# Introduction

The invention of communist culture in the aftermath of the October Revolution was perhaps the most radical of modernist projects. During the colossal transformation of Soviet society in the 1920s and 1930s, all those involved in creating socialist culture pursued the idea that defined the international avant-garde – that art should become a tool for cultural and political change. Calls for ending capitalist oppression formulated in the nineteenth century, both in the West and in Russia, were answered when Soviet Communists toppled tsarist rule in order to embark on the journey towards a stateless and classless society, as socialism was widely understood.

Since the disintegration of the Soviet State in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Soviet culture and social order have, in the West, been almost universally characterized as utopian. To adopt this perspective often means to differentiate between the noble and lofty goals of the early revolutionaries and artists on the one hand, and the violence the Russian social transformation entailed on the other. According to the view that the October Revolution and its culture were "utopian," they were based on noble "dreams" of collectivity; the revolution failed, this view goes on to rationalize, when these dreams were never translated into reality because of the tragic course of Soviet political life.[1] In other words, the October Revolution stemmed from ideas about progress and the struggle against an oppressive regime as well as brave attempts to completely revolutionize art, but these ideas were perverted in the Stalinist 1930s and employed in the service of totalitarian rule.[2] This view promotes a characterization of Russian culture that has for many years justified the study and exhibition of the works of the Russian

avant-garde available to the Western public after the fall of the Soviet empire.[3] In addition, American art historians, analysing such Soviet "utopian" ideas in art, believe that in such a view they can identify a template for resisting capitalism today.[4]

There are two problems with such an interpretation. The first concerns the fact that many avant-garde modernists continued to work throughout the Stalinist 1930s.[5] In the attempt to bring art to life, both in the 1920s and in the 1930s, artists had immense political aspirations and they collaborated with the Soviet government. As recent scholarship proposes, the avant-garde aesthetic programme was, in its great ambitions, as totalitarian as the Stalinist political one in many ways.[6] The second problem is that characterizing the Soviet political system as utopian would mean that it never materialized in structures, in technologies, in infrastructure. This is, of course, not the case. The Soviet cultural project entailed vast transformation of the physical environment. It resists being interpreted in terms of the simple dichotomy between noble dream and dismal reality.

The architecture of the decades that followed the October Revolution demonstrates this point most clearly. While art could be interpreted in terms of individual creation divorced from government politics, it is impossible to say the same about architecture. Architecture is always a collective effort and demands resources that can only be secured in collaboration with those who have power and money. Even projects that can be characterized as visionary or "paper architecture" entail some kind of idea about how they can be executed and some consideration about the political and economic conditions which would make their realization possible.[7]

What this book shows is not that Soviet culture was not utopian. Indeed, it was, in the sense that it involved a belief in the existence of *ou-topos* in the original meaning of the word – as a good place and a no-place – the ideal communist society that is yet to come into existence. Rather, this book demonstrates that the relationships between utopia and reality, idealism and pragmatism, between the will for progress and the will for tyranny, are complex and that they do not always play out in the same way. Soviet architecture, understood in the broadest possible sense as the art of conceptualizing and creating physical settings for socialist life, is the best lens for gaining insight into these relationships.

Early Soviet projects define the protagonist of Soviet modernity, the "New Man," by creating blueprints of places he is supposed to inhabit.

By focusing my study on the construction of this New Man I depart from an established paradigm. For the most part, historians have considered collective spaces as the unique product of Soviet design. These include collective houses (*dom-kommuny*), as imagined by the constructivist OSA group and realized in buildings such as the Narkomfin block of apartments by Ginzburg and Milinis; workers' clubs, such Melnikov's Rusakov club;[8] or the visionary architecture from the early 1920s, which remained on paper. Accordingly, Soviet designs were seen as designs for the collective, for the masses. Communist designs were, in fact, not only designs for collective life. The prerequisite for articulating group identities is the identity of the basic social "unit" – the socialist individual. Designing this individual, as well as designing *for* him or her, was an ideological and practical task that defined Soviet architecture of the 1920s and the 1930s.

The notion that the history of modernity can be explored as the history of the self is far from new. It particularly dominates French post-structuralism and the critical theory of the 1990s influenced by it in the English language. Critics of modern society have written sophisticated and groundbreaking analyses of how literature, speech, and everyday rituals shape the protagonist of modern life.[9] The main question this line of inquiry poses is that of agency: to what extent men and women of the modern age are fashioned or constrained by the dominant system of values and beliefs promoted by those in power, and to what extent their choices are free. This question of freedom is never outdated.

