Fences, private and public spaces, and traversability in a Siberian city

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ABSTRACT

Segregation, exclusion and partitioning of urban space are widely discussed in social sciences. Thus far, however, remarkably few studies have addressed micro-practices of dividing space. This article explores such practices in private and public spaces of a post-socialist city. It sets the focus on fences as a particular structuring element of urban space, examining both their material and symbolic meanings. Using Yakutsk, a city in north-eastern Siberia, as an example, we explore a twofold hypothesis. First, has the post-socialist condition brought about a growing awareness of individual space and, furthermore, an extension of private space? Second, can we assume that houses and their surroundings, in particular fences, walls and hedges, serve as means of displaying social status? An examination of these questions requires a typology of buildings and neighbourhoods. Significant are the differences between apartment-building areas and private-property neighbourhoods across the city with regard to the use and materiality of fences, notions of private space, and the web of shortcuts within the urban grid. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, we finally discuss the concept of traversability of contemporary urban space.

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1. Introduction

Segregation, exclusion and partitioning of urban space have been central issues of Sociology, Geography, Anthropology, and Urban Planning (recent works comprise Low, 2014; Madanipour, 2014; Massey, 2012).[1] Gated communities in particular have been in the research spotlight (Blinnikov, Shanin, Sobolev, & Volkova, 2006; Lentz, 2004 for Moscow suburbs; Hirt, 2012; Kovács & Hegedüs, 2014; Polanska, 2013; Smigiel, 2013 for other post-socialist countries). Thus far, however, remarkably few studies have addressed micro-practices of dividing space (e.g., Bondi, 1998; Hirt, 2012; Madanipour, 2003) and even fewer, the materiality of those objects that actually restrict and regulate access, i.e. walls and fences (on the latter, Andries & Rehder, 2005; Ford, 2000; Potapova, 2013; cf. Raup, 1947).[2] This article explores material and aesthetic practices of demarcation in private and public

spaces of a post-socialist city. It sets the focus on *fences* as a particular structuring element of urban space, examining both their material and symbolic meanings.

To conduct such a study in a post-socialist setting is not only of technical but also of theoretical importance for Anthropology, Sociology and History. Under socialism, notions of collective vs. individual property and access to resources bore ideological connotations and practical consequences that differed markedly from those in non-socialist countries; these connotations did not simply vanish in the 1990s; rather, they continued to exert a sublime influence well beyond the socialist period (Hirt, 2012, 2013). Social–anthropological research on post-socialist *spatial* practices has been trying to capture the complex reconfigurations of the public and the private (e.g., Gal & Kligman, 2000; Oswald & Voronkov, 2003; Read & Thelen, 2007; Humphrey & Verdery, 2004). Against this backcloth, our study in a Siberian city serves to explore to what extent, and in which ways, the lay-out and combinations of private, semi-public and public spaces have changed. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2006, 2014) on the simultaneity of controlled and uncontrolled domains in Soviet society, we will discuss the concept of traversability of contemporary urban space. Simultaneously, we hope to contribute to the growing research on contemporary urban spaces in post-Soviet Eurasia (e.g., Axenov, 2014; Alexander & Buchli, 2007; Darieva, Kaschuba, & Krebs, 2011; Hirt, 2013; Vendina, 2010).

After presenting the hypothesis, the research setting and our methods, we sketch out a typology of houses and residential areas (neighbourhoods) as key components of the urban fabric. This will be followed by a closer examination of how fences are used to structure

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[1] In addition, state boundaries and the mechanisms of controlling flows of goods and people have received much attention in social–scientific research (with reference to the post-Soviet space, see Billé, Delaplace, & Humphrey, 2012 for Mongolia, China and Russia; Pelkmans, 2006 for Georgia/Turkey; Pfoser, 2015 for Estonia/Russia; Reeves, 2014 for Central Asia). Scholarship on the aesthetics of borders and boundaries has come forward in recent years (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2010; Wolfe, 2014).

[2] Roitman (2013) describes gated communities in Argentina under the subtitle "how walls, fences and barriers exacerbate social differences and foster urban social group segregation" but only occasionally discusses the actual effects of fences and walls (pp. 164–165); rather, she analyses the social practices of the residents of gated communities.

urban space, and how practices of perimeter fencing have changed over time. The article then proceeds with a discussion of recent shifts in private, semi-public and public spaces along with the idea of traversability, and finally with concluding remarks.

