



# Assessing the Design Process of a Citizen-Centric City Center New Holland Island, St. Petersburg

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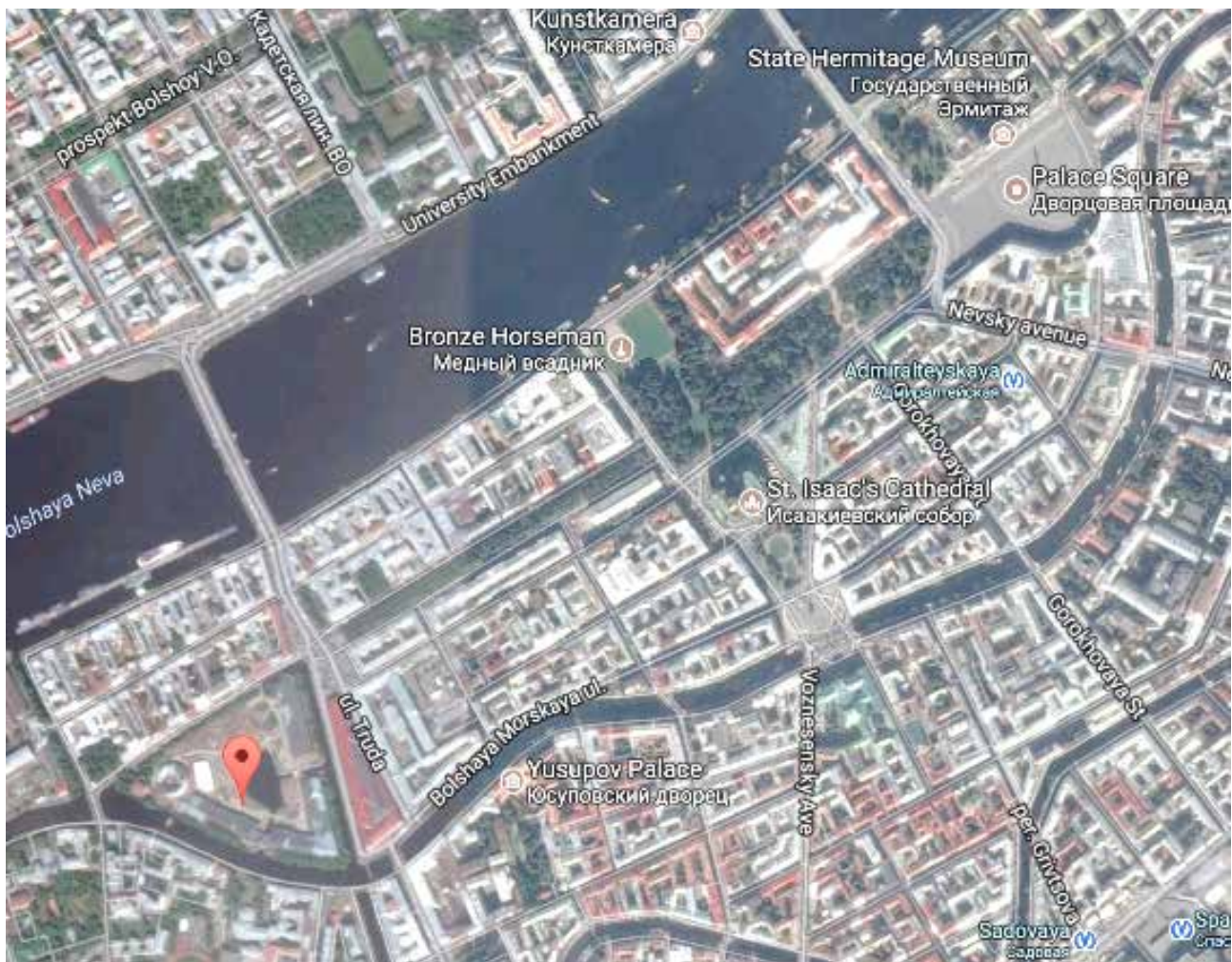
**Abstract** | Saint Petersburg as a tourist destination has done many efforts to accomplish two important objectives – tourism and social development. Accordingly, actions have been taken by the authorities to develop the city in both micro and macro scales. Developing tourism in this historical city has made the city sites meant for the citizens to be filled with tourists. Meanwhile, Palace Square (the old city center) couldn't satisfy the social needs of the citizens and gradually became the tourist center of the city. If the development of city centers does not match the needs of the society, they will become abandoned and replaced with other spaces over time.

