The Proletariat's Aesthetic Revenge
A Social and Architectural Portrait of the 'Seven Sisters'

Romain Barth

Arkady Mordvinov and Vyacheslav K. Oltarzhevsky, Hotel Ukraine, Moscow, 1947–1957. From "La prima città dell'URSS," *Casabella* 26, no. 262 (1962): 53.

> Literature can avenge us.
> Nicolas Mathieu, on his novel *Connemara* (2022)[1]

Following the 1917 revolution, the Bolshevik party supported workers' access to the highest social positions in the Soviet hierarchy. For the Bolsheviks, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was a necessary and transitional phase for implementing socialism because it gave the power to those who produced capital. As argued by historian Rita di Leo, the party headed by Vladimir Lenin and then Joseph Stalin set up an essential alliance with the *new workers* for industrializing and urbanizing the country.[2] This social group was composed of "simple manual workers, very recently urbanized poor peasants, ex-artisans, [or] ex-soldiers."[3] The new workers differed from workers in Moscow's factories because they weren't yet unionized, nor were they politically divided between Trotskyite, Menshevik, and Bolshevik factions, and they were less "suspicious of the government's monocratic [and] single-party approach."[4] Thanks to their efficiency at work (what Soviet propaganda called the Stakhanovite movement) and their commitment to the party, the new workers were able to climb the ladder of the Soviet hierarchy. From the 1950s onwards, white-collar workers, such as party officials (or *apparatchiks*), administrative employees, productive engineers, factory supervisors, and security service personnel, were drawn more and

1 "Nicolas Mathieu: 'La littérature peut nous venger'," Mediapart, effective February 3, 2022, https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/culture-idees/030222/nicolas-mathieu-la-litterature-peut-nous-venger. Translation into English by author.

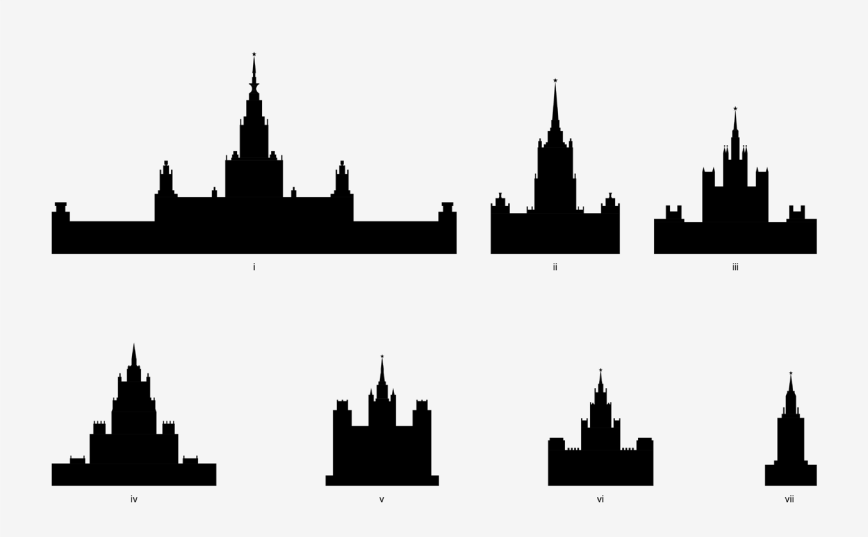
2 This essay will take up the terms *new workers* and *elite of popular extraction* that were frequently used by Rita di Leo in her book *L'expérience profane. Du capitalisme au socialisme et vice-versa.* Read more in Rita di Leo, *L'expérience profane. Du capitalisme au socialisme et vice-versa*, trans. Patricia Farazzi (Paris: L'Éclat, 2013).

3 Rita di Leo, *L'expérience profane. Du capitalisme au socialisme et vice-versa*, trans. Patricia Farazzi, (Paris: L'Éclat, 2013), 35. Translation by author.

4 Ibid.

more from the popular milieu. This process led to what di Leo called an *elite of popular extraction*.

This essay will argue that the so-called 'Seven Sisters,' seven high-rise buildings built in the 1950s in Moscow, institutionalized and made official the rise to power of this elite of popular extraction. Promoted by Stalin in 1947, the seven high-rise buildings represented the last and most important episode within the history of socialist realism—the official art of the USSR from the 1930s to the 1950s—realized in architecture. The Seven Sisters were historically situated between the end of Stalin's rule and the beginning of Nikita Khrushchev's term as First Secretary of the Communist Party in 1953; Khrushchev himself could be considered the first 'new worker' to reach the position of First Secretary.[5] After the extensive damage caused by WWII, the Seven Sisters, with their great height and rich ornamentation, were intended to become monuments to the glory of the Soviet people. At an international level, they aimed to establish USSR as a major modern power capable of technically erecting skyscrapers. As a result, Moscow State University, one of the Seven Sisters, was the tallest skyscraper in Europe until 1997 (reaching 240 meters high with 40 floors), thus reflecting the important position Moscow wanted to take on the international stage.



Silhouettes of the Seven Sisters. Drawing by Romain Barth.
i. Moscow State University ii. Hotel Ukraine iii. Kotel'nicheskaia Embankment Building
iv. Ministry of Foreign Affairs v. Building on the Uprising Square vi. Red Gates Building
vii. Hotel Leningrad

After their construction, the Seven Sisters became a subject of study for several Western architects and historians. They mainly focused on the strategic implementation of the Seven Sisters as well as their colossal forms in the city, thus making clear that they were an architectural project driven by a political vision, far from capitalist urbanization based on individual ambition.[6] Indeed, following the 1935 General Plan for the Reconstruction of Moscow, the Seven Sisters worked as a network that reinforced the city's radio-centric structure, with the Kremlin, the party's main political headquarters, at its center. As Rem Koolhaas claimed in *Content*, each of the Seven Sisters were "an enlargement of one of the Kremlin gates—a virtual Kremlin." Koolhaas's metaphor stressed that the seven high-rise buildings represented the power of the party in the

5 Khrushchev was born in a small city in the Kursk Oblast. During his youth, he was a manual worker and went on to become known for his political militancy. He then moved to Moscow to begin a career as a Soviet executive. Read more in Rita di Leo, *L'expérience profane. Du capitalisme au socialisme et vice-versa*, trans. Patricia Farazzi (Paris: L'Éclat, 2013), 77.

6 Read more in Anatole Kopp, "De la théorie à la pratique," in *L'architecture de la période stalinienne* (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1978), 311–353; Jean-Louis Cohen, "Repression and Diffusion of Modernism," in *The Future of Architecture Since 1889* (New York, Phaidon, 2012), 358–360; "La prima città dell'URSS," *Casabella* 26, no. 262 (1962): 36–62.

city.[7] Each Sister's design was based on the same archetype—a very recognizable one due to its setbacks and arrow-shaped top (formal features shared with the Kremlin gates). The repetition of this archetype as well as their provocative architecture represented for Aldo Rossi the possibility of building *modern monuments* that would contribute to developing an urban reality reverberating with socialist and collective values.[8] However, less has been said on the elite of popular extraction who lived and worked in the Seven Sisters and had a significant impact on their designs. This has never been thoroughly analyzed, even though the analysis provides clear views into the last attempts of Stalinist architecture to build socialism through popular monuments based on the provocative reappropriation of different cultural and social heritages, while condensing the programs and activities for the elite within.

The first part of this essay will focus on the Seven Sisters as both the urban representation of the ongoing modernization and industrialization of the country and as hosts of the programs for the elite of popular extraction to lead the socialist economy. The second part will illustrate how the elite of popular extraction lived and worked in the Seven Sisters, focusing on the elite's social milieu and its petty bourgeois ethos. The two last parts will focus on the reappropriation of the buildings into a proletarian culture of architectural language—especially by reclaiming a classical style—that aimed to nourish a mixed sense of pride and revenge from the proletariat.