The hypothesis to be pursued here is twofold. First, if we start from the assumption that the end of socialism brought about a stronger emphasis on individual initiative (Diligenskii, 2000; Pickles, 2006; cf. Pojani & Buka, 2015: 68, 70) then we may ask whether these translate into a growing awareness of individual space and, furthermore, an extension of private space (as fervently argued by Hirt, 2012: 2, 49–52) — perhaps even a post-socialist enclosure of urban commons? If so, we could expect that the proliferation of physical barriers would make the urban space less traversable (e.g. Roitman, 2013: 164–165). Second, can we assume that houses and their surroundings, in particular fences, walls and hedges, serve as means of distinction — of demonstrating their owner's social status and taste — as they ubiquitously do in parts of Europe (Taylor, 2008: ch. 6)? Pierre Bourdieu's widely known treatise on *Distinction* (1984) has induced some researchers to see distinction as an "invisible fence" to mark off social space (Gullestad, 1986; Manderscheid, 2006). It is apposite, then, to ask if distinction is also expressed by real fences. To assess the two above questions, the authors examine, on the basis of a post-socialist city, if processes of delimitation of space have undergone any visible change.

These questions will be explored using the example of Yakutsk, a city in eastern Siberia with a population of almost exactly 300,000 and hometown of one of the authors (Belolyubskaya). Initially owing its existence to the construction of a Russian military outpost in the 17th century, Yakutsk developed into the administrative centre and transportation hub of a vast region with a sparse, ethnically mixed population. Today, the largest ethnic groups within the city itself are Russians and Sakha (Yakuts). After a period of population stagnation in the 1990s, the city has seen rapid growth since 2001 (when the official census counted 198,000 inhabitants).

Reminiscent of other post-Soviet cities, Yakutsk is comprised of different quarters, each with a specific architectural lay-out: apartment-building areas of Soviet provenance displaying a "collectivist" architecture, multi-storey condominium buildings of post-socialist times, so-called private-sector areas (*chastnyi sektor*) with detached houses, *dacha* settlements (explained below) and individual plots. All these are embedded in an urban tapestry that also includes public buildings, blocks of garages and storage areas, shops and enterprises, industrial and commercial zones, cemeteries, parks and forested areas, grasslands and islands in the perennial flooding zone of river Lena, one of the largest streams of the world. Yakutsk extends between the river and a high, forested plateau that defines the western border of growth of the city (Fig. 1).

While Yakutsk may aptly serve as an example of a post-socialist city, it is particular in economic and political terms: being the capital of a distinct republic within the Russian Federation, the city receives a share of the revenues from diamond extraction in the western part of the republic. As a consequence, Yakutsk is widely considered a "rich" city, with larger household-income discrepancies than in other Russian cities of comparable size. The city is also highly particular in terms of the natural environment, with an amplitude of *average* monthly air temperatures of almost 60 °C and permafrost creating formidable challenges for construction work and engineering (Alekseeva et al., 2007; Shiklomanov & Streletskiy, 2013; cf. Orttung & Reisser, 2014; Solomonov et al., 2011). As a consequence, pipes of hot water run either on or above the ground. This network of pipes (*teplotrassy*) not only provides for a distinct appearance of the city's built environment, it also has a noticeable effect of structuring and circumscribing the citizens' movements and action space. While winters are long and harsh, the snow cover usually amounts to 35 and rarely exceeds 50 cm (Iijima et al., 2010), which is a factor that co-determines the height of fences to a small extent.

2. Methods of study

The first step of fieldwork consisted of identifying different parts of the city — in the way they are classified and commonly known by the inhabitants. The authors conducted a map-based informal zoning, which was corroborated and slightly augmented by two local experts' knowledge. The exercise of informal zoning also served to identify the main architectural characteristics (type of functional zone,[3] most characteristic type of buildings, approximate age of these buildings, number of floors) and the prestige of each *neighbourhood* (the term is used here with regard to the built environment, not to density of social networks). On this basis, a list of more than 20 neighbourhoods was compiled (Fig. 1). While the number and delineation of neighbourhoods must be necessarily arbitrary, there is nonetheless widespread agreement among citizens as to which part of the city carries what name. Interestingly, people know and colloquially mention the names of these neighbourhoods (locally known as *mikroraion*, *kvartal*) much more frequently than those of the official administrative units (*gorodskoi okrug*) of Yakutsk.[4]

The second task was to visit a wide range of neighbourhoods in July 2015 and use photographs for documentation of the built environment, mainly by bicycle, sometimes by car. Rather than using the concept of urban transect (Bohl & Plater-Zyberk, 2006; Krebs & Pilz, 2013), documentation was based on neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, the authors also documented one transect along the Sverdlova and Zhornitskogo streets, as they connect the city centre with the outskirts and offer a good overview of all zones of urban development, yet they do so in a less pretentious manner than the main thoroughfares (*prospekt*, *trakt*, *shosse*) leading out of the city.

