An interview with Richard Pare, photographer and expert on Soviet Modernist architecture

Tim Tower
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A version of the following interview with Richard Pare, conducted by Tim Tower of the WSWS, was originally published in March 2008*, in connection with the exhibition* The Lost Vanguard: Russian Modernist Architecture, 1922-1932*, presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City July-October 2007.*

In that exhibition "Landmark study records visionary architecture from the early years of the Soviet Union"*, Pare documented architectural masterpieces that were largely unknown outside the USSR and, in many cases, little known to Soviet citizens.*

In undertaking his decade-long investigation into "lost" Soviet architecture, 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 the field. 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 Marseille, France, some 30 years later.

Tower and Pare spoke again recently to revise and update the piece to accompany a new presentation entitled Building the Revolution.

That exhibition is being organized by the Royal Academy of Arts in London together with Fondation La Caixa of Spain. The show will open in Barcelona on February 3, 2011 and go on to Madrid, before arriving in London at the Royal Academy where it will be on view from October 29, 2011.

Pare's photographs will appear with major works from the Kostakis Collection at the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, Greece and period photographs from the archives of the State Museum of Architecture, MUAR, in Moscow.

With his photographs, Richard Pare has documented the remarkable flowering of creative work in architecture in the years immediately following the Russian Revolution, one of the most innovative movements in the history of architecture that was to be stamped out under the Stalinist regime. His recent work examines the effect of the increasingly repressive regime on Modernism in Russia in the latter years of the movement before it was completely extinguished.

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 the works of 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 Modernist high-rise designed by Mies van der Rohe in New York City], working on photographic history and building the photography collection that became one of the cornerstones of the Canadian Centre for Architecture [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 Monument to the Third International. The photograph entered the CCA collection and as the result of my interest, my friend invited me to join him on a trip to Moscow. That was the beginning.

I found there was a lot more surviving construction than anybody thought existed, in varying degrees of preservation and decay. I set about 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 was exemplary.

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, even 70 years after the fact, was an extraordinary opportunity.

Emergence of a new style

TT: There was an exceptional flowering of creative work. Where did it come from? There had been the development of Modernism in Russia before the Revolution. Architects, painters and writers found support among merchants, even among the nobility. But it took on a different character in the aftermath of the Revolution.

RP: I believe it did. Some of the early steel-frame buildings in Moscow provided the seed from which the later and more radical Modernist works developed. But there was also a very conscious desire to get away from the architecture of the regime that had gone before.

Architecture under state patronage in the Tsarist period had looked backwards to produce bankrupt works in a rigid, proto-medieval style. The prime example is a church in St. Petersburg that was built [in 1883–1907] on the spot where the assassination of Alexander II took place. The classical line of the canal bank of the original town plan was

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even broken to accommodate it. The result was an extraordinarily vulgar concoction of church architecture. It's called "The Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood."

To me, the whole generative force of the avant-garde in Russia was an attempt to move as far in the opposite direction as possible. Which is not to say that there were no Modernist antecedents. There were some extraordinarily fine Modern and Art Deco buildings constructed in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

TT: Regarding the character of the Modernist work, let me quote a little of what you wrote:

"Wandering in the empty silence of the abandoned Vasileostrovskii district factory kitchen [built in 1930–31] in St. Petersburg late one afternoon, in the surrounding desolation I felt as though the structure had returned to the essence of the architects' intention; all superfluity had been torn away and what remained was the bare bones of the structure, peeling and crumbling until it revealed the ancient techniques that had been employed in its construction." In general terms, how would you describe the architects' underlying intention?

RP: It was the idea of reinventing architecture for a new age. The paradigms were the communal house and the factory instead of the mansion and the cathedral. Architects were responding to the opportunities presented by the Revolution in the early years, before it became suborned all too swiftly.

The roof pavilion of the big factory kitchen looks as if it were built of steel, but the trusses are actually made of wood. Steel was so scarce it had to be used with the greatest economy, so the only steel components are plates bolted on to reinforce the joints. Really, it was a subterfuge. They were trying to use the vocabulary of steel but with wood. Behind the trusses you can see the wood lath that once supported the pristine plaster surfaces of the interior.

