Disseminating a design vision: the Soviet collective housing and its international fortune

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The threshold between the 1920s and 1930s was a particularly effervescent period for Soviet architecture, although one of the most tragic for the country (Viola, 2007; Graziosi, 2002; Graziosi, 2010). The dramatic dimensions of the urban crisis and the overcrowding resulting from the Late-imperial heritage (Bowlt, 2020), from the generalized collectivization promoted during War Communism combined with a renewed ideological pressure, placed the housing question, the search for new habitat solutions and forms of organization of everyday life at the center of architectural interests and the urban initiatives of public institutions (De Magistris, 1988).

'Experimental' and 'show construction' - Pokazatel'noe stroitel'stvo - were recurring terms in the specialized press when the ussr, having archived the chapter of the Novaya Ekonomičeskaya Politika (NEP), was projecting itself into the vortex of the first pjatiletka and forced industrialization (Khazanova, 1980; Colton, 1995; De Magistris, 1995).

In Moscow, the capital at the core of decision-making processes and design research, among many other notable architectural works (Kiričenko et al., 2012; Vasil'ev, 2014), three innovative buildings were under construction simultaneously. They were the Konstantin Mel'nikov's cylindrical house (Khan Magomedov, 1980; De Magistris, 1998; Kuznetsov, 2017), the Boris Iofan's giant complex for the regime élites - the House of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars commonly indicated as The House of Government (Dom Pravitel'stva) - (Gouseff, 1993; Koršukov, 2002; Kostjuk, 2019; Udovički-Selb, 2020), and the Dom Narkomfina complex (Udovički Selb, 2016; Buchli, 2017; Ovsjannnikova, Miljutina, 2017) conceived by Moisej Ginzburg (Khan Magomedov, 1972) (figg. 1, 2). They were destined to make their mark in the pages of the history of xx century architecture. In the case of the House of Government, a masterpiece «halfway between revolutionary avant-garde and socialist realism» ante litteram (Slezkin, 2017: xi), thanks to the novel The House on the Embankment written by Jurij Trifonov, it is also imprinted in the annals of the great late-Soviet literature. By the way, it was in this building, where the Odessa-born, Italian-trained architect lived and had his studio for a long time, that the Palace of the Soviets competition was conceived and partly oriented (De Magistris, 2014).

Projects profoundly different in size and character, conceived by architects of almost the same age but with very distant biographies, were equally expressive of the crucial historical moment of the transition and the ideological impulses with

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Soviet research on collective housing developed rapidly between the end of the NEP and the first pjatiletka. At the dawn of the 1930s, these experiments were interrupted by a series of legislative measures that redefined housing policies, sanctioning their incompatibility with the social and economic directions that accompanied the Stalinization of the regime. However, many of the solutions developed in this phase, banned in the USSR, experienced a significant international diffusion.

Through many reformulations, in the pre-war period and in the first decades of the post-war period, they fueled one of the most relevant circulation phenomena of design vision and settlement organization of the XX century. Some significant passages of this story are retraced, starting from the pivotal case of the famous 'transitional' house of Dom Narkomfina.

Keywords: collective housing; avant-garde; transfer

La disseminazione di una visione progettuale: la casa collettiva sovietica e la sua fortuna internazionale

Le ricerche sovietiche sull'abitazione collettiva si sviluppano nel breve periodo compreso tra la fine della NEP e l'avvio della prima pjatiletka. Agli albori degli anni '30, queste sperimentazioni vengono interrotte da una serie di provvedimenti legislativi che ridefiniscono le politiche abitative, sanzionandone l'incompatibilità con gli indirizzi sociali ed economici che accompagnano la stalinizzazione del regime. Tuttavia, molte soluzioni elaborate in questa fase, messe al bando in urss, conoscono una notevole diffusione internazionale e alimentano, attraverso diverse riformulazioni, nel periodo prebellico e nelle prime decadi del dopoguerra, uno dei fenomeni più rilevanti di circolazione di una visione progettuale del xx secolo. Alcuni passaggi significativi della vicenda vengono ripercorsi a partire dal caso pivotale della celebre residenza 'transitoria' del Dom Narkomfina.

Parole chiave: casa collettiva; avanguardie; circolazione dei modelli

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which the ussr was struggling. Comparing these architectures, the Dom Sotrudnikov Narkomfina (The House of the Employees of the Ministry of Finance), also known by the acronym Dom NKF – is undoubtedly the most innervated with clear and dense theoretical implications (Ginzburg, 1934). It also had a significant influence for its direct relationship with some emerging lines of modern design thought and with themes that stoked contemporary architectural debate both in the first and the second half of the xx century, The Dom NKF is a pivotal work of the modern movement that traces a complex history, marked not only by many episodes right up to the very recent restoration and its rebirth in the heart of the new contemporary Moscow but also by an intricate, filiation. It could be argued with good reason that, in many ways, it has been among those architectural achievements of the xx century that have emanated a pervasive and nuanced aura.

However, despite the number of studies devoted to this remarkable page of the architectural avant-garde, its context and its layered vicissitudes (Buchli, 1999) – starting from the seminal Soviet contributions due to Selim O. Khan Magomedov and Vigdarija Khazanova, and those of Kopp (1967; 1985) in the West – the parallel destiny that intensifies the historical and branched relief of this architecture and Soviet avant-garde research and links them to other international architectural pages, has rarely been – paradoxically enough – the subject of a general view, remaining confined to the limits of rather fragmentary references.

