

MOSCOW CITY CENTER

SOCIALIST VISIONS AND REVISIONS

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Introduction

The historical core of the Kremlin and its immediate surroundings has been the focal area of the Soviet capital. The center city had been a subject of several attempts of proposing a new construction. The Soviets desired to make their own mark amidst the historical buildings dated from the Tsarist era. Such marker was to express the greatness and supremacy of the Soviet social and political order.

Quite a few proposals were considered on adding significant new buildings and opening up the squares and streets neighboring the Kremlin. These design opportunities received considerable attention among the Soviet architects. Fierce polemic battles were held

between the Avant Gardists and the Academic architects of the Old School, on which architectural style would win the favor of the party and the government. Little room was left for thoughts on respecting the quiet picturesque silhouette of the historical core of the city. To win one had to win big.

The evolution of Soviet architecture, beginning in 1917 and ending in 1989, and the continuous attempts to put a socialist landmark in the Moscow city center, are traced in the epic struggle to design buildings which would symbolize for the Russian people and the whole world the political ideals and achievements of the new Soviet society and its proletarian leadership. This study presents an analysis of three significant projects planned

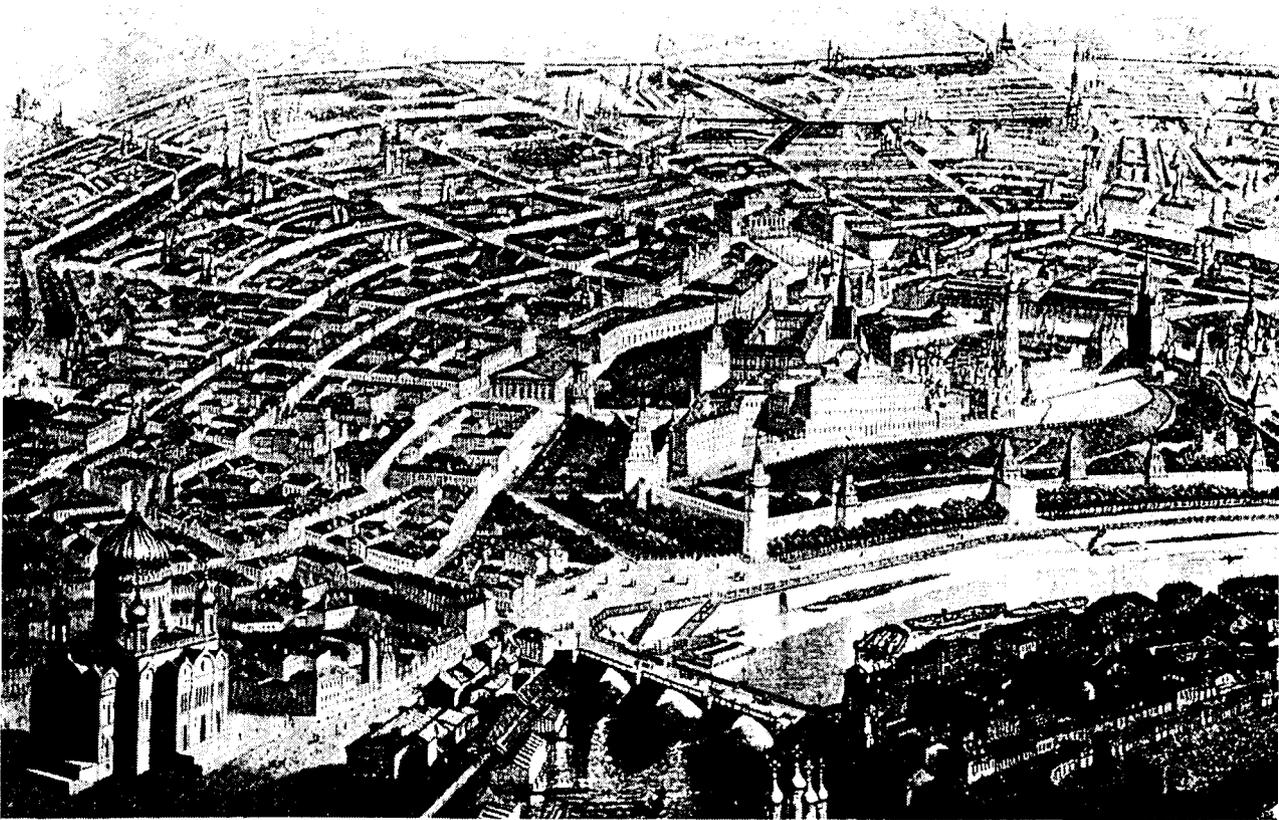


Fig. 1. Moscow City Center, print from 1860s. Kremlin is on right and the Cathedral of the Christ Savior, by Konstantin Ton, 1812, is on left.

