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Le Corbusier's Centrosoyuz in Moscow

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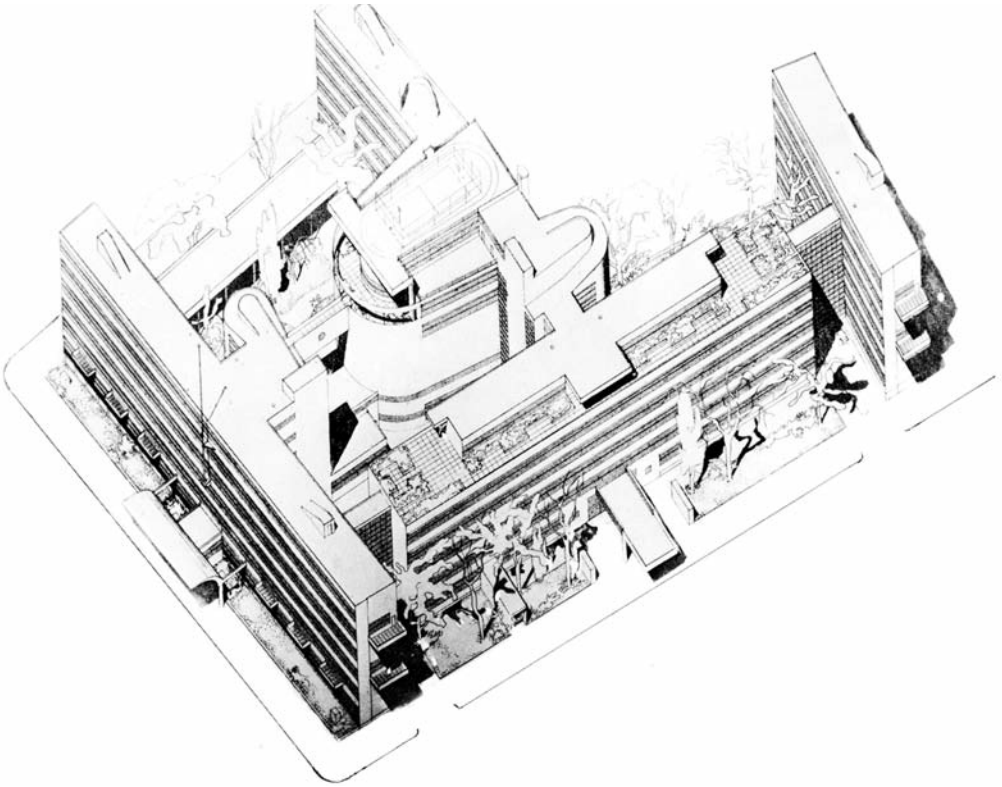
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1. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, Centrosoyuz, Moscow, first project, 1928, axonometric drawing. Courtesy of Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

Le Corbusier's Centrosoyuz in Moscow

In 1928, an unprecedented event took place in Moscow: the architects confronting each other in the competition for the design of the headquarters of the Cooperative movement, or Centrosoyuz, requested that the job be given to Le Corbusier, then present on the first of his three pre-1930 trips to Moscow. Designed with his cousin and partner Pierre Jeanneret and with the collaboration of the Russian architect Nikolai Kolli for the construction drawings, the building was completed in 1936, but not without a troubled genesis.¹

The initial patron was Isidor Liubimov, an old Bolshevik and ambitious business leader who knew quite well the policies of Western cities.² The building was meant to accommodate the offices of the cooperatives, then thriving, as the New Economic Policy was giving way to the Five-Year Plan. A large auditorium for management meetings and spectacles had to be included. The site chosen was located on the Miasnitskaia Street, an important radial street leading to the Liubianka Square. On a nearby lot in 1927, Boris Velikovskiy had built the Gostorg offices using a visible concrete structure; it is still standing, unfortunately recently refurbished with inadequate window frames.

