


THE POETICS OF ARCHITECTURE IN PROLETARIAT STATE: LAYING THE IDEOLOGY IN BRICKS (1918-1953)

PRATYUSH BIBHAKAR 

Galotias University (India) 
bibhakarpratyush@gmail.com

Abstract: Following the October Revolution and a brief period of civil unrest, Soviet leaders, architects, and engineers initiated a comprehensive reconstruction of the architectural landscape to sever ties with capitalism and align it with socialist-communist ideology. The ideology needed to be imbued within the architecture and built spaces. The paper explores the intricate relationship between architecture and ideology within the context of Soviet architecture from 1917 to 1953, a period characterized by significant socio-political transformations after the Bolshevik Revolution. Using a framework that integrates architectural semiotics and critical theory, the study examines how architectural forms and functions not only reflect but also propagate ideological narratives. To this end, official documents, archival materials, historical maps and photographs from the Soviet era on urban planning and design have been analysed. Additionally, Lenin's theory of reflection, and Stalin's socialist realism form the part of critical analysis for the study revealing the profound influence they project on architectural practices. As a method of study, one representative architecture has been selected from each of the three most prominent building types viz. "communal housing", "workers' clubs", and "Stalin skyscrapers" to illustrate how these structures embody socialist principles and contribute to the construction of a new Soviet identity. Thus, the study underscores architecture's role as a powerful tool for ideological dissemination, shaping social values and collective memory while serving as a medium for both power and resistance in the evolving landscape of Soviet society.

Keywords: architecture and ideology, Soviet architecture, art and propaganda, workers' club, Stalin skyscrapers.

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INTRODUCTION

We are surrounded by built environments – schools, homes, streets, cultural centres, and more – that serve as both concrete structures and expressions of human aspirations. These spaces reflect our civic interests, influence social and cultural values, and embed ideologies intended to shape collective memory. Their pervasive nature makes them subject to control and manipulation, particularly evident in the Soviet Union following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. This paper explores the relationship between architecture and ideology in Soviet architecture from 1917 to 1953, utilizing an integrated framework of architectural semiotics and critical theory to analyse how these structures reconfigured socio-cultural and economic landscapes and the psyche of the masses. As Gasset (1993) observed, revolution is not just an uprising against an order or regime, rather it implies setting up of a new order ideologically opposite to the previous one. It also meant aesthetic reorganization of the society which was supposedly be more beautiful than the previous one and the capitalist ones (Groys 1992).

This study analyses how soviet architectures incorporated and conveyed meanings and weaved ideological narratives, while also examining the soviet socio-political contexts that shaped architectural practices. This research adopts a theoretical framework that integrates architectural semiotics and critical theory to examine how architecture shapes and is shaped by ideology. With the help of architectural semiotics, this study aims at understanding the meanings and symbols communicated through architectural forms, emphasizing how design elements convey ideological narratives. Critical theory complements this by analysing the power dynamics inherent in architectural practices, questioning who benefits from these designs and how they reinforce or challenge existing social structures. This framework will facilitate a critical examination of specific architectural examples, revealing how they embody and propagate ideological values while also serving as instruments of power or resistance.

In order to understand the relationship between the architecture and ideology this research utilizes three primary tools

and techniques: analysis of official documents, a critical examination of Lenin's theory of reflection alongside Stalin's socialist realism and their respective incorporation in building spaces, and architectural visual analysis grounded in secondary literature. The analysis of official documents from the Soviet era includes architectural plans, communist party directives, and policy statements related to urban planning and design. Investigations were conducted using archival materials, including historical maps and photographs, as well as period publications and magazines such as *Rabochiy Klub* (Workers' Club), *Stroitelstvo Moskvi* (Construction of Moscow), and *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura* (Contemporary Architecture). By examining these documents, the research aims to uncover the intentions behind architectural decisions and the extent to which they reflect the socio-political context of the time. Secondly, this research involves a theoretical analysis of how Lenin's theory of reflection and Stalin's socialist realism were operationalized in architecture. Lenin's theory posits that art and architecture should reflect the reality of social conditions, serving as a mirror to society. This perspective will be examined in relation to architectural practices that sought to represent the aspirations and struggles of the proletariat. Conversely, Stalin's socialist realism mandated that art and architecture glorify the achievements of socialism and the state, often leading to monumental and idealized representations. This analysis will involve a comparative study of specific architectural projects that exemplify these theories, assessing how they manifest in design, style, and functionality. And, finally, architectural visual analysis draws on secondary literature to critically assess key examples of Soviet architecture by selecting significant buildings and urban spaces that exemplify the principles of Soviet architectural practice. The visual analysis will focus on elements such as scale, form, materials, and spatial organization, using an integrated framework of architectural semiotics and critical theory for architectural critique. Thus, by situating these architectural works within their historical and cultural contexts, the research will explore how design choices resonate with broader ideological narratives.

THE EMERGENCE OF PROLETARIAT STATE

After the October Revolution of 1917, the newly established Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic experienced considerable upheaval as it shifted from a monarchy to a socialist state. It was followed by a brief period of civil war. During this unstable period, the Bolshevik party sought to consolidate control and stabilize the socialist governance model through centralized economic policies consistent with Marxist doctrine, such as the temporary “War Communism” program (Service 2009). Consequently, the Bolshevik party swiftly established the Council of People’s Commissars or *Sovnarkom*, chaired by Lenin, to govern following their ascension to power via constitutional means. Among *Sovnarkom*’s early decrees and directives were exiting World War I via unilateral peace negotiations, granting independent statehood to the Polish and Finnish republics, and introducing land redistribution and nationalization programs impacting property ownership in conformity with socialist principles (Service 2009). *Sovnarkom*’s Land Decree confiscated non-peasant land, redistributing church, empire, and noble land amongst peasants via soviets. Furthermore, soviets assumed administrative control over urban regions throughout Russia starting in 1918 (Service 2009). Once a traditional, custom bound land perhaps amongst the most backward nations was now as a consequence of 1917 revolution being transformed into a novel and the most revolutionary region on earth overnight. To sustain the revolutionary causes, it required new structures and institutions to pursue the new ideals on an urgent basis. It also required a spatial revolution aligned with the political revolution to carry out a socio-cultural revolutionary transformation and fundamentally change and redefine the social relationship based on socialist and communist principles.

Thus, the Bolsheviks in their effort to redefine the whole value system and establish a new mystique (Furet 1981: 114) invented numerous institutions, ritual and practices, redefined spatial “usage, etc. what Eric Hobsbawm calls “invented tradition”, “a set of practices [...] which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 2012)”. The

Bolshevik leaders broadly used four major media to propagate and set its narrative among masses viz. public discussion and debate; visual art mostly painting and political posters; the physical environment as in creation of city or town that reflects socialist and communist ideology; and last the rituals which pervaded all walks of life – birth, marriage, death, entry into the army etc. (Gill 2011: 6-16). This work focuses on the physical-spatial environment in form of how a socialist city and town was given shape reflecting Marxist-Socialist principles to propagate and set Soviet narrative among masses particularly how the architectural landscape of Moscow was transformed. This study also aims to study how the existing architecture that carried the monarchical legacy were given new meanings and how the overall architectural landscape in USSR contributed in building and reinforcing the ideological metanarrative.

