**1917 The Russian Revolution 1967: Soviet Architecture Assumes a New ...**
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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1917—The Russian Revolution—1967

# *Soviet Architecture Assumes a New Look*

*Following is the 14th of a series of articles by reporters of The New York Times on a half-century of Soviet rule in Russia, to be observed on Nov. 7.*

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE 50th anniversary of the Russian Revolution began with one of Moscow's loveliest springs. Hedges of lilacs faced the Bolshoi Theater, tulips were fluorescent in the Alexander Gardens, and parks turned jungle green. Even the brusque earnestness of rushing Muscovites was touched by the pleasure of warm sun and clear skies.

This year the food displays in store windows were imaginative and more plentiful; there were fancy shoes, costume jewelry and enough flashy consumer goods to make the streetscape less bare; kiosks on every avenue sold oranges and ice cream and queues lined up for kvass, a refreshing thin beer made from fermented rye, and sudden deliveries of popcorn.

This year's girls wore beehive hairdos of many artificial colors, tentatively short skirts and eye make-up ingeniously improvised from East European drawing pencils found in art supply stores.

The visitor who comes to see the kind of world a planned society has built in half a century brings the well-publicized image of crumbling construction and drab vistas. He finds new 20- and 30-story skyscrapers rising dramatically along Moscow's main avenues. Modern architecture has flowered with the lilacs and tulips this spring.

Close by, churches and historic buildings are being restored with patience and quantities of shimmering gold leaf.

Beyond the skyscrapers and the treasures of the Kremlin the characteristic, post-Napoleonic streets of the eighteen-twenties, with their small classic buildings finished in umber-toned plaster, wait quietly for demolition. Rugged,

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Garth Huxtable for The New York Times

**The 32-story Council of Mutual Economic Assistance Building is being put up in Moscow by the Soviet Union and five Eastern European lands.**

# Soviet Architecture Assumes Modern Look After Stalin's Wedding-Cake Style

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late-19th-century Russo-Baroque structures that put conventional Victoriana to shame exist, too, on sufferance in the relentless reconstruction of the city.

On Moscow's outskirts, 230,000 new apartments are now completed annually. In the Southwest district a sea of shabby five-story walk-ups was begun 15 years ago as part of the city's planned expansion; 16-story buildings are the current standard. The new residential neighborhoods that ring the central city rise like a scaleless white mirage out of the flat green fields.

A visitor this year found all the crumbling construction and drab vistas, as advertised. But there were startling breakthroughs in Soviet construction and in the Soviet scene.

What has been achieved, for the 50th anniversary, is the industrialization of building on a national scale. The most recent construction, the product of an impressive experimental technology, is probably the world's most advanced large-scale use of prefabricated, reinforced concrete.

This change is the result of a concentrated 10-year program that has been spurred by state control of production and acute shortages of housing and building skills. Since 1957, with the release of more resources to the building industry and the assignment of top priority to housing research and construction, there has been an accelerated development of design and building techniques.

Much has been trial and error, and the errors are visible all over the Soviet landscape. Western observers have reported the flaking finishes, doorless balconies and leaking joints sealed with giant doses of mastic bubble gum.

### Story Behind the Flaws

What they have failed to report is the story behind the flaws: the remarkable advances in building technology in an incredibly short time, in quantities that are now leaving other countries far behind, and of a fantastic, 50-year experiment in turning a backward, agricultural country into an industrial and urban nation.

The Soviet building program is one of the most interesting, if far from perfect chapters in the history of man's struggle with his environment. In size, scope and boldness, in spite of crudities, failures and sometimes ludicrous imperfections, it is a singularly important undertaking of the 20th century.

The significance of quick, cheap industrially produced structures in a time of housing shortages and spreading slums cannot be underestimated. The Soviet advances constitute an architectural sputnik.

The Soviet Union now has a country-wide system of mass-produced, standardized, precast, prestressed, reinforced concrete elements that can be manufactured and assembled in the factory and erected in minimum time with minimum labor and costs. Moreover, the latest product is acceptable as architecture.

