The Avant-gardes in Holland and Russia

As in the case of Expressionism and Futurism, the architectural avant-gardes in Holland and Russia were at first dominated by painting and sculpture. In both countries formal experiments that were possible in theoretical or small-scale projects met with considerable resistance when applied to the constructional and programmatic needs of buildings. After the First World War, as soon as the economic and political situation allowed building to resume, architectural projects in both countries began to take on the characteristics of a more sober, international architecture and to lose national traits which had originated largely from interpretations of Cubism, Expressionism, and Futurism. This chapter will describe these national movements—De Stijl in Holland; Suprematism, Rationalism, and Constructivism in Russia—and their transition to a Europe-wide 'Modern Movement' (also known as ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’, ‘Functionalism’, ‘Rationalism’, or ‘Neues Bauen’).

In both the Dutch and the Russian avant-gardes, the logic of the machine became the model for art and architecture; the mind was considered to be able to create form independently of traditional craft, implying a new alliance between painting, architecture, and mathematical reason. Art and architecture were seen as impersonal and objective and not based on individual ‘taste’.

The avant-garde in Holland

Two opposed movements in architecture and the decorative arts flourished in Holland during and immediately after the First World War—the Amsterdam School and De Stijl. Both these movements were related to Art Nouveau and the Arts and Crafts movement as well as to German Expressionism; both believed in a unified style reflecting the spirit of the age; both inherited the Morrisian idea that society could be transformed by art; and both rejected the eclectic use of past styles, striving for a new, uncoded architecture. But each inherited a different strand of the earlier movements—the vitalistic, individualistic strand in the case of the Amsterdam School and the rationalist,
impersonal strand in the case of De Stijl. Each movement condemned the other, ignoring their shared aims and origins. The work of the Amsterdam School—whose chief exponent was Michel de Klerk (1884–1923)—was characterized by the use of traditional materials, in particular brick, and the free, fantastical but craftsman-like working of these materials. The forms of traditional architecture were not so much abandoned as transformed and made strange. Much of the most important work of the Amsterdam School was built between 1914 and 1923 and is to be found in the many public housing projects that were part of the vast urban renewal programme being undertaken in Amsterdam at the time under the direction of Berlage.

De Stijl

The De Stijl movement, though its origins lay, like those of the Amsterdam School, in the decorative arts, developed an ornamentation that reflected the influence of Cubism and rejected craftsmanship in favour of a geometrical anti-naturalism. In 1917 the painter Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931) published the first issue of De Stijl, a magazine promoting modern art. The term ‘De Stijl’ is normally applied to both the magazine and the movement to which it gave its name. The original group included the painters Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), van Doesburg, Vilmos Huszár (1884–1960), and Bart van der Leck (1876–1958), the sculptor Georges Vantongerloo (1886–1965), and the architects Jan Wils (1890–1977), Robert van’t Hoff (1887–1979), Gerrit Rietveld (1888–1964), and J.J.P. Oud (1890–1963). The group’s identity, however, had less to do with its specific membership, which was highly volatile, than with its doctrine as defined in the first De Stijl Manifesto of 1918 and in later issues of the magazine. De Stijl was edited and dominated by van Doesburg and became an important organ of the international avant-garde until it ceased publication in 1932.

Theory

The theoretical apparatus of De Stijl was a variant of existing (mostly Symbolist and Futurist-derived) doctrine, and the movement saw itself as a crusade in the common cause of Modernism. It maintained close ties with avant-garde movements in the different arts abroad, including Dada (van Doesburg himself, under the pseudonym Aldo Camini, published Dada poetry in De Stijl).

The three main postulates of the movement can be roughly summarized as follows: each art form must realize its own nature based on its materials and codes—only then can the generative principles governing all the visual arts (indeed, all art) be revealed; as the spiritual awareness of society increases, so will art fulfill its historical (Hegelian) destiny and become reabsorbed into daily life; art is not opposed to science and technology—both art and science are concerned with the discovery and demonstration of the underlying laws of nature and not with nature’s superficial and transient appearance (the theory, however, did not take into account the possibility art could still be a form of imitation).

