The Innovative Potential of Scarcity in SA’s Comradely Competition for Communal Housing, 1927

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Abstract
This essay analyses the innovative architectonic approaches developed by Soviet architects in their entries to a 1927 design competition for a new socialist housing type, the so-called dom-kommuna or house-commune. The competition, sponsored by the preeminent architectural journal, Sovremennia Arhitektura, sought solutions to address Moscow’s severe housing shortage within the limits of economic stringency. While the eight published entries abound with charts and graphs to substantiate claims of efficiency, these technocratic accoutrements obscure radical spatial complexity. At the scale of both the building and the unit, the competition designs capitalize on architectural expertise to wrest generosity from Spartan conditions. In each entry, careful allocation of program and circulation resulted in a masterful balance of plan minimalism and sectional expansiveness. This paper situates the house-commune competition entries within their historic context, but also thoroughly analyzes the architectural solutions to elicit programmatic and spatial and strategies that may be instructive for current practice.

Keywords
Communal housing; scarcity; Soviet architecture; spatial intervention.
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...Hey, an apartment!
(Act II, The Barber of Seville)

Let us agree once and for all: a dwelling is the cornerstone of human life. We note the axiom: without a dwelling, a man cannot act. Now, in addition to this, I report to all those living in Berlin, Paris, London, and other places,—there are no apartments in Moscow. How then do they live there? Here’s how they live. Without apartments.

Mikhail Bulgakov, "Moscow in the Twenties," (Moscow, 1924).¹

Figure 1. Cover of Sovremennaia Arkhitektura, no. 4-5, 1927

In 1926, the preeminent Soviet architectural journal Sovremennaia Arkhitektura (Contemporary Architecture, hereafter SA) announced a “Comradely Competition for Communal Housing,” with the charge to design the so-called dom-kommuna or house-commune. [Fig.1] The competition was prompted by the need for innovative urban housing solutions in cities such as Moscow that were experiencing a population spike at a time of economic downturn. Urban overcrowding and fiscal belt tightening are, of course, familiar base conditions for twenty-first century architects engaged with the housing question. But the latest solution to urban housing scarcity in the United States, the lauded micro-unit, is one that operates in the narrow spatial range of plan-based design. Early Soviet house-commune competition entries on the other hand, now nearly a century old and largely forgotten, offer an example of expanded architectonic imagination in re-
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response to urban housing deficiency. Viewed as collective work, the eight entries promote the entire residential complex not as simply an agglomeration of individual units, but as a “social condenser,” a collective space in which new social relations may be inculcated. At the same time, the entries capitalize on the designers’ control of space, specifically the phenomenological asset of sectional generosity within the privatized domestic realm. Systemic recalibration of the programs and spaces within the multi-unit housing complex was a crucial factor that permitted, finally, improved public and private spheres.

From a socio-political standpoint the house-commune was to be the architectural instantiation of communism, the setting for the novyi byt or “new way of life,” promulgated by the regime deliberately to reform the structures of everyday existence at all levels. Financial feasibility of construction was, however, equally important; inventive solutions were encouraged, but only within the most efficient spatial and material means possible. Many of the eight published competition entries indicate floor areas allocated to the individual resident, apartment and overall complex in their accompanying descriptive text. But these technocratic charts obscure, perhaps purposefully, the radical spatial complexity of the units themselves. Careful allocation of program and circulation resulted in a masterful balance of plan minimalism and sectional generosity. In what follows, I propose to reinvigorate the current debate about minimal housing by injecting a dose of early Soviet programming and spatial innovation.

