BOOKS

ARCHITECTURE OF LIFE: SOVIET MODERNISM AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES

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Reviewed by Amy Ione.

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Architecture of Life: Soviet Modernism and the Human Sciences is an extensively researched intellectual history of Soviet Modernism in the late 1920s. For Alla Vronskaya, the author and a professor of architectural history at Kassel University, modernism is not merely a style. Rather, she presents it in the book as an effort to formulate a new theory of art and an architecture of life. Situating her study midway between the 1917 Bolshevik revolution and the peak of the Stalinist purges of 1937, she explains that the value of this type of multi-faceted

investigation is twofold. On the one hand, Soviet theories on architectural design incorporated contemporaneous psychological and physiological studies of human life. On the other, the Soviet movement was developed from and integrated with the formation of an international modernism.

Incorporating more contextual history would have benefitted readers who are only minimally familiar with why this period of Soviet Russian history is significant. Suffice it to say that Joseph Stalin's *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1938), colloquially known as the *Short Course* [1], speaks about the second revolution he initiated. Stalin, who led the Soviet Union from 1924 until his death in 1953, termed this second revolution a "revolution from above" and writes that it began in earnest around 1928 with the acceptance of the first Five-Year Plan. The period in which this second revolution took form corresponds to the period examined by Vronskaya. According to Stalin, while dictated from above, this revolution was supported from below by the millions of peasants who were fighting to throw off kulak bondage and live on collective farms.

Critics argue that those Stalin defines as kulaks included both the affluent farmers and peasants who opposed the tenets dictated by the state. While there was an impressive effort at that time in terms of rebuilding all aspects of the country, the second revolution also forced 25 million peasant families into state-run collectives. In other words, the collective society was not centered around a horizontal Social Democratic approach but was conceived by a top-down initiative that laid the foundation for the establishment of a totalitarian state.

Stalin's governance, like the debates surrounding it, are well beyond the scope of the book under review. I have introduced the concept of the "revolution from above" because the architects in this book worked as agents of this process. This approach is also relevant because Vronskaya sees this period's accomplishments as a model for crafting a monistic approach to climate change, as I discuss at the end of this review.

The bulk of the book outlines how the Soviet architects approached their task of designing buildings to foster economic productivity and training architects. Architecturally key here, Vronskaya tells the reader, is that in this interwar period "the subject was

defined collectively, from a perspective that was both scientific and managerial, as simultaneously a part and the master of nature. In this monistic economy, a materialistic concept of nature collided with teleology—the desire to direct history's course by the power of will and reason" (p. 199).

As the book unfolded, I found that the architectural debates about form, function, psychology, and organic processes placed more emphasis on the social engineering element of design theories than individual humanistic concerns. Concepts like psychoanalysis, personality theory, studies in spatial perception, and organic growth were considered integral in developing the theories used to define how best to mesh individual attributes with the goal of shaping production and the economy. Vronskaya claims these kinds of concerns grounded functional design firmly within the attributes of the individual. For example, she tells us that Soviet architects rejected the concept of society as a machine in favor of a vision of society as an ecosystem, grouping individuals according to their psychological profiles. Labor management is represented as an effort to humanize work and distinguish it from mechanistic dehumanization. Efforts to make work pleasurable included social functions, social purposefulness, vocational selection and pedagogy, social reform, designing worker housing, furthering architectural psychology, and the development of a methodology for landscape architecture. In terms of training architects, they defined architectural giftedness as an unconscious property; it was seen as psychological and not intellectual.

What stood out overall, however, was the degree to which the theoretical generalizations seemed strikingly cold and distant from various aspects of human living. If the environmental designers thought about the impact of building design on actual people like the hordes of soldiers who had returned home from World War I with long-term injuries and shellshock, it was not apparent. Similarly, it was unclear if, when thinking about workers, their designs and constructions included nuances such as how our minds and bodies deteriorate as we age, those born with disabilities, or the environmental injuries to the body or mind that impact some unexpectedly.

For example, László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) found his left thumb permanently bent from a wound sustained on the Russian Front in 1917. This injury put him among many wounded on this front, who were themselves among the 5 million Russians who came home after the war. In the context of this book's discussion, the kinds of realities faced by those with injuries did not exist. There was perhaps no pressing need to mention Moholy-Nagy's injury, although he was referenced as one of the left-leaning individuals working outside of Soviet Russia who influenced constructivist thinking. In Moholy-Nagy's case, this injury had an impact on his life and may explain why his left hand never appears in his photography and why the "hand" was so often an element in his thinking. Indeed, after moving to America, he developed occupational therapy courses at the New Bauhaus to help rehabilitate others with war injuries.

