

Palace Complex: A Stalinist ‘Social Condenser’ in Warsaw

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Abstract

The Constructivists of the Soviet 1920s desired to suffuse architecture with revolutionary electricity. They dreamt of creating radical, new types of buildings, which would function as ‘power sources for the new order’ and ‘conductors and condensers of socialist culture’. But did the Stalinists, in fact, build more successful Social Condensers than their avant-garde predecessors ever managed to? This paper answers this question with reference to the case of the Palace of Culture and Science, a Stalinist skyscraper ‘gifted’ to Warsaw by the Soviet Union in 1955.

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Such a mish-mash of architecture, culture, controversy and function ... is unrivalled by another building, whether in Warsaw, Poland or the entire world.

It's the only building of its sort! Cinemas, theatres, museums, the Palace of Youth, that swimming pool, conference and concert halls ... Oh, and have I mentioned the panorama of Warsaw? I don't know another building in Poland, which would provide for even half of these functions!

Warsaw inhabitants' responses to the question,
'Is there anything extraordinary about the Palace of Culture?', October 2010.¹

In Warsaw's Palace of Youth, muscular teenagers pump iron in a spartanly equipped gym (**Fig. 1**). Courageous children leap from disconcerting heights into the water. Graceful adolescents in gowns and suits do the waltz and mazurka, while ballerinas-in-the-making fish-dive and pirouette next door. Paint- and clay-splattered toddlers unleash their creative geniuses in light-filled studios. In the Winter Garden, members of the Information Technology workshop construct a model of the Palace of Culture and Science – the Stalinist skyscraper 'gifted' to Poland by the Soviet Union in 1955, of which the Palace of Youth constitutes a single wing – from old computer parts (**Fig. 2**). Elsewhere in the Palace, bewildered children and nostalgic adults wander into the Museum of Technology, for the last decade or so functioning as a perpetually almost-bankrupt cabinet of technological curiosities. They clamber through imitation mine shafts and climb into 1950s Soviet space capsules. They sit down in darkness for a séance with the Glass Lady. As the Glass Lady rotates, successive sections of her viscera light up, while a cassette-recorded voice sheds light on the mysteries of the human body (**Fig. 3**). Thespians file into one of the Palace's four theatres. University students snooze in wood-panelled lecture halls on floors 11 and 12. Palaeobiologists, economists, science educators and psychologists – fellows of the Polish Academy of Sciences – populate floors 21 to 26. The now-defunct Polish Communist Party, meanwhile, used to hold its grand congresses in the 3000-seat Congress Hall, Warsaw's largest indoor spectator stage. The Rolling Stones, Miles Davis and many of the jazz greats have played here too. Today, celebrity-laden premieres and product launches, beauty pageants, blue chip art projects, big-name gigs and yet more political congresses – such as those of pan-EU political factions – continue to electrify or bore audience members sat in the Hall's red upholstered seats (**Fig. 4**). Foreign tourists mingle with local lovers at the tip of the Palace's tower, on the 30th floor cloistered viewing terrace (**Figs. 5-6**). They are drawn by the panoramic views of Warsaw, the howling wind, the eerie, monumental, sandstone-clad setting (and

the licensed bar).

Cherchez le Palais

Despite almost thirty years of discussion devoted to the idea of demolishing the Palace or filling the void around it with a forest of even-taller skyscrapers, the Palace is still the tallest building in Warsaw (indeed, in Poland), while Parade Square is still the biggest urban square in Europe. In reference to their own perceived ‘obsession’ with the Palace, with its enormity or with its traumatic historical associations, with its prominence in the everyday lives of their city, the inhabitants of Warsaw frequently joke or lament that they suffer from a ‘Palace of Culture complex’.

But before I say more about the Palace itself, I would like to delve briefly into the anthropological canon to exhume a once-influential but now obsolete notion, a ‘mouldering cliché’ in the words of Lucy Mair:² the ‘cattle complex’. Developed³ and demolished⁴ over many decades, it refers to East African pastoralist populations whose social institutions (and, by implication, collective psychology) appeared (to their ethnographers) to revolve, to an unusual extent, around livestock. One chapter in Edward Evans-Pritchard’s classic study *The Nuer* (‘Interest in Cattle’) constitutes arguably the best-known rendition of this idea. Although Evans-Pritchard never actually uses the phrase ‘cattle complex’, he makes the claim that, for the Nuer, ‘So many physical, psychological and social requirements can be satisfied from this one source [cattle] that Nuer attention, instead of being diffused in a variety of directions, tends ... to be focussed on this single object’.⁵ In the anthropologist’s elaboration, the Nuer ‘social idiom is a bovine idiom ... Most of their social activities concern cattle and *cherchez la vache* is the best advice that can be given to those who desire to understand Nuer behaviour.’⁶

Rather like Sigmund Freud’s ‘Oedipus complex’ and its marginal place in contemporary psychoanalysis,⁷ the idea of the cattle complex has (thankfully) long fallen out of favour with Africanists. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest in this article that the heuristic of the ‘complex’ can, when juxtaposed with the Soviet Constructivist idea of the ‘social condenser’, be adapted for fruitful use in ethnographic or ethnohistorical studies of architecture and urban planning – especially those which deal with situations, where a single large building or planning ensemble, like a monumental axis or city square (otherwise known as an architectural ‘complex’) occupies (or was designed to occupy) a prominent place in the social life of an entire urban organism.

