Modern Architecture & Ideology: Modernism as a Political Tool in Sweden and the Soviet Union

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Abstract
This paper examines the role of architecture in the promotion of political ideologies through the study of modern architecture in the 20th century. First, it historicizes the development of modern architecture and establishes the style as a tool to convey progressive thought; following this perspective, the paper examines Swedish Functionalism and Constructivism in the Soviet Union as two case studies exploring how politicians react to modern architecture and the ideas that it promotes. In Sweden, Modernism’s ideals of moving past “tradition,” embracing modernity, and striving to improve life were in lock step with the folkhemmet, unleashing the nation from its past and ushering it into the future. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, these ideals represented an ideological threat to Stalin’s totalitarian state.
Modern Architecture & Ideology

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INTRODUCTION

MODERN ARCHITECTURE EMERGED IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AS THE style for the industrial age, conscious of its modernity and striving to break from the traditions of the past. Ornamentation was replaced with simplicity. Timber and stone were traded for steel and glass. Romanticism was swapped for rationality. By the half-way point of the twentieth-century, Modernism was established as the dominant global movement in architecture. Many designers, historians, and philosophers maintain that Modern Architecture contains and transmits meaning—that it is more than just structure. Yoshio Taniguchi, the Modernist Japanese architect, once said, “Architecture is basically a container of something. I hope you will enjoy not so much the teacup, but the tea.” Donald J. Olsen, his American contemporary, wrote, “Architecture is a deliberate artistic creation intended not merely to give pleasure, but to contain ideas, inculcate values, and serve as tangible expressions of systems of thought.”

Modern Architecture’s ability “to contain ideas, inculcate values, and serve as tangible expressions of systems of thought” caught the attention of many politicians, who embraced architecture as a tool to promote their ideas. This thesis investigates the connection between the architect and the politician, between the aesthetic and the ideological, in Sweden and the Soviet Union, two places where the connection was particularly rich. In Sweden, Functionalist architecture, a Scandinavian breed of Modernism, emerged alongside the Swedish Welfare State. Why? How was Functionalism used to support this political project? At the same time, 800 miles away in Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union, Constructivist architecture, the Russian strain of Modernism, was purged. How come? What about Constructivism was so toxic to Stalin’s ideology? Together, these inquiries will help answer the larger question at stake: How was Modern Architecture used as a political tool?

I have organized this thesis into four sections. The first, “A Basic Understanding of Modern Architecture,” is a summary of the most important Modernist architects, writings, and principles. I hope that it will be as refreshing to those already familiar with Modern Architecture as it is informative to those learning about Modern Architecture for the first time. From here, “Functionalism and the Swedish Modernization Project” explores the link between Functionalist Architecture and the creation of the Swedish Welfare State. It starts by considering the reasons politicians sought to create a Welfare State, then outlines Sweden’s architectural history, and ultimately discusses the ways that Functionalism was used to promote the Welfare project. It demonstrates that Modern Architecture possesses an innate and indelible progressive spirit. “Constructivism and Stalin’s Soviet Union,” the next section, looks at the relationship between Constructivist Architecture and Joseph Stalin. It digests Stalin’s totalitarian ideology, looks at the ways that Constructivism was threatening to this ideology, and concludes with an examination of the architecture that Stalin chose to support his ideas. It demonstrates that Modern Architecture’s progressive spirit was so powerful that it was perceived as an enemy of the totalitarian state. The final section, “Meditations,” draws conclusions about the relationship between Modern Architecture and Ideology and explores the ever-important relationship between architecture and politics in our day.

My goal in all of this is not to be exhaustive. My goal is to provide a new kind of...
MOMENTUM

As science studies scholar Cathy Gere observes in Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism, “naming a past era with a word that means ‘of the present time’” is confusing.

Modernists defined “traditional” as anything preceding the Industrial Age, some 3,000 years of human history.


Modern architecture is built on three basic principles, emblematic of Modernism at large – a Rejection of Ornamentation and Tradition, an Embrace of Newfound Industrial Forms and Materials, and an Ambition to Improve and Reshape Life.

REJECTION OF TRADITION AND ORNAMENTATION

The Modern architect believed that “traditional” architecture failed to reflect the spirit of the new age. William Lescaze, a Swiss-born architect who pioneered Modernist architecture in America, typified this belief in his 1937 essay “The Meaning of Modern Architecture.”

Architecture is a social art, and every architectural movement has a social origin. Life, today, differs radically even from that of a hundred years ago, and it is the great change in the fundamental characteristics of our lives that is necessitating a new form of shelter...Our buildings have changed because our life has changed. One cannot, architecturally put new wine into old bottles.

Edgar Kaufmann Jr., a prominent American Modern architect, echoed Lescaze in his 1930 essay for the Museum of Modern Art, “What is Modern Design?”: “Modern design is the planning and making of objects suited to our way of life, our abilities, our ideals. It began when creative and perceptive people reacted to the vast problems posed by technological change and mass production.”

