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The Future's Past

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## THE FUTURE'S PAST

by *Rem Koolhaas*

*"Why do we have a mind if not to get our way?"*

DOSTOEVSKY

In 1929, architect Ivan Leonidov designed an office building for the center of Moscow called the House of Industry. It was conceived as a tall, rectangular slab. Its facades consisted of a steel lattice with sliding glass panels that could "disappear" in the summer, making the walls, in effect, a transparent scaffold of human activity. Two-thirds of the way up, several floors were omitted: The gap formed a park in the air. An exposed elevator-stairwell tapered toward the top to reflect the diminishing volume of vertical traffic; a separate, freestanding lift led directly from the ground to the roof to make it easily accessible to Moscow's inhabitants.

But the most unusual feature of the building was the floor plan, a drastic architectural revision of the idea and mechanics of work itself. A square grid divided two-thirds of each floor into identical areas for every worker. These subdivisions were marked on the ground by white lines on a cushion-like rubber surface meant to combine psychological comfort with acoustic control. Potted plants further demarcated individual territories.

The remaining third of each floor was conceived by Leonidov as an *antithetical zone*, an area for nonwork that included a swimming pool, a sauna and high-pressure shower, a kiosk for news and announcements, a lavish arrangement of *chaises-longues*, a small library, an acoustic console, and a TV-like screen.

Leonidov was convinced that a human being could concentrate on any given task for only about 20 minutes. Then fatigue would begin to erode performance. He built on this thesis by making each floor of the office complex into a *recuperative plane*, where work is only one of many possible activities, each erasing the exhaustion left by the previous effort. The "office" thus became a cultural apparatus, holding out to its occupants the promise of a perpetual peak condition. (Soviet officials rejected the whole idea, and Leonidov's building was never constructed.)

Not long afterward, in Manhattan, several architects, whose names have not come down to us, conceived the Downtown Ath-

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letic Club. Like Leonidov's House of Industry, the Club, built in 1931, is essentially a stack of therapeutic planes. But where each of the floors in the Moscow building was to have offered identical combinations of activities, each story of the Downtown Athletic Club is emphatically different, and the building as a whole strives not so much for an efficiency of work as for an efficiency of pleasure.

### An Incubator for Adults

Each floor is devoted to a particular interpretation of "athletic" activity. But as a climb through the structure demonstrates, the layout transcends athletics.

The lower 15 floors are accessible only to men. Their sequence from ground to top corresponds to an ever-increasing refinement of activity. Floor 7 is an interior golf course, a synthetic English landscape with grassy hills (real) and a small stream that curls invitingly across the terrain. After nature's near-total eclipse in the Metropolis, it is now re-created as merely one of the city's congested layers. Stopping on the ninth floor, the guest finds himself in a vestibule leading directly to a locker room. There he undresses, puts on trunks and boxing gloves, and enters an adjoining space equipped for boxing and wrestling. On the southern side of the locker room, there is also a small oyster bar.

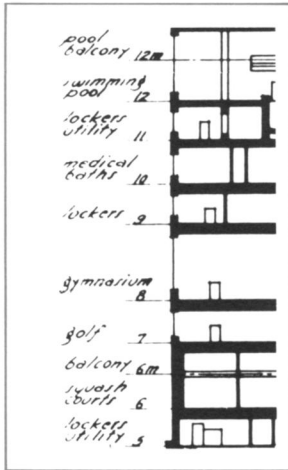
*Eating oysters with boxing gloves, near naked, on the ninth floor—such is the "plot" of this rectangle.*

The 10th floor is devoted to preventive medicine. There are sections for massage and rubbing, an 8-bed station for artificial sun-bathing, and a 10-bed rest area, all arranged around a Turkish bath. In one corner, there is a medical facility, with a capacity of five patients. A doctor here is in charge of the procedure of "colonic irrigation"—the literal invasion of the human body with cultured bacteria to modify and improve its natural metabolism.

From the 17th to the 19th floors, the men, perfected in the lower part, are allowed to communicate with the opposite sex. The final 20 floors are devoted to hotel accommodations.

