Ten thousand years before Tsar Peter the Great founded St. Petersburg, it lay under more than 1,000 meters of ice. Then, just as the first great civilizations began to flourish in the valleys of the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates, a receding glacial sea—the Baltic—flooded the territory of the modern-day city, leaving in its wake a river, the Neva, a mere youngster in geological time. Over the millennia, Nomadic Finns fished its waters, but they never settled the endless, sometimes poisonous, marshes and flat wastes beyond its banks. As a legacy, they left little more than remnants of their language, including the Finnish word for mud—Neva.

That St. Petersburg exists at all is testimony to the sheer triumph of Peter’s iron will, the city being founded on fetid bog land just seven degrees south of the Arctic Circle in a climate so harsh that even to this day, many Russians consider it unfit for living. Peter was determined to imitate what he had seen in the great seaports of London and Amsterdam, where he had studied shipbuilding. Where Russians saw only wilderness, the tsar imagined a city at the door-step of Europe, a cornerstone in the foundation of a modern nation.

The tsar’s appetite for the fruits of the Enlightenment—the architecture, science, industry, customs, and dress of Europe—was as insatiable as his desire to control the Baltic, which he wrested from the Swedes on May 12, 1703. Four days later, he laid the foundation for the Peter and Paul Fortress on Hare Island, near where the Neva splits into its two main branches. According to legend, Peter dug two clumps of dirt with a bayonet. Laying the sod crosswise, he proclaimed: “Here shall be a town.”

From across his empire, Peter summoned an unhappy legion of carpenters, stonemasons, masons, and laborers to build his capital. They lived in crowded, filthy huts and died in droves from malaria, scurvy, and dysentery. An estimated 40,000 Russian
workers and 100,000 Swedish prisoners-of-war perished building the city. For generations, Petersburgers would speak of the “psychic energy” radiating from corpses, the foundation upon which was built a “city of bones.” In time, a metropolis, delicately balanced atop 42 islands and rivaling the greatest European capitals, rose from the swamps of the eastern Baltic at a cost of blood and money only a tyrant could extract.

Peter, undeterred by merciless floods, including one that nearly killed him, commanded diplomats and his court to take up residence in his new capital. Using imported German, French, Italian, and Dutch artisans, noble families were required to build “English style” houses of bricks, lath, and plaster of at least one or two stories, depending upon how many slaves they owned. Peter even ordered 8,000 songbirds for a new aviary to complement the growing number of parks and formal gardens, whose geometric flowerbeds followed the best traditions of France. In the decades that followed, an international legion of architects would erect some 500 imposing palaces and public buildings of various shades of blue, pale green, yellow, and red—all in the name of Peter and his successors, their lovers, relatives, and patrons. Today, three centuries after the city’s founding, Peter, more than any emperor or despot, dominates this old imperial capital, now Russia’s second-largest city. Indeed, Peter’s legacy is everywhere—in manicured gardens and classical facades; in music halls that explode with applause; in some 300 research centers made famous for discoveries in chemistry, genetics, psychology, space-based technologies, and exotic man-made materials; and in the warren of wharves, shipyards, and naval bases that link St. Petersburg to the world’s great seas, and once armed the Soviet navy for nuclear Armageddon with the West. When the city marks its tricentennial this summer, the event will be a testimony to both the vision of Peter and to the tenacity of Petersburgers, who over the centuries have weathered floods, revolutions, Stalin, Hitler, and a 900-day siege by Nazi armies.
When Peter the Great founded St. Petersburg, he envisioned a maritime city comparable to Amsterdam, centered on 1,600-hectare Vasilevsky Island, the largest in the Neva Delta. Peter looked to Europe for an architect, settling on a 33-year-old Frenchman Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Le Blond. The most ambitious part of Le Blond’s project called for a grid of parallel streets and intersecting canals that would cut through the marshes and bogs of the Neva Delta. The dirt would be used as a landfill—an idea that subsequent generations of architects successfully adopted, raising the city more than two and one-half meters since Peter’s day.

Le Blond’s plan called for two grand canals running the length of the island and 12 small ones—all large enough to accommodate two passing boats. Naturally, houses along the canals would have docks for homeowners’ boats, attesting to the status of the noble families who were supposed to move to this watery checkerboard from the more comfortable surroundings in Moscow. Peter’s absences at distant wars and in European capitals allowed his best friend and the city’s Governor General, Prince Menshikov, to sabotage Le Blond’s plan. Menshikov had his own ideas for the island. Having been given most of Vasilevsky as a present by Peter, Menshikov erected a massive, three-story mansion of his own and didn’t welcome the prospect of sharing the forested estate.

