

# Beyond Utopia: Representing Life in the Productivist City

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## The City at the Magnetic Mountain

In 1930 workers sent to build a new city set up a tent settlement on a barren patch of the western Siberian steppe on the eastern, Asian side of the Ural Mountains. They had come to this place because of a geological anomaly: a mountain of almost pure iron ore. The Magnetic Mountain, as it was called, is said to have been sufficiently magnetized to misdirect compass needles in the area and, according to legend, had already saved Russia once when the iron horseshoes of Genghis Kahn's invading hordes had stuck fast to its charged surface. Now it was again being looked to in hopes that it would help to literally materialize the radical dream of a new Russia — the Soviet Union — and eventually save it from invaders coming, this time from the west. Magnitogorsk — “the city by the magnetic mountain” — would be a centerpiece of the crash program of both industrialization and urbanization undertaken under the auspices of the first five-year plan of 1928–1932. Of the new cities and urban expansions constructed during this period Magnitogorsk was among the most purely functional. The iron from the mountain was to be used to build a system of smelters, blast furnaces and steel mills that would be among the most advanced in the world and the largest ever constructed. This vast factory complex would also be a city for people to live in and forge a new cultural form that would be a model for Soviet society, even as they produced the steel that would be used to build capacity and supply industrial production across the country. Despite being literally charged with potential, the site upon which Magnitogorsk was built was remote from centers of power and culture and inhospitable to human habitation. There had been a small garrison stationed there when it was a peripheral region of the Russian empire. Rudimentary mining activity had been undertaken but then abandoned and during the civil war that followed the 1918 revolution, there had been a minor battle fought there between a retreating remnant of the “white” tsarist forces and the newly formed Soviet “red” army. Other than this, the area was only sparsely populated by mostly illiterate Kyrgyz pastoralists, who had been alienated by the white's attempts to conscript them into their fight against the reds but had otherwise not yet been touched by the revolution.

The view from the Ural Mountains looking east into Western Siberia



Local worker transporting hay in Magnitogorsk, photo by Margaret Bourke-White

To the newcomers, the site must have seemed as close to an empty, tabula rasa condition as is was possible for them to imagine and the project of building a new city to be — beyond a civilizing mission or utopian project — a task of literally restructuring the material dialectic binding matter to meaning. A radical project in terms of both its ideological ambitions and the brutal facts of its materiality, the conception, planning, design and construction of Magnitogorsk — impossible to differentiate into these neat stages — would force reconfigurations and inversions of the linkages between aesthetic and representational practices, and the interconnected relational structures of technology, political-economy and social form. As much as it was a technical, or even political undertaking, building the city would take place through a process of image creation, articulating narratives and ascribing meaning to the material and social transformations taking place at Magnitogorsk. In this the city would be a point of sharp inflection in a number of ideological struggles but would also disappear under layers of representation and dissolve, or fail to ever coalesce, as a stable object of consideration. Taking place, as it did, on the edge of both the European and the Russian worlds the construction of Magnitogorsk would represent a leap into the future as well as a leap into the unknown in which the dynamics of planning and contingency, action and consequence would play out in stark terms.



Building the rail line near Mount Magnitaia, 1931.  
photo by Johan Niegeman.

Into the *terra incognita* that Magnitogorsk presented as both a place and a project, a disparate array of actors would venture who would struggle, in terms both personal and political, to understand and articulate what they were doing, what they were experiencing, and what was happening to them. Party apparatchiks and professional agitators came to organize the work, instill consciousness of the significance and gravity of the undertaking and see to the workers development as political subjects. Engineers and technicians also came in large numbers. A few of these were committed communists or social democrats who had supported the Bolshevik's rise to power. Many more, however, were "prisoner experts" who had been convicted of counter-revolutionary actions or opinions and handed the bizarre sentence of being sent to Magnitogorsk to direct construction and manage the mills under the watchful eye of more trusted (if not as well paid or housed) assistants who served as both jailors and apprentices, gaining technical knowledge even as they tried to stop sabotage and subversion of resources. The workers too, spanned a spectrum from committed Bolshevik shock-workers to convicts and conscripts ranging from common criminals, to the indigent and displaced in need of employment, to industrious peasant farmers who had been declared kulaks and "liquidated" into a mobilized labor force as their farms were collectivized. Also, the local population was recruited as construction labor and found themselves suddenly taken from being semi-nomadic herders to becoming riveters and construction welders who were taught first to read and write in Russian and then engineering and metallurgy and Marxist-Leninist dialectics. Finally, a significant number of foreigners would also be involved who would likewise be motivated by varying combinations of ideological conviction, economic opportunism, professional ambition and political necessity. This group would include "foreign experts" some of whom were American and western European engineers — paid in gold rather than shaky Soviet rubles — who had come to design and set up the steel production equipment and sit out the depressions in their own countries. Others were left-wing modernist architects and intellectuals interested in finding an environment of radical potential in which they could put their ideas into practice. The construction brigades and factory crews would also include leftists workers and technicians from Europe and North America fleeing harsh economic and political conditions at home and seeking employment, adventure and a chance to take part in the great revolutionary project.<sup>1</sup> Each of these groups — or indeed individuals — would come with their own understanding of what was taking place at Magnitogorsk, what the work at hand was and what future it promised. This would strain the relations between representation — in the forms of images, plans and narratives — and "real" conditions to which it points and open up fissures in the formation of the modern city as an object of planning and design.

