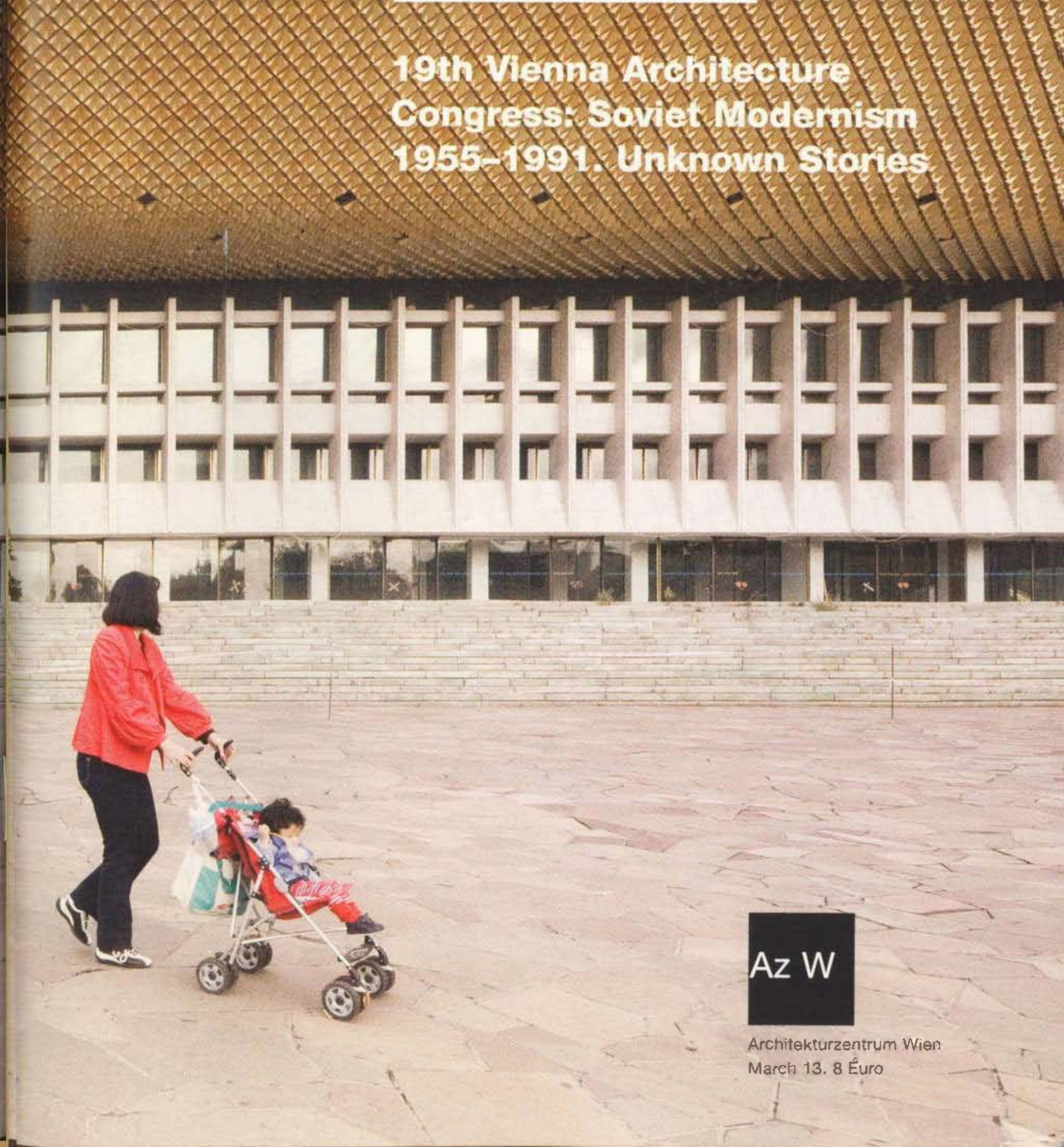
Hinter grund 54

19th Vienna Architecture Congress: Soviet Modernism 1955–1991. Unknown Stories



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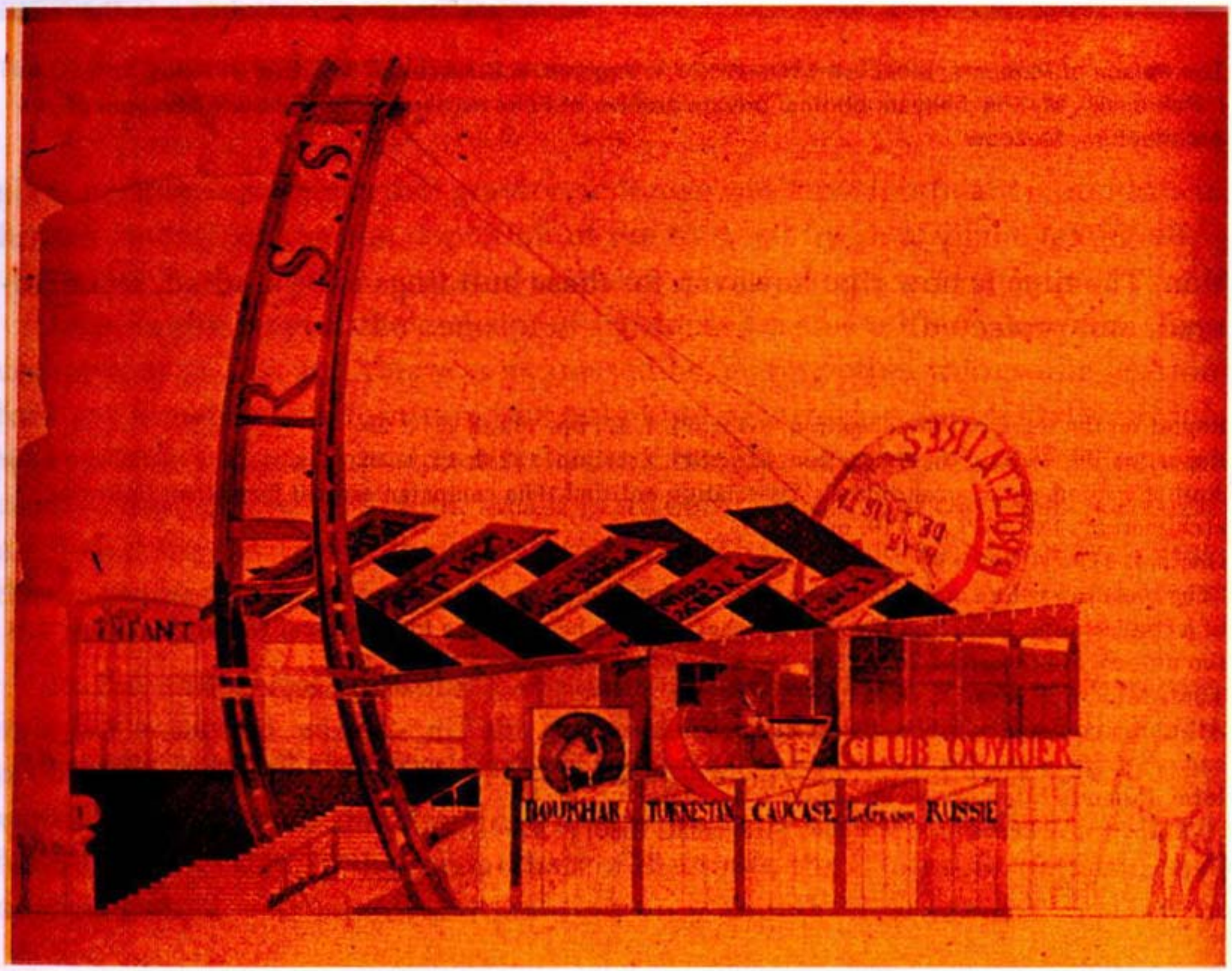


Paris Pavilion, 1925 / Konstantin Melnikov; source: Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Melnikov.* Moscow: Stroyizdat, 1990

Local Modernism and Global Orientalism

Building the 'Soviet Orient'

Boris Chukhovich

The phrase 'local Modernism' contains an obvious paradox that is almost an oxymoron. The founding fathers of Modernism had sweeping and global ambitions; they regarded the language of the new art as universal, while their social ideas, for all their diversity, were nourished by a dream of cultural hegemony which would soon be appropriated by totalitarian regimes. The name of one of the principal products of the modernist movement – the International Style – confirms the cosmopolitanism and universality of the modernist program. This explains the false confidence that Modernism could either be universal, i.e. 'Modernism, period', or make concessions to external circumstances, i.e. be 'not entirely Modernism'.

