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Revolutionary Engagement: Russian Architecture of the Early 1920s

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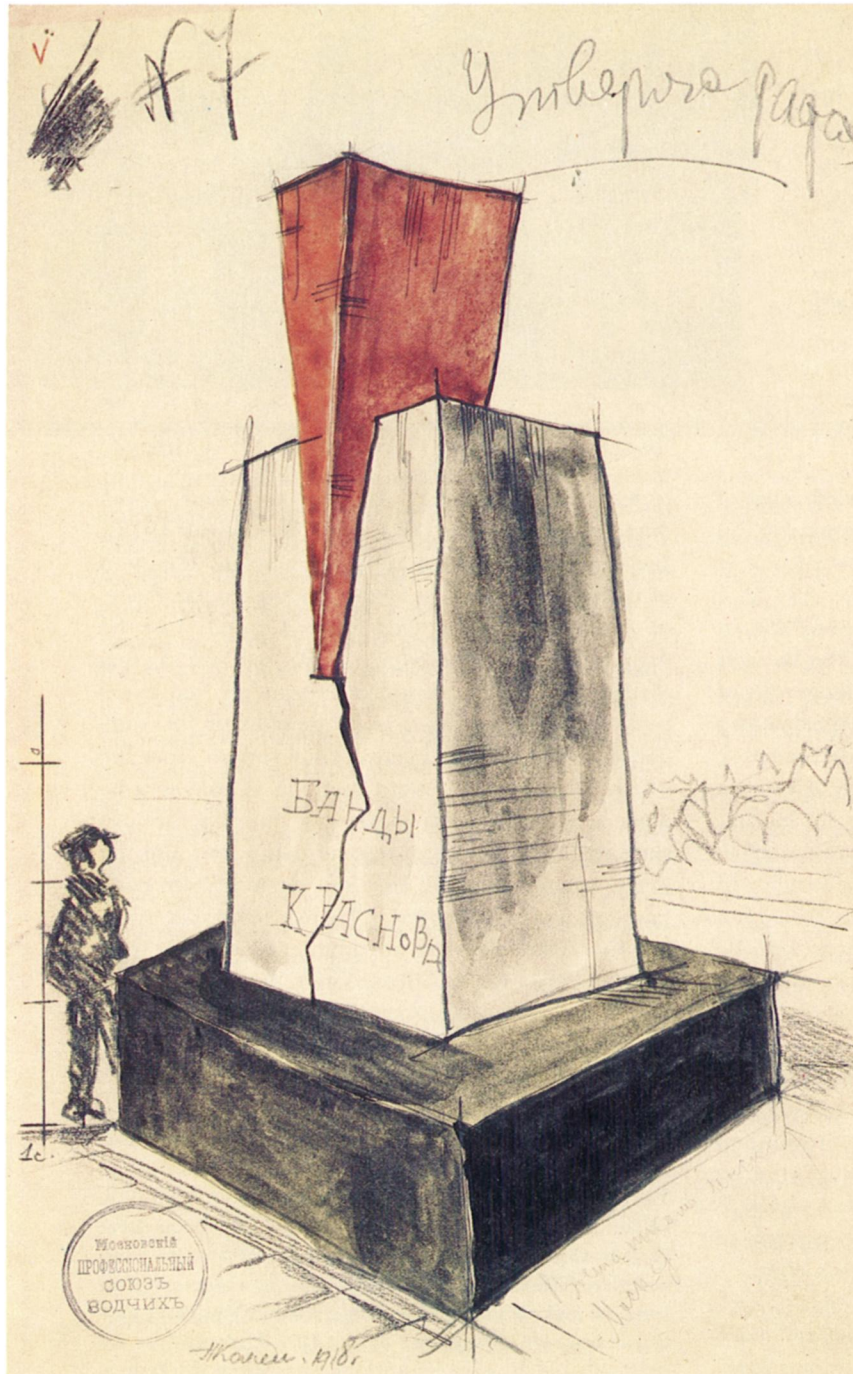


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REVOLUTIONARY ENGAGEMENT:

Russian Architecture



ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE (June 28–September 4) surveys the period 1917 to 1934 in over 150 drawings from the Shchusev Museum of Architecture in Moscow, the most important repository of architectural drawings by the Russian avant-garde architects of the 1920s. A comprehensive introduction to this work is provided by Catherine Cooke in the publication accompanying the exhibition. She is a consulting editor of *ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN* and a Lecturer in Design in the Faculty of Technology at the Open University, Great Britain. In the following article, an excerpt from her essay, she examines the development of architecture in the first years of the Soviet state.

Original drawings by the best known architects of the movement—the Vesnin brothers, Ivan Leonidov, Konstantin Melnikov, and Moisei Ginzburg—are among works by thirty-five architects included in the exhibition, which is the first in the United States to present this material. It was organized by Stuart Wrede, Director, Department of Architecture and Design, and 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.

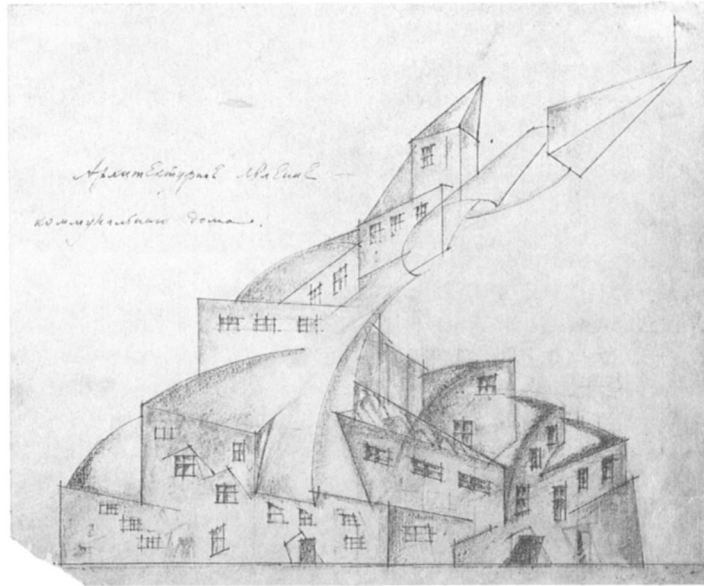
by **Catherine Cooke**

of the Early 1920s

Faced with enormous distances, a politically immature and mainly illiterate population, the victorious Bolsheviks faced real problems in communicating to the still unreliable masses the nature of the new regime and the battle that had been fought. They engaged artists of various persuasions who would collaborate, using all the visual and symbolic media that were available. Sometimes the results were highly innovative; sometimes they were no more than a change of content in a form that was culturally well established.

The Russian Orthodox Church had for centuries forbidden the making of human images, so it was traditional to erect buildings rather than statues as monuments to great victories. Thus some of the very first building designs after the Revolution were actually projects for “monuments” advertising the fact of the political takeover. In the major cities, particularly Moscow and Petrograd, traditional mass street fairs for Shrovetide and Imperial coronations were reworked into a new medium: the revolutionary festival. City squares were decorated with ideological symbols and slogans, and workers’ groups paraded with floats mocking Tsarist counter-revolutionaries, capitalists, and leaders of the hostile Entente powers. (Today’s May Day and November 7 parades are the continuation of this.)

The two earliest works in the exhibition exemplify the enthusiastic contributions of younger architects to these two genres of political consolidation immediately after the Revolution. It is unclear why a competition took place in 1917 for “a monument to revolutionary heroes in Helsingfors” (Helsinki). (Finland used the Revolution as its opportunity to get free of Russian domination.) But Vladimir Shchuko’s extraordinary triumphal arch, half Classical, half Egyptian, is a typi-

