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Le Corbusier and the USSR: New Documentation

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FREDERICK STARR

LE CORBUSIER AND THE USSR

New documentation

The outward facts of Le Corbusier's brief involvement with the USSR between the years 1928 and 1932 are by now well known, thanks in part to the architect's own writings¹ and in part to subsequent works of scholarship.² In 1928 he was approached by the head of the Soviet trade union combine Tsentrosoiuz, which proposed that he design the combine's Moscow headquarters. Le Corbusier agreed, and the structure was built, the largest project carried to completion by Le Corbusier before 1945. Two years later Le Corbusier was invited to submit a proposal to the competition to design a Palace of Soviets in Moscow. Though he entered the course with high hopes, his project did not receive so much as an honorable mention. Angered when his entry was brushed aside in favor of a bombastic and academic entry by Boris Iofan, Le Corbusier had little further contact with the Soviet Union.

Such are the facts. What they do not indicate is the significance of the short-lived mutual attraction between the Swiss architect and his erstwhile Soviet patrons. On each side, the relationship and its breakdown set attitudes that endured for a full generation. For Le Corbusier, the Soviet Union became a land of democratic reaction in which the lowest element of popular taste was permitted to define the man-made environment; for the USSR, Le Corbusier became the bourgeois technocrat *par excellence*, blind to the need for an art that was both uplifting and accessible.

Several pieces of documentation crucial to these larger issues are still unavailable or preserved only in closed Soviet archives. Fortunately, a copy of one important text, the explanatory statement that Le Corbusier submitted with his Palace of Soviets entry, exists in the archive of the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris and can be studied there.³ Offsetting these lacunae are three recent finds that help clarify Le Corbusier's relationship to the USSR in general and to the Palace of Soviets competition in particular. The first, a collection of photographs and reminiscences by Sergei Kozhin,⁴ a young Moscow architect assigned to guide Le Corbusier during his 1928 visit to the USSR, hints at contacts between Le Corbusier and the Russian peasantry that help explain his later readiness to dismiss the rejection of his design for the Palace of Soviets as being inevitable, given popular attitudes within Russia. The

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second, a letter from the architect to the Soviet Commissar for Public Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharskii, reveals a shocked Le Corbusier trying desperately to hold on to his illusions about the attitude of the Soviet government towards modern architecture in the face of the rejection of his own design for the Palace of Soviets, and his last-ditch effort to ingratiate himself with the Soviet Commissar.⁵ The third, an exchange of letters between Le Corbusier and the writer Victor Nékrassov, then a young student of city planning in Kiev, indicates the bitterness of Le Corbusier's disappointment with the Soviet leaders and suggests why he could later turn with such enthusiasm to support Marshal Pétain's government at Vichy.⁶

*

The key to Le Corbusier's infatuation with the Soviets as patrons is the 1927-1928 rejection of his entry to the competition for a headquarters for the League of Nations at Geneva. Among the various sins cited by the jury when it rejected Le Corbusier's entry was the fact that he had submitted his drawings in Indian ink rather than the specified Chinese ink.⁷ Convinced that an international cabal of academic architects had conspired to humiliate him, Le Corbusier objected publicly to the jury's decision and then sought redress through a lawsuit. As this was proceeding, he was approached to design the headquarters for the Trade Union conglomerate in Moscow. Being himself strongly attracted to the doctrine of syndicalism⁸ and perhaps thinking that the Tsentrosoiuz was dedicated to such a program, Le Corbusier found the commission a sympathetic one and in 1928 travelled to Moscow to inspect the site. Thus began a relationship that was to cause Le Corbusier to be attacked in the West as "Moscow's torchbearer"—*Die Brandfackel Moskaus*.⁹

Le Corbusier had every reason to think he would be welcomed in the Soviet capital. As early as 1922, Moisei Ginsburg, later the founder of the Constructivist movement in Russian architecture, had published materials from Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* in his theoretical text *Stil' i epokha*.¹⁰ Scarcely had the Constructivists founded their journal *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura* in 1926 than Le Corbusier's name appeared on the masthead as a member of the international board of consultants.¹¹ Within the journal, his projects were frequently published and analyzed as examples of the highest ideals towards which the younger generation of Soviet architects should aspire. Even non-Constructivists like Konstantin Melnikov gauged their success by the extent to which the Parisian master approved their work.

