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What is a Courtyard For? Generations and the Use of Space in Backyard Leningrad[1]

The backyards or courtyards of Russian cities constituted, particularly during the first Soviet decades, an important space for social relations, a community of a specific kind. Yet so far they have attracted little in-depth attention on the part of researchers. This article, based primarily on interviews recorded during fieldwork carried out in St Petersburg in 2000–2001[2] deals with one aspect of the life of the Leningrad courtyard in the 1920s–1950s: how different generations and age groups appropriated the courtyard in this period, and how a new understanding of this space, one that did not correspond either to the courtyard's original designation or to the perceptions of earlier generations, came into being. The new social context of the post-revolutionary city led to an intensification of courtyard activities, and the transformation of this space from the realm of adult household-economic activity, with which

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[2] Henceforth — EU Pb-00, EU Pb-01. Fieldwork material is held in my own archive..

it was associated when the courtyards were first created, i.e. since the construction of St Petersburg's apartment blocks for rent (*dokhodnye doma*), to the realm of children's leisure, which became emblematic of courtyard life from the 1960s onwards.

From the pre-revolutionary history of the St Petersburg courtyard

Pre-Revolutionary housing, of which most urban accommodation in Leningrad consisted up until the end of the 1950s, was largely made up of apartment blocks constructed for letting.[1] In its classical form, such a building would occupy a considerable territory and would be constructed around the perimeter of this space. St Petersburg was, in fact, renowned for some of the largest buildings of this type in Europe [Pazhitnov 1914: 55–6]. The non-built-up area in the middle was usually not particularly large and formed either a single courtyard, or, more frequently, several smaller ones that would be interconnected by dark passages that went through the building itself. Given the fact that the buildings were quite tall (commonly five to six, or even seven, storeys high) such courtyards often resembled narrow shafts, which is why they became known as 'well-courtyards' [*dvor-kolodets*]. The most spacious and the cleanest was the first courtyard from the street, while the one furthest away would contain refuse pits and cesspools. Courtyards that were large enough also had log piles or sheds for storing wood for heating and cooking, especially if there was not enough storage space in the building's cellar.

Judging by official documents, the only form of activity intended for the courtyard concerned the maintenance of the household and was carried out primarily by the building's yardman or janitor [*dvornik*].[2] Apart from keeping the courtyard clean and tidy, and *'ensuring its manifest orderliness'*, the caretaker's main domestic duty was to chop wood and deliver it to the residents' flats [Alfavitnyi sbornik 1892: 49].[3] Alongside the caretakers, the courtyards were also regularly frequented by street traders, knife-grinders, junk dealers, rag-and-bone merchants, buskers etc. They all strived to announce themselves by loud chanting, in the hope to attract the attention of the mistresses, cooks, maids and other residents of the

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1 Russian *dokhodnyi dom* (literally, 'income house'). These blocks contained a variety of different types of accommodation, from handsome, large, high-ceilinged apartments facing the street that were occupied by well-off families, up to garret rooms for students. Famous literary descriptions of such buildings are given in Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* and *Crime and Punishment*. [Editor].

2 The *dvornik* was also responsible for the regulation of population movements, having the right to inspect people's identity documents ('passports'). This function was inherited by 'house managers' after 1917, with the *dvornik* left responsible for cleaning and maintenance. [Editor].

3 Advertisements of apartments for rental (for instance, those published in *Gorodskoe Delo*), usually indicated whether the rent included 'firewood' or did not. In the latter case the residents had to deliver logs and cut them by themselves or hire the yardman to do so at an extra payment. Rent for large prestigious apartments tended to include these works.

house quarters facing the yard. The buskers were, incidentally, perceived as beggars at the time and, as such, were included by the St Petersburg police on the list of people who were formally banned from frequenting the courtyard.[1] Although, according to numerous descriptions from this period, these bans were in reality not rigorously enforced, officially, at least, the St Petersburg courtyard was not intended for any form of leisure activity as such.

The majority of such commercial visitors to the courtyards would not remain there for long: tradesmen might be invited inside and buskers would be thrown money from the windows. Residents used the courtyard only 'in transit' as it were, in order to pass through to their own part of the building, or to throw away refuse. But there were also some inhabitants of *dokhodnye doma* who did spend some time in the courtyard, above all the so-called 'courtyard children' [*dvorovye deti*] — the children of the lowest social classes — servants, workers, artisans etc.[2] Furthermore, according to the architectural convention of the time the nurseries were situated next door to the kitchens and the servants' quarters, and the windows of all of these premises would face the courtyards,[3] which meant that, in fact, all the children living in the building were at some level 'courtyard inhabitants'. In memoirs from the nineteenth and early twentieth century one finds descriptions of the courtyard from the perspective the child 'looking out of the window', suggesting that the courtyard could be part of a child's world even without the child actually being allowed to go there.[4] Thus, there were in fact two kinds of children's leisure practices associated with the courtyard: actually playing in it and watching it from outside, which in turn were associated with different social strata.[5] Nevertheless, with

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1 Buskers were allowed to perform only *'in dacha areas and on the outskirts of the city'*. They were banned from the streets so the courtyard was their only resort. If the caretaker was lenient enough, they could work here without being noticed by the *'officers of the Police'* [Alfavitnyi sbornik 1902: 266].

2 For instance, the 'courtyard kids' who used to follow the organ grinder from house to house [Uspensky 1990: 77], or the residents of Burkov Yard in Aleksei Remizov's short story 'Krestovye sestry' [The Sisters of the Cross] (1910) [Remizov 1989: 110–111].

3 As one can tell from the passages in materials from the early twentieth century relating to interior space that condemn the traditional practices of assigning the 'worst' rooms to children [Rubner 1902: 13; Nina 1906–1907: 11–12]. [This practice was beginning to change by the early twentieth century; some household manuals now recommended giving the *best* room to children, and there were blocks on Petersburg (later Petrograd) Side which included nurseries in the main *enfilade*. But, of course, families inhabiting flats constructed before the change of ideas had taken place were still likely to stick to the old ways. Editor].

4 See, for instance: Benua 1980: 284–285; Dobuzhinsky 1987: 6; Koni 1922: 19–20, 76–77; Uspensky 1990: 75–93; cf. also the 'adult' point of view, according to which the dust, smells and sounds of the courtyard, such as the cries of street traders and the noise made by buskers are labelled as *'troublesome'* and disturbing *'the peace and quiet […] of the house and home'* [Eago 1906–1907: 15].

5 Cf. Tito Kolliander's memoirs: *'But I never in fact got to know the children who were playing under my windows. Not one of them. I knew their names, knew what they were up to, the pet names their*

the exception of this quite specific 'childhood tradition', one could say that the pragmatics of the St Petersburg courtyard was at this time almost entirely defined by its adult household-economic function.

At the turn of the twentieth century another type of 'letting house' emerged, one designed to attract a greater number of wealthier residents. Apart from the 'black' courtyards (which were still used for the daily running of the household) these buildings had one or more elegant front courtyards (either enclosed from all sides or as a *cour d'honneur*, open at the front on to the street). The main living quarters of respectable households faced these courts, as they did the street. Such a front courtyard was usually kept in very good condition and resembled a garden of sorts, rather than the usual St Petersburg courtyard. The fact that there were benches there and in some cases swings for children, and that there were no household objects, indicates that the pragmatics of this courtyard was defined strictly in terms of leisure.[1]

However, although this idea of putting the courtyard space to a different, non-economic, use had begun to make an impact by the end of the Tsarist era,[2] the number of such elegant courtyards was actually very small, and they were therefore unable to transform the traditional image of the St Petersburg courtyard as a dirty and unhealthy environment, unsuitable as a place where children could play[3].

Children's courtyard leisure

The Revolution and its aftermath profoundly affected the pattern of life of 'letting houses' and their courtyards. For a short period after 1917, citizens were officially mobilised to help with the tradi-

mothers gave them, but I couldn't have cared less about any of that. The world of these children was so far distant from mine that it barely touched my consciousness, let alone evoking any interest. And we were definitely not separated only by language: I spoke and understood Russian pretty well. There was a barrier that it was impossible to breach' [Kolliander 1995: 24].

1 Towards the end of the nineteenth century in official recommendations to house owners and managers there is advice to plant trees where the size of the courtyard permits it, because *'it would be useful from the sanitary perspective and could at the same time serve as decoration in the courtyard'* [Alfavitnyi sbornik 1902: 151]. However, the absence of any other fixtures associated with leisure clearly implied that the courtyard was not intended for leisure activities. The tradition of *'laying out small gardens in the courtyards, provided there was enough space'* is mentioned by S.F. Svetlov in his memoirs [1998: 50].