TT: A technique which is a thousand years old.

RP: Exactly. They were deploying medieval construction techniques to fulfill the requirements of a modern vocabulary, which I think is fascinating in the way it was worked out.

The character of Russian Modernism

TT: There are many different tendencies represented in the structures you documented. How would you characterize what they hold in common?

RP: Consider Konstantin Melnikov, who was a maverick. He rarely collaborated with anybody, although I have seen it suggested that Vladimir Shukhov may have been responsible for engineering the cantilevers in the Rusakov Workers' Club. It does make sense: the two men worked together on garages, with Shukhov making the plans for the lightweight steel roofs.

Still, Melnikov was no mean engineer himself. He was able to devise unsupported floors for his own house. Short pieces of timber were laid in such a way as to make a grid, then the boards were put on in opposing directions. But there is no supporting beam from one side to the other.

The whole house was built remarkably cheaply. There is no waste at all. Materials are never highly finished; he used what he could get. It was the same problem for everybody, and that's another condition that drove the movement. The very stripped-down, Modernist style came to seem completely in tune with the times. In a sense the vocabulary of Modernism was enforced by the availability, or rather the scarcity, of materials. There is no excess and nothing superfluous. The whole concentration on efficiency, clarity and transparency was driven at least in part by necessity.

There was also the exchange with the Europeans. Le Corbusier came to Moscow and met and shared ideas with a number of architects including Moisei Ginzburg, a founder of the Constructivist movement and its chief theoretician. Ginzburg's 1924 treatise *Style and Epoch* was the most influential document of the Constructivist movement. Because he was Jewish, he was prevented from undertaking his architectural training in pre-Revolutionary Russia and went to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and the Accademia di Belle Arti in Milan.

Aleksandr Rodchenko travelled to Paris with Melnikov, who built the Soviet Pavilion at the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. They were all very well-versed in European culture of the time.

Ginzburg's *Style and Epoch* responds to Le Corbusier's *Vers Une Architecture* [*Towards a New Architecture*, 1923] of the previous year, but Ginzburg takes the warship and the communal house rather than the luxury liner and the private villa as his examples.

TT: While they were representative of different tendencies, they all seemed to be striving to express something that was common to them. That coherence gives the work a certain power. It was no accident.

RP: Far from it. There was a lot of lower-level Modernist construction using a similar vocabulary in and around Moscow at that time—you see it as you travel around the city once you become attuned to the idea. But it's like the developers who built things along 6th Avenue [in Manhattan] after Gordon Bunshaft built Lever House and Mies van der Rohe built the Seagram Building. It's "in the manner of," but it doesn't rise to great heights. It's dull, usable space. It doesn't have the intellectual spine that gives the key works a quality that is magical.

Take MoGES, for example. The side that faces away from the Kremlin is far more radical than the river façade, which is more Classical, deploying what its architect Ivan Zholtovskii called Neo-Palladianism.

TT: It has the little Renaissance palazzo in the middle.

RP: Exactly. But it's the same architect. In the interior court, with the structure that houses the turbines, which is visible only from within the compound and can't be seen from anywhere else, he flung caution to the winds. He saw what he could do. He was never so radical again. It was an experiment and unique in his output.

TT: The Revolution placed the social program at the forefront of cultural life. This must have played an enormous role for architecture. The building types for the initial period included the radio tower, different forms of housing, factories, factory kitchens, workers' clubs that were cultural centers, power stations and sports facilities.

Still, an analysis that stops at the level of the building program leaves out the richness of the aesthetic, intellectual and cultural currents that found expression. A new style must be motivated by a living complex of moods and sentiments, of psychological needs; that which had been the status quo before the Revolution could no longer satisfy the needs of post-Revolutionary Russia. How would you characterize early Soviet Modernism?

RP: From one example to another there is an enquiring creativity at work offering considerable variations on the basic typologies. There were experiments with prefabrication which were totally different from Ginzburg's experiments. For example, the Vesnin brothers did prefabricated housing in Ivanovo which is very advanced, really intelligent and well thought out [First Workers' Settlement, 1924-26: architects Leonid Vesnin and others]. It is so different in emphasis from the Ginzburg approach.

