И снова об авангарде первых десятилетий XX века

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CONSTRUCTIVISM: PRAGMATIC UTOPIANISM

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of the history of Constructivism and its essential theory and practice in Soviet Russia of the 1920s and early 1930s, focusing particularly on various areas of design activity, including architecture and furniture, graphic design and photography, sculpture and textiles. Consequently, it analyses in detail several designs that embody most clearly the Constructivist approach. Some of these were produced by the original members of the Working Group of Constructivists (Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Aleksei Gan, etc.), while others were devised by artists who never officially joined the group but embraced Constructivist ideas (The Vesnin brothers, Gustavs Klucis [Gustav Klutsis], Lyubov Popova, Vladimir Tatlin, etc). The author acknowledges that the Constructivists' aspiration to transform the Soviet material environment could be considered utopian in the conditions of Russia's social, economic, and industrial circumstances of the early 1920s, but she stresses that there was also a very strong element of pragmatism in Constructivist theory and practice, which is evident in the way they tackled real problems and offered eminently practical solutions to everyday difficulties. This argument is supported by detailed analyzes of certain Constructivist objects.

Key words: constructivism, aesthetic program, utopia and reality, constructed sculpture, design, architecture, textiles, posters, OBMOKhU, VKhUTEMAS.

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КОНСТРУКТИВИЗМ: ПРАГМАТИЧЕСКИЙ УТОПИЗМ

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Аннотация: В данной статье представлен обзор истории конструктивизма и его основных теорий и практик в Советской России 1920-х и начала 1930-х годов с акцентом на различные сферы практико-ориентированной деятельности, включая архитектуру, мебель, графический дизайн, фотографию, скульптуру и текстиль, через подробный анализ некоторых проектов, которые наиболее ярко воплощают конструктивистский подход. Некоторые из этих проектов были созданы первыми членами Рабочей группы конструктивистов (Александр Родченко, Варвара Степанова, Алексей Ган и др.), а другие — художниками, никогда официально не входившими в группу, но разделявшими идеи конструктивизма (братья Веснины, Густавы Клуцис, Любовь Попова, Владимир Татлин и др.). Автор утверждает, что в рамках социальных, экономических и производственных условий России начала 1920-х годов стремление конструктивистов к преобразованию советской материальной среды, несмотря на попытки решения реальных повседневных проблем, было утопическим как в теории, так и на практике. Этот аргумент подтверждается подробным анализом некоторых объектов конструктивизма.

Ключевые слова: конструктивизм, эстетическая программа, утопия и реальность, конструктивистская скульптура, дизайн, архитектура, текстиль, плакат, ОБМОХУ, ВХУТЕМАС.

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Introduction

In March 1921, a group of Russian artists coined the term 'Constructivism' and formed the Working Group of Constructivists (Рабочая группа конструктивистов). In addition to Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, the group included Karl Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetskii, and the Stenberg Brothers — Georgii and Vladimir, as well as Aleksei Gan, who wrote the group's program and the important

treatise on the ideas underlying it, Constructivism [Ган 1922b; Gan 2014]. Outside the group, artists like Lyubov Popova, Gustav Klucis, Aleksandr Vesnin, and Vladimir Tatlin also embraced Constructivist ideas.

The Constructivists proposed a new definition of art. In their program (The Progam of the Working of Group of Constructivists of INKhUK — Программа рабочей группы конструктивистов ИНХУКа), they declared «death to art», rejecting the traditional notion of the work of art and aspiring to apply their artistic skills (developed through manipulating abstract forms in two and three dimensions) to designing useful objects for industrial production [Khan-Magomedov 1986, p. 290–291; Хан-Магомедов 2003, с. 118–119]. The Constructivists called their artistic explorations «laboratory work» and this new type of creative activity «intellectual production». Moreover, they proclaimed that their ideological foundation was «scientific communism, built on the Marxist theory of historical materialism». Their aim was «the communistic expression of material structures». With this aim in view, they organized their material according to three principles: Tectonics — the socially and politically appropriate use of industrial material; Faktura — the conscious handling of material; and Construction — the organization of the material to fulfil a specific purpose.

In effect, the Constructivists were hoping to become industrial designers. They were taking their art out of the studio, out of the art gallery, and out of the drawing rooms of privileged individuals into the factory and into the home of every Soviet citizen. In this way, they hoped to contribute to the creation of a new environment — an environment that would both help to bring about the classless society of socialism and reflect their own dreams of what that environment should look like.

They had a vision, and they spent the next decade trying to create material objects that corresponded to that vision. Of course, in many ways this whole program seems to be utopian and unrealistic. The real conditions of life in the Soviet Union in 1921 were not propitious. The attempt to create a place for industrial design seemed destined to fail in a country that was just recovering from seven years of almost continuous conflict and where industrial output was a tenth of what it had been in 1914.

In December 1921, the theorist Boris Arvatov acknowledged this problematic and utopian aspect of Constructivism in a discussion at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture — INKhUK (Институт художественной культуры — ИНХУК). He stated: «We have a proletariat in the West and an ideology of proletarian culture in Russia. We have Constructivist ideologists in Russia and a Technological Industry in the West … This is the real tragedy. This is the situation in Russia now… The more courageously we deal with it, the better it will be. Is this of practical importance? Unquestionably. It's a form of political activism. It's propaganda … we should say «Comrades, this is Utopianism» … It is Utopia, and we have to say it… Utopia

is a sign, and it will play an enormous role. What can you do? We live in an age of transition» [Art into Life 1990, p. 76].

Inevitably, scholars have followed Arvatov in recognizing the essentially utopian nature of the Constructivists' aspirations as well as the tremendous difficulties and complexities that they confronted in implementing their program in a social, industrial, and economic situation that was highly unfavorable to their objectives. For Maria Gough, the Constructivists' utopianism belonged to the utopian atmosphere of the immediate post-revolutionary period [Gough 2005, p. 191]. From this perspective, the difficulties that the Constructivists subsequently encountered can be seen within the general context of the Bolsheviks' utopian attempt to implement socialism in an industrially undeveloped and war-weary country.

