Modernism and War. The Idea of Regeneration in European Art and Architecture after the First World War

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Scholars have frequently pointed at the First World War's connection to the modernisation of Europe. When the war was over, Europe transformed into a hub of modern political activity stimulated by the rise of new independent nation states, the arena of a great social experiment that subverted the old order and aimed at the rationalisation of human life, and a space of expansion for new technologies of communication and production, transforming the whole of social life, from healthcare to cultural participation.

Still, the relationship between the First World War and modernity can also be approached not so much as an external factor of modernisation, but as a crucial element of the process of modernisation itself. Such an approach has been proposed by the British historian Roger Griffin, who in his important study of the origin of 20th century modernism points to a peculiar change in the perception and construction of 'modernity' in terms of the decline and fall of the world, dating back to the mid-19th century.[1]

That change became crucial after the First World War, when the movements and ideologies focusing on revitalisation and regeneration gained significant momentum. Griffin argues that the modern subject replaced the need for religious meaning with a new dominant myth of the necessary regeneration that was supposed to show the way to a new human environment free of all the failures of the chaotic first stage of modernity. He defines modernism in general as the multiplicity of palingenetic reactions to the alleged anarchy and cultural downfall brought about by a radical transformation of the traditional institutions, social structures, and beliefs under the influence of the first phase of Western modernisation. One of the consequences of that change was a tendency to imagine the future as an open space of utopias to be implemented in historical time. Modernism understood as an alternative of the first phase of modernity gained momentum in the second half of the 19th cen-

Fig. 1: 'Prayer to the Light' (Lichtgebet), painted by Hugo Höppener (Fidus), 1922.

Fig. 2: Alexander Rodchenko with his wife, Varvara Stepanova, 1920s.

tury, when the liberal, capitalist myth of progress, rooted in the Enlightenment, lost the cultural hegemony it had achieved during the French revolution and the early stage of the industrial revolution, so that the intellectual and artistic elite now identified many current social changes with decadence. Ultimately, the first stage of modernity became a synonym of degeneration. Between the 1860s and the end of World War I, modernism remained an unfocused cultural force generated by the dialectic of chaos and new order, despair and hope, decadence and renewal, destruction and creation, manifested by innumerable artistic visions of how the new ways of representing reality could possibly revitalise the ignored or forgotten principles of the world's harmony or even support its social and moral regeneration. Next to aesthetics and high culture, the palingenetic dynamic of modernism also determined many individual projects and collective movements that aimed at establishing a socially and morally healthier social base, or at initiating a completely new socio-political order. Modernism then was an alternative project of modernisation that was to offer a prospect of putting an end to a political, cultural, moral and physical decay, and of creating the New Man.

The heroes of such a model of modernity were artists and technocrats of a new kind, free of Promethean ambitions, who wanted to build a new world by means of planning and technology. A key symptom of this new technocratic modernism was an equally new imperative: to cleanse, to sterilise, to restore order and to eliminate filth and dirt.

In many cases, contemporaries viewed the First World War through the lens of regeneration sentiments as an inevitable yet enthusiastically welcomed end of the rapid progress of the post-Enlightenment modernity that radically changed human life but also deprived it of its spiritual dimension. Maybe due to the intensity of that shock in Germany, writes Modris Eksteins, enormous crowds – from 100,000 to 300,000 people – welcomed the declaration of war on Russia on 1 August 1914.[2] The Berlin enthusiasm must have had a number of causes, but above all it must be remembered that many saw in the war an emerging new era, the rite of spring. Facing the abyss of death, writes Eksteins, they stressed regeneration, renewal, and life, perceiving the war as a promise of a revolutionary renaissance. Under such circumstances, paradoxically, the war became an ally of the German, Austrian, and Swiss enthusiasts of modernity, who called for a reform of life (*Lebensreform*).[3]

