

Urban design for multilevel planning

City as a transformational tool. The infinity cities of Ivan Leonidov

Luca Lanini

DESTeC, University of Pisa, l.lanini@ing.unipi.it

Abstract: During late '20s and early 30's, the debate on the masterplan of Moscow, on its architecture as the capital of the Workers' Promised Land and, by extension, on the form of the new Socialist City (*Soc-gorod*) transformed this metropolis into the largest urban laboratory of the 20th century. Two were the main positions: "urbanists", such as Sabsovič, who still believe to achieve the formal control of the urban entity implementing industrialization, territorial planning and the *engineering of individual existences*; and "disurbanists", such as Okhitovič, who at the contrary conceived city as a superstructure of the bourgeois-capitalist modes of production, made obsolete by the Bolshevik revolution and that, as such, should be overturned. For "disurbanists", the collapse of the city inherited by Czarism should have been implemented by dissolving the city in a new territorial form, using to this purpose the new infrastructural network planned (or better dreamed...) by Soviet Power (cars, trains, airplanes, airships, spacecraft!). The city would no longer have a form but would have to be reduced into pure process, directly derived from the Kuzmin's "daily life program", defined by the distances for commuting to the production sites, designed by the sinusoidal diagrams of the circadian rhythms of workers and by the "industrialization" of their sleep-rest-works periods. The Socialist City is founded on a brand new dimension: its scale is related to the continental extension of the Soviet Union, to the horizon of the steppes, to the industrial compounds strategically dispersed all over the U.S.S.R territory. During the years 1928-30, Ivan Leonidov (1902-1959) conceived an idea of city sprawled across the entire Soviet Union: an *infinite* urban structure, innervated by industrial zones, residential compounds, public buildings, ready to colonize the whole nation. The goal was a city-nature hybrid, unlimited but endowed by the measure given by an orthogonal ribbon grid conceived as a geographical dimension rather than a geometrical form of urban planning. A *centuriatio* that potentially went from Moscow to the Urals, a *linear* disarticulation of the American Jeffersonian grid, an "all program and no form" plan - as Rem Koolhaas would say - that was tested in the competition design for the new industrial town of Magnitogorsk. Or, in an alternative version, Leonidov's city becomes a *network*: its nodes are institutional buildings whose distances are calculated on the basis of the power of the radio signals that connect them (project for the Social Club of a "new type" versions A and B).

Keywords: Ivan Leonidov, Constructivism, Socialist City, Soviet Architecture

Introduction

I would like to discuss the work of Ivan Leonidov in the context of his own time, his visions for a future for the city and the landscape (and the city *as* a landscape) of the Soviet Union. A future that seemed at hand, so far from the *leap forward* and the wellsian science fiction of Krutikov¹, for example. A project for the future, at the same time so visionary and so prophetic that it still seems to be contemporary today.

Between 1927 and 1934, before his career would be so abruptly interrupted, Leonidov worked with great accuracy on buildings and urban designs that could have turned in architectures the transformations occurred in the Soviet Union: buildings as embryos of a New World that promised a different and more rewarding way of life (*byt*) for both the working class and the Soviet establishment.

¹ Georgii Krutikov (1899-1958) was a Soviet architect who famously designed Flying Cities orbiting around Earth and connected by single seat astro-planes.

For Leonidov, buildings and city are conceived as great *transformative tools* of the individuals and society (and of society through individuals...) and this mutation takes place through absolute and pure architectural forms. Forms and spaces of architecture as a technical aspect: scrutinized not only for the resolution of the very serious contingent problems that also afflicted the *homo sovieticus* (as *kommunal'ka*, the forced cohabitation of several families in the same apartment, mass literacy, sanitation of urban areas, supply of infrastructures and services, anthropization of an immense territory), but by means of a new definition of physical and relational structure, with the aim to reorganize work, daily life, education, rest, city and nature.

In few, famous projects, Leonidov operated a radical rewriting of functional programs and therefore of the space of buildings (and of the space between buildings) which is still avant-garde today. He was guided by the faith in architecture and by a sort of an exterior light (a humanitarian socialism, "hedonist" and planetary? The beauty embedded in the motion of the Universe? The principle of "art as a construction of life"?) to conceive the composition and the daily functioning of these architectures. Like any *exalted rationalist*², Leonidov worked to overcome the conventions, even those that have settled in the few years in which Modern Architecture has been already operating in its Functionalist format.

