

# **THE GRAVEYARD OF UTOPIA: SOVIET URBANISM AND THE FATE OF THE INTERNATIONAL AVANT-GARDE**

Comrades!

The twin fires of war and revolution have devastated both our souls and our cities. The palaces of yesterday's grandeur stand as burnt-out skeletons. The ruined cities await new builders[...]

To you who accept the legacy of Russia, to you who will (I believe!) tomorrow become masters of the whole world, I address the question: with what fantastic structures will you cover the fires of yesterday?

— Vladimir Maiakovskii, "An Open Letter to the Workers"<sup>1</sup>

Utopia transforms itself into actuality. The fairy tale becomes a reality. The contours of socialism will become overgrown with iron flesh, filled with electric blood, and begin to dwell full of life. The speed of socialist building outstrips the most audacious daring. In this lies the distinctive character and essence of the epoch.

— I. Chernia, "The Cities of Socialism"<sup>2</sup>

Between 1928 and 1937, the world witnessed the convergence of some of the premier representatives of European architectural modernism in Moscow, Leningrad, and other cities throughout the Soviet Union. Never before had there been such a concentration of visionary architectural talent in one place, devoting its energy to a single cause. Both at home and abroad, the most brilliant avant-garde minds of a generation gathered in Russia to put forth their proposals for the construction of a radically new society. Never before had the stakes seemed so high. For it was out of the blueprints for this new society that a potentially *international* architecture and urbanism could finally be born, the likes of which might then alter the face of the entire globe. And from this new built environment, it was believed, would emerge the outlines of the New Man, as both the outcome of the new social order and the archetype of an emancipated humanity. With such apparently broad and sweeping implications, it is therefore little wonder that its prospective

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<sup>1</sup> Maiakovskii, Vladimir. "Otkrytoe pis'mo rabochim." From *Gazeta futuristov*. March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1918.

<sup>2</sup> Chernia, I. "Goroda sotsializma." From *Revoliutsia i kultura*, № 1. January 1930. Pg. 16.

realization might have then attracted the leading lights of modernist architecture, both within the Soviet Union and without. By that same account, it is hardly surprising that the architectural aspect of engineering a postcapitalist society would prove such a captivating subject of discussion to such extra-architectural discourses as politics, sociology, and economics.

The bulk of the major individual foreign architects and urbanists who contributed to the Soviet cause came from Germany. Such luminaries as Walter Gropius,<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Hilberseimer, and Peter Behrens each contributed to Soviet design competitions. Former Expressionists — now turned modernists — like Bruno Taut, his brother Max, Arthur Korn, Hans Poelzig, and Erich Mendelsohn all joined the greater project of socialist construction in the USSR.<sup>4</sup> Major architects also arrived from other parts throughout Western Europe, eager to participate in the Soviet experiment. Foremost among them, hailing from Switzerland, was the French-Swiss archmodernist Le Corbusier, whose writings on architecture and urbanism had already become influential in Russia since at least the mid-1920s. From France additionally appeared figures like André Lurçat and Auguste Perret,<sup>5</sup> lending their talents to the Soviet cause. The preeminent Belgian modernist Victor Bourgeois actively supported its architectural enterprise as well.

Besides the major individual figures attached to this effort, there existed several noteworthy aggregations of international architects and urbanists, under the heading of “brigades.” The German socialist Ernst May, mastermind of the highly-successful *Neue Frankfurt* settlement, traveled to Russia along with a number of his lesser-known countrymen, including Eugen Kaufmann, Wilhelm Derlam, Ferdinand Kramer,<sup>6</sup> Walter

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<sup>3</sup> Gropius’ participation in the Soviet project was much more limited than the others mentioned here. He submitted an entry in 1932 for the Palace of the Soviets competition, and would later go on a three-day lecture tour in Leningrad in 1933, but otherwise he was less interested in prospects of building in the USSR than his compatriots. Jaeggi, Annemarie. “Relations between the Bauhaus and the Russian Avant-garde as Documented in the Collection of the Bauhaus Archive Berlin.” From *Heritage at Risk, Special Edition: The Soviet Heritage and European Modernism*. (Hendrik Verlag. Berlin, Germany: 2006). Pg. 155.

<sup>4</sup> Borngräber, Christian. “Foreign Architects in the USSR.” *Architectural Association Quarterly*. (Volume 11, № 1. London, England: 1979). Pgs. 51-53.

<sup>5</sup> See [his submission](#) to *Sovetskaia arkhitektura*. (Volume 2, № 2/3. Moscow: May 1932).

<sup>6</sup> A well-known architect, and also a friend and associate of the Marxist social theorist Theodor Adorno.

