

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT COLLECTED WRITINGS

Volume **3**
1931-1939

*Edited by
Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer*

Introduction by Kenneth Frampton

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FIRST ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS BY "PRAVDA"

On October 19, 1933, Frank Lloyd Wright received the following letter from Moissaye J. Olgin, American correspondent for Pravda.

Dear Mr. Wright:

A year ago the Pravda asked your opinion about the position of the intellectuals in the United States in connection with the economic crisis. Your opinion was then forwarded to Moscow. Today the Pravda editors, wishing to acquaint their readers more thoroughly with the changes wrought in the life of the intellectuals, during the last year, solicit your opinion on the following questions:

1. What change, if any, has taken place in the life of the intellectuals (engineers, technicians, architects, artists, writers, teachers, etc.) during the last year?
2. How has the prolongation of the crisis influenced the creative activities in this country in the realm of technique, art, literature and the sciences?
3. Do you see improvement ahead for the intellectual groups?

An early reply will be highly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Moissaye J. Olgin

As early as 1933 Wright was recognized by Russian intellectuals as a leading figure not only of architectural thought in the United States, but also of social and political thought.

Beyond the scope of politics, Wright was drawn to the music and arts of Russia—both traditional and contemporary. The Russian cinema had appealed to him, from the late 1920s on, as a great revolution in that particular art form. Beginning in 1932 he started collecting Russian films to show at his own playhouse at Taliesin. Some of these he rented, others he purchased outright. The Frank Lloyd Wright Archives still contains a sizable collection of these films, which he bought from 1933 to the mid-1950s. On his visit to Russia in 1937, Wright met Sergei Eisenstein and returned to Taliesin with a long, uncut and uncensored version of the film director's *Ivan the Terrible* for a private showing; the reels were later sent back to Russia. [Letters to Pravda, 1933]

MY DEAR MR. OLGIN:

Little visible change in the life or the attitude toward life of the intelligentsia of the United States is evident. No clear thinking is possible to them. They are all the hapless beneficiaries of a success-system they have never clearly understood, but a system that worked miracles for them while they slept. The hardships of the last three years have left them confused but not without hope that more miracles will come to pass in their behalf. They are willing to wait for them to happen.

The capitalistic system is a gambling game. It is hard to cure gamblers of gambling and everybody high and low in this country prefers the gamblers chance at a great fortune to the slower growth of a more personal fortune.

It is true that the educational system of the country has for many decades been breeding inertia. It aims to produce the middle-class mind which is able to function only in the middle of the road, boulevard preferred. It is the "safe" mind for the system as set up.

Machine power is vicarious power at best and breeds a lower type of individuality, it seems, the longer it functions. Action of any sort becomes less and less likely. So creative activity is a thing of the past—so far as it goes with machine power in these United States. Little art of any but the most superficial kind—the formula or the fashion—now characterizes the life of the States. The capacity for spiritual rebellion has grown small and the present ideals of success are making it smaller every day. No radical measures have been undertaken in the New Deal but there has been a great deal of tinkering and adjusting and pushing with prices to bring the old game alive again. Something more is needed than an arbitrary price-system to re-awaken capitalistic confidence in the spending of money.

The capitalistic system has evidently come to the necessity for a radical change that no tinkering can effect.

It is now proposed among the more sensible of the intelligentsia that all absentee-ownership be declared illegal by legislation.

The far-reaching consequences of such an enactment are hard to forecast but certainly the strangle-

hold of capitalism would be cut by such a measure and a freedom would ensue that would soon make Democracy a reality instead of the pretense it is. There is little chance however for any such measure until all the expedients have been tried and have failed in plain sight of everyone.

In the course of the next five years a real demand for such "repeal" of special privilege may come to pass. This is the feeling of the minority among the intelligentsia but they are doing nothing about it. They are spectators by birth, breeding, and habit.

Meantime all are getting on with about one-tenth of their former incomes.

I believe all three of your questions are answered in this answer to the first question.

