



From Socialist Culture to Capitalist Leisure

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From Socialist Culture to Capitalist Leisure

By Alla Vronskaya

Politics have always been inseparable from the running of Moscow's most famous public park.

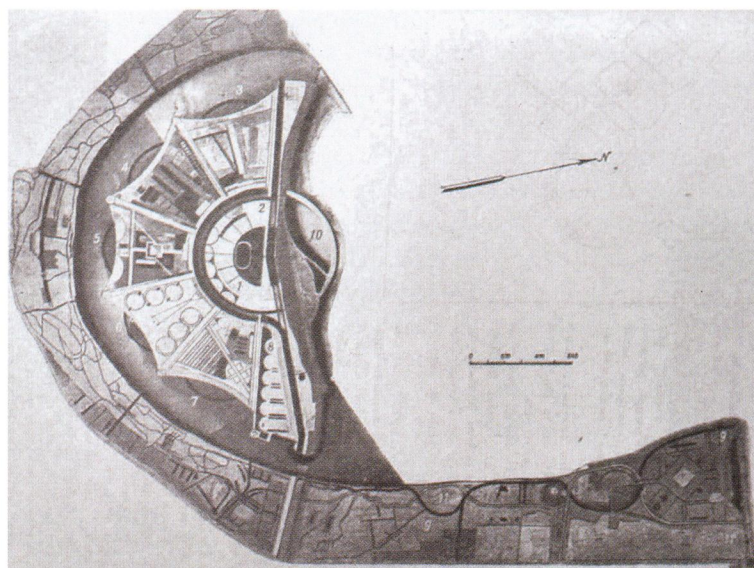
What is a socialist park? This question proved to be pertinent for a generation of Soviet architects and bureaucrats of the 1920s, faced with the task of creating a new architectural environment for a new society – one where architects worked for the people rather than those who exploited them. The new socialist park subverted all the usual solutions and definitions. It could be neither formal in style, because that was associated with feudal society, nor a picturesque landscape, which was linked to the bourgeoisie. Moreover, rather than being an exclusive space for the select few, the Soviet park welcomed everyone – sometimes, as in the case of Moscow with its 2m population, hosting additional millions of visitors. Indeed, this city, the new capital of the young state, flew many a trial balloon for various social and urban experiments, of which the development of its novel form of landscape architecture proved to be one of the most interesting.

The definition of the new Soviet public park, which came to be known as 'the park of culture and leisure', was codified in 1928. Shortly after, a complex system of 'parks of culture and leisure' was developed, according to which every town, large village and many collective farms would receive their own public park. Continuing the tradition of German *Volksparcs*, which since the second half of the 19th century had served as spaces of physical recuperation and quiet rest for the working population of big industrial cities, Soviet 'parks of culture and leisure' supplemented the German emphasis on physical well-being with a Marxist concept of leisure. Now, the park not

only helped workers to restore their health, but also allowed meaningful spending of their time outside the factory.

Discouraging passive rest, Marxist 'leisure' encouraged the workers to devote their free time to learning, expanding their knowledge, and otherwise transforming themselves into physically and intellectually improved personalities. Evening classes, lecture halls and education centres for children were located throughout the parks, as well as places for physical education and sport. And of course, no leisure, especially for the newly urbanized residents of Soviet cities in the 1930s, could be without attractions such as theatres, circuses and other performances for the masses.

The major public park in the Soviet Union was in Moscow. Named after the famous revolutionary writer Maxim Gorky, it was commonly known as Gorky Park, although officially named 'the Central Park of Culture and



Right: Konstantin Mel'nikov's Project for the Central Park of Culture and Leisure in Moscow, 1930.

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Leisure'. It was opened in August 1928 on the site of the 1923 All-Russian Agricultural Exhibition, which had in turn occupied the space of what had been the city's largest rubbish dump. Later, the park was assigned a much larger plot of land, taking in the whole curve of the Moskva River and the steep banks of the Vorob'evy Hills on its other side (where the Stalinist sky-scraper of Moscow State University now stands). This grand-scale project, however, was never realized, and the park always remained locked within its original boundaries.