REPRESENTING AND LEADING THE PLANNED ECONOMY IN THE CITY

The elite of popular extraction, as well as the Bolsheviks with proletarian origins, both impacted the design and construction process of the Seven Sisters.[9] With people from proletarian roots supervising the process, the project aimed to develop an architecture that the proletariat could like and identify with. It was possible to locate influential people in the Seven Sisters' hierarchy that had proletarian roots and were born in villages or small cities outside of Moscow region. Head of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) from 1938 to 1945, Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria was one of them. He was originally born in a village in Georgia and came from a poor peasant family. Beria was the highest representative of the party in the Seven Sisters' hierarchy and oversaw the design process while informing Stalin with the latest updates.[10] Dmitry Chechulin, and Arkady Mordvinov were the respective chief architects of the Kotel'nicheskaia Embankment Building, and the Hotel Ukraine, two of the Seven Sisters. Coming from modest families, they studied architecture after the 1917 revolution and could be considered as part of this elite of popular extraction, the first generation to descend from the social group of the new workers.[11] Moreover, as di Leo has claimed, political strategies were

7 Rem Koolhaas, "Utopia Station," in *Content* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), 395.

8 Aldo Rossi "Une éducation réaliste," *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, no. 190 (1977): 39. Read more in Romain Barth, "Les huit sœurs de *Capital Cities*," *Matières*, no. 17 (2022): 51–55.

9 The initial 1947 plan promoted by the party was to build eight high-rise buildings. The Zariad'e Building, the closest to the Kremlin compared to the other buildings, was never completed. The Zariad'e Building should have been the tallest of the eight high-rise buildings. From north to south, the Seven Sisters were known as the Hotel Leningrad, the Red Gates Building, the Building on the Uprising Square, the Hotel Ukraine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Kotel'nicheskaia Embankment Building, and the Moscow State University. For a description of each of the Seven Sisters, see Jean-Louis Cohen, *Building a new New World: Amerikanizm in Russian Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 430–439.

10 While heading the NKVB, Beria was also in charge of the secret police of USSR. He was responsible for organizing the assassination of thousands of people, notably during the Great Purge. In 1953, after Stalin's death, when Beria tried to seize power, he was killed by the other members of the Politburo, Khrushchev among them.

11 Chechulin was born in an industrial city in the Sumy Oblast (today in Ukraine) in a working-class family. Mordvinov was born in a village in the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast and his father worked as an icon painter. The Seven Sisters were built by seven different architectural teams. Each team had a primary representative and renowned architects. The five other architects were Mikhaïl Posokhin, Lev Rudnev, Vladimir Gelfreykh, Alexey Dushkin, and Leonid Polyakov.

implemented to guarantee a certain 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' At the end of the 1930s, the technicians of bourgeois origins were gradually replaced by new worker managers. Strategies for counterbalancing the opinions of the intellectuals or skilled people were frequent and allowed the proletarians to keep control of the process of production.[12]

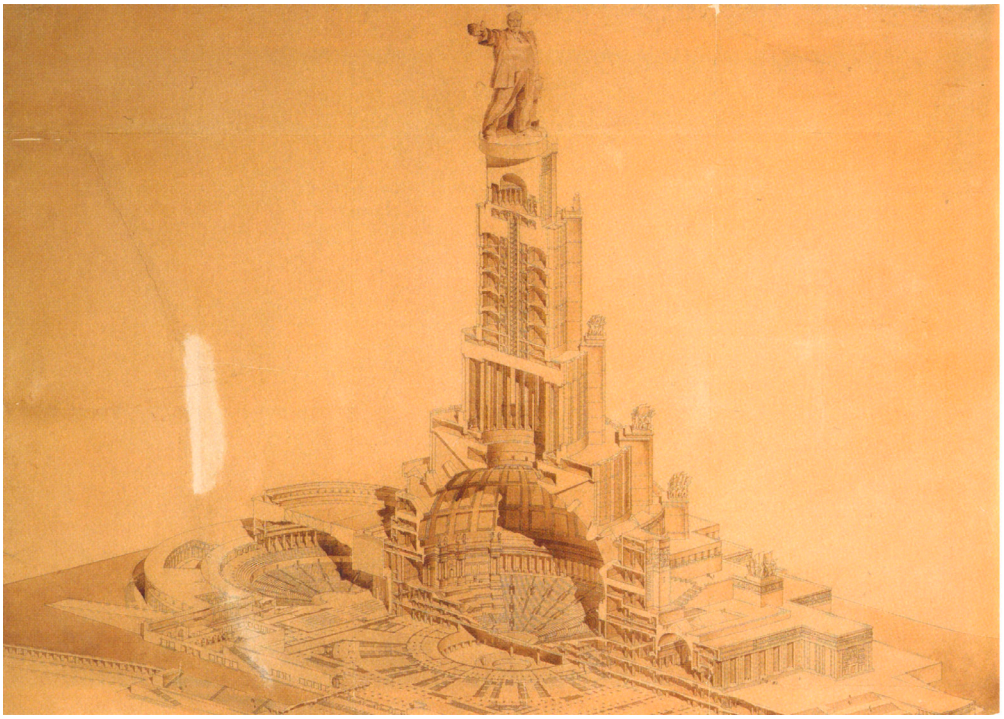
In the mid-1950s, the Bolshevik plan to give control to the new workers became more and more concrete because it enabled them to exercise party power. As a result, the Communist intellectuals and Bolsheviks of the early days (those of the 1917 revolution) were gradually marginalized in the party government. Di Leo argued that the ex-workers and ex-peasants in power progressively altered the initial political projects proposed by the Communist intellectuals.[13] They mainly focused on managing the country's economy (in competition with the growth of the capitalist economy) rather than in realizing and fulfilling the communist project (which could only be achieved in the very long term). Thus, di Leo said that: "The ex-workers in the government, in their gradual detachment from the ties of the past, and therefore […] from the invasion of politics into everyday life, turned to the mode of the economy that had created them."[14] She went on to say: "If success was in the economy and not in politics, if the first priority was not so much to create a different society, but to achieve growth beyond the level of capitalism, the consequence was the foregrounding of the economy..."[15] The party's interest in the economy focused mainly on the five-year plans—which already began before new workers reached leadership roles. By setting production targets, it proposed central economic planning throughout the USSR. After WWII and its major devastation, the party launched the fourth and fifth economic plans (1945–1955). It aimed to transform USSR into a leader in heavy industry, concentrating on mining and chemical industry and the production of steel and machinery. This drastic industrialization would remain partially abstracted from the people, especially as not all the population's essential needs were fulfilled; queuing up for basic things was common in this period.[16] Socialist realism's task was therefore to organize and highlight the ongoing modernization in the country.

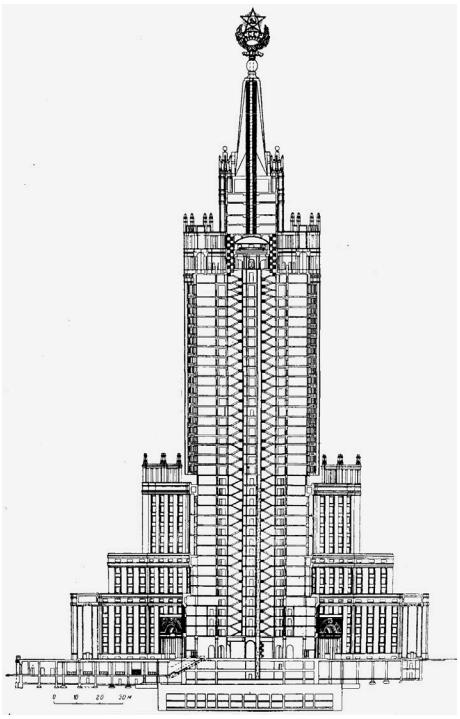
In a discourse of the plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU in 1931, Lazar Kaganovich, member of the Politburo and administrator of the 1935 Moscow General Plan (who started his life as a worker around Kiev), argued that the socialist architecture was supposed to support the development of the socialist economy and especially its industrialization. Following Kaganovich's discourse, Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co argued in their book *Modern Architecture* that socialist architecture should build "the new industrial centers, whose task was to tie the labor force to one place, to organize that force in a stable manner in the interests of the system of production, and to celebrate its importance in the [functional and] monumental restructuring of the city centers."[17] As a result, the doctrine of socialist realism, defined by leading party members as Kaganovich, tried to merge the wholistic economic plans (and attendant production issues) and the 'ideology of the plan.' Socialist realist architecture aimed to organize as well as celebrate the work of the planned economy. More than looking at industry as a simple infrastructure, socialist realism aimed to elevate it to the level of a socialist culture that would *in fine* establish more deeply the party's industrial policy. In line with this tendency, the Seven Sisters were supposed to be the place where the elite