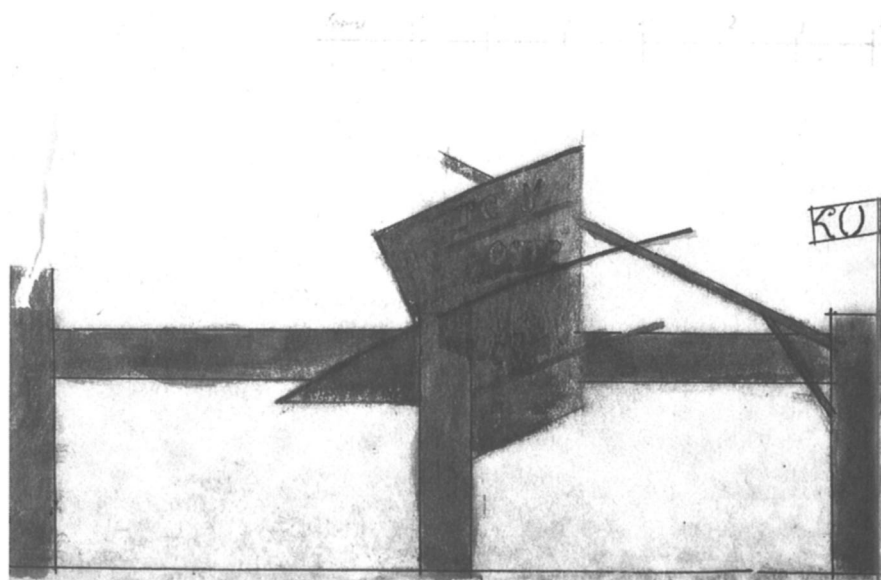


Nikolai Ladovsky. Communal House. Experimental project (Zhivskulptarkh), unexecuted. 1920. Elevation. Pencil, colored pencil, and colored ink on tracing paper, 15 3/4 x 12 1/4". A. V. Shchusev State Research Museum of Architecture, Moscow.

Facing page: Nikolai Kolli. Decorations for the First Anniversary of the October Revolution—"The Red Wedge." Executed project. 1918. Perspective. Pencil, watercolor, and ink on paper, 13 x 8 1/8". A. V. Shchusev State Research Museum of Architecture, Moscow.

cal Russian “monument” of that genre. Its heavy monumentality was characteristic of many such projects of the early twenties. Nikolai Kolli was a Moscow architecture student who had worked for Shchusev, among others, before the Revolution delayed completion of his studies. The talent that would later, as a young Constructivist, make him Corbusier’s executive architect for the Tsentrosoyuz complex in Moscow is already displayed in the splendid “monument” he designed and built just off Red Square for the street festival celebrating the first anniversary of the Revolution. Lest any workers should fail to understand the symbolism, the white block of the executed project was clearly labeled “Bands of White Guardsmen” (Tsarist loyalists) across the crack created by the Red Wedge of Bolsheviks. (Lissitzky’s famous poster on a similar theme dates from the following year.)

During the regime's first year, a network of arts administrations called IZO was set up by [Lenin's art and culture commissar] Anatoly Lunacharsky's Commissariat of Enlightenment, Narkompros. IZO became a meeting ground for all generations. In Moscow, for example, figures as different in age and culture as [Ivan] Zholtovsky and [Vladimir] Tatlin played leading roles from the beginning. When ambitious city architectural and planning bureaus were established in 1919 in Moscow and Petrograd, Lunacharsky personally recommended Zholtovsky to Lenin as head of the Moscow bureau on the basis of his proven commitment to IZO. "Although keeping out of politics and not a Party member, he has proved his loyalty to our Soviet regime," Lunacharsky wrote. Soon Zholtovsky was joined by [Alexei] Shchusev, and they assembled an office of young architects whose work had attracted their attention before the Revolution. Among them were Konstantin Melnikov, Nikolai Ladovsky, Nikolai Kolli, Ilya Golosov, and Leonid Vesnin. In Petrograd, Vladimir Shchuko was appointed to lead IZO's architectural activity, and Ivan Fomin headed the planning bureau, with elder statesmen like Alexander Benois as consultants. In Moscow particularly, under Zholtovsky, the city planning bureau became the kind of public office that is a focus for open discussions as lively as in any teaching studio, where bright young architects could quickly gain confidence in their own potential. As these names indicate, the office was an important launchpad for the architectural avant-garde.



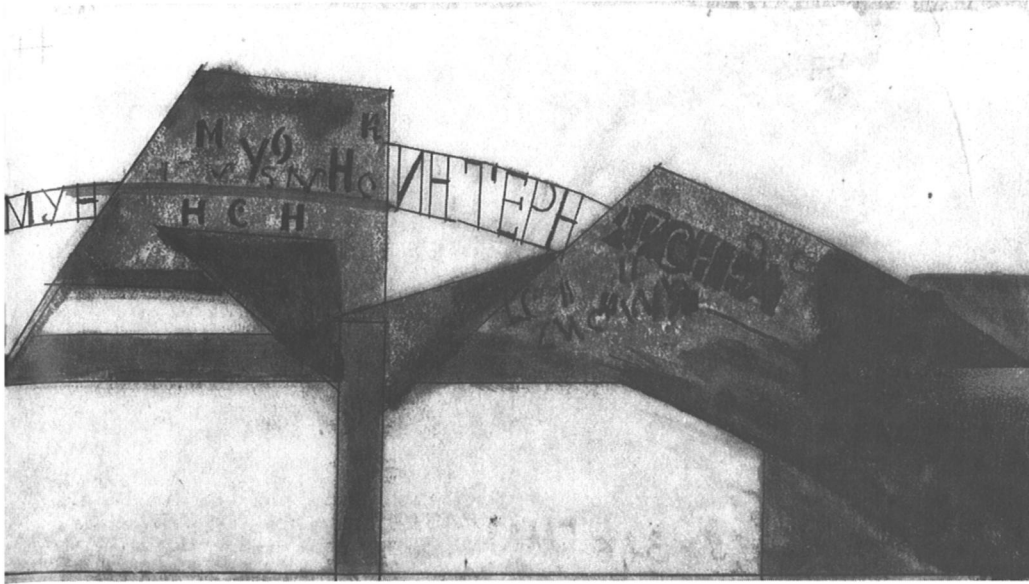
very notion of stability on which they rested. The typically utopian theme dominating their explorations was a Temple of Communion between Nations, for which [Nikolai] Ladovsky's young supporter Vladimir Krinsky contributed several ideas.

