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Living in Soviet Housing Estates: Urban Space, Transformation and Multiple Narratives

MARINA SAPUNOVA, EKATERINA GLADKOVA,
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Abstract

Soviet mass housing estates, where most of the urban population still reside, are among the significant inherited legacies of the Soviet past in Russia. Although the post-Soviet era has witnessed various spatial transformations in these areas, little is known about how these living environments have changed across the country and beyond the largest cities since the end of communism. The case of one of the *mikroraiony* in the East Siberian city of Irkutsk illustrates how the narrative of experimental and unique architecture from the 1960s and 1970s has become spatially influential starting from the 2010s. A qualitative analysis of data from multiple sources reveals multilayered social relationships, confrontations and attachments.

IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, SOCIALIST states started using mass housing development to improve the housing conditions of their citizens, solving the problem of how to provide housing that was both decent and cheap to produce. The resultant development of mass housing created a new type of spatial organisation in residential areas: residential and everyday non-residential functions were combined and organised in a strict hierarchy based on accessibility and variety.¹ In the literature on Central and Eastern Europe, this type of spatial organisation is known as a large (mass) housing estate; in Soviet planning, it is the *mikroraion*. Such residential areas still largely shape the urban landscape of Russian cities that actively added population in the second half of the twentieth century. In some cities, up to 70% of the total population resides in

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¹See Drémaité (2019, Figure 4, p. 76).

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prefabricated mass housing, and up to 50% on average in Russia.² Not surprisingly, this makes the *mikroraion* a central part of the inherited residential environment of the socialist past and, simultaneously, the key absorber of postsocialist transformations.

In the literature, *mikroraiony* are often associated with the monotonous and repetitive environment of the Soviet city.³ There is no doubt that the normative nature of Soviet urban planning and the standardisation of residential design ‘series’⁴ genuinely unified socialist residential areas. It is important to note, though, that despite the similarity of ideas, material circumstances and institutional conditions in the countries of the Soviet regime in the second half of the twentieth century, the implementation of housing programmes had significant regional variations (Drémaité 2019; Erofeev 2019; Glendinning 2021). These variations originated from differences in local planning policies shaped by the Party, the municipal bureaucracy and local communities of architects and urban planners. Thus, for example, the average size of residential districts differed; the all-union standard design series of residential buildings were localised according to specific regional conditions; and separate buildings might be given a more distinctive design (Meuser & Zadorin 2015; Erofeev 2020). Furthermore, the availability of construction materials and workforce skills varied, leading to differences in the speed and quality of construction. Thus, studies on mass housing development have branched out into the examination of numerous independent case studies, representing a library of practices and alternatives for the development of socialist housing heritage (Snopek 2015; Salukvadze & Sichinava 2019).

In the decades since the end of communism, multiple changes in the states formerly under Soviet rule brought about social and spatial changes in *mikroraiony*. Many studies mention similar processes, including the physical ageing of buildings and changes in demographic and ethnic structures, as well as transformations in the functional use of open and built spaces (Hess & Tammaru 2019; Salukvadze & Sichinava 2019; Tuvikene *et al.* 2020; Leetmaa & Bernt 2023). However, as in the case of project implementation, changes have been largely contextual and mostly dependent on local processes and actions. Moreover, the specific characteristics and results of these changes can differ not only between countries and cities but even within a single city. Studies indicate that the transformation trajectories of socialist residential areas can vary significantly depending on regional socio-economic factors, the location of the residential area within the city, housing market characteristics and planning policies (Škorić & Krklješ 2019; Leetmaa & Bernt 2023). This variability can result in these areas being considered desirable housing options in some cases, while in others they may be seen as less appropriate and less desirable. Understanding these changes and the context and factors that drove them provides a comprehensive foundation for developing long-term approaches to the maintenance of mass housing residential areas.

²Based on the data published in *Zhilishchnoe khozyaystvo v Rossii. 2022: Statisticheskii sbornik* (Moscow, Rosstat, 2022).

³Erofeev (2020, p. 33) highlights how current historiography of late socialism often reproduces a conservative view of Soviet prefabricated housing, framing it in terms of mechanical, large-scale construction and architectural uniformity.

⁴The term ‘series’ refers to a set of residential buildings that had a limited number of flat layouts and a common architectural style and construction technology.

Against the background of existing studies, there is growing interest in a more nuanced and geographically specific understanding of the Soviet residential project. In particular, with regard to Russia, the understanding of change in Soviet-era residential districts is predominantly based on studies conducted in the national and regional capitals of Moscow and St Petersburg (Gunko *et al.* 2018; Khmelnitskaya & Ihalainen 2021; Zupan *et al.* 2021; Korableva *et al.* 2023). The scholarship is thus geographically imbalanced, with regional cities underrepresented in the research (Robinson 2005; Sýkora & Bouzarovski 2012; Haupt *et al.* 2022). This criticism has led to the emergence of studies such as the analysis of changes in housing morphotype in Krasnoyarsk (Lipovka & Fedchenko 2021) and the examination of the historical evolution and urban planning process in post-Soviet cities using examples from Murmansk (Nikitina 2018), Irkutsk (Kozlov 2021) and Novosibirsk (Gashenko 2015), among others. These studies underscore the significance of local narratives and transformations, often reflecting regional political and social dynamics that are easily overlooked (Stuvøy 2023) in a centralised system of power such as the Russian state.

This essay contributes to our understanding of the regional diversity of mass housing by focusing on the East Siberian city of Irkutsk. Mass housing construction in the cities of East Siberia accompanied the extensive industrialisation and exploitation of natural resources by the Soviet regime in this region in the 1960s and 1970s (Uvarova & Naumova 2020). Because of the specific climatic and seismic conditions,⁵ the architects could justify experimenting with the typical housing design of the 1960s (Erofeev 2020), thereby contributing to the formation of a narrative of local uniqueness among architects. In the post-Soviet period, this narrative has been reinforced, particularly in the context of spatial transformations. In this essay, spatial transformations are primarily understood as changes in the urban fabric, such as the demolition of old buildings, the construction of new ones, changes to the original function or the reshaping of public spaces. These transformations widen the gap between the original idea and reality as narrated by the architects; they also represent underlying societal changes, shedding light on whether residents are either objects or agents of change. Through interviews with the residents (Zaporozhets 2017) and semi-structured interviews with local architects, and by studying public planning documents, the essay explores the changing and emerging narratives related to stagnation, the role of architectural memory in post-Soviet planning, and residents' everyday experiences and spatial attachments in the context of transformation in a Soviet *mikroraion*.

As a regional centre of the Irkutsk *Oblast'* and one of the major cities of East Siberia, Irkutsk has not experienced significant population outflow or a substantial decline in housing demand from the immediate post-Soviet period of the 1990s up to the present day (Karachurina & Mkrtychyan 2021). *Mikroraiony* located near the city centre experienced pressure from demand, as the areas with low-density development or simply vacant plots stayed unbuilt against the initial Soviet plans. As a result, these residential

⁵The Irkutsk region is located in a seismically active zone (the Mongolian–Baikal seismic belt) and has a sharply continental climate, with winter temperatures often dropping below -30°C . (Adapted from data of the Institute of the Earth's Crust, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 8 June 2022, available at: https://www.crust.irk.ru/newsabout_577.html, accessed 28 May 2025.)

areas saw infill development (*uplotnitel'naya zastroika*), the replacement of Soviet buildings with new commercial facilities and the privatisation of public spaces. For some people, these changes became opportunities: they opened businesses or received architectural project commissions. Other people resisted densification and the shrinking of open spaces through self-organisation, creating different stories around spatial transformation. This heterogeneity of spatial transformations provoked subsequent narratives about the housing areas of the socialist past. How do these narratives intersect or collide, influencing the perception of the complexity of the residential legacy, its values and further spatial changes? What insights can we gain from the social and spatial value of *mikroraiony* in addressing the residential legacy of the socialist past?

The essay begins by discussing the academic debates about how postsocialist transformations of *mikroraiony* and large housing estates are remembered, focusing on both the memory of ideas and everyday life. This is followed by a section on methodology, arguing for our choice of case study. The main section provides an overview of Soviet mass housing development in Russia from the 1950s to the 1980s and its post-Soviet transformation, followed by the presentation of empirical results and the conclusion.

