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11. The Historiographical Invention of the Soviet Avant-Garde: Cultural Politics and the Return of the Lost Project

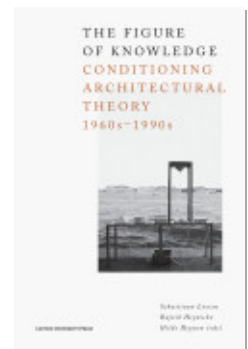
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The Historiographical Invention of the Soviet Avant-Garde: Cultural Politics and the Return of the Lost Project

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A problem that seems to escape the notice of most who study the field of Soviet architecture is the fact that since the 1960s Western thought on – and indeed, the entire established historiography of – Soviet architecture has historically developed within a specifically Western conceptual framework. While issues surrounding translation from Russian, as well as those of accessibility to sources, have always been on the mind of researchers and historians, the more fundamental problem of translation between conceptual frameworks has never really registered among the producers of what is today a mainstream historiographical narrative. As in the field of social sciences, conceptual frameworks in architecture are developed, among other things, through the production of historiography. As such, there is an evident contradiction inherent in the production of a historiography of architecture in socialism by Western academics over the period in which liberal politics replaced Marxism as the dominant framework of what could be called the academic “lefts.” This contradiction is not only problematic for the field of the history in question but also represents an interesting condition in and of itself from the point of view of a critique of historiography as a critique of ideology.¹ Here it will be argued that, within the Western liberal framework, this historiography of Soviet architecture became a tool for the consolidation of a specific, currently dominant, architectural ideology, which is linked to the ascension of a liberal alternative to the left in cultural studies and politics since the 1960s effective demise of class politics in Europe.

The contemporary version of this established narrative has recently had a particularly noticeable presence in London. In 2012, a resurgence of interest in the topic placed the historiography simultaneously at the level of serious research and

at that of architectural pop-culture.² This interest continued until 2017, when a veritable explosion of attention to the topic predictably took hold of the city's cultural institutions in the context of the centenary of the Soviet revolution. This happened in the same year when liberal politics seemed to be imploding, particularly in the Anglo-American world, a backdrop within which the tension between cultural politics and class politics seemed accentuated.

We should frame our critique of this historiographical narrative as being intrinsically connected to different understandings of politics, functioning precisely along the line that separates class politics, understood within a Marxist framework, and cultural politics, understood as its liberal-bourgeois alternative that became dominant after the 1960s. This distinction operates through historiography in architectural discourse today, which is well expressed in the London 2017 celebration of the cultural conquests of October. As one small but typical example, one could look at the description for an event in the Royal Academy of Arts in London in April 2017, part of a series on the Soviet "avant-garde." The text says:

"*Byt*" is a Russian term that encompasses daily life, domesticity, and lifestyle. After the revolution of 1917, architecture had to create the material conditions that would lead to the new "socialist" individual and corresponding "*byt*." The term therefore carries the ambition of utopian projects of the past and invites us to consider how contemporary architecture can serve, or indeed facilitate, a way of life for our time.

In post-revolution Russia, communal housing was the primary mechanism to create a truly collective society and eliminate the bourgeois domestic sphere. (...) (...) There are many who see communal living or co-living as the ideal solution to the housing crisis, regarding a communal lifestyle as socially beneficial, sustainable and economically viable. The idea of pooling funds, space and resources for greater shared gains is becoming increasingly enticing and many are willing to give up on privacy to achieve these benefits.³

One sees here how the Russian concept of *byt*, historiographically imbued with revolutionary potential, morphs into a form of cultural resistance to the economic tragedy of late neo-liberal capitalism and its crisis.⁴ This resistance, far from being a political one, culturally embraces the scarcity created by the crisis of the profit margins and fetishizes its social consequences, presenting overcrowding and poverty as progressive opportunities. So the explicit politicization of the Soviet "avant-garde" becomes an ideological facilitator for an architectural cultural project of what could be called neo-liberal communalism. One could also add as an aside that this method of achieving a certain kind of metaphysical "meaning" in architectural discourse is a sort of inverse Heideggerian proposal; substitute a German

word-to-meaning relationship with a Russian one, and the idealist, essentialist metaphysics are now suddenly revolutionary instead of reactionary.

“The avant-garde” and “the project”

Here we propose that this particular ideological articulation is historically constructed from the 1960s onwards through two key categories, “the avant-garde” and “the project.”

