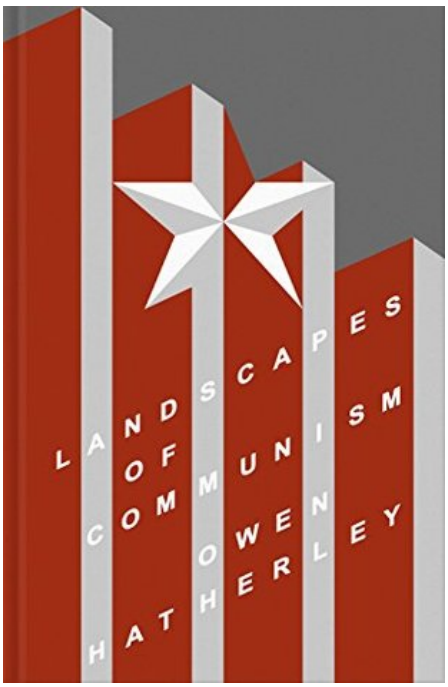

Landscapes of Communism: A History Through Buildings

Owen Hatherley

Landscapes of Communism: A History Through Buildings

Owen Hatherley

Landscapes of Communism: A History Through Buildings Owen Hatherley

'In the craven world of architectural criticism Hatherley is that rarest of things: a brave, incisive, elegant and erudite writer, whose books dissect the contemporary built environment to reveal the political fantasies and social realities it embodies' Will Self

During the course of the twentieth century, communism took power in Eastern Europe and remade the city in its own image. Ransacking the urban planning of the grand imperial past, it set out to transform everyday life, its sweeping boulevards, epic high-rise and vast housing estates an emphatic declaration of a non-capitalist idea. Now, the regimes that built them are dead and long gone, but from Warsaw to Berlin, Moscow to post-Revolution Kiev, the buildings, their most obvious legacy, remain, populated by people whose lives were scattered and jeopardized by the collapse of communism and the introduction of capitalism.

Landscapes of Communism is an intimate history of twentieth-century communist Europe told through its buildings; it is, too, a book about power, and what power does in cities. In exploring what that power was, Hatherley shows how much we can understand from surfaces - especially states as obsessed with surface as the Soviets were. Walking through these landscapes today, Hatherley discovers how, in contrast to the common dismissal of 'monolithic' Soviet architecture, these cities reflect with disconcerting transparency the development of an idea over the decades, with its sharp, sudden zigzags of official style: from modernism to classicism and back; to the superstitious despotic rococo of high Stalinism, with its jingoistic memorials, palaces and secret policemen's castles; East Germany's obsession with prefabricated concrete panels; and the metro systems of Moscow and Prague, a spectacular vindication of public space that went further than any avant garde ever dared.

But most of all, *Landscapes of Communism* is a revelatory journey of discovery, plunging us into the maelstrom of socialist architecture. As we submerge into the metros, walk the massive, multi-lane magistrale and pause at milk bars in the microrayons, who knows what we might find?

Landscapes of Communism: A History Through Buildings Details

Date	:	Published June 4th 2015 by Penguin (first published May 26th 2015)
ISBN	:	
Author	:	Owen Hatherley
Format	:	Kindle Edition 544 pages
Genre	:	Architecture, History, Nonfiction, Politics, Art, Cities, Urbanism

From Reader Review Landscapes of Communism: A History Through Buildings for online ebook

Declan says

It is Owen Hatherley’s lack of cynicism that makes 'Landscapes of Communism' both appealing and unusual. Where many would seek to mock all of the buildings constructed in eastern Europe during the communist era, he seeks to understand the intentions of those who designed the buildings. He illuminates the pre-cast rigidity of the most doctrinaire decision-makers, as well as the exemplary aspects of those exceptional buildings which combined modernist aesthetics with a genuine consideration for the social benefits of the structures.

Antenna says

4 stars for interesting content, not for clarity and style.

