

BOOKS

When design and politics were fused

BY JONATHAN CHARLEY

Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City

by Catherine Cooke, Academy Editions, 1995. 208pp. £29.50

One nightmare of the late twentieth century is the dissolution of a politics that pursues an alternative to capitalism. With this suffocation of the political imagination, belief in an avant-garde architectural practice that consciously seeks to unite a revolution in form and space with a more general project of political emancipation is extinguished.

Of all the claims to avant-gardism in the twentieth century, there is perhaps only one that deserves the accolade, and that is the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s. From within this decade of frenetic creative activity, it was the Constructivists more than any other group who sought to synthesise a revolutionary aesthetic programme with a revolutionary social agenda.

Catherine Cooke's efforts over the last 15 years to ensure the publication and translation of Soviet architectural texts from this period, have been instrumental in disseminating such ideas to as wide an audience as

possible. This new book, standing alongside Anatole Kopp's *Constructivist Architecture in the USSR* and Khan Magomedov's *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture*, makes an important contribution to what is now an immense archive in English of the work of the Soviet avant-garde.

Cooke sets out to provide an interpretative summary of the main architectural and urban theories from this period of cultural revolution, and to provide the reader with translations of original documents and copies of drawings and photographs.

The book is also intended as a 'textbook' for students and tutors alike, and is split into 12 main chapters, each of which represents an essay or indeed a lecture in itself. The book is elegantly designed in a style reminiscent of the Soviet architectural journals of the 1920s.

There is no one overriding argument that dominates the book, but there are a series of themes that Cooke returns to

throughout. One is the question of historical continuity and the relationship between pre- and post-revolutionary architects and their ideas.

Another theme concerns the unique challenges confronting architects that had arisen out of the Bolshevik revolution, not least the opportunities for a radical departure in urban design and planning offered by the proclamation on the collective social ownership of land.

In particular, Cooke draws our attention to how the social revolution prompted investigations into all areas of architectural and urban theory. Many of the debates which were to dominate architecture throughout this century – such as the relationship between town and country, form and function, history and modernity, centralised and decentralised urban development – were all rehearsed in little more than 10 years of profound social transformation.

The book includes specific chapters that deal with the work of Malevich, Leonidov and Melnikov, and others that address the organisation of street festivals, mass actions and architectural education. Perhaps the most interesting are chapters five and six, where Cooke explores the Constructivists' attempt, under the leadership of Moisei Ginzburg and Aleksei Gan, to develop a materialist programme for not only the teaching but also the practice of architecture.

Deeply influenced by Enlightenment philosophy and innovations in the natural sciences, this was an attempt to model the relationships between political, social, economic, and technological variables in order to devise a design system that could adapt to change, and which could produce buildings that would be instrumental in the process of social and *socialist* transformation.

Cooke argues the work of the Constructivists represents a key point in the history of Twentieth Century architecture that rivals anything produced by their contemporaries in western Europe

such as Le Corbusier and Hannes Meyer. For those involved in teaching or research into this area, the book will be an invaluable aid.

However, while its strength lies in the detailed interpretation of the main architectural theories, its weakness comes from the lack of a clear theoretical structure exploring the social relations that govern the production of architecture, and analysing the making of buildings as part of a more general historical process of social reproduction.

The ascendance of the avant-garde was inseparable from the dynamic and contradictory political and economic struggles that followed the social revolution in 1917. While this is acknowledged by Cooke, the connection between the two is underplayed.

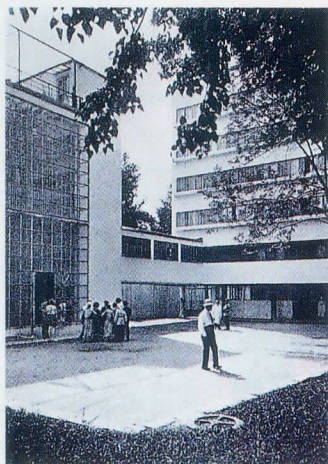
Arguably, it was only a political revolution aspiring to transform the conditions of everyday life that enabled the avant-garde to pose the questions about a corresponding revolution in form and space, and about the social role that buildings might play in a revolutionary situation.

Similarly, the fate of the avant-garde was inseparable from the counter-revolution that destroyed democracy and annihilated the political opposition, a counter-revolution which had swept through all spheres of social life by the beginning of the 1930s.

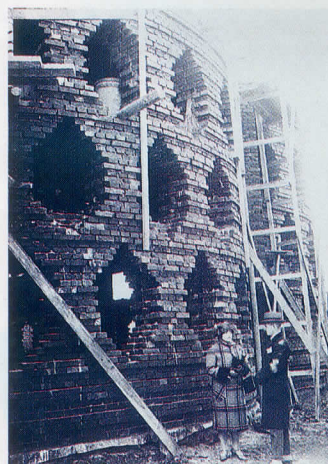
One way of characterising the history of capitalism is through the mesmerising transformations that have occurred in the organisation and perception of form and space. Equally, any political movement that mounts an assault on capitalist hegemony must address the same questions that confronted the first generation of Soviet architects.

What can be adapted from the built environment of capitalism to meet new social needs? What must be destroyed? And what forms of spatial organisation may develop that are not predicated on exploitative social relations? □

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Left: Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin housing complex, Moscow, 1930



Right: Konstantin Melnikov and his wife beside the bare brick cage of his experimental house, Moscow, 1928