Towards the Supreme Building

In an attempt to compare the Africanists’ cattle complex to a corresponding ‘pig complex’

suggested by Melanesianists, Andrew Strathern points out that this usage of the term ‘complex’ has a ‘nice ambiguity’. It suggests, Strathern writes, ‘both some kind of psychological fixation and the complex ramifications of the uses to which these animals are put’.⁸ Let me compare this observation to a passage from Selim Khan-Magomedov’s taxonomy of ‘new types of buildings for social and administrative purposes in the Soviet Union’.⁹ Referring to the specifications for the 1922 competition for a ‘Palace of Labour’ to stand on the banks of the Moskva River (the competition was won by Noi Trotsky, but the best-known entry – nicknamed *Antenna* – was the work of the Vesnin brothers; Figures: Trotsky and Vesnin designs), Khan-Magomedov points out that Palaces of Labour such as the Moscow one were officially the venue of trade union organisations; but in actual fact they were designed as public buildings serving a broad range of purposes. Closely echoing Strathern’s wording, Khan-Magomedov writes: ‘The list of functions specified for the [Palace of Labour] provides the clearest illustration of the complex uses to which these institutions were then put.’¹⁰

Among other things, the Moscow Palace was to contain: an 8,000 seat auditorium; halls for ‘meetings, lectures, concerts, performances and films’; offices for the Moscow City Council and the Moscow Party Committee; a Museum of Social Sciences; a 1,500-seater dining hall; a radio station and an observatory, and possibly an airport landing strip. Khan-Magomedov points out that ‘the requirements set in the Moscow Palace of Labour competition served as a model for a whole set of competitions for similar buildings’ during the years 1923-26 (variously called Houses of Soviets, Houses of Culture and Palaces of Culture)¹¹; and by extension, during the Stalin era. Although versions of these various Houses, Palaces and Clubs were designed for provincial cities, city districts and even work units and various other collectivities, a quest was underway throughout the whole 1920s and 1930s to build one *ur*-House, -Palace or -Club in the national capital, bigger and more spectacular than all the other ones, referred to as the country’s ‘Supreme Building’. This quest culminated in the long-running competition for the Palace of the Soviets, whose construction was not officially abandoned until some years after the end of the Stalin era.

With reference to the Constructivist notion of buildings as ‘social condensers’, I would like to make the claim here that, thanks to its Stalinist designers and patrons, the Palace of Culture fulfils – like no other monumental building in the world today – the modernist ambition (most vividly articulated by the Soviet Constructivists) to suffuse architecture with socially-consequential energy and power; what Edmund Goldzamt, Poland’s foremost Stalinist architectural ideologue, referred to as ‘architectural power’.¹² Although the ‘condensatory’ influence of the Palace is limited to the sphere of Warsaw, I argue that it makes for the only instance in the world of a successfully-

built 'Supreme Building', which constitutes a social and spatial focus for the entirety of a large city (if not for a whole ideological universe). In other publications, I have attested in detail to the manner in which the Palace's complex-generating capacity is the product of the 'complex set of functions' which literally 'condense' large amounts of people within its walls and environs; of its nodal location within the city; of its enormous size and symmetrical shape; and of the capacity of its Palace's 'forcefield' to trigger quite extraordinary affective and emotional responses.¹³ A key point I make here is that – with the exception of its symmetrical axiality, which is a Stalinist innovation – all of the other components of the Palace's architectural power named above can be connected to the influence of a Constructivist political aesthetic.

Conductors and Condensers of Socialist Culture

The most extensive initial formulations of the idea of the 'social condenser' were provided by the Constructivist architects, affiliated to OSA (Organization of Contemporary Architects), especially the group's co-founder and most eloquent ideologue, Moisei Ginzburg. On the basis of a quasi-Taylorist 'scientific analysis' of minimizing workers' movements around their apartments, Ginzburg developed a model for devising the 'basic spatial structure' of dwelling in his address to the annual conference of OSA in 1927. In Ginzburg's words, 'in the habits and attitudes of the mass population, low-voltage activity and a weak consciousness would be focused through the circuits of these 'social condensers' into high-voltage catalysts of change.'¹⁴

