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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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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

from "Taliesin, Spring Green." As has been noted, he had only recently recovered from an illness. More demanding of his energies was the Kaufmann house which was under construction, and the Johnson administration building and Hanna house had just come into the office. He was indeed busy, busier than he had been for nearly two decades. He was in the second year of his second architectural renaissance. The changed circumstances that he referred to in the telegram probably related to organizing supervision of his new work, perhaps to money and to travel costs and arrangements made by Moscow. The date of the telegram must have been very close to the last moment for such a decision.

Wright's trip to Moscow began in early June 1937. Apprentice Edgar Tafel acted as chauffeur and drove Wright, Olgivanna, and their child Iovanna from Taliesin, through dull Racine and on to Chicago.⁵ The Wrights traveled by train from Chicago to New York where they boarded the liner *Queen Mary*. At Cherbourg they disembarked and traveled by train to Paris (where they saw Iofan's Soviet Pavilion for the Paris Exhibition⁶) then, following a short stay, on to Berlin.⁷ After a brief time in the German capital, then Hitler's seat of power, they were off again by train for the Russian border. On the final leg of their journey they were accompanied by the English architect Clough Williams-Ellis.⁸

In his autobiography of 1943 Wright described the border area around the town of Njegorieloje. "There was a wide blank space at the frontier, trees all cut down, a kind of no-man's land, a barbed-wire entanglement both sides. Towers with sentries were marching up and down the station platforms on the one side, Polish sentries on the other." At the border some difficulties developed with two customs officials, a man and a woman. Wright said of the incident only that their "examination . . . was getting acrimonious and more and more complex." Olgivanna was more explicit. She warned Wright to curb his normal freely spoken opinions (keep his mouth shut) and reminded him that his tongue might land them in prison. Olgivanna spoke a little Russian and after she intervened things proceeded more smoothly. However, when Wright was asked to open a roll of drawings he carried under his arm he became indignant. "I will not open my roll of drawings."⁹ He agreed that customs had the right to inspect all material but he was emphatic; "I will not have you pawing through my drawings."

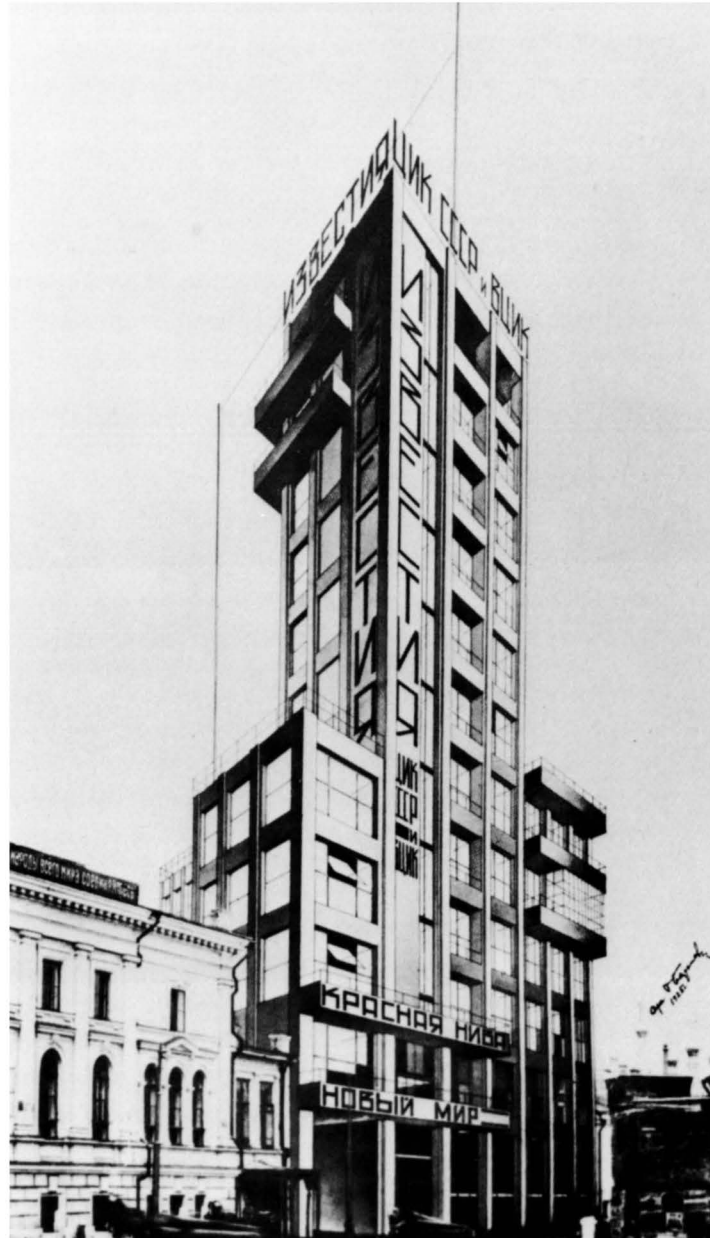
As Olgivanna described it, things again became rancorous indeed. There were threats from both sides; on one side guns were drawn. Wright could see his country defending his honor with "warships on the Black Sea." A telephone call was made by customs to their Moscow office and while this was in progress Olgivanna again warned Wright that his conduct might land them in

