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## "A Partial Synthesis": Debates on Architectural Realism

### **In Search of Socialist Truthfulness: Debates on Realism in Soviet Architecture 1930–1950**

**Maria Silina**

#### **Abstract**

This paper outlines how the architectural theories elaborated by critics such as Moisei Ginsburg and Alexander Gabrichevskii were reshaped after the 1930s, when the notion of socialist realism was introduced into the domain of Soviet arts. In the 1920s, Soviet historians shared with European colleagues a view of architecture as the evolution of mass and space, widely used to prescribe a formalist agenda. When it came to the socialist realism doctrine, critics altered their research methods, previously based on idealist terminology, to issue deterministic formulas of style development. This transformation enables the examination of the mechanism of (self-)censorship that led to the gradual degradation of professional architectural criticism in the Soviet Union.

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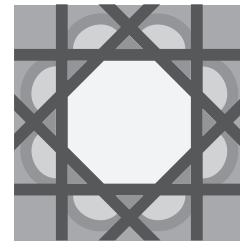
# In Search of Socialist Truthfulness: Debates on Realism in Soviet Architecture 1930–1950

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*‘Le réalisme socialiste vient de la base constituée d’écrivains ou de théoriciens; il n’est pas artificiellement imposé par des fonctionnaires de la culture.’*

These were the opening lines of *Formalisme-Réalisme*, a special issue of the journal *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* published in 1977.<sup>1</sup> The editor, Bernard Huet, argued that socialist realism, being human oriented, is the only alternative to a formalism born on the ill-fated premises of the avant-garde. While pointing at the drawbacks of socialist realism – neoclassical repetitiveness, theoretical reductionism, pan-Russian chauvinism – he nevertheless stressed that it was created by Soviet theorists and writers, and not defectively implanted by Party functionaries.<sup>2</sup> In the decades that followed, several approaches to untangle the reasons for the introduction and use of socialist realism by different agents were proposed. For instance, Danilo Udovički-Selb sought to reconstruct a way to socialist realism by differentiating between the multiple directions in Party leadership that patronized various artists groups.<sup>3</sup> The idea of direct State and Communist Party intervention, however, still dominates current scholarship and its emergence is linked to traditionalism and revivalist historicism.<sup>4</sup> Without questioning the repressive method of its introduction, Catherine Cooke found a precise function of the socialist realism method as an invention of images of radiant and vital architecture that were able to transmit ideological messages from those in power to city dwellers.<sup>5</sup> The question of origins aside, I will directly address the role of art critics in maintaining the currency of socialist realism in the architectural domain. I will argue that though art theory of the 1920s and 1930s permitted art critics to speculate on realism in architecture, the expert circles did not show any interest in it until Party resolutions came into the play. As a result, I will show how critics reconfigured their arguments in describing the development of architecture during the formative years of the socialist realist doctrine in the 1930s to make it more apt to the socialist reality, but not the methodology of their analysis. Formalist art theory persisted until the 1950s, when a new wave of political campaigns in art and culture erased any methodological references to art philosophy that nourished thinkers of the 1920s and 1930s.

To support my argument I will first briefly point at the notion of style in architectural criticism in the 1920s and the early 1930s. Second, I will concentrate on the introduction of socialist realism into architectural debates in the 1930s. To do so, I will trace two main discussions of that



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Note on Transliteration and translation: Whenever possible, the transliteration of Russian names and titles complies with the Library of Congress standard. The only exception to that rule pertains to familiar names that have acquired a recognised English spelling. Unless specified, translations are by the author.

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Huet, “Formalisme-Réalisme,” *L’Architecture D’Aujourd’hui*, 190 (1977), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Huet, “Formalisme-Réalisme” (see note 1), pp. 35–36.

<sup>3</sup> Danilo Udovički-Selb, “Between Modernism and Socialist Realism: Soviet Architectural Culture under Stalin’s Revolution from Above, 1928–1938,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 68, no. 4 (2009), pp. 466–495.

<sup>4</sup> Anders Aman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era: An Aspect of Cold War History* (New York: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 49–57; Alessandro de Magistris, “Realisms in Soviet Architecture from the 1930s to the 1950s,” in Matthew Cullerne Bown, Matteo Lafranconi, and Faina Balakhovskaia (eds.), *Socialist Realisms: Soviet Painting, 1920–1970* (Milan: Skira, 2012), pp. 173–181.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Cooke, “Beauty as a Route to ‘the Radiant Future’: Responses of Soviet Architecture,” *Journal of Design History*, 10, no. 2 (1997), pp. 137–160.

time: the so-called ‘synthesis of arts debate’ which sprang up in 1934 and the campaign against formalism and naturalism, which arose in 1936. In the final part, I will outline how political campaigns in art were mirrored in architectural practice in the late Stalinist (1946–53) and the de-Stalinisation (1954–61) periods.

