

# A New Vision in Architecture: Ivan Leonidov's Architectural Projects between 1927 and 1930

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This paper focuses on the relationship between Russian avant-garde architecture and the media. In spite of the great influence of the media on architecture during the first half of the 20th century, studies on Soviet architectural history have paid very little attention to the relationship between Soviet architecture and the media than that given to modern architecture in Western Europe. However, it has been found that the appearance of new media such as architectural photos, journals, and films dramatically changed Soviet architects' approach to architectural expression. Also, new media devices such as aerial photos, cameras with telephoto lenses, and planetariums gave architects a new perspective not only on architecture, but also on the entire world. The implementation of a media network, which was expected to cover the entire territory of the USSR, brought new possibilities to plan cities based on completely new assumptions.

Therefore, this paper highlights Russian avant-garde architects' attempts to apply media and media technology to architectural designs, particularly Ivan Leonidov's early works during his constructivist period. Although Leonidov was regarded as a star of constructivism, the biggest avant-garde architectural movement in Russia, he was criticized because of his unrealistic, abstract designs, most of which were not actually realized during his lifetime. Furthermore, his name was forgotten as a result of Stalinist oppression from the 1930s until the 1960s. Nevertheless, Leonidov can be regarded as an exceptional architect who inspired a fundamental change in the notion of the spaces and places influenced by media.

In this paper, I will first analyze Leonidov's attitude toward the media, especially to publications. He was a member of the editorial committee of the architectural journal *Contemporary Architecture (SA)*, which served as a virtual bulletin board for a constructivist group, Organization of Contemporary Architects

(OSA). The majority of Leonidov's works in the 1920s were published in this journal. Of these, I will focus on his architectural drawings and scale-model photos, particularly their unfamiliar representations. Leonidov occasionally drew buildings using white lines on black papers, depicting the buildings from a bird's-eye view. Accordingly, these images resembled objects floating in space or the projected images in a planetarium. Why did he depict buildings in such an unrealistic manner?

Secondly, I will discuss his attitude toward the cinema. When he designed his labor clubs and cultural facilities, he insisted on the importance of cinema (featuring non-fiction movies) over the theater, which was considered to be the most significant propaganda tool for the various cultural activities pursued by the clubs. Particularly Leonidov evaluated the possibilities of implementing mass media's reproduction techniques. He believed that such techniques would make it possible to provide unified and high-quality content for the masses. In addition, Leonidov expected that not only this content but also forms of mass communication would transform consumers, i.e., ordinary workers and farmers, into unified mass or ideal members of the socialist collective. Furthermore, he dreamed of creating a network of cultural facilities and even expanding this network to a cosmic scale. In other words, Leonidov's new socialized community would be based on a media network more than physical structure. Overlooking his works during the constructivist period, we will elucidate on his ideal design of a new socialized society and its residents.

## 1-1. Architecture and/in a Photograph

As Beatriz Colomina mentioned in her book, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (1996), during the first half of the 20th century the core precepts of architecture experienced a world-

wide shift. People began to acquire more architectural information through mass media such as photos, newspapers, magazines, and movies without actually visiting the buildings in question<sup>(1)</sup>. Even an unrealized construction could nonetheless become renowned through the media. For instance, the unrealized city plan, “Città Nuova” (“New City”), of the Italian architect Antonio Sant’Elia, became widely known in the European architectural world through the journal *De Stijl* (*The Style*). Additionally, the appearance of the new media changed not only the way people saw buildings, but also the way architects showcased their designs.

In the 1920s, many architectural journals were founded by modernist groups. Participating in the publication of these journals, the architects often modified or edited photos of their works. For example, the world-renowned modernist architect, Le Corbusier, edited photos of his buildings before he printed them in the journal *L’esprit Nouveau*. He airbrushed over the backdrops and other additional elements such as shrubs or kennels around the houses<sup>(2)</sup>. In short, the architects were given opportunities to alter architectural images even after the completion of the buildings.

However, in the case of Russian avant-garde architects, most, including Ivan Leonidov, had little opportunity to realize their designs and took a more radical approach to photographs. They believed that completely new constructions or physical surround-

ings based on socialism could determine a new socialist lifestyle and cultivate a collective mind. Therefore they thought that these constructions should be founded on an entirely new worldview. For example, Russian avant-garde photographer Alexander Rodchenko experimented with such a new perspective by using mechanical eyes, the camera. When he took photos of modern buildings, he used extremely obtuse or acute angles [Fig. 1]. These unfamiliar angles prevented people from adopting his new buildings to an existing context and unconsciously consuming them. In other words, Rodchenko’s architectural photos persuaded people to literally find a new appreciation of the world.

Leonidov, at the time a young student in the architectural department of Higher Art and Technical Studios (Vkhutemas)<sup>(3)</sup>, obviously shared the idea that a new appreciation for the world contributed to new constructions. Referring to these defamiliarized viewpoints, he created many architectural images in the 1920s. We can see a drawing of his graduation project, *Lenin Institute for Librarianship* (1927), in which it appears as if he replicated Rodchenko’s style of angle of elevation [Fig. 2]. The *Lenin Institute* consisted of three main buildings: a high-rise building that functioned as a library with an automated book-delivery system; a huge glass sphere for an auditorium, which also functioned as a planetarium and a speaking platform for mass demonstrations; and a low-rise building that functioned as an institute, linking the library and



Fig. 1. Photo by Rodchenko taken at an angle of elevation

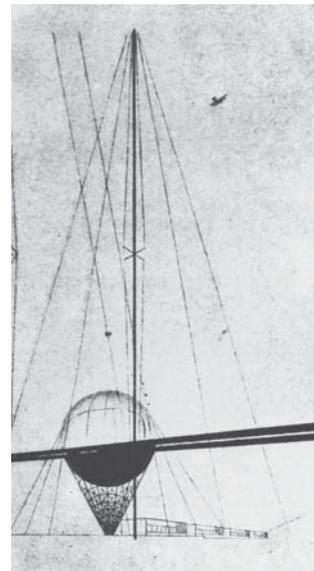


Fig. 2. Drawing of the *Lenin Institute* at an angle of elevation

the auditorium<sup>(4)</sup>. In this drawing, as a result of a perspective provided from underneath, the glass sphere is depicted as if it is floating on air. Here, we notice a unique characteristic of Leonidov's designs: architecture as a method of overcoming gravitational attraction. Of course, it would be quite appropriate to admit that there is a detectable influence here of Nikolai Fedorov's Cosmism and also of Kasimir Malevich's idea of "architecture as maximum liberation of humans from weight."<sup>(5)</sup> It is especially worth mentioning that Leonidov, however, did not directly describe his flying construction as Malevich-inspired or mention any contemporary artists or architects [Fig. 3]. Instead, he expressed a sense of floating by incorporating an intentionally defamiliarized viewpoint. Leonidov continued to apply this elevation-angle theory to his drawings for the rest of his life, even after

such dynamic expressions of space and buildings came to be regarded as heretical.

Leonidov also attached particular importance to bird's-eye views, such as those from airplanes. Airplanes and dirigibles often appear in his drawings. Constructivist architects regarded these aircraft as ideal models for new, functional architecture since there were no useless parts or dead weights such as ornaments. In fact, an article by K. Akashev, an engineer, entitled "Form of airplanes and methods of design"<sup>(6)</sup> was presented in the opening pages of the journal *SA*. But, at least for Leonidov, these were not merely models or favorite motifs. Furthermore, the images of aircraft operate as a metaphor for the viewpoint from which people can see his designs. Leonidov literally wanted to allow people to see the world from a new angle that would help them to understand what a new socialist construction could be. Two images that adjoin each other on the pages of the *SA* journal clearly illustrate his intentions. One is a photo of a scale model of Leonidov's *Lenin Institute* [Fig. 4] and the other is a plan of the same building [Fig. 5]. It is difficult to determine that the abstract figure is an architectural plan just from the drawing but, comparing it with the photo, we can see that this drawing does depict the institute from high above, as if viewed from an aircraft [Fig. 6]. In the middle of the 1920s, the panoramic perspective of aerial photographs and films was spreading among the Russian people. The Soviet literary theorist and cinema critic, Victor Shklovskii, described how aerial shots showed the land in a monotonous and geometrical fashion<sup>(7)</sup>. Supposedly, such aerial views became part of the origin of Leonidov's designs. However, more importantly, readers of