Discourses on the postsocialist transformation of large housing estates

While serving as everyday residences for many people, large housing estates and *mikroraiony* represent a complex legacy of the socialist past. Consequently, discourses surrounding these areas are diverse and conflicting, offering insights into social processes and relationships among different communities. This heterogeneity provides an opportunity for a deeper understanding of these social processes within each context. Most importantly, it involves rethinking the values of mass residential areas and formulating approaches to working with them based on an understanding of the context and communication between different actors in urban life. As Krivý (2022) argues, the socialist past is often seen as a 'foreign country', with diverse interpretations and responses to the architectural and urban legacy of mass housing production. Thus, attitudes towards the socialist mass housing legacy are shaped by the narrative tension (Diener & Hagen 2013; Ilchenko 2019) between preservation and demolition, and between memory and forgetting of the socialist past. These contrasting perceptions of the past stimulate debate about the future of mass housing estates as the initial ideas behind them and the experiences of residents are re-evaluated. As a result, divergent narratives and expectations of the residents and architects ultimately converge into 'arenas' of coalition or conflict (Bederson *et al.* 2021, pp. 69–90).

By changes in residential areas, we mean both physical and symbolic transformations. With the increasing number of studies of socialist modernist housing based on archival materials and oral history (Reid 2014; Maciuka & Drémaitė 2020; Aplenc 2023), we observe a growing demand for a more detailed dialogue about this legacy. This is largely associated with the attempt to 'reimagine historical circumstances in ways that legitimate local ideas or alternative, regional conceptions of modernism' (Maciuka & Drémaitė 2020). On the one hand, in the Soviet era these residential areas were seen as spaces of standard and cheap housing, while on the other hand, they represent spaces of experiments and initiative (Erofeev 2020). Ultimately, even with normatively defined

environmental parameters, local teams of architects, often working with local party bureaucracy, interpreted these parameters to fit local conditions, leading to wide variability of outcomes (Maciuika & Drémaitė 2020). Thus, the ideas of the authors of the residential area planning projects were reflected in the space of the *mikroraion* via spatial and functional organisation.

This historical narrative is particularly significant in the discourse on post-Soviet or, more broadly, postsocialist transformation of modernist residential areas. Changes since 1990 have disrupted the original ideas of the planners on spatial properties and values, such as compact residential modules situated within a system of public spaces, interconnected by pedestrian pathways, and featuring a coherent urban structure within walking distance to sociocultural amenities (Benkő 2015; Snopek 2015; Kazakova 2019). Simultaneously, these changes compensated for residents' lack of amenities, their poor location on the city fringes or the landscaping projects left unfinished from lack of resources. Infill development by densification often reduces the area of public spaces or social facilities (Korableva *et al.* 2023), while simultaneously expanding residential typologies and functionality. The commercialisation of the ground floors of residential buildings (Axenov *et al.* 2018) or building extensions (Salukvadze & Sichinava 2019; Majzlanová 2023) transform the original construction of series, compensating for the small size of apartments or the lack of services. The modification and redevelopment of Soviet-era mass housing from the 1990s to the present day has thus had both positive and negative ramifications. In light of all these changes, the urban planning parameters of cohesion, measured density, functionality and walkability, which were sidelined in the earlier post-Soviet period, are being reconsidered, raising new questions around the potential use of housing developments by diverse sectors of the population. Such re-evaluation also serves to highlight the diverse experiences and perspectives of estate residents, past and present, and of those who seek to preserve the memory of the original planners.

Place attachment for those who preserve the memory of the original project and those who have lived in these neighbourhoods is coloured by different factors. The Russian architectural community, often considered 'carriers of nostalgia', shares a special connection to the era in which they created these neighbourhoods.⁶ This connection is manifested in various activities, including historical excursions or exhibitions, and results in a cohesive effort to preserve and celebrate the original designs and intentions. The names of streets and places act as distinctive markers reflecting the current state of the political landscape. Toponyms reflect identity and are shaped by processes of highlighting some names and erasing others. Sometimes this means celebrating certain events or figures, while others are forgotten. Proposals to rename or introduce new names often spark public discussion. But since formal approval at the municipal level takes time, many of these ideas remain at the informal 'pre-naming' stage.⁷ These experts, with their deep-rooted nostalgia, tend to focus on the architectural and spatial aspects, emphasising the historical significance and aesthetic value of the original plans. The fact that they

⁶See, for example, the interviews with the architects in 'Sixtiers', *Project Baikal*, No. 39–40, 2014, available at: <https://projectbaikal.com/index.php/pb/issue/archive>, accessed 29 March 2024.

⁷On the consequences of renaming, see O'Reilly (2023, pp. 365–510).

recognise a growing awareness of the value of mass housing estates (Snopek 2015) underscores the importance of these areas as representations of past ideas and architectural innovations.

In contrast, for residents, these neighbourhoods are not merely representations of past ideas but spaces of daily life, personal memories and place attachment.⁸ This personal nostalgia constitutes a ‘memorial value’ (*Erinnerungswert*) (Riegl 1903; Ess *et al.* 2021), strengthening the continuity between past and present (Boele 2011; Markova 2020). This variation in attachment influences views and demands concerning the quality of the space and the need for its transformation, wherein residents may prioritise practical changes to enhance liveability while experts advocate for preserving historical and architectural integrity. However, sociocultural parameters, such as place attachment and the significance of place memory, are often overlooked in decision-making processes. This lack of consideration complicates the recognition of the sociocultural worth of these residential areas, exacerbates contradictions, generates ambiguous attitudes and, ultimately, leads to radical decisions: either demolition or abandonment (Malko & Kozlova 2019).

Furthermore, in the post-Soviet context, the mature postsocialist housing market has integrated and reassessed mass housing estates as a component of the housing supply. The commodification process entails assigning market value to this legacy. While market value is influenced by location, accessibility and quality, researchers also highlight extrinsic factors related to attitudes towards *mikroraiony* as part of the Soviet project. The narratives surrounding these estates encompass debates on demolition and preservation (Staniukovich-Denisova & Liubimova 2017; Vestergaard 2022), the demand for housing and its scarcity (Škorić & Krklješ 2019; Leetmaa & Bernt 2023), and considerations of desirability and undesirability (Lizon 1996; Petrusis *et al.* 2023). These discussions also raise broader questions regarding the nature and reinterpretation of the value of modernism (Ilchenko 2019). The perception of and attitudes towards these areas significantly shape municipal policies, particularly regarding housing shortages, demographic challenges and affordability.

In summary, while initially viewed primarily as a Soviet housing-provision project, mass housing estates have acquired multiple interpretations during the postsocialist transformation, both from within (by residents) and from external actors, such as architectural associations and public authorities. The relations between these actors include negotiations over redevelopment, contestation of spatial decisions and differing visions for the district’s future.

Data and methodology

For our analysis of spatial transformations, we chose Irkutsk, a large-sized regional capital in Russia,⁹ situated in East Siberia. In Irkutsk, 13 *mikroraiony* were built between the 1950s

⁸On place attachment as place commitment and influential factors, see Tournois and Rollero (2020), Manzo and Devine-Wright (2020).

⁹In one of the classifications of cities by population accepted in Russia, Irkutsk is classified as a large city with a population of 606,369 (‘Chislennost’ naseleniya po gorodskim okrugam i munitsipal’nym raionam (s 2011 goda)’, Irkutskstat, available at: <https://38.rosstat.gov.ru/folder/167937#>, accessed 30 May 2024). The classification is as follows: small towns (up to 20,000 inhabitants); medium-sized towns (20,000–100,000 inhabitants); large towns (100,000–250,000 inhabitants); large cities (250,000–1,000,000 inhabitants); million-plus cities (over 1,000,000 inhabitants).

and 1980s as a response to significant population growth.¹⁰ The design and construction of the *mikroraiony* were accompanied by the relocation of specialists, predominantly architects and engineers, from major cities of the USSR, as well as the establishment of local design institutes. Consequently, the architects developed an educational programme at Irkutsk University and formed a local branch of the Union of Architects. Seeking to preserve their legacy, the architects were diligent in archiving their materials; thus, the period from the 1950s through the 1980s in Irkutsk is well-documented. Based on these materials, architectural historians have created a vivid narrative of the heritage of the second half of the twentieth century in Irkutsk, portraying it as a still under-recognised part of the city's identity.¹¹

Attempts to draw attention to this heritage and gain social appreciation also have a spatial dimension. In particular, this pertains to spatial transformations in the public spaces of *mikroraiony*. One such place is Solnechny *mikroraion*, where the architects' current narrative about the experimental and unique pedestrian spaces has become the basis for a discourse on bringing these areas in line with the original 1960s design. Rather than proposing a literal restoration of the entire plan, this approach focuses on selectively completing or restoring certain features that were not built. This attempt to superimpose the past on the future, however, overlooks several decades of post-Soviet spatial transformations within the *mikroraion*, which reveal another history shaped by the multitude of actions by various stakeholders.

