

**MORE
FREEDOM,
MORE
PRIVACY**

—
An Interview
with
**Anna
Bronovits-
kaya**
by
Eglė
Juocevičiūtė



*The last talk from the series “Modern Heritages” was presented by **Anna Bronovitskaya**, professor of Moscow Architecture Institute (MARHI), editor of Project Russia magazine and general secretary of DOCOMOMO Russia. Bronovitskaya suggested a new tempting regard to the works of Russian avant-garde architects – it seems that today we are living in the future they were dreaming of. So this interview with Anna Bronovitskaya will look deeper into the community of avant-garde artists – their aims and aspirations, as well as provide an evaluation and significance of their work in today’s world.*

The first question I want to ask about is the argument you made during your lecture in Vilnius – you claimed that avant-garde architects from the twenties foresaw the living conditions of today. I was wondering if it is not the opposite, haven’t we become nostalgic for that era and their ideas and therefore we have adopted their living style?

I don’t think this is the case. First of all there is nothing to be nostalgic about. I think they tried to solve very practical things – how a home should function if women go to work as men do. It was a completely new situation – before women had always stayed at home, they did the household chores and raised children. But at some point this “tradition” ceased to exist. People stopped having so many children and stopped living with several generations of their family (though sometimes they still had to live together but the wish to “get out” was considered as normal), people also wanted to break free from too close family ties. Young people wanted to be independent and they wanted to have a much simpler home living. We have to remember that they did not have modern technical appliances – no vacuum cleaners, no refrigerators, no washing machines – actually only architects could help to design a more rational living space and to try to separate what people must have as private realm and what they could share. Why was there so much space in those projects dedicated to the collective purposes? Because it was economically impossible to give every family their own kitchen or bathroom. So I do not think it was something romantic – maybe for them it was a dream of some clean and bright future with close contact with nature. That is why they made huge windows – to see the nature through it, since in the regular urban situation you would only see the wall of the other building. They wanted more freedom and more privacy. Now we judge them as if they sacrificed family life and their privacy to this communal type of living, but I think it was the opposite that they actually wanted.

Now, when we think about the 20s and the avant-garde artists, we also consider how this architecture developed after the Second World War; that is to say, how negatively it has been regarded until these days. Maybe that is why the rise of modernist architecture is more loved by researchers – these objects were unique, built by hands, with great enthusiasm, as well as with great naiveté. How would you describe the path of constructivist ideas throughout the modernization? Is it a continuous process, or should they be separated? How do you see the liaison between the ideas of the 20s and the way they are perceived today while living in the unified space of postwar modernism?

People who worked in the 20s were the pioneers – they not only invented the types of buildings, they designed all the aesthetics. It was a completely international movement – it was not something specifically Soviet. Eventually these aesthetics won, because our everyday surroundings, things we use, they have followed that modernist line. As for the architecture, of course from the start the idea of a standard design that could be multiplied and used existed but maybe because of poor industry at that time each building was made unique. Another interesting aspect if we are talking about Russian avant-garde architects is that in the 1920s they still used the traditional Russian measuring system. The metric system was made official in Russia in 1926 but after that for several years they still used two measure systems in the drawings – metric and Old Russian. And this measuring system was based on human body dimensions. We can remember that the pioneer of functionalism Le Corbusier also created his own measuring system – architecton – based on the human body scale, in order to avoid the metric system. We may not know this, but we react to it, because the avant-garde buildings are very comfortable for us to use because of the proportions and of the dimensions. When you are in these buildings, you feel good. So that is a strong point that was lost in the second phase of modernism and of course the general scale in the sixties and seventies was much bigger. Of course these buildings have their own qualities but it is something different.

From 1933 to 1955, the so-called retrospective trend, referring to classical styles was apparent in Soviet architecture and town planning. After 1955 Soviet architecture turned back to modernism again – what was the relation between post-war modernism with pre-war constructivism? Was pre-war constructivism well known and investigated during the post-war period?

We must not forget that Soviet society was based on fear. Architects who were active during the avant-garde period had to change

their style radically in the 1950s, and they had to work in a neo-classical manner but they also had to adapt psychologically to it. What is more, they were encouraged to study historical styles and for that purpose a good educational system was established. That is to say that the tradition of the early 20th century St. Petersburg neo-classicism school had not been broken – they could use the old school books again. In 1935 Soviet architects could participate in a 9 month journey around the Mediterranean countries – Turkey, Greece, Italy and France, where they could see with their own eyes good examples of classical architecture. After some time they went on a journey to the USA – neo-classical architecture was also strong there at those times.

In some cases we can follow the architect's sequential careers – first as constructivists in the 1920s, then classicists from the 40s to the early 50s, then again – modernists from the mid 50s. For example, Georgy Vegman was brilliant in all manners; it seems that he could effortlessly change his style. Also in the 1950s many teachers at the architecture schools were those who had studied or taught in VHUTEMAS – but they were cautious and when students asked them about the avant-garde period, they often refused to speak.

What happened in 1955 was not an order to turn to modernism but it was an order to turn to more economical solutions, to stop applying “unnecessary” elements. So, first of all, architects started to look abroad for the technology of cheap pre-fabricated housing. Within a few years they were also allowed to design something more artistic, and again architects looked abroad for inspiration and references. For them it was more interesting and it is strange, but more available, maybe not first-hand, but through the publications of international architecture magazines, which they could find in the libraries, unions of architects and architecture schools. Professors sent their students to look at those magazines, find references and try to design in that manner. Old architecture magazines from the avant-garde period were not so easy to get, they were put in special departments, where special permission for access was needed.