The economic effect of the Russian Civil War (1918-1921) on Russia’s cities was immediate and devastating. The population of Moscow fell almost 50% during this period, heavy industry, already well-behind production of Western Europe, was virtually at a standstill. After 1921, upon the institution of the NEP Period (Novaya Ekonomicheskaya Politika or New Economic Policy), workers flooded back into cities that were ill equipped to handle the influx of population. Since all property had been socialized in 1917, the Soviet state was solely responsible to address the housing shortfall, yet governmental building projects were stymied throughout the 1920’s by financial instability and insufficient project management infrastructure. Stopgap measures were put in place, the first being subdivision of previously aristocratic and bourgeois residences into multi-unit housing. This solution, persistent throughout the Soviet period, is what came to be known as the kommunalka (communal apartment), a jury-rigged housing solution in which each family was granted a private room or two, and they shared entry, corridor, kitchen and often bathroom facilities with other families. But even with the transformation of existing building stock, a severe housing shortage ensued. The figures for urban housing during the first full decade of Soviet power reveal state acknowledgement of the problem and an incredible response: between 1923 and 1930, thirty four million square meters of housing were built, enough to house 3.8 million Soviet citizens.

Such circumstances made housing reform—specifically the design of efficient communal unit types that would sweep away petit bourgeois domestic habits—the primary means by which the architectural avant-garde could contribute to the material transformation of society. To engage the housing crisis architects had to be versed in the terms of the most heated sociological debate at the time that struggled to define the novyi byt, or new way of living. In his Questions of Everyday Life (1923), Leon Trotsky argued that stubborn
relational habits, the stuff of everyday life (byt), would have to be consciously reconceived in order to construct the new society. “Politics are flexible,” he wrote, “but byt is immobile and obstinate.” [Figs. 2a, 2b]

The source of everyday habit is the nuclear household; as such, Trotsky contended that traditional and oppressive domestic relations between husband and wife were a most pernicious stumbling block to the creation of a liberated proletariat. In order to ensure the ascendance of novyi byt, three massive societal changes were necessary, all targeted to achieve equality of the sexes. First, women must be liberated from “domestic slavery.” Second, childcare must become the precinct of the socialist state. Third, private property relations, in the form of marriage, must be dissolved. Although the attack on byt was primarily framed as a social issue, an equally crucial economic dimension motivated the transformation. The reconfiguration of domestic life would provide the influx of workers needed to drive Soviet industry to Western standards. Liberation from housework and child rearing, achieved through communal dining and drop-off laundry facilities as well as live-in and drop-off nurseries, would permit women to enter the labor force. At the Fifteenth Congress of the Communist Party, held December 1927 in Moscow, architects were among those pointedly addressed to help construct the novyi byt:

In drawing up a practical plan it is not enough to pose the problem of the cultural revolution in general terms. There is an enormous job to be done and in working out a five-year plan we must ... see to it that we avoid a situation in which industry is developing along socialist lines whereas our new apartments still have the same old kitchens, the same troughs, and the same washtubs.”
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These same old kitchens and washtubs perpetuated a pre-revolutionary mode of living that threatened to overwhelm the potential for systemic change.

Because of the poor state of the Soviet economy, and lack of internal industrial capacity, the material detritus of prerevolutionary life was often all that was available for domestic use. At the very moment that architects were formulating their competition entries for the house-commune, German writer Walter Benjamin was visiting Moscow on an extended two-month stay. Benjamin underscores in his diary the myriad ways in which scarcity was simply a fact of life for Soviet citizens in 1926: scarcity of goods, scarcity of living space, scarcity of privacy, scarcity of comfort. After visiting the rooms of fellow writers, he compared the Soviet interior to the standard bourgeois interior:

Like all the rooms I had seen so far…it contains only a few pieces of furniture…Completeness is an essential feature of the petit-bourgeois interior: the walls must be covered with pictures, the sofa with cushions, the cushions with coverlets, the consoles with knickknacks, the windows with stained glass. Of all this only a few items here and there have indiscriminately survived. If people manage to bear rooms which look like infirmaries after inspection, it is because their way of life has so alienated them from domestic existence. The place in which they live is the office, the club, the street.

Benjamin’s notes on the spartan Soviet domestic realm end with allusion to the new way of life being constructed, a life lived in the office (not the factory: he was, after all, an author-producer), the club, the street. However, he complicates the relationship between the new way of life and domestic space. It is not necessarily that the new way of life is so compelling that interiors cease to matter; he implies as well that the “depressing” interiors might in fact also force Soviet citizens into public life. As we shall see, material austerity is reframed by Soviet architects as a positive, cleansing asceticism. In the new architectural containers devised by SA house-commune competition entrants, light, air, and communal facilities substitute for, and make unnecessary, bourgeois living habits.

