

The Monument

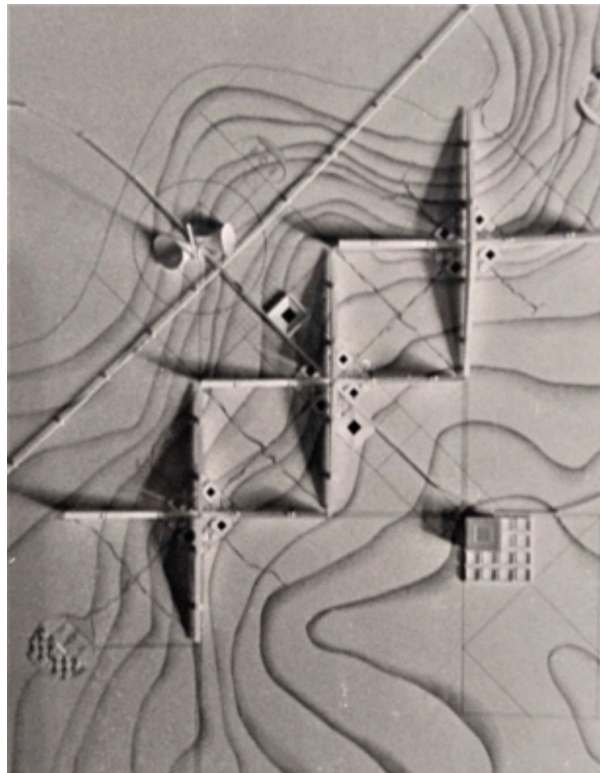
Prospective and experimental utopias in 1960s Soviet architecture

Between alternative productions and strategies for cultural diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in the late 1950s, the USSR underwent profound disruption in the field of architecture and urban planning. Abandoning what is known as the Stalinist style, Soviet architects reconnected with architectural modernism and adopted both the prefabricated construction and functionalist esthetic of the West. The alternative path of experimental and prospective architecture developed as a result. More than a deep questioning of modernism, the experimental utopias that flourished from the 1960s onward sought, in keeping with this heritage, to make architecture and urban planning evolve through the technological advances and theoretical ferment of this period. The Soviets developed innovative solutions that sought to renew the model of the socialist city. In trying to compete with the avant-garde conceptions developed in Europe and other global regions at the time, they helped reaffirm the USSR as a pioneering center in architecture.



Garry Faïf, Alexandre and Elizaveta Šipkov, Project for housing units in the Far North, 1967. Archives Garry Faïf, Paris.

After the Second World War, the USSR remained faithful to so-called Stalinist architecture, with rich decorations drawing on an eclectic repertory ranging from the Renaissance to Art Deco. The All-Union Conference of Builders that met at the Kremlin in December 1954 nevertheless led to a re-assessment, which was acknowledged on November 4, 1955 by decree no. 1871, "On the Elimination of Decorative Excess in Architecture and Building." The political reforms implemented by Nikita Khrushchev after Stalin's death in March 1953 coincided with the USSR's renewed support for the "international style" that had spread worldwide, which promoted a pared-down architecture of concrete and steel.

Between Conformism and Innovation

The Soviets adopted this architectural modernism for a number of reasons: rejection of the Stalinist regime, a political will to solve the postwar housing crisis by building more, a generalization during the 1950s of industrialized construction and prefabrication, and the USSR's full reintegration within international architectural networks. An active member of the International Union of Architects since its creation in 1948, the Union of Soviet Architects hosted its fifth congress in Moscow in 1958. This event was followed in 1959 by the American National Exhibition—which was held in the same city beneath a dome produced by Welton Becket (1902-1969) & Associates on the principle of Buckminster Fuller's (1895-1983) geodesic structures—and later in 1961 by the French Exposition of Moscow, which included a sector devoted to architecture and urban planning. In addition, many foreign books on architecture were diffused and translated beginning in the late 1950s. For example, a Russian version of the French journal *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (Architecture today) was published from 1961 onward, and became the primary channel of diffusion for Western architectural productions.

The USSR experienced architectural transformations as a result, which at the outset were primarily driven by the "new structures" that were made possible by technological progress. These productions took advantage of the knowledge developed in the West; the book by the Italian engineer Pier-Luigi Nervi (1891-1979), *Knowing how to build*, was published in Moscow in 1956, and another work by the German architect Curt Siegel (1911-2004), *Structure and Form in Modern Architecture*, was translated into Russian in 1965 and had considerable influence.

