The dialectic of the built environment: the making of an imperial city

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Jonathan Charley's dissertation *The dialectic of the built environment* is an exploration of theoretical and historical questions concerning the social character of labour and space, within the spatial and temporal coordinates of Russia and Moscow from the end of the eighteenth century to the early 1990s. This is a reproduction of a part of chapter 3, *The making of an imperial city*.

Walking the boulevards
There was always something very reassuring about the rich mixture of benzene and papirosi. It was the smell of the street, comforting and recognizably human, aromas that swirled at the foot of the triumphant city. A physical testament to progress and to repression, to the grandest of spectacles, to the discovery and annihilation of truth.

On what basis are we able to evaluate this towering colossus? Not through the proffering of pejorative and entirely subjective comments on the development of Moscow. This is to ignore the dialectic of history, and to erect yet more masks that obscure the making of city. The analysis of its construction during the years of Stalin’s rule must commence from the contradictory structure of new social relations. This refers primarily to the development of new class relations between an emergent bureaucracy and a politically and economically appropriated working class, and immediately renders the notion of a ‘socialist city’ or indeed a ‘socialist architecture’ questionable, not only in relation to the USSR but as an objective in any social formation. It is an intrinsically utopian concept that can only lead to the idealizing of one particular form of architecture. The notion of an architecture that seeks to capture the dynamic reality of social life is however another matter, but this along with other concepts central to the realist project was to be frozen. Once however we strip away the empty rhetoric of ‘developed socialism’, we find by the greatest of paradoxes that Moscow is in fact true to itself. What more appropriate architecture and urban landscape could there be for a new bureaucracy and ruling class that captures the ossification of the revolutionary process than an Imperial city that would cast in stone the new rule of law for ever? All documents of authoritarian rule impress, precisely because their magnitude and power feeds off our own vulnerability and our desire to absolve responsibility for the world to a higher authority. Grandiose feats of the architectural imagination are invariably linked to a notion of an absolute God.
The socio-spatial dialectic
The development of new ideas about form cannot be reduced to some notion of individual taste, autocratic desire or bureaucratic predilection, whether it be of Peter the Great, Stalin or Khruschev. In both late nineteenth century Moscow and the early period of the avant-garde, social relations are bound together with spatial relations in a dialectical unity. The presumed liberation of social relations from the process of reification that provides the stimulus for the revolutionary process, implies the redefinition of the relation of labour not only to itself, to the products of work and nature, but also to space.

Similarly, in the circumstances where social relations are becoming fetishized in new ways we should also expect to see the reorganization of space at all levels of the social totality. The partial solution to the riddle of heroic monumental architecture, which is one way of describing the formal characteristics of architecture from this period, is to be found in the way that the production of architecture functions as one wing in the production of new forms of ideology that fetishize social relations by claiming to be the opposite of what it actually is, i.e. an architecture of an imperial bureaucracy laying claim to socialism.

The avant-garde project sought to redefine social relations at a global, territorial, and regional level, within the settlement plan, and within the spaces of education and work. One aspect of the continuity between the 1930s and the 1920s is how this project is transformed under the emergent regime. For every significant change in the character of social relations and in the form of labour, we find corresponding transformations in the form of the built environment.

One of the ways that this was inaugurated was through the medium of the competition. There were three in particular that were important: the Plan for Moscow, the competition to design the Palace of the Soviets, and the competition to design the Ministry of Heavy Industry. Despite the appearance of pluralism and tolerance that architectural competitions offer, they were in fact a tool for establishing Party rule over architectural production, for proclaiming the ‘right answer’ and for removing both criticism and opposition. Although most of the arguments had already been discussed and aired, the 1935 plan drew all strands of the new direction in architecture together.

