

"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, dragged 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 gateway to communism. Brezhnev decided that it had "developed socialism". Gorbachev has de-

# BACK FROM THE USSR

Architect Jonathan Charley spent a year in the Soviet Union. Here he discusses some of the issues of ideology and practice that perestroika is raising for architects.

creed 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", "acceleration", "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

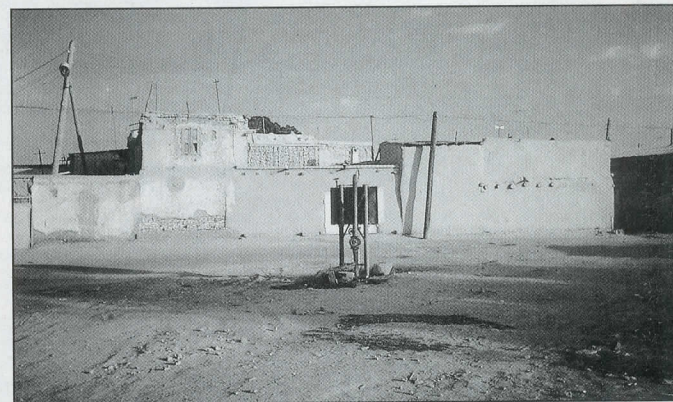
quote above indicates.

#### 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 chequer-board. The next time a visitor will be seeing this on the way out. But if you venture away from the centre the mass oceanic construction of the micro-regions (as the serviced integrated neighbourhoods of the city are called) bar the path.



General view of Moscow.



Traditional Uzbek housing, Samarkand.

Thirty years of industrial house construction, regiment upon regiment of concrete blocks and panels seemingly stretching away to the steppe and beyond. In among the maze there are, of course, landmarks: some handsome post-war brick housing, Novie Chermushki, the perplexed birthplace of the micro-region, and a splattering of experimental housing complexes, much of the inspiration for which came from the 20s.

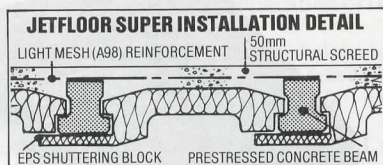
There are of course many other post-war buildings and housing worthy of note, but ironically none of them possess the same awesome power and visual violence as the centre of Moscow and its monumental radial highways. Here the Stalinist vision of the proletarian city swamps the eyes like the icy edge of mid-January. Monumental, neo-classical, heroic and despotic, the seven fearful Stalin castles own the skyline. Prospect Mira and Lenin Prospect are typical of the highways, adorned either side

by a parade of mostly individually designed housing and social/administrative buildings: thick with arches, columns, romantic motifs and hero posturing. Stalin was trying to build something like a new Rome; Peter the Great wanted to build another Venice.

The current leadership is also concerned with radical construction, but could not help but use Stalin's theatre as the stage set for the 70th anniversary of the revolution, a ritual where SS-20s and soldiers in Bolshevik costumes flooded the streets. The rules are different though. Stalin's architects turned to the Stakhanovite labour movement to construct his vision. But now people can no longer live on enthusiasm and ideology. Raising the interest of workers in their production tasks is left to the regime of material incentives. Along with the development of co-operatives, they represent the principal tools for meeting the promise of an individual flat or home for every



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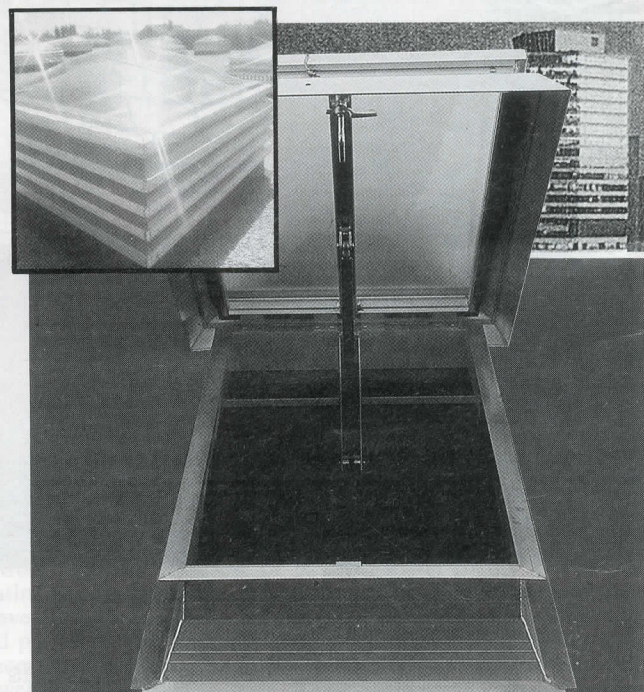
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