

Stairway That Leads Nowhere

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Moscow.

"THIS stone cylinder," growled Stashev as he pointed to a queer house with long rows of hexagonal apertures on Krivoarbat Lane, "looks like a prison, a silo tower, a storage house, like anything you please, except a place that people would voluntarily choose for their abode. . . . Dreadful. . . . The architect should be. . . ." Stashev looked distractedly about him; he could not think of a punishment severe enough to match the architect's crime.

Stashev is a young Communist. Gentle to a fault, he is known among his architect colleagues as Savonarola—all on account of his gloomy imagination and penchant for wild hyperbole in describing even the most humdrum objects and events.

After we agreed on a fiendish punishment—to prolong the architect's life and compel him to stay in his "creation" to the end of his days—Stashev went off into a lengthy disquisition on the important role of architecture in a planned socialist society and on the Soviet architect's glorious opportunities to build and create.

Indeed the Soviet Union is at present experiencing a tremendous building boom. While the boom actually started with the First Five-Year Plan, the Stakhanov movement has given it an additional powerful impetus.

New cities are multiplying at an incredible rate. Old cities are being vastly enlarged and reconstructed. Within the next ten years, Moscow alone expects its territory more than to double—from 28,000 hectares at present to 60,000 ten years hence. During the same time Moscow will put up 2,500 new large apartment houses, a palace of Soviets ("the biggest structure in the world!"), a large group of buildings designed to accommodate the Academy of Science; another group for the All-Union Institute of Medicine; several hundred new schools; hundreds of various other communal buildings; new bridges; the subway—greatly extended, with dozens of new stations, each individually designed to fit the architecture of the surrounding houses.

The same is true of other big cities, each of which has its own ten-year plan of reconstruction. All over the land, schools, theaters, moving-picture houses, workers' clubs and stadiums are springing up. Now that the collective farms are on a solid footing, they, too, have begun to demand architectural advice in the reconstruction of the villages, from schools and libraries to stables and pigpens.

Naturally, when there is so much construction going on, the work of the architect

is of universal concern. The architect is in the limelight. Much is given to him, but much also is demanded. In the words of The Komsomolskaia Pravda—official organ of the Young Communist League—"When the Soviet masses are commencing to seek the embodiment of the new life, joy, happiness, beauty in everything that surrounds them, questions of architecture assume particular significance."

Obviously, the problems Soviet architecture is called upon to solve are enormously complex. A new society, a socialist organization, dictates new forms of architecture and new methods of planning. From this viewpoint, the discussion of the reconstruction of Moscow in The Pravda of July 19, 1935, was not uncharacteristic, conveying what the Soviet masses have been expecting of their architects. The Pravda editorial demanded no more and no less than

a single, scientifically worked-out plan for the reconstruction of the great capital of the Soviet Union, [and] that the reconstruction be embodied in such beautiful architectural forms as would fully reflect all the magnificence and beauty of the socialist epoch, all the joy of our struggles and our victories.

Not an easy task this, considering the hold of tradition and the relative inelasticity of architectural forms.

In architecture the possibilities of experimentation are sharply limited by numerous social, structural, financial and various other practical considerations, much more so than in any other art. It is universally admitted that the new socialist society needs new artistic forms. But whereas an unsuccessful experiment in music or poetry is, because of the very nature of these arts, not likely to have really serious social consequences, an unsuccessful experiment in architecture can be catastrophic, or at least perpetually and conspicuously annoying. More than in any other art, originality, experimentation, formal innovation in architecture must be tempered by life's immediate requirements and practical possibilities. The balance here is so delicate that the slightest disturbance may entail disaster.

The architect, much more so than the artist in any other field, cannot let his fancy play too freely. The check on him is practical, direct, swift and often final.

This does not mean that the Soviet architects have not experimented. They have. Too much. But the results have not always been quite happy.

When our conversation reached this point, Stashev flared up again. Recalling the "monstrous prison" on Krivoarbat Lane, he now launched into a tirade against the "architec-

tural atrocities" of the formalists and the "bleak, ugly, monotonous boxes" of the constructivists; on the way he also took a jab at the "cretinous hybrids" of the eclectics.

"They are all the same," cried Stashev, "they neither feel nor understand our socialist reality. . . . It's maddening. . . . Just think. For years the constructivists kept palming off on us their so-called 'creative asceticism' as the style of socialism. Nakedness, bareness. Everything contradicting their whim of stripping structural forms they unqualifiedly rejected. The machine they elevated into an esthetic fetish. They spoke of form flowing from the functions of materials and structures, but they reduced the term 'function' to its most simplified, vulgarized sense, *excluding both ideas and men*. Decoration, even the simplest, was taboo. Creative imagination was exorcised. The past was mere trash. 'We want something that would express our epoch. . . .' Fine! But the result? Boxes! Constructivist Coffins!