While the typical Modernist architect held that “traditional” architecture failed to reflect the zeitgeist, particularly radical Modernist architects like the Viennese Adolf Loos charged that it held back human progress altogether. In his 1908 manifesto “Ornament and Crime,” a foundational text for the Modern movement, Loos wrote: “those who measure everything by the past impede the cultural development of nations and of humanity itself.” F.T. Marinetti, founder of the avant-garde movement Futurism, echoed Loos’ point in more poetic terms: “Let’s break out of the horrible shell of wisdom and throw ourselves like pride-ripened fruit into the wide, contorted mouth of the wind! Let’s give ourselves utterly to the Unknown, not in desperation but only to replenish the deep wells of the Absurd.”
Modern architects like Lescaze, Kaufmann Jr., Loos, and Marinetti put their rejection of the “traditional” into practice by eschewing ornamentation. The title of Loos’ canonical work, “Ornament and Crime,” expresses the Modern architect’s frustration with the meaningless bells, whistles, flourishes, and accents that long decorated the homes of the cultural élite. Le Corbusier, the Swiss architect who is the most widely recognized Modernist designer, cried out against ornamentation in his 1923 essay “Eyes Which Do Not See:” “Tail pieces and garlands, exquisite ovals where triangular doves preen themselves or one another, boudoirs embellished with ‘poufs’ in gold and black velvet, are now no more than the intolerable witnesses to a dead spirit (see figs. 1 & 2).”

The Modern architect replaced the ill-suited “traditional” style with one that emerged out of the new possibilities of industrial machinery. This machine aesthetic, as Modern architects called it, embraced the “precision, calculation, flawlessness, simplicity, and economy” on display in the “iron bridges, locomotives, automobiles, telescopes, airport-hangars, and funicular railways” of the day. Le Corbusier, in his 1923 book *Vers Une Architecture* (Towards A New Architecture), juxtaposed photos of the Parthenon and the Ford Model T, each as the hallmark of beauty in its age and remarked, “a house is a machine for living in (see figs. 3 & 4).” The most famous, now clichéd, expression of the Modern architect’s enthusiasm for the functionality and efficiency of the machine aesthetic was the American Frank Lloyd Wright’s demand that “form follow function.” Wright elaborates on his axiom, in “The Art and Craft on the Machine,” from 1901:

*In the years which have been devoted in my own life to working out in stubborn materials a feeling for the beautiful, in the vortex of distorted complex conditions, a hope has grown stronger with the experience of each year, amounting now to a gradually deepening conviction that in the machine lies the only future of art and craft – as I believe, a glorious future; that the*
The Modernist stress on simplicity and rationality grew out of and was enabled by new materials. Metals, cements, and glass offered unprecedented “durability, strength, weather resistance, heat transmission and insulation, and flexibility.”15 “Traditional” architectural materials, like wood and stone, did not disappear entirely, but were supplemented by steel frames which “brought about radical changes in the contours of the house.”16

AMBITION TO IMPROVE AND RESHAPE LIFE

Undergirding the Modern architect’s rejection of the “traditional” and his embrace of the future was a belief that his buildings had the power to improve the life of modern man, both spiritually and functionally.17 He conceived of his job in larger terms than just structure: “No building can function by itself. Our [job] is a complete society, and only in social terms can architecture be thought of.”18 As architectural historian H.J. Henket explains, Modern architects shared a “strong sense of social responsibility in that architecture should raise the living conditions of the masses.”19

Modern architecture’s thaumaturgic, or miraculously curing, ambition rested on the belief that the visual can express meaning. Walter Gropius, a leading German architect, epitomizes this Modernist faith in design’s meaning power: “Shapes can be exciting and soothing. In addition, their colors – shrill or soft – can increase the intended effect. Color and texture of surfaces have an effect existence of their own, sending out physical energies which can be measured.”20 The belief that architecture has the potential to contain and transmit meaning is as old as architecture itself. It is not an invention of Modernism. From Vitruvius, working in the 1st Century BC, architects and writers on architecture have maintained that buildings are more than utilitarian; they are instruments by which emotions, ideas, and beliefs are expressed.21
However, the effort to use architecture to transmit meaning, particularly to heal the ills of modern society, was amplified by Modernist architects.

Armed with this basic understanding of Modern architecture’s aesthetic and philosophical principles, we are now ready to explore how they helped the emergence of the Swedish Welfare State.

FUNCTIONALISM AND THE SWEDISH MODERNIZATION PROJECT

In the early years of the twentieth-century, Swedish politicians launched the folkhemmet, an ambitious experiment to jolt their struggling country into the new age. Functionalism, the Swedish strain of Modern Architecture, was a critical part of this modernization project, used by politicians to visually manifest the promises of modernity.

THE FOLKHEMMET

Sweden entered the 20th century on the wrong foot. Its economy had failed to recover from “the great hunger years” (suuret nälkävuodet), a period some 30 years earlier, from 1866–1868, during which a series of harsh winters and dry summers knocked out the nation’s economy, caused a sixth of the Swedish workforce to flee the country, and forced 100,000 Swedes to starve to death. The nation was severely underdeveloped. In the decades before the 20th century, nearly one-fifth of Swedish children (17.6%) did not survive their first birthday, and life expectancy at birth was a meager 43 years.

Urbanization – a metric widely used to measure a nation’s development – lagged, with as many as 85 percent of Swedes living in the countryside as late as 1880. Industrialization was late to hit Swedish shores, but all the more powerful when it finally did. With its arrival, the structures and institutions which had long provided Swedes with a sense of stability no longer made sense. As Scandinavian historian Håkan Arvidsson noted, “modernity impacted swiftly and heavily, crushing old patterns of living, organizational structures, and value systems.” Between economic collapse, underdevelopment, and the destabilizing impact of modernization, the status Sweden enjoyed as one of the critical part of this modernization project, used by politicians to visually manifest the promises of modernity.