The category of “the project” is meant here as the one Manfredo Tafuri attacks between 1968 and 1973, from his *Teorie e Storia* to his *Progetto e Utopia*. There is no need to describe his argument here in detail; a quick summary will suffice. “The project” emerges in an embryonic form in 1968 in *Teorie e Storia*, in the context of a critique of ideological deformations in architectural historiography that Tafuri calls “operative criticism.” But it only becomes a central category for him in the following year’s essay “*Per una Critica dell’Ideologia Architettonica*,” where he expands his critique of ideology in architecture in more explicit Marxian terms. The category of “the project” is, in the context of his critique, a specific ideological entity of the architectural discipline that ascribes to itself the messianic capability of producing a social future. Tafuri understands “the project” as a central element of “avant-garde” thought, emerging from the structures of disciplinary autonomy in development in bourgeois society already since the Italian Renaissance, and defines it as an ideological veil through which architects and architectural historians perceive social/historical structures and their transformation. Through this veil, the cultural intellectual idealizes their role as supra-historical and independent of class interests; the cultural agency of the architect is able to replace politics as the mode of transformative social praxis, replacing political struggle with the design of solutions that smooth over and harmonize the contradictions of history. As such, “the project” simultaneously reproduces existing social structures while pretending to alter them and ascribes to the architect a privileged position in society as a designer of futures. The defense of this privileged position is perceived by Tafuri consistently as a defense of architects’ own class interests as liberal intellectuals, as well as protecting the notion of a special quality of intellectual labor in the context of revolutionary politics that would do away with such privilege.⁵

The category of “the avant-garde” is more difficult to define with precision, and indeed, that is a crucial point of the argument. “The avant-garde” takes on many meanings from the 1960s onwards, yet at the same time always denotes the same kind of meaning. It presents itself mostly as a fixed category, while in fact being incredibly diverse in its associations. It is simultaneously a precise historiographical category, corresponding to a strict periodization – the interwar period

– and an aesthetic meta-category that goes as far back as the category of art itself. It carries an implicit political undertone and at the same time may be defined on a strictly formal, art-historical level. Its politics are anti liberal-bourgeois (whether revolutionary or fascist, depending on the historical conjuncture); at the same time, it is associated to an elite of a liberal profession and imbued into contemporary liberal aesthetic discourse. It is anti-mainstream, while being the vanguard of the mainstream.

Many would revel in the ambiguities here listed, and indeed the contemporary proliferation of the category does precisely that. But a rigorous historicization of the category permits identifying in these ambiguities the conceptual mechanisms producing precisely the ideology of “the project.” These ambiguities are structural and foundational to the use of the category; they are not simply a later distortion of an original more rigorous use, and they are constructed and articulated historiographically. It is through the decisions made in the practice of history writing – its conceptual frameworks and divisions and periodizations – that the wider uses and ideological functions of such a category develop and become established in their broadest ways.⁶ In the definition of these uses and functions, the role of the historiography of the Soviet “avant-garde” is instrumental in the specificity of its political articulation.

There is no need to produce here an account of the history of the category of “the avant-garde” from its Saint-Simonian origins to the eve of the 20th century. While such history is interesting and already points to what will be the central problematic of this essay, it is sufficient to tackle the history of the category from the moment it resurfaces in aesthetic discourse after World War II. One should say resurfaces because the category all but disappeared after World War I. While many people are aware of this, it is never a waste to state it as explicitly as possible: the term “the avant-garde” is not a term generally used by those who are identified as such by current historiography. This is especially true for the Soviet “avant-garde,” operating in a context where the vanguard role was clearly attributed to the party as a political agent, and certainly not to cultural agents. Agents of what we call “the avant-garde” generally thought of themselves as part of the specific trend or movement they were organized around – they were supremacists, constructivists, formalists, etc., and they fought for their school against others. The notion that, despite their quarrels, they all had a fundamental commonality that enables us to place them in the same categorical box is never fully generated by those agents themselves, but it does emerge slowly from the political struggles they engage in, initially around the term “constructivism.” For example, in 1930 the Soviet architectural group OSA – the group self-identifying as “constructivist” – established an alliance with their historical enemies in the remainders of the old ASNOVA – a previous group that they accused of “formalism” – in the context of OSA’s political dominance in Moscow’s architectural circles and their push for a unification of all

