

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

SPECIAL ISSUE: INDUSTRIAL URBANISMS AND ENTANGLED MODERNITIES IN EURASIA

Introduction

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Abstract

Although industrial modernization in Eurasia both preceded and outlived the Soviet project, in popular and scholarly imaginations, manufacturing cities located in the continent's eastern regions are often understood as quintessentially 'Soviet'. Yet, this perception tends to ignore the ways in which earlier urban developments were integrated with socialist innovations. This special issue seeks to decentre the concept of 'Soviet urbanism' by placing socialist forms into a *longue durée* perspective on industrial modernity and destabilizing popular equations of 'post-socialism' with 'post-industrialism'. The collection's contributions explore how modernist urbanism has intersected a variety of political and economic regimes over the past century and how evolving industrial processes continue to shape and reconfigure Eurasia's urban landscapes.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Eurasian continent underwent dramatic industrial transformations. Although regional processes of urbanization and industrialization frequently preceded the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent spread of the Soviet system, the shadow of 'socialist planning' still looms large over popular imaginations and academic studies of industrial urbanism. In these accounts, 'socialism' is often credited with providing a model for urban development that shaped the values and expectations of local communities in Eurasia, even as it set the stage for the economic challenges faced by industrial centres after the Soviet collapse. Still more, the widely held perception that twentieth-century Eurasian industrial legacies are inherently 'Soviet' has determined the trajectory of their memorialization and post-hoc modernization efforts in multiple regions. Such perceptions have also set the stage for internecine conflicts between segments of society who view these legacies, either as symbols of 'colonial domination' or an ugly sign of 'backwardness' that is inferior to Western modernity, and those who remain nostalgic for socialism and long for the return of at least some of its guiding principles. Yet, despite their radically divergent assessments of the value of this 'legacy', both camps seem highly invested in the idea that it is impossible to disentangle twentieth-century industrial urbanism from the Soviet past, attributing both its feats and failures to the peculiarity of Soviet planning and its supposedly ideologically driven premises.

However, as the literature on Soviet economic growth and planning has long argued, Soviet-era developments were partly determined by previously existing infrastructures,¹ bearing a closer resemblance to comparable industrial practices in the West than many observers imagine.² Moreover, the ruination of the so-called ‘monotowns’ – or single-function urban-industrial settlements – can be regarded as the outcome of contradictions built into Soviet planning as much as the features of post-Soviet capitalism.³ Scholars of socialist political economy have also questioned the extent to which Soviet industrial civilization truly deviated from capitalist logics, and whether its history is perhaps better characterized as an experience of striving to ‘escape the inescapable market’.⁴

Treated as a self-contained or *sui generis* category, ‘Soviet urbanism’ in fact appears to be an object without an essence. Even in those instances where the term is employed in a loose descriptive sense, it is rarely deployed as part of the global history of industrial modernization, a process that both antedated and outlived the Soviet project. Also, the idea that there was ever a singular, authentic ‘Soviet modernity’, with a stable core that survived unchanged from October 1917 to the collapse of the USSR in 1991, is itself a fiction.⁵ In practice, Soviet urban policies varied widely across the decades and geographies of the USSR as well as within the states that constituted the Soviet sphere of influence, or recipients of its planning doctrines and philosophies. In addition, many of the logics and rationales behind nominally ‘Soviet’ forms of urban and industrial planning were modified to respond to the perceived needs of Eurasian populations with very different historical experiences or visions of the future than their Soviet or Russian counterparts. What was ‘Soviet’ or ‘socialist’ about a particular planning principle or architectural feature, once it was transported to another context, where it potentially assumed new functions and meanings, remains an open question.

The aspirations of citizens of other socialist-bloc countries and ‘the Third World’ more broadly did not always correspond to the motivations of Soviet planners or their conceptions of urban-industrial space. Frictions also emerged between urban and industrial forms considered to embody ‘the bright communist future’ and what societies could afford to construct in the present. Thus, complex processes of contestation, negotiation and justification intersected as part of determining what was viable, and eventually constructed, as opposed to what was not. Additionally, the Soviet project itself was equally subject to this logic of ‘borrowing’, or introduction of innovations from abroad, alongside its own local or endogenous creations. The sites of rapid urbanization and industrialization in much of the territory of the former

¹C. Crawford, *Spatial Revolution: Architecture and Planning in the Early Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY, 2022); P. Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City, 1930–1966* (Pittsburgh, 2010).

²K. Bailes, ‘The American connection: ideology and the transfer of American technology to the Soviet Union, 1917–1941’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23 (1981), 421–48; K. Wiest, ‘Comparative debates in post-socialist urban studies’, *Urban Geography*, 33 (2012), 829–49.

