

# SOVIET ARCHITECTURE AND THE WEST: THE DISCOVERY AND ASSIMILATION OF WESTERN NARRATIVES AND PRACTICES IN SOVIET ARCHITECTURE IN THE 1950s–1960s. *Summary*

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This article deals with a watershed moment in the history of postwar Soviet architecture—Nikita Khrushchev’s 1954–1955 reform of architecture and construction. This study presents a less well-known but still important outcome of this reform: the radical growth in awareness of and connections with Western architecture among Soviet architects. Western technologies and (especially French) achievements in standardized housing construction were welcomed in the Soviet Union, as was modernist architecture, which had proliferated in Europe and the United States after World War II. This article concentrates on the first steps taken by Soviet architects towards becoming full-fledged members of the international architectural community.

During Khrushchev’s Thaw, there was an increase in the flow of information, access to foreign architectural publications, imitations of Western projects, as well as tourist groups and international delegations traveling abroad. This article gives an overview of the process of the opening and “westernization” of Soviet architecture during the Thaw, setting out an agenda for further in-depth studies of Soviet-Western architectural relations and influences. In the final section of the article, I hypothesize about the role, outcome, and side effects of this Western infiltration of the Soviet architectural sphere.

From the mid-1950s until the early 1960s, Western architecture was a novelty inspiring interest and excitement in the Soviet Union. By the mid-1960s, Western-style architecture was fully integrated into the everyday repertoires of Soviet architects. Consequently, this article deals with 1955–1965, the first post-Stalin decade, seeking to understand the moment of change in architectural practices, trends, and attitudes. Unfortunately, attitudes and moods are not easy to trace from the archives, and for this reason I also draw on architects’ memoirs and interviews. Ego-documents and oral evidence are supported by archival materials, mostly from the collections of the Russian Archive of Literature and Arts in Moscow (RGALI).

Not only architecture but other spheres of culture and social life experienced radical changes during the Thaw. As Ilya Ehrenburg’s weather metaphor suggests, the late 1950s brought to Soviet society the liberalization of culture, the shock of

Khrushchev's "secret speech," pride in Sputnik, the birth of Soviet consumerism, and the teasing rhythms of Western jazz and rock and roll. Connections with the West in most spheres of Soviet life (official as well as informal) grew exponentially, though in some cultural fields they remained hidden and suppressed almost until perestroika. The outcomes of these connections, or cultural transfers to use Michel Espagne and Michaël Werner's terminology, are of interest for today's Soviet scholars. Regrettably, architectural transfers between the West and the USSR after 1953 are still understudied, although architectural historians such as Anna Bronovitskaia and Fabien Bellat have published stimulating research on the issue.

This article contains four sections. The opening section gives the general context of the Khrushchev reforms of architecture and construction. The second section deals with the changes to central architectural schools and with the increased flow of information about Western architecture that became available in the Soviet Union. The third section presents and discusses data on foreign trips of Soviet architects. In the fourth and final section I present hypotheses and meditations on the role of the West in Soviet architecture during the post-Stalin era.

The reform of architecture and construction was one of the first launched by Nikita Khrushchev after he came to power. In 1954, during the All-Union Conference of Architects and Builders, the new leader harshly and unexpectedly attacked Stalinist architecture, accusing it of being too expensive and pompous. This move was supported (or perhaps initiated—the inner machinery of this process is still unstudied) by a letter from Georgii Gradov, an architect from Moscow. In this letter, sent to the Communist Party's Central Committee, Gradov attacked Stalinist architecture and underlined the importance of cheap mass housing. Thus, the dethronement of Stalinist architecture was simultaneously initiated from above and supported by inner tensions in the Soviet architectural milieu. One year later, on November 5, 1955, the decree *Against Excesses in Design and Construction* appeared. It confirmed the new direction and caused even more confusion among architects.

Together with the promotion of mass housing and steps towards Western architectural styles, the Khrushchev reform of architecture and construction had another outcome, more unfortunate for architects. With the ascendancy of standardized constructions, the discourse of economy, and a pragmatic approach toward building, architecture lost its exceptional status. Even before *khrushchevki* (low-cost, low-rise apartment buildings) became a reality, symbolic discrimination was taking place: the magazine *Architecture in the USSR* became *Architecture and Construction in the USSR*, and the Academy of Architecture was renamed the Academy of Construction and Architecture until its closure in 1963. It seems that, for the government at least, architecture at some point merged with and was absorbed by construction. On the one hand, this disrupted the architectural sphere rather badly, causing nuisances and troubles for architects; on the other hand, this very approach—taking architecture out of the cultural realm—opened wide possibilities for engagement with the West. The specifics of the late Soviet era's approach to Western influences were twofold: they were welcomed and promoted in scientific and technological spheres but neglected, hidden, or prohibited in many cultural

fields. Thus, architecture's transition towards the technical field of construction had unexpected benefits.

It is still unclear why it was the Western (mostly American) mainstream modernist style that was adopted by Soviet architecture after the mid-1950s. It must be noted that both Stalinist neoclassicism and early Soviet constructivism did not disappear, but the survival of the former and the revival of the latter (during the 1960s) were nuanced and less visible processes. Selim Khan-Magomedov, a well-known specialist in Russian avant-garde architecture, insists that Stalinist architectural elites prevented the old constructivists from returning to the profession and developing further their ideas. However, the opinion of Feliks Novikov, who was a young architect during that era, seems more realistic. Novikov points out that going back to constructivism was unrealistic because of the time gap and the development of technologies that had happened since the constructivist period. For him, it was "natural" to aspire to being modern. Indeed, the struggle to be modern—and to keep pace with the capitalist world—was typical of the Khrushchev era.