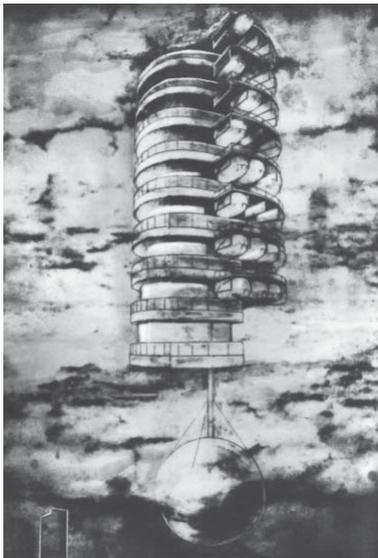


Fig. 3. Georgii Kryuchkov's *Flying City* (1928)

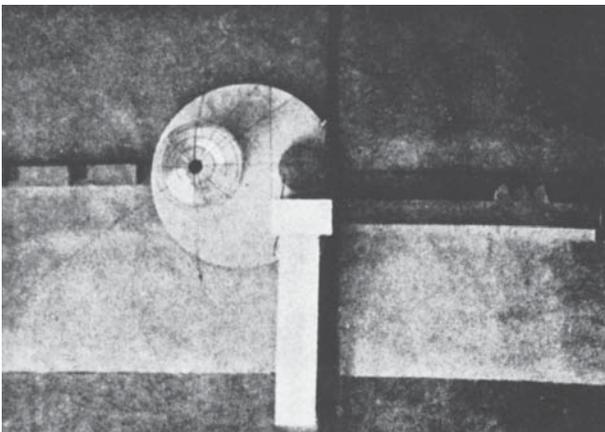


Fig. 4. Photo of a scale model of Leonidov's *Lenin Institute*

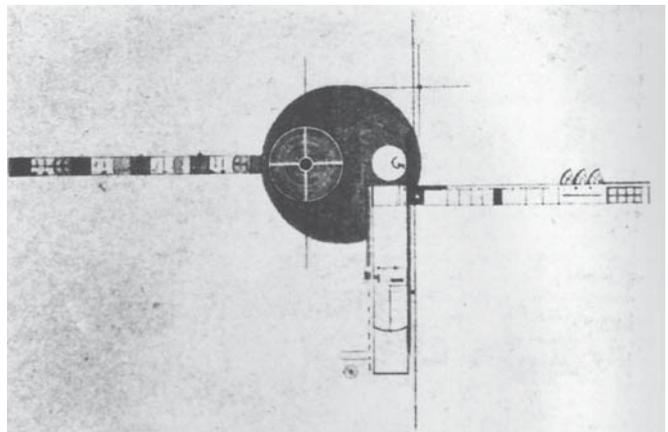


Fig. 5. Plan of Leonidov's *Lenin Institute*

the SA, by montaging his photos and drawings, could construct an overall picture of Leonidov's buildings in their imagination like an architect can with images. It was no longer a matter of whether the building existed or not. In other words, Leonidov's architectural works primarily consist of fragmentary images based on the media, not on tangible structures.

At the end of the 1920s, Leonidov began to employ another unique method: drawing white figures on black backgrounds [Fig. 7]. As a result of this new style, his designs of cultural facilities appear to float in space. In other word, Leonidov removed ordinary perception of distance, depth, and the sense of "up" and

"down" or reference to the ground. As a result, the ground was no longer the stabilized base of the buildings. The drawings were located in an infinite, non-gravitational space, or on a screen in a dim hall where images can be projected without any concern for topography. What inspired him to create such unusual expressions and what were his intentions?

A series of panels that Leonidov introduced in the first congress of the OSA in 1929<sup>(8)</sup> give us a hint of his motives. In these panels, he makes use of pictures from various kinds of media to show a new direction of his labor club designs (we will analyze his labor clubs in the next chapter). In panel no. 11 [Fig. 8], there are photos of the moon and a planetarium projector. Leonidov believed that a planetarium was essential means for education and he often designed club buildings in a dome shape, just like a planetarium. Furthermore, these constructions were depicted using white lines on a black background, which suggested the projected stars or pictures of planets in a planetarium or a movie theater [Fig. 9].

We can find other examples of his reference to planet images in his plans from 1930 for Magnitogorsk City [Fig. 10]. At this time, Leonidov had become a teacher of the VKhTEIN (a reconstituted version of the VKhTEMAS) and his VKhTEIN student team was invited to participate in a competition to design a new socialist city that included a huge ironworks and was to be located in the region of Magnitogorsk, the USSR's main iron-producing area. This competition was organized at the peak of a contro-

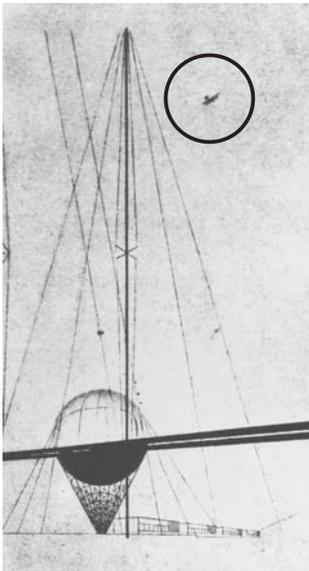


Fig. 6. Leonidov's Drawing of the *Lenin Institute*, featuring the silhouette of an airplane

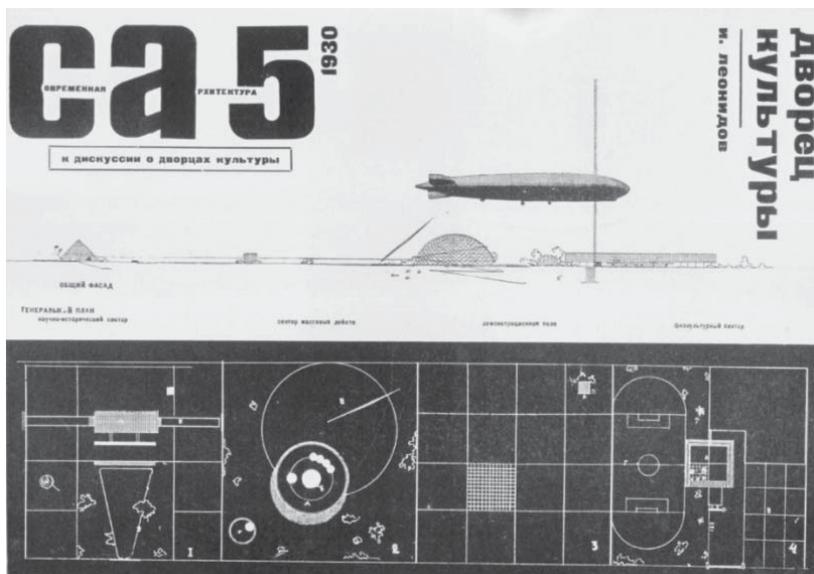


Fig. 7. Plan of the *Palace of Culture*

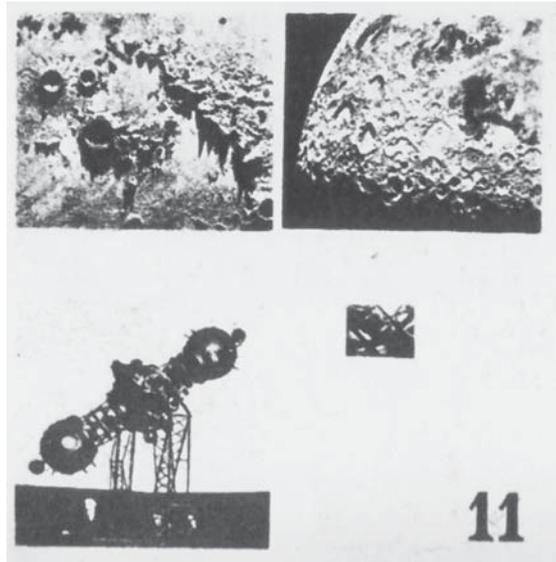


Fig. 8. "Humans work together with technology and technology works with humans"