12 Di Leo, 62–63.
13 Ibid., 135.
14 Ibid., 130.
15 Ibid., 99.
16 Katherine Zubovich recalled that in 1947 (when the Seven Sisters were commissioned by the party), the USSR was still weakened by the devastation of WWII: "Demobilization was still underway and bread lines and rationing were still a part of daily life. The failed harvest of the previous year was making itself felt in the capital; hunger and exhaustion could be seen on the faces of villagers who flowed into Moscow from the famine-stricken regions beyond." Read more in Katherine Zubovich, *Moscow Monumental: Soviet Skyscrapers and Urban Life in Stalin's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 79.

17 Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture/1*, (New York/Milan: Rizzoli/Electa, 1986 [1976]), 181.

of popular extraction organized the production system and the workforce on the overall territory as well as the features that served the socialist economy. At the same time, they were expected to become the symbols of the socialist economy in the USSR capital. With their great height and all the technical, industrial and material issues that this entailed, they represented the result of a challenge to the socialist industrialization that was taken up. The monumental forms and the excesses of ornamentation of the Seven Sisters aimed to aestheticize and celebrate the ongoing changes of the planned economy in the city.



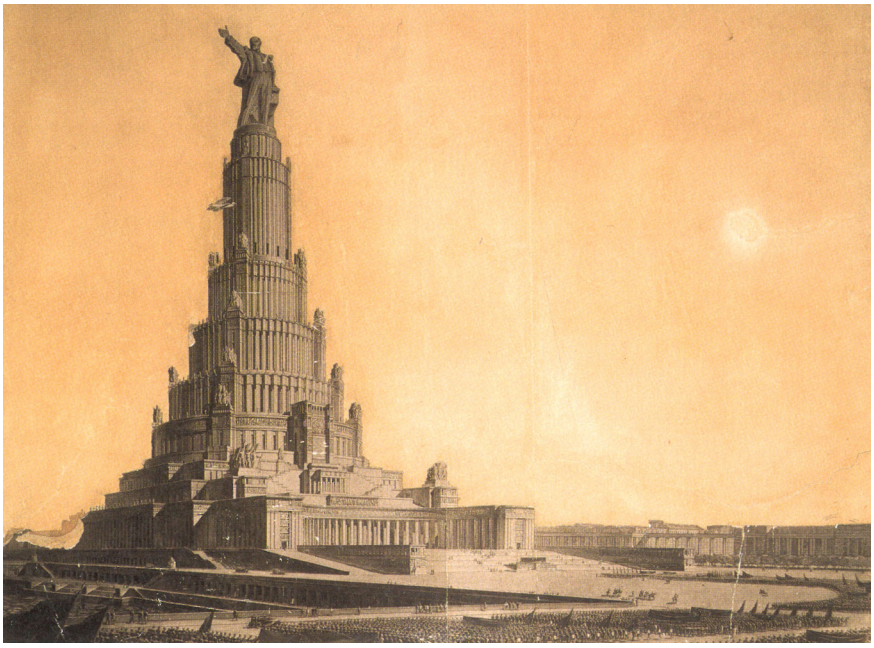


Left: Boris Iofan, Palace of the Soviets, Moscow, 1936–1940, axonometric section. From *Les sept tours de Moscou – Les tours babyloniennes du communisme. De zeven torens van Moskou – De Babylonische torens van het communisme, 1935–1950* (Brussels/Moscow, Europalia International, Fonds Mercator, State Museum and Exhibition Center Rosizo, 2005), fig. 25.
Right: Dmitry Chechulin, Zariad'e Building, Moscow, 1953, section. From Vyacheslav K. Oltarzhevsky, *Stroitelstvo vysotnykh zdanii v Moskve* [The Construction of High-Rise Buildings in Moscow] (Moscow: God. izd-vo Lit. po stroitelstvu i arkhitekture, 1953), 57.

To return to di Leo's earlier quote, from the 1930s to the mid-1950s, the party's interest switched from the "politics into everyday life" (with the presence of Communist intellectuals or Bolsheviks of the early days in power) to the "politics of the economy." This was highly visible in the different monuments that the party planned to build in Moscow. In the mid-1930s, the main skyscraper project in Moscow was the Palace of the Soviets designed by Boris Iofan, Vladimir Shchuko, and Vladimir Helfreich, which was intended to be the world's tallest skyscraper at 420 meters.[18] In hosting a gigantic congress hall as the main program, the Palace of the Soviets was supposed to be the representation of the political within the city. The congress hall took the classical form of an assembly covered by a dome (reaching a height of 100 meters) and seating the huge num-

18 According to Vladimir Paperny, the Palace of the Soviets should have become: "the most perfect architectural construction of all time, a construction with which architectural creation would altogether come to an end, so that in the future there would be only endless reproductions of this model." Apart from technical problems, the ideal architecture of the Palace of the Soviets could, by definition, never be achieved and its construction stopped in 1941 because of WWII. Besides, the Seven Sisters worked as a network in Moscow: they were based on the repetition of the ideal model of the Palace of the Soviets. This model could be reproduced according to the party's interests. Indeed, further away than Moscow, the 'ideal' model was reproduced in the 1950s in other cities where the party wanted to assert its position, such as Bucarest, Prague, and Warsaw. Read more in Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, trans. John Hill and Roann Barris (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116.

ber of 21,000 people for major political events, such as the sessions of the Supreme Soviet or the Comintern. Twenty years later, the Seven Sisters buildings aimed to represent the institutional side linked to the state's economic management. Three of them (the Red Gates Building, the Smolenskaya Square Building, and the Zariad'e Building) were to host the offices for the Ministry of Railways, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry for Heavy Industry (the latter building was never built). In addition to these programs, the Seven Sisters hosted housing (the Kotel'nicheskaia Embankment Building, the Building on the Uprising Square, and part of the Red Gates Building) that were mainly dedicated to the bureaucrats, managerial workers, engineers, and scientists. Moscow State University hosted mainly scientific departments (physics, biology, hydrology, mechanics…) that led to engineering training more than knowledge in the humanities and politics. And finally, the hotels (Hotel Ukraine and Hotel Leningrad) hosted, in luxurious condition, foreign dignitaries and tourists, showing therefore the party ambition to be a leader on the international stage.



Boris Iofan, Palace of the Soviets, Moscow, 1936–1940, perspective view. From *Les sept tours de Moscou – Les tours babyloniennes du communisme. De zeven torens van Moskou – De Babylonische torens van het communisme*, 1935–1950, fig. 24.