This approach is especially appropriate in my study of a culture whose main and openly stated goal was the creation of a new kind of human being. I will look at how the material environment was shaped and conceptualized with the intent to forge this New Man. Through a series of case studies, I present Soviet architecture – the nexus between utopia and reality, power and individual agency – as episodic history. These case studies span consecutive but radically different political, aesthetic, and economic milieus – the New Economic Policy, followed by the Five-Year Plans. Historians have come up with a variety of ways to distinguish between these periods. One is to summarily characterize the new Economic Policy, or "Leninism," as utopian and the period of the Five-Year Plans, or "Stalinism," as totalitarian. Another is to distinguish the internationalism of the Soviet early years from the radical nationalism of "socialism in one country" under Stalin's rule. An important

contribution to this chronology is Paperny's classic study that identifies "Leninist" and "Stalinist" architecture as the product of two cultural mechanisms at work in the 1920s and the 1930s respectively.[10] An exceptionally original and fruitful approach to the history of the early Soviet era is that of Katerina Clark, who explores the two periods in terms of their paradigmatic metropolitan cultures, that of Leningrad and that of Moscow.[11]

In this book I will build upon Dobrenko's theory of Stalinism as a society in which images and representations mediate all social and economic relations.[12] My interpretation of Soviet architecture as an identity-making enterprise is based on a loose interpretation of this theory, according to which the 1920s were essentially productivist and 1930s essentially representational. As this book establishes, in the 1920s Soviet power was meant to be power over means of production, while in the 1930s it was the power of demonstrating (by means of art, architecture, design, popular culture, science) the value of socialism in one country. Case studies in this book demonstrate the notion that architecture of the 1920s defined the New Man as primarily a worker. In contrast, during the 1930s the New Man was supposed to be an admirer of socialism in aesthetic terms – the "connoisseur" of socialism as a *gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art created by the Communist Party.

The boundaries between the two eras are not always sharp, especially in the case of architecture, which changes slowly and involves delays between conceptualization and realization. I am taking these deferments and anachronisms into account as I traverse the tumultuous period of the post-Revolutionary decades. In Chapter 1, "The will of the universe," I set the stage for discussing this historical course by providing an overview of the evolution of Soviet subjectivity. The lens for exploring this development is the ultimate symbol of the journey towards communism – narratives about the conquest of the skies and concepts of "outer space" as the physical realm in which the New Man will come into being. Chapters 2 and 3, "Class unconsciousness" and "A home for the very industrious individual," are dedicated to the role of architecture in promoting a productivist ethos. In the 1920s the working class formed only a small fraction of the overall population, and enlightened, "class conscious" workers – the proletarians – were a tiny minority. The task of architecture, I posit, was to create the proletarian. Proposals for a truly socialist environment were intended to impart the idea that labour was not only an economic activity but also the meaning of all

existence. Two case studies reveal how space and the material environment defined the New Man: Vsevolod Meyerhold's designs for a biomechanical stage, based on the theories of scientific organization of labour; and domestic "instruments" designed for the proletarian home.

The transition from the productivist ethos of the 1920s to the representational ethos of the 1930s is epitomized in the public baths constructed around 1930 in Leningrad and Moscow, discussed in the Chapter 4, "The world in the bathhouse, the bathhouse in the world." These structures were envisioned as both efficient machines for the production of cleanliness and microcosmic representations of the Soviet society. Chapter 5, "Stalin and the housewife," presents a particular genre of socialist realism – the environmental expertise of *obshchestvennitsy*, or socially minded women. These were housewives from provincial industrial towns who translated the aesthetic of socialist realist painting and official rhetoric about the "joyous" world of socialism into an aesthetic for home and garden – an attempt to transform the intimate world into a masterpiece of socialist realism.

Soviet architecture evolved over the course of the 1920s and the 1930s from a productivist to a representational enterprise. This evolution was also a process in which architecture became less and less abstract; a process in which, with the consolidation of state power, conceptual projects were replaced by built structures. While this book begins with a story about celestial imagination and the conquest of the ether, it ends with a project for a space below ground, the Moscow Metro which opened in 1935, the most colossal Soviet public work. The final Chapter 6, "Golden calf, golden tooth," explores the history of this immense structure, clad in expensive marble and illuminated by electrical lighting, altogether the embodiment of socialist modernity. The process of its construction was meant to transform its builders, peasants coming from all parts of the Soviet Union, into New Men – enlightened urbanites. These men and women were not only record-breaking workers but also experts on socialist beauty, and they elaborated upon their political and aesthetic expertise in a blockbuster propaganda volume, *How We Built the Metro*.