Arriving in Moscow, then, Le Corbusier had reason to expect an enthusiastic reception. Nor was he disappointed. A year before the stock market crash imposed a virtual freeze on building in the West, Le Corbusier was astonished by his hosts' constant use of the term "big" and their apparent desire to break with the stodgy past. When he asked his Russian interpreter about the association of *bol'shoi* (big) with Bolshevism he was told "Bolshevism means everything as big as possible; the biggest theory, the biggest projects. Maximum. Going to the heart of any question. Examining it in depth. Envisaging the whole. Breadth and

size." "Till then," Le Corbusier confessed, "I had understood from our newspapers that Bolshevik meant a man with a red beard and a knife between his teeth."¹²

While in Moscow, Le Corbusier had as guide the architectural student, Sergei Kozhin, on whose kitchen table he executed the first sketches for the Tsentrosoiuz.¹³ It was Kozhin, too, who took Le Corbusier into the countryside to inspect traditional Russian wooden architecture. A series of photographs preserved by Kozhin's family in California show Le Corbusier, bowler hat on his head and a cigarette in his mouth, in front of various wooden houses and barns, and side by side with a weathered and hard-looking peasant woman—this, of course, on the very eve of the forced collectivization that was to take half again as many lives as the Holocaust. Such face-to-face contact with the Russian countryside was later to enable him virtually to write off the Soviet masses as unprepared to appreciate modern architecture.

For the time being, though, Le Corbusier saw the Soviet government as providing the enlightened and technologically literate leadership of which he had long dreamed. Returning to Paris with the Soviet architect Nikolai Kolli to assist him, Le Corbusier completed plans for the Tsentrosoiuz building and dispatched them to Moscow, where a construction schedule was set at once. Never mind that the closed ventilating system—the famous *respiration exacte*—was scrapped in favor of traditional radiators, and that various other unwelcome modifications were effected.¹⁴ The fact that Le Corbusier's most ambitious project to date was actually being constructed gave reason enough for him to look to future commissions from Moscow with great enthusiasm. He did not have long to wait.

In 1931 Soviet officials sent Le Corbusier a lengthy questionnaire on the reconstruction of the city of Moscow. Le Corbusier's initial response is not yet available.¹⁵ But the fact that the theoretical drawings of Le Corbusier's most important work—*La ville radieuse*—were made in order to answer this Soviet questionnaire attests to the centrality of the project in the architect's total *œuvre*.¹⁶ To say that Le Corbusier proposed to deal with ancient Moscow with a ruthlessness that Baron Haussmann might have envied is an understatement. Upon the radial plan of the historic capital Le Corbusier imposed a roughly rectilinear organization of arteries that would have required the virtual destruction of most of the city.

By early 1932 Le Corbusier was receiving reports on the progress of his Tsentrosoiuz building and was otherwise in frequent contact with authorities in Moscow regarding his proposals to redesign their city. To be sure, he was not inactive at home, either. His Cité-Refuge de l'Armée du Salut was under construction in Paris, embodying the closed ventilation system that had been rejected for the Tsentrosoiuz in Moscow. Moreover, his epochal housing complex for Swiss students at the University of Paris was also being built at this time, suggesting that Le Corbusier's fortunes had rebounded from the low point they had hit during the League of Nations dispute. Yet it was not Paris but Moscow in which he now placed his hopes.

In 1928 he had penned a tract, *Vers le Paris de l'époque machiniste*,¹⁷

but by 1931-1932 he was preoccupied with Moscow. Identifying himself consciously with the architect of the sixteenth-century Pont Neuf, he declared "Du Cerceau, architect to the King, created for his master what was needed: Bigness."¹⁸ Now such Bigness was to be achieved only through the party of bigness, the Bolsheviks, and their leader Stalin.