Omissions of this kind demonstrate that what Vronskaya defines as an "ecosystem" appears to rest on the views of a subset of the population. Their lofty, utopian, and idealistic perch seemed elitist, for they were designing the collective in terms of aspirations about humanity and an environmental design philosophy that treated individuals generically. As she puts it, these modernist architects wanted to design spatial environments that "facilitated humanity's survival and directed its evolutionary process. . . . [they wanted] to redesign *Homo Sapiens*" (p. xxix). Part of her rationale in characterizing their work as comprising an ecosystem is put in place through introducing their views as complementary parts of a whole with shared values. One example of how their shared value system operated in a complementary fashion was offered through the concept of organicism, which is not conceptually extended to include the nuances of individual situations either. Rather, the idea is that everything in nature has an organic basis or is a part of an organic whole. Within the architectural cohort discussed in this book, some theorists saw organicism in predominantly psychological terms, emphasizing form. For others, it was seen more as a biological doctrine.

Six chapters of the book cover what Vronskaya sees as the key principles within the monistic discourse: space, orientation, fitness, process, energy, and personality. Nikolai Ladovsky's work is covered extensively in Chapter 1: Space, and Chapter 3: Fitness. While the key point of Chapter 1 is that Soviet rationalism struggled with how the ethos of productivism could be reconciled with humanness, the focus in Chapter 3 is on the Psychotechnical Laboratory he opened in 1927. This program coincided with Stalin's first Five-Year Plan, and he used the laboratory to test his psychotechnical theories. Construing the architect as a perceiving machine, Ladovsky's laboratory tested the physiological and psychological abilities of architectural students with the aim of optimizing the division of labor in architecture. The architectural debates, while developed in relation to industrial management discussions in America, differed from their American counterparts. She sees the key difference in terms of those Americans who emphasized mechanistic ideas rather than organic processes when formulating ideas about stimulating production. What struck me was the Americans who were missing. Whereas William James, for example, is cited as someone who influenced the thinking of the Soviet architects, it seems those who knew his work must have overlooked his writings that encompass occupational therapy, medicine, and disability [2].

Chapter 3 did acknowledge, however, that atypical conditions were not completely absent through an anecdote about the architect Le Corbusier, who visited Ladovsky's lab. Le Cor-

busier was unable to see stereoscopically, and he called himself a Cyclops due to his monocular vision. While at the lab, Le Corbusier was tested on Ladovsky's space-meter, an optical device used to measure depth perception. The results were disappointing. His scores on the test picked up that he lacked stereoscopic vision and flagged him as someone physiologically incapable of doing architectural work. Vronskaya uses his poor performance on the test as a verification of the instrument's ability to accurately measure spatial perception. Unfortunately, she did not critically probe the incident at all. The paradox that one of the premier architects of the twentieth century did not pass the psychotechnical perception test that was used to select qualified design and architecture students remained unexplored.

Chapter 2: Orientation is a fascinating and stimulating unpacking of El Lissitzky's views on metropolitan urbanism, formulated in the mid-1920s. We learn that Lissitsky argued for an organicist urban theory and an architecture that could organize and order metropolitan chaos without succumbing to anthropocentrism. His many self-portraits are alluring, particularly his incorporations of the eye and the compass in his designs. The evolution of these ideas to orientation came from the way the urbanism of modern cities fosters disorientation and irrationality. He assumed that modernization provided new opportunities for orientation.

Chapter 4: Process highlights the roots of notions like organization, type, process, function, setup, and so forth in terms of the first Soviet program of standardization. Key components include Alexander Rozenberg's theory of normalization and Lissitzky and Ginzburg's typification efforts. The latter is the process of creating standard or typical social constructions based on what are considered the salient characterization of standard assumptions. "Closely related, both typification and norming were thus introduced as mechanisms of normalizing architectural work: whereas the former addressed the process of design, the second targeted the process of construction" (p. 115).

Although Rozenberg saw normalization as organic, the author also mentions that he avoided considering any personal circumstances related to workers themselves. This impersonal approach was another example of why these designers seemed to approach their work with an overall lack of empathy. Based on the idea that everyday life processes (sleeping, eating, play, etc.) could be divided in the same way that scientific management divided labor into physical and intellectual tasks, Ginzburg's methodology was similarly depersonalized.

