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Harald Bodenschatz<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Center for Metropolitan Studies (CMS), Technische Universität Berlin, Hardenbergstr. 16-18 | HBS-6, Berlin 10623, Germany

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## Urban design for Mussolini, Stalin, Salazar, Hitler and Franco (1922–1945)

Harald Bodenschatz\*

*Center for Metropolitan Studies (CMS), Technische Universität Berlin, Hardenbergstr. 16-18 | HBS-6, Berlin 10623, Germany*

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The urban design practices of Europe's major dictatorships, from the end of the First World War to the end of the Second World War, are not only interesting from a historical perspective. They continue to have long-term effects and to be the subject of a disputed culture of reception. My hypothesis is that we must broaden our research concept in order to develop a satisfactory approach to the field of 'dictatorships and urban design'. We must overcome the singular national perspective: urban design has always emerged within the context of an international exchange of concepts and ideas, even in times of dictatorship. We must clear our perception of urban design: it is more than just form. The 'dictatorial' in urban design demonstrates itself less through products and more through production conditions and processes, such as the establishment of special agencies, provision and supply of special financial means, manner of project implementation and the use of forced labour. For this reason, I propose a distinction between the products and production conditions of urban design under European dictatorships.

**Keywords:** dictatorships; urban design; European perspective; Nazi Germany; Fascist Italy; Soviet Union

### Introduction

Urban design had already established itself as an international profession before the First World War, mainly in England, France, the USA and Germany. In the Soviet Union, Italy, Spain and Portugal, urban design developed as an independent profession later under dictatorial rule. The process was neither linear nor uniform. Within the field, architects, engineers and local authorities wrestled over cultural hegemony. Internationally, it became clear, prior to the First World War, that urban design was more than a search for form, even though form makes up the core of urban design. Urban design was art, science and a feat of engineering in one. It was also the answer to the health, transportation, social, cultural and economic problems of the time. Its field of action reached from the city region to a cluster of buildings.<sup>1</sup> Urban design, however, was not only the result of the activities of experts. It was the product of a range of actors in politics, administration, economy and civil society. Against this background, I use the term *urban design* to refer not only to the built form of the city, but also to the building process, production conditions and actors that influenced both building and processes, as well as to the reflection of all of these aspects.

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\*Email: [harald.bodenschatz@tu-berlin.de](mailto:harald.bodenschatz@tu-berlin.de)

The urban design of European dictatorships might seem, at first glance, to be an exotic topic area. However, I argue that it is a topic area of particular interest. Urban design played a central role for the dictatorships. It served to legitimate regimes, to produce agreement and to demonstrate power, efficiency and speed. It communicated the social and design projects of the dictatorships, both within the respective countries and internationally. It tied old and new experts to the regime. Dictatorial urban design also played an important role after the fall of the dictatorships. It became the object of structural and verbal handling strategies: of demolition, of transformation, of reconstruction, of forgetting, of suppressing, of re-interpretation and of glorification. The topic area is, therefore, both historical and relevant to the present day (Figure 1). The discussion of the topic area is, whether we like it or not, always embedded in the present state of societal engagement with dictatorships.

Dictatorial urban design is not fixed, static or definable by formal attributions. It developed together with the dictatorships. The political, design and societal goals and priorities, the usable resources and the actor constellations were subjected to change over time. The chronologies of Europe's five major dictatorships are very different. Mussolini took over in 1922 and stabilized his power by the mid-1920s; he was overturned in 1943. Stalin prevailed in the late 1920s and



Figure 1. Rome's stand at the ITB Tourism Fair (Berlin 2012) proudly displays a poster of the 'Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana', which was built between 1938 and 1943 and rehabilitated beginning in 2006. Source: The author.

ruled until 1953. Salazar ruled for 40 years, from 1928 to 1968. Hitler came into power in 1933 and committed suicide in 1945. Franco established himself in 1939, after several years of war, and shaped Spain until his death in 1975. Mussolini initially developed his urban design policies in competition with Europe's democratic systems. Stalin and Hitler, on the other hand, were confronted from the start with Italy's relatively successful dictatorial urban design policy. Franco and Salazar developed their urban design policies in the wake of the Mussolini and Hitler dictatorships. The German and Italian dictatorships ended along with the Second World War, while Stalin's dictatorship survived and expanded throughout eastern Europe. The dictatorships of Salazar and Franco survived also, but were forced to succumb to the influence of the West after Second World War. In the medium-term, this led to a fundamental change in the urban design of Iberian dictatorships.