An alternative explanation for the obstacles that the Constructivists confronted in achieving their aims is provided by Christina Kiaer who adopts Walter Benjamin's analysis of the situation. He identified «the problem in the disjunction between the utopian potential of the collective fantasies located in the profusion of objects and the different utopia enacted in the asceticism and monumental aspirations of the official forms of Bolshevik collectivity» [Kiaer 2005, p. 223]. While acknowledging that consumer desires might have not been satisfied by the austerity of Constructivist designs, Kiaer also suggests that the Constructivists actually sought to create objects that would mediate between consumer desires and socialist goals [Ibid., p. 224]. The Constructivists tended to stress the needs of society, and there are few mentions of consumer desire, as opposed to utility, functionality, and economy, in the Constructivist literature prior to 1925. Even so, it is possible that attention to consumer demand began to influence Constructivist theory and practice in the latter half of the 1920s. Certainly, the consumer began to be mentioned in theoretical discussions. For instance, in January 1925, at the First Conference of LEF (Left Front of the Arts — ЛЕФ — Левый фронт искусств), the theorist Nikolai Chuzhak criticized current Constructivist practice and argued that it should operate «in accordance with the ultimate aims of Communism, but also in direct co-ordination with the market tasks of the day» [Перцов 1925, с. 136]. At the same time, Gan pointed out that the designers were «cut off from the consumer» by the buyers for the big stores, while also being undermined by the critics [Перцов 1925, с. 144].

Whatever the specific reason or reasons, Constructivism seems ultimately to have been unable to fulfil its potential and its aspiration to attain what it called in its program the «Communistic expression of material structures» (Коммунистическое выражение материальных сооружений) [Khan-Magomedov 1986, p. 290; Хан-Магомедов 2003, с. 118].

In this article, I should like to stress the pragmatism and realism that underpinned this program, arguing that Constructivist ideals were based firmly in the artists' experiences of the Revolution and their understanding of its aims and aspirations.

From this perspective, that of the artists themselves, their program can be seen not as impractical utopianism but rather as an attempt to overcome actual problems confronting the ordinary Soviet citizen and, in this way, assist in the transition from a capitalist to a socialist environment. The Constructivists were not content with rhetoric, theoretical discussions, and simply producing designs on paper, but in pursuit of their aims, they developed a design methodology and produced prototypes of useful objects. Perhaps, following Arvatov's suggestion of December 1921, the Constructivists' activities can be seen as a form of propaganda, for their ideals. Yet the objects that they produced not only expressed the Constructivists ideas, they also were intended to fulfil really political and practical needs. In order to demonstrate the Constructivists' attention to detail and the practicalities of function and industrial production, I shall discuss and analyse some of the objects that they designed in detail.

In many ways, the position of the Constructivists was pragmatic and realistic because it entailed complete acceptance of the Revolution and a commitment to the changes that it had generated and needed to generate. By 1921, the Bolsheviks had effectively won the Civil War, and the Revolution was an accepted fact of life. The Romanov dynasty, which had lasted 300 years, had been destroyed. The aristocracy had been eliminated. Their estates had been divided up and the land given to the peasants. The huge city mansions had been carved up into much smaller living spaces for workers' families. The old way of life and the last vestiges of the old order seem to have been swept away. To avant-garde artists, including the Constructivists, the resulting tabula rasa entailed rebuilding everything, including art. Vladimir Tatlin and his colleagues voiced a common identification between the revolution and avant-garde art, when they wrote in 1920 «What happened from the social aspect in 1917 was realized in our work as pictorial artists in 1914, when 'materials, volume, and construction' were accepted as the foundation for our work» [Татлин 1921, с. 11].

At the same time, the Constructivists' move from the studio into the factory was firmly based on the reality of what artists had been doing during the Civil War. During the conflict, artists had been involved in a range of practical activities that had brought them out of the studio into the street. Creating decorations on a large scale for the revolutionary festivals had effectively fused painting, sculpture, and architecture, creating totally artistic environments, and generating the idea that the new art should embody this synthesis of the arts, while also giving birth to the idea of the artist as the creator of the revolutionary environment. The artists' involvement in producing propaganda posters for the Bolsheviks, running artistic affairs, and creating monuments for Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda led them to identify with the collective and see themselves as communicators of the revolutionary message.

The Call to Arms: Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International

Fig. I. Vladimir Tatlin, Model for a Monument to the Third International, November 1920
Source: Photo, Private Collection

The first concrete object to indicate the wider ramifications of these experiences was Tatlin's Model for a Monument to the Third International (Fig. I). It had been commissioned in late 1919 as part of the Plan for Monumental Propaganda and was completed in Petrograd in November 1920, before being moved to Moscow. The model was a huge wooden structure, about 9 meters high, but the final building was to be made of iron and glass and to be third higher than the Eiffel Tower.

The Monument was to consist of a large skeletal structure consisting of two spirals supported by an enormous girder, inclined at the angle of the earth's tilt. Inside this enormous structure, Tatlin placed four huge volumes to be made out of glass: a cube, a pyramid, a cylinder, and a hemisphere. In deference to the climate, the glass would be constructed with a vacuum, so that the glass buildings would retain the heat. According to the description published by Nikolai Punin in late 1920, each of these glazed structures was to function as premises for various bodies associated with the Third Communist International [Пунин 1920]. The lowest structure was to house legislative assemblies and was to rotate at the speed of one revolution per year. The pyramid was to house the International's Executive and Secretariat. It was to revolve at the speed of one revolution per month. The cylinder, which was to house an information center, issuing pamphlets, posters and manifestos, was to rotate at the speed of one revolution per day. Slogans were to be projected onto screens surrounding the topmost hemisphere, which may have been intended to house a radio station. Radio masts were to rise from the top of the building and messages transmitted through a telegraph office. In this way, dynamism pervaded the monument's structure and function. Not only did the interior structures move at varying rates, speeding up towards the top and evoking the motion of an efficient machine, but their purpose was also dynamic to foment revolution.

Obviously, this was an impractical project: the technology of the day was inadequate for building such a complex structure. Tatlin seems to have had difficulties even in constructing the model, so during the process, he changed the lower cube into a cylinder. In his display, Tatlin explicitly linked his art with the new technology hanging a slogan announcing, «Engineers and Bridgebuilders Make calculations for

the development of new forms». He also called on his artist colleagues to use their art to devise items of everyday use.

This investigation of material volume and construction made it possible for us in 1918 in an artistic way to begin to combine materials like iron and glass, the materials of modern classicism, comparable in their comparable in the severity with the marble of antiquity. In this way, the opportunity emerges to unite purely artistic form with utilitarian intentions. An example is the project for a monument to the third international (exhibited at the Eighth Congress). The results of this are models that stimulate us to inventions in our work of creating a new world, and which call upon the producers to exercise control over the forms encountered in our new everyday life [Татлин 1921, с. 11]. Tatlin was challenging other artists to do the same — to participate with their artistic skills in the practical tasks of creating a new world, but he was also emphasizing the synthesis of the arts, and the fusion of art with technology in combining art and utility.