SOVIET POLICY ON ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The challenge before the Bolsheviks in 1917, was not only that of gaining control over the state but also to control and transform meaning it emanated. The October Revolution was an ideological seizure too with a paradigmatic shift in state's world view, its perspective to see the traditions, the present world as well as Soviet social structure and the future all were a world apart from its predecessor. For Lenin,

all educational work in the Soviet Republic of workers and peasants, in the field of political education in general and in the field of art in particular, should be imbued with the spirit of the class struggle being waged by the proletariat for the successful achievement of the aims of its dictatorship, i.e., the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, the abolition of classes, and the elimination of all forms of exploitation of man by man (Katzner 1974)¹.

Lenin advocated for a structured role for cinema in advancing the cause of socialism, emphasizing the use of educational bills, posters, and placards in various public spaces such as clubs, reading rooms, workshops, and schools. Additionally, he promoted the display of diagrams and cartograms in these ven-

ues and on the streets to enhance public understanding and engagement with socialist ideals. However, the debate around Soviet policy on art was still debated and were multifaceted and far from established so much so that Y. Pismenny observes “there is no other sector of Soviet life in which Party policy has been as inconsistent as in the arts” (1970: 2). The foundation of Soviet Union was laid down on the principles of Karl Marx’s works. Although Karl Marx did not extensively address the role of art within a socialist system, he did hint that the association of art and polity may have beneficial outcomes on society if art was put at the state’s perusal. Soviet leaders developed aesthetic principles and rubrics to structure art under their ideology. Mikhail Lifshitz (1979) in his work on Marx remarked that

the development in all aspects of social reality is determined, in the final analysis, by the self-development of material production. Art, like law or the state, for example, has no independent history, i.e., outside the brains of ideologists. In reality, literature and art are conditioned by the entire historical development of society” (Lifshitz 1979: 60).

Lenin, the leader of the Soviet Revolution, emphasized the importance of art in the class struggle and for achieving the aims of the proletariat’s dictatorship. In one of his speeches Lenin on relation of art with masses states:

Our opinion on art is not the important thing. Nor it is much of consequence what art means to a few hundreds or even thousands out of a population counted by millions. Art belongs to people. Its roots should be deeply implanted in the very thick of the labouring masses. It should be understood and loved by these masses. It must unite and elevate their feelings, thoughts and will. It must stir to activity and develop the art instincts within them. Should we serve exquisite sweet cake to a small minority while the workers and peasants masses are in need of black bread (Zetkin 1956).

Further, a support for architectural revamping could be found in *The Communist Manifesto* itself. The Manifesto argued for an elimination of gap between the rural and urban spaces, a task which was considered as of utmost importance by

the architects and planner of the Soviet Union. Mikhail Okhitovich, a Trotskyist and an urban planner foresaw a future of architecture of Soviet cities somewhat similar to that of Los Angeles where the cities will be connected with rural areas by a large network of rail and road along which industries of various kinds have been established combined with agriculture, public buildings and separate houses.

Inspired by Campanella's vision of educational frescoes, Lenin viewed artistic monuments and poetry as key mediums for addressing the unique circumstances of Soviet Russia (Kruk 2008). These monuments, designed for accessibility, were seen by Soviet theoreticians as embodiments of democracy, capable of conveying messages to all citizens (Tolstoi 1983). Under Stalin, the rise of monuments – including paintings, sculptures, frescoes, and mosaics in public spaces – extended Leninist philosophy, emphasizing comprehensibility as essential for educational art intended to influence the masses in a “defined direction” (Lunacharskii 1923: 338). Lenin asserted that “genuine art is one expressed so clearly that it is perceivable for everybody; its subject matter should be more sublime and significant for the working masses than for the idle minority” (Shleev 1978: 50). This belief positioned art as a powerful tool for social education and mobilization. Konstantin Iuon (1925) categorized art into three types: “experimental”, which serves a “laboratory” function; “folk”, which is autonomous; and “art for the people”, designed for accessibility. Iuon highlighted key attributes of this last category, such as clarity, simplicity, visual appeal, energy, and the impact of large-scale artistic monuments.

However, the problem of space appeared to be the of foremost significance and required an immediate attention in the post-October Revolution time. And the best possible socialistic solution available was nationalisation of land. Consequently, the decision of nationalisation of land was the first decision to be taken by the new proletariat government. It gave the state a clean spacious slate and freedom to mould it, the way it suited their agenda free from any private interests. They could revamp and lay down a completely new town plan (Hatherley 2015). While studying the architecture of post-revolution times (October Revolution), it is necessary to understand this integrity of the Russian “whole” or totality, the representation of totality of

human existence. The Russian whole could be understood in words of Peter Lizon (1996):

Just as the old religious fervour and aspirations of Medievalism has created the great cathedrals, in a style expressive of the ideals of that time; Just as the Renaissance, following the disintegration of Medievalism, had created a style perfectly suited to the new individualism of that epoch, so must, ...Collectivism and Communism, ...create a new expression of the aesthetic, a new style suitable to the needs and psychology of the new collectivity; a style that would reflect the democratic ideals of the new-born state. (Lizon 1996).

Socialist and modernist urbanism emerged in response to the severe impacts of industrial capitalism in Western Europe during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, marked by widespread poverty, unsafe working conditions, and overcrowded living environments. Critics, often blending socialist and modernist ideologies, recognized the urgent need to address urban crises in industrial cities. Although not all modernists identified as socialists and vice versa, their common ground lies in a commitment to universal progress, social equality, and increased state intervention in urban governance. Both movements advocate for radical transformations in urban life, emphasizing industrialization and scientific reasoning as key to reshaping society (Drummond, Young 1920). However, they envision different societal outcomes: socialist urbanism seeks a collective and egalitarian society, while capitalist modernism does not necessarily prioritize social uniformity. The functionalist approach to urbanism was articulated in the Athens Charter, a document produced during CIAM IV (*Congres International d'Architecture Modern*) in 1933 and authored by Le Corbusier, named after the Congress's location. The rejection of Le Corbusier's design for the Palace of the Soviets marked a pivotal shift, signaling the Soviets' departure from CIAM principles. Initially, both socialist and capitalist planners embraced the Athens Charter, but socialist planners soon developed distinct urban design principles, such as the German Democratic Republic's Sixteen Principles. While the Athens Charter categorized habitation, leisure, work, and transportation, Soviet planning expanded this framework to include culture as a key component.



