

Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935

By Paul Mitchell
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Royal Academy of Arts, London, until January 22, and Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin—April 5 to July 9, 2012.

London and Berlin are the most recent venues in the six-year tour of an exhibition of work of artists, architects, engineers and photographers who were inspired by the Russian revolution of 1917.

The exhibition contrasts recent images of modernist buildings built in Russia after the revolution taken by photographer Richard Pare, with vintage photographs from the archives of the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow. Alongside are displayed Russian avant-garde paintings from the George Costakis collection at the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, Greece.

The October Revolution was the product of an international struggle for the highest principles and ideals over a period of decades, including a struggle on the cultural and aesthetic fronts. Sections of the intelligentsia including artists and architects reacted against moribund pre-war bourgeois culture, but it was only in Russia that the avant-garde was “rescued” before it became officially recognised and politically harmless.

There was an explosion of vigorous, “genuinely revolutionary” groupings. However, the Bolsheviks rejected efforts by some to become the representatives of officially sanctioned “Communist art”. Leon Trotsky also criticised those who, rejecting the artistic past and the realities of Soviet life, sought to turn “art into life”—to liquidate it into everyday life—rather than helping an impoverished and culturally backward working class to master previous achievements, absorb them, and so overcome them.

The revolution was grounded in a world perspective, the conception that the productive forces had outgrown the nation-state system and only the resources of the global economy could provide the foundations necessary for a society based on social equality. However, by the late 1920s, the defeat of the working class internationally and the isolation of the Soviet Union had led to the growth of a bureaucracy, headed by Joseph Stalin. The social atmosphere that encouraged the rise of a Marxist-scientific

intelligentsia and bold experimentation was crushed and the anti-artistic and anti-Marxist doctrine of socialist realism was imposed.

It is doubtful the work of avant-garde artists such as Liubov Popova, Ivan Kliun, El Lissitzky, and Gustav Klutssis, many of whom were to succumb to Stalinism either physically or morally, would have survived had it not been for George Costakis. A self-taught art connoisseur, Costakis started work as a driver at the Greek embassy in Moscow in the 1930s and eventually amassed the world’s largest collection of Soviet avant-garde art.

Costakis explained, “It was very difficult at that time to find paintings by Popova. Somebody introduced me to Pavel Popov, her brother. Pavel suggested me to go to his adopted son’s house. So I went. The first thing I noticed going up the stairs to the second floor, was a Popova painting on plywood being used to support the trough where they did their laundry. They showed me many of Popova’s gouaches and drawings. Suddenly, I noticed that the windows were covered by paintings by Popova on plywood. I asked them if it was possible to buy these paintings too, but they said ‘no, these ones no, it will rain and everything will get wet. Bring us another piece of plywood and then we’ll give them to you.’ ”

We are fortunate, too, that in the mid-1990s, photographer Richard Pare embarked on a campaign to photograph the huge number of “forgotten” modernist buildings—factories, schools, colleges, garages, workers clubs, radio towers, offices, health spas and housing schemes—constructed in the 1920s and early 1930s. Falling into what Pare calls “malign neglect” during the Stalinist era, many now face demolition to make way for speculative developments.

After the revolution, it was a few years before the exhausted economy began to expand again through the New Economic Policy and made available sufficient resources for construction projects. One of the first was Vladimir Shukhov’s Shabolovka Radio Tower completed in 1922, although it ended up under half its planned 350 metres due to a scarcity of steel.

Materials and skilled labour still remained in short supply. Many of the Shchusev Museum photographs show sites full of horse and carts, ill-clad peasants with primitive wheelbarrows and rickety timber scaffolding. Buildings give the impression of steel and concrete, but behind the surface are wood, bricks and plaster.

Nevertheless, a sense of space was achieved, along with a healthy environment and community, as in Konstantin Melnikov's 1927 Rusakov Workers Club in Moscow. Beauty and innovation combined with purpose.

For a decade or more, cross-fertilisation of ideas took place with leading architects and engineers from abroad, including Erich Mendelsohn from Germany and Le Corbusier from France, who were attracted to the Soviet Union and worked closely with their counterparts to complete some of the most inspired and far-sighted work of the era.

Moisei Ginzburg was such a figure. As a Jew he was denied a university education in Czarist Russia and trained as an architect in Paris and Milan. Back in Russia, he became a leading light in the Constructivist movement. His 1924 book, *Style and Epoch*, opposing construction (technology, utility) to composition (intuition, individualism) became its effective manifesto. Believing that form should be derived from purpose, communal housing, for example, was deemed to meet the needs of socialist development. At the same time, Ginzburg was acutely aware of aesthetics and that "various elements of form...engender emotions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction within us."

Ginzburg's greatest achievement was probably the 1930 Narkomfin communal house designed for Commissariat of Finance workers. Elegant pillars, wide corridors, and large double-glazed windows all contributed to what Pare describes as an "extraordinarily humane" and "intimate" assembly of different-sized apartments, communal restaurant, nursery, laundry and roof garden.

Pare's photographs of Narkomfin from 1998 reveal a terribly dilapidated building, and more recent photos show it has decayed further as disputes continue over its ownership and future use.

The exhibition explains how the creative period ended between 1932 and 1934, as the Stalinist bureaucracy reorganised artistic associations in order to stifle criticism and impose socialist realism. Pare says, "You can feel the sense of optimism seeping out of the work", and this is evident in Ginzburg's Ordzhonikidze sanatorium for Heavy Industry Commissariat workers built between 1934 and 1937. It is still a highly modernist construction, but his earlier experimentation is muted, and elements of the imperial, neoclassical-like style demanded by official

"socialist realism" are beginning to creep in.

In 1937, at the First Congress of Soviet Architects, called to confirm state control of architecture and to attack "Korbuzianism" and other Modernist trends, Ginzburg spoke at length in defence of the independence of architects. However, by the time an annex to the sanatorium was built in 1947, a year after Ginzburg's death, but which he helped design, Pare says "all hope has been extinguished."

"The whole structure is uncharacteristic; full of gloomy halls and corridors. I found it impossible to believe it was the work of Ginzburg, the architect of transparency and light," Pare concludes.

In his foreword to the exhibition catalogue, the RAA president, architect Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, enthuses over "the heroic early years of post-Revolutionary Russia" and "the atmosphere of those extraordinary pioneering years", which led to the "exceptional manifestation" in architecture.

This appears to be something of a change from the sentiments expressed back in the early 1990s when WSWS arts editor David Walsh reviewed *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Walsh pointed out how the very title was indicative of the general attitude of the exhibitors who did their best to portray Stalinism as a direct continuation and natural outgrowth of the early years of the revolutionary regime. They claimed, Walsh added, "every notion of art contributing to the changing of reality (or the very notion of changing reality in a progressive fashion at all) was utopian" and that "there was no connection between the revolution and the burst of creative energy which took place in the 1910s and 1920s."

This change, if it is in fact sustained, perhaps reflects the end of the triumphalism that greeted the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 that has been brought about by the financial crisis. An interview with Richard Pare by *World Socialist Web Site* writer Tim Tower is a central feature of the exhibition catalogue and has no doubt helped provide a perspective. This can be read here, as should Tower's review of the exhibition in Madrid last summer.

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