Without going into details of that complex phenomenon, one might say that it was a combination of various reparatory steps which, the reformers claimed, were a reaction to many undesirable developments resulting from the first wave of social modernisation, rapid industrialisation, and technological progress. A comprehensive renewal of life was to affect almost all spheres – from the forming of habitable space through human relations, personal and social hygiene, and appeals to overcome the spiritual barrenness the new era had allegedly wrought. Next to the postulates of the renewal of human spirit and environment, the reformers' attention was attracted by the problematic of the human body, the conditions of its growth, health, and disciplined everyday life. To set the bodies free from the constraints of modern civilisation and to neutralise the influence of its preferred way of life, they favoured sports, vegetarianism, natural medicine, naturism, and more spontaneous sexuality. Consequently, the new modern world, cured of all its ailments, was to become a common product of engineers, scientists, artists, and workers, while the boundaries separating aesthetic appeal from the social effects of reforms did not have to be, and were not, clear-cut. This regenerative zeal pushed many artists, scientists and technocrats to search for various sources of energy in primitive and

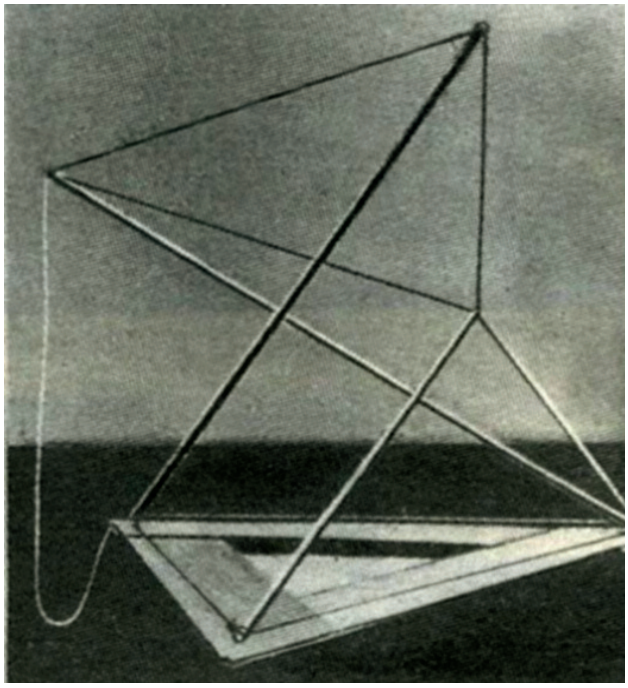

Fig. 3: 'Study in Balance', a prototensegrity sculpture by Kārlis Johansons, designed 1920.

ethnic traditions as well as in modern science and technology. It was that zeal which so often attracted them first to bolshevism and then to fascism and Nazism, promising the rise of a new world. They worshipped technology, the machine, the leader, the new woman, the new morality and, above all, the new human being. Thus, modernism in art can be interpreted as a response to the postulate of the artists' participation in the great endeavour, the will of regeneration, and of contributing with their art to the emergence of the new world inhabited by the New Man.

In order for art to become a tool for regeneration, it had to first undergo a process of broad renewal in its own right. This was through reference to sources of art itself and its specific disciplines: painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, and music, which produced a certain attitude towards artistic tradition among European artists. This entailed a return to allegedly forgotten or discarded rudiments of creation. However, this was not to repeat past styles or resurrect volatile artistic ideals and their related ideological declarations, but rather to employ such rudiments in order to create a modern art appropriate for the modern world and deprived of all defects of initial modernity. Artists drew upon the past, yet this was distant enough for them to find primary principles governing the use of colour, shape, line, body, or space.

Characteristic in this regard were the quests of European artists during the First World War and its aftermath. Within the circle of Russian constructivists, for example, Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956) and Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), the brothers Vladimir (1899-1982) and Georgij Stenberg (1900-1933), Kārlis Johansons (1890-1929) and Konstanty Mieduniecki attempted to formulate a rationalised analysis of form directed toward basic compositional directions and dispositions of colours and shapes, which they treated in an abstract manner and which served to overcome antiquated painting expression. They strove to augment this objectification of artistic technique by abandoning the paintbrush in favour of ruler and compass with use of the simplest geometric shapes.

