

Editors' Introduction

At the time of the writing of this editors' introduction, a new president had been sworn in for the United States, an event that was followed the next day by a Women's March in Washington, D.C., to protest the administration's policies. In the U.S., the present is beset with uncertainty and unease, and we have every indication the future will be similarly fractious and fraught with conflict.

Without a doubt, the rise of right-wing populisms across the globe has occurred in a context of recurring crises of capitalism, of the marginalization of peoples along class, gender, national, and ethnic lines, and of the weaknesses of the Left to come up with solid alternatives.

In these moments pulsating with change, as power relations are being reorganized, we also witness attempts to reorganize social space. One of the most telling and sharpest reminders of capital's insatiable hunger for land has been brought into sharp relief by protests organized by indigenous movements in North America, most recently at Standing Rock. The former presidential decision to stop the building of a pipeline has now been reversed by a new presidential executive order, giving the impression that the contestation of space may take sharp and pernicious forms in the near future.

At a time such as this one, the constant need to reflect on historical and present forms of organizing space, along with the intimate and complex connections of these forms with social transformation, becomes more acute.

The contents of the first issue of volume 29 of *Rethinking Marxism* are reflections on the relation between space and society. They all explore how the imaginations of particular historical eras take shape in space. In that spirit, we start the volume with a symposium, "Landscapes of Socialism: Romantic Alternatives to Soviet Enlightenment," edited by Serguei A. Oushakine, on architecture, art, and landscape design in former socialist countries, and exploring the relation between these historical forms and transformations in society.

In "*Sotzromantizm* and Its Theaters of Life," Serguei A. Oushakine contextualizes the contributions to the symposium. He starts his narrative with a reference to a visionary of Soviet architecture, to El Lissitzky's manifesto, wherein the leading constructivist set out the spatial imagination of suprematism, which would shape the new world of socialism. In this utterly radical imagining, the reshaping of the world would take place through the "rhythmic" dissection of space and time into meaningfully organized units, which would move together with the

transformation of the tools of representation, resulting in what Lissitzky named a “new theater of life.” Oushakine argues that the utopian radicalism of the constructivists remained—despite the industrialization embarked on in 1928—with leading architects such as Moisei Ginzburg and Mikhail Barshch designing Moscow as a “green city” that would be transformed into a huge park; this would be realized in an economical way with a view to solving the problems of the big city, such as dense traffic.

The new imagination represented both a desire for a radical break with and erasure of the past and also a refusal to inherit. The contributions to the symposium, argues Oushakine, develop more critical and complex stories of this “historical nihilism” of Soviet modernity. Each points to how this original refusal to claim history gave way to historicizing and historicist perspectives. These disparate ways of alluding to the past are aggregated under the name of *Sotzromantizm*, in which the spatial vision of early Soviet modernity synthesized with influences of the past, a seminal reference being made by Anna Elistratova in 1957 when the author questioned Socialist realism, pointing at the romantic traditions as possible sources of inspiration. *Sotzromantizm*, argues Oushakine, flowed in the works of architects, artists, and writers in diverse forms, creating a new “politico-poetical theater of life” and along the way providing alternatives to the rationalism of Soviet Enlightenment.

The relation between the transformation of power relations and special organization as the arena in which power struggles are fought out is a theme brought to life in the first essay of the symposium. Fabien Bellat, in “An Uneasy Metamorphosis: The Afterlife of Constructivism in Stalinist Gardens,” depicts in historical detail how several landscape projects became essential “tools” in the creation of the new Soviet Man. Bellat traces how, at a time when Stalinist neo-academism was dominating the prevalent aesthetic imagination and shaping urban policies, marginalized constructivist architects were designing parks according to their imagination of socialism, one of the rare forms of expression they were allowed. Architects such as Ginzburg, Melnikov, Vlasov, and Korjev used a combination of modern principles along with a “subtle questioning of traditional forms,” thus making their mark in Soviet architectural legacy. Bellat argues that, with their unique organization of space, the parks became a “playground” for the new Soviet person, thus changing the meaning of places and giving the constructivists a chance to alter urban spaces after their own imaginations of socialism.

Often, different perceptions of the “past” became a part of the “new” social imagination, which informed the spatial reorganization under socialism. Juliana Maxim, in “Building the Collective: Theories of the Archaic in Socialist Modernism, Romania circa 1958,” writes about the process in which the concept of primitive communism and of unalienated labor, both of which are central to early Marxism, went through a revival in postwar Romania, in particular in the context of architecture. She examines how a Marxian model of precapitalist society, rooted in community, cooperation, and a craft-based productive structure,

found life in the urban and architectural forms of the socialist experience of the country. While looking for “a synthesis between a peasant worldview” in a country that was largely agricultural and “the workings of the modern socialist state,” Maxim argues—through the examples of sites such as the Romanian Village Museum in Bucharest—that a “retrospective vision” of an archaic commune had taken hold of Romanian intellectuals; this is especially seen in the work of the anthropologist Henri H. Stahl, whose ethnographic work on the Romanian countryside, in which he argued that the earlier forms of agrarian society in Romania were communal, was immensely influential, and it is also seen in new forms of urban collectivities, which referenced these earlier imagined social forms. Maxim shows that, quite in contrast with the common wisdom that Socialism produced tedious and monotonous environments, the architectural types of Socialism, as in the case of Romania, in fact reflected a rich theory of form and practice, forming connections with a past imagined to be based on community while at the same time addressing Socialism’s concern for equality and shared experience across classes.

Just as Maxim sees references to a perceived communal agrarian past in the building of the urban environment of Romania, the next contribution looks at a similar process of historicizing in reference to the early-twentieth-century Soviet avant-garde in the context of Soviet Estonia. Mari Laanemets’s contribution, entitled “In Search of a Humane Environment: Environment, Identity, and Design in the 1960–70s,” explores the new approaches to architecture that emerged after Stalin’s death during the Khrushchev Thaw. In a speech at the Second National Congress of Builders in December 1954, Khrushchev promised to set society back on a Leninist course, and he encouraged builders to utilize industrial methods in construction, with modular buildings, and to renounce the embellishments and decor common under Stalin. In Soviet Estonia, this change presented an opportunity for designers and artists to rethink the relationship of the individual and the built environment. As Laanemets explains, this change in focus precipitated a return to the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s and to the humanism in Marx’s early writings as the basis to reenvision and rebuild Communist society. Artists, architects, and designers theorized notions of integral living environments that facilitated education, agency, and empowerment. This change in vision, Laanemets explains, demonstrates that the principles of humanism cannot be achieved merely through decoration but require opportunities for openness and active participation.

The rethinking of the relation between the new society and organized space went through torturous and meandering paths in all of the former Socialist countries. In the former German Democratic Republic, the oppressiveness and inadequacies of Socialist realism were fought through references to nineteenth-century romantic traditions. In “Subversive Landscapes: The Symbolic Representation of Socialist Landscapes in the Visual Arts of the German Democratic Republic,” Oliver Sukrow analyzes the incorporation of the romantic traditions

of the nineteenth century into the socialist culture of the GDR, focusing on the works of the landscape painter Wolfgang Mattheuer, whose influences include the philosophical work of Lothar Kühne as well as the style of the romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich. Sukrow traces the transformation of the attitude of Marxist intellectuals toward romanticism from one of condemnation to that of an “autonomous form of historical imagination” that critically engages with real Socialism. The author explores this process through the work of Mattheuer, conceived within the framework of *Sotzromantizm* as an element of public discourse and not merely an end in itself, and thus also supporting the view that the analysis of symbolic representation has to be done within its own historical time and place.

In exactly such a historical contextualization, as with all the contributions to this issue, the next essay seeks to understand how the full process of building and the use of particular building materials reflected a certain romantic nationalist imagination under socialism in North Russia. In “‘A Wonderful Song of Wood’: Heritage Architecture and the Search for Historical Authenticity in North Russia,” Alexey Golubev examines the post–World War II architectural preservation movement in North Russia that treated local vernacular architecture as a key to understanding authentic national history. Early Soviet Marxist architects and urban planners of the 1920s and 1930s, Golubev explains, aspired to transform urban space in ways that would facilitate the emergence of new social relations, and they sought to objectify their understanding of modernity with the use of materials such as concrete, iron, glass, and plastic. As nationalist interpretations of Soviet history emerged in the 1930s and intensified during World War II, architectural preservationists sought to collect, preserve, and display the historical use of wood as a construction material in North Russian village architecture of the late eighteenth century. This movement was partially influenced by romantic nationalist forms of historical imagination, and given its significance, Golubev argues that wood should be added to the register of materials that were instrumental in the objectification of socialism.

The romantic imagination of a past—in this case an “imperial” one—in Soviet Belarus is the theme of the final essay in the symposium. In “‘The Land under the White Wings’: The Romantic Landscaping of Socialist Belarus,” Elena Gapova examines the ways in which intellectuals and academics in the 1960s began to rediscover and reimagine the “native lands” of the Belarusian countryside. Gapova’s title draws the metaphor “the land under the white wings” from the work of Belarusian romantic writer Uladzimir Karatkevich, who contributed to the romantic shift in reimagining native lands. As Gapova explains, Russian imperial ethnography portrayed the Belarusian countryside as a space with no history, characterized by wild nature, swamps, bogs, wetlands, poor soils, and misery. In the context of post–World War II industrialization and urbanization, Karatkevich and other writers began to question and reimagine the Belarusian landscape, recovering the lost history of abandoned churches, manors,

architectural ruins, and castles, which physically symbolized the class struggle of the landed aristocracy. The romantic landscaping of Belarus provided a means to reinterpret the past, and by the mid-1960s this effort became legitimized with the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Historical Sites in both the Russian Federation and Belarus. With governmental funding for renovation, some historical sites and national landmarks, Gapova writes, became tourist spaces with music festivals, opera performances, and medieval reenactments, which transformed the space yet left its history still incomplete.

As integral parts of space, objects within a space also carry symbolic importance. The Art/iculations piece in this issue explores the symbolic meaning of a monument. In his essay "Against the Wall: Ideology and Form in Mies van der Rohe's Monument to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht," Michael Chapman examines Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's monument. In 1926, Mies designed and the German Communist Party constructed a "proletarian" brick monument in the Friedrichsfelde cemetery in Berlin to commemorate the ill-fated Spartacist uprising of 1919, during which the police murdered Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The monument itself consisted of an elongated brick wall (twelve meters long, four meters deep, and six meters high) that included a podium and stage for political rallies. It became a sight of mass demonstrations in Berlin until the Nazis destroyed it in 1935. For Chapman, Mies's monument was not typically revolutionary and was idiosyncratic in that it contravened some of the legacies of architectural modernism while also uniting the trajectories of modernism, the avant-garde, and the radical Left. Chapman examines the ways in which the monument reflects the values of Mies as well as the values of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

As all the contributions to this volume attest, space, built or nonbuilt, is a scene of social struggles. The issue's Remarx piece reflects on how space can be reinvented in a collective imagination in the twenty-first century based on lived experiences. In "Reinventing Political Economy: Squat's the Story," Darragh Power, with Michael Phoenix, reflect on the experience of squatting, discussing specifically the case of the Grangegorman Community Collective in Dublin. Also known as Squat City, the community was recently dispossessed, thus joining a long list of similar grassroots projects that have been destroyed. For Power, Grangegorman represented an alternative form of living—a collective one—in a city of thousands of vacant dwellings coexisting with extortionate rents. The squat was not only a place of free accommodation to residents of diverse backgrounds ranging from students to single mothers but was also a real space of living together, with collective projects such as a common garden, and of creativity involving art projects, thus providing an alternative to private property and isolated and alienating living arrangements. In consumer- and consumption-oriented capitalist societies where living spaces prioritize profit making above all else, collective arrangements such as Squat City, as captured by the eloquent expression of one of its residents, are "full of tomorrow." Power concludes his essay with a set of reflections on the

experience of anticapitalist collective projects and argues that these projects need to address the issue of consolidation of power and to imagine how this consolidation must be institutionalized, as movements that “retreat into pockets of semiautonomous zones” do not offer any real alternative to capitalism.

In the final contribution to this issue, Diana Boros starts her review of Owen Hatherley’s *Landscapes of Communism* on the premise that we—academics and nonacademics alike—rarely acknowledge the impact of our physical environment on our spirit as well as on our sense of “living together.” For Boros, Hatherley’s book sets a welcome precedent by challenging this indifference in a historical analysis of Communist design in the former Soviet bloc. Boros argues that Hatherley, tracing the changes in architectural design, makes the fundamental argument that Soviet architecture represented neither actually existing communism nor what Marx had depicted but was rather an antidemocratic, antisocial, and autocratic vision. Boros concludes by drawing our attention to the significance of the shrinking of public spaces in our cities, thus emphasizing the need for a reorganization of space as a reflection of a rearrangement of power relations in society.

Most of these pieces tell us the story that while certain perspectives may struggle for hegemony, this is never a simple struggle; these efforts always have cracks through which alternatives can seep in and reveal themselves and affect the emerging picture.

The coming days of social convulsions, no doubt, will also be a time of struggles over space and its organization. It falls on us to reflect on our alternatives and pick our sides in these struggles.

—*The Editors*

Sotzromantizm and Its Theaters of Life

Serguei Alex Oushakine

The introduction offers the notion of Sotzromantizm (socialist romanticism) as a way of framing critical engagements with the actually existing socialism of the 1950s–1980s. Large-scale historicizing projects relied on the romantic re-appropriation of space to generate versions of identity, social communities, spiritual values, and relations to the past that significantly differed from the rationalistic canons of the perfectly planned socialist society. As the introduction argues, Sotzromantizm offers us a ground from which to challenge the emerging dogma that depicts late socialist society as a space where pragmatic cynics coexisted with useful idiots of the regime. Instead, the concept allows us to shift attention to ideas, institutions, spaces, objects, and identities that enabled (rather than prevented) individual and collective involvement with socialism.

Key Words: Sotzromantizm, Soviet Architecture, Constructivism

For the Romantics, the striving for the ideal was motivated not by some abstract demands of duty (as the Classicists would have it) nor was it determined by the consideration of purposiveness or profit (as the Enlightenment thinkers' theory of the rational selfishness would maintain). Rather, it was the organic inability to exist outside the all-embracing thirst for perfection.

—Aron Gurevich, *The Thirst for Perfection*

Less than three years after the Russian revolution, El Lissitzky, a barely known director of a design and architecture workshop at the Vitebsk People's Art School, typed up a manifesto of sorts.¹ Within the next two decades, Lissitzky would significantly shape the visual language of the Russian avant-garde and Soviet official art, but in 1920 he was busily outlining a grandiose vision for the future that was about to arrive. Dispensing with such unnecessary trifles as capitalization (everybody is equal) and punctuation (nobody is separated), his *suprematism in world reconstruction* promised:

we shall give a new face to this globe. we shall reshape it so thoroughly that the sun will no longer recognize its satellite ... in architecture we are on the

1. For more on Lissitzky's work in Vitebsk, a provincial town in Belarus that became a meeting point for key figures of the Russian revolutionary avant-garde, see Shatskikh (2007) and Kantse-dikas and Iargina (2004).

way to a completely new concept ... we left to the old world the idea of the individual house individual barracks individual castle individual church. we have set ourselves the task of creating the town ... the dynamic architecture provides us with the new theater of life and ... the task of architecture—the rhythmic arrangement of space and time—is perfectly and simply fulfilled ... for the new town will not be as chaotically laid out as the modern towns of north and south america but clearly and logically like a beehive. (Lissitzky 1969, 332; capitalization and punctuation in original)

With its desire for the thorough reshaping of the world, for the resolute replacing of individuals with the collectivized “we” and individual structures with rationally constructed towns, this passage could be easily seen as yet another example of the iconic Soviet revolutionary worldview, in which the chaos of the past would yield to the clear, logical system materialized by a beehive. Lissitzky’s parataxic style, with its flattened but rhythmic structures, reveals yet another important feature. The reshaping of the world through “the rhythmic arrangement of space and time” was paralleled by the reshaping of representational tools, resulting in a peculiar metaphor of “the new theater of life”: a stage set for performing plays, which would be written in the process of their own performance.

When reading Lissitzky’s plans for giving “a new face to the globe,” it helps to remember that the year was 1920; the bloody civil war was still going on, and no major architectural projects, let alone the building of whole new towns, were even in sight. The radicalism of his plans for reconstructing the world was tempered by a lack of resources to implement them. This situation would change quickly, though. Unleashed in 1928, the industrialization campaign would dramatically transform the outlook of the Soviet Union. But it would not change the utopian radicalism of the architects. For instance, when in 1930 *Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura* (SA), the flagship journal of Soviet constructivists, published a big selection of essays reviewing the competition for the best architectural rendition of “the principles of the socialist organization of the Green city,” the level of their aspiration and the scale of the envisioned changes were just as grand as in Lissitzky’s manifesto. Moisei Ginzburg and Mikhail Barshch (1930, 22), two leading constructivist architects, insisted in their introductory essay that the transformation of Moscow into a “grandiose park” would be the most “economical way” to get rid of such “evils of the big city” as “housing crisis” or “the moving hell” of traffic jams. Recognizing the radicalism of their proposal—the majority of plants, institutions, and companies were to be “dispersed throughout the Soviet Union”—the architects concluded: “We know that our project of the socialist reconstruction of Moscow would provoke screams from various lovers of the old (*star’evchshiki*), restorers, and eclectics; but we are completely convinced that these radical projects are the only realistic and doable plan that can be economically implemented today and would become unavoidable tomorrow.” “Screams” came from an unexpected corner. Le Corbusier, who was watching the competition in Moscow, on his way

home sent a letter to Ginzburg, in which he sharply criticized the plan to dis-urbanize Moscow. As Le Corbusier (1930, 63) put it, it was precisely the urbanization and the increasing concentration of the city population that provided the key impetus for development: “Mind develops only when human masses become organized in groups. It is a fruit of concentration. Dispersion takes mind away and weakens all the disciplining bonds—both the material and the mental.” The critique did not go unnoticed. In his response, Ginzburg formulated a line of ideas, which can be seen as emblematic for the early socialist approach to organizing urban space. Addressing Le Corbusier directly, Ginzburg wrote:

You are a superb surgeon of the contemporary city ... You plant wonderful gardens on the roofs of multistory buildings, giving people a bit of greenery; you create charming villas, providing their inhabitants with ideal amenities, peace and comfort. And you are doing this because you want to *heal* the city, trying to preserve it as it was originally created by capitalism. Here, in the USSR, we are in a much better condition: we are not tied to the past ... We diagnosed the illness of the modern city. We say: Yes, it is sick; it is interminably sick. But we are not interested in curing it. We prefer to erase it entirely so that we could begin the work of creating new types of human settlements, which would have no internal contradictions. (Ginzburg 1930, 61)

In these early Soviet architectural debates, I want to highlight only one point: their perception of the past as a burden to be abandoned, as a legacy to be forgotten, or as an inheritance that should remain unclaimed. Ginzburg’s plans to disurbanize Moscow were never realized, but this failure did not stop subsequent generations of architects and urban planners to perceive landscape both as a site of major spatio-political transformations and as a screen for no less ambitious socio-political fantasies. Every decade of Soviet socialism would have its own signature project that would build things from scratch. The quick creation of new industrial cities (and labor camps) in the 1930s was gradually replaced by the massive Virgin Lands Campaign, which turned the steppes of Kazakhstan and southern Siberia into grain-producing regions in the 1950s. The campaign was followed by the rapid development of Siberia’s oil and gas deposits in the 1960s and 1970s and the construction of the Baikal-Amur railroad, a Soviet analogue of the Trans-Siberian Railway in the 1970s and 1980s. Producing in each case their own version of “the rhythmic arrangement of space and time,” these state-sponsored projects nonetheless closely followed the basic principle of disassociation from history, which Ginzburg singled out as the key condition of possibility for large-scale alterations of space: erase the past in order to move forward.

A future student of Ginzburg, Nikolai Milutin, a high-ranking Soviet bureaucrat, is famous for commissioning the Narkomfin Building in Moscow.² But he is

2. On the Narkomfin Communal House and its importance for understanding the material culture of socialism, see Buchli (1999, chap. 4).

also remembered as an important person who in a sense operationalized the dream from Lissitzky's manifesto. Milutin's 1930 pioneering study of the socialist city (*sotsgorod*) laid out the basic principles of how to think of space not in terms of individual *buildings* but in terms of separate *towns*. Defending his views, Milutin (1930, 9) offered his own variation of Ginzburg's plea for abandoning history: "We have to resolutely reject our 'historical legacy' as something that is beneath any criticism ... to use as our benchmark an old rotten woodstove or a grandfather's dusty bed would be the greatest crime and an act of sabotage in relation to our own contemporary youth and the generations to come."

With some minor differences, this basic claim—"our 'historical legacy' ... is beneath any criticism"—can be traced across various forms of aesthetic, social, and political practices in the USSR. This historical nihilism of Soviet radical modernity is hardly unexpected, and many studies of the Soviet Union traditionally focus precisely on this. But the essays collected in this volume complicate this familiar story a bit. They offer us a diverse set of examples that nonetheless demonstrate how the original dismissal of *history* very quickly produced its own panoply of large-scale *historicizing* projects and historicist attitudes. Alexei Golubev's (2017) study of practices of the museumification of the "heritage architecture" in the Russian North (initiated by another student of Moisei Ginzburg) is, perhaps, the most striking example of the complex relationship between socialist modernity and its landscapes. Yet other contributions reveal the same fundamental tendency, albeit in a slightly less radical form: architects, museum workers, designers, artists, and writers turned to the past for "models" (Bellat 2017), "prototypes" (Maxim 2017), "modules" (Laanemets 2017), "toolboxes" (Sukrow 2017), and "artifacts" (Gapova 2017), which could be retrofitted, repurposed, replicated, or at least replayed in completely new theaters of life.

It is not that a conservative striving to hold onto the historical was entirely replaced by the original radicalism of the utopian desire for grand transformations in these projects, but as they demonstrate, when it comes to scale or effort, the drive to restore and repurpose often manifested itself through the same persistent unwillingness to be realistic: villages were to be moved (as Maxim and Golubev show), and the nation's historical narrative could be totally reimaged (Gapova).

But there is a significant difference. As these contributors make clear, the *retrospective* orientation of these socialist engagements with space (and time) was also accompanied by a palpable tendency to *integrate* trends and elements that had been seen as mutually incompatible earlier. "Synthesis" seems to be a key word in the contributors' descriptions of these projects.

At least to some extent, the historicist dialogism of these projects might reflect a different stage of Soviet socialism: by the 1960s–70s, Soviet socialism *could* look back on its own legacy, taking this as the homegrown point of a new departure. However, examples from Romania of the 1950s and the GDR of the 1970s suggest that this dialogue with the past could be more than just a sign of socialism's own maturity. The interest in giving *new* faces to the globe in these "newly

socialized countries” was coeval with a similarly strong desire not only to rediscover the globe’s *old* faces but also to keep them together with the new ones.

The contributions to this volume grew out of presentations at two conferences that I organized at Princeton University. In 2013, “Illusions Killed by Life: Afterlives of (Soviet) Constructivism” explored the postwar surge of interest in the legacy of constructivist ideas and practices in design, photography, architecture, and literature of the 1920s and 1930s. In turn, “Romantic Subversions of Soviet Enlightenment: Questioning Socialism’s Reason,” in 2014, drew attention to the visible emergence in the 1950s–70s of representational forms, artistic practices, styles of narration, and modes of inquiry that resembled the key conventions of romanticism, with its profound investment in the archaic, ruinous, brooding, and spontaneous. In both conferences, the language of afterlives and romantic retrospection tried to capture the dual dynamic of socialist development after the Second World War, a dynamic in which utopian futurity uneasily sat side by side with the retrospectively created past. The two conferences also clearly demonstrated that the blanket notion of socialist realism was capable neither of containing stylistically the diversity of aesthetic and symbolic practices of postwar socialism nor of explaining conceptually the appearance of new trends and styles of the time. The notion of socialist romanticism—*Sotzromantizm*—that was discussed at the latter conference emerged as a solution to this descriptive and analytic deadlock. It might not have a universal quality but it did help to make sense of many tendencies that had remained undertheorized for a long time. Without going into detail, I want to point out only a few aspects of *Sotzromantizm*, which could help to contextualize the larger intellectual climate that generated the phenomena discussed by the contributors.

In 1957, only one year after Nikita Khrushchev’s famous secret speech, *Voprosy Literaturny* (Literary Issues), a new Soviet journal dedicated entirely to topics in literary theory, history, and criticism, published an article that initiated a long-term intellectual discussion. Anna Elistratova (1957, 28, 32, 46) an expert on the English romantic novel, directly challenged the aesthetic doctrine of the post-Stalin period by asking, “When it comes to the artistic perception of the world, can we really say that Realism is historically the only effective method we should rely on?” Pointedly drawing only on examples from the history of Western literature, the scholar insisted that “artistic tools of the Enlightenment literature, with its rationalism, its mechanicism, and its metaphysical approach to reality, obviously proved its own insufficiency.” Was it not the time to admit, Elistratova concluded, that the legacy of romanticism, with its humanistic dreams and rebellious outbursts, could offer an important source of inspiration for progressive socialist art?

This initial challenge to the hegemony of realism was followed by a series of heated debates in the 1960s and 1970s. The initial reliance on the European aesthetic tradition was quickly expanded to include examples from Russian (albeit only imperial) history. In their debates, participants highlighted such characteristics of romanticism as its propensity “to stare at the darkness in order to discern

new directions” (Kuleshov 1964, 130) and its emphasis on the “absolute autonomy and uniqueness of the individual” (Khalizev 1973, 259). Within a very short period, the status of romanticism swiftly evolved from “literature’s liabilities” (*passiv literatura*) and an unfortunate “byproduct of the historic and literary development” (Nalivaiko 1982, 156) to a symptom of “social emancipation” (Krasnov 1969, 250). By the late 1970s, the former “passive, conservative, and reactionary” romanticism (Frizman 1978, 254) was elevated to a “revolution in arts” that privileged dynamism, becoming, and spontaneity (Dmitrenko 1982, 251).

It is hard not to read these literary debates as an attempt to reframe the role of the humanities in the USSR in the wake of the horrors of the Stalinist terror and the Second World War. Framed as an esoteric philological enterprise, these late-Soviet discussions discovered in romanticism a historically available framework that could generate versions of identities, social communities, spiritual values, and relations to the past that significantly differed from the rationalistic canons of the logically planned society.

Philological explorations of romantic tropes, of course, were only one expression of a broader interest in reclaiming romanticism. In the 1960s, newly publicized texts by Isaak Babel, Andrei Platonov, and Boris Pil’niak helped to reframe the Russian Revolution, giving Communist utopia one more chance. Symptomatically, in 1968, after years of oblivion, Lissitzky’s works were republished by his widow (but only in German).³ A host of other trends paralleled this reappearance of revolutionary romanticism in the 1960s. Late Soviet cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare by Grigory Kozintsev vividly highlighted the figure of the “problematic hero,” deeply attuned to psychological nuance and the complications of being in the world (Moore 2012). Interest in the occult and the mystical (facilitated by the publication of Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* in 1966) provided yet another ground for destabilizing normative socialist-realist canons with alternative forms of epistemology. A structurally similar escape from the rationality of Stalinist neoclassicism was manifested in various attempts to articulate a feeling of kinship with the world of nature, from the vagabond aesthetics of “wild tourism” (Noack 2006; Giustino, Plum, and Vari 2013) to the “village prose” movement, with its insistence on cultural rootedness and national belonging (Parthe 1992).

Throughout the Soviet Union, romantic nationalists offered alternatives to the unifying and universalizing notion of the “Soviet people” by reinterpreting folkloric motifs in the cinema of Sergei Parajanov (First 2016), by revitalizing the genre of the historical novel (Dobrenko 2000), and by reframing ancient history (Bassin 2016). The rhetorical force of romanticism had a profound impact on such key late-Soviet phenomena as the communitarian movement in education (Kukulkin, Maiofis, and Safronov 2015) and the Soviet fascination with taming the atom (Orlova 2014) and conquering the cosmos (Gerovitch 2015).

3. I describe in detail the return of the Soviet revolutionary avant-garde in another essay (see Oushakine 2016).

Sotzromantizm allows us to approach these seemingly disparate instances as examples of an autonomous (and relatively consistent) form of historical imagination. This politico-poetical configuration—a new theater of life, indeed—brought together dispersive impulses, anarchic inclinations, psychological introspection, and metaphorical structuring in order to repudiate the basic Soviet conventions of normative rationality and mimetic socialist realism.

In short, *Sotzromantizm* views the romantic imagination in postwar Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as a form of critical engagement with “actually existing” socialism. While many recent studies of late socialism are structured around metaphors of absence and detachment, *Sotzromantizm* allows us to shift attention to concepts, institutions, spaces, objects, and identities that enabled (rather than prevented) individual and collective involvement with socialism. *Sotzromantizm* offers a ground from which to challenge the emerging dogma that depicts late Soviet society as a space where pragmatic cynics coexisted with useful idiots of the regime. As the contributors to “Landscapes of Socialism” convincingly demonstrate, the romantic sensibility not only sought to create or discover new spaces for alternative forms of affective attachment and social experience but also, and perhaps more significantly, helped to curtail the self-defeating practices of disengagement and indifference.

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An Uneasy Metamorphosis: The Afterlife of Constructivism in Stalinist Gardens

Fabien Bellat

If a failed hope could still have an afterlife, then what happened to the people who believed in constructivism? For these architects, professional survival was top priority. Many—like Moisei Ginzburg, Ivan Leonidov, and Mikhail Korjev—tried to find a specialized niche wherein they could work according to their artistic convictions and become specialists in designing gardens. The abstract geometry of the Le Nôtre gardening school was for them a source of inspiration between the use of history and the modernization of that legacy. Strangely enough, the absolute Sun King gardener became in the USSR a model, organizing nature like a suprematist abstraction. Imitating Versailles became a way to satisfy the Stalinist USSR's need for magnificence. Through gardens, the constructivists were still given a chance to experiment, changing the meanings of places. Meanwhile, they invented a daring aesthetic afterlife for constructivism, enabling a singular conceptual and political creation.

Key Words: Gorki Park, Landscape Architecture, Landscape Design, Russian Constructivism, Stalinist Landscapes

Metaphorically speaking, the attitude of the USSR toward its citizens often seemed like Kronos devouring his children. Or, perhaps another mythological image might be even more apt: Daphne's metamorphosis into the laurel tree illustrates well the transformation of former constructivist architects into designers of Stalinist landscapes. In the 1920s and 30s, a number of architects who had served Soviet modernity were either put aside by the regime or had to envisage a radical adaptation to its new cultural context. Indeed, if a failed hope could still have an afterlife, then what happened to all those people who believed in constructivism?

Metamorphosis is indeed a keyword. Creating Soviet gardens demanded a reordering of nature, both at the level of the landscape itself and at the level of public perception and taste. However, landscape architecture is almost absent from political texts. If a number of essays considered the role of the city in the new socialist world, neither Lenin nor Trotsky nor Bukharin said anything specific about the use of nature in the city center. According to Trotsky, "The man will be incomparably stronger, more intelligent, more subtle. He will have a more harmonious body, more rhythmic movements, a more melodious voice; daily life will assume

eminently theatrical forms” (Service 2011).¹ Yet to achieve such a goal presupposed building both sport and cultural facilities: stadiums, theaters, and gardens would be some of the architectural programs likely to enable this sovietization of habits. Using similar logic but with more practical words than the ostracized Trotsky, Anton Makarenko (2012), an educator in labor communes, insisted on outside activities being a key ingredient for the education of a “new Soviet man.” These requirements asked for new constructions and landscaping without giving any guidelines regarding the forms that these constructions and landscaping should take. Actually, except for the requirement for fresh air and some public gardens near workers’ homes, architects had a free hand to choose what a Soviet garden should look like. In fact, the frontline was located elsewhere.

For constructivist architects, organizing their professional and artistic survival was indeed top priority. Finding programs where they could still work, in a fragile balance between their convictions and what was expected from them, led them to reconsider more carefully the design of parks. Since landscape architecture was now part of the milieu of the new Soviet citizen, parks of leisure and rest took on new importance as essential places for experimenting with political education and mastering propaganda.

Revolution and Landscaping

“The Russian revolutionary enthusiasm, combined with American efficiency, this is the essence of Leninism”; thus spoke Stalin (1939, 87). If such a sentence seems more like a slogan than a true guideline for artists in charge of creating Soviet facilities, the insistence on spirit, undergirded by U.S. efficiency, seemed likely to promote the creation of new forms supposed to embody the revolution. Consequently, the decree “On Reconstruction of the Way of Life,” signed by the Central Committee in May 1930, discussed the best blueprints to build a socialist way of life in conjunction with the Five-Year Plan. First of all, the party organization was supposed to help this movement and to direct it ideologically. Then, blaming hurried attempts to reconstruct a way of life in one leap, the decree urged for new rules guiding the construction of workers’ cities near great industrial centers, collective facilities, schools, and laundries.

Landscape wasn’t forgotten altogether though; the official text also insisted on the urge to have “a green zone large enough between the residential zone and the productive zone” (Milioutine 1930). Apparently, landscape was given the same ideological importance as urbanism and industry. This was an innovation; before the revolution, creating parks was mostly a private matter in Russia.² The

1. All quotations in the essay were translated by the author.

2. The imperial palaces and gardens like Peterhof or Tsarskoie Selo were mostly used by the Romanov family, not open to the public (unlike Versailles, even in the seventeenth century),

decree was both mandatory and hesitant: the goals were clearly outlined, but no real conceptual framework was drawn. Indeed, Stalin's close lieutenant Lazar Kaganovitch appeared skeptical about the hypothesis of a specifically proletarian architecture, denying it a *sui generis* form and advocating instead for a process of struggle after which an art expressing "the grandeur of socialist construction" would emerge (Khlevniouk 2001, 269). Soviet architecture was indeed an insoluble problem; Soviet parks were even more so. Stalin wasn't very explicit about how to create Soviet parks; however, several of his comments on ideological goals could be and were interpreted by architects as tacit instructions for their own duties.

According to the general secretary, the mobilization of youth was "of particular importance after the consolidation of the proletarian dictatorship, in the period of extensive work on culture and the education of the proletariat" (Stalin 1939). Stalin repeatedly commented on the need for the education of workers, especially the young generations, which became the favorite target for propaganda efforts that tried to control both their thoughts and their free time. In this logic, campaigns against illiteracy, the construction of new libraries, the building of workers' clubs, and evening lessons on Marxism were some of the best-known tools used by the regime to create a socialist way of life. Other urban-minded methods such as organizing outdoor readings, initiating open summer theaters in parks, or designing a riverbank for hosting concerts could also join the arsenal of effective propaganda tools.

These ideological stances required new collective habits and new places. The *subbotnik* or communist "volunteer Saturday," encouraged by Lenin himself, used the slogan, "Let us build a new society!" But it was more of a political projection than a real description of the tasks that should be accomplished in the *subbotnik* (Lenin 1920, 123–5). Several city administrations often used the convenient method of a free labor force as a collective *corvée* for cleaning the garbage or planting trees (Dehaan 2013). As the budgets for urban planning were often underestimated, the *subbotnik* was quite useful for architects in charge of parks. If you couldn't expect from an average man to be an efficient stonemason, you could at least guide him through simpler tasks of planting trees or flowers. Besides, ideologically speaking, such exercises in collective planting could be used as an easy and not too demanding way to involve citizens in the construction of a socialist society.

The method was extensively used from the 1930s to the 1960s, helping a number of important Soviet cities to build landscaped parks as a counterpart to the extensive industrialization of the country. It was even used in October 1945 in Leningrad for planting trees at the Primorski Victory Park, as a way to involve survivors of the city blockade in the celebration of USSR triumph over Nazi Germany

except for rare special occasions. So these majestic places had only a scarce influence on the creation of public parks in prerevolutionary Russia. Few town parks were created before 1917; an example is the Hermitage Garden in Moscow, opened in 1894. See Kolosova (2012, 25–8).

(Kirschenbaum 2006). Specific neighborhoods also organized collective landscaping and gardening works. For instance, a few years after the end of the Stalin Era, the Soviet trade unions claimed that 350,000 union members participated in these outdoor activities (Potachnikov 1959).

The Architects Involved

At first, modern architects believed that the regime demanded completely new cultural foundations. Stalin (1939) himself claimed that the revolutionary spirit was “an antidote against inertia, routine, conservatism, stagnation of thought, slavish submission to ancient traditions.” Such a speech called for breaking with the past and inventing new prospects. Several Soviet architects could only approve such a postulate, which supported their own ambitions. Trained for the greater part before the revolution by talented academic masters, the future constructivists knew traditional architecture all too well, but their heart and wits pushed them to practice modern theoretical/formal experiments instead.

Constructivism was not a unified movement, being practiced by several distinct architectural associations. But those architects who wanted to invent a new revolutionary society shared initially the same desire for structural openness, presenting technological choices as going hand in hand with ideological clarity, flooding the workers’ lives with light and hope. A symbiotic conception linking art with life was supposed to develop a working method “which would make impossible in principle the dualism between social content and form, and which would guarantee us the creation of an integral, unified and holistic architectural system” (Ginzburg 1928). The constructivists thought first that new forms could be achieved by using new materials correctly and through new modes of construction erasing all previous traditions, in a logic supposed to be coherent with the communist reorganization of society. This ideal of “constructive honesty” consequently became the foundational rule enabling the striving to redesign around every human habit. In this great project, architects saw in architecture the most efficient tool for changing the very meaning of cities. The built environment should support the political struggle, gradually transforming land-use in a modern functionalist logic; the revolution was to be accomplished in the daily actions of the inhabitants of collective housings and of the users of industrial facilities. From the point of view of architecture, a large use of concrete and glass was seen as the correct answer for the task of creating new socialist conditions in Russia. However, as the constructivists soon understood to their own dismay, this theoretical idea was not so easy to translate into actual architectural practice in a country where glass production was still barely industrialized.

A competition organized in 1929 for the Magnitogorsk master plan became a battlefield used by different groups of architects to put forward innovative concepts. For instance, the Organization of Contemporary Architects (OSA) proposed a

plan—designed by a collective including Mikhail Okhitovitch (1896–1937), Ivan Leonidov (1902–59), and Mikhail Bartch (1904–76)—which included a green zone that separated the industrial from the living zones.³ This method was supposed to prevent the propagation of diseases, to encourage leisure, and to improve air quality. But that separation was not very convincing spatially and functionally, as Nikolai Milioutine (1899–1942) pointed out; therefore he proposed an alternative version that synthesized various competition proposals. This plan was supposed to have a larger green zone, and the residential area should have been “entirely surrounded by greenery” (Milioutine 1930). These good intentions did not do a good job of hiding an extremely naive conception of landscaping. They thought they would plant some trees in a picturesque, modernized English fashion and that it would be both physically sound and creatively contemporary. But behind Leonidov’s fascinating abstract drawings—done in Moscow—there was actually no practical solution regarding what could be done about greenery in Magnitogorsk’s harsh climate.⁴ Even worse, the few trees shown in the documents were, unfortunately, not enough to create a green screen able to protect the inhabitants from pollution of the industrial zone (Gozak and Leonidov 1988). Despite its revolutionary enthusiasm, the OSA group showed some of its limitations as it failed to adapt its brilliant conceptual framework to the complex reality of building a socialist city.⁵ Only by ignoring reality could one construct an ideological city.

Their project attracted unfair critics, aimed at sidelining these architects—especially Leonidov, who was seen by Arkadi Mordvinov (1896–1964) as a “wrecker.” As Mordvinov (1930) concluded, in the tone of a great Soviet inquisitor: “An intensified struggle must be conducted on two fronts: both with utopian invention, and with the stagnant utilitarian attitudes and routine, the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois phenomena and directions in architecture.” Trained in constructivist methods, Mordvinov was ambiguously rejecting, on the one hand, the most inventive aspects of the movement and, on the other hand, the ghost of historicism. However, neither he nor any other critic noticed the lack of effective thinking about urban landscape in the OSA and in Leonidov’s projects for Magnitogorsk.

Landscape was probably the weakest link in constructivist general thinking, revealing their unpreparedness to design an alliance between architecture and nature that would not only be able to create a sustainable urban environment but would also revolutionize the role of greenery in lifestyles. However, oversight of landscape’s role in creating Soviet towns was soon to be of major importance for both the disgraced constructivists and the architects of a more traditionalist bent.

3. So the professionals first discussed the topic well ahead of the Central Committee’s decision the following year, a clue showing that the power structure was following some of the late urban debates.

4. As shown in [fig. 1](#), the landscape is treated only as a secondary part of the project.

5. For a larger reflection on Magnitogorsk, see Kotkin (1997). I also focus on some lesser-known aspects of the city’s first years in Bellat (2015).

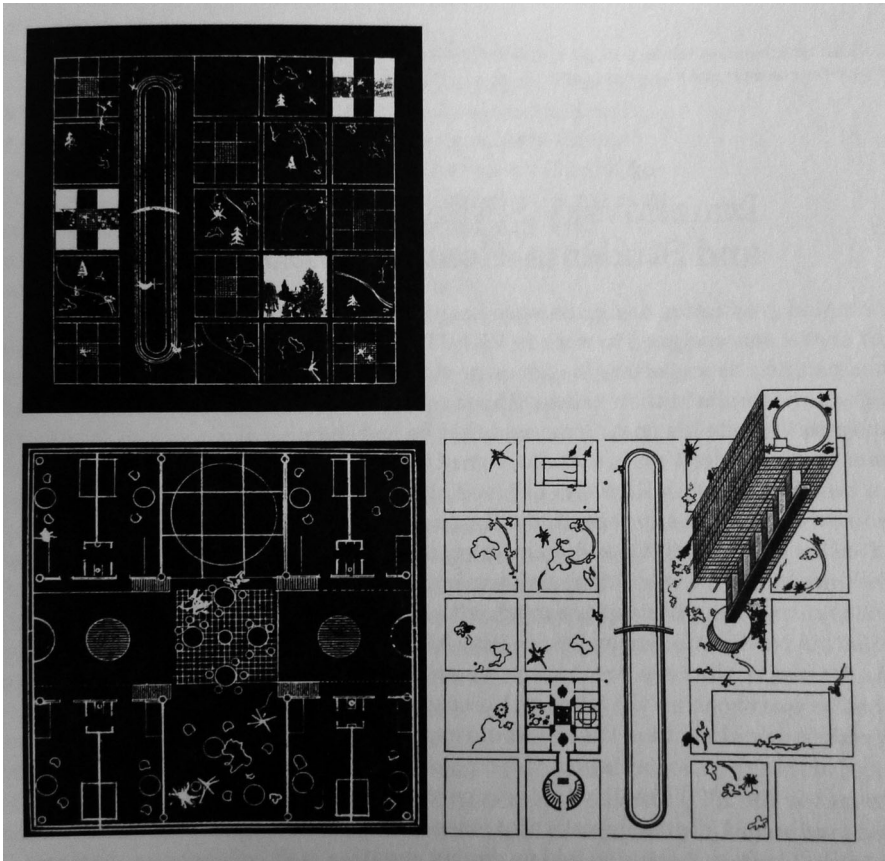


Fig. 1. Ivan Leonidov, *Project for Magnitogorsk*, 1929. Private collection.

Indeed, professors like Aleksei Chtchoussev (1873–1949) or Ivan Zholtovski (1867–1959) envisaged jointly updating their works. As a matter of fact, the young architects of the USSR naturally practiced a dynamic, stylistic coexistence, a complex interpenetration of architectural reflexes. A good illustration of this tendency to mix several aesthetic approaches occurred at the end of the 1920s when the contestation of the constructivist sphere of influence was initiated by students of the modern pioneers themselves. This context allowed for the survival of constructivist conceptions where they were not expected. Some architects adapted successfully to the neo-academic aesthetic of the Stalin Era, like Moisei Ginzburg (1892–1946), Nikolai Kolli (1894–1966) or Andrei Burov (1900–57), who somehow managed to stay at the forefront of the architectural stage. For all those who did not have such a good reputation, the road to Canossa was even more difficult. These architects tried to find specialized niches where they could work according to their artistic convictions.

This general reflex of professional adaptation pushed some great constructivists to become specialists in designing gardens. The design of gardens did not offer the same rationalist *a priori* as that of cinemas for instance, which could lead to purely ornamental choices. Yet—and this is the most interesting part of the Soviet approach to the question—the landscape program paradoxically allowed an unexpectedly syncretic approach that adeptly turned historical sources into a crucial foundation of modernist projects.

Actually, the ground was already well prepared. Among the theorists and most modern practitioners, many taught the history of parks to their students. In 1929, Nikolai Ladowski (1881–1941) made his students work on the remodeling of Gorki Park. In particular, Mikhail Mazmanyán's (1899–1971) general analytical plans of the evolution of gardens were born out of this initiative (see Khan-Magomedov 2011b). Visual graphics of this work carry the obvious influence of Leonidov, with its white lines on a black background and its layout confronting a general plan to analytical study and photomontage. This typical constructivist approach, however, was used in order to describe the park of Versailles.⁶ Mazmanyán's project, isolated as it may seem at first sight, indicates that in modern Soviet circles the example of Versailles not only wasn't rejected as an obsolete heritage but also, and more importantly, was duly studied and used as a theoretical basis for its various Sovietized versions. At the beginning of the 1930s, a particular type of infrastructure program allowed creators working in the constructivist spirit to formulate modern conceptions while meeting burgeoning, neo-academic expectations: stadiums.

