Fences, private and public spaces, and traversability in a Siberian city

Joachim Otto Habeck [a,*], Galina Belolyubskaya [b]

[a] Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universitaet Hamburg, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, 20146 Hamburg, Germany
[b] Faculty of History, North-Eastern Federal University, ul. Belinskogo, 58, 677000 Yakutsk, Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Russia

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ABSTRACT

Segregation, exclusion and partitioning of urban space are widely discussed in social sciences. Thus far, however, remarkably few studies have addressed micro-practices of dividing space. This article explores such practices in private and public spaces of a post-socialist city. It sets the focus on fences as a particular structuring element of urban space, examining both their material and symbolic meanings. Using Yakutsk, a city in north-eastern Siberia, as an example, we explore a twofold hypothesis. First, has the post-socialist condition brought about a growing awareness of individual space and, furthermore, an extension of private space? Second, can we assume that houses and their surroundings, in particular fences, walls and hedges, serve as means of displaying social status? An examination of these questions requires a typology of buildings and neighbourhoods. Significant are the differences between apartment-building areas and private-property neighbourhoods across the city with regard to the use and materiality of fences, notions of private space, and the web of shortcuts within the urban grid. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, we finally discuss the concept of traversability of contemporary urban space.

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1. Introduction

Segregation, exclusion and partitioning of urban space have been central issues of Sociology, Geography, Anthropology, and Urban Planning (recent works comprise Low, 2014; Madanipour, 2014; Massey, 2012).[1] Gated communities in particular have been in the research spotlight (Blinnikov, Shanin, Sobolev, & Volkova, 2006; Lentz, 2004 for Moscow suburbs; Hirt, 2012; Kovács & Hegedüs, 2014; Polanska, 2013; Smigiel, 2013 for other post-socialist countries). Thus far, however, remarkably few studies have addressed micro-practices of dividing space (e.g., Bondi, 1998; Hirt, 2012; Madanipour, 2003) and even fewer, the materiality of those objects that actually restrict and regulate access, i.e. walls and fences (on the latter, Andries & Rehder, 2005; Ford, 2000; Potapova, 2013; cf. Raup, 1947).[2] This article explores material and aesthetic practices of demarcation in private and public

spaces of a post-socialist city. It sets the focus on *fences* as a particular structuring element of urban space, examining both their material and symbolic meanings.

To conduct such a study in a post-socialist setting is not only of technical but also of theoretical importance for Anthropology, Sociology and History. Under socialism, notions of collective vs. individual property and access to resources bore ideological connotations and practical consequences that differed markedly from those in non-socialist countries; these connotations did not simply vanish in the 1990s; rather, they continued to exert a sublime influence well beyond the socialist period (Hirt, 2012, 2013). Social–anthropological research on post-socialist *spatial* practices has been trying to capture the complex reconfigurations of the public and the private (e.g., Gal & Kligman, 2000; Oswald & Voronkov, 2003; Read & Thelen, 2007; Humphrey & Verdery, 2004). Against this backcloth, our study in a Siberian city serves to explore to what extent, and in which ways, the lay-out and combinations of private, semi-public and public spaces have changed. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2006, 2014) on the simultaneity of controlled and uncontrolled domains in Soviet society, we will discuss the concept of traversability of contemporary urban space. Simultaneously, we hope to contribute to the growing research on contemporary urban spaces in post-Soviet Eurasia (e.g., Axenov, 2014; Alexander & Buchli, 2007; Darieva, Kaschuba, & Krebs, 2011; Hirt, 2013; Vendina, 2010).

After presenting the hypothesis, the research setting and our methods, we sketch out a typology of houses and residential areas (neighbourhoods) as key components of the urban fabric. This will be followed by a closer examination of how fences are used to structure

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[1] In addition, state boundaries and the mechanisms of controlling flows of goods and people have received much attention in social–scientific research (with reference to the post-Soviet space, see Billé, Delaplace, & Humphrey, 2012 for Mongolia, China and Russia; Pelkmans, 2006 for Georgia/Turkey; Pfoser, 2015 for Estonia/Russia; Reeves, 2014 for Central Asia). Scholarship on the aesthetics of borders and boundaries has come forward in recent years (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2010; Wolfe, 2014).

