

Change and contesting identities: the creation and negotiation of landscape in Donetsk.

By Julia Holdsworth (Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Hull).

This discussion explores the ways that contestations over the nature and pace of change during the post-Soviet era are being enacted both in and through the urban landscapes of Donetsk, an industrial city in East Ukraine. I will examine the ways in which Donetsk has, in the past, been constructed as an essentially Russian and Soviet space. Currently there are debates and conflicts over changes being made to present and develop a more Ukrainian and Western orientation in these spaces. This paper discusses particular moments in these debates and, by doing so, explores the ways in which landscapes and identities are interconnected.

The past is everywhere. All around us lie features which, like ourselves and our thoughts, have more or less recognizable antecedents. Relics, histories, memories suffuse human experience. . . Whether it is celebrated or rejected, attended to or ignored, the past is omnipresent (Lowenthal 1985: xv).

'Over there, (Western Ukraine) they are taking down their Lenins, even changing the names of the streets. Why? Here, we are proud of our history, we do not pretend that things that happened have not happened. It is just another trick, nonsense.' (Ira, an unemployed machine worker.)

Introduction

I suppose, like many others, my first attraction to anthropology as a discipline was bound up in ideas of the exotic; I was seduced by over-romanticised notions of the field and other cultures. Ultimately, however, I chose what seemed a rather less-than-exotic location for my fieldwork – a large, polluted, industrial city in Eastern Ukraine. However, over time I came to the recognition that Donetsk was both as exotic and as mundane as any other place. When I first arrived in Donetsk I was confronted with a sense of everything around me seeming at once familiar and strange. The fact of being in a city meant that many of the things surrounding me physically felt instantly recognisable; for example, there were hot and cold taps, electric lighting, public transport and shops. I soon found, however, that they did not work in the same way as in England (and why should I expect them to?), and as a consequence I developed an increasing interest in the material and physical setting for my fieldwork.

This interest in the way I interacted with, and made assumptions about, the physical landscape I was living in encouraged me to investigate the choices being made by different local bodies including local administration, local communities and local

businesses with regard to the local landscape. I wanted to know how these related to the issues of identity and change that were at the heart of my research. This discussion is important as I follow the notion that collective identities are not fundamental, and are instead constructed and maintained through social processes and actions resulting in the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). The Donbass region, of which Donetsk is the major city, has historically formed just such a community both geographically and symbolically (Kuromiya, 1984).

Taking note of Ashworth and Tunbridge's statement that the built environment is the 'most visible of heritage resources' (1999: 105), this paper explores a number of particular nodes in Donetsk's urban landscape. I examine some of the ways in which presentations and readings of past, present and future are created and communicated through this public medium and harnessed for political ends. Landscapes are not merely the settings of social action, but are also continually made and remade through social action, which is in turn influenced by landscape. Similarly, social memories are created and re-created through practices, both those which are formulaic and materially tangible, and those which are more ephemeral and performative. I use the changing landscape of Donetsk to explore the ways in which 'inscribed', relating to the former, and 'embodied', relating to the latter, memories (Connerton 1989) are being moulded and created through monuments, texts, rituals and representations in support of politicised projects relating to disputations over identity and the nature of change in post-Soviet Ukraine.

Reconstructing the state and nation through changing public landscapes

Consideration of the changing lives of cities in the Former Soviet Union is of particular importance for several reasons. The first of these is the general point that the ways in which people form and inhabit the spaces around them is always the ongoing product of the ways in which different groups see, and wish to see, themselves. Some people have more power than others to determine the outlook of these spaces. I suggest that landscapes can be considered as texts in that they are constantly made and remade in individual and collective readings and understandings. The meanings of landscapes, and points within them then, are open to differing interpretations. The memories that are intended to be inscribed through the conscious creation of landscape are not immutable and people can subvert and play with the messages being presented.

Throughout the life of the USSR there was a huge emphasis both in ideological terms and in state sponsored policies on the 'modernisation' of the country. This took, amongst other forms, rapid and extensive industrialisation and, crucially, urbanisation. The emphasis in economic plans on heavy industry and manufacturing output meant that the population of the USSR changed rapidly to being highly urbanised.¹ Cities have consequently played a very important part in the birth, life and death of the USSR as the revolutions leading to dramatic change of both the early and late twentieth century were urban (Harloe 1996).

¹ Space does not permit an extensive exploration of urbanisation processes in this article.

Ukraine declared independence from the USSR in August 1991 in a move that contributed to the final disintegration of the Soviet Union. The years since independence have been marked by an extremely troubled period as changes are being made in the arenas of politics, economy and society coincidentally in what is often termed 'transition'. Some of the difficulties of this 'transition' in Donetsk form the background to this paper.