³M. Bennett, ‘The making of post-post-Soviet ruins: infrastructure development and disintegration in contemporary Russia’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 45 (2021), 332–47.

⁴M. Lewin, *Stalinism and the Seeds of Soviet Reform: The Debates of the 1960s* (London, 1991); M. Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1993); S.A. Resnick and R.D. Wolff, *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR* (Abingdon, 2013).

⁵A. Krylova, ‘Soviet modernity: Stephen Kotkin and the Bolshevik predicament’, *Contemporary European History*, 23 (2014), 167–92.

Russian empire were themselves the products of foreign capital investments and designs, especially in spaces like the Baku oil fields or the coal mines of the Donbas. Early Soviet industrial development relied heavily on the transfer of technology and expertise from countries like the United States.⁶ For example, the Soviet Union famously bought its first tractor factories from the Ford Motor company, and Lenin looked upon Detroit as the height of extant capitalism, believing American labour processes and management techniques should be studied, and even copied, by the young Soviet republic. In fact, Soviet leaders were so enamoured with this 'mode of production' that in the 1920s Fordism literally became a Russian word, *fordizm*.⁷ In this sense, even Soviet industrial urbanism was not entirely 'Soviet'.

In light of these facts, this special issue seeks to decentre the concept of 'Soviet urbanism' by placing socialist urban forms in a *longue durée* perspective on industrial modernity in Eurasia. It strives to investigate how socialist urban and industrial planning practices built upon nineteenth- and early twentieth-century developments, which were often shaped by external pressures not wholly dissimilar from those which conditioned capitalist development in Western Europe and North America. It is not our goal to distil the Soviet experience down to nothingness, nor to render the concept of 'Soviet urban history' entirely useless to scholars. Instead, we seek to question the narratives of 'radical rupture' associated with the centrally planned economy or post-1917 urban life, which come both from supporters of the Soviet project and its most vehement critics. This step, which recognizes the Soviet experience as part of a broader phenomenon of twentieth-century modernity, enables us to move past familiar tropes which assess 'post-Soviet' urban development in terms of 'the failure of the socialist project', or brutalist structures presented as exclusively 'Eastern European', to focus on the multifarious and still-evolving forms of industry-driven, urban development across the Eurasian region.

In recent years, the notion of 'socialist urbanism' has likewise become an object of critical reflection in the social sciences and humanities for scholars seeking to problematize its implicit assumptions of radical alterity.⁸ As Kimberly Zarecor observes in her overview of historical approaches to the study of (post-)socialist urban life, the privileging of archival methods in the study of socialist cities has resulted in disproportionate focus on how cities were designed or constructed, while treating planning documents, or, better, researchers' readings thereof, as direct 'manifestations of the socialist system itself'.⁹ Such a focus lends itself well to semiotic approaches which seek to 'decode' the urban landscape¹⁰ and the subject-making ideologies behind specific architectural features or built environments.¹¹ However,

⁶Bailes, 'The American connection'; C. Crawford, 'From tractors to territory: socialist urbanization through standardization', *Journal of Urban History*, 44 (2018), 54–77; S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley, 1997).

⁷D. Greenstein, 'Assembling fordizm: the production of automobiles, Americans, and Bolsheviks in Detroit and early Soviet Russia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 56 (2014), 259–89.

⁸S. Ferenčuhová, 'Explicit definitions and implicit assumptions about post-socialist cities in academic writings', *Geography Compass*, 10 (2016), 514–24; S. Hirt, 'Whatever happened to the (post)socialist city?', *Cities*, 32 (2013), S29–S38; K. Zarecor, 'What was so socialist about the socialist city? Second World urbanity in Europe', *Journal of Urban History*, 44 (2018), 95–117.

⁹Zarecor, 'What was so socialist about the socialist city?', 96.

¹⁰M. Urban, and J. McClure, 'The folklore of state socialism: semiotics and the study of the Soviet state', *Soviet Studies*, 35 (1983), 471–86.

¹¹G. Castillo, 'Soviet orientalism: socialist realism and built tradition', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, 8 (1997), 33–47; T. Colton, *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

such a methodological focus can come at the expense of analysis of the everyday experiences of life in these spaces as well as a wider geographic coverage or span, with metropolitan cities in Central Europe or Western parts of Eastern Europe that boast rich archival records being over-represented and turned into ‘models’ for socialist urbanism *tout court*.¹² Critical studies that explore the facets of everyday life in urban industrial spaces far from these centres of power are still generally lacking, and their potential contribution to the overall picture of Eurasian industrial civilization remains underexplored.

