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## THE THREE EPOCHS OF SOVIET ARCHITECTURE IN CENTRAL ASIA

*While the European colonial powers in the second half of the 19th century expanded their dominance in Africa and Asia, Russian expansionist policy was focused on the Caucasus and Central Asia. This tendency continued even after the formation of the Soviet Union. Yet, the new communist model of society called for an even greater concentration of power in Moscow than before the Bolshevik revolution. Moscow had control over the most remote regions of the empire. This also endangered the identity of Central Asian architecture which over the centuries was shaped under Persian influence. Fashion trends in architecture coming from the north were stronger than the influence of Islamic architecture coming from the south. This was reflected in the spread of the Russian architectural avant-garde in Central Asia which prevailed until 1932. It was then replaced by Stalinist neoclassicism and, twenty-five years later, by the second wave of modern architecture related to the Khrushchev era which then passed into postmodernism in the mid-1980s. All the key tasks for the regions were set from the center, whether from the radical transformation of the peasant into an industrial society or the construction of Stalinist residential palaces for the elite, and later, toward mass uniform housing construction. On the other hand, it was in Central Asian Tashkent that typical housebuilding was linked with national design traditions.*

**Key words:** *constructivism, Stalinist neoclassicism, Soviet modernism, dwelling, Alma-Ata, Tashkent, Frunze, Dushanbe, Ashgabat.*

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IN THE SECOND half of the 19th century Central Asia became part of the Russian Empire and under the powerful influence of European culture. Eventually, this was most visibly reflected in the architecture and urban planning for the entire region. In 1865, Russian troops conquered Tashkent, which became the capital city of the newly formed Turkestan General Government. Following the October 1917 revolution, the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was founded within the Russian Federation (April 1918). In 1920, the formally independent Bukharan and Khorezm Soviet republics were established on the site of the Bukharan Emirate and Khivan Khanate which were defeated by Soviet troops. In 1924, Central Asia was nationally delimited in accordance with Leninist doctrine concerning the formation of the so-called socialist nations. In subsequent years, Moscow regularly changed the administrative structure of the region and paid little attention to natural ethnic boundaries. In 1936, after the formation of the Kazakh SSR, conditional bound-

aries were finally established between the five union republics that comprised the Central Asian part of the USSR which remained until its collapse in 1991. This determined the contours of the five current independent states of post-Soviet Central Asia. In Soviet times, all these republics were fully controlled by Moscow. Moscow displaced, assigned, and if required, repressed local authorities.

Architecture within the Central Asian republics went through the same developmental stages as the architecture of the Soviet empire's capital centers since the USSR's entire cultural policy was established from Moscow. These stages are designated as 1920s constructivism; Stalinist neoclassicism from 1932 to the mid-1950s; and Soviet-styled modern architecture between the late 1950s to the late 1980s. This last stage is most often referred to as "Soviet modernism" (Novikov, Belogolovsky 2010; Ritter et al. 2012). The traditions of Russian colonial architecture together with the former social structure almost completely disappeared (with rare exceptions). Native Central

Asian architectural traditions remained only in the form of private, low-rise residential buildings of the traditional type which arose spontaneously outside state artistic control.

### The Era of the “Soviet Avant-Garde” (1924-1932)

The first years following the Bolshevik seizure of power were marked by the noticeable absence of construction in Russia and its former colonies which were in the grip of Civil War. The 1917 revolution cut off social and economic ties within society. The Russian Empire’s entire economic system collapsed. It was replaced by so-called “war communism” introduced by Lenin. Private entrepreneurship and trade were prohibited and all private property was nationalized. The newly empowered Bolshevik Party became the only employer in the country. Representatives of free professions, including the architectural community that existed before the revolution owing to private construction orders, entered unbearable conditions. In 1921, the threat of economic catastrophe and mass peasant uprisings became such a reality that Lenin was forced to declare a “new economic policy.” It called for free private trade and entrepreneurship within a specific rigid framework.

The first independent design and construction companies opened in the USSR in 1923. As a rule, they served the Soviet departments. This early Soviet period’s main building types were various governmental buildings (i.e. halls for of Soviet councils and people’s commissariats), as well as employee residential buildings of the various governmental departments and trusts.

From the 1920s until 1932, the dominant architectural style in the USSR was so-called *modern architecture* or the Russian version known as *constructivism*, although this term referred to only one of the members from the largest architectural group of that time – the ACA (Association of Contemporary Architects). Modern architecture within the USSR developed somewhat later than in the West under its strong influence during the mid-1920s. Its rapid flourishing in Russia was stimulated due to the end of both pre-revolutionary artistic culture and the former socio-economic structure of society. No more private customers meant no freedom in their choice of style. The leaders of the modern Soviet architectural movement (for example, the ACA, and specifically the Vesnin brothers) were close to those holding senior positions in new government. This resulted in virtually a monopolistic expansion of modern architecture throughout the USSR, including Central Asia.

For several decades, two construction cultures coexisted in the cities of this region: Spontaneously emerging traditional mass residential buildings made

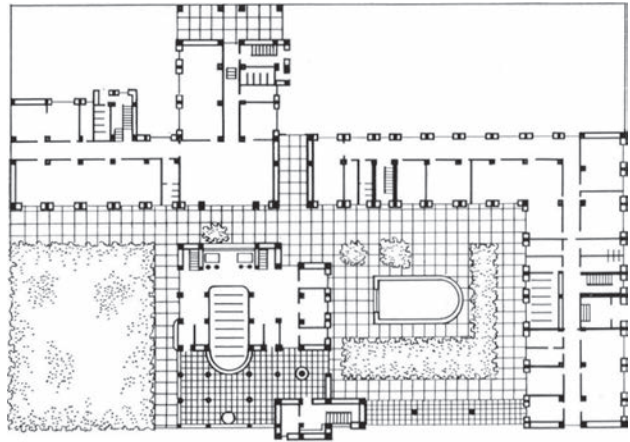


Fig. 1. M. Ginzburg, I. Milinis. Design of the House of Government in Alma-Ata, Plan. 1927. Source: (Glaudinov et al. 1987: 54)

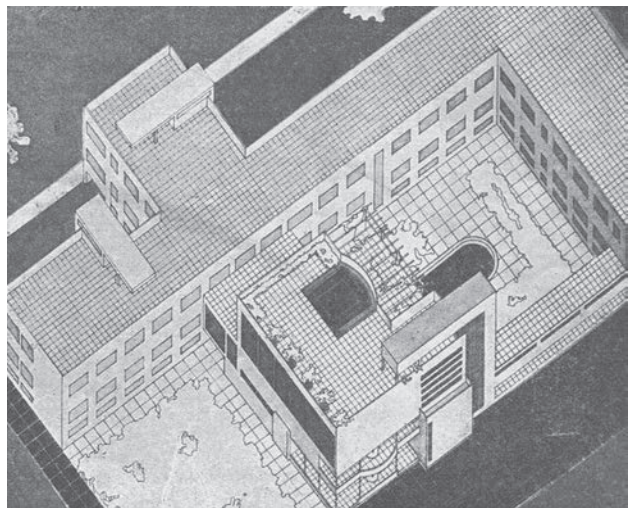


Fig. 2. M. Ginzburg, I. Milinis. Design of the House of Government in Alma-Ata, Axonometry. 1927. Source: “Modern Architecture,” 1928, No. 3, p. 75

of adobe bricks; and state architecture, European in its technical methods and styles. The latter architects came mainly from the European part of the Union. The first Soviet buildings in the Central Asian capitals, just as throughout the country, were houses of government and residential buildings for officials. Capital architects close to governmental circles from Moscow and Leningrad played an important role in their construction during the 1920s and 30s. They competed for the most prestigious buildings in provincial capitals.

