

UTOPIA DYSTOPIA REVISITED

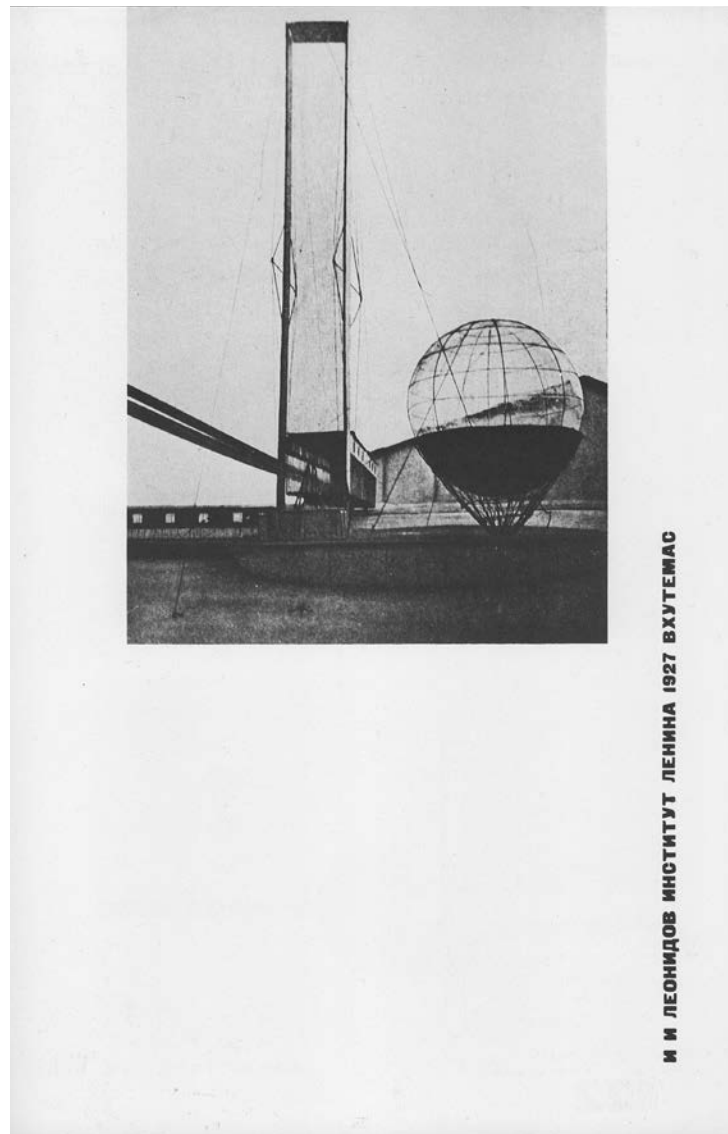
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UTOPIA AND INVENTION: THE IMAGINARY OF THE ARCHITECT IVAN LEONIDOV

by Dr Andrei Nakov



Ivan Leonidov
The Lenin Institute of Librarianship

In the vast panorama of the architectural invention of the 20th century, Ivan Leonidov's creative brilliance (1902-1959) occupies a key position, a remarkable one.

If the anti-modernist constraints of the “Soviet” society did not allow him the possibility of bequeathing to posterity significant constructions, his projects on paper, of a dazzling invention and exceptionally graphic refinement, were well known at the time and were widely disseminated several decades after his death, making him a quasi-mythical figure of modern architecture.

Throughout the 20th century, the poetic intensity of his projects fascinated Russian interpreters of modern architecture and even more so Western architects (see Le Corbusier)¹ as much as the constructivist principles, and particularly the genetic sources of his architectural poetry remained somewhat in the shadows.

A magnificent flagship of “architectural constructivism”, Leonidov's work was illustrated during the years 1926-1932 by grandiose visions. His Muscovite building of the newspaper *Izvestia* (1926), a competition project for the *Monument to Christopher Columbus* (1928-1929) in the Dominican Republic and, above all, the library of the Lenin Institute (1927), were a real firework display of the constructivist poetry presented in the final-year project work defended by the young architect at the Vkhoutemas school, in Moscow.

After that, he engaged in ambitious projects such as the Magnitogorsk industrial complex. Considered fascinating for its spatial audacity and its pure graphic refinement, the Lenin Institute was honoured with a special issue of the Russian magazine *CA (Contemporary Architecture)* No. 4-5 of 1927). This one-time issue of equally exceptional size was dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the “October Revolution”, an event raised at the time to the dimension of the founding myths of the “new society”.

