

Nonarchitects in Architecture

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In the second half of the nineteenth century, and particularly in the early years of the twentieth, almost all the arts in Russia—literature, music, theater, and painting—experienced a sense of unprecedented acceleration and of creative ferment and renewal. Only architecture seemed immune.

Architects were, as a rule, competent professionals (some, of course, did possess genuine talent). At the time, architecture schools produced two types of specialists: “architect-artists”—stylistic connoisseurs, experts at monumental composition and architectural decoration—and “civil engineers” with more generalized abilities. It was common practice for an experienced “civil engineer”—the owner, say, of an established architectural firm—to invite an “architect-artist” (in most cases, a promising newcomer) to decorate the façades of a project already complete in all other respects. (New structures were awarded prizes for the “best façade” in any given year.) Thus architecture evolved in accordance with changing stylistic trends and fashions.

Russian society was, nonetheless, unhappy with the state of architecture. Inasmuch as architecture was the “mother of all the arts,” its decline (whether absolute or only relative) was viewed as a brake on artistic and spiritual culture as a whole. Both the notion of a “synthesis of the arts”—which was given particularly wide currency through its promotion by Richard Wagner and which was subject in Russia to a number of distinctive interpretations—and the purposeful quest for a “style” that would be the artistic reflection and expression of the epoch made demands of architecture which its present resources were deemed inadequate to meet. What innovation there was in architecture was perceived as not radical enough. The developments in vanguard painting were not replicated in architecture.

In many countries, vanguard art exerted an extraordinary formal influence on the emergence of “new architecture” at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Russia—where this process occurred later than it did in France, Germany, Holland, or Austro-Hungary—the period of influence was quite brief (of seven or eight years’ duration, from approximately 1917 to 1923) yet unusually concentrated. And it was preceded by a long period of preparation, initiated when nonarchitects, cognizant of society’s displeasure with architecture, repeatedly attempted to intervene in architectural projects.

As at the end of the nineteenth century, so at the beginning of the twentieth artists—such as Mikhail Vrubel', Viktor Vasnetsov, Vasilii Polenov, Sergei Maliutin, Aleksandr Golovin, Konstantin Korovin, Nikolai Rerikh, Aleksandr Benua (Alexandre Benois), Evgenii Lansere, Ivan Nivinskii, and Sergei Vashkov—participated in architectural design (most often of façades and interiors), designed exhibitions and festive decorations, made sketches for furnishings and urban objects, and took part in architectural competitions. In most such instances, artists were not seeking to try their hand at another profession. Whether conceiving their own designs or executing a commission, they were, rather, in search of alternatives to the customary solutions of professional architects.

Arrogation of the prerogatives of the architect (or master builder) was less pronounced, yet no less consequential, in those cases where leading figures in the other arts—including Il'ia Repin, Polenov, Shcherbatov, Leonid Andreev, Maksimilian Voloshin, Vasilii Kamenskii, and Fedor Shaliapin (Feodor Chaliapin)—commissioned designs for their own homes. Repin's Penaty, his estate and studio in Kuokkala, near St. Petersburg, flouted generally accepted architectural rules and “good taste,” yet demonstrated an entirely unconstrained and direct approach to architectural form (fig. no. 1): The estate was constructed to suit the individual needs of its owner, his family's style of life, and his own aesthetic preferences. The



fig. 1

View of the northern façade of Penaty, Repin's home in Kuokkala.

radical formal boldness and departure from preconception evinced in Penaty put Repin in the architectural vanguard long before there was an architectural avant-garde in Russia. The "brazenness" that Repin discerned in contemporary art could be labeled an almost indispensable trait of any active intervention by outsiders in architecture.

Nonarchitects were, however, most often drawn not to actual architectural practice but to the nonutilitarian and abstract "planning" of *fantastic* structures. The proliferating works of science fiction and other writing about the *future* depicted the unprecedented skyscrapers and feats of engineering, the private homes and public buildings, and the fantastic means of transportation in the mechanized city of the future. (Most of these books, it's true, were either translations into Russian or imitations of the works of Western writers, H. G. Wells foremost among them.) A distinctive fantastic and forward-looking urban "design" emerged, which combined quasi-reality (the reality of certain American and European metropolises) with unbounded imaginings.

In 1912, a certain *Sinii zhurnal* (*Blue Journal*) each month offered its readers an illustrated description of the "St. Petersburg of the future" (side by side, incidentally, with harsh gibes at "Futurism" in Russian literature and painting). The "Moscow of the future" was depicted in a 1913 series of advertising postcards as a city of contrasts, its famous architectural monuments of the past juxtaposed with imposing examples of a fantastic "Americanized" architecture. Other visions of the architecture of the future were of course put forth: the idyllic "city-garden" or the "cozy nest" hidden away in nature.

In painting and graphic art at the beginning of the century, however, the heightened interest in architecture was directed in most instances not toward the future but toward the past, toward ancient and "post-petrine" Russian architecture, above all (at the end of the nineteenth century, the latter was still not considered "Russian").² Nostalgia was the prevailing mood. Artists, as it were, boycotted contemporaneity and its accompanying architectural and urban realities.

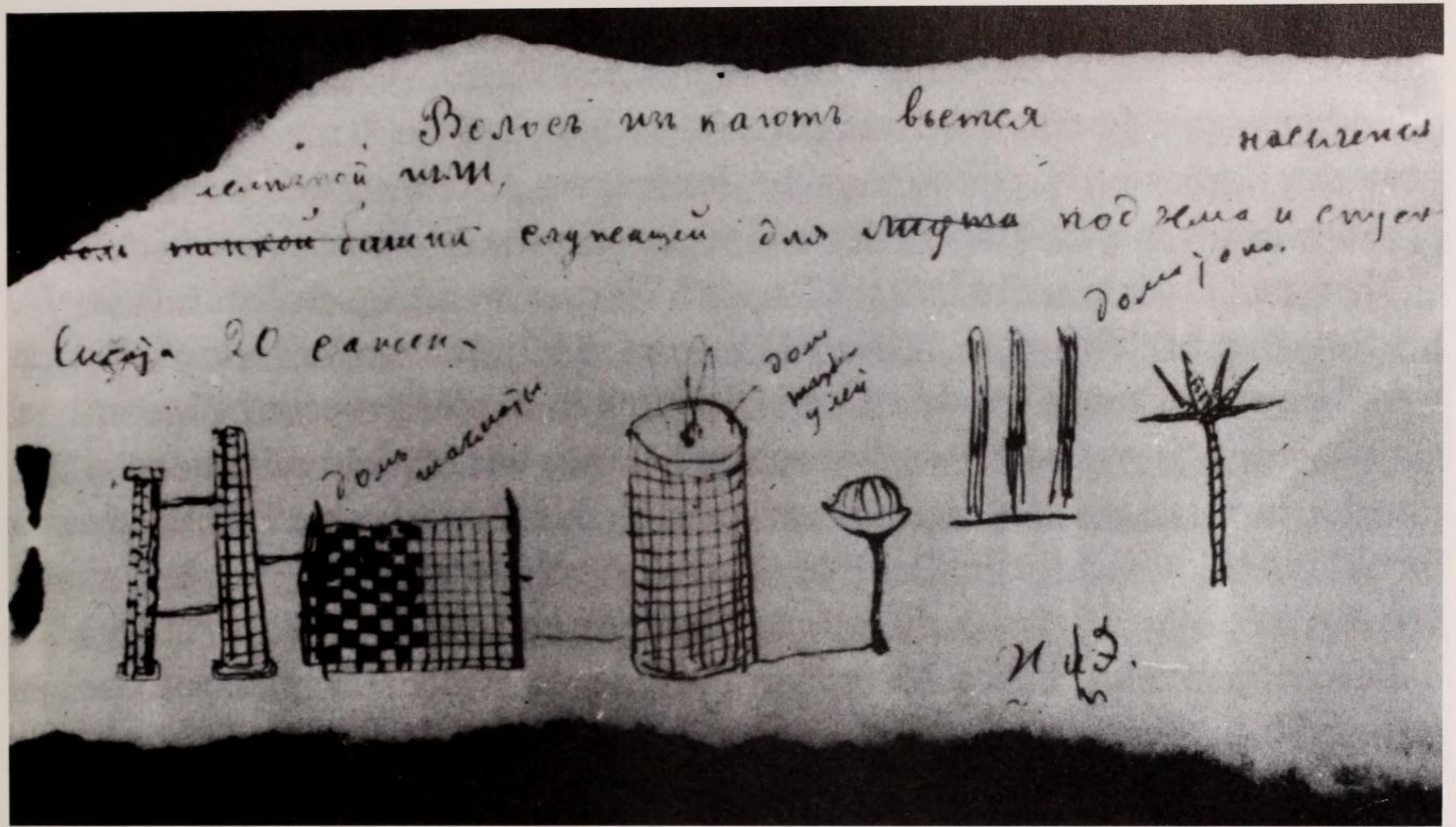


fig. 2
 Manuscript with architectural fantasies sketched by Velimir
 Khlebnikov, 1915-16.