Probably under the influence of their painter colleagues in Inkhuk (the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow), which replaced Zhivskulptarkh with a speed characteristic of those unstable years, the language became more planar and more clearly structured. Thus Krinsky's works from 1920 are closer to the con-

"Construction," many believed, crucially embodied the spirit and philosophical essence of the age . . .

While [Kazimir] Malevich went to Vitebsk and formed his UNOVIS group (Affirmers of the New Art) in the art school there with [El] Lissitzky, Tatlin was running artistic and cultural affairs for IZO in Moscow and developing his famous contribution to the tradition of "buildings as monuments"—his *Monument to the Third International*. Seeking easier working conditions, he went to Petrograd to build the model. Meanwhile, in Moscow young architects and abstract artists made a first attempt to come together across the old professional divide in a group they called Paint-Sculpt-Arch: Zhivskulptarkh. The resulting architectural "investigations" showed the role played by Cubism in building a first bridge across the professional divide toward an architecture that rejected not just the formal languages of traditional building but the

temporaneous work of artists like Liubov Popova or Alexander Rodchenko, with whom for a while they converged. The next year, 1921, saw them part again when experimentation and debate had clarified in their minds how the new notion of "construction," derived ultimately from the inspiration of Tatlin, differed as an aesthetic principle from the traditional notion of "composition." "Construction," many believed, crucially embodied the spirit and philosophical essence of the age, and of their new world in particular. Each had taken his own stance on the role these "constructive principles" should play in his future work within the new ideology. These debates were to be a watershed in the development of avant-garde architecture, as the two camps that formed—the adherents of "construction" and of "composition"—



Vladimir Krinsky. *Festival Bridge Decoration*. May 1921. Elevation. Pencil, watercolor, and ink on tracing paper, 3 7/8 x 12 7/8". A. V. Shchusev State Research Museum of Architecture, Moscow.

contained the embryos of the Constructivist and Rationalist groups in architecture.

The topics of this early work by future Rationalist leaders Ladovsky and Krinsky begin to reflect the new social circumstances. In the exhibition there is a festival bridge decoration celebrating the Communist International from Krinsky, and Ladovsky contributes a scaled section of his communal-housing project. But the point was made with a Krinsky work, which pre-aced The Museum of Modern Art's 1988 exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture*, that the structural references here are determinedly anti-constructive. With a Civil War raging around them, economic stasis, and the building industry reduced to a tabula rasa, who could say where "realism" in construction lay?

It is clear from this group of works that expressive potential is the focus of interest. Generally the expressive medium is form, but some items, such as Krinsky's bright gridded "structure in space," represent the supplementary importance accorded to color by the painters in this group. When the VKhUTEMAS school was created in Moscow in late 1920, the members of Inkhuk took over the crucial basic or foundation course, akin to the Bauhaus *Vorkurs*, which was the common preparation for students of all artistic and design disciplines. The collection of schoolwork by the student Ivan Lamtsov, completed under the direct tutelage of Ladovsky in 1921–22, shows the full range of set exercises, from those devoted purely to the formal expression of such sensations as weight and mass to first extensions of this work in the direction of making "buildings." Lidia Komarova's responses to the same exercises a year later make an interesting comparison; where Lamtsov remained with Ladovsky and

Krinsky in Rationalism, Komarova would end up with Vesnin and Ginzburg in Constructivism. . . .