The Polish constructivist Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952) addressed the issue of painting renewal in a more complex manner, albeit in a similar spirit. He believed that Renaissance and Baroque painting, basing itself upon spatial illusion and elaborating upon literary anecdote, disrupted imperative painting consistency between rudimentary properties of painting – a rectangle plane enclosed in frames and forms placed upon it. Painting unism, as postulated by Strzemiński, was to restore this unity by reconciling the nature of painting elements with the painting surface in a manner that would not break up such

Fig. 4: The Polish art theoretician and avant-garde painter Władysław Strzemiński and the Polish artist Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951), fragment.

Fig. 5: Alexander Rodchenko: 'Dance. An Objectless Composition', 1915.

Fig. 6: 'Rite of Spring', painting by Nicolas Roerich (1874-1947), costume design, 1913.

surface, yet which allowed retention of its optical integrity.

Postulates for the renewal of painting also obviously appeared in the realm of other artistic directions, both prior to the First World War, e.g. in artistic practice and its theory on the part of Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) or Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) or among Italian futurists, and afterward. Dadaists and surrealists in many European countries also sought to renew art.

Many European artists believed that all varieties of primitive culture were particularly invigorating. No matter whether the primitive was the art of distant non-European tribes, the earliest art of ancient Greece, folk art, or even urban folklore, they believed that it showed the way back to immediate expression, intensity of reception, genuine mutual contact between the artist and the audience and simplicity of form. Renewed thanks to the impact of the primitive, modern art promised spiritual regeneration of the allegedly destroyed roots of European art. Certainly, understood in that way, the primitive was no ethnological or archaeological reality but a discursive construction related to a critique of the bourgeois society. Since the foundation of that society was property and the nuclear family controlled many social and religious restrictions, against such a background the primitive society seemed communist, sexually liberated, and full of explicit emotions. In that respect, the paintings of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and the German expressionists or Diaghilev's ballets appeared revolutionary – parallel to other emancipatory or critical efforts directed against the degenerate present. Evidently, the enormous popularity of the Russian ballet in pre-war Europe must have been related to the destruction of the permanent foundation of European culture and the promise of immediacy: emotional experience, revealing the origin of artistic expression and the spiritual essence of man. The archetypal topic of 'The

Fig. 7: 'Archer', wood engraving by Władysław Skoczylas (1883-1934), designed 1923.

Rite of Spring' – a ritual sacrifice at the dawn of budding life, exotic costumes, choreography which shocked the audience with its stylised primitivism and unusual music – seemed to play havoc with the decadent culture of a world in decline.

The dominant evolutionism allowed artists and intellectuals to combine the idea of the cultural development of primitive art with folk art and children's art. In such a view, they all became valuable and inspiring as vehicles of crucial artistic and spiritual values. Thus, the years of the First World War were a period of intense reference to folk culture in which, particularly after 1918, the artists of the new states searched for the surviving key elements of national cultures, trying to develop some modern national visuality and specific national styles as part of their political identity. This tendency was the most clearly visible during the International Exposition of Applied Arts in Paris in 1925, where many newly established countries, such as Poland, Latvia, Finland and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croatians and Slovenes (SHS) displayed numerous examples of painting, sculpture, and applied arts strongly influenced by local folk culture in their pavilions.

It is important to note, however, that once again this was not a nostalgic return to a folk past, but rather the creation of a modern visual expression based on elements of folk culture in which respect for elements of local tradition, such as harmonious feeling of form, elaborated over centuries, and respect

for the nature of the material employed could seamlessly blend with achievements of modern art, such as clarity of visual shape, simplification of form as well as its connection with function.

It should also be stressed that artistic circles did not put forward regeneration postulates simply to produce new styles or new visual idioms. They were artistically responding to a multifaceted call for social regeneration, hence, an entire range of social reforms. In this sense, we must seek the sources of such a regenerative approach toward art in Great Britain, within the broad movement for renewal of arts and crafts personified by such names such as John Ruskin (1819-1900) and William Morris (1834-1896). Both men attributed responsibility for the universal downfall of European societies to rapid strides in civilisation, and both sought a solution through a return to an ethical dimension of aesthetic creativity. William Morris called for a rebirth of artistic handicrafts not only as an antidote to the ugliness of machine production, but also as a fundamental element of social renewal aimed at creating a new social structure. This renewal would be based on a reciprocal exchange of services, an alternative to the capitalist market, as well as respect for work that would be ennobled by social utility and aesthetic value. The arts and crafts movement was taken up in many European countries and, indeed, a basic artistic impulse and social regeneration was seen in the revival of artistic handicrafts. All artist renovator communities – whether in Cracow or Vienna, in Budapest or Munich – coupled their calls for a handicraft revival with social reforms, economic issues and national or regional identity.