Mstislav Dobuzhinskii's series *Gorodskie sny* (*Urban Dreams*)—among which one may include scattered works (fig. no. 3) dating from the late 1900s to 1922, when Dobuzhinskii left the USSR—is one of the few examples of an artistic envisioning of the “city of the future.” A typical representative of the backward-looking *Mir iskusstva* (World of Art) group, Dobuzhinskii transformed his traditional manner in treating this subject, fusing several heterogeneous sources—Piranesi, turn-of-the-century European urban sketches, the idiom of early-twentieth-century Russian architectural Neoclassicism, and his own 1914 sketches of contemporary London (the last the fruit of his brief Cubist period). Dobuzhinskii's series exercised an undoubted influence on the plastic language of architectural projects from the early stages of the delineation of the postrevolutionary architectural avant-garde through the Palace of Labor competition in 1923³—a period that came to be labeled that of “revolutionary Romanticism.”

Architecture was unprepared both artistically and technically to absorb the “extremes” of vanguard art, and it was only after the October Revolution that architects began to use the cityscapes of the Russian Cubo-Futurists—the paintings, dating from the 1910s, of Aristarkh Lentulov, Aleksandra Ekster, Liubov' Popova, Mikhail Le-Dantiu, Kazimir Malevich, Ivan Kliun, Ivan Puni, and others—as a “textbook” on a new spatial vision and the “aesthetics of rupture and dislocation,” and as a source of certain concrete formal “motifs.”

The results of acquaintance with Cubo-Futurist painting are evident in the architect Vladimir Krinskii's experimental projects from 1919–21. These are not architectural drawings but Cubist “paintings” of buildings. And the plicated or serrated dismembered architectural masses favored from 1922 by the architect Konstantin Mel'nikov were surely indebted both to Lentulov's 1919–20 series of landscapes depicting the ancient architectural ensembles of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity and St. Sergei, New Jerusalem, and Tsaritsyno as well as to Popova's architectural paintings of 1916.

In about 1910, however, when the style moderne that had prevailed at the beginning of the century had been rejected by both traditionalists and the “left,” a Neoclassical movement came to the fore, buttressed by the interest in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Russian culture recently awakened by *Benua* and *World of Art*. Both the “public” and architects viewed classical St. Petersburg through the works of contemporary artists and poets (such as Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandel'shtam, and Benedikt Lifshits—the last a Classicist within Futurism). “St. Petersburg was beautiful when no one noticed its beauty and everyone dismissed it,” said Aleksandr Blok. “But here we've sung St. Petersburg's praises, and now everyone knows how lovely it is, admires it, is enraptured by it!”⁴

It is interesting that both Mandel'shtam and Lifshits discerned in St. Petersburg's early-nineteenth-century architecture those spatial and temporal notions and categories whose relevance would be perceived only in the twentieth century and which would prove of particular interest to the Russian “Futurists.” In poems identically entitled “Admiralteistvo” (“The Admiralty”)—Mandel'shtam's from 1913, Lifshits's from 1915—the two poets declared that the architecture of this remarkable building (constructed in 1806–23) “denies the superiority of space” over time and “severs the bonds of three dimensions,” “in defiance of Euclid.”

Andrei Belyi's novel *Peterburg* (*St. Petersburg*, 1913–14) was an exceptionally powerful and expressive statement of a new subjective vision and perception of the metropolis. The Classical layout of St. Petersburg and the old buildings of the “era of Aleksandr”—praised for their “clarity,” “simplicity,” and “logic”—were in Belyi's novel a picture of spatial

irrationality, borderlessness, and existential absurdity. The critics were quick to recognize the novel as “Cubism in literary prose, equal in strength to the Cubism of Picasso” and its author as the “only true and significant Futurist in Russian literature,” whose conjoining of “Cubism and Futurism . . . with true, unmediated Symbolism” made for his originality.⁵

These are the words of the philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev. Sharing the widespread belief that architecture had fallen into decline, Berdiaev not only felt that “architecture has already perished irrevocably” but (already in 1914) pinpointed the reason for its demise in the “long-standing victory in architecture of the lowest form of Futurism.”⁶

For the time being, however, hopes were strong that Neoclassicism would prevail. While World War I forced a sharp cutback on new construction, planning continued unabated (this was Russia's first “architecture on paper” boom). And the artistic achievements of architectural Neoclassicism even gave rise to attempts to return vanguard painting to the “true path,” to use the example of architecture to influence all of Russian art. Georgii Lukomskii, a defender of the Neoclassical revival, wrote:

While painting seeks “new” ideals, outside of any principles or traditions and with the sole end of creating art suited to the era of the automobile, telephone, and cinematograph, truly new architecture, which meets the demands of today by erecting banks, houses of the people, car garages, markets, and telephone exchanges, finds it possible to utilize the traditions of the past beautifully and thoughtfully.

*Isn't it therefore obvious that the new aspirations in painting are strained and lifeless? . . . Doesn't it follow that it is possible for all contemporary art to make use of old forms?*⁷

Strange though it may seem, the same argument was made by Anatolii Lunacharskii after the Revolution. People's Commissar of Enlightenment and official art-policymaker in the USSR, Lunacharskii was a both long-standing Party member and a gifted writer on public affairs, an art critic, a poet, and a widely produced playwright (though his plays were on occasion banned by the official Soviet censorship—such was the curious new situation in art). He was, moreover, the most prominent representative of the Marxist wing of Russian “Postivist aesthetics,” and always approached strictly artistic—and especially formal—problems somewhat speculatively, measuring any phenomenon by sociological criteria and the theory of class struggle.

It was not only personal taste but the high value placed on the art of antiquity and the Renaissance in the writings of Marx and Engels that caused Lunacharskii's sympathies to lie unwaveringly with Classicism. He maintained that the “classics”—that is, the art of the ancient democracies and of those periods when the bourgeoisie was “young and progressive”—were the most valuable cultural legacy for the proletariat. (This was somewhat difficult to square with another Marxist tenet—that each new social order is prepared within the one preceding. When in the late 1920s the architecture critic A. Mikhailov—one of the chief participants in the ideological and political persecution of Constructivist and “Formalist” Soviet architects—accordingly evinced an interest in the architecture of the capitalist period, Lunacharskii severely criticized this “mistake” and returned the “errant” Mikhailov to the summarily preferred “classics.”)⁸ Vanguard art (under the collective rubric of “Futurism”) was, by contrast, inevitably regarded as a manifestation of “capitalist culture in the period of its decline.”

Lunacharskii's outline for a monumental mass spectacle, planned for Red Square in the spring of 1921, gives some notion of his architectural utopia (as was the common practice, the



fig. 3
Mstislav Dobuzhinskii
City of the Future, 1918-19.

spectacle presented a succession of different social epochs, symbolized by changes in architectural decoration):

Fourth act: capital . . . decorations conveying . . . a conglomeration of buildings: mills, industrial plants, prisons . . . corresponding dances (perhaps in deliberately "Futurist" style) . . .

*Fifth act: . . . a group of workers . . . gradually erects the city of the future. This is a complex, gleaming with all the colors of the rainbow, of marvelous fantastic buildings (I would recommend that light aerial constructions prevail) bearing such legends as "Free School of Labor," "Temple of Science," and "Temple of Art." The most important thing is to create a bewitching tableau which would give a hint of the "promised city."*⁹

The chief question for Lunacharskii was always "What kind of art do we need?"¹⁰ And the answer he gave never varied: art kindred with the classical. In a course on the theory of art in 1921, he examined architecture as the "center of the fine arts,"¹¹ while in his practical work as commissar he was convinced that architecture tended least of all the arts toward change—and was least in need of any.¹² The Architecture Subsection of Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) was, as a consequence, composed entirely of traditionalists and proponents of Classicism, and headed by Ivan Zholtovskii.¹³

The other members of Izo Narkompros—painters and sculptors for whom, it would seem, architecture should be of no concern—had quite different views. The vanguard artists under David Shterenberg in Izo Narkompros, and particularly those on Izo Narkompros's Art Board in Moscow (which was headed by Vladimir Tatlin), were advocates of innovation in architecture. Their program, calling for a radical renewal of all aspects of architecture and its "return" to the ranks of contemporary art, entailed uncompromisingly sharp criticism of the situation in architecture and rejection of its historical canons; a search for a new architecture that converged with vanguard painting and sculpture, and was understood as a new "synthesis of the arts"; a system of education oriented toward study of the contemporary construction industry and the technical side of the artist's and sculptor's craft ("artistic culture"); denial of the hierarchical ranking of "high" and "utilitarian" art; direct assistance to architects desiring additional vanguard training (Zhivskul'ptarkh [the Synthesis of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture Commission] and Unovis [the Affirmers of the New Art]); and—most important—advancement of concrete proposals for fundamentally new buildings, structures, "minor architectural forms," and so on.