Constructivism reached Central Asia shortly before its 1932 prohibition. However, in 1925-1926 in the city of Kyzyl-Orda, the first capital of the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (as Kazakhstan was called between 1925-1936), Sergey Andriyevsky built residential buildings along with a quite modern club from adobe bricks. Alma-Ata (today’s



Fig. 3. V. Burovtsev. OGPU Club, Alma-Ata, 1930. Source: (Glaudinov et al. 1987: 51)

Almaty, Kazakhstan) became the capital of the Autonomous Republic in 1927. In that same year the Moscow Architectural Society announced a competition for a new house of government for the Kazakh ASSR, which was to include the premises for the Central Executive Committee, the Council of People's Commissars, the State Planning Committee, the Party and the Komsomol organizations along with a hall for meetings of the Soviet councils. First prize was awarded to the strictly functional project of Moisey Ginzburg and Ignatiy Milinis (Fig. 1-2). Ginzburg, at that time, was one of the most influential Soviet architects and, together with the Vesnin brothers, edited the journal *Contemporary Architecture*, the main publishing organ for the constructivists. Ivan Leonidov's project won third prize in this same competition. This spectacular, but modest building was completed by 1931 (Glaudinov et al. 1987: 53-54). It now houses the Kazakh National Academy of Arts. Ginzburg led the construction of several more governmental buildings in Alma-Ata – the Turksib administration building (Turkestan-Siberian railway, 1928-1934), the Main Post Office (1930-1934), the "House of Delegates" Hotel, and the Sovnarkom hospital.

One of the most interesting constructivist buildings in Alma-Ata is the GPU (secret police, predecessor of the KGB) theater club designed by architect I. Burovtsev (1934). Part of the so-called "Chekist"<sup>1</sup>

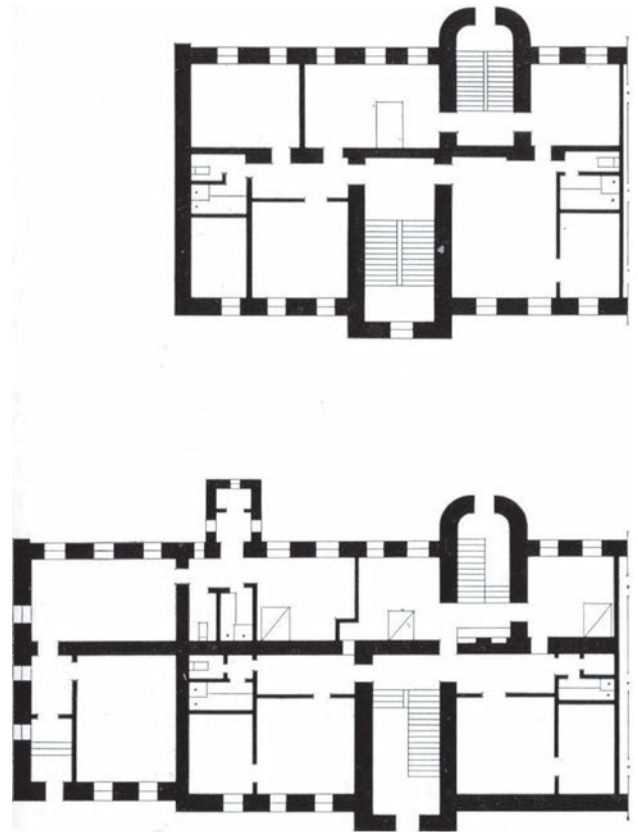


Fig. 4. A. Azarov. Ten-apartment building complex in Aktyubinsk. Plans. 1934. Source: (Glaudinov et al. 1987: 45)

<sup>1</sup> Chekist – state security officer in early Soviet Union.

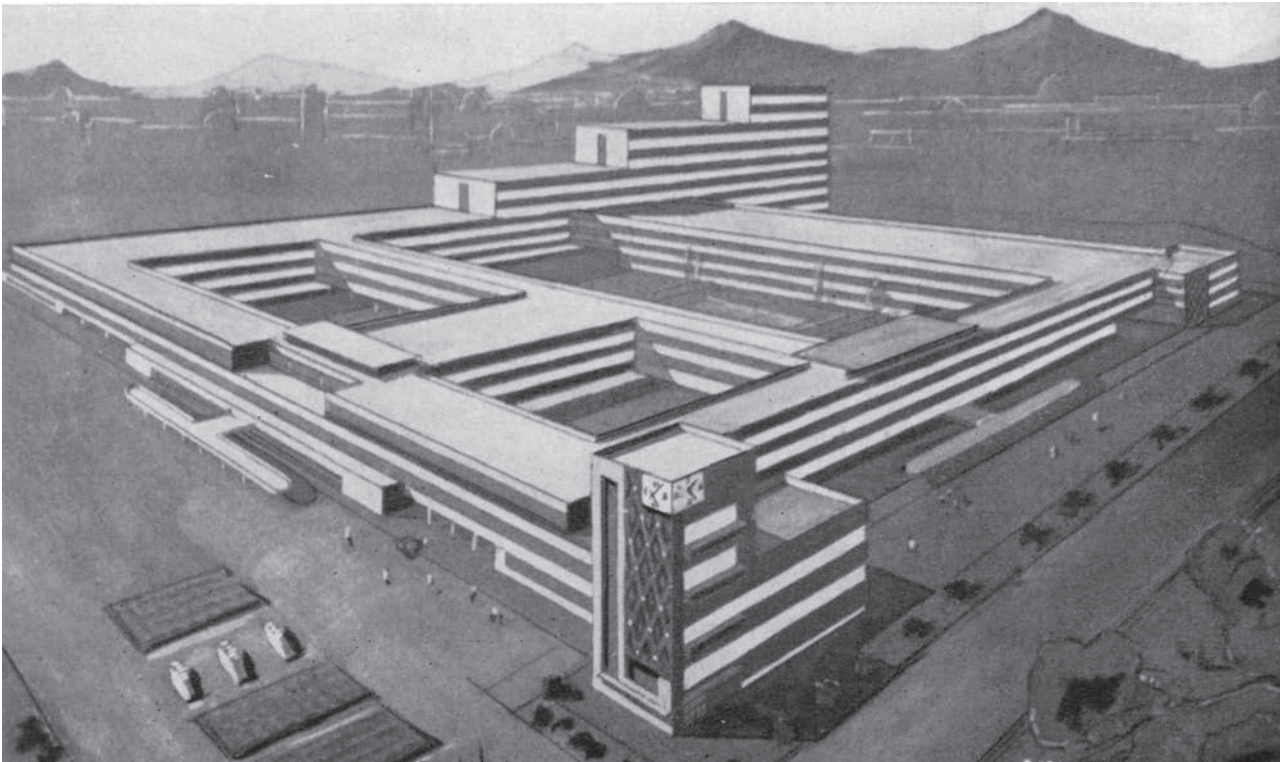


Fig. 5. A. Shchusev. House of Government in Samarkand, 1929. Perspective. Source: (*Afanasyev* 1978: 90)



Fig. 6. S. Polupanov. House of Government in Tashkent, 1931.  
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/gairatk/posts/10208717949578928>

town,” it consisted of residential and administrative buildings for the Soviet “secret police” administration, specifically the Main Political Control (Fig. 3). The same principle was followed when constructing closed complexes of administrative, residential, and service buildings of various Soviet departments in all the capitals and larger cities of the Soviet Union.

In March 1932, almost simultaneously with Stalin’s ban on modern architecture, a governmental decree ordered the construction of 102 “specialist houses” containing units of 300, 100 and 50 apartments respectively in the USSR’s most important cities with a combined total of 11,500 apartment complexes throughout the country. The program planned housing for the upper stratum of the Soviet and party elite. It included for the construction of five complexes in Central Asia – two one hundred unit apartment buildings in Tashkent and three fifty-unit apartment buildings, one each in Frunze (modern Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), Stalinabad (modern Dushanbe, Tajikistan), and Alma-Ata. As a rule, the first specialist houses were designed in 1932 under the influence of constructivism. However, most of them were redesigned to meet new requirements either during the design stage or already during the process of construction. In Alma-Ata, a complex of “specialist houses” (the so-called “slanting houses”) designed by Peter Wilhelmzon was built between 1934-1937. It consisted of eleven simply designed two-story buildings with eight apartments each. They stood at an angle to the street and were inhabited by people from the scientific and artistic Party elites. The entire complex apart from one non-residential building was demolished in 2007.

One very interesting, strange, and completely unique residential building with ten-apartments is found in Aktyubinsk (Aktobe, Kazakhstan). It was apparently erected in the early 1930s. This two-story, two-section building which abuts against each other contains two staircases for each two-apartment section. One staircase was for the front door and the other was considered the “black,” or “secret” staircase. On the ground floor, each section contained an additional apartment. Apparently, this was a dwelling meant for local high-level authorities (Fig. 4).