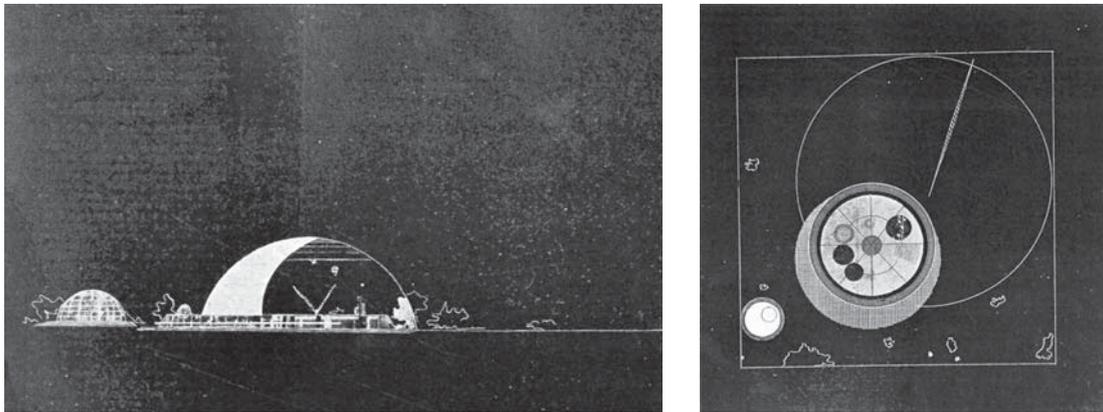


Fig. 9. Elevation and plan of the *Palace of Culture* (the section for mass demonstration)

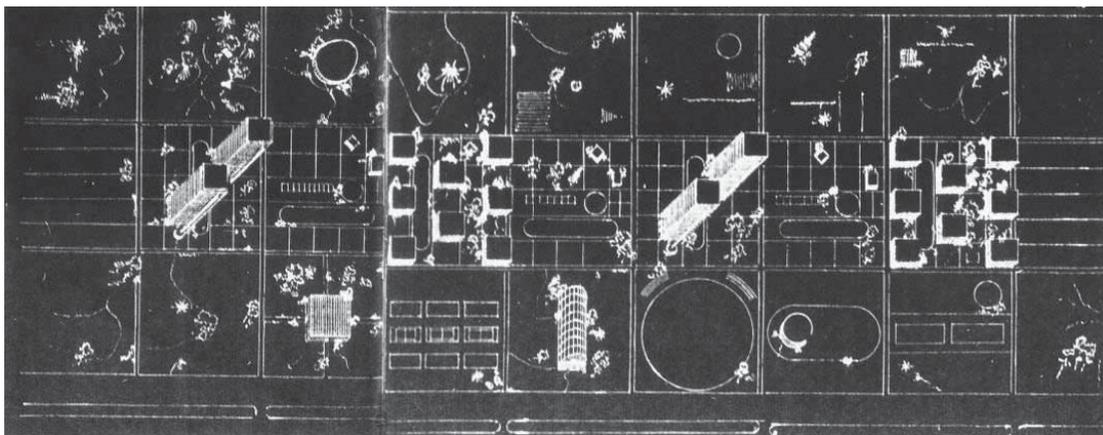


Fig. 10. Magnitogorsk City project

very concerning socialist cities (1929-1930)<sup>(9)</sup>. The Magnitogorsk project was regarded as the touchstone of the "socialist city," or the "socialist form of population settlement."<sup>(10)</sup>

## 1-2. Astrophotographic Perspectives

The controversy concerned two opposing concepts of the ideal socialist city. First, Leonid Sabsovich, the leader of the Urbanists, an economist, and a member of the Gosplan, proposed a medium-

sized city named “Agro-gorod” (“Agro-city”), which combined both agriculture and industry. In particular, he emphasized collective living, that is, in his plan every adult (even couples) would have his/her own room in a “dom-kommuna (communal house)” or “jilkombinat (living complex)” with dining areas and baths for common use. Children would be separated from their parents and live in a children’s section<sup>(11)</sup>. In order to mobilize all adults, particularly women, for labor, private family functions (i.e., housework and parenting) would be managed by public organizations. On the other side, Mikhail Okhitovich, the leader of the Disurbanists and a member of Stroikom, planned his own city, not featuring aggregations of physical structures, but an embodiment of the dynamic process of manufacturing. He presented a linear city plan, which was based on the principle of “maximum freedom, lightness, rapidity, communication, and connection.”<sup>(12)</sup> In his plan, assuming the prevalence of motor vehicles, every adult would live in an individual, prefabricated house, alongside a network of roads that stretch across the entire country. Okhitovich, differing from Sabsovich, insisted on completely removing the traditional concept of a city by improving transportation and mass communication, referring to Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* and *The Housing Question*<sup>(13)</sup>.

As a result of this dispute, the constructivists’ group OSA was split into Urbanists and Disurbanists, but Leonidov did not take sides and instead designed his own city project, applying elements from both schools. His Magnitogorsk City consisted of a 25km strip stretching along a central artery, similar to Disur-

banist cities and, in case the population exceeded the capacity of the original plan, the same grid pattern could be repeatedly replicated. In a sense, his city planning was open-ended. Residential zones where people live in communal houses, as in Urbanist plans, lay at the center of the strip. Administration zones and zones for children, including a kindergarten and a playground, are located next to the residential zone. Fields for sports, parks, and zoo parks are arranged outside of this central zone<sup>(14)</sup>. Each section is divided into a grid pattern depending on its function.

The most distinctive feature of this design is surely the repetition of this grid pattern. We can also find its origin in the crossing axes of his *Lenin Institute* project. It is also visible as a design framework in his *Palace of Culture* (1930) [Fig. 7]. The grid pattern determines the arrangements of the city components in his Magnitogorsk project. However, he ignored the original topography; Magnitogorsk is in fact a very hilly area and quite inappropriate for the construction of a grid-based city. It seems that the surface of the land loses its characteristics and transforms into a flat screen where any images can be projected.

Furthermore, the grid pattern also plays a unique role in Leonidov’s drawings. For example, it functions as a frame. In his drawing of a residential section for the city, the grid frame connects and shows different construction views: the ground plan, façade, and axonometric view [Fig. 11]. The aerial view of Magnitogorsk City and the plan of the residential section [Fig. 12] remind us of the moon photos in panel no. 11 [Fig. 8]. Applying repeated geometric figures like cra-

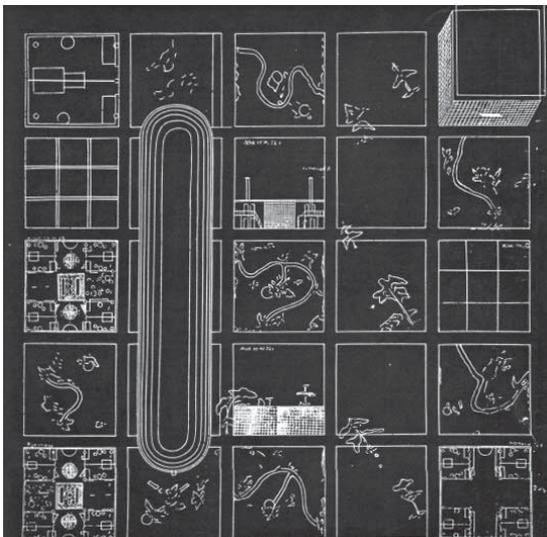


Fig. 11. Drawing of a residential section

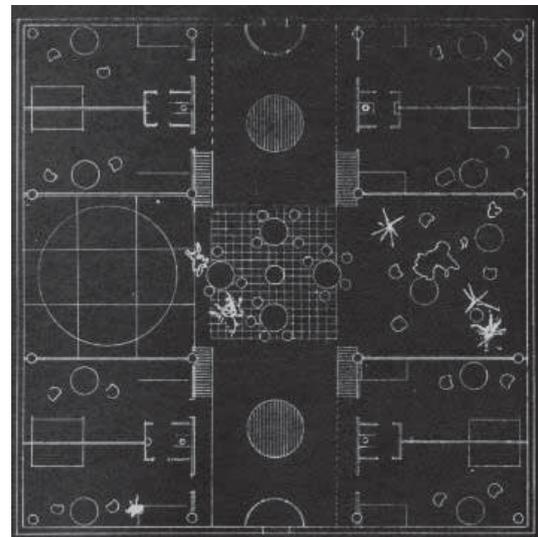


Fig. 12. Plan of a residential section

ters, Leonidov designed Magnitogorsk as a city mapped in a grid pattern. Such a geometric order opposes centripetalism and the spatial hierarchy of old cities and affords access to public facilities more equally for every resident of the city. It is most likely that Leonidov considered the geometrically uniform pattern afforded by the telephoto lens to be an ideal module for socialist cities because it would standardize the land and convert it into neutral units. In other words, astrophotography inspired him to see the ground not as familiar "motherland" but terra incognita covered with geometric craters, similar to the moon.

