

# Mutations of publicness: from the social condenser to social distancing



```

open ('Mutations of publicness: from the social condenser to social distancing.txt') as mutations_of_publicness

text_data = text_analysis (mutations_of_publicness)
  Total word count = 4129; Average word length = 5.22; First person pronouns per 1000 words = 4;
  Proper nouns per 100 words = 8.1; Total unique words = 1618; Longest word = 23; Average sentence length = 29.49;
  Stop words per 100 = 41.9; Similarity to 'The Library of Babel' = 0.88; Average syllables per word = 1.7;
  Total references to "infrastructure" = 10

font_data = text2font_data_conversion (text_data)
  dimension (unit width = 1.59; pen width = 0.84)
  proportion (cap height = 1.18; bar height = 0.99; asc. height = 0.94; desc. height = 0.70; x-height = 0.64)
  shape (horiz. increase = 1.27; vert. increase = 1.97; contrast = 0.96; superness = 0.47; slanting = 0.0)
  optical corrections (aperture = 0.58; corner = 0.69; overshoot = -0.29; taper = 0.28)

return: 'mutations_of_publicness.otf'

```

Developed by radical Soviet architects in the early 20th century, the social condenser sought to transform public spaces into machines for social interaction. Michal Murawski looks at how contemporary (mis)interpretations of the term have created a new breed of condensers that counter the very social values they claim to uphold.

## Text by Michal Murawski

The social condenser is a theoretical concept developed by radical Soviet Constructivist architects in the 1920s. It is devoted to conceiving how architecture, the city and public space can coalesce into an integrated machine for bringing people into close proximity with each other, and – like a condenser or transformer in an electrical circuit – increasing the “voltage” or intensity of their interactions. The effect of this act of social condensation, for lead proponents Moisei Ginzburg and others, would be to transform people from alienated, isolated bourgeois subjects to self- and mutually fulfilled members of a collectively oriented, radical new society.

Among the most important and influential architectural concepts of the past hundred years, it has more recently been misappropriated and used as the design inspiration for a dubious new breed of multi-functional parks and public spaces (many but not all of them privately owned). Starting in the 1980s and 1990s with the Parc de la Villette and Promenade Plantée in Paris, the trend culminated in the second decade of the 21st century with Manhattan's High Line, Singapore's Gardens by the Bay, Moscow's Zaryadye Park, and Salesforce Park in San Francisco. Not forgetting projects closer to home, including Greenwich Peninsula's The Tide (a particularly dystopian ersatz High Line, also designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro) and the failed Garden Bridge project. These new quasi-social condensers, crucially, have a tendency to imagine themselves as projects

devoid of infrastructure (understood as the technical hardware which underlies the everyday functioning of society): these are self-avowedly *infrastructureless* or “post-infrastructureal” terrains, which claim to function exclusively on the superstructural level of emotion, spectacle and “wow effect”. This ideology of the victory over infrastructure is already expressed very neatly in the design of Zaryadye Park, which turns a former railway line into a zone of gentrified and sensuous urban pleasure; while its parameters were expressed with particularly earnest lucidity by Timur Bashkaev (speaking at a public discussion devoted to architecture and power, which I organised during my field research in Moscow), one of the local Russian architects working on the Zaryadye project together with Diller Scofidio:

[The High Line] triggers emotions ... and that's it, there's nothing else there ... no communication, no transport, no nothing ... And so Zaryadye, its main task, yes ... [is to] trigger enormous positive emotions ... colossal “wow effects”.

