

BATA COLONIES: MODERN GLOBAL ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING

ERIC J. JENKINS

*Washington-Alexandria Architecture Consortium
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University*

Introduction

This paper will attempt to reveal the social and political acts of the Bata Shoe Company as the company supported and sponsored modern architecture, urban design, social concerns, and labor methods in the Twentieth century. It will examine how those political and social acts of will — symbolized by the architecture and urban environment — were tested at the Bata company town in Belcamp, Maryland.

Political Act of the Bata System

The Bata Shoe Company, from its inception in 1894, has prided itself as a family-based, labor friendly, progressive and “welfare capitalist” firm.¹ Beginning in 1916 and until the outbreak of World War Two, the company professed this pride through an aggressive sponsorship of modern architecture and urban planning. This built environment was a physical manifestation of the philosophy and goals of the Bata company.

The goals of the Bata firm have been consistent since its founding, are straightforward and, as seen in its company literature and in the writings of its leaders, clearly stated: to increase productivity, extend profit margins, and expand, dominate, and continue a global market. In 1931 Tomas Bata, Sr., the ambitious founder of the Bata Shoe Company, wrote: “The greatest ideal of the true owner of a small enterprise is the longing for growth, the longing for development, the firm determination to extend his enterprise ...”² Bata was, foremost, an industrialist. Seemingly contradictory to this was his philanthropic, paternally sponsored social welfare and the humane built environment fostered by it. However, the mutually beneficial social ideals and sound economic practice becomes clear through his writings. The genuine political, social and economic acts and the subsequent unmatched devotion of his employees were the means to a financially successful end. Bata wrote, “We have been able to convince ourselves in our own business dealings that love and service of one’s neighbor are not a form of self-sacrifice but the best business policy.”³

Along with social ideas and techniques, Tomas Bata developed his understanding of modern manufacturing techniques of the textile and automobile industries in the

United States and Europe. Prior to and following World War I, Tomas Bata traveled extensively throughout industrialized nations to observe and, at times, participate in the manufacturing processes. He was impressed with the efficiency of the Ford Automobile assembly line and adopted much of Ford’s techniques — including the timing of workers as they performed their duties. By 1921, Bata factories became a model of efficient mass production. Within ten years, the Bata shoe company would expand its interests into aircraft, building materials, rubber and clothing production.

While gathering information in the United States and England, Bata noted the conditions of industrial labor — conditions in which the general welfare of labor was often of low priority. During this period of the early 20th century, industry considered workers only as a mechanism integral to manufacturing. Typically, manufacturing laborers were, even by standards of the time, overworked, malnourished, unhealthy, ill-housed, and (with a notable exception of Ford) paid relatively low wages. Labor had little commitment, beyond monetary, to a company. Industry was relatively unaware, had no regard, or did not act upon a mutually beneficial, social commitment to labor.

Tomas Bata recognized a vital balance of individual labor, community, and leadership in any business enterprise. In his autobiographical notes, Bata reveals this thoughtful recognition as he moved from frustrated salesclerk to powerful industrialist. In his youth, Bata’s social ideals were influenced by many socialist philosophers including Leo Tolstoy and Karl Marx.⁴ His Slovak culture and religion engendered a sense of social concern, a concern that was passionate. In his youth, he admits intolerance for “black-souled capitalists”⁵ and spoke out against unjust industry: “O these capitalist wretches! O the injustice that there is in this world!”⁶

Bata soon realized through his experiments in business, that unlike the ideals spoken by socialist thinkers, the key to rights and freedoms of labor were hard work, education, and a healthy environment. Those, he surmised, could be provided by a just leader of industry. He wrote: “No undertaking can fulfill its social tasks, live and flourish, unless it has a guiding head who accepts the supreme responsibility and from this draws all his

authority.”⁷

With his leadership, Tomas Bata instituted a socially conscious, capitalist enterprise. Within a beneficial context of garden cities, mass-produced housing, hygienic conditions, and fair labor practices, Bata employees became emotionally dedicated to the firm. To this day, former Bata employees during inter-war years profess respect and commitment to the Bata firm.

With a socially moral stance and efficient manufacturing techniques, the Bata firm prospered with a dedicated labor force. Emilo Rimailho, a contemporary observer of industry, noted in 1933 that Bata’s approach “fully deserves our attention for its social consequences ... employees feel no longer that they are working just for wages, but that they are in certain measure partners.”⁸

The “Bata System”⁹ was an intense, philanthropic, and paternal approach to business. In a sense, the Bata system encouraged a familial relationship between employee and the firm. This encouragement came in the form of sound labor practices, social interaction, education programs, health management, and, finally, the built environment. Bata’s political and social guidance to his employees is clear as he writes: “The great-souled man is he who works enough to bring benefit to other, to those among whom he lives, and if possible even to the whole State.”¹⁰ Bata employees shared a “moral point of view”¹¹ in their work and life.

