Conclusion: The Social Condenser – A Thing in Itself?

In his 1968 paper 'The Use of an Object', psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott describes how 'relating may be to a subjective object, but usage implies that the object is part of external reality'.[1] For Winnicott, to use an object is to take into account its objective reality or existence as 'a thing in itself' rather than its subjective reality or existence as a projection. The change from relating to using is for him significant, as it 'means that the subject destroys the object' and that the object stands outside the omnipotent control of the subject, recognized as the external object it has always been.[2]

The conversation Michał and I had with the architects now in charge of the restoration of the Narkomfin – Natalya Shilova, and Alexey Ginzburg, the grandson of Moisei Ginzburg, the building's original designer – marked a turning point in my own relation to the Narkomin. This was a moment where I had to face up to the fact that I had been 'relating' to the social condenser, in Winnicott's words, projecting my aspirations onto it, according to my need to find a socialist design history and typology to inspire me.[3] I had been reading all that I could find (in English translation) about its history; but this had turned out to be a reading *with* the designer's intention, reinforcing my act of relating to the building, rather than a reading *against* it or according to those uses that come after design and can involve appropriation. In trying to understand the Narkomfin historically, I had discovered its architect's intentions, and since those intentions coincided with my own, this meant that I turned its objective reality and existence as 'a thing in itself' to own ends. Encountering Alexey and his strong scepticism about the building as a socialist icon and his grandfather's Marxist intentions made me wonder about my own idealism (again).

Self-reflection is a theme that threads though many of the contributions to this special issue – wistful and in some cases passionate desires for socialist societies are critically re-valued through a careful attention to historical detail and to the contemporary context. Several of the authors have considering again their earlier attachments to ideas and architecture, revisited concepts and memories of places that once inspired them, and examine afresh sites of aspiration and hope in their own previous work. Victor Buchli's essay is a beautiful example of this, in which the Narkomfin shifts from the centerpiece of his previous ethnography – a groundbreaking investigation and analysis of building and its designers and occupants over decades – to become a palimpsest or motif of the process of condensation

itself. This is why the transdisciplinarity of this issue shapes the ways in which we return to the Narkomfin, through not only architecture, but also art theory, psychoanalysis, and ethnography. As Michał Murawski's article also shows, the ethnographer's sustained and deep-digging into the specificities of the uses of social condensers as they change over time, is so important in offering an understanding of occupation that is often eclipsed in architectural theory by the return – time and again – to the architect's intentions.

The fact that Alexei is the grandson of the original designer of the building – Moisei Ginzberg – makes him a blood relative. I did feel closer to the origins of the building sitting next to him. And when we were talking, I hoped somehow that through his breath, the truth of the building's history would emerge. One good reason, I reflect in retrospect, not to mix oral interviews with archival research. How can a piece of dry paper win over a human voice, with all its styles of persuasion? As a materialist historian I knew of course that to hope like this is wrong, and then again, I sensed that somewhere in Alexey there was matter relating to his grandfather. But through our conversation, such hopes were dashed, in Alexei's refutation of the socialist origins of the social condenser as an architectural type.

Alexey's determination is to write history such that the social condensing in the Narkomfin can be understood, on the one hand, as a result of the increasing density of cities, specifically Moscow, and on the other, as fitting with the desire of Soviet designers to produce artefacts and spaces in the international style. The decision to offer a choice of apartment types, and minimal kitchens following the European approach, in the Narkomin, is not for him an intention to 'crystallise' the new *byt* under socialism, but a design decision taken as a sign of the times – globalisation, industrialisation, urbanisation.

Michał and I took Alexey's refutation of our reading of Ginzberg's claims in his texts from *Sovremmenaia Arkhitektura* (SA) as a challenge. In re-examining those texts, extractions and quotes that had been translated from Russian to English, we realised there were several quite problematic discrepancies with the secondary sources – either a lack of precision concerning the source of the original or no citation at all. We also realised that there were a number of texts, many by Ginzburg, which were often referred to, but had never been translated into English. So we decided to get these key sources translated, and in some cases retranslated, from the Russian originals. These have been incredibly helpful for resituating Ginzburg's own voice back into the arguments over the building and its intention that have

ensued way beyond his death. The translations from the 1920s provide a strong sense of the context and manner of architectural theoretical argument at that time; the important issues at stake, the need to make claims powerfully, and to refute criticism. So I think we can say safely now, *contra* his grandson, that these sources do provide evidence of Ginzburg as the designer of social condensers with socialist aims. But this is certainly not the end of the story. Key questions still stand, for example, on the relation between form and function as they are styled in architectural theory, or between material and consciousness as Andrew Willimott and Nick Beech discuss in their essays here. Not least, can architecture determine behaviour? And from a more historical perspective, were these social condensers intended to change social relations or to respond to the change in social relations?