De Stijl belonged to the millennialist tradition of Expressionism and Futurism. Although it lacked any obvious political dimension, it was nonetheless Utopian; it imagined a future in which social divisions would be dissolved and power dispersed. It combined a commitment to modernity with an idealism that associated scientific and technical change with spiritual as well as material progress. The metaphysics of the movement were to a large extent taken from the Theosophist and Neoplatonist M. J. H. Schoenmaecker, whose book The Principles of Plastic Mathematicus (1916) claimed that plastic mathematics was a ‘positive mysticism’ in which ‘we translate reality into constructions controlled by our reason, later to recover these constructions in nature, thus penetrating matter with plastic vision’. Schoenmaecker believed that the new plastic expression (Neoplasticism), born of light and sound, would create a heaven on earth.

The two main theorists of the movement were Mondrian and van Doesburg, but they by no means agreed on all points of doctrine. Mondrian’s concept of Neoplasticism, based partly on Schoenmaecker and partly on Kandinsky’s influential book Über das Geistige in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art) of 1911, was restricted to painting, whereas van Doesburg attempted to apply it to architecture as well. Although both Huszár and Van der Leck made important contributions to the early development of Neoplasticism, it was Mondrian who worked out its logical implications. The system that he eventually arrived at was based on a radical process of reduction in which the complex, accidental appearance of nature was refined to the variations of an irregular orthogonal grid, partly filled in with rectangles of primary colour [72]. According to Yve-Alain Bois, Mondrian organizes the picture surface in such a way that the traditional hierarchy between figural objects and an illusionistic ground is abolished. In Mondrian, ‘no element is more important than any other, and none must escape integration’. These structural principles of non-redundancy and non-hierarchy are similar to those underlying Schoenberg’s atonal and serial music. In traditional painting it is the figural object that conveys the symbolic or lyrical content (as does melody in music); in Mondrian’s paintings the meaning is transposed from the represented object to the abstract organization of the two-dimensional surface—an effect analogous to Boccioni’s idea that it was no longer objects (reduced to lines, planes, and so on) that provided rhythm and emotion, but the relations between them (see page 100).
The relation between architecture and painting

In the early phase of the De Stijl movement, there was an emphasis on the collaboration between architecture and painting. The following remarks by Van der Leck are typical of this position:

Modern painting has now arrived at the point at which it may enter into collaboration with architecture. It has arrived at this point because its means of expression have been purified. The description of time and space by means of perspective has been abandoned; it is the flat surface itself that transmits spatial continuity... Painting today is architectural because in itself and by its own means it serves the same concept as architecture.

This statement is in many ways unclear. For example, if it is true that painting and architecture are becoming increasingly indistinguishable, what sense does it make to say that they should enter into a collaboration? Collaboration can only take place between things that are different—as in the Wagnerian concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk.

During the 1920s, a split between painters and architects developed, epitomized by a correspondence that took place between J. J. P. Oud and Mondrian. In this correspondence, Mondrian claimed that painting was able to anticipate the desired merging of art and life precisely because it remained on the level of representation, and was not, like architecture, compromised by its immersion in reality. Until architecture freed itself from this condition, it could not participate in the movement towards the unification of art and life. For Oud, on the other hand, if art was eventually to merge with life, it could only be at the level of existing reality. Far from being antagonistic to the purification of artistic form, the principles of utility and function were inseparable from it (in this Oud’s position was the same as that of Le Corbusier). Mondrian’s extreme idealism and Oud’s aesthetic materialism were incapable of finding common ground.

Van Doesburg’s position differed from that of both Oud and Mondrian. He accepted Mondrian’s idealist resistance to the pragmatics of architecture, but he believed that architecture, by the very fact that it existed in real as opposed to virtual three-dimensional space, would play a privileged role in achieving the union of life and art. The ideal (which he shared with the Futurists) of an observer no longer separated from that which was observed, was already immanent in architecture and needed only to be brought out.