Gorky Park was destined to fulfil an important mission: to become a model socialist park that would later be replicated throughout the country. It was, in fact, a laboratory of Soviet urban landscape, where the concept of a 'park of culture and leisure' was developed. The initial design was as revolutionary as the park's social mission and its first architects were the avant-garde luminaries Konstantin Mel'nikov and El Lissitzky.

Mel'nikov, the designer of the Soviet pavilion at the 1925 Paris Exposition, proposed a project centered on the park's major entrance, the railway station, from which different zones stemmed like the petals of a flower until they reached the bank of the Moskva River, which dictated the shape of the park. The geometric arrangement of the trapezoid 'petals' resembled Suprematist paintings, while the entrance and the zone of primary development on the former exhibition site were marked by a diamond-shaped parterre – the only part of the project that was eventually realized.

By 1929, Mel'nikov had been replaced by the painter, architect and exhibition designer El Lissitzky, who saw the park less as an opportunity for formal architectural experiments, and more as an exhibition – the site for mass theatrical spectacles and processions. Indeed, ever since his time, in Gorky Park as well as in other Soviet parks, major processional avenues have been lined with posters, exhibition stands and pavilions.

In 1933 Gorky Park welcomed another chief architect: Aleksandr Vlasov, who would soon become one of the major architects of the Stalinist era. He gave the park a more classical outlook that conformed to the new official style. Classical order, vases, marble staircases and statues appeared; yet at the same time he introduced more playful elements, such as the Lilies-of-the-Valley Alley with lamps in the shape of the flowers, big marble frogs that 'guarded' the embankment of the river, and – the symbol of the park – the scandalous naked *Girl with an Oar* statue by the sculptor Ivan Shadr, which was placed in the middle of the central pool in 1937, the year of the Great Purges.

Right: Photograph of *The Girl with an Oar* taken in the late 1930s.

Together with Lissitzky, another person who was to play a key role in its history came to the park – twenty-five-year-old Betti Glan, who had previously directed one of the largest workers' clubs in Moscow. With this experience, she developed the principle of activation of visitors, according to which visitors to the park were not merely passive spectators – rather, they were co-workers, collectively participating in the development of the park's continuous recreation.

Glan claimed the credit for creating a novel form of mass action, a political rally that combined a meeting with a theatrical performance in which people, objects and machines played an equal part. Her specialization was the theatrical direction of mass holidays and celebrations, which supplemented the worker's individual development – a rational explanation of their role within the political and economic events in the country with an aesthetic and emotional charge. A holiday, as defined by Glan, had to demonstrate the advantages of socialist order by a 'cheerful and joyful organization of leisure'.

This totalitarian character of mass rallies and celebrations was out of place after Khrushchev's liberalization of the mid-1950s. Moreover, the park's educational mission was boring for many visitors who

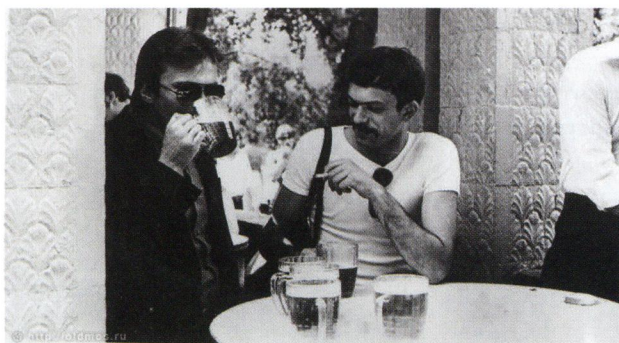




State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Above: S. A. Luchishkin, *Celebration on Vorobiovy Hills*, 1932.
 Below: A Beer Bar in the 1980s.

preferred the attractions and dancing which had originally, in the 1930s, been recognized as the prime feature of 'parks of culture and leisure'. Although, throughout the Soviet era, Gorky Park remained a giant playground, still containing some pavilions, theatres and restaurants, by the 1980s it was visited mostly by families and by youths attracted by the beer bar (a rarity in Soviet Moscow) near the central fountain. Its fate mirrored that of the state which produced it: following the decline of the 1980s, it saw neglect and abandonment in the 1990s. The pavilions gradually decayed and were closed down, and soon little more than attractions and bars were left as reminders of its former glory.



