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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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uninteresting, lacked ornament (proponents would say it showed proportionally refined cubic massing); but more importantly, when constructed it was poorly detailed, weathered badly, and often looked downright ugly. At least Wright found it so, and he believed it naive. Clough Williams-Ellis, who toured the Soviet Union in 1932 and was possibly “the last of the English Arts and Crafts Architects,”³⁵ seems to have got it partially wrong when he said retrospectively, “On my first visit [1932] their architectural gods had been Ernst Mai, le Corbusier and Wright and starkness was all,” but got it right when he continued, “but now [1937] I found them gone all Ritz with the classical orders, marble, carving, and gilding proliferating everywhere.”³⁶ Engineering works were another matter, for there was no tradition of artistic excellence for comparison. It should be remembered that there was negative reaction in the West to the modernism produced just after the turn of the century. There was an important and critical difference. Western architects and clients retained the ability to make a choice; tradition and modernism existed and evolved side by side in pluralistic excitement. Such choices were forbidden in the USSR.

As previously noted, articles in English about Soviet architecture were few in number, a persistent trickle. After 1933 the trickle dried up. The dearth of information was emphasized in 1937 by *The Architectural Record*, which noted, perhaps in the view of editor Larson, that American architects “have followed the fragmentary accounts of recent trends in the architecture of the Soviet Union without obtaining a clear picture of what is going on there.”³⁷ If Wright received any information during those years it would have been filtered through propaganda channels, at occasional Soviet-organized exhibitions, or appearing in the pro-Soviet press including magazines such as *New Masses* or *Soviet Russia Today* (after 1951 *New World Review*). As might be expected, not even the Western socialist or Communist press was kept abreast of—let alone fully aware of—actual happenings in Russia during 1934 to 1938. Certainly propagandists gave subjects such as art and architecture a low priority. It was highly unlikely that Wright would have been aware of the struggles within the Soviet architectural profession between the Party reactionaries, the formalists (to use their vernacular), and the revisionists of the 1920s who, by 1937, were no longer the vanguard but virtually the enemy.

16 Why Attend?

It is not clear why Wright accepted the invitation to attend the Moscow Congress. He was to celebrate his seventieth birthday in June 1937 but before that happy day he had been seriously ill. During the week of 28 October 1936 he gave a lecture at Columbia University in New York. However, probably by early December he developed pneumonia. His strength may have been sapped by a fall from a

road grader in June 1936 at Hillside near Taliesin. He suffered some bruising, twisted limbs, and crushed ribs. Also, his left leg was put in a cast in September 1936, "phlebitis (pneumonia aftermath) . . . I broke it up in Tokyo building the Imperial Hotel and it seems a weak place." By 17 December the fever broke but even as late as 26 January 1937 he was still "house bound." His recuperation continued through February and finally in March he traveled to San Francisco and Hollywood, a tired but well man.¹ His major commissions, those with Kaufmann, Hanna, and Johnson, had not received the personal attention he desired. So he was both quite busy and still weak from his recent illnesses. One reason for beginning to build a home in Arizona was to obtain desert warmth in winter. Yet he elected to undertake the long, tiring journey to Russia.

While not clear, reasons provocatively assert themselves as to why he should have visited Moscow. Some are interesting individually while collectively they are quite persuasive. Wright was titillated by exotic places; he needed an occasional change of environment for revitalization; he loved to travel and then to write and talk of those places and the people he had met. From 1917 to 1922 he spent most of his life in Japan. He had traveled to Europe, England, South America, the Caribbean, and all about North America by the time the Moscow invitation arrived at Taliesin. By traveling to Russia his wife would return to a place whose culture would stimulate memories of adolescence, and she would have a chance to see "old friends who might still be alive." She was always reluctant to discuss her family, especially those relatives, possibly only her older sister, who remained in the Soviet Union. After World War II her brother and sister-in-law lived at Taliesin at Wright's insistence. There is no record of meetings with family in Moscow or while traveling to and from the city in 1937. Nevertheless the possibility of some form of contact may have been considered, in fact may have been a major determinant for the visit.

