

Angarsk, Russia, 2008 – To a large extent, Moscow has the Siberian hinterland to thank for its enormous wealth. But Siberians see very little of this affluence. Life is hard. There are no billionaires to be found in Cement Town.

“HOW THE STEEL WAS TEMPERED”
Impressions of a model Stalinist village

There is one small shop in Cement Town, which is called ‘Hope’. The name is painted in graceful letters above the door. It sells vodka, dried fish, sausages and essential household items; but mostly, it sells vodka. It is 10 o’clock in the morning. The cleaning lady stands in the middle of the room. Her sizeable behind is out of proportion with her narrow shoulders. She plunges a mop into a bucket of black water and looks anxiously around her until the only customer at the till has put his half litre bottle of vodka into his coat pocket and with a flourish, propelled himself onto the street. Outside it is minus 40. The drunkard laughs about something. This is strange because Cement Town is totally deserted. A diffuse light deadens the sound. It is as if at the moment Cement Town was completed in 1955, the ice age set in.

Cement Town is a small suburb of the East Siberian industrial city of Angarsk. At the end of the 1940s, 60,000 of Stalin’s prisoners erected Siberia’s largest industrial complex here. The prison camps still stand among the smoking chimneys of the petrochemical industry. Angarsk is a city of criminals, forced labourers and communist bruisers. Sixty years on, the city still has a reputation as a *banditski gorod*, a bandit city.

Most Angarskians are proud of their city. They call it ‘The Leningrad of Siberia’, because the severe, imperial architecture is said to have been based on St. Petersburg’s city planning.

One of Angarsk’s first neighbourhoods was the cement workers’ town. It is located far from the centre, and comprises 53 two-storey apartment blocks that literally stand in the shadow of the enormous cement factory; a model Stalinist village, complete with a pompous cultural centre and a three-tiered fountain on the high street.

The inhabitants of Cement Town once lived to the rhythm of the factory bell. There was work, the children went to school and a social services system took care of basic needs. The factory played a central role in this. In the 1990s, however, everything fell apart. Rival clans fought relentlessly for control of the cement factory. The most difficult years were 1996-1998 when the factory was plundered and left bankrupt and Cement Town’s inhabitants were abandoned to their fate. People began to look for work elsewhere and the area emptied. One of the schools burned down, while the other was turned into a drug rehabilitation centre. Only the kindergarten is still open, attended by 15 children.

Today, the chimneys of the factory have started to smoke again, but Cement Town’s residents have seen little of the new economic prosperity. Cement Town has been written off; it has been erased from the balance sheet.

The blast furnace

The cement factory still functions using old, energy-intensive Soviet processes. Four steadily turning metal pipes, seven metres across and 150 metres long, supply the materials for the

production of cement bricks. The pipes lie on a slight incline and at the end of each pipe is a cement oven, the compartments of which follow the slope of the pipes. Spark fly out from the flaming ovens and every now and then, glowing bricks are thrown into the middle of the floor.

Over 40 years, Vladimir Roedoi has worked his way up to the position of the blast furnace's chief engineer. Since privatisation, he has seen management teams come and go. He shrugs his shoulders at this. His factory floor is the beating heart of this Soviet basilisk.

"Our factory was the most beautiful in the Soviet Union's industrial culture," he says. "We produced above capacity. It was a clean factory; there were six greenhouses where we grew roses, which we distributed on Women's Day. That's no longer possible; we are only allowed to make cement now. The factory was awarded the Order of Lenin twice. Then perestroika destroyed everything. We have lost 18 years. The collective has fallen apart."

The director

Ivan Nikiforov has occupied the director's chair for just two months but he has no intention of moving. When asked about the recent struggles for control of the cement factory, he leans back on the broad backrest of his chair but gives little away. The result is surely obvious? He is the one who has made it to the director's chair and it would be a smart man who could depose him.

Nikiforov talks in tonnes of production capacity. The factory is on the up. There is a building boom in Russia. The director has faith in the future. "But only under Putin!" he emphasises. "Putin is the only guarantee of stability. The lawless chapter has been closed. Those who dare to break the law these days go straight to prison."

His favourite writer is Nikolai Ostrovski, author of the Soviet realist ode to heavy industry, *How the steel was tempered*. "I was raised in the spirit of that book," he says. The fall of the Soviet Union hurt him deeply. "But the worst thing is that we have lost a generation in the 18 years since perestroika."

DJ Artyom

The centre of Cement Town is considered a 'no go' area. "Nothing more than junkies and artists looking for fame!" they say of the suburb's residents. Artyom (26) laughs at this. He was born in Cement Town. During the week he works at the shunting yard of the local railway. At the weekend he is a DJ in the cultural centre. "Of course there are some shady characters here. And things happen, you know. But I know everyone and what they're all up to. I make sure they don't mess with my equipment."

Birch saplings grow in the cultural centre's gutters and the building is completely run down. Artyom rents the old theatre auditorium from the City Council. He plays electro-house and buys his music from the kiosks in Irkoetsk, 50 kilometres away. Downloading takes too long; the telephone lines are so bad that they are barely able to process data. He reckons on a crowd of about 30 people on Friday evenings, with twice as many on Saturdays, because this is when the kids from the nearby village, Kitoi, turn up.

In the cultural centre's cellar, Artyom has hung up a punch bag. It is like a gym to which only he and a few friends of the same age have the key. "The younger guests always make such an unbelievable mess," he says.

Artyom and his friends expect nothing from the government or from the cement factory. In fact, they would rather be left alone. "But still, it would be great, of course," Artyom fantasises. "We don't need much to turn this place into something beautiful. Look at it already. We did all of this ourselves."