

Inventing "Modern Architecture": Government and Social Order in the USSR in 1930s*

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Abstract—This paper describes the use of architecture as an instrument of propaganda and symbolic representation of the government doctrines, which achieved a particular acuteness during the interwar period in the USSR. The system of governing the art world by the state created in those years retained its influence during the following decades. That's why, after 80 years passed, it's so important to look into the mechanisms that made this process run. This paper aims to analyze social and political sources of major events in the 1920-1930s architecture based on archive and press studies. This material, unveiling the culture governing mechanisms in the prewar USSR, could contribute to better knowledge of the inner reasons of 1932 aesthetic and institutional reconstruction of architectural activity, and also of the 1937 All-Union architectural meeting's sense and goals.

Keywords—*soviet architecture; avant-garde; constructivism; functionalism; Art Deco; architectural styles; soviet history*

I. INTRODUCTION

The period under consideration — the beginning and the middle of the 1930s — is the time of complex cultural and social processes both in the Soviet Union and in Europe and the United States. The interwar twenty years around the world were marked by a universal desire for a stable, balanced, “bourgeois” life. At that time, Europe has been recovering after World War I, experiencing the destruction of borders, instability, uncertainty, and in a somewhat exalted form sought for everyday well-being and pleasure. “The desire to forget about the horrors of war and mark its ending with an unprecedented celebration of life is a quite natural reaction of “displacement” for people who survived the shock. The deep impression of both military and peaceful possibilities of new technology, which expanded the boundaries of the usual space, and at the same time violent social protests, the psychological trauma of the “lost generation”, political conflicts have become the new reality of the 1920s and important factors in the life of society, which largely determined the image of the art of this time”

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[1].

The tendency to post-crisis “stabilization” of human life at the level of the ordinary citizen has been sound in many countries during the 1920s and 1930s. As a result, the response of art and mass culture to the common request of society and governmental policies has also been similar in different countries. First of all, this process has begun in France, which in the first half of the 1920s gave rise to the Art Deco style as a universal model for the synthesis of tradition, modernity, elite and mass cultures.

The American economic crisis of 1929 echoed in Europe in 1930-1931, triggering the second wave of after the war panic. The powerlessness of states and the disunity of citizens in the face of economic and social upheaval have become apparent. The most robust society's need for stability, peaceful future, private individual rest, and states' need to demonstrate their strength and integrity have needed to be realized.

At this point, Art Deco has been received throughout Europe — from the UK to Poland and Bulgaria — as a recipe for aesthetic harmonization of society at the level of everyday culture. Since 1933, the U.S. government has developed a similar cultural policy aimed at overcoming the great depression at the level of the ordinary citizen.

So, the governments of France, Germany, Italy, England, Austria, Holland, Scandinavia, and the USA in the 1920-1930s have turned to mass art as a powerful tool of influence on people, the psychological stabilizer. Everything that surrounded the daily life of citizens that could instantly affect it make it easy, comfortable — music and cinema, graphic design and design of consumer goods, fashion and dance — has been filled with new sound, promoted and encouraged. It is no accident that the most cheerful and frivolous films have been shot in Hollywood during the great depression. Art Deco eventually became a universal style that united the countries on the eve of World War II in a common desire for a visual environment that was sensual, modern, but at the same time rooted in the tradition.

Architecture as a synthetic, the most powerful and total means of emotional impact was given a major role in this “therapy”. In the early 1930s, Art Deco began to serve the state and large corporations, losing the playful style of the

Paris exhibition of 1925. The style of “monumental order” [2] was crystallized, combining populism, dynamism, flexibility, and ingenuity of Art Deco with the ideological pathos required by the client. This new universal architectural language, accessible to the masses, was used to express the power, authority, wealth of both Rockefeller-level personalities and colonial governments like Great Britain, France, and Italy...