Just as he was penning these words, Le Corbusier's studio on rue de Sèvres was awaiting the Soviet jury's decision on the second phase of the competition for a Palace of Soviets. Since much has been written about this competition, the reader can refer to the many secondary works for general accounts of the program and various phases in the selection process.¹⁹ Suffice it to say that the building was conceived by the Soviet government, no less than by Le Corbusier himself, as a response to the League of Nations' claim to be constructing the capital of all nations in Geneva. The direct heir of Soviet efforts in 1919 and 1922 to construct a world capital for workers, it was at the same time a lineal descendant of several nineteenth-century attempts by the tsarist government to build on the same Moscow river site a national memorial that would symbolize the aspirations of the entire Russian nation.²⁰

While never a Communist Party member and not even a Marxist in any rigorous sense of the term, Le Corbusier embarked on this project with a fervor of messianism mixed with paranoia that rivalled that of its sponsors. In the same essay of early 1932 cited above, he conjured up a picture of a thoroughly defeated West, its banker-leaders hoping desperately to recoup their nations' economics by fanning war between Russia and China, a war that would at once create endless possibilities for foundering European and American industries in the form of orders for weapons and food and would also pin down on its eastern border Soviet power for a generation, thus taking the pressure off the West.²¹ A bizarre scenario, perhaps, but all the more significant in that Le Corbusier credited it as real. Clearly, he had absorbed the heady utopianism of the First Five-Year Plan and was using the threat of future Soviet greatness to ridicule those who had thwarted his career at home.

That there was a strong dose of naïveté in this need scarcely be said. But the tragedy of collectivization was little appreciated in western Europe and America in the early spring of 1932, and the dramatic change in temperament that the USSR had undergone during the last year of the First Five-Year Plan was all but unknown abroad, even as its importance was grossly underestimated by members of the Soviet intelligentsia at home. What Le Corbusier might have been apprised of, but evidently was not, was the changing Soviet attitude towards his own work that was already manifest by 1931, as he was working on his Palace of Soviets. On the one hand, several Soviet architects who had heretofore withheld praise appeared in print with fulsome acknowledgements of his accomplishments. One, the formalist Nikolai Dokuchaev, a member of the Association of New Architects and therefore opposed in principle to Constructivist utilitarianism, found praise for Le Corbusier's new purist aesthetic based on cubism.²² But on the other hand, the rising tide of populism that was expressed in what Ilya Ehrenburg called the "cult of accessibility" and which was eventually to be channelled into the doctrine of "Socialist Realism," was already touching Le Corbusier. One hostile critic,

D. Aranovich, in a review of contemporary French architecture, noted with unfeigned delight, albeit inaccurately, that Le Corbusier had "neither followers nor students" in the USSR.²³ Another, writing in *Pravda*, admitted Le Corbusier's influence but decried the fact that it seduced students in the USSR into drafting projects embodying "abstraction going all the way to utopianism."²⁴ In still another vein, the Moscow proletarian architect Alexander Nekrasov attacked the domination of architecture by utilitarian engineers, who, he claimed, "had opened a deep gulf between their art and architecture." Nekrasov argued that true contemporary architecture does not derive from the machine, as Le Corbusier claimed, but from the combination of classical principles with socialist ideals, that the former tsarist academician Ivan Zholtovskii and his younger Soviet disciples, including Boris Iofan, were developing. In these and other essays of 1929-1932 the names of those who were eventually to defeat Le Corbusier and the other modernists were already coming to the fore.²⁵

This threatening current was far from Le Corbusier's mind as he set out to develop his entry in the Palace of Soviets competition. After three months of frantic work, he and his colleagues developed a plan which has been called "perhaps the greatest building ever built."²⁶

Only a handful of the dozens of drawings, plans and elevations for this mammoth structure have been published. The remainder are preserved in closed archives in Moscow, although numerous drawings and plans are also to be found in the archives of the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris. Until these have all been analyzed in detail, one cannot speak with precision of the significant alterations the project underwent in the course of preparation.²⁷ What is clear is that the suspension of the ceiling for the 15,000 seat assembly hall from a soaring ferro-concrete parabolic arch constituted a signal innovation in its day, as did the elaborate system of ramps and roadways by which Moscow's non-existent automobile fleet would gain access to the building. Le Corbusier attached great importance to these technical achievements and elaborated his conception of the building in a model of such exactitude and elegance that it was later exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and then toured the United States for several years thereafter.²⁸ Its present whereabouts are unknown.