On Peter’s return to the capital in 1718, he was “struck dumb with astonishment,” wrote an eighteenth-century historian. Two boats could not pass on the canals, and some were already silting up with mud. Peter, fearing the Europeans had deceived him, personally measured the canals against the original plans for Amsterdam. Not a single one matched. Exhausted by the cost of the two-decade-long Great Northern War with Sweden, Peter cut his losses and abandoned the canals. Today, one or two of the original canals remain on Vasilevsky Island, whose streets are laid out as numbered liniya—Russian for “lines”—where most of the canals would have been built.

The hazards of travel across the canals to the mainland and the constant threat of raging floods also played a role in Peter’s decision to abandon Vasilevsky Island. When both channels of the Neva froze in the winter, Vasilevsky Island was cut off from the rest of Russia, except by foot across the ice. During the rest of the year, the island was connected to the mainland by 20 government-authorized ferryboats manned mostly by illiterate peasants. Peter, who wanted his subjects to learn seamanship and sailing, finally permitted ferry boatmen to use oars after the Polish ambassador, a major general, and one of the tsar’s own doctors drowned in sailing accidents crossing the Neva. Walking across the ice, in fact, became the only sure way across the river. The rest of the year, residents of Vasilevsky and other islands were virtual prisoners of Peter’s dream to reproduce Holland on the Gulf of Finland.

To be sure, some important buildings were built on Vasilevsky Island during Peter’s reign and for a century to come. On the Strelka, at the eastern end of the island, rose the port, customs house, and stock exchange, adorned with a statue of Mercury, the god of trade, all testifying to St. Petersburg’s links with distant capitals. The blood-red Rostral Columns, erected on the Strelka to commemorate victories of the Russian fleet, became lighthouses on the Neva.

Against all odds, the city flourished, rising on the south bank of the Neva. At its heart was the Russian navy headquarters, the Admiralty, topped with a 72.5-meter, needle-like golden spire. Mansions graced Nevsky Prospect, the city’s main thoroughfare, and its four great waterways—the Moika and Fontanka Rivers, and the Griboyedov and Obvodny Canals. Suspension bridges of intricate design linked islands studded with marble obelisks, Egyptian sphinxes, and cathedrals with spires more Protestant than Russian Orthodox. By the nineteenth century, when St. Petersburg was in full bloom, enthusiasts called the glamorous capital
As St. Petersburg begins its tricentennial celebration on May 12, the city celebrates not only its triumph over adversity, but a time of renewal as many of its most famous monuments receive long-awaited and much needed care and attention. Russian president Vladimir Putin, a native of St. Petersburg, committed some $600 million in Russian aid to this conservation effort. To this sum have been added a host of international donations from nearby republics and countries, as far away as Britain, the United States, and Australia. At the heart of Putin’s anniversary program is the rapid restoration of the Konstantinovsky Palace at Strelna, just west of St. Petersburg along the Gulf of Finland. This is a valiant reconstruction effort as Strelna was looted and burned by the Germans in World War II; only its shell survived. At a cost of more than $172 million, Putin is converting the former imperial palace into a presidential maritime residence, the first such residence since the age of the tsars. The international community has been a major contributor to this campaign. WMF, too, has taken an active role, including several sites in and around St. Petersburg on its biennial Watch list, and actively sponsoring several projects.

The brilliant decorative ensemble at the Catherine Palace is enhanced with rooms inlaid with semiprecious minerals. The Agate Pavilion remained intact after the destruction of the main block of the Catherine Palace in World War II, but fell into disrepair during the Communist period. Support from the Kress European Preservation Program has helped to launch the campaign to restore this extraordinary interior. On the island, the Romanovs built a 237-acre contained world of residences, pavilions, servants’ quarters, parks, and guardhouses. The centerpiece of this imperial estate is the Yelegin Palace, built in the 1780s, and renovated by Carlo Rossi in the Russian Empire style. Among the most important structures are the Guardhouse Pavilion, which housed regiments of the Imperial Guard, and the Flag Pavilion, designed by Carlo Rossi, on the island’s eastern promontory.

WMF in Britain recently undertook the restoration of Flag Pavilion, which was completed in July 2002. The floor of the Flag Pavilion, which was abandoned during the Soviet era, had decayed due to rising damp, and a large part of it collapsed. The roof leaked, and the rafters had partially rotted. Original cast-iron urns, which once flanked the pavilion, had been damaged through vandalism.

After a two-year restoration, the pavilion is once again luminous in its light-blue finish. Inside, restored rooms house an exhibition on Rossi and his projects in the imperial capital. Outside, a flag, which bears a bright blue cross on a white back-ground—the imperial ensign of the navy and the symbol of the island—is once again raised.

