PLANNED INDUSTRIAL TOWNS AS GLOBAL WORKING-CLASS SETTLEMENTS

REVISITING THE LEGACY OF MODERNIST CITY PLANNING IN RUSSIAN AND INDIAN PERIPHERIES

BY

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to my parents

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Abstract

This thesis presents an analysis of the historical built environments of planned industrial towns in remote regions of Russia and India, focusing on how these environments continue to shape and structure urban life today. The research demonstrates that domestic politics and local conditions fundamentally influenced twentieth-century urban modernist movements, and that these built environments continue to support working-class populations. By advancing a nuanced, primarily social understanding of these settlements originally shaped by modernist planning principles, the thesis challenges conventional, Western-centric narratives of modernist design and architecture. By foregrounding the settlements' distinct social and property dynamics, this dissertation also seeks to unpack and emancipate the concept of a planned industrial city, and to re-evaluate its historical and contemporary significance from a non-Western-centric, transnational perspective.

While existing literature provides us with the widespread popular and academic criticisms of post-war modernist urbanism and architecture, it largely focuses on well-known buildings and/or their celebrated architects. In contrast, small towns, whose architectural and urbanistic value may not be immediately apparent, are seldom given critical attention. When addressed, criticism often reduces them to examples of top-down planning presumed to be incapable of fostering vibrant of meaningful social life. As a result, working-class-oriented urban planning is frequently dismissed as simplistic and unworthy of deeper investigation, thereby overshadowing its potential benefits and complexities.

Through ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and archival research, this study argues that twentieth-century planned industrial towns has a strong social rationale, being intentionally designed to improve the living conditions of and cultivate the urban working class, by supporting it through socially oriented urban planning. Furthermore, the research explores the social role that the historical built environments of these towns continue to play in diverse contemporary social and political contexts.

The main aim of this cumulative dissertation therefore is two-fold. **First,** it seeks to unpack and reconceptualize the notion of the 'industrial city' by shifting the analytical focus away from industrial functions of the cities toward the underlying social logic of their urban planning that played a vital role in the global post-World War II

reconstruction era. These towns were conceived as solutions for states to enhance social welfare and drive radical social change, embodying ideals of progress and modernism through affordable housing, equitable urban rights, generous spatial layouts, integrated sanitation systems, and the inclusion of green spaces. **Second,** the research aims to unravel lesser-explored processes involved in the evolution of the formerly state-led modernist environments in these planned settlements. In particular, it interrogates the material endurance of the built environment of planned industrial towns, examining how the physical and social spaces persist or contested in the face of contemporary, market-driven urban developments.

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, particularly focusing on his concept of 'social space' as a dynamic, historically situated construct, this research investigates how these towns mediate the ongoing dialectic between the built environment and evolving urban realities. Conceptually, Lefebvre's framework guides the analysis, recognizing social space as historically contingent but enduring — reproduced and transformed through lived experience, representations, and spatial practices. Space is approached not as a passive backdrop, but as an active product and co-producer of social relations, property regimes, and power structures. Empirically, the dissertation employs a qualitative and multi-scalar methodology to explore and conceptualize the material and social production of space within planned industrial towns in transnational contexts. This dissertation utilises diverse qualitative methods, including in-depth field observations, material landscape analysis, and exploration of historical narratives. Fieldwork in the selected towns involves participatory observation, the systematic use of photography, and detailed field notes to document and interpret the present state of the built environment as lived, perceived, and conceived space. This is complimented by semi-structured interviews and conversation with key actors and contributors to spatial production, such as architects, urban planners, workers, visitors and residents, thus enabling a comprehensive understanding of both everyday practices and spatial representations.

The results of this work are presented across three publications, each interrogating the dialectical relationships between urban form and social relations. By repositioning the twentieth-century infrastructure of planned industrial towns—and their attendant social spaces—at the heart of modernist urbanism, the study challenges prevailing

historiographies of urban design that have often marginalized these settlements as peripheral or purely economically and politically instrumentalized sites. In addition, this study demonstrates that the social space of planned industrial towns is an evolving arena of contemporary urban life—a co-produced space that continue to inform collective urban experience well beyond its origins in mid-twentieth-century planning ideologies. The dissertation argues that the planned industrial towns often encode a working-class orientation within their spatial organization and everyday life even amid the pressures of commercialization and individualization.

Deutsche Kurzfassung

Diese Dissertation präsentiert eine Analyse der historischen gebauten Umgebungen geplanter Industriestädte in abgelegenen Regionen Russlands und Indiens, mit besonderem Fokus darauf, wie diese Umgebungen das urbane Leben bis heute prägen und strukturieren. Die Untersuchung zeigt, dass innenpolitische Dynamiken und lokale Gegebenheiten die urbanen modernistischen Bewegungen des 20. Jahrhunderts grundlegend beeinflusst haben und dass diese gebauten Umwelten weiterhin Arbeiter*innenklassen unterstützen. Indem eine differenzierte und primär sozial orientierte Perspektive auf menschliche Siedlungen entfaltet w8ird, die ursprünglich von modernistischen Planungsprinzipien geformt wurden, hinterfragt die Arbeit konventionelle, westlich-zentrierte Narrative des modernistischen Designs und der Architektur. Durch die Hervorhebung der spezifischen sozialen und eigentumsrechtlichen Dynamiken der Siedlungen versucht diese Dissertation zudem, das Konzept einer geplanten Industriestadt zu entflechten und zu emanzipieren sowie ihren historischen und gegenwärtigen Stellenwert aus einer nicht-westlich-zentrierten, transnationalen Perspektive neu zu bewerten.

Während die bestehende Literatur umfangreiche populärwissenschaftliche und akademische Kritiken des modernistischen Städtebaus und der Architektur der Nachkriegszeit bietet, konzentriert sie sich vornehmlich auf bekannte Bauwerke und/oder deren gefeierte Architekten. Im Gegensatz dazu erhalten kleinere Städte, deren architektonischer und städtebaulicher Wert nicht unmittelbar ersichtlich ist, selten kritische Aufmerksamkeit. Wird ihnen doch Beachtung geschenkt, so reduziert sich die Kritik oftmals darauf, sie als Beispiele von Top-down-Planung darzustellen, die angeblich nicht in der Lage sind, eine lebendige oder bedeutungsvolle soziale Gemeinschaft zu fördern. Infolgedessen wird auf die Arbeiter*innenklasse ausgerichtete Stadtplanung häufig als simpel und einer tiefergehenden Untersuchung nicht würdig abgetan, wodurch ihr potenzieller Nutzen und ihre Komplexität in den Hintergrund treten.

Mittels ethnographischer Feldforschung, halbstrukturierter Interviews und Archivrecherchen argumentiert diese Studie, dass die im 20. Jahrhundert geplanten Industriestädte eine ausgeprägte soziale Logik aufweisen, welche darauf abzielte, die Lebensbedingungen der städtischen Arbeiter*innen zu verbessern und eine urbane

Arbeiterschaft zu kultivieren — unterstützt durch sozial orientierte Stadtplanung. Darüber hinaus untersucht die Arbeit die soziale Rolle, die die historischen gebauten Umgebungen dieser Städte in den unterschiedlichen zeitgenössischen sozialen und politischen Kontexten weiterhin spielen.

Das Hauptziel dieser kumulativen Dissertation ist somit zweifach: Erstens soll der Begriff der „Industriestadt“ neu beleuchtet und konzeptualisiert werden, indem der analytische Fokus von den industriellen Funktionen der Städte hin zu den zugrunde liegenden sozialen Logiken ihrer Planung verschoben wird, die eine maßgebliche Rolle im globalen Wiederaufbau nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg spielten. Diese Städte wurden als Lösungen konzipiert, mit denen Staaten das Sozialwesen stärken und radikalen sozialen Wandel vorantreiben wollten, wobei sie Ideale von Fortschritt und Modernismus durch bezahlbaren Wohnraum, gerechte städtische Teilhabe, großzügige räumliche Strukturen, integrierte Sanitärsysteme und die Einbeziehung von Grünflächen verwirklichten. Zweitens zielt die Forschung darauf ab, weniger beachtete Prozesse zu untersuchen, die an der fortschreitenden Entwicklung vormals staatlich geprägter modernistischer Umwelten in geplanten Siedlungen beteiligt sind. Im Besonderen hinterfragt sie die materielle Beständigkeit des gebauten Erbes geplanter Industriestädte, indem untersucht wird, inwiefern physische und soziale Räume angesichts zeitgenössischer, marktorientierter Stadtentwicklungen fortbestehen oder umkämpft sind.

Unter Rückgriff auf Henri Lefebvres Theorie der Produktion des Raums, insbesondere dessen Begriff des „sozialen Raums“ als dynamisch und historisch situierte Konstruktion, untersucht diese Arbeit, wie diese Städte die andauernde Dialektik zwischen gebauter Umwelt und sich wandelnden urbanen Realitäten vermitteln und gestalten. Lefebvres Ansatz dient der Analyse als konzeptioneller Rahmen, indem sozialer Raum als historisch kontingent, aber gleichzeitig beständig aufgefasst wird— reproduziert und transformiert durch gelebte Erfahrung, Repräsentationen und räumliche Praktiken. Raum wird nicht als passiver Hintergrund, sondern als aktives Produkt und Mitproduzent von sozialen Beziehungen, Eigentumsordnungen und Machtstrukturen verstanden. Methodisch verfolgt die Dissertation einen qualitativen und multi-skalaren Zugang, um die materielle wie soziale Produktion von Raum in geplanten Industriestädten im transnationalen Kontext zu ergründen und zu

konzeptualisieren. Eingesetzt werden diverse qualitative Methoden, darunter intensive Feldbeobachtungen, Analysen der materiellen Landschaft und die Auswertung historischer Narrative. Die Feldforschung in den ausgewählten Städten umfasst teilnehmende Beobachtung, den systematischen Einsatz von Fotografie sowie detaillierte Feldnotizen, um den aktuellen Zustand der gebauten Umwelt als gelebten, wahrgenommenen und vorgestellten Raum zu dokumentieren und zu interpretieren. Ergänzt wird dies durch halbstrukturierte Interviews und Gespräche mit zentralen Akteur*innen und Mitwirkenden der Raumproduktion, wie Architekt*innen, Stadtplaner*innen, Arbeiter*innen, Besucher*innen und Bewohner*innen, wodurch ein umfassendes Verständnis sowohl alltäglicher Praktiken als auch räumlicher Repräsentationen ermöglicht wird.

Die Ergebnisse dieser Arbeit werden in drei Publikationen präsentiert, die jeweils die dialektischen Beziehungen zwischen urbaner Form und sozialen Beziehungen untersuchen. Indem diese Dissertation die Infrastruktur geplanter Industriestädte des 20. Jahrhunderts — und die damit verbundenen sozialen Räume — ins Zentrum der modernistischen Stadtforschung rückt, stellt sie herrschende Geschichtsschreibungen des urbanen Designs infrage, die solche Siedlungen häufig als marginal oder rein ökonomisch und politisch instrumentalisierte Orte betrachten. Zudem wird gezeigt, dass der soziale Raum geplanter Industriestädte ein fortbestehendes Feld zeitgenössischen urbanen Lebens ist — ein ko-produzierter Raum, der das kollektive Stadterlebnis weit über seinen Ursprung in den Planungsideologien der Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts hinaus prägt. Die Dissertation argumentiert, dass geplante Industriestädte selbst unter dem Druck von Kommerzialisierung und Individualisierung häufig eine arbeiter*innenorientierte Prägung in ihrer räumlichen Organisation und im Alltag bewahren und weitertragen.

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Figures

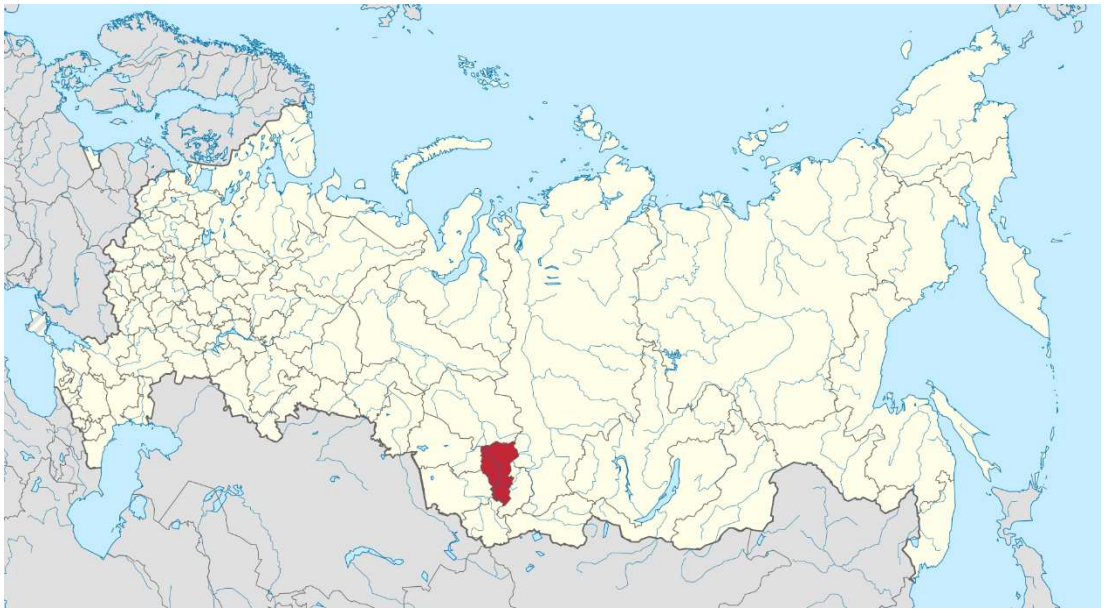
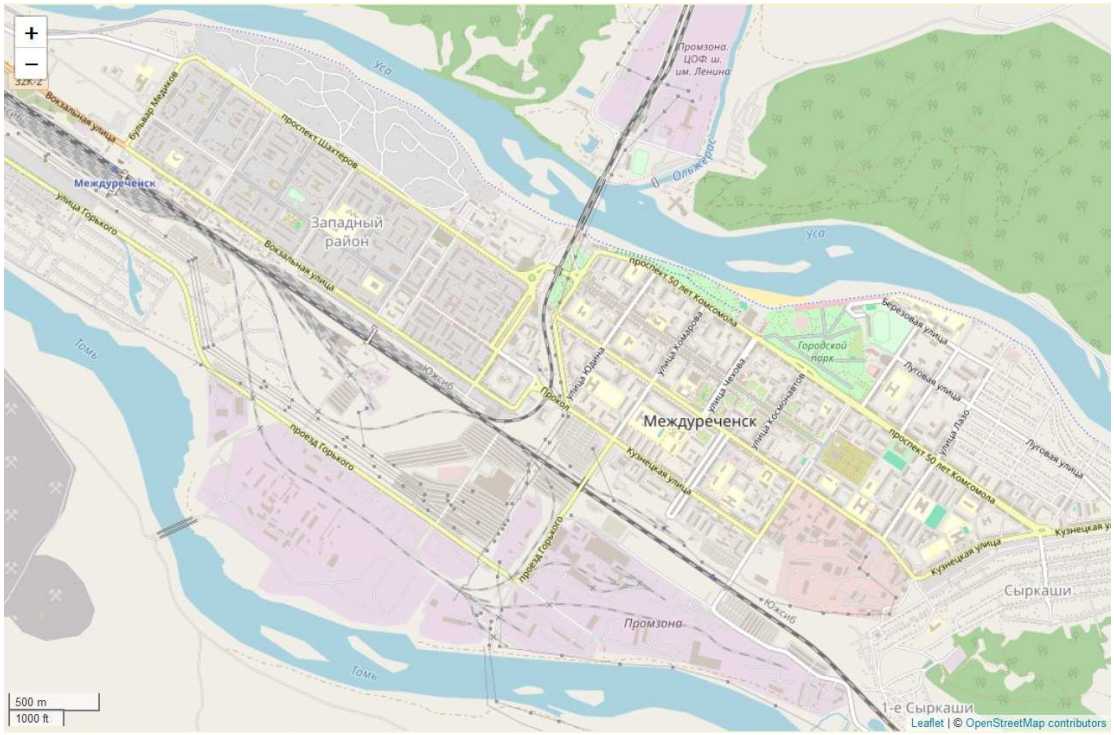


Figure 1: Map of Kemerovo Oblast, Russia, the region to which Mezhdurechensk officially belongs. Source: Wikimedia Commons (2021). Wikipedia contributors, Stasyan117. URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=103406235, CC BY-SA 4.0. Retrieved May 5, 2025.



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[1] VKontakte is a social media platform. Source content may be subject to change or removal.

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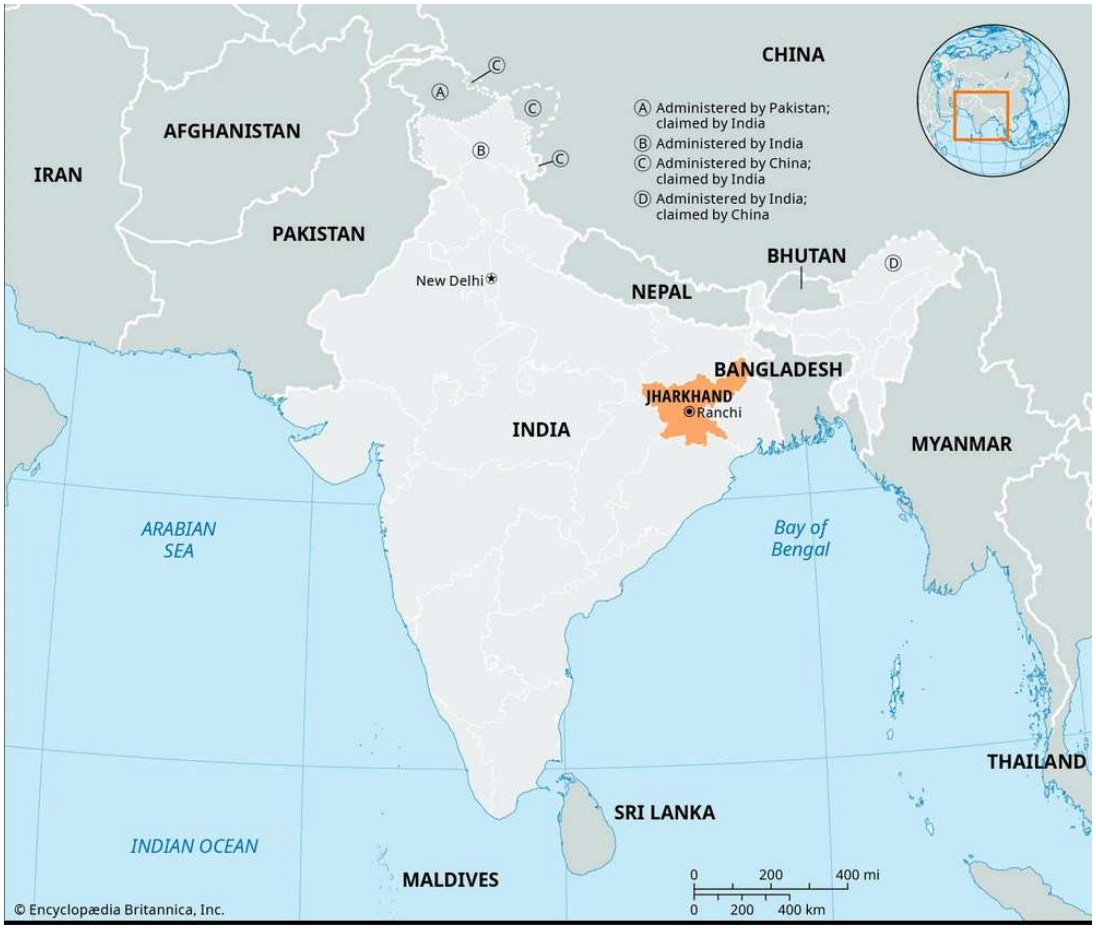

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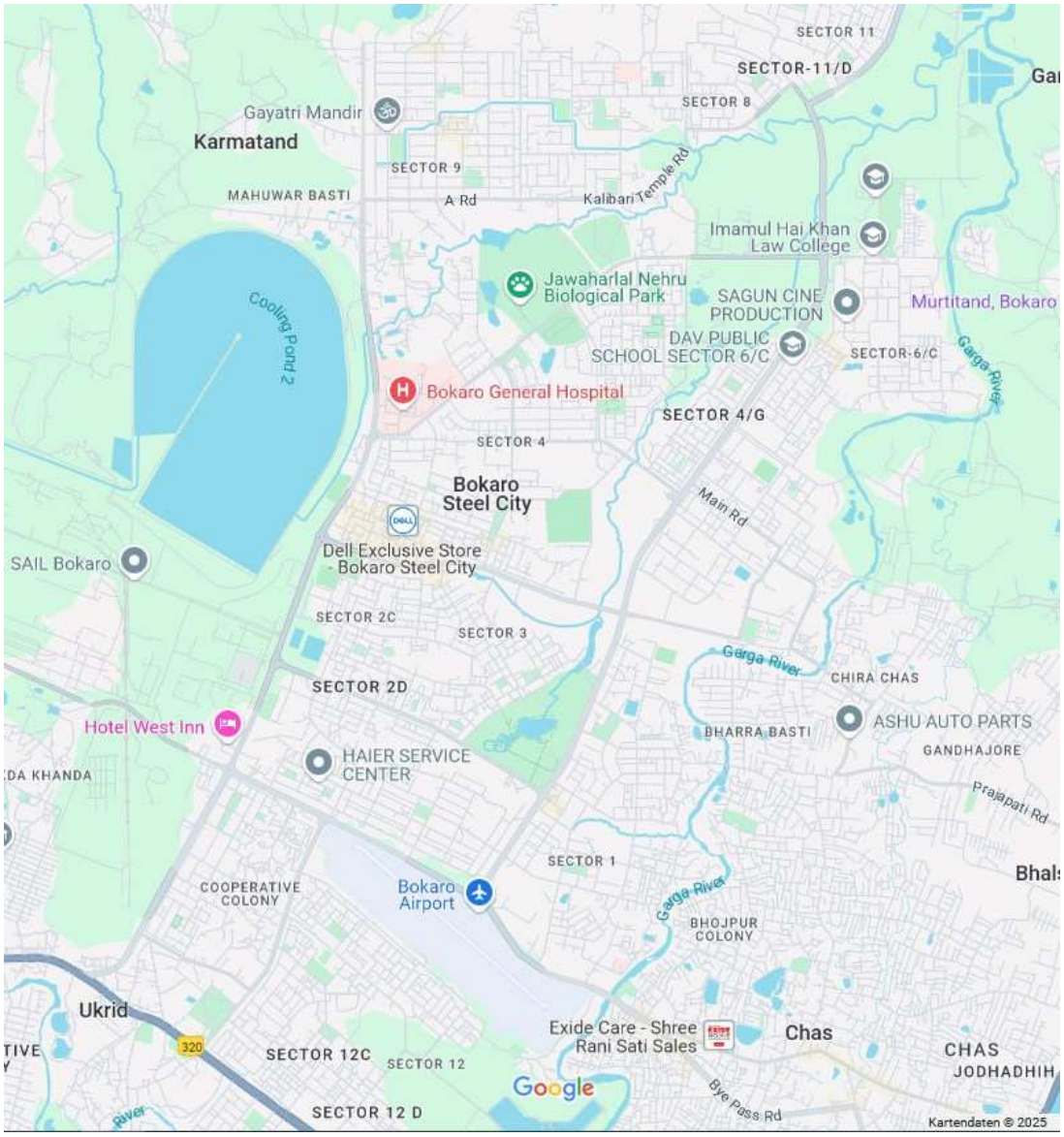

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1 Introduction

1.1. Why this research?

The motivation for this dissertation stems from a deeply personal journey into the world of planned industrial towns. I grew up in Mezhdurechensk, a mining town in south-western Siberia designed and built by the Soviet Union in the 1950s. For much of my life, I regarded this place as unremarkable—simply a functional, industrial settlement lacking the celebrated history or beauty of European cities such as Saint Petersburg or Paris, which I would later visit. It was only after spending over a decade living in major urban centres like Saint Petersburg and later in Budapest—cities renowned for their architectural grandeur—that I began to reconsider what constitutes urban beauty and meaningful urban design. There, I became acutely aware of how market-driven urbanization and historical development shape urban environments., often resulting in forms of spatial segregation and exclusion that are taken as for granted as 'natural'. Returning to Mezhdurechensk as a researcher many years since I lived there, I found myself recognizing for the first time the distinctive intentionality and design of such planned towns.

This sense of rediscovery became a catalyst for my research agenda. Traveling internationally and reading in different languages further broadened my perspective, revealing similar settlement elsewhere —Dunaújváros and Salgótarján in Hungary, Eisenhüttenstadt in Germany, and Bokaro in India. It became clear, that planned cities are not a uniquely Soviet phenomenon, but part of a global pattern. As with Mezhdurechensk, cities like Bokaro in India revealed the enduring legacies of twentieth-century industrial urbanism across radically different contexts, from socialist and post-socialist states to postcolonial societies. Their relative invisibility in both scholarship and public discourse, despite their ongoing vibrancy and scale, underscored the need to examine their global spread and enduring legacies more rigorously and comparatively. This dissertation is therefore dedicated to exploring the significance of these planned industrial towns: how they have shaped urban experience and working-class life, and how their pasts continue to inform the present.

1.2. Planned industrial towns: a conceptual clarification

In recent years, urban scholars have increasingly examined the distinctive and arguably most prevalent form of twentieth-century urban development known as the new town. Hundreds —if not thousands —of such settlements have been built across continents (see e.g. Wakeman, 2016; Ludwig, 2021; Crimson Historians and Urbanists, forthcoming, b). According to some scholars, these once-new cities are now aging rapidly in contemporary, neoliberal market-driven urban context (Lebow, 2016; Wiesener, 2022), underscoring the need to understand —or revisit —their legacy and ongoing relevance. While this dissertation is concerned with the impact and legacy of these global settlements —frequently overlooked in current discourse, we must first deal with the terminological complexities that surround them.

The International New Town Institute in Rotterdam describes new towns primarily as urban settlements (1) constructed on greenfield sites, without pre-existing urban fabric, and (2) shaped by deliberate socio-political agenda (Wiesener, 2022). While as an analytical term new towns are mostly used to describe settlements built throughout the twentieth century, the phenomenon of building *new* cities dates back further: new towns have existed since antiquity, built to mark specific moments in history (Wakeman, 2016:1). Historians like Andreas Ludwig note that the process continues today, particularly in the form of modern satellite towns in East Asia and in the Middle East (Ludwig, 2021: 13). Thus, while the specificity of 'twentieth century' remains analytically useful, it is not an absolute distinction. For the purposes of this dissertation, the focus is specifically on new towns of the hey days of the twentieth century.

Within this broad category, size and function of new towns have often been overlooked. Scholarship and public imagination typically focus on large, iconic, and spectacular examples such as Brasília or Chandigarh—cities whose bold urban design and striking architectural forms provide dramatic, visually impressive manifestations of modern planning ideals. These high-profile cases have become emblematic for modernist urbanism in both scholarly and popular representations—symbolizing the monumental expressions and, at times, brutality of state power. As a result, the academic gaze often lingers on capital cities and grand architectural gestures, overshadowing the far broader phenomenon of new town development.

Yet, small to medium-sized towns constituted a significant, yet underrepresented, part of global urbanization (Bell and Jayne, 2009; Ocejo et al., 2020). The majority of new towns built worldwide were not monumental capitals built by famous —French or American —architects but small to medium-sized. Examples span continents—from Almere in the Netherlands, Vällingby in Sweden, Milton Keynes in the UK, to Nowa Huta in Poland, Eisenhüttenstadt in Germany, Komsomolsk-na-Amure in Russia, 23 de Enero in Venezuela, Tema in Ghana, Panzhihua in China, and Bokaro Steel City in India. These cities receive comparatively little scholarly attention, in part because their iconography—even when noticed—is less architectural and more industrial. When they are featured, they are frequently depicted through images of factories and large-scale industrial enterprises rather than celebrated as architectural landmarks.

This is hardly coincidental: the global new town movements of the twentieth century were tightly linked with processes of industrialization, which reflects a period when technological and scientific advance—and thus urban and national development—were equated with industrialization (Parry, 2020: 7). The fact that the construction of new towns was closely intertwined with the establishment of factories, mines, and other industrial enterprises has led to them being predominantly associated with industry and production, often overshadowing the social transformations and aspirations that many new towns were designed to achieve. In academic debates, these new towns are often referred to as industrial cities, functioning largely as appendixes for industrial enterprises (e.g. Laki, 2014; Ringel, 2020; Strange, 2019: 330), neglecting their modernist architectural features and the significant social redistribution efforts that underpinned their planning. The cities indeed supplied the labour force needed for significant industrial investments. Yet the notion of ‘industrial cities’ —whether it is ‘company towns’ in the Americas, ‘monotowns’ in state socialist countries, ‘steel cities’ in India, and generally ‘industrial’ or ‘factory cities’ elsewhere —draws attention away from the social logic of these planned urban developments (for the critique: Cera and Sechi, 2020; Strümpell, 2023: 325).

The scholarly literature also employs a range of other terms to describe these kinds of settlements such as ‘new communities’, ‘garden cities’, ‘satellite towns’, ‘worker cities’, ‘socialist cities’ or ‘modernist cities’, depending on their regional, functional, or ideological contexts. This diverse terminology reflects both the complexity of the

phenomenon and the different scholarly traditions and regional experiences that have informed its study.

To understand these settlements more comprehensively, this dissertation argues for the necessity to consider the term ‘planned town’. While ‘new’ town emphasizes the construction on a greenfield side and break with historical continuity, and ‘industrial’ town the city’s intertwined relations with industrialization, ‘planned’ town highlights the intentionality behind such cities’ creation. Planned towns—particularly those built in the twentieth century—were usually conceived according to a comprehensive master plan, by a vision and effort of urban professionals, often with strong involvement from government or state agencies. The ‘planned’ aspect stresses that these urban places were the products of deliberate vision, which included not only spatial and functional layouts but also ambitions of social transformation. However, in both public and academic discourse, ‘planned towns’ have sometimes carried negative connotations, viewed as instruments of state control and top-down social engineering. Nonetheless, their planned nature remains a key analytical feature: it distinguishes these settlements as tools of intentional and desired social change.

In light of these considerations and for the analysis of the new towns which were built in the twentieth century to activate a social change, this dissertation suggests to employ the term ‘planned industrial city’, which refers specifically to small and medium-sized urban settlements that were (1) intentionally master-planned, and (2) fundamentally linked to industrialization. This focus deliberately excludes administrative or purely governmental cities, as well as large iconic capitals that dominate much of the modernist urban planning literature. Moreover, ‘planned industrial city’ foregrounds both the industrial *raison d’être*—reflecting the emic understanding of these cities among residents. As I will demonstrate, it is precisely through this lens that we can appreciate how the historical materiality of these cities continues to inform contemporary urban landscapes and meanings.

1.3. Situating the research

Given the terminological complexity outlined above, this dissertation revisits the concepts of new towns and industrial towns, with the aim of scrutinizing their role and functionality in urban planning across a range of geopolitical settings —moving deliberately beyond the mainstream historiography of modernist architecture. To

achieve this, I focus on the concept of the planned industrial city, exploring its distinct social logic and emphasizing its foundations in class-sensitive urban planning, centred on the urban working class. Consequently, a primary objective of this dissertation is to conceptualize planned industrial towns of the twentieth century —one of the most spread modernist forms —as fundamentally working-class settlements.

By shifting the focus away from industrial-ness, I argue —as the first key focus of my dissertation—that these cities served as the material grounds for particular social agendas. These agendas, as products of modernism, were intended, in Marxist terms, to enact structural change at the level of the material base (e.g., housing, infrastructure, and spatial organization) rather than merely at the ideological level of the superstructure (such as culture, aesthetics, or governance) (Groys, 2019). In this sense, these cities were not just symbolic representations of progress, but also active instruments for reshaping social relations through the very fabric of the built environment. This approach brings to light processes that have so far been relatively neglected in academic debates, especially regarding the material 'becoming' or 'endurance' of modernist built environments. The dialogue surrounding these cities often centres on the post-industrial shift, driven by their industrial roles (e.g. Ringel, 2014; 2021). Images of aging new towns have frequently been reduced to depictions of ruins or inadequate material structures (Schwenkel, 2012; Graupner, 2019; for critique see: Kisiel, 2021; Chan, 2009; Martin, 2014). Meanwhile, the focus of social logic behind the planned cities remains under-explored.

Furthermore, the processes of ongoing re-production of their social space — encompassing social arrangement, land, property or state formations within these built environments –form the second major focus of this dissertation. By investigating how the social rationale embedded in these lesser-known, smaller-sized modernist cities actively contribute to today's social landscape, this dissertation highlights the persistent influence of modernist built environments on contemporary urban landscape—an influence that often remains invisible.

Some scholars across disciplines have highlighted the limitations of viewing the modern built environment solely as outcomes of political and economic goals. Instead, they argued for recognizing modern architecture and urban planning as active tools of social modernization (Beech, 2014: 195; Molnár, 2013: 10–11, 16). This aligns with

my argument for shifting scholarly attention: not only away from symbolism of administrative capitals, but also beyond the narrow reading of industrial production in planned industrial cities. Building on these insights, the three papers comprising this thesis seek to conceptualise the broader social contribution of planned towns to today's urban fabric. Specifically, they posit that planned industrial towns were conceived and perceived with certain social agendas, which continue to shape contemporary working-class urban life, precisely through the enduring materiality of their built environments.

This focus is guided by two primary research questions:

1. **How do planned industrial towns, as materially and socially produced urban forms, constitute a globally circulating phenomenon beyond the West?**
2. **What is the legacy and contemporary transformation of this phenomenon in the context of the evolving neoliberal order of recent decades?**

These two questions entail the following sub-questions:

SQ 1: What are the core historical and socio-material characteristics that define planned industrial towns as a global phenomenon across diverse geopolitical and geographical contexts?

SQ 2: How have planned industrial towns been historically developed, and adapted to different contexts, and what local and global forces have shaped their trajectories?

SQ 3: In what ways does the socially produced urban form of the global planned industrial towns impact the (re-)production of social space, especially for the working-class communities?

SQ4: How do global planned industrial towns respond to and participate in the reconfiguration of social and physical urban space amid major neoliberal socio-political transformations?

To unpack the sociality of these settlements and to explore the daily enactment of these towns on the ground, this dissertation employs Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space (Lefebvre, [1974] 1991). By mobilising Lefebvre's concept of 'social space', the research seeks to understand the urban space of these cities as intertwined with social relations. Lefebvre's dialectical approach underscores how

social relationships, property regimes, and land control are interwoven into the formation and transformation of social spaces (Ibid.: 81–85). Moreover, Lefebvre insists that no social space disappears entirely; instead, it evolves, retaining persistent forms and functions even as new social forces come into play (Ibid.: 164–5, 229, 403, 412). These insights will guide my analysis to develop a nuanced, historically contingent understanding of these urban environments, paying attention to the subtle conflicts and contradictions that emerge over time.

Taking seriously the concept of the production of space— not solely focusing on a 'lived' dimension but including both its conceived and perceived dimensions, as elaborated in theoretical chapter 3—this dissertation adopts a historical perspective, emphasizing the ways in which urban form and social relations are deeply intertwined over time (King, 1980; Harvey, 1990; Lawrence and Low, 1990; Lefebvre, [1974] 1991). The research also aims to move beyond Cold War divisions and politically deterministic framings of these settlements to develop a more nuanced and social understanding of planned industrial towns. This requires to move beyond the national narratives and responds to the call for global ethnography (Burawoy et al., 2020), allowing for an empirically grounded investigation of planned industrial settlements designed and built in the Soviet Union and early post-independence India.

The papers of the dissertation draw on empirical data such as individual interviews, document analyses, participatory observation and experiencing everyday life. These data serve to illustrate and accompany the development of a theoretical framework on the production of social space in planned industrial towns. By addressing the aforementioned research questions, this dissertation contributes to the interdisciplinary field of urban studies and urban history, particularly by advancing an understanding of global planned industrial towns as a phenomenon of modernist urbanism that is not confined to specific regions and that. both historically and today, plays an active role in ongoing social struggles.

1.4. Findings and contribution

By closely analysing the historical processes and social rationales underpinning the deliberate, master-planned construction of industrial towns, focusing especially on Mezhdurechensk in Russia and Bokaro in India, this dissertation demonstrates that these cities were not simply functional sites of industrial production. Their urban

design and built environments were shaped by a conscious interplay between state objectives, economic imperatives, and social agendas—most notably the goal of fostering working-class communities and supporting the social reproduction of workers' families. Moreover, by situating these towns within a global comparative perspective, the research uncovers unexpected commonalities in their spatial organization, social logic, and material legacy, across diverse geographical, geopolitical and cultural contexts.