Kratz, and Walter Schwagenscheidt. The Austrians Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (designer of the famous “Frankfurt Kitchen”), her husband Wilhelm Schütte, and Anton Brenner also accompanied May in his journeys.<sup>7</sup> Together with the Hungarian Bauhaus student Alfréd Forbát,<sup>8</sup> the German-Swiss builder Hans Schmidt, and the Bauhaus and De Stijl veteran Mart Stam, originally from Holland, these architects comprised the famous “May’s Brigade” of city planning. Many other German architects and city-planners, still less well-known, belonged to May’s group as well: Hans Burkart, Max Frühauf, Wilhelm Hauss, Werner Hebebrand, Karl Lehmann, Hans Leistikow, Albert Löcher, Ulrich Wolf, Erich Mauthner, Hans Schmidt, and Walter Schulz, to list a few.<sup>9</sup>

Hannes Meyer, another Swiss German, also departed for Moscow, after being suddenly dismissed from his position as director of the Bauhaus on grounds of his leftist political sympathies.<sup>10</sup> He took with him seven of his best students from Dessau, who were themselves of quite varied backgrounds: Tibor Weiner and Béla Scheffler, both Hungarian nationals; Arie Sharon, of Polish-Jewish extraction; Antonín Urban, a Czech architect; and finally Konrad Püschel, Philip Tolziner, René Mensch, and Klaus Meumann, all German citizens.<sup>11</sup> These members together comprised the so-called “Red

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<sup>7</sup> Teige, Karel. *The Minimum Dwelling*. Translated by Eric Dluhosch. (The MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: 2004). Pg. 214. Originally published in 1932 in Czech as *Nejmenší byt* by Václav Petr, Prague.

<sup>8</sup> Leśnikowski, Wojciech. “Functionalism in Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, and Polish Architecture from the European Perspective.” From *East European Modernism: Architecture in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, & Poland between the Wars*. (Thames and Hudson, Ltd. London, England: 1996). Pg. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Names recalled by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky in an interview with Christian Borngreber in 1978. Borngreber, “Foreign Architects in the USSR.” Pg. 61.

<sup>10</sup> “You [Oberbürgermeister Fritz Hesse] referred me to the investigation of Bauhaus affairs which the Anhalt Government was demanding as a result of the false report from the town authorities — and called for my immediate resignation. The reason: it was alleged I was bringing politics into the Bauhaus. A Marxist (you said) could never be the Director of the Bauhaus. Immediate cause of dismissal: a voluntary contribution as a private person to the International Workers’ Aid Fund for helping the distressed families of the miners on strike in the Mansfeld coalfield. It was no use reiterating that I had never belonged to any political party.” Meyer, Hannes. “My Dismissal from the Bauhaus: An Open Letter to Oberbürgermeister Hesse, Dessau.” From *Buildings, Projects, and Writings*. Translated by D.Q. Stephenson. (Arthur Niggli Ltd. New York, NY: 1965). Pgs. 103-105. Originally published in German in 1930.

<sup>11</sup> Mordvinov, Arkadii. “Baukhauz k vystavke v Moskve.” From *Sovetskaiia arkhitektura*. (Volume 1, №

Brigade.” A number of other German architects associated with Kurt Meyer’s (unrelated to Hannes) urban and suburban group were also shown in attendance at the international building conference in Moscow in 1932: Magnus Egerstedt, Josef Neufeld, Walter Vermeulen, E. Kletschoff, Julius Neumann, Johan Niegemann, Hans-Georg Grasshoff, Peer Bücking, and Steffen Ahrends.<sup>12</sup>

The newly formed constellation of Eastern Europe that emerged out of the postwar dissolution of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires was also represented in force by some of its leading modernists. From Czechoslovakia, the great Constructivist poet and architectural critic Karel Teige<sup>13</sup> lent his incisive observations to the Soviet Union’s various attempts at regional and municipal planning. Two of Teige’s close compatriots in the Czech avant-garde, the functionalist architects Jiří Kroha<sup>14</sup> and Jaromír Krejcar,<sup>15</sup> were already active in the Soviet Union at that time. Besides Wiener, Scheffler, and Forbát, who were associated with May’s and Meyer’s groups in Moscow, the Hungarian modernists Laszlo Péri, Imre Perényi,<sup>16</sup> and Stefan Sebök<sup>17</sup> each worked independently for the Soviet state. Finally, the Polish avant-gardists Edgar Norwerth<sup>18</sup> and Leonard Tomaszewski<sup>19</sup> also collaborated with various organs of the government of the USSR during the execution of its second five-year plan.

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1/2. Moscow: March 1931). Pg. 10.