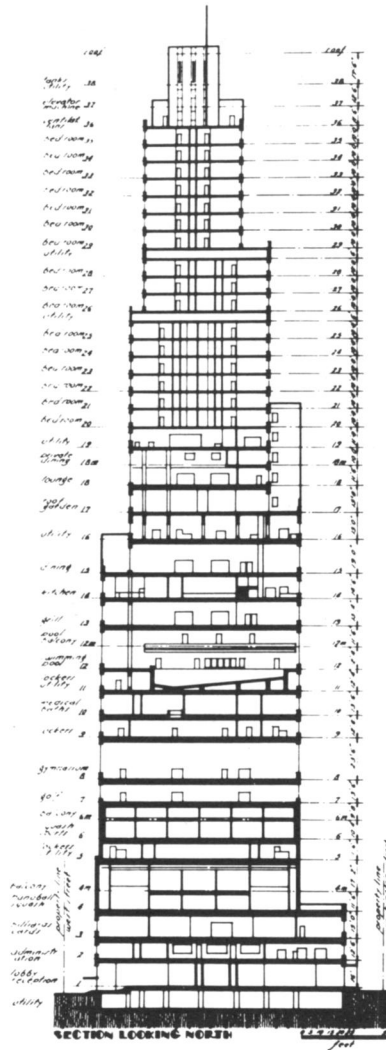
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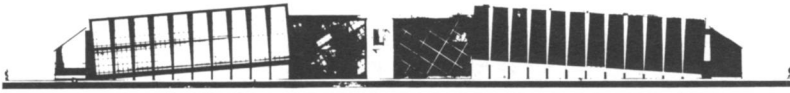


*The Downtown Athletic Club (1931) is in Manhattan on Washington Street near Battery Park. Almost indistinguishable from surrounding towers, the 38-floor club contains a unique environment.*

From *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*.  
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Such fanatical pursuit of a transcendent peak physical and mental condition amounts to a form of human redesign. The Downtown Athletic Club provides its clients with traditional athletic pastimes that have been crossbred with modern technology. The result is an incubator for adults, who, impatient with the pace of evolution, can reconstruct themselves into new beings.



*From Melnikov, Solo Architect in a Mass Society by S. Fredrikson, ed., c. 1978 by the Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission.*

*Melnikov's Laboratory of Sleep (1929). Beds were to be built in, with the floors sloping gently to obviate the need for pillows. Beneficent technicians would enhance the sleeping environment with sounds and scents.*

Again in 1929, again in Moscow, Konstantin Melnikov drafted Green City as an entry in a competition to design a combination of vacation resort and Communist suburb. Melnikov's proposal envisioned, among a variety of other therapeutic inventions, a system of diagnostic "laboratories" that would encircle the Russian capital somewhat like a chain of motels. Soviet workers would check in after an exhausting stint at the factory (Stalin's policy of rapid industrialization was just beginning) and be assigned to special dormitories that were filled with mixtures of oxygen and other gases. These would induce appropriate types of sleep and dream, and in the process cure whatever psychic or organic imbalance had been diagnosed by teams of paramedical receptionists. From a control booth at the end of each dormitory, sleep supervisors could adjust the gas composition, humidity, and air pressure; they could also add smells and reproduce, on a special acoustic installation, the "rustle of leaves, the cooing of nightingales, the soft murmur of waves." The beds could even be made to rock gently.

### Synthetic Nature

Like the Interior Golfcourse at the Athletic Club, Melnikov's Laboratory of Sleep represents an approach to architecture that absorbs all of the new technology at its disposal and assembles it into larger-than-life visions. "Cure through sleep and thereby alter the character," Melnikov proclaimed in one poster; "anyone thinking otherwise is sick." This architecture was not inhuman. It was an attempt, in the early days of the Soviet Union, to make clients of the masses. The creation of a "new Soviet man" was a task not just for ideology but for architecture.