Trying to build a new multi-functional city center, the authorities devolved the design of the city to well-known international design companies for three times. Hence, New Holland Island, the new city center of St. Petersburg, has a unique historical identity and various design stages, which in general, has been a very successful effort and people have accepted it very well. This paper is an attempt to examine and compare different design experiments made by successful international design companies which were never realized due to unconformity with the public needs. We also take a look at the new policy taken by the authorities after observing the actual interactions between the people and the site. The project was accomplished by West8 Company in 2014, according to the demands of the society and also considered opinions of the design team. This experiment can be a good prototype for the development process of Iran's traditional cities. Hence, we can prevent chaos and preserve the identities of the cities and social interactions in the city by using citizen-based policies.

**Keywords** | Landscape, Revival, Identity, Citizen-based, Locating.

**Introduction** | It should be noted that, what brings concept to a city landscape is the connection of an individual to its present and past, emerged in the context of the city; and a mean for maintaining or generating this connection is the collective memory of the city. One can summarize the relation between the identity of a city and its landscapes in the interactions of four factors which are tools for preserving identity in city landscapes: physical features of the city and their capabilities; perceivable meanings and concepts in the city; the dynamic context of time and today's life; and the social and civil life of the citizens. Since one of the most important features of a person's identity is its interactions with its manufactures and also the cultural, natural, and physical aspects of its environment, every change in these aspects will in turn, change that identity. Therefore, although the concept of identity in city landscapes is affected by the skeleton, the collective memory and the culture of a city, but over time, it will be adding to that collective memory and culture (Atashinbar, 2009).

St. Petersburg with a rich historical background and strong identity, owns a historic landscape. Palace Square as the center of the city, is a considerable space for tourists and citizens, but the question is, how much it can satisfy the current needs of its own people. In this study, the term the center of the city refers to its historical center and the center of origination, the beating heart that gathers everyone to interact with each other and the environment (Mansoori, 2015). The new center of St. Petersburg is the result of the interactions and the courses of different evolutions in the city. However, this site does not match the geographical location of the old city center and even its current functions differs from the ones meant for it. The actual interactions within the site led the authorities to change their policies about the project and transform it to a cultural-social city center instead of repairing it. Therefore, regardless of the huge amount of money spent on numerous proposals, the design process was once again devolved to WEST8 – a specialist in designing landscapes and



Pic. 1: Plan of the city center and the location of New Holland Island, St. Petersburg, Russia. Source: <https://goo.gl/maps/ZTr7rs3AF1B2>.

public spaces.

The main question of this article is that how, and why the dictated policies were changed and if this change was successful. To answer this, we will delve into the approaches and the measurements taken in this project based on what the designers, employers and the current managers have said.

### Project Overview

In 1719, the New Holland Island was founded by Peter the Great (the first tsar of Russia) in order to create a ship making company near the imperial center in St. Petersburg. The site has a triangular shape which is separated from adjacent lands by three water canals (Pic. 1). In the current era and keeping up with the developments of the city, the design and construction processes were assigned to WEST8. In 2014, the first phase of the project was designed and implemented under the supervision of New Holland Development (NHD) Company and it was opened to the public. The island is currently known as the social center of St. Petersburg and numerous events and annual ceremonies have been held in this site (Pics. 2 & 3).