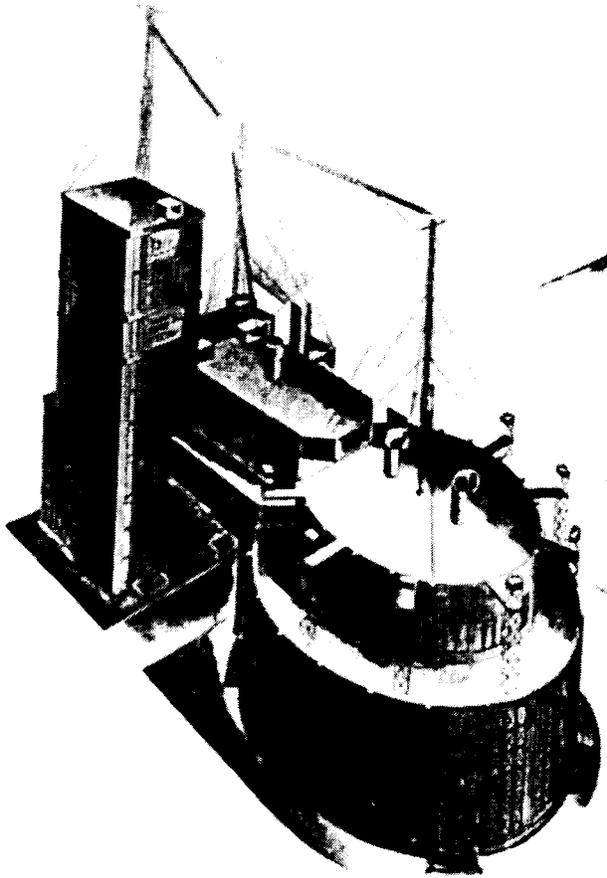


Fig. 2. Third prize competition entry of the Palace of Labor, 1923, by Vesnin Brothers, established the Constructivist language in Russian architecture. Axonometric drawing.

to be built immediately adjacent to the Kremlin: the Place of the Soviets (1931-1938); the National Commissariat of Heavy Industry (1934-1936); and the Central Museum of Lenin (1973-1976). Successive design competitions, held at crucial times in the political, social and cultural life in the Soviet Union, heralded substantial changes in architectural design philosophy and in urbanism and architecture as art form. While these projects had not been constructed, times have changed, and the Cathedral of the Christ Savior, which was demolished in 1931 to

make room for the Palace of the Soviets, is now being rebuilt. The lessons from the 70 years of existence of the Soviet Union are that politics and architecture must not mix. No government should control creativity nor dictate a style for propaganda for self aggrandizement and political immortality. Sadly enough, it was not only the facades of buildings and silhouettes of cities which suffered from the imposition of the Moscow rule, but the architects and their families, and the entire socio-cultural scene were victimized and marked for good.

The Palace of the Soviets

The design competition for the Palace of Labor, a combined government center and a central house of culture was held in 1922-1923. The Palace of Labor site was north of the Kremlin on Okotonoyardsky Square on the parcel presently occupied by the hotel Moskva. This predecessor to the canonical Palace of the Soviets set the precedent. While the results of this competition produced through the entry of the Vesnin brothers the model of Modern Russian Architecture, the program was typical of a certain gigantism, which was to reappear throughout the history of the later period, a gigantism that expressed the desire to outdo the capitalist world, even in the scale of its buildings. Though quite unpractical, considering the resources available at the time, the program nevertheless reflected an entirely novel conception of what a Soviet building should be. The Vesnins established here the architectural vocabulary of Constructivism.

The competition for the design of the Palace of the Soviets — a structure intended as the architectural symbol for the Soviet state — was, in 1931, open for international participation. Among the invited entrants were Le Corbusier, the Perret brothers of France and Walter Gropius, Erich Mendelsohn, Hans Poelzig of Germany. The American entries submitted were by the Second Prize winner A. Kastner and O. Stonorov, Simon Braines, and Hector Hamilton, who was one of the three Grand Prizes awarded in the field of 160 entries. But none of the entries brought forth a picture of a monument shaped in the new style that would satisfy the jury as representing both the masses and their leadership. The Russian Avant-garde entries of Melnikov, Ladovsky, Ginsburg, and the Vesnin brothers were rejected, too. The new style did not yet have concrete form.