A former student of the Soviet Palladio Ivan Zholtovski and former assistant of Le Corbusier on the Centrosoyouz building, Nikolai Kolli, became an expert on sport facilities. During the 1930s, he worked on several stadiums for Moscow and was involved notably in the construction of the Stalingrad stadium and its reconstruction after 1945. These projects were quite schizophrenic. Their plan and structure were in the best functionalist logic: the façades were almost baroque; and their general layout was a landscape design clearly drawn from the French formal garden. That model was carefully chosen; it enabled a geometric division of area with large grassed compartments, organized in a hierarchy of spaces, leading to the main stadium in both an effective and majestic relationship with the main stadium. There the abstract geometry of constructivism and modern functionalism were successfully merged with a Stalin-era, neo-academic expression in which the French classical model was updated with subtlety. With these stadium projects, Kolli managed, not without a certain deftness, to remain faithful to his commitment to both modernity and traditional culture. His project offered a modern aesthetic that nonetheless was able to serve the more academic needs of Stalinist propaganda.

6. As [fig. 2](#) shows, the drawing tries to isolate the main lines of the classical garden, creating a kind of abstraction.

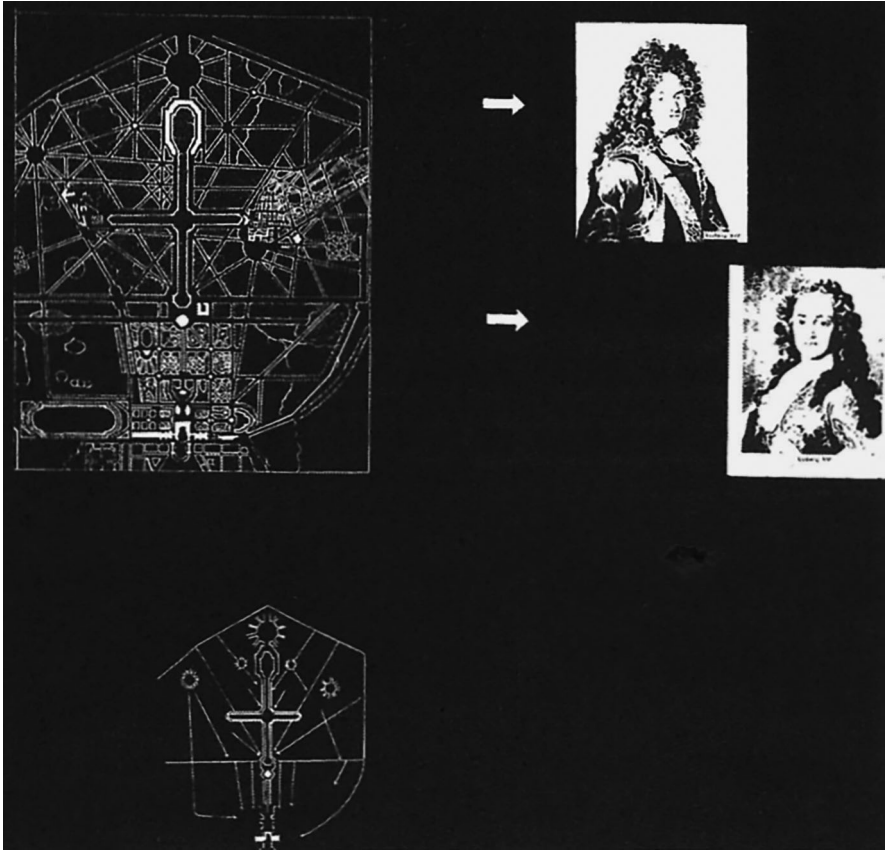


Fig. 2. Mikhaïl Mazmanyán, *Analytical Study of Versailles Park*, 1929. Private collection.

Following Kolli's experiments, another former constructivist, Georgi Vegman (1899–1973), developed in 1939 a prototype for the standard stadium.⁷ This project also used the hierarchical spirit of the seventeenth-century, formal garden with its symmetry, while the grassy lawns were repurposed into sports areas easily accessible by wooden walkways and adorned at key points with gazebos. The French influence cleverly distorted by Vegman helped to forge a new typology: the classical geometry was indeed useful for creating an imaginative, standardized, landscaped architecture. Unexpectedly, the recreation grounds of ancien-régime aristocrats turned into a model for proletarian leisure projects in the USSR. This dialogue between monumentality and functionality convinced other constructivists that green spaces could provide them with a creative autonomy they no longer had on other projects.

7. Fig. 3 uses a bird's-eye view to show clearly the organization of the gardened space in this facility.

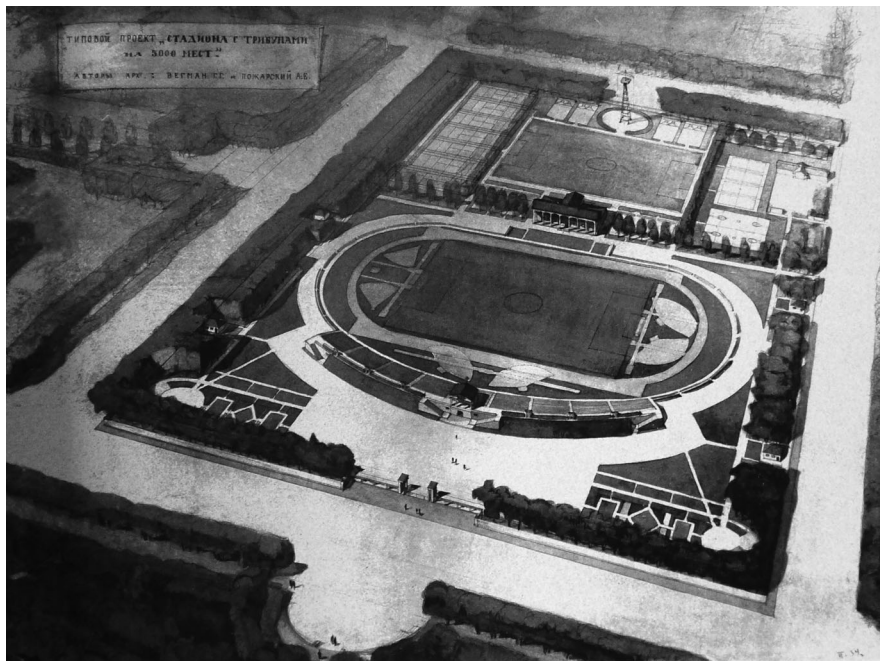


Fig. 3. Georgi Vegman, *Project of Standard Stadium*, 1939. Private collection.

Leonidov: Landscaping as Aesthetic Survival

Seen as the prodigal child of constructivism—even by academic masters like Chhtchoussev and Zholtovski—Ivan Leonidov surprised many by remaining a visionary with almost no finished projects under his belt. He was a son of a peasant family and an apprentice of an icon painter; the revolution offered him new prospects. Acceding to the Vkhoutemas workshops in 1921, Leonidov turned to architecture by working with an older innovator, Aleksandr Vesnin (1883–1959). His radical diploma project in 1927 on the topic of a Lenin Institute brought him fame among Soviet architects. However, in spite of his perfect social biography according to Soviet criteria, he suffered attacks by rival architectural groups, especially from the more politicized young wolves of the VOPRA.⁸ Ideological in their nature, these onslaughts eventually prevented him from teaching. Gradually, he lost all his influence on the Soviet scene, soon turning into a pariah who could create only paper architecture.

Facing this professional ostracism, Leonidov tried to survive, dedicating himself to landscaping projects. In 1932 his proposals for the Hermitage and Tverskoy Boulevard gardens in Moscow used in all appearances a classical vocabulary, albeit

8. The Organization of Proletarian Architects; see Khan-Magomedov (2011a).

significantly reworked.⁹ He transformed the vegetal exedras into shelters for crystalline compositions with hyperboloid vases using neon tubes to complement plants (Khan-Magomedov 2011a). The whole was supposed to be a “green carpet,” helping workers to find some rest in the heart of the city (Kopp 1975). Unable to accomplish anything in Moscow, in 1934 Leonidov joined the team of his friend Moisei Ginzburg, who was then in charge of building spa facilities in Crimea, under the supervision of the People’s Commissariat of Heavy Industry (Khan-Magomedov 2011a). There Leonidov continued his appropriation of classical forms: the Artek project (a children’s camp) explicitly quoted the Caprarola Villa Farnese, with its pentagonal plan and its logic of multiple axes, using the topography to place a stadium in the lower parts of the plot and then modeling a grass-sloped pyramid which would serve as an amphitheater in the Greek spirit, using ramps to lead to the majestic, pentagonal parterre.¹⁰ In these palatial plans, the architect incorporated a world map hinted at by plant and rock patterns, envisioned as a geographical exploration tool for young pioneers. Quite naively, Leonidov expected that his project—at least in its decorative parts—could be partially realized by the Komsomol youths. So the children too were supposed to give their labor freely to the state in a *subbotnik*. This mobilization of youth was aimed at involving future Soviet citizens in the construction of their own leisure places (under the scrutiny of the party). From an ideological point of view, it was a good way to give responsibility to youngsters; from the architect’s standpoint it was a free labor force able to create his socially conscious project step by step. As a result, from a young age, Soviet citizens were prepared to contribute to the building of a new socialist environment.

In his attempt to appropriate the legacy of Italian or French gardens from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Leonidov was not merely an emulator. He expressed old models through a modern geometrical language, and by adding a landscaped world map, he retained the pedagogical function so typical of constructivist parks of culture and rest. Actually, the constructivist idea of the educational function of flowerbeds was used without major changes by the Stalinist neo-academic culture; it was only slightly modified through references to Italian and French classical gardens. Here the creative process had a double effect. First of all, constructivist gardens were supposed to involve citizens directly in the shaping of a socialist way of life. Second, the modernization of a classic legacy intended to give a larger intellectual scope to the Soviet people, presenting them as the rightful heirs of a world heritage. Unfortunately, these projects were, for the most part, too ambitious and disconnected from the practical realities of the USSR and probably already out of fashion ideologically, and, as a result, they were confined to private offices and architecture museums as paper models, never to see the light of day.

9. As [fig. 4](#) shows, the architect reworked the urban space as an abstract leisure ground.

10. In [fig. 5](#), the use of a world map in the center of the project insists on the idea of world revolution.

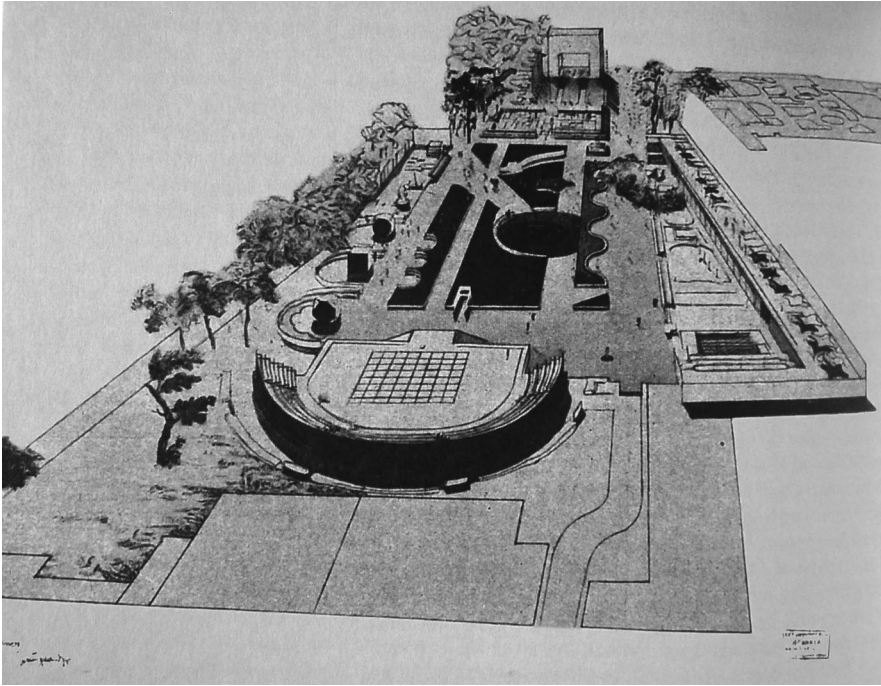


Fig. 4. Ivan Leonidov, *Project for the Hermitage Gardens*, Moscow, 1932. Private collection.



Fig. 5. Ivan Leonidov, *Project for an Artek in Crimea*, 1934. Private collection.

Leonidov did work on a garden stair in Ginzburg's sanatorium project in Kislovodsk (Russia's North Caucasus). Initially Ginzburg had entrusted this secondary element to Viktor Kalinine (1906–?),¹¹ whose design envisioned a somewhat modernized structure used in art-deco French gardens. Leonidov's alternative proposal made the most out of the landscape's qualities; the architectural landscape was conceived in such a way as to take advantage of the slope of the hill. Small amphitheaters were installed where the height difference was most important, and flatter sections were used to create small squares decorated with benches and fountains. Everything was designed in imaginative forms, blending constructivist geometry with classical inspirations with modest equipment enabling sport and cultural outdoor activities. Leonidov's project at Kislovodsk functioned as an effective tool for outdoor gatherings, like poetry recitals or theatric performances. Indeed, it was meant to overcome the "cultural backwardness" denounced by Stalin (1939), offering an adequate location for "meeting the cultural needs of the workers," as Stalin advocated. An outcast from Stalinist society, Leonidov at the same time was ultimately and paradoxically useful to the state's propaganda as a creator of landscapes allowing "an easy and cultured life" (Stalin 1939).

Gorki Park: From Constructivist Projects to the Stalinist Garden

Following Leonidov's example, other leading moderns envisaged the drawing of parks as a way to keep constructivist conceptions afloat. Such was the case of Moisei Ginzburg and Konstantin Melnikov (1890–1974) in their projects for Gorki Park. This site had a famous history as a place of architectural experimentation (Evstratova and Koluzakov 2012). Starting in 1922, a competition had been organized to accommodate the All-Russia Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition in the Park. The entries were submitted mostly by prerevolutionary authors.¹² In the end, Zholtovski's project was selected and put into motion in 1923. The first general layout and the pavilions were the result of Zholtovski's cooperation with Viktor Kokorin (1886–1959) and Nikolai Kolli. The project was a version of a classic model with a number of constructivist features; the hierarchy of the classic flowerbed grid was offset by a more inventive formal purism. Zholtovski's plan created a central axis around which were organized both the pavilions and the plantations, but its architectural approach favored a semi-open court, closing off potential space. As Chtchoussev (1923) pointed out: "The contrived nature of

11. I did much research between 2010 and 2015 to discover the fate of Kalinine. He was still alive during the 1970s, but I could not discover anything on him after the 1980s. He probably died in the 1990s in a period when many elderly artists died without being noticed—not surprising in these chaotic years for the country—but there is a lack of information about this point.

12. Such as Ivan Fomine (1872–1936), Vladimir Chtchouko (1878–1939), Ivan Zholtovski, and Nikolai Lanceray (1879–1942), though Ilya Golossov (1883–1945) sent a proposal more marked by the new experimental spirit.

the central part of the parterre constrains, with its cold breakdown, the further development of the exhibition.” The focus on the use of space was thus becoming a major point in Soviet architecture; old devices, more adapted to closed palaces or gardens, were no longer sufficient. More open spatial structures had to be created in order to allow for the effective organization of people’s activities in the park.

The first of its kind, Gorki Park sparked important debates on how to tie new approaches to the classic experience. New projects—the Tobacco Pavilion by Melnikov and the Milk Pavilion by Georgi Goltz (1893–1946)—implemented experimental styles of architecture in a classic landscaped weft. This strange admixture reached its double outcome; it produced a majestic impact on every visitor, designed as it was as an aristocratic French park, while boasting of Soviet economic achievements through the modern dynamism of the pavilions. Far from being an artistic somersault, the Soviet revival of organizational principles used in the French gardening style was useful for highlighting the modernism of the pavilions, with their huge advertisements or slogans that reflected the new life and products of Soviet society.

This synthetic characteristic of the place still guided the later projects in the 1931 competition for the remodeling of the park, but a new social and political context introduced some major differences. The previous competition took place in 1922, when constructivism was rising to its prominence; in 1931, constructivism was already being actively marginalized. The 1931 competition resulted in the considerable change of scale of the park: it was supposed to include now the Krinski bridge to Lenin’s Hills, linking both banks of the Loujniki meander of the Moskva River. Despite the monumental scale of the plan, Ginzburg still envisioned the space with a functionalist logic in mind; following his previous works of the 1920s on disurbanism, he emphasized separate zones of sport and leisure activities without a visible, hierarchical organization of the territory (Kopp 1975). The architect remained loyal to the constructivist ideal of a place modeled by abstract geometry, which was seen as the best way to provide new Soviet man with modern spatial constructions for sport, leisure, and outdoor trips.

Other projects by Vitali Dolganov (1901–69)¹³ or Liubov Zaleskaia (1906–79) were based on a similar logic, although they shyly tried to insert classic flowerbeds along interrupted axes. These projects showed how constructivists struggled to integrate this syncretic logic; the architects who adapted themselves to the neo-academic standards were the ones who were able to provide such works more easily. Paradoxically, it was Melnikov who offered one of the most ambitious projects.¹⁴ Because of his Soviet pavilion built for a 1925 Paris exhibit and his workers’ clubs, Melnikov became one of the great names of constructivism. Yet his proposal for Gorki Park attempted a synthesis, a trend that could be traced in several of his projects (notably the classicist staircases of the Kaoutchouk Club in 1927 and his project for

13. Fig. 6 expresses the search for a geometric way to handle the urban landscape.

14. Fig. 7 uses the same method as previously shown in Fig. 6.

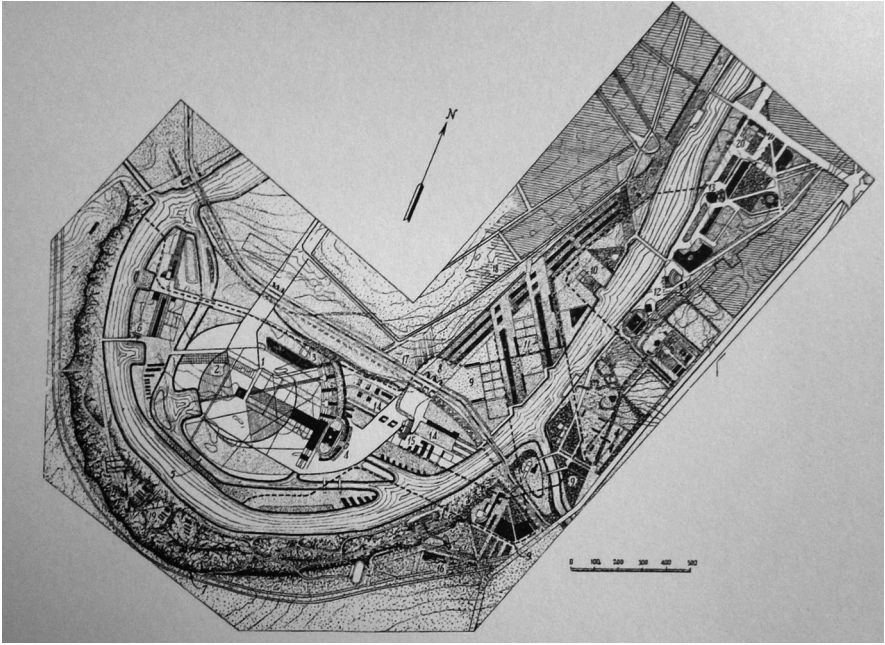


Fig. 6. Vitali Dolganov, *Project for Gorki Park*, Moscow, 1931. Private collection.

the Palace of the Soviets Competition). The landscape project allowed him to work out his syncretic approach before his major project for the Narkomtiazprom in 1934. Using the alluvial meander under Lenin's Hills, Melnikov envisioned a monumental half-circular kneecap, while the outside curve was pinked like a gigantic mechanical wheel, forming what resembled landscaped flutes. In this majestic armature, similar to the Versailles hierarchical organization of space, Melnikov placed a number of landscaped facilities for leisure and rest. Fountains and basins were also conceived according to a synthetic logic; historical forms were expressed in a minimalist, geometrical language. Melnikov's version of Gorki Park was a syncretic landscape experiment, placed somewhere between an assertion of new Soviet man and an assimilation of classic sources. The legacy of Versailles was helpful for adding some glamor to industrial symbolism. With this bold reference, Melnikov originated a genre in which classical heritage served as a strong framework for Soviet ideology. He created a remarkable precedent, which his ambitious colleagues did not neglect.

That the ideas proposed by Ginzburg and his fellow constructivists were not adopted and that Melnikov was removed from his post were clear signs of their loss of influence. Finally, in 1934, the onus was on Aleksandr Vlasov (1900–62) to restructure the site.¹⁵ Vlasov was awarded a diploma in 1928 at the Moscow Civil

15. As *figs. 8–9* show, the projects become more ambitious, summoning a world heritage to serve new aspirations for grandeur in the USSR.

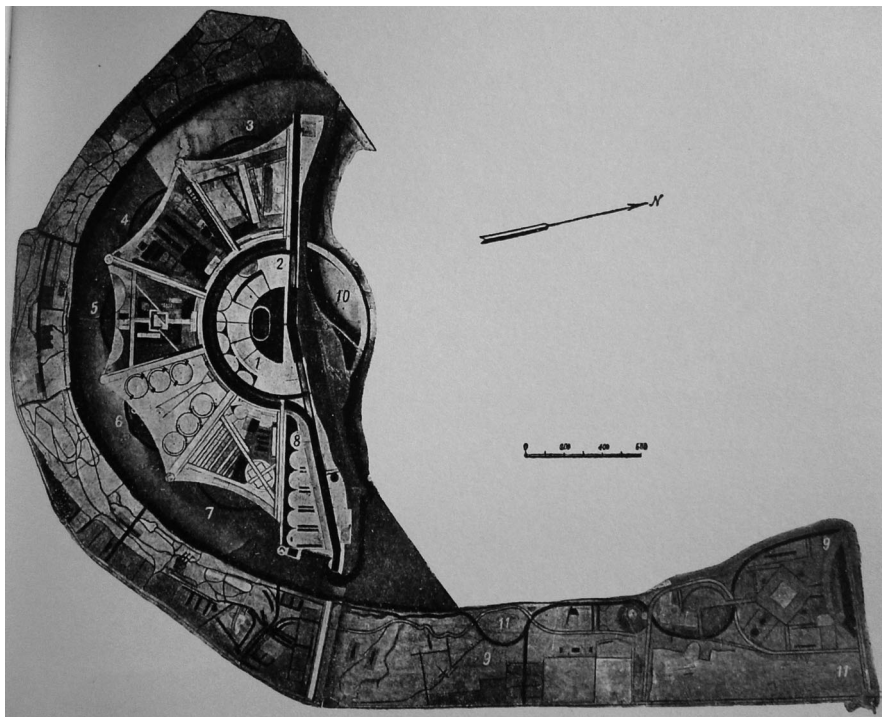


Fig. 7. Konstantin Melnikov, *Project for Gorki Park*, Moscow, 1931. Private collection.



Fig. 8. Aleksandr Vlasov, *Project for Gorki Park*, Moscow, 1934-7 (MUAR, Moscow).

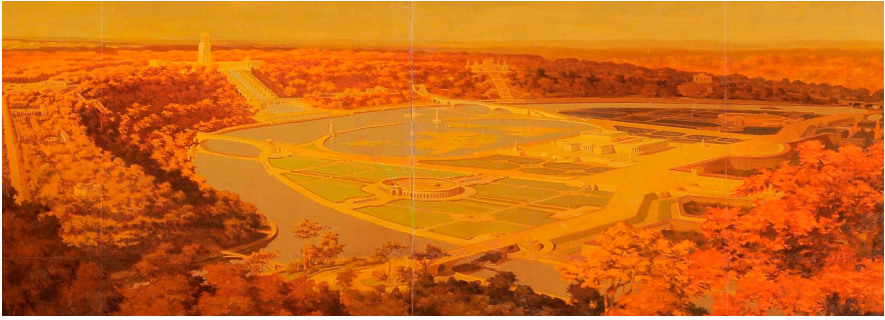


Fig. 9. Aleksandr Vlasov, *Project for Gorki Park*, Moscow, 1934–7 (MUAR, Moscow).



Fig. 10. Aleksandr Vlasov, *Fountain in Gorki Park*, Moscow, 1937. Photo by the author.

Institute of Engineers and had thus started his career with a modern background. His visionary project for the Palace of the Soviets showcased his perfect assimilation of constructivist principles. However, Vlasov was, along with Karo Alabian (1897–1959), Arkadi Mordvinov, and Mikhaïl Mazmanyán, among the “young wolves” who knew how to prove their ideological dedication to the party. At the same time, these young wolves infiltrated little by little professional groups such as the VOPRA and especially specialized publications like *Sovetskaïa Arkhitektura*. Thanks to his work on Gorki Park, Vlasov managed to reach the first circle of Stalinist builders. On this occasion, he benefited from the support of the venerable Zholtovski, who underlined specifically Vlasov’s interest in the architecture of

gardens, thereby helping him obtain the post of the chief architect of Gorki Park (Evstratova and Koluzakov 2012). Zholtovski saw in Vlasov an architect who was equally influenced by modernity and by a wish to master the classic legacy, and he recommended him for the job, not without afterthoughts, however. In 1935, Vlasov also worked on a large project for the Moskva meander, redesigning it with alleys inspired by Le Nôtre's work in Versailles and Chantilly. Vlasov intended to create a large artificial harbor with artificial islands forming a huge world map. The constructivist sense of social pedagogy was alive and strong in the project, but it was infused now with a Stalinist purpose; a lesson of geography was blended with a classical sense of greatness. The Second World War interrupted the realization of the project; it was never to be finished in its original grandiose form. After 1945, Vlasov remodeled the site in a less extravagant way, emphasizing the Versailles-like atmosphere in the park, creating in the end a subtle blend of former constructivist elements with Sovietized details of the Tuileries-like garden. With Gorki Park, Vlasov achieved one of the best Soviet landscape syntheses; as a piece of art, the park stands at the crossroads between constructivist experiments and a Sovietized refashioning of Le Nôtre's Versailles legacy (see [fig. 10](#)).

Korjev, or, the Double Face of Gardens

Vlasov's case was far from being isolated. Mikhaïl Korjev (1897–1984) was another architect who succeeded at the same game. Korjev was one of Nikolaï Ladowski's best students; even his coursework showed that he was a very promising creator-in-the-making. Between 1924 and 1927, he collaborated with Ladowski on the Red Stadium project along the slopes of Lenin's Hills. During the 1930s, he produced many plans and blueprints; some of them were even partially realized (like the Ismailovski and Lefortovo Moscow parks). His early works combined a very constructivist sense of pedagogy with a targeted use of the spatial rigor of classical French gardens. Indeed, like Leonidov or Vlasov, Korjev also designed parterres in the form of world maps (the idea was quite popular in the USSR as it alluded to the global nature of the revolution). Flowerbeds were lined up with banners, posters, and slogans from the arsenal of Marxist-Leninist propaganda.¹⁶ Korjev's clever fusion of propaganda with constructivist touches framed as modernized classicism was a useful tool for transforming the garden into an implicitly political place.

After World War II, Korjev entered the competition for the restoration and extension of an eighteenth-century historical park at Kouskovo, near Moscow,¹⁷ but his masterpiece was his design for the Moscow State Lomonossov University

16. In [fig. 11](#), the architect is attempting a last use of modern landscape ideas.

17. The magnificent [fig. 12](#) shows the progress of the architect in his creative adaptation of seventeenth-century design methods.



Fig. 11. Mikhaïl Korjev, *Project for a Garden*, circa 1930 (MUAR, Moscow).



Fig. 12. Mikhaïl Korjev, *Project for the Restoration of Kouskovo Gardens*, Moscow, 1946 (MUAR, Moscow).

Garden.¹⁸ At Kouskovo, Korjev's proposal was certainly more classical, but it did tweak the inherited formal frames, using channels in an imaginative way and playing with lines of force and geometric ornaments which remained subtly influenced by constructivism. Paradoxically, his work for the university garden used even fewer of these modern traits. Instead, as if magnifying this regime's accomplishments, the design relied mostly on a classical legacy.

These two gardens are perfect examples of the cultural ambiguity of Stalin's era. According to Stalin (1939), it was "necessary to fight the tendency to be confined in the strictly national framework." What Korjev had created can be seen as a perfect illustration of this policy: in the context of bloated, post-war chauvinism, the university garden transformed the environment into a peculiar synthesis of American skyscrapers and the Versailles park (see fig. 14–15). Korjev gave the USSR a garden that blended the world's two cultural symbols—for the purpose of the Soviet regime. Given its Versailles feel, Korjev's garden was a good answer to Stalin's insistence on the worldly importance of the revolution. As Stalin (1939) put it, "The revolution is a radical shift in the way of life and traditions, in the culture and ideology of the exploited masses worldwide. This is the reason why the October Revolution is a revolution of international and even world order." Despite its apparent anachronism, Korjev wove together tradition and modernity, the national and the international, giving the garden the global dimension the general secretary requested. Using fragments of a royal past along with modernity, the USSR was inventing itself as a synthesis of the world's cultures.

This process was quite similar to the mannerist aesthetic of the Renaissance, where "cultural awareness of the time presents itself as both revolutionary and traditionalist, and it simultaneously works to isolate but to unify existing artistic trends" (Panofsky 1983). If Stalin's speech was characterized by disjuncture between words and real acts, the work of architects like Korjev managed to implement the targets set by ideology with undeniable subtlety. The Renaissance ideal of synthesis found in the Stalinist regime an unexpected heir, where even landscape was used to educate people in matters of politics. Indeed, gardens are not innocent places, far from it. Versailles in Louis XIV's France and Lomonosov University in Stalin's USSR fulfill the same function: shaping nature to further a political agenda. Korjev's projects provided an excellent instrument for the state's propaganda, which started paying more attention to the Soviet citizen as a participant in the greatness of Stalin's state.

Aside from his realized works or unrealized projects, Korjev (1940) had a major role in formalizing the Soviet approach to landscape. In 1940, he published a textbook that oscillated between a reminder of constructivist approaches and an assimilation of processes of the formal garden, while staying carefully descriptive so as to avoid ideological content. After de-Stalinization, Liubov Zaleskaïa, a close colleague of Korjev, had more freedom to write on the topic. Her 1964 book *Lessons*

18. In fig. 13, this use of the French formal garden is now perfectly obvious.

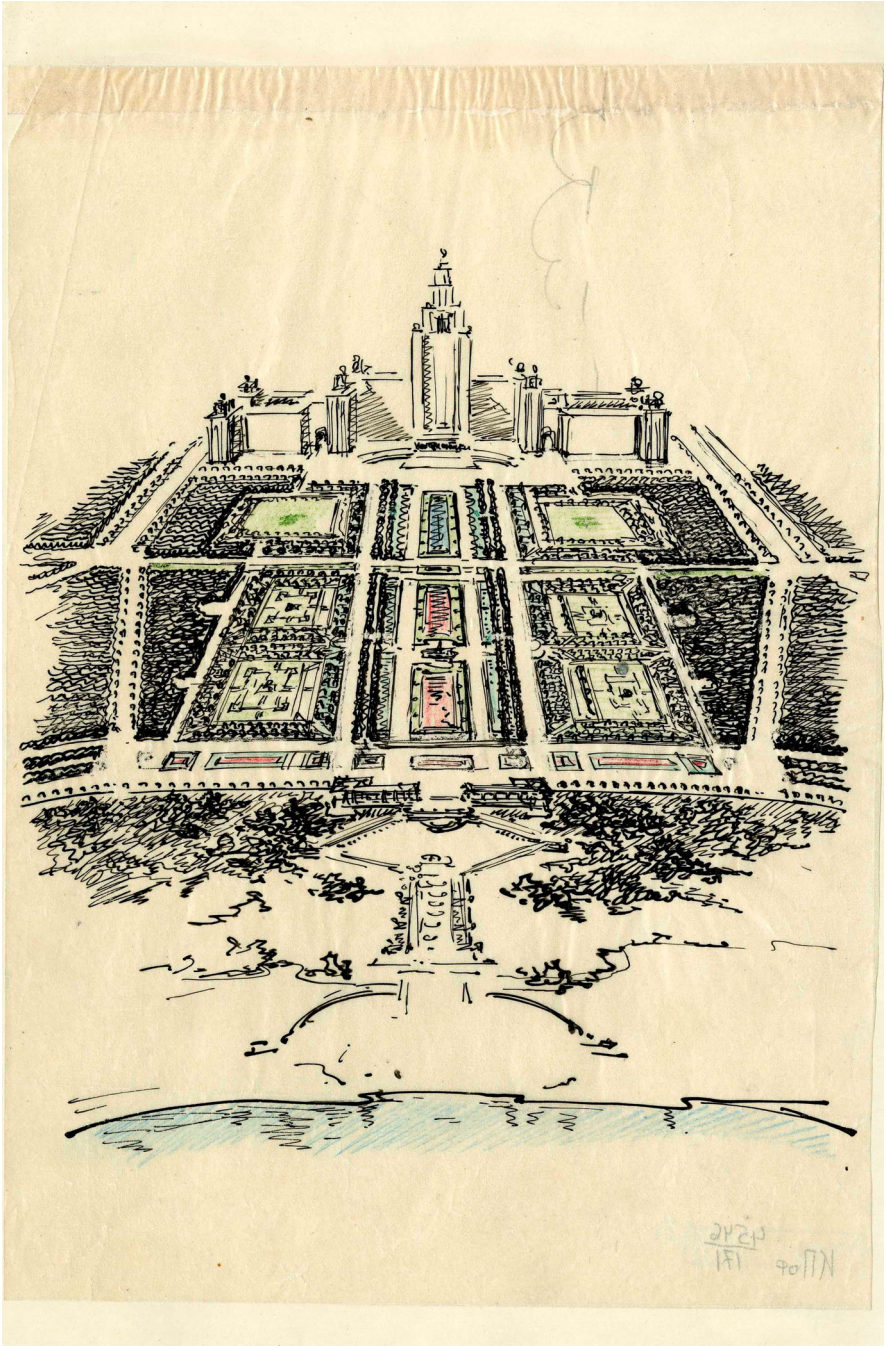


Fig. 13. Mikhaïl Korjev, *Project for the Gardens of Lomonosov University, Moscow, 1948* (MUAR, Moscow).



Fig. 14. Mikhaïl Korjev, *Gardens of Lomonosov University*, Moscow, 1948–52. Photo by the author.

on Landscape Architecture was a brilliant survey of worldwide landscape practices in which Soviet constructivism was presented as an example of aesthetic movements of the past that contributed to the production of the second Soviet modernity. Constructivism became heritage. Its social theories were then long forgotten, but its inventive forms and shapes continued to project long and vivid shadows.



Fig. 15. Mikhaïl Korjev, *Gardens of Lomonosov University*, Moscow, 1948–1952. Photo by the author.

Leningrad: From Constructivism to Resurrection of Classicism

Relatively distant from Moscow's debates, Leningrad was not reduced to imitation or to apathy, in part because of its very different urban context. The former capital may have lost to Moscow its best prerevolutionary architects, such as Vladimir Chtchouko and Ivan Fomine, but that only gave the city more latitude for developing its own version of modernity.

New projects for Leningrad preserved some constructivist features over the 1930s. A competition for the Krestovski stadium organized in 1933 was a good example of this trend (Khan-Magomedov 2009). Most submissions were still constructivist in spirit, using the Krestovski peninsula as a vast, open space for sport activities (see Luntz 1934). For instance, a project by unidentified authors under the signature of TsPKO—probably students of the Leningrad Academy of Architecture—imaginatively used the island form to rebuild the embankments like a fortress of the classic age, with moats and triangular curtain walls in the spirit of the French military engineer Vauban. This project probably tried to create a modern Soviet equivalent of the first general plan of Saint-Petersburg designed in 1717 by Jean-Baptiste Le Blond. In his proposal, Evgueni Katonine (1889–1984) tried to highlight the flatness of the peninsula with a design that would enable wide

vistas across the landscape, which in turn afforded sport facilities a view of the Neva's mouth or of the Gulf of Finland.

None of the projects were considered satisfactory, and the jury finally commissioned Aleksandr Nikolski (1884–1953) to build the stadium. Nikolski's work on the Krestovski stadium between 1934 and 1941 still showed a large formal influence of constructivism, but spatially it was conceived in a spirit of grandeur that could easily compete with Versailles. The buildings could still be labeled constructivist due to their crystalline volumes, but the general urban composition glorified the central axis, turning the Soviet stadium into what the castle was to the classic, formal garden. The Krestovski stadium excelled in syncretism: the play on the major axis was inherited from the classic age; the picturesque layout of the park had the English flavor; and there were even numerous traces of constructivism in architectural details. Majestic and strange, the project succeeded in giving prominence to this remarkable site.

Unlike Nikolski, who adapted himself to neo-academicism with only mixed results, Nikolaï Baranov (1909–89) had an easier time appropriating the formal landscape model for modern needs. Trained in the pioneer atmosphere of constructivism, Baranov was typical of the 1930s arrivistes who condemned constructivism for promoting an aesthetic foreign to the Soviet mentality. Nevertheless, from 1944 onward, Baranov furthered Nikolski's vision on landscape as a foundation for his own works (Kirschenbaum 2006). The Park Pobeda (Victory Park) in Leningrad, supervised by Baranov, combined the axial composition of hierarchical, French-style landscape elements with subsections of the picturesque, English-style garden. Baranov also used flowerbeds shaped as geometrical floral crystallizations, which echoed the experiments of French modern gardens of the 1920s and 1930s as well as the constructivist tendency of the 1920s. Celebration of victory was closely linked with the ideas of leisure and rest that were articulated by constructivists two decades earlier. An example of syncretism of sorts, this Soviet variant of landscape style was not a simple resurrection of classicism but an active revision of several aesthetic models—a heterogeneous, architectural construction created to better serve a triumphant Soviet Union.

Gardens of the Second Soviet Modernity

This Soviet variant of the French-style formal garden, planted on the ruins of constructivism and cobbled together by Stalinist neo-academicians, did not end its history during the architectural de-Stalinization of 1954. Trained under the aegis of neo-academicism, architects like Iakov Bielopolski (1916–93), Félix Novikov (1927–), Sergueï Speranski (1914–83), Anatoli Polyanski (1928–93), or Evgueni Rozanov (1925–2006) had the opportunity to design monumental ensembles that preserved traces of classic compositions while simultaneously embodying a new approach to the legacy of constructivism.



Fig. 16. VDNKh, *Fountain of the Friendship of People*, Moscow, 1953. Photo by the author. Under the direction of Viktor Andreev and Georgi Zakharov.

With the Memorial to the Battle of Stalingrad, Bielopolski envisioned a gigantic commemorative field: a park based on a main axis, a basin that mixed geometric abstraction and a lingering neo-academic monumentality, along with an antechamber to the sanctuary with the flame and superhuman statue of victory. The ensemble was a synthetic design that finally demonstrated the multiple sources of the second Soviet modernism. Similarly, the Palace of Pioneers in Moscow, coauthored by Novikov and Igor Pokrovski in 1962, used the diagonal axis of access to dynamically introduce a vast esplanade, which skillfully alternated tiled floor with grass strips in a zebra-stripe fashion. The building paid tribute to constructivist forms, but it was also influenced by the latest tendencies in landscape design in the Americas (e.g., as the work of Roberto Burle Marx in Brazil).

In these (and many other) projects, the constructivist legacy was used as an important source. Or, to put it slightly differently, the constructivist landscape experience, or at least the version of it transformed by the pressure of the Stalinist neo-academicism, had a long-lasting posterity, being used as a model for essential parts of parks in the USSR until the collapse of the country itself.

Conclusion

Seemingly limited in scope, the landscape projects described in this essay were a significant tool in shaping the life of new Soviet man; paths, parterres, and fountains became a crucial part of his leisure. In turn, at the time when Stalinist, neo-academicism dominated aesthetic canons and urban policies, designing socialist parks constituted one of the rare realms where marginalized constructivist architects could express their artistic vision and their professional skills. All key representatives of Soviet modernity contributed to the debate or to the landscaped realizations of the Stalinist era. Ginzburg was among the first to propose a large-scale constructivist project for Gorki Park. Melnikov also made proposals in which he tried to invent a Stalinist version of the French classical garden. Melnikov's approach turned out to be particularly seminal and was duly mulled over by Vlasov, whose own work on Gorki Park was a combination of classical tradition and Soviet modernity. This conjunction of constructivist traces with a classic heritage was carried out to perfection by Korjev, from his projects of the 1930s until his masterful work on the gardens of the Lomonosov University during the 1950s. As for Leonidov, who was ostracized by his colleagues, he found refuge in gardens which guaranteed him a minimal creative presence, albeit temporarily, and allowed him to see at least one of his contributions materialized.

In a way, the landscape program gave constructivists a chance not only for their aesthetic survival but also for their suitable presence in the Soviet architectural debate. Landscape architecture presented an articulation of modern principles with a subtle questioning of traditional forms, linking contemporary creation with a renewal of a historic legacy. The abstract geometry of the Le Nôtre gardening school was seen by constructivist architects as a source of inspiration for bringing together the past and the future. Strangely enough, it was the Sun King's gardener who became a role model in the USSR. Quoting Versailles was seen then as a way to satisfy the need for magnificence in Stalin's USSR (see [fig. 16](#)). But under this stylistic appearance, the socialist content was not entirely forgotten—places still retained their pedagogical function and could be used for leisure, sports, or political lectures. With their organized greenery, paths, flowerbeds, and fountains, socialist parks and gardens remained distinguished playgrounds for the new Soviet man and a perfect scene for displaying the regime's accomplishments. Through their gardens, architects were still given a chance to experiment and to change the meaning of places. In doing so, they invented a daring, aesthetic afterlife for constructivism, a historically unique conceptual and political metamorphosis.

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Building the Collective: Theories of the Archaic in Socialist Modernism, Romania circa 1958

Juliana Maxim

This essay looks at the seeming contradiction that existed in socialist Romania circa 1958 between certain primitivist tropes and an agenda of modernization in the discourse about socialist architecture. The search for archaic principles in both material and social form occurred in a variety of mediums and institutions, and the essay details two examples: the open-air collection of rural architecture of the Village Museum in Bucharest and the revival of the notion of the primitive commune in H. H. Stahl's ethnohistorical writings. The essay shows how the determinedly modernist architecture of the new socialist housing districts and, more generally, visual representations of the country's industrialization should be understood in this context of primitivist thinking. The essay argues that rapid socialist modernization was accompanied by an equally intense search for collective, unalienated practices thought to have existed inherently in the primitive.

Key Words: Architecture, Ethnographic Museum, Primitive Commune, Romania, Type

In this essay I examine the process through which two questions central to early Marxism, the existence of a primitive communism and the possibility of unalienated labor, until then largely neglected by Soviet Marxism, underwent something of a revival in the context of postwar socialist Romania, specifically in relation to architecture. I argue that a Marxist-derived model of a precapitalist community rooted in cooperation and a craft-based mode of production, became acutely relevant in the face of the imperative to devise new urban and architectural forms suited to an unprecedented socialist experience. Paradoxically, a systematic effort to modernize architectural design and construction rode on an apparently reactionary wave of interest for premodern structures and customs, and I show how, in fact, models of a modern, socialist, urban living environment were often connected to an intensive, loosely Marxist-based investigation and reinterpretation of the countryside and its age-old architecture.

Although both Marxism and modern architecture originated from similar concerns and observations about life in the industrial city, and although throughout

the twentieth century, a number of architects with genuinely socialist convictions engaged with the needs and condition of the working class, little of the intellectual tradition and analytical categories of Marxism have been brought to bear on the thinking about modern architecture. In the little-known context of Romania in the 1950s, however, Marxist historical analysis and architectural production came to intersect each other, and this essay shows how efforts to produce a dialectical-materialist reading of the Romanian past resonated in surprising ways with contemporary designers' practice.

While the encounter between inherited Marxist ideas, Romanian ruralism, and architecture was the product of very specific historic conditions, such overlap requires us to reconsider the familiar view of the postwar architecture of the Soviet bloc as a practice aggressively industrial, internationalist, and firmly antagonistic to vernacular tradition. In fact, much of the Romanian story line—the rapid industrialization and its accompanying aesthetic, paired with a cultural preoccupation with all things peasant—unfolded, with minor variations, throughout postwar Eastern Europe. But in Romania, a country still largely agricultural by the mid-twentieth century, and which had long defined its identity as deeply rural, the search for a synthesis between a peasant worldview and the workings of the modern socialist state acquired a particular urgency. In tracing the suggestive power that the retrospective vision of an archaic, agrarian commune had on certain Romanian intellectuals, I try to shed light not only on the history of architecture under socialism, but also on the “applicability” and success of certain Marxist notions within the official doctrine of a socialist state. More generally, this essay shows how visions for a socialist city could in fact be rooted in a longing for premodern customs, how novel forms of urban collectivities could echo imagined primitive associations, and how the exaltation of industrialized labor could hark back to a commitment to craft. At the heart of the most representative projects of socialist modernism, one could find a conservative attachment to tradition and precapitalist ways of life.

