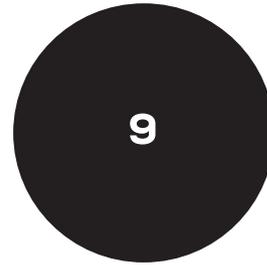




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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Evgeniya Abramova

## **The Bolotnaya Square: Urban Design in Moscow Between Social Activities and Political Protests**

### **Introduction**

The Bolotnaya Square attracted attention as an urban public place in Moscow during the Wave of Protests of 2011-2012 and the movement "For Fair Elections." Prior to this historical event, the location of the square in the city center and its close proximity to the Kremlin alongside a unique green area had made the square attractive since the 1990s – for real estate developers, urban dwellers and new social movements. City authorities paid particular attention to this area and proposed a new plan as a part of the private-public partnership for the total redevelopment at the beginning of the 2000s. This plan was not implemented until 2014 when another project was proposed but at this time only for one plot of land around the square. However, whereas the first project arose within an old 'facility management' paradigm of urban development during the tenure of the first Mayor Luzhkov administration, the latter project expressed the so-called "Turn to the City" approach – part of a new strategy conscious of urban design as a key for improving the quality of the urban environment in Moscow.

Urban dwellers and various political groups also contributed to the development of the Bolotnaya Square. The location and green environment of the square made it attractive for leisure, touristic and cultural activities. Political groups regard the square first of all as a transition point, and then also as a place for holding mass meetings. However, the diversity of social, political and urban groups who used the square for their public demonstrations lead to the Square losing any specific



1. Roman Minaev, Bolotnaya Square (an area of impassable and heavy going swamp with reeds and bulrush – vegetation of 4.5 metres in depth), 2015. Courtesy of Roman Minaev.

historical and symbolic associations connecting the aims of street rallies and the meanings of this urban location. The Wave of Protests of 2011-2012 changed this situation and reconfigured the relationships between urban actors including the city / federal authorities, private developers, and inhabitants. To a certain extent, it had an impact on the urban environment of the Bolotnaya Square, on the everyday activities and street rallies in Moscow.

This article explores this reconfiguration and this impact through the spatial political economy, which sees the city as a socio-spatial structure produced by conflict between capital and labor. This conflict is scrutinized from the perspective of Moscow's social-spatial development in general and the Bolotnaya Square in particular, considering the "Turn to the City", urban design and the movement "For the Fair Elections" in 2011-2012. The first of the three chapters is devoted to the concept of urban design as a "unitary theory" and its critique in turn from the perspective of spatial political economy. The latter puts into question the capability of the theory to understand urban development through social activities and sustainability in the city, whilst ignoring conflicts taking place in a city. The second chapter investigates the so-called "Turn to the City" in Moscow and the role of urban design as a core tool for city redevelopment. The third chapter locates a particular place – the Bolotnaya Square – within this "Turn" and the socio-spatial structure of the city. This relocation takes place on three levels: the environment of the square, social activities and political demonstrations. The latter is considered on the basis of the new Protest Wave of 2011-2012 and the movement "For Fair Elections" which make this space a place of conflict.

### **Urban Design: a Theoretical Approach**

What is urban design? Despite the fact that urban design really begins together with the appearance of the first urban settlements, modern urban design is the historical product of modernism, Fordism, industrialization, mass production and the consumer society. It is also an integral part of urbanization. It first came to be recognized as a research subject only in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At that time scholars came to discern it not only as an element within disciplines such as architecture, urban planning, sociology, psychology, and aesthetics, but placed it as a central point of urban studies, making it possible to conceive of a 'unitary theory' of urban design. Ali Madanipour in his book *Design of Urban Space* (1996) suggests

studying the subject as a “multidisciplinary activity of shaping and managing urban environments, interested in both the process of this shaping and the spaces it helps shape” within “the socio-spatial continuum.”<sup>1</sup> This approach put together previous discussions, which had reduced and divided urban design among various disciplines. At the same time, it represented a response to the Marxist approach to the analysis of urban development which sees urban design as “an unimportant element in a process signified by the conflict between capital and labour.”<sup>2</sup>

