

Preface: The social condenser: a century of revolution through architecture, 1917–2017

Michał Murawski,

Department of Russian, Queen Mary University of London, UK (Author's e-mail address: m.murawski@qmul.ac.uk)

Jane Rendell

Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, UK (Author's e-mail address: j.rendell@ucl.ac.uk)

In the centenary year of the Bolshevik revolution, this special issue is devoted to the idea of the 'social condenser'— among the most powerful architectural concepts produced in the Soviet Union in response to the earth-shattering events of 1917. The idea of the social condenser proposed deploying architecture as a way to forge radical new kinds of human collectivities: collectivities of co-habitation, of coproduction, of intellectual work; as well as collectivities of affect, beauty, empathy and passion. Suffused with vivid connotations pertaining to electricity, radiation and magnetism, the social condenser is a concept with an extraordinary, totalising reach. In its very formulation, it encompasses society's economic and material infrastructure, the humdrum minutiae of everyday life as well as the unruly domains of the transcendental and fantastical. Crucially, it also encompasses the entire domain of architectural endeavour: from dwelling and work to public space and everything in between.

But the precise significance of the social condenser is difficult to pin down. In the Russian Constructivist texts of the 1920s, the term was used in quite a broad way, often as something of an overarching term for referring to the new 'type' of post-revolutionary architecture. After 1928, the term 'social condenser' itself was abandoned in the USSR, although many of its postulates, it can be argued, continued to suffuse the practice of architecture, planning and social engineering during the Stalin years. From the late 1950s, the aesthetics, morphologies and ideologies of early Soviet modernism were being rediscovered not only in Khrushchev-era Russia, but also on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Thanks to the work of Western and Soviet historians such as Anatole Kopp and Selim Khan-Magomedov, the term 'social condenser' re-entered the lexicon of architects, artists and thinkers all over the world. Notably, the idea was appropriated—but, in the process, depoliticised, fragmented and ironised—by the towering ideologist of late-capitalist, turn-of-the-millennium architecture, Rem Koolhaas.

The social condenser, then, is an architectural concept and typology, which has exerted a profound impact on the imaginations, and on the theoretical and design work of artists, architects and others for the duration of the last century. At the same time, however, it has been also been re-worked to accommodate a whole plethora of, often contradictory and vague, meanings and associations. The character and parameters of the social condenser, in other words, need re-definition.

This is the point of departure of this special issue: to re-define the social condenser in a way which is consistent with the spirit and context of the Soviet 1920s, but which is not restricted to the aesthetics, exemplars and realities of that historical time and place. Our aim is to dissociate the social condenser from an exclusive association with the Soviet *avant-garde*. Since, in any case, it is impossible to get into the heads of the Soviet Constructivists, to discover beyond any doubt what they 'really meant', we work towards formulating a re-definition of the 'social condenser', deployable in the twenty-first century—not only on historical and theoretical grounds, but also on the contested terrain of practice—to the design and use of the built environment itself.

At the same time, however, we do not want to divorce the social condenser from its revolutionary genesis. Our un-anchoring and re-activation is at the same time a return to the social condenser. To this end, this special issue provides the first complete English translations of all of those articles from *Contemporary Architecture (SA; Sovremennaia Arkhitektura)*—the constructivist architects’ journal—which refer to the social condenser. This is intended to allow readers to juxtapose the diverse original meanings of this term with subsequent ones, and to embark on their own re-definitions and re-activations with as full an awareness of context as possible.

Reflecting the holistic character of the social condenser, this special issue brings together a broad, interdisciplinary range of contributors: cultural historians, architectural historians and art scholars, social anthropologists, architects and artists. Contributions describe the *longue durée* tribulations in the lives of buildings explicitly designed as social condensers, such as Moscow’s famous Narkomfin dwelling (Buchli, Charley) and Soviet workers’ clubs (Bokov, Hatherley). Others draw theoretical and empirical links between the social condenser and more-and-less distant times and spaces. The social condenser is thus used to shed light on: urban house communes in the first post-revolutionary years in Russia, where a process akin to condensation was designed and theorised *without* architectural design (Willimott); Stalinist monumentalism in 1950s Poland (Murawski); the intellectual and spatial ‘explosion’ which produced the New Left in 1960s London (Beech); Henri Lefebvre and heterodox spatial thought in 1960s France (Stanek); council estate demolitions (Rendell) and the decline of public arts centres in late-capitalist Britain (Phillips).

This special issue considers the social condenser as a concept born of the 1917 Revolution and the Soviet *avant-garde*, but un-anchors it, refusing to treat it as cocooned within the cosy domain of Soviet modernism’s ‘innocent’ years. By subjecting this electrifying idea to a systematic, wide-ranging re-examination, this special issue aims to re-charge the social condenser as a vector for radical architectural thought and practice in the twenty-first century.

Acknowledgements

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Gusejnova, Andreas Schönle, Anastasia Koro, Markus Lähteenmäki—helped us to arrive at informed translations of several very tricky phrases.

The content is further enriched by our interview with Alexey Ginzburg and Natalya Shilova: thanks are due here to Clementine Cecil for the introduction. Our conversation with Alexey and Natalya, an edited transcript of which (speedily and meticulously produced by Stylianos Giamarelos) is included in this issue, was both enjoyable and very instructive for us: bringing to life many of the diverse and contradictory meanings which it is possible to attach to the idea of the social condenser. Many thanks are due to Alexey and Natalya for their time, for agreeing to include this transcript in the issue—and for granting us permission to include new translations of Moisei Ginzburg's writings. Finally, funding from the UCL Bartlett Architectural Research Fund provided us with the means necessary to facilitate the translations from SA: we are grateful to Yeoriya Manolopoulou, Luis Rego and Mark Burgess for supporting our application.