Environmental determinism. Now today, this is a discredited idea, that architectural form can determine social relations, most would reject this in favour of a more interactive way of approaching the relation between form and behaviour, function, programme or use. For my part, I would still rather follow the potential of the Marxist geographers' notion, which was highly influential in the late 1990s, of the 'socio-spatial dialectic' (from Edward Soja's reading of Henry Lefebvre),[4] that spaces can change people, but that people can change spaces. Ginzburg, and the Russian-speaking commentators on Ginzburg coming some 40-50 years later, use a variety of different terms to describe the relation between the spatial and the social or design and use, translated into English as assist, crystallize, encourage, facilitate, focus, foster, generate, induce, promote, permit, and stimulate. However, the concept of environmental determinism has recently returned under a different guise, at least in housing discourse via outfits such as Create Streets who wish to argue that living in houses rather than high-rise apartments does and will make people happier.[5]

Social scientists using tools such as space syntax argue that behaviour is influenced by spatial form. But even if it is possible to track patterns of movement what can those traces really tell us about what people want? We talk of desire lines, how one can choose to take a short cut to get from A to B, across the mud and the grass, rather than to go the long way around the concrete path following the designer's intentions. But what can these so called 'desire-lines' really tell us about what people were hoping and dreaming when they performed such movements? Just because someone ended up living in a flat in Moscow without a kitchen, can we ever know whether they aspired to social revolution?

As Willimott argues, in a manner that parallels Alexey Ginzburg's thinking in form, but is asserted for a wholly different set of reasons, (like the social condenser itself, we might argue), by looking at a range of archival sources, it is necessary for us to consider the social condenser as a response to behaviours that already existed, rather than a prop architects put in place in order to encourage the social transformations in users that they were hoping for. Thought of this way, the Narkomfin and other social condensers of the transitional type, can be understood as designs for new buildings that match the social transformations in users' behaviours – aspirational, desirous, political – rather than as buildings that predict and dictate those new behaviours – this, Willimott argues, is what the primary evidence shows.

If so, did those living collectively do so out of necessity, because of the shortage of housing, or because they wanted to try socialism? Were those communal kitchens shared because it was cheaper, or because of the ideal of communal living was aspired to? And what became of the social condenser as it was reworked in the London of the late 1950s, and then into 1960s? Was the UK really full of social condensers as late as the 1970s – on the Aylesbury Estate, as I suggest, and in the arts centres that Andrea Phillips discusses? And is it going too far to suggest that the welfare state was a social condenser? It was an attempt to reduce wealth disparity, that we know, but not to redistribute wealth. So if there was no intention of social change or revolution, is the staircase at Bevin Court designed by Russian *émigré* architect Berthold Lubetkin, simply to be read, for example, as a functional or economically determined statement?

In his essay in this volume, Owen Hatherley goes back over his early work, questioning his reading Moscow's social condensers of the 1920s, and re-visiting what he is now calling 'actually-existing social condensers', for what they are today. His forensic examination of these icons of socialist modernism is a salutary tale, which prompts us to ask, how far can the concept and the typology of the social condenser be translated across time, as well as culture and place? Is such an architectural type historically and materially determined or can it be refigured today? And what is at stake in arguing for the need to look back at its point and purpose of origin today?

The image of both the social condensers of Moscow and those built in their image elsewhere and decades later, is one often viewed through a nostalgic eye, and with tendency to

eulogise. The gaze which looks back has an inbuilt tendency to focus on what has been lost, because it is looking for what was and so can be no more. But an attempt to re-build an image of 'lost' social condensation, as one might discern from my own essay here, as well as those of Nick Beech and Phillips, might be worth it – if at least to remember what it is that is being destroyed, especially when the alternatives being offered are deceptive and cruel. Can the social condenser be more to us than a lost object, can anything be more than that? Well, as Winnicott points out, a use object – as a thing in itself – may have more agency.

Agency is important, so is action, possibility, and projection. The future face, the looking forward, of the social condenser is an important counterpart to the looking back. The architectural design project has this at its heart – the projection of a future intention, a new series of actions to be performed in and through built form. And such project(ions) do not have to *determine* future use. A form designed for one purpose in the past, can also be used for something different in the present, or future, as Bernard Tschumi has suggested in his design tactics of dis-, cross- and trans-programming, where one function can be laid on top of another providing the potential for multiple programmes to critique and destabilise each other.[6] The example of 'Arry's Bar which I discuss in my essay, is interesting to consider in terms of trans-programming, where one programme gets laid over another not normally associated with it, here a public planning inquiry over a bar at a football club. But whether or not this creates a dis-programming, where one programme can be overturned and potentially undo the other, depends on specific patterns of use themselves: how far is that public inquiry aiding this council to dispossess those residents of their homes, or helping to protect their human rights; are the usual bar-time drinkers, fans or managers; does one group of people ever get to meet the other?