jail. Moscow must have said something to the effect that all was right and proper concerning the Wrights. They were then put on a train on which they ate “sumptuous meals” *alone*, Wright emphasized, in the dining car. They were advised to lock and chain their compartment at night. Wright raised the logical question: “Is someone afraid of us, or afraid *for* us?”¹⁰ It needs to be remembered, indeed stressed, that, as historian Kathleen Berton said, “The year 1937 is generally accepted as the beginning of the worst period of the purges in which ten million [sic] were reckoned to have lost their lives. It was in this atmosphere that the First Congress of the Union of Architects was held.”¹¹ On their arrival in Moscow on 21 June, six days after the conference began, the Wrights were welcomed by architects Iofan, Kolli, Arkin, and their spouses who presented Olgivanna with bouquets of flowers. Later, the American Ambassador (“Joe Davies . . . a Madison U. boy,” said Wright)¹² privately informed the Wrights of the execution of Marshall Tukhachevsky.

Once the Wrights entered Russia everything was paid for by “the Soviet.” Such generosity could not suppress the obvious. In a fleeting, almost parenthetical thought in his 1943 autobiography Wright somberly summarized one lasting impression: in Russia, “Too much going into building up the defense which would inevitably have to be used,” he said, “and perhaps just because it was built up to such proportions! It was a subject of which no one spoke. I don’t know. The world was in a jam. Great changes coming. And there was something in the air then—May [June], 1937—that made everyone afraid of something he couldn’t define.”¹³

Outside the Congress Wright saw much of the country in and around Moscow. Aleksei Shchusev took him to see the Russian’s design of a “Soviet Hotel” and Iofan described his winning design for the Palace of the Soviets.¹⁴ Of course Wright saw many other buildings during his visit and there was a large exhibition of Soviet architecture mounted in the House of Unions lobby.¹⁵ He found the constructivist buildings a little shabby, “indeed, drab, lonesome, technically childish.” He visited a *kolkhoz*, a collective farm where, he said, the same flowers and trees and weeds were seen as those at home in Spring Green. In another Russian village that was part of the official tour and notable for prized nineteenth-century eclectic architecture, he saw “the same herds and the same birds and similar architecture” as those at his Wisconsin home.¹⁶ (In his autobiographical reminiscences he recalled the days in Tokyo during 1917–21 while working on the Imperial Hotel when he entertained Russian expatriates and refugees from the Bolshevik wars—princess so-and-so and “Countess C.”)¹⁷ But the thousands of sea and land miles traveled in 1937 were not for the purpose of touring, rather for business of sorts. The business of the Congress had been announced in the Soviet architectural press in May as follows: “The first All-Union Congress of soviet architects is

17.1 Perspective of proposed *Izvestia* building, Moscow, 1926, G. Barkhin, architect.



summoned to complete, amongst its other important tasks, that great spade-work which was conducted for some years in organizing the united creative society of soviet architectural cadres—the Union of Soviet Architects.”¹⁸

Guests at the Congress were divided into language groups and provided with two interpreters who alternated in translating proceedings. The English-speaking group consisted of Harald Hals and Edvard Heiberg from Norway, Sven Markelius from Sweden, from England B. Garrett and Williams-Ellis (who sat with Wright), and Simon Breines and Wright from the USA. The French-speaking group included the Spanish government architects Manuel Sanches-Arcas, J. Martin, and J. Vaamonde, and the Frenchmen Francis Jourdain, Lurçat (a “militant communist” Parisian who was then designing a large hospital group in the USSR),¹⁹ and Marcel Lods. Also present were architects from a few other European and Mediterranean countries; Turkey, Belgium, Rumania, and Czechoslovakia were mentioned.²⁰ Major papers and discussion resumés were made available in French to all guests.

Breines was an interesting fellow, an architect fully committed to European modernism in thought and practice. He worried about what he saw as social and economic inequities (“evils”)—the business, finance, and credit systems—but he did not labor on these. On one occasion he expressed concern over perspective renderings of mainly urban buildings, like those by the popular Hugh Ferriss, who in 1929 had published his “ode to the skyscraper,” as Manfredo Tafuri has put it, *Metropolis of Tomorrow*. Breines believed they were too impressionistic and false. Honesty was also missing in architectural education and professional practice. They were all linked. Implied was a socially irresponsible Beaux-Arts system infecting education and architectural design. Breines found Wright to be honest as a designer, his own “judge,” and this was reflected in his plain “line drawings.” Breines confessed to a liking for the new Central European architecture: it did not need the “assistance of artistic paper compositions.” His attack was not well received by New York’s architectural establishment but at least it was given public air at a lecture and on the pages of *American Architect*.²¹ In the early 1930s he was actively involved with The Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists and Technicians, a union of sorts dedicated to assisting those groups of professionals during the Depression and promoting their cause to Congress in the hope of inducing employment and a variety of monetary reliefs.²² In 1946 Crown published a book by Breines and John P. Dean, *The Book of Houses*, on how to make selections in postwar America.