1. The present economy has practically eliminated our profession, such as it was.

2. An entirely new set of ideas more in keeping with the principles of architecture are needed before thinking men can be inspired with sufficient confidence to go on building any more buildings. In the epoch now painfully closing—disguised as "economic depression"—architecture was only bad form of surface decoration: landlord bait for tenants. If the profession of architecture has any future it must get the building more directly and sensibly out of nature for the native.

3. Nor do I see any possibility of any return to the abnormality which has become normal, without some serious recognition of such organic integrity as a matter of means as well as an end to be achieved. Capitalistic centralization was content to employ the makeshift. Its economic structure was a makeshift. Its buildings were makeshifts. Its social life was an economic anxiety to makeshift. And finally its devotion to the makeshift is sterilizing all human creative power. There is left but ingenuity and scientific research.

4. I view the U.S.S.R. as a heroic endeavor to establish more genuine human values in a social state than any existing before. Its heroism and de-

votion move me deeply and with great hope. But I fear that machine worship to defeat capitalism may become inverted capitalism in Russia itself and so prostitute the man to the machine. Because the heart beats of the human soul are not like the ticking of a watch creative art is essential in any up-building of any social order worthy to be called organic and to endure. Individuality is a precious

asset of the human race where it rests upon a common basis fair to all and should be rewarded according to its just value. This just reward is no less the problem of Russia now than of every other sincere attempt to enable all to rule and be ruled by their own bravest and their own best.

Yours sincerely,

Frank Lloyd Wright

CATEGORICAL REPLY TO QUESTIONS BY "ARCHITECTURE OF THE U.S.S.R."

In 1933 Wright received a list of nine questions from the editor of *Architecture of the U.S.S.R.*, a magazine of the association of Soviet architects. The nine questions dealt not with the political and social questions that *Pravda* had asked (pp. 140–142), but with the workings of the architect's mind, from preliminary conceptual design to final work on construction and "polishing up."

Wright's reply presents a concise picture of how he regarded the architectural process, from start to finish, as it applies to the design and construction of a building. Consistent with all his thinking, the process itself cannot be easily divided into parts. Rather, it issues from the same general principle he applied to his work—from within outward:

Dear Sir:

We are mailing you today the first issue of our new magazine "*Architecture of the U.S.S.R.*," and wish to inform you that we wish to have the pleasure of your kind collaboration.

We consider one of our main objects an exchange of experience between prominent Soviet and foreign architects and your collaboration would be of particular value to us.

In the next issue of our magazine an exchange of opinions is organized between the most prominent architects of Russia and foreign countries on the subject:

"MY METHOD OF ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNING"

(Method of work and the course of creative process).

Owing to the considerable interest your answer to this question presents for us, we would ask you in particular to take up the following problems:

1. Preliminary working out of an architectural assignment, study of technical and economic conditions;
2. Composition work, how in the course of designing a certain artistic idea is born and worked out in detail;
3. Part played by drawing and sketching;
4. How to make use of classical and modern architectural monuments; how to utilize them;
5. Forms of collective work, collaboration with other architects while working out a certain design. Role of one's assistants;
6. Collaboration with sculptors, artists;
7. Final work on the design;

8. Work following completion of design, work on the construction site;
9. Corrections, additions, polishing up.

It goes without saying that the above-mentioned questions are of an estimating nature and may be, should you deem it necessary, altered, amplified, and also replaced by any other questions you will find of interest.

We would request you to answer us in the way you will find most advisable and, if possible, to illustrate it with photographs of your works, drawings, sketches, etc.

Considering that all the material relating to this subject will appear in our next issue, we should get your answer not later than on October 10th.