Social, economic and disciplinary motivations intertwined to forge innovative approaches in the SA Comradely Competition. From a social perspective, architects were encouraged to engage the construction of the novyi byt. Socially innovative programs and forms were hammered out under a regime of economic restraint, such that designers were challenged to devise highly efficient, and constructable, responses. Although it does not appear that the competition entrants were given specific per-person floor areas to achieve, a number of the entries met a severe restriction of nine square meters per person. Such tight quarters were justified initially by SA competition entrants, and later by the Soviet government, in light of amenities decanted into communal spaces elsewhere in the complex. Thus armed with a governmental mandate, and a specific program for change, the discipline of architecture was in a position to enact societal and spatial transformation. In deliberately incendiary language, architect G. Wegman utilized the pages of SA to spark his colleagues into action. He implored the readership first to consider the bare facts of the housing crisis, and second, to consider the grave risk that opportunities for meaningful intervention might pass:
The desperate housing shortage that befell us in 1921, and that progressed rapidly until 1924, leaves us now in a state of “crisis;” it is, explicitly, a national disaster, corroding not only the individual human body but the entire country… It is unacceptable if at the end we have allowed, with deep regret, the colossal potential for new construction, created by the storm of revolution, to remain inert or unexploited at an appropriate scale. 

It is not enough, stated Wegman, to be handed the task; action must follow. Per his formulation, what was at stake was the efficacy of architecture.

SA, published from 1926-1930, was the most prominent Soviet architectural journal in the late 1920s, and also the only architectural journal that published into the period of Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932). The journal was, for all intents and purposes, the mouthpiece of the OSA (Ob’edinenia Sovremennikh Arkhitektov, Union of Contemporary Architects), a group with strong avant-garde credentials. From its foundation, the OSA concerned itself with the role architecture could play in the foundation of novyi byt. Internal debates over the appropriate programmatic and spatial constitution of this new social order figure heavily in the first couple of years of SA’s publication.

When the editors of SA announced the competition and posed a set of questions on the topic of communal housing to the readership almost a decade had passed since the October Revolution. For the leftist intelligentsia—to which the editorship of the journal belonged—the time for “making do” was past. The SA competition was not the first, however, to elicit solutions to the problem of the communal house. In 1925, the Moscow Soviet organized a design competition for communal housing, and articulated for the first time in the competition brief the auxiliary facilities that were to become standard provisions in most subsequent iterations of the type: common dining halls and kitchens, laundry and recreational facilities.

Forceful instantiation of the novyi byt, as was promoted by the house-commune competition, might sound like a bio-political act. It is important, therefore, to be clear about the remote relationship between SA and the state. The journal was published by Gosizdat, the State publishing house. But during the NEP period—understood historically as a pluralistic time in economic and social terms—artistic-theoretical enterprises were allowed a degree of freedom, including freedom to express openly distrust of bureaucratic interference in design work, as the editors of SA did in their first issue. They were invested in devising solutions to the housing shortage, to be sure, and in thinking through the organizational implications of new communal programs. Of equal importance, however, was the broader drive to provide architectural and planning practices a foothold in the new society, and to achieve design excellence within the constraints of a culture of minimalism. Unlike the first house-commune competition noted above, the SA competition was not state-derived. As a consequence, the first truly architectural solutions to the problem of the communal house emerged from the 1927 SA competition, since the particular tasks set for the entrants were devised by designers themselves and assiduously formulated to bring forth innovative spatial solutions.
The questionnaire published prior to the competition addressed two different respondent types: the comrade (worker) and the specialist (builders, engineers, economists). [Fig. 3] The pseudo-sociological scrim of the survey suggests an outward interest on behalf of the editorship in non-specialist collaboration, but the very construction of the questions themselves reveal lingering meritocratic tendencies.