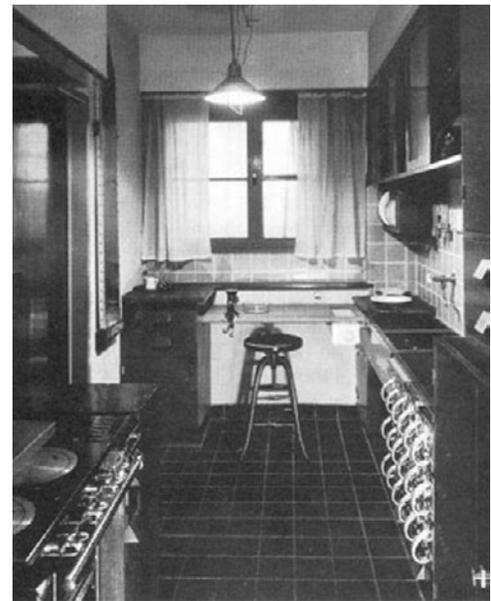
## Factory City / Kitchen City

Officially in charge of master planning Magnitogorsk, was the German architect Ernst May. May had been among the founding members of the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) and municipal architect for Frankfurt from 1925 to 1930 where he had overseen the Neue Frankfurt project that built progressive, functionalist workers housing under the sponsorship of a left-wing city government. Many of the architects who worked under May had trained at the Bauhaus or — like Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky who designed the *Frankfurt Kitchen* for the *Neue Frankfurt* housing projects — had been active in Vienna when it was controlled by a Marxist city government. In 1931, with the political situation turning against them, May had refashioned his design team into a “brigade” and brought them to the Soviet Union to work on urban projects.

May came to Magnitogorsk armed with the planning guidelines for the Sotsgorod or “Socialist City” put forward in 1930 by Nikolay A. Milyutin People’s Commissar of Finance and director of Narkomfin. The Sotsgorod existed as a collection of abstract diagrams and specifications organized by both geometric abstraction — specifically linearity — and the abstraction of material processes in industrial production. The concept of the linear city was not a Soviet invention but rather was synthesized from a number of motifs emerging from progressive discourses on the city and corporatist and technocratic ideas about rationalized social management. Le Corbusier, who by the late 1920s had emerged as a dominant figure in the ideological formation of modernist architecture, first articulated what he termed the “four functions of architecture” (housing, industry, recreation, and circulation) and politicized linearity as the essential form of industrial production in his 1929 scheme for the *Ville Radieuse* or radiant city. The linear arrangement was posited as a “rational” alternative to cities organized concentrically with housing and workshops accreting haphazardly around either symbolic representations of state and religious power, or marketplaces and other sites of commercial exchange. While the linearity of the *Ville Radieuse* is meant to provide for efficient, high speed circulation of vehicles it also figures heavily as an axial composition device and is “radiant” in the sense of radial or axial, baroque planning seen in Versailles or in Haussmann’s Parisian boulevards, that creates lines of sight. If the linearity of the Fordist assembly line — admired by both the Bolsheviks and by Le Corbusier’s ideological patrons in French Syndicalist and Saint-Simonian technocratic circles<sup>2</sup> — is present in the *Ville Radieuse* it is primarily as a formal metaphor rather than an organization of the social relations of production (of which Le Corbusier was ambivalent).

Linearity would be loaded with significantly different ideological significance by the Constructivist elements of the Soviet *avant-garde*. These had begun with radical experiments in painting and sculpture that, equating compositional form with social composition, sought to overturn harmony and order with the shock and rupture of the revolution. In architecture and in time-based media such as film and theater, Constructivists found it necessary to revolutionize not only the forms of objects and images but also of social relations by which they were produced. While Le Corbusier remained committed to conceptions of universal human needs and a shared human spirit animating an architecture made to the measure of man, the Soviet *avant-garde* asserted a structurally determined subjectivity that could be designed as machines are. In abstracting and rationalizing both the body and the human subject, Constructivism sought to establish a reciprocal relationship between people and their architecture in which each makes the other.

In the 1920s El Lissitzky had come to Western Europe bringing constructivist influences to the functionalism of the Bauhaus’ left wing and the abstraction of the Dutch *De Stijl* movement, so that the arrival of architects from Western Europe in the 1930s would appear as much as an echo or return of Soviet ideas as it was a new influence. The westerners would find a second generation of Soviet artists and designers struggling to respond both to the success of the revolution and accusations of bourgeois formalism by endeavoring to carry their work “into the factory” and engage directly with both manufacturing processes and the social formations that



The Frankfurt Kitchen designed by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky.



