

# Anatole Kopp's *Town and Revolution* as history and a manifesto: a reactualization of Russian Constructivism in the West in the 1960s

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## Introduction

Historical narratives are never objective, and they all have a certain ideology with an implicit (or even explicit) idea lying behind them. Art history narratives are both political and performative:<sup>1</sup> they shape our perception of the phenomenon called 'art' as a succession of styles, artists and masterpieces. The past of art is constantly recreated and reinvented from the present of an art historian. Within the field of art history, the case of the history of architecture is, probably, the most complicated because architecture is a public phenomenon *par excellence*, and its implementation and interpretation are often socially and politically engaged.

The case discussed in this article is a perfect example of the aforementioned engaged art historical writing – political, performative, militant. Governed by his political convictions, the protagonist of this article, a French architect and architectural historian, Anatole Kopp (1915-1990), tried to change not only the narrative of architectural history, but also the architectural practice of his era. In 1967, Kopp published one of the first scholarly studies of Russian Constructivism, the book called *Town and Revolution*. Widely read and quickly translated into English, this text contributed to the inclusion of Russian constructivism into the canon of European Modern movement and to the rising popularity of the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s worldwide. Furthermore, Kopp's book belongs to the kind of art historical writing, which has now completely disappeared, that makes direct links between past and present architectural practice and uses the past instrumentally to find solutions to current problems. For Kopp, Russian constructivism became a model that could help to resolve the social and professional crisis of French architecture of the 1960s. Although this passéist utopia never came to be, his *oeuvre* illustrates the fact that art history is always deeply embedded within the political and social situation of its era and needs to be deconstructed and demythologized by historiography scholars.

The aim of this text is to show how art history is constructed *from* and *through* the present, how the different contexts affected Kopp's work, and how the historical

<sup>1</sup> A good example of the performativity of art history is the MoMA exhibition 'Modern Architecture - International Exhibition', and specifically its catalogue, which opened in New York in 1932. Its curators, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, assembled works by different architects and gave them the title of 'International style'. The term did not exist prior to this, but quickly became known and recognized worldwide. On this exhibition, see Terence Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art*, New York: Rizzoli, 1992.

narrative that he created reflected, intertwined with and elucidated his architectural, social and political environment. Here I want to refer to Jonathan Culler's work on the notion of context and, subsequently, to problematize the context within which the protagonist of this article is normally placed. Back in the 1990s, Jonathan Culler, a specialist in semiotics and literary studies, problematized the notion of context. He suggested that context is traditionally and intuitively perceived as the stable and objective environment of an event, but, according to him, this perception is deceptive. In Culler's words, 'the context is not given but produced; what belongs to a context is determined by interpretive strategies; a context is just as much in need of elucidation as events; and the meaning of a context is determined by event'.<sup>2</sup> Culler proposed to use the terms 'frame' or 'framing' to understand how the meanings of events and acts 'are constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, systems of values, semiotic mechanisms'.<sup>3</sup> Referring to Norman Bryson's interpretation of Culler's ideas, the historian of East European art Piotr Piotrowski concludes that:

Although observed forms may sometimes be similar, our 'framing' will give them distinct meaning. We should therefore focus more on the frame than the idiom. Perhaps, the art of the entire world, or at least of the East and the West, speaks with a similar language. However, it says something quite different within 'our' frame.<sup>4</sup>

One of the goals of this article is to show the heuristic value of reframing. The existing research (although very limited) on Anatole Kopp<sup>5</sup> puts him into the French context of the revolutionary 1960s and his figure is studied as an example of a French engaged leftist intellectual. I do not deny the interest of such approach, but my vision of Kopp is different. I will position his figure within the frame of the Soviet studies and, more precisely, as one of the key figures in Soviet architecture studies. Seen from this perspective, Kopp appears to be a fascinating case of a transnational scholar who contributed to the contemporary narrative of the modernist architecture and a true believer in the universal social values of architecture, not only lasting through time, but also penetrating through the Iron Curtain divide.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988, XIV.

<sup>3</sup> Culler, *Framing the Sign*, XIV.

<sup>4</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *In the shadow of Yalta: art and the avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion, 2009, 27.

<sup>5</sup> See Anat Falbel, 'Anatole Kopp (1915-1990): the Engaged Architect and the Concept of Modern Architecture' in *International DOCOMOMO Conference, The Challenge of Change: Dealing with the Legacy of the Modern Movement*, Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2008, 43-48; Anne Raymond, *Anatole Kopp 1915-1990*, DEA en Histoire de l'art, Université Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1992, Paris; Anat Falbel, 'Anatole Kopp (1915-1990): the Engaged Architect and the Concept of Modern Architecture', URL: <http://thecharnelhouse.org/2013/08/02/anatole-kopp-1915-1990-the-engaged-architect-and-the-concept-of-modern-architecture/>; Ross Wolf, 'On Anatole Kopp', URL: <http://thecharnelhouse.org/2013/08/02/on-anatole-kopp/>.

