CHAPTER TEN

THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE:
THE MODERNIST ARCHITECTURAL UTOPIA UNDER STALIN

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It is sometimes suggested that the avant-garde utopia finally died in April 1932 when the Party abolished all independent creative groups and subsequently formulated and imposed Socialist Realism. Yet this judgement is as optimistic—or as pessimistic—depending on your point of view—as assuming that the October Revolution of 1917 immediately saw the establishment of a socialist society. While the mechanisms of government control, such as the various official unions, were established in the wake of the 1932 decree and, in theory, were given the power to impose the new aesthetic—that aesthetic was far from being fully formulated. The various definitions put forward in 1934 at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers (Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh pisatelei) were fairly vague and so allowed a variety of interpretation, especially in architecture. The formulation ‘realist in form, socialist in content’ or Andrei Zhdanov’s admonitions to writers to ‘depict reality in its revolutionary development’ were difficult to apply to architecture, although his belief that writers should be ‘engineers of the human soul’ dovetailed with avant-garde architects’ conviction concerning the transformative nature of modernist design.

In 1933, the journal Architecture of the USSR (Arkhitektura SSSR) admonished, ‘In its search for an appropriate style, Soviet architecture must strive for realistic criteria—for clarity and precision in its images, which must be easily comprehensible by and accessible to the masses’. The


emphasis on architecture’s comprehensibility and accessibility indicated that architects needed to take into account, and appeal to, the taste of ordinary citizens. Despite this fundamental premise, such formulations as ‘realistic criteria’ were vague and difficult to interpret in terms of actual building design. Clearly, the specific aesthetic features of Socialist Realism in architecture required elaboration, and this process took time. As the All-Union Creative Conference of Architects in 1934 admitted, ‘Our task is the struggle to embody in the language of architecture the great slogans of our epoch’. ‘Struggle’ here is the operative word. The inevitable lack of clarity and precision in defining exactly what architectural language was appropriate in order to achieve this aim gave modernists a certain leeway, allowing their approaches, ideas, and utopian visions to operate within certain restricted parameters.

Of course, by this time, modernism’s position was not very secure. In 1930, the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Architects (Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo proletarskich arkhitektorov—VOPRA) had orchestrated a virulent campaign against formalism in general and Ivan Leonidov in particular. They disliked the austerity and uniformity of the International Style and modernist architects’ contempt for the architectural heritage. Similarly, in June 1931 the Party’s resolution on urban renewal had emphatically rejected the more extreme and iconoclastic ideas of avant-garde architects and had advocated a compromise with traditional approaches. On the basis of such evidence, it has been asserted that ‘by 1934… the political defeat of the modernists was a fait accompli’. Yet, when the Union of Soviet Architects (Soiuz sovetskikh arkhitektorov) was formed in July 1932, the Constructivist Viktor Vesnin became its first president. Naturally, he ensured that his modernist colleagues were well represented within the organisation, although the doctrinaire VOPRA stalwart Karo Alabian became the Union’s vice-president, representing, with his

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5 According to Ivan Mikhailovich Gronskii (editor of Izvestiia and Novyi mir at the time), Stalin coined the term in conversation with him on 23 April 1932. See I.M. Gronskii, Iz proshlogo… Vospominaniia (Moscow: Izvestiiia, 1991), pp. 334–335.


7 See, for example, A. Mordvinov, ‘Leonidovshchina i ego vred’, Iskusstvo v massy, no. 12 (1933), pp. 12–15.

8 Za sotsialisticheskuiu rekonstruktsiuiu Moskvy (Moscow: Mosgubispolkom, 1931).

9 Tarkhanov and Kavtaradze, Stalinist Architecture, p. 16.