According to the book *Delirious New York* (1978) written by Rem Koolhaas, Manhattan's grid pattern strictly regulates the use of land while allowing complete freedom and diversity inside each grid. However, in contrast to Manhattan's grid, Leonidov's grid blocks are multiplied repeatedly for an unlimited number of times, not only outside of the city, but also inside the cells; they even cover each building's exterior and interior. Referring to Kasimir Malevich's epoch-defining picture, *Black Square* (1915), art historian John Milner mentions that Leonidov's grid pattern determines the space, buildings, and proportions of the entire design<sup>(15)</sup>. As a result, there could be no room for unexpected events or inventions. In addition, Leonidov's grid city no longer requires any architects; it automatically duplicates itself and multiplies. Such an automatic grid system was regarded as a sign of "constructivists' fetish toward the machine," or simply "machinism" and was used as a basis for anti-constructivism propaganda in the 1930s. Nevertheless, in some sense, Leonidov's Magnitogorsk City project can be considered to be a culmination of, and the limitations of, his creativity during the constructivist period.

## 2. How to Make the New Soviet Men?

As we have already seen, in Leonidov's architectural drawings, aerial photos, and astrophotography functioned as a model of a new worldview. Also, his technique of drawing by white lines on a black ground reminds us of images on a screen at a movie theater. There is no doubt that the also cinema inspired and determined Leonidov's architectural expression. Besides, he noticed the importance of the cinema, to be more precise, it's potential to catch the ideal image

of the collective people "New Men" and transmit this image to the public. Therefore, the second chapter focuses on the role of the cinema in his cultural facility projects.

In the early 1920s, creation of "New Men" became a widespread theme among various kinds of specialists in Soviet Russia. For avant-garde artists and theorists, cultivation of New Men primarily meant socialization and industrialization of laborers. For example, Vsevolod Meyerhold, the founder of the theatrical training method, Biomechanics; Aleksei Gastev, the leader of NOT (Scientific Organization of Labor); and the radical constructivist-productivist theorists Osip Brik and Boris Arvatov argued about how labors should "properly" conduct themselves and how to act in a socialized and industrialized environment. Soviet architects began to involve themselves in this drive to create New Men by designing new types of architecture, in particular labor clubs. These places were regarded as factories that produced New Men by promoting a series of cultural activities. In the middle of the 1920s, amateur theatrical activities were considered to be the primary aspect of labor clubs. However, Leonidov rejected the theater's importance in club designs. In fact, he insisted that the mass media should form the basis of these new clubs, since he thought that only it could transmit ideal images of the collective. So, first, I will analyze Leonidov's unique club designs, comparing them to other avant-garde architects' designs, and then I will elucidate on his reasons for denying the importance of the theater.

### 2-1. The Method of Creating New Labor Clubs

The Soviet Theatre Revolution followed the October Revolution and, consequently, a number of new experimental theaters appeared over a short period. Anatolii Lunacharskii, the Commissar of Enlightenment (*Narkompros*) said: "The Revolution says to the theater that (...) I need you as a collaborator, a searchlight, an adviser. I want to see my friends and enemies on your stage. I want to see them at present, in the past and in the future, and their development and success. I want to see them through my eyes. And I want to learn through your theatrical methods."<sup>(16)</sup> His words demonstrated that these revolutionary theaters were expected to teach the people of new social values and the Soviet worldview.

But why was the theater so important to Bolshevik leaders? During the October Revolution and the Civil War, countless amateur theaters emerged in Soviet Russia. City and local governments, the Red Army, trade unions, and the Proletkult intensively organized and sponsored these theaters because they had become aware of their advantages as propaganda tools. In particular, new practices such as agitational trials (*agitsudy*)<sup>(17)</sup> had nothing comparable to the stage and footlights that traditionally divide actors from the audience and allow theatrical conventions. Theatrical practices educated the audience directly by conducting interactive dialogs with them. For instance, the mass pageant, *The Storming of the Winter Palace* (1920), which was a reenactment of the defining moment of the October Revolution, was another important propaganda exercise. Thousands of ordinary people played the roles of collective laborers or soldiers, that is, the roles of their idealized selves, and experienced the “revolution” as an organized mass movement or as a result of the collective will. It was believed that the masses would be transformed into a collective of New Men through such theatrical practices.

After the Civil War, the Soviet government designated the creation of labor clubs for these theater groups in order to confine them within its influence. Until then, most of these groups had performed frequently in unspecified places such as battlefields, streets, and bars. Before the October Revolution, there were several clubs in urban areas that were not for the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie but for workers. However, the biggest difference between these new clubs and the old ones were their purpose – now they were designed to provide public enlightenment and (or) propaganda as a means of creating new Soviet men with a socialized mentality and behavior. As a result, Soviet architects were assigned to design new labor clubs that would function as factories where the New

Men were to be produced, not only by watching dramas, but also through theatrical training as actors (including instruction in Vsevolod Meyerhold’s Bio-mechanics)<sup>(18)</sup>. Therefore, the designs of the clubs were required to be a departure from the traditional designs of bourgeois theaters. To quote the amateur theater theorist, A. Petrov, “Where the theater hall begins the labor club ends.”<sup>(19)</sup>

At first, however, a gap existed between these theorists and the Soviet architects. One of the earliest design competitions for new types of labor clubs was a competition for the *Palace of Laborers*, which was held in Petrograd (1919). However, the winning design [Fig. 13], created by Ivan Fomin and his team, was, according to Anatole Kopp, “no more than clumsy borrowing from the worst architecture of the past.”<sup>(20)</sup>

The new labor clubs eventually appeared four years later. At the end of 1922, the Society of Moscow Architects (MAO) organized a competition for a *Palace of Labor* that was to be constructed in the center of Moscow. This was the first nationwide competition that officially questioned what sorts of designs would be suitable for a new socialist building. The 46 plans submitted were diverse, as Soviet architects were searching for a new style. Of these, one of the most outstanding plans was by the Vesnin brothers (Leonid, Victor, and Alexander), who designed their *Palace* as a huge factory [Fig. 14]. In other words, they literally employed the factory concept as a means of producing the New Men. In their design, we see the same features, such as antennas, signboards, and geometric constructions, as used in Alexander’s stage design for the mass pageant *The Third International* (1921)<sup>(21)</sup> [Fig. 15], which was performed in Khodynka Field, and for the play *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1923)<sup>(22)</sup> [Fig. 16], which was performed at the Kamerny Theatre. Dismissing existing architectural styles, particularly architectural ornamentations, as dead weight,

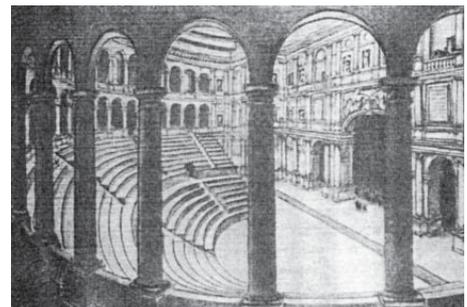
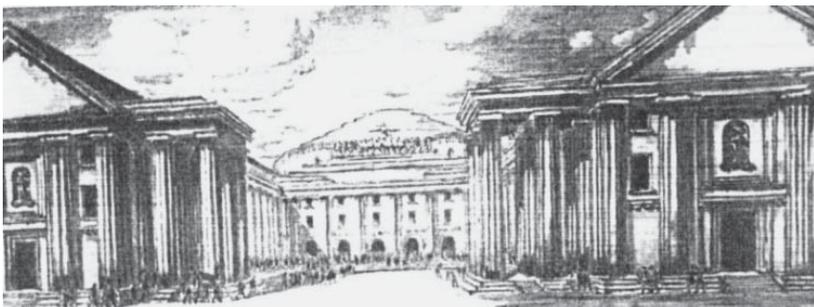


Fig. 13. The winning plan for the *Palace of Laborers*, designed by Ivan Fomin and his team