Projects of the 1920s and the 1930s forged the Soviet New Man by providing settings and aesthetic templates for the personal and the everyday. Their study contributes to the understanding of early Soviet cultural history and the evolving ethos of modernism, of which Soviet architecture is the most radical manifestation. This ethos, both idealistic

and pragmatic, both sublime and mundane, has not been pursued in a singular way in the history of Soviet, but also Western, modernism. The different manifestations of this ethos explored in this book shed light on the horizons, limitations, and fate of the ultimate modernist attempt to use art to execute a political and social overhaul.

## Notes

1 The interpretation of Soviet intellectual and cultural history as utopian dominates Western scholarship. In historical literature, it was established by Richard Stites. Stites' seminal work, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Soviet Union* (Oxford University Press, 1988), traces the origins of what he calls Russian "social daydreaming" in the nineteenth-century Russian visionary tradition, for example in Chernishevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, or, in the populist movement, the mystical works of Fedorov, Tsiolkovsky's and Bogdanov's Cosmism, and others. Stites' *Revolutionary Dreams* laid the groundwork for the possibility of interpreting Soviet history not as an isolated communist experiment, nor merely as an attempt to implement Marxist ideas, but as an extension of pre-Revolutionary tradition that involved translating Western social visions. Stites' use of the notions of "utopia" and "dreaming" establishes a narrative according to which the cries for social reform were pure and lofty from the nineteenth century to the 1920s and according to which it was Stalinist terror that led to the perversion of these ideas and their utilization by the totalitarian cause.

2 In the field of architecture, the most important interpretation of this narrative about lofty ideals and their demise during the "bloody" epoch of "Stalinism" is Hugh Hudson's popular book with the dramatic title *Blueprints and Blood: The Stalinization of Soviet Architecture* (Princeton University Press, 1993; 2015). It describes how Stalinist forces within the architectural profession suffocated the avant-garde, thus engaging in "terror from below" that preceded and announced the years of Great Terror.

3 The earliest comprehensive Western exhibition of Russian avant-garde art, planned as a new kind of collaboration between the East and the West at the very end of Soviet socialism, was organized by the Russian Museum and the Tretyakov Gallery in collaboration with the Guggenheim Museum and The Frankfurt Schirn Kunsthalle. The exhibition, entitled "The Great Utopia," toured Germany, the Netherlands, and the USA in 1992. In the introduction to the thick volume that accompanied it, the curators explain that their initial working title, "Construction and Intuition," which referred to the aesthetic principles and processes that defined the Soviet avant-garde, was changed to the final title by their "Western colleagues." This change of

title, and of the entire conceptualization of the avant-garde as a utopian movement, stemmed from the need to confront the relationship between the politics and the artistic legacy of the Soviet Union. The presentation of Russian avant-garde art as utopian is introduced in the catalogue by Thomas Krens, the Guggenheim administrator, and Michael Govan, and it articulates a narrative that mirrors that of Stites. Like the Russian revolutionaries of October, avant-garde artists are, according to these authors, "idealistic," their plans working well in theory but badly in practice. In the 1930s, when art was connected with political practice – "instrumentalised," the authors say – utopia and idealism ended.

4 The separation of radical and progressive revolutionary goals from revolutionary violence characterizes the work of authors contributing to the art history journal *October*. In the period spanning the 1980s to recent years, this separation has allowed the authors to identify with the 1920s revolutionaries while not fundamentally challenging the liberal democratic art historical discourse they participate in. In 1984, Benjamin Buchloh published the most influential article of this kind, "From faktura to factography," which clearly separated Leninism from Stalinism in aesthetic terms in *October* 30 (Autumn 1984): 82–119. More recently, Kristina Kiaer, who studies the Soviet notion of the object, published "Boris Arvatov's socialist objects" in *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 105–118, which she expanded into the full-length manuscript: *Imagine No Possessions* (MIT Press, 2005). The work of *October* raised awareness of the importance of the Soviet project. But the notion that Soviet art of the 1920s can be used as a template for resistance is suspect because of the radical difference in social context between then and now and the radically different understanding of means for achieving political goals.

5 The boundary between the 1920s and the 1930s in the realm of art and architecture is not as clear cut as American leftist criticism would have it. Consider, for example, the well-documented work of El Lissitsky on the 1930s propaganda magazine *USSR in Construction*. Even more convincing is Danilo Udovički-Selb's paradigm-changing discussion of the continuity of modernist architecture in the 1930s ("Between modernism and socialist realism: Soviet Architectural culture during Stalin's revolution from above, 1928–1938," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 68 no. 4 (December 2009): 467–495). As Udovički-Selb points out, the delay from conception to execution in architecture challenges the notion of synchronicity between political upheaval and transformations of the built environment. This is even more true in the case of everyday buildings, such as bathhouses, bakeries, and schools, which were often modernist throughout the 1930s. The explanation for this lack of synchronicity is that, while reflecting major political overhauls, architecture also belongs to the realm of what Braudel

defined as the "longue durée," the slow change of the material environment and everyday habits.