### Site Background

After building the General Staff Building in early 18th by Peter the Great, a ship making company in the proximity of this building was necessary. Therefore, canals were made by Dutch architects to dry out the swamps and the island was named New Holland accordingly (Pic. 4). This complex has undergone many changes and has developed by well-known architects, which itself, shows the important identity of the site for its people.

During the 18th century, the island was used as a wood storage for Marine forces. In the mid-19th and after the growth

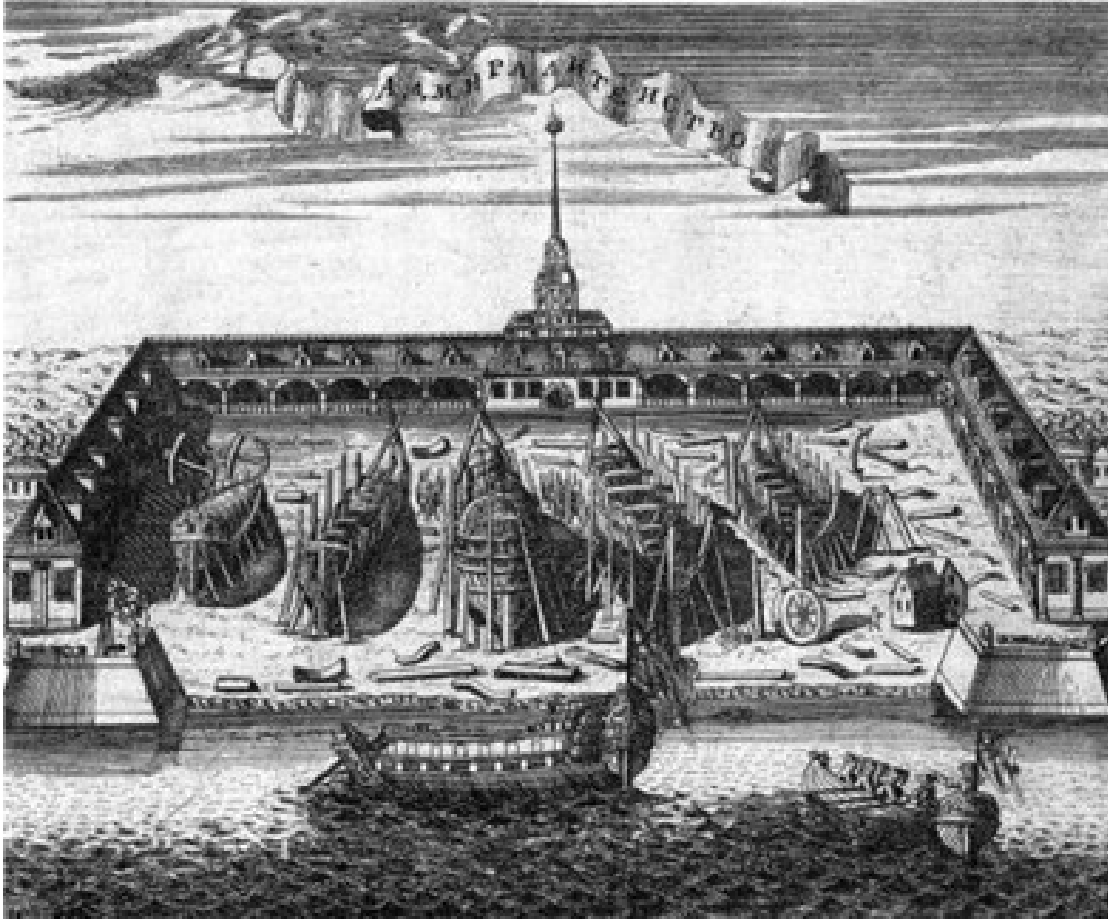
and development of the city, the need for a prison was a priority. Hence, by the discretion of city authorities, the task of building a prison in this complex was assigned to Marine forces. In the early 20th, a water tank was built to test the ship. This water tank was used to test the first prototypes of battle-ships and the first submarine of Russia. At the same time, a radio station was built in this site which had an integral part in broadcasting the famous speech of Lenin in 1917 Revolution (New Hollands, 2017).

