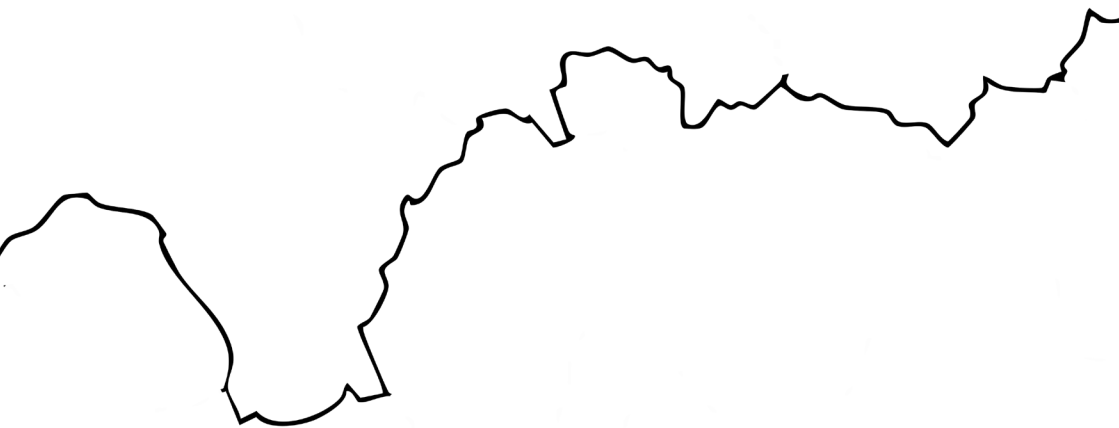# TALES
OF POST-SOCIALIST
AND POSTCOLONIAL
TRANSFORMATION

Perspectives from Literary and Urban Studies

Daniela Zupan,
Cecile Sandten,
Katja Lipgart (eds.)

CONTENTS

EMPTINESS

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Tales of Post-Socialist and Postcolonial Transformation – An Introduction

Cecile Sandten & Daniela Zupan

Cities in post-socialist and post-Soviet Europe underwent rapid and profound transformation after the fall of state socialism. These processes affected cities on multiple scales, including the planning institutions, the built environments and the everyday practices. Cities witnessed the collapse of welfare systems amid unclear property rights, incoherent regulations, and ambiguous responsibility allocation. As laboratories of change, post-socialist cities thus provide particularly promising entry points into the study of urban transformation.

A comparable dynamic is at play in postcolonial South Asian cities. Having emerged from two hundred years of colonisation, they have navigated the turbulence of independence struggles and accelerated into contemporary neo-capitalism within a matter of decades. This trajectory – marked by both rupture and reinvention – is vividly reflected in contemporary Indian English literature, where writers explore their protagonists' instability, shifting cultural identities, emancipation struggles, and their society's uneven power structures against the backdrop of transforming urban spaces.

As part of two seminars which were taught at Bauhaus University Weimar and at Chemnitz University of Technology, respectively, two workshops were conducted that aimed to bring together these two seemingly disparate academic strands. The first workshop was held in Weimar (8–9 May 2025) and the second in Chemnitz (5–6 June 2025).

The idea for the joint effort was the result of an ongoing collaboration between Jun.-Prof. Dr.-Ing. Daniela Zupan (European Cities and Urban Heritage, Bauhaus University Weimar) and Prof. Dr. Cecile Sandten (English Literatures, TU Chemnitz). Designed to integrate academic research, site-specific analysis, and creative reflection, the project brought together students from literature, architecture, sociology, urban studies, and related fields.

Daniela Zupan's seminar focused on transformation processes in post-socialist cities of Central and Eastern Europe. Zupan introduced students to theoretical and conceptual approaches on post-socialist urban transformation and grounded these in case studies from Kosovo, Croatia, Serbia and Latvia. Addressing issues such as infrastructure, built environments, emptiness and social actors, students explored what lessons can be drawn from these profound ruptures for present and future urban transformations.

In Chemnitz, attention turned to postcolonial perspectives through literary texts. Cecile Sandten's seminar, "Tales of Transformation: Fictions of the South Asian City", investigated how Indian English writers portray the city as a space of identity negotiation, disruption, and change. Readings included *Corridor: A Graphic Novel* (2004) by Sarnath Banerjee[1], *A New World: A Novel* (2000) by Amit Chaudhuri[2], and Anita Desai's "The Rooftop Dwellers" (2001)[3], in addition to Bombay poems. The seminar combined literary theory with urban studies concepts – such as heterotopias, the flâneur, or thirdspace – to analyse how literature engages with urban transformation. Generally, postcolonial cities feature prominently in the works of Indian English writers, who explore questions of cultural identity within highly commercialised and transforming urban spaces. Banerjee, for instance, through an intricate mode

of graphic design, examines the urban flâneur in his graphic novel *Corridor*[1], set in Delhi's consumerist landscape of the late 1990s; Chaudhuri's *A New World*[2], in modernist fashion, traces the diasporic experience of its protagonist who meanders between the summer heat in Calcutta and his disrupted life due to the divorce from his wife in America in the interstices of the streets and apartment block of the Indian metropolis, capturing generational tensions and cultural displacement; and Desai's (long) short story "The Rooftop Dwellers"[3] depicts the 'barsati' – a modest rooftop room in late 1980s Delhi – as a spatial and symbolic site of the female protagonist's emancipation through both literary and urban studies lenses.

This volume on "Tales of Post-Socialist and Postcolonial Transformation: Perspectives from Literary and Urban Studies" is a reflection of this collaboration and presents a selection of student contributions from the interdisciplinary workshop series. While both strands – the post-socialist and the postcolonial – were explored during the two workshops and in the interdisciplinary student presentations, the essays collected here place a particular emphasis on post-socialist urban studies, focusing on three main topics: "Built Environments", "Infrastructures" and "Emptiness". Within each topic, students were asked to reflect on a key writing on post-socialist urban transformation. Within the topic "Built Environments", students discuss the text "Turbo Urbanism in Prishtina" by Kai Vöckler (2008)[4], in which he depicts the haphazard urban transformations that set in after the Kosovo War (1998–1999). Within the section "Infrastructures", students engaged with a chapter by Deana Jovanović titled "The Thermodynamics of the Social Contract"[5], in which the scholar analyses post-socialist transformation from the vantage point of heating infrastructures in the cities of Rijeka, Croatia, and Bor, Serbia.

The section "Emptiness" comprises essays on Dace Dzenovska's article "Emptiness: Capitalism Without People in the Latvian Countryside"[6], in which the author investigates emptiness as a complex and context-specific social formation. The two essays on the city tours by Sandten (Chemnitz) and Zupan (Weimar), in addition, offer a lively twist to the whole volume.

Although not part of the student workshop, the final section, Further Interventions, expands the volume's perspective by drawing connections between post-socialist and postcolonial urban experiences. Cecile Sandten's poem on the Grenfell Tower fire reflects on how neglect, unsafe housing practices, and the marginalisation of residents can lead to disaster. Doniyor Kamol Ugli Keldiyorov's essay revisits the suppressed Jadid reform movement in Soviet Central Asia, exposing tensions within the Soviet Union's anti-colonial image.

The photographs included in this volume originate from various post-socialist regions and complement the written contributions by offering visual perspectives on the themes explored. They illustrate the topic from different angles and stand in their own right as reflections on environment, infrastructure and emptiness, while also opening up further associations beyond the scope of the individual texts.

Endnotes

[1] **Banerjee, S. (2004).** Corridor: A Graphic Novel. New Delhi: Penguin Global.

[2] **Chaudhuri, A. (2000).** A New World: A Novel. New York: Vintage Books.

[3] **Desai, A. (2001 [2000]).** "The Rooftop Dwellers." In: Diamond and Dust and Other Stories. London: Vintage, pp. 160–207.

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KOSOVO

Prishtina

BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

Essays on:

Vöckler, Kai (2008). Turbo Urbanism in Prishtina. In: Vöckler, Kai: Prishtia Is Everywhere. Turbo Urbanism: The Aftermath of A Crisis. Archis, 35–54.

Lessons From Prishtina's Transformation

Isabel Wiese

Due to the complex and unstable history of the region, Prishtina has faced many deep ruptures concerning territory, identity, government, and economic systems. These ruptures have manifested within the built environment of the city, resulting in a unique post-conflict and post-socialist type of urbanism referred to as Turbo Urbanism. Resulting in a city that constantly verges on a crisis so severe that the Kosovar architect interviewed in the book[1] sees no other solution than to call for a complete Haussmannisation of the city. To learn from this case study, it is vital to consider how a city can reach this level of crisis and what can be done to prevent it. I will briefly discuss two important lessons: first, reinstating the emphasis on the collective right to the city, and second, understanding how unregulated neoliberal urbanisation promotes destruction through construction.

One could argue that the unregulated, informal development practised by the people of Prishtina represents an unrestricted version of the right to the city. Due to the unclear legal systems and unstable government, the people of Prishtina have shaped their surroundings according to their preferences with little to no interference from the state. But is this truly enacting the right to the city? I would argue that it is not by referencing David Harvey's conceptualisation of the right to the city as a collective act that must benefit the whole community while opposing the hegemonic capitalist mode of city-making[2]. As the article describes, the interests and desires of individuals and the capability to generate profits were prioritised, leading to conflict within the community and an unsafe, overbuilt urban environment. While the collective right to the city is an essential concept for all cities, the case of Prishtina demonstrates that it is especially vital to apply it to post-conflict situations, given the newfound freedom and urgency they can produce. Currently, many cities around the world are facing significant destruction due to conflict. Therefore, considering the importance of a collective, community-centred rehabilitation should be a crucial lesson for future transformations.