2 This idea provided the basis for different solutions regarding the permissibility of courtyard leisure in general. In a number of cases not only the front yard but also any other sufficiently spacious and clean courtyard could become a playground for a child from the so-called middle class [Dobuzhinsky 1987: 6–7].

3 See for instance the reaction of contemporaries to the construction of 'letting houses' and their remarks on the life conditions of 'courtyard residents' [Zhurnalnaya mozaika 1840:2; Eago 1906–1907: 15; Paskal', Trubole 1906–1907: 5; R. 1911: 4], and cf. the courtyard image in the so-called 'physiological sketches' [Nekrasov 1844: 255] and the press [M. V-ov 1908: 8; Protopopov 1910: 1393; Stolichnaya khronika 1911: 10–11; Pazhitnov 1914: 56].

tional tasks of the yardman — keeping watch by the yard gates at night and clearing snow from the streets and tramlines. This phenomenon was, however, temporary. At the same time, the new regime of life, where the contingent of 'servants' (including visiting ones, like laundresses) was dwindling almost to nothing, and where taking care of firewood was no longer the responsibility of yardmen, drew more and more of the residents into the courtyard.

For some of the inhabitants, their interest in the courtyard was still limited to their household needs, which they used to justify their presence there. However, a new kind of 'need' had also emerged. The courtyard had now become the only place where small children, too young to be sent to the park or the public gardens on their own, could be let out to play.[1] Generally speaking, the notion that 'the child must play outdoors in the fresh air' became an *entrance ticket to the courtyard*, as it were, for children whose families would not have allowed this in better circumstances. Another 'excuse' for children's courtyard leisure activities was the general reduction of accommodation space and the fact that in communal flats, noisy group children's games were simply not possible:

And I can remember this as well. We weren't allowed into the courtyard just like that to begin with. But after the revolution, during the first years after, sometime... don't remember exactly, but we started getting let into the courtyard after all [...] Yes, we were let into there from time to time — so what? There were only draymen there, nothing else. I mean, no children at all. So it wasn't the done thing to spend time in the courtyard (EU Pb-01, PF-27, woman born 1912).

We all lived in communal flats, it was difficult to get together, there practically wasn't any room. [...] So we spent time outside. First, there were unoccupied areas where you could play. See? For instance, there was the courtyard, there was a wasteland where we could run around, play hide-and-seek, tag, Cossacks and Robbers — those kinds of games. (EU Pb-00, PF-1, man born 1923).

The situation described in the first of the above two quotations, where *one wasn't allowed to go into the courtyard to begin with, because this wasn't the done thing, but then, later on, started being allowed to*, is typical of the entire period examined. This increased permissiveness of parental attitudes towards the courtyard cannot

[1] Parents had usually little spare time because household tasks were very time-consuming, and because almost everyone, including women with children, had to work. The food crisis of the first post-revolutionary years and the generally low wage levels forced most city dwellers, including women who had not previously worked, to take up a job (preferably one in government service, which had many benefits). People with 'unreliable' social origins (i.e. from the gentry or merchant classes) also had to avoid getting into the category of 'non-working elements' (on the advantages of the 'working' status and adaptation of the former bourgeoisie to the Soviet way of life see [Chuikina 2000a: 80, 82–83; 2000b: 167–170]).

always be explained by the age of the child, i.e. by the fact that the child growing older made it somehow safer to play in the courtyard. Quite the contrary, play in the courtyard was perceived as particularly suitable for younger children since here they did not need to be specially accompanied and could be supervised from the window, while the older children could still be sent to a nearby park on their own or to take part in a hobby circle.[1] Furthermore, the confined space of the courtyard was far better suited for toddlers who were happy with a heap of sand and hopscotch, as opposed to the older children who were likely to appropriate a much larger part of the courtyard and would take over objects that, from the adult perspective, were not appropriate for children's leisure. The courtyard occupations of the preschoolers were thus not seen as intrusive, and rarely carried the potential for serious conflict. Younger children were much less susceptible to what adults saw as the *bad influence of the courtyard* than the teenagers, as will be discussed in what follows.

Ideas about where it was preferable (i.e. less dangerous) for children to play could have entirely contradictory 'rational' justifications. On the one hand, there was a widespread idea that in the courtyard '*everything was under someone's control. The kids that were running around there, like... and what the parents and neighbours were shouting at them from the windows left no doubts that everything was right in the public eye'* (EU Pb-00, PF-14, man born 1940). On the other hand, a preference for public spaces where the controlling function was delegated to the wider community was sometimes expressed: *'When we spent time in the public park, it was a large open space which was always crowded, and we were sort of under supervision, but in the courtyards anything could happen'* (EU Pb-00, PF-29, woman born 1940).

In many cases, whether the child played in the courtyard or not served as an indication of the social status of the child's family, of its belonging to the intelligentsia or 'a family with St Petersburg roots' (if it did not play in the courtyard) as opposed to coming from an *'ordinary family'* or a family of incomers (if it did). Clearly, this attitude harked back to pre-Revolutionary circumstances and was maintained, first and foremost, by the older generations. It is nevertheless interesting that it managed to survive up until the very end of the 1950s.

Inf. *Well, we weren't allowed into the courtyard at all. In those times... it was considered sort of not proper, yes.*

Int. *Sort of not proper to spend time in the courtyard?*

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[1] i.e. a hobby circle such as were operated in culture clubs and by 'Pioneer houses' and (from the mid-1930s) 'Pioneer palaces' [Editor].

Inf. *Yes, yes. In the fifties nobody spent time in the courtyard. Though there were some, the children, as a rule, of those who just came in after the war, first generation of migrants, right? They were the ones who spent time there. And the local kids didn't go. No, no. It wasn't the done thing. [...] Which doesn't mean that we were well-off, not at all. We were got together into groups, say, five to ten kids, sometimes less, depending on the parents' income*[1]*. And we were taken for walks in the Mikhailovsky Park, or in the two boulevards just in front of Mikhailovsky Palace — that's where we had our walks. And of course Mikhailovsky Park, the Field of Mars, the Summer Garden — that's where they took us. [...] And those who had grannies, they went out with them. Because there were almost no kindergartens then, it was a big problem. [...] But later — this was when I was in the sixth class, maybe. I was fourteen, no, thirteen — I started to go out into the courtyard. So the kind of people that went there must have changed a little. But the same old thing went on as well. You see, the families round us, well they sort of had higher standards, in the moral line, those families, I'd known them since I was a child, and they didn't let their kids into the courtyard. But [as] my Granny was dead by then, there was nobody to say that 'only the cook's kids go into the courtyard' — no, they were 'courtyard girls, courtyard kids', — correction: that's what my Great-Grandma used to tell me, not my Granny. And so I was allowed into the courtyard. Naturally, that was exactly what I was longing for. Yes, so then we did start going out into the courtyard* (EU Pb-01, PF-23, woman born 1941).

The above quotation is evidence of an extreme, though still quite widespread, view regarding the acceptability of children spending time in the courtyard. All the more 'extreme' since in the house where the informant lived there were two courtyards: a 'working' one and a 'communal' (*obshchestvennyi*) one. The latter was not particularly well maintained, but it was large enough for children's games. The presence of more than one courtyard was, as a rule, significant, since it provided the possibility of a functional division of space. As had been the case before 1917, the courtyard further away from the street, usually dubbed *the back yard* or *the black yard*, was designated for household tasks, while the *front yard* would be considered 'communal' or rather, specifically, for general use by children.

[1] Private preschool groups were one alternative to courtyard children's leisure. However, already from 1923 the activity of these groups started to be restricted (no more than three children in a group were allowed), while the qualifications of nannies (always female and normally referred to as 'bonnes' (*bonny*)) were subject to rigorous checks. They had to register with the 'Educational Workers' Union' (Rabpros) and the Department of Public Education (Otdel narodnogo obrazovaniya). In 1941 they were banned. [O poryadke zanyatii s detmi vne shkoly 1924; O chastnykh doshkolnykh gruppakh 1941]. And yet, according to the testimony of a number of informants, some children still attended such groups (which could have 5–6 children) in the post-war years.

