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Living Efficiently

The Aesthetic of the Russian One-Room Habitat in the 1920s

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So far, housing in the early Soviet era has been considered in terms of collectivist ideas, materialized in the house-commune. Projects for this type are seen by historians as the materialization of the Communist ethos, primarily because they provided minimal spaces for individual habitation and ample shared facilities for dining, entertainment, childcare etc. What I am interested, instead of these shared spaces, is the individual living cell. I argue two things. First, that this cell is the Soviet analogue of what Sloterdijk called the “egosphere,” the Western efficiency apartment housing and forming the individual subject. As such, it was supposed to play a crucial role to how the Communist self was constructed, a role even more important than those assigned to the much discussed communal spaces. Secondly, I argue that “egosphere” had a particular quality which was a symptom of Soviet politics, aesthetics, and ethics of the 1920s. The way in which it was designed defined the citizen as a worker, as one who physically operates the environment in the same way he would operate tools in the factory. The Communist egosphere was a particular kind of a “machine for living,” which was to be operated as a mechanism in the most literal sense. As such, it materialised the communist ethos, but also represented a reinterpretation of Western models. Both the Communist and the Western efficiency do not, of course, exemplify how the majority of the population lived. But they are key models of domesticity which show how architecture projected the image of the modern self.

Egospheres

Sigfried Giedion famously defined the striving for efficiency as the main tenet of the modern.¹ “Efficiency” meant the increase in speed, the elimination of all that is superfluous, the streamlining of movement. These advances were all made possible by mechanization and, in turn, demanded an increased mechanization of all aspects of life, from industrial production to the organization of the home. Moreover, efficiency became an

1. Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).



existential principle which defined how people approach modern living: how they think of hygiene, comfort, social life.

In architecture, perhaps nothing exemplifies the principle of efficiency more than the type of apartment with the same name. The “efficiency” is the single-room habitat which enables the occupant to satisfy needs and wants in a minimal and best organized spatial envelope. In it, eating, grooming, entertaining are performed in the most economical way.

Peter Sloterdijk argues that the efficiency apartment is also efficient in another way: as the architectural envelope that aids the formation of the modern self, the individual social unit, in the most effective way. In “Cell Block, Egospheres, Self-Container: The Apartment as Co-Isolated Existence” he calls this architectural type an “egosphere,” and stresses its role in the formation of the modern capitalist subject and the template for modern social life.² “The tendency towards cell-formation,” he writes, “is the architectural and topological analogue of the modern society.”³ Sloterdijk explores it as a space containing a vast array of “egotechnologies,” such as the book, the mirror, the radio, the television, means of exploring and crafting one’s image, “pairing with oneself,”⁴ which encloses the self-indulgent, self-reflexive, individual. For him, the efficiency or studio apartment is also a stage for performing egoistic rituals of pleasure, such as masturbation and one-night stands. He traces the development of the “cell block” from Le Corbusier’s fascination with monastic cells to the present day and the wide-spread Western phenomenon of solitary life. What characterizes “egospheres” is that they are mass-produced. Although the individual searches for authentic experience, this experience and the image of the self are standardized. Architecture also operates in tandem with the media, which disseminates mass fantasies, information about ideal health and nutrition, spiritual and physical ideals. The architecture and culture of the efficiency apartment complements mass culture and, architecturally, the stadium, as a site of mass “fascinogenic” existence.

When Sloterdijk turns to the East, he stresses the contrast between the isolation of the individual self in the capitalist society socialist existence in the Soviet Union. He uses the example of the house-commune as a model of collective habitation and claims that it precluded the formation of “egospheres” and “self-containers.” The capitalist self, he argues, is formed in the efficiency apartment. The socialist self was to be formed in spaces for collective living.

2. Peter Sloterdijk, “Cell Block, Egospheres, Self-Container: The Apartment as a Co-Isolated Existence,” trans. Daniela Fabricius, *Log 10* (Summer/Fall 2007): 89-108.