While taking photographs, the authors tried to focus on (i) typical views and features of the built environment; (ii) fences in their typical aspects and diversity; (iii) urban furniture and (iv) infrastructure, including the network of pipelines above ground level (*teplotrassy*), earlier mentioned as a particular and yet ubiquitous feature of the cityscape of Yakutsk. A total of 2500 photographs were taken and sorted in accordance with the list of neighbourhoods.

The authors also conducted interviews with a real-estate solicitor, an entrepreneur who produces construction materials and teaches engineering at the local university, with an urban-planning expert of the city's administration and with one of the mayor's deputies. In addition, one of the authors arranged for several interviews with residents in the city's *private-sector areas* (see below). In sum, the authors combined expert interviews with rapid visual documentation of almost all neighbourhoods identified during the initial informal zoning exercise.

3. Types of residential buildings and their contribution to the urban landscape

As an interim result of the first task — the informal zoning — it turned out that almost each neighbourhood combines different types of residential buildings; the number of these types is quite low, however. This typology of buildings, sketched out above, is widely known among the inhabitants of Yakutsk and in fact, throughout Russia and post-Soviet countries. Moreover, the type of building is usually much more decisive in terms of real-estate value than the prestige of the neighbourhood. To explicate the interrelation of architecture, location, enclosure and aesthetics, it is necessary to describe different types of buildings in this section, whereas the use of fences will be described in subsequent ones.

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[3] On the Soviet principles of functional zoning (industrial zone, residential zone, green belt) see Bolotova (2012). Her article includes some observations on fences and aesthetics of industrial areas (2012: 658–659).

[4] There are eight districts (*okrug*): Avtodorozhnyi, Gagarinskii, Gubinskii, Oktiabr'skii, Promyshlennyi, Saisarskii, Stroitel'nyi and Tsentral'nyi, along with the suburbs and villages of Magan, Markha, Kangalassy, Khatassy, Prigorodnyi, Tabaga and Tulagino (Administratsiia Glavy, 2010). All eight districts and the suburb of Markha were visited and documented by the authors in July 2015.
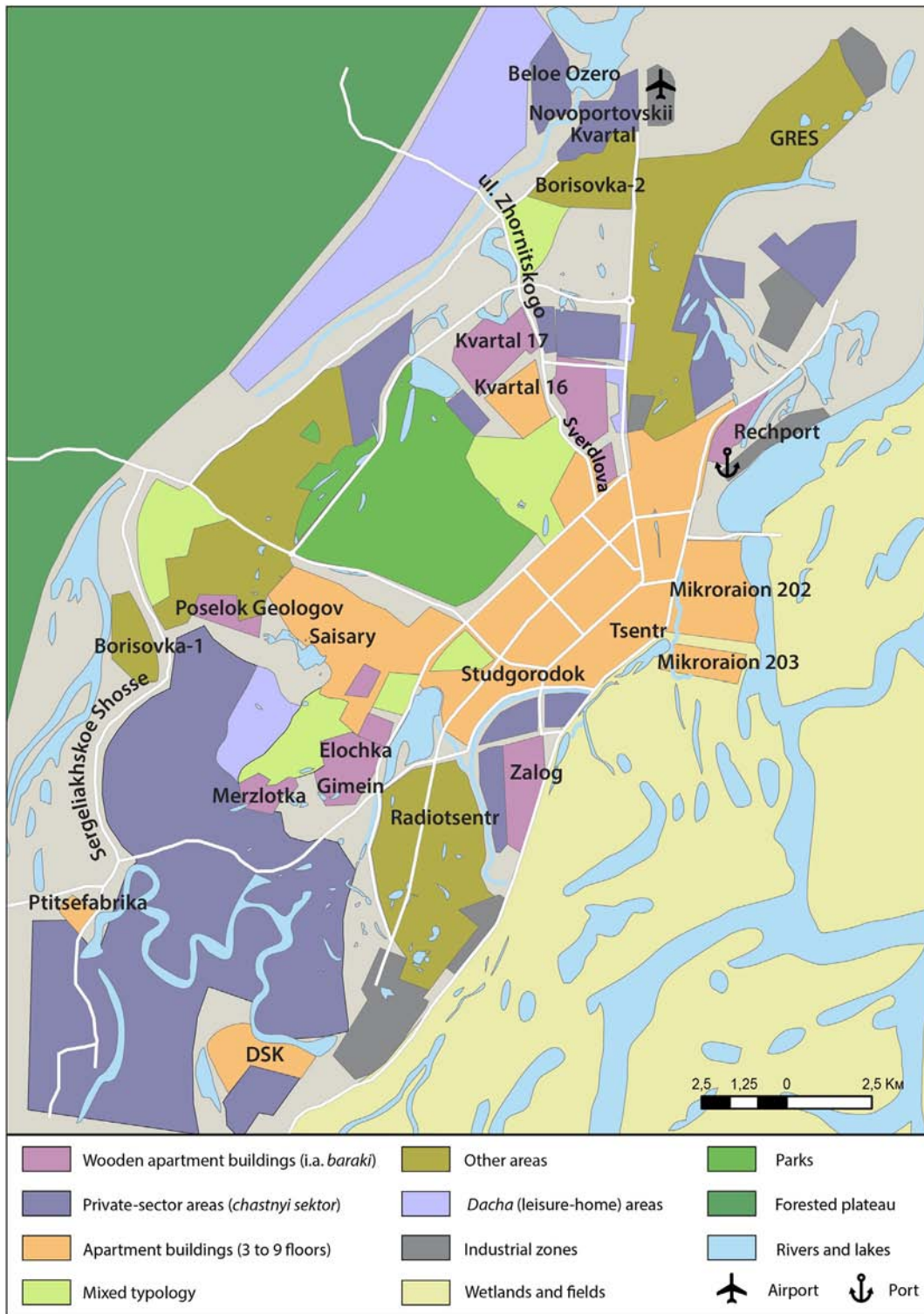
Fig. 1. Schematic map of Yakutsk, showing the main types of built-up areas and the names of neighbourhoods. Base map: http://2gis.ru, design: Aytal Yakovlev and Julius Didovets.

