Commentary

Secret Cities, Closed Cities: Amazement, Bafflement, Fear, and Anxiety

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The subtitle of this article, “Amazement, Bafflement, Fear, and Anxiety,” is taken from Gregor Sailer’s (2012) photo essay of secretive cities around the world, entitled Closed Cities. Such terms are used to highlight the confusion that has accompanied zoned spaces, jurisdictions, and most recently “smart city” plans under development by digital media companies. This article’s reading of Sailer’s photographs, which is followed by a contrasting set of photographs from the book ZATO (Novikov, 2019), represents an effort at documenting a brief history of such secret spaces, and in so doing attempts to demystify the range of emotions and promotional efforts that have tended to obfuscate the economic business plans of such exceptional cities and spaces. As a consequence, the main arguments of this brief article stand in stark contrast to more literal interpretations of Sailer’s photographic project, such as Joerg Colberg’s (2013) analysis that “The photographs are not banal, the places are.” Given the intense security and often concentrated business models and industries in such spaces, however, the term “banal” is misleading at best. Secret cities are hardly banal. Rather Sailer’s (2012) Closed Cities represents intensely governmentalized and exceptional spaces that often serve to both experiment with—and guide—our collective visions of future cities, economies, and lifestyles. The following juxtaposition of Sailer (2012) and Novikov’s (2019) photographs demonstrates that secret cities are not shuttered spaces, rather they capture and represent biopolitical and economic experiment zones, where exceptions are developed into rules.

At first glance, the first pages of Sailer’s (2012) photography book do present a rather stark—and yes, seemingly banal—visual preface. It opens with a decidedly barren map. Granted, we are not so much amazed at the outset, but nor are we overcome by a page-turning wave of banality. Rather, we are baffled. What kind of map is this? It only features six small dots accompanied by the names of cities and their country or state abbreviations: Nordelta (AR), Mirny (RUS), and so on. The map, which runs over two facing pages, is encircled by longitude and latitude degrees to the east, west, north, and south. At the bottom right is a small scale in miles and kilometres.
The sparse nature of this “table of contents-as-map” not so subtly sets the stage for Sailer’s series of photos. There is an ecological and environmental consistency to this collection of photographs, the images depict barren, depressing, and inhospitable spaces, cities, and landscapes. A particularly stark series of photos represents examples of domestic architecture from brutalist Soviet apartment blocks, another set focuses on Middle Eastern migrant worker camps. In all these photographs, and indeed throughout the entire book, humans are noticeably absent—entirely.

In the book’s afterword, Margit Zuckriegel (2012) refers to the collection of photos as depicting a “no-man’s land” or simply as “neutral” (p. 251). On the surface, these spaces, sites, and structures are seemingly not made for humans, or at least ones that value or seek happiness. Yet neutrality, banality? No. Humans clearly persist in many photos, for example through an image capturing clothes drying in the wind (see Figure 1), invoking apocalyptic questions. Are these ecological wastelands? Have they been abandoned? Clearly they have not, since selective images of Sailer’s (2012) closed cities depict economic activity: exhaust or steam billows from a chimney in one photo, illuminated lights and street lamps are seen in many others, dust emanates from a deep and wide mining pit in one particularly grandiose two-page photo (see Figure 2). To invert Colberg’s (2013) point then, these are certainly banal photographs, but the spaces are decidedly not. Why else would Sailer bother to capture them?

**Figure 1: Clothes dry in wind**

Closed cities are not closed down or abandoned spaces, nor are they devoid of humans, as Sailer’s (2012) photo essay would have us believe at first glance. But they may be apocalyptic or at least ethically dubious laboratories. More on that latter.

Closed cities are also known by other names. “Secret cities” or better “Soviet secret cities” being the most common, given the eastward glance of much of the scholarly literature, contemporary Western geopolitical anxieties, and also photographic lenses.
Kate Brown’s (2013) comparative study of American and Russian “atomic cities” follows this trajectory, as does urbanist Keller Easterling’s (2014) analysis of the “Russian science city” in her popular book *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*.

Two threads, at the very least, persist in regard to these terms for emergent, zoned spaces. The first is the recognition of a city that is distinct from others—they are almost universally secluded from the rest of the nation and world—through walls, fences, and checkpoints that strictly control entry and exit. Closed cities are often purposefully excluded from maps, they are spaces to be surreptitiously hidden and then later revealed to the world. There is also a common ideological sense of purpose in closed cities, given the focus on security and military industries and the cultivation of a privileged “classless” status for its inhabitants.

