For example, the thorny issues of France’s institutionalized racial inequalities, class exclusion, and the police violence pervasive in a number of suburbs are referenced, somewhat anecdotally, throughout the book, but they are dropped rather quickly from the analysis. To be fair, as an architectural historian, Cupers wishes to avoid a simplistic conflation of built forms and typologies with multifaceted sociopolitical problems linked to uneven capitalist development and to France’s troubled colonial past. The lack of statistical data, as Cupers mentions, is partially to blame for this blind spot. Yet a more sustained and critical engagement with these issues would have been useful, particularly given recent public debates about the French suburbs in the aftermath of recurrent waves of riots.

Furthermore, unlike Newsome and Foucault, Cupers does not examine in detail the impact on planning culture of influential postwar political movements, whether they were communist, social Catholic, or more conservative. This book does open interesting areas for new research, such as the significant role of religious spaces in France’s multifacith suburban neighborhoods (despite the French state’s controversial laws enforcing laïcité, or secularism), and for more in-depth study on topics such as the place of public art in the grands ensembles. Undoubtedly, many future scholars will have occasion to grapple with Cupers’s impressive study.

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4. I am here referring to the title of Anatole Kopp, Quand le moderne n’était pas un style mais une cause (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1988).

Philipp Meuser and Dimitrij Zadorin
Berlin: DOM, 2015, 456 pp., ca. 1,000 illus. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 9783869224466; $59.95 (paper), 9783869223922

Between the mid-1950s and its collapse in the early 1990s, the Soviet Union organized the largest mass housing construction campaign in human history. The transformation was momentous: in three decades, approximately thirty million families were ushered into modern living as the socialist welfare state provided them for the first time with their own individual apartments, most of them industrially built and equipped with amenities like central heating and running water. The endeavor was epic, its sheer scope greatly exceeding such iconic modernization projects as the Haussmannization of Paris. Like Haussmannization, the Soviet housing campaign produced its own architectural icons, most notably the so-called khrushchevs, a simple bar of three to five stories developed under Nikita Khrushchev’s reign. Yet, despite its success at accommodating tens of millions in a relatively short time, the Soviet mass housing program acquired a distinctly bad reputation. Notorious for shoddy construction, cramped spaces, and drab urban environments, the buildings came under fire both from professional circles and from the public long before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the many practical and theoretical revisions aimed at improving the standards of design and construction, the negative image of the program’s housing prevailed, becoming entrenched as a global stereotype of soulless urban monotony, even though comparable industrially produced housing was constructed across the world, regardless of political and ideological divisions.

In the past several years, scholars have started challenging the simplistic image of Soviet mass housing as an unqualified failure, bringing to light the project’s emancipatory dimension as well as its social, political, and economic complexities.1 Such scholarly efforts resonate with the simultaneous resurgence of popular interest in the built environments of the former socialist world, most obviously manifested through the mass media’s focus on the more spectacular achievements. From Soviet bus stops and Yugoslav war memorials to futuristic civic structures and resorts found all over Eastern Europe, socialist architecture is now regularly featured in coffee-table books, popular periodicals, and Internet blogs. Between mass-media sensationalism and pioneering works by urban and cultural historians, architectural history proper is only starting to catch up with other fields in historicizing the socialist world, including mass housing as its central architectural problem. Towards a Typology of Soviet Mass Housing is a groundbreaking effort in that respect. A product of obvious enthusiasm, it is best described as a source book that offers an enormous amount of primary information, including around a thousand illustrations: archival drawings, maps, and period and contemporary photos, as well as newly produced diagrams. The book does not offer much interpretation or a strong historical-theoretical argument, but it is notable for providing an unparalleled insight into a vast amount of material previously inaccessible to scholars outside the former Soviet Union.

The volume is divided into two clearly defined sections. In the first part, titled “Typology,” Philipp Meuser presents a broad systematization of the material according to ten parameters: from the institutional and legislative frameworks through spatial organizations, structural systems, and architectural styles of apartment buildings to the typical methods of construction. The “Catalogue,” written and compiled by Dimitrij Zadorin,
describes and documents the twenty-five most important “series” of standardized housing produced between the mid-1950s and mid-1980s and indicates their regional distribution across the vast expanse of the Soviet Union. The book is equipped with a useful glossary as well as a short bibliography of key primary sources.