One striking aspect of the Constructivist narrative on 'social condensation' was the relentless extent to which the electro-magnetic aspect of this metaphor was hammered home. Cultural historian Katerina Clark draws attention to the fact that Ginzburg makes use of the term 'condenser', referring to an apparatus which brings about changes in physical processes through electricity. This, says Clark, implies an identification with Lenin's famous 1920 dictum: 'Communism equals [Soviet power] plus the electrification of the entire country.'¹⁵ Further, Clark specifies that the trope of the 'condenser' suggests not merely the conveyance of electric current, but its intensification. The social condensers were not meant merely to distribute ideological energy throughout city and society. Instead, in Clark's words, the task of the social condenser was to provide the material conditions of existence on whose ground, 'through its *byt*, that is, through the ordinary and everyday, society would, paradoxically, attain the extraordinary.'¹⁶ I think Clark's analysis suggests that the Constructivists' 'electrification' of architecture can be read, therefore, as a precursor of the Socialist Realist ambition to harness – and politicise – the power of the sublime in architecture.¹⁷ Clark and numerous other writers (Boris Groys, Leonid Heller, Evgeny Dobrenko)

identify the sublime as the ‘dominant aesthetic mode’ of Stalinism. Heller, for example, describes Stalinist culture as ‘a fusion of the sublime and the everyday’¹⁸, while in Groys’ description, Stalinism’s ‘perfect building’ was to serve the needs of the people and at the same time generate a sense of celebration and the extraordinary.’¹⁹ As I will show in this article, the Stalinist articulation of the political-aesthetic sublime absorbed the Constructivist passion for electricity. For the Stalinists as much as for the Constructivists, the royal route to the otherworldly was an electro-magnetic one.

In Ginzburg’s founding declaration, the notion of the social condenser pertains most of all to the category of dwelling; but the resolutions adopted at the first OSA Conference in 1928 widen its remit, characterising the ‘new type of communal dwelling, the new type of club, Palace of Labour, Executive Committee Building, factory etc’ as ‘*conductors and condensers of socialist culture*’ setting these novel institutions against ‘investment properties’ and other types of building inherited from ‘pre-Revolutionary social, economic and technological conditions.’²⁰ Following this usage, Khan-Magomedov defines all the ‘buildings intended for new social purposes’ as ‘social condensers of the era’, and points out that the ‘drive’ to produce these structures ‘runs through all Constructivist theory and practice.’²¹ Resorting to similar electrically-infused terminology, a German 1929 text by El Lissitzky refers to the Soviet ‘club’ as a ‘social force’ (*soziales Kraftwerk*, which can also be translated as ‘social power plant’).²² According to Lissitzky, the ‘power sources of old order’ (churches and the old palaces) ‘can only be transcended by establishing new power sources belonging our new order’.

Tracing a trajectory through the debt which Warsaw’s Stalinist ‘social condenser’ owes to various Constructivist ‘Supreme Buildings’, it is imperative to mention Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International, a 400m structure intended to straddle the River Neva at the entrance to Petrograd (**Fig. 7: Tatlin photomontage**). Although the tower concept dates from 1919, two years before the term ‘constructivism’ was first used, Tatlin’s colossus can clearly be seen as the foundational project of the Constructivist canon. As well as containing the headquarters of Comintern – the global centre of international communist power – Tatlin’s tower was to have a literal electro-magnetic function; its top level was to house, in Nikolai Punin’s summary, ‘all the various means of broadly informing the international proletariat, and in particular a telegraph, projectors for a large screen located on the axes of a spherical segment, and a radio station, the masts of which rise above the monument’.²³ All sorts of other kinds of energy – not least cosmological – were to be concentrated and transmitted by Tatlin’s tower, whose three levels were to rotate (from bottom up), at yearly, monthly and daily speeds. The cosmology of Tatlin’s

Babylonian tower, however, was to be one of the communist victory over the cosmos, over God, over nature and of Victory over the Sun. It being 1919, the sun's power could not directly be harnessed to power the tower. Instead, the desire to keep the tower turning was a statement of confidence in the Soviet imperative to electrify the Soviet Union, as expressed in Lenin's above-cited dictum.

Punin's pamphlet links the tower's cosmological and electrical power further to a political-epistemic energy, in declaring: 'We maintain that only the full power of the multi-million strong proletarian consciousness could bring into the world the idea of this monument and its forms'; as well as to the might of the human body: 'The monument must be realized by the muscles of this power', he writes. 'The form wants to overcome the material and the force of gravity, the strength of the resistance is enormous and massive: straining every muscle, the form finds an outlet through the most elastic and rapid lines which the world knows, through spirals. They are full of movement, aspiration, and speed: they are taut like the creative will and like a muscle tensed with a hammer.'²⁴

Centralised Network Metropolis

In an analysis of Hugh Ferriss's expressionistic, semi-fantastic drawings of New York's 'city of tomorrow' and the design of the Rockefeller Center's Radio City Music Hall, Eric Gordon points to the centrality of radio communication to the aesthetic and infrastructural articulation of American modernity. The American 'networked metropolis', however, was predicated on 'connectivity without centralization', built around a 'networking model that deemphasized the center while placing attention onto the circulation of information.'²⁵ This constituted, in Gordon's rendition, a 'distinctly American push away from the "superpower" centralization' of European – and especially of Soviet cities.