Apart from seclusion, security, and secrecy, the other main characteristic of such cities, as represented in a selection of Sailer’s (2012) photos, is a strict focus on economy—on purposefully opaque business and work. Zuckriegel’s (2012) afterword in Sailer’s book confirms this thesis: “Closed cities are ... communities defined and created for a particular purpose, architectural and urban surrogates pragmatically designed to accommodate work forces or to allow some particular work to be performed” (p. 249). Zuckriegel, however, curiously notes that closed cities have not evolved over time.

Not surprisingly, representations of the closed city in books, popular essays, and documentary film largely focus on their military economies and research and development activities. These are largely “company towns,” not unlike the modern industrial cities that thrived in the 1950s—think iron production companies in cities throughout the Ohio river valley, the pulp and paper mills along the west coast of Canada, or the coal mines in the valleys of southern Wales. And just as many of these one-industry towns started to suffer and collapse in the 1970s, so too did many closed,
secret, or nuclear cities after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of negotiated arms treaties. And here is where we begin to be amazed, baffled, and so forth, this in opposition to Zuckriegel’s contention that closed cities do not “evolve.”

**ZATO: From fusion to tax credits**

Just as with many cities and zoned urban spaces around the world, closed cities in Russia undertook efforts at rebranding themselves as new forward-looking centres of economic production during the years following perestroika and the fall of the Soviet Union (1991—onward). In 1995, for example, Russian government officials held what *The Times* newspaper reported was “an extraordinary trade exhibition in Moscow” (Beeston, 1995) (p. 5), highlighting the economic switch in closed secret cities from “swords to sofas” and other domestic products. According to the report, “The competition among the secret cities is stiff” (Beeston, 1995, p. 5). Three short years later, Russian closed cities witnessed another attempt at rebranding, emerging as post-secretive. In 1998, a number of closed cities working in conjunction with American state and industry officials “launched an ambitious scheme … to turn Russia’s 12 secret cities — homes of its top nuclear scientists and technicians — into silicone valleys.” (Beeston, 1995, p. 5) Former U.S. Secretary of Energy Bill Richard thus exclaimed that “We are putting $30 million of US taxpayers’ money into helping people start small businesses. I am confident US businesses will follow” (Masterman, 1998, p. 20).

Following former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s early 1980s experiment with “enterprise” (tax-free) zones (Thornley, 1991) and other financial inducements for businesses to move into economically deprived areas, post-Soviet secret cities became sites of financial experimentation and exception. Secret cities, however, had always been exceptional spaces in financial terms, as Kate Brown (2013) notes in her terrific secret cities book entitled *Plutopia*. In the Soviet Union and the United States, secret cities offered an exceptionally comfortable middle-class lifestyle for working-class individuals and their families. Brown (2013) writes:

[Nuclear cities] … generated happy childhood memories, affordable housing, and excellent schools in prize-winning model communities that became havens for the new nuclear families that inhabited them. The plutonium pioneers … recall never having to lock their doors, children roaming safely, friendly neighbours, and the absence of unemployment, indigence, and crime. (p. 3)

As a new Russian secret city emerged in the 1990s, however, this classless myth of 1950s “plutopia” was replaced by the 1990s business model of fossil fuel extraction and tax avoidance. Hence it might be more appropriate to say that such cities were not so much exceptional as integral to the new financial order, offering spaces from which the booming Russian oil and gas industries could escape taxation and other forms of oversight and regulation.

Part of the rebranding and restructuring of secret city economies included renaming the city itself. In 1992, mirroring efforts to open Russia up to foreign investment and divest itself of some nuclear armaments and associated industries, closed cities were renamed “closed administrative territorial formations” (Zakrytye Administrativno-
Territorial’nye Obrazovaniya), or simply “ZATO.” According to Martin Sixsmith (2010), the Russian government introduced new laws that “gave ZATOs the right to ‘grant additional reductions in taxes and fees to legal entities that are registered as taxpayers … . Firms operating there were allowed to enjoy the same beneficial tax status traditionally associated with offshore havens such as the Bahamas or the British Channel Islands” (p. 192). “Fuel producers had to pay excise. For optimising this tax, the factory capacity of refineries was rented to companies registered in ZATO” (Glazunov, p. 164). Not surprisingly, oil and gas companies flooded into ZATO territories, often setting up shell offices that brought few jobs. Russian government investigators determined that “hundreds of millions of dollars in taxes’ were under-collected from firms using ZATOS, including many oil companies” (Sixsmith, 2010, p. 192).

### Representing ZATO

If Sailer’s (2012) *Closed Cities* photo essay served to established exceptional economies at the centre of seemingly banal, human-free spaces in Russian and elsewhere, Sergey Novikov’s (2019) photo-essay book, aptly entitled *ZATO*, offers a critical reassessment of secret cities through the memories of its citizens and former inhabitants. As a consequence, Novikov’s project arguably better represents the range of emotions invoked by Sailer: amazement, bafflement, fear, and anxiety.