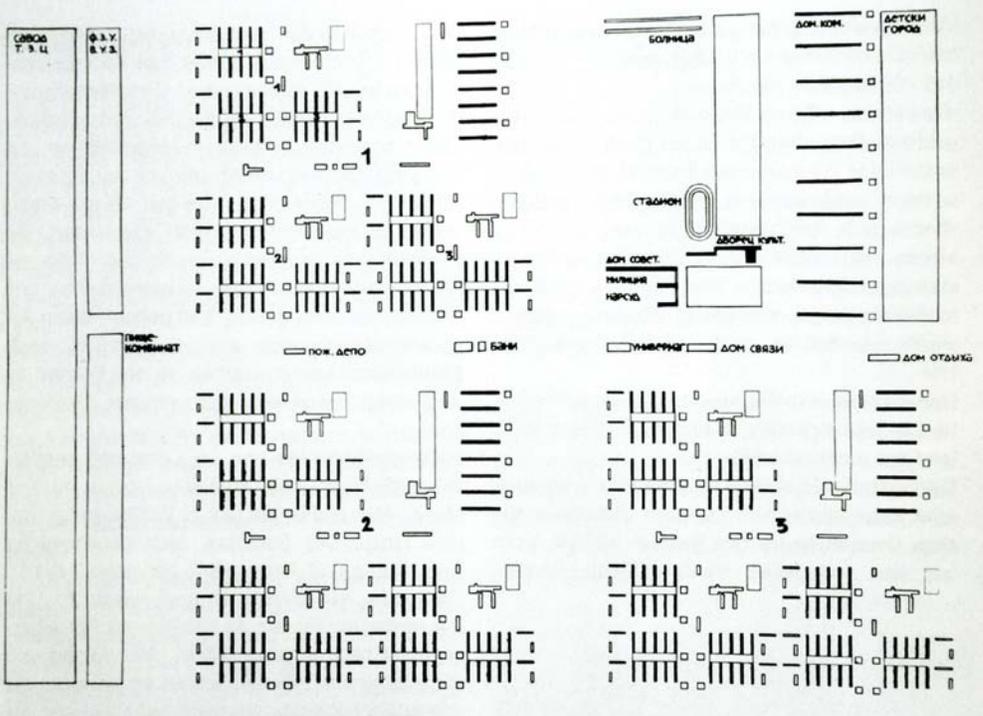
Deutsche Bauen in der UdSSR (Germans building in the USSR), *Das Neue Frankfurt*



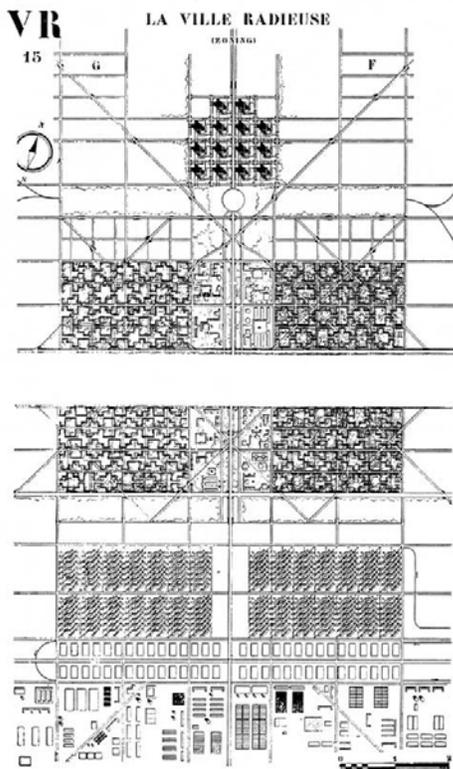
Ernst May with his stereo camera in the Soviet Union 1931, photo Johan Niegeman.



The May Brigade in the Soviet Union,  
photos by Ernst May and  
Johan Niegeman.



Nikolay Milyutin, Sotsgorod (The Socialist City)

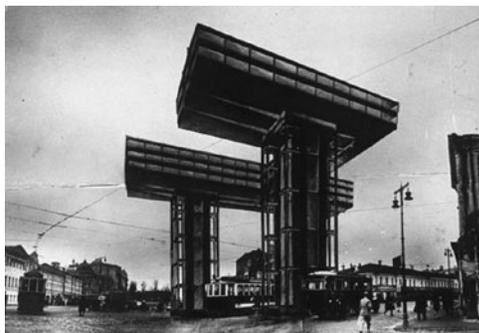


Le Corbusier, plan for La Ville Radieuse

supported and emerged from them.<sup>3</sup> These Productivists sought to collapse art and design into the work of engineering and management, so that the direction of material production and the choreography of industrial processes could be activated as a site of engagement. It is less common to describe architecture as Productivist but the term is a good fit for projects of the 1930s that expanded the concepts of constructivist workers' clubs of the 1920s — conceived of as “social condensers” designed to inscribe new forms of sociability<sup>4</sup> — to the scale of the city.