The 1935 plan
In what amounts to perhaps one of the most contradictory and ludicrous statements in any book on Soviet architecture, Posokhin (1980) claims that 1931 saw ‘the resolution of the basic social problems of the nation.’ This ‘solving of social problems’ enabled the Central Committee of the CPSU to pass a resolution calling for the development of a Master plan for Moscow. This was an important document, not only as a statement of policy but because it set the structure for the future development of the city right up to the present day. It is also of unique historical importance in another sense, for there can be few examples in the history of architecture and urban design that have sought to plan a whole built environment in such an integrated and comprehensive manner.
Following the great international interest in the possibilities for generalized planned urban development that the Soviet Union was unique in offering, and which had encouraged Le Corbusier, Ernst May and Hannes Meyer to submit schemes for the new Soviet capital, the plan for the creation of a ‘genuine socialist city’ was finally published on July 10th 1935, with the innocuous title ‘On the general plan for the reconstruction of the city of Moscow’. It contained programmes for the infrastructural development of the Metro, the Moscow-Volga canal, the rebuilding of the banks of the Moscow river, the asphalting of roads, a decision to strictly limit the growth of the city and to surround Moscow by a green belt. This was to be accompanied by a vast and ambitious programme of housing, social and commercial construction including cinemas, hotels, supermarkets, schools and factories. It is however the spatial restructuring of the city that is most revealing. Here we find the conscious decision to amplify the historic radial-ring road system of streets, not only through the construction of new ‘magistrals’ but through the widening to between 30 and 40 metres of existing boulevards. The classical character of the city was to be enhanced by the planned construction of ‘several monumental buildings of state importance’, the reconstruction of town squares with new names, ‘Komsomol’, ‘Soviet’, ‘Triumphal’, ‘October’, ‘1905’, and a new crown in the sky line, The Palace of the Soviets to replace the Church of Christ the Saviour (Fig. 1).

Finally, new buildings were to be constructed along the boulevards that were to be the best examples of ‘classical’ and ‘new’ architecture, with the most important boulevards, crossroads and city nodes being adorned with the ‘most expressive and parade like compositions’ with housing blocks between seven and 14 storeys. That this plan led to the construction of buildings and boulevards that as passers by we can admire and contemplate with the same awe we reserve for a trip to the sites of Rome, should not be surprising and is not contested. It is primarily to the objective contradictions of such an architecture that we turn our attention, an investigation of the consequences of which reveal the paradox of pleasure that comes from awe.

Whether it be the grand plan or the individual building, we see the same tensions reproduced that we see in relation to the labour process: realism and ideology. We meet the negation of the aesthetic and political programmes of the...
avant-garde, the idealization of history and social progress, the projection of absolute and universal categories, the representation of a non-contradictory reality and the mystification of social relations.

**The idealization of form and space**

It is suggested that many of the earlier ideas on town planning offered by Ginzburg, Barshch, Leonidov, Milyutin, Ladovski and Okhitovich which attempted to redefine the urban in the light of new social relations, 'retained their umbilical cord to the erstwhile utopian tradition' (Ikonnikov, 1988). They were however no more utopian than the 1935 plan, which with the accompanying drawings and aerial perspectives by Schusev and Rudnev confirm the new Moscow as an imperial showpiece city. An agglomeration of axes, boulevards, squares and temples all leading to the Palace of the Soviets which would be built to tower over human history. The city, like history itself, is shorn of the curse of conflict and contradiction.

But neither tendencies can in fact be described as intrinsically utopian. This accolade should be reserved for the architectural fantasy which bears no relation to material life. What is more important is to see both tendencies as potentially real projects that are bound together historically, yet simultaneously negate each other. This is evident in a number of ways. Both the programmes of the 1920s and 1930s share a commitment to the fundamental restructuring of space that is interdependent with the development of post capitalist social relations and the redefinition of the human subject. As equal claimants to the progressive traditions of European culture and socialism, they can both be characterized as heirs to the Enlightenment programme of rational planning. Thus behind the formal opposition between the disurbanist technological fetish of the avant-garde and the embodiment of the city of classical antiquity of the 1935 declarations, we can see two similarly audacious proposals to subject nature and space to the rational plan, an act that firmly places both tendencies in the modern revolution, a revolution that commences with the capitalist assault on time and space.

Their unity as two historically linked movements also finds expression in their opposition. In the same way that the concept of 'high art' only has any meaning in relation to its opposite, that is 'low art', the reality of a plan for an Imperial city, the epitome of a centralized ruling bureaucracy, can only be evaluated by that which might contradict it. Thus the final negation of the 'Stalinist city' only occurs with the dissolution of state ownership as the predominant form of property, and the collapse of the State control over social life as the predominant means of maintaining political order. This begins to happen with the introduction in the 1990s of differential rents, the commodification of land, labour power, 'parliamentary democracy' and other features of the drive to legalize private property and develop the market.