No winner was named for the first round of the competition, although entrants were given critiques of their projects. Le Corbusier was apparently told that his entry had caused a considerable stir, and that various technical aspects of his design had earned high praise among the Moscow architectural and political elite. He was also given certain suggestions for changes which he was able to introduce into the design without unduly altering the overall scheme. Finally, he was informed that the selection process would now enter a second phase to which any architect in the world would be free to submit proposals. Eventually over 160 projects were to be received, including twenty-four from abroad and eleven from the United States alone. In a flush of democratic zeal, rank amateurs, too, were encouraged to submit their ideas and a large number actually did so.²⁹

At the same time this procedure was made known to Le Corbusier

he was told that the solicited projects from the first phase would automatically qualify for the second phase. In short, Le Corbusier had reasonable grounds for thinking that he would be among the finalists, if not actually the winner, of the grand prize to design a capital for the workers of the world. Hence, when the blow fell on February 28, 1932, he was totally unprepared. The three first prizes of 12,000 rubles each were offered to Ivan Zholtovskii, a court architect to Nicholas II; Hector Hamilton, a virtually unknown designer of office buildings from New Jersey; and Boris Iofan, a younger Moscow architect whose work appeared to be a cross-breed of Zholtovskii's and Hamilton's. Le Corbusier was not even among the runners-up. Everything in which he had placed his hopes since 1928 now lay in ruins.

The explanations offered by the seventy-member jury and the several commentators whose critiques were later published in the official book in the competition provided no consolation. Academician A. V. Shchusev, for example, wrote that

"The predominance of skeletal-industrial motifs of construction emphasized by Le Corbusier, when applied to a building for the center of Moscow, imparts a completely incorrect interpretation to the idea of the Palace. This incorrectness is only reinforced by the separated disposition of the halls on the site, which recalls the confusion of an industrial town."³⁰

Another critic acknowledged the immense Soviet interest in Le Corbusier's work but, after examining with care and respect the purely technical aspects of the project, attacked its outward appearance:

"On the artistic expressiveness of his project Le Corbusier says nothing, supposing that this expressiveness should appear as a natural consequence of the functional solutions and techniques of construction he has employed. But it is clear that [all this] is still insufficient for imparting to the structure the degree of high artistic expressiveness that is unconditionally essential for a project like the Palace of Soviets."³¹

The rejection of his project by the Soviet judges and the blatantly traditionalist basis of their opposition outraged Le Corbusier. After staking his hopes on the USSR, he found that, with respect to architecture, it behaved no better than the League of Nations. It is a bitter irony that Le Corbusier's letter of complaint to his old acquaintance, the Soviet Commissar of Public Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharskii, should have been addressed to Geneva, the scene of Le Corbusier's earlier humiliation. As it happened, Lunacharskii was in the Swiss city as a member of the Soviet delegation at the meetings of the preparatory commission for the League of Nations's disarmament conference. Unknown to Le Corbusier, but rich in symbolism, the USSR was at that very moment on the verge of joining the League!

Le Corbusier's letter, the original of which is presented for the first

time below, reveals the extent of his shock at the Moscow jury's decision and at the same time his monumental egotism, which led him still to assume that the USSR would eventually embrace his vision of a modern architecture and society, in the face of all the contrary forces at work within that nation. It is this egotism, too, that led Le Corbusier, in his letter to Lunacharskii, to misread completely the nature of Stalin's rise to power and of his chief instrument of success, the Five-Year Plan. Clearly, Le Corbusier hoped that the set-back in his personal fortunes would be only temporary and that it lay within his powers, through shameless ingratiating and gratuitous attacks on his western colleagues, to attain the position of court architect in Moscow to which he had long aspired.



13 mars 1932

Monsieur Lounatcharsky
Genève

Cher Monsieur,

Vous ne m'en voudrez pas de revenir sur l'entretien que nous avons eu à Genève samedi dernier concernant le Palais des Soviets.

Le Palais des S[oviets] est (dit le programme) le couronnement du Plan quinquennal. Qu'est le Plan quinquennal ? La tentative la plus héroïque et véritablement majestueuse dans sa décision d'équiper la société moderne pour lui permettre de vivre harmonieusement. Au bout du Plan quinquennal, une *idée*. Quelle idée : rendre l'homme heureux. Comment atteindre, au milieu des résidus innombrables d'un premier cycle de civilisation machiniste, un état de pureté capable seul d'ouvrir une ère de bonheur ? En n'hésitant pas à se tourner résolument vers l'avenir, en décidant d'être d'aujourd'hui, d'agir et de penser « aujourd'hui ».