A number of elements relating to Donetsk serve to make the local experience of transition and its incorporation into modern, independent Ukraine problematic. Under the Soviet system Donetsk was not only part of the project of modernisation, but was also a fundamental driver of this as the region produced the raw materials, such as coal and iron, that underpinned the whole system. Donetsk then is explicitly linked to the successes of the USSR, and before the dissolution of the Soviet Union Donetsk workers were considered by themselves and others to be 'quintessential proletarians' (Mykhnenko 2000:5), and consequently enjoyed high wages and status.

Today the local economy, based in heavy industry and outdated from years of underfunding during and after communism, has suffered heavily from prolonged economic crisis and restructuring. The majority of people living in the city and the surrounding region retain strong identifications with Russia, remaining, both culturally and linguistically closer to Russia and Russians than Western Ukrainians. Orientation to Russia, and a widespread nostalgia for the Soviet Union both serve to weaken local engagements with, and belief in, the projects of the Ukrainian state. In current processes of identification and change, 'the confusion over reorienting oneself to another cultural (non-Soviet) identity is compounded by overall social and economic chaos and the subtleties of identity choice' (Wanner 1998: 18).

The state is necessarily engaged in a nationalising² project in order to create and maintain its own legitimacy, and in these debates, the most significant other is 'Russia'. Hence, Ukrainian Russians and Russified Ukrainians within Ukraine are a particular problem as they mean that the 'other' has to be integrated into the new system. Throughout this piece I do not seek to over-problematise the term 'the state' and instead employ it in a manner similar to that used by local people in Donetsk. By locating the agents of these threatening processes of change in faceless organisations they underscore the sense of disempowerment and dispossession felt locally with regard to the current processes of social change. However, I do not simply accept such local constructions unquestioningly, and where appropriate I draw attention to the specific processes involved.

All new systems necessarily remake heritage in order to fit the needs of the present and the imagined future. Such processes of remembering are never apolitical, a nation's historicity is an important political process, which reflects the interests of present and future national projects. The processes of change involve 'a rejection of many aspects of an immediate past, a resuscitation of other, previously suppressed, pasts and a reconstruction of a new past in the service of the newly envisaged futures' (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1999: 105).

In Donetsk the imaginative use of monuments, parades and commemorations as symbols and makers of history and collectivity are aimed at fostering a particular form

² I am using the term nationalising state to mean state activities which foster emotive identities with the current state. In the case of Ukraine state, civic nationalism is closely associated with a more Ukrainian ethnic nationalism.

of Ukrainian identity. As Bender states, 'landscape is never inert, people engage with it, re-work it, appropriate and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, group, or nation state' (1993: 3).

The communist system left a massive legacy of 'landscape heritage', street names, monuments, buildings, commemorations of public holidays and other public iconography, which now need to be incorporated into, or are rejected by, the current system. Two major questions are raised in dealing with these; what and how much should be erased or removed, and what should be put in its place? At the root of this discussion of landscape in Donetsk is the dispute over selective remembering and forgetting in modern Ukraine. 'Monuments are nothing if not selective aids to memory: they encourage us to remember some things and to forget others. The process of creating monuments, especially where it is openly contested... shapes public memory and collective identity' (Ladd 1998: 11).

Many cities in Western Ukraine, with a much higher proportion of ethnic Ukrainians and where people have generally engaged more positively with the processes of change, have embarked on projects to alter the landscapes they inhabit. This has included removing the statues of Lenin and other Soviet figures, changing the names of streets and public spaces and exchanging Russian writing and Soviet era symbols for Ukrainian. The calendar also marks these changes with the introduction of new holidays and festivals such as Independence Day on 24 August. In Eastern Ukraine these processes have occurred on a much more limited scale. Many public buildings and other signs now appear in both Ukrainian and Russian and some of the Soviet plaques have been removed from public buildings but many more remain.

In the context of the nationalising projects of Ukraine, the claiming of Donetsk as a Ukrainian space is seen by some readings to be especially important. For example, one of the myths/stories of legitimating Ukrainian independence rests on tracing itself back to the Cossack Hosts, which were located in what is now Eastern Ukraine. In claiming these Hosts as Ukrainian, there is an explicit link being made between this territory and Ukrainian territorial integrity. Therefore, Donetsk, a Russian/Soviet space has to be successfully incorporated into Ukraine. However, as noted above, many people in Donetsk are less than willing to be incorporated into Ukrainian visions of Ukraine that they feel excludes them as Russians.