In the face of these challenges, a modern ambition was taking shape, “a new, forward-looking and benign great power dream: the vision of Sweden as a cutting-edge industrial and economic world power.” This ambition manifested in the modernization project, an effort to “lift [Sweden] by the bootstraps and transform it from a land of sour gooseberries to a land flowing with milk and honey.” Modernization centered around the concept of folkhemmet, the use of the home and family as a model for society – the term folkhemmet is a combination of folk (people) and hemmet (home). If the good home hinged on good parents who are able to put food on the table and orchestrate the lives of their children, the folkhemmet, similarly, hinged on the good ruling power, a state that could provide the conditions for a good life and guide its citizens towards it. Per Albin Hansson, the Modernization project’s figurehead, outlined the folkhemmet vision in his classic statement from 1928:

On special and indeed on everyday occasions, we often speak of society – the state, the municipality – as our common home, the people’s home (folkhemmet), the civic home ... The foundations of the home are community and the sense of stability no longer made sense. As Scandinavian historian Håkan Arvidsson noted, “modernity impacted swiftly and heavily, crushing old patterns of living, organizational structures, and value systems.” Between economic collapse, underdevelopment, and the destabilizing impact of modernization, the status Sweden enjoyed as one of the critical part of this modernization project, used by politicians to visually manifest the promises of modernity.

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of belonging together. The good home knows no privileged and disadvantaged, no favorites and no stepchildren. None there looks down on any other, none tries to gain an advantage at the expense of others, the strong does not oppress and plunder the weak. In the good home, equality, consideration, cooperation, helpfulness prevail. Applied to the great home of the people and citizenry, this would signify the breaking down of all social and economic barriers which now divide citizens into privileged and disadvantaged, rulers and dependents, rich and poor, propertied and impoverished, exploiters and exploited.

Francis Sejersted, the late Scandinavian historian, asserts four key ingredients of this modernization project – liberation, economic development through technological progress, differentiation, and consolidation of the nation-state. First, modernization relied on liberation, on using human rights and democracy to dissolve personal and systemic oppression. Hence, “the good home knows no privileged and disadvantaged, no favorites and no stepchildren...In the good home, equality, consideration, cooperation, helpfulness prevail.” Second, modernization meant economic development through technological progress, or the release from poverty via technological development. Hannsson expressed this clearly – “the breaking down of all social and economic barriers which now divide citizens into privileged and disadvantaged, rulers and dependents, rich and poor, propertied and impoverished, exploiters and exploited.”

Third, modernization implied differentiation, or the splintering of a homogenous society into many discrete entities, each with their own culture and values – something, admittedly, Hannsson did not vocalize in the included excerpt. And finally, modernization revolved around a consolidation of the nation-state, or the congealment of these differentiated entities under one banner – “the foundations of the home are community and the sense of belonging together.”

While the folkhemmet was a radically new type of project, it did derive many of its ingredients from the nation’s past. Its paternalist and state-interventionist qualities echoed policies dating back centuries. During the Vasa dynasty, for instance, Gustav I ruled over an absolutist, highly centralized state which carried out important religious and administrative tasks. The underlying moral logic of the Swedish Modernization project, the ambition to liberate the individual from all forms of subordination, is intrinsically linked to the long-standing Swedish theory of love, by which relationships are structured on the principle of egalitarianism, not dependency.

As the Swedish journalist Per Ohlsson writes in *Gudarnas*, “quite contrary to non-socialist assumptions of recent years, the thoroughly regulated, protected society is not a Social Democratic invention. It is a national project, founded in ideas and laws which are much older than the labor movement.” The state-interventionist, unifying project of folkhemmet – though greatly exceeding anything seen before – was not entirely new. It gave age-old ingredients industrial scale.

I find the name folkhemmet particularly interesting. Imaginably, Per Albin Hansson, the folkhemmet’s father, could have named it “People’s Place,” “People’s Nation,” or any variant of the like. But the use of “People’s Home” set the stage for the program’s critical architectural component. And even if Hansson’s phrasing was not considered,
even if it was unconscious, it was the ultimate Freudian slip – architecture was to be instrumental in building Sweden’s future.

SWEDISH ARCHITECTURE UNTIL FUNCTIONALISM: ARCHITECTURE AS MEMORY

Between Sweden’s founding in 1397 and the twentieth century, the nation underwent a host of “traditional” architectural styles. Caught up in the powerful currents of style, the nation was thrown between the Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic, and Neoclassical. These styles were hardly befit for the modern age and, come the twentieth-century, moored Sweden to the very past it was trying to move beyond.

Architecture is, at its most basic, a technology of shelter. In the northern latitudes, finding a warm, dry cave to live in was not an easy task, so Sweden’s earliest settlers had to fabricate shelter from the elements by some other means. They took to building crude huts and tepees centered around an open fire. The earliest of dwellings were dug deep into the ground, until their roofs were all that could be seen of them. Building materials were scavenged from the immediate surroundings, with wood and birchbark readily available in the heavily forested parts of the country and straw and clay elsewhere. Structures were simple and entirely dictated by what could be done with the limited materials at hand. Gradually, once Swedes solved the need for protection against the elements, they turned their attention to the symbolic value of their dwellings. A carved door or porch, for instance, became a status symbol, and the higher one’s social standing, the more care was taken in adorning their abode. I read this as an indication that Swedes have long appreciated the expressive value of architecture – the very same expressivity central to Modern Architecture.

