

Graduate School Review Competition

Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935

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Perhaps the exhibition starts too well. The juxtaposition of the sinuous skeleton of Vladimir Tatlin's unrealized Monument to the Third International—a startling scarlet riposte to banality even as a model one fortieth of its intended size—and the self-confident Palladian splendour of Burlington House perfectly embodies the sense of rupture sought by the Russian avant-garde. However, the visitor's experience of this irruption of innovation is not matched elsewhere: the other exhibits shown in *Building the Revolution* are presented with admirable intelligence and detail but fail to match the visceral immediacy of this first encounter.

The comparison is, of course, unfair. Tatlin's monument was never built, so it is as present here as anywhere, whereas the other avant-garde masterpieces on show are still standing, sometimes only barely, in their own compelling contexts. Their two-dimensional reproductions consequently become postcards inscribed with a plaintive 'Wish you were here', invitations to experience the building itself.

Architecture exhibitions always require a suspension of this naïve desire for interaction with the auratic original. However, it is exactly this urge to imbibe the aura of creative originality which still provides the central logic for most gallery experiences. Thus the suppression of this desire for the original is not easy, especially at the Royal Academy. Moreover, the exhibition itself does little to help; this is because, perversely, the 'art' component fulfils our longing for 'genuine' objects so well. The paintings and sketches by Popova and Malevich are distracting not only because they are insufficiently integrated with the narrative of the exhibition to provide context but because of their quiet insistence on status as real historical artefacts. The exhibition's greatest Pyrrhic victory, however, is Richard Pare's exquisite photography.

This shot from beneath the Shabalovka radio mast is typical in its astute use of the photographic idioms of Alexander Rodchenko, contemporary to these buildings, to show how a new way of building was dependent on a new way of looking. However, such creative composition often conceals the buildings' dialogue with their surroundings—we rarely understand how it felt to have these buildings spring up around you. Moreover, the fact that



these photographs become objects of artistic contemplation in their own right—fascinating investigations of the gaze and the built environment—hinders our appreciation of the aesthetic function of the buildings themselves, their own interrogation of space and light.

Communicating the power of these buildings is important: Tatlin's unbuilt monument is safe forever; Narkomfin, the Rusakov Workers' Club and many others are dangerously dilapidated and undervalued. Their disappearance would further limit the perception of the Russian avant-garde in general to the category of harmless but impractical—a viewpoint with significant cultural consequences. Although the Royal Academy should be praised for extolling the virtues of such bold architecture, the over-determined aesthetics of this exhibition hinder a full appreciation of its innovative force. Luckily, however, the visitor cannot leave without another look at Tatlin's impetuous red tower, a lasting reminder of the dynamism of the avant-garde's bellicose dialogue with tradition.

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