## Debates on Architectural Style in 1920s Criticism

To trace the path of socialist realism to becoming a Party-sanctioned art theory, I should touch on the notion of architectural style. In the 1920s, style was one of the most popular terms in artistic manifestos and art critical texts.<sup>6</sup> It was viewed as a typical image of an epoch, and opened up opportunities to discuss the actual social dimension of architecture. This is exemplified in a seminal treatise of Soviet architectural avant-garde, *Style and Epoch* (1924) by Constructivist artist Moisei Ginsburg (Fig. 1). According to Ginsburg, elements of style possess a genetic nature, both in terms of productive abilities and historic evolution that cannot be made up arbitrarily:

Only a spark of creative energy born of modernity and producing artists capable of working not in whatever style they like but only in the innate language of modernity, reflecting in the methods of their art the true essence of the present day, its rhythm, its everyday labour and concerns, and its lofty ideals – only such a spark can generate a new flowering, a new phase in the evolution of forms, a new and genuinely modern style.<sup>7</sup>

This notion of style was shared by the majority of Soviet architectural activists, such as Pavel Novitskii, dean of the famous *Vkhutemas* (Higher Art and Technical Studios) in 1926–30, who, speaking of style, referred to Broder Christiansen, Paul Frankl, and Gottfried Semper, seeing it as a ‘unity and organized nature of varied elements’ that cannot be invented.<sup>8</sup> Architectural theory was a matter of special and very ambitious concern in socialism. New cultural institutions were founded in the USSR to establish a coherent science of the humanities. One of them was the State Academy for Creative Sciences (GAKhN, 1921–29) with Aleksander Gabrichevskii as the most prolific architectural theorist of his time. In 1923 he had created a theory of architecture based on a formalist analysis of space, intensively using structural symbolism elaborated by Alois Riegl and Gottfried Semper’s findings in materialist history of habitual spaces.<sup>9</sup> He also saw architecture as a product of reflexology, instincts, the evolution of species, as well as unconsciousness and erotic impulses, being at the same time inspired by Hegelian idealism, differentiating absolute mass as *inorganic sculpture* (obelisks, ziggurats) from space as negative architecture (caves).<sup>10</sup> He insisted on the teleology of architectural development, which ‘ideally requires an equal relationship and mutual organization between the capsule and what is encapsulated, mass and space.’<sup>11</sup> A decade later, when socialist realism was introduced, Party leaders

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Fabrikant, “Priznaki stil’a,” *Iskusstvo* (GAKhN), III, no. 1 (1927), pp. 7–15.

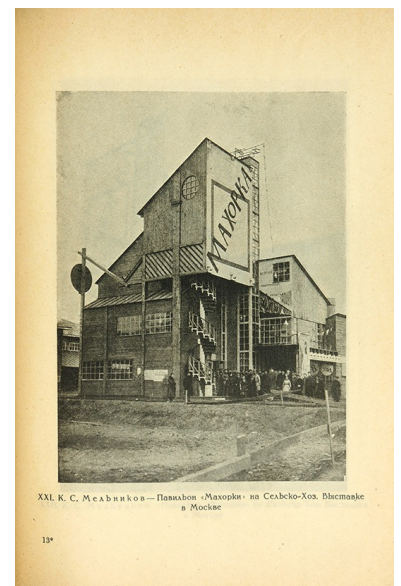
<sup>7</sup> Moisei Ginsburg, *Style and Epoch* (New York: MIT Press, 1982), p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Pavel Novitskii, “Stroitel’stvo sotsializma i stil’ sovremennoi arkhitektury,” *Pechat’ i revolutsiia*, 2 (1928), p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Gabrichevskii, “Prostranstvo i massa v arkhitekture,” *Iskusstvo* (GAKhN), 1 (1928), pp. 292, 307–308.

<sup>10</sup> Gabrichevskii, “Prostranstvo i massa” (see note 9), p. 293.

<sup>11</sup> Gabrichevskii, “Prostranstvo i massa” (see note 9), p. 307.