So too the task of creating a "new Metropolitan man." In 1930, the famous Manhattan impresario Samuel ("Roxy") Rothafel went on a fact-finding tour of Europe in search of inspiration for Radio City Music Hall, which was being designed

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under his personal supervision. With his architects, he went to Moscow, where Melnikov showed him his "Sonata of Sleep" designs (the scheme had been rejected by Soviet authorities). Roxy was impressed by Melnikov's vision of a beneficial, synthetic environment and saw its relevance to his own enterprise. Back in Manhattan, he incorporated several of the themes of the Laboratory of Sleep into the new Radio City Music Hall.

The Music Hall is more than an entertainment palace; it is the first completely synthetic resort in the heart of a Metropolis; it offers a replica of nature, appropriately intensified, to the inhabitants of Manhattan.

### Return to Disneyland

The theater's vast ovoid interior is covered with plaster rays that extend across the entire ceiling, containing the audience like a firmament. The curtain is made of a specially developed synthetic fiber, so reflective that it "outshines the sun." When the lights are slowly dimmed, the impression of a sunset is inescapable. When they are switched on again, the theater offers the spectacle of a sunrise. There are three or four such complete cycles in each performance. If the metaphor is taken seriously, the audience lives through three or four accelerated days.

In a further escalation of the artificial, Rothafel used the air-conditioning system for more aggressive purposes than simple cooling. At first he considered adding laughing gas to the hall's atmosphere, so that his 6,200 daily visitors would be transported to another world at once. He gave up the notion only after urgent pleading by his lawyers, substituting for the  $N_2O$  emanations what he believed was health-giving Ozone.

In the end, his theater combined super-time with super-health, a union that was caught perfectly in his Melnikovian boast, used in advertising, that "A visit to Radio City Music Hall is as good as a month in the country."

The House of Industry, the Downtown Athletic Club, Green City, and Radio City Music Hall reveal the conceptual core of what is now called—usually with a sneer—Modern Architecture. All manifest an ambition to conquer a new territory. Their creators—Leonidov, Melnikov, and the rest—shunned traditional architecture with its passive reliance on dignified urban decors as a means of generating a dignified culture. They wanted to contribute to the modern age directly. The blueprint was all, in their view, not for its formal niceties and promise of spatial quality, but because, with its inscribed functions, it was the equivalent of a musical score, a notation of the roles per-

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formed by the human occupants. To establish a world totally fabricated by man, to live inside fantasy—this was the ambitious program they had set themselves, a program that to be realized could never be openly stated. Who would allow it?

This view of architecture was triggered by a specific mutation in the forms of human coexistence: hyperdensity, the simultaneous explosion in certain parts of the world of both modern technology and human population. From this mutation, modern architects derived their vision of an architecture equally mutant, and perhaps compensatory and retaliatory as well. Their object—dangerous, manipulative, artificial, experimental, and behaviorist in the extreme—was the transformation of the Metropolis into a colossal laboratory, not only, as in Melnikov's case, of sleep, but of life itself.

But there are opportunities commensurate with the dangers of this approach. It claims for architecture a role in human experimentation, not just in designing the laboratory. If the Metropolis is already transforming its inhabitants, why not take the process into our own hands? Only in this way can we invent the "plots" for the disinherited, scriptless urban masses, the drifting castaways of the 20th century.

At this moment, however, a persistent if unspoken coalition of the two major architectural avant-gardes—the Rationalists in Europe and the Post-Modernists in America, both of them susceptible to a misguided "historicism" in their designs—threatens this 50-year-old Architecture of Congestion with deliberate extinction. The best minds in modern architecture are ready to abandon the claims staked out in the 1920s for an activist profession with a capability, and indeed a responsibility, for redesigning the human environment. The new architects are determined to pose the issues of architecture in traditional terms once more. Doric columns, pediments, moldings, piazzas—all are making their prodigal return.

This conflict makes it both simple and difficult to predict architecture's future. If this reactionary coalition wins, there will be no future—only an empty imitation of the past that will make Disneyland a monument to authenticity. If the coalition loses, the future of architecture will be as unpredictable as ever.

