

Conference Paper

European *Par Excellence*. Several Remarks on Interpreting Soviet Urbanization in Siberia

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Abstract

The paper explores the Soviet urbanization as a European trend, developing between the extreme poles of uncompromising rationalism and the human element. At all these levels – a reasonable theory, its clash with reality and the inevitable utopia trap – the characteristics of a modernity project and its relation to tradition and cultural and social changes are revealed. One of the major issues discussed in the article is the attitude of the Soviet urban project to the past (tradition) and to the future (its ideological drive). Its history is characterized by sharp turning points: abrupt shifts leaving no room for compromise, reasonably planned and imposed from above. While not avoiding questions concerning local specifics, colonialism and the possibility to identify different "modernities", it is suggested to analyze the Soviet city as a part of the European project, from the cultural (modernity), aesthetic (modernism) and economic (modernization) perspectives.

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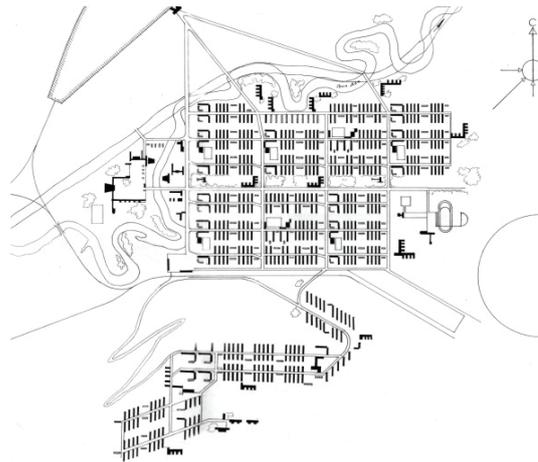
Keywords: modernity, modernization, modernism, Avant-garde, Soviet urbanisation, Siberian city, utopia

1. Introduction

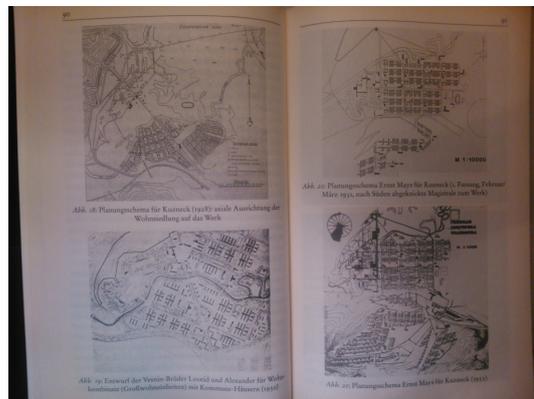
The unrealised project of Kuznetsk by Ernst May (Fig. 1) is a model proposal of a space governed by mechanistic justice, in which even the amount of light and air in identical apartments is distributed extremely reasonably and with uncompromising fairness. A researcher trying to interpret the project inevitably stumbles on an aporia: the city, understood as a division of a metallurgical plant and a new egalitarian space for living in, appears to be both Soviet and European at the same time.

The project was designed by European architects, but it is European not only because of its authorship. Although the project was commissioned by the USSR and could be implemented only in this country, it was the Soviet authorities that eventually blocked its realization. Accused of being either communist or capitalist, the idea was rooted in two mutually opposed ideological concepts. How can we describe such cultural facts

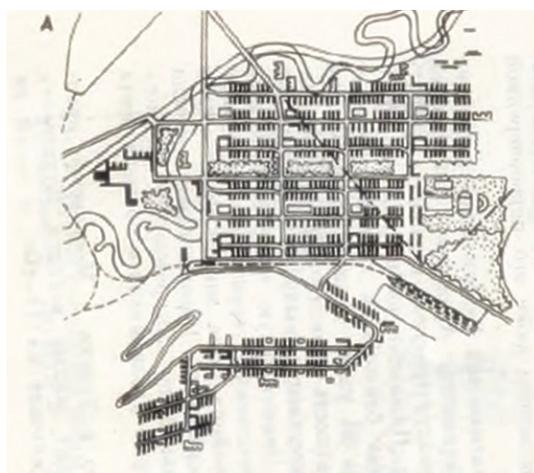
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(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 1: Unrealised project of Kuznetsk, arch. Ernst May et al., first version February/March 1931, scale 1: 10 000. Source: *Standardstädte. Ernst May in der Sowjetunion 1930-1933. Texte und Dokumente*, 2012, ed. T. Flierl, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin, p. 91.

if we want to retain the awareness of their social, aesthetic and economic origins, but without losing sight of their specific local character?