1

**Fig. 1**  
Page from Moisei Ginsburg’s *Style and Epoch* with an image of Konstantin Melnikov’s Makhorka Pavilion at the 1923 All-Russia Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow. (Photo: Library of the Academy for Fine Arts, Moscow).

would repeat the main arguments of Constructivists and art historians, proclaiming architectural style as a reflection of needs and features of the modern socialist era and looking for a harmony of mass and space in socialist buildings. However, the very context of the above-mentioned theories – the enthusiasm of Constructivists to reframe modern society according to the secure and scientifically verifiable new science of architecture, as well as the quest of art historians to furnish practice with up-to-date theory – would soon be radically reframed by Party-inspired repressive campaigns.

## Introducing Socialist Realism in the Early 1930s

At the beginning of the 1930s, three events occurred that launched an implementation of socialist realism into Soviet architecture. First of all, in February 1932 the Soviet government announced that none of the proposed projects to build an ambitious Palace of Soviets were satisfactory and that they privileged neoclassical design. ‘Monumentality’, ‘simplicity’, ‘coherence’, and ‘elegance’ were favored in order to express the ‘grandeur of our Socialist reconstruction.’<sup>12</sup> This agenda represented the direct intervention of Party authorities into the professional domain.

Secondly, the Decree of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik party On Restructuring Literary Artistic Organizations in April 1932 liquidated independent artistic groups in order to avoid their ‘isolation from the political tasks’ and to pursue the creation of a universal Soviet culture.<sup>13</sup> Experiments and theory-making were completely converted into the bureaucratic, Party-controlled process.

Finally, in 1934 at the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers socialist realism was proclaimed to be the only desirable method of artistic work.<sup>14</sup> The Statute of the Soviet Architects’ Union in 1937 echoed this decision and considered socialist realism in architecture as the ‘harmonious union of the ideology and truthfulness of the artistic concept with the closest possible correspondence of each building to the technical, cultural and practical demands made on it’.<sup>15</sup>

The formula did not differ greatly from the above quoted habitual definitions of style in the 1920s, but these were direct instructions to use neoclassical style which was required to further the quest of architects and critics. An article by Alexei Nekrasov on ‘Realism in Architecture’ in the prestigious *Architecture of the USSR* magazine in 1934 is an example of intellectual confusion caused by a violent intervention of Party activists into the domain of professional expertise (Fig. 2). Nekrasov followed an early work by Alois Riegl titled *Stilfragen* where the latter analysed naturalism and realism in depicting floral and animal motives in architecture.<sup>16</sup> Then Nekrasov switched to a more formalist framework by saying that ‘One must look for realism in that organization and perception of space which permeates architectural mass.’<sup>17</sup> This question of space and its organization had already been studied by Nekrasov several years earlier, in 1928. Indeed, his observations on historical Space Development from Ancient Egypt to the harmony of mass-space relations in the Ancient

<sup>12</sup> Ivan Matsa, Lidiia Reingardt, and Lazar’ Rempel’ (eds.), *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let. Materialy i dokumentatsiia* (Moscow: Ogiz-Izogiz, 1933), p. 552.

<sup>13</sup> Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* (see note 12), pp. 644–645.

<sup>14</sup> “Ustav soiuzs sovetskikh pisatelei SSSR,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 3 September 1934.

<sup>15</sup> “Ustav soiuzs sovetskikh arkhitektov SSSR,” *Arkitekturnaia gazeta*, 23 July 1937.

<sup>16</sup> Alexei Nekrasov, “Problema realizma v arkhitekture: v poriadke obsuzhdeniia,” *Arkitektura SSSR*, 1 (1934), pp. 52, 54, 56.

<sup>17</sup> Nekrasov, “Problema realizma” (see note 16), p. 52.





2

Greek architecture were commonplace in early modern architectural thought, and equally shared by avant-garde artists like Moisei Ginsburg and academics like Aleksander Gabrichevskii.<sup>18</sup> Summarising his observations in both the 1928 and 1934 articles, Nekrasov emphasised the infinite nature of modern architectural space, opened equally to outer space and underwater depth with its glass walls and flat roofs, as well as general urge of Western civilisation towards rationalisation.<sup>19</sup> But while in 1928 these features of contemporary buildings were seen positively, in 1934 they had become problematic. Nekrasov indicated the abstract nature of new architecture and the intolerable lack of tactility embodied in architectural masses that kept them from harmony. In the 1934 article he landed on the notion of realism that associates with the mass, tactility, and haptic qualities of walls and the human body. It was time, Nekrasov proclaimed, to turn to Antiquity in order to regain the plasticity of architecture.<sup>20</sup> This was a significant and alarming shift: as a result, art critics who had been modelling features of the new architecture by using an up-to-date art historical lexicon turned instead to existing models of the past, applying them to the future development that became deterministic.