Much later, and after two more rounds of invited competitions (1932-1933), Boris Yofan, in a style imitating



Fig. 3. The Palace of the Soviets limited competition for five, 1932-33, winning design by Boris Yofan. Model photograph shows relationships to the Kremlin ensemble.



Fig. 4. Moscow comprehensive plan, 1935. The radial boulevards (prospekts) had been defined. The Palace of the Soviets is positioned southwest of the Kremlin.

the Italian Renaissance, won the favor of the jury, of Stalin and his circle, and certainly of the great masses too. This image stood as a symbol of the new style named Socialist Realism.

Eclectic architectural hybrids, a convergence of Neo-Renaissance and Neo-Classicism, were modified with some national ornaments and were usually decorated with the insignia of the Soviet State. Such hybrids were designed after the competition to “express” the progressive ideals of Socialism.

The Urbanist Setting and Silhouette of the Palace

In 1940, the Academy of Architecture of the USSR, Department of Urbanism, issued a book called *Architectural Composition of Cities*, written by A.V. Bunin and M.G. Kruglova. According to the authors: “This work was done in order to acquire the town planning principles of past epochs so that they could be applied in fulfilling the tasks of urban design in the Soviet Union.”¹ It was clear that they contributed to the doctrine of Socialist Realism of Soviet architecture and urbanism. The book devoted two chapters to the Palace of the Soviets in relationship to the center of Moscow. In 1931, the June plenary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party passed an important resolution relating to urban planning and development. “The battle has been joined to give Soviet architecture a new ideological content, to assimilate all the progressive elements of our cultural heritage, to create highly artistic forms that will fully satisfy the aesthetic needs of the members of the socialist society.”² The resolution of the Central Committee “concerning the general plan for the reconstruction of the city of Moscow” (1935), which the



Fig. 5. The Palace of the Soviets final approved design, 1935, by Yofan, Gelfreykh, and Shchuko. Perspective drawing with Kremlin on left.

people rightly called the “Stalin Plan,” is a monument of “historical significance” in relation to the new practice of architecture.³ This plan, prepared on “the initiative and under the direction” of Josef Stalin, opened a “new” and dismal era in the development of architecture and city planning.

The prominent site of the Palace was chosen next to the Kremlin for the purpose of having a relationship with the castle complex, while belonging to the center of the city at the same time. During congresses, sessions, or conferences, there would be enormous demonstrations held in proximity to the Palace. The site location is perfect for these occasions, because the Palace square lies between the two major circulation belts: the central city circle and the circle of boulevards.

In its dimensions, the Palace would be the tallest building in the world. “This makes us proud but it also creates some doubts. Will not, in fact, the Kremlin and the center city be repressed by the grandiosity of the structure?”⁴ To answer this question, one must start with an example. For the Kremlin buildings, the Cathedral of the Christ Savior (which formerly stood on the site of the Palace) was unnecessarily voluminous and heavy. According to the authors, an explanation for this is that a blind cubic volume always is expressive of a large building. Thus the Cathedral claimed a leading position and suppressed the nearby buildings.

The height of the full monument was finally set at 415 meters. The Kremlin towers were 50-60 meters high. “This contrast is so strong that it is necessary to isolate all the small-scale buildings in the vicinity which are comparable to the monument.”⁵ The height of the Palace was determined by the dimensions of the crowning sculpture. Numerous sketches and model studies

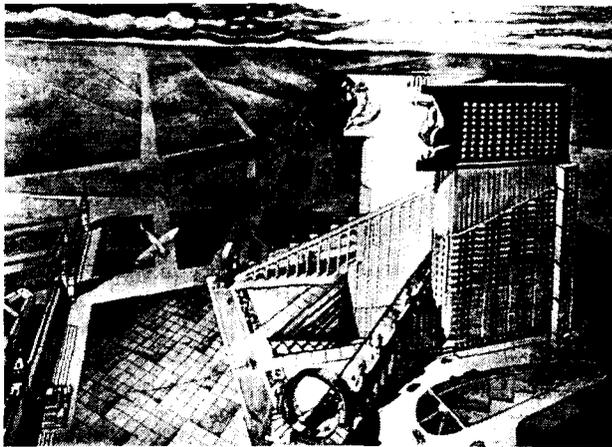


Fig. 6. *The Commissariat of Heavy Industry (Narkomtyazhprom) competition entry by Konstantin Melnikov, second round of competition. Red Square site, 1934-36. Perspective drawing with Kremlin on left.*

