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ARCHITECTURE

Ideology Through Geometry

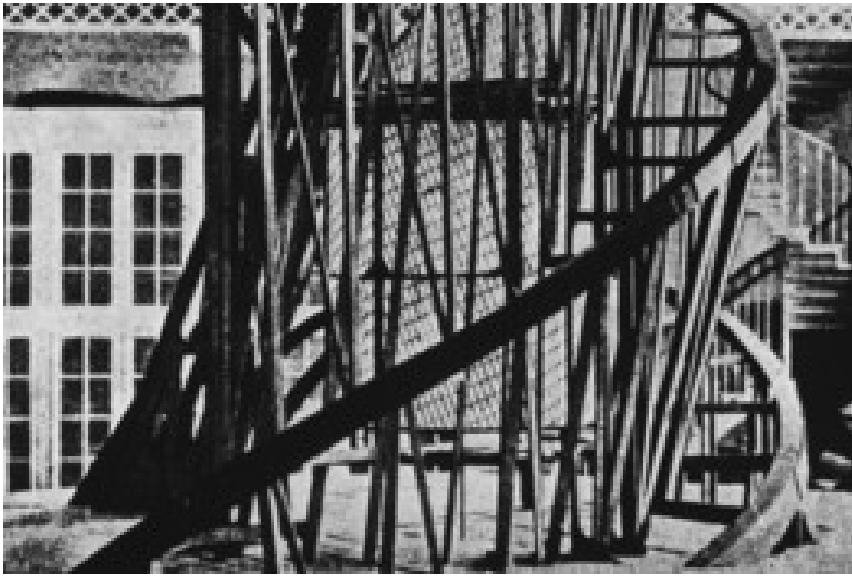
By **CAMMY BROTHERS**

December 20, 2011

London

What was radical architecture before it was chic? At a time in which the mantle of the avant-garde has been inherited by architects such as Rem Koolhaas (designer for Prada and the Chinese government) or by Zaha Hadid (architect for Moammar Gadhafi before his fall), it is worth remembering what revolutionary architecture meant when it was more than an attitude.





An early 1920s model of Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, with its three rotating levels. A 33-foot-tall scale version of the tower has been constructed in the courtyard of the Royal Academy. *ULLSTEIN BILD / THE GRANGER COLLECTION*

For a brief, utopian moment in early 20th-century Russia, artists and architects together sought to forge an abstract language of form suited to the politics of the new state. Vladimir Tatlin's famous model for a Monument to the Third International—envisioned in 1920 as a 1,300-foot-tall ziggurat-like tower rotating on three levels—embodied the visionary, futurist aesthetics and idealism of the movement. The commitment to abstraction and the sense of shared purpose between painters and architects paralleled that of the Bauhaus, and in fact some of its members traveled to Moscow. Yet while the Bauhaus is enshrined in the history of European architecture

and modernism, the Russians are often sidelined, and only a few protagonists—such as Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky—are widely known by nonspecialists.

“Building the Revolution: Soviet Art & Architecture 1915-1935,” a small exhibition now on view at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, conveys the electric energy and genuine radicalism of the works created during this period. Architecture shows are notoriously difficult: The building itself isn’t there, models can be clunky, and architectural drawings are hard for the uninitiated to read. But here large, color photographs by Richard Pare, executed over 15 years, show Russian avant-garde architecture in various states of use and disuse, shininess and dullness, and demonstrate that an architecture exhibit can be a beautiful thing to behold. Implicitly, the photographs of the decaying state of many of the buildings are their own powerful polemic about the need to preserve this vital but often undervalued heritage. Interspersed with Mr. Pare’s images are photographs and texts of the period, as well as drawings, paintings and collages. And enticing audiences into the show is a 33-foot-tall scale model of Tatlin’s monument, constructed in the courtyard of the Royal Academy and standing in stark contrast to its stately Palladian architecture.

**BUILDING THE REVOLUTION: SOVIET ART
& ARCHITECTURE 1915-1935**

Royal Academy of Arts

Through Jan. 22, 2012

The show brings several fascinating and timely aspects of the period into sharp focus. While many young designers and students are now seeking to expand what they see as the traditional purview of the profession—making beautiful houses and offices for the rich and powerful—the show serves as a reminder that their utopian view of the

purpose and audience of architecture is by no means new. The architects of revolutionary Russia could rely, however, on a phenomenon almost unknown today: large-scale public financing of monumental architecture. This is of course a longstanding tradition—even Roman emperors built public baths to garner popular favor—but one that has virtually disappeared. Thus contemporary architects such as Shigeru Ban, Bryan Bell (in the tradition of Samuel Mockbee), Anselmo Canfora, Teddy Cruz, Walter Hood, Sergio Palleroni and Cameron Sinclair have sought to side-step this problem by seeking patronage elsewhere: among the communities they hope to serve.

In light of these new efforts, it is useful to witness the idealism with which the much-blighted concept of social housing was conceived. Certainly many of these buildings have fallen into disuse and neglect, but the exhibit reminds us of the hopeful spirit in which they were created, and of their beauty. A structure such as the Narkomfin

Communal House in Moscow, designed by Moisei Ginzburg and Ignati Milinis in 1930, remains a poetic embodiment of rigorous geometric principles combined with moments of experimentation. The building's social agenda—creating spaces that would encourage traditional families to move toward communal living—was advanced not at the expense of aesthetics, but in concert with it. The building illustrates the close dialogue between Russian and European Modernists: Taking up Le Corbusier's principles, it was elevated on pilotis, had banded fenestration and a roof garden. Le Corbusier didn't have a chance to bring these ideas to fruition until he built the Unité d'habitation in Marseille more than 15 years later, a building that shows his careful observation of Ginzburg's design.

Despite these close ties to European Modernism, building conditions in Russia remained stubbornly rooted in the past: In a fascinating interview in the exhibition catalog, Mr. Pare describes how the unavailability of new materials forced architects to imitate the appearance of steel while using traditional wood construction methods.

Another compelling aspect of the show is its demonstration of the engagement of painters in architecture, theater design, graphics and so forth. Calling themselves ZhivSkuptArch (painting-sculpture-architecture), artists and architects sought to create works that transcended these traditional categories. A gorgeous set of studies by Ivan Kudriashev for the decoration of the First Soviet Theatre in Orenburg, from 1920, conveys the convergence of spatially conceived paintings and architecture conceived in geometric planes. They suggest a dynamic movement through space through a remarkably simple palette of shapes and colors.

Ultimately, the exhibition asks: Is the idea of utopian architecture an impossible paradox? The short life of this exciting, experimental moment—which would soon collapse into Stalinism and the repressive expectations of social realism—suggests the precarious nature of a state-sponsored avant-garde.

The relation between aesthetics and politics, or the ideology of style, remains a puzzle. The most visible legacy of this period today is in the sleek, geometric aesthetic of Ms. Hadid, who by her own account draws inspiration from the work of Malevich and El Lissitzky, but whose projects include works for patrons ranging from King Abdullah to Eli and Edythe Broad. What does it mean for an architect to adopt the aesthetics of early 20th-century Russia and the politics of Switzerland?

Make what you will of Marxism, this was a historical moment when ideas mattered, and when geometrical abstraction was the new universal language. Architecture today is

personality driven, participating in the competitive logic of the market, fueled by rivalry, intensely professionalized and most often serving private clients. The exhibit is an instructive reminder that creativity can also thrive collectively, in dialogue with art, and in service of shared goals.

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