Ainsi a fait l'URSS. Du moins le croyons-nous, nous qui regardons de loin votre effort. Nous le regardons avec un tel intérêt, avec une telle soif de voir se réaliser quelque part sur la terre, cette aspiration universelle vers un état d'harmonie, qu'une fois en est née, partant, une mystique. Cette mystique : l'URSS. Poètes, artistes, sociologues, les jeunes gens et surtout ceux qui sont restés jeunes parmi ceux qui ont connu la vie, — tous ont admis que quelque part — en URSS — le destin avait permis que la chose fût. L'URSS se fera connaître un jour matériellement — par l'effet du Plan quinquennal. Mais, dès aujourd'hui, l'URSS a allumé sur le monde entier une lueur d'aurore. Des cœurs vrais sont tournés vers nous. Ça, c'est une victoire, — bien plus forte que celle qui suivra sur le plan matériel.

« L'architecte exprime la qualité d'esprit d'une époque. » Donc le Palais des Soviets révélera, dans la splendeur des proportions, la finalité des buts poursuivis chez vous depuis 18. On verra de quoi il s'agit. Le monde verra. Plus que cela, l'humanité trouvera sous les auspices de

l'architecture un *verbe* exact, infrelatable, hors de toute cabale, de toute surenchère, de tout camouflage : le Palais, centre des institutions de l'URSS.

Vous avez fait connaître par le monde que ce palais serait l'expression de la masse anonyme qui vit l'époque présente.

Décision : comme la Société des Nations, le Palais des Soviets sera construit en Renaissance italienne...

La Renaissance italienne — comme les Romains et les Grecs — construisait en *pierre*. Si grands que fussent les rêves, la pierre fixait les limites de sa mise en œuvre et de son obéissance aux lois de la pesanteur.

A la Renaissance, il y avait des princes lettrés qui dominaient les masses. Un gouffre séparait la fortune et le peuple. Un gouffre séparait le palais, logis des princes, de la maison du Peuple.

L'URSS, union des républiques soviétiques *prolétariennes*, dressera un palais qui sera hautain et hors le peuple.

Ne nous illusionnons pas dans la rhétorique : je sais parfaitement que le peuple — et le moujik aussi — trouve admirable les palais de rois et qu'il est de son goût d'avoir des frontons de temple sur le bois de son lit.

Mais la tête pensante des Républiques soviétiques doit-elle conduire ou flatter et cultiver des goûts prouvant la faiblesse humaine ?

Nous attendons de l'URSS ce geste qui domine, élève et conduit, parce qu'il exprime le jugement le plus haut et le plus pur. Sinon ? Sinon il n'y a plus d'URSS et de doctrine et de mystique et de tout... Il est EFFARANT de devoir être conduit à poser de telles questions.

En un mot pour conclure : il est effarant, angoissant, dramatique, pathétique que la décision actuelle de Moscou puisse commencer son œuvre de désagrégation de l'opinion, de désenchantement, d'amère ironie. Et que le Plan quinquennal se couronne de ceci : « petitesse des hommes ».

Cher Monsieur, dans mes propos, nulle amertume de candidat évincé. Non. Mais j'aime trop l'architecture et trop la *Vérité* pour désespérer déjà. Je voudrais aller parler à Moscou, expliquer, exprimer. Je voudrais aller dire ceci : l'effort innombrable, l'immense labeur anonyme ou signé de ces cent années de sciences, a créé sur le monde la *grande collaboration*. Il n'est un appoint technique : béton armé, fer, verre, chauffage, ventilation, acoustique, statique, dynamisme, il n'est un outil : machines de toutes natures — qui ne prouvent la grande collaboration.

L'architecture — en l'occurrence l'architecte — a pour mission de mettre en ordre cette armée de collaboration et par la vertu de la puissance créatrice de composition, par la puissance d'une intention élevée, elle peut exprimer le visage unique et magnifique de cette humanité créative. Ce visage serait-il un masque ? Jamais, non jamais.

Me permettez-vous de parler objectivement ? *J'aimerais aller à Moscou.*

Le 29 de ce mois, s'ouvre à Barcelone la session du Comité inter-[nation]al pour la préparation du Congrès international d'Architecture qui se tiendra à Moscou en septembre.

Mon voyage d'Alger peut être remis (je viens de l'apprendre) à mai.

Je suis attendu à Rome pour deux conférences présidées par Mussolini et pour une entrevue avec lui. But : les Italiens me demandent d'aller

arracher le Duce à l'erreur dans laquelle il s'enfoncé en ordonnant de construire l'Italie en *style Romain* (Vous voyez combien le mal est partout.)