This simple, vernacular architecture did not change until the Middle Ages, when the construction of durable buildings became more important. Undressed stone and brick were used to reinforce timber constructions and in some instances became mandatory as early building codes were instituted to prevent fire. Churches became opulently endowed with brick to the glory of God. Town walls and castles were fortified to strike fear into enemies. Between church and castle, the symbolism of architecture was being used on a new scale. Along with the new materials stone came the technique of vaulting, by which ceilings could be curved and structures could be larger and heavier. With this new technique and these new materials, Sweden was able to embrace the Gothic style, an invention of the French cathedral builder Abbé Suger, which wound its way to Scandinavia along new global trade routes. Beginning in the early 1200s, Gothic churches were built with a fury – 1,500 of them total – and medieval towns like Stockholm’s Gamla Stan were arranged according to Gothic planning ideals (see fig. 5, overleaf).

Gothic architecture prevailed between the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, until the Renaissance style of the sixteenth-century. The castles of Gripsholm and Kalmar, with their massive walls and fusion of medieval and Renaissance features were erected, for example, in 1537 during the reign of Gustavus I. Stockholm’s Royal Palace, designed by the German architect Nicodemus Tessin was perhaps the most overt expression of Sweden’s Renaissance energy (see fig. 6, overleaf). Its construction, the largest and most costly project in Sweden, extended over a period of more than fifty years and was designed with extreme attention to the Renaissance’s stress on symmetry, proportion, and geometry.
Soon enough, however, the Renaissance lingua franca of the sixteenth-century was replaced by the Baroque style. Sweden rose to be a great power in the seventeenth century and the nation’s newly formed aristocracy took to reflecting their wealth in elaborate physical form – adorning their homes with the sculpted roofs and ornamentation that they saw lining the boulevards of the Parisian élite. Many Swedish architects and artists went abroad where they came under Baroque influence.

With the second half of the eighteenth-century, Sweden headed in yet another architectural direction – Neoclassicism. Neoclassicist architecture was typified by strict symmetry and a pursuit of harmony in all things, from the overall concept down to the tiniest detail. The latter was achieved by using measurements and proportions known since the ancient world as being especially attractive. The architecture of ancient Greece and Rome excited much interest, but the direct influences largely came from Italy and France, with their innovative reinterpretations of classical architectural heritage.

The aspirations of the royal family, the military establishment, the Church, and an ever-expanding aristocracy generated great demands for new buildings along Neoclassical lines. Towns, too, were redesigned with straight streets, rectilinear blocks, and grand piazzas punctuated by a notable building in the style of Sixtus V’s vision for Rome. Neoclassicism was elevated to Sweden’s official style, and all buildings and structures of real importance were Neoclassically garbed.

Sweden, by the time it reached the twentieth-century, had been washed over again and again by different architectural styles. Faced with the challenges of the twentieth century, many Swedes turned to architecture to anchor them in the past. This reality was laid bare at The Stockholm Exhibition of 1897, a show marked by nervous nostalgia. Gamla Stockholm (Old Stockholm), a massive amusement park on the exhibit’s eastern edge, was modeled after a veritable Renaissance town – Stockholm in the mid-sixteenth-century – with a castle, turrets, a market square, and burghers’ houses (see figs. 7 & 8, overleaf). In a time of discomfort, Swedes turned to the architectural past to soothe their neurasthenia.


24 Ibid.

This “newly awakened, romantic and retrospective nationalism,” rooted in architecture, was inhibitive to the modern ambitions of the folkhemmet. Sweden's architecture, in other words, tied it to the ghost of the past it was trying to escape and shackled its modern desires. For the nation to enter the new age, for it to achieve the lofty goals of its modernization project, it needed a radically new type of architecture, one that visually manifest the future-oriented ideals of the folkhemmet. It needed Functionalism.

FUNCTIONALISM: MODERNITY MADE PHYSICAL

Functionalism, the Swedish school of Modern Architecture, was a deliberate expression of the folkhemmet. If the folkhemmet was to offer a new order in the modern disorder, a ‘Swedification’ of the untamed forces of modernity, Functionalism was to do the same in physical form.

The connection between Functionalism and the folkhemmet was clear at the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930, which had an entirely different feel from that just before it in 1897. The “Old Stockholm” was swapped for the new and models of “traditional” buildings were replaced with those of Functionalist buildings. Gunnar Asplund was selected as the show’s principal architect – perhaps because he, as a once “traditional” architect, represented the very transition from the past to present that the exhibition wanted its visitors to make. His architecture of “unmistakable charm and simplicity, and a bareness and purity of the form, materials, and colors” was sprinkled across the fairground (see fig. 9, overleaf). The Exhibition's housing section, which included 10 detached houses and 16 flats designed by different architects, was Functionalism at its most raw. Although the flats were small, the new ways of shaping windows to let in light yielded a new sense of spatiality. The Swedes developed studies of daylight conditions in buildings systematically, and extended this type of “scientifcness” to other fields, such as the particular functions of kitchens and bathrooms (see fig 10, overleaf).

Swedes came to the exhibition en masse to get a glimpse of the future. Considering

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26 Rojas, Sweden after the Swedish Model, p. 13.
27 The idea that Swedes turned to architecture to soothe their fears is interesting. It suggests that architecture has not only the ability to shape meaning in the present, but also to revive memories of the past.
29 Ibid., p 66.
the short time the show lasted, this event – part public education, part popular amusement – marked an unprecedented modern mass experience in the history of Sweden. The exhibition area on the Gärdet south sea shore was visited by almost four million guests from its opening day on May 16th to its closing day on September 29th. Not all of the visitors, however, liked the Functionalist architecture they experienced and its inherent suggestion that modernity ought to be embraced. Ivar Lo-Johansson, the socialist writer, describes the air of conservatism, nostalgia and romanticism:

When they saw everything new in the view of the new age, their eyes became round and shielded like the eyes of owls. They did not seem able to tolerate the clarity ... Isn't that nice? They said about an old rocking chair with awful cushions which stood in a corner as an example of hideous taste.