Born in a small village in the Tver region, Ivan Léonidov was born out of a native peasant family and benefited from the strength of the “spirit of the people” which his father generously passed on to him. Arriving in Moscow in 1921, the young Léonidov had access to the new architectural education that began to be taught by the Vkhoutemas, a school of the art structured according to the principles of the new abstract art that quickly flourished in Russia during the years 1916-1919.

This revolution of the “constructivist” imagery, due to the logic of the non-objective art, had replaced the old vision of static buildings overnight. It was going to flourish in a new revolutionary vision, which was the exact opposite of the old “academic” tradition, a system of values which was dismissed by the explosion of non-objective art.

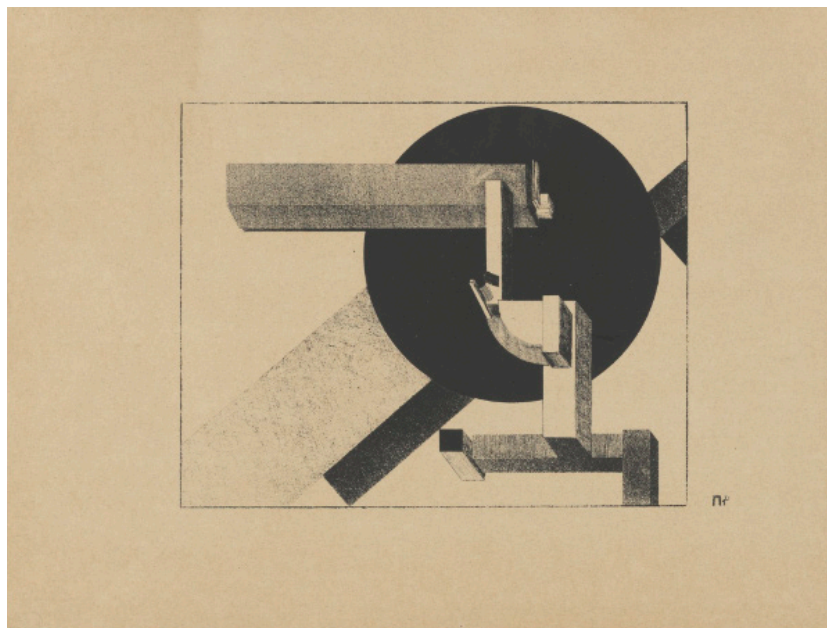
The year 1921 was a pivotal year of the modernist escalation in Moscow. It was marked in the annals of modern art by exhibitions as radical as that of the young group “Obmokhou” (Young Painters' Association), displaying the abstract “linear” sculptures of Rodchenko, Yoganson, Medounetzki as well as those of the brothers Gueorgui and Vladimir Stenberg.

In September 1921 the exhibition “5x5=25” was the ultimate confirmation and the no less radical overcoming of the constructivist painting of Alexandra Exter, that of Rodchenko or that of Popova and Vesnin. In the pictorial practice of these artists, painting became a very bold manipulation of linear patterns, with the dynamic tension of matter replacing the old “descriptive” logic of planes.

¹ Cf. Andrei Gozac et Andrei Léonidov, *Ivan Léonidov*, ed. par Catherine Cooke, Londres, Academy Editions, 1988.



Vladimir Tatlin
Model for the Monument to the Third
Internationl, 1920



Lazar El Lissitzky
Proun 1 D from Proun, 1920

The traditional material was then replaced by the dynamics of the lines, carrying the energy of the shapes and construction, the latter having been erected with the purpose of the “constructivist” practice. Alexander Vesnin was one of the first teachers in the Vkhoutemas’ department of architecture where Ivan Leonidov entered in 1921.

The second half of 1921 was also marked by the Muscovite presentation of Lissitzky’s “Proun” utopian projects. His collection of *Proun* lithographs was printed at the time, as the artist explained the logic of this suprematist “architecture of the future” at public conferences at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhoul), a newly created research and discussion forum.

The architectural invention of the Malewiczean suprematism reached thus in full force Moscow, where new forces joined this current (Klucis, Senkin, Kudriashov). It is important to remember that the summer of 1921 was marked in Moscow primarily by the now-famous “Tower” (Monument to the Third International) of Tatlin. The same project which, at the end of June, was featured in a presentation made on the margins of the Komintern’s Congress (The Communist International).

A grandiose and audaciously utopian project of an unprecedented scale at the time, from one day to the next this work would mark, more than any other, the architectural poetry of the 20th century. As an event that was meant to be global in scope, this Congress would generously open the doors of world fame to Tatlin’s “Tower”. These were the poetic ingredients that served as vectors to the young Vkhoutemas student’s vast architectural horizons.