The interior

The Decorative Arts movement (Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau) had sought to unify the visual arts and architecture. But this had only fleetingly been achieved, in the person of the ‘artist-craftsman’. One of
the aims of the De Stijl artists was to occupy the void created by the demise of this artist-craftsman, but to occupy it as painters. In 1918, van Doesburg decorated the interiors of a house by J. P. Oud (The De Vonk House, 1917–18) with colour felt tiles and stained-glass windows which were simply added to the architectural framework. But in the same year, both Van der Leck and Husez took a more holistic approach, either by designing and colouring all the tectonic elements of a room—doors, cupboards, furniture—so as to create a unity of rhyming rectangular forms, or by applying colour patches to walls and ceilings, often 'against the grain' of the architectural structure [73]. The effect of these interventions was to merge structure, ornament, and furniture in a new unity. The difference between ground (architecture) and figure (ornament, furniture, etc.) was erased, reversing the trend initiated by the interiors exhibited in Germany around 1910 by, for example, Bruno Paul, and reverting to the Jugendstil practice of treating the interior as an indivisible, abstract unity—as in Van de Velde and Wright.

Van Doesburg and architecture

In external form, the influence of De Stijl as well as that of Wright can already be seen in several architectural projects in Holland in the period immediately after the First World War. In these the geometrical, horizontal, and vertical elements that emphasized the main forms still looked like ornamental additions to the structure—for example in the work of Jan Wils and Robert van't Hoff [74]. Van Doesburg also experimented in external architectural forms, but his approach was different. In 1917, in collaboration with Jan Wils, he designed a small, pyramidal public monument made up of prisms—a type of abstraction that can be traced back to Joseph Hoffmann’s decorations at the 14th Vienna Secession Exhibition of 1902. By 1922, van Doesburg had begun to ‘activate’ such purely sculptural forms by making them coincide with habitable volumes. In work executed by his pupils from the Weimar Bauhaus, asymmetrical house plans were projected vertically to create interlocking prismatic volumes [75]. These researches reached a climax in 1923 when, in collaboration with the young architect Cornelis van Eesteren (1897–1988), he exhibited three ‘ideal’ houses at Léonce Rosenberg’s L’Effort Moderne gallery in Paris. Two of these houses—an ‘Hôtel Particulier’ and a ‘Maison d’une Artiste’—were variants of a single type of house, which,
The early figural works which show the transformation of a tree into a binary system of vertical and horizontal dashes. Because of its centrifugal, stem-like structure the house has no front or back and seems to defy gravity. It is a self-referential and self-generated object with a form that is not 'composed' from the outside but results from an internal principle of growth. The Maison d'une Artiste can be seen as an allegory of nature, in which an initial, unitary principle exfoliates into an infinity of individuated forms. Primary colours are added to the planes to differentiate between them. In van Doesburg’s Counter-constructions of a year later [77], the whole composition is reduced to

because of its wide-ranging influence, deserves to be discussed in some detail [76].

The house consists of an aggregation of interlocking cubic volumes which appear to 'grow' from a central stem or core in a manner that recalls Wright’s Prairie Houses. In its underlying organization the house is systematic but in detail it is accidental and variable. This idea recalls the system-plus-variety of Mondrian’s paintings, particularly

76 Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren
Axonometric drawing of Hôtel Particulier, 1923
A development of van Doesburg’s earlier studies (see 75), the cubic composition is further broken up by arbitrarily placed rectangles of colour.
these hovering and intersecting coloured planes, allowing space to flow between them, in accordance with Futurist principles. Van Doesburg defined this spatial system as follows:

The subdivision of the functional spaces is strictly determined by rectangular planes, which possess no individual forms in themselves since, although they are limited (the one plane by the other), they can be imagined as extended into infinity, thereby forming a system of coordinates, the different points of which would correspond to an equal number of points in universal, open space.9

In these drawings, axonometry is more than a useful graphic tool. It is the only method of representation that does not privilege one part of the building over another (for example, the façade over the interior). In ‘real life’, the only way to recall such a house in its totality would be to trace and retrace its interior spaces in time, as in the case of Loos’s Raumplan houses. Axonometry converts this temporal, semi-conscious process into an experience that is instantaneous and conscious. For van Doesburg these drawings seem to have symbolized his technomystical vision of an architecture identical with the flow of lived experience. They were idealized representations of the ineffable. Axonometry was also fundamental to van Doesburg’s attempts to represent four-dimensional space.10

The only building in which van Doesburg’s formal principles were applied was the Schroeder House in Utrecht (1924) by Gerrit Rietveld. Externally the house appears as a montage of elementary forms, but its fragmentation turns out to be a purely surface effect. It is in the interior that the house comes to life. Rietveld has reinterpreted van Doesburg’s Counter-constructions in terms of the earlier experiments of Van der Leck and Houszar, and the furniture and equipment of the house is transformed into a vibrant composition of rectilinear forms and primary colours.