Reconstructions of an urban space

I now turn to a discussion of some of the specific ways that the urban landscape of Donetsk is a contested landscape, one in which the debates about identity are played out through visual and spatial representations within the city. I consider several different aspects, including the employment of old and new monuments as well as the commemoration of history and identities through holidays and parades.

Donetsk is a large industrial town in the Russian speaking east of Ukraine. In its modern form it was founded approximately 130 years ago as part of a rapid programme of industrialisation in the region that was instigated to take advantage of the extensive coal and mineral deposits. Up until this time the area was relatively empty, and into the twentieth century, there were few large, developed settlements. Because of this, Donetsk can be described as a Soviet city in the respect that it is not a 'partially changed city' but a 'new city' (Rugg 1972) and as such it very strongly has an identity as a Soviet space. Today, Donetsk is a city of approximately one million

people and constitutes an important economic, administrative and political centre within Ukraine. In a number of ways, the Donbass, and Donetsk is an alternative power centre within Ukraine, reflected in competition and rivalry. Last year the local football team won both the national League and the Cup, beating Dynamo Kiev in the final. This led to huge celebrations in Donetsk, and the whole of the centre of the city was bedecked in orange and black, the colours of the local team, and also Donetsk regional colours. The victory was incorporated into the perceived conflict between East and West Ukraine. As Vitaly Alexandrovich, a local man commented, 'hah, we are rivalling Kiev now, we will be having Donetsk as the capital soon – not just in football, but in everything.'

The lack of an ancient quarter in Donetsk leads to its historic identity being very firmly located in the Soviet past, again affirming the close identification with Russia. The centre of the city, as with all purpose built Soviet cities is constructed on a grid system, spreading outwards from the central 'Lenin Square'. A statue of the man himself gazes across the open space to the Ministry of Coal Building that lines one other side. These twin symbols that represent the wealth and ideology upon which Donetsk was built are joined, on other sides, by the Opera House and Philharmonic and other major public offices such as the central post office. The skyline of the city is dominated by the numerous slag-heaps marking entrances to coal mines within the city borders. Although these are generally thought of as being ugly, local people often have a more complicated relationship with them as they are also important markers of local identities as 'workers'. Some of these heaps have names, and are said to resemble figures and objects such as 'the bear', 'the tractor' and 'the mountain'. This naming of the heaps personalises them and incorporates them into the daily lives of local people, further embedding identities.

In recent years the centre of Donetsk has been transformed to look like a modern, prosperous city. Buildings lining the central streets and boulevards have undergone wholesale repairs to their facings, and pavements have been newly laid. These changes have only been undertaken in the central streets to date, and the majority of the city remains much as it has been under the Soviet era, with the addition of some private housing, billboards and shops and street markets being some of the major changes.

A significant moment in this process of developing the centre occurred when the entire central square was given a 'facelift' in the build up to the celebration of Donetsk 130 year anniversary. This would have been an ideal opportunity to remove the statue of Lenin that dominates the square, and there was some discussion and consternation amongst locals that this may be done. Communist party activists, who gather under the statue during the week to sell newspapers and magazines were not the only ones concerned. Other people asked how the town could have a square without a monument, and were adamant that replacing him with a Ukrainian figure was unacceptable. A further element was added as the majority of public parades and festivals are oriented to the square, with the stage being erected in Lenin's shadow. In the run up to the anniversary celebrations, one friend commented, 'we are celebrating our history, the reasons why we are here, if we did not have our history around us then what are we celebrating? We have nothing here but these things now'. Lenin survived this moment and continues to oversee the square, although now he appears to looking askance at a new McDonald's restaurant that was opened last year. I asked many people if they thought this was incongruous, but, apart from a few, most people felt

that their attachment to Lenin and other monuments was as part of their history rather than expression of a fundamental political position.

As societies change, places also change as they become active and reflexive sites of transformation. People are active in this process and though monuments, commemorations and rituals are intended to reinforce the messages being supported by those in power they are always open to multiple readings as well as deliberate subversions. For example, although each town in the USSR had its own statue of Lenin, there were a number of different possible stances that Lenin could be sculpted in. These have come to be known by individual nick-names such as 'looking for money for the budget Lenin' (a model of Lenin with one hand in his pocket); 'looking for a brighter communist future Lenin' (a model of Lenin gazing into the middle distance); and so on. In spite of this somewhat less than reverential approach to Lenin, the statue remains an important focal point, not just as background to everyday life, but also because people actively seek connection with the statue to anchor them to place and community.