The interview with a real-estate solicitor elicited the types of buildings and their status, expressed as the average sum of money people are willing to pay when buying[5] a flat of comparable size in

different types of buildings (on individual housing, more shortly). High-rise condominium buildings, newly erected near the city centre and in some suburbs, are at the top of the list. Large-panel buildings (*krupnye panel'nye doma*, colloquially abbreviated as KPD) also fetch comparatively high prices; various subtypes of these, i.e. construction series, are valorised differently (Fig. 2). In Yakutsk, large-panel buildings with nine floors first appeared in the 1970s. Older houses built of bricks have their own sub-classification based on the period

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[5] As all over Russia, residents of Yakutsk prefer to buy flats. The percentage of people hiring flats is much lower than in Germany. Soviet apartment-building flats were privatised and transferred into the ownership of the officially registered residents in the 1990s (Zaviska, 2012).

Fig. 2. Large-panel buildings of the 112 series in "Mikroraion 202" area, constructed in the late 1980s.
Photograph: J. Otto Habeck.

of construction, thus the type called Khrushchevka usually has five floors and Stalinka three to four floors.[6]

Wooden houses in Yakutsk are of very divergent appearance. Those in private property and built on private initiative will be described below. Those built on the initiative of the city, some enterprise or organisation once used to define the urban landscape most significantly. However, few wooden houses have survived in the city centre: most have been destroyed or disassembled in order to give way to multi-storey stone buildings. This process started many decades ago and it continues in post-socialist times. There is just one small quarter of a dozen or so newly-built wooden houses in the city centre that seeks to emanate the historical identity of the city.[7] Outside the city centre, wooden buildings abound in some areas. Very typical for several neighbourhoods are two-floor wooden houses with four entrances and six flats per entrance, equipped with central heating but no running water (Fig. 3). Locally these are known as *baraki*,[8] a term that denotes their low prestige and some sense of provisional housing. Catering for the rapid influx of workers from other parts of the Soviet Union, these buildings originate from the 1930s through to the 1970s. Designed as temporary housing, they came to be utilised much longer than initially

intended. Of all types of buildings, *baraki* stand at the low end of the price range.

Wooden houses in private possession dominate the more peripheral — or more marginal — parts of the city, namely the private-sector areas (*chastyni sektor*) interspersed in all but the most central districts and the *dacha* settlements (*dachnye poselki*) in the outskirts. These two categories — *chastnyi sektor* and *dachnye poselki* — are officially and unofficially differentiated from each other. In Soviet times, *dacha* plots were granted to individual dwellers for recreation and for private food production, but not legally assigned as private property, and people were not entitled to use *dachas* as permanent residence (Caldwell, 2011; Nakhshina & Razumova, 2009; cf. Bolotova, 2012). Housing was of simple and seasonal character. Since 2006, however, dachas can be claimed real estate in individual ownership, people may reside there permanently and be officially registered on dacha plots (Federal'nyi zakon, 2006). The differentiation between *dacha* settlements and private-sector areas has thus become blurred in Yakutsk (Stammler & Sidorova, 2015: 10) and elsewhere in Russia, which signifies a noteworthy trend in this study of expansion of private spaces.

In both sorts of areas, wooden houses are of highly diverse shape, often showing signs of ingenuity and make-shift. Often wooden houses grow gradually, depending on the means of the owners. The wide range extends from small cabins with just one room for weekend pastime to fully-equipped, imposing mansions with two or even three floors and rich ornaments at the outside. Throughout the outer parts of Yakutsk one can observe a replacement of old wooden *dacha* buildings by new wooden or stone buildings with improved facilities. (cf. Stammler & Sidorova, 2015).

