

Ola Soederstroem, ed. *L'industriel, l'architecte et le phalanstère: invention et usages de la cité d'entreprise d'Ugine*. Paris and Montreal: L'Harmattan, 1997. 195 pp. ISBN 978-2-7384-5678-6.

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## The Industrial and the Architect: Around the Factory Settlement of Ugine

Postmodern architects are still very confident. Modernists, (and why not cite Le Corbusier as the archetypal example?) believed that architecture had to be functional and apposite for an industrial present and future. They also believed that society and culture were behind them and that they should insist on social changes to fit their designs. From Tony Garnier onwards, the modern industrial city could be viewed (preferably from the air), not as a blot on the landscape—like, for example, nineteenth century St. Etienne—but as a beautiful construction. Modern architects would ensure that new industrial settlements would be in harmony with their natural topography. Factories and towns would be located and designed to produce a life-enhancing environment, good for children, for workers, for business. The confidence of the modernists lay in their belief that they could achieve this.

Postmodernists are more cautious. They are aware that cultural “norms” are difficult to manipulate. Theories about the relationship between society and the built environment have foundered. The physical environment neither creates societies, nor do societies create particular physical environments (as Soederstrom points out, p. 10). Above all, what determines particular outcomes in particular places is not straightforward. The actions of individuals and circumstances at crucial moments, in the planning, designing and constructing stages, play a large part in what actually gets built on the ground. This book is devoted to a study of a factory settlement built in Ugine, in the French Alps, between 1908 and 1910. The

aim is to reveal, through interdisciplinary study, the various combination of factors which produced a special result, even where these factors are as much arbitrary as planned.

This is a way of offering an insight into the nature of architecture and planning, as well as into their actual social outcomes. Ugine is not an important settlement. It is not a Mulhouse or, to offer a British example, a Letchworth Garden City. That is not the point. What is at issue is the quality of the imagination that went into its planning. That yawning gulf between physical planning and the social life it is intended to serve is bridged by reference to the particular and the historical. In fact, historical records are thin on the ground. The papers and correspondence of the two leading actors in the drama—the patron, Paul Girod, and the architect, Maurice Braillard—contain very little information about their proposals for Ugine. This fact only encourages the editor of this volume, Ola Soederstrom. The aims of his interdisciplinary team are to find a way of bringing together the divergent discourses of architecture and social analysis. The historical importance of Ugine is that it provides a discrete example for analytical purposes. It is to be used as a tool for unlocking theoretical conundrums.

How do the authors set about doing this? The key is in their interdisciplinary approach. Ola Soederstrom, the director of the Fondation Braillard Architectes in Geneva, Switzerland, has drawn on the expertise of three colleagues: Elena Cogato Lanza, an architect from the Uni-

versity of Venice, the architectural historian Paul Marti and the sociologist Susanne Oguey, both from the University of Geneva. Each has subjected this industrial community to an analysis appropriate to his or her specific discipline. This is to be done in such a way that history, architecture, and theory will interlock. Soderstrom himself tackles the discourse around the subject of workers' housing in the nineteenth century to set the scene. Susanne Oguey then pursues the idea of contemporary models and their influence. Elena Cogato Lanza has the task of examining UGINE as a practical project, from the point of view of an architect and a businessperson, and the task of studying how early ideas about the final product determined the actual outcome. Paul Marti is left with the challenge of analyzing the relation between the architectural language of the scheme and the social identities.

In each case, there is an attempt to relate discourse with object, theory with practice. This provides many interesting insights such as the subtle differences between a Garden City (the British ideal was the dominant one in the period of UGINE's development) and the phalanstery which draws on a French tradition (especially that of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier). In fact, what strikes an English reviewer of this book is how far it appears to have been stimulated by current American scholarship on sociotechnological change and an earlier French tradition which is being rediscovered. In terms of the latter, for example, there is the rediscovery of France's pioneer sociologist, Fredric Le Play, discredited after his death, when the ultra right wing Action Francaise saw a possibility of using his ideas as a basis for social engineering.

He did not deserve such a fate. His work at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867 (a subject of one of the excellent illustrations in this book) was done to encourage a modern discourse about the nature of workers' housing by providing exhibits.

The purpose of the whole volume, however, and the one it needs to be judged by, is the attempt to bring sociology, history, and design together in a particular technical context: the building of a modern factory settlement. What the authors have done is to raise many interesting issues and questions of a theoretical nature, but there are problems. UGINE is only a small settlement. Its historical records are thin. The crucial problem of moving from the sociological theory to the unique historical example is made easier for this reason, but the end result is not entirely convincing. Although the illustrations are marvelous, the subject matter is not perhaps quite strong enough to bear the weight of analysis. What this book does offer, however, is a fresh approach to architectural history which, by putting buildings firmly in the context of time, place and purpose, gives new insight into the complex interplay between built form and social change. Even if the interdisciplinary approach does not come together quite perfectly, it is still a very interesting experiment which might push future work in a similar direction. Postmodernists could start here.

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