### Synthesis of Arts as a Sign of Socialist Realist Architecture

A key question in defining socialist realist architecture was posed in 1934: to what extent can a pure architectural surface visualise the Socialist essence of architecture (Fig. 3)? The answers were given during numerous presentations and meetings of architects and artists, such as at the Art in Architecture conference held in Moscow in 1934. All the participants followed an idea of the necessity of figurative sculptures and ornaments that were thought of as twofold emblematic references to socialist reality, as well as the crucial element of mass that would harmonise architectural space.

<sup>18</sup> Alexei Nekrasov, "Puti arkhitektury: k probleme stil'a sovremennoi arkhitektury," *Pechat' i revolutsia*, 4 (1928), pp. 70–75.

<sup>19</sup> Nekrasov, "Puti arkhitektury" (see note 18), p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> Nekrasov, "Problema realizma" (see note 16), p. 58.

**Fig. 2**  
Moisei Ginsburg, Ignatii Mil'nis,  
Narkomfin building, Moscow, 1930.  
(Photo: Library of the Academy for Fine  
Arts, Moscow).



3

One of the most influential artists of the period, theorist and follower of optical psychophysiology in art in Soviet Russia, Vladimir Favorskii, referred in his talk at the 1934 conference to the ‘truthfulness’ of architectural composition, which he equated to realism. He contrasted both of them to the arbitrariness of decoration, the criticism of the latter being routinely associated with eclectics of Russian and European architecture of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Another prominent Soviet art historian, Mikhail Alpatov, supported the idea of truthfulness in architecture and turned to structural symbolism, taking Ancient Egypt as classical example, the architecture of which was illusionistic but not constructive.<sup>22</sup> The truthfulness of the constructive and material parts of architecture were thought to oblige other arts, such as sculptures and murals, to be equally self-referential – painting should avoid illusionism, sculpture should express plasticity of the architectural organism, but should not destroy the wall.<sup>23</sup> In short, the visual symbolism and hierarchical understanding of applied and free-standing objects, among other traditional art historical modes of thinking on mass and space, were the most common arguments to justify the historicist retreat of modern Soviet architecture (Fig. 4).

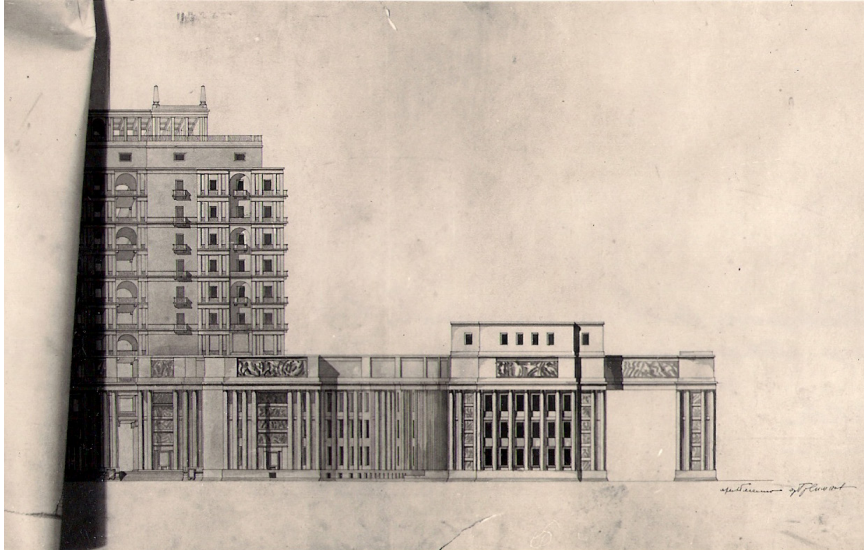
<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Favorskii, “Zhivopis’ i arkhitektura,” in Mikhail Zhitomirskii, *Voprosy sinteza iskusstv. Materialy pervogo tvorcheskogo soveshchaniia arkhitektorov, skul’ptorov i zhivopistsev* (Moscow: Ogiz–Izogiz, 1936), p. 44.

<sup>22</sup> Mikhail Alpatov, “Problema sinteza iskusstv v khudozhestvennom nasledstve,” in Mikhail Zhitomirskii, *Voprosy sinteza iskusstv* (see note 21), p. 23. This example was elaborated by Alois Riegl, see Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl’s Theory of Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> David Arkin, “Arkhitectura i problema sinteza iskusstv,” in Mikhail Zhitomirskii, *Voprosy sinteza iskusstv* (see note 21), p. 16; Vera Mukhina, “Zakony tvorchestva, usloviia sotrudnichestva,” in Mikhail Zhitomirskii, *Voprosy sinteza iskusstv* (see note 21), p. 95.