Contact with Aleksandr Vesnin was to be all the more stimulating. Vesnin, a long-time friend and comrade of Tatlin’s cubist experiences, had been intimately present in 1915 when Tatlin’s first reliefs were created, those artworks whose importance for the birth of abstract sculpture, and that of constructivist in particular, can never be underestimated.

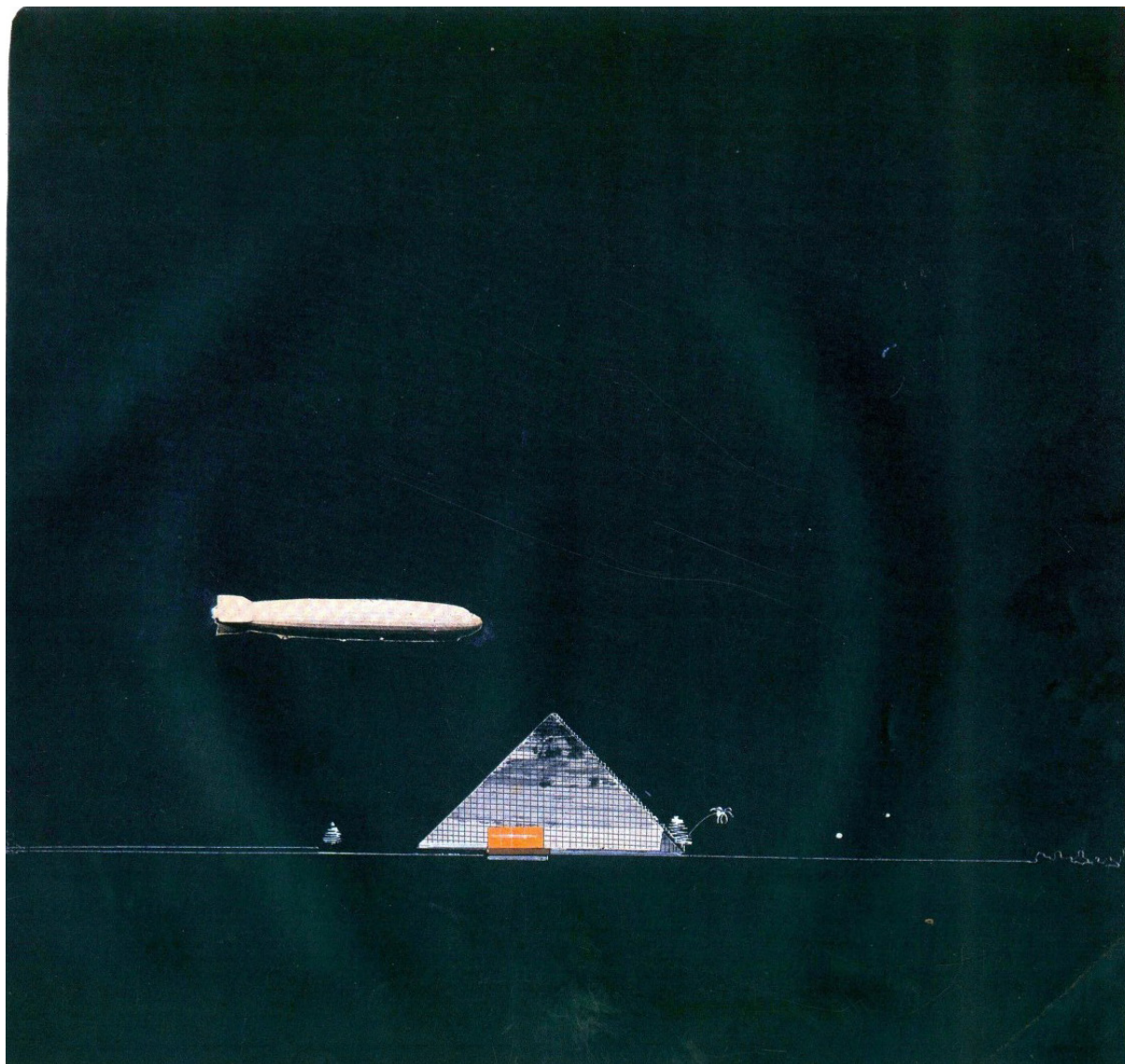
Besides Vesnin, among the initiators of the new architectural thinking, Nikolaï Ladovski (1881-1941) and Vladimir Krinski (1890-1971), another companion of Vesnin and Tatlin and a great theorist of modern architecture, were also present in Moscow’s art scene.