Structures like Tatlin's tower and the Vesnin brothers' *antenna* were designed as centrepieces of this Soviet hyper-centralised radio-metropolis. But the Soviet networked city was not just about radio communication; it was also about public transportation. The clearest triumph in this area was, of course, the Moscow Metro system, (the first line was opened in 1935) and organised to correspond to the concentric organisation of Moscow's city layout. The future Moscow subway appeared as a reference point for El Lissitzky to conceive of eight 50-metre high 'horizontal skyscrapers' (*Wolkenbügel*, or 'cloud-irons'), designed between 1923-25 in Zurich and published in *ASNOVA* in 1926.²⁶ Like Stalin's future subway system, the locations of the *Wolkenbügel* were determined according to Lissitzky's analysis of Moscow's centralized organisation: the eight structures were placed at the busiest intersections between Moscow's radial streets and the

concentric Boulevard Ring ('the inner of the two roads which form a semicircle around the Kremlin').²⁷ (**Fig. 8: *Wolkenbügel* layout from Cooke**) The *Wolkenbügel* – articulated by Lissitzky as a critique of the American skyscraper, 'the spread of which took place entirely anarchically, without any concern for the city as a whole' – were to accommodate 'offices and institutions' in their highest, horizontal sections. This core, usable part of the structure would be raised on three supporting pillars (achieving 'maximum usable area for minimum structural support'), integrated into the transport system, one of which would descend into the ground to function as a metro station, while each of the other two formed street-level tram stops.

***Kompleksnyi* Constructivism**

As Groys' canonical analysis makes clear,²⁸ like the Stalinists after them, the Constructivists aspired to turn the city into a totality: 'We consider that the part is subordinate to the whole and that the system of the city determines the character of its structures', wrote Lissitzky.²⁹ Catherine Cooke also asserts the link between this approach to the idea of the 'complex', around which I organise my analysis; she writes: 'Their's [the Constructivists'] was what today could loosely be called a 'systems' approach, or in the older more general Russian term, a *kompleksnyi* approach. It addressed the design problem as an integrated complex. It was concerned with solving the problem as a whole.'³⁰

But the locations of the *Wolkenbügel*, circulating around (and determined by) the old Moscow city core and consolidating its historical structure – focussed around the Kremlin and Red Square – brings to mind not only the Moscow subway, but also the seven late-Stalinist 'tall buildings' ('the Seven Sisters'), erected at several locations around the centre of old Moscow between 1947 and 1953 (**Fig. 9: *Vysotki* Map, WM Commons**). Like Lissitzky's *Wolkenbügel*, there were initially to be eight of these tall buildings, although only seven were built. Stalin's towers were also formulated as critiques of the American skyscraper (the open space which surrounded each of these towers, it was claimed, highlighted that they were not built with a profit motive in mind) although they were determinedly vertical and bore a striking resemblance to some pre-1939 North American highrises. Their placing and spires are commonly described as being arranged in relation to the towers of the Kremlin wall.³¹ In Karl Schlögel's description, however, 'these seven High Buildings, which indeed still dominate Moscow skyline today ... all turn towards a single point of focus. This is not the Kremlin, but the *Palace of the Soviets* – an intersection therefore that exists and yet does not exist.' He continues, 'the seven High Buildings which put their stamp on the profile of the city only make a complete ensemble when the historically schooled eye

adds in the centrepiece, that [non-existent] “Supreme Building” originally intended to be the tallest and largest of them all.’³²

The long course of the competition for the Palace of the Soviets is well-known. The various Constructivist and otherwise modernist proposals were gradually rejected, and the winning monumental designs were modified to finally end up at the 1934 project of Boris Iofan, Vladimir Shchuko and Vladimir Gelfreikh. Although there is no doubt that the aesthetic of the Palace of the Soviets became more rigid and monumental with time, it does not require too much imagination to speculate that the Babylonian form of the final design is no accident – the Iofan project, with its multiple cylindrical tiers of decreasing girth and its 415-metre projected height has far more in common with Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International than did any of the Constructivist projects submitted for the first round of the competition in 1931.³³ Just as the shadow of the unbuilt Palace of the Soviets hangs over the cityscape of contemporary Moscow – described by Schlögel as ‘a chord without a dominant’³⁴ – so did the shadow of Tatlin’s unbuilt Petrograd monument overdetermine the shape and significance of Moscow’s phantom *dominanta*.