This dissertation posits that planned industrial towns, often analysed within the confines of area studies, represent a *global* phenomenon, with hundreds—if not thousands—of such cities constructed during the twentieth century. Despite their ubiquity, these cities remain largely underexplored and undertheorized, often confined within area studies or overshadowed by more monumental or internationally recognized urban projects. While mainstream scholarship often centres the work of prominent architects and designers—frequently from Western contexts—this study shifts attention toward the ordinary, non-monumental, yet socially significant examples of modernist urban development, as seen in India and the Soviet Union. By foregrounding the work of local urban professionals and examining the social ambitions of planned industrial towns, the dissertation recovers a more inclusive global history of modernist urbanism, centred on class and everyday urban experience rather than architectural celebrity or spectacle.

This research thus enriches the field of critical urban studies by widening the analytical lens to encompass the lived realities of ordinary cities and by highlighting the collective social functionality of built environments that have previously been marginalized or ignored. In doing so, the project advocates for writing a more inclusive and socially attentive history of urban planning—one that recognizes the enduring impact of both historical logics and ordinary urban places on global urban futures.

The second major contribution involved reframing how we think about urban transformation and future-making. Rather than treating urban futures as something to be imagined, forecasted, or built entirely anew, this dissertation argues that contemporary and future urban developments are necessarily shaped by persistent historical legacies. The study challenges conventional notions of urban novelty and urges awareness of the political, economic, and social logics that have historically

informed the creation—and ongoing transformation—of specific urban forms. Reconceptualizing planned industrial towns as dynamic contributors to the urban working class, the dissertation demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of their spatial and social architectures, even in the face of intensified marketization and commercialization. In sum, this research advocates for recognizing not only the innovations of the past, but also the enduring power of historical built environments in shaping urban futures.

2 State of the art

This dissertation is grounded on two primary conceptual pillars. The first concerns the concept of the 'planned industrial town' and the often-confusing terminology surrounding this urban form. Because such towns have been constructed across diverse national and regional contexts —each possessing distinct political, economic, and social frameworks— a range of terms has emerged, adding to the definitional ambiguity. To clarify this, I draw on area-specific scholarly works that investigate the historical development and social features of planned towns. Exploring this nationally and regionally fragmented research, I will highlight similar social patterns across different contexts and the fundamentally global character of the planned industrial town as a form —a phenomenon that has yet to be fully understood in a comparative perspective. The second conceptual pillar focuses on the 'endurance'—encompassing transformation and evolution—of urban planning and the built environment of these towns today, with particular emphasis on the impact of material structures on contemporary urban landscapes. The literature I engage with encompasses a range of disciplines, including urban studies, anthropology, sociology, urban geography, and urban history.

2.1. Unpacking the concept of a global planned industrial city

2.1.1. The government's role in modernist urbanism and the planned industrial city

Across diverse political and geographical contexts, twentieth-century governments have shouldered the core responsibility for initiating, directing, and managing the complex processes of intensive urbanization of the twentieth century. As Dennis P. Doordan observes when discussing post-WWII architectural forms, the new urban landscapes built in this period were 'symbols of a new peaceful world order rising phoenix-like from the ashes of World War II' (Doordan, 2014: 1). This was accomplished through large-scale interventions—ranging from master planning and zoning, to the direct or indirect control of land, resources, and critical social infrastructures.

While the dominant role of the state in the urban projects of socialist countries might seem self-evident, it has often been taken for granted and thus insufficiently examined in detail. Only recently have scholars begun to investigate more closely the specific mechanisms of state intervention and the rationales behind them (Zarecor, 2011; Collier, 2011; Molnár, 2013). In the socialist context—where state ownership prevailed and government agencies assumed full responsibility for citizens' lives—the state not only devised urban plans but also directly implemented them (Zarecor, 2011). This centralized control manifested in public financing, management of housing complexes, and a pronounced emphasis on standardization and prefabrication (Zarecor, 2011; Monclús & Díez Medina, 2016; Metspalu & Hess, 2018). Furthermore, the state provided a range of comprehensive facilities, such as schools, markets, and cultural centres, as part of a broader social engineering agenda exemplified by the Soviet *microrajon* ('microdistrict') concept (Bernhardt, 2005; Bocharnikova, 2014).

Because the state's role was vital in socialist countries, and the construction of planned cities was a very widespread practice too, academic and public discourse has often equated planned cities exclusively with state socialism (e.g. Pinchuk, 2019). However, substantial state intervention was also central to urban development in many different postwar states. Recent scholarship, such as *Architecture and the Welfare State* (Swenarton et al., 2015), highlights the extensive and underexplored connections between welfare state policies and urban form in Western Europe, revealing that large-scale urban projects pursued economic redistribution and social welfare, necessitating robust government involvement (Ibid.: 1, 7). As early as the 1930s and 1940s, various western European governments began to take responsibility not only for housing but also for leisure and broader social modernization (Heraud, 1968; Høghøj, 2020).

Numerous studies also reveal that the state not only envisioned but also implemented numerous urban projects, with public companies serving as key agents in the contexts of Western Europe and Asia (J. P. Parry & Strümpell, 2008; Swenarton et al., 2015; Ortolano, 2019; Strange, 2019). Similarly, in countries of Latin America states played a direct role in providing worker housing as an integral part of industrial urbanization (Koury, 2020; Herod, 2011). As urbanization and industrialization were often intertwined, planned cities were established as part of ambitious agendas of rapid

industrialization—a zeitgeist of the century (Parry, 2020: 7). In this context, state-owned industrial companies often served not merely as economic enterprises but as direct agents of states, tasked with translating the state's broader social and urban visions into reality. These public companies were responsible for both the construction of industrial infrastructure and the development of urban settlements, thereby serving as instrumental agents in implementing the social and spatial objectives set forth by the state.

Scholarship on state intervention in urbanism often remains limited by methodological nationalism, at risk of producing an oversimplified view of these efforts as isolated, country-specific projects (see for the critique: Swenarton et al., 2015: 1). Moreover, the complexity of governments' involvement is sometimes overlooked, as detailed state action is frequently dismissed as mere 'top-down' control—a perspective found in the influential works of Jane Jacobs (1961) and James Scott (1998), as well as in later critiques. For instance, in post-socialist contexts and in studies of Indian planned urbanization this approach is often uncritically adopted (e.g. Kalia, 2006; Laszczkowski, 2016; for a nuanced critique of this approach see: Murawski, 2018).

In sum, numerous studies have shown that state-led urban transformation was not confined to socialist regimes; across diverse political contexts, the deliberate creation of new towns— often with an emphasis on social integration and transformation—reflected deep state involvement and the pursuit of broader policy goals. In the post-WWII era and during the dissolution of colonial empires, many governments actively sought to use urban planning as a tool for social transformations. Thus, the pivotal role of the state in twentieth-century planned urbanization was both far-reaching and instrumental in shaping modern urban societies.

2.1.2. The social functionality of global planned industrial towns

As mentioned earlier, the conventical scholarly narrative of internationally recognized modernist urbanism has often centred on Western architectural icons—such as Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut, Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater House, or the Guggenheim Museum. Even at the city scale, planned capitals like Chandigarh in India and Brasília in Brazil —and the celebrated architects behind them—are seen as defining examples of singular designers. The emphasis on individual architects as well as brutalism of modernist architecture sometimes overshadow the breadth and

diversity of the postwar movement, particularly its realization in small- and medium-sized cities and its foundational investment in social infrastructures.

Recently, scholarship has begun to shift away from focusing on modernist works solely as political symbols or aesthetic achievements, shifting attention towards the social fabric and impact of the architecture. The studies now encompass housing estates, vital infrastructures such as electricity and sewage systems, and residential amenities—elements which together formed a significant and influential segment of 20th-century modernist urban development (e.g. Swenarton et al., 2015; Crawford, 2022). Scholars argue that post-war modernist architecture was marked by evolution and dynamism; in response to dramatic socio-political events, architects and theorists sought not to abandon, but to renew the legacy of modernism, following decades of experimentations with forms, content and critical discourse (Legault & Goldhagen, 2000; Kulić et al., 2014). This emerging research highlights the sociocultural contributions of less celebrated works and seeks to acknowledge their foundational role in shaping everyday life (Kiaček, 2024; Ikaputra & Widyastuti, 2025).

Foundational principles —including community engagement, high-quality housing, accessible amenities, and integrated transport networks— substantially shaped postwar modernist urbanism. Models like Ebenezer Howard's 'garden city', Perry's 'neighbourhood unit', and the Soviet 'microdistrict' (*microrajon*) arguably informed diverse regional adaptations (Wakeman, 2016; Crimson Historians and Urbanists, forthcoming, a). Scholars agree that the central aim of planned towns was to cultivate socially balanced and equitable communities — particularly for industrial workers who often arrived from surrounding rural areas —by providing superior housing with modern conveniences —such as sewage, ventilation, electricity, water —and robust public infrastructure (Heraud, 1968; Ortolano, 2019: 61–77; Crawford, 2022; Strümpell, 2023: 220). This infrastructural ambition went beyond mere housing; it extended to the provision of grand and abundant public spaces, including attractive parks, impressive train stations and cultural halls, designed to be both welcoming and generous (Hester & Srnicek, 2023; Jones, 2025). As Owen Hatherley observed in *Militant Modernism*, such environments aimed to be 'dense, urban, and while unashamedly housing the poor as part of the new Welfare State, glamorous' (2008:

35) , underscoring the view that material quality was as important as stylistic innovation.

Globally, the intention to create balanced, self-contained communities reflected a broader aspiration for a more just societies, following the Second World War and the fall of colonial empires. It was also a response to Cold War competition, with the Soviet Union touting improved working and living conditions for all (Varga-Harris, 2015). Notably, modern planned towns sought not only to improve living conditions for industrial workers, but to implement comprehensive urban infrastructure on a city-wide scale—including sewage systems, water supply, drainage, and sanitation facilities— to address urgent public health concerns that had long been neglected in rapidly growing industrial cities. This approach aimed to create healthier and more orderly environments, addressing the enduring problems of industrial workers living in overcrowded, substandard urban environment —a problem that had existed since the Industrial Revolution but had rarely been effectively tackled (Wakeman, 2016: 21).

Building these modern communities entailed directly confronting social inequalities and striving to overcome traditional divisions of religion, caste, or ethnicity (Parry, 2020:7–9). Planners and governmental bodies sought to ensure that workers—regardless of origin—could enjoy decent living conditions and aimed to create cities where the working class could thrive, instead of being marginalized on city outskirts. Though sometimes critiqued as utopian, these efforts realized in the urban form of a twentieth-century planned industrial city *intentionally* sought to dramatically enhance quality of life, embodying what Rosemary Wakeman (2016: 298) calls 'magical thinking'—a belief in the transformative power of urban design.

Such ideals manifested differently depending on context. In the UK, the largest new town program in Western Europe was implemented in the quarter century following the Second World War, beginning with the New Towns Act of 1946. This deliberate state-led initiative aimed to mix social classes by avoiding the spatial marginalization of the working class and by promoting diverse housing types within the new towns and providing a lot of communal facilities—schools, leisure, and recreation (Heraud, 1968: 33–35, 55). Unlike private American suburban developments, British new towns were public sector enterprises, and, in contrast to traditional council housing, they promised self-sufficient communities (Ortolano, 2019). The UK program ultimately

produced more new towns than any European country outside the Soviet Union (*ibid.*). The welfare state thereby created many kinds of spaces, including hospitals, schools, council estates, and shopping districts as integral parts of these new communities.

Across Western Europe—from the Netherlands to Denmark—welfare states invested in new towns to mitigate class segregation and foster balanced communities, blending modernist architectural principles with social democratic values (Creagh, 2011; Drummond & Young, 2020: 4; Swenarton et al., 2015: 1–7). In the Soviet Union — another global leader in new town construction (Wakeman, 2016: 22) —planned towns pursued an egalitarian agenda, using urban planning as a tool to create classless societies, minimize social differentiation, and guarantee equal housing for all societies (Cera & Sechi, 2020; Crawford, 2022; Sammartino, 2018). The normative imperative was that all citizens must share comparable living conditions—for society to be truly healthy — which shaped a vision where social differentiation was minimized, and every family was entitled to similar housing. In Indonesia and planned communities across Asia and Africa, similar strategies emerged—but with adaptations to local priorities and flexibility in implementing social aims (Ikaputra & Widyastuti, 2025). In post-independence India—the site of the world's second largest new town programme (Glover, 2012: 108)—planned cities were used to deliberately disrupt entrenched social hierarchies. By attracting migrants from diverse regions and backgrounds, new towns were envisioned as cosmopolitan spaces that would dilute the dominance of any single group and diminish the hold of traditional social identities (J. Parry, 2008a; Strümpell, 2013).

In sum, these lesser-known examples of modernist planning, including a wide spectrum of planned towns, are becoming increasingly recognized as the products of modernist movement, despite being overlooked by the convential narratives of modernist architecture as aesthetically brutal or representing political motives. A growing research regards planned towns, designed based on modernist principles, as vital instruments of social transformation by governments across contexts. Industrial workers and their families were the primary beneficiaries of the 20th century new town movement, but planned cities' design and planning were rooted in a broader commitment to building more balanced and equitable societies (Drummond & Young, 2020). As a result, residents of planned cities usually enjoyed a comparatively high

standard of housing and access to infrastructure, often becoming some of the most advantaged members of their (working) class on a regional or even national scale. This dynamic not only helped attract established urban workers, but also provided pathways for newcomers seeking upward mobility, thereby reinforcing material comfort, social status, and ideals of collective dignity.

2.1.3. Who 'invented' the planned towns? Evolving debates

Debates about the origins of planned towns are deeply intertwined with broader historical and geopolitical contexts, often reflecting Cold War regional divides (Moravanszky, 2017: 10; Murawski, 2019). While national or regional narratives prevail, another tendency is to ascribe the phenomena's origins exclusively to Western invention and subsequently portray its development elsewhere as mere export or imitation —a perspective that has also been a subject to critique (Schwenkel, 2020: 6). As we will see, questions about the beginnings of planned towns are inextricably linked to debates over the origins of the modernist movement.

From a UK perspective, the genesis of planned towns is frequently attributed to Ebenezer Howard's garden city model, envisioned in the late nineteenth century to address urban challenges and create self-sufficient communities for the working class. As such, Rosemary Wakeman argues that this model spread globally, informing new towns not only in the UK but also as far afield as the Soviet Union (Wakeman, 2016: 12–13, 22, 102–150). Similarly, even works that critically acknowledges the imperial and colonial contexts of Western planning tend to foreground the 'white imprint', focusing extensively on Western architects' roles in modernist historiography, including the manifestations in the Global South (Crimson Historians and Urbanists, forthcoming, a; Rabinow, 1995; Swenarton et al., 2015: 10). Sidelining the contributions of local planners and professionals, this body of work risks portraying modernist urbanism in non-Western contexts as imported.

Another body of scholarship challenges the notion of modernist planning as an exclusively Western export. So, there is now increasing recognition, especially in comparative urban studies, that socialist urban planning followed its own distinct trajectory, what is famously labelled as socialist modernism. This perspective of the comparative approach within the transnational history of modern urbanism was first proposed by Kotkin (1995), and has since been actively pursued and developed by

numerous researchers (Bocharnikova and Harris, 2018; Mark et al., 2020; Schwenkel, 2020; Stanek, 2020; Erofeev and Stanek, 2021; Ginelli, 2022).

Additionally, there is a decolonial scholarship that challenges the centering of not only Western but also of Soviet models as the primary influences for planned towns globally. Scholars, exploring twentieth centuries modernization in Central and Eastern Europe such as Zarecor (2011), Molnár (2013) and Metspalu and Hess (2018) have demonstrated that planners in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Estonia actively shaped the urban landscapes of these states, sometimes in tension with or adaptation to imposed models. These scholars demonstrate that, contrary to common belief, local architects and urban professionals played a significant role in shaping these cities, balancing governmental regulations with creativity and local expertise. These scholars underscore the importance of recognizing local decisions and creativity in urban planning, rather than viewing external influences as the sole driving force.

This perspective is increasingly evident in postcolonial contexts as scholars advocate for moving away from non-Western-centric historiography, which constructs Western Europe as the archetype of modernity and, consequently, views modern expressions elsewhere as mere mimicry or secondary imitations of an 'original modernity' (Hosagrahar, 2005; Mitter, 2008; Mamedov, 2025). Art historians and sociologists argue for the acknowledgment of multiple modernisms, challenging the myth of a singular, Western-centric modernist movement as both superficial and simplistic. Thus, to recognize modernism as a movement realized in diverse contexts —including but not limited the well-studied Western examples — is an approach advanced by scholars researching, for example, Indian modernism (Gast, 2007; Pathak, 2006, 2024). Similar contextualizations can be seen in East Asia, as exemplified by projects like the 2022 MoMA exhibition 'The Project of Independence', which reframed post-independence urban development in South Asia as a tool for cultural emancipation—not just from colonial power but also from Western monopolies over modernist narratives (Stierli et al., 2022).

Following these insights, this dissertation understands the origins and trajectories of planned towns not as linear diffusions from West to East or North to South, not simply from core capitalist countries to the peripheries. The three papers of the thesis position planned cities as products —and co-producers — of inter-national modernism, as an

outcome of diverse and intersecting influences, including local priorities, international models, and shifting socio-political conditions. Such urban forms as Mezhdurechensk (Russia), Nowa Huta (Poland), Almere (the Netherlands), Eisenhüttenstadt (Germany), Bokaro (India) and many others exemplify a combination of shared modernist aspirations and context-specific realities.

The transnational character of planned industrial towns makes it possible to decouple this urban form from any single political regime —as was also proposed earlier (Zarecor, 2018) (2007), underscoring the caution against reducing modernist planning to the political instrumentality of particular governments (Doordan 2014: 3–4). Instead, the urban form of the planned industrial city reflected international and multi-disciplinary debates about technology, society, and the reconstruction of everyday life—resulting in a plurality of outcomes shaped by both idealism and pragmatism. Ultimately, the widespread adoption and adaptation of this urban model by diverse governments worldwide illustrates that its global appeal was rooted in its perceived capacity to support ambitious projects of social transformation, tailored to fit local contexts and national narratives, at a moment when the international agenda was focused on building a new world from the ashes of the old, unequal one.

2.2. The ‘endurance’ of modernist urban forms

The previous sub-chapter examined the scholarly discussion over historical background underpinning the creation of planned industrial towns and their intended social functionality. This sub-chapter investigates the debate surrounding the role of these historical built environments in today’s urban landscapes, particularly in light of the dramatically transformed context—marked by shifting political climates, evolving economic models, and a changing role of the state in driving social change.

2.2.1. Why revisit modernist urban ideals today

Planned industrial towns, as products of modernity, were largely designed —as discussed in the previous sub-chapter —to redefine social relationships, including relations between the state and its citizens. Grasping the revolutionary —or at least transformative —zeal behind these projects, and their vision for new formats of urban living is not straightforward for a contemporary observer. Architectural historian Vladimir Kulić asserts that ‘to study modern architecture in the early twenty-first century is to confront a subject whose coherence is continually contested’ (Kulić et al.,

2014: x). In line with this, scholars like Doordan (2014), Kordas (2018), Murawski (2019) call for disentangling modernist projects from present-day biases and norms, suggesting to examine the modernist works, informed of their original social objectives. Revisiting these urban experiments today requires a critical, nuanced, and contextually informed perspective—— one that acknowledges their contentious legacies amid shifting socio-political and environmental realities. Two pressing tensions frame this concern.

Firstly, in an era marked by market-driven rationality intertwined with cultural nationalism, state-led and community-oriented, equalizing urban planning may appear as incompatible with contemporary priorities. For example, as sociologist Avijit Pathak (2019) observes, Nehruvian modernity's emphasis on scientific development and collective progress contrasts sharply to today'sneoliberal corporate culture, in which technology is commodified, science is divested of its sense of wonder, and political discourse prioritizes identity conservatism over meaningful debate on objectives. This paradigmatic shift has fundamentally reshaped how we interpret the social ambitions and transformative capacity of modernist architecture. As a result, planned towns are famously portrayed as examples of top-down urban planning, critiqued for their rigidity and their failure to account for the complex dynamics of everyday urban life (Jacobs, 1961; Tafuri, [1976] 1996; Scott, 1998). Closely linked are narratives that highlight their social inflexibility and inadequacy (Hommels, 2008; Sennett, 2010). The turn toward participatory urbanism further reinforces this perspective, often framing it as an obvious corrective to the perceived shortcomings of earlier top-down modernist approaches.

Secondly, engaging critically with modernist urban environments today also requires moving beyond reductive Cold War geopolitical frameworks. Across the literature on planned towns, varying terminologies for settlements on different continents and a lack of attention to parallel developments across the Iron Curtain continue to shape and limit scholarly understandings of urban life in these contexts. Architectural historian Ákos Moravánszky, in his discussion of twentieth-century European architecture' historiography, critiques the tendency to confine the concept of the welfare state to Western social-democratic projects and to contrast these with the so-called 'authoritarianism' of state socialism, arguing that such divisions obscure significant

parallel developments on both sides of the Iron Curtain (Moravánsky 2017:10). A similar dynamic is evident in studies of planned cities, where settlements are often presumed to be fundamentally different simply because they were built in different socio-political systems. Planned towns in welfare states, by default, tend to be considered fundamentally distinct from those in socialist contexts, or from company towns in the Americas. While important differences resulting from divergent political-economic and socio-cultural contexts must be acknowledged, such distinctions should not overshadow the relevant similarities and shared dynamics of this urban form. A comparative approach offers a productive way to explore both the convergences and divergences among planned towns across varied contexts.

Studies of the legacy of modern urbanism today are often constrained by persistent interpretive frameworks that obscure its social history and complexities. As a result, there is a prevailing tendency to examine post- socialist/ industrial/ secular cities primarily through the lens of rapture. Geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and urban scholars have extensively documented the spatial reorganizations of state-led cities in the wake of the global socio-political and economic restructuring that began in the end of 1980s (see for this scholarship's analysis: Grubbauer, 2012; Sechi & Golubchikov, 2025). Research on transformations and market-driven changes has become a cornerstone of urban studies concerning post- socialist/ industrial / secular cities, often at the expense of investigating the persistence and adaptation of their social functions.

What if the specificity of planned industrial towns, often discussed within various 'post' frameworks today, actually stems not from market-related transformations but from elements rooted in their socialist, secular, and industrial foundations, along with their underlying social rationality? What if perceived failures of modern projects are actually a testament to the success and endurance of these built environments? This dissertation is written from the perspective that, before assessing how these cities operate in the present, it is essential to understand the original intents and contexts in which they were constructed, as they may still retain this foundational social rationality. A focus on merely market-driven transformations offers misleading perspectives on the unique —historical and contemporary —character of these cities.

To better understand the enduring legacy of the planned cities' modernist built environment, it is therefore crucial to delve more deeply into factors that have contributed to persistent misinterpretations of planned industrial towns. In the following sub-chapter, I discuss in depth two main reasons surrounding misconceptions around planned industrial towns. The first reason refers to the prevailing myth of *post-industrial*, where public and academic discussions often overlook the social functionality or class structure of these cities, focusing instead on their industrial links. The second reason pertains to the myth of the *post-socialist* city, where 'socialist city' is often equated with those built in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe, associated with socialist governance and/ or a specific region. These two myths are inherently interconnected and not easily separable, but they are presented here separately for analytical clarity.

2.2.2. The myth of postindustrial cities

Unlike iconic modernist cities like Brasília and Chandigarh with their monumental designs, most planned cities of the twentieth century, as already noted earlier, were small to medium-sized industrial settlements rather than administrative hubs. They celebrated an era that valued industry, science, and technology. The terminology describing them varies by context—terms such as 'company towns' in the Americas, 'monotowns' in state socialist Europe, or 'steel cities' in India illustrate this diversity. In broader discussions, these cities are often simply viewed as industrial. This association with industrialism has somewhat backfired on these planned towns. Not only are they labelled as industrial, but they are also closely linked with the notion that they primarily serve industrial purposes, overshadowing the diversity of social relationships within these urban settlements. Sociologists and urban scholars often view these settlements as subordinate to their enterprises, a perspective critiqued by several scholars (Mazereeuw et al., 2017: 79; Strümpell, 2023: 327).

The term 'postindustrial' is widely used in urban studies, yet it remains highly ambiguous. First, 'postindustrial' often refers to cities that thrived during the industrial era but are now undergoing significant changes in their economic landscape (Hauser, 2020). Once symbols of wealth and prosperity, such cities witness declining economic importance and urban decay, sometimes called as ruination, grappling with significant

political and economic shifts (Kisiel, 2021). Narratives about abandoned industrial spaces—such as those in cities like Detroit or Chicago—or the phenomenon of shrinking cities, including cases from the Emptiness Project (Dzenovska et al., 2023), exemplify this understanding.

Second, the term can describe the transition from traditional industries towards new economic bases such as service sectors, new industries or diversified economies in former industrial towns. For example, the shift of a major port city of Bremerhaven into Germany's centre for the offshore wind energy industry, a so-called 'Climate City' (Ringel, 2018) or cases in which industrial cities turn towards sectors like drone manufacturing (Poenaru, 2022), electronics or IT (McNeill, 2022; Poenaru, 2022), illustrate this understanding. This conception closely aligns with classic formulations of the 'postindustrial' society (Touraine, 1971; Bell, 1973; Block, 1990; Hage & Powers, 1994), characterized by a shift from manufacturing to services, the emergence of a knowledge economy, and the rise of technology and higher education. It often implies the inevitable supersession of industrial society by urban centres focused on managerial, technological, and symbolic forms of labour (Vaccaro et al., 2016; Popovici, 2022).

A third common usage focuses on industrial heritage, where deindustrialized sites are revalorized for tourism and cultural preservation—such as the Zollverein Coal Mine Complex in Essen or ongoing activism for Eisenhüttenstadt's UNESCO heritage status. These projects may cement the social realities of these town as relics of the past (as discussed by Pasieka & Filipkowski, 2015). Moreover, this conceptualization of seeing 'industrial' is something which belongs to the past and is no longer of use risks reinforcing a Western-centric view on urban change —overlooking the fact that many heavy and labour-intensive industries have simply shifted to Eastern Europe, Central Asia, East Asia, and beyond.

Ultimately, the term 'postindustrial' risks obscuring everyday social realities and the persistence of lived industrial environments by relegating them to the past. Despite efforts in urban studies to address urban transformations and uneven development amid neoliberal transformations through socially sensitive lenses and critical Marxist geography (e.g. Brenner et al., 2003; Brenner, 2004), the notion of 'postindustrial' remains pervasive and rarely questioned. While an exclusive focus on the 'decay' of

industrial cities may appear politically neutral, ethnographic research consistently shows that residents of such areas are often stereotyped or stigmatized in both academic and public discourse—as ‘dangerous,’ ‘underdeveloped,’ or ‘backward’ (Morris, 2015: 30; Vanke and Polukhina, 2018; Wacquant, 2013: 18). Meanwhile, the current emphasis in urban planning on consumer services, economic growth, and the abundance of entertainment leisure activities pushes critical discussions about social inequality to the margins (Zukin, 2011). As Doreen Massey (2005: 4) argues, many places do not simply fade into obsolescence, but actively renegotiate their futures within changing economic and political frameworks.

In sum, the ‘postindustrial’ myth can obscure the nuanced realities of planned industrial towns—their enduring legacies as well as their reinvention. It is crucial to recognize their ongoing potential for transformation and their ability to integrate into global urban futures, rather than dismissing them as obsolete. This dissertation, therefore, adopts a critical stance toward the concept of ‘postindustrial.’ Rather than reproducing narratives of linear progress or irreversible decline, I focus on the endurance and adaptation of industrial towns: their ongoing negotiation of identity, the persistence and reinvention of their social and built environments, and their possible futures. The complex realities of these towns require a more flexible and empirically grounded approach—one attuned to the continuities and transformations that shape everyday life, beyond the dominant language of ‘postindustrialism.’

2.2.3. The myth of postsocialist cities

The concept of the 'post-socialist city’, often associated with the USSR and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), has significantly shaped our understanding of urban spaces both within and beyond this region. This association tends to limit perspectives on the true complexity and diversity of these cities (Ferenčuhová and Gentile, 2016; Gentile, 2018). The term 'post-socialist’, particularly within urban studies, has been the subject of extensive debate regarding its historical validity, heterogeneity and meaning.

Initially, a 'socialist city' might seem straightforward, often referring to urban areas designed and constructed under non-capitalist political agendas in the Soviet Union and other Second World regions like CEE. These planned cities aimed to challenge and reshape prior property and social dynamics through strategic urban planning. Under socialism, urban modernity manifested as the socialization of means of

production (Murawski, 2018: 931). These cities' built environments represent long-term investments in collective-oriented infrastructure, prioritizing public goods, access to services, and communal spaces for social welfare and equity. This framework also reflects the tautology expressed by Lazar Kaganovich in 1934, which posits Soviet cities as socialist due to the nationalization of private property (as noted by Murawski, 2018: 929). The reconfiguration of property and land relations was also crucial for Henri Lefebvre's understanding of social space, which I will discuss below in 3.2.

similarly points to the inadequacy of the term, arguing that 'postsocialist' is unable to encompass the diversity of urban worlds that have emerged since socialism.

As these cities evolved under neoliberal pressures of the last several decades, commercialism, and real estate development, many scholars have questioned the stability and relevance of the 'post-socialist' concept, particularly since the 2010s. Some researchers advocate for abandoning the term, arguing that post-socialist experiences vary dramatically across different contexts (Hann, 2016; Müller and Trubina, 2020; Odak et al., 2022). Alaina Lemon (2011) similarly points to the inadequacy of the term, arguing that 'postsocialist' is unable to encompass the diversity of urban worlds. Critics like Gentile (2018) suggest that labelling cities as 'post-socialist' additionally contributes to the marginality of Eurasian cities (Darieva and Kaschuba, 2011: 11) and disconnects them from broader urban studies, reinforcing unnecessary boundaries. Drawing on Robinson (2005), they propose it might be more productive to view these cities as ordinary, like any other urban areas, which would entail dropping the region-specific term.

Others argue that erasing 'state socialism' from our epistemology effectively erases this experience from the geopolitical map and aligns all cities in front of the neoliberal market, thereby downplaying the significance of ideological foundations. For example, Ousmanova (Ousmanova, 2020), critiquing Müller's renowned article 'Goodbye, Socialism', asserts that it is no coincidence that socialism is being dismissed precisely as the concept of the Global East is introduced, aiming to stand alongside the Global North and South. She believes these categories suppress ideological conceptualization.

Another interesting perspective on addressing the post-socialist concept comes from urban scholar Sonia Hirt in her insightful work *Iron Curtains*. She argues for high

utility of the concept and the corresponding scholarship because, as she posits, post-socialist urban processes exemplify broader global transformation trends, such as privatization, commercialization, and suburbanization, on a very brutal and so more obvious scale (Hirt, 2012: 5). These processes, which are fundamental to contemporary capitalist urban changes worldwide (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Smith et al., 2008), manifest in post-socialist cities in an overt and unmasked manner, making them particularly obvious. Observing and analysing these processes allow us to better understand manifestations of neoliberalism on-the-ground.

The emphasis on the 'post' transformation is a central issue within the post-socialist discourse, often overshadowing enduring socialist elements —an aspect this dissertation aims to highlight. Recently, a growing number of scholars, partly responding to the debate over abandoning the post-socialist concept, have focused on the endurance of socialism to assert the continued relevance of the term. Felix Ringel explores the term's multiple temporal meanings and diverse experiences within post-socialist contexts, examining what the socialist legacy means for residents of East Germany's industrial cities (Ringel, 2014, 2020). Kimberly Zarecor suggests that urban socialist modernity should not be constrained by political regimes but viewed as a stage of urban development with distinct decision-making priorities which continue to inform urban landscape today (Zarecor, 2018). Michał Murawski explores the continuing power of socialist space-making in socialist Poland (Murawski, 2018, 2019). Max Welch Guerra acknowledges the significant influence of European state-socialist planning models in parts of Latin America, Africa, and Asia up until the 1980s, often overlooked in planning historiography but present until today in the urban landscape (Guerra, 2023: 2–3).

The essence of a post-socialist city may lie not only in the 'post'—the transformation after the 1980s—but in the enduring socialist elements. The historical architectural and material structures that survive beyond socio-political transformations can have a lasting social impact (Stanilov, 2007). This perspective necessitates viewing the built environment and spatial practices as integral to social practices, rather than secondary to the economic and political shifts defining these cities.

2.3. Outlining the research gap

The research gap identified in this dissertation focuses on two main aspects. Firstly, while much attention has been paid to planned industrial towns within certain regional or ideological contexts, there is a need to recognize these towns as a global phenomenon. Planned industrial towns have emerged and developed across diverse geographical and geopolitical settings. These urban projects share commonalities as modernist interventions, conceived in the aftermath of dramatic political events like World War II and anti-colonial movements, reflecting broader socio-political aspirations and principles of urban planning.

Secondly, dominant academic and public narratives remain largely focused on rupture. Historic and contemporary accounts frequently emphasize moments of dramatic changes such as dissolution of political regimes, factory closures, or ecological crises —a perspective reinforced by discourses of the 'postindustrial' or 'postsocialist', as discussed in section 2.2. This dissertation questions whether such ruptures represent the total erasure or transformation of these urban environments.

This dissertation thus seeks to move beyond methodological nationalism and rupture-centred frameworks by highlighting the endurance and everyday continuities within planned industrial towns. Through a comparative and international approach, especially focusing on non-Western contexts, it examines how the mundane and persistent spatiality of these towns contributes to ongoing social negotiations and power dynamics. In doing so, it reveals that these processes are not exceptions but central to understanding the long-term transformation of these urban spaces.

3 Theoretical framework

This dissertation's focus on the production of space draws on Henri Lefebvre's work, as outlined in *The production of space* (Lefebvre, 1991). Specifically, I outline the key aspects of Lefebvre's theory that are relevant to my analysis such as his triadic approach to social space and his argument that social space never truly disappears. My intention is to apply selected elements of his framework to clarify the phenomenon under investigation and to better understand the social dynamics of planned industrial towns. However, I do not aim to contribute to Lefebvre's theoretical corpus.

3.1. Henri Lefebvre's critique of planned towns

Before delving into Lefebvre's key concepts relevant to this dissertation, I find it important to first address his own perspective on post-war modernist urbanism which is the subject at hand. As will be discussed in this sub-chapter, since the 1970s Lefebvre was notably dismissive towards new towns, both in Western Europe and in socialist states —a stance that has in many ways contributed to the prevailing negative perception of planned cities. I therefore wish to address Lefebvre's critique here, before turning to his broader theoretical contributions that I adopt in this dissertation.

Lefebvre's early optimism about postwar urbanism is evident in his 1961 analysis of a planned Swiss new town, in the Furttal valley near Zürich (Lefebvre, 1961, quoted in Stanek, 2008: 74). The project, influenced by sociologist Werner Aebli, categorized residents' needs into three tiers (society, community, freedom) and twelve specific domains (e.g., hygiene, art, politics).Lefebvre praised this design for balancing social, economic, and aesthetic needs through 'an equilibrium, at the same time stable and vivid, a sort of self-regulation' (Stanek, 2008: 194).

By 1970, when he published *The urban revolution*, however, Lefebvre rejected such functionalist approaches in urban planning. As architectural historian and reseracher of Lefevbre's work Łukasz Stanek notes, Lefebvre critiqued the functionalist concept of 'needs' and the assumption that those could be mechanically translated into segregated spatial functions (Stanek, 2015: 121). This shift, according to Stanek, mirrored broader trends at the *Institut de Sociologie Urbaine* (ISU), where Lefebvre worked, since the ISU's research pivoted explicitly from studying inhabitants as 'beings of needs' to 'beings of practices' (Ibid.: 122).

A few years later, in *The production of space*, Lefebvre provocatively argues that state socialism failed to produce a distinct spatiality. He asserts*:* 'No architectural innovation has occurred; no specific space has been created' under state socialism (Lefebvre, 1991: 55). For Lefebvre, 'a revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed, it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses' (Ibid.: 54). This sweeping dismissal overlooks the nuanced ways socialist urbanism challenged property relations and collective life (Murawski 2019: 918–9). These critiques reveal that Lefebvre saw planned towns—particularly those emblematic of socialist urban planning—as fundamentally limited projects. In his view, these towns failed to break with established paradigms or foster truly revolutionary everyday life; instead, they merely replicated existing social structures in a reconfigured spatial form.

Lefebvre's critique aligned with French postwar thinkers associated with *the Centre d'Études, de Recherches et de Formation Institutionnelles* (CERFI) and with Michel Foucault, who viewed state-led urbanization as a tool of biopolitical control (Stanek, 2015: 125). This persistent scepticism toward planned towns shaped not only Lefebvre's work but also contributed to the broader critical outlook on such urban projects —a perspective later amplified by post-structuralism and the neo-avant-garde—casting doubt on their emancipatory potential and their capacity to genuinely transform the urban experience. Today, echoes of this critique persist in the widespread scholarly and popular condemnation of post-war planning and architectural paradigms (Kordas, 2018). This dissertation does not adopt Lefebvre's polemical stance toward modernist planned cities; rather, it employs his theoretical framework to analyse the evolution of social space produced within the postwar modernist urbanism.

