

During my first visit to Moscow after becoming program director at the Strelka Institute, one particularly significant thing did not happen. I have been thinking about it not happening a lot lately

On an errand to buy a SIM card, I happened to pass the Russian White House, the scene of the failed 1991 coup that brought Boris Yeltsin to power and which is — as much as any one event can be — the symbol of the end of the Soviet Union.

It was also, thanks to an early Relcom link sending updates to the outside world, in some sense a launch event for the Russian Internet.

By coincidence, as I was walking I noticed the date — August 21, 2016 — the 25th anniversary of the end of the coup. I am not one to stand on ceremony but for someone who grew up in California in the midst of the Cold War, finding himself in Moscow on that day to witness such silence was eerie. There was nothing at the White House to hint at the anniversary. Nothing much about it on TV either, certainly not on the state television channels. At the site of its occurrence, the anniversary of this “revolution” was an unmarked non-event.

I had been to Russia many times before. The first time was as a teenager visiting the city then still called Leningrad, and I have had the chance to reflect (in print and otherwise) on the deep, strange interrelations between Russia and my home, California, particularly the space race and the rise of algorithmic governance, attempted and realized. Both have their unique politics of amnesia. For the beautiful and banal La Jolla, it is phones, drones and genomes. For Moscow, it is a century or more of unmourned, unprocessed utopian regimes. Now it seems these may seek some awkward (and illiberal?) convergence. We are the passengers of that convergence, and, I wonder, something else?

The think-tank we are hosting at Strelka takes urbanism — quite broadly but still specifically conceived — as a medium whose messages are both determinant and up for grabs. To begin, I will share some of the initial thoughts on the program’s research theme that I wrote up earlier this summer, and discuss some of what we hope to address and to accomplish.

## The New Normal

Something has shifted, it seems. We are making new worlds faster than we can keep track of them, and the pace is unlikely to slow. If our technologies have advanced beyond our ability to conceptualize their implications, such gaps can be perilous. In response, one impulse is to pull the emergency brake and to try put all the genies back in all the bottles. This is ill-advised (and hopeless). Better instead to invest in emergence, in contingency: to map the new normal for what it is, and to shape it toward what it should be.

At Strelka, the previous program’s research theme was called “Hybrid Urbanism,” based on the idea that physical/virtual mixtures are still a novel hybrid. But this interlacing is not a