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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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primitive and backward building industry, in which, more and more, idealised technology had to give way to ordinary ingenuity on a lower level, led other [architects] to a hollow and insincere aestheticism, indistinguishable from that of the formalists they had set out to replace, inasmuch as they were forced to reproduce the adulterated forms of an advanced technique in the absence of its real media. . . .

[Events] did not wait for the various groupings of architects to settle their internal difficulties: and, with the continually expanding building programme brought by the [first] Five Year Plan, the search for architectural competence became more and more pressing, for these were the years which saw the planning and the foundation of such gigantic industrial towns as Kuznetsk, Magnitogorsk, Zaporozje, and many hundreds of smaller centres.¹³

It must be noted that some of those cities were built by American contractors. Moreover hundreds of factories were designed by and construction was supervised by the American architects Albert and Moritz Kahn. Their significant contribution at the request of the Soviet government has been wiped from official histories. All nonofficial and western histories also fail to mention the Kahns.

In any event the Lubetkin recollections echoed concerned sentiments current in Moscow in the early thirties. As he suggested, all of the uniquely creative productions directed toward defining a new architecture for a new society were to end—suddenly.

14 Prelude to the 1937 Congress

The June 1937 All-Union Congress of Soviet Architects was intimately caught in a swirling tide of disarming and often horrific events: events that defined political and personal power; events that turned the joy of creating a new culture one hundred and eighty degrees and into autocratic orthodoxy; events explicitly determined by Joseph Stalin's political machine.

Warnings to those who would not follow the dogma of Communist Party policy had slowly turned to action. For instance, in 1932 internal passports were introduced, thereby reviving one of Peter the Great's most despised means of controlling the peasantry, and there was the controversial Party-made famine of 1932–33. In 1933 a series of concentration camps were established in the north and east of Russia where peasants and technical labor from throughout the USSR were impounded. The peasant had his title changed to "worker"; he no longer belonged to a landowner but to a soviet cadre. And there were other repressive acts.

The murder of Sergei Kirov in December 1934 was the public act enabling Stalin to control, and where necessary purge, a rising and expanding opposition to his leadership; Stalin had no rival. The switch from liberally applied social—and artistic—experiments in the 1920s to constrict-

tion and constraint in the 1930s has been summarized as follows: “the Communist Party . . . shrank the individual into an instrument for the achievement of material progress and the construction of socialism.” In consequence, said historian Marshall Shatz, the “liberalization of many areas of Soviet life in the twenties gave way to strict social discipline and cultural conformity.” The political and bureaucratic mechanism was the Five-Year Plan. With its advent “the emphasis was now on productivity, work, and self-sacrifice for the collective good as defined by the Party, on harnessing individual energies for the benefit of the state rather than releasing them for the fulfilment of the individual” and society.¹

Obviously Trotsky’s deportation in 1927 (he was murdered in 1940 in Mexico) did not effectively eliminate Stalin’s opposition. Kirov’s murder highlighted the policy of terrorism that continued for at least the next four years. Old Bolsheviks of the left and right opposition as well as members of the Red Army were executed or exiled or committed suicide. To give the spectacle a sense of justification a series of show trials were staged. Fake and unsubstantial charges were trumped up and often staged for public consumption. They were given great publicity.² In all, millions of people were arrested, deported, jailed, or simply disappeared: poets, artists, musicians, architects, and engineers were included, as were Stalin’s own cadre.³ The GULAG (Main Administration of Correction Labor Camps) was dramatically increased and by 1941 it administered 11,000,000 prisoners, mainly political, guarded by half a million secret police.

Historian Isaac Deutscher defined two fundamental interlocking questions raised by the purges, especially since they occurred nearly parallel in time—and in kind—with Nazism in Germany. “If so many outstanding politicians, administrators, and military men,” said Deutscher, “had in fact formed a monster fifth column, it was asked, then what was the morale of a nation in which this could happen? If the charges were faked, then was not the regime that indulged in such practices rotten from top to bottom? . . . this is how it presented itself to outsiders.”⁴ Russian diplomat Andrei Y. Vyshinsky’s admission that Marxist doctrine was merely an outward cloak legitimizing the machinery of despotism was plain. Stalin’s Marxism and Hitler’s Nazism were based on socialism, could be equated, could be synonymous, did occur simultaneously. In art in 1934 the Soviets censured the avant-garde, in 1936 the Nazis declared expressionism and modernism “degenerate.”⁵

In spite of the Soviet’s announced aim of crushing capitalism, there was a time in the 1920s when the Russian mind welcomed progressive influences of European and American thought in the arts. Some architects from Europe, the northern Mediterranean, the British Isles, the Americas, and Australia⁶ were excited about the prospects of Soviet architecture and city and regional planning.