Reformers believed that architecture and urban planning played a crucial role in their efforts, particularly as regards the climax of degeneration which was, allegedly, the capitalist metropolis. There is no scope here to consider even the main currents of its political and artistic critique, as symbolised by the famous description of the industrial districts of Manchester by Friedrich Engels, which shows how the efficiency of modern industry is linked to the degeneration of the natural environment and the living conditions of working-class families.

The postulates of improving the modern city had already appeared before the First World War, combining new urban planning with economy and social

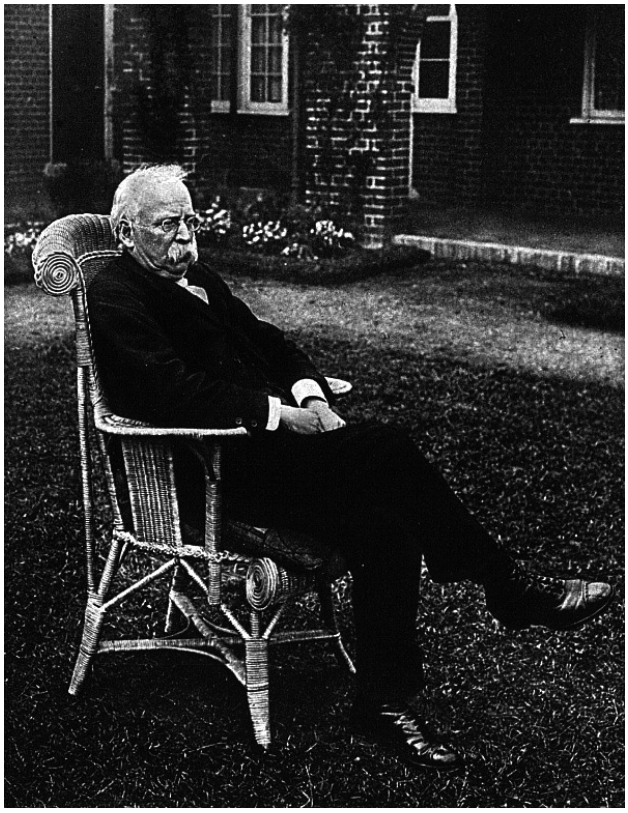

Fig. 8: Ebenezer Howard, the English founder of the garden city movement, 1926.

programmes. Such was Ebenezer Howard's (1850-1928) idea of the garden city: in contrast to the metropolis, Howard proposed a network of small urban structures consisting of small houses surrounded by gardens, where life would be much healthier, thanks to contact with nature, and significantly cheaper, as lots would be co-owned by members of particular communities.[4]

Howard's idea of a city-garden was of great interest in many countries of Europe, where special associations were formed with the task of putting Howard's concept into practice.[5] The first of these outside the British Isles had already been founded in 1902 by a group of German reformers affiliated with the life reform movement. Significantly, an exceptionally important group of regeneration-oriented architects emerged from the ranks of the Deutsche Gartenstadt-Gesellschaft. They established an association linking industrialists and designers, the Werkbund, in seeking to implement Howard's idea. The

Fig. 9: Election campaign poster of the Social Democrats in Vienna, designed by Victor Theodor Slama, 1923.