Fig. 3  
Alexei Nekrasov’s article “Realism in architecture”. In: *Architecture of the USSR magazine*, 1 (1934). (Photo: Library of the Academy for Fine Arts, Moscow).





4

Architectural theories and their reliance on historical examples were in mutual consent with architectural projects of the mid-1930s. The limited number of apartment blocks and public building that were built during the 1930s were generously furnished with figurative sculptures, images of workers, and Party and State symbols, incorporated to appeal directly to the socialist viewer and be visually distinguishable from fallacious bourgeois architecture.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the late Stalinist period was exemplified in neoclassical buildings such as the Moscow metro of 1935–1954 and the Red Army Theater of 1934–1940, that also followed pattern of straightforward symbolism of exuberant figurative decoration (Fig. 5). Since then and until the collapse of the USSR architectural sculptures, murals, and mosaics were seen as elements that made the entire building socialist realist.<sup>25</sup>



5

<sup>24</sup> Maria Silina, *Istoriia i ideologiia: monumental'no-dekorativnii relief 1920-1930-h godov v SSSR* (Moscow: BuksMart, 2014), pp. 98–105.

<sup>25</sup> Natalia Davydova, "Strastnoe slovo khudozhnika. L. Polischuk, S. Scherbinina," *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, 2 (1980), pp. 18–19.

**Fig. 4**  
Alexander Gegello, Project for the Palace of Technology in Moscow, 1933. (Photo: Archive of the Academy for Fine Arts, Moscow).

**Fig. 5**  
Moscow, Kievskaya underground station, 1953. (Photo: Archive of the Academy for Fine Arts, Moscow).



6

## Campaign against Formalism and Naturalism in Architecture

The notion of realism became even more important for Party art critics after 1936, when the repressive Campaign against formalism and naturalism was launched with the quest for a new style suitable for Socialist culture. Formalism meant constructivism in architecture and was harshly criticised for its abstract thinking, which was said to be distant from the social needs of modern society.<sup>26</sup> Another claim was that Constructivists refused to consider architecture as art, which was seen as a crime against common people longing for beauty.<sup>27</sup>

Beginning in 1936, the opposition of socialist realism and formalism expressed in constructivist projects of Moisei Ginsburg and Ivan Leonidov, as well as the highly original designs by Konstantin Melnikov, became pronounced in a clear way: architects needed to elaborate a notion of socialist realism in architecture, avoiding formalism in its constructivist version (Fig. 6).<sup>28</sup> The imperative to do so was soon reinforced by harsh political repression of Party leaders like Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938) and many others, a move that coincided with the anti-formalist Campaign.<sup>29</sup> Many of the artists who had collaborated with the accused politicians were jailed, murdered, or committed suicide, while others lost their commissions and recognition and were forced to survive on the breadline. In those years any accusation, be it creative profile or association with a repressed person, could result in imprisonment.<sup>30</sup> This immediate threat destroyed the creative atmosphere, encouraged a lack of solidarity and increased self-censorship among Soviet architects, which, in turn, led to the wide dissemination of Party slogans in professional debates.

Already by 1937, the terms ‘formalism’ and ‘naturalism’ were being mentioned only as undesirable traits that had to be exterminated in socialist realist practice. It was symptomatic that Party-affiliated critics and activists avoided listing visual characteristics of socialist realism, insisting on a habitual contemporary notion of style as a set of characteristic features of an epoch. The officially recognized definition of realism read as follows:

<sup>26</sup> *Protiv formalizma i naturalizma v iskusstve* (Moscow: Ogiz-Izogiz, 1937), pp. 56–59, 59–62, 62–70.

<sup>27</sup> Otakar Mácel, “Zur Theorie des sozialistischen Realismus in der Architektur,” *Archithese*, 19 (1976), p. 43.

<sup>28</sup> “Protiv formalizma, uproschenchestva i eklektiki. Obshchemoskovskoe soveshanie arkhitektorov. Rech K.S. Alabiana,” *Arkhitekturmaia gazeta*, 23 February 1936.

<sup>29</sup> Oleg Khlevnuyk, *Politburo: Mehanizmy politicheskoi vlasti v 1930-e gody* (Moscow: Rospen, 1996), pp. 187–234.

