Russia

REFORM CLUB

Jonathan Charley talks to Andrei Gozak, one of the editors and chief designer of *Arkhitektura SSSR*, and Viacheslav Glazychev, vice-president of the architects union.

THE Soviets love slogans, and one of Gorbachev's favourites along with "restructuring", "openness" and "acceleration" is the construction of a new phase in Soviet history built on the "strict observance of law" — law that will deepen democracy in political, economic and cultural life.

Of particular importance for architecture and the construction industry is the new law on state enterprises. This requires all enterprises, not only construction organisations, to move towards economic independence, self accounting, and self management.

Such a law, while being a precondition for change, does not by itself guarantee the transition to greater autonomy and self management. This is in a country which not long ago revealed it had a colossal 17 million bureaucrats, so it is not surprising to find a certain amount of scepticism among the population over Gorbachev's ability to deepen democracy and make such a vast army publicly accountable. This entrenched group has for a long time been one of the reasons for the discrepancy between what is written constitutionally in Soviet law and the subsequent manifestation of such legislation in daily life.

The drafting of new laws and proposals for the future of Soviet architecture is gaining momentum. Again, while not guaranteeing change, they are an essential precondition. The architectural profession in recent years has been vociferous in calling for greater democracy and an end to rigidly centralised management. The success of the architectural profession's reformation and reconstitution is dependent not only on the wholesale restructuring of economic and cultural life across Soviet society, but also on the active participation in and support of such reforms throughout all levels of the population.

The heads started rolling in the architects union not long ago with the ousting of conservatives, and their replacement by representatives of a new current in Soviet architectural thinking. Yuri Gnedovski was elected president, and Viacheslav Glazychev vice-president. This move was mirrored in the world of education by the appointment of Alexander Kudrvatsev as new head of the Moscow Institute of Architecture — tentative signs of a new era in tolerance and permissiveness.

Alongside the law on state enterprises there are proposals for the decentralisation and the granting of greater autonomy to both design and build organisations; the formation of design and build combinations; a considerable increase in the role played by architectural and building co-operatives; the development of effective public participation in the design process; and the struggle to furnish architects with more rights on site particularly regarding quality control.

All of these processes are in motion but while the architects union supports them, it seems it is not ready to dent the state monopoly on architectural production. Many people feel that the sooner the present state system is dismantled or at least radically reorganised, the better. This is a slow and cumbersome process. Attempts are being made to organise co-operative type teams in state design offices, but like the independent architectural co-operatives that have appeared over the last few years, they are still in their infancy.

The way the future unfolds is largely unpredictable. It is closer to chaos than a plan, and closer to a battlefield than an organised experiment. Achieving such long-term changes requires an army of committed enthusiasts who have, above all, the political muscle to influence or even actually become the decision makers. While a package of draft laws and proposals have been submitted to the Supreme Soviet (in theory the highest legislative organ in the Soviet Union), little progress will emerge until the architects union secures a strong lobby in the newly formed parliament. In the recent elections, Glazychev unsuccessfully stood as a candidate representing the architects union, but another of the union's candidates was elected.

Gozak (left) and Glazychev.

Certainly both he and Andrei Gozak are active in trying to re-establish the architectural profession after its marginalisation in the building team which followed the introduction of systems building. They share a reluctance to see the future of Soviet architecture built on the present state system of "design by catalogue" and centralised management.

In this they differ from many of their immediate colleagues of the same post-war generation, who are terrified by even the mention of such things as "architectural pluralism", and are inevitably more concerned with maintaining the existing order of things.

Alongside them is the giant building industry complex, a large chunk of which also shares a more conservative attitude to change. More than 11 million building workers are involved in the construction industry as a whole. If they along with management cannot be motivated to raise productivity, improve quality, and become more spontaneous in their response to building demand, it is difficult to see how the architectural profession will succeed in its objectives.

The situation is further complicated by the industry being trapped in Soviet building technology's rigid development. Despite attempts at a more flexible form of mass production, the industry's commitment to industrialised systems building, especially in housing, puts a brake on some of the more imaginative and radical design schemes, and inevitably preserves and perpetuates some of the present system's bad aspects.

To fundamentally restructure building technology would require an enormous devaluation in the fixed capital represented by thousands of concrete panel plants built up over the past thirty years. This adds fuel to the traditional argument of building economists that prefabricated concrete panel construction is the most economical form of building technology in terms of labour productivity and space.

As a result many young people have rejected architectural practice. Nevertheless they are physically and emotionally far better prepared to take on the new challenge than their immediate elders. In some ways though, even the recent generation of architectural graduates are still far too conditioned by a pre-glasnost education. This has left them as good technicians with superlative graphic skills, but a low level of "humanitarian education". It is perhaps with the next generation entering architectural schools that hope lies.

But without a more broad based support, there is a limit to the extent that even the next generation of architects can effect change. Critical here is the question of quality — of how to restructure the building industry complex so it has as its primary objective the needs of the consumer rather than mere fulfillment of the quantative targets in the five-year plan.

A parliamentary architectural lobby will only be effective if public opinion outside organs of government and party can be mobilised towards issues of quality. Firstly to the quality of life in general, closely followed by the quality of the environment. This includes ecological as well as architectural sanity. If this is accomplished, then progress can be made towards reform, and real pressure can be put on the local soviets, who are slowly breaking away from the big ministries' stranglehold.

Moscow may continue to give guidelines as to how and where to invest in the protection of the natural environment, and production of the built environment, but it has become clear that the power to make decisions and to practically implement them should increasingly be shifted to local soviets and other local social organisations.

Similarly, the ability of architects and the construction industry to meet the cultural and climatic needs of ethnic groups is dependent on the development of real autonomy in the different republics. One of the most important things glasnost has so far given is this platform for criticism and self expression. Without it, both personal and national tensions would have continued to boil until they exploded in far worse ways than we have seen recently.

All this is taking place against a background of continuing impatience at the marginal results so far achieved by perestroika. Between 1971 and 1985, the growth in national income fell by a factor of 2.5. What has become known as the "obsolete structure of production" is now being overhauled. Nevertheless in Moscow ration cards for sugar have been introduced.

The Soviet consumer's patience wears a little thin when such basic commodities are unavailable. The situation becomes even more acute now that the people have the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction. For Gorbachev this makes the slogan "actions speak louder than words" increasingly poignant.