Werkbund, however, not only entailed construction of the best-known German garden city, Hellerau near Dresden (1909), with the participation of its members, but also its updating of the British idea of a garden city by elaborating on the formula of a modern settlement and functional housing. Moreover, their ideas, particularly as penned by Herman Muthesius, greatly influenced housing reformers in Central and Eastern Europe. In this sense, Howard's reformist ideas can be considered a source of inspiration for artists' and architects' planning of an entire series of designs of inexpensive and functional housing for the broad masses, together with equally inexpensive and functional furnishing with items of everyday use. The

Fig. 10: The Karl-Marx-Hof, designed by Karl Ehn, built in Vienna 1927-1930.

artists presented these designs at numerous exhibitions visited by multitudes in many European countries, particularly during the post-war housing deficit.[6]

The crisis situation after the end of the First World War created a convenient opportunity to enact housing and urban planning reforms without great delay. A vivid example is the activity of so-called Red Vienna, namely the social-democratic administration of the Austrian capital, which in 1919-1934 launched a series of public initiatives that were modernistic in spirit, including communal housing estates and buildings (such as, for example, the famous Karl-Marx-Hof), sports facilities, and health centres, together with support for a range of social reforms.[7]

However, what the European architects proposed after the First World War was much more radical. The spatial and architectural framework was to become an instrument for developing an alternative form of social organisation and regulating everyday life for the sake of its rationalisation. Avant-garde urban planners came out with two competing ideas: the super-block that would satisfy most of its residents' needs, imposing on them a coercive model of socialisation, and anti-urbanism, that is, a radical transformation of the urban structure of contemporary Europe, leading to the disappearance of traditional cities in favour of linear or network settlement compositions with no difference between the city and the country.

Superblock proponents limited the area of private space by reducing it to sleeping cabins. In this sense, a superblock was to have a large number of single rooms that could also be connected with those of

Fig. 11: The Narkomfin Building was designed by Moisei Ginzburg and Ignatij Militis in Moscow, Soviet Union in 1928-1930 (state after renovation in 2017).

neighbouring individuals if they so desired as well as vast common areas: dining rooms, laundries, baths, and common rooms to spend free time. At times, designers of such structures attempted to formulate rules regulating the rhythm of community life, occasionally ordered according to age. For example, in 1929 the STROIKOM (Building Committee), a community of avant-garde Russian architects, drafted such a housing programme in the form of a house-commune design. They believed this concept would prevail everywhere:

> In the near future, when the model of a bourgeois two-generation family expires and communism is achieved in full. [...] The house-commune for STROIKOM was based on a fully socialist and collectivised scheme of life for thousands of people living in 6m rooms-bedrooms, with a shower, sink and toilet for every two rooms. Such a community was to be subsequently divided into three groups according to age: from birth to the age of 8, age 8 to 16, and adults above the age of 16. Other than sleep, individual non-physical work and personal hygiene, all other activity would be conducted in a collective manner: eating in common cafeterias, work in offices and libraries, physical exercise in gyms, and relaxation in salons, reading rooms and a surrounding park, as well as child care provided in children's quarters and nurseries.[8]

Buildings constructed according to this idea were modified in practice, including, for example, a housing block for the staff of Narkomfin (National Finance Commissariat) designed by Moisei Ginzburg (1892-1946) and Ignatij Militis in 1928-1929. Nevertheless, its structure to this day manifests a characteristic division between a common area and an area with individual apartments. Certainly, the culmination of