The book opens on a similar note to Sailer’s (2012) book, though in this instance Novikov (2019) anchors his photographs with words: “These [secret] cities did not appear on any maps, had encrypted names and were called ‘mailboxes’ — much like secret manufacturing facilities located within these cities that had no specific address, but rather a mailbox where all their post was sent. The inhabitants of these cities were instructed not to refer to their place of residence, but rather to use the name of the nearest major city” (p. 1). A closer link between the secret city and the body of its inhabitants is established in Novikov’s photo of a mailbox hoisted in the air by a pair of arms (see Figure 3). The subject’s face, or even portion of their head, is not visible, yet a series of numbers written on one outstretched arm foregrounds the book’s biopolitical undertones.
Thus, while Sailer (2012) forces us to imagine *homo economicus* in his human-free photos of secret economies and spaces, Novikov’s (2019) secret-citizen subjects pervade his photographs. These distinctions are further amplified by the differences in the production of the two books. *Closed Cities* (Sailer, 2012) assembles photographs captured by a visual artist, with a reputation built on a series of books and multiple public gallery exhibitions. Sailer’s book includes commentary and critiques from established art critics. The aesthetic pretensions leach out of his book’s pages. ZATO (Novikov, 2019) is decidedly populist by contrast, built upon a collaborative, internet-enabled process of bringing together photographic representations of a number of current and former ZATO inhabitations. Novikov (2019) explains the book’s *modus operandi*:

Project ZATO is a visualization of the memories of residents of closed-cities and my own experience of visiting these places, inspired by discussions on web forums, announcements by municipal authorities, and publications on social media sites. The photographs are staged, and the project does not contain any photos that I took myself in the closed cities. (p. 1)

This brings us back to a recurring theme of this article: the closed, zoned, secret city serves as a site of economic experimentation, only in this instance the experiments turn inward on and through the human body. Novikov’s (2019) artistic and photographic project is simply a reminder of this experimental space, albeit an important one that raises questions about the cost of human life in Russian ZATOs. Remember Brown (2013) reminds us, through the image of a “plutopia,” of the economic contradictions of the secret city. While offering riches and a lifestyle unparalleled for the working class and their families, the by-products of many secret cities were hazardous to human life. The good life; the toxic life.

The biopolitical contradictions of this good-yet-toxic life are, however, mocked and ridiculed in Novikov’s (2019) ZATO. These photographs are staged, and as a result, become campy representations of totalitarian security throughout the ZATOs: a bare-chested man holds a glass to the wall to listen in on a neighbour (see Figure 4), a woman is hand-
cuffed to a tree in a forest, a man with a red armband signals another man to stop, a long corrugated steel security fence goes on for as far as the eye can see, and so on.

There are also reminders of how the citizen subjects of the secret city embrace surveillance and security, again as good life, though along decidedly toxic lines, often xenophobic ones. Next to the image of the bare-chested surveillant neighbour we see a large apartment complex. Novikov’s (2019) accompanying text reminds us that there are no criminal elements in the secret city’s housing market. In another two-page photo, three secret city citizens converge on a street corner where a man of Asian descent looks at a map. A mother holds her child’s hand firmly, keeping her distance. Most striking, though, is ZATO’s (Novikov, 2019) cover, which depicts a man at a barbed wire fence. He holds a roll of wire in his hand, though it is unclear if he is adding to or removing the fence. The text above his head reads, “I wonder what kind of homosexuals could have voted to open up the town.”

The toxicity of ZATO is also, as we have already seen, economic. Novikov’s (2019) choice of photos is much less ambiguous or contradictory on this point. Many of these photos focus on environmental toxins, particularly in water: a man taking a bath stares at a can of drinking water floating among the bubbles, a hooded figure is seen fishing next to nuclear submarines in a harbour, a bare-chested man up to his knees in a lake waves a flag with nuclear images. Brown (2013) argues that such toxic and environmental hazards of life in secret cities were a trade-off of sorts, though it is arguable whether its citizens were fully aware of such dangers. She writes: “As Plutopia matured, residents gave up their civil and biological rights for consumer rights” (p. 5, emphasis added). Brown’s secret cities were utopian in many respects, middle-class lives for working-class workers, but their economic experiments with plutonium would have long-lasting health impacts on residents. Brown, in other words, amplifies the secret city as a site of biopolitical experimentation.