When we study modernist slogans, it is not difficult to come to another tempting, but not always productive conclusion. It is easy to suppose that local Modernism comes about mainly as the result of the decisive influence exerted on an architect by natural or cultural context. Thus, for instance, architecture criticism has long since tended to 'localise' the work of Alvar Aalto (Sigfried Giedion, for instance, wrote that "wherever Aalto was, Finland was always with him").[1]

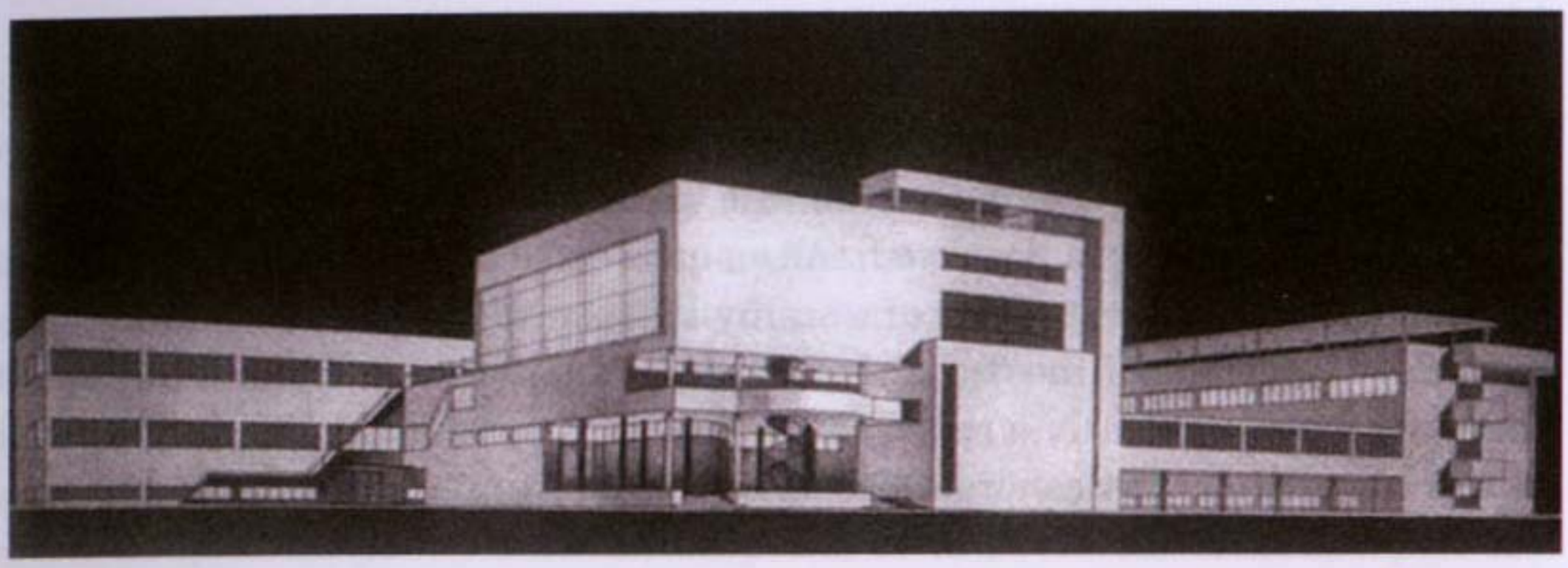
It is probable that there were indeed such links and influences, but I would like to emphasise that the focus on them was characteristic of that time when critics still treated architects' words and thoughts with a pronounced reverence. Today, however, we are very conscious that architects' words and the criticism written by their contemporaries have sometimes concealed much more than they have explained. The discourse that took place between architects' work and the general public possessed the general qualities of discourse, i.e. it was not simply abstract reflection following, with certain gaps and deviations, in the footsteps of form creation, but was indirectly or directly linked with the fields of power and authority that directed the construction process. For instance, the modern researcher studying the architectural work of Aalto will undoubtedly note the fact that Aalto often played with different explanations of his work depending upon the zigzag-shaped geopolitical situation in the period between the two world wars, easily passing over in silence, when necessary, the Finnish qualities of his creations and just as easily switching to an emphasis of their pan-European character.[2]

