

Jonathan Charley writes from Moscow, a city that shares Glasgow's latitude if not its perspective

Not unlike a human body, cities accumulate scars that no amount of plastic surgery can fully repair. Moscow is dominated by the consequences of three major operations that have taken place since the great fire of 1812 when, in the face of Napoleon's advancing armies, the population fled, torching two thirds of the city on the way.

The first belongs to the 19th-century emergence of Moscow as a thriving administrative and trading centre, with the relics of the mediaeval heart of the city reorganised within a classically inspired radial plan.

With the revolutionary avant-garde a crumbling memory, the second operation began after 1935. It sought to transform Moscow into the agit-prop showpiece of the Soviet empire. It was a monumental project to build a "third Rome", resplendent with widened boulevards flanked by stone cliffs, underpinned by a marbled metro and crowned by the seven stars of Stalin's citadels.

One only really sees the third phase of surgery that dates from the late 1950s if you travel beyond the inner ring roads. Here the city tumbles away from its web of axes, squares and monuments into an ocean of pre-fabricated concrete residential blocks grouped in mikro-rayons. Like the schemes in Glasgow, these were meant to be fully serviced neighbourhoods but have since become notorious for poor construction, poverty, and the inadequate provision of social and cultural facilities.

Although a spatial and social simplification, it is difficult to resist seeing Moscow and Glasgow as dual cities, with a geographical division between the dynamic boom town of imperial memory at the centre and the impoverishment of the mikro-rayoni, and the schemes surrounding and infringing upon it. Not unlike the tourist schedule for Glasgow and Edinburgh, it is possible to visit Moscow and leave still completely unaware of the spaces of everyday urban life experienced by the seven million Muscovites that do not possess mobile phones.

One response to this deepening social inequality, spatial separation and exclusion is to resort to a culture of reinvention and to engage in a sustained programme of self-promotion to create a rhetoric of progress. The attempted reconstruction of Glasgow as a tourist mecca and service centre feeding the culture industry, and devoting itself to localised displays of consumer affluence and organised ritual, is one experiment in this global phenomenon.

Moscow's experiment in urban reconstruction is predictably grander but equally contradictory as it aspires to be the headquarters of a particularly wild type of capitalism. Ever since the first rumblings of perestroika, there has been a steady stream of ambitious bureaucrats and party hacks running away as fast as possible from their Soviet identities. Forming a fragile alliance with gangsters and capitalists they sought not so much to dismantle the state as to quarrel over the spoils and to ensure the transition from a state capitalist system to one where private capital accumulation could be given a moral, legal or, if need be, illegal foundation.

This did not, however, stop them from trying to dismantle the symbols of the Soviet past. For it is one of the "principal spoils of the victor" on the ascension to power, to puncture the skyline and to seize, occupy or destroy the buildings, lands and urban spaces symbolic of the previous regime.

Like teenagers ridding the room of the remnants of childhood, first to go were the statues of fallen heroes leaving gaping holes in the middle of squares. As the busts of Dzerzhinsky, Kalinin, and Lenin were being dumped in a park, the new censors rushed up and down the boulevards spraying the red banners white, and in place of the slogan "invest your labour in the State and we will guarantee you socialism" substituted "invest your money in the Olga bank and we will guarantee you a 1,000% profit". Hammer and sickle street lamps flickered their last, the roadside exhibitions of heroes and heroines of labour disappeared under dust, and the gable end tributes to Lenin were replaced by Marlboro Man.

Of late, the process of cosmetic reconstruction has descended into -

idiocy. Gogol and Bulgakov would have been proud, with the parading of an absurd yearning for an imperial, older Russia of twin-headed eagles, bronze bears and miserable priests - a manufactured nostalgia in which place names and streets vanish overnight, and the whole landscape of the city centre becomes enveloped by the letter B. Bananas, bars, banks, boutiques, Bistros, BMW's, bullets, biznizmeni, bandits and beggars.

Not content with a mere facelift, Mayor Luzhkov launched a programme of Grand Projects in the tradition of vainglorious autocrats. These included the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, the Sculpture of Peter the Great (or is it Peter Pan?) and the completion of the Park of Victory - three colossal

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historical pastiches that represent cornerstones in the construction of a new nationhood, defined as Orthodox, Russian and patriotic.

These have been accompanied by the construction on Maneshnaya Ploshad of a giant luxury shopping mall to commemorate the 850th anniversary of the city in 1997, thus depriving Muscovites of one of the historic meeting places for political demonstrations. Like the competition entries for Borovitskaya Ploshad next to the western entrance to the Kremlin, a mixed venture of luxury hotel, shops, offices and a museum, there is revealed not only a proto-Stalinist predilection

for monumental mimesis but a new phase in the development of a private market for land and buildings.

It is axiomatic but true to say that those that suffered under the old regime continue to do so now. But one of the differences is that the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty, previously hidden by the removal of unwanted institutions and zones away from the cameras of the world press, is now acutely visible.

The new ruling elite, have alarmingly voracious appetites for the accoutrements of petty-bourgeois culture, with mirrored glass offices and Rolex kitsch being particularly popular. And they are nasty with it, revelling in the ostentatious disposal of enormous amounts of dollars in the casinos carved out of the remains of a workers' club.

It is thankfully true that you can now eat and drink anywhere in the city centre at almost any time of day or night, and talk without fear of being arrested. But for most Muscovites the price of such new freedoms is prohibitive. They remain confined to the 'spalniye rayoni' facing rent increases, broken roads and collapsing buildings, the repair of which represents one of the least-lucrative sectors of building activity. What is far more profitable and is now epidemic is heroin - fresher, stronger, more addictive than in Glasgow, and freely available in huge quantities.

This is not the end of the similarities. Straddling the 56th parallel together would imply that if the gulf stream continues to shift southwards, fur hats and ice-skating will become a common sight in Glasgow as we are plunged into sub-arctic winters that will transform the wandering drunk into Mary Shelley's most famous character.