Owing to the new legislation mentioned above, *dacha* settlements come to merge with newly-built houses and villas in many areas. The Russian term for the latter — *kottedzhy* (from "cottage") — does not quite capture the affluence and sometimes conspicuous luxury displayed by the owners of these villas. It should also be mentioned that wooden architecture is no thing of the past: a number of *kottedzhy* and upgraded

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[6] As categories of period of construction, Stalinka, Khrushchevka and Brezhnevka do not always imply a certain building material — e.g. there may be Khrushchevka houses built of panels rather than bricks — nor do they always imply a distinct number of floors. However, in Yakutsk the term Khrushchevka usually refers to a five-floor house built of bricks, concrete, etc. but not of panels. See Harris (2013) for an overview of post-war Soviet architectural history.

[7] The only wooden house in this part of the city that has persisted from pre-Soviet times is that where the Sakha revolutionary A. Amossov had his home for several years. It has been turned into a museum. Throughout the city, there are extremely few (wooden or brick) buildings older than one hundred years. The oldest brick building is a church, Troitskii sobor, dating back to the first third of the 18th century and currently being reconstructed.

[8] Some older inhabitants describe *baraki* in a different manner: wooden houses with only one floor and one long corridor with rooms to both sides, reminiscent of dormitories (as described by Kotkin, 1995: 171–197).

Fig. 3. Wooden houses of the *baraki* type in the "Geologists' settlement" (*Poselok geologov*). Residents have fenced out a parcel of land to be used for growing vegetables. Photograph: J. Otto Habeck.

dacha buildings ostentatiously show the diversity and decency of wooden architecture (Fig. 4). More than elsewhere, the upper middle and upper class use their plots at the outskirts of the city for showing their sense of taste and achievement. Regardless of the size of the building and the financial resources of the owners, wooden houses in private possession emanate a strong sense of individualism (cf. Nakhshina & Razumova,

Fig. 4. A newly-built wooden villa at Sergeliakhskoe shosse, locally known to be one of the most prestigious areas of Yakutsk. Photograph: J. Otto Habeck.

2009) and in fact "privatism" (Hirt, 2012: 4 et passim), and the fences around them clearly signal a zone of privacy and individual (or household) agency, about which more below.

Having said that, the mixture of ostentatiously rich and shockingly decrepit buildings is astounding in many parts of the city. Here we see once again that it is not so much the location within the urban space or the overall character and prestige of the neighbourhood but rather the type of building and the investment into the private space that signify the owner's self-positioning in social space.

4. Fences and urban furniture in the apartment-building areas

One immediately evident result of the study is the stark difference in function and appearance of fences between the *dacha* or private-sector areas on the one hand, and those residential areas where apartment buildings dominate, on the other. In the latter, fences usually have the function to steer pedestrians' movements, to protect the small greens in front of the tower blocks etc. These fences are not meant to regulate *who* may pass; rather they regulate *where* to pass. Their usual height amounts to some 30 to 60 cm. In fact, it is not always easy to discern these fences from railings. They form part of a wider range of urban furniture (*malye arkhitekturnye formy*, or micro-architectural forms), along with flower beds, park banks, small playgrounds, etc. A very striking example of this type of fence exists right in front of the dormitory where one of the authors stayed during this research (Fig. 5). These fences and diverse forms of urban furniture can be read as attempts to increase the aesthetic quality of the urban space, make it more beautiful and orderly, give it a certain attire and perhaps even identity.

Of course, fences in apartment-building areas are of various appearances and functions. Some fences do grant access only for *some* and keep out all others not entitled to enter, notably at construction sites, commercial enterprises, schools and kindergartens, and also strategically important buildings. Depending on the site, the fence consists of metal pickets or of the simpler and cheaper profile sheeting (*proflist*, see below). The traversability of courtyards, which, as we shall argue shortly, is an important indicator of private/public space, is directly dependent on the amount of (high and thus unsurmountable) fences. The apartment-building areas constructed in socialist times are characterised by a high degree of traversability. There is some evidence that in earlier decades, access to courtyards was regulated *socially* not physically: passers-by would avoid taking shortcuts because of fear of youth gangs controlling "their" territory (Schröder, forthcoming). However, physical traversability now seems to be declining: trying out shortcuts through apartment-building areas on numerous occasions during the photo documentation trips, we came across several instances of courtyards being separated from each other by fences. The amount of such fences is growing, albeit slightly, indicating a tendency towards enclosure of semi-private spaces, as observed elsewhere by Hirt (2012). However, the predominant majority of courtyards continue to be physically accessible and traversable for pedestrians and cyclists. The tendency to shield off single apartment buildings or whole courtyards is relatively low as of yet. One of our respondents, the entrepreneur, explains this by his observation that flat owners in tower blocks rarely unite to improve or safeguard the space around "their" blocks.