Edmund Colleijn, a leading planner in Berlin's 1955 reconstruction, emphasized why "the street is not just a traffic band, the square not just a traffic hub, the apartment building not a dwelling machine, but street, square and building are in their external appearance expression of a societal-artistic idea" (Hain 1993: 62). The core unit in the Soviet urban system was the *mikroraion*, designed to ensure equality in housing, environmental quality, and access to services, promoting equitable service distribution within walking distance and supported by efficient public transit (Smith 1996).

The first issue of the leading Constructivist journal, *CA* engaged the idea of socialist architecture in order to transform the way of life suitable for socialist living. Although there was mutual agreement over "social priorities of post-revolutionary years", there was a problem of identification of a suitable style (Cooke 1990). A wide array of choices lied in front of the Socialist state some of which were: 1) before 1917 revolution, two of the most popular trends were the supermatism and Tatlin's culture of materials which had profound impact on setting cultural policies and redefining them; 2) the architects and engineers who worked at Vkutemas/Vkhutein and projected the system of construction and design as a rationalized aesthetic system as exhibited at the Obmokhu exhibitions and the First Discussional Exhibition of Associations of Active Revolutionary Art, Moscow, 1924; 3) many other trends prevalent in 1920s like idea of figuration in photography and painting and photomontage as well as the constructivism (Krens, Gouen 1992). There were two rival school of architecture in the USSR, one led by Constructivists and the other by Rationalists. Both the schools, more or less focussed on the construction of reproducible types of buildings however, the Constructivists preferred a smooth, technology driven, sophisticated style in contrast to the Rationalist who while also focussing on modernist style, preferred an expressive and one-of-a-kind impact (Hatherley 2016).

In 1927, Moisei Ginzburg and other editors of *CA* articulated a radical architectural concept known as "social condensers", (Bokov 2017) aimed at fostering a social revolution. The editors described this type of architecture as intended to "shape and crystallize a new socialist way of life". It was applicable to various building types, including communal housing, public



kitchens, workers' clubs, administrative buildings, factories, and parks. The goal was to instil new behaviours, norms, and habits that would elevate human consciousness in line with socialist aspirations. For Ginzburg and his colleagues, the Soviet era symbolized an "epoch of socialism-under-construction" (Bokov 2017), with the social condenser serving as a key instrument for realizing these socialist ideals.

This transformative vision was a direct response to the *no-vyi byt* (new way of life) promoted by the Bolsheviks following the October Revolution of 1917. The Bolsheviks aimed to dismantle the hierarchical social structures of Tsarist Russia and rebuild society on collective principles. Their objective was to overthrow the capitalist economic system and reorganize society along socialist lines, with Leon Trotsky emphasizing that "the problems of everyday life" were central to the construction of socialism. Consequently, the concept of social condensers became part of a broader social engineering initiative aimed at shaping the *noviy sovetskiy chelovek* (new Soviet man).

Consequently, the architectural landscape of post-czar Soviet Russia was deeply influenced by the Marxist-Socialist principles espoused by the ruling ideology. Through maintaining a control over visual art, appropriate ideological symbols and images were produced which once internalized by masses could provide legitimacy and inculcate a new culture orienting people's whole life towards, creating and becoming of "Soviet man". Through manipulating all spheres of life, Soviet leaders were able to slowly eliminate the difference between public and private. From the very beginning, the Bolsheviks were determined of constructing a Moscow with ideal socialist principles. Moscow was aimed to be a material epitome of Soviet imagination, a symbol in itself (Gill 2013).

LENIN'S THEORY OF REFLECTION AND SOCIALIST REALISM

Central to the Soviet approach to art was Lenin's theory of reflection, which posited that images should objectively mirror reality. Lenin rejected the arbitrariness of signs and symbols and emphasized the importance of faithfully depicting the

world as it is. Lenin with utmost clarity states the objective of art. Art for him was not an end in itself, it was not precious by itself, it was just a means to achieve party's objective as nothing attracted more than the art, making it suitable instrument for meeting party's objective. Thus, he talked of moulding the direction of art, steering it in a way which helps to meet communist objective. Lenin proposed a theory of reflection in his essay *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (Lenin 1908).

The reflection theory, a cornerstone of Soviet epistemology and a key aspect of dialectical materialism, challenges traditional sign usage. It dismisses the notion of sign arbitrariness and emphasizes the faithful reflection of reality. According to this theory, the concept of reflection implies a similarity between signifier and signified, the object, implying the signified faithfully reflected by signifier. Lenin distinguished such signs from symbols, and hieroglyphs. From this perspective, the subjective dialectics of thought are seen as reflecting the objective dialectics of nature², with logical structures symbolizing the fundamental conditions of reality (Katvan 1978). Lenin firmly believed in the capacity of the human mind to perceive nature's reflection in an objective manner, considering this reflection to be both absolute and true. The avant-garde artists of the Left Front of Art (LEF) were profoundly influenced and motivated by this notion of objectification.

For Levy, an architectural space is polymorphic and polysemic space, where diverse forms and shapes are associated with diverse meanings (Levy 2009). Lenin was fully aware of making use of this space and was motivated to assign it a specific meaning. Thus, immediately after the revolution he drafted a plan called "expropriate and resettle private apartments" conceiving the idea of communal housing. The idea of communal apartment was a step towards creating a "revolutionary topography" (Boym 1994). It indeed was a revolutionary step as it involved "uniting different social groups in one physical space" (Attwood 2010). The ownership of such houses lied with the state and people were allotted these apartments on a nominal charge. Such new buildings constructed were designed for communal lifestyle housing common eating spaces, libraries, and gymnasium for a certain block of apartments. These apartments were often devoid of private kitchens e.g. the Narkomfin

“Semi-communal” House (see Fig. 1, 2) or the Textile Institute Communal House, in Moscow (Hatherley 2016). A similar kind of housing and apartments was spread across the cities of Soviet Union from Moscow to St. Petersburg to Novograd that suited the image of a classless. Some of the metro stations built in the mid-1930s could also be cited as strong examples incorporating the idea of Lenin’s theory of reflection.

During the mid-1930s, a cultural movement known as socialist realism emerged in the Soviet Union as part of the Great Retreat. This artistic style gained further prominence in the post-war era within the Warsaw Pact countries, thanks to a cultural revolution orchestrated by the party during the late 1940s and 1950s. As noted by Castillo (2008), socialist realism combined socialist themes with nationalistic elements, creating a distinctive form of cultural internationalism that incorporated reimagined symbols of national identity. This artistic movement departed from the universal ideals of the modernist avant-garde, opting instead for design elements rooted in both global and local influences. Architectural writings associated with socialist realism highlighted the movement’s connection to ancient Greek and Roman traditions, a heritage previously championed by 19th-century neoclassical proponents of the Beaux-Arts style. As a result, socialist realism established a distinctive artistic framework that merged international influences with a renewed emphasis on national identity.