The Palace of the Soviets and the Seven Sisters had in common their form, with their setbacks and their reinterpretation of the classical architectural style; in that sense there was a continuity between these two unprecedented skyscraper projects in the USSR. However, the Seven Sisters as skyscrapers also represented the accomplishment of the Palace of the Soviets. In fact, the Palace of the Soviets was based on a design contradiction between the skyscraper's form (the vertical axis) and its main programs (the horizontal platform). The Palace of the Soviets consisted of a horizontal platform that connected the congress halls to a gigantic piazza. This platform was an element that opened out a political institution onto the city and thus put politics and a civic ethos at the center of urban life. While the vertical axis of the skyscraper played the role of a landmark towering over the city with a 100-metre-high sculpture of Lenin at its summit, it metaphorically represented the monocratic party and the elite as a strong entity that guided the country. None of the Seven Sisters had such a horizontal platform connecting the interior programs to a piazza, they were mainly located close to parks or infrastructures such as main roads or

railway stations. By preserving only the verticality, the Seven Sisters became *pure skyscrapers*. And their great heights perfectly fitted with the new programs and needs of the elite of popular extraction. The severe repetition of floors in skyscrapers was ideal for the elite's programs such as housing, hotels, and especially for the rationality and the efficiency that the bureaucracy offices required. Also, due to the skyscrapers' large sizes, their facades were autonomous of the programs inside. While the programs changed, the seven facades repeated their similar architecture and signaled the strong presence of the party in the city, as with the vertical axis of the Palace of the Soviets—yet lost the horizontal direct relationship with the city and 'civic potential' present in the model.

Around their four specific programs (office, university hotel, and housing), the Seven Sisters condensed people with high-level skills and with a certain social stature. Even though the ground floor levels were public and accessible for everybody, a social selection process was performed to determine access the Seven Sisters' upper floors. In *Moscow Monumental*, Katherine Zubovich proved that no workers, even the Stakhanovites, were lucky enough to move into a luxury flat in the Seven Sisters that hosted housing.[19] In fact, only well-established people were granted a flat. As the party did the selection for granting apartments, being networked or having a job valued by the party was the only possibility to gain access to one of the luxurious flats.[20] It seemed that a social selection was also effective in the different programs of the Seven Sisters. In the prestigious hotels, only wealthy people were accepted, while in the ministries, high-level skills were required. The social selection happening in the Seven Sisters brought together the people that were essential for the regime yet being also the place where the same wealthy social group met and socialized. If the Seven Sisters hosted the elite of popular extraction who were leading the socialist economy, they also turned out to be an introverted social environment accommodating the need of the elite.

CONDENSING—THE ENACTMENT OF THE SOCIALIST LIFE

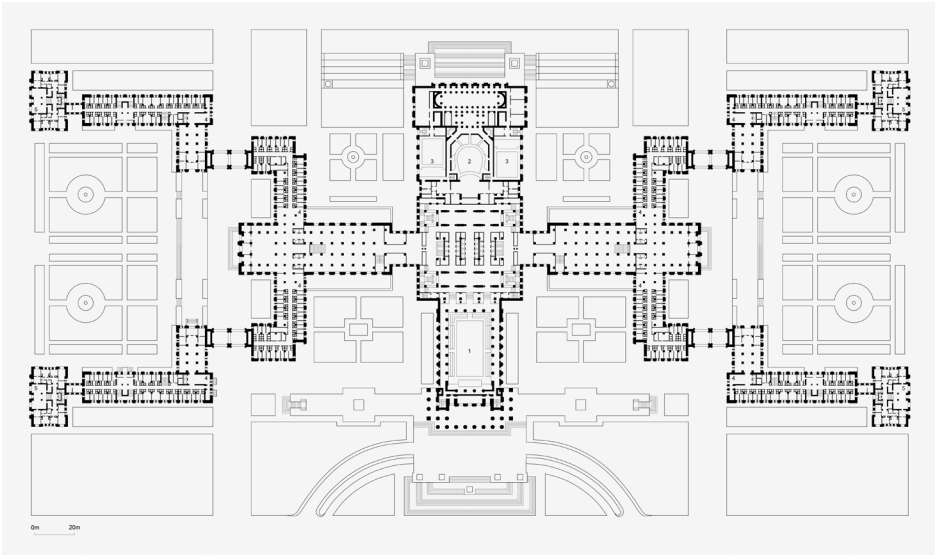
It is usually said that, through their projects, the 1920s Soviet modern movement known as constructivism (especially the OSA group) *enacted* a socialist way of life while socialist realist architecture only *represented* socialism.[21] In trying to give form to the words of Communist intellectuals, the constructivists focused on concrete production issues for shaping an egalitarian society with a communist ethos, while the socialist realist architects would only develop 'pure ideological' projects with ornaments and decorations. In fact, socialist realist architecture not only *represented* socialism but also *enacted* a socialist way of life. However, this socialist lifestyle didn't derive from a clear political ambition by architects to design a new architecture for a new man, as with the constructivists' projects. Rather, it was mainly based on the results of the socialist economy and therefore on the Seven Sisters as the places of production (where the elite worked) and reproduction (where the elite studied and lived). Moreover, the socialist realist lifestyle, in particular in the Seven Sisters, was the outcome of the ethos of the elite of popular extraction. This ethos was close to the petty bourgeois ethos, which is characterized by the reappropriation of different architecture cultures from different social milieux. It was mainly expressed as an attempt to imitate the codes of a higher social milieu than that from which the elite of popular extraction came, without being initiated or having an academic background to properly understand these codes.

19 Zubovich, 173.

20 It was well-known that the elite lived in the Seven Sisters. As a result, the inhabitants were mockingly named *Vysotnik*, after *Vysotki*, a name for the Seven Sisters in Russian meaning 'high-rise buildings.' Read more in Anne Nivat, *La maison haute: Des Russes d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 134.

21 The terms *enacted* and *represented* are taken from the article *Architecture and Counterrevolution: OMA and the Politics of the Grands Projets* by Pier Vittorio Aureli. Read more in Pier Vittorio Aureli, "Architecture and Counterrevolution: OMA and the Politics of the Grands Projets," *Oase*, no. 94 (2015): 47.

Lev Rudnev, Moscow State University, Moscow, 1949–1953. From Oltarzhevsky, *The Construction of High-Rise Buildings in Moscow*, 28.



Lev Rudnev, Moscow State University, Moscow, 1949–1953, upper ground floor plan. Drawing by Romain Barth.
1. Assembly hall 2. Concert hall 3. Auditoriums 4. Student housing 5. Faculty housing

Lev Rudnev, Moscow State University, Moscow, 1949–1953, assembly hall. From Oltarzhevsky, *The Construction of High-Rise Buildings in Moscow*, 43.

In this part, I will try to highlight this cultural diversity through the example of the OSA group's social condensers, as well as the twentieth-century luxury residential hotels in New York.

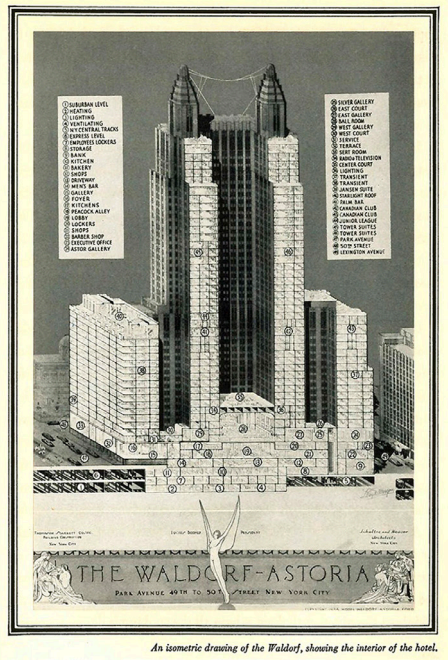
Moscow State University, built by Lev Rudnev, was different from the six other high-rise buildings because it was a larger urban complex and still outside the borders of the city in the 1950s, yet it was planned to be connected by an urban axis in the 1935 General Plan. Among the Seven Sisters, Moscow State University could be considered as the most influenced by the constructivists (even though it avoided using the modernist language of the constructivists). In particular, Moscow State University was influenced by one of the main inventions of the constructivists: the social condenser. More than just one building, a social condenser was an urban complex concentrating collective activities and programs that would enact a socialist way of life. In this sense, the university's urban plan worked as a French neo-classical composition: a colossal 450-meter-long symmetrical *palais*, wing buildings that reinforced the principal axis, and gardens that enhanced the perspective leading to the city. As the soviet engineer Vyacheslav K. Oltarzhevsky described it in the 1953 book *The Construction of High-Rise Buildings in Moscow* (solely devoted to the Seven Sisters), the main building hosted a large number and huge diversity of programs: student housing for 6'000 students, housing for the faculty, classrooms, laboratories, auditoriums, libraries, a social club with a concert hall, and sport facilities with a swimming pool, restaurants, museums and an assembly hall.[22] Yet, all the programs were clearly distributed to avoid any clashes and thus followed a sense of social hierarchy and responsibility. In fact, the first floor plan comprised of the professors' flats symmetrically placed at both ends in isolated turrets. It also comprised of the student housing units in the form of slabs. Every two student housing units shared a shower and toilet. At the center of the layout of the first floor plan (the most important because above it rose the steeple crowned with Soviet symbols) were situated the educational and research facilities for each scientific department as well as the auditoriums and classrooms. All these programs were connected to certain floors allowing, however, the students to move directly from the dormitories to the classrooms. Moscow State University became a classical incubator for engineers and scientists in providing all the facilities for the blossoming of body and mind.