A far different critique is of course to be found in the work of the avant-garde. To argue for the invalidation of the Soviet avant-garde on either aesthetic or technological grounds is to miss the fact that its impossibility lay in the assumption that the fundamental transformation of social relations necessary
for the development of new directions in spatial design had taken place. One of the ways in which the work of the avant-garde is distinguished is by the combination of a radical politics with the imperative to imagine the possible and to contemplate the improbable. Despite the various contradictory and confused attempts to locate new historical ideals, the question of history and the problematic of space nevertheless remains open ended with the avenues of criticism preserved. It is exactly into these gaps opened by the avant-garde that the bureaucracy inevitably steps, in order to pull the world back from the brink of the unknown and to protect it from ideas now deemed to be both unreasonable, semi-fanciful, and dangerous.

We encounter the unambiguous logic between the concept of the State as the only repository of freedom and democracy and the offering of an absolute city that in essence calls on a single historical ideal, the architecture of the State appropriation of the slave. As the concept of spatial mobility is replaced by that of stability and immobility, the question of the dynamic of history and the emergence of new forms of property is declared shut and closed. The tendency towards an absolutist conception of social life tends to be replicated at all levels of the social totality. State property as the highest form of socialist property, the Stakhanovite hero worker as the highest form of labour, the neo-classical urban plan as the most appropriate

Figure 2. The Liubanka (Dzerzhinsky Place in Soviet times), home of the Secret Service.
urban pattern for the socialist city, historical development from hereon as the unburdened and non-contradictory march of science and technology, are all aspects of absolute tyranny that deny the dialectical unity of the forces and relations of building production (see Fig. 2).

By resurrecting the past in an idealized manner, the 1935 plan offers a way of rejecting the future and negating the present. In the situation where all political and economic power is concentrated within the hands of the ruling bureaucracy in Moscow, and where economically exploitative relations are being fostered between the Russian and non-Russian territories, there can be no option to the creation of hierarchically ordered and centrally administered space. In institutionalizing the ‘universal’ and ‘absolute’ city, the plan plays a role in the removal of opposition and in marginalizing the possibility of the creation of an alternative plan for urban development. The subordination and exploitation of the Soviet worker becomes objectified in an architecture of authoritarian rule that is presented as the victory of the socialist city. In place of its liberation, time and space fall under a new reign of order and administration. This ordering of space was to be replicated in
the post war plans for the reconstruction of Perm, Stalingrad, Novorossisk, Cheliabinsk and other cities. Whilst the proposals were to become tempered by the 1950s housing crisis, the logical outcome of the absolutist city are vividly encapsulated in the proposals by Iofan for Novorossisk (1943–1944) and by Arkin for Stalingrad (1944–1956) (see Fig. 3).

The spectacle of the militarized city

The reinforcement of the radial character of the city had other consequences. The arterial roads made the traversing of the city far easier, not only for civilian transport but of course for the military. The breadth of Moscow’s main boulevards, Lenigradskoe Shosse, Leninski Prospekt, Kutusovskii Prospekt, and Prospekt Mira (see Fig. 4) enables aircraft to be landed right in the middle of the city; they also enable the sealing off of one part of the city from another and the rapid deployment of troops. This can be explained by the conversion of the Soviet economy into one dominated by the military industrial complex, but in the situation of civil unrest this militarization of space facilitates the division and segregation of territory and people, assisting the reimposition of order and control. It was fully revealed during the ritual staging of parades and demonstrations, when the militarized plan of the city was exposed. On such holidays as Red Army Day, May Day and November the 7th,
the side streets were closed and all roads led directly to Lenin's mausoleum, as the city became transformed into a massive ‘theatre’ of war. This was another very important device for veiling deeply rooted antagonistic relations. We no longer had real class warriors but ‘actors’ dressed in bolshevik outfits riding on horses, SS20 missiles on trucks appearing out of nowhere, ranks of tanks trundling around the ring road, smiling masses holding portraits and chanting slogans (see Fig. 5). Such a carnival stage and magical grandeur creates an intoxicating atmosphere, in which historical events and the role of individuals can be completely mythologized. For every portrait held aloft signalling the greatness of Lenin and Stalin, there remains a subtext which declares the subordination of the masses. Such performances operate in exactly the same way as the ‘realist’ figurative paintings, in which the world is cloaked in a romanticism that is all pervading and borders on sycophancy.