Le Corbusier's project survived the first round of the competition, in which Peter Behrens and Max Taut had also taken part. He was invited to a second round, together with Soviet architects, including Ivan Leonidov, which was never judged, as the competitors joined voice to support his entry. Le Corbusier worked hard to imagine a series of solutions for the articulation of the office wings and the auditorium before traveling to Moscow in October 1928 with a first complete set of drawings, in order to discuss with the patrons and conceive the final design. As he frequently did to outbid the commissions received, Le Corbusier went far beyond the limits of the plot, proposing a complete reorganization of the neighborhood. But the design was in itself extremely clear in its plan layout: one main and thicker wing was to be built alongside the Miasnitskaia, with two thinner, lateral wings and the auditorium in the back connected to a fourth wing, leading to a new street parallel to the Miasnitskaia, in accordance with the city plan of 1928. Following his discovery of the crowds invading the streets of Moscow, he modified the building to

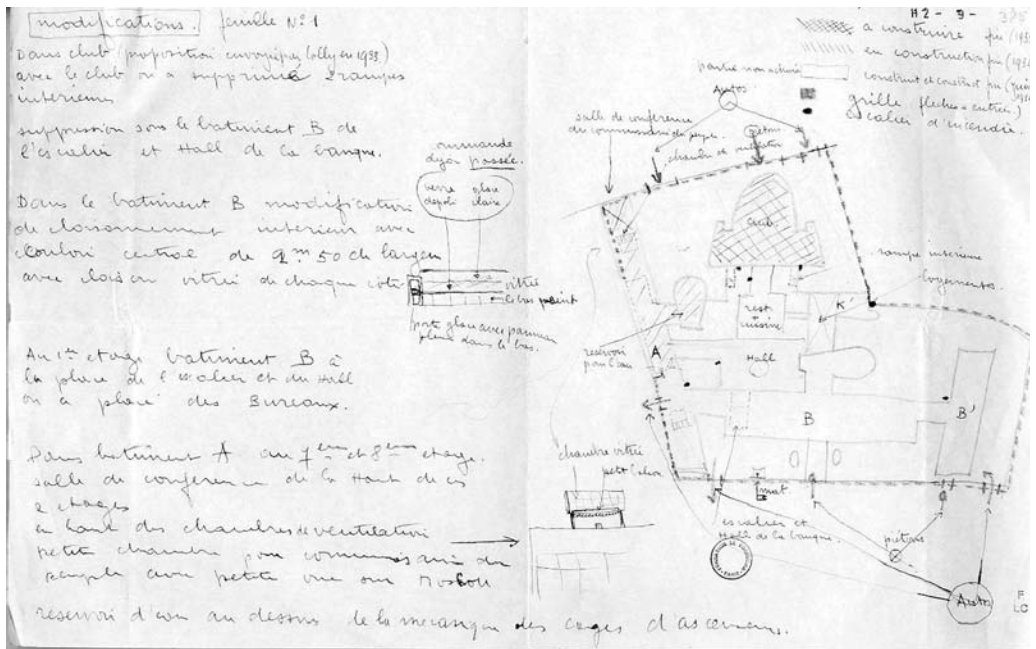
introduce pilotis under each wing, changed the main axis of the auditorium, and suppressed the fourth wing.

He wrote: “*Circulation* is a term which I used all the time in Moscow, so much so in fact that some Soviet delegates became distinctly ill at ease. *Architecture is circulation*. Think what this means. It condemns academic methods and sanctions the principle of *pilotis*.”³ From the pilotis, the employees of Centrosoyuz were supposed to reach their workspace using a system of ramps (climbing seven floors . . .) and some elevators.

In his 1930 book *Précisions*, Le Corbusier also insists on the upper tier of the building: “on the skyline, the impeccable lines of this crystal prism circled with a band of volcanic stone that mark the parapet of the terraces. The sharp break with the sky is one of the most adorable conquests of modern technique (the elimination of the roof and the cornice).”⁴ Between the sky and the pilotis, he used different types of façades, some clad in Caucasus tuff and others in glass, using the concept of the “neutralizing wall” he was then imagining, in combination with the principle of “exact respiration” inside the rooms. But this early air-conditioning scheme, which would have been implemented by an American firm,⁵ proved much too costly to implement in the dire conditions of Russia’s building sites.