Designed by Moisej Ginzburg and Ignatij Milinis (Čepkunova, Ametova, 2019), one of the most interesting exponents of Soviet design culture in collaboration with the engineer Sergej Prokhorov, the Dom Narkomfina represents in its conception the consistent outcome of the work which the constructivist group gravitating around the osa had developed starting from the mid-1920s. It was the result of a theoretical and design pathway deeply rooted in the historical situation of the Soviet Union of that time, but also innervated in the xix century's vision of the Phalanstère and linked to the experiences and ideas that were regenerating urban housing concepts in the first decades of the xx century in Europe, particularly in the pre-wwi Germany and the Weimar Republic. This work was presented in the pages of the periodical SA-Sovremennaja Arkhitektura (Cohen 1990; Cohen 2010; Anderson, Romberg, 2005) - the most famous and internationally known Soviet avant-garde publication, in a rhetorical frame, typical of the launch phase of the first Five-Years Plan, dominated by references to collectivism, rationalization and the 'scientific' organization of production processes, i.e., NOT-Naučnaja Organizacija Truda: one of the central aspects of Amerikanism absorbed by revolutionary Bolshevik thought (Khazanova, 1980, Cohen, 2020) (figg. 2, 3). The ideas and visions promoted by Le Corbusier from the early 1920s were a reference more than transparent, observed with particular attention and sensitivity¹ within the sphere of the recently (mid-1920s) established organization of constructivist architects. The innovative elements introduced into the Corbusier's matrix were equally significant and striking to connote the typological vision of the modern house in a collective key, ideological-oriented, and adapted to the specific Soviet context largely dominated, as mentioned, in the urban areas by the phenomenon of cohabitation. It was present in

endemic forms in the tsarist period and consciously used by revolutionary policies through the 'redistribution' (*uplotnenie*) of rooms in apartments initially designed for single families (De Magistris, 1988; Storia Urbana, 2002; Meerovič, 2008). The *NKF*, a sophisticated building of rigorously modern appearance, was mainly intended for an élite of employees attached to the *People's Commissariat for Finance* helmed by Nikolaj Miljutin (Cohen, 2002; Khmel'nickij, Miljutina, 2013). The Minister (People's Commissar) himself lived in the separate double-height unit on the top of the building, overlooking the roof terrace à *la* Le Corbusier. Apart from that, the building guaranteed, within the Soviet context of that time, relatively high standards: each family had its accommodation at its disposal.

However, the new Commissariat's residential house also strove to prefigure and accompany its inhabitants – not in a coercive way like that which characterized the condition established in Soviet cities during the early revolutionary years – towards new forms of collectivist living (*byt*) outlining a feasible mass standard and therefore a future solution to the increasingly dramatic cohabitation dominant both in Moscow as well in other cities in the Soviet Union.

For these reasons, the NKF building was called the 'house of transitional type,' dom perekhodnogo tipa. It materialized and tested not only new construction techniques aimed at the development of prefabrication (still embryonic in the Soviet Union) but, above all, an alternative solution to the Communes (Doma kommuna) developed simultaneously. In fact, towards the end of the 1920s, in a particularly crucial moment of the Soviet 'cultural revolution' (Fitzpatrick, 1978; Stites, 1989), transitional typologies were part of the research framework that converged toward the definition of a new community housing concept in which the relationship and interaction between functions and spaces were deeply reconceptualized. The Narkomfin was conceived, thanks to a dynamization of the relationships between individual and collective spaces through its original typological and distributive solutions – particularly the famous F unit, the double-height living cells intended for smaller family units served by a corridor - as a 'transitory' residential complex towards a new 'habitat' (Khazanova, 1980; De Magistris, 1988). Its designers imagined it as a condenser envisaged to direct, like the workers' clubs conceived in the same years, the urban condition that emerged in the age of the New Economic Policy, widely penetrated by market relationships and forces that aspired to the return of capitalism, towards the uncertain horizons of the future socialist city of which the building could represent a possible precursory fragment.

The *Narkomfin* was, at the same time, intended as a critique of the 'individual' models inspired by the vision of the Garden city and Garden suburb, dominant in the first post-revolutionary years and widely promoted during the NEP by 'bourgeois' cooperatives, but also of the typologically more conventional multi-family and multi-level solutions that were spreading, thanks to municipal intervention, in the second half of the 1920s from Leningrad (the *Trakornaja ulica* and the *Serafimovskij učastok* designed by Gegello, Nikol'skij, Simonov) (fig. 6), to the developments (*ulica Usačeva* and others) that marked the rebirth of housing production in Moscow (Čeredina 2004; Ovsjannikova, 2011) and other Soviet cities.

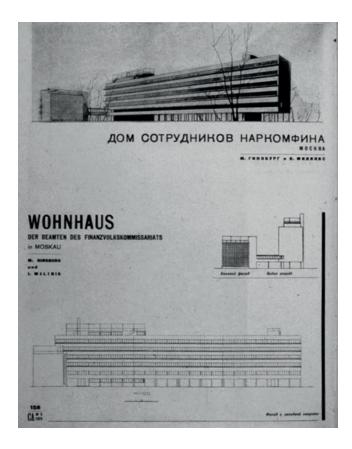


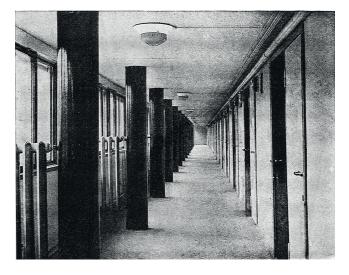


1. B.M. Iofan, D.M. Iofan, Vcik residential complex, also known as Dom pravitel'stva (House of Government), Bersenevskij naberežnaja, 1927-early 1930s.