Leonidov's projects are *objects of fantastic reaction* (Quilici, 1975), visionary but rigorous architectural machines, defined with great typological, distributive, constructive and urban precision [Figure 1]. His radical architectural program is mainly achieved by the means of Technique, constantly displayed in his designs.

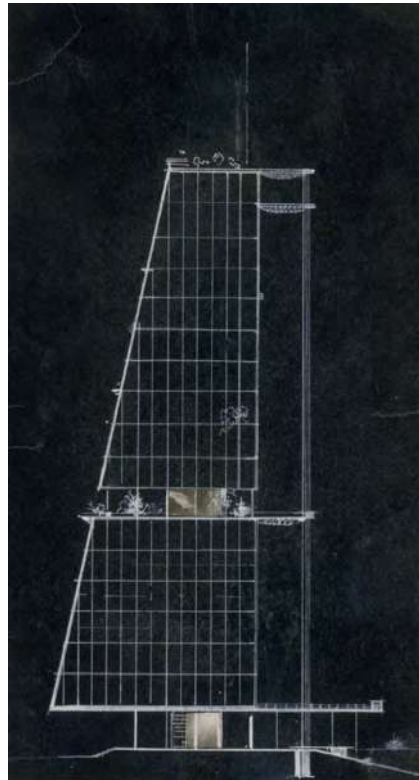


Figure 1, Ivan Leonidov, House of Industry, 1928

After 1917 Technique is the conceptual tool chosen by the Bolsheviks to redeem the destiny of Great Russia and to transform it into an global industrial power. It is considered as a banner for the libertarian implications they saw in it ("the liberation of work") and it becomes the formal language of this

² For a definition of *Exalted Rationalism*, see Rossi A., 1967, Introduzione a Boullée. In: Boullée E.L., *Architettura. Saggio sull'arte* (Padova, Ita: Marsilio), 7-24.

"mystical" phase of the revolution. It is intended as an instrument for agitation and propaganda, a vehicle for information and calls to arms, a raw product for artistic experiments: the agit-prop trains, the posters and photography of Rodčenko, the cinema of Ejzenštejn and Vertov, the walking megaphones of Klutsis, the huge urban installations of El Lissitzky and Tatlin, the people's theater of Mejerchol'd, the experimentation on language of Majakovsky. The first generation of Constructivists architects - the Vesnin³ brothers, for example - maintained a 19th century idolatry for Technique, a reminiscence of an industrial century that this extreme part of Europe has never known. For Leonidov, on the other hand, Technique is never just a constructive effort or adornment for a Socialist heraldry, but is a defining point of view on architecture. The collimation between compositional and constructive techniques is the way to completely redefine the relationship between purpose and form of buildings, between their meaning and the life of men, between architecture and city. A relationship between architectural composition and technology, between formal experimentation and the technical level of the Soviet construction industry that remained unresolved, and that would be later the main cause of the prompt eclipse of the avant-garde party in the Soviet architecture, of its implosion under the weight of the demands of the forced industrialization and the command that architecture must serve solely as assembly line in the construction of Socialism.

Leonidov's point of view stands in antithesis both to the formalism of the avant-garde and to the socialist realism, which basically converged on one point: the liberation of the arts from capitalist superstructures to make them immediately understandable by the masses. In Leonidov the research on abstraction and on the functioning, in many ways still unknown, of *new buildings for a mass society* generate a broader conceptual depth that does not allow us to select only formal aspects to the detriment of ideological reasons. Leonidov, who during his career will realize only one project, produced a series of architectural and urban designs of such paradoxical realism to be able not only to become the iconological heritage of every Modernism but also to trigger a debate that continues today on the transformation for the city of Moscow as well as for any other contemporary metropolis.

The city of steel

Moscow becomes the new capital of the Union of Russian Federal Republics on March 5, 1918, a decision whose strategic objective is to move the main government offices from the maneuvering area of White Armies. The city immediately became the point of accumulation of the main avant-garde groups that, having abandoned the Petersburg orbit, began to gravitate around some institutions like the VChUTEMAS and the InChuK⁴, real incubators of a production that ranges from cinema to photography, to the production of everyday objects, to graphics, to painting, to architecture, in the wake of the Bauhaus, just founded the year before in Weimar.