The qualitative analysis combined different sources of information, including urban planning and architectural documents,¹² data on the housing stock,¹³ interviews, field observations and audio/visual recordings of various public events related to the Solnechny *mikroraion* between 2020 and 2024. The spatial and archival analysis included examining the following themes: the initial plan, its implementation and the current stage of development transformations, transformation of open spaces and changes in the functional structure. Our analysis also considered the transformation of the residential environment from the 1990s to the present day, including densification, in order to obtain a picture of the spatial evolution of the *mikroraion* and the municipality's current plans for its development, as well as to identify the narratives constructed by architects and residents behind these spatial changes. The combination of sources, as in the approach used by Zhelnina (2023), allowed us to verify the visions of the past and the future of Solnechny with regard to the aims and problems of the modernist residential legacy.

¹⁰Because of the extensive industrialisation of Siberia, the city of Irkutsk grew from 365,893 in 1959 to 549,787 in 1979, according to the All-Union Census data available at: <https://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/pril.php>, accessed 10 April 2024.

¹¹Irkutskie politekhovtsy—aktivnye uchastniki XX Mezhhregional'nogo festivalya 'Zodchestvo v Sibiri-2020', available at: <https://www.istu.edu/novosti/pub/56684>, accessed 20 September 2020.

¹²Historical materials included plans of the *Verkhny Bief* residential area, photos of the models of the Solnechny *mikroraion* of the 1970s, archives of *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* provided by Elena Grigorieva, founding editor-in-chief of *Project Baikal* journal. Planning documents are public documents and are published either in the regional socio-political newspaper *Oblastnaya obshchestvenno-politicheskaya gazeta Ogirk* or on the official regional website, available at: <https://irkobl.ru>, accessed 2 April 2024.

¹³Data on the housing stock available at: reformazkh.ru, accessed 31 January 2022.

The field study consisted of two parts. The first comprised in-depth interviews conducted in 2020 with architects who worked at *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt*, the local planning institute responsible for the *mikroraion*'s development, in the 1960s–1990s. Interview material was complemented by the notes and recordings (audio and video) collected during various events held by the Union of Architects and the Technical University of Irkutsk. These events included excursions to the Solnechny *mikroraion* for international teams of architects as part of a festival and urban planning workshops.¹⁴ A valuable source of data was the regional edition of the journal *Project Baikal*,¹⁵ which included archival material on the project's inception and interviews with architects involved in its development.

The second part consisted of go-along interviews (Evans & Jones 2011; Zaporozhets 2017) with the residents of Solnechny *mikroraion*. Interlocutors were invited to conduct walking tours around Solnechny (see Appendix 1). The tour option was chosen primarily to stimulate conversation about the everyday spaces of the district, their significance to residents and the impact or meaning of any transformation (Kusenbach 2003, 2008). To gain a mix of views, in deciding who to invite for interview, we chose people who had lived in the *mikroraion* for a long time, in the same place, along with those who had recently moved into or within the area. All interlocutors lived in Soviet panel buildings in apartments that they had either received during the privatisation process or bought.¹⁶ The interviews were conducted in Russian, the native language of the interviewer and all interlocutors. Some potential respondents declined to participate in the go-along interview. Since we did not represent city authorities or developers, engaging us would not bring about any changes to the *mikroraion* and therefore the interview was perceived as having no value.

Soviet Russia's mass housing estates and their post-Soviet transformation

Mass residential development in the Soviet Union started in the 1950s with Nikita Khrushchev's measures to reform housing management and development (Meuser & Zadorin 2015). The All-Union Meeting of Architects and Builders initiated the reforms in 1954, where Khrushchev's concluding speech declared that construction should use cheap, plentiful factory-made panels for standard designs. Then, at the XXII Congress of

¹⁴See, Annual International Architectural Festival *Zodchestvo in Siberia (ZVS)*, Irkutsk, 2020, available at: <https://zvsiberia.ru/zvsiberia2020>, accessed 29 March 2024; Annual International Workshop on Urbanism 'International Baikal Winter Urban Planning University', 17th session: 'System of City Centres. Formation of Public and Business Spaces', 2016, available at: <https://www.istu.edu/deyatelnost/obrazovanie/institut/iasd/mbzgu/default>, accessed 30 April 2024; 'Unloved Heritage "Socialist City"? Planning Strategies for the Sustainable Development of Large Settlements from the 1960s and 1970s', Trilateral Partnerships—Cooperation Projects Between Scholars and Scientists from Ukraine, Russia and Germany Volkswagen Stiftung, June 2016–September 2018, available at: <https://istb.iesl.kit.edu/917.php>, accessed 3 July 2025.

¹⁵*Project Baikal* is a journal of architecture, design and urbanism, published by the VostokSibAcademCenter of the Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction Sciences. We drew on the following issues: 'Utopia', No. 5 (2005); 'Agglomeration', No. 9 (2006); 'Irkutskgrazhdanprojekt', No. 12 (2007); 'Vladimir Pavlov', No. 26 (2010); 'Sixtiers', No. 39–40 (2014); 'Irkutskgrazhdanprojekt–50', No. 43 (2015); 'Regional School', No. 64 (2020); 'Socialist City', No. 68 (2021); 'Linearity', No. 72 (2022), available at: <https://projectbaikal.com/index.php/pb/issue/archive>, accessed 29 March 2024.

¹⁶See Appendix 2 for more detail.

the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1961, Khrushchev outlined the idea of providing each family with a separate flat by the end of the 1980s.¹⁷ These reforms initiated a dual restructuring of Soviet housing construction, that combined the development of mass housing series designs with the introduction of a spatial unit called *mikroraion* designed to integrate mass housing series, green spaces and social infrastructure (Drémaité 2019). Both approaches were intended to enable quicker and cheaper large-scale housing construction. The *mikroraion* became the primary organisational framework for Soviet mass housing programmes, replacing overcrowded communal apartments (*kommunalki*) and barracks, which together had dominated the urban housing stock in the Soviet Union up until the 1950s (Meerovich 2014).

The development of mass housing meant that, after years of ‘enforced communal living’ (Meerovich 2014), a large section of the population experienced life in a separate residence for the first time and were able to enjoy private domesticity (Reid 2006). To accommodate this shift, large areas on the periphery of city centres were turned into zones of mass housing. As a result, in the Khrushchev (1953–1964) and Brezhnev (1964–1982) eras, the residential landscape of Soviet Russian cities radically changed.

The spatial transformation of Soviet *mikroraiony* in Russia has occurred over several phases since the 1990s. The first major shift occurred in 1991 with the launch of a housing privatisation programme, which allowed residents to obtain ownership of their formerly state- or municipally-owned flats. This process transformed the ownership structure of Russian cities, where privately owned housing accounted for 91.8% of the total housing stock in 2018 (Kosareva & Polidi 2021). However, this shift produced a highly fragmented system of housing ownership, where a single building might include owner-occupiers, tenants renting from absentee landlords, residents in social housing and non-privatised units (Korableva *et al.* 2023). Attempts to introduce collective governance mechanisms, such as housing associations, were delayed and uneven, resulting in a persistent gap between ownership and control. As highlighted by Gunko *et al.* (2018), this fragmentation and lack of coordinated management have complicated routine maintenance and undermined collective renovation efforts.

Between the early 2000s and mid-2010s, a second shift emerged with the rise of private infill development (Korableva *et al.* 2023). In the case of *mikroraiony*, this often meant new housing construction on land plots within existing residential districts, allocated by the municipal authorities and sold to private developers. Infill development frequently disrupted the original spatial logic of *mikroraiony*, exacerbating infrastructural strain and reducing green spaces. In response, self-organised resident groups emerged to resist densification and the loss of green or communal space. As documented in Irkutsk and other Russian cities, such contestations often took the form of court appeals, public hearings and protest rallies (Bederson *et al.* 2021; Korableva *et al.* 2023), highlighting growing tensions between local communities and both municipal authorities and developers.