"And the formalists, they are even worse. Those fellows have become so fascinated by the pursuit of new forms that they have overlooked not only the socialist content of our life but also the function of materials and structures, even in the crudest constructivist sense. *They are after form for form's sake, after form torn away from both ideological content and practical function*. 'We want new forms,' they say. Fine! Neither are we opposed to innovation. What we are opposed to is irresponsible paper planning: monuments that look like corkscrews, structures in the shape of hammers and sickles, absurdly impractical houses that mar the principal streets of our cities."

I tried to mention the many beautiful new buildings I had seen in Moscow, Kharkov, Kiev, the Crimea. But Stashev was in one of his Savonarola moods and his words came like an angry torrent.

"Of course there are beautiful buildings. But not enough. The worst atrocities are now being perpetrated by the eclectics. Those are unprincipled scoundrels altogether. Take a fellow like Yefimovich—a constructivist who, when he sensed that the vogue was changing, rushed to the classicists for inspiration.

"We are not against utilizing our cultural heritage. But critically! Yefimovich, however, proceeded to build a workers' apartment house in the style of an eighteenth century palace! That's the eclectic's idea of expressing and beautifying our life. A hodge-podge of old and new architectural motifs. Ornamentation of the most ostentatious bourgeois kind. Colonnades and porticoes without rime or reason. Some of these buildings actually make you sick. Soviet

rococo—can you imagine anything more terrible than that?"

THOUGH I agreed with much of Stashev's criticism, I was a little surprised by the intensity of his emotion. I was thinking of my friends at home. I simply could not recall even one who might have been as wrought up over problems of our American architecture as Stashev was over those of the Soviet Union. When I expressed this thought to Stashev, he replied:

"Architectural triumphs and fiascos have always been taken rather poignantly in the U.S.S.R. Partly this can be explained by our terrible housing shortage. But the main reason, I think, is that we take all our art problems seriously, perhaps a little too seriously.

"Personally, I was much worse when I was younger. Several years ago, for instance, during the early hectic days of collectivization and industrialization, when people were living under an intense strain—the kulaks embittered; the proletariat overworked; the intelligentsia bewildered; trials of wreckers, the Shakhta trial, Ramzin and so on, one after another—then the ugly boxes that were springing up like mushrooms all over the land drove me into a state very near insanity.

"Those grey, gloomy, monotonous eyesores pressed upon my brain.

"It is a plot," I said to myself, 'a far-reaching, devilish plot.

"The old specialists, the architects, the engineers, the experts are banded in a secret league of vengeance and contempt.

"They know we are still helpless. They know we still have to rely on them. They think we don't understand. They are sure that we shall never learn.

"They mouth words about socialism, creative asceticism, constructivism, innovation, but actually they are doing us dirt.

"To them the proletarian revolution—socialism—is bleak, cold, drab, inhuman. To them our Soviet Republic is a prison house; the proletariat a dumb, ignorant, brutal jailer. Hence these boxes. No variety, no individuality—dead monotony.

"They are cowardly and mean," I thought to myself, 'but they are vengeful. This is their silent protest into the future. This is how they are slandering us before posterity.'

"The thing became an obsession with me. In every such building I saw the contemptuous stony sneer of the enemy.

"Wait. Wait, I would shake my fist. Our own people are coming, they are learning, before long you will be exposed.

"I even thought of writing a story in which an old architect, a wrecker, overhears two of his students express the thoughts I have just expressed to you. He is overwhelmed by the keenness of the young Communists. Suddenly he realizes that he is beaten, that the League of Vengeance and Contempt is doomed. He commits suicide."

Savonarola paused. I waited for him to calm down a bit. Then I ventured to suggest as delicately as I could that his concep-

tion was a little too nightmarish. He was grossly unjust to the older Soviet architects who certainly hadn't all been wreckers. After all, in those years, the pressure on them was terrific. Millions were crashing into the cities. Houses had to be built and built fast. There were not enough structural materials to choose from. Nails, steel, door knobs, paints—there was very little of anything. Furthermore, the absence of strongly desired machinery tended to express itself psychologically in an inordinate exaltation of the machine, in elevating it to the heights of an esthetic principle. Under the circumstances, constructivism at that time was really a kind of rationalization of the unavoidable. And yet a grain of poetic truth in Stashev's delirium could not be denied. He was still young then, impatient. Socialism to him was the most beautiful era in man's history. Those buildings were the direct antithesis of his dream. He was several years ahead of time. His truth was in the future. But from the Communist point of view he was really wrong. He had not taken into account the immediate needs. He was not practical, not dialectical and therefore a little too panicky.