Source: Moskva v fotografijakh 1920-1930-e gody, Liki Rossii, Sankt Peterburg, 2010.

2. M. Ginzburg, I. Milinis, and S. Prokhorov, Dom sotrudnikov NKF RSFSR, Moscow, 1928-1930. Source: Ginzburg, 1934.





3-4. M. Ginzburg, I. Milinis, and S. Prokhorov, Dom sotrudnikov NKF, Moscow, 1928-1930. Sources: *SA-Sovremennaja Arkhitektura*, n. 5, 1930 (fig. 3) and Ginzburg, 1934 (fig. 4).

This keywork of mature constructivism was - with some constructions closely linked to the same avant-garde and research circuit, like the residential building in Gogolevskij bul'var Dom RŽSKT2 'Pokozatel'noe stroitel'stvo' (1929-31) - a quintessential architectural embodiment of the historical moment in which it was conceived and built. The fluidity and the articulation still present in the relationship between politics and technical culture, between government institutions, the decision-making sphere, and architectural research reflected by the complex framework of housing policies, as was the case in the Soviet Union in the 1920s (Veselovskij, Shejnis, 1927, Storia Urbana, 2002; Meerovič, 2018), the design explorations and discussions on the urban reorganization in full (and basically free) swing on the eve of the First Five-Year Plan, the activity of the independent professional associations and articulated forms of commissioning (Storia Urbana, 2002), legitimized the experiments welcomed and promoted by the same public actors such as the RSFSR's Strojkom. The general cultural and political atmosphere favored the encounter with the new and more advanced international modernist tendencies, which seemed to be on the verge of triumphing in the Soviet Union in an original and highly radical perspective (figg. 7, 8, 12). However, all this occurred shortly before a sequence of measures were taken by the Communist Party (KPb) that repositioned the architectural and urban planning guidelines (De Magistris, 1997b; Essaian, 2021). The decisive years, to be understood against the background of the tragic events of the period, were those between 1930/31 and 1932. A series of decisions set specific limits to radical (collective) housing research, the urban strategies (1931) and defined (1932) (Khiger, 1935; De Magistris, 1997b), first for Moscow and later for other Soviet cities, on what characteristics housing design should have to respond to the new orientations established by the regime which was moving towards definitive Stalinization. These measures - connected with the refusal of the egalitarianism that, until the end of the 1920s, permeated significant aspects of housing legislation and design visions - were decisive in defining the social, typological and, to some extent, aesthetic horizons of the architectural discourse about socialist realism (De Magistris, 1995). The struggle against uravnilokva (the leveling) and flat 'anonymity' in favor of the 'expressiveness' of forms and social hierarchies were themes that found prompt reception in the specialized press3 and dealt a decisive blow to the solutions inspired by socially radical and aesthetically modernist dictates.

The margins of legitimacy, the ideal and ideological perspectives quickly disappeared, which had guided the activity of the *Strojkom* of the Russian Socialist Federation (RSFSR) and were at the root of the Avant-garde design conception, of the *Dom NKF* and the project of *Dom-kommuna* by Mikhail Baršč and Vladimir Vladimirov, generously illustrated in the pages of *SA-Sovremennaja Arkhitektura* (Vel'man, 1929b: 122-123). A residential mega-structure destined to be erected by the Mossovet (the Moscow municipality) – which never happened because of the U-turn – in 1930. The volume *Žilišče-Die Wohnung-L'Habitation*, written by Moisej Ginzburg on the edge of this turnaround but released in the editions of Gostrojizdat only in 1934, already reflected this critical moment that would be revealed to be historic, clearly documenting an approach









5. Photos of the Narkomfin in a state of decay (2016) and in an advanced stage of restoration (early 2020). Pictures by the author.

and a coherent research process carried out within the scope of Soviet institutions (Kazus', 2009), merging into an extremely interesting series of proposals and developments that were quickly consigned to a sort of limbo. The period that Vladimir Paperny defined in his seminal book *Culture Two* (Paperny, 2002) was taking shape (fig. 10).

Unsurprisingly, as a comment to the introduction to the volume, there was this editor's note «po pros'be avtora» (Ginsburg, 1934: 6) – that's what was written 'at the request of the author' –, underlined that the text had been completed in 1932, but since that time, «much had changed». In July 1932, as mentioned above, the decree *O tipe žilogo doma* was approved, which dictated, firstly, the new typology and even – somehow – formal parameters for future residential constructions. Ivan Žoltovskij, the authoritative architect who represented the spearhead of Russian neo-classicism, proposed a clear exemplification of these criteria in his design for the *House of the Mokhovaja*, built in front of the Kremlin walls and inspired by the Palladian Loggia del Capitanio, which opened right in 1934. It was correctly interpreted by a respectable critic in the pages of *Arkhitektura SSSR* as the nail in the coffin of constructivism.

Within this context, *Dom-Narkomfina* – a socialist *machine* à *habiter* – a prototype for the near future mass construction, was quickly consigned to its uniqueness and put on a deadend track. The architecture envisioned on the thin border between pragmatism and utopia has become a testimony of the coagulation of an unrepeatable field of forces and energies transformed – like many other Soviet avant-garde projects developed in the late 1920s – into an 'archeological' remnant of an exceptional moment in architectural history.

