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Recent reassessments of Soviet architecture and urbanism have centered international intellectual and institutional connections, embedding Soviet modernism squarely within the European and North American professional circuits of which it was a constitutive piece. This effort has proceeded from both contemporary Russian scholars and those based at US and western European academic institutions. Jean-Louis Cohen’s *Building a New New World: Amerikanizm in Russian Architecture* (2020) argues for the centrality of the United States in the development of Soviet architectural practice. Evgeniia Konyshova and Christina E. Crawford have demonstrated the importance of American and German engineers and architects to the conceptualization and execution of the electrification campaign of the mid-1920s and the First Five-Year Plan.[1] By placing Bolshevik modernization projects in dialogue with Western developments, these works complicate overly schematic and simplistic arguments about whether, how, and why modernism failed in the twentieth century, and what the possible alternatives might be for our own era of crisis.

Alla Vronskaya’s wonderful new book, *Architecture of Life: Soviet Modernism and the Human Sciences*, is a major contribution to the intellectual history of the avant-garde that similarly foregrounds the interconnected nature of Soviet and Western architectural discourse and practice. The book’s subject—integrationist organicism in architecture predicated on philosophical monism—is mirrored by its methodology, an adept exposition of the ideas of the Moscow-based Higher Art and Technical Studios (VKhUTEMAS) in the broader context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century human sciences. Vronskaya places monism back at the core of Russian revolutionary Marxism and examines what that means for our understanding of the architectural avant-garde. In so doing, she avoids traditional narratives of a conflict between formalists in the Association of New Architects and functionalists in the Organization of Contemporary Architecture, highlighting instead their shared commitments to overcoming these binaries.
with an organic synthesis. Similarly, Vronska
demphasizes the mid-1920s turning points, most
famously when the workshop and studio structure
of VKhUTEMAS was jettisoned for the Higher Art
and Technical Institute’s more productivist aims of
industrial management that undergirded the First
Five-Year Plan. Yet Vronska cautions that “the
victory of industrial management did not equal an
unmitigated acceptance of mechanicism. Within
this discourse, room for discussion and debate
emerged as architects and theorists sought, in the
manner of [Minister of Enlightenment Anatoly]
Lunacharsky, opportunities for compromise” (p.
76). Compromise is synthesis in the political mode,
but Architecture of Life is muted about the dynam‐
ics of political developments across the 1920s and
1930s. And understandably so, given the surfeit of
sensationalism in much existing scholarship on
the period (for instance, Hugh D. Hudson Jr.’s Blue‐
prints and Blood: The Stalinization of Soviet Ar‐
chitecture, 1917-1937 [1993] and Boris Groys’s The
Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dict‐
tatorship, and Beyond [1992]). Nevertheless, Vrons‐
ka’s monograph is not so much a refutation of
the received wisdom regarding the Soviet avant‐
garde’s tragic arc as a meditation on what distin‐
guished their ideas and methods. Her monograph
powerfully reminds us that their political defeat
was never total.

Architecture of Life is structured around a
pairing of each of six “key principles of the mon‐
istic discourse with one of the disciplinary con‐
cerns of interwar modernist architecture ([Space]
form-making, [Orientation] urbanism, [Fitness]
terior-design, and [Personality] landscape archi‐
tecture) examining how the former was mobilized
for responding to the latter” (p. xxx). With each,
Vronska traces an international discourse through its impact on revolutionary Russia and
then grounds it in the work and thought of a select
representative of the avant-garde. The cast of his‐
torical actors includes familiar figures in Soviet
architectural thought—El Lissitzky, Nikolai
Ladovskiy, and Moisei Ginzburg—as well as more
obscure ones, such as the theorist and policy‐
maker of early Soviet standardization Alexander
Rozenberg, the director of Moscow’s Central Park
of Culture and Leisure (more commonly known as
Gorky Park) Betty Glan, and the Ender siblings—
color theorist wall-painters and students of the
artist Mikhail Matyushin. All of these actors
shared a commitment to the revolutionary hu‐
manist project of producing a new type of person
by effecting the transformation of their environ‐
ment. They made important conceptual and prac‐
tical contributions beyond architecture to the de‐
veloping fields of experimental psychology, ped‐
egagological and organizational theory, and semiotics.
Throughout the book, Soviet architects, designers,
and thinkers engage in dialogue with internation‐
al counterparts; they cultivate friendships and
more intimate relationships. Vronska takes the
avant-garde on their own terms, recognizing their
influences while highlighting their many generat‐
ive innovations, which informed, through the in‐
termediary role of British socialist biologists and
human ecologists like H. G. Wells, Julian Huxley,
and Patrick Geddes, things as significant as “the
development of modernism under the British wel‐
fare state and its later retransplantation on Amer‐
ican soil” (p. xxvi).

