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St. Petersburg Renaissance

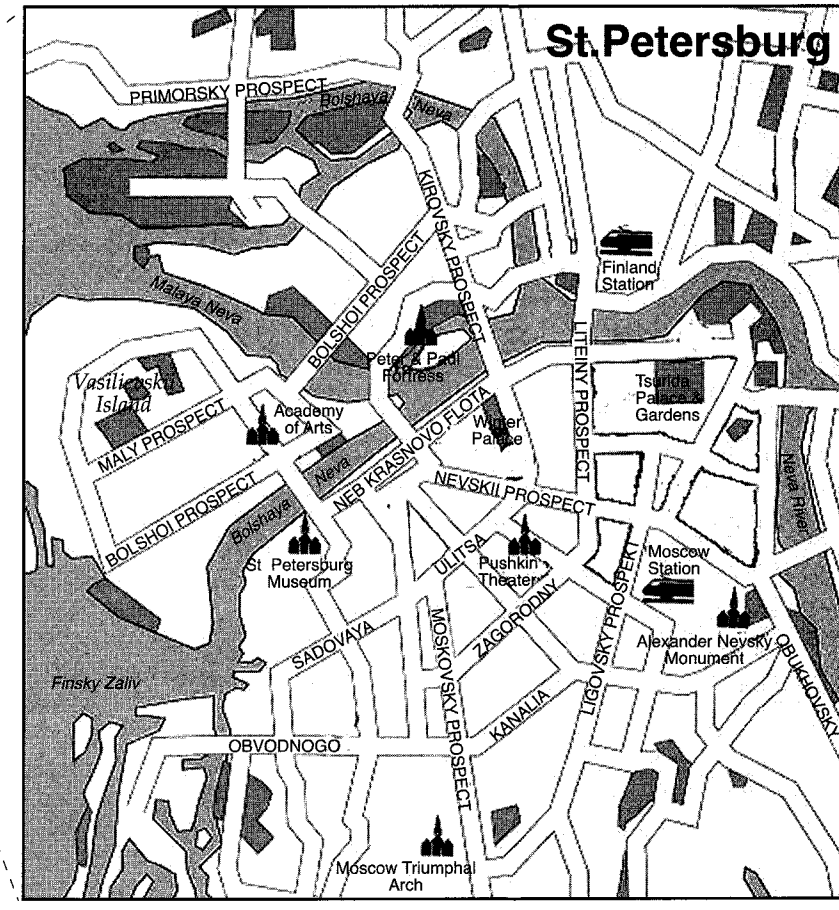
By Gregory Feifer

JULY 2001

ST. PETERSBURG—A Moscow friend tells me he always tires of St. Petersburg on the third day. "That's when I just can't walk down Nevskii Prospekt another time," he said, speaking of the city's main street, its Fifth Avenue, Broadway and Madison Avenue all in one. It's actually much more: once a broad projection of the tsar's might, but also its opposite as a cultural symbol. (Fyodor Dostoevsky's "underground man" is rudely snubbed by his social superiors here, for one. He's sent into a flight of anger that serves as the story's crux.) Unlike my friend, I'm always prepared to walk Nevskii and any other St. Petersburg street until the arches of my soles collapse—except, that is, when I saw it last July. Nevskii Prospekt is now mostly dug up, its broad, Soviet-era patchwork asphalt sidewalks now being replaced by elegant marble and granite slabs. It may have made the avenue unwalkable, but it's a cause for joy.

That the Bolsheviks left St. Petersburg relatively alone after the Revolution meant that much of its architecture wasn't razed as in the old/new capital Moscow. The move had the effect of turning St. Petersburg—an artificial city created by an act of will—into a museum. (The city guides working on canal-boat excursions aren't simply mouthing a cliché by saying Petersburg is an open-air exhibition.) Being left alone also meant neglect. By the end of the Soviet era, St. Petersburg was in a massive state of decay. In 1991, as if to highlight that fact,

St. Petersburg's epic Imperial thoroughfare, first built during the reign of Peter the Great after a design by Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Le Blond. Named after the river to which it leads, Nevskii Prospekt reflects much of the city's life, from the grand to the pathetic. It's now under major reconstruction—its Soviet-era shoddy asphalt sidewalks are being replaced with granite and marble. Willed into existence under a grand plan, St. Petersburg is once again subject to a major project—this time, of reconstruction.



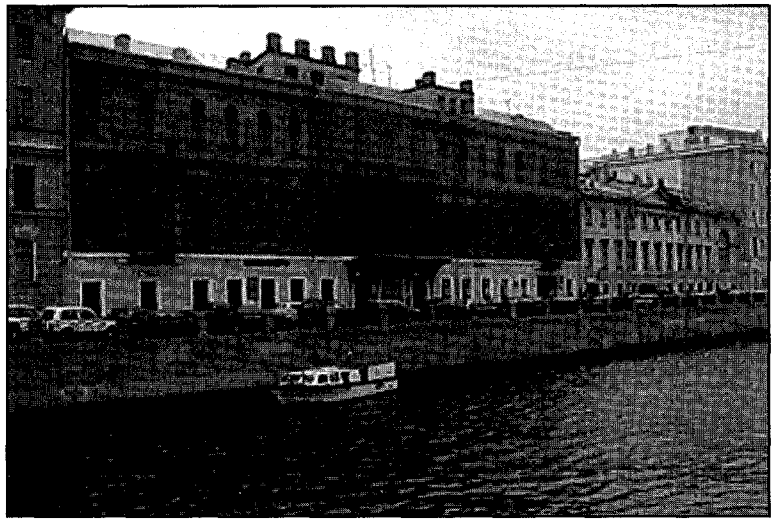
the city's residents were on the brink of starvation, surviving with ration cards allotting inadequate amounts of bread, sugar, butter and vodka.