Architecture beyond De Stijl

But apart from Rietveld, modern architecture in Holland developed in a different direction from De Stijl, sharing only a certain number of principles such as formal abstraction, immateriality, and the avoidance of symmetries. The emerging architecture rejected De Stijl’s rigorous reduction and fragmentation and returned to closed forms and frontality. The work of J. J. P. Oud in the 1920s is hardly touched by De Stijl [78], while that of Johannes Brinkman (1902–49) and Leendert Cornelis van der Vlugt (1894–1936) shows De Stijl’s influence in a rather ad hoc use of interlocking volumes, cantilevered floors, and floating vertical planes. By the early 1930s, in such works as the Van Nelle Factory (1927–9) and the Sonneveld House (1928) [79], both in Rotterdam, De Stijl forms have been totally assimilated into a
Constructivist architecture of smooth, machine-like surfaces and extensive glazing. Van Doesburg himself, in the studio house he built in Paris in 1921, abandoned his earlier Neoplasticism and built a relatively simple, functional box.

The tension that developed between De Stijl and the new architecture of the 1920s is revealed by J. J. P. Oud in the book *Nieuwe Bouwenkunst in Holland en Europa* published in 1935:

Remarkable as it may sound the Nieuwe Sachelijkheid (New Objectivity) developed in large part from the initial development of the liberal arts—above all painting. The origins of its forms lay much more in the aesthetic domain than in the domain of the objective. . . . Horizontal and vertical intersections of parts of buildings, suspended floors, corner windows, etc., were for a time very much in vogue. Their derivation from painting and sculpture can be easily demonstrated and they have been continually used with or without any practical aim.\(^\text{11}\)

Oud's play on the word 'objective' in opposition to 'esthetic' and his disapproval of the 'unpractical' influence of painting and sculpture, clearly indicate the emergence of the new 'functional' parameters. Despite this, the idealism and formalism of van Doesburg's work made it a catalyst for Modernist architects seeking a new formal language, just as Frank Lloyd Wright's work had been a few years earlier. As a result of van Doesburg's exhibitions in Weimar and Paris in 1922 and 1923 respectively, and his presence 'off-stage' at the Bauhaus in 1921, Neoplasticism exerted a considerable influence on architects like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe at critical moments in their careers.

The Russian avant-garde

The reform movement in the arts followed much the same trajectory in Russia as in Western Europe. A revival of the vernacular arts and crafts inspired, as elsewhere, by William Morris, was initiated at two centres: the estate of the railway magnate Savva Mamontov near Moscow (in the 1870s) and the estate of Prince Tenisheva at Smolensk (in 1890). Both were closely associated with the Pan-Slav movement. But in 1906 this movement itself underwent a transformation with the founding of the Organization for Proletarian Culture ('Proletkult'), by Alexandre Malinovsky, self-styled 'Bogdanov' (God-gifted). Bogdanov had abandoned the Social Democrats for the Bolsheviks in 1903, and his new organization initiated a shift from the concept of the folk to that of the proletariat, and from handicraft to science and technology. According to Bogdanov the progress of the proletariat towards socialism would have to take place simultaneously on the political, economic, and cultural planes. These ideas were in fact closer to those of Saint-Simon than those of Marx, particularly in their call for a new 'religion' of positivism.

A common pattern in Russia and the West can be found not only in the change of emphasis from handicraft to machine-work, but also in the re-emergence of the fine arts as the most important site of experiment, linked to the concept of *Gestalt*. The only substantial difference was that in Russia the industrial art and fine art movements occurred simultaneously and became locked in a destructive ideological battle, whereas in the West, though they overlapped, they occurred sequentially.

