

N A T I O N A L C O L L E G E O F A R T A N D D E S I G N

FINE ART , PAINTING

An Exploration into the Political Effect on Architecture of  
the Reconstruction of the Soviet Consciousness

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The Russian revolution was an episode that challenged the principles of the country's physical environment. A great feat of creativity was required from the professionals moving in the sphere of construction, to respond to these changes. Transformation of the old values demanded an alternative forthright direction and this experimental process of decision making characterized the new architectural scene. To fully understand the mutation of the Russian national identity, I propose to retrace certain architectural visions that illustrate the enormous conflicts within the destiny of the State. This I propose to explore through a discussion of the contrasting movements of Constructivist and Social Realist architecture.

One of the essential points in discussing the Soviet case is that one cannot segregate the architecture as an isolated phenomenon, for it must be appreciated, that the nature of architectural 'determinism' was inextricably bound to that of the political climate. What emerges is that the politically unsettling times motivated passions on all architectural fronts, in turn architecture aided the new structures in a stronger attempt to reinforce the communistic ideal.



## CHAPTER 1.

### The Specialized case of Soviet Architecture

The early part of this century saw much violent discourse between the political directives of the Soviet Union. It is a rich example, and possibly the most singular one, whereby architecture and the arts strove to play a vast role in the ideological reference to the States underpinnings. Amongst the large repertoire of architectural invention in the post-revolutionary period, two groups in particular, the Constructivist and Social Realist Architects stand out as the ideological movements that best illustrate the 'schizophrenic' resolve of the emerging State. One may ponder the psychological effect of the revolution that could cause such diverse expressions in architecture. From this, one may assume the existence of a certain instability relating to the then contemporary vision of communism. Yet the tumultuous growth of each individual movement could be described as powerful and therefore one is lead to believe that despite the uncertainties of the times architectural creativity highlighted the enthusiasm of the embryonic system.

A main uniting element between both groups was the strength of political content that prophetically sought to determine the route of the Soviet consciousness in architectural matters. This is not merely a connection thrown loosely to unite the apparent visionary conflicts, but within the framework of Soviet architecture it is the crux of the matter that makes it such a specialized case. The imperative of cultural reconstruction was never questioned. Indeed the very nature of revolutionary chaos induced a barrage of enthusiastic ideas each vying for originality and legitimacy in the substitution of one discarded culture for another.

The Soviet case is an unorthodox one. To fully appreciate the drive to social order in the sphere of architecture one must assess the characteristics of the revolutionary legacy that placed these architects in such a unique situation.

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Architecture by its very nature is controlled by the society it serves and its very success greatly depends on the cultural values of that society. It is also subject to state or private patronage and must invariably reflect the aims of its patrons. In a capitalist society architecture is somewhat disposed to problems such as boundaries of private property, planning permission and the often disjointed aims of architect and engineer. The advantage, however for the Soviet architects was that many of these constraints were lifted. (F.N.1)

It must be acknowledged that the early groups of experimental architects actively encouraged discussion and training in the field of engineering unlike their western counterparts. Engineers such as Shukov, Loleit and Krasin maintained contact with architecture and became members of the Constructivist and Rationalist organisations. This however was born out of the impoverished state of engineering facilities and must not be wholly attributed to conscientious zeal on the architects behalf. A conjecture to this, could be the proposal that the Constructivist output became more creative in its development due to the absence of a defined engineering tradition. It is a possible contribution to architecture in terms of the engineering crisis for the well documented 'invention' of ordinary building practice can surely be seen as an advantage to the introduction of original architecture.

Although the concept of architectural determinism is by now a largely dismissed idea one must appreciate it in its context as a fervent basis of the struggle to re-organise society. The exhilarating texts and manifestos of outspoken party bureaucrats and architects verbally reflect the novelty of this new spirit of discussion.

**Footnote 1:**

One can say, the fundamental shifting in land ownership only occurred at the advent of Stalin's governmental career. Despite the 'Pan Russian Committee' speech on land policy 1918, Stalin's rule inaugurated the major changes of socialist development. One can observe this through the growth of the industrial classes from 4 million in 1928 to 10 million in 1932.



What could be read as a naive overflow of idealism in many of these texts was not simply an expression of misplaced optimism. It is essential to contextualise the written schemes of the architects in an attempt to understand the psyche of a new phase. One can be left bewildered by the raw utopianisms of the architects in the face of economic disaster. Yet, instead of dismissing a large number of these architects they must be assimilated in their proper scope to observe the essential undercurrent of the revolutionary expectation.

The fuse that lit the revolution was generally felt to have grown from the embarrassing military defeat at Manchuria in 1905 and the hardships imposed by the First World War. However, the alienation of the populace from the figureheads in authority stemmed from an earlier era. The 1864 decree of the 'emancipation of the serfs' whetted the national appetite for 'self-determination'. The nobility had been disappointed in their efforts to subsequently gain control in local administration and the emancipated serfs had been disappointed in the belief that they would be financially better off. Tsar Alexander II had made the fatal governing mistake of raising the people's expectations. Embittered as such, the revolution was seen by many Russians as a justified opportunity to acquire the unforgotten practice of self determination. It is understandable that a great deal rested on the success of the decision making in the New State.

Despite the locatable advantages of such an unprecedented situation, the realities of the socio-economic situation were stamped onto the realities of an architectural schematization. Although the 'New Economic Policy' years (N.E.P.) were attributed with enhancing an economic balance throughout the state, the Soviet Union was a state that faced drastic shortages. Obviously housing was one of these areas and many, early , architectural projects owe their work concentration to these specific conditons. With a poor availability of raw materials coupled with the weak economy, the national reconstructive plans were being considered at a painstaking pace. We are given a glimpse of the disparity between the architects and the monumental tasks facing them. The urgency of the overhall was commented on by Lunarharsky.

"AT THE PRESENT MOMENT THE GOVERNMENT IS CONFRONTED WITH ONE TASK, HOW TO IMPART TO THE PEOPLE AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE THE HUGE AMOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE THEY WILL NEED IN ORDER TO FULFIL THE GIGANTIC ROLE WHICH THE REVOLUTION HAS GIVEN THEM" (F.N.2)

This efficiency and complete psychological reconstruction were the means to embody the state with the necessary foundations of the working socialist machine. Stalin envisaged this through the five years plan schemes. Yet another solution to this problem was the governmental indoctrination of the State's principles through the official medium of a proletarian culture.

**Footnote 2:**

Lunacharski 1918 speech (p 115, Bolshevik Culture)

## CHAPTER 2

### Creating a Proletarian Culture

The literal meaning of the word 'culture' in the Russian language was associated with notions of learning and the arts, but also had roots connected with the intelligentsia of pre-revolutionary society. The cultural outlook of this group infused many radical ideas such as notions of political and ethical 'right mindedness' along with traditional cultural considerations. Thus the embodiment of both a political and cultural reconstructive schematization as a framework for the state, was almost a sub-conscious conclusion. Indeed the revolution in its political sense could only remain effective when all aspects of culture proceeded towards radical transformation. Such a radical transformation was seen to be the development of an apparatus of 'proletarian culture' as an attempt to re-organise the basic elements of civic authority.

The early Bolshevik offensives on the cultural front were often indecisive arguments pertaining to several unrelated matters. It is difficult at times to sort through the quagmire of discussion to extract glimpses of a foundations of Soviet architecture. Despite Leon Trotsky's blank dismissal of proletarian culture as nothing more than a class based concept, the main thrust of the early discourse centered around its utility as a state appendage. "PROLETARIAN ART, OF WHICH SO FAR THERE IS NO TRACE IS POSSIBLE ONLY AS AN ART THAT IS SOCIALLY USEFUL AND MOREOVER CONSCIOUSLY USEFUL, AN ART THAT TO ITS VERY MARROW IS BOUND INDISSOLUBLY WITH LIFE, EVOLVING WITH IT AND DERIVING FROM IT - WHEREAS THE BASIC FEATURE OF BOURGEOIS ART LIES IN THE FACT THAT ITS FORMS LIVE AND MOVE OUTSIDE AND ABOVE CONCRETE REALITY IN A RIGIDLY FIXED, ETERNALLY ESTABLISHED FORM".