Such parades are hardly unique features of the Soviet regime. The organization of ritual as a means of strengthening social cohesion is one of the fundamental characteristics of all class societies. Whether it be the gladiatorial confrontations of ancient Rome, Royal processions, executions in revolutionary France, the show trials of the 1930s, the McCarthy trials of the 1950s, or the great leisure shopping experience, what passes as entertainment and pleasure also fulfils the function of disguising the critique of society of the spectacle. It is simply that in the situation of dictatorship the manipulation of the spectator becomes particularly vivid and naked to the eye. This sits in marked contrast to the short-lived happenings and events of the early 1920s. Again it is part of our dialectic that the spontaneous events, gatherings, sculptures and art that celebrated the revolution and the opening up of new horizons indicated the overwhelming importance of ritual in the development of consciousness, with one crucial distinction: whereas the former promised to turn the individual into an active and creative participant in a free and voluntary art, the latter became a strictly organized ritual that gave the mass the illusion of participation whilst reducing them to the role of an army...
of passive spectators. In the very celebration of labour we witness its defeat.

Architecture and the idealist notion of truth

The reliance on myth and historical deception is not to be explained by the inappropriate application of the methods of realism to architecture. It is to be found, as with painting and literature, in the replacement of a critical method by a subjective notion of truth.

Let us briefly continue our fantasy story with more Party pronouncements on the character of Soviet realism as it was meant to apply to architecture. In the editorial columns of Arkhitektura CCCP in July 1933, the new tasks for architecture were declared. The first task was the application of the totally arbitrary concept of 'idealnost'. The new socialist content, lying at the base of each new Soviet construction, must dictate to the architect the appropriate technical and economic organization, its planning and internal arrangements, and its architectural-artistic decisions; in which one of the most important methodological acts was to be the 'critical assimilation of previous architectural heritage'. Similar to the instructions to writers and painters, architects were informed that this was not to be achieved through any kind of 'bourgeois eclecticism' but by the 'profound assimilation of the workings of previous architectural compositional methods and principles for the expression of the new socialist content.' Thus under the slogan of 'architects to the scaffold', the new architecture was required to 'aspire in its stylistic quest for realistic foundations – for clarity, precision in its images, easy to read and intelligible to mass perception'.

Thus the concept of realism is reduced to vague concepts of truth and comprehensibility, a clarity of meaning that was to be achieved through historical research, or rather historical mystification. Claims to the superiority of the dialectical method are parodied in what was in effect an old fashioned argument for populism, the antithesis of the notion of progressive historical transformation, in which populist claims to diversity and freedom can be revealed as re-affirmations of homogeneity and stability. The possibility of launching a critique from a materialist perspective was made all the more difficult when faced with a language that justified itself through the use of 'marxist' categories. The analysis of the reification of social relations becomes a life threatening option in the face of declarations that confirm uncritically the epoch of socialist democracy: 'the workers await bright new homes, worthy of a Soviet citizen, industrial buildings, appropriate to the nature of socialist labour, monuments to the great creativity of the Stalinist epoch,' – an epoch in which the reign of the fetish is claimed to have passed.

'Human relations, liberated from the fetishism of things, from all deceptions created in class societies, are not obscured by the genuine and fundamental meanings of creativity in all fields of art. Socialist Realism as the leading method of Soviet Art in opposition to naturalistic contemplation and idealistic organicist bourgeois art, stands for the free activity of people, of a dynamic world,
directed on the scientific basis of Marxism and Leninism . . ."13

As if by stealth, the work of Rubin and Pashukanis is incorporated and turned on its head. 'Socialist realism' becomes the very method by which the process of reification is negated. It is able to do this precisely because as a realism it lays bare the 'deceptions' of class societies. But for all the essays by Lunacharsky and Lukacs, realism becomes an apology for an aesthetic critique of the social world. As such and within the logic of this aspect of aesthetic autonomy, it can of course never reveal to itself the fact that Soviet realism has negated the negation of social relations and reified them in new ways, not least within the very structure of language itself, and perhaps most gloriously in the production of architecture and space.

Assimilation, eclecticism and an Hegelian aesthetic

Ultimately such phrases are meaningless as a theory of architecture or as a method for understanding the real nature of the physical transformation of the city. As the Party struggled to find 'an appropriate style', a truly Soviet architecture that would 'strive for realistic criteria – for clarity of precision in its images', and which would 'be easily comprehensible by and accessible to the masses', the slogans of the avant-garde were replaced by new ones that relentlessly tried to find the right words to describe socialist realism, such as 'truth in Art' and 'mastery of the heritage' (Tarkhanov and Kavtaradze, 1992).14 The search for an architecture becomes dominated by the pursuit of an ideal, an architecture of purity that captures the essence of socialist man and woman. The religious or rather metaphysical overtones of such a programme lead inevitably into a world where, like literature, the periods of architectural history can be classified into ranks where the most progressive of forms earn their position by virtue of being closest to the truth. For all the cries of materialism, the Soviet quest for an appropriate architecture is deeply Hegelian.

