Architecture: New World, Old Dreams New World, Old Dreams
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Architecture

New World, Old Dreams

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

OLD revolutionaries, like old soldiers, fade away. Those in the Soviet Union who have survived purges and the pressures of political change are in their 70's and 80's now; old men in a young nation. Most live lives of quiet anonymity.

The architectural revolutionaries joined the great Soviet adventure early. They fought for a new world, with the Bolsheviks. Heroes of the brief esthetic episode called Constructivism, those who are left are on the shadowy sidelines of the new Soviet society. The world they see, on the 50th anniversary of the revolution, an event being celebrated internationally with considerable hard sell, is a modern world, but it is not their world. The buildings going up on Soviet avenues today, 20 and 30-story prefabricated skyscrapers, are not their buildings, or their dreams.

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Some of their buildings still stand. Few in number originally, they are the subject of architectural pilgrimages by foreign visitors and of a near-cult by Soviet students.

These buildings were meant to be as free from the shackles of bourgeois tradition as everything else in the new Communist state. What they were, and are, for those that were constructed are still in use and currently being "rehabilitated," are striking exercises in 1920's abstraction. Here are the floating, locking, interpenetrating Constructivist shapes carried over from art to architecture in one of the most interesting, if short-lived chapters in modern architectural history.

At least one or two Constructivist structures can be found in all major Soviet cities. They are as easily identifiable today as 17th century Italian Mannerism, and for the scholar, just as intriguing. With the initial enthusiasm for architectural revolution, Le Corbusier was invited to build in Moscow. His Centrosoyuz building of 1928-34, on Kirov Street, is currently the Central Statistics Agency.

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In Moscow, there is the Zuyev Club, by Panteleimon Golosov, built about 1928, an extraordinary structure with a glass cylinder pushing through the right-angled wraparound projection of a solid wall. The Rusakov Club, constructed in 1926 as a workers' club by Konstantin Melnikov, is now a movie theatre. Vladimir Tatlin's bold projects are archive architecture. There was neither money nor resources, in the early revolutionary years while revolutionary design was still favored, to carry them through. Golosov and Tatlin are dead; Melnikov is still alive.

In 1925 Konstantin Melnikov brought Russian architectural Constructivism to international notice. He designed and built the sensationally successful Soviet pavilion at the Paris Exposition of that year, which enjoyed instant critical acclaim as art and as the symbol of the new socialist nation. ("They carried me on their shoulders," he says today.)

His own home, built a few years later, still stands in Moscow. It is half hidden by a high fence and over-

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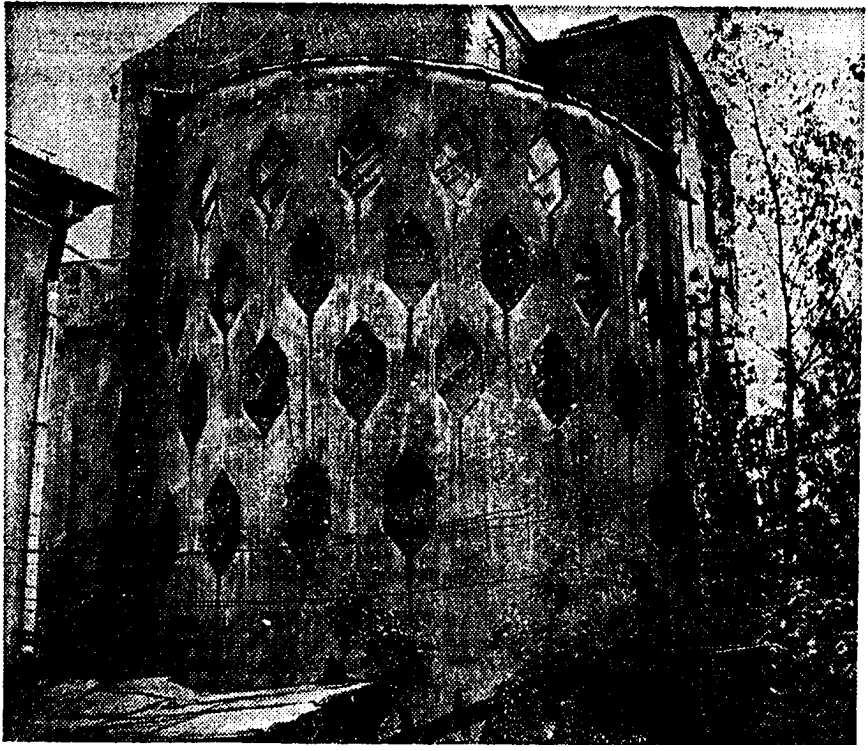

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Soviet Constructivism: House in Moscow by Konstantin Melnikov, built in 1928
A subject of architectural pilgrimages by foreign visitors and Soviet students

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grown lilac bushes. A shabby concrete double cylinder made of two interlocking forms, the rear is pierced by a pattern of small lozenge-shaped studio windows. At the top, incised in the concrete, are his name and the date, 1928.

Konstantin Melnikov is now in his eighties. I visited him in Moscow's Central Hospital one warm May evening this year. He was an ambulatory patient, and we met outside on a path lined with bushes laden with sweet smelling white blossoms.

Courtly, blue-eyed, with thin white hair and moustache, in a bathrobe over a cotton hospital suit, he broke off a flowering branch and presented it to me with gentle dignity. We spoke through a student interpreter. It was an evening — with the hospital hush and the fading light and an old man's memories — that will remain with me like a dream; for him, the unexpected homage of the present, for me, a bittersweet excursion into the past.

Central Hospital is a huge, forbidding neoclassical pile of undiluted grayness, and its location, in a distant suburb of the city, belies its name. In front, a once-formal garden with a dry, neglected fountain has long gone to shaggy jungle growth. The outdoor promenade route is a straight path that goes squarely around the hospital grounds. Where it relented in back, softened by the bushes that made a kind of natural arbor over wooden benches, we sat and talked.

He spoke of the early days after the revolution, of the ardor that led the hand of the architect to new ideas and forms. He told how easy it was then to find an answering ardor in the officials of the party; of how he went to the leaders, a young man with sketches under his arm, and received immediate approvals without reviews or delays.

His face saddened as he spoke of the changes in the 1930's, of burgeoning bureaucracy and the increasing difficulties of getting the new work built. He had been an innovator, a creative force, and the force was cut off abruptly with the government's turn to academic classicism as the approved Soviet style.

He would not speak unkindly of the men who embraced the change and built the pompous monuments of the late 1940's and early 1950's. His involvement in architecture was personal, not polemical. He was not interested in issues, past or present. He cared only about architecture as an art. In the soft spring evening air, as the sun went down, he spoke of old enthusiasms and old triumphs. "There were men of talent in my day, and there are men of talent now," he observed. He was not bitter that Soviet history had passed him by.

By the mid-1930's the cultural freeze had set in; the official line was social realism in the arts and classical eclecticism in architecture. The work of the avant-garde was denounced as decadent and the innovators were supplanted by the academicians. Today, the academicians have been supplanted by the modernists. In a curious sense, history has come full circle. But today's Soviet architects are talented, pragmatic technicians, not visionaries. Visions, like old soldiers and old revolutionaries, also fade away.