Another type of courtyard, which promoted a positive attitude towards children's leisure, was the courtyard of newly built Soviet blocks.[1] Until the 1950s urban housing construction was limited, but some areas were built upon already from the mid 1920s. The new courtyards were usually formed haphazardly, lying between several separate blocks, and had a much larger area, though with minimal specially planted vegetation and very few other fixtures. The standard minimum was a few withered flowerbeds, some tangled and worn grass, a couple of benches by the entrances to different blocks, and a sand pit. Any utility constructions would be positioned somewhere on the periphery, leaving the central area for leisure activities. In cases where the house had a local boiler-room,[2] or more rarely, a gas-main, the need for storing logs was reduced, or indeed, disappeared entirely. A decisive factor was also the absence in these new-built areas of any city parks, which meant that part of the latter's function was intentionally delegated to the courtyards.[3]

Without doubt, the new Soviet courtyard was intended for the leisure not just of children but also of adults. However, judging by the research carried out in 1936 by the Institute of Communal Economy in two of the best-equipped Leningrad areas (along Lesnoi prospekt),[4] at peak time, only 23.3 percent of children and 3 percent of adults spent their leisure time in the courtyard. The authors of the publication concluded that *'such a small percentage of adults is due to the absence of areas suitably equipped for their activities'* [Brodovich, Kruglyakov 1937: 23–4]. Note, however, that what was meant by facilities for adults as a rule included sports grounds that would have been more suitable for teenagers and youth than for the bulk of the adult population as such. Pensioners are seldom mentioned as potential courtyard users. What the city administration essentially meant by maintaining yard space, therefore, was maintaining it for *children and the working population*.

One important concern of the city authorities was the organisation of children's leisure activities as a means of ensuring that they were supervised, thereby preventing anti-social behaviour in the streets,

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1 Housing and courtyard development in the so-called 'worker's districts' was aimed at creating a new type of Soviet town space — an open and well-maintained block designed for *the workers to spend their leisure time*, as opposed to the aristocratic centre with its macabre courtyards designed for *domestic needs* (concerning the changing hierarchy of town spaces see [Gerasimova, Chuikina 2000]).

2 That is, a district boiler-room supplying heat and hot water to entire blocks of the city. [Editor].

3 The principle adhered to by Soviet urban development stated that *'the first cell of development should be not an individual courtyard but the entire block'* which would include areas for various forms of leisure activities, to be used by all the residents of that block [De-Planson 1923: 48; see also Bubnov 1939: 138–151; Kruglyakov 1939: 5–77].

4 A street north of the city centre, on Vyborg Side, that is, in a major industrial area which witnessed a good deal of 'model housing' construction in the 1930s. [Editor].

such as the disruption of traffic. From the mid-1930s the city council (Lensovet) required the local housing boards (Lenzhilupravlenie) to set up nurseries and play areas within housing cooperatives (*zhakty*, an acronym for *zhilishchno-arendnoe kooperativnoe tovarishchestvo*), *'creating for each house special locations where children can play games, preventing them from playing and roller-skating in areas designated for traffic'* [O preduprezhdenii detskogo ulichnogo travmatizma 1938: 7].[1] Evidently, the ability to fulfil such directives depended to a large extent on the availability of free space in the courtyards and on the existence of any spare premises, which was far from widespread. Judging by resolutions passed by the Leningrad city administration which recorded the absence of *'basic conditions for playing games, sports and other reasonable forms of children's entertainment'* in courtyards and parks [O merakh bor'by 1937: 3],[2] as well as the reports of the Commission for Assistance to Households with Children (TsGA-SPb, f. 4948, op. 1, d. 420, ll. 27–49 rev.), [3] and my own interview material, the organisation of courtyard leisure activities for children remained at this time in the realm of good intentions, rather than actual practice. As far as equipping children's play areas is concerned, things started improving only in the late 1940s and 1950s, a development linked to the mass demolition of wood-storage sheds, when in addition to sand pits, there appeared swings, slides,[4] and, in a few places, even modest skating rinks.

Assessing the outcome of the above changes, one can note that the overall attitude of adults towards children's courtyard leisure ceased, during the Soviet era, to be simply positive or negative. In the majority of cases the attitude now depended on a range of concrete circumstances: the properties of the courtyard space and of the contingent of residents (and also of potential visitors likely to come into contact with the child), of the child's age, of the degree to which the parents and other members of the family were occupied and could or could not supervise the children etc.

In conclusion to this preliminary section let us cite another informant's opinion which, in its positive evaluation of courtyard life, lies at the opposite extreme to the one from a woman born in 1941 quoted above. Note that the situation in both cases was similar, in that the house had two courtyards, one designated for household

[1] See also [O bor'be s narusheniyami 1933: 5; Ob organizatsii vneshkol'noi raboty 1936: 2; Ob organizatsii obsluzhivaniya 1938: 4; O vneshkolnoi rabote 1938: 5].

[2] See also [Ob usilenii borby 1950: 1; Ob usilenii borby 1952: 5].

[3] Commissions for Assistance to Households with Children were organised just after the War were organised immediately after the War due to the lack of the necessary work with children.

[4] The Russian in fact refers to wooden structures iced over in winter and used for sliding down [Editor].

purposes and the other for leisure activities, though without any special fixtures. Both informants are female, and their age and social status are roughly the same.

Inf. *We lived so well, I mean we were so close to all the people in our courtyard. The courtyard was our family. [...] The front yard was like a nursery. Nobody [i.e. no outsiders] was allowed there, it was perfectly clean. Nobody was cross about our playing and shouting there. As a rule we didn't sit at home, because all the girls who were my close friends and all the boys lived in communal flats. You didn't feel free to do what you wanted — your parents would come home from work, everyone in one room. So all the kids would go outside. And we knew all the people who lived there. That was because we knew all the kids, and so of course we knew their mums and dads too. We always said hallo to everyone. It was as if, you know, the courtyard was one big family. And there were a lot of us of almost the same age* (EU Pb-01, PF-10, woman born 1939).

The disruption of the previous status of the urban courtyard and, as a consequence, the contradictory attitude towards it that emerged, left open the answer to the question about the *permissibility/impermissibility* of particular practices and forms of conduct, as well as of who the protagonists' of this space were. Now that the courtyard had become the property of 'the collective of residents', it was *nobody's* property and started to be appropriated by various adult and children's groups.

Courtyard communities

There are some communities that were considered as courtyard habitués except children and teenagers. The cramped conditions in communal flats naturally meant that many adults, as well as children, were tempted to spend leisure time outdoors,[1] However, the perception that an adult should occupy himself with 'useful work' for as much time as possible, and that leisure hours should be spent in a 'cultured' way,[2] affected the general attitude towards those adults who spent time in the courtyard in ways unconnected to household needs or any other 'useful occupation'.

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[1] Communal flats mostly resulted from *uplotnenie* ('compression', i.e. the forcible sub-division of large 'bourgeois' apartment blocks into multi-family tenements, *kommunalki*).

[2] I.e. in a rational, civilised way, as befitting educated adults (*kulturnyi*). The campaign to inculcate leisure practices of this kind among the lower orders can be traced back to the 1870s, but received a new boost under Soviet power, when regulating leisure became one of the responsibilities of official groups, such as the Komsomol, and of state institutions, such as 'houses of culture', as well as the cultural sections of large factories and plants, etc. There was a particular drive to inculcate decorous and rational activities in public places [Editor].

At the same time, the presence of certain adult groups in the courtyard was still considered 'normal', and the negative characteristics of some of them were not deemed to be sufficient grounds for the residents or the household management to do anything to prevent their presence there. In the majority of cases, such courtyard groups were perceived as a 'vulgar' phenomenon, which is why in interviews one often hears informants making a special point of the fact that, for example, in their courtyard, there were no such people, their presence being otherwise typical of this environment.

Inf.: *Besides the parents whose children were running around in the courtyard and who simply had somehow to participate in courtyard life, there were also a lot of other people who took an active part in it. They were all sorts of drunkards. For them, of course, the courtyard community was the most important thing. [...]*

Int.: *It looks as though in the courtyards one could mostly expect to meet children and drunkards, then...*

Inf.: *Children, drunkards and grannies. More often than not, there was no place to sit down there, and still there were some kind of granny communities. Sometimes they even found somewhere to sit down, some sort of benches would be arranged.. They all knew each other well, too. And so there were these three groups: kids, drunkards and grannies — they somehow consolidated this community [i.e. the courtyard one]. At least, the community of those who wanted to take part in courtyard life* (EU Pb-01, PF-14, man born 1940).

As one can see, two principles are used in defining courtyard communities — age and gender. Although it was perfectly possible for a 'granddad' or a young unemployed woman (i.e. housewife) or, say, people's 'house workers' (i.e. maids) to enter the community of 'the grannies' (*babushki*), the number of these was relatively small, which is why in the naming of the group there is a well-defined age and gender characteristic. Male courtyard groups, on the other hand, were usually not divided into generations (youth, middle-aged persons and pensioners); at the same time, the male community, as a rule, excluded children. In rare cases, the gender principle would be broken and the male community could include a woman 'of a particular kind' (*'you know the sort — a man in a skirt'* EU Pb-01, PF-14, man born 1940).

It is clear that the readiness to join a courtyard community was greater among those who were for one reason or another passive in the wider sphere of public life and who realised their need for social contact precisely in the courtyard. At the same time, the inclination to spend free time in the courtyard was also evidence of the presence in the group of certain specific 'courtyard interests' — the principal criterion for identifying the group's common identity.