Besides returning to a more conventional heating system, the project approved for construction embodied certain changes in respect to the model exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Western Art in Moscow in 1930, the main one being an opening up of the plan toward the west. Construction had started that year, but Le Corbusier would never again return to Moscow. The supervision of the site was carried out by Kolli, in contact with Paris by mail, and by the former draughtsman of the office, Frantisek Sammer, who had moved to Moscow. Yet, the scarcity of building materials led to an interruption of work in 1931–32. Former Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer couldn’t hide his Schadenfreude, writing that “this orgy of concrete and glass would never be finished, but that it would be abandoned, if only because of the materials.”⁶

Construction resumed in 1932, when Liubimov was appointed Peoples’ Commissar for Light Industry, a position he held until his arrest and execution during the 1937 purges. The new function of the building did not really impact its architecture, and the reports to Le Corbusier by visitors like José Luis Sert or Charlotte Perriand, who both came to Moscow in 1934, were rather positive, except on the issue of colors. The samples sent by Kolli through Charlotte, who documented all the problems met on the site, prompted an angry reaction from Le Corbusier. He then affirmed that “the colors are those of the boudoir” and do not represent a Soviet polychromy.⁷



2. Charlotte Perriand, sketch of the Centrosoyuz site, sent from Moscow, 1934. Courtesy of Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

In fact, more substantial changes took place in the construction of the façade, with the use of metallic frames for the double glazing, which were thicker than the slender ones perhaps incautiously drafted in Paris. Also, the limited supply of high-quality glass led to the use of two different colors—white and green—for the windowpanes.⁸ In the back of the building, the pilotis were fluted, this manner of “colonization” giving them the dignity simple cylindrical stilts would not have acquired. This policy of architectural “improvement” also extended to the interior where the industrial finishes imagined by Le Corbusier were dropped in favor of more elaborate materials. The posts in the great hall were faced with reconstituted grey marble, with pale oak moldings in lieu of the missing capitals, and faux black marble plinths. The correspondence of Charlotte Perriand reveals that the changes in favor of flashier materials were imposed by Liubimov himself.⁹

The walls were faced in yellow Crimean marble, and the floors composed of large squares of light-grey marble with a crisscross pattern of darker grey lines. The ramps were carpeted in black rubber and paneled with oak. The walls of the landings were of grey marble. The office partitions were also largely decorated in various pale-colored woods.¹⁰ In short, the completed object was totally faithful to the composition and the structural principles of Le Corbusier but had been significantly resurfaced internally by Kolli.

The building was hotly debated in the press. Viktor Kokorin qualified this “chuzhoi dom” (foreign house) as “unholy.”¹¹ Sergei Kozhin, the former constructivist and later partner of Richard Neutra, regretted the “cold, monotonous,



3. Centrosoyuz, Moscow, 1928–36; Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, architects. Rear façade on the Novomiasnitskaia street. Photograph by Jean-Louis Cohen, ca. 2000.

disagreeable” nature of the walls behind which “people must work under tension, like automata, without joy.”¹² Alexander Vesnin alone bravely praised “Moscow’s best building in the last hundred years,” as one “characterized by clarity of architectural thought, precision in the construction of masses and volumes, the purity of different elements reflecting contrast and nuance, overall scale and attention to detail, a lightness associated with monumentality, simplicity and architectural unity.”¹³ In a heated meeting with the architects, Party leader Lazar Kaganovich, Stalin’s deputy in charge of architecture, simply declared the building to be a “a big fat sow with legs too short.”¹⁴ And Kolli himself retreated to a safe distance at the tribune of the 1937 Architects’ congress.

Having survived the war’s bombs unhurt, the building would not be spared the attacks of the architectural *apparashiki* in the years of Zhdanovism. The ideologue Mikhail Tsapenko still condemned it violently in 1952.¹⁵ The building would be rehabilitated, together with architectural modernism in general, under Khrushchev, as it was transferred to the central direction of Statistics of the USSR. It is featured for instance in 1962 in Bylinkin’s handbook *Istoria sovetsko architektury 1917–1958*, where it is seen as “an example of the most acute expression of western constructivism”: “the building’s plan layout fits fully with the content and the character of a soviet institution,” even if some rooms are underlit and other receive “excessive summer light.” “The reason is the canonization of some formal principles.” “The volumetric composition on the Kirov street side is expressive.”¹⁶