In order that they might participate, these idealists traveled to the USSR in comparatively large numbers. Then, with the terror at least partially revealed, they pressed their embassies to get them out. They left the USSR not because they had fulfilled a task and satisfied their desires: they fled. Hannes Meyer, who had directed the Bauhaus from 1928 to 1930, traveled to Moscow to take up a position as a professor at the Higher Institute for Architecture and Building, and then became a member of architect Karo Alabian's Organization of Proletarian Architects. Alabian was one of the Party's more devoted managers and Meyer was outspoken against the constructivists. But around 1936 Meyer pleaded for and received permission to return to Switzerland. At about this time, or 1935–36, the first arrests of architects began.⁷

Therefore the 1930s reversed the trend of the 1920s: Russia isolated itself from western nations. Terror as a political tool swept aside the noble words of Soviet idealism. A partial halt to the process of self-destruction finally arrived in 1938, perhaps only because of the threat of an external war.

While Wright may not have been privy to details such as arrests of architects, he seemed unconcerned and, it must be observed, at times unmoved by the revelations about Stalinism. Wright was certainly aware of them for he mentioned the atrocities in his autobiography.⁸ As well, when he arrived in Moscow in that June of 1937 the American ambassador, Joseph Davies, most probably counseled the American architect and definitely informed him that Marshall M. N. Tukhachevsky had just been executed. Naively, as if it just occurred to her, Mrs. Wright remarked that the execution "may have aggravated political unrest."⁹ The Soviet architects' union, however, was concerned and moved by the politically inspired events orchestrated by Stalin.

It is now generally understood that neither Stalin nor the Party selected one particular architectural style. However, the Union of Soviet Architects together with Party bureaucracy most assuredly determined what was and was not acceptable. No individual or artistic or professional clique would be permitted to make such determinations, unilaterally or otherwise. It was the Union that carried Party policy to the architectural profession. The Union was a sieve through which the Party allowed Union members to believe they were initiating and effecting professional and artistic ideas by a process that was not democratic but may have appeared to be so to outside observers. It was a process whereby loyalties were to be displayed at a convention attended by a select few dominated by a Party clique. And always the cunning Georgian was watching and listening. In a written overture Stalin's words greeted delegates to the June Congress.¹⁰ Comrade Schteinberg from the Ukrainian S.S.R. was one of many speakers at the Congress who plainly acknowledged

“the great architect Comrade Stalin.”¹¹

The 1937 Congress was the culmination of a long, awkward process of attempts by the state to control the arts. In 1932, the Seventeenth Conference of the Communist Party proclaimed “that within five years socialism must be achieved within every sphere of Soviet life.”¹² It was unclear how the architectural profession would achieve such a broadly based prescription. As we have seen, throughout the 1920s a remarkable and idiomatic architecture flourished on paper if seldom constructed.¹³ But around 1930, groups, associations, and individuals, vying for ideological and/or personal supremacy, factionalized the profession. Attempts were made to pacify certain groups or individuals or to amalgamate other informal groups or semiofficial associations in an effort to defuse, so to speak, the rather bitter polemics. Amalgamation was slow and in response the Party, wrote Soviet historian S. O. Khan-Magomedov, “was compelled to intervene.” Under a decree of April 1932 entitled “Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations,” all such professional groups were dissolved.

In July 1932, therefore, the Union of Soviet Architects was formed “with members of the earlier societies elected to its committee.”¹⁴ But the realities of events in 1932 are not quite as simple or innocent as Khan-Magomedov outlines. The April decree was the first step to enforcing Party control over all aspects of literary and artistic life in order to direct all aspects of artistic production. The second step was to force all architects into one Union of Soviet Architects. The third step was the establishment of Arplan (Arkhitekturno-Planirovochnoi Komissii or Architecture-Planning Commission) under the direction of super-bureaucrat L. M. Kaganovich, which occurred almost simultaneously with formation of the Union. “A controlling organ,” noted architectural historian Milka Bliznakov, “Arplan, was established to review and approach each design before acceptance for construction.” “Its function was to review and approve each design before acceptance for construction, not only from a functional but mainly,” it should be emphasized, “from an aesthetic viewpoint.”¹⁵

This review by the Party fit specific arguments that had been put by Lenin, including the following. “Every artist, everyone that considers himself an artist, has a right to create freely according to his ideals, independent of anything,” and here Lenin was referring specifically to the marketplace. But he quickly added that in fear of possible chaos, “we”—the Party—“must guide this process according to a plan and form its results.”¹⁶

A contradiction of monumental proportions.

This exposé together with other revealing comments were innocently presented in the

London magazine *The Studio* in 1935. Articles for that issue about all aspects of Soviet art were written by a group of official Soviet authors. David Arkin's article on architecture—he was then Secretary of the Union of Soviet Architects—succinctly outlined the official interpretation and defended the Party prescriptions.