Male courtyard leisure was certainly not always based exclusively on communal drinking, even if the latter formed a significant component of their courtyard interaction. The most 'famous' courtyard group were the 'domino-players' (*dominoshniki*). They would team up not just in courtyards but also in parks, public gardens and other places, wherever one could set up a table — the essential prop for a game of dominos. The game process was dubbed 'slaughtering the goat' [*zabivat kozla*].[1] Since in many cases they played in beer (which the loser would have to 'stand' [*postavit*][2] rushing off to the nearest stall to fill up the beer keg that was another essential prop of the game) this group overlapped to a large degree with the courtyard drunks' group. Drinking and uttering obscenities was considered the usual accompaniment and typical attribute of the domino-playing group: in other words, such behaviour was classified as *normal* (providing, of course, that some tacitly accepted restrictions, such as the level of noise generated in the process, were being observed). This is why open conflicts, such as the ones described in the next quotation, were rare. The situation described below is actually from the early 1960s, i.e. at the point when the courtyard had become primarily a *children's space*. Besides, the game of dominos in immediate proximity to a children's play area would have been perceived as *exceptional* even in the previous period.

Inf.: *And so these men played dominoes there, they made themselves a table. And they broke it, you know! And the women! They pulled it right away from them: 'Get out! Round the back of the blocks you go,*[3] *— by the bins, where the rubbish is! Get out! That's where you belong'. And that is where they put it [the table].*

Int.: *But why?*

Inf.: *Because those men were swearing, you know, and drinking there. And there were kids around. [...] They put up that table right where the kids were playing in the courtyard, next to the sand pit. Where the kids were playing... [...] Well, and they were using swearwords and drinking. Especially at the weekends... On Saturdays and Sundays they were always there.*

Int.: *And the women who broke the table and drove them away — did they just live there or did the house management office take that decision?*

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[1] See Vladimir Toporov's wonderful article about the mytho-ritual origins of the expression 'to slaughter the goat' [Toporov 1978].

[2] Cf. 'to stand a round of drinks' in English. [Editor].

[3] Reference is here made to a courtyard in a new-built area, which means that the expulsion of the domino-players *behind the house* in this case did not mean they were sent 'outside the courtyard': the territory where rubbish bins were kept was analogous to the 'black yard' of the old buildings. Thus, the conflict aimed not to ban this form of leisure as such, but to ensure the *correct* distribution of the courtyard space.

Inf.: *Just the residents and the two yardmen, and they went: 'Get the hell out of here! There are kids so-and-so...' And smashed it up [i.e. the table]. And the head of the House Management Committee said: 'They're right. Get going, there are kids around.'*

Int.: *So did those men complain to the house manager?*

Inf.: *No. He himself said: 'Don't swear at the women. That's no good. There are kids here. Go to the back, build your table and play there'* (EU Pb-01, PF-37, woman born 1925, janitor).

In the earlier period, when children's courtyard leisure was still considered as something forced upon one by circumstances rather than the option of choice, the notion of the incompatibility of men's and children's communities was reflected in children being forbidden to approach the domino table (this was sometimes a sort of an 'internal ban' in the sense, 'stay away or be chased away'). The table was actually most often set up in the least visible part of the courtyard, next to the log sheds or in any concealed corners. In cases where in a large courtyard the table was in a more open location, children kept a certain ('acoustic', so to speak) distance: '*Of course, we weren't allowed there, or even within earshot. Five metres or so away'* (EU Pb-01, PF-18, man born 1950). In older buildings there was little need for such an imaginary 'boundary' given the more complex configuration of the courtyard and the presence of all sorts of fixtures in it. At the same time, if the domino table happened to be erected by the house management committee itself, as one of the courtyard's regular features, it could be situated in the 'communal' zone, which meant it could be used by children in the day-time and the domino-players in the evening.[1]

Although the domino-players' form of leisure was understood as an idle and purposeless waste of time, playing dominos was otherwise considered a perfectly normal way to spend one's free time. Among specially recommended board games kept at official Soviet recreation rooms (the 'red corners',[2]) dominos stand side by side with chess and draughts [see e.g. TsGA-SPb, f. 151, op. 5, d. 139, ll. 1–30]. Once the active refurbishment of courtyards started in the post-war period, one often finds a '(small) table with benches' on the list of necessary fixtures [TsGA-SPb, f. 4948, op. 1, d. 420, ll. 12–49].[3]

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1 It is interesting that in this case children used the table in virtually the same way — they too played dominos, though not 'for money'. There was no gender exclusion in this case since girls played alongside the boys (EU Pb-01, PF-33, woman born 1926).

2 A 'red corner' is an agitational and club facility sited in a housing block as well as many official institutions [Editor].

3 Later on, in the 1960s-70s tables disappeared from the courtyards, evidently because they were considered as elements of adult, rather than children's leisure, and as thereby provoking undesirable activities.

Apart from domino-players, chess- and draughts-players could also use improvised courtyard tables, but they tended to prefer benches alone, placing the chessboard in between the two seated players. At the same time, the presence of a table in the courtyard was in itself a prompt to the consumption of alcohol. The table might well be used for this latter purpose by groups of young people, or for cross-age groups who had the same 'leisure interests' in mind. The fans of all these types of games formed the community of 'courtyard males' [*dvorovye muzhichki*].[1] Though they would not be particularly respected by the other residents, they would certainly not be seen as an anomaly.

The opposite pole in the continuum of courtyard social exchanges was occupied by the community of 'grannies', who served as the main means of consolidating the collective of residents. 'Grannies' might take a more or a less active role in community life, but whichever way, their consolidation role had various practical bases. Grannies, like children, often contracted 'courtyard friendships', though those among grannies were slightly different in that they might involve exchanges such as *'borrowing a small amount of money, visiting each other, exchanging opinions in the kitchen, complaining about what was going on, living together through the different events, big and small, that were going on here...'* (EU Pb-01, PF-24, man born 1929). Their presence in the courtyard was explained not just by the fact that they were retired, and hence had abundant free time, but also by the fact that they might be supervising their grandchildren or minding the laundry drying on the line. This meant that the grannies were universally understood to be spending time in the courtyard 'in a useful way'.

Apart from the very fact of interacting with one another and with the other residents of the house on a daily basis, the special status of 'the grannies' could also be based on regular contacts with the household management and the caretakers. Indeed, for certain posts that did not require special qualifications (e.g. issuing identity cards, working as typists, lift attendants, etc.) the housing administration actively recruited older women who sought work near their homes. This in turn could mean that child-care arrangements in families were simpler to arrange (because the grannies would take over child-care when parents were out at work). The professions of house managers and yardmen began being feminised early in the Soviet period, a process that was accelerated during the Second World War; after the War, the only competition that women had in this domain was from demobbed military men. This meant that most employees in the house management office were middle-aged or elderly women who lived in the block where the courtyard was or

[1] The term *muzhichok* is slightly patronising — cf. 'little man'. [Editor].

one close by. In their free time it was obviously easy for them to join the grannies' community, either in an active sense, or simply as 'attached members' who wanted to stay in regular contact with their friends.

As a result, the grannies frequently operated, on the one hand, as a kind of 'information centre', and on the other, as an organ of 'control', one that might not have possessed any real power in a formal sense, but certainly had some authority in matters concerning everyday life in the courtyard. And whilst the adult residents of the house could, in principle, ignore the older generation or look down on it,[1] (at least until the grannies complained about something to the house manager), the children could hardly avoid the strict control of the grannies, irrespective of the presence or absence of any family ties between them.

Inf.: *There were benches at each doorway, of course. There were grannies sitting there, discussing anyone who visited or came out of the block, and all the latest gossip. Even I remember this, though kids usually don't pay attention to such things. I remember because they were always getting at us, nagging us about something. They were always giving out about something. For example, telling you to walk slowly. So why should I walk slowly? But the way I understand it now, it was sort of an information exchange point.*

Int.: *And what was the reaction to the grannies' criticism?*

Inf.: *Well, how could the boys react? For about seven seconds you sort of obeyed, made your whole expression show that you agreed and would never do that again, and then you'd run off immediately and go on with what you had been doing. No special reaction. It was like reacting to any old fly, which you can't shoo off, and then you have to pretend you respect her a lot too.*

Int.: *And do you have to pretend you respect her?*

Inf.: *Of course you have to pretend you respect her. There's no other way. She's a granny, isn't she? And they are a sort of authority. There was this feeling that they had the right to criticise you. Like teachers, maybe* (EU Pb-01, PF-18, man born 1950).