As Rose observes, 'One way in which identity is connected to a particular place is by feeling that you belong to that place. It's a place in which you feel comfortable, or at home, because part of how you define yourself is symbolised by certain qualities of that place' (Rose 1995). When a friend of mine, Lena, got married she followed the custom of having her wedding photos taken in Lenin Square, under the Lenin monument. I asked her why she wanted to do this as she certainly does not consider herself as a communist. She replied: 'Lenin is part of my life, and the square, well it is important to me, and to my family, it would not be right to get married, to have such an important event and not to include such an important place. Well, I suppose it's a tradition...it means something but I am not sure I can tell you exactly...' Lena's analysis of her decision to be photographed by Lenin on her wedding day is not political, but rather places the monument within the context of her family and what is 'right'. I suggest that this demonstrates the ways in which simply 'belonging' is important in considerations of landscape.

I now turn to some of the ways in which Donetsk is being incorporated into 'Ukraine' through the development of street furniture and landscape. Whilst in Donetsk I noticed over time that the colours of the Ukrainian flag, (yellow and blue to represent the colour of ripe cornfields under a blue sky) were becoming increasingly visible in public spaces throughout the city. Thinking about this I began to question to what extent this choice of colours was accidental. Once I had begun to be sure that there were unusually large amounts of yellow and blue, I began to ask other people I knew if they had noticed the same thing. One particular informant, Misha, then became almost obsessive about this topic and each time we met he would have found a new crop of 'discoveries' and relate them at great length. These included trolleybuses, trams, park benches, shop signs, fences and scaffolding. In view of the previous discussion, I suggest that the deliberate deployment of Ukrainian national colours in Donetsk's public spaces forms part of the attempt to 'own' and 'control' Donetsk and its inhabitants, to claim the space as specifically and irrevocably incorporated into modern Ukraine. This is being done for reasons of both civic and ethnic nationalism. The government, obviously, is interested in creating and maintaining a unified country which is clearly different from its nearest neighbour, Russia, whilst others, specifically with a more ethnically oriented Ukrainian nationalist agenda, are seeking to influence ideas of what it means to be 'Ukrainian'.

Erecting and removing monuments and other symbols are potent symbolic acts that serve to create and sustain myths and then denigrate and depose them at a later date. The very fact that such activities are being enacted in the centre of the city testifies to their important totemic value. In the new era, new kinds of monuments are being erected, that speak to an ideology rather than commemorating people or events. The billboards I discuss in some detail below can, in this sense, be read as monuments to the new ideologies of capitalism and nation as I explore below.

Billboards: contested and contesting sites

Throughout the main, arterial routes in Donetsk, a plethora of advertising hoardings have grown up. Many of these are simply sites for advertising aspirational products and lifestyles. Some, however, are sending much more complicated messages. Here I analyse one of these sites in some detail. In the middle of Artema Street, the main street in the centre of Donetsk a number of billboards have been erected in the last two or three years. These spaces for advertising have often been erected with little sympathy for the surroundings, for example, the front of the Opera House is now obscured by large boards promoting fridges, stereos and holiday companies. In the middle of Artema Street, the main street, a few yards up from the recently refurbished Krupskaya Library³ there are a number of these advertising hoardings. The complicated and mixed messages displayed in these sites take some unravelling.

Firstly, this site is advertising a particular, aspirational product through the medium of glossy, highly stylised marketing. In this case, as with the majority of products advertised on these sites, the products being offered are of western origin, or are associated with 'the west' through their presentation in the advert as belonging to an affluent lifestyle, which is also encompassed clearly within a Ukrainian context by the fact that the supporting and surrounding structures of the hoardings are painted in yellow and blue. The products on display are advertised in Ukrainian, thereby associating the Ukrainian language (much maligned by many Russians) with these products. The aspirational nature of these products is further underlined by the use of English words that have become recognisable in the local context, such as 'good' and 'sexy'.

These messages are then associated with localised affiliations by the presence of a coat of arms showing the traditional symbols of Donetsk, a black hand clutching a hammer against an orange background and a placard, in yellow and blue, on which is written, 'Forward Donetskers to a Better Future' a slogan undersigned by the president himself. Built into the top of the whole structure is the symbol of Ukraine, a trident in yellow and blue.

Finally, to complete the plethora of symbols that are displayed within this one site, on the supporting legs of the hoarding is another placard displaying the region of the city, again directly linking the messages in the rest of the board to local people and their lives.

This complex mixing of symbols can be read as a new kind of monument. If we take Ladd's (1998) comment that monuments shape public memory and collective identity, then such billboards represent and create the attempt to do both of these, whilst

³ Named after Lenin's wife.

utilising techniques and media that will be instantly understood by locals as they call upon collective memories and experiences from the Soviet past.