From the winter of 1915-1916, he was one of the first to appreciate in perspective the originality of Tatlin’s reliefs, the most revolutionary works ever seen. In 1919, Ladovski was to provide one of the first and most remarkable definitions of the - future - “constructivist” architecture: “Space, not stone, is the material of architecture,” he stated. Unlike the inertia and the immovable gravity of the stone, space, conceived as a dynamic medium, thus animated by new energetic forces, became at that time the new *material* of non-objective sculpture (see Tatlin’s reliefs).

During the 1920s, this type of material - a space animated by energetic tensions - became the primary material of the *constructive* dynamics of Leonidov’s architecture. Still in the twenties, Katarzyna Kobro, a sculptor working in Poland but influenced in 1920-1921 by the same Muscovite constructivist spirit, marked by the example of Tatlin as well as of Malevich, who she met in Smolensk, thus defined the spatial logic of her abstract sculpture (1929), a visionary creation among the most original of her time:

1. The Sculpture is part of the space, the condition of its organic quality and its link to space.
2. The Sculpture is not a composition of the shape for itself, but the composition of space.
3. The energy of successive forms in space creates a space-time rhythm.

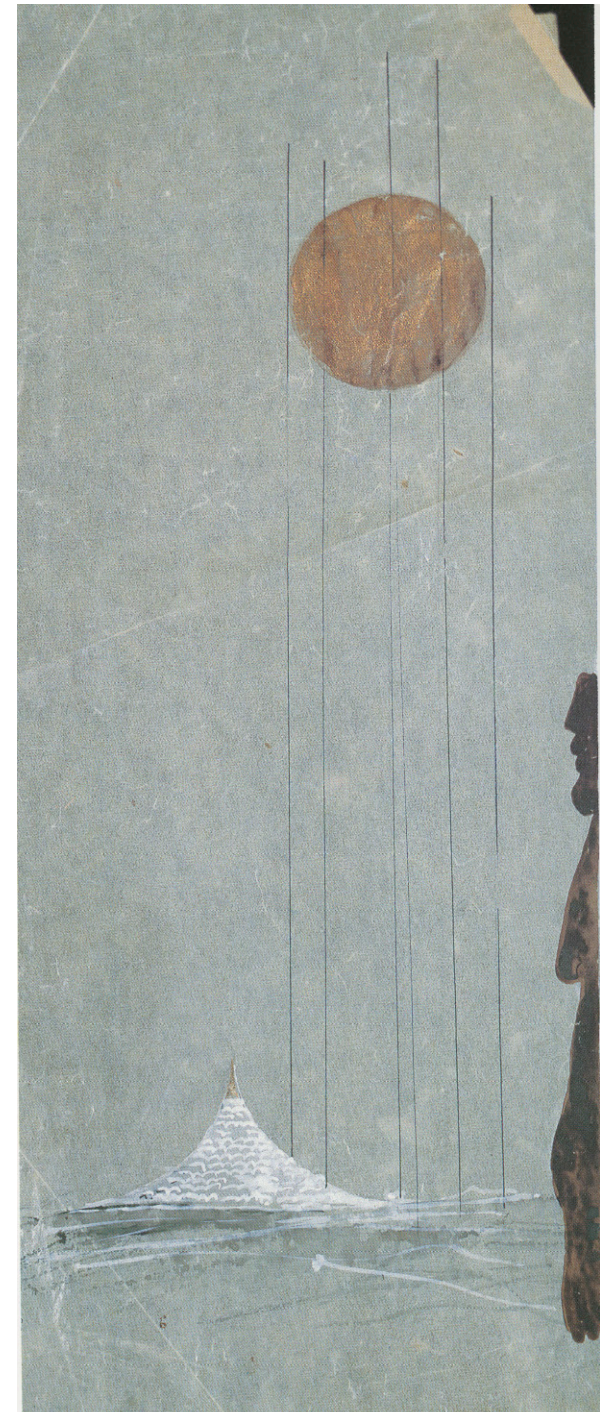
In developing this type of spatial thinking, one could approach in a “sensible” way the latest creation of Leonidov, a creation in which the manipulation of space energies, the Alpha and

