

Landmark study records visionary architecture from the early years of the Soviet Union

Tim Tower
20 October 2007

Lost Vanguard: Soviet Modernist Architecture, 1922-1932—Photographs by Richard Pare, July 18-October 29, 2007, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City

In the history of architecture, there are few moments that are richer and more challenging, more influential, yet enigmatic, than the birth of modernism. Within it, one of the most fascinating chapters of all was that which opened under the Russian Revolution, producing a body of work that, tragically, remained little known for six decades, until the Stalinist regime collapsed and plunged the Soviet Union back to capitalism.

Images of Soviet modernist structures now on view at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, and contained in a companion book published by Monacelli Press, may well illuminate, as never before, these precious artifacts and that early movement for modernism of which they formed a vital part.

“Lost Vanguard: Soviet Modernist Architecture 1922-1932” consists of a selection of 74 structures documented in photographs by Richard Pare, prepared with the support of the Canadian Centre for Architecture and its founder, Phyllis Lambert, and presented at MoMA by Barry Bergdoll, chief architecture curator, and Jean-Louis Cohen, professor in the history of architecture at New York University.

Pare made eight extensive trips to the former Soviet Union between 1992 and 2000, according to MoMA’s web site, “and created nearly ten thousand images to compile a timely documentation of these structures, many of which are now in various states of decay, transformation, and peril.”

The Russian Revolution was a monumental event, the first time in history that the exploited took power and retained it. Russian social development had been characterized by poverty and backwardness, but the country remained, as Trotsky noted, “a part of world economy, only an element of the capitalist world system.” In Russia, different stages of civilization and culture approached and intermingled with one another. Europe’s most backward country, still emerging from a peasant economy, was compelled to take the road of socialist revolution in 1917 because there was no other progressive answer to its social problems.

For one brief decade, the first workers’ state attracted leading architects and engineers from abroad to join their Soviet counterparts in carrying out some of the most inspired and far-sighted work of the time. The architects included Erich Mendelsohn from Germany and Le Corbusier from France, who participated in major projects. Albert Kahn Associates of Detroit filled a steamship with architects, engineers, their staff and equipment to build hundreds of factories in the USSR.

In their execution, however, innovative designs often confronted a scarcity of up-to-date materials and the limitations of building techniques that had not changed for centuries. These problems were exacerbated by the conditions of national economic isolation.

Pare’s study brings into focus a process that was, at the same time, both exhilarating and frustrating—lighting up the future while still gripped by the semi-feudal past.

The exhibit notes that the fertile period ended abruptly between 1932 and 1934, as the Stalinist bureaucracy reorganized professional associations by way of stifling criticism. By early 1933, Stalin’s policies had helped deliver the German working class into the hands of the Nazis and brought about the downfall of the Communist International as a revolutionary instrument.

From 1934, the bureaucracy imposed its anti-artistic and anti-Marxist doctrine of “socialist realism,” sinking its teeth into the country and sealing the fate of creative cultural life. The intellectual flower that had blossomed on the surge of revolution would soon disappear into the Gulag as the historical tide ebbed away.

“Lost Vanguard” begins with the dramatic image of the radio tower on Shabolovka Street in Moscow. Completed in 1922, it was the first major structure erected after the revolution.

Between 1914 and 1921, wars and counter-revolution had reduced heavy industry in the USSR to 20 percent of Russia’s pre-war level. As the exhausted economy began to breathe again through the New Economic Policy, initiated in the spring of 1921, the proposal for a radio tower to rise 350 meters above the Moscow skyline embodied the enlightened character of the new regime and its plans for electrification of the vast country.

Designed by Vladimir Shukhov, the tower combines six of the hyperboloid cages he had devised two decades earlier as supports for water towers. These diaphanous forms achieve exceptional strength and light weight by combining straight members in a kind of conical, tubular truss, which reduces the critical tendency of such structures to buckle.

Upper sections were assembled inside the lowest and hoisted into place. Still in use today for radio and television broadcasts, the tower stands at 150 meters, the original plan having been shortened for lack of steel.