For what might be more accurately called “townscapes", journalist Owen Hatherley presents a detailed, at times indigestible, analysis of Soviet era architecture. Despite limited finances, he managed to roam quite widely with firsthand impressions of Moscow, Berlin, Kiev during the recent demonstrations on the Maidan, the remains of Ceaucescu’s Bucharest, Warsaw, Vilnius, even Shanghai, to name the main cities visited.

Each starting with a relevant quotation, the chapters are themed: the “magistrales” or wide boulevards cut through cities to permit state-orchestrated demonstrations of power; the massive, impersonal to the point of being soulless suburban blocks of apartments to house large numbers of workers as fast as possible; “houses of the people” to encourage suitable social activities; palatial metros, some stations ironically built in Moscow at the height of Stalin’s Reign of Terror. There is even a chapter on quirky examples of improvisation: extra rooms tacked onto the sides of high-rise flats, and self-managed tower blocks in New Belgrade like the Genex, resembling two enormous linked grain silos. Themes are set in context by an initial introduction on the nature and aims of Soviet architecture.

I learned a good deal from this book. I had not realised how much Soviet styles varied in a relatively short period and liked Paperny’s useful if simplistic definition of “Culture One” Modernism, dynamic, with horizontal structures, low, long and linear, as opposed to “Culture Two” Stalinist, with its “monumental, solid, massive, immovable” vertical structures. These harked back to past grandeur for the frontages of “people’s palaces”, intended as spacious flats for ordinary workers as in East Berlin’s flagship project, Stalinallee, together with major buildings like Moscow State University with their stepped ziggurats and the “Socialist Realism” of the huge, stylised statues of patriotic workers.

I had not considered how “Utopian Soviet planners” rejected distinct urban quarters as a survival of “obsolete capitalist structures”, so that individuality was only possible through chance variations in a site. Even under Krushchev’s less extreme regime, decrees led to an “International Style” extending between the far-flung borders with Scandinavia, Afghanistan and Japan, with identical standardised plans down to the use of the same mass-produced doorknob.

Ironically, the “social condensers” constructed to provide under one roof a variety of activities to create good socialist citizens often became rare examples of creative, “one-off” architecture, such as Melnikov’s

Rusakov Workers' Centre in Moscow.

I accept that for reasons of economy only small, grainy black-and-white photographs are used, but they are often not placed right next to the relevant text. Some buildings, like the famous Dessau-Törten cubic houses of Gropius are described without the inclusion of any photograph at all, which is like a radio programme explaining how to make a complicated origami bird. Hatherley's prose is a little too leaden to get away with this. Key points may be lost in his verbose and sometimes opaque style. To cite one small example, he writes that, "Modernists of the interwar period have….become pejorative for their hostility to the street". Does he mean that they became pejorative about the use of streets in urban design, or that their hostility to streets has aroused criticism from others? The latter include Jonathan Raban who argues that to "kill the street….cuts the heart of cities as they are actually used and lived in". Hatherley's lack of clarity matters because it is confusing. The omission of the construction dates of many developments discussed is also unhelpful.

Concepts like Modernism and Constructivism need concise definitions, and a glossary of terms and architects would have been useful for reference. The book would have been more effective with fewer examples, each with a better photograph and concise text. When I took the trouble to find buildings on Google images, I could understand much better what the author was getting at, but it is cumbersome to read a book in this way.

Davide Lonigro says

Mr Hatherley takes us through a wonderful and interesting trip. Reading about architecture in this entertaining, involving way helped me a lot understanding the architecture of the former socialist countries I've been and the one I'm currently living in. Thanks sir!

Carol says

This review of some of the types of Communist structures in Europe and Russia reminded me of a more academic-style tour than Simon Winder's Danubia or Germania. Hatherley is best when he is visiting the buildings himself and commenting on what he is seeing and what he knows he should see. His visit to Maidan in Ukraine has given me the best idea yet of what that protest space is like. I lost some interest when his narrative moved back to arm's length, but still learned about the significance of wide streets, worker's buildings, and Baltic resorts.

