Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution

by

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The M.I.T. Press
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts

720.947
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1984

Second printing, 1986
First MIT Press paperback edition, 1984

Originally published in 1930 by Verlag Anton Schroll & Co., Vienna, under the title "Rußland, Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion." Second edition published in 1965 by Ullstein Verlag, under the title "Rußland: Architektur für eine Weltrevolution"

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Library of Congress catalog card number: 70-92782

ISBN 0-262-62047-2 (paperback)

Printed and bound in the United States of America

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The birth of the machine signaled the onset of the technological revolution, which destroyed the handicrafts and played an essential role in the rise of large-scale modern manufacture. In the course of a single century new production systems transformed all aspects of life. Modern technology not only revolutionized social and economic developments but aesthetic ones as well. The basic elements of new architecture in Western Europe and America were determined by this revolution.

October 1917 marked the beginning of the Russian Revolution and the opening of a new page in the history of human society. It is to this social revolution, rather than to the technological revolution, that the basic elements of Russian architecture are tied.

The individual, private client has now been replaced by the so-called "social commission." Emphasis has shifted from the intimate and the individual to the public and the universal. Today, architecture must be judged according to different criteria. The whole field of architecture has now become a problem. And what is more, in Russia this problem had to be faced by a country exhausted by war and hunger and tightly sealed off from the rest of the world. These new architectural problems could not be solved until a foundation had been provided by the restoration of order in the economy. Prewar production levels were quickly achieved. For our present needs, however, such prewar levels and rates of production are inadequate. To be effective and to fulfill our mission in the world, we must strive to accelerate the rate of growth, to force the pace. This can only be accomplished if we do not limit ourselves to what we have inherited but, instead, completely reconstruct it. We must not only build, but rebuild. We are rebuilding industry, we are rebuilding agriculture. This restructuring of production creates a new conception of life that nurtures culture, including, of course, architecture. Our new architecture does not just attempt to complete something that has been temporarily interrupted. On the contrary, it is poised on the threshold of the future and committed to more than mere construction. Its task is to comprehend the new conditions of life, so that by the creation of responsive building design it can actively participate in the full realization of the new world. Thus the thrust of Soviet architecture is directed toward the goal of reconstruction.

Buildings designed to serve all of society have always acted as a repository of the sum total of all creative energies. Depending on the prevalent social order, these have usually been of either a religious or a governmental character: the Church and the Palace. These were the power sources of the old order. Their power can only be transcended by establishing new power sources belonging to our new order. Some years ago it was thought that palaces would serve this purpose, except that now they were to be called "Palaces of Labor." This created the danger of introducing a foreign and superficial pathos into our lives. If the term "palace" is to be applied to our situation at all, and in order for it to have any validity in our situation, it is the factories that should be transformed into "Palaces of Labor" first. The competition of 1923 for the "Palace of Labor" in Moscow represented a new departure in this direction and marks the beginning of a great number of competitions for similar palaces, later called "Palaces of Culture," which in turn eventually came to be known quite simply as "Clubs."

In the course of this work three phases of development can be traced:

1. The remodeling of existing buildings that had previously served different functions, and their subsequent transformation into clubs.
2. The building of new complexes. However, it was soon discovered that the conglomeration of diverse and unrelated individual elements, consisting of the theater hall (old baroque system) and the motion-picture hall, both surrounded by corridors and individual rooms, did not offer a good solution for the new cultural task.
3. Only gradually were attempts made to resolve this task by a complete restructuring of the problem.

The growing needs in this area helped to bring about a clearer understanding of the whole problem. To achieve a solution, new spatial volumes and construction methods had to be created capable of providing all the age groups of the working masses with facilities for recreation and relaxation after a day's work, i.e., a place to store up new sources of energy. Here each child, each adolescent, each adult, as well as all the older people, could be educated into becoming collective human beings

outside the circle of their families, while their individual interests could be enlarged and broadened at the same time. The aim of the club is to liberate man and not to oppress him as was formerly done by the Church and the State.

It would be shortsighted to think that such a building could be invented in one try by a so-called architectural "genius." What we demand from the Soviet architect is that, as an artist and because of his perceptive intellect, he will fully comprehend and amplify the faintest ripple of developing energies much sooner than the masses—who tend to be shortsighted as far as their own growth is concerned—and that he will transform this energy into tangible architectural form.