All this is not apparent to the casual observers of Moscow's new skyline. But even the untrained eye is instantly aware that a special brand of modern architecture is reshaping the Soviet world.

Until now, the popular impression of Soviet building has been of shabby walk-ups and the seven pompous, all-purpose, pseudo-classical cookie-cutter towers that stolidly dominated the Stalin-era view. Rome has its seven hills; Moscow has its seven wedding cakes. They are acquiring the status of period pieces now, a kind of architectural high camp.

There are no wedding cakes in Moscow's new construction. Kalinin Prospekt has at least a third of a mile of modern skyscrapers in a coordinated urban design; the svelte, 32-story Council of Mutual Economic Assistance Building is being put up jointly by the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries; there is a slender, 1,745-foot reinforced concrete television tower; the nearly completed new Gosplan headquarters, for the state planning agency that directs all aspects of Soviet life, soars behind Gorky Street's traditional facades.

The steel-glass-and-marble Palace of Congresses, the first indication of this radical change of architectural course, has stood inside the historic Kremlin since 1961. Its break with the past is still a subject of lively controversy.

The new buildings are increasingly assured, uncompromisingly contemporary versions of the international style. They are a bit tentative, like Moscow's miniskirts, obviously catching up stylistically rather than taking off in new directions.

### Mechanical Difficulties Persist

The great leap forward is still tripping over mechanical difficulties, such as air conditioning, which, when it operates at all, seems to be for the purpose of sealing in those rich Russian smells. But reactionary Soviet building is a thing of the past.

Finishes, although still far from Western standards, are improving noticeably. Surfaces are of factory-bonded mosaic or marble chip, rather than raw concrete. Proportions and details are being upgraded. More important, with a few exceptions, a distinctive style results from Soviet large-scale prefabrication.

The meaning of the Soviet achievement in industrialized building is summed up by an American official. Dr. A. Allan Bates, director of the Office of Industrial Standards of the National Bureau of Standards, has said: "The Soviet Union can now produce a four-room apartment for $3,000 to $3,500 that would cost $10,000 in the United States. What the Russians have done is to develop the only technology in the world to produce acceptable low-cost housing on a large scale." In the United States, most construction is still in the handicraft age.

### Town-Planning Concepts Retarded

While design of individual buildings grows more advanced and sophisticated, design of cities and towns is curiously retarded. Planning clings to the sterile, neo-classicism of endless straight avenues, vacuous squares and conventionally ruled-off residential quarters.

Standard structures and standard layouts are used over and over again. Even with better buildings, the Soviet landscape continues to be dreary.

In the newest plans, the present uniform neighborhoods, or "microdistricts," of 5,000 to 20,000 people will be broken down into smaller units with services for groups of 1,000 apartments for more intimacy and human scale. But essentially the Soviet plan is dated, doctrinaire and lifeless when built. What looks clean and promising measured at one inch to 100 feet in the scale model becomes vast and inhuman measured by weary human footsteps. This is still the Soviet ideal.

By count of the Institute of Town Planning, 900 new Soviet cities have been built since the Revolution and 1,700 cities have been rebuilt after having been 50 to 100 per cent destroyed in World War II.

The job has been done, delayed by war, defense and military spending, lack of skills, and the heavily industrialized objectives of the Soviet Union's first 40 years, which emphasized factories, power plants and munitions and pushed housing and consumer needs to a back burner.

What simmered, chiefly, were shortages. To meet them, the postwar building boom has turned the open fields around Moscow and other Soviet cities into vast expanses of standardized residential blocks and started a number of new communities from Siberia to the Black Sea.

A purely Soviet phenomenon, this immense building program has reshaped one sixth of the world's inhabited land surface, the third most populous country and one of the two great powers of the world.

The need now, openly acknowledged, is for quality as well as quantity solutions.

### Reinventing the Umbrella

In a sense, for the last 50 years the Russians have been reinventing the umbrella. They have had to learn, or relearn the basic skills that are practiced automatically in other countries to reach the status quo of contemporary civilization. In housing, however, they have taken the process further.