<sup>12</sup> “An den internationalen Kongress für neues Bauen. Generalsekretariat.” *Das Neue Stadt*. (Volume 8. № 6/7. Berlin, Germany: 1932). Pg. 146.

<sup>13</sup> Leśnikowski, Wojciech. “Functionalism in Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, and Polish Architecture from the European Perspective.” From *East European Modernism: Architecture in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, & Poland between the Wars*. (Thames and Hudson, Ltd. London, England: 1996). Pg. 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Bonta, János. “Functionalism in Hungarian Architecture.” From *East European Modernism: Architecture in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, & Poland between the Wars*. (Thames and Hudson, Ltd. London, England: 1996). Pg. 171.

<sup>17</sup> Jaeggi, “Relations between the Bauhaus and the Russian Avant-garde as Documented in the Collection of the Bauhaus Archive Berlin.” Pg. 156.

<sup>18</sup> Leśnikowski, “Functionalism in Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, and Polish Architecture from the European Perspective.” Pg. 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 32.

A number of American architects contributed to the Soviet effort as well. Albert Kahn, the celebrated builder of Detroit — along with his brother, Moritz Kahn — helped design over five hundred factories in the Soviet Union as part of its push toward industrialization.<sup>20</sup> Thomas Lamb, the well-established constructor of many of America's first cinemas, and Percival Goodman, an urban theorist who would later build many famous American synagogues, also offered their abilities to the Soviet state.<sup>21</sup> The pioneering American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, though he would not officially visit Russia until 1937, nevertheless spoke openly about the greatness of the Soviet project during the early 1930s. By the early 1930s, Wright was disillusioned with the capitalist socioeconomic system: "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 gambler's chance at a great fortune to the slower growth of a more personal fortune." By contrast, he exclaimed the virtues of the Soviet project: "I view the USSR as a heroic endeavor to establish more genuine human values in a social state than any existing before. Its heroism and devotion move me deeply and with great hope."<sup>22</sup>

Despite the great influx of foreign modernists seen during this period, however, the influence of the new architectural avant-garde was hardly alien to the Soviet Union. On the contrary, it had begun to establish itself there as early as 1921 — if one discounts the renowned monument proposed by Tatlin for the Third International in 1918.<sup>23</sup> That year

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<sup>20</sup> Borngräber, "Foreign Architects in the USSR." Pg. 51.

<sup>21</sup> See Lamb's submission for the Palace of the Soviets, pg. 77, as well as Goodman's submission (Project № 169), pg. 80. *Sovetskaia arkhitektura*. (Volume 2, № 2/3. Moscow: May 1932).

<sup>22</sup> Wright, Frank Lloyd. "First Answers to Questions by *Pravda*." From *Collected Writings, Volume II: 1931-1939*. (Rizzoli International Publications, Inc. New York, NY: 1993). Pgs. 141-142. Published originally in 1933.

<sup>23</sup> There is a common misunderstanding regarding the status of Tatlin's famous Monument to the Third International. Tatlin's tower is quite frequently even cited as the *originary* example of Constructivist architecture. While his Monument was quite influential, it is important to remember that Tatlin was an architect neither by training nor profession. This is a point that Lissitzky stressed repeatedly: "Tatlin created his tower...[though] he had no schooling in engineering, no knowledge of technical mechanics or of iron constructions." Lissitzky, El. "Architecture in the USSR." From *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*. Translated by Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers. (Thames & Hudson Press. London: 1980). Pg. 368. Originally published in German in *Die Kunstblatt*, No 2. February 1925.

witnessed the appointment of the architects Nikolai Ladovskii, Nikolai Dokuchaev, and the sculptor Boris Efimov to the faculty of VKhUTEMAS, the well-known Moscow technical school often compared to the Bauhaus in Germany.<sup>24</sup> Along with Vladimir Krinskii, Konstantin Mel'nikov, and the international modernist El Lissitzky, Ladovskii and Dokuchaev went on to constitute the avant-garde group ASNOVA (the Association of New Architects) in 1923, though it would only publish the declaration of its existence in 1926. Ladovskii's brightest pupil and laboratory assistant Georgii Krutikov would join the group upon graduating the academy in 1928. Opposed to ASNOVA, the equally-stalwart modernist OSA (Society of Modern Architects) formed the Constructivist school of architectural thought in 1925, led by such outstanding designers as Leonid, Aleksandr, and Viktor Vesnin and their chief theorist Moisei Ginzburg. Il'ia Golosov officially became a member in 1926, followed by two of their exemplary students, Ivan Leonidov and Nikolai Krasil'nikov, in 1927 and 1928 respectively. Though divergent in terms of their fundamental principles, both OSA and ASNOVA were united in their opposition to atavistic architecture and their mutual commitment to modernity.