The ground floors of the Seven Sisters located in the city also condensed a diversity of activities, yet they were closer to the lobbies of New York's residential hotels. Often on two levels, the ground floors of the Seven Sisters worked as centralities in the urban fabric where neighborhood life and the elite of the upper floors seemed to intersect. The Hotel Ukraine, designed by Arkady Mordvinov and Oltarzhevsky, concentrated in a symmetrical plan collective facilities meant to be used for everyday life: café, restaurant, post office, library, hairdresser, shops, billiards room, and winter garden. At the center of the composition, the entrance was an entity in itself, richly ornamented with vaults, paintings and sculptures. Because of this prestigious architecture, the lobbies perfectly suited social and official moments such as political congresses and plays while suddenly elevating the architecture of everyday life into a luxurious vignette. The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, completed in 1931 by the architecture firm Schultze & Weaver, was one of the luxury residential hotels in New York.[23] Residential hotels enabled the upper classes to live permanently in the city and enjoy the pleasures of daily life without having to maintain a mansion with a host of servants.

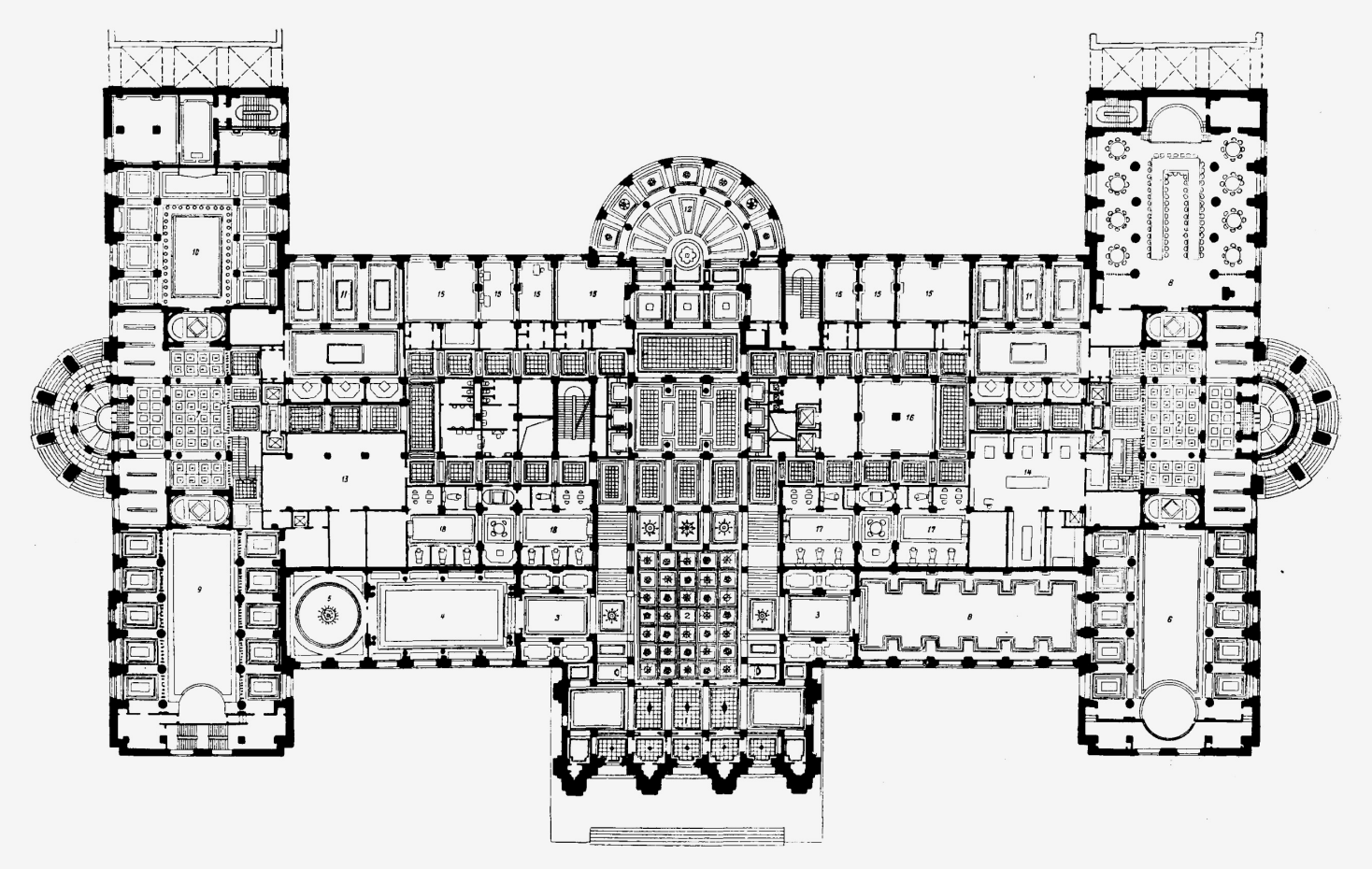
22 Vyacheslav K. Oltarzhevsky, *Stroitelstvo vysotnykh zdanii v Moskve* [The Construction of High-Rise Buildings in Moscow] (Moscow: God. izd-vo Lit. po stroitelstvu i arkhitekture,1953), 7–22.

23 Jean-Louis Cohen showed that there was a close relationship between Soviet and American architects until the start of the Cold War in the early 1950s. Soviet architects made official trips to New York, as Boris Iofan did in 1934, where he analyzed the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center skyscraper for the design of the Palace of the Soviets. Oltarzhevsky was active in New York from 1924 to 1935. It can be speculated that the soviet architects were not only influenced by New York's skyscrapers. They were also perhaps familiar with the U.S. residential hotels. Read more in Jean-Louis Cohen, *Building a new New World: Amerikanizm in Russian Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 292–336. On the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, see Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan (New York: The Monacelli Press,* 1994 [1978]), 132–151.