In order to even be able to discuss the complexity of urban design, various conceptual decisions are necessary. Although these may seem self-evident, they are anything but. My hypothesis is that there are two methodological imperatives that allow for an expanded approach to the topic area of 'urban design and dictatorship'. First, the tunnel view, focused on individual dictatorships, must be overcome. Second, we must strive for an open, flexible, but complex concept of urban design. I will limit the following to the discussion of these two imperatives. My argument<sup>2</sup> refers largely to the obvious contradictions between Italian and German receptions of dictatorial urban design.

### **Plea for a European perspective of dictatorial urban design**

My first point is that urban design only becomes transparent when discussed from a European perspective. Often, indeed usually, the urban design practices of the major European dictatorships are examined and discussed from a national perspective. I refer to this perspective as a *tunnel view*. In the dictator-run states, urban design also served as a means to gain the recognition of democratic countries. Furthermore, especially after Hitler's assumption of power, it served increasingly as the trump card in the rivalry among Europe's major dictatorships. In this respect, the period is similar to the era of Absolutism.

The urban design rivalry among the dictators began in 1933. This did not just begin with Hitler's seizure of power. In the context of urban design, the decision made by the Palace Building Council in Moscow on 10 May 1933, to monumentalize the Palace of the Soviets, must be mentioned.<sup>3</sup> The decision designated Boris M. Iofan's design as the basis for all further work. The palace's upper section was to be topped with a 50- to 75-metre-tall sculpture of Lenin. This architectural monumentalization had serious, often overlooked consequences for the urban development of Moscow. Up to this point, only the area surrounding the Palace of the Soviets was to be redeveloped. The decision to erect a gigantic figure of Lenin implied a subordination of Moscow's entire urban structure to a single entity: the Palace of the Soviets. With this, a new type of dictatorial urban design, which I call *neo-baroque* urban design, was established.

The Palace Building Council's decision to create an enormous palace was not so much a sign of the dictator's sense of international competition as it was a response to what was regarded as a triumph over the Soviet Union's dire economic and social crisis – a victory perceived of as socialism's breakthrough.<sup>4</sup> This bombshell, however, forced the other dictators to search for their own answers. These answers would have to compete in the dictatorship rivalry. Hitler quickly accepted this challenge (Figure 2). As one of the later-emerging dictatorships, Nazi



Figure 2. The main building of the Berlin Tempelhof Airport (2013) is one of the largest buildings from the National Socialist period located in Germany. Since the airport was used to supply West Berlin with goods during the Berlin Blockade in 1948–1949, the site and buildings are very popular today. Source: The author.

Germany was in the difficult position of having to outdo the earlier ones. Mussolini also reacted to this new situation, especially after his proclamation of a new, fascist empire, in 1936.<sup>5</sup>

The urban design practices of each individual dictatorship can be better understood if placed within a European context. Such a perspective can also help to complicate an oversimplified understanding of dictatorial urban design. Urban design, after all, was not invented by the dictators themselves, but developed in a complex dialogue between experts and the dictatorial leadership. Experts wrestled with one another in a state of tough competition about how to best express the political project of the respective dictatorships. In doing so, they were well informed about the urban design policies and projects of the other dictatorships.