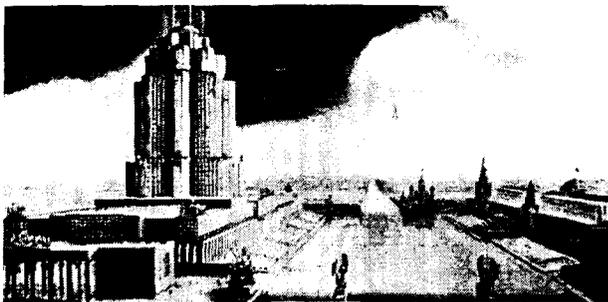


Fig. 7. *The Commissariat of Heavy Industry (Narkomtyazhprom) competition entry by Vesnin Brothers, second round of competition. Red Square site, 1934-36. Perspective drawing with Kremlin on right.*

“proved” to the design team of Gelfreykh, Yofan, and Shchuko that the pedestal had to be lifted. The dimension of the figure at 50-75 meters was “recommended” by the Construction Committee. Stalin personally changed the height to 100 meters in the final design.

The National Commissariat of Heavy Industry

While the design for the Palace of the Soviets was being “continuously improved” by young Yofan and his mentors, a second attack on the center city skyline was staged.

The program for an enormous building — the headquarters of heavy industry, Narkomtyazhprom — was the subject for an architectural design competition held in 1934-1936. Run in three rounds, the competition site for the first and second round was the prominent Red Square, across from the Lenin Mausoleum, on the parcel occupied by the department store G.U.M. The third round site was located South-East of the Kremlin ensemble, on the Zaryada Quay, presently occupied by the Hotel Rossiya.

The list of entrants includes both architects of the Soviet architectural Avant-garde of the 1920s and the

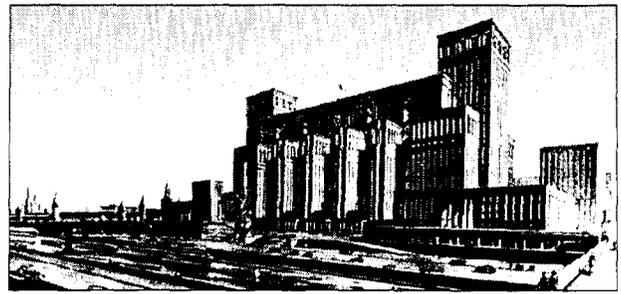


Fig. 8. *The Commissariat of Heavy Industry (Narkomtyazhprom) competition entry by Alexei Shchuko, third round of competition. Zaryada Quay site, 1934-36. Perspective drawing with Kremlin on left.*

protagonists of Socialist Realism. The evidence of deterioration of the progressive ideals of Constructivism shown in competition entries was clear.

Melnikov submitted a symmetrical design of the machinist aesthetics. Ginsburg maintained the principles of Constructivism in his design. But Leonidov attracted the attention. In an asymmetrical composition of three towers of a rectangle, circle, and a triangle in plan, he “strived to find the unity of the new ministry with the Kremlin complex and the St. Basil’s Cathedral.”⁶

At this time a derogatory term “Leonidovism” had been coined in the Soviet architectural press condemning the “cosmopolitan” modernists who did not obey the design methods of Socialist Realism. The entries of Fomin, Yofan and Shchuko show the obedience in the heavily conceived Historicism.

The Vesnin brothers were awarded the first place. The round one composition of four towers connected with sky bridges is similar to the Ginsburg’s entry who at this time collaborated with the Vesnins. The second and third round designs were dominated by virtually an identical tower of an eight spike footprint. Here, in the idiom of the superstructure pedestal for Lenin statue of the Palace of the Soviets, the setbacks of the later Stalinist skyscrapers were anticipated.

The Central Museum of Lenin in Moscow

The Soviets have attributed enormous importance to the mandate of the revolutionary leader and founder of the Union, Vladimir Ilich Lenin. Among the great theorists and practitioners of Communism only Lenin statements, pictures and statues had been everywhere. Certainly, the same cannot be said about any other past Soviet leader.