For Hegel the Ideal is to be found in the classical. In *Aesthetics. Lectures of Fine Art* vol. 1, he stated that it is within the realm of classical art that content and shape are united.15 He argued that since the human acts as the foundation for the development of both the form and content of classical art, such art can justly lay claim to a Universality.16 Whilst Hegel was more reserved about the merits of classical architecture, he nevertheless considered that it displays a similar appropriateness of purpose such that it could become freed from confusion with the organic and the symbolic. Thus classical architecture 'subserves a purpose, it comprises a perfect totality in itself which makes its one purpose shine clearly through all of its forms.' (Hegel, vol. 2, 1975).17 It is this same historic search for truth and for an ideal unity of form and content that lies at the centre of the Soviet project, and was celebrated in the synthesis of 'national form' and 'socialist content'. But to call the architecture of this period classical is to stretch the meaning of the description to the point of emptiness.

For all the new chatter, Soviet architecture from this period is far more structured by romantic conceptions of the Russian than any progressive
vision of the Soviet. In terms of form we only have to compare the work of Chechulin, Fomin, Iofan, Golts, Golosov, Zholtovski, Mordinov, Blokin, and any number of others to expose the fallacy of the critical assimilation of the architectural heritage. Whilst architectural history was undoubtedly assimilated, the choice of form was driven far more by individual competition between these new academic masters than by any truly rational concept of history. What we are left with is an extraordinary collection of buildings that are highly idiosyncratic, and ultimately eclectic in their use of historical references.

Claiming the classical tradition
At least in this the architects remain firmly in the tradition of the nineteenth century. The grand European drive of Peter the Great and Catherine had permanently installed the classical in the architectural vocabulary, and as we have seen this led to the widespread penetration of classical principles of urban and building design into the traditions of Russian architecture. This as we know unfolded in the struggles of ideas between the neo-classical and the eclectic. Many of the architects who re-emerged in the 1930s such as the Renaissance revivalist Zholtovski and the author of the red doric and proletarian classicism, Fomin, had been educated in the pre-revolutionary academies (see Figs. 6 and 7). They thus brought to bear on Soviet architecture not only the noted traditions of hierarchical work relations, but the traditions of scholarship and a rich knowledge of nineteenth century architectural history.

The littering of neo-classical masterpieces in so many Russian towns and cities made it easy for the revivalists of the 1930s to claim the classical heritage as their own, with of course its particular characteristics that had come from its historic collision with the ‘Byzantine’ and medieval Russian tradition. As such neo-classical architecture was claimed at the height of Soviet xenophobia as being an example of profound originality that was ‘organically linked with the national life’ (Cracraft, 1988). In addition it could be argued that the return to the heritage of classicism, reflecting as it did national Russian tradition, was entirely appropriate to the creation of a new Soviet style, a convenient antidote to the ‘international excesses’ of the modernists and ultimately a fitting accompaniment to the theory of socialism in one country.

However, the formal character of these buildings cannot be embraced by any one genre. They remain a highly eclectic, dare we say a ‘post modern’ mixture of historical symbols and meanings that pay homage to the orthodox church as much as to classical antiquity. To refer to them collectively as lying within the tradition of a heroic monumentality brings us closer to a basis for a real understanding. This links many of the schemes not with periods in the history of style, but with transformations in the production of social life. Here we think not only of 1930s Germany and Italy, but also of the architecture and planning of the French enlightenment, the period of imperial expansion in the nineteenth century British Empire, and the monumental constructions of the capitalist revolution in the USA. In other words our task
at this juncture remains an investigation of the aesthetic but in a manner that restrains claims for aesthetic autonomy.

It is perhaps stating the obvious to comment on the appropriate nature of such heroic monumentality to the ruling bureaucracy. It was hardly the first time, and unlikely to be the last, that a ruling class or social group has adopted a historic melange as architectural policy. Claims to mastery of history remain an important ingredient of other claims to political, economic, and social superiority. It is a paradox that such architecture fulfilled the Party objectives of 'clarity' so admirably. There could be no confusion in the minds of visiting peasants and workers of the reality of a strong and powerful State system. The means of production of social life belonged to them, like everything else, through the Party and the State - what greater gift could there be than the appropriation on behalf of the peasants and workers of 2000 years of architectural history, the perfect union of ideology and truth.

