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When studying urban plans that have been conceived within the ideological framework of totalitarian regimes, one will at some point come across the notion of *tabula rasa*. In the theory of urbanism, this notion (literally: clean slate) is used as a metaphor for planning or building without regard for pre-existing layers. This disregard is diametrically opposed to the phenomenon known as *genius loci* (the spirit of the location or the sense of place), which envelopes the character of the location.

There are plenty of examples of this footloose tabula rasa methodology around. From the infamous *Plan Voisin* for Paris in which Le Corbusier replaced the old city centre with highrises, to many new city developments. These are literally ungrounded plans, built from scratch.

That this attitude towards the pre-existing layers may be problematic, is quite understandable. A tabula rasa never occurs naturally, but always – the odd natural disaster aside – as a result of human actions wiping the slate clean, or, leaving our metaphor behind: demolishing buildings, erasing street plans and at times expulsion, or worse, of the original inhabitants.

It may well be the reason why ideological regimes favour this tried and tested method; interventions of this kind are justifiable in a world vision that rejects anything and everything that came before and shows this by subsequently building a completely new cityscape. Consistently executed tabula rasa tactics can in that sense be thought of as military tactics: the conqueror scorches the earth in order to plant his flag of victory.

Often, developing from tabula rasa is preceded by a battle between planner and the pre-existing layers while projecting a new city model onto reality. The old and new realities never quite fit seamlessly and the old reality has a nasty habit of popping up time and again in one form or another. Apart from that, practitioners of tabula rasa face another problem: the physical tabula rasa doesn't wipe memories, and the history of what has been erased too, continues to exist.

Socialist Experiment

In their turbulent existence, the three Russian cities of Birobidzhan, Kaliningrad and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk have had to deal with a regime that wanted to make a clean sweep in more than just an urbanistic sense.

These cities, teetering on the edge of the former Soviet Union, have at one point all been subjects in a socialist experiment, which has resulted in a longlasting struggle between ideology and pre-existing layers.

But the development of these cities also shows something else: all three of them have been subjected to a developmental tool that goes beyond the phenomenon of tabula rasa, and that offers a far-reaching solution for the *inconvenience* that is history: Birobidzhan, Kaliningrad en Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk have all had interventions that touch their history; the different urban plans for these cities show that the Soviet regime didn't wipe the genius loci as such, but resculpted it to make it fit into the ideological mould of a *socialist city*. This meant that not only the spirit needed remodelling, but the location itself too. The latter could be likened to *sgraffito*: selectively using the pre-existing layers to physically support the new, socialist identity.

Through this double manipulation of both spirit and location, the regime created a rendition of history that the Kremlin deemed to be the one and only correct version.

This article examines how the Soviet regime resculpted the genius loci in Birobidzhan, Kaliningrad and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and how it tried to alter the flow of history to its advantage.

Birobidzhan’s Grazy Pastures

‘Look at the streets (...). They are paved, and lined with trees and hedges’¹

Birobidzhan, situated deeply in Eastern Russia, is the oldest of the three socialist experiments. The experiment started out with Party propaganda that painted the rugged landscape as lush, green pastures. But the plans translating the experiment into an actual socialist city, never left the drawing board.

Birobidzhan is named after the close by rivers the Bira and the Bidzhan. Both rivers join the river Amur, that separates the former Soviet Union from Chinese Manchuria.

The creation of Birobidzhan is interwoven with the region that shares its name. In 1928 the USSR designated the area for the Jewish population within the federation. This was in line with Stalin’s ideology, who was of the opinion that every culture needed to have its own region that was ‘national in form and socialist in content’². Eventually, Stalin thought, these cultures would assimilate into true socialist Soviet culture, devoid of any religious content.

That was the official tale of Birobidzhan, although defending the region bordering China most certainly played its part, and it is rumoured that the entire project was intentionally set up for failure from the very start. Be that as it may, the region was to become the Jewish nation-state, including Yiddish language and culture, but without the Torah. The inhabitants’ main task: working the land.

In April of 1928 the first Jews arrived by train in Tikhonkaya, a small settlement along the Trans-Siberian Railway. Together with the surrounding area, this settlement would develop into the city of Birobidzhan.