Despite this, precisely at the dawn of the 1930s, a no-less significant horizon opened up, linked to the international circulation and dissemination of the model and, above all, of the ideas from which it had been generated. We must admit that it is challenging to present this context in all its complexity due to space limitations and the gaps that still exist today in the history of xx century architecture. Certain aspects of the overall legacy of the research of Ginzburg and his colleagues can, in any case, be traced considering the circumstances and the vectors that made that process possible. The dissemination was favored by elements such as empathy for the revolutionary experiment underway in Russia, the knowledge of Soviet



6. A.I. Gegello, A. S. Nikol'skij, and G. A. Simonov, Housing complex, Traktornaja ulica, Leningrad, 1925-1927 Source: B.M. Kirikov, M.S. Shtiglitz, Arkhitektura Leningradskogo avangarda. Putevoditel', Kolo, Sankt Peterburg, 2009.

magazines abroad, in particular the journal SA - an aspect that still needs to be explored – and the fluidity of the contacts within the fields of modern European culture, thanks also to a mobility which, until the mid-1930s, was still possible between the ussr and Western countries, before Stalinization narrowed the range and the opportunities into an exclusively institutionalized framework. Exhibitions favoring the circulation of avant-garde proposals were also important. One worth mentioning is the case of the First Contemporary Architecture (SA) exhibition held in Moscow in 1927 (Kokkinaki, 1980; Zygas, 1992).

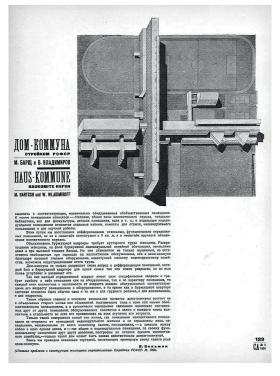
An important aspect has been the growing attention to the problem of existenzminimum, not only, but especially in the context of CIAM (Mumford, 2000). The emergence was generally equally incisive, in a phase of crisis, of a renewed framework of strategies, public initiatives and actors - in particular, the cooperative movement - that went beyond national borders and political divisions (in Europe but also overseas) and between the 1920s and 1930s stimulated experimental initiatives in the field of housing design for the working population.

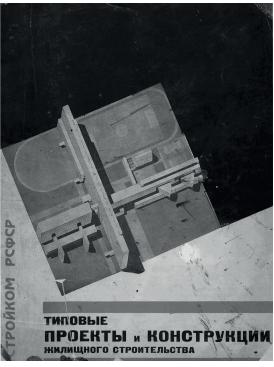
Projects inspired by the work of Ginzburg and the Constructivists were developed, for example, thanks to these processes of transmission of ideas in the United States during the great economic crisis. An interesting case is the Chrystie-Forsyth Development in New York, designed by William Lescaze and George Howe (Hubert, Stamm Shapiro, 1992; Caramellino, 2010; Muffato, 2012; Caramellino, 2016).

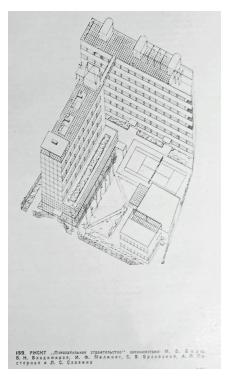
A decidedly relevant factor was the mobility out of the Soviet Union and the individual opportunities arising from trips to the ussr, undertaken directly by Western architects and motivated by professional or cultural reasons.

A privileged actor was, first and foremost, Le Corbusier. As mentioned above, his ideas played a role in the development of the 'constructivist' architectural discourse. However, they were also subject to a profound reworking (and radicalization) in Soviet Russia in the second half of the 1920s. Avant-garde circles' admiration for the Swiss-born architect led to his winning the Centrosojuz competition and a series of travels to the Soviet capital.

The opportunity also brought Le Corbusier to visit the work site of the Narkomfin complex, consisting of two joint buildings - with





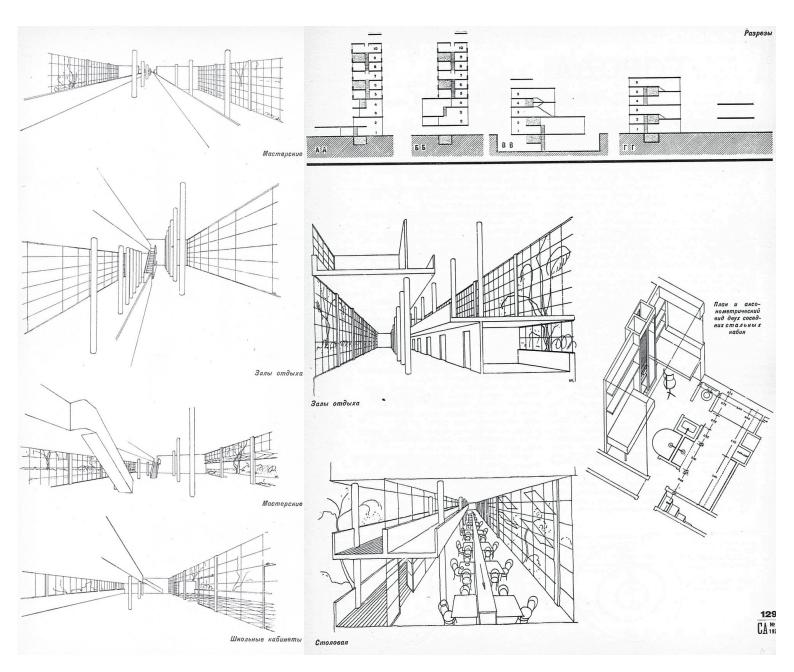


- 7. M. Baršč and V. Vladimirov, Dom-Kommuna, Strojkom RSFSR, 1929. Source: *SA-Sovremennaja Arkhitektura*, n. 4,1929. 8. Strojkom RSFSR, *Tipovye proekty i kontrukcii žiliščnogo stroitel'stva* [Housing typological projects and buildings], Moskva, 1930. 9. M. Baršč, V. Vogradov, I. Milinis, S. Orlovskij, A. Pasternak, L. Slavina, RŽSKT, Show construction house, 1929-1930.
- Source: Ginzburg (1934).