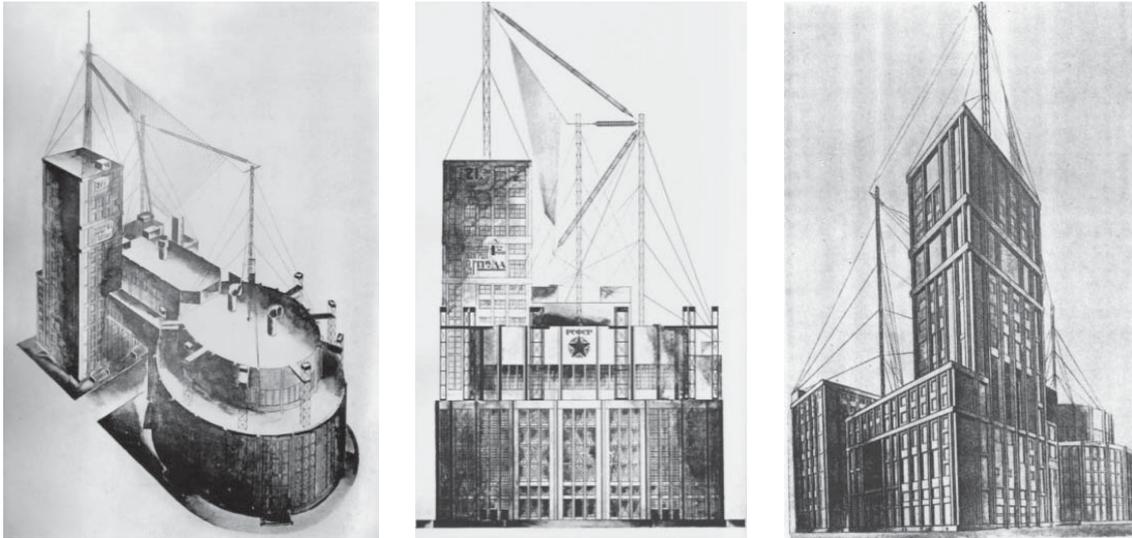


Fig. 14. Vesnins' *Palace of Labor*

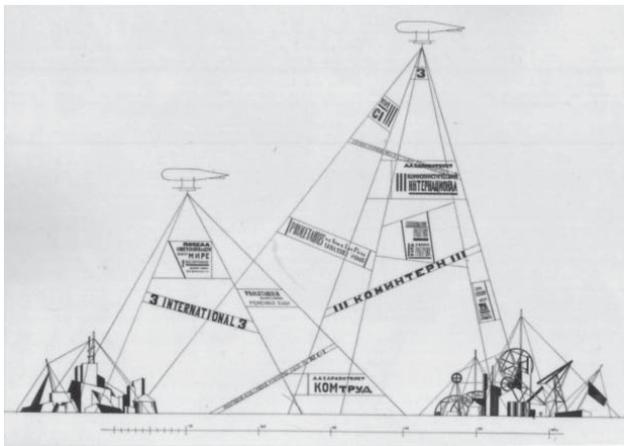


Fig. 15. Design of *The Third International*

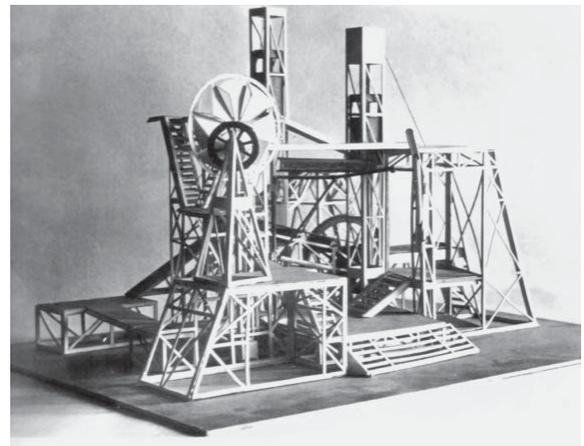


Fig. 16. Design for *The Man Who Was Thursday*

Alexander Vesnin, who was later to become the leader of the constructivist-architects' group OSA, pursued new architectural forms. These details demonstrate that Alexander considered the place to be not only a mass conference hall, but also a huge propaganda tool featuring posters, banners, radios, and antennas. A clubist, I. Khvoynik, insisted that the clubs' façades should be "propaganda organs"<sup>23</sup> that showcase the clubs' idea and purpose. Another clubist, M. Petrovsky, considered the club's interiors and exteriors to be the first and most valuable promotion for the club<sup>24</sup>. The Vesnins' labor club design surely embodied such ideas of the clubists.

## 2-2. The Mass Media and New Labor Club Designs

However, when the Vesnin brothers' *Palace of Labor* received third prize and Noi Trotsky's classical

plan was awarded first prize, it shocked the young architects and students. In fact, this event triggered the modern architectural movement in Russia—constructivism<sup>25</sup>. Soon after the competition for the *Palace of Labor*, new types of labor clubs were designed and constructed. In particular, Konstantin Melnikov's five clubs (*Rusakov*, *Kauchuk*, *Svoboda*, *Frunze*, and *Burevestnik*) opened a new horizon for designs of labor clubs. In the *Rusakov Club* [Fig. 17], people participating in a street parade or demonstration could move from the street directly across the stage inside the club using exterior stairs. There was no backstage, so every activity in the *Rusakov* was completely exposed to spectators. Six independent halls in the club could be integrated into one huge hall using movable partitions. Melnikov explained his design thusly: "When I planned the club building, I maintained one basic principle, that every activity in the club should be openly

demonstrated in front of the public's eye, not in closed box-rooms connected by corridors. I achieved this by systems in the halls, by the halls itself, that can change spaces, reduce and integrate them etc."<sup>26</sup> In this case, referring to the revolutionary theaters' dynamism and nonrepresentational character, Melnikov realized a new type of theatrical space. Furthermore, he successfully combined the two opposite elements of the construction: dynamism and stillness, the interior and the exterior.

However, Ivan Leonidov denied the theater's importance in club design, despite being Alexander Vesnin's favorite pupil. At the first congress of the OSA, he said: "I reject the idea of theatre's positive importance as I consider it to have outlived its cultural role and because of the primitiveness of its methods and technology."<sup>27</sup> Using the panels shown below, Leonidov demonstrated what Soviet architects should or should not refer to when designing new clubs. For example, in two panels he marked Xs over club

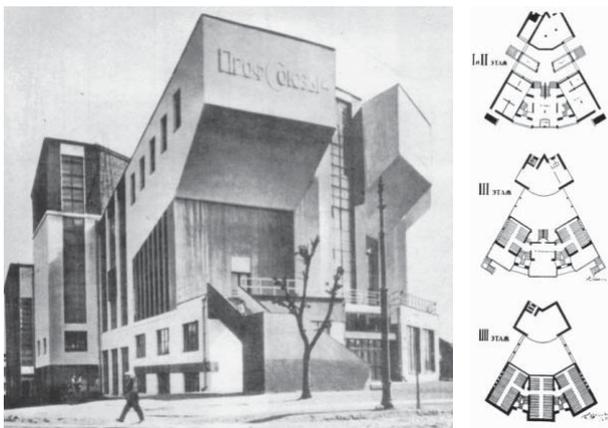


Fig. 17. Melnikov's Rusakov Club



Fig. 18. Several club designs and a photo of an actor

designs, including Melnikov's one, that primarily focused on amateur theater activity [Fig. 18]. Instead of theaters, Leonidov and his colleague Ignaty Milinis claimed that radio, film, and long-distance image-transmission devices such as television should replace theatrical practices<sup>28</sup>.

On the other hand, he also rejected fictional movies with professional actors, as he demonstrated in another panel [Fig. 19]. In the conference he said, "As a technique, I certainly do not reject a cinema without actors. But I think it should be organized in the constructivist approach. Such non-acted films, for example Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, only undermines the non-acted film by presenting without any interpretation from social point of view on life."<sup>29</sup>

It is difficult to determine precisely what Leonidov thought of different kinds of films or his "social point of view on life," but the following pictures give us a clue. The photo in panel 9 [Fig. 20] shows people exercising, and the photo in Fig. 19 shows people riding motorcycles. In both photos, the people's movements are shown in real-life settings. In both panels, Leonidov implies his belief that a film should capture and show dynamic and non-fabricated images of collective bodies instead of images of a single body, such as a movie star, posing in front of a camera. Moreover, these people's unified poses create a pattern that is difficult to recognize except from a distant perspective, similar to the repeating pattern of moon craters [Fig. 8]. In other words, such viewpoints capture and show images of people, not as an aggregation of random individual movements, but as a unified

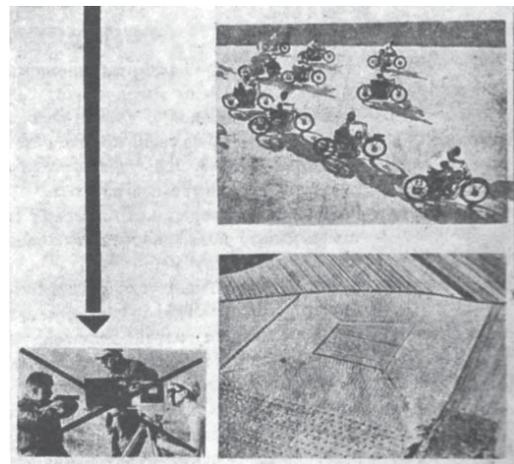


Fig. 19. Leonidov marked an X on a photo of people shooting a movie

mass movement with a single purpose or single law. Through the camera's desubjectified eye, people can obtain and share an identity as a participant of this organized mass – the socialist collective.