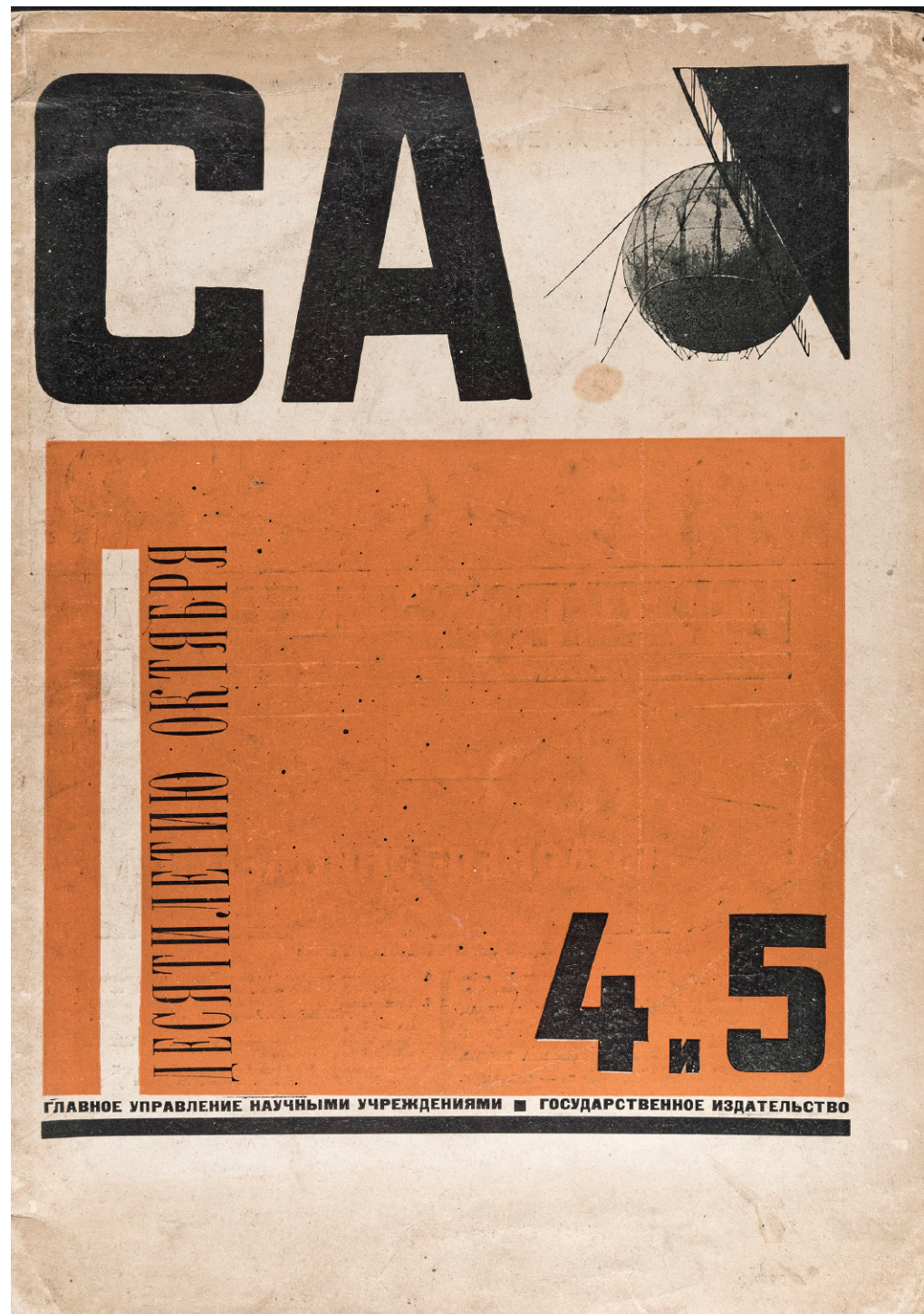


Ivan Leonidov
Palace of Culture on the site of the Simonov Monastery, Moscow, 1930

