

An interview with Richard Pare, co-author and photographer of *The Lost Vanguard: Russian Modernist Architecture, 1922-1932*

Tim Tower
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Born in Portsmouth, England, in 1948, Richard Pare studied graphic design and photography at Winchester and Ravensbourne College of Art before going to the Art Institute of Chicago, where he received an MFA in 1973.

Around that time, his association—which was to prove long-standing—with Phyllis Lambert of the Canadian Centre for Architecture began. For the CCA he documented limestone buildings in Montreal and also courthouses for the United States Bicentennial project. During 15 years as the centre’s curator of photography, he created a collection of forty-eight thousand images representing the full depth and breadth of the medium.

Court House, A Photographic Document was published in 1978, followed in 1982 by Photography and Architecture 1839 to 1939. Both books accompanied exhibitions at major museums and were highly acclaimed. In 1990 he published Egypt: Reflections on Continuity and in 1996 received the American Institute of Architects monograph award for The Colors of Light—The Architecture of Tadao Ando.

The Lost Vanguard: Russian Modernist Architecture, 1922-1932, co-authored with Jean-Louis Cohen, was published in 2007. In it Pare documents architectural masterpieces that were unknown outside the USSR and, in many cases, little known to Soviet citizens. Selected photographs from the project have been exhibited in Moscow at the Schusev State Museum of Architecture in the wing known as The Ruina and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

In launching his decade-long investigation, Pare recognized the significance of the opportunity to record buildings that had been inspired by the October Revolution of 1917. The humanitarian and socialist principles embodied in some of the best examples of Soviet architecture are inseparable from their influential role in the history of architecture. The housing block designed by Moisei Ginzburg, for example, provided the guide in all essentials for l’Unité d’Habitation of Le Corbusier, which was built in Marseilles, France, some thirty years later.

Pare speaks passionately about the precarious condition of many of these seminal modernist works and his own commitment to the effort to preserve them.

His photographs will join selections from the Costakis Collection of Soviet modernist art and contemporary photographs of many of the same structures from the collection of the Schusev museum in an exhibition at the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, Greece, opening in May, 2008. The exhibition will go on to other major museums in Europe and North America.

Tim Tower spoke with Mr. Pare in New York.

Origins of the project

Tim Tower: You have a deep sympathy for Soviet modernism. Would you explain how that developed?

Richard Pare: This goes back to the early impressions of a schoolboy listening to the Dean of Canterbury, an ardent socialist and great fan of the Soviet regime. He was completely bamboozled by the Stalinists, but his panegyrics about building factory chimneys in five days and the Five Year Plan did leave a lasting impression.

Later, I had a very fine art teacher who took his own slides and, as part of his course, gave lectures on Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and the Bauhaus. But there were no Russians. That work was unavailable. Also, my father was an artist, a painter and a teacher. I was familiar with Mondrian, Picasso and Braque among others from a very early age.

The idea of modernism as a way of thinking and an aesthetic was instilled in me. It is something I have admired for a very long time.

I eventually ended up with an office in the Seagram Building, [the classic modernist high-rise by Mies van der Rohe in New York City], working on photographic history and building the photography collection that eventually became one of the cornerstones of the CCA. Some years later still, in 1993, in the gallery of a friend, I ran across a picture of [Vladimir] Tatlin and his assistants building the model of the tower for the Third International. Of course it entered the collection of the CCA [Canadian Centre for Architecture] and as a result of my interest, he invited me to join him on a trip to Moscow. That was the beginning.

There was a lot more than anybody thought existed, in varying degrees of preservation and decay. I began acquiring a network of contacts and friends who have been unbelievably supportive. The generosity with which people went out of their way to help me in what I was doing was amazing.

TT: Describing the state of neglect and decay in a factory kitchen, you wrote in the introduction that it seemed as if the structure had returned to the essence of the architect’s original intention. In general terms, how would you describe that intent?

RP: It was the idea of reinventing architecture for a new age. The Russians were responding to the revolution in the early years before it became suborned all too swiftly.

The European modernists have been known in detail for decades. But the correspondence between European Modernism and the Soviet experiment was virtually unknown. The chance to record the range and brilliance of that work was an extraordinary opportunity, even seventy years after the fact.

International connections

TT: What attracted leading architects from Europe and America, men like [German architect] Erich Mendelsohn and Le Corbusier, for example, to work in the USSR?

RP: Both of them were ardent supporters of the revolution. So there was an effort to respond and participate. A group of architects in Moscow literally stepped aside, issuing a statement in favor of the Centrosoyuz project being given to Le Corbusier. It was the biggest project that he had ever built, and he was very much committed to it.