Fig. 20. A photo of people exercising in an unnumbered panel

### 2-3. Designs of Leonidov's Labor Clubs

Leonidov, at the same time, emphasized media as tools that could deliver equal education more efficiently. In his opinion, every worker could learn from highly specialized programs recorded or broadcast from research institutes via media devices in the clubs, no matter where he or she lived<sup>(30)</sup>. His colleague, Milinis, criticized the “ad-lib character, primitiveness, and overemphasis of theatrical practices”<sup>(31)</sup> of the current labor clubs. Leonidov and Milinis believed that the capabilities of mass media, i.e., the conquest of physical distance, universality, and uniformity of information, were superior to the physical limitations and the lack of uniformity caused by human inconsistency that was prevalent in amateur theaters, which depend on individual instructors.

These ideas of Leonidov are reflected in his labor club designs. He planned two clubs, first, the *Club of a New Social Type* (1928) [Fig. 21], which had two variants. In a caption, he described the club's purpose

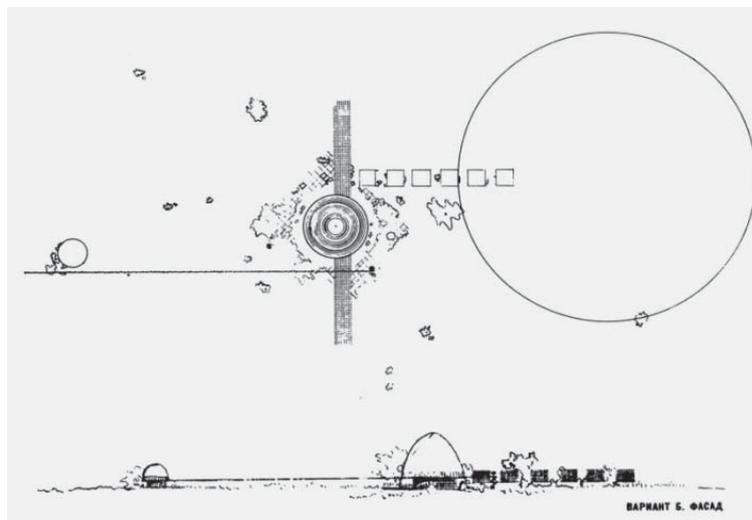
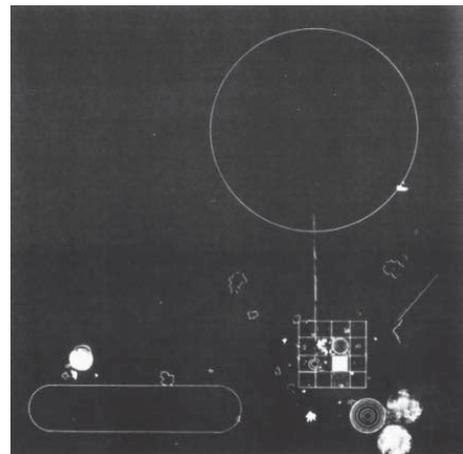
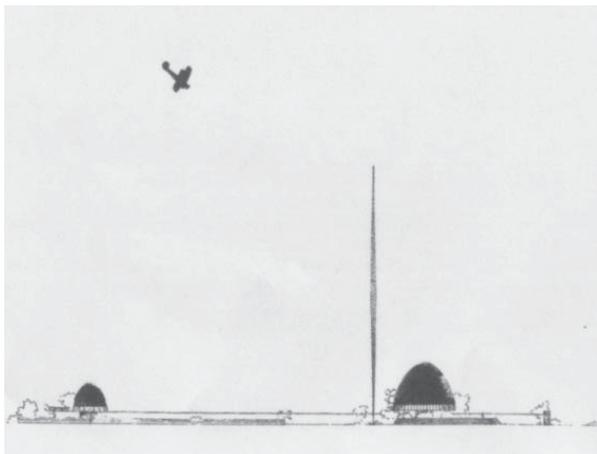


Fig. 21. Leonidov's *Club of a New Social Type*, plan A (above) and plan B (below)

as “familiarity with the facts of our life today and with science.”<sup>32</sup> He anticipated that the club’s primary activities would be science and political education. He also emphasized the importance of sports and physical training, but never mentioned theatrical activity. Another unique feature of his design was a vast plaza (2,500m<sup>2</sup>) covered with glass panels that occupied the club’s center. Around this greenhouse plaza, Leonidov placed a multipurpose hall (for lectures, movies, or planetarium shows), a library, laboratories, fields for air sports (gliders, balloons, and airplanes), a park, and a stadium. This de-centripetal disposition and very little land coverage were aspects of his unique design features. This empty center particularly contrasts with the Vesnin brothers’ and Melnikov’s club designs, which featured a huge hall with a stage occupying the center.

Worthy of mention is that the glass walls of Leonidov’s plaza were designed “to involve the individual and his personal life in the widest possible way in the dynamics of the world around him.”<sup>33</sup> Of course, glass was considered by constructivists to be an essential material for new architecture. For instance, the Vesnin brothers designed an office building, the *Leningrad Pravda* (1924) [Fig. 22], which featured a steel skeletal structure and glass curtain walls. Pedestrians could see information and news, which would be shown on these walls, along with the publishing process of the newspaper inside the building<sup>34</sup>. In this project, glass functioned as a screen or

showcase<sup>35</sup>. Khvoinik, the clubist, suggested applying such a skeletal façade to the new clubs. Khvoinik expected that transparent walls could make club activities visible from the street and, as a result, the entire club building would become an advertisement<sup>36</sup>. But, Leonidov’s conception of the glass was quite contradictory to this shop-window idea.

Unlike Vesnins’ glass advertising tower, which rises vertically and therefore involves separation from pedestrians, Leonidov’s glass square is horizontally based and pedestrians can freely go in and out of it. His glass walls no longer separate the space into inside and outside. In fact, in his project *Columbus Monument* (1929) [Fig. 23], glass walls were removed and replaced with powerful jets of air<sup>37</sup>. In other words, Leonidov dreamed of a moment when physical construction was dematerialized and the transparency of glass negated its materiality.

Leonidov submitted a second club design for a competition to design the *Palace of Culture for the Proletarsky District of Moscow* (1930) [Fig. 7], which was to be located on the site of the Simonov Monastery. In the general comments published in the architectural journal *Construction of Moscow*, the architects of the All-Union Association of Proletarian Architects (VOPRA) stated that this competition, which was sponsored by a labor union, acted as “a litmus paper of the proletarian community.”<sup>38</sup> Here, they highlighted two main negative aspects. One was MAO’s “retrospective” plan, which appeared to recon-



Fig. 22. The office building for the *Leningrad Pravda* (1924)

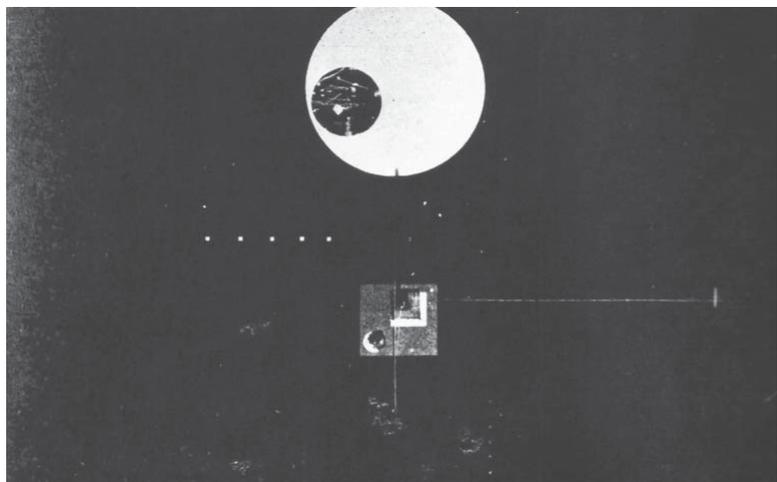


Fig. 23. *Columbus Monument* (1929)

struct the former Simonov Monastery, and the other was Leonidov's team's "individualistic" plan<sup>(39)</sup>. In particular, Leonidov was accused of having ignored not only the competition program but also "proletarian demands," i.e., demands for "a high emotional content."<sup>(40)</sup> Behind this criticism there were the hidden intentions of the VOPRA members, who wished to remove rival architectural groups. They made use of Leonidov's design to attack the OSA leaders, in particular Alexander Vesnin and Moisei Ginzburg.