For all its universalist declarations, the origins of Modernism were not global, but absolutely local. As Nicolas Bourriaud has stated with lapidary simplicity in one of his interviews, "Modernism in the 20th century was actually quite Western-based."[3] As a consequence, when modernist experiments spread beyond the territorial borders of Europe, the significance of the discursive fitting of architecture to the local context increased markedly. In the case of the West's periphery, as in the example given above from Nordic Scandinavia, the primary emphasis was on the distinctive quality of the natural context; in non-Western areas, on the other hand, priority was given to cultural and civilisational specifics, whether real or deliberately invented. In this respect the history of Modernism in Central Asia is extremely interesting.

We may assert that the discursive framework for new architecture in what used to be Russian Turkestan was based on imported old European views of the 'Orient'. The metanarrative that nourished the local architectural process was all about building 'a new East', 'the Soviet East', and 'a showcase for socialism in the East', with help from 'the workers of the East' and in particular from 'liberated women of the East' in order that Central-Asian cities should 'shine like the stars of the East' and become 'capitals of friendship and warmth'. In other words, what was distinctive about the Central Asian situation was the meeting of local Modernism and global Orientalism. Of course, this was not the Orientalism that figures in serene old texts concerning the fruitful meeting and interaction of the cultures of East and West, but rather the phenomenon that we see today in post-colonial studies.

We may consider the precursor of the meeting of Modernism and Orientalism to be Konstantin Melnikov's final sketch for the Paris Pavilion of 1925. In spite of the worldwide fame of this monument of the Russian avant-garde, architecture historians have paid almost no attention to the Central Asian emblems which appear in the sketch. As an emblem of Bukhara, Melnikov chose a camel against the background of a sunny landscape with barchan dunes and a river; as a symbol of the Turkestan Republic he chose an Islamic crescent. These symbols are clearly a reflection of typical European prejudices. Central Asia is seen here either as virgin desert by way of contrast with the technological civilisation of the West, or as a concentration of medieval religiousness (again as distinct from Western rationalism and atheism). The parade of such exotic representations paradoxically makes Melnikov's masterpiece part of the series of pavilions for world colonial exhibitions held in Paris from the second half of the 19th century. The exhibition of 1925 was similar to the 19th century exhibitions in that the pavilions representing the European powers stood next to numerous pavilions belonging to the French colonies. This context should make our perception of the Soviet pavilion more multidimensional. The pavilion's ground floor was occupied by mini representative stands for what had been parts of the Russian Empire, beginning with Russia, which in the imperial tradition was called *la Grande Russie*. Extremely interesting here is the fact that the republic of Bukhara is depicted as part of the USSR, although it never was. In the autumn of 1924, when the design of the pavilion was being prepared, Bukhara was still officially recognised by the RSFSR as an independent state, while in 1925, when the pavilion was built, it was indeed part of the USSR – not, though, as the Republic of Bukhara, but as part of the new state of Uzbekistan. Thus Bukhara's inclusion in the Soviet pavilion is proof of the colonial character of the annexation of parts of Central Asia to the USSR. At a time when the local elite were still discussing what political form the region would take, its future as part of the Soviet Union had already been entirely predetermined in Moscow. But, of course, Bukhara was not a standard colony of the capitalist world. Even if the centre still prevailed politically over the periphery in the 'socialist colonies', the relationship between the two and the discourses involving them were of a different kind – as was reflected metaphorically in Melnikov's pavilion. Borrowing from the Marxist lexicon, we may say that the pavilion's colonial 'base' is surmounted by a Soviet/proletarian superstructure. Thus the first international artistic representation of the Soviet state was a symbolic combination of two images of modernisation: it was hierarchical/colonial on the one hand and cosmopolitan/socialist on the other.