This temporal tension between past, present, and future was uncomfortable – and productive. It “strip[ed] off the mystical veil” associated with the heavily ornamented styles of the past and opened Swedes up to the future.

There were, of course, those who appreciated the newness of Functionalism outright. Gunnar Larsen, from the evening newspaper Dagbladet, reported: “This is a poetry of democracy, that wonderful apolitical democracy which consists of our everyday life becoming more beautiful and comfortable...The Swedish Exhibition is the Style of Functionalism beaming with Joy.” The architect E.A.M Mellbye reflected, “everybody was encouraged and inspired by the architecture which was practical, yet refined, light and airy, vivid and full of joy.” Another onlooker noted, “More than any other date since the Industrial Revolution, 1930 constitutes a boundary line between old and new [in Sweden] (see figs. 11 & 12, overleaf).”

The 1930 Exhibition was its breakout moment, but Functionalism had been bubbling under the surface for some time. As early as 1899, Ellen Key wrote Skönhet för Alla (Beauty for Everyone), which advanced the notion of improvements for everyday life
through beautiful, but accessible, goods.\textsuperscript{36} Key’s insistence on the emergence of beauty and good taste emanating only from the natural world and particularly one’s own specific needs and environment set an early precedent for Functionalism. Uno Ahren, an early Functionalist architect, attacked traditional architecture and the applied arts after the Paris Exhibition of 1925 – “A wild longing for air, space, freedom seized me,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{37} As Per Råberg, a Scandinavian art historian, explains: “The absence of clarity and logic, the lacking connection between purpose and form, the superfluity of pretentious artistry, filled Ahren with a feeling of deep reluctance, but simultaneously evoked a need for liberation.”\textsuperscript{38} Ahren was not alone in his distaste of the old. Gunnar Asplund, who was building in the Classicist style as late as 1920, shoved aside his ancient leanings and joined the Functionalist charge. So too did Gregor Paulsson, the director of the 1930 Exhibition itself. In 1916 he had published the book \textit{Den Nya Arkitekturen} (The New Architecture), and in 1919 \textit{Vakrare Vardagsvara} (More Beautiful Everyday Commodities). \textit{Vakrare Vardagsvara} was a piece of propaganda writing in favor of uniting art and industry; it was a link in the program for raising the aesthetic quality within the mass production of applied art aimed at a broader public.\textsuperscript{39} Joining them was Captain Hans O. Elliot, who condemned those incapable of building housing “suitable for the needs of the Zeitgeist, marked by the current and future rationalism, instead of tradition and old-fashioned romanticism.” He charged further, “The essential spirit of the age? It seems to me that this essence is to a remarkable degree just noise, a loud and at times spiritually impoverished noise. With the giant loudspeaker as its symbol.”\textsuperscript{40}

The goal of Ahren, Asplund, Paulsson, Elliot, and their Functionalist colleagues was simple, just like their architecture – improve everyday living for the largest possible number of people through rationality and science.\textsuperscript{41} Functionalism’s principles were laid out in the 1930 manifesto \textit{acceptera} (accept) – the title demonstrating its overt plea for the embrace of a new architectural and, in turn, societal age. Penned by Gunnar Asplund, \textit{acceptera} focused on a society in transformation, touching housing and the idea of “home,” industry and crafts and aesthetics. Its final sentences are its most powerful:

\begin{figure}[h]
  \centering
  \includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{planetarium.jpg}
  \caption{The Asplund-designed Planetarium at the 1930 Exhibition is thoroughly Modern in its use of simple geometry and its absence of decoration.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
  \centering
  \includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{steel_frame.jpg}
  \caption{Functionalism architecture was enabled by new industrial materials, such as the steel frame, seen here.}
\end{figure}
To accept the present reality – only thus we can master it, in order to change it and create a culture which is a flexible tool for life. We do not need the out-grown forms of an old culture in order to maintain our self-esteem. We cannot creep backwards out of our own age. Neither can we jump over something which is troublesome and obscure into a Utopian future. We can but look reality in the eyes and accept it in order to master it.

The 1930 Exhibition is precisely the point at which Functionalism and folkhemmet met, where the connection between architecture and ideology was particularly raw. Functionalism’s grand debut at the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition came just two short years after Per Albin Hansson announced the folkhemmet project. The Functionalist bible’s title, acceptera, was adopted as the Exhibition’s slogan.

Within a few years of Functionalism’s grand debut, it was adopted as the official Swedish architectural style. Housing projects, the single largest initiative of the Swedish government – to quite literally give its folk (people) hemmet (homes) – were taken up by Functionalist architects in towns like Uppsala, Vällingby, and Malmo (see figs. 13 & 14, overleaf). Sweden became a model of how a well-functioning welfare state did architecture. In 1943, the English journal Architectural Review devoted its entire September issue of that year to Swedish architecture, noting “There is much we have to learn from Sweden...Swedish housing is the most progressive in Europe in its social organization. Most public buildings, especially the smaller ones, are pleasant, light-hearted, almost playful, and yet strictly contemporary.”