(Boris Arvatov 1922, bl p.255)

The idea of a proletarian culture maybe considered very relevant in the light of fundamentally recruiting the willing participants of a new communistic state in its full working authority. Initially its basic aims were those of creating a means of agitation, yet its true potency was its ability to also incorporate the full

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agenda of the revolutionary construction process. A construction process which included the reflection of the state political outlook and a means for a subtle indoctrination into the comunistic lifestyle. As early as 1918, Alexander Bogdanov wrote " ART ORGANISES SOCIAL EXPERIENCES BY MEANS OF LIVING IMAGES WITH REGARD BOTH TO COGNITION AND TO FEELINGS AND ASPIRATIONS. CONSEQUENTLY ART IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON FOR ORGANIZING COLLECTIVE FORCES IN A CLASS SOCIETY-CLASS FORCES". (F.N. 1)

Reactionary dismissal of the past was the well tested weapon in establishing the legitimacy of the state. The Bolsheviks recognized the fact that their political adversaries with held the inheritance of a cultural heirarchy. It seems quite possible to decipher from this the link to the roots of paranoia that fueled the ideological denunciations of all alien aspects in architecture (F.N.2)

If we examine this factor in connection with the two architectural groups, it is possible to highlight an important distance between Constructivist Architecture and Social Realist Architecture. The situation for creating a more appropriate culture for a display of the legitimacy of the Soviet process at times presents us with the most chillingly committed expressions of communistic zeal on the Constructivist behalf. One could be of the opinion that many of the contributory manifestos surrounding the Constructivist discussion groups appear as efforts to obtain 'watertight' ideologies. However it seems overly sceptical to criticize the Constructivist endeavour when presented with the understandable precariousness of their situation on the international stage. A more obvious target is Social Realism since it would be futile to argue against the defensive quality of the movement. Western influences were responsible, it was argued, for any potential sabotaging of the integrity of the state. The contrast between Social Realism against Constructivism in handling this awareness would be the fact

**Footnote 1.**

(p 176 Russian Art of the Avant Garde)

**Footnote 2.**

Indeed the conviction of the Soviet art critics in their rejection of all foreign artistic influences can be found in the 'Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Literature 1987 which described Social Realism' as the leading artistic method of the modernera' (p14 Art Under Stalin)



that Social Realism as a movement more actively sought to infuse the theme of superiority in the work **(F.N.3.)**

When applying the notion of a proletarian culture to architecture one must be aware of the specific aims of such an artificial term. Discussed at length in quite often a very vague way, it was seen as the elemental device in changing the cultural outlook of the state with hopefully a 'knock on' effect in all other areas of transformation as in state education, worker's morale etc. That it should be 'proletarian' in nature is not as unusual as it might at first appear. **(F.N.4)** When imposing

**Footnote 3.**

As Igor Golomstock wrote in his analysis of the nature of art in a one party state:

- (a) "The State declares art (and culture as whole) to be the ideological weapon and a means of struggle for power.
- (b) The State acquires a monopoly over all manifestations of the country's artistic life.
- (c) The State constructs an all embracing apparatus for the control and direction of art.
- (d) From the multiplicity of artistic movements then in existence, the state selects one movement, always the most conservative, which most nearly answers its needs and declares it to be official and obligatory.
- (e) Finally the State declares war to the death against all styles and movements other than the official ones, declaring them to be reactionary and hostile to class, race, people, party or state, to humanity, to social or artistic progress."

**(Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, fascist Italy and the Peoples Republic of Washington)**

**Footnote 4.**

The proletarian numbers of the Soviet Union at this period amounted to a small percentage of the state's population.

a cultural vision that best suited the organisation of the 'masses' it is clear that even through the early stages of discussion, industrialisation was the elemental resource of state presentation.

Constructive architecture was for a short space of time, an architecture in keeping with the method of proletarian transformation. Writers such as Bogdanov asserted "THE TRUE REVOLUTIONARY ARTIST WAS THE WORKER WHO FREED HIMSELF FROM THE WEIGHT OF HIS CULTURAL HERITAGE AND WHO WORKED IN CLOSE PROXIMITY TO THE FACTORY". (F.N.5) The Constructivist ethic in its specific unification and industrial and communistic themes, compounded this deliberation as the most appropriate means for socialist advancement. Commissar Lunacharsky maintained that the new dictatorial regime was a friend of modern culture. This view is important in that it reflected an attitude shared by a number of party members in appreciating the qualities of a uniform, abstracted identity to eliminate the sense of the parochial.

**Footnote 5:**

(Alexander Bogdanov p. 205 Constructivism)

### CHAPTER 3

#### The Schemes of the State:

It is essential to consider the town-planning schemes of both architectural groups together with the background of the physical environment and the political climate. The characteristic principle of the two movements was the uncompromising notion of creating a state 'reborn' into the era of communism, despite their tendencies to leach aspects from other cultures, i.e. the Constructivist collaboration with Le Corbusier and the Social Realist interest in cultures past. Thus originality in effect was the key factor in architecturally forming the ideological state and this required a complete overhaul of previous architectural principles. The Constructivists in their pursuit of ideological superiority often deliberately aimed to build on well respected values present in the architectural treasure of the past. It was a trait which was in common with the Social Realists and is possibly a symptom of the Soviet phenomenon to never do things by halves.

" The development of socialist architecture should be determined by the content of our new existence, of our new socialist way of life, by the new technology .... and by the new horizons that open up before us."

Alexander Vesnin,  
Sovetskaya Arkhitectura

" The new construction offers great opportunities for the construction of fundamentally socialist cities."

Arkadi Mordivinov 1943.  
Istoriya Russkogo  
Iskusstva.

Concrete examples of the argument between both architectural groups in their identification of the 'socialist state' can be found easily in the schemes drawn to revolutionize the fundamental patterns of living. In this area projects were set up concerning town planning and specific purpose building schemes.



Concentrating on this aspect of Soviet architecture, one is presented with an opportunity to examine the overall working schematization of both strands of architecture. Although on each side many plans were never fully realized, the roots of a possible planning identity can be deduced from the contextualisation of the architect's designs.

A manifestation of the divide between Constructivism and Social Realism saw an increasing gap between social commitment and state aggrandisement. The Constructivists, whose interests always lent heavily on the interaction between populace and architecture, had more in common with the communistic ideas of function and integration.

When in 1922 plans for the reconstruction of Moscow began, the housing situation had been insufficiently resolved by the system of co-habitation. In treating the drastic economic shortages on the housing front the Bolshevik solution was one of challenging the basic problems of standards and living space. A study carried out in 1913 revealed that out of seven hundred large towns nationwide, only two hundred and fifteen had a water supply. Twenty-three had an effective sewage system. It must be understood that the notion of town planning in this stage of the new state was like other new concepts; virtually unheard of. The authorities of previous Russian society merely placed the general ignorance attached to the subject, the shift of interest, into the hands of the people was conducive to the image of 'self-determination'. The Bolshevik government decreed "A CITY PLANNING COUNCIL WITH LOCAL BRANCHES WILL BE SET UP TO EXAMINE PROJECTS. THE PLANS FOR LARGE CITIES AND TOWNS OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE WILL BE APPROVED BY THE SOVNARKOM (COUNCIL OF PEOPLES COMMISSARS) THOSE FOR SMALLER CITIES BY THE GUBISPOLKOM (PROVINCIAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES) THOUGH THE SOVNARKOM MAY PROTECT THE DECISIONS OF THE LATTER WITHIN A CERTAIN PERIOD. EVERYTHING RELATING TO THE PREPARATION AND APPROVAL OF CITY PLANS SHOULD BE OPEN TO PUBLIC CRITICISM SINCE THEY INVOLVE

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THE INTERESTS OF THE POPULATION AS A WHOLE AND EVERY INSTITUTION".  
(F.N.1)

One cannot help but notice the amalgamation between politics and architecture in the field of town planning. Revolutionary discussion, imbued the city as the key area of transformation, for it was there that the Marxist ideas of class struggle would be fought. Thus, the successes of socialist supremacy were ingrained with the success of the planned structure of the city in terms of the basic decisions of lifestyle that would be made there.

However the immediate years after the revolution were characterised quite surprisingly by the formal and conservative expressions of architecture that one came to expect in the period of the Constructivist demise. (see FIG 1) Certainly it is hard to explain this unexpected turn of events except to say that in being offered the initial state projects architects such as Zoltovsky Shuchsev and Fomin, highlighted the governments deep felt need for respectability. The architects in the Constructivist movement were often students and mainly spent their time at the drawing board unlike their more experienced counterparts. However the Constructivist's hesitancy to take full advantage of their circumstances, led to greater background research studies on their behalf.

The Constructivist solution to the transformation of the 'soviet consciousness' in town planning pivoted around the theme of 'social condensers'. In keeping with the politically integrated context of education and industrialisation, it satisfied the state agenda. Indeed certain economic factors, such as the enlistment of women in the work force and the importance of creating subsequent facilities to liberate them did make it a particularly functional solution.

What emerged from the proceeding years of governmental policy was that the precedence given to heavy industry, led to a number of corners being cut out on the national budget. Consumer goods

**Footnote 1:**

Iz Sovetskoi Arkitektury 1917 - 1925, Moscow Akademiya Nawk SSSR 1963.



were particularly in short supply and a major area targeted for budgeting was housing and other areas of the building industry. An example of the of the 'squeeze' on construction can be found in G. Vegman's official statistics for living space (F.N.2) which constituted little more than five square meters per person in Moscow city. (see Table 1) The annual increase in population far exceeded the increase in rentable constructions.

Table 1.

	Individual Living Space Allotment	Increase in Rental Constructions	Increase in Population
Provincial Citys	6m <sup>2</sup>	3.50%	5.10%
Suburban Moscow	6.3m <sup>2</sup>	2.90%	2.60%
Moscow	5.2m <sup>2</sup>	3.30%	5.40%

Solutions surrounding these shortages tended to take on a harsher communal aspect than probably acceptable in terms of a gradual phase of transformation. Yuri Larin's 'emergency measures', or Kuzmin's futuristic proposals of 'Super collectivization' had tendencies towards regimes of a greivous nature, that not only resembled 'army' life but may have done a lot to harm the credibility of social condensing in general. Answers like these must be attributed to over-eager attempts at solving the catastrophic housing shortages, however this was not to be the last time utopianisms were to be found in Soviet problem solving, and it may bear relevance to the nature of the architects position in being surrounded by conflicting arguments.