When the Russian avant-garde compared their own experiments with what was happening in Europe, they for obvious reasons emphasised what made



Government House, Alma-Ata, 1928; source: Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Arkhitektura sovetskogo avangarda*. Moscow: Stroyizdat, 1996

their work different from the West, but when they turned to face Asia, they consciously or unconsciously became Europeans, embodying in their approach various European stereotypes of the East. The emblems chosen by Melnikov show us once again how superficial the Russian avant-garde's knowledge of Central Asian reality was and how orientalist the demiurgic modernist designs that they proposed for this region were. The principal paradox of the Central Asian situation is thus seen to be that even the cosmopolitan/socialist component of modernisation was largely orientalist in character, precisely as a result of imposing on the region rules of life and an image which had been determined in the 'centre'. The 'living creative work of the masses' was organised and directed from the centre, had to report to the centre, and represented Central Asia to the rest of the Soviet Union as 'the Soviet East'. So the old principles of European domination filtered through into Soviet practices and were orchestrated within the context of the new public order that declared an allegiance to the principles of universal brotherhood and equality.

In 1926 Moisey Ginzburg wrote a famous article entitled 'The National Architecture of the Peoples of the USSR'. This was probably the most programmatic statement ever made by the Constructivists concerning 'the East'. The broad generalisations made in the article were based on the architectural environment of the cities of Dagestan and Central Asia, in analysing which Ginzburg came to the conclusion that Soviet architects were here confronted with a "dead East" and a "living East". As an example of the dead East he gave the *medressa* of Ulugbek in Samarkand, about which he remarked: "The mosque of Ulug-bek [sic] is the culmination of the once mighty, but now absolutely dead, historical period in Uzbekistan, a gravestone for the now finished period of national development of the Muslims, a period of autocratic oriental tyrants and the apogee of Islamism, which enslaved the living active

force of working Muslims; these are forms which are capable of reflecting only the atavistic national idea of the East." As a counterweight to this there exists "the typical residential district of the oriental *kishlak, aul*, or city – the starting point for the development of a new national culture of the East."[4] It is easy to note that Ginzburg's statements here are based on the most common clichés, clichés that have been unmasked by Edward Said and are evidence, on the one hand, of Ginzburg's evident incompetence regarding Central Asian architecture, and, on the other, of his confidence in his right to dissect the body of culture into 'dead' and 'living' – into that which is to be destroyed or preserved in a museum and that which may be retained and used.

Two years later, Ginzburg was commissioned to design the Government House in Alma-Ata. The design has a free and asymmetrical layout of the kind that is characteristic of Constructivism – with an internal courtyard and a number of blocks standing on pilotis that allow free passage through to the other side, in complete accordance with the five principles formulated by Le Corbusier. However, the need for this concept to be discursively fitted to the local context made it necessary for Ginzburg to abstract himself from the original source (Le Corbusier) and reorient himself on local traditions. "In front of the main entrance into the Government House itself," writes Ginzburg, "on the north side is an open space with columns under the congress hall – a kind of terrace, which has great functional importance given the climatic and living conditions of our East."[5] Many years later, Selim Magomedov accepted this derivation unquestioningly. He wrote: "Ginzburg took account of the local natural and climatic conditions and living traditions. The blocks of which the House of Government is composed are arranged in such a way as to form a green courtyard in the centre, and in the vestibule in front of the meeting room and among the vegetation on the flat roof there are the open reservoirs (*hauzes*) that are traditional for Central Asia."[6]

There is one point that needs to be clarified here. *Hauzes* were indeed popular inside old Central Asian cities such as Samarkand or Bukhara. However, Alma-Ata is a city situated to the north-east of Bukhara and further from it than Cologne to Rome, in another climatic zone and in an utterly different cultural context (originally, the city took shape as the Russian settlement of Verny; the native Kazakh population was not settled and so could have no tradition of building *hauzes* in its public spaces). In just the same way as the typical 19th century European orientalist took the East to be the enormous territory stretching from Northern Africa to Japan, the researcher into Soviet Constructivism understood the Central Asian republics, a territory comparable to that of Western and Eastern Europe, as a single geographical and cultural space.

Kaĭkauz, design for a prototype micro-district development, Tashkent, 1978 / Sabir Rakhimov, Andrey Kosinskiy (project leaders); Gennady Korobovtsev, Georgy Grigoryants (main architects), et al. photos: private archive of Andrey Kosinskiy

We may distinguish two different types of Orientalism in Central Asian Modernism: earth-based and demiurgic. The former was expressed in the stylisation of formal parts of buildings or the urban environment associated with the region's historical architecture. For instance, Melnikov in his design for the Palace of Labour in Tashkent uses patterned grilles – features that are unusual in his work – in the balcony railings, while Shchusev employs the continuous ornamentation of certain walls in his design for the Government House in Samarkand. This kind of decoration of what is basically modernist architecture was subsequently practised from the 1960s to 1980s, notwithstanding all the declarations about building 'a new historical community, the Soviet people', a policy which supposed that factors relating to the ethno-cultural genesis of different regions would be evened out.