**Palace of the Soviets and the Commissariat of Heavy Industry**

The Palace of the Soviets was central to the 1935 plan. There are many apocryphal stories that surround the proposed site which are used to explain why it was never built, not least concerning the revenge of God. But the impact of the competition on the future of Soviet architecture was profound. The competition understandably received great coverage in the press; this was after all the building to house the first ever workers' government in the world. The approval of the scheme by Iofan was for a colossal and monumental building comprising of stacked cylinders of decreasing diameter which was to be crowned by a statue of Lenin, taking the overall height to 415 m (see Fig. 8). Approved by both Lunarcharsky and Stalin, the Palace drew obvious comparisons not only with the Tower of Babel but with Boulée's project for a cenotaph to Newton (1784). Rather more unfortunate comparisons can be made with Speer's Reich Chancellory in Berlin. Nowhere was the race to become the heir to Rome more explicit however than in the 1937 Paris World's Fair in which pavilions by Speer and Iofan confronted each other with formal similarities that contradict the display of mutual opposition and antagonism.

The comparison with Tatlin's tower however reveal far greater contradictions. A kinetic structure of glass and steel meets a decorative mass of national and neo-classical symbols and motifs. This is hardly surprising: whereas the former (composed in 1918) was imbued with the dynamic aspirations of the Internationale, of global and permanent revolution, of the withering away of the State, the latter in its final version of 1936 was conducted in the context of a political culture that proclaimed the success of socialism in one country, that had declared the class struggle within Russia to be over, and had abandoned the withering of the State for its massive reconstruction. In the former the human subject remains a participant in government; in the latter the subject sinks under the masonry of a building that declares the Soviet State, not the Soviet worker, the historic victor. As such, the Palace of the Soviets is the perfect
embodiment of the unity of centralized State ownership and bureaucratic dictatorship.

If the Palace of the Soviets confirms the subordination of the Soviets, the competition for the People’s Commissariat of Heavy Industry confirms the subordination of the worker. The schemes by Fomin and Abrosimov, 1934; Shchuko and Minkus, 1936; Mordvinov, 1936, and even Melnikov share a number of characteristics. They are all massive in scale, employ a rationalized stripped down neoclassicism in a symmetry arranged around a central axis, are adorned with sculptures and ‘revolutionary’ motifs and can only be approached by mounting a series of colossal triumphal stairways. Like the Palace of the Soviets, they display not so much a critical assimilation of the progressive aspects of architectural history, as the fulfilment of Party demands for a monument. The results can only be described as despotic grandeur, in which the subject and even the workers’ collective stands in passive contemplation of the power that exists beyond them all. That such schemes were held up at the time as symbols of the imminent victory of socialism is no more than part of the production of ideology that distorts the real nature of the regime. If realism was in theory about ‘capturing the dynamic and dialectical development of social life’, then these visions encapsulate the process of deepening rigor mortis.20 Their statement is an unequivocal denial of decentralized workers’ control of production, and of the democratic management of industrial development. Such schemes embody the degeneration of the revolutionary transformation of the labour process, and the institutionalization of a new ruling class.

Completing the absolutist city
With the hindsight that we now have, none of these comments are particularly original. The links between a triumphant architecture and dictatorship are well established and acknowledged. But the emergence of architectural ideas as an aspect of consciousness cannot be explained by stories about Stain and Kaganovich. These individuals, prominent and powerful as they were, were simply the representatives of a new ruling class. Nothing could be more erroneous than to identify such architecture in any way with the development of socialism, unless socialism is taken to mean the
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Figure 9. Golosov - housing on Yaruskom Boulevard, Moscow, 1934-1936.
Figure 10. Vaynstein - housing on Chakalova Street, Moscow, 1936-1937.

state ownership of the means of production, and
the introduction of capitalist techniques of man-
agement and organization of the labour process.
As an architectural vision they project in accord-
ance with the 1935 plan an absolute vision of the
city, in which new gods replace old ones. In this
case architecture becomes the mirror of the pro-
duction of absolute surplus. The latter, in the name
of the state, pushes the worker to the absolute
limits of human labour, the former is the very
medium in which this must happen and which
must extend construction technology to the very
limits of mass, scale and height, high enough to
conquer the remnants of the Orthodox church and
Kremlin.