movements under their wing in the new group VANO.⁷ We see also how the newer group VOPRA – a later group of younger architects trained in postrevolutionary academia who had also joined OSA and ASNOVA in 1929 in a joint declaration (defending what we could today call “modernism” – another category that had no general use at the time) – denounce the traditionalist architecture produced by several old established architects of the prerevolutionary period, reject VANO, and make the constructivists their main target immediately afterwards. However, a clear periodization that matches what we now call “the avant-garde” does not really become formalized until after World War II, and it comes, curiously enough, as an article of “Stalinist” critique. While the younger generation of architects who led VOPRA did establish the “constructivism” of their elders as their enemy and accuse them of being just as “formalist” as the ASNOVA “formalists” that OSA critiqued, “constructivism” was for them specifically the constructivist group OSA, not a general umbrella term for every single architectural trend and movement founded before theirs. It becomes so only with the emergence of the category of “socialist-realism,” which isn’t really formulated with great precision before the short period when Soviet cultural policies were defined by Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin’s minister of culture from 1946 to 48.⁸ “Constructivism” as a meta-category for, essentially, all architectural and visual arts groups from the revolution to the early 30s is then the first form of “the avant-garde” and defines it as a periodization, but it comes from its enemies, the term itself becoming kind of a slur. It remains so till the end of the Stalinist period and keeps its negative associations even in the context of the posterior denunciation of “Stalinism” by his successor, Nikita Khrushchev. The Khrushchevite critique of “Stalinist” aesthetic guidelines, produced between 1954 and 1956,⁹ made no break with the category of “socialist-realism” and merely joined a condemnation of “Stalinist” monumentalism to the already-established condemnation of “constructivism.” Till the mid-1960s, both “constructivist” flights of fancy and “Stalinist” kitsch monumentalism were considered “formalist.” “Constructivism” as a category only starts being rehabilitated in the early 1960s in Soviet academia and is only really the object of serious interest towards the turn to the 1970s.¹⁰ This is also the time when an interest in historicizing Soviet architecture, particularly that of the first couple of decades, develops in the West, part of the general interest in historicizing “modernism” as a whole.

Historiographies and origin stories

It is useful to separate the Western historiography of Soviet architecture into two distinct phases, one from the mid-60s to the early 80s, and one from then onwards. This distinction can be defined specifically through the use of the explicit term

“the avant-garde” – while it is mostly absent in the first phase, its generalization effectively defines the second.¹¹ The second phase comes with a merger of two very different bodies of historiography that develop in the first phase, bodies that don’t really interact much and are mostly defined by disciplinary areas. Specifically, there is one body of Western historiography of the Soviet “avant-garde” that constructs the first accounts of the developments in the visual-arts, and one that deals with architecture. They have different agents, different concerns, and above all, different ways of articulating aesthetics and politics.

They both start at the turn to the 1960s, and both then lay dormant till the eve of 1968. The visual-arts historiography begins firmly in England, with the efforts of Camilla Gray from 1959 onwards.¹² The architectural historiography begins in Italy, with issue 262 of *Casabella-Continuità* in 1962 fully dedicated to a first attempt at a comprehensive historicization of Soviet architecture from 1917 to the present, followed the next year by Vittorio de Feo’s *URSS: Architettura 1917-1936*, effectively the first Western book on the subject.

It is however only around 1968 that interest in early Soviet art and architecture – again, the term “avant-garde” was not yet in general use – really explodes in Britain, Germany, France, and on the American East coast. The first of a huge wave of exhibitions of late Russian and early Soviet visual arts happens in Berlin in 1967 and continues to 1973.¹³ Starting in 1971, a similar wave of articles in arts journals in the same countries cover the same materials, and several books compiling Russian texts are published by American authors after 1973.¹⁴ Again, English is the language that mainly dominates the visual-arts historiography. Meanwhile, the architectural historiography remains in Italian and French. Anatole Kopp’s landmark work begins in 1967 with the publication of *Ville et Révolution* and goes on till 1978, while a wave of Italian books starts with Vieri Quilici’s *L’Architettura del Costruttivismo* in 1969.¹⁵

Within the architectural historiography there are important differences between the approaches of the Italians and that of Kopp,¹⁶ but here we will address only the crucial difference between the continental historiography of early Soviet architecture and the mostly Anglo-American historiography of early Soviet visual arts. That difference lies in what could be called the “origin stories” of what would become known as “the avant-garde,” which is directly linked to the specific meaning of the term “constructivism” for each of these two bodies of work. Essentially, the meaning of the term is so different as to effectively constitute two different “constructivisms” as historiographical objects, which in turn have a relation to two different “constructivisms” as historical objects.