In Leonidov's *Palace of Culture*, like his Magnitogorsk City project, a clear grid pattern equally divides the site into four sections according to their functions: a physical culture section, a demonstration field, a mass activities area, and a scientific and historical section. In the physical culture section Leonidov placed a glass pyramid with a gymnasium inside that was surrounded by a pool/canal, an internal beach with sand and artificial sunlight, and space for indoor sports. In the mass activities area there was "a new type of hall" with movable seats and podiums. According to Leonidov, this huge hemispheric hall should be constructed as a place, "Not for contemplation, but for joint initiatives in public and political activities, for exhibitions and for parades,"<sup>(41)</sup> instead of theatrical activities. In the scientific and historical section there was a cuboid low-rise building that was divided into several labs. In addition, there was a pole that functioned as a mooring mast for dirigibles and as a radio antenna.

Historian Elena Sidorina highly evaluated Leonidov's labor club designs because of their uniqueness; that people's activities were not limited to inside the club buildings, but spread across the vast field<sup>(42)</sup>. Nonetheless, Leonidov's design was criticized at the time by VOPRA members. They said: "The differentiation of the parts of the architectural organism, and a mechanical decomposition into individual elements that has been taken to absurdity and does nothing to stimulate the development of mass club activities."<sup>(43)</sup> In the present day, however, we should re-evaluate his designs from the viewpoint of media studies: we can consider them not as plans based on a specific site but as conceptual constructions based on a media network. In fact, avant-garde architects often adopted mass media into their designs. The Vesnin brothers designed their *Palace of Labor* to also function as a radio station and the office of *Leningrad Pravda* to be a center

of publication. Leonidov adopted a mass communication system into the design of his graduation project *Lenin Institute*. In this project, the entire staff of the institute can work together simultaneously on a single job, using telephones, radio, and visual communications. To connect with the outside world he thought of using a powerful radio station. Additionally, Leonidov's *Magnitogorsk City* project was based not only on transportation, but also on a mass communication network.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the German media theorist Marc Ries mentioned that non-physical, intangible structures, including traffic and media networks, were becoming more and more crucial elements in modern buildings and city designs<sup>(44)</sup>. Leonidov had the same idea a half century earlier, using it as a means of connecting scattered constructions and removing the barriers between club activities and the real life outside the clubs. In the caption of his *Palace of Culture* Leonidov says:

The *Palace of Culture* is a methodological center that has its cells all over the USSR and is linked with all other possible institutes, academies, museums, libraries, and other related facilities.

The *Palace of Culture* is the headquarters of the cultural revolution, which organizes the entire system of spreading political education and the entire system of cultural development for its district on the basis of mass independent work and of wide-ranging development of worker's initiatives<sup>(45)</sup>.

This caption describing the *Palace of Culture* demonstrates that Leonidov planned the club not as a single building but as the node of an entire cultural system. He intended that the media network created by his labor clubs would eventually cover the entire territory of the USSR and connect everyone, regardless of physical boundaries. Leonidov designed this cultural system to resemble revolving planets in the universe [Fig. 24]. Additionally, he also used his idea of a media network that connected the entire world in his *Columbus Monument* project. In this project, Leonidov planned that information broadcast from the Monument would be projected onto the screens installed in plazas and museums across the world. In

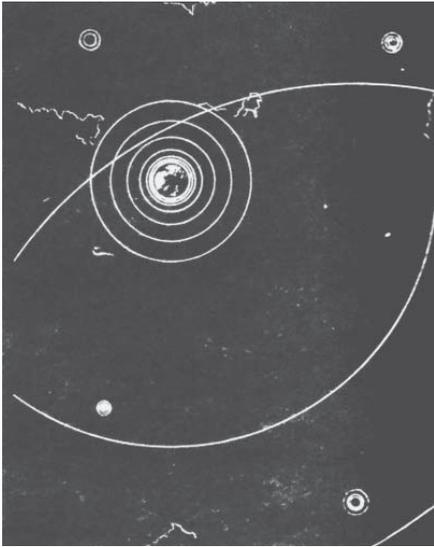


Fig. 24. Spatial layout of cultural organizations

addition, he even dreamed of networks stretching to other planets<sup>(46)</sup>. His figurative architectural drawings, which remind us of heavenly bodies, now became a literal plan to organize the planets.

### 3. Conclusion

In her book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000), Susan Buck-Morss highlighted that cinema creates a space where images of organized and unified revolutionary people exist that can exist nowhere else<sup>(47)</sup>. According to her, it is quite doubtful whether we can imagine the revolution as a mass action without films such as Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). In short, these fictional images made and reinforced the concept of the ideal collectives and the Soviet Union itself. Nevertheless, a Soviet constructivist architect, Ivan Leonidov, denied such fabricated images. Instead, he attempted to find images of ideal collectives in real life and show them through his architectural projects.

In particular, as we have seen, aerial photos and astrophotography immensely influenced his architectural expression. Leonidov used the perspective of a camera from high above in order to defamiliarize the appearance of objects that are visible in everyday life. According to him, this desubjectified "flying eye" literally opened up a new vision of a new socialist life. What is most important is that this view deconstructs spatial hierarchy, which was absolutely reinforced under socialist realism in the next decade<sup>(48)</sup>. These weightless viewpoints encouraged people to escape not only from literal gravity, but also from the social and symbolic restrictions that bind people in a pre-

revolutionary world, such as the ancient regime of the Russian Empire, social conventions like the family system, and old-fashioned worldviews. Insisting on using these visions as models for designing new types of labor clubs and socialist cities, Leonidov believed that such images produced by the camera's eye would serve as a blueprint that would give laborers an identity as members of the collective and, thus, transform them into a real collective.

Concurrently, Leonidov also considered a mass communication network to be essential in order to share such collective images. In a sense, according to Leonidov, the construction of media networks was more important than actual construction as a means of organizing the new collective. He believed that it would equalize education and make it efficient not only through media content, but also through mass communication's characteristics. From this viewpoint, his clubs were different from the Vesnins' and Melnikov's theater-centered clubs, which aimed at direct discipline and communication, therefore limiting education to the clubs' physical structure. Leonidov also expected that an overall media network, based in the clubs, could produce individuals who were independent but, simultaneously, connected with the collective through their interests. This is surely the new type of society that Leonidov dreamed of. In other words, he expected that socialized mass media would produce ideal masses—the socialist collective.

### ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1. Photo by Rodchenko taken at an angle of elevation  
Современная архитектура. 1927. №1.
- Fig. 2. Drawing of the *Lenin Institute* at an angle of elevation  
Современная архитектура. 1927. №4-5.
- Fig. 3. Georgii Kryuchkov's *Flying City* (1928)  
Хан-Магомедов С. О. Георгий Крутиков. М., Издательство Фонд «Русский авангард», 2008.
- Fig. 4. Photo of a scale model of Leonidov's *Lenin Institute*  
Современная архитектура. 1927. №4-5.
- Fig. 5. Plan of Leonidov's *Lenin Institute*  
Современная архитектура. 1927. №4-5.
- Fig. 6. Leonidov's Drawing of the *Lenin Institute*, featuring the silhouette of an airplane  
Современная архитектура. 1927. №4-5.
- Fig. 7. Plan of the *Palace of Culture*  
Современная архитектура. 1930. №5. С. 1.
- Fig. 8. "Humans work together with technology and technology works with humans"  
Современная архитектура. 1929. №3.
- Fig. 9. Elevation and plan of the *Palace of Culture* (the section

for mass demonstration)

Современная архитектура. 1930. №5.

Fig. 10. Magnitogorsk City project

Современная архитектура. 1930. №3.

Fig. 11. Drawing of a residential section

Современная архитектура. 1930. №3.

Fig. 12. Plan of a residential section

Современная архитектура. 1930. №3.

Fig. 13. The winning plan for the *Palace of Laborers*, designed by Ivan Fomin and his team

Хазанова В. Э. Клубная жизнь и архитектура клуба. 1917-1941. М., Жираф, 2000.

Fig. 14. Vesnins' *Palace of Labor*

Современная архитектура. 1927. №4-5.

Fig. 15. Design of The Third International

Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

Fig. 16. Design for *The Man Who Was Thursday*

Хан-Магомедов С. О. Александр Веснин и конструктивизм. М., Архитектура-С, 2007.