We present in Fig. 13 the design for a club, planned as the center of a settlement. The club rooms and the service rooms are located along two perpendicular axes. The large theater hall and the smaller auditorium are situated radially. Each successive floor recedes toward the top in a step-like manner, and the whole is grouped around a vertical axis. **Fig. 13** **Plate 19**

A conceptual expansion of the problem yields the following propositions:

The large park grounds are to be organized in such a way that a number of open, half-open, and closed rooms will form a unified whole, responding to the functions of club life. The club ought to become a gathering place where the individual becomes one with the collective and where he stores up new reserves of energy, while he should at the same time be given the opportunity to split off and join smaller groups for the pursuit of special activities. Thus, both small and large rooms must be conceived in an organic manner, while the whole should form a new unified spatial relationship. In this context, the Roman bath, old monastery layouts, or theater plans, can no longer serve as models. It is evident that flexible rooms will have to be created to allow for different uses and variable circulation patterns. The most important thing to remember is that in the club the masses should provide for themselves, that they should not throng there from the outside merely to seek amusement, but that they should instead arrive at a realization of their potentialities by their own efforts. The club's role is to become a University of Culture. If one accepts the premise that private dwellings should strive to operate on the basis of the greatest possible austerity, then by contrast, public dwellings should provide the maximum of available luxury accessible to all. The term "reconstruction" is therefore not applicable to this case, since there is no building precedent in the past that by virtue of its social significance would provide us with a prototype

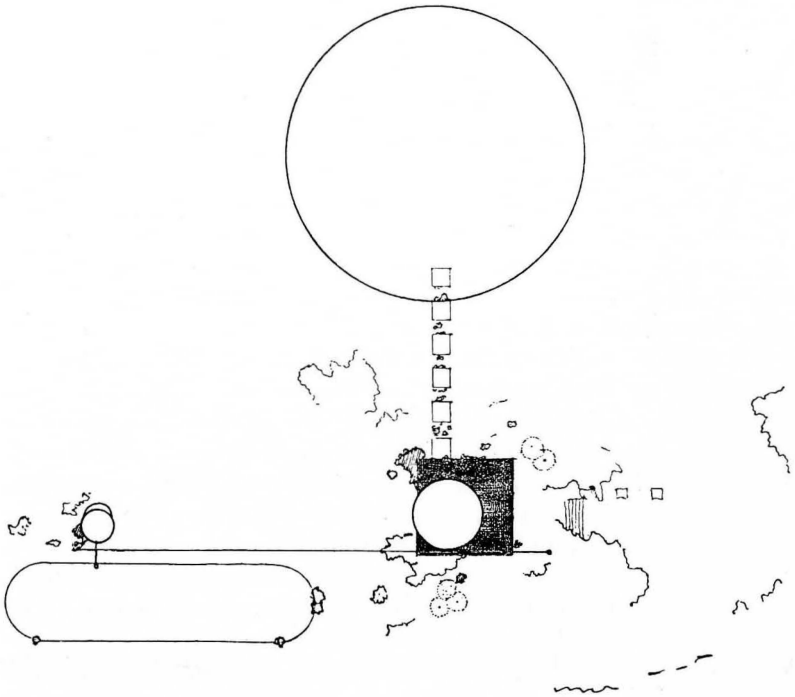

Fig. 13. I. Leonidov: Club.

solution. Here, both internal and external form must become the concrete expression of our concept of the spiritual condition and the aesthetic life of social man.

Sports

The close relationship between mental and physical training suggests a similar affinity between sports structures and clubs. The new society desires a strong generation, for strength is equated with optimism and the joy of living. This explains why "physculture" enjoys equal rank with the other elements that make up the totality called "social culture." In our society so-called sports records are irrelevant. Physculture, i.e., the culture of the body, is important.