3. Sloterdijk, “Cell Block, Egospheres, Self-Container,” 89.

4. Sloterdijk, “Cell Block, Egospheres, Self-Container,” 99.

Most literature on Soviet housing discusses the house-commune as a model for socialist habitation. And it stresses the role of communal spaces. Which is quite logical. The collectivization of dining, childcare, entertainment, study most apparently exemplifies Communist ideals. Here are some examples. Anatole Kopp, who studied constructivist designs for house-communes, is fascinated with what he calls the “supercollectivization of life,” and the inclusion of libraries, clubs, kindergartens, nurseries, schools, recreation centres, into house-communes.⁵ He, furthermore, posits, that, according to this model, individual housing units were supposed to disappear. The scholar who compiled an amazing amount of archival material on Soviet architecture, which most subsequent writing was based on, Selim Omarovich Khan-Magomedov argues with him in terms of dating and the origins of communal housing, placing them in the early 1920s. But he similarly focuses on collective spaces.⁶ The discussion of house-communes continues with Andrei Ikonnikov’s contemplation on the successes and failures of experiments in communal living and the social contribution of projects for house-communes, which again have to do with the possibilities of collectivizing domestic life.⁷

5. Anatole Kopp, *Town and Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning 1917-1935*, trans. Thomas E. Burton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970).

6. Selim Omarovich Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and the 1930s*, trans. Alexander Lieven, ed. Catherine Cooke (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987).

7. Andrei Ikonnikov, *Russian Architecture of the Soviet Period*, trans. Lev Lyapin (London: Collets, 1988).

But in this paper I want to focus on the individual unit within the commune, the “egosphere,” or the space for individual habitation. I will claim that, in the context of the unbridled enthusiasm for collective living, the individual cell still played an important role in defining the socialist self. I want to explore how notions of efficiency and mechanization were materialized in this type of unit, what were their particularly Soviet aspects, and what was the dialogue between single cell design in the Soviet Union and modernism in the West.

One of the most iconic examples of Soviet housing of the 1920s is the experimental project for the house-commune designed in 1929 by constructivist architects Mikhail Barsch and Vladimir Vladimirov for the Housing Commission of the Russian Socialist Federal Republic . It was supposed to house 1,000 people and is emblematic of Soviet social experiments because it was supposed to have a communal dining room, school, club, facilities for childcare. It incorporates ideas about efficiency and mechanization: in the dining room, for example, there is a production line which delivers food to the tables. One of the key problems in this design, however, was also the individual cell, what Barsch and Vladimirov called “the sleeping cabin.” As



drawn by architects, it measured 3.75 by 1.6 meters without the sanitary unit. The challenge was to make the most compact living space, but at the same time to provide for what was seen as the basic needs for the individual in a private or semi-private sphere. The individual as an isolated unit. The cell is made for rituals of self-care (it contains a shower, a toilet and a sink), for rituals of self-reflection (there is a desk for reading), and for self-grooming (it contains a closet).

What was the status of this sleeping cabin, and those like it, in the Communist project of housing collectivization? Which values, if not those of the Western consumer society, was it supposed to embody? What was efficient private space according to Soviet architects? What was the model citizen defined by this space? These are some questions I will attempt to answer.

Let me start with a cell not unlike this one, whose author elaborated his intentions in more detail. It is the “living cell” in Nikolai Miliutin’s project for *Sotsgorod*, designed in 1930. The construction of the new living unit is part of Miliutin’s program to do away with two characteristics of the old city: family-based habitation and the organization of the city around a market. The new “living cell” is proposed according to the program of disurbanism, which promoted the elimination of the differences between city and the country. In it, family disappears, and people associate freely, according to their private preferences, rather than economic or property reasons. The purpose of the room is not to be only a sleeping cell, because, according to Miliutin, that reduces the dwelling “to a mere toilet.”⁸ He tried to articulate what the individual sphere was, what the individual needs of a solitary inhabitant were. He defined them as book use, relaxation, safekeeping of things, hygiene. The unit is supposed to provide for all these functions in the most minimal space, with an area of only 8.4 square meters.

8. Nikolai A. Miliutin, *Sotsgorod: The Problem of Building Socialist Cities*, trans. Arthur Sprague (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), 82.

