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“MOVE OFF WITH HIGH SPEED INTO SPACE”

Moscow Industrial Architecture threatened by neglect and ignorance

Industrialisation came late to Russia. In spite of the formidable role members of the Demidov dynasty for example played in Russian iron production since Peter the Great's times (1699 first Ural iron foundry in the Jekaterinburg district), it was only in the last decades of the 19th century, when population growth created ever bigger national markets, that after the 1861 state-induced emancipation process the state itself and not private entrepreneurs (as in England) or banks (as in Germany) stimulated industrial development.

In the three decades before World War I, Russian industrial growth was one of the fastest in the world. Nevertheless, the country as a whole remained predominantly agrarian in terms of nearly all relevant parameters. So after the Russian Revolution, the new system “inherited” a sort of development, that still followed the authoritarian patterns the Czar's reign had set in the second half of the 19th century. It was said that both possibilities of developing the country after the revolution: bolshevism or capitalism, were equally profound “westernising” alternatives (Gregory Grossman).

The war and its aftermath, civil war, set the country back in its development perspectives. Only at the end of the 1920ies, under the auspices of the necessarily comparatively liberal “New Economic Policy - NEP”, conceived under Lenin in the early 20ies, Russia again reached production and consumption levels of the pre-war period. In the next ten years, from 1928 to 1938, the Soviet economy underwent its biggest industrialization spurt.

It is only with regard to this background, that Moscow's and Russia's heritage of buildings and sites related to industrial-technical purposes over a period of more than 150 years can be interpreted.

It must be realized with regard to 20th century, that the “corridor” of possibilities to form and express the economic dynamism of the time in terms of buildings and sites was extremely short. And it must be realized, how breathtaking the achievements of a handful of highly gifted architects were under these circumstances, to bequeath a totally unique heritage to all mankind.

The city of Moscow itself occupies a prominent role in this process. In 1918 the young Soviet government moved from St. Petersburg to a city that had not been Russia's capital for more than two centuries.

Hopes and fears were greater here than in other parts of the vast country, everyday life was more brutal, dreams more fervent than in contemporary Paris, London, Rome or Berlin. In the few years between the Bolshevik revolt and Stalinist terror the city became the largest, most productive, but also most risky laboratory of the Modern Movement. Although the formidable range of post-1918-buildings erected in Moscow alone somewhat obscures the fact that in the whole of Russia breathtaking modern structures evolved, it is still true that the capital gathered together the most advanced talents and provided spectacular building tasks.

State, commercial and social organizations as well as factories obtained the role of building sponsors in a climate of mutual interest in progress and solidarity with other progressive forces worldwide. Based on the early-twentieth-century movements of Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism, the specific Constructivist and Rationalist architecture in this country was to become Russia's first and last contribution to the modern movement in the field of architecture. “Constructivism is Russia's only independent contribution to international architecture” says David Sarkisjan, director of the National Schusev Museum of Architecture in Moscow.

In an entirely radical way, architects translated their client's demands into shapes not related to architectural tradition anymore, but inspired for example by the futuristic forms of cogwheels or turbines, such as Melnikov's Russakow-worker's club. On the other hand but at the same time, other forms are mirrored in buildings like the planetarium, built like Melnikov's club between 1927 and 1929 near the Sadovaja-Kudrinskaja Street by Mikhail Barshch and Mikhail Siniavsky. It is at this moment being “lifted” for more than six meters and considerably rebuilt.

Industrial Architecture

Industrial architecture was no small part of this overall atmosphere of departure towards an unheard of future. Of course, Moscow is also teeming with pre-revolutionary industrial buildings

as well, such as F.O. Shekhtel's printing shop "Utro Rossij" of 1907. Centralization, inherent trait of all Russian developments over the centuries, made the city from the 1890ies on an important centre of manufacture and infrastructural features.

After the revolution however, huge organizations like "GOELRO", the state commission for the Electrification of Russia amongst others stimulated the construction of numerous modern power plants all over the nation as a new building type that was in demand in great numbers.

In Moscow, across the river from the Kremlin, the prismatic steel-glass walls of the "MOGES" power plant, built by Ivan Zoltovskij on the Moskva shore in 1929 and forever frozen and idealized in Rodshenko's dynamic photographs, represent still today this post-World-War-I-development, forever twinned to Lenin's famous definition: "Comunism, that is the power of the soviets (=communist councilors) plus electrification of the entire country".

The building is not listed as an historic monument and awaits "further consideration" by an "expert's commission".

In a related branch of the electric technology - namely the use of electric waves to transmit messages - Moscow has produced an outstanding achievement in the shape of Vladimir Suchov's famous "Sabolovka" transmitting tower, a 150- meter-structure in the tubular shape of a giant folding-grill-like grid, built in 1919-22, originally meant to be 350 meters high. It again served its original purpose, when in 2000 Moscow's 1967/537-meter television tower caught fire. In 1927 this outstanding engineering genius erected numerous high-voltage transmission towers near Nischni-Novgorod on the banks of river Oka.