However, a holistic approach like this and a ‘unitary theory’ for comprehensive urban design can be seen as “a generalized anarchy of ideas within mainstream urban design,” as Alexander Cuthbert puts it out in his book *The Form of Cities. Political Economy and Urban Design*.<sup>3</sup> Cuthbert demonstrates that this approach is mostly based on “utopian wish fulfillment, normative spatial concepts, professional influence at a series of somewhat random and arbitrary aesthetic choices.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, urban design is mostly associated with beauty and usability in relation to the building environment for urban inhabitants – following the tradition of the creation of utopian cities with ideal urban and social structure, invoking ideas of community (Ferdinand Tönnies) and public place or square (Camillo Sitte) as the core elements of urban life represented in the agora of the democratic Western European city. Today, urban design is also represented in the concept of sustainable urban development, mostly connected to the *environment movement* of the 1960s, which addressed issues of urban ecology, the attainment of a balanced relationship between city and nature and the effective usage of natural and human resources.

Aspects of these concepts could be found in Dutch architect Jahn Gehl’s approach, which received wide recognition in the 1970s, when he published his book *Life Between Buildings* in 1971 and redeveloped Stroget – the first and the longest pedestrian street in Copenhagen.<sup>5</sup> Gehl emphasizes the significance of “activities” which occur in public spaces and divides them into three categories depending on the physical environment: necessary, optional and social activities. The last became the main point for Gehl and his followers’ approach. He regards social activities as a connection that “takes place every time two people are together in the same place.”<sup>6</sup> Although, as Gehl claims, “the physical framework does not have a direct influence on the quality, content, and intensity of social interactions, architects and planners can affect the possibilities for meeting, seeing, and hearing people –

possibilities that both take on a quality of their own and become important as background and starting point for other forms of contact."<sup>7</sup> Gehl's contribution to urban design and its theory is that he switches attention from material objects to social activities in the city, as well as from urban planning and architecture to everyday life. He thereby continues a tradition of studies on social life in small urban places begun by American urbanist William H. Whyte.

However, the problem with Gehl's approach, conceived in the 1970s, had become apparent in 1990-2000. By then Gehl Architects, founded as a Copenhagen based office in the 1970s, had become a global firm providing urban design services in New York, London, Melbourne, San Paulo and Mexico City. And so in 2011, Gehl Architects was invited to Moscow by the city government. Gehl's recommendations for the aforementioned cities focus on sustainable urban development whilst enhancing the quality of life as well as improving urban infrastructure. The recommendations include the ideas from the 1970s and suggest turning streets, squares, parks and rivers into a public, green, accessible, well-connected network for walking with a balance between cars and pedestrians. These recommendations assume, but never publicly proclaim, that the urban structure should exhibit ideal (beautiful, good) architectural forms and infrastructure alongside democratic social structures.

Gehl's approach, progressive in the 1970s, came to reveal the shortcomings of these concepts of urban design: they ignore the fact that the 'life between the buildings' together with buildings themselves are not produced only by social activities or social interactions. They are also produced by collective social actions and social conflicts. These conflicts still occur in the cities and are based on the conflict between capital and labor, as identified by political economy. Cuthbert, following Manuel Castells, reminds us that the conflictual processes in the city define urban meaning. However, unlike the Marxist conception which focuses on production, the new political economy deals also with consumption whose role increased during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and since then. Today, the conflict between capital and labor are thought of as a conflict between those who possess capital in the form of real estate in the city and those who are forced to sell their labor and to choose accordingly the place they work, live and consume. This conflict develops in cities and urban design plays a crucial role in this process.

As David Harvey demonstrates in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1990),<sup>8</sup> capital, in order to accumulate and generate surplus, is looking for a new forms of investment in the city. Capital is 'fixed' in a particular urban environment and therefore needs to switch to a new circuit of accumulation. This change occurs alongside "the increased complexity of social structure and the competing interests that exist between classes and class factions."<sup>9</sup> In general, the conflict has shifted from the sphere of production to the sphere of consumption and to the reproduction of labor forces in general. Contrary to t Gehl's position, spatial political economy emphasizes the increased role of the state in urban development today. The state has become the central agency in order to control urban planning as a response to increased demands to allocate resources more effectively and sustainably. Cuthbert sees this process as a new form of "capital accumulation through public-private partnership."<sup>10</sup> The latter has become the prevalent form of capital accumulation in the processes of redevelopment for de-industrial areas on the international arena.<sup>11</sup> Post-Marxist theory emphasizes the role of urban design in these processes of capital accumulation and social reproduction. Urban design manifests itself on three levels. Firstly, it is used by capital and the state as a tool, which adds exchange value to current urban environment. Secondly, it helps to commodify urban space by improving the quality of the urban environment and making the city more usable (more green, open and public) for urban dwellers, i.e. for the reproduction of labor forces because the city is "the space where social reproduction connects with the market and where civil society spends its leisure time."<sup>12</sup> Finally, the irrepressible conflict between capital and labor leads to the commodification of urban structure; and capital and the state legitimize their power through urban design as Paul Knox points out in his book *Cities and Design* (2010). Urban design "helps the dominant social order to protect itself from opposing ideological forces" and can be used to undermine the power of new social, political and urban movements.<sup>13</sup> Knox uses the term "signature of power" to capture this process of undermining, which has the physical and symbolic impact both on material objects of urban structure and the social forces producing urban space.

