

7

Eyes which do not see. 4: Palace of the Soviets

JOSEPUQUETGLAS, TRANSLATED BY CHARMAINE LAY AND CARLES MURO¹

On his first visit to New York, Le Corbusier thought the skyscrapers to be small, short and timid. Instead, the key word for his understanding the Soviet Union of the end of the Twenties was "BIG". He explains this in an article that was published initially in the magazine *Prélude* in 1932, and then later in his book *La Ville Radieuse*, in 1935, while commenting on his surprise on discovering that the origins of the word "bolshevik" contained the concept of "big" and its superlative². From this confessed feeling I think that it is possible to attempt to understand one of Le Corbusier's most enigmatic and poorly explained projects: his competition entry for the Palace of the Soviets, in 1931. Its failure, on losing to a classicist pastiche, marked the end of the relationship between Modern Architecture and the Soviet Union and was deserving of one of Le Corbusier's most deeply disappointed comments³.

The building was to respond to an unusual programme: a centre for work and representation from which political life and the economy of the Soviet Union was to be governed. An enormous brain and muscle. The Escorial of the twentieth century. An assembly room for 15,000 people, a smaller one for 6,500. Cloakrooms and gigantic vestibules with no steps at all so that the fluid movement of thousands of people would not be broken. Hectares of sloped floors. The stage in the large assembly room, for instance, was large enough for 1,500 people allowing huge demonstrations to traverse the building, crossing the stage as they were saluted by the 15,000 delegates, and then exiting the building at the other end. Many other rooms, libraries, and the corresponding services. A new Kremlin on the other side of the Moskva.

"Bol'she!"

Le Corbusier does not often explain the figurative origin of his projects, although he discretely leaves enough clues for them to be discovered.

In the Centrosoyus building, for example, at the same time that he pronounces his beliefs in anti-symbolism and strictly constructive efficiency, and while defending himself against the accusations of for-

malism from Centro-European "functionalist" architects, Le Corbusier publishes, without comment, a plan photograph of the model showing what no visitor could suspect: the building, headquarters of the workers' cooperatives, is in the shape of an outlandishly modern worker, dressed in a helmet, overall and gloves, working on science-fictional technology.

In the case of the Palace of the Soviets critics have recognised fewer associations. Until now, only the most obvious has been pointed out: its debt to Eugène Freyssinet, the engineer who built the bridge over the Seine at Saint-Pierre du Vauvrey in 1923 and the airship hangar in Orly between 1917 and 1921, which Le Corbusier had already published in the magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau* when its construction had hardly begun. However Freyssinet's work cannot be accepted as the imaginative stimulus for the Palace of the Soviets, but only as its constructive possibility, its practical demonstration.

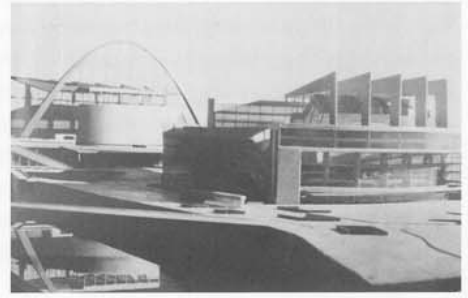
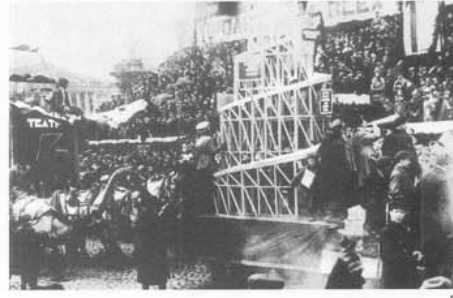
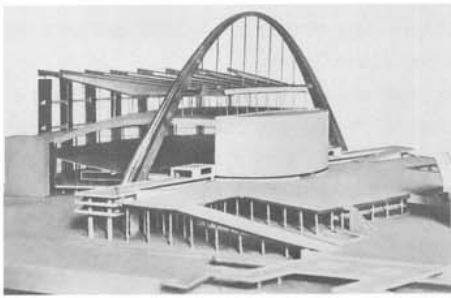
If Le Corbusier had taken Freyssinet as a starting point, he would have made a literal quotation that would have been the same size as the original. He would not have produced this radical and audacious enlargement of the company which was, for Le Corbusier, the essence of the issue: its metaphorical transformation. Indeed, what is not clear is how the issue would have been solved had one known which was bigger in one's imagination: a parliament building or an airship hangar. The starting point for the project must be found in some other place.

