



(*ibidem*)

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*Lysychansk (Ucraina). La statua di Lenin colorata dagli attivisti locali
in una foto scattata pochi giorni prima della sua rimozione.*
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When West Meets East in Tolyatti



Michele Cera e Guido Sechi
Tolyatti. Exploring Post-Soviet Spaces
 The Velvet Cell, Berlin 2020
 pp. 128, € 28

Two recent seminars organised by the EstLab research group (DASStU, Politecnico di Milano) – *Made in Italy Goes Eastern* (2021) and *Cold War Interactions* (2022) – have drafted the path toward an international debate on the Italian culture's impact on the 'other side' of the Iron Curtain. This debate concerns geographically and historically both the Eastern bloc (post-socialist states from CEE) and the Soviet Union (post-soviet states). The seminars gathered international scholars from mainly architecture and urban history studies, deeply involved in researching the built environment inherited from the socialist years, its further interpretation and transformation while facing the global market and the social and cultural liberalisation of the last thirty years. In 2020, a year before the beginning of this academic initiative, two books were published focusing on the town of Tolyatti/Togliatti. Both books illustrate and present to the broad international audience a case study that probably embodies best the tangible and intangible impact of Italian (industrial) culture in the Soviet Union.

Togliatti. La fabbrica della Fiat (Giunta, Silva, 2020) focuses on the moment of the town's transformation in direct reference to the building of the Av-

tograd (today Avtozavodskiy) car plant and district through the direct contribution of Fiat during the 1960s and 1970s. This was a matter of knowledge and know-how transfer at the technological level in the broader Soviet industrialisation strategy which was passing by the mid-1960s from 'steel' towards the diversification of production, however with a continuous interest in the heavy industrial branches. The book captures through its narrative the intangible aspect of building this 'soviet giant' while travelling in time and space between Torino and Tolyatti's realities with the use of oral and documented history. Moreover, its written historical narrative authored by Claudio Giunta is accompanied by an aesthetic narrative of today's Tolyatti as a post-soviet reality captured by the Italian photographer Giovanna Silva.

In a similar vein, the second publication dedicated to Tolyatti in 2020, *Tolyatti. Exploring Post-Soviet Spaces*, brings together the post-soviet analysis accomplished through the dual presentation of written and visual narratives drafted to complete each other. Even more, the two books complement each other. One focuses on the oral history of Tolyatti's construction during the 1960s due to the entanglement of Italian and Soviet cultures. The second brings into attention the town's spatial and material manifestations in time while tackling some of the basic principles of the economic and territorial planning of the soviet world: the construction, use, and transformation of the mono-industrial town to serve as the basis of the overall national economic interests. Furthermore, *Tolyatti* establishes a communication bridge between the academic and the photographic journalism project, focused exclusively on the aesthetic of the (post)soviet reality through its graphic design, structure, and distribution of the different narratives (i.e., theoretical framework, archival illustration, and documentation of the 1960s, and post-soviet reality of Tolyatti). The book alternates monochromatic archival images dating from the construction of Tolyatti with a particular interest



in the housing district, the text by urbanist Guido Secchi (in English and Russian), and the photographic essay by Italian photographer Michele Cera focused on today's post-soviet reality of Tolyatti. In this manner, the city unravels to the broader public, academic or not, bringing into attention aspects still unclarified at the theoretical level when dealing with the built specificity of the soviet town and its transformation or somewhat reluctance to further post-soviet transformation. From the proportion of the text, image, and graphical structuring of the different narratives, it becomes clear that we deal with a photobook that should be understood as such.

This typology of editorial projects represents a common trend in the last twenty years when dealing with the research, observation and recording of the post-socialist transformations in political, economic, social, and cultural aspects and their impact on the built environment. The photographic representation of the socialist built environment has become of interest for foreign and autochthonous artists and researchers, such as in the case of the photographic recording of the Brezhnev-era architecture by Frédéric Chaubin (2011) or the most recent recording of the 'Socialist Modernism' by BACU Association (2020), regarding the former territory of the Soviet Union solely and not extended to the overall CEE. However, in 2019, a more complex publication appeared focusing on Soviet modernism, brutalism and post-modernism by the Ukrainian art and architectural historian Ievgeniia Gubkina and photographer Alex Bykov. This work promotes a critical and historical approach to contextualising the built legacy associated with the aesthetic representation of the post-soviet realm.