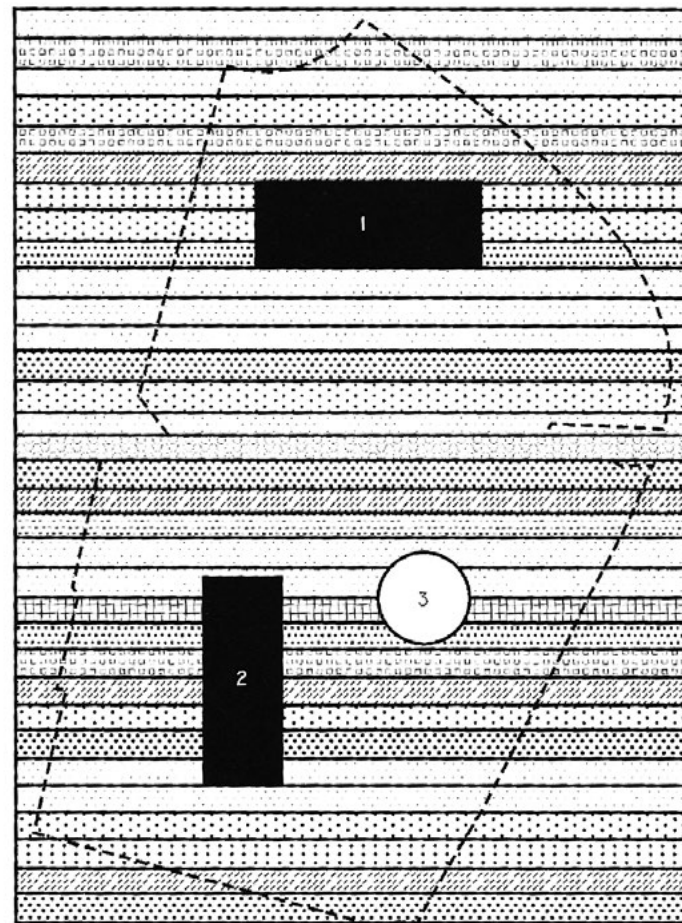
How have the world's many new social condensers coped with regimes of “social distancing”? And was the way people chose to behave in the social condensers during pre-pandemic times really all that different to the social distancing now being enforced during the current crisis? Will a more radical, truly collective type of social

condensing become possible after social distancing measures are gradually reversed? The answer may lie in how this new infrastructureless space is already “socially distanced”. Indeed, any move towards a substantive, progressive, radical – truly public, communal, inclusive, free, wild and equal – mode of social condensation will only be possible when architecture and public space systematically confront their own *infrastructures* – understood here more broadly not just as technical equipment, but also in the Marxian sense as referring to the ownership structures, economic relationships and structures of exploitation and inequality underpinning them. Indeed, the contours of a new infrastructure-conscious social condensation have begun to come into view under conditions of late lockdown: not on the High Line or in Greenwich Peninsula, but in the shadow of the newly-empty plinths dotted around the cities of the world since the end of May 2020.

Rediscovered by French scholars like Anatole Kopp and Henri Lefebvre in the 1960s, the social condenser became one of the most influential concepts in 20th-century architecture and planning, particularly after it was picked up by the most influential young architects and theorists of the following generation, among them Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis, Bernard Tschumi and Zaha Hadid. However, in the process of being incorporated into the language of the then emerging new ideology of architecture and public space, it was stripped of its radical content (see the 2017 special issue of *The Journal Of Architecture* I co-edited on this topic). This ideology – and practice – of public space advocated bringing bodies together in a close, sensuously, haptically, somatically intense type of interaction; but it now lost its connotations of radical, transformative social change. In other words, the architectural theory of somatic communism (to borrow Paul B. Preciado’s phrase) laid the ground for the architectural reality of somatic capitalism.

This concept became a key source of inspiration for theories of the design of new types of parks and public spaces. Rem Koolhaas explicitly deployed this concept in his unbuilt 1982 design for the Parc de la Villette in Paris, and even mock-“patented” the idea of the condenser he developed for the park in his book *Content*, which he defined (in classic late 20th-century architectural gibberish) as “programmatically layering upon vacant terrain to encourage dynamic coexistence of activities and to generate, through their interference, unprecedented events”.

Rem Koolhaas did not win the competition, but Bernard Tschumi’s realised concept incorporated many of the same inspirations and ideas as Koolhaas’. La Villette became the blueprint for a new typology of multi-functional, high-concentration “post-park”,



Rem Koolhaas, Patent for “Social Condenser”, 1982

which was realised in projects such as Paris’s Promenade Plantée (1993), Chicago’s Millennium Park (2004) and, in its most celebrated version, New York’s High Line (2009-). In the words of landscape architect James Corner – who worked on the project together with the practice Diller Scofidio + Renfro – on the High Line, “the visitor becomes as much a performer as a viewer, more deeply engaged in participating in the theatricality of urban life – the promenade as an elevated catwalk, urban stage, and social condenser”. In this new type of urban parkscape, the stroll is conceived as a multi-level, multi-sensorial, intersubjective, even artistic and theatrical, experience of “social condensation”. Intense on every level, but – in mocking negation of the ideas of the Soviet architectural ideologists who conceived this idea – utterly depoliticised.