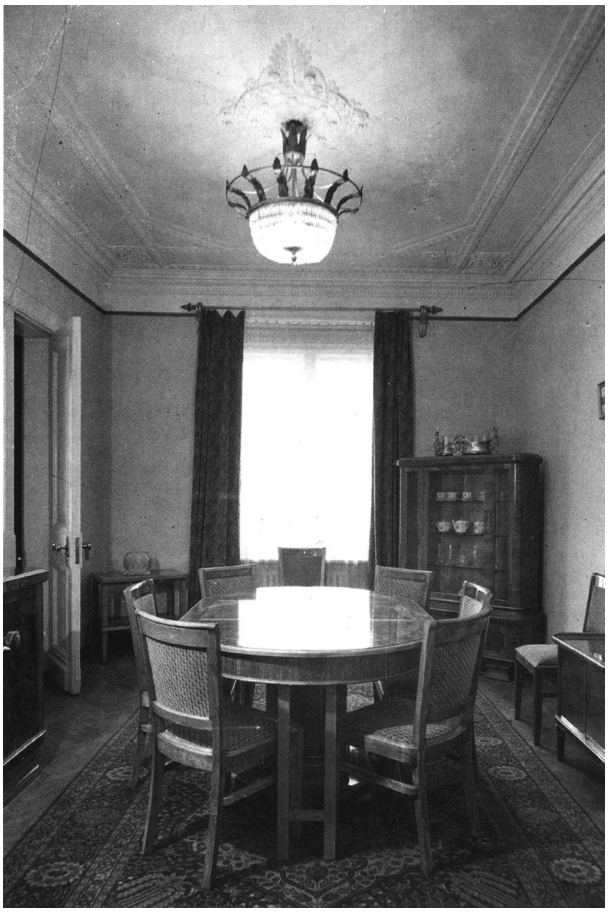
Mikhaïl Posokhin, Building of the Uprising Square, Moscow, 1950–1954, store interior. From Katherine Zubovich, *Moscow Monumental: Soviet Skyscrapers and Urban Life in Stalin's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 181.



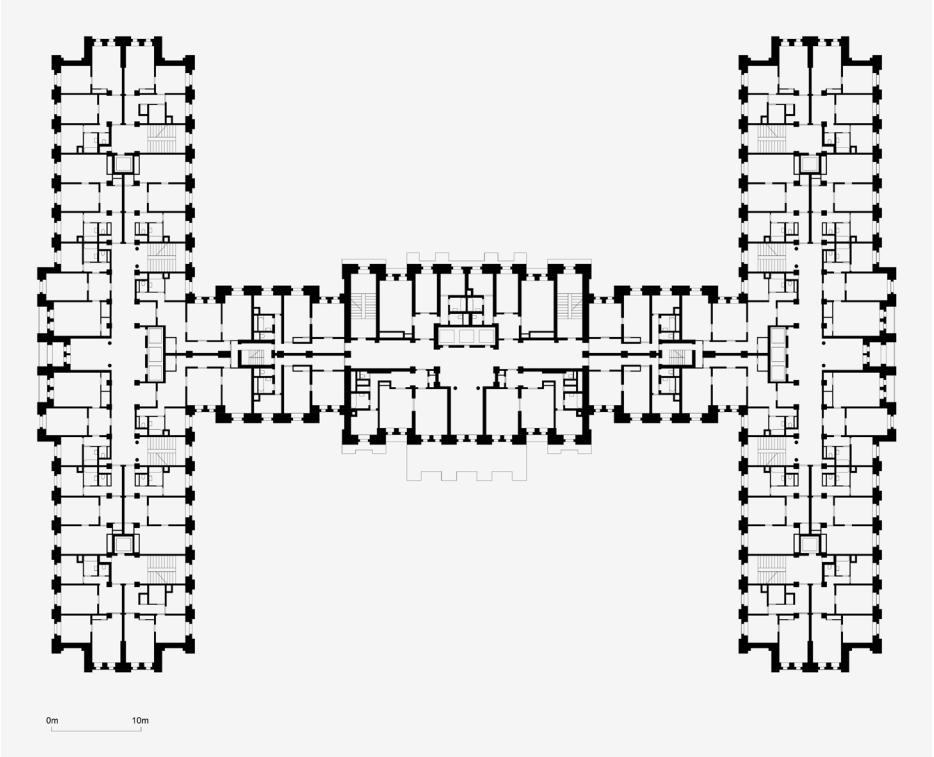
Schultze & Weaver, Waldorf Astoria Hotel, New York, 1929–1931, axonometric view. From "explore the history of the waldorf astoria in new york and SOM's plans for its renaissance," designboom, effective June 17, 2021, https://www.designboom.com/architecture/waldorf-astoria-new-york-som-plans-renaissance-06-17-2021/



Arkady Mordvinov and Vyacheslav K. Oltarzhevsky, Hotel Ukraine, Moscow, 1947–1957, first floor plan. From Oltarzhevsky, *The Construction of High-Rise Buildings in Moscow*, 113.
1. Lobby 2. Main lobby 3. Anteroom 4. Salon 5. Library 6. Restaurant 7. Side lobby 8. Banquet hall 9. Cafe 10. Canteen 11. Billiard room 12. Winter garden 13. Internal services office 14. Central laundry room 15. Service rooms 16. Fire equipment 17. Men's hairdressing salon 18. Ladies' hairdressing salon.



Dmitry Chechulin, Kotel'nicheskaia Embankment Building, Moscow, 1947–1952, living room of a private apartment. From Zubovich, *Moscow Monumental: Soviet Skyscrapers and Urban Life in Stalin's Capital*, 184.



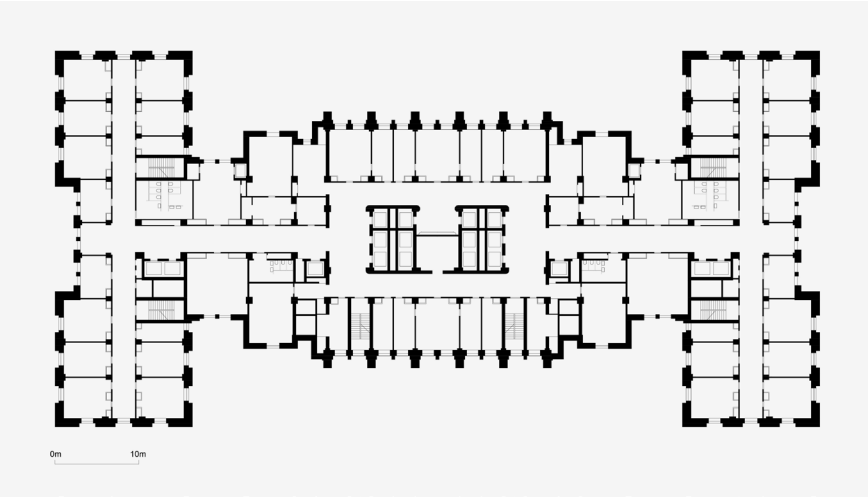
Mikhaïl Posokhin, Building of the Uprising Square, Moscow, 1950–1954, plan of the 4th–6th floors. Drawing by Romain Barth.

Generally speaking, the upper floors housed private rooms, while the ground floor, known as the lobby, served as the social area. The lobby was composed of different luxurious rooms that condensed different collective activities used by both the residents and the wider neighborhood, such as a ballroom for different kinds of events, restaurants, bars and shops. Originally, the term "lobbying" for a business came from the lobby, where the elite bourgeoisie informally networked and consolidated their social positions. Both the Seven Sisters and the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel proposed the lobby as a place where human interactions were increased and therefore this space became the background for elite reproduction.

