

Repair, Brokenness, Breakthrough

Ethnographic Responses



Edited by

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REPAIRING RUSSIA

MICHAŁ MURAWSKI

Moscow c. 2018: The Era of *Plitka*

At 11 p.m. on a hot August night, my friend Timur goes off in search of a taxi. We are standing on 1st Tverskaya Yamskaya Street, a major artery in central Moscow. He takes a wrong step and is immediately kettled by a circumambulating procession of yellow diggers and forklift trucks, lurching at high speed around what remains of Tverskaya Yamskaya's pavement surfaces. He emerges from the blockade, only to stumble over a pile of asphalt pavement chunks, freshly ripped out of the ground. The mountains of asphalt chunks are interspersed – here as more or less everywhere else in central Moscow – with even huger piles of brand new granite pavement stones, waiting to be laid into the ground by armies of jumpsuit-clad workers, the vast majority of them *gastarbeiters* from Central Asia. The whole scene is framed, here and everywhere else, by a never-ending sea of white and green striped banners, the official visual brand – designed by the graphic design team of Strelka KB – of 'My Street', or *Moya Ulitsa*. Strelka KB is the hip urban consultancy that has increasingly monopolised 'public improvement' (*blagoustroistvo*) projects in Moscow and Russia during the late Putin era.

Moya Ulitsa is the name of the most ambitious *blagoustroistvo* programme carried out in Moscow since the fall of the Soviet Union, currently being exported with ever-increasing zeal throughout the Russian regions, the former Soviet space and – if Strelka realises its ambitions – to the world at large.

Plitka – the Russian word for tile or paving stone – is one of the most important words in Moscow under the reign of the technocratic Mayor Sergey Sobyenin, who has ruled the city since the dismissal of the strongman populist Mayor Yuri Luzhkov in 2010. Journalist Sergey Medvedev (2015) has gone so far as to christen the Sobyenin years the 'era of *plitka*'.

Once they have been liberated from their packaging, but before coming to their final resting place in the ground, the piles of *plitka* are laid in a bewildering array of formations throughout the city. In the revolutionary centenary year of 2017, as the museums of Moscow (and the world) put on blockbuster shows celebrating the art of the Soviet avant-garde, the *plitka*



Figure S7.1. Abstract *plitka* assemblage. Photograph by Michał Murawski.

of Moscow were arranged into quite spectacular formations, which often bore an uncanny resemblance to the abstract art of the early twentieth century. In and around the Stalin-era high-rise (*vygotka*) on Kotelnicheskaya Naberezhnaya, the *plitka* were assembled in towering arrangements strikingly reminiscent of Kazimir Malevich's *architektons*, the suprematist artist's sculptural fantasies on the theme of architectural verticality (let us call them *plitkatektons*). Elsewhere, cut chunks of *plitka* were balanced against each other – sometimes accompanied by a concrete traffic cone, discarded stone cutter blade, uprooted manhole cover or wooden crate – in a manner more reminiscent of an abstract work by El Lissitzky or Popova.

Sometimes the vernacular constructivist *mise-en-scènes* acquire a formal and temporal complexity, which seems to leave Eisenstein far behind. Outside the *vygotka*, workers ripping out asphalt from the building's driveways were forced to work their way around an inconveniently parked black Volvo, left lingering on a tiny island of asphalt in the dust (flanked by a square flowerpot and a *plitkatekton*). By the following evening, the three principal elements (car, pot, *plitkatekton*) were still in place, although some meaningful changes to the form and composition had taken place: the square concrete flowerpot had been replaced by a circular concrete flowerpot; the *plitkatekton* had been reduced in height by about two-thirds and



Figure S7.2. A Volvo flanked by a square flowerpot and a *plitkatekton*. Photograph by Michał Murawski.

moved behind the flowerpot; the asphalt island was gone, and the black Volvo had been replaced by a battered old BMW with flat tyres (now standing on the opposite side of the flowerpot to where the Volvo had been). The BMW was maxed out and could not possibly have been driven to its spot; it could only have been dragged or dropped there – whether out of the back of a lorry, or from one of the *vysotka*'s windows.

Plitka is not the only material artefact of Moscow's *blagoustroistvo* whose deployment has achieved a remarkable level of poetic and semiotic depth. This is even more true, perhaps, for the white and green banners (or *falshfasady* – 'false façades', as they are sometimes non-derogatorily called in Moscow). The *falshfasady* have been a staple of the Moscow landscape since the second year of the *Moya Ulitsa* programme in 2016. The distinctiveness of their design and the sheer extent of their proliferation during the most intense summer/autumn phases of *blagoustroistvo* quickly endowed these banners with an iconic status – it was difficult to take a photograph in central Moscow during the warm months of 2016–17 without a *falshfasad* making its way into your shot. The *falshfasady* very quickly became objects of artistic, fashion and design inspiration. White-green striped 'Sobyanin socks' and 'Sobyanin dresses' became must-wear items – and Instagram staples – of 2017, while users of the encrypted messaging app Telegram



Figure S7.3. The BMW arrived to stay. Photograph by Michał Murawski.

(partially banned by the Russian government in April 2018) were able to spice up their chats with a set of satirical *Moya Ulitsa*/Sobyanin-themed stickers.