Finally, the shift from a socialist economic model to a capitalist, specifically neoliberal, model means that construction and planning will be decentralised and focused more on their profit-generating capabilities. This is especially intensified in the case of Prishtina, which is deregulated on a large scale. Here, property owners have exercised complete freedom by cutting corners on materials and labour costs and constructing large, ambiguous structures to maximise profits. Vöckler argues that the resulting buildings have effectively destroyed the city; that is, destruction through construction. This issue is not limited to post-socialist and post-conflict situations; cities all over the world currently face this challenge. For example, in my hometown Richmond, Canada, investors have exploited the highly speculative housing market and relaxed neoliberal regulations to build mega-mansions on highly fertile agricultural reserve land[3]. To maximise profits, these property owners construct mansions that occupy their entire plots, completely destroying the valuable soil beneath. Prishtina illustrates how a city can be "destroyed" by unregulated construction, and the current neoliberal transformations taking place in my hometown risk following the same path.

Fig. 1
Turbo Urbanism
Baku, Azerbaijan
© Katja Lipgart

Prishtina's Parallels to Other Tales of Transformation

Lenia Barth

Overbuilt, informal, post-socialist. This is how Kai Vöckler[3] describes Prishtina after 1999. Despite Kosovo having its immensely unique past, something stood out when reading his descriptions of Prishtina's Turbo Urbanism. There were similarities to other tales of transformation that were the subject of this seminar.

Surprisingly, the results of his study tie very well with Ananya Roy's findings in her research about the Indian planning system[4]: she explains that informality is not only a neglected part of a regulated system, but instead, informality is the basis and the starting point of planning, from where places are being regulated. Vöckler's observations show very well how this unregulated basis can look in a society where an urban fabric already exists and is being altered.

Roy's second argument can also be witnessed here: informality is not at all something that only poor, disadvantaged people are constructing or living in. Instead, informality can be constructed – by the state or in this case, by private investors in Prishtina. Both arguments need to be part of considering future developments and transformation processes. Climate change, lack of natural resources, and the rupture of democratic systems – all of these could create more post-war societies, which creates room to abuse these spaces of informality.

Notably, also an argument made by Felix Ringel[5] in his analysis of "Discomfort in a Former Socialist Model City in East Germany" can be seen reflected here: the post-socialist context is only a part of what influenced Prishtina's society during that time. Far more present was the post-war influence, the division of society as well as the influence of powerful external players like the European Union and the United Nations. Of course, the socialist past still sets the frame, as socialist infrastructure is still immensely present in Prishtina's built environment and is being converted, added to, as well as demolished. However, we should not be too quick to assume that all of today's characteristics are only shaped by Prishtina's socialist past.

In this, I see another interesting similarity to Ringel's recognition about post-socialist East Germany: the described feeling of being "freed" from socialist dictatorship and then directly being taken over – sucked in – by another system. In post-war Prishtina, it can be witnessed that international actors took over instead of the local population. So, after the end of the war, the population was again under a top-down foreign ruling – this time deriving from Western European nations. This administration then forced Kosovo to develop according to Western "development standards," according to the example of Western capitalism.

The still immensely present paternalism originating from Western European countries needs to be reflected upon and prevented, as it can be one of the most disruptive influences of current and prospective tales of transformation.

Fig. 2
Heritage endangered by investor-urbanism
Kyiv, Ukraine
© Daniela Zupan

Fig. 3
Urban renewal
Kyiv, Ukraine
© Daniela Zupan

Take-Aways of Post-Socialist Transformation

Simona Lenghel

Sometimes history is not given its due importance, and then large-scale interventions have undesired impacts. This was the case in Prishtina, with a very clearly defined intervention that ignored path dependencies and local idiosyncrasies. It relied on legislative rule, which would have "automatically" (according to Vöckler[3]) solved all issues, not taking into account social fragmentation and distrust in authorities, including the intervening UN. And it failed.

In the contentious scene of post-war Prishtina, relational and reputational resources filled the space left by authority. Rules and regulations regarding planning and local life came from an unelected authority; they were imposed, but not followed. Instead, the built environment followed social relations, familial ties and friendships. It proliferated in a world full of new possibilities, where it had to be adapted step by step as the social world beneath it grew. I imagine the built environment as mushrooms after rain on the hummus of a thick forest of connections.

The built environment became putty in the hands of new investors – it could take on whatever one dreamed of. It took inspiration from many parts of the world, especially the US, which had an important political and military role in Kosovo. I think an approach that comes from the commons could be useful in such disruptive rupture processes. Specifically, the concept of a loosely coupled system (introduced by Karl Weick and adapted by Daniela Piana to the commons) – it is "a system where the connections among its units are weak, but flexible enough to easily react and adapt to horizontal patterns of coordination"[6]. In Prishtina's case, the units were families and friends, individuals, coordinating to rebuild their city to fit the new horizons. Out of this, new architectures emerged. Investors and builders constructed a skeleton that waited to be given life in the shape of housing, commercial space, offices – whatever was needed at the time of completion. The built environment – the units of the system – was individualised and reacted with little regard to other units part of the same system. Approaching the issue using a loosely coupled system would have ensured more coordination and connection between the various units, leading to more coordinated growth.

Another new typology emerged in the form of the brothers' villas: the father had to divide his wealth equally to all sons; daughters were still excluded. Thus, the villas patriarchs built in the early 2000s were identical, lined up in a row, corresponding to the number of sons. This typology reflects micro- and macroeconomic developments moulded on traditional values and patterns:

Once again, the built environment became a reflection of the state of society. Uncertainty was transformed from a setback to creativity and a source of profit. Society transformed in a nonlinear manner, starting from social cues, to the built environment, and much later to real institutional transformations.

During times of profound rupture, when social and governmental institutions collapse, it is easiest to turn back to the basic social unit of the family. Familial ties, which extend to other relational ties, were what shaped the built environment in Prishtina.

Fig. 4
Bottom-up adaptations of socialist housing
Kiev, Ukraine
© Daniela Zupan
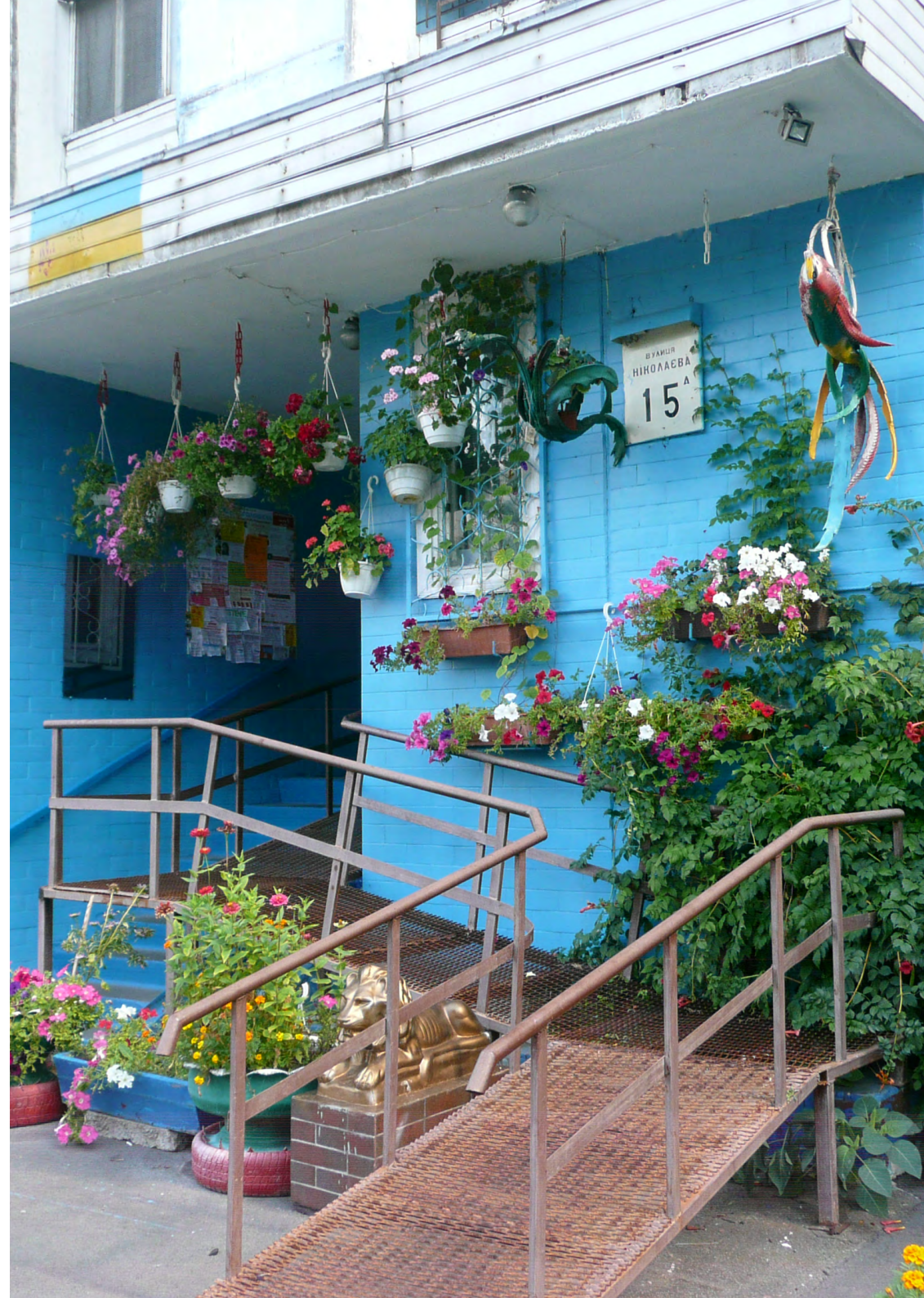
Transformation After Rupture in Prishtina

Aleks Karabadzhakov

Rupture and Rise of Informality

The 1999 NATO intervention marked a deep rupture in Prishtina's institutional and spatial landscape. With the collapse of Yugoslav structures, a vacuum opened in urban governance and persisted, as committees such as the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) failed to establish strong planning institutions or enforce regulatory frameworks, giving rise to informal construction. Buildings rose overnight without permits, infrastructure, or planning. However, this process should not be judged as a failure, but rather perceived as the emergence of a new system. As such, it should be regulated in a way that reflects new informal realities.