In the USSR, artistic processes developed according to a similar scenario, but, nevertheless, had a strong specificity, due to the unique political and economic conditions. The result of the first five-year plan (1929-1932), despite the dizzying rise of industry, was the deepest social crisis. Optimism and the rise of the society in the first post-revolutionary years, the willingness to put up with deprivation and hunger in the name of the idea have long been replaced by emotional devastation. By the end of the 1920s, only fear and accumulated fatigue from the anguish, inhuman mobilization, spurred by repressive measures have been left. The nation was close to disappointment in the regime, which could result in riots and anarchy. The government took measures that have supposed to calm the masses, create an image of stability in the country, the illusion of prosperity and peace.

“The main difficulties have been overcome” conclusion was the result of S. M. Kirov’s report of at the XVII Congress which can be attributed to the general mood of society in the early 1930s. “Why today at this stage the party gives clear guidelines on architecture, speaks on directional issues and directly gives instructions, which haven’t happened before? It’s because the time has come ... the stage of a prosperous life that unfolds in the country before us causes this basic political direction, which follows from all our activities.” [3].

In 1931, the new course of easing economic policy had been adopted. Gradual rehabilitation of professionals, the recovery of private property in collective farms, the return of the individual cattle ownership has led to the so-called neo-NEP and mini-reforms [4]. The new course was acquired in 1933-1934. The government tried to mitigate the social crisis, expelled millions of “disenfranchised”, “kulaks”, “specialists”, “social outsiders”, “companions” etc. from the society. Despite the proclaimed continuation of the class battle, many of the rejected earlier have been forgiven or rehabilitated.

II. THE REASONS OF ATTACK ON AVANT-GARDE

Everyone's desire to relax has had to be realized as thoroughly and quickly as possible. The best way to achieve the dream of the masses of comfort, peace, prosperity was not the transformation of their everyday environment, but the depiction of these desired changes through of all kinds of art.

The turn to the normalization of everyday life was expressed in the harsh criticism of the theories of “functionalists” (OSA — *Organization of Contemporary Architects / Ob’edinenie Sovremennykh Arhitektorov*) and “formalists” (ASNOVA — *Association of New Architects / Associaciya Novyh Arhitektorov*) (since 1930) and the

promotion of the convenience and comfort of urban life. The denial of rationality, organization, ideologization of personal space, cultivated in the previous era, resulted in the escalation and promotion of emotional, leisure, consumer spheres of life. Newspapers wrote that it had been the time to abandon “vulgarity of deliberate austerity, still so recently considered a good Soviet tone.” [5]. It was stated that constructivists “haven’t understood the basic fact that people wanted to live with the fulfillment of all their needs, to live beautifully and comfortably.” [6].

Also, A. V. Lunacharskiy, I. L. Matsa and other critics of the circle of the Communist Academy argued that the avant-garde architecture, which has strived to structure life, social relations, work, etc., has had no means for active emotional management of society. It turned out that instead of the architecture that successfully organized an ideal, clean, well-functioning space for filling it with life, an expressive environment that was able to organize the psyche, to make people “not to speak, but to sing”, to emotionally translate various meanings, i.e., to create a unique environment was needed. Architecture should have been meaningful — accessible, open, narrative. It should have been initially filled with life, without requiring additional effort from the person. It has had to be human.

The “moderate” course was also of great importance for the foreign policy of the USSR. The growing threat from Nazi Germany forced Stalin to pay special attention to relations with Western Europe, emphasizing the democratic nature of the Soviet regime and its fundamental difference from fascism. To demonstrate the well-being of the population of the young Soviet State at the lowest — everyday level, various tools have been put into use — from Foxtrot to tourism advertising, from the production of silk stockings to tennis fashion.

Foreign contacts were encouraged; it was at this time that the Intourist had been created and hundreds of thousands of people visited the Soviet Union in 1934-1935. Tourist routes, in addition to Moscow, covered Leningrad, Kharkiv, Sochi, Odessa, Baku, Trans-Siberian railway; thousands of colorful brochures and posters were issued. Foreign guests’ trips to the USSR should not have been associated with danger and recent bloody events, but with a fashionable, leisurely tour on a board of a comfortable ship or a fascinating journey in the compartment of the train on the Trans-Siberian railway.