350 Cubic Meters of Concrete

In January 1959, the film director Mirel Ilieșiu and his crew traveled to the construction site of the Bicaz Dam, a colossal project in the Carpathian Mountains intended to power the turbines of the country's largest hydroelectric plant. The outcome of the visit was *Bicaz cota 563*, a multipart documentary about the reengineering of the pastoral region into a brand new kind of landscape.¹ Straddled across the Bistrița, a river that cuts precipitously through the mountain range, the massive dam altered profoundly the valley's lush slopes, where villagers had

1. See “‘Bicaz Cota 563’—Film Documentar,” *YouTube*, 25 September 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLxq3ZBBCYo>.

for a long time pastured sheep, cultivated the difficult terrain, and lived in small, wooden houses without electricity or running water. At the time of the filming, the ancestral and picturesque existence was being brought to an end by the waters of the artificial lake scheduled to submerge the valley, displacing the inhabitants from a dozen villages to—as the film endeavors to show—better, larger, more solid dwellings with brightly lit windows.²

In the documentary, the camera appears almost giddy from the extraordinary landscape, dancing up and down, magnifying the scale of the construction through dizzying views of heights, vertiginous falls through the concrete riverbed, or the whirling of cranes. To describe the gigantic artifacts, images of flowing concrete and roaring equipment race by as a narrator recites numbers of a fabulous tale: a tunnel five kilometers deep, millions of cubic meters of concrete, billions of cubic meters of water. After reveling in this mountain-moving force, however, the film quiets down and shifts scale, zooming in on the real protagonist: Găină Ion, crane operator. Born in the river valley but now a man of modern machines rather than ancestral agrarian occupation, Găină Ion, perched up high in his cabin, works the land of his forbearers, no longer through patient, solitary cultivation but through an entirely new kind of labor, mediated by technology and undertaken collectively: “Thousands upon thousands of workers took the Bicaz [Dam] to heart,” and “the entire country stands by [the workers],” narrates the off-camera voice. Găină Ion’s particular contribution to this titanic and communal enterprise consists of adding 350 cubic meters of concrete daily to the dam’s rising silhouette (figs. 1–3).

Găină Ion’s work is gigantic, measured in tons, and repetitive—load after load of concrete, day after day. Nonetheless, it requires the dexterity and coordination of a miniaturist: each millimeter on the crane’s levers, we are told, has an amplified effect on the concrete bucket’s movements and position, making the operator’s work as precise and absorbing as that of a skilled artisan. “Had he not worked on a crane, he would have built violins or embroidered Gobelin [tapestry].” We see him maneuvering his crane with focused gaze and delicate gestures. “Găină Ion sculpts miniatures,” we are told. The allegory with sculpture makes clear that the construction of a vast concrete dam—and, by extension, of any socialist project—requires the same kind of craft and investment of the self as a handmade artifact. A product of industry situated well beyond the human scale, the dam is nonetheless as unique and “authentic” as the artisanal object, and Găină Ion’s attachment to his crane is as strong as the craftsman’s to a precious tool, an extension of himself. “What will you do after the dam is completed?” he is asked. “I will go where my crane goes,” he answers.

Ilieșiu’s documentary about the Bicaz Dam was part of a well-established genre within socialist visual culture in Romania and beyond, which turned sites of labor

2. This scenario, repeated multiple times across the Soviet world, was developed a few years later in Valentin Rasputin’s (1979) novel *Farewell to Matyora*.



Fig. 1. *The Dam under Construction*. Still from *Bicaz cota 563*. Directed by Mirel Ilieșiu, 1959.

and industry into modern, affectively charged landscapes. To that end, this kind of imagery departed from the conventions of the bourgeois landscape, which required that nature be only minimally troubled by human presence. Instead, the socialist landscape combined the aesthetic delight of natural forms (in the case of the Bicaz documentary, the rushing force of water, the majestic valleys) with the representation of man-made interventions, seeking a kind of synthesis between the enduring motifs of the natural world and the upheavals of the modern one. After 1947, as the new Romanian socialist state engaged in large industrialization projects that ranged from enormous steel plants to mass housing estates for the newly urbanized workers, the problem of monotony and anonymity and overall foreignness of these new environments arose from the very start. Industrial work and its products (architecture being one of them) were seen at once as key to socialism, but also as potentially dehumanizing. The film's celebration of the dam's outsized scale was therefore paired with the intimate presentation of the socialist worker Găină Ion, whose ordinary qualities (we see his file among thousands of other files, his conventional wedding picture, his chain smoking) were clearly meant to balance the imposing, prodigious construction. What interests me more specifically, however, is what distinguishes the film from the customary



Fig. 2. *The Cranes*. Still from *Bicaz cota 563*. Directed by Mirel Ilieșiu, 1959.

socialist story of the model worker: Găină Ion’s ability to engage in industrialized labor without drudgery is understood as the result of a mediation between a pre-industrial, craft-based mode (“Găină Ion’s hands execute the movements of a clockmaker”) and the standardization and efficiency of advanced mechanization. The transformation that radically modified the landscape of the valley, shifted the basic means of production from traditional agriculture to modern industry, and changed Găină Ion from peasant to worker is also presented in the film—and elsewhere, as I will show—in terms of reconciliation between opposite registers: individual commitment and teamwork, brute force and precision, colossal and millimetric scales, efficiency and affect, and, perhaps most importantly, crisis and continuity.

The Primitive Commonwealth

In 1958, as the Bicaz Dam was under construction, ethnographer Henri H. Stahl (1958) published his magisterial study on the earliest settlements in Romania, which he called communal villages (*sate devălmase*, from the word of Russian origin *valmă*, meaning a crowd, but with connotations of blending or coming



Fig. 3. *The Crane Operator*, Găină Ion. Still from *Bicaz cota 563*. Directed by Mirel Ilieșiu, 1959.

together in confusion). Stahl, perhaps Romania's most prolific thinker on the rural question in the second half of the twentieth century, and one of the few to genuinely engage with Marxism in his work, had begun his career in the 1930s as a prominent member of the Bucharest Sociological School under the direction of Dimitrie Gusti, with whom he collaborated on numerous investigations of the countryside. Like most sociologists studying the peasant world in the interwar years, Stahl had worked in large, multidisciplinary teams of scholars documenting village life in order to obtain the kind of synthetic ("monographic") description of the rural universe that was the school's signature method. Much of Stahl's (1939) theory about the Romanian primitive communal village developed from his early findings, which, at the time, had little to do with Marxism. In the context of the 1950s, however, during which the socialist state was dramatically altering property relations through nationalization and forced collectivization campaigns, Stahl's early observations on the persistence, in the Romanian countryside, of seemingly precapitalist socioeconomic structures gained a new meaning and relevance. By 1958, Stahl had turned the empirical knowledge amassed during relatively open-ended investigative campaigns into a systematic and theoretically

ambitious history of landownership in Romania (Durand-Drouhin and Szwengrub 1981–5, 202).

Stahl's three-volume work proposed that before capitalism transformed modes of production, Romanian villages were essentially communes in which land was held and worked collectively, as a group (*de-a valma*). According to him, traces of such primitive collective structures had endured, albeit in various stages of dissolution, all the way into the 1940s, thereby providing empirical evidence that for the Romanian peasant, the original relation to land was collective rather than private, and that the existence of large landlords to whom the peasants were bound was a deformation of a primordial condition of equality and cooperation (Stahl 1958).

Stahl's (1958, 225) theory of the development of land tenure described the Romanian peasantry as organized around the common use of pasture, forest, and other agricultural property:

In a Romanian village, we don't find a juxtaposition of individual households, each with different production areas confined to their territory but, on the contrary, we find a system in which each household has parcels or right of use in each of the main economic zones [such as pastures, hayfields, forests, herds of sheep] that belong to the village as a whole. This should be evidence enough to show that we are confronted with a collective village, in which the functions of each individual household are fulfilled within a complex economy organized at the scale of the village.

Stahl's argument was, in fact, a very late application of the theory of primitive agrarian communism that had had its heyday in the nineteenth century in Germany, England, and Russia. Marx and especially Engels, in his influential 1884 *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, were important channels for propagating the idea of a primitive agrarian communism as one of the stages of development of society. Stahl opened his book with an extensive discussion of the theory's diffusion and evolution through classic texts of historical materialism (not only those of Marx and Engels but also of Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and many others). Stahl's argument for an essentially collective origin of social life constituted thus one of the most convincing efforts to reconcile decades' worth of information collected about the Romanian village by the Bucharest School of Sociology with a Marxist intellectual tradition only recently established in Romania.

Stahl, a scholar of vast erudition, was aware that by the 1950s, at the time of his publication, a general theory of primitive communism had been largely replaced by more precise archeological and anthropological analyses.³ It was therefore not toward international academic forums that Stahl directed his contribution,

3. "Primitive communism" had been replaced by then with more specific formations such as "tribal," "egalitarian," "kin-ordered." See Saitta (1988).

but toward the particular intellectual environment of a Romanian society trying to assimilate and adjust to the categories and principles of socialism as they were imported from the Soviet Union. It is in such context that Stahl's model of the earliest rural settlements in Romania had far-reaching political and methodological implications. Marxism had used the idea of a primitive condition of common ownership of land in order to argue the contingent nature of private property and Stahl's research similarly demonstrated that private ownership was in fact historically circumscribed rather than a permanent feature of Romanian society. Although Stahl did not engage directly with the profound transformations introduced in the countryside in the 1950s, such as collective farming and cooperatives on nationalized land, his argument was bound to be read in light of the official policies of the day and to provide legitimacy to the ways in which the socialist state was altering property relations. It is, however, when rethinking modern socialist forms of the city, rather than the countryside, that Stahl's theory of the archaic further reveals its relevance. His attempt at recovering from the distant past a "typology of collective social life" constituted, I argue, one among several poignant efforts of the time to reconcile the radical changes introduced by socialism with a new understanding of tradition.

"The First House Built by Man": Origins and Types

During his long career, Henri Stahl contributed not only an expansive body of theoretical writings but also a sustained reflection on ways to communicate the findings of sociological or ethnographic research to larger audiences. For a decade he was in charge of a methodology seminar at the University of Bucharest widely attended by a whole generation of social workers who applied their knowledge to their work in cities and countryside. Stahl was also instrumental in the conception and realization of one of the most enduring and popular cultural institutions in Romania, the Village Museum in Bucharest. First opened in 1936 as a temporary open-air display of rural architecture and artifacts amassed by the Bucharest School of Sociology, the Village Museum quickly became one of the most visited destinations in the capital, attracting both leisurely crowds and the patronage of cultural elites. The early exhibition showcased rural households and their inhabitants, a church, windmills, fountains, presses, and other traditional technologies representative of rural know-how, objects that had been singled out during extensive campaigns of documentation of the Romanian countryside by teams of sociologists, some of them led by Henri Stahl.⁴

After 1947 and throughout the 1950s, the Village Museum grew from the remnants of the interwar temporary exhibition into one of Romania's most important

4. On the beginnings of the Village Museum, see the letter of Dimitrie Gusti (1993, 9) written to King Carol II, 20 April 1936.



Fig. 4. Aerial view of the Village Museum. Postcard, before 1973, author's collection.

museums and one of the largest open-air collections of rural architecture in the world. Between 1949 and 1958, dozens of original structures were transferred to the collection; by 1966, the museum had acquired 249 large constructions and hundreds of smaller artifacts. The artifacts were organized into a total, immersive, and picturesque landscape, on the banks of the Herăstrău Lake, with homesteads dispersed along winding paths and framed by lush vegetation and lifelike touches such as flocks of chicken roaming around. “Together, the [exhibits] compose a small, authentic village, with grass and flowers, with decorative and fruit trees. Walking from one exhibit to the next, the visitor travels from one *raion* [administrative zone] to the next, thus taking a rapid stroll through the entire country” (Focșa 1967, 7; see fig. 4). Similar open-air collections were common in the USSR and throughout the Soviet bloc—almost as common as the landscapes of modern industry and factories.

It is there that, in late summer 1958, the curators transferred several structures from the site of the Bicaz Dam: a church, two tiny single-room houses, and a wood-and-straw conical structure (*surlă*) that shepherds built when out to pasture (fig. 5). They arrived in Bucharest as a thousand fragments—beams, slats, posts, shingles, doors, and windows—many delicately carved or painted, carefully wrapped in cotton wool. Throughout the fall, a team of carpenters, some of them brought along from the same region, slowly reassembled the wooden puzzles, giving the original structures a second and much more public



Fig. 5. House from the village of Răpciuni and shepherd's hut in the collection of the Village Museum, Bucharest. Photo by author, 2013.

life on the museum's meadow.⁵ Most of the artifacts came from Răpciuni, a small village on the banks of the Bistrița River, one of twenty settlements scheduled to be submerged by the waters of the new Bicaz Reservoir and whose inhabitants were to be displaced to other locations. Găină Ion might very well have been one of the thousands of inhabitants affected by the relocations.

What tied together Stahl's speculation about the primitive Romanian commonwealth and the painstaking transfers and reconstruction of authentic architecture in the museum, was the role granted to vernacular artifacts to act as tangible embodiments of larger social realities. In the same way that Găină Ion—a singular person with a specific history, habits, and character—could represent the entire Romanian working class, the artifacts in the museum's collection were unique objects that could depict the "village" in general. Working in the quasi-total absence of written documents, Stahl (1958, 6) had come to see the contemporary village as an archive of material signs in which one could read the traces of much earlier social and economic structures: "We have to take into account the exceptionally rich source of evidence constituted by the social remnants with an

5. Technical information on the methods surrounding the dismantling and transportation of the church can be found in Zderciuc, Vladuțiu, and Petrescu (1966). Without public access to the archives of the Village Museum, I found information on the transfer of the Răpciuni church in the archives of the National Institute of Historical Monuments, Historical Monuments Directorate (Institutul Național al Monumentelor Istorice, Direcția Monumente Istorice), files 7534, 7535, 2353.

archaic character that have survived in our country until today, sometimes almost integrally.” To buttress his theory, Stahl approached the village and its architecture as the enduring manifestations of the distant reality of the primitive commune. His argument about the collective nature of the first Romanian social organization relied chiefly on the assumption that certain artifacts, albeit of recent manufacture, had nonetheless the capacity to express much older social and economic relationships. In the socialist years, the Village Museum operated with the same understanding of the rural landscape as a historical and sociological document from which one could extract prehistoric models of human organization and custom. This is how museum curators put it in one of the many publications on methods for collecting and display: “By doing a diachronic study [of the regional types] and starting from contemporary forms that often present a plurality of variations, we can observe the evolution of cultural forms, by recognizing in the written, graphic, or material documents that ethnography or other disciplines can provide, the *prototype* itself from which they developed” (Florescu, Zderciuc, and Vulcănescu 1966, 21). Crucial knowledge was to be deduced not from the single artifact but from a large corpus of formal variants. As in the case of Găină Ion, whose significance consisted in his resemblance to all other socialist workers, folk constructions yielded meaning not by themselves, but as part of a group or family of forms.

In particular, the basic single-room dwellings in the collection such as the ones from Râpciuni held a special place in the discussions of the evolution of architecture and the development of society.⁶ In the museum’s collection, these dwellings stand out as archetypal solutions for shelter, akin to a child’s drawing of a house: a door, a single square window, a prominent roof with ample, protective eaves. A label designated the conical hut as “one of the first types of shelter erected by man.” Consistently described as time capsules from an original pastoral condition, they were explicitly understood as the architectural representatives of the primitive commune.

Despite all their putative archaisms, however, these artifacts were recent constructions. Most artifacts in the museum lack a precise date, but by the 1950s,

6. The view that wooden architecture historically preceded constructions in masonry was often repeated. Another Moldovan house brought from the village of Zăpodeni two years after the Râpciuni transfer is presented to the visitor as “the prototype of the single-cell dwelling of the past in which lived the vassal peasant (*clăcaș*). The low ceiling, the small windows covered in sheepskin demonstrate the difficult living conditions to which were reduced poor peasants who were cruelly exploited ... In terms of technique, it represents an old form of wood construction” (Focșa 1967, 41; see also Stănculescu 1941).

In his 1957 book on Romanian folk architecture, architectural historian Grigore Ionescu (1957, 27) had already singled out the Râpciuni house as an example of “the typical form of an archaic dwelling with a single room,” spawning an entire family of studies of the “primitive hut.” The type of the conic hut also constituted the object of extensive study aimed at “understanding man’s journey in terms of housing from the most ancient times—the primitive commune—until today” (Chelcea 1970, 43).

very few were more than a hundred years old. (The house from Răpciuni, for instance, is vaguely dated to the nineteenth century.) Made out of wood or other rapidly decaying materials, most of the exhibits could only have been of a relatively young physical age, and consequently, their historical value had to reside also in the immaterial principle of their form—in other words, in their typological character.⁷ The significance of this architecture was thus suspended between material authenticity and uniqueness (all artifacts were brought with great effort from their original location rather than rebuilt as replicas) and the conventional qualities that made each artifact a specimen, an object at once singular and general: “Any museum object—house, technical device, tool—must be first and foremost *typical*, that is, must synthesize in its structure the entirety of morphological and functional characteristics of the species to which it belongs,” or, “An architectural piece in the museum is the expression of an effort to adapt construction to the material and spiritual demands of society in a certain milieu and in a specific historical moment. It is the *typical* form of a certain social group in a certain area” (Florescu, Zderciuc, and Vulcănescu 1966, 25–6 [emphasis mine]).

Type

Socialist ethnography’s preoccupation with the archaic might seem remote from the contemporary concerns of building a new society. But as ethnographers speculated about the origins of society or the fundamentals of vernacular construction, a similar interest in type swept the architectural profession during those years. Like in most of the Soviet bloc, the late 1950s in Romania were years of drastically accelerated housing construction meant to alleviate shortages created by the migration to the city of a large part of the rural population.⁸ For architects in the 1950s, confronted with the pressing need to build housing fast and economically, the practice of architecture rapidly shifted from the design of singular buildings to the conception and planning of units that could be deployed in series. Even before the Khrushchev-mandated turn to standardized construction, socialist housing programs had to rely on basic repeatable designs called types (*proiecte-tip*) and on a method called typification (*tipizare*). In the context of postwar design and construction, type referred to the standardization of construction—initially, quantities and kinds of materials per dwelling unit, for instance, or soon

7. Grigore Ionescu (1957, 7), one of the most important historians of Romanian architecture of the twentieth century, wrote, “Folk artworks are constantly rebuilt. Conceived and executed by an endless succession of generations, such repeated rebuilding constitutes in large part a work of restoration (of the same type): the new house or church cannot be conceived as removed from the models that preceded them.”

8. From 1948 to 1966, for instance, Bucharest added more than three hundred thousand inhabitants, a 25 percent population increase. New industrial centers such as Hunedoara saw their population quadruple in less than a decade.

after, building components such as prefabricated panels. In this sense, typification had the advantage of yielding predictable and efficient constructive norms. Equally important, however, type referred to design solutions in plan, with implications not only in terms of constructive systems but also spatially in terms of the interior organization of each apartment. Significant attention was devoted throughout the 1950s to these spatial types, which concerned, for instance, the size and arrangement of rooms as a function of the number of inhabitants, the relations between rooms (with or without corridor, for instance), the position of the kitchen, or the combination of units in multistory buildings.

In the 1950s, the architectural profession in Romania was reorganized in large institutes, in part to support the development of such type-projects (*proiecte tip*) for a variety of scales, users, and contexts. Early on, typified construction systems became the charge of the IPC (Institute for the Design of Constructions, renamed soon after as the Institute for the Design of Construction Types); the IPB (Institut Proiect București, the architectural agency for all Bucharest) received a clear mandate to approach housing in terms of basic, repeatable, and adaptable types; many other similar institutes existed on a regional level. By the end of the decade, the practice of architecture had become indistinguishable from the design and application of type-projects.

Thinking in terms of types rather than individual buildings constituted a significant cultural shift for an architectural professional class mostly trained in presocialist Romania, often in a Beaux Arts tradition with its rules of harmonious composition and stylistic expression. In contrast to that tradition, typification as a design and construction method bypassed conventional notions of creativity and authorship and prevented elaborate engagements with form: “When it comes to typification, we need to concentrate our efforts on the essential elements that constitute a building, rather than on the building itself” (“Sedința plenară largită” 1958, 3).

As a design aid for contemporary architects, typification, based on mechanized production and economic calculations, shared very little with the ethnographers’ theoretical search for vernacular types. The modern and the peasant architectural types coincided, however, in their definition as a syntactical order imposed on (or extracted from) an otherwise endlessly varied set of particular solutions, and therefore as a method for formulating collective consensus on what constituted good, appropriate form. In other words, for architects, ethnographers, or museum curators equally, type’s usefulness consisted also in its shared social meaning or convention.⁹

The omnipresence of standardized design and building techniques and their economic justification has been a widely recognized theme of postwar architecture throughout the Soviet bloc. What is more rarely discussed—and revealed in the

9. Previous discussions about theories of type, primarily in German architectural debates in the early twentieth century, reveal similar connotations. See, for instance, Blau (2006).

juxtaposition with the ethnographic—is that an architecture of types carried an equally important collective dimension that resonated particularly with the task of building the new urban forms of socialism. In both its vernacular and contemporary manifestation, type was the essential, stable principle reached by reducing formal variations to a common root form, and as such produced forms that were fundamentally legible and iconic. As an object of cultural exchange and communication, type offered a vocabulary that was collectively generated and collectively understood, and which could turn modern architecture into a medium of familiarity, unified experience, and collective identity. While ethnographers explained architectural forms in terms of a people’s habits and traditions and repeatedly invoked “the anonymous creator, representative of the masses” (Ungureanu 1966, 3), committed socialist architects called for the designer’s work to assume a collective quality, both as an activity and as a product—done by the group, for the group: “Architectural activity today is no longer the personal problem of the single creator, but a collective activity within a state organization” (“Marea sărbătoare” 1959, 9).

A Modern Socialist Commune?

The search for primordial forms of community that had guided Stahl’s theory of a primitive Romanian commune also permeated discussions about the socialist city. In 1958, the Union Internationale des Architectes (UIA), a small but culturally influential organization, held its fifth congress in Moscow (Glendinning 2009). The extensive reports filed by the team of Romanian delegates, as well as the conference excerpts published in *Arhitectura RPR*, signal a shift in the architectural profession that can best be described as a rethinking of housing in terms of urban units rather than a collection of individual buildings. One of the most significant outcomes of the meeting was the idea of organizing the new housing estates into “neighborhood units” that would not only satisfy the inhabitants’ contingent, practical requirements but also address more profound problems of social and collective life under socialism (Baranov 1958, 26).

Therefore, 1958 was also the year in which the architects’ preoccupation with the constructive and spatial implications of type-projects expanded from the scale of the building to that of the city in order to fully include the need to create cohesive communities in a context of industrializing modernity and urban migration. After the UIA congress, housing design turned increasingly toward the investigation of new forms and scales of urban organization that the existing city could no longer satisfy. The design of the new residential environments sought to produce small societies of intimates linked by the shared daily use of spaces (parks, playgrounds) and facilities (shops, clinics, schools, or a cinema). Like in the imaginary village staged in the museum, recurrent housing types would provide the outward expression of a basic organic social unity, smaller and more palpable than the larger and

more abstract political collective of the state. First designated as “neighborhood units” (a term borrowed from English and American practice), these small territorial units were quickly renamed *microraion* (or microdistrict, from Russian *mikrorayon*), a change in terminology that suggests that what was once a Western notion was transformed, integrated, and adapted to the context of the Soviet bloc.¹⁰

Prior urban planning techniques had proceeded additively, through the conception of discrete parcels, often in a grid-like system; by contrast, the *microraion* required the planner to conceive the territory as a whole, proceeding outward from a core of shared functions and services, through territorial units of increasing size and complexity that nested within each other. If earlier housing projects were intended to be inserted within the existing urban fabric, the *microraion* complex was meant to function autonomously, even in an autarchic manner, as a fully formed alternative small city (fig. 6). The *microraion* occupied a clearly defined area, delimited by streets with intense traffic or by other strong dividing elements. To achieve cohesion, its territory was not to be crossed by important streets, and pedestrian and car traffic were separated, creating a clear boundary between inside and outside. The maximum distance between any dwelling, service, and public transportation was only a few minutes’ walk, and to that end, the size of the *microraion* was not go beyond ten thousand inhabitants and often remained smaller (Locar 1960, 5). From 1958 onward, the *microraion* constituted the urban planning device of choice in Romania and elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, and was repeatedly offered as a spatial answer to the social and functional imperatives of a new socialist society.

The *microraion*’s experiential and functional completeness echoed, in a contemporary form, Romanian ethnographers’ view of the village (instead of the family, the factory, or the nation) as the basic, indivisible social unit that contained within it, like a microcosm, all aspects of life. Like the village for the primitive commune, the *microraion* spatialized the political organization of a socialist society, giving expression to “the social unity of the urban organism,” “the collective character of certain everyday functions” and the “multilateral content of collective life under socialism” (Budişteanu and Rău 1960, 22–5). It acted as a school for the socialist citizen: it urbanized the workers, many of whom had come from the countryside, by accustoming them to new spatial tropes they would come to associate with life under socialism (such as shared outdoor spaces, the close physical proximity of apartment dwellings, kitchens separate from living spaces, balconies), and by replacing old elements of reference (such as class, ethnicity, place of origin) with new physical and visual ones. It operated as a device of social integration, bringing together “the worker, the functionary, and the intellectual” with the

10. The term seems to have been first used in 1959 in a series of Soviet publications: “Pravila i normy planirovki i zastroiki gorodov” (Rules and norms of the planning and construction of cities) and “Zastroika zhilykh mikroraionov” (The construction of the residential microdistrict) (Moscow: State Publisher for Constructions, Architecture, and Construction Materials).



Fig. 6. Aerial view of a *microraión* in the Balta Albă housing district, Bucharest. Published in *Arhitectura RPR* 12, no. 4 (1964): 28.

aim of actively blurring class distinction: “The *microraións* must constitute first and foremost the solution to the social life of the people of tomorrow,” the “transposition of tomorrow’s social life into functional, economic, and aesthetic relations” (Sebestyen 1962, 11).

Finally, the socialist *microraión* altered architecture’s purview altogether. Conventionally, architectural design concerned the housing unit or the single building; the *microraión*, however, required that the building no longer be conceived as a single, independent entity but as a member of a family of objects that together would constitute a larger spatial unit. Because the *microraión* was designed from the beginning as a coherent whole, no building could accrue meaning by itself, but only as part of a larger territorial relationship established through multiples: “A new unit needed to appear in the organization of the city; from the beginning, it became clear that the apartment building was too small a unit, one that could not ensure a restructuring [of the city] ... The idea of the *microraión* has appeared in the evolution of our thinking about ensembles” (Silianu 1962, 7). The generic, impersonal air of socialist residential architecture—the visual cliché of the monotonous, easily interchangeable apartment towers—was a consequence not only of industrialized, mass-construction techniques, but also of a deliberate attempt to dislocate signification away from the singular architectural object in favor of the shared rules of the whole. It is therefore tempting to find in such “collectivization” of buildings a spatial metaphor for their inhabitants’ own overcoming of individualism.

Primitive Huts and Socialist Apartments

Type-based architecture and its organization in microdistricts generated a landscape that was, visually, radically different from the picturesque image of a

premodern commonwealth so eagerly reconstructed by Henri Stahl and staged in the Village Museum. In fact, one of the key attractions of the museum was the contrast its architectural collection offered to the housing districts cropping up around Bucharest—such as, for instance, the Floreasca housing project, situated within walking distance from the Village Museum, along the shores of the same string of lakes. Still under construction in 1958, Floreasca was one of the most publicized architectural realizations of the Romanian socialist state.¹¹ As the artifacts from Râpciuni and other submerged villages arrived in Bucharest, hundreds of workers, cranes, and other machinery were erecting dozens of new housing blocks amounting to thousands of apartments at great speed. This is how Floreasca was described in 1956:

I walk along rows of housing blocks, through the courtyards filled with flowers. ... In the distance other blocks are being built. There are plans for 80 of them ... Already 15 are inhabited. A small town.

I enter block number 7, by chance.

Fancy that! You need only turn a valve to heat the radiator. You light a match and the gas stove warms up. You light another match, down in the laundry room, and the water heater starts boiling. You turn a faucet, and warm water fills the ceramic tub. Turn another one and hot water reaches the dishwasher in the kitchen. Press a button, and the garbage disappears, down to the incinerator. This is how the workers leading production lines live, along with their families. Or the functionaries. Or the intellectuals.¹²

(Botez 1956, 74–5; see fig. 7)

In terms of practices and techniques, the contrast is indeed striking between the museum's artifacts and modern construction. The first belong firmly to the realm of tradition and craft: wood parts carved by hand, each with a unique and irreplaceable character, and assembled according to ancestral custom, without plan or documentation. On the other hand, contemporary architects designed with building components that were serialized, identical, interchangeable, and produced in large numbers in factories, according to projects that followed scientifically devised norms, calculated standards, and explicit ratios. The peasant artifacts, now consecrated by the museum, had immense value—as witnessed by

11. Along with the holiday resorts on the Black Sea Coast and the industrial steel mills on the Valea Jiului, it had been exhibited at the Fifth Congress of the International Architects' Union in Moscow in 1958.

12. Compare this quote to the Village Museum director's description of the visitors' encounter with the minimal huts and the implements of peasant life in the collection: "Some visitors are particularly struck by the difficult conditions of the past, when people had to work hard with primitive tools, to live below ground in humid, dark shelters, lit with ambers from the fire" (Focșa 1967, 74).



Fig. 7. Floreasca housing, Bucharest. The Village Museum is located in the green wooded area in the middle ground. Postcard, after 1964, author's collection.

the care with which they were transported and manipulated; by contrast, architects sought to achieve the cheapest price per socialist apartment.

And yet, the contrast was more superficial than constitutive. Though presented as a display of rural, archaic practices, the dwellings in the museum were unavoidably permeated by modern technology and industry. Their presence in Bucharest, hundreds of kilometers from their place of origin, required the same kind of centralized planning and infrastructure as the construction of modern type-projects. Their disassembly and reassembly necessitated a modular approach in which parts were sorted and numbered according to a system analogous to construction with prefabricated elements. The ephemeral, organic materials were treated with chemical preservatives that made them as much the products of science as the latest pre-stressed concrete. Finally, the work of reassembly was no longer the result of custom and collective wisdom, but of a procedure tightly managed and paid for by the state institution. Like Bicaz Dam and the new housing estates of those years, the museum collection was the object of mass-media attention and widely publicized through film, advertisement, and an endless number of postcards.

Although the Floreasca apartments were depicted as futuristic in their smooth and total mechanization of everyday life—the miraculous turning of the valve—and the artifacts from the museum collection as quaint and pastoral, the socialist housing advanced forms of togetherness that evoked the kind of community

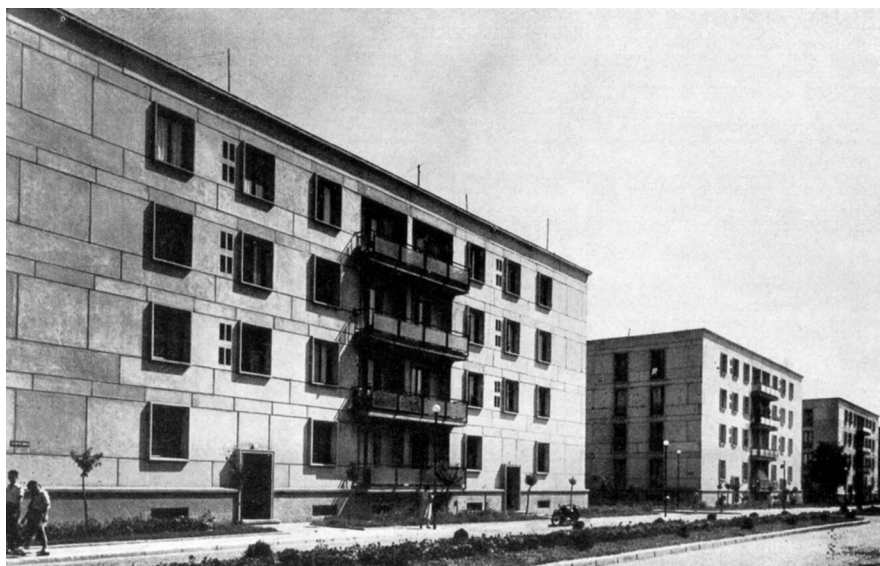


Fig. 8. Buildings in Floreasca, Bucharest, late 1950s. Cover page of *Arhitectura RPR* 6, no. 12 (1958).

ethnographers attempted to deduce from the vernacular past.¹³ The Floreasca housing project, for instance, anticipated all the traits of the *microraiion*. It used an existing street grid, but merged all preexisting individual parcels into one large territorial unit under municipal control; it also emphatically rewrote the character of the place by building affordable workers' housing instead of the single-family middle-class villas that had been the standard for that part of the capital. Like in Stahl's description of the primitive commune, in which individual needs and actions were fulfilled in a collective system, in Floreasca, the apartments were individually owned or rented, but land was developed and used as a single entity. A significant portion of the terrain was devoted to collective functions: the spaces between buildings became intimate shared gardens where residents came to chat and children to play. In the center of the development stood two schools, four pre-schools, a public bath, a laundry, a cultural center with club and library, a movie theater, a park, and a general store (Ionescu 1969). Finally, certain architectural details required their inhabitants to engage in close encounters, as was the case with the balconies shared by two apartments, with only a low partition in between. (Garbage chutes, stairways, central heating, and, at times, very thin walls also produced unexpected forms of intimacy.) The project as a whole offered a didactic illustration of what socialist planning could achieve once collective

13. The term "community" is not widely used in the 1950s in Romania, but "the collective" and "collectivity" are. Stahl explored in detail the varied terminology that collective ownership and cooperation assumed in the history of the village (*sat devălmaș, confederație, ocol*).

ownership prevailed over private interests and once the fragmentation of the city's territory, which resulted from individual property, could be overcome (see [fig. 8](#)).

Utilitarian Beauty

Another concern that connected the spaces of the Bicaz Dam, the Village Museum, and the *microraiion* into one continuous landscape of socialism was the highlighting of signs of labor and production, even at the heart of the most picturesque and organic natural form. If in his documentary *Ilieșiu* turned the work site of the Bicaz Dam into a new kind of environment, ethnographers presented the countryside as a work site. The revival of the notion of a primitive agrarian commune confirmed the view of the Romanian countryside as an essentially *worked* landscape—indeed, Stahl had insisted that early free peasants had joined together first and foremost to work the land in association. Similarly, much was made in the Village Museum of the harmonious aesthetic that emerged from a relation to nature based on labor, and the selection and display of objects argued for the utilitarian origin of form.

The museum prided itself on its extensive collection of tools, varied, suggestive, and often intriguing, that ranged from a simple carding comb to imposing windmills. Throughout the collection, the visitor could see how practical requirements engendered both spaces and artifacts: how mechanical necessity dictated the windmill's silhouette, or how the task of tilling the soil gave its dynamic shape to the hand plow exhibited next to the Răpciuni hut (see [fig. 9](#)). Architecture spoke of utility and pragmatic, rational choices: the hearth organized interior spaces, the availability of local materials gave the roof its particular proportions, the needs and rhythms of the pastoral existence determined the construction system of the shepherd's hut. Simple and legible, vernacular structures provided valuable evidence of the direct way in which function could translate into morphology. The satisfaction of material needs, however, not only engendered typical, stable forms, but also endowed folk products with what the curators described as unself-conscious, spontaneous beauty and character. "Forging with their own hands the constructions and objects that responded to their needs, the people expressed through them their artistic feeling. From simple objects of everyday use, adapted to practical needs, the people realized artworks that combined skillfully and ingeniously the useful and the beautiful" (Focșa 1966, 13).

The fusion of the technical and aesthetic dimensions (which had also animated *Ilieșiu's* filmic metaphor about the crane operator as sculptor of mountains) constituted socialism's other tremendously hopeful stake in the notion of the primitive: if the vernacular could achieve a certain kind of harmonious feeling through its utilitarian, typical creations, then perhaps socialist industry, whose products and spaces also stemmed from a collective response to physical conditions and practical demands, could resonate similarly with users and inhabitants. Archaic forms,



Fig. 9. House from the village of Răpciuni, in the collection of the Village Museum, Bucharest. Postcard, before 1973, author's collection.

devoid of “style” or the need to aggrandize a ruling class and yet beautiful, provided a direct line of descent from the craft of the village to the products of socialist industry. The same legibility of function that gave the Răpciuni mountain hut its character could perhaps extend to the housing block and its easily understood construction. The exposed corner joints or the emphatic roof of the primordial rural house could find their modern equivalent in the simple syntax of prefabricated panels assembly, and perhaps achieve the same kind of striking, immediate visual expression.

Ilieșiu's documentary about the Bicăz Dam portrayed the socialist work site as the fantastic and monumental landscape of technologically driven upheaval; meant for the same audiences, the equally fictional construct of the Village Museum (and, through it, of the primitive commune) showed an opposite concern for gentle familiarity and peaceful coexistence with the natural elements. Although visually foreign to each other, these two spaces belonged to the same capacious socialist imaginary. In between the colossal dam and the diminutive village, at the center of a system of ideological coordinates where industrial, modular, rational architecture met with concerns for affect, community, and familiarity, the *microraión* or socialist residential complex housed the new working class. Many of its inhabitants were newly urbanized, semiliterate peasants¹⁴ for whom

14. Or to use a category elaborated by Serbo-American sociologist Andrei Simic (1973), a part of the population of Bucharest in the 1950s would have been “peasant urbanites.”

the viewing of Ilieșiu's documentary or a visit to the museum (where factories regularly scheduled outings) constituted a lesson at once intuitive and powerful about work as the ordaining principle of everyday life. The spare architecture of their new apartments extended that lesson by giving tangible form not only to the products of cranes and factories but also to a social contract about equality and togetherness.

What, then, could be obtained from reactivating the idea of the primitive commune in the midst of Romania's socialist modernization? What could the study, interpretation, and encounter with archaic forms provide to the new dweller of the socialist city, circa 1958? And what can we, retrospectively, discern about the socialist project when linking together episodes as disparate as the filming of a dam, the design of a mass housing complex, and the display of folk architecture? Taken together, they challenge the quasi-unanimous verdict that socialism produced material environments of monotony and alienation, showing instead that the humanization of both labor and spaces was an imperative as strong as that of modernization. The notion of architectural type, much maligned as the root principle of the tedious uniformity of socialist society, contained in fact a rich theory of both form and practice, product and production: it contained a proposition about origins, partly formulated in relationship with theories of primitive agrarian communism; it answered constructive needs in rational ways while also providing equality and shared experience across classes. Type proposed a kind of utilitarian beauty that provided a synthesis between creativity and production, which was particularly desirable for reconciling the users or inhabitants to the industrial origin of the socialist object or dwelling. Finally, a typical artifact combined freedom and community, as its particularity receded into commonwealth: such artifact was the ideal citizen of a good society.

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In Search of a Humane Environment: Environment, Identity, and Design in the 1960s–70s

Mari Laanemets

This article explores how designers and artists working in Soviet Estonia sought to assess and rethink the relationship of the man to his/her surrounding environment. At the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s various attempts to imagine a new kind of humane environment appeared as a response to modernization. The creation of a new integral living environment—the main task of Soviet design proclaimed by VNIITE—included aspects of social agency, and of educating and empowering the user. The conceptions of integrity and humanity, central to these new designs, were developed against the background of a return to the early writings of Karl Marx as well as to the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s.

Key Words: Environment, Soviet Design and Architecture, Marxist Theory of Design, Humane Space

As we all know, the main problem of contemporary culture is the human environment. Or according to a more primitive scheme: the city—man. This is the problem upon which the possibility of human life on this earth is dependent.

—Leonhard Lapin, *Kaks kunsti*¹

In a postwar and post-Stalinist Soviet society, man's material environment became particularly important (Buchli 1997). Its integral design “for the realisation of the most progressive social ideas” became a national priority (Gens 1972b, 8). Integrity was one of the ideas and characteristics meant to separate the Soviet environment from the West and aid in overtaking it. Subjected to capitalism, Western design was thought to induce constant consumption, while Soviet design was free to focus on creating a harmonious material environment—a truly humane space

1. Translated by Helen Ikla. Quotations from Glazychev 1972, Brecht 1972, Lehari 1976, Lapin 1975, 1997, and Lapin and Lapin 1997 are translated by Helen Ikla.

for living—supporting harmonious human relationships (Soloviev 1973, 34).² This perspective became increasingly important within the context of the expanding artificial environment during the development and spread of new technologies, which gave cause to think about these changes—the mediation of a new technological civilization and protection of human nature within it (Sarap 1975, 19–20).³ Soviet design, which was neither held back by the interests of capital nor pushed forward by the desire to increase profits, was aimed at transforming the environment and the human, while educating consumers and users and empowering them (Sarap 1975, 55–60). The creation of a new integral living environment was based on the idea of synthesis, which at first simply stood for the synthesis of different modes of art into a single harmonious whole—the involvement of art in architecture and the formation of public space—but which soon expanded beyond the medial synthesis into a demand for an increasingly total joining of different scientific disciplines, for a “total design” involving the environment and human activity (Olep 1972).

This essay deals with new visions of space, human environment, and its organization that appear at the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s, mostly as a response to modernization and the official rhetoric regarding a synthesis of the arts. The emphasis is on theoretical argumentations and experimental projects—visionary fields rather than the realities of the built environment. I would like to make these conceptions of integrity and humanity more complete, as they are the background for the reorganization of the environment, and to understand how these ideas changed over time, especially at the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s.

My examples are from the periphery of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Estonia. Soviet visions of space and concepts of (material) environment have attracted much interest in recent research. The focus of these studies, however, has been on Russia with its centers Moscow and St. Petersburg, while non-Russian Soviet republics remain unexplored. At the same time, Baltic states occupy an exceptional position: the less restrictive situation allowed artists to realize unique experimental projects like the exhibition series *Space and Form*.

First, I shall deal with visions of a new environment based on formal experimentation, where investigating elementary (geometric) forms and structures became the basis for organizing environments. Such (formal) solutions were, for example, propagated by the first *Space and Form* exhibition held in 1969, which is the basis for much of the discussion in this article. Next, I will look into experiments in spatial practices, certain innovative spatial conceptions that emphasized

2. Soviet design had a double role: emphasis was placed, on the one hand, on being different from Western design, and on the other, on the improvement and competitiveness of Soviet products. Learning from the West was thus justified and recommended, because the Soviet economy was dependent on foreign currency and thus on growing exports.

3. In 1956 Nikolai Bulganin, then premier of the Soviet Union, had announced the launch of the “scientific and technical revolution.” Industrialization of housing alongside other key sectors was one of the important engines of Soviet modernization after Stalin (Pavitt and Crowley 2008, 167).

a new relationship between space (the environment, architecture) and its user. In the last part of the essay, I will analyze the expansion of ideas of synthesis and total experience on the basis of Leonhard Lapin's conceptions and their implementation in Sirje Runge's work during the 1970s.

Modernization: A Synthesis of the Arts

After Stalin's death new values in approaches to architecture tentatively emerged, starting what has been understood as reinstating modernism (Kodres 2002, 130).⁴ This was made possible by Nikita Khrushchev's (1993) speech at the Second National Congress of Builders in December 1954. In a speech, which stood for the beginning of the Khrushchev thaw (promising to set the society back on the Leninist course), the first secretary of the party encouraged builders to employ industrial methods in construction, develop modular building types, and renounce embellishments (or "excess" as Stalinist décor was now called).⁵

The rationalization and industrialization of construction, for the most part, provided hope for an increase in productivity—the issue of the material environment was primarily a political topic, and modernization in construction was brought on by the postwar lack of living space. Thus, this (re)turn to modernism was determined by economic, not aesthetic considerations; the idea of simplicity and functionality was instrumentalized by planning institutes (Gerchuk 2000, 85–8). Modernist architecture became an important tool in the rational restructuring of lifestyle, which was more often than not justified with rhetoric corresponding to the modern age (89–90), and rarely with constructivist principles or the productivist conception of nonhierarchical material culture (Starr 1971). The contemporary form's objectives of "rational beauty" were in accordance with the objectives of production: easy to produce and available to the masses/as widely as possible (Ivask 1973, 20). Victor Buchli has compared the rupture in ways of living that started at the end of the 1950s to the "cultural revolution" of the 1920s, demonstrating that at the center of this break was the material environment and lifestyle where the formation of the "new Soviet man" was thought to take place, but also that this was an attempt by the Communist party to exert control over the domestic sphere. Although the rhetoric that followed the reforms emphasized the

4. For many architects, this would have without a doubt seemed like a turn backward, but as recent studies have shown, this (re)turn was very ambivalent and debatable (see Bocharnikova 2014, 84–106). Also, terms like "modernism" and "functionalism" were generally not used. Until the end of the 1960s, only "contemporary style," "contemporary Soviet architecture," or "socialist architecture" were mentioned. These terms were used because of a need to retain a crucial difference from the West. Regarding the term "socialist modernism," see Reid (2009).