Naturally, after the heady years of c. 1921 to 1932 this enforced bureaucratic control was bitterly resented. Yet nothing could be done about it. Similar proposals were desperately resisted in 1932 by writers, the more immediately obvious propagandists, but without success. For architects, factional divisions remained for many years in spite of Union efforts. Resolution of many ideological questions was not achieved, especially those of artistic will and definition of an appropriate socialist architecture. Therefore, the Party called the Union to exercise authority over its members. Architecture was the last art form to come under restrictions of the new Soviet policy. The turning point, in fact, had already been passed. Unity by political control was achieved by 1937 and the Congress was a formality for ratification of the new professional orthodoxy and a new architectural formalism.

Yet one problem persisted—and persists: Soviet architects and the Party bosses did not know how a new—or old—architecture could in fact be explicitly socialist. As far as the 1937 Congress was concerned such a refashioning of the past or a rejection of constructivism was too vague. And so the Congress was, “by its own standards, premature,” wrote Frederick Starr; the “leaders of the Union of Soviet Architects had no choice but to celebrate the triumph of a program that did not exist. Unsure of what they could affirm, they concentrated their attention instead on what they could safely deny. . . . Formalism best fit this need, the more so since it had already been linked with Trotskyism. Accordingly, the Congress turned into a kind of orgy of denunciation of formalism.”¹⁷ It may have been artistically premature but politically for the Stalinists it was overdue.

The Party revisionists believed the Soviet architecture of around 1932 was wrong, therefore Le Corbusier was wrong, therefore constructivism and so-called formalist ideas and modern architecture were wrong. Modernism was wrong for the following reasons: it had no roots in Russia or elsewhere in the Soviet Union, it was too formal and based on preconceptions some of which led to “fetishism,” it was not Marxian, it was individual and therefore not collectivist and consequently counterrevolutionary, it was not sufficiently expressive as witness the clichés produced around 1928–32 in the USSR, and it was contrary to “the methods of socialist realism.”¹⁸ Only the proletariat could determine artistic taste but invariably, of course, the Party prescribed and the proletariat accepted without choice. Indeed, *Izvestia* exhorted local soviets “to draw the masses . . . into a discussion of the shortcomings in architecture” in preparation for the Congress.¹⁹ From a

destructive, negative test of what was wrong, could what was right be found? Perhaps from the remnants? Not the best way to begin anew. Yet Wright's own polemics attempted to verbally destroy in the hope that rebuilding would be to his ideas.

The word "formalism" is a rather fuzzy, imprecise term that relies on context. In the 1920s formalists were historicists; around 1930 formalists were the Central European architects. In 1932 Anatoli Lunacharskii, Commissar for Education, urged a return to the antiquities and cited Marx's well-known admiration of Greek civilization. Therefore, as historian Arthur Voyce succinctly put it, ancient Greece and Rome were invoked "as an inspiration for a new Proletarian Renaissance—Athens and Rome reappraised, revitalized and refashioned, so as to fit the purposes and ideas of the young Soviet Republic."²⁰ It was a process of selective retrieval, one often used by fundamentalists. Exactly the same rationale was used by Hitler in the 1930s. Russian expatriate architect Berthold Lubetkin, who had left Russia for Paris and then London in the late 1920s, described formalism of the mid-1930s as substituting "the sense-experience" for "rational judgement"; or to put it another way, romanticism for rationalism. The Commissariat of Light Industry building in Moscow, Tsentrosoiuz, designed by Le Corbusier, was greatly admired when first proposed in 1928 but ignored on its opening in 1934–35 and ridiculed as formalist in 1937.²¹ Clearly, formalism is what you wish it to be.

This definition, such as it is, was affirmed by what happened in the 1930s. "In the attempt to define beauty," wrote historian Bliznakov, Soviet "architects and theoreticians turned to the past. Analysis of the architectural achievements from ancient Egypt to the Rococo led to the conclusion that a synthesis of all the arts . . . would inevitably lead to a perfect and beautiful building . . . the search for synthesis in the 1930s was concentrated exclusively on the past." Bliznakov described the devolution from traditional hierarchy to bureaucratic power and dependency: "In their writings on the principles of synthesizing the arts of the past, theoreticians naturally made extensive use of illustrations. This handy research led architects to a literal transposition of illustrated elements rather than to the search for new forms based on principles of abstraction. Image led to image. Gradually this eclectic imitative art came to be accepted as the official style under the name of Socialist Realism." Beauty therefore "was not a goal in itself but only a means of propagandizing for socialist ideology,"²² another tool for building Marxist materialism.