3.2. Henri Lefebvre's theory of production of space and key concepts

3.2.1. Lefebvre's theory of production of space and the concept of 'social space'

Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of space — that proves pivotal to this research — offers a framework to examine not only the spatial dimensions of historical

developments but also the historical dimensions of spatial processes. Lefebvre's approach to space redefines space not as a passive container but as an active product of social relations—a dialectical process between material conditions, politics and lived experiences. At the heart of this analysis is how social space is produced: what constitutes the 'social' within space, and how does this concept illuminate the processes of spatial re-production over time.

Lefebvre insists that space is not merely 'created' or 'constructed' but produced, a term that — according to the philosopher — underscores its embeddedness in material and social processes (Ahuja, 2009: 25–26). Influenced by Hegel's concrete universal and Marx's materialist dialectics (Stanek, 2008: 65), Lefebvre, as he was applied by social historians and anthropologists, posits that every society generates unique social spaces, which increasingly dominate over natural environments. Therefore, social space may serve as an analytical lens for examining society — rather than viewing society as a framework for understanding space (ibid.: 34).

Social spaces are thus emerging as a 'work' of specific social formation (Lefebvre, 1991: 412; Ahuja, 2009: 25–26), a set of relations that inherently echo the social interactions of different groups. Social spaces are not inert 'things'; they perpetuate these relations through material forms (ibid.: 68–77) and therefore may function dialectically through time—as both an outcome and a vehicle for re-producing social relations (ibid.: 412). According to Lefebvre, social spaces are therefore produced not in isolation, but are profoundly intertwined with social relationships, property relations, and land control mechanisms (Lefebvre, 1991: 81–85).

How is (social) space produced? Central to Lefebvre's theory is the articulation of social space through a triad: perceived, conceived, and lived dimensions. Thus, processes and strategies involved in producing social space can be analysed across their representational/ conceived dimension (planning concepts, ideologies, political conception of space), material /perceived dimension (built forms), and lived dimension (practices of everyday life, such as appropriating, inhabiting). Therefore, social space is shaped not only through lived experience but also through the 'conceived' and 'perceived' aspects of the built environment, meaning that social space is historically-contingent as including historically specific forms of social arrangement (Ahuja, 2009: 25–26). The contradictions that emerge between the production of lived space and

conceived or perceived spaces may, in turn, crystallize into particular social configurations (ibid.: 33–39, 41–43). Nonetheless, as a historical product of specific social relations and ideologies, social space thus contributes to the production and reproduction of social hierarchies and relationships, which arguably may imply, according to some scholars, that the production of urban space is fundamentally hegemonic (Kipfer 2008: 200).

Methodologically, the perspective to recognize the social in the urban demands recognizing the built environment not as an 'empty' container for social life, but as an active participant in shaping and transforming social relations (Ahuja, 2009: 26–27; Lefebvre 1991: 154). Space should not be viewed as 'passive physicality' (Bodnár, 2001: 177), nor as an inert backdrop where social and cultural activities take place. Instead, it is one of the core 'constructive dimensions' of society (Brenner et al., 2003: 7) that contributes to these activities. Lefebvre's framework thus allows us to unpack how politics and material practices crystallize in spatial configurations, or as Harvey would put it, 'become fixed in the spatial fix' (Harvey, 2001: 284–294). This approach illuminates both the spatialization of historical processes (through urban planning, territorial organization, or everyday practices) and the historical imprint embedded in spatial forms.

3.2.2. Lefebvre's theory of production of space: endurance and transformations

Lefebvre's concept of social space challenges the notion of space as a static container and emphasizes that social space never fully disappears (Lefebvre, 1991: 86, 164-5, 229, 412). Understanding of continuity and endurance with this argument of Lefebvre offers, as I suggest in this sub-section, a critical lens to analyse how historical spatial arrangements linger within contemporary urban landscapes.

As we engage with the concept of social space, it becomes clear that space actively re-produces social relations through historically specific material, conceptual, and everyday practices (Kipfer, 2008: 62). The historically contingent production of space, as theorized and illustrated by Lefebvre through the dialectical triad, reveals that materiality of social space is linked to conceptual meanings and embodied 'experiences', with both being invested in the material aspects of space (Schmid, 2008: 41). Golubchikov and Sechi (2025), drawing on Lefebvre, argue that urban space

should be viewed as a dialectical terrain, open to ongoing social negotiations. Approaching the urban in this way foregrounds the dynamic relationships between politics, space, and everyday life, emphasising the production of urban space as an ongoing process (Ibid.: 6).

These theoretical insights become particularly evident when examining how large-scale urban interventions unfold in practice. For example, modernist urban planning—such as the mid-twentieth-century transformation of villages into new towns—often exposed contradictions between abstract, state-driven visions and the deeply rooted existing spatial logics of existing communities (Strümpell, 2023: 302). Over time, these master plans were gradually infiltrated as people inhabited these spaces, they reshaped them through informal adaptations and grassroots resistance, demonstrating the endurance of earlier spatial arrangements even in the face of ambitious reconfigurations. These dynamics are examined in depth in anthropological accounts of other Indian steel towns that epitomized the Nehruvian vision, most notably in Jonathan Parry's studies of Bhilai (Parry, 2008, 2013, 2020: 88–119) and Christian Strümpell's studies on Rourkela (Sanchez & Strümpell, 2014; Strümpell, 2014, 2023:267–305)

The arrival of dramatic neoliberal reforms after the 1990s introduced yet another layer of spatial negotiations and contestation**.** In planned cities like Rourkela, Bhilai, and Bokaro Steel City, the shrinking of public-sector space coincided with the rise of gated communities and commercial malls, revealing a shift in social paradigms but not a total erasure of the past. The built environments—originally designed to materialise collective ideals and foster new social relations—became sites where public, private, and informal interests coexist and often collide. The cities' modernist housing grids and abundant public spaces now intermingle with privatized infrastructures. Thus, urban space emerges as a layered terrain where vernacular, modernist, and neoliberal urban doctrines continuously overlap and are contested. This historical layering illustrates Lefebvre's argument that no spatial order is ever complete or final; rather, each present is interwoven with traces of the past, producing spaces that are at once enduring and perpetually transformed, creating a palimpsest of competing historical projects (Lefebvre, 1991: 164–5, 229).

Lefebvre's assertion that 'no space disappears in the course of growth and development' (ibid.: 86) thus challenges deterministic views of urban change, insisting instead that even dominant social forces cannot wholly erase or reinvent space. Rather, social space accumulates in layers, with past formations shaping present dynamics. This perspective is indispensable for analysing contested urban evolution, particularly in planned cities where competing ideologies collide over historical development. This approach reveals built environment as a historical artefact — an urban form shaped by coexisting ideological dominants and competing modes of production (Ahuja, 2009: 30).

Following Lefebvre's framework, urban space in this dissertation is understood as simultaneously a product, co-producer, and transformer of social relationships (Lefebvre, 1991: 38–9), interwoven in socio-political dynamics. This framework also aligns with David Harvey's (1990: 419) insight that urban spaces reflect their historical origins even as they adapt to contemporary pressures. Such an approach calls for more than merely documenting urban transformations; it insists on considering the persistence of some historical elements or forms in the production of social space. Therefore, far from being passive backdrops, built environments are actively constituted by and constitute social relations (Premat, 2009), functioning as terrains of everyday class struggle.

3.3. Social power of the built environment beyond political and economic forces

Henri Lefebvre's concept of social space fundamentally challenges the notion that space is a passive backdrop for social life. Instead, Lefebvre conceives of social space as actively produced through the interplay of spatial planning, built forms and lived experiences—a dialectical process captured in his triad of conceived, perceived, and lived spaces (Lefebvre, 1991: 86, 164–165, 229; Ahuja, 2009: 36). From its inception, space is thus imbued with layers of social relationships: not only among inhabitants and between residents and the state, but also between people and the built environment itself. In this sub-chapter I develop further this argument, underscoring that the endurance of social space cannot be reduced to the continuity of political institutions responsible for its creation. Even when these authorities dissolve or transform, the

social forms and meanings embedded within the built environment may persist and be enabled.

This perspective fundamentally alters our understanding of the relationship between built environments and state power. Instead of viewing the state or other dominant actors as operating prior to spatial politics or simply employing architecture and urban planning as tools for representing political or ideological narratives, this approach recognizes that the built environment has its own social agency. While various theoretical approaches exist for exploring this agency, this dissertation — employing a Lefebvrian framework of the production of space—focuses specifically on the historical form of a social space, expressed through its conceived and perceived dimensions. Social space thus actively sustains social relations that cannot simply be instituted or dissolved by political decree, nor can they be reduced to mere social appropriations.

The role of the state is predominant in the 'conceived' element of space and influential in its 'perceived' forms, therefore the ongoing production of social space is not bound to the transformation of space through daily practices, encompassed in the 'lived' fragment. It is the 'the state as will and representation [that …] is capable of modifying the distribution of resources, income, and the "value" created by productive labour (surplus value)' (Lefebvre, [1970] 2003: 78). Yet, once built forms are realized, this influence cannot be simply reversed. Social arrangements are literally embedded in the concrete fabric of buildings and cities, resulting in spaces that continue to carry specific meanings, uses, and social potentials even after dramatic shifts in political governance (Beech 2014: 197). Research by scholars like Golubchikov (2017) and Strümpell (2013, 2023: 267–312) demonstrates how postsocialist and postcolonial urban spaces —originally constructed along modernist lines —retain forceful social dynamics despite attempts to erase or contain them.

Modernist urban planning in contexts such as social-democratic Britain and socialist Hungary also provides compelling examples of how urban spaces possess ongoing agency and are continuously shaped by inherent social dynamics. For instance, in both settings, modernist architectural forms and urban layouts continued to structure collective life and evolve long after the period of intense state direction had passed (Molnár, 2013: 10–11; Beech, 2014:194–195). These cases illustrate that historical

urban environments do not remain static relics of a particular politico-historical moment but actively participate in the transformation of social relations even amid the dissolution of political institutions that produced this built environment. In light of Lefebvre's work, these studies affirm that architecture and urban space, once constructed, acquire their own historically-contingent sociality, and therefore should not be viewed as the static tendency to link spaces exclusively to specific politico-historical powers (Brenner, 2004; Brenner et al., 2003).

The quality of social space to 'endure' through time therefore forms the precondition for ongoing social negotiations, social tensions and future transformations (Lefebvre, 1991: 52, 62–63; Ahuja 2019: 38). Overlaying the constructed environment on an existing site —as no space is ever truly empty (Lefebvre, 1991: 154) —leads to contradictions and complexities that arise from these layered interactions. This theoretical framework therefore also allows to highlight the inherent contradictions within urban arrangements, where co-existence of spaces built within various socio-political paradigms co-exist.

Given that social space is continually produced and does not simply vanish without a trace, a total rupture from the past is impossible; instead, there is an inevitable continuity that shapes each new spatial configuration. Even in cases of deliberate demolition, the act itself, along with its material and mnemonic remnants, leaves traces that persist in the new social reality. As spaces are socially produced and intimately linked to social relations, we can discern layers of temporalities within the built environment, each embedded with social meaning. Ultimately, social space serves as a dynamic terrain where past and present social relations are dialectically intertwined, enabling different temporalities —layers of social spaces —to coexist and continually influence one another.

This multi-layered complexity of social space thus provided concrete possibilities and means of structuring social space. It also set limits to the ambitions of institutionalised interests—including contemporary states intertwined with capital interests—to remake space entirely in their own image (Ahuja, 2019: 38). In other words, there is a measure to how much social space is subject to control; as it always generates new possibilities for transformation, often emerging from its internal contradictions (Lefebvre, 1991: 52, 62–66). The layered temporal structure of social space and the tensions among

these ‘layers’ —or what historian Ravi Ahuja calls the ‘specific synchrony of the non-synchronous’ —define the limits of institutional interventions on existing urban space (Ahuja, 2019: 38).

The built environment is thus capable of profoundly contributing to social arrangements through its material durability —a power that outlasts both the dissolution of states and later market-driven attempts at transformation. As Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson (1985) argues, architecture does not simply ‘express’ social paradigms at a distance, but actively mediates and organizes power relations by virtue of its materiality. Art critic and philosopher Boris Groys (2019) makes a similar point regarding modernist artefacts in general. By mediating —do not confuse with representing —politics and projecting it in spatial forms, urban spaces provide the scaffold for social relations and experiences (Kipfer, 2002: 127). As such, it is urban spaces serve as sites where the production of social dynamics and its contradictory elements can be observed on-the-ground (Goonewardena, 2005; Kipfer & Keil, 2002).The built forms and spatial arrangements inherited from previous eras do not passively wait to be reinterpreted; rather, they persist as active structures that shape and constrain social relationships, values, experience —never in a strictly deterministic fashion, but by establishing the parameters within which new social interactions become possible. In this sense, the longevity and layered nature of built space serve both as a historical record *and* as a means of struggles around social change, class formation, and the ongoing reproduction of inequality—even as new political or economic forces seek to impose their own meanings or uses. Thus, the social relations embedded in the material fabric of the built environment can outlast, and at times shape, subsequent social struggles.

4 Methodology

In line with Lefebvrian insight that materiality and urban space has its own sociality and bear social power, Langdon Winner (1980) in his celebrated essay, 'Do Artifacts Have Politics?', posits that material objects embody specific forms of power and authority, rather than merely reflecting external political contexts in which they are situated. Focusing on the historically-informed built environment of planned industrial towns, this dissertation investigates how material structures shape social relations in today's urban social life under very different politico-economic conditions and prevailing ideologies. To explore how the built environment endures and what effect it has on the social in planned industrial towns in diffeent geographical and political contexts, the built environment of two planned industrial towns —one in Russia and one in India —were chosen as case-studies. The choice of these cases as well as data collection, analysis, and the unique value of historical ethnography for tracing the longue durée of material agency will be discussed in the following sub-chapters.

4.1. Historical ethnography

In this PhD dissertation, ethnographic methods serve as the primary approach, with a strong emphasis on integrating historical perspectives to understand the complex political, economic, and social dynamics. To this end, I utilized historical ethnography as a method being called so by urban anthropologist Setha Low. Historical ethnography not only involves active observation and participation during the field-trip but also entails a thorough exploration of the locale's historical background, including the biographies of its places and material landscape (Low, 2017: 36–38). Given its significance as a distinct methodology, a separate sub-chapter will be devoted to discussing historical ethnography in detail. This will underscore its role in providing a nuanced understanding of how historical contexts inform present-day cultural settings.

When conducting ethnography, employing historical ethnography enables a deeper comprehension of a place's history and context. This involves engaging with archival materials, such as maps and newspapers, to gain insights not only into current dynamics but also into the historical narratives and discourses that have shaped the locale. Importantly, this method challenges researchers to critically analyse and

question historical accounts, fostering a nuanced understanding of the processes that produced certain urban spaces.

While I am not formally trained as a historian, I actively engage with historical sources —including maps, local newspapers, published histories and talking to people who were involved in historical processes, if a chance had arisen. This allows me for complementing and contextualizing my field observations. Rather than relying solely on secondary literature (which often reproduces prevailing discourses unquestioned), I approach these materials as an ethnographer: reading them critically, cross-referencing different types of sources, and scrutinizing whose perspectives and narratives are privileged or omitted. In Mezhdurechensk (Russia), for example, my analysis drew on locally published books and historical photographs to identify dominant discourses as well as explore everyday details overlooked in formal histories. In Bokaro (India), I supplemented my ethnographically informed understanding with archival maps and interviews with individuals involved in planning the city. This approach does not aim to produce definitive historical accounts, but instead recognizes the partiality of all sources, using them to critically interrogate the narratives that shape each city's identity. Thus, historical ethnography, in my research, is about developing a reflexive, critical engagement with the materials that inform urban memory and meaning.

The emphasis on the social production of space from a materialist perspective is particularly valuable for delineating the historical emergence and socio-political formation of urban spaces. Questions such as 'When was it built?', 'Under what circumstances?', and 'What politics influenced its financing and design?' guide this inquiry. This approach seeks to uncover how spaces or places come into existence, exploring the social, political and historical motivations behind their planning and development. By intertwining the material aspects of space and place-making, historical ethnography reveals both the manifest and latent ideologies underpinning a space's materiality. This socio-political analysis emphasizes the social, political, and economic forces that shape space (Low, 2017: 34), offering a comprehensive framework for understanding how historical contexts inform present-day urban landscapes.

A striking example of the necessity of this approach emerged during my initial field trip to Bokaro. Prior to the trip, I have made plenty of readings of secondary sources about Bokaro's construction. Influenced by the discourse of 'export' prevalent in urban studies on planned cities in the Third World, I expected Soviet involvement in its design. Prior literature also suggested Bokaro was a planned modernist town developed by Soviet city planners as part of the USSR's internationalist program (e.g. Strange, 2019: 319–337). However, already during my early days in Bokaro and interactions with local historians and architects, I learned that the city plan was developed entirely by a local group of experts, highlighting a 1960s shift toward demonstrating Indian expertise in city planning. The Architecture and City Planning Department of Bokaro Steel City, where urban professionals from all over India joined to work together, played a critical role in India's modernization efforts, independent of Soviet planning.

Similarly, in Mezhdurechensk, historical ethnography became an indispensable tool that allowed me to revisit and to uncover the complex dynamics underlying the city's urban transformation. Rather than simply echoing the familiar post-socialist themes of decline, decay or impoverishment common to studies of planned industrial towns, I referred to the archival sources—including local newspapers from the 2000s, and books on the city published in the Soviet era— to reconstruct what specific spaces meant and how they evolved over time. For example, reports about the renovation of Kommunistichenskij Avenue, which instead of a large green zone was redesigned as a pedestrian promenade with shops, were instrumental in tracing the city's ongoing adaptation and marketization strategies. This archival research enriched and sometimes complicated the stories shared by residents, illuminating not only what changed, but also why and how these processes unfolded. Revisiting key landmarks, such as the iconic worker statues, through this combined historical and ethnographic lens allowed me to move beyond viewing them as static relics. Instead, I understood them as dynamic symbols, encapsulating the ongoing negotiation between the city's industrial legacy and its present-day realities. By situating everyday transformations within their precise historical and social context, historical ethnography enabled me to produce a more nuanced narrative—capturing not just marginalization, but also the adaptation, change in the reinterpretation and the specificity of the city's urban dynamics.

Historical ethnography make it possible to explore how cities contain multiple, overlapping layers of history, shaped by competing visions of the past and present (e.g. Tuvikene, 2010; Vanke & Polukhina, 2018; Cera & Sechi, 2020). By interrogating archives alongside contemporary experiences, the research uncovers (1) the manifested and latent political visions and forces driving urban design decisions, (2) the discrepancies between planning intentions and real-world usage, and (3) the often-hidden struggles over who gets to define a city's landscape. In both Bokaro and Mezhdurechensk, this approach allowed to see urban spaces as intricately shaped by historical legacies, power structures, and social negotiations.

4.2. Juxtapositional comparative approach

The methodological approach to case selection in this dissertation embraces the concept of parallel contextual comparison, as inspired by Judit Bodnár (2001). In drawing parallels between housing privatization in Budapest and tenure conversion in London, Bodnár suggests that the focus must be on the distinctive trajectories each case represents (ibid.: 20). She cautions against attributing the disappearance of certain urban conditions in Budapest solely to the withdrawal of state socialism, suggesting, instead, a need to recognize broader global influences at play (ibid.: 3). She suggests a framework for placing distinct urban experiences into a meaningful dialogue, focusing on the intricate interactions between their historical narratives rather than searching for direct equivalences. Bodnár proposes a comparative framework that situates each urban context within its specific historical, political, and social constellation which arguably entails understanding how the histories of each city are both uniquely local and yet shaped by entanglements with transnational processes. This approach to parallel contextual comparison does not set cases in opposition but rather allows them to illuminate one another—each seen in its own historical and political context, yet revealing shared patterns and dynamics. By placing the cases into a constructive dialogue, this analysis foregrounds the shared dynamics and nuanced interrelations that emerge when each case is understood in meaningful dialogue with the other.

In this dissertation, my selection of Mezhdurechensk and Bokaro Steel City reflects this approach of juxtaposition. The cities are not presented as identical entities ripe for confronted comparison with the same criteria for each; rather, they are seen as distinct

yet conceptually similar examples of modernist urban planning which may tell us about diverse modernist movement. While each city emerges from its specific historical and cultural context—Soviet socialist urbanization for Mezhdurechensk and postcolonial India's nation-building efforts for Bokaro— juxtapositional comparative approach means examining how their respective histories of planned industrial urbanism, interact with broader global currents such as industrialization, new town movement, social modernization, and post-war positivism. This shared origin offers insights into the role of state-led development in shaping urban experiences for working-class populations. Despite their differences, the analytical power lies in their ability to highlight divergent meanings within their unique socio-political landscapes.

By emphasizing their contrasting yet resonant aspects, the study resists direct one-to-one comparison in favour of placing distinct urban experiences in critical conversation. This comparative lens foregrounds how differences and similarities emerge through concrete local conditions and visions, rather than through the search for one-to-one functional analogues. By adopting this approach, this dissertation traces the complex interplay between locally rooted practices, inherited urban forms, and globally circulating ideas, generating a more nuanced understanding of how planned industrial towns are re-made in different contexts and enriching our understanding of urban endurances of planned industrial towns.

4.3. Case-studies

4.3.1. Case-studies selection

The selection of case studies for this dissertation emerged from professional research interests in peripheral cities' urbanism and my intellectual evolution as a researcher. My personal history of growing up in Mezhdurechensk —a planned industrial city in southwestern Siberia designed to fuel Soviet industrialization—fundamentally shaped my academic curiosity about global industrial cities built in the last century. This biographical connection and me migrating several times from one country to another naturally generated comparative questions about parallel urban experiments in different geopolitical contexts. Multiplied by opportunities and limitations of research practices, two planned industrial towns were of my conscious choice for this research: Mezhdurechensk, Russia and Bokaro Steel City, India.

It was of pivotal importance to choose case-studies with regards to the research question. No single planned industrial city is representative of another. Thus, research conducted in any specific region cannot be generalized across the regions. In selecting my case studies, I aimed to enable a meaningful comparison by choosing two cities that share foundational characteristic such as their origins as planned industrial centres, the political importance the cities played in their national contexts, the (post-war) time of construction, while differing in other key aspects, including political-economic governance and different geopolitical position. These case-studies provide insights into both shared processes and context-specific outcomes within the broader phenomenon of a planned industrial city under study.

The first case-study, Mezhdurechensk, was built in the 1950s in southwestern Siberia, alongside the development of numerous coal mines—both underground and open-pit—with PJSC Raspadskaya (one of Soviet Union's largest underground coal mines) being just one among many in the area called the Kuznetsk Basin. The city therefore became an important hub for coal production during the Soviet era and exemplified the socio-economic strategies of the Soviet state, which saw the creation of such cities as a means to consolidate industrial power and cultivate the urban working class, including in the most remote and peripheral places. The city is deeply associated with its industrial workforce which symbolized the strength and resilience of the Soviet working class, as miners played a crucial role in boosting the country's industrialization after at the World War II.

The city's design followed comprehensive planning principles, particularly of the concept of 'microdistrict' (*mikrorajon*) in its heart (Shatskaya, 1978: 20–25), a planning term and spatial unit developed by planners to organize residential life around social reproduction facilities such as nurseries, schools and other amenities (Bocharnikova, 2019; Crawford, 2022). Notably, the establishment of planned mining towns in the Soviet Union began much earlier, notably already in the 1930s, as part of the broader industrialization efforts of the Stalin era. This earlier period saw highly experimental and sometimes improvised projects, such as Komsomolsk-na-Amure or Magnitogorsk which served as pioneering grounds for socialist city-building methods —as analyzed by Fomina (2025) and Kotkin (1995) correspondingly. In contrast, by the time Mezhdurechensk was constructed, Soviet planners could draw on the

accumulated knowledge and experience from these earlier undertakings. As a result, Mezhdurechensk was designed as a more systematically planned city—rather than an experimental settlement—incorporating established Soviet urban planning principles and organizational models.

The second case-study, Bokaro Steel City, was conceived in the 1960s in eastern India, alongside the construction of a massive steel plant —one of the largest in all of Asia. The Bokaro Steel Plant stands as both an engineering and political landmark, having been built with extensive technical and material assistance from the Soviet Union. While this fraternal collaboration was fundamental for the steel plant's development, it notably did not extend to the planning or construction of the city itself—a distinction that reflects Bokaro's unique urban genesis. Bokaro Steel City came to symbolize the ideals of postcolonial Indian modernity, invoked as one of the countries' 'temples of modernity', and played a crucial role in the state-led project of rapid industrialization and extensive urbanization. Strategically located in a remote part of eastern India, Bokaro also carried a broader significance for national integration: establishing an industrial and social anchor in a previously peripheral region was part of the state's vision for unifying the country under a project of developmental nation-building. In this way, Bokaro Steel City not only functioned as an industrial powerhouse, but also as an emblem of postcolonial India's aspirations to modernity and national cohesion.

As the fourth and last of India's planned steel cities, its design and construction drew on the experience of its predecessors and reflected a shift towards greater local initiative. In particular, Bokaro's city planning department was granted exceptional autonomy and resources, eventually encompassing a team of around fifty professionals—a reflection of the importance attached to systematic urban planning. The city was organized spatially around the concept of the 'sector', with each sector providing for the everyday needs of residents, including schools, day-care centres, and other social infrastructure essential to the production of a stable urban working class. This approach to planning resonated with Soviet practices such as the microdistrict, with the 'sector' remaining a term devised by Indian planners rather than an analytical category for research.

As for the similarities, both cities were conceived as iconic industrial centres central to their nations' modernization projects, designed with utopian visions for working-

class advancement through state-led modernist planning. Significantly, both were implanted in previously rural peripheries with substantial indigenous populations (the Shor people in Siberia's Kuzbass region and Adivasi communities in Jharkhand respectively), while maintaining complete public ownership of urban infrastructure — a standard feature of Soviet urbanism but remarkable in postcolonial India's mixed economy. The comparison gained particular analytical traction when considering how both nations confronted profound economic crises in the early 1990s, entering the neoliberal era through divergent yet parallel processes of structural adjustment. This shared temporal juncture —what might be termed their 'neoliberal transition point' — reveals how their publicly-owned urban infrastructures faced remarkably similar pressures of privatization and welfare state retrenchment, despite originating in different political-economic systems.

The differences between the cases are also informative. Mezhdurechensk epitomized the spatial logic of a socialist planned economy during the Soviet Union's postwar reconstruction, with its urban morphology physically embodying the Soviet ideology of a classless society (Cera and Sechi, 2020). In contrast, Bokaro Steel City materialized what might be termed social-democratic urban ideals, incorporating income-based housing categories that consciously maintained social difference while promoting spatial proximity in residential areas and social mixing in public spaces. Where the Soviet model pursued architectural egalitarianism, Bokaro's planners envisioned a different civic model: one where manual and non-manual workers would share urban spaces. This fundamental ideological divergence, amplified by the cities' opposing positions in Cold War geopolitics, creates particularly productive analytical friction when examining how their modernist urban frameworks respond to the pressures of commodification and marketization today.

This selection proves valuable for examining how state-socialist and postcolonial modernisms converged in their spatial approaches to working-class formation while diverging in their ultimate trajectories. The comparison illuminates not just planning histories but the lived experience of industrial urbanism across two continents, offering what might be called a comparison of modernist urban forms on-the-ground in distinct but dialogic contexts. What also makes this comparison theoretically productive is how it reveals modernism's pluralistic nature —while both cities employed similar

architectural vocabularies, their political and geographical contexts diverged significantly, thoroughly undermining notions of the International Style's neutrality (Doordan, 2014: 9). Through this paired examination, we gain unique insight into how similar spatial forms operated under different political economies during and after the Cold War's ideological struggles.

4.3.2. Negotiating access: Case-study 1 (Mezhdurechensk)

My connection to Mezhdurechensk—the first case study in this dissertation—is both personal and scholarly. Born and raised there after my parents settled in the city in 1988 when my father began working at one of its major mined, I left Mezhdurechensk after finishing the gymnasium. Nearly a decade later, I returned in 2019 for my Master's research on working-class women's labour experiences in post-socialist Russia. This extended fieldwork enabled me to engage with Mezhdurechensk not just as my hometown, but as a subject of systematic observation. Living in the city as a researcher, I became attuned to urban changes I had previously taken for granted, such as the emergence of new consumer spaces, malls, cafés, and renovated streets.

What began as incidental observation soon evolved into the deliberate collection of photographs, field notes, and reflections, resulting in an unplanned yet valuable archive documenting urban transformation. These materials later became foundational empirical data for the first paper of this dissertation. Upon revisiting my interviews transcripts and fieldwork data years later through a spatial lens, it became clear how women's entrepreneurial choices were simultaneously constrained and shaped by socialist urban planning's legacies. While geopolitical constraints in 2022 prevented new ethnographic fieldwork, I remained in touch with my interlocutors and drew on digital data such as online-blogs, and archived newspapers to continue tracking urban developments from afar.

This approach aligns with what Burawoy calls 'reflexive ethnography' (2003) — revisiting a previous research site and leveraging existing data and established relationships to study longitudinal change. This reflexivity — noticing and documenting changes I didn't originally set out to study — exemplifies the adaptive nature of reflexive ethnography. Moreover, my reliance on digital data, continuing contact with interlocutors, and reinterpretation of past interviews and field notes show a flexible approach to data collection and analysis, valued and encouraged by reflexive

ethnography as it adapts methods and sources according to evolving research questions and contexts. Thus, my analysis moves between autobiographical insight and scholarly critique— approaching Mezhdurechensk not just as a research site, but as a historically contingent, living city I am invested in. This autobiographical closeness contrasts with my research interests, which brought me to Bokaro. My experience in Bokaro, on which I will talk in the next section, was that of an outsider, arriving with little prior connection or expectation. This difference inevitably informs my modes of access, observation, and interpretation, and I remain attentive to these distinct positionalities throughout my comparative analysis.

4.3.3. Negotiating access: Case-study 2 (Bokaro Steel City)

Unlike the previous case-study, Bokaro Steel City was selected through purely scholarly exploration after months of researching planned cities beyond Western Europe and North America, with a focus on small-to-medium-sizes industrial settlements. Once I identified Bokaro as a second case study —for the reasons outlined earlier —I spent months preparing for fieldwork by studying India's post-independence history, its social modernization agenda, and the role of urbanization within this context. My fieldwork in Bokaro consisted of two intensive field trips in 2023, taking in total approximately two months of on-site research.

My first field visit served mainly as an introduction, functioned as an exploratory phase, allowing me to assess potential research access points, to identify (working) research questions, and to establish preliminary contacts. I began my fieldwork by engaging in what I envisioned as participatory observation. I visited the Township Administration to introduce myself and seek contacts who could assist with my research, and introduced myself to the owner of the hotel where I stayed, who helped secure a research assistant/translator and provided initial interview contacts. Subsequently, I conducted interviews with him and members of his social network, who generously shared their insights. After establishing these initial connections and securing a translator, Sejal Vasant, I explored the city, conversing with locals and collecting information from those encounters. Since residents speak a variety of languages —most commonly Bhojpuri, but also Hindi and others —the assistance of a translator was essential, as I do not speak Hindi or other local languages.

Participatory observation served as a tool to glean information about the city's key landmarks—akin to learning about a city from guidebooks or through long-term residency I successfully established significant connections with local residents and urban professionals in the city, relationships that I have maintained regularly since then. A particularly valuable connection emerged with Dipankar Das, former Deputy General Manager of the Architecture and City Planning Department of SAIL (Steel Authority of India Limited), the public-sector company which manages public-sector enterprises in India. Das provided critical insights into the city's design evolution and granted me access to crucial documents that shed light on the city's history. This dual approach —combining institutional access with grassroots networking —proved essential in a peripheral city where archival resources were scarce (Bokaro lacks a city museum and has limited published urban histories).

The second research trip, building on preliminary findings, allowed focused investigation of two key areas: Bokaro's housing scheme (which provided the empirical foundation for this dissertation's second paper) and the transformation of public spaces following India's post-1990s economic reforms (forming the basis for the third paper). Furthermore, my understanding of everyday life in Bokaro was significantly deepened through numerous conversations with a range of local residents over both field trips. In particular, extended discussions with my translator and research assistant, Sejal Vasant, as well as with her parents and friends, offered valuable perspectives on the social fabric of the city. Additionally, insights from Sri Dipankar Das—who has lived in Bokaro since the 1980s—and his colleague, a native of Bokaro, along with many other township residents, enriched my research. These interactions provided access to local experiences and histories that I, as an outsider to Bokaro, could not have accessed as intimately as in the case of Mezhdurechensk, where I had lived myself.

4.4. Research Methods

This research employs a combination of qualitative methods, with a strong emphasis on an ethnographic approach. Engaging in ethnography allowed me to develop a keen sense of spatiality, which proved especially important for Bokaro, as my field trips were the only opportunities for me to experience the city. Through direct observation and immersion, I was able to notice and feel details such as the width of the streets,

the presence of greenery, the height of buildings, the distance between fences, and the placement of streets and streetlamps. These spatial elements formed a connected and meaningful whole in my perception, giving me a better grasp of the spatiality of the city. Having previously travelled to and experienced various planned cities in other parts of the world, it was especially significant for me to engage with and physically experience what makes Mezhdurechensk and especially Bokaro well-planned and evolving cities.

Exploring the endurance of the modernist built environment involved mapping social space in flux, which required a nuanced understanding of the interactions between social relations and the built environment. Therefore, qualitative methods were an obvious choice. Besides, ethnography aligns with my primary research motivation—to capture perspectives from the (material) ground level. As outlined by McDowell (1992), qualitative research methods, including participatory observation and semi-structured interviews conducted through small-scale, detailed case studies, are well-suited for this types of inquiry.

The research incorporated key ethnographic practices, such as:

- Systematic observation of streets, public spaces and built environments;
- Semi-structured biographical and expert interviews, along with informal conversations with residents, visitors, and workers;
- Collection and analysis of historical materials, including maps, and archival documents;
- Detailed field notes documenting spatial practices and material changes.

By observing, note-taking, interviewing, and engaging in casual conversations with urban professionals and some residents, I explored, to the extent related to my research questions, how social spaces have been created, and how they informed the urban landscape in time. This combination of methods enabled me to understand people's interactions with their surroundings and provided insight into the changes and continuities occurring in urban settings. These methods offered a comprehensive understanding of the conceived, perceived and lived experiences of specific spaces and material changes within these urban environments.

The interview component of this research comprised 22 semi-structured interviews conducted across both field sites. In analysing of the seven interviews with women in Mezhdurechensk who had established businesses between the mid-1990s and mid-2010s, I specifically focused on how their entrepreneurial activities both shaped and were shaped by the city's transforming urban spaces. Those were biographical interviews. In Bokaro, I conducted fifteen interviews with a diverse range of urban actors, including planning professionals from the city's development department, managers of historic and contemporary public spaces, local business owners, and two local historians specializing in the region's industrial urbanization. These interviews were crucial to my analysis in a number of ways. They have helped to contextualize, interpret, and weigh data I garnered from written sources. This aspect is particularly significant in the context of the prevailing political interpretations surrounding state-led urban planning and the viewpoints of scholars who do not align with the working-class struggle. The interviews, along with other collected data, also allowed me to narrow the focus of the case studies and test initial hypotheses.

Note-taking was another essential tool. During all three field-trips, I documented observations whenever feasible, but details often had to be committed to memory and written down during breaks or at the end of the day. I aimed to be as attentive as possible, though occasional oversights were inevitable. The most important practice was to be careful, attentive, and sensitive to the events unfolding around me. Mapping historical changes in specific spaces and buildings was another key component of my research. This involved collecting and analysing historical materials, maps, and archival documents to understand transformations over time. Engaging with the spatial environment allowed me to appreciate the materiality and socio-historical narratives embedded within urban landscapes, resonating with phenomenological insights from Merleau-Ponty (1962) and comprehensive documentation of the present as inspired by Golubev (2020: 7–8).

The study's analytical framework combines three complementary approaches. First, I examined the historical conception and perception —in Lefebvrian terminology —of cities through collected historical data and expert interviews. Second, I explored how modern planning ideas evolved in two distinct political settings over time using ethnographic methods. Third, throughout the research, I reflected on my unique

position—being both an insider and outsider—which influenced my understanding and interpretation of the findings. This reflexivity allowed me to critically analyse how my personal experiences, biases, and interpretations shaped the research process and outcomes.

In summary, the methodological framework adopted in this dissertation has addressed the research objectives by providing an in-depth, multi-faceted perspective on the endurance and evolution of urban spaces within the context of modernist architecture. The mixed-methods strategy, encompassing ethnographic practices and historical analysis, has been instrumental in unveiling the complex narratives embedded within the urban landscapes of Mezhdurechensk and Bokaro.