Although some Russian Jews looked forward to living a farmer’s life, others needed to be enticed by the government to become pioneers in this faraway region of the Soviet Union. It is at this point, in the enticing, that true character of the location and the socialist story of Birobidzhan start to diverge. Or, put differently, the government set the wheels of propaganda in motion, churning out a utopian image of the region. This official picture full of exotic, abundant nature and a climate well suited for agriculture didn’t match reality: large areas of the region consisted of swamps and mountains. Winters were freezing, summers scorching and mosquitoes never far away.

The pioneering effort wasn’t well-organised. Newly arrived Jews, most of whom had never even tilled any kind of soil, were left mostly to their own devices. Allotted plots of land turned out to be undrained, or impossible to till and families quickly ran out of food. What did start was what can be considered to be the first step, also apparent in Kaliningrad en Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, in the psychological process of *identity remoulding*: changing the names.

The small Russian village of Kyrma became the Yiddish Valdheim, the village of Alekseevka became Frayland and Tikhonkaya was, as stated before, renamed Birobidzhan.

Despite the harsh conditions, the region did flourish in the years that followed and the city of Birobidzhan built a Jewish theatre and a library full of Yiddish literature.

Around 1933 the Soviet government decided to go a step further than renaming settlements and project its socialist ideals on the city of Birobidzhan by means of urban planning. The task was handed to Swiss architect and former head of the Bauhaus Institute, Hannes Meyer. The result was an ambiguous work. Meyer’s written analysis appears rational enough, taking the drainage problems into account and focussing on good housing and arable land. His drawings, however, contain certain ele-

ments that are mostly intended to impress and that show up often in socialist planning: wide, building-flanked, magistrals leading up to a central square...

For the time being, it was to no avail. The plan was never approved and Stalin thwarted his own policy: the city of Birobidzhan that had taken so much effort to develop, was maimed twice by classical tabula rasa behaviour; liquidating part of the population, burning books, destroying buildings.

Nevertheless, the magistrals in Hannes Meyer’s drawings had promisingly hinted at a vision of a *socialist city* and in the plans for Kaliningrad, they were to reappear in all their splendour.

Kaliningrad – Shedding a Different Light

Transformation from the former Königsberg to the socialist Kaliningrad started at the end of the Second World War with hard fought battles. After defeating the Germans, the Soviet regime remoulded Königsberg’s genius loci. The designers charged with rebuilding, allowed the city’s new identity plenty of sketchingpaper and some of them incorporated large pieces of Königsberg in their plans brimming with socialist grandeur.

The Soviet army entered the German city of Königsberg in 1945. This city, situated on the Baltic Sea coast was the strategic focal point of the region bordering Eastern Prussia. The Soviet army was victorious, the city lay in ruins. Most of the original inhabitants had either fled, been killed or been deported after the war. Some years later, very few Germans were still living in the city that wasn’t to be called Königsberg any longer.

The Soviet regime wasn’t content merely renaming Königsberg into Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad had to be transformed into a socialist city, the ideal living environment for the new Soviet citizen that had to be drawn there. The Party employed a two-pronged strategy to achieve this transformation: it placed the city’s buildings in a bad light to provide Königsberg with a new identity and it perverted the city’s history to justify its presence.

Concerning the history: Stalin himself had already dealt with that by twisting it around; according to him Eastern Prussia and therefore Königsberg too, was a part of the ‘Slavic realm’³ that had been occupied by Prussia for centuries and thanks to Stalin’s intervention, had been returned to its rightful owners.

The Communist Party not only projected this image of Germany as an occupying force onto the historical narrative, but onto Königsberg’s cityscape as well. It discarded German architecture as petrified suppression: its buildings were portrayed as gloomy, (mostly) military structures with closed façades.

This rejection opened up the way for renewal, starting at the centre. The urban planners applied the same vernacular that had changed Moscow and the precursors of which had already been visible in Hannes Meyer’s work: ultra large squares linked by wide magistrals, flanked with buildings in neoclassical style with a grandeur akin to Moscow’s Gorki Street.