The aesthetic of the cell is the modernist aesthetic of light, air, and cleanliness. Miliutin tries to provide for unobstructed ventilation, and wages a war against decoration and open shelving, as well as “various rags which our inhabitants do so love to ‘prettify’ their dwelling, turning it into such a dusty accumulation of useless trash.”⁹ Miliutin cites Marx’s words from the Communist Manifesto on the abolition of “official and unofficial prostitution,” i.e. marriage, and celebrates the breakup of the family, the symbol of which is the elimination of the double bed. Instead, new units are formed where people do not share a bed, but sanitary facilities.

9. Miliutin, *Sotsgorod*, 84.

One is not united with the other by sex, but by a love of hygiene. (In his project, notably, the toilet is eliminated as a “dirty” object which spoils the picture.)

Miliutin does not only eliminate the double bed, but also all mobile furniture except a folding chair. All furniture is built in: a working table, a divan-bed or a collapsible bed, storage, medical cabinet. Rather than a set of objects, Miliutin considered the furniture “the minimum necessary equipment that is indispensable for man’s living quarters.”¹⁰ Everything in the “cell” slides, folds and unfolds. The bed is a Murphy bed. The desk folds into the closet or is folded parallel to the wall. The chair can be folded or unfolded. The inhabitant is in a constant physical relationship with the interior. He does not only live: he also operates home as a physical labourer: opening, closing, sliding, folding its parts, living in locomotion. In effect, the apartment is not only a space for self-reflection, but also housing equipment, which is to be physically operated, worked with. Whereas Sloterdijk’s capitalist subject was a passive reflective subject, the Communist inhabitant is also a worker, and he is moulded as a physical labourer through the way he inhabits his “egosphere.” To live efficiently means also efficiently operating the environment, which one approaches as an apparatus, something resembling the apparatus of production.

10. Miliutin, *Sotsgorod*, 84.

The idea of the environment as an assemblage of dynamic objects which have to be operated, worked with, emerged at the beginning of the 1920s. Boris Arvatov, the prominent art critic, wrote in his “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing” that objects are mechanical creatures, human partners, living instruments, and “co-workers in human practice.”¹¹

11. Boris Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing,” trans. Christina Kiaer, *October* 81 (Summer 1997), 121. Originally published as “Byt i kul'tura veshchi,” *Almanakh prolektkulta* (Moscow, 1925).

Collapsible furniture, moving sidewalks, revolving doors, escalators, automat restaurants, reversible outfits, and so on constituted a new stage in the evolution of material culture. The Thing became something functional and active, connected like a co-worker with human practice. Mechanization + dynamization led to the machine-ization of the thing, to its transformation into a working instrument.¹²

12. Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing,” 126-27.

To become a Communist, in Arvatov’s understanding, is nothing less than to achieve a psychological and physical union with the dynamic thing, and operate it like a machinist.



Only when the productive forces of humanity begin to be operated by mechanics, electrical fitters, machinists, drivers and conductors will the dominion of Things—as instruments directly connected to both the people and the forces of nature that operate them—begin.¹³

13. Arvatov, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing," 128.

Arvatov's call for the "machine-ization + dynamization" of the everyday object and his trust in the power of this transformation to shape the person as a psycho-physiological individual was preceded by the design efforts of the students of the Higher Artistic Technical Studios (VKHUTEMAS) students. The 1923 exhibition of their works in Moscow unveiled, according to the journal *Lef*, three "types" of things: (1) moving things, (2) foldable things, (3) multifunctional things. These things were supposed to play a key role in creating the Communist New Man. According to the journal *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* (Contemporary Architecture) these were "not any kind of things, but things that organize and educate the society."¹⁴ They were made by new people, capable of combining "productive-constructive and social-organizational skills."¹⁵ Things presented by VKhUTEMAS students, and intended for minimal living spaces, move, fold, change function. They are unfinished things, things always on the brink of becoming something else. There is a folding bed; there is a bed that transforms into a chair. They are, in a way, prototypes of IKEA furniture of the modern studio apartment, created with Revolutionary zeal and the belief that they can transform man and society to create a new, active self.

14. *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* 3 (May 1929), 121.