Anna says

I took my time reading 'Landscapes of Communism', in part because it's a weighty tome and therefore inconvenient to take on trains. Moreover, it is a pretty dense read and perhaps somewhat of an acquired taste. (I find reading about buildings curiously relaxing for some reason.) Hatherley takes the reader on a scrupulously detailed tour of communist architecture, which includes a selection of black and white images but is largely reliant on detailed descriptions. It's both a travelogue and history lesson, written in Hatherley's distinctive tone: incisive and intermittently waspish. Each chapter covers a different category of communism's physical remnants; roads, housing, memorials, and so on. Although I found the first half enlightening, parts of its dragged and it was the second half that proved fascinating. Chapter 5 is a definite

highlight, as Hatherley and I share a taste for grandiose public transport infrastructure. I do love reading about the Moscow metro system. Also of note was the chapter that followed, which discussed the varying approaches to reconstruction taken by devastated Eastern European cities after WWII. Hatherley points out that most of what we now consider historic architecture in such cities is not what it seems, having been carefully rebuilt by the communists. The chapter on memorials contains perhaps the most vividly unsettling descriptions, including of Lenin's tomb and the museum devoted to Stalin in his home town, as well as some very thought-provoking analysis of how the communist past is being rewritten through a lens of nationalism.

In short, this book is well-suited to armchair tourists like me, who are interested in the historical significance of architectural aesthetics but don't want the bother of actually travelling to look at structures. Perhaps more adventurous people than I will be inspired by this book to visit the places it describes; I've mainly been inspired to read more about soviet transport infrastructure. The book concludes strongly with a comparison of Shanghai's current architecture, a vision of capitalist communism in the 21st century. Tying up the threads of his history of communism and its buildings, Hatherley cites this conceptually intriguing idea about China:

> ...What seems like merely the administration of capitalism by an oligarchy which is the Communist Party in nothing but name, is actually a gigantic, prolonged version of the New Economic Policy embarked upon by the Bolsheviks throughout the 1920s - the use of a dirigiste, state-planned capitalism to build up productive forces to a level where the population has gone from being poor to being reasonably comfortable, after which the Communist Party could take command of this wealth and use it for the building of full communism, something which can, after all, in 'stage' theory only be achieved after the development of a mature industrial capitalism. This is at least what Deng Xiaoping always claimed was going on...

That point reminded me of Red Capitalism: The Fragile Financial Foundation of China's Extraordinary Rise, which asks, 'What in China isn't a sovereign wealth fund?' It seems that the history of 20th century communist buildings can still tell us quite a lot about socialism in the 21st century. 'Landscapes of Communism' is best appreciated at a leisurely pace, as it gives the reader plenty to chew on.

David says

A great photo-journalistic, exhaustively researched look at how communism/socialism has impacted the architecture of a number of countries, including skyscrapers, housing, metro stations & memorials. The photos alone are quite intriguing.

Ondrej Urban says

I'm probably doing this book a huge disservice if I write that this was one of the most interesting boring books I've ever come across. But then again, who actually reads reviews from weird blonde randos rather than just glancing the star rating before they decided whether to go for it, right?

Landscapes of Communism caught my eye in a bookstore mainly due to my own, horrendously slow and probably not that awesome anyway, writing - namely, it looked like a nice inspiration for strange locations.

Now that I'm done with it, I can say that it partially worked, but also gave me quite a bit more. This book, I imagine, would be interesting for either a niche audience of about 5 people in the west that are into this stuff, a small crowd that like decent journalism and/or writing and, finally, a lot of people like me that actually come from the eastern Europe and grew up around all the ridiculous stuff the book describes. Briefly, if you are one of us ("one of us, one of us!"), this book will help you look at where you live or grew up with a completely new eyes, enabling you to experience the urban landscape better, notice details that escaped you before and lets not forget boring your friends to death with yet another dose of nerdy fun facts.