Failures of Top-Down Planning

The international administration brought technocratic, top-down planning models, unsuitable for the circumstances of the city. While unobjectionable, it was, without doubt, the best option available at the time. The plan seemed to ignore or misunderstand the local context, particularly the informal, socially driven ways people were organising and building. The plan drafted with German consultants was completely out of synchronisation with the speed and logic of the actual development of Prishtina. Buildings had already overtaken the land it planned to regulate. Moreover, the financing aspect of it was not determined. Emphasis should be placed on participatory, locally informed planning, as imported models without adaptation are irrelevant or harmful.

Urban Space as Cultural and Political Statement

After decades of Serbian control, Kosovo Albanians seized the opportunity to materialise their presence in the urban landscape. Turbo Architecture emerged – chaotic, eclectic, and borrowing from Western commercial aesthetics, but applied in ways disregarding proportion, context, or coherence. It is not just kitsch; it is a form of performativemodernity – buildings assert new economic hierarchies and project success. In the urban space, architecture is used as a way of rewriting history, asserting visibility, and challenging the past.

Neoliberalisation and the Fragmentation of the City

In the absence of regulation and a wave of migration, a building boom surged. Land became the most valuable commodity, with speculation driving both development and displacement. Entire public spaces had been encroached upon by private investors. Access to construction capital was mostly held and funded by the Kosovo Albanian diaspora and their families. Those who had no access to finances and networks were left behind. Already fragile infrastructure could not hold up to the pressure of construction. Post-rupture urban transformation must account for the rapid entry of the new market system and its social consequences. Without strong public institutions and redistribution tools, neoliberal urbanism only accelerated inequality and eroded the commons.

Erasure of Urban Memory

In the building rush, much of the authentic side of Prishtina was lost. Ottoman heritage, socialist public buildings, and local landmarks were demolished or buried beneath new developments. This loss of urban memory made the city feel disjointed. In many cases, the material past was actively seen as a symbol of oppression and backwardness. Without anchors in history, it becomes harder to build shared meaning or

community. Transformation should not be equated with erasure – even in rupture, continuity is important – architecturally, emotionally, and socially. Preservation and memory work should be central to planning in cities undergoing such changes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, transformation after rupture is contested and improvised. For post-socialist cities, this means planning must not only impose order but also engage with informal practices, social memory, political identity, and new economic realities.

Fig. 5
A typical post-Soviet mikroraion
Aktau, Kazakhstan
© Daria Volkova

Endnotes

[1] **Vöckler, K. (2008).** The Chaos in Prishtina Is Strangling Everything… [Interview With Visar Geci]. In Prishtina Is Everywhere: Turbo Urbanism: The Aftermath of a Crisis (pp. 55–58). Archis.

[2] **Harvey, D. (2008).** The Right to the City. New Left Review, 53, 23–40.

[3] **Vöckler, K. (2008).** Turbo Urbanism in Prishtina. In: Vöckler, Kai: Prishtina Is Everywhere. Turbo Urbanism: The Aftermath of A Crisis. Archis, 35–54.

[4] **Roy, A. (2009).** Why India Cannot Plan Its Cities: Informality, Insurgence and the Idiom of Urbanization. Planning Theory, 8(1), 76–87.

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Fig. 6
Stark contrasts in the post-socialist city
Kyiv, Ukraine
© Daniela Zupan

INFRASTRUCTURES

CROATIA

Rijeka

SERBIA

Bor

ADRIATIC SEA

Essays on:

Jovanović, Deana (2019). The Thermodynamics of the Social Contract: Making Infrastructures Visible in the Case of District Heating. In: Two Towns in Serbia and Croatia. Post-Socialist Urban Infrastructures, Routledge, 38–53.

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The Mehr Housing Project in Iran

Setareh Nikfar

Deana Jovanović discusses the "thermodynamics of the social contract" in her study[1] of towns that used to be part of Yugoslavia. She shows how infrastructure, like district heating, can remain physically intact while losing its moral and social legitimacy (ibid). The failure of infrastructure, she argues, is not due to technical problems, but rather to its inability to continue providing care, dignity, and fairness (ibid).

The Mehr Housing Project in Iran is a good example of this idea. The government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad launched Mehr in 2007 to help low-income Iranians find affordable housing. It promised not only shelter but also a moral good: homeownership as a reward for the "oppressed"[2]. As such, Mehr was not merely a housing policy, but a material enactment of the state's role as a guardian of Islamic justice.

The project did not make the future livable, however. Many units were constructed in remote areas far from jobs, public transportation, healthcare, schools, and other urban amenities. People received buildings made of concrete, but not functioning neighbourhoods. The infrastructure was physically present, but it failed to create livable communities.

Often, residents say they feel abandoned and betrayed. "They gave us a house, but they took away our time, our dignity, and our future," as one resident told a journalist from Etemaad Newspaper[3]. Residents have frequently described life in Mehr towns as being "dumped" into a ghost town. In interviews and articles, common complaints include a lack of schools, unsafe environments, or the sense of being punished rather than helped. For example, Tajrishy and Vesal report that "many residents com-plained about unavailability of basic utilities (electricity, water, gas),"[4] and that schools, clinics, and other services "did not also expand at the rate new houses were occupied" (ibid). Photographer Hashem Shakeri similarly describes these new towns as having "very few facilities… like recreational centres, welfare, education, and hygiene,"[5] leaving residents in "a series of buildings… in the middle of the mountains" with virtually no local amenities (ibid). These narratives underline how infrastructure can become a source of resentment and shame, rather than pride.

These feelings are similar to what Jovanović describes as the post-socialist urban experience, in which infrastructure becomes visible not through physical breakdown but through the failure of its moral promise. In both cases, the infrastructure appears to function, but it does not serve its main social purpose.

Thus, the Mehr Housing Project exemplifies how the Iranian social contract is breaking down. It was intended to demonstrate care and inclusion, but instead it became a symbol of abandonment, disillusionment, and disconnection. It reminds us that when infrastructure fails morally, it does not merely break; it fractures people's trust, futures, and sense of belonging.

Fig. 7
An element of waste infrastructure in a post-Soviet residential courtyard
Aktau, Kazakhstan
© Daria Volkova

The (In)Visibility of Infrastructures

Jakob Steinkötter

In the early morning of 11 September 2024, parts of the Carola Bridge in Dresden collapsed. The completely unforeseen collapse shook the city and the entire country. The austerity policy in the monitoring and maintenance of Germany's infrastructure, whether rail or road, and the resulting dilapidated condition, which until then had been denounced almost exclusively in specialist circles, now came crashing into the public eye in Germany. In this case, it seems clear that we mainly see infrastructure when it fails.

This observation coincides with Stephen Graham's thesis, which sees the visibility of infrastructures precisely in their failure. His publication[6] formulated this thesis and at the same time stimulated an increased academic debate on infrastructures in the fields of geography, urban studies, planning and anthropology.

However, Graham's thesis does not remain unchallenged. Another way of making infrastructures visible is described by Jovanović[1] in her study of Post-Yugoslav heating systems. She argues that infrastructures here became visible through a re-ordering of relations between the state and its citizens, the so-called thermodynamics of the social contract. How can this be? What exactly does that mean?

Here it is necessary to consider the social transformation process of the Post-Yugoslav countries, which is primarily to be understood as a post-socialist transformation process. The socialist Yugoslav state, which was more democratic and liberal in comparison to the Soviet Union, was seen by its citizens as a "provider" of certain welfare state services. In this respect, the relationship between the state and its citizens did not differ significantly from the Western welfare economies of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The provision of district heating and the associated infrastructure by the socialist state represented a symbolic and material pillar of this relationship.

In the course of the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia and the neoliberal shock therapy in its successor states, however, this relationship was severely shaken, if not completely turned upside down, as Jovanović vividly illustrates. While the physical materiality of the heating system remained unchanged in this transformation process, and thus the promise of the socialist welfare state could still be experienced, the central finding was that the economic subjects changed. The formerly proud and largely satisfied users of the heating system have developed into neoliberal subjects who fight for the neoliberal doctrine of individual choice in their efforts to achieve a fair price for heat. This illustrates how the social contract and social conditions have fundamentally changed under neoliberalism, starting with the individual. It is precisely this change that makes the unchangeable materiality of the heating infrastructure visible in the everyday lives of its users.

In this respect, Jovanović's exploration of the Post-Yugoslav heating system is an exciting, possibly complementary perspective on the becoming visible of infrastructures through their failure. Referring back to the collapse of the Carola Bridge, it can be assumed that the fundamental infrastructural promise of the modern state is also being shaken here. Where this upheaval will lead us remains to be seen.

Fig. 8
Road works
Saint Petersburg, Russia
© Daniela Zupan

Fig. 9
A residential complex
Aktau, Kazakhstan
© Daria Volkova

A Whimper in Infrastructure

Dominica Tabea Utecht

"This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but a whimper." – T. S. Eliot (from The Hollow Men).

This line encapsulates a key tension in Jovanović's study[1], a work that has significant implications for our understanding of infrastructure failure and the erosion of social contracts. It is not a dramatic collapse but a silent, gradual process that Jovanović's study illuminates.

Jovanović convincingly argues that infrastructure becomes visible not only through physical collapse but also through the lived experience of a broken social contract. This challenges traditional infrastructural theory, which often equates visibility with technical failure. Instead, she invites us to see infrastructure as a moral and political technology, where the rupture lies in social relations, trust, and legitimacy. However, Eliot's poem also hints at something more profound – a whimper that signifies not just a breakdown but an existential exhaustion. This raises profound questions about the boundaries of Jovanović's framework and the broader implications of her study:

Is the "whimper" a moment of potential or resignation? Does it signify a chance for change or an acceptance of the status quo?