¹⁷XXII S’yezd Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soyuza. 17–31 oktyabrya 1961 goda: stenograficheskii otchet: v 3-kh t’, 1962, p. 198, available at: https://archive.org/details/22nd_Congress_CPSU_17_31_Oktiabria_1961/22nd_congress_CPSU_17_31_oktiabria_1961_Vol_1/, accessed 28 May 2024.

The third phase emerged in the 2010s with a state-led turn towards initiatives aimed at improving public spaces under the federal Comfortable Urban Environment (*Komfortnaya gorodskaya sreda*) programme, first introduced in 2017. The ‘comfortable city’ idea included in the programme emphasised aesthetic upgrades, landscaped courtyards, pedestrian zones and recreational amenities. However, these interventions often created overly curated and sterile environments. While visibly transformative, they bypassed public deliberation and failed to incorporate resident knowledge or priorities or address deeper infrastructural inequalities or urban fragmentation (Zupan & Gunko 2019). As such, the programme contributed to a top-down narrative of improvement that often conflicted with lived experiences and local understandings of urban space.

These waves of post-Soviet transformations brought not only material changes to *mikroraiony* but also reshaped social life within them. They weakened neighbourly ties, disrupted communal practices (Tkach 2024), and deepened inequalities in access to public goods such as green areas, infrastructure and mobility (Polukhina 2023). Yet these social shifts were rarely addressed in professional or policy debates, which tended to focus on design and development rather than lived experience. From the 2000s onwards, many decisions about the use and redevelopment of space were driven by alliances between municipalities and private developers, frequently bypassing residents and their interests (Bederson *et al.* 2021). These struggles highlight how the post-Soviet transformation of Soviet *mikroraiony* has not been a linear process of decline or renewal, but one shaped by conflict, negotiation and multiple, often conflicting, visions of the urban future.

The planned, implemented and transformed living space of Solnechny mikroraion

From the 1950s and into the 1970s, the development of Irkutsk and Eastern Siberia more broadly was connected to the continued process of Soviet industrialisation initiated in the 1920s and 1930s. The construction of hydroelectric power stations to supply cheap electricity spurred the growth of heavy industry and the extraction of natural resources for the Soviet economy (Uvarova & Naumova 2020). These large-scale projects generated at least 20 years of stable migration by young, skilled workers to East Siberia (Gonina 2023). As in previous phases of industrialisation, one of the significant factors for relocating workers and qualified specialists was the possibility of obtaining accommodation. Thus, residential construction became integral to industrial regional development.

The development of Solnechny *mikroraion* in Irkutsk during the 1960s and 1970s exemplifies many ambitions of Soviet modernist planning, while also illustrating how local experimentation could diverge from country-wide mass housing series designs. The project was developed by *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt*, a regional architectural institute under the State Committee for Construction in the Soviet Union (*Gosstroï*) established in 1964.¹⁸ Some residential districts, including Solnechny, were located on undeveloped territories of the upper basin of the dam of the Irkutsk Hydroelectric Power Station.

¹⁸The history of *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* is featured in ‘Irkutskgrazhdanproject–50’, *Project Baikal*, No. 43, 2015, available at: <https://projectbaikal.com/index.php/pb/issue/archive>, accessed 29 March 2024; Interview 10, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1980s–1990s, Irkutsk, 29 May 2020.

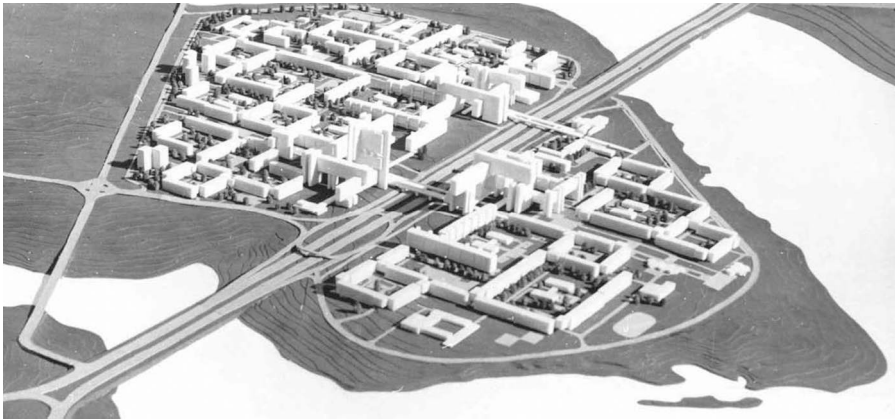


FIGURE 1. MODEL OF THE RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOLNECHNY MIKROAION. 1970s, IRKUTSKGRAZHDANPROEKT

Source: From the archives of *Project Baikal* journal; reproduced with permission.

These areas resemble peninsulas with significant shorelines and multiple water access points. For the architects, this location opened up the possibility of incorporating recreational elements into the residential design, such as waterfront promenades, boat docks and landscaped green spaces along the shoreline (see Figure 1).

In Solnechny, architects worked with standard housing series 1-464 (five storeys) (see Figure 2) and 135 (nine storeys) (see Figure 3) but introduced several design adaptations to better respond to local conditions. For the 1-464 series, they developed corner sections on stilts to create open ground-level transitions, semi-open courtyards, adaptation to the sloping terrain and lighter visual forms.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the 135 series was modified for seismic safety through structural reinforcements.

The 1-464 series form semi-enclosed courtyards, described by one of the architects as ‘incredible’ for that time and ‘implemented, although not economically justified’.²⁰ This was considered remarkable because it contradicted the dominant rationalist principles of Soviet mass housing development aimed at minimising construction costs through simplified open layouts and strict housing standardisation. Instead, these individualised elements required design approval by and cooperation with local house-building factories, where each non-standardised element had to be separately produced or adapted. For the industrial type of Soviet housing production, even minor deviations from standard designs significantly increased costs and disrupted the factory workflows and construction timelines.

Alongside the adapted mass housing series, the project included several architect-designed gallery-type buildings with non-standard layouts, including external bridges connecting buildings to each other or to the surrounding pedestrian infrastructure. These

¹⁹Interview 12, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1960s–1990s, Irkutsk, 25 June 2020.

²⁰Interview 12, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1960s–1990s, Irkutsk, 25 June 2020.



FIGURE 2. CORNER SECTIONS ON STILTS IN 1–464 AC SERIES, SOLNECHNY, IRKUTSK (LEFT); A COMBINATION OF FOUR 1–464 AC SECTIONS AND CORNER SECTIONS PROJECTED FOR THE SOLNECHNY (RIGHT)

Source: Photo by Ekaterina Gladkova, 2022 (left); photo by Roman Malinovich, 2022 (right).



FIGURE 3. 135 C SERIES, SOLNECHNY, IRKUTSK (LEFT), A COMBINATION OF FOUR 135 C SECTIONS (RIGHT)

Source: Photo by Ekaterina Gladkova, 2022 (left); photo by Roman Malinovich, 2022 (right).

buildings aimed to introduce spatial diversity and individuality within the otherwise repetitive logic of Soviet mass housing. The use of bridges also reflected the other intention of the plan: to separate the pedestrian ways from vehicular roads. This ambition was anchored by two pedestrian alleys connected by the bridges leading to the riverbank, with social facilities (such as libraries, pharmacies, hairdressers), schools and child-care facilities opening onto these alleys.²¹ As one of the architects recalled: ‘They were always searching [for ways to differentiate each *mikroraion*]. It is not just that all six or five *mikroraiony* were built under the repetitive plan—no’.²² This remark underscores

²¹Interview 12, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1960s–1990s, Irkutsk, 25 June 2020.

²²Interview 11, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1980s–1990s, Irkutsk, 20 June 2020.