Productivism would provide terms by which leftist elements of CIAM were able to see the relational forms of political-economy and industrial production, not only in factories and urban infrastructure but also in domestic space: in kitchens, and bathrooms and bed rooms. Architects working in the Soviet Union critiqued the model offered by Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*—and the CIAM *Functional City* project that developed from it—on the grounds that it was blind to class struggle and antagonistic social relations in general. In 1931 May published an article entitled “Moscow: City Building in the USSR” in the German magazine *Das Neue Russland* in which he reports on the work his brigade in the Soviet Union was involved in, criticizing the mapping technique deployed in the *Functional City* that only used the categories of the four functions. May implies that, however Le Corbusier's city may look, it still had a concentric quality that could not be escaped — except through socialism:

*The capitalist city has developed concentrically around the market place and while the rich, the middle classes, and the proletarians live in clearly separated districts of their own – this differentiation of class structures being recognizable from afar and defining the capitalist city's particular character and form – the city of the USSR knows only one class, the class of the working people.<sup>6</sup>*



EL Lisitzky, Horizontal Skyscraper

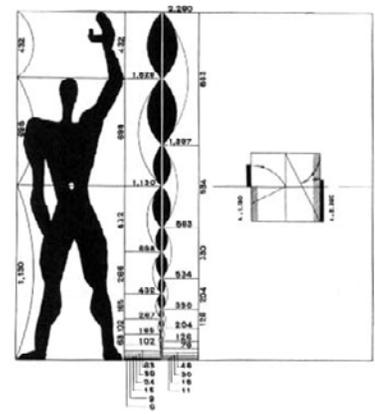
Only in classlessness does May see the opportunity to achieve the truly de-centered, destratified, industrial efficiency promised by the linear city concept. Of the cities that May was involved with planning — including the much more monumental, administrative, manufacturing and logistics hub at Stalingrad — Magnitogorsk, with its remoteness, its newness and its monomaniacal focus on a single, large-scale, heavy industry, offered the clearest opportunity to assert a model of completely “functional” — meaning productive — urbanism.

In applying the model of industrial production to the whole of the city and the functional relations at work within it, May sought to develop an architecture that would facilitate, if not actually effect, a set of social transformations hoped for by

Marxists and especially Marxist-Feminists in both Europe and the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> In the *Frankfurt Kitchen*, Schütte-Lihotzky had applied the efficiency logics of Taylorist “scientific management” to the kitchen in hopes of liberating the time, and therefore labor of women from housework and thereby redefining gender roles. In Magnitogorsk, the May brigade sought to expand these concepts on an urban, mass-cultural scale. Declaring that, “the traditional image of the family is in the process of extinction,”<sup>8</sup> May discusses the application of industrial division of labor to reproductive functions conventionally preformed within the family, and suggests such integrations of family life into production as the inclusion of nurseries in factories, so that mothers can feed their babies while at work. These measures were intended to not only overturn bourgeois gender roles but also to separate parents and children, so that the new generation could be brought up free of the tainted traditions of the past.

May proposes that by consolidating cooking, eating and laundry facilities and offering individual housing for workers in large-scale collectives, would free women’s labor for productive purposes. Further, the entire model of the family might be overturned as the basic social and productive unit of society, and workers would instead create new, as-yet-unknown, collective social forms. May however backs off from discussing what actually might go on in the private lives of the revolutionary proletarians and attempts to drop a veil of privacy over the actual negotiation of interpersonal relationships and also individual subjectivity. May assures his readers that “[t]he relationship between man and woman in the context of collective life has been left untouched and is being regarded as a strictly private affair between individuals.”<sup>9</sup> May concludes his article disappointingly, by accepting some the terms of conservative critics both in the Soviet Union and abroad that characterize radical social programs of productivist modernism as being too expensive or disruptive and disorienting to a populace exhausted by war and dislocation. Faced with the rigorous extremity of the material conditions on the ground in Magnitogorsk — and perhaps also his disengagement from them — May concedes that there are not sufficient resources for the experimental communal housing, childcare and educational facilities he imagines. This however, betrays the vision of these spaces serving as condensers or reaction chambers in a unitary urban social-factory whose most important product was not steel but rather new subjectivities, and new forms of life that would add up to a new world beyond capitalism. Where May’s utopian ambitions would fall short was not so much in the inadequacy of production to supply consumption but rather in the inability to negotiate, or balance the books between production and reproduction: the city-as-factory and the city-as-kitchen.

By winning the favor of the ascendant Stalinist regime the conservative champions of social continuity triumphed in 1932 with the issuing of the Communist Party edict “Concerning the Reorganization of Literary Artistic Societies” establishing the affirmative, accessible aesthetics of Socialist Realism as official doctrine. In practical terms, this began a process that affected the expulsion of foreign architects — as well as most of the rest of the “foreign experts” — from the country and the disciplining and marginalization of the Russian *avant-garde*. The anti-humanist abstraction of Constructivism and Productivism was replaced by simple, uplifting pictorial images that would inspire and instruct workers in the “reality” of their new society. Painting and sculpture was returned to a didactic, representational mode and architecture to visual monumentality and *Beaux-Arts* aesthetic, rendered in austere severity but blown up to a heroic scale worthy of the empire of the proletariat. Apologists for Socialist Realism equated the vigorous health and solidity of the subject with the stability of social forms such as the family. Architecture would act positively to reinforce the identity of its inhabitants and the — assumed to be natural — forms of their culture rather than intensifying the rupture and transformation of modernity.



