

Moscow Is Unlovable and Unlivable

By [Alexei Bayer](#)

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Even a short visit to Moscow is enough to convince anyone that Russia is not normal. Its capital is both a symbol of the country's problems and a focus of popular discontent in its own right. For 70 years, Communist rulers planned scientific urban renewal, but they only managed to destroy all that was useful or harmonious. Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev declared Moscow an "exemplary Communist city." In a sense, he was right: Moscow became a sad example of colossal schemes poorly executed and abandoned halfway to completion.

High oil prices and a government worthy of any petrokleptocracy transformed Moscow into a boom town, where overpriced boutiques and glittering apartment buildings for the rich stand amid decay and neglect. Today's Moscow is unlovable and unlivable, overdeveloped, underserved by public utilities and choked by traffic. You can't drive, you can't breathe, there is no place to park and walking is impossible thanks to giant SUVs lining the sidewalks.

Moscow treats you to the indignity of official corteges speeding by while ordinary citizens wait, and of the high and mighty shoving other cars off the road, sometimes with fatal results. There are larger humiliations, too, such as having a thoroughly corrupt mayor who ran

the city as his personal fiefdom, vastly enriching his own spouse. When he was finally dismissed, it was the Kremlin, not Muscovites, who kicked him out and brought in an outsider from the remote Tyumen region.

But Moscow is slowly developing a civil society that is concerned with improving life in the city and rooting out predatory practices. At first, such activities were brutally put down. Lyudmila Melikhova, an activist defending the city's heritage, was run over by a truck across the street from the Moscow School of Architecture in 2009. Blue Buckets — the movement poking fun at official cars with their blue flashing lights — has been hounded by the traffic police. Defenders of the Khimki forest just outside Moscow have been harassed and beaten up.

But now, improving the quality of life in Moscow has become a popular issue. A plan for the preservation of Kitai-Gorod, a historic neighborhood next to the Kremlin, recently caught the attention of Vladimir Putin's election campaign. An architectural firm submitted a proposal to turn the neighborhood into a pedestrian district, evicting government offices and creating a historic hub similar to the ones that exist in cities across Europe.

The plan also includes a public park on the site of the recently razed Rossiya Hotel. It is not a new idea, but amid his plummeting approval ratings Putin suddenly decided to back it. Moscow architectural authorities immediately organized a competition.

The way it now stands, it looks like another election gimmick. First of all, the decision should be made by elected municipal officials, not Putin. As to the competition, its organizers seem to want an abstract, pro forma discussion, while the real decision will be made by the usual insiders who will divvy up the money budgeted for the project.

But times have changed. Architects and activists plan to do what people do in other, normal cities: They plan a series of well-publicized public hearings, and they intend to fight for their vision.

Slowly, one project at a time, Muscovites are taking back their city. Perhaps Russia will eventually follow as well.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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