A similar understanding of sensorial intensity underlies the use of ideology in Zaryadye Park in Moscow. In the shadow of the Kremlin, it is another landscaped social condenser designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, in collaboration with landscape architects Hargreaves Jones and several Russian practices; it was opened by Vladimir Putin in September 2017.

As the park’s first director, Pavel Trehleb, told me, Zaryadye consists of “an incredible potpourri of unlimited, diverse types of services” that allow visitors to complete a “unique pathway” (*unikalnyi marshrut* or “marching route”)



Vladimir Putin in Zaryadye Park. Kremlin.ru

and “experience a series of awesome emotions in an average time of just two to three hours!” This two- to three-hour *marshrut* is not the only one available, he qualified. There are, in fact, a series of visiting “cycles” that have been “programmed into” the park, lasting “from a minimum of one and a half hours ... all the way up to an entire day”. This kind of intricate visitor programming is necessary and essential, Trehleb insisted, because “for the brain, it is very important that you find yourself constantly within some sort of external impulses that constantly nourish your emotional system”.

“What is our main role?” asked Trehleb. “We charge people with positive energy, emotions ... which allow them to live, to be joyful.” Without knowing it, this description gives literal expression to this mutated understanding of Zaryadye as a “social condenser”, an intensifier of electrical currents. He underlines it by making use of the fact that the name Zaryadye, taken from the old trading district of Moscow that used to occupy this site (*za ryad’ami* or “behind the trading rows”), can also be interpreted as a pun on the Russian word for appliance charger (*zaryadka*). This act of charging also carries with it an explicitly social function, even a patriotic one. The “positive energy” emanated by the park allows people to “change their attitude towards the city and the country”; it impacts on “people’s emotional state, on their social adaptability. Even if you have financial problems at home,

or family or other life problems, nevertheless you have [in the park] a source of energy, a place to charge yourself, you go there to suffuse yourself with useful energy”.

To cynically interpret these words, what Trehleb is trying to say is that if you – the inhabitant of Moscow – are feeling down, or if you are feeling poor, don’t bother going out onto the streets to make a racket, don’t take it out on the government or the municipality. Instead, why don’t you just come and suffuse yourself with positive energy in your local social condenser?

The social function of the social condenser, then, is interpreted here in *precisely* the opposite way to the sense in which the architects of the 1920s meant it. For Trehleb, the “parkscape” becomes a transformer not for intensifying social energies, but for dulling or relaxing them. The social condenser becomes a social *de-condenser*. The park is here conceived not as a political machine, but as an “anti-politics machine” (to misquote a phrase from the anthropologist James Ferguson, coined with reference to the functioning of western development agencies in southern Africa).

Crucially, the social condensation of the High Line and of Zaryadye is an intensely theatrical experience; it is about showing off to your fellow park users, and interacting with them on an aesthetic rather than a political level. This type of theatrical sociality lends itself extremely well to various forms of technological mediation.



Selfies in Zaryadye Park. Photograph by Michal Murawski

Most prominently, through the medium of the selfie, social condensation can be broadcast to the whole world, turning architecture into *selfie-itecture*.

One of the core functions of Zaryadye Park, for Trehleb, is tied up precisely with the selfie: “Most people come here because of the excellent views; these are views which really never existed before. Through the birch forest, you can see the Pokrovsky [St. Basil’s] Cathedral; from the Soaring Bridge you can see panoramas [of the Kremlin]; from under the glass ceiling [the vast, decorative bulbous roof suspended over the grassy knoll atop the philharmonic building, in the eastern corner of the park], you have glorious panoramas [of Moscow and the Kremlin]. And these are really remarkable views, visual images, which allow you to take legendary, amazing photographs!”

The two most popular selfie spots in Zaryadye are the “northern landscapes” or “tundra” area, laid out on top of the park’s media centre, and the Soaring Bridge, essentially a viewing spot that juts out from Zaryadye over the Moskva River.