The socialist realism, which became the guiding ideology of all art in Soviet Union in 1930s also came to dominate architecture. Numerous independent architectural schools were closed and the architects joined to form All-Union Society of Proletarian Architects (VOPRA). This union in the coming times played a significant role in executing the socialist realism in architecture (Hudson 1994; Kopp 1985). The new political tendencies required the architecture to reflect the Soviet progress on the path of which Soviet Union had started marching. Such architecture would be lively, hopeful and poised. The classicism saw its regeneration in the early 1930s, with some diverse style accommodated within the larger framework. The *gorkom* Secretary, Lazar Kaganovich (1931) in a meeting of CC in June 1931, in Moscow gave a call for the reconstruction of Moscow and announced that Moscow be “a laboratory to which people

from all over the Union will flock to study its experience”, and “a capital worthy of the proletarian state” and thus, it would fetch a worldwide recognition of the possibilities, a proletarian state could provide. The French deurbanist Le Corbusier, who sought for demolition of the whole Moscow city and rebuild it from the ground zero. The strategy was to build new housing, buildings for communal services (such as cafeteria, snack and tea houses, kitchens etc.) power stations, transport facilities like Metro, road and streets, provision for water supply, parks etc. across the city. There was a halt to putting up any industry in Moscow or St. Petersburg from 1932 onwards. The notice worthy features in these instructions included absence of any monumentalism or any other grand structure and emphasis over urbanisation put an end to the long- standing argument between urbanists³ and de-urbanists⁴.

Finally, the draft plan got its tentative acceptance by Stalin in 1934 and was finally approved jointly by Sovnarkom and CC in mid-1935. The plan was to echo the fact that “Moscow is the Red Capital of the Soviet Union, where the warm heart of world revolution beats with ardour, bringing freedom to all exploited and oppressed humanity, where revolutionary fighters worldwide could see in Red Moscow the capital of their socialist motherland”, and to assure that “the construction of the capital of the USSR and the architectural form of the capital fully expressed the greatness and beauty of the socialist epoch”. The new policy confirmed the use of best classical traditions (Berton 1977) along with the use of new technology and emphasised that the new plan should integrate all city space into a single whole giving an image of a “genuine socialist city”. The upper limit of the population was decided to be five million while doubling the geographical boundary of the territory. In addition, two canals were decided to be built afresh which would surround the city from all sides thus, catering to its water demand. The embankment of the rivers was also to be completed. Roads were to be built to decongest the existing traffic. The city centre was to be restructured with a new road extending from Dzerzhinsky Square, passing through Okhotnyi Riad and the Manezh, to the site of the Soviet Palace. From there, the road would continue toward Luzhniki and the Lenin Hills. The buildings situated between Dzerzhinsky Square and the Palace site were to be demolished, and new structures

designated for public and scientific purposes were to be erected along this newly planned route. The dimensions of Red Square, Nogin Dzerzhinsky, Sverdlov and Revolution Square were increased and were reconstructed, while some other minor structures were demolished and removed such as Kitai Gorod and Zariad'e for giving way to building newly conceived soviet monumental structures. Residential buildings were expanded and allowed to be up to six-story, however, in case it falls on wider roadside or in streets of some significance it could reach to a level of seven to ten or fourteen story also. The joint report of Sovarnkom and CC asked to ensure "construction in the capital of the USSR and the architectural form of the capital fully reflected the greatness and beauty of the socialist epoch".

ARCHITECTURAL TRENDS AND DEBATES

Architecture functions as a reflection of the zeitgeist of its era, translating abstract ideas into tangible forms. The Soviet architecture envisioned in *CA* emerged directly from the concept of *novyi byt* (new collective lifestyle), a central promise of the Bolshevik Revolution. Between the 1920s and mid-1930s, industrialization in the Soviet Union accelerated at an unparalleled rate and scale. Thousands of new industrial zones were established in remote and sparsely populated regions, including the Urals, Siberia, and the Soviet Far East, alongside the creation of approximately one hundred new towns and cities, as well as numerous worker settlements near urban centres. This rapid development was intended to accommodate a population exceeding five million, as outlined in the first two Five-Year Plans for economic growth. During these planning periods, the Soviet state aimed to employ and house six to seven million people (Crawford 2022).

Professionals from various fields were tasked with educating the masses to adopt the new language of communism and gradually become champions of its ideals. Among these, architects and city planners played a crucial role, bearing the responsibility of instilling communist principles through their designs and urban planning initiatives.



Moscow and St. Petersburg (the then Leningrad) in the post-revolution period preferred an updated form of the English garden city movement⁹ featured with small houses or low-rise apartments without façade constructed in an open green area, without following any traditional design or ornamentation and using rich colour, following geometrical patterns. Such housing could be witnessed in Usachevka and Dombrovka districts of Moscow (Hatherley 2016).

This work examines three specific and widely prevalent and most prominent public architecture – communal housing (house-commune), workers’ clubs and Moscow verticals that occupied most of the geographical space and which could typify the general Soviet architectural built spaces and articulate Soviet ideology. Further, this study has selected one or two representative buildings in respective category as case study and analyses them semiotically and critically. In the Soviet Union, communal housing, workers’ clubs, and Moscow Verticals (Moscow Highrise buildings) were vital architectural elements that encapsulated the core principles of socialism and communism. These structures transcended mere functionality; they were imbued with ideological significance, serving as tangible representations of the state’s aspirations for a new social order. Communal housing promoted a collective lifestyle and collaboration among residents, reflecting the essence of the socialist ideal. Meanwhile, workers’ clubs functioned as cultural and educational hubs, disseminating communist ideas and fostering a sense of camaraderie within the working class. Often grand and imposing, government buildings symbolized the strength of the state and its commitment to constructing a socialist society. Together, these architectural forms played a crucial role in shaping Soviet identity and advancing the ideological narrative of the regime. Collectively, these architectural styles developed into powerful tools of ideological dissemination, upholding the principles of equality, development, and collectivism while significantly influencing the identity of the Soviet state over time. Through their form and purpose, they communicated the idea that architecture could not only promote social interaction but also help the Soviet Union achieve its revolutionary goals.

Communal Housing

Prior to the First World War, housing conditions in pre-revolutionary Russia were deplorable, with an average of more than two individuals per room and approximately 50,000 apartments housing up to four people per room. These flats frequently lacked reliable water and electricity supplies, had no access to public transportation, and were situated far from paved roads (Chavarría 2022). Marxist theory posits that the resolution to the housing crisis can only be achieved through the dismantling of the capitalist mode of production (Marx, Engels 1933: 36).

Following the October Revolution, a decree abolishing private ownership of urban real estate was issued in late 1917 and ratified on August 20, 1918. It revoked private ownership of all urban land, both developed and undeveloped, and placed all such land and structures under the control of local authorities (*Zhilishchnoye zakonodatelstvo* 1950: 53). This decree laid the foundation for Soviet policies addressing the housing crisis, as the state assumed control over land, housing, and production means.

According to the 1923 census, the average living space per capita in urban areas of the USSR was 6.45 square meters, which decreased to 5.85 square meters by 1926 (*Statisticheski ezhegodnik 1922-1923*, 1923; *All-Union Population Census 1932*: vol. LIV). The industrialization and collectivization policies led to a mass migration of peasants to cities, but state investment in housing remained insufficient, causing a decline in per capita living space throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Sosnovy 1958).

Between 1929 and 1959, Soviet cities saw the construction of 373.6 million square meters of living space, with the state building 289.4 million square meters (77.5%) and private individuals contributing 84.2 million square meters (22.5%) (Sosnovy 1958). This large-scale state-led construction aimed to address the housing crisis and accommodate the growing urban population, particularly after the war. However, following World War II, per capita living space gradually increased during the fourth Five-Year Plan (1946-1950) (Sosnovy 1958).

In the USSR, housing use to be measured by the square meters of living space per person, rather than by the number of



apartments or occupants per room. Housing units were classified into different types, including entire apartments, portions of apartments (e.g., two or more rooms), single rooms, sections of rooms (like a corner), and spaces within communal dwellings. The *zbilaya ploshchad* (living space) included living rooms and bedrooms, while *nezbilaya ploshchad* (non-living space) covered kitchens, halls, bathrooms, corridors, and other service areas, even if used for living. Together, these comprised the total floor space (*obshchaya ploshchad*) of a dwelling (*Slovar-spravochnik po sotsialno-ekonomicheskoi statistike* 1948: 352).

From the perspective of dwelling types, all residences can be classified into two main groups. The first group includes apartment-type dwellings, where the basic unit is the apartment. The second group consists of communal dwellings, where large groups of people live together. Apartment buildings can be further divided into two subcategories: those with apartment-type occupancy and those with room-type occupancy. In apartment-type occupancy, a single family occupies an entire apartment, regardless of the number of rooms, and these apartments typically have separate facilities such as kitchens and bathrooms. In the USSR, these apartments usually contain one or two rooms.

Conversely, in room-type occupancy buildings, a multi-room apartment is shared by several families, with each family occupying one room and sharing facilities (such as bathrooms and kitchens) with other occupants. Each room in such apartments had to have a direct access to a hallway, reflecting the expectation that multiple families will occupy the space. Sanitary and other facilities are planned to accommodate this arrangement. However, there is still a need for single-family apartments, as it is not uncommon for such units to be occupied by multiple families.

Thus, the urban housing crisis as well as the ideological underpinnings became major causes of choosing commune housing (or housing commune) as single solution to the twin problems. Some of the most prominent commune housings in Moscow built before 2nd world war includes the Textile Institute Communal House in Moscow, the Narkomfin Commune House etc. of which this study examines in detail the Narkomfin commune house built for the employees of Ministry of Finance.





Fig. 1. A model of the Narkomfin house designed by architect M. Ginzburg and I. Milinis in 1928-30 (Ginzburg 2006).

Narkomfin House Commune

Narkomfin house commune or Narkomfin Building could be taken as a typical example of architecture built in the first decade of formation of Soviet Union. It was created for staff of the Ministry of Finance of the RSFSR (The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic). Laundry, childcare, and even residents' leisure activities were all designed to take place in shared spaces and meals were to be served in a communal dining room. Narkomfin Building was designed by Moisei Ginzburg. Architect, Alexander Pasternak, brother of poet Boris Pasternak, was close associate of Ginzburg. He was involved in a series of projects for living cells, compact apartments designed for various types of family. In architecture this led to the creation of commune house and "transitional types" projects such as the Narkomfin Building. Later a decree was issued that recommended construction of such living cells at mass level. The Narkomfin house provided economical and comfortable living accommodation for the time, and natural lighting was also preferred. It consisted of three blocks: the housekeeping block, the communal block, and the residential

block. The sun entered the building from the east façade in the morning into the bedrooms, the glazed gallery, the corridor, and kitchens and from the west façade, into the dining and living rooms in the evening. The first residents moved into the Narkomfin Building in 1931. It was redesigned and repaired a few times since its construction.

The Narkomfin Building's design reflects the principles of functionalism, where form follows function. The building's layout promotes communal living, a key tenet of socialist ideology. The open floor plan encourages social interaction and collective living, symbolizing the Soviet ideal of community over individuality. The use of large windows and balconies emphasizes transparency and accessibility, suggesting an openness to the public and a break from the oppressive architectural forms of the past.

Material wise the building has been predominantly constructed of concrete and glass, thus, conveys a sense of modernity and progress. Glass and concrete in those times were emblematic of the industrial age and signify the Soviet commitment of building a new society. Aesthetically, unadorned and stark surfaces reflect the Constructivist rejection of bourgeois aesthetics, embodying a utilitarian ethos prioritizing social function over decorative elements. Further, the spatial arrangement of living units around communal spaces can be interpreted as semiotic expression of the socialist ideal of collective living. The design promotes shared experiences, with communal kitchens and gathering areas symbolizing the dismantling of traditional family structures in favour of a more communal social fabric. The spatial organization serves as a physical manifestation of the ideological shift towards collectivism.

The Narkomfin Building would also serve as an instrument of ideological propagation, embodying the values of the Soviet state during a time of radical social change. It reflects the aspirations of the early Soviet regime to create a new type of citizen—the Soviet man, one who is socially conscious, cooperative, and aligned with the goals of the state. The architectural choices made by Ginzburg are not merely aesthetic; they are deeply intertwined with the ideological project of fostering a new socialist society. Moreover, an element of power dynamics is also

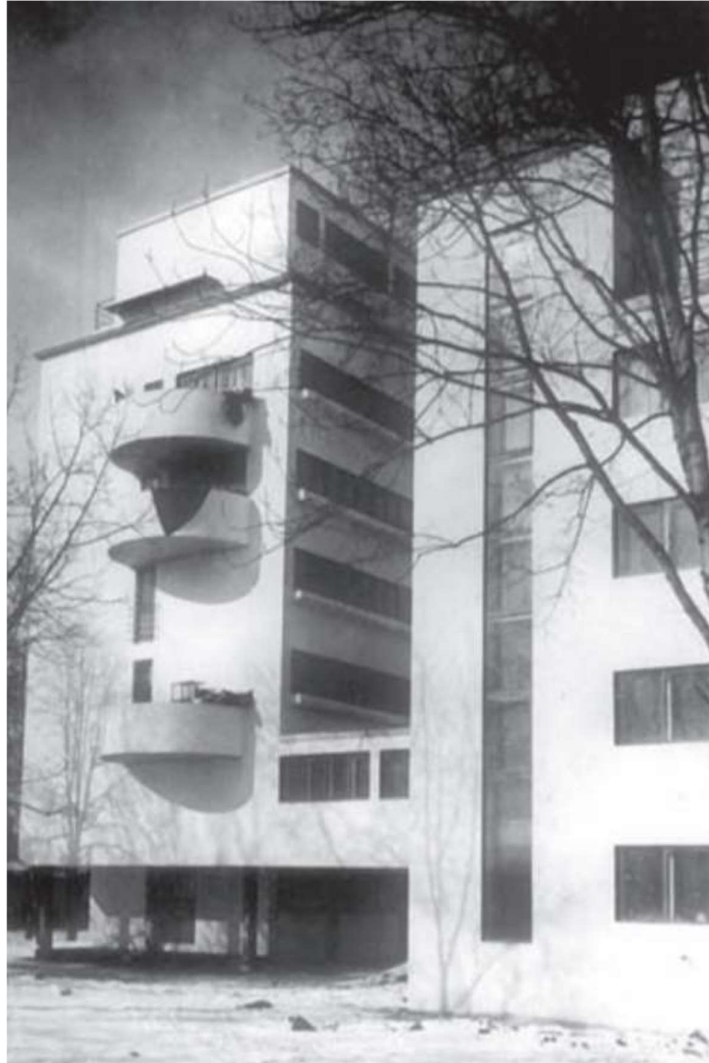


Fig. 2. *The original Narkomfin house of the Ministry of Finance on Novinsky Boulevard 25, Moscow. A view from South, 1930 (Ginzburg, 2006).*

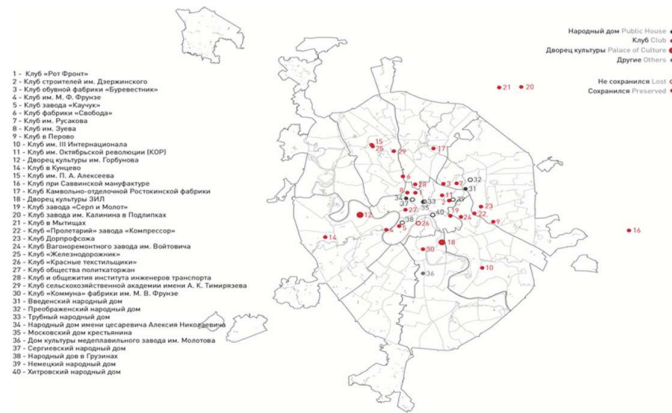


Fig. 3. Site map of workers' clubs, palaces of culture and people's houses in Moscow (Bokov 2017).

inherent within the building design. While the building empowers the residents through communal living, it simultaneously reflects the state's control over individual lives. The emphasis on shared spaces can be seen as a means of surveillance and social regulation, where the state's ideological agenda is reinforced through architectural form. The Narkomfin thus becomes a site of both empowerment and control, illustrating the duality of modernist architecture as both an agent of liberation and an instrument of state power. Finally, if looked from the current context, the Narkomfin could also be viewed as a site of resistance against the commodification of living spaces and the alienation inherent in capitalist urban environments. Its original ideals challenge modern architectural practices that prioritize profit over community. Furthermore, the building has inspired critiques of contemporary housing policies, serving as a reminder of the potential for architecture to foster genuine social connection.

Workers' Club

To create a new world for socially marginalized groups, the Soviet Union needed a persuasive aesthetic vision, one that would span from the introduction of *novyi byt* (a new collective lifestyle) to the development of the *Sotsgorod* (socialist city), a space where this collective lifestyle would be realized. This vision aimed to reshape social structures and daily life. Central to this transformation was the *Rabochiy klub* (workers' club), which became a crucial symbol of the new collectivity. It was viewed not only as a platform for proletarian culture but also as a representation of the collective life itself. Therefore, the Bolshevik newspaper *Izvestiya* declared "Comrades, set up clubs! Let these clubs be the tribune for all who seek conscious freedom! Let them be beacons for the masses, seeking meaning, but not knowing the way! Clubs! More clubs! And as fast as possible!" (Afanas'ev, Khazanova 1963)⁶.

Between the late 1920s and mid-1930s, over a hundred workers' clubs and palaces of culture were built in Moscow and its surrounding region (see Fig. 3), though only a few remain in active use today. These clubs played a central role in the "production of political culture", situated at the "core of class struggle", and served as a new space for communist ideology, displacing traditional religious institutions (Khazanova, Afanas'ev 1963). Initiated by the Communist Party and supported by trade unions and youth groups, the clubs functioned as communal living spaces, performance venues, educational centres, daycare facilities, and sports hubs, all promoting *novyi byt* (the new collective lifestyle). The term *rabochiy klub* was coined to challenge the elitist notions of the traditional club, which were exclusive spaces for the Tsarist aristocracy. These clubs aimed to disseminate new ideology more effectively than in communal housing projects.

Workers' club was a poly-functional space primarily consisting of foyer, auditorium, recreation room, library, classrooms, administration, playroom for children, usable roof etc. The larger clubs even included a gymnasium, a dining hall, games room and additional sections, lecture halls etc. Regardless of size, all clubs featured an auditorium for mass assemblies and theatrical performances, with public processions being a primary function, both spatially and formally.

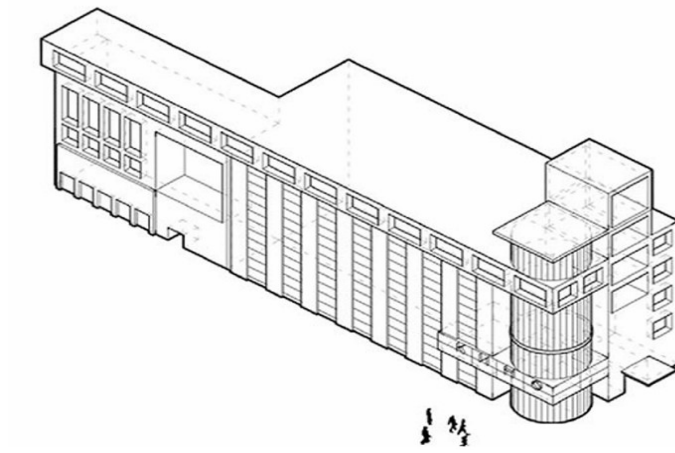


Fig. 4. *Zuev workers' club* (Bokov 2017).

The Zuev Workers' Club

The Zuev club (fig. 5) was one of the most iconic clubs in Moscow built by architect Ilya Golosov in 1927. It is a notable example of Constructivist architecture which served not only as social and cultural hub for workers but also as a significant symbol of the ideological aspirations of the early Soviet state. Analysis of Zuev workers' club through the lenses of architectural semiotics and critical theory reveals how its design communicates meanings and embodies ideological values while acting as an instrument of power and a site of resistance.