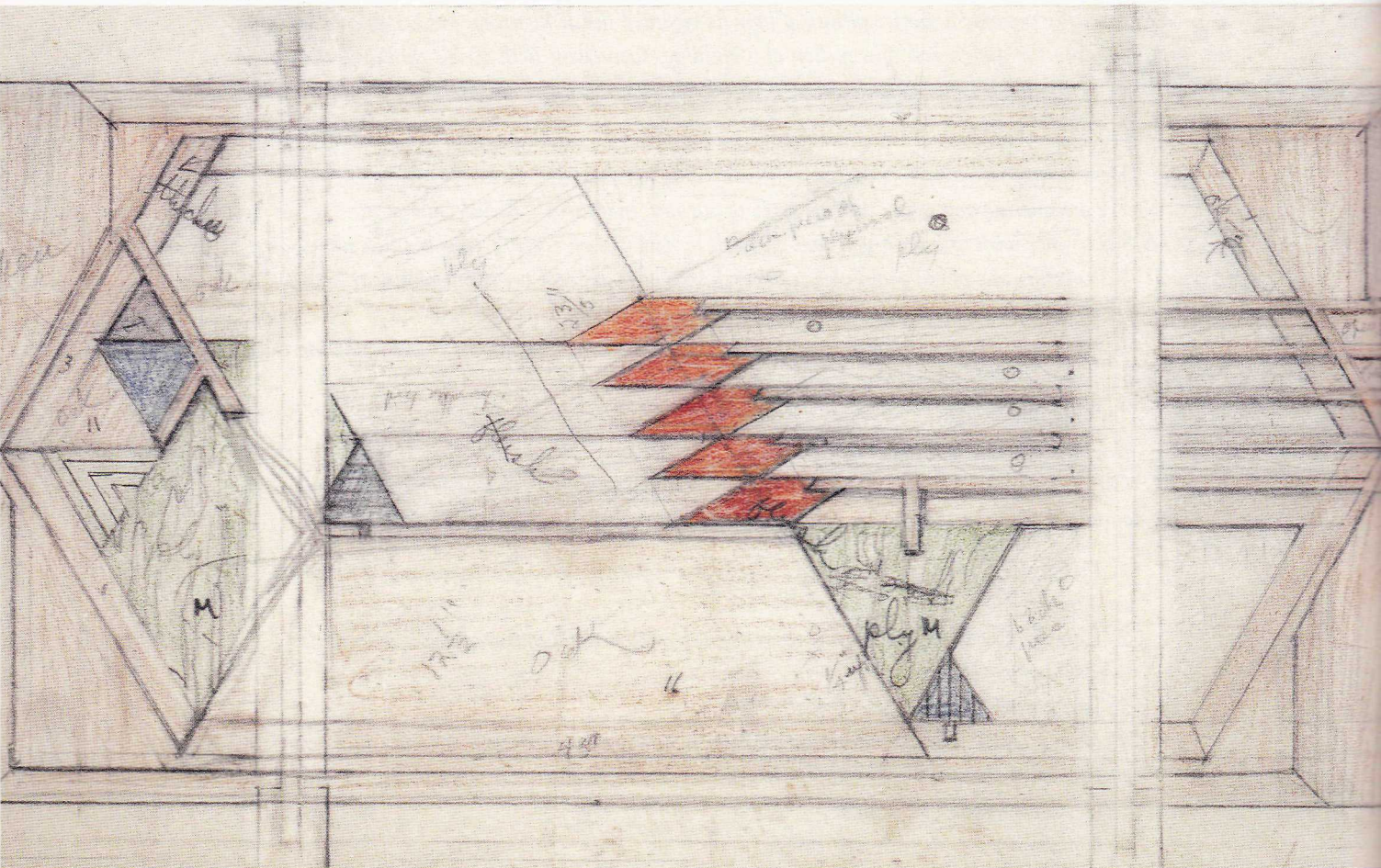
Thanking you in anticipation of your kind collaboration, we beg to remain,

Sincerely yours,

Editor in Chief

[Letter to Architecture of the U.S.S.R., December 7, 1933]

Fire screen (destroyed), Hillside Home School. Spring Green, Wisconsin. 1934. Elevation. Pencil and color pencil on tracing paper, 38 x 18".
FLW Fdn#3404.004



TO SHOW HOW THE WHEELS GO ROUND IN THE CREATIVE mind of an architect is none other than creation itself. But to answer your questions as may be:

1. The solution of every problem is contained within itself. Its plan, form, and character are determined by the nature of the site, the nature of the materials used, the nature of the system using them, the nature of the life concerned and the purpose of the building itself.