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[1] Compare the despotic 'secret government of the old women' in the courtyard where Leonid Filatov lived in Ashabad: *'In the evening my courtyard is gloomy and deaf, / Hubbub and laughter are scarce, — / The secret administration of old women / Is having a meeting in the dark pavilion. / It is intimidated, my poor courtyard, / Even the snap of the lock sounds like the snap of a breech-block. / Those who have known the terror of old women, / Will agree with me — no terror is worse. / Get lost, you black hole, / The kingdom of slander, mould and dust!.. / But even in the morbid abyss of the courtyard / The sparkles of freethinking go off. / Like a Jacobin flag in the morning / Next to the same old pavilion / The wind is tearing from the rope / The panties of the girl next door!...'* [Filatov 2002: 228].

Of course, not all elderly female residents interacted in the courtyard. 'The grannies' group' sometimes included only a fraction of the older generation — *'people who are inclined to... you know, there is a kind of people who will never do something in the home or read a book — no, they only want to gossip'* (EU Pb-01, PF-21, man born 1934). An almost invariable condition for the presence of grannies in the courtyard was the availability of benches, which were usually situated near the front entrance. Having seats here not only made it possible to observe other people's comings and goings in comfort, but also meant that those using the door had to pass very close to the grannies, and so could hardly avoid communicating with them in some way.[1] As a rule, even when there were other benches in the courtyard, the grannies would always retreat to their 'sentry box' position. The domino-players also depended on a prop, namely the table, but their positioning was, on the contrary, motivated by a desire for isolation. Courtyards that lacked such fixtures would be taken over almost entirely by children and teenagers during the day, and groups of youths in the evening.

Sport was a widespread activity among children, teenagers and youths in the courtyard: where older groups preferred volleyball, younger ones played football and *lapta*.[2] Among the girls, who, as a rule, did not play football, the most popular was *shtander*.[3] Of course, there was no proper sports equipment and the only requirement was the existence of some empty space. The goal was usually marked by two logs or cobblestones, or some pre-existing gap in a wall or fence etc. The washing line would serve as a volleyball net, and even the ball itself (a sought-after item, especially in the post-war years) might well be homemade.

In principle, sports games were precisely the kind of leisure activity that was not only permitted by local city authorities, but was actually actively encouraged in courtyards and parks. From the perspective of the 'insiders' (i.e. residents), however, this form of courtyard entertainment was the one most loaded with conflict. There were two main reasons for conflict — the fact that ground-floor flats might well get their windows broken, and the noise created, especially in the late evening. In many cases the interests of the residents were defended by the yardmen, who would halt the activities of the transgressors, and report broken windows and other

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1 Because not to greet people as you passed would have been considered rude. [Editor].

2 *Lapta* is a game like rounders, played with a bat and small rubber balls. Complicated (and varying) rules govern how 'runs' may be scored and when people are declared 'out'. [Editor].

3 *Stander* is another game like rounders. The etymology is unclear, but may be from the English 'Stand there!' since the title of the game comes from an order shouted to players. A standard derivation, from *stand hier* (German) is clearly wrong, as this is not an imperative, but a past tense (and omission of the pronoun would be odd in any case). [Editor].

'violations of order' to parents or to the house manager.[1] This control mechanism could also be exercised, or at least supported, by the courtyard grannies, who '*also knew all about everyone and could pass on information to your parents'* (EU Pb-00, PF-4, woman born 1937). It was precisely in such moments of conflict that special *courtyard rules* would be formed (partly on the basis of official regulations, and governing household activities, as well as leisure). Such rules did not exist to start with, since the courtyard was not considered part of 'domestic space', but in the process of its being *appropriated* in the Soviet period, certain regulations evolved:

Inf. *Well, there were certain rules, there was order, of a kind. Kids were taught some rules right from the start. What they could do and what not.*

Int. *And what was it that you could or couldn't do?*

Inf. *Well, we weren't allowed... to break the windows, OK, they told us we could play, raise our voices, and so on, but only in a certain way... But we had to throw the ball around in some games, like 'shtander', for example. [...] And we weren't allowed to make noise... the house manager told us, after nine, that's it. Once it got to nine, no games could be played. People had to have a rest. And we observed this very strictly. [...] There was discipline back then, you see — we weren't allowed to do just anything, like today's kids are. So I suppose all this was probably showing us the way to behave, little by little* (EU Pb-01, PF-10, woman born 1939).

The separation of different generations within the courtyard could be either territorial or temporal (as in the use of a table by children and the domino-players at different hours). Temporal division of the courtyard among the different generations was as a rule characteristic of the smaller and less well-equipped courtyards in the old part of town: while certainly attracting different groups, these did not give them the possibility of 'spreading out' as it were. In the quotation below, 7 pm was the temporal boundary when the courtyard shifted from the domain of children to the domain of young people:

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[1] Cf. the following memories of pre-war childhood: *'Childhood is a hierarchy. My hierarchy was of a specific kind. The janitors were at the top. They controlled the courtyard and kept an eye on everyone. Even the district militia [police] officer ranked lower, because he was only keeping an eye on criminals'* [Kryshchuk 1997: 170]. The figure of the caretaker is very important for the community of children and teenagers, being associated with two key areas of activity — that of sanitation and household maintenance, on the one hand, and that of administrative control, on the other. The realisation of these functions ensured the *observance of order* in the courtyard, i.e. the necessary degree of cleanliness and silence, and the observation of the accepted norms of behaviour. It is true that in every individual case this level differed and depended on a number of different factors (the respectability of the area and the building itself, or otherwise, the level to which the courtyard was equipped, the contingent of residents etc.) — essentially the same factors as defined whether it was permissible for children to play in the courtyard or not.

Inf. *We'd leave...we'd be driven out of the courtyard at seven. Actually driven out, yes. 'Enough. Go home. That's it.' Only those who were older could stay, the adults and young people. These could be students or young people who were already working. That is, they could sit there and play gorodki*[1] *or discuss something, just sit and talk. But the schoolchildren like us, the junior kids, all had to go home. We couldn't run around till eleven there.*

Int. *So what happened there later, after you left?*

Inf. *The older ones would say on there. Well, they were sitting there, just talking. Must have been discussing some news. Sometimes, of course, we'd organise something on our own, steal down and sneak out. And then, of course, got it from the yardman later*[2] (EU Pb-00, PF-4, woman born 1937).

It is clear that the most convenient courtyards for providing space for different generational groups were the larger and better-equipped courtyards in the new-built areas, where in addition to the benches for the older generation *'there were sandpits where the tinies were playing, there were swings where the kids were playing... and further on there was a playground, where they were running around, playing lapta, the older kids. And, naturally, next to the sheds were the older kids, because it was more convenient there, you could sit on the roof, let your feet dangle and have a good time'* (EU Pb-00, PF-2, woman born 1939). And yet, the very openness of these new courtyards (especially if they lacked traditional objects like sheds) excluded many forms of leisure common in the courtyards of the old part of town. The ill-equipped well-courtyard packed with sheds, typical of Leningrad until the 1950s, was, in fact, especially readily appropriated by children and teenagers, and, less frequently, by some adult male groups.

Household objects and courtyard leisure: wood sheds and log piles

The wood sheds or log piles and the territory adjacent to them were in fact among the most important features of the courtyards where leisure activities were concerned. Up until the Second World War, the older yards usually had a number of large, two-storey sheds (in some cases they were even made of stone) in which each family

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[1] A game like a combination of skittles and the Oxfordshire traditional game Aunt Sally, in which short heavy sticks are thrown at piles of batons standing in various formations on the base (*gorodok*) in an attempt to dislodge these piles. [Editor].

[2] The informant also justified the banning of children from playing outdoors after 7 pm by official regulations. These however officially applied only to streets and public places and not to courtyards as such. Moreover, the hour after which children were not to be seen outdoors unsupervised was set only in 1940 (9 pm for children under the age of 14) and then in 1944 (10pm for children under the age of 16). [O meropriyatiyakh po bor'be s detskoi beznadzornostiyu 1940: 2; O pravilakh povedeniya detei v obschestvennykh mestakh 1944: 8].

had a right to a section. After the war, the construction of such sheds was the responsibility of the local housing administrations (the co-operatives, *zhakty*, and *domoupravleniya*, 'housing offices'). Sometimes the logs were kept in the house cellar, in individual sections also called 'sheds' ('*we had sheds in the cellar*'). If there was not enough space in these 'communal sheds', residents would build their own personal sheds independently, either obtaining materials from their own house management or collecting them personally from building sites and refuse dumps.

In conditions where firewood often ran short, the contents of these sheds was clearly valuable, yet they were secured by tiny locks that were no obstacle to anyone wanting to gain entry into them. Such lack of security was especially attractive to children and teenagers who used this space for their games and other forms of entertainment: '*Those sheds, before the war you could play in them very well. You could get there through the roof, or through the back wall, or in some other way. This was all very interesting, and it was all ours'* EU Pb-01, PF-41, man born 1927). Everyone knew which shed was whose and there was no need for any names and numbers on them, which left plenty of free space for children to use the walls as a kind of 'information bureau' of their own.