Le Corbusier, *Le Modulor*, 1948  
A system of measurement based on ideal human proportions.



Kazimir Malevich “The Strong Man.”  
A sketch of a costume design for the constructivist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, in which human bodies are abstracted into geometric forms.



Varvara Stepanova, Designs for women’s sports costumes intended to create a condition of androgyny by obscuring the form of the body with geometric patterns.



Ernst May, General Plan for the City of Magnitogorsk



Union Day in Russia. In this poster celebrating the organization of labor, workers are rendered as abstract cartoons while the factories they work in are shown as a montage of photographs.



A constructivist monument. Photograph by Ernst May.

## The Dreams of Engineers

Were it the case that either this account or May's mapped neatly onto a known "reality", it might be possible to simply characterize the construction of Magnitogorsk as another story of utopia foreclosed, betrayed or failed. This however is not the case and it is therefore only possible to consider other appearances or projections and triangulate to a provisional understanding of what this city was and is. What does seem clear is that the views of both the European architects and the planners in Moscow were at best narrow and focused and at worst obscured by the limitations of their ideological frame, blinded by the brilliance of the projections they sought to cast into the world. Whether prisoners, hired guns or committed partisans, the engineers, managers and technicians who built Magnitogorsk had radical ambitions of their own and can perhaps be said to have been building an entirely different kind of revolutionary society.

The reciprocal interest between Soviet economic planners and American business and industrial culture — on both sides composed of equal parts admiration, fear, envy and morbid fascination — would motivate a visit to the steel production centers of Cleveland, Ohio and Gary, Indiana by a delegation of Soviet engineers and economists. In these exchanges it is possible to see glimmers of the kind of apolitical solidarity that Saint-Simon imagined between technicians and "industrials"<sup>10</sup> that would be able to see past and through the veils of culture and politics and collaborate on the task of building the biggest, most advanced steel production facility in the world. In characterizing Magnitogorsk as a "dream world"<sup>11</sup> Susan Buck-Morss cites Antony Sutton's dry, analytical account<sup>12</sup> of the Cleveland-based engineering firm Arthur McKee and Co. winning the contract to design and administer the construction of the city's mines and mills in 1930 with a proposal based on a heroically scaled-up version of the U.S. Steel Gary plant organized by an "integrated design that provided a linear flow from raw materials to finished products."<sup>13</sup> Buck-Morss is also, however, able to claim Magnitogorsk as the Soviet Hollywood that drew ambitious and optimistic young people seeking opportunities to reinvent themselves. If, in this view, Magnitogorsk's vast complex of smelters and blast furnaces and continuous casting mills is a factory first and then somehow more than and less than a city, then it is a factory producing both material value and cultural values and also utopian "no place." It is however, a utopia whose ideal model is Gary, Indiana — which is to say either something beyond utopia or else no utopia at all.

Some of the perspective of these radical technicians is provided in the autobiographical account of an American named John Scott who came to Magnitogorsk in 1932 after dropping out of the University of Wisconsin and taking some basic welding courses. In his book, *Behind the Urals: An American in Russia's City of Steel*,<sup>14</sup> published in 1942, Scott recounts his experience working as a welder during the construction of Magnitogorsk and then in the mills until the purges and rising distrust of foreigners made it too dangerous for him to stay in the Soviet Union. Scott is by no means an objective narrator. Writing, as he did, from England with



The May Brigade in the Soviet Union, photos by Ernst May and Johan Niegeman.



American specialists in an automobile factory designed by Albert Kahn, in Cheliabinsk, 300 kilometers north of Magnitogorsk.



the tide of the Second World War just beginning to turn and his Russian wife waiting for an exit visa that would allow her to join him, Scott is understandably reluctant to be critical of either the Soviet system or the people he worked with. Also, he seems interested in playing down his communist sympathies so as not to jeopardize his own chances of returning to the United States. Scott writes in a laconic, understated style that calls to mind the self-deprecating irony of talking blues folk songs, hard-boiled dime-store detective novels or perhaps a clumsily executed beatnik travel adventure. He is, nonetheless, able to present a comprehensive set of facts and figures pertaining to first construction and then steel production that convincingly convey the staggering scope and scale of Magnitogorsk. Scott intersperses his analysis with harrowing stories, delivered in a jocular deadpan, of he and his comrades rubbing snow on their faces to keep their noses from freezing as they work in howling winds high up on the mammoth blast furnaces and barely-trained farm boys falling to their deaths from the scaffolding because the wood for guard rails — the only fuel on the treeless steppe — had been burned for heat.