He never saw it completed. There were all kinds of difficulties in funding, shortages of steel and concrete. Nothing was easy to come by. In spite of everything, it came out wonderfully well. He sent a photographer, Lucien Hervé, to record it in the 1950s. But as far as we know, that view of the ramps had never been published until I took the picture. Which is quite extraordinary when you think about it. That is one of the great Corbusian spaces. Technical limitations may have prevented Hervé from making such an encompassing image.

With Mendelsohn it was the same. He had traveled in Russia and written a book *Russland, Europa, America*, published in 1929, as a pendant to his *Amerika* of 1926, which is about the modernist experiment. He went there with the commission to build the Red Banner Factory, but withdrew his name from it ultimately because he was dissatisfied. He had designed it for steel, but they had to build it with wood and other materials.

It's still there—an amazing building, what's left of it. It took me a long time to find it, because the original drawing I had was a section through one of the factory floors, which had probably been destroyed in the war. The main rooms for the looms had big vents on the sharply upswept roof. Presumably, if you opened the windows at the bottom, there would be an up current that would take all the fiber and fluff out of the atmosphere to improve working conditions.

That was the bit that I was looking for, and that was the bit that did not survive.

Technique and the peasantry

TT: You have written about the near-miraculous results achieved by the peasant workforce. Would you explain what you meant by that?

RP: During fallow periods, in winter and the time between seedtime and harvest, peasants went into the cities to do construction work in what was an ongoing tradition long before the revolution. Contemporary photographs show scaffolding made up of great baulks of timber that is so cumbersome, and yet it is quite beautiful. What they did with such primitive means is amazing.

There is a kind of roughness in the detailing. The architectural vocabulary required absolute simplicity of decoration. Beyond the slight relief in the facade, the way window moldings were cut and the frame handled, there is none. This was a perfect fit between the scarcity of resources and a minimal aesthetic.

If you look carefully at details in the ramps at the textile institute, for example, the round columns at the acute angles of the triangle do not quite match up. But it doesn't matter because the intentionality was so strong that the message comes across very clearly anyway.

This is exceptional, actually. When I was in India some years ago, I went to see some of Le Corbusier's buildings at Ahmedabad. He built a museum there with similarly unskilled laborers, and the concrete beam at the roof line is not quite straight. It is jarring and the necessary connection, shall we say, between intention and execution is lost.

Somehow the Russians got away with it. The buildings are vibrant with a kind of earthy dynamic that was not present in the more politely refined version of European modernism.

Architecture as educator

TT: Leon Trotsky wrote the following passage in 1924. "There is no doubt that, in the future—and the farther we go, the more true it will be—such monumental tasks as the planning of city gardens, of model houses, of railroads, and of ports, will interest vitally not only engineering architects, participators in competitions, but the large popular masses as well. The imperceptible, ant-like piling up of quarters and streets, brick by brick, from generation to generation, will give way to titanic constructions of city-villages, with map and compass in hand. Around this compass will be formed true peoples' parties, the parties of the future for special technology and construction, which will agitate passionately, hold meetings and vote. In this struggle, architecture will again be filled with the spirit of mass feelings and moods, only on a much higher plane, and mankind will educate itself plastically, it will become accustomed to look at the world as submissive clay for sculpting the most perfect forms of life. The wall between art and industry will come down." (*Literature and Revolution*)

This notion has suffered in the years since then. What would you say? Can architecture contribute to the development of a better society?

RP: One would like to think so. It's just such a shame that they were never really given the opportunity to fully develop their ideas and work them out. Even within that short period of time, the physical discourse was colossal.

They were striving to create an ideal way of living. But I think they also realized very quickly that they were leaning into the wind. It was becoming more and more difficult, and they were conducting a kind of rear guard action.

It was the most radical experiment ever attempted. It did not succeed, but it was not from lack of will. The regime became ultimately so repressive, it was impossible to deviate from the Stalinist norm. You can feel the sense of optimism seeping out of the work around 1932. After that the heavy catechism of the Stalinist regime imposed itself.

In looking at the work of the Russian Modernists, my aim was to get beneath the surface, find out their intentions and render that intent through the filter of accumulated time. The idea was to articulate the poetic vocabulary of modernism and, at the same time, allow the accumulation of time to have its part in the dialogue, to give depth and richness to the subject that it might not have had when it was built.