Comrade:
1. How do you visualize the material framework of the workers’ new way of life and what is your attitude to the purely utilitarian aspect of things, i.e., their petit-bourgeois essence?
2. What do you think of the new way of life? In your opinion, what new needs have arisen and what old needs are now dying out?
3. Which aspects of life should remain private and which should be organized on a collective social basis?
4. How are the problems of public catering linked with the liberation of woman from her enforced social passivity?
5. What are your views on the public education of children within the framework of new forms of collectivism and new social customs? On the possibility of organizing special establishments for training children?
6. Comrade, do you have any suggestions on how to organize the workers’ leisure?

Specialist:
1. What new building materials and methods should be used to replace the old ones with due regard for insulation value and economy?
2. What new equipment should the apartment contain?
3. What should be used instead of permanent partitions?
4. What is more economical and rational: a building with just a few apartments or one with many (rural or urban type of housing)?
5. What is the most rational number of stories with due regard for the method of construction?
6. What are the minimum dimensions (area, volume) of various types of rooms?
7. What is the role of standards in relation to the rationality and economy of residential construction? What standards should be introduced?

The questions addressed to the workers are carefully formulated to garner support for inevitable social and programmatic changes to urban housing. The first question asks the respondent to envision a new material framework of living conditions, but refers simultaneously to the “purely utilitarian aspect of things,” thereby promoting an ascetic lifestyle free of material accumulation (the purview of the petit-bourgeois, per Benjamin’s formulation and assumed by the editors). In addition to an ascetic personal sphere, the survey tacitly elicits support for auxiliary programs to be shared by house-commune residents. Communal dining facilities are cited as a means to ensure “liberation of woman from her enforced social passivity,” and care of children, the questionnaire implies, should be a matter of public rather than familial concern. Because the proper answer is embedded in each of these questions, the use of actual responses would be of limited value to the competition entrants except as corroboration for preconceived editorial attitudes about communal housing.

When addressing the specialist, the survey questions are more open-ended and seek to accumulate specific, quantifiable information from among peers that could be used to set rational design parameters. The questionnaire asks advice on the optimal number of building stories, reasonable unit dimensions and appropriate equipment within the units. The only leading question in the specialist’s section asks: “what should be used instead of permanent partitions?” Here, the fixed and cellular nature of the pre-revolutionary unit plan is summarily dismissed as incompatible with the contemporary need for flexibility and openness. Five lengthy responses to the questionnaire were published in early 1927—all by specialists—which, in addition to the initial call for entries, constituted the informal competition brief for the designers.

Before analyzing the eight published competition entries, the house-commune designs must be situated within a longer trajectory of architectural type, since spatial innovation here emerges not only from social and economic forces, but from within the discipline of architecture. To suggest that early Soviet architects were referring in any way to past precedents is to repudiate the avant-garde’s own anti-historical rhetoric. But as the house-commune designs demonstrate, the spatial and material strategies in evidence reveal latent acknowledgement of past models, even if to consciously reverse them.

Two pre-revolutionary housing types impelled the spatial play evident in the competition entries: the izba and the bourgeois apartment block. The izba, a traditional rural peasant house, is a thick walled, low ceiled single story structure. The spatial and material
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memory of this archetypal Russian house would have been carried into Soviet cities by newly arrived rural émigrés. The izba was an autonomous object in an agrarian context, a culturally-loaded artifact. For the urban proletariat, the bourgeois apartment block resonated, conversely, as an aspirational housing type. But while the soaring ceilings of these urban apartments allowed light to stream through large windows, a clear hierarchy of space within the floor plan was also evident. In the prototypical pre-revolutionary apartment block, the “address” apartments faced the street while the other half of the units looked onto a courtyard internal to the city block. Inside the apartments service programs such as kitchens, lavatories, and servants’ quarters were tucked against an internal wall and deprived of natural light and air.