Stashev did not reply. When we approached the recently reconstructed Arbat Square, the beautiful subway station, with the six red flags on top fluttering against the sky, gleamed across the way. Stashev's face lit up. He was no more Savonarola.

"You are quite right," said Stashev quietly. Then contritely: "If I were to do the story now, I wouldn't kill the old architect. I would make him go through a change similar to that of Ramzin. The young students would stir his better self, they would win him to Sovietism. My last paragraph would read: 'A few years passed. The two students, now recognized Soviet architects, aided by their old teacher, were embodying their early vision of socialism in the bright, spacious, airy, colorful, simple, yet magnificent structure of Moscow's subway.'"

A FEW days later, Stashev strutted into my room waving triumphantly The Komsomolskaia Pravda.

"I wasn't so wrong after all! Sound Communist instincts, comrade; trust them and you will always be right."

He spread out the paper on the table. "Read, then bow in reverence before my wisdom."

As I glanced at the paper my eye was immediately caught by a photograph of the very house on Krivoarbat Lane that had provoked Stashev's angry harangue. Underneath was the legend: by Architect A. Melnikov.

The picture was surrounded by an unsigned piece under the intriguing head STAIRWAY THAT LEADS NOWHERE and the subhead *Architecture Upside Down*.

The piece was written very much in the same vein as the Shostakovich article in The

Pravda a short time previously. Then it was NOISE INSTEAD OF MUSIC. The language used in describing the above-mentioned house was as devastating as that used by The Pravda in describing the opera *Lady Macbeth from the Mzensk District*.

Many centuries ago [opined the Young Communist paper] the artist Hieronymous Bosch peopled his canvases with hosts of monstrous freaks, men with birds' heads, feathered hunchbacks, winged vermin, disgusting bipeds. But the sickliest medieval imagination, the gloomiest fantasies of Bosch pale before the creations of architect Melnikov, before the monstrousness of his structures, where all human conceptions of architecture are turned upside down. . . .

"So the Shostakovich articles in The Pravda are having their repercussions in architecture," I ventured to suggest.

"To be sure," rejoined Stashev. "But there is a more basic cause. The Shostakovich articles did not come from a clear sky either. The real cause is: something is rotten in the state of Denmark. There is a general revaluation of values. The Stakhanov movement has inaugurated a veritable fever of stock-taking in all fields. Now that the architects are on the carpet, there will be many casualties. Just mark my word."

Whatever the ultimate causes, the immediate reason for the outburst in The Komsomolskaia Pravda was the "trickster architect's" blueprint of a house which was to be built on one of Moscow's handsomest thoroughfares. The house was to have no corners! Instead, there would be gaps covered with very thin decorative arches. The balustrade on the balcony was to be in the shape of petals inclining toward the street. "To fall off such a balcony would be the easiest thing in the world." On the bottom "architect Melnikov proposed two stairways that would lead nowhere."

The paper reminded Melnikov of past sins: his various ultra-modern but utterly uncomfortable workers' clubs in Moscow; his plans for a building "to rationalize sleep," as well as for a house that "to a bird in the air would look like a hammer and sickle"; and, finally, his plan of a fifty-seven story building for the Commissariat of Heavy Industry, which provided for sixteen stories below the earth's surface, to be contained in an enormous concrete bowl with open stairways.

Together with Melnikov, other formalists, professors of architecture and the editors and critics of The Architects' Gazette, came in for a sound drubbing.

And it is such topsy-turvy architecture, such plans, such projects, such representations of lifeless, absurd, formalist tricks, that are acclaimed as the "last word" in artistic innovation. Melnikov tirelessly creates new caricatures in order to overwhelm his gasping colleagues by his violation of architectural canons. Such atrocities become objects for "thoughtful" analysis of experts and for imitation of admiring students.

Now it happens that Melnikov, the "trickster" architect whom The Komsomolskaia Pravda accused of "playing the genius" and

of "artistic eccentricity," had long been among the leading architects in the Soviet Union. A man with considerable reputation, his project for the Columbus monument in Haiti aroused interest among artists in America, while his Soviet pavilion in Paris and his Intourist garage in Moscow were praised even by his most intransigent critics.

Had I not been prepared by Stashev's violent reaction to Melnikov's house on Krivoarbat Lane, as well as by the sharp tone of The Pravda articles on Shostakovich, I should have been a little more pained by the virulence of the Young Communist paper. Now I was inclined to accept the criticism, though I was still disturbed by its vituperative manner.

I knew, from experience, that the article in The Komsomolskaia Pravda was only the opening shot. That a barrage in the whole Soviet press would inevitably follow. That all kinds of meetings and conferences would take place. That many architects—constructivists, formalists, eclectics—would be rising in public and with real or pretended fervor would beat their breasts and cry *mea culpa*.