The complex remained the same until the current century and after closing the abandoned prison in 2004, the ownership was relegated to the city at last. In 2006, a contest was held to remake this island and finally, Norman Foster and Partners Inc. won the contest. The proposal was to build a multi-functional complex which due to many reasons, was never realized (Pic. 5). The second effort was a contest in 2011 named "New Ideas for New Holland." This slogan was meant to convey the design of a multi-functional social and cultural complex. Many famous companies from all around the world took part in this contest and finally WorkAC was announced as the winner. Their proposal was a complex with cultural centers, theater, museum, exhibition center, schools and scientific laboratories, with the concept of "a city within a city" (Pic. 6).

During these series of events, in 2011, the complex was opened to the public for the first time since Peter the Great, continued to serve as a park in its old conditions. Within 2011 to 2013, the site hosted more than 1200 events and up to 700 thousands visited the complex. When the authorities observed the public demand for a social space instead of a multifunctional cultural center, they changed their approaches and policies and kept the site open to the public. Accordingly, they decided to develop the space allocated to the New



Pics. 2 & 3: Ceremonies and social activities in New Holland Island, St. Petersburg, Russia. Source: in balance and harmony. Source: <http://www.mqw.at/en>.



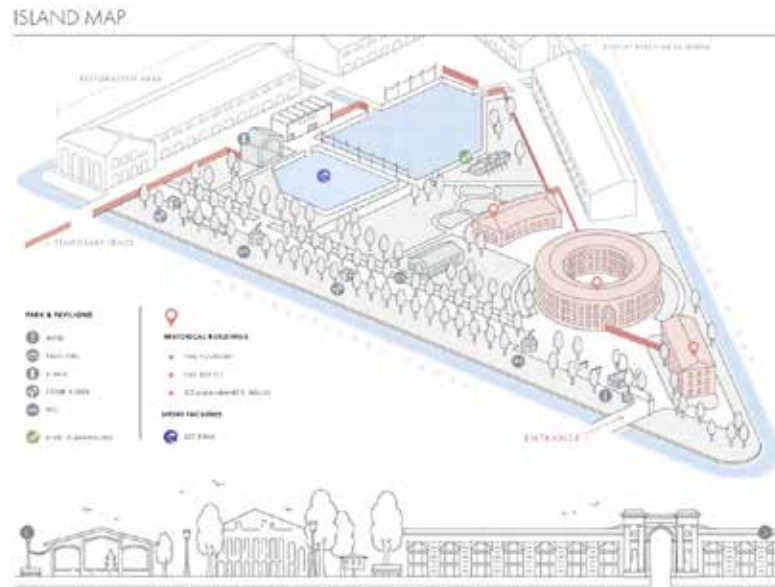
Pic. 4: First drawings of New Holland Island, St. Petersburg, Russian balance and harmony. Source: <http://www.mqw.at/en>.



Pic. 5: Norman Foster and Partners' proposal, St. Petersburg, Russian balance and harmony. Source: <http://www.mqw.at/en>.



Pic. 6: WorkAC's proposal, St. Petersburg, Russian balance and harmony. Source: <http://www.mqw.at/en>.



Pic. 7: The current state of the complex designed by WEST8, St. Petersburg, Russian balance and harmony. Source: <http://www.mqw.at/en>.

Holland Park and maintained it as it was. The design of the project by WEST8 was meant to complete the previous efforts (by WorkAC); (Table 1). In 2014, the first phase of the project was completed and in 2016, the project was finished (Pic. 7).