5. Fences in the private-sector and dacha areas

Fences in *dacha* and private-sector areas do function as delineators of private space, and they do so very clearly. Their appearance leaves hardly any doubt about their function to *keep people off*. Moreover, most fences effectively block vision and protect the household's garden or plot from the gaze of bypassers. Mostly they do not allow bypassers to fully assess the beauty of the house, giving sight only of the top floors. Even some of the most spectacular buildings in the outskirts of the city have fences that hide rather than reveal the status of the owners. Of all fences built on private initiative, only a small number serve as markers of distinction. Seen from the inside, they keep off the anonymity of the street from the intimacy of the house and garden. By the same token, hundreds of suburban streets look comparatively uninviting because they are virtually shielded off from people's residences (Fig. 6). Only

Fig. 5. Students' dormitories of the North-Western Federal University. Fences and railings serve to protect young plants and to regulate pedestrians' movements. Photograph: J. Otto Habeck.

Fig. 6. Typical view of a street in the *chastnyi sektor* (private sector). Fences are approximately two metres tall and seclude houses and plots from the gaze of bypassers. Photograph: J. Otto Habeck.

when gates open and bypassers can take a glance inside does the aesthetic quality of the house and garden really come to sight.

Two more points ought to be made here about the material of a fence and its age. Wooden fences are gradually being replaced by metal picket fences or profiled sheeting (apart from these, other materials exist too[9]). The first type is more expensive. If an owner does want to expose the beauty of his home or garden, they are more prone to use metal-rod fences, perhaps in combination with brick columns or other components. Wrought iron is popular as an element of fence modules and even more often of gates (Fig. 7). These indicate a certain aesthetic ambition of the owners. By contrast, the cheapest, most widespread and arguably least pretty type of fence is that made of profile sheeting, called *profilirovannyi list*, *proflist*, or *profnastil*. A square metre can be bought for 240 or less rubles in numerous shops in Yakutsk, which amounts to c. 4.10 USD at the time of writing this article. Dark blue, dark green and pale yellow along with light grey dominate the suburbs, while red is less common.

Older fences partly, though not fully, exert a slightly different aesthetic. First, one can find detached houses and dacha buildings from the 1930s to 1980s that feature smaller and more elegant wooden fences, yielding views of the garden and house. Second, there are a number of wooden houses of the same period or even pre-1930 with high wooden fences that keep off the views of bypassers in the same way that newer fences do, but what is particular of some of these are wooden gates of c. 2.50 m height (Fig. 8). These may be seen as a traditional element of Yakutsk wooden architecture (Popov, 2007: 50) — partly reflecting Sakha rural architecture — and their form is sometimes vaguely alluded to in more recently constructed gates of metal or other material. Generally speaking, gates throughout Yakutsk are often taller than the fences of which they form part.

Fences made of *proflist*, wood or other material can also be found in one type of public-housing, namely the *baraki*, those two-storey wooden

buildings of low prestige. They never surround the entire building but shelter off only a few square metres in front of some window. Such spaces are used as vegetable plots or storage areas of some individual residents of the house.

What emerges visually from the character of fences in the private-sector areas (and occasionally elsewhere) as well as from the discussions with experts and individual owners is a twofold function: they are meant to safeguard both security and privacy. When confronted with the researchers' observations about the abundance of *proflist*, some of the experts interviewed held that home owners in the suburbs do have to tackle growing levels and new, more unabashed strategies of burglary. However, other interviewees deny the efficacy of high, intransparent fences against burglars: the higher the *proflist* fence, the less the probability that neighbours will notice any incident of burglary (one interviewee added that burglars have become professional enough to remove even large objects over high fences by means of lorry and hoist). While the utility of the fence against burglary is contested, their function of safeguarding privacy is mentioned quite rarely, i.e. considered too subtle or negligible.

6. Post-Soviet shifts in private, semi-public and public spaces

Considering phenomena of segregation and enclosure elsewhere (Low, 2014; for Moscow's suburbs, see Blinnikov et al., 2006; Lentz, 2004; Vendina, 2010), it is important to state if a trend towards gated communities can also be discerned in Yakutsk. We found that only few gated communities have emerged so far: compounds with walls or fences, inhabited by obviously affluent residents, can be found along a road called Sergeliakhskoe Shosse in the forested outskirts of the city. A particular case is Borisovka-2, which in the mid-1990s was initially built as a gated community with a high (transparent) fence all around, but the gate at the main road leading into this neighbourhood is now permanently left open and thus does not fulfil the originally intended function.