Well after price liberalization and the end of food shortages (for those few who could afford to buy what they wanted), however, the city's decay seemed only to accelerate. Many stunningly original and elaborate architectural masterpieces were literally crumbling to the ground in what seemed an irreversible process. Until this summer. The city is now undergoing a massive regime of rebuilding in preparation for its 300-year anniversary celebrations in 2003. For the first time, St. Petersburg seems to be emerging from its Soviet slumber. That's particularly surprising, given the fact that the city's administration has distinguished itself as one of Russia's most corrupt. Critics complain that only the most visible parts of the center are being rebuilt—and that building contracts are awarded as part of the web of corruption gripping the city. I don't quite agree: better the center (with so much to be saved there alone), and in corrupt fashion, than nothing at all.

The Committee

I went to see the municipal committee coordinating the preparations for the jubilee set to take place in a little under two years. It is overseeing a massive effort, including scores of rebuilding schemes, public-works projects (new asphalt, new sidewalks), as well as the planning for the actual celebrations. Those will include parades, concerts and exhibitions that, as currently foreseen, will be concentrated in a weeklong period in June. (Related events will take place over the entire year, however—indeed, they've already been going on for several years.) The city already has a good head start in creating an atmosphere in which it will celebrate its sense of itself. St. Petersburg puts on a "carnival" each year, during which revelers dress up in costumes representing Petersburg buildings and geometric shapes. The celebrations have displayed relatively avant-garde thinking not unmindful of the city's intricate and complex cultural life and history. So I'd hoped I could talk to committee members about St. Petersburg's hoped-for cultural rebirth, its place in the eternal argument between Russia's Slavophiles and Westerners, and how significant the upcoming celebrations might be.

The committee, the full name of which is the Committee for Preparation and Celebration of the 300th Anniversary of St. Petersburg, is located behind the Alexandrinskii Theater, just off Nevskii, on a street designed by and named after the Italian architect Carlo Rossi. The theater, also Rossi's creation, is a looming yellow structure with a columned loggia topped by a statue of Apollo in his chariot. The theater company, established in 1756, is Russia's oldest. The street behind the theater is itself a Petersburg landmark, perfectly proportioned to form a square. At 22 meters, the street is exactly as wide as the buildings on each side are tall, and 10 times as long. Here stands the Vaganova School of Choreography, one of the world's finest, having produced such dancers as Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky,



A strangely typical sight—a building on the Moika Canal shrouded while undergoing renovation work

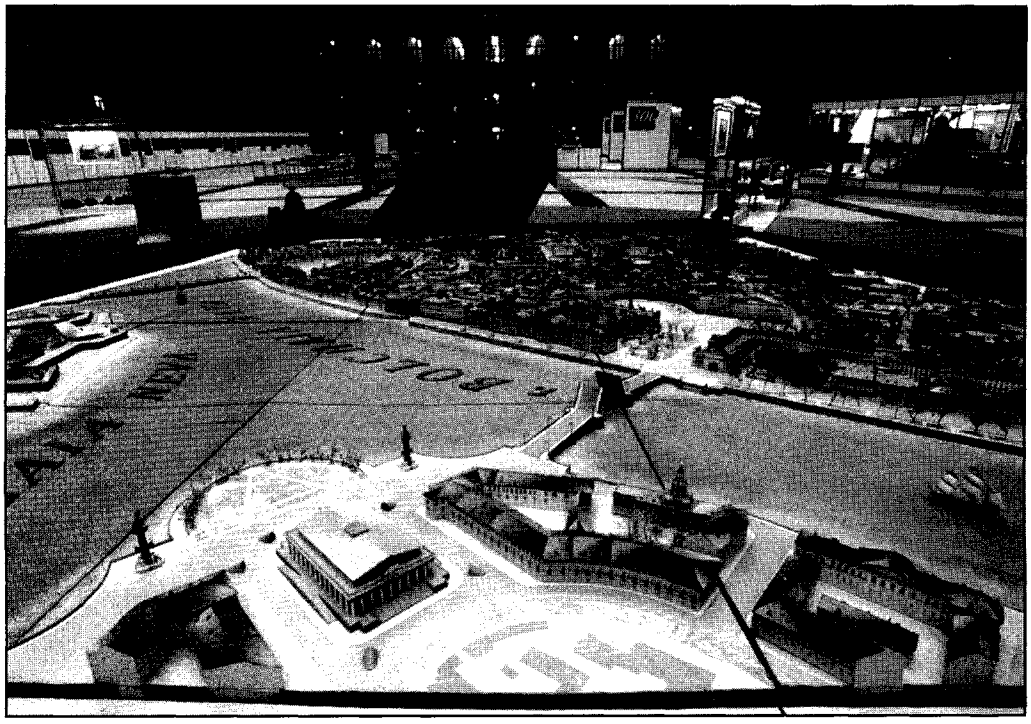
Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov. (The school began life in 1738 training the children of palace servants who would take part in court entertainments. In 1934, Agrippina Vaganova implemented the school's modern curriculum. Now, over 2,000 hopefuls apply each year, of whom around 90 are chosen to undergo the school's grueling regime.)

Like much of St. Petersburg, parts of the school complex are in terrible shape. The façade requires plasterwork and a paint job. The dank interior needs at least some of its naked lightbulbs to be replaced. But the 300th anniversary committee's offices inside the school complex are newly renovated. I was greeted by Natalia Shvetsova, a "major specialist," according to her business card, but really an assistant to committee chair Natalia Batozhok, with whom I'd scheduled an interview. Batozhok, it turned out, had been called away by the city mayor (who calls himself "governor"), Vladimir Yakovlev. Shvetsova wouldn't tell me when or even *if* I'd be able to speak to Batozhok, and it quickly became clear I'd be able to pose none of my questions.

Instead, Shvetsova bombarded me with a pile of public-relations material—glossy brochures, a flashy CD-ROM cut to the shape of a business card, one-off periodicals and photographs. They told me roughly nothing. Nothing about the upcoming celebrations, in any case. One thick, slick brochure titled "300: The 300th Anniversary of St. Petersburg" had not a single word or picture devoted to the anniversary. It did contain a number of slogans, however, including "St. Petersburg—Stronghold of the Russian State System." What that had to do with the anniversary I couldn't figure out. Neither could I understand what it meant. St. Petersburg isn't really any kind of state stronghold, except in the conception of Russia's history. Okay, I thought, it may be the stronghold of very powerful mafia groups and bureaucratic client/patron relationship structures. But I didn't think that's what the anniversary committee meant.