The eye is drawn to the boards laid into the stucco, which I initially thought were demonstrations of joints between the units. Actually they are not, which is a little disappointing, shall we say. They are not structural at all, just planks laid on as a decorative scheme. But the architects did articulate the unit system very carefully, which becomes apparent in the variable form of the footprint of the different types and the way the

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windows are laid out. Everything was coming off a production line and yet everything could be put together in different configurations. It was an early example of that kind of prefabricated approach to housing.

International connections

TT: What attracted leading architects from Europe and America, men such as Erich Mendelsohn and Le Corbusier, 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 number of the major architects in Moscow literally stepped aside, removing themselves from competition and issuing a statement in favor of the Tsentrosoyuz project being awarded to Le Corbusier. It was the biggest project he had ever built, and he was very committed to it. There were all kinds of difficulties in funding, political opposition, and the shortages of materials we have already discussed; nothing was easy to come by. The work was overseen in Moscow by Nikolai Kolli. Le Corbusier never saw it completed.

In spite of everything, it came out very well. Le Corbusier eventually sent a photographer, Lucien Hervé, to record it in the 1950s. But as far as we know, the view of the ramps had never been published until I took the picture, which is remarkable when you think about it. That is one of the great Corbusian spaces; perhaps technical limitations prevented Hervé from making such an encompassing image.

With Mendelsohn it was the same. He had travelled in Russia and written a book, *Russland—Europa—Amerika*, 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 Textile 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—a singularly original building, what's left of it. It took me a long time to find it because the drawing I had was a section through one of the factory floors, which was probably destroyed in the war. The main factory spaces 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-draft that would take all the fiber and fluff out of the atmosphere to improve working conditions. That was what I was looking for, and that was the bit that did not survive.

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

RP: During fallow periods, in winter, and at 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, yet quite beautiful in its simplicity. What they achieved with such primitive means is remarkable.

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

If you look carefully at details in the ramps of Ivan Nikolaev's Textile Institute Student Housing, for example, the round columns at the acute angles of the triangles that constitute each ascending level 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 actually quite exceptional. 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 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 and society

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 is one of the major catastrophes of the history of architecture in the 20th century that in Russia they were never given the opportunity to develop their ideas fully and work them out. Even within that short period of time, the physical discourse, the ferment of ideas and the effort to construct represent a heroic achievement, considering the small number of contributing architects. 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 rearguard 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, to attempt to fathom their intentions and render that intent through the filter of time. The idea was to articulate the poetic vocabulary of Modernism and also to allow the accumulation of time to have a part in the dialogue, to give a depth and richness to the subject that it might not have had when it was built.

For me, perhaps the most emblematic photograph of the whole series is the blue interior of Moisei Ginzburg and Ignatii Milinis' Narkomfin Communal House. It is actually less about architecture than most of the pictures. It's about the way life is being lived in that space, and more, because it spans two or three generations.

Narkomfin, designed for the workers of the Commissariat of Finance, is a very successful building—one of the masterpieces of the century. Let us hope it survives. It came at a key moment and had a vast influence on the further development of architecture: Le Corbusier borrowed heavily from it and deployed what he had learned in his Unité d?habitation in Marseille, though almost 20 years elapsed before he had the chance.

It was assembled with such intelligence … the transparency of it, the possibility to walk underneath it. The roof garden was beautifully thought

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out, though not completely realised, 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, inviting plant growth to be incorporated into the principal façade and thus softening the rigor of its composition, is beautifully done. Everything is brought together with a sense of community; it really is a communal house.

TT: It seems this building concentrated many of the fundamental characteristics of early Modernism.

You mention "transparency." In studying the photographs, one begins to appreciate that this term has literal, figurative and conceptual significance. You also call it "extraordinarily humane." Perhaps you could explain these ideas a bit more.