With the oil boom of the first years of the new century, the shameful condition of Gorky Park became a topic of frequent criticism and discussion in Russia; but it was only in 2011 that a restoration programme was announced. It is now widely associated with Sergey Kapkov, the Director of the Park in 2011, for whom the park, just as for Betti Glan some eighty years earlier, became the opportunity for a remarkable career rise.

Born in 1975, the bureaucrat Kapkov rose to prominence as PR manager for the London-based Russian 'oligarch' Roman Abramovich, whom he helped to obtain the positions of a governor and an MP in 1999-2000. Kapkov himself, a member of the ruling United Russia party, served as an MP between 2003 and 2011. And from 2004, Kapkov simultaneously headed the Abramovich-patronized National Academy of Football.

It was the Abramovich connection that brought the successful pro-Kremlin functionary to Gorky Park. In 2011, the Center for Contemporary Art *Garage*, which belongs to Abramovich's partner Daria Zhukova, had to leave the historic Mel'nikov building that it occupied (and which gave the centre its name). Zhukova's choice of a new home for her centre was the Hexahedron pavilion in Gorky Park. Kapkov,

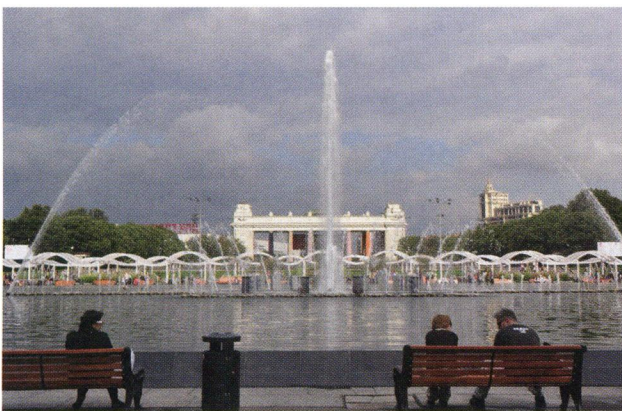
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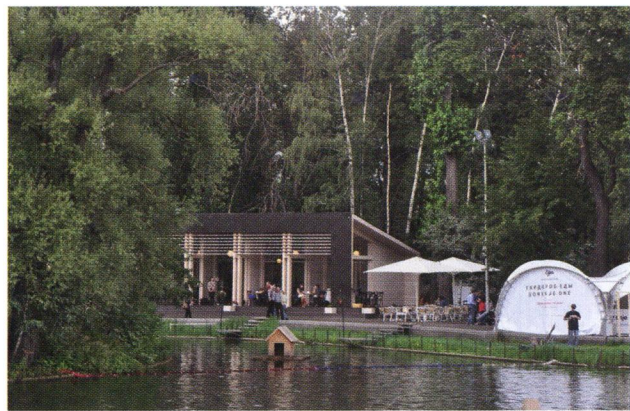
Above: Table tennis players in Gorky Park, September 2012.



Above: The children's playground, September 2012.



Above: The fountain with the entrance beyond.



Above: Restaurants by the lake.

Abramovich's trusted aid, was there to facilitate the move. (He had, indeed, experience of dealing with divas, being married to a TV-show host whom he left for another one, Ksenia Sobchak, today a vocal leader of the anti-Putin opposition).