5 Published works

Rather than providing a synthetic overview of planned industrial towns, this dissertation advances through in-depth case studies, each exploring a distinct social dimension of urban design and its enduring legacy. By emphasizing the singularities of various political and geographical contexts, the research renders both a broader, and a more nuanced, portrait of modernist urban planning as manifested in planned industrial towns. The three publications, developed and published over the course of four years (2021–2025), collectively form the empirical and analytical foundation of this work.

5.1. Overview of the publications

The **first paper**, titled 'Pioneers of gentrification: women entrepreneurs prospecting in a post-soviet industrial city', is a single-authored peer-reviewed work published first online in 2023 in the *Journal of Urban History*.

The **second paper**, titled 'Beyond socialist cities and superblocks: Contextualized modernism of an Indian planned working-class city', is a single-authored peer-reviewed work, published in *Urban History* in the special issue on 'Industrial urbanism and entangled modernities in Eurasia' in November 2025.

The **third paper**, titled 'From working-class cultivation to non-commercialised social interactions: the evolving social role of the modernist public spaces in the industrial city of India', is a peer-reviewed book chapter, published in December 2025 in *Contingencies in urban future-making*, a volume edited by Monika Grubbauer, Joachim Thiel and Lucas Pohl in the *Transcript Verlag*.

5.2 Contents and contributions

The first article investigates Mezhdurechensk—a planned industrial city designed to support the Soviet Union's postwar industrialization and one of the prominent 'monotowns' built to support the Soviet vision of an urban working class—characterized by comprehensive state ownership and the provision of social infrastructure. The study analyses how the city's built environment structured working-class women's economic strategies amid Russia's early market transition of the 1990s and 2000s. The city's design, which had historically emphasized social reproduction facilities over commerce, resulted in an urban landscape almost devoid

of formal venues for trade and entrepreneurship. This lack, rather than being a mere deficit, offered a critical window of opportunity: in the absence of competition from established markets or corporate chains, women —in a context of profound uncertainty and where formal employment opportunities dwindled —creatively appropriated socialist institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and nurseries, converting them into ad-hoc marketplaces and informal shops. These women became spatial pioneers, or as the paper argues, pioneers of gentrification, —actively reshaping the urban fabric before capital from larger cities and external franchises arrived to formalize and dominate local retail through the construction of malls and branded outlets.

The article's primary contribution, therefore, is to recast the narrative of urban transformation in post-socialist contexts: rather than simply framing commercialization as the inevitable and omnipresent force of neoliberalism, it foregrounds how the absence of commercial spaces in the socialist city generated temporal and spatial niches for female entrepreneurship. Rather than viewing their actions merely as adaptations to encroaching neoliberal forces, the paper demonstrates that it was precisely the scarcity of commercial venues that provided opportunity for the working-class women who lacked cultural and financial capital, needed in the market driven environment. While most studies focus on how capital transforms postindustrial and postsocialist cities, the article's distinct contribution lies in theorizing how the very absence of commercial infrastructure created an unexpected opportunity for working-class women. The absence of commercial infrastructure unintentionally provided the women with both the time and space to pursue entrepreneurial activities, counteracting the disadvantages they faced in the emerging neoliberal order. The analysis reveals how material urban forms constrain and enable social action, affirming Lefebvre's insight about the endurance of social space that never disappears. Even as Mezhdurechensk's spaces adapted to neoliberal logics, its material legacy continued to shape class —and gendered —dynamics long after the socialist system collapsed. The paper thus offers a fresh perspective on urban change in planned industrial towns, treating the built environment not as a passive backdrop exposed to economic and political upheavals but as an active participant contributing to the social.

The second article examines Bokaro Steel City as a distinctive example of early-independent India's approach in applying modernist urban principles for the rapid urbanization of a postcolonial country. Although the steel plant at Bokaro was designed and constructed predominantly under the Soviet expertise, this fact has led to widespread misconception regarding Soviet influence on the design and planning of the city itself. The paper seeks to dispel this myth by demonstrating that Bokaro's urban design is, in fact, the product of Indian architects from across the country, who came together to build a city envisioned as a foundation for India's new postcolonial future. Bokaro's urban planning, as the paper argues, served as a cornerstone for nation-building through industrial urbanization, aiming to transcend entrenched 'traditional' differences over caste, ethnicity or religion. In doing so, it contributed to the broader project of social modernization and the construction of a secular, modern India liberated from colonial rule.

Through historical analysis and qualitative methods, the study situates Bokaro within the political-economic context of the Non-Aligned Movement, emphasizing its independence from both Western company towns and Soviet monotowns. The research reveals that Bokaro's urban design embodied a consciously balanced vision of society, using income-tiered housing schemes to support social stratification while expansive shared communal amenities encouraged shared spaces and experiences among residents of varied social background and classes. While Bokaro's housing policy was differentiated by income and occupation—a feature that set it apart from Soviet industrial cities—its emphasis on public institutions reflected a shared vision of the state's responsibility for education, healthcare, and culture. Furthermore, the abundance of public property in Bokaro distinguishes it from Western models, adding another unique dimension to its urban character. Bokaro's urban design represents a unique convergence of domestic socio-political aspirations and the transnational appropriation of planned cities as instruments of social modernization.

The paper's contribution lies in reconceiving state-led modernist urbanism in the Global South as an original project of nation-building and social engineering rather than a derivative of Western or Soviet models. By foregrounding India's singular modernist experiment, the article challenges prevailing typologies of twentieth-century planned towns and demonstrates that postcolonial India developed an urban

paradigm tailored to local realities. This approach re-centres experiences of the Global South within the history of modernist planning, repositioning such cases from the periphery to the core of urban studies, and deconstructing Cold War binaries that have traditionally structured the field.

The book chapter, building upon the analysis of Bokaro Steel City's modernist design from the second paper, explores how Bokaro's historical public spaces continue to shape its social landscape today. It argues that, despite decades of commercial and market-oriented pressures on urban landscape, the public spaces such as libraries, parks, cinemas built decades ago remain vital arenas for social interactions and non-commercial leisure, sustaining a working-class ethos in the face of neoliberal income-related exclusivity. These enduring sites, as the chapter demonstrates, provide spaces for residents marginalized by new dynamics of privatization and consumption, thus resonating with the larger dialectic between built environment and social change explored in the first article.

Explicitly reinforcing Lefebvre's dialectical approach to social space, the analysis investigates the deep-seated relationships between the state, property, and space as materialized in the built environment. In Bokaro, older public spaces remain largely non-privatized—neither fully nor partially transformed—retaining open or highly affordable access for visitors. This stands in stark contrast to the restricted and increasingly expensive access found in new libraries, cinemas, and the proliferation of upscale cafés. The persistence of these accessible public spaces underlines a deliberate resistance to the ongoing privatization of the urban commons.

By documenting the enduring materiality of these sites, it challenges dominant urban studies narratives that focus exclusively on rupture and transformation, instead highlighting the resilience of past spatial forms. Through this perspective, the analysis reveals how historical public spaces continue to sustain non-commodified collective practices and structure class-segmented access to urban amenities. By actively shaping social interactions and contributing to ongoing class dynamics, these material forms provide a new understanding of the persistence of working-class urbanism amid neoliberal change. Ultimately, the chapter interrogates the continued relevance of modernist spatial experiments and the broader implications of postcolonial industrial cities for theorizing the relationships among space, time, and social transformation.

Adding a new layer to our understanding of the endurance of sociality in the built environment, the chapter demonstrates how modernist public spaces simultaneously acquire new meanings while preserving their historical functions. It contends that the historicity embedded in these places inevitably introduces contradictions. In the case of Bokaro's public spaces, these contradictions manifest in their evolving role: while once serving the entire urban population, they now in fact accommodate those excluded from privatized, commercialized venues, revealing both the lasting significance and the shifting social contribution of these sites in the changing urban landscape.

The third publication makes a significant contribution to urban studies by challenging prevailing narratives that interpret urban transformation primarily through the lens of rupture and discontinuity. Instead, it documents the remarkable resilience of modernist urban spatial forms in Bokaro—a planned industrial city with a strong working-class presence and a history spanning nearly fifty years. The chapter demonstrates how these historical spaces continue to foster non-commodified forms of collective interaction, remaining vital in the social life of the city. By foregrounding the endurance of working-class urbanism in this context, the study offers a fresh perspective on the dialectical relationship between space and social change in planned industrial environments, particularly within the postcolonial setting.

6 Main findings

This final chapter presents the key findings I have reached in my dissertation and towards the end I reflect on the limitations as well as on potential trajectories for future research.

6.1. Planned industrial towns designed as global working-class settlements

This dissertation investigates the historical and contemporary production of urban space in two planned industrial towns: Mezhdurechensk, Russia, and Bokaro Steel City, India. Across three articles, my research moves beyond dominant economic and industrial accounts by placing the social dynamics of planned industrial towns at the centre of analysis. To avoid Western-centrism, I adopt a framework that unpacks the sociality of planned industrial towns as a global phenomenon and offers new insights into their enduring historical and contemporary significance. By foregrounding the often-overlooked social contributions of these towns' built environments, I argue that planned industrial towns play a significant role in contemporary urban social—and particularly class—struggles. Crucially, in referring to class struggle within this dissertation, I do not mean the organized actions of trade unions, large-scale strikes, revolutionary mobilizations, or direct confrontations with state authority. Instead, I am concerned with the quotidian dimensions of class struggle—the everyday processes of social re-arrangement, the continual negotiation of class power, and the navigation of unequal class relations. These persistent, routine practices constitute an ongoing terrain of contestation and adaptation, through which working-class communities both resist and accommodate the pressures of an evolving urban order.

6.1.1. The global reach of modernist urbanism: Spotlight on planned industrial towns

A review of the interdisciplinary and international literature on planned industrial towns has revealed their prominence as one of the most widespread forms of twentieth-century modernist urban development, with hundreds realized worldwide. Despite this prevalence and the attempts to highlight the phenomenon (e.g. Wakeman, 2016; Strange, 2019; Ludwig, 2021; Crimson Historians and Urbanists, forthcoming), historiography of modernism has generally centred on iconic architects and

monumental works —as described in 2.1. —overlooking the more mundane forms of modernist architecture and urbanism as experienced in the less visible, yet highly influential settlements.

As others have shown (Stierli et al., 2022), this research has demonstrated that in the various geographical and political contexts, modernist architecture was not only a means of technical or aesthetic innovation but also an instrument of cultural and political emancipation, liberating societies from colonial models and Western paradigms, and a tool to create a better society than in the past. While the social function of modernist urbanism —addressing unhealthy living conditions, eradicating slums, and driving social change —has been acknowledged in architectural glossaries (Curtis, 1982; Frampton, 1985), only recently have these aspects became the subject of focused academic analysis, from a historical perspective and, to a lesser extent, through a contemporary lens (Kulić et al., 2014; Swenarton et al., 2015). This dissertation aims to contribute to this ongoing effort to rethink modernism as a global and socially transformative phenomenon.

The socio-historical and empirical analysis of planned industrial towns has uncovered significant insights into post-war modernist urbanism, including its reinterpretation of historical contexts and its foundational role in shaping new urban futures. By shifting attention to these everyday urban forms, typically designed for working-class populations, this dissertation has challenged the Western-centric and mainstream narratives, and has highlighted the true global scope and diversity of modernist urbanism. The case studies of this dissertation, Mezhdurechensk and Bokaro, exemplified the modernism of peripheral industrial towns. This study suggest that these two cases illustrate the argument that mundane spaces —such as the built environment of planned industrial towns —can be read and translated into politicized landscapes offering alternative readings of past events, as well as potential directions for future forms of sociality, as has been argued for peripheral spaces (Martin, 2014).

By shifting scholarly focus to the less celebrated examples of modern architecture and investigating how modernist principles were realized on the ground in remote invisibilized cities, my research has highlighted the diversity and complexity of modernist urban practices and their social contribution. By attending to the endurance of built environments in planned industrial towns, this dissertation highlights the

micro-practices and often-invisible infrastructures that shape urban life (Grubbauer, 2015). Focusing on underexplored layers of urban landscapes —the historicity of the built environment —is additionally backed up by shifting attention from high-profile architects or new developments projects to the historicity of the built environment—an essential factor in the production of both physical and social spaces.

A crucial finding of this research is the diversity not only of modernist urban forms, but among planned industrial towns in particular. These cities emerged globally on both sides of the Iron Curtain —and beyond—arguably constituting the most common urban type of the twentieth century. Examples could be found across continents, but it is in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, that planned cities in vast majority materialized as industrial towns. For the predominantly agrarian and industrially developing countries—like the early Soviet Union and early post-colonial countries, city planning became central to social modernization and was often integrated to 'catch up' with the perceived modernity of developed nations, resulting in an unprecedented proliferation of planned towns as industrial hubs.

Notably, I demonstrated that modern architecture and planning, especially in the post-World War II era, alongside being intertwined with social transformations, were connected to independence and anti-imperial agendas, as also was previously highlighted by scholars with regards to contexts across Africa, Asia, and beyond (Ikaputra and Widyastuti, 2025). This finding reveals how modernist urbanism was not merely imported from the core capitalist countries —as suggested by some scholars (Swenarton et al, 2015.: 10; Wakeman, 2016: 22) but was developed within and according to local social dynamics and aspirations. This dissertation therefore moves beyond determinist understanding of modernist urbanism, positioning postcolonial and socialist modernist urbanisms as mutually constitutive influences on global modernism. This argument is made explicitly in the second paper of the dissertation but is pronounced is the first and third papers too.

6.1.2. Key characteristics of twentieth-century planned industrial towns

In exploring planned industrial towns built across distinct political and geographical contexts—such as those in the Soviet Union and newly independent India—this dissertation situates these cities within their unique geopolitical settings. Despite the

different political economies and their different positions in the global order, their local towns display notable similarities in their design principles and social goals, employing a juxtapositional comparative approach, as suggested by Bodnár (2001) and discussed above in 4.2, alongside a socio-historical analysis in the sense outlined by Lefebvre (1991) and discussed in chapter 3, this research delineates more clearly both the convergences and specificities of planned industrial towns. This dissertation highlights how, notwithstanding specific differences, global planned industrial towns share core characteristics rooted in the era's embrace of modern technology and the transformative potential of architectural modernism. Below, I outline the key features that define the global phenomenon of the planned industrial town.

First is the enthusiastic embrace of 'progress'. Across contexts, twentieth-century planned towns were envisioned as embodiments of scientific and industrial advancement, rooted in Enlightenment ideals that privileged rationality, and linear, future-oriented notions of time (Alexander et al., 2007: 25; Stammler and Bolotova, 2010). This belief was more than just about industrial growth; it was connected to the ideas from the scientific revolution and Enlightenment, signifying a conscious departure from 'tradition' and 'superstitious' beliefs (Parker, 2014: 109). The scientific temper—reason, empiricism, and objectivity—was heralded as a solution to the era's social and political challenges. The broader 'progress' narrative reshaped perceptions of time, seeing it as linear and future-focused, unlike past cyclical views. It presented improvement as inevitable and tasked society with aligning progress alongside these developments. Urbanization was viewed as a commitment to building a better tomorrow. As Rosemary Wakeman writes: 'whatever their size, whether famous or forgotten, all these new town projects shared a utopian rhetoric and conception […] the new town was a marvellous glimpse at tomorrow' (Wakeman, 2016: 2). In this sense, cities like Mezhdurechensk and Bokaro were not just planned cities, but prototypes for their nations' future visions—flagships of socialist and secular modernity, respectively (ibid.: 8; Parry, 2020: 7–10), bearers of universal progress that is possible thanks to scientific and technological achievements—of which thoughtful urban planning was an example.

A second defining feature is the expanded role and responsibility of the modern state in shaping society, most notably through ambitious state-led urban planning (Heraud,

1968; Swenarton et al., 2015; Zarecor, 2018). Guided by secular and welfare principles, governments assumed an explicit responsibility for the well-being of their citizens —an undertaking not left to individual initiative but rather institutionalized at the state level. This entailed not only the provision of housing and infrastructure but also fostering a working and professional class to guide the modernization process. By minimizing market influence in key sectors and prioritizing social balance and/ or equality, particularly those defined in class and income terms, the state sought to engineer more just and modern urban communities—a dynamic that remains central to debates on the role and responsibility of the state in urban development.

Finally, these planned towns were conceived as arenas for social engineering reflecting the era's zeitgeist, as anthropologist Jonathan Parry puts it (Parry, 2020: 7). While planners often invoked ideals such as balance, harmony, and quality of life, the precise meanings of these concepts were sometimes elusive (Wakeman, 2016: 3). What stands out, however, is the scale and ambition of the changes these towns were meant to embody. Key objectives included providing decent housing, ensuring employment, and guaranteeing access to essential services and resources like water, access to education and health benefits, especially in the immediate post-war and postcolonial periods. The goal was comprehensive societal harmony, extending beyond affluent residential areas to encompass entire urban environments.

6.1.3. Cultivation of the working class in the historical design

A central argument of this dissertation is that the design of planned industrial towns was fundamentally oriented towards the cultivation of a working class. This approach was instrumental to the socialist project of the Soviet Union and the nation-building efforts of early postcolonial India. These cities provided essential amenities for social reproduction and restructured social relations: residents were understood and valued as workers, not consumers or entrepreneurs. Urban design fostered collective identities and egalitarian interactions, encouraging residents to relate to one another first and foremost as workers of some sort, regardless of their particular job or class distinctions. In this analysis, Lefebvre's concept of 'social space' has proven invaluable as the framework highlights how space is both a product of, and a force shaping, social arrangements—underscoring the mutually constitutive relationship between urban form and collective social life.

CHAPTER 6. MAIN FINDINGS

The social character of built environments in planned socialist cities has been widely examined by scholars (e.g. Bocharnikova and Harris, 2018; Murawski, 2018; Cera and Sechi, 2020). Research has shown that the socialist city was conceived as both an instrument of social transformation and a material expression of the state's promise to improve living standards (Zarecor, 2018). These urban environments were designed to provide private family space alongside abundant collective amenities, supporting egalitarian social atmosphere (Smith, 2010; Harris, 2013; Varga-Harris, 2015).

This dissertation has built on these insights, exploring how the built environment of working-class settlement, such as Mezhdurechensk, has shaped the urban landscape following the dissolution of the political institutions that originally supported these urban arrangements. While much attention has historically focused on Soviet contexts, this research has further contributed by providing a socio-historical analysis of planned industrial town design and planning in postcolonial India—an area that has previously received limited scholarly attention. Specifically, the discussion of Bokaro Steel City in the second paper of this dissertation illuminated how the built environment in early postcolonial India was strategically deployed to promote a working-class citizenry on the scale of the planned industrial city.

The evidence suggests that the historical design of these small- to medium-size cities was not solely aimed at improving the material conditions of workers, but also at fostering 'worker-ness' as a collective experience. Both Mezhdurechensk and Bokaro became arenas where new political and social orders were negotiated—spaces of agency for a wide range of actors involved in societal transformation. These findings echo Kotkin's observations on Magnitogorsk (Kotkin, 1995), reinforcing the idea that such cities played an active role in redefining social relations and supporting new political projects. In semi-peripheral and peripheral contexts, where planned industrial towns were especially prominent, these processes assumed particular importance, highlighting the global and context-specific dynamics underpinning modernist urbanism.

6.2. The endurance of planned industrial towns' working-class character in contemporary urban landscapes

6.2.1. *Still* working-class cities: the active legacy of the historical built environment today

Another key finding of this dissertation is the persistence and adaptation of working-class sociality of planned industrial towns, a phenomenon that has been at focus in the first and third papers of this dissertation. Employing historical ethnography as a methodology, this dissertation has demonstrated that the built environment of the planned industrial towns remains a dynamic agent within contemporary social life. By reconceptualizing twentieth-century planned industrial towns as enduring working-class formations, my research reveals how their built environments sustain working-class urban fabric —although sometimes in unexpected ways —even in the face of neoliberal urban transformations. These findings allow us to see the mundane modernist built environment as an active contributor to social struggles.

The first paper of this dissertation has discussed in ethnographic details how the absence of commercial spaces —a characteristic of state-led urban planning, oriented more on social reproduction than on commercial premises —provided both spatial and temporal resources for working-class women. This feature enabled working-class women to navigate and effectively respond to the highly challenging context of intense commercialization and neoliberalization that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The deliberate scarcity of commercial spaces in the urban design delayed the aggressive incursion of capital into the local market. This allowed working-class women to repurpose former institutions such as schools and hospitals as informal market hubs well into the 2000s.

Similarly, the third paper of this dissertation, discussed the impact of the state-led built environment on the contemporary social struggles. The chapter has argued that Bokaro's public leisure facilities constructed during the 1970s remain central for those workers who are otherwise excluded from privatized and commercialized alternatives. These public spaces continue to shelter non-commercial activities even after India's pivot from a welfarist, state-led agenda towards a neoliberal, middle-class-oriented

national politics. Collectively, these cases illustrate the longue durée effects of materiality on the social life of peripheral industrial settlements.

While these places no longer serve the same social roles as they did within the socio-political frameworks that originally produced them, the research demonstrates that the very fabric of these urban social spaces continues to contribute to social arrangements for the benefits of working-class people. This continuity is not limited to a symbolic remembering of a state socialist or Nehruvian socio-political order. Rather, the built environment actively mediates concrete practices of social life in the present—affording access to public parks, libraries, leisure facilities, and other non-commercialized domains of everyday interaction, as shown in the first and third papers. The historical built environment, therefore, ensures the persistence of non-commercialized and accessible forms of sociality, directly shaping the lived experiences of working-class residents who have limited access to contemporary amenities. As such, the contribution of the planned industrial towns' built environment to contemporary urban life is both material and relational, underpinning present-day forms of social interaction that are irreducible to mere remembrance of the past.

This continuity is arguably constituted by the enduring 'social space' — as understood through the notion of Lefebvre— which never fully disappears not only due to the 'lived' dimension of the space such as the usage and appropriation practices, but also due to its 'conceived' and 'perceived' dimensions: the socio-political visions and material forms which co-constitute the social space. This endurance persists even amid the growing individualization and commercialization of social relations within contemporary urban shifts. The emphasis on continuity in understanding urban spaces allows to see beyond ruptures and erasures, which dominate the discourse on global planned industrial town as discussed in 2.2.

Both case studies demonstrate that modernist urban forms, being oriented toward some kind of egalitarian or developmentalist goals, embed lasting potentials in shaping social relations long after their initial ideological frameworks have left their hegemonic places. This counters not only critiques of modernist urbanism that dismiss it as a politically imposed form lacking social or residential rationale (cf. Scott, 1998; Sennett, 2010) but also the prevailing narratives of ubiquitous neoliberal homogenization (Peck et al., 2009; Gentile, 2018). Having outlived their ideological

context, these planned spaces —as shown in the first and third papers of the dissertation —contribute to this layered social reality, supports the arguments of researchers, who caution against overstating the power of recent neoliberal changes to erase or wholly transform modernist urban spaces with its sociality (Beech, 2014; Molnár, 2013; Sechi and Golubchikov, 2025).

These findings directly challenge the notion advanced by many scholars (Scott, 1998; Hommels, 2008; Sennett, 2010) who maintain that state-led urban planning produces rigid built environments that become socially inadequate over time. Instead, the research suggests that materiality is not simply subordinate to the political upheavals or regime changes; rather, the built environment possesses a durable agency of its own, sustaining certain social functions and identities well beyond the lifespan of the socio-political frameworks that produced it. Following Lefebvrian dialectics (1991), this dissertation approaches the built environment as more than a static container: it is a dynamic and historical social space that never completely disappears but instead accumulates successive meanings, which is vividly illustrated in both cities. The historical material forms in these settlements inherited from state-led projects of the last century are not simply passive remnants; they endure as active resources for collective life, providing working-class residents with spaces as tools to negotiate changing conditions and to maintain the urban social relations of the past.

While neoliberal policies and practices aim to repurpose urban spaces economically, their material bedrock still reflects originating social relations (Lefebvre, 1991: 229). The findings of this research are therefore understood through Lefebvre's insight that social space never fully disappears; rather, it accumulates layers of meaning, constraining and enabling agency in forms that resist total neoliberal reshaping. Anchoring this continuity in Lefebvre's concept of social space, the findings highlight the built environment's central, active role in the endurance of the modernist built environment in contributing to the social struggle. Thus, the urban is understood not just as a backdrop but as an ongoing participant in the production and reproduction of certain socialities—capable of both conserving and enabling new forms of working-class life. Built environment of planned industrial towns must be recognized therefore not as an inert expression of state power, but as a historically resilient participant in the ongoing contestation and negotiation that take active part in today's social struggle.

6.2.2. Contradictions of endurance: historicity as a site of tension and transformation

A crucial insight arising from this research is that the very durability of materiality — understood not merely as physical structures: ‘space is not a thing’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 73) but as social space— entails a continued persistence of sociality, at least to some extent. This enduring presence of social space, in turn, establishes the conditions for contradictions and recurrent cycles of transformation over time (Lefebvre, 1991: 52, 62–63; Ahuja, 2019: 38). The multi-layered temporal structure of urban environments, and the persistent tensions among these historical layers, define both the potential and the limits of any institutional interventions into existing urban spaces. This perspective is indispensable for understanding the uneven and contradictory transformations unfolding in planned industrial towns today.

The theoretical approach adopted in the dissertation, grounded in Lefebvre’s dialectic of space, exposes the city’s multi-layered structure, allowing us to see social space as a site of contradictions and to trace the complex ways that different historical ‘layers’ of spatial design, social use, and materiality interact. Rather than viewing modernist cities solely as being entirely rewritten by neoliberal logics, or statically staying as past urban structures, this framework situates them as historically specific phenomena whose form and function are continuously reworked and remoulded in urban context while embracing their original social space.

The research presented in the first and third papers demonstrates the asymmetry of spatial transformations: the resilience of working-class social space does not extend to the city as a whole but is increasingly serving the vulnerable of the market-driven order. Instead of disappearing, these spaces become in some ways marginalized strongholds—persistent but embattled sites of working-class interactions that continue to influence everyday life and class dynamics. This contradiction is central to the ongoing class struggle, as these spaces simultaneously resist and accommodate the pressures of a changing urban order.

Moreover, as argued in recent scholarship on both former socialist cities (Golubchikov, 2016) and Indian planned towns (Strümpell, 2013), heightened class divisions emerging in the changes of the 1990s, now overlay these historic environments. In this context, modernist urban planning provides a form of shelter or

shield for less privileged groups, offering material and social infrastructures that can soften, though not eliminate, the harshness of the new market system. The contradiction, then, lies in the fact that while these environments were not designed for the inequalities now imposed upon them, their material and social histories allow them to serve as refuges—however imperfect—against the full exclusionary force of neoliberal urbanism.

Ultimately, these planned industrial towns exemplify the core insight of Lefebvre's theory: social space does not vanish but instead becomes the ground upon which new contradictions and contestations play out over time. The endurance of materiality is thus not simply a matter of persistence, but a source of both possibility and tension—a long-term social actor shaping, and shaped by, ongoing political and social transformations.

6.2.3. Lessons for urban future-making

The study of Mezhdurechensk and Bokaro demonstrates that the aspiration to build new and better cities—the impulse behind much of today's urban future-making—has deep historical roots. The modernist cities at the heart of this dissertation were not only experiments in social engineering; they were ambitious attempts to create entirely new environments and forms of citizenship, meant to reflect and produce the most advanced and ideal forms of society. Contemporary projects, from new towns in Asia and the Middle East to large-scale ecological initiatives, continue in this tradition of building for the future.

However, this dissertation underscores that future-making in the urban realm cannot ignore the historicity and agency of existing built environments. Space is not a passive backdrop; rather, material urban forms—accumulated over time—actively shape how new projects are received, how social life unfolds, and even how new ideals are contested or realized. The enduring materiality of the city possesses its own momentum, often exerting as much influence on urban futures as intended new developments do. Thus, meaningful urban transformations must engage critically and creatively with the historic layers and active forces embedded in the built environment, acknowledging that the future is always constructed in dialogue with what already exists.

Importantly, this reminds us that today's urban interventions—no matter how innovative or future-oriented —will similarly endure beyond their original context, shaping future possibilities and inequalities in ways we cannot fully predict. In light of this, any meaningful effort at urban future-making should remain critically aware of how material environments persist, accumulate meaning, and become contested terrains for future social and class struggles. Designing cities, then, is never only about the present; it is also about the long echoes those choices will have in shaping the social worlds yet to come.

6.3. Research limitations and future directions

This dissertation explores the sociality of planned industrial towns located in remote regions of Russia and India and unveils how historical built environments continue to shape social — particularly class — dynamics in these cities today. Yet there are notable limitations that must be acknowledged.

While this study foregrounds material structures and the enduring legacies of the built environment, future research could further enrich our understanding of class dynamics and spatial practices through a more extensive collection of in-depth interviews with residents. Such approaches hold promise for uncovering how different groups establish relationships with place and interact within these urban settings. In Bokaro, for example, engaging with a broader array would also require overcoming linguistic barriers as my interlocutors were speaking different languages, including Bhojpuri. A deeper ethnographic inquiry might also shed light on how those living *around* planned cities perceive and experience the spatial dynamics generated by these environments. There remains considerable scope to explore the ways in which the material legacy of planned towns continues to shape social and spatial relations, not only within their boundaries but also across the surrounding urban fabric, thus broadening our perspective on their wider socio-spatial significance.

Furthermore, while the findings offer insights into class dynamics within the cities, I suggest not to establish universally planned industrial towns as definitive models for urbanism that cultivated working class. The influence of these built environments must be examined alongside other significant factors, such as economic policies and labour movements, which also contribute to shaping class relationships in these contexts.

Despite these limitations, the research contributes two critical insights. First, it unpacks one of the most unexplored and mundane yet prevailing urban forms of modernist urbanism, such as planned industrial towns. These settlements, beyond their technological and positivist roots, were utopian ventures seeking greater equity across national and regional contexts (Wakeman, 2016: 2, 298). Using examples from different political and geographical contexts, this study demonstrates how postwar urbanism sought to transcend speculative development in favor of socially-oriented design paradigms. Solutions for post-war reconstruction consciously rejected former models of urban speculation and profit-driven development, which reduced urban spaces to mere opportunities for capital investment (Harvey, 1989). Instead, socially-oriented planned urbanism, as seen in these planned towns, represented a forward-thinking initiative towards a future with greater class-equality and collectivism as envisioned by urban professionals and governmental bodies in that period. Secondly, the research underscores the lived legacy of this global urban form and highlights its historical and contemporary significance in contributing to social dynamics. The legacy of these environments may emerge in unexpected ways, such as socialist-era nurseries evolving into informal market hubs or postcolonial public spaces resisting full commodification.

Moving forward, the study identifies several priorities for further research. Expanding the analysis of ‘social space’, as conceptualized by Lefebvre, to other planned industrial towns from the twentieth century—such as Scandinavian welfare cities, African mining towns, and company towns across both North and Latin America—promises to yield valuable insights. Understanding how different state-citizen-property relationships materialize spatially and comparing these to contemporary new towns from a working-class perspective in different geographical and political contexts could shed light on change of urban paradigms over years and explore evolving patterns. In addition, there is a pressing need to investigate how residents adapt and repurpose modernist infrastructures in response to current challenges, including ecological crises, commercialization of public life, and managerial-class dominance in urban spaces. This kind of inquiry would necessitate deep ethnographic engagement with communities to appreciate the nuanced ways space is negotiated and lived.

Moreover, an interdisciplinary synthesis between urban studies and labour sociology could uncover how built form influences class relations and address why many modernist spaces, including modernist planned towns, are often reduced to mere economic projects or neglected in mainstream theory, as noted by Kulić (2018). Lastly, there is substantial potential for gender-related research within these environments. Exploring how the built environment contributes to contemporary social dynamics could shed light on its impact on different groups, such as working-class or other marginalized women. A nuanced gendered approach is essential to understand how the women experience and appropriate these spaces, particularly in the context of urban shifts favouring the middle class.

7 Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the interplay between neoliberal politics and practices, from one side, and the planned industrial towns' urban space of another era, from another side. The central hypothesis proposed here is that state-led—often labelled as 'top-down'—urban planning has served as a crucial shelter or shield for working-class populations who have found themselves in some ways marginalized amid the rise of market-driven socio-political systems. Empirically, these dynamics were investigated in two planned industrial towns—Mezhdurechensk in Russia and Bokaro Steel City in India—both geographically peripheral yet emblematic of the modernist ambition to build cities and developed primarily in association with the industrial workforce.

This dissertation underscores that urban space, conceived as an ensemble of entrenched social relations, possesses a historical endurance that cannot easily be dismantled by market forces, or political ideology — an idea central to Lefebvre's concept of the endurance of social space developed in the theoretical chapter. Recognizing the historicity of these urban spaces is vital in grasping urban transformation—not only as an effect of neoliberalism but also as the result of the continued legacy of their original design.

The ongoing presence and function of historical urban planning and spaces as contributors to working-class life are visible in the ability of Mezhdurechensk's urban space to provide support for women lacking access to the shrinking labour market, or Bokaro's provision of non-commercial and affordable leisure opportunities for people excluded from the privatized entertainment. In the context of neoliberal ideology, which frames individual wellbeing as a matter of personal responsibility and routinely excludes certain groups from access to urban resources, these—enduring, state-built inherited environments continue to provide crucial forms of support for working-class residents, particularly for those facing new forms of exclusion. As such, this dissertation argues that these cities were created as, and continue to function as, working-class settlements

The absence of private property—a standard condition in the planned economy of Soviet Union, and exceptional situation in Indian mixed economy—enabled planning logics centred around state-led residential zones and abundant social reproduction facilities and public spaces. The public industrial company —the owner of the land

and all the city's premises —was not an independent social actor, but largely an instrument of the state's vision for these cities and was responsible for implementing this vision locally. By foregrounding the urban design and planning of peripheral planned industrial towns—built upon modernist logics of focusing on large-scale housing, public amenities, robust infrastructure, strong state involvement, and centralized planning—this dissertation challenges the Western-centric historiography of modernist urbanism. Rather than emphasizing solely individual, often well-known architects like Le Corbusier or those related to CIAM, or on iconic brutalist buildings or administrative capitals, the dissertation redirects scholarly attention to often-overlooked and invisibilized but a broader and more diverse landscape of modernist urbanism vital to working-class life.

Overall, this dissertation demonstrates the continued relevance of Lefebvre's conceptualization, which integrates social and material relations, property regimes, and land mechanisms, as a powerful lens for analysing both the present realities and future trajectories of urban life. It also highlights the role of urban experiences as arenas where broader social dynamics, state interventions, and collective identities are negotiated, offering possibilities for agency, adaptation, and resistance. Understanding the endurance and evolving impact of historically contingent modernist urban planning remains critical for analysing ongoing social effects and for identifying both the possibilities and constraints for counter-hegemonic urban futures.

Data Availability Statement

This dissertation draws on qualitative data, including but not limited to the ethnographic research in Mezhdurechensk, Russia (February–March 2019), and Bokaro Steel City, India (February–March 2023; November–December 2023). In accordance with ethical guidelines and copyright regulations, all data that can be publicly shared have been made available in the associated peer-reviewed publications and the framing paper.

All data that can be published with regards to the case-study of Mezhdurechensk are included in the framing paper and Paper 1 of the dissertation:

Redkina, I. (2025) Pioneers of gentrification: women entrepreneurs prospecting in a post-Soviet industrial city. *Journal of Urban History* 51.1, 210-227. doi: 10.1177/00961442231194105

This encompasses selected excerpts from semi-structured biographical interviews, fieldwork notes, and relevant visual and historical materials, all published with appropriate permissions. Detailed information regarding the six informants whose narratives underpin the analysis is published in the Appendix of Paper 1; additionally, one interview was withdrawn by the informant and therefore, its excerpts and data on the informant are not published. Photographs and other visual materials are included and appropriately cited in the dissertation. Materials sourced from social media groups and published works therefore are cited and linked, as permitted. Further underlying data, such as raw interview transcripts, audio files, field notes, and copyrighted historical or visual materials, cannot be made available due to ethical restrictions (including participant confidentiality and withdrawal of consent) and copyright limitations.

All data with regards to the case-study of Bokaro Steel City that can be shared are published in the framing paper, and Papers 2 and 3 of the dissertation:

Redkina, I. (2025) Contextualized modernism: Cultivating a technical elite through urban planning in post-colonial India's industrial city. *Urban History.* Published online 2025:1-22. doi: 10.1017/S0963926825100400

Redkina, I. (2025) From working-class cultivation to non-commercialized social interactions: The evolving social role of modernist public spaces in an Indian

industrial city. In M. Grubbauer, J. Thiel, & L. Pohl (eds.), *Contingencies in urban future-making*, Transcript, Bielefeld, 99–127. ISBN: 978-3-8394-3014-9.

