

## What if these were the "smart cities"? A broad urban restoration for residential buildings in Russia.

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In March, within the SPINE (1) project, the Architecture Department of the Vladimir State University, the Regional Government and the Local Government organized a unique seminar that gathered further Local Governments and the newborn Urban Planning department of the University of Moscow. The seminar gave room and voice to the several NGOs committed to sustainable urban development, hence dealing with the use of sustainable energies, environmental sustainability and the organization and preservation of the urban historical heritage. During the seminar many projects and *case studies* were presented, illustrating the following topics: restoration of early 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial buildings, landscape design and careful restoration of orthodox churches and monasteries. All presentations impressed not only us but also the audience for the knowledge and expertise that architects, engineers and sociologists proved to have with regards to the fields of sustainable development, the new frontier for living and the relation between urban quality, historical heritage and social development.

Ironically, however, while the seminar focused on historical and architectural issues, upgrading of historical buildings for energy saving and energy efficiency purposes, landscape design, urban planning and quality living, the scenery from the windows of the building that hosted the seminar offered a view of the new town (picture 1), which is broadening and slowly erasing the early 20<sup>th</sup> century city landscape (picture 2), and that will be the predominant element for 20-30 years to come. The urban landscape was very different from the ideas that were being discussed with such expertise, knowledge and passion.

Our Russian colleagues illustrated the wonders of the urban restoration and some of the initiatives that had already been taken. Notwithstanding this, the sight from the window only provided us with shallow and banal buildings whose inspiration could only come from speculation. That was the trend in Vladimir, just as it is in many other Russian towns and in the whole world: tall, dull buildings whose aspect clashes with the surrounding urban landscape, buildings made with modern materials leading to high energy consumption, excessive building packing density, hardly no public spaces, buildings marked by a lack of architectural quality rich in post-modern references to recall the idea of traditional residential areas of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.



picture 1 – Picture taken from a window of the Vladimir Regional Administration building, illustrating the residential area under construction.



picture 2 – 1950's picture of Ulitsa Gor'kogo, a Broadway in the area where residential areas illustrated in picture 1 are being built.

Therefore, while the seminar illustrated original attempts to reuse historical cities, the sight from the window provided us with non-places, as Bauman and Augé would define them. That was the strongest feeling and the sharpest contradiction the audience felt.

Yet such visual shock enabled us to underline a crucial element, another branch of the SPINE project. The Russian town of Vladimir and other neighbouring regions are an opportunity to move from the preservation of a single, crucial, historical building to the preservation, upgrading and reuse of traditional wooden houses with one or two storeys, elements that characterize the urban environments and the outskirts of many towns in Russia and in Ukraine (pictures 3, 4). Moreover, this opportunity may once again be coupled with energy efficiency and energy saving issues, namely environmental sustainability, when it comes to the urban environment.

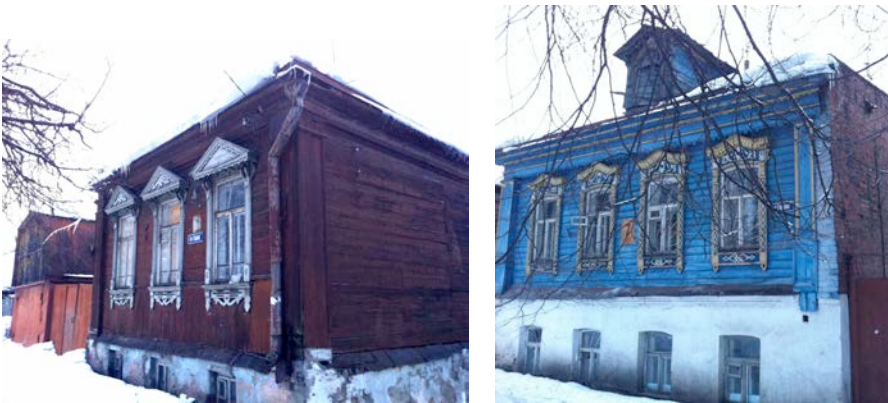
As a matter of fact, irrespective of the beautiful styles, colours, shapes and historical legacy with which such buildings inspire our souls (even in the west), many of them are homes for the elderly and are not connected to a District Heating network; heating is then carried out through methane gas in the place of wood (the way such houses had to be heated with). Which is why these houses are no longer environmentally sustainable. Therefore, they fall victim to urban speculation and ferocious property speculation. The urban areas in which such houses are present are vast, often central, areas where private and public green are intertwined, hence creating a unique morphology that deserves to be highly considered from the point of view of architecture and urban planning. It is a distinguishing feature for many cities in this kind of areas, which no contemporary architecture nor style can match.

A multi-task programme would be therefore advisable, envisaging:

- A census, delimitation and analytical detection of these urban areas;
- An evaluation of each building to understand its characteristics to carry out a census using a GIS basis;
- The Analysis of existing modern technologies to restore a building, enabling it to cater for the requirements in terms of energy efficiency and energy saving criteria;
- The opportunity to provide these neighbourhoods (indeed unique within the global architecture and urban planning) with District Heating systems to make the buildings more affordable for their owners,

hence encouraging them to keep their houses, with a view to making the buildings more environmentally sustainable;

- The opportunity to add further services to these areas (shops, workshops, a nursery school and a primary school, sports centres and neighbourhood centres) and
- The setup of a broad urban restoration process starting from the city of Vladimir. This will call for support from local, central and national authorities and EU preservation and tourism funds for a common heritage to be protected and preserved.



pictures 3 – 4. Examples of traditional wooden houses in a neighbourhood within the city centre in Vladimir.



picture 5 – View of window frames on the ground floor of a wooden house. Please note that bad restoration attempts or makeshift maintenance measures carried out to increase the functional and energy saving performances of the buildings can actually jeopardize aesthetic and cultural aspects of the house, without enhancing its functional aspects. The PVC window frame in the picture lacks the functional devices of the original wooden frame, namely the multiple-opening system, hence reducing the energy saving upgrade provided by the new window frame.

A few activities of the SPINE project will try to bring the problem into focus through a first approach envisaging analysis and design processes and later coupled with some of the steps that have been previously described, with a view to raising awareness and make the topic up-to-date and “fashionable”. It is therefore clear that one of the goals is to cope with the issue involving the use of public funds. The problem is that funds have been collected for years by marketing operations through which new expansions and land use have been passed off as innovative projects when they have received the “*smart*

*city*" label, which is gathering millions of euros from public funds all over Europe. What if these were the real "smart cities"?

### **Notes**

(1) the SPUNE project ([www.spineciudad.net](http://www.spineciudad.net)) has been described in the previous essay.