Samarkand, the capital of the Uzbek SSR from 1925 to 1930, was later relocated to Tashkent. Apparently, this transfer of the capital to Tashkent was unexpected and sudden because in 1930 preparations were underway in the Moscow workshop of Aleksey Shchusev for a very effective constructivist project involving the House of Government of the Uzbek SSR specifically prepared for Samarkand. Unfortunately, the project was never implemented (Fig. 5). Stefan Polupanov (1904-1957) an architect from Kharkov worked in Samarkand and Tashkent beginning in

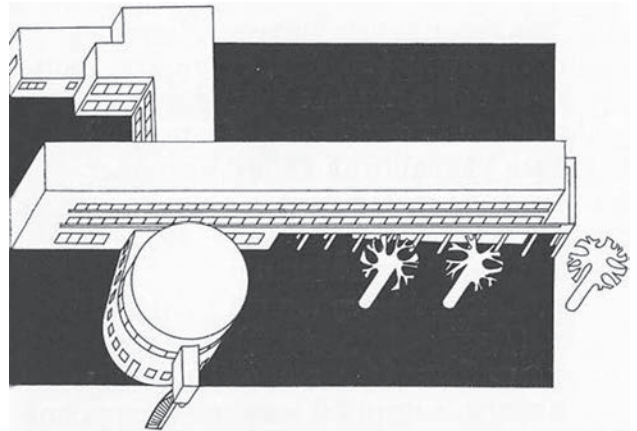


Fig. 7. S. Polupanov. House-commune of the NKVD in Tashkent, 1931.

Source: (*Kadyrova* 1987: 42)

1928. His Samarkand projects included a communal house for the NKVD, a technical school for industrial agriculture, and an art college. For Tashkent he designed the House of Government (1931) (Fig. 6), the communal house (1934) (Fig. 7) as well as a factory-kitchen (1934). All the buildings were constructivist in style. In 1927, a constructivist building for the Central Asian Communist Institute was constructed in Tashkent under the direction of G. P. Bauer. A complex of two-story residential buildings dating to the same period was built under the auspices of the oldest Tashkent architect, Georgy Svarichevsky (1868-1936) for railway employees.

Konstantin Babiyevsky’s project, constructed in Tashkent in 1931, resulted in a very interesting dwelling for NKVD workers with rounded balconies. This was one of the very first residential buildings with apartments equipped with separate kitchens and bathrooms. Two specialist houses in Tashkent on Beshagach Street and Navoi Avenue were erected in 1934 from a project designed by A. Pavlov (*Kadyrova* 1987: 62). The first building demonstrates the period’s metamorphoses in architecture into the state style. This four-story building with three- and four-room apartments was originally constructivist as clearly based on the volumetric composition and plans. It went through several stages of modification and eventually was decorated with three-story columnar porticoes with arches. This decor is strangely in conflict with the rhythmic functional composition and vertical constructivist stained-glass window of the stairwells.

Among the few early buildings in Frunze—the capital of Kyrgyzstan whose name was later changed to Pishpek in 1926 and today is called Bishkek— included a railway station (1930), a printing house (designed by architects Yu. Dubov, A. Furshtadt, 1931), and the Stalin School (architect A. Majuja, 1931).



Fig. 8. A. Zenkov. House of Government in the city of Frunze, 1926. Source: <http://www.foto.kg/galereya/page,1,150,699-frunze-dom-centralnogo-ispolnitelnogo-komiteta-kirgizskoy-assr-cik.html>

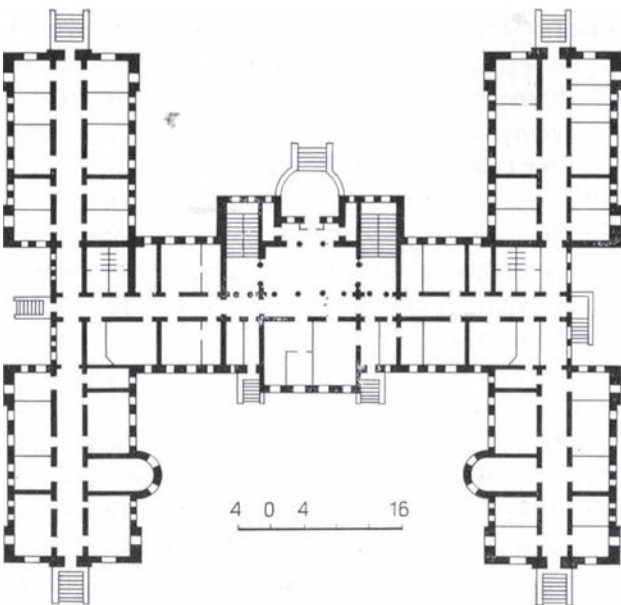


Fig. 9. A. Zenkov. House of Government in the city of Frunze, 1926. Plan. Source: (Pisarsky, Kurbatov 1986: 102)

In 1924, the Czechoslovak production cooperative “Intergel’po” moved to Frunze, and constructed the first industrial and public buildings in the city according to the designs of engineer Andrey Zenkov. He designed, among others, Kyrgyzstan’s first governmental building, a hotel, a hospital, and an unusual “round polyclinic.” Zenkov (1863-1936), an architect of the older generation, had considerable experience prior to the revolution in the city of Verny (renamed Alma-Ata in 1921, today’s Almaty) and did not become a constructivist.

In 1926, a solemn two-story House of Governmental, the building of the Central Executive Committee of the Kyrgyz ASSR, was built according to Zenkov’s design -- which is a relatively rare example of traditional colonial eclecticism in Soviet Central Asia from the 1920s (Fig. 8-9). Today, it houses the Assembly of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan. Another building, designed for Pishpek by the architect Yuriy

Dubov in 1932-1933, housed the republic’s administrative government. In 1936, a project originally designed in the constructivist style involved a three-story building constructed with decorative facades and surprisingly involved elements of Art Nouveau (architect Korbutofsky) (Fig. 10). The Pedagogical Institute was a constructivist building with a very interesting and complex spatial structure. It was designed by Yu. Dubov and completed in 1934.

Unlike Tashkent, Samarkand, Alma-Ata, and other old Turkestan cities in which Russian architecture from colonial times has been preserved; the city of Dushanbe of the early 1920s was a village comprised of traditionally constructed adobe houses.<sup>2</sup> With the arrival of the Soviet government in 1925, the city began to grow rapidly. The first government offices in Dushanbe were housed in one-story mud structures. Stone buildings appeared only by the early 1930s and were quite modest. These included specifically the post office that has not survived to the present day (Fig. 11); the cinema (now the Philharmonic) designed by the architect S. V. Kutin; the building of the Council of People’s Commissars (opposite the mayor’s office); and the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture (25 Rudaki Avenue) designed by the architect P. I. Vaulina. A very interesting constructivist “zigzag” residential “house of specialists,” was designed and built by B. Revyakin in the early 1930s.

Muscovite architects (V. M. Keldysh, V. M. Chaplin, Ya. V. Samoilov) designed a textile factory with its characteristic water tower and built-in clock (Fig. 12) for Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, and constructed between 1925-1927. This was the first building in Ashgabat with a reinforced concrete monolithic frame and large glass windows. It is one of the few that survived the catastrophic Ashgabat earthquake of 1948 without significant damage (Katsnelson et al. 1987: 56-59).

### The Era of Stalin Architecture (1932-1955)

After Stalin obtained absolute power in the Politburo in 1927-1928, he immediately began his social and economic reforms. He repealed Lenin’s “New Economic Policy” along with the right to private property, trade, and manufacturing. All resources in the country were expropriated by the state and the entire labor force also came under the state. Thus, Stalin received the opportunity to implement his plans for the rapid construction of heavy industry and the military complex leading to the militarization of the country. At the same time, he took measures to create

<sup>2</sup> Since 1922, Dushanbe was the capital of the Tajik ASSR and included as a part of the Uzbek SSR. From 1929 to 1961 it was known as Stalinabad.