The more reasonable attempts at normalizing standards of living maybe attributed to the rersearch of the Constructivist architects. The O.S.A. (Association of Contemporary Architects) took a main drive in addressing the housing construction industry. The concept of 'miniaturization' was widely abandoned as space cutting was bleeding the housing budget unnecessarily. Miniaturization consisted of mainly cutting old apartments of superfluous

Footnote 2:

1925



elements such as maids stairs and pantries. This required con-technical skill in alterin irregular apartments to allow more living space. What was proposed instead was to move toward 'standardization' in building construction complete with full collective facilities. The veritable advantage of this scheme was to allow the architects a greater degree of control as they did not have to deal with the adaption of old designs to new concepts. Headed by Moses Ginzberg, the O.S.A. researchers embarked on split level designs known as the 'Stroikam Unit' (**See Fig.2**) drawn up through painstaking research, although based on official statistics for living sapce, they can be credited with making an attempt to satisfy the requirements of standardized housing in a relatively cheap and involved way. The innovation of the Stroikam Units lay in their reduction of the ceiling height in appropriate areas such as the kitchen. Through re-examining the ratio of living space to service areas the Stroikam Units combined affordability with a satisfactory standard of spacing. Despite the interest generated by the units, it was still speculated that only forty per cent of the population could avail of these apartments. The state recognised this problem and calculated to encourage families towards comunal living. (**F.N. 3**)

However the Constructivist architects had realistically approached the problem by a rationally humane introduction to communistic transformation. Ginzberg wrote "WE CONSIDER THAT ONE OF THE IMPORTANT POINTES THAT MUST BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN BUILDING NEW APARTMENTS IS THE DIALECTICS OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT... WE MUST PROVIDE FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF A GRADUAL, NATURAL TRANSITION TO COMMUNAL UTILISATION IN A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT AREAS. THIS IS WHY WE HAVE TRIED TO KEEP EACH UNIT ISOLATED FROM THE NEXT, THAT IS WHY WE FOUND IT NECESSARY TO DESIGN THE KITCHEN ALCOVE AS A STANDARD ELEMENT OF MINIMUM SIZE, THAT COULD BE REMOVED BODILY FROM THE APARTMENT TO PERMIT THE INTRODUCTION OF CANTEEN CATERING AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT". (**F.N.4**)

**Footnote 3:**

Although certain types of communal housing schemes were seen as temporary measures by most architects, their existence did however heighten the fact that solving the housing programme was a long way off. Indeed Melnikov's dormitory proposals for housing were dismissed by central committee as "highly unsound". (**p.152 Town and Revolution**)

**Footnote 4:** (p 141 Town and Revolution)

An integral part of the Soviet system of 'social condensing' was the infusion of the 'club' as a focal area of education and socialization. The role of the 'workers club' as a 'collective' force, incorporated all age groups and served the function of a leisure and cultural area, while providing the means for communal indoctrination and social organisation. By facilitating its use the emphasis on home life and other private pastimes shifted to a more communal atmosphere and indeed a more participatory one. The running of such clubs were in conjunction with local boards of tradeunionists and politicians and became popular units of construction amongst these boards. No less than seven thousand People's Houses or Clubs came into being during the first two years of Soviet rule. The problems surrounding these centres, like all other areas of social construction, lay in stressing the proper cultural outlook as a rudimentary aspect of building. The early projects of the 'Workers Palace' by Fomin and Beloborodov in 1919 rested heavily on the infusion of baroque and classical architectural motifs to emphasize the grandness of the Soviet State. The synonymous links between cultural and intellectual recreation and ornate settings were deeply imbued in the psyche of the people. The early advances into this area display that subconscious connection, yet in relation to the increase of creative activity in the club facilities the importance of building diversification grew. The question of flexibility was one of the Key areas to be challenged, as the building rules of traditionalist structures could not be reconciled to new functions imposed by a new system.

Konstantin Melnikov's clubs such as the Kauchuk factory club (see Fig. 3) stand out as examples of progressive invention and experimentation. His worker clubs were attempts to greatly alter the flexibility and functioning purpose of the internal spacings. By devising sliding panels as partitions, he introduced the separation or fusion at will of two or more areas. This was created as a speculative device for altering the function of the internal space.

More adventurous in design the Constructivist architect Ivan Leonidov primarily sought to realise the possibilities of direct social alteration through the club. His aim was not to be found



so much in challenging the internal workings of the club, as in challenging the nature of the club as an identified national service. Leonidov expected this would result through specifically catering for a vast spectrum of amenities for instance garden complexes, parks etc. (see Fig.4) (F.N.5) A reflection of its popularity was that the question of its economic feasibility was readily dismissed. Leonidov's designs for cultural complexes were becoming a trend. The Vesinin brother's winning design for the 'Proletarsky District Palace of Culture' competition compounded three large complex blocks into a garden setting, equipped with theatrical and observatory facilities. (F.N.6) One can imagine the enthusiasm of the architects involved in anticipating culture as a new socially relevant activity. As El Lissitsky wrote in 1930 "THE IMPORTANT THING ABOUT A CLUB IS THAT THE MASS OF THE MEMBERS MUST BE DIRECTLY INVOLVED. THEY MUST NOT APPROACH IT OR BE CHanneled INTO IT FROM THE OUTSIDE AS MERE ENTERTAINMENT. THEY THEMSELVES MUST FIND IN IT THE MAXIMUM OF SELF-EXPRESSION". (F.N.7)

Another sector forecast as a primary centre for social condensing was the industrial sector. Partly this conclusion resulted from an understanding of the time being spent at the plant or factory, but equally it may be seen as an exaggerated attempt to justify socially the thrust into rapid industrialisation. Budget planning alone in the late twenties shows the States notorious committal to the development of plants, factories and other industrial projects. One can say that in this field, more than any other, architect and engineer alike literally set about inventing industrial architecture. The seeds of a world power states were founded in many projects such as the Chernorech super-phosphate factory (F.N.8) and the industrialisation of areas such as Mangnitogorsk, Sverdlovsk and Novosibursk.

**Footnote 5:**

Design for 'Club for a New Social Type' 1929.

**Footnote 6**

Moscow 1931

**Footnote 7:**

El Lissitsky - Russland: Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion - Vienna 1930 - (p116 Town and Revolution)

**Footnote 8:**

Gorki 1918

What must have been the greatest industrial achievement of the O.S.A. the Dneproges (**F.N.9**) was not only the largest hydroelectric powerstation in the world but a prestigious point of reference to the national success story and was used as that. The question of the ecological problems it inflicted on the countryside paled in comparison to the triumph of its power generating supply and transportation facilities. (**F.N.10**) No less a remarkable success was its structural feat which demonstrated an architectural interest in treating the industrial aspects of building. In contrast to its size the construction was managed in such a way that its naturalistic form displayed all the simplicity and clarity of an efficient machine (see Fig. 5).

(The Constructivist design of the dam was tampered with by the addition of ornate motifs during its reconstruction after the war.)

It would not be a fair appraisal of the intricacies of 'social condensing' to catalogue its many specialized areas in a generalized way. Therefore elemental aspects of the scheme such as, communal houses, canteens, bakeries etc, have been neglected in this account. However it seems relevant to highlight the architectural breakthroughs on such crucial fronts as housing, industry and clubs exclusively for their importance as components of social transformation. In every case presented the specific function of each purpose built design was dealt with separately in terms of the problems it posed, the consideration of its inherent characteristics and the utility of its modification. This approach can only stress the energetic creativity of the Constructivist architects in realistically ascertaining a more substantial method of investigation.

In the broader sphere of things city management and planning comprised the packaging of the conclusive set of social condensing principles. Town and city planning represented, in its socio-economic context, issues of national consideration. The initial pressure placed on architectural town management grew from the

**Footnote 9:**

Designed by Victor Vesnin, N.Kolly, S.Andreyevsky, G. Orlov, V. Korshinsky. 1927-1932

**Footnote 10:**

The annual output of the Dneproges is of 3.6 billion Kilowatt hours.



importance of creating facilities to sustain the productivity of growing centres. Indeed many towns such as Dzerzhinsk, Magnitogorsk and Karaganda were a matter of immediacy and were conceived rapidly without due attention to geographical knowledge or resource materials. The pressure imposed on the architects must be one of the factors that colour this era as an experimentally dangerous period.

Despite the interest gathered in the area of building a 'socialist city' the pace of research was often at odds with the overwhelming push towards industrialisation. Questions on the housing front had still not been properly resolved by 1926, so one can fully understand the well grounded hesitancy of the architects in attacking larger things. As early political directives had served as a protector to the Constructivist motivation, those same political directives under a new leadership created a barrier for the architects between the incompatibility of new economic objectives and social considerations. It is at this point that one can say the concept of 'architectural determinism' was on the decline and it seems more relevant to attribute to the architects the job of filling the social deficiency created by forthright industrialisation. What becomes clear at this stage is that the scale of the state's problems launched many architectural planners back into the realm of utopianisms. The 1929-1930 debates on 'Urbanisation' and 'De-urbanisation' reflect the importance of the architects in facing their tasks at this period.

The 'Urbanists' under the architect Sabsovich were aware of the divide in society between agriculture and industry in a so-called spectrum of social unification. They were committed to the development of architectural organisms (i.e. social condensers') and saw within their elaboration a systemized solution to national integration. It was proposed that this should be carried, through the introduction of a strict zoning network. Its effect would be the separation of industrial and agricultural sectors from the social condensing sectors. Although the Vesnin brothers voiced a distinct interest in Sabsovich's ideas, the main participation of the O.S.A. migrated towards the De-Urbanist movement and the green city concept (F.N.11) To an

**Footnote 11:**

The De-urbanist group included Moses Ginzberg, G.Vegman, Pasternak and V.Vladimirov, all high profile members of the O.S.A.

extent, these architects were voicing a disgust at what they saw as the failure of social organisms when denouncing.