A particularly good example of this is the way Lissitzky’s work is used. This most cliché of objects is useful here simply because he served in 1966 as the first contact the Anglo-American architectural circles had with the historiography of visual-arts

“constructivism” and simultaneously the preferred object through which visual-arts historians broached architecture.¹⁷ For their historiography, Lissitzky is simply an architectural manifestation of “constructivism,” and through him the historiography nearly covers early Soviet architecture from its own visual-arts point-of-view.¹⁸ For the continental architectural historiography, Lissitzky lies mostly outside of “constructivism,” for he is entirely unrepresentative of the problems that define the Soviet architectural debate in the late 1920s and early 30s. To understand the complicated nature of the terms, one should realize that Lissitzky was indeed a part of the international “constructivist” movement, self-identifying with the term, in the early years of the revolution between Russia and German-speaking Europe. But he was also part of the architectural group ASNOVA – albeit a distant one – against which the OSA constructivists organized themselves after 1926. As such, it is useful to note that there are not one, but two historical Soviet “constructivisms”: one in the visual arts till the early 1920s, and one in architecture from the 1920s onwards. The “constructivisms” don’t mix and their agents are largely different. They are mutually incompatible for reasons not to be listed here but that can be summed up by stating that architectural “constructivism” forms in 1926 in a large measure as a critique of visual arts “constructivism.”¹⁹

The different ways of understanding this category, crucial to the definition of a periodization, have a direct relation to what was referred to as “origin stories.” The continental architectural historiography puts the genesis of what will be later called “the avant-garde” firmly as a political beginning intrinsically connected to October. “Constructivism” is for these continental historians ascribed mostly to OSA, the category then being first and foremost a specific movement, be it one that is generally perceived to be the most advanced and sort of final form of the professional “project” of architecturally articulating socialist politics. The inherent political character of “constructivism” puts it, for these historians, as the vanguard of the vanguard; with this, architecture would fulfill its mission to plan the reorganization of the built environment to produce the new man of the future. The narrative of this continental historiography should be read as a case of “operative criticism” in Tafurian terms, protecting contradictions inherent to “the project” of “the avant-garde.” Where the revolution is understood as a cultural one more than as a political and economic one, architecture, specifically that of “constructivism,” would be the central subject of the plan rather than an object of the plan. More than “Soviets and Electrification,” as in Lenin’s famous formula, socialism would instead be the path towards a new collectivist way of life; architecture, as a cultural and technical agent, would be the direct organizer of this new social structure. That this cultural “project” of liberation failed is then taken as sign of totalitarian counter-revolution. As such, the fate of “constructivism” as a cultural “project” is intrinsically tied to the revolutionary political project. The historiographers of

architectural “constructivism,” especially Kopp, do not find a similar “project” anywhere else, nor can they – they simply take the role of the defeated *true* revolutionary that was betrayed by the development of *real* events. According to this, “constructivism” must carry the meaning of this specific political dimension and cannot function as an umbrella term – the one used by these historiographers is the more neutral term “the ’20s.”

The Anglo-American visual arts historiography exists in stark contrast to the above. It has a more formal definition of the object it studies, extending the genealogy of the latter into the late 19th century; the revolution is something that seems to mostly just happen to this object and it sort of ends up dealing with and wading through the revolution, ultimately failing. Naturally, “the ’20s” is not their umbrella term, for the period it focuses on lies mostly before the start of that decade. While this historiography initially lacked a specific term – for Gray it is simply “the Russian experiment” – “constructivism” eventually begins to serve this role, in more or less the same way it did in the Soviet debate after the 1940s. However, this historiography, because it has a more formal art-historical, and less political, understanding of its historical object, manages to have at the same time more empirical rigor, but with this, less historiographical substance and less precision when it comes to periodization. Some authors present “constructivism” as a tradition of formal innovation coming from the last decades of the 19th century, while others present a “tradition of constructivism”²⁰ that extends away from revolutionary Russia to the post–World War II West. This stretching of the historiographical category into the present of the historian should be looked at as another, different case of what Tafuri calls “operative criticism” and is achieved precisely by depoliticizing categorical connotations.