The overwhelming gravity that the debates over Soviet urbanism held for the avant-garde, their seemingly high stakes, is difficult to emphasize enough. Just as the USSR was first embarking upon its five-year plans, the nations of the West were facing the threefold crisis of global capitalism, of parliamentary democracy,<sup>25</sup> and of the European sciences<sup>26</sup> in general. At no prior point had the future of the worldwide socioeconomic

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And again: "[Tatlin] accomplished [the Monument] without having any special knowledge of construction." Lissitzky, El. *The Reconstruction of Architecture in the Soviet Union*. From *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, translated by Eric Dluhosch. (MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: 1984). Pg. 29. Originally published in 1930 as *Rußland, Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion*.

Tatlin never developed a theory of architecture. Nor did he even advance any other major architectural proposals throughout the rest of his career. Indeed, the Monument is something of an anomaly with respect to his corpus as a whole.

<sup>24</sup> "In 1921 a group of young professors (Ladovskii, Dokuchaev, Efimov) succeeded in constituting an autonomous department in the faculty of architecture at the academy (VKhUTEMAS) in Moscow." Lissitzky, "Architecture in the USSR." Pg. 372.

<sup>25</sup> Schmitt, Carl. *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Translated by Ellen Kennedy. (The MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: 2000). Originally published in 1928.

<sup>26</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Translated

system of capital seemed so uncertain — never had its basis been so shaken. On nearly every front — economic, political, and epistemological — it faced defeat. Italy, Germany, and finally Spain fell beneath the rising tide of Fascism. Everywhere it seemed that Europe was entering into the darkness of Spenglerian decline.

But by that same score, in a positive sense there had never been a planning project as ambitious as the Soviet centralized economy. It represented a moment of unprecedented opportunity for international modernists to build on the highest possible scale, the chance to realize their visions at the level of *totality*.<sup>27</sup> For with the huge projected budgets set aside for new construction toward the end of the 1920s, the modernists saw an opening to implement their theories not just locally, but on a regional, national, and — should the flames of revolution fan to Europe — a potentially international scale. This mere fact alone should hint at the reason so many members of the architectural avant-garde, who so long dreamed of achieving an “international style”<sup>28</sup> without boundaries, would be

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by David Carr. (Northwestern University Press. Chicago, IL: 1980). Originally published in 1932.

<sup>27</sup> In the sense of a unified, homogeneous whole.

<sup>28</sup> This is intended not only as a reference to the eponymous book by the two Americans, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, but to the countless articles and texts by figures such as Le Corbusier, Gropius, Hilberseimer, and Ginzburg from 1923 on, which make statements like the following:

“[T]he architect, the artist, without mastering the sovereign possibilities of technology, remains clouded in academic aestheticism, becomes tired and convention-bound; the design of accommodations and of cities escapes him. This formalistic development, mirrored in the ‘isms’ that have rapidly succeeded one another in the past few decades, seems to have reached its end. A new essential sense-of-building is unfolding simultaneously in all the cultured countries. Our realization grows of a living form-will [*Gestaltungswille*], taking root in the totality of society [*in der Gesamtheit der Gesellschaft*] and its life, investing all realms of man’s formative activity with a unified goal — beginning and ending in building.” Gropius, Walter. *Internationale Architektur*. (Bauhausbücher, № 1. Munich, Germany: 1925). Pg. 6.

“If one takes a cursory glance at everything that is now taking place in the architectural life of all countries, the first impression will be this: *the world is split into two halves. In one of them, eclecticism still reigns* — having lost any point of departure, having exhausted itself through and through — *perfectly symbolizing the deteriorating culture of old Europe. In the other [half] young, healthy shoots push themselves through* — landmarks, the beginnings of a new life start to emerge, from which it is not difficult to extend the single, unified thread of an international front of modern architecture. Despite all the differences and peculiarities of different countries and peoples, this front really exists. The results of the revolutionary pursuits of the modern architectural avant-gardes of all nations intersect with one another

attracted to the Soviet cause. That the number of international representatives of the avant-garde swelled to such an unparalleled degree should come as no surprise, either, given the prospect of imminently realizing their most utopian dreams. In the midst of the collapse of the old order, as heralded by world war, pestilence (Spanish influenza), revolution, and a nearly universal depression, it appeared as if the modernists were being granted their deepest wish — *of erecting a new society upon the ashes of that which had preceded it*. “Our world, like a charnel-house, lays strewn with the detritus of dead epochs,” Le Corbusier had thundered in 1923.<sup>29</sup> In the wake of global instability, crash, and catastrophe, the Soviet five-year plan seemed to offer to him and his fellow avant-gardists the chance to wipe the slate clean.