The confusion that occurred in the central architectural schools seems to be a good indicator of what was going on in the late 1950s. In their memoirs, many alumni of the Moscow Architectural Institute (MAI) point out that their professors did not know how or what to teach and that many of the old Stalinist specialists lost their credentials in the eyes of the students. However, Feliks Novikov underlines that not all the youngsters accepted and welcomed these novelties in the beginning. Another clear sign of the turn to the West was the liberalization of access to Western magazines and books in university libraries. Before the mid-1950s the libraries of both MAI and the Academy of Fine Arts in Leningrad received foreign literature and periodicals, but access to them was limited. Between the late 1950s and mid-1960s these materials became more easily accessible.

The issue of access to information about Western architecture leads to the question of language. According to the application forms of architects going abroad in the 1960s, very few of them had mastered foreign languages. In an interview, the Moscow-based architect Evgenii Ass (who graduated from MAI in 1970) confirmed this point, saying that few of his generation spoke English. Hence, Soviet architects likely looked through the magazines, paying attention to pictures and drawings, but not actually reading them. This way, Soviet architects might have been familiar with the forms of contemporary Western architecture but did not know the discourses and discussions around these forms.

For about a decade starting in 1961, an enterprise was launched that could partly solve this problem: a few foreign magazines on architecture and construction were translated and published in the Soviet Union. The most important and famous among them was the French *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (*Architecture today*, henceforth *AA*). However, the quality of the publication was harshly criticized by architects. In 1965, Anatolii Strigalev, an architectural historian working at the Research Institute of History and Theory of Architecture, complained in his review of the *AA*'s Russian edition that the content of the magazine was severely censored and remade by the Russian editors. For example, objects of abstract art were deleted from the pictures by

retouching, which, according to Strigalev, was a meaningless and unacceptable intervention. He also pointed out that due to these arbitrary changes it was impossible to use the Russian translation of *AA* magazine for research needs.

The Thaw opened not only more opportunities to access information about the West within the country but also occasions to travel abroad. During the Stalin era the number of architects going abroad was very limited, especially during the anti-imperialist and antic cosmopolitanist campaigns of the late Stalin years.

After the late 1950s Soviet architects had many possibilities to go abroad: business trips, bilateral exchanges, delegations to congresses and conferences, and, in a new development, tourist trips. My research draws on numbers concerning the Union of Soviet Architects and its members, hence the entire range of travel options may not be covered. For instance, young architects could go abroad through Komsomol's travel agency Sputnik, and a certain number of architects went on foreign trips through the State Committee on Construction (Gosstroï), the State Committee on Civil Construction and Architecture (Gosgrazhdanstroï), different ministries, and so forth. However, at least for Gosstroï and Gosgrazhdanstroï it is clear from the archives that the number of architects they sent abroad did not exceed a dozen per year.

Going back to the Union of Soviet Architects, it must be noted that the statistics held in its archive are scarce and controversial, but this is a normal feature of Soviet statistics in general. Nevertheless, they give an idea of the number of its members going abroad. Thus in 1964 from the Union of Soviet Architects 257 tourists were supposed to go to capitalist countries and 180 to socialist countries, 437 in total. From the Moscow section of the Union of Architects, in 1961–1967 from 125 to 285 architects went to foreign trips each year, 1,429 in total. The number of the Union of Soviet Architects' members going abroad on official business trips was even smaller: 41 in 1967, 28 in 1969, and 30 in 1970. At the same time, it seems that some architects, especially those belonging to the higher stratum of the profession, went abroad on regular basis. It also seems that the greater part of these travelers were from the center of the country. The latter statement is true especially of delegates to international organizations and congresses of which the Soviet Union was a member (the International Union of Architects, housing commissions of the United Nations, UNESCO, and so on).

Even though these numbers are not huge, they present a striking contrast with the late Stalin era, when the phenomenon of foreign tourism simply did not exist. However, the organization of these trips and the trips themselves were still deeply controlled. Architects going abroad had to submit a substantial dossier to be allowed to leave the country, and during their travel they were saddled not only with their direct duties but also with the task of representing their country as a bastion of flourishing socialism. After the trips, the leaders of the groups were supposed to submit a report on their stay, but, unfortunately for historians, most of them neglected this task. A note of complaint from the archive of the Moscow section of the Union of Architects confirms that the absence of reports was a problem at the time and is not simply a gap in the archival collection.

Soviet architecture's opening towards the West influenced it in several ways. Obviously, the new architectural style, similar to Western postwar modernism, was the first and most evident outcome. Furthermore, the new knowledge and experience gave Soviet architects of the 1960s a powerful push towards experimental design and futurist projects, the best known of which are the New Element of Settlement (NER) and the House of the New Way of Life by Natan Osterman. The academic sphere of history and theory of architecture was also refreshed and invigorated under the influence of Western approaches. However, the study of Western architectural theory did not influence the sphere of theory of Soviet architecture, remaining a field apart—a space of refuge from the reality of building-construction plants and socialist realism in architecture.

All in all, since the mid-1950s Soviet architecture's attitude towards the West changed dramatically. A large share of Soviet architects had access to information on foreign architecture, and some of them, mostly from the higher stratum of the profession, traveled widely and supported connections with Western colleagues, taking part in international conferences and delegations. All of these things had been impossible during the Stalin era. However, even after being included in the international architectural community, Soviet architecture stayed on its periphery and, by the early 1970s, disillusioned those Western colleagues who had been enthusiastic about it during the 1960s.