

# Story of a paper tiger

Ivan Leonidov, by  
Andrei Gozak and  
Andrei Leonidov.  
Academy Editions,  
216pp, £35.

By Jonathan  
Charley

IVAN Leonidov, one of the most influential but contradictory Soviet architects, emerged out of the explosion of architectural production that followed on the heels of the 1917 revolution.

Over the last two decades both Western and Soviet cultural and architectural historians have focused attention on the cultural revolution that accompanied the struggle for political and economic power. The early

20s generated an unprecedented and in many respects unique wave of painting, literature, theatre, and of course architecture. While the class struggle for the effective control of society's productive forces pursued its contradictory path, cultural activists turned their attention to the creation of a cultural vision that was appropriate to a revolutionary movement and the birth of a new form of social organisation.

The work of the principal architectural movements in the 20s—the constructivists (OSA), and the rationalists (ASNOVA)—have been well documented by Kopp, Cooke, Khasanova, and Khan-Magomedov. This book can be seen as another contribution to the available material. It is also something of a first, in that it is a joint East-West production. The surmounting of the obstacles that lay in the way of such a project is in itself an achievement.

Recently Soviet tv presented a documentary on the activities of youth in contemporary Soviet architecture. The noted drift of some young architects to a fantasy "paper" architecture was likened to some of the

schemes of their mentors in the 20s. Comparatively little of the richness and diversity of the constructivists and rationalists' architectural design ever came to fruition. The reasons are various. Some of the criticisms on the grounds of technical feasibility and cost can be understood; the death knell of Stalin's vision of a neo-classicist socialist realism that was supposedly socialist in content yet drew on national traditions is the other main reason.

Leonidov was perhaps the most famous of the paper architects and became a whipping-post for the conservative school of Soviet architectural thinking, which by the early 30s had routed the school of experiment and innovation that Leonidov, Ginzburg, Lissitsky, Melnikov and the Vesnins among others had represented. The book gives an almost exhaustive catalogue of his design work and painting throughout the 20s, the 30s and until his death in 1959.

The reproduced drawings and paintings are accompanied by Leonidov's own comments and by the critiques and polemic that much of his work provoked in

the architectural journals of the period. These accompanying notes offer a fascinating insight into the cultural struggle of the early years of Soviet power. The front of the book contains a couple of gushing personal remembrances of the man by friends and his son and a more interesting and profound essay by Andrei Gozak on the sources and context of Leonidov's imagery.

Leonidov was born in 1902 into a peasant family, was a secretary in the Bolshevik party in 1918, and by 1927 had completed his architectural diploma. He represented a new generation of architects from working-class and peasant backgrounds who had been given the opportunity by the events of 1917 of entering into a previously closed domain. By the time of his death in 1959, he had worked as architect, painter, teacher and sapper.

Yet apart from the landscaped staircases for a sanatorium complex for the workers of the heavy industry commissariat, none of Leonidov's major schemes were ever built. He was viciously attacked for idealism and utopianism, and

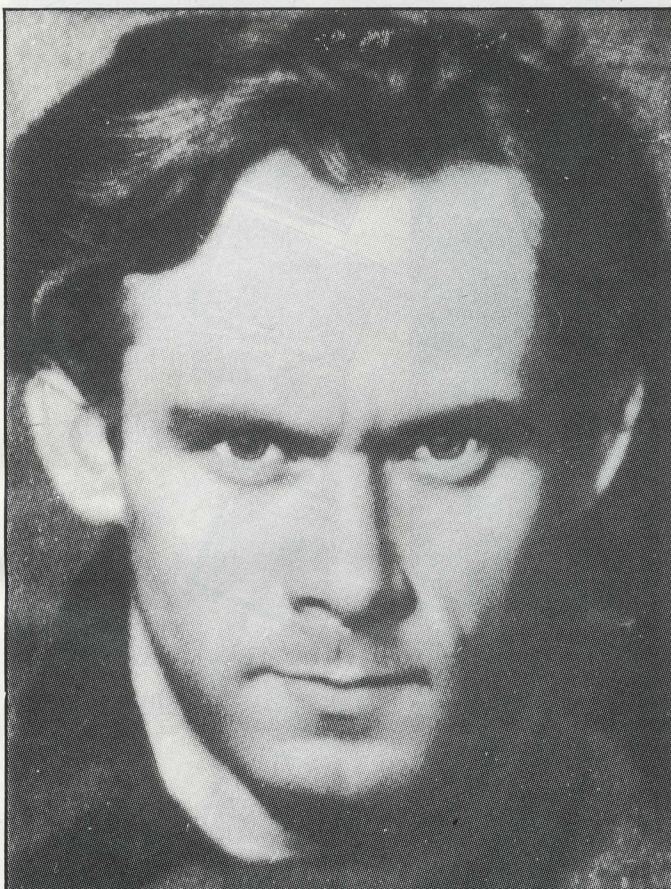
roundly criticised for his lack of attention to technical detailing and economics. Some of these criticisms do have a grain of truth. Soviet industrial and building materials production did not overtake its pre-war levels until the 30s. This, coupled with the semi-proletarian and seasonal nature of building labour itself, placed severe restrictions and requirements on architects to tailor their work to the material conditions prevalent in the Soviet Union at that time. So where does the value of Leonidov's work lie?