There were inscriptions like this: 'Vovka, come at five. Tolka, Kolka and Ivan are coming as well.' And who knows what that all meant. On the walls there, we had this domestic mail exchange for kids. About where we were going, and why... 'Come round — we're here and here...' We usually wrote things up in chalk (EU Pb-01, PF-41, woman born 1927).

In conditions where there was a constant lack of living space in communal flats, the wood shed took over a more general storage function: apart from firewood, people might store household goods, as well as sports' and children's equipment, assuming they had any. This was often the place for bulky homemade products (like large barrels of pickled cabbage), and, in periods of acute food crisis, even small farmyard animals, mostly chickens and piglets.[1] At the same time, despite its multiple functionality, the shed was consist-

[1] This situation was also affected by changes in the social composition of the population of the central areas through an influx of workers from the outskirts and of people from villages, who brought their own social practices with them. In March 1941, keeping animals other than cats, dogs, and rabbits was officially banned in all the central districts of Leningrad (except Vasilievsky Island). The area of the ban was progressively increased during the post-war years, and in 1953, keeping all livestock and poultry was banned in the entire city ([O soderzhanii domashnikh zhivotnykh 1939; 1941; 1944; 1946; 1948; 1949; 1951; 1953]. For earlier examples of such bans, see e.g. [O poryadke soderzhaniya domashnego skota 1933]; [O soderzhanii domashnikh zhivotnykh 1939]). On the outskirts, in the working class districts or Soviet new construction sites, the residents would lay out kitchen gardens and keep small domestic animals or even cows in the sheds till the late 40s and early 50s, though it was officially forbidden (EU, Pb-00, woman born 1939; EU, PF-44, man born 1930).

ently associated with the male sphere, primarily because all labour with preparing firewood (trips to the depot, organisation of transportation, sawing, and, finally, maintaining the daily supply kept in the flat between the doors on to the 'black' staircase leading down to the courtyard) was considered a strictly male duty.[1]

Apart from their basic purpose of storage, the sheds might be used in other ways too: for instance, the 'paterfamilias' might create his own 'den' here, setting up a joiner's bench and even a plank bed, thereby creating his own personal space outside the overcrowded communal flat.[2] This practice was especially widespread in the post-war period when central heating started replacing wood-heated stoves (so the sheds were now empty, but had not yet been declared redundant: in the 1960s, they were often demolished, or replaced by leisure space or garages). It must be noted that residents did not always welcome the authorities' decision to refurbish the courtyard, which invariably implied the destruction of the sheds, and they seemed to prefer to preserve this extra household area effectively in their own personal possession rather than have the sheds replaced by, say, a communal courtyard garden.[3]

Fathers passed on their roles to the sons, who were encouraged to take an active part in 'firewood labours'[4]. If the father died prematurely or was called up to join the army during the war, the teenage boy would take upon himself the responsibility for the wood as well as the male's right to the shed.

Inf. *And then, in all these sheds, I remember, Dad would always be trying to make something, he must have liked doing it. Besides, we needed it, because everything for the household had to be done by*

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1 In the absence of an able-bodied male, this work could be done by caretakers or teenagers who wanted to earn an extra money. There were also professional wood-cutters who went from courtyard to courtyard or waited for customers in specially designated places, like the markets. [In extremity, it could also be done by females — cf. the reminiscence in Ilia Utekhin's article above about the girl who did this during the Blockade, to the astonishment of her daughter, hearing about this decades later. [Editor].

2 Later on, it was the garages that became such 'male territories' and played the role of workshops or places to store fruit, vegetables and home food provisions, as well as a place where groups of men could hang out together.

3 A conflict emerged in 1957 when the residents of a house tried to defend their sheds even though they no longer used them to store firewood. At this point, on the initiative of the Ispolkom, new types of sheds were built to replace the old ones. These were standardised and took up 3 square meters and were meant to be shared by the residents of three separate flats. However the residents thought this was not good enough [TsGA-SPb, f. 4948, op. 4, d. 310, ll. 11–12 rev.].

4 In much the same way, girls were introduced to 'women's work', and sometimes to the female community, through doing the washing in the courtyard laundry. Although manual washing was quite a hard job, mainly daughters were involved in it from a young age, which served to preserve traditional gender roles. Bringing firewood in for the stove or getting the washing to the attic to be dried could be the husband's or son's responsibility. In some houses washing was done in small groups, and then the laundry became the main communication and interaction site of the female community (see for instance [Ivanova 2001: 56]).

hand, we couldn't afford to buy anything. So we had a joiner's bench in the shed, some other device and instruments. [...] Afterwards, I was in charge of this shed. And I was — what? — 15 years old, in 1951.

Int. *So that in general it was the man who was in charge of the shed?*

Inf. *Of course. Mum hardly ever went there. I remember it was my own estate all right. <...> So what I am saying is that at one time it was where all my interests were centred. I was trying to make some things there... Well, my own territory. Because it was quite important at that time to have one's own space. [...] And I saw the shed for a while as my own territory, somewhere I could escape to and where there was no one, I was the master. And it was very important for me, I think, because in our room*[1] *we were always together, and this was something different* (EU Pb-01, PF-35, man born 1936).

Using the shed in this way was another contribution to the transformation of courtyard space into a leisure area — this was a place where the man could do some DIY 'in his own time'. Moreover, the shed-turned-workshop often became the site of male socialising, where men could drink in private rather than out in the courtyard 'right under everyone's nose', or indeed at home, where this would not have been possible to organise. This way, the *domestic* function of the courtyard was complemented by a *leisure* one.

Another important characteristic of these improvised sheds was the randomness of their positioning, which resulted in the creation of a large amount of *hidden corners* and cubby-holes ideal not just for children's games but also various non-normative forms of behaviour and leisure. For instance, they were used by both adults and teenagers for drinking and also for urination. In the post-war years the role of this space as a male zone that facilitated non-normative behaviour was partly transferred to the now emptied sheds. As a rule, neither the residents nor the house administration, perceived this situation as 'abnormal', although children could be prevented from playing in the area around the sheds, or in the 'black yard' as such.

They were drinking all right. There was always someone the worse for wear around. The older guys would often have a drink in a corner [v zakutochke]. Of course, nobody did it openly. It wasn't thought proper. Any more than it was to go and urinate in the centre of the courtyard. If you had to pee, it was more decent to use some space that was screened off, round the corner (EU Pb-01, PF-36, man born 1936).

[1] i.e. in the room that the informant shared with his family. [Editor].

Int. *And was there a lavatory in the courtyard?*

Inf. *No. Everybody went round the back of the shed. What do you think? They had to! Men! Well, what d'you think?... Nowhere else to go, was there?*[1] (EU Pb-00, PF-7, woman born 1937).

Wood sheds, log piles and cubby-hole corners served a yet wider range of functions for groups of teenagers who required spaces that were *visually inaccessible* to adults. In the cubby-holes created by the sheds and log piles, they would huddle together to smoke or experience the first intimacies with a member of the opposite sex ('snogging' or 'touching her up'). Those who owned sheds (or could get hold of their father's or neighbour's shed keys, or indeed, knew how to pick a lock) could even allow themselves to 'go the whole way'.

Another space used for this purpose was the cellars and attics (which were also accessible from the courtyard). Since these premises were used to store discarded items no longer in use (such as old mattresses), there was even the possibility of some 'comfort' here (and attics were also used to dry clothes). One of our informants remembers how older teenagers used to take girls that they had successfully 'pulled' to the attic or cellar. Since this was a communal space and well known to yardmen and policeman on the beat as a likely 'den of vice', younger children would be asked to keep a lookout and would then receive their first theoretical and practical lessons in 'adult' relations as a reward.[2]

In some cases this sort of entertainment could lead to actual assault. Women's anxieties frequently focused on these 'daily realities', especially in the post-war years: *'I always thought somebody would jump at me from behind a wood stack and drag me away or attack me, or kill me, and that was really scary'* (EU Pb-01, PF-32, woman born 1940). Compare: *'There were rumours that attics and cellars were the most terrible places, that you could be dragged in there and killed, and they'd pull your clothes off. You couldn't think of anything worse than a cellar* (Ibid.). The quotation below illustrates both the criminal and the 'romantic' adventures of a fifteen-year-old and his gang in a working-class area of the city immediately after the Second World War.