Therefore, this special issue seeks to bring together historical case-studies, which trace Soviet urban cultural forms, as they were articulated across diverse national, social and ecological landscapes, while placing those studies in dialogue with explorations of present-day struggles over urban memory and heritage projects in former industrial manufacturing centres. The collection strives to move beyond ideal-type ‘socialist environments’ to grasp how socialist urban forms co-existed with, and continue to co-exist alongside, other non-socialist modes of spatial integration and urban planning. As such, the issue shifts its geographic focus away from the capitals of East-Central Europe to often-understudied locations in Ukraine, Russia and Lithuania, while extending the geographic reach of its analysis not only to Soviet Central Asia, but also to East and South Asia. In a very real sense, the history of twentieth-century industrialization was the history of the industrialization of Asia, not of Europe, with the great majority of the large-scale, breakneck transformations taking place in regions outside of what has come to be known as ‘old Europe’.

By moving the centre of gravity away from metropolitan and urban-dense regions in Western Eurasia and foregrounding the continent’s often-overlooked peripheral locations, the contributions to this issue tease out the particularities of the continent’s twentieth-century industrial urbanism, often characterized by its unprecedented pace and grandiose planning in sites, unburdened by the constraints of elaborate, pre-existing urban fabrics – some of which stretched back to antiquity. This recentring of urban experiences on the margins of Eurasia enables the contributors to produce nuanced accounts of the historically diverse and multifaceted nature of industry-driven modernization, while questioning the received wisdom that ‘the socialist city’, suddenly emerged on the scene from the dramatic political rupture of 1917, dominated the Eurasian landscape for the better part of a century, and then simply vanished or decayed unceremoniously following the Soviet system’s demise.

The issue’s first three contributions explore the dynamics of socialist urbanization and industrial planning in contexts marked by a relative paucity of large-scale, high-density settlements, paired with attempts by Soviet and local planners to increase the productivity of national economies by expanding the footprint of existing urban spaces or building new infrastructures that would give them access to underexploited or untapped labour and natural resources. In his study of the transformation of Bishkek into the capital of the Kyrgyz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, Alun Thomas demonstrates how patterns of governance inherited from the late imperial-era Russian administration, including lack of cadastral records, interlaced with early Soviet practices of national delimitation and new priorities for urban growth and sedentarization of pastoral populations. Through a detailed account of the interplay

¹²J. Kubeš, ‘European post-socialist cities and their near hinterland in intra-urban geography literature’, *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-Economic Series*, 19 (2013), 19–43.

of interethnic relations and land-distribution politics in early Soviet Bishkek, Thomas demonstrates that the privileging of Kyrgyz pastoralists over European settlers during land disputes (which persisted in Kyrgyzstan much longer than in other Soviet republics) was conditioned by a peculiar constellation of legal and economic processes that shaped Bishkek's urban expansion after the Civil War, rather than conscious efforts by local authorities to 'right the injustices' of the tsarist era. The case of Bishkek also highlights the geographical and temporal unevenness of Soviet industrialization, as it was not until after the start of World War II and the forced evacuation of industries from the western USSR to the region that the city fully developed local industrial capacity.

While Thomas focuses on the intricacies of ethnic politics in the early Soviet Union, Nikolay Erofeev's study of industrial urbanism in Mongolia explores Cold-War-era socialist development practices, with a focus on how prioritization of resource extraction informed the territorial and urban planning logics of this mostly rural country. Drawing on the case of Erdenet, a mono-industrial mining town in northern Mongolia built with Soviet assistance, Erofeev explores the politics of technology transfer, financing and developmental aid within the Soviet-led COMECON, or Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. He argues that the onset of economic stagnation in Eastern Europe in the 1970s resulted in a shift in the logic of socialist aid towards a more pragmatic policy, which reproduced neocolonial patterns of exchange via extractive industries that did not differ as markedly from their Western counterparts as Soviet ideologists might have liked to believe. Yet, despite this material-ideological incongruence Soviet policy nevertheless made mineral extraction a central part of urban planning, promoting intensive urban development, which stalled once socialist aid came to be replaced by private investment.

