

Redesigning Constructivist Architecture in the 1930s and Retro-Modernisation of Soviet Cities after World War II

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Soviet cities of the 1930s – 1950s were sites for the development of dramatic events of confrontation and interaction between classical and avant-garde trends in architecture and town planning. The end of the 1920s marked the beginning of the industrialisation in the USSR and, at the same time, the triumph of the Soviet avant-garde. The division of the city into functional areas, wide streets for modern transport, simple-standard multi-apartment blocks in open green spaces, buildings for everyday services located next to housing – those principles of the future Charter of Athens were established in urban projects of new residential areas and “socialist cities” in the industrial centres throughout the Soviet Union: Magnitogorsk and Sverdlovsk in the Ural region, new towns in Donbas, Chardzhou in Turkmenistan, New Kharkov in the east (Fig. 1), and Zaporozhye in the south of the Ukraine, and so on. All types of buildings – clubs and offices, schools and hospitals, railway stations and post offices, houses and factory buildings – were designed according to constructivist standards of simplicity, functionality, utilitarianism, absence of decor, and demonstration of the possibilities of new materials and structures.¹ The Soviet government encouraged those revolutionary experiments in architecture at that time. But the victory of Modernism did not last long.

A violent return to traditional forms occurred in the early 1930s and was proclaimed by the authorities throughout the country. The winning project in the competition for the Palace of Soviets in Moscow was a turning point. Its architectural envelope hid the modern structure of the giant building, which became a visual guideline to decorativism.² Actually, the official ban of Constructivism had a disastrous effect on many avant-garde buildings and town-planning complexes. They were subsequently distorted by alterations or simply not realised (Fig. 2). Unfinished Constructivist public and residential buildings were subjected to “reconstruction”. Their facades were “enriched” with details: cornices, pylons, entablatures etc. and so their authenticity was lost.³ This development also spawned contradictory architectural forms in the pre-war period. Some examples can be regarded as precursors of the Postmodernism of the 1970s (Fig. 3).

Neo-classical examples of the 18th and 19th centuries became the base for the development of architectural and town-planning principles of the “Soviet classics” (“Socialist Realism” style), which dominated completely in the Soviet cities in the 1930s to 1950s. However, it was not a blind imitation. Some ideas were borrowed from the modernist ideology: wide streets and boulevards, enlarged comfortable multi-storey residential blocks, and a high percentage



Fig. 1: Project of a housing complex for the social city “New Kharkov”, the architects’ team led by Pavel Aleshin, 1930



Fig. 2: The unrealised project for the hotel “Intourist” in Odessa, a team of architects from Giprograd and Glavproekt, 1932



Fig. 3: The perspective of the apartment house “Mayak” in Zaporozhye, the project of architect George Orlov, 1934

of green areas. All of these were combined with traditional techniques, modified and adapted for the modern city. An improvement of classic urban planning techniques began as early as in the 1930s, and their final formation occurred during the years of the post-war reconstruction of Soviet cities in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Some town-planning and architectural principles developed in the 1930s to 1950s can be listed:

1. The main attention was focused on the creation of representative ensembles of main streets and squares in the cities, using classical techniques derived from previous eras, as applied in the ensembles of St. Petersburg. Large-scale reconstruction of the main Moscow highways became a model for imitation. It was launched by a government decree “About the Master Plan for the Reconstruction of Moscow”, approved on July 10, 1935 and widely advertised in the professional press.⁴ Urban planners had to focus on creating ensembles of main urban highways and squares, giving them “splendour”. The system of project activities was changed for the purpose of realising these tasks: the so-called main architectural highways offices were created.

The ensemble of Nevsky Avenue of the 18th and 19th centuries in St. Petersburg served as a demonstration of classical town-planning solutions. It had a complex composition: the continuous front of the buildings along the avenue was interrupted by wide monumental squares, including other intervals and accents that enriched its image. The reconstruction of Gorky Street – the main Moscow artery (now Tverskaya Street) – followed this pattern in the second half of the 1930s. The main arteries of many Soviet cities reflected these classic techniques during the post-war reconstruction. These were: Stalin Avenue (now Independence Avenue) in Minsk, Lenin Street in Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg), Spartak Street in Chelyabinsk, Engels Street in Rostov-na-Donu, Karl Marx Avenue (now Yavornitsky Avenue), five kilometres in length in Dnepropetrovsk (now Dnepro), and many others.⁵ Their post-war reconstruction perfectly illustrates the inclusion of the main squares in the composition of the streets.