The second, demiurgic, type of Orientalism was based on the conviction that the historical environment of medieval cities – the 'dead East' to use Ginzburg's terminology – was part of the feudal lifestyle of the local population, a lifestyle that needed to be demolished to its foundations. The most decisive word in this matter belonged to urbanism. For decades following the master plan for the development of Tashkent of 1928–1931, architects put forward proposals involving the 'extermination' of the historical urban environment. In certain cases, and specifically in Tashkent and Samarkand, their methods have survived perestroika and the grand bulldozing process is only now coming to an end. However, there have also been exceptions. The idea of not demolishing old urban development in its entirety occurred for the first time in the reconstruction project for Bukhara (F. Dolgov, 1935–1936), which proposed preserving parts of the historical centre as "historical and archaeological reservations"![7] At Tashkent a similar concept made its appearance during discussion of the master plan of 1939. One

of the proposals involved leaving part of the old urban environment as a 'museum' in order that future generations should be able to compare the good life lived under socialism with "the dour medieval past".[8] This discussion was interrupted by the war; later, however, it was taken up again with new force. Mitkhat Bulatov, the Chief Architect of Tashkent, expressed the conviction that the structure of the old city, which is divided into *mahallas*,[9] should be developed rather than destroyed, since the *mahalla* was a prototype for the collective life that would be led in the future under Communism.[10] Thirty years later, this idea was taken further in the reconstruction project for the old Tashkent district of Kalkauz (Andrey Kosinskiy, Gennady Korobovtsev, 1978).

By the end of the 1970s most of Tashkent's old districts had already been demolished and replaced with a grid of modern avenues. The reconstruction plan for the district of Kalkauz, where there were numerous architectural monuments and a picturesque canal, proposed a different kind of approach. Preserving the medieval buildings and structure of the crooked lanes around them, the architects proposed surrounding them with tiers of modern development. The dense low-rise residential environment was to be replaced with 5- or 9-storey houses. The avenue was to be crowned by extravagant multi-storey hotels from which tourists would be able to relish exotic views. The layout took the form of an amphitheatre concentrated around what remained of the old city. Evidently realising the impossibility of preserving the old way of life, the architects proposed populating the old streets with a concentration of craftsmen – potters, engravers, chisellers, and so on – who could produce their goods under the watching eyes of tourists. Thus the old city was to become a theatre stage with actors as its fictive inhabitants, while the residents of the multi-storey residential buildings and hotel guests would be a voyeuristic audience. This idea is slightly reminiscent of the reconstruction plan for Algiers proposed by Le Corbusier in 1931. Subsequently much criticised for his colonialist approach, the maître of Modernism tried to separate the new city from the famous Casbah, erecting tiers of multi-storey houses above the old city blocks and even creating a special suspended road for those who wished to descend to the sea, allowing them to observe the historical environment from above without actually having to pass through it. The ancient city was on show for everyone to see – a kind of exotic museum exhibit. In spite of the similarity of these two projects, there were also notable differences between them. The Kalkauz project does not set out to conserve the old areas of the city, as is the case with le Corbusier's plan for Algiers. The city blocks are to be divided into zones, called 'communist *mahallas*'; and the proposals represent the coming together of three projects – communist modernisation, the invention of the 'New East', and the representation of the 'old city' as a 'historical-cultural reservation'.