> Deindividualization opened the door for reconfiguring design according to the economic principle: the normalization of life necessitated the rationalization of architecture, and as a result, the contemporary apartment must be developed like the best contemporary travel suitcase, considering everything necessary that it must contain and using every square centimeter (p. 131).

Chapter 5: Energy continues the discussion of Ginzburg's theories through wall painting and the economy of perception. Admittedly, I found this chapter somewhat difficult to follow. Suffice it to say that the author examines Ginzburg's collaboration with Bauhaus designer Hinnerk Scheper from 1929–1931 in their work on wall paintings. They saw these paintings as a mechanism for unlocking unconscious perception and thus transforming everyday processes into meaningful activities by improving the energetic functionality of the subject. The chapter also describes these Soviet projects as a tool of standardization and psychological control. It was intended to regulate subjectivity rather than as a tool of production.

Perhaps my difficulty in deciphering the logic here stemmed from the way the theories presented in this chapter made me feel claustrophobic, which was coupled with my thinking historically about the power of wall paintings in environmental design. Wall paintings were ubiquitous from the earliest cave paintings. We find them in Minoan palaces, Renaissance palaces, and beyond. In terms of the lack of empathy in this book, I was reminded of how wall paintings were used in medieval hospitals to ease the pain of patients. Indeed, wall paintings served as a healing device, a framing that was missing throughout this volume. When we think of these historical murals in hospitals today, we are more likely to remember the names of artists who painted them than the architects who built the buildings. The Flemish primitive Hans Memling's (1430–1430) paintings for St. John's Hospital in Bruges, now Museum of St John's Hospital, come to mind.

Chapter 6: Personality centers on landscape architecture through the development of Central Park of Culture in Moscow, commonly known as Gorky Park. Opened in 1928, the site was built to add culture to the leisure time of the working class. Designed as a part of the evolutionary program of building better humans, the park focused on "the integral personality of the human and on its production by social means" (p. 165). It was intended as a place where the alienating and detrimental effects of the division of labor would be overcome. Vronskaya describes the landscape architectural project as an acknowledgment that the division of labor in a factory was a fragmenting operation in terms of individual experiences, one that led to biological simplification and stunted development.

"Dealienation" was the term used to explain the purpose behind the project. In other words, there were two goals: one to remove the sense of alienation workers experienced in factories, the other to produce better and happier humans who would, in turn, spur industrial productivity. After the park was built, it turned out that most visitors resisted the engineered cultural aspirations, preferring the entertainment options, leading

the designers to rethink and modify the design.

The book's conclusion is titled "History: From the Monistic to the Terrestrial." Here Vronskaya attempts to connect the interwar views with contemporary concerns about climate change and the role of humanity in shaping our planetary environment. She suggests that the monistic organizing principle of Soviet interwar modernism offers material for reflection and rejects pluralism as a path. It is intriguing to think that William James, who as mentioned above was said to have influenced some of these theorists, advocated for pluralism, seeing value in moving beyond dialectics. Indeed, in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) he wrote: "[t]hings are 'with' one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word 'and' trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes" [3]. Among what escaped in this section is how ecological studies have broached and debated top-down and bottom-up variables, a topic unmentioned in her chapter and far beyond the scope of this review.

Leonardo readers will no doubt find aspects of the book's discussion fascinating. Often, the framing surrounding the discussions of art, engineering, the mind, and the body intersect with contemporary STEM and STEAM debates. The repeated references to Soviet films that included architectural montage and spatial/perceptual elements were quite enticing as well. Another plus is that the text is enhanced by beautifully produced black-and-white illustrations and a welcome section of color plates. There are also challenges in reading the book. I found the task of holding onto all the various Soviet acronyms and organizations somewhat daunting. A reference list would have aided the reader immensely. While I disagree with the thrust of many of the author's suppositions, her research did stimulate me to think more deeply about modernity, Soviet history, the importance of environmental design in our lives, and how bottom-up social democracies and top-down totalitarian regimes differ.

References

1 J.V. Stalin, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Short Course)* (Lulu, 2016.)

2 Amy Ione, *Neuroscience and Art: The Neurocultural Landscape* (Berlin: Springer [in press]).

3 William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909) p. 221.