In his monograph, *Le Corbusier et la mystique de l'URSS*, Jean-Louis Cohen, as well as referring to Freyssinet, points out another association. The roof of the large assembly hall, is held up by an asymmetrical structure. On one side, the huge concrete arch, "à la Freyssinet" from which eight enormous articulated beams are suspended with cables. The opposite ends of these beams are supported upon inclined columns. Cohen associates these two figures: the parabolic arch and the sinuous line traced by the beams and columns, with an emblem fitting to the occasion: the hammer and sickle, characterized by the curve of the sickle blade, and the right-angled bend between the handle and the head of the hammer. It's

¹ El texto original español puede encontrarse en www.arch-mag.com. — ² As it is — or used to be — known, the "bolsheviks" and the "mensheviks" were, in fact, the majority and minority sectors, respectively, of the Russian Social-Democratic Party. — ³ Letter to Anatoli Lunacharsky of March 13th 1932. Published in: J. L. Cohen, *Le Corbusier et la mystique de l'URSS*, Mardaga, Bruxelles 1987, p 233.

- 1. Le Corbusier, Palais des Soviets, 1931.
- 2. E. Freyssinet, Airship hangar in Orly, from *L'Esprit Nouveau* 18, juin 1922.
- 3. Le Corbusier, first drawing in Moscow, from the platform at the Belorussia Station, October 10th 1928.
- 4. Makhovaia Street, Moscow.

- 5, 6. Simplified version of the model of Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* at the May Day parade in Leningrad, 1926. (See the horse).
- 7, 8. Eisenstein, images from *The General Line*.
- 9. Le Corbusier, Palais des Soviets, 1931.



not bad, he could be right, but you have to turn your eyes slightly too willfully "cubist" to see the great parade of hammers and sickles.

The arch could easily be associated with another figure that is very close to Le Corbusier's world: the "Twenty-four Hours Law", the path of the sun, the parabolic curve of the sun, twelve hours above and twelve hours below the horizon. So often can this emblematic line be seen in books, projects, paintings and drawings that finding it here, built at a grand scale is hardly surprising. This happy coincidence is probable, but the imaginative source for the project is not to be found here either. This arch that represents the path of the sun could just as well have been built in Copacabana as in Moscow: anywhere on the planet. And, for Le Corbusier, an architectural project has never been an excuse for leaving his most private and personal convictions deposited upon the earth, but rather to make evident a unique relationship between the site and the activity that construction initiates.

To reach what, in my opinion, is the origin of the project, to see emerge the same thing that Le Corbusier saw when he looked at the model or thought about the palace, one must observe a drawing that Le Corbusier made as he arrived in Moscow on 10 October 1928, from the platform of Belorussia Station. His suitcase is at his feet on the platform, in the background rise the cathedral of the Old Believers and the Triumphal Arch celebrating the victory over Napoleon. The centre of the drawing is occupied by a coachman with his horse and carriage. The perspective is not so different from the very drawing that Le Corbusier used to present the project, as though it were built, showing the Kremlin and the cathedral occupying the centre and one side of the image, while the Palace of the Soviets is displaced towards the other end. What do we see? What surprises us? What is the most significant coincidence between the drawings? They have something in common: the arch. The horse's collar together with

the Triumphal Arch is surprisingly similar to what will become the concrete arch of the Palace of the Soviets.

This was the common way of harnessing horses and beasts of burden in Russia and is easily found in any photograph of the times, urban as well as rural. It is a type of collar that does not come into direct contact with the animal's neck, but follows it at a distance, in the form of a parabolic arch of wood and leather. They can be seen in some scenes of Eisenstein's *The General Line*, worn by oxen or horses and marking the contradiction between the ancestral material culture of the peasant and the new cooperatives, precisely built in "Corbusian" architecture. On October 16th 1928, Le Corbusier had seen *Battleship Potemkin* and four reels of *The General Line*, which he renamed in honour of Eisenstein, whom he met on the same occasion, as *The Straight Line*.

This is, in my opinion, the origin of the concrete parabolic arch. It is, though enlarged, the local system of collaring animals that any Russian would immediately recognise.

Thus, the building becomes a gigantic carriage that extends there to serve the whole nation, with neither oxen nor horses, but powered by the will, enthusiasm and tenacity expressed by millions of people during those years, and building what was, for them, the new society. It was not a Triumphal Arch, a passive and declamatory backdrop, but an instrument of work and action. A machine for transforming the world, a machine for living.

It was never built. Another carriage, but of a very different nature, was built instead: the one pulled by Mother Courage wandering around the waste land.

Josep Quetglas: see p. 87