2. Cross sections of the main city avenues took into account all the necessary requirements for transport, pedestrians, gardening, lighting etc. Wide streets for the passage of modern public transport and huge squares for mass parades were typical of the urban development of the modern period. They migrated from modernist projects to town-planning standards of the 1930s to 1950s. The post-war reconstruction of the destroyed city centres is a clear testimony to that. For example, it was proposed to straighten the Soviet Street (now Independence Avenue) in Minsk, to expand it significantly from 12–16 metres to 48 metres and transform it into the main avenue of the capital of Belarus. The width of Khreshchatyk Street in Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, was more than doubled (Fig. 4) – up to 75 metres (its earlier width was 34 metres).⁶

3. Closed residential blocks became the main elements of the urban fabric again, but their dimensions were significantly increased, as well as the number of floors of residential buildings. The enlarged quarters were used by town planners – who had been modernists in the late 1920s – for the reconstruction of the existing urban centres in order to create large open green spaces and for a better insulation of the apartments.⁷ The instruction about the enlargement of residential blocks was contained in the decree „About the Master Plan for the Reconstruction of Moscow.“ It was also applied to all other cities.

4. The idea of a green city, developed by the modernists and included in the Charter of Athens, was picked up and continued in the period of the “Soviet classics”. It was laid down in the Plan for the Reconstruction of Moscow in 1935. It was reflected in the greening of the main urban arteries and residential areas, as well as in the creation of boulevards, public gardens and parks. All green sites played an important role in the maintenance of the composition and the stylistic integrity of the whole. Specific techniques of landscaping were hallmarks of the style. Bowls of fountains, sculptures and the intricate ornamental geometry of