All trade unions possess their own sports grounds. The largest sports complex of this kind is being built on the outskirts of Moscow, along the most beautiful stretch of the shores of the Moskva River, the Lenin Hills rising from the right bank, the opposite shore being flat and even. Shown in plate 23 is one of the most interesting designs for this project: **Plate 23** a sports complex on the left bank of the Moskva, on a site where the river forms a large sweeping semicircle. The largest part of the complex consists of a colossal autodrome. Its outline is determined by the semicircular shape of the site and also by the traffic pattern. A number of stadia are located within and outside the autodrome. The river bank itself has been developed into an aerodrome. The most characteristic and striking feature of the design is the structure of the grandstand. It consists of a huge, bracket-like superstructure of reinforced concrete and steel-rib construction. The autodrome is on the lowest level. Below are **Fig. 14** a number of rows of seats covered by a projecting canopy whose top **Plate 23** surface is designed to serve for bicycle and motorcycle racing. More rows of seats rise up to a break in the structure, which from that point on projects forward again. Five rows of enclosed booths are suspended from the underside of this cantilever.

The V-form of the grandstand has a double advantage: the viewing distance from the last row is only slightly greater than from the front one, and the upper seats provide a protective roof for the lower ones. Here, elements of structure and design have been consciously combined. Plans for the right bank near the Lenin Hills have been developed by the ASNOVA-Group under the leadership of Ladovski, who designed the stadia complex of the "Red Sports International."

Institutes of public hygiene are closely related to physculture. In Russia the bath has a very specific character—it is a steambath. The village has traditionally solved the problem in a very simple way: usually

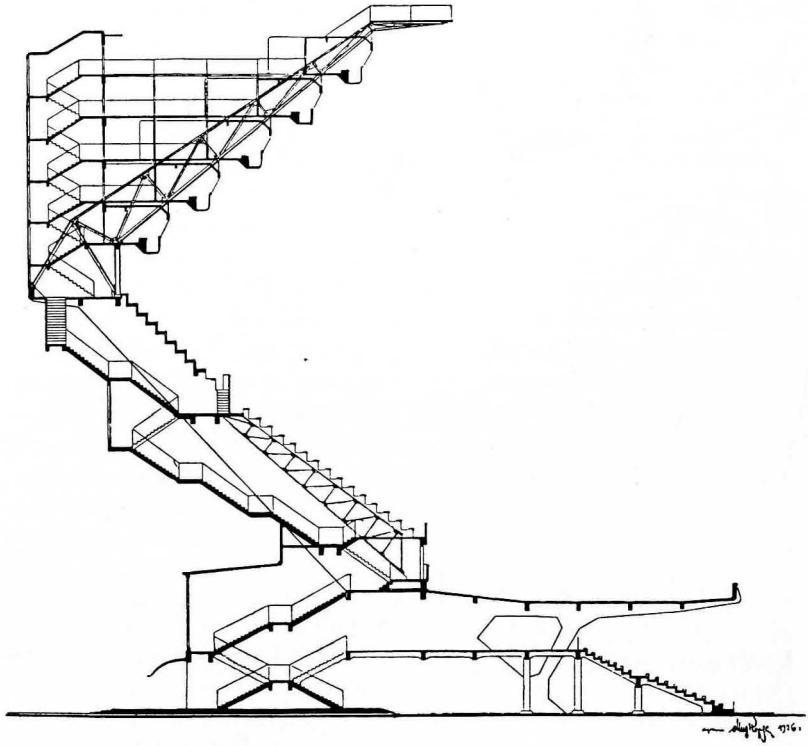

Fig. 14. M. Korshev: Section through the grandstand of a stadium for the city of Moscow, 1926.

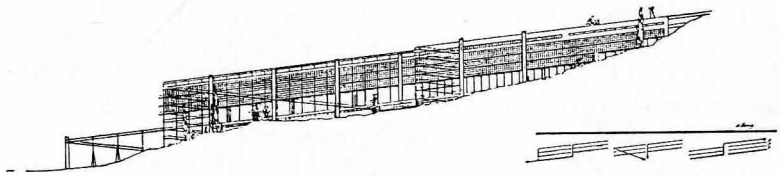

Fig. 15. Afanessiev (Vkhutein): Spa hotel.