Fig. 10. Yu. Dubov. Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Kirghiz SSR, Frunze, 1936.  
Source: (Pisarsky, Kurbatov 1986: 103)



Fig. 11. Post Office, Dushanbe, 1934. Source: “Dushanbe – Stalinabad – Dushanbe.” Dushanbe, 2014, p. 36

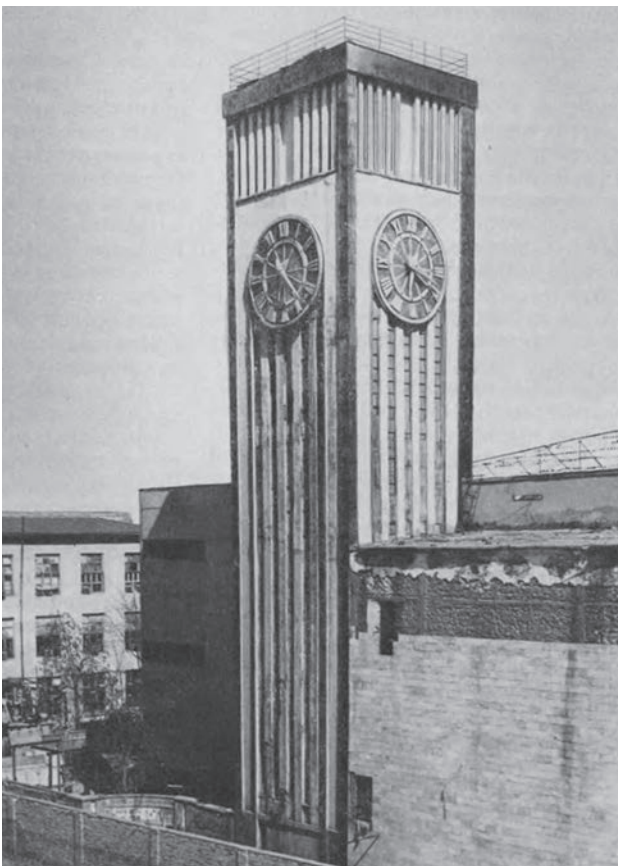


Fig. 12. Water tower of a textile mill in Ashgabat. 1929.  
Source: (Katznelson et al. 1987)

a new artistic image in the USSR. Under these conditions, architecture played the most important role for urban scenery which fostered the creation of the new Stalin's state (Khmelnitsky 2007).

Modern architecture, which was focused on solving purely functional problems and remained under the strong influence of the West, did not serve these purposes. Creating a new unified imperial style for the USSR was now required based on historical examples and complete isolation from western architecture. *Politburo* member, Lazar Kaganovich, headed this project to develop a new style in Moscow during the 1930s. All important projects had to pass visual inspection at the highest level and became a standard for the whole country. The Soviet government was not interested in architecture as such. It only affirmed facades visible from afar and overlooking main streets. As a result, the professional level of design degraded. Work on the functional tasks of architecture and independent volumetric and layout concepts lost their meaning. Such endeavors were perceived as insubordinate to governmental instructions.

The beginning of the Stalin's style in Soviet architecture dates to the spring of 1932 when the results were announced for the All-Union competition for the Palace of Soviets. The competition for this huge building—functionally meaningless though very important ideologically—was conceived by Stalin as an instrument of stylistic reform. Hundreds of architects were involved in this project. In fact, it involved the country's entire architectural community. (Khmelnitsky 2007: 77-126).

The three highest prizes were awarded to eclectic projects that had either nothing to do (i.e. the project of Ivan Zholtovsky) or very little in common with modern architecture (i.e. projects by Boris Iofan and Hector Hamilton). It signaled to all Soviet architects that modern architecture was over and it was a time to focus on “the revival of the historical heritage.” This meant designs depicting splendid eclecticism and decorated by antiquity. From that moment on, Soviet architects' international ties were severed.

Further measures were taken to create censorship control over the entire artistic life of the country. The Bolshevik's decree by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party dated April 23, 1932, entitled “On the restructuring of literary and artistic organizations,” liquidated all creative organizations that had existed in the USSR up to that point. It resulted in the formation of united labor unions, including the Union of Soviet Architects with the respective subordinate unions established in all the Soviet republics. If the previous architectural associations were founded on the principle of their members' contiguous creative concepts (different concepts for different associations), then the new unions were

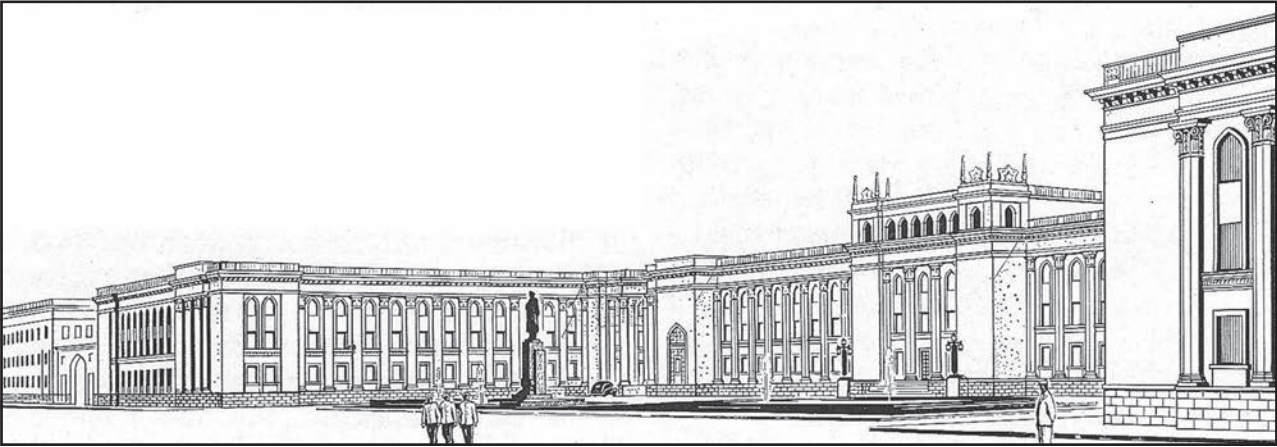


Fig. 13. S. Anisimov. Design of the building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Tajikistan. Dushanbe, 1952. Source: (Veselovsky et al. 1987: 83)

aimed at uniting everyone involved in creative work into a single organization under Party control. From that moment on, all artistic concepts were to be held in common, although still obscure. It was only clear that modern architecture in its pure form, without “historical” décor, was no longer accepted.

By the early 1930s, architecture in the USSR had already been constrained. Private enterprise was forbidden as early as 1928-1929, and all architects were hired employees of various state authorities. This ensured control over the entire architectural life in the country and facilitated the creation of a unified state style.

The architecture of government and administrative buildings changed dramatically taking on design patterns of a palace (Fig. 13). Ceremonial government complexes were designed and built in many capitals and larger cities which displayed symmetry and a monumental aspect. The volatility of composition and the latitude which shaped the constructivist era completely disappeared. This paved the way for an endless reproduction of the same layouts and facade compositions. All the stylistic metamorphoses that took place in Moscow were immediately reflected in the provincial capitals and larger cities, including those in Central Asia.

**Government buildings.** The focus of architecture in the capitals of the various Soviet republics of the 1930s was on governmental buildings and theaters. These also served as halls for party congresses and conferences. The competition for the Government Palace held in Alma-Ata in 1937 was won by the high-ranking Leningrad architects, Boris Rubanenko and Georgy Simonov. Before the war, they only managed to dig a foundation pit. The project was revised many times and was completed only in 1957. The building in question was a typical Stalinist ceremonial neoclassical building with a deep six-column two-

row portico with mandatory elements of national décor necessary for that time (Fig. 14).

In 1947, Aleksey Shchusev designed the Kazakh Academy of Sciences building in Alma-Ata. Its first version, like a cartoonish *madrasah* with a dome over the main entrance, was rejected. The second – a traditionally Stalinist building, but with elements of Asian décor – was approved and built in 1957 (Fig. 15) (Glaudimov et al. 1987: 96-98). In Pishpek, the three-story building housing the Kirghiz SSR administration was completed in the same year (architects R. Semerdjiyev, G. Nazaryan). In 1965, a two-row eight-column portico was added to it (architect E. Pisarskaya), which made it similar to the House of Government in Alma-Ata (Fig. 16).

Between the 1930s-1950s, many administrative buildings, educational institutes, and cultural centers in large and small cities of the USSR in various sizes with similar layouts were built in the form of palace buildings. Their facades were decorated with real or overhead porticoes. In the Central Asian republics elements of national décor were also added to the facades.

**Theaters.** The government directive for huge theater construction in larger capitals and industrial cities of the USSR dates to the late 1920s. Many were already completed by the time constructivism was banned. Therefore, after 1932, as a rule, their facades were redesigned “according to the classics.” One of the most curious examples of this building type was the former Kazakh Drama Theater in Karaganda designed in the constructivist style in 1932 by the Moscow Institute Standartgorproyekt. It is possible that this group of German architects led by Ernst May, who then worked at the Institute, was also involved in the general development plan for Karaganda (in particular, Alfred Forbat). The theater was originally designed as a very large 1000-seat cinema with club





Fig. 14. B. Rubanenko, G. Simonov. House of Government of the Kazakh SSR in Alma-Ata, 1939-1957.  
Source: Ruslan Muradov archive



Fig. 15. A. Shchusev with the participation of N. Prostakov. Academy of Sciences building of the Kazakh SSR. 1948-1953.  
Source: Ruslan Muradov archive



**Fig. 16.** R. Semerdjiyev, G. Nazaryan, E. Pisarsky. House of Government of the Kyrgyz SSR, 1957-1965.  
Source: (Pisarsky, *Kurbatov* 1986: 115)

rooms. Its construction was completed only by 1935. By that time, the entire theater building with its pronounced constructivist structure was then adorned with Renaissance decor (Fig. 17).

The construction of new opera houses was a matter of honor for the capitals of the various republics during the 1930s. These projects were usually ordered from Muscovite architects who were close to Stalin. One of the earliest and most famous examples of a purely Stalinist theater is found in Tashkent (Fig. 18). The high-ranking Moscow architect Aleksey Shchu-

sev received the Stalin Prize for this project in 1948. The design, originally conceived in 1934, was delayed due to the war with the theater completed only by 1947. Initially, the design was in the classical style with semicircular arches and statues, but then it included Eastern motifs within the facades with ogival arches (Afanasyev 1978: 139-145). In Soviet art history, such architecture was designated “national in form and socialist in content” (Alabyan 1937: 41; Shchusev 1940).

In Dushanbe, the Opera and Ballet Theater was built around this same time (1935-1946). It was decorated with a magnificent portico and Ionian columns (architects D. Bilibin, V. Golly, A. Junger, artist S. Zakharov). In this instance, architects provided almost no Eastern elements. The prototype for a standard Stalinist theater or club was, as a rule, based on a temple from antiquity with a pediment and a columnar portico (Fig. 19). Such an example is the Kyrgyz Opera and Ballet Theater in Pishpek (architect A. Laburenko). Its foundation was laid before the war, but only completed in 1955. The theater resembles a classical temple with a splendid multi-column portico and sculptures over the pediment (Fig. 20).

In 1934, Turkmenistan’s administration organized a custom-made competition for an opera and drama theater in Ashgabat that included the participation of several high-ranking Muscovite architects (V. Shchuko and V. Gelfreich, I. Fomin and A. Shchusev). The winning project featured huge semicircular arches on the main facade with Renaissance decor by Shchuko and Gelfreich (Fig. 21). The foundations were immediately laid by 1935, however, it became



**Fig. 17.** Kazakh Drama Theater, Karaganda, 1932.  
Source: <http://theconstructivistproject.com/ru/object/2261/kazahskij-dramaticheskij-teatr-kazdramteatr>

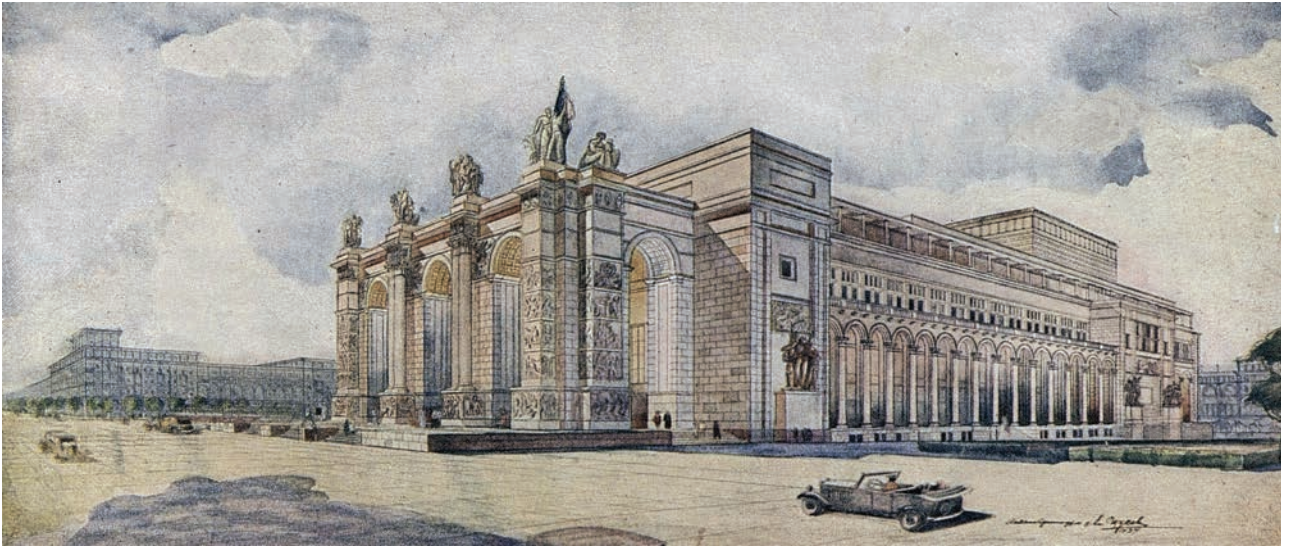


Fig. 18. A. Shchusev. Design of the theater in Tashkent, 1934. Source: "Iskusstvo" No. 4, 1935

clear that the government had no monetary means to complete construction and the project was cancelled (Bazhenov 1997). In 1947, a music school was built on the foundations of the theater (A. Maksimov, P. Kukhtenkov) which collapsed the following year due to a powerful earthquake. A new competition was announced two years later, won by the architect Aleksander Tarasenko. In his design, he provided façade arcades both in the front and along the two sides with pointed arches characteristic of the local medieval tradition with abundant stucco ornamentation. The project was implemented between 1951-1958 at

another site, but also within the historical center of Ashgabat. Today, this splendid building houses the Mollanepes student theater (Fig. 22).

**Dwellings.** Official designs for dwellings in the 1930s completely changed their characteristics in comparison with the previous era of the first five-year plan (until 1932). Mass communal housing types were no longer considered; rather, they were substituted by single compartmental dwelling houses. Moreover, rich elite houses with their "black stairwells" and rooms for servants became the standard.



Fig. 19. A. Junger, V. Golly, D. Bilibin. Opera House in Dushanbe, 1939. Source: Ruslan Muradov archive



Fig. 20. A. Laburenko. Kyrgyz Opera and Ballet Theater in the city of Pishpek (Bishkek), 1955

Photos of apartments in these domestic buildings were published in architectural magazines and considered to be the only type of housing found in the Soviet Union. When designing ceremonial centers for new cities, the most richly decorated houses were built along main streets, serving as a backdrop for festive processions and demonstrations. The same principle was applied for the main streets of Central Asian cities. The architecture was so unified that the individual names of architects lost their meaning. Unlike the previous short era of modern architecture, individual identities still could not manifest themselves in such conditions.

Simultaneously, an abundance of mass housing for laborers was built at industrial enterprises. These took on the form of barrack cities and towns and remained invisible to the architectural press (Brumfield, Ruble 2002; Meerovich 2008; Meerovich et al. 2011). Two residential settlements were usually arranged at large factories: A workers settlement which consisted of communal barracks and dugouts; as well as an isolated settlement for authorities with a variety of housing ranging from the villas of plant managers to hostels for lower-ranking employees. An example of this sort of village, which later grew into a city, was

Chirchik, Uzbekistan in the first years of its existence. This area developed due to the construction of two hydroelectric power plants and a nitrogen fertilizer plant in the foothills of the Tien Shan Mountains.