Although the Commissariat building was never
constructed, the themes that it introduced to Soviet
architecture were to be reproduced, if at a more
modest scale, in the construction of public build-
ings and housing. Whilst work was conducted that
sought to introduce typical sections and standard-
ized details, the most impressive schemes from
this era are the prestigious individually designed
'neo-classical' housing schemes. Reserved on the
whole for bureaucrats and Party officials, the need
to create a facade for the triumphal avenues
replaced the development of the housing com-
mune and the Novie Beat (New Way of Life). Not
only were collective notions of living rejected in
favour of the typical bourgeois family, but more
importantly the revolution in gender relations that
the commune promised – that is the liberation
of women from universal obligations in the domestic
world – were refied in law but abolished in
practice. The new Soviet man became a parody of
the old Russian man, and the new Soviet woman
had achieved a strange form of liberation. Not
only was she required to still carry out the major-
ity of domestic duties, but she was also 'allowed'
to work and labour alongside men. In the name
of women's liberation, women's alienation was
doubly compounded.

Whilst the size of some of the housing
schemes did enable an economy of scale in the
replication of details and apartment plans, archi-
tects indulged themselves in the production of
schemes which, being dependent on the same
technology and materials such as brick, masonry,
plaster and ceramic tiles, did not lend them-

selves to the mass production of housing. As in
the construction labour process, the only form
of collective identity admissible was that which
 corresponded to official State organs. Architects,
lke workers, found themselves in relations that
were founded on a notion of individual com-
petition. Thus the 'hero worker' joins arms with
the 'hero architect'. In a situation where collec-
tive bonds were being undermined, the possibility
of a critique of dominant architectural practice
became as difficult as the critique of the labour
process.

This of course is no more than one more aspect
in the repression of any mass activity that did
not conform to Party rules. The boulevards of
Moscow are littered with these housing schemes
of which the neo-renaissance block by Zholtovski
on Mokhovaya Prospekt, 1934, the 'romantic sym-
bolism' of the scheme by Golosov on Yaruskom
Boulevard, 1934-1936 (Fig. 9), and the monolithic
'renaissance' blocks by Vaynstein on Chakalova St.
1936–1937 (Fig. 10) are representative examples. The contradictory nature of such ostentatious architecture is obvious yet entirely predictable. Despite the urgent need for a mass housing programme, for the whole 17 year period 1923–1941 the housing fund of Moscow increased by only one half of that in the pre war period. Ginzburg, the Vesnin and other constructivists had indicated and briefly demonstrated what Ernst May in Frankfurt had proved conclusively, that it was perfectly possible with the political imagination and will to set in motion a house building programme that was revolutionary in both its formal and social aspirations.

But the architecture of conspicuous bureaucratic consumption, which in its formal and social programmes represented the complete negation of Ginzburg's Dom Perekhodnoga Tipa (housing committee of a transitional kind), continued to enjoy a privileged position right up until the 1950s, reaching its apogee in Chechulin's towering housing complex on the banks of the Moscow river, 1948–1952 (Fig. 12), and Posokhin's housing scheme on Vosstania Square, which are two of the complex of 'fortress' buildings that included the Moscow State University, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that altered the Moscow skyline for ever (Figs. 11 and 12).

In the history of the Imperial city, the Palace replaces the Internationale, the castle replaces the commune, and in the place of the universal access to knowledge and books, as expressed in Leonidov's Institute of Librarianship, the Lenin library was built, an unimaginative sterile neo-classical block, in which access to the far reaches of the interior, to the deep sources of truth, becomes closely guarded and impenetrable.

The opening of the Metro was the most perfect example of the 'fight for a new culture, for new labour, for the new person, for an immediate, bright and splendid life for all human kind' (Kosarev et al., 1935). Here we remember Konstantin. Such an achievement could leave the worker in no doubt as to the legitimacy of the regime. Nothing could dull the pride of the shock workers at a feat the completion of which would have all citizens trembling in awe at the greatest union of engineering, art, and labour the world had yet seen. We finish this part of the story recalling the words of Kaganovich:

'In every piece of marble, in every piece of metal and concrete, in every step of the escalator is manifest the new human soul, our socialist labour, our blood, our love, our struggle for the new person for a socialist society... The worker sees in the metro his strength and power. If before
only the rich used marble, now under our power, this construction – is for us – the workers and peasants – the marble columns, are the peoples, Soviet and Socialist in every one of these palaces burns a flame, moving forwards to the victory of socialism... Greetings workers, engineers, technicians, party and union organisers, non party individuals, everyone who built the metro with love, with belief, they built not only for themselves but for socialism... Greetings to the victorious Party of Lenin and the great builder of communism, our comrade Stalin.”