As nuclear and other toxic industries closed or left, some secret cities moved on from financial experiments to pharmaceutical and other life science-based economic models. A former nuclear city called Sarov, for example, partnered with a number of American health researchers in the late 1990s to study asthma. Indeed from the
outset of secret cities, particularly nuclear cities, citizens came under intense “medical surveillance” (Brown, 2013, p. 67). The secret city became a human laboratory for scientists concerned about the effects of radiation on the environment, the food supply, and humans. A similar story is recounted in ZATO (Novikov, 2019); one of the book’s most striking photos depicts a young woman with blue spots all over her face (see Figure 5). The facing page depicts a set of red and yellow pills next to text that reads: “Triazavrin (TZV) is a broad-spectrum antiviral drug developed in the closed town of Novouralsk. Triazavrin is effective against 15 types of influenza. … Triazavrin could save the world from Ebola fever” (p. 37).

Conclusion: Experiments with the smart city

A documentary film [on the secret American city] Hanford … shows few bodies or faces. Combustion engines attached to claws and cranes appear to do most of the work. … The film’s producers left on the editing room floor images of men who ran the machines, along with every emotion — consternation, anticipation, boredom, fear. (Brown, 2013, p. 19)

Over the past year, a number of business groups, civic activists, and politicians have offered a similar range of emotions in response to a zoned “smart city” experiment on the lakefront in Toronto, Canada’s largest city. Proposals from the so-called “Sidewalk Labs,” led by Alphabet, the parent company of Google, have included the building of smart neighbourhoods, condo buildings, and other lifestyle-related infrastructure (Sidewalk Toronto, n.d.). Initial concerns from citizen groups focused on privacy, followed by questions of data ownership and stewardship (BlockSidewalk, n.d.). This business model is obviously not new; it lies at the heart of revenue streams for a number of so-called FAANG digital media companies (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and Google). Similar to the biopolitics of toxic bodies, such companies have thrived on the mining of human emotions, fears, likes, and anxieties through “user-generated” content on and across digital properties and platforms. The dramatic intensification and circulation of transactional, geo-locative, and other forms of personal data introduced the building blocks of a new computational business plan that would mine the behavioural attributes of so-called technology users going forward. In the context of smart cities then, inhabitants have become the raw material for the new business model.

Not surprisingly, FAANG companies are rebranding their former computational public profiles to much more architectural or grammatical symbols and corporate mastheads. Where once there was Google, the Web search engine and associated online advertising named after googol, a mathematical term meant to express an unknowable number, there is now the parent company known by the corporate name “Alphabet,” a term that denotes the very building blocks of human communication.

Moreover, as more details of Sidewalk Labs’ emotional/infrastructural experiment have been released to the public, Alphabet’s smart city plans have increasingly taken on the qualities of a secret city. The Canadian Press for example reported in February 2019 that “Sidewalk wants cut of property taxes and development fees for Quayside project” (Canadian Press, 2019). The smart city is, in other words, seeking much more
than personal data and an efficient life; it wants to become its own secret exceptional city within a city. Surprisingly, perhaps, or not, citizens of Toronto, if polls are to be believed, remain largely in favour of this city experiment (Vincent & Kennedy, 2019). But then again, so did inhabitants of other secret, closed cities such as ZATOs.

Alphabet has abandoned its plans for a smart city in Toronto for the time being, and the city itself has closed in an experiment that seeks to stop the spread of the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19. Indeed cities around the world have closed their borders, shops, bars, and schools. Concerns over security, safety, and economy continue to spread, similar to the virus itself, through financial markets and the emotions of the world’s populations. We have witnessed efforts to secure the nation and city. Borders are closed. Foreigners and asylum seekers shut out.

Yet at the same time as the world witnesses a radical closure of everyday life, future imaginaries, economies, and experiments will most likely be guided by the fear and anxieties produced by the fear of a sick, closed city. Such anxieties may form the contours of the coming city experiments, post-closed cities, post-pandemic cities. And on this point, proposals for impersonal, technologically enhanced and efficient experiments such as Sidewalk Labs in Toronto will likely proliferate. Such zones, or secret cities within cities, will inevitably proffer social distance and security through automation and algorithms. Yet, as we are already seeing in some intensely deregulated jurisdictions such as the United States, such secret cities lack common infrastructure to tackle common problems, health related or otherwise.

It is possible to learn from historical images and photographs of closed, secret cities—to discover their relationship to economy, exceptionalism, and experimentation. Such cites have evolved. They are not banal, faceless places. They constantly invoke secrecy and promise security, while largely serving their citizens up as experimental subjects. Such spaces, of course, need to be exposed, not as exceptions but as experiments that become the rule.

**Note**

1. A 2019 study in the U.K. concluded that enterprise zones established since 2011 provided only one-third of the projected jobs. In some zones, employment actually dropped (Brockelbank & Mistry, 2019).

**References**