It is therefore little wonder that the tenor of the debates over Soviet urbanism should have been cast in such stark terms. The fate of the entire avant-garde, if not society itself, hung in the balance. Whichever principles won out might ultimately determine the entire course of future building for the USSR, and perhaps the world (pending the outcome of the seemingly terminal crisis in the West). Modernist architects, who had up to that point been mainly concerned with the design of individual structures, and only here and there

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closely in their main lines of development. They are forging a new international language of architecture, intelligible and familiar, despite the boundary posts and barriers.” Ginzburg, Moisei. “Mezhdunarodnoi front sovremennoi arkhitektury.” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*. (Volume 1, № 2. Moscow, Russia: March 1926). Pg. 41.

“The new architecture...is based not on problems of style, but on problems of construction...So the surprising agreement in the external appearance of this new international architecture is also evident. It is not a fashionable matter of form, as is often assumed, but the elementary expression of a new conviction of construction. Although often differentiated by local and national particularities and by the person of the designer, in general the product is made subject to the same conditions. Therefore the uniformity of their appearance, their spiritual connectedness across all borders.” Hilberseimer, Ludwig. *Internationale Neue Baukunst*. (Julius Hoffmann. Stuttgart, Germany: 1929). Pg. 1.

“The principles of the [international] style that appeared already plainly by 1922 in the projects and the executed buildings of the leaders, still control today an ever increasing group of architects throughout the world.” Hitchcock, Henry-Russell and Johnson, Philip. *The International Style: Architecture since 1922*. (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. New York, NY: 1995). Pg. 49. Originally published in 1932.

<sup>29</sup> Le Corbusier. *Toward an Architecture*. Translated by John Goodman. (Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA: 2007).



touched on the greater problem of urbanism, now scrambled to articulate their theoretical stances on the issue of “socialist settlement.” As a number of rival positions emerged, they came into heated conflict with one another. Whole books were written and articles published in popular Soviet journals defending one theory and attacking all that opposed it. And so the disputes did not merely take on the character of modernism combating its old traditionalist rival, but that of a radically fractured unity of the modernist movement itself. The fresh lines of division being carved within the architectural avant-garde did not owe so much to national peculiarities as it did to the *radicality* of the question now being posed before it: *that of the fundamental restructuring of human habitation*. For the issues at hand were not simply the reorganization of already-existing cities, but also the construction of entirely new settlements from the ground up. The intransigent tone that the debates subsequently assumed is thus more a testament to the urgency and sincerity of the modernist theories of the city being put forth than it is to some sort of arbitrary disagreement over matters of trivial importance.

This point is especially important to stress, moreover, in light of some interpretations that have recently dismissed these crucial differences in the avant-garde’s architectural visions of utopia as a *quantité négligible*. Not long ago, the argument was advanced that these theoretical disputes amounted to little more than quibbling pettiness on the part of the members of the avant-garde. According to this version of events, the modernists merely dressed up their personal animosities, jealousies, and professional rivalries in high-sounding rhetoric and thereby ruined any chance for productive collaboration with one another. Moreover, it asserts that it was this very disunity that led to the modernists’ eventual defeat at the hands of the Stalinists. Weakened by the years of petty bickering, this argument maintains, the two main groups representing the architectural avant-garde (OSA and ASNOVA) were easily undercut by the fledgling, proto-Stalinist organization VOPRA, working in cahoots with the party leadership.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, this account almost completely overlooks the international dimension of the debates, choosing instead to narrowly focus on the faculty politics taking place within the walls of the VKhUTEMAS school of design. While this was doubtless an important stage of the debate, it can scarcely be considered the decisive grounds on which the war

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<sup>30</sup> Hudson, Hugh. *Blueprints and Blood*. (Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ: 1995). Pgs. 82-83.

over Soviet architecture was waged. It is symptomatic that such an interpretation would leap suddenly from the middle part of the 1920s to the final defeat of the architectural avant-garde in the 1937, ignoring practically everything that transpired in between. As a result, it is able to treat the problem as a merely internal affair, concerning only Soviet architects. This then allows the importance of the tensions within the VKhUTEMAS leadership throughout the early- to mid-1920s to be grossly overstated.<sup>31</sup> Even if the field of inquiry is thus limited, however, the polemics can by no means be reduced to mere cynicism. Such bitterness and resentment could just as easily be an outcome of (rather than a ground for) heated argumentation.