In fact, the slogan—and others like it—were facsimiles of statements made by President Vladimir Putin, who has claimed to be building a strong Russian state by centralizing administrative power in the country. The result so far—greater corruption and murkiness, the kind that actually goes along with *weak* state structures—has come about because of a strengthening of the arbitrary power of civil servants over their subordinates. Getting ahead in Russia today involves less initiative and risk than the exact opposite: security through ingratiation with the presidential administration. Accordingly, the St. Petersburg anniversary committee seems to be building up to a celebration of which the president would be proud. To do that, it needs to reassure the Kremlin exactly what it plans to celebrate: less Petersburg itself than the city's role in boosting Putin's authority. This kind of activity is very close to that exhibited by much of the media. It's self-censorship, the so-far voluntary kind that will no doubt lead in time to the enforced variety. That's especially important in St. Petersburg, since Governor Yakovlev sided with the

A news conference earlier this year with some of the chief organizers of the upcoming celebrations: (from left to right) Committee for Utilities Improvement and Road Maintenance chief Anatoly Dedukhin, St. Petersburg's mayor (he calls himself "governor"), Vladimir Yakovlev and anniversary committee chair Natalia Batozhok



A mockup model of central St. Petersburg in one of the exhibitions earlier this year dedicated to the reconstruction work. The view is from the Vasilievskii Island, across the river from the Winter Palace.

losing forces against Putin and the Kremlin in the bitter political struggle that led up to Putin's tapping as president in 1999.

In true Soviet fashion, Shvetsova refused to answer any of my questions—about funding, the planning of reconstruction projects, even about celebration events in 2003 that are already being loudly advertised on large billboards all over town. "Speak to the cultural committee about that—I wouldn't want you to have any information that wasn't completely accurate," she said, smiling. I'd already spoken to the cultural committee—which had directed me to Shvetsova's organization. Instead, Shvetsova unleashed a barrage of vague facts and superlative adjectives describing her committee's activities. "It's a return to our roots, to the generations that disappeared [during the Communist years]," she told me. "But it's also a demonstration of the strength of the current generation for generations of the future. As for specifics: "The committee is organizing the activities of all the organizations—Russian and foreign—and citizens in preparation for the jubilee," Shvetsova said. "It's tremendous work involving the evaluation of thousands of proposals." Which proposals, I asked? "There are simply too many for me to pick out any one of them," she replied. "There are so many good ones." Give me one example for my readers. "Oh, I simply couldn't. It wouldn't be fair. Speak to the cultural committee."

Shvetsova did tell me, however, that President Putin was the honorary chairman of the committee. One of the magazines she gave me was a thick-paged glossy called "Our Authorities," (*"Nasha Vlast"*—which also means "our power.") The cover showed a picture of members of a Kremlin-organized youth movement at a rally in support of the president in Red Square earlier this year. The teenagers wore tee shirts depicting the president's face, and it was widely reported in the Russian press that they had been bribed into attending with free CDs and vacations, and were bussed into the capital. It was compelling proof that a new cult of personality was taking shape to glorify the President. Inside the magazine I found candidly staged pictures of Putin: with former President Boris Yeltsin, kissing an elderly woman, kissing a baby, being saluted by soldiers in Chechnya. There are articles about "What Makes Russia Great" and upbeat reportage about the campaign in Chechnya complete with eager, smiling soldiers sitting on top of tanks. The back cover shows a more compassionate side—over a photograph of a young girl sitting on a doorstep are superimposed the words, "The first task of those in power is to take care of children." Shvetsova was bursting with pride and pointed to another brochure featuring a (no doubt throw-away) Putin quotation: "The St. Petersburg Jubilee is an excuse to remember Russia's greatness and the sources of that greatness." Shvetsova interrupted the interview to photocopy the words for me.

Okay—Putin's agenda was clear. What about other participants in the anniversary preparations? More evasion. "St. Petersburg belongs to the whole world," Shvetsova said. "So now the world should help rebuild the city. We're open to everyone." Shvetsova wasn't open, however, to saying exactly whom. Nor was she open to my request to photograph her. Surely, she must have thought, someone somewhere would have to approve of such a thing. That was a responsibility she couldn't take on herself.

I did manage to learn some facts about the preparations, however, thanks in some part to telephone calls to other municipal committees, which proved less secretive. The celebration committee—Shvetsova's—has evaluated over 4,000 reconstruction and celebration projects, and has so far settled on around 1,500 of them. Some of the rebuild-

ing work falls under federal jurisdiction, funded by federal cash. Much of the work, however, is being carried out by the municipal administration. The Committee for Utilities Improvement and Road Maintenance is repaving much of the city center and laying new brick sidewalks. It's a colossal task since most of St. Petersburg's roads are in a dismal state. New squares are being built and bridges over the city's numerous canals are being renovated. Water pipes are also being replaced to help improve the city's notoriously decayed infrastructure. New pedestrian walkways are even planned for the 1970s- and 1980s-era concrete-slab slums ringing the city.