This was an aesthetic position, but it also represented a practical response to Soviet reality and developments in the wider world. For the new state, technology represented the key to recovery from the devastation of the military conflicts, which had destroyed industry and reduced the economy to a system of barter. Technology was also the key to future progress, and survival. Lenin stated: «without machines, without discipline it is not possible to live in contemporary society. It is essential to possess the latest technology or to be crushed» [Ленин 1969, с. 116]. In this respect, Constructivism represented a realistic approach to reality and how the government envisaged changing that reality.

By early 1921, government policy was focused on stimulating the tattered Soviet economy and resuscitating industry through measures like NEP: The New Economic Policy. This represented a compromise with capitalism and was intended to encourage entrepreneurial activity. Small businesses could be privately owned, but large factories and all heavy industry were state-owned. At the same time, Lenin introduced his plan for the electrification of Russia, with the slogan «Communism equals Soviet Power plus the Electrification of the Entire Country» [Ленин 1970, с. 30].

In this respect, the Constructivists' emphasis on industry was a realistic and direct response to current Communist Party policy. Industry had a particular importance in the new Russia — both practically and ideologically. It was key to economic survival and implementing socialism in a primarily agrarian country, but the workers — the new rulers of Russia — were themselves the product of industry and an industrial culture based on technological development. Lenin stressed the importance of using the latest production methods, developed in the USA by Henry Ford (the production line) and the time and motion ideas of Frederick W. Taylor — which were called Taylorism. Of course, before the Revolution, Lenin had criticized Taylorism as a method of exploiting the proletariat. Now it was a tool for reindustrializing Russia.

Laying the Foundations: Laboratory Works and Experimental Constructions

In May 1921, the Constructivists presented a series of works at the Society of Young Artists, the OBMOKhU (Общество молодых художников — ОБМОХУ) exhibition in Moscow (Fig. 2). The exhibits look like innovative works of art, although strictly speaking, these works could now be categorized as «laboratory works» — i. e. experiments in three-dimensions undertaken not as aims in themselves, but with an ultimate, utilitarian aim in view. Two of the surviving exhibits are Rodchenko's Oval in an Oval (Fig. 3) and Medunetskii's Spatial Construction (Fig. 4). Both are about materials and space. In the Rodchenko construction, the form develops in space, enclosing and interacting with it. In the Medunetskii work, the shapes thread through each other with a minimum of contact and their lines define the spatial parameters of the enclosed volumes. Rodchenko cut concentric shapes from a piece of plywood and then rotated them and fixed them in place with wire. The process meant that the work literally moved from the flat plane into three-dimensional space. Rodchenko then suspended these constructions from the ceiling so that they could turn slightly in the breeze and, and in this limited way, interact with the environment. Rodchenko used plywood and painted it with metallic paint. The metallic paint reflected the light, visually dematerializing the structure further for the viewer, intensifying the play of light on the form, and increasing the sensation of dynamism.

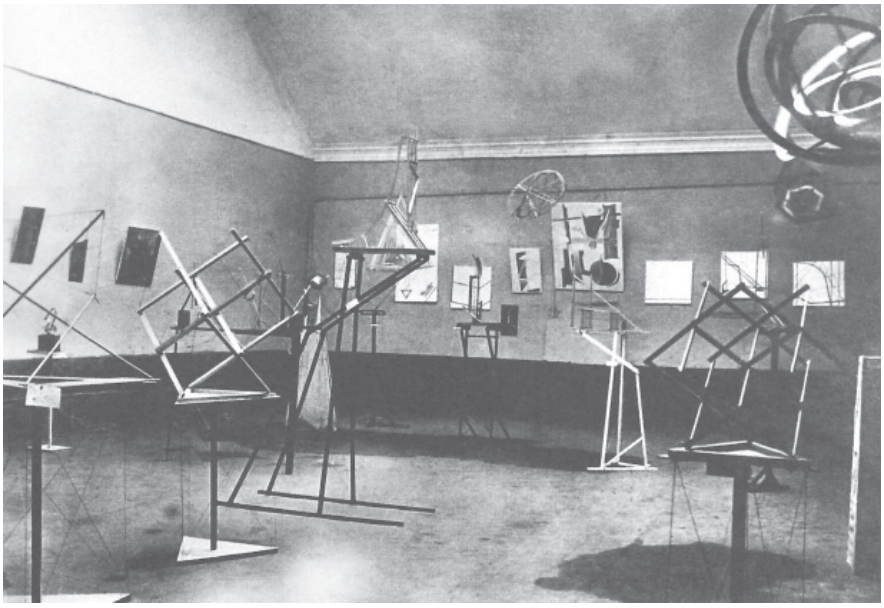

Fig. 2. Second Spring Exhibition of the OBMOKhU, Moscow, May 1921. Photograph showing the exhibits of the Working Group of Constructivists
Source: Photo, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive

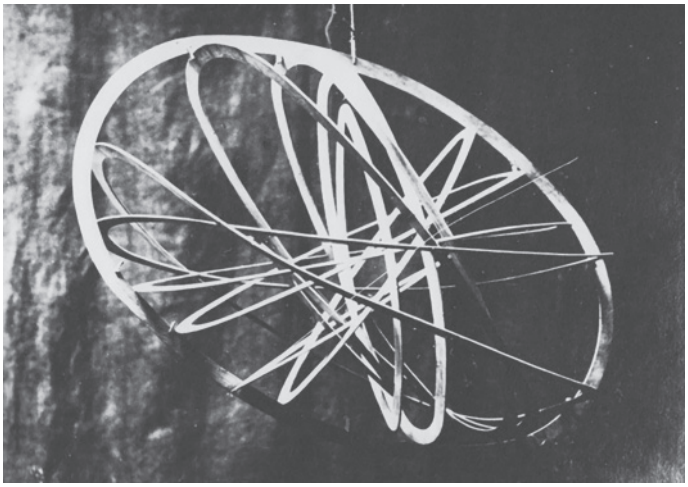

Fig. 3. Aleksandr Rodchenko, Spatial Construction No. 12, Oval in an Oval, 1921. Museum of Modern Art, New York
Source: Photo, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive

Fig. 4. Konstantin Medunetskii, Construction, 1921
Source: Photo, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, USA

Fig. 5. Vladimir Stenberg, KPS No. 13 (Construction of a Spatial Structure), 1921
Source: Photo, Private Collection

In contrast to the mathematical clarity of Rodchenko's construction, Vladimir Stenberg's work possesses a more technological emphasis (Fig. 5). It includes metal and glass, offcuts of which he probably acquired from the railway yards, where he and his brother worked [Хан-Магомедов 2008, с. 22]. The construction looks as if it might be part of an existing or projected technical structure — like roof lights or a bridge. It clearly isn't, but it has a very strong technological and engineering resonance. This resonance is intensified by the stand. Instead of a solid plinth, Vladimir Stenberg produced a supporting open-work skeletal structure. The two elements — the sculpture and the stand — work in harmony together, forming one large entity. The entire ensemble, with its use of industrial material, also epitomizes the principles of economy, space, technology, and industry.

In comparison, Medunetskii's construction is much freer of specific technological or utilitarian associations (Fig. 4). It focuses on the aesthetic and inherent qualities of the materials, which are visually highlighted by the color of the forms. The red rod is of malleable iron and its curved form contrasts with the shinning yellow and sharpness of the flat brass triangle.

The First Constructivist Designs

1922 saw the first practical implementation of Constructivist ideas when Klucis designed a series of propaganda stands to mark the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in Moscow and the fifth anniversary of the Revolution [Klucis 2014]. While the 'radio orators' simply consist of loudspeaker s transmitting recorded speeches (Fig. 6), other stands are more complex. Screen-Tribune-Kiosk, for instance, combines a screen, a speaker's platform, and underneath shelving and a panel for displaying literature and posters (Fig. 7). This was a multi-media stand — combining film (newsreels), sound (the speaker's voice), the written word (leaflets) and images (posters). The structure was based on the kind of skeletal and telescopic constructions that Klucis had made in 1921 from wooden rods of identical thickness, but varying lengths (Fig. 8). It also displayed the influence of the Stenberg brothers' constructions and stands, with the use of tension wires. In this respect, it is a good example of how laboratory works fed into the design process. The complex structure was economic in terms

of the materials used, relatively easy to construct (and deconstruct), and so could be moved to different locations, and was functionally flexible since it was able to fulfil various propaganda functions. We do not know, however, whether it was built. One stand, The International was erected at the hotel where the Comintern delegates were staying, but apart from that, it is not known precisely how many stands were made.

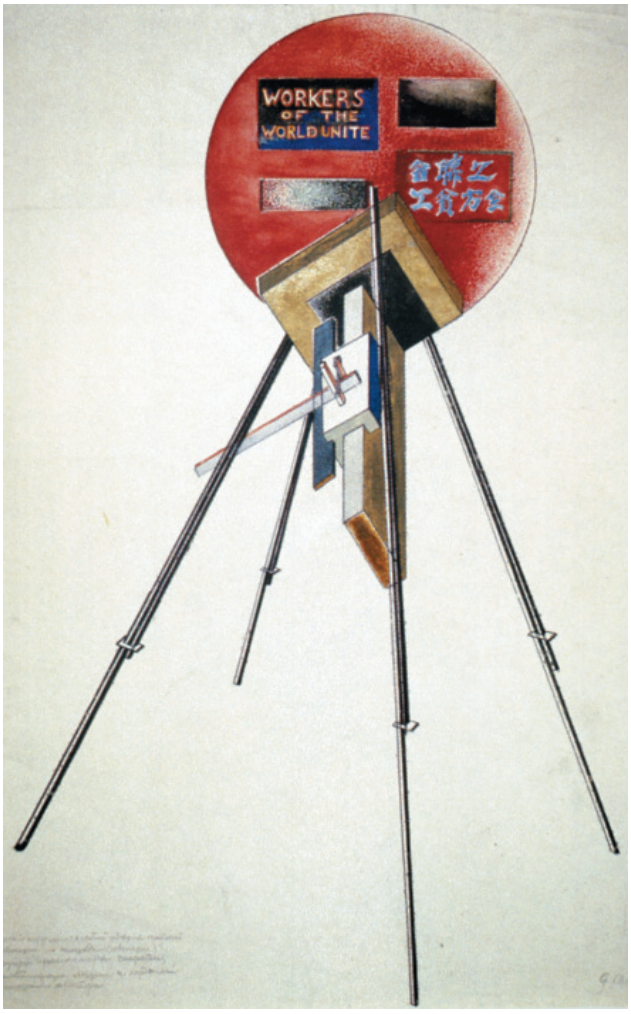

Fig. 6. Gustav Klucis, Design for a Stand Celebrating the Anniversary of the Revolution, 1922
Source: Photo, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

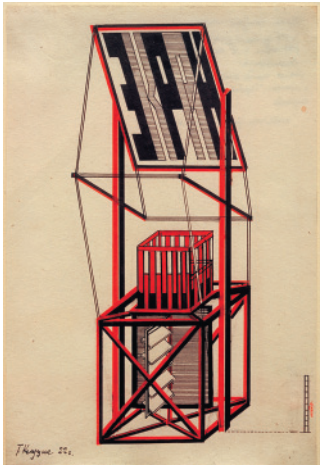

Fig. 7. Gustav Klucis, Design Screen, Tribune, Kiosk, 1922
Source: Photo, Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

Propaganda stands and kiosks — impermanent structures, often made of wood — provided an opportunity to explore different design ideas and even get

them made. At a time when materials in general and building materials were in very short supply, this was an important consideration. Gan, for instance, designed a book kiosk, which could be erected anywhere and closed up, when not in use (Fig. 9). Opened up, it contained several shelves, which enabled potential customers to see what publications were on offer and buy them.

