Books


WILL HOBSON

'DEAR RESIDENTS, due to the onset of summer, the hot-water supply in your building will be turned off from May through to October. We apologise in advance. Utilities Service of the Building Management. PS. Sunlight washing-up liquid will help you solve some of your problems in any grease-cutting formula is effective even in cold water.'

This steely piece of statement from an apartment building in Bostov-on-Don is one of many notices - high-handed and bureaucratic on the one hand, lonely and handwritten on the other - that Russian folklorist Alexei Plisets-Sarno has been instigating since the late Eighties. Published in a remarkably beautiful book, Notes From Russia (FUEL £22.95, fuel-design.com), they hold up an idiosyncratic, occasionally baffling mirror to Russia's past two decades, thereby neatly complementing the luminous photожournalism of Motherland by Simon Roberts (Chris Beet CR2). Photographing some parts of Russia that have only recently been opened to civilians, Roberts's work captures not only the country's amazing variety and extent, but also an intense sense of individual Russian lives. The absent and expelled harbour master of Petrovsky-Kanschensky, the twin sisters in their stylish mausoleum in Magadan, trainstation transfigured into the gulag - these are stories of figures and places from Russian literature and history.

In a similar vein, Soviet Bus Stops by Christopher Herwig (CR2 £27.95): the book is brought to life by a revealing interview with one of the few occasions on which Soviet architecture shed its functionality, plumping instead for a jaunty riot of domes, columns and towers. Immortalising and celebrating this wild fantasy, bus stops as yurts, hats, domes - even, in one case, what looks like the Stonehenge office from King John Malibock. Perhaps it will catch on here.

Architectures of Waiting by Ursula Schulz-Dornburg (Walter König £50) poignantly fills out these stage sets with a series of portraits of people waiting at bus stops in a remote part of Armenia, alongside shots of the Hejaz railway between Damascus and Medina that has been slowly sinking back into the desert since the Bedouins and TF Lawrence destroyed it in 1917. Finnish film-maker Aki Kaurismäki is an obvious reference, but there's something of 'Oxyymorons', too, in these photographs, and quiet poetry.

Meanwhile, back in the metropolis, in a fit of inspiration, Ancient Rome on Five Denarii by Philip Matsysk (Thames and Hudson £12.95) uses the travel guide format of "Getting There", "Entertainment", "Law and Order" etc. to bring ancient history to life. From the moment you see the miles of aqueducts racing towards the world's largest city, the smoke rising from its millions of hearths and forges, the tombs lining the streets and the city has you spellbound. The scavans people used to get citizenship, Roman attitudes to cumbersome travel and communication, the successfully re-used technology, the seizes, the roads and canals you can picture in your pocket - XS Green testifies to a ferment of creativity among artists who are trying to work out how to build in a humane, sustainable, efficient way and who share an infectious delight in exploiting the potential of their environment, its existing structures. Small, but optimistic's characterizations: the work of an English illuminating pieces about Al-Azhar, Cairo's public park, the rebuilding of Martyr's Square in Beirut, the unlabelled treasures in Syria's National Museum and the Iraq National Museum, whose director's incredible blog can be read at www.blakmaoui.fr.html - but overall the book is dominated by Dubai.

The world's tallest skyscraper, largest shopping mall, biggest theme park, comprising all of the world's major theme parks - Dubai's fusion of Las Vegas and China's special economic zones continues to boom at a spectacular rate. Rem Koolhaas, the book's eminent grise, is clearly right in saying that, as a model for other high-tech cities, Dubai has to be taken seriously.

After this, XS Green: Big Ides, Small Buildings, by Phyllis Richardson (Thames and Hudson £14.95), like a good indie film, is a tonic. 'Backsack houses' - extensions that clip on to the backs of houses - tree houses, buildings made from fridges or carved wood and sandblasted, inflatable abodes you can carry in your pocket - XS Green testifies to a ferment of creativity among architects who are trying to work out how to build in a humane, sustainable, efficient way and who share an infectious delight in exploiting the potential of their environment, its existing structures. Small, but optimistic's characterizations: the work of an English

Otho, Sakhlan Finland, from Motherland by Simon Roberts.

Roberts's work captures an intense sense of individual Russian lives. The Redstone City Diary 2008 (Redstone, £18.95) stylishly sashays through the 20th century, combining images and quotes such as this from Frank O'Hare: 'We used never leave the confines of the New York one wishes - I can't enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life. (It's enough to make you nostalgic.)

Elsewhere, Without, With, edited by Shumon Basar, Antonio Carver and Markus Biede (Rizzoli £18.95), a collection of essays on the 21st century from a Middle Eastern perspective. Its articles and photographs are wide-ranging.

Meadow by Andy Garnett and Polly Dent. (Fairground £20). Here one has the chance to buy a meadow in Somerset untreated by fertilizer or pesticide, the author has already realized that this is a winner. Here is a site of special scientific interest and home to a Manhattan of butterflies, moths and insects. This beautiful, action-packed account of your yearly progress makes one understand what Devlin says, 'that the great tapestries of the Middle Ages are not an artist's dream, an appreciation of the romantic golden fields, but an accurate representation of what people saw around them'.

The business of restoring land to this state takes generations, but somehow seeing these orchids, enchanter's nightshades, meadowsweet, sedges, vetches, Yorkshire fog and corydalis, frilled water drops creates a sense of possibility. Like Raymond Depardon's memorable autobiography of growing up on a farm in the Aosta Valley and becoming a Magnum photographer, Our Farm (Actes Sud £19.95), there are photos here of the countryside in May that would make anyone happy wherever they are. And finally, don't miss Best of British by Jon Henderson (Random House £15). Henderson's chosen his 100 sporting heroes, from Henry VIII to the Tamer of the Rovers and Torvald and Dean.