Of course, there was, in a sense, historic justice in all this. The Soviet masses have become awakened. Their tastes have developed. They are refusing to be bamboozled

by names and reputations. They want simple but beautiful and comfortable cities, houses, factories, clubs, theaters, railroad stations. They do not want buildings that look like hammers and sickles. They do not want tricks, boxes and ugly hybrids. I understood all that. And I was ready to be happy over it. But the one thing that kept gnawing in my consciousness was Stashev's cheerfully uttered prophecy.

"Now, Stashev," I turned to my visitor worriedly, "about the many casualties—that sounds pretty sinister to an outsider. Perhaps you don't know it, but the harsh treatment Shostakovich received in The Pravda created a very unfavorable impression abroad. Liberals, some of them warm friends of the Soviet Union, have taken the whole thing rather badly. Here is The Nation, for instance, liberal magazine in America. Well, according to its critic Joseph Krutch, Shostakovich has been 'cast out into outer darkness' and is now 'sitting amid the ruins of his reputation.' You see, they seem to think it was a pretty shabby way of treating an artist. And now you come along gloating over possible casualties. . . ."

Stashev, whom I had scarcely ever heard laughing before, now burst out into an amused chuckle: "That's rich! Casualties!

Gloating!" Then earnestly: "No. Don't worry. There'll be no blood, prisons, no ruin and no darkness. The fellows who deserve it will be criticized—that's all. Some a little more severely, some a little less. Those whose reputations are based on something solid, those who have genuine talent and have something to say, will recover very quickly. Those who have no talent and have nothing to offer, they, let's hope, will be persuaded to go into other work, where they might be of more use to themselves and to society.

"As to Shostakovich, will you write to your Mr. Krutch that he need not shed too many tears? I saw in a paper this morning that Shostakovich has been commissioned by the Maly Operny Theater of Leningrad to compose the music to a libretto about the revolutionary Baltic Fleet. The libretto was written by Osip Brik. The opera is expected to be ready for production some time next year. Not so bad for a fellow who has been cast out into outer darkness!

"There will be many such casualties also in architecture. And Melnikov will be among the first ones. Of one thing you may be certain: from now on he will apply his talent to better use than building stairways that lead nowhere."

Communist Street Speaker

ISIDOR SCHNEIDER

Again looks at his watch; and though less time has passed than his nervous foot has ticked off in his shoe, his impatience holds. He thinks: with every minute gone, go men.

"Where are the comrades? the stand, the literature, the flag? Where are they? This is the time, and time is our resource. He said a true word who said: 'The Communist's ledger is his watch.'

A half hour lost will lose the night. The listless lateness soon will quiet this corner; our voices will clot on silence. The swallowing wind will leap for our voices."

He scans the passersby.

The anxiety, the love in his straining eyes holds them a moment;

then they go. And he sees where they go—their faces in the cinemas,

melted in film, steeped to the inner brain in painted fog; in the dance halls shaken to the most narcotic nerve; stumbling in saloons, in the alcohol chains welded on their legs.

"Stop them! Stop them!" his mind cries. "Come, Comrades! This is the hour!

This is the workers' hour! The brief strength they took in with their meal;

the brief peace they have before the workday cramp returns, before their hour of sleep signs in their weary yawn."

And just as he has pulled the watch again, the metal hot on his palm, he sees them. The comrade with the stand uncramps its limbs and sets it up; the comrade with the literature

opens her stuffed briefcase; the comrade with the flag

ties it to the platform; this smiling girl has phoned the police and smiles with the memory of the precinct captain's fret.

He climbs the stand, grips the thin rail like a rein, feels for the loosened board and fits his foot across as in a stirrup;

and like one mounted and commanding men, summons the passersby,

"Fellow Workers!" And they stop; they gather, they stand before him,

sneerers and enemies, along with the tired, the trusting, the bitter,

the curious, the lost, the hopeful, the indignant. A warmth runs from him through them. The light of his mind is not glassed in

like a lecturing savant's, turned on and off by semesters.

It is an open fire; he flames with gestures; his voice gives heat. A heckler hisses; his phrase sputters out as if spat into a fireplace.

When the speaker ends, the applause is like a crackling under the glowing faces whom his fire has kindled. When they scatter,

their faces are still alight, a spark on each eyeball.

The handclasps give a pressure like a pledge.

A comrade, saying,

"Good speech, comrade; here's a proof," brings forward a recruit,

introduces him to the speaker, pulls from his pocket, proudly, the signed card, shows it. The recruit, the speaker smile, the look of comradeship between them.