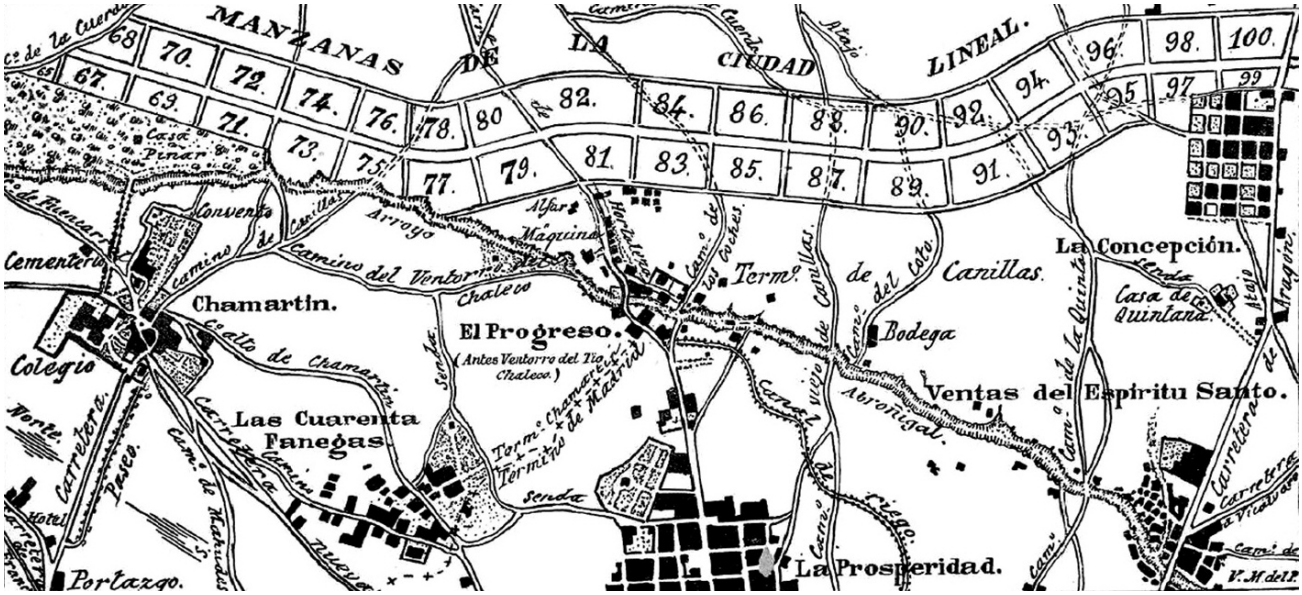

Fig. 12: Arturo Soria y Mata, 'Project of Linear City' (Ciudad Lineal), 1895-1910.

this idea, although temporally distant from the period after the First World War, is the Le Corbusier (1887-1965) housing project in Marseille, with 337 flats situated on 12 floors, together with a complex of stores and premises for educational, sporting, or service use accompanied by a programme of social integration.

Anti-urbanists were primarily inspired by the Communist Manifesto, in which Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) called for an overcoming of urban and rural disparities. Yet the tradition of calls for disassembling the urban structure has a longer tradition, as evidenced by the Ciudad Lineal project from 1895-1910, planned by Arturo Soria y Mata (1844-1920).[9]

Opponents of traditional urban structures were proposing forms of settlement that abandoned the traditional central order of the city in favour of an allegedly rational, egalitarian, and functional linear or network composition. Its modular and repetitive character limited the need for public transportation by locating people close to their workplaces, made equal the living conditions of all residents of a given structure, and divided specific spheres of everyday activity, separating industrial zones from residential areas and services.

The unrealised concept of the so-called social-city in Nikolai Miljutin's (1889-1942) book *Sotsgorod: The Problem of Building Socialist Cities* (1930)[10] provides insight into what anti-urbanists sought to achieve. The publication included, among others, plans for the urban structure of a new part of Stalingrad together with a tractor factory, and Nizhny Novgorod with an automobile plant organised along functioning communication routes, allowing a functional tie between industrial and agricultural production, transport, power supply, administration, everyday life, education, and teaching. Industrial and residential areas were to be situated across from each other in parallel lines, separated by a green protection strip at a width of approximately 500 meters. Thus, workers were provided with sufficiently limited fresh-air walks to work (10-20 min.) to avoid excessive investment in public transport. Miljutin situated nurseries and kindergartens, public facilities (cafeterias, clinics and the local administration) as well as a parking area with sports facilities within the residential zone. Finally, an agricultural area was to be located outside this arrangement with fruit and vegetable gardens and agricultural combines, thus maximally reducing the path of sewage release onto fields and product transport from fields to the residential zone.