Breines was impressed by efforts in the Soviet Union generally and the Congress particularly because constituents from all the USSR participated and because, he said, “the proceedings

were carried on in an atmosphere of vigorous, free, and objective discussion and self-criticism." Breines reportedly collaborated with Joseph Vanderkar and they were one of the place-getters in the international competition for a Palace of Soviets. They traveled to Moscow as a result, possibly in 1932–33. However Breines and the Wrights may have got along in Moscow, Wright subsequently makes no mention of Breines. With Ralph Pomerance, Breines maintained a partnership in New York from the 1930s into the 1970s. In 1938–39 they were associates to Soviet architect Karo Alabian and site architects for the USSR pavilion built for the New York World's Fair.²³

The papers presented at the Congress were routine and repetitive. They praised Stalin; they dealt with achievements in various states and cities in the USSR, with tasks for Soviet architects, with reports on the Palace of Soviets, with city planning, especially for Leningrad and Moscow, and with "reconstruction" for housing, industrialization, and education.²⁴ The first day set the pace, style, and tone. Karo Alabian, by then "principal scribe and purveyor of the official party line in Soviet architecture" and general secretary of the organizing committee of the architects' Union, offered the keynote address.²⁵ He "plunged directly into the question of the hour" when he asked, "What is the social function of architecture in the USSR and what form shall it take?"²⁶ He gave no answers, finding it easier to list those architects who failed "to serve the interests of the people," such as Melnikov the individualist, Nikolsky and the Vesnins the constructivists, "who adhered to the 'modern' or 'functional' style."²⁷

Pravda noted in one of its daily postmortems that architectural styles and ideas as well as architects themselves came under scrutiny and were praised or damned. The newspaper continued its resumé. The only true realistic architecture was that which had been formulated by the Party. Were ideas of present-day Europe and America of use? . . . we have to learn from them . . . "we must catch up," said Aleksei Shchusev.²⁸ Soviet architects must learn to express truth (wisely left undefined). Ancient architecture should be a source of ideas but not copied mechanically. The architecture of the capitalist countries was experiencing a decline because it had exploited the masses. Technology would be a key to success. Architects must be reeducated. Within the ranks of our architects were enemies of the people, and they and their works were "exposed." True Party lines had not been achieved by academic architecture, i.e., the schools were not providing a proper education (Ginzberg, Viktor Vesnin, and Melnikov were professors). Some architects followed the leftist bourgeois art—the Central European modernists—because they did not understand the political ideas of Lenin. One of the more important aspects of Soviet architecture, said N. J. Kolli, was the influx of constructivist architectural ideas in the 1920s. French architect Le Corbusier was one

of its promoters and, emphasized Kolli, his style became a basis of Soviet architecture.²⁹ And on and on it went for a very long week like a Russian novel.

The Congress papers had been more-than-less prescribed by *Pravda*.³⁰ As well, factory workers, Red Army personnel, writers, painters, sculptors, and artists participated or performed publicly or criticized architects and their buildings. Architects, planners, and bureaucrats from all the Soviet republics and major cities attended, with representatives giving papers. The good and the bad in their realms were exposed. A desire for regional identification was a rare positive contribution, the implication being that ethnic cultures should be allowed to express themselves. Some architects confessed the error of their ways and pledged closer adherence to the Party. Viktor Vesnin pointed out that while it was true that many postwar architectural ideas from the West had been adopted without sufficient criticism and with an incorrect ideological approach, nevertheless it was equally true that in the 1920s constructivism contained much of value.³¹ He admitted that he and his brother Aleksandr had erred in not vigorously combatting extremists in their ranks. But, he said, "the way to overcome constructivism is through the application of socialist architecture," and by a scientific method.³² He was politely suggesting that if one was to redefine socialist architecture, precision was necessary. The exact method was left undefined, perhaps purposely so.

After summarizing the papers, the Party took the architects to task in the pages of *Pravda*. For instance, Viktor Vesnin was old-fashioned. He and Moisei Ginzberg followed individualism and did not disclose their own mistakes in their speeches. Their confessions and new pledges soon followed this.³³ The Congress purged Melnikov from the profession and his teaching position; he was ostracized. Then resolutions were passed including a demand to overcome formalism and, oddly, eclecticism; medals were given; and new pledges of solidarity were offered.³⁴ In the foreword to his book *Constructivist Architecture in the USSR*, Anatole Kopp was concise: one result of the Congress was to "erase" all reference "to the achievements, projects and theoretical research that had made the Soviet Union one of the poles of progress in architecture and town planning during the 1920s." That censorship was effective for the next forty years.

The Congress closed on 26 June. On that day before the closing ceremony Wright's paper was read.

18 Wright's Paper

There are four versions of Wright's speech in Moscow in 1937: two are Russian, one by *Pravda* and one by the journal *Arkhitektura SSR* (or *Architecture of the USSR*), and two by Wright. Each version served a different purpose. Not one wholly agreed with the others and for good reasons. The first