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BOOK REVIEW

Pitting the Olives Might Help: A 1990s Expatriate Odyssey Through Unhinged Russia

by Don Alexander, MCIP, RPP, Vancouver Island University

Full Disclosure: The author is my younger brother.

THIS IS NOT A BOOK ABOUT PLANNING PER SE, but it has observations that are relevant to planning. It chronicles the experiences of an international development consultant in Moscow from 1994 to 1997 after the "fall of communism." Indeed, he arrived a scant few months after an armed confrontation between President Boris Yeltsin and the Russian Parliament, some of whose members were still communists, that led to the shelling of the Russian White House and the death of two hundred to one thousand combatants in related street fighting.

This book has a dramatic opening: on a renaissance trip to Moscow, the author and his future boss are walking down the street on his first day in the city only to be swarmed by a pack of kids aged from roughly six to fourteen, punching kicking and jabbing fingers into pockets. They eventually fend off the attack, but only after his boss is $100.00 lighter.

Despite these two events, the author and his wife decided to move to Moscow where he would work with Russian partners to set up an operation providing business services to fledgling entrepreneurs in Moscow and elsewhere. Throughout the book, he describes their experiences — with corruption, transportation and communication challenges, and the rigours of everyday life in a country with nine time zones — with a dry wit that is at times side-splitting.

Initially, the transition was a tough one involving a shift from a society in which choice, convenience and affluence are the norm for many to one in which scarcity, poverty, and poor accommodations predominate, even for many expatriates. Many couldn’t adapt and wound up going home early and, despite some dark nights of the soul, the author and his wife resolved to stick it out and to embrace the compensations associated with living in a new and exciting place and culture. In this, their attitude contrasted sharply with most expats who tried to replicate the suburban experience, while hating everything Russia had to offer, and being quite vociferous in saying so.

In time the author and his wife came to love Moscow and its environs and admire the resilience of the people who had completely lost whatever safety net they had once had, and yet still found ways to survive. They thoroughly explored the hidden crevices of the city on foot, by bus, and metro, and were often surprised by the things they found — tiny underground nightclubs, hidden back alley restaurants, and massive outdoor flea markets. They were also struck by the extraordinary polarization of wealth. In the aftermath of communism, twenty oligarchs had managed to appropriate nearly half of the country’s GDP while most Russians lived in grinding poverty. Those lucky enough to have a job had often not been paid for months at a time. In the years immediately following the Gorbachev era, due to the devaluation of the Russian ruble, some commodities — such as metro tickets — increased in price 5000-fold.

The mention of pitted olives in the title refers to the astonishment that the Russians could be the world’s leading space technology innovators and yet not be able to create a device for pitting olives for restaurant use. They were also disconcerted by their maid’s practice of dunking her improvised mop in the toilet in order to wash the floor. But gradually it dawned on them that at least some of the things that they took for granted back home, and saw as so important, maybe weren’t.

There were a number of paradoxes they noted during their stay. In theory, communism was supposed to promote the public good, but in fact the constant scarcity meant that, when an opportunity presented itself to grab a desired commodity, it was ‘every man for himself’ as people elbowed each other out of the way in a feeding frenzy. Also, people were so accustomed to squaring in their living conditions that when Linda, the author’s wife, attempted to clean up communal areas, she was met with hostility and indifference. In this sense, John Kenneth Galbraith’s observation about “private wealth and public squalor” in North America was reversed in Russia. The public realm was often magnificent and imposing while people lived in atrocious domestic living conditions. Not only were the residential buildings in terrible repair, but the new structures built under Khrushchev and Brezhnev were hideous in design and made of the shoddiest materials.

So what are the take-home messages for planners? Expend more effort on creating a meaningful public realm, but not one that is built on the backs of the people as was the case in both the Tsarist and Soviet epochs. Not that that is likely to happen given that people here are so tax-averse. Second, build on our on-again, off-again commitment to multiculturalism in Canada to create built environments that help make people genuinely curious about other people and cultures, something that is singularly lacking amongst many Americans. Most of the American expats the author met had not the slightest interest in Russia or the Russian people; they only wanted to live like they had lived back home.

Third, while paying attention to the public realm give attention to bread and butter issues like decent housing, jobs and income, social programs, and health care — items in short supply for the vast majority of Russians. Apart from housing, these are things that planners — with the possible exception of social planners — have scant influence over. They are the province of senior governments. Only in the U.S. have significant numbers of people been allowed to fall to Russian levels of poverty and, there, the built environment is even worse in many cases. Only in America, amongst developed nations, would an economic and social sacrifice zone like Detroit be allowed to exist. Canada is still in relatively good shape by comparison.