The city that emerged from the "war communism" (1918-1921) is an immense shattered village, a city of wood rather than stone with still strongly rural features: a monumental center, which has its symbolic focus in the fortified citadel of the Kremlin, then the vestiges of orthodox power, some *Modern* buildings (*Modern* is the regional variant of *Art Nouveau*), the production complexes, expelled towards the radial routes of the city, in the midst of a boundless village of wooden *isbas*. A metropolis where the epic of the capital of a new world must be built, made possible by the embryonic accumulation of urban capital and the repopulation generated by the *Novaja Ekonomičeskaja Politika* (New Economic Policy, NEP): it is the *transition city*, between *ancien régime* and Socialism (De Magistris, 1988). If during the years of the "war communism" Moscow had become a gigantic and temporary theater of shambolic urban scenographies, the NEP years saw the making of a whole series of new metropolitan centralities, a widespread network of buildings that must represent the tangible and daily symbols of Bolshevik modernization through the collectivization of culture. These *ganglia* of the Soviet establishment draw a new topography of power that overlapped with the ones inherited from Czarism. The mystique of the "capital of Socialism" is built either through the monumentalization of localized

³ Alexander (1883-1959), Leonid (1880-1933) and Viktor (1882-1959) Vesnin were among the most influential architects of the first wave of Russian avant-garde.

⁴ VChUTEMAS are the State Superior Arts and Technics Workshops founded in 1920 in Moscow, InChuK is the Institute of Artistic Culture founded by Vassilij Kandinskij in the same year.

urban junctions (clubs, for instance), or through large complexes (*ansambl'*) that mixed infrastructural nodes and bureaucratic institutions, appearing as colossal propaganda and symbolic machines. These dense complexes on a metropolitan scale must be immediately recognizable, visible from every part of the city, incarnating the image of the power and the "weight of the State". The skyline of the capital becomes a precise technical question many architects like Ivan Leonidov, Alexander Vesnin and El Lissitzky⁵ dealt with.

The dazzling revolutionary Moscow of the NEP is the theater and the field of forces within Leonidov organizes objective data and give them form through peremptory architectures actively working to expand the material and psychic dimension of the metropolis and to draw it on another scale, the territorial one, necessary to weld countryside and large productive entities to the destiny of the city.

Leonidov correctly identifies in this overlap, physical rather than ideological, the only possibility of survival of the Soviet collectivist utopia: the city as "a sublimated acropolis" of countryside made productive by industrialization.

This is the meaning of the colossal dimensions of the Lenin Institute [Figure 2], of the Narkomtjažprom complex, of the Palace of Culture of the Proletarsky district, of the plan for Magnitogorsk. The architecture becomes, together with the airships, the airplanes, the flying machines of Krutikov, the Tatlin's *Letatlin*⁶, the tool to fill this *big emptiness*, to fill the space of Soviet Russia with a new civilization. The city is therefore transformed into a potentially infinite artifact and its space in a void furrowed by the orbits of buildings that with absolute geometric shapes measure the Earth's surface and define the space-time continuum (which therefore excludes the pre-Einsteinian and premodern distinction between interior and external spaces) of environments for residence, for education, for physical education, for the continuous training of the individual through work.



Figure 2, Ivan Leonidov, Lenin Istitute, 1927

Architecture for a New World

The architecture of worker's club is therefore one of the cornerstones of the design reflection of Leonidov (as well as of the others Constructivist architects). They are the *social condenser*, the palaces of the new ruling class, the "aristocrats of proletariat." in 1928 Leonidov designed two futuristic projects for a "new type" clubs (version A and B). The intersection of activity required by this new ganglion of

⁵ Lazar El Lissitzky (1890-1941) was one of the major modernist artist, actively working as painter, sculptor, graphic designer and architect in Russia, Switzerland and Germany.

⁶ The *Letatlin* is a human powered flying machine invented by the Soviet artist Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953).

the socialist society cannot be confined to a single building (as it happened in Melnikov's⁷ or Golosov's⁸ work), but becomes a *pavillion* system (a memory of the native village?) including vast areas of industrially cultivated land, botanical gardens, zoos, laboratories for scientific research, sports and outdoor communal equipments, mass theaters, airports, gigantic television screens (he also invented a term - *televizde* - in 1928!) that broadcast newsreels and films, amplification systems that do not transmit music but fragments of discourses and background noises, in a surprising anticipation of both the *musique concrète* and the *found voices* of Eno and Byrne [Figure 3].