These three levels of post-Marxist urban design theory emphasized by the spatial-political economy provide the right approach to understanding what might be called "the paradox of the Bolotnaya Square" when the geographical toponym –

“swamp” – provided a negative name to the oppositional political movement “For Fair Elections”; and this term started to be used by this movement in 2011–2012. So we may explore how the “signature of power” came about and shaped the machinery of the retrospective rationalization of the public events in Moscow in those years. How were those events organized into a narrative whereby the state and capital preserved their dominant position regarding the design of the urban environment and the social activities contained within it?

The spatial-political economy perspective helps us to perceive the unique features of one of the key events in modern Russian and Moscow’s history in particular. It helps us answer several questions: How did one of the central squares in Moscow become one of the places for a new round of capital accumulation in the years of 1990–2000? How did the Bolotnaya Square become one of the first places in the post-socialist city to embody the ideas of “The Turn to the City” with the creation of designed urban places for the reproduction of social forces? How did the Bolotnaya Square emerge as a place of social and political protest, which then went back to everyday social interactions?

In the next section, the “The Turn to the City” in Moscow will be analyzed addressing the economic, political and social conditions of urban development, which made urban design into a key tool for the redevelopment of the post-Socialist city.

### **Moscow: “The Turn to the City”**

Moscow experienced an explosion of interest as “a city”, as urban development and urban design. This interest could be the result of tendencies such as globalization, neo-liberalization and de-industrialization in post-Soviet cities. Moscow urban structure, which was constructed as a Fordist city divided into an administrative center, a production zone and ‘bedroom communities’, partly changed in the 1990s but its rigidity and sustainability to a certain extent generate and re-produce the issues, which are common for post-Soviet urban development. In general, according to a project of “The Strategy of Moscow Social and Economic Development up to 2025,” there is a disproportion between the business activities and the quality of the urban environment.<sup>14</sup> This disproportion is based on the country’s resource-based economy, which brings large economic benefits for Moscow as a city on a national scale. Moscow’s status as the capital provides for the concentration of financial, labor, trade and transport flows in the Russian

Federation. There is “the accumulation of 80% financial turnover, 80% of investment property; 70% of Russian bank system, and a large proportion of export-import deductions.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Moscow has the highest living standards and the best quality of life in Russia.

However, the resource-based economy causes instability and crucial dependence on oil-price fluctuations that leads to the destabilization of the city economy and undermines business and investment activities. All these factors exacerbate other actual urban issues and disproportions. For example, there is a significant income gap. Moscow income is twice as high as the Russian average but the *relative* poverty level is also very high. Up to 30% of Moscow citizens have less than 60% of the Russian capital’s average income.<sup>16</sup> This situation is accompanied by a decrease in housing access, the monopolization of housing market, an out-of-balance of transport infrastructure and the under-development of public places and pedestrian connectivity. Furthermore, Moscow’s socio-spatial structure mirrors (or even duplicates) the aforementioned national disproportions on an urban level: while the city center accumulates jobs, transportation, customer services and cultural infrastructure – all these are underdeveloped in the peripheral areas. According to the research of the Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design “Archeology of the Periphery,” “high job supply concentration in the center compared with the periphery: 37% jobs are in the Central Administrative District, which accounts for 5% of the city territory, and 9.3% at industrial facilities taking up 16% of the city’s territory (industrial zones).”<sup>17</sup> The disproportion between the center and periphery, between business activities and the quality of urban environment challenged the federal and city authorities to “turn to the city” and look at Moscow from a global perspective in the 2000s.