Tolyatti is a former Soviet mono-industrial town located in the north-western part of Russia in Samara Oblast (province), on the Volga River. The town tells the story of the Soviet Union's ambition to plan for electrification, industrialisation and, thus, the efficient use of natural resources strongly rooted in the ideological belief of the socialist capacity of changing and shifting socio-geographies (Boia, 2000). The town was initially known as Stavropol-on-Volga, moved its location once with the construction of the Kuybyshev Reservoir in the early 1950s, to change its name to Tolyatti/Togliatti in 1964 when it was selected as the main headquarters

of an Italian-Soviet joint car production site (pp. 16-20). Thus, by the mid-1960s, in the process of diversification of the Soviet industrial production, the settlement's fate was decided when the VAZ automobile plant was built with the help of Italian Fiat, giving space and name to a new district «entirely built according to a different logic than the one which predominates in post-socialist countries and Russia nowadays» as Guido Secchi stresses (p. 108).

The book states clearly from the very beginning its intention to capture two aspects that fascinate western scholars and artists concerning the 'other side' of the Curtain imprinted on the built environment: the socialist culture and heritage (p. 12). As an *easterner* with identity roots within the socialist reality and, simultaneously, a *westerner* researcher interested in the recent past, I would suggest using with precaution the 'heritage' concept concerning the socialist and soviet built environment as it implies either an official (top-down) or unofficial (bottom-up) patrimonial acknowledgement. This process is still at its very beginning thirty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Concerning the 'soviet culture' captured in its transformation, the book brings into attention the concept and material manifestation of the Soviet mono-industrial town, a tool used by the Soviet state from the late 1920s to colonising its territory based on an economic efficiency principle but also to control, shape and remodel a socialist society and system in itself (Strange, 2019), ready to be exported during the late 1940s and early 1950s in the Eastern Bloc (Aman, 1992). The micro-universe of the socialist society and soviet culture is embodied in the dynamics of the mono-industrial towns (Kotkin, 1997).

The eastern socialist concept of the mono-industrial town, not sufficiently approached by the international scholarly debate, subtly differs from the western company-town mentioned by the authors (p. 20). The mechanisms and dynamics that simultaneously triggered the establishment of the socialist system with its various and continuous spatial and architectural explorations were dictated by the political ideology (Strange, 2019). From Magnitogorsk, the most known case study in Soviet industrialisation and urbanisation, also considered as the 'October Revolution itself, the socialist revolution' (Kotkin, 1997), to Tolyatti, a less known example,

the entire soviet universe can be understood based on different typologies of mono-industrial towns interlinked through the economic and politically centralised strategies. An aspect that lacks the brief contextualisation of the Tolyatti project is that the contribution of Fiat as a western company is not exceptional for the soviet setting. It represents a continuity from the beginning of Magnitogorsk's planning and building when western planners were involved in designing and building the most strategic Soviet industrial settlement (Kotkin, 1997; Clayton, 2019). Furthermore, it could seem intuitive that Italian scholars and artists approach an argument such as Tolyatti. It becomes relevant for an international audience as a case study different from the generation of the 'steel giants' (Magnitogorsk, Novokuznetsk, Zaporozhye, Lipetsk, Novotroitsk etc.) approached in their complex transformations, as a sign of diversification of interest towards the post-soviet reality.

Combining contextual writing supported by academic research with the photographic recording of the ongoing state of the Soviet legacy, *Tolyatti* adds an ingredient deeply rooted in the Italian background when dealing with the built environment. That is the use of archival documentation materials such as photographs from the construction of Avtozavodskiy rayon. The visual dialogue between the photographic recording of two different moments in the existence of the Avtoograd district (then, during its construction, Avtozavodskiy now still dependent on the industrial production) stresses another central theme of relevance for the authors: the post-soviet transformation of the mono-industrial town presenting a «hybrid spatiality of transition» (pp. 16-20). The authors argue that Tolyatti still lacks several standard transformation processes found in other post-soviet towns, such as «segregation, polarisation, and deep social anomie» justified as a «strong resistance to transformation» (pp. 108-9). The same wording was used in 2007 in a similar aesthetic narrative about the Romanian 'industrial giants' dating to the communist period (Andresoiu, 2007), subjectively judged in lack of deepened research on the argument. Meanwhile, the exact 'industrial ruins of the Golden Era' are currently subject to a potential patrimonial acknowledgement due to broader research activity sustained

by a social and cultural acknowledgement from the local communities (Tiganea 2013; Tiganea, Di Biase 2016). Thus, considering the fast-changing trends, attitudes, and interests in the recent past, maybe a larger debate on why this soviet/socialist 'reluctance to transformation' occurs needs to be further elaborated.

On various occasions, the authors underline that the photobook should be understood as a 'first chapter of a wider project', offering the opportunity to broaden the research concepts and framework. In this sense, a series dedicated to the post-Soviet built environment would be much appreciated and sustain the understanding of the complexity of these cities and communities' transformation. On the other hand, if this photo book remains a pilot episode of an 'unaccomplished' project, then it will lose its experimental value.

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