Jovanović highlights residents' attempts to re-negotiate the social contract through claims as "moral citizens." But does this truly open space for collective political agency, or does it confine citizens within neoliberal logics of individual responsibility? The poem's tone of quiet despair might suggest that these struggles risk becoming fragmented and insufficient to reverse systemic decline.

How does the focus on post-socialist infrastructure in Jovanović's study translate to other contexts? The thermodynamics metaphor elegantly captures the interplay of energy and social dynamics. It refers to the energy transfer within a system, which can be applied to the social dynamics of infrastructure and social contracts. However, does this metaphor risk oversimplifying the power asymmetries involved? Eliot's "whimper" could signal that infrastructural invisibility masks deeper forms of structural violence and abandonment, not just failed promises.

Jovanović emphasises how infrastructure becomes visible through social rupture, yet the poem's melancholic tone challenges us to consider what remains invisible, ignored, or silenced. This brings us to the politics of visibility and invisibility. Are there voices or experiences outside this narrative – marginalised groups or systemic factors – that remain unseen in the study's focus on individual consumer strategies?

The quiet fading of the heating promise, mirrored by Eliot's haunting whimper, reveals the fragility of post-socialist social contracts and a broader contemporary crisis of infrastructure, trust, and social solidarity.

Fig. 10
An uncovered manhole
Aktau, Kazakhstan
© Daria Volkova

Is There Heating After Socialism?

Volga Arkhipava

Let me start with a feeling: socialist-era heating. Inefficient, generous, even wasteful. But it was reliable. Everyone got heat, as the state paternalistically decided.

Then, suddenly, this system crashes into neoliberal reforms, and residents of post-socialist countries find ourselves trapped between two radically differing regimes. On the one hand, there is the post-socialist legacy of huge, ageing infrastructure with vertical radiators, leaky pipes and urban layouts that resist modernisation. On the other hand, there is the free market demanding efficiency and "choice." In Serbian Bor, families burdened with flat-rate heating bills that spiral into debt; across the border in the EU, in Croatian Rijeka, those who cannot afford to choose when to heat their homes still face heavy costs.

But there is one more feature: the sense of an unfulfilled promise. Nostalgia for a paternalistic way of providing.

The result? People pay more for less heat, infrastructure decays, but companies still profit. This is not a real choice. The system punishes the most vulnerable social groups while ignoring material constraints.

Urban specialists are supposed to imagine better urban futures. But what should be done for that?

Firstly, I would encourage urban planners and researchers to study technical issues more. This is crucial, despite all the complexity. Physical infrastructure (such as pipes) and social systems (such as markets or municipal policies) are not separate; they shape each other.

Secondly, path dependency is not a destiny. Post-socialist infrastructures are not the enemy. With careful retrofitting and public investment, such as EU funds, they offer a platform for innovation.

Thirdly, energy justice means recognising heat as a human right, not a luxury. Protests in Liberec and Rijeka, in Irkutsk and Bishkek, show what happens when heating becomes a commodity. Raising awareness of energy poverty and developing the capacity to quantify and map it are essential steps. Furthermore, the participation of residents in decision-making processes related to pricing and infrastructure improvements should be encouraged.

Infrastructures must be repaired, not abolished. The gap must be bridged – technical knowledge connected with social justice. And it must be remembered: infrastructure is always there, even when it is invisible.

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Fig. 11
A gas pipe
Aktau, Kazakhstan
© Daria Volkova

LATVIA

EMPTINESS

Essays on:

Dzenovska, Dace (2020). Emptiness: Capitalism Without People in the Latvian Countryside. In: American Ethnologist 47(1), 10–26.

Emptiness in The Post-Socialist Countryside

Samira Wernitz

"Homes without people, schools without students, and train tracks without trains"[1] – this striking image captures the disintegration of Latvia's countryside. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, rural Latvia has undergone a profound process of depopulation and decline, shaping the country's social and physical landscape.

Since 2001, the number of villages in Latvia has declined by thirty-two per cent – entire communities are now erased from the map (ibid). It is a loss difficult to grasp from the outside, but even more painful for those within the country. Since 2009, over twenty train routes have been cancelled, and eleven of them physically dismantled (ibid). One hundred and seventy-one schools have been closed, and many bus routes have been cut without replacement (ibid).

The process of decline is not simply passive. Rather, it is actively accompanied by decisions that withdraw essential services and dismantle critical infrastructure. It is a form of abandonment: people are left behind without sufficient opportunities for transportation, education, or the means to sustain everyday life.

This situation reminded me of the themes explored in the text by Jovanović[2], particularly her discussion of the breakdown of the social contract between the state and its citizens. In Latvia's case, the disappointment does not lie in unmet promises of heating but in the betrayal of withdrawing the means for people to care for themselves and their communities.

Under socialism, the state was expected to play a central role in ensuring the well-being of its citizens, particularly in rural areas. But with neoliberal reforms, these same regions have faced the harshest consequences of the transformation: shrinking populations, shuttered services, and the erosion of trust in political institutions. The expectation that the state should still hold some responsibility for providing essential services persists. Yet the state's increasing withdrawal causes a rupture in that expectation. As a result we see: those who can leave, do – and those who stay are left without a clear future.

I also had to think of my grandparents' village in southern Brandenburg, another post-socialist region that is today marked by emptiness due to people leaving the area. For years, there has been no public bus connection; the only possible way of transportation is the car. Residents of the village and neighbouring communities are fighting continuously for a bike lane, without any success. Here as well people are frustrated with local politics and fear future developments.

We can see: Latvia's rural emptiness is not just a demographic concern. It reveals the fragility of the post-socialist social contract and shows the consequences of a transformation that until today makes many feel left behind.

Fig. 12
A rural post office
Volgograd region, Russia
© Katja Lipgart

Fig. 13
Rurban emptiness
Perm, Russia
© Daniela Zupan

Emptiness is Not Absence

Zoé Philipps

It smells like pines; the sun warms my skin, but the air is still cold. Everywhere around me only trees, some dead – the bark beetles' work, most still standing.

Emptiness. I have been hiking through this landscape for two days, and I encountered it a few times already. It is right there, in an empty building, in a crossed-out sign for a hotel or restaurant, in the thinned-out bus schedule.

Emptiness. Walking along the path, I had to stop in front of this building: the Chaussehaus. The façade is dirty, the sign still hanging, a window open, its curtain hanging outside. I felt ambivalent, with a slight fright and creepiness, but also a tenderness.

Knowing of the Thüringer Wald's past as a prosperous tourism zone during GDR times, I fantasised about the past in this building: the exhausted hikers coming to a rest, eating freshly formed Thüringer Klöße, part of a state-company holiday group, singing worker songs while sipping on their beers. What was their idea of their future? Surely not this. Which futures past were lost, which are still held on to?

The shifts of material and social relations that happened in the Thüringer Wald I can only begin to imagine. But I also realise I know more about the absence than about the emptiness in the region: I know about the absence of tourists, of jobs, of public transportation, of future perspectives.

But what about emptiness as a lived reality? This Gasthaus gave me a glimpse of the materiality of emptiness, of its related sensations. What behaviours had to change following this emptying post-1990, here, just outside my door? Which futures did people envision? And how do planners interfere and interact with this emptiness? I suppose acknowledging it as more than just an absence of something is a beginning, a necessary first step. But what are envisionable futures then? I wish I could ask the Chaussehaus.

Fig. 14
An abandoned restaurant in the Thüringer Wald
Thuringia, Germany
© Zoé Philipps

Finding One's Self in Strangeness

Pelin Kalkan

The article looks at the emptiness through the socio-spatial transformation in rural areas of Latvia. In the post-Soviet era, privatisation, withdrawal of state support, integration into the European Union and neoliberal policies have caused significant out-migration, ageing population and low birth rates in rural areas, but "emptiness was not only about absence. It was an observable reality and a way of life that locals imbued with meaning by drawing on the discursive frame of modernity, in which emptiness comes before civilisation and sets in after its retreat"[1].

Emptiness has a sensual dimension. People passing through empty, demolished buildings feel very unsafe and uncanny. This spatial circumstance is affecting the urban experience of the residents in the sense of safety. Students without schools and homes without residents cause individuals to lose their sense of belonging and move away from collective life.

The personal experiences from the paper were striking. Especially with Milda. Ninety-two-year-old Milda represents the experience of a subject who is outside the modern capitalist system but still "alive." She is an old woman trying to maintain her own rhythm, relationships and sense of belonging in a destroyed world, and the woman called Ilze by the author to me is a symbol of purgatory – namely she is in-between, neither belonging to the village, nor to the city. Although Ilze tries to establish a life in rural Latvia, she needs to migrate to Germany for better opportunities and conditions. In this case, staying in the countryside is only possible "with sacrifice".

These personal experiences from the paper were really beautiful because the author never took anyone as a "victim". Her approach positions individuals as agents who seek meaning, reproduce, connect with place, and resist losing this connection. So the "emptiness" is not only a demographic or an economic issue, but also an emotional, social one.

While reading this article, my mind immediately went to the city of Hakkari, in eastern Türkiye and its countryside. There, too, the exodus of the young population, the ageing of those who remained, and the closure of public services such as schools and health centres have created a "feeling of abandonment" in the eyes of the local people. The movie *A Season in Hakkari* (dir. Erden Kıral, 1983) is the illustration of emptiness, abandonment and the longing of finding your true self within these surroundings. As it is in good movie plots, either someone leaves the town, or there is a stranger coming to the town. In this story, a stranger comes to the town and gets lost in his own strangeness. His alienation from himself and from the space he is physically in is a beautiful tragedy. Because there is a lust for belonging and a need for running away. The main character goes,

"For a long time now, I have been searching for myself here – like someone standing before a door, unable to enter his home, having lost the key in the dark; maddened, unable to break the door, helpless, a stranger – here, among strange, unfamiliar people"[3].

