretations, including Neo-Renaissance, Neo-Classicism, 'Proletarian' Classics, or Neo-Russian style in mediaeval and Classicist post-war versions. The method of 'Socialist Realism', as defined in the late 1930s, called for quite understandable principles: truth in architecture, use of classical heritage, nature as an integral part of the architectural ensemble, national forms in architecture, synthesis of arts and high technology.⁷ This corpus of guidelines had a significant impact on Eastern and Central Europe in the post-war period under new political and social conditions.

Opposed to Modernism and Russian avant-garde in scale, mass, rhythm, style, texture and images, Stalinist architecture is associated with several urban megaprojects representing 'Socialist Monumentalism'.⁸

– *The System of the Moscow metro* (1930s–50s) is one of the most extraordinary underground urban structures in the world for its combination of efficient engineering and



Fig. 3b: Underground railway map for Moscow, 1934, worked out under the supervision of M. Bedritsky



Fig. 5: High-rise building on Kotelnicheskaya embankment, Moscow, 1947–52, D. Chechulin, A. Rostkovsky (2012)

extravagant design of ‘palaces for the masses’. This is an outstanding hydrogeology project, demonstrating a victory of engineering skills in the battle for space. It provided possibilities for architectural creativity. Opened in 1935, the new Russian underground destroyed the Western stereotype of the technical transportation structure. A unique functional space dressed in the forms of ‘high’ architecture and art was designed by leading architects and artists as a ‘synthesis of the arts’, using marble, sculpture, paintings and mosaics for its decoration. Although world-famous, the Moscow metro is only partly protected on a regional level; ground-water, inappropriate reconstructions and crowding have led to the deterioration of several stations, including the most famous ones, although their restoration has been launched (Figs. 3a and b).⁹

– *The Channel Moscow-Volga* (V. Krinsky, A. Rukhlyadev, G. Vegman, et al, 1932–37) represents a unique technical, architectural, urban and social heritage site in Moscow and the Tver regions of 128 km length. It consists of 240 different technical structures, including ten dams, eleven locks, eight hydro-electro stations, five water reserves, and pump stations. Infilled with water in 1937, it has an artificial levelling with significant change of water levels – from 124 to 162 m. The Channel is linked with other water systems and turned Moscow into the ‘port of five seas’. It also represents a traumatic heritage as it was built by Gulag prisoners. This potential WH site has inadequate protection and shows serious deterioration and development risks (Fig. 4).

– *The System of High-rise Buildings* in Moscow (1947–52) represents post-war Triumphalism and the first European version of skyscrapers. Placed at a great distance from each other, seven Stalinist towers create a huge ensemble of megastructures, a new system of vertical dominants, disconnected in scale from the traditional urban fabric. Their ‘crystalline’ masses as clots of energy, dressed in retrospective forms, rise from the low urban strata and reveal the planning logic of the city. The implementation of this quasi-Utopia with the nucleus of the unrealised Palace of Soviets was the crown of the Romantic myth of ‘Socialist Realism’, which influenced other countries of the post-war Eastern bloc. At the associative level, the Moscow skyscrapers also developed the phenomenon of ‘Manhattan’ and stood for the idea of technological progress and possible future. Although world-famous, they are protected only on the regional level (Fig. 5).

– *The Ensemble of the VDNKH¹⁰ Exhibition* in Moscow (V. Oltarzhevsky et al, 1937–54) is another urban example of the enormous complex of the ‘city within a city’. This is a large-scale monument to the former USSR representing the country with all its republics as national pavilions. This famous ‘SocRealism’ complex demonstrated political and economic ambitions, huge geographic dimensions, multi-nationality, and a variety of regional artistic schools. The exhibition typology predetermined the creation of pavilions of unusual architectural forms, saturated with sculpture, unrestrained decor, and a variety of fine motifs and finishing materials (including ceramics, mosaics, gilt). The com-