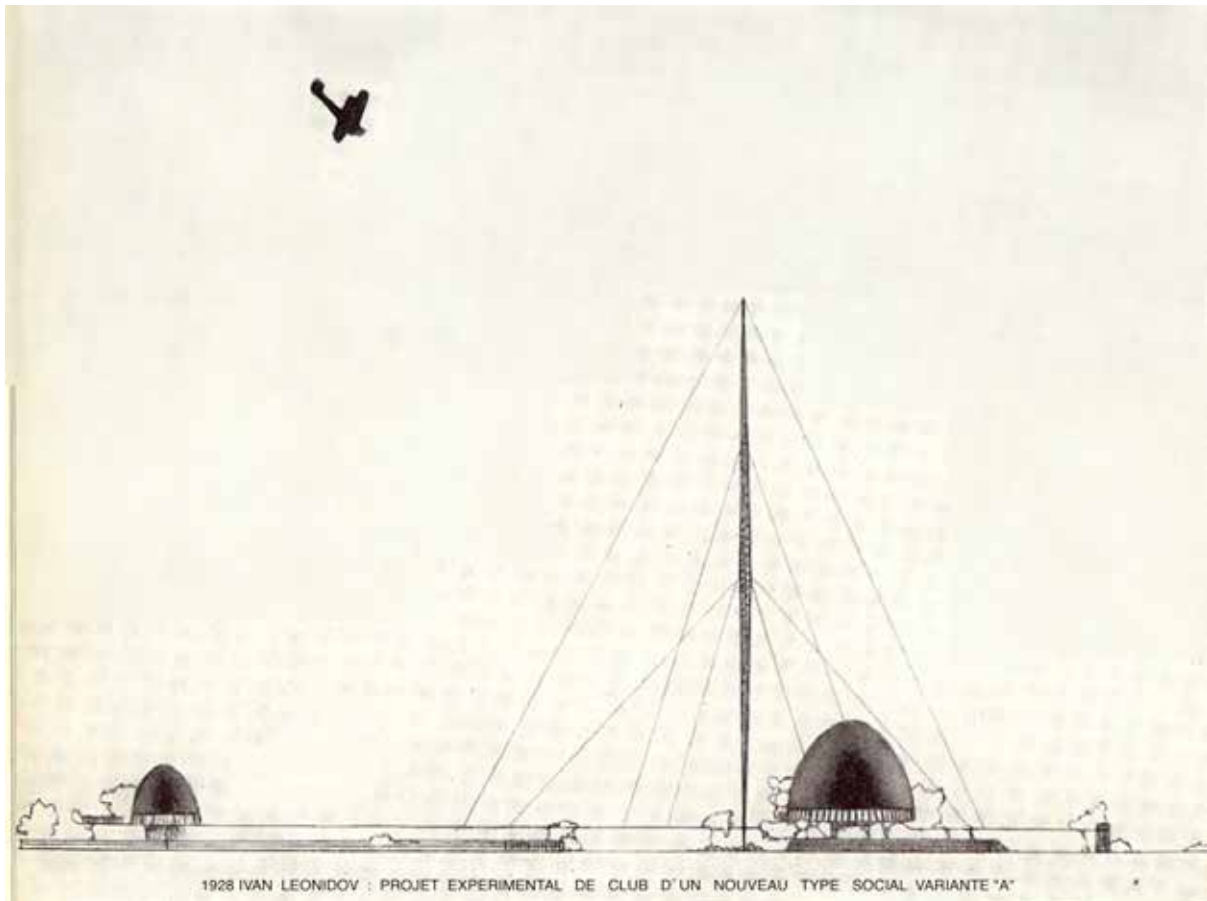


Figure 3, Ivan Leonidov, Social Club of New Type version a9, 1930

The buildings around which the landscape design revolves are large ogival glazed structures that clearly looked at the Moscow Planetarium designed by Baršč and Sinjavskij⁹ in 1927, within which flexible spaces are organized to host conferences, politics meetings, scientific demonstrations, libraries, swimming pools, gyms, greenhouses. The club has become a widespread system for a rarefied, territorial city, in which spatial relations have dissolved into a new perceptive and psychic paradigm placed between phenomenal spaces and diagrams and which aims at “a general reorganization of consciousness”. A new city, sparse but large as the whole country, connected by an *immaterial infrastructure*: a net of radio receivers in a sort of precognition of what a *smart city* is: “Each building appears as a node that bears significance equal to its potential for cultural dissemination and reception. The curves of the diagram identify cultural centers with transmitters of electro-magnetic signals, suggesting that Leonidov understood culture – or cultural organization – as no longer a problem of

⁷ Konstantin Melnikov (1890-1974) was one of the most famous Constructivist architect, he designed several masterpieces as the U.S.S.R pavillon at the Paris Exposition of decorative Art in 1925.