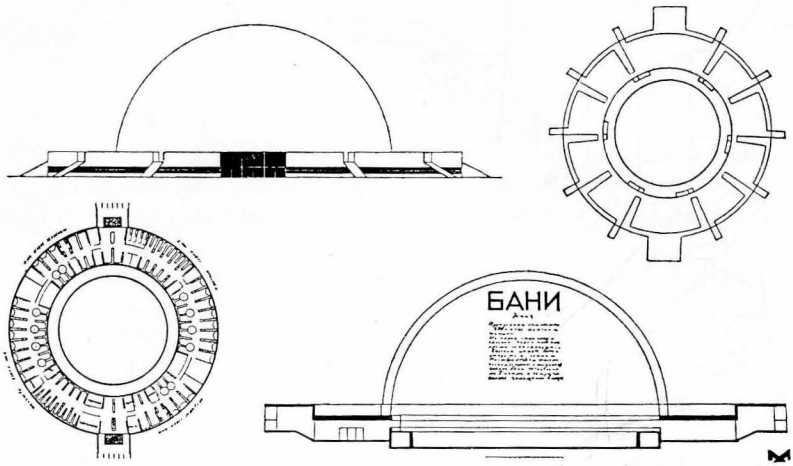

Fig. 16. Atelier A. Nikolski: Bathhouse for the city of Leningrad.

a small hut with a large stove was placed next to the village well. The city on the other hand developed the public bath house with its large communal steamroom. The floating swimming pools in the rivers used during the summer and the large bathing facilities on the Russian Riviera, which take up one third of the whole Black Sea coast from the Crimea to Batum, are used by the Russian population as open-air bathing establishments. Formerly, these facilities were accessible only to the propertied classes. Now, the whole coast has been declared a national recreational area and is being intensively developed to accommodate the vast number of vacationers crowding the beaches. In the design of these facilities two contradictory elements have to be reconciled: the free and organic growth of nature, seen as an entity of stone, vegetation, and water, as opposed to unity created by man. All this must be combined and ordered in harmony with the sensibilities and spirit of our time.

The conceptual aspect of this problem may be approached from two basically different vantage points: singular order, i.e., an order directly aimed at the whole, and organic order, or geometric order, i.e., an order based on uninhibited inner growth. The design of a facility on the shores **Fig. 15** of the Black Sea (Fig. 15) may serve as an example.

The planning of the building follows the slope of the shore with a corridor 200 meters long, flanked by the dwelling units. This represents

geometrical order. There is a plan afoot to build, adjacent to the massive main building, a system of easily assembled housing units that could be
Plate 26 erected at various locations according to personal preference and as required during the bathing season—in other words, a prefabricated standard unit for individuals or families, easy to assemble. Everybody picks his own location out of the available sites. The unity of a camp site develops. Modern mechanical services are provided only on a community scale. This represents an attempt to achieve a synthesis between individual freedom and collective interdependence.

Fig. 16 One example of a solution for a citybath house is described below. The circular layout is planned as a large garden. From the outside one enters
Plate 25 directly on to the flat roof and into the sun bath. The swimming pool is located in the center. It is covered by a glass dome that can be opened during the summer months. The individual baths for both men and women are located to the right and left along the circular periphery and are sunk two meters below the ground for the sake of lower construction costs.

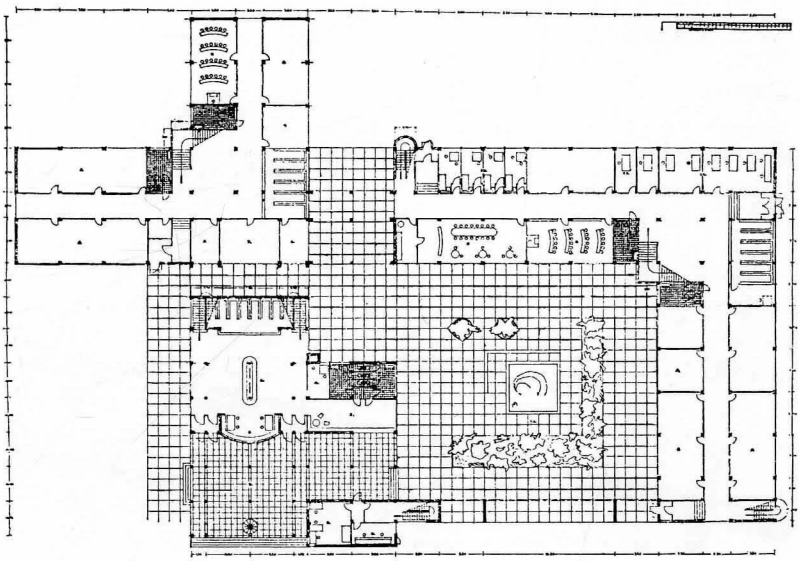

Fig. 17. M. Ginsburg: Government building for Alma-Ata. Plan.