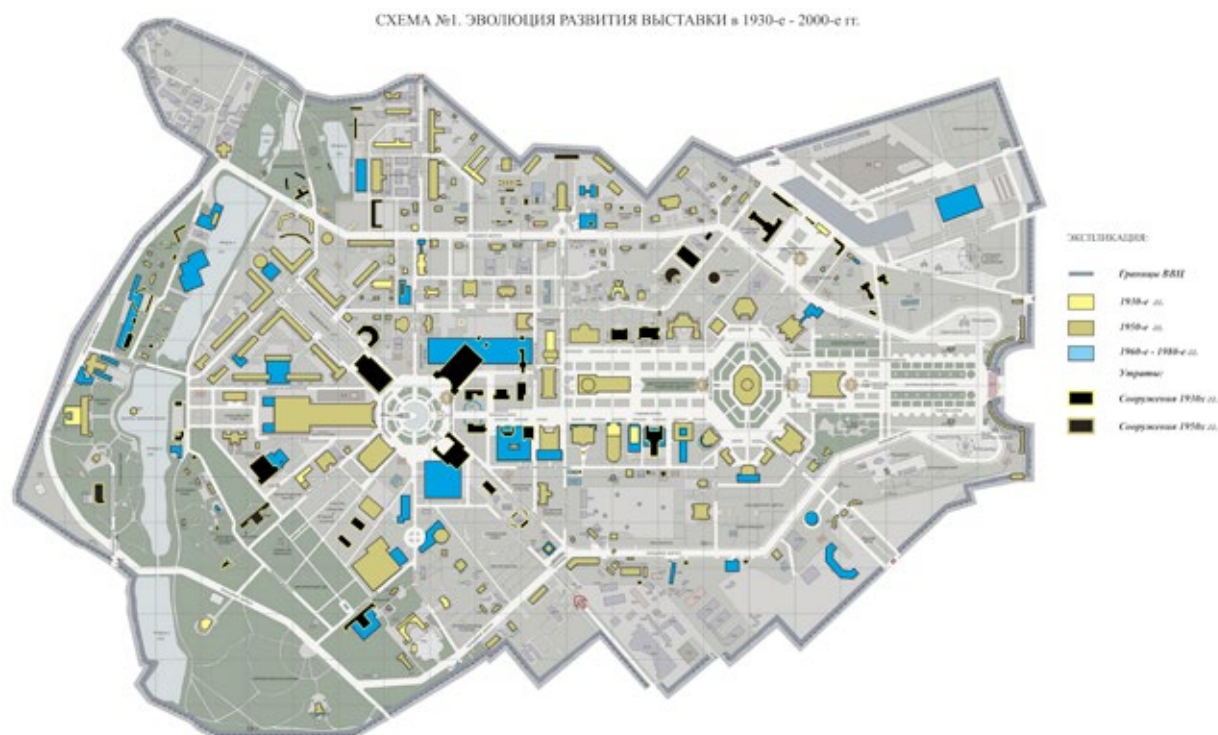


Fig. 6: Ensemble of the VDNKH Exhibition, Moscow (V. Oltarzhevsky et al, 1937–54), scheme of the exhibition development, 1930–2000

plex reflected the worldwide trend of Art Deco transferred to a ‘Soviet’, sometimes almost to a kitsch version. This eclectic space was built on a classical basis and acquired considerable historic and cultural values. Protected on a federal level, the pavilions being restored, the VDNKH Exhibition is at risk of being drastically changed and redeveloped (Fig. 6).

– *The Central Planning Ensemble of Yerevan*, the capital of Armenia, with the master plan by the outstanding architect A. Tamanyan (1924) is one of the examples of world capitals designed in the 20th century. The round form itself, referring to the classical ideal (Plato; the Renaissance ‘ideal city’), is unique in its scale, topography, its clearly seen planning axis and the main vista, with Biblical Ararat as the focal point. This major natural and urban dominant plays a decisive role in establishing a planning link between the main Republic and Theatre Squares (1920s–50s). Yerevan was built of local building materials (tufa) with specific colour and texture. The site is the symbol of Armenia and the centre of national cultural revival. This potential urban WH site suffers from quick development processes and presently is under threat (Figs. 7a and b).

– In 2014, Russia added the *Mamayev Kurgan Memorial Complex ‘To the Heroes of the Battle of Stalingrad’* to the WH Tentative List, upon criteria (i), (iv), (vi).¹¹ This is the only 20th century site nominated by the State Party. It commemorates the Stalingrad Battle (1942) which determined the post-war balance in the world. The complex on the Volga banks with the dominant huge allegorical statue ‘The Motherland Calls!’ is the tallest in Europe (E.

Vuchetich, eng. N. Nikitin, 1959–67). Mamayev Kurgan is 85 m high and seems to be a sculpture itself, floating above the city. However, there is good reason to extend the nomination with other potential components: *the post-war urban reconstruction of Volgograd (Stalingrad)*. The rebuilding of the completely destroyed city was no less a feat, and its triumphal ensembles, monumental buildings and staircases towards the Volga also became symbols of victory (V. Simbirtsev, A. Kurovsky et al, 1953). Presently, the city centre is experiencing the impact of development, which reduces the value of this important potential WH site.