## Early historiography of Soviet architecture

Soviet architecture is traditionally divided into three periods: the avant-garde period of the 1920s, the Stalinist neoclassic period (from the mid-1930s-1950s), and post-Stalinist modernism (from the mid-1950s until the demise of the Soviet Union). Scholarship dedicated to each of these periods has very different topics and questions, and any kind of unified narrative of Soviet architectural history is virtually non-existent. Soviet avant-garde architecture is probably the only period of Soviet architecture that is strongly incorporated into the Western narrative of architectural history.

The first scholarly writings on Soviet architecture appeared in Europe in the middle of the 1960s, and much later in the US, at the beginning of the 1970s. At least three important factors contributed to the development of scholarship on Soviet architecture abroad. First, in the post-war period, the Modern movement was already treated as part of the history of architecture: the 1920s were perceived as a period that was recent in time, albeit very distant culturally and technologically. In the 1950s-1960s the canon of pre-war modernism (the 'first' modernism) as a style was still in the process of formation. Thus, the 'rediscovering' of Soviet modernism was part of the revision of the history of the Modern movement. It was neither the only nor the earliest one. For example, already in the late 1950s, Reyner Banham sought to introduce Italian futurism 'not simply as one among the many avant-garde movements in the 1900s but as a major force, if not the major influence on the ideology of modernism.'<sup>6</sup> As I will demonstrate later on, Kopp's ambition regarding the Soviet constructivism was very similar to Banham's.

Second, it is undeniable that Khrushchev's Thaw, the process of destalinization and the increasing openness of the Soviet Union to the rest of the world, made studies on Soviet art and architecture much easier. Moreover, even for Soviet scholars the Thaw opened archives that had previously been closed and opened up research subjects that had been forbidden during the Stalin era (constructivist architecture being one of these). Third, the interest in the Soviet Union in all spheres cannot be separated from the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s worldwide. While it is true that the Soviet project had lost a lot in popularity since the aftermath of the Second World War, and that in France Maoism and Trotskyism attracted many more young adherents than the French Communist Party, the Soviet Union was still the first truly revolutionary country and an unknown mysterious land of anti-capitalism, despite being criticized and viewed as *démodé*.

Western European scholars began to take an interest in Soviet architecture in the early 1960s. Surprisingly, in France, with the exception of his younger colleague and friend, Jean-Louis Cohen,<sup>7</sup> Anatole Kopp was the only historian and theoretician

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present. Inventing Architectural Modernism*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, London, England, 2008, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Louis Cohen, *Le Corbusier et La Mystique de l'URSS: Théories et Projets Pour Moscou, 1928-1936*, Bruxelles: Pierre Mardaga éditeur, 1987, published in English in 1992. It must also be noted that Cohen wrote his Ph.D. thesis on another French architect tightly linked with the Soviet Union, André Lurçat. Less known outside France, Lurçat was Le Corbusier's main

of architecture to focus on Soviet architecture. His books are still to date the main reference of French historiography on the topic. They have been republished, are frequently cited, and are easy to find in bookstores even today.

In Italy, the situation was different. In the 1960s, a large group of Italian scholars began to work on Soviet architecture. Most of them belonged to the Venice school of architecture and were related to the Institute of History of Architecture of the Venice University Institute of Architecture (IUAV),<sup>8</sup> directed by Manfredo Tafuri. Tafuri himself, as one of the most well-known historians and theoreticians of architecture of the XX century, did not work much on Soviet architecture. However, he published a few articles on the topic and taught a university course on the history of Soviet architecture at the IUAV in the academic year 1971-72. Even Aldo Rossi, another important name belonging to post-war Italian (and world) architecture, was interested in the issue of socialist cities. Most Italian architects and historians related to the IUAV were Marxists, although not communist. Contrary to Kopp, with his focus on the social project of the October Revolution, these Italian colleagues were more interested in the artistic side of the Soviet avant-garde and in the status of the artist in the revolutionary era. It is interesting that, although Kopp regularly mentions Italian scholarship in the bibliographical sections of his books, he never refers to the writings of his Italian colleagues directly and I was not able to find any direct traces of his connections with Italy.