But unlike in Birobidzhan, here the urban planners weren’t dealing with a green, scarcely built up area. Far from it: Königsberg had been a full-fledged, operational harbour city and although it sustained heavy damage, it had not been wiped out completely. Notwithstanding the fact that many designers would preferably have started with a clean slate, some urban planners chose to take a pragmatic approach due to a shortage in funds and building materials. They sought refuge in cleverly using what was already there, literally re-valuing parts of Königsberg.

To them the rubble from the bombings became the first rendering coat in which they scraped out their plans, carefully selecting old and new: an urban sgraffito brimming with socialist symbolism, as exemplified by the city centre plan drawn up by the Giprogor, the State Institute for Urban Planning.

In the designers’ view, the centre needed to be situated at its former location, as a natural connecting point for the city’s outskirts. The original main streets too were to be reused in this plan, albeit widened and straightened in accordance with the style of the socialist cityscape.

And last but not least, Giprogor’s members reused the urban momentousness of what was possibly the most significant spot in the city, the one spot that all radials pointed toward and where several watercourses converged: the square with the Teutonian castle Königsberg. In Giprogor’s view the location had to get new meaning by tearing down the castle ruins and building a Soviet palace ‘worthy of the new Kaliningrad’⁴. This plan was never executed as such.

Dmitrii Navalikhin, chief architect for Kaliningrad at the time, considered this masterplan to be too modest. He himself designed a much further reaching plan for Kaliningrad’s city centre, characterised by denying the context: an unadulterated tabula rasa treatment. By blending Moscows 1937 masterplan’s main structure into its own plan, Navalikhin sought to make Kaliningrad into a Soviet city.

This plan too never became reality, except for a few fragments. So Navalikhin thought of a quicker way to provide the city with a new identity: a scattering of monuments that illustrated the ‘new Russian, socialist character of the city’⁵. It was a minor yet very significant procedure: the monuments simply acted as a new ‘guideline’ on how to read the city and provide the old with a new symbolism.

Much later, in 1967, Kaliningrad was to demolish the castle after all. On its foundations rose *The House of the Soviets*, a massive structure that, due to insufficient funding, remained unfinished. As a result, and because many of Kaliningrad’s new inhabitants failed to see the logic behind demolishing the castle, the location did not become the new heart of the city, but a spot wrought with controversy and discussions instead.

Twenty years prior, the Party had been more successful in changing the meaning of an urbanistically laden location like this, when it did so in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk.

Identifying Lines in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk

The Japanese urbanistic legacy in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk was an evenly spaced street grid. When Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk fell into Soviet hands, the city had to be provided with a new, socialist identity. The Japanese grid turned out to be flexible enough for remodeling the city into a socialist mould. In doing so, the new regime struck the genius of the previously Japanese city right in its heart. The Japanese architecture however, turned out to be less pliable and not so easily adaptable to the new regime.

The southern part of the Isle of Sakhalin, on which the city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk is situated, has changed hands many times between Japan and the Soviet Union over a long period of time. In 1905 the region was handed over from Russia to Japan as a result of the Russo-Japanese war. In 1945 the Soviet Union finally reclaimed the area again. It changed the city. There was no longer any room for Japanese inhabitants. They were expelled. And as he had done in Birobidzhan and Kaliningrad, Stalin lured Soviet pioneers into coming to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk with

propaganda and privileges.

What remained of Toyohara, as the Japanese had named the city, was the urban fabric: a linear street grid. The Japanese had laid out this grid in order to develop the city, hardly worthy of that title at the start of the colonisation, into the colony’s headquarters. They laid out a grid of 60 square *ken* (11,664 m²). The city was divided in four parts via crossing axis; the Odori running from North to South and the Maoka-dori at right angles with it. Parallel to these main roads, equally spaced smaller streets were laid out, forming the boundaries of oblong building plots.

Apart from these two main streets, there was another important street: the Jinja-dori. It started in the West at the railway station and ended in the East at Mount Asahigaoka. At this end of the grid, the Japanese built the Shinto temple complex Jinja, which became the centre of Toyohara on national and religious holidays. The population would gather here by way of the Jinja-dori.

But, as mentioned previously, in 1945 the Soviet Union reconquered the city. Toyohara became Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and with that name came a socialist identity that had to be translated onto the city, or to be more precise, into a new Soviet centre with Party offices and parade grounds.