Soviet culture was torn between two opposite poles: unyielding rationalism and the unpredictable human element. Analyzing the pure theory and its clash with reality shows two different perspectives, but also reveals features shared by the Soviet urban experiment and the project of modernity.

The objective of this paper is to describe the processes of Soviet urbanization from the perspective of their European component in the most comprehensive and universal way possible. Denouncing socialism as an imported Western concept alien to Russian culture is as old as the socialism in Russia itself. However, the perspective of this paper is different. Its purpose is not to discuss the origins of these ideas, or the paths of their transmission from Europe to Russia, or the postcolonial issues, but to investigate the morphology of the Soviet project, European *par excellence*.

Not only for the purpose of the current paper, but also as a basic research task, we propose to identify three different fields of investigation: modernity as social condition, modernism in art (with the focus on architecture and town planning), and modernization as an aspiration of the Soviet state. The proposed division corresponds to the boundaries between the domains of morality, art and science in Western societies (culture, aesthetics, economy). Their separation from tradition and everyday practice, but above all their autonomy and isolation caused by the professionalization of certain areas of activity gave rise to new challenges that dampened the initial enthusiasm about the observed progress.

Siberia has been chosen for analysis as a region which underwent urbanization on an impressive scale during the twentieth century, both by expanding the existing cities and by founding new ones. Unlike the European part of the Soviet Union, Siberia had not had established such strong urban traditions and the new socialist project could be implemented here without making concessions to the enduring past.

2. Modernization

Urbanization was an inseparable part of modernization and its scale was particularly large in Siberia. Journalists of the time reported proudly:

In new places, in the taiga, in the polar regions, in the southern steppes, giants – the first-borns of socialist industry grew up ([12], 60).

The first five-year plans were a time of real urban revolution. Between 1926 and 1939, the urban population of the country doubled (from 26.3 to 55.9 million), the

percentage of the urban population increased from 17.9% to 32.8% ([5], 126). This moment of transition from theory to practice in architecture was simultaneously the heyday of Soviet architectural and social utopias. Not incidentally, it was in the years 1929–30 that the so-called “discussion on socialist settlement” occurred, which was essentially a dispute between urbanists and disurbanists ([6], 43-158).

Because of its predominantly agrarian character and a late start, Siberia was the region that experienced the largest scale of industrialization and urbanization during the period, and the changes occurring there were the most radical. Particularly rapid was the development of Western Siberia. The increase in heavy industry in Siberia was fivefold, compared to the double growth on the national scale ([13], 352-353).

However, for a long time Siberia remained backward. A glaring example is the fact that in 1927 the number of cars in Siberia was only 293, whereas their total number in the USSR was already 18,000 ([15], 91). It was the combination of these two factors: rapid change and the vast expanse of undeveloped Siberian land that created a fertile ground for utopian thinking. Until the implosion of the Soviet Union, Siberia retained this potential for the romanticization of man’s actions, such as conquering nature and expanding the area under his command.

Non-urbanized Siberia appeared to be a space of opportunity, of starting from scratch. This was especially true for new cities established on a massive scale, unburdened by prerevolutionary urban traditions. Despite its virginity, however, Siberia became yet another place where an abstract idea encountered resistance of reality. Even the most high-minded and meticulously elaborated plan related to human communities cannot foresee all factors that will come into play in the future. Creating a project of an ideal space for an ideal community, where the setting is not a fictitious remote island somewhere in the Indian Ocean, but a specific locality and specific people, was a daunting challenge, which thwarted the creators’ imagination as early as at the stage of theoretical planning. Although Siberia seemed to be a flexible material, it posed obstacles to the designer, such as remoteness from transport routes, a harsh climate, a small population, absence of technology, or unqualified building personnel. All these limitations restricted the freedom of town planners and architects not less than the burden of the past carried by the historical cities in the European part of the country.

Modernization of the state was closely connected with its ideological background. This characteristic was not unique to the Soviet setting: modernism grew from industrialism, just as postmodernism is rooted in post-industrialism. Throughout the history of the Soviet discourse, the modernization of the country and the society was of central

importance (note the wide-spread slogans: electrification as an Lenin's revolution's attribute, "catch up and overtake America", the Space Race, rivalry related to various indicators of economic growth, such as the amount pig iron produced each year, etc.).