"COMMUNAL HOUSES, THOSE ENORMOUS; HEAVY MONUMENTAL, EVERLASTING COLOSSI, PERMANENTLY ENCUMBERING THE LANDSCAPE". (F.N.12) A growing rejection of communal facilities coupled with an honest rejection of their effectiveness, undermined aspirations to meet the States requirements.

This assessment of the State building issues had direct implications with regard to governmental policy as a whole. Engels had postulated that a city population that contained more than twenty-thousand citizens would lead to increased depravation in the area. The De-urbanists, encouraging a less populated schematization directly expressed a scepticism about the ethics of centralization and thus tapped indirectly into the question of a centralized form of governmental decision making. In this context it should come as no surprise that Party interest grew on the question of cultural development.

Although many visionary plans thrown up by the debate were dangerously unstable it still remains in hindsight an important period. This can be gathered from the fact that it was a move towards creating socialist resettlement while attempting to re-affirm the necessity of a complete housing overhaul. Schemes like the De-urbanist project at Magnitororsk questioned the research of previous housing programmes. Desigend by M. Okhitovich, N.Sokolov, M. Barshch and V. Vladimirov in 1930, it was a typical example of the groups interest in segregated and private housing allotments compiled by using cheap, local materials ( see Fig 6).

The case of Constructivist town planning was an idea affiliated to the process of specific problem solving. As previously mentioned, restrictions either economic or political created setbacks in this process. It is a small consolation to say that Constructivist research laid a valuable foundation to city planning on an

**Footnote 12:**

(p. 177 Town and Revolution)



international level. It is apparent that the Constructivist work resulted from a very genuine interest in social re-settlement and the improvement of living standards. In arguing against a dismissal of the architects for their 'Utopian' schemes, one must not forget that the Constructivist contribution, realistically proposed a gradual process of integration without discounting the necessities for total change.

Most of the important building activity after 1930 dealt mainly with the supermonumental statements on the Stalinist Regime. Although credited with a participation in the design for the Moscow-Volga canal, Stalin's role in the orchestration of architectural planning is rarely mentioned. However his role as complete censor of public taste was undeniable, for it was impossible to construct any major building without his personal signature on the design. A story runs, that Aleksei Shchusev (one of Stalin's favourite architects) in his design for the 'Hotel Moskov' 1935, sent Stalin two different impressions for the wings of the hotel. Stalin realising there was a choice or even a discrepancy in the plan, approved the design. The engineers and builders, terrified by the prospect of confronting their leader on this 'slip' built it as it stands today, completely asymmetrical (**see Fig.7**)

The policies of Stalin's State were reflected closely in the themes of Social Realist architecture, therefore one can say that that political vision of Social Realist architecture was more in tune with the direct aims of the state than the Constructivist vision. The veritable control of the Social Realist movement by the party only serves to graphically illustrate the distinct objectives of the party. Thus, there are problems in discussing Social Realism as an authentic architectural movement rather than as a basic medium for imparting State slogans. One gets the feeling that in placing the harness of Social Realism on the people, it is highly suspect as to whether Stalin's main interest was to inspire admiration or fear. In ways it seems irrelevant as to which it inspired as long as it exerted control.

There is a tendency by commentators on totalitarian art to align Social Realist architecture and Nazi architecture because of its monumental characteristics. This however is

a misconception and a clarification of the differences between both would serve to re-illustrate the Social Realist position. Their incompatibilities hold two very important points, primarily that Soviet architecture was focused as a movement by the people for the people whereas Hitler's State architecture enlivened its citizens from 'above'. Secondly the strict German formalism which was characterized in Albert Speer's work, was considered severe in Soviet eyes. Buildings like Kara Alabyan and Vasili Simbirtsev's Red Army Theatre, leaned on the 'spiritualism' of the socialistic experience by incorporating a five pointed star as the basic design. This building exemplified the Soviet capacity to dismiss traditional building rules in favour of capturing the essence of nationalistic supremacy i.e. the star motif of the State (F.N.13) (see Fig.8)

A common element however, between totalitarian cultures was the notion of the capital's aggrandisement. Building construction sought to depict Moscow as the 'model' city and a focus of Soviet life, for example plans for the Palace of Soviets and Iofan's designs for the total reconstruction of Moscow were schemes to flatter the image of the State. This is also obvious in the example of Moscow metro. It was the most well known triumph of Soviet Russia, whose lasting impression perhaps added a degree of authenticity to the weight of the Social Realist endeavour, abroad. Construction began in 1932 by architects from the Metroproyekt Design Office who conceived the plans for these subterranean palaces. Such well known architects as Ivan Fomin, Dmitry Chechulin, Schusev and Vladimir Glefreikh collaborated not only with construction engineers but sculptors and painters alike in distinguishing

**Footnote 13:**

Built in Moscow 1934-1940. A story ran that Lazar Kaganovich a politburo member had a great interest in the development of Soviet architecture and in this case took the liberty of tracing his five-pronged inkpot onto the design thus inspiring the architects. (p75 Art Under Stalin)



the metro as a feat of excellence of international renown (F.N.14) (see Fig.9). The network spanned over two-hundred kilometres of track which contained one hundred and thirty five chandelier lit stations, including secret lines to Stalins dacha and the Kremlin.

How funding was suddenly made available for this vast enterprise, is indicative of State manipulation especially in the light of the Constructivist failure. This was the opinion of Andre Lurcat (F.N.15) who commented on the accumulation of funds for Moscow. (F.N.16) Money the 'avant gardist' architects were denied, was liberally available to illustrate the justification of classism over modernism in a demonstration of 'good taste'.

Concentrated projects of this scale in the cities must have drawn on the resources of the State. So unlike the De-urbanist interests of the Constructivists the Social Realist architects affected a disharmony in building concentration throughout the Soviet Union. In the period of the fourth and fifth (F.N.17) Five Years Plans, projects on a large scale were implemented such as the Volga-Don canal construction. Apart from this, beavering energies were thrown exclusively into prestige building. This aspect of Soviet history, leading up to Kruschchev's taking power, was expressively characterised by the State's gross neglect of ordinary housing schemes. The poignant fact was that while habitation conditions were appalling for millions, Stalins drive to rennovate the major cities especially Moscow commanded a high level of finance and got it.

**Footnote 14:**

The Sokoliniki Station, opened in 1935 was awarded a Grand Prix at the Brussels World Fair. Its architects N.Bykova and I.Taranov designed the external vestibule as a construction piece reminiscent of an exhibition pavillion. Awards were also give to other stations, such as the Mayakovskaya Station which received a Gold Medal at the New Year World Fair and the Krasnie Vorota Station which won a Grand Prix in Paris.

**Footnote 15:**

Architect and Author of "L' ARCHITECTURE EN U.S.S.R." Bulletin de l'Union des Architects 1938. (p.227 Town and Revolution)

**Footnote 16:**

Erected in 1934 this apartment building was designed outside the standard regulations for living space. (p227 Town and Revolution)

Known by the Muscovites as Stalin's 'Vampire' style buildings, the large elaborate sky-scrapers spanned the city horizon in an effort to convince the nation of the city's importance. **(F.N.18)** They were seven identical symbols of State policy **(see Fig.10)**

The planning schemes of the State under Social Realism totally contradicted the aims of the Constructivists. Politics and the vision of the leader was the deciding factor in determining the success or failure of these contradictions and the movements involved. Stalin himself was also responsible for the transformation of the nature of architecture, not just as the tool of the State, but also in terms of the form and content that changed voluntarily or compulsorily the consciousness of the architectural profession itself.

**Footnote 17:**

(1946 - 1950) and (1951 - 1955)

**Footnote 18:**

Two were located alongside the river. One at the central train station. Three beside the garden ring and the last, the Moscow University building was echoed in the distant South West region of the city. **(p.169 Art Under Stalin)**

CHAPTER 4

The importance of content and form in construction

The study of linguistics and its connection with form and content in Soviet architecture presents us with a descriptive means for recalling the impact of Constructivism and Social Realism in society. The differences between both groups becomes more apparent by discussing catagorical linguistics surrounding the two movements.

One of the great legacies of the Constructivist architectural movement was found in their elaboration of the complex language of construction. This was specifically engineered to constitute bodies of harmonious unification. The need for a consistent language of building was strongly felt to facilitate, more efficiently the transformation of the socialist environment. Thus the 'Constructive' logic of the proletarian task was to be echoed by an equally effective 'constructive' system throughout the workers surroundings. This was not achieved by merely merging man and machine but as something more ambitions, a 'social catalyst'. A Constructivist amalgamation could not be separated from human integration.

