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Modernist Heritage of Sverdlovsk Today



The main square of sotsgorod Uralmash in the 1930s. On the left a water tower completes the Cultury Boulevard



The present condition of the water tower



Dom Justitsii completing Malysheva street, 1930s

The avant-garde period was short but significant for the history of Ekaterinburg. Developments that took place there in the 1920s and 1930s both changed the appearance of the city and considerably influenced its present general layout.

In 1923 the Ural area was united into one big administrative unit, the Ural region, to stimulate recovery of the Urals' industry. Shortly afterwards, during the First Five-Year Plan, the Soviet government advanced a programme for creating the Ural-Kuznetsk Combine. The Urals steel and the coals of Siberian Kuzbas formed the second industrial base in the east of the country. In order to strengthen the young state economy, Stalin decided to build his stronghold in the centre of the country, unreachable for any invading army or even foreign air forces. For the Urals landscape, hardly disturbed by mankind, this meant transformation into one massive construction site. The old towns were to be reconstructed into giants of Soviet industry, and new socialist cities were to rise.

The establishment of the Ural region coincided with the period when avant-garde ideas in Soviet architecture were supported by the government and even had the status of the 'state style'. The prospect of large-scale construction offered modern architects an excellent opportunity to test their theoretical works in practice, which resulted in the appearance of Modern Movement architecture and town-planning in the Urals.

For the city of Ekaterinburg this meant a tremendous transformation because it was chosen as the capital of the vast Ural region, and thus was destined to play a key-role in Stalin's industrialization plan for the Urals and West-Siberia. In 1924 Ekaterinburg received the new name Sverdlovsk and entered into a period of big construction. Sverdlovsk required an entirely new development strategy that could transform it from the principal town of a province into a "progressive" capital. Thus, in the years of the First Five-Year Plans, work was carried out to create the general layout of Bolshoy Sverdlovsk (Great Sverdlovsk). Representatives from architectural associations in Moscow and Leningrad worked together with local architects regarding a new system of urban construction according to the general layout. Sverdlovsk provided a wide sphere of activity for constructivists from the group OSA headed by M. Ginzburg. Their "functional method" based on new technologies and standardization was repeatedly used there. A great number of public administration buildings, residential buildings and other examples of new socialist building types rose with rapid speed everywhere around the city.

Construction under the Bolshoy Sverdlovsk plan came to an abrupt halt in 1934. At that time, the Ural region, having failed to hold on to its territory, disintegrated into a number of smaller regions; therefore Sverdlovsk lost the privileges of an administrative and economic centre of a gigantic region. Accordingly, the rate of financing of construction was reduced. Despite that, Sverdlovsk-

Ekaterinburg has played an important part in the history of architecture of the Modern Movement as an example of implementation of a regional model of modernism.

The fate of the utopian ideas of the avant-garde in the USSR in the second half of the 1930s is well known. With the coming of the totalitarian epoch they lost their actuality, as those ideas did not coincide with the mission of the new government. Soviet architects turned to the laws of the newly introduced aesthetics of socialist realism in their creative work and were guided by them for a long period. In an ironic twist of fate, the avant-gardists who had shown their contempt for all the previous architectural periods were doomed to the same sad lot.

In the early 1990s the city was once more renamed Ekaterinburg. At that time it found itself in a struggle with the effects of an acute economic crisis. This had a negative effect on the attitude towards cultural heritage in general, and the preservation of modernist monuments in particular. At present, the state of these monuments gives us justifiable concern regarding their future. Over the years of careless utilization, with rearrangements inside and extensions outside, with uses other than their original purpose or no use at all, many monuments declined. Some buildings and sites that had a structure-forming function in the city disappeared from view, hidden by later buildings, despite the fact that both separate buildings and complete town-planning formations deserved the status of monuments. The poor physical condition of these structures also was a result of problems typical of the construction process of the 1920s. Those included not only a difficult economic situation and imperfect technologies, but also the fact that the creators of the new architecture were somewhat far from reality. For example, in their projects for Sverdlovsk, the OSA group did not fully take into account the difference of local climatic conditions from the conditions in Moscow, which made it necessary for constructors to "adapt" the object to the location and led to distortions of the architect's design. The use of low-quality building materials has also catastrophically affected the present physical condition of modernist buildings. Sometimes a building was made in a material that was totally different from the one that was planned. An underestimation of the importance of the architect's supervision also affected quality.

Although "Sverdlovsk modernism" is in a critical state, until the present time little has been done to investigate and systematize the experience of the avant-garde period in Sverdlovsk and the Urals; there has been no active and organized work on conservation and restoration of its monuments. When outlining the path for conservation and restoration of the modernist heritage of Ekaterinburg, one should specify a number of high priority tasks. There is no need to mention how much the majority of those monuments need repairing, as the problem is typical for this style on the whole. Ekaterinburg, in particular, has to solve the following problems:



The apartment complex 4 Dom Gorsovet, 1930s



The changes of 4 Dom Gorsovet in the late 1990s



The present condition of 4 Dom Gorsovet

- to give certain monuments and sites back their original town-planning role;
- to free buildings and structures from later extensions that distort their appearance. This point, however, should make an exception for the façade decorations made during the Stalinist epoch, as they were achieved by the same architects and therefore have considerable aesthetical value;
- to restore original fragments and parts that have been lost in the course of time;
- to adapt monuments according to present utilization requirements, giving them a new function if necessary, but making sure that their appearance remains intact;
- to consider implementation of the architect's design insofar as it was not implemented when certain projects were built.

A few illustrations of these problems are given below. The problems, however, tend to occur as a bunch, rather than as a single issue per case.

One of the most poignant examples of a monument that lost its town-planning significance is a water tower from the Uralmash plant (1928–1931) that was built according to the design of the architect M. Reisher. It was erected at the end of Culture Boulevard, one of the three streets that radiated from the main square of sotsgorod Uralmash in the classical form of three rays and formed a town-planning structure for the district. The tower was designed first of all to provide water to the plant and the workers' settlement and was planned as a spatial dominant that completed Culture Boulevard. The material used was also exclusive – the tower was one of the first structures in Sverdlovsk to be built of ferroconcrete. The people liked the tower very much, and it acquired the name "Belaya Bashnia" (White Tower). By the early 1970s the House of Culture of the Uralmash plant had been erected in front of Bashnia and had fully blocked the view of it, taking upon itself the role of the structure that completes the boulevard. Thus, a unique monument of constructivism was excluded from the life of the city and doomed to a miserable existence in the backyard of another building. At present, extensive discussions are being held on the further role of Belaya Bashnia.

The recent history of the tower is as follows. Ten years ago, an insurance company "Belaya Bashnia" was established, and the Uralmash Plant became one of its shareholders. The water tower was its contribution to the authorized fund of the joint-stock company. The management of the insurance company was thinking for a long time about how to use Reisher's creation. There was a proposal to arrange a club of the insured in the tower or to open a restaurant there. However, all those projects remained on paper. At the end of the 1980s, the company transferred the tower to the ownership of the Regional Committee on State Property as it became unprofitable to maintain it. The tower has never been repaired. Its dual status was the reason for this: on the one hand, this is a monument of federal importance and is accordingly under the protection of regional authorities; on the other hand, the land on which the monument stands belongs to the city, and the city administration has a different view of how its property should be used. A compromise in the given situation is still to be found. Specialists are well aware of the fact that Belaya Bashnia has irreversibly lost its role as a spatial dominant and are looking for different ways of returning one of Ekaterinburg's symbols to the city.

One more monument found itself in a comparable situation. Dom Justitsii (House of Justice) is the compositional centre of the site occupied by the Gorodok Justitsii (Justice Quarter), situated near the western end of Lenina Prospect (1930). Built according to a design by I. P. Antonov and S. Ye. Zakharov, Dom Justitsii performed the same town-planning function as the tower: it completed Malysheva Street, the second largest street after the Lenina Prospect. In the 1970s, someone apparently guided by the need to extend housing facilities and proceeding solely from the

sufficient size of the building site, erected a standardized apartment building in Malysheva Street that has hidden the monument. This example not only illustrates a violation of the restricted area around the monument, but also is an example of a non-professional approach that ignores the very foundations of town-planning. Still, as these flats do not have any architectural value, there is some hope that the building will be demolished in the future.

The practices of private enterprise in the post-Soviet period have especially affected the appearance of residential buildings. Here we deal, among other things, with the personal ability of each individual businessman to be aware of such a matter as "cultural value."

An apartment complex *4 Dom Gorsovet* (4th House of the City Soviet), built between 1927 and 1928 after the design by the architect S. V. Dombrovsky, opens the ensemble of the Uralskikh Kommunarov (Ural Communards) Square. One of its buildings faces both Lenina Prospect and Moskovskaya Street, which provided for a corner accent in its composition. Such a favourable location could not but attract the attention of business people in the post-Soviet period. As was typical of the 1990s, the apartments on the ground floor were bought and the space was occupied by a new shopping centre. Its entrance area completely ignored the context and the status of the monument. The situation was aggravated by the fact that the new component was extended, using the same primitive method, when a completed part that had been made in one style was later extended by another part that was independent in its concept both from the existing structure and the monument itself. An alien "tumour" on the façade disfigured it and contrasted with the collapsing original parts. Such ignorant approach also stimulated the process of dilapidation.

In the second half of the 1990s the owners of the trading complex have signed, together with the Research and Development Centre for Protection of Sverdlovsk Oblast Monuments, a document containing obligations for conservation of the monument. They were ordered to dismantle the annex and put the facades into order. Unfortunately, the owners were still not capable of realising that the building they were dealing with was a monument. The new façade, designed for the whole shopping centre, is made of standard glass-in-steel elements. A foil of brown-toned glazing covered up the whole corner looking over the square.

The apartment complex Dom Uraloblsovnarkhoza (the House of the Ural Regional Soviet of the National Economy (1930–1933)) that is situated at the corner of Malysheva Street and Khokhryakova Street is one of the structures that realize designs by M. Ginzburg and his colleagues related to a new socialist type of dwelling. Based on the project by Stroikom (the Construction Committee) of the RSFSR, the complex contains a complete set of typological and building innovations for the given project, but it was specially adapted to Sverdlovsk. The complex consists of four blocks grouped around a yard

space. Together with different living units, workshops, recreational areas, areas for public catering and a kindergarten were designed in the blocks. The hostel building that faced Malysheva Street included offices on the first floor and was partly supported by open concrete supports that provided a passage to the internal yard. That building has become a compositional and functional centre of the site and presents the greatest interest. Up till now the building has experienced numerous alterations. During the Second World War a canteen with facility rooms and an open gallery on the top floor were rebuilt into additional dwellings. Since the late 1980s, the block has been suffering from the fact that the shops occupying the ground floor were placed between ferroconcrete supports. The facades of the shops were accented with bright decorative materials that did not match the image of the monument. Together with other changes that distorted the architect's design, this led to the loss of aesthetic value for the constructivist monument.

The problem of architectural dissonance in combination with the loss of original details can be considered with regard to the building *Fabrika-Kukhnia* (Kitchen-Factory, 1930) by architect G.P. Valenkov. The silhouette of *Fabrika-Kukhnia*, an example of a technological innovation that had to create a new way of life, was supposed to accent the merger of Sverdlova Street and Karla Liebknechta Street. Construction of the building stopped when the Ural region disintegrated and financing was reduced. However, certain blocks have been completed. *Fabrika-Kukhnia* is valuable due to both the modernist style manifestation and as one of the few representatives of structures of that type in the city. At present it houses a factory producing macaroni; only an experienced viewer can recognize this building in a space that is squeezed from all sides by different new structures. It is also difficult to recognize the building because in the course of its utilization the important parts of its façade – a corner balcony that supported its composition and a quarter-cylindrical glass staircase – were lost.

A direct relationship between the monument's scale and the magnitude of the difficulties it is exposed to is not a surprise. The larger a monument the bigger is the bundle of its problems.

The fact that *Gorodok Chekistov* (Security Officers' Block) played a prominent role in the ensemble of the new city centre on *Parizhskey Kommuny* (Paris Commune) Square demonstrated the growing influence of *NKVD-OGPU* (People's Commissariat for Home Affairs – Unified State Political Department), the complex client. The project, designed by architects I. Antonov, V. Sokolov and A. Tumbasov (art design), was carried out from 1929 to 1936. The *Gorodok Chekistov* was planned as a single ensemble. Although the composition contains the same elements as other similar projects of the time, its compositional entity is unique. An image of an impregnable fortress was created at the expense of a reserved and balanced character, combined with an



The apartment complex Uraloblsovnaarkhoz, 1930s



The present condition of Uraloblsovnaarkhoz



Fabrika-Kukhnia, 1930s



The present condition of Fabrika-Kukhnia



Gorodok Chekistov



The present condition of Gorodok Chekistov

asymmetrical arrangement of elements. The complex was well thought-out: on the one hand, it proceeded from the types of activities of its residents; on the other hand, it provided the latest achievements in housing construction and socialist life standards. The impregnable walls formed by the apartment blocks of the Gorodok-fortress hid behind them a system of cultural and community facilities conveniently arranged in an internal park, side by side with recreation and sports areas and playgrounds. Asymmetry and complex architectural rhythms of apartment blocks were compensated by common elements of façade design: smooth walls with window openings alternate with vertical lines of bay windows and glazed bands of staircases. End façades are rounded-off with balconies.

Special attention in the complex composition was given to the public group on the southwest side, presenting two blocks and an overhead gallery between them, looking onto the square and the main street. The corner of the Parizhskoy Kommuny Square was accentuated by the most prominent building in the complex, the ten-storey apartment hotel for single officers (today, the Iset hotel), designed in the form of a semi-cylinder bearing on two massive pillars. The Dzerzhinsky Club building is known primarily for its spiral stair projecting as a cylindrical

structure into Lenina Prospect. Since the stairway bears on an external structure, a light atrium is formed in its core part over the whole staircase height, opening a view of a unique beam ceiling in the form of a five-pointed star. The staircase accentuates the right-angle intersection of the club and entertainment parts of the building. In the club part, rooms for association activities are grouped around light-filled foyers of semi-functional application. Such a method allowed the architects to shorten the depth of the corridors for group rooms, and this had a positive effect on spatial perception in the interiors. The latter are probably the only example of modernist interiors in the city that remained intact.

The whole Gorodok was built of plastered brick. The wooden floors were laid on metal beams. Reinforced concrete was used sparingly in the hotel and the club only, and because cement was in short supply, the concrete structures were of poor quality. The bay windows present a frame-and-filling structure.

Presently, most of the structures are worn out. In addition to that the complex has been undergoing functional re-orientation. The ground floors of the apartment blocks are sold out and many small shops and offices affect the unity of ensemble. The hotel building, in addition to being in critical technical condition, is facing the problem of compliance with contemporary safety norms. The upper floors are unsafe for use unless an additional emergency staircase is built. Before that time this half of the hotel can only be used as a big commercial board.

It is essential that a preservation or reconstruction program is developed for the whole complex. For that, the complex should come under the responsibility of only one owner, which is what has already happened with a monument that is located just across the street.

Club Stroiteley (Builders' Club, later Sverdlovsk film studio) was constructed in 1929–1930 as a project by the architect Ya. A. Kornfeld, who was one of the OSA founders, at the crossing of Lenina Prospect and Lunacharskogo Street. The club was another component of the ensemble of the new city centre. It became a built example of a new type: the multi-functional workers' club. This type is characterized by thorough planning of the functional zones, reflected best of all in the complicated volumetric and spatial design of the Builders' Club. A rhythmical dynamic for the façade composition was achieved by a striking alternation of smooth wall surfaces and windows apertures that looked different due to size and proportions. The Builders' Club has played a definite role in the process of stylistic evolution of the functional method.