Modernization in accordance with Western models was considered necessary, but also transitional, rather a means to an end than a goal in itself. The tactics of the Soviet authorities was simple: after receiving the necessary know-how from the West, all external assistance had to be stopped. But more importantly, this assistance was to be only superficial from the very beginning as it was limited to sharing technology, without engaging the ideological and political dimensions. Experts invited to the USSR were supposed to share their technical and organizational solutions with the Soviets, but ideological issues were kept at bay. Here their Soviet colleagues would insist on their ideological superiority in all matters pertaining to the interpretation of the designed spaces.

At this point, a remarkable example is the carrier in the Soviet Union of Ernst May, a German architect working in the Ural-Kuzbass region. May recalled the experience with bitterness: although he considered himself a person with a left-wing outlook, while working for "the first socialist country" he found out that his proposals were accused of being essentially capitalist. The vagueness of the concepts "essentially socialist" or "actually capitalist" made the attacked defenseless, even more so as the definitions of these concepts not only were ambiguous, but also changed over time.

For instance, in December 1930 May was commissioned to plan a new industrial city of Magnitogorsk. In a competition to win the order, he defeated a project by his Soviet colleague, architect Sergei Chernyshev, who proposed building a fan-shaped city. Centralized and hierarchical, Chernyshev's design had been criticized as a "capitalist relic". But the attitude towards May's ideas changed quickly and his project of a city without a distinct centre (with social and cultural facilities located mainly on the outskirts) met with fierce criticism. The new argument was accusing the project of being... of capitalist origin ([8], 40-59). From then on, Soviet architects would often use radial schemes in planning new cities and new socialist districts (Norilsk, Stalinsk, Uralmash in Sverdlovsk, and beyond the USSR, e.g. the Nowa Huta district of Cracow, etc.). In this case, May was considered blameworthy mainly because of having a European passport.

Another favourite accusation levelled against May involved his projects of apartments without a kitchen. They were criticized as an example of "a mechanical transfer to Soviet conditions of the characteristic features of the workers' dwelling in capitalist countries" ([4], 150). The truth was, however, that May did include kitchens in his

European projects (Frankfurt, Silesia). Projects for the Ural-Kuzbass were sometimes deprived of them, but only at the request of the Soviet authorities (From the decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR on the construction of the Magnitogorsk Combine and Magnitogorsk, 1929, 219). Moreover, May designed the apartment so that in the future it was possible to connect several small, one-room apartments into a single, large apartment with a kitchen ([8], 184).

As soon as the Soviet authorities had reached the conclusion that the invited and generously rewarded foreigners would not contribute more in their narrow technical fields, without further ado they stopped the collaboration. In late 1933, Ernst May was forced to leave the country without having realized his ambitious ideas.

3. Modernism

In the 1920s and 1930s, the architects who championed new architecture in Europe were mostly of left-wing persuasion. While neoclassicism may be blamed for flirting with the Nazi and Stalinist regimes, aesthetics of modernism is usually associated with the aspirations to reorganize the world in a rational way and to introduce revolutionary social changes. However, in contrast to advancing the idea of cheap housing for workers (e.g. New Frankfurt, Warsaw Housing Cooperative), modernist architecture had also another side. Obviously, not all modernist architects sympathized with socialism: it must be remembered that Fritz Ertl, a graduate of the famous Bauhaus school, designed the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz II – Birkenau. Conservative modernism was not a marginal, but rather a mainstream trend. Those in power were eager to turn to modern architecture associated with progress and economic growth. Impressive government buildings, banks, churches, prestigious districts for high-level officials were rising everywhere.

In any case, however, the modernist look had a strong ideological leaning. So strong was the ideological component that some aesthetic solutions were applied contrary to their functions, or to conceal their real function, and thus violated the principles of functionalism.

The paradoxical relationship between modernist architecture and politics was even more complex in the Soviet Union, where two contradictory tendencies – to underscore both social equality and hierarchy of power – were to be reconciled in the urban space. The case in point was Igarka, a new city established north of the Arctic Circle in 1929. Unique wooden constructivist realisations combined international trends in

architecture (like the references to the aesthetics of shipbuilding, used mainly in port cities, Fig. 2) with specific local climate and economy (available building materials).