⁸ Ilja Golosov (1883-1945) was a Soviet architect of the first Constructivist wave, author of the famous Zuev Club in Moscow in 1928.

⁹ Mikahil Baršč (1904-1976) and Mikahil Sinjavskij (1895-1974) were both Constructivist architects.

absolute space and distance, but rather as a function of signal strength. The points in Leonidov's diagram elide the difference between the club as material architecture and the club as site of immaterial media exchange. [...]. With his club, Leonidov sought to embed Soviet culture within a new logic of social, spatial and media relations. In doing so, he articulated a distinct position within architectural constructivism, one that addressed not the organization of material and space but rather the organization of media networks and their spatial consequences" (Anderson,2013) [Figure 4].



Figure 4, Ivan Leonidov, Social Club of New Type, 1930

But even those lush, abstract systems in which architecture is constricted are never self-referential objects, they are deformed by the links with the other urban facts they intercept: the Palace of Culture of the Proletarsky district and its planimetric grid rotates to accommodate in the lay-out the ancient Simonov Monastery, the Lenin Institute finds its alignment in one of the Muscovite radials, the Narkomtjažprom (Minister of Heavy Industry) weaves a series of almost musical relations with the positions and proportions of the monuments that gather inside and around the Kremlin citadel. The Palace of Culture is a part (the origin?) of an infinite city that ranges from Moscow to the Urals. It is basically a *superclub*, it has accesses to a range of technologies producing a sensorial experience equal to that of a contemporary rock show: lights, over-amplified sounds, cut-up images on giant screens, rotating stages, bridge, cranes, mobile walkways, all props taken from the research of the Futurists and the Productivists for the stagecraft during the first years of the Revolution [Figure 5].

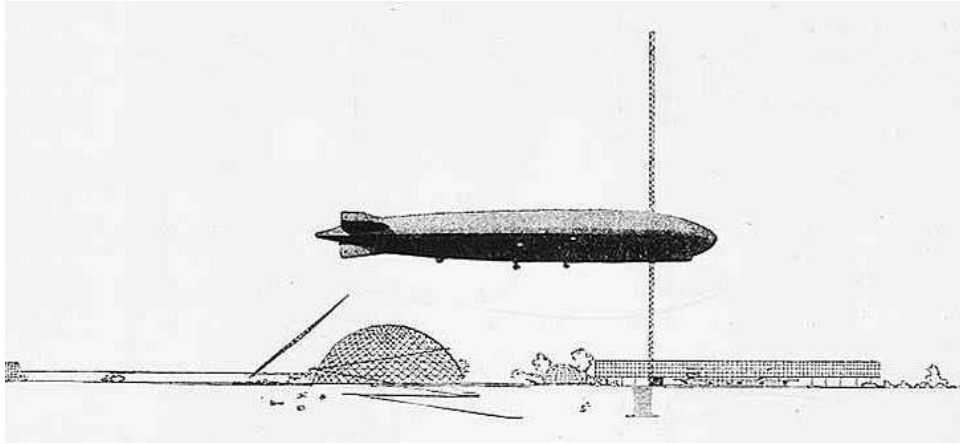


Figure 5, Ivan Leonidov, Palace of Culture of the Proletarsky district, 1930

The complex is located in a large lot in the southern suburbs of Moscow, occupied in part by the Simonov monastery, which Leonidov doubles and divides into four consecutive squares of 240 m side, each organized around a building that determines its use. A pyramid is the sport building: a large gym, a swimming pool with an artificial beach, gardens and terraces for heliotherapy. A semisphere shaped in iron and glass acts as an auditorium for mass manifestations. It is the anti-Bolshoi, as stated in the liner notes accompanying this projects: thanks to the variable configuration of the slabs and the seats as already experimented in the Total Theater by Gropius and Piscator (1929) and in the building designed by Mejerchol'd and Barkhin¹⁰ (1930). A giant truss serves as a mooring for airships and a radio mast, a long bar on *pilotis* is designed to accommodate scientific laboratories and a library [Figure 6].