Such calls for innovation were repeated in a number of texts (sometimes almost word for word),¹⁴ bearing witness to a certain collective conception that likely had a single source. That source was Tatlin. As no less an authority than Nikolai Punin attested, "Tatlin's influence on us . . . was, I say, boundless . . . Much of what became the program of Izo Narkompros went back to Tatlin's basic principles."¹⁵

Prior to the Revolution, vanguard painters had had no chance to test their formal ideas on any object of an architectural nature, yet the critics had immediately detected the architectural potential of, for instance, Tatlin's counter-reliefs. The decoration of the Café Pittoresque in the summer of 1917 afforded artists their first practical opportunity, and contemporaries viewed it as an event of fundamental significance. Georgii Iakulov, who had headed the group of artists decorating the café, considered himself as a consequence the father of Constructivism (whereas in fact he subsequently became a leading representative of the romantic line in "artists' architecture").¹⁶

It was Tatlin's view that the time for easel painting was past (at least for him personally) and that it was necessary to create a new art, which he first designated in 1919 as "material, volume, and construction." From the beginning of 1919, word of Tatlin's work on a project for a grand building-monument—bathed in a certain theatrical mystery—became a real factor in artistic life, influencing art's evolution toward Constructivism and production art (though they were as yet unnamed). Tatlin's model for the *Pamiatnik III-emu Internatsionalu* (*Monument to the Third International*, 1919–20) made an enormous impression on contemporaries, gained fame around the world, and was transformed into a symbol. Here, however, we will not dwell on Tatlin's Tower but, rather, examine certain of his conceptions of architecture, which were in large part shared by other artists.

Artists' intervention in architecture was a conscious, willed desire that would have to be satisfied, as they saw it, *without architects' help*. In his report on the year's work of Izo Narkompros, Shterenberg singled out the "architecture section," stating that "turning to the best architectural forces of St. Petersburg and Moscow," the Art Board "had not immediately been able to establish close contact with them, and even in the future will perhaps not entirely see eye-to-eye with them."¹⁷ He was expressing the view of the majority of his colleagues when he said that "insofar as architects continue to start from Greek columns, from a desire to squeeze between them cars and locomotives and large buildings for meetings, libraries, and cafeterias for the broad masses, all their efforts will come to naught and artistic architecture will be entirely swept aside. Yet this doesn't mean that the greatest monuments won't be created." Shterenberg placed his hopes in "engineering construction," which "as of late . . . has far outstripped architecture and offers an array of new forms that in the future will be the cornerstone of construction."¹⁸ Thus the stage was set for examination of architectural issues outside the Architecture Subsection of Izo Narkompros—in Izo Narkompros as a whole and in the Subsection for Artistic Labor (created, in part, to meet this need); later among the members of Zhivskul'ptarkh, Inkhuk (the Institute of Artistic Culture), and Lef (the Left Front of the Arts); and, finally, in independent vanguard architectural groups created in 1923 and 1925.

Both of the chief leaders of the avant-garde—Malevich and Tatlin—were convinced that the situation in architecture was irreparable and emphatically juxtaposed architecture with *building*. In 1920, Tatlin called those working with him on his Tower "*builders*"; in 1922, while organizing the *Obzor novykh techenii iskusstva* (*Survey of New Trends in Art*) exhibition, he endeavored "to mobilize all the artistic forces of Petrograd working in the new art—in painting, theater, music, sculpture, and *building* [emphasis added]";¹⁹ and in 1924, he argued "against the participation of architects in the construction [of a monument to Lenin], allowing only artist-Constructivists and technician-engineers."²⁰ Tatlin offered a formula for the creative activity—which he labeled the "construction of materials"—that would, in his view, replace traditional architecture: "Painting + engineering – architecture = construction of materials."²¹

When working on a concrete project, Tatlin (as well as the majority of other artists in a similar position) did not seek to replace all professional specialists, only architects. In Tatlin's view, the artist, whom he regarded as the "initiating unit in the creative work of the collective," must *invent a form* suited to the task at hand; the job of various specialists was to "elaborate" and realize that form. The slogans Tatlin hung when he exhibited the model for his Tower were indicative of his stance: "We Are Inventing the Construction of Materials,"

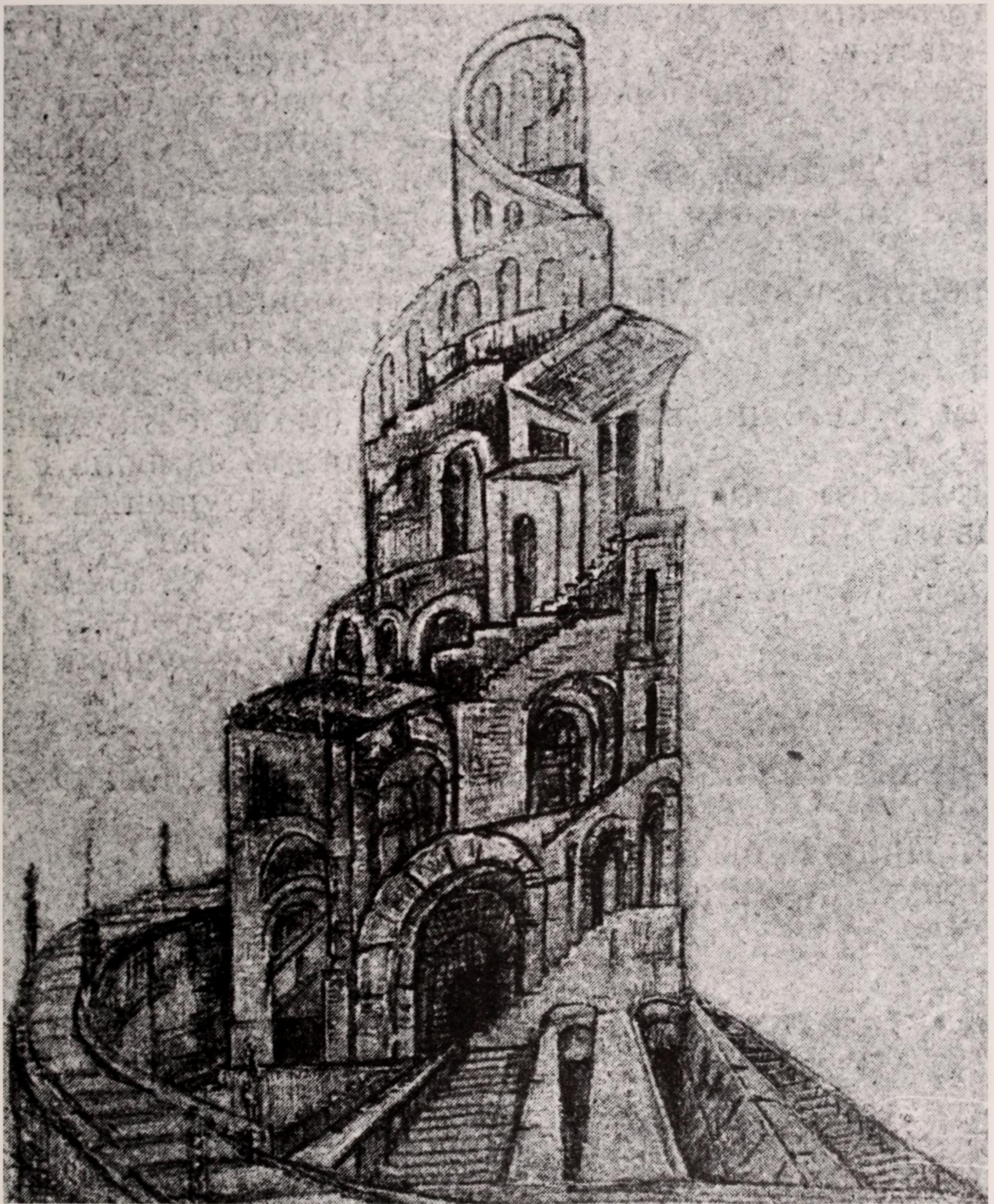


fig. 4
Georgii Iakulov
Project for a monument, The Twenty-Six Commissars, Baku, 1923.

“Engineers and Bridge Builders, Base Your Computations on Invented New Form,” “Metalworkers of the World, Manufacture Parts, Build New Form in Honor of the Third Communist International.”²²

Although the Tower was profoundly influential in the changes that began to occur in Russian architecture in the early 1920s, Tatlin a decade later expressed displeasure with the by then widespread functionalist-Constructivist forms of architecture: “the forms used in the construction industry (in architecture) have a certain fixed schematic character,” are geometrically primitive, avoid “curved construction forms and complex curvature,” and make routine use of “customary construction materials”—all of which “leads to monotony,” which is “plain to see in contemporary international architectural competitions.”²³ While the Constructivists deemed functionality adequate to render form artistic, Tatlin’s view was that “invented” form was first artistic and then functional.