In the design of Komsevmorput office (Fig. 3), Igarka's builders used single-sloping roof, a practical solution in a place with abundant snowfalls. At the same time, however, they managed to conceal it: for a viewer looking at the main facade from the river, the roof seemed to be flat.

For constructivists, a flat roof was the symbol of the achievements of modern architecture. They disagreed with the opinion that it disfigured the building and it was believed to be not only practical (enabling e.g. arranging a solarium on the roof), but also beautiful. The Municipal Architect of the city of Rotterdam wrote to his Soviet colleagues:

Objections [against flat roofs – K. N.-S.] arising from aesthetic considerations are ridiculous: if something is practically feasible, it also matches the aesthetics of today ([17], 102).

In fact, however, it was exactly the opposite. If the flat roof was considered beautiful in Europe, it was because it was practical, whereas in Siberia it was desirable despite its impracticality. A flat roof was difficult to construct and then to maintain. Implementing it would have required raising the building culture, the workers' competence and the quality of materials in the USSR to a higher level. The unfavourable climate only aggravated the problem.

Other symbols of constructivist architecture were new building materials – concrete, iron, and glass. However, Igarka's constructivism is built with wood (Fig. 4). But even this fact was successfully concealed: wood proved to be an excellent substitute for concrete and even it is possible to mistake one for the other while looking at the plastered building.

Such Baroque-like architectural visual illusions contradicted the modernist slogans, but they fit in well with the propaganda-based Soviet culture.

4. Modernity

In modernization ambitions, and in modernist shape manifested itself the modernity of a Soviet city. The controversy surrounding the relations between the Russian (and later Soviet) culture with European modernity has not subsided, including the question whether the Russian project was modern at all [1]. Our proposal is to interpret Soviet urbanization not only as a project of economic progress based on industrialization, but above all as a cultural (sociocultural, anthropological) project of modernity, which had



Figure 2: River Port Administration, Igarka, 1932. Source: "USSR im Bau" 1932, No. 11.

been inspired by the belief of the Enlightenment philosophers that it was possible and



Figure 3: Seaplane Base (earlier Komsevmorput Office), Igarka, 1938. Source: Igarka's Permafrost Museum.

urgent to reshape the world rationally, instead of letting natural bottom-up processes take their course.

While generally supporting the view that different modernities exist (determined by their cultural backgrounds), and taking into consideration their unique characteristics, we still believe it is justified to use the notion of the European project of modernity in our case, as the scope of the project is not necessarily limited to Western Europe. To escape the temptation of Eurocentric reductionism, it is crucial to emphasize at this point that this approach does not downgrade the significance of the distinguishing features of various European or non-European modernities. However, recognizing their diversity does not render pointless our search for universal characteristics. Focusing too much on details involves the risk that the "awareness of fundamental interconnections will be lost" [1]. To understand the differences, it is necessary to identify the shared fundamentals first.



(a)



(b)

Figure 4: Wooden constructivism in Igarka. Gorsovet Building (City Council), 1932. Source: Igarka's Permafrost Museum.

At this point, it is vital to establish those qualities of modernity that seem relevant to our analysis and crucial for understanding the cultural phenomenon that the Soviet city was.

A less controversial issue is understanding Soviet modernity not as a historical period, but as a condition of a society formed within one of the metanarratives – in our case within the framework of the Soviet version of socialism. The Soviet project possessed an integral, totalitarian character, it was grounded in an allegedly universal explanation of the social reality (its genesis, functioning, and aspirations), thus providing legitimacy of social institutions. The Soviet utopian project was sanctioning the present on the basis of an anticipated and desirable vision of the future – opposite to a traditional myth seeking its legitimacy in the past (a distinction that Lyotard was “explaining to children” – Lyotard 1986, 29). This is the reason why the notion of Project is applied here.

Possibly the most striking aspect of modernism was the avant-garde, described by Habermas as a vanguard invading unknown territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden, shocking encounters, conquering an as yet unoccupied future. The avant-garde must find a direction in a landscape into which no one seems to have yet ventured. But these forward gropings, this anticipation of an undefined future and the cult of the new mean in fact the exaltation of the present [2].