A noticeable tendency towards enclosure and fencing-in can be observed around certain categories of public buildings, such as ministries and offices, all of which are presumed to be potential targets of terrorist

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[9] Other materials include metal meshwork, concrete, left-over sheets from metal stamping and sometimes combinations of all these. Conspicuously absent are concrete fences with diverse ornaments, such as elliptic forms with small columns, frequently seen these days in Poland and the western part of the former Soviet Union (illustrated on https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Concrete_fence_1.JPG).

Fig. 7. A *proflist* fence with a self-made gate, featuring metal plates and wrought iron (the plot is located in the area of Zalog). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)
Photograph: J. Otto Habeck.

attacks. Checkpoints and security guards regulate access to these buildings.

Other than these, most of the vast terrains of public and semi-public spaces (courtyards, alley ways, and the spaces under and along the *teplotrassy*) thus far continue to be open spaces, accessible and traversable by all, and subject to use or abuse by whoever happens to be there. When asked about the reasons behind this seeming indifference to public space, interviewees point out that citizens of Yakutsk (and in extension, Russia) thus far perceive little if any responsibility for regulating or improving public or semi-public space. By the same logic, micro-

Fig. 8. Erected in the Soviet period, the gate is reminiscent of rural Sakha architecture, though located close to the city centre (in Zalog). Lower picket fences like the one on the right-hand side are rarely used today.
Photograph: J. Otto Habeck.

practices of exclusion occur *inside* the tower-block buildings rather than on the street, as both authors have witnessed in Yakutsk and other cities: tower-block residents occasionally insert metal doors to regulate access to the corridors between lifts/staircases and their flats. It appears, then, that the staircases themselves constitute a semi-public space, or nobody's space, off the responsibility of the individual or household. Aesthetic efforts are invested in the space of the flat itself, not the doorways and stairs that lead to it.[10]

In sum, then, citizens of Yakutsk do demarcate private spaces, but not so much by appropriating the commons of socialist times for individual or collective purposes. Rather, they are trying to keep the imponderabilities of social interaction off the private sphere, pursuing a mode of living that Hirt describes as fortressed homes (cf. Hirt, 2012: 2, 27–28, 131–148).

7. Traversability — common practices of "getting through"

In this section, we return to the notion of traversability, defined as the degree to which an urban space can be traversed freely, without encountering physical barriers. Concerning the traversability of apartment-building areas, it may be said that it simply results as a side-effect from the intended separation of different flows of traffic (pedestrians, cars) that is typical for urban planning of the post-war period and high modernism (Trancik, 1986). However, we believe that there are some more intimate aspects to the notion of traversability in (post-) Soviet space. We are tempted to connect the idea of traversability of courtyards with some broader understanding of the relation between official and unofficial uses of spaces: the idea that the official ways of everyday life prescribed by state institutions — including the official ways of walking the city, as designed by urban planning — may actually give reason to the emergence of unofficial ways. This point was elaborated by Alexei Yurchak (2006: 24–29) in his discussion of the informal niches and by-ways that were in fact *established* by the Soviet political system that officially intended to shape all aspects of life. In addition to the official ways of doing things, there existed unofficial, informal strategies (cf. Ledeneva, 1998; Sántha & Safonova, 2011) and these often appeared to be more straightforward.

Yurchak, however, rather than just reiterating conventional "binary accounts" of socialism, points to the simultaneity and ambivalence of the two modes: "many of [the Soviet citizens'] everyday practices routinely transgressed, reinterpreted, or refused certain norms and rules represented in the official ideology of the socialist state" (Yurchak, 2006: 8). He pays meticulous attention to spaces, situations and domains existing outside the system (Yurchak, 2006: 132; 2014: 14). This idea can be transposed to the Soviet urban space, which was characterised by the simultaneous existence of formal and informal structures, controlled and uncontrolled forms of acting and moving.

Over the last three decades, the scope for circumventing, counteracting or transcending official modes of conduct and communication has been shifting but not waning; it also shapes current practices of navigating urban space and the physical movement through the city's apartment-building areas. By this logic, the "disciplined sidewalks" (Hirt, 2013: 533), the carefully designed squares, avenues and streets were intersected and interwoven by numerous small footpaths and shortcuts from one courtyard to the next. Moving along the officially designated routes — the pavements in line with the grid structure of the large streets — would appear to be almost

counter-intuitive, for the walk through the courtyards would seem quieter, usually quicker and generally easier. Navigation by courtyards and informal footpaths comes to symbolise spatial knowledge of the unofficial sides of city life (Nielsen, 2004: 53–57).

Such practices of informally navigating the city and the pertinent unofficial knowledge can be supposed to change in line with newly emerging barriers, and more generally in line with shifts in the partitioning of private, semi-public and public spaces. They are also dependent on the architectural lay-out of districts and the principal guidelines of urban planning. New guidelines of urban planning will perhaps pay more attention to the actual pathways and vernacular topographies of local residents than those of the high-modernist period from the 1960s to the 1980s.