Another exceptional example of this type of settlement is the residential town for oil field workers near the city of Guryev (today's Atyrau) in Kazakhstan (architects S. Vasilkovsky and A. Arefiev). Construction began in the Fall of 1943. The settlement was built for the Guryev oil refinery located in a hot, waterless desert. The plant belonged to Americans and was obtained by the Soviet Union under a lend-lease program. The village, kept in complete isolation and under guard, consisted of comfortable one-, two-, four- and eight-building apartment complexes adapted to the hot climate conditions and formalized as Central Asian architecture. The village had a water supply, sewerage, a central pool, and other amenities that indicated the residents' privileged status. The housing plans and structures were extremely diverse and interesting which was not typical for residential architecture of that period. Apparently, this diversity came from the fact that a department of the NKVD carried out the construction. This governmental branch's architects enjoyed relative intradepartmental

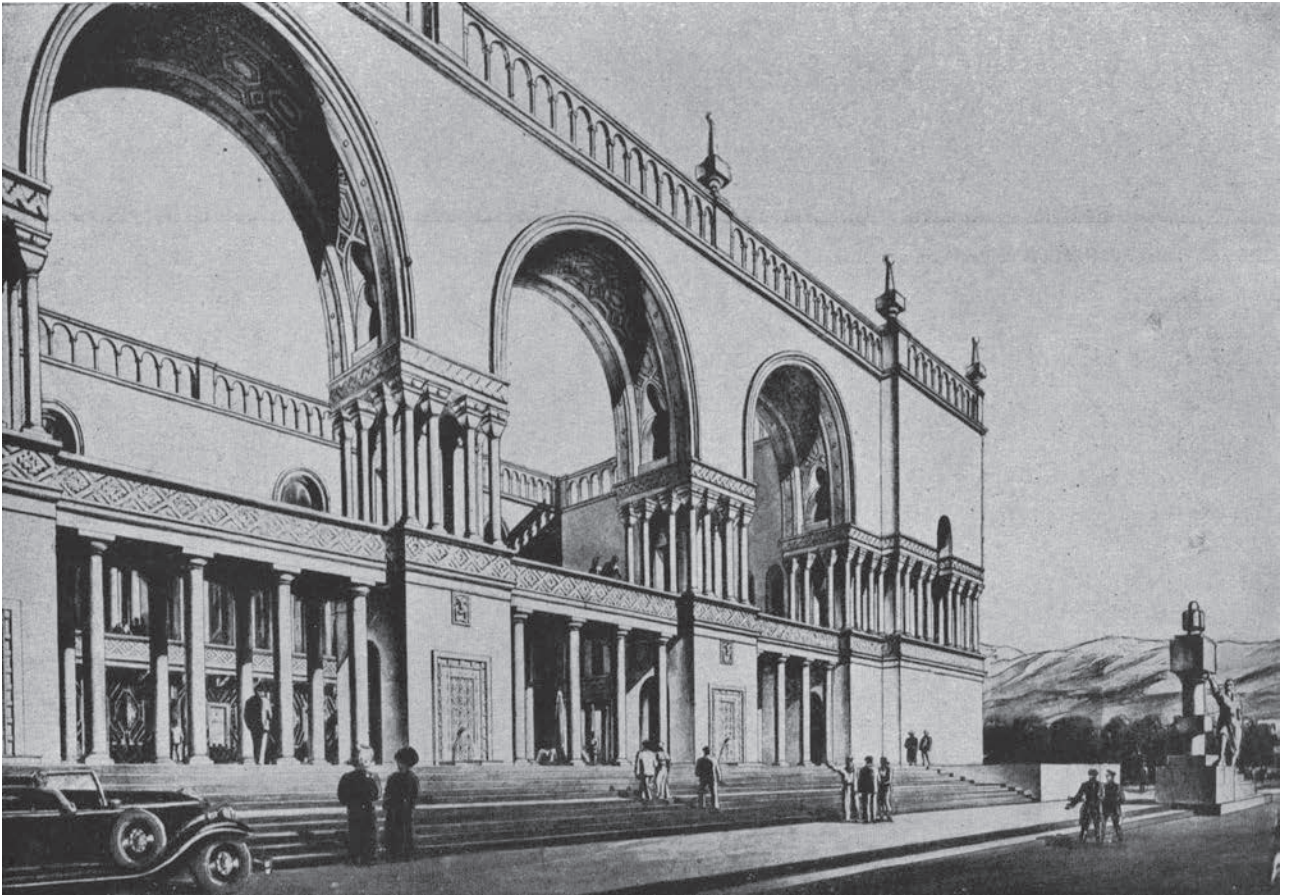


Fig. 21. V. Schuko, V. Gelfreich. Project of the theatre in Ashgabat, 1934.  
Source: Yearbook of the Society of Architects-Artists, vol. XIV. Leningrad, 1935, p. 241



Fig. 22. A. Tarasenko. Mollanepes Drama Theater, Ashgabat. 1951-1958. Photo: Vyacheslav Sarkisyan, 1995



Fig. 23. S. Vasilkovsky, A. Arefiev. Worker's settlement, Guryev, Theatre. 1944-1945.  
Source: [pastvu.com/456108](http://pastvu.com/456108)

freedom in terms of their artistic concepts. The factory and settlement were built by prisoners and deportees whose 12,000-member prison camp was located nearby. The design project for the village received the Stalin Prize in 1946 (*Khmelnitsky 2013*).

### The Era of Soviet Modernism (1955-1989)

The death of Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev's rise to power led to a paradigm shift in urban planning and architecture in the USSR. Architects reoriented themselves to the original patterns of modern Western architecture comprised of monotonous buildings that formed the urban landscape. In terms of architectural history, the Soviet Union of the mid-1950s returned to the ideas advocated by Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, or Ludwig Hilbersierner, together with Ernst May and his Moscow design office. These concepts proposed in the late 1920s and early 1930s previously never became a reality due to their radical nature. It marked an end to the *décor* of industrial production and design, as well as the city, which was now a closed entity.

However, this reorientation was not a logical consequence of economic development or public will.

Rather, it was prescribed by the country's leadership in accordance with the political dictatorship's norms. In building policy terms, success was defined as providing housing to the population through purely pragmatic solutions. The luxurious Stalinist buildings and palaces for the people, whose apartments were available only to a few privileged residents, were useless from this point of view.

Khrushchev delivered his decisive speech, which changed the country's entire architectural and construction policy, on December 7, 1954, a year-and-a-half after Stalin's death. In a report at the All-Union Meeting of Builders, he advocated the need to achieve a comprehensive industrialization of construction. This implied a tendency to develop the widest variety of residential units with the most limited number of standard building components. Now, the newly created construction industry rather than architects, had to build cities.

Khrushchev foresaw the need to introduce a rational construction method based on manufacturing standardized assembly line features. He also formally rehabilitated the constructivists convicted under Stalin. The functional rationalism of modern architecture was also revived. Until the end of the 1920s, in

Europe, the Soviet Union, and the United States, this concept was a relatively weak phenomenon in terms of the real volume of construction, although in the modern architectural history it usually appears as the dominant style of the era (Moizer 2021).

Khrushchev's break with neoclassical architecture did not mean criticism of Stalin. Specific projects and their designers, including laureates of Stalin prizes, were perceived as objects to be ostracized. Three of them were completely deprived of their titles. In general, Khrushchev's position was consistent with the proposals of the young architect Georgy Gradov. He addressed Khrushchev with a letter, outlining the main steps to avoid expensive Stalinist construction methods. The acuteness and significance of Khrushchev's address has been disregarded for a long period of time, but the current historiography of architecture evaluates it as one of the most important manifestos in modern architecture (Kazakova 2013).

If under Stalin, Soviet architecture's tasks should master the "historical legacy," later it became connected to rational construction methods. The internal political problem consisted in resolving a most serious housing crisis across the entire gigantic Eurasian empire ranging from Soviet Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg) in the west to Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan in the east. In terms of foreign policy the challenge was to win the competition with the capitalist world. The military balance for this had already been achieved, at least geographically. During the Potsdam Conference of 1945, immediately after the end of World War II and the defeat of a common enemy, conflicts began between the former allies leading to the Cold War.