Three architectural competitions to design a Central Museum of Lenin in Moscow were held in 1969-1972. The competition series, as has been painfully familiar from many previous attempts, did not produce satisfactory results. Three teams of architects lead by A. Poliansky, M. Posokhin and E. Rozanov were charged with the responsibility for continuing design of the Lenin Museum. The concentrated effort of the teams lasted three years, from 1973 to 1976. Despite the fact that many design schemes were studied in this three year period and despite the fact that successful Posokhin was one of the team leaders, (the author of such projects as the Kalinin

Porspekt, Palace of Congresses in the Kremlin and the Soviet Pavilion at the EXPO-67), not even this effort brought a satisfactory design solution.

Design by Rozanov, et al, on the site of the Swimming Pool Moskva brought back memories of the bombastic final design solution of Boris Yofan for the Palace of the Soviets. The site for both, of course, was identical. Though much smaller in size, Rozanov's design was based upon the same idea as that of Yofan. The building formed a pedestal for a statue of Lenin which was placed in the central point of the plan. While the final design solution of Yofan reached a height of 415 meters, the scheme of the Rozanov team was only some 100 meters in height. By all means, the 1973 Lenin Museum scheme is more modest since in Yofan's design the statue alone measured 100 meters.

In the site planning design, the grandiosity of this proposal exceeded that of Yofan. The ceremonial square between the proposed Museum and the Kremlin castle was to be an open paved plaza, as in the case of the Palace of the Soviets. In addition, Rozanov's team extended the axis of the ceremonial square to the other side of the Museum, parallel with the Moskva river, to triple the overall length of this shaft of open space. Numerous existing buildings in this area would have to be demolished to make way for the poorly thought out concept.

None of the design schemes of the three teams proved to be the right answer to the design for the Central Museum of Lenin. After evaluating the three team's design work, a governmental committee on architecture and construction of civic buildings recommended that the teams be united into a single design group. In December 1976, a special office was set up in Moscow under the triumvirate leadership of the previous three team leaders: Poliansky, Posokhin and Rozanov. The new office was commissioned to devote the year 1977 to work on the Museum project. In one year's time, 45 design schemes were prepared by the office.

The preferred schemes placed the Museum right on the top of the swimming pool, imbedded in the Palace foundations. There was little difference among the three variants. They all featured a square in the outside perimeter of the plan with a circle in the middle. The circle naturally followed the circumference of the foundation ring. Columns wrapped around the entire square of the plan. The statue of Lenin was planted in the front plaza. Stylistically, the designs were of Classical origin. They were compositions displaying a strict symmetry.

Was the Soviet history going to repeat itself? The cubage of the Lenin Museum was much smaller than the cubage of the Palace of the Soviets; but, on the other hand

its significance was the same if not greater. However, one burning question remained: Did the design of a civic building in the Soviet Union have to be in a style of stripped Neoclassicism?

This same question was answered once before by Moisey Ginsburg, in the twenties. He remarked that "if, before the Revolution, our stylistic journeys to the past of the Renaissance and Classicism were justified, then the last few years (from the Revolution through the twenties) showed us the truth: that it is certainly easier to move forward when you look in the direction you are going."

Conclusion

The Palace of the Soviet or the Lenin Museum and the Ministry of Heavy Industry, all designed to serve as the supreme architectural symbol for the Soviet society, were never built. The G.U.M. department store on the Red Square, flanking the Kremlin from the east, continues serving the shoppers. Consistent with the fall of the Soviet totalitarian regime, the rebuilding of the 1812 architect Konstantin Ton's Cathedral of the Christ Savior, which was flanking the Kremlin from the west (and was demolished in 1931 to make room for the Palace of the Soviets) is nearing its completion. The Moscow city center has not been much altered but the years of socialist Realism are visible throughout the city. The mammoth buildings of the Stalin's Gothic, built between 1949 and 1957, ranging from 20-30 stories high with central towers and spires, exceed several times the height of the tallest bell towers of medieval Moscow and changed its landscape beyond everything that had been previously built in the Soviet times.

NOTES

- ¹ A. V. Bunin and M. G. Kruglova, *Architectural Composition of Cities* (Moscow, 1940).
- ² M. P. Tsapenko, *On Realist Foundations of Soviet Architecture* (Moscow, 1952).
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Bunin and Kruglova, *Architectural Composition of Cities* (Moscow, 1940).
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ El Lissitsky, The Forum of Socialist Moscow, *Architecture USSR*. Moscow, No. 10, (1934).

REFERENCES

This paper is based on the book entitled the *Palace of the Soviets - The Paradigm of Architecture in the USSR* (Colorado Springs, CO: Three Continents Press).