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The Houses of Soviets: Soviet Architecture and Socio-political Change of 1920-30s

My doctoral project, “The Houses of Soviets: Soviet Architecture and Socio-political Change of 1920-30s,” deals with a new building type, the House of Soviets, developed in 1920-30s. The Houses of Soviets were usually built in the newly established regional administrative centers. After suddenly becoming regional centers, these cities needed buildings for Soviet state authorities. Thus, the main function of Houses of Soviets was to house Soviet government. Moreover, these constructions often provided a space for socio-cultural activities such as theater, cinema and concerts.

Standing in the shadow of Workers’ Clubs and Communal Houses, the Houses of Soviets have never been in the focus of a comprehensive study. This is due to the established tradition of studying the Soviet architecture of the 1920-30s. Most of the studies focus on theories, concepts and new building types mainly developed by artists and architects of the avant-garde.

Concentrating on avant-garde tradition makes it nearly impossible to consider the development of Soviet architecture homogeneously with all its diverse forms and functions because of the following three problems. First, it creates an opposition between those architects who had an explicit connection to avant-garde and those who did not. Second, following the development of architectural theories accentuates the study on projects designed in relation to them, such as realized and unrealized designs of Communal houses, Workers’ Clubs and others. This leaves the designs of buildings without a direct connection to theories at the margins of the research agenda. The third problem is the dichotomy between the noble aspiration of avant-garde architects to build a better world and the tragic course of Soviet politics. The common strategy to deal with this dichotomy is to search for interrelations between the official statements of Soviet politicians and the ideas of architects allowing the disregard of social and political circumstances of the development of the Soviet architecture. Consequently, the Communal Houses, Workers’ Clubs, Palaces of Culture and other monuments designed and built in 1920-30s are generally

interpreted as a response to a common, “utopian” dream of Soviet politicians and architects in building a socialist society.

The Houses of Soviets stand in this tradition in a very defiant place. Firstly, both avant-garde architects and traditionalists designed the Houses of Soviets proposing different formal representations. Secondly, the few articles concerning the conception of the Houses of Soviets were written exclusively by avant-garde architects. This limits the investigation into the function of these buildings to those Houses of Soviets designed by advocates of the avant-garde. Finally, being administrative building their history is closely associated with the reality of socio-political transformations: such as the spatial reorganization of the state, Sovietization of the periphery, and the alteration of the political system as well as everyday life. Thus, to study the history of the Houses of Soviets, one should answer the question: how were the Houses of Soviets – with all their diverse forms and functions – developing during the socio-political transformations of 1920-30s. Transformations which in turn were caused by the Revolution and attempt to build Socialism?

My research is based on the analysis of the social relations between architects and the Soviet state authorities during the construction of Houses of Soviets in Bryansk, Nizhny Novgorod, Ivanovo, Elista and Makhachkala in Russia, Minsk in Belorussia, Yerevan in Armenia and Almaty in Kazakhstan. Reconstructing the histories of these buildings, I consider how the idea to construct the Houses of Soviets materialized through the negotiation between different social agents involved in the process of design and construction at different stages. In this way, I present the form and function of the buildings as a result of the collective vision of what the House of Soviets should look like. Furthermore, concentrating on the questions of location, form and function, I investigate how the negotiation processes and decisions concerning the constructions were similar or different with respect to different time and space.