The Zuev workers' club is characterized by its functional design, which reflects constructivist ethos of prioritizing utility and social purpose (fig. 4). The building's layout that consists of spaces for meetings, performances, and leisure activities, symbolizes the Soviet commitment to workers' rights and community engagement. The open and adaptable spaces suggest a break from traditional bourgeois architecture, representing a new social order focussed aiming at collective well-

being. Further, the use of brick and concrete in the club conveys a sense of performance and strength, symbolizing the industrial power of the Soviet state.

The building's geometric forms and lack of ornamentation reflect the modernist rejection of past architectural styles, signifying a radical departure from the aesthetics of the Tsarist era. The design emphasizes functionality over decoration, embodying the ideological shift towards a utilitarian approach to architecture. Moreover, the arrangement of spaces within the club facilitates social interaction and collective activities, reinforcing the idea of community as central to socialist ideology. The auditorium and communal areas are designed to foster engagement among workers, promoting a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. This architectural choice communicates the importance of collective identity in the Soviet context, where individualism was often viewed with suspicion. From contemporary standpoint, the club stands as a site of resistance against the commodification of culture and the alienation of the working class. Its original intent to serve the community challenges modern architectural practices that prioritize profit over social purpose. The building stands as a reminder of the potential for architecture to create spaces that foster genuine community engagement and resist the pressures of capitalist development.

Thus, the Zuev Workers' Club exemplifies the complex interplay of architectural semiotics and critical theory in the context of early Soviet architecture. Through its functional design and symbolic materials, the building communicates the values of collectivism, community, and worker empowerment. At the same time, it reflects the power dynamics inherent in the state's ideological project, serving both as an instrument of control and a site of potential resistance. Analysing the Zuev Workers' Club not only enhances our understanding of Soviet architectural practices but also invites reflection on the broader implications of architecture in shaping social and ideological landscapes.

From the critical perspective the Zuev club also served as an instrument of ideological promotion embodying the values of Soviet regime in the celebration of the working class. By providing a space for cultural and educational activities, the





Fig. 5. Zuev Workers' Club (Ulitsa Lesnaya 18): exterior by architect Ilya Golosov. Photograph by Branson DeCou, 1931.

building reinforces the state's commitment to the upliftment of the proletariat and also reflect its obligation to the proletariat's education and empowerment thereby fostering masses' loyalty to the socialist state. On the other hand, the club operates within a framework of state control, the narratives build within the club are aligned with the ideological goals of the Communist Party. Thus, there is a duality in the working of club which highlight how architecture could serve simultaneously as liberatory and as an authoritative agent both.

Moscow Highrise (also called Moscow Verticals or Stalinist Skyscrapers or Seven Sisters)

In the aftermath of the war, Soviet Union was looking for constructions which symbolised and celebrated the power, confidence, unity and strength. A redevelopment plan of Moscow was prepared with this underlying spirit. The key component of the new construction included the idea of building eight high-rise buildings, or the so called “Moscow verticals” of which only seven were built. However, the high rise did not appear immediately. Earlier in 1934, a group of Soviet architects in the leadership of B. M. Iofan and V. A. Shchuko went to New York for studying American architecture particularly that of high rise building so to adapt them to the Soviet architectural landscape who later became the architects of the so called “Stalin’s Empire style”⁷. V. K Oltarzhevsky was another skilled architect involved with one of the Moscow verticals who had some experience of high-rise buildings in USA. The call was given to the Soviet architects to “create outstanding works of socialist architecture which reflected the glory and greatness of the Stalinist epoch” (Berton 1977). These high-rises were supposed to be constructed differently than in the capitalist west and were to be bestowed a height which could make its progress obvious to the world while giving an expression to the Soviet way of life. These buildings transformed Moscow’s urban landscape by expanding streets and other public spaces, making the city’s street perspectives more dynamic with widely spaced compositional elements.

Of the seven buildings, three were situated along the old fortification line of the Garden Ring: a combined administrative and residential building at Kranyye Vorota, completed in 1953, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at Smolenskaya Square, finished in 1952; and a residential building with apartments at Vostania Square, finished in 1954. Further, they included two hotels viz. The Hotel Leningradskaya, finished in 1953 itself built on an important transport junction, Kalanshevskaya Square, located in the close proximity of a railway terminal; and the hotel Ukraina which was finished by

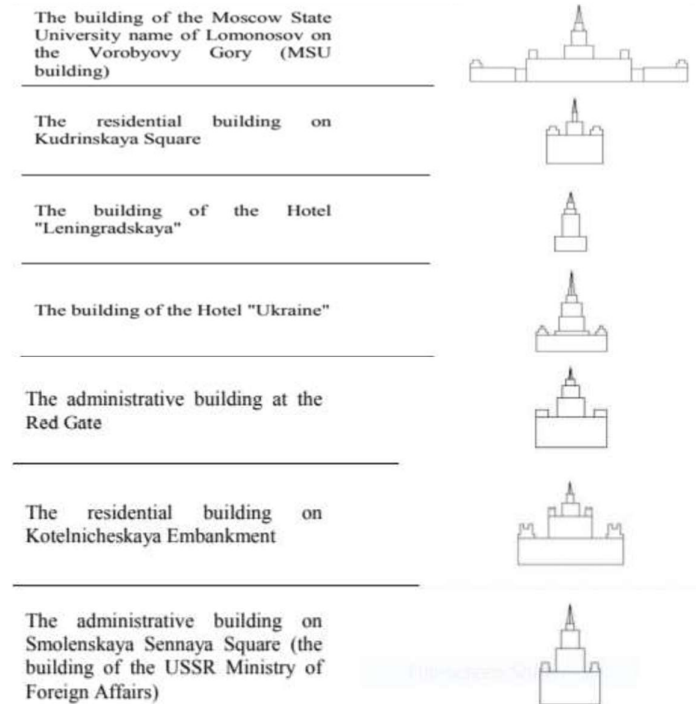


Fig. 6. Graphical scheme of Moscow High Rises (Golovina, Oblasov 2018).

1956 was built on a water front at Dorogomilovskaya embankment. Next, an apartment building was completed in 1952 on Kotelnicheskaya Embankment at the confluence of the Moskva and Yauza rivers. The final building was a university structure in Lenin Hills. An eighth building, planned as an administrative headquarters for the Ministry of State Security in Zariad'e, was never constructed.

They all were constructed in tier-style (refer Fig. 6), with a step-like structure with a heavy plinth several storeys up surmounted by a spire (Tarkhanov, Kavtaradze 1992). The buildings were built as a victory statement and became a prime feature of the city, radiating power and triumph. Clearly, the construction of the seven sisters served the purpose of political

and administrative leaders more than the commoners. Stalin's high-rise buildings created a sense of upward mobility, each with a central tower. And, on Stalin's special instruction each of them was fitted with a metallic glass spire, a distinguishing feature of these buildings. The buildings were a combination of 17th century Gothic cathedrals along with modernist, thus merging the past with the future.