Fig. 15
Streetscape with abandoned heritage
alongside investor urbanism
Odessa, Ukraine
© Daniela Zupan

Progress Cannot Breed
Where Capitalism Bleeds

Sarah Kate Gentry

When reading the text, I found it similar to the emptiness I feel when driving around the Virginia and West Virginia border in the US. Like certain factory towns in the former Soviet Union, West Virginia is full of mining towns, fully dependent on a single production chain. Within these towns, people faced physical hardships from the gruelling labour, resulting in illnesses that were mended by opioid drugs. Starting in the 1990s, the overprescription of these drugs gave rise to a widespread addiction crisis in the Appalachian region. The cycle of poverty, poor health, and social challenges created by the epidemic continues to this day.

As the global market outsourced jobs, rural mountain towns were left behind, struggling with infrastructure gaps left by a government that had long neglected them. These regions have become some of the strongest bases of support for Trump, as many residents felt he acknowledged their struggles and spoke directly to their sense of being forgotten by the political establishment. I observed this cycle in the paper as well: people being abandoned by their municipalities when they were not profitable, and a population that took on the mindset that they were bound to continue a cycle of emptiness and disenfranchisement.

When driving through this mountainous area, I see the emptiness in dilapidated buildings with only lace white curtains sustaining any form of life, while the people feel trapped by governmental abandonment

Latvia is emblematic of Post-Cold War patterns of power where both the state and capital have increasingly withdrawn from rural spaces. Since 1990, the country has lost over twenty-eight per cent of its population. And this "emptying" is not just a past event; it is ongoing. Infrastructure fails, more people leave, and that further justifies disinvestment. It is a cycle: decline feeds decline.

After 1991, many ethnic Latvians saw independence as a liberation from Soviet control. But the form of capitalism that replaced socialism was a strange mix of post-Soviet, nationalist, neoliberal, and European systems. It encouraged self-reliance, not state support. In practice, that meant people were expected to maintain their lives with little more than EU subsidies and personal resilience. They shifted from depending on one government – the Soviets – to another – Brussels or the EU, but without the same sense of stability or care.

Ironically, the Soviet Union had once tried to pre-empt rural decline by modernising agriculture and building up rural villages. But after the Soviet collapse, there was no real plan to sustain these areas under capitalism, especially when profit was not guaranteed. Capital does not flow where it cannot grow.

In this vacuum, survival becomes a community effort. One example from the paper describes a mobile shop that barely breaks even just to reach scattered residents, or Ilze delivering for the post herself. These people form what the author calls a kind of makeshift family. They care because the municipalities do not. But with so many people gone, who is left to care?

Some argue that this is just the natural way of the world – that people move to cities in capitalist economies, and rural spaces die off. But that logic is deeply flawed. Just because a village is not profitable does not mean it should not exist. A sustainable life is not the same thing as a

profitable one.

In the end, this paper is not just about Latvia. It is about the consequences of a world where value is measured only in capital. And it asks: what happens to people and places when they are no longer seen as worth investing in?

Fig. 16
A former sugar factory
Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine
© Daniela Zupan

Let It Flow – The Naturalism of Capital

Leon Wiesemann

How do you perceive emptiness? A territory not meant to be empty – it is not the vastness of mountains or deserts, but an absence of humans in a place where humans once intended themselves to be.

This phenomenon is not only post-socialist, but the very sudden population decrease after 1989 is a particular characteristic found across the eastern side of the former Iron Curtain. From the Latvian countryside to post-industrial, formerly dense urban agglomerations in Bulgaria, and even in our surroundings right next door – in the villages and cities of Thuringia.

Imagine that your whole environment becomes emptier. Imagine staying ten years in the same place, and in those ten years, a third of the population is no longer there. A third of the houses stand empty. A third of all infrastructure vanishes – be it transport, cultural events or grocery shops. Left behind, the buildings steadily acquire a kind of "haunted" character, serving as witnesses to the people who once inhabited them.

How natural is that? How do we perceive not the outcome, but the reason for people leaving their homes? Perhaps they were searching for their luck elsewhere – luck that translates into money. Capitalism and liberal democracy had outlasted their socialist counterpart; the duopolistic world fractured, and the "end of history" was suddenly proclaimed.

So, it was time, in the post-socialist world, to let nature take back what it deserved. The artificial developments of the past decades, which now appeared misguided, were corrected. It is just like allowing a forest to reclaim space, or a river to blaze its path without human interference – right? Humans were expected to follow and represent the newly reordered capital flows. But these flows did not pass through the "broken" systems that had once been established.

But why perceive capital flows as natural? The post-socialist environment is not some kind of nature conservation area where humans should let the invisible hand of the market regulate everything into its own equilibrium. It is fascinating to observe how the discourse of economics within academia has shifted – how once philosophical discussions about human coexistence have faded into a narrow corridor of paradigms focused on rationally maximising benefits.

Methodologically, economics appears almost as a natural science – with dense, almost ritualistic mathematization of its paradigms and models. While these analytical tools may aid in understanding complex economic processes, they obscure the fact that – unlike water flowing downhill under gravity – capital does not move according to natural laws. It flows where human-made incentives, regulations and power structures allow it to.

As the end of history is (un)fortunately not yet reached, humans and societies are meant to organise themselves in ways that do not treat any economic system as a necessary precondition of existence. A form of emptiness like this is not natural – it is the product of decisions, ideologies, and much more.

Fig. 17
New life in abandoned places
Odessa, Ukraine
© Daniela Zupan

Fig. 18
Transforming ruins
Rostov-on-Don, Russia
© Daniela Zupan

Emptiness is Never Total

Sara Eskandari Torbaghan

Dzenovska explains that "emptiness" is not just about people abandoning a place; it is also a political and emotional condition. In rural Latvia, after the country joined the European Union, many areas were abandoned. But the deeper issue was that the government and market no longer saw value in these places. She shows that capitalism does not necessarily bring development to every area. Some places are excluded from its benefits and left to decline.

Sistan and Baluchestan is one of the largest yet poorest regions in Iran. Like rural Latvia, it faces long-term poverty and underdevelopment, high migration (especially among the younger generation), the collapse of traditional jobs like farming and fishing due to drought, poor water policies, and heavy border controls.

However, the feeling of emptiness here has deeper roots. During the Pahlavi era, the region was brought under the central government control but not truly integrated. Since the 1979 revolution, the government has treated the province more as a security concern – mainly because of its Sunni Baloch population and location near Afghanistan and Pakistan – than as a region needing development. As a result, basic services like schools, public transportation, and jobs are still missing. The state and private investors often ignore the region, keeping it on the margins.

So, much like Latvia in Dzenovska's paper, Sistan and Baluchestan is not just poor; it is politically emptied. It is a place where the nation-state and capitalism both fail to create a sense of future.

Dzenovska encourages us to read "emptiness" as a global symptom of selective capitalist geography. It allows us to move beyond narratives of "backwardness" or "natural decline" and ask: Who decides which areas matter and which do not? How are some regions systematically excluded from national imaginaries of development? And how do people continue to live, resist, or dream in these emptied-out zones?

In Sistan and Baluchestan, despite neglect, there are strong traditions of cross-border networks, cultural resilience, and informal economies – a reminder that emptiness is never total, and that life persists even where the state and capital withdraw.

Endnotes

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Fig. 19
Garages
Perm, Russia
© Daniela Zupan

WORKSHOPS

Weimar

Chemnitz

Workshop Overview: Literary and Urban Studies in Dialogue

Cecile Sandten & *Daniela Zupan*

The first part of the collaborative workshop series "Tales of Transformation: Post-Socialist and Postcolonial Cities as Laboratories of Change", taught by Jun.-Prof. Daniela Zupan (Bauhaus University Weimar) and Cecile Sandten (TU Chemnitz), began at Bauhaus University Weimar with a warm welcome and joint picnic in the Institute for European Urban Studies (IfEU) garden, giving students from both universities the opportunity to get to know each other in an informal setting. Following initiatory talks by Daniela Zupan and Cecile Sandten, the group was introduced to the key perspectives of the workshop. Zupan focused on urban transformation in post-socialist contexts, highlighting the reinvention of housing experiments and the rise of (right-wing) authoritarianism in post-socialist Europe, while Sandten first offered an introduction to Literary Urban Studies and then turned to postcolonialism. Zupan, in addition, explored how the socialist past is mobilised for today's post-socialist transformation, while Sandten's talk also set the stage for the later screening of *Hong Kong Love Affair*[1] (dir. Peter Chan, 1996), which she contextualised in relation to Hong Kong's handover from British to Chinese rule on 1 July 1997, marking the end of 156 years of colonial governance. Her introduction to the film highlighted how it reflects the protagonists' urban imaginaries and the cultural transformation unfolding during this period of political and cultural transition. Building on these inputs, participants then engaged in group discussions on how urban change can be understood and analysed through both literary and urban studies lenses.

The afternoon featured group work and city explorations, encouraging students to reflect on spatial and social change through both conceptual and experiential lenses. The day concluded with a film evening, including pizza and a screening of *Hong Kong Love Affair*, which offered further material for reflection on urban transformations in a global context.

On the second day, students reconvened to explore the intersections of postcolonial and post-socialist urban experiences. In small working groups, they developed initial ideas and questions, which they then shared in short pitch presentations. The workshop culminated in a guided visit to Weimar-Schöndorf's socialist-era housing estate "Waldstadt." Led by Marie Weber (Bauhaus University Weimar), this excursion offered an on-site perspective on the legacies of socialist planning and current urban challenges (see the next article). A joint reflection closed the workshop, highlighting shared insights and preparing the ground for the second part of the series in Chemnitz.