The bridge and tundra are usually the most congested fragments of Zaryadye. In good weather, it is often difficult to force one’s way through the huddled, bulging collectivity of people engaging in a sort of selfie sociality: photographing themselves and each other, adjusting poses and framings, fixing hair, self-deprecatingly

laughing at their own vanity, gently haranguing passers-by who stepped into their shots or politely thanking those who waited. The bridge’s functioning as a piece of selfie-itecture, a machine designed to trigger people’s desires to photograph themselves, is – of course – an integral function of its design.

Arguably, the more social *condensation* becomes mediated through technology, the more it begins to herald the act of social *distancing*. We can see this, for example, in The Tide project in London, a particularly blatant piece of selfie-itecture. Unlike the high lines of Paris and New York, which are actually built atop former, repurposed pieces of urban transport infrastructure, The Tide is a one-kilometre chunk of fake High Line awkwardly integrated into an enormous private housing development adjacent to the former Millennium Dome. The PR materials of the Tide project make a horrendously emphatic point of over-emphasising the possibility of sensuous, spontaneous social, commercial, creative and artistic interaction atop and beneath the elevated parkway. Regular craft markets are held. Mediocre (or downright miserable) blue-chip public artworks – including offcuts by Damien Hirst, Antony Gormley and Richard Wilson – populate the peninsula. Users are encouraged to download and avail themselves of smartphone apps to aid them in every aspect of the “peninsula experience” – even meditation.

If you are feeling down,  
or if you are feeling poor,  
don't bother going out  
onto the streets to make  
a racket, don't take it out  
on the government or the  
municipality. Instead, why  
don't you just come and  
suffuse yourself with positive  
energy in your local social  
condenser?



OPO meditation experience, The Tide, London. Photograph by Michal Murawski

One app in particular is described as: “a portal that blends the power of meditation with the beauty of the world. Simply open the OPO app, be guided to an OPO portal near you, have a seat and immerse in the OPO soundscape. Relax and breathe in the view.”

I visited The Tide during its opening weekend in July 2019. A “pop-up” music festival was taking place at the entrance to the elevated promenade. A short distance away, a young couple was seated on a bench, their eyes closed. They had their headphones in and were availing themselves of the OPO meditation experience. Another man was sitting on the opposite edge of the same bench at a safe social distance from the couple. He had arrived before them and was having a video call on his phone. The couple, distracted from their mindfulness experience, occasionally cast disapproving glances in his direction, before eventually asking him, quite rudely, to decrease the volume of his phone call. In the social *de-condenser*, then, social meditation trumps social - albeit disembodied - communication.

As the social-distancing regime has come into force around the world, the majority of the world’s post-park social (de-)condensers closed their doors. The High Line closed on 16 March (but reopened on 16 July) and Zaryadye shut on 26 March (although it reopened in May, despite rising Covid-19 infection rates, ahead

of Russia’s dubious constitutional-reform referendum, which gave Vladimir Putin the de-facto right to remain president for life and made any form of non-heterosexual marriage unconstitutional). Singapore’s (much larger-scale) Gardens by the Bay reopened in April, but with strict social distancing measures in place. Many “traditional” parks – where the intensity of multi-functional sociality is less – by contrast, have remained open throughout, including New York’s Central Park and London’s Royal Parks (although Moscow’s Gorky Park was closed).

In London, social-distancing measures were enforced or at least instructed in some parks, but the style and intensity of their enforcement is quite inconsistent and variable. The New River Walk (opened in 1996) in the inner London borough of Islington, which lies on my regular jogging route, is an interesting case in point. A Promenade Plantée-esque post-park in some ways, the New River is a landscaped series of connected ponds, mimicking the former appearance of the real waterway that ran through this section of London until being routed underground between the 1890s and 1940s.

Today, under lockdown, a north-south one-way system (resembling those periodically put into place in Russian parks and public spaces) is in place throughout the New River. Some benches are given the appearance of

biohazards or crime scenes thanks to lines of red-white tape (see Singapore’s *tape\_measures* Instagram account) or they serve as objects to which blue arrow stickers marking the one-way system are attached. A vaguely pathological atmosphere is reinforced by white human-body outlines painted onto the surface of the walkway, at intervals of two metres.