From this dramatic starting point, the study and MoMA exhibition review factories, communal kitchens, apartment blocks, workers’ clubs, theaters, elaborate sports facilities, the headquarters for the soviets, garages and even a modest shelter for a bus stop. Examples are drawn from Baku in present day Azerbaijan, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Ivanovo, Gorki and Sverdlovsk in Russia and from Kharkov and Kiev in Ukraine.

Much of what remains is in bad repair and facing extended neglect, or even destruction, in the current orgy of real estate speculation. Still, the evidence is unmistakable. The output was, for its time, prodigious.

In 1925, Erich Mendelsohn was invited to construct the Red Banner textile factory in Leningrad. Having completed the Einstein Tower in Potsdam and the Luckenwalde hat factory, he was among the most prominent young architects working in Berlin. For Mendelsohn, accepting

the Soviet commission was a risk worth taking.

While only the power house remains, its towering smoke stacks and half a dozen strip windows, rising the full height of the massive space for generating equipment, give a sense of the vitality of the early Soviet Union. Segmented, ribbon windows wrap semi-circular forms that protrude from the machine room; and the whole gives one the impression of a displaced ocean liner, plowing down Pionerskaia Street.

On returning from the USSR, Mendelsohn published a book about his experience, in which he discussed the contradiction between the widespread aspirations for a socialist future and the conditions of backwardness that dominated the economy.

“Technique is Russia’s great problem,” he wrote, “because only its help can procure the long omitted, can provide the economic support for the idea of balancing the branches of economy;...in Russia, technique is the symbol of a future, on whose success depends the value of her dreams.”

Everywhere, there are signs of the sharp contrast between the new style and traditional methods of building. As Richard Pare explains, “These pristine modernist surfaces were actually quite medieval in their basic arsenal of materials and techniques. They were built by peasants who had no training whatsoever. They were farmers who came into the city in the summer while the harvest was growing. Here they are trying to interpret this radically daring architectural vocabulary, and yet they’ve never held rulers in their hands in their lives. For them to have succeeded so many buildings of such radical simplicity—with a kind of integrity and transparency—is astonishing in itself.” (In an interview with Liz McDaniel of *Men’s Vogue*)

The Russian Revolution was grounded in a world perspective, which recognized that the productive forces had outgrown and made obsolete the nation-state system. To establish the foundations necessary for a society based on social equality, only the resources of the global economy would suffice.

The great upsurges that followed in Germany, Britain and China, however, failed to extend the reach of the workers’ state during the 1920s, increasingly thanks to the policies of the Stalinist parties themselves. Isolated in poverty-stricken Russia, the revolution faced intractable conditions. Stalinism fed off those conditions. Mendelsohn, working in Leningrad at the time, must have witnessed the bureaucracy gaining in strength and distorting the early forms of state planning. He identified a tendency to romanticize the future in lieu of confronting the real problems in the actual development of technique.

“As Russia’s poverty delays her success,” he wrote, “the plan exaggerates the execution of the idea, its reality. Consequently, the realistic technique twists itself into a mystical future—the absolute reality is derailed into an erroneous path of romanticism” (*Russland, Europa, Amerika*, p. 114). Trotsky wrote in opposition to this kind of fantasizing about the future in his *Problems of Everyday Life*. Isaac Deutscher, in his well-known biography, noted that Trotsky constantly drew attention to the backwardness and poverty of everyday life, “from which the Russian only too frequently sought to escape into the realm of abstract doctrine.”

Nicolai Colli worked with Le Corbusier on a new headquarters for the soviets in Moscow, the Centrosoyuz building, which today houses a Statistical Department of the Russian government. There is a stunning, sculptural sensuality in the long, curving ramps that snake through the interior. Contrast the open interior with a bulky exterior volume skinned in 16-inch-thick red tuff stone from the Caucasus, which was employed to protect the interior poured-concrete structure from Moscow winter temperatures that routinely drop to -40° Fahrenheit.

