

Beyond Utopia: Representing Life in the Productivist City

Alan Smart

During the rapid industrialisation of the Soviet Union's first five-year plan, the city of Magnitogorsk was built on a sparsely inhabited site in the Western Siberian steppe marked by a geological anomaly - a mountain of almost pure iron ore. Magnitogorsk was nominally designed by Ernst May, a founding member of CIAM and former municipal architect of Frankfurt who had come to the Soviet Union with his "brigade" of leftist German and Austrian architects. The May brigade would, however, struggle with both material difficulties and a constellation of ideological conflicts that would make the city into a screen onto which were projected ambitions, aspirations and anxieties about social transformation effected or facilitated by architecture. Magnitogorsk was conceived of as a city organized completely by production where the linearity of the assembly line and the continuous casting mill would extend into the kitchens and bedrooms of the workers and become the basis for a radical new culture. This would be contested by the Socialist Realist call for symbolic form and cultural continuity and the humanism of the western media until the city, and its real conditions of radical change, would disappear under competing regimes of image production.

Biography:

Alan Smart is an architect, critic and researcher practicing with the design collective Other Forms. He has degrees from the University of California at Berkeley and Princeton University, has taught at Syracuse University, Ohio State University, Hong Kong University and the Sandberg Institute and been a researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academie.