The architectural response to the new government order was, firstly, the appeal to the classical heritage (comparable to the pathos of the appeal to the tradition in French and American Art Deco), and secondly, the orientation to the tastes and wishes of the consumer. The party nomenclature, the authorities, and ideologically significant layers of society (proletariat), which in the mass had similar ideas of “beautiful” and “correct” architecture were the client and the consumer at the same time.

The introduction of ideology in the field of architecture, the emergence of a rigidly formulated order partly influenced, similar to the processes in the West, the rise of post-constructivism as the response of the professional community to the new requirements of the era, as a system

of preservation and use of intellectual and plastic achievements of the avant-garde in new conditions.

Paradoxically, these trends, taken to their logical conclusion, have led to its early decline. Here lies the fundamental difference between the conditions for the development of post-constructivism from the development of Art Deco and monumental orders. In most countries, including totalitarian Italy and even Germany, the authorities chose the architecture they liked but did not create it themselves. The architecture was allowed to maintain its professional autonomy and elite isolation, and therefore — to develop evolutionary according to its internal laws. In the USSR, this border — between professionals and the authorities — began to fade, actively supported by distrust of the “old specialists”, as a result of which the client himself had to eventually become an implementer (“the proletarian architect”), and the professional elite had to disappear.

The formation of post-constructivism, without a doubt, was influenced by government directives, resolutions and trends in the party nomenclature environment. Usually, historians of architecture interpret this socio-political layer only as the context of a particular style. In the case of post-constructivist architecture, the programs and decisions of party leaders are equal in importance to the concepts of architects and theorists.

III. INFLUENCE OF THE STATE ORDER ON THE SOVIET ARCHITECTURE IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIO-CULTURAL PROCESSES IN EUROPE AND THE USA

As the primary language of government programs, the architecture of the 1930s is the most representative (regardless of typology), solemn, official, and, accordingly, monumental. Bruno Taut, perhaps anticipating the interest of the Soviet government in the architectural process in the West, wrote in 1926, “If the Soviet Union builds its monumental buildings in a new style, in accordance with the spirit of the era, it will give the whole world in an unexpected and stunning form proof of its right to power” [7]. However, he did not foresee that the new style, in the end, would not have been in tune with the experiments of the avant-garde and would have followed the changed “spirit of the era”.

The new, representative, architecture of municipalities, ministries, people’s commissars, embassies, palaces, colonial houses, spread to universities, libraries, museums, theaters, and then the interiors of ships, resorts, cinemas, schools, post offices, department stores, going down to the level of a wealthy man in the street. Despite the stylistic nuances and a broad range — from genuine luxury to cheap props, from solemnity to the game, regardless of the actual size — monumentality remained the primary technique of that architecture. A new language for the expression of monumentality, as we will see later, was found at the intersection of innovation and tradition, modern shaping, design techniques, and classical heritage.

So, the classicism again became popular, because it legitimized, claimed power, which was characteristic not

only for totalitarian states. The appeal to heritage — to the order, proportions and rhythm — meant the appeal to order, to the forever established harmonic laws of architecture, and to eternal beauty.

Later, in his diaries, the German architect A. Speer wrote about the general desire for classics in the West in the 1930s: “During my brief stay in France, I examined the Palace of Chaillot And the Palace of Modern Art, as well as the still unfinished construction of the public Museum of Labor, designed by the famous Auguste Perret. I was surprised to find France in their buildings also leans to Neoclassicism. Later, there were a lot of talks that this style is a sure sign of the architecture of totalitarian states. It is completely untrue. To a much greater extent, it is the sign of the era, and it can be traced in Washington, London, Paris, as well as in Rome and Moscow, and our projects for Berlin” [8]. It is no coincidence that Speer emphasized the globality of this desire for classical roots. For many years it has been connected only with Germany, the USSR, and Italy, although now the world process interrupted by the Second World War is obvious. What Speer vaguely calls the “sign of the era”, considered in the context of culture, social processes of the 1930s, can be called the mentality of the era, a kind of universal psychology characteristic of a society in a certain period of history.