Although scheduled as historic monuments, in June of 2005 the local power supply company decided to demolish one of them and has plans to destroy further Suchov towers.

As a sort of time-bridging-figure Suchov, who in 1927 even was to become a Soviet oil minister, was also prominently involved in the roof construction of older Moscow landmark buildings: as early as 1889 he designed the three half-barrel-shaped roofs over what is today "GUM" department store (more like an arcade in its ground-plan, today a centre for many independent outlets): 295x15 meter glass-iron constructions, that have been "modernized" recently,

but were modern already in 1889, insofar as they distinctly allowed the filigree 800-ton glass-iron construction to be seen clearly, as opposed for example to

the Paris roof constructions of department stores like Lafayette or Printemps.

In one more prominent Moscow building Suchov's hand is also still clearly visible: in 1912-17 he covered the city's largest railway station, Kiev station with a 230 meter long shed roof of 48 meters span along similar constructional lines as the GUM roofs. This structure has been recently modernized as well, but still allows the magnificent space to be admired unhampered.

Apotheosis of Modernity: Car travel

Suchov also accompanies us right into Moscow's modernist period: He was involved in one specimen of a whole group of buildings which probably like no other building type caught the imagination of contemporary architects. Like for the Italian futurists, the automobile to post-revolutionary planners promised a speeding up of all forms of life as well as unlimited freedom of movement and therefore a brand new future to mass and individual travel. Consequently garage buildings count among the most original creations of the 1920ies Soviet architectural era. Here, the name of Konstantin Stepanovitch Melnikov comes into play. This Moscow born architect (1890-1974) got the commission to erect the Soviet pavilion at the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs" in Paris in 1925. This in turn led to the task to design a 1000-taxi-garage for the city, which however remained in the planning stages. Shortly afterwards, in March 1926, Melnikov took over the design for a Moscow garage for over hundred Leyland buses the city had acquired from England. Melnikov developed a one-level parallelogram (his original design was multi-storey) of 54x167 meter. Seven portals at the narrow end admitted the vehicles, that parked in parallel rows, from which the 104 buses could easily drive away by turning to the long side where there were eight triangularly protruding exits that allowed for a smooth flow of traffic at exactly 137 degrees to the building's axis. The movement of vehicles was simulated before the building was erected and brought excellent results in terms of time economy, which was the reason why Melnikov's design won.

The very long structure avoids all monotony by the zigzagging ground plan that nevertheless followed consequently the functional principles of traffic flow.

Vladimir Suchov contribution was the design of a steel roof that translated the zigzag principle to the elevation of the garage. Above the central part, elevated window openings crisscross the roof's ridge.

In 2001 this unique roof construction of riveted steel lattice trusses by Suchov was removed without any documentation of the original structure, citing reasons of danger of collapsing under the weight of snow. Here the paradoxes of the protection of historic monuments in Russia become obvious: The law on the protection of historic buildings excludes the use as garage for a scheduled monument – so Melnikov's "Bachmetevskij-Avtobusnij-Park", listed as no. 664 of the Moscow monuments list as a "monument of local significance" cannot serve its original purposes any more.

In the third and last example of buildings for the future mobility of the masses, Melnikov reached a peak of expressive dynamism conveyed by means of strongly suggestive elements: the façade of the Inturist tourist's and Gosplan garage on "Aviamotornaja" Street, dated 1933-1936. In no other case does a decorative approach come so strongly to the fore", Otacar Macel, author of a 2000 book on Melnikov, says. Along the main façade of the garage, the combination of an enormously huge circular window (forerunners of which were already to be seen on the front wall of his Leyland bus garage) and a sweeping diagonally rising roof evolving out of the bottom of window shape

give it a very strong symbolic meaning:

"The path of the tourist is represented as infinite, starting with a curving sweep (the circular window) and then aiming to move off at high speed into space", Melnikov himself describes his purpose in a genuinely futuristic way of speech. Antonio Sant Elia's designs of the time before World War I come to mind – with the difference that none of his buildings were ever built.

Today this dynamic-futuristic way of "moving with high speed into space"

seems to have completely gone out of fashion. No chic Moscow nouveau-riche would dream of parking his four-wheel-drive SUV in one of Melnikov's derelict garages. With a certain shame or bashfulness contemporary citizens

seem to look at the dwindling remains of their short lived contribution to world architectural history.

Constructivism is definitely not in fashion and it seems that especially the witnesses of the industrial and social movement of the 1920ies cause strong embarrassment and are no reason to look proudly back to.

Mainly production or infrastructure buildings but also the worker's clubs and dwelling houses so intimately linked to the rapid changes in the post-revolutionary society seem to carry a wealth of unwelcome associations with them. One of them might be the recollection that many clerical buildings ha to make room for these new futuristic designs. This attitude is not restricted to the common man alone: Moscow's central institute for the inventory of Russian Historic Monuments, the "Institute for 'Art' Studies" under director Aleksei Komech stop their activities well before the turn to the 20th century – an attitude overcome by Western colleagues about thirty years ago, when monuments started to be regarded as documents of history and not so much necessarily any more as mere works of art.

