Bathing recently played host to seminars on perestroika. Jonathan Charley was there.

Dialogue of design

that modern urban settlements have thrown at us. This would seem to fulfill the role of such seminars which, as well as forums for friendship, are perhaps more valuable for promoting questions and catalysts for further debate rather than providing concrete answers.

Many of the following contradictions are indeed common to both the Soviet and European experience. The potential for their solution arguably differs. The individual and society, modernism and historicism, quality and quantity, order and chaos, planning and the market, tradition and the avant-garde. These are all conflicts which people in the workshop agreed as having a global existence and significance (and not only for architects). When they manifest themselves in historically specific societies though, they inevitably assume different character.

The ritualistic introductions on law, ecology, education and architecture, the four workshops were assembled. Our group was a motley crew that included architects, students, landscape designers, ex-Greater London Council planners, Andrei Bokov (secretary of the Soviet Union of Architects); and Berthold Lubetkin. If the truth be known our discussions were only touched on the proposed title. The debates, dialogues and monologues focused more on the contradictions that the architectural community and its associated areas face; contradictions that urgently need to be resolved as the prerequisites and pre-conditions for us to be able to conceive of solutions to the complex design problems.

Lubetkin was an architecture student in 1917 and has the unflinching collection of Almost a Century in the forefront of architectural practice and criticism. From his having student work assessed by such as Marcovich and Rodchenko, to the ritual burning of a Lenin memorial at a children's playground in Finsbury, to this year's 40th anniversary of the Finsbury Health Centre, and beyond. With the clarity of mind that many of us would envy, his remarks are still sharp and sharp, the 20th century has been a ride between the null and the car", and are still told by an unashamed commitment to the idea of the architect whose primary role is to serve society.

In voicing his slight disappointments at the apparent dominance of empiricism and pragmatism over some kind of unifying morality and ideology within the present-day Soviet architecture, he seems to show his distance from the generation of Andrei Bokov. Bokov was one of the first post-war generation of Soviet architects. He remembers Meldvik and Leonidov as old men and in his comments and slides over the two days he seemed to concentrate more on specific problems than delivering a universal doctrine. In this context we were treated to a fascinating combination of experiments and real projects. These varied from the relationships between architecture and environment, to a display of children's architecture to the work of students working on the reconstruction of the destroyed or never-built architectural heritage of Moscow.

Lubetkin has it that money cannot be found not only will churches be rebuilt but perhaps even the Tatin tower will be. Much of the work dealing with the relationship between modernism and historicism appears to have been a new Soviet architectural buzzword — "retrosvitina" — retrodevelopment, a paradoxical word that seems to sum up the tension between the critical assimilation of past built forms in the process of production of the modern city. Disagreements did happen. Concerns of the more predictable being over the concept of the industrialization of the building process and the role of technology.

The precise relationship between man and machine, and such tensions that exist between the preservation of our architectural history and the contemporary urban fabric face us all. In this sense Bokov and others tended to emphasize the similarity of our problems. But if we are to maintain that architecture is an expression of not just cultural but social and economic forces, this would seem to be a difficult position to maintain as a component of the modern world. For example, do we still have the necessary preconditions in the British at the moment for building something like the Finsbury Health Centre? Most people in the workshop agreed that we did not. Whereas in the Soviet Union, whilst society remains the principal client, they do. Another topic was the post-war housing that occurred in both the USSR and in Britain. On the face of it the product appears similar. But the motives for it were clearly different. The Soviet drive for productivity was fixed by the imperatives of immediate quantitative expansion. In Britain it was partly to do with housing need but more to do with satisfying the goals of architects and furnishing some contractors with enormous profits.

This raised the problem of prospective criticism. Given the acute housing crisis in the USSR, the question was raised as to whether the almost complete subordination of quality to quantity was historically justified? Is there any way in which we can in the country justify the post-war tower block boom?

It also raised the specific problem of how architecture responds to crises so as to avoid the same mistakes, which is a particularly acute problem in areas affected by recent earthquake following the recent earthquake in Armenia.

Both the Soviets and ourselves are suffering from these post-war buildings but within a long term perspective our abilities to remedy the situation differ. Local authority housing in Britain is still expanding in the USSR, and there are attempts being made to improve quality. It seems our housing problems will be left to the ravages of the market which, for many of us, raises profound doubts as to the long-term housing prospects both in terms of availability and quality for the vast majority of us on lower incomes.

If there is a doctrine that pervades contemporary Soviet architectural thinking then it is something to do with "pluralism." As Bokov began to explain, this involves the ability of architects and builders to marry spontaneity with planning, and flexibility with creativity in their tasks of meeting the multitude of needs that exist in such a vast continent. The pre-conditions for this are quite clearly the political and economic reforms taking place in the USSR, and for the future of architecture it would seem to rest very strongly on decentralization, local democracy and the restoration of effective power within the hands of the local Soviets.

In a provocative manner, and perhaps expressing a different concept of pluralism, Lubetkin commented: "I am dead against pluralism... pluralism is a second cousin to opportunism... pluralism means a diversity of expression, and if art is a reflection of the social conditions then this is precisely the reflection of disorder. In 1964 Dossettovsky wrote to his country and wrote some letters home about London. He went to see the city and he writes, 'everybody is grumbling about the disorder in the city, about the lack of unity'. But the disorder is the style of the bourgeoisie. Chaos and disorder is a characteristic of this competitive society, where the notions of good and bad do not exist. It is the market that decides. If sells it must be good. That is the philosophy of Margaret Thatcher."

In such a seminar the learning process is two-way. As Lubetkin would see, the wisdom and the experience of the Soviet experts to. Do we both have a valid reason to mend the quality of our minds have yet to be proved.

In this sense international dialogue can only broaden and deepen our understanding of how the world works. We can hopefully look forward to the increased frequency of such opportunities.