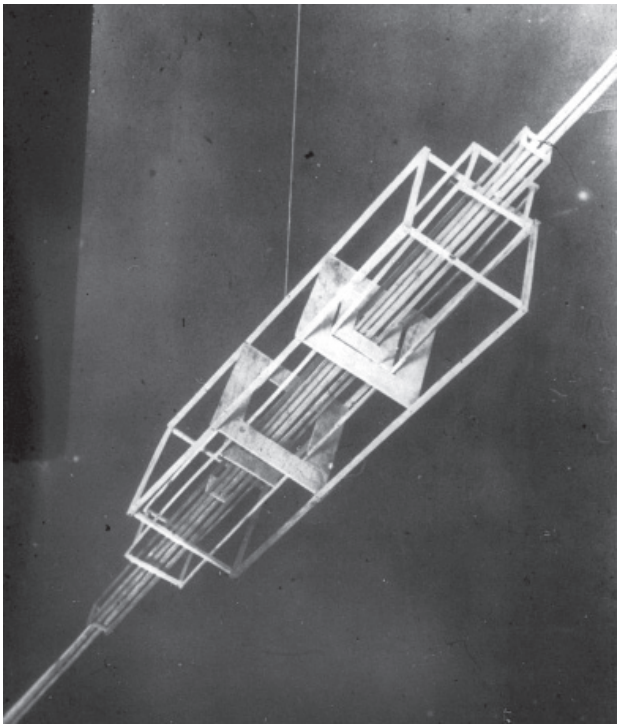

Fig. 8. Gustav Klucis, Constructed Sculpture, 1920s. Lost
Source: [Klucis 2014, vol. 1, p. 14]

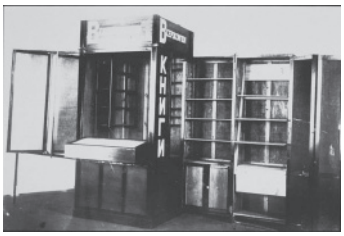

Fig. 9. Aleksei Gan, Book Kiosk, 1924
Source: Photo, Private Collection

Constructivist Objects in the Theatre

Such stands and kiosks were relatively small in scale. A more challenging opportunity to explore Constructivist ideas was provided by the theatre. Popova's set and costume designs for The Magnanimous Cuckold, which opened in April 1922, was one of the first demonstrations of Constructivism in the theatre. The play was set in a mill, which Popova transformed into a machine for acting — a skeletal apparatus, containing doors, ladders, wheels, a slide, and a bench (Fig. 10).

At particularly dramatic points in the action, the wheels would start rotating. While the stage became a machine, the actors became workers. Hence, they all wore identical working clothes, with trousers for the men and skirts for the women.

These costumes were called production clothing (прозодежда) and individuals were only distinguished by various minimal additions such as an apron for the Nanny. The acting style was in tune with Constructivism's industrial and technological emphasis. Vsevolod Meyerhold turned his actors into gymnasts and mechanical entities. He developed the theory of biomechanics, according to which, the actors conveyed emotions through physical actions. These movements employed some of the gestures derived from commedia dell'arte.

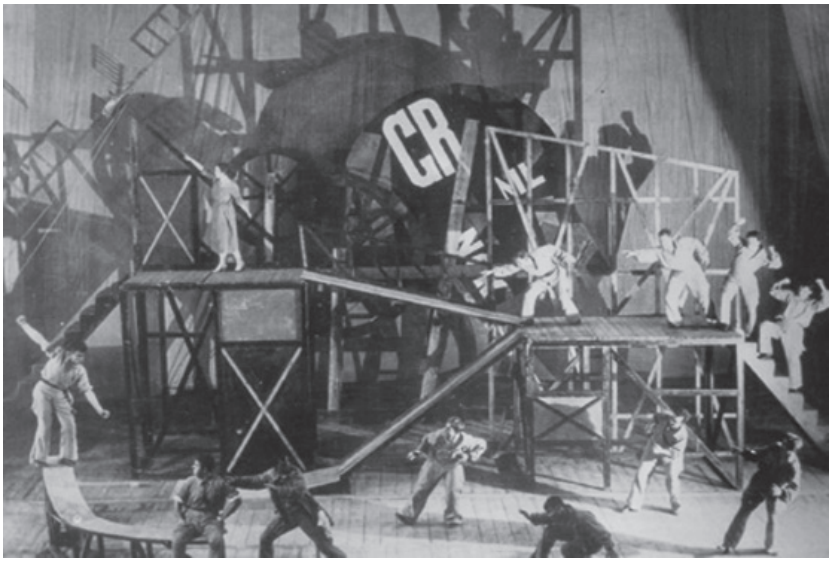

Fig. 10. Photograph of the production of The Magnanimous Cuckold, April 1922
The décor and costumes were designed by Lyubov Popova
Source: Photo, Private Collection

For a while, Meyerhold's theatre continued to provide a microenvironment, where Constructivists could develop design ideas. For The Death of Tarelkin, Stepanova, created not one machine but a series of devices, which were painted white (Fig. 11).

Unlike Popova's rather monolithic set, they were relatively easy to move and so could be distributed at will across the stage. They were involved in the action, so when one of the characters landed in jail, he had to go through a structure resembling a meat mincer. 1n 1923, Aleksandr Vesnin produced a more architectural set for the play based on G. K. Chesterton's 1908 novel, *The Man who was Thursday*, directed by Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamernyi Theatre in Moscow (Fig. 12). It combined elements from both Popova's and Stepanova's sets, but was more ambitious structurally, looking like real scaffolding and containing many more levels and a lift. For all three artists, the theatre provided a micro-environment where they could experiment with ideas and realize them for a limited period.

Fig. 11. Photograph of the production of The Death of Tarelkin, 1922
Set and costumes designed by Varvara Stepanova
Source: Photo, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive

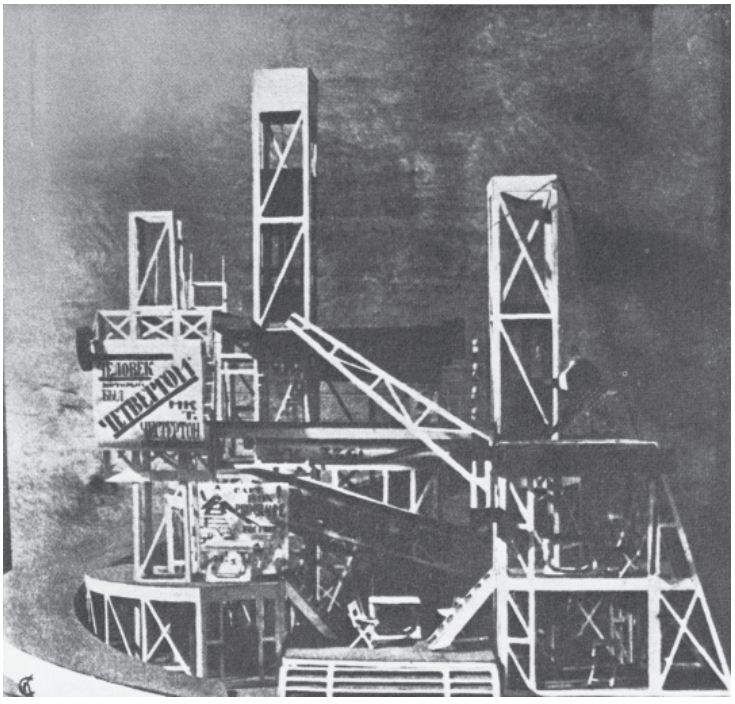

Fig. 12. Photograph of the production The Man Who Was Thursday, 1923
Set and Costumes designed by Aleksandr Vesnin
Source: Photo, Private Collection