Last, Irina Redkina's study of the design and construction of the Bokaro Steel City in Jharkhand, India, explores the social politics of planned industrialization in this post-colonial nation, where Soviet and Anglo architectural practices and technologies blended together to give birth to localized models of urbanism adapted to the needs of this newly independent state. Problematising the pervasive tendency to treat modern urbanity in 'the Third World' as a product of the transfer of models either from the capitalist or socialist bloc, Redkina draws on the concept of 'contextualized modernism' to produce a nuanced analysis of nation-building and domestic socio-political visions as well as local debates on modernist urbanism at the heart of Bokaro's design. Far from a mere extension of the steel factory built by Soviet engineers, the city, Redkina argues, was endowed with the vital historical mission of serving as 'a melting pot', where old divisions of caste, religion and class could be dissolved or transcended through shared public space. One of the primary goals of townships like Bokaro was to serve as incubators for the next generation of India's technical intelligentsia and spaces that could cultivate a skilled urban workforce composed of officers, executives and mid-level professionals living in shared residential areas.

These historical articles are followed by the second section which consists of three case-studies that address the politics of memory in planned industrial cities. Built from scratch or greatly expanded by diverse labour migrants from across the USSR, such cities were often characterized by their concentrations of military-industrial complexes and scientific research centres, which fostered tight-knit, bounded and relatively secluded communities, along with a strong sense of shared historical mission among residents. In many cases, these cities lack a pre-Soviet urban history and still have their toponymic landscapes rooted in Soviet symbols, which allows

socialist-era triumphalist narratives of ‘industrial pride’ to remain cornerstones of local identity. Celebration of the industrial achievements of these new urban manufacturing centres in the Soviet All-Union press encouraged the development of robust, localized communities of memory, which comprised segments of the cultural and technical intelligentsia as well as ‘honoured citizens’, who leveraged their cities’ nationwide fame to lobby for funding of heritage initiatives from regional and municipal authorities. These factors overdetermined the trajectory of memory and identity-making in these planned cities after the collapse of the USSR, which was characterized by difficulties of decentring the Soviet past and sizable segments of the community that remained deeply invested in the legacies of Soviet industrialism. Victoria Fomina’s article on memory-making in Komsomolsk-na-Amure, a military-industrial hub in the Soviet Far East, built in the 1930s with the participation of the Komsomol, or Communist Youth volunteers, draws attention to the particularity of planned frontier cities, whose first generations of residents were also its founders or ‘first builders’. She argues that active efforts by the Soviet government to glorify the creation of Komsomolsk as ‘a feat of Soviet Youth’ through the commissioning of films and novels by well-known directors and writers gave the figure of ‘the Komsomol first builder’ widespread notoriety, investing it with unparalleled moral authority. This moral authority, in turn, granted participants in the city’s early construction substantial influence over its urban development and cultural politics, effectively enabling them to curate their own memorialization. Yet, the narrow definition of ‘first builders’, which historically only included Komsomol members, while excluding other categories of workers who laboured on the site, set the stage for a popular questioning of the category and its privileged status in the post-Soviet era.

While Komsomolsk represented a showpiece of pre-war utopian urbanism, Linara Dovydaitytė and Oksana Denisenko explore the creation and memorialization of Visaginas, a nuclear town built in north-eastern Lithuania in the 1970s by a much later group of ‘first builders’. The authors seek to destabilize the taken-for-granted assumption that the heritagization of nuclear sites is a ‘post-socialist process’, prompted by deindustrialization and economic decline, demonstrating instead that the planned nuclear town engaged in self-heritagization and conscious memorialization of its activities from the very onset of construction. Dovydaitytė and Denisenko argue that these practices have had lasting impacts on how different generations of residents make sense of the nuclear past and how they struggle over the reproduction, dethroning and in some cases, commodification, of the town’s industrial heritage. While the identities of both Komsomolsk and Visaginas remain deeply rooted in their industrial legacies and the Soviet-era memory canon, the case of Sarov, investigated by Eglė Rindzevičiūtė, shows how the former secret nuclear town in Central Russia, known to many as the birthplace of Soviet nuclear weapons, and built on the grounds of a renowned monastery, has actively capitalized on its Orthodox heritage to rebrand itself after the Soviet collapse. The residents of this town, she argues, actively engage in *nuclear kraevedenie* – or amateur research into regional, nuclear history – and grassroots initiatives to preserve local material heritage. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Sarov’s residents sought to pluralize the community’s identity and sense of belonging by promoting alternative facets of the town’s history, separate from the confrontation between the two superpowers, such as curating not only the houses of scientists who designed the Soviet atomic bomb, but also the sites associated with the Orthodox church and the life of the widely venerated St Seraphim of Sarov.