In the mid-1930s, Italy was the second country, after the USA, which attracted the greatest professional attention within the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> Plans for the capital city of Rome received unusual consideration in Soviet publications. The creation of a new Rome, in the footprints of ancient imperial Rome, was carefully documented. Marcello Piacentini, the leading architect of Rome's redevelopment, was appreciated without dispute. The construction of new towns in fascist Italy was also carefully studied. Littoria and Sabaudia were praised. Their dimensions, however, from the Soviet point-of-view, seemed 'toy-like' in comparison with the new towns in the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> In 1934, Soviet specialists regarded the competition surrounding the *Palazzo del Littorio*, the central fascist party building in Rome, as a kind of general showcase

of fascist architecture and urban design. The Soviet press emphasized that the Italian press compared this palace with the Palace of the Soviets.<sup>8</sup> One of the most important cultural ambassadors between Rome and Moscow was Boris Iofan, the architect elected to design the Palace of the Soviets. Iofan studied in Rome from 1914 to 1916, and worked in Italy for many years. From 1914 to 1919, he was an assistant to Armando Brasini, who would later become one of the most important architects of the Mussolini period. Iofan eventually worked as an architect in Italy during the fascist era. He did not return to the Soviet Union until 1924.<sup>9</sup>

Nazi Germany also focused on Italy, especially on the reconstruction of Rome and the creation of new towns in the former Pontine Marshes. A report on urban design in Rome was published in issue number 6 of *Bauwelt* in 1939. Marcello Piacentini presented the Italian new towns in the April 1939 edition of the elite magazine *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*. Even Italy's modern architecture was celebrated by Peter Behrens in the 1938 article 'Neue italienische Bauten' (New Italian Buildings) in the magazine *die neue linie*.<sup>10</sup> Another remarkable publication was an internal National Socialist publication that made Soviet texts on urban design available in German to the experts of National Socialist urban design.<sup>11</sup>

The architectural community in Italy was also well informed of the developments in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In the September 1936 issue of the magazine *Architettura*, edited by Marcello Piacentini, the article '*L'urbanistica e l'abitazione in Russia*' was published. It presented many projects of Soviet modernism, including works by Nikolai A. Miljutin, Ernst May and Moisei Y. Ginzburg, despite the fact that, by 1936, modern architecture had long ceased to be accepted by the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. The new dimension of Soviet urban design also gained recognition in the Italian magazine:

Apart from the new Italian rural centres and the Baltic town of Gdynia in Poland, in this century in Europe, only Russian towns have been constructed in a systematic manner, although not always according to the concepts of architects and urban planners.<sup>12</sup>

In August of 1939, a special issue of *Architettura* appeared, titled '*L'Architettura nel Terzo Reich*'. Marcello Piacentini's introductory words (written in four languages!) were almost sibylline:

To-day in Germany, the metre measures one thousand centimetres. [...] In those fluted pilasters, which are not rude, but strong and masculine, one sees a military temperament and one feels that one ought to pass them in review, all lined up as they are, as if in uniform. No one can yet judge this movement; we must await its regular development.<sup>13</sup>

Exhibitions of various types played a key role in the international exchange of urban design experiences. Exhibitions served to present accomplishments, but also the conceptual justification of urban design and the demonstration of the promised new city for the new man of a new state. They also illustrated the rapidly changing power relationships within Europe. Remarkable examples of this include the World's Fair in Paris,<sup>14</sup> the Agriculture Fair in Moscow,<sup>15</sup> the Exhibition of the Portuguese World in Lisbon,<sup>16</sup> the theme park 'Portugal dos Pequenitos' in Coimbra<sup>17</sup> (Figure 3), the travelling exhibition of 'Neue Deutsche Baukunst' (New German Architecture)<sup>18</sup> and the planned World's Fair in Rome.<sup>19</sup> Here, I would like to focus just on the travelling exhibition 'Neue Deutsche Baukunst', as it illustrates the hegemonic position of the National Socialist dictatorship in Europe in the early 1940s. The exhibition was



Figure 3. The children's theme park 'Portugal dos Pequenitos' (2012) was inaugurated in Coimbra (Portugal) in 1940, and still stands as a miniature of the architecture of the Portuguese Empire of the Salazar period.

Source: The author.

shown in Belgrade, Budapest and Sofia in 1940; Barcelona, Lisbon and Madrid in 1941–1942; and Copenhagen, Istanbul, Ankara and Smyrna in 1943.<sup>20</sup>

Urban design has always been present in the international exchange of concepts and ideas, even in times of dictatorship. The reduction of dictatorial urban design to comprehensive plans, axes, monumental buildings and huge squares is misleading. We find similar plans and projects of the same period in other cities, such as Paris or Washington. We also find countless projects of housing construction, social infrastructure and transport infrastructure in nations ruled by dictatorships.