2. In organic architecture composition, as such, is dead. We no longer compose. We conceive the building as an entity. Proceeding from generals to particulars by way of some appropriate scheme of construction we try to find the equation of expression best suited, that is to say most natural, to all the factors involved as enumerated in above answer to question number one.

3. Drawing and sketching are merely a means to clarify and to record ideas. In themselves they should play this minor part. As a means of communication between architect and client or between architect and builder they are necessary language and as such should say as simply and directly as possible, and as truthfully, what requires to be said and no more.

4. The only way classical or modern architectural monuments can be helpful to us is to study that quality in them which made them serviceable or beautiful in their day and be informed by that quality in them. As ready-made forms they can only be harmful to us today. What made them great in their day is the same as what would make great buildings in our own day. But the buildings we should make would be very different, necessarily.

5. It is seldom that collaboration can enter into truly creative work except as one man conceives and another executes. But, even so, the highest is not attained. In the art of architecture conception and execution should be a self-contained unit. An architect's assistants should be like the fingers on the architect's hands in relation to the work that he does. The "committee meeting" never produced anything in architecture above the level of a compromise. No architect's competition ever resulted in anything above an averaging of averages. Where creative work

is concerned competitions are devastating.

6. Sculpture and painting are integral features of architecture and the architect himself should be sufficiently master of both to enable him to visualize and embody these features where and as they belong in his creation. Architecture, sculpture and painting should be one synthesis, as sympathetically executed as the composer's score is executed by the orchestra directed by the composer himself.

7. Final work on the design should merely be completing the harmony of the whole by justifying all details, checking up on and changing such as may not be digested in the sum total of the project. Little "polishing" should be necessary if the project has been well conceived and is a natural solution well worked out and if it was properly recorded.

8. Work on the construction of the site should be directly under the supervision of the mind of the man that conceived the building in its completeness: the architect. And such organization and assistance should be given him as will ensure the completion of the work to his satisfaction.

9. Corrections, additions should be as few as possible. If sufficient study has been devoted to the development of the project they should be unnecessary. But sometime in the final construction of any work a better way of accomplishing the desired result may appear and a better way which should not be lost. But the architect should be the final judge in any such event and he should be free to make the necessary changes to the best advantage of the whole work. Plans and specifications are made to educate the architect and his assistants. Progress in this educational process should not stop as experience goes on after the structure has been begun except in so far as the process may complicate the system executing the building. For this reason it is better to have flexible means of execution with as little financial penalty for changes as possible and, in the work, as little confusion or waste as possible. Nevertheless, and before all, any good building is the proper working out of a definite system of construction which should be fully grasped and understood—that is to say "mastered"—by the architect before he begins to plan his building.

CONCERNING THE U.S.S.R.

Wright's wife, Olgivanna, spent her early life in Russia; in Moscow during the winters and at her sister's dacha on the Black Sea in the summers. When Wright was invited to Russia in order to address the All-Union Congress of Soviet Architects, in June 1937, his trip was made more meaningful due to her skills as an interpreter and her ability to share with him her firsthand knowledge not only of the Russian language but also of the traditions, culture, peoples, and character of Russia itself. Expectedly, for her, Russia had drastically changed since her exodus in 1917 at the outbreak of the revolution. Just at the time that the Wrights were invited there, Stalin was waging his purge against the Russian peasant farmers who opposed his collective farming program. Hundreds of thousands died in that savage bloodbath, but the Wrights were obviously shielded from such events. Their associations and relationships were confined mainly to the Soviet architectural community. In this regard they had a most pleasant trip. His account of that visit, as he wrote for *Soviet Russia Today*, praises the Russian peoples and their spirit and commends the attitude, if not the work, of its architects. Olgivanna, on the other hand, being fluent in the language, was more aware of the hardships and heartbreaks of the Soviet Union twenty years after its supposedly glorious revolution. Wright candidly expressed his views in this unpublished article, "Concerning the U.S.S.R.," as well as in an article for the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* in reply to their request for an article "about culture under fascism and culture in the U.S.S.R. for the twentieth-anniversary issue which will be read by at least twenty million people." When these articles and statements, along with others appearing in Soviet-American periodicals were read in the United States, they caused great consternation. Wright was accused of being a communist, of being what people at that time called a "red" sympathizer. The story of that Russian trip and its ensuing events was told in full by Wright when he revised and expanded *An Autobiography* in the early spring of 1943.