4. Centrosoyuz, Moscow, detail of the glass façade on the Miasnitskaia Street. Photograph by Jean-Louis Cohen, 2006.

Yet, according to Bylinkin, “the additions to the ground floor have partially destroyed the architect’s concept.” It is true that the pilotis space had been by then completely enclosed in order to extend the office space. Kolli supervised some restoration work on the façade in the 1960s, before a complete overhaul of the glass walls in the 1970s, under the direction of Leonid Pavlov, a former student of Ivan Leonidov. Probably the most Miesian of the Soviet architects active from the 1960s through the 1980s, Pavlov also built an elegant office building in the back of the Centrosoyuz. Aluminum profiles were used in a restrained manner for these works.

Now occupied by the Federal Service of State Statistics of Russia, the building is listed as a historic monument “protected by the State.” One plaque and a sculptural composition featuring a reproduction of the Modulor vouch for this status on the building. The question of whether this protection status is of the “federal” level is crucial to the building’s eligibility for being restored with state funds, unlike buildings that have the status of “local” monuments and are not public property.

Indeed, a complete overhaul of the structure is necessary to return it to a state of historical consistency. The task is not impossible, given the apparently sound condition of the building’s structural elements such as the concrete skeleton, the ramps, and the roof. The exact condition of the offices is difficult to assess, as it is always very difficult to visit the interior of the building (statistics seem to remain as secret



5. Centrosoyuz, Moscow, detail of the stone façade on the Novomiasnitskaia Street. Photograph by Jean-Louis Cohen, 2006.

in Putin's Russia as they were in Soviet times), but a series of problems can be easily listed, based on frequent surveys of the exterior and on a 2006 visit, made without permission to take photographs.

On the exterior, the building's surroundings are poorly managed. The space under the building remains enclosed, and the pilotis are unperceivable. The integrity of the stone cladding has been compromised by the poor condition of the joints and irrelevant cement repairs. The outdoor space is lit with unfit fixtures. The aluminum frames have aged and are sometimes deformed. Occasionally, clear glass panes have been replaced by colored ones. The inadequacy of the HVAC systems is reflected in the episodic presence of external air conditioners, installed in an ad hoc manner, and by protruding mechanical ventilation ducts added on the Miasnitskaia Street side.

As perceived from the outside, substantial transformations have been brought to the offices. The interior façade has been reshaped to create conventional windows, and new partitions have been introduced to accommodate daily activities. Of course, the ideal here would not be to return to an absolutely "authentic" organization of the office space reflecting Le Corbusier's unimplemented ideas, but simply to respect the architectonic properties of the building. Or are we thinking, in the manner of Viollet-le-Duc, to "return the building to a state which might never have existed at a given moment"?¹⁷

A brief visit to the interior reveals the poor condition of a large part of the floors, where the original white and grey



6. Centrosoyuz, Moscow, main ramps.
Photograph by Richard Pare.

marble installed by Kolli has been replaced by ordinary tiles. A large part of the ground floor's pavement has been damaged by the underground works related with the creation of a new subway line, but damage seems at first sight to be limited to the superficial layers of the structure. The original rubber flooring is in most cases missing from the ramps. The original paternoster chain elevators, once a feature of all office buildings in Germany and Russia, are unusable, but they could easily be restored. Many such systems are still working, and I recently saw a perfectly functioning one in the former AEG Neue Automobil Fabrik in Berlin-Oberschöne weide (1910; Peter Behrens, architect).

The lighting used throughout the circulation spaces of the Centrosoyuz building is based on neon tubes, which are dysfunctional, anachronistic, and simply irrelevant. If the office floors lit by the glass wall are bathed in sometimes-excessive sunlight, most circulations have a rather gloomy atmosphere. The issue of color cannot of course be dismissed. The present grayish tone of the walls does not correspond either to the colors prescribed by Le Corbusier or to the color scheme proposed by Kolli, which can be found in the archive of the Le Corbusier Foundation in Paris.¹⁸

Russia has not (yet) joined the preparation of a collective bid made in 2005–2006 by five countries—Argentina, France, Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland—following an initiative



7. Centrosoyuz, Moscow, ramp. Photograph by Richard Pare.

of the Le Corbusier Foundation to have a cluster of superbly restored buildings by Le Corbusier proposed for UNESCO's World Heritage list, but the country's representative was not entirely negative. The Russian committee for UNESCO is supportive of the idea, and maybe the Centrosoyuz will in the end be included in a list of emblematic buildings to be protected and restored. Despite the apparent solidity of its main structure, it is nevertheless clear that the restoration of many of its architectural features is a considerable project, which will require a direct investment by Russia's federal government. In short, it is a test of the willingness of the country's leadership to protect its modern heritage. The quality of the built spaces, as documented by Richard Pare's photographs, is an excellent incentive for future action.