The diversity of artistic movements that characterized the pre-revolutionary avant-gardes in Russia, especially those deriving from Cubism and Futurism, persisted in the post-revolutionary period, presenting the historian with a bewildering array of acronyms. Support for the revolution came from all artistic factions, including the most conservative, each faction identifying with its aims. For those avant-garde artists and architects who joined the revolution, the Utopian fantasies of the period before the First World War seemed about to become a historical reality.\(^\text{12}\) The revolution released an explosion of creative energy, in which the paths opened up by the pre-war European avant-gardes were redirected towards the achievement of socialism.

Art institutions

The Ministry of Enlightenment that was set up after the revolution under Commissar Lunacharski, who had been associated with Proletkult, was more tolerant of Modernist art than was the party establishment as a whole. Under the new ministry, there was a general reform of the art institutions. The Free Workshops, founded in Moscow in 1918 and renamed the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops (Vkhutemas) in 1920, were the successors of the two main pre-revolutionary Moscow art schools—the Stroganov School of Industrial Design and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. The fusion of the old school of art with a craft school which, since 1914, had been training students for industry, created a fundamental institutional break with the past—similar to that which occurred at the same time in the Weimar Bauhaus—a change epitomized by the introductory design course or 'Basic Section', which was shared by all departments. The progressives in the school were divided into two ideological camps: the Rationalists, led by the architect Nikolai Ladovsky (1881–1941) and his United Workshops of the Left (Obmas), and the Constructivists, whose members included the architect Alexander Vesnin (1883–1939) and the artists Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958), Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), and Alexei Gan (1889–1940). Another important institution was the Moscow Institute
of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk). It was within Inkhuk that the leftist First Working Group of Constructivists was formed in 1921, and that a significant debate took place between this group and the Rationalists over the question of 'construction' versus 'composition'.

Rationalism versus Constructivism

Though in their forms the Rationalists and Constructivists were often similar, they were ideologically fundamentally opposed to each other. According to the Rationalists, the first task in the renewal of art was its purification and the discovery of its psychological, formal laws; according to the Constructivists, art, being an intrinsically social phenomenon, could not be isolated as a purely formal practice.

The Rationalists, starting from the architectural fantasies of Expressionism, elaborated a system of formal analysis based on Gestaltpsychologie [80]. Ladovsky's course at the Vkhutemas was the core of the Basic Section until the school was reshaped on more conservative lines in 1930. In 1923 Ladovsky founded the Association of New Architects (ASNOVA) to counteract the growing influence of the utilitarian Constructivists within Inkhuk.

Another essentially formalist group must be mentioned here: the Suprematists. Founded by the painter Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) in 1913, this movement had much in common with Dutch Neo-plasticism, including its geometrical reductivism and its involvement with Theosophy—in the case of Malevich, with the writings of P. D. Ouspensky. Unlike Mondrian's paintings, the Suprematist work of Malevich still relied on a figure-ground relationship between represented objects and illusionistic space—even if this space was now featureless and Newtonian. Also unlike Mondrian, but like van Doesburg, Malevich extended his system of ideas to architecture. In a series of prismatic, quasi-architectural sculptures (which he called 'Arkhitectrons') he sought to demonstrate the timeless laws of architecture underlying the ever-changing demands of function [81]. The Darmstadt-trained architect El Liisitsky (1890–1941) was associated with Malevich at the art school in Vitebsk in the early 1920s. The paintings which he grouped under the name 'Proun' ('Project for the affirmation of the new') explored the common ground between architecture, painting, and sculpture. Many of them consisted of Arkhitektornike objects floating in a gravity-free space, represented in spatially ambiguous axonometric projections. Like van Doesburg, Liisitsky was interested in the possibility of representing four-dimensional space, though he later repudiated this idea.

In contrast to the Rationalists, the Constructivist group held that what constituted the essence of modern art was not the principle of form, but that of construction. The First Working Group of Constructivists (founded by Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Gan) represented the group's most radical wing. The group extended the Futurist concept of the work of art as a 'construction'—a real object among real objects—rather than a 'composition' of represented objects, maintaining that this necessarily entailed the total elimination of fine art in
favour of applied or industrial art (or ‘production art’ as they preferred to call it). They thus converted the Hegelian idea of the sublation of art into life—already present in pre-First World War avant-garde theory (for example, in that of Mondrian)—from a vague Utopian fantasy into an actual political project. This programme was set out in Alexei Gan’s manifesto, ‘Konstruktivist’, of 1922.\(^\text{15}\)