What Scott refers to as the “socialist city,” is not a planning model but rather a specific neighborhood of modernist mid-rise tower block housing built only after the mills and smelters had been brought on line. Further, he seems to be under the impression that the name is not official but rather a bit of sardonic Russian humor.

“A panorama of the chaotic site, showing the two blast furnaces and coke plant.” Photograph published in John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia’s City of Steel*.



“Agitation point in the tent settlement, 1930” Photograph published in John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia’s City of Steel*.



“Interior of an exemplary ‘shock worker’ barracks.” Photograph published in John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia’s City of Steel*.



“Party Lessons.” Photograph published in John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia’s City of Steel*.



“Fountains on the pedestrian mall between the apartment buildings of the socialist city, 1938” published in John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia’s City of Steel*.

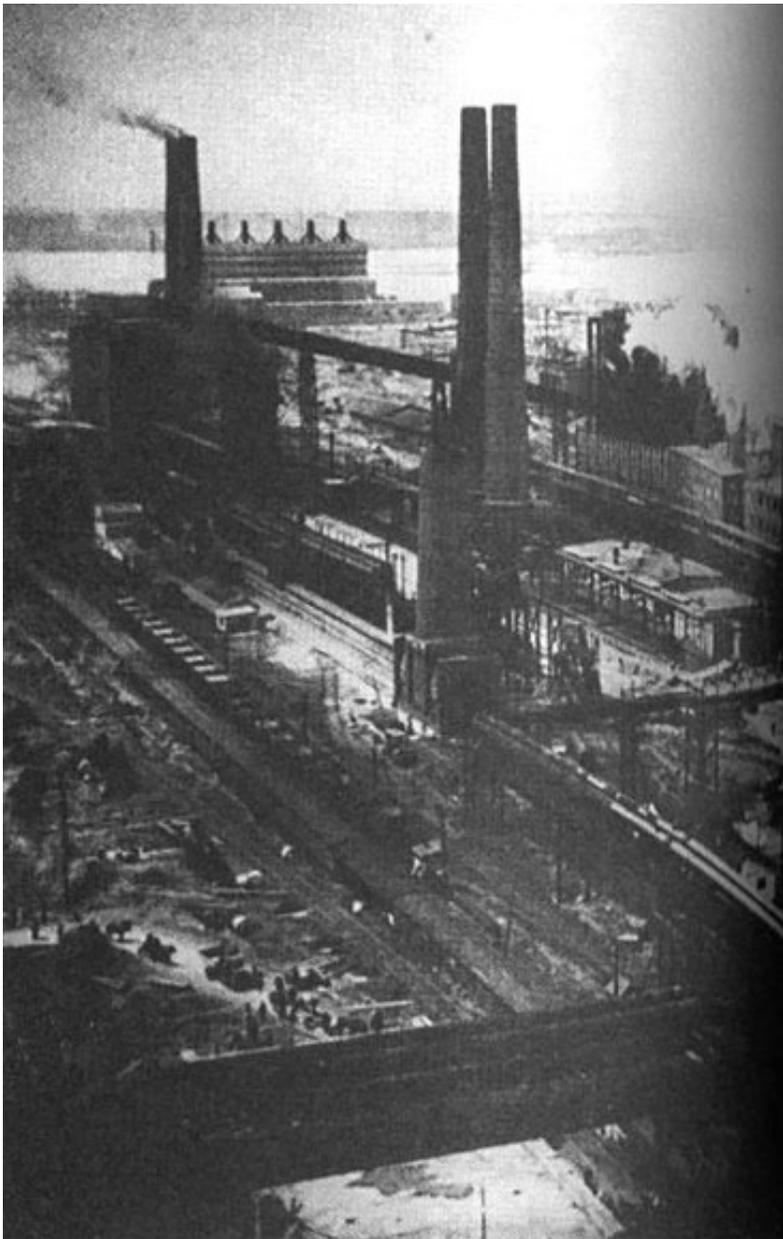


Margaret Bourke-White, “Kentucky Flood” for *Life Magazine*.