But this notion — that the real differences within the modernists' debates over Soviet architecture and urbanism were largely exaggerated — is swiftly dispelled once one takes note of the extra-architectural interest surrounding their potential results. For architects were hardly the only ones worried about the form that new Soviet settlements would take. The ideological influence of architecture on society was not lost on non-architects within the Soviet hierarchy. Many thinkers, scattered across a wide range of vocations, were therefore drawn into the discourse on socialist city planning. Quite a few economists participated in the discussion. Besides Leonid Sabsovich, a writer for the state journal *Planned Economy* and a major figure in the debates, economists like Stanislav Strumilin (one of *Planned Economy*'s editors) and Leonid Puzis weighed in on the material aspects of the various schemas of town planning. Professional sociologist Mikhail Okhitovich

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<sup>31</sup> Catherine Cooke, one of the great Anglophone authorities on Soviet architecture (tragically killed in a car crash in 2004), pointed this out in her initial review of Hudson's book. Hudson marks the date of the final deathblow to the avant-garde, someone melodramatically, as occurring in 1937, which he considers to have been symbolized by the murder of the former-Left Oppositionist and architectural disurbanist Mikhail Okhitovich, which he uncovered as having taken place during the purges. Cooke, though "grateful" for this "archival nugget," warned that outside of specialists, "others may be mystified as to the significance of the man [Okhitovich] or the weight of the issues he raised, for there is no context here of the eighteen-month public, professional and political debate of which his ideas were a part." This oversight is no coincidence, however. For if Hudson had examined Okhitovich's ideas on city planning he would have been forced to discuss the broader international discourse surrounding Soviet urbanism. As it happens, the 1937 selected by Hudson as the last gasp of the avant-garde in Russia is correct; but because it was when all foreign architects were expelled. Cooke, Catherine. "Review of *Blueprints and Blood: The Stalinization of Soviet Architecture, 1917-1937* by Hugh D. Hudson." *Russian Review*. (Vol. 54, № 1: Jan., 1995). Pg. 135.

joined OSA in 1928, and went on to become one of its major spokesmen. The celebrated journalist and author Vladimir Giliarovskii reported on some considerations of nervo-psychological health in the socialist city.<sup>32</sup> Even more telling of the perceived centrality of the problem of Soviet urbanism to the five-year plan is the number of high-ranking party members and government officials who wrote on the matter. The Commissar of Enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii, Lenin's widow Nadezhda Krupskaya, the old guard Bolshevik Grigorii Zinov'ev, and the doctor and Commissar of Health Nikolai Semashko all devoted lengthy articles to the consideration of different proposed solutions to the issue of urban planning. So clearly, the detailed differences between the various Soviet urban projects concerned more than solely the architects.

Another historiographical point that must be made is that what appears to have been "Stalinist" from the outset could not have been recognized as such at the time. The emergent features of what came to be known as Stalinism — its bureaucratic deformities, thuggery, and cultural philistinism — had not yet fully crystallized by the early 1930s. While it is true that these qualities may have been prefigured to some extent by the failure of the German and Hungarian revolutions after the war, the USSR's consequent isolation, and the cascading effects of the political involutions that followed — none of this could be seen as yet. The betrayed commitment to international revolution, the disastrous (if inevitable) program of "Socialism in One Country," did not bear their fruits until much later. The residual hope remaining from the original promise of the revolution echoed into the next two decades, before the brutal realities of Stalin's regime eventually set in. In 1930, there was no "Stalinist" architecture to speak of. Even the eclectic designs of the academicians did not fully anticipate what was to come. The contours of what would later be called "Stalinist" architecture — that grotesque hybrid-creation of monumentalist gigantism and neoclassical arches, façades, and colonnades — only became clear after a long and painful process of struggle and disillusionment. Toward the beginning of the decade, a number of possibilities seemed yet to be decided upon, and so the utopian dream of revolution continued to live on.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Giliarovskii, Vladimir. "Problema sotsialisticheskogo goroda i nervno-psikhologicheskoe zdorov'e." *Planovoe khoziaistvo*. (Volume 6, № 3. Moscow, Soviet Union: March 1930). Pgs. 111-116.

<sup>33</sup> Stites, Richard. *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian*

Whatever latent realm of possibility may have still seemed to exist at the moment the Soviet Union initiated its planning program, however, its actual results admit of no such uncertainties. The defeat of modernist architecture was resounding and unambiguous. And while it would survive and even flourish in the West following the Second World War, the avant-garde left something of its substance behind in Russia. Its external form remained — with its revolutionary use of concrete, glass, and other materials, its austere lines and structural severity — but it had been deprived of its inner core, and now stood devoid of content. For architectural modernism had hitherto expressed an inseparable duality, and *deduced its role as both a reflection of contemporary society and an effort to transform it*. These two aspects, its attempt to create a universal formal language that corresponded to modern realities and its sociohistorical mission to fundamentally *reshape* those very realities, were inextricably bound up with one another. When the architectural

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*Revolution*. (Oxford University Press. New York, NY: 1991).