The chief paradigm for this ‘constructed’ object was the three-dimensional work of Vladimir Tatlin (1888–1953)—particularly his ‘Counter-reliefs’ of 1915, based on Boccioni’s 1914 reinterpretation of Picasso’s relief collages, and his maquette for a Monument to the Third International (1919–20), a fusion of Cubo-Expressionist form and quasi-rational structure [82]. The First Working Group saw such works, which were palpably non-utilitarian, as a halfway house to the creation of a hitherto non-existent human type: the ‘artist-constructor’, who would unite the skills of the artist and the engineer in one person. The scholastic mystifications of much of this debate masked an attempt on the part of the First Working Group to reconcile artistic idealism with Marxist materialism. It is clear from Tatlin’s occasional writings that for him it was the mimetic and intuitive understanding of complex mathematical forms that constituted the necessary link between modern art and political revolution, not the literal production of these forms. The artist’s work was not part of technology, but its ‘counterpart’.\(^\text{16}\)

The essential concern of the First Working Group was the artist’s role in an industrial economy—a concern common to all avant-garde groups since the founding of the Deutscher Werkbund 14 years earlier. The Constructivist theorist Boris Arvatov suggested that the craft shops of the Vkhutemas should be used for the invention of the standard forms of material life in the field of furniture, clothing, and other types of production.\(^\text{17}\)

Artists like Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Lyubov Popova (1889–1914) and their students set about designing the components of the new socialist micro-environment [83]. Unlike the furniture produced by the Werkbund-inspired German workshops before the First World War, these objects never entered the production cycle and their designers did not have the factory experience which might have led to
mixed state and privately financed corporate buildings. After 1922 numerous competitions were launched. Though few resulted in built projects, it was from these competitions that the first permanent, large-scale Constructivist architecture emerged. Its chief characteristics were the elimination of all ornament and the external expression of the structural frame, showing the influence of American factory design, and of Walter Gropius’s and Ludwig Hilbersheimer’s separate entries for the Chicago Tribune competition of 1922. Although the Proletkult movement had been suspended in 1923, some of these ponderous monoliths were enlivened with written signs and mechanical or electrical iconography reminiscent of the agitprop kiosks of the early years of the revolution and connected with Lenin’s Plan of Monumental Propaganda of 1918. Vesnin’s design for the Moscow headquarters of the Leningrad Pravda (1924) was little more than an oversized and regularized kiosk, with its transparent frame and pithead imagery, and its icons of communication—and it had some of the playfulness of his and Popova’s stage-sets [85]. In other cases, such as Vesnin’s competition entry for the Palace of Labour (1924–25) and Ilya Golosov’s Workers’ Club in Moscow (1926), the building mass is broken up into huge Platonic volumes containing the main programmatic elements.

OSA

In 1924 a new professional group was formed within the Constructivist faction under the intellectual leadership of Moisei Ginsburg (1892–1946) and the patronage of Alexander Vesnin, called The Union of Contemporary Architects (OSA). This group was opposed to both the Rationalists and the First Working Group. It sought to steer the avant-garde away from the Utopian rhetoric of the Proletkult tradition, towards an architecture grounded in scientific method and social engineering. The group’s aims reflected a trend in the Russian avant-garde towards reintegration and synthesis. As Leon Trotsky pointed out in his book Literature and Revolution (1932): ‘If Futurism was attracted to the chaotic dynamics of the revolution . . . then neoclassicism expressed the need for peace, for stable forms. This was equally true of avant-gardes in the West, where—as we shall see—there was a turn to neoclassical calm and precision as a reaction against the irrationalism of Expressionism, Futurism, and Dada.

The group published a journal—Contemporary Architecture—and established close ties with avant-garde architects in Western Europe. Ginsburg’s book Style and Epoch (1924) was closely modelled on Le Corbusier’s Vers une Architecture (though opposed to the idea of Platonic constants), and was influenced by Riegler’s concept of the Kunstwollen. OSA posited an architecture of equilibrium in which aesthetic and technical—material—forces would be reconciled. It was
European developments. The journal emphasized the autonomy of the aesthetic object: "We do not wish to see artistic creation restricted to useful objects alone. Every organized piece of work—be it a house, a poem or a painting—is a practical object. Basic utilitarianism is far from our thoughts." Though ostensibly promoting the latest Constructivist ideas, the magazine completely ignored the anti-aesthetic doctrine of the First Working Group.