This includes selected interview segments, fieldwork notes, archival and other visual materials (used with the owner's permission). Archival and social media sources utilized in the research are fully referenced in the publications. The urban planning documents, original photographs, raw interview data (transcripts and audio files), and detailed fieldwork notes remain unavailable owing to a participant anonymity, and restrictions associated with the private ownership and copyright of source materials.

In summary, all data that can be made publicly available are included within the dissertation's published papers. Data, that is excluded from publications, is withheld due to the following reasons: (1) ethical restrictions relating to participant confidentiality and / or withdrawal of consent; (2) informant requests for non-disclosure or anonymity; and/or (3) legal constraints, including copyright and private ownership of certain documents and images.

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Annexe: Publications of this dissertation

Annexe A: Full text of paper 1

Pioneers of gentrification: Women entrepreneurs prospecting in a post-soviet industrial city

Redkina, I. (2023) Pioneers of gentrification: Women entrepreneurs prospecting in a post-soviet industrial city. *Journal of Urban History* 51.1, 210–227. https://doi.org/10.1177/00961442231194105 (Original work published 2025)

Article

Pioneers of Gentrification: Women Entrepreneurs Prospecting in a Post-Soviet Industrial City

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Abstract

After the introduction of market reforms in the post-socialist coal-mining city of Mezhdurechensk (Russia), the original urban planning rooted in Soviet industrial modernity adapted to the logic of globalization and gentrification. One way this played out is the conversion of streets into sites of consumption, with the appearance of numerous ground-floor shops that gave underemployed women an opportunity to facilitate early gentrification. This dynamic ended in the mid-2010s, when more prominent market players began to dominate the city space with franchise shops. This article is an ethnographic exploration of how working-class women, drawing on their gendered and class-based skills, demarcate a place for themselves in post-Soviet industrial settings and become the pioneers of gentrification. I also explore the limits of women's self-employment activities and the narrative of individual responsibility for entrepreneurial failure, namely the eventual closure of their businesses twenty-five years later.

Keywords

gentrification, women, gender, labor, entrepreneurship, post-Soviet studies, postindustrial cities, ethnographic case study, self-employment, Russia

Introduction

The unique history of single-industry settlements built in the USSR and other state socialist countries (often referred to in academic texts and the media as *monogoroda*, literally, "monotowns") has attracted researchers and activists interested in urban (re)structuring of the post-socialist period. Socialist architecture and centralized urban planning, and their public and leisure spaces in particular, are regarded in these studies not only as relics from the past. They are also a significant part of the contemporary European urban landscape[1] and provide an alternative vision of neoliberal urban planning both for the present and future.[2] Investigating the social experiences that are present in industrial post-socialist cities permeated by global capital flows is not yet usual in the field. However, there is a growing number of sociological publications dedicated to the intersecting themes of labor, gender, and neoliberalism.[3] My study contributes to this scholarship on urban transformations in post-socialist industrial cities by analyzing the role of

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women small-scale entrepreneurs in the early gentrification of a coal-mining Siberian city over the last thirty years.

By closely analyzing women's participation in globalization and gentrification processes, I seek to read female entrepreneurial trajectories not as the result of being exploited by global forces but as evidence of their engagement with post-Soviet urban changes and their involvement in constructing them. I argue that female business owners of micro companies were initial agents of gentrification in the post-Soviet industrial city of Mezhdurechensk, and I also analyze the limits of this engagement. By the mid-2010s—once a certain level of gentrification had been reached—the interviewed entrepreneurs shut down their enterprises and started to look for other work strategies.

By taking up Emanuela Guano's encouragement to study women's involvement in the process of urban renovation—which in her research context was the transforming of post-industrial Genoa's piazzas and streets into sites of the consumption of culture[4]—I demonstrate women's involvement with the gentrification processes of post-Soviet Mezhdurechensk. This research also takes a cue from Hanna-Mari Ikonen's study on the "periphery" of Finland,[5] which argues that, in the long run, entrepreneurship entails a level of self-exploitation incompatible with a mother's gendered role; therefore, this work choice, first, cannot be permanent, and second, brings a significant level of disappointment. Her study is rooted in Will Atkinson's approach, which questions the individualization of risk and points to permanent classed responses to precarity.[6] Drawing on Ikonen and Atkinson, I explore the trajectories of these women's enterprises and the limits of self-employment as a (gendered) work strategy in post-Soviet industrial urban settings. This article explores how the young women of the late Soviet generation became pioneers of gentrification but were then pushed out from the local urban space. By the end of the article, I investigate the narrative of personal entrepreneurial failure which is prevalent in the records of the interviewees, in light of the shared story of their enterprises being shut down by the mid-2010s.

Methodological Reflections

This research has an auto-ethnographic component, as it stems in part from my own experience as a daughter of an industrial-worker father and of an entrepreneur mother, who had made several attempts to succeed in business after losing her job as an engineer in the beginning of the 1990s. I grew up in a home where the variety of cosmetics and accessories my mother stocked for sale was a source of fascination for me. I brought my friends home, and together we looked at lipsticks of different colors; we carefully opened lids to sniff perfumes for sale on the shelves; marveled at the sets of bracelets and earrings. Our home was often crowded with my mother's female colleagues or clients who, in my view, were both real ladies and independent women doing business. In my childhood imagination, my mother's office was a mysterious place where grand ambitions and dreams could come true. With her job, my mother was bringing a seemingly parallel reality to my daily life, with the beauty of foreign cosmetics and ambitious female colleagues. Given the role that my mother's working pursuits had played in my socialization, I could not help being intrigued by —what I retrospectively consider—the politics of class and gender emerging from women's independent economic activities, starting in the very beginning of the 1990s and expanding all across small Russian cities during the following decades.

For ethnographic fieldwork, I went to Mezhdurechensk in the spring of 2019 and spent two months there. This short-term fieldwork is built on prior lived experience in the region. During my visit in 2019, I noticed the profound transformations in the city's built environment: the beautification of several downtown streets and squares, as well as the replacement of the central open-air market by a mall, and a variety of independent shop spaces by franchise supermarkets. Only a few places could still be found where the city allowed individuals to conduct informal trade.

The initial focus of this research was on women aged forty-four to fifty-five, all university or vocational school graduates who had started to run their own small businesses in post-Soviet Mezhdurechensk by the beginning of the 2000s and whose work-related decision-making was affected by a changing labor market. All of them previously lived in other cities, and none of them came from the intelligentsia or a middle-class family. They did not have "ins" or connections to the top municipal administration levels, nor to the executive board or shareholders of the local mines. In other words, these women lacked the access to different forms of capital which were useful, and sometimes necessary, for starting a business enterprise.

I conducted six one-hour-long semi-structured interviews, which in some cases included an ethnographic "reversal" where the interviewees carefully asked me about my own educational and working experiences, as well as my family status, opening up a more informal interview space. Though remembering with nostalgia the time of personal and professional development when they were self-employed, at the same time, they retrospectively regretted the structure of their work–life balance from that period, and some of them shared their motherhood challenges. This influenced my central research question on their enterprises' trajectories, as I then included the factors of subjects' life courses and personal evaluation of this work strategy into my analysis. This approach is rooted in oral history scholarship, which draws attention to inter-subjectivity, especially in the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee.[7]

A City Proud of Its Miners

The city of Mezhdurechensk is one of the hundreds of monotowns purpose-built in the USSR to service a single industry, as part of the country's heavy urbanization process. Mezhdurechensk is a town with about 100,000 people in southwestern Siberia, with a steady population decline since 1994. The city was established in the 1950s to increase industrial coal production (see Figure 1) and had one of the largest coal mines in the USSR—PJSC Raspadskaya—which is still Russia's largest single underground mine. During the Soviet times, the state's role as an industrial owner and industrial zoning regulator was central to the region. In 1989, Raspadskaya was the first site of that year's coal miner's strikes, which had a huge impact on Gorbachev's Soviet Union. The argument has been made that because of the scale of that strike, post-Soviet Mezhdurechensk has received steady attention from top Russian politicians, including several visits of the current president. After the USSR dissolution, the city's economic profile did not change. However, with the reconstruction of the Soviet planned economy into a market economy, Mezhdurechensk started to depend directly on coal market prices. Workers from the mines and other former state-operated entities were forced to contend with unpaid wages for months, while public services stopped being free.

Gradually, all fourteen enterprises in Mezhdurechensk became parts of three massive holdings, one of which was controlled by Gennady Kozovoy, one of the top one hundred wealthiest people in contemporary Russia. Mezhdurechensk in this manner was not an exception but rather a rule: this unequal privatization of industrial enterprises happened in the 1990s in most post-socialist cities[8] and took place with the active backing of state authorities and foreign capital. The last major change occurred in 2013, when Evraz—a U.K.-based multinational steel-making and mining company, one-third of which belonging to Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich—took control of a few coal mining enterprises, including PJSC Raspadskaya. In 2016, the workforce layoffs and the downsizing of the primary coal enterprise of Raspadskaya were so heavy (within six months, the mine had reduced staff by 20%) that even the local authorities, which almost never critiqued the company, publicly demanded that the mine leadership stop its layoffs.[9]

Since the 2000s Mezhdurechensk's authorities and allied corporations have been experimenting with redefining the city's identity toward making it more attractive for tourists. However, the

Figure 1. Mezhdurechensk's Emblem. Taken from the official website of Mezhdurechensk' administration: accessed April 10, 2023, https://www.mrech.ru/goverment/gerb/2010/04/21/8512-gerb-goroda-mezhdurechenska.html#gallery-8512.

Figure 2. A sculpture called "Following in my father's footsteps" was established in 2017 on a main city square. Taken from the Tur-Raj.Ru Online Newspaper: accessed April 10, 2023, https://tur-ray.ru/mezhdurechensk-attractions.html.

proud coal mine worker has remained a key symbol of the city. Mezhdurechensk is peppered with banners and bronze monuments glorifying miners and their labor (see Figure 2). Also, when I visited the main municipal library, female librarians were bewildered by my request for media articles on women's labor in the city: "This is a mining town. Here, work is mostly for men." This correlates with the title of Mikhail Agapov's study on an oil industry city of Kogolym, located in

the Russian North: "Everyone is an oil man here." Agapov demonstrates that the formula of a single-industry city, "the city of X," where X stands for representatives of the corresponding profession (thus, "Mezhdurechensk—the city of coal miners"), is common for this type of settlement; this results in the hegemony of an industry worker's identity and hides the structural inequality of other occupations.[10] Although one can easily find women working outside their homes, such as in Mezhdurechensk's banks, municipal offices, hospitals, kindergartens, and schools, a common perception of paid labor in the city is still associated with men. Most of my interviewees too did not see anything extraordinary in portraying a male coal miner as a worker deserving most social and political acknowledgment.

From that, we can infer that the prevalence of masculine manual labor is linked to an inherited glorification of production work, rendering other forms of labor comparatively invisible, and therefore underestimated. For women entrepreneurs, this masculine image of Mezhdurechensk adds to the invisibility of their own contribution to the city's transformation.

No Way We Stay Home

In the first decade after the dissolution of the USSR, mine workers faced deteriorating working conditions: there were months when salaries were not paid, or they were paid "in kind." Nonetheless, many (mostly men, including some of the interviewed women's husbands) did not want to risk their formal job contracts and still prestigious work in mines. Therefore, male breadwinners used to stay in their positions, hoping for a better change. Some of them, though, obtained an informal side job for cash. They were ready to wait and endure, hoping that, over time, their primary occupation would again become well paid, stable, and, at best, prestigious. Their reliance on a bright future was primarily viewed in connection with the enterprise they worked at.

The labor market situation was quite different for women employed at state-subsidized enterprises in the industrial cities of post-Soviet Russia. They were the last who could hope of keeping formal employment during massive layoffs.[11] Some of them could not return to their employers to work after maternity leave, as those enterprises no longer existed. Young women, who had just finished school or graduated from college, were confronted with a generalized lack of access to formal white- and blue-collar jobs at recently privatized state companies.[12] However, according to several studies,[13] women were eager to not "return home," as working outside the home became essential to women's everyday lives in former Soviet industrialized regions.

Barbara Alpern Engel[14] and Marina Kiblitskaya,[15] in their respective analyses of women in the early post-Soviet labor market, argue that when women's engineering, teaching, financing, and other work or education qualifications became not capitalizable, many searched for other ways of earning a living. They had not looked for ways of commercializing their hobbies or interests but were driven to search for money, especially quick money. Within the highly restricted options in the labor market of an industrial city, and trying out their skills in supply chains, logistics, and customer communication, women eventually turned to self-employment. It provided access to much-needed cash, social mobility, a degree of security and personal empowerment,[16] and the feeling of not being trapped and/or bored at home.[17] Emanuela Guano, in an Italian case study, demonstrates that many middle-class women grabbed the opportunity to create new "cultural" niches for themselves in post-industrial Genoa's urban space: they became vendors in antique and artisan fairs, and took up jobs as intercultural operators, tourist and museum guides, and cultural animators.[18] Likewise, in Mezhdurechensk, the working-class women being socially accepted as experts on women's products and services demarcated the business niche of "female-oriented" goods and services, such as toys for kids, women's clothing, beauty services, and many others. The women I talked to started monetizing precisely the "womanly" spheres, where they were supposed to have skills, such as women's fashion, cosmetics, and hairdressing. This was a way to sidestep the tension between "doing business," which is coded as male,[19] and "doing

gender." In this way, the socially accepted constructs of being a woman and an entrepreneur would not be in great conflict.

The Happiness of Family Life and Overwork

The entrepreneurial subject is not genderless, as imagined in the neoliberal model of personhood, and the decision to become and continue to be an entrepreneur cannot be understood without looking at the (gendered) life course[20] of a business owner. The notion of a gendered life course includes the notion of generations: the women in this study belong to the generation born in the 1960 and 1970s and experienced early post-Soviet transformations in Mezhdurechensk in the 1990s as young mothers. In the biographical narratives that follow, I explore how being part of that generation, and the women's experience of motherhood in the 1990s, is expressed in the endeavor of earning and gaining control over their lives.

All my interviewees, born in the 1960s and 1970s, were married by the beginning of the 1990s, and all but one had been young mothers. I do not find this pattern a coincidence, but instead due to the late Soviet gender order. In the Soviet gender order during Brezhnev's rule (when most interviewees were socialized), the state was the primary agent in regulating employment, family, and social support for women. It was shaping changes in official discourse interpreting femininity and masculinity. The state carried out a pronatalist social policy and pursued an ideology that equates "correct femininity" with motherhood.[21] As portrayed by influential Soviet movies such as *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1979)[22] and *Office Romance* (1977),[23] a woman's happiness is determined by family life. A specific combination of the late-Soviet legacy and the lack of possibilities of formal employment during the post-Soviet period encouraged women to succeed and perform both within the household and professionally and to take *full* responsibility for these spheres. Moreover, while young women were exposed to uncertainty and a blurry image of the future, taking the employment situation as their own responsibility might have given them the feeling of control over planning and composing their future.

Several studies argue that women actively looking for a place in the labor market were driven by their responsibility toward family and their vision of what family life should look like.[24] Indeed, my interviewees confirm this observation. Marina, a schoolteacher in art with a university degree and relevant experience in the late 1980s in Kazakhstan, worked together with her husband for a sewing company when they came to Mezhdurechensk in the beginning of the 1990s. After the company withheld workers' salaries in 1995, Marina decided to work as a salesperson in a shop to pay for her children's day nursery. Entering the retail business then, she was surprised at how much profit one could make: "My salary [as a salesperson] was paid at the end of each working day: 800 to 900 rubles a day. It took me two days to cover the monthly day nursery payment. The rent for the apartment was 100 rubles. And, you know, you could live pretty well with the rest of the money." Later it helped that her husband stayed with the sewing company, because when in the beginning of the joint business with her sister, Marina needed a car, they were using the one Marina's husband had access to as he was employed as a driver. Subsequently, Marina was the one who quit work with the company in 1998, with no further state social support, and took this risk of an initially informal employment, which might have been only temporary, and had limited opportunities for advancement. Only after their small company became established did Marina's husband leave his employment at the sewing company and become officially hired at Marina's. This allowed him to not have a gap in pension fund contributions. As Marina emphasized, doing extra work and taking on an extra challenge was her way of caring about herself and her family's future. Marina hence took up the roles of breadwinner and caretaker at the same time.

In 1993, when Inga started to work in the open-air market in Mezhdurechensk, her son was younger than three years old, so not allowed in day nursery yet. At that time, her husband worked at a factory and often had shifts during the daytime. Therefore, she left her son alone most days,

when nobody could babysit him, while she worked nearby. "It was good that we lived close to the market. So, if I felt something was wrong with my son, I'd just run and check," remembers Inga. Vera recalls a similar obstacle of having an infant at the beginning of the 1990s. After coming to Mezhdurechensk in 1994 from Kazakhstan together with her husband, Vera—who was pregnant—soon realized that his salary was not reliable. One year later, Vera started to trade: making her rounds at public enterprises with a small rollaway and staying at the central market. She left her son with her friend, who stayed home with her own children and agreed to take care of him. Another interviewee, Natalia, also sold cosmetics, yet she invited interested women to her home, where she stayed with her two children. So, this at first informal self-employment allowed the women to choose when and where to earn money. Studies show that the likelihood of a married woman, especially with children, becoming self-employed is higher than that of a single woman.[25] Some scholars consider self-employment as a strategy to balance motherhood and family care work with income-generating work, even at the expense of overwork.[26] In her research on entrepreneurial experience of one woman living in the "margins" of Finland, Ikonen points out that for her informant, self-employment ultimately entails a level of self-exploitation that requires a lot of endurance and self-governance.[27] Likewise, when I asked Vera whether it was hard for her to be an entrepreneur in a male-dominated city, she did not like the question and responded, "by nature, women were created to manage more tasks and to be flexible."

Although the pro-market ideologists of the 1990s did not have a strict agenda about gender relations in post-Soviet Russia,[28] a significant decrease in the number of affordable childcare places made it harder to balance paid work with childcare and housework (which was considered to be a female responsibility). Subsequently, the general flexibility of working hours offered by self-employment was an important asset in combining childcare, household work, and paid work—a task in front of which many young women of Mezhdurechensk of the 1990s un-accidently found themselves. Self-employment as a work decision of young women thus can be seen as a consequence of the late-Soviet gender order, where primary responsibilities over children were placed on the mother's shoulders.[29]

On the Frontiers of Gentrification: Biographical Accounts

The modern Soviet city was built on the ideological triad of industry, urban space, and welfare—a state-socialist set for the future-building of an egalitarian society. A third of contemporary Russian cities were built in the USSR as *monogoroda*, single-industry cities centered around one particular natural resource. The Soviet urban planning embodied in the *monogoroda* model was based on the understanding that industries and urban forms should be interdependent.[30] Therefore, special attention was paid to public places and public facilities, but not to commercial spaces. This means that right after the market economy was introduced, social spaces such as an open-air market, hospitals, and public education institutions (schools, libraries, and kindergartens) were the primary places used for commercial activities. Since the 2000s, Mezhdurechensk has been undergoing a reconstruction of public infrastructures and services: new residential buildings started to appear, the city was beautified, and an increased number of ground-floor shops have been changing their names and been given a fancier look. Gentrification and commercialization led by large national and regional chain stores have been introduced in Mezhdurechensk, not without participation of the interviewed female entrepreneurs. The city's outlook was changing: Central Park was renovated, the biggest streets were accessorized with decorative tiles and small geometric sculptures, and by the end of the 2000s one could see a new bowling alley, family-friendly restaurants, and a cinema which became a trendy place among teenagers and families. Regular customers and the increasing revenues of the women's businesses were interrelated with this urban development: they were renting their first shop spaces and competed over new sales stands at the most profitable places in the city: the central open-air markets and the main trafficked street.

The city's main commercial thoroughfare, Kommunisticheskij Avenue, was reconstructed between 2005 and 2007: a beautiful water fountain with lights and music appeared in front of the headquarters of Raspadskaya, and renovated lighting, plentiful benches, and attractive landscaping, including flower beds, made this avenue the favorite recreation area of local citizens. During the 2000s, which was a golden period for many professionals in Russia, including small-scale entrepreneurs, Kommunisticheskij Avenue and the open-air central markets were the best-selling spots.

That is how Marina remembers choosing a spot for her first shop in 1998:

> I walked along the [Kommunisticheskij] avenue; I knew I had to get a place on this street. Why? Because this was the most heavily trafficked street. Back then, it was like the Arbat [the street in Moscow, a tourist destination and an important trade street, home to many craftspeople and shopkeepers—I.R.]. Today there is nothing. These chain stores took over everything. It seems that now more people go to the Palata mall than to all the shops on that street. But back then, it was the most high-profile street. That's how it played a role too [at the business], that the road was full of people. (Marina)

In this quote, Marina also refers to a moment of change in trade on Kommunisticheskji Avenue: franchise shops and malls appeared in Mezhdurechensk at the end of the 2000s. The first big supermarket appeared in Mezhdurechensk at the end of the 2000s, and the malls at the beginning of the 2010s.[31] The first two-floor mall, Palata (meaning "palace"), was built on the outskirts of the city in 2011 and is still one of the biggest malls in the city. On the ground floor, there is a supermarket surrounded by smaller shops of mobile phones and watches, as well as a few ATMs, with a few more shops on the upper floor. That was only the first mall structure to appear, and this diverted customer flows. By the mid-2010s, there were more than five malls, in the city and outside it. Eventually, in the beginning of 2014, even the central open-air market located in the heart of the city, where Marina, Inga, and Vera had their stands (*paviljony*), was dismantled. Now occupying the site is the Rajon mall (meaning "district"), which has operated there since 2015.

As Marina insightfully emphasized, the expansion of mall spaces pulled the flow of customers away from previously highly trafficked streets. This multiplied the competition for malls' retail booths, which were significantly more expensive than the smaller shops on the streets, and which put small-scale entrepreneurs in a more disadvantaged position than franchises and mid-sized business owners. The rent at malls' booths was not manageable for most of my interviewees. They could not compete with franchise owners or other major market players. Another business, run by the interviewee Inga, was also dramatically affected by the dismantlement of the market. In the very beginning of her trading activities, Inga was selling clothes mostly in kindergartens, sometimes in schools. Later, she rented a metal kiosk at an open-air market until her business became more formalized. Structural upgrades from metal kiosks to pavilions became required by the market, and payment for these new stands was only permitted through bank transfers from a company account. Because cash payments were no longer possible, this market upgrade process meant Inga had to register a company. Until 2014, Inga's business was relatively steady. She tried to open a second location within a department store but could not make it work because of family reasons. However, even with only one pavilion selling women's clothes, Inga managed to gain a loyal customer base, had a stable monthly revenue, was able to buy all the family's clothes, bedsheets and other home textiles, as well as paid for the whole renovation of the family's flat. However, when all the traders were asked to leave the market due to the starting of construction of a three-floor mall and a big grocery supermarket, that was a challenge Inga could not overcome. She had been looking for a retail space for a long time but could not find anything affordable.

> I quickly began to look for a new place. This Rajon which was about to be built: 1800 rubles per square meter! And anything less than 50 square meters is not rented. . . . Well, my friend worked at Kolos [previously one of the most popular department stores at Kommunisticheskij Avenue]. She said that they rent a 9-meter space there. I thought that the ceilings are high there, so it should be fine. But she told me that she is not going to stay there for more than a year. No sense: no people, no trade. I thought it over, I thought it over . . . Oleg [Inga's husband] says: "Do you need this trade? How many more years are you going to spend on this trade?" Well, I closed it down. (Inga)

With this, Inga closed her company, and for the next four years she was employed as a salesperson at a bathrobe store. Since then she has informally been selling various textile products, especially bedsheets, to the regular clientele she acquired during her past entrepreneurial activities at the open-air market and to new customers through a social media platform.

After finishing college as a hairdresser, another interviewee, Oxana, moved to Mezhdurechensk in 1986 and was employed at a Soviet-type beauty salon (*Komitet bytovogo obsluzhivanyia*: beauty salon, operated via the local housing services committee). Later in the 1990s, she worked in a hairdressing salon where she together with a few other women rented a place informally. At the same time, she was going to various public institutions, mostly schools and kindergartens, because—as Oxana recalled—"they were the places with the easiest access to the clientele." The days when she was making her rounds of the city's institutions and offering her services as an on-site hairdresser were the most profitable days. In the 2000s, she had to register her business in order to keep paying rent legally, and she also had to stop her on-site hairdressing services. In 2009, thanks to her friends, she started to sell cosmetics, which became a small addition to her self-employment activities, but in 2013, Oxana stopped these sales because there was no longer enough demand. And in 2018, she had to formally close her business because of the high taxes she had to pay on an annual basis. Currently, she receives an adequate maternity payment for her second child and keeps working as a hairdresser informally, at a salon run by her friend.

Natalia had sold cosmetics for eighteen years, from 1995 to 2013, though with some pauses. First, she was making these sales on an informal basis, at her own home, which was of great convenience, as she had two toddlers to care for. Once she had gained a more regular clientele, she also visited clients' workplaces. As she was working for a network marketing company, she was also interested in recruiting other distributors. Therefore, she organized recruiting events, mostly renting big auditoriums or staging her gatherings at public entities, such as the House of Culture (*Dom Kultury*). In 2007, she registered her business, and just before that she rented an office to display and demonstrate all the products she had, so she could immediately try them on the clients as well as recruit other people into sales activities. Since then, she has rarely used public facilities for any event. Natalia closed her business in 2014 because of unpayable loans.

Vera also started out using state-subsidized facilities for her business. Still, she was the only one of my interviewees who still owns her business. Vera had been getting her wares from her friend's tenants, who regularly brought various wares from Novosibirsk. Since 1994, Vera had been selling them at various public institutions, such as schools, day nurseries, municipalities, and then later at the open-air market. After a while, Vera started to go to Novosibirsk herself to buy outerwear. The places she sold these goods stayed the same. First, she had rented a tent at the market, then a metal kiosk. She registered her business in 2000, and three years later, she rented out a pavilion. In 2005, she bought a two-room flat on Kommunisticheskij Avenue and converted it into a store. She still has this sales venue, and two others: One is the pavilion that was at the open-air market until its demolition; Vera did not want to sell it, so she relocated it to the outskirts of the city. The other, which focuses on male outwear, is at a mall. Unlike Oxana, Natalia, and Inga, Vera was not as greatly affected by spatial changes.

Two more interviewees, like Vera, bought property for commercial purposes in the 2000s: Marina and Nina. However, they had to close their businesses in the 2010s. Since 1985, Nina had worked as a librarian in one of the city's schools, but sometimes she flew to Moscow to visit her brother. His wife worked as the leading designer of a textile factory of high-quality women's clothes, which Nina considered as "very sellable goods, much better than those Chinese mass market things." She used her work place to develop her business: "Imagine, I put on the table all these women's clothes in a pile 20 meters high. Three days—everything is sold out. Maybe that is how I realized that trade is money." Nina rented a ground-floor spot not in Mezhdurechensk but in Myski, a smaller and more affordable city twenty kilometers from it—and she bought the space a few years later. Nina's business was affected severely by the economic formalization of small businesses. Nina recalled a single tax on imputed income (*edinyj nalog na vmenennyj dohod*). The nature of the tax is that it is a fixed monthly payment that is independent of the actual profit made, and which was supposed to encourage entrepreneurs not to hide their income (as mentioned in the local newspaper *Kontakt*, no. 12, February 15, 2002). Initially, the tax was implemented in 2001. According to the calculations of another local newspaper, *The Miner's Banner in the New Millennium* (*Znamya shaktera v novom tysyacheletii*, no. 36, September 6, 2001), it doubled the tax payments of many small businesses. This resulted in increased anxiety felt by novice merchants and once even turned into a protest in front of the city administration building in 2003 (Interview, Inga). Some interviewees mentioned this tax's amendments in 2012-2014. Nina clearly remembers those years because she had to pay seventeen thousand rubles monthly only for this tax levied on her store of sixty square meters. That amount, equivalent to around 235 euros, was a lot of money in comparison with her actual income:

> For what? Can I earn that much or not? Nobody cared about that. Well . . . And that's not even the end of it. You still pay salaries to salespersons, and deduct money to the pension fund for people, which is around 20 percent, plus social insurance and the income tax. Beautiful amount in the end! So eventually, you get nothing. Ultimately, there was simply no point in keeping this business. This tax is the most predatory. Every year, the coefficient rose higher and higher. That is what killed small trade. (Nina)

Marina opened her first store in 1998 when she and her sister decided to sell children's toys. This was partially because Marina had worked previously as a salesperson. With the financial help of their parents, they rented a store on Kommunisticheskij Avenue, where she then worked in the same retail sphere she had been in before: toys for children. The trade was going very well, and Marina opened three more sales locations in the following years. She remembers this period of the 2000s as economically flourishing:

> Trade was going fine. Everyone had many sales locations already. It was crazy back then! Rent was going up, and storefronts cost crazy money because they were in demand. We could spend 100,000 rubles (around 3500 euros of those days' rate—I.R.) just for the necessary equipment. Now, this stuff is not worth it. We wasted money because we had it. Our logic was to grab a vacant spot so that a competitor could not be there! (Marina)

Marina and Natalia also mentioned that traders from bigger cities nearby started to do business in Mezhdurechensk, which made it harder for them. Since the 2010s, Marina had to close all her three sales locations, stop renting a warehouse, and dismiss all her salespersons. Marina did this involuntarily; she was sued due to unauthorized usage of a logotype and had to spend a lot of money to defend herself. She believes this situation was organized by her competitors from bigger cities:

> Slowly, the rent began to rise for everyone. [. . .] But then wholesalers from Novosibirsk, well, from whom we bought goods . . . It became difficult for everyone, so for them too. They began to open

> stores now in our cities, Mezhdurechensk, Novokuznetzk . . . Ultimately, their prices are 20 to 25 percent lower, and we kept buying goods from them. Such nonsense. . . . That is, at first, they got rich on us, and then they came to our cities. I closed a couple of my stores first. And then they came to me and said that I sell toys with a logo without the right to do so. They filed a lawsuit. And I sold the last store, and we waved goodbye. Now I sell sandwiches, work only when it's my shift. I live in peace. (Marina)

One of the reasons why these female-run businesses were hit so badly is their size. Competition rose drastically in the 2000s, which required more and more investments, such as expensive pavilions, a growing number of stores, more staff to hire, higher taxes, and higher rent. Throughout this process, the women's businesses were receiving only as much investment as needed to keep them alive. They never grew into mid-sized businesses. Partially this was because these women heavily invested earnings in their apartment renovations, furniture improvements, children's education, and their well-being. Initially driven by their responsibility for their families' futures, they kept work and family not as separate units, but as one working for the other. Both were equally important, and both demanded many resources. Natalia installed five new windows at her family's apartment and had bought a whole new kitchen set by 2007, while she had already been buying all the family's shoes and clothes for many years. Marina and Inga also renovated their flats according to new trends. Vera and Nina invested in real estate, primarily by buying residential properties, which they also considered as investments for their children. Most of the interviewed mothers did not believe that the education in the local schools would be good enough for their children to be able to enroll in a good university in a larger city. Therefore, they heavily invested in supplementary education of their children. They also initiated family travel abroad for their children to explore the world beyond their factory town.

According to Lees, Shin, and López-Morales,[32] gentrification is the upward class-based transformation of urban space. It not only consists of the physical "upgrading" of the built environment but also includes changes in business types, leisure, and consumption activities. At the beginning of gentrification, women were glad to actively engage with urban commercialization and beautification processes. They were investing in their kiosks, stands, then retail booths, competing for the best spots on the most commercialized spaces. However, it only took a few supermarket chains to fully cover the need for fundamental textiles such as T-shirts, bedsheets, and jeans and to replace the sales spaces of the women's small-scale enterprises. Malls of various sizes became the main place for entertainment and leisure time, including consumption. Those women who started their businesses as small size, without the ultimate goal of making them big at any cost by the mid-2010s, could not compete with more prominent players. By the time my ethnographic work took place—April 2019—the businesses of five out of six interviewed women had closed. Vera's entrepreneurial trajectory is the only exception among my interviewees.

Many household issues, such as extra care for parents or parents-in-law, mainly lay on the women's shoulders. At the same time, the enterprises they created and maintained could not rely on anybody else but them. Inga spoke emotionally about how she needed to sacrifice her business needs for care work. When her husband's mother fell ill, the inflexibility of work shifts at her husband's (coal mining) job put help from his side out of the question, as she stated. Therefore, it was her responsibility to sort out all of this: Inga hired an employee to work at her store so that she could have more time to care for her mother-in-law. Most other examples related to childcare combined with paid work are from the 1990s and are mentioned above. Due to the patriarchal order, it was expected that a man should be the breadwinner. With quite strict requirements regarding men's factory work, the responsibility for the education and moral life of children, and care for elderly family members, lay primarily on women's shoulders, although

they were at the same time eager to have their own lives outside of their homes and did their best to make this work.

During the early gentrification of post-Soviet Mezhdurechensk, when commercial venues only started to develop, women actively engaged in the commercialization of the urban space and benefited from a change in consumption style. They were on the frontiers of gentrification, conquering streets and markets with their products for sale and eagerly participating in changing the physical appearance of the market by replacing its metal kiosks with fancy pavilions. Women of the post-Soviet industrial city played a crucial role in early market changes in the city's spaces and quickly learned how to benefit from changing patterns in consumption habits. However, once a certain level of city gentrification was reached, the major players, with their franchises and mall structures, entered the local market. The female entrepreneurs running small-scale enterprises to sustain their and their families' needs could not anticipate the limits and vulnerability of running micro-companies, and they failed against the new competitors. While regional development of "margins" in post-industrial societies is often associated with the spread of small-scale entrepreneurship, the trajectories of these women's enterprises point to the more profound implications of such development in the personal histories of small entrepreneurs. As mentioned earlier, Emanuela Guano's research has brilliantly demonstrated how middle-class women have entered the space of Genoa's street market and participated in the gentrification of Genoa with their trade of valuable antiques and crafts. However, this presence was a constant struggle between the domestic and the public spheres; the blurring of these boundaries was fraught with risk.[33] In conclusion, although small-scale entrepreneurs are agents of early gentrification, they are not the beneficiaries of the marketization of post-socialist industrial spaces in the medium or long term.

Individual Responsibility Over Shared Outcomes

The history of spatial changes in early post-Soviet Mezhdurechensk tells the story of gentrification formation, built on state socialist material structures and later expanding beyond them. It is a tale of the conquest of the city's streets, markets, and public facilities that gave birth to today's Mezhdurechensk and continued the city's life. But also, it is one of persistence and struggle accompanying the lives of the pioneers of these frontiers. In the last section of this article, I explore how these pioneers of the (post)industrial city's early gentrification evaluate their self-employment activities.

From the time the women opened up their enterprises to April 2019, when interviews in this study took place, the spatial and commercial landscapes of the city as well as the work strategies of the women had changed significantly. Vera was the only one who was still running her own business. Oxana, Marina, and Natalia were employed; Inga was working with various textile products, selling mostly bedsheets to her regular clientele and via a social media channel on an informal basis; Nina closed her business and did not look for another job after she married a wealthy businessman:

> He insisted on it. He said: "Shut it down. You do not need it. I shut it down, and it was a good decision. At the right time. All the other entrepreneurs eventually closed later." (Nina)

Despite the hardships of the 1990s and their business ventures' financial outcomes, most of the women interviewed stated that the time they were running a business was a time of personal and professional development. Despite many challenges, they deeply valued the self-realization and self-development they have gained from using many of their skills, communicating with people, and exploring the unknown. While many images of what a prospective future might look like have been destroyed together with the fall of the Soviet Union, self-employment did not have much of a preconceived image, so it allowed women space for their imagination. This open space

allowed women to pursue a non-alienated job where they could earn money, even in such a drastic period, and also be creative, adventurous, and explorative. Being an entrepreneur enriched them with empowerment, self-confidence, and space for creativity. Marina reasons: "I loved to earn money, work with people, do something creative and interesting, and to be on my own." The lifestyle of an independent and unordinary woman doing business in a coal-mining city with a masculine image was also rewarding.

The flexibility of working hours given by self-employment, especially under the conditions of scarcity that dominated until the mid-2000s, turned into very long working hours. This flexibility was at the expense of exceeding the women's expected work hours, and they had limited time to rest, be at home, and spend time with friends and family.[34]

> My friend has always invited me for a holiday, but I have always been busy with work. First, in the 1990s, I had to work so much for my children, now it is a grandson. My husband has a horribly small pension; none of us could predict it. It seems I will never go for a proper holiday just for myself. (Inga)

> I am going to be 58 years old; that's not nothing. However, I do not feel so old, anyway. I need to live for myself. Travel around, at least, to explore something. Because of how it was—I was buried under a pile of work. Entrepreneurs are the unhappiest people because they do not have the opportunity to relax and rest. Always in stress because there are many costs and tasks that change constantly. If I could go back in time, I would not have chosen to do this work but would have rather stayed at home with my daughter. . . . Life passes you by! (Nina)

Long working hours were often described as an unexpectedly high cost to pay for doing a "profitable" job. Aiming for success and working hard for financial independence went along with the shame of not being a good enough mother. Marina felt sorry that she had not noticed that the atmosphere in the school where both her children studied was far less than friendly, and that the children were being made fun of by their classmates. Vera regretted that she, in the absence of free time, was buying everything for her son, spoiling him instead of spending time with him. In the interviews, Natalia and Inga also felt guilty about their motherhood but were generally happy with how their children are doing now.