(Tatlin’s later works, as well, had an impact on vanguard architects. Mel’nikov, who as a rule was indifferent to the work of others, not only promoted the model of the Tower exhibited at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* [International Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative and Industrial Art, Paris, 1925] but was much impressed by *Letatlin* [1929–32]—a utopian and entirely nonarchitectural work.)²⁴

Malevich’s influence on twentieth-century architecture was even more wide-ranging than Tatlin’s. His concern with architecture likely began very early on. The Suprematist paintings he showed at the end of 1915 exhibited features in principle kindred with those of architecture, and “volumetric Suprematism” dated from about 1920 (though hardly earlier).²⁵ Thereafter his interest in architecture only grew, reaching a peak in the early 1930s.

Immediately after the Revolution, however, Malevich contented himself with sharp and merciless criticism of the state of architecture. In a series of derisive articles published in 1918 in *Anarkhiia* (*Anarchy*) and *Iskusstvo kommuny* (*Art of the Commune*), Malevich stated categorically that “the new cannot live in the old”; that “an enormous step has been taken [in all the arts] . . . only architecture is a ‘withered branch’—like cripples, the architects walk on Greek columns as if on crutches”; and that architecture insulting to contemporaneity was a “slap in the face to ferroconcrete.” “We artists,” he concluded, “must come to the defense of new structures.”²⁶ Malevich’s criticism was impossible to ignore.

Malevich argued the case for a transition to non-objective art (“art as such”)—whose task was not to repeat (to “reflect”) the forms of life but to create new forms for it—with, among other things, references to architecture and building. He cited the example of the carpenter who, while constructing a building, does not imitate “objects and things as they appear in nature” but “creates a new guise and form not known in nature.”²⁷ This specific feature of architecture, in Malevich’s view, was both a convincing justification of the expediency of non-objectivity in all the other arts (“painting as such,” “poetry as such,” and so on) and an aid to discerning the distortion of the essence of architecture, the subjugation of its formal principles to static and outmoded canons, in contemporary practice. “Architecture as such” had to be restored.

Architecture was an important and integral part of Malevich’s all-embracing Suprematist system. “I understand architecture as an activity outside everything utilitarian,” said Malevich. With this assertion, however, Malevich was not drawing the traditional distinction between the functional art of architecture and the other arts but affirming that all the arts, architecture included, were independent from “naked utilitarianism.” “Thus I understand *all the arts as activity free*

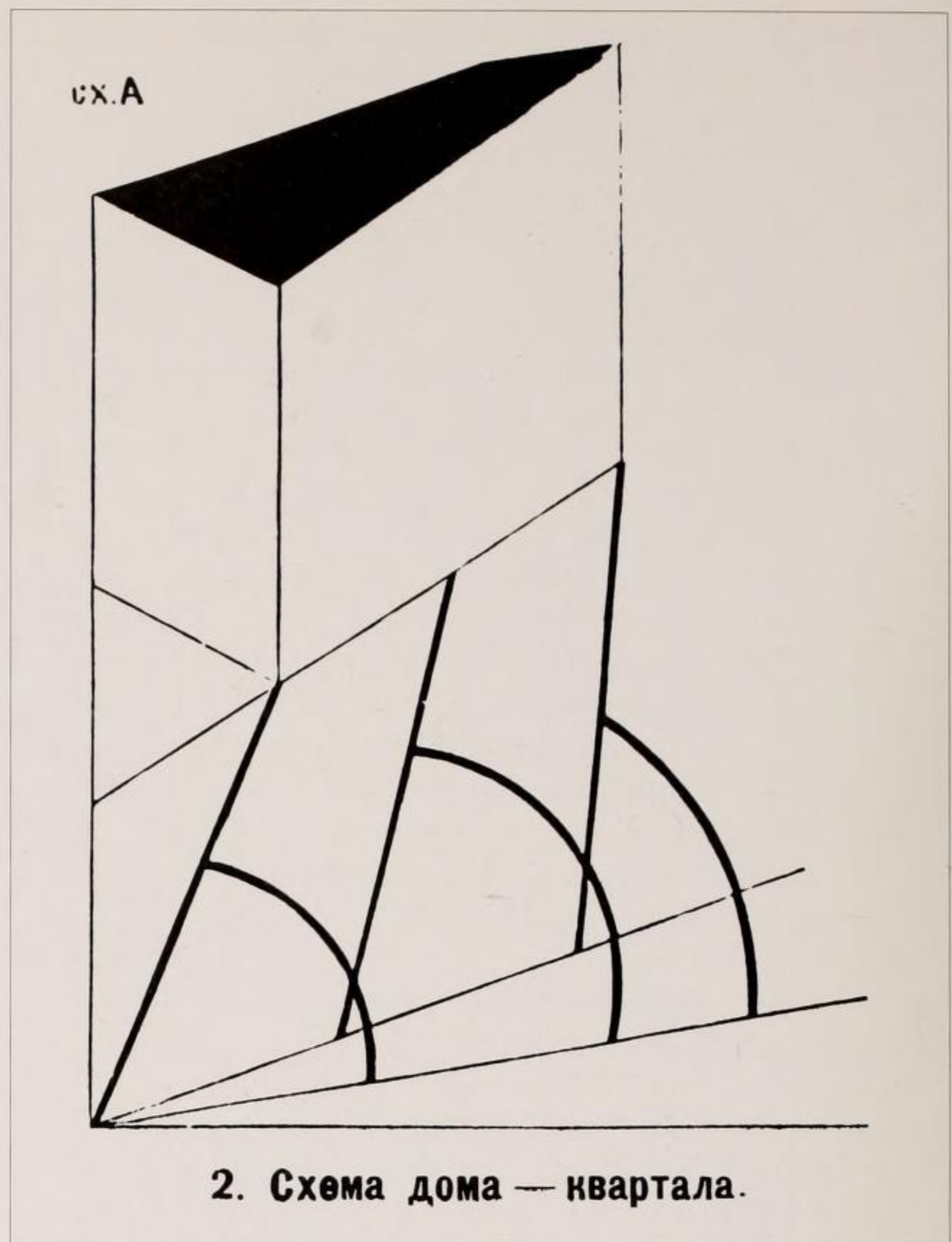


fig. 5
Anton Lavinskii
City on Springs: Sketch for Housing Block, 1921.

from all economic and practical ideologies [emphasis added].”²⁸ Technical and utilitarian activity, according to Malevich, produced “things,” whose perfection changed over time: “a cart, a carriage, a locomotive, and an airplane are a chain of unconsidered possibilities and tasks.” Whereas art “can call its creations *finished works* [*proizvedeniia*], since their execution is absolute, timeless, and unchanging, hence properly considered [emphasis added].”²⁹

The new (non-objective) art would not borrow its forms from nature and reality yet it would be intimately linked with reality and inspired by it. Malevich regarded Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism, and Constructivism as the inevitable art of the modern metropolis and its way of life. Though he denied the authority of utility over art, Malevich acknowledged a special, art-specific, utilitarianism (“Suprematist forms, as an abstraction, became utilitarian perfection”) and “economy” (“the fifth dimension I introduced into art”).³⁰ From 1920, Malevich methodically demonstrated various types of Suprematist architecture—in projects for speaker’s rostrums (plate no. 130), living quarters, public buildings, monuments, urban complexes, and interior decorations—and persistently sought to have a hand in the training of architects.

Of all the new formal systems advanced by painting in the early twentieth century, Suprematism proved the most congenial to and influential on the worldwide movement toward “new architecture.” Yet the Soviet wing of this movement—architectural Constructivism—evinced a rather strange ambivalence vis-à-vis Malevich. While in practice Malevich’s forms were more widely and directly employed than were those of any other artist, the Constructivist theorists (Boris Arvatov, Aleksei Gan, and others) only partially acknowledged the significance of Malevich’s formal achievements and insisted on the ideological alienness to Constructivism, and even the political enmity, of Malevich’s artistic and philosophical conceptions.³¹

The vanguard artists who followed the example of Malevich and Tatlin—the nonarchitects who turned to architecture or to creative work having tasks akin to those of architecture—traveled many different paths. Works representative of what could be called the consciously utopian, maximalist trend, oriented toward unlimited scientific-technological and social progress, were intended to be powerful catalysts to development; they projected the most general formal outlines of the “architecture of the future” and were unconcerned with any “real” technical, economic, or other sort of limitations. Man’s creative powers and the technology placed at his disposal were omnipotent. Such works as Anton Lavinskii’s *Gorod na resorakh* (*City on Springs*, 1921, fig. nos. 5–6) and Gustav Klutskis’s *Dinamicheskii gorod* (*Dynamic City*, 1919) and series of spatial constructions (1921–22)—not to mention the great Suprematist utopia—were a continuation of “Futurism” (“The Future is our only goal”) in new circumstances. The legacy of this trend may be discerned in the projects for “flying cities” executed in the late 1920s at Vkhutein (the Higher Artistic-Technical Institute) by Georgii Krutikov, Kalmykov, and Iuzefovich, as well as in certain projects by Ivan Leonidov (for a monument to Christopher Columbus [1929], a socialist settlement in Magnitogorsk [1930], and a City of the Sun [1943–59]), Mel’nikov (for a monument to Christopher Columbus [1929] and the Green City [1929]), and other architects.

