

Cordula Gdaniec

Olga Brednikova and Oksana Zaporozhets, eds. *Mikrourbanizm: Gorod v detaliakh. Sbornik statei*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014. 352 pp. ISBN 978-5-4448-0178-9.

Cordula Gdaniec. Address for correspondence: Einstein Forum, Am Neuen Markt 7, 14467 Potsdam, Germany. cordula.gdaniec@einsteinforum.de.

Over the past few years Russian cities, and in particular Moscow, have been changing in a new direction. More emphasis has been put on the development of public space, parks have been refurbished, embankments made accessible, temporary cultural spaces have sprung up in many interstices, urban interventions and activism from various groups have become more visible and engaging of local communities, and what was hitherto unimaginable appears to have become possible—bicycling in the megacity. All in all, this most recent urban development is coinciding with an increased awareness and interest in all things urban in Russia. However, these changes are rarely reflected in academic publications. *Microurbanism: The City in Details* is a refreshing Russian publication on urban studies in Russia that attempts to fill this gap. Editors Olga Brednikova and Oksana Zaporozhets have surveyed Russian publications and contemporary urban-studies discourses within and outside academia and have selected the articles in this book to fit an innovative approach to studying the city that puts its dwellers and visitors in focus.

The main goal of the editors is to “breathe life into the city” by, for instance, applying nontraditional research themes and approaches; they describe the volume as a “collection of texts in which the authors try to capture urban life by way of analyzing the experience and inhabitation of its places, by highlighting and describing fine and (in the context of big theories) insignificant details. By describing life in the city, the researcher is joining the ranks of the creators of the imaginary city ... we wanted to create ‘our’ city, a city in which we, absolute urbanophiles, are living—close, understandable, and easy to read, human and warm, rich in moods and experiences, a city consisting of nuances and details, which are essential for everyday life” (14). It is this close-up view of the city, of its individual inhabitants and specific spaces, as opposed to its social groups and overlying structures, that the editors call microurbanism. The term is currently used in urban-planning and city-marketing contexts, mainly in the United States, and is usually applied to cities of fewer than 250,000 inhabitants which “possess a highly uncommon set of desirable attributes normally exclusively associated with much larger metropolitan centers.”¹ According to Jonathan Barnett, microurbanism “can be applied as a term for studying subsets of the city” (2011:21). The editors of this volume use the term in a different sense,

¹ See, for example, the information and marketing website of The Research Park at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (<http://researchpark.illinois.edu/about/champaign-urbana>).

although they do see a connection within the context of ideas in contemporary architecture and planning that give increased attention to small-scale projects and the concept of a human-scale city. Indeed, there is congruence with micro sociology, which zooms in on people and their everyday lives. However, the editors make a point of distancing themselves, at least in this collection of texts, from traditional ethnographic “thick description,” which they, perhaps a bit harshly, critique as “boring” (19) and, in their view, not a suitable analytical tool for getting at these more under-rated aspects of city life discussed in this volume.

“The point is that you simply don’t know where you’re headed. That’s the most interesting.” This quote by a so-called digger, a young man active in a Russian sub-culture of urban exploration—namely the exploration of underground spaces—sets the tone for this volume (45). The notion of movement through the city of the body of the resident and/or researcher is considered at length in the introduction: for the purposes of this book, the “idler” (*zevaka*) is introduced as a figure whose exploration of the city yields more insight than the widely discussed and applied figure of the flaneur: “Choosing the role of the idler, above all else, means succumbing to curiosity, anticipation of something interesting and captivating in a very broad sense” (31). By “planting” the idler in the city, the editors suggest that this personage helps uncover and describe the microcosms within the city that are presented in the book. It is within these close-ups, in the interstices of the urban fabric, and in the interwovenness of different categories of urban activity and representation (as produced by administrative actors, organized communities, economic actors, artists, or activists) that, according to the editors, “the city comes to life and reveals the diversity of its participants” (27). In this sense, the chapter on “Practices of Exploring Empty and Derelict Spaces,” for instance, sheds light on the invisible parts of the city, which turn into crystallization points for different practices, making the city more accessible and understandable to its inhabitants. It is representative in its approach of writing from a personal interest or encounter as well as treating the intellectual and physical exploration of this phenomenon as an “idle” wandering through the city’s spaces.

The articles are grouped into four sections. The first, “Experiencing the City: Multisensoral Urban Encounters,” explores the scope and experience of different levels of the urban environment, from corporality to soundscape. Chapters include exploration of derelict spaces, the story of a tramline, and “choreographies” of passengers on public transport. The second part, “‘Entertaining Town Planning’: Spaces and Experiences,” presents various subtle experiences, which are all set in specific arrangements of its physical infrastructure. These chapters describe, for example, soundscapes of backyards, flea markets as “urban stages,” and the role of the city in Russian wedding traditions. While uncovering and reading the many layers of the urban fabric is a well-worn research approach, the third section, “Nonlinear Urban Past,” introduces shabbiness as a “new metaphor” describing a cautious and thoughtful attitude of the researcher towards the city. Chapters in this section examine the phenomenon of new urban tourism, a form of urban exploration, and industrial heritage. “Urban Connections: Piecing Together the City Puzzle,” the fourth section, aims

at uncovering new types of connections—within and of structures as well as through inhabitants' creativity. Topics here range from street art in Hamburg to Internet society and traffic policing.

The articles are all studies by Russian urban researchers, including many young newcomers, but are not limited to cities in the Russian Federation—Hamburg, Berlin, and the Czech city of Olomouc feature. Neither are they limited to the largest and most famous cities in the Russian Federation: two studies are based on the southern city of Rostov-on-Don, and one deals with an industrial town beyond the Arctic Circle, Kovdor in the Murmansk Oblast. This collection of articles is to be recommended to urbanists everywhere who are interested in a tangential approach to phenomena in the postmodern city, not only those who do research on cities in Russia or the former Soviet Union. While the contributions vary in scope and quality—a few are fairly short (but succinct) and not all of them develop or discuss the relevant theoretical frameworks—the collection as a whole provides interesting case studies and food for thought. In a sense, *Microurbanism: The City in Details* can be regarded as a Russian view on a common research paradigm, shedding light, through the editors' introduction as well as through the various case studies, on new theoretical avenues in qualitative research on life and spaces in the city.

REFERENCES

Barnett, Jonathan. 2011. "A Short Guide to 60 of the Newest Urbanisms." *Planning* 77(4):19–21.