The detail of Constructivist experimental logic can be found in an understanding of their applied vocabulary. Through examining the specific writings of architects such as Iakov Chernikov one can fully appreciate the importance placed on the building process as a whole. The point of incorporating all aspects of constructional design in language specification was primarily an effort to acquire a well defined approach to building, in order to avoid misleading conclusions and incompatibilities. Studies aimed at unifying the ideological approach, not only in the areas of 'Konstruksiia' (the grammatical and intellectual programme) but also in the areas of 'Stroits'tvo' (the manual aspects of working). Within the overall meaning of 'Constructivism' the synthesis of elemental considerations also encompassed the appropriate selection of raw materials (F.N. 1) and the correct balance between political and industrial cohesion. (F.N.2)

Footnote 1:

'Factura'

Footnote 2:

'Tektonika'



It was the Constructivist 'systems' approach that made sure that architectural form and content were well grounded. As Moses Ginzberg wrote in 1927 "SUBCONSCIOUS,IMPULSIVE CREATIVITY MUST BE REPLACED BY A CLEAR AND DISTINCTLY ORGANIZED METHOD" (F.N.3) Throughout the building process the systems approach became the main united aspect of the method of construction. Elements such as 'penetrating joints', 'embracing bodies' and 'clamping forms' were all Constructivist compositional terms, used to illustrate the organization of creative building. Indeed compositional aspects of design were crucial in the point of overall construction. Everything from the largest girder to the smallest 'integral' body had its own specific mode of treatment. The system also advised the correct method of colour, texture, elevation and illumination for the most 'constructive' results.

Theoretically it was reasoned that through an apparently conclusive set of architectural directives, the apparatus of variables available was such that an extensive use of the Constructivist method would lead to superior designs. When analysing content and form in Constructivist buildings each design was a separate project and treated as that. (Designs for factory plants were completely different in content to designs for mass bakeries). Yet unifying all constructions was the framework of the systems approach that imposed a certain order on the form and content. An example of the compositional interests of the Constructivist approach is the Vesnin brother's Motorg Department Store.(F.N.4) Its expression is that of a lyrically composed design that incorporates a streamlined glazed steel framework around the vast window section which acts as a foil to the vertical concrete top with its bold insignia. It is a typical early example of the Constructivist interest in composition and elemental harmony whose external order is echoed through every part of the building.

It is quite evident by contrasting the principles of Constructivism

Footnote 3:

(p.8 The Russian Avant Garde - Architectural Design Vol.53)

Footnote 4:

Moscow 1927



against the notion of form and content in Social Realist architecture, that a completely different emphasis emerges. The Constructivist interest specifying the nature and use of the building by architectural investigation does not apply to the building norms of Social Realism. (The classical structures of a Palace of Labour may equally have been replicated in the design for a public bath). In terms of the movements linguistic contextualization one is firmly presented with one label, 'massovost'. (F.N. 5) It is a word that would only be understood in Soviet society in connection with the appearance of a totalitarian state. 'Massavost' principles of architecture were associated with grandly expressing the lofty ideals of the state in an over-powering way. Possibly like the Constructivists the aim was not to be misunderstood and in Social Realist terms its effectiveness was based on the simplicity of a slogan. Thus the combinations of multi-leveled 'wordings' on the Constructivist's behalf were not popular for their input into the national message. Architektura SSSR magazine clarified the state position on content and form in discussing Gelfreik and Minkus' Ministry of Foreign affairs building. (F.N.6) It was felt that the architects "HELD BEFORE THEM THE TASK OF REFLECTING IN AN ARTISTIC IMAGE THE SENSE OF PRIDE OF THE SOVIET PEOPLE IN THEIR SOCIALIST STATE WHICH HAD CRUSHED FACISM IN BATTLE AND BECAME STILL STRONGER AND MORE POWERFUL, THEIR SENSE OF PRIDE IN THEIR SOCIALIST MOTHERLAND AS THE INVINCIBLE STRONGHOLD OF ALL PROGRESSIVE AND FREEDOM LOVING HUMANITY". (F.N.7) Social Realist architects saw themselves as embodying the spirit of true classical revival. Classical Greek architecture was seen as an exception to the rule against looking backwards and even Lunacharski in the Ministry of Enlightenment, advised a better modeling on "CLASSICAL ARCHITECTURE THAN BOURGEOIS ARCHITECTURE".

**Footnote 5:**

'Mass appeal'

**Footnote 6:**

Smolenskaia Square, Moscow

**Footnote 7:**

(p270 Totalitarian Art)

Having said that however, the Stalinist preference for classism, baroque and Russian traditionalism made inconsequential additions to the Soviet patchwork idea of building. The only rule that is decipherable from the form was the existence of a slogan.

The rules of classism which relate to human proportions were blown out of scale to satisfy the State's taste for superstructured edifices for the masses. "OUR TASK IS THE STRUGGLE TO EMBODY IN THE LANGUAGE OF ARCHITECTURE THE GREAT SLOGANS OF OUR EPOCH".

(F.N.8) The incongruity of the context is imaginable when picturing the masses themselves, having to queue for a five Kopek ticket at a fourteen meters high baroque booth in the Moscow metro station. The 'Komsomolskaia - Koltsevaia' station built by Schusev drew such admiration from Stalin for its reflection of "THE GREATNESS OF THE EPOCH" and the "CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNISM" that Schusev was showered with honorary awards.

Although a 'classical' stylistic content may be attributed to Social Realist architecture, the notion of 'style' was an unhealthy concept. In Constructivist terms style was a frame of mind, representative of capitalistic decadence. This was the ideological basis the Social Realist architects expounded on, yet their angle on the associations of the word were matters for the State. The notion of style as a reflection of transience occupied a prime position of contempt for the Social Realist architects, for maintaining a State cultural identity, the government demanded a secure form of representation. As previously mentioned it must be speculated the State was sensitive to opinions both internally and abroad. State security had a well documented growth under Beria in the Ministry for State Security. Stalins ever watchful grip on official state opinion had not presented the new Soviet architecture as a mere stylistic movement open to honest criticism and improvement. In effect, Social Realist architecture was a mirror of the Stalinist regime and was not prey to stylistic whims of the people. Its very use

Footnote 8:

(p.270 Totalitarian Art)

as the State medium to communicate to the people, depended on its aura of enduring strength and structures of mere 'style' were certainly not conducive to reflecting State slogans. The Serpukhovskaia metro station received a cold reception from Arkhitektura SSSR as " IT DID NOT TELL OF EVEN ONE HEROIC EVENT IN THE HISTORY OF OUR PEOPLE, DID NOT IMMORTALIZE IT, DID NOT GLORIFY EITHER THE BEAUTY OF THE PRESENT DAY OF THE SOVIET PEOPLE, OF THE GREATNESS OF ITS ASPIRATIONS TOWARDS A COMMUNIST TOMORROW". (F.N. 9)

Footnote 9:

(p.271 Totalitarian Art)



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION:

The fact is that until the power of Stalins position had been assured one cannot say that the drastic changes (as one recognizes them today) occurred in Soviet society. The Stalinist drive to industrialization was a major factor in stimulating all other areas of production including the building trade. For it must be remembered that Soviet architecture in general was linked closely to the circumstances of the State and was never characterized by aesthetic innovation alone.

Although the Constructivists displayed a commitment to challenging the problems of construction in the communistic sense, the main bulk of their work concentrated on a period before Stalins tightened grip. For this reason they are not distinct examples of socialist architecture, more as repressed examples of a communistic architecture in principle. It is tempting to look at this experimental phase in architecture and to imagine the development of the Constructivist working method as one quite sympathetic to the difficulties attached to consciously transforming the environment. To contrast this Social Realist architecture presents itself as the insensitive tool of an aggressive state.

However any 'gut-reaction' attitude to Social Realist architecture must be challenged for reasons of its endurance long after Stalins death. Denounced after his departure, Khrushchev blamed Stalin for contributing to the heavy Soviet losses during the Second World War. (F.N.1) This if we recall our history books is an acute observation on Khrushchev's behalf. Yet there is an argument to suggest that, had Stalin not fanatically industrialized the country at all costs Soviet society would have suffered worse casualties in the war. This benevolence towards Stalin's vision may also be extended to his vision in architecture. It is

#### **Footnote 1:**

Stalin in the 1932 - 1935 purges eliminated many of his high ranking generals. This coupled with his disbelief in a German conspiracy caused him to jeopardize the Soviet position.

difficult to understand the mentality of a war-torn, poverty stricken state, heading straight into the dismal isolation of the Cold War. One must hazard a guess that the Soviet people had numerous reasons for identifying with the exaggerated symbols of hope, victory and secure if not suppressive strength. It was an era that saw international feats of boasting. The ideological supremacy of Roosevelt Washington, Mussolini's Rome and Hitler's Berlin sustained a national character that was very much a product of the times.

Therefore it is clear to see how the abstract and modest functionality of the Constructivist architecture was out of tune with the direction of Socialism from the international standpoint. The Constructivists work adhered closely to the revolutionary ideal when comparing it to its visual counterpart, yet its sources were Tsarist (F.N.2) in nature and therefore did little to visually challenge the Western powers. The importance placed on visual slogans was what characterized the Social Realist movement in architecture and was by way of a comment on the states best suited means for transforming the mass consciousness.

**Footnote 2:**

Modern art was introduced in Moscow by the pre-revolutionary middleclasses, who supported the break from academic art.