5. In November 1955, the State Committee for Construction (Gosstroï) published the Resolution of the Central Committee and USSR Council "On elimination of excesses in design and construction."

democratic nature of this new rational way of living⁶ and the humane nature of the new (complete) environment, which helped man reach a harmonious “self,” the “modernist” reforms of the Thaw were for the most part disciplinary and less liberating (Buchli 1997, 162).

In Soviet Estonia, as in the rest of the Soviet Union, new housing complexes and small apartments were constructed, as these had become a significant part of the dominant planned economy (Crowley 2009, 235). Despite their economic size—according to regulations the smallest single-room apartment had to be at least eighteen square meters, and the largest four-room apartment could not be larger than sixty square meters (Ojari 2004, 48)—these light-filled and hygienic apartments were still the epitome of progress, even though the bleak and monotonous environment of the new developments became the typical “Soviet landscape” (Crowley 2009, 234–5). Journals like *Kunst ja kodu* (Art and Home), founded in 1958, offered schemes for how to furnish tiny standard apartments—for example, instructing readers on where to place the TV set, radio, or piano.

Nevertheless, the course toward modernization reevaluated the Soviet avant-garde as a precursor of Soviet design and revived its idea of art as something that shapes and organizes the environment, and with it a new way of life (e.g., Lissitzky 1989). While Buchli demonstrates a similarity with the 1920s, when revolutionary art was supposed to produce a new space-environment and objects, which in turn were to teach and implement a new Soviet way of living (e.g., Arvatov 1997), the connection he builds is still much more conceptual. Even though the aims of transformation in the 1960s were slightly different from those in the 1920s⁷—and the expression more influenced by jargon—the more recent discussions concerning socialist design were still heavily based on previous conceptions.⁸ The emphasis put on the role of art (aesthetics) in forming the human living environment and shaping the individual through the configuration of everyday material surroundings and facilities corresponds to constructivist and productivist ideas regarding the introduction of art into life. Dissatisfaction with the form and quality of (industrially produced) commodities, which were subject to constant critique and the improvement of which was tied to the greater involvement of artists in the industrial production process (Tomberg 1961), was in fact tied to broader issues regarding the role of design in

6. The rhetoric used during Khrushchev’s time to legitimize modernism included several ideologically and aesthetically loaded terms such as contemporaneity, purposefulness, youthfulness, openness, freedom, and democracy (Reid 2009, 101).

7. Unlike in the earlier era, the debate during the 1950s and 1960s was not focused on the complete dissolution of the domestic sphere (Buck-Morss 2000, 190–205). For the dematerialization of Soviet daily life and domestic sphere see Cubbin (2014).

8. In the 1960s, the constructivist avant-garde of the 1920s had been rehabilitated step-by-step as the predecessor of Soviet design. This point of view was represented, for example, by VNIITE (*Vsesoiuznyi nauchno-issledovatel’skii institut tekhnicheskoi estetiki* or All-Union Scientific Research Institute for Technical Aesthetics), which claimed to be the inheritor of the traditions of VKhU-TEMAS. The institute played an important role in the revival and study of the 1920s Soviet avant-garde.

contemporary Soviet society. This was not solely understood as providing everyday objects and environments with a more “comely” face, but was also tied to the moral, social, and political responsibilities of the designer-artist. The necessity for an accentuated intervention must then be understood as far-reaching, as a demand for conceptually new objects and environments.

The Socialist Culture of Things

The debate over the “socialist material culture” returns, as previously mentioned, to the 1920s, when the need for determining a specific, decidedly Soviet—proletarian—art (architecture, design) practice corresponding to Marxist teachings, leading to invention and theorization of new kinds of useful material objects that would transform everyday life and consciousness under socialism, was initiated. One of the most well-known advocates and theoreticians of proletarian production art, Boris Arvatov (1972; translation mine), emphasized the need to socialize artistic methods and thought that artistic creation was a tool for educating the individual, who would consciously organize the forms of his activities and material environment. By this he did not mean decoration, but purposeful organization of all spheres of life (23). Furthermore, while in a bourgeois society, formational and organizational activities remained the prerogative of a small caste of art specialists, the proletarian society made methods of artistic organization accessible to everyone. “Colors, sounds, words, etc. in their spatial and temporal forms are the object of every person’s activity,” wrote Arvatov (22; translation mine). Just as every person must be capable of walking and talking correctly (qualitatively), they must also be competent in organizing the world of things that surrounds them, thus making them a harmonious individual (22). Arvatov looked forward to the abolition of the distinction between work and play, between technical object and cultural subject, between professional and amateur. He wanted to restore the lost connection between the artist and the living environment within the new conditions of modern industrial production. Thus, restoring the unity of aesthetics became the aim of socialist aesthetics—to involve all the senses and, in addition, to become active. Art was the force—the action—that intervened and transformed life (Kiaer 2005, 69–70). The “socialist things” made from this perspective overcame alienation. In Marxist theory, alienation is a consequence of capitalism, capitalist labor relations, and commodity fetishism in particular (Marx 2008, 86–7). Socialist things, as Arvatov (1997, 126) imagined them, would be transformative, changing people, shaping “gesticulation, movement and activity.” Design became less about perfecting the form of things and more about the shaping of the form of relations.

Humanism as Practice

The return that took place during the 1950s and 1960s led back not only to Lenin but also to young Marx. The humanism in Marx’s early work was rediscovered and

this was supposed to become the basis for the rebuilding of a communist society, from which Stalin's rule had become distanced. This humanism was centered on the revaluing of subjectivity and the creative individual (Lauristin and Vihalemm 1998, 1391).

Marx saw human nature as something not universal and unchanging. Instead, he understood it as something that was the result of societal relations. However, human nature was also determined by how man expresses himself and transforms the world through creative practical activities. These sensory-activity pursuits (with production forces and relations acting in the background) are vital for the formation of human nature because human beings are by nature free, purposive producers (Werckmeister 1974, 12–5). But this kind of free production—self-realization—is inhibited within a capitalist mode of production as the division of work results in the distancing of the human-producer from the product of their activity. The joint and self-sufficient experience of the working process is broken, resulting in the worker becoming alienated.

This condition of subjugation became topical during the 1960s. Naturally, this was mostly a problem of capitalist society, but it was not limited to it (Blum 1969). The reasons for alienation were seen as authoritarianism and bureaucracy as well as dogmatism, which hindered not only scientific development but also the more general manifestation of human creativity. In the hope of establishing “true socialism” and an open democratic society, overcoming alienation came into focus and art/aesthetics had its special role in this. Art was often seen as the only possible non-alienated labor in contemporary society where man performs in their full reality as a creator (Scanlan 1985, 309–10).⁹

Although the fevered discussion about the role of the aesthetics in society at first occurred in the context of applied arts, it exerted pressure also on dogmatic realism. This was also the basis of French Marxist Roger Garaudy's 1963 book *Realism without Borders*, which was translated into Russian in 1966 and provided grounds for lively discussion in the Soviet Union. However, more important than the expansion of the concept of socialist realism were Garaudy's thoughts on the function of art in the contemporary society. Namely, Garaudy tasks art with the possibility of humanizing the world, overcoming alienation and creating new values. All this was supposed to be achieved in a “practical” manner (Kangilaski 1965, 1711–3). Art is not a mirror that reflects reality, nor a screen

9. Marx himself operated within two conceptions of art. While typical artistic production practiced in a society was instrumentalized and stood (like religion, politics, and morality) at the service of said society and power, “true” art was characterized by the opening of human nature, and by free self-realization. True art could only exist in such a way in a society without divisions of labor. Also, it would not have been practiced by people who specifically chose to be artists but rather by those who painted, among other things. The emancipatory utopia of this kind of society (communism) is the multifaceted person (Marx and Engels 1990, 33).

onto which one projects reality. Instead, it is a plastic model¹⁰ of reality (1717–8). With that, the emphasis moved from the “superstructure,” a common vulgarized Marxist interpretation of art as a passive reflection of socioeconomic relations (the base) to artistic activity as a part of “transformative practices,” which were similar to other forms of productive consciousness and work. The focus was not on the ideological content of art, but instead on its practice.

The restoration of the “human dimension” (and the superseding of alienation), in light of Marx’s early writings, meant not less than developing spaces where creativity can unfold, and generating situations where everybody can participate in the organization of material and in the creation of a new living environment, creating integrity and unity, not in the illusory external form of objects, but in practice and in human activity (Kantor 1967, 192–4).¹¹ Philosopher and sociologist Karl Kantor, whose theory of aesthetic production relied on Arvatov’s ideas, as well as on Marx’s early writings, defined socialist design as the production of harmonious societal relations (Cubbin 2015, 112–3). He did not consider design, or the “production art of the future” as Kantor called his theory of new design, a question of formal qualities, but saw it as a political and social statement.

Concern about “good form”¹² is contrasted by an obligation to ascertain “true needs.”¹³ If such a critique at first seems to be directed against a desire and a cult of things, an urging for “reasonable and rational” consumption (Mirov 1966), then in light of the discussions mentioned before, this all acquires a slightly different meaning. It cannot solely be understood as an “education of taste” (Heynen 2005, 16–23)¹⁴ as it also involves a societal and socially engaged dimension. A monotonous environment and a bleak apartment became fields of experimentation, spaces for creative experiments, which could be used for developing new ideas of spatial formation that went much further than a “correct” or clever organization of furniture in a confined space.

10. In art history “plastic” indicates that it is a model made by using the means of art—forms, color, light, rhythm, and so on. A broader notion would be visual model, or artistic model.

11. For an account of Kantor’s theory of socialist design see Cubbin (2015, 89–129, and especially 115–20).

12. The concept of “good form” originates with the Swiss artist and architect Max Bill (2008), who had studied at Bauhaus Dessau.

13. Several articles propagating design raised the issue of true and illusory needs. For example, Bruno Tomberg (1961), interior architect, designer, and founder of the design department at the Estonian State Art Institute, demanded that committees be created in larger department stores that would control the quality of products on sale—to minimize their fetishist characteristics by eliminating all indecent/inappropriate products that could lead the consumer to satisfy the “wrong” needs.

14. Hilde Heynen has described the process of institutionalizing and integrating modernism, which took place both in the West and to the east of the Iron Curtain. According to her, after World War II, modernism became an architectural style spreading examples of “good taste,” but not social ideas.

Module: The Building Block of a New Kind of Society

These searches for new strategies and methods of spatial organization led to experiments with form. Elementary form and standardized detail were the general themes of the exhibition *Space and Form* in 1969, focusing on the issue of using elementary standardized forms in nonstandard ways, offering individualized solutions in terms of forms, materials, and colors. The series of exhibitions, initiated at the end of the 1960s by the interior decorators' section of the Artists' Union of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR), aimed to provide new analyses of spatial organization and a material-spatial environment that would go beyond the limits of everyday practical tasks, to develop creative initiatives and thinking, where the completeness of objects or functional concerns didn't matter (Asi and Tamm 1969). From 1969 to 1984, four incredibly popular exhibitions were held at the Tallinn Art Hall. Each of these exhibitions followed a special, yet broadly defined concept, and the display spaces were designed accordingly, creating spectacular, total, or even unfamiliar environments.

The design of the initial exhibition, according to its theme, was based on a strict geometric modular structure, its primary motifs being the square and the sphere (fig. 1).¹⁵ All participating artists were required to form their individual presentations via these shapes, deriving cubes, rectangular prisms, and cylinders from them.¹⁶

In the context of Eastern European art histories, there has been an emphasis on a different role of design, namely in supporting the restoration of the form as an artistic quality that had been incriminated by dogmatic realism as “formalism” (Eimermacher 1991, 128; Kodres 2002). The exhibition series in question also has been interpreted as “resistance” to ideological pressure on Estonia to, with the aid of “good and tasteful design and products,” confirm that the country belonged to the West, further distinguishing it from the Soviet Union (Kodres 1999). However, studying the exhibition carefully as well as the discussions around it offers a slightly different perspective.

The first exhibition demonstrated flexible forms and modular furniture that could be (at least possibly) dis- and reassembled endlessly. As Udo Ivask

15. Every participating artist-designer was assigned to one “cubicle” and some artists worked in teams. That said, the level of collective activity varied greatly, with some teams engaging in true collaborative design or conceptualizing and others using the shared space to exhibit works by several different people. The minutes of the interior-design section meetings show that although a jury was present, artists were mostly left on their own regarding the nature of their contributions. Proposals were rarely discussed and, if at all, mostly to analyze the feasibility of executing the work and its materials.

16. Although the initial idea was not to showcase finished samples of a practical and beautiful spatial setting, in reality the furniture and object samples outnumbered the rest of the exposition. The display structure took up only half of the exhibition. The more distant rooms displayed furniture and object samples, produced especially for the exhibition. Later, the furniture was bought by the Ministry of Culture in order to help cover the exhibition's expenses.



Fig. 1. *Space and Form I*, Tallinn Art Hall, 1969. Design concept by Maia Laul, Kärt Voogre, Eha Reitel, Saima Veidenberg and Taevo Gans. Photo courtesy of the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

(1973, 20), an architect and another important advocate of a contemporary understanding of design, noted: “A technically, geometrically and functionally successful formal experiment can be realized as a vase, furniture, space, and even an entire city.” Exemplary for the employment of modular parts was the element-furniture with x-legs by Bruno Tomberg (fig. 2). The furniture could be combined and used effectively as seating elements or a table, and could be transposed into other tasks and functions.

Manfredo Tafuri (1976, 105–7; 131–3) has described the modular system and its promise of flexibility as a reflection of the profit-oriented logic of capitalism—where everything was “open” and capable of being restructured and (individually) organized at any time, and the romantic idea of the participation of all became the ideology of the flexibility of capitalist accumulation. However, this conception of flexibility and indeterminateness was also true in regards to a society with a planned economy. In his exhibition analysis, Ivask (1973, 20) brings out the advantages of “mobile furniture”—a minimal number of elements allowed for the rationalization of production methods and decreasing production time, save on material and time—economic production and reproduction, thus also giving it a high social value. Modularization and transformability promised flexibility, which could be used to create a more humane environment, meaning a space more



Fig. 2. Bruno Tomberg, *Element-Furniture*, 1969. Photo courtesy of the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

adaptable to individual needs and desires that might change over time.¹⁷ All this was achieved while keeping with the economic efficiency that coincides with standardization.

Thus, the focus of the first exhibition was largely on the restructuring and modernization of production in the 1960s where the idealist logic of elementary forms, which provided space with a rational and streamlined look, came threateningly close to the logic of the conveyor belt. Here, geometry is consistent with the demands of and the capabilities of industrial production. However, they did not exceed the framework provided by the industry and thus came to deploy industrial norms within the home. Furthermore, Ivask (1971, 11) believed that the search for a geometric clarity and simplicity of forms suited to a human scale would result in a highly organized harmonious environment and aid in avoiding entropy in the home, stairwell, street, or society.¹⁸

17. Ivask (1971) compared such systems with children's building blocks, which can be aligned or placed on top of one another to create an endless number of combinations. When furnishing his own home, Ivask based everything on a sixty by sixty by thirty centimeter "modular box." Ordinary veneer-covered boxes made of blockboard and stained dark brown were combined to make tables, shelves, seating, and beds.

18. Warnings against entropy in the everyday artificial environment—the proliferation of "visual noise" that dulls the senses and diffuses attention—along with the criticism of the chaotic

However, to see this ideology of flexibility in terms of the expansion of forms of societal control only is to miss how this furniture—everyday things—was intended to activate the user to engage creatively with his/her everyday surroundings. Modular forms with adjustable parts were closely connected to the user's interests and needs, promising constant interaction and participation for the user-consumer—for example, by reorganizing the forms. The possible solutions depended fully on the users' imagination. Thus, both flexibility and a multifunctional character placed demands of creativity and intelligence on the users while they were manipulating the furniture, forcing them to act.

The stringent formal economy of the designs in the exhibition is reminiscent of suprematist and constructivist programs. As for constructivists, the construction of objects was not an expressive process but a universal one, based on scientific method and analytical knowledge (Margolin 1997, 90–1). Tomberg and Ivask too emphasized that form should not be so much the result of aesthetic quality, but the result of finding a solution to a problem or task (Ivask 1973; Tomberg 1973). When considering the challenges faced by design, Tomberg was not that interested in the comfort and enjoyment that the consumption and ownership of things might offer. Instead, he considered the intelligence and rationality of consumption and the responsibilities and initiative of the user. This consideration was made possible by uncomplicated furniture that dictated its uses as little as possible. Providing and developing modular building blocks instead of ready-made furniture¹⁹ was supposed to enhance the active involvement of the consumer.²⁰ Thus, besides the fact that such furniture was ideal for a small apartment, it also provided a potential for (inter)activity—an active user could alter and transform the furniture according to different needs, the furniture now understood as nothing more than a “system of equipment” (Cubbin 2014, 13). Rather than passively consume, the ideal Soviet user would interact with objects actively and meaningfully (Margolin 1997, 94). Elementary forms and modular standardized components stood metaphorically for openness and mobility, and for a whole range of possibilities through which users “could realize their own social agency” (Henning 2007, 37–8). Therefore, the exhibition *Space and Form* was not focused on formal issues separated from practice.

disorder and formless nature of modern life, were the backdrop for the new design discourse. The designers saw their task as controlling and managing this chaos.

19. This also meant that the working methods of designers had to change. The design curriculum composed by Tomberg emphasized the modularization and flexibility of form. Starting off from one simple form, the students moved from the planar level to packaging, from a simple everyday object to complete environmental solutions (Sarapik 2014, 337).

20. The involvement of the consumer/user was also fostered by the insufficient quality of the apartments, which required reworking along with completing the interior decoration. Tips for this were published in magazines like *Kunst ja Kodu* (Kurg 2014, 118).

The Exhibition: Experiments with Spatial Practices and Experience

These attempts to mobilize the user through objects were soon applied to space. A new approach to space and its organization was achieved with a second exhibition, *Space and Form*, in 1972, designed by Tomberg. This exhibition abandoned the rationality and comprehensiveness of the first one and focused on experience. While the first exhibition's economical structure based on the horizontal and the vertical could be perceived organically and was easy to navigate (Summatavet 1972), for the second exhibition Tomberg created a kind of immersive experiential environment, combining numerous vertical surfaces and employing painted and mirrored surfaces (fig. 3). The model shows a labyrinthine structure with narrow aisles, which some visitors perceived as claustrophobic (fig. 4).

The exhibition space was created by the “abstract” play of form, light, space, volume, rhythm, and color—using all these elements not in a passive but in an active way. The shape that dominated was that of a crystal: the main element of the exhibition was a shield created by combining a rectangle and a triangle, which in turn allowed for the creation of a particular labyrinthine structure (executed by Saima Veidenberg). The effect of the labyrinth was multiplied with mirrors, which were also used to involve the viewer with the space directly while at the same time creating a disjointed spatial experience. The color mode was based on the movement of the color specter from red and orange tones to violets, from warm to cold tones. This approach was used to join the entire hall into a single composition, containing areas with different emotional charge and spatial effect (Ivask 1972a).

Attempts at destabilizing the viewer's experience and manipulating perceptions were present in several other installations, which offered a play with mirrors, pulling the viewer down into the depths of the space only to push them out. A similar effect of “uncertainty” was created by Taimi Soo's spatial installation: a room painted with different colored stripes blurred the distinction between walls, floor, and ceiling. Cylinders placed on the floor or hung from the ceiling and accents that stopped and broke the movement of the stripes created the rhythm of the space (fig. 5). The environment created by Virve and Jutta Aunre also forced the viewer to directly engage with the space, to “directly physically perceive the volumes of the space organised by form (colour and light)” (Gens 1972b, 9).

These spaces came close to the “disorienting Constructivism” of El Lissitzky's exhibition spaces (Gough 2003). With the use of colors, moveable wall panels, and other devices, Lissitzky attempted to engage the viewer physically into the show, to disrupt the traditional contemplative relation to art. In his retrospective statement of *Demonstrationsräume*, Lissitzky (1967, 362; translation mine) claimed his concern to



Fig. 3. *Space and Form II*, Tallinn Art Hall, 1972. Design by Bruno Tomberg. Photo courtesy of the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

be the mobilization of the viewer: if traditionally the viewer was lulled into passivity (by walls of pictures), his design—the room—was to “make the man active.”

At a discussion held in the Artists’ Union following the second exhibition, Estonian art and architecture historian Leo Gens called the exhibition a successful experiment in the spirit of Soviet design. Gens stressed the importance of the fact that the display was not intended to present viewers with new spatial decoration principles or perspectives for the further development of domestic culture, and as a result did not offer furniture samples.²¹ The exhibition, then, was not merely

21. Such design exhibitions would have been dangerous in the Soviet context. Modern furniture and commodities were scarce in the distributive network, so it would have created confusion had viewers started to demand them for the decoration of their own homes (Gens 1972a).

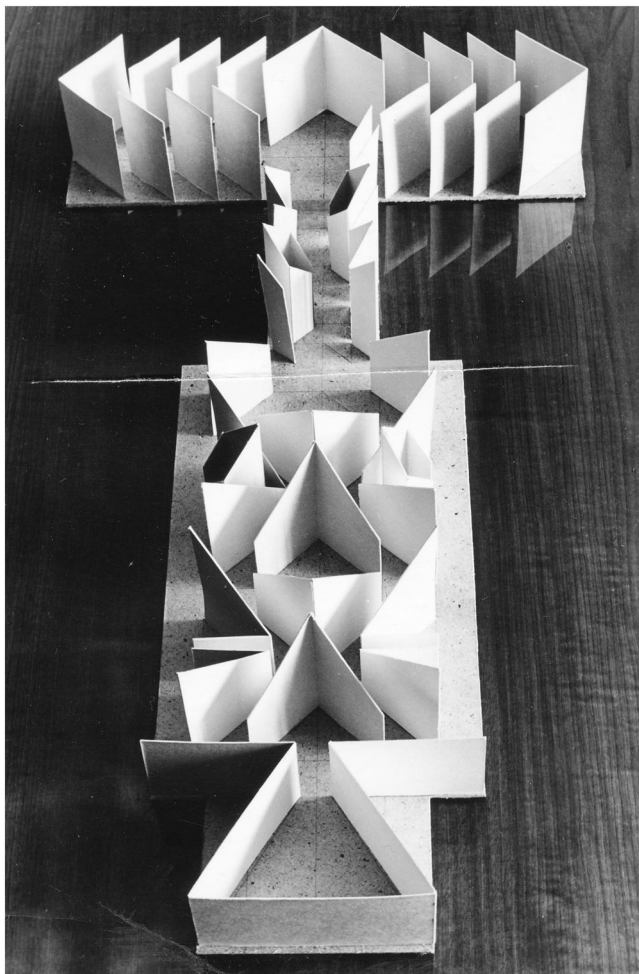


Fig. 4. *Space and Form II*. Photo of a model. Photo courtesy of the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

guiding the expectations of a passive consumer, but was giving shape to active consumption, which Arvatov had pointed out forty years previously.

Western art (and design), which was intended for private contemplation and consumption, encouraged passivity in individuals, whereas socialist objects were to advance human action. They were to be dynamic, flexible, and affective, and able to adapt instantly to the needs of social practice (Arvatov 1997, 126; Margolin 1997, 102). Through these qualities, socialist objects would assist in developing, amplifying, and enriching humans' sensory, physical, and mental capacities. As such, they would differ from completed, fixed, static, and consequently, "dead" capitalist commodities (Arvatov 1997, 122). Socialist material culture was supposed to create



Fig. 5. Taimi Soo, *Striped Space*, 1972. Photo of the reconstruction is from 2006, the Estonian Art Museum (2006).

critical and conscious subjects and thus make them resistant to the lure of consumption (Kiaer 2005, 68).

These ideas were not less current in the 1960s when the Soviet Union started to promote consumer culture (Reid 2013) and the passivity that comes with it was starting to take hold in society. A harmonious individual is an active individual. The environment and the objects within it must promote this activity and not create the illusion of harmony within a “beautiful” home while hiding the actual fragmentation. The task of the designer-artist was to humanize the environment. This meant not so much embellishments that would enhance the

bleak surroundings, but transforming the individual into an active subject, making them dynamic, challenging the user's intelligence and creativity, and empowering them.

The exhibition reviews, which without exception emphasized the exceptional and innovative nature of this event, also brought out the aspect of spectacle. According to Gens (1972a, 11), the most important characteristic of the exhibition (and its objects) was the playfulness. The exhibition was a spectacle directed at the viewer,²² but instead of mobilizing their habits, it focused on changing patterns of thinking. This activation was achieved through a playful and speculative approach—for example, blurring the line between artistic tropes and the utilitarian object or, concerning the environment of the exhibition, complicating and “interrupting” the viewer's perception of space. Orienting oneself within it did not occur (semi)automatically; instead, it called for the activation of all senses. Gens relates it to contemporary life: “In the street, in front of the TV set, in the cinema, at the café, the viewer is used to kaleidoscopically alternating impressions, where unexpected associations of form, color and light teach him/her to see the moving and changing spatial structure. By depicting and programming new, complex visual associations that take shape in the contemporary world, the exhibition led the way out of the closed, petrified environment” (1972a, 11; translation mine).

The labyrinthine structure of the exhibition mostly involved the viewer directly in testing their unmediated sensory experience and spatial consciousness. The unfamiliar, ambiguous information, dispensable details, and disruptions made the environment lively and hindered smooth orientation in it, actively involving the viewer and thus altering the traditional viewing/consuming situation. Russian design theorist Viacheslav Glazychev has likewise argued that the exhibition, as a specific mode of address, must provoke the audience (“with every element, every cube”) so that the viewing becomes a process, the viewer a coauthor taking part in the work of the exhibition, contributing to its “making” (1972).

For “genuine” design, according to Gens, use has to be uncomfortable to some degree, creating a critical distance between the object and user. Gens brings out Tomberg's bow-back chair (fig. 6), which has armrests that are just a bit too high and which Gens describes as “irony at cosiness and elegance”

22. Guy Debord (1996) adapted Marx's theory on the fetishism of consumer goods in his analysis of contemporary societies using the concept of “spectacle” to stand for the mass media. Spectacle is a self-sufficient control mechanism of contemporary society that places people in the role of the passive consumer, becoming the basis for alienation. However, Gens understood spectacle differently: he saw it as performance that has been inscribed with estrangement, and therefore as a means to entice the audience and create participatory interest. It is thus more similar to the theatrical “situations” that Debord saw as an adequate political practice for interrupting the “spectacle.” Debord and Gens recall what Sergei Tret'iakov (2006) had outlined decades previously when he called for a regime that breaks down the barrier between the artist as creator and the spectator as consumer.



Fig. 6. Bruno Tomberg, *Chair*, 1972. Photo courtesy of the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

(1972a, 12; translation mine).²³ Gens seems to be imagining objects and spaces that in a sense acquire a dynamics, a “life” of their own, and resist easy consumption. It is possible that Gens had in mind Arvatov’s elaborations on “socialist things” as “active material objects,” liberated from the enslavement of commodity status (1997, 123). At the same time he takes up a Russian futuristic idea with roots in Russian formalism—to break the automaticity of perception. When the futurists

23. Tomberg himself expressed that he wanted to design a chair that did not dictate how one should sit in it (interview with the author, 2 June 2005).

declared that the reader must clash with the language, then at this particular exhibition the user in a way clashed with the object, not knowing how to use it or what its purpose was. This experience in turn opened up something new, a fresh perspective. Several objects and installations in the exhibition asserted this moment of the transformation of the artistic trope. These objects do not imply a comfortable existence. Instead, they become agents of heightening the awareness of the user. Naturally, this push for a heightened awareness could be understood within the context of various campaigns started at the end of the 1960s that condemned the “bourgeois” desire for things and the abundance of “inessential” objects. Still, this particular stance seems slightly different.

Gens was probably acquainted with the Russian formalists, especially Victor Shklovsky’s ideas on art as a form of experience, and in particular as a defamiliarizing, estranging, and renewing experience. Shklovsky (1965) understood art as a certain technique of estrangement (*ostranenie*) that disturbs mechanical vision through complicating the perception processes, thus creating a new gaze, “a new way of seeing.” Art would help by sensitizing perception blunted by everyday routines, thus awakening a more conscious perception.²⁴

Gens thus saw the interruption of purposely disfigured objects as possibly transformative, and the artistic activity of design as an integral part of social practices, which should result in change. Soviet design, as it appeared in exhibitions of this sort, was meant to further critical and contemplative stances by creating distance through a sense of estrangement in the user, instead of alluring and “completely engaging the user, turning the viewer from a conscious person into a sleepwalker” (Brecht 1972, 276).²⁵ Quite the opposite, design was supposed to shake the viewer loose from “a life poured into things.” The act of breaking the automatic nature of perception stood for a significant moment of emancipation when the consumer would become aware of the space that surrounded them, the objects that made up their environment, and how they themselves wanted to live (Kantor 1963).

The organizers of the exhibition also emphasized the wish to abandon traditional object samples and avoid presenting off-the-shelf stereotypes (common to fashion magazines), which the viewers could mechanically transpose into their home environment. According to Tomberg (1972), they wanted to “disrupt passive consumption, a highly widespread tendency in an information society, and guide the consumer towards the path of independent thinking.” They wanted to help people overcome helplessness in decorating their home, promote

24. Regarding the development of estrangement from an initially aesthetic and formal concept into a socially engaged “new way of seeing,” see Lachmann (1984).

25. This type of “artistry” that creates estrangement is similar to Brecht’s V-effect. Gens must have been aware of Brecht’s work, as Brechtian theater was eagerly propagated in Estonia during the 1960s. There was high demand for changing these experiences into something more immediate and intense (Epner 2010, 18).

individual skills in solving their specific needs.²⁶ The goal of these exhibitions, which were meant for a small circle of professionals and at the same time aimed at a wide audience, was to promote creativeness (Asi and Tamm 1969). The “complex organization” of the exhibition, its dynamic environment was aimed at the viewer, forcing the physical activity in space. The perception of objects and spatial relations themselves became a creative process, evoking the situation of co-authorship, where the automatic perception was replaced with active imagination (Lehari 1972, 13).

The design historian Kaia Lehari has argued for the importance of form and composition (not differing much from Shklovsky). Designing an environment is, according to her, primarily an organization of perception. On one hand, people need clear and univocal information to orientate them within space and to turn human behavior into something automatic and infallible. However, the basis for a truly humane environment is to the same extent the breaking of the automatic nature of perception through the ambiguity of information, which is achieved by veering away from a strictly functional and constructive order, and introducing random and unnecessary changes: “An aesthetically expressive form/environment changes the perception of objects and spatial relations into something similar to the creative process, calls forward collective authorship, a moment of creating with the artist.” To organize the optimum spatial environment, Lehari (1976) stated, “we would first have to learn to create a complicated order that involves both the regular and the random, the practical and the seemingly coincidental.”

The idea of design represented by the exhibition and its theorists is thus political: (socialist) material culture creates critical and aware subjects. Here, the role of objects moving away from a directly utilitarian—habitual and thus passive—function was humanist not purely in an aesthetic sense as emotional counterpart to the technicism and rationality of the surrounding reality (Nugis 2013, 90). Truly, the reestablishment of humanism—“the human measure”—is understood in a completely different way—in consideration of how much “action” the environment granted. These were the “most progressive social ideas” the exhibitions followed.²⁷ The attempts to engender a transformation in the sensation of space,

26. To avoid, as Tomberg (1972) observed, such common negative situations as buying a desk to decorate the living room even though no one in the family is involved with writing, or decorating the living room as a dining room although the family eats in the kitchen.

27. The shift from the first exhibition’s rational user-space relationship to the more experimental, disorienting, yet engaging spaces of the 1972 exhibition reflects the transformation in ideology as a consequence of the wider crisis of modernity in Soviet Union in the early 1970s. Rationality and positivist reasoning, as well as the narrow focus of Soviet modernization policies on technical criteria, did not come in for severe criticism until the 1970s. The technocratic belief in scientific progress as the best mechanism for resolving social problems, including the organization of people’s daily environment, dominated the 1960s. But eventually this tenet came to be seen as the problem. The idea of the artist taking command over industrial production then gained even more relevance and was reframed as the idea of the artist who disrupts the rationality and functionality of the modern environment (Lapin 1973).

movement, and order were meant (albeit less radically than the ventures of the avant-garde) to change the consciousness of the users—without dreaming of effecting a transformation of society—and to make them more sensible and critically aware.

“A Synthetic Environment”

The homogenization of the living environment resulting from the industrialization of the construction process became a topic in both professional circles and the press soon after, and continued through the 1970s and 1980s. Already at the end of the 1950s, the synthesis of the arts program, aimed at “humanizing” the dull, new, and “emotionally poor” architecture, was called to life (Lindpere 1999, 203–4). The addition of artistic decorations to industrially produced buildings was a substitute for the prosaic exteriors of new buildings. This was supposed to help “enliven” the new architectural environment—to animate it plastically—and thus bring it closer to the people (emotionally).

However, this type of synthesis became a subject of critique rather quickly²⁸ and a search for more organic opportunities for synthesis to replace this artificial joining of art and architecture began. Art needed to become a more integral part of architecture, thus moving toward the concept of monumental art centered on space itself. Thus, at the end of the 1950s, some theorists argued that monumental art created a space, a material and visual environment, that had the power to organize people’s bodies and transform their consciousness. This was thought to happen through the use of abstract concepts such as proportion, rhythm, and color relations. Form and color would articulate space and create a “field of influence,” which would affect people “unconsciously”; they just had to be present in the “harmonious” space to be affected (Reid 2009, 106).

At the same time, the real potency of design was significantly diminishing in the early 1970s, as a consequence of the economic crisis. Tom Cubbin (2015, 193–4), in his recent study on Senezh Studio, has pointed out that the retreat from economic reforms (introduced in 1965 by Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin in order to promote limited market competition between enterprises) had a noticeable effect on designers’ status, marginalizing their already fairly extraneous roles in production and forcing them to withdraw from industry into experimentation. For Estonian designers, it became attractive to work not in industry but at the State Cooperative of Art Products (ARS), which designed and made only unique objects. This shift toward individuality was the reason Tomberg, the main initiator of the above-mentioned exhibition series, distanced himself from the series after its third edition in 1976. For him it became “too experimental,” moving away from “real concerns” into subjectivity and thus arbitrariness (from an interview with Tomberg, 2 June 2005).

28. The results of the program were modest for several different reasons. Apart from the rather meagre means for executing the project, it was also hindered by a lack of communication between artists and architects. For an architect, art was a threat to the architectural whole. Artists however were often led by the misconception that they had been brought in to correct architecture (Tolli 1984, 24).

This approach became even more prevalent from the late 1960s onward, resulting in changes to the concept of environment itself. New electronic means available for artists accompanied and strengthened this approach, providing even better instruments for the creation and realization of “synthetic” environments. The new conception of environment based on information theory included not only physical space, but also social and medial aspects, and substantially influenced the relationship between environment and design. Design was to regulate the environment (not to create new objects) and thus limit chaos and entropy (Ivask 1972b). The scale of what was considered “synthesis” had changed considerably and did not just stand for a blending of different modes of art. The act of designing involved knowledge from other areas such as sociology, ergonomics, and so on, on the basis of which a whole was created—a “decent living environment for humans” (Kurg 2014, 143).

Leonhard Lapin was one of the eager propagators of new environmentalism. In several presentations and texts, Lapin (1997, 16) argued that the main aim of art (bearing in mind all of the different spheres of art from design to happenings) should be the creation of a new living environment. He confronted the official “synthesis of arts” discourse with the concept of “synthetic architecture” and demanded that all other modes of art be included in the creative process of an architectural form: “The new architecture is a synthetic art, which in its form ties philosophical ideas, the research and experiments of sociology, psychology, theology and theatre, the formal aesthetics of the visual arts, the achievements of the scientific-technical world and the possibilities of industry” (Lapin 1974, 57; translation mine). The idea referred to the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which was developed in the mid-nineteenth century and then expanded by the avant-garde into a “total artwork” involving the environment and all spheres of human activity.²⁹

In the following years, Lapin (2013) pursued this concept of synthesis further, linking it with the new artistic practice. He addressed the need to create a new aesthetic system developed in accordance with the contemporary industrial reality and with technological progress. Lapin demanded that art regain its social objectives like the production of new environment. Lapin’s vision of future art practice directed his attention to monumental art and became concretized when he was appointed as designer of the survey show on twentieth-century Estonian monumental sculpture, organized by the Exhibitions Department of the Ministry of Culture of the Estonian SSR in 1976. On his initiative, a small section of “new work” was added to the main exhibition, featuring contemporary art: models and architectural projects, kinetic objects, abstract paintings, and prints. Lapin, appropriating the

29. The art nouveau concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was also propagated by the journal *Art and Home*, to which Leonhard Lapin was a frequent contributor. This idea had a particular meaning within the context of the Eastern European private sphere. The 1970s were characterized by a withdrawal into privacy, which compensated for adapting to the system. The home became an expression of singularity not different from art nouveau. The role of everyday life and the “culture of objects” as a place of creativity and liberty was thus ambivalent.



Fig. 7. Leonhard Lapin, *A Monument to Tallinn*, 1976. Gouache on wood, 100 × 100 cm. Courtesy of the Museum of Estonian Architecture.

unlikely official genre of monumental art, reshaped it in an extensive effort to redesign public urban space, an integral and (syn)aesthetic environment (“Uudisloomung monumentaalkunsti näitusel,” 1978, 35). In this respect, Lapin’s environments were much like Tatlin’s (1989, 97) “monuments of the new era,” not meant to be objects of veneration but fully operational sites used for various social activities—including lecture rooms, sports halls, information centers, print shops, cafeterias, and other social venues. Analyzing the built environment in the city center of Tallinn, Lapin (1980, 20) emphasized the need for a new monumental art practice. He argued that the daily life of ordinary citizens had no urgent need for single heroic monuments, but rather called for integrated space. His *A Monument to Tallinn*—a 345-meter-tall monument located in the new residential area of Mustamäe—illustrates, if in a futuristic way, the concept of “new

monumental art” that moved away from objects (monuments) toward integrated space (fig. 7).

On each story of this suprematist-style monument—a tree symbolizing the unity of nature and new technological environment—a period of Tallinn’s history would be displayed using audiovisual multimedia. At night “from 18 to 6 single elements glow colorfully and split away to outer space. Unrepeatable spatial situations are regulated by a computer” (Kurg and Laanemets 2008, 173). In a way, while the monument dissolves, generating unrepeatable spatial configurations, mobility and transformability are brought to their limits.

This new type of synthesis that moves from merging different modes of art to a broader—total—understanding involving the environment and all spheres of human activity (all the while overcoming the opposition between art and technology) is present in the work of Sirje Runge. Runge, who was married to Leonhard Lapin at the time and was using the name Sirje Lapin, was interested in combining colors in design with other—sensory, aural, verbal, kinetic, motoric—means and contemporary technological achievements to create “all-encompassing ephemeral atmospheric environments” (Lapin 1975, 19). Ideas from the *Space and Form* exhibition gained a much broader interpretation when applied to urban space where the town infrastructure is joined with phenomenological space, seeking to engage “all the senses and the entire central nervous system” (Lapin and Lapin 1997, 290).

The most significant and ambitious experiment to imagine this kind of urban synthesis is Runge’s diploma work, “Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn,” which reconsidered the possibilities of art in the arrangement of the urban living environment from the end of the 1950s (Lapin 1975). Blending constructivist principles with a postindustrial program,³⁰ the project investigated the means for reconstructing various peripheral locations—derelict industrial areas, dilapidated courtyards, and disused plots—which Runge envisioned turning into a dynamic, integrated urban environment.

The project included three kinds of interventions: first were urban “decorations” that consisted of repainting the neglected buildings’ facades with decorative patterns, much in the spirit of traditional “synthesis of the arts” (Lapin 1975, 6–7). The second part consisted of modular constructions composed of nodes, stairs, elevators, levels, and boxes that could be differently combined. These constructions, up to six stories in height, were equipped with cinema and TV screens, music boxes, information boards, and kiosks strongly reminiscent of constructivist portable kiosks and stands (fig. 8).

In the cubic, cylindrical, or spherical boxes one could relax, listen to music, meet and spend time with friends, or just climb in and around the structures. The third urban intervention envisaged by Runge consisted of “urban design fantasies” that approached the qualities of the environment more abstractly (expressing general

30. Runge can be seen following Archigram. For the sake of the context of this essay, I will limit my discussion to certain aspects.

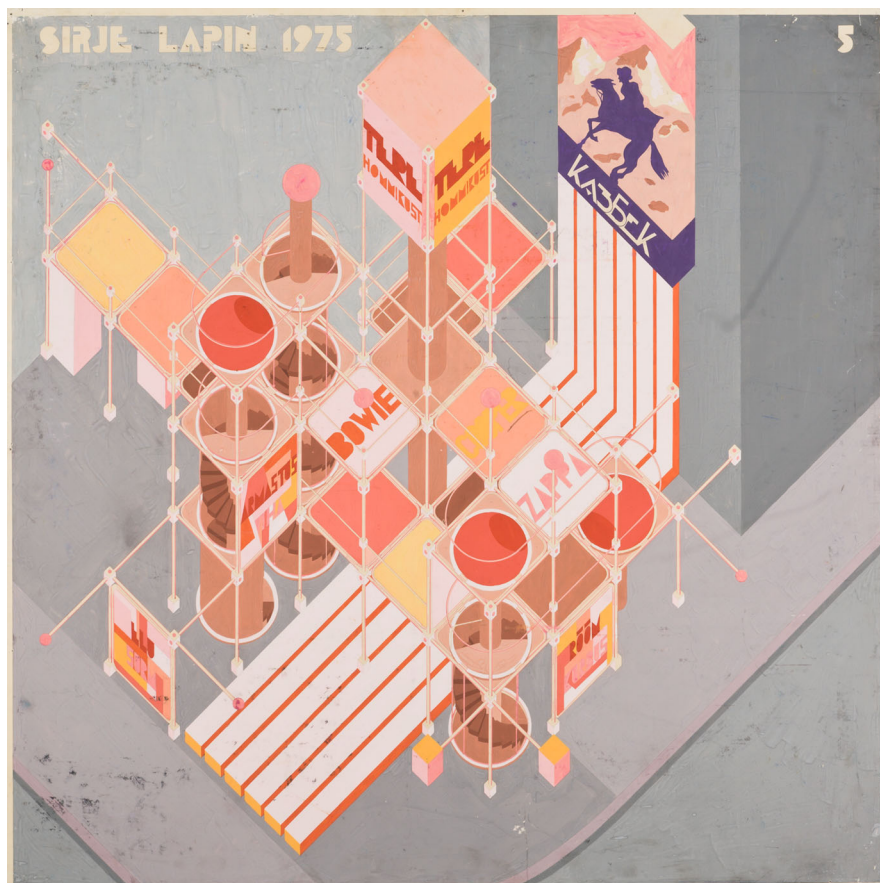


Fig. 8. Sirje Runge (Lapin), *Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn*, 1975. Display board 5, gouache on cardboard, 100 × 100 cm. Courtesy of the Museum of Estonian Architecture.

ideas and the most secret desires of the society, and at the same time manifesting them in a concrete way). While the convertible modular systems could be applied to different locations, fantasies corresponded to and reacted to the specificity of the site, to its history, and to the “spiritual” qualities of particular places.

Keeping with the spirit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Runge’s statement explained her vision of a new urban environment: “A cultured urban environment, regardless of its history and structures, should in the end form an aesthetic whole” (Lapin 1975, 3). At the same time, she emphasized the importance of engaging the urban population with the communicative whole of the city: “The city cannot be seen as just an utilitarian machine, it is also a focal point for man’s material and spiritual resources ... The city cannot be saved from its rationalist monotony solely by an

architecture with beautiful facades and forms, solitary parks, squares or trees. The city contains many communication systems, which should all be integrated to its design" (19).

The city that Runge imagined—not a static composition, but “a multimedia applying all technical means available” (Lapin 1975, 19)—was enticing and enthralling, constantly changing (lighting effects changed the constructions depending on the seasons, time of day, and weather) and engaging (it was possible to “intercommunicate” with other city-dwellers or to retreat to a private music box with a headphone system). The human scale of the environment was shaped by plenty of spaces (and events) that did not determine the activity of the viewer but instead encouraged free participation. Of course, an environment saturated with advertising, cinema, television, and music must have felt rather desirable in a context devoid of mass entertainment (names of Western stars such as Frank Zappa and David Bowie could be found on the signs attached to the structures). However, could Runge’s spectacular environment just be a “dream world”—a total whole where the difference between art and life, between aesthetics and information, between people and their environment disappeared because everything from communication to manifestations of life had been aestheticized?

Runge’s diploma work is consistent with new views on design—total design, as it was propagated at the time within the department of industrial art. The object of design was not so much things (items or buildings), but the relationships between them, creating events and situations, designing human relationships (Keskküla 1974). Runge’s structures were intended not only to decorate and “fill” temporary breaks in construction, but also to transform the public space, to turn neglected or abandoned urban territories into dynamic points of entertainment and communication. Even though consumption tended to create frustration rather than satisfaction within Soviet society and often resulted in longing and jealousy versus satiation, it can still be said that equating the possibility to consume with the freedom of choice is just as nearsighted. Runge’s work is ambivalent and controversial. On the one hand, she wished to be the creator of a new spectacular environment. At the same time, Runge was deeply influenced by Marshall McLuhan’s theory of a new electronic age, especially his understanding of the role of technology in the changing world (and in the changing of the world). Her concept of an integral environment was inspired by McLuhan’s descriptions of a new sensuous world with moving images influenced by simultaneity and nonlinearity where the user’s paths of movement are not predetermined or their actions rationally organized. According to McLuhan, these kinds of spectacular spatial experiences integrate people into an environment, which thus becomes an extension of their bodies, resulting in communication that involves the whole fabric of their being (1964, 20, 36ff.). Only such intense synesthetic moments of totality are able to defeat fragmentation and alienation.