A more practical definition was contained in a series of official prescriptions issued the day before the Congress opened. In *Pravda* on 15 June 1937 the Communist Party explained the purpose and defined the role of the Congress.²³ The directives were diverse and can be paraphrased

like this. The Congress was important since in its long history architecture had never been so closely associated with the masses as in the Soviet Union. American architecture, by contrast, served the bourgeois and not the people. (In all the denunciations of American society, Wright was never mentioned, not even in the most subtle manner.) Soviet life actually creates artists while lifestyles in bourgeois countries only degrade architecture. In a socialist country the architecture is a participant in creating a new society. Working people need to admire beautiful buildings that are also functional. The contrast between beautiful areas and slums is an undeniable fact of capitalist cities. Thanks to the love and attention of Stalin and Lenin, Soviet architecture and many other artistic fields are showing results of which one must be proud. (And then the ordinances became more precise, almost as warnings.) Stalin's rule in construction is a concern for the people, and while some architects realize this they are not cooperating. It is the duty of architects to free architecture from formalism, trickery, or routine. Divorced from life, many architects do not pay attention to the needs of the people and therefore they must be criticized at open meetings. Planning must be performed in an unselfish way. A failure to understand politics and to follow Party lines explains many failures in architecture and building. The task at hand was then announced: the opening of the architects' Congress must bring about the complete destruction of formalism and falseness. The Congress will create a Soviet architectural style whose sole responsibility will be the needs of the people of our time. "We are now in Stalin's third five year plan and we must rise to the great task before us," said *Pravda*. "Greetings to the first Soviet Congress of architects." Political reality was gravely emphasized by Molotov, who stressed the Party's will to arbitrate rules governing architects.²⁴

The constrictions introduced by Stalin's Party exerted a basically conservative, reactionary strain that would not allow experimentation, would not countenance explorations into realms unknown or potentially dialectic: dialogue was forbidden. Liberal investigation of what might be (or what existed, as far as the constructivists were concerned) was also forbidden. A selection of a series of known, traditional, therefore accepted quantities was not only more theoretically viable but bureaucratically easy. Indeed, quantifiable convenience must have been seriously persuasive although usually couched in other terminologies. It was, therefore, difficult to define such a style. And yet the word "style" cannot be used with confidence for such a futile and perverse eclecticism. In fact, Soviet architect Karo Alabian in his statement as president of the Union lamely and imprecisely defined Soviet Realism as an amalgam of "ideology" and "truthfulness" that meets the demands of technology, culture, and practicality. It was an acceptable definition, however, even if contradictory in the face of eclectic historicism.

The All-Union Congress was crucial for four interlocking reasons. The first and most important was the outwardly visible and verbal acknowledgment of allegiance by the profession's individuals to Stalin's rule. The emphasis of Congress events and eulogies on Stalin, a kind of groveling, is part of the dynamics of the cult of personality that initially grew out of a Russian ecstasy for Lenin and was successfully if forcibly transferred by Stalin to himself. In view of the chilling climate and the acts of terror orchestrated by Stalin between 1932 and June 1937, this simple statement had special meaning. Second, the Congress was designed to demonstrate that, as artistic and professional spheres within the Soviet republics, architecture and city planning were in tune with and executing the ideals of Soviet socialism as determined by the Party, therefore the Union. Third, the Congress was also crucial for the careers of individual Soviet architects and, fourth, it shaped architectural design and stylistic acceptance. The actual wording used to announce the Congress was, however, innocuous. During a meeting on 19–21 April 1937, the Union of Soviet Architects determined that the All-Union Congress would meet in June with the following agenda: (1) task of Soviet architecture, (2) the general plan and reconstruction of Moscow and other planned cities, (3) the architecture of the home, (4) architectural schooling and training of building craftsmen, (5) statutes of the Union, and (6) elections.²⁵

The stage was set. Into this physical and ideological turmoil guests were invited to attend and participate. Their involvement was both passive and active: to listen, to visit, to see, to talk, and to give papers. People were much like show pieces brought in from various places in the USSR, from Europe, the Mediterranean, and America. In June 1937 the constructivists took the brunt of criticism, denunciations, and demands for confessions of waywardness, even "wreckerism." So too did individualists such as Moisei Ginzburg, Viktor and Alexandr Vesnin, and Konstantin Melnikov. Yet America's most eminent and well-known architect and an outspoken individualist and experimentalist was also invited as a foreign guest of the Union and Party. He would serve the Congress well if he were to accept their invitation.

15 Wright, Architecture, and the Soviets prior to 1937

There may have been several reasons for the Soviets to invite Wright as well as other foreign architects. The struggle, to use their term, of world Communism would be given a new life in spite of the notorious difficulties of the mid-1930s. In any case, the next meeting of the Comintern and the Party was due in less than two years. It was necessary to provide evidence that socialism and Stalinism were active in all spheres of artistic life as decreed in 1932. The internal problems of the USSR would seem less onerous if emphasis could be shifted to positive world developments. As