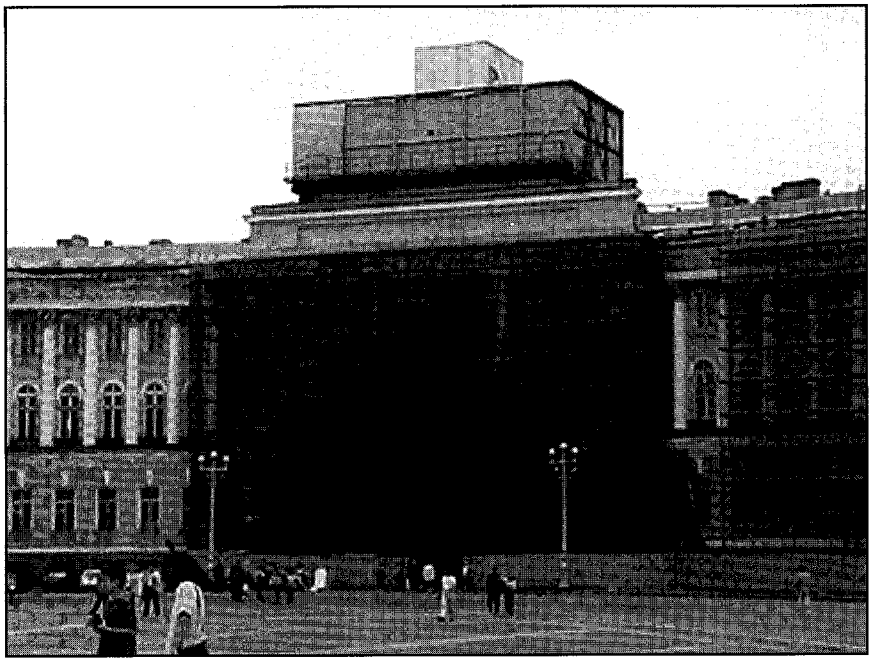
The most prevalent criticism of the work—voiced, for example, in the English-language newspaper *The St. Petersburg Times*—accuses the projects of superficiality. The desperate plight of schools, hospitals and the terrible state of communal services are being ignored, the paper claims. The construction projects are also said to be mired in corruption. And they are accused of turning the stately northern capital into a bourgeois hell, the commercialism of which will benefit only the wealthy. But such criticism seems to ignore the fact that in the rest of Russia, virtually nothing at all is being done to benefit the public. A significant number of St. Petersburg's public-works projects do in fact seem to be aimed at benefiting city residents as a whole—and not just along the usual tourist routes. Each city district is undertaking renovation and beautification projects, including a new ring-road highway around the city and a 300-year anniversary park. That's no mean feat in this heavily bureaucratized state, in which the public good is often not simply ignored but usually exploited to serve the elite.

There are problems. One of the abuses of which the city administration has been accused is its attempt to commandeer federal money. Worse, museum directors and administrators have complained that city authorities have tried to force them to make changes that would harm their sites. Municipal bureaucrats have countered by saying they want to make the most of the city's "cultural wealth." One of the conflicts involved the city's most cherished park, the Summer Garden, which Peter the Great commissioned in 1704 as a formal Versailles-style garden with numerous fountains. The park was redesigned by Catherine the Great—after being ruined by a disastrous flood in 1777—to resemble a less formal English garden. It still accommodates a number of Baroque statues, houses Peter's modest Summer Palace, and is very popular with Petersburgers. Pushkin and Gogol were drawn here. Ivan Goncharov used the garden as a setting for ill-fated couple Oblomov and Olga in *Oblomov*. Vladimir Nabokov writes of the park as a central memory of his childhood in Russia. It was here that city authorities wanted to open several "élite" restaurants to "utilize" the space in the best possible way. The garden's administrators fought back, saying—quite rightly—that the public space would be ruined. The conflict has so far ended in a standoff, but other museum directors continue to confront similar problems.

Meanwhile, the celebrations committee is also coordinating the work of foreign organizations and those from other countries of the so-called former Soviet Union. The city may initiate a committee coordinating help from African countries, and is so far receiving help from the administrations of European cities such as Stockholm. One of the motivating factors for working with foreign organizations is the allure of foreign sponsors. The celebration committee has picked out thousands of buildings, monuments and other sites for possible reconstruction and approached various foreign organizations that might be interested in helping with the work. A group of Italians, for example, is helping in the restoration of some structures designed by Italian architects.

The actual celebration events—as opposed to reconstruction work—are still being planned. One of the highlights will be a carnival parade, for which the city's annual celebrations have served as rehearsals. (This year, 1,000 took part in the parade, while many more looked on.) The celebration committee now plans on staging its week of activities around the city's official founding date, May 27. The committee is still evaluating thousands of proposals from all sorts of organizations and individual citizens, including, for example, veterans groups and art galleries. One of the planned events is a concert called "Stars of the World," set to take place at the nearby palace at Tsarskoe Selo. Valery Gergiev, the much-acclaimed conductor and artistic direc-

Whole city streets have been turned into barren construction site-scapes.



The main arch of the General Staff building, facing the Winter Palace, is also under renovation. It's a good thing, too; plaster and bricks had begun to fall off in recent years. Commissioned in 1819, the structure is another of Carlo Rossi's designs. It was so large, Petersburgers spread rumors that it would fall during construction. "If it falls, I fall with it!" Rossi declared, and stood on the top of the arch when the scaffolding was removed. Typically, the façade was said to be the best part, concealing scrubby courtyards and muddy passages within. In 1918, Moses Uritsky, head of the Cheka—forerunner to the KGB—was assassinated in the building's eastern wing housing the Foreign Ministry. Shortly after, the Bolsheviks began their Red Terror. The Palace Square was renamed Uritsky Square until 1944.

tor of the venerated Mariinsky Theater, will conduct what the committee hopes will be well-known musicians from around the globe. Even Shvetsova spoke of the concert. "It's been approved by Putin," she said.

Things haven't been going so well for Gergiev recently. His productions of Aida and other Italian operas were largely panned when they toured London in July—one critic claimed it was the result of Gergiev's having taken on too large a repertoire in too little time. But that's peanuts compared to the fact that Gergiev has transformed his Mariinsky Theater to eclipse the (now almost unwatchable) companies of the Bolshoi and many other theaters around the globe. The Mariinsky now produces perhaps the world's best ballet through a combination of sticking to traditional values of Russian ballets (tall, "swan-like" dancers, for example) and experimentation. Above all, however, is discipline. A recent production of Balanchine's "Jewels"—considered avant-garde even today by the traditionalist Russians—was nothing less than brilliant, with the kind of humor and sexiness only the most accomplished of virtuosos can pull off. Another production, of the comparatively staid "Giselle," was also a joy to watch. The Mariinsky stands out as a bright spot in the city's cultural life amid the decay that plagues much of Russia. Gergiev will no doubt contribute much to the tercentenary celebrations.

Does Anyone Care?

Most St. Petersburg residents to whom I spoke didn't seem to care much about the celebrations. That's no surprise in a city wracked with poverty. Many St. Petersburgers still live in that reviled Soviet institution: the communal apartment. City officials count around 150,000 of them, which house hundreds of thousands in a city of around 5 million. The large number—the highest in Russia—is partly a result of the devastation the Second World War World wrought on the city's housing stock. At the same time, the Nazi blockade, during which around a million residents died of cold and hunger, fostered in survivors a feeling of community that helped facilitate life in communal apartments.

But that life is a dismal one by all accounts. Communal apartment dwellers, whose families often have to share quarters with two or more families, usually share one bathroom and one kitchen—not to mention the details of their lives—with their neighbors. Residents are often even lucky to get their own rooms, and the apartments' "public" spaces are almost always dingy, dirty and old. That's enough of a shock to visitors marveling at the city's architectural façades—even more so when they find buildings remolded and painted on the outside remain decrepit and crammed on the inside. It's a contrast that has haunted the city since the Revolution, and continues to inform attitudes about preparations for the anniversary celebrations. City officials have recently drafted a plan for the first time to phase out

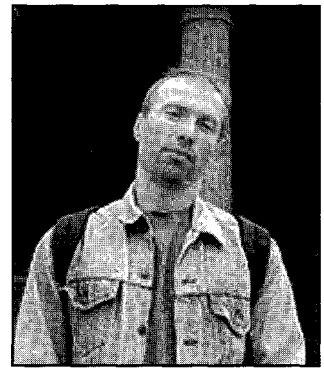
A proposed design for a trolleybus advertisement publicizing the 300th anniversary

Petersburger Olga Fomin says she doesn't give a fig for the upcoming celebrations.

communal apartments, but its 20-year timeframe seems optimistic.

"I don't feel any pride in the city's preparations," said Olga Fomin, a 25-year-old Petersburg native. "I'm sure someone somewhere is stealing money do redo the façades. But I don't even care about the façades. And I don't like parades. I can't stand masses of people and I'm not going to be able to afford to buy a costume myself to take part."

I prodded Fomin about whether some of the city's improvements had indeed made the city seem more livable. "Well, I guess the city is getting better," she admitted grudgingly. "The roads especially. But they're trying to Europeanize the city by opening shops and making it pretty on the outside. I don't think most people here need that. In the West, students and the elderly can afford to go sit in cafés—but not here."



Yuri Riabchikov says the celebrations will allow Petersburgers to feel they belong.

Another resident, Yuri Riabchikov—an old friend of mine—was more optimistic. "The celebrations have given a kickstart to the effort to rebuild," he said. "For all the problems, that can't but be a good thing. It's a positive thing for the city's atmosphere, making it more lively for us living here. And the celebrations themselves—well, they make at least some of us feel that we belong here, that we can take part in the city's life. I'm all for that."

Marketing the City

The driving forces behind the tercentenary celebrations are economic, not cultural. The city's administrators are keen on marketing the city, chiefly for tourism but also to attract direct foreign investment and new business projects. The city is therefore prepared to make large investments in rebuilding to attract foreigners and exploit the 300th anniversary to the fullest. That's actually a somewhat novel, even revolutionary approach in Russia, where foreigners have to spend days and shell out hundreds of dollars to obtain visas—and then put up with ongoing bureaucratic hassles on their arrival. (One example is the needless requirement that foreigners—already having procured a visa—also "register" with authorities within three days of arrival, at a cost of around $40.) In most of the country, it cannot but seem that obstacles are created specifically to discourage visitors from coming.

Petersburg is different in that it's relatively accessible to the visitor. Its nascent café culture and increasingly competent service industry reflects the fact that the city as a whole has cottoned to the idea that foreigners are good—that they spend money and need to be encouraged to visit. It is perhaps Petersburg's own initiative in attracting foreigners that in turn creates the need to assure federal authorities that the city is doing it for the greater good—for the strength of the state (and thereby the Kremlin) and not for its own profit (which would then somehow have to be subjected to the Kremlin's discretion).

Planning for the celebrations began in the mid-1990s, with committees formed around the globe to help the city tap into its cultural wealth to promote its future economy. By 1999, seminars were being held to map out strategies. During a conference in St. Petersburg in May 1999—attended by members of George Soros's Open Society Institute, the Stockholm City representative office in St. Petersburg, the U.K. government's Know How Fund, European Union affiliates, the Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum and other organizations—stress was placed on the need for a "unified marketing program" for the anniversary. Effective use of the city's "potential" was linked to the implementation of projects that would upgrade the city's infrastructure, reconstruct the historic center, create a favorable business environment and develop a stable tourist industry. Architectural and restoration projects were to be funded with the purpose of boosting marketing and investment policies.

One of the organizations taking part in planning is the American Committee for 2003, an assortment of self-described "cultural and business leaders." The committee was formed in 1993, and formally became St. Petersburg's "official U.S. partner" for the celebration in 1995. The committee is headed by Metropolitan Museum president William Luers and its members include Librarian of Congress James Billington, writer Suzanne Massie, publisher Paul Gottlieb, ballerina Natalia Makarova and former Pepsico CEO Donald Kendall, among others. The committee's work is

A ubiquitous sight already: "St. Petersburg 300" on a vendor's awning—two years ahead of the event.

A gaggle of sailors and naval officers in this famously maritime city negotiate what's left of a sidewalk.

spearheaded by New York's CEC International Partners, which has facilitated a number of projects in the run-up to the tercentenary celebrations. Those have included staff exchanges between the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Hermitage, the New York Public Library and the Russian National Library, and many other exchanges, festivals and exhibitions in the United States and St. Petersburg. One of the exchange programs, funded by New York's Trust for Mutual Understanding, was named the VisART Contemporary Art Project, and sent American curators, critics and artists to Russia between 1998 and 2000 to discuss their areas of expertise.

The stress on long-term cultural exchange as well as the heavy involvement of foreign organizations in preparation for St. Petersburg's tercentenary appears to be part of an attempt to foster a renaissance on all levels and of all aspects of the city's life—including the economic—by way of the crucial task of preserving its cultural heritage. That both the means and the ends of the work involve significant contact with the West is important when many of Russia's politicians are trying to pull the country away from the West. In that sense—as in many others—preparations for St. Petersburg's 300th-anniversary celebrations constitute a major cultural, political and economic event.

According to city authorities, about 10 percent of funding for the entire anniversary project, including construction work and celebration events, will come from municipal sources (chiefly for infrastructure). The federal government will contribute about 15 percent (for housing and preservation of the center). Half is to come from private investors and the rest from World Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development loans, the issuing of Eurobonds and other sources.

By 2000, city authorities had worked out a draft "concept," chiefly for the purpose of developing the city's economy and image. "The Anniversary is to become one more factor in creating a favorable investment climate in the city and bringing about new investment projects," the document read. Chief among the means of achieving that was to be "boosted activity in the domains of culture and tourism," which will "certainly attract much attention to the city." The draft foresees an increase of tourists to about three million annually.

With more tourists would come more hotels, restaurants and other related businesses. The aim would be achieved in part by reconstruction of the city's port, airport and some of its railway stations. That would also help increase the city's volume of trade and development of related industries. The governor's office also hopes for a boost in high-tech industry. St. Petersburg is currently one of the world's centers for computer programming (and hacking) brainpower. City authorities also want an increase in cultural and scientific research.

A "strategic plan" unveiled by Governor Yakovlev meanwhile heavily stressed the need for "social justice." The plan calls for the creation of at least 200,000 new jobs, the increase of per-capita income of not less than 15 percent, the increase in life expectancy of three years, the increase in per-capita living space, a reduction in the number of the city's communal apartments, an increase in budget revenues of not less than 20 percent, and improved housing, public services and social aid. A tall order for one celebration.

The Flâneur

As I've indicated, the result of all the activity became visible as a unified project for the first time this summer. After years of sporadic renovation, the ball is rolling. The number of construction sites is seemingly endless. Buildings are going up for war veterans and survivors of the indescribably hellish Nazi blockade. The whole front of the Petrograd side of the city (opposite the Neva River from the central Winter Palace) seems to be being redone. Elite dachas are going up. The notorious Pulkovo airport is finally being revamped. Parks, pedestrian zones—even an Aquapark are going up. In the center, crumbling 18th-century facades are being renovated. Many will house business centers, hotels and expensive apartments. New buildings—dull and unoriginal compared to the old ones, but nonetheless not as offensive as they could have been—are also being erected.

Soon after arriving in St. Petersburg, I lost interest in the journalistic effort of trying to account for the rebuilding and preparation work and instead became lost—as I

usually do—in the city itself. The far-off celebrations can't compete with the city as it stands. It's a place that is not best experienced as an exercise in journalism. Rather, one has to assume the role of flâneur and wander the streets in random order, sit in cafés, watch the crowds.

I found again that the city's architecture seems to have an effect on the way its residents act. St. Petersburg's public seems youthful. It's also fairly stylish, although clothes generally aren't expensive. St. Petersburgers are poorer than Muscovites, and their city—in the commercial and political sense—is provincial. People in St. Petersburg are also friendlier, more naïve, more idealistic. The summer crowds roam the city streets from dawn to dusk and well into the night. That's partly a reaction to the long cold, damp winter months when only a few hours of overcast daylight illuminate the city. St. Petersburg is a metropolis that demands its inhabitants be outside when they can.

A stately building, part of a central market, shows the true state in which most of the city finds itself: run-down and abandoned-looking.

For me, the city's effect is such that one cannot experience it objectively. I find it not only desirable but necessary to become part of the crowd and examine one's own views from its point of view, as it were. Whenever I'm in the city, I'm therefore paradoxically drawn into a subjective world—my own feelings become the center of my thoughts, but as the ruminations of one of the crowd. The city then becomes in a sense my city, which I piece together during my walks. It is not a city anyone else can describe to me—and in that lies its greatness.

St. Petersburg is un-European in that its chiefly Baroque architecture largely reflects a single plan, the projection of a single political source of will. Its ornate cornices and caryatids are over-the-top, larger and more numerous than in a more organically developed city. The city is also an architectural reflection of Russia's political and cultural tendency to adopt European forms—only to create uniquely Russian products. But paradoxically, precisely because of the effect of its architecture on the pedestrian, St. Petersburg can also be seen as a truly European city. That is, the city's marginally European status perversely makes it more European than "real" European cities because it embodies a single vision of the European. Europe might have moved on, but St. Petersburg defines a frozen Russian notion of the West that in execution contains a purer sense of the ideal. Walking through the city, one is exposed to one street after another on which each building is as stunning and original in its interpretation of that St. Petersburg style as the next. Even small streets and seemingly abandoned alleys are treasure troves.

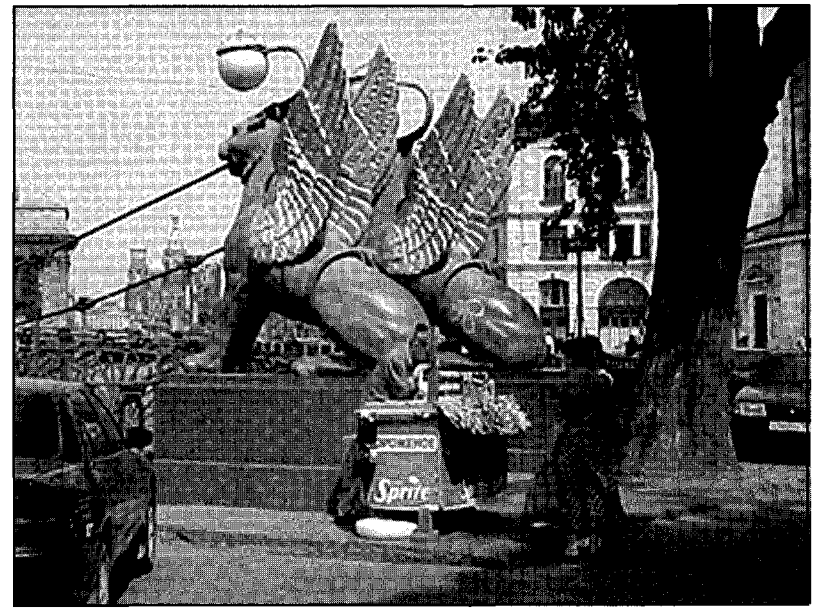
An arch in a bad state of disrepair. It is part of the Gostinnyi Dvor complex, an 18th-century bazaar in a massive, two-story building almost a kilometer in circumference. It took over 60 years to build and was named after gostinye dvory, *or merchant's hostels.*