The end of their business ventures, which left them without significant savings, and sometimes even with debt, made the women rethink their work strategies. Marina, Natalia, and Oxana found formal employment, as it provides a stable expected salary, does not require further financial investments, and adds money to a pension system. Nina, who is mostly provided for by her husband, insightfully elaborates on the lack of state social guarantees for entrepreneurs during both their active working lives and after:

> Now, I would have chosen to be an official, a deputy, or work for the police. They have vacations, subsidies, additional benefits, and sick leave. We had none of it. They lived much better than us. Now they also do. They have better pensions. (Nina)

The stories and feelings related to the times when the women's enterprises were experiencing a crisis are mixed. Some closed their enterprises voluntarily when they became tired of keeping up the business after twenty years. Others spent all their money on paying off debts and could not find any other resources to run on. The third group was over-indebted and forced to halt all their formal economic activities to keep a low profile. These stories were fresh when shared with me, and I believe this might have led to some details remaining unspoken. However, something striking ran through all the stories I heard.

The narrative about the 1990s as the very beginning of "a new life" was a collective feeling: each of these women saw themselves as one of the many people hit by systemic change. The

women perceived the dissolution of the state socialist system with the concomitant decline of job opportunities and an uncertain image of the future as a shared experience. They felt alone in the face of their struggles, but it had been clear to them that the economic hardship they experienced was not their fault.

This is in contrast to their evaluation of self-employment activities in the 2010s, when they stated the importance and responsibility of their individual decisions and did not problematize the existing unequal political and social structure and its limitations and constraints.[35] The prosperous 2000s was seen as a time of personal achievement, and the defeat encountered in the 2010s as their own personal "entrepreneurial failure." The state's ignorance, unfair power relations, and technological and economic changes were mentioned in the interviews, but the feeling of individual responsibility dominated. Only Nina explicitly condemned the state for making it hard for her to keep her business up and running.

Following the findings of Jeremy Morris and Hanna-Mari Ikonen,[36] my research demonstrates that the social capital of the working-class women's network remained limited and was not enough in a new competitive environment. Will Atkinson[37] also points out the importance of ingrained barriers of class and work inequality in the analysis of responses to precarity, such as the self-employment in this study, and questions the individual decision of taking a risk. With the apparent autonomy of individual women's ventures, there were obvious similarities in the timing of their victories and losses: the types of pressures and hardships women experienced, and how motherhood and age were an integral part of many of the decisions they made. However, the rugged individualism of the neoliberal ideology imposed since the 1990s influenced the way the women regarded their careers. The challenges the small-scale entrepreneurs faced in the 2010s were not seen as part of larger systemic trajectories of urban development in the market forces of neoliberal Russia but were instead considered by the interviewed women as a personal failure. Perceiving the closure of their enterprises as due to their own failure reflects how the women entrepreneurs placed the full responsibility for a chosen work strategy on each individual worker in the post-Soviet period.

Epilogue

This ethnographic study analytically looked into the lives and aspirations of female entrepreneurs belonging to a late Soviet generation living in the coal-mining post-Soviet city of Mezhdurechensk (southwestern Siberia), which was built right after WWII to empower the Soviet Union's industrialization. Built according to Soviet urban planning concepts and to sustain the state socialist industrial modernity system, the city was enriched with public places and public facilities. Still, it lacked variety in its commercial sector. Therefore, after entering the neoliberal market in the 1990s but before high-level institutionalized commercialization in the city (the beginning of the 2010s), social spaces such as open-air markets, hospitals, public education institutions (schools, libraries, and day nurseries) were the primary sites of trade and service activities. This produced vacant space in which small-scale amateur entrepreneurs could maneuver in an early post-Soviet industrial city, which provided the opportunity for some women to contribute to the vibrancy of gentrification.

Drawing on the ethnographic study of Emanuela Guano,[38] I demonstrated that women small-scale entrepreneurs were key agents of gentrification and facilitated urban change in the post-Soviet industrial city of Mezhdurechensk by responding to changes in leisure and lifestyle activities. At the beginning of the gentrification process, these women actively engaged in the commercialization and beautification of streets and squares. The picture changed for most of them by the 2010s, when a new level of city gentrification was reached: more prominent market players entered the local economy, with their franchises and mall structures taking over the urban

Table 1. Biographical Interviews, a Total of Six Interviews Transcribed.

Name	Year of birth	The Soviet-time working and/ or educational experience	The primary type of business	Registered business	Current paid working activities	The interview date
Marina	1961	Art schoolteacher	Retail of children's toys	1998-2016	Employed in the food industry	April 22, 2019
Nina	1961	Librarian, a store consultant	Retails of children's clothes	1995-2013	—	May 10, 2019
Oxana	1962	Hairdresser	Beauty salon, retails of cosmetics	1995-2002, 2008-2013	Employed at a beauty salon	April 22, 2019
Natalia	1965	Engineer at a factory	Retails of cosmetics, make-up services	1997-2003, 2007-2014	Employed at a medical center, and babysitting	April 17, 2019
Vera	1973	Worked in a textile factory and a bank	Retail of outwear	1997-nowadays	Running two outwear store	April 24, 2019
Inga	1964	Worked as a seller in a grocery shop	Retail of female clothes	1993-2016	Doing trade with bedsheets informally	April 19, 2019

commercial space from those who had been on the frontiers of these processes. The research thus speaks against a common belief that regional development of "margins" in post-industrial societies is determined by the spread of small-scale entrepreneurship.

While women of the post-Soviet industrial city played a crucial role in early gentrification processes and learned quickly how to benefit from changing patterns in consumption habits, they could not be ready for the limits of the contemporary market. Five interviewed women out of six had to close their businesses and change their work strategies (See Table 1). As the study showed, one of the reasons why women's businesses could not be sustained over periods of economic retraction is their size. The scale of their businesses had not changed since the beginning of the 2000s due to the fact that women were responsible not only for their business ventures but also for family well-being, children's education, and care for the elderly. In addition, they invested in their homes in ways that would match their aspirations. I have demonstrated that it is crucial to analyze the decision to become and continue as an entrepreneur by looking at the gendered life course, as well as at the class position and geographical location, of a business owner. Such an approach is rooted in understanding enterprises' trajectories not as self-serving entities but as significant elements in the interconnection of women's (gendered) life endeavors and socio-political context.

Being exposed to the neoliberal understandings of work and success and being attached to family responsibilities brought the women to ambivalent outcomes. The women remain anxious and doubtful about some of the implications of their business activities on their lives, especially regarding the lack of social benefits and financial savings for their retirement. While self-employment was seen as an individual work strategy, the closure of their enterprises after twenty-five years and facing the aftermath challenges is largely regarded by the former entrepreneurs as their *own* personal "entrepreneurial failure." This is in contrast to the 1990s, when these women each saw themselves as one of a great number of people hit by systemic changes. Therefore, they did not reflect on this shutdown of small-scale enterprises as part of the limits of the contemporary market of post-Soviet industrial cities facing harsh gentrification a few decades after the dissolution of state socialist system. Instead, most of them take individual responsibility for their inability to continue business in changing conditions.

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Author Biography

Irina Redkina is a doctoral researcher at the Universität Hamburg, Germany. Her research topics include city planning of new towns in the twentieth century, the urban legacy of state socialism, and the social life in industrial cities. The subject of her particular interest is the influence of urban fabric and spatial politics on social behavior and everyday practice. She works with the legacy of material structures of industrial cities, which were built in the twentieth century as flagships of modernity and symbols of the future. She researched industrial towns in Eastern Europe, mainly in Hungary and Russia, as well as in Kyrgyzstan. A central Indian industrial town of Bokaro Steel City, built in the late 1960s with Soviet technical and financial aid, is the case study for her PhD research and, as the last planned city of India, an exceptionally intriguing example of modernist urban planning. Previously she worked at the Research Center for Cultures, Politics, and Identities (IPAK.Center, Belgrade, Serbia) and the Center of Independent Social Research (CISR, Saint Petersburg, Russia). She is currently a guest editor of an upcoming Special Issue inspired by the Eastern European Feminist Conference, "Gender Struggle in Eastern Europe" (Kaunas, 2019). She also works as a books and articles translator.

Annexe B: Full text of Article 2

Contextualized modernism: Cultivating a technical elite through urban planning in post-colonial India's industrial city

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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

SPECIAL ISSUE: INDUSTRIAL URBANISMS AND ENTANGLED MODERNITIES IN EURASIA

Beyond socialist cities and superblocks: contextualized modernism of an Indian planned working-class city

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the history of Bokaro Steel City – a planned industrial settlement conceived in the 1960s in the Indian state of Jharkhand as part of India's post-Independence modernization programme. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and archival materials, I demonstrate the unique socially inclusive approach of tackling social inequalities, focusing specifically on how planners approached social reproduction. By foregrounding the distinctiveness of Bokaro's urban design, I argue for a re-evaluation of modernist urbanities, delinking them from the exclusively Eastern European monotowns or Western superblocks and demonstrating how Indian planners adapted modernist ideas to meet their local objectives.

Introduction

Until the mid-1960s, the land occupied today by the expansive Bokaro Steel City presented a coal-rich yet rural area in the Damodar River Valley of eastern India. The area, which had been comprised of 45 villages with a total population of about 37,000 people, underwent a remarkable transformation into a new township named after the nearby Bokaro River.[1] From its inception, the city was closely integrated with the nearby steel plant, whose construction had commenced just a few years earlier and had been technically and financially supported by the Soviet Union. Situated in the districts of Dhanbad and Hazaribagh in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand (part of the state of Bihar until 2000), the city's construction was part of a regional development strategy[2] that promoted the creation of state-owned and state-operated industrial enterprises in remote areas – an exceptional case in the history of Indian

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[2]BSL, 'General Plan', 9.

urbanism. The planned industrial towns and other large-scale projects, such as steel plants, power stations and shipyards, were meant to constitute post-Independence India's 'temples of modernity' – a term coined by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to describe the vision of development, which focused on advancement of public-sector scientific research institutes and heavy industries. The construction of Bokaro was part of an even larger urban development scheme that embraced the creation of administrative centres and state-driven industrial growth.[3]

After the dissolution of British rule in 1947, which ended with the partition of the subcontinent into the two independent nations of India and Pakistan, India found itself, according to Prime Minister Nehru, in a 'backward' state, distanced from 'modernity' by centuries.[4] The Indian government launched an extensive new town programme, completing 118 new urban settlements between 1947 and 1981, which collectively housed approximately five million people, making it one of the largest[5] new town programmes in the world.[6] For comparison, according to various estimates, the Soviet Union constructed approximately 300 planned cities, while the United Kingdom – another leader in the global new town movement – built 32 new towns in the quarter-century following World War II. In addition to the iconic modernist city of Chandigarh, the aesthetics of 'international style' have been widely realized in the post-colonial Indian cityscape, including in the state capitals of Bhubaneswar and Gandhinagar as well as in many new towns built in the first decades of Independence.[7] These planned cities were meant to provide a material foundation to assist the country's rapid transformation from rural to a mostly urban nation and to provide living arrangements for cultivating a new social and moral character of their inhabitants. This material rebuilding of India was part of Nehru's decolonization and emancipation efforts aimed at creating a technologically advanced and modern society.[8]

Despite Nehru's continuous efforts to disentangle the concept of modernity from the West, he and his followers were critiqued both by intellectuals and by the broader public for building India – in direct and metaphorical ways – upon what were seen as a Western model and its concepts of modernity, freedom and democracy.[9] Such criticisms persist to this day. Important figures in post-colonial studies, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, have dismissed Indian modernism as a failed attempt at

[3]W.J. Glover, 'The troubled passage from "village communities" to planned new town developments in mid-twentieth-century South Asia', *Urban History*, 39 (2012), 108–27, at 109.

[4]J.P. Parry, *Classes of Labour: Work and Life in a Central Indian Steel Town* (New Delhi, 2020), 5.

[5]G. Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town* (Cambridge, 2019).

[6]Glover, 'The troubled passage from "village communities"'.

[7]R. Kalia, 'Modernism, modernization and post-colonial India: a reflective essay', *Planning Perspectives*, 21 (2006), 133–56.

[8]Kalia, 'Modernism, modernization and post-colonial India', 135; V. Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York, 2008), xvii–xviii; A. Shaw, 'Town planning in postcolonial India, 1947–1965: Chandigarh re-examined', *Urban Geography*, 30 (2009), 857–78.

[9]Shaw, 'Town planning in postcolonial India, 1947–1965'; G. Singh, S. Kahlon and V.B.S. Chandel, 'Political discourse and the planned city: Nehru's projection and appropriation of Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 109 (2019), 1226–39; Parry, *Classes of Labour*, 14–16.

decolonization.[10] To challenge the rigid notion of modernism as exclusively a Western development, Indian art historian R. Siva Kumar has introduced the concept of 'contextual modernism',[11] underscoring the variety of modernism(s) based on the unique interplay between global modernist movements and traditional values, practices and norms. Seeing modernist works as contextualized by their various meaning-laden contexts allows us to acknowledge modernism not as a homogeneous movement, but as one inherently shaped by all of these contexts. The concept of contextual modernism thus advocates for a dynamic understanding of cultural interactions, challenging the idea of unilateral cultural exchange – from West to East or vice versa.

Bokaro's urban plan reflected a commitment to modernist urban planning principles, characterized by significant state involvement, functionalist design and the belief that the built environment can shape nature, including human nature.[12] The Bokaro General Plan primarily catered to public-sector employees, including but not limited to those working at the Bokaro Steel Plant (hereafter BSL for Bokaro Steel Limited), which was – and still remains – the city's main employer. This focus has sometimes led to the misconception that Bokaro was solely linked to industrial production and direct Soviet influence. However, the city's design and development also reflected a broader vision that integrated local contexts and addressed social needs.

Taking inspiration from this conceptual framework of contextual modernism, I approach the urban design and planning of Bokaro Steel City (hereafter Bokaro) both as a *product* of the interplay between the modernist movement and local contexts and as an integral *component* of this same movement, thus shaped by and shaping modernism. In this article, I aim to shift the focus away from purely Western or Soviet influences on Bokaro's design and instead examine the key factors that informed the planners' decisions, particularly the social rationale that underpinned Bokaro's conceived space.

In my analysis of Bokaro's urban design, I focus on 'conceived' space through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space.[13] Lefebvre identifies three aspects of social space production: conceived (space as 'representation'), perceived (space as 'configuration') and lived (space as 'signification'). This article delves into the abstract representation of space, crafted by professionals such as geographers, planners, cartographers, architects and engineers. By examining Bokaro's 'conceived' space, I approach urban space as the intentions and envisioned spatial arrangements of planners. This exploration reveals the ideological and functional aspirations underpinning Bokaro's urban planning, offering insights into the vision that shaped this planned community.

The research is based on an analysis of archival materials and ethnographic fieldwork. I examined the General Plan of the City (n.d., *c.* 1969–70) and the Master

[10]G.C. Spivak, 'City, country, agency', in V. Prakash (ed.), *Theatres of Decolonization: (Architecture) Agency (Urbanism)* (Seattle, 1997), 1–22, cited in V. Prakash, 'Inheriting modernism: rethinking Chandigarh in the post-colonial frame', in *Constructing New Worlds: Proceedings of the 1998 ACSA International Conference, 23–27 May 1998, Universidade* (Washington, DC, 1998), 187–90.

[11]R.S. Kumar, *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism* (New Delhi, 1997).

[12]L. Drummond and D. Young (eds.), *Socialist and Post-Socialist Urbanisms: Critical Reflections from a Global Perspective* (Toronto, 2020).

[13]H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, 1991).

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Approach Plan (1974), accessed during my two-month fieldwork stay in Bokaro. These essential documents were provided by Dipankar Das, the former deputy general manager in the Architecture and City Planning Department at the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL), with whom I conducted several semi-structured interviews to gain insights into the workings of Bokaro Steel City's Architecture and City Planning Department. Das was employed as an architect at the department from 1980 to 2013, where he was involved in the design, planning and maintenance of the city according to the General Plan. From 2013 until his retirement in 2023, Das served as a consultant for the Township Administration on city development issues. Additionally, over the past decade, Das has operated his own private architectural office. Additional historical documents and books were sourced from the Human Resources Department of SAIL. I also used an online-published diary of a Soviet engineer who was part of a technical delegation overseeing the Bokaro Steel Plant from 1970 to 1973.

Multiple modernities: a view from the global new town movement

New towns constructed in the twentieth century have historically been viewed through the lens of 'Western' influences in their design. The term 'new towns' originated from English-language scholarship and refers to planned cities built on greenfield sites. Viewing new towns as products of 'Western' modernist urbanism is not rare in the historiography of colonial or post-colonial countries. Consequently, research on planned urbanism in post-colonial countries has frequently focused on how Western planners aimed to control colonial societies by creating new urban spaces driven by the imperatives of efficiency, science and standardization.[14] Numerous studies examine the 'golden age' of the global new towns movement, generally seen as spanning from 1945 to 1975, when planned new towns became a favoured solution across many continents for states to enhance social provision through urban planning.[15] The prevailing perception is that the concept of modernity – grounded in scientific planning and progress – is inherently Western, exported globally and that modernist urban forms were conceived by colonizers or were products of colonial imposition.

Over the past decade, this conventional narrative of the 'Western' roots of modernist urbanism has been increasingly challenged. Scholars have argued[16] that socialist cities should be viewed as products of socialist modernity, with Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain*[17] pioneering this comparative approach within the

[14]P. Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago, 1995), 332; D. Mittner, *New Towns: An Investigation on Urbanism* (Berlin, 2018), 34–53.

[15]M. Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (Aldershot, 2003); R. Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement* (Chicago, 2016); Crimson Historians and Urbanists, 'Introduction', in Crimson Historians and Urbanists (eds.), *New Towns on the Cold War Frontiers* (Rotterdam, forthcoming).

[16]See, e.g., N. Ssorin-Chaikov, 'Soviet debris: failure and the poetics of unfinished construction in northern Siberia', *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 83 (2016), 689–721; M. Murawski, 'Actually-existing success: economics, aesthetics, and the specificity of (still-)socialist urbanism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 60 (2018), 907–37; H.D. DeHaan, 'Framing the socialist city as practice', *Contemporary European History*, 31 (2022), 469–77.

[17]S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995).

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transnational history of modernist urbanism. Additionally, some have questioned the dominance of Western influences on modernist urbanism in the Global South during the Cold War. Examining large-scale projects in Accra, Lagos, Baghdad, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait City, Łukasz Stanek in *Architecture in Global Socialism* traces the collaboration of local consultancies with architects, planners and contractors from socialist states and challenges the notion that these modernist urban structures were merely products of 'Westernization' or Americanization, a dominant perspective solidified in the wake of capitalist triumphalism after 1989.[18] Similarly, other scholars emphasize how urban planning was instrumental to shaping 'socialist worldmaking' during the Cold War.[19] A history journal recently published a special issue on Second World urban history, critiquing the Western-centric historiography and periodization of new towns that often starts with post-World War II reconstruction and ignores planned *ex novo* cities that had emerged in the Soviet Union since the early 1930s.[20] These critical voices have led to a reconceptualization of modernism as an international phenomenon, highlighting global exchanges through both practical collaboration and knowledge sharing.[21]

Now, an emerging perspective on modernist urbanism calls for decentring Western and Soviet influences alike, highlighting more diverse forms of modernity. Kimberly Zarecor, focusing on communal housing, challenges the notion that post-war Czechoslovakia's architectural policies were solely dictated by Moscow.[22] Similarly, Virág Molnár highlights the significant role of local governments and architects in creating Hungary's distinctive socialist housing architecture, as well as the effort these actors made to reshape everyday life and political systems, contrasting this with the strict Soviet directives in post-war Berlin.[23] Nikolay Erofeev and Łukasz Stanek offer a nuanced view of Ulaanbaatar's planning, which stemmed from extensive exchanges among Mongolian, Soviet and other Comecon[24] actors during the Cold War.[25] These ethnographic works decentre Soviet influence in state socialist or allied projects and move beyond the notions of 'export' and 'import', arguably

[18]Ł. Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton, 2020).

[19]C. Schwenkel, 'Traveling architecture: East German urban designs in Vietnam', *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*, 2 (2014), 155–74, at 155; J. Mark, A.M. Kalinovsky and S. Marung (eds.), *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington, 2020); Z. Ginelli, 'Decolonizing the city? Traversing urbanscapes in the world-systemic transperipheral histories between socialist Hungary and the Global South' (blog), 2022, https://zoltanginelli.com/ accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

[20]D. Bocharnikova and S.E. Harris (eds.), 'Second World urbanity: new histories of the socialist city', *Journal of Urban History*, 44 (2018), 3–117.

[21]Á. Moravánszky and T. Lange (eds.), *Re-Framing Identities: Architecture's Turn to History, 1970–1990* (Basel, 2017), 13–24; A. Sammartino, 'The socialist city of tomorrow in retrospect', *Journal of Urban History*, 49 (2023), 1404–9.

[22]K.E. Zarecor, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960* (Pittsburgh, 2011).

[23]V.E. Molnár, *Building the State: Architecture, Politics, and State Formation in Post-War Central Europe* (London, 2013).

[24]The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) was an economic organization from 1949 to 1991 that comprised the countries of the Eastern Bloc along with a number of socialist states elsewhere in the world. See M.C. Kaser, *Comecon: Integration Problems of the Planned Economies* (Oxford, 1967).

[25]N. Erofeev and Ł. Stanek, 'Integrate, adapt, collaborate: Comecon architecture in socialist Mongolia', *ABE Journal: Architecture beyond Europe*, 19 (2021), 1–37.

rooted in outmoded colonial or Cold War binaries of Western modernism or Soviet socialist modernity. This strand of literature highlights the complexities of transnational social and political realities as manifested in material foundations.

Also in the realm of Indian modernist architecture and urbanism, scholars have challenged the assumption of modernism as inherently 'Western' and urge for a shift away from Eurocentric historiography that positions Western Europe as the archetypal 'modern'.[26] Early post-Independence urban development in India was recently revisited in the 2022 exhibition 'The Project of Independence: Architectures of Decolonization in South Asia, 1947–1985', hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition, examining the architecture and built environment in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, frames these urbanities as a tool for cultural emancipation, not only from the weight of political and cultural colonization but also from a rigid conception of modernism as uniquely developed by the West.[27]

In sum, this body of work emphasizes Avijit Pathak's call to acknowledge the existence of multiple modernities,[28] challenging the notion of a singular, linear perspective. By moving away from monolithic narratives of modernism, this approach acknowledges regional differences and helps to understand the dynamics between central and peripheral relationships.[29] Consequently, it cautions against assuming that urban modernity is seamlessly transposed across different locales or merely imposed by dominant powers.

The limits of a Soviet imprint in a peripheral Indian city

Scholars advocating for greater recognition of Indian contributions to international modernism often challenge the notion of Indian modernism as merely a Western product. However, this narrative diverges for Bokaro, which, along with Bhilai – the first Indian city built with Soviet assistance in the 1950s – is sometimes associated with Soviet urban expertise. In this section, I explore the reasons for the persistence of such perceptions and identify the limits of Soviet influence on Bokaro.

Bokaro and three other planned towns, built in early post-Independence India, were developed near steel plants established with technological and financial assistance from various foreign governments on both sides of the Iron Curtain. This practice reflected India's strategy, positioning itself with the Non-Aligned Movement[30] in order to leverage Cold War dynamics. Two of the four steel plants were built with fraternal collaboration from the Soviet Union, leading to the occasional mischaracterization of these towns as products of Soviet aid. Architectural historian Clayton Strange, in his insightful book *Monotown: Urban Dreams Brutal Imperatives*, employs a transnational comparative approach to examine planned industrial cities

[26]J. Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism* (London, 2005); K. Gast, *Modern Traditions: Contemporary Architecture in India* (Basel, 2007).

[27]M. Stierli, A. Pieris and S. Anderson (eds.), *The Project of Independence: Architectures of Decolonization in South Asia, 1947–1985* (New York, 2022).

[28]A. Pathak, *Modernity, Globalization and Identity: Towards a Reflexive Quest* (Delhi, 2006).

[29]P. Mitter, 'Decentering modernism: art history and avant-garde art from the periphery', *The Art Bulletin*, 90 (2008), 531–48.

[30]The Non-Aligned Movement, established in Belgrade in 1961, is a coalition of 120 countries not formally aligned with any major power bloc.

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in the Soviet Union, China and India.[31] He identifies a 'Soviet town-framing' phenomenon, suggesting the Soviet single-industry planned city model was transferred to Asia and Africa alongside Soviet industrial projects. Strange sees Bhilai and Bokaro as built according to Soviet town-framing practices. Similarly, anthropologist Jonathan Parry referred to the central Indian city of Bhilai as a 'Soviet-built steel town' in a 2008 paper,[32] but later corrected this in his influential book *Classes of Labour*, published 12 years later,[33] clarifying that the township's design was carried out entirely by a renowned architectural firm from Mumbai, without Soviet involvement. The diverging interpretations about the design origins of these urban spaces stems from their proximity and political connection to steel plants. These planned cities, often termed 'industrial towns' or 'steel towns', are often viewed as extensions of the industrial complexes that employed their residents, thus undermining their status as independent urban settlements.[34]

Planned industrial towns were pivotal to India's state-led industrialization agenda.[35] Early independent India, primarily an agrarian country with a weak industrial base, embarked on a path to 'catch up' with the modernity of developed nations by prioritizing industrialization. This shift was particularly significant given that British colonialism had deindustrialized India in the nineteenth century, transforming the country from a world-leading exporter of processed goods to primarily exporting raw materials to Britain and importing British manufactured goods.[36] The national modernization agenda emphasized rapid industrialization and urbanization working in tandem – a strategy some scholars argue mirrored the early Soviet Union's strategy.[37] This approach explains the proliferation of industrial new towns in post-colonial India.

To achieve rapid industrialization, India prioritized developing heavy industries as a quick solution to post-colonial economic challenges.[38] Its industrial strategy emphasized a producer-oriented steel industry that served smaller, often privately owned, businesses rather than large corporations or individual consumers, with the aim of stimulating long-term economic growth rather than short-term profit.[39]

[31]C. Strange, *Monotown: Urban Dreams Brutal Imperatives* (San Francisco, 2019).

[32]J. Parry, 'The sacrifices of modernity in a Soviet-built steel town in Central India', in F. Pine and J. De Pina-Cabral (eds.), *On the Margins of Religion* (Oxford, 2008), 233–62.

[33]Parry, *Classes of Labour*, 91.

[34]As noted by M. Mazereeuw, M. Ojha and A. Barve, 'Migrant informalities of Indian steel towns: planning lessons from Rourkela, Bhilai and Durgapur', *Environment and Urbanization ASIA*, 8 (2017), 74–93, at 79; C. Strümpell, *Steel Town Adivasis: Industry and Inequality in Eastern India* (New Delhi, 2023), 235.

[35]Kalia, 'Modernism, modernization and post-colonial India', 153; Glover, 'The troubled passage from "village communities"', 108–9.

[36]A.K. Bagchi, 'De-industrialization in India in the nineteenth century: some theoretical implications', *Journal of Development Studies*, 12 (1976), 135–64.

[37]S. Roy, 'Cities of hope: steel townships and the spatial practices of the nation-state', in *Beyond belief: India and the politics of postcolonial nationalism* (Durham, NC, 2007); Strange, *Monotown*, 15; Parry, *Classes of Labour*, 7.

[38]G. Mishra, 'Indo-Soviet economic cooperation', in V. Bhatia (ed.), *Indo-Soviet Relations: Problems and Prospects* (New Delhi, 1984), 113.

[39]F. Macheda and R. Nadalini, 'Samir Amin in Beijing: delving into China's delinking policy', *Review of African Political Economy*, 48 (2021), 119–41; V.G. Mehtras, *Labour Participation in Management: An Experiment in Industrial Democracy in India* (Bombay, 1966), 33; R.B. Singh, *Economics of Public Sector Steel Industry in India* (New Delhi, 1989), 2.

Significant investment in the steel industry was deemed necessary due to the limited benefits of small-scale steel production. Large plants like the Bokaro Steel Plant became crucial for supporting other industries reliant on steel, such as railway manufacturing,[40] and for fulfilling the country's strategic needs. Bokaro Steel Plant, the fourth major steel plant in post-colonial India, was established as a public-sector enterprise.

The first three large steel plants had already been built with international aid: the Rourkela Steel Plant in Odisha was supported by West Germany, the Durgapur Steel Plant in West Bengal by Britain and the Bhilai Steel Plant in Chhattisgarh (part of Madhya Pradesh until 2000) by the Soviet Union. Initially, for the Bokaro Steel Plant in Bihar, India sought collaboration with the United States, partly due to the prior involvement of the US-based Damodar Valley Corporation in local industrial projects.[41] However, US support waned in 1962 amid congressional opposition to a 'socialist enterprise' due to the Indian government's insistence on keeping the plant's ownership in the public sector. By May 1963, after US prospects closed, India invited tenders from other countries, leading to a 1965 agreement for Soviet financial and technical assistance for the Bokaro Steel Plant.[42]

Its construction began in 1967, with Soviet specialists assisting and meticulously monitoring construction and operations. Soviet engineer Valentin Krzhivitsky, working in Bokaro from 1970 to 1973, details his experiences in his diaries, published in an online blog.[43] He noted with pride that the Soviet delegation saw the plant into production, describing the first blast furnace commission in October 1972. In his diaries, he also emphasizes how the Soviet specialists' daily lives included a steady routine of supervisory and operational duties, which aligns with Jonathan Parry's observation of Soviet management style of such projects as centralized.[44] Krzhivitsky writes:

> In the morning I ran around the sites where the installation was going on. If the situation deserved it, I gave the people a little dressing down, otherwise I praised them for their work. I explained all the misunderstandings and, having made sure that there were no questions left, that everything was clear to the supervisors, foremen, and welders, I returned to the office of the complex and reported to my boss.[45]

It is important to note that the steel plant operated under Indian control from the very beginning. The plant was envisioned in the 1950s as a public, Indian-owned project, and was managed by Hindustan Steel Limited (HSL) and later by the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL). From its conception, it was clear that HSL would own the plant, with the Soviet Union acting as a foreign sponsor to assist in this public initiative.

[40]R.C. Allen, *Farm to Factory: A Reinterpretation of the Soviet Industrial Revolution* (Princeton, 2009).

[41]K.C. Sivaramakrishnan, *New Towns in India: A Report on a Study of Selected New Towns in the Eastern Region* (Calcutta, 1976), 26; Strange, *Monotown*, 322.

[42]Strange, *Monotown*, 318–20, 326.

[43]V. Krzhivitsky, 'Bokaro Welcomes Us! My Valley: A Blind Man's Blog [Bokaro Privetstvuet Nas! Yudol' Moya: Blog Slepogo Starika] (blog), 2018, http://old-blindman.blogspot.com/2018/11/blog-post_24.html accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

[44]J.P. Parry and C. Strümpell, 'On the desecration of Nehru's "temples": Bhilai and Rourkela compared', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (2008), 47–57, at 53.

[45]Krzhivitsky, 'Bokaro Welcomes Us!'. Free translation by the author.

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Reflecting on the collaborative efforts in the development of the steel plant, Krzhivitsky notes that Indian workers took charge of the surrounding infrastructure projects independently:

> On the 24 January 1964, a public-sector limited liability company was established – Bokaro Steel Limited (BSL). It was our employer, we helped it, we worked for it. Their first premises were the houses of the new city of Bokaro, namely Sector III and Camps I and II, to receive the first arrivals to the construction site. Sectors II, IX, IV, and so on were built without any breaks. *The Indians carried out these works themselves, without our help. Soviet specialists were engaged only in the plant* [emphasis added].[46]

This diary entry, dated around the mid-1970s, emphasizes that Soviet specialists were exclusively involved with the plant, an understanding echoed by Bokaro's residents during my fieldwork. After the plant's launch, according to my personal exchange and interviews with local residents, a smaller number of Soviet specialists stayed in Bokaro until the early 1990s. Although no official data exist on the exact numbers of Soviet citizens residing in Bokaro, the residents I spoke with estimate that, at its peak, the total number of Soviet specialists and their family members living there was around 3,000.[47] Their long-term engagement meant Soviet engineers and their families often lived in Bokaro for several years in a distinct area known as the 'Russian Colony', which featured two- and three-storey houses (see Figure 1), a primary school, a club, a shopping centre and a small playground. It constituted a typical neighbourhood but required a special pass to enter it.[48] While this extended presence was crucial for the plant's successful operation, it had little direct influence on the city's development. Nevertheless, the long-term presence of the Soviet experts may have left a cultural and social imprint on the local community; these aspects warrant separate research.

Cultivating cohesion: social reproduction as Bokaro's core strength

The important role of public-sector companies in Nehru's vision for post-colonial Indian development has been extensively explored in scholarly literature. However, the distinct urban planning and social fabric of individual steel towns have generally been overlooked.[49] The Indian new town programme, central to Nehru's vision for modernist development, had ambitious social goals. First, this programme sought to reshape national spatial politics to promote regionally balanced urbanization.[50] New towns were strategically located in predominantly rural areas of eastern and central

[46]*Ibid.*

[47]To understand this in context, when the iron production plant was commissioned in 1972, Bokaro's population was nearly 100,000, and by 1981, it had grown to over 220,000 inhabitants. See Strange, *Monotown*, 337.

[48]B. Swachchhasila, 'Mrs Kasalova's Perestroika', *Telegraph India*, 27 Sep. 2020.

[49]Important exceptions are a chapter in Jonathan Parry's monograph on Bhilai (Parry, *Classes of Labour*, 76–103), and a chapter in Christian Strümpell's monograph on Rourkela (Strümpell, *Steel Town Adivasis*, 234–312). Along with these anthropological accounts is an inquiry on Rourkela's urban development explored by an architect and planner; see A. Saad, 'Rourkela – the double life of an Indian new town', in Crimson Historians and Urbanists (eds.), *New Towns on the Cold War Frontier*.

[50]Kalia, 'Modernism, modernization and post-colonial India', 134.

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Figure 1. Russian Colony, photograph *c.* 1970s. Courtesy of the Facebook group 'Bokaro Lovers'.

India to integrate these regions into the emerging nation-state,[51] and to ensure an even distribution of the population between larger and smaller cities, as well as between peripheral and centrally located regions.

Second, it aimed to facilitate social transformation of a predominantly rural Indian society into a modern and secular urban nation.[52] The demographic makeup of planned cities, developed on greenfield sites, was unique as it attracted workers from across India, preventing any single regional group from dominating. In these planned townships built by migrants from across India, the segregation of space and services based on ethnicity, caste and religion was strictly prohibited by the Indian government.[53] Since 'traditional' identities such as caste vary regionally, they could not be straightforwardly transplanted into new towns, nor could hierarchies among unfamiliar groups be easily established or legitimized. Challenging the essentialization of inequality and cultivating a cosmopolitan atmosphere, this social 'blending' strategy aimed to foster new social relations[54] and unify new residents as belonging to a single nation.[55] This cosmopolitanism played a crucial role in the partial dismantling of entrenched social divides. Implementing Nehru's vision on the ground was primarily the responsibility of governmental bodies, professional architects and engineers, who leveraged modernist urban design to achieve these goals. The

[51]Strümpell, *Steel Town Adivasis*, 235.
[52]Glover, 'The troubled passage from "village communities"', 124; Strümpell, *Steel Town Adivasis*, 15.
[53]Saad, 'Rourkela – the double life of an Indian new town'.
[54]Parry, 'The sacrifices of modernity'.
[55]Singh, Kahlon and Chandel, 'Political discourse and the planned city'.

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government recognized architecture and urban design as powerful tools for facilitating social transformation, aligning with what labour geographer Andrew Herod describes as 'social engineering through spatial engineering'.[56]

In Bokaro, the Architecture and City Planning Department, led by senior planner B.K. Gupta and chief architect-planner B. Mehta, was responsible for implementing the ambitious social objectives of the new town programme. Bokaro was a city of considerable political significance, serving as a model settlement in India's new town programme. Moreover, it also held the distinction of being the last planned city built around a major steel plant in independent India, allowing it to accumulate valuable experience and knowledge from earlier projects.