6 In the *Total Art of Stalinism: Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond* (1988; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992; London: Verso Books, 2011), Boris Groys goes even further than establishing the sharp contrast between the 1920s and the 1930s, during which progressive ideals of the avant-garde were presumably betrayed. According to him, and to the circle of Moscow conceptual artists to which he belonged, the art of socialist realism developed upon an avant-garde foundation. Furthermore, the Stalinist political project is the ultimate realization of totalizing avant-garde aspirations.

7 The radical leftist tradition of architectural history claims that the capitalist avant-garde is utopian as well, drawing on the examples of "paper architecture"; that is, unbuilt designs. The most famous instance of this is the criticism of Manfredo Tafuri who, in his seminal works *Architecture and Utopia* (1973; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976) and *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (1980; Cambridge MIT Press, 1990), establishes that the work of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, which existed only on paper, marks the beginning of a utopian tradition which reflects the inherent contradictions of the capitalist order and the ultimate impossibility of producing social change within it. Capitalist designs share with those in the communist society the fundamental modern paradox: that effecting political change demands collaboration with the State and a betrayal of any ideological purity – if it existed in the first place. In this respect, it would follow that avant-garde "experiments," like successful "bourgeois" projects, demanded a pact with power for their realization, and that the notion that the avant-garde reached its apex in Stalinism might not be entirely ludicrous.

8 The connection between Soviet art and the Soviet State is usually examined in terms of how architecture attempted to serve the collectivist ideals of the Communist Party. See, for example, Anatole Kopp, *Town and Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning 1917–1935*, trans. Thomas E. Burton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970); Selim Omarovich Han-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and the 1930s*, trans. Alexander Lieven, ed. Catherine Cooke (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987); and Andrey Ikonnikov, *Russian Architecture of the Soviet Period*, trans. Lev Ljapin (London: Collets, 1988). This perspective has been recently adopted in Jean-Louis Cohen's textbook, *The Future of Architecture since 1889: A Worldwide History* (Phaidon, 2012).

9 The realization of collectivist ideals would be impossible without first defining the communist individual. The groundwork for the study of subjectivity in Western cultural theory has been established by Louis Althusser, Jaques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Jacques Rancière. Despite numerous and sophisticated differences, including radically

different opinions on individual agency, these theorists all believe that the terms of discourse and representation fundamentally define who an individual is or is not. Battles over defining the identity of the citizen are key both for the operation of power and the struggle for freedom. Architecture, as the nexus between aesthetics and everyday ritual, plays a key role in the design of self – in the design of citizens as political beings.

10 Vladimir Paperny, in *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two* (1985; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 2011), defines the difference in the architectures and protagonists of the two big historical periods, "Stalinism" and "Leninism," as the difference between two cultures. To Paperny, the two periods are characterized by cultural changes that resemble natural phenomena, created not only by power but by all participants in the Soviet social intercourse. Soviet history, Paperny says, is the product of dichotomies such as those of movement and immobility, uniformity and hierarchy, the lyrical and the epic.

11 The difference between the cultures of the 1920s and the 1930s that Paperny described in terms of broad and abstract dichotomies is explored by Katerina Clark in *Petersburg, Crucible of the Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and *Moscow the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). She captures the complexity of the social, cultural, and political space of pre-War Soviet history by tying it to two cities which serve not only as material environments but also crucibles for distinct sets of ideas about Russian destiny. Clark challenges common assumptions about the contrast between the 1920s and the 1930s, including those of Paperny and his Moscow circle. According to her nuanced account, the pre-War Stalinist age which, Paperny would say, was the inflexible and petrified system of hierarchical and historicist ideas that replaced the revolutionary 1920s, is more complex and heterogeneous and involves internationalist and avant-garde currents alongside or even within a conservative and totalitarian discourse.

12 For the purposes of this book, a study of the role of architecture in articulating the identity of Soviet citizen as a truly communist being, the best theoretical framework is that outlined by Evgeny Dobrenko in his *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Dobrenko's study is less a description of the Soviet self, however, and more a study of the ways in which that self was created. Dobrenko's book presents two theses that are also crucial for my study. The first is that advertising, science, statistics, and administrative documents can be examined as aesthetic practices. The second is that aesthetic practices not only represent reality but also play a key role in shaping it.