The Palace of the Soviets – in the original brief and in the final instance – was to accommodate a multiplicity of functions: the main government centre of the Union, a cultural centre for theatrical and musical performances, congress halls and conference rooms, the largest of these designed to hold over ten thousand spectators.³⁵ Like the various avant-garde projects for ‘Supreme Buildings’ described by Khan-Magomedov, it was to be *kompleksnyi*. The seven Stalinist high-rises actually built, however, all fulfilled single functions (a university, the ministry of foreign affairs, a hotel, a residence, administrative offices): they were not *kompleksnyi*; in themselves, it would be difficult for them to function as ‘social condensers’ without the existence of the pivot which was supposed to hold them together. Although the Palace of Culture borrowed its bombastic scale and extravagant aesthetic from these buildings, most clearly from Moscow State University (the only of the Moscow buildings taller than the Palace and designed by the same architect, Lev Rudnev), the Warsaw Palace’s *kompleksnyi* multi-functionality and core rather than peripheral location meant that – in terms of the social and spatial role the Palace was meant to play in the city – it had a great deal more in common with the Palace of the Soviets and other planned ‘Supreme Buildings’ than with its Moscow ‘Seven Sisters’.

The Palace of Culture

Let me link this sketch of the early-twentieth century permutations of the ‘Supreme Building’ as social condenser directly to the story of how the Palace of Culture came to be in Warsaw, and to the

condensatory role it plays in the city today. In first years after the Second World War, Soviet political power was swiftly being consolidated in Poland. At the same time, land plots in the war-ravaged capital city of Warsaw were being expropriated from their pre-war owners, and a new, socialist metropolis began to take shape on the rubble of the old bourgeois city. Already in 1948, the idea of raising a 'Central House of Culture' on the Soviet model in the very centre of Warsaw began to be taken seriously, and an architectural competition was organised. The functional programme for the Central House of Culture, as outlined in the competition conditions, referred to the building as the 'primary architectural accent of the entire city centre and of the entire capital.'³⁶ Further, the 'House of Culture ensemble should be situated/located so that on the basis of its architecture a new urban plaza can emerge, which would play host to mass manifestations connected to meetings simultaneously taking place inside'.³⁷ The competition conditions also stipulated that the 'ensemble' should contain a number of 'monumental interiors', including 'a Great Congress Hall for around 10,000 spectators'; 'a hall for ceremonial meetings with an entrance hall and other representative/state/ceremonial rooms'. Furthermore, the House of Culture ensemble was to contain the following 'departments': '(a) Scientific (research centres, libraries, reading rooms; (b) artistic (exhibition halls, art facilities); (c) Musical (concert halls); (d) Theatrical (two theatres for 1,200 and 400 spectators); (e) Cinematic (projection rooms, several theatres)'.³⁸ With some modifications, the above came to form the basis for what could come to constitute, by 1952, the contents of Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science, 'gifted' to the city on Stalin's decree in April 1952, completed in July 1955.

This emphasis on *kompleksnyi* multi-functionality was combined with flightier eschatological imaginings from the very beginning. As Polish anthropologist Zbigniew Benedyktowicz has observed, poems written about the Palace at the time of its construction constantly invoke the Palace's connection to the cosmic and celestial worlds ('On the Palace spire/ Where the wind whines/ A crystal ball shines high in the sky').³⁹ In the work of Hungarian poet Ferenc Pakozdy ('So it climbs above Warsaw, static below / A portent! A symbol! The heavens are stormed'), Benedyktowicz sees a Marxist interpretation of Babel, via semiotician Yuri Lotman's reading of Tatlin's tower as a 'double inversion of Babel: in the first place, the values of heaven and earth were reversed, and in the second the myth of the separation of the peoples was taken over by the notion of the union of peoples'.⁴⁰ The reference here is to Marx's famous comment that the Communards of Paris are 'storming heaven', also noted by Lotman in his interpretation of the Marxist inversion of the Babel myth. Marx's remark is also mirrored – more likely knowingly than not – by Warsaw's then Chief Architect Józef Sigalin, the local figure who had the biggest single

impact of any Polish actor on the shape, form and location that the Palace came to take in Warsaw. ‘Our squadron’, Sigalin wrote of Warsaw’s post-war planners and architects, working not only to lift the city from the ruins, but also to recast it as a socialist metropolis ‘is a squadron of lunatics, storming the heavens’.⁴¹

The Palace’s association with the cosmos and the otherworldly have outlived, to be sure, the fall of the Polish People’s Republic in 1989. Cartoonists, artists, poster designers and meme creators constantly represent the Palace as a spaceship, rocket, space invader or alien mothership, and the Palace has a special significance for Warsaw’s community of UFO-spotters. Not only is it a prestige location for uploaders of flying saucer films onto YouTube, it is also home to the UFOVIDEO organisation, described by a non-member interlocutor of mine as ‘the most renowned organisation of UFO spotters in Poland and one of the oldest such groups in the world’ (registered around 1978). UFOVIDEO stores its voluminous records (‘the oldest and best UFO records in Poland’) in the Museum of Technology, and its members continue to meet occasionally in a tiny cranny underneath one of the Museum’s staircases.