RP: The entry level is now so corrupted that it's difficult to get any sense of what it was once like. The whole idea of the building floating on pilotis [pillars or stilts] has been eliminated by it having been enclosed in the shoddiest construction imaginable. So the open character of the entry level as planned has been replaced by a dour and cave-like gloom. However, as soon as you ascend, the powerful original character of the building begins to assert itself. The whole trajectory seems to be towards lightness; the landings are suspended and free of the glass curtain wall, allowing you to see all the way up and down the full height of the building. The glass is old, cracked and dirty, but it is still possible to understand the intention.

TT: In a number of images there is bright sun, suggesting something special about how the building was oriented.

RP: Upon entering the interior street levels, on the eastern side and catching the morning sun, the proportions of the corridor do not seem cramped. It is open and airy. With the light from the windows, and radiators to warm it in winter, it must have been a congenial place to pass the time of day with your neighbors.

The plan appears effortless when you are passing through it, but is actually characterized by great ingenuity and a masterly arrangement of space. The degree of variability in the different apartment types, still accompanied by formal rigor in the way they are arranged, provides every unit with well-lit space. Some of the apartments have a clear connection with both sides of the building, allowing exposure to the sun in both the morning and afternoon.

The westerly façade is characterized by large expanses of double glazing, further enhancing the lightness and transparency of the interior. This was a time when fresh air and sunlight were thought of as highly therapeutic. This aspect reached its apogee in [Finnish architect] Alvar Aalto's sanatorium at Paimio, which was being constructed at the same time.

Ginzburg equipped Narkomfin with similar facilities: places to exercise and sunbathe on the roof. There is a coherence and free-flowing character to the whole scheme and a clear sense of idealism in the search for new patterns of existence to shape communal life.

TT: Jean-Louis Cohen has written about the way Soviet industry of the time combined relatively new materials and techniques with truly ancient methods. Ginzburg seems to use glass and steel in a bold and straightforward way that challenges the technical limitations he encountered.

RP: The building was very advanced technically, a factor that has had an effect on its present condition. There was little time to test the materials and there were problems from the beginning with some of the components. The blocks tended to be permeable and thus, compounded by official neglect, the surface stucco is continually being forced off in the harsh winters.

However, the core frame in cast reinforced concrete was so well constructed that it remains uncompromised. Other elements of the construction were ancient, however. Behind the stucco of the rooftop apartment for Commissar of Finance Nikolai Miliutin, for example, you can see that the insulation was chopped straw.

Recent photographs

TT: The catalogue includes two photographs from your recent work at the sanatorium and annex at Kislovodsk. Construction of the complex occurred in two phases, the first part from 1934 to 1937, and the annex begun in 1947, the year after the principal architect had died. Would you comment on the significance of the complex and the difference between the two phases?

RP: Toward the end, the sense of optimism was rapidly being extinguished. At that moment, in 1934, Ginzburg was commissioned by G.K. Ordzhonikidze, one of Stalin's oldest collaborators, to lead a team of architects to build the Narkomtiazhprom sanatorium [Sanatorium for workers in the Commissariat of Heavy Industry]. The predicament of the Modernist architects working at this critical moment is expressed in this building. I sense a will to confound the arbiters of Stalin's historicist taste by using ancient motifs of which they were no doubt entirely ignorant. The political climate was in flux once more but the regulatory oversight had not yet become completely ossified.

The plan for the sanatorium makes compromises, but with finesse, and still looking for a workable solution within the strictures handed down from above. The central Therapy Block which stands at the focus of the development is still highly innovative in its construction, filled with flying stairs, bridges and large expanses of glass and with a strong linearity in the sweeping arc of its plan.

Behind and above the treatment section, Ginzburg repeats for the bathing establishment the circular plan that had been used for public baths throughout the Modernist period.

But here the idea is elaborated with a colonnade surrounding a central atrium and with finely executed mosaics let into the floor. The interior of the Therapy Block represented a major change in Ginzburg's use of space. It begins to take on attributes of the "palaces for the people" exemplified in the lavishly appointed metro stations in Moscow. Ivan Leonidov's stairs, which define the main axis of the whole complex, are a part of this effort to create a dramatic processional program.