The facility was advanced in many ways. Built of reinforced concrete, it combined multiple programmatic functions, such as, for example, office space for 3,500, a restaurant, lecture halls, a theater and other facilities. The design explores themes that would be fully developed in future work of the great Swiss architect.

One gets a whiff of the rising tension in the country and the coming assault on intellectual freedom, in a comment about the building by Stalin’s closest henchman. Referring to its soft, reddish veneer and slender columnar structure, the General Secretary’s appointed head of the Organization Department, Lazar Kaganovich, quipped it was a “pink sow with too short legs.”

Another jewel in Pare’s work consists of photographs of the Rusakov Workers Club on Stromynka Street in Moscow designed by Konstantin Melnikov in 1927. Around this time, Melnikov was collaborating with the engineer Shukhov on a number of large garages for the Leyland bus company. The two may have joined forces on this club design that combines beautifully engineered, cantilevered massing to achieve a powerful architectural effect.

Workers’ clubs had been built in other areas of Europe; but in their commissions, the local soviets imparted a new content to this building type. They became the concrete harbingers in everyday life of a new society, incorporating theaters, rehearsal spaces, meeting rooms, class rooms, office spaces and other functions under one roof.

The Zuev Workers Club in Moscow, designed by Ilia Golosov, provides a striking example of the architecture that the new tasks inspired. A vertical glass cylinder balances several massive rectangular solids in a unified, asymmetrical composition. Clear-cut contrasts, such as a glass skin juxtaposed to windows set deep into thick walls, define a fresh vocabulary in which the volume, skin, mass, structure and material are each articulated separately.

Marx praised the Paris Communards in 1871 for “storming heaven.” Could anything less have been applied to the Bolsheviks and the Russian workers? Perhaps, this helps explain why great cantilevers, aerial catwalks and sky hooks fascinated Soviet architects. Here Golosov balances a massive weight on a glass cylinder, manipulating components in a way that does not defy gravity, but demonstrates a confident mastery of its forces.

The exhibition reviews the suppression of creative work by the Stalinist bureaucracy, citing for example, the tragic case of Konstantin Melnikov, who was kept under house arrest and prohibited from practicing architecture from 1932 until his death in 1974. It also cites the dangers posed by today’s real estate speculators, who bulldoze a modernist treasure if the land beneath it can be turned for a profit.

Another, more insidious threat to the full appreciation of these works arises from another quarter. Nicolai Ouroussoff, writing in the *New York Times*, called the period of the exhibition among the most fruitful in modern architecture, “What distinguished it was,” he wrote, “the passion of its conviction, however naive, that architecture could be an agent for profound social change. That this vision was still born,” he continued, “only adds to its allure: as an incomplete experiment, it potentially could be renewed by future generations.”

Ouroussoff is clearly hedging his bets, not wishing to appear too heavy-handed in disparaging the ideals of the Russian Revolution. The descending cynicism that dominates his outlook, however, is unmistakable. The assertion that the October Revolution was “still born” and that it was “naive” to believe that architecture could play a role in it speaks volumes about the contemporary intelligentsia.

To grasp the role of architecture as an art form, one must consider it within the context of society as a whole. Were the Soviet modernists engaged in a futile effort? Was it not possible that their work might contribute as the masses around them struggled to raise themselves to meet the tasks of building a new society? If architects could never organize and make conscious and, thereby, never concentrate the aspirations and strivings of their fellow beings, then it would be fair to say that they make no art, or no art of significance.

To illustrate this point, one need only consider a brief historical comparison. With modest means, local soviets erected innovative

structures that entertained, educated and organized workers and their families in their neighborhoods. Today, vast sums are spent building casinos in the desolate center-cities of Detroit, Buffalo and Shreveport, with the sole purpose of hypnotizing, addicting and bankrupting those poor souls who are either stuck in dead-end jobs or losing them.

The early modernists left a rich legacy. "Lost Vanguard" deserves a broad audience and careful consideration. The exhibition will be on view at MoMA through October 29, and the photos are reproduced in a broad format book with commentary by Pare and Cohen, published by the Monacelli Press.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact