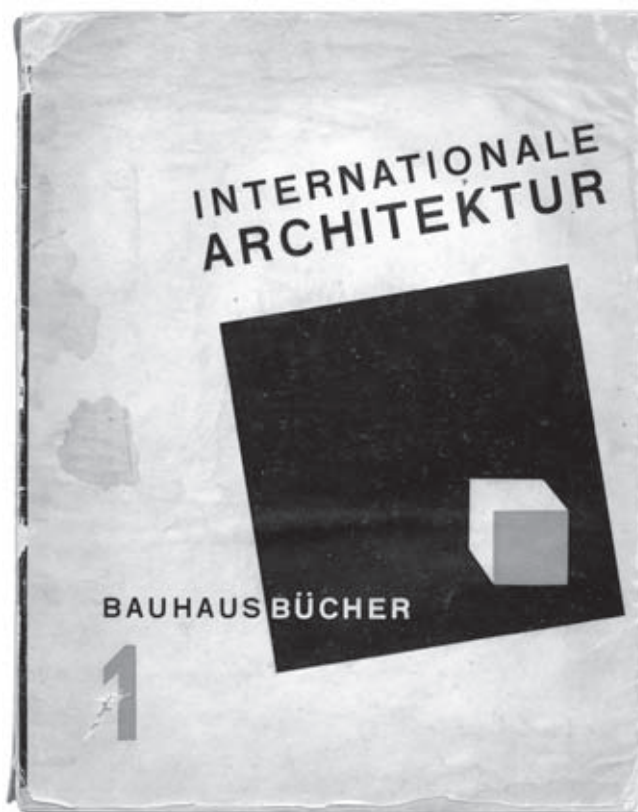


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Relations between the Bauhaus and the Russian Avant-garde as Documented in the Collection of the Bauhaus Archive Berlin



Cover of the exhibition catalogue “Bauhaus Dessau 1928–1930” (1931), using a poster designed by Max Gebhard and Albert Mentzel



Cover for “Internationale Architektur” (Bauhausbücher 1), 1925, by Farkas Molnár, Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy

With this paper I can just give a brief overview of the relations between the Bauhaus and the architectural avant-garde of the Soviet Union, as documented in our collection. More in-depth research on this topic is necessary and must, of course, also include material from other archives.

Documents concerning relations between the Bauhaus and the Soviet Union are scarce. The first impression is that there were no contacts on an institutional level between the Bauhaus and Soviet schools of architecture at all – one might assume for political reasons. Nevertheless, there were official contacts we know about starting from 1927 onwards: obviously they were initiated by the Russian side and were based on exchange visits by students or the participation of the Bauhaus in German touring exhibitions to Moscow.

It was not before 1929 that one of the so-called young masters, Hinnerk Scheper, took leave from the Bauhaus and went to Moscow to work there for two years before returning back to the Bauhaus. He was followed by a total of c. 30 Bauhaus people – including the former director Hannes Meyer – who left Germany for Russia in the early

1930s, at a time when they were no longer members of the Bauhaus and were seeking for a new job opportunity.

I shall start my overview with two of the directors of the Bauhaus – Walter Gropius and Hannes Meyer – and then focus on the students.

Walter Gropius

When Walter Gropius curated the exhibition “Internationale Architektur” at the Bauhaus in 1923, he invited a fair number of foreign colleagues to take part – especially from Holland and Czechoslovakia, but there was not a single participant from the Soviet Union. This astonishing disproportion can also be noticed in the publication, which Gropius presented two years later, in 1925, as the first of the famous Bauhaus books. Here, there is just one single example of modern Russian architecture, the Vesnins’s design for the House of Labour in Moscow (1923). It even seems, that Gropius had no photographic material from his Soviet fellow architects

at all as he was re-using an image taken from the German periodical “Die Bauwelt“. His knowledge of modern Russian architecture depended on the then still scarce literature and the reports of colleagues who had already been there – for instance first hand information by Erich Mendelsohn. Gropius and Mendelsohn incidentally met on a long train trip from Switzerland back to Berlin in 1925, during which Mendelsohn gave an extensive and enthusiastic account of his insights, which he gathered in Leningrad.

The second revised edition of Gropius’ book “Internationale Architektur“ from 1927 gives three new examples of Russian buildings, the design for a market hall by Ginzburg & Vladimirov (1926), an open market in Moscow from Melnikow, and a powerstation, also in Moscow, by Norwert. These are all less well known works of Soviet architecture without an obvious political context or revolutionary stance. Gropius might have chosen them in order to react to the attacks from conservative and reactionary parties that accused him at the time of being a Bolshevik. But also in these years, Gropius’s interest was much more focused on new building technologies and scientific management, which led to an American orientation. After he left the Bauhaus in 1928, Gropius went on a six-week journey to the USA to study new building technologies. It was not until the beginning of the 1930s, at a time of economic depression in Germany and the upswing of the first Five-Year-Plan in the Soviet Union, that Gropius participated in international competitions, such as that for the Ukrainian State Theatre in Charkow (1930/31). In his explanatory report Gropius proposed a theatre that would work as an “architectural space machine” with a system of projectors that could flood the whole stage, ceiling and side-walls of the building with images. A year later, in 1931, Walter Gropius was invited to take part in the competition for the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow. He suggested “a single, huge space over a circle, as a symbol of the joining of the masses into a human and political mega-unity.” As in his entry for the Charkow theatre, Gropius stressed the unity of stage and auditorium, the fusion of the real world of the spectator with the events on the podium. He therefore envisaged film screens, mobile stage platforms and a colour organ.

Letters in the collection of the Bauhaus-Archiv document that in 1931 a Soviet government delegation visited Gropius in Berlin and nourished expectations that he be called to Moscow, presumably as the head of the town planning department of Giprogor. But at the end, no more than a three-day lecture trip to Leningrad in 1933 resulted from Gropius’s Russian plans.

Hannes Meyer

The second director of the Bauhaus, the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer, left for Moscow in 1930 after he was dismissed from the Bauhaus under the accusation of being

a Marxist. Together with a group of seven Bauhaus students – René Mensch, Klaus Meumann, Konrad Püschel, Bela Scheffler, Philipp Tolziner, Antonin Urban and Tibor Weiner – he formed the Red Bauhaus Brigade and became a professor at the WASI, the Advanced School for Architecture in Moscow. In 1931, Meyer curated an exhibition on his former work as Bauhaus director at the Moscow State Museum of New Occidental Art, which was accompanied by a catalogue in Russian. Hannes Meyer’s extensive activity in the Soviet Union until 1936 has been published in different books and exhibitions during the last years. The Bauhaus-Archiv owns 22 original exhibition photo-panels that document his work on the urban planning of the cities of Birobidschan, Moscow and Perm. In addition, the holdings of the brigade member Philipp Tolziner are part of our collection and shall be published in the near future.

Bauhaus students

In the autumn of 1927, various official delegations from the Soviet Union visited the Bauhaus, amongst the few known by name were Ilja Ehrenburg and Anatol Lunatscharsky. They came to Dessau not only to get to know the Bauhaus, but also to see its new building and a housing development under construction in the suburb of Törten by Walter Gropius. There was also a group of Russian students visiting the Bauhaus in late 1927, sent to Germany by the Soviet government to study building methods. During a round table discussion with Bauhaus students they exchanged their points of view on architectural and social questions. Gunta Stölzl, former student and head of the weaving department at the Bauhaus, went to visit the Russian students the next year in Moscow, accompanied by the Bauhaus members Arie Sharon and Peer Bücking. They took part in an international congress on architecture and got acquainted with Leonid Ossipowitsch Grinspun, then a student at the Wehutesmas.

Hinnerk Scheper

In 1929, probably as a result of these relations between the Bauhaus and Russia, Hinnerk Scheper, a former student who had become head of the wall-painting workshop at the Bauhaus was invited by the Soviet government to set up a central advisory service for painting and decorating in Moscow, the Maljastroi. Assisted by the Bauhaus student Erich Borchert and by the Russian painter and Matjuschin student Boris Ender, Scheper was responsible for colour designs in residential and municipal buildings. At the end of 1929 he was asked to work on the painting of the Narkomfin communal housing building designed by Ginzburg & Milinis. Colour designs for the flats were published at the time, as well as painting



Hinnerk Scheper, Moscow 1930



Members of the Bauhaus and Russian colleagues during a visit to the Soviet Union (12 May 1928)

schemes of the corridor ceilings and walkways in different colours as a means of orientation. The holdings of Hinnerk Scheper belong to his family, with whom the Bauhaus-Archiv is presently thinking of planning a smaller exhibition on Scheper's work in Russia from 1929 to 1931.

At least five architects from the office of Walter Gropius – most of them former Bauhaus students – went to work in the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1930s, when

Gropius was running out of commissions and could not offer them anything to do anymore. I will focus on two distinguished young architects, the Hungarians Fred Forbat and Stefan Sebök.

In 1928 Fred Forbat got the commission to design a communal housing building for the foreign civil engineers working in Moscow. It was never built as the specialists were not concentrated in the capital as first planned, but sent to different parts of the country, where they worked in mixed brigades. Forbat developed a keen interest in Russian architecture and he held on to his contacts there. In 1932, he finally went to Moscow for a year, where he was part of the brigade of the German architect Ernst May working on the plans for the city of Magnitogorsk. The holdings of Fred Forbat belong to the Swedish Museum of Architecture in Stockholm; the Bauhaus-Archiv owns a copy of the manuscript of Forbat's autobiography together with photographic illustrations, which were given to us by Forbat himself. The chapter on his year in Russia is probably one of the most extensive descriptions of a foreign brigade member in Moscow during the early 1930s.

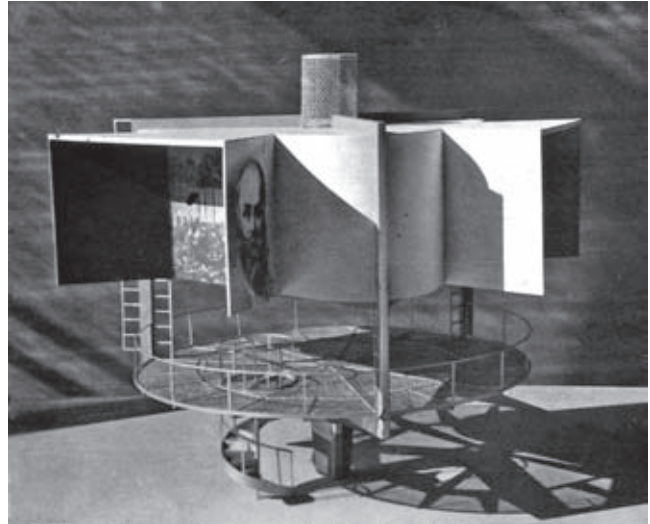
The Hungarian Stefan Sebök worked in the office of Walter Gropius from 1927 until 1931 and was involved in his entry for the competition of the National Theatre in Charkow. While working with Gropius, Sebök was also occupied with designing various personal projects. These include the 1930 competition for the monument for the poet Taras Shevtshenkow, also in Charkow. His entry is an alternative design to conventional monuments and must be regarded as one of the first examples of interactive media, as it supplies visual and oral communication to the passers-by in the form of posters, photos, films, and also recorded speeches. A theatre group could perform on a platform and pedestrians were even able to choose their desired film. The Bauhaus-Archiv preserves a small leporello of Sebök's Shevtshenko Monument, which he gave to Walter Gropius as a farewell present when leaving for Russia in 1931. Sebök also designed the interior and furnishings of the Soviet Pavillion at the Leipzig Fair, (1931), commissioned by the Soviet Commercial Section at the embassy of the USSR in Berlin.

In 1931 Sebök accepted the invitation of the Soviet government for foreign specialists to work in the USSR. Unlike other foreign architects who only stayed for a year or two, he obtained Soviet citizenship and married a Russian. Sebök had different jobs in Moscow, for example in the architectural office of the Kasan Railway and with Mosprojekttrans and Sojustransportprojekt, where he was in charge of designing railway stations, for instance the Kasan and the Kursk stations in Moscow. In 1936 Sebök began working in the architectural studio of the Vesnin brothers. Here he took part in several projects, one of them the Paveletskaya Metro Station. When the German troops entered Russia in 1941, Sebök was arrested on a trumped-up charge of spying for the Gestapo. He was found guilty and sentenced to death, but died due to

malnutrition the day before he was supposed to be shot. His wife and daughter moved to Charkow where they were shot by the Gestapo in a massacre. Stefan Sebök was posthumously rehabilitated by the Russian Government in 1997. The Bauhaus-Archiv is presently preparing an exhibition on this talented young architect with an experimental mind, to be shown in 2008/09 in Berlin, London and Budapest.

Summary

To my knowledge, there were no official relations between the Bauhaus and Soviet institutions, though different Soviet delegations visited the Bauhaus and there were contacts between students. It was not until the late 1920s that Bauhaus members like Hinnerk Scheper went to Russia, starting off an intense co-operation between Soviet avant-garde architects and Bauhaus members. Especially with the Red Bauhaus Brigade of Hannes Meyer, but also followed by many individual former Bauhaus members, a fruitful support began. I believe that there is still a great amount of research to be done in this field and



*Stefan Sebök, design for the Shevtshenko monument
(photo from 1930)*

could only give you a short overview of our holdings. The Bauhaus-Archiv is determined to work on this subject in the coming years.