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

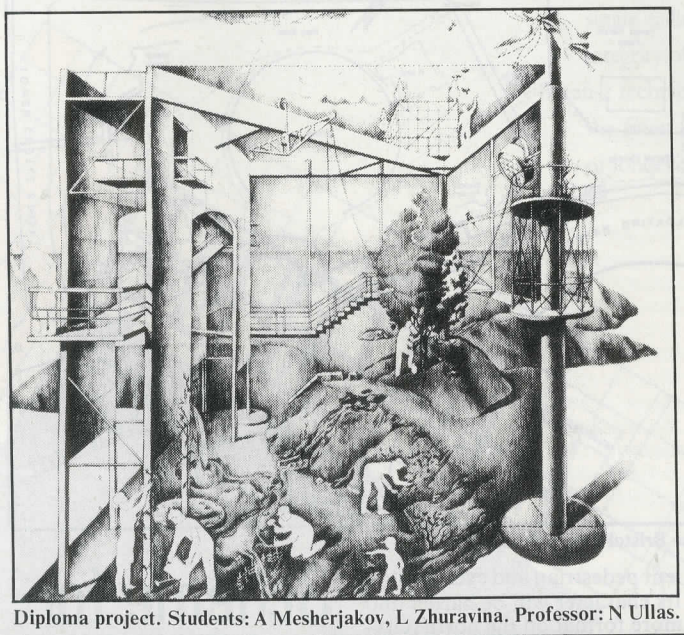
Dialogue of design

HAILING from the nooks and crannies of Britain, Russia, Georgia and the Baltic republics, we had assembled to discuss the gritty themes of "Empowering the Local Soviets (councils)", "Education for the Urban and Rural Revival", "Conservation and Ecology", and the awesome subject of our workshop which was "Designing for the City of the Future".

Following the ritual introductions on law, ecology, education and architecture, the four workshops were assembled. Our group was a motley crew that included architecture students, landscapers, ex-Greater London Council planners, Andrei Bokov (secretary of the Soviet Union of Architects), and Berthold Lubetkin.

If the truth be known our discussions only broadly touched on the proposed title. The debates, dialogues and monologues focused more on the contradictions that the architectural community and its associated actors 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 that modern urban settlements have thrown at us. This would seem to fulfil the role of such seminars which, as well as forums for friendship, are perhaps more valuable for promoting questions and catalysts for further debates 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 characters, and it was around such themes that the two days tended to revolve as the representatives of different generations of Soviet- and British-based architects met — sometimes tentatively and sometimes head on.



Diploma project. Students: A Mesherjakov, L Zhuravina. Professor: N Ullas.

Lubetkin was an architecture student in 1917 and has the unique recollections of almost a century in the forefront of architectural practice and criticism. From having his student work assessed by such as Malevich and Rodchenko, to the ritual burying of a Lenin memorial under a childrens' playground in Finsbury, to this year's fiftieth anniversary of the Finsbury Health Centre, and beyond. With the clarity of mind that many of us would envy, his remarks are still deft and sharp, "the 20th century has been a race between the lift and the car", and are still fired by an unashamed commitment to the idea of the architect whose primary role is to serve society.

In voicing his slight disappointment at the apparent dominance of empiricism and pragmatism over some kind of unifying morality and ideology within present-day Soviet architecture, he seems to show his distance from the generation of Andrei Bokov. Bokov was one of the first post-war generations of Soviet architects. He remembers Melnikov 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 collection of experiments and real projects. These varied from the relationship between architecture and theatre, to a display of childrens' architecture to the work of diploma students working on the reconstruction of the destroyed or never-built architectural heritage of Moscow.

Rumour has it that if money can be found not only will churches be rebuilt but perhaps even the Tatlin tower as well. Much of the work dealing with the relationship between modernism and historicism appears to hang on a new Soviet architectural buzzword — "retrorazvitia" — 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 happily occur, one of the more predictable being over the concept of the industrialisation of the building process and the role of technology.

The precise relationship between human 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 emphasise 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 consistent doctrine. For example, do we still have the necessary pre-conditions in Britain 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, while 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 fired by the imperatives of immediate quantitative expansion. In Britain it was partly to do with housing need but more to do with satisfying the egos of architects and furnishing some contractors with enormous profits.

This raised the problem of retrospective 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 this country justify our post-war tower block boom?

It also raised the specific problem of how architecture can respond to crises so as to avoid the same mistakes, which is a particularly acute problem in the Soviet Union at this moment 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 is still expanding in the Soviet Union 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 has 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 preconditions for this are quite clearly the political and economic reforms taking place in the USSR, and this future for architecture would seem to rest very strongly on decentralisation, local democracy and the restoration of effective power within the hands of the local Soviets.

In a provocative manner, and perhaps employing 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 1864 Dostoevsky came to this 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 it sells it must be good. That is the philosophy of Margaret Thatcher."

In such a seminar the learning process is two-way. As Lubetkin said, we have neither the wisdom nor the experience to tell the Soviets what to do. For we both have a common condition in that the quality of our minds has yet to be explored.

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