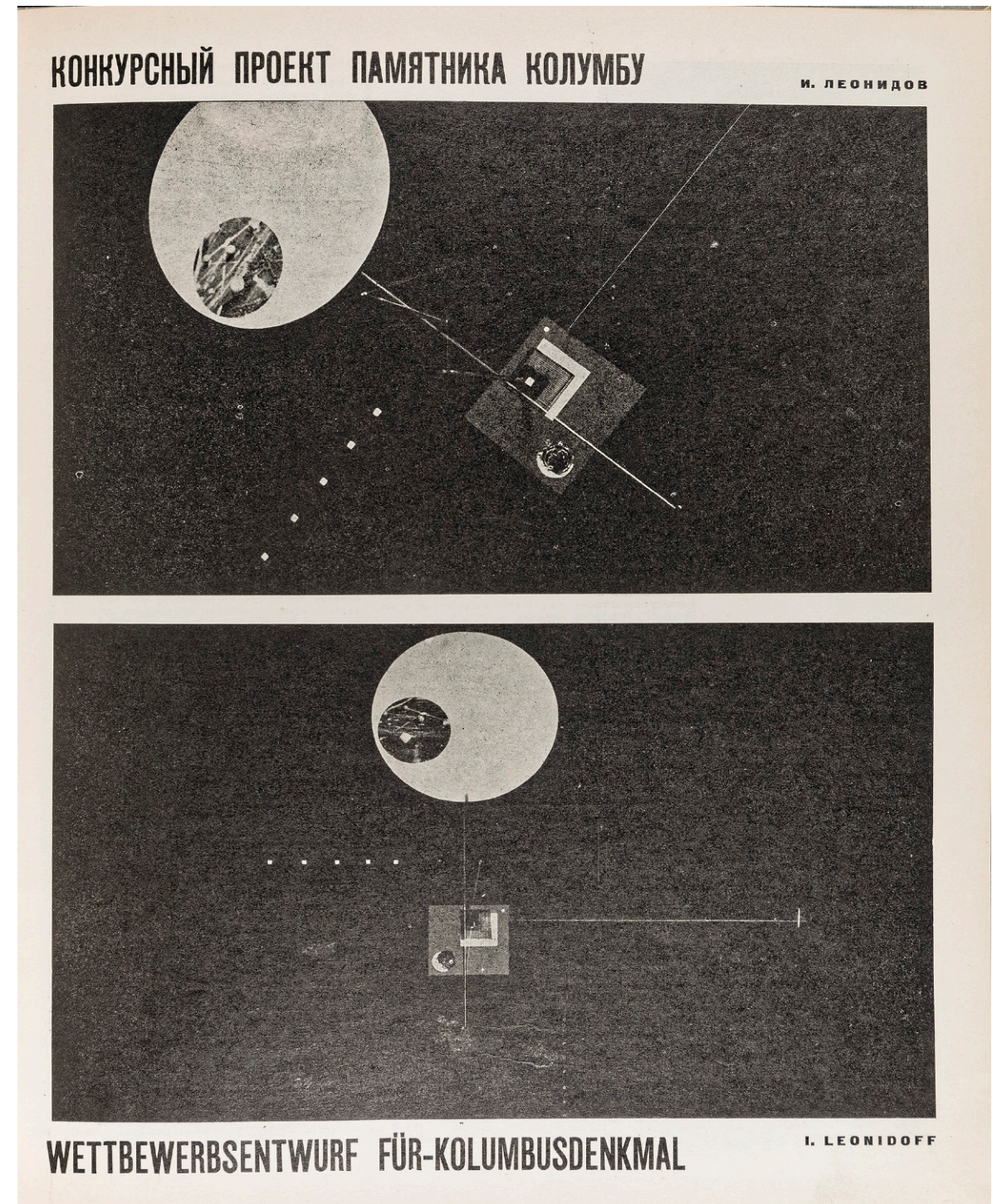


Ivan Leonidov
The City of the Sun, 1943-1959





CA Magazine (Contemporary Architecture) 4.5, 1927



Ivan Leonidov, competition for the *Monument to Christopher Columbus* (1928-29), taken from CA 4, 1929

Omega of constructivist logic, constitutes the basic definition and forms the entire dynamics of “construction”, a concept which according to Mies van der Rohe (1922) replaced “architecture”.

As for Leonidov, he quickly arrived at visions where transparency and guide-lines define constructions, launched like cosmic vessels in a new space. His tension structures were daring and surprising to his contemporaries in both East and West. They still appeal to us today. This was the end of the world of static matter, of immobile relations, of “proportions”. The reign of the Egyptian pyramid (neo-classicism) was over.

Similar to the revolutionary system of Kbro, which was also that of Moholy-Nagy or Theo van Doesburg (and later), this dynamic approach was far from the decorative games of Yakov Chernikhov, a lyrical designer lost in the late 1920s in an almost abstract architectural futurism but of a trivially decorative kind. Just like what happened to the painting from the “second” Kandinsky, an artist and teacher at the Bauhaus who, from 1923, also lost himself in an abstract-geometric painting, strained by sterile academic formalism.

On the contrary, Leonidov’s architectural ensembles flourished in the vastness of extraordinary spatial visions, all imagined from aerial perspectives in which the existence of volumes is only justified by the dynamics of “freestanding” shapes.

One can find, in his case, the principles of non-objective art as proclaimed by Malevich in the aesthetics of which the *existential* autonomy of the shapes, these suprematist “*beings*”, defined their very existence.