It is already rather widely known that Soviet efforts at standardizing and industrializing the production of residential architecture received a decisive boost in the wake of Stalin’s death. As Khrushchev’s “Thaw” rejected Stalinist policies and the overblown monumentality of socialist realism, the construction of residential architecture took a decidedly utilitarian direction, single-mindedly aimed at resolving the housing crisis in the most efficient way. Meuser and Zadorin’s account adds a great deal of new information and nuance to this general story by showing how the mass housing program, originally initiated and directed from the top down, acquired a life of its own to evolve through several distinct generations, which closely corresponded to legislative reforms and the resultant changes in standards and norms. Only the first three generations produced practical effects before socialism collapsed, advancing from extremely stringent material and spatial constraints and limited conceptual possibilities toward higher standards, greater flexibility, and an increasing variety of urban layouts, building types, and formal articulation. A parallel evolution involved the development of construction methods that strongly, although not exclusively, favored industrialized production, especially large-panel prefabrication. This evolution, which occurred for several decades and on a continental scale, produced its own intractable universe that came to include between four hundred and five hundred different series, a staggering number that seems to defy the very idea of standardization. Behind the apparent diversity, however, certain models demonstrated remarkable persistence. The material presented in the book suggests that the core principles of modernist urban planning remained virtually unchallenged in practice, even though alternative models were already being explored in theory in the early 1960s. Similarly, the diagrams of apartment plans appear to have undergone only limited revisions; most remarkably, the typical kitchen-bathroom block located adjacent to the entrance appears almost unchanged over thirty years, with rare exceptions emerging only late in the socialist period. Such solutions were developed for economic reasons and were enforced by bureaucratic norms; their persistence suggests that the continued domination of economy in housing production resulted in an ossification of design, as opposed to the more experimental possibilities available in other fields of architecture.

Even though the evolution of Soviet mass housing paralleled and in many instances intersected with similar processes in the rest of the world—for example, through direct technological imports from France and the United States—there were certain developments that not only appear specific to the Soviet Union but also challenge some of the existing stereotypes. Because of the vast scale of the country, standard designs had to be customized for a wide range of geographic regions and their climatic, seismic, and cultural specificities. Throughout the 1970s, for instance, there was a remarkable range of attempts to move away from the purely utilitarian approach to design by “regionalizing” the prefabricated buildings through artworks, especially in the Soviet Union’s peripheral republics. Similar attempts were made elsewhere in Eastern Europe at the time—for example, in Hungary and Czechoslovakia—but Soviet decorative balcony screens, color effects, and large-scale mosaics appear to be quite unique in terms of both scale and variety. The results were especially interesting in Central Asia, where geometrical motifs associated with traditional Islamic art ostensibly responded to the need for regional and ethnic identification. The many such examples documented by Meuser and Zadorin certainly deserve further study in relation to aesthetic and political discourses in the Soviet Union, as well as in comparative terms, for example, vis-à-vis the parallel attempts to regionalize modern architecture across the Middle East.

As helpful as it is, Towards a Typology of Soviet Mass Housing is not without shortcomings, in part due to the occasionally awkward English translation. The authors are certainly right to say that Soviet mass housing is “poorly studied,” and the amount of primary research they provide is undoubtedly groundbreaking; however, the field is not entirely a tabula rasa, and their account could have greatly benefited from the findings of several recent studies. For example, Meuser’s summary claim that “the examination of Soviet serial mass housing . . . can be applied to socialist mass housing in general” (143) seems less convincing in the light of Kimberly Elman Zarecor’s work that demonstrates how prefabricated housing in socialist Czechoslovakia was largely a homegrown effort deeply rooted in interwar experiments. Notwithstanding the fact that the socialist world cannot be equated with Comecon states, even the Soviet bloc was not exactly the monolith that the Cold War stereotype would suggest; a proper comparative study of socialist mass housing would thus be necessary before any overarching conclusions can be drawn. Another useful source for Meuser and Zadorin could have been Steven Harris’s social history of the khrushchevka, which brilliantly demonstrates how the typical Soviet apartment plans in effect emerged from the architects’ navigation between bureaucratic constraints and the need to prevent communal occupation. In that light, the infamous kommunalka—the communal apartment occupied by several families—appears as a ghost that haunted the design of mass housing long after Stalin’s death and probably deserves at least a brief mention as the chief, albeit negative, motivating force for design in the post-Stalinist period.

Despite these minor shortcomings, Towards a Typology of Soviet Mass Housing is a valuable resource that not only presents an enormous amount of historical material but also raises numerous important questions. A product of obvious enthusiasm, it will greatly facilitate further studies of mass housing in the twentieth century.

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2. On the alternative proposals by the New Element of Settlement (NER) group in Moscow, see...

The translation in some instances obscures theoretical conclusions, and in others it causes terminological confusion, for example, by referring to “detached houses” when the context suggests that the actual topic is freestanding towers (156).


5. See Harris, Communism on Tomorrow Street.