<sup>30</sup> Valentina Tikhanova, “... za otsutstviem sostava prestuplenia...,” *Panorama iskusstv*, 3 (1990), pp. 6–30; Olga Roitenberg, *Neuzheli kto-to vspomnil, chto my byli... Iz istorii khudozhestvennoi zhizhni. 1925–1935* (Moscow: Galart, 2008).

**Fig. 6**  
Red Army Theatre by Karlo Alabian, Vasilii Simbirtsev et al., Moscow, 1934–1940. Postcard, 1983 (Photo: Library of the Academy for Fine Arts, Moscow).



Socialist realism in architecture means the harmonious union of the ideology and truthfulness of the artistic concept with the closest possible correspondence of each building to the technical, cultural and practical demands made on it. [...] The socialist realist method is not defined by any firmly delineated formal characteristics or techniques, and it therefore does not reject the techniques of any of the styles of the past, where these are progressive and provided they are skilfully and creatively applied to the modern conditions in which the socialist nations are developing.<sup>31</sup>

It is noteworthy that in this Party-sanctioned definition, the notion of style was replaced by a notion of method. There were constructivists who had first posed a problematic question of style and method in the 1920s which was now being adopted by promoters of socialist realism in the 1930s.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, in articles published in *Modern Architecture* magazine, Moisei Ginsburg argued that architecture is a function of the epoch and socially meaningful form. The architect's mission is to study and scientifically justify the main labour and social activities in the buildings, and consequently study questions of movement, house equipment, hygiene, etc. Architects must absolutely avoid the canonisation of forms, according to Ginsburg, and constructivism must be seen as a method, not a style, as rationalising social needs presupposes ever changing forms of architecture.<sup>33</sup> These ideas were echoed in the debates on socialist realism, but not to Ginsburg's benefit. The ambiguity in the definition of socialist realism was allowed to manipulate artists and can be seen as a repressive instrument in managing the professional community. Ultimately, it segregated art critics from architectural practice, disturbing any strong association of theoretical findings and social needs.

One of the unfortunate examples of a new conjuncture in art theory and practice is Aleksander Gabrichevskii's work of the 1940s. In 1944 Gabrichevskii, who had been accused of formalism in 1936, gave a talk in the prominent Moscow Architectural Institute (MArkHI) under the title 'Realism in Architecture'.<sup>34</sup> There he avoided any of the references to the formalist analysis of space that he used in his earlier works. In an attempt to justify realism, he focused on the observation of nature as primary basis of the architect's work. Thus, talking about the importance of details in architecture, he referred to Ruskin's example of the perception of a rock's surface, changing as one approaches it.<sup>35</sup> Like Nerkasov in 1934, Gabrichevskii retreated into naïve realism, popular in architectural theory of the 1870s and 1880s, while still being unable to turn completely away from his formalist formation. For example, he talked about Ancient Egyptian architects who built pyramids in a realist way – contrasting their sharp silhouettes to the vast plain desert.<sup>36</sup> The same views on natural laws in architectural composition were promoted by his colleague and friend Ivan Zholtovskii, who used organicist analogues in his educational courses and built intensively decorated representative official buildings for prominent Soviet functionaries (Fig. 7).<sup>37</sup> The reintroduction of direct

<sup>31</sup> "Ustav soiuzov sovetskikh arkhitektov SSSR," *Arkitekturnaia gazeta*, 23 July 1937.

<sup>32</sup> *Pervii vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Gos. Izdatelstvo, 1934), p. 712.

<sup>33</sup> Moisei Ginsburg, "Konstruktivism kak metod laboratornoi i pedagogicheskoi raboty," *Sovremennaia Arkhitektura*, 6 (1927), pp. 162, 164; Moisei Ginsburg, "Itogi i perspektivy," *Sovremennaia Arkhitektura*, 4–5 (1927), p. 112.

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Gabrichevskii, *Morfologia iskusstva* (Moscow: Agraf, 2002), pp. 494–511, 835.

<sup>35</sup> Gabrichevskii, *Morfologia iskusstva* (see note 34), p. 503.

<sup>36</sup> Gabrichevskii, *Morfologia iskusstva* (see note 34), pp. 502–503.

<sup>37</sup> Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Ivan Zholtovskii* (Moscow: C.E. Gordeev, 2010), pp. 276–281.



7

**Fig. 7**  
Ivan Zholtovskii, Residential building, Moscow, 1934. Page from the 1950 album XXX years of Soviet architecture. (Photo: Library of the Academy for Fine Arts, Moscow).

naturalism witnessed an ultimate segregation of art concepts of the 1930s and 1940 from social agenda in Soviet housing.