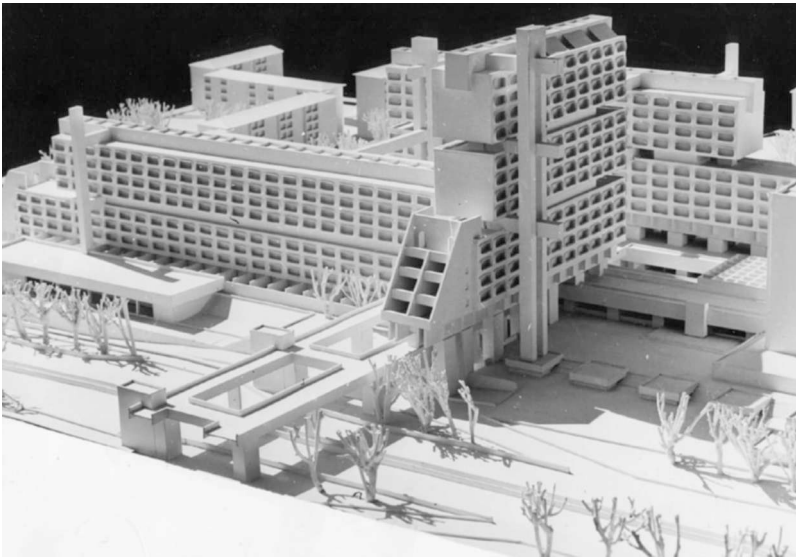


FIGURE 4. GALLERY-TYPE RESIDENTIAL BUILDING ON KARL-MARX-STADT AVENUE (NOW ZHUKOV AVENUE). ARCHITECTS: VLADIMIR PAVLOV, NIKOLAI BELYAKOV, 1983

Source: From the archives of *Project Baikal* journal; reproduced with permission.

how, despite working within the constraints of standardised series, the design team made a conscious effort to differentiate each residential district.

Implementation and transformation

Despite its ambitious design, the implementation of Solnechny's original plan between the 1970s and the 1990s was only partial. This pattern illustrates the difficulty of implementing non-standard architectural solutions within the constraints of Soviet mass housing production. Technical limitations, chronic material shortages and the rigidities of the prefabrication production system led to compromises in both quality and performance. For example, the corner sections of the 1-464 series were 'heavily criticised', as 'the apartments above the stilts were freezing', with poor insulation due to a lack of available materials.²³ Only a few architect-designed buildings were completed according to the original intentions. Among them was the so-called *dom-korabl'*, a gallery-type housing block with a unique layout and design (see Figure 4).²⁴ These shortcomings reveal the structural gap between architectural ambition and the industrial logic of Soviet housing construction, in which customisation often undermined, rather than improved, the built result.

²³Interview 12, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1960s–1990s, Irkutsk, 25 June 2020.

²⁴See, for example, M. Meerovich in 'Curtain XX', *Project Baikal*, No. 59, 2019, available at: <https://projectbaikal.com/index.php/pb/article/view/1447/1420>, accessed 29 March 2024.

Several other elements of the original plan were never realised either, for example, key components of the pedestrian infrastructure, such as the bridges to connect the pedestrian alleys, as well as some social facilities or housing sections.²⁵ This left the *mikroraion* with areas set aside for planned development that never happened, which were later made available for new private development in the post-Soviet period. The green areas, particularly along the shoreline, also became vulnerable to later redevelopment, since they lacked any clear designation or protective zoning. However, architects reflecting on this process often interpret criticism of unbuilt elements as a broader denial of the Soviet past. In their view, such criticism overlooks the coherence and clarity of the original intentions, meaning the plan was done ‘clearly, beautifully, and convincingly’.²⁶ This perspective highlights how the ideal of the plan continues to hold symbolic weight, even when its practical execution proved uneven.

The spatial transformations of Solnechny in the post-Soviet period reflect the wider trends in post-Soviet Russian cities. Three specific phases can be identified: the 1990s to early 2000s, when most changes were limited to the gradual completion of the social infrastructure included in the Soviet plan and low-scale infill housing construction on the east–north part of the shoreline; a second phase during the 2000s and 2010s was marked by housing densification and resident mobilisation in response to new development pressures; and a third, ongoing phase since the late-2010s, in which the focus is on improvements to public space, coordinated by the municipality through the federal funding programme. These layered transformations bring together the residents’ post-Soviet lived experiences in Solnechny as well as the commemorative narrative maintained by the professional architectural community, which continues to view Solnechny through the lens of its unfulfilled 1960s design ideals.

‘The unique in the typical’: an architectural narrative of 1960s–1970s mass housing in Irkutsk

The post-Soviet architectural narrative in Irkutsk presents the housing construction of the 1960s and 1970s in the city as a case of ‘unique for limited money’.²⁷ Commemorative in quality, it frames local housing development as experimental and exceptional within the otherwise standardised Soviet mass housing system. At the core of the narrative is the belief that the *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* architects of the 1960s succeeded in delivering modifications to standard housing series design, as well as architect-authored housing and spatial decisions. By the late 1960s, the first standardised panel mass housing of the 1950s was already subject to criticism among Soviet architects for its monotony and drab uniformity (Drémaitè 2024). Architects who joined *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1960s from Moscow, Leningrad and Kyiv²⁸ were aware of these critical discussions and the

²⁵Interview 12, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1960s–1990s, Irkutsk, 25 June 2020.

²⁶Interview 12, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1960s–1990s, Irkutsk, 25 June 2020.

²⁷Interview 11, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1980s–1990s, Irkutsk, 20 June 2020.

²⁸See ‘Irkutskgrazhdanproject—50’, *Project Baikal*, No. 43, 2015, available at: <https://projectbaikal.com/index.php/pb/issue/archive>, accessed 29 March 2024.

resistance to the state's complete rejection of aesthetic considerations as 'architectural excesses' (*arkhitekturnye islishestva*).²⁹ The geographical distance from Moscow and importance of Siberia for Soviet industrialisation allowed Irkutsk architects greater freedom in arguing for specific modifications, especially when justified as necessary adaptations to regional climatic or seismic conditions.³⁰

Moscow, as the centre of Soviet administrative power, also features prominently in the narrative. The ability of Irkutsk-based architects to carry out design experiments is often contrasted with the stricter control and standardisation faced in the capital, as seen in the claim by one interviewee that 'what Irkutsk achieved that Moscow did not at that time was the modification of typical residential buildings into individualised series. Moscow did not interfere much in the experiments with block elements in the *mikroraiony*'.³¹ At the same time, this comparison does not imply that Moscow resisted innovation. On the contrary, central authorities demonstrated institutional interest in experimentation as a means to improve cost-effectiveness and spatial solutions in mass housing. Resources were selectively allocated to regional design institutes like *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt*, with the aim of testing new approaches that, if successful, could be incorporated into the official catalogue of standard housing components (Erofeev 2020, pp. 196–98). This contrast with Moscow thus serves less as a literal description of greater regional freedom, and more as a rhetorical tool to highlight the complexity of getting any deviation approved. Interviewees noted that architects often used seismic or climatic justifications to obtain permission for more individualised architectural features than such conditions strictly required, citing it as a strategy of how creative ambition operated within Soviet bureaucratic constraints.

Building on this, in the post-Soviet era, the story of housing construction in the 1960s and 1970s has become the story of the 'original and bold' solutions of the 1960s architects (*shestidesyatniki*) in Irkutsk.³² Since 2002, when the exhibition 'The Irkutsk School of Architecture' was held at the Russian House in Berlin, the Irkutsk Organization of the Union of Architects has actively promoted the idea of a 'regional architecture school', highlighting its uniqueness during the times of standardised mass housing production.³³

The description 'original and bold', however, is not exclusively historical, as the Union of Architects also employs the original 1960s plan as a benchmark when evaluating post-Soviet transformations of Solnechny. This is exemplified by one interviewee's claim that 'if Solnechny had remained as it was conceived and properly built, considering all the requirements, it would have been a great example...', but [post-Soviet] developments both along the shore and inside had a great impact [on the

²⁹Such criticism was published in the journal *Arkhitektura SSSR* in the 1960s.

³⁰Interview with Lucian Antipin in 'Irkutskgrazhdanproject—50', *Project Baikal*, No. 43, 2015, pp. 11–2, available at: <https://projectbaikal.com/index.php/pb/issue/archive>, accessed 29 March 2024.

³¹Interview 11, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1980s–1990s, Irkutsk, 20 June 2020.

³²Interview with Lidin Konstantin in 'Sixtiers', *Project Baikal*, No. 39–40, 2014, pp. 38–42, available at: <https://projectbaikal.com/index.php/pb/issue/archive>, accessed 29 March 2024.