[2] Roitman (2013) describes gated communities in Argentina under the subtitle "how walls, fences and barriers exacerbate social differences and foster urban social group segregation" but only occasionally discusses the actual effects of fences and walls (pp. 164–165); rather, she analyses the social practices of the residents of gated communities.

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urban space, and how practices of perimeter fencing have changed over time. The article then proceeds with a discussion of recent shifts in private, semi-public and public spaces along with the idea of traversability, and finally with concluding remarks.

The hypothesis to be pursued here is twofold. First, if we start from the assumption that the end of socialism brought about a stronger emphasis on individual initiative (Diligenskii, 2000; Pickles, 2006; cf. Pojani & Buka, 2015: 68, 70) then we may ask whether these translate into a growing awareness of individual space and, furthermore, an extension of private space (as fervently argued by Hirt, 2012: 2, 49–52) — perhaps even a post-socialist enclosure of urban commons? If so, we could expect that the proliferation of physical barriers would make the urban space less traversable (e.g. Roitman, 2013: 164–165). Second, can we assume that houses and their surroundings, in particular fences, walls and hedges, serve as means of distinction — of demonstrating their owner's social status and taste — as they ubiquitously do in parts of Europe (Taylor, 2008: ch. 6)? Pierre Bourdieu's widely known treatise on *Distinction* (1984) has induced some researchers to see distinction as an "invisible fence" to mark off social space (Gullestad, 1986; Manderscheid, 2006). It is apposite, then, to ask if distinction is also expressed by real fences. To assess the two above questions, the authors examine, on the basis of a post-socialist city, if processes of delimitation of space have undergone any visible change.

These questions will be explored using the example of Yakutsk, a city in eastern Siberia with a population of almost exactly 300,000 and hometown of one of the authors (Belolyubskaya). Initially owing its existence to the construction of a Russian military outpost in the 17th century, Yakutsk developed into the administrative centre and transportation hub of a vast region with a sparse, ethnically mixed population. Today, the largest ethnic groups within the city itself are Russians and Sakha (Yakuts). After a period of population stagnation in the 1990s, the city has seen rapid growth since 2001 (when the official census counted 198,000 inhabitants).

Reminiscent of other post-Soviet cities, Yakutsk is comprised of different quarters, each with a specific architectural lay-out: apartment-building areas of Soviet provenance displaying a "collectivist" architecture, multi-storey condominium buildings of post-socialist times, so-called private-sector areas (*chastnyi sektor*) with detached houses, *dacha* settlements (explained below) and individual plots. All these are embedded in an urban tapestry that also includes public buildings, blocks of garages and storage areas, shops and enterprises, industrial and commercial zones, cemeteries, parks and forested areas, grasslands and islands in the perennial flooding zone of river Lena, one of the largest streams of the world. Yakutsk extends between the river and a high, forested plateau that defines the western border of growth of the city (Fig. 1).

While Yakutsk may aptly serve as an example of a post-socialist city, it is particular in economic and political terms: being the capital of a distinct republic within the Russian Federation, the city receives a share of the revenues from diamond extraction in the western part of the republic. As a consequence, Yakutsk is widely considered a "rich" city, with larger household-income discrepancies than in other Russian cities of comparable size. The city is also highly particular in terms of the natural environment, with an amplitude of *average* monthly air temperatures of almost 60 °C and permafrost creating formidable challenges for construction work and engineering (Alekseeva et al., 2007; Shiklomanov & Streletskiy, 2013; cf. Orttung & Reisser, 2014; Solomonov et al., 2011). As a consequence, pipes of hot water run either on or above the ground. This network of pipes (*teplotrassy*) not only provides for a distinct appearance of the city's built environment, it also has a noticeable effect of structuring and circumscribing the citizens' movements and action space. While winters are long and harsh, the snow cover usually amounts to 35 and rarely exceeds 50 cm (Iijima et al., 2010), which is a factor that co-determines the height of fences to a small extent.