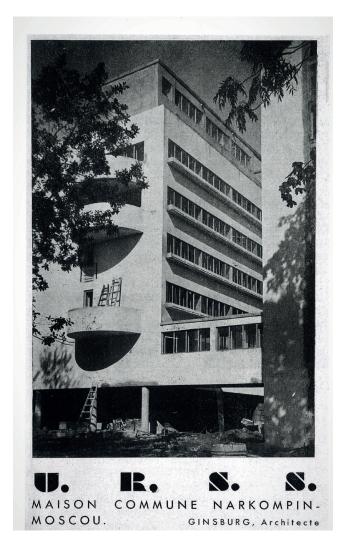




- 10. Cover of M. Ja. Ginzburg, Žilišče-Die Wohnung-L'Habitation, 1934.
- 11. I. Vajnštejn, residential building for skilled workers, Moscow, 1932-38. Picture by the author.



 $12.\,M.$ Baršč and V. Vladimirov, Dom-Kommuna, Strojkom RSFSR, 1929: sections and interiors. Source: SA-Sovremennaja Arkhitektura, n. 4,1929.



explicit reference to the new headquarters of the Bauhaus, from an elevated passage - in the latter phase of its construction. What is considered by many interpreters a turning point in Corbusier's work, the selective gaze that filters the experience gained until then, projecting it onto the scale of collective housing, was, among other things, the effect of his direct contact with the Soviet experience, first and foremost of his familiarity with the experimental building under construction near the Garden ring and his dialogue with Ginzburg and the constructivist group (Cohen, 1987). Its immediate result can be tracked above all in two important works of the early 1930s: the Citè du Refuge (1929-1931) (Taylor, 1980) and the Pavillion Suisse (1929-1933), where the innovative theme of the complex constituted by the aggregation of the residential area with spaces dedicated to communal functions was developed considering the poetic development that was engaging the Swiss architect. In particular, the definition of the design for the Salvation Army, for which the Swiss architect had already created l'Asile flottant (1929) - the floating shelter for the homeless on Quay d'Austerlitz – developed hot on the heels of his intense Soviet experience, as rich as it was controversial (Cohen, 1987). This provided essential cues for translating into modern



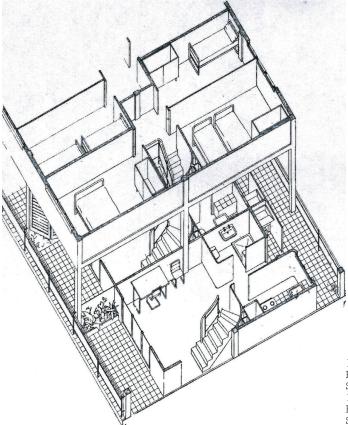


13-14. The Narkomfin published in L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui, n. 5, 1931 (left), and in the pages of Architectural Review, May, 1932 (right).

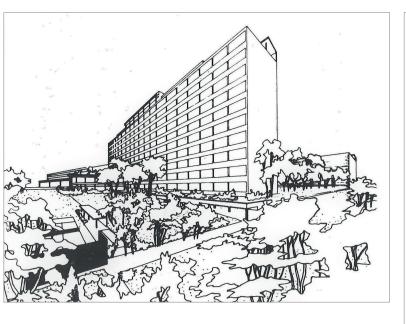
15. J. Sert and J. Torres Clavé, the trip to Moscow to visit the Narkomfin in 1934. Source: Garcia, Rovira (2011).

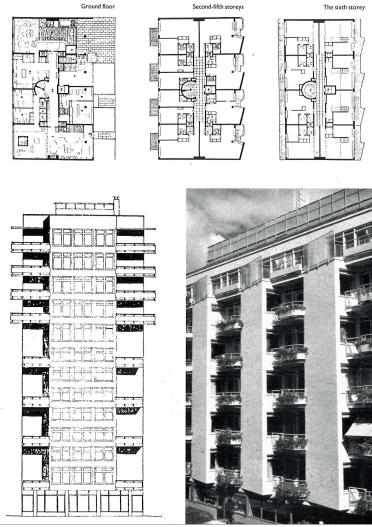






16. J. Sert, J.B. Subirana, and J. Torres Clavé, Casa Bloc, Barcelona, 1933-1937.
Source: Garcia, Rovira (2011).
17. J. Sert, J.B. Subirana, and J. Torres Clavé, Casa Bloc, isometric view of the duplex unit.
Source: A.C., n. 11, 1933.