Finally, these contributions are followed by two ethnographic case-studies, which explore the interplay between official state-heritage policies and grassroots memorialization initiatives undertaken in Ukraine and Azerbaijan – countries whose extractive industries have a long, pre-Soviet history, but where popular attitudes towards industrial heritage remain strongly shaped by the Soviet experience. Victoria Donovan's study of industrial legacies as 'difficult heritage' in eastern Ukraine, reveals the complexities linked with the preservation of an increasingly precarious industrial inheritance, whose material and symbolic presence continues to dominate the local landscape, while remaining deeply entangled with ambivalent memories and personal histories of multiple generations of Donbas residents. Drawing on extensive research with memory activists, amateur archivists and artists, Donovan illustrates the power of grassroots, community-led initiatives which seek to engage with and redefine the meaning of a material culture that would otherwise be relegated to the status of 'historical trash'. Marginalized by decades of deindustrialization and austerity as well as a shift towards 'de-communization' in official cultural policy prompted by Russian military intervention, 'industrial heritage', Donovan argues, became a source of inspiration and identity-making for a new generation of artists and cultural workers, whose engagement with this legacy oscillates between Soviet nostalgia, creative reappropriation of the stigma of 'post-industrial wastelands' and critical distancing from Soviet-era meanings and narratives.

Unlike in Ukraine, where military conflict has rendered the country's industrial legacies highly politicized and contentious due to their popular perception as intrinsically 'Soviet', in Azerbaijan, state policy towards industrial heritage is characterized by a quieter, and not wholly accidental neglect. In her study of oil heritagization in Baku, Leyla Sayfutdinova demonstrates how cultural policies that prioritize the preservation of pre-industrial architecture in hopes of promoting a consumption-driven, 'post-oil' economy, result in the fragmentation, although not total erasure, of practices of memorializing the industrial past. In the absence of systematic preservation plans, the heritagization of the local oil industry occurs primarily through the activities of state-controlled enterprises, which invest in the memorialization of their own company histories, as well as the efforts of informal tour guides, who respond to popular interest in industrial heritage by organizing private walking tours. The lack of a centrally co-ordinated policy or adequate state funding for such activities, Sayfutdinova finds, results in dissonant, but largely uncritical narratives of the place of oil in Azerbaijan's national history. These narratives reproduce celebratory visions of 'progress' and 'modernity', often foregrounding the contributions of wealthy nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Azerbaijani business elites, while silencing the multiethnic and working-class histories at the heart of Baku's industrialization.

In many ways, the rapid deindustrialization across parts of Eurasia since the collapse of the Soviet Union was prefigured by, and overlapped with, the decline of traditional-industrial and Fordist communities in Western Europe and North America. Just like the modernization processes from the early nineteenth century onwards, post-Soviet deindustrialization in the late twentieth century proved to be a highly uneven process, whose scales varied not only geographically, but also across specific sectors and industries. While South and East Asia have tended to benefit from what scholars have called 'the new international division of labour' – a configuration characterized by the formation of novel and/or greatly expanded industrial-labour

markets outside 'the West' (e.g. China, Korea, Vietnam, India),¹³ in most former Soviet-bloc countries, 'socialist modernity' remains a largely discredited project, with any talk of industrial revival on a scale similar to the Soviet experience being rejected as all but impossible. Today, few of these states would readily embrace a new policy of central planning with industrial urbanism as its key touchstone, tied as it is either to the 'failed' Soviet project or widely criticized and ecologically harmful practices. Yet, other parts of Eurasia have benefited from this global reconfiguration, creating new patterns of wealth accumulation and knowledge transfer that embody new potential sources of developmental aspirations.

While techno-optimism is hardly present in most former Soviet states, there is nevertheless a sense in which the surviving industrial enterprises of post-Soviet Eurasia could be partially revived by these new centres of global dynamism and their demand for raw materials and capital goods, proving the premature nature of any easy equation of 'post-socialism' with 'post-industrialism'. In this context, the region's industrial legacies, devalued due to their obvious clashes with the 'green', financialized or service-based economies supported by Western development agencies and NGOs, could be revalued in surprising, if environmentally unsustainable, ways. Despite the decline of industrial urbanism in post-socialist Eurasia since the 1990s, its legacy remains robust, with most of these countries continuing to be urban-majority societies, where sizeable portions of their citizenries still reside in small or medium-sized cities, either founded or substantially elaborated during the Soviet era. Today, these industrial centres continue to evolve in step with world-scale processes that have reconfigured international trade relations and industrial supply chains, but which are equally likely to be plagued by their own inevitable cycles of boom and bust, stagnation and revival.

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¹³F. Fröbel, J. Heinrichs and O. Kreye, *The New International Division of Labour: Structural Unemployment in Industrialised Countries and Industrialisation in Developing Countries* (Cambridge, 1980).