The avant-garde did not reject the past, but instead reinterpreted it. Not only the future (Tatlin’s Tower) or the present day (satirical ROSTA windows) provided material for their activity, but also the past (Eisenstein’s films). In a way, designing the future is always modern, as it assumes the superiority of a rational mind over natural developments. To quote Lev Trotsky, “Building of socialism as a whole can be characterized as the desire to rationalize human relations, i.e. to subordinate them to reason, armed with science” [18].

One of the most important features of modernity is the recognition of the primacy of reason, which was an immanent part of the Soviet discourse and had an enormous influence on the processes of Soviet urbanization, symbolically emphasizing the need to create the New Cities, different from the historical ones. As Yuri Lotman noticed, “the ideal artificial city created as the realization of a rationalistic utopia, was to be deprived of history, since the reasonableness of the “regular state” meant the denial of historically established structures. This implied the construction of the city in a new place and, accordingly, the destruction of all ‘old’, if it was here” (Lotman 1984, 35).

The Soviet rationalist discourse existed parallel to an irrational reality. As the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski once observed, it was this irrational, teleological

component of Marxism that ensured its political effectiveness. In his opinion, “The influence that Marxism has achieved, far from being the result or proof of its scientific character, is almost entirely due to its prophetic, fantastic, and irrational elements” ([7], 525).

The combination of these two extreme poles – rational and irrational – was the driving force behind Soviet utopian projects. Declaratively grown from observations of reality, allegedly developed by the powerful human mind, in addition they were given a stamp of dogma. We must agree with Kotakowski that it was the combination of the rational and the irrational that ensured the political efficacy and historical endurance of Marxism, but that at the same time this combination led to the eventual failure of its Soviet incarnation.

The project of modernity is believed today to be compromised, or even annihilated. Without dwelling on the nature of this crisis, it should be emphasized, however, that it is the complete and closed phenomena that have great analytical appeal and enable a holistic, external overview to emerge. This is why the Soviet period is such an interesting subject for analysis today.

5. Conclusion

As an exercise for the mind, utopian thinking has a practical value for human societies, but what can be the consequences of an attempt to implement a utopia? Confrontation with reality obviously requires compromise. How can this be reconciled with a system that made a refusal to compromise one of its rallying cries? Such an attitude prevents evolutionary shifts from occurring. Radical changes and revolutions (plural!) determined the Soviet history from its world-shocking birth to the unnoticed end.

Urban material clearly reveals these watersheds.

The avant-garde, tireless in its attempts to remodel society in a socialist spirit by reshaping urban space, offered a complete socialization of everyday life in accordance with socialist principles, a harsh and egalitarian modernist aesthetics. The most consistent project of the house-commune was not created in Moscow, but in the distant Anzhero-Sudzhensk (Fig. 5). Not for chekists, artists or high-ranking officials, but for Siberian miners. It was not designed by some prominent architect from Moscow, but by Nikolay Kuzmin, a student from Tomsk. However, the project was never implemented as in the spring of 1930 the party abandoned experimenting with the complete collectivisation of daily life [16].