Russians also conducted considerable theoretical research in the field, with Vasily Vlasov's (1906-1958) *Long Pieces in Thin Veiling*, which studied thin-walled constructions, being translated into French in 1962. In the Structures of Buildings department at the Moscow Institute of Architecture, Mikhail Tupolev (1903-1975) worked on spherical coverings and crossing systems, and in 1966 told *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* that he had invented a system for a crystallographic cupola in 1946, before learning of the existence of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes.

Prospective and experimental utopias

The Soviets were also especially innovative in the field of architecture in critical climactic zones. The LenZNIIEP (Leningrad Regional Scientific Research Institute of Experimental and Standard Design) conducted research on this subject under the direction of Tatiana Rimskaja-Korsakova (1915-2006), while Aleksandr and Elizaveta Šipkov and Ekab-Olgert Trušin's worked on urban units in the Far North.

Under the leadership of architects such as Viačeslav Škvarikov (1908-1971), Yuri Bočarov (1926), Boris Rubanenko (1910-1985), Vitaly Lavrov (1902-1988), Georgi Gradov (1911-1984), Nathan Osterman (1916-1969), and Andrej Meerson (1930), each institute of architecture and urban planning created a department for Prospective research. However, the most radical creations emerged from institutes for teaching and research. At MARKHI (Moscow Architecture Institute) in 1960, a group of students led by Aleksej Gutnov (1937-1986) and Ilya Lejava (1935-2018) presented, as part of their degree, a project for a futurist city named NER (New Habitat Element). This series has served as a chronological marker, as it is considered the first experimental utopia of the period.

These creators continued their research with NIITI, the Institute for Research on Theory, History, and Problems of Prospective in Architecture, which under the direction of Andrej Ikonnikov (1926-2001) and Nikolaj Gulânickij (1927-1995) served as a refuge for architects who preferred the path of experimental research over practical productions. NIITI's workshops were divided between works that were more or less abstract and plastic—such as those by Viačeslav Loktev (1934-2018), Viačeslav Kolejčuk (1941-2018), and Andrej Leonidov (1902-1959)—and more in-depth research on new urban structures that appealed to interdisciplinary teams. The research conducted

in particular by Aleksej Gutnov, Ilya Lejava, the sociologist Georgi Djumenton (1926), Zoja Kharitonova (1936), Andrej Baburov (1937-2012), Konstantin Pčel'nikov, Igor Gunst (1935), Ilya Smoliar (1928-2008) and others borrowed equally from Japanese metabolists and research on structural morphology conducted in France by Robert Le Ricolais (1894-1977) and David Georges Emmerich (1925-1996), in Germany by Konrad Wachsmann (1901-1980), Günter Günschel (1928-2008), and Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz (1929), and in the United States by Buckminster Fuller. They were also influenced by the spatial urban planning of the Frenchmen Yona Friedman (1923) and Paul Maymont (1926-2007), which the Soviets were familiar with through the writings of Michel Ragon, who was translated into Russian in 1963. The Laboratory of Architectural Bionics founded by Yuri Lebedev initiated sustained cooperation with the Institute for Lightweight Structures founded by the German Frei Otto (1925-2015).

Garnering little consideration from political and decision-making bodies, experimental and prospective architecture led to very few concrete applications, but soon demonstrated to the rest of the world the USSR's ability to produce new thought, including as part of the international architectural competition organized by the IUA. In 1966, the most innovative solutions in the competition to rebuild downtown Moscow were presented at the French-Soviet urban planning conference held in Paris under the auspices of the France-USSR association, with the Moscow Workshops for Research and Production in Architecture and Urban Planning (Mosproekt) being awarded the 1966 grand prix from the French Circle of Architectural Studies. The NER was also exhibited during the Milan Triennial of 1968, at the initiative of Giancarlo De Carlo (1919-2005). That same year De Carlo wrote the introduction to a book presenting the concept of NER, which was published in Italian in Milan (*Idee per la città comunista*), and in English in Boston (*The Ideal Communist City*). Finally, it is not insignificant that *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* devoted issue number 147 in December 1969 to Soviet architecture, with fairly in-depth articles on creations from NIITI and other Soviet institutes for experimental design, or that the French-Soviet technical and scientific cooperation initiated in 1966 took its place within the institute's program of research topics, such as new cities in artificial environments or prospective urban planning, thereby demonstrating the interest sparked by Soviet thinking in these pioneering domains. Consequently, the division of Europe by the Iron Curtain did not prevent exchange in architecture and urban planning, and the creations of Soviet experimental architecture were used as elements of influence in international networks.

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