A new period of repressions in artistic and scientific spheres started in 1946 with the second wave of the anti-formalist campaign and the 1951 campaign against comparative method in literature and Western culture in general (the anti-cosmopolitan campaign) that deepened the gap between the social dimension of architecture and the theory that was thought to support it.<sup>38</sup> All these actions, seemingly distant from the architectural domain, resulted in a total denial of references to bourgeois modernist philosophers of formalist or idealist formation. Realism was now seen as a philosophical doctrine and a coherent aesthetic theory elaborated by Marx and Engels, as well as their followers, including prominent Soviet Party leaders such as Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin.<sup>39</sup> This is evi-

<sup>38</sup> Pavel Druzhinin, *Ideologija i filologija. Leningrad, 1940e gody. Dokumental'noe issledovanie* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Mikhail Lifshits, *K voprosu o vzgliadah Marksa na iskusstvo* (Moscow: Gos. izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1933); Mikhail Lifshits (ed.), *Lenin o kulture i iskusstve* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1938). For a comprehensive overview of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, see Katerina Clark, "Marksistsko-leninskaja estetika," in Hans Günter and Evgenii Dobrenko (eds.), *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon* (Saint-Petersburg: Akademicheskii prospect, 2000), pp. 352–361.



Fig. 8  
Page from Aldo Rossi's "Une éducation réaliste". In: *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, No. 190 (1977), p. 39. (Photo: *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*).



denced in a 1952 book titled *On the Realistic Basics of the Soviet Architecture* by one of the late Stalinist Party activists in architecture, Mikhail Tsapenko. In reviewing socialist architectural criticism, all theories introduced by architects were criticised, such as one by Nikolai Ladovskii, who worked on the premises of Gustav Fechner's *Entföhlungstheorie*, or by Moisey Ginsburg as a follower of Wilhelm Worringer, Alois Riegl, and Henri Bergson. The 1920s works by Aleksander Gabrichievskii were also declared perverse, despite the fact that he had already made a forced shift from Hegel and Semper to naïve naturalism with formalist rudiments.<sup>40</sup> Various campaigns in the late 1940s resulted in an elimination of all possible parallels of Soviet art theory to Western origins. This segregation both from historical references and up-to-date international criticism was deepened during the post-Stalinist era in the course of the Cold War, and even now the set of imaginable links to Western philosophy and art theory are extremely limited, and educational programs in humanities remain characterised by isolationism (Fig. 8).<sup>41</sup>

## Results of Political Campaigns in Architectural Theory and Practice

Although openly aimed at the humanisation of architecture, the critiques of formalism in the repressive Party-sanctioned campaigns of 1936 and 1948 did not lead to an introduction of more intuitive approaches to social issues in urban planning and housing. The majority of the population lived in barracks and communal apartments, as was in case of Leningrad, where by 1951 there resided 3.3 families per apartment.<sup>42</sup>

The situation seemed to be changing radically with de-Stalinisation process in 1954, when neoclassical fashion was considered a sign of totalitarian rule and blamed for the failure of socialist mass housing. At the All-Union Conference of Builders, Architects, and Construction Industry Workers in November 1954, Party leaders expressed concerns over the high rates of buildings containing non-rational and exuberant use of decorative elements.<sup>43</sup> Within a year, this demand to get rid of Stalinist decorations became a Party decree.<sup>44</sup> The results were controversial, as the desire for accelerated construction led to, among other things, paradoxically poor variations of ready-made constructions, an extremely low quality of building materials, and disregard of human needs.<sup>45</sup> During the 1970s and 1980s, Soviet architects followed the usual path in criticising Western architectural practices embodied in postmodernism.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, however, their own trajectory of development from the rigid system of the early post-Stalinist years prompted the same concerns on the alienation of form and context, made by Western European architects and critics of the postwar generation (Aldo Rossi, Alan Colquhoun), who turned to Realism in architecture.<sup>47</sup> In the 1970s Soviet architects, still guided by a limited Party lexicon, attempted to reconsider the notion of socialist realism in architecture, but this attempt attracted little serious attention, as its reductionist agenda remained attached to Stalinist era. Human-oriented rethinking of the mass housing and social dimension of socialism

<sup>40</sup> Mikhail Tsapenko, *O realisticheskikh osnovakh sovetskoi arkhitektury* (Moscow: Gos. Izdatelstvo, 1952), pp. 128, 133–139, 139–141.