Unfortunately, as often happened at that time, an excellently designed project was built in low-quality materials. Instead of reinforced concrete, metal and glass, as intended by Kornfeld, Club Stroiteley was made of bricks, frame-and-filling or frame-and-board elements. The monolithic concrete floor slabs were placed on metal or wooden beams with slag filling and were equipped

with suspended ceilings. Within a short period all these elements proved to be non-durable.

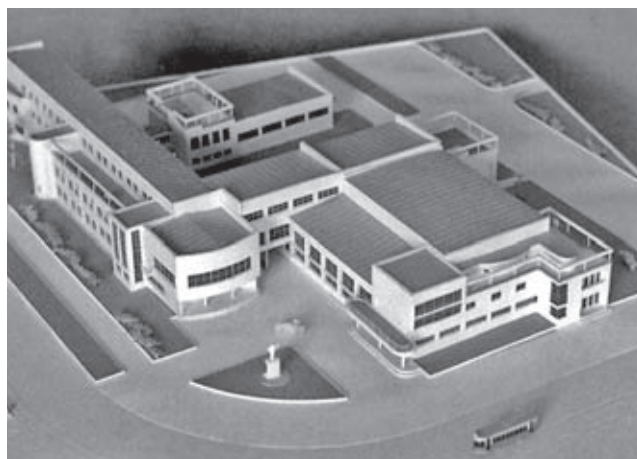
The use of low-quality materials is the main problem of this monument, but not the only one. Not all the architect's ideas were realized. Together with losses and alterations from later periods, the above-mentioned problems considerably destroy the compositional integrity that was achieved by the architect when designing the building. It especially affected the complicated entrance area of the building, which was formed by club and entertainment parts that came together at a right angle and by a small square in front of them. This key unit managed to balance the combination of volumes having different sizes by means of a large stained-glass window that was designed in the face plane of a hall and presented a contrast with blank plastered surfaces of adjoining volumes. A stained-glass window was never made during construction.

By the 1990s the monument, housing the Sverdlovsk film studio, was in such poor technical condition that it was classified as broken down. Then several engineering surveys were conducted to figure out which parts were to be reinforced or replaced. The regional government tried to find a comprehensive approach for conservation and reconstruction of the monument, but was not able to allocate funds for this purpose.

Thus, in 1998 the Regional Committee on State Property announced a tender for a long-term lease-out of the 7,500 m² film studio complex. The tender produced fast results, as a certain commercial entrepreneur took it with the intention of transforming the film studio into a shopping centre. After gaining the permission, the new tenant showed full recognition of the exclusiveness of the building he was dealing with. He hired architects in order to adjust the complex to the new purpose with all possible care. His ambition was even to reconstruct the original appearance of the building, according to Kornfeld's project. Unfortunately, practical matters did not allow this project to be carried out completely. The above-mentioned stained-glass window still did not emerge. Nevertheless, the new shopping complex "City Centre," which opened its doors shortly after the millennium change, features more original details than the building had ever had. Club Stroiteley became the first precedent of a constructivist monument being restored and put into new use in Ekaterinburg.

We could continue listing the examples of a critical state of modernist monuments in today's Ekaterinburg. However, we shall limit ourselves to the above and shall try and find the main reasons that interfere with the improvement of the above situation. On closer examination, the problem falls into two main factors:

- a low level of awareness with regard to the value of the Modern Movement architecture on professional, administrative and public levels because of the "young" age of the monuments in question. This results in lack of practical experience in restoration, renovation and



A reconstruction model of the Builders' Club



Club Stroiteley, 1930s



The present condition of the Builders' Club

programmed use of monuments belonging to the given period;

- lack of a clear position on the part of the Russian protection legislation referring to architectural monuments from the 1920 and 1930s. Hence there is a lack of coordination of actions by city and regional authorities in protecting and utilizing the heritage of the Modern Movement architecture. The role of public organizations in this process is underestimated. Apart from that, the role that administrative bodies give to that heritage when planning prospective development in Ekaterinburg remains unclear.

The first steps in this direction have already been done. It will, however, take much more effort before the constructivist heritage will be reinstated in its capacity of an integral, fully functional and well-adapted architectural and town-planning element in the city organism.