The Future and Utopia

In these times we must be very objective, very practical, and totally unromantic, so that we can catch up with the rest of the world and overtake it. But we also know that even the best "business" will not of itself advance us to a higher level of culture. The next stage of cultural development will encompass all aspects of life: human productivity and creativity, the most precious faculties of man. And this not in order to accumulate profits for individuals, but to produce works that belong to everybody. If we just consider all the accomplishments of our own generation, we are certainly justified in taking for granted a technology capable of solving all the tasks mentioned earlier. One of our utopian ideas is the desire to overcome the limitations of the substructure, the earthbound. We have developed this idea in a series of proposals (sky-hooks, stadium grandstands, Paris garage). **Plates 23, 28, 62**

The design of the Lenin Institute on the Lenin Hills in Moscow is based on this idea. The building complex consists of a tower structure (library for 15 million volumes), low-story buildings with reading rooms and workrooms, and a spherical building (elevated in the air) containing a central reading room for 4,000 users. The latter can be **Figs. 28, 29**

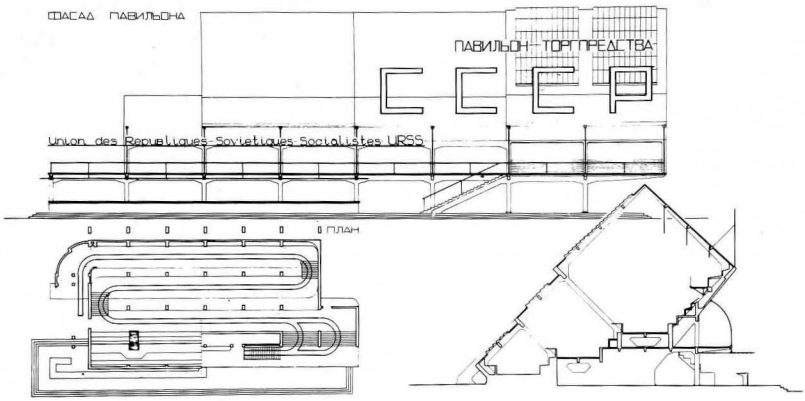

Fig. 27. M. Korgiev: Trade Fair Pavilion for the Paris Commercial Representatives.

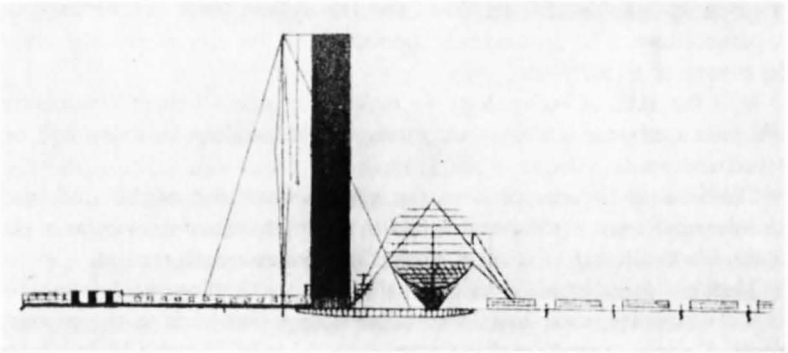

Fig. 28. I. Leonidov: Lenin Institute. Main elevation.