Since Stites already touched on utopian vision in Soviet town planning during the 1920s in chapter nine of this book (pgs. 190-208), it may be wondered why it demands another treatment. First, while Stites' book offers an excellent framework of analysis for this period (one which I am partially adopting), there are many glaring factual errors in his account. One is quite understandable; he provides Mikhail Okhitovich's date of birth and death as "1896-1937," which is true, but then adds that he "died of natural causes." Pg. 194. Hudson, whose best insights are purely factual, revealed after his visits to the archives in 1992-94 that Okhitovich was actually a victim of the purges. Stites' other mistakes make less sense. For example, on page 197, he describes Moisei Ginzburg the "main spokesman" for "the principle of 'rationalism' in architecture." Ginzburg was one of the foremost leaders of the Constructivists in OSA, whose theories opposed those of the Rationalists in ASNOVA, led by Ladovskii. On the following page, he lists urban proposals which he attributes to Ladovskii and Varentsov as belonging to OSA, when the former had actually been the president and the latter the secretary of ASNOVA.

Beyond this, however, the reason this subject warrants another study is that even though Stites provides an admirable assessment of the utopian dimension of early Soviet town planning, he leaves out much of the complexity and richness of this topic. First of all, he only looks at the Urbanist and Disurbanist parties in the debate, with one offhand reference to Miliutin's alternative idea of a "linear city." He does not once mention ARU, the urban planning group Ladovskii founded in 1929 after parting ways with ASNOVA. Nor does he consider some of the international teams of architects who participated in the utopian project of the early Soviet Union. Finally, because his interests are different from my own, he does not look into the relationship between utopian modernism and its totalizing tendencies as evidenced by the Soviet case. This is doubly important, since I intend to retroactively ground the obstinacy of the debates by it.

avant-garde ultimately failed to realize itself by achieving this mission, it became cynical; its moment of opportunity missed, it chose instead to abandon the task of helping remake society. Cast out of the Soviet Union, the modernists let go of their visions of utopia and made their peace with the prevailing order in the West. They pursued traditional avenues like public contracts and individual commissions to accomplish each of their proposals. No longer did they dream of building a new society, but focused on limited projects of reform rather than calling for an all-out revolution. Emptied of its foundational content, however, modernism gradually gave way to post-modernism as architecture became even further untethered from its basis. Reduced to a set of organizational forms, modernist design grew increasingly susceptible to criticisms of its apparently “dull” and “lifeless” qualities. Modernism’s capitulation to the realities of bourgeois society doomed it to obsolescence. The modern itself had become passé.

Framed in this way, this paper will assert that the outcome of the debates over Soviet urbanism in the 1930s sealed the fate of the international avant-garde. All of its prior commitments to general social change were reneged. Modernism’s longstanding duty to solve the problem of “the minimum dwelling,”<sup>34</sup> which for Marxists was closely tied into Engels’ work on *The Housing Question*,<sup>35</sup> was relinquished after only the first few CIAM conventions (1929-1931). Its resolution to put an end to wasteful (even criminal<sup>36</sup>) ornamentation and make all building more functional was scaled back to a mere stylistic choice, rather than a general social practice. Likewise, modernism’s call for a uniform, standardized, and industrialized architecture of the home was replaced by a tendency to custom-design each individual dwelling — usually the wealthier ones — as its spare, geometric style became chic among the upper classes. The mass-production of housing,

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<sup>34</sup> The problem of the *Existenzminimum* was pursued by members of CIAM such as Walter Gropius and Karel Teige throughout its early years.

See Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, and Gropius, Walter. “Sociological Premises for the Minimum Dwelling of Urban Industrial Populations.” Translated by Roger Banham. *The Scope of Total Architecture*. (MacMillan Publishing Company. New York, NY: 1980). Originally published in 1929.

<sup>35</sup> Engels, Friedrich. *The Housing Question*. Translated by . *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 29*. (International Publishers. New York, NY:

<sup>36</sup> Loos, Adolph. *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*. Translated by Michael Mitchell. (Ariadne Press. New York, NY: 1997).

serialized with interchangeable parts, was instead taken up by companies building in a more traditional style, hoping to turn a cheap profit housing students or the poor. Those bleak modernist housing complexes that *were* created all too often became places to merely stuff away the impoverished classes, cramped and out of sight. (That such places would become areas of high concentration for drug use and petty crime is only fitting). Finally, the quest for a universal architectural language was abandoned. This language was adopted exclusively by those particular architects who identified themselves with the modernist movement, and even then it was pursued on only a piecemeal basis.