In those of the Seven Sisters that hosted housing, the family apartment was the most used type. The typical family apartment consisted of a living room, a separated kitchen, a bathroom, and bedrooms for parents and children. It thus followed a model where private flats were meant to house the nuclear family (and in fact almost no studios were available). The two-or-three-room apartments were quite small but offered private flats for families, which were quite rare in the 1950s. Indeed, many Muscovite families lived in *dom kommunalka*, shared flats where rooms were very small and where kitchens and bathrooms were used by many families. The revival of the family apartment in Soviet society could be surprising, especially when Communist theorists such as Friedrich Engels developed the Communist society as a family-less society. The renewal of the family apartments could be explained by the ethos of the elite of popular extraction. In fact, it perpetuated proletarian habits (it was in this social class that the roots of these ex-workers and ex-peasants in power could be found) in which the family formed one of the principal piers of the social class. At the same time, this elite reappropriated the bourgeois way of life in residential hotels such as in the Shelton Hotel in New York, completed in 1923. Based on a mix between private apartments and collective facilities, this enabled New York families to keep their capital within the family unit while enjoying the social activities in the metropolis. As Anne Nivat described it in *La maison haute: Des Russes d'aujourd'hui*, even though belonging to the state, many Seven Sisters flats were passed on to the descendants of the residents. It suggested that, although Soviet society was 'classless,' the social position of the elite could be hereditary, and therefore challenged the usual Soviet belief that prestigious flats were granted on the basis of individuals' commitment.[24] In the Seven Sisters, as in the residential hotels in New York, a series of internal institutions facilitated the life of the residents and offered them activities. In the Seven Sisters, there were three institutions: the *domkom*—reminiscent of OSA projects—was a residents' committee organizing social activities and caring for children; the party, also represented by a residents' committee, organized political and propaganda activities in the Red Corners; and the administrative office in charge of the high-rise building in Moscow managed the upkeep and maintenance of the Seven Sisters (for example, 150 employees maintained the Kotelnicheskaya Embankment Building). Therefore, residents benefited from a wide range of collective activities that allowed them to enjoy life in society while having access to prestigious and sought-after private flats. Having the chance to live in the Seven Sisters demonstrated a certain social success and elevated the residents to a prestigious social stature within Soviet society.[25]

24 In the Seven Sisters, many flats were passed on to children if one of them was still registered in the parental flat. Anne Nivat, *La maison haute: Des Russes d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 43, 59, 135, 146, 220.

25 Nivat mentioned that many residents of the Kotel'nicheskaia Embankment Building were spied on by the party, through eavesdropping on telephone lines or sending maintenance agents to spy on the public. Although these skyscrapers offered exceptional conditions for the elite, they also condensed them into specific locations, making it easier to control them. One of these residents stated that: "Everyone in this building served the regime in their own way, without really thinking about it. They were the 'favourites', even though the Soviet regime was in the habit of monitoring every single citizen. We were all slaves, but there was a difference between the simplest slaves—the majority of the population—and the well-known and spoiled slaves, the elite. No one dared dream of better living conditions than in this house." Read more in Anne Nivat, *La maison haute: Des Russes d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 209. The passage is translated by the author.



Vladimir Gelfreykh and Adolf Minkus, Smolenskaya Square Building, 1950–1954, typical floor plan. Drawing by Romain Barth.

As mentioned earlier, besides serving as housing, the Seven Sisters were also the offices of ministries and the places of production for the bureaucracy. The typical plans for offices were composed of great repetitions of almost identical working rooms. A linear corridor, placed in the middle of the building, connected the rooms on each side. This highly rational plan was visible in the Smolenskaya Square Building, designed by Vladimir Gelfreykh and Adolf Minkus, for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this plan, the placement of the columns suggested that this type of office plan was anticipated from the earliest stages of design—far from the office typical plans in New York skyscrapers, which were meant to adapt quickly to constantly changing businesses. In fact, the two alignments of columns defined the width of the corridor and its placement in the middle of the building. From the columns and perpendicular to the corridor, partition walls were repeated and divided a series of working rooms. Because of the large number of working rooms, this type of office plan seemed to require a work process following highly defined procedures based on the division of different tasks by sectors and responsibilities. It would also imply a vertical hierarchy where orders were passed down from representative to representative. In this sense, in the Seven Sisters hosting offices, hierarchies were clear and attention was given to high-ranking people; for instance in the Smolenskaya Square Building, senior executives had separated entrances and cloakrooms while in the Red Gates Building, built by Alexey Dushkin, a working floor was reserved for the upper hierarchy.[26] Moreover, if the typical office plan aimed to be highly functional for the bureaucracy, its rationality (with linear corridors and repetition of rooms) was also the metaphor for how an ideal, efficient, and ordered bureaucracy should be organized. In this regard, in the Smolenskaya Square Building, the corridor was magnified by the architects. With their long perspectives leading to views over the city, the corridors displayed employees in a very orderly and straightforward architecture. It invited them to apply the same values to their work while making them remember the impact of their work on the city. The corridors thus became the symbol of the rationality that a bureaucracy needed to have in order to impact the whole territory.

26 Oltarzhevsky, 72.

INSTITUTIONALIZING—THE REPRESENTATION OF SOCIALISM

In *The Construction of High-Rise Buildings in Moscow*, Oltarzhevsky mentioned many times that "the great Stalin" was the most "brilliant architect of communism."[27] It was obvious that this formula was necessary for Stalin's cult of personality. But it also made explicit something else: the architects had to conform to the ideological line of Stalin and the party. By working as state artists, the architects were given a specific mission to support the politics of the party. Therefore, they became producers embedded in a social structure—in contrast, the constructivists were more autonomous from the party as well as in their design projects, but couldn't have as much of a concrete impact on society as the socialist realist architects. Following Kaganovitch's 1931 statement, the architect's task was to celebrate the socialist economy by using architecture as a strong ideological instrument. As a result, the capital city should host monumental bureaucratic institutions that could represent a socialist culture shared by all of Soviet society. This was done by using architectural languages that aimed to awaken pride in belonging to the proletarian social class and the USSR as a nation. Regarding pride in belonging to the proletarian class, for both the elite of popular extraction and the workers, reappropriating the former elite architectural language and turning it into a proletarian architecture nourished a mixed sense of pride and revenge from an oppressed social class that had overcome its oppressors. In that sense, the Seven Sisters reappropriated the classical style that the former aristocrat and Tsarist elite used to design official buildings, such as the old Moscow University completed in 1819. Regarding pride in the USSR as a nation, the Seven Sisters reappropriated historical and national architecture, especially the architecture of the Kremlin and the orthodox churches. It stimulated patriotic feelings, much needed after WWII engendered critical devastation throughout the country. In *L'architecture de la période stalinienne*, Anatole Kopp defined the socialist realist design method as the "critical assimilation of cultural heritage."[28] Indeed, it aimed to reappropriate and *imitate* the *image* of the architecture of the past and turn it into a proletarian architecture. What mattered was no longer the hidden codes of classical architecture that required initiation or academic background, but the possibility of using the grandiose architecture of the past and reappropriating it for the emergence of a proletarian culture.

To represent the socialist culture, the Seven Sisters' architectural language were based on common knowledge and common feelings of monumentality. The widespread classical and national architecture were key elements for stimulating this common knowledge. This was highly visible in the peristyle-like entrance of Moscow State University, with its imposing columns reinterpreting the façade of a Greek temple; the numerous cornices with metopes and triglyphs on certain levels of Moscow State University reminiscent of classical architecture; the towers and turrets of the Kotel'nicheskaia Embankment Building reminiscent of the multitude of spires of orthodox churches, such as Saint Basil's Cathedral in Moscow; the slenderness of the main tower of the Hotel Leningrad reminiscent of the Kremlin gates; and the sculptural elements crowning the towers in the Kotel'nicheskaia Embankment Building reminiscent of both a reduction of the onion domes of orthodox churches and of baroque architecture. Moreover, sculptures and wall carvings were cheerfully used in the Seven Sisters. They were meant to communicate Communist symbols such as the five-pointed star or the hammer and sickle. Sculptures and wall carvings were reminiscent of orthodox churches and religious monuments which used these elements to communicate their cultures to people, yet the Seven Sisters represented other allegories.

27 Oltarzhevsky, 214. Translation by author.
28 Anatole Kopp, *L'architecture de la période stalinienne* (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1978), 219. Translation by author.

Lev Rudnev, Moscow State University, Moscow, 1949–1953, peristyle-like main entrance. From Oltarzhevsky, *The Construction of High-Rise Buildings in Moscow*, 32.

Leonid Polyakov, Hotel Leningrad, Moscow, 1949–1954. From Oltarzhevsky, *The Construction of High-Rise Buildings in Moscow*, 140.

Dmitry Chechulin, Kotel'nicheskaia Embankment Building, Moscow, 1947–1952. In the middle of the composition is the Saint Basil's Cathedral and, on the right, one of the Kremlin gates. From "La prima città dell'URSS," *Casabella* 26, no. 262 (1962): 52.

