

Basan Kuberlinov

University of Warsaw

The Houses of Soviets: Socio-political Change and Constructivist Architecture

My dissertation project focuses a new building type, the Houses of Soviets, developed by Constructivist architects, whose avant-garde style was predominant in Soviet Union between 1923 and 1933.

The Houses of Soviets were usually built in newly established regional administrative centers. These buildings were developed as unique multifunctional constructions because these new centers needed buildings for administrative and socio-cultural purposes. The Houses of Soviets simultaneously housed government and Communist Party organizations and provided space for socio-cultural activities such as theater, cinema, music concerts and others. In some instances the Houses of Soviets were a part of the construction plan of completely new cities where central ensembles were composed entirely of avant-garde architecture as is the case with the Houses of Soviets in Dzerzhinsk, Elista, Alma-Ata, and Dushanbe. The new municipalities were built in the 1920-30s as socialist cities. Furthermore, the development of the Houses of Soviets was a part of such historical events as the first Five-Year plan, urbanization, industrialization, Cultural Revolution.

As the Houses of Soviets not only played a central role in social life, but also housed the local representatives of Soviet power (namely, OIK's Regional Executive Committees), they might be considered as a material embodiment of the Soviet State in the region. Therefore, as the Houses of Soviets encompass social, cultural and political contexts they are perfect objects for studying the relationship between Constructivist architecture, politics and society,

The multifunctionality of the building type as administrative and socio-cultural center on the one hand; and the complexity of the historical context of construction of Houses of Soviets on the other, define the purpose of the research: to reveal the architectonic concepts of the Constructivist Houses of Soviets and their execution as well as to consider the alternation of

their design, reception and exploitation with respect to the change of socio-political conditions of 1924-1939.

The research is based on the analysis of the social relationships between architects, users and the State against the backdrop of two historical processes, which took place between 1924 and 1939: first, the development of the Houses of Soviets as a building type along with the Constructivist theory and second, the progressive transition of the Soviet Union from the Market Socialism to Stalinism. The architecture is considered as the social agent or material index through which the primary social agents, such as users, producers and clients (in our case, the State) make their agency effective, as proposed in Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of visual art. However, in the contrast to Alfred Gell's theory, I shift the focus from the social interactions to the materiality of index. In other words by investigating the relationships between architects, users and the State through their interactions with the buildings, I consider what role the alternation of socio-political context played for the material form of building type and how this alternation affected its design, perception and exploitation. One of the basic methods is archival work: documents concerning construction, such as architectural drawings and historical photographs, are collected, analyzed and systemized.