As I ventured out of the empty park, the streets of the city were free not only of people but also of cars. An unusual proportion of the traffic was constituted by traditional London black cabs (people prefer hackney carriages to Uber’s standard Toyota Priuses, because the driver and passengers are separated by a screen). A creepy proportion of taxis seemed to be decorated with advertisements for video communication apps such as Zoom. “Meet happy,” says one of these ads.

Consultancy firms, developers, ad agencies and municipalities frequently measure the success of an architectural or planning project by comparing the number of selfies and other photographs uploaded to Instagram at a given site before and after its completion. Following the closure of Zaryadye and the High Line, one might have expected the volume of selfies to grind to a halt. But city dwellers continued to post “throwback” images from their archives reminiscing after pre-Covid social condensing.

What does this global outpouring of nostalgia for social condensation suggest? It seems to portend, on the surface at least, that people are aching to go back to normal, to a life of intense and sensuous, paradisiacal parkland interactions.

As I have been trying to suggest, however, the type of social condensation cultivated and practised in the world’s post-parks over the past two decades is deprived of certain key ingredients. It adds up to a caricature of the socially transformative, collectively intense type of condensation propagated by Moisei Ginzburg and his comrades in Moscow of the 1920s. It is proprietorial, self-focused rather than substantively inter-subjective and in many ways, *anti-social*. It is built atop the remnants of the infrastructure of 20th-century high modernity (or it pretends to be built atop an imitation of this kind of infrastructure), yet it effects a disavowal or negation of these pieces of infrastructure. It reduces social interaction to the superstructural or sensual, while apparently repressing the physical infrastructure, as well as the political and economic conditions which allow for these projects to come into being. The High Line is in essence a bullet of gentrification running through Lower Manhattan, the direct effect of whose construction has been an exponential increase in land values in its immediate vicinity and the attendant process of class, race and social cleansing. The Tide is a desperately overwrought façade for an odious privately-built housing

development, which provides low-quality, rabbit-warren dwellings for mortgage-bound middle-income (predominantly white) house buyers at the lowest reaches of the “property ladder”, while shunting the minimal legally required quantity of (predominantly non-white) social housing tenants into a badly-designed poor enclave several hundred metres removed from the riverfront (and the above-bemoaned pseudo-High Line which abuts it). Each of these quasi-condensers, of course, was built by minimally reimbursed migrant labourers, distinct from its users in class and race – most visibly so in the case of New York, where the greater share of the labour force were Hispanic *Gastarbeiters* from Central America, and in Moscow, whose construction workforce is constituted by migrant labourers from the impoverished former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

Perhaps, acting out their stymied desire for inter-human interaction following the lifting of lockdowns, people will begin to take over the world’s selfie-tectural post-parks and to indulge in a more expansive, substantive, critical, generous type of public social condensation on the terrains of these sterile, highly surveilled spaces. But I wouldn’t bet on it. The 300 Muzak-blasting speakers constituting Zaryadye’s tannoy system (most of which also have surveillance cameras attached to them) will continue disciplining the movements of park visitors, while white middle-class heterosexual couples will continue to blissfully and silently meditate amid the generic shrubbery of the socially cleansed Greenwich Peninsula, while passively-aggressively shushing the conversations of black people seated within earshot. The infrastructure itself, the Marxian *basis*, “the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises the superstructure [Überbau]” will remain hidden from view in these greenwashed playgrounds of capitalism.

But the era of Covid has given rise to a new type of social energy. Right at the beginning of the lockdown, behavioural psychologists – including those connected to the government’s shadowy and dubious “Nudge Unit” – predicted that *something* was coming. A long period of lockdown, the psychologists claimed, would give rise to a seething cauldron of “lockdown fatigue”, whose release would manifest itself in exuberant social interaction and a consequent second wave of infection. This reasoning, in effect, became one of the core arguments deployed by Boris Johnson, his advisers and Dominic Cummings’s milieu of misfit Malthusians, to delay the onset of lockdown by over two weeks (relative to the majority of European countries). The effect has been, as many of these same people have now admitted, a massive increase in the infection and death rate. As I write, the UK has suffered 40,000 Covid-19 deaths, by far the worst figure on the European continent.

A grossly disproportionate share of those killed, as the government's own report (which it attempted to self-suppress) revealed, were people of African and Asian descent. In the United Kingdom, for example, people of Bangladeshi or black people of African or Caribbean origin are about twice as likely to die from Covid-19 than white people. In the United States, black people are three times more likely than white people to die of the disease.