Lost project returned

The contrasting origin stories and categorical associations brings us both to the full consequences of the second historiographical phase and to the final point of the argument. As already mentioned, the second phase comes in the early 1980s with a merger of two different historiographical bodies that developed during the first phase. This merger is produced, very specifically, in London, and led by the architectural discipline, and even more specifically, in and around the Architectural Association. In that school, starting in 1974, “Russian constructivism” had begun being introduced through design teaching, mostly in Diploma Studio 9 running at the time under Elia Zenghelis and Rem Koolhaas.²¹ Zenghelis and Koolhaas combine references from the visual arts and architectural historiographies in a way serious historiographical work had yet to do.²² Eventually, starting in early

1978, a series of more scholarly events on the subject took place, led by Catherine Cooke who starts presenting her research, the first in the Anglo-American circles to tackle the specificity of Soviet architectural production outside the extremely limited framework provided by the established visual arts historiography. These efforts, following Soviet historians' own attempts at historicizing "constructivism" and the British attention given to them,²³ become canonical via their publication in *Architectural Design* between 1983 and 1991. Here, architectural history is finally mixed with the work of the Anglo-American authors of the visual-arts "constructivism" historiography, with Christina Lodder's articles and the Costakis collection lying side by side to Cooke's own articles on what becomes firmly identified and crystallized as the Soviet "avant-garde" in explicit fashion.²⁴

With this, we reach the final form of the Western historiography of Soviet architecture, which we have referred to until now as "the avant-garde." This final form brings with it a wave of extremely valuable work and empirical research, which becomes invaluable after the dissolution of the USSR and the increased ease of access to the relevant material. However, this comes at the cost of historiographical precision, for as the two historiographies merge, so too do the properties of each of the two "constructivisms" they separately dealt with. The intrinsic cultural politicality of the "project" of "constructivism," as understood by the continental architectural historians, is fused with the relative imprecision, via depoliticization, of the umbrella term "constructivism" of the Anglo-American historians of the visual arts. As such, an aura of implicit politicality becomes associated with the vague definition of "the avant-garde" as a new meta-category that really does not require any specific articulation with any actual politics. As the AA studio masters migrate to America at the end of the decade, the new narrative gets fed into design as a historiographical legitimator from a revolutionary past. In 1978, Koolhaas identifies himself with a "constructivist" swimming pool arriving at and slicing through a *Delirious New York*. In 1988, Koolhaas, Tschumi, and a whole panoply of rising stars are identified as the "avant-garde" of a new "deconstructivist architecture" at the MoMA exhibition of the same name curated by serial depoliticizer Philip Johnson, an exhibition that pairs the works of the Western "heirs" with those of the Soviet forerunners.²⁵

Here we must return to Tafuri and his critique of "the avant-garde" and its "project." The implicit political character carried within the category of "the avant-garde" is one that is historiographically constructed in the span of a few decades, between the mid-1960s and the '80s. Tafuri points out how the historical defeat of "the avant-garde" comes as the material conditions for real planning develop, architecture being revealed to be not the subject of the plan but its object – leaving unsaid the obvious point that the subject is politics.²⁶ Such is the failure of the cultural "project," and its architectural manifestation in the '30s. One should add

that for Tafuri the very category of “the avant-garde” with which he works is itself a historiographical version of “the project” he attacks until 1973, being effectively a migration of “the project” from cultural practice to the academic discipline of cultural history. The meta nature of the category and its ambiguities facilitate the confusion between political struggle and cultural proposal, or in other words, effectively substitute class politics with cultural politics. The Soviet “avant-garde” is an incredibly strong historiographical object for this purpose, and this purpose is embedded in the development of its Western historiography. The continental effort of politicizing architecture via “the project,” and the Anglo-American tradition of depoliticizing it, each through its own historiographical practice, merge in a new grand narrative; this results, effectively, in the depoliticization of the very idea of the politicization of architecture.

“The project” itself reaches its final form in this way. From a cultural “project” aimed at expressing and, in so doing, replacing political praxis, it becomes a redemptory rhetoric imbued with an aura of revolutionary politicality practices that, by the standards of most historical agents of “the avant-garde,” would be called “formalistic” and therefore reactionary. The “project” of the past “avant-garde,” pregnant with the specter of communism, is historiographically brought back to redeem the present “avant-garde” from the sins of its “formalism.”