A Detailed Analysis of Ministry of Foreign Affairs Building

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) building in Moscow was one of the most prominent examples of Stalinist architecture completed in 1953 standing as a symbol of Soviet power and prestige, reflecting both the architectural ambitions and the political context of the post-war Russia. It was built to showcase the nation's strength and progress following the devastation of World War II and architecturally characterized by grandiosity and a fusion of traditional and modern elements aimed at projecting the Soviet's authority domestically and internationally.

The MFA building functioned as complex signifier within the broader context of Soviet architecture. Its imposing height and classical detailing symbolise power and authority. The verticality of structure conveyed aspirations of dominance and authority while the prominent spire topped with a star signified the Soviet state's ideological commitment to communism and its global ambitions. Its formal architectural language that blended traditional Russian motifs with modernist elements, reflecting a semiotic strategy that communicates continuity with the past while simultaneously asserting a modern identity. The use of classical elements such as columns and pediments, evoked historical legitimacy. This duality was crucial in the construction of national identity, aligning Soviet Union with the grandeur of its imperial predecessors. The façade's arrangement, with large arched windows and elaborate decorations, created a visual hierarchy that emphasized the building's significance and communicates the importance of the Ministry within Soviet state reinforcing the idea that foreign



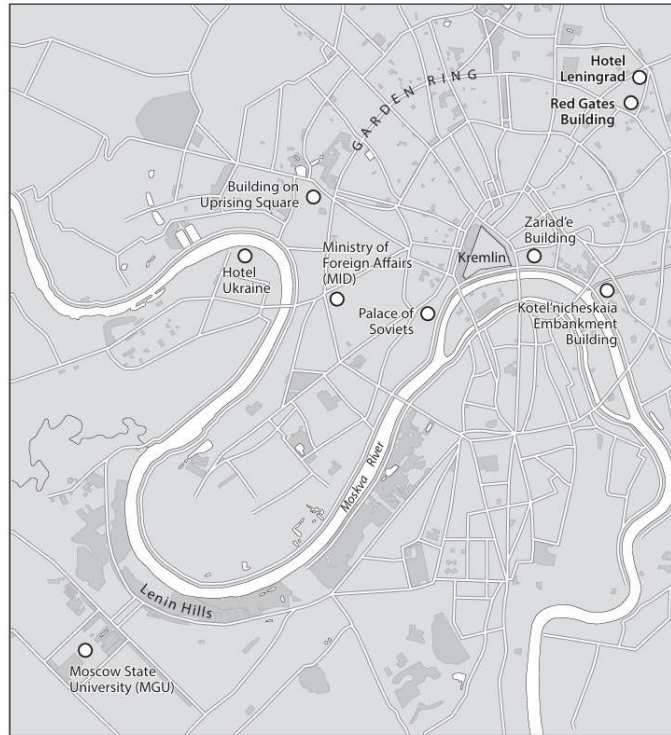


Fig. 7. Map of Moscow in the 1950s with Stalinist skyscrapers marked. Map by Cox Cartographic Ltd. (Zubovich 2021).

affairs were central to the Soviet identity. The ornamental details, including bas-reliefs depicted military and historical themes, serving as reminders of the Soviet Union's ideological foundations and aspirations.

From a critical theory perspective, the MFA embodied the ideological project of the Soviet state articulating its strength and unity and served as a state's ideological apparatus reinforcing the narrative of Soviet exceptionalism. Its grandeur beside being aesthetically appealing intended to evoke feelings of national pride and loyalty among citizens. The

building also served as an instrument of power. Its monumental scale and strategic location signify the authority of state in international affairs emphasizing Soviet Union's formidable role on the global stage. Further, by merging the classical elements with modernist design, the structure reinforced the idea that socialist ideals could coexist with traditions. This incorporation beside legitimizing the Soviet regime served to marginalize alternative architectural expressions that do not align with the state ideology. The structure also influenced how citizens perceive their government and their place within the nation thereby bestowing a sense of collective identity and pride in Soviet citizens.

CONCLUSION

The architectural transformation in the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1953 serves as a profound illustration of how built environments can reflect and propagate ideological narratives. Following the October Revolution, Soviet leaders utilized architecture as a means to establish a new social order, aligning physical spaces with socialist-communist principles. The integration of Lenin's theory of reflection and Stalin's socialist realism shaped the architectural landscape, resulting in structures that not only met functional needs but also conveyed ideological significance.

Through the examination of communal housing, workers' clubs, and Stalin skyscrapers, it becomes evident that these buildings were designed to foster collective identity and reinforce the values of socialism. They transcended mere functionality, serving as symbols of state aspirations and vehicles for ideological dissemination. The architectural practices during this period not only transformed the physical environment of Soviet cities but also influenced the collective memory and social values of the populace.

This study ultimately emphasizes the significant role of architecture in shaping societal ideals and highlights the complex relationship between ideology and built environments. As the Soviet Union underwent major socio-political transformations, architecture became a vital medium for expressing



power and facilitating resistance, profoundly influencing the identity of both the state and its citizens. As we examine these dynamics, it becomes crucial to understand how the architectural landscape evolved in the wake of these changes. It will be intriguing to explore how architecture evolved from the end of Stalin's era to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and even more compelling to compare post-Soviet architecture with its Soviet predecessors.

NOTES

¹ The draft resolution prepared by Lenin for the First All-Russia Congress of Proletcult, held in early October 1920, significantly influenced the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Party during discussions regarding Proletcult's concerns on October 9 and 11. The central and provincial Proletcult decided to operate under the authority of the People's Commissariat of Education, as mandated by the Congress's Communist group. However, some Proletcult leaders later accused the Congress of interfering in artistic matters and conspiring to dissolve Proletcult. The Central Committee categorically refuted these accusations in its letter titled "On Proletcult Organisations", which was published in Pravda No. 270 on December 1, 1920.

² For arguments on dialectics of nature refer to F. Engels (1925), *Dialectics of nature*, Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/don/index.htm>.

³ It supported the concentration of people, industrial facilities in and around major urban spaces.

⁴ The so called "deurbanists" called for a design which supported a more decentralised community and development of communication network between the major urban centres and small townships. They argued for removing the gap between urban and rural, although supporting development of infrastructure in Moscow. From early 1930s they seemed to lose the war with the urbanists.

⁵ The English Garden City Movement originated with the publication of Sir Ebenezer Howard's book *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in 1898, which was republished in 1902 under the title *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* in the UK. In this work, Howard presented the concept of a self-sustaining urban community surrounded by green space, featuring a balanced mix of residential, industrial, and agricultural areas. The design of the garden city followed a concentric layout, characterized by expansive open spaces and parks.

⁶ *Rabochie Klubi* in "Izvestiya", 10 (9th May, 1917). Quoted in K. Afanas'ev, V. Khazanova (eds) (1963), *Iz Istorii Sovetskoy Arhitekturi 1917–1925. Dokumenti i Materiali*, (Moscow), p. X.

⁷ Coined by the famous Soviet architecture critic Khan-Magomedov S.O.



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