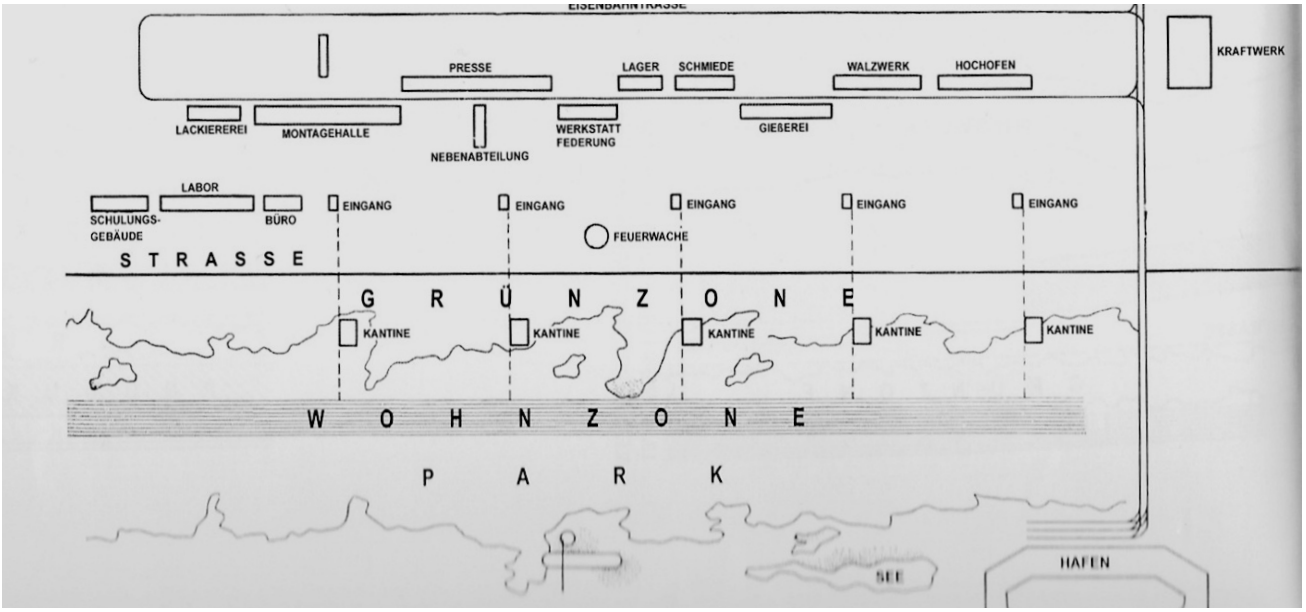

Fig. 13: 'Stream Schema of Car Factory in Nizhny Novgorod', by Nikolai Miljutin, 1930, German facsimile of the original Russian edition, ed. Dimitrij Chmelnizki, Berlin, 2008.

The nature of the residential zone itself was to encourage, albeit not under immediate pressure, acceptance of a new social structure, which, in line with ideological logic, was to replace family ties. Architects planning this zone thus gave primacy to childcare institutions, collective feeding points, mechanical laundries, and spaces enabling collective spending of free time. The proximity of these communal conveniences was to encourage people to send their children to nurseries and kindergartens, to make use of cafeterias or laundromats and to participate in group forms of recreation and entertainment. The expansion of common spaces signified an obvious functional and, thereby, spatial reduction of single residential dwellings that were limited to a small (2.8 m x 3 m) room with a common bathroom.

However, such radical programmes linking the construction of alternative housing structures to the urban texture with the transformation of family-oriented society into a different formula never progressed past the planning stage, even in post-revolutionary Russia. They were abandoned not for reasons of ideology, but rather due to political and financial factors. Nevertheless, the idea of moving away from urban structures toward the construction of free spaces with standardised units (blocks) with certain reduced elements of social programmes became very popular, particularly in East-Central European countries in the 1930s and after the Second World War. Radical visions reappeared, as evidenced by Oskar Hansen's so-called Continuous Linear System in 1967; Hansen envisioned the construction of linear settlement structures extending in rows from northern to southern Poland, which, with time, were to displace traditional construction.[11]

More than a decade after the First World War, regeneration projects constituting the nucleus of European modernity, particularly the most extreme forms that exerted pressure to create a New Man, naturally came to resemble each other. Yet they were threatening to those political ideologies also calling for broad social regeneration. This time, however, projects to heal society, to improve people's lives, and to establish patterns of development were transposed onto an aggressive political pragmatism, which, in gaining massive support in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and fascist Italy, produced another war in their wake.

Endnotes

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