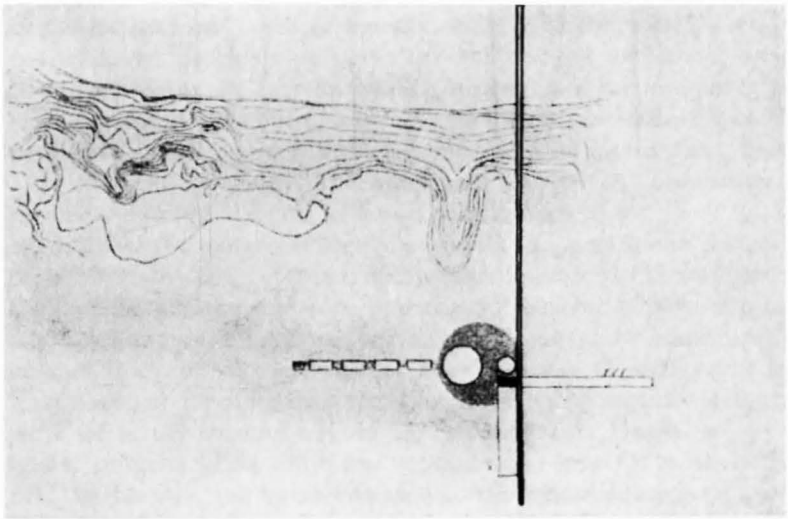

Fig. 29. I. Leonidov: Lenin Institute. Site plan.

divided up into several sections, and the sphere itself can be used as a planetarium. The institute is connected to the city across the river by means of an aerotrain.

It is the task of technology to make sure that all these elementary volumes that produce new relationships and tensions in space will be structurally safe.

The idea of the conquest of the substructure, the earthbound, can be extended even further and calls for the conquest of gravity as such. It demands floating structures, a physical-dynamic architecture.

Though in reality a reduction of these futuristic plans and proposals is still necessary, their basic soundness is apparent even at the present time. A good example of this approach is the exhibition building of the Trade Representatives of the USSR in Paris. The designer has taken the "utopia" of the suspended grandstands and developed it further to achieve an enclosed building, thereby fusing the path of the visitor with the various objects and goods exhibited. This represents a crystallization of an idea where function, construction, interior space, and exterior volume are intensified by giving the whole a new meaning and a new unity. **Fig. 27**

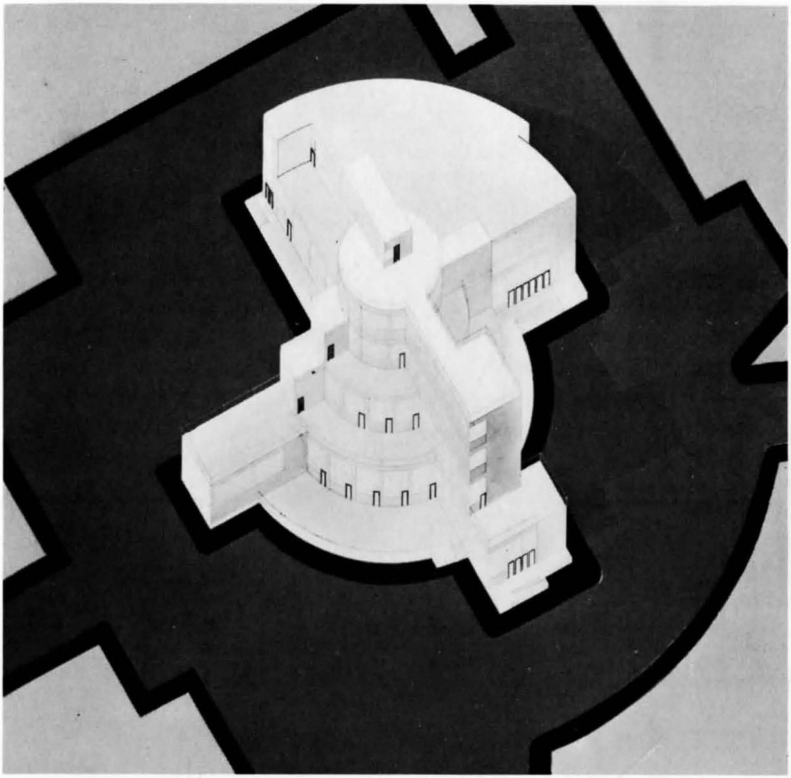

Plate 20. I. Lamtsov: Club for the center of a settlement.