18. S. Markelius, Project of collective complex for Alvik, Stockholm, 1932 c. (left, not realized) and Collective house on John Ericssonsgatan, Stockholm, 1935 (right). Source: Capobianco (2006).

architectural terms the social vision of the philanthropic institution founded in Great Britain in 1865, whose ideals were in harmony with the architect's convictions. The complex metabolic lines and the references that led Le Corbusier to explore the inseparable individual-collectivity dialectic has a starting point with his visit to the Certosa del Galluzzo in the Florentine hills but see Soviet collectivism and the knowledge of Dom NKF as a crucial moment that would lead in the post-wwii period to the *Unité d'Habitation*. From the point of view of typological solutions, this building can be considered as another fundamental, albeit indirect, filiation with the design of the Narkomfin building. As much as can be assumed in the early post-war years - obviously as a result of an articulated metabolism - in the case of the Golden Lane Housing (Alison and Peter Smithson, 1951-52), with its streets in the air. However, the encounter between Le Corbusier, Moisej Ginzburg, and constructivism also had other fertile repercussions considering the international turnover of young architects. In fact, the Swiss architect brought away a series of blueprints of the Narkomfin project to his Parisian studio in rue de Sevres in 1929 (Cohen,

1987). The architect Josep Sert worked there for some time and, perhaps, happened to see them. The work was nonetheless known. It circulated thanks anyway to the images published in SA-Sovremennaja arkhitektura as well as in other specialist magazines such as L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui4 (fig. 13). The same Josep Sert, one of the leaders of the Catalan modernist group (Pizza, Rovira, 2006), also visited Moscow in 1934 (fig. 15). It is therefore not surprising, that, in this case too, the Dom NKF could become an essential source of inspiration for the concept (especially the double-height housing cells) of the Casa Bloc (1932-1937) designed in Sant Andreu de Palomar with Bautista Subirana and Torres Clavé, a masterpiece of Iberian rationalism of the 1930s, whose plan included a fragment of the redént of the Ville Radieuse (Garcia, Rovira, 2011). The dwelling had an ironic fate with the epilogue of the Civil War and the victory of Francisco Franco, which had crucial consequences for the GATCPAC. The building, which was supposed to embody the progressive values of the Catalan rationalist movement expressed by the AC-Actividad Contemporanea magazine, became the residence of the Guardia Civil (figg. 16, 17).



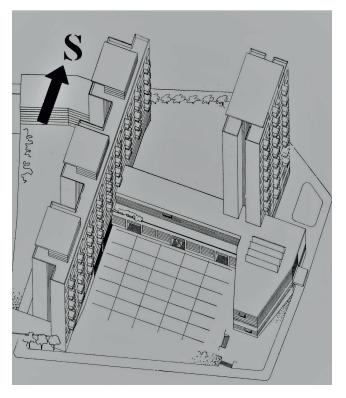


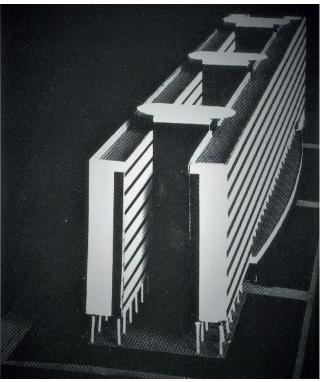
19. Journal Ter es Forma n. 10, 1931 on the collective housing.

The housing solutions inspired by recent Soviet design experiences found a receptive context in the cultural and artistic environment of London's nascent British modernism of the early 1930s.

For example, alongside Gropius's «elegantly austere» five-story building in the Siemenstadt development, we can hypothesize their influence in the case of Wells Coates's Isokon, also known as Lawn Road Flats, another remarkable building with a remarkable history (Daybelge, Englund, 2019: 172). Featuring apartments with access to decks and external passages, it was the first example with this type of modern-inspired solution to be conceived in England. It was among the first residential modern buildings in London designed for up-to-date inhabitants who traveled lightly and wanted minimum space and maximum service, reaching its «apogee with its use by refugees» (Jackson, 1970: 63), artists and spies (Burke, 2019). This is where Walter Gropius - just arrived in England - lived in a room on the thirdfloor studio with a bed hidden behind a curtain, a bathroom, a dressing room, and a tiny kitchen. Meals were provided by a central kitchen (Daybelge, Englund, 2022). Agatha Christie also had a flat in the Isokon, as did Arnold Deutsch, the Austrian communist and alleged 'university lecturer'. He was the controller of 'The Magnificent Five,' the Cambridge graduates

headed by Kim Philby, who spied for the Soviet Union from 1934 on. Alongside the «incontrovertible» (Allan, 2012: 146) Corbuserian provenance of the architectural vocabulary, the direct knowledge of the Soviet experience and theoretical debate was, moreover, definitely one of the inspirational elements for the design of *High Point I* by Berthold Lubetkin (Jackson, 1970; Curtis, 1974; Allan, 2002, 2012; Berkovich, 2021): a modern housing unit with a specific plan and, above all, characterized by an innovative combination between the residential and collective spaces. This architect was born in Georgia in 1901, experienced in his youth the Revolution, and took part in the artistic ferment that followed. Leaving the Soviet Union in 1922, as many other architects at the edge of the NEP, he was first educated in Paris before moving to London, where he founded Tecton. Always attentive and sympathetic to the architectural developments in the ussr, he was destined to take on a vital role in the emerging British Modern Movement, of which the building was one of the first highly remarkable expressions. The High Point I apartments in Highgate (1933-35), arranged on a Cross of Lorraine plan to maximize exposure to air and contact with the outside, were among the first original and convincing syntheses of the architectural and urban doctrines deriving both from Le Corbusier - an «embryonic illustration» of the «theory





20. J. Gillar, Project of a collective housing complex, Praha, 1931. Source: Kubova (1992).

21. J. Havliček, K. Honzik, Collective housing project (KolDom), Praha, 1930. Source: Kubova (1992).

of the vertical garden city» (Jackson, 1970: 44) – as well as from Soviet 'constructivist' transitional housing.

