

“A Bit of Europe in Maryland”: The Baťa Colony in Belcamp

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In 1933, Vladimír Kárfík, architect for the Baťa Shoe Company (and the only architect to apprentice with both Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier) purchased land between Baltimore and Philadelphia on the company's behalf. Kárfík quickly, yet quietly, combined the separate parcels for the Baťa outpost in the United States: Belcamp, Maryland. One of nearly two-dozen colonies already scattered throughout Europe, India and Brazil, Belcamp would be a Czechoslovak town exported to America.

Designed and built by Baťa employees between 1937 and 1939, company chief executive Jan Baťa conceived Belcamp as the headquarters for all corporate activities in North America. In addition to its distinct garden city plan and characteristic Baťa buildings nearly identical to those of *Zruč nad Sázavou* and *Sezimovo Ústí*, the company also exported its unique blend of managerial, welfare-capitalist and social practices. While the company's designed environment and “Baťa System” may have engendered an *esprit de corps* amongst Czechoslovaks, it could not do so in pre-World War II United States. Belcamp would never achieve what its designers had envisioned but rather would presage the changing dynamics of corporate sponsored environment and welfare capitalism in the post-war era.

The intention of this paper is to first examine Belcamp's physical form as an example of a Baťa colony conceived, built and transformed between 1937 to the present day. Second, it will discuss how the distinctly Czechoslovak design ideas and ideals faced the reality of the United States at the start of the World War II and its role in the diminished Baťa sponsored environments after the war.



Top: Belcamp under Construction, 1939 (source: Baltimore Sun), Bottom: Belcamp hotel, 2000 (author) / Belcamp Sokol insignia