As the twenties progressed, Soviet society's efforts to restructure its public organizations as well as everyday life led to widespread demand for new building types. Architectural competitions became one of the main stimuli and showcases for innovation in these areas. The professional organization that oversaw most of the competitions was the Moscow Architectural Society (MAO). Through war and revolution the now elderly [Fedor] Shekhtel had remained its president, but as the new world came to life, Shchusev replaced him in 1922. That autumn MAO announced the first major competition for a state building of the new regime: a Palace of Labor, or workers' parliament, to stand just north of Red Square. It was to celebrate the creation of a new unified state, the USSR, after the end of the Civil War and, in Stalin's words as Party secretary, "the triumph of the new Russia over the old." It must show the West, said another Party leader, Sergei Kirov, "that we are capable of adorning this sinful earth with such works of great architecture as our enemies never dreamed of." Ladovsky and his colleagues refused to enter the competition, though some did projects privately. They reckoned that a jury composed of Shekhtel, Zholtovsky, and the *World of Art* critic Igor Grabar would make it a waste of their time.

Faced with a brief that called for enormous auditoriums and accommodation, and the revolutionary monumentality obviously expected, most of the entries could be described as "bulbous expressionism." It was indeed a tamed version of that genre by a Petrograder, Noi Trotsky, that won. Here we have two interestingly contrasted schemes: a rather well-articu-

Ilia Golosov. *The Lenin House of the People, Ivanovo-Voznesensk (now Ivanovo). Competition project, unexecuted. 1924. Perspective. Board, ink, and gouache on paper, 12 5/8 x 24 3/4". A. V. Shchusev State Research Museum of Architecture, Moscow.*



lated example of that type by Andrei Belograd of Petrograd, who had become rector of the Academy School when it re-formed from the “Free Studios” in 1921, and the [entry of the] Vesnin brothers, [Leonid, Viktor, and Alexander], which got third prize. Applauding the latter’s “attempt to create a new social organism, whose life flowed not from stereotypes of the past but from the novelty of the brief itself,” and the “simple, logical three-dimensional expression” of that externally, Moisei Ginzburg would later describe the Vesnins’ project as “the first demonstration of our new approach” and “the first concrete architectural action of Constructivism.”

As part of the campaign to revive small-scale industry and trade under Lenin’s New Economic Policy, a major Agricultural and Handicraft Industries Exhibition was held in Moscow in the summer of 1923 on the riverside site of today’s Gorky Park. It was everyone’s first chance to build something and therefore generated enormous enthusiasm and interesting collaborations. Shchusev and Zholtovsky did overall planning and supervision, although young students such as Kolli and Andrei Burov, as well as the older Golosov brother, Panteleimon, took prizes in a competition for some aspects of the layout. Zholtovsky’s main official pavilions showed that even the cheapest timber could not upset his talent for harmonious proportions and classical ordering. One of his pavilions had “constructive” relief decoration by the young artists Alexandra Exter and the Stenberg brothers. Elsewhere Popova and Rodchenko contributed, while Shekhtel did the pavilion for Turkestan in the non-Russian section, and Ilia Golosov designed the playful, spatially quite complex little quadrant-shaped building of the Far Eastern republics. Shchuko from Petrograd did the foreign section, including a boldly modernist restaurant complex. The published records do not make clear whether such student designs as

Georgi Golts’s little bandstand or Lamtsov’s bottle-shaped beer kiosk ever were built, but the drawings convey the exuberance of the exhibition as a designers’ event. For the development of avant-garde architecture, the most important building was Melnikov’s pavilion for the state tobacco trust, Makhorka. He later described it as his “best ever building,” which one might question, but its dynamic volumes caused a sensation and were a steppingstone to his next exhibition pavilion, for Paris in 1925.

The year 1924 was a frenzied one for competitions. Monuments remained in demand, and Fomin’s design for a memorial to the revolutionary leader Sverdlov exemplifies a continuing type of inventive but still classically based monumentality that characterized much architecture at this time. Lenin’s death in January of that year caused the revolutionary city of Petrograd to be renamed Leningrad and heralded a spate of competitions for memorials and buildings named for Lenin in major towns all over the USSR. Among the competition projects for a Lenin House of the People in the textile city of Ivanovo-Voznesensk was one by Ilia Golosov. The great leader’s first temporary mausoleum on Red Square was a modest wooden structure by Shchusev, quickly replaced by a second temporary version, also wooden, where Lenin’s embalmed body lay under a glazed sarcophagus by Melnikov. Under the chairmanship of Lunacharsky, the Commission for a Permanent Mausoleum for Lenin then launched a multi-stage competition for a masonry building that would “fit into the architecture of the Square.” The main reason for the competition boom, however, was the revival of the economy to a point where new building might again be contemplated. The outburst of design activity by the young avant-garde in response to the rising crescendo of competitions reflected the growing maturity of a self-confident new generation of architects.