Why do I consider the book boring? Ever since I recently made the conscious decision to read more nonfiction books, I opted for those with events, those that told stories, wisely assuming that descriptive textbooks would not grab me quite as much (and then my reading progress would suffer, I'd fail my reading challenge and who wants to live like that?). Well, this book fits the latter category - full of concrete, plastic, revolutionary art, concrete, facades and concrete, it's mostly a descriptive non-story overlaid at places with historical remarks and personal notes about how the author and his girlfriend explored all of these locations. Yet, somehow, it works, and you enjoy looking at all the weirdness, opulence and forced glorification of the simple, asking for more.

The chapters in the book cover what seems like a complete, or at least a major fraction of the, well, types of communist architecture. The topics remain interesting throughout, from the major streets and microrayons at the start of the book, through underground railways all the way to the self-celebratory monuments.

Throughout and after reading this book, I often felt some kind of nostalgia - most probably for the places where I grew up and that are changing quickly, making a lot of things I knew disappear. Consciously I know this is a good thing, cities in the east are getting prettier, more clean and modern... however, reading about the weird and abstract art scattered throughout the former communist bloc, about milk bars and badly made prefab concrete statues, that all brings me back to where I grew up, playgrounds I used to play at, where most of the equipment was somehow broken, the ugly bus stop where I had my first kiss... and once in a while one is very much allowed a completely biased trip down the memory lane.

Howard says

This is a weighty tome, beautifully typeset (with correct diactritics!) and bound, with better-quality photographs than the author’s previous books, but with a word count probably twice as large. I enjoyed it, but it took me a very long time to read it, in contrast to *New Ruins* and *Bleak*, through which I whizzed.

The classification of eight types of buildings and landscapes is inspired, and the discussion of each of them, with countless examples, is comprehensive. Clearly the author has done very thorough research; I learned a lot about history of the former Soviet Bloc countries. The enthusiasm for the metro systems in particular comes across with great verve, and the feelings inspired by the various memorials and museums are almost as good as being there oneself. I am now inspired to visit some weird and wonderful places well off the tourist trail. Also the first-person narrative and personal anecdote is entertaining, and I would actually have enjoyed more of it, just like in *A New Kind of Bleak*.

For anyone with more than a passing interest in the former Soviet Bloc countries, which were so mysterious to those of us growing up in the 1970s and ’80s, I would say that this book is a must-read, but you’ll have to

give it a lot of time and attention to get the best from it.

Charlotte says

Owen Hatherley has provided a truly epic account of the main themes of urban landscape and design during the Communist period. His non-traditional chapter genres allow for in-depth analysis of several cities across decades and leaders, without confusing the reader. The generous number of photographs bring both public and domestic buildings to life, many of which would never be seen in a typical travelogue or city architectural guide.

Concentrating mainly on Poland, with excursions in to Russia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and others, I feel Hatherley genuinely attempted to visit every site he could and analyse the architecture objectively. There are glimmers of his personal preference, but these do not overshadow the history and information he imparts.

I especially enjoyed the sections on post-WW2 city reconstruction, underground metros and memorial statues, as Hatherley cleverly expresses the motivations and monumental human effort involved undertaking such projects in a devastated landscape.

Rory Mcclenaghan says

Outside of some specific architectural terms I don't think this book is as impenetrable as some have suggested. Hatherley writes well even if he does seem a bit of a prig at times. His sympathies obviously lie with socialism and I'm inclined to disagree with a few of the concrete efforts he champions but this doesn't make this any less of an enjoyable journey around the former communist states. This is going to sound a bit facile but it could do with more pictures. It's great that a lot of the images are ones he and his girlfriend took or come from old postcards, but there are so many structures described that I spent a fair bit of time checking them out on my phone as I was reading.

---

két con says

This is more like a travelogue than an architecture or history book, anyhow very impressive in its scope.

Thorlakur says

Mr. Hatherley writes a highly readable book on this interesting subject. His left leaning persuasions make him a sympathetic observer, but not blind to the cruelties and absurdities sometimes involved in communist city planning. This book is his own travelogue, so he omits the places that he hasn't visited, such as Cuba, North Korea or any of the heavily subsidised former people's republics on the African continent. In that regard, this "research" feels incomplete.