Inf. *Because our shed, when we stopped keeping pigs, it was empty, right? So they installed some bunk-beds there, Dad made something*

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[1] Before the Revolution, the courtyard often contained a toilet for passers-by with a notice on the front entrance. These toilets continued to exist in the Soviet era, although most of them became totally derelict and were demolished already before the War. Nevertheless, while lacking this vital element, the courtyards did preserve and still partly preserve the former function.

[2] The interview from which this is taken describes life in a rough area during the postwar years (EU Pb-01, PF-26, man born 1940).

to lie on, sit on, have some rest. [...] Well, we were young guys then, terrible hooligans... [...] So I once went away to fetch some wood, and the boys got together, grabbed a girl and... erm... in this shed of ours — Tolya[1] *knew where the keys were, that was simple — and they raped her there, right? And they all got caught. In short, Tolya Andreev got a five-year prison sentence, and he died in prison. Why am I saying all this? I could have easily been in their company, if I hadn't... if I'd been there.*[2] *[...]*

Int. *And what about girls — were there any of them around, or was it an all-male group?*

Inf. *No, the group wasn't mixed. But there were some girls about — to go to the cinema with, maybe, or we'd have a quick kiss and cuddle [poprizhimalis] in the shed somewhere. [...]. I remember, that's how I got to know Dina [informant's first wife]... Well, I sort of knew her, we hung around together, we knew... we met each other. So there I am going out one day — me from my ground floor, and her from further up the stairs. I looked at her, she looked at me, and we kissed. I took her by the hand and led her into the shed. But in fact nothing serious happened then* (EU Pb-02, PF-44, man born 1930).

As one can see from all this, the territory of the courtyard was divided into 'universal' and 'male' zones.[3] The first included the space that was open to general observation and regulated by norms that were 'taken for granted' and common to all courtyards, but which were made manifest primarily by the female population of the courtyard and by the official administration (which, as noted earlier, was to a large extent feminised in the post-war years). This zone (the first or 'clean' courtyard) tended to be reasonably well-kept and was meant in the first instance for children's games and walks, and was kept under the eye of the yardman, the grannies, and other residents with windows overlooking it. Thus, the open space of the courtyard can be classified as *universal (=female) — visible — under authority — clean — intended for leisure (=for the children)*.

The 'male' part of the courtyard space, on the other hand, overlapped to a large extent with the 'domestic' area (since it was men's 'domestic' activities that 'legitimated' their place in the courtyard). It included 'private' spaces such as sheds, and later garages, and the areas where 'courtyard workmen' such as carpenters did their

[1] All names are replaced by fictional ones.

[2] The story of how Tolya could get hold of the key is perfectly plausible, but might also be an invention. According to another version of the same event, this time recounted by the informant's daughter, the informant actually took an active part in what happened but, unlike his friend, managed miraculously to escape unscathed.

[3] Gender structuring of the courtyard space obviously deserves separate study and cannot be considered exhaustively in the framework of this article.

work if they had nowhere else to go, and also the territory round the domestic premises of various kinds (for instance the 'corners' in between the sheds, the area round the rubbish tip or litter bins), and also the domestic yard generally, and sometimes also cellars, attics, 'black' staircases. Because of being *beyond visual range* from the position of the observer of open space, this territory did not come under the control of the domestic administration and the collective of residents. Or, to be more accurate, what went on here was usually ignored — at least until it directly affected the main inhabitants of the building.[1] The rules of 'male space' were local to every courtyard and were established *a posteriori* — by main force on the part of the most active, authoritative and/or powerful group. It is therefore possible to classify this space as *domestic (=male) — unclean — invisible — non-controlled*. What is more, children in many cases had the opportunity to choose their space, and were able to manoeuvre between the open, stably regulated 'general' space and the less safe space of 'wider opportunities'. For boys and youths particularly, moving into 'male' space could constitute a specific form of peer-group socialisation.

There is an interesting case from before the war concerning a courtyard in one of the early Soviet buildings. This courtyard had log piles where teenagers used to build small hiding places (referred to as *butakhi*)[2] as a functional substitute for sheds. These constructions were used to articulate status relations within the group insofar as the right to the *butakha* belonged only to the leaders of the gang and the most authoritative members of the community. The *butakha* did not only prevent the teenagers from being seen but was also perceived as a form of 'private property'.[3] Therefore, despite the lack of any sort of locks, unauthorised incursion into someone else's territory could entail serious consequences for the transgressor.

The existence of the *butakha* marked and increased the status of the owner who could *invite people to his place* and in some cases even charge for this. It might also act as a place where money for, say, cigarettes or cinema tickets could be exchanged. The younger children perceived the very fact of being admitted to a *butakha* as a unique privilege, and hence were prepared to pay for it. For instance, the owner of a *butakha* who organised 'literary events' — *'[He] brought over some lads...who were several years younger, in the*

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[1] Or until acoustic signals (such as yells or loud swearing coming from that direction) compensated for the absence of visual signals.

[2] From *budka,* meaning booth, sentry-box, kennel. An analogous term is found in the vocabulary of the pigeon-fancier (the most colourful urban male community of the 1930s–50s) where the term *budka* is used for the pigeon loft.

[3] On the construction of a different type of teenage hideouts — 'the headquarters' (*shtaby*) that were used to rule over the entire group (based on material from a later date) see [Osorina 2000: 147–169].

shed, and there, in complete darkness, in a scary voice he retold 'The Laughing Man'[1] (EU Pb-01, PF-24, man born 1929) — was able to make an entrance charge for these.

There were simpler cases of use as well: *'We made caves in the stacks... made sort of fortifications, mines, and stayed in there'* (EU Pb-01, PF-35, man born 1936), for example. In other such instance, the boys *'got together in the corners [v zakutochkakh] to play cards, gamble,*[2] *spin the knife'* (EU Pb-01, PF-32, woman born 1926). For the younger part of the children's courtyard community, wood sheds and log piles served as an ideal territory for playing 'hide-and-seek' (*pryatki*) and 'tag' (*pyatnashki*), in which both boys and girls could take part. In contrast to the secret entertainment of the older children, these games were played out in the open and could provoke a negative reaction from the adults, who were concerned either for their children or for the contents of their sheds. In general, though, the *dual functionality of courtyard objects*, the fact that they could be used both for household purposes and leisure activities, was taken as read at the time.

In very densely built-up courtyards, children could end up playing on the roofs of the sheds (and sometimes even on the roof of the building itself), which served as the missing space of the courtyard, though on another level, and for this reason, created extra play options[3]. As a territory belonging to the children (and particularly the boys), the shed roofs became arenas where 'skirmishes' would regularly take place. The main purpose of these fights was to define/confirm the status of individuals in a group and therefore they needed to be demonstrative.[4]

Status value was also attributed to *sitting on the logs*, by the 'leading' courtyard group of older teenagers. As a rule, the average age of such a group would be 14–16, with a range of two to three years maximum between the oldest and youngest. Contrary to using sheds, where *invisibility* was crucial to teenagers, here, as with *butakhi*, it was above all important to show off one's power:

Inf. *When all the big boys [lit. rytsari, 'knights'] or, the important people, so to speak, the godfathers, were sitting on the stacks, they had the right to tell us: 'come here' — and we had to.*

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1 In the given case the 'intellectual' aspect of courtyard leisure is partly explained by the fact that newly-built areas, such as the informant here lived in, were inhabited to a considerable degree by families belonging to the Soviet elite.

2 Not just cards but also any other games played 'for money' (such as tossing coins) were considered forbidden.

3 Since the 1960s and to this day such a two-level use of the courtyard has been continued in the children's playgrounds created on top of warehouses, bomb-shelters, and garages.

4 These 'positional fights' were primarily directed not at an external audience but other members of the group itself who would watch while sitting on the roof itself.

Int. *And were these stacks a special place?*

Inf. *Yes, the logs, they were logs. They'd be spitting there, husking sunflower seeds, telling jokes. Among themselves. And we'd be hanging around. Because it was an unknown world, an adult world. They could call us over and say: 'Baryá, come here... Go buy me a mug of kvas'. All kinds of things they'd tell you to do, they weren't stuck for ideas... They'd tell you to go to the shops, or whatever else, they might say, if they happened to be short of cash: 'Fetch me a piece of white bread... with butter. Get it from your granny, quick!' And I'd go home, and cut the bread, and bring it, because I'd got the point: they needed it*[1] (EU Pb-01, PF-24, man born 1929).

The issue of how children and teenagers formed different courtyard groups in terms of age and what their mutual relationships were requires separate, more extensive, examination. Without dwelling on this in detail here, it is worth noting one circumstance essential to the understanding of courtyard generations. For a considerable number of informants the upper limit of their 'courtyard childhood' was the age of twelve to fourteen. At this age two developments were possible: in one case new, alternative communities would be formed on the principle of commonality of interests rather than residence (or 'territory') — as a rule, in these situations, *'the courtyard ceased to exist'* for the teenager. In another case, the courtyard would actually 'expand', as it were, across a larger local territory that would include neighbouring areas around the house. The unity of this new, now expanded, community was often defined by the presence of an older (semi-)criminal group that 'ruled over' this territory.[2] Such a group would in many cases include the courtyard leaders, which meant that the courtyard could potentially act as a 'conduit' into the criminal world.