#### Aim, Approach and Measurements

This project was finished after many years of practice and numerous design proposals, and it was based on what the people actually needed. The dictated policy defined for this project was to recover and rebuild the historical site of New Holland. But the design company chose two main objectives for this project (WEST8, 2017):

Rebuilding the architecture, according to the previous plan by WorkAC

#### Creating a New City Center for the State

Rebuilding the architecture was part of the policies set by the employers and it was proved to be beneficial in the previous design by WorkAC. But when we have the task of creating a new city center, structures should be recovered for the best possible responses. Creating a new city center was dictated by the public and accomplishing this goal was an overwhelming task for the design company. On the other side, the design company had considered historical-identity and social-educational approaches in its design process. In the final design, we have considerations for all the citizens and age groups; and all the social interactions in the city have been considered and acted upon (New Holland, 2017).

In macro scale, the site was transformed to a city park to host various annual events, and in micro scale, we can note the followings (Pics. 8 & 9).

- Creating the ship of Peter the Great as a playground for kids
- Creating a lake with skiing capability
- Creating cultural pavilions
- Reviving the historical buildings
- Creating a medical herbs garden
- Unique lightings during the night
- Specific halls for important events
- Creating vast areas of green grass
- Calling for a new city center

The old city center which is formed by crossing the three main axes of St. Petersburg, is in fact a building for Marine forces; and the main square of the city (Palace Square) is located in the right axis, in front of the Hermitage Royal Palace. Palace Square plays an important and responsive role as the city center, though, it is transformed to a tourist destination for the people from all around the world. This square does not have the necessary recreational and cultural facilities for the citizens and its function has been diminished to a museum, an exhibition center for tourists and a host for formal ceremonies. Hence the citizens need a new center with new and modern tourist attractions. Modern attractions are actually a group of city spaces and functions created in accordance with today's needs and technological advances. It not only meets the social and economic needs, but also plays an important role in filling the spare time of the public in developed and

Table 1. An overview of previous and current efforts. Source: author.

Designer	Achievements	Approach to architecture	Approach to landscape	Drawbacks	Strengths
Norman Foster and Partners	winning the 2006 design contest	designing a massive multifunctional structure in the center of the site	no approaches to landscape	not using the existing - old structures in the site devastating the very - strategic surroundings neglecting the site's - identity	creating a multifunctional city center
WorkAC	winning the 2011 design contest	recovering the interiors of the existing structures in the site	creating a non-functional, merely recreational landscape	neglecting the functional needs of the people in the site	maintaining the old - structures recovering and reviving the old structures view to landscape - ((merely aesthetical
WEST8	assigned in 2014	maintaining WorkAC's design	creating a landscape satisfying all the needed functions and having a historical identity		satisfying the functional needs in designing the site

developing societies (Soltani, 2009).

Therefore, the need for a recreational-cultural city center which can response to the new lifestyles of the citizens is growing. We can argue that over time, city centers can lose some of their collective functions and become a place merely for tourists and national ceremonies. If so, a new place will function as the city center and respond to the public needs.

#### Locating a New City Center

In St. Petersburg, citizens are very proud of the historical background of the city and its founder, Peter the Great. All the developmental policies of the city are formed based on this attention and will be so in the future. Hence when there is a need for a new center to host social events, all the attentions will turn toward searching for a proper location in the strategic spots of the city. As mentioned earlier, this strategic spot is located around the Marine force building. But there was no room for a new city center near Palace Square and St. Isaac Church, so a 1000 meters space in front of the marine force building was freed. The public could pass across the city center in a beautiful green axis and directly reach the site. In fact the first advantage of this island is proximity to the identity center and the second advantage is its national and historical identity which brings outstanding events to memory. Its nostalgic role in the history of St. Petersburg is well understood and used by the designers to advance the educational and cultural knowledge of users. Finally it should be noted that, taking advantage of recreational facilities like the canals around the site, the island's nature, the lake within the site, various bridges, old structures, among other features has

made the site a special and unique place in St. Petersburg.