Figure 4. All eight entries for the Comradely Competition for Communal Housing, Sovremennaia Arkhitektura, no. 4-5, 1927

Economic, social, and disciplinary motivations align in four potent architectural maneuvers that recur in the published entries to SA’s Comradely Competition for Communal Housing. [Fig. 4] Starting at the scale of the complex and moving to the unit, the entries share inclusion of building-wide communal facilities, inventive unit access, vertical generosity, and double exposure within the units. Of these four strategies only the first, communal facilities, hints at the socialist context in which the designs were devised. But the programs of these shared facilities, and the role they play within the complex of small unit types, can and should nonetheless be revisited in the context of latter day micro-unit design.

The bare-bones competition brief made no mention of shared facilities, yet all respondents included communal services within their designs. These auxiliary programs had two major site planning and architectural implications. First, the house-commune complexes were necessarily organized around these new social hubs. In both the Ginzburg and
Wegman schemes (Entries No.1,2), communal facilities were located on the top floor and accessed via sky-bridges that linked complexes of multiple buildings; the balance of the entries placed these programs, perhaps more pragmatically, on the ground floor. [Figs. 5a, 5b & 6a, 6b] In all designs the large communal spaces were made distinctly legible from afar—with transparent facades that contrasted to the aggregative unit floors—in order to communicate the new programs at the building scale. The second important implication of auxiliary programs was a reduction of square footage within the housing units. As the text that accompanies Ginzburg’s scheme explained, common dining, recreation, kindergarten, nursery, and laundry facilities were programmatic innovations that permitted transition to a fully socialist sensibility, but they were also a way to reduce construction costs on a unit-by-unit basis. In many entries the unit kitchen was drastically minimized, the bathroom reduced in size to preclude household washing, and sleeping quarters decreased to loft-like proportions, since waking leisure time was to be spent on public recreation and study. Framed in this way, small private dwelling units were simply the result of a more robust public sphere.

Figures 5a, 5b. Entry 1, M. Ia. Ginzburg, Sovremennia Arkhitektura, no. 4-5, 1927
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One design adjustment within the private unit that generated friction between house-commune architects and the eventual occupants was the minimal provision for individual food preparation, the trade-off for common dining facilities. The All-Union Population Census of 1926 found that a full 36.5% of families shared a kitchen with others, 22.3% had no kitchen facilities at all, and 4% were unknown; over half of the population, therefore, was without a private kitchen. Such figures indicate that because of the acute housing crisis—before the house-commune model had even come online—the
private kitchen was a rare amenity, and likely a coveted one. As Nikolai Popov, chief of Moscow housing noted in 1925, excision within the living unit of such a crucial amenity was fine in concept for those psychologically ready to move to communal facilities, but the majority instead clamored: “Let us die in our [private] kitchens.” 16 SA editor Ginzburg understood that the house-commune had to accommodate the process of becoming fully socialist, and as such unit designs must be reflective of this transitional moment. 17 While dining communally in the canteen was expected, Ginzburg and other designers also provided small kitchen alcoves in the units for reheating meals or making tea. The private kitchen was justified only in this provisional manifestation; once full socialism took hold, the kitchen could be easily removed and the niche given over to other uses. The minimal kitchens in the SA competition entries had a single- or double-burner stovetop, shelving and sometimes a small sink. Some versions even had a drop-down eating table that could be collapsed and hidden from view when the kitchen was not in use. Later versions of these units, such as those developed by Ginzburg and colleagues at the STROIKOM, and those constructed in the Narkomfin Building in Moscow, also allowed for a kitchen niche, which was to be closed most of the time behind accordion doors. [Fig. 7]

Figure 7. Kitchen rationalization, STROIKOM Research Group, Sovremenaia Arkhitektura, no. 1, 1929
Sensitivity to building-wide efficiency required that the “wasted” space of common circulation be carefully considered as well. To use contemporary parlance: the spatial games evident in the competition entries aimed at maximizing the net-to-gross ratio. Two primary circulation systems emerged among the competition entries to address this concern. In vertical access schemes, switchback stairs with intermediate landings were used to access multiple units, obviating the need for common corridors. In horizontal access schemes, shared corridors were used to enter the units, but they did not occur on every floor and were often placed on an exterior wall to allow for natural light to enter the common space. The designs of Wegman and Vladimirov (Entries No. 2, 3) are examples of vertical schemes in which clusters of units hang off a single stairwell. [Figs. 8a, 8b]