That leads to the question of fantasy and utopia. Since their appearance at the end of the 18th century, the “aerial” visions found in Leonidov were considered “fanciful”, if not “utopian”. From the mid-19th century onwards, they became famous, mainly thanks to the balloon voyages of the French photographer Nadar, who was a grand adventurer of balloon travelling as well as of photography.

A half-century later, and especially from the appearance of the first flights of aeroplanes, from the 1900s onwards, what was once a fantasy became a banality of everyday life.

Is that not the case with every imaginative gem? Jules Verne’s idea of a voyage *From the earth to the moon* (1865), a “utopian” fantasy at his time, was taken up in the cinema thirty years later by Georges Méliès, whose 1902 film *A trip to the moon* was one of the first filmed productions of “science fiction”.

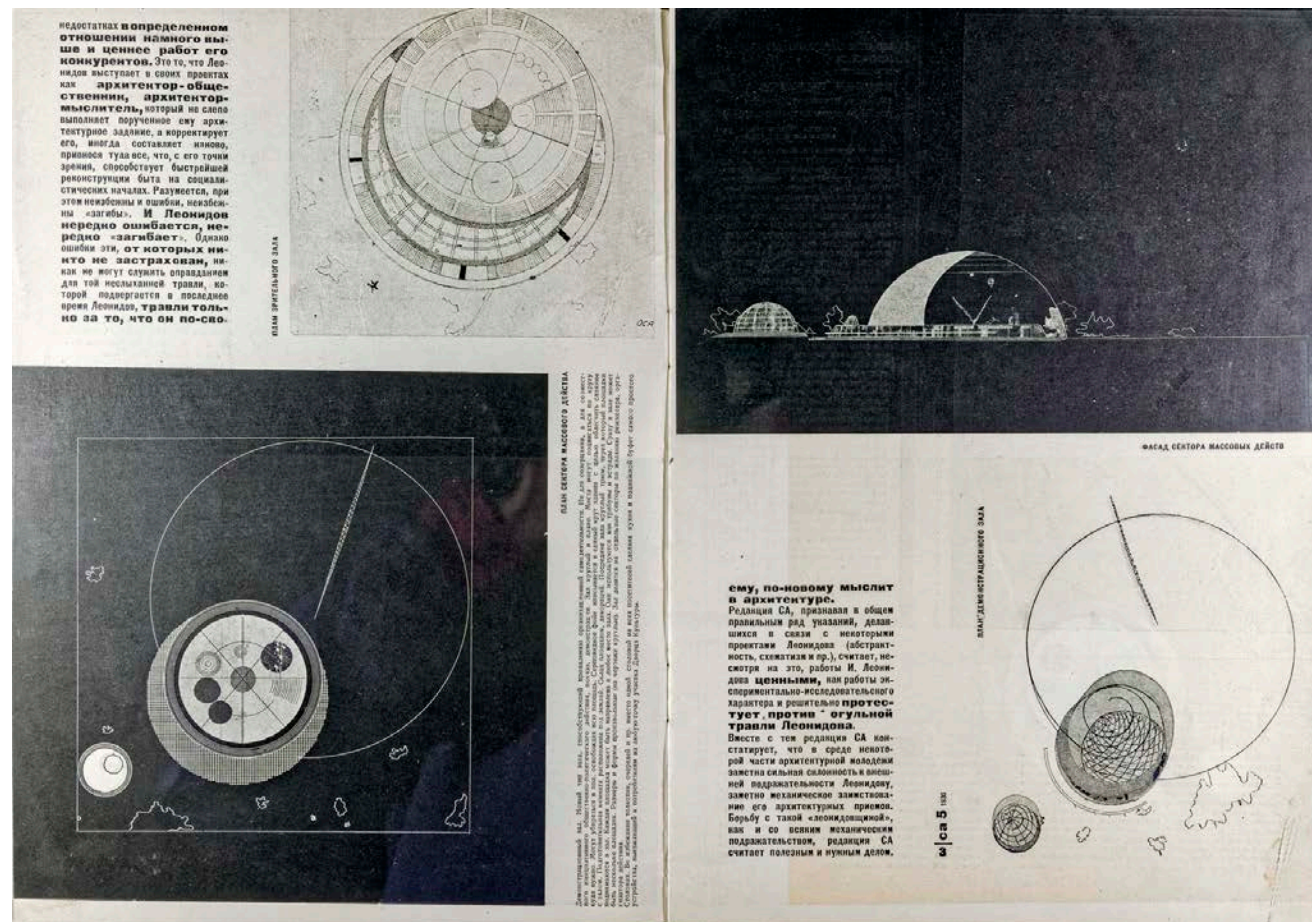
Sixty years later, it would also become a reality.

