

Looking at Russian Cities With an Eye to the Arts

By [John Freedman](#)

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Blair Ruble calls himself an "urbanist" and you can see that immediately if you look at the title of some of his books — "Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City," "Money Sings: The Politics of Urban Space in Post-Soviet Yaroslavl," and "Second Metropolis: The Politics of Pragmatic Pluralism in Gilded Age Chicago, Silver Age Moscow and Meiji Osaka."

Ruble's most recent book, "Washington's U Street: A Biography," is the writer and scholar's first work to avoid the Russian topic altogether and focus, in part, on one of his great loves — American jazz.

But Ruble is never far from Russia. He is the director of the Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., and the Kennan is one of the most diverse and active organizations in the United States whose chief task is to explore Russian culture and society.

As Ruble told me late Sunday morning, about an hour before catching a cab to Domodedovo Airport, the Kennan Institute recognizes that it is "impossible to understand Russia without understanding Russian cultural achievement."

The dynamism of Russian culture "isn't always visible if you approach Russia through politics or even economics," he added.

Anyone who follows Russia has crossed paths with the Kennan Institute at some point or another. I spent many afternoons there in the early 1980s listening to speakers talk on topics of Russian literature and art. It was my first opportunity to meet the writers and scholars whose books I had been reading for years.

Ruble explained to me that it is no longer possible for the Kennan to host writers as they did in the past, when Vasily Aksyonov or Vladimir Voinovich were resident artists there. All that means, however, is that the impact of the institute is felt in different ways today, as scholars continue to research the "dynamism of Russian music, theater and literature," and the "adaptability of new forms of social media," such as Facebook and other forms of modern communication.

At present, the Kennan is conducting a Comparative Urban Studies Project, in conjunction with which, Ruble is beginning work on a new book that will take into consideration the effect of a city on the arts, and, in turn, the effect of the arts on a city.

"I recently wrote a book about D.C. that explores how the urban environment encourages the performing arts as a means of expression in defining space," Ruble explains. "I want to take the questions that arise in my work on Washington and apply them to Russian cities. Why do certain art forms emerge in certain places? How do the arts reflect the dynamism of a place?"

Of particular interest to Ruble is the city of Yekaterinburg, whose cultural achievement, as he points out, "is greater than you might assume."

Click on the image above to hear Ruble make these comments and many more about his work with, and observations about, Russian culture and society.

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