The two-day workshop in Chemnitz was held in cooperation with the Industrial Museum Chemnitz and convened in their rooms. It was also embedded in the European Capital of Culture Chemnitz 2025 programme. Guest lectures by literary urban scholars Dr Lieven Ameel (Tampere University) and PD Dr Nora Pleßke (Otto-von-Guericke University Magdeburg) enriched the students' theoretical and practical understanding of the overall topic. Ameel's talk on "Transforming Urban Waterfronts – Dreams, Schemes and Unruly Realities" scrutinised how cities imagine themselves by examining waterfronts as ambiguous margins – spaces where personal and communal dreams, silences, and unruly realities emerge. Situated between land and sea, the actual and the

possible, the present and the future, these liminal zones were explored through a diverse range of literary texts.

Pleßke's contribution "From Brownfield to Green City: Contemporary Storytelling and Scripting in Urban Transformation" explored how urban redevelopment can be framed as a form of progressive, values-based nationalism – in this case, constructing a vision of a fair, green, and forward-looking Scotland. Focusing on the Granton project in Edinburgh, she examined the concept of the ecocritical theme park as a global response to the planetary emergency, highlighting the inclusion of city residents as co-creators in the process. Pleßke argued that heritage can serve as a vital resource for cultural placemaking, enabling both recreation and renewal in contemporary urban narratives. In the ensuing discussion, Pleßke also talked about the BMBF-funded research project "transSCAPE: Cultural Spaces of Knowledge" which she leads. The project investigates cultural transformation in Magdeburg's former commercial and designated science port. Both presentations opened further interdisciplinary discussion.

A highlight of the Chemnitz workshop was the visit to the exhibition "Tales of Transformation: Chemnitz – Gabrovo – Łódź – Manchester – Mulhouse – Tampere" at the Industrial Museum (guided by curator Dr Barbara Waske), which traced (post-)industrial transformation across European cities. In the exhibition, students were able to immerse themselves in the development processes of these cities from the nineteenth century to the present day, experience history and visions of the future through digital extensions, and observe how foundries become universities, spinning mills become luxury lofts, and factory halls become studio buildings.

As another on-site exploration, students, scholars, and guests partic-ipated in a city walk through Chemnitz to new and old spaces of transformation. In this framework, they visited key urban sites, including the "Garage Campus" and the "Alte Aktienspinnerei" (Old Stock Spinning Mill), now home to the university library (see Sandten in this volume).

The initiative to carry out interdisciplinary work builds on a long-standing cooperation between Professors Sandten and Zupan, who have been collaborating in a research group initiative, a podcast titled "How Cities Transform"[2], as well as published academic work[3] together. Their shared aim with this event was to foster interdisciplinary dialogue and engage students in comparative literary and urban research. As a positive outcome, the two seminars and workshops created a space for critical reflection and creative dialogue on processes of urban transformation.

Endnotes

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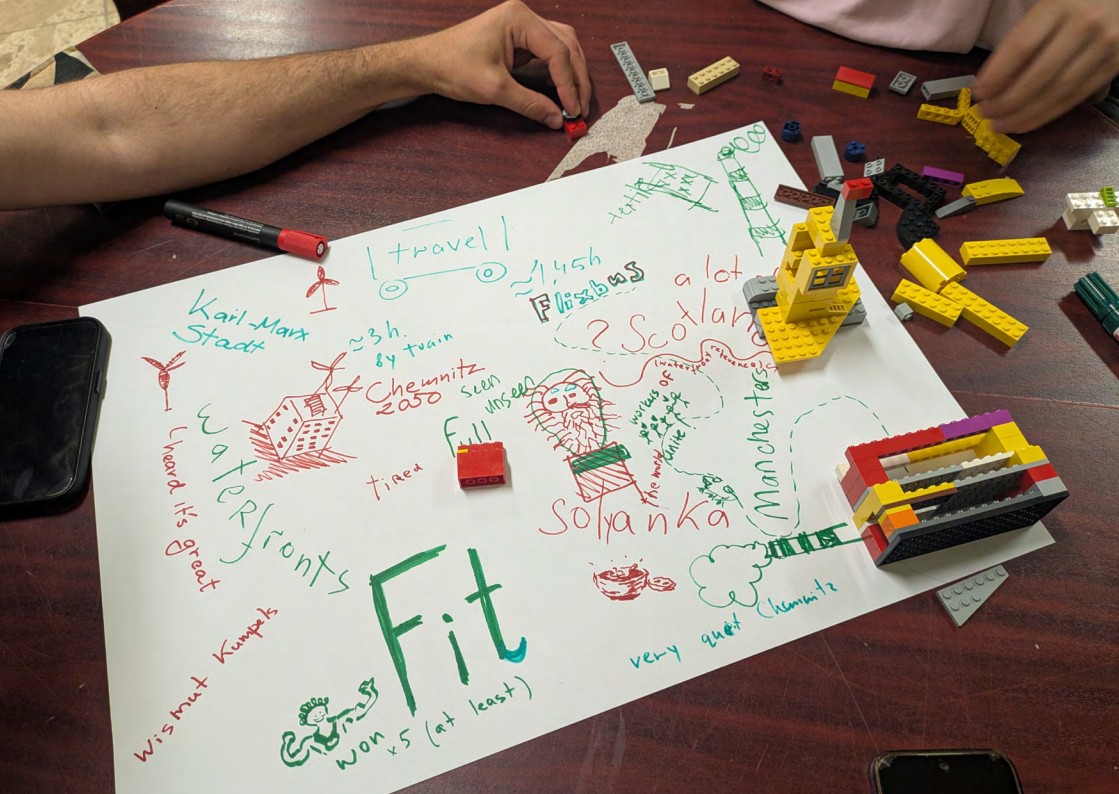
Fig. 20
Workshop brainstorming session
Chemnitz, Germany
© Volga Arkhipava

Fig. 21
A visit to the reinvented Kraftwerk
Chemnitz, Germany
© Volga Arkhipava

Walking Tour Through
The Waldstadt in Weimar

Daniela Zupan

In a piece published in the newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in 2020, local journalist Andrea Hünninger argues that Weimar consists of a melange of two parts: Weimar 1 and Weimar 2[1]. Weimar 1 comprises the East German Weimar, the GDR legacy, more concretely its belt of pre-fabricated housing estates together with the challenges of transformation. Weimar 2, on the other hand, comprises the Goethe–Schiller–Bach–Bauhaus–Hitler's favourite city-Weimar, in other words the signifier of whole Germany showing high culture besides worst terror. Since German reunification, these parts clash against each other, with the GDR legacies having been increasingly de-evaluated as a failed experiment of socialism. The transformation had deeply polarising effects, not only in Weimar. While socio-spatial polarisation is on the rise throughout Germany, a comprehensive study by sociologists Marcell Helbig and Stefanie Jähnen[2] showed that it hit East German cities particularly hard, with Weimar ranking high in the list of the most segregated cities in Germany. The authors further show how this process is not only deeply connected with post-socialist transformation, but spatially defined. In Weimar too, segregation spatialises along Weimar 1 and Weimar 2; that is, along the socialist, prefabricated housing estates from the GDR housing programme.

As part of the seminars "Tales of Transformation: Post-Socialist and Postcolonial Cities as Laboratories of Change" students from both universities went to visit the Waldstadt, one of the socialist housing estates in Weimar, on Friday 9 May 2025 to reflect on these processes. The Waldstadt is one out of three socialist housing estates in Weimar, built during the GDR at the fringes of the city to alleviate the housing shortage based on prefabricated housing construction. Weimar Nord was built north of the central station between 1962–1986. It comprises mostly five-storey buildings with a couple of high-rises. Weimar West, located at the western part of Weimar, was constructed between 1978–1987 and comprises mostly five–six-storey buildings with some eleven-storey buildings. In contrast to these two estates, relatively little is known about the Waldstadt. The Waldstadt is the latest of these estates. It was built in the second half of the 1980s – shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall – and comprises mostly five–six-storey buildings.

The Waldstadt is located four kilometres north of the city centre. It is part of Schöndorf, the most northern district of Weimar, which became part of the city in 1939. The new housing estate was planned on a hill next to a forest to provide affordable housing and healthy living conditions for up to 6,000 people. Today, the district houses approximately 4,400 inhabitants, with around 3,000 people living in the Waldstadt. Due to the collapse of state socialism, the comprehensive plans for the Waldstadt have not been fully implemented. Yet, the idea of green living with an excellent view of the city was not given up after reunification. Indeed, the 1990s saw several postmodern adaptations with multi-family housing and a mixed-use centre for the area. Despite these interventions, the Waldstadt was facing significant shrinkage and social polarisation. In 2007, it entered the "Soziale Stadt" programme, a state-funded programme aiming to strengthen community and stabilise social structures, increase attractiveness as a place for living, create a high-quality green and open space infrastructure, and improve the image of the Waldstadt.

In the course of the programme, the housing estate underwent urban renewal, some green space redevelopment, and further facilities such as a multi-generation house and a youth club were added. Constructed shortly before the German reunification at the northern fringe of the city, the Waldstadt reflects paradigmatically the shifting dynamics from being a showcase of late socialist housing production to becoming a laboratory of post-socialist capitalist transformation.

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Fig. 22
Living in the forest. The Waldstadt in Weimar
Weimar, Germany
© Daniela Zupan

Walking Tour to a Selection of Chemnitz' Interventionist Spaces

Cecile Sandten

As part of the European Capital of Culture 2025 programme and the special exhibition "Tales of Transformation Chemnitz – Gabrovo – Łódź – Manchester – Mulhouse – Tampere" (25 April 2025 – 16 November 2025) at the Industrial Museum Chemnitz, students from the workshop took part in a two-and-a-half-hour walking tour through Chemnitz on Friday 6 June 2025. The tour, led by Cecile Sandten, Professor of English Literatures at TU Chemnitz, guided students from both universities as well as guests to various sites of intervention and transformation across the city. Throughout the walk, Chemnitz was approached as an urban space shaped by multiple, overlapping layers of historical, architectural, cultural, and social change.