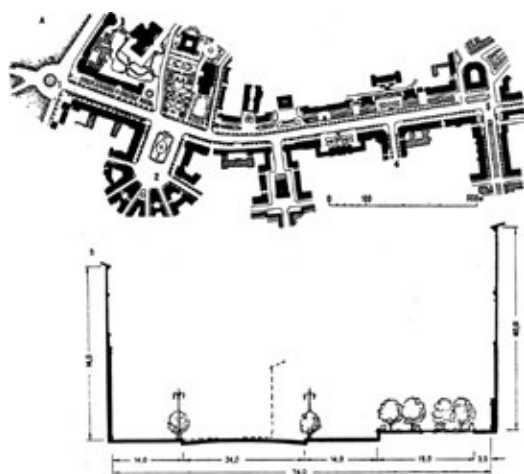


Fig. 4: Post-war reconstruction of Khreshchatyk Street in Kiev, early 1950s

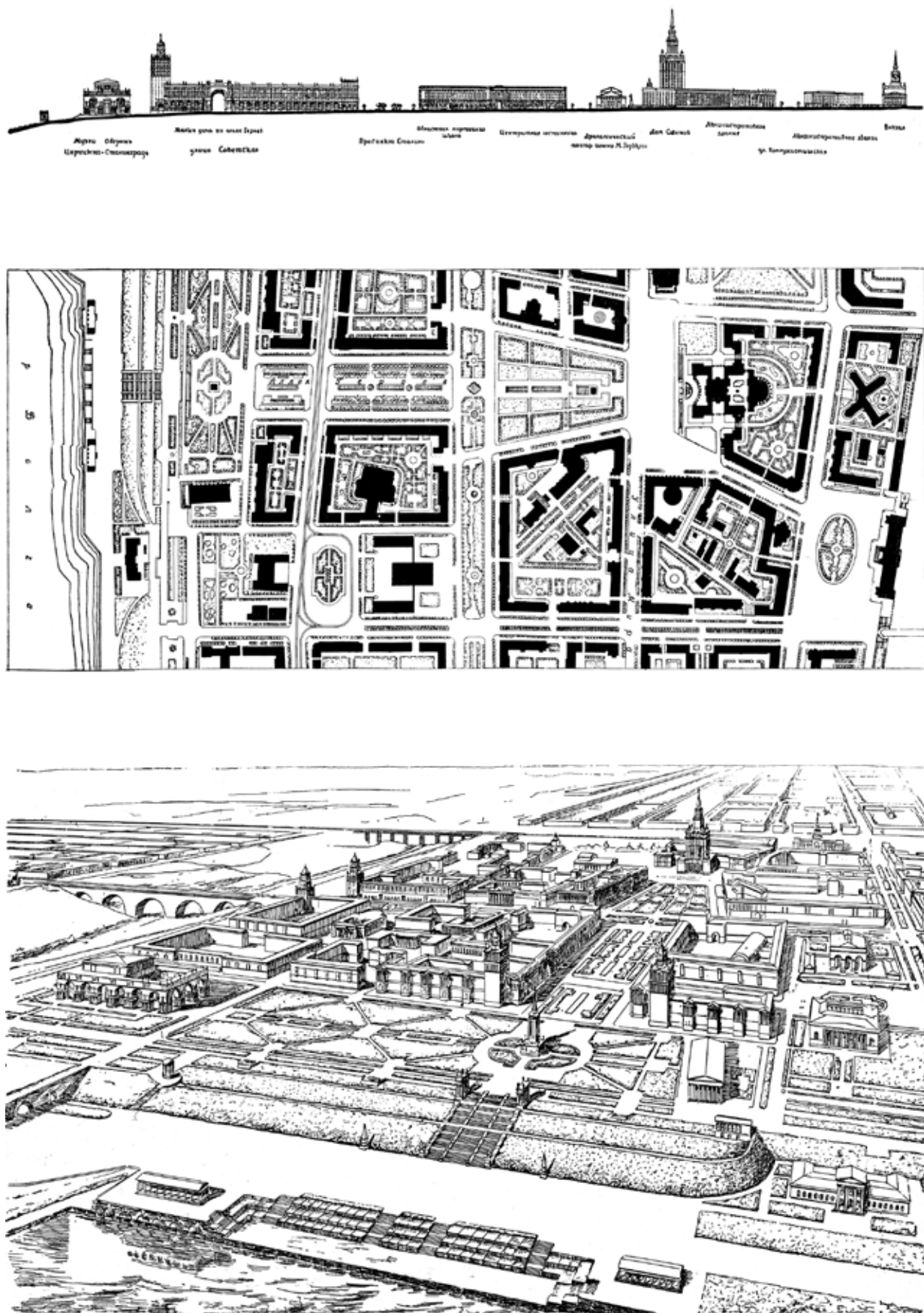


Fig. 5: The development project for the central ensemble of Stalingrad, early 1950s

flower carpets were style “markers” and integral components of the architectural ensemble in which each element was considered a part of the artistic whole. Attention was also paid to the stylistic elaboration of the more utilitarian elements of architectural street furniture (benches, urns, street lamps, etc).⁸

5. The prevalence of symmetry in the formation of urban ensembles, the composition of the ensemble culminating in a town-planning accent such as a tower with a spire, and a number of other classical techniques were used everywhere.

The beginning of the street or square was often flanked by high-rise pylon houses to emphasise the importance of that direction or the splendour of that complex. Depending on the whole town-planning idea, some corner houses were marked with towers that played the role of compositional accents in the street ensemble and had no other utilitarian function. This mode, derived from historical analogues, began to be used in the late 1930s.

6. Classical compositional ideas acquired a total character and a huge scale during the post-war reconstruction and after the decision to build eight high-rise buildings in Moscow, seven of which were actually erected. They influenced the whole face of the city, created its new silhouette and transformed the ensembles of large urban areas.⁹ The whole city began to be considered as an integral composition. The reconstruction projects of other Soviet cities started to follow this method. Extensive urban areas began to obey a single compositional concept where high-altitude accents were outlined and visually interrelated.

7. The classical order system was adapted for buildings of very different purposes. Schools and universities, railway stations and houses had to look like palaces. Folk motifs began to prevail in the decoration of the facades in the early 1950s. An example is the luxurious ceramic decoration of residential buildings on Khreshchatyk in Kiev.