2. Methods of study

The first step of fieldwork consisted of identifying different parts of the city — in the way they are classified and commonly known by the inhabitants. The authors conducted a map-based informal zoning, which was corroborated and slightly augmented by two local experts' knowledge. The exercise of informal zoning also served to identify the main architectural characteristics (type of functional zone,[3] most characteristic type of buildings, approximate age of these buildings, number of floors) and the prestige of each *neighbourhood* (the term is used here with regard to the built environment, not to density of social networks). On this basis, a list of more than 20 neighbourhoods was compiled (Fig. 1). While the number and delineation of neighbourhoods must be necessarily arbitrary, there is nonetheless widespread agreement among citizens as to which part of the city carries what name. Interestingly, people know and colloquially mention the names of these neighbourhoods (locally known as *mikroraion*, *kvartal*) much more frequently than those of the official administrative units (*gorodskoi okrug*) of Yakutsk.[4]

The second task was to visit a wide range of neighbourhoods in July 2015 and use photographs for documentation of the built environment, mainly by bicycle, sometimes by car. Rather than using the concept of urban transect (Bohl & Plater-Zyberk, 2006; Krebs & Pilz, 2013), documentation was based on neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, the authors also documented one transect along the Sverdlova and Zhornitskogo streets, as they connect the city centre with the outskirts and offer a good overview of all zones of urban development, yet they do so in a less pretentious manner than the main thoroughfares (*prospekt*, *trakt*, *shosse*) leading out of the city.

While taking photographs, the authors tried to focus on (i) typical views and features of the built environment; (ii) fences in their typical aspects and diversity; (iii) urban furniture and (iv) infrastructure, including the network of pipelines above ground level (*teplotrassy*), earlier mentioned as a particular and yet ubiquitous feature of the cityscape of Yakutsk. A total of 2500 photographs were taken and sorted in accordance with the list of neighbourhoods.

The authors also conducted interviews with a real-estate solicitor, an entrepreneur who produces construction materials and teaches engineering at the local university, with an urban-planning expert of the city's administration and with one of the mayor's deputies. In addition, one of the authors arranged for several interviews with residents in the city's *private-sector areas* (see below). In sum, the authors combined expert interviews with rapid visual documentation of almost all neighbourhoods identified during the initial informal zoning exercise.

3. Types of residential buildings and their contribution to the urban landscape

As an interim result of the first task — the informal zoning — it turned out that almost each neighbourhood combines different types of residential buildings; the number of these types is quite low, however. This typology of buildings, sketched out above, is widely known among the inhabitants of Yakutsk and in fact, throughout Russia and post-Soviet countries. Moreover, the type of building is usually much more decisive in terms of real-estate value than the prestige of the neighbourhood. To explicate the interrelation of architecture, location, enclosure and aesthetics, it is necessary to describe different types of buildings in this section, whereas the use of fences will be described in subsequent ones.

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[3] On the Soviet principles of functional zoning (industrial zone, residential zone, green belt) see Bolotova (2012). Her article includes some observations on fences and aesthetics of industrial areas (2012: 658–659).

[4] There are eight districts (*okrug*): Avtodorozhnyi, Gagarinskii, Gubinskii, Oktiabr'skii, Promyshlennyi, Saisarskii, Stroitel'nyi and Tsentral'nyi, along with the suburbs and villages of Magan, Markha, Kangalassy, Khatassy, Prigorodnyi, Tabaga and Tulagino (Administratsiia Glavy, 2010). All eight districts and the suburb of Markha were visited and documented by the authors in July 2015.