³³'Regional Schools', *Project Baikal*, No. 64, 2020, pp. 73–97, available at: <https://projectbaikal.com/index.php/pb/issue/archive>, accessed 29 March 2024.

integrity of the original urban design]’.³⁴ This narrative, which frames subsequent changes in Solnechny not as new directions but as unwanted deviations from what was originally intended, clouds the architects’ perspective on the post-Soviet transformations. Applying this nostalgic lens risks ignoring the actual social and economic forces that have shaped post-Soviet transformations, as well as the contributions of residents, developers and other actors involved.

Post-Soviet transformations as a narrative of loss

Another dimension of the architectural idealisation of the 1960s plan is the narrative of loss, which interprets the unfinished elements of the original 1960s plan and later post-Soviet spatial transformations of Solnechny as the erosion of a once-coherent urban vision. In 2020, the Union of Architects opened a four-day exhibition in Irkutsk dedicated to the work of architects in the 1960s on one of the pedestrian alleys that was part of the initial project in the northern part of Solnechny *mikroraion*. The exhibition was accompanied by a tree-planting event and a guided walk by architects through the *mikroraion*, focusing on the spatial solutions of the 1960s (see Appendix 1, photos A & B). The exhibition related to a broader commemorative effort led by members of the Union of Architects, many of whom were former employees of *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt*, students or colleagues of the original Solnechny project authors. It aimed to highlight the contributions of *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* and to recognise the value of the spaces of the 1960s, whether completed or merely conceptual. As part of this effort, the Union proposed naming the alleys after the architects of the 1960s, thereby ‘adding them to the toponymy of Irkutsk’, and completing elements of the original design, such as the bridges connecting the pedestrian alleys (Grigoryeva & Lidin 2021). In the narrative promoted by the Union of Architects, the residential architecture of the 1960s in Irkutsk is portrayed as a period of ambitious yet context-sensitive experimentation, characterised by modernist clarity, integration with the landscape and appreciation of the value of open spaces that structured everyday life in the *mikroraion*.³⁵ This commemorative turn also aims to reassert authorship over buildings and spaces long treated as anonymous or overlooked during decades of post-Soviet transformation.

The pedestrian alleys in Solnechny, intended by the 1960s plan to become linear centres of social infrastructure, have in reality become quiet green corridors lacking public activity or services. Many of the ground-floor spaces initially designed for non-residential use, such as shops or community facilities, remain vacant, while commercial and social life have gradually shifted toward the main streets that are more easily accessible by car. As one interviewee noted, the alleys are appreciated by the residents for their greenery and calm atmosphere largely disconnected from public life, but they do not serve the social and commercial function envisioned by their designers.³⁶

³⁴Interview 12, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1960s–1990s, Irkutsk, 25 June 2020.

³⁵See the discussion on the 1960s architecture in ‘Sixtiers’, *Project Baikal*, No. 39–40, 2014, available at: <https://projectbaikal.com/index.php/pb/issue/archive>, accessed 29 March 2024.

³⁶Interview 11, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1980s–1990s, Irkutsk, 20 June 2020.

Yet, recent discussions have revived the original concept of alleys and footbridges as a symbol of 1960s experimental planning (Grigoryeva & Lidin 2021). Although the footbridges were never constructed, the concept is still presented in architectural discourse as a forward-looking and locally grounded contribution to modernist urbanism. This commemorative framing has also shaped recent interventions in Solnechny's public spaces supported by the Union of Architects. In 2023, a project for transforming one of the alleys received federal funding, including plans for lighting, paving and exhibition modules about architects of the 1960s.³⁷ Such interventions reflect a broader recent pattern in practices to improve public space in Russia, which are often oriented toward quick, visible results (Zupan & Gunko 2019). In a sense, this continues the practice of improvement funding that existed in the 2000s. In 2007, a major public space in Solnechny received funding for the installation of a monument to Marshal Zhukov, a memorial alley to World War II victims, and the transformation of the surrounding square (see Appendix 1, photo C). Due to insufficient resources in the local budget, the improvement project had to be significant in order to attract additional funding from the federal centre. As stated by the mayor of Irkutsk, quoted in *Irk.ru*, 'the project is costly: creating the memorial complex requires R100,000,000. The city authorities allocated R1,500,000 for the design work' (Kondrashova 2007). Thus, only 1.5% of the funding came from the local budget. These projects, typically dependent on federal subsidies, often prioritise symbolic meaning over functional use (Zupan & Gunko 2019). In a context of limited municipal resources, architectural memory, commemorative significance or visible results become key instruments for justifying funding, while the everyday needs of residents and the long-term usability of public spaces remain secondary (Gunko *et al.* 2022; Smirnova & Adrianova 2022).

The effort to preserve the memory of the 1960s, particularly regarding open spaces in *mikroraiony*, is notable for treating these pedestrian areas as having independent value. However, the narrative of the architectural community regarding Solnechny has focused on the loss of spatial ideas and solutions from the 1960s and 1970s, directing efforts towards their reconstruction. The possibility of reconstructing and preserving the spatial solutions of the 1960s is justified as preserving 'the second [modernist] identity of Irkutsk [after Irkutsk's traditional wooden architecture], which the residents have not yet appreciated'.³⁸ Post-Soviet changes simply do not fit this framing of the legacy of Soviet mass housing modernism as vitally experimental and forward-looking: 'Our future has already been here. It was the sixties' (Grigoryeva & Lidin 2021). Meanwhile, the complexity of post-Soviet urban space, shaped by competing actors, formal and informal decision-making, and shifting responsibilities (Bederson *et al.* 2021) is largely overlooked by this nostalgic perspective. Thus, the transformations of residential areas are viewed as 'a loss', where the visionary last Soviet master plan of 1970 for Irkutsk

³⁷ 'Bul'var "Solnechny" poyavitsya v Irkutske v 2024 godu', *Oblastnaya obshchestvenno-politicheskaya gazeta Ogirk*, 2 April 2024, available at: <https://www.ogirk.ru/2024/04/02/bulvar-solnechnyj-pojavitsja-v-irkutske-v-2024-godu/>, accessed 29 March 2024.

³⁸ 'Irkutskie politekhovtsy—aktivnye uchastniki XX Mezhhregional'nogo festivalya 'Zodchestvo v Sibiri—2020', available at: <https://www.istu.edu/novosti/pub/56684>, accessed 20 September 2023.

was never fulfilled.³⁹ Decisions were made in the post-Soviet era, by various actors with various motivations, just not according to a master plan.

Residents' narratives of change: everyday life and spatial memory in Solnechny

The narrative of everyday change among Solnechny residents centres on contested densification projects and consequent gradual infrastructural decline rather than master plans or commemorative ideals. The 2000s and 2010s were marked by land grabs and new residential development, often led by private development.⁴⁰ In this period, as noted across many Russian cities, 'conflicts over urban environment arrangements became part of everyday life' (Bederson *et al.* 2021, p. 16). The places where Nelya, a resident of Solnechny since 1985, stopped during the interview were closely connected to these changes. Describing one of the projects of the 2000s, she explained that new buildings had replaced green spaces that once felt like an integral part of the district, 'everything was demolished. The new housing blocked everything, of course. Such a tall house for us here. We just couldn't see the point of it'.⁴¹ In fact, a part of these 'green' spaces had been allocated for construction in the original Soviet plan, but the buildings were not completed. In the post-Soviet period, these sites were re-allocated by the municipality and redeveloped with taller housing blocks based on revised, more intensive projects.

Between 2006 and 2009, there were regular news reports of opposition to the city administration among Solnechny residents, who engaged in activities including rallies in the *mikroraion*, court proceedings, open letters from self-organised groups, and the dissemination of information about planned developments.⁴² Local civil society activism included the development of alternative solutions for spatial organisation in the districts (Vigovskaya 2019). As Nelya recalled, while passing by a new building (see Appendix 1, photo D):

How many protests were there then! ... They did not listen to us! ... We were against these houses, I told you ... we could have made a market here, a farmer's market. And one guy even died; he was killed. He had fought so much. Then someone hit him on the head, and he died within a month. And then the construction started right away.⁴³

³⁹Interview 12, architect who worked for *Irkutskgrazhdanproekt* in the 1960s–1990s, Irkutsk, 25 June 2020.