Of course one has to understand that there is a wealth of building types equally mistreated by authorities during communist rule: churches, monasteries, chateaus, bourgeois town houses, they all have had hard times. The reemerging democratic society instinctively looks back towards "untroubled" periods, the "good old times" when changes were less rapid and social conditions (if you were on the right side of the fence) were "orderly". The nouveau riches take Czarist splendor as a role model and prefer historicist surroundings, not necessarily original and old, imitations will do. Like in the West, the severity of modernism does not appeal to everybody and the appreciation of faraway aficionados of the constructivist period is not on the radar of 95% of the population.

It will be decisive, whether the information, that constructivist architecture in Russia is unique on a world scale and that it is five past twelve for saving at least some of it, gets through quick enough to a sufficient number of people. One must be hopeful that the international April 2006 conference can be really helpful here.

A wealth of re-use concepts for pre-modernist industrial buildings

Unlike the difficult heritage of the 1920ies, the pre-revolutionary factories of Moscow are increasingly estimated as thriving places of urban multi-purpose re-use possibilities. Architectural and historical substance is saved in quite a lot of new art, commercial and leisure centers established in the rich heritage of Moscow's industrial past. One of the most recent for example is the conversion of a former silk mill on Timur Frunze Street, near the Park Kultury metro station. Two projects, Krasnaya Roza (Red Rose) and Artplay, use the turn-of-the-century-complex in different ways. While Rozhdestvenska architects, experienced in working with old buildings, supplemented the – carefully restored - historic brick architecture with functional modern elements to create high-quality office space, the silk warehouse from 1904 has conserved under the hands of different architects many traits of the original production period, setting the stage for studios, exhibition spaces and gastronomy under the name of "Artplay". The complex resembles a 1980 Hamburg project in the former Zeise ships propeller factory. Here the famous in-restaurant "Eisenstein" – "Ironstone" – thrives since more than twenty years now, retaining even the soot on the chimney in the old boiler house, in which it is located. This experience may well serve to give a good prognosis for Moscow's silk mill conversion on Timur Frunze Street, where as in Hamburg, "creative" parts of the population break the ice for a greater majority to follow. About six years ago, the textile works of "Krasnij Tekstilschiki" – "Red textile worker's factory" on the banks of the Vodootvodny canal have successfully been converted to the office center "Golutwinskaja Sloboda" to which the participants of the 2000 international conference for the preservation of the industrial heritage – TICCIH were proudly invited by the investor. The feeling was that here "modernization" had gone a little far, but the project helps lowering the barrier to make use of former industrial buildings for modern purposes. In an attractive no-more-not-yet-state are parts of the huge complex of the famous "Red October" chocolate factory, urbanistically in a very prominent situation surrounded by water. Under the name of "ARTStrelka" – Art Headland" design, art, photography and fashion galleries have been set up in the former factory garages. Production will soon move away and there are ambitious development plans for what is called the "Golden Island" project that since some years is watched over by Zereteli's tasteless grotesquely oversized statue of Peter the Great. It has to be seen whether high grade projects for elite housing, office space and gastronomy will develop or if it shall be possible to more adequately work with the enormously attractive body of the gigantic chocolate factory. A very spontaneous use has been found for the huge textile complex on Danilovskaja Street. Here, a multi-site-supermarket labyrinth has been integrated into the group of former textile mill buildings. Nothing much has been changed. By means of improvisation everybody occupies from some dozen to some thousand square meters selling everything under the sun from pirated designer jeans to rubber dolls. This is just the process you can find in many Eastern European industrial building complexes. The Prague abattoir for example is used in exactly the same way, creating a provisional state that may survive for many years and rather without real intention helping to save historical buildings of great value. Quite nearby, the breathtakingly functional reinforced-concrete complex of the pre-World-War-I municipal warehouses still awaits the wakening kiss of some enlightened commercial or preservationist prince. There are thousands of structures within and outside of Moscow still awaiting discovery, inventorying and re-using. The wealth of unused architectural and historically prominent buildings is nearly unlimited. Structures of an industrial character are a considerable part of this total heritage. Western Europe has started after the decline of traditional industries since the 1950ies to learn about the integration of this constitutive part of our Post-Industrial-Revolution history. There is hope that more and more possibilities arise to transfer this process both as learning and acting phase to Russia before it is too late. Let us hope that not the same mistakes will have been made that led to such intolerable losses such as the demolition of London's Euston Station, the Ruhrgebiet's Krupp administration building or Berlin's art nouveau mosaic factory Puhl&Wagner. It cannot often enough be emphasized that in the general but also in the industrial field of 20th century architecture Russia has made the world the present of constructivist buildings that are unique in the world. These structures at the same time tell the story of the solidarity and nearness of a European avant-garde that could not be told anymore. This is true also for the quite different achievements of the 1930ies. Should treasures like Melnikov's garages, the 1930ies Moscow metro stations or the sites of the 1932-37 Moscow canal be demolished and forgotten the loss would be undescrivable.