It is therefore not surprising, in an age when the field of the left has become dominated by cultural studies and cultural politics instead of political economy and class politics, to see a cultural interpretation of revolutionary politics, constructed around the term *byt* and presenting, in the face of the crisis of capitalism, an architectural alternative of cultural commonality to an actual political praxis of working class organization.

In the words of the exhibition text this paper started with: “In post-revolution Russia, communal housing was the primary mechanism to create a truly collective society and eliminate the bourgeois domestic sphere.” This is a nonsensical affirmation for any who deal with the political struggles of the time. In post-Revolution Russia, the primary mechanism was workers’ control over the means of production and elimination of the bourgeois state. In a true manifestation of “the project” of architectural practice migrated to historiographical narrative, the architectural tendency of culturalizing the revolution in the past amounts to its neutralization in the present. That this ends up merely fetishizing capitalist relations instead of combating them is but the contemporary manifestation of the problem Tafuri was attempting to tackle in the short period from 1969 to ’73. This is the ultimate face of “the project” that the historiography of “the avant-garde,” and especially the Soviet “avant-garde,” carried into our present under the guise of radical culture. In effect, it is naught but a liberal shackle on an operative politicization of the architectural discipline.

The historical problem today is in the ideology of the discipline of architecture and, to paraphrase Le Corbusier, *byt* or revolution. Architects tend to prefer *byt* because it matches their disciplinary liberal-bourgeois subjectivity. The current sociopolitical trends however, like those of the 1930s, are demolishing in front of our very eyes such liberal illusions. In such a context, the false hope for a nonpolitical cultural progress that *byt* brings is an objective accomplice of reactionary politics. Just as the Soviet “avant-garde” was historiographically turned into an ally of the “formalism” of Hadid and Schumacher, so *byt* is turned into an ally of the neo-liberal stage of capitalism of both Clinton and Trump. And, in the inevitable failure of its ideological insistence on nonpolitical cultural utopianism, it tends to favor Trump. Given the fact that the center fails and liberal capitalism is at the gates of a fascist turn, architects and historians would do well to abdicate from the “avant-garde” delusions of an architected cultural progress and opt instead for architectural concerns that, instead of fetishizing austerity, are put in the service of organized political transformation.

Notes

1. This approach could easily be understood as residing at a confluence between the concerns of the architectural historian and theorist Manfredo Tafuri and those of the historian and theorist of history Reinhart Koselleck – between the category of “operative criticism” of the first (essentially representing ideology in the specific field of architectural history) and the category of “conceptual history” of the second, a field that, by historicising concepts, frames the production of historiography as a historical object in itself.
2. See particularly the exhibition *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935*, held at the Royal Academy of Arts from October 2011 to January 2012, the culmination of a series of exhibitions taking place between 2007 and 2009 between Moscow, New York and Thessaloniki, joining together a selection from the Costakis collection, period architectural photographs of the Soviet “avant-garde,” and Richard Pare’s recent photographic coverage of the aging buildings that still stand today. This series of exhibitions produced several books in the form of extended catalogues, with the distinguished collaboration of Jean-Louis Cohen. See particularly the catalogue of this last London exhibition: Tom Neville and Vicky Wilson, eds., *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935*, exhibition catalogue (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2011).

On the other end of the research-to-pop-culture spectrum, one may note the English language publication of *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism*, again an extended catalogue for an exhibition of the same name held in 2010 at Galerie Gmurzynska in Zurich, where

the work of the London-based architect is paired with Malevich's as a sort of direct heir to its tradition of "avant-gardism." See: Galerie Gmurzynska, *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism* (Zurich: Galerie Gmurzynska/Hatje Cantz Books, 2012).