Gozak has christened Leonidov as an "artist, dreamer and poet". Indeed it is his vision and his ability to manipulate space, colour, form and nature for which he is chiefly remembered. That architecture needs people who push the boundaries of its own disciplines is important even if it does not succeed in transcending paper. Perhaps the most famous of Leonidov's designs is his graduation project for the Lenin Institute. The frequency with which this suprematist-influenced composition of rectangles and spheres has consistently been

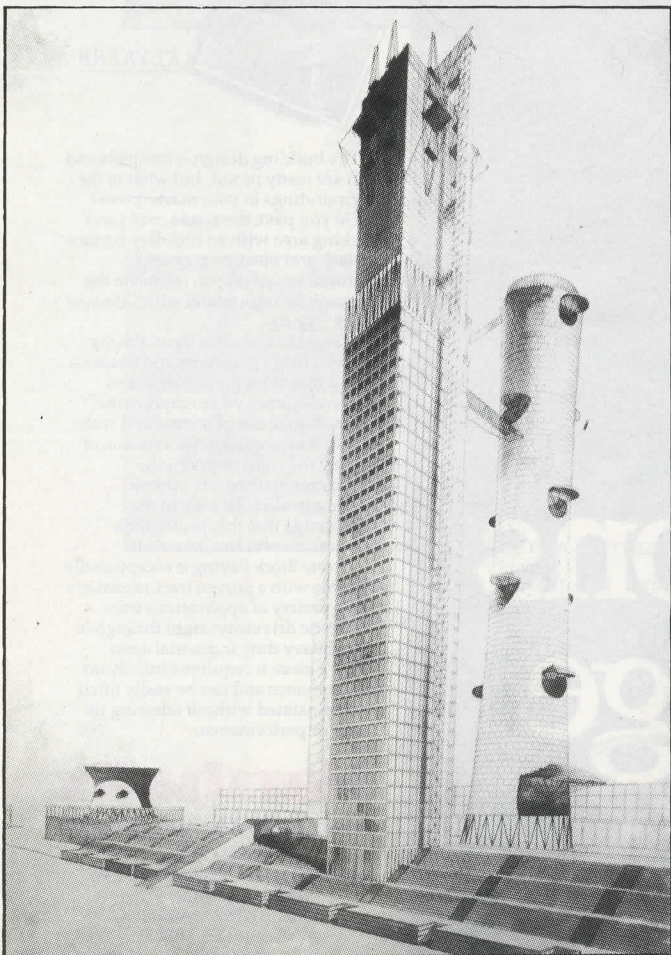
referred to by architects and image-makers to the present day stands as testament to his continued relevance.

Too often though the imagery of the early Soviet architects is wrenched out of the context of its production and use. The plagiarisation of the aesthetic qualities of the work of Leonidov pays scant regard to the fact that its form did not appear from some heavenly unconnected list of architectural symbols, but from the purpose of the building, eg the palace of librarianship and literature to be named after Lenin.

Much of Leonidov's work is little known. The Club of a New Social Type, 1928, and the Palace of Culture for the Proletarskii District of Moscow, 1930, can in many ways be seen as extensions of the Lenin Institute, not only in the exploration of space and the use of simple geometric forms, but in the emphasis on the built environment as a learning experience and as a tool in the construction of a "new person". In the chronological path that the book takes through his work, the next notable event is the Headquarters for the



Ivan Leonidov in 1928.



Headquarters for the Commissariat of Heavy Industry.

## Buckingham and Vitoria. Matured Naturally to Guarantee Quality.



Just like the very best Spanish wines, SSQ natural slates are guaranteed to inspire and impress.

Rich in texture and with an innate maturity they add a new and beautiful dimension to roofing, cladding and flooring applications.

Specifying SSQ Buckingham and Vitoria slates by name ensures:

- \* Predictable high quality, performance and appearance.
- \* Slates that conform to BS680: Part 2: 1971. DIN52201-52206

- \* Immediate availability (we hold more than 3 million slates in stock at our London depot).

- \* Natural blue black and grey colours that provide unobtrusive beauty for years to come.

- \* A product that is ideal for prestige, refurbishment or multi-phased projects . . . Now and in the future.

- \* A 150 year guarantee.

