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On the immobility of architecture

Panel-block architecture relies on industrial, prefabricated building construction, created by casting and curing concrete slabs, and transporting them for assembly to future panel-block neighbourhoods. Language metaphors suggest that concrete is stable, solid, and immovable—in many languages, the noun for real estate translates as “immobile”—so few people would consider such architecture to be dynamic, fluid, and responsive both to abstract ideas, and to social and political change.

In 2017, Moscow authorities ordered the demolition of over five thousand panel-block apartments built during Nikita Khrushchev’s industrial mass-housing campaign, aiming to relocate a million-and-a-half Muscovites. Residents could veto whether their panel-block building would be demolished, but property owners lured by promises of better housing voted to demolish their own homes. I explore such motivations in conversation with five anonymous inhabitants critical of current policy, merging their narratives with long-term anthropological research on the history of twentieth-century art and architecture.

On February 24, 2022, Russia began a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. An early symbol of war became Soviet mass-housing blocks devastated by bombing raids, standing with missing façades and exposed furniture. In newly occupied regions of Ukraine, private Russian contractors are currently building panel-block mega-projects, arguably, to solidify Russia’s presence in the region. These contractors took ownership of Soviet-era panel-block factories following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, revealing how architecture can be destroyed, colonized, built anew, and mobilized, all to accommodate political and economic agendas. Originally, this project used watercolors to create a contemporary aesthetic of panel-block mass housing; now these watercolours have been put into motion by using digital animation and stop-motion techniques to decry Russia’s brutal and unrelenting war.