Following Tomas Bata, Sr.’s death in 1932, his son Tomas, Jr., and half brother, Jan perpetuated the philanthropic and economic tradition. Throughout the 1930s, the Bata company continued expand and sponsor further studies of architecture and urban design throughout the world.

The Symbolic and Global Built Environment

The symbolism of the paternal and philanthropy of the Bata firm is seen in the built environment in which Bata manufactured and developed an empire. From a base in Zlin, Czechoslovakia, the Bata empire carried its symbolic forms and acts to a global scale. As part of market expansion, Bata established manufacturing colonies in five continents and retail outlets in over seventy countries. As Tomas Bata, Sr. often stated in actions and words: “Let us plan our enterprise on a worldwide scale...”¹² Bata’s young modern architects played into the political act and planned, on a worldwide scale, a built environment symbolic of the industrial age. The colonies and retail outlets transferred the economic, technological and ideological symbols of Bata. Bata colonies were conceived of and designed in Zlin and literally shipped to sites throughout the world. Town plans and architecture, as well as social and economic structures, were transplanted, unchanged and complete throughout the world.

The urban design and architecture of Bata colonies epitomized the direction of modern thinking in the early 20th century. Bata urban design followed a vision parallel to Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City Movement and Tony Garnier’s Cite Industriale. As in ideas described by these and other modern thinkers, Bata’s vision reflected social reform, technological advances, mass production,

international design, hygiene, and a high moral ground. In 1927, Bata clearly stated his vision of the modern industrial city: “Our aim is a garden city full of sunshine, water, refreshing verdure, and cleanliness; a town of the highest wages, of flourishing crafts and businesses and trades ...”¹³

Bata’s urban designers, such as Jan Kotera and Frantisek Gahura, designed towns that linked industry, welfare, and economics. Bata towns colonies were designed and built throughout Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas; each designed under specific guidelines that arranged housing, factories, and public space.

Bata Urban Design Guidelines

The size, extent and form of a colony were predetermined in Zlin. Each colony was limited to approximately 30,000 persons. The colonies were laid-out in distinct zones known as quarters. The quarters held separate functions of the town including factories and warehouses, the public square and civic buildings, married employee residences and unmarried employees apartment buildings also known as hotels. The streets and public spaces were laid out on either a grid or radial system with recreation facilities, churches and elderly housing were interspersed within the town. Green recreational and agricultural zones surrounded the colonies. The roads, sewers, curbs, and sidewalks were constructed with either concrete or Bata manufactured bituminous material.

Architecture

Bata architecture, in conjunction with its urban design, was consistent with trends in modern design circles. Employee housing, public buildings, office buildings, and factories were lessons in mass-production and concerns for health and human welfare. Bata’s architectural endeavor included sponsorship of the 1935 International Housing and Furnishing Competition and the patronage (if only temporarily) of architects such as Bohuslav Fuchs, Ludvik Kysela, and Le Corbusier.¹⁴ Bata architecture, most notably Vladimir Karfik’s office block in Zlin with its moving office-suite, continued to expand both modern technical and spatial investigations.

The architecture of Bata colonies continued to expand a modern, socially explicit concern for social and scientific modern ideals. In 1935, Antonin Cekota, analyst of the Bata system, described Bata’s intention in architecture: “The building of schools, hospitals, and other social institutions, the creation of educational and healthy systems, are incidental parts of the culminating endeavor — to create a more productive, and admirable human being.”¹⁵

Architects in Zlin developed models for modern mass-produced architecture. Civic buildings, apartment blocks, hotels, factories, and even Tomas Bata’s memorial were based upon a concrete frame. This poured-in-place frame, with a modular of 6.15 meters by 6.15 meters, allowed for mass-produced and uniform architecture. The modular frames were, depending upon function of the building, in-filled with variations of brick or glass curtain wall. The form work was reused and transported to various building sites in Zlin and to all Bata colonies.

Single family housing did not employ the concrete

form work of larger buildings, but were predominately duplex units mass produced on site using brick masonry, concrete, and wood construction. Each unit included a private garden, central heating, gas, and electricity. The units were well defined with cubic, ordered interiors and exterior massing similar to that of Adolf Loos.