The realism of social deception

Ikonnikov (1988) argued that the austerity of 1920s modernism was replaced by forms that reflected ‘the optimistic belief in man’s omnipotence’, with the use of tradition to contribute to a ‘warm humanity’ It could equally be argued that the emergent architecture of the 1930s displayed the exact opposite, the pessimistic reality of the individual’s powerlessness. Such historical games within architecture always run the risk of reproducing myths What was supposed to be a showpiece to the world, a demonstration of the great strides being made in the Soviet Union towards socialism and individual liberty, shrouded in secrecy the realities of the purges, showtrials, disappearances and hunger. In the face of deepening crisis the only route for Soviet architecture was to contradict the realities of social life and to attempt to build in stone an ideal city, a forlorn reference to the grandeur of the ancient world. Here the real definition of
'socialist realism' emerges as the realism of social deception.

By now it should hardly need repeating that the transformation of space is bound to the transformation of labour. For each step in the process by which a peasant is turned into a wage worker, we see not only the rationalization of the labour process, but the transformation of the object.

The peasant worker in the 'artel' builds the mansion house, the semi-proletarian in the new state trust builds the first railways and factories, the first urban based brigades of wage workers build the first housing schemes, and the fully proletarianized Stakhanovite building worker gives blood to build the workers' city. Here there is no mechanical process of determination but a series of directly corresponding historical transformations within the practice of politics (the exercise of control and domination), economics (the structures of ownership and the regime of accumulation) and culture (the production of ideas, knowledge, and a way of life).

All of these practices are governed by the perpetual transformation of social relations, in particular those that arise on the basis of class. At historical moments, these relations can become reified, that is objectified; in law, policy declarations, architecture, art, literature and within language itself. At this point ideology becomes the cement that simultaneously binds and disguises the reality of social life.

The limits on the development of the 'heroic' city are entirely set by the limits of 'heroic' labour itself. Borders can be broken within the imagination, but to fulfil the construction of an Empire city by means of a labour process, that is in the throes of the transition from 'handicraft' building production, to a primitive largely unmechanized manufacture, requires a limitless supply of labour that can be constantly expended and replaced. Just as there are limits on the availability and capabilities of labour, so there are limits on the development of the city. This changes radically when the construction labour process becomes mechanized.

The final stage in our story sees the simultaneous homogenization of labour and the built environment that accompanies the all out drive towards industrialization. This is the real story of modernity.

A peculiar inheritance

As it emerged from the aftermath of the Second World War Soviet society displayed some peculiar features. That it should inherit many of the characteristics of the bourgeois world and of nineteenth century thought is not in question - the slightest knowledge of the process of historical change would indicate this as inevitable. But that they should become permanent features of a society is deeply problematic for any theory that maintains that it was socialist, deformed or otherwise. The labour process was dominated by capitalist techniques of management, aesthetic theory was dominated by archaic notions of the artistic ideal and absolute, the process of reification born in capitalist society was continued and reproduced in new ways, its only real claim to historical originality being in the unification of all
these tendencies under a State regime, that bore more than a passing resemblance to the state of Hegel. Thus socialism became defined not by the revolution of everyday life but by the State, and this of course lay at the root of its undoing.

Notes and references
7. See Sovietskaya Arkhitektura. 1917–1957 (Moscow, 1957), p. 6. The editorial committee included Vlasov and Abrosimov, prominent architects of this period, and is remarkable not least for not even mentioning the avant-garde in the introductory retrospective, referring only to certain ‘formalist theories’ and ‘deviations from the party line’.
8. See A. Tarkhanov and S. Kavtaradze, Stalinist Architecture (Laurence King, 1992), pp. 100–103, for excellent reproductions of these and other notable drawings from this period.
10. Ibid. p. 2.
11. Ibid. p. 2.
16. Ibid. p. 476.
19. This competition along with all the other projects from this era were of course documented in the two main journals. The Palace of the Soviets was published in Stroitelstva Moskvi, no. 3 (1932), p. 13ff; and in Arkhitektura CCCP (July 1933), p. 5ff.
20. This is a reference to an earlier part of chapter 3 which analyses the classic debate on realism between Adorno, Lukacs and Brecht. The passage is a paraphrase of Lunacharsky’s essay on realism. See Lunacharsky, A.V., O sotzialistich eskom realizme (On Socialist Realism) (Moscow, Isskvestvo, 1975) pp. 328–345, 356–360.