The successes of Functionalist architecture were closely echoed by those of the folkhemmet. Very soon after the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930, Sweden would enter its ‘golden age.’ As the Swedish economy blossomed, so too did Functionalist structures. As unemployment rates tumbled to historical lows, so too did the inhibitive memories of Sweden’s “traditional” architecture.

Functionalism was the architectural agent of the folkhemmet. Progressive architects joined forces with progressive politicians to will Sweden into a modern nation – into
“a land flowing with milk and honey.” I find Functionalism’s deep politicization noteworthy, for it stands in the face of many readings of Swedish modernist architecture as innocent and soft. Functionalism illustrates that no matter how paired-down an architecture may appear to be, it always carries meaning.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND STALIN’S SOVIET UNION

At the same time that modern architecture was serving the folkhemmet, 800 miles away it was threatening Joseph Stalin’s totalitarian reign. Stalin rose to power in 1928, promising to transform the Soviet Union from a peasant society into an industrial and military superpower. As Soviet life became increasingly brutal under his Five Year Plans, Stalin replaced complete information with half-truths, fables, and myths to conjure the illusion of the “good life” to come. In the process of hijacking reality, he purged Constructivist architecture and replaced it with Soviet Realism.

STALIN’S TWO TRUTHS

Joseph Stalin took the reigns of the Soviet Union on the promise of a svetloe budushchee (radiant future) – a future free from burden and full of fertile, everlasting life. For this future to arrive, he argued, the Soviet people had to trust in his divine intervention and put in hard work to will the peasant nation into a modern superpower. “We are 50 or 100 years behind the advanced countries,” Stalin noted. “We must make good this distance in 10 years. Either we do it, or we shall go under.” Stalin’s Five Year Plans were rather successful in making up this distance. The first, introduced in 1928, increased national oil output from 11.7 to 21.4 million tons, the output of steel from 4 to 5.9 millions tons and the output of coal from 35.4 to 64.5 million tons. The second Five Year Plan, running from 1932 to 1937, produced similarly impressive results. Between 1932 and 1937, oil output increased from 21.4 to 28.5 million tons, the output of steel in increased from 5.9 to 17.7, and the output of coal from 64.3 to 128.5. As the historian E.H Carr wrote on the eve of Stalin’s death in 1953:

“If we contrast the Russia of twenty-five years ago with the Russia of today, the outstanding and almost breathtaking contrast is the rise of Russia to become one of the two great world Powers; and this in turn is due to the astonishingly rapid expansion and modernization of the Russian economy. This achievement cannot be dissociated from the name of Stalin.”

Equally as indissociable from Stalin was the terror his modernization wrought on the people of the Soviet Union. Failure to meet the intentionally unattainable goals of the Five Year Plans was punished as treason and often resulted in murder. The imposition of an uninterrupted work week wrought havoc on family life. Labor camps were set up to feed the voracious appetite of industrialization. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a political prisoner at the ruthless Kolyma labor camp, recalled “every tent in the settlement was surrounded with piles of frozen corpses on three or four sides.”

Collectivization, which promised to increase the food supply for the urban population by consolidating individual farms into state-owned farms, resulted in widespread famine. It is estimated that five million people died as a result of collectivization, with Stalin using “starvation as a means of punishing areas

References:
1 Joseph Stalin, “Speech Delivered at the First All-Union Conference of Leading Personnel of Socialist Industry” (Moscow: February 4, 1930), Online.
4 Brooman, Stalin and the Soviet Union, p. 15.
6 Arvidsson, Modernization and Welfare, p. 4.
which resisted his policies.” The Great Purge, a product of Stalin’s “gloomy personality and paranoid tendencies,” hit its peak between 1937–38, with secret police executing more than 1,000 alleged traitors per day, most with a single shot to the back of the head.7

As Soviet life became more brutal in the 1930s, with rural catastrophes, famines, and mass arrests, Stalin turned to propaganda to replace complete information with half-truths, fables, and illusions. The Soviet artist Solomon Telingater’s photograph illustrating Stalin’s statement, “Life has improved, comrades, life has become more joyous,” embodies this turn (see fig. 15). In it, a nude blond boy sits astride a dead sturgeon at the sunny seaside. As art historian John Bowlt explains, Telingater’s photograph is a “conglomeration of images that may be read didactically:” the smiling child “personifies the health of the young Soviet state,” the sturgeon “suggests an abundance of food for all,” not just for survival, but for pleasure as well, and the sailboats “indicate the desirable presence of outdoor recreation.”8 Aleksandr Gerasimov’s 1938 painting Joseph Stalin and Kliment Voroshilov in the Kremlin Grounds achieves the same reality reconstruction, depicting Stalin as than Voroshilov, his right-hand man and head of the Red Army, despite the reality that he was much shorter (see fig. 16).9

In Stalin’s Soviet Union two types of truth met head on – the rational, scientific truth of the industrialization and modernity he hoped to bring to peasant Russia – and the hijacked truth that his propaganda used to mask the terror. This battle between Stalin’s two truths extended to architecture, where Constructivism – an architecture of rational truth – was exterminated, and replaced by Soviet Realism – an architecture of constructed truth.

CONSTRUCTIVISM: FOR THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE

One chilly night in early 1922, Moshe Ginzburg, Vladimir Maiakovskii, and Aleksei Gan huddled in a musty Moscow basement. So enthralled by a new vision of the

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7 “Sentenced To Death In Stalin’s Great Purge” (Radio Free Europe), Online.