The age of 14 was also a frontier of 'adulthood' in other ways. A fourteen-year-old boy was now more freely admitted to the adult male courtyard community — at the dominos table or in communal drinking sessions. Correspondingly, at this age all the 'justifications' that were seen to make children's courtyard leisure healthy and legitimate would disappear, and the teenager who now 'hung around the courtyard' would be classed by local vigilantes, such as

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[1] Compare a story about this sort of 'tribute' or 'tax' as narrated by Aleksandr Kolker: *"Sometimes I would put my violin under my pillow and stuff the case with 'batsilka' and 'balabaska', as well as 'chernyashka' and 'belyashka'. This is thieves' slang. We had lads in our courtyard who had already 'done time' ('chalilis"). They 'ruled over' the territory. And here was a boy wearing glasses and carrying a violin. Somebody called Churakha would grab me by the collar and ask: "Well, have you brought batsilka-balabaska?" 'Batsilka' was everything fatty, and 'balabaska' — everything sweet. 'Chernyashka' and 'belyashka' were kinds of bread. That was how I 'paid my taxes' with the stuff in my case, and then Churakha kept 'maza', that is did not let others offend me"* [Kryschuk, Landa 2002: 14].

[2] In the period examined such groups were called 'yobbos' (*gopniki*) or 'ruffians' (*shpana*), etc.

the grannies, as a member of the category of people who lived by 'courtyard rules' in a bad sense, or had fallen into 'bad company'.

At the same time, it was precisely groups of young people who could sometimes become activists in the movement for 'developing the courtyard'.[1] In this context, two striking examples come from the 1950s. The first relates to a residents' meeting held in 1957 where 'teenagers and young people' had been making a racket till late at night, *'breaking windows with a football while drunk and playing cards'*. The residents decided to make over another more suitable yard for gatherings of this kind (probably one without windows) and to help set up a sports area, because *'young people need to have somewhere for useful recreation'*. In the closing address the young people are not referred to as hooligans any more, but rather as 'Komsomol members', and they themselves are invited to apply to the District Committee of the Komsomol for help with setting up the sports ground [TsGA-SPb., f. 4948, op. 4, d. 310, ll. 21–21 rev.].

The second example concerns some older teenagers who had set up a football pitch in the courtyard themselves and who put a great deal of effort into disrupting building work on a kindergarten that was scheduled for building on the same spot. Night after night they would destroy everything done during the day. The local beat policeman, who knew the lads well from previous run-ins, was unable to win them over. It is clear that the answer they kept giving, *'Well, so where are we supposed to play football, then?'* counted as a valid argument. The upshot was that they escaped punishment, since the protest itself was absorbed into the wider campaign to clean up courtyards and organise rational leisure for children and teenagers. In fact, the policemen himself forced the organisation building the kindergarten to build a new pitch on some waste land nearby, and only at that point did the teenagers 'permit' the kindergarten to be built in their courtyard (EU Pb-04, PF-51, man born 1941).

In the post-war decades, central heating and gas supplies began to be introduced right across the city (previously, only small areas had had access to either). The installation process took more than twenty years to complete, but tens of thousands of buildings already had these services by the end of the 1940s. As gas and central heating arrived, the courtyards in the old part of town were refurbished, the now dismantled wood sheds being replaced by modest gardens

[1] In other words, the movement to make the courtyard the focus of 'moral education' and 'Communist education' by organising sports facilities and leisure clubs. A central role in this was played by the Komsomol and Pioneer movement: on the efforts to use the latter to introduce 'rational leisure' for children in courtyards, see: Catriona Kelly. *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890–1991*. New Haven, 2007. Chapter 11. [Editor].

and children's playgrounds. The new courtyard fixtures, designed to organise children's leisure, were rather uniform and quite limited in their range and in the ways they could be used: for the winter period there would be a slide for sledging and a skating rink, and for summertime a sandpit, a swing and, later on, in some places, some climbing ladder fixtures. In this period, the official position, implementing the idea of the 'well-maintained courtyard', perceived household fixtures and activity as such as something that *hindered children's leisure*. Thus, in 1949, in a report by the Commission for Assistance to Households with Children that outlined the results of an inspection of the state of children's play areas, as examples of *poor maintenance of courtyards* one finds cited drying laundry, sheds and logs, which are all said to 'overwhelm' the courtyards [TsGA-SPb, f. 4948, op. 1, d. 420, l. 12]. From this point on, the courtyard (with the exception of the tarmac path running along the house itself) often started to be referred to as a 'playground' (*ploschadka*), even if structures such as sheds remained standing and nothing was actually done to tidy it up. The dominant form of activity in this new playground-courtyard was, logically enough, children's leisure.

* * *

The modulation of the social context that occurred in the post-revolutionary years altered the traditional pragmatics of the courtyard and became one of the main factors in the energisation of courtyard life that took place over the next four and more decades. Insofar as it originally belonged to the sphere of practical housekeeping, and had a traditionally low status because of being associated with dirt, activities practised by members of the 'lower orders', and so on, the courtyard did not seem to be particularly valuable to anyone as a leisure space, and no-one had pretensions about 'owning' it. The courtyard became subject to appropriation by any number of residents, groups and generations, though these individuals and their families might be labelled 'uncultured' because of this. In turn, the view that the courtyard was an 'uncultured' space meant that a wider range of behavioural forms and practices were tolerated than in other public urban spaces, or in communal flats themselves. Drinking and gambling, excretion, and sexual experimentation were ignored, provided they did not become too blatant. But household maintenance and children's leisure were the most obviously legitimate activities.

In turn, these two functions defined the basic 'zoning' of courtyard space. And the 'household' section acquired the function of a 'male space, where many behaviour norms and practices that were clas-

sified as abject prevailed, while the 'open' or 'clean' area of the courtyard intended for children was under the control of the female sector of the community and of the household administration. However, members of the younger generation often preferred the uncontrolled 'household' or 'back' section with its inviting sheds and log piles, where the most varied kinds of game and behaviour could take place. Whichever way, the courtyard had a central role in children's socialisation, being the fundamental place where many of them observed adult behaviour outside the family, whether this meant learning 'approved' activities such as work tasks, or participating in elicit ones, such as drinking and gambling. It also, of course, was crucial in terms of peer-group socialisation: here children learned to associate with groups comprising other children of roughly their own age.

The contrast between the new, spacious and well-maintained Soviet courtyard, designed primarily for children's leisure and the (useful) practice of sports, and the old, dark and unhealthy courtyard of the previous era, emerged already in the 1920s. However, the actual realisation of this new courtyard concept on a wide scale began only in the 1950s. During the period the domestic 'male' component of the courtyard life was gradually losing its priority and acquiring a forced character, becoming an obstacle to its main function, which was now understood as leisure for children. A well-regulated yard now contained no household facilities, and many 'improper' forms of leisure, traditionally characteristic of male courtyard communities, were ruled out.[1] Equally, yardmen and 'courtyard grannies' exercised a far less significant role.[2] Thus, from the 1960s, the courtyard acquired the definitive and 'respectable' status of a *space for children*.

Abbreviations

TsGA-SPb: Central State Archive, St Petersburg.

Archival Citations

TsGA-SPb, f. 151, op. 5, d. 139. 'Ispolnitelnyi komitet Soveta Deputatov trudyashchikhsya Petrogradskogo raiona gor. Leningrada. Dokladnye zapiski i perepiska s domokhozyaistvami o sostoyanii krasnykh ugolkov' [Executive Committee of the Soviet of People's Deputies, Petrograd District, Leningrad. Reports and Correspondence with

[1] At the same time, in cases where hideouts are available, for instance, formed by equipment intended for children, such as little huts or the empty space under the slide, even in the new courtyards one can encounter small communities of drunks.

[2] Changes to the local housing administration, in particular the absorption of small housing offices into large district-wide ones, not only reduced the status of the house manager and the yardman, but also of the 'courtyard grannies'.

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Translated by Andy Byford

Courtyard chess and domino players, 1960s [This image, and the others included, are from the family archive of T.Ya. Fomenko and N.N. Orlovskaya, by whose kind permission they appear here]

Grannies, children, and washing hanging out to dry in a courtyard on Prospekt Marksa (now Bolshoi Sampsonievskii prospekt), Vyborg Side, Leningrad, early 1930s.

Children in a courtyard on Prospekt Marksa, early 1930s.