When Runge spoke of the necessity of creating a new type of environment involving all “the audio-visual tools at the artist’s disposal,” revealing her

distinctively theatrical conception of space, she also reiterated what constructivists had called for previously. This type of environment, which engages its users emphatically, involving their vision, hearing, and touch; turns people's relationship with the world into something more active and integrated; and aids in overcoming alienation, was theorized in Soviet avant-garde circles in the 1920s by artists such as Lissitzky (1967, 362–3). According to McLuhan, a “non authoritarian” environment demands greater engagement from its user, making them a creator and a collaborator. Runge's aim was a specific “complicated order” that was intended to create irrational and chaotic moments within the functional organization of the city and thus result in greater engagement, in a more (inter)active relationship between man and his surroundings. She did not argue for the control of “chaos” by means of total design, but instead insisted on involving irrational details in city planning. She was interested in interrupting the functionality of modern urban space, in complementing it with “irrational”—i.e., cognitive and sensual—moments. The new synesthesia was to overcome (space) fragmentation and alienation produced by the modern rational culture. One of her “urban design fantasies” contained colorful chimneys in a labyrinthine park to be constructed on the site of a former power station. The aim of the renewal was the reintegration of a neglected area into the city. The park's chimneys would emit colorful and pleasantly scented smoke—a new kind of fountain that also sought to signal the historical legacy of the location (Lapin 1975, 16).

Conclusion

This article followed changes in the vision of the Soviet environment, reflecting on the shifts and transformations in how the human environment—a central topic in the 1960s and 1970s—was imagined and conceptualized. The article examined three approaches from the late 1960s to mid-1970s that tackle the relationship between environment and user in modern industrial Soviet society.

Following the period of the thaw, with its worship of rational values and technocratic approach, expert knowledge was challenged by the idea of user participation. The didactic tone that dominated at the beginning of the 1960s, and that prioritized contemporary taste and “actual needs,” was only a decade later replaced with involvement of the individual through the creation of variable modules that they could choose to combine to meet their needs. The idea of interactivity gained a whole new meaning as its focus moved from a pragmatic sensibility and engagement to active imagination and deeper involvement. A humane environment was not created by the appropriate arrangement, but instead by the mobilization of the mental energy of the user, and their intellectual and sensuous capabilities. It was no longer considered necessary to direct the arrangement of furniture; rather, the emphasis was on supporting empowerment. Thus, making a more humane environment and overcoming alienation through art did not solely mean decoration or a symbolic mediation of monotonous urban spaces where individuality or

recognizable signs offered people the chance to identify with the environment.³¹ Instead, design involved a much broader field of meaning, namely the possibility for realizing human creativity. If art's role was to protect human nature from automatism, then it also meant its liberation from illusions and habits. The experiments described above, including the exhibitions in the *Space and Form* series, claimed that our environment, including domestic space, was a field of creative practice, that even everyday life was a place for expressing creativity. To achieve humanism, an opportunity for openness was needed, something to present the possibility for active participation.

Designing for user choice and active participation was developed further in experiments that sought to create a synesthetic environment, as described in the third part of the article. Designers attempted to create a space that would address the whole body of the user, and engage their entire central nervous system. Again, this new human environment of total involvement would be not a "passive container," but interactive, programmed for discovery and not instructions, in order to make users aware of it, to make them coproducers, to make them act.³²

Last but not least, the newly conceptualized environment offered an alternative approach to viewing and perceiving city space. Developing environments that would activate the user/viewer was antagonistic to the stagnation of the Brezhnev years, and to the overall societal withdrawal into the private sphere. Creating ambiguity instead of order (and as a result, involvement in depth) challenged not only bureaucracy, but also a society stagnating as a result of indifference.

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31. This understanding of humanization is characteristic of environmental psychology introduced during the 1970s (e.g., Heidmets 1978, 4).

32. Indeed it is the artist who, in McLuhan's (1964, ix) vision, helps raise critical consciousness by creating "anti-environments," or "counter-environments," "that provide us with the means of perceiving the environment itself."

Marxism editors, Serap Kayatekin, Jared Randall, and Ceren Özselçuk, for their constructive and professional assistance. I am indebted to Kai Lobjakas for her help with obtaining the visual material, and I am thankful to the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design and to the Estonian Museum of Architecture, as well as to all the artists for their permission to use images.

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Subversive Landscapes: The Symbolic Representation of Socialist Landscapes in the Visual Arts of the German Democratic Republic

Oliver Sukrow

This essay on the visual representation of landscapes in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) suggests the historical and aesthetic significance of romantic traditions of the nineteenth century for the Socialist cultural practice of the GDR as well as for theoretical reflections on the importance of landscape and nature for the development of a Socialist society. With such a comparative approach, we can not only interpret philosophical work by Lothar Kühne as a Marxist reflection on romantic notions of the importance of landscape but we can also trace the stylistic influence of romantic artists like Caspar David Friedrich on the GDR's Socialist landscape painting. More specifically, the essay shows how Wolfgang Mattheuer became the foremost GDR landscape painter by adapting, transforming, and reevaluating Friedrich's art. Relying on the tradition of German romanticism, Mattheuer developed a new genre of Socialist landscape representation comprising both important artworks and tools of critique.

Key Words: German Democratic Republic, Landscape, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Romanticism, Visual Art

The appearance of the landscape is the visible expression of a particular era.
—Reinhold Lingner, “Auswertung der ‘Landschaftsdiagnose’”

How Caspar David Friedrich's Rediscovery and Wolfgang Mattheuer's Breakthrough Triggered the GDR's *Sotzromantizm*

Over forty years ago, in 1974, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) with a conference in Friedrich's hometown Greifswald and with a major retrospective in Dresden, where he lived most of his life (see Imig 1974; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden 1974; and see figs. 1–2). The celebrations of Friedrich's



Fig. 1. View of the Foyer, *Caspar David Friedrich and His Circle*, Dresden exhibition, 1974–5, © SLUB Dresden, Deutsche Fotothek, Waltraud Rabich.

artistic achievements in the genre of landscape painting marked the climax of an ongoing controversial, dynamic, and complex debate on romantic art and romanticism in the GDR. While until the 1960s, the romantic movement was condemned and criticized by Marxist intellectuals for ignoring sociopolitical realities after the French Revolution of 1789 and for an antirationalistic mystifying of the world, various developments paved the way for a positive and productive connection of Socialist culture to its nineteenth-century ancestors. Processes, which can be understood within the framework of *Sotzromantizm* as “an autonomous (and relatively coherent) form of historical imagination” offered a “form of critical engagement with actually existing Socialism.”¹ The integration of Friedrich’s oeuvre into the art canon of Socialist East Germany can be seen as a sign of those developments within the framework of *Sotzromantizm* and were part of the early critical engagement with the Socialist society of the GDR of the 1970s.

In the same vein, Manfred Bachmann (1928–2001), the director of the State Art Collections of Dresden, said in his opening speech for the Friedrich exhibition of 1974 that Friedrich’s art “embodies the best traditions of the progressive bourgeoisie” and can therefore be seen as a fruitful source of inspiration for the visual art of the Socialist presence (Bachmann 1976, 11)—a claim which found its

1. See “CFP: Romantic Subversions of Soviet Enlightenment (Princeton, 9–10 May 2014),” *H-ArtHist*, 21 November 2013, <http://arthist.net/archive/6476>.



Fig. 2. View of the Klingersaal, *Caspar David Friedrich and His Circle*, Dresden exhibition, 1974–5, © SLUB Dresden, Deutsche Fotothek, Waltraud Rabich.

equivalent in popular culture and mass media of the GDR (see figs. 3–4). At the same time as Friedrich’s art was rediscovered, conferences and exhibitions focused on a contemporary East German artist, whose oeuvre was also dominated by the depiction of landscapes: Wolfgang Mattheuer (1927–2004) was seen as inheritor of the German romantic tradition in the genre of landscape (Palme 1974, 138–41; Feist 1974, 20–1). Even a smaller exhibition in the New Masters Gallery in Dresden was devoted to his works, accompanying Friedrich’s retrospective. Mattheuer was interpreted and pushed forward as a modern Socialist neo-romantic artist, as an artist who inherited and triumphed over Friedrich’s art (Kuhirt 1975, 281–5; see fig. 5). In 1974, it seemed that the aesthetic dogma of a naturalistic Socialist Realism and its critique of “Romanticism” were overcome and replaced by a more differentiated approach (Goeschen 2001). No longer was “Romantic belief seen as a serious threat to the Socialist ideology” (Hertel 2014, 248). Friedrich’s landscapes were purged of the spiritual element. Instead art-historical research and ideology emphasized the political and social elements of his landscape paintings. At that moment, Friedrich won his place in the collective memory of East German society again as he had under other German regimes from the early twentieth century (Busch 2001, 521).

To move beyond the well-established formalistic part of an art-historical comparison between Mattheuer and Friedrich and to show new perspectives on how



Fig. 3. Cover of the journal *Bildende Kunst*, no. 8, 1974, with a reproduction of Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Stages of Life*, 1835. Photo from the author's archive.

landscapes under Socialism were seen, represented, perceived, and interpreted through paintings, a more general discussion of its representations seems necessary. Therefore, this essay is structured in the following way. Taking the comparison between Friedrich's and Mattheuer's works as starting point, I am going to discuss in the first part of this essay how depictions of landscapes in the GDR can be judged as "cultural images, pictorial ways of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings" of real, existing Socialism (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988, 1). By analyzing the imagery of landscapes through painting and "by setting it in its historical context" (2), I show that every analysis of symbolic representations of landscape has to be relativized as phenomena of a specific given time

KULTUR

Größe und Grenze romantischer Kunst

Anstellung zum 200. Geburtstag Caspar David Friedrichs in Dresden

Von Joachim Uhlitzsch

Wie es erwartet, sind die vier Dresdner Gemäldegalerien in der Ausstellung ein geschlossenes Ganzes mit Werken von Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) umfängliche Zeugnisse, die sich nicht nur als Bild der Hofkunst, sondern auch als Zeugnissen der romantischen Kunst im allgemeinen betrachten lassen. Die Ausstellung ist ein Dokument der romantischen Kunst, die sich in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland entwickelte. Sie zeigt die Entwicklung der romantischen Kunst von den Anfängen bis zu den letzten Jahren des 19. Jahrhunderts. Die Ausstellung ist ein Dokument der romantischen Kunst, die sich in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland entwickelte. Sie zeigt die Entwicklung der romantischen Kunst von den Anfängen bis zu den letzten Jahren des 19. Jahrhunderts.

Die Formen der Gemälde sind nicht nur in der Technik, sondern auch in der Komposition und der Farbgebung. Die Werke sind in der Regel in der Mitte des Bildes, was die Aufmerksamkeit des Betrachters auf sich zieht. Die Komposition ist oft asymmetrisch, was die Dynamik des Bildes verstärkt. Die Farbgebung ist warm und erdtonig, was die Atmosphäre des Bildes verstärkt.

Willkommen, einander entgegen, in der Friede- und Harmonie, die die Romantiker als Ziel der Kunst betrachteten. Die Romantiker sahen in der Natur ein Spiegelbild der menschlichen Seele. Sie suchten nach der Harmonie zwischen der Natur und der menschlichen Seele. Die Romantiker sahen in der Natur ein Spiegelbild der menschlichen Seele. Sie suchten nach der Harmonie zwischen der Natur und der menschlichen Seele.

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Seine Bilder sprechen von ihrer Hoffnung. In Dresden, wo Friedrich von 1810 bis zu seinem Tode im Jahre 1840 lebte, erlebte er, so das Maler, alle die er heute wieder erleben wird. Sein Werk ist ein Dokument der romantischen Kunst, die sich in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland entwickelte. Sie zeigt die Entwicklung der romantischen Kunst von den Anfängen bis zu den letzten Jahren des 19. Jahrhunderts.

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Seine Bilder sprechen von ihrer Hoffnung. In Dresden, wo Friedrich von 1810 bis zu seinem Tode im Jahre 1840 lebte, erlebte er, so das Maler, alle die er heute wieder erleben wird. Sein Werk ist ein Dokument der romantischen Kunst, die sich in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland entwickelte. Sie zeigt die Entwicklung der romantischen Kunst von den Anfängen bis zu den letzten Jahren des 19. Jahrhunderts.

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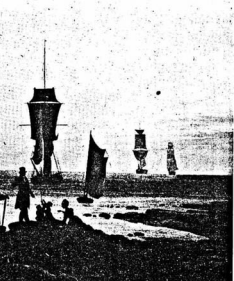
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Caspar David Friedrich: Die Lebensauen, Öl, um 1823

Ein liebenswertes und begeistertes Publikum

Eintra meistlich berichtet aus Japan

Es wird von der Fala der Meeres der 2028 in Japan, in einer Serie von sieben Konzerten. Die erste dieser Konzerte fand am 1. März in der Stadt Tokio statt. Die Konzerte wurden von der japanischen Regierung unterstützt. Die Konzerte wurden von der japanischen Regierung unterstützt.

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XVII. Internationale Dokumentar- und Kurzfilmbiennale

Erfahrungen im Umgang mit der Wirklichkeit

Von Horst Klotzsch, Peter Berger und Gudrun Schmidt

Die Film sind nicht einfach "Dokumente". Sie sind eine Art "Kunstwerk", das die Wirklichkeit darstellt. Die Film sind nicht einfach "Dokumente". Sie sind eine Art "Kunstwerk", das die Wirklichkeit darstellt.

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Das politische Gespräch gehört zu diesen Filmen

Interview mit dem Regisseur Carlos Alvarez

Carlos Alvarez, bekannter Dokumentarfilmer und Regisseur, hat sich in einem Interview mit dem Regisseur Carlos Alvarez über seine Arbeit und die Rolle des Politischen im Film geäußert.

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DSF-Kulturhauser

betrieben in Magdeburger

Das DSF-Kulturhaus in Magdeburger ist ein Zentrum für kulturelle Aktivitäten. Es bietet eine Vielzahl von Programmen und Veranstaltungen für die Bürger der Stadt.

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Fig. 4. Joachim Uhlitzsch, "Importance and Limitations of Romantic Art," aus Fig. 4 of Neues Deutschland, 28 November 1974. Photo from the author's archive.

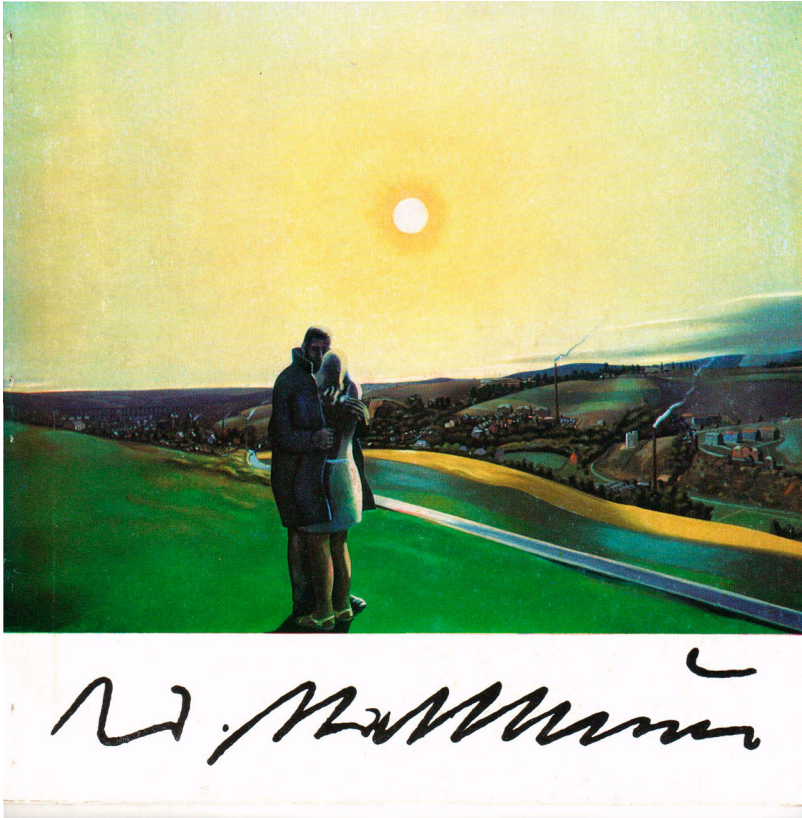


Fig. 5. Cover of the exhibition catalog *Wolfgang Mattheuer*, Dresden, 1974. Photo from the author's archive.

and place in history. Supporting an argument which has been brought into the debate by Simone Tippach-Schneider (2004, 21), I argue that the “motif of landscape in the visual arts of the GDR was never an end in itself, but goes far beyond its object” and could also serve as a critical element in public discourse.

In the second part, I introduce briefly the history of landscape painting after 1945 in East Germany to link the reception of Friedrich's romantic art, Mattheuer's landscapes, and the ongoing debates on landscape art in the GDR. Here, I analyze and reread Bernhard Kretzschmar's (1889–1972) iconic first Socialist landscape painting *View of Eisenhüttenstadt* (1955–8) as mirror image to Friedrich's and Mattheuer's meaningful landscapes.

In the third and last part of my essay, I show that Mattheuer's artworks are not only romantic-masked critiques on environmental issues, as has been suggested (Hertel 2014, 11–2), but also unique contributions to a renewal of Socialist art through the genre of landscape. I end my essay with a summary of and outlook

on the concept of *Sotzromantizm*, exemplified here by landscape paintings of the GDR.

Friedrich and Mattheuer: The Concept of *Sotzromantizm* as Actualization and Historicization

The historicization and actualization of the romantic era—exemplified by the 1974 exhibitions and conferences on Friedrich and Mattheuer—are directly linked to the genre of landscape painting with the changing image of man, nature, and society in Socialist ideology and in visual culture and with theoretical discourses on the role of landscape under Socialism (Kühne 1985, 41). Here, the concept of *Sotzromantizm* provides an innovative, flexible model to contextualize historically anachronistic or contradictory phenomena, even in the visual arts of the GDR. Since this concept is connected with the development of historicization and actualization of romantic narratives, taking the positive reception of Friedrich's work and Mattheuer's breakthrough as landscape painter can serve as a starting point to explore the paradoxical situation of the emergence of romantic-inspired art in the GDR of the early 1970s.

Mattheuer's genuine contribution to *Sotzromantizm* can be seen as both a critique and a renewal of late Socialist culture in the GDR. Mattheuer's success and Friedrich's return as a role model for Socialist art are two outcomes of the same process, which can be described as the historicization and actualization of romanticism. *Historicization* incorporates the art of the romantic era around 1800 into a positive prehistory of the Socialist visual arts, offering a less dogmatic and more objectified approach to the past. This is linked with the profanation of Friedrich's spiritual landscapes (Busch 2001, 521). *Actualization*, on the other hand, means that contemporary artists in the GDR like Mattheuer demonstrated that the language of the romantic movement—as well as ideas linked with it—could be used as an aesthetic, stylistic, and formal toolbox for Socialist art. So Mattheuer not only invented a genuine expression of Socialist landscapes based on Friedrich's romantic landscapes but also managed to meet the expectations of an audience whose members were able and willing to decipher his art as a representation of their own daily lives, attitudes, values, desires, and issues in actually existing late Socialism.

Since the 1960s, shifts in the judgment of romanticism took place in the intellectual and aesthetical landscapes of the GDR, not just in the visual arts but also in philosophy and aesthetic theory. I am especially referring to Lothar Kühne's (1938–85) important essay "House and Landscape—An Outline of the Communist Culture of the Social Space" of 1974—exactly the year in which Friedrich and Mattheuer were displayed and discussed in the GDR.

The point that Mattheuer was the inheritor of Friedrich—as an actualizer of romanticism for the purpose of the evolution of Socialist art—has been put forward since the 1970s and was invented by East German art historians (figs. 6–7). First,



Fig. 6. Caspar David Friedrich, *The “Große Gehege” near Dresden*, circa 1832, oil on canvas, Stately Art Collections Dresden, Gallery New Masters, Dresden, Germany, © Wikipedia Commons.

Dieter Gleisberg (1970, 227) mentioned in 1970 that Mattheuer’s landscapes were “extended romantic spaces full of emotions.” In his unpublished dissertation of 1978 entitled “On the Social Function of Contemporary Landscape Paintings in the GDR,” Peter Romanus (1978, 104–10) wrote that Mattheuer’s romantic landscapes would mirror the aesthetic attitudes of modern man in the late 1970s, symbolizing a distant relationship between human beings and nature. It was Heinz Schönemann (1988) who gave a detailed account of Mattheuer’s formal and compositional orientation toward Friedrich in 1988. Even after German reunification in 1989–90, Mattheuer’s romanticism remained the focus of art-historical research. Christoph Zuschlag (1999, 219–36) themed Mattheuer’s landscape paintings as a historical source for interpreting cold war history. Two larger exhibitions in the past decade put Mattheuer’s contribution to German landscape painting front and center. In 2002, Mattheuer confessed in an interview with Peter Iden (2006, 78) that he was “especially attracted by the landscape.” Also, Gillen (2004, 74) touched upon the close connection between Friedrich’s and Mattheuer’s art as early as 2004. And later, in 2007, an exhibition exclusively on Mattheuer as landscape painter was shown in Leipzig. In the catalog, Jenns Howoldt (2007, 50–60) investigated the romantic roots of Mattheuer’s art, and Eduard Beaucamp (2007, 14–26) focused on Mattheuer’s attempt at a renewal of the romantic tradition of

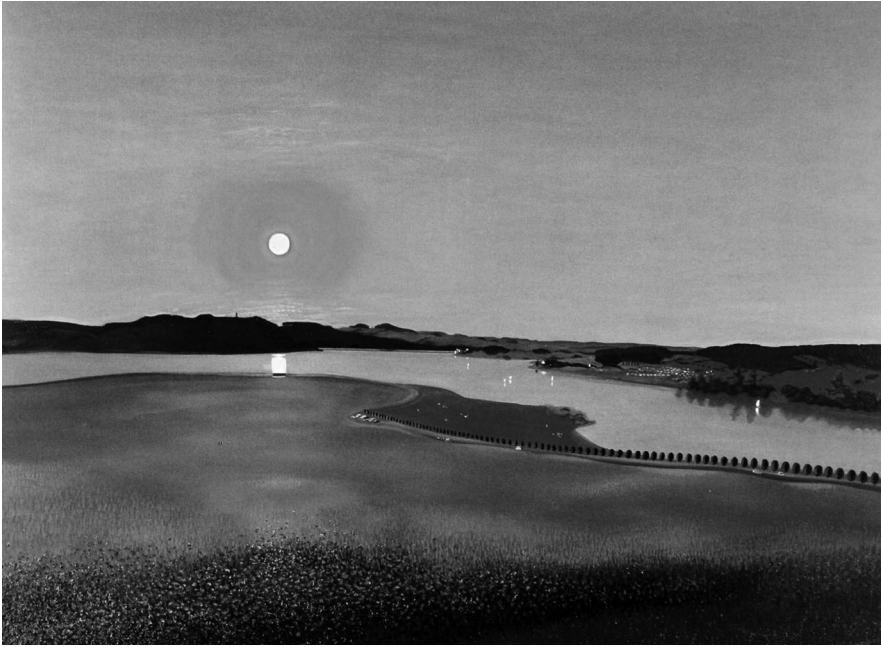


Fig. 7. Wolfgang Mattheuer, *A Beautiful Evening*, 1976, oil on canvas, Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria. Photo from the author's archive. © 2016, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

landscape as a carrier of meaning. As recently as 2014, Anja Hertel (2014, 11–2) published her dissertation on Mattheuer's landscape as a carrier of political meaning, summarizing the state of research and adding to it a close reading of selected landscape paintings from 1961–83 as “political landscapes.”

However, since the 1960s, little has been done to explain the emergence of landscape painting in the visual arts of the GDR within the discourses on nature and landscape taking place at that time. Rather, Hertel's dissertation analyzes landscape in conventional ways grounded in the 1970s. For sure, this way of interpreting Mattheuer's (2002) landscapes is very convincing and justified by his own accounts in his diaries of the 1970s and 1980s. However, this artist-centered approach tends to neglect both the historical and the intellectual background of Mattheuer's political landscapes.

Approaches to Socialist Landscapes

Before discussing Mattheuer's achievements in establishing a Socialist aesthetic critique on the appearance of landscape in the GDR, it is necessary to shed light on the ways in which landscapes of Socialism and their visual representations



Fig. 8. Free German Youth, regional executive of Brandenburg, *Migrate with the Free German Youth through Our Lovely Homeland*, poster, 1948, Federal Archives, Berlin, Germany. © BArch, Plak 100-037-039/Werbe-Kobow.

can be theoretically approached. Basically, landscape was culturally significant and meaningful under Socialism. The depiction of landscapes or territories, famous sceneries and outlooks in movies, photographs, poems, graphics, murals, and paintings in the GDR always meant something more than just a topographical reflection of the very landscape; it referred to something outside the visual or literary representation (figs. 8–9). Wolfgang Emmerich (1996, 196–7, 374–9) has pointed out that literary descriptions and representations of landscape have played an important role and were seen by contemporaries as more than reflections of actually existing landscapes.



Fig. 9. *Peace to Our Homeland*, poster, 1989, Federal Archives, Berlin, Germany. © BArch, Plak 102-002-040/Horst Wendt.

The attempt of Socialist cultural politics after 1945 to occupy and resignify former aristocratic mansions in the East German countryside can be seen as an example of the ideological importance of the concept of landscape in a broader sense. Not only were palaces refurnished for new functions like “culture houses” (*Kulturhause*), hospitals, *Kindergarten*, or offices but also the gardens and parks of the palaces were redesigned and reused for social, public, or political activities as new Socialist greens (fig. 10). In other cases, parks were completely redesigned and opened as, for instance, the Island of the Youth (Berlin 1949) and the Island of Friendship (Potsdam 1951–74), Pioneer’s Park (Berlin 1950–1) or as the First Horticultural Exposition of Socialist Countries (Erfurt; see fig. 11).² All of them were

2. For more on Erfurt, see Vagt (2013).

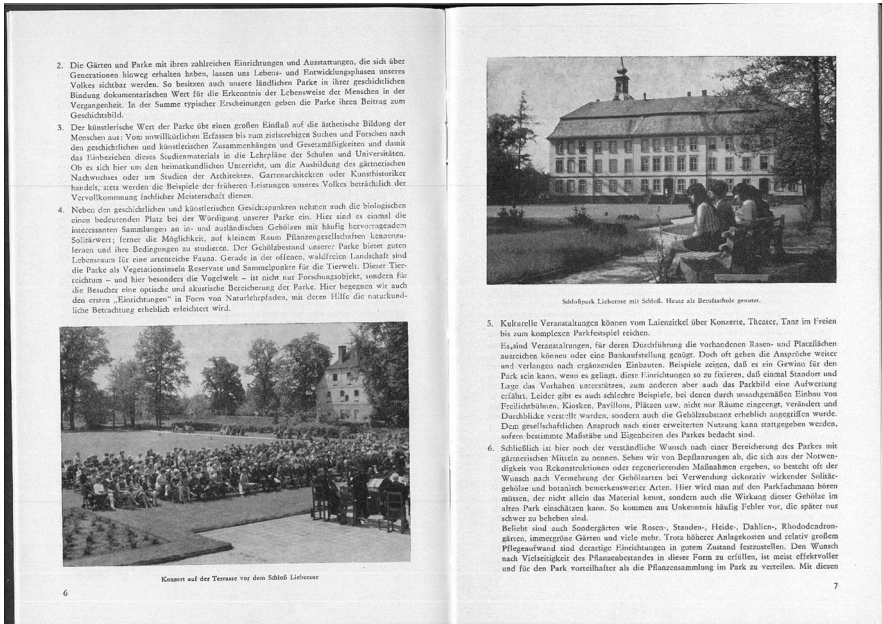


Fig. 10. Lieberose Palace and Garden, pages 6–7 of the book *Maintenance of Rural and Historical Parks*, ed. Cultural Association of the GDR (1972). Photo from the author’s archive.

assigned as Socialist spaces and were deeply connected to the concept of manmade landscape, of “second nature,” as important spaces of the Socialist humanization of society.³

The opinion that environment, whether natural nature or second nature, has a distinct influence on man and society but is also shaped by man and society can also be found in the art debates of the time. For example, the state-edited *Dictionary of the Arts (Lexikon der Kunst)*, a long-term project of the 1970s, dealt not only with genres, techniques, materials, and artists but also with aesthetic concepts of Socialist culture. It is no wonder that it also contained articles on “nature,” “landscape,” and “environment.” These can provide insights in the ways that landscape and connected topics were judged by art historians and cultural scientists.

“Nature,” as described in the article of the same name, is an “independently, outside-of-our-consciousness existing diverse set of organic and inorganic forms of existence and forms of movement” (“Natur” 1973, 502). Man has come from nature and arisen from it “through productive, spiritual and sensual appropriation for his purposes.” It is important for our general topic to mention that the *Dictionary of the Arts* argues that nature and man are in a productive and connected

3. For similar attempts in the Soviet Union, see Kucher (2007).



Fig. 11. Horticultural Exposition of the GDR, *View from the Exposition Grounds to Erfurt Cathedral*, Erfurt, 1953, Federal Archives, Berlin, Germany. © BArch, Bild 183-32536-0001/Wittig.

interdependency wherein man has created a second nature through labor and productivity. This second nature is described as “artificial environment.” Every landscape contains its manmade character as part of its second nature. The character of landscape as a manmade and man-shaping environment is represented, as this article suggests, in a “depiction of landscape” that “mirrors a specific relationship to nature” (503). Consequently, if the visual representation of nature tells us something about class and power structures, as well as about the economic status of a society, then the genre of landscape painting serves on one hand as the “human appropriation of nature through aesthetical, visual-artistic reproduction of untouched or man-designed natural environment.” On the other hand, the genre should “clarify the relationship of man with nature, his thoughts and feelings and social views, through which the depiction of landscape gains emotionality

and social-relevant content.” The article makes clear that under these conditions a “value-neutral, artistic depiction of landscape” is not possible since visual representation always *means* something (Landschaft 1971, 850). Soviet landscape paintings, it continues, show “untouched nature as well as man-designed nature” and “teach with their works appreciation of nature-affirmative, sensuous *Heimatliebe* (loving of one’s home).” This can also be traced in the landscape paintings of the GDR where especially the “depiction of nature which has been designed by the creativeness of man and the new cities” attracted artists (854).

As the cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove (quoted in Whyte 2002, 20–1) described in his 1994 essay “Landscape and Power,” “Landscape is not an object but ‘a way of seeing’ rooted in ideology. It represents a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature, and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to external nature.” The observation that landscapes are “a way of seeing” was also the starting point of Martin Warnke’s (1995, 14) groundbreaking art-historical study, *Political Landscape*. He argued that “even the simplest topographical features are the result of political decisions.” Even though Warnke was not interested in the political landscapes of Socialism or in the landscapes of the twentieth century, as Hertel has shown, his study still proves that the iconography of landscapes is a fruitful source for historical in-depth studies, even for Socialist examples.

Especially in the GDR of the 1950s and 1960s, the role of Soviet imagery of landscape and nature as a borderless space of human labor and limitless pool of resources was chosen as the stylistic and content role model for the painters in the GDR. Visual representations of industrialized Soviet or East German landscapes were mirrored in philosophical discourses on nature. In those decades, from a philosophical viewpoint, nature/landscape was not seen as something to protect but as an “outer strange power” to be ruled (Moeck 2005, 152). The relationships between nature/landscape and economic and industrial needs was tilted toward economy, as can be traced in the paintings. This attitude toward landscape was shaped under Stalin in his 1938 book *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (published in German in 1951) in which he denied that the transition of the geographical milieu has any determining influence on the development of a society (Löther 2007, 196). Later, in the 1960s, during the so-called “scientific-technical revolution,” it was said—according to an anonymous article in the party newspaper *Berliner Zeitung* of September 1965—that the “qualitative transformations in the relationship between man and science and technique became the most important instrument in the appropriation and mastery of nature.”⁴ Propaganda argued for the development of a modern, “rational” relationship to nature, which Klaus Gestwa (2010, 11) has

4. See “Vor dem neunten Plenum des Zentralkomitees der SED: Menschen verändern die Welt—und nicht Roboter (Zum Thema: Der Mensch in der technischen Revolution),” *Berliner Zeitung*, 21 April 1965, 3.

described as an “energetic imperative to legitimate a progressive subjugation of nature.”

Only in the mid-1970s, after changes in the political and economic structures of the GDR, did the party officially recognize the need for a more protective treatment of nature, as can be read in the Socialist Unity Party of Germany’s (SED) program of 1976. Nature was described then “as inexhaustible source of life, of material wealth, of health, and of pleasure for the people,” which must be “protected and rationally used” (Vaatz 1996, 860). The 1970s marked the beginning of an environmental awareness among the people of the GDR since the damage to the environment was no longer contestable to the public (fig. 12). Consequently, not only can pragmatic support of ecological grassroots activities in the GDR be observed from the mid-1970s but also it is clear that thinkers and artists became more and more aware of the issue (fig. 13).

One example of this environmental awareness among Marxist intellectuals was Lothar Kühne. He developed within East German contexts a highly innovative and controversial argument reflecting upon the relationships of nature, landscape, and architecture under Socialism and Communism. Even though the work of Marxist critics in the GDR of the 1970s has caught the recent interest of political scientists and historians (see Amberger 2014), Kühne’s writings still need to be investigated. This also holds true for an art-historical analysis of the genre of landscape painting in the GDR and its relationship to environmental discussions.

First published in 1974 in the journal *Weimarer Beiträge*, Kühne’s essay “House and Landscape” deals with the relevance of landscape as the “grounding moment of the material living conditions of mankind.” Referring to Marx and Engels’s *German Ideology* (1845–7), Kühne (1985, 9) argues that landscape is not a “simply given fact through nature” but that it represents an “objectified social relationship in nature.” Every landscape therefore embodies “structures of social living conditions” and carries signs of human labor and its organization. Landscape is manmade and makes man at the same time. Landscapes encode the formation of the productive forces in the history of man since the earliest time in its specific signs. This development over centuries has been observed and analyzed by the Marxist-Leninist philosophy of dialectical materialism (36). For Kühne, landscape is not only a specific surface on earth with natural and artificial signs. In Socialism/Communism, he argues, landscape is “the unity of social, micro-communal, and individual areas of space, which are summarized and interrelated in the house and the space of nature and the space of production” (39). The formation of Socialism and the future development of Communism will lead to new relationships between man and nature: “Those transformations include the aesthetical, practical-objective and practical-spatial relationship of man with nature” (30). He believes that only under Socialism can man and nature reach a harmonious state, while the capitalist system destroys natural resources and causes the alienation of man from nature (9).



Fig. 12. Dr. Hans Reichelt, Minister for Environmental and Water Protection, visits a coal mine near Cottbus, 15 May 1972, Federal Archives, Berlin, Germany. © Bild 183-Lo515-0033/Werner Großmann.

That was virtually the official position of the SED, exemplified by Kurt Hager (1912–98), member of the central committee of the SED and responsible for ideology and propaganda, who in 1975 gave a talk at the Humboldt University of Berlin honoring the fiftieth anniversary of Friedrich Engels’s 1925 *Dialectic of Nature*. In his speech, Hager (1975, 44) claimed that only Socialism and developing Communism are able to solve environmental problems because under Socialism “the character of Capitalism as limitless overexploitation of productive forces and reckless looting of nature” has been overcome. At the same time, the SED prevented the publication of critical empirical studies showing the factual status of the devastation of the GDR—ideological assumptions held as truths superimposed the factual power of reality (Amberger 2014, 49). According to Amberger’s study on ecological utopias in the GDR, Hager and the SED “predicted for future Communism the dialectic repeal of the contradiction between human productivity and nature. In the meantime, in actually existing Socialism or ‘Dictatorship of Proletariat,’ politics should work on the repeal of this contradiction” (47–8).

Despite the ideological specifications by Hager and others and despite the situation of the environment in the GDR at that time, Kühne argued with regard to the ongoing economic and industrial developments in Socialist countries that it must



Fig. 13. *Environmental Library*, Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg, 17 January 1990, Federal Archives, Berlin, Germany. © Bild 183-1990-0117-024/Klaus Oberst.

still be the ultimate aim of Socialism to establish a productive relationship between the working class and natural surroundings, including landscapes. Through labor, mankind appropriates nature and its forces—for example, coal or gas—and develops a harmonious state. But Kühne (1985, 10) also makes clear that even a Socialist society has its “limitations and problems of the design of the surroundings” that have to be addressed. Kühne’s critique of an uncontrolled and destructive treatment of nature/landscape was based on Marx’s 1844 *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts*, wherein he asserts that nature as earth is not only an object of labor for mankind but is “one side of the objective man, his inorganic body” (32). Under capitalism, nature and landscape become mainly a matter of utility and exploitation through the proletariat. So capitalism is alienating not only men from one another (and man from work and man from nature) but also man from the organic and inorganic parts of his entity. Instead, after establishing a Socialist society and economic structure, the working class can liberate nature as its

inorganic body and could eventually build a harmonious relationship. Kühne's optimistic viewpoint with regard to the possibilities of a Socialist treatment of nature and landscape can be seen in the following quotation: "This is the point where the aesthetic as force of design of the practical living is not simply a form of the enforcement of the exchange-value standpoint but rather a constitutive moment of revolutionary and emancipating practice" (33). Not until the liberated individual in Socialism is aware of its own emancipation from capitalism and begins to "appropriate his own richness" can that individual "appropriate the richness embodied in the landscape" (42).

For Kühne as leftist, the "true" design of architecture and landscape based on the ideology of Marxism-Leninism was fundamental to a harmonious Communist relationship among people and between people and nature. The writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin provide the tools and the inspiration for the Socialist/Communist reshaping of the landscape. For Kühne (1985, 41), "the Communist landscape" is the backdrop of and condition for the "world-historical realization of man." That is why he argued against the systematic and radical destruction of nature for the price of economic growth. Even though Kühne never saw himself as oppositional in a Western sense, this links his ideas with the ideas of other Marxist opposition thinkers in the GDR having environmental backgrounds, such as Rudolf Bahro (1935–97), Wolfgang Harich (1923–95), and Robert Havemann (1910–82).⁵ But since Kühne's Marxist philosophy is not precisely the topic here, I have only briefly pointed out some aspects of his thinking on nature, architecture, and landscape.

The Importance of Socialist Landscape Paintings

In the early 1950s, in the era between the crisis and consolidation of the new Socialist regime,⁶ East German art critics demanded paintings showing contemporary topics "mirroring the transformations in our social life and helping to realize its aims," as Traugott Stephanowitz (1954, 3) put it in 1954. One year before, the artist and cultural politician Kurt Magritz (1953, 42) attacked the landscape paintings of the *Third German Art Exhibition* in Dresden because the visual "representation of people and the representation of landscape do not form an organic unit." While Ulbricht (1893–1973) as head of the party and leader of the state claimed that the visual arts and landscape painting in particular had to "inspire the masses for the great tasks of the building of Socialism" and to "celebrate the triumph of man over the forces of nature" (Mansfeld 1953, 27), the artistic results in the genre of landscape painting "disappointed" the state ideals of the 1950s. Instead of tending toward Soviet Socialist realism with its neo-impressionistic styles and genre-motifs, the German tradition of nineteenth-century landscape

5. See Amberger (2014).

6. See Scholz (2009, 268) and Malycha and Winters (2009, 103).

became the focus of artists and historians searching for the possible roots of a new landscape art under Socialism. With regard to the problematic of Marxist-Leninist ideology (Lukács 1980), this led to the rediscovery of the romantic art of Friedrich, Ludwig Richter (1803–84), and Moritz von Schwind (1804–71). Even though these developments of the 1950s were only foreplay to the actualization and historicization of *Sotzromantizm* in the GDR in the 1970s, they show that the substantial qualities of nineteenth-century landscape imagery were also recognized under Stalinist cultural politics in East Germany.

That was, however, not a process starting in the 1950s, since also during the Nazi dictatorship of 1933–45, and even before in the Kaiserreich and in the Weimar Republic, the genre of German landscape painting was important for various reasons (Heinzelmann 1997, 218–9). In this case, the reception of the romantic era in the GDR can be seen as historically continuous in Germany from around 1900. As in the important *Jahrhundert-Ausstellung* (centennial exhibition) of 1906 in Berlin—in which the romantic movement and especially works by Friedrich were rediscovered and used for nationalistic, anti-French, and anti-modern sentiments (Busch 2001, 519)—Socialist art history began again to rediscover and reinterpret Friedrich and his circle, but now in a Socialist manner. With respect to landscape paintings, Hermann Müller (1953, 13) explained in *Bildende Kunst* that the difference between romantic and Socialist landscapes lies in the Socialist paradigm that “the close bonding [of art] with the people’s life and the people’s motherland” creates “a sensual, comprehensive, and practical representation of landscape.” Romantic artists of the early nineteenth century had instead tended to overemphasize the spiritual forces of nature, and they fled into fantasy and religion. Later on, this critique was kept but historicized. The spiritual quality was explained as a way for artists to express their disappointments about sociopolitical developments in Germany between the French Revolution of 1789 and the fight against Napoleon culminating in 1815—romantic art as a form of inner emigration.

After Stalin’s death in 1953 and during a phase of cultural liberalization, the tradition of romantic landscape painting was again the topic of exhibitions and articles in the GDR. The most important example was the show *German Landscape Painting 1800–1914* by the National Gallery in Berlin in 1957. In his review, a classic text of Socialist interpretation of landscape painting (Hertel 2014, 60), Kuno Mittelstädt (1953, 30) discusses the genre from an ideological perspective. His main arguments were that landscape paintings have served since the Renaissance as “mediation of ideology” and as “embodiment of a bourgeois sense of home and national identity.” His review ends with the pathetic claim for a genuine Socialist way rooted in tradition to “develop a style of landscape painting that corresponds with the artistic principles of Socialist realism and that is a comprehensive and intensive expression of our life.” The function of the visual representation of the landscape in Socialism is to “depict the landscape as a space in which the transformations of life and the building of a new society takes place.”

As I have shown, the position of Kühne (1985, 9) and others in relation to landscape was that it represented not only the “grounding moment of the material living conditions of mankind,” as well as the ensemble of natural and artificial objects in an environment, but also the way that man has dealt with industry and labor in a specific area and how his “creativity” shaped his natural surroundings. Even economic and historic layers were inherent to the construct of landscape, as the articles in the *Dictionary of the Arts* point out. And, very important, nature/landscape should not only be threatened from an exchange-value standpoint but also from an aesthetic point of view, as Kühne proclaimed (33). Here again is a conceptual link to the way that romantics in the nineteenth century saw the environment because they also believed in an inner, fragile relationship of man and nature next to an “objective,” outer relationship. Despite Kühne’s emphasis on the importance of landscape for Socialist society or art-historical manifestations that stressed the role and function of landscape painting for contemporary art, the visual representations and discursive layers in the GDR did not mirror that.

Rather, within the canon of genres, landscape painting was traditionally seen as low compared to historical painting (or “era image”), the supreme genre (Pracht 1975, 282). Nevertheless, even landscape paintings had to contribute to the verifying of the future and to the building of a Socialist society in the GDR. Until the late 1960s, the Socialist critique of the romantic movement—with its emotional-spiritual relationship to nature—hindered the debate by excluding examples of romantic landscapes that might have served as good examples for a patriotic and technically advanced representation of landscape in a Marxist sense. However, even though it was not possible to discuss romantic role models for Socialist art until the 1970s, awareness of the central achievements of landscape paintings from around 1800 as carriers of meaning never disappeared. A significant change in the position of the genre of landscape painting in the hierarchy of visual arts can be observed between the late 1940s and the 1970s. This dynamism in hierarchy is also recognizable in the ways that art historians discussed the role, function, and style of landscape painting (Schulze 1974, II).

One example of the changes of the 1950s is Ullrich Kuhirt. In his essay “Man and Labor in a New Relationship,” published in 1958, Kuhirt argues that, under Socialist conditions, man and labor have established a new relationship that should be visualized. For Kuhirt (1958, 232), the genre of landscape painting was an ideal type for “making the special qualities of Socialist labor noticeable and recognizable.” According to him, the genre has to symbolize “the becoming of the Socialist building, the quality of liberated labor, the new, by degrees emerging beauty of man-made things.” In a highly idealistic view of art, Kuhirt proclaims that “man and their machines are new, at the same time not disturbing but organically integrating elements of the landscape and overall their masters.”

Ten years later, in 1968, Getraude Sumpf in *Landschaft und Industrie* (Landscape and Industry) reflected on the landscape paintings that had been shown in the

Sixth German Art Exhibition in Dresden. For her, the depiction of the industrial landscape, as well as portrait and historical painting, “has the special quality to mirror the understanding of the world of modern man in Socialist society and his lifestyle” (Sumpf 1968a, 239). Landscape paintings with industrial elements like factories or construction sites, she continues, “are never simply a pictorial presentation but they are always embodying a piece of the creating and shaping man, our Socialist contemporary,” which can be deciphered and read (242).