### **A plea for a distinction between products and production conditions**

In the field of urban design, it is useful, even necessary, to distinguish analytically between products and production conditions.<sup>21</sup> The term *product* signifies proposed and realized urban design projects. *Production conditions* describe the organization and formation of the

professional world, such as professional associations, magazines and institutions. It also signifies the organization and realization of urban development projects, including structures of building ownership and the intended use of buildings and spaces. It signifies the dominant role of state or public institutions as owners and developers, competitions, the composition of juries and legal frameworks. It refers to access to building and land ownership, financing and general resource mobilization, as well as associated propaganda.

With urban design, dictatorships pursued more than a solution to local spatial problems. Through urban design, they communicated their project of a new society, a new state and a new man. They demonstrated *where* the journey would finally take them and offered their followers spaces for living, working and relaxing.

If we accept this analytical distinction between products and production conditions of urban design, we cannot focus on the products alone. In current Italian literature, this is often the case. It is necessary, rather, to illuminate the political, legal, professional, social and cultural framework. Only then does it become clear *why* and *how* the products were realized and why they were designed in a certain way. Conversely, as the dominant German position calls into question, it is not enough to discuss production conditions alone or to classify products as inferior simply because they were created under dictatorial production conditions.

Urban design in dictatorships would not have been possible without a revolution in urban design production conditions. Discussing this often neglected factor, therefore, is just as important as discussing the products. These conditions illustrate the differences among the dictatorships. They also demonstrate that not everything that is typically perceived as being dictatorial existed under every dictatorship. However, they also reveal great similarities among the dictatorships with respect to general trends.

The transformation of institutions and rules of urban design was necessary for implementing the respective dictatorship's new urban design programme. The elimination of local autonomy was a central factor in this process, which allowed centralized decisions to be made in regard to local projects. In contrast to Nazi Germany, the fascist regime in Italy renounced a general regulatory measure and central agency. As a result, Italy had no chief architect, such as Albert Speer in Germany. However, the establishment of a loyal group of urban design experts was exceptionally important to all of the dictatorships. This required the establishment of architecture universities, the control of architecture associations, the organization of conventions and the publication of magazines. Numerous competitions, especially in the Soviet Union and Italy, contributed to the recruitment and development of experts. The role of these competitions should not be underestimated. The experts, on the other hand, worked enthusiastically to realize the urban design programmes of their respective regimes.

All of these measures would have resulted only in beautiful drawings and plans, had it not been for the simultaneous creation of a capable and willing system of state-controlled actors. These actors could transform the drawings and plans into concrete construction projects. Included were the various mass organizations; for example, women and children, producers of housing and infrastructure and, in Italy, Portugal and Spain, the Church. The rapid deployment of these organizations enabled the effectiveness of the dictatorial urban design practices. The presence of trained experts within a centralized decision-making system made it possible. The role of armies of qualified and unqualified workers, many of whom were forced labourers, should not be ignored.



By arguing in favour of a distinction between products and production conditions, I place myself between different cultures of reception (i.e. those of Italy and Germany). Therefore, we must probe further. How is it possible that the current Italian reception of the fascist regime's urban design products is, for the most part, positive? Conversely, why does the German architectural world view this with a lack of understanding or even disbelief? Both questions refer to apparently differing attitudes regarding the basic question of what constitutes the 'dictatorial' in urban design.

Does urban design in a dictatorship signify primarily oppression and terror (Figure 4)? Such a fundamental attitude essentially excludes a distinction between production conditions and products. The realized urban design project (i.e. the product) would then logically be a medium of oppression and, as such, be generally regarded as negative. One position, which is still often regarded as a provocation, states that the dictatorships were not sustained only by repression and exclusion, as in the conquered countries and colonies, but also through tolerance and even consent. According to this position, the dictatorships stabilized themselves through the



Figure 4. The Valley of the Fallen (2012), Valle de los Caídos, which was realized by forced labourers between 1942 and 1959, houses the gravesite of Francisco Franco. Even today, it is a controversial tourist destination and a place of pilgrimage for supporters of the Franco regime.