The Alexander Palace—commissioned by Catherine the Great as a gift to her grandson Alexander I and built by the Italian architect Giacomo Quarenghi in 1792—was the informal summer residence of the Imperial Family, complementing the more formal Catherine Palace. The palace was used by the Admiralty of the Baltic until the mid 1990s, during which time it fell into disrepair. Its inclusion on WMF’s 1996 list of the 100 Most Endangered Sites facilitated the transfer of the building to the museums at Tsarskoye Selo. Shortly thereafter, WMF undertook emergency roof repairs on the Nicholas II wing of the building, undertaken in large part by an American Express grant. Today, the Alexander Palace serves as a museum dedicated to the lives of the last tsars. On display are many original family possessions, even children’s clothes—a stark and poignant reminder of the end of an empire.

Most recently, WMF has embarked on a campaign to restore Catherine the Great’s Chinese Palace, or Oranienbaum, at Lomonosov, 15

west of St. Petersburg. The building is a rare example of eighteenth-century Russian rococo chinoiserie decoration, having survived 70 years of war and revolution.

In 1762, Catherine commissioned the Italian architect Antonio Rinaldi to create the palace as a private retreat. Rinaldi gathered some of the finest European craftsmen, including Giovanni Tiepolo, who executed the Venetian ceiling paintings; Giovanni and Serafino Barozzi, who did a number of wall paintings; and the sculptor Marie-Ann Collot. Much of their work has survived albeit in fragile condition.

Today, the palace is composed of 28 rooms on the ground floor, with a second story that was added in the nineteenth century. Among the most beautiful rooms is the Hall of Muses in the eastern wing, which bears the delightful figures against a background of light pinks and blues. Natural light streams in from the outside through French windows, opening into the garden. The undisputed highlight of the Oranienbaum, however, is the Glass-Beaded Salon. Unique in Europe, the room features exotic scenes of birds, cornucopias, and flowers, made up of more than two million shimmering, horizontal glass beads. The room originally had a glass floor—since replaced by parquet—that would have heightened the breathtaking effect of the beads. Their fragility is apparent, as some of them are starting to unravel.

Following the completion of a conditions assessment, emergency repairs on the palace began this March. The roof was repaired, and a number of broken drainage pipes were replaced to arrest the decay and enable the building to dry out. The building must be dry before any work on interior finishes can begin. WMF in Britain hopes to raise some $3 million to complete the restoration of the Chinese Palace, $330,000 of which has already been raised.

Collectively, these projects underscore the changing fortunes of St. Petersburg, and the city's determination to leave the scars of the twentieth century behind and embark on an even more glorious future.
the rival of Rome, perhaps a “new Jerusalem,” surely the “Venice of the North” — a likeness made popular by Peter himself.

After Peter’s time, a half-dozen imperial castles and estates rose to ring St. Petersburg like crown jewels. Nowhere is St. Petersburg’s imperial heritage more stunningly preserved than at the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoye Selo, or the “Tsar’s Little Village,” the official summer residence of the royal family until 1917. Here, gilded mirrors trimmed with arabesque carvings amplify the sun’s rays, illuminating the largest ceiling painting in all of Europe. Appropriately titled the Triumph of Russia, the 846-square-meter colossus takes its subjects from Peter’s many passions. For the painting, like St. Petersburg, glorifies Russia’s victories in war and its achievements in art and science.

Although the Catherine Palace was burned by retreating Nazi forces during the Second World War—which left little more than a shell of the original building—its interiors have been reconstructed, sustaining the craft traditions that created them in the eighteenth century. Later this summer, its famed Amber room, once hailed as an eighth wonder of the world, will reopen to the public after a painstaking, 25-year reconstruction. The superb interior, made completely of amber, was admired by Peter the Great on a visit to the palace of Frederick King of Prussia. Shortly thereafter, it was offered to the tsar as a state gift. Prior to the outbreak of World War II, the room had been dismantled and placed in cases for safekeeping. But Nazi forces managed to spirit away the wall decorations in the face of the advancing Red Army. Working from photographic records, Russian craftsmen have laid more than six tons of amber to match the original panels. When the purchase of materials became too expensive following the end of the Soviet regime, the Catherine Palace received financial support from the German government to complete the task.

The palace, Yekaterininsky Dvorets, takes its name from the first of four high-spirited empresses to rule eighteenth-century Russia—Catherine I, the Lithuanian-born second wife of Tsar Peter. By the time Catherine’s daughter, Empress Elizabeth I, finished building a memorial to her mother, the original, 16-room stone mansion was transformed into a palace that rivaled Versailles, with 200 rooms behind a Baroque facade of aqua blue, white, and gold that measures 306 meters. Catherine II “the Great,” perhaps the most powerful woman to rule Russia, left her mark on the palace, adding more rooms and an English park to the French formal gardens. She built an array of pavilions, including Chinese-style pagodas, monuments to her victories over the Turks, and a pyramid for her favorite dog. Visitors calling on Catherine at Tsarskoye Selo saw a display of wealth so overwhelming, there could be no doubt Russia had arrived as a world power.