S'il vous était possible de préparer mon voyage à Moscou ? Je vais même être indiscret : ne m'avez-vous pas dit que vous retourniez sous peu à Moscou ? Alors ceci : s'il m'était possible de vous accompagner dans ce voyage, je pourrais vous entretenir de tout ce qui bouillonne en moi, relativement aux villes et aux maisons.

A Moscou, je pourrais, en dehors du Palais parler en public de la *Ville Radieuse* et expliquer où le progrès et une vue large nous ont conduits et exposer à votre pays qui est le seul ayant les institutions permettant la réalisation des programmes contemporains, le détail technique de la question :

la réforme architecturale

la *journée solaire* de 24 heures et son programme

les nouvelles techniques de la *respiration exacte* à l'intérieur des bâtiments (avec les résultats des récents essais du laboratoire de St-Gobain) (Problème décisif capital pour l'URSS)

les problèmes de l'économie du sol dans l'économie domestique

l'insonorisation des logis

l'acoustique

Là sont des vérités, des réalités, des choses à longue trajectoire qui sont dans l'esprit du Plan quinquennal — beaucoup plus que certaines méthodes restrictives, sans imagination et malthusiennes, auxquelles on a fait grand accueil en URSS.

Et si l'on veut, je pourrais parler de *proportion*, de beauté, de ces choses qui sont les impératifs de ma vie, car il n'y a pas de bonheur possible, sans l'esprit de qualité.

A Buenos Aires en 1929, j'ai fait dix conférences (un cycle) en quinze jours. Je veux bien le faire à Moscou.

Cher Monsieur, voici vingt ans que je vis comprimé. Paris m'a été jusqu'ici indispensable car Paris est le champ clos de la qualité. La vie sévère que j'y mène a porté des fruits. Ignorant en tout, je le sais, je connais toutefois beaucoup de choses de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme.

J'ai à Moscou des amis de cœur, des collègues dans lesquels j'ai grand espoir. J'ai à Moscou des ennemis, mais, je crois, beaucoup d'amis.

Je vous dirai encore ceci : à Moscou j'ai toujours défendu M. Joltowsky qui est un vrai architecte, sensible et plein de talent. C'est cet arrêt inattendu sur une forme historique de l'architecture qui a créé nos divergences. Mais je parlerais avec lui d'architecture, infiniment mieux qu'avec la plupart de mes collègues occidentaux qui se dénomment « architectes modernes ».

Je termine : entièrement désintéressé, passionné d'architecture, à l'âge de maturité où un homme doit *donner*, j'offre ma collaboration en toute loyauté et sans espoirs de gains.

Voilà.

Tout cela était long à dire. Voulez-vous me pardonner d'avoir retenu si longtemps votre attention.

V[otre] bien dévoué

Le Corbusier³²



Since one copy of this letter was preserved in the Lunacharskii archive, we can be sure that Le Corbusier's fulminations reached their destination, though we have no evidence of Lunacharskii's reaction or response. It is certain, however, that Lunacharskii's response—or silence—was unsatisfactory from Le Corbusier's standpoint. His offer to visit Moscow and set forth his ideas having been rebuffed, Le Corbusier grew increasingly angry. One may suppose that he discussed the outrageous notions of the Soviet jury with his fellow western architects when they met in Barcelona—not mentioning, of course, the snide remarks about them that he had only recently made in his letter to Lunacharskii. At any rate, by the time Le Corbusier received a questionnaire from a group of students of city planning in Kiev, his wrath had reached monumental proportions. The students, headed by V. Nékrassov (no relation to Alexandre Nekrasov cited above), turned to the Swiss master builder with a series of very mild questions.³³



Kieff rue Proletarskaja 24/17

Monsieur,

Nous, — un groupe d'étudiants de la faculté d'Architecture de l'Institut de Construction à Kieff (URSS) — nous adressons à vous avec une demande, qui, nous l'espérons, ne vous incommodera pas trop.

Nous intéressant beaucoup au sort de l'architecture contemporaine et désirant connaître les opinions de ses représentants les plus éminents, nous prenons la liberté de vous poser les quatre questions suivantes :

1. Que pensez-vous des résultats du concours international du Palais des Soviets à Moscou ?

2. Qui considérez-vous comme le plus éminent des architectes contemporains de l'Europe Occidentale et de l'Union Soviétique ?