In 1957 Wright was interviewed by Mike Wallace on national television. Wallace brought up these articles and the issues of Wright's visit to Moscow in 1937. He asked the architect, "How can you explain this enthusiasm for a country which even then, and certainly now, has instituted thought control by terror, political purges, by blood, suppression of intellectuals?" To which Wright replied, "Do you ever dissociate government and people? I don't find it difficult. I find that government can be a kind of gangsterism, and is, in Russia. . . . I think the people are unaware of all these things that are happening to them. I don't think they've appraised them at their true value. . . . Communism is utterly, from my standpoint, wrong."
[Unpublished essay, 1937]

IF CAPITALISM IS FAIR, THEN UNIONISM MUST BE. IF MEN have a right to capitalize their ideas and the resources of their country then that right implies the right of men to capitalize their labors. In fact men must do so if any balance in the social order is to be preserved. That is why I said I should like to see our country unionized "to the hilt." The "hilt" meaning the government—I suppose. The right to capitalize implies the right to unionize. A non-fascist supreme court would declare and defend that obvious right.

But Russia has found a more simple way to carry on.

The "capital and labor" struggle is too complicated for the more human instincts of the more human point of view of that intensely humane racial group.

Capital and labor in the U.S.A. are two fists continually at each other—because the U.S.A. is "two-minded"—a country divided against itself. As I see the U.S.S.R., it is a two-handed affair, single-minded. A country united within itself.

The U.S.A., a senior country now, has its own problems and breakdowns steadily on the increase.

The U.S.S.R., an infant, has its own problems and breakdowns steadily diminishing.

If conscience in the U.S.A. were still in human scale and clear, this new order in Russia would not appear a menace. As a people we would be keenly interested to learn the truth instead of press-wild to believe it must fail.

Ourselves unable, unwilling, or afraid to proceed the more simple way, we seem to resent even the thought that the simple way might be the better way and we shut our eyes, too tight.

Now I don't know what "Communism" is. For years I've tried to find out and no two advocates seem to describe it alike. As for Socialism—do you know what it is? Does even Norman Thomas know? What little hoping and thinking I've done concerning a social state yearns and leans toward democracy. Whatever is democratic I am inclined to trust. I love and cherish the ideal of freedom I read into the ideal our forefathers held for this country. But what is democratic? Certainly not the U.S.A. as it is drifting at present. England more so but still not so. France? Wait a little while and see. Japan? An imitation about where France is just now. Spain? A degenerate nation dismembered by hypocritical sympathizers. Germany? A natural consequence of inflicted inferiority. Italy? A natural consequence of degeneracy.

Holland, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark? Self-determining peoples nearer democracy than any. The Balkans? Just awakening to the dangers of "higher civilization." China? An antique giant trying to wipe sleep out of its eyes.

Russia? Well, compare her constitution with ours and go to see the *spirit* of her people—the *character* of her enterprise—the proud way her men and women walk the streets, sing in unison in the street-cars and work in factories and fields; their own enterprise: their own streets: their own factories: their own fields. Let those men and women tell you what they feel, and—yes, what they think too, concerning what they are doing and *why*, instead of taking what some little university boy turned press-reporter edited by a corporation-newspaper tells you.

Even the multitude of books so well and wisely written on the subject of the Soviet proceed to



Oljivanna and Frank Lloyd Wright, on board the SS Bremen, en route to Russia. 1937. FILW Fdn FA#6202.0001



Frank Lloyd Wright and Mr. and Mrs. Arkin, outside Moscow. 1937. FLLW Fdn FA#6827.0001

drink the tub of dye to find its color—never seeing it: never *seeing* it because the spirit alone can see the spirit.

The Russian spirit in this new way of life over there, where 90 per cent of the people are still what we call “illiterate,” is vigorous and healthy beyond any nation on earth. As I walked the streets among them I felt “God help any nation, or nations either, undertaking to interfere with this.”

Out of such liberation and consecration come heroisms: flyers over the North Pole, not stunting mind you, but as a natural consequence of their new way of life. Coming up are new heroisms in all walks of life. One hundred and forty-four states intensely alive and humane, colorful with individuality, all united in hope and purpose. Well, it does seem too good to be true. Says the press: “There is a nigger in the woodpile.”

But how could the “press” see? The prejudice of self-interest is always blind. Fear sees only itself. Sees “red” in this case.

But so far as this country is democratic and not guilty, it must see the U.S.S.R. as a natural comrade of the U.S.A.

Concerning “the Reds,” “Communists,” Trotskyites, and campus intelligentsia in our country, they now seem to me the worst enemies of Russia. If as the Trotskyites say, Stalin is betraying the revolution, then—well, he is betraying it into the hands of the Russian people, which may be just too

bad for world-communism. But it doesn’t seem bad for Russia.

Only about fifteen years away from the turmoil of revolution, inevitable reactions still in the bloodstream of the nation to be dealt with, enemies within her borders and surrounding her, that youth has found a wise and competent if relentless leader who begins the new Russia with the new-born being in the cradles of the crèche behind the workers, whether workers are in the factory, the field, or home.

Culture is a word everywhere used in practice by the Russians. There, in Moscow, stands the great new palace of culture designed by the Vesnin brothers: the Park of Culture and Rest with the Green Theater seating 20,000 people—400 acres in the very heart of Moscow: their splendid amplified cinemas, operas, the ballet, and the theaters: their incomparable free sanitariums and sanatoriums. And you ride with “culture” on the new subway as you pass through palatial station after station. They build culture in everywhere. Even their architects consider culture.

I don’t recall ever hearing the word used in connection with our public enterprises, do you?

Russians with all their handicaps, work hard—but happy—toward the democracy we—a house divided against itself—profess and fail to practice.



Frank Lloyd Wright and Mr. and Mrs. Yofan, Society of Cultural Relations Banquet, Moscow. 1937. FLLW Fdn FA#6827.0002

FOR "IZVESTIA"

HERE IS TO YOU DEMOCRATIC RUSSIA, YOU THE INTERIOR nature of man working its way according to principle into a naturally beautiful way of life. You will soon see the architectural forms of hereditary aristocracy as just as false to any naturally beautiful way of life as the old aristocracy itself was false to human rights.

Fascism is the resort of nations in weakness or despair and may accept the old forms with modern improvements because Fascism is merely some man attempting to work out a pattern of life and impose it upon men from the outside. Nations living under capitalism or aristocracy too long become senile or bewildered, helplessly accepting the dictator. But Fascism does not know Principle. It knows only the approved fashion.

Russian Democracy must not have shed its blood to reject the aristocratic wrong only to spend its best energies in continuing the false forms of that aristocracy where culture is concerned—as it is being continued in architecture and the arts in Soviet Russia today. Soviet Russia can not afford to be too patient with that cultural lag. The cultural forms of the Czarist regime were betrayals of their originals and can only betray your new reality. They will make of your priceless youth a premature senility.

Capitalism too, helplessly accepts the false forms of hereditary aristocracy and applies them to whatever is new. Nothing is more capitalistic than the skyscraper and its elevator. With capitalism as with Fascism, the autocratic Beaux Arts sits in the shadow of government as a cultural lag to render cultural acts null and void—shirking reality as irksome, even vulgar. Neither the sterility of Fascism nor the blindness of capitalism should dominate in Russia today by way of this cultural lag.

Because Soviet Russia has begun her social life at the beginning and nobly takes her stand with the forces of Democracy, she must immediately seek true forms in the arts for all of her new life. And these forms cannot be traditional unless they were and still are organic where the new life lives. If Russia does not seek and find true new forms, she will build into her social fabric a time-lag from which she may never recover and that may prove fatal.