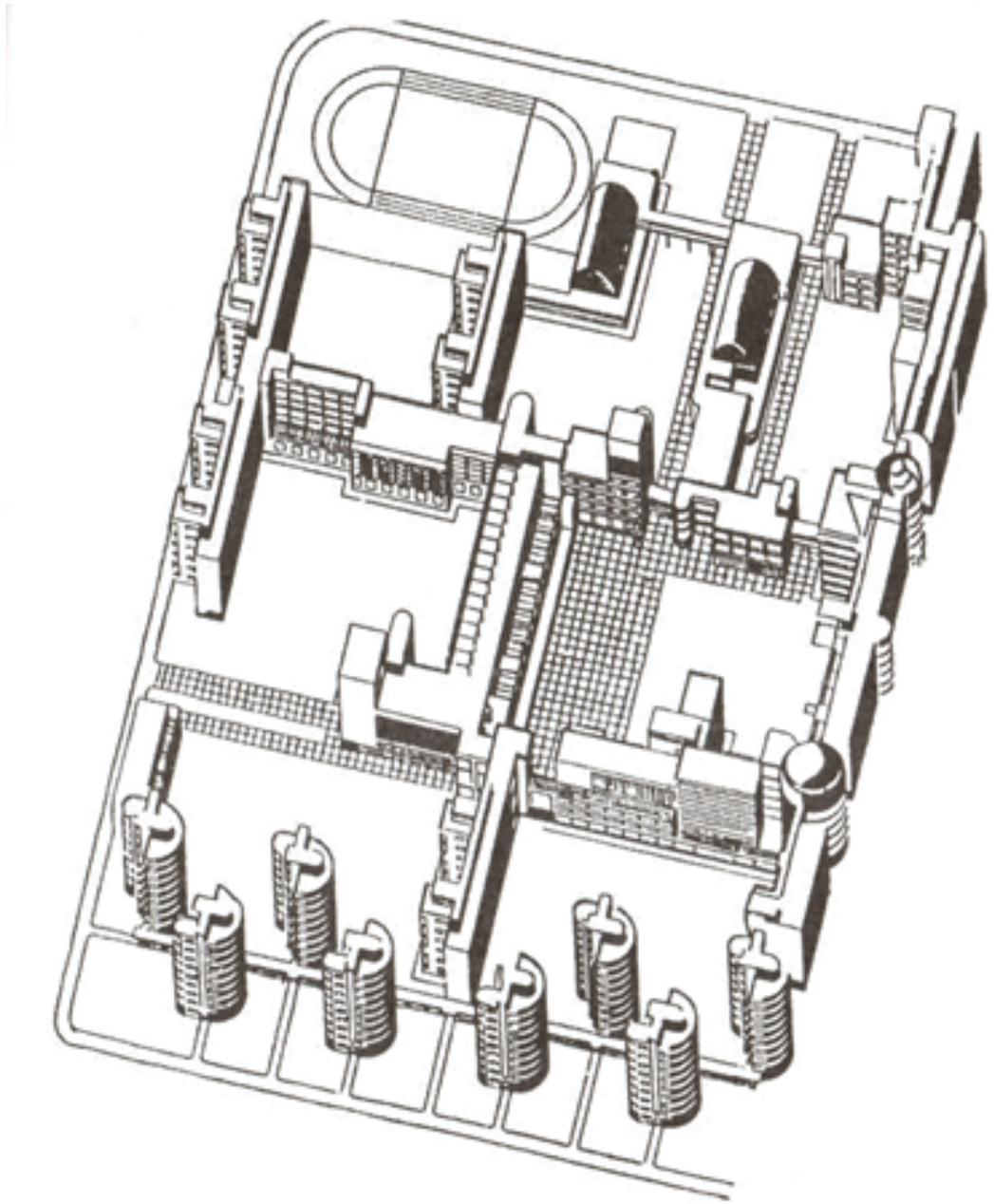


Figure 5: N. Kuzmin, House-commune in Anzhero-Sudzhensk, 1928-1929. Source: N. S. Kuzmin. Diplomnyy proyekt „Dom-kommuna dlya Anzhero-Sudzhenskikh gornyakov“, Tomsk 1928-1929, kopiya dokumenta [The diploma project “The House-Commune for the Anzhero-Sudzhensky Miners”, Tomsk 1928-1929, a copy of the document]. Muzei arkitektury Sibiri im. C. Balandina, № 2201/2.

Ernst May’s schematic *Zeilenbau* buildings (buildings arranged in rows) were erected in Kuznetsk (Stalinsk) and in Magnitogorsk (Fig. 1). Although their construction was justified by acute housing crisis and their immanent egalitarianism, the idea was soon rejected as a “leftist deviation” [8].

In the field of architecture, the articles and disputes of the 1930s are not only acknowledgements of mistakes made during the first post-revolutionary years. In them, a belief is expressed in a complete revolution, a new beginning about to occur. Only now a real socialist city is ready to be built: beautiful, cosy, symbolizing the abundance of the new economy.

Neither can Khrushchev's housing programme that followed be called a reform ("On elimination of excesses in design and construction", 1955). It was yet another breakthrough, the next revolution, a new beginning. Only now a real socialist city is ready to be built: housing accessible to every family.

In situations in which the initial enthusiasm had waned, such dramatic shifts were vital to create mobilization.

After breaking the thread of historical development, a new turn to the past (Stalin's socrealism, Khrushchev's modernism, the present-day flirtation with the Orthodox church, etc.) is essentially a false tradition: planned, rational, imposed from above. And it is possible to interpret such an "invented tradition" (to use a term coined by Eric Hobsbawm) as another project of modernity.

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