Painters, naturally, regarded color as one of the most significant components of architectural form. Unfortunately, however, insuperable practical obstacles allowed only rare endeavors in this realm between 1918, when Natan Al’tman designed his decorations for Petrograd’s Palace Square (plate

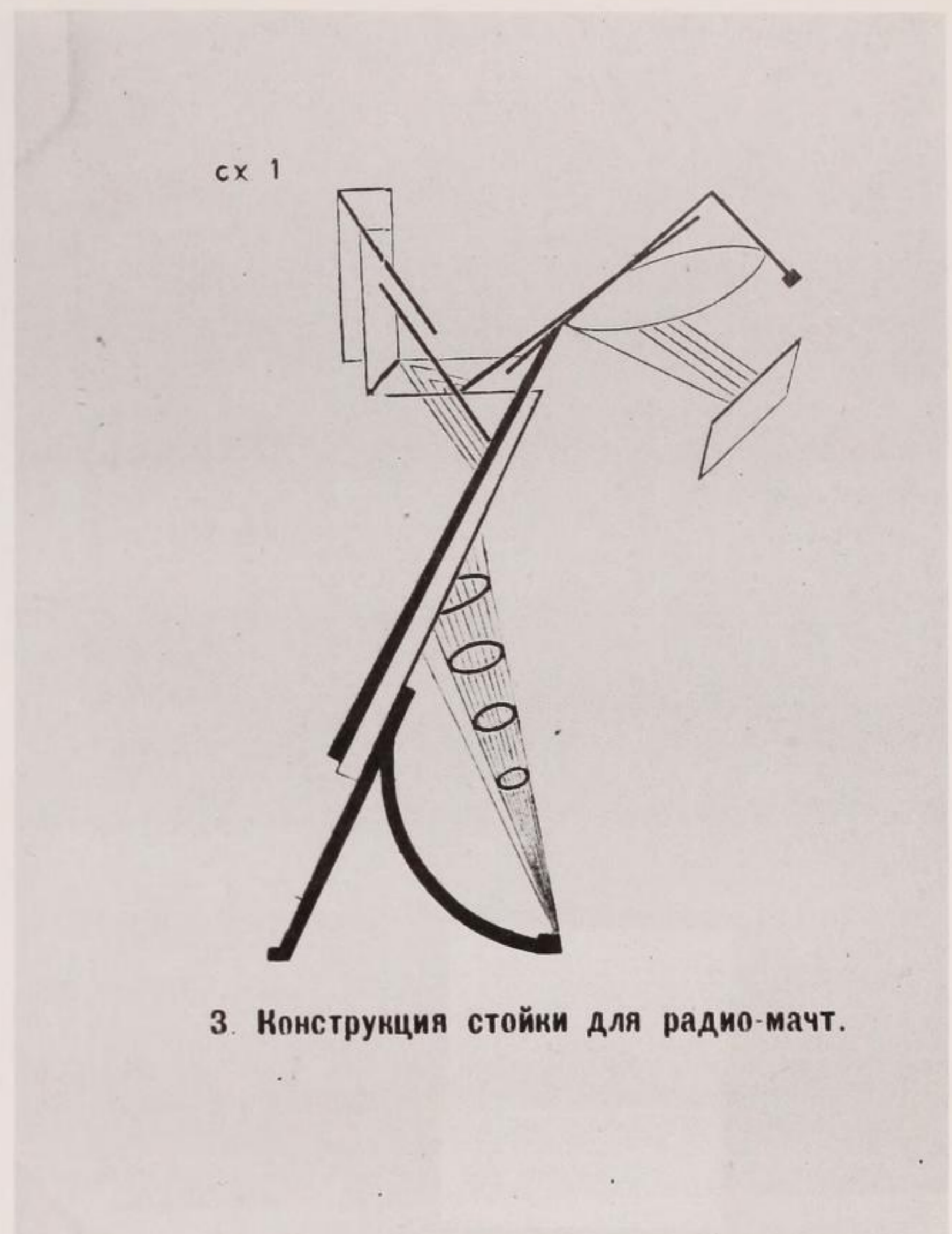
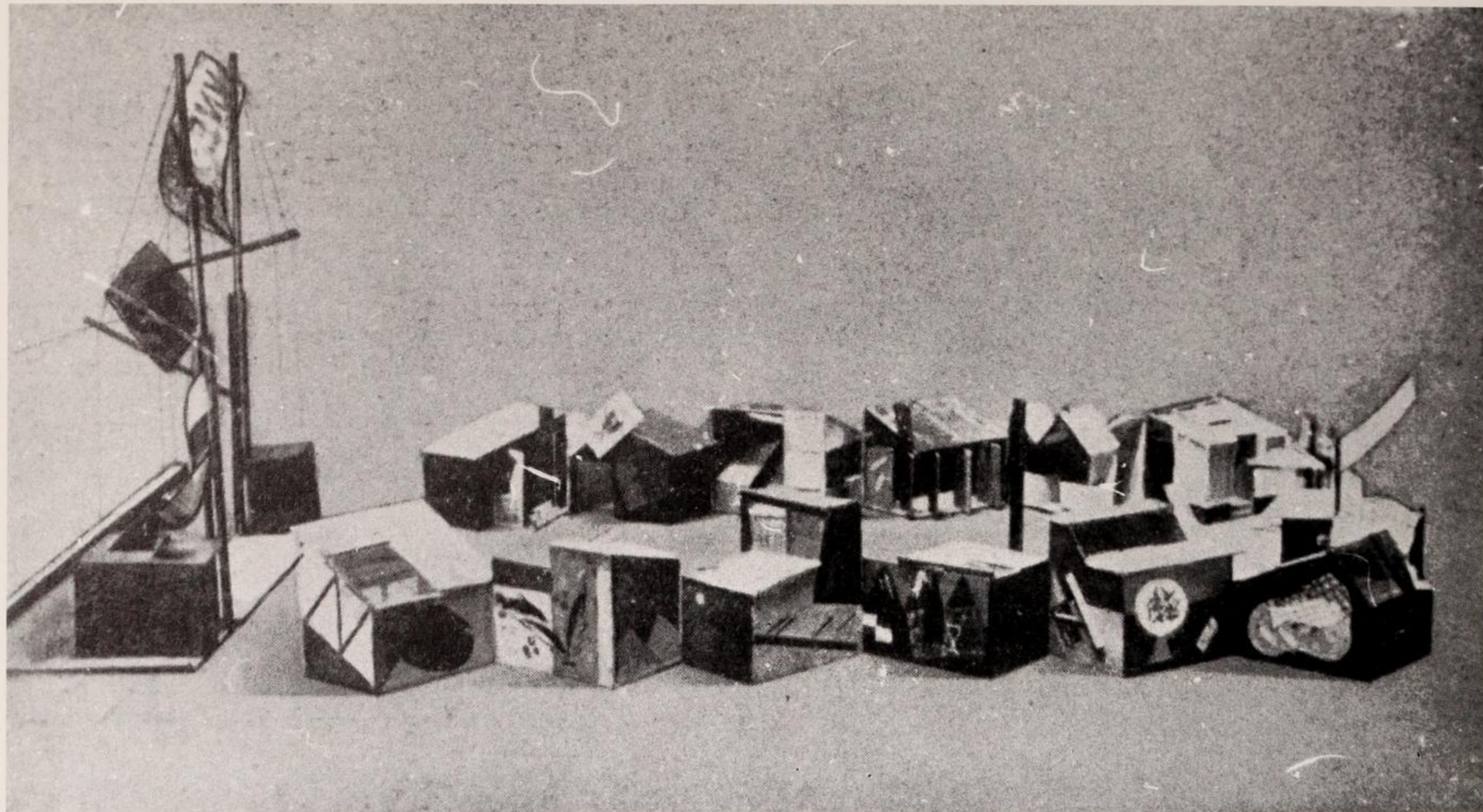


fig. 6
Anton Lavinskii
City on Springs: Construction for a Radio Tower, 1921.



nos. 103–106), and 1932, when Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg decorated the Arbat in Moscow.