8. Conclusion

First, the task was to check the assumption that, in the city of Yakutsk, spaces that were formerly designated (or commonly perceived) as public or semi-public are gradually being appropriated as private spaces, causing a lesser degree of traversability of urban space. Our observations show that this statement is valid to some extent. True, the number of gated communities in and around Yakutsk is still very small. True, for most residents of the apartment-building areas the notion of private space is limited to their flat rather than their house. True, traversability of apartment-building areas is still relatively unimpeded. Still, there is some evidence for a slight yet noticeable tendency towards partitioning of the urban space of Yakutsk. It would be exaggerated, however, to speak of a fully-fledged enclosure of urban commons. The most important criterion is the difference between the apartment-building areas and the so-called private sector (*chastnyi sektor*). Characteristic for the latter is not just the rigid partitioning of space, but also the function of fences as visual barriers. A semi-rural environment (Hirt, 2013: 534), the *chastnyi sektor* has received remarkably little attention in research on (post-) Soviet cities, and while it is clear that low-density suburbanisation has become a characteristic trait of the post-socialist city (Hirt, 2013: 534), information on the development of private-sector areas and pertinent practices of enclosure during the *Soviet* period is scarce.

The second assumption, then — about fences as a means of distinction and demonstration of social status — must be rejected for Yakutsk. Few private owners decide to invest aesthetic meaning into fencing the perimeter of their plot: most prefer to seclude themselves visually from the outside world. Individual aesthetics and aspirations of "creating one's space" are rarely shared with bypassers. Rather, individuality needs to be protected from "the street", which implies that the latter is widely perceived as an indifferent or even hostile social environment. A further finding is that the perceived need for safeguarding private space has increased in the private-sector areas and also in the dacha settlements. As a rule of thumb, one may state: the newer the fence, the taller it is. A final observation is that the city authorities and experts in urban planning are outspokenly dissatisfied with the visual appearance of private-sector areas, but as in some other post-socialist cities (Smigiel, 2013: 128) they have very little influence on house owners there, considering that the city provides only limited services and infrastructure in the private-sector areas. The urbanist ideal of "management of surfaces … through a balance of concealment and exposure, between public and private spheres" (Madanipour, 2003: 234) is pursued in some central parts of Yakutsk, but it is thwarted in the outskirts.

In this article we have focused on the materiality of fences, arguing that this aspect has been neglected in studies on how urban space is organised. To be sure, distinction, segregation, delimitation and defence of personal space happens not only by means of physical barriers. New technologies and practices of control are being appropriated: CCTV, security guards, vigilante groups, and other forms of monitoring. Devices of regulating access are changing, from physical barriers towards less obvious forms of surveillance (Cresswell, 2010: 26;

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[10]   In admission of observations that run counter this argument, we do acknowledge that there are apartment-building residents who unite to create a more beautiful environment inside their buildings, keep plants, clear the area around the house of waste, plant flowerbeds etc. A similar ambivalence between neighbours' indifference and interest in semi-public spaces is reported by Pojani and Buka (2015: 73–74) with reference to Tirana. In the past ten years, Russian cities have seen top-down induced initiatives of local self-administration (*territorial'noe obshchestvennoe samoupravlenie*, abbreviated as TOS) which seek to improve the outer appearance of neighbourhoods, but their visibility in Yakutsk is limited as of yet (cf. Habeck, 2011 for Novosibirsk).

Graham & Wood, 2003). The study presented here could be expanded by also paying attention to non-physical barriers. Some of these are explicit signs such as pictograms and written instructions in the urban space ("entry forbidden", "these premises are under surveillance", etc.); and we contend that in the case of Russia, they receive less attention and therefore exert less persuasive power than in Western countries. In other words, in order to be taken seriously, a barrier should be obtrusive and unmistakable in its physical presence.

In addition, there are yet other barriers, those of the invisible or situative kind, regulating access to space by social interaction. In late Soviet times and especially in the 1990s, no-go areas emerged as the result of youth gangs informally controlling the space of "their" neighbourhood. Research on perceptions of dangerous urban spaces in another post-Soviet setting suggests that the overall level of threats to personal security on the streets, i.e. in *public spaces*, has been regressing after the 1990s — in Yakutsk, Novosibirsk (Schröder & Habeck, in preparation) and probably also in Russian cities in general. This research topic needs yet to be pursued. Nonetheless, for Yakutsk we can state that the ubiquitous fear of burglary and theft goes along with the habit of protection against visual intrusion of *private space*. As of yet, the city of Yakutsk does not feature many gated communities; instead it features countless tall and intransparent fences that seem to deny urbanity.

Acknowledgements

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