Fig. 17. Melnikov's *Rusakov Club*

Хан-Магомедов С. О. Константин Мельников. М., Стройиздат, 1990.

Fig. 18. Several club designs and a photo of an actor

Современная архитектура. 1929. №3.

Fig. 19. Leonidov marked an X on a photo of people shooting a movie

Современная архитектура. 1929. №3.

Fig. 20. A photo of people exercising in an unnumbered panel

Современная архитектура. 1929. №3.

Fig. 21. Leonidov's *Club of a New Social Type*, plan A and plan B

Современная архитектура. 1929. №3.

Fig. 22. The office building for the *Leningrad Pravda* (1924)

Современная архитектура. 1926. №1.

Fig. 23. *Columbus Monument* (1929)

Современная архитектура. 1929. №4.

Fig. 24. Spatial layout of cultural organizations

Современная архитектура. 1929. №3.

## NOTE

- (1) Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge and Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 14-15.
- (2) *Ibid*, pp. 109-111.
- (3) Former Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and Stroganov Moscow State University of Arts and Industry merged to form Free State Art Studios (Svomas) in 1918. Then the Svomas was reorganized into Vkhtemas in 1920. It was well-known that a lot of avant-garde artists (Alexander Rodchenko, Aleksandra Ekster, Lyubov Popova etc.) taught in Vkhtemas. Leonidov entered Vkhtemas in 1921. At first he wanted to choose art (painting) course, but during studying in a basic course for the first-year students, he changed his mind and went to industrial (architecture) course. Supposedly he was influenced by a teacher of the basic course Alexander Vesnin (the future leader of constructivist architects' group OSA) and the trend "from art to life," or from representation of new reality to construction of new

realities. Actually avant-garde artist-teachers encouraged the first grade students to go the industrial courses, where they were exercising their power. Хан-Магомедов С. О. ВХУТЕМАС-ВХУТЕИИ: Комплексная архитектурно-художественная школа, 1920-1930 гг. М., Знание, 1990. С. 6-45.; Хан-Магомедов С. О. Архитектура советского авангарда: Проблемы формообразования. Мастера и течения. Т. 1. М., Стройиздат, 1996. С. 374-376.; Хан-Магомедов С. О. ВХУТЕМАС. Т. 2. М., Издательство «Ладья», 2000. С. 7-9.

- (4) Леонидов И. И. Институт Ленина // Современная архитектура. 1927. №4-5. С. 120; Andrei Gozak and Andrei Leonidov, *Ivan Leonidov: The Complete Works* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 44.
- (5) Малевич К. Архитектура как степень наибольшего освобождения человека от веса // Черный квадрат. СПб., Азбука, 2001.
- (6) Акашев К. Форма самолета и методы проектирования // Современная архитектура. 1926. №3. С. 65-66.
- (7) Шкловский В. «Великий перелет» и кинематография // Левин Е. сост. За 60 лет. М., Искусство, 1985. С. 76.
- (8) Леонидов И. И. Проект клуба нового социального типа // Современная архитектура. 1929. №3. С. 108-109.
- (9) This controversy occurred in summer 1929 behind acceleration of the Five-year Plan, particularly promotion of heavy industry. Many city planners and avant-garde architects who believed that physical environment of a city could determine from residents' lifestyle to their mentalities argued what the socialist cities should be at committees in Gosplan and Comacademy and on a journal *Revolution and Culture*. However, the dispute was suddenly closed by the resolution "About work, concerning reconstruction of a way of life" of the Central Committee in 1930.
- (10) Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 33.
- (11) Сабсович Л. О проектировании жилых комбинатов // Современная архитектура. 1930. №3. С. 8.
- (12) Охитович М. К проблеме города // Современная архитектура. 1929. №4. С. 134.
- (13) Охитович М. Социализм города // Революция и культура. 1930. №3. С. 51.
- (14) Леонидов И. Пояснение к социалистическому расселению при Магнитогорском химико-металлургическом комбинате // Современная архитектура. 1930. №3. С. 1.
- (15) John Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 197-198.
- (16) Луначарский А. В. Станиславский, театр и революция // Статьи о театре и драматургии. М-Л., «Искусство», 1938. С. 87.
- (17) Agit-trials were a sort of mock trial, which put controversial issues to spectators for their judgment. In the spectacle, anti-Bolsheviks, from a famous White Guard general Pyotr Vrangel to an unnamed army deserter or to global capital, were brought to the court. Mally Lynn, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 42-43.

- (18) *Арватов Б.* Театр как производство // О театре (Сб. статей). Тверь, 1922. С. 120.
- (19) *Петров А.* Народные клубы (рабочие и крестьянские). М., Издательство «Народный учитель», 1919. С. 69.
- (20) Anatole Kopp, *Town and Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning 1917-1935* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), p. 120.
- (21) The pageant was directed by Meyerhold, and its script was written by Ivan Aksenov. Alexander Vesnin participated in it with Lyubov Popova as stage designer. In addition, 200 cavalries, 2,300 soldiers, 16 cannons, 5 airplanes, military bands, and countless ordinary people were to have taken part, but the pageant was not realized, mainly because of financial problems. *Чиняков А. Г.* Братья Веснины. М., Стройиздат, 1970. С. 61.
- (22) Alexander Vesnin designed three stages at the Kamerny Theatre, and *The Man Who Was Thursday* was the last one. A historian of Soviet architecture Selim Khan-Magomedov described its dynamic and skeletal construction as a junction of constructivism in art and architecture. *Хан-Магомедов С. О.* Архитектура советского авангарда: Проблемы формообразования. Мастера и течения. Т. 1. М., Стройиздат, 1996. С. 361.
- (23) *Хвойник И. Е.* Внешнее оформление общественного быта. М., Долой неграмотность, 1927. С. 28.
- (24) *Петровский,* Принципы и методы клубной работы. С. 41.
- (25) Soon after the *Palace of Labor* competition, Alexander Vesnin was invited to the VKhUTEMAS as a teacher and was elected leader of the constructivist group.
- (26) *Хан-Магомедов С.* Константин Мельников. М., Архитектура-С, 2006. С. 131.
- (27) *Леонидов И.* Вопросы, заданные по докладу тов. Леонидова на 1 съезде ОСА, и ответы на них тов. Леонидова // Современная архитектура. 1929. №3. С. 111.
- (28) *Милинис И. Ф.* Проблема рабочего клуба // Современная архитектура. 1929. №3. С. 112.
- (29) *Леонидов.* Вопросы, заданные по докладу тов. Леонидова. С. 111.
- (30) *Леонидов И.* Организация работы клуба нового социального типа // Современная архитектура. 1929. №3. С. 106.
- (31) *Милинис.* Проблема рабочего клуба. С. 112.
- (32) *Леонидов.* Организация работы клуба нового социального типа. С. 106.
- (33) Там же. С. 107.
- (34) *Гинзбург М.* Новые методы архитектурного мышления // Современная архитектура. 1926. №1. С. 1-4.
- (35) The Soviet movie director, Sergei Eisenstein described problematics of the glass wall and one-way eye in his unfinished screenplay the *Glass House*. In his scenario residents in the huge glass apartment peep others secret and spectate misery of the next-door through glass walls. In other words, the transparent glass allows dealing with the objects which exist beyond the wall like merchandise in a showcase or images on the screen.
- (36) *Хвойник,* Внешнее оформление общественного быта. С. 28.
- (37) *Леонидов И. И.* Конкурсный проект памятника Колумбу // Современная архитектура. 1929. №4. С. 148.
- (38) *Карра А., Симбирцев В.* Форпост пролетарской культуры // Строительство Москвы. 1930. №8-9. С. 20.
- (39) Там же.
- (40) Там же.
- (41) *Леонидов И.* Дворец культуры // Современная архитектура. 1930. №5. С. 6.
- (42) *Сидорина Е.* Русский конструктивизм: истоки, идеи, практика. М., «Винити», 1995. С. 187.
- (43) *Карра, Симбирцев,* Форпост пролетарской культуры. С. 22.
- (44) Marc Ries, “Zai huzai, koko to jiko: Autobahn to media no shinkinsei (fortda. hierselbst: Die Verwandtschaften von Autobahn und Medien),” translated by Tadashi Saito in *10 + 1*, no. 15 (Токуо: INAX Shuppan, 1998), p. 128.
- (45) *Леонидов И.* Дворец культуры // Современная архитектура. 1930. №5. С. 6.
- (46) *Леонидов.* Конкурсный проект памятника Колумбу. С. 148.
- (47) Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), p. 147.
- (48) Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 123.