For the majority of people living in Donetsk the products advertised on these hoardings are economically unobtainable, and remain to some degree partially strange, being goods that people may have no direct experience of. However, the presence of the adverts contribute to the creation of Ukraine as part of a tradition in which obtaining such goods is a possibility, that these are available within Ukraine is emphasised by the colours of the hoardings themselves, clearly associating the possibilities of economic success and lavish consumption with the state and the nation. A further message in these hoardings is that they serve to claim the public spaces in which they are erected as Ukrainian spaces, acting as monuments to the ideologies and political views that are concurrent with the idea of the city as a Ukrainian space. Such ways of conveying these messages are particularly appropriate in the local context as they are directed at a population that is accustomed to the medium of public spaces being used to communicate government sponsored messages and ideals to the rest of the people.

This element is furthered by the practice of placing slogans exhorting people to collective effort and action in order to improve their own and other people's lives, again clearly resonating with similar tropes used throughout the communist era. Finally, all of these messages are explicitly localised and linked to local communities through the presence of plaques carrying the name of the city region. There is one final element that ties these messages to the local level and incorporates them into people's lives and local identities. Donetsk was known in the past as the 'city of a million roses'. A few years ago the huge majority of these roses died in a drought. A programme of replanting has begun recently, and some of the first sites that roses have been planted are around these hoardings.

Conclusion

This paper has begun to explore the ways in which current debates about identity are carried out through the uses of and decisions made about the landscape of an urban environment. In this discussion I have focussed primarily on current practices that are seen locally as 'Ukrainianisation'. This term encompasses a set of processes Tatiana Ivanovna, a woman who spent her life working in diverse parts of the USSR (mainly in the east) defined as 'they want to make us forget, to live quietly and to die quietly... as if we were never anything other than this. This Ukraine is not my home but what can I do, I cannot move so I must stay here, and anyway where would I go. There is no place for us, (seeking agreement from the other women around the table), not for us Russians in Ukraine'.

I have explored the ways in which embodied and inscribed memories are bound up in the urban spaces of Donetsk, and the ways choices about how the urban landscape is altered and maintained can be interpreted as politicised acts. The use of Ukrainian language on street signs and advertisements, and the removal of Soviet era symbols forms part of what is interpreted locally as a wider project of rewriting history and 'Ukrainianising' both local people and spaces. In response to this, retaining monuments and street names serves to foster continuity of familiar spaces and identities as well as continuing to express alternative identities to those being nurtured by the Ukrainian state. In attending to these issues I have explored the ways in which

landscapes in general can be seen as sites of contestation over identity, and more specifically how ideas and 'Russian-ness', 'Ukrainian-ness' and 'Soviet-ness' come to be expressed through choices about the physical environment in Donestk.

References

- Anderson, B. 1991. *Imagined communities*. London: Verso.
- Ashworth, G.J. and Tunbridge, J.E. 1999. Old cities, new pasts: heritage planning in selected cities of central Europe. *GeoJournal*. 49: 105-116.
- Bender, B. 1993. *Landscape: politics and perspectives*. Oxford: Berg.
- Connerton, P. 1989. *How societies remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harloe, M. 1996. Cities in transition. In Andruz, G. Harloe, M. and Szelenyi, I. (Eds) *Cities after socialism: urban and regional change and conflict in post-Socialist societies*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. 1983. *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kuromiya, H. 1998. *Freedom and terror in the Donbass: A Ukrainian-Russian borderland, 1870-1990s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ladd, B. 1998. *The ghosts of Berlin: confronting German history in the urban landscape*. University Of Chicago Press.
- Lowenthal, D. 1985. *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mykhnenko, V. 2000. *State, society and protest under communism: Ukrainian miners and their defeat*. <http://www.psa.ac.uk/cps/2000Mykhnenko%20Vlad.pdf> accessed on 1/11/2003.
- Rose, G. 1995. Places and identity: a sense of place. In Massey, D. and Jess, P. (Eds) *A place in the world?: places, cultures and globalisation*. Open University Press.
- Rugg, D. 1972. *Spatial foundations of urbanism*. Wm C Brown.
- Wanner, C. 1998. *Burden of dreams: history and identity in Post Soviet Ukraine*. Penn State University Press.

About the author

Julia Holdsworth is currently writing up her PhD in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Hull. Her main area of research interest is Post-Soviet change and her thesis focuses on the various ways people cope with, and characterise, these changes in Ukraine.