3. Introductory text to *A New Communal: Быт – Way of Life*, an event at the Royal Academy of Arts programmed for April 10, 2017. From: "A New Communal: Быт – Way of Life," Royal Academy of Arts, accessed December 31, 2016, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/event/a-new-communal>.
4. "Byt" has become a somewhat trendy concept through which to look at the cultural history of the Soviet Union for the past couple of decades. It provides a framework of "Russianness" that favours perceiving class warfare during the Revolution as a sort of revolutionary cultural war to destroy old bourgeois "forms of life" and construct a socialist "identity." See, for example: Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic: 1890-1934* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999).
5. Tafuri produces this argument mainly in the works identified. However, a particularly strong and clear version of his argument is present in his seldom read text of 1971, *Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie*, an article focused specifically on the Soviet "avant-garde" written for a volume coedited by himself. See: Manfredo Tafuri, "Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie," in Alberto Asor Rosa, Manfredo Tafuri et al., *Socialismo, Città, Architettura URSS 1917-1937: Il Contributo degli Architetti Europei* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1976).
6. Tafuri himself produces a sort of relativist form of this point on the mutual dependence between historiography and theory in his introduction to *La Sfera e il Labirinto*, but the most poignant body of work addressing it at a theoretical level is that of Reinhart Koselleck, who advocates the need for a history of concepts. It is also a crucial problem for one of the first and most influential theorists of "the avant-garde," Peter Bürger, who spends the first two dozen pages of his 1979 *Theory of the Avant-garde* on the historical condition of historiographical categories, taking profuse amounts of help directly from Marx. See: Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
7. VANO, the Scientific All-Union Association of Architecture, itself came as a partial success after the failed attempt in 1929 to establish the same kind of unification through a Federation of Revolutionary Architects.
8. And constructivists held positions of power till just after this moment. Viktor Vesnin, the most politically connected of their ranks, was only removed from the presidencies of both the Academy of Architecture and the Union of Architects in 1949, and it is hard to ascribe this purely to political reasons since he was by then sixty-seven.
9. Mainly in the series of debates taking place between the Builder's Conference of December 1954 and the Congress of the Union of Architects of November 1955. These are entirely published in Soviet journals at the time and systematically covered

- in the British journal *Soviet Studies*. See, for example: Robert William Davies, “The Builder’s Conference,” *Soviet Studies* 6, no. 4 (April 1955): 443-57; Robert William Davies, “The Building Reforms and Architecture,” *Soviet Studies* 7, no. 4 (April 1956): 418-29.
10. With one of Selim O. Khan-Magomedov’s first works, a paper entitled “On some of the problems of Constructivism,” showing in 1964 a positive evaluation of the early period, an evaluation that was positively received by the Architectural Theory Section of the Moscow Section of the Union of Architects. See: Stephen V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev’s Thaw* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), 133.
 11. This is not to say the term is not used earlier. Clement Greenberg already used it famously in his *Avant-garde and Kitsch* in 1939, in *The Partisan Review*, which could be regarded as an early form of a historiography of “the project.” It also comes up every once in a while in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly in the visual arts, and was dominant in Italy. A particularly relevant example of an early historicisation of the category is Donald D. Egbert’s “The Idea of Avant-garde in Art and Politics,” in *The American Historical Review* in 1967. But it is not anywhere near the universally conventioned term in its contemporary categorical function. See: Clement Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” *The Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): 34-49; Donald D. Egbert, “The Idea of ‘Avant-garde’ in Art and Politics,” *The American Historical Review* 73, no. 2 (December 1967): 339-66.
 12. She published a few articles in British arts journals: “The Genesis of Socialist Realist Painting” in *Soviet Survey* in 1959, “The Russian Contribution to Modern Painting” in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1960, and “Lissitzky” in *Tipografyca* also in 1960. Three exhibitions follow between 1959 and 1962 in London, presenting the work of early Soviet artists: *Kasimir Malevich, 1878-1935* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1959, *Larionov and Goncharova*, organized by the Arts Council in 1961, and *Two Decades of Experiment in Russian Art: 1902-1922* at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1962. This bleeds over a bit into architecture via an article by Kenneth Frampton on Lissitzky published in *Architectural Design*, which is based on one of Gray’s articles and as such doesn’t really cover much specifically architectural at all. See: Kenneth Frampton, “The Work of El Lissitzky,” *Architectural Design* (November 1966): 564-66.
 13. The list of the exhibitions is too extensive to cover here. It must be noted that the term “the avant-garde” does show up already in a few of them, particularly in the very first one, *Avantgarde Osteuropa 1910-1930*, organized by the German Society of Fine Arts and the Academy of Arts in Berlin, as well as *Osteuropaische Avantgarde bis 1930* at Galerie Gmurzynska in Köln and *Russian Avant-Garde 1908-1922* at the Leonard Hutton Galleries in New York in 1971. It is however still far from being a universal term.
 14. The more impactful authors are Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt who, after coediting *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation* in 1973, each go on to publish their own collection of translated texts in 1974 and 1976 respectively with *The*

Tradition of Constructivism and Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934.