OSA architects concentrated on housing and urbanism as the main instruments of socialist development. Ginsburg was not an advocate of communal living in its more doctrinaire form, according to which a strict Taylorism should be applied to both work and leisure time and family life should be virtually abolished. But despite the importance Ginsburg attached to the opinions of ordinary people, the types of apartment that he provided in his Narkomfin Housing in Moscow (1928–9) were unpopular because, with their minimal surface area, they did not allow for the kind of untidy extended family life to which people were accustomed. The building reflects the influence of Le Corbusier in its plastic and sectional organization and its combination of family dwellings and communal facilities [86].

In the field of urbanism, OSA was caught up in the controversy between the urbanists and the disurbanists. In this debate, the urbanists proposed the moderate decentralization of existing cities, preserving them in their substance, and the creation of Garden Suburbs along the lines of Raymond Unwin’s Letchworth and Hampstead Garden Suburb in Britain. The disurbanists, on the contrary, called for the progressive demolition of existing cities, except for their historical cores, and the dispersal of the population over the whole countryside. Ginsburg’s disurbanist views are evident from his competition projects for the Green City (a leisure city to be built near Moscow), and for the steel city of Magnitogorsk in the Urals, one of the new cities planned as part of the first Five Year Plan of 1928. For Magnitogorsk, Ginsburg designed light, wooden houses on pilotis, suitable for a new kind of nomadic life. These plans were based on the theories of the sociologist Mikhail Okhitovitch (1896–1937), who proposed the dispersal of industry and a balanced relationship between urban and rural life, predicated on the Fordist model of universal automobile ownership. In their projects OSA adopted the concept of the linear city as proposed by the Spanish urbanist Soria y Mata (1844–1920) and his Russian disciple Nikolai Mileutin (1889–1942), who was also the client for Ginsburg’s Narkomfin Housing.

Two visionary architects
Among the many architects of talent who emerged in the 1920s in Russia, two figures stand out: Konstantin Melnikov (1890–1974) and

fiercely opposed by Ladosky’s ASNOVA for its positivist attitude and its emphasis on technology.

An earlier manifestation of such internationalist ideas had been the short-lived journal *Veche* (Object) published in Berlin in 1922 by El Lissitzky—spokesman of the Russian avant-garde in Germany—and the poet Ilya Ehrenberg. The main purpose of this journal, which was mostly written in Russian, was to acquaint Russian readers with
Ivan Leonidov (1902–39). Melnikov had a pre-revolutionary background, whereas Leonidov was formed within the culture of the post-revolutionary avant-garde. Both, however, were committed equally to socialism and Modernism and sought to give symbolic form to the ideals of the revolution while at the same time exploring architectural ideas for their own sake.

Melnikov was old enough to have been influenced by the Romantic classicism fashionable when he was a student, after which he came under the spell of Expressionism and the Proletkult movement. His approach was in many ways similar to the formalism of Ladovsky; but he believed Ladovsky’s ideas to be too theoretical and schematic and, with Ilya Golosov, he set up a separate Vkhutemas studio—The New Academy—that taught a more individual and spontaneous approach to design. In Melnikov’s projects the forms and spaces were based on a close study of the programme, which he interpreted in terms of clashing and distorted geometries, as in the USSR Pavilion at the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1925 [87]. His buildings gave rise to associations and ideas beyond architecture and acted as signs within the existing urban context, as, for example, in the Rusakov Workers’ Club of 1917. Their similarity, in this respect, to the architecture parienne of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736–1806), who was popular among architects in Russia at the time, has often been noted.

Melnikov rejected a purist definition of modern architecture either in a formal or a technical sense and his buildings exhibit an eclectic mixture of structural expressionism, formal abstraction, and the allegorical use of the human figure. Such “kitsch” elements, as found in the
Commissariat for Heavy Industry of 1934, appear in his work with increasing frequency in the 1930s and probably reflect the official demand for a Social Realist architecture. But since Melnikov used them as additional weapons in his armoury of shock tactics—bringing to mind the critic Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of the ‘making strange’ of traditional practices—rather than aiming at a reconciliation with tradition, his work suffered the same official neglect in the 1930s as that of the Constructivists and Rationalists.