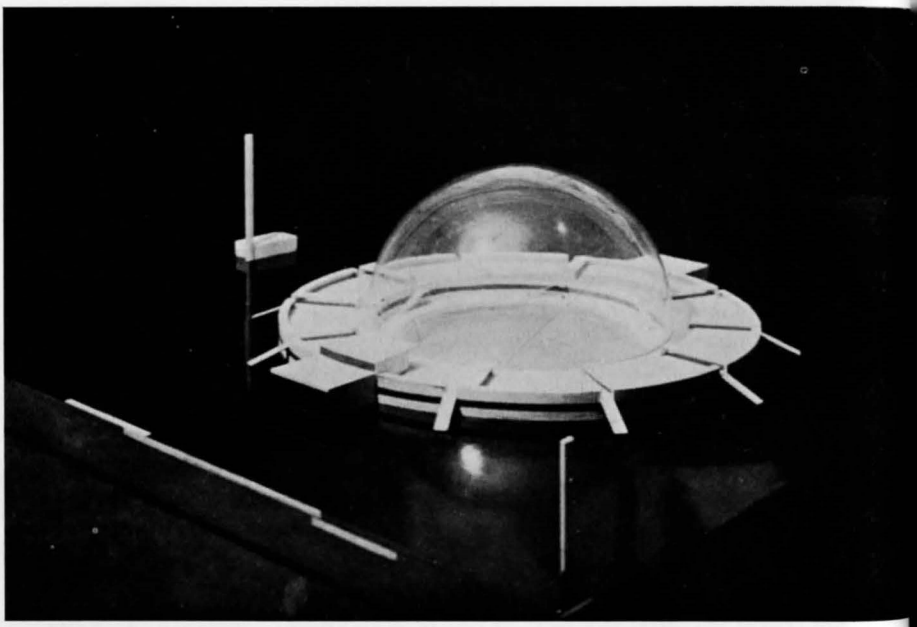

Plate 25. Atelier A. Nikolski: Bathhouse.

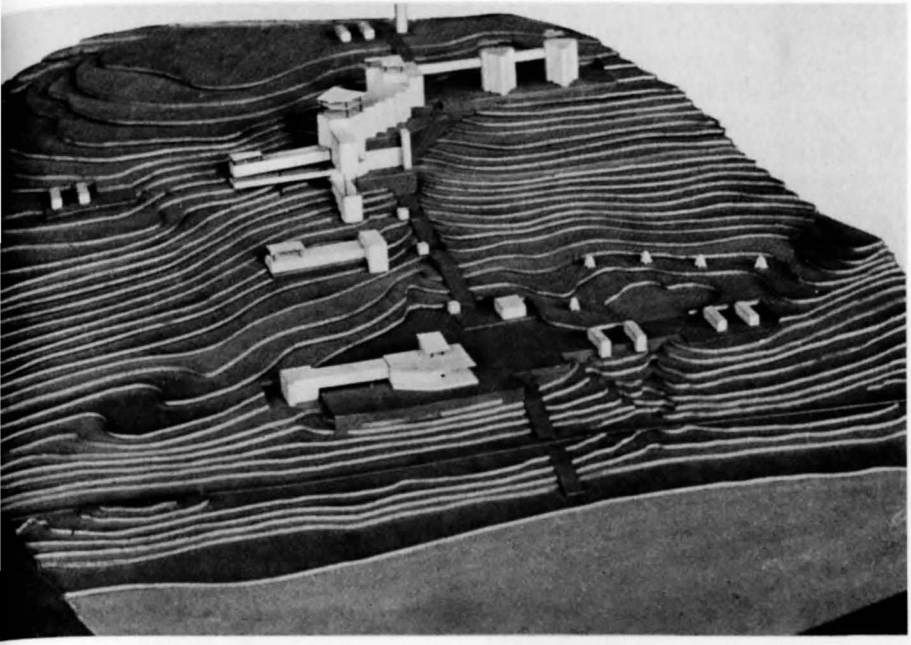

Plate 26. Bunin (Vkhutein): Spa hotel on the Black Sea.