Also, Scandinavia in the 1930s, moving towards a rapid and original assimilation of modernist trends, was sensitive to the influx of the collectivist visions of the Soviet avant-garde. In Finland, the Paimio sanatorium by Alvar Aalto and his wife Aino (Stewart, Rogers, 2017) - the fruit of many influences next to the decisive one of the Zonnerstraal sanatorium of Duiker - can be meant as a humanized reinterpretation, elaborated in the smallest of details, of communal Soviet mega-structures. In particular, the house-commune mentioned above by M. Baršč and N. Vladimirov was acknowledged in Sovremennaja Arkhitektura's pages in 1929. This possible source of inspiration was stripped of any ideological implication connected to the vision of permanent reorganization of mass housing but adapted to specific healthcare needs and temporary accommodation of the people needing care in a comfortable medical environment surrounded by nature. However, Aalto's case is far from isolated. In Sweden, burdened by the housing crises and social mobilization, the influence of progressive circles and cultural associationism and debates regarding the approval of the new urban law created favorable conditions for developing particularly advanced visions, similar to the constructivist reflections regarding transitional housing.

This sensitivity stood out in the dense manifesto of radical functionalism Acceptera (Accept) (Creagh, Kåberg, 2008) signed in 1931 by Gunnar Asplund, Walter Gahn, Gregor Paulsson, and Sven Markelius (Caldenby et al., 2008). One of the most consequent and controversial proposals developed in this context was that of the kollektivhuset (collective house), which took shape thanks also to the initiative of the Professional Women's Club, whose members included Alva Myrdal and Viola Wahlstedt, partner of the architect Sven Markelius. The difficulties for working women in managing the family, an issue similar to the problems recognized in revolutionary Russia (Attwood, 1999), lay at the basis of the proposal developed by the great Swedish architect and published in 1932 (Rudberg, 1989; Mattson, Wallenstein, 2010) (fig. 18). The work was planned for the Alvik (Stockholm) area, an open municipal-owned piece of land facing the sea and conceived as a complex of three tall segmented parallel blocks integrated with a system of low constructions destined for communal activities. The design sparked much controversy - including the accusation of importing Soviet regime ideas that disrupted the vision of the family - and it never went beyond the design stage; despite that, Markelius continued to reflect on the collective concept and created the Collective House (1935) on John Ericssonsgatan in the Kungsholmen district of the Scandinavian



22. K. Teige, *Nejmenší byt*, Vaclav Petr, Praha, 1932.

capital. In this case, it was a building of 56 apartments of different sizes (from 1 to 4 rooms) destined for differently sized family units and people living alone, fitted with a communal kitchen, daily support services including an infirmary and a restaurant open to the general public (Mattsson, Wallenstein, 2010; Seits, 2018). The stereometric rigor and radicalism of the first design, which probably would have marked an equally important stage of the *Paimio Sanatorium* for architecture, gave way to creating the architectural image in which the functional plan's complexity and flexibility were reflected.

However, Central and Eastern Europe created a particularly favorable environment for disseminating and redeveloping Soviet ideas of communal housing. While in Poland (Czerner, Listowski 1981; Parlagreco, 2005) the growth of the cooperative movement was at the basis of housing projects and experiments influenced by German culture, a direct reference, also ideologically motivated, to the proposals of Soviet constructivism came from Hungarian and Czechoslovakian modernist architectural circles. The Hungarian group CIAM, led by Farkas Molnár and György Masirevich – his colleague at the Technical University

of Budapest –, later replaced by József Fischer, recruited by Bauhaus and politically orientated, in stark contrast with the pragmatic and moderate attitude of the dominant circles of Hungarian professional culture, found in the wake of the 1929 crisis different opportunities to put forward innovative proposals. The group organized various exhibitions, and one of these, in September of 1931, entitled *Collective City – Collective House* (Kolváros-kolház)⁶ clearly drew inspiration from the experiences still in progress that were developing in the USSR (fig. 19).

The influence of the Soviet experience that found its highest architectural expression in the Dom NKF led, above all, to the theoretical debate and design developments that involved the young Czech Republic (Švacha, 1994; Kubova, 1992) referred to the figure of Karel Teige, a leading intellectual personality of the European artistic avant-garde. The elaboration of new housing concepts architecture in the Soviet Union was the subject of constant attention, developed by the contacts starting from the mid-1920s (Švacha, 1993), by Teige and the progressive design culture circles that would form around the radical Leva Fronta movement founded in 1929 after the dissolution of Devetsil (Pechar, Urlich, 1981). Shortly after the presence of some projects in the First Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture in Moscow in 1927 and the publication of constructivist research in the pages of SA from 1927 on, at the dawn of the 1930s, some exponents of radical tendencies elaborated communal solutions for the development of new neighborhoods in Prague (figg. 20, 21). This set of interests and experiences merged into one of the main European editorial contributions of the interwar period in the field of housing architecture: the highly documented book by Karel Teige devoted to his minimal house Nejmenší byt (1932), an accurate summation of work and debates about housing in the period after the First World War, which indicated the communal solution as the crucial horizon of progressive architectural design (fig. 22). The Soviet experience played an essential role in these pages, placing themselves at the core of the arguments.