8. The synthesis of sculpture and architecture was proclaimed as the principle of Socialist Realism. Sculptural groups decorated the facades of not only public, but also apartment buildings.

The total destruction of historic urban centres during World War II was the occasion for the implementation of these principles in the large-scale reconstruction of the late 1940s and early 1950s in Soviet cities, such as Minsk, Kiev, Stalingrad (Volgograd), Zaporozhye, Sevastopol etc. The ensembles of their central streets and squares and residential blocks are distinguished by the integrity of the compositional design, the stylistic unity, the monumentality of the buildings, plus their gorgeous ornamentation and spacious landscaping.

According to the post-war reconstruction plan for Stalingrad (Volgograd), the central part of the city was divided

into quarters of up to four hectares where buildings of four to five storeys were to be erected, while buildings of six to eight floors were to be erected on important sites. Some high-rise buildings, the House of Soviets, the House of the Soviet Army, the railway station, etc were included in the composition to maintain the scale and create a picturesque silhouette of the city. The green ring of large landscaped territories had to encircle the city centre. Victory Park on the embankment of the Volga River, public gardens and boulevards were also included inside it (Fig. 5).¹⁰ However, not all project ideas were implemented.

A characteristic feature of the design process at that time was the creation of an individual project for each building. A new round in opposing the two antagonistic tendencies was defined in the mid-1950s. A return to the modernist principles of industrialisation in architecture and urban planning and to standard design was inevitable because of the increasing need for accommodation. However, the declared “fight against excesses” in architecture led to the incompleteness of socialist-realist urban ensembles and buildings which were in the process of being erected then. The main high-rise building of Stalingrad – the House of Soviets – was not built. The main building of the ensemble of Khreshchatyk in Kiev – the Hotel “Moscow” – was left incomplete without a tower with spire. This fate befell many urban ensembles of the Socialist Realism period.

The complex relationship between classics and the avant-garde – from confrontation to intermingling – became the leitmotiv of 20th century architecture. Two opposite poles created an energy field that gave dynamism to its contradictory development. Today, the appearance and layout of many modern cities retain traces of the interaction between the two main directions in 20th century architecture. These traces are the sole means to understand the essence of continued urban development. Therefore, it is vital to preserve them.

¹ БЫЛИНКИН, История советской архитектуры, Москва, 1985, pp. 17–76.

² SMOLENSKA, *Dome Symbolism*, 2012.

³ SMOLENSKA, *What Style of Building*, 2010, pp. 201–205.

⁴ Социалистическая Москва, 1935, pp. 1–5.

⁵ ГИРШОВИЧ, *Застройка магистральных*, 1957, pp. 117–144.

⁶ See also ГИРШОВИЧ, *Застройка магистральных*, 1957, p. 118.

⁷ ГАЛАКТИОНОВ, *Планировка и застройка*, 1957, p. 91f.

⁸ SMOLENSKA, *Green Areas*, 2012, pp. 229–238.

⁹ ОЛТАРЖЕВСКИЙ, *Строительство высотных зданий*, 1953.

¹⁰ БАБУРОВ, *Проблемы застройки центра*, 1953, pp. 4–9.

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Die Neugestaltung der konstruktivistischen Architektur in den 1930er Jahren und Retro-Modernisierung der sowjetischen Städte nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg

Abstract

Sowjetische Städte der 1930er bis 1950er Jahre waren Orte, an denen dramatische Konfrontationen und Interaktionen zwischen klassischen und avantgardistischen Tendenzen in Architektur und Stadtplanung stattfanden. Ende der 1920er Jahre setzte sich die sowjetische Avantgarde in der Architektur durch. Die gewaltsame Rückkehr zur traditionellen Architektur in den 1930er Jahren hatte dann verheerende Auswirkungen auf viele avantgardistische Gebäude und Stadtplanungskomplexe. Schließlich war eine Rückkehr zu den modernistischen Prinzipien der Industrialisierung in Architektur und Stadtplanung in den 1950er Jahren aufgrund des steigenden Bedarfs an Wohnraum unvermeidlich.