– The serial transnational WH nomination *Post-war Central Magistral in Eastern and Central Europe (1940s–1950s)* is an international initiative of Belarus, Germany, Poland, Ukraine and Russia. The main metropolitan streets of Minsk (Avenue of Independence), Berlin (Karl-Marx-Allee), Warsaw (Marszałkowska) and Kiev (Kreschatik) were built based upon the Tverskaya Street pattern in Moscow. This famous prewar model of Socialist urban planning became a kind of ‘route map’ in its selection of scale, image, functional content and architectural style, marked by features of national peculiarity (Eclecticism, Neo-classicism or late versions of ‘Socialist Art Deco’). The participants of the Minsk international workshops reiterated *the importance of the Socialist architecture of the Post-World War II period in the context of the history of architecture and culture in general and support to the idea of its studying, documenting and safeguarding in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe*.¹²

III. Post-war modernism (late 1950s – 1980s)

The post-war neo-modernist period began after Stalin's death in 1953 and Khrushchev's Thaw ('Ottepel') after 1956, with a change of the political course, the end of repressions and Gulag. It left us the legacy of a developed concept of micro-district ('mikroraijon'), vast areas of typified residential construction and examples of 'new towns'. They were based on individual projects and on an environmental approach aimed at improving the quality of life (Zelenograd), including newly built cities with scientific research functions. Among them are:

– *Akamedgorodok (Academic City) in Novosibirsk* (late 1950s–1970s), the world-famous research centre founded by the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1957. This is a unique landscape and architectural ensemble built as the 'Forest-City' near Ob Sea with clearly expressed functional zoning, free micro-regional planning structure, and a residential area set within natural harmony and beauty. The site has great ecological value and historical significance for the exploration of Siberia in the 20th century. *Akamedgorodok* has more than 20 scientific institutions and Novosibirsk State University; it acquired international fame and significance and was used as a prototype for other cities of science, such as Tsukuba in Japan. The site is protected on a regional level; presently it is under development pressure (Fig. 8).



Fig. 7b: Yerevan, main Republic Square, 1924–1958, A. Tamanyan et al (2016)

– *The Complex of Star City (Zvezdny Gorodok, 1960s–1980s)* was launched not far from Moscow in 1960 as the Cosmonaut Training Centre. The master plan of Star City (V. Asse, 1973–74) gave birth to the unique research and residential centre for development of cosmonautics in the USSR, one of the global leaders of space exploration in the 20th century. Set in a picturesque landscape, the city was not demarcated on maps and could only be entered with a special permit. Only recently, both the Cosmonaut Training Centre named after Y. Gagarin and the Star City were



Fig. 7a: Central planning ensemble of Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, aerial view, master plan by A. Tamanyan, 1924



Fig. 8: Akamedgorodok (Academic City) in Novosibirsk, late 1950s – 1970s, aerial view, 2005

opened to the public. The complex has two of the world's largest centrifuges for testing space overloads, as well as the hydro laboratory for simulating weightlessness in the outer space. The site has no protection status. In 2017, it was included in the WH International 'AeroSpace' serial initiative (Fig. 9).

This analysis is the first attempt to identify 20th century urban sites with World Heritage potential in the former USSR. It requires further detail and research. There is also a need for comparative analysis, which would emphasise the most significant values and unique characteristics forming the OUV. However, it is important that the vector in the direction of further study has been designated.

¹ In 2018 several fundamental publications in Russian were published (see bibliography list).

² Avantgarde und Welterbe. Petersburger Dialog. ICOMOS Deutsches Nationalkomitee, 2008.

³ BODENSCHATZ / POST, Städtebau, 2003, Russian edition Moscow 2015, pp. 31–67.

⁴ PISTORIUS / VOLPERT, Vor dem Verschwinden.

⁵ From 1919 to 1934 Kharkov was the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR.

⁶ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6249/>

⁷ ALABYAN, Protiv formalizma, 1936, pp.1–3.

⁸ As defined by M. Czarnecki during the debates in Berlin, 2017.

⁹ DUSHKINA, The Moscow Metro, 2008, pp. 128–134.

¹⁰ VDNKH – USSR Exhibition of Economic Achievements.