They enjoyed things, whatever they might be, that were outside of—or a challenge to—their view of the Establishment. A trip to Russia was such a challenge. They showed foreign films to the young people of their Fellowship and some were Russian. This proved to be disturbing to rural Wisconsinites. Historian Twombly discovered that when Wright was accused in 1936 of showing too many Soviet films, he replied "that Russian movies were no more propagandistic than American westerns, and that as citizens of the world the Fellowship had an obligation to explore the cultures."² Wright even wrote reviews of Russian films for the Madison newspaper *The Capital Times*. The ruralites' views were an understandable conservative response, even though Russian films were not excluded from American movie houses in the 1930s. For instance, during the week in 1932 that Wright visited Seattle, *China Express* was showing at a city cinema (admission 25 cents):

**A marvelous Superfilm, portraying
the struggle of the Chinese masses.**

**A stirring, realistic drama
you will never forget.**

**MADE IN
SOVIET RUSSIA**

In a theater just down the street Rex Lease was playing *The Utah Kid*. By 1943 people at Taliesin had viewed nearly eighty Soviet films,³ all rented since 1935 from the Soviet-controlled Amkino Corporation in New York City.⁴ All this indicates one or two levels of interest in the Soviet Union: but there are more substantial reasons.

Foremost, it seems Wright wanted to test his intellectual liberality. His own life had been one of action in and reaction to society, its norms and shibboleths. He left his first wife for a woman who shared his notion of free love as propounded by Ellen Key and other popularizers of the notion. From 1908 onward he acted out a belief in himself as an institution outside, if not above, his profession and the society it served. Not that he was always antagonistic; he simply believed in the necessity for people to act out their roles individually. He refused to acknowledge the rights of states to protect their people by setting competence tests through professional registration. The list of his protestations, if that is the correct word, against collective society in the name of liberality could be extended, and has been by other historians. Perhaps equally persuasive was the presence of Soviet Union military volunteers, as they were called, overtly fighting totalitarianism in Spain where the fascist forces of Mussolini and Hitler were materially engaged. Further, the Bolsheviks fought czarism and then displayed enormous internal fortitude by a vigorous and repressive reshaping of society into a potent, self-sustaining if demagogic whole. Suffice is to say that Wright was a revolutionary spirit. A personal evaluation *in situ* of the Sovietization of a former monarchy was indeed an enticing proposition.

Practically, then, Wright saw the Soviet experiments of the twenties and early thirties as a challenge to "dead cultures," to use his words, therefore to dead architectural style. He shared at least a portion of the *Zeitgeist* theory then so prevalent in Central Europe and Russia. He believed that the Russia of the 1930s should be the Russia of the 1930s just as he argued that America should—must—be similarly motivated. To the Soviets he prophesied that they would "create a worthy architecture which will be in harmony with the Soviet way of life, just as the Kremlin was in harmony with the social environment which gave birth to it."⁵ He saw that in the 1920s established

academic roles played by architects and art theorists in Europe and European-based cultures—like the U.S.—were subjected to critical evaluation and scrutiny in the Soviet Union, and that was good. He believed that reappraisal, even revision, was necessary but not of those elements traditionally national: “I see no necessity for Russia to die that the Soviet Union may live,” he said.⁶ With parallel and equally candid vigor, architecture and American nationalism (his interpretation) dominate his writing from 1930 to at least 1950.