Historians, firstly Selim Khan-Magomedov, started to research this period only at the end of the 1960s when many avant-garde architects were still alive and would allow him to look into their personal archives. But they were also cautious because they knew that they would be persecuted again. I also think there was a hunger for something more normal – many architects had fought in WWII and had seen Western Europe and knew that people there

actually lived better, not worse as they were often told by Soviet propaganda.

I have read that one of the reasons why Soviet architects did not look at their own modernist heritage, but searched for references in foreign countries, was the fact that Sigfried Giedion had not included Russian constructivism into his history of modernist architecture.

Yes, this could be possibly true, because there is always the question of available sources, and Sigfried Giedion's book was very influential. We forgot about another important fact – the idea of competition with the Western world, especially the USA. When Khrushchev first visited the US, he was really impressed with what he saw, so he wanted the Soviet scientists, as well as the architects and designers to show the world that they were capable of doing the same things as the Americans. In the 50s the propaganda of American culture was an important political tool. Khrushchev wanted to make something similar – this allowed the establishing of the Kalinin Avenue (New Arbat) with skyscrapers in the centre of Moscow. For the contest of the new Moscow centre most architects presented ideas based on creating a completely new image of the city, with lots of abstract forms, and ready to destroy the historical architecture. When the New Arbat was built, some people pitied the destroyed buildings of the 18–19th centuries, but for the younger generation it was really tempting to have something modern, something Western – new cafes, concert halls, wide boulevards – people could walk there and show off their new clothes, it was something really urban and international.

You mentioned in your lecture that architects from Germany, the USA and other Western countries would come to the USSR to design buildings. Is this connected to the socialist ideology of modernism or were there other reasons for that?

Partly. But there was also a possibility to realize the large scale projects and projects for which they would have no clients in other countries.

Were there international competitions? How did foreign architects get to know about the possible commissions?

Mostly through Germany, because there were really tight connections between the Soviet Union and Germany. There were close ties between the two schools – Bauhaus and Vkhutemas – as well, and a constant exchange of professors and students. At a cer-

tain point, the Soviet government understood or were advised by experts that Soviet architects and especially engineers lacked some specific experience to build, let's say, big factories. They needed some people with knowledge, not necessarily technical. For example, Hinnerk Scheper, a Bauhaus professor who designed colour schemes for the VHUTEMAS building was invited to Moscow to advise on the colours of buildings and he worked there for three years I think, so it was a very interesting collaboration. Another fact was the recession, the Great depression, and it is no secret that the Soviet Union saw this economic failure of Western capitalism as a huge opportunity to make a leap forward. All the resources of the country were put into adapting Western technologies, to buy the machines. American architects, such as Albert Kahn, spent a lot of time designing factories and residential districts for the workers in the USSR because it was real work and rather good money.

Hartmut Frank, the curator of the "Two German Architectures" exhibition has said that at least 20 years must pass in order for us to start analyzing any subject without emotions. In Germany the biggest 'enemy' of preserving the socialist heritage is the capital based business. In Lithuania, I think the situation is a little different because such amounts of capital are not involved, but instead we have lots of ignorance about the heritage. What is the situation in Moscow?

Yes, in Moscow the big capital, the ignorance and the corruption are the main cases. The people who fight for heritage are not used to bribing, but on the other hand people responsible for these buildings are used to being bribed and they do not trust the people fighting for the heritage. So it is a deadlock. As long as the Russian economy works on pay-backs it is extremely difficult to make anything for another reason.

Was that the case when the decision not to preserve the Narkomfin building was made?

In the Narkomfin case there was also a question of taste. The former mayor of Moscow Jurij Luzhkov just hated this architecture. Luzhkov had grown up in a barrack, he was from a really poor family, for him that kind of architecture and the idea of communal living are very strongly connected to painful memories.

Are there different points of views concerning socialist architecture in the community of scholars in Russia? In Lithuania 15 years ago scholars were not sure if the socialist heritage should

be preserved. It was often linked with collaboration and the rules imposed by the occupiers, but today with the younger generations already starting to raise their voices, this architecture is very much accepted.

If we are talking about avant-garde, of course there are people who have a different taste than that, but everybody agrees that it is worth preserving. When we are talking about Stalinist architecture, again some people like it some people don't, but generally we think that buildings that were designed by good professional architects should be preserved independent of someone's taste because in a 50 year period it would not matter. But if we are talking about the 1970s and the 1980s, scholars and experts could not overcome their long-existing attitude that this architecture is ugly and inhuman. This perception is changing; it is the case of generations. Architects see what good architecture is, they are able to see the values but architectural historians and the experts who are called in when it is necessary to decide the future of these buildings sometimes honestly could not see what is worth preserving there. I think that this approach will change but until that change comes we have to uphold these buildings.

You made an interesting remark during your lecture about a hundred years period during which architectural style becomes valuable.

Yes, I was educated as an art historian and I noticed this process of appreciation in the architectural field as well. But you know this period is getting shorter, which is probably natural. The development of information systems has meant that all periods and precedents are more or less available, so we know much more about our past than people did a hundred years ago. But the principle is the same. As people in the 17th century could not see beauty in the Gothic architecture and started seeing it as something interesting only in the 19th century. Then suddenly it became the best thing Europe has produced since the Antique. Another example – Art Nouveau – which went out of fashion pretty quickly but was appreciated again during the second half of the 20th century, I think that a time will come for everything.