Since inception, too, the Palace has been saturated with connotations, aesthetics and rhetorics of ‘radiation’, ‘electromagnetism’ and the circulation of various kinds of ‘energy’. In April 1952, just days following the announcement that Warsaw would ‘receive’ the Palace from the Soviet Union, writer Leon Kruczkowski enthused:⁴²

Today, this joyful news is electrifying the imaginations of all inhabitants of the capital and of the whole of Poland. This noble gift from nation to nation will not only be a lasting monument to our eternal friendship. The very process of its construction will radiate over all of us day after day, more powerfully than words ever could.

Three years later, when the Polish Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz cut the ribbon outside the main entrance to the Palace on 21 July 1955 (in the presence of President Bolesław Bierut and Soviet ambassador Panteleimon Ponomarenko) he announced, ‘From today, the opening day of the Palace, it will not be merely an image melted into the figure of figure of Warsaw. From today, it will be a building radiating its social and cultural content over Warsaw.’⁴³

And today, long after the fall of communism, Varsovians continue to refer to the mysterious and powerful forcefields of ‘energy’, ‘magnetism’ and ‘radiation’, emitted by or concentrated within the building. With its literal as well as its metaphorical ‘radiation’, the Palace impacts on the daily life of city-dwellers. Among the many ‘legends’ and urban myths associated with the Palace

and relayed by my Warsaw informants, the ‘deathly radiation’ emanating from the television antennae located at the Palace’s spire figured prominently, as did a well-known Warsaw story about ‘spontaneous orgasms induced by the radiation from the spire’.⁴⁴ Drivers, who have parked their cars on Parade Square complain that the awesome radiation emitted from the TV antennae on the Palace spire blocks their automatic car locks from working; employees of institutions located within complain of poor cellphone reception, for which they blame the Palace’s rock-solid, ultra-thick Soviet walls and ceilings.

Crucially, the forcefield, within which the Palace exerts its condensatory impact, reaches far beyond these thick walls. Wherever you go in Warsaw, the Palace follows. 45% of Varsovians can see the Palace from their windows, either at home or at work.⁴⁵ The figure of the Palace stars in movies, novels and comic books, graces art installations, pop anthems, adverts, urban myths and legends. As a motif on t-shirts, sweaters, hats, tote bags, earrings, brooches and tattoos, the Palace imprints itself pervasively onto the bodies of the city’s inhabitants.⁴⁶ But its dominance over the city is not limited to the symbolic sphere. It marks the absolute centre of Warsaw – once a polycentric city, which had no clearly-defined, singular core space. Today, the sheer intensity and diversity of social interactions, associations and events, which *condense* on Warsaw’s *dominanta* and epicentre is – as far as I am aware – unmatched in any large urban setting in the world. Its centrality, which was quite consciously launched by the construction of the vertical body of the Palace and the sundial and milestone-laden Parade Square (initially called Central Square), has accumulated over the decades: The Śródmieście (Middle City) railways station was completed on Parade Square in 1963. The *Centrum* department stores were built just beyond the perimeter of Parade Square, opposite the main entrance to the Palace, in 1969. Warsaw *Centralna* railway station (Poland’s largest, busiest, and, as one of my interlocutors in Warsaw pointed out, only *Central* as opposed to *Main* Station) was opened with much fanfare in 1973. The most beleaguered station of Warsaw’s underground railway, Metro *Centrum*, was opened on the south-eastern corner of Parade Square in 1998. The Świętokrzyska station, on the north-eastern corner, followed in 2001, and became the only interchange station on the metro network when the second line began running in 2015.⁴⁷

Conclusion: Condensing Complexity

Rem Koolhaas is arguably the contemporary architect whose work makes the most conscious – rhetorical as well as stylistic – borrowings from the Constructivist canon. In *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas characterises the (now-closed) Manhattan Downtown Athletic Club (1931) as ‘a

Constructivist Social Condenser: a machine to generate and intensify desirable forms of human intercourse.⁴⁸ Koolhaas argues that the Club – an elite meeting place for rich New Yorkers, in Koolhaas’s own words, ‘A machine for metropolitan bachelors’⁴⁹ – ‘represents the complete conquest – floor by floor – of the Skyscraper by social activity’ (Figure), putting into practice ‘the theoretical lifestyle modifications that the ... 20th century European avant-gardes have been insistently proposing, without ever managing to impose them.’⁵⁰