The USSR’s possible interest in Wright has been noted. His knowledge of some of those interests must have intrigued him. He knew, of course, that Europe had been thrilled with his ideas and his architecture. He believed that they believed, therefore surely the Soviets believed there was something “correct” in his theories and practice as revealed in his architecture. Perhaps, he might have reasoned, the European response also resulted because he said that he believed, that he was forthright. Did opportunity offer a new platform to proselytize? Did they invite him because they needed him; that is his ideas about architecture, but more importantly about his vision for an organic life? When he confirmed his intention to attend the Congress he said his “sympathy with Russia’s need in architecture impels me to go.”⁷

A study of Wright’s written works in the 1930s, including the collaboration with Baker Brownell, indicates that he was not enamored with American capitalism, so what was the practice of Soviet socialism really like? Was the Taliesin Fellowship, his and Olgivanna’s notion of a working school, professional office, and farm, similar to a communal *kolkhoz* or, less likely, a local soviet? And what of those highly praised engineering works, dams, and those new cities and housing projects, underground railways, theaters, and convention halls? Wright must have been intrigued by Moscow’s ancient architecture, its tradition as capital of the Russias, the changes proposed, and, since many of the constructivist buildings were built in the big city, its modern architecture.⁸ How did Roosevelt’s large and expensive Tennessee Valley Authority compare with its Soviet predecessors? How did Russian constructivist architecture look in reality, in its environment?

In the 1930s, for someone disappointed or, in Wright’s case, despondent over aspects of the American system as highlighted and exaggerated by the Depression, a trip to the USSR was a tempting proposition. For a man needing heaps of aggrandizement, the opportunity was heaven-sent. In any event the trip was free.

Wright’s need of publicity, of being newsworthy, cannot be glossed over as a superficial part of his personality; rather, it was a dominant feature. And if one looks at his manuscripts or literary output after his visit to Moscow, one cannot help but be persuaded that he wanted to become

a voice knowledgeable about Russia and only secondarily about Soviet architecture. Indeed his and later Olgivanna's views on Communism, praising yet cautionary, were voiced in writings that began in 1937 and carried well into the 1960s.

17 To Moscow and the Congress

Wright may have intentionally promoted himself in such a way as to obtain the invitation to Russia, and the Congress may have provided a reasonable excuse for the invitation. Yet it would be silly to suggest he ingratiated himself or begged the favor. In January 1933 he sent his former student Michael A. Kostanecki a relatively long letter. In one section he wrote that it was "the time to acquaint Russia with the principles and ideals of an organic architecture." Wright wanted to go himself but since he could not he asked Kostanecki, "why do you not run over and have it out with the young architects in charge of the Soviet architectural destiny?" Wright added that he thought his thoughts about the disappearing city would be "good medicine for them—too."¹ Later in the letter he thought a show he was preparing for the Milan Triennale might thereafter travel to Poland and Russia. Perhaps the young Polish architect passed the word along to the right authorities.

Then in March 1934 Wright wrote to Moissaye J. Olgin, American correspondent for Pravda, that he, Wright, was anxious to know if Olgin had received an earlier letter on a "pressing personal matter."² All other correspondence is apparently lost, so the exact subject is unknown. It may have been about Mrs. Wright's family, for instance, or about a visit to Russia, or what? In 1934 Wright was also trying to obtain at least three scholarships from the USSR for their people to attend his Fellowship. Later in 1935 one B. A. Verdernikov in Kiev apparently asked to study with Wright. Wright agreed to take him, and wondered if perhaps "the Soviet" might provide Verdernikov with a scholarship since Wright understood "they are sending young men abroad for special training with different masters."³ Nothing material eventuated from these letters although correspondence continued sporadically for many years with Kostanecki in Krakow. These letters together with all the evidence previously presented here indicate the extent of Wright's involvement with Russia and the Soviet government prior to June 1937.

Exactly how or when Wright was invited is unknown, but it was in late April and he refused. Then sometime in May 1937 he changed his mind. His acceptance by telegram on 22 May to the Soviet Consul in New York was brief but revealing: "Sir: Felt I must refuse the kind invitation of the Soviet being extremely busy besides feeling unable to undertake expensive journey but circumstances have changed so now pleased to attend convention Moscow June 15th. Mrs Wright will accompany me. My sympathy with Russia's need in architecture impels me to go."⁴ It was sent