This socialist city was considered good housing for those lucky and in the good graces of the party apparatus. During the years of construction, however, Scott and the other workers lived mostly in barracks, segregated by gender and organized by working groups. He however understands these conditions as matters of practical necessity rather than radical design. Scott also frames as pragmatic the construction of the new people who will live in the new world that Magnitogorsk opens up. Scott recounts stories of his colleagues working long shifts in the cold, and then attending classes at night where they learn to read, or study mechanics and metallurgy and Marxism. They become technicians, engineers and managers and, also, they learn techniques of “doing” politics in ways that both allow them to dictate the terms of their own lives and to struggle with each other for power and resources. He tells how his wife came from a peasant background and became a crane operator and then went on to run a rolling mill. He tells the stories of *kulak* prisoner workers becoming foremen, of party apparatchiks becoming close friends with the prisoner experts they watched over and learning engineering from them. He also tells of party managers enriching themselves at the expense of the project, sometimes with impunity but other times only to be caught and executed or sent deeper into Siberia to the even more dystopian islands of the “gulag archipelago.” The architects, when they appear in Scott’s account, are among the foreign experts who live separately from the construction workers and buy food from their own, better-stocked commissary. May’s pictures from Russia support this account in that they show him and his brigade dressed in suits and working in expansive office environments hung with large maps of their project sites and watched over by portraits of Lenin. When he is out doors and on site May takes touristic snapshots that seem more like the images of a man on safari than someone documenting a worksite. In Scott’s account, the modernist project within communism is not absent, but is rather described as a driving force that makes it possible to imagine the radical project of Magnitogorsk at all. The daily life he depicts is organized by an ethos of survival and solidarity that operates in the immediacy of the present more than either projections of the future or iconographies of the past. When the purges of the later 1930s begin to ramp up, Scott suggests that they mainly effect those involved in party politics and personal intrigues — while nonetheless seeing to his own safety. In a way strikingly in harmony with American corporate culture Scott implies that the way to live in the new industrial utopia is to work hard, make yourself useful, stay positive and keep your nose clean and your sense of humor intact.

## Capitalist Realism

The other important American voice narrating an account of Magnitogorsk is Margaret Bourke-White, the pioneering photojournalist who would become famous for her iconic images of the Second World War and political leaders and events afterwards. After completing a photo study of depression struck America, Bourke-White was hired as a correspondent by the newly launched *Fortune* magazine. *Fortune* had been conceived, during the boom years of the late 1920s as a magazine for, and about the wealthy and powerful. The first issue, however, did not make it to press until 1930, just after the market crash that began the depression, so the editors refashioned the magazine as a defiant mouth-piece for the perseverance and resilience of American industry. Bourke-White, a liberal progressive with left-populist sympathies was hired for her ability to evocatively depict the “human face” of political events and economic conditions. In 1931, she was sent to the Soviet Union to document the industrial expansion and assess the attendant cultural developments. Bourke-White spent a significant part of this trip in Magnitogorsk photographing workers building the steel mills and producing some of the most widely used representations of the city’s construction. Bourke-White’s images favor themes of the natural and technological sublime, empathetic identification with the humanity of her subjects and juxtapositions of these two to create narratives of the endurance of humanity in a world organized by forces both inhuman and superhuman. In Bourke-White’s images of construction, small human figures toil with shovels as the massive blast furnaces loom in the background; a youthful construction worker looks up from a foundation pit, tired and dirty – but hopeful.



Magnitogorsk steel production facilities, and workers in their barracks and at the construction site. Photographs by Margaret Bourke-White

Bourke-White frames scenes of camaraderie in the cramped and Spartan but clean and well-kept barracks. She photographs a young woman machinist at her drill press, watching her piece intently but in a pose that could also seem prettily feminine and demure despite the visible muscularity of her hands and forearms. In her pictures, Bourke-White trades in a realism similar to Socialist Realism – but interested in depicting the “reality” of the human condition rather than a revolutionary society. One of the repeated juxtapositions Bourke-White makes is between human subjects and the esthetic representations of ideologies: In a particularly heavy-handed example, she depicts a dirty, exhausted-looking steel worker sitting down to a dinner or bread and soup beneath a poster depicting heroic, robot-like workers marching in file.



Worker in Magnitogorsk. photograph by Margaret Bourke-White

This figure of a robot-worker returns in a series of photographs taken of a constructivist monument, of unexplained significance, that features illuminated text and a statue of a workers body abstracted into cubist rectangular volumes with its arm raised towards the future. In this representation, “robotic,” machine-like subjectivity is situated in a muddy, rutted, field beneath a looming winter sky with the mills in the distance. It looks forlorn and abandoned; less a ruin of a failed utopia than something that was never able to match the superhuman magnitude of forces with which it sought to engage.



Interior of Women’s barracks. Photograph by Margaret Bourke-White

Bourke-White does not seem to be denigrating the radical aspirations of the workers at Magnitogorsk, but instead suggesting that ideologies, like nature and technology, are yet another hulking edifice that people find ways to inhabit, survive, and make their peace with. Calculated to flatter the good-hearted, pragmatist sensibilities of her audience, her work is, of course, as propagandistic as the posters and constructions she photographs. But still, it makes a case for there being something — some state of existence — that amounts to a real life that happens while other plans are made. Whether the thing behind the plan — the ghost of existence within the machine — is anything so immutable or absolute as either a noble “human spirit;” or a primitive, animal condition of bare life; or is simply the ungraspable way that our plans and our constructions make and remake us even as we make them is a question of position. Bourke-White might, in her own practice, more clearly articulate a third way, between the symbolic orders of Socialist Realism and the abstract systems of Productivism. Her ability to navigate the Soviet Union and produce images of things not yet seen in the West cemented her role as a narrator and her ability to move, with her cameras, through a world organized by vast mechanisms of creative destruction.