The Soviet Union bought and borrowed some industrial building techniques and developed others. Whole factories for prefabricated parts were purchased from France, bits of technology were taken from Sweden and Denmark. From the United States, the only debt is to Henry Ford or the assembly line. Soviet housing is coming off the assembly line now.

It is sometimes hard for the visitor to grasp the obvious: the state owns all the land and does all building everywhere. There is one significant exception. About 20 per cent of Soviet housing is now constructed as cooperatives, undertaken by trade unions or professional groups, using low-cost government loans.

### Statistics on Housing Construction

By Soviet count, 393 million square meters of housing space was constructed in cities and towns between 1960 and 1965. Of this new housing, 70 to 85 per cent is said to have been industrially produced. With the usual optimistic upgrading, 480 million square meters is expected to be built in 1966-70. Two million houses were built in rural areas in the 1960-65 period. (One square meter is about 10 square feet.)

These facts and figures were presented by a high Soviet planning official in an interview across the inevitable T-shaped arrangement of desk and conference table, with the usual bottles of fruit soda, under the ritual portrait of Lenin. (The portraits vary from rigid realism to sophisticated sketches, a clue to the taste of the office's occupant grasped eagerly by the Western visitor.)

The official projected the classic Bolshevik image—leonine gray hair, rugged worker's features and open-necked shirt. His nails were immaculately manicured. The office was in one of Moscow's uncountable government buildings, shabby, musty, with a precarious elevator and peeling walls, the decaying entrance guarded by a little old woman wearing a head scarf and carpet slippers.

The figures translate into almost identical patterns of housing, with minimal regional variations, all over the Soviet Union. Today all large Soviet cities are ringed with new suburbs. Moscow's newest, Cheryomushki, occupies 1500 hectares and houses 170,000 people.

The Soviet suburbs are not like any suburbs that any American has ever known. There are no little houses with handkerchief yards, no split-level developments, no colonial salt boxes with two-car garages, nor even the garden apartments that have become the American suburban way of life.

Suburbs in the Soviet Union consist of blocks and blocks of unrelieved, identical apartment houses, breaking off abruptly at the edge of open fields and a rural landscape.

The suburban apartment buildings are placed in ruler-straight, widespread rows with vast areas of grass and trees between, lined up uniformly on broad, bowling-alley streets with more grass and trees down the middle.

Five- and nine-story structures are currently being supplemented with 12- and 16-story buildings. All are arranged with the relentless regularity and overscaled, desolate open spaces of what Americans know and denigrate as public housing.

Ironically, only American mass-produced suburbia equals the result in sterile monotony.

It soon becomes obvious to the visitor that things are measured differently by the Russians. What is sterility to Americans is bliss to them. The clean but unvarying Soviet residential neighborhoods make most Western visitors miserable and Soviet citizens ecstatic. There are some complaints about details and perpetual bureaucratic delays, but few criticisms of planning.

If the present Soviet standard of living is measured against the immediate past and still-existing conditions, this contentment is easy to understand. There is really no meaningful basis of comparison with the American way of life.

This does not mean that what the Soviet Union has today does not need to be vastly improved (it does, and the Russians know it), or to deny that the American standard of living is infinitely better; it simply means that judgments can be made only in perspective.

### History of Housing Shortage

That perspective can be quickly and painfully established by a fairly typical example. A middle-class Moscow apartment of six rooms, built about 1910, may have been occupied by a single family of a mother, father and two children as late as 1920.

In the early nineteen-twenties, with the influx of population to the cities after the revolution, and the deterioration of the housing stock, that family would have been reduced to three rooms. The other three rooms would have been shared, at first by relatives.

By the middle twenties, as housing shortages increased, the six rooms were occupied by six families, using the communal kitchen and bathroom. After the war, with mass destruction of cities and housing, there were 35 people in those same six rooms.

Fragments of families shared rooms, all shared the one refrigeratorless kitchen and antiquated bath and toilet. Waiting for the single stove, some cooked all night. Conditions were unspeakable.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the Soviet concept of paradise is still the American public housing standard of the nineteen thirties; safe, sanitary, standard accommodations.