¹¹ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5936/>

¹² Recommendations of the 4th International Expert Workshop, December 2, 2017, Minsk.

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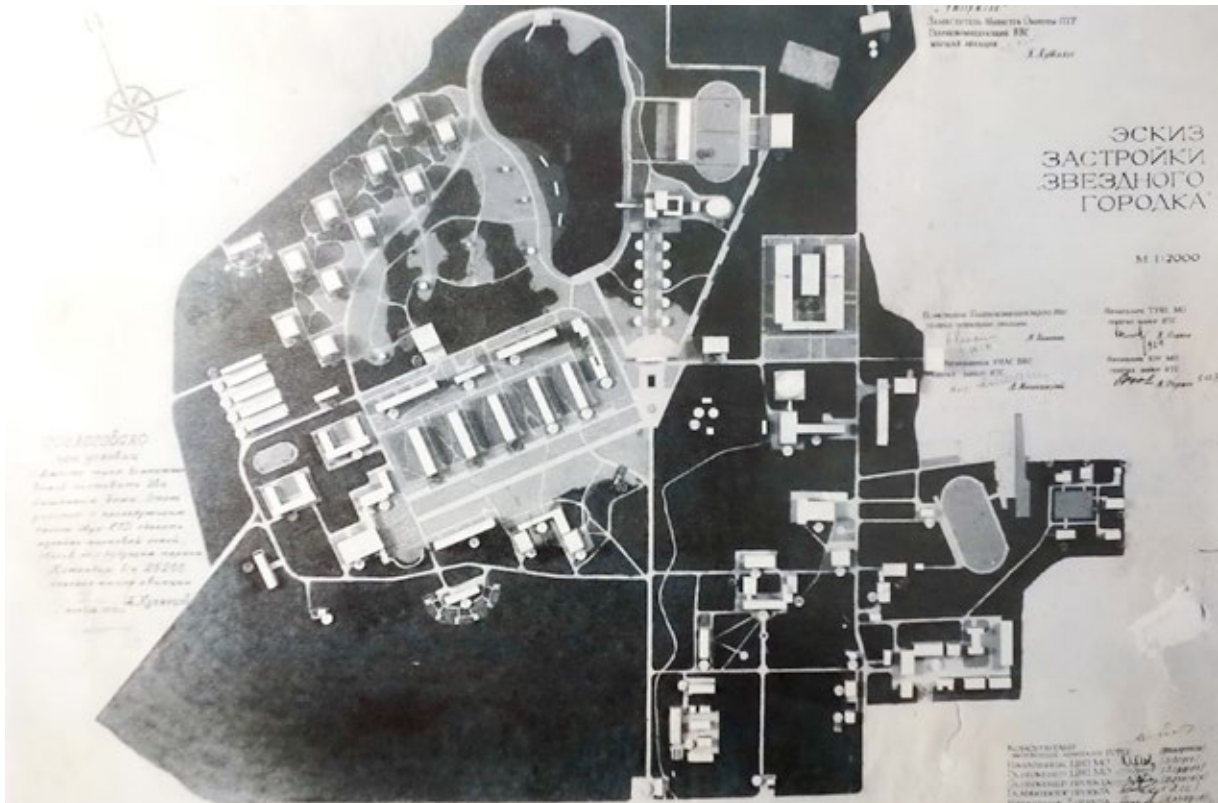


Fig. 9: Star City (Zvezdny Gorodok, 1960s – 1980s) and the Cosmonaut Training Centre, master plan (V.ASSE et al, 1973–74)

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Das Welterbepotenzial des stadtebaulichen Erbes des 20. Jahrhunderts in der ehemaligen Sowjetunion

Abstract

Eine Identifizierung und Bewertung von stadtebaulichem Welterbepotenzial in der ehemaligen UdSSR ist derzeit aufgrund mehrerer objektiver Faktoren kompliziert. Dazu gehoren unzureichende Forschung zur sowjetischen Stadtplanung und die Notwendigkeit ihrer Neubewertung, schnell voranschreitende zerstorerische Prozesse im Zusammenhang mit Sanierung und Marktwirtschaft, eine generell unterschatzte Schicht des architektonischen und stadtischen Erbes des 20. Jahrhunderts, ein unzureichender Schutzstatus und in der Folge Verfall, Veranderung und direkte mechanische Zerstorung. Der Aufsatz behandelt einige potenzielle/hypothetische Kandidaten fur das Welterbe.