

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
May 1990

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

June 28 - September 4, 1990

The first exhibition devoted exclusively to the work of the Russian avant-garde architects of the 1920s opens at The Museum of Modern Art on June 28, 1990. Organized by Stuart Wrede, director of the Department of Architecture and Design, ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE comprises over 150 drawings revealing the diversity and innovation of this remarkable period in twentieth-century architecture. Selected from the A.V. Shchusev State Research Museum of Architecture in Moscow, the world's most important repository of this material, this is the first time these original drawings have been shown in the United States.

On view through September 4, this exhibition is supported by a grant from Knoll International, Inc. Additional funding has been provided by Lily Auchincloss, The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Trust for Mutual Understanding.

Although little of their work was built, the architects of the Russian avant-garde have had a significant international influence, both at the time they practiced and since the 1960s, when their work was rediscovered. Among the thirty-five architects represented in the exhibition are Iakov Chernikov, Moisei Ginsburg, Vladimir Krinsky, Ivan Leonidov, Konstantin Melnikov, and the Vesnin brothers. Several related works from the Museum's collection, including Le Corbusier's original model for the *Palace of Soviets* (1931) and

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drawings by Viktor Vesnin and Kasimir Malevich, are installed in the fourth-floor architecture gallery.

The restructuring of Soviet society following the Revolution of 1917 led to a widespread demand for both new buildings and new forms and gave the architectural profession an opportunity to redefine its social and cultural roles. Innovative and sometimes utopian in nature, the architectural work of the Russian avant-garde displays a conceptual and structural daring that belied a critical shortage of building materials. Their elegantly rendered drawings, dating from 1917 to 1934, include designs for commercial and industrial buildings, cultural and athletic centers, and workers' housing, as well as several major competitions for important civic monuments.

Originally inspired by Cubism and Futurism, the avant-garde spirit was fostered in intimate collaborations among artists, architects, photographers, filmmakers, and industrial and graphic designers. Leading artists such as Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin had a direct influence on architecture. Schools such as the VKhUTEMAS, staffed by many members of the avant-garde, pursued an open and experimental teaching program that encompassed all the arts. Equally if not more radical than the German Bauhaus, the VKhUTEMAS was also a center of the theoretical and ideological debates that would dominate the period.

The earliest projects in the exhibition include student exercises in composition and massing, competitions for monuments to the Revolution, and designs for stage sets and fair buildings. Nikolai Kolli's *Decorations for the First Anniversary of the October Revolution* (1918) offers an indication of the radical tendencies already germinating. A highly symbolic monument

showing a red wedge of Bolsheviks shattering a white block representing the Tsarists, it is one of the few built projects of this period.

By the mid-1920s, with the economy reviving, architectural competitions abounded, spurring an outburst of design activity and reinforcing the already diverging ideologies. The Rationalists emphasized formal, spatial, and psychological considerations. Early versions of their experimental projects, such as Krinsky's *Communal House* (1920), were highly theoretical, gravity-defying arrangements of abstract shapes. The Constructivists, by contrast, were fascinated with materials and based their designs on real structural and functional concerns. The practical, glass-and-steel proposals of the Vesnin brothers typify this approach. Also fundamental to the period were the many older members of the profession whose designs adhered to classical, prerevolutionary forms. In their work can be seen the aesthetic basis of Socialist Realism.

The climax of these theoretical and stylistic conflicts came with two competitions for prestigious state buildings of enormous scale. The international competition for the *Palace of Soviets*, issued in 1931, drew entries from the leading modernists; many of these designs are included in the exhibition. However, the jury's directives--to assimilate the cultural heritage and incorporate other artforms--clearly favored a traditionalist response. The winning proposal, a collaboration by three architects and a sculptor, is a massive classical structure incorporating a three-tier colonnade topped by a twenty-five-story statue of Lenin.

The competition for the *Commissariat of Heavy Industry* (1934) can be considered the last effort of the avant-garde in Russia. Leonidov's sophisticated entry comprises three towers that evoke the medieval Russian

pogost--asymmetrical tower forms that not only mark the town center but, by their varied silhouette, provide an orientation point in the landscape. Although his highly creative interpretation sought to integrate modernism and the Russian urban heritage, it nevertheless was considered far too modern and abstract for the jury. Ultimately, Socialist Realism--as interpreted in essentially traditional classical forms--prevailed as the official style under Stalin, based presumably on its popular appeal to the country's still largely rural, peasant population.

Following its New York showing, ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE will travel to the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal (June-August 1991). One additional venue is planned.

In conjunction with the exhibition, a symposium on the architecture of the Russian avant-garde will be held in the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2 on Thursday, June 28, at 8:00 p.m. Stuart Wrede will moderate a discussion among scholars and architects, including Jean-Louis Cohen, professor, Ecole d'Architecture, Paris Villemin; Christina Lodder, lecturer in the History of Art, University of Saint Andrew, Scotland; Anatole Senkevitch, Jr., professor, College of Architecture, University of Michigan; and Frederick Starr, president, Oberlin College. Tickets are \$8, members \$7, and students \$5, and are available from the Department of Education, 212/708-9795.

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PUBLICATION

Architectural Drawings of the Russian Avant-Garde.
 Preface by Stuart Wrede. Essay by Catherine Cooke.
 144 pages. 152 illustrations, including 38 color
 plates. Published by The Museum of Modern Art.
 Clothbound, \$37.50, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.;
 paperbound, \$24.95, available in The MoMA Book Store.

No. 40

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