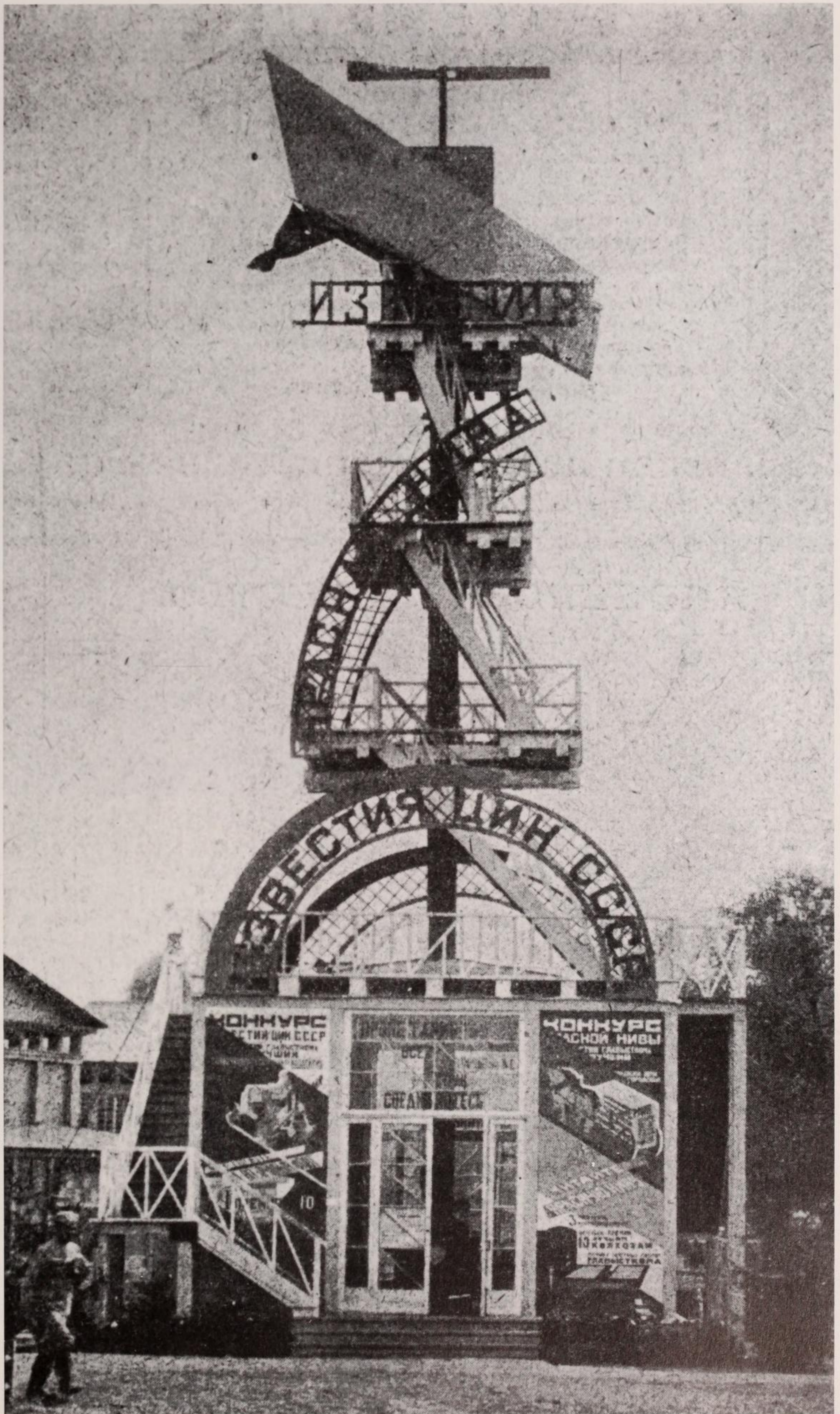
Artists such as Tatlin and Naum Gabo introduced dynamic elements into architecture, and long before architects they—along with Konstantin Medunetskii, the Stenberg brothers, Ekster, Lavinskii, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and others—attempted to integrate modern technical and constructive elements (such as towers and antennae) into architectural compositions. Professional architects had already adopted these forms by the advent of the competition for the Palace of Labor in 1922–23 (see the projects by the Vesnins, Kuznetsov and Toropov, and Il'ia Golosov, among others) and they would remain a favorite motif of the Vesnins, Leonidov, and Iakov Chernikhov.

(One has to wonder why the works of such other nonarchitects as the brilliant engineers Vladimir Shukhov [creator in 1894 of an open-work tower shaped as a hyperboloid rotation and designer of the Shabolovka Street radio tower in Moscow (1919–22)] and Tat'iana Makarova [whose hyperbolic paraboloid roofing was patented in 1928] went virtually unnoticed by the architecture of the 1920s.³² Perhaps it was because there was no artist to serve as intermediary between engineer and architect?)

Artists' interest in such individual aspects of architecture as form and color led them logically to the next step: direct participation in architectural planning. Most of these projects (especially at first) involved "minor architectural forms": speaker's rostrums (by Il'ia Chashnik and Nikolai Suetin, 1920 and thereafter, plate nos. 140–141, 147), kiosks (by Lavinskii, Gan, and Grigorii Miller), Klut'sis's agitprop constructions (1922, plate nos. 109–113), Rodchenko's reading room for a workers' club (1925), Aleksei Babichev's mobile agitprop theater (1922), the series of projects for architectural constructions displayed by the members of the First Working Organization of Artists at the *Pervaia diskussionnaia vystavka ob "edinenii aktivnogo revoliutsionnogo iskusstva* (First Discussional Exhibition of Associations of Active Revolutionary Art, Moscow, 1924), monuments, furnishings, exhibition pavilions (designed by Ekster [1923, fig. no. 8], Klut'sis [1923], Rodchenko [1923], and by Shterenberg in collaboration with Medunetskii and Sergei Kostin [1925, fig. no. 7]),³³ and so on.

fig. 7
David Shterenberg, Sergei Kostin, and Konstantin Medunetskii
Model for the Soviet Trade Center, Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, Paris, 1925.

fig. 8
Aleksandra Ekster with Vera Mukhina and B. Gladkov
Pavilion for Izvestiia TsIK, All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, Moscow, 1923.



Nowhere, however, was there a more concentrated exchange between art and architecture than in Zhivskul'ptarkh, a group organized and led by the sculptor Boris Korolev. The leading representative of sculptural Cubism in Soviet Russia, Korolev did not come by this role by chance.

Korolev's Cubism was radical yet entirely unorthodox. The dominant feature of his forms, which appeared to be still in the process of assuming their final shape, was not analyticalness or constructiveness but expressiveness, an internal tension. An early commentator described Korolev as an artist who created sculptural form not by removing the extraneous but by adding parts, "modeling" one to the other.³⁴ The observation is partially warranted: Korolev did follow such a procedure even where it would have seemed ill-suited, for instance, in certain of his Cubist sculptures from wood. This feature of his work perhaps also goes some way toward explaining his interest in architectural form, which is always created from the conjoining of parts. Korolev's enormous works were intended for public spaces, yet they contained forms entirely without analogues in architecture: massive forms, only partially geometrized, either undifferentiated or the result of the simple placement of heterogeneous parts one on top of the other. His works not infrequently had a pear-shaped silhouette, and their vertical axis was inclined rather than straight.

Korolev was simultaneously involved in social and organizational work. After the Revolution, he was the de facto leader of the new Union of Sculptors and a member of many commissions. He later joined the Moscow Art Board of Izo Narkompros where, with Tatlin and Zholtovskii, he was part of a "troika" representing painting, architecture, and sculpture (and certainly Korolev's interest in architecture must have been fueled by this association with Tatlin and Zholtovskii).³⁵ He organized and headed Izo Narkompros's Subsection on Artistic Labor, was active in the reorganization of art education, and was likely the instigator and one of the chief authors of a number of documents and undertakings for the 1918 Plan for Monumental Propaganda. It was Korolev who proposed the most "Formalist" monuments, one of which—a monument to Mikhail Bakunin—was erected on a square adjoining the State Free Art Workshops. It was never, however, unveiled. Rather, in February 1920 it was destroyed as a consequence of the persistent opposition of officials of the Moscow Soviet, who labeled the work "incomprehensible to the people."³⁶

In the spring of 1919, a small group of architects, recent graduates of architecture schools in Petrograd and Moscow and now participants in various arenas of the Plan for Monumental Propaganda, decided to take up architectural planning with Korolev. Nikolai Istselenov, S. Dombrovskii, Ia. Raikh, and A. Rukhliad'ev met with Korolev at the group's first session on May 6, 1919. Nikolai Ladovskii and Vladimir Fidman joined them three days later, and on June 25th so did Krinskii. Dombrovskii and Rukhliad'ev left the group for work-related reasons in August; G. Mapu joined only in late November.