According to Warnke, collecting, exhibiting, and displaying painted landscapes have been common courtly practices of the symbolic and factual performance of power ever since the Middle Ages. By presenting the possessions and the richness of their countries in works of art, kings, leaders, and dictators proved their ambition of complete rule over their territories. Possessing a painted landscape nearly always meant possessing its real counterpart—or at least meant a claim of ownership of the real landscape. The dictatorial regimes of the twentieth century relied on those premodern beliefs of the power of landscape paintings. Portraits of Stalin “in the landscape” from the 1940s visualize a “totalitarian idyll.” Stalin’s ambitions for universal power over man and nature are manifested as “visions of utopia” in industrialized landscape imagery in Soviet paintings (Morozov 2003, 82; see fig. 14).

While Stalin was often depicted in landscapes, Ulbricht was shown in genre scenes of agricultural reforms or as the inspirer of the construction of new Socialist cities (fig. 15). While scientific discourses on the genre had developed from the 1960s in cultural politics, the hierarchy of the genres was again manifested in the old-fashioned canonical way that the GDR designed the interior of the People’s Palace in Berlin as the central building of the state. Begun in 1972 and finished in 1976, it incorporated a series of forty-four landscape paintings by twelve artists in rooms that were used for political and social activities (Romanus 1978; see figs. 16–7). They were dedicated, as Romanus wrote, “to the beauty of our country, the achievements of the people, and the treasures of nature.” Furthermore, they could “contribute to the aesthetical appropriation of our natural and social environment as they make the relationship of man to society, to his own and to his objectified forces in the landscape tangible” (Romanus 1976, 448). Here, we find exactly the “nature-affirmative, sensuous *Heimatliebe*” that was demanded from landscape paintings in the *Dictionary of the Arts* (Landschaft 1971, 854).

Paradoxically—and ironically at the same time—this setting can be tied back to baroque role models such as the Prussian palaces of the eighteenth century in Potsdam and Berlin, or early modern Saxonian courtly architecture in Dresden, as both incorporating and displaying landscape paintings of their state territories. But this historic-ideological diachronism of role models of absolutism was not questioned. Officially, the aristocratic mode of representation through and with landscape painting was seen as a symbol of the “diversity of the Republic with its landscape beauty and its people” (Kuhrmann 2006, 112–3). Instead of pointing out the obviously anachronistic early modern approach to landscape as *power* and *possession* speaking out from the series of paintings—a claim recited in



Fig. 14. Viktor Semenovič Ivanov, *According to the Plan of Stalin We Will Change Nature!* Poster, 1949, Museum of Design Poster Collection, Zurich, Switzerland. © ZHdK.

artworks that early modern and baroque rulers also used for their political visual propaganda, shown here by the Socialist Party's aspiration to rule the *whole* country and its provinces—one argued from a class viewpoint when speaking about the artworks in the People's Palace.

In his thesis of 1978 written at the Academy of Social Sciences at the Central Committee of the SED, Romanus discussed the landscape sceneries in the People's Palace. For him, landscape paintings enable “the viewer's ability for a delightful encounter with artistically appropriated habitat.” They would give “insights into different social relationships” because landscapes can be seen as “object and medium of social production, as space of communication and recreation of people, and as reference points of different emotional and aesthetic experiences of the personality” (Romanus 1978, 10). In his study, Romanus focused on the viewer of landscape paintings in his approaches. His background as social scientist becomes obvious. He argues that visual representations of landscapes could appeal to “the inner, spiritual world of people and their emotions” (64). Being a carrier of meaning and of epochal thoughts, landscapes might also express in their visuals “the ideal understanding of an era” (85). Thus, the “ideal



Fig. 15. Rolf Kiy, *Portrait of the State Council of the German Democratic Republic, Walter Ulbricht, in Halle/Saale*, 1970, oil on canvas. Photo from the author's archive.

understandings of an era”—the visual representation of thoughts in and with the landscape—are historically dynamic and change over time. Romanus also distinguished between landscape paintings in which the harmony of society, nature, and man is dominant; those landscapes in which an overall harmonious expression is shown but in a way embodying critical aspects; and finally, those landscapes in which “the critical judgment is the artist’s main request” (14). However, one more point seems of interest in the argument that the symbolic representation of landscape anticipates future developments. Romanus also wrote, “Landscape paintings as poetic designs of the future ... refer to the contrast between the contradictory reality and the poetic representation of harmonious relationships between society and nature” and aim to visualize these “as a desirable social ideal as an



Fig. 16. Conference room at the People's Palace, Berlin, with landscape paintings by Harald Metzkes, 1980s. Photo from the author's archive.



Fig. 17. Harald Metzkes, *Lusatia Mountains*, 1975, oil on canvas, Art Collection Lusatia, Senftenberg, Germany. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016.



Fig. 18. Bernard Kretzschmar, *View of Eisenhüttenstadt*, 1955–8, oil on canvas, Museum for Young Art, Frankfurt/Oder, Germany. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016.

historical feasible harmony” (110). That means that even Romanus’s late-1970s study referred to an old topos in Socialist utopian thinking which was also envisioned by Marx: the repeal of all differences between man, nature, and society in Communism and the erection of a realm of freedom. For Romanus as a partisan scientist, the romantic movement and Friedrich’s art were not worth researching as inspirational sources for contemporary landscape painting like they were for Bachmann (1976, 11), the director of the State Art Collections of Dresden, as shown in the beginning of this essay.

Kretzschmar’s *View of Eisenhüttenstadt* as a Socialist Role Model for Landscape Painting in the GDR

At least one painting of the mid-1950s seemed to fulfill perfectly the demands for a Socialist landscape art embodying an organic relationship of people, nature, and industry, inspiring its viewers to contribute to the building of Socialism and celebrating the nation’s beauty and progress: Kretzschmar’s iconic *View of Eisenhüttenstadt* (Romanus 1978, 89; see fig. 18). Kretzschmar received a commission from the Ministry of Culture of the GDR in 1955 to paint the “first Socialist city” of the country, bearing the name Stalinstadt.⁷ It has been widely celebrated as the first

7. “Stalin’s Town,” until 1961; later it became Eisenhüttenstadt, “Town of Steel Smelting.” See Männel (1989, 60).

Socialist landscape painting, as a major step toward the “socialization” of the romantic tradition in East Germany (Kuhirt 1958, 227; see fig. 19), and as a symbol for the triumph of contemporary art over the bourgeois art of the past.

Kretzschmar’s masterpiece belongs in a very long tradition of panoramic views executed by Dresden-based artists since the eighteenth century. It unifies older elements of an aristocratic view over the territory, the early modern element of staffage figures in the foreground, as well as a restrained impressionist style.⁸ Stylistically and compositionally, Kretzschmar painted a very anachronistic image for a modern Socialist role model of the 1950s, not following the Stalinist aesthetics of that decade but relying on naturalism in monumental and pathetic forms. However, its content and message were seen as contemporary and even utopian (Kuhirt 1958, 232; Schmidt 1970, 8).

By implementing the panoramic view of the newly founded industrial plant of Eisenhüttenstadt—described in 1963 by an anonymous journalist of the *London Times* as a “town of young blood and iron” in a landscape of “poverty and barrenness ... a desert” (“Town of Young Blood and Iron” 1963; see fig. 20)—and its settlement into a sunny, summery atmosphere under a clear blue sky, the artist created a utopian image of a striking Marxist vision, reminding its viewer of the repeal of all differences not only between classes and men but also between town and country, human society and the natural environment.⁹ In his landscape, Kretzschmar celebrated the construction of Eisenhüttenstadt as a symbol for the construction of Socialism in the GDR and as a milestone toward the realization of the Marxist utopia.¹⁰ The visionary features of Kretzschmar’s painting and the ideological implementation of landscape appears even stronger when comparing the discourse around the art work with literary reports and newspaper articles of the late 1950s on Eisenhüttenstadt. It becomes clear that reports and photographs of the new city are not simple, factual descriptions. Media was creating a specific image of Eisenhüttenstadt, “the town of young blood and iron,” as a materialized Socialist miracle, as a kind of superhuman achievement in the East German province. Authors, photographers, and visual artists like Kretzschmar—especially when describing the geographic situation of the city—emphasized that the workers of the GDR have created “a place of a new, a Socialist culture” where “only sand and sparse pines were found before” (G. and R. 1953, 4; see fig. 21).¹¹ No other viewpoint of the city was better to see and understand visually the transformation from desert into urbanity than standing on the top of a hill in the south of the city (“Diehloer Höhen,” about 230 feet high) as many photographs and reporters had done before to get a full vista of the city’s

8. For Kretzschmar’s biography see Dalbajewa and Dehmer (2011, 58–67).

9. For more on Socialist environmental politics in Stalinstadt/Eisenhüttenstadt, see Scholz (2009, 310).

10. For more on nature and Marxist utopia, see Seng and Saage (2012, 11).

11. The cited article is signed only by initials; the actual names of the authors are unknown to the author.



Fig. 19. Teenagers discussing Bernhard Kretschmar's painting *View of Eisenhüttenstadt*, fourth German Art Exhibition, Dresden, 1958, Federal Archives, Berlin, Germany. © BArch Bild 183-59605-0002/Löwe.



Fig. 20. Tractor clears the woods after the symbolic foundation ceremony of the new industrial town of Stalin-Town near Berlin, 18 August 1950, Federal Archives, Berlin, Germany. © BArch Bild 183-Too19B/Hans-Günter Quaschinsky.



Fig. 21. View of Eisenhüttenstadt (formerly Stalin-Town) from the hill “Diehloher Höhen,” 14 August 1960, Federal Archives, Berlin, Germany. © BArch Bild 183-75484-0018/Erich Zühlsdorf.

growth (fig. 22).¹² With his *icon* of Eisenhüttenstadt, Kretschmar also managed to oppose the sense of loss which was crucial for romantic landscape painting. He painted an optimistic answer as a symbol of creativeness and the power of the working class in the reconstruction of a Socialist state, even capable of building an entirely new factory and city in the ‘desert’.

Kretschmar integrated several groups of people in his panorama. They represent different forms of seeing and dealing with landscape. The people in this painting can be seen as carriers of meaning which invite the viewer to appreciate the “scope and meaning of the things happening in the scenery” (Schmidt 1970, 25). On the very left of the picture, the painter included a family of three, the father showing his son the scenery. One could interpret this family as symbolic representation of the old and new generations within GDR-Socialism. The elder father and mother belong to the founding generation that teaches the new generation about the heritage and the achievements of the state. The family is representing a moral and historical approach to landscape as, according to Kühne (1985, 39), “the unity of social, micro-communal, and individual areas of space, which are summarized and interrelated in the house and the space of nature and the space of production.”

As Warnke (1995, 115) has shown in his book *Political Landscape*, “landscape motifs can repeatedly be invested with religious or moral significance,” which is here also suggested for Kretschmar’s painting. In the mid-foreground, a young couple rests

12. See Horlamus (1963, 12), Häslér (1966, 5), and “Auf du und du mit StalinStadt,” *Berliner Zeitung*, 16 August 1960, 3.



Fig. 22. Tourists regard Stalin-Town from a nearby hill, 21 August 1954, Federal Archives, Berlin, Germany. © BArch Bild 183-26012-0001/Horst Sturm.

in the shadows of vegetation. Their view on the landscape must be very limited since they are sitting behind bushes. They are concentrating to one another and represent therefore a lyrical, “romantic” approach to landscape—as romantic refuge for emotions and feelings. Just behind the couple, a group of *flâneurs* is coming up the hill, showing another approach to landscape as vital scenery for sport and free-time. The same holds true for a pair of cyclists in the right foreground. Lovers, walkers, and cyclists are depicted by Kretzschmar as typical representations of a contemporary approach to landscape by inhabitants of cities. For them, landscape is not only a place of aesthetic contemplation or a carrier of moral meanings but also a more or less neutral space for pragmatic use.

The counterpart of the ideological approach to landscape which is symbolized by the family on the left is a self-portrait of Kretzschmar who is shown as a red-dressed figure in the far right mid-ground. Recalling Friedrich’s romantic use of the so-called *Rückenfigur*—which is shown with the back to the viewer—he is showing himself in the actual process of painting on an easel. However, he is not only symbolizing the authenticity of the painting as a true panorama of Eisenhüttenstadt, but also is representing a third approach to the landscape—in addition to the moral-historic and the pragmatic approach—that is the aestheticizing contemplation of the landscape rooted in the romantic era and manifested especially in Friedrich’s landscape paintings. While Friedrich and others around

1800 were barely represented as self-portraits in their landscapes, Kretzschmar situates himself within it as creator of the image and as element of the landscape at the same time. A parallel interpretation of this landscape goes that Kretzschmar's painting is both a topographically accurate visual representation of the city and area of Eisenhüttenstadt and an allegory of different forms for how to approach a landscape under Socialism. Like the moral (family) and pragmatic approach (hikers, cyclists, lovers), also the aesthetic approach (painter) leads to the painted anticipation of a harmonious relationship between man and nature/landscape, a vision of the coexistence of the needs of human society under Socialism with the surrounding nature.

Kretzschmar's work was seen as "utopian" by some authors in the GDR because it anticipated an ideal status which had not yet been reached and which was a projection of hopes for a better Socialist future. Underlining the impression of a tranquil and peaceful interrelation of man and nature in Kretzschmar's panorama, he showed the steel factory as well as the urban structures as if they were organic parts of this industrialized landscape, not showing any of the negative aspects of its transformation in the last couple of years. The power station, the steel factory, blast furnaces, housing, construction sites, and the streets geometrizing the landscape do appear "naturalized" rather than "artificial" in this environment. The manly geometrization of space—recognizable in the alley running from the left to the center of the painting and the division of the mid-ground in parcels of land—appears ordered and clear. The color of the walls of the housing site on the right has the same color as the earth around it and becomes therefore a part of the ground. The naturalization of artificial, man-made objects in the landscape through aestheticization also becomes evident when comparing Kretzschmar's clouds of smoke from the factories with the "natural" clouds—they are hard to distinguish because of the same shared color and form. In his painting, no element of alienation of man and nature is recognizable. Instead, they are shown in a perfect, organic harmony, the repeal of all differences as Marx prophesized in Communism. In his personal utopian vision of Eisenhüttenstadt as a symbol and allegory for the progress in Socialism and the building of a new and better society, man has transformed nature into a Communist landscape without violating it. Schmidt had already emphasized this interpretation in the early 1970s. Regarding Kretzschmar's oeuvre, he wrote that landscape was for the painter "a social habitat, not just a beautiful *sujet*" (Schmidt 1970, 8). Schmidt also saw Kretzschmar's intention to anticipate a utopian vision of man and nature in his painting: "nature being disturbed in its rest already suggests its transformation into a human habitat, in which both will finally merge into a harmonious unity" (25). Especially when combining this work of art with the political propaganda around the new town, the utopian qualities of Kretzschmar's painting are obvious: "And Walter Ulbricht told the workers in his speech and while visiting the exhibition, what Stalinstadt will look like. He pointed to the model of the city,

and in this gesture lies the solid certainty that the city will arise tomorrow as big and beautiful as it is today thought in the model and in the plan” (G. and R. 1953, 4).

Schmidt did not want or was not able to underline a potential subversive nature of Kretzschmar’s painting. Even though it is not as clear as in Mattheuer’s later landscapes, Kretzschmar divided its panorama with a diagonal line as Mattheuer did later in his Bratsk painting. For the iconic depiction of an envisioned landscape of industry, housing, and nature, the tree-shadowed avenue linking the hill in the foreground with the city and the power plant in the background serves as a compositional and as a content-related division. It creates a remarkable dynamism in the overall harmony. This diptych view, which can be seen as a distinction between present and future, reality and wish, is mirrored in the black and white clouds above the industrial complexes, in the different people’s activities on the hill, and in the dialectic of young and old personified in the family group on the very left where a father is explaining to his child the view of the concrete landscape as well as of future development. To which future and what utopias will the road—which the founding generation has cut into the sandy woods of the former East German desert—lead?

However, twenty years after Kretzschmar, a disappearance of the utopian character of the industrialized landscape can be traced even in Socialist landscapes (Gillen 2004, 77). According to Romanus (1978, 90), industrial landscapes of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Kretzschmar’s panorama, had “celebrated the productive relationship of society to nature” with an “unlimited euphoria towards technique”; at the same time, paintings of the same *sujet* in the 1970s would not only “celebrate the actual stand of the rule over nature” but also “reflect the process of the transformation and of the creation of landscapes” (102). So these *sotzromantic* images of landscape meant a break in the genre of landscape painting in the GDR. The qualities of reflection and anticipation of man-nature relationships were embodied in the paintings by Mattheuer, who was inheritor and renewer of the romantic tradition in Socialist landscape painting and who also established himself as one of the most prominent landscape critics in the GDR.

Mattheuer’s Landscapes as Deconstruction of the Ideal and the Utopian Relationships of Man and Nature

After interpreting Kretzschmar’s idealistic painting of Eisenhüttenstadt, of which the cultural politics of the party expected the evolution of the genre of Socialist landscape imagery, this chapter is devoted to Mattheuer’s attempt for a renewal of that very genre. Not relying on Kretzschmar’s stylistic mode but grounded in more subjective romantic visions of a meaningful and emotional relationship of man and nature, Mattheuer’s landscapes are genuine artistic expressions of a Socialist romanticism.



Fig. 23. Wolfgang Mattheuer, *Landscape around Bratsk*, 1967, oil on hardboard, National Gallery, Berlin, Germany. © bpk/Nationalgalerie, SMB/Roman März, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016.

As pointed out earlier in this essay, Mattheuer has been compared to the romantic Friedrich since the early 1970s. The Dresden exhibition, which included both artists, as well as the Greifwald conference, proved the close connection between them. Clearly, Mattheuer did not copy Friedrich, but he adapted some motifs, compositional elements, and even the custom of written explanations that Friedrich also used. Friedrich's paintings were all of a conceptual character and not straight records of a direct observation of nature (Stumpel 2008). The same is true of Mattheuer: he also observed nature but then reordered and reorganized elements in an artistic, not naturalistic, way. Interestingly, Mattheuer's first landscape paintings of the 1960s were far from Friedrich as a stylistic role model. Only later, in the 1970s, did Mattheuer's oeuvre show more and more parallels to Friedrich's artworks.

Mattheuer became known to a broader audience through his painting *Landscape near Bratsk* (fig. 23), created around 1967 after a state-organized trip to the Siberian city with other colleagues (Sumpf 1968a). It was first presented at the *Sixth German Art Exhibition* in Dresden in 1967. Since the region around Bratsk and its huge industrial complexes were described with a pathetic tone in official sources as “the

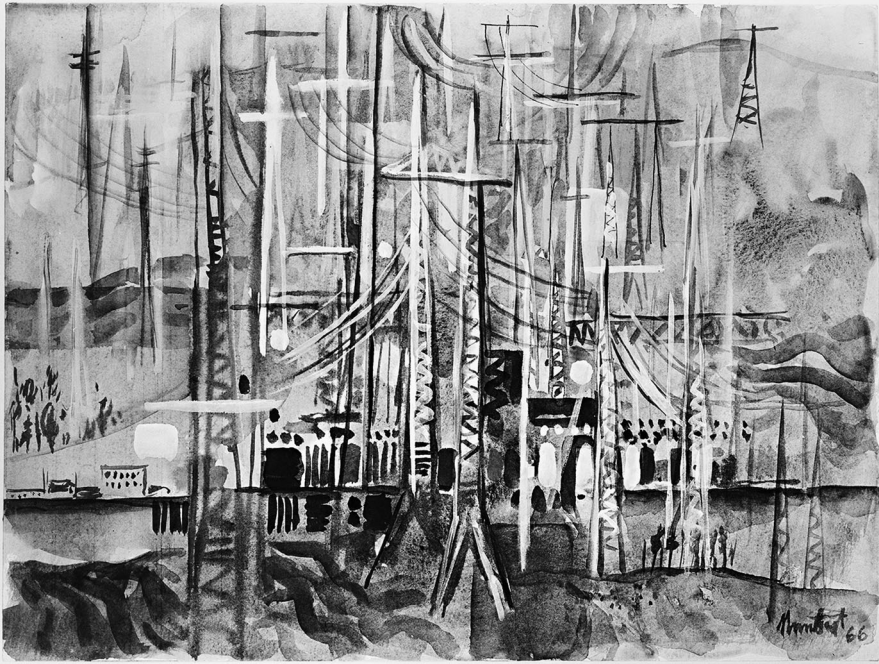


Fig. 24. Willi Neubert, *Electric Power Plant of Bratsk*, 1966, watercolor. © SLUB Dresden/Deutsche Fotothek/Rudolph Kramer.

electrical heart of Siberia” (fig. 28),¹³ Mattheuer’s visual representation offers some surprises when compared with other contemporary paintings of this Siberian place. While Willi Neubert (1920–2011) and Armin Münch (1930–2013), who accompanied Mattheuer to the USSR and to Bratsk, fulfilled the expectations of SED officials for a noncritical and partisan depiction of transformed landscapes of Socialist reproduction and rule over nature with their paintings (Sumpf 1968b; see figs. 24–6), Mattheuer neglected this approach. He focused not so much on industry—which is, in fact, pushed toward the background—but more on the people and their behavior in a transformed, destroyed, and torn landscape (Gleisberg 1970, 231). This could not have been the intention of the “Socialist Grand Tour” organized by the party, which should have proved the exemplarity of Bratsk as manmade landscape and as source of artistic inspiration.¹⁴

It is obvious that Mattheuer did not celebrate the human triumph over nature or the victory of Soviet Socialism (Hertel 2014, 124). He shows us a waste-brown desert structured by broken pipelines, streets, and power lines. Beyond the power plant in the background, the sky enigmatically turns from bluish to greyish, and the

13. For the history of the hydroelectric power station at Bratsk see Gestwa (2010, 32–5).

14. In fact, many of the big industrialization campaigns in the Socialist world were depicted in the visual arts and spread through media. See Best (2010).



Fig. 25. Willi Neubert, *Dam of the Hydroelectric Power Plant of Bratsk*, 1966, oil on canvas. © SLUB Dresden/Deutsche Fotothek/Rudolph Kramer.

pipeline leading from the plant to the foreground divides the landscape. This compositional element was implemented by Kretzschmar in the late 1950s to establish a “diptych view” in his landscape, too. For Mattheuer, the diagonal pipeline stands as visual and symbolic metaphor for the human “cut” through the natural landscape and its consequences. Just as industry or human artifacts in this landscape lack heroism or pathos, the same is true of the human figures. The concentration of human inhabitants of the industrialized environment in the painting was already observed by Mattheuer’s contemporaries (Sumpf 1968a, 240). Neubert’s and Münch’s Bratsk images mainly dealt with the technological and industrial impacts of the huge project; Mattheuer put the inhabitants of this artificial

environment in the center. This decision links Mattheuer's image to another, also international and highly recognized piece: Viktor Efimovich Popkov's *The Builders of Bratsk* (fig. 27), which was exhibited at the 1962 Venice Biennale and marked, according to Matteo Bertelé (2014, 108), "a break with Socialist realist painting, starting from the author's declared intention to free himself from subject painting."

But in Mattheuer's piece, an old lady on the left contemplates; a boy on the right is playing with tanks next to a fallen tree. On the pipeline, two women are balancing while moving forward. At first sight, this picture seems to have nothing in common with Friedrich's sublime landscapes, which celebrated man in nature. It is true that Mattheuer does not really show us a romantic image of landscape, but what links his picture with Friedrich is that Mattheuer presents not only a landscape but also a space of meaningful interaction between humans and nature (Mittelstädt 1953, 30). Meanwhile, the landscape tells us something about human beings. In Bratsk in the late 1960s, the people are isolated, disoriented, and struggling individuals trying to live in a dramatically changed landscape. The separation of industry from the people in Mattheuer's painting could be read as alienation of man from both work and surrounding nature. Of course, partisan interpreters of his work like Romanus (1978, 34) denied the alienation, claiming his landscapes are characterized by an "artistically judged contradiction ... with a basic affirmative tendency towards Socialism." And Sumpf (1968a, 240) argued that the youngsters in the painting are conquering the new landscape, as the boy judges "the torn earth of the huge construction site as a romantic arena of his war-games." However one categorizes the person in the painting, whether as alienated or excited, all readings of Mattheuer's landscape have to respect the specific qualities represented in the concentration of the human beings in the landscape and their relationships with nature. With this, Mattheuer pushes a critical perspective on the developments at Bratsk, thematized by Popkov in 1960 on a larger scale linked to the overarching man-nature relationship.

Should this painting have represented a place of the "world-historical realization of man" with which Kühne was so fascinated, or the attractiveness of a "nature which has been designed by the creativeness of man," which the *Dictionary of the Arts* reported (Landschaft 1971, 854)? Indeed, far from having a romantic aura, Mattheuer's landscape "mirrored a specific relationship to nature," but obviously not in the partisan and dogmatic ways of conventional realistic art in the GDR. It is neither superficially romantic—in the sense of a visual representation of a harmonious and idyllic man-nature relationship—nor superficially Socialist—in the sense of a Gorkian optimistic vision of the triumph of the working class over nature. However, Mattheuer's *Bratsk* is on a conceptual level romantic as well as Socialist because it visualizes the romantic feeling of the loss of the harmony of man and nature (Lehmann 2001, 188) and because it represents in a genuine style the manmade character of the Siberian landscape as a "sign" or allegory for the ongoing transformations of the "second nature" through civilizational and industrial influences. Or to put it another way, *Bratsk* as a landscape



Fig. 26. Armin Münch, *Bratsk I (First Draft)*, 1966, pen, chalk, watercolor, from the graphic cycle *Bratsk/Siberia*. © SLUB Dresden/Deutsche Fotothek/Rudolph Kramer.



Fig. 27. Viktor Efimovich Popkov, *The Builders of Bratsk*, 1960, oil on canvas, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. Photo from the author's archive.



Fig. 28. Building the Bratsk Hydropower Plant, 29 September 1959. © RIA Novosti archive, image #315182/Michael Trahman/CC-BY-SA 3.0.

transformed fundamentally by the Socialist society of the Soviet Union is the mirrored counterpart of Kretzschmar's *Eisenhüttenstadt* as a utopian, Marxist vision of the East German sandy desert transformed into a new town. Remarkably, both artists chose industrial landscapes to give their romantic/Socialist attitudes adequate expression.

While Kretzschmar painted a vital and bright scene of the growing city of *Stalin-stadt* in the late 1950s, Mattheuer showed in his 1974 *Friendly Visit to the Lignite Mining* (fig. 29) a tortured and deformed landscape. It is the same blue sky and a comparable industrial plantation in the background of both paintings, but Mattheuer brings the central motive—some workers and square-headed party officials

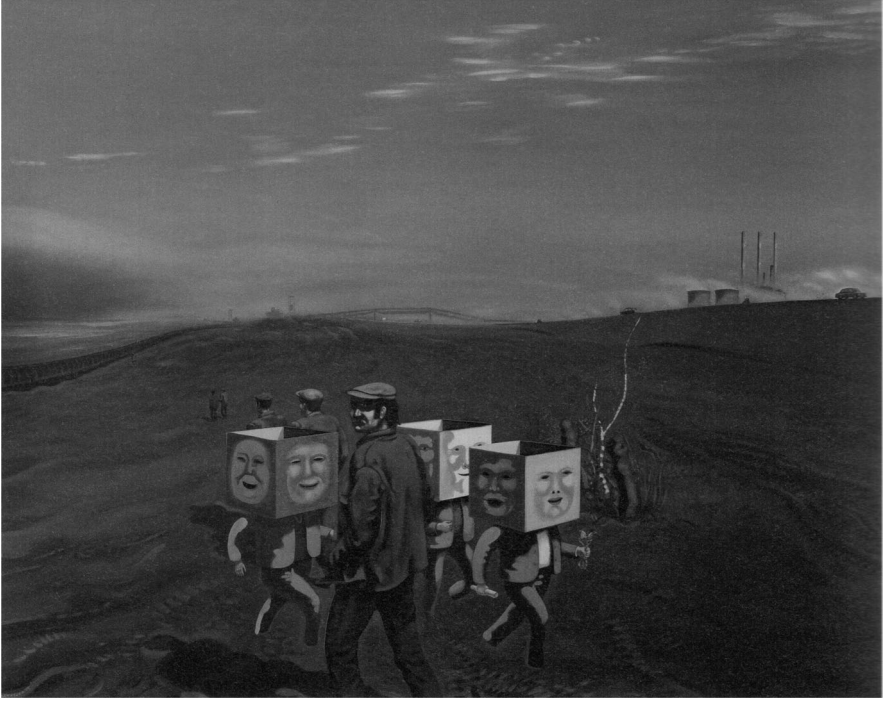


Fig. 29. Wolfgang Mattheuer, *Friendly Visit to the Lignite Mining*, 1974, oil on hardboard, private collection, Potsdam, Germany. Photo from the author's archive. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016.

with documents—much closer to the viewer. Not only are the human beings alienated from one another but they also seem to have lost contact with nature. But what nature can be traced in the image at all? Only a small piece of vegetation survives in the foreground in the middle of the brown desert. While Kretschmar has most likely chosen the panorama format for his utopian vision, Mattheuer presents a “closed” landscape without any perspective into future development. The viewer is not invited to recognize a bright future but is confronted with the very problems of life under Socialism and the ongoing destruction of natural resources in the 1970s (Scholz 2009, 475–7).

This painting by Mattheuer can be read as a critique of Socialist environmental politics that aimed to change nature and landscape as a programmatic act, as an “overcoming of the past and its limitations and as overcoming of nature,” as Best puts it.¹⁵ Regarding the partisan viewpoint on the visual arts, Romanus

15. “It has been especially the idea of planning in a great—a ‘geological’—scale, which inspired the visions of future [in Socialism, O.S.]. The alteration of the physical space, for example of rivers, meant the rule of man over nature. Infrastructural major projects are related closely with ideas of

(1978, 92) claimed that the “dominant concept of man and society which arose from an idealized, simplifying imagination of the dialectics of the development of society” is now replaced by a more differentiating approach, but on the other hand he did not recognize the obvious critical elements in Mattheuer’s landscapes.

Mattheuer’s references to Friedrich’s art developed further in the late 1970s. As in the previous examples, his *Oh Caspar David ...* (see fig. 30), with a direct reference to the romantic in the title, is again characterized by the combination of reality and fantasy, of symbolic representation and accurate observation. In this case, Mattheuer forgoes human figures and visible artifacts of human society; only the smoking power plants in the very background are a direct reminder of industrialization. However, what is most important here is, I think, the division into three zones: the brown foreground with a fallen oak, the large central area consisting of regular but artificial hills of dark earth, and the dark greyish sky above. The reference to Friedrich is given not only by the title but also by the tree in the foreground because for Friedrich the oak was a symbol of the German nation and history (Hernand 2001; Grummt 2008). In his *Abbey in an Oak Forest* (see fig. 31), the tree and architecture form a commitment to the German culture, symbolized by oaks and gothic ruins (Lehmann 2001, 191). Following the intensive resource extraction in the GDR, the oak in Mattheuer’s painting has fallen and the landscape has been transformed. Now it is not a vital symbol like a tree dominating the scenery but a depressive and monotonous outlook on actually existing Socialism.

Mattheuer was quoting art historical styles, techniques, and motifs as *actualization* and *historicization*. Despite his partisan engagement and involvement in Socialist cultural politics in the GDR, Mattheuer formed an artistic opposition against the dogma of Socialist realism as mirroring reality in its revolutionary development. Mattheuer oriented himself toward Friedrich. For him, the category of history was much more than just a formal aspect of his work; it was an attitude toward the presence of actually existing late Socialism. Mattheuer dealt with manipulated and transformed elements of older styles in order to express his view of contemporary issues. Artworks of the 1970s and 1980s by Mattheuer became “time images” on several levels: they quote the past (style, motifs, technique) by interpreting the present (topic, message), and they envision the future very skeptically. One can observe neither Kretzschmar’s open and bright horizons nor the powerful vision of a technocratic utopia in the landscapes of Mattheuer. Panoramic views, stable positions, and clear messages are replaced by highly subjective and enigmatic visions that emphasize the role of the subject viewing the painting. The artistic vision of a connection between industrialization and the overcoming of nature as a symbol of Socialist modernity (Best 2010, 138), which was embodied in Kretzschmar’s works, has lost its force of persuasion. Neither an ideological nor a clear

modernity—both as the overcoming of the past and its limitations and as overcoming of nature” (Best 2010, 139).

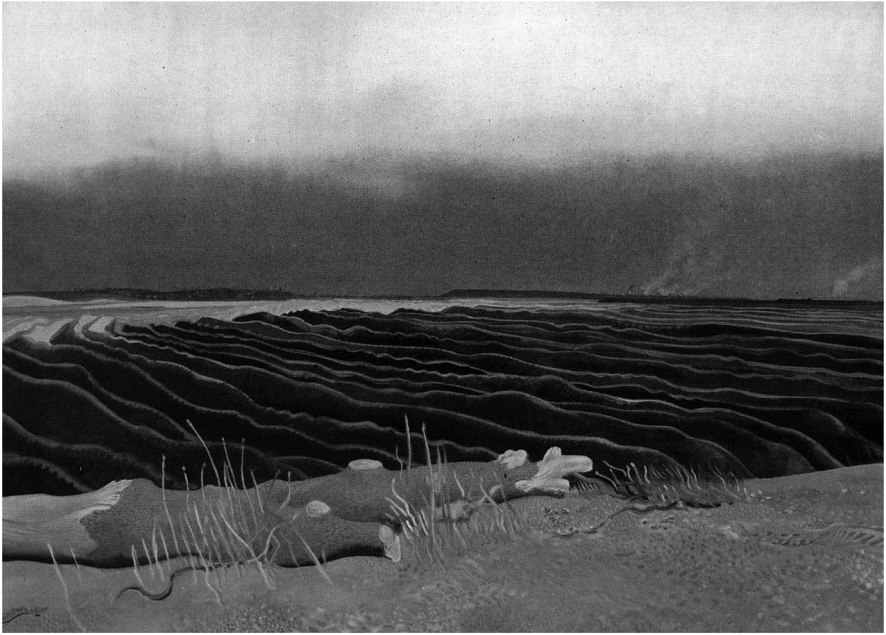


Fig. 30. Wolfgang Mattheuer, *Oh, Caspar David ...*, 1975, oil on hardboard, Mattheuer Foundation, Leipzig, Germany. Photo from the author's archive. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016.



Fig. 31. Caspar David Friedrich, *Abbey in an Oak Forest*, 1809–10, oil on canvas, National Gallery, Berlin, Germany. © Wikipedia Commons.

Socialist slogan can be traced in Mattheuer's landscapes; the subject is turned back upon itself, a truly romantic topos.

Conclusion

This essay has aimed to contextualize the rediscovery of romantic landscape images in the visual arts of the GDR and the emergence of critical voices with regard to the great environmental problems stemming from the ruthless industrialization and the construction of a Socialist society as part of the framework of *Sotzromantizm*. Intellectuals like Kühne, art historians like Romanus, and artists like Mattheuer were dealing with contemporary issues represented and symbolized in the category of landscape. If Ina Adler (1976, 331) observed that “Mattheuer understands the space of landscape as expression and status of human transformation and creation, as space of human life and human perfection ... the space of landscape is directly social space,” then it becomes clear that the subversive qualities of the symbolic representations of landscapes lie in an emancipatory approach established in the Enlightenment and continued in the romantic era. Throughout art history, philosophy, and politics grounded in Marxism-Leninism, thinkers in the GDR were referring to this idealized vision of landscape as a place of moral complement based on Rousseau, Schiller, or Marx.

However, all of these visual examples are characterized by different approaches to the Socialist landscape, oscillating between subordination of nature to the demands of the Socialist economy and society, on one hand, and the romantic “charging” of nature as space for subjective and emotional interpretations of the present state of society on the other. Future research on the topic of the reception of romanticism should investigate much more deeply the importance of the romantic tradition for German art after World War II in both East and West (Schmitz-Emans 2004, 28–31).

In this specific case, I suppose that the relevance of landscape paintings in the GDR can be compared to the appearance of romantic elements in art theory, art history, and the visual arts as a dynamic process since the late 1960s. This appearance had widespread consequences for the interpretation of the prehistory of art in the GDR (Feist 1974). Plus, it resulted in the circumstance that, especially in the genre of landscape painting, romanticism again became a fruitful source of inspiration for contemporary artists in Socialism. This was extraordinary since romanticism had been criticized for being backward looking and ideologically reactionary. The reception of the German romantic era of the early nineteenth century can therefore be interpreted as part of the broader phenomenon of the historicization of the cultural roots of the GDR. The emphasis on the viewer as autonomous subject and the ambiguity of Mattheuer's landscapes—his landscapes can be read as critique, depictions of romantic sentiments, transfigurations, allegories, or all of them at once (Uhlitzsch 1974, 4)—challenged and questioned Socialism's

reason in art and its faith in artistic “truth,” linking Mattheuer’s works with Friedrich’s (Busch 2001, 521). While Friedrich’s landscapes lost their spiritual and religious impetus through the Socialist interpretation of his work—which then led to the historicization of his oeuvre—Mattheuer’s landscapes, on the other hand, gained pictorial and aesthetic.

Kühne’s utopian vision of the repeal of the alienation of man, nature, and landscape in Socialism/Communism and of the “humanization” of the environment, which he had drawn in his essay “House and Landscape,” has not come into being. In the very same year that his collection of essays was published, 1985, Kühne killed himself. Only a few years later, the whole Socialist experiment in East Germany collapsed, partly because of the subversive practices of environmental protection groups, which saw the party’s and state’s failures also represented in the natural devastation and disasters around the country (fig. 32). Ever since,



Fig. 32. *Great Landscape with Heap*, 1985, caricature, *Der Spiegel*, 30 (1985): 68. Photo from the author’s archive.

Mattheuer's paintings have been interpreted and used for various meanings and aims, whether for celebrations of the Socialist culture of the GDR, as in 1974, or whether as critical expressions on environmental and sociopolitical developments in the 1980s. His images became visual expressions of an actualization of romantic ideas on the power of nature and landscape. Finally—and again—the cultural category of landscape is crucial for understanding how members of the Socialist society of the GDR saw nature and landscape, how they interacted and transformed their environment, and how they envisioned their ideal life *within* the changing landscapes of Socialism.

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“A Wonderful Song of Wood”: Heritage Architecture and the Search for Historical Authenticity in North Russia

Alexey Golubev

This article examines architectural preservation in North Russia after World War II as a movement that treated local vernacular architecture as a key to understanding the authentic national history of Russia. It argues that Soviet architectural preservationists were driven by romantic nationalist ideas that sought to establish northern Russian vernacular architecture as an aesthetic system that fully realized the expressive potential of wood as a construction material. Moreover, Soviet preservationists linked this system to a society free of the social conflicts that allegedly existed in North Russia, thanks to its geographic and political marginality until the tsarist oppression of the nineteenth century. While widely employing the conceptual apparatus of early Soviet-Marxist architects such as Moisei Ginzburg and Aleksei Gan, Soviet architectural preservationists petrified the transformative social agenda of early Soviet architectural theory.

Key Words: Architectural Preservation, Politics of Aesthetics, Republic of Karelia, Russian Constructivism, Soviet Architecture

The architecture of peasants' houses, as well as their tools, everyday objects, design, and other forms of folk art, have preserved much of what emerged in far more remote times, what is rooted in the deep foundations of feudalism, what goes back to the cradle of the ancient ethnic cultures of the [Soviet] people.

—Aleksandr Opolovnikov, *Museums of Wooden Architecture*

Superficially, two of the UNESCO heritage monuments in Russia—the Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow and Kizhi Pogost in the Republic of Karelia—are the absolute opposite of each other. The Narkomfin House (see [fig. 1](#)) epitomizes the early Soviet approach to architectural planning. For Soviet-Marxist architects and urban planners of the 1920s and 1930s, the city was a space intended to organize a new social life. Their writing and practice sought to transform urban space in ways that would allow for new social relations to emerge. Moisei Ginzburg (1892–1946), a



Fig. 1. *The Narkomfin Building*, 1930s, photo by Robert Byron, Wikipedia.com.

theorist of Soviet constructivist architecture, reflected this transformative social approach to architecture in the design of the Narkomfin house (1930). With its minimized private space and built-in service facilities including daycare center and canteen, the Narkomfin House had to act as a “social condenser” (a term coined by Ginzburg in 1928)—that is, as a material form that aggregated people into collectives and forged new forms of communal life (Buchli 2000, 64–76). In contrast, Kizhi Pogost (see fig. 2) is an architectural complex consisting of two eighteenth-century wooden churches and an octagonal bell tower built in 1862. It is also the core exhibit of an open-air museum of wooden architecture that was established after World War II to collect, preserve, and display objects of North Russian village architecture. Whereas the Narkomfin House embodied the understanding of history as a vibrant, present, and active process, the museum of Kizhi represented an attempt to capture and freeze it in a historical landscape. The Narkomfin House sought to materialize the socialist future in concrete and glass. Kizhi Pogost objectified the national past in wood. Yet there is a deep connection



Fig. 2. *Kizhi Pogost*, 1960s. Reproduced by permission of the Museum of Kizhi, KP-6814/1.

between these two objects. The architectural preservation effort in the postwar USSR encapsulated in the open-air museum of Kizhi drew extensively on the theory of early Soviet constructivist architecture. Its main ideologist, the restoration expert of Kizhi Pogost and the first designer of the museum of Kizhi, Aleksandr Opolovnikov (1911–94), was a student of Ginzburg.

In the 1930s, the Soviet leadership turned to nationalist interpretations of Soviet history, a trend that emerged and intensified multifold during World War II (Stites 2000; Brandenberger 2002; Platt and Brandenberger 2006); this change required objectification in architecture. As a result, the postwar period saw a growing effort on behalf of architectural preservation. The foundation for a changed state politics of architectural preservation was laid with decrees in 1947 and 1948 that expanded the list of heritage objects in the USSR and imposed legal responsibility for their proper maintenance on regional authorities. De-Stalinization reforms also greatly intensified the scale of museumification of old buildings and other structures. In 1960, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) Council of Ministers passed a resolution establishing a national register of buildings and structures, recognizing designated buildings and structures as officially protected monuments and further expanding the practice and coverage of architectural preservation (Livshits 2008; Kelly 2014a). Titled “On the further improvement of the protection of monuments of culture in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic,” it included a list of several thousand buildings and structures, mostly churches (“Postanovlenie SM RSFSR,” 1960). The list grew

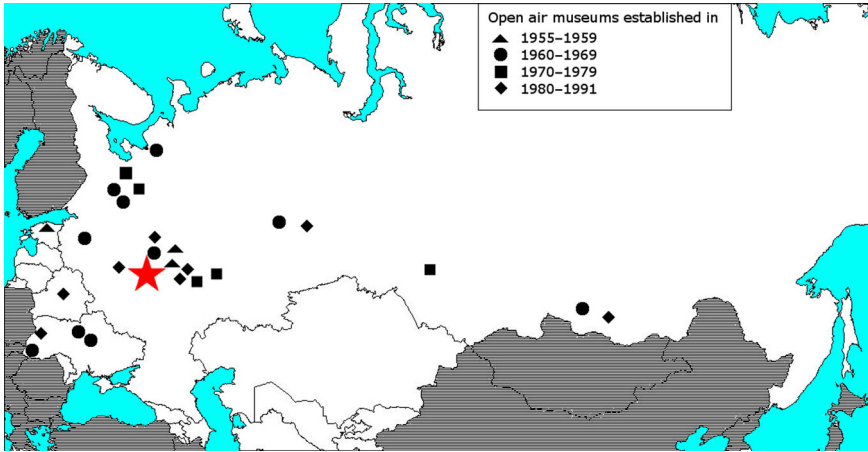


Fig. 3. A schematic map of major open-air museums established after World War II in the Soviet Union, by decade, beginning in 1955. Designed by the author. Sources: Opolovnikov 1968; Kulturnoe-nasledie.ru.

almost every year, and, in the course of the last three decades of the Soviet Union, the landscape of late socialism became punctuated with tens of thousands of buildings, including churches, that became officially recognized as objects of historical and cultural heritage.¹ This process was followed by a related one in which old buildings and structures from abandoned villages were disassembled, moved, and restored in specially designated areas to create open-air museums of heritage (usually wooden) architecture. The map below shows major open-air museums established in the USSR after World War II (see fig. 3); according to a Polish museologist, by 1990, their total number had grown to fifty-eight (Czajkowski 1991).