Chronologically, this “turn” could be linked to two events. In 2009, the Strelka Institute was established as an educational interdisciplinary center combining architecture, urban planning, design, sociology and art as methodological approaches to research into and transformation of Russian cities. The dean of the Institute is an architect – Rem Koolhaas. The second event is the resignation of the mayor Yury Luzhkov, who had been running the city for 18 years, since 1992. The new mayor, Sergey Sobyenin, was appointed by the Russian president in 2010 and was elected in 2013. The Moscow authorities, in collaboration with the Strelka Institute, began a public discussion on future urban development at the Moscow

Urban Forum that put Moscow within the context of current urban trends including the search for drivers of urban development such as mega events, branding and urban design.<sup>18</sup> It is supposed to make Moscow a global city, attract new investments and improve the quality of the environment. It also includes the development of public, green places and pedestrian areas. So urban design has been treated as a key tool – to achieve these goals.

### **The Bolotnaya Square: Socio-Spatial Structure**

The Bolotnaya Square is used here as an example to reveal the contradictions and conflicts that take place in the city between labor and capital. This brings to light the hidden interests of each of the main actors – the state, the city, business, inhabitants and political movements – which impact the urban socio-spatial structure, including the urban environment produced by the federal and city authorities, the land and real estate owners in public-private partnerships, and the urban dwellers with their social and political activities in this place. In this section, each of the actors and their interconnections will be scrutinized.

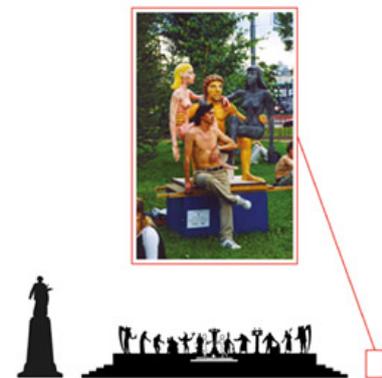
### **The Bolotnaya Square environment**

The Bolotnaya Square is situated in the inner-city area (Central Administrative District - CAD), close to the Kremlin and the Russian president's official residence, on the opposite side of the Moskva River. The Yakimanka District, as part of the CAD, is classified as one of six post-industrial districts alongside Khamovniki, Arbat, and Tverskoy districts in Moscow.<sup>19</sup> They accumulate economic, political and cultural functions of the city and represent Moscow as an international city.

A brief journey into the history of this place demonstrates that the low-lying area in the South between the Moskva River and the Vodootvodny Canal used to be seasonally flooded until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The square was used for public executions (one of the most famous being the execution of Yemelyan Pugachev, a leader of the peasant rebellion in 1775), military parades, and a food market in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Attempts to re-shape the meaning of this place were undertaken twice - by erecting monuments in the square. First of all, the Soviet government erased the monument to the Russian realist painter Ylya Repin in 1958 to connect the square and the State Tretyakov Gallery on the opposite side of the river. Later the state oil-company "Rosneft" (the Russian state-owned oil company),

whose headquarter is located over there, set-up the sculptural composition "Children are Victims of Adult Vices" in 2001. Despite the fact that the square was divided into two areas by these monuments, the place nevertheless preserved its unity with its name – the Bolotnaya ('swamp'). This meaning remained neutral until 2011 when the movement "For Fair Elections" organized a mass meeting followed by a mass rally in 2012. During and after these public demonstrations, this opposition movement assumed the negative connotation of a "swamp" which came to be understood as 'failure'. However, in the post-Soviet period the square remained one of the rare green places in the city center. City authorities had started to improve the urban design of this area before "The Turn to the City." Luzhkov's government as the owner of the land included the square in the program of site landscaping in 1996. It was the first time the condition of the flowerbeds had been improved in a post-Soviet city. In 2007 the Bolotnaya Square was included in the General Scheme of Landscaping of the City of Moscow up to 2020. The square was becoming quite popular for inhabitants especially in the summer time of the 2010s – other squares did not provide so much green space.