Figures 8a, 8b. Entry 3, V. Vladimirov, Sovremennaia Arkhitektura, no. 4-5, 1927
The crenellated plan form of Vladimirov’s prototype is comprised of a bar that holds the majority of units, accessed on even landings, and a slightly proud square appendage with units that utilize the half landings. This design hits a high note among the competition entries for its mutually beneficial interior innovation and exterior articulation. The inherently dynamic building volumes are enlivened by the alternating fenestration between the bar and its appendage.

An innovative “skip-stop” horizontal access type is seen most clearly in the sectional axonometric drawing for A. Ol’s design (Entry No. 6). [Figs. 9a, 9b] In this scheme and Entries No. 1 and 4, the shared corridor occurs only every three floors in section to allow for two-story units that are navigated by private vertical circulation.

*Figures 9a, 9b.* Entry 6, A. A. Ol, Sovremennaia Arkhitektura, no. 4-5, 1927
Skip-stop unit access is best known as the innovation at the heart of Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation housing tower in Marseille, France (1947-52); it was not, however, his creation. As Jean-Louis Cohen has noted, Le Corbusier toured the construction site of the Narkomfin Housing Commune—the first building in Moscow constructed on the skip-stop principle tested in the Comradely Competition—with his friend and colleague, Moisei Ginzburg, when he traveled to Moscow in 1929. Le Corbusier took drawings of the scheme home to Paris for later use, never crediting the source.  

In either vertical or horizontal access schemes, net-to-gross efficiency does not prevent social interaction. In the horizontal schemes long corridors—especially naturally-lit shared access corridors on an exterior wall, like those in Vorotyntseva and Polyak’s design (Entry No. 4)—demonstrate gallery-like potential, and transmit interior activity and sectional gymnastics to the exterior. [Figs. 10a, 10b]

Figures 10a, 10b. Entry 4, N. Vorotyntseva and R. Polyak, Sovremennaia Arkhitektura, no. 4-5, 1927
If communal facilities were used as justification to reduce the typical unit size in plan, clever building-wide circulation reinstated generosity in unit section. This distinctive architectural response attacks the two pre-revolutionary housing precedents at once. The specter of the dark and oppressive izba is banished, and the ample ceilings of the bourgeois apartment are co-opted and trumped by the open lightness of the double-height living space of the house-commune unit. Expansive floor-to-ceiling windows in these spaces also act as registers, on the exterior, of the relative transparency of private life under socialism.

Figure 11. Entry 3, V. Vladimirov, Sovremennia Arkhitektura, no. 4-5, 1927

Vladimirov's design (Entry No. 3), well documented in two detailed plans, demonstrates sectional expansiveness within the vertical access type. The first level plan shows an entry landing for four small units, each with a living space, kitchen niche and toilet on the entry floor. An internal set of stairs brings the inhabitant up to a narrow sleeping loft that looks down over the double-height living space. Two additional units occupy the square portion of the building to the top of the plan; access to these units is on a shared half landing, and again, an internal stairway rises to a sleeping loft that looks down onto the living room. A. OI's horizontal access design (Entry No. 6) utilizes a similar tactic. As the axonometric section shows, the access corridor, here embedded in the center of the plan and section, occurs every three floors. Two-story L-shaped units are nestled around the corridor such that the inhabitants enter either on the upper floor and circulate down into the balance of the unit, or they enter on the lower floor and utilize the internal stairs to move up into the remainder of their living space. In either case, service and sleeping areas are single-height spaces, stacked in the middle of the plan, to allow the living space free to stretch vertically.