Is anyone today inventing new typologies, or setting the conditions for cross-, trans- or dis-programming? The era of the grand project is over, and we are operating on the back foot in a mode that is exhaustingly outraged and permanently resisting, always having to say no, rather than yes. And even if we build a new yes, how long can a form or programme constructed in the service (or even hope) of radical social change last, before it is co-opted? These questions need considering more carefully through the scope of what Łukasz Stanek writes here as occurring in the shift from functionalism to desire and pleasure, or what Phillips describes as resubjectification. This brings into focus architecture's relation to emotion, to feelings as well as behaviours, to psychoanalysis as well as psychology.

The close connection between architecture and psychoanalysis is present in a word like 'condensation', which Sigmund Freud deployed, along with 'displacement', to discuss the psychic mechanisms of the dream work. He described these mechanisms in his 1900 *The Interpretation of Dreams*, [7] translated into Russian in 1913. [8] While condensation may be a form of compression (and we can, as Alexey did, observe that people get compressed in cities), this does not mean we know what they will do when they are compressed. Perhaps under compression or condensation will do something completely unexpected?

When the dream work condenses, two different thoughts come together in a new and ambiguous state, where the distinctions held by each original are lost. *Ostranenie*? Perhaps. In a translation of a key text by Lev Vygotsky, who brought Freud and Marx together around the notion of conditional reflexes, 'develop[ing] a system of "reflexological Freudian psychology" in the spirit of dialectical materialism', [9] we find these two terms in adjacency: ' "condensation" (*ostranenie)* '. [10] Condensation was a term Vygotsky used to understand the interaction of external and inner speech; and yet the appearance of the term *ostranenie* beside it (as Vygotsky's translation or perhaps the translator's) firmly signals its intended relation to Victor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarisation or making strange. Was this Vygotsky's suggested translation or an idea of the translator's? We can never know for certain, nor can we know if if Moisei Ginzberg read Freud. But we can be certain that, under condensation, things defamiliarise.

Michel de Certeau argues that:

> Psychoanalysis and historiography […] conceive of the relation between the past and the present differently. Psychoanalysis recognizes the past *in* the present; historiography places them *beside* one another. […] Two strategies of time thus confront one another. [11]

Here in this special issue we have placed an appendix of translations of original Russian sources on the social condenser from the 1920s beside a series of essays discussing the relevance of the concept and the typology for the present. The act of reading is such that the past is no longer *beside* but *in* the present: is this is what happens when the social condenser socially condenses?

[1] D. W. Winnicott, 'The Use of an Object', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, v. 50 (1969) pp. 711–716, p. 715.

[2] Winnicott, 'The Use of an Object', p. 713.

[3] Jane Rendell, *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis: Spaces of Transition* (London: IB Tauris, 2017).

[4] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* [1974] translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) p. 8. This quote from Henri Lefebvre is discussed in Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 81, footnote 4.

[5] See for example, Create Streets, *A Direct Planning Manifesto for London*, Feburary 2016, p. 4. See http://www.createstreets.com (accessed 10 March 2017).

[6] See Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996) pp. 191–2 and p. 205. See also Bernard Tschumi, 'Interview with Bernard Tschumi: Architecture and the City', in Iain Borden, Joe Kerr and Jane Rendell (eds) with Alicia Pivaro (2001) *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), pp. 370–85 and Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: IB Tauris, 2006), pp. 115-6.

[7] Sigmund Freud, '(A) The Work of Condensation' and '(B) The Work of Displacement' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IV (1900): The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953) pp. 279–304,and pp. 305–309.

[8] See Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria, 'Introduction to the Russian translation of Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle', [1925] translated from the Russian by Renée van de Veer and Theresa Prout, in Renée van de Veer and Jaan Valsiner (eds), *The Vygotsky Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), pp. 11–18. First published in Sigmund Freud, *Po tu storonu principa uduvol'stvija* (Moscow: Sovermennye Problemy, 1925), pp. 3–16. See also Alexander M. Etkind, 'How Psychoanalysis was received in Russia, 1906–1936', *Journal of Analytic Psychology*, v. 39 (1994), pp. 191–202.

[9] Vygotsky and Luria, 'Introduction to the Russian translation of Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle', pp. 10–11.

[10] L. S. Vygotsky, *Educational Psychology*, [1926] translated by Robert Silverman, (Boca Raton, Florida: St Lucie Press, 1997), p. 249.

[11] Michel de Certeau, 'Psychoanalysis and its History', [1978], in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, translated by Brian Massumi, foreword by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986), pp. 3–16, p. 4.