Dmitry Chechulin, Kotel'nicheskaia Embankment Building, Moscow, 1947–1952, ornaments and sculptures on top of towers. From Anne Nivat, *La maison haute: Des Russes d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 60.

Lev Rudnev, Moscow State University, Moscow, 1949–1953, sculptures representing Communist allegories on either side of the main tower. From "Moscow State University 6," Wikipedia, accessed October 13, 2014, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moscow_State_University_6.JPG.

For instance, in Moscow State University, two sculptures represented allegories of Communism: a peasant woman holding ears of wheat and a sickle, and a working man wearing an apron and carrying a hammer. Both this architectural language based on common knowledge and the extensive use of sculptures and wall carvings aimed to develop a grandiose architecture that would be easy to read. In that sense, the Seven Sisters aimed to be appropriated by people, becoming popular figures for Muscovites and beyond. During his youth trip to Moscow in 1955, Aldo Rossi felt the popularity of socialist realist architecture. He stated that, more than architecture itself, it was the "emotion" it produced and the "collective fact" it created that impressed him.[29] In *A Scientific Autobiography*, Rossi claimed, while mentioning Moscow State University, that he "became conscious of the possibility that architecture could be unified with popular pride…"[30]

If the Seven Sisters' architectural languages aimed to be popular, the excessive use of classical and national architecture also reflected the petty bourgeois ethos of the elite of popular extraction, especially by using this architecture in strengthening the presence of Soviet institutions. In *Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, Vera Dunham proposed two definitions of the word 'culture' that were at stake during the period of socialist realism. *Kultura* was close to the artistic disciplinary fields, which required an initiation and generated intellectual stimulation. It represented the intellectual world that socialist realism was aligned against. And *Kulturnost* was about a "proper conduct in public" that would "encode the proper relationship between people through their possessions

29 Rossi, "Une éducation réaliste," 39. And "Entretien avec Aldo Rossi," *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, no. 190 (1977): 41.
30 Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, trans. Lawrence Venuti (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 40.

and labels; between mores and artifacts."[31] *Kulturnost* was a guide for behaving in public as well as for helping everyone conform to their social positions in the Soviet institution. The grandiose architecture of the Seven Sisters aimed to institutionalize more responsible, serious, and dignified behavior. The symbolic presence of the institution could elevate people toward more ideal behavior with socialist manners. This classical architecture wasn't only found in the public floors but also in the private spaces like in the family apartments or in the Moscow State University professors' flats, with their interior cornices, a chandelier, and imposing chairs. If living in the Seven Sisters demonstrated a certain social success, the classical décor aimed to showcase the pride that residents could have in this social position. Therefore, both in the private flats and on the public ground floors, this grandiose architecture put at stake one of the components of the petty bourgeois ethos: in reclaiming the classical language that was attached to the Tsarist elite, the elite of popular extraction stressed the institutional *image* of this architecture and consequently the effect the grandeur of this image had on people, more than the intellectual stimulation it could produce.[32]

Lev Rudnev, Moscow State University, Moscow, 1949–1953, living room of a professor's apartment. From Oltarzhevsky, *The Construction of High-Rise Buildings in Moscow*, 46.

31 Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1990), 22.

32 It is also for this reason that the formal excesses of socialist realist architecture became easily mocked, as we are reminded by the casual remark of the constructivist architect Ivan Leonidov that Rem Koolhaas quoted: "When we celebrated Leonidov's 100th birthday, one of his friends, an architect, told us that Leonidov had once stopped him when they were walking here on the new boulevard, looked at the looming enormity of Stalin's new buildings, and whispered, 'What would happen if they invested the same might into kindness…?'" Read more in Rem Koolhaas, "Utopia Station," in *Content* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), 395.

This grandiose architecture made clear that the Seven Sisters were *machines à communiquer*, to borrow a term from Manfredo Tafuri in his essay "The Disenchanted Mountain."[33] The excesses of architectural forms and languages, pushed to their limits in this last episode of Stalinist architecture, aimed to spread the socialist ideology of the party. For the architects, the task was clear: they had an ideological role to play in the society. And Oltarzhevsky confirmed this postulate saying that architecture should reach an "ideological saturation of the architectural image."[34] Architectural languages, allegories, and symbols were bound to stimulate a socialist culture and, especially, a proletarian culture that aimed to exacerbate the pride of the workers and of the elite of popular of extraction, both sharing the same roots. The Seven Sisters' design acted as a common cultural ground between the elite of popular of extraction, who led economic planning, with the workers who implemented it. Thus, the workers could see in the Seven Sisters the results of their work and, at a larger scale, the role of their social class in achieving economic plans. As Tafuri and Dal Co claimed: "The working class must admire the symbols of its own power and recognize the synthesis it represents in relation to history."[35] As popular monuments in the effigy of a proletarian culture, the Seven Sisters' forms and languages aimed to be the *trait d'union* between the workers and the elite of the economic plans whose results couldn't be seen directly.

RECLAIMING CLASSICISM AS PROLETARIAN ARCHITECTURE

On an international scale, by reappropriating the classical and national languages and using them for Soviet institutions, socialist realist architecture aimed to showcase that workers could develop their proper proletarian culture, once they weren't oppressed by the bourgeois social class. The Seven Sisters were supposed to rival the great height and the technical capabilities of New York's capitalist skyscrapers as well as challenge the classical language that was always appropriated by the upper social class. In a provocative way, the Seven Sisters aimed to achieve an *aesthetic revenge* of the proletariat vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie. Taking on an epic character, the Seven Sisters aimed to remind the workers of their roots, restore their pride, and highlight their lives as part of the epic of great history. However, one should recall that the Seven Sisters were reserved for the elite of popular extraction—the elite had the chance to live and work in more prestigious conditions than workers. And the design of the Seven Sisters, in stimulating a proletarian culture also served to disguise and legitimate the power of the elite of popular extraction.

Regarding the figure of the architect, since socialist realist architects conformed to the politics of the party, they managed to combine their talents with the strong political impact of the party. It led to a great cohesion between the *Kultura* of the architects and the *Kulturnost* of the party. This process—restrictive for the architects—resulted in slender architectural objects where ornaments, figurative symbols, and allegories dealt with austere modern elements, such as the drastic repetition of small windows in Moscow State University. However, designing popular architecture also meant designing forms that many people could like, because architectural languages could stimulate a certain pride and also design typologies (such as the family-type apartment in the Seven Sisters) that didn't challenge the status quo of lifestyle, therefore reproducing conserv-

33 Manfredo Tafuri, "The Disenchanted Mountain: The Skyscraper and the City," in *The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal* (London: Granada, 1980), 409.

34 Oltarzhevsky, 4. Translation by author. Since the socialist realist architecture aimed to *imitate* architecture of the past, the term 'image' (*obraz*) of an architectural project was frequently used by architects of that period. Read more in Anatole Kopp, *L'architecture de la période stalinienne* (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1978), 234.

35 Tafuri, Dal Co, 181.

ative habits. Socialist realist architects became the producers of the party with an ideological task to achieve. This has given architecture a higher profile and importance during the period of socialist realism, but also forced architects to neglect any possibility of design criticism.

Arkady Mordvinov and Vyacheslav K. Oltarzhevsky, Hotel Ukraine, Moscow, 1947–1957. From "La prima città dell'URSS," *Casabella* 26, no. 262 (1962): 53.

After perestroïka and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the Russian Federation opened up to foreign capital and to the market economy. Foreign'capitalists came to Moscow to start businesses in virgin territory. The former socialist elite was gradually replaced by the new capitalist elite in the flats of the Seven Sisters. This fresh elite liked the classical, grandiose, and provocative architecture of the Seven Sisters, as well as their views on the city and the Kremlin. After the socialists reappropriated Tsarist classical architecture, this gentrified socialism shows that luxury once again belongs to those in high social positions.

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