Admittedly, this dated, lifeless model is no longer an adequate ideal. It is certainly inadequate for an advanced affluent country like the United States, where such developments, often with less design merit but with considerably more spacious apartments, form the hard core of the underprivileged and the alienated.

The standard will also be questionable in Russia once the acute housing crisis begins to ease and living conditions improve. Housing in preparation for 1970 has larger rooms and better layouts.

Architects and planners are aware that their biggest future problem—creating a more varied and enriched environment with their standardized industrial buildings—is already outlined with alarming clarity. At least one high-placed architect spoke of the new neighborhoods as "dead."

On the other hand, there is a surprising pleasure in conformity, a contentment with regimentation in the Soviet system and philosophy, that militates against the variety, human scale and individualism that are prized in the West.

### Soviet Cities Lack Real Style

There is no real style in Soviet cities yet. Culture, the magnet and ornament of urban life, is a strange, communal, deflowered ritual that stresses mind and body building according to Boy Scout rules and state morality. There is little public grace.

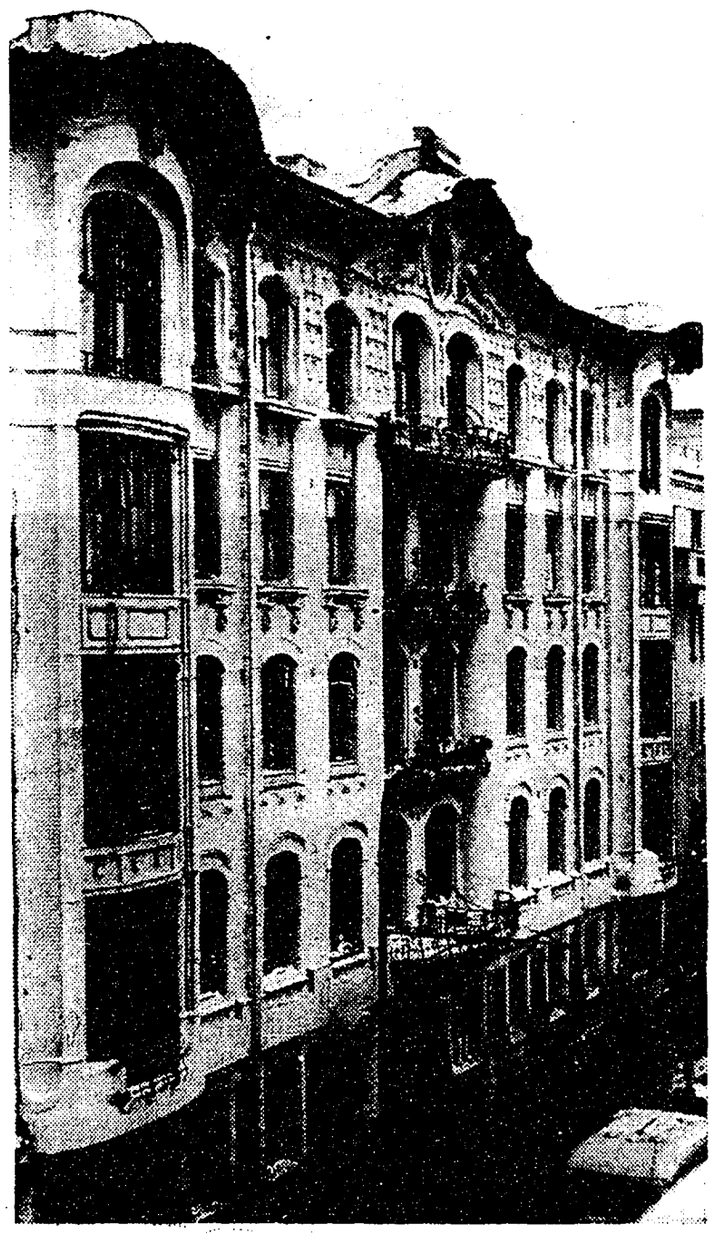
Whatever concessions have been made to the desire for the "good life," the Russians have succeeded in avoiding "bourgeois decadence"—the overt pleasure in the splendid delights of living and that shiny bauble called civilization. There is a grayness in most Soviet cities that is equally of the spirit and of the environment.