Author Biography

Jean-Louis Cohen trained as an architect and historian in Paris and is a professor at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. His research focuses on twentieth-century architecture and urban planning in France, Russia, Germany, and North Africa. His work has resulted in numerous exhibitions and books on both sides of the Atlantic. He has published *Casablanca: Colonial Myths and Architectural Ventures* (with Monique Eleb, 2002), *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge 1893–1960* (1995), and *Le Corbusier and the Mystique of the USSR: Theories and Projects for Moscow, 1928–1936* (1992). In 2007, he curated MoMA's exhibition *Lost Vanguard: Soviet Modernist Architecture 1922–32*.

Endnotes

¹ See my *Le Corbusier and the Mystique of the USSR: Theories and Projects for Moscow, 1928–1936* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

² Isidor Liubimov, ed., *Bolshye Goroda Zapadnoi Evropy Berlin Parizh London, po dannym zagranichnoi delegatsii Moskovskogo Soveta* (Moscow: Izd. MKKh, 1926).

³ Le Corbusier, "Les techniques sont l'assiette même du lyrisme; elles ouvrent un nouveau cycle de l'architecture," in *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture*

- et de l'urbanisme* (Paris: G. Crès & Cie, 1930), 46, 48. I prefer this translation by Kenneth Hylton to the published one: *Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).
- ⁴ Le Corbusier, "Les techniques sont l'assiette même du lyrisme," 59–60.
- ⁵ American Blower Corporation, letter to Le Corbusier, January 24, 1930, Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris (to be abbreviated as FLC from here on).
- ⁶ Hannes Meyer, "Hannes Meyer über Sowjetrußland," *Die Baugilde* 11, no. 30 (1931): 1602.
- ⁷ Le Corbusier, letter to Nikolai Kolli, Paris, April 13, 1934, FLC.
- ⁸ Charlotte Perriand, memo to Le Corbusier, January 18, 1934, FLC.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Nikolai Kolli, "Dom Narkomlegproma", in *Arkhitektura SSSR*, October 1936, p. 28. Kolli also described the building in similar terms in a letter to Le Corbusier of March 25, 1936.
- ¹¹ Viktor Kokorin, "Chuzhoi dom," *Arkhitekturnaia Gazeta*, January 24, 1935.
- ¹² S. N. Kozhin, "Oshibki zamysla," *Arkhitektura SSSR* 2, no. 12 (December 1934): 9.
- ¹³ Alexander Vesnin, "Legkost', Stroinost', lasnost'," *Arkhitektura SSSR* 2, no. 12 (December 1934): 8.
- ¹⁴ Lazar Kaganovich, speech at the meeting of the Moscow architects, February 28, 1935, Russian State Archives for Political History, 81/3/186/34, quoted by Elisabeth Essaïan in *Le plan general de reconstruction de Moscou de 1935* (Doctoral thesis; Saint Denis: University of Paris 8, 2006), 369.
- ¹⁵ Mikhail Tsapenko, *O realisticheskikh osnovakh sovetskoi arkhitektu* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo lit-ry po stroitelstvu i arkhitekture, 1952).
- ¹⁶ Nikolai Bylinkin, *Istoria sovetskoi arkhitektury 1917–1958* (Moscow: Gos. izd. lit. po stroitelstvu, arkhitekture i stroitelnykh materialam, 1962), 76.
- ¹⁷ Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, "Restauration," in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Vve A. Morel, 1854), 8:14.
- ¹⁸ Nikolai Kolli, color samples for the Centrosoyuz sent to Le Corbusier, 1934, FLC H2(9)332 to 334.