15. Kopp follows his inaugural book with *Changer la ville, changer la vie* in 1975 and *L'Architecture de la période stalinienne* in 1978. His is still probably the most widely read take on the subject. The Italian production is wider and more diverse, with *La Costruzione della Città Sovietica* by Paolo Ceccarelli in 1970, *Socialismo, Città, Architettura* edited by Manfredo Tafuri in 1971, *La Città Sovietica* by Marco de Michelis and Ernesto Pasini in 1976, and *Città Russa e Città Sovietica* by Vieri Quilici also in 1976.
16. Among which is the fact that Italy is the one country in the world where the category of “the avant-garde” is universally used, though is fiercely debated. Tafuri, for example, fully rejects it simply as a periodization of the cultural and artistic production of the 1910s to the 1930s, seeing it instead as a mechanism prevalent in bourgeois art since its Italian Renaissance inception.
17. The first piece of writing trying to historicise early Soviet architecture in an architectural publication was “The Work of El Lissitzky” by Kenneth Frampton, published in *Architectural Design* (November 1966), coming as a direct importation into architectural circles of Camilla Gray’s 1960 article on Lissitzky published in *Typographica* no. 16 and two exhibitions on Lissitzky in 1965, one a retrospective that toured Europe and a later show at the Grosvenor Gallery in London.
18. Another popular object for that purpose is Yakov Chernikhov, whose manifesto book *The Construction of Architectural and Mechanical Forms* of 1931 is a very late sort-of-architectural expression of the visual arts trends of 1917-1922, being completely obsolete for the architectural debate happening at the time. As such, it helps maintain the impression that architecture is being covered, while in effect being fully ignored.
19. The gradual architecturalization of the historical “avant-garde” is a large topic that will not be addressed here, but it is an important one. As the “art-unto-life” ideology of “productivism” becomes more central in the Soviet debate, so too does architecture as organizer of life become the dominant field, as opposed to the artistic-symbolic mere expressions of a new life the visual arts were capable of. The Anglo-American focus on the visual-arts “avant-garde,” and its presentation of vaguely proto-architectural actors like Lissitzky and Chernikhov as the architectural expression of this trend, could be seen as a symptom of an unwillingness to deal with the more radical “avant-garde” critique that eschews “art-as-institution,” as Bürger puts it in his *Theory of the Avant-garde* in 1974, and moves from representation towards organization. Continental Europe, where a revolutionary left exists, does not suffer from the same ideological impediments. The tendency of the historical “avant-garde” to drift towards architecture is noted by authors such as Gray or Bann but only really fully addressed by Tafuri in all its implications, mainly in his already mentioned *Il Socialismo Realizzato e la Crisi delle Avanguardie* from 1976.

20. This is obviously referencing Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974).
21. In which Zaha Hadid, incidentally, who fashioned herself as worthy heir to Malevitch, was at the time studying. Bernard Tschumi was also introducing this material in his Diploma Studio 12.
22. From the constitution of a “Malevich group” in the academic year 1975-1976 to a series of seminars on the “social condenser” at the end of the first term of the previous academic year. It’s important to note that while Malevich is practically nonexistent in the Continental histories of Soviet architecture at the time, he was heavily treated by Anglo visual-arts historians; conversely, the OSA concept of the social condenser is entirely absent from the Anglo-American histories of Soviet visual-arts is but central to Continental architectural history.
23. See the special February 1970 issue of *A.D.* dedicated to *Building in the USSR*, edited by Oleg Shvidkhovskiy, and the following English publication of his book of the same name in 1971. Selim O. Khan-Magomedov would then see his work regularly translated into English through the 1980s and 1990s, precisely during Cooke’s period of greatest activity.
24. Cooke wrote several articles during this period, as well as guest editing four special issues entirely dedicated to the subject, entitled *Russian Avant-Garde: Art and Architecture* in 1983; *Iakov Chernikhov* in 1984; *Uses of Tradition in Russian and Soviet Architecture* in 1987; and *The Avant-Garde: Russian Architecture in the Twenties* in 1991.
25. Just as Zaha Hadid would do again in her Zurich exhibition of 2010 and the subsequent book of 2012.
26. In Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* (Cambridge Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1976), 100.