One thing that Koolhaas’ borrowings from the Constructivists have in common with those of Rudnev and the Stalinists is the conviction that skyscrapers make for the best ‘social condensers.’ As Koolhaas puts it elsewhere, ‘only Bigness instigates the *regime of complexity* that mobilizes the full intelligence of architecture.’⁵¹ The primary distinction, however, between Deconstructivist and Stalinist uses of Constructivism,⁵² concerns the mereology of building-city relationships, the manner in which big buildings relate to the context of the city as a whole. Koolhaas describes the Manhattan Downtown Club’s architecture as a ‘complete surrender to the definitive instability of life in the Metropolis.’⁵³ The Palace by contrast, is the product of an attempt to – in the words of Poland’s Stalinist-era leader Bolesław Bierut – replace the old ‘city of fragments, chaotically put together’⁵⁴ with (citing academician Lev Rudnev), ‘a unified image of beauty ... connected to the city as a totality’, linked in ‘an architectural whole with ... old Warsaw’, but also, in the description of Rudnev’s design team member Igor Rozhin, ‘transforming the city in its entirety’⁵⁵. In Goldzamt’s characterisation, meanwhile, the ambition was to create a ‘unified composition of the centre on the basis of the Palace ensemble ... This is in the essential interests of the architectural unity of the city, and in the interests of the distribution of the aesthetic power of the Palace ensemble throughout the city as a whole.’⁵⁶

The Palace’s effectivity, then – as an actualisation of these Stalinist-holistic desires – is derived from its ability to interact with the city as a totality. In other words, the Palace Complex (as both a city-building and city-debilitating phenomenon) works not by means of a Koolhaasian embrace of complexity, instability or chaos. It works, because the Palace itself is complex, big and well-located enough to be able to concentrate (or *condense*) so much of the city’s complexity in one place. Rudnev’s Palace is a better Constructivist ‘social condenser’ than anything Koolhaas has designed, because of the properly *kompleksnyi* social and aesthetic relationship of totality which Warsaw’s ‘Supreme Building’ was able to establish with its host city. And it would never have been able to establish this relationship of totality if its design and construction were not motivated by the communist ambition to ‘revolutionarily transform the city’,⁵⁷ and to ‘transform the infrastructure of social ties’ within.⁵⁸

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- ¹ From an online survey of 5,271 respondents carried out in October 2010 in collaboration with the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art and Collegium Civitas.
- ² Mair, Lucy. 1985. "Letter: The Cattle Complex." *Man* 20 (4), p. 743.
- ³ Herskovits, Melville J. 1926. "The Cattle Complex in East Africa." *American Anthropologist* 28, pp. 230–72; Evans-Pritchard, Edward Evans. 1940. *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Schneider, Harold K. 1957. "The Subsistence Role of Cattle Among the Pakot and in East Africa." *American Anthropologist* 59 (2), pp. 278–300.
- ⁴ Chambers, Robert. 1983. *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. London: Longman; Lako, G. T. 1985. "The Impact of the Jonglei Scheme on the Economy of the Dinka." *African Affairs* 84 (334), pp. 15–38.
- ⁵ Evans-Pritchard, Edward Evans. 1940. *The Nuer*, p. 16.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ For a useful history of Freud's usage of this term, see Bennett, Simon, Rachel B. Blass, 1991. "The development of vicissitudes of Freud's ideas on the Oedipus complex". *The Cambridge Companion to Freud*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1991
- ⁸ Strathern, Andrew. 1971. "Pig Complex and Cattle Complex: Some Comparisons and Counterpoints." *Mankind* 8 (2), p. 129.
- ⁹ Khan-Magomedov, S. O. (Selim Omarovich). 1987. *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s*. London: Thames and Hudson, p. 399.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 400.
- ¹² Goldzamt, Edmund. 1956. *Architektura zespołów sródniejskich i problemy dziedzictwa*. Warszawa: Panstwowe Wydawn. Naukowe, p. 18.
- ¹³ XXX ANONYMIZED
- ¹⁴ Moisei Ginzburg, 1927, Tselevaya Ustanovka v Soveremennoy Arhitekture, *Sovremennaia Arkhitektura*, No. 1, pp. 4-10; cited in Clark, Katerina. 1995. *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 251.
- ¹⁵ Clark, Katerina. 1995. *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 251.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ As well as in painting, literature, music and the other arts. See Heller, Leonid. 1997. "A World of Prettiness: Socialist Realism and Its Aesthetic Categories." In *Socialist Realism without Shores*, edited by Thomas Lahusen and E. A. Dobrenko. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, p. 70.
- ¹⁸ Heller, Leonid, "A World of Prettiness", *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Groys, Boris. 2003. "The Art of Totality." In *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, edited by E. A. Dobrenko and Eric Naiman. Studies in Modernity and National Identity. Seattle: University of Washington Press, p. 114. Katerina Clark also links the 'total' ambition of the idea of the 'social condenser' to a Constructivist attempt to turn real life into a 'sort of ballet or *Gesamtkunstwerk*', see Clark, *Petersburg*, p. 255. This paper also owes emerges in part, in response to Boris Groys' classic argument that Stalinist constituted the fullest realisation of the avant-garde project to turn life into a 'total work of art: 'Under Stalin the dream of the avant-garde was in fact fulfilled and the life of society was organised in monolithic artistic forms, though of course not those that the avant-garde itself had favoured.' Groys, Boris. 1992. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and beyond*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. For a fuller engagement with Groys, see XXX. 2013. "Palaceology, or Palace-as-

Methodology: Ethnographic Conceptualism, Total Urbanism and a Stalinist Skyscraper in Warsaw.” *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Science* 5(2), pp. 56-83.