9 Ibid., p. 48.
world, they furiously sketched, wrote, and scribbled down ideas – pausing only for the occasional smoke. Sharp, rational strokes on blueprint paper stood next to diagrams of new machinery, which stood next to framed pictures of the 1917 October Revolution. Constructivism was in the making.

Konstruktivism (Constructivism), the Soviet expression of Modernism, was deeply tied to the Soviet socialist movement and its promise of proletarian, or Bolshevik, revolution. In the same way that socialists promised to unseat the old intelligentsia, Constructivist architects promised to overthrow the “traditional” aesthetic order. The Vitruvian triad of Firmness, Commodity, and Delight, which had more or less governed architectural discipline since the first-century BC, was to be replaced by a triad of their own – Function, Construction, Aesthetics. Constructivist architects saw themselves as an important force in the impending revolution, holding that “contemporary architecture must crystallize the new socialist way of life.”

Implicit in Constructivism’s Bolshevik bond was the quintessential Modern idea that architecture could heal the diseases of individuals and society. It was an architecture for the people by the people, an architecture governed by rationality, space, freedom, and cleanliness. Constructivist architect Moisei Ginzberg’s Narkomflīn, for example, designed the year Stalin rose to power, was built to solve the most pressing problem of urban planning – how to avoid the isolation that comes with living in a city. It featured a library and a shop, a communal kitchen and dining room, and even a rooftop solarium for Moscow’s short, hot summer. There were meeting rooms to allow the people to convene with one another. The corridors to the flats were big, wide, and open to encourage tenants to see them as the village street and stop and talk with their neighbors (see fig. 17). The result was “a six-story blueprint for communal living as ingenious as it is humane.” The Gosstrakh Apartment complex was designed in the same thaumaturgic spirit. Built for the employees of the Gosstrakh State Insurance Organization, it combined apartments with communal facilities, emblematic of Modernism’s ambition to improve and reshape life (see fig. 18).

12 Ibid., p. 23.
14 Kopp, Constructivist Architecture in the USSR, p. 56.
15 Ibid., p. 57.
Of course, while Constructivism was a particular response to its political, economic, and sociocultural Zeitgeist, it participated in the global discourse of Modern architecture. The Constructivist idea that “Architectural methods should resemble those of the ‘inventor,’ which means abandoning the recourse to borrowings from the past, whether in the field of architectural form or spatio-functional solutions,” has tinges of Swiss, German, Swedish, and American Modernism.16

Just as Modernists around the world gathered into their particular “schools,” Constructivists formed two main organizations of their own, the ASNOVA and OSA. The Association of New Architects (ASNOVA) was founded in 1923 by the VKhUTEMAS design school professor Nikolai Ladovsky and the Organization of Contemporary Architects (OSA) was established two years later by Moisei Ginzburg and Alexander Vesnin.17 The two groups argued over architectural nuances, but agreed that revolutionary architects must “consider contemporary materials and technological possibilities, must educate their students to solve practical problems and create real buildings that answered actual needs, and accepted the existence of psychological effects of architecture.”18

Constructivism’s inherent proliterian, rational spirit, which Stalin once hailed as a young member of the Soviet socialist party, would prove toxic to his totalitarian state.

SOCIAL REALISM AND THE GREAT ARCHITECTURAL PURGE

Arthur Koestler’s 1940 novel Darkness at Noon follows Nikolas Rubashov, a member of the Bolshevik vanguard, arrested and jailed for political treason.19 We live with Rubashov for several weeks in his cell and in his mind, “coming to know a man who has dedicated himself unswervingly for forty years to the program of the revolution, and who has struggled for its abstractly conceived ends by any necessary means,” only to be cannibalized by his very work.20 Rubashov is Constructivism.

As Stalin’s propaganda machine worked around the clock to replace complete information with half-truths, fables, and illusions, the dictator became interested in the physical and visual transformation of the Soviet Union. Under his command, Constructivism was washed away, much like the original Bolshevik party that inspired it and in which Stalin had participated. By the mid 1930s, the ASNOVA and OSA were disbanded.21 Constructivism’s few remaining champions were rounded up and shipped off to labor camps to starve and freeze. Constructivism – an architecture of truth, made by the people for the people – was replaced by Soviet Realism – an architecture of myth and autocracy.

No moment marked Constructivism’s death more clearly than the competition for the Palace of the Soviets. Between 1930 and 1932, Stalin asked the world’s great architects to design the administrative center of his empire. This was a task with utmost ideological weight – the building at the center of Stalin’s universe would be a beacon of his philosophy.22 The result was an architectural face-off. On one end, stood the Constructivists, touting their ideals of science, rationality, and truth. Almost every major Constructivist submitted an entry. So too did global Modernist heavyweights Walter Gropius, Erich Mendelsohn, and Le Corbusier. Opposing them were architects of the Soviet Realist school, armed with power, myth, and intimidation. Tête-a-tête were two truths – the real and unreal.23

18 Ibid., 451.
The unreal won. The selected design was produced by Boris Iofan, a young Odessa-born architect. Iofan presented a “hyper-Stalinist project of oppressive monumentality,” drawn to be the tallest and largest building in the world. It was the perfect crystallization of Stalin’s fantastic and radical ideology – “the centralization of imperial power, all on a superhuman scale, with a waterfront orientation” that suggested he could conquer nature (see fig. 19). I’m not sure Stalin knew what to expect from this competition, and the fact that he openly invited architects of every style and nationality affirms his rather ambiguous aims. But he was surely stunned by the results, seeing in Soviet Realism the physical image of his state and in Modernism a potential threat. Modernists across the world called out against Iofan’s design. Le Corbusier remarked, “It is hard to accept the fact that they will actually erect that odd thing which recently has flooded all of the journals.” Frank Lloyd Wright, addressing the First Congress of Soviet Architects, quipped, “This structure – only proposed I hope – is good if we take it for a modern version of Saint George destroying the dragon.”