#### Approach According to Objectives

The actions taken here are dividable to micro and macro scales. Regarding macro scale actions, transforming the site into a park and a public space seems reasonable and according to public needs. Though at first, the objective was merely recovering the site and making it a multifunctional complex but after observing the interactions made in the site, changes were made and the open space was brought up to focus. Therefore the existing site was used as a cultural city center for public events. Combining the new objective (creating a new center) and the previous objectives resulted in the macro scale measurement: transforming the site into a city park. We can mention the lack of recreational spaces and holding public events in the previous center as the motives for this action. Hence, the designers used a cultural and recreational approach to turn the site into a city park.

#### Aligning Measurements with Objectives

Proper actions should be aligned with the objectives. For instance, reviving the historical buildings is a recovering measurement based on a historical-identity approach and employer's demands. By defining proper up-to-date functions for the old buildings according to the previous proposals, these buildings have come to life again. On the other side, most of the measurements are according to the second goal: creating a new city center with proper functional and recreational aspects. In order to advance the knowledge of the society about the history of the site, a ship is made as a playground which resembles the Peter's ship and has attracted the parents too.

Hence, two age groups have been considered in the design. The other measurement was using a vast area of green grass. This follows a historical approach and imitates the royal gardens of Russia. Accordingly, medical herbs are used instead of flowers to bring functionality along aesthetics. There are open speech halls and cultural pavilions in the form of tem-

porary structures with native materials which support public interactions and the easy flow of the people .As for recreational facilities ,a skiing track is built in the center of the site. Lightings during the nights is very unique with accents on main spots of the site .These lights do not disturb the eyes and are capable of changing patterns in special events) Table.2



Pics. 8 & 9: Designing at micro-scale; creating the ship and the medical herbs garden, St. Petersburg, Russia in balance and harmony. Source: <http://www.mqw.at/en>.

Table 2: A summary of the actions taken in New Holland Island. Source: Author.

Policy	Objectives	Approach	Measurements	Strengths	Drawbacks
recovering and rebuilding the complex	rebuilding the architecture according to the previous plan of WorkAC	historical-identity	revival of historical structures	assigning suitable and up-to-date functions to existing structures	-
		cultural and recreational	transformation into a city park (macro scale action)	based on demands and needs of the public – having enough facilities and strategic location	-
		economical and aesthetical	medical herbs garden	beneficial while aesthetical – saving costs	not involving users in learning about this plants
	creating a new city center for the county	using context and recreational activities	a lake with skiing capabilities	using the potentials of the site in winter	-
		social – educational	creating cultural pavilions	building with temporary structures and wooden materials	
		identity and aesthetics	unique lightings	accents in important spots and avoiding disturbance	neglecting the historical background in lightings
		social	specific halls for important events	temporary structures suitable for the event – positioning in open space	cold weather and snow problems in winters
		social-identity – recreational	creating vast areas of green grass	focusing on the identity of green grass areas used in royal gardens	cold weather and snow problems in winters – high maintenance costs
		cultural-identity – social – educational	creating a historical ship as a playground	focusing on the national identity of Russia – involving children and their parents in history	



**Conclusion** | City landscape is a very unique phenomenon with strong identity which cannot be formed based on a personal opinion ;it is shaped from within the context and by the public needs .City centers are macro-scale elements of city landscapes and each can have a unique function and identity. The main historical center may change over time ,only to reduce itself to merely a place for visitors and occasional events. If so ,proper policies and placements can shape a new place as the modern city center to act along the historical center and satisfy the needs and demands of the public .As so ,the design of New Holland Island took place :two stages of policy making and designing by famous international companies ,and

yet not satisfying the public needs ,led the authorities to bear all the expenses and devolve the project to a third company, namely WEST8 .The new design had to respond to the public needs and also advance and organize them .The designers used the right approach both in micro and macro scales to promote the current and next generations .Therefore ,city centers can take different identities and functions through the time and be moved from one place to another to satisfy the new needs for both places .Hence the authorities should consider the public needs in developing their cities and not making decisions solely based on the dictated policies .With such an approach ,we can see citizen-based city landscapes which advance the societies and prevent huge expenses.

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