The members of Zhivskul'ptarkh sought a "synthesis of painting, sculpture, and architecture" (in so doing they were part of the larger quest for a "synthesis of the arts") that would provide the basis for a new formal language of "architecture as such." They formulated their task as the "rebirth of the pure significance of the architectural construction" and as a "project for the construction of a building of pure art."³⁷ Their sketches for a Temple of Communion Among Nations (plate nos. 657, 659), communal homes (plate nos. 654–655, 658), and the Soviet of Deputies building did not represent "socially new types of buildings"³⁸ but were occasions for the elaboration of form; they were sketches, in the words of Istselenov, for a "structure freed from the utilitarian character of the latest architecture, a structure in which art would be given a chance



fig. 9
Boris Korolev
Salomé, 1922.

to reveal its synthetic oneness.”

(Inasmuch as Korolev was a sculptor by profession, the group was originally called *Sinskul'ptarkh* [the Synthesis of Sculpture and Architecture Commission] and defined its task as the “elaboration of principles and concrete professional questions of the linkage of sculpture and architecture as arts operating with form and space.” Yet the group’s members also stated that “the present . . . puts forward the question of a synthesis of the arts of spatial rhythm: painting, sculpture, and architecture.” Assimilation of the formal experience of vanguard painting [which had earlier been a stimulus to vanguard sculpture, in particular to the “painterly reliefs” and other works of Russian “sculpto-painting” in the second half of the 1910s] did not require any firsthand knowledge of painting.)

Ladovskii’s sketches, both as a whole and in their specific details, most fully met the aims of *Zhivskul'ptarkh*; they were also the most interesting and were distinguished by a particular daring and originality. It was in *Zhivskul'ptarkh*, moreover, that Ladovskii began to work out new pedagogical methods. In *Vkhutemas*’s Basic Division, he promoted the teaching, to students of all specializations, of the formal bases of contemporary art. And the research laboratory he created at the school had its origins in a proposal advanced jointly with Korolev in *Zhivskul'ptarkh*.

The experimental *Zhivskul'ptarkh* projects of Krinskii and Fidman (plate nos. 660–662) also bore fruit. Whereas Dombrovskii, Rukhliad'ev, and in particular Istselenov (plate no. 663), though they shared the general aims of the group, probably found the direction taken by Korolev rather less congenial. Raikh was first and foremost an architect on the theoretical plane, while Mapu represented a type of architect—active but imitative—characteristic of the periphery of the left avant-garde.

Two painters—Rodchenko and Aleksandr Shevchenko—had joined *Zhivskul'ptarkh* in mid-November 1919 (six and a half months after the group’s formation, and two and a half months before it ceased its activity in early February 1920).³⁹ Their participation should not, however, be regarded as the inauguration of a specific “painting period” in *Zhivskul'ptarkh*’s work, for no changes occurred in the character of the sketches of the group’s architect members. Shevchenko’s sole known *Zhivskul'ptarkh* project merely borrowed from Ladovskii’s idea for a dynamic communal house and endeavored to shine only in its execution. Rodchenko, by contrast, created a large series of architectural fantasies and projects during 1919–20 (plate nos. 652–653).

Zhivskul'ptarkh embodied in concentrated form the path that all of Soviet architecture would soon follow. However, during the 1920s, which witnessed the emergence of a vanguard architecture in the USSR, “nonarchitects” exercised a different sort of influence on architecture. The social standing of architecture was nominally quite high, and it attracted the more or less active interest of many Party and government figures. At the close of the decade and the beginning of the 1930s, the formal achievements of architecture would strike many of these “nonarchitects” as worthless. They would have no regrets when the direction of Soviet art and architecture was abruptly altered by an order from above.

—Translated from the Russian

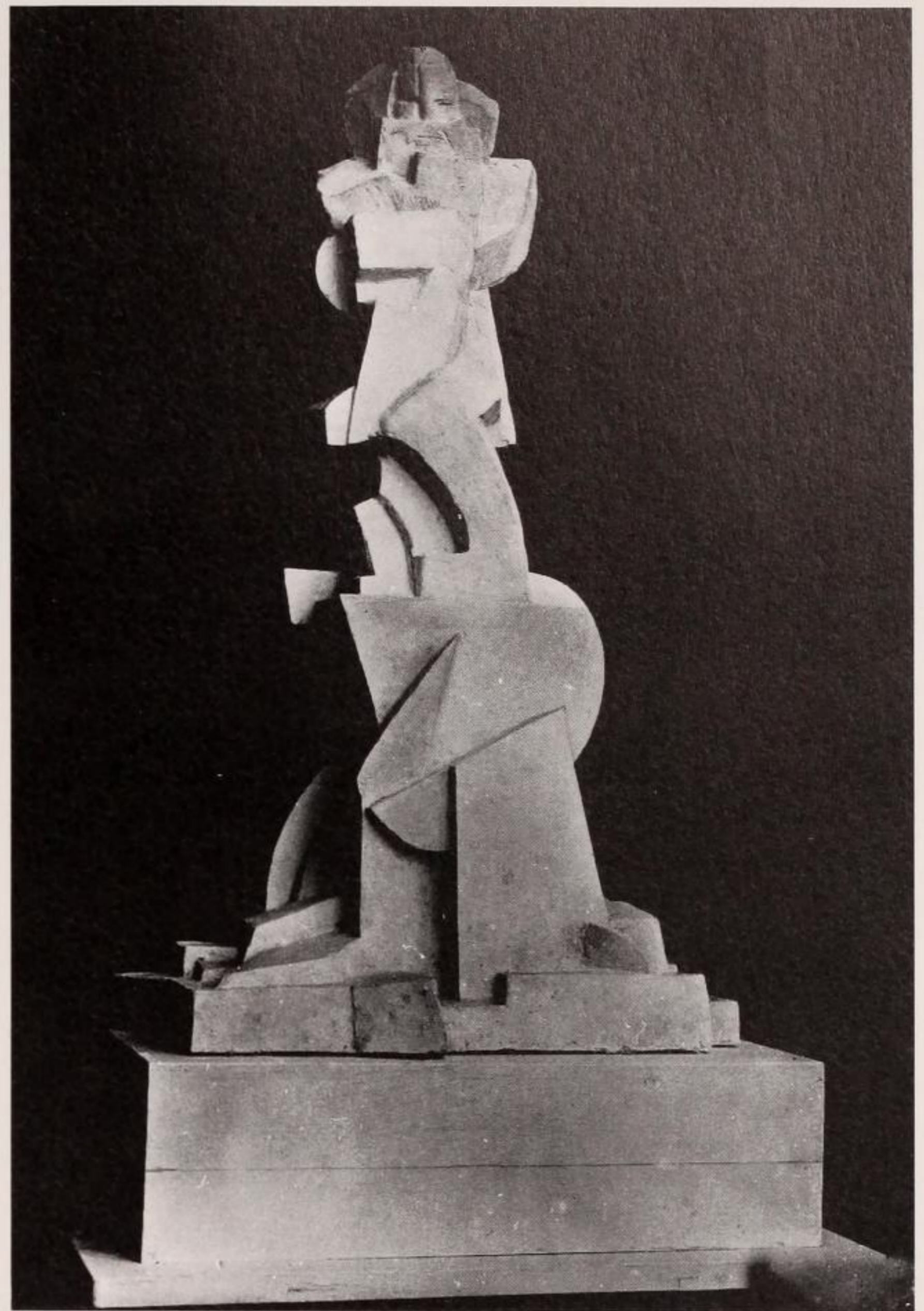


fig. 10
Boris Korolev
Project for a monument to Karl Marx, Moscow, 1919–20.