Narkomfin has a more intimate attitude toward space than the much more imperial Kislovodsk sanatorium. The later project is elegant in its distribution of form and space, but what is missing is the sense of radical experimentation that was so distinctive in Ginzburg's masterpiece Narkomfin. In the later annex all hope has been extinguished. I was told by the current librarian that the architect had a falling out with his collaborators. By the time the project went forward, he was dead. His grandson confirmed, however, that he had been involved with the design.

The exaggerated rustication of the ground floor stonework and the huge arches and oculi [round windows or openings] are almost preposterous in their gigantism. The whole structure is uncharacteristic; full of gloomy halls and corridors. I found it impossible to believe it was the work of Ginzburg, the architect of transparency and light. There is a cruel irony in that when Corbusier was planning the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille, using Narkomfin as his source of inspiration, Ginzburg was compelled to produce a structure he must have considered anachronistic.

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Contemporary practice and preservation

TT: Can you tell us something about the relation of this work to current practice and the motive for preserving it?

RP: There is always an unease between architects having to fulfill a brief from the client, cost, and architectural intent. I think the Russian Modernists were trying to break free from those kinds of constraints. In spite of the difficulties, there was an underlying optimism and vigor. Visionaries saw possibilities and, against the odds, found ways to produce some canonic buildings that define Modernism in the early years of the Soviet regime.

That is why I and an ever-increasing number of others are intent on securing the future of some of the most significant structures. I am aware, at the same time, of the perils arising from ending up with a few token "masterpieces" divorced from the urban context. There is a catastrophe unfolding in Moscow at present. They have torn down listed buildings from before 1812. The texture of the city is being erased.

Such an indiscriminate wave of destruction and unbridled speculative construction is unbearable. The city has altered beyond recognition in the years since my own first trip in 1993. When they do make decisions to retain part of the legacy, the results are as often as not a fiasco.

The Hotel Moskva [1932-38], one of Aleksei Shchusev's late works, was knocked down completely to build a huge underground shopping mall and garage, and then rebuilt as a concrete facsimile on top. The mentality appears to be that it must be better now because it has air conditioning and a concrete structure. But all the original detail and atmosphere have been swept away.

TT: What about the preservation movement? Where is it coming from and who supports it?

RP: It seems to be coming up from the bottom. This is not just about the Modernist legacy but about the whole fabric of the city. The city government has looked on while developers have torn down buildings that officially were protected by the same government. People are paid to look the other way.

TT: Allowing these monuments to decay seems to have another motive beyond money. There must be a real fear of the history these buildings represent. Some people would just as soon they were forgotten. The experiment had failed and the record held no particular interest. History would carry on as if the Russian Revolution were really an aberration. But the ideas have refused to fade.

RP: I think the tide is turning. Since the collapse of the Soviet regime there has been a tendency to see all the works created during those years, in architecture especially, as being bad by definition.

I don't think it is fear so much as blindness, an inability to accept the transformative intention of the visionaries who conceived the radical buildings of the Modernist period. But now there are moves afoot to draw attention to the legacy of the Russian Modernists, with the emergence within the last decade of the Moscow Architecture Preservation Society. It has highlighted the plight of the entire Modernist canon.

TT: What are your plans in the near future?

RP: There is still work to do to finish this project. There are cities I have still not been able to reach. Even in Moscow there are buildings which are closed and inaccessible. I intend to record as many of these structures as I am able, running a race to make the study as complete as possible before too much more is swept away.

Putting these pictures together as an exhibition has been a revelation. Even a subject as familiar as Aleksei Shchusev's Lenin Mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow took people by surprise. When you go through it as a visitor, being hurried through the tomb chamber, you are so dominated by the body lying there that you pay little attention to the space. It is Shchusev's masterpiece, symbolizing that moment of historical change and the focus of the regime on the relics of Lenin. The main ceremonial event of the Soviet calendar, the May Day parade, passed in front of the assembled leaders, who took the salute literally standing on Lenin's body.

The exhibition opens with a very different image, Vladimir Shukhov's Shabolovka Radio Tower, which was about transparency, openness and spreading the word, the dawn of the socialist state. And the mausoleum, at the other end of the sequence, is the heart of darkness.

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