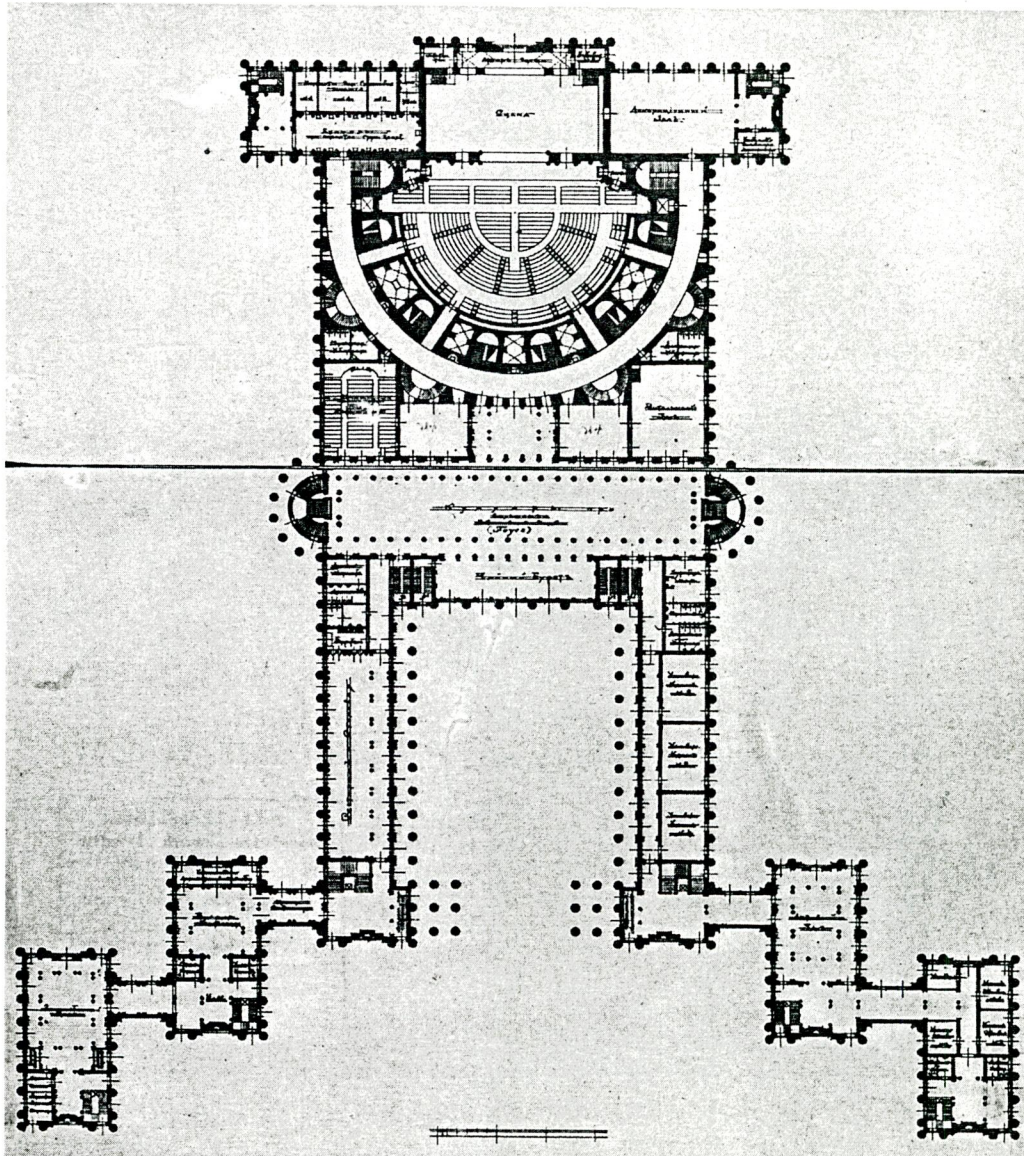
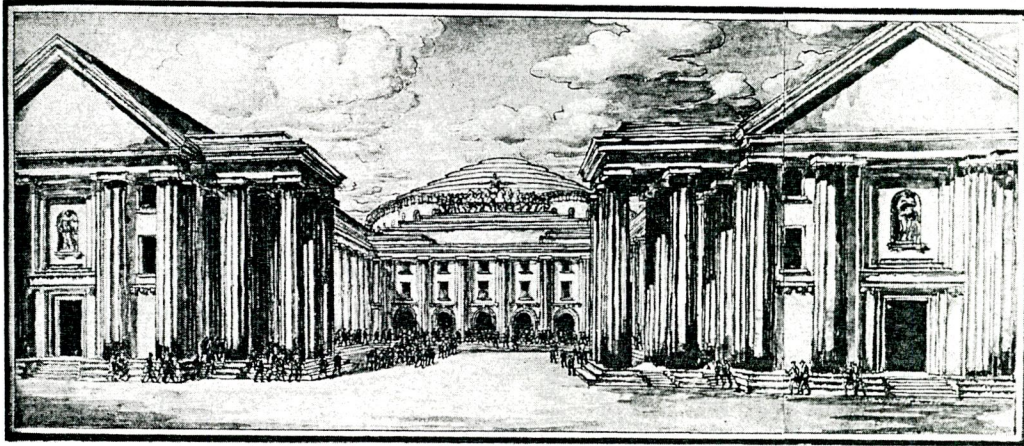


FIG 1 - Ivan Fomin - Design for the Workers Party  
Petrograd 1919







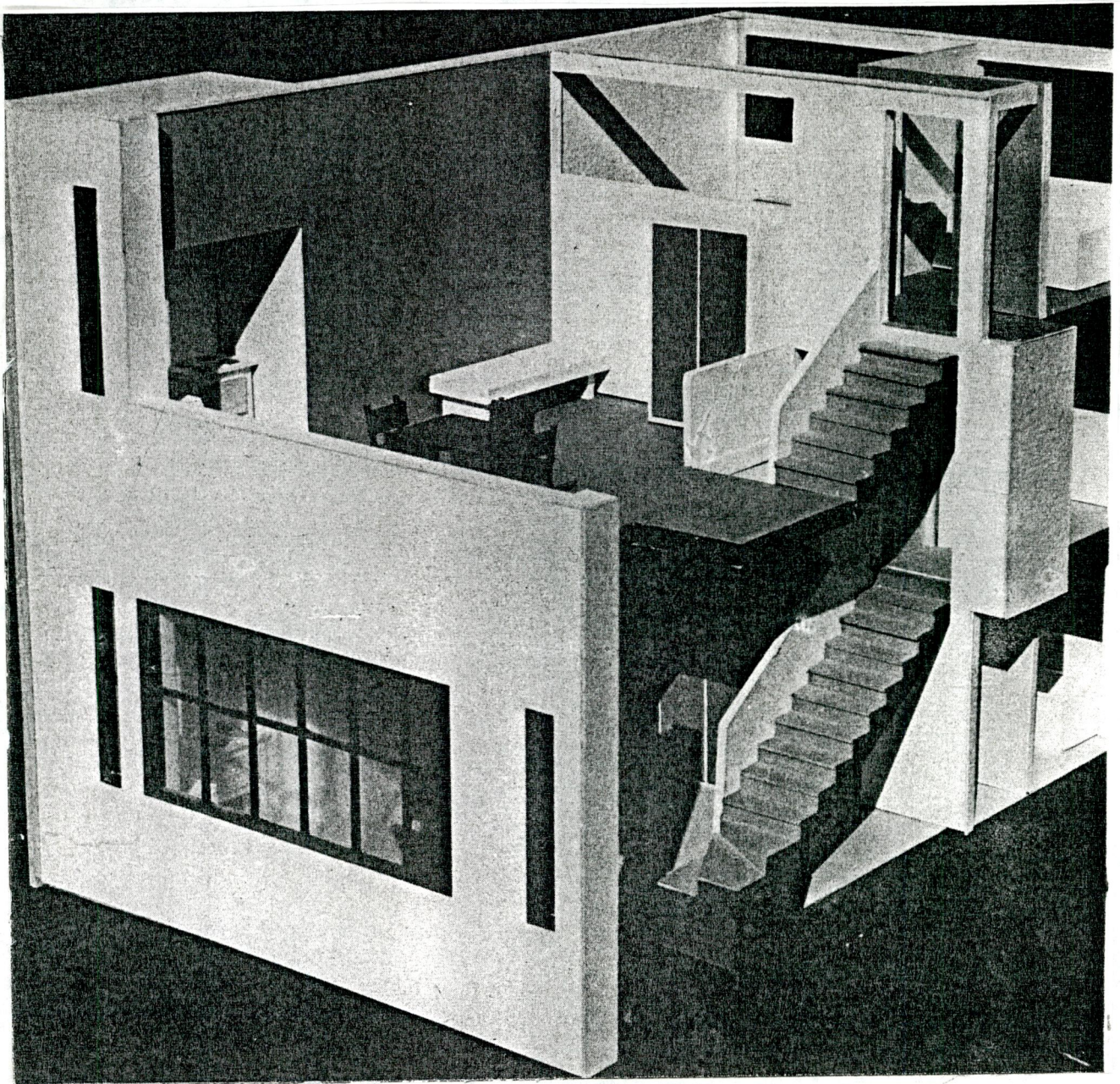


FIG 2 - F.Type Split - level housing unit.









