Monotown: urban dreams brutal imperatives
by Clayton Strange, San Francisco, Oro Editions, 2019, 430 pp., US$ 45.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781939621573

Christina E. Crawford

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Across many of the chapters, inclusion is considered from various points of view. For instance, Clare Rishbeth addresses ‘visibility and un-belonging’ (p.28) and Setha Low outlines ‘propositions for socially just public space’ (p.63). Meanwhile, Rike Sitas presents public-facing art as a tool to engage diverse communities and Tridib Banerjee explores the idea of the urban commons. In contrast with much of conventional public art, Sitas suggests that ‘identifying art practices that take the interaction with public’s more seriously – facing publics, in public ways … ’ is especially important for the Southern Hemisphere (p.369). Banerjee explores the idea of the commons which he explains as ‘resources under collective ownership that have remained a central construct in the field of resource management and environmental protection’ (pp.501–503). Such commons provide many ecosystem services, that is, benefits we receive from the natural world that we generally consider are free.

Around the globe, urban commons have become stages for protest. In his chapter, Jeffrey Hou presents a thoughtful and insightful discussion about public space as a place of resistance and democratic resilience. He traces the role of public space and democracy and explores spaces of assemblies and amalgamation, of visibility and meaning, of encounters and negotiations, and of everyday resistance. Professor Hou uses Occupy Wall Street in New York City’s Zuccotti Park in 2011, the Arab Spring also in 2011, and the Women’s March in 2017, among other examples, to make his case.

Several other authors explore related themes about protests in public space. For instance, Sabine Knierbien considers the relationship between urban resistance and urban emancipation; Tali Hatuka discusses the dynamics among public spaces, protests, and meanings; and Andrei Crestani and Clara Irazábal analyse public space and defiant denunciation and resistance in Latin America. During the pandemic, the United States has experienced waves of protests as the result of the killing of George Floyd and other Black Americans by the police. These protests have prompted a collective reckoning with long-overdue issues of racism and social justice.

In their epilogue, Palazzo and Metha observe: ‘Public space is in continuous evolution’ (p.513). About public space, they ask: ‘What is the next thing?’ This question prompts an answer in the final footnote, where they observe: ‘Unfortunately, we are all living the next thing’ (p. 514). The COVID-19 pandemic certainly has altered our views about public space. *Companion to Public Space* provides many valuable insights about how we might conceive the public realm in the next, next thing, that is, post-COVID-19.

Frederick Steiner

*Stuart Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA*

Via fssteiner@design.upenn.edu

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**Monotown: urban dreams brutal imperatives**, by Clayton Strange, San Francisco, Oro Editions, 2019, 430 pp., US$ 45.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781939621573

A monotown (*monogorod* in Russian) is, as its name suggests, a single-industry town. More specifically, it is a self-contained urban node built *ex novo* for a solitary industrial enterprise on a remote site, most often by a socialist state with a robust centralized planning apparatus. The term and urban type were born in the first decades of the Soviet era when urban theorists debated the spatial implications of socialism unleashed on the continental scale. With the
ability to consider the economy and territory holistically, Soviet economic and spatial planners could move materials and labour as needed to reach far-flung natural resources, locate enterprises beyond adversarial bombing range, and colonize the sparsely populated sectors of the Eurasian continent simultaneously. They achieved those objectives through the installation of a largely standardized urban module that bundled industry, housing, and social services: the monotown. As Clayton Strange explains in his book’s introduction, the term has taken on largely negative connotations in the post-Soviet, post-industrial context, and has become ‘synonymous with economic decay’ [3]. *Monotown: Urban Dreams Brutal Imperatives* lays out the history of the urban type and investigates eight case studies in the former USSR, China, and India. The book does not offer solutions to the monotown’s problems – decline of heavy industrial output, unemployment, and depopulation – but instead provides context for this under-researched transnational urban phenomenon and highlights the specific conditions and design of each site.