The total distribution of the stripes throughout Moscow's cityscape and popular culture was no doubt a function of the successful work done by KB Strelka's graphic design team, but it was also an index of the vast scale of the *Moya Ulitsa* programme, a scale it would have been impossible to achieve without KB Strelka's access to the power vertical, and to the mechanisms of Russia's ever-intensifying, ever-more sophisticated 'authoritarian modernisation' project – in which the consultancy bureau plays an increasingly integral part. It is this hypernormalised – but at the same time otherworldly and surreal – political aesthetic of *blagoustroistvo* that performance artist and actionist Ekaterina Nenasheva highlighted in her 2017 project *Between Here and There*. Nenasheva spent three weeks walking around Moscow, her eyesight replaced by a VR headset displaying scenes from closed mental health institutions in which Nenasheva had volunteered: 'existing on the boundary between two realities, I was always stumbling upon the wreckage of some kind of third *perestroechnoy* reality.¹ *Moya Ulitsa* functioned, in my action, to some extent as a new Russian futurism . . . the fences, gaping holes in the ground, piles of construction materials always found themselves on my path, and sometimes drew me into totally new worlds'.



Figure S7.4. *Between Here and There*. Photograph by Ekaterina Nenasheva.

As *Moya Ulitsa* drew on and on, the banners became swiftly grubbier and more haggard, and the manner of their inevitable appearance and instantaneous proliferation following the onset of spring soon became an object of ridicule. In September 2017, Strelka failed to secure the municipal contract to continue project-managing the *Moya Ulitsa* programme (this was, well-informed sources in Moscow say, not a surprise – Strelka had long since reoriented their work towards the federal level). Yet many of the old green and white banners remain, having been printed (and plagiarised) in such quantities that – notwithstanding their increasingly vagabond appearance – they are ineradicable from the streets of the city, continuing to stand their ground, whether camouflaging rolls of turf in Zaryadye Park or erected into strange tent-like formations on Red Square.

Possibly the most spectacular collection of past-sell-by-date *Moya Ulitsa* banners can be admired on Paveletskaya Square, outside the major railway station of southern Moscow. Here, a former public square – which last underwent *blagoustroistvo* in 2004 – lies in a spectacular state of dereliction, awaiting the long-delayed construction of a vast shopping centre, mired in legal disputes for the last decade. All sides of the puddle- and rubble-strewn wasteground are (barely) concealed from public view by a gargantuan *Moya Ulitsa falshfasad* scroll, erected in 2016, and displaying renderings of some of the programme’s key sites. The contrast between the luscious vi-



Figure S7.5. Green and white Strelka banner. Photograph by Michał Murawski.



Figure S7.6. *Moya Ulitsa* banners on Paveletskaya Square. Photograph by Michał Murawski.

sualisations of the luxurious city immaculate and the actually-existing city object is rendered all the starker by the fact that many of the renderings are themselves in various states of mangled dissolution. On Paveletskaya Square, and elsewhere in *plitka*-era Moscow, the material artefacts of repair themselves appear to take on affects and aesthetics of brokenness.

Yet it would be a mistake to see Paveletskaya Square's brokenness as a symptom of *Moya Ulitsa's* 'failure'. In fact, as I have written elsewhere (Murawski 2018a), it may be more ethnographically interesting – and theoretically generative – to view this and other instances of apparent calamity or dilapidation through the lens of success rather than of failure. Almost all of the projects featured on the Paveletskaya *falshfasady* have, in fact, been successfully implemented, in remarkable time. By many accounts, indeed, *Moya Ulitsa* has so far been a roaring success. According to its own (methodologically more-or-less dubious) criteria, *blagoustroistvo* has led to 23 per cent more pedestrians on city centre streets, and a threefold increase in the number of Instagram photos taken on Tverskaya and in the number of children photographed on Novy Arbat. *Moya Ulitsa* has also led to a one-third growth of restaurants on Tverskaya, versus an 18 per cent decrease in the number of banks on streets that underwent *blagoustroistvo*.

Moya Ulitsa is also a success if measured by the effects on Strelka's own corporate growth (see Murawski 2018b). But it is even more of a triumph if measured by the rewards reaped by development and construction firms close to the municipality (Golunov 2017). Over the seven years of Sobyanin-era *blagoustroistvo*, according to the calculations of journalist Ivan Golunov, half of the programme's 200 billion rouble (£2.5 billion) budget was split between five companies: over twenty billion roubles went to companies tied to prominent Russian-Vietnamese businessman Pavel Të (also a major beneficiary of Moscow's ongoing housing renovation programme), while eleven billion roubles went to companies run by Alexander Biryukov, the younger brother of Moscow Deputy Mayor for Housing and Infrastructure Petr Biryukov. *Blagoustroistvo* falls within the portfolio of the older Biryukov, who – on renewing the *Moya Ulitsa* programme, scheduled to end in 2018, until 2020 – told journalists that the programme may in fact be extended indefinitely: 'Our work for the good of Muscovites will continue without end', Biryukov said.²

Repair itself may look like brokenness, but every apparent calamity has the capacity to turn into a triumph. Correspondingly, while it may not always be easy to identify linear causal chains or lay down blame (or praise), it is rarely impossible; (almost) every apparent failure is someone else's success.

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Notes

1. Nenasheva's chosen word literally means 'under-reconstruction', but it also invokes the social absurdities and uncertainties of Gorbachev-era perestroika.
2. For more info about the press conference see <https://www.rbc.ru/society/07/07/2017/595f945b9a7947172457fb1a?fbclid=IwAR12yo09EAwUiW8A6mG25A-aqcsPeiyHhJYXNO0m-voU1xIFNouHT9yiY3o> (retrieved 22 April 2019).

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