In March 2011, Kapkov left his parliamentary position to become the new director of Gorky Park, a position offered to him after negotiations between Abramovich and the new mayor of Moscow Sergey Sobianin. The ambitious \$2bn reconstruction was to be jointly funded by the city and local business, Abramovich only sponsoring the reconstruction of the Hexahedron.

So today the park looks very different from how it had looked before. It has become a mix of Western hippyism and trendy nostalgia for the 1930s USSR. The old attractions and kiosks have been removed and replaced with flower-beds, lawns and restaurants. Children can play in new playgrounds, while their parents (and everyone else) are welcome to enjoy free wifi Internet throughout the park. Cafés sell frozen yoghurt (a Western novelty in Russia) as well as nostalgic Park of Culture-brand ice-cream in 1930s-inspired wrappers.

The widely-publicized project for the restoration of the whole of the original park was, however, abandoned. The 'original' plan, indeed, would be hard to find as none of the projects prepared by the avant-garde architects in the 1930s had ever been realized. Restoring the appearance of the park to what it looked like then would also mean organizing giant political rallies and theatrical performances with thousands of participants and spectators – a plan too ambitious, perhaps, even for the official Stalinist nostalgia of today's Russia.

Even Mel'nikov's flower-bed, which still existed and would not have been difficult to restore, was not executed. Instead, one can see plastic pergolas in the style of 1970s retro-Futurism around the Soviet-looking benches. Having received no financial support from Abramovich, the park had to look for other sources of funding. Today, its primary sponsor seems to be Swedish furniture company IKEA, which supports the park in return for a massive advertising campaign. In September 2012, for example, the park looked like a big IKEA festival: the columns of the main entrance were wrapped in a colourful IKEA advertisement, while the rest of the park was full of IKEA stages and pavilions.

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While Kapkov's work as the director of Gorky Park was so highly assessed as to bring him the position of head of Moscow's Department of Culture, the city's parks have hardly ever been more endangered than today. The notoriously expensive Moscow property prices have led to a constant demand for real estate, which is often bought for investment and speculation rather than living. During the twenty years of Yuri Luzhkov's mayorship, Moscow suburbs, former industrial zones, empty lots, and even the Sanitary Protection Zones between Soviet apartment blocks (required to protect nature and people from nearby industrial sites) have all been developed and filled with new residential skyscrapers, many of which remain sold out but never inhabited.

As this resource has been exhausted, the new mayor Sergey Sobyenin, equally eager to satisfy the profit hunger of the real-estate magnates, resorted to what seems the last available (and an easily accessible) option – Moscow's parks. In Soviet times Moscow could boast one of the country's largest areas of green space – real woods and forests. Today, these are seen as a lucrative piece of expensive land within the boundaries of the city. Sobyenin has accepted a programme for the 'improvement (*blagoustrojstvo*) and development (*razvitiie*) of parks', which includes constructing restaurants and recreation centres.

And as the 'improved' sites lose their status of natural conservation areas they become luxurious residential districts set in the former forests. Serebrianyi Bor, one of the

oldest preserved wood-parks in the country and one of the most prestigious parts of the city to live in (Sobyenin himself has a summer residence there) has been the first victim, where the new 'improvement' plan approves the eight-fold expansion of its residential sector. Other major wood-parks—Losinyi Ostrov, Bittsevo, Sokolniki, Izmailovo—have also been condemned to development.

The recent transformation of Gorky Park, although generally praised by the press and loved by the majority of Muscovites, is nevertheless problematic. Why cannot the richest city of an oil-booming country maintain its major public park without money from private capital? Is Westernization the only plausible restoration programme for a Soviet Park?

The one positive impact, though, that the park's restoration has definitely had, was reminding the people about the importance of having green public spaces in their city – a reminder, perhaps, that will make them ready to struggle for the preservation of the other Moscow parks during this crucial moment in their history. ❀

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Below: The Stalinist entrance to Gorky Park wrapped in an IKEA advertisement in September 2012. Photographs on these pages by the author.