⁴⁰Some examples from the newspapers: 'Mnogo shuma i ... nichego?', *Irkutsk*, 7 February 2003, p. 6; 'Plan "Marshal"—agressiya ili dobrososedstvo?', *Irkutsk*, 31 January 2005, No. 8–9; 'Serie pyatna irkutskoi zastroi', *Oblastnaya gazeta*, 4 July 2008, No. 73 (348), p. 3; 'Sporny bereg', *Vostochno-Sibirskaya Pravda*, No. 27, 1–8 July 2014; 'Narod protiv sadika', *Vostochno-Sibirskaya Pravda*, No. 51, 9–16 December 2014.

⁴¹Interview 2, Nelya, 81 years old, Solnechny, 14 April 2022.

⁴²Online news portal of the Irkutsk region irk.ru; *Radio Svoboda—Sibir' Realii*; information portal *Babr24*; *Oblastnaya obshchestvenno-politicheskaya gazeta ogirk*, *Babr24* (independent regional online media platform focused on Baikal Siberia), available at: <https://babr24.com>, accessed 24 June 2025; *Sibreal (Sibir.Realii)*, Siberian service of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, available at: <https://www.sibreal.org>, accessed 24 June 2025; *Ogirk (Oblastnaya obshchestvenno-politicheskaya gazeta)*, available at: <https://www.ogirk.ru>, accessed 24 June 2025; *Telekompaniya 'AIST'* (regional television broadcaster, Irkutsk), available at: <http://www.aisttv.ru>, accessed 24 June 2025.

⁴³Interview 2, Nelya, 81 years old, Solnechny, 14 April 2022.

The history of the conflicts of the 2000s, however, remains largely unexplored and residents are reluctant to discuss this. What little residents were prepared to tell us reflected their accumulated fatalism regarding changes in their living environment. Not all efforts failed, however, as in the late 2010s, residents successfully defended the district's park against new development (Vigovskaya 2019; see Appendix 1, photo E). Thus, civic activity has become part of the narrative about significant places in the district through what has been successfully defended or lost.

Meanwhile, the densification of the Solnechny *mikroraion* has significantly changed its landscape and infrastructural supply. On the one hand, the new residential development has attracted shops to the ground floors and allowed new small businesses to open. During a tour, Yura, who had lived here since childhood, described the post-Soviet residential development as 'atypical, and therefore beautiful' (see Appendix 1, photo F),⁴⁴ something that distinguishes Solnechny from other parts of the city. Polina, who moved to Solnechny more recently, saw the new housing developments of the 2020s as a sign of progress, noting the appearance of 'beautiful buildings by the water, next to a well-maintained park' and adding that now 'there are places to walk'.⁴⁵

At the same time, post-Soviet developments have disrupted the Soviet assumptions regarding social facilities, engineering networks and transport infrastructure. Long-term residents pointed to recurring problems with water and electricity supply, attributing these issues to overstretched infrastructure that had not been redesigned to accommodate the growing population: 'there are often disruptions in the water supply, in the heating. Now cold or hot water is often turned off, and the electricity often goes out'.⁴⁶ Furthermore, there is no provision for parking. The older parts of Solnechny were not designed for private car ownership, which has resulted in overcrowded courtyards and improvised parking wherever space is available: 'the old development of Solnechny is very cramped, narrow, not designed for car parks. People use all possible options to park. If there is no tree or fence, then you can park'.⁴⁷ Interlocutors who have lived in the neighbourhood since it was built say that the dead-end courtyards of the *mikroraion* cannot accommodate the increased number of vehicles (see Appendix 1, photo G). This 'infrastructural deficit' (Zaporozhets & Bagina 2021), however, has not been translated into action by the residents, but remains a complaint to be someday resolved by house management companies or the municipality: 'We were somehow promised [by the municipality] that this hill would be levelled. Then we would have had enough space for more cars'.⁴⁸ In the short term, the residents often described temporary, informal arrangements to cope with growing pressure on infrastructure, bypassing official channels of coordination and maintenance.

The systemic lack of solutions for infrastructure issues by the local authorities is compensated by beautification projects aligned with the 'comfortable city' federal programme agenda. During tours, interlocutors often pointed out 'beautified spaces' as a

⁴⁴Interview 1, Yura, 25 years old, Solnechny, 19 April 2022.

⁴⁵Interview 7, Zhenya, 24 years old, Solnechny, 30 May 2024.

⁴⁶Interview 2, Nelya, 81 years old, Solnechny, 14 April 2022.

⁴⁷Interview 3, Misha, 26 years old, Solnechny, 18 April 2022.

⁴⁸Interview 4, Sonya, 28 years old, Solnechny, 18 April 2022.

sign of ‘district development’ and ‘putting things in order’, turning a ‘bad’ place into a ‘good’ one (see Appendix 1, photos K, J & L).⁴⁹ As 81-year-old Nelya observed, ‘the place has become pleasant. Benches were installed along with lighting, and a playground’ (see Appendix 1, photo H). Still, she noted that these changes sometimes came at the cost of greenery: ‘There were many trees on that side ... they cut them down and made a path. We were against it’.⁵⁰ While such projects are frequently described by the residents in terms of bottom-up initiative (‘the residents were the initiators, yes’),⁵¹ they in fact reflect the structured participation format embedded in state-led urban programmes (Zupan & Gunko 2019; Smirnova & Adrianova 2022).

Although local activism in Solnechny emerged during the 2000s protest campaigns, its contemporary expression is now largely confined to state-framed participation mechanisms. As Polina, who moved to the district in 2020, noted, self-organisation continues in Solnechny, yet primarily focuses on beautification decisions.⁵² Thus, the appearance of civic engagement is maintained, but its scope is narrowed to align with the priorities of the federal ‘comfortable city’ agenda.⁵³

Alongside the spaces of controlled and uncontrolled transformation, we also encountered unchanged places during the ‘tours’. These places, unaffected by state transformation programmes or investment interests, stood out as meaningful to residents. We were taken to the shoreline by interviewees Sonya and Misha. Misha described it as follows: ‘Not well-maintained, partially wild. And we always used to run with the dog along this wild shoreline (see Appendix 1, photo M). You can ride a bike there and take a walk, it’s great. It’s very beautiful, with a view of the city. For me, this district is about nature, about proximity to the water’.⁵⁴ The shoreline was included in every ‘tour’ (see Appendix 1, photo N), as a valued element of active recreation, a source of pride and a feature of the district, reflecting the modernist approach that residential areas should incorporate nature. Yura, who grew up in Solnechny, compared Solnechny with the centre of Irkutsk: ‘It’s great in the city, of course, but we have a whole beautiful shoreline. If you go past the bus stop, there’s a little forest there, nothing has been touched. It feels like you are still in the city, but almost out of town’.⁵⁵ In describing the shoreline, interviewees commonly referred to the smell, the special atmosphere, the wind and memories of personal events, all elements associated with the *mikroraion* as a special space.⁵⁶

By contrast, the pedestrian alleys at the centre of the architects’ union narrative ‘failed to be mentioned’ during the tours with residents (Zaporozhets 2017; Veselkova *et al.* 2019). The unfinished and incomplete pedestrian alleys remained an experiment on paper. Instead, alternative pedestrian routes emerged. In residents’ narratives, post-Soviet spatial

⁴⁹Interview 2, Nelya, 81 years old, Solnechny, 14 April 2022; interview 1, Yura, 25 years old, Solnechny, 19 April 2022; interview 4, Sonya, 28 years old, Solnechny, 18 April 2022.

⁵⁰Interview 2, Nelya, 81 years old, Solnechny, 14 April 2022.

⁵¹Interview 2, Nelya, 81 years old, Solnechny, 14 April 2022.

⁵²Interview 6, Polina, 36 years old, Solnechny, 29 May 2024.

⁵³Interview 2, Nelya, 81 years old, Solnechny, 14 April 2022; interview 6, Polina, 36 years old, Solnechny, 29 May 2024; interview 3, Misha, 26 years old, Solnechny, 18 April 2022.

⁵⁴Interview 3, Misha, 26 years old, Solnechny, 18 April 2022.

⁵⁵Interview 1, Yura, 25 years old, Solnechny, 19 April 2022.

⁵⁶Similar descriptions of the embankment emerged during each walk with the interlocutors.

transformations are deeply connected to notions of ‘rootedness’ and personal meaning (Brown & Perkins 1992; Brown *et al.* 2003). This includes both ‘attachment by location’ and ‘attachment by memory’, which reflects emotional and symbolic ties developed over time (Mihaylov & Perkins 2013). These forms of attachment are negotiated through lived experience, as residents navigate physical changes while maintaining a sense of continuity and belonging.