15. *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 121.

Similar furniture was designed in what Anatole Kopp¹⁶ discusses as a paradigm of efficient planning in constructivist architecture, "Unit F" developed for the Housing Committee of the Russian Socialist Federal Republic. The committee included Moisei Ginzburg and Mikhail Barsch. Unit F emerged from the "scientific" analysis of different kinds of apartments, "residential boxes" to be mass produced. The project involved two split-level one room apartments shared a corridor. (This project served as a model for Le Corbusier's *Unite d'Habitation*.) Each unit would effectively be one room, split into two levels: one with a height of 2.25 meters and one with a height of 3.5 meters. This type of housing was not only experimental, but was built in Moscow on the Gogol' Boulevard in 1930, and architects who designed the building occupied many of the apartments of the F type.

16. Kopp, "The Stroikom Units" in *Town and Revolution*.

The furnishing for this unit was developed by El Lissitsky with VKhUTEMAS students. There was standard, partially built in furnishing in each of them, including a round table, shelf, sofa

and three soft top stools that could make up a second sofa when placed in a row by the wall near the soft back fastened to the wall. There were two fold-down beds fastened to the wall in the sleeping place. There were built-in lighting fixtures moving on rods. In “Equipping the Residence with Furniture” of 1930 Lissitsky wrote that his design choices were guided by the new standard: the one-room apartment as a workers’ abode.¹⁷ What had been taking place in multiple rooms now took place in one. For him, the single room was the new socialist housing type. As in Miliutin, the inhabitant had minimal possessions, was a true proletarian. “They move into the apartment as they do into a steamship cabin or a railroad car compartment bringing just linen and items for personal use with them,” Lissitsky wrote.¹⁸ The second aspect of this typification was that the elementary psychophysiological needs had to be analysed and classified, so that the furniture can be mass produced. The aim was to define the most rational and efficient occupation of living space and the most progressive workers’ attitude to the environment. This involved not only turning the apartment into a mass-produced total work of art but also what Lissitsky calls “equipping” the habitat. His “equipment” resembles an apparatus of a mechanical nature which is to be constantly manipulated. The apartment is, as Arvatov put it, “dynamized” and “mechanized.” The two basic types of furniture, to be combined, are furniture that is “transformable and convertible,” and one that is “combinatory.” One should, according to Lissitsky, “seek such limits of mechanization that [people] should service [themselves].”¹⁹ The user combines various standardized elements to construct and reconstruct the “box.”

Soviet mechanization of the apartment, despite its peculiarities, often involved a curious dialogue with developments in the West. Unit F was, in some versions, supposed to contain a uniquely Soviet contraption: the kitchen armoire. In the quest for efficiency the apartment was condensed to such an extent that the kitchen became, according to its designers, a closet-laboratory. This closet was the result of engagement with Western models of Taylorization and standardization of the working class abode. In 1928, an architectural correspondent of the constructivist journal *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* visited the housing exhibition in Stuttgart, in which he discovered the Frankfurt kitchen by Margarethe Schütte-Lihotzky, designed from standardized elements and according to Taylorist principles. There were great economic hopes for the innovation. These were hopes that Soviet

17. Lasar Lissitsky, “Oborudovanie Zhilishcha Mebelyu” (1930), cited in Selim O. Khan Magomedov, *Heroes of the Avant-Garde: Lasar Lisitsky* (Moscow: S.E. Gordeev, 2011).

18. Lissitsky, “Oborudovanie Zhilishcha Mebelyu,” 202.

19. Lissitsky, “Oborudovanie Zhilishcha Mebelyu,” 202.



housing would finally be liberated from unnecessary kitchen space, which could now be contained in a minimal possible volume. Volume and surface calculations were revised in light of the new discovery. The mutant Soviet offspring of the German architectural invention was introduced in the January 1929 issue of *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura*. It incorporated all the basic elements of the culinary instrument reassembled as an oversized armoire. The kitchen betrays a fascination with disassembling and reassembling, with condensing, with the movable thing as the axis of everyday life and the mechanism for the self-affirmation of the working man. It was meant to be unfolded, folded, opened, closed, and effectively worked on, rather than worked with. It belonged, like the Frankfurt Kitchen, to an inhabitant-worker. And it enforced this notion by defining domestic space as something to be refashioned and reconstructed.