This article examines the museumification of old architecture in the post-World War II USSR as a phenomenon that absorbed the rhetoric and conceptual apparatus of early Soviet-Marxist architecture yet pursued a very different political agenda. Instead of a radical social transformation, open-air museums of heritage architecture reflected and stimulated a Romantic interpretation of nationalist Soviet history. The geographic focus of this article is the Republic of Karelia, a region in the northwest of Russia. Between 1940 and 1956 it was officially known as the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic and was a full member of the Soviet Union on a par with the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Estonia, and other Soviet republics. Unlike in the other members of the Union, however, its title nation was an ethnic minority in the Republic: in 1937, the

1. The official register of “objects of the historical and cultural heritage” of the Russian Federation currently includes over 140,000 items. Its online version provides detailed descriptions for 120,000 of them. See *Pamiatniki istorii i kul'tury Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, accessed 13 December 2016, <http://mkrf.ru/ais-egrkn/>.

share of Karelians in its population was 29.3 percent, a percentage that has only fallen since then (Pokrovskaia 1978, 50). As a result, its leaders were concerned with the search for national symbols that could represent Karelia on the national stage and justify its quasi statehood. To achieve their goals, the government of the Karelian-Finnish SSR employed a number of experts of architectural preservation whose aim was to describe and preserve—or, alternatively, to recreate—the historical landscape of Karelia. This political order empowered Soviet enthusiasts of preservation to define the cultural and historical imagination at the regional and, over time, national levels. Focusing on the activities of these enthusiasts, I show how wood, a traditional building material in local communities, became a symbol of the “deep cultural roots” of Soviet society. Recent scholarship in the studies of socialist materiality has enriched our knowledge of how socialist regimes sought to objectify their understanding of modernity and visions of historical progress in such materials as plastic, concrete, iron, and glass (Hellebust 2003; Rubin 2012; Fehérváry 2013; Chadaga 2014). This article seeks to add wood to the register of materials that was instrumental in the objectification of socialism; as a material, wood, due to its very texture, could serve as a living witness to its authentic history.

Whereas the Soviet-Marxist architecture of the 1920s and 1930s understood history as a vibrant process and sought to contribute to its making with new material forms, the postwar architectural preservation movement sought to transform history into visual pleasure through spatial constructions. The paradoxical nature of this situation lay in the fact that Soviet preservationists borrowed the rhetoric and methodology of Soviet constructivist architecture. For both, the search for authentic architectural forms was the essence of their activities. But Soviet-Marxist architects such as Ginzburg (1926, 3) argued that architectural forms had to serve a new function: namely, the organization of the material conditions of social life, hence his call to Soviet architects to “realize [their] design from the inside out.” For Soviet enthusiasts of architectural preservation, the forms with which they worked were devoid of any functions other than performing history. Their preoccupation with architectural form translated into an effort to find the primordial, ideal, aesthetic system allegedly inherent in wooden, vernacular architecture and cleanse surviving objects of any later accretions.

The architectural preservation movement, which existed both in the Soviet center and in the periphery, was intrinsically connected to the struggle for social power in post-World War II Soviet society. Stephen Bittner (2008) and Catriona Kelly (2012) have shown in their research on architectural preservation in Moscow and Leningrad, respectively, how heritage architecture gave the Soviet urban intelligentsia the social power to define the historical imagination by appealing to national memory as an essential, materialized phenomenon. While many Soviet urban planners and officials were still eager to produce new socialist forms of social organization through architecture, growing preservation activism

among Soviet intellectuals after World War II, especially beginning in the mid-1950s, complicated any large-scale reconstruction or demolition of heritage architecture. Using postwar legislation on architectural preservation as well as diverse institutional opportunities such as letters to newspapers and public hearings, heritage architecture enthusiasts became a force to be reckoned with in late Soviet architectural planning.

The campaigns in Moscow and Leningrad were spearheaded by “old intelligentsia”—that is, people whose families had lived in these cities for several generations. At stake for them was their immediate lived space. It was different in the Soviet provinces where an architectural preservation movement also sprouted up in the late 1940s and further developed in the post-Stalinist era. The people whose work laid the foundation of open-air museums of wooden architecture, such as Aleksandr Opolovnikov and Vyacheslav Orfinsky in North Russia, came from regional urban centers, such as Petrozavodsk, the capital of Karelia, or from other Soviet regions. Their desire to protect heritage architecture, driven by romantic, nationalist forms of historical imagination, led them to extrapolate the perceived historical authenticity from buildings to their residents. The focus on authentic architectural form translated into the artificial archaicizing and exoticization of North Russian communities. The natural and historical landscape of North Russia was one particular resource to which they resorted in their preservation activities.

Lyrical Landscapes of Socialism

One of the essays in György Lukács’s 1911 *Soul and Form*, “Longing and Form,” begins with a discussion of the persistent link between German, French, and Italian landscapes on the one hand and different forms of longing that dominated their respective national literatures on the other. In trying to describe this connection, Lukács engaged the complex issue of the relationship between landscape and literary production. German landscapes, he claimed, “have something nostalgic, something melancholy and sad about them; yet they are homely and inviting.” In the context of the history of German literature, such landscapes informed the writing of “poetic songs of longing.” It was very different, he argued, with the landscape of Southern Europe:

The landscape of the South is hard and resistant ... A painter once said: “It has already been composed before you ever get into it.” And you cannot enter into a “composition,” you cannot come to terms with it, nor will it ever give an answer to tentative questions. Our relationship to a composition—to something that has already taken form—is clear and unambiguous, even if it is enigmatic and difficult to explain: it is that feeling of being both near and far which comes with great understanding, that profound sense of union

which yet is eternally a being-separate, a standing outside. It is a state of longing. In such landscapes the great Romance poets of longing were born, they grew up in it and they became like it themselves: hard and violent, reticent and form-creating. (Lukács 1974, 91–2)

The relationship between a landscape and literary production is for Lukács mediated by affects that vary from one national geography and cultural tradition to another. That landscape is not merely an object of social construction but is itself an important factor of social change—not least by providing forms of symbolic response to the modernization processes of the last two centuries—has been a popular subject in recent scholarship (Ely 2009; Cusack 2010). What Lukács also notes—an observation that he applies to Southern Europe but which can be extrapolated to many other cases, including North Russia—is that a landscape might offer its observers a certain persistent composition: a combination of elements accepted as inherent for this particular landscape. It is a well-known argument that landscape is constructed by the observer’s gaze (Urry 1990; Greider and Garkovich 1994). Lukács suggests that a landscape, in turn, can provoke a certain gaze by providing a combination of formal elements—an inherently present composition.

If conceptualized in terms of visual effect, North Russia confronted observers with a landscape that had resisted late imperial and Soviet attempts at modernization. For the tsarist authorities of the late imperial period, North Russia remained a low-priority area until World War I when the Murmansk Railway, which provided a connection between central Russia and the Arctic coast, was hastily built (Elenius et al. 2015, 183–6). In 1920, when Karelia attained a degree of self-government, its leadership, which was composed mainly of Finnish émigré communists, tried to justify its autonomy by offering it as a model of balanced, regional modernization. When their effort failed to achieve rapid industrialization, Karelia became a testing ground for the use of Gulag labor with the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal (Baron 2012). Yet all these modernization efforts remained rather superficial in terms of their visible impact on the North Russian landscape. North Russia’s scarce population was scattered over vast swaths of territory in a large number of small villages: for example, in Karelia, according to the 1933 census, the rural population of some 250,000 people was distributed among 2,700 villages over an area of 147,000 square km (Pokrovskaja 1978, 59).² The geographic and economic marginality of local communities meant that wooden, vernacular architecture was predominant in the region with the exception of a few local, urban centers, most prominently its capital, Petrozavodsk, a city with a population of 70,000 in 1939 that grew to 200,000 by the mid-1970s. As for the natural landscape, most of North Russia is covered by the taiga and has a large number of lakes, rivers,

2. The area is indicated according to the entry “Karelian ASSR” in the 1937 first edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*.



Fig. 4. Boris Pomortsev, *Subbotnii den'* (Saturday), 1961. Reproduced by permission of the Museum of Fine Art of the Republic of Karelia, ZhK-87 KP-1365.

and bogs that formed during the retreat of glaciers in the end of the last Ice Age with Karelia alone having over 60,000 lakes and 20,000 rivers.

To many observers, the North Russian landscape suggested a persistent composition that linked together tender northern vegetation, omnipresent water surfaces, and wooden buildings of the pre-revolutionary age, such as churches, chapels, and log cabins. This composition became the dominant theme of local artists; in the postwar era, landscape painting became the staple product of artists of the Petrozavodsk art school, such as Boris Pomortsev, Sulo Juntunen, Tamara Yufa, and many others. A 1973 survey of art in the autonomous republics of the Russian Federation singled out “lyrical landscapes” as the dominant genre of Karelian artists. When describing Boris Pomortsev’s landscapes (see figs. 4 and 5), its author, Viktor Vanslov (1973, 155–7), a prominent Soviet theorist of aesthetics, wrote that “Karelia reveals itself before the spectators’ eyes as a wonderful land of silence and poetry.”

Pomortsev’s 1961 *Saturday* (see fig. 4) depicts an old wooden sauna on the shore of a placid lake surrounded by a coniferous forest; his later 1977 *Awakening* (see fig. 5) is a painting of the Churches of the Transfiguration and of the Intercession



Fig. 5. Boris Pomortsev, *Probuzhdenie* (Awakening), 1977. Reproduced by permission of the Museum of Fine Art of the Republic of Karelia, ZhK-317 KP-8363.

on the island of Kizhi in Lake Onega, one of the most recognizable symbols of Karelia that I will discuss in the next section. Both images reflect the lyrical gaze provoked by North Russian landscape. Vanslov's inclusion of Pomortsev and his fellow Karelian landscape painters in an encyclopaedia of Soviet Russian art signalled an important cultural shift: in contrast to the narratives of the prewar accelerated industrialization (Golubev 2007), archaic elements in architecture as well as in social relations were no longer something to struggle against. Postwar Soviet culture recognized this landscape that blended together natural and archaic architectural elements as a socialist landscape. The framework of northern nature, water, and wooden architecture became recognized as the dominant form of visual portrayal of Karelia in particular and North Russia in general. The landscape paintings of Soviet artists made the north Russian resistance to modernization into a virtue rather than a fault: Karelia was portrayed as a place in which local communities had preserved authentic folk traditions that had been lost in more urbanized regions ("Karelia ... as a land of ... poetry"). The lyricism of the landscape became synonymous with the historical authenticity of its people.

The double movement from the inherent composition of the North Russian landscape to persistent forms of its cultural representations and back to the cultural production of local communities, now understood as an extension and a natural part of this landscape, was reflected in a documentary film that the Radio and Television Broadcasting Commission of Karelia commissioned in 1968 as a “calling card” for the republic. The film was entitled *The Land of Karelia* [Zemlia Karel’skaia], and was directed by Yuri Rogozhin on the basis of a screenplay by Vladimir Danilov, both from Petrozavodsk. The official annotation of the film described it as a “film about the past and future of Karelia” that shows it “through the eyes of a man who was born and raised here.”³ The entire film’s narrative revolved around a small village in Karelia (it remained unclear, perhaps intentionally, if it was Russian or Karelian) on the shores of an unnamed lake; its plotline follows the boat trip of two local residents who departed at dawn as a ten-year-old boy and girl, were shown halfway through the film at midday as a young couple, and returned home at dusk as an old man and woman. Short scenes with major landmarks of the republic—including wooden churches, Stone-Age rock carvings, the Kondopoga Pulp and Paper plant, and one of the local hydropower stations—served as brief interruptions in this plotline that also included detailed scenes of traditional crafts with a particular focus on boat building.

On the surface, *The Land of Karelia* features a number of allusions to Alexander Dovzhenko’s masterpiece *Earth* (1930), beginning with the title (both use the same Russian word “zemlya”) but also with its celebration of a new harmonious unity between people and nature and its particular attention to the material foundations of national character.⁴ Yet Dovzhenko’s film brought together the old and the new to show how the latter supersedes the former in an inevitable class conflict; Rogozhin’s film, in contrast, lauded the historical succession of traditions and praised cultural continuity. *Earth* is based on the materialist understanding of history as social struggle; *The Land of Karelia* documented the petrification of history and its monumentalization in an archaic landscape. An internal review of the Radio and Television Broadcasting Commission, which was part of the formal approval process and thus reflected the intentions of the patron (government of Karelia) rather than the actual content of the film, emphasized the film’s focus on the organic connection between the archaic history of Karelia and its more industrial present: “The beauty of this place stems from its certain patriarchal character and nicely matches with features of Soviet

3. See the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Russia, f. R-785, op. 1, d. 94a/529v, l. 1 (annotation of the television documentary film *The Land of Karelia*, 1968).

4. In Dovzhenko’s film, Ukrainian-ness (in its Soviet version) is derivative of an intimately close contact between the earth/soil and people’s bodies that is emphasized by numerous close-ups of traditional rural culture and natural landscapes. For more details, see Liber (2002, 106–13). Rogozhin’s *The Land of Karelia* follows a similar strategy for its cinematographic representation of Karelian-ness.

Karelia's today".⁵ In fact, as the editorial script of *The Land of Karelia* shows, "features of Soviet Karelia's today" occupied less than 10 percent of the entire film with the rest devoted to the filming of Karelian nature, lakes, traditional crafts, old wooden buildings and structures, as well as local residents who were portrayed in an intimate unity with this idyllic landscape:

Early morning. The camera is located on a hilltop from which we can see a lake sparkling in the sun's rays. A small village is visible on a far shore. Waves are washing on rocks. A boy is sitting on a rock. A small sauna on the lakeshore with a little quay leading into water [cf. Boris Pomortsev's *Saturday* in fig. 4]. The boy pushes a boat with a fair-haired girl off the quay. The boat is moving through the lake. The boy is sitting on the stern with a steering ore in his hands. The girl is rowing.⁶

Industrial scenes were only a disguise for a film that claimed that the specificity and identity of the region and its people were more about a close connection to an unspecified (and hence mythological) past than to the allegedly foreseeable communist future or even the socialist now. The film's total length, 350 meters, was standard for a 16 mm film reel used by Soviet television, with only 23 meters devoted to industrial and urban scenes and landscapes, despite the fact that, by this time, the urban population of the republic (490,516 people) greatly outnumbered the rural (222,935) people (see "Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1970g"). The director was only partially honest when he claimed that *The Land of Karelia* represented the region "through the eyes of a man who was born and raised here." The film, indeed, incorporated the male gaze with its tendency to dominate the landscape, to employ aerial perspectives through frequent scenes shot from hilltops—the kind of vision generally associated with the quintessentially male occupation of a pilot. Yet this gaze hardly belonged to a native of these shores. The search for historical authenticity in this film, and elsewhere in post-World War II Soviet cultural production, was part of what William Connolly calls a modern "drive to mastery" over nature and populations, a peculiar form of domination that seeks to transform a natural landscape into "a set of vistas for aesthetic appreciation" (Connolly 2008, 281)—even as forms of aesthetic appreciation and appropriation could be suggested by the landscape itself. After all, for local residents, "a small sauna" is a utilitarian rather than aesthetic object. The aestheticization as well as museumification of wooden, vernacular architecture were products of metropolitan claims of historical authenticity in the local landscape in order to establish symbolic control over the northern Soviet regions as a large lyrical landscape, a mythological past of the Soviet people—disregarding its heterogeneous ethnic

5. See the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Russia, f. R-785, op. 1, d. 94a/529v, l. 25–6 (a review of the television documentary film *The Land of Karelia*, 1968).

6. See the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Russia, f. R-785, op. 1, d. 94a/529v, l. 34–5 (a review of the television documentary film *The Land of Karelia*, 1968).

composition, controversial history of forced labor, harsh climate, vast distances, and rocky terrain that resisted acculturation.⁷

The lyricism of the North Russian landscape, with its persistent combination of taiga nature, lakes, and old wooden buildings, informed the restoration efforts and writing of the architectural preservation movement enthusiasts who consistently emphasized “the organic connection” between local nature and traditional architecture (Orfinskii 1972, esp. the chapter “Unity”; Belyaev, Gushchin, and Gushchina 1973, 8, 16). Soviet architectural preservation, in fact, developed over the postwar period into a process of maintenance and construction of lyrical landscapes for the aesthetic pleasure of urban audiences. The next section will examine the ideology and practice of Soviet architectural preservation using the creation of an open-air museum of wooden architecture on the island of Kizhi as a case study.

Aleksandr Opolovnikov’s Making of Kizhi

The island of Kizhi on Lake Onega is home to one of Russia’s largest and most famous open-air museums of wooden architecture. The museum’s center is Kizhi Pogost, which acquired the status of a protected “cultural and historical monument” in 1920, although the local parish was allowed to use its churches for religious service until 1936. While the churches avoided any damage during World War II, immediately after its end in 1945, the government of the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic decided to fund large-scale reconstruction work to secure the survival of the site. The desire of regional authorities to transform Kizhi into a museum open to the public motivated the postwar restoration effort. As a notable and well-known architectural monument, Kizhi was deemed the most suitable object to embody and perform Karelian locality as well as to use it educationally to foster the formation of a regional identity among the local population.⁸ Not surprisingly, as early as 1946, the Karelian-Finnish government committed to a long-term plan according to which the island of Kizhi would, in the future, accommodate “a collection of monuments to local autochthonous architecture.” To implement this idea, notable objects

7. For authenticity as a category of political and colonial domination, see Mawhinney (2000) and Raibmon (2005).

8. See the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Russia, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 1/10, l. 2; d. 5/47, l. 99 (an explanatory letter of the chief architect of the Karelian-Finnish SSR, D.S. Maslennikov, enclosed to the 1949 restoration plan of the Church of the Transfiguration. December 20, 1949). Another prominent example was the Finnish epos *Kalevala* by Elias Lönnrot. It was largely based on folklore of northern Karelian areas, and in the postwar period the government of the Karelian-Finnish SSR used its genealogy to claim *Kalevala* as a common Karelian-Finnish epos (Okabe 2014). On the educational use of heritage objects in Soviet postwar tourism, see Gorsuch (2011, 26–48) and Koenker (2013, 128–66).

of wooden architecture would have to be relocated to Kizhi from all over Karelia (Opolovnikov 1974, 19).⁹

Apart from didactic considerations, the regional quest for historical authenticity included an important political component: as mentioned earlier, after World War II, the authorities of Soviet Karelia were seeking ways to legitimize their republic's status as a full member of the Soviet Union despite the fact that Russians were an ethnic majority there. As one of the measures, they lobbied the Soviet government to allow the resettlement of Ingrian Finns who had been forcibly deported from the Leningrad region to Siberia and Kazakhstan during the 1930s. Thanks to this effort, some 21,000 Ingrians moved to Karelia during 1948–9 before the campaign was shut down during the Leningrad Affair, the largest post-World War II political cleansing (Suni 1998; Brandenberger 2004).

Architectural objects were just as important as people for the making of regional specificity because, if conceptualized in proper terms, they could act as material evidence of Karelia's primordial history. In 1947, the Karelian-Finnish government hired two Moscow architects to take a tour of Karelian villages "in order to survey, register, measure, and photograph monuments of architecture and objects of folk design [narodnoe tvorchestvo], so that urgent measures could be taken for their preservation."¹⁰ One of them was Aleksandr Opolovnikov, a student of Moisei Ginzburg whose Marxist theory of architecture was discussed above.¹¹

Opolovnikov's career went in a very different direction from that of Ginzburg. He became one of the leading practitioners and theorists of the Soviet architectural preservation movement, engaging in numerous preservation and restoration projects in north Russia. After his expedition to Karelian villages in 1947, Opolovnikov was hired by the government of the Karelian-Finnish SSR to carry out its program of preservation, restoration, and collection of heritage wooden buildings. His first assignment was the restoration of the Assumption Church in Kondopoga during the summer of 1948. The next year, Opolovnikov was appointed the chief restoration expert in Kizhi and became responsible for its development into an open-air museum of wooden architecture. In 1951, he supervised the relocation of a nineteenth-century house and barn to Kizhi, the first two objects in the museum's

9. National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Russia, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 1/16, l. 30 (a memorandum from the architectural preservation department head, V.A. Troshin, to the chief architect of the Karelian-Finnish SSR, D. S. Maslennikov, on the architectural collection on the island of Kizhi).

10. See the Museum of Kizhi, KP-2670 (an accompanying letter of the Council of Ministers of the Karelian-Finnish SSR issued to architects A. V. Opolovnikov and V. V. Tolkushkin, 5 August 1947).

11. Aleksandr Opolovnikov (1911–94) was born into a noble family in the Ryazan Governorate and received a degree cum laude from the Moscow Architectural Institute in 1939, where he defended his graduation work under Ginzburg's supervision. After World War II, he became one of the leading Soviet experts in architectural preservation and authored several monographs and textbooks on this subject.



Fig. 6. Aleksandr Opolovnikov and N. A. Savin, *A General Plan of the Former Muromsky Monastery*, 1954. Reproduced by permission of the Museum of Kizhi, KP-271/1.

collection. In 1955, in the atmosphere of post-Stalinist liberalization, he developed a large-scale expansion project of the museum and personally supervised the relocation of twenty-four objects from various locations in Karelia.¹²

The historical landscape of North Russia, perceived aesthetically (as lyrical) rather than socially (as archaic), obviously informed Opolovnikov's politics of restoration. Materials from his field trips to villages in Karelia include not only schemes and plans of surviving heritage buildings but also general plans of the surrounding landscape. For example, his 1954 plan of the former Muromsky Monastery on Lake Onega, from which the fourteenth-century Church of the Resurrection of Lazarus was moved to Kizhi island, shows (apart from the church itself) surrounding log buildings, trees, a lake shore, and even boats moored to the shore (see fig. 6). His planning of the open-air museum in Kizhi emphasized an aesthetic unity of architecture and landscape, and in his writing he reiterated that

an architectural monument is not just the building itself standing in isolation of its surroundings. The concept of an "architectural monument" also includes its landscape: both natural and man-made. The landscape is an integral part of the aesthetic impression of the monument and *shapes our perception of it* in one way or another. This leads to a conclusion that when we plan

12. See the Museum of Kizhi, KP-5713/1, 2; KP-5714 (a design of the architectural collection of the open-air museum "Kizhi" by A.V. Opolovnikov, 1955, 1958).

restoration works on [an architectural] monument, we should somehow preserve and in individual cases even restore its surroundings. And one more important conclusion ... Any restoration project should include ... a protective zone and a landscaping zone restricted for new construction (Opolovnikov 1974, 202; emphasis added).

To satisfy the political demand of the KFSSR authorities for primordialist narratives and objects, Opolovnikov developed his theory of architectural preservation as the museumification of an historical landscape. His basic definition of an open-air museum was “a collection of architectural monuments that are exhibited in the background of a typical [for this region] natural landscape” (Opolovnikov 1968, 6). His conception of the Kizhi museum consequently developed into the creation of such a landscape so that its didactic and political potential would be easily available to local audiences (regular ferry trips between Kizhi and Petrozavodsk, the capital of Karelia, had already been established by 1948). The use value of vernacular architecture was nullified as it became first and foremost a sign of history designated for visual consumption. The lyricism of the northern landscape underwent a political translation that turned local communities into exotic reservations of the traditional primordial culture of the Russian and Karelian people. “The Russian North [in general] and Karelia [in particular] are a huge and unique sanctuary of the people’s wooden architecture that has emerged historically in a natural way,” wrote Opolovnikov (1976, 10) in his volume on the Kizhi museum. This approach, which conflated history and nature and treated architecture in aesthetic terms as part of the natural landscape, inevitably brought Opolovnikov’s making of Kizhi into conflict with practices of North Russian vernacular architecture.

By the late 1940s, the churches of Kizhi represented an architectural palimpsest: in the 1820s their eighteenth-century log walls had been covered with planking and domes sheathed with iron; in the 1880s, they were also painted (Melnikov 2006, 48; see fig. 7). These changes reflected both the regional architectural fashion as well as the desire of parishioners to distinguish visually their churches from the surrounding landscape. When Opolovnikov designed his restoration program of Kizhi Pogost, he discarded these changes as “eclectic” and “ahistorical” and prepared an ambitious project that included their removal in order to “restore” the original look of the church.¹³ These measures unavoidably led to dramatic changes in the appearance of Kizhi Pogost, undoing late tsarist-era renovations that Opolovnikov (1976, 100) argued reflected the class oppression of the genuine people’s culture:

Local “do-gooder” nobility and clergy dressed the Church of the Transfiguration in a then-fashionable attire of planking painted in garish bright yellow,

13. See the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Russia, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 5/47, l. 99; d. 7/60, l. 43 (the minutes of a discussion meeting of the Architectural Preservation Administration of the Ministry of Urban Construction of the U.S.S.R. on a restoration project of architectural monuments of Kizhi Pogost, 11 January 1950).



Fig. 7. A 1947 sketch of the southern facade of the Church of the Transfiguration before Opolovnikov's restoration project. Reproduced by permission of the Museum of Kizhi, KP-267/6.

while the wood shingles of the domes were replaced with cold and lifeless iron ... And a wonderful song of wood—eternal, gentle and exciting—was shut down; the texture and beauty of log walls was completely erased; the charm of wooden shingle domes was gone. A unique creation of Onega Lake architects lost its genuine magic character and became similar to ordinary village churches of the later age.

Opolovnikov's (1976, 101) argument played on a perceived contrast between the authentic nature of the monument as "genuine architecture" of the common people and attempts of nineteenth-century bourgeoisie and clergy to strip the Kizhi Pogost of its authentic character and subdue it to their class interests. Opolovnikov's hostility to architectural ornamentation as something disguising authentic architectural forms was apparently borrowed from the constructivist theories of his teacher, Moisei Ginzburg (1982, 114), whose *Style and Epoch* (1923) famously called for the

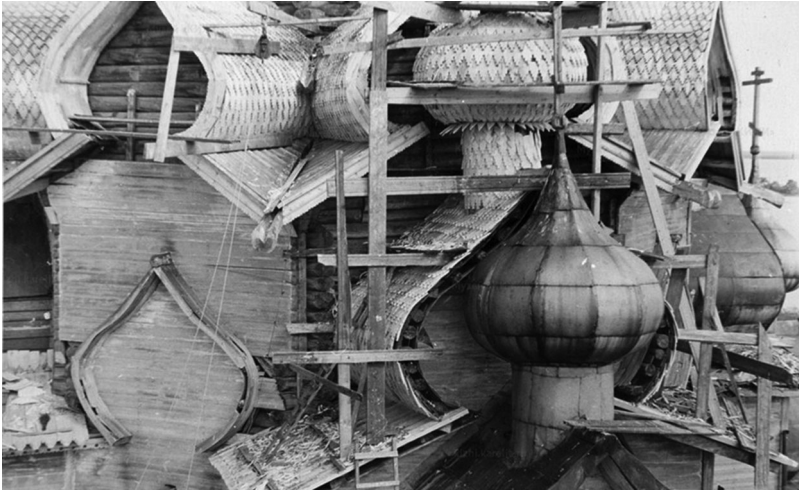


Fig. 8. Restoration works of the Church of the Transfiguration, between 1956 and 1959. The upper side of the image shows restored parts of the church with wooden shingles and unpainted log walls; the lower side of the image shows the prerestoration interior of the church with iron-covered domes and painted planking. Reproduced by permission of the Museum of Kizhi, KP-6520/10.

cleansing of excessive architectural ornamentation: “Architectural monuments laid bare and cleansed of their glittering and superficial attire appeared with all the fascination and unexpected sharpness of an artistic asceticism, with all the power of a rough and austere language of simple, uncluttered architectural forms.”

The cleansing of wooden architecture of both natural and man-made accretions became the main focus of Opolovnikov’s activities (see [fig. 8](#)) and through his published works became part of the theory and practice of architectural restoration in the USSR. His 1975 textbook on the restoration of wooden architecture emphasized (literally, with the use of a bold font) the restoration of buildings to their original form as the fundamental task of his discipline, an approach that interpreted all later changes as “distortions”:

The first and most important task in developing the theoretical foundations of restoration [as a scholarly discipline] is the analysis and complex understanding of the nature, essence and specificity of later distortions to monuments of people’s architecture. The problem of distortions and accretions is thus the key and main problem in the methodology of restoration and at the same time remains the most notable stumbling block on the pathway to the reconstruction of genuine masterpieces of wooden architecture. (Opolovnikov 1974, 62)

Yet Ginzburg’s and Opolovnikov’s similar rhetoric in regards to form should not be misinterpreted as a similarity in their politics. Ginzburg sought to build new

communalism and called on his fellow architects to be “not a decorator of life, but its organizer.” Form was important for him as long as it reflected a certain function; his *Style and Epoch* draws extensively on industrial design as exemplary in this respect.¹⁴ In contrast, Opolovnikov, an expert responsible for the production of a historical landscape through the creation of an open-air museum, worked with very different functions of architecture. Churches and houses of the Kizhi Museum had to perform the historical authenticity of the Karelian-Finnish Republic.

The fact that these churches and houses, as objects of vernacular architecture, were designed and redesigned to perform their particular functions was disregarded, since the official ideology was extremely hostile to religion and strove to reform the patriarchal organization of life in rural communities. Opolovnikov, consequently, appealed to wooden architecture as a medium that had preserved the cultural forms originating in Russia’s precapitalist period. In his interpretation, these forms embodied an alleged past communalism of the Russian people that had fallen prey to the capitalist development and class oppression of nineteenth-century tsarism. Whereas Ginzburg wanted socialist architecture to overcome social alienation, for Opolovnikov old wooden architecture served as a means to overcome historical alienation by bridging the gap between the past and present community of the Russian/Soviet people. This belief can be seen in the curious combination of his reverence for the eighteenth-century churches of Kizhi Pogost with a very mixed, if not straightforwardly negative, attitude to its third object, the 1874 bell tower:

The bell tower was built not in the traditions of the people’s architecture, but according to a project designed “in an artificial style” by an eparchial engineer ... It means that its architecture is not only subdued to the petrifying canon of the official conservative Orthodoxy, but also embodies general aesthetic norms of that time’s dominant culture: eclecticism and a pseudo-national ethos. The decline of architecture is seen in every single detail [of the bell tower]. (Opolovnikov 1976, 87)

After two pages of harsh criticism, Opolovnikov condescends to grant the bell tower the right to exist: “an integral part of the [Kizhi] architectural ensemble ... that reminds us, even if very approximately, of the silhouette and general appearance of the original [eighteenth-century] bell tower” (88). In other words, for him the only value of the current bell tower was mimetic, owing to its resemblance to the original bell tower that had been demolished in 1872 due to its dilapidated condition.

As mentioned earlier, Opolovnikov was hired in the late 1940s by the Karelian-Finnish government as an intellectual from the Soviet Metropole whose

14. See Ginzburg (1982, 113, 76–93; note the section on industrial design).

professional expertise could add weight to the republic's claims for regional specificity. This position gave him the power to determine what the authentic architecture of North Russian communities was and was not. Yet this power was not uncontested. When Opolovnikov and other enthusiasts of North Russian historical heritage started their campaign for its preservation and restoration, the campaign—supported and funded by the government of the Karelian-Finnish Republic—included a struggle against low-level bureaucrats who had prioritized rationality over historical heritage and who were often tempted to demolish old buildings to cut the financial burdens that the latter incurred (Opolovnikov 1974, 51–2; Vorobyeva 2011). The situation only became more complicated after the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin's "personality cult," and the post-Stalinist leadership revived, to a certain degree, early Soviet technoutopian visions of rationally built, socialist spaces that implied the demolition of old structures. As Steven Bittner noted in his study of Moscow's Arbat neighborhood, "Khrushchev saw [in the heritage architecture of Moscow] remnants of old Russia that were incompatible with the stature of the new" (Bittner 2008, 140). The dominant discourse of socialist construction still routinely implied the purge of the old, pre-revolutionary meanings and structures, and the perceived value of "national antiquities" did not necessarily provide immunity for heritage buildings from persecution by local bureaucrats as well as from sheer neglect (Kelly 2014b, 288–9). Last but not least, in July 1956 the status of Karelia was downgraded from a full member of the USSR to an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation.

At the same time, Khrushchev-era liberalization of cultural life in the Soviet Union provided heritage architecture enthusiasts with opportunities to defend their *de facto* romantic and nationalist understandings of Soviet history and to challenge, albeit implicitly, the modernist approach to urban development adopted by the Soviet government beginning in the mid-1950s. To justify their claims for the power to define the Soviet historical imagination, preservation experts appealed to the very material of their objects—wood—as a witness to the authentic history of Russia.

Accretions of History

In justifying his main thesis that the essence of preservation and restoration activities lay in the removal of all later accretions, Aleksandr Opolovnikov repeatedly appealed to the aesthetic qualities of wood. His 1974 textbook of architectural preservation includes a lengthy discussion about the properties of wood that goes beyond physical qualities and focuses instead on its ability to organize "the rhythm" and "tectonics" of architecture: "The unity of [architectural functionality and aesthetic properties of] wood is particularly outstanding in the tectonics of a log building—in a steady rhythm, as in epic songs, of heavyweight log tails ... in

slim and soft vertical lines of axe-cut corners that trim the building's silhouette; in the plastic structure of walls enlivened with small windows; in the overall color composition of the building with its picturesque palette of half-tints and shade" (Opolovnikov 1974, 27).

Both "rhythm" and "tectonics," as used in this fragment, are borrowed from the theory of Soviet constructivist architecture: "rhythm" is another tribute to Moisei Ginzburg (1923),¹⁵ while the term "tectonics" is borrowed from Aleksei Gan, whose writings mentioned tectonics as one of three basic elements of the new social architecture. Understood as a dialectic relationship between people and their material world, tectonics implied the interrelatedness of social and material forms that constructivist architects, artists, and designers were supposed to embody in their works and thus contribute to social progress (Romberg 2010, 148–73). "Tectonics is... an explosion of the [material's] internal essence," wrote Gan (2016, 852) in his 1922 manifesto, concluding: "Constructivism without tectonics is like painting without color."

The use of constructivism's vocabulary had several important implications for the Soviet architectural preservation movement. First of all, it provided a conceptual apparatus to justify preservation activities. Dealing with buildings that had lost their original functions, such as churches, houses for extended peasant families, sheds, and mills, Opolovnikov had to build a model that explained their historical importance through an aesthetic system allegedly inherent in North Russian vernacular architecture. His analysis of numerous heritage buildings in Karelia and elsewhere in North Russia led him to conclude that, by the early nineteenth century, local masters had created and consciously employed a "system of artistic methods" that fully realized the expressive potential of wood as a construction material (Opolovnikov 1968, 16). Moreover, the borrowing of constructivist vocabulary with its focus on the dialectic of material and social forms gave Opolovnikov an opportunity to link this system to a society free of social conflicts that allegedly had existed in North Russia thanks to its geographic and political marginality prior to the tsarist oppression of the nineteenth century: "The tsunami of the Mongol invasion that enveloped almost all of Russia missed the North. Here, the fire of Russian statehood and national culture was never extinguished. While the succession of the original traditions of Russian culture dating back to Kievan Rus was interrupted, if not destroyed [elsewhere], in the North this culture and its traditions survived in their purity" (Opolovnikov 1976, 14).

By this logic, the heritage architecture of Karelia was witness to an authentic and genuine people's history of Russia in its entirety. The historical importance of the churches of Kizhi Pogost was that they represented an exemplary expression of this aesthetic system, a kind of glossary that could be used to understand the original language of Russian culture. The texture of wood offered, in turn, the basic structural elements of this language that, when combined, merged into "a

15. Ginzburg's first book was titled *Rhythm in Architecture*.

wonderful song of wood.” This approach to architectural preservation was understandably hostile to later accretions, clearly prioritizing the antiquity and authenticity (real or imagined) of old wooden buildings over the meanings and contexts of their use in local communities. The product of an aesthetic and political position of Soviet metropolitan intellectuals, the preservation movement valued indigenous architectural forms as long as they blended into the landscape with the unpainted grey and brown colors of their log walls. To put it another way, for Soviet restoration experts—and for Soviet authorities and their public via the authoritative discourse of these experts—old buildings were important as long as they performed authenticity and traditionalism, thus objectifying the much-sought-for historical depth of modern Soviet society. Any “non-natural” or “non-authentic” elements, such as plaster, paint, iron, and wallpaper as well as exquisite carved ornamentations that local residents had increasingly used since the nineteenth century, were then interpreted as annoying interruptions into this performance of Russian authentic historical culture: something like the darkened layers on Old Russian icons that concealed original paintings and had to be removed.

In fact, the restoration of Kizhi Pogost to its original state was accompanied in a very similar process by the restoration of icons that had been confiscated from Karelian churches in the interwar period.¹⁶ In 1945, the same year that the government of the Karelian-Finnish SSR passed a resolution to restore Kizhi Pogost and transform it into a museum, it hired two experts of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow to inspect and evaluate the republic’s collection of icons.¹⁷ One of them, Vera Briusova (Svetlichnaia), was later invited to prepare a detailed plan and budget for their restoration; submitting her funding application in 1948 to the Karelian government, she justified the historical importance of this work: “These monuments [icons] are products of the richest creative imagination and the supreme mastery of artists of the local independent school. Their restoration will reveal an immense picture of autochthonous art ... Adding any elements during restoration is completely prohibited, because every monument [icon] represents a genuine masterpiece that has its own artistic value.”¹⁸

Briusova’s emphasis on locality (expressed in this short excerpt in three synonymous adjectives—“local,” “independent,” and “autochthonous”) was a direct reference to the political demands of local authorities. As such, it represented an artificial historicization of Soviet local and regional identities that translated into an ever more rigorous search for the historical authenticity of Soviet-era

16. See the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Russia, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 3/32, l. 54 (an information letter of the architectural preservation department on the preservation of icons in Petrozavodsk, 1948).

17. See the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Russia, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 1/16, l. 25 (an information letter of the architectural preservation department on the icons stored in the Karelian Museum of Local History, 20 August 1946).

18. See the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Russia, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 3/32, l. 63 (V. G. Svetlichanaia, a plan of the restoration works on Old Russian icons, 1948).

administrative structures, such as the Karelian-Finnish Republic (Ilyukha and Shikalov 2010; Donovan 2012, 2015). It positioned icon painting in the domain of regional folk culture as opposed to religious or national high culture. It also justified the return of some icons to the churches of Kizhi Pogost as they were placed there as objects of “autochthonous art” rather than sacred objects. As with the painted planking of the churches in Kizhi that were stripped to reveal the texture of their log walls, later layers were removed from icons to recreate their authentic aesthetic forms. Briusova described this process in technical terms as “the removal of old darkened varnish from icons and their re-varnishing.”¹⁹ This authenticity of icon painting had never been important in religious worship; just the reverse, icons were regularly renovated by adding new layers on top of previous ones or completely repainted. It was the Soviet search of historical authenticity that reinterpreted these layers as the dirt of time that concealed primordial, Russian culture.²⁰

The borrowing of constructivist vocabulary in architectural preservation politics had one more implication that became increasingly visible in the post-Stalinist period. Constructivist theory reflected the active social program of its authors such as Ginzburg and Gan and their desire to reform society; the terms “rhythm,” “tectonics” and “texture” all implied the transformative character of the new social architecture. As a result, the application of these terms to the vernacular architecture of North Russia could not remain purely academic and descriptive. While Opolovnikov and other experts of heritage architecture argued that only the uncovered texture of wood was capable of expressing the authentic character of Russian culture preserved through the local historical landscape, these claims clashed with local meanings and practices related to housing. In the postwar communities of Russian Karelia, it was quite typical to use painted planking for the external walls of log houses, and plaster, wallpaper, and modern furniture for their interiors (Taroeva 1965, 195–8). On the one hand, this was an obvious borrowing of new tendencies in urban housing. On the other hand, it was a particular indigenous form of working with landscape, as painted planking offsets a building from its surroundings, while interiors with modern wallpaper and factory-built furniture represent an optical intervention into the everyday visual experience of rural communities that are dominated by the persistent combination of water, northern vegetation, and the bleak colors of unpainted wooden surfaces. Yet for Soviet architects, local residents of Karelian communities had to be saved from their perceived loss of historical authenticity, a task all the more important because now the architects designated North Russia “a sanctuary”

19. See the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Russia, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 3/32, l. 63 (V. G. Svetlichanaia, a plan of the restoration works on Old Russian icons, 1948).

20. In Soviet literature, this search for historical authenticity—often at the price of conflict with official authorities—became the main motif of Vladimir Soloukhin’s 1968 novel *Black Board*, published in English translation as *Searching for Icons in Russia* (Soloukhin 1972).

of traditional folk culture. By a logic that clearly originated from the theory of constructivist architecture yet had little in common with its emancipatory moment, architectural preservation experts called on Karelian villagers to cleanse their houses of these eclectic elements that, in their view, provoked the misrecognition of one's true authentic self. Opolovnikov's (1981, 31) book *Wooden Russia*, for example, condemned the use of wallpaper in contemporary North Russian houses by appealing to the aesthetic system that he uncovered in pre-nineteenth-century wooden architecture:

Earlier, people never hung wallpaper in their houses: Russian peasants always had an acute and expert sense about the natural beauty of wood as an architectural material, the beauty of the most common, simple things. And what wallpaper can match the natural texture of unpainted wood, with the dark stripes of its core, the rhythm of knots, the smooth yet slightly coarse surface! A floor assembled from broad half beams, the powerful, non-disguised setting of log walls, plank benches along the walls ... this all creates a stalwart, steady rhythm of accentuated horizontal lines.

Aesthetic elements of traditional architecture—"natural texture of unpainted wood," "dark stripes of its core," and "rhythm of knots"—are represented here as an interface between the materiality of architecture and genuine selves. From this perspective, the use of wallpaper leads to a loss of physical contact between people and wood with its appealing, affective texture, a situation regarded as highly undesirable. Another preservation expert, Petrozavodsk architect Vyacheslav Orfinskii (1972, 5–6), wrote: "The early twentieth century saw the decline of [North Russian] folk architecture, when its genuine beauty escaped again and again from the ornamental nets of small architectural details that imitated fashionable forms of urban architectural styles of that time ... Isn't it a genuine, although never recognized, tragedy of an entire generation of folk architects? ... Having lost the Ariadne's thread of century-long traditions, folk masters wandered off the road and got lost."

A native of Petrozavodsk, Orfinskii grieves here not only the loss of authentic architectural traditions in Karelian communities but also the alleged inability of their inhabitants to comprehend this loss and realize how their neglect of "century-long traditions" damages the historical succession of Soviet society. It is, however, most harmful for themselves ("a genuine tragedy of an entire generation").²¹ His authoritative discourse denied local communities the right to assign their own meanings to domestic and communal space and pushed him to create a separate academic discipline in the 1980s: *etnoarkhitekturovedenie* (studies of ethnic architecture). Its aims combined scholarship and activism, including the

21. Needless to say, the interpretation of new tendencies in the vernacular architecture of North Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a "decline" is contested by some scholars (Sevan 2011, 152–3).



Fig. 9. Building of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic, circa 1940. Author unknown. *Source:* Karelia, Istoriiia i sovremennost v dokumentakh i fotografiakh, page 76, Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 2000.

production of a full register of wooden heritage buildings in North Russia, the development of theoretical foundations for the use of folk architectural traditions in modern architecture, and public outreach to local communities (Grishina 2009). In 1997 it became institutionalized with the establishment of the Research Institute of Theoretical Problems of Folk Architecture, which received a double affiliation at the Petrozavodsk State University and Research Institute of Architectural and Urban Theory (Moscow), with Orfinskii as its head (Polozheniie o nauchno-issledovatel'skom institute 1997).

Conclusion

In June 2013, mass media in the Republic of Karelia circulated an image of eighty-four-year-old Orfinskii, by then a full member of the Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction Sciences, as he rushed to stop the demolition of a 1936 wooden building in Petrozavodsk. During World War II, Petrozavodsk experienced massive destruction of its prewar architecture and civil infrastructure, and this building, located on the central city street (Lenin Avenue), was a notable survivor of the prewar age. It was used for various government offices, including the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic, and had housed a children's clinic since 1960 (see [fig. 9](#)). In April 2001,



Fig. 10. Illegal demolition works in Petrozavodsk, 16 June 2013. Photograph by Mikhail Meshkov, *Gazeta-licey.ru*. Reproduced by permission.

the building was partially destroyed by fire. Reconstruction was stalled due to lack of funding, and there were two more fires in 2003 and 2006. Despite the pitiable state of the building, municipal authorities insisted that, as an architectural monument (official status had been granted to the building in 2000), it had to be restored to its authentic form. In June 2013, the owner of the building, desperate to turn it from a liability into an asset, brought an excavator and started illegal demolition works (see [fig. 10](#)). When news reached Orfinskii, he rushed to stop the destruction of the building, which was the moment a camera caught him (see [fig. 11](#)).

The interference of Orfinskii and, perhaps more importantly, of the Minister of Culture of the Republic of Karelia, Elena Bogdanova, stopped the demolition ([Meshkova 2013](#)). As of late 2016, the former building of the Karelian-Finnish People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs remains in its half-destroyed state in the very center of the city, its charcoaled walls covered with tarpaulins. In its present condition, it is hardly a monument to architectural heritage but rather a monument to regional preservation activism that successfully deploys Soviet-era understandings of old wooden architecture as the core foundation of a regional identity which opposes the transformation of local historical landscape into lived space. As such, it demonstrates an absolute priority of architectural form over function in the heritage preservation politics in Russia. While still employing the rhetoric of Soviet constructivist architecture, the post-Soviet preservation movement was unable to suggest any other justification for its activities than that of the historical authenticity of forms. Devoid of any social content, its politics are more concerned with hollow walls than with their use in social life. The same,



Fig. 11. Vyacheslav Orfinskii runs to prevent the demolition of the 1936 building, 16 June 2013. Photograph by Natalia Meshkova, *Gazeta-licey.ru*. Reproduced by permission.

in fact, happened with constructivist architecture over time. When post-Stalinist Soviet architects turned to constructivist architecture in search of inspiration and borrowed some of its ideas for the Soviet mass housing program launched in the late 1950s, they capitalized on forms developed by Moisei Ginzburg, Aleksei Gan, and other early Soviet constructivists but discarded their social agenda (Karpova 2015, 15–6, 125–6). The current debate about the restoration of the Narkomfin House is focused on its preservation as part of the Moscow architectural landscape, as a monument to the history of Soviet architecture just like the wooden churches and buildings of North Russia.