The square is part of the so-called Golden Island, one of the redevelopment projects for this territory – "The Golden Moscow Ring". It also reflects the specificity of the location which has the highest land and real estate prices in the city and makes this area very attractive and potentially profitable for real-estate investors and developers. Besides the Federal and City governments, the major owners of the land and property estate are the Russian key corporations – Rosneft, Sberbank (Saving Bank of Russia), FSK EES (the Federal Grid Company of Unified Energy System), and Rostec (the Russian Technological State Corporation).<sup>20</sup> These stakeholders, with their investments fixed in the current urban environment, need to switch to the next circuit of capital accumulation and use urban design for this purpose. Three redevelopment projects were proposed for the area. The first was "The Golden Moscow Ring" program, which was organized as a public-private partnership between the City Government and the Corporation of Development of Territory (CDT), in 2003.<sup>21</sup> According to this program, the Bolotnaya Square would be



**2. Roman Minaev, The Exhibition of Artist Alexander Povzner's sculptures, the beginning of the 1990s, 2015. Courtesy of Roman Minaev.**

developed with new luxury apartments, offices, entertainment complexes, shopping centers and underground parking lots in the square. In addition, the transportation system would be extended with a new metro station, tunnel and a bridge in this area. The second project was the Global Financial Centre. However, neither project was implemented due to: the high costs for the redevelopment of this particular area; the collision between other land and buildings proprietors' and leases' interests and the financial crisis of 2008. The City Government proposed a third project in 2014. They sold a portion of land to a developer – the Capital Group, which planned to build a mixed-used complex with luxury apartments, a boutique hotel and offices for Russian and foreign business companies.<sup>22</sup> This project visually connects the Kremlin and the Bolotnaya Square and modifies this green and public place for urban dwellers to the luxury place for elite. In general, it re-started a new cycle of capital accumulation in this area due to its adding exchange value to the underdeveloped territory through high-end urban design.

## Social activities

The Bolotnaya Square is a place where capital became fixed and switched to the next circuit of accumulation and the current physical environment of the Bolotnaya Square is the result of a constellation of stakeholders' commercial interests and competition for the land and buildings; but this square is also a place where reproduction of labor occurs. Urban dwellers regard this place as green, leisure, touristic, cultural and subcultural; many social activities have taken place there which have provided "an opportunity to be with others in a relaxed and undemanding way," as Jan Gehl characterized these interactions.<sup>23</sup> People lie on the grass, sit on the benches; children play at two playgrounds during the summer time. There are many "wedding trees" with locks and a spot for touristic buses. It is also a place for the gathering of Moscow left- (antifascist) and right-wing (football fans) informal groups, poi performers, goths and reenactors. All these subculture groups occupy a certain area within the square and do not collide with each other. The Bolotnaya Square is also regarded as a place for concerts and festivals: it provides enough space for a musical stage and professional equipment.<sup>24</sup> However, as the spatial-political economy determines, this urban space is not only generated by social activities and interactions – by socially appropriated behavior for public spaces. The space is also determined by conflicts and public protests in

the city.

## **Political demonstrations (protests)**

The history of protest activities in the Bolotnaya Square demonstrates that this place was most considered a transitional point for mass rallies in the 1990s. Later on, the federal and city authorities came to be one of the actors and so laid claim to public demonstrations in the city using new political groups and new legal restrictions for protest activities in Moscow. As a result of the mixture of different political and social street activities, the Bolotnaya Square, as well as other Moscow public places, lost its historical or symbolic meaning and came to be recognized as one of a series of urban locations suitable for any type of street demonstration.

As a transitional point, the square was important because of its location within the city center and its proximity to the Kremlin. People marched from South to North (from the Zamoskvorechye district to the Kremlin) along three streets: Bolshaya Yakimanka, Bolshaya Polyanka, or Bolshaya Ordynka. They crossed Malyy or Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Most to reach Vasylevsky spusk (close to the Kremlin) or the Revolution Square. At the end of the 1990s, trade unions, which had demanded a defense of labor rights and social benefits and had been protesting against wage reductions, repeatedly marched by this place. These groups protested together with others groups such as the Moscow City Committee of Communist Party of the Russia, "The People's Patriotic Union of Russia" Social Movement, "The Working Russia" Movement. In the 2000s, the pro-Kremlin youth movement "Walking Together" (Idushchie Vmeste) took to the streets and organized one of their meetings in the Bolotnaya Square. The movement started to compete with other groups for Moscow public places and demonstrations in the city. Furthermore the federal government implemented new amendments to the law "On gatherings, demonstrations, rallies, processions and picketing" circumscribing citizens' rights to organize demonstrations in the city, in 2004. In 2007, the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov added to these restrictions with two new normative acts hindering any public protest in the city because of 'safety considerations', obstructing them with bureaucratic regulations.