For me, perhaps the most emblematic picture of the whole book is the blue interior in the [Soviet constructivist architect Moisei] Ginzburg building. It is actually less about architecture than most of the pictures. It's about the way life is being lived in that space over two or three generations. Narkomfin [Commissariat of Finance—the complex was designed for its workers] is a very successful building—one of the masterpieces of the century. Let us hope that it survives.

Narkomfin came at a key moment and had vast influence on the further development of architecture. Corbusier borrowed heavily from it for *l'Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles, but almost thirty years elapsed before he had the chance.

It was assembled with such intelligence ... the transparency of it, and the ability to walk underneath it. The roof garden was beautifully thought out, though not completely realized; and there was a communal refectory, a laundry and a nursery for children.

All the necessities of existence were gathered together in one place. In

spite of all the difficulties under which it was built, it rose to the level of an extraordinarily humane building. It has places for single people, places for married couples without children and places for families. The use of natural light and easy access to the ribbons of the exterior window boxes, softening the rigor of the façade ... beautifully done. Everything brought together with a sense of community, it really is a communal house.

Contemporary practice

TT: One could see your book as a critique of contemporary practice, not of everyone. But in terms of the influence of Post-Modernism, a lot of contemporary architecture lacks the qualities you admire. What is your attitude toward contemporary trends?

RP: Architecture has always been a very uneven practice. There are some people who have a great gift and build with the intention of creating spaces that are good for people. But there is always more bad stuff than good.

It's the capitalist system. Money wins. It's appalling really. In some cases, it can be effective and generate great masterpieces in building when you are able to have a client with deep pockets who wants to build something of great quality.

Tadao Ando comes to mind. A high percentage of his buildings operate at a brilliant level because of his sense of the space and the exquisite quality in the way he builds. You get the sense of a real trajectory in his career.

But most of the time, it is the superstar architect putting his signature on something. It is a little stifling. It shuts out many of the most creative people. Particularly in Russia, the most interesting architects are hardly able to get enough work to sustain a living.

People like [the UK-based architectural firm] RMJM, building all over the world, are all about ego. They had a scheme to build a gigantic skyscraper in St. Petersburg that would destroy the beautiful, elegant, horizontality of the place. It would be a catastrophe, and they don't care. It has been derailed for the time being, but is being outdone by [British architect Norman] Foster's gargantuan Crystal Island project for Moscow.

That's the great failure of a lot of high-ranking architects. They want a signature building in every major town, but it has nothing to do with the urban fabric.

There is always an unease between architects having to fulfill a brief from the client, cost and the architectural intent. I think the Russians were trying to break free from those kinds of constraints.

In spite of the difficulties that were coming thick and fast, there is an underlying optimism, vigor and drive. Visionaries saw possibilities and against all the odds found ways to produce that slender number of buildings that were to define Modernism in the initial/early years of the Soviet regime.

That is why I am intent on securing the future of the important ones. We started to touch on the kind of catastrophe that is going in Moscow at present. It's just unbearable. They are tearing down buildings from before 1812. The urban texture of the city is being erased.

Plans for the future

TT: What are your plans in the near future?

RP: I am looking for funding to finish this project. There is still another volume to do on the modernists, cities that I have still not been able to get

to. Then there are structures like Central Institute of Aerodynamics and Hydrodynamics, for example, which are still closed and inaccessible.

It has an amazing wind tunnel that was built in 1925, a giant gramophone horn in white stucco. There are a handful of photographs in *USSR in Construction*. I've been begging to get in there right from the beginning in 1993. It's an extraordinary structure: a long, long tunnel with a beautiful horn at the end to create air flows. There is the sanatorium by Ginzburg at Kislovodsk with the stairs by [fellow constructivist architect Ivan] Leonidov. The only project of his [Leonidov's] that was ever built.

For the immediate future I would like the exhibition to travel as widely as possible. It really got under way about two years ago when I put up 21 large prints in a powerful space called The Ruina, a wing of the State Museum of Architecture in Moscow. It was badly damaged by fire some time ago and only the most rudimentary steps have been taken to stabilize the structure, just a new roof really, but because of its powerful character it has become one of the prime spaces to exhibit in Moscow. People were incredibly moved by the show when it was presented there. All their lives they had been walking past Centrosoyuz and did not know what it was like inside.

Even the photograph of the mausoleum on Red Square was a revelation. When you go through it, you are so dominated by the body lying there that you don't remember the space. It is [architect Alexei] Schusev's masterpiece. It symbolizes that moment of historical change.

The book opens with the radio tower, which was about transparency and hope and spreading the word. And the mausoleum, at the other end of the sequence, is the heart of darkness.



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