

Privatising St. Petersburg: Neoliberal Urban Restructuring and the Destruction of Commons

The stagflation crises of the seventies was only the most visible part of a much deeper, systemic crises: a crises of sinking profit rates. It was not by chance, that the before marginal neo-liberal ideology, promoted by corporately financed institutes, became the hegemonic order: Privatisation, liberalization and deregulation opened the way to former commons for capital. Marketisation, commodification and subjection under the logic of maximal profit entered the urban space making the city part of the new order and taking away what Lefevre has called "the right to the city".

Since the breakdown of the Soviet Union St. Petersburg was one of the first victims of neoliberal transformation. When under the communist regime a living place was the right of everybody, under capitalism homes were privatized; squares and parks for recreation were obstructed; schools and hospitals turned into private property; the historical heritage damaged. These changes were not less "natural" than the introduction of the neoliberal system in general - neoliberal think tanks and international advisers played as important a role as did the new neoliberal institutes and institutions they helped found.

Although it is difficult from an economical point of view to imagine a financial source for the built environment other than private or public (state), there are philosophical concepts in the "Right to the City" approach, which can help to formulate alternatives to the neoliberal urban mainstream: The right to accessible and healthy housing, air and sun, cultural heritage, community or common space. Framing these rights as commons from which nobody can be excluded, alternative solutions can be modeled, which don't depend on capital or the state.

The presentation will show, how neoliberal agents introduced institutional and structural changes in the city and what spacial and economic order resulted from them. It also will demonstrate, how urban initiatives struggle against the dispossession of commons they face from capitalist and state actors.