Did not Paris, say, have a similar effect on its citizens? "Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet," writes Charles Baudelaire. "The man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd... The solitary and thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in the universal communion. The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusk in his shell, will be eternally deprived of."[1]

The philosopher Walter Benjamin describes Baudelaire's actions. "In Baudelaire, Paris becomes for the first time a subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is not regional art; rather, the gaze of the

[1] Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen* (1869), New York: New Directions, 1970, p.20.

allegorist that falls on the city is estranged. It is the gaze of the *flâneur*, whose mode of life still surrounds the approaching desolation of city life with a propitiatory luster. The *flâneur* is still on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class. Neither has yet engulfed him: neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd."[2]



The Bank Bridge (Bankovskii Most), which crosses the Griboedov Canal. Its suspension cables emerge from the mouths of four griffins with gilded wings, designed by Walter Traitteur. Griffins were the mythical guardians of gold in ancient Greece.

The Baudelarian flâneur is both part of the crowd and estranged from it: a state that is the genesis of the poetic vision. I doubt there's a single flâneur in any Russian city outside Petersburg. But it is as a flâneur that one best experiences the country's northern capital. As I've mentioned in previous newsletters, the French philosopher Michel de Certeau compares walking in an urban landscape to reading words on a page. It is the act that brings the "text" of the city's architecture to life. St. Petersburg is rich in material. Certeau tells us not to follow guides, but to write our own texts from city streets—which undermine the vision of the city excluded by urbanistic projects, such as St. Petersburg's grand plan. In Petersburg, time also constantly changes each path as one finds new niches and columns and ornamentation on the broad avenues and narrow side streets, resplendent in their Baroque grandeur. The light is always different. Each time, water from the city's canals and the Neva River reflects images differently. Every time I walk the same route, I see a different city in the same way that each time one watches a well-made film, one sees a different, more complex product—because, of course, one notices its artifice and the greater meaning its devices impart.

I took my latest trip to St. Petersburg during perhaps the best time to visit the city, catching the tail end of "white nights," when the sun barely sets before rising again. For hours at night, the city is engulfed in the surreal neither-dark-nor-light of a Magritte painting. At night, it seems the entire city is out on the streets, even during weekdays. Those young revelers who can't afford discothèques or the upscale Mafioso-attracting strip-bar nightclubs stroll up and down Nevskii Prospekt, gravitating to the Neva embankment by the Winter Palace. Here, several floating piers house outdoor discos playing tinny Russian and western pop music. Even then, only a few pay the tiny entrance fee and most choose instead to lean against the granite embankment and watch. Mafia thugs and molls can be found here, too. But the bulk of the crowd is made up of average citizens out on a lark.

The Artificial City

St. Petersburg is a creation like no other. It's one of the world's great achievements. It is therefore paradoxical that the city was built with the labor of downtrodden serfs, many of whom suffered greatly and died for the purpose of projecting the tsar's power. The French Marquis de Custine, who traveled to St. Petersburg in 1839, writes of the reconstruction after a fire of the magnificent Winter Palace under the autocratic Nicholas I: "In order to finish the work in the period specified by the Emperor, unprecedented efforts were required. The interior construction was continued during the bitterest cold of winter. Six thousand laborers were continually at work; a considerable number died each day, but, as the victims were replaced by other champions who filled their places, to perish in their turn in this inglorious gap, the losses were not apparent." Those losses were compounded by the fact that during cold spells of minus 15 to 20 degrees Fahrenheit, rooms were heated to 86 degrees to dry the walls more quickly. "Thus these wretches on entering and leaving this abode of death—now become, thanks to their sacrifice, the home of vanity, magnificence and pleasure—underwent a difference in temperature of 100 to 108 degrees."[3]

But life couldn't have been entirely rosy for those who benefited from the work, either. Writing of the city's artificiality and the seeming incompatibility of its architecture to the aesthetic sensibilities of the cold Baltic landscape, Custine was shocked at the city's neoclassicism. "One can permit [the Russians] to look to Constantinople for their architectural models, but not to Athens. Seen from the Neva, the parapets of the Petersburg wharves are impressive and magnificent; but from the first step on land you discover that these same wharves are paved with inferior stones, inconvenient, uneven—as dis-

[2] Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, New York: Shocken Books, 1978, p.156.
[3] Astolphe, Marquis de Custine, *Empire of the Czar: A Journey Through Eternal Russia*. New York: Doubleday, 1989, p.73.

agreeable to the eye as they are painful to pedestrians and treacherous to carriages. Gilded shafts, fine as lightning rods; porticos whose foundations almost disappear under water; squares adorned with columns which are lost in the vastness of the ground that surrounds them; statues copied from the antique, whose lines, style, and arrangements clash to such an extent with the nature of the soil, the color of the sky, and the climate, as well as with the faces, dress, and customs of the people, that they resemble heroes imprisoned in the land of their enemies..."[4]

Custine recoiled even more from what he saw on the streets. Having been harassed by the border police and customs agents in almost same the way travelers today must endure ("Russia is the country of useless formalities," he concludes), Custine writes, "One does not die, one does not breathe here except by permission or by imperial order; therefore, everything is gloomy and constrained. Silence presides over life and paralyzes it. Officers, coachmen, Cossacks, serfs, courtiers, all are servants, of different rank, of the same master and blindly obeying an idea that they do not understand. It is a masterpiece of military mechanics; but the sight of this beautiful order does not satisfy me at all, as so much regularity cannot be obtained except through the complete absence of independence."