Source: The author.

creation of a socio-cultural hegemony: they solicited the consent and trust of broad segments of the population, particularly of the new middle classes that benefited from dictatorial rule.<sup>22</sup>

Urban design was among the instruments used to produce consensus. Urban design included the generally overlooked efforts to modernize traffic and transportation systems, urban services systems and social infrastructure. The dictatorships' numerous new infrastructure projects do not fit into the typical picture of a rigid, stagnant, repressive form of government. Urban design's significant contribution to the production of consensus and, thus, to the consolidation of the dictatorship is not always recognized. From this perspective, it is not necessarily given that urban design has a negative connotation.

If we consider the implications of this position, it immediately becomes clear why disputes about such assessments are so vigorously contested. They are not simply an issue of urban design. Rather, they concern a whole framework of arguments that are based on different fundamental attitudes. To not connote urban design products *a priori* as negative is to implicitly question the common understanding of dictatorship as a form of terror opposite the majority of the population. The resulting gap makes the rehabilitation of dictatorship possible.

Examining dictatorships purely in terms of terror, however, is not enough. It sheds insufficient light on the actual dimensions of dictatorships. To stabilize their rule, dictators promise their people a bright future and demonstrate this by way of specific projects. For the dictatorships, ensuring broad acceptance of major urban design projects was an issue of high priority. This greatly restricted experimentation with unpopular design patterns. Urban design was intended to fascinate, inspire and encourage consensus, which required appropriate design and use. Form was not conceived of as a means of oppression, at least not within the dictator's home country.

Form was also not simply populist. It was linked to the familiar: the everyday. At the same time, it became associated with the dictatorship. Attractive form was used to position the efforts of infrastructure modernization in a favourable light. Form was not just a sham. Rather, it was an offer to those social classes that were benefitting from the regime's policies. These included the increasing number of employees of the newly established or expanded governmental or semi-governmental institutions. The new middle classes found their jobs in the areas of city centres that had been cleared of poor housing. They lived in the compact urban areas created in the process of the city's expansion. In this sense, the 'dictatorial' quality of urban design can also be observed in the urban form, but in a different way than is often assumed. The chosen form aimed at producing consensus and still, or again, produces consensus. Of course, this does not apply to occupied countries or border regions in which form was used as a means of intimidation. The openly repressive character of a dictatorship, therefore, can be observed less in the actual form. Rather, it can be observed in the conditions of production of these forms. This includes, for example, the elimination of local autonomy, the socio-spatial reorganization of the city, the establishment of special authorities, the passing of special laws, appropriation of special finances and the recruiting of forced labour. In all dictatorships, unwanted social classes were excluded through urban design. In the Soviet Union, Italy, Germany, Portugal and Spain, they were forced to live in unplanned, as well as planned, shantytowns. This type of settlement plays no part in official publications and/or in most current research projects.

To mitigate the risks associated with general revisions to condemnations of dictatorial regimes, the products of urban design must be embedded in the context of a broader argument.

A dictatorship remains a dictatorship, even if it focuses on producing consensus. In other words, such an understanding enables the explanation of dictatorship.

## Outlook

I have campaigned in support of two conceptual decisions that could contribute to research within the topic area of ‘urban design and dictatorship’. These include (1) the overcoming of a national tunnel view and (2) the development of a complex urban design definition that considers both the product and production conditions. Of course, an individual cannot do this alone. We need a network to research dictatorial urban design from a European perspective, not only out of historical interest, but also out of current interest. However, things are happening in this regard. Since 2011, a network of academic and government institutions has solidified around Forlì, the capital city of Italian Romagna. This network has dedicated itself to dealing with the built heritage of ‘totalitarian regimes’ of the twentieth century, especially those of Southeast Europe: Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes in Urban Management (ATRIUM).<sup>23</sup> Another academic network, Urbanism of European Dictatorships during the XXth Century Scientific Network (UEDXX), which is focusing on Central, South and Southwest Europe for the time being, was established in 2013 on the initiative of the *Weimarer Baushaus-Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur und der Stadtplanung*.