Conclusion

The transformation of mass housing developments in the post-Soviet period largely reflects social relations, being both the product and result of societal and power dynamics. Multiple actors, each pursuing their own interests, have contributed to the heterogeneity of the *mikroraion* space. Instead of adhering to the modernist concept of a unified, communal space, *mikroraion* structures have become fragmented and diverse in their utilisation and perception. This observation aligns with the findings of Pirrus and Leetmaa (2023) in their study of the transformation of large housing estates in Tartu and Vilnius.

Currently, *mikroraiony* encompass a patchwork of spaces shaped by diverse uses, meanings and degrees of attention, even if this variety is not apparent from the outside. The multifaceted nature of modernism scatters its history into numerous narratives, necessitating a more nuanced dialogue about this legacy. Modernist spaces, like other parts of the urban fabric, are inscribed with names, stories and memories. In producing memory by linking space, image, historical experience and emotions, the practices of substitution and fragmentation are not unique for Soviet modernism. The politics of memory is widely tied to mnemonic censorship or selective forgetting. Homogenising space, or ‘cleansing’ the urban environment, has become a key method of reorganising history in post-Soviet Russia (Scherrer 2007). The resulting plurality of local narratives thus functions not only as a symptom of fragmented memory, but also as a form of resistance against externally imposed collective identities (Ushakin 2011; Galeja 2015). In everyday life, this fragmentation manifests itself in weak emotional or historical attachment to space. This spatial–historical dissociation turns places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) into empty signifiers, screens for projections that serve as signs of absence—that is, places instead of memory (*lieux au lieu de la mémoire*) (Deschepper 2018). Ignoring this plurality ultimately blocks alternative future developments.

However, significant inequality exists among these actors in representing their interests within the *mikroraion* space, evident in the unsuccessful resistance of residents to new developments. Besides developers vying for land development, architects also play a role in the appropriation of public spaces. They prioritise the *mikroraion*’s historical purpose to fit a specific Soviet planning narrative, often disregarding the changes of the post-Soviet period. Consequently, post-Soviet changes are seen as deviations rather than subjects for dialogue, understanding and integration into the future narrative. The memory of the original project’s form not only holds symbolic or historical significance but has become an argument in spatial decisions for the future.

The legacy of Soviet *mikroraiony* lies not only in their design principles, but in how their social and spatial values have been interpreted, challenged and reimagined by multiple actors over time. Our study shows that many places often overlooked by architectural discourses

have become central to how residents negotiate belonging, memory and access. Yet these places remain weakly institutionalised: poorly maintained, rarely discussed beyond beautification schemes and lacking mechanisms for inclusive decision-making. These spaces highlight how the everyday legacy of modernist housing continues to evolve through lived experience rather than formal design.

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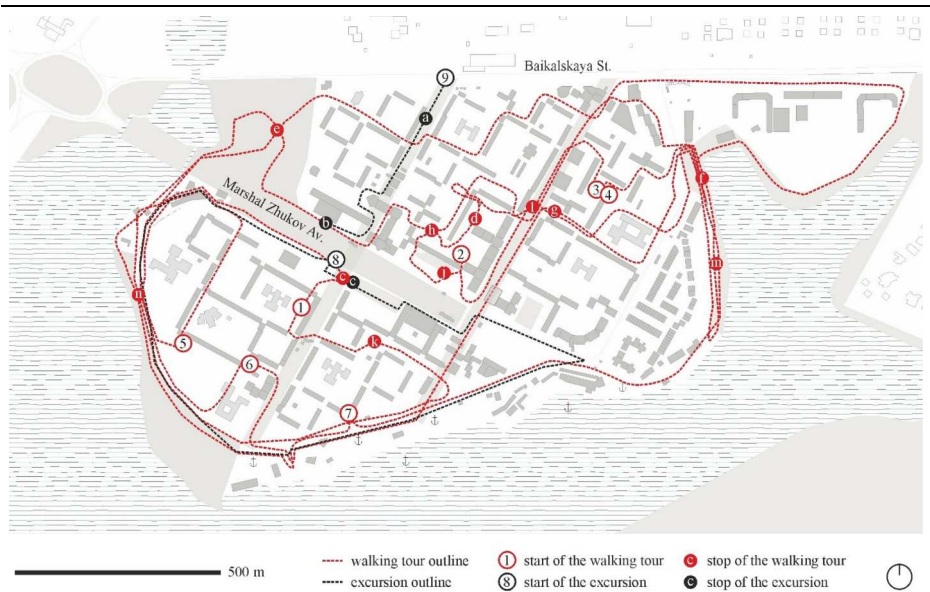
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Appendix 1. Stops on the walking tours and excursions



Stop	Photo	Location
A		The four-day Union of Architects exhibition on one of the pedestrian alleys

(Continued)

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Stop	Photo	Location
B		An architecturally unique building 'Dom-korabl' from the 1960s
C		The monument to Marshal Zhukov on the alley dedicated to World War II victims
D		The new building of the 2010s that replaced green spaces

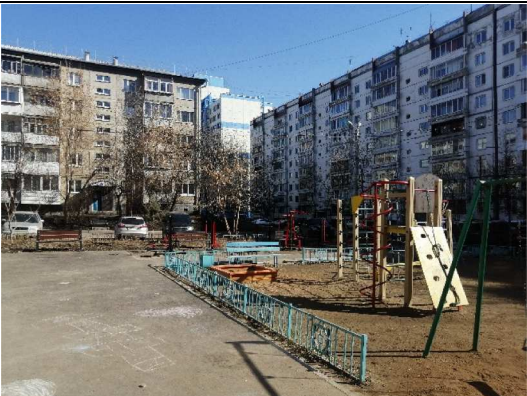


(Continued)

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Stop	Photo	Location
E		The district's park
F		The new housing developments of the 2020s
G		The dead-end courtyard used for unofficial parking




(Continued)

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Stop	Photo	Location
H		The beautification project of the playground aligned with 'comfortable city' federal programme agenda
J		The beautification project aligned with 'comfortable city' federal programme agenda
K		The beautification project aligned with 'comfortable city' federal programme agenda

(Continued)

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Stop	Photo	Location
L		The beautification project aligned with 'comfortable city' federal programme agenda
M		The wild shoreline
N		The wild shoreline

Source: All photos were taken by Ekaterina Gladkova during a go-along interview.

Appendix 2. List of interviews

Interview	Name	Age	Number of years living in Solnechny	Occupation	Household	Date
1	Yura	25	22	PhD student	Alone	19 April 2022
2	Nelya	81	37	Retired	Alone	14 April 2022
3	Misha	26	4	Programmer	Wife and dog	18 April 2022
4	Sonya	28	4	Bank employee	Husband and dog	18 April 2022
5	Oksana	40	8	Small business	Husband	27 January 2023
6	Polina	36	2	Architect	Husband and three children	29 May 2024
7	Zhenya	24	22	Student / teacher	Mother	30 May 2024
8	Excursion to Irkutsk <i>mikroraiorny</i>	–	–	As a part of International Conference in Irkutsk ‘Perspectives for the Socialist City’, Trilateral Partnerships—Cooperation Projects ‘Unloved Heritage of the “Socialistic City”?’ Planning Strategies for the Sustainable Development of Large Settlements from the 1960s and 1970s’, Volkswagen Stiftung As a part of the International Architectural Festival ‘Zodchestvo’ in Siberia—2020	–	6 September 2018
9	Excursion and opening of the exhibition ‘Architects of the Sixties’	–	–	–	–	24 September 2020
10	Anonymous	–	–	Architect, worked for <i>Irkutskgrazhdanproekt</i> in the 1980s–1990s, member of the board of the Irkutsk regional organisation ‘Union of Architects of Russia’	–	29 May 2020
11	Anonymous	–	–	Architect, worked for <i>Irkutskgrazhdanproekt</i> in the 1980s–1990s, member of the board of the Irkutsk regional organisation ‘Union of Architects of Russia’	–	20 June 2020
12	Anonymous	–	–	Architect, member of the Public Council at the Architecture Department of Irkutsk Oblast, worked for <i>Irkutskgrazhdanproekt</i> in the 1960s–1990s, member of the board of the Irkutsk regional organisation ‘Union of Architects of Russia’	–	25 June 2020