²⁰ Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers*, p. 596.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

²² Lissitzky, El. 1970. *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*. London: Lund Humphries, p. 43. See also Siegelbaum, Lewis H. 1999. “The Shaping of Soviet Workers’ Leisure: Workers’ Clubs and Palaces of Culture in the 1930s.” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 56, p. 90.

²³ Punin, Nikolai. 1993. “The Monument to the Third International.” In *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, pp. 311-312.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²⁵ Gordon, Eric. 2005. “Toward a Networked Urbanism Hugh Ferriss, Rockefeller Center, and the ‘Invisible Empire of the Air.’” *Space and Culture* 8 (3), p. 253.

²⁶ See Cooke, Catherine. 1995. *Russian Avant-Garde Theories of Art, Architecture and the City*. Academy Editions, p. 198.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*.

²⁹ Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde Theories of Art*, p. 198.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³¹ Colton, Timothy J. 1995. *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p. 329.

³² Schlögel, Karl. 1993. “Shadow of an Imaginary Tower.” In *Naum Gabo and the Competition for the Palace of Soviets, Moscow, 1931-1933*, edited by Helen Adkins. Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, pp. 182-183.

³³ For background, see Schlögel, Karl. 1993. “Shadow of an Imaginary Tower.” In *Naum Gabo and the Competition for the Palace of Soviets, Moscow, 1931-1933*, edited by Helen Adkins. Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, pp. 182-183; Milner, John, 1984. *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

³⁴ Schlögel, Karl. 1993. “Shadow of an Imaginary Tower”, p. 182.

³⁵ Schlögel, Karl. 1993. “Shadow of an Imaginary Tower.”

³⁶ Knyt, Agnieszka. 2003. “Miasto Pod Pałac.” *Karta* 39, p. 115

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Benedyktowicz, Zbigniew. 1991. “Widmo Środka Świata: Przyczynek Do Antropologii Współczesności.” *Konteksty: Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 45 (1), p. 19.

⁴⁰ Lotman, Yuri L. 1990. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris, p. 111.

⁴¹ Kołodziejczyk, Marcin. 2012. “Józef Sigalin: Postawy Polaków.” *Polityka*, February 7.

⁴² Bendyktowicz, “Widmo Środka Świata”, p. 22.

⁴³ Sadowski, Jakub. 2009. *Między Pałacem Rad i Pałacem Kultury: studium kultury totalitarnej*. Krakow: Wydawn. Egis, p. 203.

⁴⁴ XXX ANONYMIZED

⁴⁵ According to my October 2010 survey, see Note No. 1.

⁴⁶ XXX ANONYMIZED

⁴⁷ XXX ANONYMIZED

⁴⁸ Koolhaas, Rem. 1994. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. New York: Monacelli Press, p. 152.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 159.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 152.

⁵¹ Koolhaas, Rem, Bruce Mau, Jennifer Sigler, Hans Werlemann, and Office for Metropolitan Architecture. 1998. *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large: Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau*. 2d ed. New York: Monacelli Press, p. 497.

⁵² Deconstructivism in architecture emerged during the 1980s, mixing influences from post-structuralist or 'deconstructivist' philosophy of writers like Jacques Derrida, and aesthetic influences from deconstructivist architecture. The 1988 New York Museum of Modern Art. Exhibition, curated by Mark Wigley and Philip Johnson, consolidated the movement, and featured architects including Koolhaas, Peter Eisenmann, Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid and Bernard Tschumi. See Johnson, Philip, and Mark Wigley, 1988. *Deconstructivist Architecture*. 1st edition. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

⁵³ Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, p. 157.

⁵⁴ Bierut, Bolesław. 1950. *Szescioletni plan odbudowy Warszawy*. Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, p. 4.

⁵⁵ Sigalin, Józef. 1986. *Warszawa 1944-1980 : Z Archiwum Architekta*, vol. 3. Warszawa: Państw. Instytut Wydawniczy, pp. 434-5.

⁵⁶ Sigalin, Józef. 1986. *Warszawa 1944-1980 : Z Archiwum Architekta*, vol. 2. Warszawa: Państw. Instytut Wydawniczy, p. 12.

⁵⁷ Edmund Goldzamt, cited in Sigalin, Józef. 1986. *Warszawa 1944-1980 : Z Archiwum Architekta*, vol. 2. Warszawa: Państw. Instytut Wydawniczy, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Goldzamt, Edmund. 1956. *Architektura zespołów sródmiejskich i problemy dziedzictwa*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawn. Naukowe, p. 18.