Khrushchev's speech to the Soviet construction guild also was an important manifesto because it formulated post-war architectural design principles in the USSR. By revolutionizing architecture and construction, he outlined the principles of Soviet international politics for the next 30 years. This new policy was reflected both in urban planning strategy and in new building standards and regulations of socialist architecture. Rational design and standard construction, which became highly important under Khrushchev, served as the basis for the largest architectural and construction program of the 20th century. In fact, this former locksmith from the Ukrainian Donbass, as no one else in the world, had a significant impact on construction in his country, although his reign ended by 1964.

However, exactly a decade prior to his resignation, Khrushchev set a new direction for future Soviet architecture. "We are not against beauty, we are against meaningless things," he declared, criticizing Moscow's chief architect, Aleksander Vlasov. At that time, the state had no money for houses with broach-



Fig. 24. "Detsky Mir" toy store in Alma-Ata, 1962. Source: Ruslan Muradov archive



Fig. 25. Yu. Ratushny and others. Hotel "Kazakhstan" in Alma-Ata, 1978. Source: Ruslan Muradov archive



Fig. 26. E. Rozanov, V. Shestopalov, Yu. Boldychev, engineers V. Krichevsky, I. Lentochnikov. Lenin Museum in Tashkent (1970). Source: Ruslan Muradov archive

es and towers and other types of “luxuries.” The Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers of the USSR passed a decree entitled “On the elimination of excessiveness in design and construction” which was published a year later. It reported that “many architects are mainly involved in decorating the facades of buildings and they do not work on improving internal planning and furnishing residential buildings and apartments.” Considering that a year earlier Khrushchev had outlined the contours of economic construction, this decree appeared as a blow to officials on various levels.

Albeit with some delay, the new Soviet functionalism immortalized itself in the architecture of the Kremlin Palace of Congresses (State Kremlin Palace) in Moscow. This structure, which seems architecturally provocative next to the historical monuments of the Kremlin, is considered the firstborn of Soviet architecture during the Khrushchev era (Meuser, Börner, Uhlig 2009: 56-63). However, the lofty artistic concepts of post-Stalinist architects could only be realized in single and particularly important buildings. Mass housing development lagged far behind representative buildings from an aesthetic standpoint. Nevertheless, it played an important role in political

propaganda. A functional style designed to produce as much living space as economically possible in the shortest possible time, became an artistic expression of a new mode of life which reflected itself in Central Asia as well.

The massive use of concrete throughout Kazakhstan brought along the construction of transparent public buildings such as the “Tselinny” cinema (architect V. Katsev, 1964) or the “Detsky Mir” store (1962) in Alma-Ata (Fig. 23). Their modest geometric shapes and glass facades symbolized architectural transparency and served as an intentional contrast to the pomp of Stalinist buildings.

A new area of competition between geo-political systems emerged in the 1960s and was reflected in the architecture. After the world’s first manned space flight, the struggle between the two social systems intensified in the field of aerospace. The success of Soviet cosmonautics was reflected in architectural images. For example, the Ostankino television tower built in Moscow in 1967 resembled the shape of a rocket. The fascination with space symbolism also manifested itself in Tashkent when a 375 meter-high television tower was erected in 1984 which also appeared very similar to a space rocket. Of course, the architecture



of this tower—designed by N. Tersiyev-Tsarukov, Y. Semashko, and V. Rusanov—was also conditioned by the seismic conditions of the region.

Gagarin's flight gave rise to semiotic architecture such as the aerospace museum in Kaluga or the circus in Kazan which has the appearance of a "flying saucer" (Chaubin 2012; Ivanov 2017). Its dome is no longer an element of the overall architectural composition such as in the Moscow Theater of Satire which has become a separate space. While the foreign policy crises such as the events in Cuba, Vietnam, and Czechoslovakia widened the gap between the superpowers and technological competition in the space did not contribute to ideological rapprochement; the Soviet Union was also shaken by internal political problems.

On April 26, 1966, an earthquake destroyed the center of Tashkent – at that time the fourth largest city in the USSR. The houses built mostly of adobe collapsed within minutes. Hundreds of thousands of townspeople lost their homes. This major human tragedy provided a political opportunity for the leadership to conduct a propaganda campaign to display exemplary city rebuilding. Teams of designers and builders from every Soviet republic were sent to Tashkent within a month. In the following years, this city located in the southern part of the USSR turned into an experimental laboratory for industrial homebuilding (Meuser 2016). The mixture of Soviet style and local folk art created a unique result and today Tashkent is considered a successful example of Moscow's efforts at providing teams of architects and homebuilding industrial plants with a certain level of artistic freedom.

The outcomes included confirmation of a less than obvious analogy between the artistic capacity of panel homebuilding and Islamic artistic principles. At the same time, it fulfilled Khrushchev's requirement of using similar buildings on construction sites and following the same principle in various building types. Or, to put it more provocatively, the Soviet ideology of serial homebuilding combined with the Islamic rule of repetitive basic forms, although they have different cultural origins, have an affinity when it comes to their use in architecture. In 1954, Khrushchev had stated that expensive facade decoration was a waste of resources and even should be considered an "architectural perversion." Later, however, this approach was softened by the universal principle of Islamic decor with its repetitive designs covering a building like skin.

The sun-protective grids, known as "panjara," played a special role in the prefabrication of decorative features. Until the end of the 1980s, the use of these particular features in Soviet Central Asian architecture served as a second curtain wall in both residential and public buildings.

The so-called House of Soviets in Alma-Ata (architects A. Naumov, V. Mikheyev, 1968) with its rotary sun-protective panels or the hotel "Kazakhstan" (architect Yu. Ratushny et al., 1978) with its elegantly curved lines of deep balconies shading the hotel rooms located behind them (Fig. 25) are examples of non-standardized buildings that can withstand both the cold of Central Asian winters and the summer heat.

The Eastern building traditions in Soviet architecture from the early 1970s are also found in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Ethnic elements in architecture can be seen in Tashkent's Lenin Museum (architects V. Rozanov, V. Shestopalov, 1970) and the Uzbekistan Hotel (architects I. Merport et al., 1974) (Fig. 26-27), or the Karl Marx State Library in Ashgabat (architect A. Akhmedov, 1960-1975), which formed part of a major administrative and public city center (Gnedovsky 1978).

Urban planning focused on urban landscape creation underwent an unprecedented boom during this period. Spacious areas with architectural

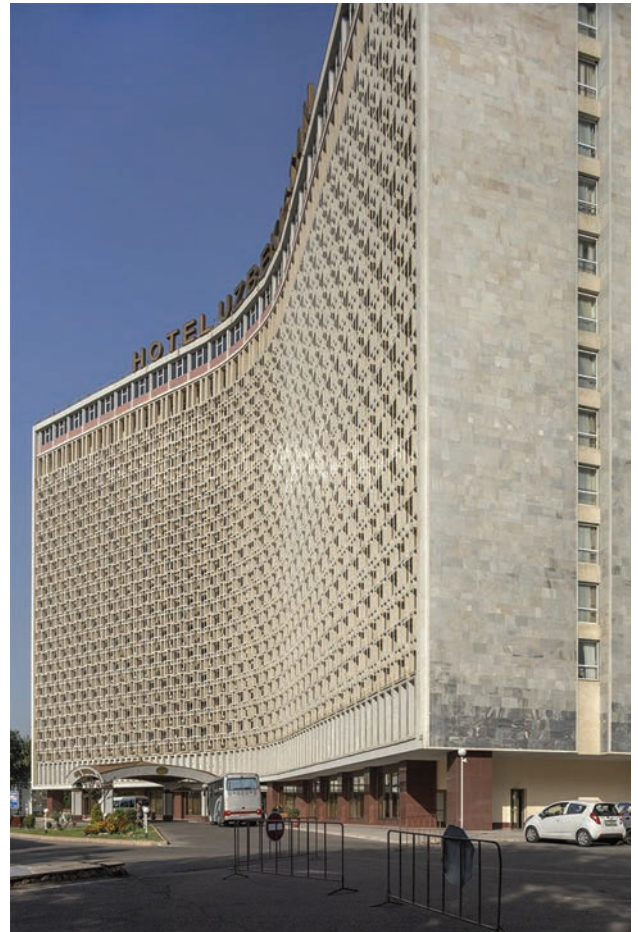


Fig. 27. I. Merport, L. Yershova and V. Roshchupkin.  
Hotel "Uzbekistan" in Tashkent, 1974.  
Photo: Roberto Conte, 2017

accents, inspired by the master plan of the city of Brasilia, became mandatory elements of integrated urban planning. In terms of architecture and theory, and sometimes detail, parallels could be found both in Soviet Central Asia and in Eastern Europe. Urban ensembles characterized by their scope emphasized public space as a stage portraying the life of a socialist society. The consistent separation of traffic streets from pedestrian zones was recognized as progressive and promising.