<sup>41</sup> Vadim Bass, "Formal'nii diskurs kak poslednee pribezhishche sovetskogo arkhitekтора," *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 137, no 1 (2016), cited after <http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/6998> (accessed May 18, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Blair A. Ruble, "From khrushcheby to korobki," in William Craft Blumfeld and Blair A. Ruble (eds.), *Russian Housing in the Modern Age: Design and Social History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 235.

<sup>43</sup> "Prodolzhenie rechi tovatishcha N.S. Khrushcheva," *Pravda*, 28 December 1954, pp. 3–4; "Iz stenogrammy Vsesoiuznogo soveshchaniya po stroitel'stvu. Moskva. 30 noiabria – 7 dekabria 1954," in *Estetika ottepeli. Novoe v arkhitekture, iskusstve, kul'ture* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2012), pp. 412–416.

<sup>44</sup> "On elimination of excesses in design and construction," Resolution of Central Committee and USSR Council, 4 November 1955, cited after <http://www.sovarch.ru/postanovlenie55/> (accessed May 18, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Andrei Gosak, "V ritme vospominanii," *Arkhiturnii Vestnik*, 86 (2005), pp. 42–7; Blair A. Ruble, "From khrushchevki" (see note 42), pp. 232–270.

<sup>46</sup> Andrei Gosak, "Vmesto togo chtoby pouchatj...," *Arkhitectura*, 13, 523 (1982), p. 7. On the relationship towards postmodernism, see Richard Anderson, *Russia: modern architectures in history* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), pp. 247–280.

<sup>47</sup> Kenneth Michael Hays (ed.), *Architecture theory since 1968* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 246–253; 254–261; Irina Davidovici, *Forms of Practice: German Swiss Architecture 1980–2000* (Zurich: gta Verlag, 2012), pp. 241–251.



also failed to emerge after the collapse of the USSR, due to a rise of profit-oriented capitalism.<sup>48</sup> The disregard of a social agenda in urban planning and mass construction can partially be explained by the disillusionment in the Communist intellectual legacy. Since the 1990s, socialist realism has been considered as an invented term that describes only the darkest time of Stalinist repressions in the domain of art.<sup>49</sup> Socialist realism, being non-existent, made many sure that not only had architectural methodology failed to survive in the Soviet Union, but that it is also absent in modern Russia due to a lack of historical tradition of architectural criticism and urban sociology. The study of the successful but silenced – or failed and neglected – attempts of Soviet-era architects to integrate modernist and post-modernist social agenda into Party-regulated mass construction are imperative to Soviet architectural history today.

## Conclusion

The introduction of the notion of realism into Soviet artistic life provides a poignant example of how politically-driven interventions into professional, practical and art critical expertise operated in the domain of architectural theory, and how they reshaped the social agenda in architecture. As has been shown in the examples of Nekrasov's and Gabrichevskii's works, art theory that served to describe changes in architectural style was turned into the prescription of architectural development on its way to socialist realism. The definition of style, elaborated by Moisei Ginsburg in his study of Constructivist architecture, was not significantly changed while being transferred into official formulas of socialist realism. In practice, however, the key question of the 1920s on the socialist essence of architecture shifted from a social agenda to the necessity of figurative sculptures and murals seen as signifiers of socialism, as the debates on synthesis of art of the 1930s have shown. In the de-Stalinisation era, architecture returned to modernism, banning the historicism of the previous decades and celebrating the long-awaited integration into the European stylistic agenda. But this unity was only fictional, as no criticism of modernist formalism in its Soviet version was possible. While the re-actualisation of realism debates in the 1970s Western discourse gave way to the postmodernist search for more intuitive and sustainable approaches to architecture, Soviet professionals were guided by the State to using a Cold-War inspired lexicon and producing prefabricated, sub-standard apartments. Until now, due to the disillusion in Communist initiatives that were performed poorly and forcefully, the socialist agenda in architecture, its failures, and its efforts, remain obscure and unrecognised.

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<sup>48</sup> Nina Krasnaia, "Zhilaia sreda v ee sotsial'nom i gradostroitel'nom soderzhanii kak predmet arkhitekturnogo i dizainerskogo tvorchestva," in Tatiana Malinina (ed.), *Massovoe zhillishche kak ob'ekt tvorchestva. Rol' sotsial'noi inzhenerii i khudozhestvennikh idei v proektirovanii zhiloi sredy. Opyt XX i problemy XXI veka* (Moscow: Buksmart, 2015), pp. 525–545.

<sup>49</sup> Evgenii Dobrenko (ed.), *Izbavlenie ot mirazhei. Sotsrealizm segodnia* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), pp. 6–27.

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