Female Machinist in Magnitogorsk. Photograph by Margaret Bourke-White

## After Utopia

As Bourke-White went on to become a war correspondent, others found paths-of-flight away from Magnitogorsk. May left in 1934, Scott stayed four years longer. Unable to return to Germany, May went to Kenya where he bought a ranch and waited out the war. Magnitogorsk continued to produce steel throughout the war in ever increasing quantities. The monumental city of Stalingrad became the site of a symbolic battle that would mark the turning point of the war but would result in its almost total obliteration. The materiality of this battle would see Magnitogorsk steel, refined from the Magnetic Mountain, being turned into tanks in Stalingrad factories and rolling, unpainted, off the assembly lines directly into the inferno of destruction. The monumental icon city would thus die a powerful, symbolic death and the obscure materialist city would live and grow in its mechanistic vitality. May would return home after the war to find both Frankfurt and his hometown of Hamburg heavily damaged. The left-wing of the modernist movement was scattered and isolated even as Le Corbusier and his faction of CIAM stood poised to assume important roles in forming the ideology of post-war reconstruction with new urban plans and monuments to peace and the triumph of the human spirit. May, though invited to assume a roll in this, would withdraw from active involvement with CIAM instead returning to Hamburg to help rebuild his home city.



Worker eating beneath a Union Day in Russia poster. Photograph by Margaret Bourke-White

During the war, Magnitogorsk was designated a closed, strategic city and effectively disappeared from the view of both foreign observers and much of the popular imagination in the Soviet Union until the openness of *glasnost* allowed its



Constructivist “robot” worker monument. Photograph by Margaret Bourke-White



Magnitogorsk victory monument.

reemergence from obscurity. Magnitogorsk had expanded in phases during its period of relative invisibility. In an ironic mirroring of the progression from Constructivism to Socialist Realism, districts of stripped-down, bulked-up *Beaux-Arts* style housing with radial boulevards cutting through their street grids had been built during the postwar reconstruction. This was then followed, in the Khrushchev era’s return to modernism, by the construction of rows of tower blocks, widely spaced along a green transit axis. The Magnetic Mountain has, however, disappeared for good, having been completely turned into steel and leaving only a pit in the earth to mark where it had been. The air and the water had been radically transformed as well, earning Magnitogorsk a place on the United Nations’ list of the world’s “Most Altered Environments.” With its mills now privatized and iron ore brought in on trains, Magnitogorsk remains a major site of steel production in Russia. It has universities, an opera house and hosts the Pushkin Drama Theatre and a hockey team named “The Metallurgists,” with a reputation for being the bruisers of the Russian league. It is unequivocally a real place. On a hill overlooking the city, a massive iron statue, made of some infinitesimally small fraction of Magnitogorsk’s iron production, offers an account of its historic significance. It shows an older, bearded worker handing an impossibly out-of-scale sword to a younger soldier suggesting a classic allegory of the continuity of patriarchal power. This account is perhaps as true as May’s or Scott’s or Bourke-White’s. Perhaps Magnitogorsk has survived not only the wars — both hot and cold — but modernism as well. It is also true, however, that something was broken here, not only symbolically, but also in real, material terms, and that people made their world within the forms of industrial production, material and value, and ideology. Despite the efforts of those who struggle to represent in words and images — and therefore recapture it within the circuits of the normal, the planned, and even the real — this radical break resists representation. The rupture and remaking of the form of life exists in a dark space beyond the light of the planner’s reason and the mythological iconographies of power, in the darkness beyond utopia.



Home and away jerseys of the *Metallurg Magnitogorsk* hockey team.

<sup>1</sup> See John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel* (Indiana University Press, 1942).

<sup>2</sup> See Mary McLeod, "Architecture or Revolution': Taylorism, Technocracy, and Social Change," *Art Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Summer 1983), pp. 132-147.

<sup>3</sup> See, Christina Kiaer, "Into Production!': The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism," *Transversal Texts* (2009, EIPCP) [<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/kiaer/en>]

<sup>4</sup> El Lissitzky, "The Club," in *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1970).

<sup>5</sup> A good account of this exchange can be found in, Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928–1960* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 59-65

<sup>6</sup> Ernst May, "Moscow: City Building in the USSR" in *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1970) originally published in *DAS Neue Russland* (Frankfurt, 1931).

<sup>7</sup> Schütte-Lihotzky was influenced by the Neue Frau movement in Germany and Soviet feminist Alexandra Kolantai's theories on gender and labor.

<sup>8</sup> Ernst May, "Moscow: City Building in the USSR"

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Henri de Saint-Simon, "The Political Interest of Industry," and, "On M. Barthélemy's Proposal to the House of Peers," *Selected Writings on Science, Industry and Social Organization*, edited and translated by Keith Taylor (New Jersey: Holmes and Meier 1975).

<sup>11</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, "A Cosmopolitan Project" in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2000)

<sup>12</sup> Antony C. Sutton, *Western Technology and Soviet Economic Development 1917–1930* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> Buck-Morss, "A Cosmopolitan Project"

<sup>14</sup> Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*.