A Colony in Belcamp, Maryland

Bata established uniform and somewhat autonomous manufacturing colonies throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Each colony included factory buildings, housing, public parks, recreation facilities, schools, hospitals, and other civic buildings placed within an town plan. The architecture and towns were designed in Zlin and built by local contractors under supervision of Czechoslovak architects or engineers. Czechoslovak managers and instructors guided the local labor force in both technical aspects and in the Bata system.

The Belcamp colony is typical in its inception and design; it is atypical in its encounter with opposing political views and social ideals and alien concepts of the built environment.

Belcamp: 1933 - 1997

Belcamp, Maryland, located approximately 40 miles north of Baltimore, was originally agricultural land and a summer resort community. Of interest to the Bata designers were the major intercity highway and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad that bisected the site. Also of interest was the Bush River that bordered the site. This navigable river and tributary of the Chesapeake Bay was a potential connector to the Atlantic seaboard.

In 1933, Vladimir Karfik, a Czech architect who apprenticed with Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, moved to the area and purchased property for the Bata Shoe Company.¹⁶ The town and architecture was designed in 1937 by Frantisek Gahura and Karfik. Initially Belcamp was designed to be the headquarters for all corporate activities in North America. Like other colonies it was to be somewhat self-sufficient, house approximately 30,000 persons, and provide an economic, social and physical environment for employees.

Belcamp was laid out in a combination grid and radial plan with large, figural green spaces. The larger linear green space bisected the residential quarters. Adjacent to this green space are the schools, recreation facilities, churches, and retirement home.

Construction at Belcamp began in June 1939. Within a year, twenty-five buildings were completed on the site; the site contained two factory buildings, a four-story hotel for unmarried employees, twenty-one duplex units, a director's house, and an elementary school.

Today, the distinctive grid of streets and districts and the concrete frames and brick masonry are easily recognizable. The factory and warehouses are located in the southeastern quarter. The five story hotel for unmarried employees is to the northeast. The residential quarters, school building and recreation area are to the northwest.

As stated, the design and intent of Belcamp were typical of a Bata colony. However, following the annexation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany, the

direction of the Bata firm, and subsequently Belcamp, was fundamentally altered. Following the annexation, Bata enterprises made North America the center of all corporate activities. Thomas Bata, Jr., Jan Bata, and approximately one hundred employees and their families fled Europe. As part of this exile, two separate colonies were developed in North America: Belcamp, directed by Jan Bata, was to be the United States headquarters and Batawa (near Toronto, Canada), directed by Tomas Bata Jr., was headquarters for the Canadian market.

Belcamp, as a flourishing colony, had a life span of only a few years. Although it continued to function as a Bata factory, it ceased growing toward its original purpose. Only a few, single story warehouses and manufacturing plants were added after 1939. The hotel's ground level shops and theater, "piano nobile" of cafeteria and ballroom, three floors of residential suites, and roof top terrace were used as late as 1977. The school building, which never functioned as intended, was transformed into a warehouse and assembly plant during World War II. The duplex houses were occupied until as late as 1985. In essence, from 1939 onward, the town existed as a mere ghost of a colony. Today, the factory buildings continue to produce a small amount of footwear. However, the town and other architecture are deserted and slated for demolition.

Contributions To The Fall

The Bata Shoe Company introduced unique ideas of urban design, social interaction, and industrial practices to a secluded area of Maryland — ideas fairly unfamiliar to American labor and society. Belcamp was designed to be the headquarters for one of the largest markets in the world but the colony, and social and political ideals associated with it, failed to gain acceptance in the United States.

The reasons for its failure, both numerous and debatable, cannot diminish the progressive nature of the site, the town plan, and the architecture. Unfortunately, these progressive ideas and physical forms helped raise suspicions among government leaders, union organizers, and others in the community. Specific events contributing to the failure can be found in records of United States courts, contemporary periodicals, and notes of former Bata employees:

Social Housing

Many of the American workers refused to live in Belcamp and chose to live outside of the colony in surrounding towns or rural communities. Only those who could not afford to live elsewhere or were from Europe lived in the colony.¹⁷

Social Structure

The social structure formed by the Bata employee/manager relationship was not easily accepted by the American workers. In Zlin and other colonies, free time, health maintenance, exercise and after hour activities were routinely orchestrated by the Bata company. American employees were not accustomed, to nor ready, to be assisted in socialization, hygiene, and general welfare.¹⁸

Public Opinion

Negative public opinion, press reaction, labor union pressure, and government accusations played a role in the demise of Belcamp. Following scathing accusations¹⁹ by the FBI, members of the U.S. Senate, unnamed sources, and even the U.S. Army, the Bata firm concentrated its headquarters in Canada. Canada, with closer governmental, societal, and cultural ties to Britain and Europe, was more amenable to Bata and its methods.²⁰