Ivan Leonidov, 12 years younger than Melnikov, was a product of OSA and Ginzburg’s formalist–functionalist wing of Constructivism. In complete contrast to the physicality and drama of Melnikov’s work, Leonidov’s designs seem to exist in a disembodied Neoplatonic world in which technology has been converted into pure Idea. His reputation rests largely on a series of Utopian projects designed between 1927 and 1930. The first and most significant of these was a project for the Lenin Institute of Librarianship [88], which was shown at the first Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture at Moscow in 1927. This project resembles a Suprematist composition. It is dominated by a slender glazed tower and a translucent sphere (the auditorium), the latter apparently prevented by tension cables from floating off into space. A second project, for a Palace of Culture (1930), was a transformation of the typical workers’ club into an institution for proletarian education on a national scale. Unlike that of the Lenin Monument, which expands dynamically from a central point, the plan of the Palace of Culture consists of a static rectangular field, subdivided by a square grid on which the different Platonic elements—glazed hemispheres, cones, and pyramids—are deployed like pieces on a chessboard. These and other projects by Leonidov are remarkable for the apparent effortlessness with which they summarize and integrate the Suprematist and Constructivist traditions.

The end of the Russian avant-garde

Throughout the 1920s Russian avant-garde architects struggled to hold onto their freedom of action, which usually meant the freedom to put forward ideas that were more radical, both socially and artistically, than those of the Communist Party. But towards the end of the 1920s the gap between the avant-garde and the political establishment increased. As the Stalin government became increasingly authoritarian and culturally conservative, the architects became more Utopian—as the work of Leonidov demonstrates. The same was true at the level of urbanism. While the architects of OSA condemned the traditional city, the Communist Party saw it as a cultural heritage that was understood by the masses and should therefore be preserved, extended, and improved. The plan for Moscow of 1935 (architect: V. N. Semenov), though based on the city’s unique medieval structure, followed the general principles of such nineteenth and early twentieth-century city plans as Haussmann’s Paris, the Ringstrasse in Vienna, and Burnham’s Chicago. The official view was summed up in the slogan: ‘The people have a right to columns.’

With Stalin’s first Five Year Plan of 1928, the government embarked on a ruthless programme of industrial development and agricultural collectivization. This programme included the construction of a number of new industrial cities sited near sources of raw material. The solutions that Ginzburg and Milyutin proposed for Magnitogorsk were ignored in favour of conventional centralized cities. Showing little faith in Russian architects with their lack of practical experience and preoccupation with long-term, Utopian ideas, the new city managers hired foreign architects with experience in the techniques and management of new settlements. These included the German architect Ernst May and the Swiss Hannes Meyer (who moved to Russia in 1930 after losing hope that socialism might be established in western Europe). Such architects, however, completely misjudging the true situation in Russia, were disappointed when they discovered that their clients were more interested in their technical skills than their Modernist aesthetics—which in any case could hardly be realized under the primitive conditions of the Russian building industry.

Two events symbolize the final death of the avant-garde in Soviet Russia. The first was the dissolution in 1932 of all autonomous
architectural professional groups except the Stalinist-dominated All Union Society of Proletarian Architects (VOPRA),28 which resulted in increased government control over the profession. The second event was the result of the prestigious Palace of the Soviets competition, held between 1931 and 1933. After a long drawn-out procedure a young ‘centrist’ architect—Boris Iofan—was awarded first prize from a list of entrants that included many of the stars of European Modernism, among them Gropius, Mendelsohn, and Poelzig from Germany, Brasini from Italy, Lamb and Urban from America, and Auguste Perret and Le Corbusier from France [89].

Henceforth the state maintained a firm grip on architectural policy. The architects of the avant-garde either vainly attempted to adapt their style to the approved monumentalism or became bureaucrats (for example, Ginsburg), working for technical improvement within a cultural policy of Socialist Realism that contradicted all that they had lived for in the 1920s.