Once the government decided to establish the next steel plant in Bokaro, the department, formed in 1962, conducted preliminary studies to create an initial plan sketch. These studies aimed 'to evolve the basic concept for the General Plan'.[57] In 1964, an All-India Panel of four Town Planners, after a site visit, reviewed the plan and its concepts and provided feedback and suggestions.[58] In March 1966, the comprehensive plan was finalized, outlining both short- and long-term development in line with the state-led vision.[59] The plan was revised in 1974 and again in 1982–84, when new roads and sectors were added, along with other amendments.[60]

By 1980, the Architecture and City Planning Department in Bokaro had grown to about 50 members, reflecting its substantial capacity and importance. Among its distinguished staff was Dipankar Das, an architect who joined the department in 1980 already with extensive experience. Das previously worked at a private architectural firm and held educational credentials from prestigious institutions – holding a degree in architecture from Baroda (now Vadodara) and a town planning degree from IIT Kharagpur, one of India's leading engineering universities. In an interview, he stated he was drawn to the project by its scale and competitive salary; he was impressed by the department's considerable size and the high qualifications of the team: 'When I came to the department, I was shocked because it was a very big department. It was a huge department! There were about 28 executives [architects and planners], and 29 non-executives like draftsmen and others' (8 March 2023, Bokaro). Das mentioned with fascination the department's management of a vast archive, its production of over 30,000 manual drawings and its maintenance of design integrity throughout the new town. In his view, the department's organized efforts and significant influence on the city's development, together with the political importance of the city, were very attractive to qualified staff all across India. Das was pleasantly surprised to find his former classmate from IIT Kharagpur also hired by the department, highlighting the fact that Bokaro was attracting talent from prestigious institutions in the country.

According to Managing Director Mr K.M. George, who signed the General Plan's Foreword, life satisfaction was crucial for good working conditions, especially in a remote setting where many residents had migrated from elsewhere. As noted in the

[56]A. Herod, 'Social engineering through spatial engineering: company towns and the geographical imagination', in O. Dinius and A. Vergara (eds.), *Company Towns in the Americas: Landscape, Power, and Working-Class Communities* (Athens, 2011), 21–44.

[57]BSL, 'General Plan', 10.

[58]*Ibid.*

[59]N.R. Srinivasan, *The History of Bokaro* (Bokaro, 1988), 118.

[60]BSL, 'General Plan', appxs. 2–3.

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housing section of the plan, life satisfaction is part of the general working life of a person, and housing is described as 'one of the basic requirements where a person can feel at home before and after his working hours'.[61] The City Plan thus aimed to establish a robust material foundation for the town's social development to ensure a healthy social environment in the long term: 'Long range planning…besides being economical, also helps towards the growth of [a] healthy environment where the people would derive maximum contentment from "work" as well as "home".'[62]

The department's work was structured around the provision of basic yet high-quality social amenities for the township's residents, adhering to the principle of even distribution of facilities across the city, ensuring all sectors were equipped with modern civic amenities such as electricity and running water.[63] According to Das, this approach was inspired by the comprehensive urban planning strategies seen in Chandigarh's development. Scholars similarly note that the construction of Chandigarh in Punjab, along with other India state capitals such as Gandhinagar in Gujarat and Bhubaneswar in Odisha, served as crucial training grounds for Indian planners in the post-Independence period. These projects not only provided planners with invaluable hands-on experience but also contributed to the broader body of architectural and urban planning knowledge, becoming instrumental in training new generations of architects, engineers and planners and intended to provide them with valuable experience to be later deployed in other urban centres across India, thus fostering urban development.[64]

The department's work was centred around what became known as the 'primary school concept', a key element outlined in the General Plan as the 'Primary and Secondary School District Concept'. This approach described a hierarchical organization of self-contained functional units at three levels: city, sector and neighbourhood. Each neighbourhood comprised 100 to 150 dwelling units, with each unit consisting of four or more apartments. Several neighbourhoods together formed a sector. In Bokaro, 10 out of 12 sectors were residential, and formed a city. As alluded to in the name of the concept, central to the city's spatial organization was the placement of schools. A primary school served as the nucleus of each neighbourhood, and secondary schools anchored the sector level. Planning incorporated precise calculations of distance to ensure accessibility: a primary school with a capacity of 490 students, all living within 0.6 km of the facility, and a secondary school with a capacity of 600 students, all within 1.6 km.[65] This strong emphasis on schooling illustrates the importance of social reproduction in the township's design.

The neighbourhood unit concept was instrumental in the three-tier system of the urban design's hierarchies, well-defined transportation network and community organization around schools. Architectural historian William Glover argues that 'village-like' neighbourhoods, centred around a green zone with a primary school and local shops (see Figure 2), were designed to facilitate villagers' transition to an urban lifestyle while encouraging community engagements.[66]

[61] *Ibid.*, 21.
[62] *Ibid.*, 9–10.
[63] *Ibid.*, 22–3.
[64] A. Thorner, 'Nehru, Albert Mayer, and origins of community projects', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 (1981), 117–20; Kalia, 'Modernism, modernization and post-colonial India'.
[65] BSL, 'General Plan', 18.
[66] Glover, 'The troubled passage from "village communities"', 110–12.

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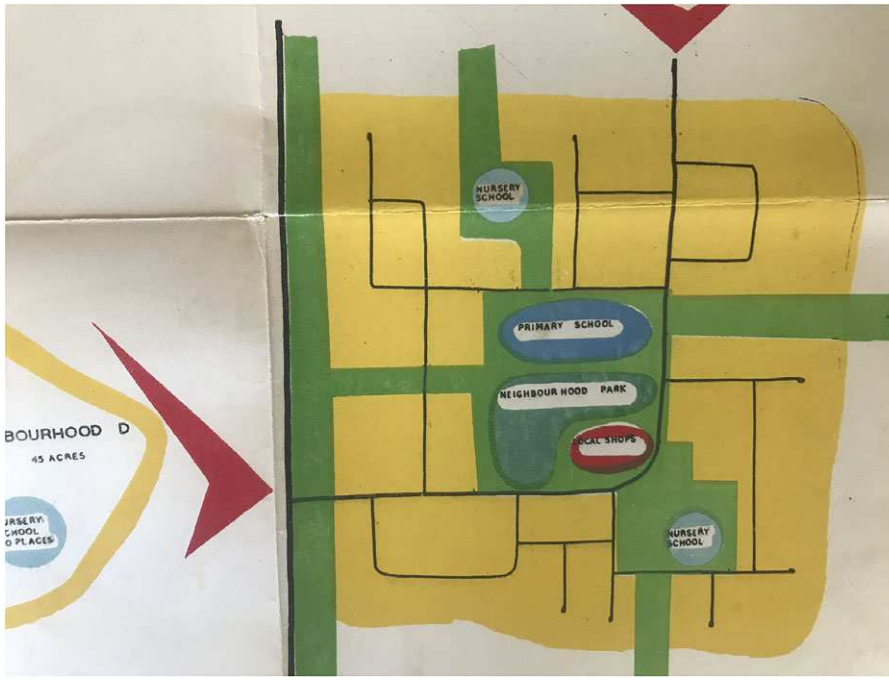

Figure 2. The scheme of social facilities included in the neighbourhood unit in Bokaro. *Source:* BSL, 'General Plan: Bokaro Steel City' (Bokaro, n.d., *c.* 1969–70), 19. Courtesy of Dipankar Das.

Each sector included two secondary schools as well as essential facilities such as health centres, post offices, religious and cultural institutions, police stations and sports playgrounds (see Figure 3), thus functioning as a self-contained unit. This self-containment was vital as Bokaro's construction unfolded in two phases. Phase one, which ran until 1981, targeted the completion of 17,850 apartments and associated facilities. Phase two, from 1982 to 1988, aimed to construct 17,183 additional homes. Together, they achieved a total of approximately 30,000 completed apartments.[67] As outlined in the General Plan, self-contained sectors also ensured community life during construction phases of the city.[68] Facilities such as public institutions, bus terminals, hospitals, highways, parks and a college were tied to the city level in this three-tier system.

The built environment was designed to eliminate concerns over basic needs, fostering conditions for residents to enjoy stable daily routines. The city's design emphasizes the state's responsibility for providing a comprehensive and holistic social welfare system for public-sector employees, offering free healthcare, education and leisure. As articulated in the Foreword of the General Plan, achieving a high level of satisfaction for the city's community, both in the workplace and in life as a whole, was a central objective of the township's design:

[67]Srinivasan, *The History of Bokaro*, 122–4.
[68]BSL, 'General Plan', 18.

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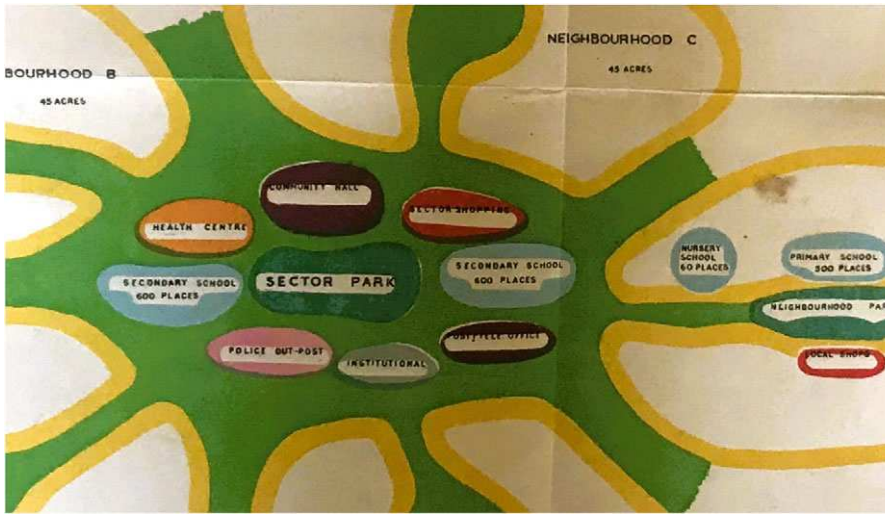

Figure 3. The scheme of social facilities included in each sector unit in Bokaro: health centre, community hall, sector shopping, secondary school 600 places (x 2), police out-post, institutional, post/tele[phone?] office. *Source:* BSL, 'General Plan: Bokaro Steel City' (Bokaro, n.d., *c.* 1969–70), 19. Courtesy of Dipankar Das.

> When located on an isolated and virgin site, it [Bokaro Steel Plant] creates demands for housing, recreation, shopping, education, medical and similar other requirements of the employees and their dependants. For harmonious working conditions, an integrated steel plant requires an integrated community life for its employees. To achieve this, a new town with all facilities has been designed for the employees of Bokaro Steel Limited so that they have not only job satisfaction but also full life satisfaction.[69]

To conclude, the township design paid a great deal of attention to ensuring access to social amenities for its residents, distributed evenly across sectors. By strategically positioning primary schools at the core of each neighbourhood, the plan ensured the safety and accessibility of educational services for all local families and fostered community engagement. This nested hierarchy of social facilities – from neighbourhood units to sectors and up to the city level, demonstrates a social-oriented model for urban development, fostering a sense of community through the provision of well-equipped shared public spaces. Centred on the distribution of infrastructures of social reproduction, Bokaro's strategic organization reflects a state-led urban approach that positions these facilities as pivotal instruments for reshaping the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The original plan, conceived in 1969–70, underwent continuous revisions. The General Plan version that I had access to had in its appendix two revisions, made in 1974 and 1982. These revisions pertained to the plans for constructing a commercial airport, alterations in certain road layouts and the decision to develop Sector XII in the south of the city instead of Sector VII in the north due to unforeseen land issues. According to Das, such revisions were regularly integrated into the plan to

[69] *Ibid.*, 8.

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adapt to evolving circumstances. While Bokaro's construction largely followed its original General Plan, informal housing had been emerging in and around the planned township, occupying some of the previously uninhabited spaces: the newly urbanized space with all its built infrastructure was attractive. However, this aspect lies beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on the conceived city and the latent and manifest ideologies of Bokaro's design. The original layout is clearly visible even today, characterized by key housing stock – which we examine in the next section – and infrastructures of social reproduction.

The social rationale of the housing scheme

In the context of steel towns such as Bokaro, the relationship between the state and its citizens is not straightforward, as it is intricately mediated – and perhaps facilitated – by an industrial company. The state delegated the task of social provision to public companies like BSL, positioning these industries as both components of economic development and patrons of welfare services. A crucial aspect of the state/public company/citizen framework was the 'urban' element, which served as an instrument to provide welfare, as may be seen in the emphasis on social reproduction in the city's design. The triangular relationship between the state, industry and urban planning was essential for establishing welfare provision.

In the 1960s, land for Bokaro, requisitioned from local peasants, was subleased by the central government to the state of Jharkhand (then Bihar) and subsequently to SAIL. SAIL was given the responsibility of overseeing the development of the city's township and facilities, including educational, healthcare and industrial infrastructure.[70] However, what makes Bokaro different from a typical company town is that SAIL played a supporting role in fulfilling the government's social and urban agenda, rather than merely serving corporate interests. In a history of SAIL authored by high-level managers and a former CEO, the authors noted that before the 1991 economic reforms, the steel industry was one of the country's most controlled sectors and was regarded by the state as a 'national benefactor'.[71] This interplay ensured that the state retained primary authority over Bokaro's development, aligning its urban growth with the state's broader socio-political vision.

To facilitate the social transformation of a predominantly rural society into a modern, urban and secular nation, the Indian government sought not only to mitigate traditional village identities based on ethnicity, religion and caste – as discussed in the previous section – but also to promote social blending at a class level. There was a clear understanding regarding who the city was designed for: the public-sector workforce, specifically the employees of BSL. This category encompassed not just the plant's workers but also the employees of schools, hospitals and other facilities, establishing that all BSL employees – who made up the majority of the township's residents – were central to social provision and politics, effectively rendering them 'producer patriots'.[72] Conversely, workers in the informal sector

[70]*Ibid.*, 16.

[71]A. Pande and S. Kumar, *Making the Elephant Dance: The Turnaround Story of SAIL* (Los Angeles, 2021), 185.

[72]Referring to workers of a public-sector plant in another Indian 'steel town' called Rourkela, anthropologist Christian Strümpell emphasizes that the steel plant's workers, who constituted the largest part of the township's population, were expected to transform into what might be called 'producer patriots'. The

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and those employed by private companies were, to some extent, excluded from this 'social transformation' plan. From the outset, the plan envisaged the development of private industries around the public-sector steel plant and acknowledged the potential presence of BSL contract workers. Moreover, the potential presence of workers who were not regular BSL employees is acknowledged in the General Plan: a dedicated area was to be leased out for private developers to provide residential buildings for 'floating and construction population'.[73] This distinction in the workforce was therefore built into the plan, implying that a significant portion of the local population would be excluded from the township, including from its housing, infrastructure and social amenities. This underscores the crucial role the company played in this development vision.

Another key aspect of class politics was focused on reducing disparities between the officers and manual workers of BSL. Bokaro's urban government deliberately designed a social arrangement through housing distribution rather than allowing market forces to segregate areas by affordability. This strategy aimed to prevent affluent individuals from monopolizing particular residential areas. To tackle social hierarchies and segregation, Bokaro's housing scheme promoted social mixing by offering diverse housing categories within a single sector (see Figure 4). These categories were tailored to different occupational groups, conforming to national standards set by the Bureau of Public Enterprises in the 1960s.

Housing categories, classified by income levels, varied in size and amenities (see Table 1). Executives, earning higher incomes, received spacious villas (Type A), while senior officers shared bungalows (Type B) due to density regulations. Officers were allocated smaller units (Type C), and workers were housed in more modest dwellings (Types D, E and F; see Figure 5), each tailored to specific income brackets. Despite variations, all accommodations provided a notably high standard of living compared to typical workers' conditions. Each unit featured electricity, running water, indoor toilets and kitchens, offering a quality of housing considered superior by Indian working-class standards.[74]

The design of residential spaces in Bokaro aimed not only at providing high-quality housing with a strong emphasis on an infrastructure of social reproduction but also at facilitating daily interactions among public workers across different job hierarchies by having them live together. The township included six housing categories, with Type A being the most commodious (193 sq. m) and Type F the smallest (34 sq. m). These categories co-existed within each sector, promoting social mixing by requiring residents of privileged categories A, B and C to share public spaces with others. While the majority of residents in any given sector belonged to categories D, E and F, privileged housing categories were deliberately not segregated into separate sectors.

Non-executive workers and executives had to live together within the same sector, 'to mix them up', as noted by Dipankar Das. According to Das, the Architecture and City Planning Department received numerous complaints from high-level officers. He noted: 'Since different social groups were not allowed to live and exist separately, high-ranking and mid-level professionals had to share spaces with lower-ranking

population worked to literally build the nation not only by moulding steel but also by reshaping traditional identities; see Strümpell, *Steel Town Adivasis*, 316.

[73]BSL, 'General Plan', 24.

[74]Parry, *Classes of Labour*, 92.

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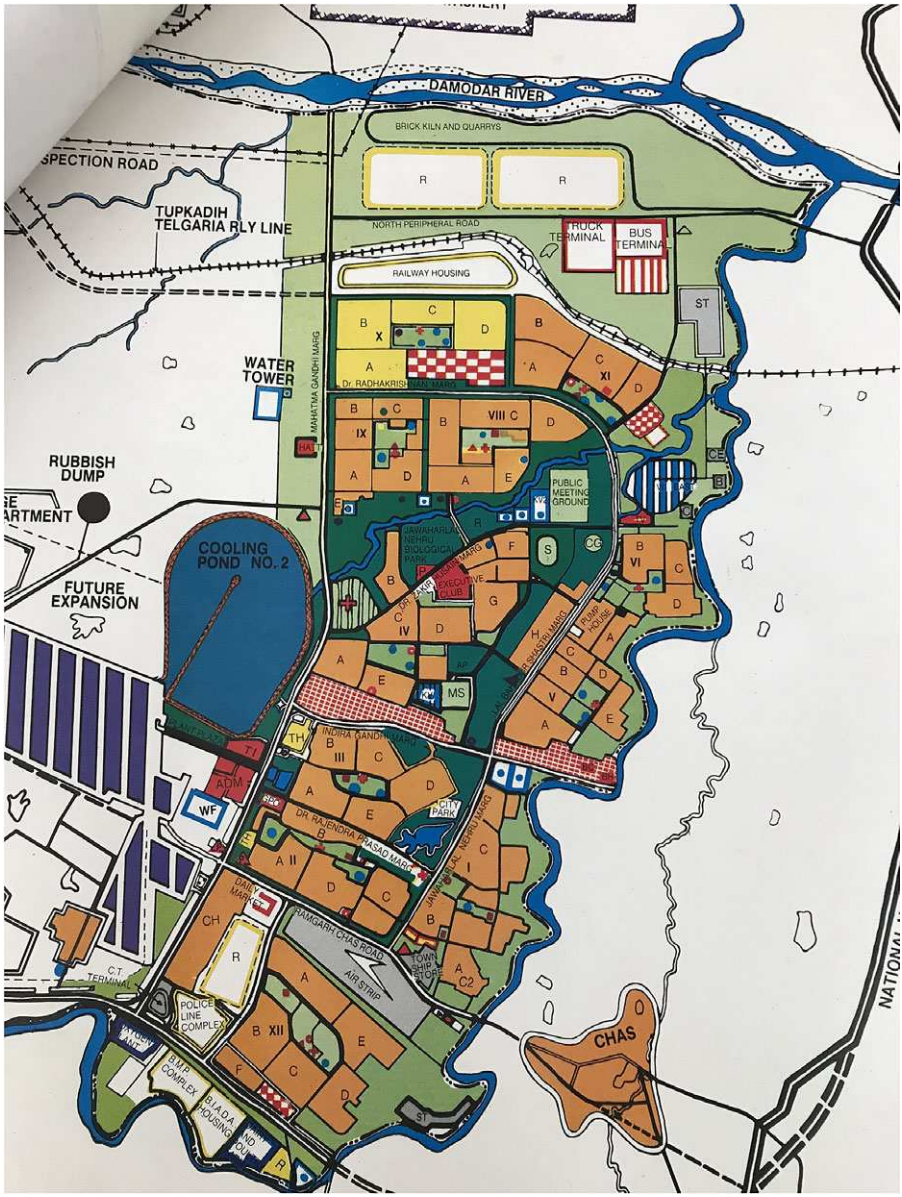

Figure 4. City Plan of Bokaro Steel City. In this plan, the township is located to the right side of the plant, of which we only see a small part. The capital letters attached to the orange sections indicate the housing categories, and the Roman numerals represent the sector number. Chas is not part of the planned township but, as a nearby settlement, is noted on the map. Courtesy of Dipankar Das.

workers. This did not always work well.' These challenges highlight the efficacy of the town-planning objectives. While it may not have been easy, the enforced contact between individuals from diverse backgrounds within a shared residential space encouraged social interaction. The integration of different levels of employees within

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Table 1. Housing categories in Bokaro Steel City.

Housing type	**Size (m^2)**	Description	Pay range (rupees)	Number of units in the city
A	195	Villa for executives' families	2,001 and above	26
B	140	One-to-two-storey bungalow for senior officers' families	1,251–2,000	160
C	83.6	Two-bedroom unit for officers' families	601–1,250	876
D	56	Two-room unit for workers	301–600	2,004
E	37	Common housing for average workers	111–300	9,756
F	34	Housing for low-income households	Up to 110	3,702

Source: 'General Plan: Bokaro Steel City' (Bokaro, n.d., *c.* 1969–70), 24. The number of units represents only the first phase of the township's construction. For income comparison: the average annual income per capita in Bihar (the region Bokaro belonged to at that time) in the 1960s was 332 rupees.

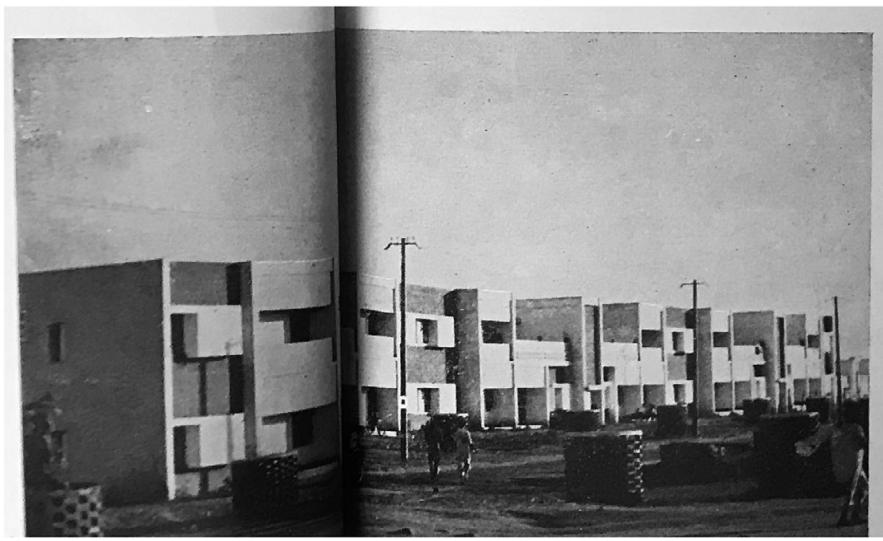

Figure 5. Housing category D. BSL, 'General Plan: Bokaro Steel City' (Bokaro, n.d., *c.* 1969–70), 19. Courtesy of Dipankar Das

a single residential setting inevitably generated tensions, especially considering that workplace hierarchies remained unchanged.

The articulated ideology of mixing housing categories in the design was only superficially addressed in the General Plan, which briefly stated that an 'attempt has been made to mix…categories…to blend the city with a socially acceptable environment'.[75] This nod towards social experimentation was overshadowed by a greater emphasis on aesthetic considerations, such as how the category-based variation in housing designs created an 'interesting street picture'.[76] Additionally, a functional

[75]BSL, 'General Plan', 22.
[76]*Ibid.*

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TABLE 27—HOUSE ALLOTMENT AS ON MARCH 31, 1988

(Number)

Sector	A	B	C	D	E/F	Hostel	Total
I	—	282	508	200(1)	848(1)	152	1,990
II	—	—	—	—	4,060	—	4,060
III	—	—	472	1,128	1,920	60	3,580
IV	26	48	852(2)	272	1,326	—	2,524
V	—	55	118(3)	144	96	93	506
VI	—	—	—	930	1,620	—	2,550
VIII	—	—	—	688	3,590	248	4,526
IX	—	—	—	1,264	5,584	—	6,848
XI	—	—	—	60	—	—	60
XII	—	—	—	528	3,030	—	3,558
Total	26	385	1,950	5,214	22,014	553	30,202

NOTE
(1) Denotes semi-permanent type
(2) Includes 200 quarters to Soviet personnel
(3) Includes 76 quarters to Polish/American personnel

SOURCE: Estate Section, Town Administration Deptt., BSL

Figure 6. House allotment as of 31 March 1988. *Source:* N.R. Srinivasan, *The History of Bokaro* (Bokaro, 1988), 24.

rationale was offered by positioning lower-income housing closer to the plant, based on the presumed lack of car transport among residents[77] – although this was not entirely true, since many of the larger villas and upper-class housing were indeed placed in sectors near the plant.

The General Plan does not detail how housing categories were specifically mixed, discussing only the stages of housing construction.[78] However, in *The History of Bokaro*, published in 1988, N.R. Srinivasan provides a table with category-based and sector-based data.[79] This table, as of 31 March 1988 (see Figure 6), demonstrates the integrated approach, showing categories A, B and C mixed with D, E and F. This arrangement indicates an intentional blend of different residential categories within the township. Through this combination, the layout promoted a class-diverse residential environment. The predominance of categories D, E and F in all sectors highlighted a commitment to providing affordable and accessible housing for a broad range of residents. This distribution also ensured that the most affluent employees did not occupy exclusive residential areas. Instead, they lived alongside individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds, and this generated shared communal spaces and daily interactions.

Bokaro's housing policy presents a unique case that both mirrors and diverges from the typical approaches found in post-war planned industrial cities in the Soviet

[77]*Ibid.*, 23.
[78]*Ibid.*, 48–9.
[79]Srinivasan, *The History of Bokaro*, 24.

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Union. In many respects, Bokaro's urban planning aligns with principles of socialist modernity. First, enhancing social provision through urban planning, where the state supplies services while a public company distributes them on the ground, reflects an ideological integration of urban planning, welfare provision and industry, rooted in the belief that the built environment can drive social change, similar to the power dynamics in socialist cities.[80] Secondly, the emphasis on social reproduction facilities is parallel in vision with socialist cities, reflecting a commitment by the state to participate in social transformations and share responsibilities with families regarding educational, medical and recreational development.[81] Moreover, the concept of individual land plots – a remnant of capitalist land development – was not used in the plans. Thirdly, the state vision, executed through urban planning, resulted in central planning – a defining characteristic of both socialist cities and Bokaro.

However, what sets Bokaro apart from socialist cities such as Mezhdurechensk in south-western Siberia, whose urban policies I analysed in another article,[82] is its approach to housing categories within the urban plan. While socialist cities typically featured standardized housing developed by the state, varying primarily by the era of construction (e.g. differing styles from the Stalin to Khrushchev periods), Bokaro's strategy intentionally integrated different housing categories so that they spatially co-existed in the same sectors. By mixing categories A to C with categories D to F, Bokaro ensured that affluent employees did not have exclusive domains. However, the existence of these housing categories in itself illustrates that inequality was not entirely eradicated in favour of an egalitarian society. Rather, the goal was to balance class inequalities through mixed-class township neighbourhoods, albeit with tensions, but toward a more socially balanced society. Furthermore, according to the 1988 data, these A to C categories are located only in four sectors, which are the city-centre sectors and those closest to the plant. This indicates that affluent employees did receive privileged locations, but not on an exclusive basis. This arrangement of housing distribution reflects an intention to advance modest social-democratic ideals rather than a pursuit of a classless society, setting Bokaro apart from the traditional models of socialist cities.

Cultivating a technical elite in an industrial working-class city

Bokaro was conceived and constructed as an exceptional city in India, meant to embody the nation's future. It was equipped with high-level infrastructure to attract well-qualified professionals and engineers essential for industrial growth. However, it also attracted other labourers who saw Bokaro as an ideal place to build their lives and

[80]This model is described by Cera and Sechi in their analysis of the socialist city of Tolyatti in the Urals, Soviet Union; see M. Cera and G. Sechi, *Tolyatti: Exploring Post-Soviet Spaces* (Berlin, 2020).

[81]The distribution of social reproduction facilities through allocating them evenly across sectors mirrors the principles of the socialist *mikroraion* (micro-district), where the residential complex is a combination of dwellings, nurseries, kindergartens, elementary and high schools, a community centre, community parks with leisure facilities and areas and other public services. For more on the *mikroraion* model, see D. Bocharnikova, 'Inventing socialist modern: a history of the architectural profession in the USSR, 1954–1971', European University Institute Ph.D. dissertation, 2014; C.E. Crawford, *Spatial Revolution: Architecture and Planning in the Early Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2022).

[82]I. Redkina, 'Pioneers of gentrification: women entrepreneurs prospecting in a post-Soviet industrial city', *Journal of Urban History*, 51 (2025), 210–27.

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the lives of their children. This design served as a strong base from which to build a city where engineers and other technical elite critical for the future of India would be nurtured. In this article, I have argued that Bokaro's urban arrangement of close-knit residential zones and many shared spaces was deliberately designed to foster daily interactions among residents from diverse economic backgrounds.

In Bokaro, no affluent group was permitted to territorially dominate a sector, and this design supported the aim of cultivating a technical elite of industrial workers. By ensuring that families of manual workers as well as some service workers would live together with those in administrative and managerial positions, the urban layout prompted residents from all economic backgrounds to live in proximity to each other, allowing their children to grow up together, learn in the same schools and participate in community activities. This mingling across different professional tiers aimed to contribute to the development of a cohesive community where social barriers were minimized and the distinctions between the professional-managerial class and blue-collar workers residing in the township were blurred.

The focus on primary and secondary schools was crucial to this effort. The design mandated that children of all resident workers, whether manual labourers or executives, attend the same schools, sharing educational resources and wearing standard uniforms provided by the schools. The layout was structured so that residents would participate in community centres, frequent markets and playgrounds together. Such interactions would grant access to shared resources and social capital, facilitating informal learning and exposure to diverse perspectives. This tacit learning, embedded in the design, was based on daily interactions and aimed to increase the likelihood of different groups' children accessing high-ranking technical – often industrial – positions in Bokaro.

By establishing urban spaces where families from varied economic backgrounds co-existed with ample public facilities, Bokaro's design was centred around fostering the next generation of professional 'producer patriots', reflecting a nation-building strategy driven by state-led urban planning. Similar to post-Independence state capitals that served to 'produce' architects, engineers and planners, Bokaro, I argue, was envisioned as a training ground for engineers and the technical-industrial elite.

The presence of income-based housing categories points to the social-democratic nature of the city's design scheme, unlike in the planned industrial cities of the post-war Soviet context, which arguably aimed for a classless society. Bokaro's design was not intended to be universally egalitarian; rather, it modelled another type of citizenry where residents shared urban privileges and social responsibilities with the state. This arrangement supported Bokaro's role as a training ground for nurturing a technical elite.

Conclusion

By examining the Bokaro General Plan through Lefebvre's theoretical lens, I uncovered the intentions and spatial arrangements as a 'conceived' space, along with how both the middle and working classes were envisioned to inhabit it. The design of Bokaro represents a remarkable instance of modernist urban planning that intricately weaves together local socio-political aspirations with broader transnational influences.

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By adopting R. Siva Kumar's concept of contextualized modernism, we gain insight into how Bokaro's design emerged as a product not only of its time but also of its specific location in post-colonial India. The Indian industrial township has been analysed in this research not as a mere replication of Western or socialist modernities but as an adaptation of urban social objectives and functions. Bokaro's design, while influenced by the international modernist new town movement, was heavily informed by local contextual factors, reflecting a modernist vision uniquely suited to India's post-colonial context.

Central to my argument was highlighting the distinct ways in which inequalities among the workforce of the public company were mapped out in Bokaro's plan. In this model town, post-Independence India's planners sought not only to develop residential zones for public-sector workers but also to cultivate a socially inclusive environment, integral to nation-building agendas and radical social transformations, two critical themes for many countries during the second half of the twentieth century. By incorporating and blending diverse income-based housing categories within sectors, the plan sought not only to blur ethnic, regional and religious lines but also to dissolve class barriers. In doing so, it sought to cultivate a technical elite, essential for a new nation striving to narrow the industrial gap with 'developed' industrialized countries and forge its own form of modernity.

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Annexe C: Full text of Article 3

From working-class cultivation to non-commercialized social interactions: The evolving social role of modernist public spaces in an Indian industrial city

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Pitfalls, Potentialities, and Transformative Practices

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The evolving social role of modernist public spaces in an Indian industrial city

Irina Redkina

Introduction

Modernist architecture and urbanism have often faced criticism for their perceived rigidity and failure to capture the complex dynamics of urban social life. They are frequently depicted as products of top-down control with little regard for lived experience (Jacobs, 1961; Tafuri, [1973] 1976; Scott, 1998; Sennett, 2010). However, recent scholarship on post-war urban modernism, recognizing the multiplicity of its initial aims and afterlives, seeks to nuance and decolonize such generalizations (Kulić et al. 2014; Swenarton et al., 2015; Kordas, 2018). This chapter contributes to this growing body of work by focusing on the public spaces designed in the early 1970s in Bokaro Steel City in line with modernist principles of urban planning. Bokaro, a planned industrial city in eastern India, was built in conjunction with the massive Bokaro Steel Plant – one of Asia's largest, constructed with Soviet support. Conceived as part of one of the largest national new town programmes (Glover, 2012: 108) and of a national social modernization agenda (Parry, 2020: 7–9), the city and its public spaces were intentionally designed by Indian urban professionals to foster an urban working-class model town and to shape patterns of collective life and citizenry in postcolonial India. In this chapter I demonstrate that the functionality of Bokaro's built environment endures amid the drastic socio-economic changes of the last decades. This interplay has led to contingencies in the social role these spaces play today.

Since the 1990s, Indian urban development has shifted towards neoliberal economic strategies, resulting in reduced state-provided social security and

greater autonomy for the public company managing Bokaro's land and facilities. Despite these market-driven reconfigurations, Bokaro's urban design has exhibited a notable resilience: The city's built environment has consistently adapted to provide essential public goods, especially to the city's vulnerable populations. In functioning as a social buffer, the city's originally planned environments mitigate today's inequalities brought about by neoliberal transitions. By focusing on the city's past and future urban development, this research repositions modernist urbanism as a dynamic legacy in the present-day urban landscape.

By analysing Bokaro's historical public spaces in flux, I explore how their social role has been changed: from sustaining the city's working-class character to providing space for affordable recreation and non-commercialized social relations. The contingency in the social role of these public spaces, I argue, is made possible by their enduring sociality. Amid significant socio-economic transformation and the rise of commercialized, exclusionary venues such as policed shopping malls, modernist public spaces no longer function precisely as their planners intended. Originally designed to cultivate an aspirational, forward-looking urban working class and foster collective sociality, these modernist public spaces persist in offering leisure as a public, collective good. Today, these older spaces predominantly serve those excluded from the city's commodified centres of consumption. While they may no longer epitomize the postcolonial future its planners once envisioned, these spaces have become refuges that maintain and reflect the city's working-class identity within a landscape increasingly dominated by neoliberal values and market-driven urban change. By analysing the evolving social role of Bokaro's historical public spaces, I argue that a remarkable robustness of the planned city's design has maintained Bokaro's ability to provide essential public goods, despite pressures from commodification and market-driven changes.

The empirical findings presented here challenge dominant critiques of modernist urban planning by showing that these historical urban structures are not socially static or exclusively geared towards control. Thus, instead of adopting the prevalent stance in mainstream literature, which views modernist urban planning as a 'top-down' enterprise judged in terms of success or failure (Tafuri, [1973] 1976; Scott, 1998) – and which is echoed by numerous scholars, such as Nandy (2003) and Roy (2007) in the Indian context – this chapter instead attends to the enduring elements and nuanced legacies of Bokaro's public spaces. It asks what forms of social relations were envisioned and produced through state-led modernist planning, and why. Further, it

explores how these social relations continue to inform the urban landscape and everyday life of Bokaro today. Hence, it offers new perspectives on how the built environment can inform urban landscapes in ways that go beyond the original intentions of political institutions.

My study takes inspiration from the philosopher Boris Groys (2019), who has argued that modernist developments operate primarily on the level of the material base – meaning the material, physical conditions and environments of society – rather than on the superstructure level, that is, the abstract ideas and cultural narratives constructed upon those material foundations. Consequently, this analysis delves into the material structures of Bokaro, tracing their evolving social roles over time. To theorize these shifting dynamics, I draw on Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'social space', which foregrounds the ways in which urban spaces are produced and continually transformed through social relations and historical processes. 'Social space' is a historical social form, a product or a work of a certain social formation (Lefebvre, [1974] 1991: 412; Ahuja, 2009: 25–26), a set of relations that inherently echo the social interactions of different groups. The concept underscores that space is never empty or neutral but both produced and re-produced (Lefebvre, [1974] 1991: 36). Unlike natural spaces, social spaces, according to Lefebvre, are deeply intertwined with social relations, property relations, and land control mechanisms (Ibid.: 81–85) – an observation which will be crucial for our analysis. Lefebvre underlined the importance of material reality (ibid.: 68–77), which, despite being remoulded and transformed under changing urban realities, never disappears completely (ibid.: 164–65, 229, 412). Historically contingent social space therefore cannot be completely eliminated, even by the most powerful players. Forms, functions or other elements will necessarily persist: 'no space disappears in the course of growth and development' (ibid.: 86). As spaces evolve, they adapt to contemporary pressures yet still embody their historical contexts, as noted by thinkers such as David Harvey (1990). This conceptual lens provides us with a comprehensive understanding of how past urban future-making affects the present urban landscape.