Beyond the Catherine Palace and the nearby Alexander Palace, where the last tsar, Nicholas II, and his family were held under house arrest in 1916, are the Great Palace and Park at Pavlovsk. Just south of these lies the Gatchina Palace, a favorite retreat of Paul I. Also outside the capital are Peterhof, or Petrodvorets, Peter the Great’s sumptuous palace on the Gulf of Finland, and, slightly further west, the restored palaces at Lomonosov, sometimes called by its tsarist-era name Oranienbaum.

The tsars may have preferred the splendor and isolation of the Catherine or the Alexander Palaces, but their official residence always was the Winter Palace, a flamboyant Baroque temple of some 1,057 rooms on almost nine hectares between the Neva embankment and Palace Square. Since the 1917 October Revolution, the Winter Palace has formed the heart of the State Hermitage Museum, one of the world’s great treasure houses of art and culture. Best known for its collection of some 15,000 paintings, the Hermitage treasures originated with 225 canvases that...
Catherine the Great acquired in exchange for canceling a Berlin merchant’s tax debt. The museum grew to include its extraordinary collection of Rembrandt, Rubens, and Van Dyck, as well as modern masterpieces by Matisse, Picasso, Gaugain, Cézanne, and other French artists confiscated after the October Revolution. The empress built the Small Hermitage in 1764 as a private art gallery adjoining the Winter Palace. But Catherine acquired paintings at such a fast pace that she had to build a second pavilion 20 years later. Subsequent rulers built the Hermitage Theater and a New Hermitage, and Nicholas I opened them to the intelligentsia in 1852. The whole imperial collection, including two Madonnas by Leonardo da Vinci, finally became public property after 1917. Lenin’s Bolsheviks added to the Hermitage’s holdings, confiscating enormous holdings of privately owned art.

Always cramped for space, the Hermitage has acquired the 450,000-square-foot general staff building, a Palace Square landmark in need of a roof-to-foundation face-lift. Other needy structures, in a city that has worked around the clock to prepare for its tercentennial celebration, include Peter and Paul Fortress, the State Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory, the Shostakovich Philharmonic Hall, and the Mariinsky Theater, home to the famed Kirov Ballet.

Meanwhile, the overcrowded Russian Museum has acquired the Marble Palace, a neoclassical edifice built for one of Catherine the Great’s lovers, made of 32 kinds of marble and considered extravagant even by St. Petersburg standards. With more than 350,000 objects in its collection, the Russian Museum is considered an encyclopedia of Russian art, from twelfth-century icons to the giant canvases of Kasimir Malevich, the darling of the early twentieth-century Avant-Garde. The museum also owns and has restored the Stroganov Palace, stronghold of one of Russia’s first families on Nevsky Prospect, and the Mikhailovsky Zamok, or St. Michael Castle, where Emperor Paul I was murdered in 1801. Surrounded by moats and laced with secret passageways, the salmon-red St. Michael Castle became a military engineering school—and hence its nickname, the Inzhenerny or “Engineer Castle”—after the royal family gave it up following the tsar’s untimely death. Dostoyevsky studied there from 1837 to 1843.

One of St. Petersburg’s greatest engineering triumphs is St. Isaac’s Cathedral, whose gilded dome of more than 100 kilograms of gold dominates the city skyline. Built by an army of serfs, who sunk 10,000 tree trunks into the banks of the marshy Neva to support the cathedral’s colossal weight of more than 300,000 tons, St. Isaac’s is filled with icons, frescoes, gold, marble, and tons of malachite from the Ural Mountains. Officially a museum, St. Isaac’s throws open its doors on the most important Russian Orthodox holy days of Christmas and Easter.

Over the centuries, the Neva has been merciless in its rage. A flood on November 7, 1824—considered the city’s worst and immortalized by Alexander Pushkin in his poem The Bronze Horseman—killed 569 people and destroyed 300 buildings. The high-water marks from this and catastrophic floods in 1772, 1777, 1903, and 1924 are etched in the wall at the Neva Gate at the Peter and Paul Fortress. Faded now by time and neglect, the old city center has been added to UNESCO’s World Heritage list to help protect it—like Stonehenge or the Forbidden City of Beijing—for all time. Face-lifts already have renewed many of St. Petersburg’s great edifices that Peter and his successors built at such cost. St. Petersburg today stands as a monument to imperial vision, made manifest by European architects and long-suffering Russian workers, and is stoutly defended by her citizenry. Together, they created a capital amid the scattered islands and deep channels of the Neva, where once there were only swamps.