3. Ne trouvez-vous pas que ces derniers temps on remarque dans l'architecture la tendance de tourner à droite et comment l'expliquez-vous ?

4. Quelle explication donnez-vous au fait que les plus intéressantes et originales, au point de vue de l'architecture moderne dans l'Europe Occidentale sont... les églises (?), p. ex. — la cathédrale de Bialostok (Pologne), les églises de Düsseldorf, de Francfort s/M, etc. ?

En nous excusant encore une fois du dérangement que nous vous causons et en attendant avec impatience votre réponse, nous vous prions, Monsieur, d'agréer l'expression de notre profonde considération.

V. Nekrassoff
L. Serpiline
Domansky
V. Mousitchenco
L. Barabach

P.-S. Ci-joint une enveloppe avec notre adresse





Le Corbusier's reply of October 13, 1932, must have shocked the young Ukrainians with its vitriol. With the concurring signatures of eight other distinguished West European architects, Le Corbusier voiced all the bitterness that had been festering in him since the springtime announcement (see letter, p. 202).

Nékrassov and his friends might well have been astonished at this blast of vitriol from a person whom he had scarcely met and with whom he had little in common. But undaunted, he turned once more to Le Corbusier with a second letter dated 13 November, 1932. It is unfortunate that this document is not extant, for without it one is at a loss to explain the much milder tone in which Le Corbusier couched his letter of response (see letter, p. 205).

Comparing these lines with Le Corbusier's earlier letter of 13 October 1932, one wonders what had caused the volte-face? The relative mildness of this second reply to Nékrassov can be traced to two quite different causes. First, Le Corbusier seems to have decided that the involvement of his friends and disciples, the brothers Vesnin, in the task force assigned to rework Iofan's winning entry opened the way for him to influence the outcome of events in Moscow and even perhaps to insinuate part or all of his own project into the final design. Second, he apparently came to accept the official view that a purely avant-garde project would not appear sufficiently to the tastes of the Russian masses.

At any rate, he was willing at least to acknowledge that "the judgment of the jury was probably the result of careful attention to psychology. I recognize the reasons but still not without regret."³⁴ In other words, the primitive character of the Russian masses rendered them unfit to appreciate modern architecture.

Whether this judgment, elaborated at some length in a memorandum of 1934, was a mere rationalization or the considered result of the impressions of the Russian peasantry he had garnered during his 1928 trip, it marked Le Corbusier's decisive turning away from the USSR and the Communist experiment in general. True, he maintained contact with Alexander Vesnin, who continued after 1932 to publish laudatory articles on him and even to compare him to Brunelleschi.³⁵ He also received at least one more letter from his young correspondents in Kiev, who, to be sure, stayed prudently within the bounds of what was officially acceptable.³⁶ But with the exception of such personal associations and the continuing contact necessitated by the final stage of work on the Tsentrosoiuz building, Le Corbusier's break with the USSR was complete. The road to Vichy lay open.

For its part, the world of Soviet architecture turned equally decisively away from the ideals espoused by Le Corbusier and his Russian friends and manifest so fully in the project for the Palace of Soviets. Henceforth, no project in the utilitarian spirit of Le Corbusier could hope to succeed in the USSR unless it was thoroughly masked with frescoes, statues, and other ornamentation of heroic proportions. "Le Corbusianism" became a term of abuse, defined by novelist Aleksei Tolstoi on the pages of *Izvestiia* as a

symbol of "isolation, the power of the sword, of gold, or of mystical delusion—in short, individualism."³⁷ Those friends of Le Corbusier who continued to function professionally—notably Ginsburg and the Vesnins—either muted their avant-gardism or retreated into pedagogy or purely technical experiments. Others, such as Kolli, switched over to a safe Socialist Realism while still others, such as Sergei Kozhin, emigrated.

New Orleans, 1980.

1. Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse* (Paris, 1933); and Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, *Œuvre complète de 1929 à 1934* (Zurich: Willy Boesiger, 1964).
2. See especially Giorgio Ciucci, "Le Corbusier e Wright in URSS," in Manfredo Tafuri, ed., *Socialismo, città, architettura URSS, 1917-1937: il contributo degli architetti europei* (Rome: 2nd ed., 1972): 171-194.
3. Soiuz sovetskikh arkhitektorov, Iu. M. Slavinskii, ed., *Dvoretsov; vsesoiuznyi konkurs 1932 g.* (Moscow, 1933): 84. Cf. Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, "Projet pour la construction du Palais des Soviets à Moscou", note explicative, décembre 1931, Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.
4. Sergei Kozhin, *Zapiski arkhitekatora* (n.d., MS).
5. Le Corbusier's letter to Lunacharskii was published in Russian in A. V. Lunacharskii, *Ob izobrazitel'nom iskusstve*, I. A. Sats, compiler (Moscow, 1967) I: 489-492.
6. These documents were made available to the author by the *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* and by the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris. In thanking the directors of the Fondation, the author wishes also to express his gratitude to Dominique Négre for her timely assistance.
7. Robert Furneaux Jordan, *Le Corbusier* (London, 1972): 52 sq.
8. Robert Fishman, "From the radiant city to Vichy; Le Corbusier's plans and politics, 1928-1942," in Russell, Walden, eds, *The open hand: essays on Le Corbusier* (Cambridge, 1977): 245 sq.
9. Cited in Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, *op. cit.*: 16.
10. Moisei Ginsburg, *Stil' i epokha* (Tver': 1922).
11. On this relationship see S. Frederick Starr, "The Union of contemporary architects," in George Gibian ed., *The Russian avant-garde, 1900-1930* (Ithaca, 1974).
12. Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse*, *op. cit.*: 183.
13. S. Kozhin, *op. cit.*: 139.
14. R. F. Jordan, *op. cit.*: 55.
15. For the questionnaire on the reconstruction of the city of Moscow, cf. Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.
16. Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse*, *op. cit.*: 291.
17. Issued as a supplement to the bulletin *Redressement français*, 15 Febr. 1928: 12.
18. Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse*, *op. cit.*: 183.
19. See the excellent accounts by Anatole Kopp, *L'architecture de la période stalinienne* (Grenoble, 1978) chapt. 7; Antonia Cunliffe, "The competition for the Palace of Soviets in Moscow, 1931-33," *Architectural Association Quarterly*, 11, 2 (1979): 36-48; and the list of sources in Anatole Senkevitch, Jr., *Soviet architecture, 1917-1962, a bibliographical guide to source material* (Charlottesville, 1974): 166-173.
20. See S. Frederick Starr, *The incomplete symbol: Russia's search for a national Capitol, 1800-1950*, for the Tulane University School of Architecture (New Orleans, 1980).
21. Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse*, *op. cit.*: 184-185.
22. N. Dokuchaev, "Korbuze-Sone," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 3-4 (1929): 130.
23. D. Aranovich, cited in K. N. Afanasev, ed., *Iz istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury 1926-1932, dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow, 1970): 112.

24. D. Arkin, "V poiskakh novoi arkhitektury," *Pravda*, 14 Jul. 1928.
25. A. Nekrasov, "Puti arkhitektury; k probleme stilia sovetskoi arkhitektury," *Pechat' i revoliutsiia*, 4 (1928): 69 sq.
26. R. F. Jordan, *op. cit.*: 57-58.
27. *Dvorets sovetov*, *op. cit.*: 84.
28. R. F. Jordan, *op. cit.*: 59.
29. Cf. B. N. Zasyupkin, "Tvorcheskaia initsiativa rabochikh predlozhenii v proektirovanii dvortsa sovetov," in *Dvorets sovetov*, *op. cit.*: 95-99.
30. A. V. Shchusev, "Mezhdunarodnyi konkurs dvortsa sovetov," in *ibid.*: 78.
31. *Ibid.*: 85.
32. Archive of the Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris. A Russian translation has been published, see n. 5. In the Soviet edition, the letter is inaccurately dated as 13 May, rather than 13 March, 1932.
33. Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris. Made available through the courtesy of the *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*.
34. Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, *op. cit.*: 17.
35. A. Vesnin, report to Moscow architects, Febr. 1936, reproduced in Mikhail G. Barkhin, Iurii S. Iaralov, compilers, *Mastera sovetskoi arkhitektury ob arkhitekture*, 2 vols (Moscow, 1975), II: 23.
36. Dated 28 February 1933. Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.
37. Aleksei Tolstoi, "Poiski monumental'nosti," *Izvestiia*, 27 Febr. 1932.