Constructivist Textiles and Mass Production

While the theatre provided a forum for exploring design ideas, possibilities for engaging in industrial production were limited. In 1923 the manager of the First State Cotton Printing Factory in Moscow, however, advertised for artists to come and work in the factory as designers. Popova and Stepanova responded to this call, and between autumn 1923 until early 1924 they produced an enormous quantity of textile designs that were printed at the factory. They were responding to a real need of the country. By 1923, textile production in Russia was beginning to recover from the disruption caused by the fighting, but factories were having difficulties finding alternatives to the foreign patterns (mainly French) on which they had formerly relied [Strizhenova 1991, p. 136]. Cloth was in very short supply, and output was extremely low in terms of both quantity and quality [Yasinskaya 1983, p. 9]. Factories mainly produced plain cloth, but sometimes re-used pre-revolutionary designs and templates.

All of the designs that Popova and Stepanova submitted to the factory were based entirely on geometric form and responded to the structure of the fabric — i. e. the warp and weft. All the designs were economic in both the set of shapes and the limited range of colors that the artists used. At most, they employed two colors plus black, in addition to the white of the fabric. The permutations that both artists devised are stunning.

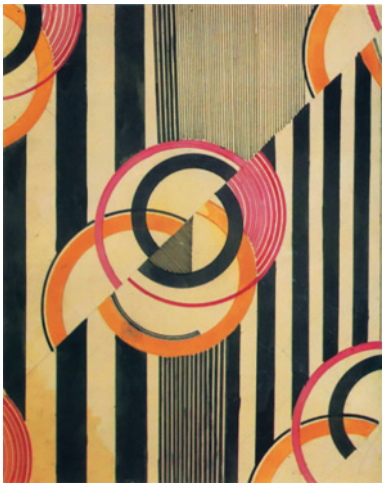

Fig. 13. Lyubov Popova, Textile Design, 1924
Source: Photo, Private Collection

Popova manipulated simple geometric forms, lines, triangles, and circles as well as color and the base white of the fabric to produce a vast range of designs. Sometimes the result looks extremely complex (Fig. 13), but it is created simply from vertical lines in black of various widths which are placed at various distances apart, to which are added pink and yellow circles of various sizes. The component elements may be simple, but vibrancy and dynamism are created by the dislocation of the image — *сдвиг* — that disrupts the regularity.

Stepanova worked in a very similar way, using the same vocabulary of geometric shapes, orchestrated to produce numerous permutations. In one of her designs, she simply made a pattern using vertical lines in one color to evoke circular shapes, using horizontal lines in another color to define the spaces between the circular forms. As a variant of this, vertical lines replaced the horizontal lines, to produce a different effect (Fig. 14). Such prints were a far cry from the pre-revolutionary fabrics, which

usually consisted of floral motifs in a regular repeat pattern. As an article in Pravda acknowledged, «these designs are infused with the pulse of contemporary life — dynamic and strong» [Викторов 1923].

Fig. 14. Varvara Stepanova in a dress made from fabric printed to her own design, 1924
Source: Photo, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive

Constructivist Clothing

Inevitably, both Stepanova and Popova designed items of clothing using their new designs, such as the dress Stepanova produced for herself (Fig. 14). In general, the clothing was simple in shape and adapted to the various functions the person

wearing it had to perform — either related to work or relaxing. Both artists had designed their first items of clothing as costumes for the theatrical productions they had devised for Meyerhold. For these plays, they had developed the idea of production or working clothing (прозодежда) (Fig. 10), (Fig.11). This meant clothing that was designed to fulfil a specific function perfectly.

If it was intended for working, «production clothing» could simply be overalls, which were functional, without decoration or embellishment. In contrast, Stepanova's designs for sports clothing (*спорт одежда*) include geometric decorative components, although here these had the function of identifying various teams (Fig.15). Apart from this feature, all the items were strictly functional, and economic in terms of material used and the process of production (cutting and sewing), since they are simple and geometric in shape (comprising mostly shorts, but one skirt).

Fig. 15. V. Stepanova, Samples of sportswear, 1923
Source: [ЛЕФ 1923a]

Using an identical approach Rodchenko designed his own worker's suit, conceived with his own type of activity in mind (Fig. 16). Appropriately, it has many

pockets for his pens, etc. It also has leather trim on the neck, cuffs, and the openings, presumably so that it would be hard wearing. The construction is clearly displayed through the lines of stitching. There is no attempt to conceal or decorate. Everything could be justified in terms of function.

Tatlin, too, designed clothing — a worker's suit and all-season coat (Fig. 17). Tatlin explained that the coat was made of a light material but had several different linings: flannel for spring and autumn, and fur for winter. It was cut wide over the shoulders and under the arms to allow for air circulation — and hygiene. The pockets were placed quite low down so that the hands could easily rest in them [Татлин 1924]. Tatlin had hoped to interest a factory in his designs, but sadly failed. He also designed a fuel-efficient oven, but none of the three variants that he made worked well.

Fig. 16. Photograph of Aleksandr Rodchenko in his production suit, 1923
Source: Photo, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive

Fig. 17. Vladimir Tatlin, Design for an Oven and an All-Season Coat, 1924
Source: Photo, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive

Opportunities for the Constructivists to work in actual factories were severely limited. Soviet industry was at a low ebb in the early 1920s, and those factories that were functioning in general had no idea of how to use designers. The exception was the First State Cotton Printing Factory in Moscow. But Tatlin's experience was more typical. When he approached the Lessner Factory in Leningrad, he was set to work as a draughtsman, copying plans [Институт 1923, с. 87].