Many of the units presented in the entries also boasted double exposure, such that each apartment is a thru-unit with windows on both (or multiple) facades of the building.
The bourgeois apartment block is in the crosshairs with this configuration, since unlike the typical single-sided pre-revolutionary unit, the doubly-exposed unit ensures that no space remains buried in the plan without natural light or ventilation. Operable windows placed at either end of the unit move fresh air naturally through the living space, offering modern hygienic standards. In A. Ol’s axonometric drawing (Entry No. 6), the second floor stretches from a private exterior balcony, along a mezzanine that looks down onto the double-height living space, to the sleeping quarters in the back. The Vladimirov scheme (Entry No. 3) provides a more complex interlocking configuration in which windows face south in the living space but north in the sleeping loft. In this design, the double-height living space gathers natural light from both sides of the building; two-story glazing in the main space, and ceiling-washing light from other direction of the sleeping loft. The insistence on double exposure units affected the building type, enforcing narrow width and extended length: the “bar” configuration. Competition entries that provided site plans such as those by Wegman, Vladimirov and Sobolev (Entries No. 2, 3, 8) indicate the planning trend to long rows of repetitive housing bars, typological investigations not dissimilar to the concurrent zeilenbau schemes of Weimar architects. [Fig. 12]

Governmental response to SA’s competition was immediate. In 1928 the STROIKOM (Construction Committee of the Russian Republic) founded a special commission to create standardized unit types. SA editor and author of Entry 1, Moisei Ginzburg, was tapped to head the division, and was assisted by a small group of OSA colleagues (and fellow competition entrants). Over the next few months the group designed six standardized unit types, all of which took the competition entries as points of departure. [Fig. 13] In his report presenting the units, Ginzburg made explicit a number of design criteria that had been merely implicit in the competition, including rationalization of kitchen space, “exploiting unutilized height of service areas” by stacking them with sleeping zones, providing “good lighting in all areas,” and “through ventilation—two exposures.”19 The most innovative unit, the F-type, combines many of the best features of various competition entries [Fig. 14]. A building comprised of F-type units would have horizontal access, with skip-stop common corridors running along on an exterior wall. Here, novelty resides in the fact that the corridors are offset half of a floor level from the unit floors. In order to access the units, inhabitants enter either the unit foyer and move up half an internal flight
of stairs to their living space, or they enter and move down a full flight. The sectional interlocking is so efficient and complex that three-dimensional drawings and models are necessary to understand the design.

Figure 13. Diagram of the Economic Efficiency of Various Spatial Configurations, STROIKOM Research Group, Sovremennaia Arkhitektura, no. 1, 1929

Figure 14. F-I type unit, STROIKOM Research Group, Sovremennaia Arkhitektura, no. 1, 1929

Only six projects that utilized STROIKOM units were built, the most important of which was the Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow [Fig. 15]. Narkomfin, the ultimate realization of an avant-garde conceived and designed house-commune, has received a fair amount of scholarship; it will not be covered in any detail here. It is my contention, however, that the seeds of this one important project must be traced back to the collective work of all eight entrants to the SA Comradely Competition.
The push to design and construct highly socialized living conditions in general, and the house-commune in particular, came to a halt at the beginning of the 1930s. The fate of this architectural type is linked to a sweeping shift toward Stalinist conservatism in all spheres. In 1928, NEP Period economic policies were replaced by the First Five-Year Plan, signaling a move toward massive industrialization and away from cultural reforms. In this context debates on the novyi byt took a radical turn. On May 16, 1928 the Central Committee of VKP(b) issued a formal directive: “O Rabote o Perestroika Byta” (On the Work Concerning The Restructuring Of Everyday Life):

The Central Committee of the VKP(b) warns against the attempts of certain comrades to construct a new byt by forced administrative means; administratively separating children from parents, socialized dining, etc. The new byt must be built by taking into full account existing material conditions, and in no instance must it run away and construct plans for the realization of which there do not exist the means or the possibilities.\(^{20}\)

The directive made clear that the moment for aspirational social action had passed. In a scramble to mirror the shifting tide, SA retrenched in its position as well. The above directive was published in SA 1-2, 1930, accompanied by a wavering, slightly confused editorial titled “Kuda idti?” (Where to Go?) In addition, Moisei Ginzburg wrote in 1932, and published in 1934, a book Zhilishche (Housing), in which he categorized the work of OSA during the previous five years as experimental, having “suffered from extreme conclusions and schematic solutions.”\(^{21}\)

Since capital investment from the mid 1930s through the 1950s was allocated to industrial projects and representational city-building, the Soviet housing shortage worsened.
The issue was finally reopened after Stalin’s death when Khrushchev, a former housing specialist, was installed as Premier.