Family Disputes

Bata family disputes further contributed to the Belcamp failure. Jan Bata, head of Belcamp, saw that sharing leadership with his nephew was not satisfactory to his personal success. Jan filed suit in U.S. courts to gain control of the entire Bata company from Tomas Bata, Jr. However, following several years of legal battles, the U.S. federal courts ruled against Jan and removed his control over United States concerns. This action left Tomas Bata Jr. the sole director of Bata Europe and North America. Subsequently, Tomas, Jr. consolidated the Bata enterprise to Batawa. Belcamp became a symbol of ill-will and remained a secondary concern to the Bata firm.²¹

World War Two

Two years after the initial construction at Belcamp, the United States entered into World War Two. The Bata company, like other industries, moved into the war related production. Control of employee benefits, social activities, and other traditional Bata affairs were subjugated to the war effort.²²

Conclusion

Belcamp is a symbol of the built environment as a political and social act which, either naively or boldly, encountered cultures beyond its initial cultural context. The paternal approach of the Bata Shoe Company engendered a familial relationship between employee and the firm. This encouragement, in the form of economic, labor, social, educational, health, and built environment benefits, were political acts that encouraged a sense of community. This communal effort, however humane and moral in thought, was primarily for productivity, efficiency, and economic growth.

Bata's progressive political stance on social issues, technology, and health were reactions to conditions existing and woven into the European economy, society and landscape. Modernism, the garden city movement and social concerns grew and developed within an industrialized, European context. The idealized colony of Belcamp — its design, purpose, and social structure — were merely fruits of a distinctly different set of circumstances than those facing American society. Factory towns, technologies, and mass-production did exist in the United States, however, the social, economic, and physical landscape did not and therefore could not support radical and progressive social aspects of the Bata Shoe Company.

The Bata company did not disguise its political and

social direction. Further, it did not conceal the intent of good housing, concern for healthy living, and need for community as a basis for a contented and productive employee. There was no hidden agenda. However, this open social, cultural, and economic agenda could not take root in the United States.

The modern architects and designers for Bata, either for convenience or other reasons, adopted the Bata political and social belief in their designs of international architecture and modern garden cities. Belcamp is significant because it is a Czechoslovak town in the United States that failed because it was too European. Still with all of its flaws, the Bata company's progressive social, political and economic objectives sponsored a humane, industrial environment on an international scale.

NOTES

- ¹ Chikugo, Koji, *Tomas Bata: The Czech Example Of Welfare Capitalism*, (State University of NY, 1991).
- ² Cekota, Antonin, *Zlin, The Place of Activity* (Prague: Zlin, M. Knapp, 1936), p. 13.
- ³ Bata akciová společnost, Gottwaldov, *Bata: Menschen Und Werk*, (Zlin, 1935), p. 56
- ⁴ *Ibid*, p. 89.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, p. 76.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, p. 75.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, p. 38.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, p. 138.
- ⁹ Architekturmuseum In Basel, editor, *Die Bata -Kolonie In Möhlin*, "Das Bata System," Architekturmuseum In Basel, (Basel, 1992), p. 61.
- ¹⁰ Cekota, Antonin, *Zlin, The Place of Activity* (Prague: Zlin, M. Knapp, 1936), p. 108
- ¹¹ Bata akciová společnost, Gottwaldov, *Bata: Menschen Und Werk* (Zlin, 1935), p. 56.
- ¹² Cekota, Antonin, *Zlin, The Place of Activity* (Prague: Zlin, M. Knapp, 1936), p. 108.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, p. 15.
- ¹⁴ Novak, Pavel, *Zlinska Architektura* (1993), p. 291.
- ¹⁵ Cekota, Antonin, *Zlin, The Place of Activity* (Prague: Zlin, M. Knapp, 1936), p. 38.
- ¹⁶ Land Records of Harford County Maryland, Liber SWC, Number 227, Folio 355, 24 November 1933.
- ¹⁷ Lillian Sonberg, interview by author, Abingdon, Maryland, 25 March 1997.
- ¹⁸ Lillian Formanek, interview by author, Abingdon, Maryland, 22 March 1997.
- ¹⁹ "Smearing' charged by Bata Shoe Head," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, (January 28, 1941).
- ²⁰ Bata, Thomas J. with Sonja Bata, *Bata: Shoemaker to the World* (Toronto, Canada: Stoddart Publishing Co., Limited, 1990), p. 153-155.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, p. 159.
- ²² "Bata Yields In OPA Suit," *Baltimore Sun*, (September 29, 1945).