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The Failures of Dom Kommuna Design

Upon escaping the oppressive regime of Nicholas II, Russian citizens began to press for more power and involvement in their government. Though public interest was better represented in the dual power structure formed after the February Revolution, this system only heightened their differences. The “network of democratic council of workers, soldiers and peasants” and the bourgeois Provisional Government shared no similar values, preventing any reform and subsequently leading to the Lenin’s October Revolution in 1917.¹ Once in power, Lenin began to radically mold Soviet Russia. He wanted to transition the citizens into a more socially conscious society through reforms like the emancipation of women, employment equality, and communal living.² Because of the wide-spread audience that communal houses (Dom Kommuna) would reach, it seemed like the perfect vehicle to implement his ideas. However, while Dom Kommuna housing seemed to be an all-encompassing solution and a way for Russia to gain an advantage over its peers, upon actual implementation, it proved to be a failure and stalled Russia’s economic and cultural development.

Socialism inspired a national fervor and emphasis on Russian culture that proved to be problematic since they inadvertently neglected their economic development. Amidst the transition to becoming a fully socialist society, Lenin still desired Russia to be economically prominent. Collectivism demanded a reprioritization of the group over the individual which created a confusing economic climate. Specialized workers like doctors, military generals, and

¹ Clunie, Gregor. “The Rise and Fall of the Russian Revolution.” *International Socialist Group*. September 3, 2012. <http://internationalsocialist.org.uk/index.php/2012/09/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-russian-revolution/>.

² Andrusz, Gregory D. “Housing: Social, Economic and Spatial Dimensions.” In *Housing & Urban Development in the USSR*, 114. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985.

textile managers were placed in similar conditions as the unemployed.³ Business owners were forced to give up their property to the government in order to provide communal apartments.⁴ Economic development is the antithesis to socialism. The centralization of power in the government and its desire to control the working environment gave citizens no motivation to compete or to foster the economic environment that was happening in other countries.⁵ Industrialization demands the need for social classes, competition, and technology and Soviet Russia's ignorance of these factors and faith in socialist society was too idealistic and prevented them from attaining any economic success.

The intentions behind communal living had potential to be as revolutionary as Lenin perceived, however, its lived experience proved that its design was extremely flawed. Designs like Vladimir Vladimirov and Mikhail Barshch's Dom Kommuna House outwardly seemed successful in serving its function. Each person's individual space was extremely small and uncomfortable and almost physically forced sociality among its residents and funneled them towards the central floors and its communal spaces.⁶ However, this design ignored the fact that "people did not quite live that way" resulting in these spaces becoming oppressive rather than equalizing.⁷ Inhabitants of these spaces recall the apartments feeling like they were "being ruled" [by the government].⁸ Families were forced into dark cramped apartments and experienced

³ Messana, Paola. *Soviet Communal Living: An Oral History of the Kommunalka*. Palgrave Studies in Oral History. 20. New York, N.Y., United States: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011.

⁴ *Ibid*, 20.

⁵ Hudson, Hugh D. "'The Social Condenser of Our Epoch': The Association of Contemporary Architects and the Creation of a New Way of Life in Revolutionary Russia." *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, 34, no. 4 (1986): 557.

⁶ Wolfe, Ross. "Mikhail Barshch's Housing-Communes in Moscow 1928-1930." *The Charnel-House: From Bauhaus to Beinhau*, April 14, 2014. <http://thecharnelhouse.org/2014/04/14/mikhail-barshchs-housing-communes-in-moscow-1928-1930/>

⁷ Humphrey, Caroline. "Ideology in Infrastructure: Architecture and Soviet Imagination." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11, no. 1 (March 2005): 40.

⁸ *Ibid*, 44.

alienation from their roommates based on their possessions and previous class status.⁹ If anything, more individual differences became highlighted within these structures than in their previous homes. These apartment complexes intended to create community amongst its residents but its physical and theoretical design did not translate these ideas and instead fostered an environment of oppression and discrimination.

Communal housing has repeatedly proved itself to be flawed in design and implementation but forms of it are still prominent today. The growth of urban centers following World War II and increasing separation between the rich and poor led to the creation of Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis. After a few years of crime and rioting, people were quick to realize its faults and label it the failure of modern architecture. However, within urban centers right now, low-income housing projects reflect the same dismal conditions. Clustering people of similar socio-economic groups is not an effective form of urban planning, but is rather another way that the government separates and discriminates against its citizens. Architectural ideas like this continue to be repurposed in contemporary design and architects need to be conscious of its downfalls and be wary of America possibly experiencing a similar societal failure as Soviet Russia.

⁹ Messana, 9.

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