

FEATURE



Concrete panel housing construction in the + 40 deg C summer heat of central Asia



Moscow 1988. The industry is struggling to introduce flexibility into the mass production of prefabricated building component/elements

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ques, the organisation of labour and production, and the improvement of economic mechanisms.

Another committee — *Goskormtrood* — is responsible for labour, while financial control of construction organisations is left mainly to *Gosbank*, the main state bank, and to *Stroibank*, the industry's own bank.

The committees coordinate the work of the construction ministries which in turn manage the on-the-ground construction organisations. These ministries either cover the whole union or individual republics (there are 15), and in some cases both. Larger settlements like Moscow, Kiev, Leningrad, and Tashkent have their own management and administrative departments.

The present system of construction ministries dates from 1967. Three core ministries cover the whole of the Soviet Union.

These are the ministries of heavy construction (coal and metals), of industrial construction (chemical plants, some factory building), and of construction (some light industry, some housing, commercial and other sectors).

Alongside these are a series of more specialised ministries, including the ministries of energy and electrification, of irrigation and water, of coal mine construction, of gas and oil, of transport, of special installation, and of rural construction.



Close up of Soviet brickwork — a quality problem

In addition there is a ministry for the building materials industry, and the Russian republic has its own ministry for housing construction.

The degree to which a ministry is active in any one republic depends on the natural resources and production targets of that region.

One suggestion for rationalising the organisation is that in any one republic there should be only one general contracting construction organisation, to which all other construction departments are subordinate. This overall republican ministry would be responsible for managing and developing an integrated construction plan for the whole republic, while remaining subordinate to the republican council of ministries.

Building work is carried out by construction and installation 'trusts' and 'associations'.

Most construction trusts operate on *khozraschot* — a cost-accounting, self financing regime which gives the trust a considerable degree of independence from the State. It was introduced in the 1920s but only achieved widespread diffusion recently.

The trusts receive contracts from the various ministries, credit from the state banks and are required to show a profit. They in turn agree on contracts with their 'construction - installation' departments. This system of 'external' contracts between ministry and construction trust, accounts for 92 per cent of all construction work in the state sector.

A trust may have any number of 'construction - installation' departments, and these departments can be responsible for any number of construction brigades. A construction brigade can consist of as few as 12 or of more than 60 building workers.

Brigades are increasingly working on a system known as

Wages and labour shortages

ON average a building worker sets 240 rubles a month. In the frozen north or other inhospitable regions he can earn over 600 R. An architect or engineer is on about 150 R and a factory worker on around 200 R. Most wage increases compare favourably across industries.

Building work is not particularly popular. For five months of the year work is done in the ice and snow. It is tough and hard under site conditions that are often not only cold, but poorly furnished with services for workers.

Whether there is a labour shortage in construction is something that people argue about. Despite Gorbachev's denial many citing the open display of gangs of students and groups of conscripted soldiers involved in major construction work as part of the evidence. Among these groups many are unskilled.

The trade unions take pains to point out that every one has the opportunity to train fully and improve their skills. Judging from the quality of much of the work, there would seem to be a big skills shortage. Building workers are only now catching up with the skills consequence of the almost complete industrialisation of building production in the last 25 years.

The gaps in the Soviet skill market come to light when the Soviets have to turn to French and Finnish firms for the construction of the new prestigious 'Cosmos' hotel and the restoration of an old hotel in the centre of Moscow.

brigadnie podryad.

There is a national system of rates for labour output, materials use, transport, and plant use, and this provides the basis for calculating the contract sum.

Wages are strictly tied to the quantity and quality of the finished product, in what amounts to a sophisticated piece-work and bonus wages system.

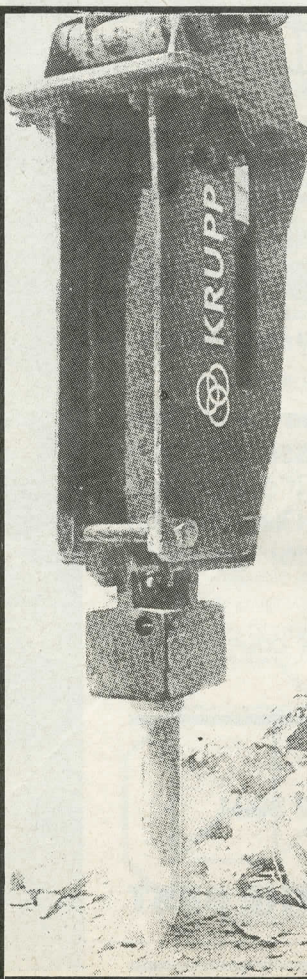
From the first of January 1988 all construction organisations have been obliged to transfer to the new economic mechanisms of *khozraschot* and *brigadnie podryad*. By the year 2000 contract cost accounting and profitability should be the major economic levers for motivating workers from the brigade to the ministry.

As well as these economic reforms and the strengthening of republican ministries there is a general policy of decentralising

decision making on capital investment in construction, and of uniting design institutes with industrial and construction enterprises to form large design and build organisations.

If, as rumoured, the rouble floats on the international exchange market there will be an increased possibilities for foreign firms.

One of the corner-stones of *perestroika* is to supply every family with a separate flat or home by the year 2000. One of the keys to this is seen as the development of individual and co-operative housing construction. But although the State-run house-building operations seem unlikely to meet their targets, opportunities for foreign contractors are likely to remain in heavy engineering.



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