IV. CONCLUSION

The universality and accessibility of the classical language made this style of “monumental order” (according to the term introduced by Franco Borsi in relation to the architecture of 1929-1939) international, despite the local features. The scope of Art Deco in its original, French version, in my opinion, is somewhat narrower in architectural terms, although more synthetic (as it includes furniture design, fabrics, printing, ceramics, and jewelry, fashion, etc.). Its framework long established by critics had no place, for example, for an overly rigid architecture of Nazi Germany, over monumental architecture of Mussolini’s Italy, it also couldn’t fit the imagination of Sant Elia and inappropriate austere ensembles of Red Vienna (Karl Marx Hof), as well as the Soviet architecture of the years 1932-1937. In turn, the “monumental order”, on the contrary, doesn’t affect design in any way, characterizing only architecture.

The specificity of this particular style is noted by historians of architecture M. V. Naschokina and V. L. Hite, placing it in the framework of Art Deco, but separating it from the frivolous and syncretic style of the Paris exhibition of 1925. Researchers tend to define it as a “neoclassical version of Art Deco”, which, unlike the “Neoclassicism of the second wave” acts as no less monumental and expressive, but somewhat reduced, populist, not academic branch of the classical tradition” [9].

It seems not quite correct to me to call the Soviet architecture of the first half of the 1930s Art Deco: The Soviet Style, its genesis, roots, and methods, despite the resemblance, are still far from the European or American version of Art Deco. More architectural and essential

“Monumental Order” or “Post-Constructivism”, invented by S. O. Khan-Magomedov seem to me to be more appropriate names for this style. In the future, we will reveal the tools and specifics of this phenomenon and find different justifications for these two definitions.

According to Franco Borsi, it is a monumental order that brings together the works of the 1930s of A. Perret, A. Laprade, R.-H. Expert, M. Roux-Spitz, and many others in France, M., Piacentini, D., Muzio, D. Ponti, E. Lancia and others in Italy, A. Speer, E. Fahrenkamp, H. Poelzig in Germany. J. Hoffman in Austria, C. Holden, B. Lubetkin and others in the UK, V. Horta and R. Bram in Belgium, J. Oud in the Netherlands, and G. Asplund and A. Aalto in Scandinavia and the Soviet architecture of the time. This international style can be attributed to the architecture of post-constructivism: Projects of the 1930s K. S. Halabyan, P. F. Aleshin, G. B. Barkhin, M. O. Barshch, D. D. Bulgakov, A. K. Burov, A. A. Vesnin, V. A. Vesnin, V. G. Gelfreykh, M. Y. Ginzburg, I. A. Golosov, P. A. Golosov, A. N. Dushkin, I. A. Zvezdin, B. M. Iofan, V. P. Kalmykov, I. Y. Karakis, V. D. Kokorin, N. J. Colley, J. A. Kornfeld, A. D. Kryachkov; I. G. Langbard, A. J. Langman, E. A. Levinson, I. I. Leonidov, K. S. Melnikov, M. I. Merzhanov, I. N. Nikolaev, G. K. Oltarzhevsky, I. E. Rozhin, Z. M. Rosenfeld, L. V. Rudnev, N. A. Trotsky, A. I. Fomin, I. I. Fomin, D. F. Fridman, V. I. Fridmana, V. A. Shchuko and many other less well-known architects in the USSR.

Post-Constructivism, as the Soviet version of the “Monumental Order”, existed in the USSR for a short time, approximately from 1933 to 1937, but there were a massive number of projects of buildings in this style, implemented part of which is comparable to the architectural heritage of the Avant-Garde.

It is important to note that there are no general theoretical texts documenting style as a conscious system. And articles by M. Y. Ginsburg, A. V. Vesnin, V. V. Vesnin, I. A. Golosov, I. A. Fomin, S. A. Lisagor, M. O. Barsch, N. A. Trotsky tried to be formulated in their speeches the vision of the further development of Soviet architecture. In the book, I will rely on these texts to analyze and describe the holistic style of post-constructivist architecture.

At the heart of these opposed theoretical constructions — analytical and ideological which have formed post-constructivism style, often mistakenly attributed to the “Stalin Empire Style” — are two different methods of artistic and intellectual activity, and even deeper — two worldviews. Let us dwell on them before turning to the specific characteristics of post-constructivism.

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