

“Space shapes a person; constraints free the soul”: Watercolor sketches of Moscow panel-block apartments on the eve of demolition.

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Abstract

This visual anthropology project was informed by a series of plein-air watercolor sketches of panel-block apartment buildings, painted in conversation with ethnographic research participants in Moscow in 2021. Such housing, built on an industrial scale during Nikita Khrushchev’s mass-housing campaign between 1955 and 1964, and which came to be nicknamed *khrushchevkas*, became ubiquitous across the Soviet Union. In 2017, in Moscow, Russia, panel-block apartments were threatened by the *renovatsiya* campaign, which asked residents to vote to demolish their own homes, now declared dilapidated housing. The author painted a number of these apartment buildings slated for demolition, recording details in the construction, ornamentation, and topography of each apartment block. The author also gathered testimonies of artists who live in-, and whose artistic practice revolves around such housing, asking participants to share their artistic process, memories of growing up and living in such housing, and feelings about the prospect of losing their home. While supported by the majority of the population, the *renovatsiya* campaign would erase local histories, revealing the state’s authoritarian attitude towards its own citizenry, but much worse, it served as premonition for Russia’s renewed aggression in Ukraine, which, less than a year later, caused a widespread political and humanitarian disaster, closing all possibility for further research.

The quote originates from an ethnographic research participant living in a Moscow socialist panel-block apartment. The participant adds: “I cannot escape it, the life that I live here, with all the rude neighbors and marginal personalities. This is the truth of Russian reality. I don’t have a clean well; I have a dirty well.” While such an account may signal hopelessness or resignation to one’s living conditions, it also describes an “interanimation” (Basso 1998), or “affective resonance” (Mühlhoff 2019) as dynamic, relational interaction between people and the places they call home.

In 2021, I undertook a visual anthropology research study to examine people’s experiences living in Soviet-era industrial mass-housing. This type of housing became nicknamed *khrushchevkas*, because it was built during Nikita Khrushchev’s Soviet housing campaign, 1955-1964. In 2017, Moscow authorities declared over five thousand of these apartment blocks “dilapidated housing stock,” and ordered their demolition, threatening to displace a million-and-a-half Muscovites. Residents could veto whether their apartment would get demolished; however, most people, lured by promises of new housing, opted to demolish their own homes.

My research used visual anthropology approaches, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews, which I conducted in Moscow, Russia in Autumn 2021. In conversation with participants, I witnessed feelings of anger, anxiety, and melancholy as reactions to losing one’s home. *Khrushchevkas* were sentimentalized through positive memories of Soviet childhood and described as a place where generational continuity and reciprocal forms of neighborliness became symbolically contrasted with present-day realities. In conversation with participants, I made water-color sketches of apartment blocks slated for demolition. Zoe Bray calls this type of exchange “anthropology with a paintbrush,” and considers it a form of knowledge production that accumulates embodied, multisensory, and intersubjective experiences (Bray 2015). Additionally, for me, painting people’s homes became a way to materialize their memories, and to anchor my own experiences growing up in Moscow as an “autobiographic record of one’s discovery of an event” (Berger 2013).

Russia began a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In the first weeks of the war, those of us watching events unfold on our screens, described feeling numbness, shock, terror. An early symbol of war became Soviet housing blocks devastated by bombing raids, standing with missing façades, or exposed furniture. It became morally objectionable to lament Moscow's *khrushchevkas*, considering the same panel-block homes—which came to represent the devastation and ruin brought upon by Russia's war—were being destroyed in Ukraine. Considering these events, the sketches no longer represented nostalgic Soviet discourses, but a call to scholarship to critically examine Russia's imperial ambitions, and to ensure Russia's perpetrators be held morally and politically accountable for destroying life, livelihood, and home.

Works Cited

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Figure 1: *Khrushchevka* in the Noviy Cheremushki Micro-district. Watercolor on paper, Autumn 2021.



Figure 2: *Khrushchevka* in the Severnoe Tushino Administrative District. Watercolor on paper, Autumn 2021.



Figure 3: *Khrushchevka* in the Severnoe Tushino Administrative District. Watercolor on paper, Autumn 2021.



Figure 4: *Khrushchevka* in the Severnoe Tushino Administrative District. Watercolor on paper, Autumn 2021.



Figure 5: *Khrushchevka* in the Koptevo Administrative District. Watercolor on paper, Autumn 2021.

About the author

Gregory Gan (PhD, University of British Columbia 2019) is a visual anthropologist with research interests in the anthropology of art and architecture, affect, and transculturalism. His training as a filmmaker resulted in two acclaimed ethnographic features, *Turning Back the Waves* (2010) and *Theory of Happiness* (2014), as well as *Still Life with a Suitcase* (2019) an interactive, multimodal installation based on a series of interviews with post-Soviet Russian-speaking migrants living in Paris, Berlin, and New York.

Gregory holds a guest postdoctoral fellowship at the Collaborative Research Centre “Affective Societies” at Freie Universität Berlin, where he is currently completing a feature-length ethnographic film about panel-block mass-housing by animating original watercolors. Titled *Empathy for Concrete Things* (2023), the film traces the continuities between Soviet and post-Soviet architectural policy, and Russia’s war in Ukraine, denouncing the Russian state’s totalitarian posture both at home, and abroad.