This socio-historical analysis of Bokaro's space is grounded in ethnographic research conducted over two months of fieldwork in 2023. That work allowed me to contextualize concepts and practices of public spaces, urbanism, and modernism. The necessity of a historical approach to ethnography, which involves not only field observation but also in-depth exploration of the city's historical narratives and material landscape (Low, 2017: 36–38), soon became evident during the fieldwork. A historical perspective was present

in key documents on Bokaro's public spaces, such as the General Plan of the City (1969–70), the Master Approach Plan (1974), and photographs from 1997 – all provided by Dipankar Das, the former deputy general manager in the Architecture and City Planning Department at the Steel Authority of India Limited (the public company responsible for Indian steel production, hereafter SAIL). The 2023 fieldwork combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photography, and field notes to collect information on the current state of public spaces and was enriched by conversations with site workers and visitors.

In the next section, I explore the broader debate over the interplay between architecture and political power, with a particular focus on whether material structures can maintain social traits even after the political frameworks that created them vanish. Following that, I analyse the implicit and explicit ideologies embedded in Bokaro's historical design and its public spaces, seeking to uncover the intended social interactions the urban space was meant to foster. I then discuss how public spaces served as cornerstones of Bokaro's social agenda, then continue by examining their social performance today and investigating their evolving social role in the current urban conjuncture. Subsequently, I analyse the contingencies of the social functionality in Bokaro's public spaces, highlighting unexpected ways in which these environments continue to inform the city's landscape. I also discuss how Lefebvre's notion of social space contributes to understanding the endurance and transformation of Bokaro's historical built environment amid shifting political-economic conditions. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the evolving social role of historical public spaces over time, in juxtaposition to influential critiques of modernist urban planning.

Beyond political scaffolding: The enduring rationales of the modernist built environment

In the post-World War II reconstruction era, planned industrial cities were widely viewed by governments as blueprints for the future and vital instruments of desired social transformation (Alexander and Buchli, 2007). The so-called new town movement emerged as a prominent urban planning strategy in the mid-20th century and was characterized by the proliferation of entirely new urban settlements on previously undeveloped sites, often built according to comprehensive plans and with intended social, economic, and

architectural goals. Its settlements, as efforts to address rapid urbanization, housing shortages, and social reform, embodied the promise of universal progress and modernist ideals, including affordable housing, equal rights in urban spaces, spacious planning, integrated sanitation, functional spaces, and ample green areas. The movement's 'golden' age is generally seen as spanning from 1945 to 1975 (Wakeman, 2016: 1), a period during which planned towns became a favoured solution across continents (Strange, 2019; Crimson Historians and Urbanists, forthcoming).

A robust body of criticism has challenged the premises and outcomes of state-led urbanism. Early on, Manfredo Tafuri's influential *Architecture and Utopia* (Tafuri, [1973] 1976) argued that the utopian aspirations of modernist urban design would inevitably become entangled with the logics of capital and state power, portraying modernism's social optimism as a naive attempt to solve social problems, detached from historical and political-economic realities. Similarly, Henri Lefebvre, in *The Urban Revolution* ([1970] 2003) and *The Production of Space* ([1974] 1991), critiqued both capitalist and state socialist urban planning for their faith in rationally ordering social needs into neatly segregated spatial functions (Stanek 2015, 121; Lefebvre, [1974] 1991: 55). Lefebvre's perspectives aligned with contemporary French theorists such as Michel Foucault, who considered state-led urbanism as a tool of social control (Stanek, 2015: 125). These foundational critiques informed later post-structuralist analyses, most notably James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998), which argued that modernist planning prioritized legibility, efficiency, and administrative order over the complexity of lived urban experience, often resulting in rigid and inflexible urban spaces. According to Michael Kordas (2018), this dominant critical perspective paints post-war modernist planning as rigidly technocratic and socially disengaged, a view that continues to influence both scholarship and public discourse regarding the shortcomings of modernist urbanism.

A key assumption in this critical debate is that modernist urban products were primarily vehicles for state power, and therefore often viewed by scholars as a political representation, prioritizing control over social vitality and therefore holding little contemporary relevance. As Nick Beech insightfully concludes from analysing scholarship on modernist urbanism, dominant accounts often frame the state as operating outside and above both polity and architecture, with architecture serving merely as a neutral 'medium that the state can mobilize' for its aims (Beech, 2014: 196). Other recent studies also view these dominant accounts as reductive. Rather than seeing the modernist built

environment as simply mirroring political influence, the studies argue that architecture should be seen as an active instrument of social modernization and power, deployed to physically construct and periodically reproduce certain social systems (Molnár, 2013; Beech, 2014). This line of research calls into question the assumption that modernist material structures are secondary to political institutions, instead highlighting how the former can facilitate the spatial reproduction of specific social relations even after the political structures that produced them have vanished.

To analyse the social role of modernist architecture, it is essential first to understand what constitutes its social dimension. Numerous historical studies have investigated the social relations embedded in modernist urbanities and planned cities around the globe. Architectural historians have provided nuanced readings of developments in architectural form and practice in, for instance, the former GDR, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, highlighting the intricacies of state-led urban housing projects (Zarecor, 2011; Molnár, 2013). The ambitions of the UK's new towns to unite social classes and create balanced communities, along with the relationship between the built environment and the welfare state, have long been examined in critical scholarship (Heraud 1968; Frampton 1985). After a long hiatus, the relationship between the welfare state and the built environment in Western Europe has only recently been re-examined, marking a significant scholarly return to this topic (Swenarton et al., 2015). Complementing these perspectives, studies have also investigated the development of a small working-class city near Detroit, with well-equipped housing for Ford factory workers (McCulloch, 2023). Collectively, these studies illustrate the global endeavour to embed social considerations within a historical understanding of modernist urban planning.

The debate over the contemporary relevance of modernist built environments, particularly of planned cities, has become a subject of growing scholarly interest, especially in post-socialist urban studies. Despite the dissolution of the political institutions that founded state socialist cities, the built environment of these cities continues to significantly impact the contemporary urban landscape, as scholars such as Kimberly Zarecor (2012), Felix Ringel (2014) and Michał Murawski (2019) have demonstrated. Their studies highlight how built socialism was and continues to be lived, offering resilience against capitalist encroachments while preserving original social and spatial functionalities. Similar findings are echoed in studies of the modernist planning legacies in small towns located in the UK, the Netherlands, Vietnam, and elsewhere, highlighting how the historical built environment continues to play an impor-

tant role in the urban social fabric amidst dramatic changes in socio-political landscapes (Beech, 2014; Ortolano, 2019; Schwenkel, 2020; Chevalier and Tzaninis, 2022).

Studies on the legacy of modernist urban planning in the Indian context also add significant contributions to our understanding. Nehruvian projects, for example, face criticism for being political status symbols that glorify industrial gigantism over local realities. Srirupa Roy (2007: 150) critiques the abstract vision of Indian steel towns, while Ashis Nandy (2003) notes that planners' fascination with modernity led to an erasure of cultural differences and the production of infrastructures misaligned with India's social conditions. However, grounded, bottom-up perspectives unveil the social rationales behind these cities' designs. Jonathan Parry's anthropological study on the steel town Bhilai suggests the township serves as both a social and economic project (Parry 2020: 7); he emphasizes its cosmopolitan core and role in blurring distinctions between officers and workers (ibid.: 76–103). Anthropologist Christian Strümpell's (2023) research on Rourkela, another steel town, provides valuable insights into everyday urban life and its social differentiation between the public company's regular employees, who enjoy job security, and other workers in the area. Revealing the historically contingent relationships between urban living, ethnicity, and caste in Rourkela, Strümpell emphasizes the socially contested nature of the city's space. He also highlights the transformation of former farmers into modern workers, significantly shaping Rourkela's social landscape (2013). Adding to this, architect Ali Saad (forthcoming) views Rourkela as a city with diverse social modernization goals. Together, these studies underscore the distinct social rationales underpinning the urban planning of these Indian townships.

In conclusion, while mainstream literature frequently dismisses postwar modernist urbanism as socially inadequate, a growing body of empirical studies has examined the social character of the modernist built environment across diverse geographical and political contexts. The research presented here contributes to this scholarly endeavour by offering a case study of modernist urban planning in an Indian peripheral industrial city, further enriching our understanding of modernism's living legacies.

Urban futures of the past: The history of urban design and planning in Bokaro Steel City

Bokaro Steel City stands as a prime example of a planned industrial new town where architecture and urban planning were leveraged by the Indian government to initiate radical social transformations. Between 1947 and 1981, India established 118 new towns – one of the world's largest new town programmes (Glover, 2012), alongside those of the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. This initiative formed part of a broader movement towards Indian decolonization and social modernization, aimed at creating a technologically advanced and modern nation with economic autarchy (Prashad, 2008: xvii–xviii; Shaw, 2009). Efforts extended beyond town construction and also included the development of public-sector research institutes and heavy industries (Glover, 2012; Pathak, 2019). Among the most iconic urban developments symbolizing these aspirations was Chandigarh, designed as a capital city. However, the majority of new towns, like Bokaro, were industrial settlements (Glover, 2012). Strategically located in remote regions, these planned industrial towns sought to integrate peripheral areas into the Indian state, promoting modernization through urbanization and industrialization (Shaw, 2009; Glover, 2012). They aimed to transform 'tribal' populations into a modern urban workforce for the newly independent state (Strümpell, 2013).

Bokaro Steel City, in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand (before 2000, the southern portion of Bihar), was part of this social modernization agenda. Bokaro and similar planned steel towns of that period were each established adjacent to large steel facilities built with support from foreign countries – the Durgapur, Rourkela, and Bhilai plants by the UK, West Germany, and the Soviet Union, respectively. The Bokaro Steel Plant was also constructed with Soviet aid, often leading to misconceptions that Bokaro's urban design closely followed Soviet town-planning practices (Strange, 2019: 319–37). However, as shown elsewhere (Redkina, 2025), Bokaro's design was distinct from both Soviet and Western planned cities, particularly in its approach to social inequality. While influenced by the international modernist new town movement's principles, Bokaro's planning also reflected local contextual factors – most notably, India's distinct political economy and Bokaro's role within the country's postcolonial nation-building agenda. Rather than seeking to eliminate class differences – as Soviet urban design aimed to do (Cera and Sechi, 2020) – Bokaro's design aimed to mix up classes within the new urban fabric.

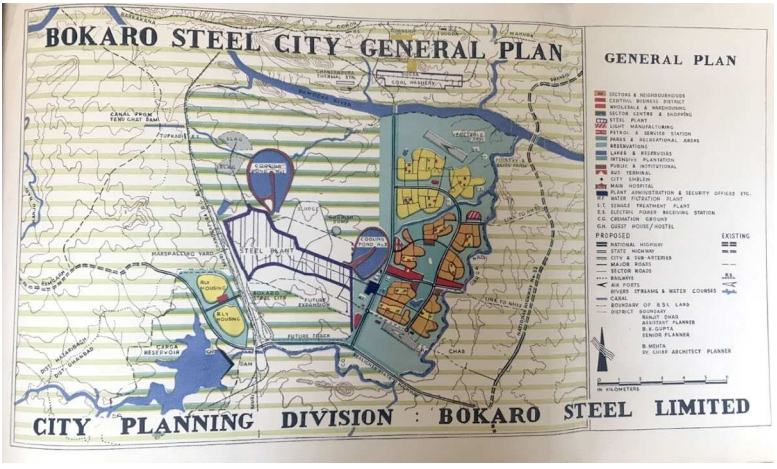
Bokaro's urban design incorporated modern planning principles aiming to provide the working class with a solid material foundation for a decent life. Initiated in the 1960s, the Bokaro Steel City Architecture and City Planning Department identified key concepts and spatial hierarchies to achieve this vision (Bokaro Steel Limited, n.d.: 10). A central idea was the 'Primary and Secondary School District Concept', which organized the city as a whole through a hierarchy of self-contained neighbourhoods and sectors. At the neighbourhood level, 100 to 150 dwelling units were grouped around a primary school, green space, and local shops, creating a 'village-like' setting designed to foster community and facilitate a smooth transition for people moving from rural areas (Glover, 2012: 124). Several neighbourhoods formed a sector, and multiple sectors made up the city.

This three-tier system structured community life around educational and social infrastructure, while a well-defined transport network connected the different levels. As alluded in the name of the concept, schools were central, with each neighbourhood featuring a primary school and each sector containing two secondary schools, alongside parks, local shops, nursery schools, and tot lots. In addition, each sector included other essential facilities such as health centres, post offices, religious and cultural institutions, police stations, and sports playgrounds (Bokaro Steel Limited, n.d.: 19). Large facilities, such as Bokaro General Hospital or City Park, were strategically administered at the city level. This nested hierarchy of social facilities demonstrated a socially oriented model of urban development, aiming to foster a sense of community through the provision of well-equipped shared public spaces. Intensive construction based on the General Plan took place in the 1970s, with further developments continuing in the 1980s. The city's construction largely adhered to the original plan; the implementation of smaller modifications over the years was outlined in appendices.

Bokaro's design, as seen in the General Plan (Figure 1), aimed to integrate workers from different income levels within shared residential spaces. Housing for different income groups was intermixed within each sector (Redkina, 2025). This incorporation of mixed-income housing within a single sector was a crucial aspect of the housing scheme, intended to encourage families from various income backgrounds to interact and share public spaces, shops, parks, and community centres (Bokaro Steel Limited, n.d.: 21–24). Notably, in an effort to set up a model town with a standard of accommodation surpassing the national average, each housing unit was equipped with electricity, running water, indoor toilets, and kitchens (ibid.: 37–43), providing a superior quality of

housing by Indian working-class standards at the time (Parry, 2020: 92). Unlike simply constructing a plant and hiring local villagers, the Indian government thus aimed to make Bokaro as a model of an alternative way of living.

Figure 1: The general plan of Bokaro Steel City, highlighting the relational location of various facilities within the city, and the city's proximity to industrial facilities.



Source: Bokaro Steel Limited, General Plan, ca. 1969–70. Courtesy of Dipankar Das.

Bokaro's historical design stands out in the landscape of Indian urbanism for its extensive level of state involvement and reliance on public-sector initiatives, reflecting the city's social role as part of social modernization effort in the early postcolonial country. Bokaro was designed as more than a provider of an industrial workforce; it was envisaged as a model city for a modern urban working class, in line with Nehruvian ideals of social equity and economic development (for additional maps and images, see Redkina, 2025). This commitment necessitated a complex relationship between the state, the public company, and urban governance. Land was compulsorily acquired from local peasants by the central government, then transferred to the state of Bihar (now Jharkhand) and subsequently subleased to SAIL, which continues to manage the land to this day. SAIL was responsible for overseeing the city's construction and governance, as well as managing social infrastructure such as schools, nurseries, and a hospital, alongside the industrial plant (Steel Authority of In-

dia Limited, 2012). In carrying out these tasks, SAIL primarily implemented the government's social and urban objectives, thereby maintaining the state's overarching authority.

In sum, Bokaro aligns in many ways with the broader global new town movement by embracing master-planned urban development, rational spatial organization, and a focus on collective social infrastructure – principles rooted in modernist planning across Europe and beyond. However, Bokaro is also marked by distinctly Indian and postcolonial features: a mixed economy combining state and public enterprise with private initiatives; the specific imperative of constructing a new national identity in the aftermath of colonialism; and distinct ways of mixing classes (for more details see Redkina, 2025). Ultimately, Bokaro stands as a unique experiment, synthesizing international models of planned development with India's particular socio-political context and state-driven aspirations.

The historical design of Bokaro's public spaces

To trace the historical design and development of Bokaro's public spaces, this research has drawn on a range of sources: the city's General Plan, dated from ca. 1969–70; an interview with Dipankar Das (an architect from the Architecture and City Planning Department who has resided in Bokaro since 1980); interviews with senior city library staff; and conversations with long-time residents. Together, these perspectives provide a nuanced account of how public spaces in Bokaro were envisioned, produced, and experienced in its initial decades, before the major socio-economic changes of the 1990s.

As evident in the maps of the General Plan, public spaces were central to Bokaro's design, as they were supposed to foster a sense of well-being and belonging in this new and remote town. Community facilities – educational, medical, retail, and recreational – were discussed in as much detail as housing and utilities such as electricity lines or sewerage (Bokaro Steel Limited, n.d.: 29–32). This emphasis on public spaces was intrinsically linked to the aspiration of cultivating a vibrant community life within the city – a goal that K. M. George, SAIL's managing director of that time, identified as fundamental to Bokaro's development: 'For harmonious working conditions, an integrated steel plant requires an integrated community life for its employees. To achieve this, a new town with all the facilities has been designed for the employees of Bokaro Steel Limited so that they have not only job satisfaction

but also full life satisfaction' (ibid.: 8). Additionally, this approach reveals that residents were regarded not simply as consumers or passive recipients of services, but as an essential workforce whose needs for relaxation and fulfilment were integral to the city's planning – needs to which the city was both obliged and committed to address.

Leisure and cultural spaces, central to the discussion in this chapter, are addressed in the General Plan through concepts of 'recreation' and 'shopping' and were integrated into the three-tier system of neighbourhood, sector, and city levels (ibid.: 18–19, 22–23). Neighbourhoods included children's playgrounds, toddler areas, and feeder parks that served as green buffers within residential blocks. Sectors contained local shops for convenient access to basic groceries, and most importantly, community halls. The latter, a vital part of the urban model, were eventually built in six out of ten residential sectors. Designed to align with the Nehruvian model of secular India, the community halls were non-religious and meant to foster interaction among diverse groups. They offered indoor game rooms, libraries, and areas for activities such as workshops or teenage gatherings, as well as outdoor sports areas with programmes for the well-being of both teenagers and adults (ibid.: 32). As residents shared with me, they could organize workshops or schedule meet-ups in the halls. Considering that an income-mixing housing scheme was also integrated on the sector level, these halls were important in bringing together people from different economic backgrounds through shared social activities. Additionally, each hall featured a library corner, offering a quiet study space or opportunities for study, rest, and learning. One interviewee, now a researcher in New Delhi, recalled how a community hall library enabled him to access books from different countries, which was of great interest to him as a child. Older residents I talked to remembered these library corners as peaceful retreats away from home.

There were also larger recreational facilities, generally situated closer to the city centre, as there was typically one large facility of each type available for the whole city. Expansive green spaces formed a defining feature of Bokaro's urban landscape from its earliest stages of development, reflecting a wider trend in modernist city planning. Since Bokaro was to be developed in several stages, the General Plan, dated ca. 1969–70, provided details for land use for the first stage only: 505 hectares out of 1255 were allocated for public green areas, such as city parks, feeder parks, and other open spaces, representing 40.2% of the area (ibid.: 20). This early focus on green zones was also reflected in a 1997 pre-

sentation by the Architecture and City Department of Bokaro[1] delivered by Dipankar Das, who served as an architect and town planner at the department from 1980 to 2013.

Figure 2: An arched bridge to the island in City Park, Bokaro Steel City, November 2023.

Source: Author.

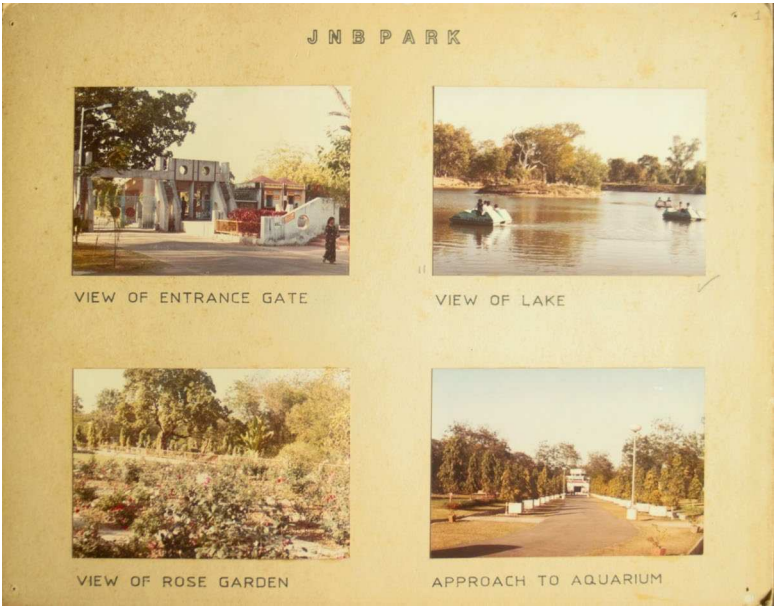
The presentation included a slide about the city's forests, underscoring their continued importance. I accessed a collection of old films and photographs capturing the beauty of City Park, established in the 1970s as a central recreational hub. Designed with gardens, lakes, and islands connected by arched bridges, the park featured rose gardens, palm trees, and pavilions providing shaded spots for relaxation. A large stage hosted significant city events, making the park a focal point for community gatherings. The park

1 The presentation, held at the University of Ranchi, focused on the development of Bokaro as an industrial city, a unique phenomenon in the region. The largest city near Bokaro, Ranchi became the capital of the newly formed state of Jharkhand in 2000.

also offered boating facilities on its large lake, as well as several restaurants, enhancing its social and recreational appeal. Based on photographs and residents' accounts from the 1980s and 1990s, the park was indeed impressive compared to parks in other Indian cities I have seen.

Another major green area, the Jawaharlal Nehru Biological Park, completed in 1989, was the last public space designed and constructed by SAIL. Being one of the largest gardens in the state of Bihar (now Jharkhand), it showcased rare flora and fauna (Steel Authority of India Limited 2012: 48) accompanied by informative signage, earning its reputation as a zoo. Even today in the park, one can still see old information posts about the animals and plants found there. Thanks to its size, the park also offered a tranquil escape from urban noise. Additionally the zoo's attractions, according to the above-mentioned films, included rose gardens, a miniature train, and the Jal Jeev Vihar aquarium, which displayed posters of aquatic life.

Figure 3: The Jawaharlal Nehru Biological Park (zoo), Bokaro Steel City. Presentation card (analogue photographs mounted on paperboard), 1997.



Source: Courtesy of Dipankar Das.

The city's extensive green venues were complemented by cultural venues. Bokaro's cultural infrastructure, which included community halls, was enhanced by the Central Library, near the city centre. Opened in 1974, this well-lit, multi-storeyed building with modern amenities symbolized the city's commitment to community and secular development. The library, though recently renovated, still retains its original layout, with separate study spaces and an old but vast collection of books in multiple languages. Several older residents recalled that it regularly hosted events for school students, such as book fairs or reading games. Addressing an image of the urban working class, these efforts aimed to lay the foundation for a more informed and affluent modern society. Additionally, three modern cinemas offered further entertainment options, enriching Bokaro's robust cultural landscape.

Figure 4: Central Library, Bokaro Steel City, November 2023.

Source: Author.

Bokaro's urban planning is generally oriented on merging classes, yet two clubs were notable for an early exclusionary nature: the Bokaro Club and the Russian Club. The Bokaro Club was discreetly located near the Bokaro Hotel – which primarily catered to high-ranking guests meeting the plant's and city's top executives. The club offered a conference room, concert hall, and rooftop

bar-restaurant, but these did not serve the general public. The Russian Club, located in a residential area for the Soviet technical specialists posted to Bokaro to build the steel plant, primarily functioned as a cultural centre for the Soviet delegation and Communist Party of India members. It only occasionally opened for public screenings and monthly events, where labourers and executives gathered with their families to watch films. Both clubs were largely inaccessible to the lower classes. This highlights a key aspect discussed earlier about Bokaro's urban planning: The city's design did indeed promote social mixing in many public spaces – where people from different backgrounds were brought together by the necessity of social activities – yet it also preserved exclusive venues for the upper classes, where such interaction was not required, thus preventing the total elimination of class differences.

Figure 5: Bokaro Club, Bokaro Steel City, March 2023.

Source: Author.

To conclude, in the 1970s and 1980s – still the early decades of post-Independence – when many Indian cities lacked entertainment infrastructures (Athique and Hill, 2010: 30), Bokaro stood out by offering abundant green spaces, cultural amenities, and leisure facilities. This approach aimed to at-

tract qualified professionals to the remote location (Pande and Kumar, 2021: 185) and ensure a high standard of living for public-sector workers – the majority of the planned town's population. Rather than establishing a classless society, Bokaro's urban design aimed to facilitate promoted coexistence and social engagement, reflecting the early post-Independence vision of fostering community and well-being in a city of national significance.

Evolving social functionality of modernist public spaces: Preserving the working-class fabric amid commodified logics

Beginning in the 1990s, Bokaro experienced a profound socio-economic transformation, shaped by broader geopolitical changes and nationwide shifts towards market liberalization. These changes departed from a state-led Nehruvian social contract and moved to neoliberal economic strategies (Patnaik, 2007; Patel, 2022). Indian cites were reimagined from places of use-value designed as decent places to live and into investment opportunities for private capital (Fernandes, 2004). As state provision and social security diminished, SAIL – according to its management – found itself without government support while continuously being burdened by high labour and social infrastructure costs (Pande and Kumar, 2021: xii, 35). In response, SAIL redefined its role from a national benefactor to a more profit-oriented entity (ibid.: 185), reducing its workforce significantly: from about 50,000 employees in the 1990s to 16,467 by 2015 (Strange, 2019: 336). SAIL also ceased its active role in Bokaro's urban development. Since 1989, after delivering the last major state-sponsored project, the Biological Park, SAIL has shifted to primarily being a landowner, inviting private investment in sectors like real estate, entertainment, and hospitality. Private investors have since established art centres, educational facilities, and upscale restaurants and cafés. These changes have profoundly impacted Bokaro's urban landscape, particularly in leisure and cultural activities, challenging Bokaro's original vision as a hub for social reproduction rooted in Nehruvian modernist ideals.

The two new major landmarks in Bokaro, the Bokaro Mall and the Hindu temple Jagannath Mandir – built in the last decade by Chinese and Indian investment respectively – exemplify this trend. The Bokaro Mall symbolizes middle-class consumerism and offers, for the most privileged, a controlled retreat from the city's hustle, whereas Jagannath Mandir indicates a move towards ethno-nationalization and privatized religious spaces. Unlike histor-

ical public spaces, these new spaces are more exclusive, defined by purchasing power and religious affiliation. Additionally, government mandates on corporate social responsibility (CSR) – requiring companies to support social, environmental, and economic development – have notably shifted responsibility for social well-being from the state to private entities. In Bokaro, CSR is exemplified by projects like the Bokaro Handicraft Training Centre – where rural women in economically challenging situations learn to craft and sell bamboo products, promoting small-scale entrepreneurship as a solution to economic challenges. These new spaces are markedly different not only in their sociality, but also their materiality. The well-lit, shiny, and meticulously maintained environments are purposefully designed to contrast with the functionalist and practical nature of the past. Overall, these new developments prioritize individual responsibility for social and economic life, selective social engagement, and leisure through consumption.

Today, Bokaro's historical public spaces exist within a shifting political and material context, shaped by an unforeseen restructuring. While modernist urbanism and its built environment are often criticized for their top-down approach and supposed social inadequacy, little attention has been paid to the evolving role of these spaces under current market conditions. This research argues against simply dismissing these historical spaces and the broader Nehruvian agenda that produced them. It draws on Lefebvre's understanding of social space – which emphasizes the interplay of 'conceived' (planning concepts and ideologies), 'perceived' (built forms), and 'lived' (everyday practices) dimensions (Lefebvre [1974] 1991: 38–39) and contends that *'no space disappears in the course of growth and development'* (ibid.: 86) but instead accumulates historical layers that shape present dynamics (ibid.: 164–65, 299). Lefebvre therefore suggests that social spaces are shaped by these layers, as well as by property relations and land control (ibid.: 81–85). This perspective is especially valuable in Bokaro, where the relationship between the built environment, state ownership, and the public company creates a complex interplay between historical legacy and contemporary urban dynamics.

In Bokaro, the persistence of state ownership and of the social functionality of parks, libraries, cinemas, and the zoo – still owned by SAIL – underscore the endurance and resilience of the city's modernist ideals. Today Bokaro's built environment shaped by these Nehruvian modernist ideals remains largely intact. Unlike many other industrial towns where public spaces have been commercialized or converted into heritage sites, Bokaro's historical amenities have largely retained their original roles, with only minimal material changes, such

as signs of neglect or renovation. Thus, the city's public spaces exhibit remarkable consistency in their public ownership and social function despite market-driven pressures since the 1990s. What has changed is the broader urban landscape in which these spaces now operate, and the social role they now play, redefined in response to contemporary economic and social realities.

Bokaro's cultural landscape has shifted with the rise of multiplex cinemas and digitalization, which challenge the roles of older cinemas and libraries. Multiplexes now offer luxurious movie experiences with plush seating and fresh popcorn, making them exclusive due to pricing. This shift has impacted the traditional cinema scene: One of the three old cinemas has closed, while two – Jitendra and Pali Plaza – remain, today primarily serving low-income audiences who cannot afford the multiplex experience. Being located in the city centre and offering the same movies but at lower prices, these cinemas ensure that cultural participation remains affordable; this could be interpreted as *resistance to the* commodification of leisure, upholding cinema as a public good for a broader number of workers, rather than a luxury, and serving as class-balancing space.

The Central Library has also transformed, moving from a bustling community hub to a quieter study space. It now focuses more on subscriptions to regional and national journals than on expanding its book collection, resulting in an outdated and disorganized catalogue. Competing against new private libraries offering modern amenities like wi-fi and air conditioning but for higher fees (400 rupees per month), the Central Library remains financially affordable at a nominal cost (60 rupees per year). The library continues to privilege SAIL employees, providing them with membership immediately, whereas other people must acquire a sort of recommendation letter from a SAIL worker. Therefore, the library leans to historical social hierarchies rather than adapting to market-driven hierarchies. This reflects both the persistence of collectivist spatial legacies and the broader challenges facing public infrastructure under market pressures.

Significant changes have occurred at the neighbourhood and sector levels, as these areas have not consistently received financial support from SAIL. Many green spaces and playgrounds have been neglected and are now overgrown with greenery. Community halls, once central to the social mediation between classes, have nearly disappeared in favour of private venues. In the mid-1990s, the community halls became popular for private weddings and events due to their ample indoor and outdoor spaces. However, new private wedding venues catering to more glamorous tastes soon overshadowed them.

As SAIL scaled back support, funding for community hall activities dwindled, resulting in their decay and the closure of all six community halls by the late 2010s. Currently, the community centre in Sector III is undergoing a revival, with new facilities such as a tennis court, football field, and numerous indoor rooms, including a stage. This reflects a potential renewal phase for community spaces in Bokaro, but the actual results are yet to be seen.

Figure 6: The Jal Jeev Vihar aquarium, reopened in 2023 after renovation, in the Jawaharlal Nehru Biological Park, Bokaro Steel City, December 2023.

Source: Author.

The Jawaharlal Nehru Biological Park (JNB) is the standout success among Bokaro's historical public spaces. It is exceptionally well-maintained, with manicured lawns, gardens, and an improved children's area. Recent renovations, like the reopening of the Jal Jeev Vihar aquarium, have enhanced its appeal. JNB hosts events such as Wildlife Week, Environment Day, and Animal Welfare Days, attracting families despite a declining animal population. Its

remote and expansive location offers a peaceful escape from urban noise. According to the 2016–2017 park report, JNB is financially sustainable, with support from entrance fees and revenue from photo and film shoots, reflecting a focus on profitability that enables continued renovations. Unlike the Town Administration–managed City Park, which shows signs of neglect, JNB operates under SAIL, with dedicated oversight.

City Park, an important green area in Bokaro, today continues to serve as a vast, open-access green space with free entry; it has not been upgraded, has aging infrastructure and overgrown gardens, and is only slightly maintained. Yet the park retains its role as a central locale with picturesque lakes that draw visitors for walks and picnics, especially during winter. Some previously accessible areas, like the islands and rose gardens, are now gated, restricting access and leaving visitors to view them from behind fences.

Figure 7: A closed gate to a bridge and an island in City Park, Bokaro Steel City, November 2023.

Source: Author.

Nevertheless, no major privatization or commercialization has taken place in City Park: There are no upscale cafes or restaurants marketed to higher-income groups, and visitors – as my interlocutors describe – continue to use the space as in earlier years, gathering for casual recreation and leisure. In this sense, City Park's persistence as a freely accessible space demonstrates a form of resistance to the enclosure and monetization of urban public spaces; residents' right to leisure and nature survives, however tenuously, against the logics of profit and pressures of contemporary urban transformations.

In summary, by the selective maintenance and upgrading of existing public facilities – neither commercializing them nor, since 1989, building new public facilities – SAIL acts primarily as a landowner and steward of the older social arrangements rather than as a developer. SAIL's commitment to public ownership and basic facility maintenance has been critical in preserving the original design and functionality of these spaces. Continuity of public ownership has kept the focus on visitors as residents, not dividing them based on their financial means. Leveraging Lefebvrian dialectics, as interpreted by Ahuja (2009: 30), these urban spaces embody historical social arrangements and actively reproduce the social dynamics initially embedded during their production – such as collective use, state stewardship, and public accessibility. These continue to be reflected in the way these spaces are conceive and perceived today.

Past visions, present realities: Conclusion

As the editors of this volume observe, contingency is based on the notion that nothing remains permanently fixed or unchangeable. It represents not only a condition of uncertainty but also an openness to unpredictable and plural futures. Even seemingly solid material structures, such as those from the last century constructed from concrete and an ambitious social vision, remain subject to reinterpretation and adaptation as urban realities evolve. This is evident in Bokaro's parks, libraries, and other historical public spaces, which were initially designed to foster an integrated and exemplary working-class community for a postcolonial nation. The role of bringing together people from different backgrounds has largely diminished. Over time, their social role has shifted: Today, these spaces provide vital infrastructure for residents who are excluded from the city's proliferating commercialized entertainment venues. Unlike the newly appeared privatized venues, where social interaction is commodified, Bokaro's historical public spaces have retained their collective and

inclusive character. Conceived as state-driven models for a postcolonial, inclusive future – embodying the ideal of leisure as a public good – these spaces now provide rare opportunities for accessible recreation. This stands in sharp contrast to the exclusive experiences offered by Bokaro's privately developed leisure venues.

This research has demonstrated that the social roles played by Bokaro's historical modernist public spaces are fundamentally contingent, shaped by the evolution of both the built environment and urban narratives. These empirical findings can be fruitfully interpreted through Henri Lefebvre's concept of social space. As Lefebvre argues, space is not a natural or neutral backdrop (Lefebvre [1974] 1991: 26, 30, 36); rather, it is actively produced through social relations and arrangements (ibid.: 36, 412). His dialectical understanding of social space suggests that no social space ever fully disappears, but each, instead, retains enduring forms and functions even as it is reshaped by new social forces (ibid.: 164–5, 229, 403, 412). Drawing on this perspective allows for a critical analysis revealing how spatial arrangements persist and evolve over time, shaping both contemporary and future urban landscapes. Therefore, the modernist forms and functions built under Nehruvian ideals, produced through particular social relations, endure through the 'conceived' and 'perceived' elements of the built environment.

However, within the changed urban landscape, this endurance appears to inform the contemporary social landscape in an unexpected way: serving for those excluded by the new urban order. Far from fading into irrelevance, Bokaro's public spaces function as dynamic social agents in the present, while remaining products and co-producers of evolving social relationships (ibid.: 38–39). Grounded in a socio-historical understanding of urban spaces as deeply embedded with historical layers, property relations, and land control (ibid.: 81–85), this chapter argues that Bokaro's historical public venues continue to play a prominent role in the city's social urban landscape. Central factors contributing to the social endurance of Bokaro's historical public spaces, as this study suggests, are the continuity of their public ownership and their persistent social functionality. Yet, as political and material contexts have changed, so too has the social role of these spaces.

This contingency underscores that the persistence of the modernist built environment allows these spaces to remain relevant in an increasingly polarized urban landscape. The evolving contributions of older modernist structures challenge narratives that dismiss modernist planning as inherently inflexible or inadequate, as suggested by Scott (1998) and Sennett (2010) – and

reiterated by Roy (2007) and Nandy (2003) in the context of Indian planned towns. Instead, as this ethnographically grounded study has demonstrated, Bokaro's historical public spaces function not as static relics but as active components of urban life, maintaining their commitment to collective use and social integration.

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