The Workers' Club

So, although the Constructivists wanted to design for industry, they had to be satisfied with designing and making individual items themselves. This proved

difficult and, therefore, the only fully designed Constructivist interior to emerge in the 1920s was the Workers' Club (Fig. 18). This was designed by Rodchenko and made for the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris in 1925 [Варст 1926]. Rodchenko's design fully answered the ideological, physical and social requirements of the new state. For the Bolsheviks, Workers' Clubs were important crucibles for the new society. They provided places for rest and relaxation but also for culture and education. They supplanted the church as social centers, and they tried to inculcate new communist values. Often, because of the building shortages, the clubs were often organized in old buildings, which were ill-adapted to fulfil these needs.

Fig. 18. Aleksandr Rodchenko, The Workers' Club, Paris, 1925
Source: Photo, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive

Rodchenko's design responded to this role and current realities. He provided items of furniture that were suitable for the purpose: table and chairs, plus bookshelves, a display board, a speaker's platform, and a chess table. He used standardized elements and spelt out Lenin's name in a modular form to link his design method with the great leader. Lenin had died the year before, in early 1924, and naturally his image adorned the walls of the Club. Every item was constructed from wood, which was cheap and plentiful in Russia, could easily be worked and produced in existing factories.

All the items of furniture were space saving. Rodchenko was not just following Constructivist principles, he was also thinking of the real situation of workers' clubs in the Soviet Union. Often, they consisted simply of one room and that room needed to be able to cater for all the activities in which the workers wished to engage. There was no room for bulky furniture and unnecessary items. Space was at a premium. Hence the principle of devising items that were space-saving or could be collapsed and easily stored when not in use answered a real need.

The table consisted of a middle section and two flaps, which ran down its whole length, on each side. These flaps had a slight ridge along their entire edge, which enabled books to rest there at an angle, so they were easy to read. When the table needed to be used for other activities, such as painting or making posters, the flaps could be raised, and the table became a single flat surface. Likewise, the chairs were constructed simply and economically. There were three uprights which were joined at the top — to provide armrests — in the middle to provide a seat and at the bottom to provide stability. The uprights were joined at the base by three wooden struts, in the middle with extended semi-circles of wood, and at the top by a ring of wood.

Constructivism and The VKhUTEMAS

The Constructivists not only designed objects for everyday use, but they also developed a design methodology and teaching programs that would instill that methodology in a new generation of artists. The Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops, known as the VKhUTEMAS (ВХУТЕМАС — Высшие государственные художественно-технические мастерские) were set up in December 1920 to train artists for industry and to train art teachers for schools [Декрет 1920]. The Constructivists played a leading role in three of the eight faculties: The Basic Course or Foundation Department; the Wood and Metal-work Faculty which was run by Rodchenko; and the Architectural Faculty, where Aleksandr Vesnin and Moisei Ginzburg worked.

Constructivist Graphics

One of the few areas which consistently demonstrated Constructivist principles during the 1920s was Graphic design, especially posters and book covers. As in the textile designs, the Constructivists used simple geometric forms but combined them in inventive and innovatory ways. Inevitably, posters included a figurative element, so that the viewer could clearly identify the item that was being offered, but this item could be presented in an innovative way or combined with abstract elements, as in Rodchenko's poster for children's dummies (Fig. 19).

Fig. 19. Aleksandr Rodchenko, advertising poster, 1923
There are and Have Been no Better Dummies. Ready to be sucked until Old Age
Source: Photo, Private Collection

Fig. 20. Aleksandr Rodchenko,
Cover to the journal LEF, 1923
Source: [ЛЕФ 1923b]

While the objects in these early posters were often hand-drawn, Rodchenko also used collage elements, cut from magazines and newspapers, as in his cover design in which a gorilla with the spear is attacking an airplane (Fig. 20). The image effectively communicates the Communist message — which was also the Constructivist message: Modernity, the new technology, and the airplane are unbeatable. They are taking humanity to new heights and leaving the old values and the old way of life behind.

Increasingly, the Constructivists made photomontages and used photographic images in their graphic designs. Photographs are figurative, but they are also the products of a machine — the camera, and they can be reproduced in multiple copies. As Gan stressed, they are «a product of industrial culture» [Ган 1922a]. Undoubtedly, this quality of mechanical production and reproduction attracted the Constructivists.

At the same time, the photograph's ability to be perceived as an accurate reflection of reality and to make objects seem real and tangible made photographs valuable for propaganda and made photomontage an ideal medium for propaganda posters. In 1924, after the death of Lenin, photomontages answered the demand for memorabilia and images of the dead leader. They could be produced rapidly and could use and re-use a limited store of images, manipulating them in different ways to produce an almost endless supply of images.

It was, however, the First-Five Year plan, implemented in 1928, that brought photomontage to prominence as a medium for propaganda and Klucis as the designer of some of the most effective and persuasive posters produced. In his designs, he frequently repeated the photographic image at different scales to give it more impact, and generally at a diagonal to evoke a sensation of dynamism. He used red grounds, which contrasted with the grey of the photographic images and increased the visual impact of the image. And he used simple sans-serif lettering, which was easy to read.

Fig. 21. Gustav Klucis,
For Socialist Construction
Under the Banner of Lenin, poster, 1931
Source: [Klucis 2014, vol. 1, p. 295]

One of his most memorable posters is Under the Banner of Lenin for Socialist Construction, in which the faces of Lenin and Stalin are fused (Fig. 21). By manipulating the photographs, Klucis created an image in which the two leaders share one eye. Visually, this poster reinforced the idea of Stalin as the rightful heir to Lenin and imbued him with the same kudos as the dead leader. Lenin is in front, suggesting the vision of an industrialized Soviet state is his. But Stalin is close behind supporting him and realizing his vision.

The Constructivist Photograph

Of course, manipulating photographs taken by someone else encouraged the Constructivists to take their own photographs. Rodchenko seems to have started taking photographs in 1924, when he acquired his first camera. He stressed that he was concerned to explore the potential of the camera as a machine to present

a different image of the world. He emphasized the desirability of adopting different views, of looking down or looking up at things in the everyday world. He took mages of industrial items, focusing on their details. When he was taking his photograph of the Shukhov Radio Mast, he was inside the mast, looking up, and his image reveals the intricate framework of the structure (Fig. 22).

