

DENNIS LETBETTER
STREETSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHER

Large cities contain photographic icons that we enjoy seeing over and over again. And most photographers of cities are certainly responding to popular demand when they give us new views of popular icons like Times Square, Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower, and Red Square or St Basil's.

While large cities cover hundreds of square miles, photographers usually confine their work within an area of a few square miles. They select for us what is worth seeing, and they select what is familiar to us. It seems that most photographers hesitate to venture too far away from the familiar icons. May be it is because they know that we, their public, need to be reassured. "Yes, this is indeed Paris; I have been there, the Eiffel Tower is showing in the corner."

Dennis Letbetter's Moscow photo album is different. Letbetter is a photographer and a pedestrian at the same time. We feel him moving through the streets, looking where he puts his feet, looking at the traffic lights before crossing. He looks at the pavement, he looks at the sky. He starts his city walk in the center of Moscow but he continues in an ever-expanding spiral, always farther away from the center. At time we feel completely lost in desolate distant suburbs far from the familiar sights of the Kremlin or the Bolshoi, but it is still unmistakably Moscow, and probably it is the Moscow that most Muscovites know and see more often.

Letbetter does not photograph monuments or people, he photographs streetscape. There might be a monument here, and people there, but they are just part of the streetscape. Do not expect a cute shot. No close ups of a babushka selling flowers near a metro entrance. It is the real Moscow, sometime grim, sometime stunning, and sometime nearly abstract. It not so much the Moscow of the tourists, it is the Moscow of the residents, with a balance between the severe and the peaceful.

Letbetter belongs to a long artistic tradition: the school of the realists and neo realists. He works in the logic and state of mind which might have been those of Gustave Courbet and Fellini. He reveals the aesthetic of everyday reality. This reality, severe or peaceful, is the subject of his art. Overhead wires, wet macadam, decrepit walls are often part of the picture. But we never feel that he is focusing on any detail in particular—the panoramic view does not allow that—the detail just happens to be there and is a part of the composition of the streetscape. The subject is the streetscape, imposing, peaceful or bleak.

Letbetter imposes on himself a strict discipline: black and white, a fixed panoramic format, vertical and

horizontal, no cropping, no zoom. The constraints of these self-imposed rules oblige him to concentrate on composition and image balance, these are often stunning. For instance, the vertical panoramic view of an apartment building resting on a garden whose alley cuts the picture on the diagonal. The panorama allows us to see the apartment building in a front view and the garden in a plunging view. The darkness of the garden with its diagonal alley becomes a pedestal for the building. Seen separately these two objects are terribly banal; seeing one as the prolongation of the other, made possible by the vertical panorama, gives literally a new dimension to the picture.

Many travel writers have developed the idea that Moscow is at the juncture of East and West. The golden bulbs of its churches are closer cousins to the cupolas of Isphahan or Samarkand than to the domes of Western European cathedrals. The 19th century apartments in Moscow's center are certainly European in style but are often underlined with some orientalist ornament. However, to me the peculiarity of Moscow is that it is bearing witness of the extraordinary 70 years experiment with utopian socialism. "The rule of the game," which normally preside over the land use of cities with which we are familiar, does not apply to Moscow's suburbs. Years of socialist experiments have left tracks on the city's outer layers in the same way as flood or fire leaves tracks on the concentric rings of an old tree. The core of the city belongs to the mercantilist 19th century but the outer rings reflect the socialist belief that land has no value. Land was not a constraint for the planners and architects who designed the suburbs of Moscow. The photographs of Letbetter let us see the effect of socialism on the landscape when he moves through the outer rings. In some pictures we can see that the valueless land is purely wasted and is covered with weeds and urban flotsam. But in other views the vast expanse of land is majestic. A few apartment towers rising from a primeval forest reflect on a deserted lake.

I had so much pleasure looking at Dennis Letbetter's photographs of Moscow. I found his approach so convincing for someone like me who loves cities—and makes a living working in them—that I wonder when he will take the challenge of applying his talent and his craft to other capitals of the world. When will we be surprised by Letbetter views of Paris, Shanghai or Rio?

—Alain Bertaud