Thus, Leonidov’s projects, showpieces of artistic ingenuity and space finesse, were a century ahead of their time in architectural construction.

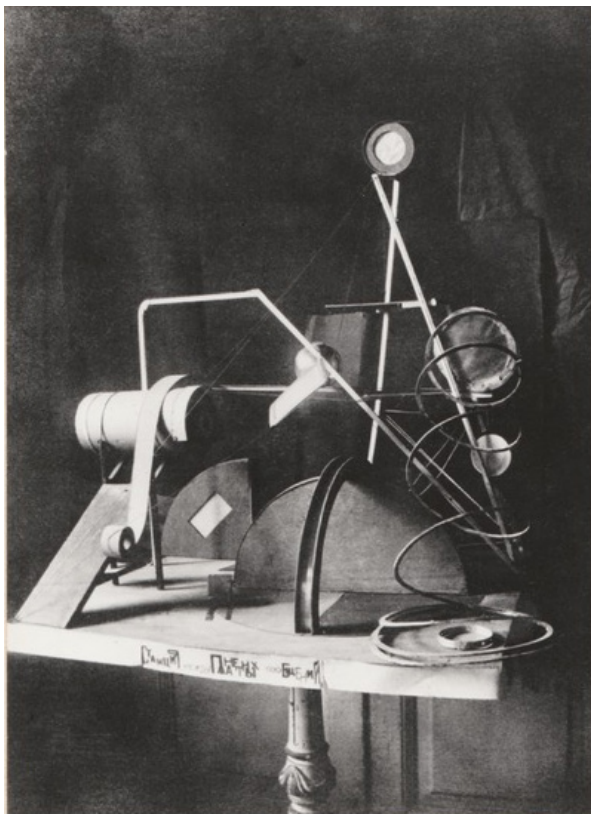
As utopia became a possible construction, ceasing to be a *u-topia*, it became *an art*. The strength of innovation in his case was measured by the negative response that it certainly provoked: as Malevich’s suprematism was fought in the artist’s lifetime, so was the audacity of Leonidov’s projects.

His constructivist poetry was so despised by the critics of innovative architecture that from 1930 they launched the reactionary insult of “leonidification” of architecture, in favour of a sinister de-escalation which they called “recognition of the achievements of the past”.

In this way were repudiated, for more than half a century, the brilliant inventions of one of the greatest poets of modern architecture.



Ivan Leonidov, Competition for Palace of Culture for the Proletarskii district of Moscow, 1930, taken from CA 5, 1930



Project for an interplanetary station, author unknown,
Moscow SVOMAS (Free studios) c. 1920-21,
courtesy Archives Nakov, Paris

ARTISTS' BIOGRAPHIES

Mariana Bisti

Born in Greece, 1981
Lives and works in London and Athens

David Greene

Born in Nottingham, 1937
Lives and works in London

Tadashi Kawamata

Born in Hokkaido, 1953
Lives and works in Tokyo and Paris

Gustav Klucis

Born in Latvia, 1895
Died in Moscow, 1938

Lazar El Lissitzky

Born in Russia, 1890
Died in Moscow, 1941

Kasimir Malevich

Born in Kiev, 1879
Died in St Petersburg, 1935

László Moholy-Nagy

Born in Hungary, 1895
Died in Chicago, 1946

Mike Nelson

Born in Loughborough, 1967
Lives and works in London

Liubov Popova

Born in Moscow, 1889
Died in Moscow, 1924

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Born in Dublin, 1958
Lives and works in London

Ben Rivers

Born in Somerset, 1972
Lives and works in London

Yuko Shiraishi

Born in Tokyo, 1956
Lives and works in London

Alison Turnbull

Born in Colombia, 1956
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Georges Vantongerloo

Born in Antwerp, 1886
Died in Paris, 1965

Richard Wilson

Born in London, 1953
Lives and works in London

Gary Woodley

Born in London, 1953
Lives and works in London

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Tadashi Kawamata: Courtesy of the artist

Frederick Kiesler: Courtesy of the estate of the artist and Jason McCoy Gallery, New York

David Greene: Courtesy of Archigram Archives

Mike Nelson: Installation view, Galleria Franco Noero, Torino, 2017. Photo: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano. Courtesy the artist and 303 Gallery, New York; Galleria Franco Noero, Turin; Matt's Gallery, London; and neugerriemschneider, Berlin.

Kathy Prendergast: Courtesy of the artist and Kerlin Gallery, Dublin

Ben Rivers: Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

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