Fig. 22. Aleksandr Rodchenko, The Shukhov Tower, 1929
Source: Photo, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive

Architectural Constructivism

Constructivism also became involved with designing real buildings for the new environment. The original members of the Working group of Constructivists had been artists, not architects, but Aleksandr Vesnin, who painted and devised theatrical decorations, was also an architect who embraced Constructivist ideas. In 1925, he and a few other architects, such as Moisei Ginzburg, set up the Society of Contemporary Architects, known as OSA (Общество современных архитекторов — ОСА). The group were committed to using the latest technology and creating modern buildings that would be «social condensers», stimulating the emergence of a new way of life, that would be appropriate to the new technological age as well as promoting a more communal and socialist ethos.

Initially Constructivist designs for buildings displayed the process of construction and the structural skeleton supporting the building on the outside as in the Leningrad

Pravda office designed by the Vesnin brothers (Aleksandr, Viktor, and Leonid). Eventually, however, the Constructivist architects adopted the main features of Le Corbusier's architecture and the International Style, such as smooth white walls, ribbon windows, flat roofs, and a roof terrace. All these features are present in Ignatii Milinis and Ginzburg's Narkomfin building (Fig. 23), which has recently been lovingly restored to its original condition [Гинзбург 2020].

Fig. 23. Moisei Ginzburg and Ignatii Milinis,
The Narkomfin Building, Moscow, 1930
Source: [Гинзбург 2020, с. 58]

Although the exterior might have affinities with Western architecture, the interior was designed in accordance with the functional method devised by the Constructivists of OSA. According to this, the architect had first to analyse the various functions the building had to perform and then consider these in relation to the wider ideological and social issues, the «tectonics» of the Constructivist program. Hence the Narkomfin building had different types of apartments, suited to individuals, couples, and families. To make life easier for the residents, there was a communal dining hall, and only limited kitchen facilities in the apartments. Finally, these functional spaces were constructed using the latest building materials and technology.

Organic Constructivism

Towards the end of the 1920s, a further development in Constructivism took place: a development that I have called Organic Constructivism. This might seem to be a contradiction in terms. But the principles of tectonics, construction and faktura remained, except the source of inspiration was no longer technology and the machine, but nature. Tatlin, who had inaugurated the emergence of Constructivism with his Model for a Monument to the Third International in 1920, was also responsible for developing this new type of Constructivism [Татлин 1932].

Around 1928, he started working on a flying machine which he called the Letatlin — a play on his surname and the verb to fly (Fig. 24). He conceived it as an air bicycle, which one would ride or propel through the air, in the same way as one would cycle on the ground. In developing the Letatlin's shape, Tatlin studied young birds and how they learnt to fly. The materials that he used were also organic — willow, ash, linden, leather, whalebone, silk, and cork, although he did also use metal ball bearings.

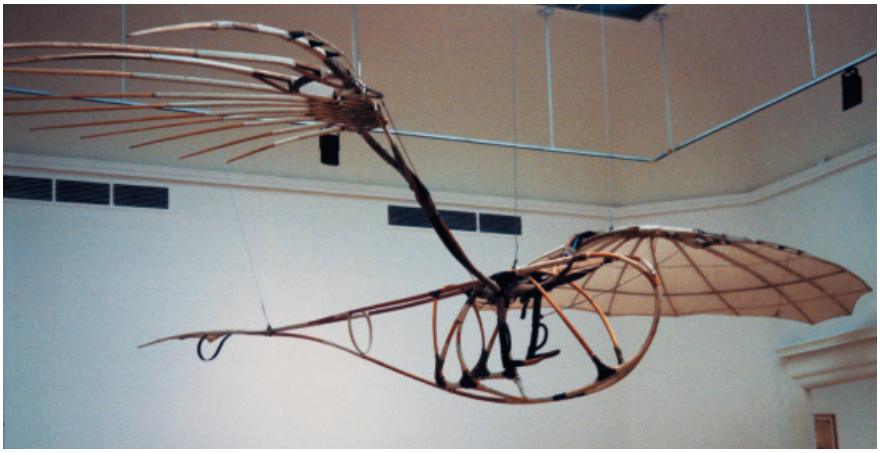

Fig. 24. Vladimir Tatlin, The Letatlin, 1929-1932
Source: Photo, Private Collection

As an object, the Letatlin seems remote from any functional purpose. It did, however, interest the government because man-propelled flying machines were silent and so could be used for spying on the enemy, before, during and after military conflicts [Siukonen 2001]. For Tatlin, the Letatlin as an air bicycle that could and should be used by anyone, liberating people from gravity and enabling them to move freely in space. From this perspective, the Letatlin represented the ultimate freedom for Russia's socialist citizens, and was, therefore perhaps, the ultimate socialist object. It was an unrealised vision of freedom, but it was also a work of art. Tatlin considered it «aesthetically perfect» [Зелинский 1932].

Conclusion

By the end of the 1920s, Constructivism was losing momentum. Few of the Constructivists' products had been mass produced except for their textile designs 1923-1924, and their advertising and propaganda posters. While graphic design continued to flourish, their geometric textile designs had proved unpopular with consumers, so the factories had returned to producing printed fabrics with more figurative patterns. Constructivism in architecture was still thriving to some extent,

and continued to influence some areas of design, including that of factories, well into the era of Socialist realism.

Tatlin had emphasized the aesthetic qualities of his design for the Letatlin, and this stress on aesthetics was an essential component of the Constructivists' approach. They did not use the word «style», and it certainly was not employed in their program which highlighted the principles of construction, tectonics and faktura. Nevertheless, the aesthetic that they employed was based on their abstract experiments with geometric form in two and three dimensions. Geometry and economy, along with the emphasis on space, were not merely pragmatic or utilitarian criteria, they were also aesthetic criteria.

Ultimately, it was precisely the Constructivists' aesthetic that impeded the realization of their dreams and their vision of transforming Soviet reality. During the 1920s, the Constructivists had devised various objects that effectively answered the real needs of Soviet citizens as well as the demands of Soviet officialdom. Yet the Constructivists' responses to those needs did not always correspond to the desires of the consumer or to those of the regime. Unfortunately, neither Soviet citizens nor their government wanted the Constructivists' rather spartan designs, based on geometry, economy, and simplicity. They wanted something much more traditional. In the end, despite the Constructivists successful efforts to create effective solutions to real problems, their vision of the new reality did not correspond to that of the Russian people nor to that of their rulers. It is not that the Constructivists' vision was necessarily utopian, but that the designs they offered in executing that vision were too modern for Russian tastes at that time.

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