The book has three distinct parts. ‘Part 1: Preliminary Frameworks’ defines the monotown, establishes its origin in the early Soviet Union, and briefly compares it to other industrial town models. ‘Part 2: Monotowns’ contains four case studies located in the former USSR: Novotroisk, a steel town; Yurga, a machine building town; Mezhdurechensk, a coal mining town; and Krasnokamensk, a uranium mining town. The Soviet case studies move west to east across Eurasia and follow one another roughly chronologically from the 1930s to the 1960s. ‘Part 3: Translations’ presents four case studies outside of the USSR: Baiyin, China, a copper mining town; Bhilai, India, a steel town; Bokaro, India, also a steel town; and Panzhihua, China, an extremely remote diversified extraction and production town. Three of the four non-Soviet monotowns were designed and/or constructed with technical assistance from the USSR. Strange notes that these eight monotowns were selected ‘to reflect notions of the socialist ‘ideal town size’ – that is to say, towns that were not exceptionally large or small but that constitute projects of significant population and investment’ [5].

The case studies are standardized both narratively and graphically, making the book inherently comparative. The texts present the broad historical conditions that precipitated each town’s establishment, discuss the industrial processes that impacted the largely gridded, modular urban form, and bring the reader from inception to today. *Monotown* is copiously illustrated with original detailed maps presented in two-page spreads in the middle of each case that share common scales and keys to allow for easy cross-comparison. The maps reveal the extreme modularity of monotown morphology while also highlighting various ways in which standardized residential superblocks adjust when they come into contact with idiosyncratic natural conditions like waterways, topography, and extraction sites. The legibility of the images (not keyed in the text) and the arguments they make depends on the reader’s visual acuity. A critical map or photograph might be located pages away from the text that describes it, and some images are not referred to in the text at all. This is a minor point for trained architects or urbanists, but the decoupling of image and text may cause non-designers to lose the thread. Historians will also find *Monotown*’s scholarly apparatus rudimentary: the textual sources are largely secondary, the endnotes are limited, and there is no index.

Clayton Strange travelled to all eight case studies covered in the book, a territorially ambitious itinerary that covers the Eurasian continent. The book’s case studies are, furthermore, not the typical stops. Strange notes at one point that, ‘[i]t is not uncommon for those in Moscow charged with overseeing projects in specific monotowns to have never visited the towns they are responsible for,’ [142] a problematic disengagement from those at the centre of power that plagued these towns during planning, and that continues to plague them today. It is in this poignant context that the book shines and reveals the benefit of ‘shoe leather’
reportage as a methodology. Residents of these purposely remote sites reward the intrepid researcher. Monotown is filled with historic photos of these towns before, during, and after initial construction gathered in situ with the help of archivists at local history museums. Each case study also opens with a grid of the author’s on-the-ground photographs that illuminate the contemporary lived experience. With such locally collected evidence as ballast, these case studies have a satisfying corporeality.

Architects and urban designers will benefit from the novelty of these geographically diverse case studies to expand the urban design canon. Any combination of monotown case studies can be pulled from the book and slotted easily into a presentation to discuss the complex relationships between industry, ecology, and urban life, and to investigate how hyper-standardized urban superblocks adjust to a variety of contexts. For pedagogues, the monotown is an urban model instructively clear in its motives and formation. Unlike the utopian industrial models that Strange cites – Tony Garnier’s cité industrielle (1989) is a touchstone throughout the book – the eight monotowns explored here can sustain deep diachronic analysis because they were built and still exist. What are the benefits and drawbacks of a closed urban system? How and in what ways do local factors including climate, topography, and connectivity cause a rigid urban unit to adapt? These and other pedagogical questions emerge from the monotown cases. The book also constructively models a methodology of close looking, tracing, and mapping (Corner 1999), activities that generate new knowledge of place that yield discoveries to surprise even local experts.

If Monotown has a flaw, it is that it takes on too much. Eight case studies are a lot to juggle if we consider another new book comparatively, Architecture in Global Socialism (Stanek 2020), that also presents transnational socialist urban formations (in that case across Africa and the Middle East in the postwar period). Stanek’s book features five cases in five countries which is already just barely intellectually manageable for the reader. But ambition is hardly worth faulting in the case of Monogorod. Understood as a series of case studies ready to be cherry-picked for comparative content, this book will bring remote single-industry sites the recognition they deserve as historical urban models and also as observable test cases for post-industrial decline or, one hopes, regeneration.

References

Christina E. Crawford
Department of Art History, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA
christina.crawford@emory.edu  http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0401-8430
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