If we are to return to the present and attempt to deduce strategies from the house-commune to approach, mitigate, and even innovate in the face of contemporary housing scarcity, it seems fair to ask how well the constructed projects met the vision. The answer to this question is bound to its original context and duly problematic. Narkomfin, the one house-commune project well documented through the post-Soviet period, will stand in as a representative case. Few of the communal programs upon which the project was structured were built as planned, and those that were built did not function as intended. The transitional kitchen-closets (always controversial) were quickly transformed into permanent fixtures, and many of the conventional unit types were altered by the occupants over time. The most innovative unit, the F-type, was rarely adapted, however, and its generous sectional qualities were largely retained.

The constructed examples were flawed, to be certain, but the design approach, set by the entrants of the SA competition, was not. The only way to ensure spatial quality under the stricture of economic austerity, the designers asserted, was to reformulate the problem in architectural, not quantitative, terms; the resulting designs represent an instructive act of architectural subversion. In this case, the metric of square footage was respected as a means to convey seriousness of purpose where economization was concerned. But the architects enacted a cunning sleight of hand by remaining close to that metric: they utilized the standard of floor area—not total volume—when addressing the technocrats. They provided vertical abundance while expounding plan minimalism.

Finally, the Comradely Competition entries demonstrate that architecture is a specific form of knowledge, one that has the capacity to devise humane housing solutions within the context of scarcity. Their designers provided a template for strategic action that capitalizes on the spatial intelligence of the discipline.

Endnotes


4 This calculation utilizes the nine square meter per person figure common in early Soviet housing research. Housing area figures from Anatole Kopp, 1970. Town and revolution; Soviet architecture and city planning, 1917-1935. New York: G. Braziller, p. 129.


8 As discussed later, in 1928, after publication of the SA competition, architect and editor Moisei Ginzburg was tapped by Stroikom, Construction Committee of the RSFSR, as head of a research and design section for the standardization of housing. Ginzburg and colleagues took twenty-seven square meters, or nine meters per person, as the goal for all Stroikom units. In a rare convergence of socialist and capitalist real estate metrics, the micro-units proposed for Bloomberg’s Manhattan are also, on average, 300 square feet, or twenty-seven square meters. New York Department of Housing Preservation & Development, “adAPT NYC Request for Proposals”,<http://www.nyc.gov/html/hpd/html/developers/HPD-adAPT-NYC-RFP.shtml>.


10 Kopp, Town and revolution; Soviet architecture and city planning, 1917-1935, p.145.

11 I refer here specifically to the notion of biopower as formulated by Michel Foucault: the governmental practice of organizing, regulating and subjugating bodies through a variety of techniques, here architectural.


13 As translated in Kopp, Town and revolution; Soviet architecture and city planning, 1917-1935, p. 246.

14 Ginzburg, M. Ia., 1927. Kommunal'nyi Dom A1, Sovremennaia Arkhitektura, no. 4-5, p.130.


19 Kopp, Town and revolution; Soviet architecture and city planning, 1917-1935, p. 135.

20 Buchli, An Archaeology of Socialism, p.60.


22 The children’s crèche, for instance, was not constructed, and thus other communal spaces, such as the summer dining room, had to be commandeered for the provision of childcare. The common laundry functioned well through the 1950s. Buchli, An Archaeology of Socialism, pp. 75-76.

23 Because the Narkomfin was designed as a “transitional” house-commune, the project was comprised of four unit types (F, 2-F, K and dormitory units) that offered a range of living options. The F units, discussed in the text, were the most minimal, open and therefore socialist in orientation, while the K units, which had partitioned rooms, a full kitchen and bath, allowed for a continuation of bourgeois living habits.
References


