

A Bata life

Julia Thrift reviews *A life in Bata Modernism – straight lines, flat roofs and planned communities*, a talk given by Sir John Tusa on 19 November 2024, organised by Docomomo UK

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In 1936 Sir John Tusa, the eminent journalist, was born in Zlín, in what is now the Czech Republic. When he was three years old, his mother packed up their house and they moved almost a thousand miles away to Essex, in England. Bizarrely, the town they moved to – East Tilbury – was identical in every respect to Zlín. It had identical modernist flat-roofed houses, in identical streets, with an identical state-of-the-art shoe factory providing employment.

The shoe factory was the key to everything. It was owned – as was the whole town – by Czech entrepreneur Tomas Bata, who a century ago pioneered the mass-production of shoes. Bata's shoe factories massively reduced the price of footwear and increased its availability. Cheap footwear was revolutionary and there was international demand. In some countries, Bata shoes were the first many people could afford, to the extent that 'bata' became the word for 'shoe'.



The busy production line of the Bata shoe factory

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Everything in East Tilbury bore the familiar Bata logo – even the fire engines

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(Opposite page)
Like all Bata housing, East Tilbury homes had a distinctive modernist aesthetic

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⌚
Christmas
celebrations at
the Bata club

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Bata's success was down to streamlined manufacturing. But 'the Bata system' extended far beyond the manufacturing process, or even the design of the factory: like the Cadburys in Bourneville, Bata designed and built a whole community. Unlike the Cadburys, Bata exported his 'Bata towns' all over the world, each one the same.

As a young man, Tusa's father worked in the factory in Zlín. His talent as a manager was noticed and, aged 30, he was sent to Essex to set up a new Bata factory and town. When enough had been built to house his wife and child they joined him.

As John Tusa explained, Bata was 'paternalistic and authoritarian'. Bata towns provided jobs, homes, welfare and community. But Bata controlled every aspect of life: when Tusa's father wanted to marry, he had to ask his boss for permission. Tomas Bata's response was to look in Tusa's bank account (Bata owned the bank, too) to review his employee's savings.

In Essex in the 1930s, when jobs were scarce and poverty grinding, the chance of finding both a job and a new home must have seemed incredible. The factory had no difficulty attracting workers, despite its bleak and isolated location. With no other towns nearby, Bata provided everything – including a cinema, festivals and celebrations. Photos show off-duty employees and their families socialising. Stuck in the middle of the Essex potato fields, there was little else to do and no-one else to do it with. It was, says Tusa, ‘a closed community in many respects’.

It was also of its time. When Tusa grew up, his mother insisted he left. As the end of the 20th century approached, Bata shoes became less desirable and eventually the factory closed. Tomas Bata had died in a plane crash in 1932. He had forced the pilot to make the journey, despite being warned that weather conditions were unsafe. As Tusa noted wryly: ‘The authoritarianism of Tomas Bata was his downfall.’

Julia Thrift is Director of Healthier Placemaking at the TCPA.
All views expressed are personal.

Notes

The Bata Heritage Centre in East Tilbury is holding an open day on 26 April.
For details see: www.bataheritagecentre.org.uk/upcoming-events/



➤ The newly refurbished Bata hotel, 1960

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