The tour began at the Industrial Museum Chemnitz, where the group had just concluded the second part of a two-day interdisciplinary workshop and presented their findings related to the seminar's themes. The museum itself served as a notable case of spatial transformation: it is housed in a former foundry hall of the Hermann und Alfred Escher AG from 1907, and is emblematic of Saxony's industrial heritage. The building itself is an impressive massive brick structure with high ceilings, steel beams, and an open hall layout – resembling both Manchester architecture and, perhaps more strikingly, a "cathedral of industry."

From the Industrial Museum, the group walked to the first stop, the "Garagen-Campus Chemnitz" – a space of intervention as part of Chemnitz being European Capital of Culture 2025. There the group was invited to enjoy a guided tour through the transformed space: a creative and experimental hub born out of repurposed urban infrastructure.

The Garagen-Campus is a compelling example of how industrial infrastructure can be creatively reimagined for contemporary urban re-use. Originally built as a streetcar depot for the CVAG (Chemnitzer Verkehrs-Aktiengesellschaft), this site served for decades as a central hub for the city's tram network – an essential part of Chemnitz's transport infrastructure and industrial identity. With its expansive garages, functional architecture, and proximity to key tram routes, the former depot once housed and maintained the city's streetcars. After its decommissioning, the site lay dormant for a longer period of time, reflecting broader questions around post-industrial reuse in Chemnitz, housing also the tram museum Chemnitz in one part of the space. Since 2021, the area has undergone a dynamic transformation into the Garagen-Campus, a multi-purpose urban laboratory and event space, inviting, in particular, the neighbourhood to join, interact, explore, and make it into their own space.

Thus it functions as a creative campus, offering room for experimentation, co-working, exhibitions, events, and education. It has become a platform for collaborative projects, including those linked to Chemnitz 2025 – European Capital of Culture. For example, every Sunday from 12.00–18.00 h artists Rainer Prohaska (FU-TURAMA LAB) and Kilian Jörg build sustainable fantasy cars in front of the public. As such, it is more than a relic of the past – it is a space of cultural production, actively engaged in shaping the city's future.

From the Garagen-Campus, the group took the tram to Zentralhaltestelle, heading to DasTietz. This imposing former department store, which employed around one thousand people at its peak in the late

1920s, was one of the most progressive and successful in Germany – reflecting Chemnitz's status at the time as the wealthiest city in the country. Today, the building serves as a public space, housing the City Library, the Adult Education Centre, the Museum of Natural History, and the New Saxon Gallery. Fully renovated in 2004, it stands as a landmark of adaptive reuse. However, the commercial sections have significantly declined, facing serious challenges due to high rents and the urgent need for infrastructural refurbishment. In the inner courtyard of DasTietz, the group visited the Petrified Forest – a remarkable fossil display dating back 290 million years, formed by a volcanic eruption in Chemnitz. Excavations at the original site are still ongoing.

Nearby, on the grounds of the investor-driven planned "Johannisvorstadt development," archaeologists made a significant discovery: the remains of an eighteenth-century mikvah (a Jewish ritual bath for women), located near the path of the subterranean Chemnitz river. The mikvah testifies to the presence and cultural practices of the city's historical Jewish community. However, the site's fate became controversial. Despite the cultural value of the find, the investor behind the redevelopment chose not to alter the building plans to accommodate the archaeological find for the public. As a result, the mikvah was encased in a protective cocoon of sand and concrete – a preservation method that ensures its physical survival but removes it entirely from public view or interpretation. It now exists only as a silent layer beneath the new urban fabric – a poignant metaphor for the tensions between memory, investor-driven interests, and erasure in urban transformation processes.

Next, the group visited the Saxon Museum of Archaeology Chemnitz (smac), located at Stefan-Heym-Platz – named in honour of Stefan Heym (1913–2001), one of the most influential and prolific Jewish German-American-GDR-BRD writers of the twentieth century. In 1933, at the age of twenty, Heym was forced to flee Nazi Germany due to his outspoken political views and critical writings – particularly his poem "Exportgeschäft", written at the age of seventeen – making him one of the youngest German exiles, first to Prague and then to the United States. The Stefan-Heym-Platz itself, however, is a stark and heavily trafficked space – dominated by cars and trams – offering little invitation to pause or reflect. Two recently constructed buildings – a hotel located just around the corner from the smac, and the headquarters of an energy company – form a closed and imposing frontage along Bahnhofstraße, leaving little to no openness for pedestrians or opportunities for urban dwelling due to the buildings' huge dark glass and concrete facades. The smac is housed in the iconic former Schocken Department Store, designed by Erich Mendelsohn and inaugurated in 1930. Commissioned by Jewish entrepreneur Salman Schocken, the building's dynamic modernist architecture once embodied progress and modernity. After the Nazi expropriation of Jewish businesses, the department store was "Aryanised" and renamed Merkur AG in 1939. Remarkably, it survived WWII intact and functioned under various names during the GDR period – HOWA, Centrum Warenhaus, and later as a Kaufhof store after reunification. Kaufhof relocated to a new building in 2001, designed by renowned architect Helmut Jahn, as part of the city centre's post-reunification revitalisation. That building has been abandoned following the decline of Karstadt/Galeria Kaufhof in 2024 and is now slated for reuse, making it one of Chemnitz's most recent inner-city urban transformation and development projects – the third of its kind, which underlines that the time of the great department stores has ultimately come to a close. After years of vacancy, the Free State of Saxony restored the

Schocken building, and in 2014 it reopened as smac. The museum now presents 300,000 years of Saxon archaeological history, while also paying tribute to its Schocken legacy. The building illustrates the complexities of German retail history, from Jewish ownership to Aryanisation, GDR collectivisation, neoliberal transformation, and eventual civic use.

A short walk led the group to the iconic Karl Marx Monument – locally known as "Nischel" (which is Saxon dialect and means "head"). Unveiled in 1971, the 7.1-metre bronze head designed by Soviet sculptor Lev Kerbel symbolises Chemnitz's socialist past, when the city – renamed "Karl-Marx-Stadt" from 1953 to 1990 – was extensively rebuilt as a model socialist city. The bronze bust remains one of Europe's largest free-standing head sculptures and a potent visual marker of socialist ideological transformation. Since reunification, the Karl Marx Monument has lost much of its original socialist symbolism and no longer serves as a site for state-organised parades. Instead, it has become a gathering point for public demonstrations and civic events. During the annual "Hut-Festival", for example, the "Nischel" is humorously adorned with an oversized hat to welcome its visitors.

The final stop was the Alte Aktienspinnerei, an architectural jewel of nineteenth-century industrial Chemnitz. Originally built around 1858 by architect Friedrich Theodor Roschig, it was one of Saxony's most advanced spinning mills. Constructed entirely from iron and stone for fire safety, it once housed sixty thousand spindles. After industrial use ceased, the building underwent various transformations – hosting a department store, puppet theatre, city library, and art gallery. Following years of vacancy, a European competition led to its revitalisation. Since 2020, it has served as the central library of Chemnitz University of Technology, unifying previous locations and housing over 1.2 million books

and seven hundred workstations. The renovation, led by ARGE Aktienspinnerei, respected both the building's monumental past and the needs of a modern academic institution. In 2025, a memorial plaque was added to honour Ernestine Minna Simon, a textile worker and strike leader, linking the site's history of labour, gender, and resistance to present-day academic inquiry.

This walking tour through Chemnitz provided students with the opportunity to engage in transformation as a concrete, spatial process embedded in the urban fabric. Sites such as the covered mikvah, repurposed industrial buildings, restructured commercial spaces, and recontextualised monuments illustrated how political, economic, cultural, and discursive shifts are materially inscribed into the city's architecture and public – often contested – space. Next time, the focus of the walk will shift to exploring Chemnitz as a (post)colonial space, acknowledging that industrialisation and commercialisation have historically been rooted in the exploitation of so-called "backward" peoples and their resources – used to fuel expansion, progress, and mobility in the countries and cities of the Global North. Alternatively, students interested in literature can come with me on a "Literary Walk Through Chemnitz."

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FURTHER INTERVENTIONS

Combustible Certainty

Cecile Sandten

An Act of Parliament for designing a staircase
is no longer in place
the system is not broken
it is built this way[1]
to drive the economy
upfront
entirely problematic
regulations are shortened,
buildings refurbished
layer by layer –
adequately, they say.
Regulations.
Exploring the place.
Innovation
does not necessarily mean less risk.
What risk?
Whose risk?
Anything is allowed.
Lack of scrutiny.

Is it the materials?
Is it the regulations?
Is it the lack of regulations?

In Scotland
five 14-tower blocks dominated the landscape
reduced to rubble.
New plastic windows
surrounded by a plastic cladder.
A dropped cigarette started
a fire
in the living room
of a fifth-floor flat.
He immediately jumped in his car.
Fire – like catchwood.
Things *were* inflammable.
Things should never have been
put on a building
combustible cladding
should be removed
from all buildings
would cost millions.
Beast of a government.
Eighteen years before the Grenfell Tower fire –
it came with a Certificate –.

21st floor of Grenfell Tower
out of 24
the view was amazing –
London Eye, Tower Bridge, blue sky
residents allowed to choose the colours
cladding – makes it pretty to the eye.

People and politics meant to prevent people.
Grenfell, where the standards were met
the standards were not met.

Aluminum composite material (ACM),
polyethylene is not inflammable –
polyethylene cladding
sandwiched in ACM
is very inflammable.
Felt like a new coating
covering the walls.
Aluminium does not burn,
protects the polyethylene inside –
but where the fire reached the polyethylene,
things are different.
The metal peels back
it melts
the black core
suddenly
oozes and drips
like tar –
with flammable droplets
falling
into a black puddle
fire
burning
burning.