It turned out that the Japanese grid was extremely suitable for physically translating Soviet ideology. Here, the designers found something that had lacked both in Birobidzhan and Kaliningrad: the long line.

It is visible in the plans drawn up by the Lengiprogor (Leningrad branche of the State Institute for Urban Planning). A drawing dating from 1955 shows an oval-shaped square in the middle of the Jinja-dori as the plan’s centrepiece. On the northern and southern edge, Soviet palaces face the square. The Jinja-dori is widened to magistral-size and ends in the East at a landscape park with lanes that spread out like a goose’s foot. A whiff of Versailles in the Far East...

The other thing that stands out, is that the grid’s mesh is enlarged to accommodate large-scale blocks of buildings. Many streets from the original grid had to be erased.

But these plans too were never to become a reality. This time because the Kremlin voted on a resolution against too expensive construction plans.

Yet there was one spot with crucial urban meaning in the former Toyohara that was restructured in a way that struck Toyohara’s genius at its heart. It was the spot where the Jinja-dori ended, theatrically as only particularised lines in a neutral grid can end. The spot that at certain times gave Toyohara its centre. Like a statue torn from its pedestal replaced with a sculpture by its conqueror, a hotel for Party members was erected on the spot where Jinja temple complex used to stand. The former Jinja-dori transformed into a magistral called Communist Avenue. The mountain the building nestles against also changed name: Mount Asahigaoka became Mount Bolshevik.

Although taking great care in precisely selecting from the Japanese urban structure, the socialist planners were ostentatiously less willing to reinterpret Japanese architecture. If a Japanese building was granted a second lease of life, it was usually provided with a new skin to fit in with the new regime. In some cases this seems to have been highly successful, as can be seen on the inventories list by Itani, a researcher at the Slavic Research Centre⁶, who researched the Japanese architecture in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk.

Apart from 90 Japanese buildings and three ruins, five buildings are listed as ‘suspected Japanese buildings’⁷. These are structures of which Itani has an inkling they have a Japanese history, despite the current inhabitants maintaining that such is not the case.

Conscious Remoulding

This tale of Birobidzhan, Kaliningrad and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk describes three instances of conscious remoulding of what was. In Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk it was done mainly in a physical sense by selectively changing the Japanese grid, and establishing a new meaning for the city's crucial detail, Mount Asahigaoka. The highly irregular medieval street pattern in Kaliningrad turned out to be less pliable. There, the struggle for a new identity was in the first couple of years, mostly a mental process. And Birobidzhan's surrounding landscape was absorbed into, and remoulded by, socialist ideology. Nowadays, developing with an awareness of the past is a phenomenon that is a matter of course. These three cities however, show a conscious remoulding of their genius and locus together that was meant to result in a different story than history had been telling until then. It is the combination that causes problems, as it creates a fictional history. For when a totalitarian regime remoulds history, it reduces the memories of former inhabitants of, let's say Königsberg, to unreliable reminiscences. As the *suspected buildings* of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk show, this remoulding of the story behind it actually hinders the city. For are not inklings a weak foundation for interpreting a location?

And now? Now nothing. Stalin's era has come to an end. Over time, these three cities have grown. They have become like any other modern city, a palimpsest to which new buildings are added, old locations are written off and bits and pieces of the past still shimmer through into the present.

And yet... Part of the inhabitants of Birobidzhan, of which a fraction is Jewish, cherishes the city's Jewish background. In recent years, unequivocally Jewish symbols have appeared in public areas: from menorahs to patterns featuring the star of David and a sculpture of Tevye the Dairyman from Sholem Aleichem's story. In several locations in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, reminders of the Japanese past appear in the form of Zen gardens. And Kaliningrad? There the debate on whether or not to rebuild the castle rages on and the yearning for Königsberg appears to be quenched with historicising architecture.

Does Tevye tell the story of Jewish Birobidzhan? Does a carefully composed garden embody the essence of expulsing the Japanese from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk? Will Kaliningrad get Königsberg back by rebuilding the castle? Perhaps. Yet at the same time these symbols are inadvertent reminders of the monuments erected in Kaliningrad by the Soviet regime to remould the pre-existing layers. Albeit that this recent reduction of history may very well have been generated far less consciously. What remains is an inkling.

Translated by Sylvie Hoyinck

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