

Stalin's Urban Archipelago

The Cities Shaped by Socialist Realism

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Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ) Volume 40

Conferece hosted by the University of Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane 2-4 December 2024

Edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz

Published in Brisbane by SAHANZ, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7638772-0-7

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DOI: 10.55939/a5433pa1qh

Citation:

Strong, Joshua. "Stalin's Urban Archipelago: The Cities Shaped by Socialist Realism". In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 87-88. Brisbane, Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9th June, 2024



SAHANZ Society of Architectural Historians Australia & New Zealand



December 2-4 2024

Brisbane, Australia

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The Cities Shaped by Socialist Realism

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In the 1930s, the Soviet Union defined a formula for architecture and urban planning that came to be applied wherever Stalinist rule was imposed. The legacy is an archipelago of cities stretching from Europe to East Asia that have been shaped by Stalinist planning and Socialist Realism, which has plausibly been labelled the “other” International Style.¹ However, far from being a uniform style, Socialist Realism accentuated national differences, giving rise to a diverse range of subvariants across the archipelago. This paper will examine how, and why, this process unfolded.

Socialist Realism, a doctrine that applied to all forms of cultural expression in the USSR after 1932, depicted an idealised version of Soviet life. The “realism” referred not to the grim reality of the 1930s, but reality as it would be in the glistening communist future. Socialist Realist architecture was a reaction against the functionalist “box-architecture” of Modernism that, in the eyes of the Communist Party, ignored the aesthetic requirements of the working class. Instead of functionalism, architects were guided to take what was best from history, resulting in often-haphazard, idiosyncratic fusions of references. Buildings were festooned

in columns and arches, gilded spires, ziggurats, communist iconography, and artwork depicting “typical” scenes and heroes from Soviet life. It was an architecture that was both celebratory and didactic.

Socialist Realism developed alongside ideas about Soviet urban planning. In 1931, Moscow Party leader Lazar Kaganovich issued a report titled *Socialist reconstruction of Moscow and other cities in the USSR*, signalling a departure from 1920s avant-garde thinking. He called for a mass housing program, improved services, a rapid transit network, and a totalising city plan.² This led to the Moscow General Plan (1935), which aimed to transform Moscow into a grandiose ensemble of Socialist Realist architecture. The city’s ring and radial layout was to be expanded with wide boulevards circling and converging on Moscow’s symbolic centre, marked by the proposed Palace of the Soviets, a neoclassical skyscraper topped with a 100-metre statue of Lenin (Figure 1). The Plan became the playbook for cities across the USSR, each of which soon had its own bespoke version.

That this did not result in uniform cities was due to Socialist Realism’s prescription

1.

Greg Castillo, “Peoples at an Exhibition: Soviet Architecture and the National Question,” in *Socialist Realism without Shores*, eds. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (New York: Duke University Press, 1997), 91–119, 115.

2.

Lazar M. Kaganovich, *Za sotsialisticheskiyu rekonstruktsiyu Moskvy i gorodov SSSR* [Socialist reconstruction of Moscow and other cities in the USSR] (Moscow, Leningrad, 1931).

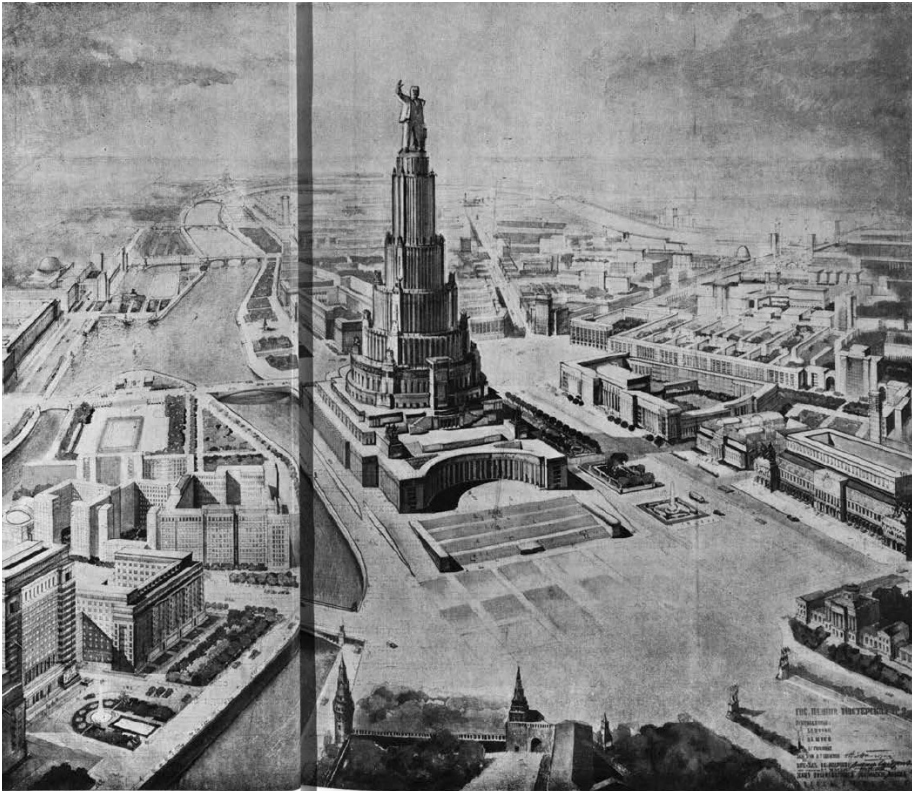


Figure 1:
 Rendering of the area of the Palace of the Soviets
 by architects V.G. Gelfreikh, V.A. Shchuko, and
 B.M. Iofan (*Arkhitektura SSSR*, nos. 10–11 (1935):
 26–27. Sourced from the International Association
 of Eurasian Unions of Architects.)

that art and architecture should be “national in form, socialist in content.” As distinct from Western Modernism, with its tendency to flatten cultural distinctions, Socialist Realism accentuated them, using minority vernaculars to convey political messages and instill loyalty. This approach needs to be understood in the context of Soviet nationalities policy, which positioned the Party as the champion of national minorities. By promoting local elites and celebrating minority traditions, the Soviet state created what Terry Martin labelled an “Affirmative Action Empire,” in which non-Russian national identities were “depoliticized through an ostentatious show of respect.”³

Following the “national in form, socialist in content” formula, architects across the disparate Soviet republics drew on local histories and ethnic motifs to develop regional variants of the official style. Traditions as diverse as Armenian church design, the Islamic architecture of Baku and Samarkand, and Ukrainian Baroque were conscripted into the service of Socialist Realism, creating an array of fusion styles that were fitted within standardised urban plans.

After World War II, Socialist Realist architecture and Soviet planning became an export product to the areas occupied by the Red Army. Similar approaches were adopted by the emerging communist states of East Asia. The result was that the Stalinist city emerged, guided by the prescriptions of Socialist Realism, across a diverse multi-national space that ultimately encompassed most of the Eurasian landmass. Framed within scholarship on Soviet cultural and nationalities policy and using selected works and statements from architects in the non-Russian republics and wider communist sphere, this paper will show how these architects interpreted their briefs at the local level and in the process created a vast urban archipelago of commonalities and differences.

3.

Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 13.