FIG 3 - Konstantin Melnikov Kauchuk Factory Club 1927







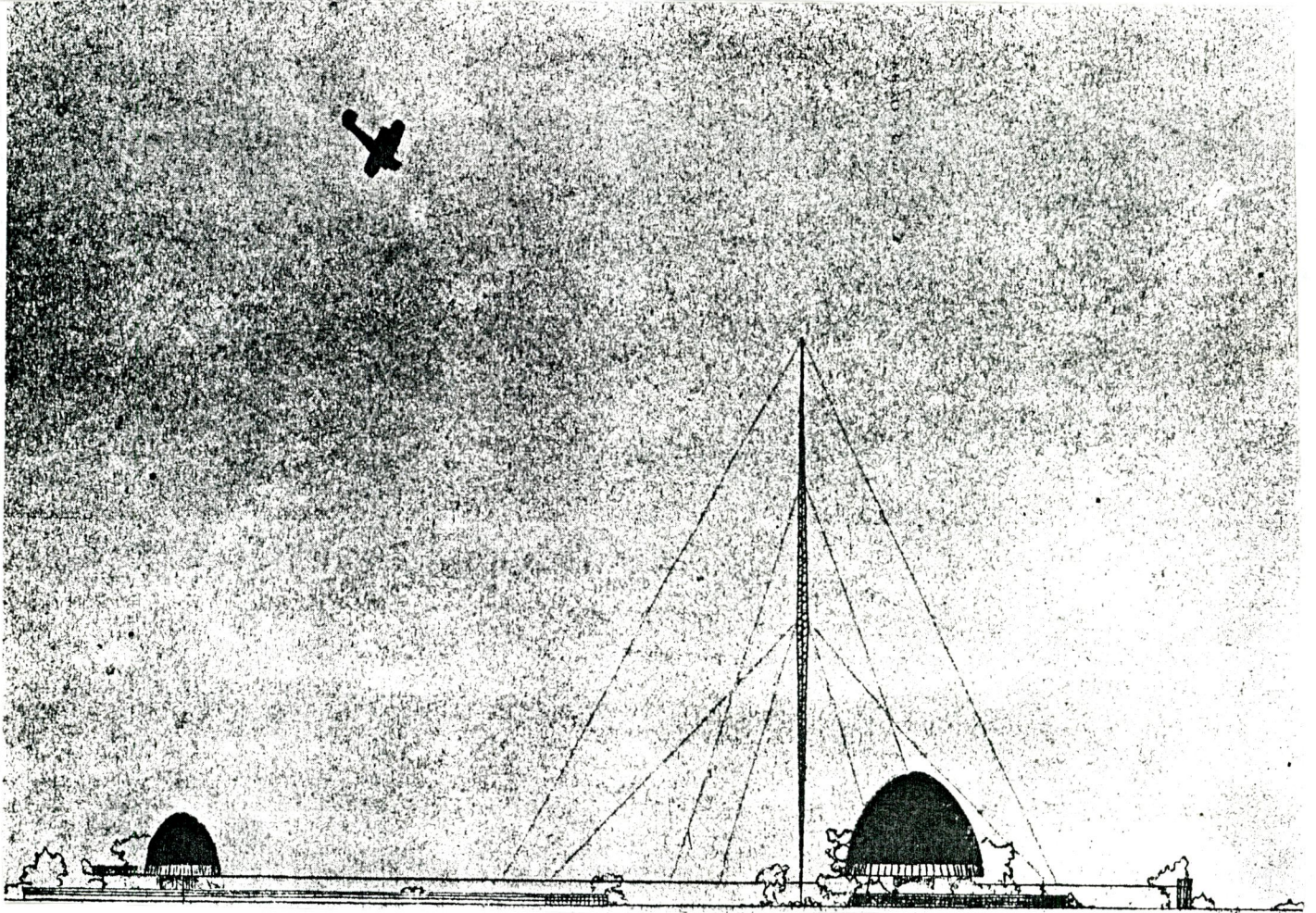
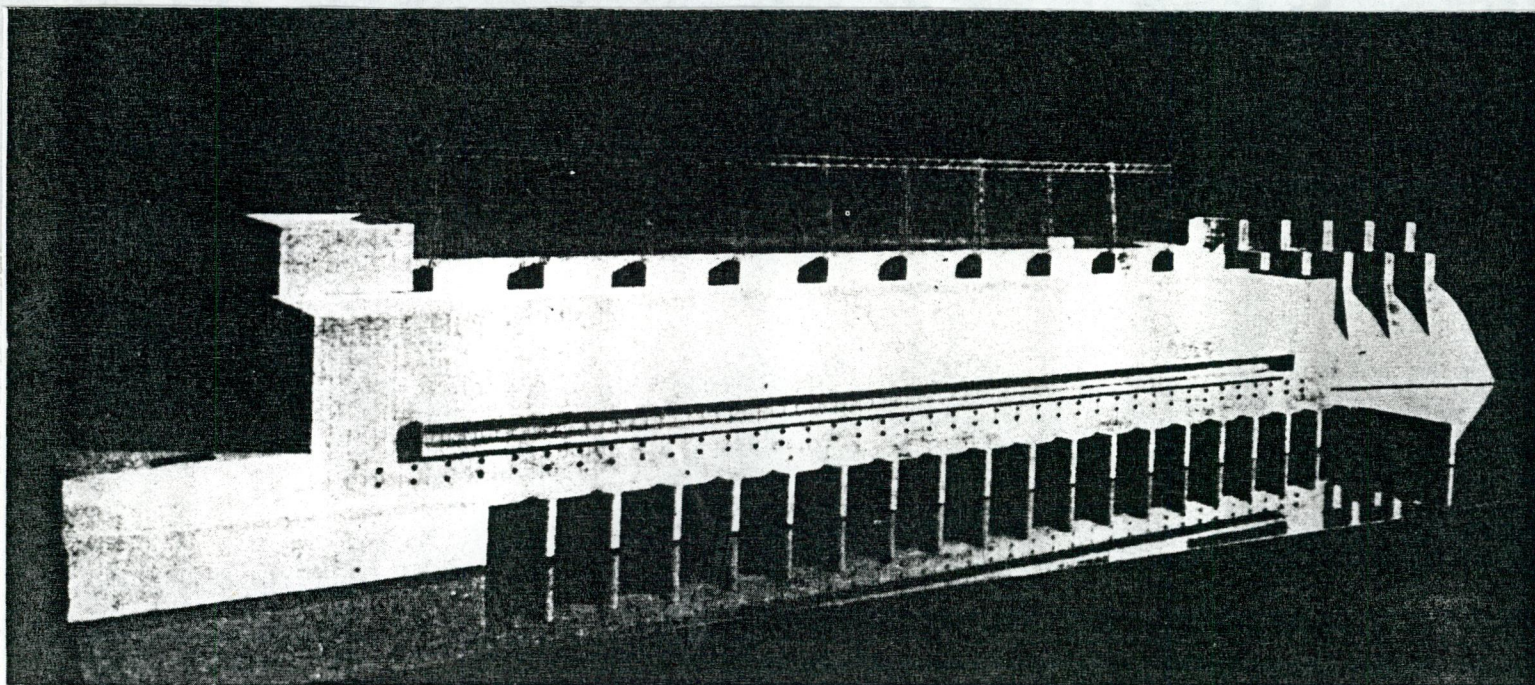


FIG 4 - Ivan Leonidov 'Club of New Social Type' 1929









Dnepr HEP complex: Plan and model of the sluice and turbine building, with turbine hall below, by an architectural group of the Dneprostroy Administration comprising Viktor Vesnin, Nikolai Kolli, Grigori Orlov, S. Andreevskii and V. Korchinskii, following a competition project of 1929.

Dnepr HEP complex: Sluice and turbine building, model from the southern corner.