Nevertheless, the Bolotnaya Square was used by different political and social groups in the 2000s. There was a meeting "For the Russia without Fascism"

organized by the liberal-democratic party "Union of Right Forces" (Soyuz Pravyh Sil), the NGO "The Moscow Helsinki Group" and The Russian Anti-Fascist Front in 2006. In 2007, there was an anti-Semitic meeting of people who protested against Israel policy in Palestine. In 2008, a meeting against abuses by the police was held there. The United Public Committee to Protect the Family, Childhood and Morality gathered in the Bolotnaya Square in March; the United Democratic Movement "Solidarity" gathered in May 2010. In 2011, nationalist groups proclaimed that it was time to "Stop feeding the Caucasus," "Stop Robbing Russian Regions" and "Down with the Party of Crooks and Thieves." The last slogan was used by a new national-liberal political leader, Alexey Navalny, who supported the meeting in Bolotnaya.

### **A new Wave of Protests: 2011-2012**

How did the Bolotnaya Square succeed as a significant place for political protests in the city? How did it return to the ordinary life of everyday social activities? Lastly, how did the "signature of power" narrate the negative meaning for the movement "For Fair Elections" as a "swamp opposition" and "prisoners of swamp"? These are the questions to which I would like to propose tentative answers here.

The Bolotnaya Square acquired this particular connotation connected to "swamp" only during the new Protest Wave of 2011-2012, which emerged as a response to the elections for the Russian State Duma on December 4, 2011. Primarily, this new Wave reconciled two events that took place in the same particular place – Bolotnaya: the first massive political meeting "For Fair Elections" on December 10, 2011; and the most brutal mass rally of May 6, 2012. Despite the fact that the purposes, the social or class composition, as well as the motives and consequences behind this Wave are regarded differently by different scholars (one of the main points of significance was that it was a protest of a new middle class in Russia); it is agreed that the movement attracted new and previously apolitical participants and consolidated existing political groups – groups belonging to opposite ends of the political spectrum.<sup>25</sup>

The choice of the Bolotnaya Square as a venue for the first mass meeting of "For the Fair Elections" (December 10, 2011) was made by the city authorities during negotiations between the city representatives and the organizers of the demonstration. Initially it was assumed that the meeting would be held in the

Revolution Square located in the city center, next to the Kremlin and the State Duma. The potentially provocative proximity to the latter buildings led to relocation of the meeting to the Bolotnaya Square. The city representatives and organizers agreed that there would be a transition passage from one square to another for people who had planned to gather in the first place. However, not all participants agreed to relocate from the Revolution Square to Bolotnaya on December 10, 2011. An opposition political leader, one of the organizers of "The March of Dissent," Eduard Limonov, stayed at the Revolution Square; his supporters chanted, "We will not go into the swamp!"<sup>26</sup>

Limonov treated the Bolotnaya Square as "the most worthless piece of territory where protests could be held. It is an island isolated from everything."<sup>27</sup> He claimed that the agreement between the city authorities and the organizers was not logical because Bolotnaya did not prevent potential overcrowding. "The Revolution Square is located in the middle of three squares and connects to broad streets between the Manezhnaya Square and the Lubyanka Square. A million protesters could be fit there. While the Bolotnaya Square is actually a small island squeezed between the Moscow River and the Canal; this dangerous trap could establish conditions for Khodynskoe Tragedy, or to drop people into the winter river and the Canal."<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, from the perspective of street demonstrations, the location and configuration of the Bolotnaya Square have certain limitations. In addition to limiting access to the area from the river, canal and bridges, access is also blocked by a roadway. Despite the fact that the area is located on the "Golden Island", it is further away from the Kremlin and other authorities' buildings than the Revolution Square, for instance. Bolotnaya is surrounded mostly by offices - which are empty at weekends. There is only one apartment building located near the square; another one - The House on the Embankment - is located across the roadway. Moreover, the spatial and physical characteristics of the Bolotnaya Square do not lend themselves to the Western European tradition of conceptualizing a public space. The Russian architect Eugene Asse called the Bolotnaya Square "no space." He said that "in the context of the Moscow center [...] the Bolotnaya Square does not exist. There is a narrow strip of waterfront, which was kindly allocated for this action. The location is extremely uncomfortable due to its length."<sup>29</sup> All these impediments came into play for establishing a specific connection between the Bolotnaya physical environment and political protests. Step by step, the organizers'

compliance to gather in the Bolotnaya Square composed a strong negative discourse combining the meaning of a swamp as a pond of stagnant water, a damp place, or a condition or situation of stagnation, and the spatial characteristics of its urban location that restrain opportunities for street protests.