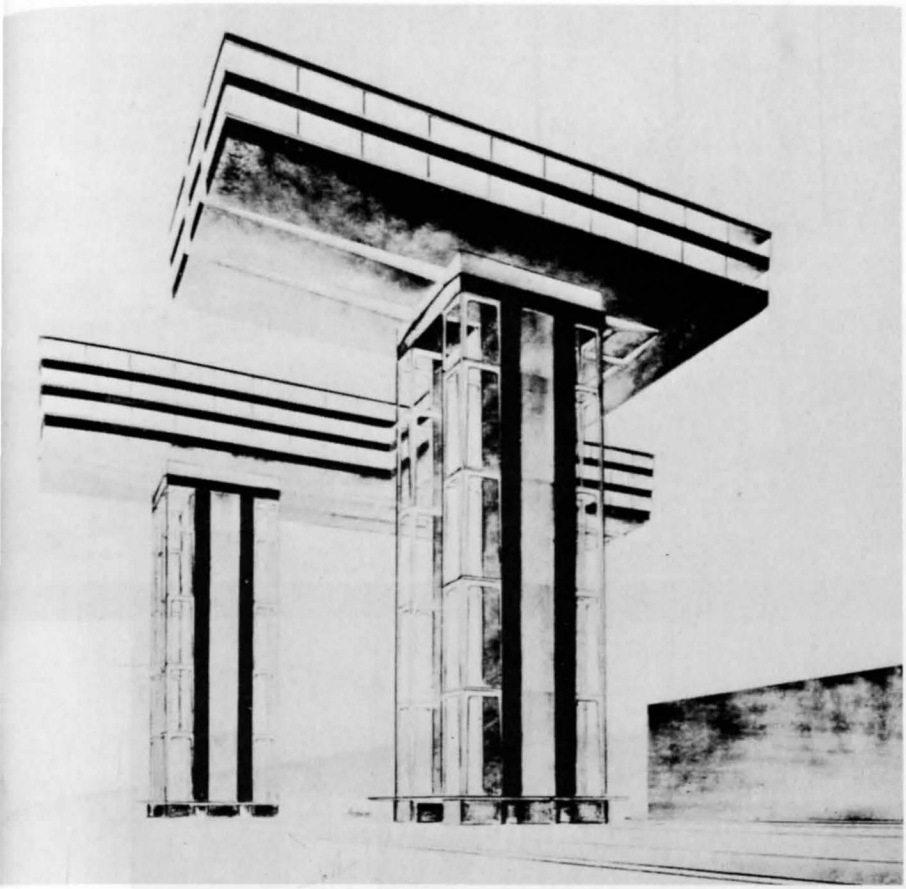

Plate 28. El Lissitzky: Sky-hook, 1924.

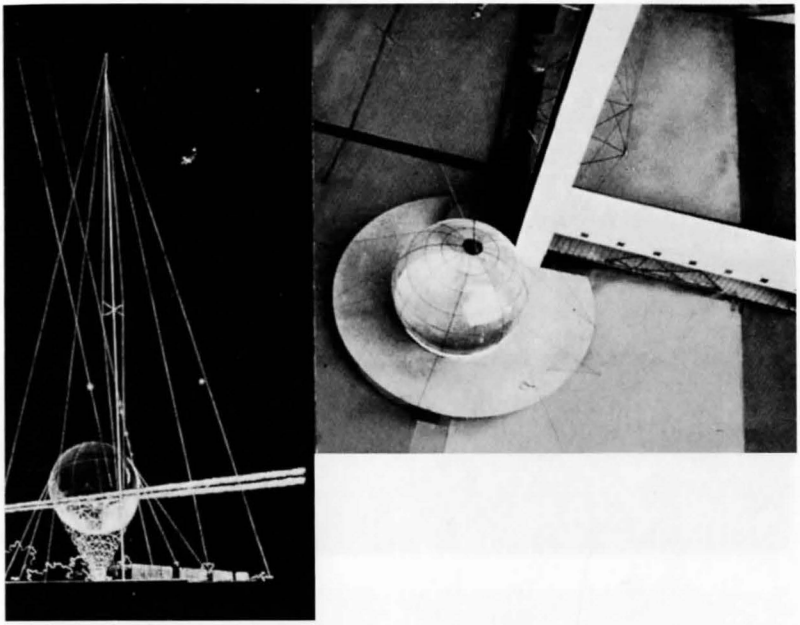

Plate 60. I. Leonidov: Lenin Institute.