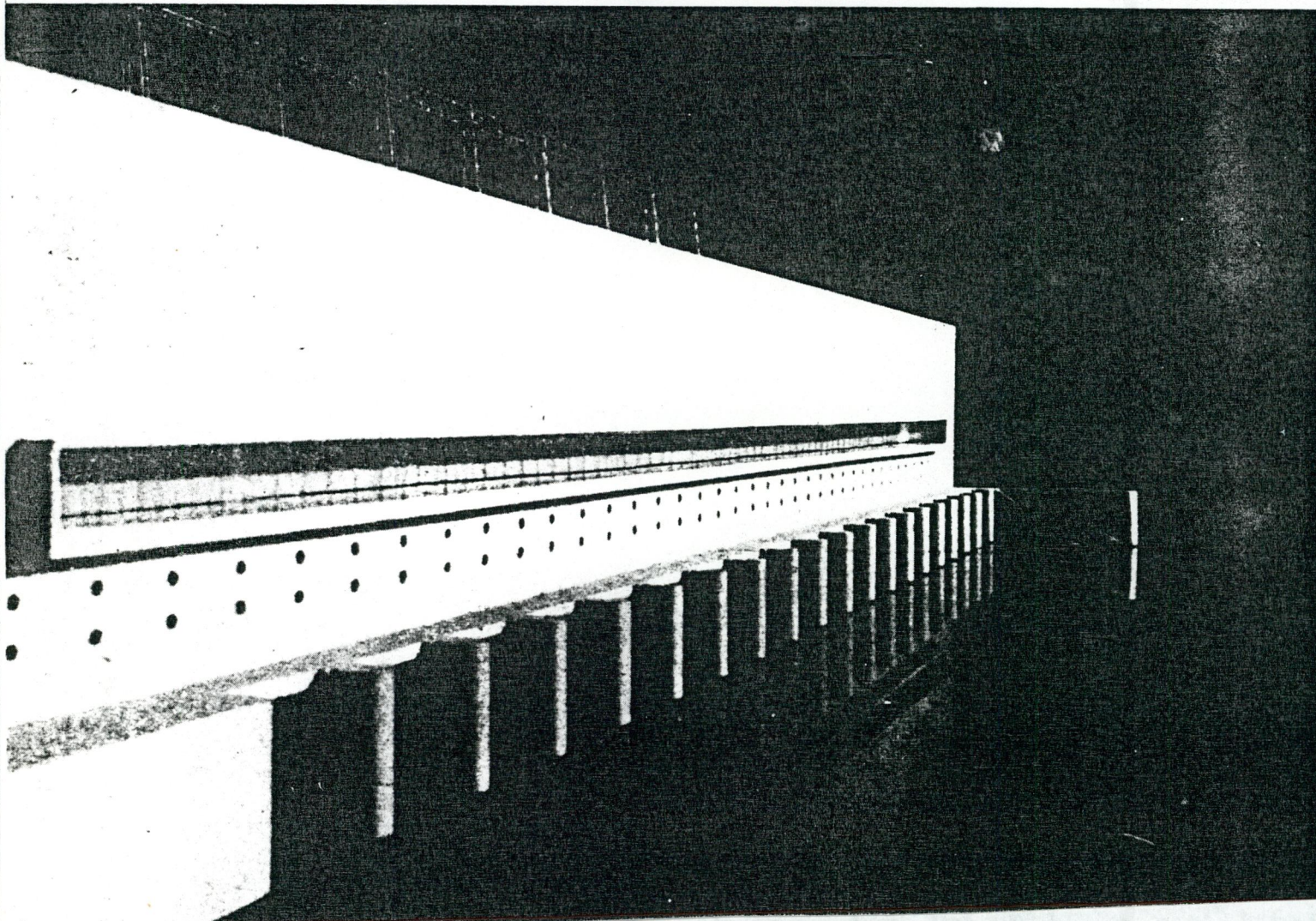


FIG 5 - Dnepr Hep - complex 1929







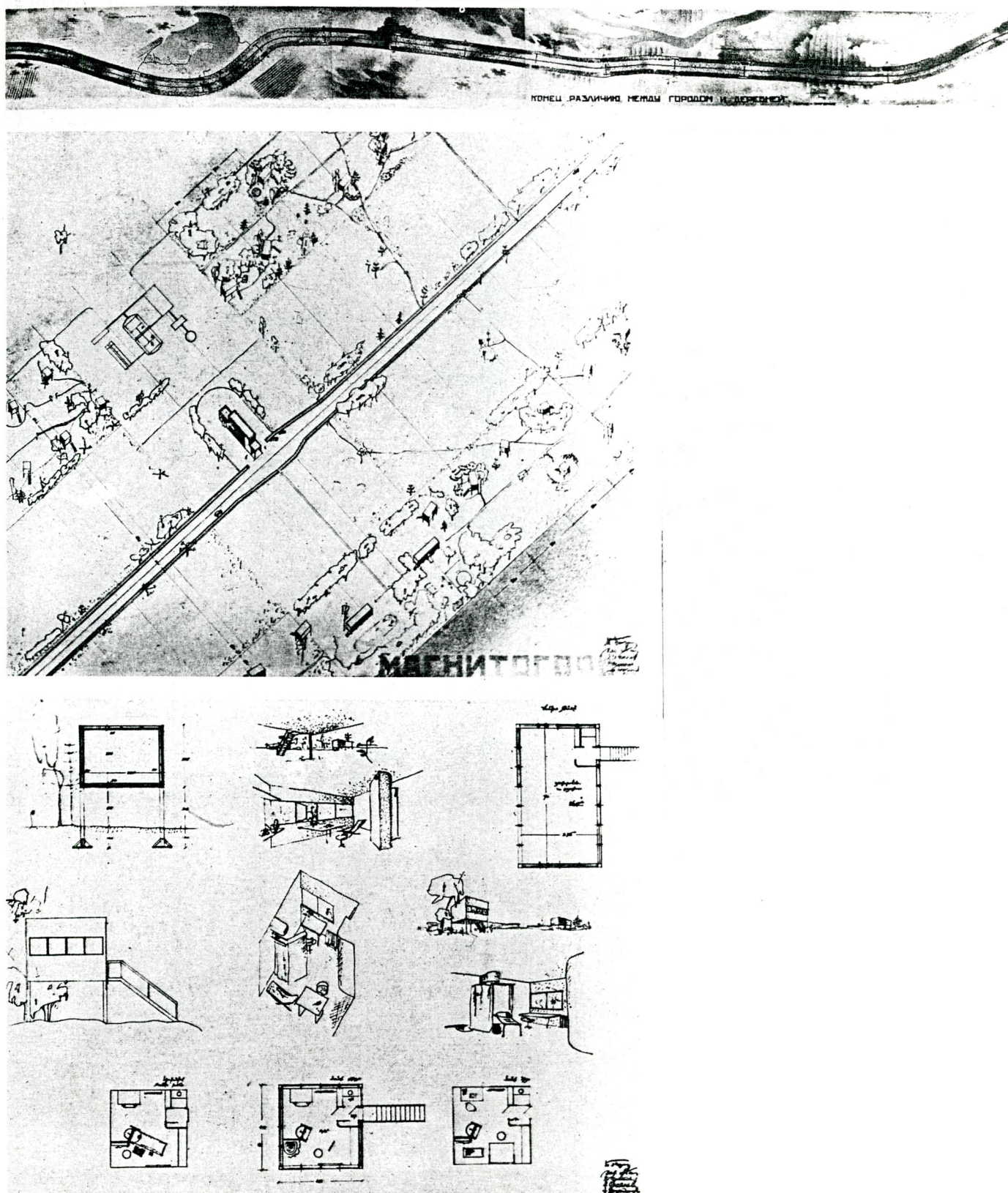


FIG 6 - Okhitovich, Barsch, Vladimirov, Sokolov design  
for Magnitogorsk 1930



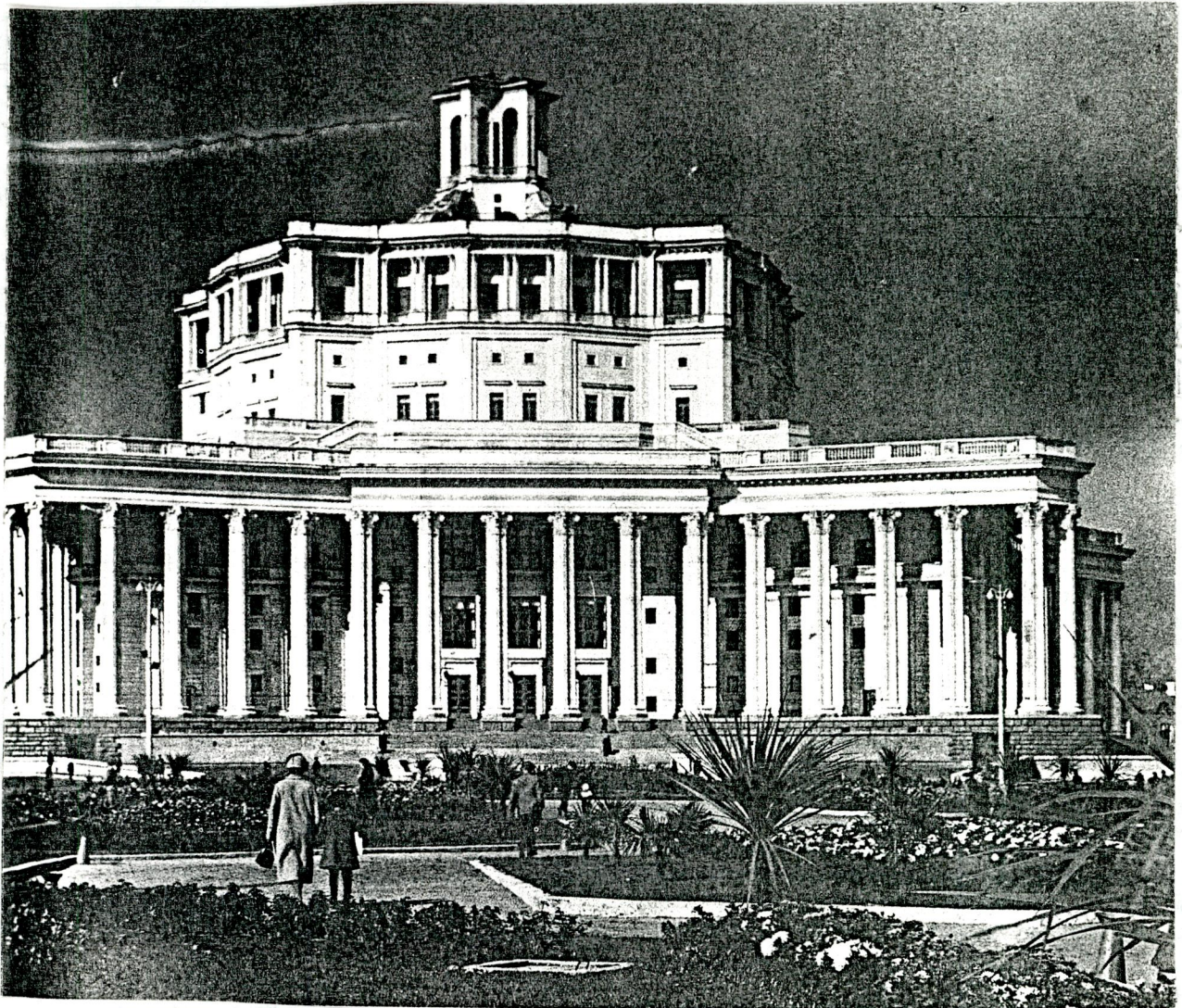


FIG 8 - Alabyan and Simbirtsev - Red Army Theatre 1934 -40









FIG 9 - Aleksei Dushkin 'Revolution Square metro' 1935 - 1938









FIG 10 - Rudnev, Chernyshyov, Abrosimov, Khryakov  
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