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## Notes on contributor

Harald Bodenschatz is a sociologist and urban planner. His main focus is urban design history, both in research and practice (i.e. linking history to urban development strategies and actual projects). He has worked at the RWTH Aachen and the TU Berlin in the fields of urban planning, architecture and urban design. After 1995, he was Professor for Sociology of Architecture and Planning at the TU Berlin. Although retired, he is still engaged in urban development strategies and research projects ([www.bodenschatz.metropolitanstudies.de](http://www.bodenschatz.metropolitanstudies.de)). He has published several books and many articles on urban planning and urban design (<https://portal.dnb.de/opac.htm?jsessionid=1F0DAFEFD5EC8EA05210A77804504EF3.prod-worker1?method=showResultSiteByHitNumber&currentResultId=Woe%3D120440415%26any&hitnumber=>). He is a member of the editorial and/or advisory boards of *Forum Stadt*, *Deutsches Architektenblatt*, *Journal of Biourbanism*, *Journal of Urbanism* and *DpArquitectura*.

## Notes

1. Bodenschatz et al., *Stadtvisionen 1910|2010*.
2. Studies of different dictatorial regimes served as the basis for this article. In 2003, I published the results of a *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG) research project on urban design under Stalin, together with Christiane Post: *Städtebau im Schatten Stalins*. The publication of the results of a research project of the TU Berlin on urban design for Mussolini followed in 2011: *Städtebau für Mussolini*. The volume *Städtebau für Mussolini. Auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Rom* appeared in 2013 as a reissue of the main chapter of the Mussolini book. Throughout the course of my research on the urban design history of Berlin, I have also become acquainted with dictatorial urban design in

Berlin: *Platz frei für das neue Berlin* (1987); *Berlin auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Zentrum* (1995) and *Berlin Urban Design: A Brief History of a European City* (2013). After all, together with Max Welch Guerra, Christian von Oppen, Piero Sassi and Uwe Altrock, I am preparing a (DFG) research project on urban design under Salazar and Franco. The article itself is the elaborated version of a lecture held at the international conference *Windows upon Planning History* in Kassel, Germany, on 8 February 2013. It includes arguments presented at the symposium *Histories in Conflict*, held for the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the inauguration of the ‘Haus der Deutschen Kunst’ in Munich on 10 June 2012, and arguments presented at the symposium *Urban Design and Dictatorship in the 20th Century: Italy, Portugal, the Soviet Union, Spain and Germany. History and Historiography* in Weimar on 21 November 2013. The text was translated from German into English, partially on behalf of the *Haus der Kunst* and partially by Neele Reimann-Philipp.

3. Bodenschatz and Post, *Städtebau im Schatten Stalins*, 171–2.
4. *Ibid.*, 175.
5. Bodenschatz, *Städtebau für Mussolini*, 34–6.
6. Bodenschatz and Post, *Städtebau im Schatten Stalins*, 132–4.
7. Rempel, *Architektura polsevoennoj Italii*, 119–24.
8. Iofan, “Materialy o sovremennoj architekture SŠA i Italii,” 44.
9. Bodenschatz and Post, *Städtebau im Schatten Stalins*, 323.
10. Bodenschatz, *Städtebau für Mussolini*, 420–1.
11. Deutsche Akademie für Wohnungswesen Abteilung Siedlungsgestaltung, *Auszüge aus einem Lehrbuch*.
12. Fariello, “L’urbanistica e l’abitazione in Russia,” 460.
13. Piacentini, “The Premises and Characteristics of Present-day German Architecture.” 471.
14. Burckhardt and Meyer, “Weltausstellung Paris 1937,” 321–52.
15. Bodenschatz and Post, *Städtebau im Schatten Stalins*, 241–6.
16. Acciaiuoli, *exposições do estado novo*, 115–30.
17. Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, *Jardim Portugal dos Pequenitos*.
18. Speer, *Neue deutsche Baukunst*.
19. Bodenschatz, *Städtebau für Mussolini*, 176–99.
20. Deschan, *Rudolf Wolters*, 135–9.
21. Bodenschatz, *Städtebau für Mussolini*, 424–35.
22. *Ibid.*, 435–7.
23. Zupančič et al., *Manual of Wise Management*.

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