Probably the most extreme example of the mechanization of the “egosphere,” where the entire cell becomes an apparatus is Lissitsky’s project for an efficiency apartment exhibited at the Dresden Hygiene Exhibition in 1929. The residential box is dominated by a wall that rotates 90 degrees around a hinge. The wall can transform the cell from a one-room into a two-room space, depending on the time of the day. During the day, it is folded against the wall, and the room is open. During the night, it occupies the centre of the room, and divides it into two bedrooms. Three beds can pop out of the wall. The habitat is no longer a stable composition, but a gigantic apparatus, which the worker has to operate during the course of the day, an apparatus rather than a cosy nest. It is constantly under construction, as is the Communist society in becoming and the proletarian self.

The Soviets and the Western modernists communicated ideas about mechanization, efficiency, and the modern self. Perhaps the most curious example of the import and transformation of Western modernist ideas into Russia is the constructivist reinterpretation of Le Corbusier’s “machine for living,” the one-room Villa Savoye. Le Corbusier was published in Russia already in 1922. His “five principles” were well known to Russian architects. When the Building Committee set out in 1929 and 1930 to design the ideal workers’ dwelling, it produced Individual House no. 30. It was a one-room villa in nature, had white washed walls, strip windows, and was raised on pilotis. But it also measured four by four meters, and was intended for a single person. Instead of partitions, there were different

20. "Individual'noe zhilische tip no. 30," *Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura* 6 (November 1930), 13.

combinations of basic objects: bed, desk, table, and "sanitary unit, which determined "different level of differentiation of everyday functions in the room."²⁰ There is also a second version of the project, developed for the competition for Magnitogorsk, which incorporates Le Corbusier's principles and the idea of the operable house. In it, everything was supposed to move and change. At night, the bed is pulled out. In the morning, the bed is folded in and the shower curtain is pulled for a morning shower. Then the table and the chair are unfolded . . . The aesthetics of the machine for living were fused with the literal mechanization of the house.

Russian architects were also fascinated by the "unrootedness" of Le Corbusier's architecture (he claimed his designs were inspired by ships, and he announced that he will build identical versions of Villa Savoye on different locations around the world.) This "unrootedness" of the Le Corbusian model was a basis for a new kind of planning imagination. The Section for the Redistribution of the Population of the State Planning Committee (the members of which were again Ginzburg and Barsch, and the spiritual leader sociologist Ohitovich) integrated it into a deurbanist project for a "commune of houses" which would be an alternative to the "house commune." Villas could move, and be placed, according to user's desires, at different distances and form different connections, so that one day in the future an organic and voluntary collective is created. This final, romantic, version of the house-machine, as a habitat in bucolic nature, as both a mechanism and an organism, the modern version of the primitive hut, resonates with Le Corbusier's later project, his Cabanon de Vacances of 1952, which was, like the Individual House, a crystalized and miniaturized interpretation of modular principles, measuring also approximately 4 by 4 meters. And it was the very abode which Le Corbusier built for himself instead of a client, working on defining his own mode of habitation and identity.

Like the efficiency apartment, the Communist living cell was an important template for modern living, despite the collectivization of housing functions not present in the West. Despite the fact that most people, in fact, do not live in either type of "egosphere," both are powerful models for how the self was imagined and how the architects projected ways in which it was to be formed. What is peculiar for the Soviet "self-container" is that the worker as an inhabitant was not only a passive contemplative subject, but was also supposed to work on the environment as an apparatus,



to operate it, to realize his identity of a labourer in relationship with the living environment. The connections between the Soviet and the Western model of the habitat as a “machine for living” in these two examples in the 1920s exist and are maybe more complicated than one would admit. Most importantly, Soviets adopted Western ideas, subsuming them into utopian projects. A reconsideration of the Western efficiency might involve not only reading it as a materialization of the capitalist cultural logic, but also exploring its implicit potential as a vehicle for a voyage toward real and imaginary futures.