"We must not only build but rebuild. We are rebuilding industry, we are rebuilding agriculture. This restructuring (perestroika) of production creates a new conception of life that nurtures culture, including course architecture."

El Lissitsky, 1929

THERE are few countries in the world that evoke and provoke such instant and contradictory emotions as the Soviet Union.

Fear and loathing, joy and pain, crime and punishment. A continent of 15 autonomous republics, designed by the events that followed 1917 from an agrarian and still largely feudal economy into the age of modernity as an industrialised military superpower.

The development of all societies is pitted and pockmarked by contradictions, and the diversity of opinions that arise in the West over the fundamental character and nature of the Soviet Union is reflected inside as well. In 1936 Stalin declared that the country was at the gate to communism. Brezhnev decided that it had "developed socialism". Gorbatchev has declared that it is nowhere near communism, that Brezhnev's slogan was meaningless (what's the difference between developed socialism and communism?), and that all it has is the basis for building socialism.

On arriving for a year of research into architecture and construction, I found myself in an era of new-found slogans: "restructuring", "openness", "democracy", "acceleratation", "all power to the Soviets", the active participation of the masses", and "the struggle against bureaucracy. Without an understanding of the meaning and historical roots of these slogans, architecture and construction make very little sense. It is not the first time that we have heard these terms, and many of the 250 million Soviet people are playing a guessing game as to what it all might mean in the late 1980s. The word "perestroika" first appeared as a working concept in the 20s, as the Lissitsky quote above indicates.

The scale of construction. If the clouds are clear as you circle above the suburbs of Moscow, you will witness what appears as a huge 3D checkerboard. The next time a visitor will be seeing this is on the way out. But if you venture away from the centre the mass oceanic construction of the micro-regions (as the serviced integrated neighborhoods of the city are called) but the path.

The picture on the right is a snapshot of the cityscape of Moscow at the beginning of the 20th century, as seen from the sky. The city is divided into several large districts, each with its own distinct characteristics. The buildings are tall and closely packed, with few trees or open spaces.

The cityscape shows the typical features of a Soviet city: large, rectangular buildings with few windows, and a lack of green spaces. The streets are narrow and winding, with few sidewalks or parks.

The text continues with a discussion of the challenges of urban planning in a socialist country, highlighting the contradictions and tensions between modernity and tradition.

At ground level it's the First floor

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