Notes

1. I. E. Repin, *Pis'ma k khudozhnikam i khudozbestvennym deiateliyam* (Moscow, 1952), p. 192.
2. The first scholarly book on the history of Russian architecture (A. Pavlinov, *Istoriia russkoi arkhitektury* [Moscow, 1894]) is based primarily on the notion that "Russian" architecture ceased to be created after the beginning of the eighteenth century.
3. Many symbolic-romantic compositions depicting the construction of huge monuments or the destruction of monuments of "classical" architecture appear in revolutionary graphic works. These images were meant as signs of social change; they do not contain formal creative ideas and are for the most part imitative. In 1920, one of the leading Neoclassical architects, Ivan Fomin, proposed a project for a monument which would be based on an overturned entablature (of a particular order), and crowned with the drum of a column and crude stone frames inscribed with the slogan "We Destroy, We Finish Building—All Our Strength Lies in Ourselves."
4. Vl. Orlov, *Poet i gorod. Aleksandr Blok i Peterburg* (Leningrad, 1980), p. 148.
5. N. Berdiaev, *Krizis iskusstva* (Moscow, 1918), pp. 41–42.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
7. G. K. Lukomskii, *Sovremennyi Peterburg. Ocherk istorii vozniknoveniia i razvitiia klassicheskogo stroitel'stva 1900–1915 gg.* (Petrograd, 1917), pp. 54–55.
8. See "A. V. Lunacharskii. Neizdannye materialy," *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* 82 (Moscow, 1970), pp. 90–92, 124–125.
9. A. V. Lunacharskii, "Sstenarii dlia massovogo deistviia na prazdnike Tret'ego Internatsionala," *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* 80 (Moscow, 1971), pp. 664–66.
10. "A. V. Lunacharskii. Neizdannye materialy," p. 582. The phrase also appears in many other works by Lunacharskii.
11. *Ibid.*
12. A. V. Lunacharskii, "Ob Otdele izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv," *Novyi mir* 9 (1966), pp. 236–39.
13. Isolated pronouncements by Lunacharskii in support of new art, such as "the Architecture Faculty is the crown of Vkhutein" (1928), were related to peripheral factors (his gradual familiarization with the new artistic language, his unmediated aesthetic impressions, his fascination with the young students) and did not change the Commissar of Enlightenment's entrenched attachment to classicizing retrospectivism: "Back to Ostrovskii! Back to the Wanderers!"
14. See, for example, N. Punin, "O pamiatnikakh," *Iskusstvo kommuny*, March 9, 1919; D. Shterenberg, *Obzor deiatel'nosti Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv* (Petrograd, 1920), pp. 93–99 (dated by the author April 1919); *Spravochnik Otdela IZO Narodnogo komissariata po prosveshcheniiu* 1 (Moscow, 1920), pp. 37–45, 50–73 (proceedings of a conference on art education in the summer of 1920); V. Tatlin et al., "Nasha predstoiashchaia rabota," *VIII s'ezd sovetov. Ezhednevnyi biulleten'* 13 (January 1, 1921), p. 11; and B. Arvatov, *Iskusstvo i klassy* (Moscow and Petrograd, 1923), pp. 15–20, 84.
15. N. Punin, "Kvartira No. 5," *Panorama iskusstv* 12 (Moscow, 1989), p. 194.
16. Much about the work on the decoration of the Café Pittoresque remains unclear (including the individual artists and their roles). Iakulov already had experience in decorating and painting artistic cafés, but these were done in an entirely different style (one which characterized the majority of his works) than that of the Pittoresque. His sketch for the design of the stage is a notable exception. (The sketch is in the collection of the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, where it had been labeled an "unidentified theatrical sketch." It was displayed as such in the exhibition *50 let diplomaticheskikh otnoshenii Frantsii i SSSR* [Fifty Years of Diplomatic Relations Between France and the USSR, Moscow, 1975], but during the preparations for the exhibition *Paris–Moscou/Moskva–Parizh*, in which the work was also shown, I identified it as Iakulov's design for the Pittoresque). The innovative aspects of the decorations for the Pittoresque (Iakulov's included) are undoubtedly related to Tatlin's active role in the work of the artistic collective.
17. Shterenberg, *Obzor deiatel'nosti Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv*, pp. 95, 94.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Central State Archive for Literature and Art, Moscow, f. 4340, op. 1, ed. khr. 19, l. 110b–12.
20. *Izvestiia* 46 (February 24, 1924).
21. Central State Archive for Literature and Art, Moscow, f. 4340, op. 1, ed. khr. 6, l. 43.
22. A. Strigalev, "V. E. Tatlin," *God arkhitektury* (Moscow, 1987), p. 465.
23. *Vystavka rabot zaslužennogo deiatelia iskusstv V. E. Tatlin* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1932), p. 5.
24. Konstantin Mel'nikov, conversation with author.
25. Malevich's own dates of 1913 for the origin of Suprematism (in his set designs for *Pobeda nad solntsem* [Victory over the Sun]) and of 1913, 1915, 1916 for that of volumetric Suprematism (*Formula suprematizma* [Formula of Suprematism] and *Prostranstvennyi suprematizm* [Spatial Suprematism]), reproduced in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878–1935* [Leningrad, Moscow, and Amsterdam, 1988, nos. 172–173) cannot be accepted. A summary view of the evidence suggests that Malevich's text (dated December 15, 1920) probably fixes with reasonable accuracy the beginning of the Suprematists' commitment to working on volumetric and architectural tasks: "Suprematism in its historical development had three stages: black, colored, and white. All periods were passed through under the conditional signs of planes; as it was expressing the plans of future volumetric bodies and truly at the present moment, Suprematism is developing in the spatial time of a new architectural construction." K. Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920), pp. 2–3.
26. K. Malevich, "Mir miasa i kosti ushel," *Anarkhiia* 83 (June 12, 1918), and "Arkhitektura kak poshchechina zhelezo-betonu," *Iskusstvo kommuny* 1 (December 7, 1918). Malevich considered the Neo-Russian style of the Kazan' Railway Station (1912–26, designed by Aleksei Shchusev), which was then under construction, a blatant example of architectural archaism. For Tatlin, the style moderne Iaroslavl' Railway Station (1902–04, designed by Fedor Shekhtel'), which stood on the same Moscow square, was an example of architectural forms that had become "ludicrous" only a few years after construction.
27. K. Malevich, "O poezii," *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo* 1 (1919), p. 34.
28. K. Malevich, "Zametki o arkhitekture," reproduced in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878–1935*, p. 116.

29. K. Malevich, "Vvedenie v teoriu pribavochnogo elementa," quoted from Kazimir Malevics, *S targynelkili vilag* (Budapest, 1986), pp. 139–140.

30. Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka*, pp. 2–3.

31. See, for example, A. Gan, "Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche," *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* 3 (1927), pp. 104, 106.

32. Several American publications (see, for example, K. P. Zygas, "Tatlin's Tower Reconsidered," *Architectural Association Quarterly* 8, no. 2 [1976], pp. 15–27) have suggested that the open-work hyperboloid defense towers on American warships (which Tatlin could have seen while he worked as a sailor on the Mediterranean Sea) were one source for the *Monument to the Third International*. Moreover, it has not yet been recognized that these towers were based on Shukhov's patent and that Tatlin undoubtedly had seen variants of Shukhov's towers (the lighthouses near Odessa and Kherson, the water towers on many railway stations and enterprises, the gun turrets of the battleship *Imperator Pavel I* [Emperor Paul I] in the St. Petersburg harbor) on several occasions. The prevalence in Russia of this constructive form, invented by Shukhov, only underscores the strangeness of Soviet architects' failure to employ it. It is interesting that even the memoirs of an eyewitness record that the Russian public remembered the towers of American ships, which were one of the subjects of early documentaries (see V. Kataev, *Almaznyi moi venets* [Moscow, 1990], p. 130).

33. Shterenberg, Medunetskii, and Kostin bravely competed against Mel'nikov to design the Soviet Trade Center for the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*. For Mel'nikov's reaction, see his *Arkhitektura moei zhizni*, comp. A. Strigalev and I. Kokkinaki (Moscow, 1985), pp. 76.

34. A. A. Sidorov, *Boris Danilovich Korolev* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1934), p. 17.

35. B. D. Korolev, *Iz literaturnogo naslediiia. Perepiska. Sovremenniki o skul'ptore* (Moscow, 1989), p. 117.

36. Korolev was probably the first to make a complete break in his work for reasons of "ideology and form." The pressure on Korolev over the course of several years was so intense that, in 1923, he completely abandoned his "Formalist experiments." Yet he was blackmailed for his "Formalist past" throughout his life.

37. Citations here and below from the documents of Zhivskul'ptarkh are drawn from the B. D. Korolev files, Manuscript Division, State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

38. S. Khan-Magomedov, "Zhivskul'ptarkh," *DI SSSR* 5 (1978), pp. 32, 33.

39. Krinskii invited Rodchenko to join Zhivskul'ptarkh after the November 8, 1919, concluding meeting of the competition for the kiosk project (at which they both received awards), and Rodchenko invited Shevchenko, with whom he had worked on exhibition-related projects. Shevchenko, in turn, immediately proposed that Tatlin, who was then living in Petrograd, also be invited.

The Great Utopia

*The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde,
1915–1932*

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

State Tret'iakov Gallery

State Russian Museum

Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

G U G G E N H E I M M U S E U M

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ISBN: 0-89207-095-1

Published by the Guggenheim Museum
1071 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10128

Distributed by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.
300 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10010

Printed in Japan by Toppan Printing Co., Inc.

Jacket:

Kazimir Malevich
*Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman
in Two Dimensions)*, 1915
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Photo credits: Michael Agee, Jorg P. Anders,
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June 5-August 23, 1992

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
September 25-December 15, 1992

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