ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Discovering The Talent of Ivan Leonidov

The first exhibition in the United States of the work of the Soviet architect Ivan Leonidov (1902-59), one of the most radical talents of the early years of the Russian Revolution, can be seen until Feb. 21 at the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies, 8 West 40th Street. This rare documentation reveals a remarkable artist whose eclipse today is equalled only by his fame within the Soviet Union in the 1920's. The new material adds a previously unwritten chapter to modern architectural history and has all of the elements of genius and angst of a classic Russian novel. Leonidov's story is a personal and esthetic tragedy of epic proportions.

It is largely a story of unbuilt buildings; of all the spectacular projects on view at the Institute, ranging from cultural palaces to new towns, only an ornamental stair built into a mountainside was constructed in 1937 in the Crimea. Oddly enough, this fact diminishes neither his significance nor his position in the official assessments of modern architecture. The present display makes that position clear.

Because Leonidov's work has not been widely known and has been virtually inaccessible, the assessment is overdue. Except for a very brief initial period, Leonidov was systematically downgraded and deprived of his livelihood by the Soviet bureaucracy that controlled all architectural production. A series of portrait photos shows a young man of intense spiritual beauty reduced to a broken and eroded sadness by the end of his life.

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We owe this important show and a forthcoming book to two Dutch architects, Rem Koolhaas and Gerrit Oorthuys, who have painstakingly searched out the material in the Soviet Union. The exhibition has been aided by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. On the basis of photographs of drawings, models and paintings—none of the original documents could be taken out of the country—and new models made by the institute's students, Leonidov emerges as one of the towering talents of the 20th century.

This was admittedly an idealistic and Olympian talent of vast romantic dimensions—visionary in the classic definition. The clichés of the Russian temperament are all present—intellectual passion and imaginative ardor—but the reality that comes through is of an intensely creative mind devoted to the new ideals of revolution and abstraction.

Leonidov was a leading architectural light of the related Russian movements of Suprematism and Constructivism, in the company of—and indebted to—such artists as Kasimir Malevitch and El Lissitsky. Among the influential architects of the time were Ladovsky, Ginsburg, the Vesnin brothers and Konstantin Melnikov. For one exhilarating decade right after the revolution, it looked as if these men might indeed remake the world, or at least a part of the Soviet Union, in their image.

Actually, the esthetic revolution came to Russia before the political revolution. The years from 1914 to 1917 saw the

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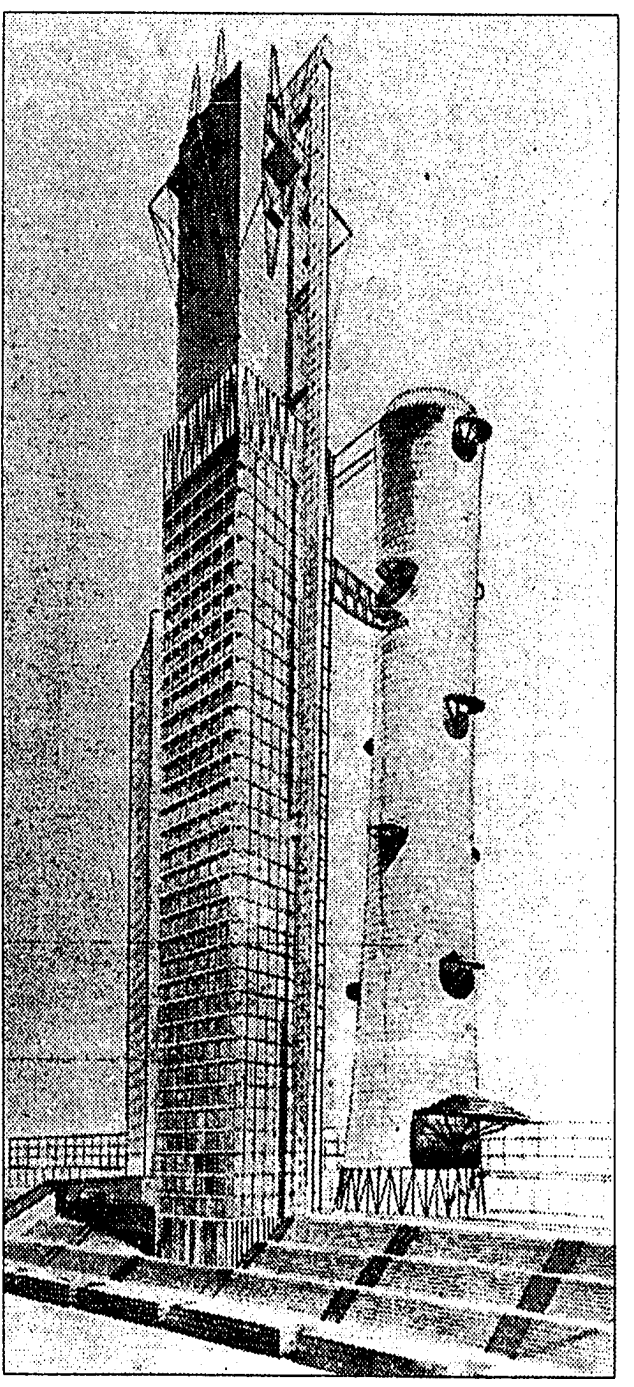