Seeing the potential of this new architecture as propaganda, Stalin directed several efforts to develop Soviet Realism. In the years after the fateful Palace of the Soviet competition, Soviet Realist architectural academies were set up to teach the next generation of Russian architects. Buildings bearing Iofan’s aesthetic shot up across the nation (see fig. 20).

Just as Soviet Realism was being developed to become the architectural agent of Stalinism, Constructivism was being secretly purged. There is no more clear example of this than the case of Mikhail Okhitovich, Constructivism’s most radical and unrelenting theoretician. The son of a former Tsarist bureaucrat, Okhitovich joined the Soviet Party in 1917 while a soldier for the Red Army and led its early architectural efforts. Deeply educated in Marxism, he became disillusioned by Stalin’s warped ideology, asserting he had abandoned the Marxist social revolution in favor of merely enhancing the political superstructure. As Stalin’s policies grew harsher, and his radicalism more perverted, Okhitovich became more aggressive. On January 8th,

25 Le Corbusier, as quoted in “Art and Architecture Towards Political Crises: The 1937 Paris International Exhibition” (Culturedarm), Online.
26 Frank Lloyd Wright as quoted in Ibid.
1935, he delivered a cutting speech on “The National Form of Soviet Architecture,” denouncing Soviet Realism as a “national form of folklore.” He went further, calling out the Stalinist “cult of hierarchy,” which sharply opposed the anti-hierarchical nature of his Modernist architecture. As the architectural historian Hugh D. Hudson writes:

The lack of hierarchy in contemporary architecture constituted the antithesis of the world that Stalin and his allies sought to construct – a world in which cultural, and thus political, hierarchy was all important – a world architecturally exemplified by the proposed monumental Palace of the Soviets and by the creation of awe through giant squares, streets named Il’ich, wide boulevards with fountains and sculptures of the Renaissance, and tall buildings, all with stress on the vertical.

Okhitovich’s 1935 speech, known as the “Okhitovich Affair,” was his last straw. To members of Stalin’s inner circle it represented “a most serious threat demanding especially serious attention.” Constructivist architecture, it demonstrated, possessed the dangerous ability to cut through myth with truth, and was thus kryptonite to the Stalinist state. Days after, Okhitovich’s speech he was arrested. He died in a labor camp in 1937. Constructivist architecture followed the path of its most courageous leader. With Okhitovich’s death, Constructivism was finally purged. Stalin’s truth triumphed over Modernist, rational truth.

MEDIATIONS

You think philosophy is difficult enough, but I can tell you it is nothing to the difficulty of being a good architect.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

MODERN ARCHITECTURE IS MORE THAN STRUCTURE. IT IS VISUAL PHILOSOPHY – an embodiment of the Modernist system of thought. In Sweden, Modernism’s ideals of moving past “tradition,” embracing of modernity, and striving to improve life were in lock step with the folkhemmet, unleashing the nation from its past and ushering it into the future. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, these ideals represented an ideological threat to Stalin’s totalitarian state. While Modern architects were particularly fascinated with the expressiveness of their architecture, all architecture has such “meaning power.” As the design theoretician Juan-Pablo Bonta put it, “efforts to construct a meaning-proof architecture have always been de facto unsuccessful...Even an architecture designed to be meaning-less would mean the desire to be meaningless, and thus could not actually be meaningless.”

I write this exactly one month before Donald Trump will be sworn in as the 45th President of the United States, and understanding architecture’s ability to communicate seems as important as ever. Trump, a global real-estate developer, appreciates the symbolic power of architecture. Trumpitecture is imposing. At least one Trump Tower dreamed of being the tallest building in the world, an aspiration that “has more to do with testosterone than taste.” Trumpitecture is narcissistic. It abounds in glitter, glitz, and gold – loud pronouncements of Trump’s self-acclaimed success. The
Donald even prescribed that the “Trump” sign on his Las Vegas tower be 2,800 square feet, larger than the average American home (see fig. 21, overleaf). Trumpitecture is regressive. It abounds in surface decoration and turgid opulence, techniques that the pioneers of Modern architectural thought discarded as failings of the past – out of touch with a modern and progressive society (see fig. 22). As American architect Doug Staker recently wrote, we need “look no further than Trump’s architectural prowess to envision the world he would wish upon us.”

Trump plans to rearchitect America by investing a trillion dollars in infrastructure. Mere hours after his election victory he declared, “we’re going to rebuild our infrastructure, which will become, by the way, second to none.” Whether Trump will design these projects in his signature Trumpitecture style remains to be seen, but if he should, we’ll be able to read through the lines. What Winston Churchill once said with optimism, we should take with caution: “the things we build, build us.”

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5 Staker, "Trumpitecture Stands as a Sad but Honest Reflection of the Values Trump Proudly Emodies," Online.
6 Ryan Bradley, "What You Need to Know About Donald Trump’s $1 Trillion Infrastructure Plan," on Fortune, Dec. 21, 2016, Online.