State Library named after Karl Marx, Ashgabat, 1964–1976 / Abdullah Akhmedov (main architect), B. Shpal, V. Alekseyev; photo: private archive of Vadim Kosmatschof
Palace of the Friendship of Peoples, Tashkent, 1981 / Yevgeny Rozanov, Ye. Sukhanova, Vsevolod Shestopalov, E. Shumov; artist: Alexander Kedrin; photo: private archive of Farkhad Tursonov

Even if the Central Asian architects shunned historical references, their works were invariably subjected to discursive approbation in order to satisfy the requirements of orientalist representativeness. For instance, with regard to the Karl Marx Library in Ashgabat (Abdullah Akhmedov, 1966–1976), a building that was clearly inspired by Le Corbusier's Brutalist experiments in India, one critic wrote: "The problem of national form has here been given a talented and profound interpretation. The overall layout in itself – with its inner courtyards and covered terraces – reveals the influence of the techniques of national architecture [...]. But all this is merely at the level of general associations; there is an absence of forms or details taken from ancient architecture."[11] This kind of displacement of meanings is extremely typical, as is the encratic character of the rhetoric used here. For instance, in describing Gulistan Market in Ashgabat (Vladimir Vysotin, 1984), whose exterior expresses the classic modernist motif of 'resisting mass', one writer emphasises that "in it we can trace a link with the ancient traditions of Central Asian cities, where the bazaars were not just places for trade, but also centres of interaction between people."[12] Another example is the work of Yury Parkhov, a Dushanbe architect who systematically developed two modernist themes – combinations of the atomic forms of the parallelepiped and cylinder and the use of longitudinal horizontal strips to add texture to buildings. In the commentaries written on his work we read: "The external appearance of [his] buildings is understated, while their brick cladding will facilitate associations and visual links with Tajik folk architecture."[13] Thus local reality verbally re-codes architecture in accordance with the rules of Soviet orientalist discourse.

Post-colonial research has clearly shown the strong link between Orientalism and the West's colonial domination of the rest of the world. Central Asian Modernism is an example of the constant presence of these colonial connotations. We are tempted to ask bluntly: do the architectural practices considered here not confirm the widespread view of the USSR as a 'red empire' and of the Central Asian republics as its colonial annexes? I think there cannot be a single objective researcher who would equate relations between the centre and the periphery in the USSR and in classic empires such as Great Britain and France. In the latter cases there were different historical circumstances, but it is also true, above all, that 'classical colonisation' and communist society possessed different projects. However, a distinctive Soviet Orientalism nevertheless existed, and there was likewise a relationship of domination between the 'European' centre of the USSR in Moscow and the 'Eastern'-Asiatic periphery. This relationship turned out to be part of the Soviet project, with the latter combining global plans for the creation of a global 'kingdom of freedom' with what was frequently the forced construction of a Eurasian power. Like Melnikov's pavilion of 1925, it contained two components: a communist one and an orientalist one. These may be thought of in two different ways – as the erection of a communist superstructure on top of a post-colonial base or as the gradual overcoming of colonial elements during the course of the unfolding of the communist project, hopes of which were encouraged by the cosmopolitan 1960s. It is difficult, however, in the light of the geopolitical catastrophe that soon befell the USSR, to escape the conclusion that the model of base and superstructure is more apt.

1 Sigfried Giedion, *Vremya, prostronstvo, arkhitektura* ['Time, space, architecture']. Moscow: Stroyizdat, 1984 (3rd edition). p. 340.
2 As was done by Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen in her monograph *Alvar Aalto: Architecture, Modernity, and Geopolitics*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009.
3 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqHMlLrKpDY.
4 Moisey Ginzburg, 'The national architecture of the peoples of the USSR', *Sovremennaya arkhitektura*, Nos. 5–6, 1926, p. 113.
5 *Sovremennaya arkhitekturo*, No. 3, 1928, p. 77.
6 Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Arkhitekturo sovetskogo avangarda*. Moscow: Stroyizdat, 1984, p. 585.
7 Dissertational research by Mark Notkin, 1980s, p. 122 (undefended dissertation; manuscript supplied by the author).
8 Paul Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City, 1930–1966*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010, p. 70.
9 Mahallas: distinctive urban communities in historical Central Asian cities.
10 Stronski, *ibid.*, p. 151.
11 Yury Gnedovsky, 'The new library building in Ashgabat', *Sovetskaya arkhitektura*, No. 6, 1976, p. 8.
12 Yuly Katsnelson, Agliman Azizov, Yevgeny Vysotsky, *Arkhitektura Sovetskay Turkmenii*. Moscow: Stroyizdat, 1986, pp. 202–203.
13 Vsevolod Veselovsky, Rustam Mukimov, and others, *Arkhitectura Sovetskogo Tadjikistana*. Moscow: Stroyizdat, 1987, p. 185.

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