Driven to situate the Moscow-based architec‐
tural avant-garde in a properly European intel‐
lectual context of progressive and radical scientific
monism, Vronska can be forgiven for neglecting
the other side of the conservative-progressive
spectrum within the revolutionary Bolshevik
state. As strange as it may sound, this book hardly
mentions many of the most influential Soviet ar‐
chitects of the 1920s and ‘30s, particularly those
who continued to practice a blend of the academic
style and the “Empire”-tinged neoclassicism inher‐
ted from the late tsarist era. The two most influ‐
ential architects of the first half of the Soviet peri‐
od (both in terms of buildings built and a legacy of
students), Ivan Zholtovsky and Alexei Shchusev,
receive scant mention. Others, such as Boris Iofan,
Karo Alabyan, Vladimir Semenov, Vladimir Shchuko, Vladimir Gel’freikh, Lev Rudnev, and Dmitry Chechulin, are not mentioned at all. Most of these men were empowered by the Stalinist turn to neoclassicism in the mid-1930s, whether by virtue of preexisting affinity for classicism (Zholtovsky) or due to adept political flexibility (Shchusev, Chechulin, and Iofan). Vronskaya largely omits the conflicts between these traditionalists and progressives in Soviet architectural society, particularly in educational establishments and over prized studio spaces in historic urban cores. In so doing she takes the pettiness of professional in-fighting, a gossipy characteristic unfortunately rife in many Russian-language memoirs and histories of early Soviet architecture, out of the story of the intellectual development of the avant-garde. While Vronskaya's approach is laudable, the reader should know that it leaves out of view the equally consequential conservative and traditionalist interpretations of modernity, without which there is no accounting for most of the Soviet architectural and urban heritage.

Moving away from score-settling diagnoses of culpability, Architecture of Life constructs a framework of analysis useful to critical theorists in the present. Cold War discourses with maximalist emphases on production, consumption, efficiency, and freedom have exhausted their coherence, without abdicating control of governing institutions. In a conclusion that emerges from an effective synthesis of preceding chapters, Vronskaya highlights the relevance of the Soviet avant-garde for those in search of a new progressive ideology within the confines of a more modest immanent teleology, a concept best summarized by Peter Engelmeyer as “purposefulness in the absence of goals” (p. 199). According to Vronskaya, the “decline of life sciences as the universal epistemological paradigm” in the aftermath of the Second World War submerged the relevance of monistic discourses beneath an ocean’s surface of political and philosophical commitment to individualistic subjectivity and unrestricted personal freedom (p. 197). But this myth has been compromised by the severity of the ecological disaster that has attended postwar modernization, surfacing our need for new organicist and bioeconomic models. Vronskaya sketches out a terrestrialist theoretical trajectory that draws from Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Louis Marin, manifest in the work of McKenzie Wark and the late Bruno Latour's “geostory” (p. 204).[2] Noting the cautious utopianism of architects and designers motivated to build in light of the terrestrial (such as Design Earth’s Rania Ghosn and El Hadi Jazairy), Vronskaya offers a lesson from the Soviet monistic modernists, who demonstrated “the impossibility of drawing a neat boundary between the managerial, exploitative (civilizational, in Latour’s terms) modernist attitude to nature on the one hand and materialism and organicism on the other” (p. 207). Vronskaya leaves no doubt that the Soviet avant-garde still has something to say to present-day critical theorists, architects, and designers, and she provides us with one of the best English-language syntheses of their ideas yet.

Notes
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