The focus on western architectural standards from the early 1960s stood in parallel with economic cooperation with the West which was later fulfilled by Brezhnev. Using a radical modernization of industry and agriculture, Khrushchev started to compensate for the economic and technical ties with the West absent under Stalin. This also included the construction of railway branches in southern Siberia and the agrarian-industrial development of the Kazakh SSR with its center in Tselinograd (today's Nur-Sultan). The plowing of the Kazakh steppes was the Soviet version of the civilizing development of the American West from a century earlier.

These far-reaching plans also included an ambitious reconstruction of Central Asian cities. The projects with new vast administrative areas containing public buildings, following Soviet ideology, specifically expressed the unity of culture, education, and politics. These appeared between 1971 and 1980 in the Soviet Central Asian capitals of Ashgabat (Turkmenistan), Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan), Pishpek (Kirghizstan) and Tashkent (Uzbekistan) (Conte, Perigo 2019). These examples of architectural concepts that corresponded to Brezhnev's russification policy was stated in the 1977 Soviet constitution. Among its official goals was the creation of a "united Soviet people;" economic cooperation with the West during the previous cultural isolation from the outside world; as well as cultural and common assimilation within the country.

Eastern elements of Central Asian architecture were first introduced due to Khrushchev's prescribed economizing in architecture, and then, under Brezhnev, to the focus on originality and diversity. The features were expressed either in the direct use of traditional motives as, for example, in the musical and drama theater in Kyzyl near the Mongolian border; or abstractedly, with the help of reliefs, as on the facade of the Party archival complex (Fig. 28) and the House of Political Education in Ashgabat (sculptor Ernst Neizvestnyi, 1974).

The architect Nikolai Ripinsky (1906-1969) played an important role in the history of Soviet architecture in Kazakhstan. After graduating from the Kiev Civil Engineering Institute in 1931, he worked in Moscow for eight years under the leadership of Ivan

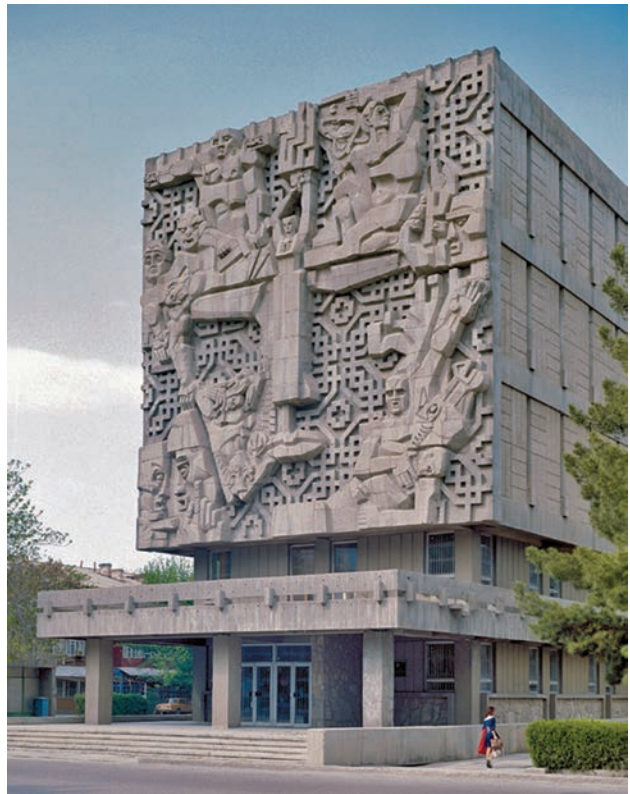


Fig. 28. V. Klivensky, D. Vysotskaya, sculptor E. Neizvestnyi. House of the Party Archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan. 1974. Photo: Vyacheslav Sarkisyan, 1995

Zholtovsky, one of the most senior Soviet architects at the time. In the 1940s, Ripinsky was repressed and then exiled to Kazakhstan. In 1954, he headed the Kazgorstroyproyekt in Alma-Ata, the largest design institute in the Kazakh SSR. In 1970, after his death, the construction of perhaps his most important work was completed in Alma-Ata – the Lenin Palace of Culture. Later, it was renamed the Palace of the Republic (Fig. 29). In general, this city has also developed its own architectural language displaying features of national Kazakh architecture ranging from turquoise-blue domes to walls with designs from national folklore and Central Asian-styled interiors (Bronovitskaya et al. 2018).

Repetition as a decorative principle superimposed on the aesthetics of facade decor during the late 1960s fell on fertile soil in Soviet Central Asia. The architectural designs of typical kindergartens and nurseries also included the Central Asian principle of decorating with repeating ornamentation in the form of butterflies or fish. Although this method was an unconscious interpretation of Muslim design traditions, it simultaneously expressed a craving for architectural decoration which spread throughout the entire zone influenced by the former Soviet Union.

This expressed a combination of typical construction with a touch of individuality in the external design.

In addition to its attempt at creating a single, figurative language for a vast, culturally diverse, and giant empire, the Soviet Union sought out specialists from the countries of the “class enemy.” For example, in the late 1950s France sold licenses to the USSR for the design and construction of standard housing in Baku and Tashkent. But by the early 1970s, the first specific representative urban planning projects appeared in the Soviet empire. Their development and construction often took 10-15 years. This was the era of the grand building, the so-called “architecture of congresses,” which within the Soviet sphere was expressed, first, in the buildings having a cultural or scientific purpose or those that determined the appearance of urban centers.

The period of the 1960s and 70s was characterized by the contours of the USSR’s ideological domination most widely outlined on the map of the post-colonial world with the help of hidden participation

in wars around the globe. After de-Stalinization, the Soviet empire acquired a new international face and presented itself to the outside world as cosmopolitan and modern. At least in the media, Brezhnev and his associates tried to appear on equal ground with the capitalist West. It sought to project a model of society which was meant to dominate in the future. Yet, the internal economic signs of disintegration within the socialist camp were becoming noticeable from the outside. While the art of hiding this crisis still prevailed, representative architecture and astronautics—especially prestigious for world powers—served as a platform for the competition of society’s best model.

But as the country’s economic situation became more precarious and the entire state system’s signs of wear proved more noticeable, supporting a feeling of victorious optimism was more important. On the eve of the 22nd Summer Olympiad in 1980, Moscow experienced a grandiose construction boom whose assistance clearly and visually demonstrated the superiority of its own political system to the whole world.



Fig. 29. N. Ripinsky et al. Lenin Palace in Alma-Ata. 1970. Source: Ruslan Muradov archive



Fig. 30. E. Rozanov et al. Palace of Friendship of the Peoples in Tashkent. 1982. Photo: Werner Starke.  
Source: [postvu.com/717649](https://postvu.com/717649)

The expressed desire for organic forms was reflected in its representative buildings and in the capitals of the various Soviet republics (Fig. 30).

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power brought about the rejuvenation of the Politburo leadership while simultaneously providing an impetus for economic development. However, Gorbachev's "perestroika" initiative and policy of openness inevitably led to the disclosure of abuses within the economy resulting in the self-liquidation of the state and party

dictatorship. After the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991, the so-called "turbo-capitalism" took root in the former space of the Soviet superpower. This was intensified by the growing importance of the regional capitals and centers because of general decentralization. This gave rise to a new type of Eurasian city, based on the American model, which was mostly oriented on vehicular movement and abundance of shopping centers, whereas Soviet traditions have been preserved in homebuilding.

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