Unfortunately most of those buildings inspired by the European left wing in modern architecture are ugly structures badly built because no architect of the left wing is really enough of a technician to build original buildings. Some of these architects are painters experimenting with building as they would with any genre. So it is maybe difficult now for the Russian people to understand that the new Simplicity of organic architecture does not mean plainness. Organic form has true simplicity no matter how exuberant it may be or how completely rich in detail. Russia's first adventure in the direction of a modern architecture has resulted in many brutal concrete structures, not really simple in the organic sense. They are only plain.

Reaction was inevitable. But Russia will soon learn that she cannot find the necessary new forms in art and architecture by any renewed study of "classic" forms, because the new reality toward which life now turns for expression and in which Russia is socially a world leader was unknown to the ancients in their art. The modern thought of life and architecture as organic had no place in what the ancients did. They did not know this modern thought that the reality of a building does not consist in the four walls and roof but does consist in the space within them to

be lived in; this thought that the reality of the vase is not the clay the potter shaped upon the wheel but the space he enclosed into which he might put something; the thought that not any fixed points but what lies between them in space established by the relation of each to each and each to all—relativity—is reality. In this nonfascist, noncapitalistic thought we have the true modern philosophy of art. A study of classic architecture cannot help us to express the thought because the ancients—if aware of it—did not learn to express it in the forms they made.

If Russian Democracy is to be itself and really live now, it must learn to express that thought in whatever it builds or makes. That thought is the end of the old materialistic life, beginning a life of the spirit. In addition to this fundamental change of thought there are now the miracles of glass and steel, electricity and machine power to use in giving it effect.

Russia must have food—quickly; Russians must not starve. They must have clothes and shelter; they must not freeze. But these things of life we call the arts they must now mean to Russia more than they could ever mean to Czarist aristocracy, or no real democracy will ripen for the Russian people. What has been done will revert to the type it overturned and the world will witness one more inversion. The old forms and uses of luxury must go out with the old sense of right which was wrong. Not only must a new success-ideal take its place but there must be a rationalization that the old luxury was also an unearned increment and is now even more harmful to the human spirit than was direct oppression.

So I am saying to the Russian people whom I love and am learning to respect: be yourselves *now*. Feel and think your way toward honesty of motive and noble purpose in building. In building, make honest uses of materials in forms suited to those materials and appropriate to the purpose of the building. Learn to understand these new functions and new materials like glass and steel and concrete as we are learning to understand the new freedoms of your social status.

Old Russian folkways, so far as they went, were wise in these things. The old aristocracy knew nothing of them and turned its back upon them. The palaces of the aristocrats, root and branch, were

rot—as rotten as their lives. Their costumes and manners were no better. Their whole sense of beauty was as superficial as it was artificial—a subtle poison, and it destroyed them.

Tear the ugly Renaissance structures built by stupid kings and princes out of the Kremlin. Formal planning, the regimentation of classic orders, glittering chandeliers and vaulted ceilings are no mark of nobility. They are only the excesses of a privileged class—fashionable because they did not know how to use privilege for the good of mankind, and no more works of art than is a military uniform.

The buildings of a democracy will first know and love the nature of the ground upon which they stand. They will realize that the humble horizontal line is the line of human life upon this earth. Good or great building is the natural companion of trees and gardens and fields. Why should we know where those leave off and building begins? Study Russian nature for your forms, my Russians. Throw the musty text-books away. Close these morgues you were taught to call museums. Learn the basic principles of the new reality you profess as these principles apply to buildings, sculpture, painting, planting, and clothing. Only so can Democracy give fresh proof of quality—proof that it can feel and think for itself to create life anew on really noble terms.

It is only when principle is unknown or disregarded or its practice stale that vulgarity lifts its monstrous head to leer in the face of life, or dons a wig and silks, and minces. Russia, go slow with the unearned increment of that culture whose domination you have rightly rejected. Let Fascism have that delusion to go along with other shams to the ultimate shame that must belong to the makeshift. Russian architecture can grow by way of its living social principle. Fascist art has no chance for growth—dead at the root it can only wither.

This American hopes you will be true to Russian life, too true to take from your oppressors what you have not earned—putting on something poisoned by long abuse. You may die of it now as so many of your people died that you might choose the nobler thing—art and architecture true to the new reality. The Soviet Union must realize and represent the new reality—root, branch, flower, and fruit.