



# Microrayons By Bee Flowers

Perhaps it has something to do with anything becoming everything if you look at it for long enough, but after my research of the outer areas of Moscow, I was pleasantly infected with the idea that these public housing blocks, known as 'microrayons', are under-appreciated masterpieces of art. Austere, restrained, never too polished or easy on the eye, they resist classification; but, like a roughly hewn object, like a paint-splattered canvas, they compel through defiant imperfection. Enclosing a central yard, the Soviet microrayon creates a Richard Serra-like monumental space where foreboding walls lurch towards dwarfed pedestrians. Being in the privileged position of the mere spectator who does not have to live there, I am thrilled by that oddly disjointed, disturbed minimalism.

The basic building block of the residential areas of the Socialist city became the "microrayon", which comprises a set of large buildings in the form of identical blocks. Each microrayon is part of a hierarchy of service provision, and several microrayons together form a larger unit for the provision of a wider range of services. Endlessly expandable, without modifications or site-spe-

cific considerations, this is the "Generic City" in practice. The Modernists' street phobia has triumphed; with hardly any facilities for socialization at the street level, people are a scarce sight. Many interiors too, reveal a striking uniformity in layout, furniture, drapery, lighting and utensils. The attentive traveler can't help but wonder what took place here.

Since the 1920s, Soviet architects had labored on the development of a new form for the city, one structurally attuned to the new, socialist lifestyle. Conventional Marxist wisdom dictated that material conditions determine consciousness, making it imperative for these to be altered so as to shape the new, collectivist social order. Individual houses were to be replaced with identical living units, thus imposing the uniformity that would cause a substitution of individualism with collectivism. Naturally, the private was swiftly declared political, and petit-bourgeois domesticity (which served as a shelter for the tempests of change in society) was to be eradicated in favor of more communal forms of co-habitation. Armed with the slogan 'nothing superfluous', the Communists embarked on a large-scale destruction of interiors that could potentially nurture the old mindset.

However, large-scale construction in adherence with these principles had to wait its turn, as Stalin's anti-intellectual populism gained the upper hand in the early 1930s, and architecture's expressive value henceforth was to glorify the freshly rediscovered doctrines of statism and nationalism. By 1954, however, Khrushchev denounced Stalin's well-built, thick-walled and ornate

buildings as criminally wasteful, and reached back to a mix of utilitarianism and Soviet core values. With efficient construction methods now available, and the country finally sufficiently industrialized so as to supply materials in large quantities, the face of the USSR's housing stock changed rapidly towards 'honest' and 'rational' boxes, hastily pieced together from concrete slabs.

Once again, domesticity was to wither away along with the state itself, with the target year for such 'full communism' set at 1988. The newly built houses provided a convenient "tabula rasa", where reformers could determine the material circumstances of the dwellers. To deal with pre-existing interiors, state-disseminated 'household advice' was used to attain reformist goals. In a characteristic wave of planning euphoria, the mono-functional layout of interiors was decried as petit-bourgeois. The old space distribution, with furniture arranged along the perimeter of the room focusing on the dining table, was abolished, and the room was divided into functional zones. Such a rearrangement of furniture was designed to break the nucleus of the 'hearth'. The next step was to reduce the number of items of 'material culture' in the apartment, towards a utopia devoid of objects and commodity fetishism. The dinner table was eliminated, and the dining ritual relegated to the 'mechanical' zone of the kitchen. As much as possible, furniture was made transformable, so as to reduce the number of pieces and de-artefactualize the domestic sphere,

while simultaneously masking functions deemed inappropriate for the collective room. Full communism didn't occur, however, and the envisioned de-materialization didn't materialize. And still, today, cities largely consist of bare-bones concrete boxes and green strips. In a telling scene of a popular Russian movie, a man gets off a plane, drives to his neighborhood, his street, his building, turns they key to the front door of his apartment, only to discover later that he's in the wrong city. Now, with Ikea finally part of the marketplace, Russians have a choice of furniture, but within the monolithic construction industry, remarkably little has changed. Naturally, the sector has no internal stimuli for change, and in the absence of alternatives there are no effective market pressures. Moreover, now that the vast majority of Russians live in system-built housing blocks, these have come to define the urban experience; the expectation of things being any other way has died. And so, the Russian builder wakes up each morning with the same task as the day before: to build another one. A big one.

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(images below: Metro Moscow)