It is not surprising that the murder of George Floyd unleashed such a torrent of rage and disgust. In part, this was because of its vivid, grotesque and unambiguous performance of brutality, which brought to consciousness the pervasive, merciless racialised violence at the heart of the American state. But there is plenty of evidence that the despair and anger caused by Covid and lockdown – not just the death rate but the hugely asymmetrical impact of lockdown on the economic lives of poorer people, among whom people of colour are heinously overrepresented in most of the Western world – contributed to the strength of the reaction. As novelist Ben Okri has pointed out, Floyd's dying words, "I can't breathe", had a particularly morbid symbolic resonance in 2020, these being the very same three words that Covid sufferers elsewhere repeated as their immune systems battled the respiratory symptoms associated with the disease; three words that black people in America were three times more likely to utter than white people.

The lockdown, then, did not just end – as the Nudge Unit, in its ill-meaning naivety, had predicted – with drinkers rushing to the pubs and/or gentrifying white urbanites flocking to the meditation benches. It ended with righteous angry crowds, predominantly non-white, taking to the street and demanding justice, reparations and symbolic retribution. It ended with the wave of raw, spontaneous, iconoclastic social effervescence that apparently began in late May and early June with the spontaneous tearing down of several monuments (to Edward Carmack, Robert E. Lee and Charles Linn) in Tennessee and Alabama; it gathered momentum and arrived in Europe on 7 June with the toppling and sinking of the likeness of slaver Edward Colston in Bristol and, days later, the genocidal rubber baron King Leopold in Brussels; it rippled back over the ocean with intensified force, swallowing up dozens more monuments not only to slave-owners, slavery-glorifiers and colonisers from Robert E. Lee to Christopher Columbus, but also racists and bigots from the more recent past, such as the black-hating, gay-bashing mayor of Philadelphia, Frank Rizzo.

It gave rise to surreal, semiotically confounding gestures such as the simultaneous entombing of monuments to Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi on Parliament Square. As a worker putting up scaffolding told me, when I asked him how he felt about the fact that he was building a metal cage around the likeness of Nelson Mandela: "This is the weirdest fucking thing I've ever done; I feel like I'm high." As I write, this tide has peaked on the eve of United States Independence Day with Donald Trump's speech at the foot of Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. Standing beneath the god-sized figures of slave-owner presidents hewn into a mountainside, on land stolen from the Lakota Sioux by the US government, Trump decried the "angry mobs" and – extraordinarily – managed to link iconoclasm to "cancel culture". "This," he said, "is the very definition of totalitarianism [sic]."

Artists, architects and scholars, from Sigfried Giedion to Christo, have for decades been announcing the death of monumentality as we know it and heralding its alleged obsolescence or withering with the arrival of a new – counter-monumental or post-monumental – aesthetic or mode of public space. Sites, such as Zaryadye and the High Line see themselves precisely as epigones of this new type of "anti-monumental" or "non-monumental" architecture – horizontal rather than vertical, in symbiosis with nature rather than desiring to master it, humble and welcoming rather than monstrous and foreboding in affect. Yet – unlike the monuments to slavers and racists, which do little to veil the infrastructure of hate, violence and subjugation from which they arose – these new types of space disavow the violence they rest on and enable. At the core, however, these apparent PPParadises (privatised public paradises) function as machines of social alienation rather than convergence, and as enablers and accelerators of class-, race- and gender-based stratification and inequality.

The brutal honesty of a reactionary monument to a Colston or a Lee encourages – under crisis-accelerating conditions of pandemic – a furious, justice-fuelled sociality to coagulate in its orbit. The disingenuous, asymmetrical, non-monumental sterility of PPParadisiacal public space triggers little other than lethargy. This type of pseudo-public, pseudo-somatic, pseudo-collective architecture is disingenuous about the violence at its core, and all the more difficult therefore to unmask and dismantle. By contrast, the advantage of figures of dead white men rendered in stone or bronze is that – in all their vulgar, obsolete, dumb monumentality – they are easy enough to string up and pull to the ground. ◊

Statue of Mahatma Gandhi, Parliament Square, London. Photograph by Michal Murawski