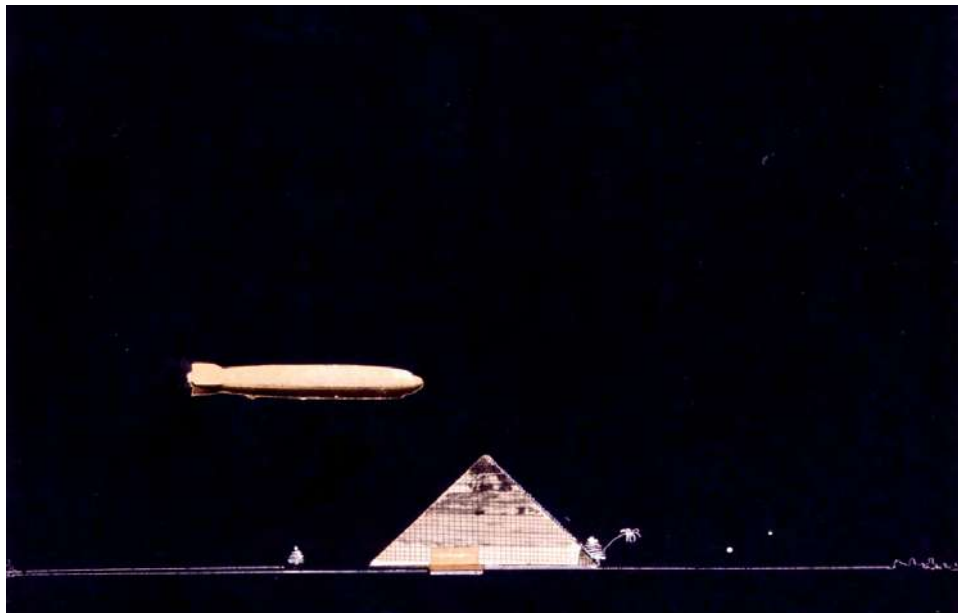


Figure 6, Ivan Leonidov, Palace of Culture of the Proletarsky district, 1930

¹⁰ Grigorij Barkhin (1880-1969) was a Soviet architect, famously working with the theater author Vsevolod Mejerchol'd for an experimental theater in Moscow in 1930-33

It is a rarefied system of buildings, yet another composition of Platonic solids, whose innovative conception has remained intact. His program already included food and energy self-sufficiency, the continuous view of avant-garde films, educational documentaries, newsreels, sports commentaries which were to replace the folk dances and classical ballets, military songs and hymns of the *kolchozj* in the training of Soviet citizens. Connections are ensured by aircraft, the only means of moving in the immense Soviet country, education is based not so much on the great Russian literary tradition, but on scientific-technological training and physical education, on the pragmatic productive use, almost in a physiocratic way, of the land, that is a fundamental part in the composition of this complex.

The infinite city

If the Russian avant-garde was able to design the many utopian variations of the Socialist City it was also always able to propose pragmatic and progressive alternatives to the problems of the real city.

The "war communism" has depopulated the capital (almost halving its population) and left its building stock and infrastructures in a state of obvious degradation. During the NEP the condition of overpopulation that had characterized the last Czarist phase took its toll. The debate on the urban figure, the *grosseforme*, of Moscow and its architecture and, by extension, those of the new Socialist City transform this metropolis into the greatest urban laboratory of the twentieth century.

For "disurbanists", such as Okhitovič¹¹, the city as we know it is a superstructure of bourgeois-capitalist modes of production which should be demolished. It will no longer have a shape but will be reduced to a pure process, which arises from the "graph of daily life" elaborated by Kuzmin, from the sinusoidal diagrams of the circadian rhythms of workers, the distances for commuting to the places of production and the "industrialization of rest", such as the SONnaja SONata, the Melnikov's "sleep factory" or the holiday resorts of Sokolov¹².

A principle gathered from the 1930 project for the "Green City" of OSA, coordinated by Ginzburg¹³ and Baršč. The objective is the *destruction* of Moscow: decentralization of all production complexes, deportation of the entire population along the axes connecting the capital to the new industrial towns, prohibition of building within the urban perimeter, demolition of unhealthy neighborhoods, transformation in equipped parks of all the free areas available, reorganization of the 17th century Moscow in a gigantic theme park in which some duly isolated monumental ensembles emerge (the Kremlin, the Arbat, etc.) as well as new collective complexes dedicated to culture, rest and research.

If the Capitalist City is the urban formalization of relations of productions rendered obsolete by the Bolshevik revolution, the Socialist City cannot take back either its axes or its forming modalities, it must indeed overturn them. Starting from the relationship between nature and buildings, up to a general rethinking of its dimension which has to deal with, in order, the continental extension of the Soviet Union, the new infrastructural level, the production units strategically scattered from Leningrad to Vladivostok.