Successful test results,
misleading half-truths,
deliberately misheld
truth.
Certificate –
telling the industry it could be used
on any building in the UK
£1,000,000 saved,
failure of panels in fire tests
cladding with the cassette panels
accredited "F"
out of A, B, F –
very flammable,
lowest fire safety possible
continued to be given to UK builders:
it has a bad behaviour when exposed to fire
flammable material
cheaper to manufacture
has a fire-retardant core
in flat panels,
yet lower fire-safety panels
cladding
becomes
combustible material,
should not have been used.
Did nothing.
Changed nothing.
Certificate –

standard panel met the standard.
Government decision.
Residents allowed to choose the colours.

72 people died, including 18 children
covered in combustible products
to cover high-rise buildings.
Acting unethically.
One copied the other:
combustible
insulation
combustible
cladding
together.
14 June 2017.
Above 18 meters.
Misleading marketing.
Tweaking the chemical ingredients –
old text used for the new material –
for 13 years –
to achieve *best sales.*

72 people died, including 18 children
one 6-months old baby
one pregnant survivor had a stillbirth
after the fire.

It was said the insulation met

high fire standards
in high-rise buildings.
Certificate –
combustible insulation
used with over 200 high-rise tower blocks
around the country

an accident waiting to happen

72 people died, including 18 children.
Grenfell Tower, London –
not *just* inflammable,
very inflammable
and the insulation
and the combustible products.

72 people died, including 18 children,
one died before he was even born.

19 nationalities:
an Afghan army officer,
a Sudanese dressmaker,
a British artist,
an Italian architect,
an Egyptian hairdresser,
an Eritrean waitress,
a Lebanese soldier.
Taxi drivers, teachers.

Football fans.
Churchgoers.
Devout Muslims.
Big families.
Working singles.
Seven white Britons
lived on the block.

Minority ethnic communities
disproportionately affected
having to live cheap.
And the insulation.
And the combustible products.
Certified –
by the Government
built to protect –
and *not* protect.

Endnotes

[1] The italics in the poem are taken from the multi-part podcast The Grenfell Tower Inquiry – "Grenfell: Building a Disaster" by Kate Lamble. The Grenfell Tower Inquiry Podcast, produced by BBC Radio and hosted by Kate Lamble, is a ten-part series launched as part of Phase 2 of the public inquiry. It has been active from 2018 through 2024. The episode titled "Grenfell: Building a Disaster" was published in September 2024, with the final episode ("The Final Act") released on 4 September 2024.

Erased Futures:
The Jadid Movement and The Limits of Soviet Anti-Colonialism

Doniyor Kamol Ugli Keldiyorov

In the decades after World War II, the Soviet Union actively positioned itself as a leading force in the global struggle against colonialism. While the Soviet Union portrayed itself as a global supporter of anti-colonial liberation movements during the Cold War, this image of international solidarity was carefully constructed to promote its own ideological influence. Throughout the 1950s and beyond, the USSR sought to align itself with newly decolonising nations in Asia and Africa, presenting socialism as a path to freedom from Western imperialism. Yet beneath this display of progress and unity lay a deeper contradiction: the suppression of local movements within the Soviet Union that had once envisioned their own paths to emancipation. One of the most important of these was the Jadid movement, a group of reform-minded Muslim intellectuals active in the early twentieth century across Central Asia, then commonly known as Turkestan. These thinkers and writers promoted education, cultural renewal, and social reform in the hopes of revitalising their communities and asserting a form of modern identity grounded in local traditions rather than Soviet socialism. Their ideas offered an alternative vision of liberation, one that the Soviet state would later erase from public memory.

Emerging in the late nineteenth century under Russian imperial rule, the Jadid movement called for modern education, cultural revitalisation, and social reform as the foundation for a renewed national identity. Jadid thinkers saw the colonial presence in Central Asia not only as a political obstacle but as a barrier to intellectual progress. Through plays, poems, essays, and newspapers, they encouraged their communities to embrace both Islamic ethics and modern knowledge, aiming to restore a sense of collective agency among Central Asian Muslims. What made their efforts particularly powerful, and later, dangerous to the Soviet state was their insistence on defining progress through indigenous values rather than through imperial or Soviet models. Their vision offered a competing idea of what it meant to be modern, one that challenged the monopoly of both Tsarist and later Soviet authority over the future of the region.

To better understand the significance of the Jadid movement, it is essential to consider how historians have interpreted its emergence within the colonial context of Russian Central Asia. Adeeb Khalid, a leading scholar on the region, argues that while the Jadids were shaped by the conditions of empire, they were not simply products of Russian colonial policy. As Khalid[1] explains, "they were not the product of a 'Russian colonial policy'; rather, they appeared in a context that had been deeply shaped by Russian rule and its advertent and inadvertent consequences" (ibid). Russian imperial control over political life in Turkestan was far-reaching, but its influence over cultural and educational spheres remained relatively shallow. It was in these semi-autonomous domains – traditional maktabs (Islamic primary schools), the press, and aspects of private life – that the Jadid movement began to take shape. In these spaces, Khalid (ibid) explains, "the Jadids' desiderata for cultural reform overlapped to a considerable degree with what the Russians also espoused," particularly around the concept of taraqqiy (progress), which to the Jadids meant adopting "modern knowledge, modern forms of sociability and organisation" (ibid).

The Jadids thus promoted reforms such as the establishment of new-method schools, which marked a sharp break from the traditional maktab education. These new institutions were about far more than just improving literacy rates; they embodied, according to Khalid (ibid), "a modern, enlightenment vision" that redefined both childhood and education itself. The introduction of globes, maps, and printed books, along with the rejection of corporal punishment, reflected "a new sense of being in the world" (ibid). Education was not merely a practical necessity but a vehicle for spiritual and societal transformation, aligning Islam with modernity rather than opposing it.

Khalid's work also underscores that the Jadids were not separatists seeking to overthrow imperial rule but reformers who imagined inclusion into a universal civilisation. They believed that "natives were capable of achieving progress," which made their project fundamentally subversive to the colonial order that depended on maintaining distinctions between colonisers and colonised (ibid). As Khalid (ibid) insightfully writes, "Jadidism was a movement for the inclusion of 'natives' into universal civilisation and into the mainstream of imperial life, not for separation from it" (ibid).

In the political sphere, Jadidism remained primarily a cultural reform movement rather than a political one up until 1917. When political demands arose, they were framed within the desire for greater autonomy and equality within the empire, not for full independence. Mahmudhoja Behbudiy, one of the most influential Jadids, exemplified this attitude when he wrote in 1907 that Turkestan needed "greater autonomy than the Muslims of European Russia," advocating for proportional representation and Muslim inclusion in state institutions (as cited in Khalid 2009, 436). Behbudiy envisioned local councils and educational reforms

as means to secure a degree of self-rule within the imperial system, reflecting the Jadids' broader strategy of reform rather than outright rebellion.

However, as the Russian authorities grew increasingly suspicious of the Jadids' activities – particularly their emphasis on Muslim solidarity, cultural revival, and political participation – the movement came under growing surveillance and ideological scrutiny. After the Bolshevik Revolution years, a brief period of tactical cooperation with Jadid leaders gave way to outright repression. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet regime launched a systematic campaign to dismantle Jadidism, viewing it as ideologically incompatible with Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy and as a potential source of nationalist resistance.

During the Stalinist purges, many leading Jadid intellectuals were accused of bourgeois nationalism, pan-Islamism, and counter-revolutionary sympathies. Hundreds were arrested, tortured, or executed, while others were sentenced to long terms in the Gulag, the vast network of forced labour camps scattered across remote regions such as Siberia and the Arctic. These camps were notorious for their "brutal conditions, high mortality rates, and the erasure of individuals from society"[2]. Some Jadids were also exiled to desolate areas where survival itself became a form of resistance. In the 1930s the Stalinist regime exceeded its disciplining of Muslim authorities by unleashing a murderous campaign of executions, mosque and madrasa closings, and deportations and resettlements[3]. The scale of oppression in Central Asia was staggering: according to archival records, tens of thousands of cultural, religious, and educational figures across the region were purged during this period, with Uzbekistan suffering some of the highest rates of execution and imprisonment among the republics[4].

Beyond physical elimination, the Soviet state launched a campaign of symbolic erasure. Jadid publications were banned, their schools closed, and their names expunged from educational curricula and public discourse. Monuments and commemorations were prohibited, and any reference to the movement was considered dangerous. Individuals who spoke positively about the Jadids – or even mentioned them without condemnation – risked being denounced, arrested, or subjected to state surveillance and disciplinary measures[5]. This form of symbolic oppression produced a cultural amnesia, wherein successive generations were deprived of access to their own intellectual and political heritage.

In this period, the Soviet regime promoted the October Revolution of 1917 as the foundational moment of Central Asian progress. Soviet historiography reimagined the revolution not only as the liberation of workers and peasants but also as the beginning of modernity for the formerly "backward" Muslim republics. By framing the revolution as a civilising force, Soviet narratives positioned Russian-led socialism as the legitimate successor to – and eraser of – any prior visions of national self-determination, including those championed by the Jadids.

By 1958, when the Afro-Asian Writers' Conference was held in Tashkent, the Soviet Union was actively promoting itself as a leader among newly decolonising nations. The conference was part of a broader strategy to project an image of international solidarity and cultural progress. However, the Central Asian literary tradition shown to the world had already been carefully curated to exclude its most self-assertive voices. This selective representation was not incidental; it was a deliberate strategy to portray Soviet Central Asia as a model of successful 'decolonisation' achieved through socialism, while carefully excluding the historical memory of indigenous anti-colonial movements. The absence of the Jad-

id legacy at the Tashkent conference is therefore not a marginal oversight but a critical lens through which to examine the contradictions at the heart of Soviet internationalism: the USSR championed liberation struggles abroad while simultaneously erasing competing visions of emancipation within its own borders – visions that, if acknowledged, would have directly challenged the state's ideological narrative and claims to moral authority.

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Fig. 25
An abandoned fishing village
Mangystau Region, Kazakhstan
© Daria Volkova

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