Still, there is a great deal of pride—so much has been struggled for, so much has been hard-won—that makes Soviet cities and public spaces, in spite of dreariness or shabbiness, neat and clean. Russians love and respect things big, new, standardized and in multiples of thousands.

Moscow's immense new Southwest residential district, begun in 1952-53, stretches on endlessly, in parallel straight lines. There is no scale, no variety, no surprise. It is monotony with light, air, sun and greenery in season, and, on sum, that effect is no worse and sometimes a good deal better than a lot of the construction on the outskirts of large American cities.

The outlying landscape of free enterprise is sordid and chaotic; of a state-planned society, clean and regimented. It is not a choice that offers many pluses in either case.

*Tomorrow: Housing in Moscow area reflects Soviet technological gains.*

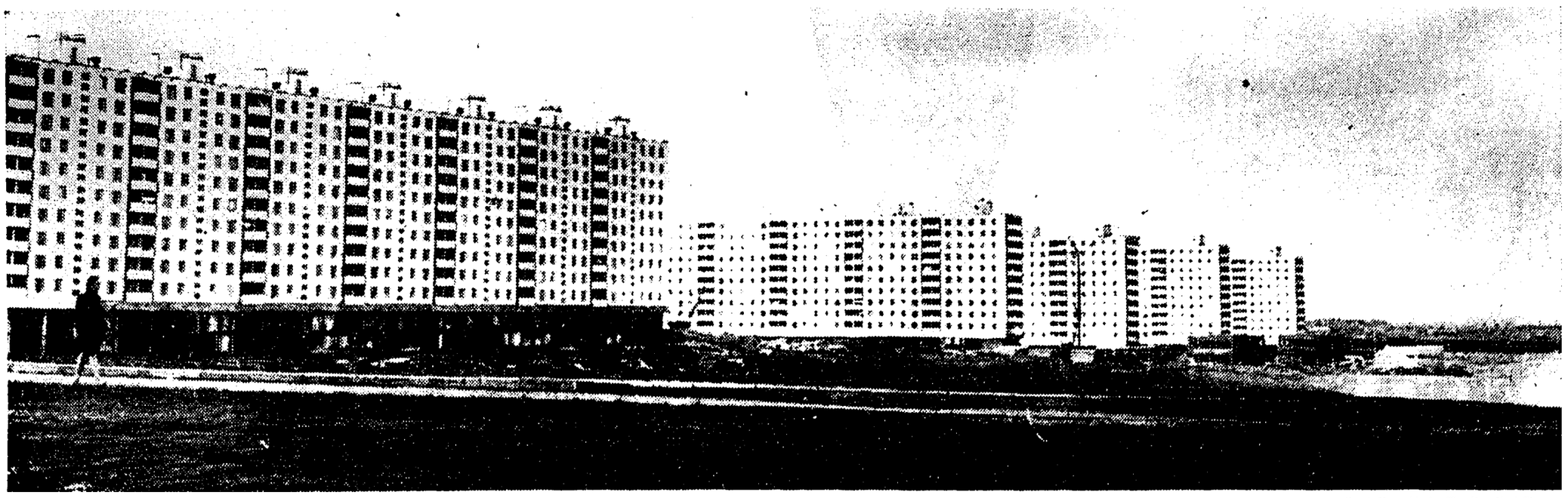


Novosti from Sovfoto

VARIETY OF STYLES: Shown are some of the architectural styles in the Soviet Union. Left: a prerevolutionary house, built around 1900-1910, on Kropotkin Street in Moscow. Above: a workers' club in the capital. It is an example of the constructivism style of the 1920's. Below: Leningrad's Narva Gates, typical of the classical revival noted in early 1950's.


The New York Times Oct. 19, 1967

BUILDING BOOM: New housing projects ring the Soviet capital as the government seeks to satisfy consumer demand.



Garth Huxtable for The New York Times

SUBURBAN MOSCOW: Prefabricated, prestressed, reinforced concrete 12-story apartment houses stretch away to the horizon in the city's Southwest District