In Leonidov's work the real city (Moscow, Magnitogorsk) and the planned one overlap: the first is not only a scenographic background, the second is not only a design, together they are a unique dialectical reality equipped by the new architecture and whose material is an *expanded void* that seems to aspire to a cosmic dimension, that "space as a non-material coagulant" (Quilici, 1975). An avant-garde point of view on architecture and city pursued through the use of all modern techniques related to transport, communication, image, construction, composition.

In Ivan Leonidov's vision, Moscow becomes the nucleus of the celebratory centers of the administrative buildings in which the Soviet power is articulated (great isolated complexes, ancient and modern: the Kremlin, but also the ministries, the Palace of Soviets, the headquarters of the great cultural institutions),

¹¹ Mikahil Okhitovič (1896-1937) was a Soviet sociologist and urbanist who led the current of disurbanists. Executed by NKVD during the Great Purgue.

¹² Nicolai Sokolov (1904-1990) was a Soviet architect. He designed the socialist version of SPAs and holiday communal resorts.

¹³ Moisej Ginzburg (1892-1941) was a Soviet architect, one of the masters of Russian Constructivist. He designed one of its famous building, the communal house NARKORFIM in Moscow in 1928-32.

from which an infinite, ribbon-like urban structure, innervated by industrial areas, residential neighborhoods, public buildings, prolonged itself throughout the Soviet Union, colonizing that boundless territory.

The objective is a city-nature, unlimited but endowed by the measure given by a *centuriation*: a geographical dimension rather than a geometrical-urban pattern. A system that potentially goes from Moscow to the Urals, a linear disarticulation of the Jeffersonian grid, a "all program and no form" plan - as Koolhaas would say - which is concretely tested in the design for the new mining town of Magnitogorsk [Figure 7].

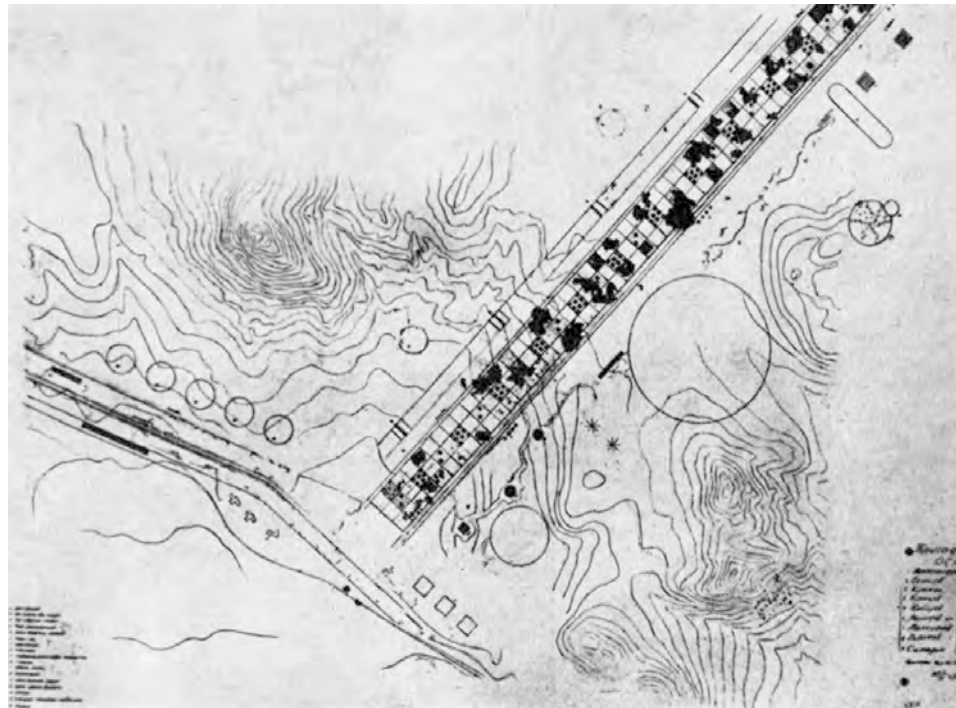


Figure 7, Ivan Leonidov, Plan for Magnitogorsk, 1930

A competition – won by the May Brigade, the group led by the former Frankfurt chief architect - in which the various trends operating in the USSR on the project of the *Sov-Ggorod*, the new socialist city, confronted themselves. Leonidov proposed an organization based on the repetition of large square meshes equipped with large collective buildings, industrial centers, towers for apartments and low houses. Even for these lodgings the principle of the collective housing is enforced: small cubicles for individual rest that converge in a large collective environment equipped with tea rooms, gardens, spaces for physical exercise. A libertarian, pre-hippie commune rather than a *Dom Kommuna*, a less militarized version of the contemporary experiments on the residence of STROIKOM (Building Commission of the Russian Republic) led by Moisej Ginzburg.