The figure of Orfinskii hurrying to stop the demolition of an old wooden building, while two marginally interested residents of Petrozavodsk look on, is also symbolic in another sense. While Soviet and post-Soviet architectural preservation discourse sought to reinvent local communities, eventually it exerted a much greater influence on its producers than on the target audience. The failure of recent measures to revive traditional ways of life and architectural forms in Karelian villages is a particularly illustrative example. Since 1995, a team of Russian and Finnish architects and ethnographers has been working on an ambitious project to preserve the Northern Karelian village of Panozero as an architectural monument and as a living community devoted to traditional ways of life. Funding from the Juminkeko Foundation (Finland) was used, in particular, to revive domestic weaving, boat building, and sauna building. Trained by Finnish and Petrozavodsk

specialists and working on newly imported equipment, the residents of Panozero were paid for performing traditional crafts for tourist groups (Nieminen 2003; Yaskeliainen 2003). In a 2006 interview for the local TV Channel GTRK Karelia, Orfinskii argued that “what is happening in Panozero is not only the restoration of exemplars of traditional architecture, but also the maintenance of the centuries-long lifestyle of northern Karelians,” revealing that the drive for the museumification of the North Russian landscape, when applied consistently, is capable of transforming into objects not only buildings but also people (“Vesti: Karelia” 2006).

Yet these measures could not stop out-migration from the village and, between 2002 and 2013, the population of Panozero dropped from 89 people to 52, reflecting the rural flight also experienced elsewhere in North Russia. Orfinskii (2003, 313), after all, could not conceal his disappointment that local residents were much less enthusiastic about the preservation of their village than were urban enthusiasts from Petrozavodsk and Finland and called on “the [Russian] state and society” in order to “help Panozero residents to preserve life in this ancient Karelian land.” A Petrozavodsk journalist expressed this disappointment in a more straightforward way writing that “[outside] connoisseurs of traditional culture and ancient life style find in Panozero indigenous beauty and charm, which, unfortunately, most local residents fail to see” (Kulikov 2011). The project to revive Panozero created new cross-border connections between heritage enthusiasts in Karelia and Finland but did not manage to connect their visions with the practices of local populations. This indifference was also true in the Soviet era when local residents often set abandoned houses and entire villages on fire, destroying the North Russian historical landscape and subverting preservation discourses that sought to transform them into natural extensions to this landscape (“Pamiatniki istorii i kultury” 1980; “Perspektivy ‘neperspektivnoi’ derevni” 1980; “Vesti: Karelia” 2015). Arson, as well as accidental fires in abandoned heritage buildings, has occasionally occurred in the post-Soviet era as well, most notably at the former building of the Karelian-Finnish People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs.

Having failed to revive rural communities in accordance with their supposedly traditional lifestyle and architecture, the conservation movement in contemporary Russia was more successful in mobilizing its own ranks—that is, the educated urban class. Every year, several dozen people from Petrozavodsk travel to the museum of Kizhi and stay for the entire tourist season from May to October, dressing up in traditional peasant dress from the Onega Lake region and performing traditional crafts, whereas residents of surrounding villages largely ignore this practice unless it implies monetary rewards (“Ozhivshaia ekspozitsiia muzeia Kizhi,” 2013).

There are at least two non-governmental organizations in Moscow and St. Petersburg: “Obshchee delo” (“A Common Matter”) and “Verenitsa” (“Cavalcade”) that pool the financial contributions, labor, and equipment of educated metropolitan residents willing to travel to North Russia in the summertime to participate in the restoration of its wooden churches. Both NGOs actively publicize their activities through the use of social media, public conferences, and

documentaries. In Aleksandr Pasechnik's (2014) documentary *The Arc (Kovcheg)*, produced by the NGO *Obshchee delo*, one of its activists explains the rationale behind his efforts: "If the [North Russian] village keeps on living, then the state [of Russia] will keep on living." The restoration of old wooden churches is thus interpreted as a revival of local communities and, through them, the healing of the national body. The Soviet quest for historical authenticity has produced persistent forms of identification that became influential among the educated urban population as nostalgia for ancient architectural forms, for affective interaction with wood, and for lost cultural traditions.

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“The Land under the White Wings”: The Romantic Landscaping of Socialist Belarus

Elena Gapova

This essay explores the imaginative transformation of quintessentially socialist Soviet Byelorussia into a romantic and sacred “land of castles.” The romantic landscaping, performed in the 1960s by intellectuals and especially the writer Uladzimir Karatkevich, changed the meaning of the land by creating a site parallel to the socialist republic, the land of intellectual and moral pursuits that can sustain life’s meaning. This romantic shift also points to changes in the texture of Soviet society, as new types of elites—intellectuals and literati—sought to contest the Communist party’s agenda of man’s being in the world. The “really existing socialism” witnessed an emergence of new ideas regarding national space and landscape that legitimized nonsocialist historical consciousness: inspired individuals, rather than the working class, were emerging as subjects of history and agents with a mission.

Key Words: Belarus, Socialism, Landscapes, Romanticism, Uladzimir Karatkevich

Sound, light, motion, even smell can all be used ... to define space.

—Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World*

In Search of Lost Space

The picture below (see [fig. 1](#)), which comes from my family archive, shows a group of people photographed in front of a medieval building; damaged by shelling, it has weathered many historical calamities. This is the castle of Mir, which used to belong to the Radziwills, Lithuanian-Polish-Belarusian magnates, whose wealth, the legend goes, had been on par with that of the French kings. The people in the photo are academics, mostly researchers at the Institute for Belarusian Literature of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences (where my mother worked at the time) as well as linguists and ethnographers. Within the next twenty years, they would be the *crème de la crème* of Belarusian humanities. The year was 1967, and the photo was taken during a bus tour, a popular item in the emerging tourism industry.

Normally, commercial tours took travelers to Soviet memorial sites, most of which celebrated the human losses and military victories of World War II or



Fig. 1. Belarusian scholars at the castle of Mir, 1967. From the author's family archive.

socialist achievements. Academics and intellectuals, however, preferred different routes: a work collective would rent a bus using the funding that their local trade union provided for recreational travel, which socialist workers were entitled to, and they would drive to ancient Belarusian towns, picturesque ruins, castles, and estates that had often been turned into warehouses and other things with clear use value. During the drive, a group member with expertise in a particular locality or historic period would pick up a microphone to dwell on the events and names that were associated with the sights visible through the bus windows, with a historian passing the microphone to an ethnographer and then to a literary scholar. Instead of focusing on the achievements of modernization, speakers would dwell on the events of earlier days while recovering obscure names, citing baroque poems and medieval chronicles, and pointing to landscapes, ruins, or specific landmarks. The bus would stop at a memorable rock or an ancient oak under which a young local aristocrat had been on a date with a girl who would never become his wife, and the young man's melancholy had poured out as beautiful poetry in a subaltern language, giving birth to a new national literature.

The ways of imagining and practicing space build off the tendencies to associate places with meaning and to relate to an environment "in the ways in which we bring a particularly human range of emotions and beliefs to our interaction with the physical world" (Cresswell 2004, 8). Such pilgrimages, which remain an

unexplored phenomenon, belong with a more general Soviet trend of experiencing and romantically reinventing socialist space, and this essay focuses on some creative work that served as inspiration for this reinvention in Belarus. The smiling man in his thirties in the back row of the photo referenced above, second from the right, is Uladzimir Karatkevich¹ (1930–84; see [fig. 1](#); see also [figs. 2](#) and [3](#)), currently considered a master of national literature, an inventor of the genre of Belarusian historical fiction (Lewis 2014), a charismatic poet and intellectual. Posthumously revered as a national Walter Scott and Byron at the same time, he reached cult status, especially with younger, nationally oriented cohorts. A famous photo of Karatkevich was repainted by an admirer on a wall adorning a hipster quarter of clubs and art galleries in Minsk as a tribute of sorts (see [figs. 3](#) and [4](#)). Having created the myth of Belarus as “the land under the white wings,” the writer inspired a production of national space that was beyond socialism.

The French Marxist social geographer Henri Lefebvre (1991) suggested in his *Production of Space* that every society produces its own space. Seeking a unitary theory of physical, mental, and social space, Lefebvre came up with “a philosophy of history, not an architectural theory” (Hays 1998), theorizing space as an expression of the modes of production and a configuration of the relations of power. His analysis proceeded from three ways of producing space as a combination of material, meaning, and practice, and one of the questions asked in his book was whether socialism produced a space of its own (Lefebvre 1991, 54). This essay intends to follow a reverse movement—not to but from socialism—to explore the imaginative transformation of Soviet Byelorussia—a quintessentially socialist, modernized, and industrialized republic—into a land of castles with a European past and, finally, into a unique and pure homeland, a sacred space that can sustain life’s meaning. The romantic landscaping of which Karatkevich was a major agent changed the meaning of the land by creating a site parallel to socialist Belarus, the land of castles and manors, gothic mysteries, chivalry, noble uprisings, pure nature, and intellectual and moral pursuits that seemed to resonate with intelligentsia and to give answers to life’s persistent questions at a time when the tarnished socialist ideal began to be questioned. That imaginative process marked an important social shift. Socialist space was adorned with appropriate landmarks—be they architectural and industrial sites or landscapes and monuments—that reflected the Marxist vision of history through the class struggle and progressive development that was finalized with Soviet socialism. The imagined space of romantic castles and melancholic ruins invoked a different past and, with it, a set of moral values, philosophical concepts, and personality structure.

This essay suggests that “really existing socialism” witnessed an emergence of new ideas regarding national space and landscape that legitimized nonsocialist historical consciousness: inspired individuals, rather than the working class, were

1. Vladimir Kоротkevich, if transliterated from Russian.



Fig. 2. The monument to Karatkevich in his native Orsha. Photo by the author.

emerging as subjects of history, as agents with a mission. The argument can be made that a romantic shift in imagining the native land and its historical myth was largely spurred by changes in the organization of physical space that produced a generational sense of insecurity, because the traditional way of life was being displaced due to rapid urbanization and because the socialist project of changing the world—both the social world and the space that embodies social relations—was coming into being. The mass drift of people from their physical environment and the way of life that they knew and understood often brought a sense of loss that was more than personal. At the same time, the symbolism of place was related to the power of some men over others and the images they tended to project. This shift may point to changes in the texture of Soviet society and, in particular, to the emergence of new types of elites—intellectuals and literati—as powerful contestants of the Communist party's agenda of mankind's being in the world.



Fig. 3. Karatkevich in the 1980s. Photo by V. Zhdanovich.

I will start with a brief discussion of the symbolism of space in socialist Belarus and then move to its romantic landscaping in intellectual projects, with the work of Karatkevich at the center.

Socialist Belarus: Place and Meaning

Places, be they settlements, regions, or national lands, are “localities with meaning” (Cresswell 2008, 134), and moral geographers share a view that the dominant cultural symbols of the Old World draw their strength and legitimacy from history, while those of the New World are more likely to invest in nature (Marx 1964, 73). Belarus, however, does not fit into this paradigm. When a Canadian scholar who was asked by a Belarusian immigration officer about the purpose of his visit to the newly sovereign country replied that he was a historian, he was told:



Fig. 4. The photo by Zhdanovich repainted on a wall in Minsk. Photo by the author.

“There is no history here!” (Marples 1996, 3). Most probably, the officer referred to a lack of established heritage, a paucity of landmarks that lead as imaginative threads to the recognized past: that is, the past filled with names and events that are codified in national literature, art, and textbooks. This meaningful absence of history, however, was compensated for by references to Belarusian nature and landscape—and by extension, to the sad lot of the folk.

Russian imperial ethnography portrayed Belarusian lands situated between Russian lands and the West as “this miserable (unlucky) territory, which seems to be fated to periodic devastations and innumerable disasters” (*Zhivopisnaya Rossia* [1882] 1993, 296). The emerging national literature that was contemplating the lot of peasants and national oppression on the part of the Polish aristocracy and Russian tsarist administration lamented misery, wild nature, poor soil, wetlands—poverty, and a peasant song that was like an endless groan. If at the heart of the very definition of place is the notion of a meaningful segment of geographical space, then a master symbol ascribed to Belarus was the swamp, as featured in *The Morass*, a 1933 novella by Jakub Kolas; *The Robinsons of Palesse*, a 1930 adventure story; or the programmatic socialist realist novel *People on the Marshes*. The latter opened with a powerful description of the vast expanses of swamp as an epitome of the people’s lot:

The huts sat on an island. To tell the truth, few would consider it a real island, for neither a sea, nor a lake was washing its shores with their waves. Only

rotting lumpy bogs and sad forests were getting wet in the rain all around it ... For the biggest portion of the year, the island was cut off from other villages and small towns. Even on good days, occasional newspapers or letters from sons and brothers would hardly get there in the bag of a local man—for who would want to force oneself through all that mud for no really important reason—but even that subtle connection to the world was broken easily with the first lengthy rain. In spring and autumn, that connection would remain broken for months: the bog would swell with water and mud and cut off the island from the world more efficiently than any major space of water would be able to do. For many days, people would live as if they were on a raft that angry weather had carried away from the shore and into the sea: one could only expect that friendly wind or good fate would bring it back to the shore. But people on the island were not scared nor did they think of that situation as strange. From all sides, as far as they knew, close and far away, similar peninsulas were sitting amidst endless bogs and woody thickets that were stretching for hundreds of miles from north to south and from east to west. People had no other choice but to live there, and they did. The monotonous, boring rains, that were falling on wet roofs for months, the cold winds that were breaking fiercely into the eyes of small windows with the gusts of blizzard, and the warm sun that would rise on good days over the patches of alders, would see the island busy with its nonstop daily toil. (Melezh 1962, 5; translation mine)

Landscape painting and descriptions of space and nature are the products of ideological determination, ways of seeing the world, faithfully reflecting the values, myths, and power relations of the societies in which they emerge (Bassin 2003, 151), and in Belarusian cultural texts, bogs are simultaneously a natural fact and an imaginative construction. Generally, wetlands have a very low property value, and a poor landscape is a sign of the poverty of the community that inhabits it. With time, the swamp as a metaphor for hardship and misery began to be opposed to the progress and civilization that were represented by Soviet socialism. In the cultural imagination, people get out of the swamp, both morally and physically, as their environment is transformed, and the socialist “second nature” is created with the drainage of bogs, the construction of roads, and importantly, the arrival of socialism. In the above-mentioned novel, “people on the marshes” go through the socialist collectivization of farmland, and landscape changes stand for social changes.

With rapid post-World War II industrialization and urbanization, Belarus turned into a socialist success story as its industry took its place among the most technologically advanced in the region (Ioffe 2008, 107). Its landscape was reshaped, and in the early 1960s “the biggest (hydro) melioration project ever carried out anywhere in the world” (Rassashko 2010) produced significant areas of land suitable for planting crops. The melioration affected landscape, climate, soil, and village life, and these changes, with the rise of ecological consciousness,

began to be questioned because they had contaminated the original purity of land and culture. Initially, however, socialism and land productivity as the epitome of progress served as the undeniable moral basis for the transformation of space; in socialist (and capitalist, for that matter) vision, nature was to be conquered, for it stood as a universal means of production (Smith 2008, 85). As the wasteland of swamps was civilized and society was moving beyond the ills of underdevelopment, Soviet Belarus, the land of industrialized landscapes, was shedding the curse of past suffering, particularly immense during World War II when the nation suffered the highest casualty rate in the world: every fourth person perished. It was the site of a powerful antifascist partisan movement, where “the very soil was burning under the feet of fascist invaders” as a popular metaphor had it, and woods and bogs were seen as resistance allies, as in a song that celebrated Belarusian partisanship:

Oh, birches and pines, partisans’ sisters,²
 Oh, young forest’s roar,
 As I hear your song with my heart,
 I recall my young years,
 And the faces of enemies, and partisan camp fires ...
 Or my dear land, you are free for time to come,
 For I stood up to fight for you. (Russak 1956; translation mine)

Another song in Russian by *Pesnyary* (Bards), a popular folk-rock group, was an identity card for socialist Belarus and also invoked a connection between landscapes and resistance: “A white stork is flying over the fields... My memory is strolling down partisans’ forest trail... My youth, Byelorussia, partisans’ songs, burning skies, pines, and the fog” (Dobronravov [1975] 1979). The lyrics naturalized history with references to nature, and in Soviet lore Belarus was turned into a “partisan-Republic” (*respublika-partizanka*). Memorial sites and spatial landmarks that provided links to the past resonated with the people’s need to remember. In villages, simple gypsum statues marked numerous communal graves of soldiers whose remains had been retrieved from local fields. The maps of cultural tourism in Soviet Belarus highlighted the incinerated village of Khatyn’; the fortress in the westernmost city of Brest, the site of a German attack on the USSR in June, 1941; and the manmade Mound of Glory near Minsk (see [figs. 5 and 6](#)) where in 1944 several Soviet military formations joined together for a liberating offensive. Belarusian cultural memory seemed cemented beneath two politicized doctrines: the agrarian backwardness of the swamp overcome through socialist modernization and World War II tragedy and eventual triumph.

2. In Belarusian, the names of most trees are, grammatically, feminine.



Fig. 5. The manmade Mound of Glory near Minsk. Photo by S. Oushakine.

Castles, Not Bogs: A Romance with Fantasy

Space may exist simultaneously on several parallel sites, real as well as textual/virtual, surviving or demolished, because ruins, landscapes, objects, and even sounds can stand for places or events.³ Socialism is not as straightforward as we sometimes tend to think, and the 1960s especially witnessed the rise of nuanced ideas and visions, as many intellectual endeavors that emerged in the midst of socialist modernity—books, paintings, research projects, movies, and so on—sought to extend imaginative threads to nonsocialist temporalities, often through references to spatial landmarks. A romantic agent of that movement in Belarus, Uladzimir Karatkevich, left behind a complex legacy. Belarusian literature, whose attempts at modernist innovations had been suppressed during Stalin’s purges, remained somewhat folkloric or socialist realist for decades, and Karatkevich sought to engage this literature with developed literary imagination and major European genres.⁴ He produced the first national historical novel, *The Spikes [of rye] under Your Sickle* (Karatkevich [1965] 1989), which focuses on the “ripening” of the 1863 uprising in the Belarusian-Polish borderlands; also he produced the first Belarusian detective novel, which he brought new topics, ideas, and literary technologies.

3. An LP with the chime of Orthodox church bells from the town of Rostov was released in the late 1960s under the title of *The Bells of Rostov*.

4. Belarussian scholar Vicar Kavalenka (1975) argued that Belarusian literature developed in the twentieth century at an accelerated pace and produced, in the course of several decades, works in all major literary genres.



Fig. 6. A memorial plaque in Minsk at the site where several members of the resistance were executed during World War II. Photo by the author.

Karatkevich populated his books with young, noble-at-heart male characters who try to reach out for something beyond the confines of ordinary life and often find their holy grails in the past, to which they are related intimately. Andrey Belaretsky, the main character of *King Stakh's Wild Hunt*, Karatkevich's ([1964] 2012) best-known book due to a Soviet cinematic adaptation,⁵ is an ethnographer interested in local legends. His choice of occupation is motivated by his emotional relationship to his people, oppressed and silent: “I sought my people and began to understand, as did many others at the time, that my people were here, at my side, but that for two centuries the ability to understand this fact had been beaten out of the minds of our intelligentsia. That is why I chose an unusual profession for myself—I was going to study and embrace this people ... I ... became an ethnographer” (9).

This paradigmatically romantic oeuvre plays with the tropes of decay, death, insanity, ruins, gloomy marshes, a haunted castle, a captive maiden, and a mystery that, at the end, gets a materialist explanation, as gothic mysteries should. In the introductory pages, Karatkevich drops the names of Percy Bysshe Shelly, a romantic poet, and Anne Radcliff, a gothic pioneer, as witty signs to those who understand. The plot, which unravels at the turn of the century, revolves around a “wild hunt”—i.e., a dashing pack of mighty horses (similar to those, Karatkevich tells us, that galloped over Belarusian pastures in the Middle Ages) that appear out of nowhere and bring violent death to those who rebel against the established

5. The book was translated into English and published for Western audiences by the Soviet Progress Publishers in 1974; in 2012, a revised translation was issued by Glagoslav Publishers.

order. As the story starts, Belaretsky embarks on an expedition in a most unwelcoming part of the “Northwestern Province,” whose landscape is an inscape of Belarusian misery: “The locality is just a tiny bit more pleasant than the famous forest of Dante” (Karatkevich [1964] 2012, 30). One particularly nasty November night, while trying to get to a remote corner where some babushka may still remember a legend that, if not recorded, would die with her, the ethnographer finds himself on the brink of perishing in a swamp: “It was not even a quagmire ... a quagmire is not at all monotonous ... One has to be a man-hater with the brain of a cave-man to imagine such places. Nevertheless, this was not the figment of someone’s imagination; here before our very eyes lay the swamp. This boundless plain was brownish, hopelessly smooth, boring, and gloomy” (15).

Having escaped the desolate bog, the protagonist gets into an estate whose melancholic mistress, the last descendant of an aristocratic family, is doomed by an ancestral curse to die young. The hideous sign of that is the wild hunt, whose terrifying gallop resonates with eternal Belarusian despair. The ethnographer uncovers the hunt to be a conspiracy of landowners who seek to control peasants with superstitious fear, as this makes it easier to exploit them. Rising against injustice, he gets in trouble with the tsarist administration and has to reside for some time in Siberia. This is a hint of the numerous insurgencies that had been taking place in these lands for two centuries, since the moment they were incorporated into the empire. The gothic novel turns out to be about class struggle.

Two types of landscapes that carry a complex symbolic load keep the narrative going. First, there is a romantic palliative of wild nature in which “humans see what we bring to our minds” (Dean 2007, 74); in this particular case, nature stands for some unruly and dangerous force. Second, there is a manmade landmark, a medieval castle. As Martin Warnke (1995, 39) explains in his study of the politics of landscapes, castles tend to symbolize power and oppression and control of resources. The castle is the stronghold of landed aristocracy who have exploited powerless peasants for centuries. This structure, which has ugly skeletons in its evil past, holds a death grip over the captive maiden for whom her own fate and the fate of her oppressed land have become naturalized: “A terrible land, terrible trees, terrible nights” (37). A ruined castle in another book, *The Dark Al’shansky Castle* (Karatkevich 1978), hides the key to a mystery in which medieval conspiracies are interwoven with the events of World War II, as a gang that terrifies a village is eventually uncovered as consisting of former fascist collaborators.

But the castles, fortified structures, and great manors that emerge in books by Karatkevich may also invoke the idea of the power and might of the land, with its grasp of trade, crafts, and culture; and that vision was in sync with some developments in the humanities and civic initiatives that were unfolding in the midst of 1960s socialism. Quests for lost culture were sweeping throughout Soviet space at that time. A group of Belarusian intellectuals headed by art historian Volga (Olga) Terashchatava embarked on regular expeditions to the countryside. Their purpose was to rediscover and describe architectural sites and ruins and to look for

paintings, wooden sculptures, old books, tiles, and other cultural objects that could be found in abandoned churches, manors, and sometimes in households. Started as a private initiative, these expeditions were soon supported with government funds, and their acquisitions made a foundation for the Museum of Ancient Belarusian Culture that was opened in 1979 on the premises of the Institute of Art History, Ethnology, and Folklore of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences.

In the Russian Federation, several prominent writers and artists drew public attention to the fact that unique medieval Orthodox architectural sites had been turned into garages and warehouses or were left to decay. Vladimir Soloukhin (1969), a writer and collector, wrote a powerful book that featured ancient icons and frescos that were desperately rotting in decaying country churches in the Russian north. Architects and city planners were unhappy that, with the realization of socialist city projects that followed the modernist principles of an international, functionalist transition in architecture and urban planning (Siegelbaum 2013, 70–3; Bohn 2014), old buildings were being demolished, and a campaign for rescuing national culture that started in the media moved to living rooms, cafes, and other places. In 1965, the Society for the Protection of Monuments of History and Culture of the Russian Federation was founded; a year later, a similar organization was created in Belarus, where after the devastation of World War II, mass housing, infrastructure, and industrialization rather than architectural legacies were top priorities. To give way to the new construction, contemporary avenues, and mass housing projects of socialist modernity, whole blocks, including the ancient street of Nemiga in Minsk, were demolished.

The Society for the Protection of Historical Sites began to publish a regular bulletin, and in the mid-1970s a brochure-like book, *The Castles of Belarus* by archeologist Mikhas' Tkachou (1977), was put out under its auspices and hit a nerve. The book contained architectural plans and descriptions of the remains of castles and fortified structures that could be found in Soviet Belarus. Earlier scholarship viewed them as the architectural landmarks of Western Rus', of Eastern Slavic medieval lands, or of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Tkachou instead made a list of castles confined to the territory within the administrative borders of Soviet Belarus and attributed them to a particular historic entity (see fig. 7–9). He maintained: "For centuries, Belarusian experienced builders constructed powerful castles and used whatever material they had at hand ... The architectural sites presented in this book serve as priceless evidence of our history and national heritage; to own them is not only our undeniable right, but also a great responsibility" (3). Several years later, Tkachou reasserted particular spatial materiality in another book, as he argued that, "In the Middle Ages, Belarus was called 'the country of castles.' Every twenty or thirty kilometers there was a fortified town and a settlement" (Tkachou 1991, 3).

People who had suffered under the yoke of castles were not mentioned in those books. Churches and estates had been demolished by Bolsheviks in the 1920s as the "dispensaries" of opium for the people or as the sites of oppression. Now they were

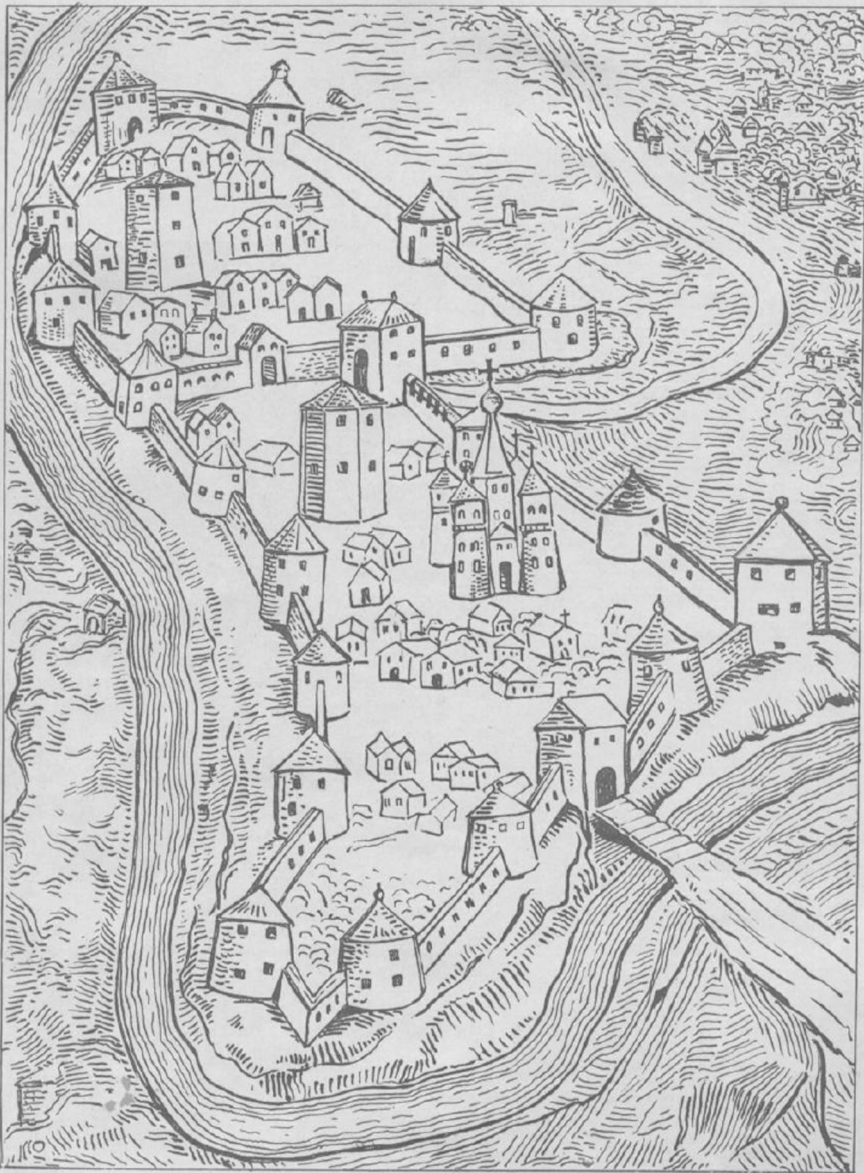


Fig. 7. The front page of Tkachou's book *The Castle of Belarus*, which reproduces a medieval painting of the town of Polatsk. In the public domain.

redefined by intelligentsia as national cultural heritage, and it began to be felt that socialist development was architecturally destructive. With time, castles came to be appropriated as national landmarks, and later, in a nonfiction book for teenagers,



Fig. 8. A photo of the Tower of Kamenets published in *The Castle of Belarus*. In the public domain.

Karatkevich (1977; translation mine) pictured the Belarusian landscape adorned with ancient

castles, which mostly [now] lie in ruins. They are on the hills, by the rivers, on islands. They are very diverse, these ancient structures. They may look like a primitive stone cattle barn: a square plot encircled by very high walls three meters thick (in the town of Lida). Another one looks like the teeth of a



Fig. 9. The Castle of Mir in the early nineteenth century. Painting by Napoleon Orda that was used in *The Castles of Belarus*. In the public domain.

buried monster protruded through the ground; the teeth that have weathered time and are as tall as a big house (Navahradak, Kreva).

We tend to “understand places by architecture that defines them” (Hornstein 2011, 2), even if it exists in our memory or imagination. Some later editions of the book had magnificent structures on the cover (see figs. 10 and 11) as, with time, a vision was established that Belarus was the land of castles. Other projects contributed to the idea that these territories had been the repositories of cultural development prior to socialism, especially the emerging cult of Francysk Skaryna (Francisk Skorina), a Slavic book printer who was born in the ancient Belarusian town of Polatsk (Polotsk). In 1517, he translated into the Slavic vernacular of his time and printed (in Prague) the *Bible of Rus (Biblia Ruska)*, the first book in an Eastern European language ever printed in the Cyrillic script (Podokshyn 1981).⁶ In a collective volume that was prepared to mark the 450th anniversary of the event and sought to inscribe Skaryna into a European context, a suggestion was made that he could be viewed as a Renaissance man on par with Copernicus or Erasmus. Belarusian lands were seen as a part of the European Reformation movement (Zaitsau 1968, 119), a cradle of Slavic book printing, and a place of concentration, of transmission of

6. It is sometimes claimed that Skaryna translated the Bible into Belarusian, whereas no conventional Belarusian language existed at the time. Some researchers maintain that Skaryna’s books were in Church Slavonic heavily saturated with Belarusian.



Fig. 10. The cover of *The Land under the White Wings*.

Western ideas (to Moscow) for a long period of time and a laboratory for Russian verse. A sculptor was commissioned to make a huge statue of Skaryna to be installed in the main building of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences as a landmark of national intellectual tradition.⁷ Soon his image began to be reproduced in paintings, mosaics, tapestries, and other surfaces and came to dominate libraries and other cultural settings (figs. 12 and 13). A passage from Skaryna's ([1517] 1969) introduction to

7. A statue of Skaryna was put in front of the National Library in Minsk in 2004.



Fig. II. A photo from Tkachou's *The Castles of Belarus* that served as an inspiration for the cover of *The Land under the White Wings*.

his translations of the Bible into the language of his birthplace, where he wrote of one's love for one's native land, began to be cited regularly: "Really, from their birth animals that walk in deserts, know their pits; birds that fly in skies, know their nests; fishes that swim in the sea and rivers, feel their waves; bees and others like them defend their beehives, and in the same way people have great favor for the places where they were born and suckled."

Obviously, Skaryna did not think of his land of origin in terms of contemporary political geography; however, his legacy was attributed to Belarusian cultural heritage. Karatkevich (1966) made a direct reference to him in a poem in which he appealed to his countrymen, who were becoming urbanized and Russian-speaking



Fig. 12. Skaryna's alleged self-portrait that was first published in one of his books and is regularly reproduced on Belarusian posters, stamps, and paintings. In the public domain.

and, he felt, were neglecting their heritage: "The grandchildren of Skaryna! Remember, that you have the sacred legacy of your own! Do not give what is sacred to dogs!" That sacred legacy included spirituality as well as material



Fig. 13. The image of Skaryna on a mural at the Library of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. Photo by the author.

culture: as Karatkevich’s characters uncover evil plots and rise against oppression, their rooms are heated with stoves covered with ancient tiles that used to be manufactured by “Belarusian” artisans; they sit at the tables that were crafted by medieval Belarusian furniture makers; on special occasions, they put on outfits made of old Belarusian textiles; they drink from precious cups that were blown several centuries ago by Belarusian glass makers. Whenever he can, Karatkevich mentions local traditions, legends, outfits, the arts and crafts of which he, as well as his characters, historians, and ethnographers, were connoisseurs. Through the words of his characters, who often identify themselves as members of the Belarusian nation, Karatkevich marks these artifacts as Belarusian, although his plots unfold at a time when the attribute could hardly be used.

Having defined Belarus as an aristocratic land of castles—not bogs—that were a part of its heritage and identity before socialism, intellectuals and academics were rethinking Belarusian history and cultural myths that were based in a particular vision and cultural attribution of national space. Rediscovered national physicality and materiality could inspire a particular “desire of place” (Hornstein 2011, 4) and spur the awakening of a “remembered past,” when a longing is forged “for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time” (Boym 2007) that may never have existed in the form in which it is imagined.

Negating Socialism: Nation and Nature

The quest for a rediscovery of native lands in the 1960s was one response to a specific anxiety that was taking hold of Soviet society, as socialist development and the very communist ideals began to be questioned. For decades, Soviet people had lived “in trenches, on barricades and on socialist construction sites” (Alexievich 2017; translation mine), but after fascism had been defeated and the country was industrialized and modernized, they seemed at a loss for what their goal was supposed to be.⁸ In socialist Belarus (and elsewhere), this existential crisis was shaped by shifts in population structure.

In 1960, 32 percent of Belarusians lived in cities; in 1980, 60 percent did. Many new urbanites were born in the countryside prior to World War II and made it to universities during postwar industrialization.⁹ They never returned to their native places and became a “transitional” generation. Highly educated, many of them retained identities that were “based” in a relationship with nature: they had a view of the world, a knowledge and understanding of nature, that is characteristic of the peasant lifestyle; they cared about weather (whether there was going to be drought or a rainy summer or early frosts) and the beauty of landscapes in their native corners; they knew the names of local plants; many regularly helped their parents with harvesting and spent their vacations in ancestral homes. Their parents, although proud of their children, often could not understand the nature of their children’s work and worried that when they died, there would be no one to look after the family house, that apples would be falling down in the orchard to rot on the ground, and that fields would be covered in weeds. City life might have been somewhat challenging for this generation, for it did not provide a ready answer to the question of what to do when one is not working; the pastimes one could think of seemed a form of idleness. Some of these people felt like the last ones in the ancestral line, if not “the last of the Mohicans,” because with urban transition and the crisis of socialist modernity, they were losing their sense of purpose, in the same way as the protagonist of *King Stakh’s Wild Hunt*: “A particular feeling that tormented me, a feeling that in those days stirred every Belarusian soul. It was his lack of belief in the value of his cause, his inability to do anything, his deep pain—the main signs of those evil years” (Karatkevich [1964] 2012, 13).

It can be argued that Karatkevich was responding to that existential lack with his sophisticated romantic plots based in the past. The renowned scholar of nationalism Miroslav Hroch (2007) recognizes that romantic phenomena can be diverse, while their only common denominator is a sense of social alienation that stems from a feeling of insecurity and disrupted harmony of the world that tends to be

8. See Vail (1998) for a detailed discussion.

9. Those from western Belarus were born in what had been Poland and went to Polish schools; they joined the socialist project, in fact, after 1945.

more common among educated cohorts. Romantic Karatkevich appealed to a similar uprooted milieu. In *The Spikes under Your Sickle* (Karatkevich [1965] 1989), he even interrupts the narrative to philosophize not as a narrator but as a real person about the meaning of the uprising of 1863, which was treated as anti-tsarist in Soviet Marxist textbooks but became established as anti-Russian in later scholarship (see Bich 2005). Karatkevich showed his contemporaries the way, provided a sense of purpose and belonging, and outlined a project of individuation. His plots, which unravel in historical settings, contain detailed descriptions of nature and geographical phenomena and have as main character an intellectual, a historian, an ethnologist, or an aristocrat who is a man of sensibility and consciousness with an interest in folk culture and national history.

Karatkevich provided guidance to a generation of uprooted villagers turned into art historians or ethnologists, who had a collective sense of ambivalence regarding their life course. Mostly, he reconsidered the role of academic professionals. For example, the protagonist in the detective story *The Dark Al'shansky Castle* is a historian who takes a leave of absence to write a book (Karatkevich 1978). On the very first evening, as he puts on a fresh shirt, makes a cup of coffee, places a stack of clean paper on his desk, and takes a pen, a doorbell rings. In the story that follows from this unexpected visit, the historian, to untangle the mystery, has to put his professional expertise at the service of his pursuit, much in the same way as the main character in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

Romanticism is not solely a literary trend but rather an approach to life (Hroch 2007). Having invented academics and scholars as romantic heroes, Karatkevich was able to show the new members of urban intelligentsia ways of living in modernity (including more sophisticated forms of consumption), of inscribing sexuality and erotic sensibility into the pattern of socialist life. At the same time, Karatkevich turned professional work into a form of service to people and land. He suggested that (and demonstrated how) one could live fully and morally, fight evil, reach out to the future, influence a course of history—that is, be meaningful in a bigger scheme of things, by standing against injustice. Whatever forms it may take, injustice threatens the native land in the same way as the wild hunt, which stands for evil as such:

But even now I sometimes see in a dream the grey heather and the stunted grass of the waste land, and King Stakh's Wild Hunt leaping, dashing through the marshes. The horses' bits do not tinkle; the silent horsemen are sitting up straight in their saddles. Their hair, their capes, their horses' manes are waving in the wind, and a lonely star is burning overhead. King Stakh's Wild Hunt is racing madly across the Earth in terrifying silence. I awaken and think that its time is not yet over. Not as long as gloom, cold and darkness, injustice and inequality, and this dark horror that had created the legend of King Stakh, exists on Earth. Across the land, half drowned in fog, still roves the Wild Hunt. (Karatkevich [1964] 2012, 291)

The writer imagined his own life as service, as he confessed with his magnum opus, a novel about the uprising of 1863, he intended to “pay my debt to the river Dnieper, to the people of the uprising of 1863, to Belarus” (Karatkevich 1966, 195). The conflation of land/nature and people/nation that is apparent in this confession (the river, people, and the country) is common in his writing. Looking at dangerous bogs and inhospitable woods in *King Stakh’s Wild Hunt*, Belaretsky thinks about his country/nation: “Oh, how fearful, how eternal and immeasurable is thy sorrow, my Belarus!” (Karatkevich [1964] 2012, 14). The title of his nonfiction book *The Land under the White Wings* is another example. The metaphor was justified by a natural phenomenon that, Karatkevich (1977, 3) believed, was specific to his native land: “Our country, Belarus, can be called ‘the land under the white wings.’ To a great extent, a stork is its symbol. Certainly, there are Danish storks that Andersen sang of, there are storks in other Western countries. There are some in Southern lands. But to the East of Belarus, then, except for Central Asia, there are almost none.” Intellectuals tended to interpret “the white wings” over Belarus (which means “white Rus/Russia”) as the wings of the “guarding angels” of the land, which was believed to be blessed or sacred. Such interpretation was suggested by a pantheistic poem, in which Karatkevich ([1980] 1982, 141; translation mine) asserted that

“God lives in Belasus”—
 That’s what my simple folk say.
 This truth is affirmed by the dew on the grass
 And by the eternal circle of stars.
 This truth is affirmed
 By the strength of (water) waves,
 And by the oath of our ancestors,
 And by the golden steel of our language,
 And by the universe of our thoughts.

The poem was at odds with state atheism and invoked the romantic glorification of the folk and their language, the cult of folk customs, history, nature, and collective memory, while asserting the fusion of physical geography with cultural phenomena that arise from a particular tradition. In Russian—and Belarusian (and other Slavic languages) as well as in European languages, the words “nation” (*narod*) and “nature” (*priroda*) derive from the common root that contains the metaphor of natality: that is, something that is *born* but that also *becomes* or is made (Kharkhordin 2011, 168). *Nation* and *nature* are both natural and cultural phenomena: nature is not completely natural, especially in modernity, while nations, in popular imagination, result from natural origins. Thus, the two concepts seem intimately connected. But at the same time, the members of a nation/nature are only capable of birthing—that is, of producing something naturally and satisfying their immediate needs—and only those few who are capable of what Hannah Arendt



Fig. 14. The Castle of Mir in 2016. Photo by S. Chareuski.

calls “*vita activa*” can produce something new through *praxis* (Kharkhordin 2011, 191). The captive maiden in *King Stakh’s Wild Hunt* urges the protagonist to act and resume a guiding role: “Go to your people! Go to those who live, starve, and laugh! Go and win!” (Karatkevich [1964] 2012, 145). Belaretsky, an academic and intellectual, is a member of a special group of those who act and lead.

Moral geographers think of places as localities with meaning that emanates from adhering to, transgressing, or recreating moral codes in the relationship between people and the physical environment (Matless 1994). Previous socialist ideology was based on a Marxism that viewed nature as a universal means of production; a man could conquer nature or labor within it, while land was a form of capital. Thus, the epic poem *The New Land* (1911–23) by the Belarusian classic author Jakub Kolas (Kolas 1923) demonstrated this relationship between a workingman and the land. It tells the story of a peasant, a land renter, who had a dream of a plot of his own. When, after a life of drudgery and misfortunes, the man is finally going to sign papers at the bank, he gets sick and dies without ever realizing his peasant dream of land ownership. The nativist fusion of nation and nature implied a different kind of a relationship. As the land of laborers and socialist heroes was transformed into sacred space, a very different range of moral values came into being that gave rise to a broad range of philosophical (rather than socialist) concepts and meanings. This new vision appealed to a humanistic spirituality and ethos rather than to class-based values and moral approaches.

With time, the moral space of socialism was becoming displaced by humanistic rather than class-based values and ranges of emotion because individuals were substituted for class, and a project of individuation that sought an engagement with eternity was activated. As the socialist project was losing its momentum, Soviet intelligentsia, in their pursuit of meaning, did not see man as the conqueror of the natural world nor anymore as a socialist hero but rather as a link in the river of being: “And the great river is flowing and flowing. We were not there, and it was still moving its waves along its banks of forests and stork nests. We will be gone, and it will still be running further and further, to the distant, and the final, sea” (Karatkevich 1989, 12; translation mine). In the vision of the romantic writer, that river was flowing in the legendary land of castles, and its soil emanated magic. Serving this sacred entity—nation and nature at the same time—rather than building communism, could sustain life’s meaning.

Conclusion

In this essay, I intended to describe and contextualize some work on cultural memory and the representation of space that was carried in the 1960s and 1970s by Belarusian academics and literati. The romantic landscaping that was started as a reaction to and a way of overcoming socialist modernity gave an impulse to national agitation, culminating during perestroika when the remapping of land with pre-Soviet place names and historical reenactments, pilgrimages, restoration workdays, folk festivals, and protests against new construction became common, although not necessarily successful—at least not in a way that Karatkevich could have imagined. With time, the metaphor of “the land under the white wings,” which he had created, filtered into popular culture and, with the advent of the market, turned into a commodity. These days it pops up as a phrase or an image on posters, chocolate boxes, landmarks, and elsewhere.

Castles have also lost some of their romantic mysticism. With state sovereignty and the need to sustain some kind of national branding (partly under pressure from the public), the government became concerned that the country had no history and thus allocated funds for the renovation of some historical sites and national landmarks. The castle of Mir that was mentioned at the beginning of this paper was a priority on the list. [Figure 14](#) shows how it looks now that the renovation has been completed. A “Disneyfied simulacrum,” to use a catchy phrase (Hatherley 2015, 317), it is of interest to tourists and suggests a well-ordered use of space, with music festivals, opera performances, and medieval reenactments. However, the new version of the place leaves its history incomplete. During World War II, fascists turned the castle of Mir into a Jewish ghetto¹⁰ where

10. It is featured in Ludmila Ulitskaya’s (2006) *Daniel Stein, the Translator*, a famous novel that was awarded the Russian National Book Prize in 2006. However, in her book Ulitskaya did not provide the real name of the place.

several hundred people were killed, a fact that the castle museum does not even mention. The place looks as if nothing much had ever happened there.

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