MILKA BLIZNAKOV (Blacksburg, Va., U.S.A.)

The Constructivist Movement in Architecture

The brief but highly productive period of modern architecture in the USSR, known as Constructivist architecture, was actually promoted by two groups of architects: the Rationalists, organized in the Association of New Architects (Asnova), and the Utilitarian Constructivists, organized in the Society of Contemporary Architects (OSA). While modern architecture developed almost simultaneously in several countries and was conceived of as an international movement from its inception, the Constructivists contributed the greatest number of modern buildings erected during the 1920s, the most substantial research, and the soundest theoretical base of architectural design. Two institutions, the Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk) and the Free State Art Studios (Svomas, later renamed Vkhutemas) became centers of architectural experiments and arenas of theoretical debates.

Inkhuk was established in May, 1920, within the administrative framework of Moscow's Department of Fine Art (IZO). Its objective was to work out an official ideological and theoretical basis for the development of all the arts. Although Marxist theories were the starting point for the Institute's work, Marx himself had offered very little guidance since he never tackled directly the problem of proletarian culture. In asserting that every culture is a superstructure based on a particular economic system, Marx assumed a socialized economy to be the prerequisite for a classless society which would automatically create its unique classless culture. This attitude may explain the Soviet government's initial support of avant-garde artists (not yet accepted in capitalist societies) and of their search for an abstract artistic vocabulary of pure geometric forms divorced of any national or historic connotations, as leading towards an unprecedented international culture.

At its formation, Inkhuk united writers, painters, sculptors, and architects. Among the architects were the founders of Asnova, Nikolai Ladovskii, Nikolai Dokuchaev, and Vladimir Krinskii, and the leaders of OSA, the brothers Vesnin.

"The goal of the Institute of Artistic Culture is scientific research into the basic elements of the individual arts, as well as of art as a whole from the analytical and consequently from the synthetical viewpoint."

Kazimir Malevich (1878-1936), the founder of suprematism, consistently emphasized that suprematism is not an art movement, but a "world-outlook," a Weltanschauung. And although he is still acknowledged primarily as a painter from 1915 on Malevich also turned to architecture as a main outlet for his creative efforts. His stated goal was the creation of Suprematist architecture, which was to evolve from the incorporation of Suprematist principles into the existing environment. This new environment was to be imbued with absolute, eternal aesthetic values which would evoke specified sensations and feelings and thus continuously better their users. Such environments were to be achieved through the proper combinations of pure, enduring geometric forms, volumes, and planes. The synthesis of such pure architectonic forms in space Malevich called "architecture as such." His own experiments in composing harmonious geometric forms in space he called architektoniki (from the Greek architectonikos meaning constructed as if architecture). They were tools in the search for a contemporary architectural vocabulary and a comprehensive method of architectural composition.

The wide potentials opened up by Malevich's work were best realized by his collaborator in the Vitebsk art school Unovis (an abbreviation from "Affirmation of the New in Art"), El (Lazar) Lissitzky (1890-1941). Lissitzky was an architect by training. He studied architecture and engineering in Darmstadt (1900-1914) and graduated just in time to make his way home at the outbreak of World War I. After a brief employment with an architectural firm in Moscow (construction in Russia had come to a standstill), and a subsequent attempt to make a living as a book illustrator, Lissitzky returned to his home town, Vitebsk, to head the department of applied art in Unovis. The short period in Vitebsk (summer, 1919 to autumn, 1921) Lissitzky considers the most creative years of his life; he taught, developed his "Proun" theory, designed posters and book covers, wrote articles and essays, and worked on architectural projects. But El Lissitzky was more than the sum total of his activities. He conceived of his varied endeavors as integral parts of the designed human environment. His main concern was the development of a valid method of design equally applicable to graphics, implements, interiors, architecture, urban planning—every man-made object. His search was for permanent artistic concepts which would permeate and unite the entire environment of an industrial society. The painterly experiments of spatial compositions and harmonious correlations of planes, volumes, and spaces Lissitzky called Prouns (an abbreviation of their Russian name, "Project for the Affirmation of the New"). Although connoting the name of the art school Unovis, Lissitzky intentionally dropped the word "Art" in the name of his projects, since, in contrast to Malevich, he aimed at an environment for man's activities where art as fine art would no longer exist.

The theoretical foundation of the Proun was the logical continuation of the development of abstract art from Cubism to Suprematism. Lissitzky claimed that not only would "imitative painting," as he called representational painting, disappear as society becomes more urban and industrialized, but abstract painting would also vanish since its only purpose is to transform the vision of the artist and the public in search of new artistic values: