Heather D. DeHaan’s monograph is devoted to the city planning of the Avtozavod district of Nizhny Novgorod (Gorky from 1932 to 1990) that was undertaken in its most dramatic moment in Soviet history. It began in 1928-31 with the series of ambitious avant-garde projects which aimed to build an ideal socialist city and ended with the 1935-39 bombastic projects of representative ensembles that were destined never to come to life. The author’s aim is to emphasize the role of experts in creating a Stalinist city and to scrutinize the “tensions between technological (expert-led) and sociological (class-driven) transformations” (p. 14).

In order to achieve this goal DeHaan considers three main topics: 1) the symbolic and representational dimension of the totalitarian state, a domain which is well established in Slavic studies due to the seminal works of Catherina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko, and others; 2) the expert’s role in making Stalinist culture; and 3) a close-up study of the local institutional history of city planning. The latter two themes are less studied in Western scholarship and discussed only by contemporary Russian scholars.

To address the available literature on expert’s role in city planning, we should mention the works of Yulia Kosenkova, which are the most important sources on Soviet planning, construction laws, and institutional history. Evgenia Konycheva has published in Russian and German on socialist city planning in Magnitogorsk, Cheliabinsk, Orsk, and other cities. In his publications, Mark Meerovich also considers planning, urbanization, and mass housing in industrial centers as seen from a social-economic perspective. The detailed studies of local histories of Soviet planning and architecture that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms of Stalinist culture-making and the institutional history of architecture and city planning in the dominantly industrial cities of Western Siberia, such as Yekaterinburg (former Sverdlovsk), Samara, and others, are of particular interest. This list of books, published predominantly in Russian, shows the great bibliographical importance of DeHaan’s research devoted to the planning of Nizhny Novgorod/Gorky in the 1920s and the 1930s.

Divided into seven chapters, the book starts with the symbolic cityscape that embraces the development of architecture from Peter the Great to the October Revolution of 1917 and ends with a narrative on city life metaphorically portrayed as a theatrical scene and examined through a description of the spectacular mass and semi-volunteer beautification of the city. These mass mobilizations were widely used throughout the 1930s to conceal the failure of the systematic approach to solve the continual urban problems of Nizhny Novgorod/Gorky. The focus on urban identity and ritualization practices is especially pronounced in chapter 4, which narrates,
as the author calls it, the Stalinist “iconographic vision” of city representation (1935-38). The author provides valuable data on the practices of local Gorky authorities, who aimed to include in local cityscapes monumental and impractical designs crafted in and for Moscow, a practice that became routine in Soviet city planning for years. The use of metaphorical language of theatrical performance—“the drama of building socialism” (p. 16)—still follows the concept of Stalinism as an avant-garde creative project, offered and developed by Boris Groys. It seems that allusions and references to theater are popular in Soviet studies because the chaos and anarchy of city management appears to be too confusing for scholars to take a closer look at the complex reality that was a mixture of Communist Party ideological imperatives, spontaneous and irregular administrative and institutional reforms, and professional ambitions.

The author, however, proposes a more nuanced and intuitive approach to the history of Soviet city planning by opening the discussion of agency in constructing Soviet socialist cities. DeHaan aims to escape a straightforward understanding of Stalinism, which is usually seen as a producer of either victims or collaborators. To develop her narrative, DeHaan introduces two heroes: Aleksandr Ivanitskii and Nikolai Solofnenko, the city planners of Nizhny Novgorod/Gorky in 1928-39. As described in chapter 3, Ivanitskii was an experienced planner who received his training before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. His main project for Avtozavod in Nizhny Novgorod was filtered through the numerous state regulations and was eventually rejected after passing through the sophisticated bureaucratic system of construction offices and governmental departments of various levels. His successor, an inexperienced but politically loyal activist, Nikolai Solofnenko, was a typical vydvizhenets of the Stalinist cultural revolution era (1928-31). Despite their totally different profiles—Ivanitskii as enthusiastic practitioner and Solofnenko as politician—they are both portrayed as persons from the ivory tower of pure science whose professional ambitions were far from practical. This image clashes with another powerful narrative. The two individuals are depicted against the background of the dozen governmental and administrative bodies that were acting in the face of exclusive scientific bodies that were acting in the face of exclusive scientific bodies[10] that were acting in the face of exclusive attention to industrial construction and total disregard of mass housing. According to Kosenkova, it was typical of Soviet cities, and the construction was often conducted irregularly due to the available capacities, ambitions of local governments and industrial bodies, and disregarding the general plan.[11] In Gorky, this led to the massive construction of poor-quality temporary barracks and unfinished buildings, and enduring problems with city improvement and transportation.

The book concludes with an examination of the deeds of the professional experts who failed to fulfill any of the proposed plans for Nizhny Novgorod/Gorky, seen...
against a polyphonic or even chaotic background of Soviet institutional history, which paradoxically combined weak connections and a strong bureaucratic network along with the immense power of Stalinism to produce rituals and symbols.[12]

The reader will find this book a thought-provoking contribution to the contemporary scholarship on Stalinist culture and will admire its author’s desire to eloquently portray experts’ areas of responsibility, the all-embracing Soviet bureaucratic and political slogans, the socialist economy and numerous reforms during the turbulent cultural revolution period and the evolution of institutions and agencies of the Stalinism since the mid-1930s. Heather DeHaan’s book is one of the few studies of local city planning in the Soviet Union accessible in English. This makes the monograph a valuable source for researchers of Soviet architecture and urban history; it also points to the problems that still need to be addressed, such as experts’ agency and the institutional history in art and architecture domains in the USSR.

Notes


[7]. A. K. Sinel’nik and V. A. Samogorov, Arkhitektura i gradostroitel’stvo Samary 1920-h – nachala 1940-h (Samara: SGASU, 2010).

[8]. On Moscow reconstruction as a model of the socialist city, see Katerina Clark, “The ‘New Moscow’ and the New ‘Happiness’: Architecture as a Nodal Point in the Stalinist System of Value,” in Petrified Utopia Happiness Soviet Style, ed. Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko (London: Anthem Press, 2009), 189-200, see also Qualls, From Ruins to Reconstruction, 46-84.


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