Ensuring an advanced level of housing is one of the main objectives of all the researches on architecture and the city of the first Soviet era. For Ivan Leonidov, before being a "living machine", the house is an exact device for the construction of a new life: it must allow individual rest and at the same time maximize the moments of collective life; must have the necessary intimacy for people forced into years of *kommunal'ka* and at the same time be the first cell of collective organization of society (a "laboratory of communism"); it must be recognized as a home by the recently urbanized masses and also have all the comforts of bourgeois residences; it must be technologically advanced but also economic and buildable in a short time by unskilled workers, it's a tool that can transform the worker of a Communist state into a "new man", built to allow the transition from a bourgeois way of life to a socialist one, which in this most extreme examples presupposes the dissolution of the family and the collective care of children [Figure 8].

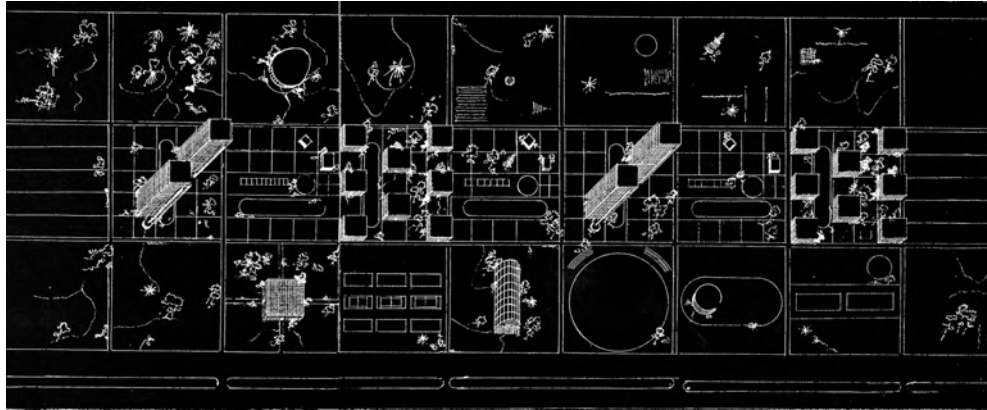


Figure 8, Ivan Leonidov, Plan for Magnitogorsk, 1930

But it is on this ideological issue that the main failure of Soviet radical architecture (and of the Soviet system) is consummated: the nation born from the October Revolution is not able to produce a significant discontinuity to the housing crisis of the Czarist era, even when its masters produces some significant prototypes.

Those buildings and programs for Moscow designed by the Soviet avant-garde at the turn of the 20s and 30s of the 20th century seem to return continually, almost subliminally, to the fabric of our daily experience. Russian vanguards have spread their effects throughout the 20th century and are prolonging their extraordinary fascination even in the new one. Especially from the point of view of architectural and urban design. It could be useful to reflect on how some great contemporary urban landmarks have introjected some icons of the Constructivist period. In London, for instance, where Renzo Piano's Shard is modeled on a section of a Leonidov project, while Anish Kapoor's Orbit Tower is a clear tribute to Tatlin's Monument to Third International. Architectures that have not been able to build Moscow as the capital of the Soviet Nation and instead return to build other cities, as has often happened in urban history for buildings of such symbolic and evocative power.

A collection of projects that gives us the image of an *alternative* Moscow, of a great collective project for the construction of the city and its architecture once confined to the world of urban visions but capable of configuring - from their architectural figure to their historiographical "aura" - a plan for a "analogue Moscow", transforming it into a modern and cosmopolitan metropolis, while recording the dramatic changes in Russian history of which it was the theater.

Reflecting on these projects means guessing how Moscow would have changed, in its morphological features, in its urban dimension if, in one of the many sliding doors of history, it had been built by the vanguards and not by the realsocialist classicism that redesigned its vast sectors in the following years. A process of alternative construction of the city which actually, though in a latent form, has always been in place, because the architectures of Leonidov, Lissitsky, Mel'nikov, the Vesnin brothers had clearly predicted axes, themes and issues that the development of this great Eurasian metropolis would eventually have ended up facing in the following hundred years.

As if they were architectures so meaningful that somehow managed to deform space and time.

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