Ivan Leonidov's drawing for the Headquarters for Ministry of Heavy Industry in Red Square, Moscow

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towns were planned. The radical designs were often beyond the economic and technological reach of the new government. But most major Soviet cities have at least one or two Constructivist monuments of the 1920's, such as Golossov's remarkable Zuyev Club in Moscow of 1926-27, and a wealth of documents remain from the constant competitions that became the established Soviet way of choosing public designs.

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The new Soviet architecture came to outside attention through Konstantin Melnikov's much-admired Paris Exposition Building of 1925. It was greeted by European professionals as an esthetic revelation. "They carried me on their shoulders," he recalled in 1967, a few years before his death. A book on Melnikov by S. Frederick Starr will be published later this year.

By 1930, the conservatives regained power and set out to destroy the radical art styles. The progressive architectural organizations, Asnova and OSA, were dissolved by Stalin in 1932 and replaced by the State Academy of Architecture. In 1937, the Congress of Soviet Architects established the familiar wedding-cake classicism as the official academic style.

The most vicious attacks of all were leveled at Leonidov. The whole range of subversive strains to be purged were lumped under the epithet "Leonidovism." He had been graduated as a star student from the Vkhutemas, the experimental school that predated the Bauhaus, in 1927; he was acclaimed and lionized for his talent from 1927 to 1929, and totally discredited by 1930. He lost both his teaching position and his apartment and became ineligible to build anything at all.

A life began for him and his family of temporary shelter in friends' apartments and offices; in later years he worked as a taxi driver and a painter of lampshades. He continued to enter the endless competitions that he had no hope of winning, and that is the body of work in the Institute show.

Two projects, one near the beginning and the other at the end of Leonidov's career and life, are compelling examples of his mastery of art and symbolism. The powerful images of a 1933 competition entry for the headquarters of the Ministry of Heavy Industry, the center of all Soviet planning, are unforgettable, once seen. The plan would have cleared Red Square of such structures as the GUM Department Store to create a vast space almost twice its present width. Part was to be crowned with what Leonidov called "a sheaf of towers" on a podium base.

The towers are three symbolic skyscrapers overshadowing the Kremlin and St. Basil's Cathedral. But Leonidov saw this as the proper esthetic culmination of the "subtle and majestic music" of the architecture of the Kremlin and Red Square—in fact, he viewed it as a historical necessity in terms of the supremacy of the Soviet state.

The three tall, clustered towers are rectangular, triangular and circular in plan. The rectangular tower is a grid of masonry and glass, topped by a dynamic linear abstraction of stainless steel masts meant to hold platforms for "sky performances." An external elevator soars up one side. The triangular tower has stone piers and curved glass walls. The round tower tapers like a smokestack and is of black glass blocks, luminous at night, with projecting, gold-colored "viewing platforms." All are connected by aerial bridges.

Next to this overwhelming Constructivist fantasy, Futurism looks tame. The freehand sketches that preceded the formal drawings are very beautiful; they have an almost Renaissance calligraphy.

Leonidov's last project was "The City of the Sun," worked on from 1947 to his death in 1959. This consisted of a huge tent, for which many fanciful studies were made, with a satellite suspended over it in an intricate and delicate geometry. Whenever world peace was achieved, the satellite was meant to be released to rise and float indefinitely in the sky. It would be appropriately and darkly Russian to equate the satellite with Leonidov's spirit and to dwell on metaphors of peace and freedom. But it would be unnecessary. Leonidov's art has obviously been its own symbol and tragic necessity. ■