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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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Moscow

In June 1937 Frank Lloyd Wright attended the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Architects held in Moscow.¹ Curiously, the episode has not been discussed by observers or historians beyond borrowing Wright's own published impressions, such as they were. Even the most recent biographies fail to treat the subject.² It was an extraordinary meeting, not only in the opinion of the man from the midwest prairies but in that of his hosts. As well, he gave a talk to a consortium of colleagues gathered in Moscow for what was a dramatically serious occasion. That paper has only recently been presented in English.³ Four fundamental questions need to be asked about this event: why was Wright invited, why did he accept, what occurred at the conference in respect of his presence, and what effect did the sojourn have on him?

Wright's activities preliminary to his Moscow visit have been explained in some detail. Yet it would be well to look at pertinent events in Russia leading to the Congress: events that occurred in the 1920s immediately after the Bolshevik seizure of power, and events initiated by Stalin in the 1930s. Only with an outline of those events can the questions be properly answered.

13 The 1920s

The miserable withdrawal from World War I, the internal war of 1918–21 to revolutionize Russian social and political life, the debilitating famine in 1921, and the conquest of neighbors by the Red Army immediately preceded a period of amazing optimism, at least in comparison to the past. And the past had been rejected through great effort and pain during those four years. There seemed to be a release of previously constrained impulses, buoyed by great anticipation and a belief that the only path must be upward. One result was a period that can fairly be described as one of the most vigorous, most exciting moments in the course of architectural history; ideas flowed uninhibited to direct enormous creative energies. The upheaval was far more dramatic architecturally than that which took place in Paris in the late 1000s, in Florence in the late 1400s, or in Central Europe concomitantly in the mid-1920s.

A paraphrase of constructivist Aleksei Gan, a member of the First Working Group of Constructivists that was formed in 1921, sets the political and therefore the practical realities of architecture as one of the arts in the new Soviet Union. Old concepts of art must die with old cultures and the "enemy are those unable to grasp the 'fact,' which [the] . . . Marxist rationale makes logically inevitable, that there cannot be a peaceful evolutionary transition in Russia's concept of art