The theoretical and political efforts of Czech design culture in terms of communal housing have, in many ways, unique aspects and arrived as far as the post-second World War period, particularly stoked by the political climate that followed the Liberation, open to international debate and animated by a breadth that is acknowledged in the Teige's book *L'architecture moderne en Tchècoslovaquie* published in English and French in 1947. This context would witness a breakaway with the political developments of 1948, which led to the birth of the Czech Socialist Republic and would determine, during the Stalinisation years (late 1940s-early 1950s), the entry of Czechoslovakian design culture within the horizon of socialist realism *Sorela* (Åman, 1992; De Magistris, 1997a).

In 1946, some competitions called for architects to reconsider the subject of communal housing for workers from the perspective of the reconstruction of the industrial territory (Kubova, 2016). The reference to the design tradition related to Soviet constructivist avant-garde was undoubtedly just as decisive as the influence of the Corbuserian ideas, in turn, 'genetically' linked, as said, to the design of the *Narkomfin building*.

In this context, in Zlin – the famous city of the Bat'a enterprise –, work on a communal house designed by the architect Jiří Voženílek began. Above all, the even more ambitious *collective housing complex in Horni Litvinov*, designed by V. Hilsky and E.

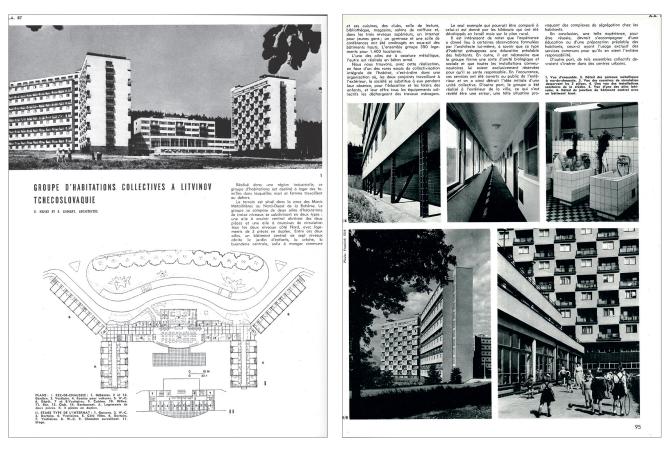
Linhart, is an actual 'social condenser' made up of two tall buildings in the shape of an L, between which communal services as well as an open space for collective use were located (figg. 23, 24). In 1947, the model for housing cells was presented at the Milan Triennale and in the *Habitat et urbanisme* section of the *International Exhibition* in Paris. Again, in 1960, this work that, perhaps, is one of the most important testaments of the design approach projected towards innovation in terms of typology and social relations, which the *Dom Narkomfina* had majorly contributed to, would be considered relevant and commented on in the pages of *Architecture d'aujourd'hui.*⁷

«We find ourselves, with this realization, in front of one of the rare attempts at integral collectivization of the habitat, that is to say, in an organization where the two spouses working outside, the society substitutes for them during their absence for the education and leisure of the children, and offers them all the collective equipment, relieving them of household work» (s.a., 1960: 95). We were right on the crest of a new phase that would also lead Soviet and Western historiography to 'rediscover' the Soviet avant-garde and, in particular, to re-read the architectural work of Moisej Ginzburg. Precisely in the 1960s, Soviet architecture gave its original contribution to the new experimental wave that swept the international scene, reworked and updated the avant-garde legacy, and arrived at design results of considerable interest. The best known is undoubtedly the House of the New Way of Life (DNB-Dom novogo byta) by Natan Osterman (Astaf'eva-Dlugač et al., 1988) with Petruškova, Kanaeva and others (Masterskaja n. 2 MITEP), who a decade earlier was the head of the collective that designed the Novye Čeremuški district, the milestone of post-Stalinist architecture. Looking for approaches to make mass housing more comfortable, the architect conceived an approach that revitalized the idea of the house commune. It consisted of two 16-story buildings in the form of open books connected by a low construction containing a library, a gym, and other collective services (Šerstneva, 1966; Kiselevič, Rabinovič, 1966; Bronovickaja, Malinin, 2016).

On the same horizon, we can inscribe – less known but no less significant – the solutions developed for an experimental apartment house with public services and two-level flats in Moscow (1965) by former-constructivist Ignatij Milinis, the co-author of the *Narkomfin complex* with Ginzburg. This project (Čepkunova, Ametova, 2019) was directly inspired by units developed just in the 1920s within the framework of Strojkom-RSFSR, from which, in many ways, the whole adventure of these architectural pages had started.

Notes

- 1. See the journal SA, edited from 1927 to 1929.
- 2. Acronym of $R\check{Z}SKT$ stood for workers' cooperative construction societies.
- 3. See, for example, the journals $Sovietskaja\ Arkhitektura\ (Soviet\ Architecture)$ and $Stroitel'stvo\ Mosky\ (The\ Construction\ of\ Moscow)$.
- 4. See L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui, 1931, 5.
- 5. The core of the Hungarian group between 1929 and 1938 consisted of Farkas Molnár, József Fischer, György Rácz, Gábor Preisich, Zoltán Révész, Máté Major, József Körner, István Bakos and György Dóczi.
- 6. See Ter es Forma, 1931, 10: 331-332.
- 7. See Architecture d'aujourd'hui, 1960, 87: 94-96.



23. V. Hilsky and E. Linhart, Collective Housing in Horni Litvinov, 1946. Source: L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui, n. 87, 1960.

24. N. Osterman, A.V. Petruškova *et al.*, New Lifestyle building Dom novogo Byta (DNB), Moscow 1968-1969. Source: Author's archive.

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