This negative connotation between Bolotnaya and the movement “For the Fair Elections” was reinforced by the second event of May 6, 2012. The beginning of the rally was the same as the previous one of February 4, 2012. The rally was planned to begin alongside the Yakimanka Street toward the Bolotnaya Square – the place for a meeting. However, access from the street to the square was narrowed by the police, the rally stopped and some of the organizers and participants held a “sit-in” on the street and some of them – according to the different versions of its organizers and participants – tried to break through a police cordon or “put up a fight,” or started a “mass riot.”<sup>30</sup>

The clashes of protesters with the police led to the detention of more than 400 people. Criminal charges were brought for inciting riots, the ‘use of violence against a representative of the authorities, as well as ‘planning to organize mass riots in Russia’. More than 30 people became involved in the case; some of them have been released under an amnesty, some received prison sentences from 2.5 to 4.5–years.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the clashes on May 6 started to be perceived as a premeditated action, initiated by the authorities. The campaign against the organizers was unfolded. Leaders of “The Left Front” Sergei Udaltsov and Leonid Razvozhayev were sentenced and the other leader, Alexei Navalny, was placed under house arrest. As Navalny concluded, “the authorities had originally planned to disrupt the rally. The question is whether they were planning already to prosecute people for organizing riots. Until recently, the answer was no. But then... it was more like the plan was just that.”<sup>32</sup>



3. Roman Minaev. The Illegal Memorial to an Only Victim of Events May 6, 2012 (the graffiti on asphalt – address: Bolshaya Yakimanka, 35), 2015. Courtesy of Roman Minaev.

This post-factum rationalization and interpretation of past events by establishing a strong connection between authorities’ intentions, street clashes and the symbolic meaning of the square, could be seen as the result of the authorities’ pressure on the organizers and participants of the political protests. The latter

started to use the “swamp criminal case,” “prisoners of swamp” and “the swamp opposition” for their social and political identity. So, “the paradox of the Bolotnaya Square” could be seen as the result of the work of a “signature of power” which destroyed the opposition political movement and where urban design was also used as a tool of political repressions.

Today, there are no visible traces of these political protests at the Bolotnaya Square in 2013-2014. The area and its physical environment has been completely cleaned and returned to everyday social activities by a utility service. Furthermore, despite the fact that there is no cohesive development project for the Bolotnaya Square and the “Golden Island” altogether, this territory has not lost its attractiveness as an investment opportunity – due to its central location and a proximity to the Kremlin. “The Turn to the City” and the increase in the significance of urban design has the potential to further increase this attractiveness and a “good” urban design of one of the green public places in the city center already added exchange value to the Bolotnaya Square.

## **Conclusion**

Looking back to the political protests in the Bolotnaya Square, one might conclude that the “unitary theory” of urban design does not provide sufficient tools for understanding the processes occurring in the city. Based on the idealistic conceptions of the ideal city and sustainable urban development, it outlines social activities and social interactions in public places but ignores any type of protest actions. Moreover, this theory does not draw particular attention to the conflict based on the contradiction between capital and labor, even if it deals with an analysis of the production of urban space. So it became complicated to take into consideration the circles of capital accumulation in the city, the reproduction of labor forces, the role of the urban design as one of that adds exchange value within of these circles legitimizing the dominating power.

The spatial political economy, by contrast, deals with this conflict and helps to dispose of the “paradox of the Bolotnaya Square” and the construction of the meaning of this particular urban location. This approach to urban design regards the socio-spatial structure produced and consumed by the state and business in the form of public-private partnership, by urban inhabitants along with politically active groups in the city. The case of the Bolotnaya Square demonstrates that

urban environment and social activities in this place should only be considered together with political action. Only in this way it is possible to grasp the socio-spatial structure of this particular place and the city in general.

## Footnotes

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9 Cuthbert, 45.

10 Ibid., 75.

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23 Gehl, 534.

24 The Bolotnaya Square was noted twice. Firstly, it was part of a short survey for the project "The Committee for the Activation of Collective Memory" in May, 2011. Fifteen interviews were conducted on the Repin monument and the physical environment of the square. See: *The Committee for the Activation of Collective*

*Memory* (2012), accessed February 18, 2015,

<https://committeeacm.wordpress.com>. Secondly, a visual study of social activities and traces of political protests was conducted in October–November, 2012.

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