Custine continues: "The word of the Tsar has the power to create, they say. Yes, it brings stones to life, but in doing so it kills men. Despite this small reservation, all Russians are proud of the ability to say to us: "You see, in your country one deliberates three years over the means of rebuilding a theater, whereas our Emperor builds the biggest palace in the world in one year.[5]

"... the Russian government would never have been established anywhere else in the world," Custine concludes, "nor would the Russians have become what they are under a different government."

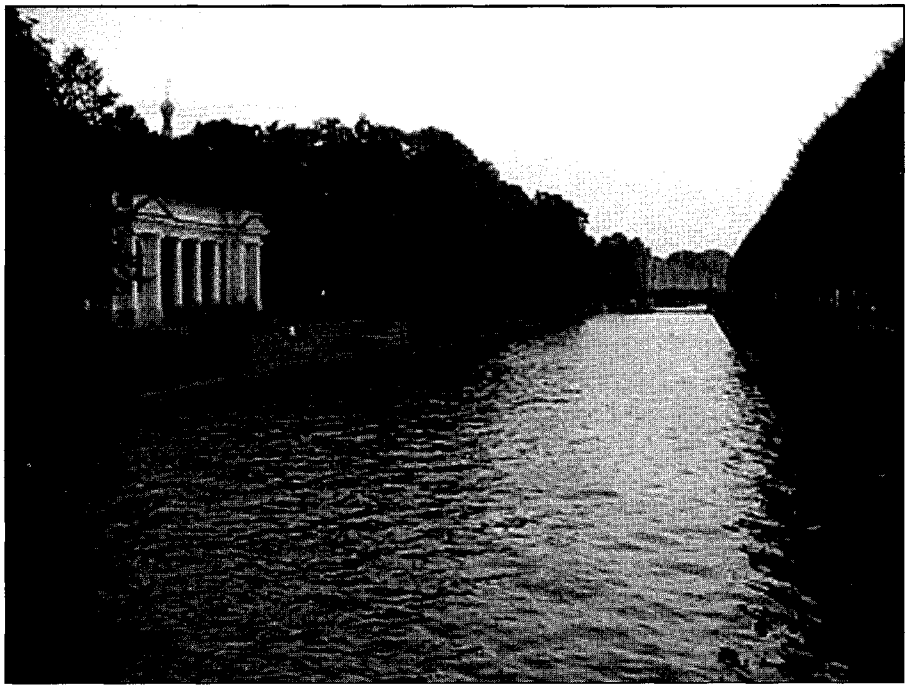
Custine's tremendous insights have only been made greater with time; his words are just as suited to Russia today than to the empire as it was more than 150 years ago. Can't one say the same about Putin—who sanctions the killing of thousands of innocent Chechens in the name of his "strong" state, and stifles the free press—than about Nicholas? There is one difference, however—and that is St. Petersburg itself. Custine's observations largely hold true to society in Moscow. But with the loss of its status as capital, St. Petersburg ceased to function in its role of hyper-artificial metropolis (even with the more "organic" development of late-19th-century industrialization and worker migration). The city, for the first time, was free to develop a life of its own—a possibility stifled by 70 years of communism, of course. But now that the Soviet Union is gone and the days of decay and austerity are—I hope—slowly fading, the city can be seen for the first time as never before.

St. Petersburg may still have many Soviet afflictions, including a lack of decent restaurants, but as a whole, the city seems to have been invaded by benevolent heathens who have taken it over and are having a party. The masses—however impoverished, however dismissive of their city's treasures—are now free to enjoy its beauty. This could only have taken place with a change of political regime (two, it turns out). For the first time, despite the tremendous decay, there's a sense that at least a start on a new way of life has begun. That's why the impetus to reconstruction given by the tercentenary celebrations is so important—especially since the development of the rest of Russia seems to be moving, once again, in the opposite direction.

White nights. Past midnight at the Museum of Hygiene, of all things in this decidedly unhygienic country. It is housed in a typically St. Petersburgian colonnaded building on Italianskaya (Italian) Street.

To me it doesn't matter where the money comes from, or how corrupt the contract bidding process, or that the celebrations are being planned in exemplary Soviet fashion. The important thing is that, like the Stalin five-year plans, reconstruction has been given a time frame and a push forward via official decrees. Despite all the problems and obstacles, this celebration, one senses, will be very different from Moscow's 850th (in 1997), which was heavily official and excruciatingly devoid of anything that did not glorify its mayor. St. Petersburg's will be a true celebration of the city's culture, and precisely because the greatness of that culture—in the shape of its buildings and ballet and literature and other forms—exerts a tempering and democratizing

[4] Ibid., p.67.
[5] Ibid., p.77.



South of the Summer Garden on the Moika Canal during white nights

effect on the official nature of the preparations.

Reconstruction, meanwhile, has to be done right. It's expensive and slow work; shoddy rebuilding will only chip away at the vessel of Petersburg culture. It seems the city administration understands that, more or less. Slowly, whole streets are being repaved and repainted and the city is being preserved as it should be—or at least as well as it seems it can under the circumstances. Despite the presence of various architectural layers, the single vision—that alien version of the European Custine criticized (and that even the Soviets couldn't break)—is being restored.

An acquaintance of mine, Vyacheslav Glazychev, who heads Moscow's Institute of Architecture, shares the optimism. After the Revolution, he says, "a very large educated section of society remained... It still exists. And as before, the Petersburg educated public is much poorer than Moscow's as a whole. But its natural Europeanism is, as before, a strong antithesis [to Moscow's].

Glazychev says St. Petersburg's traditional role as a nexus for Westernizers might come to life in the city's 300th-anniversary celebrations. "It will collide with the neo-Slavophile, neo-Orthodox traditions and that might finally be some kind of push toward a renaissance of cultural life." This pedestrian—who will never tire of walking up Nevskii Prospekt—certainly hopes so. ❑

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