The Soviet Union alone had presented the modernists with the conditions necessary to realize their original vision. Only it possessed the centralized state-planning organs that could implement building on such a vast scale.<sup>37</sup> Only it promised to overcome the clash of personal interests entailed by the “sacred cow” of private property.<sup>38</sup> And only it had

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<sup>37</sup> Le Corbusier, in a letter to Lunacharskii in July 1932, wrote that the Soviet Union was the “only one possessing the institutions that permit the realization of modernist programs.” Le Corbusier. “Letter to Anatolii Lunacharskii, May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1932.” Translated by Michael Wolfe and Michael Vogel. Taken from S. Frederick’s publication of the original French letter in his article “Le Corbusier and the USSR: New Documentation.” *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*. (Vol. 21, No. 2: April-June, 1980). Pg. 218.

<sup>38</sup> This point was mentioned by a number of thinkers as relevant to the Soviet Union’s advantage over its counterparts in the West, where private property still reigned:

“The housing reform undertaken by modern architecture could operate only within the limits determined by this social system, the Western European and American forms of which are imposed even upon the proletariat. Workers’ houses constructed today in industrial centers are merely impoverished versions of the bourgeois villa. New architecture, which undertakes to reform housing, understands that today any logical solution presupposes a far-reaching revolution in social customs and forms. Only a new organization of society can facilitate the creation of new architectural forms — forms essential by today’s standards. A standardized type of apartment and the implementation of collective housing can take place only in a socialist society, a society unencumbered by private property or by the social and economic unit of the bourgeois family.” Teige, Karel. *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*. Pg. 108. Originally published in 1928.

“The nonexistence of private land ownership with its accompanying conflict of private interests creates the conditions for unimpeded city and regional planning for densely populated areas, based solely on community welfare and the modification of these plans as the need arises and at any given moment of time. In the same way, state control of the economy in general, and the concentration of all large construction enterprises under central control in particular, allow a planned effort directed at the industrialization of

the sheer expanse of land necessary to approximate the spatial infinity required by the modernists' international imagination.<sup>39</sup> The defeat of architectural modernism in Russia left the country a virtual graveyard of the utopian visions of unbuilt worlds that had once been built upon it. It is only after one grasps the magnitude of the avant-garde's sense of loss in this theater of world history that all the subsequent developments of modernist architecture in the twentieth century become intelligible. For here it becomes clear how an architect like Mies van der Rohe, who early in his career designed the Monument to the communist heroes Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in 1926, would later be the

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construction, standardization, and the systematic establishment of building standards." Ginzburg, Moisei. "Contemporary Architecture in Russia." Translated by Eric Dluhosch. *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*. Pg. 156. Originally published in *Die Baugilde* in October 1928.

"The German city planner would be surprised to no end if he could watch his Russian colleague at work. What! No twenty regulations, laws, and restrictions obstructing rational planning in a spiderweb of private property lines? Really free land? And no twenty-four hour municipal authorities who must be consulted each time the planner wishes to establish a building line? No jurisdictions, and no hangovers, and what has been planned can really be built? And the results to be really seen and experienced? No building inspectors and by-laws to obstruct free design?...Only by freeing the best creative energies of the city planner from the shackles of private property restrictions can their full flowering in their entire social, technical, and artistic dimension be assured. In our country, city planning is what the word says: mere city *planning*. In Russia city planning is in fact city *building*." Wagner, Martin. "Russia Builds Cities." Translated by Eric Dluhosch. *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*. Pg. 208. Originally published in *Tagebuch*, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1931 (Berlin, vol. XXX).

"The key to the solution of [the housing] problem lies in the question of private property in particular, and of the production and social situation in general. Within the framework of the prevailing system, all questions of social policy, whether they concern workers' rights or housing demands, are only by-products of the class struggle; any occasional successes result only in a partial alleviation of the evils of greed and usury. Because they never touch the root cause of the problem or change anything in the basic constitution of the system, they remain a palliative and a superficial treatment of symptoms, never leading to a real cure. Since the housing question, as an inseparable part of the housing crisis, is inextricably linked to the current economic system, it cannot be eliminated unless this system is eliminated and a new one established." Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*. Pg. 60.

<sup>39</sup> In a journal entry dated July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1927, Erich Mendelsohn recorded that "[t]he endless space of Russia makes dream and aspiration — idea and action — impenetrable in the negative sense, infinite in the positive." Mendelsohn, Erich. *Erich Mendelsohn: Journals and Notebooks*. (Triangle Architectural Publishing. New York, NY: 1992). Pg. 119.

man responsible for one of the swankiest monuments to high-Fordist capitalism, the Seagram's Building of 1958. And here one can see how Le Corbusier, embittered by the Soviet experience, would go on to co-design the United Nations Building in New York, after briefly flirting with Vichy fascism during the war.