However, he constantly refers to Catherine Cook, a British specialist in Soviet avant-garde, whom he met during her graduate studies in Cambridge. Together with the specialist in Soviet avant-garde paintings, Camilla Grey, Cook was a pioneer in the Soviet studies field in the UK.<sup>9</sup> It seems that her interest in Soviet architecture was purely academic; at least, I have no evidence of her engagement with any kind of left ideology. Over on the other side of the ocean in the US, however, the context in which Soviet architecture was studied was very different. In general, American Soviet studies existed under the label 'know your enemy' and were often initiated and paid for by the state.<sup>10</sup> Taking into consideration the Cold War specifics, it is not surprising that American scholars were more engaged in studies of Soviet housing and urbanism than architecture. Atypically for French academia, which tends towards self-isolation, Anatole Kopp maintained his connections with the US: he twice received a Graham Foundation grant and was also a fellow at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Studies.

All in all, however different their background was, foreign scholars of Soviet architecture usually met with the same obstacles: a lack of materials, a language barrier, difficulties with visas and stays in the USSR, limited access to documents (or no access at all), and, often, suspicion, ignorance and a lack of understanding about

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rival in the French Modern movement and spent a few years in the USSR during the 1930s. Unlike Le Corbusier, Lurçat was a devoted communist.

<sup>8</sup> Istituto de Storia dell'Architettura dell'Istituto Universitario di Architettura de Venezia (IUAV).

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture, and the City*, London: Academy Editions, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> See the illuminating research of David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

their topic in their own countries. In the 1960s, the Soviet avant-garde was still a new field but, at the same time, the disillusionment with the Soviet system had already spread widely among Western leftists. Thus, the study of Soviet architecture was far more of a risky and unobvious choice than we can now imagine.

### **A French militant architect discovers the Soviet Union**

In the early period of Soviet history, up to the mid-1930s, the USSR had intense connections in the field of architecture and building with the US, Germany and France. Steadily decreasing during the 1930s, these links were cut almost absolutely at the post-war years of 'zhdanovshchina' and the struggle against cosmopolitanism. However, soon after Stalin's death, the Soviet Union opened its borders to foreigners. Called the Thaw, this period of Soviet history was marked by relative liberalization and openness to the West and by the will to cooperate with foreign countries including the so-called 'capitalist' or 'bourgeois' ones. Like specialists in other fields, Soviet architects took advantage of the opening of the Iron Curtain in order to exchange information and cooperate with foreign colleagues.

It must be noted that for Soviet architecture this period was almost revolutionary. The first housing reform was launched by Nikita Khrushchev immediately after he came to power. The decree 'Against excesses in architecture and construction' issued on November 1954 criticized and de facto doomed Stalinist neoclassicism in architecture as expensive, unpractical, and non-socialist. A new architectural style was needed, and it was found abroad: the post-war International style architecture that had already spread widely all around the world was appropriated and interpreted by Soviet architects from the mid-1950s onwards. Members of Soviet architectural establishment travelled all over Europe and the US, studying foreign experience and collecting information on contemporary architecture. Similarly, many foreign architects visited the USSR from the late 1950s. The decade from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s was thus a rather unique period of mutual acceptance and vivid interest between Soviet and Western architects, a period of active two-way exchange. It was during this period that Anatole Kopp visited the USSR for the first time and wrote his first book on Soviet avant-garde architecture.

Anatole Kopp had Russian origins – his parents were Russian middle-class Jews who left Russia soon after the October Revolution and settled in Paris in 1923,<sup>11</sup> when young Anatole was only eight years old. Kopp studied in the Special School of Architecture (École spéciale d'architecture, ESA) until his departure to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1938. During the war years he finished his Master's course in architecture at MIT, was given internships in different architectural offices and taught architecture in Black Mountain College. After the war Kopp collaborated with different architectural agencies before founding his own with his friend Petr Chazanov in 1957, one year after his first trip to the USSR.

Kopp became a member of the French Communist Party when he was a

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed biography, see Anne Raymond, *Anatole Kopp 1915-1990*, DEA en Histoire de l'art, Université Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1992, Paris.

student at the school of architecture, most probably in 1936. From the end of the war, he worked as a designer for different exhibitions organized by the PCF. As the Brazilian historian of architecture Anat Falbel mentions, his engagement with communism was so intense that he even had trouble with the Order of architects because of his militancy.<sup>12</sup> Falbel also points out that already in his early writings (although not so numerous) Kopp was interested in Soviet architecture, even though he also published on American urbanism and general issues of urbanism and architecture. I presume that his trip to the USSR in 1956 was a turning point in his intellectual interests and the beginning of his life-long engagement with Soviet architecture.

The travel of the French architects to the Soviet Union was organized by the Association of Friendship France-URSS, one of many bilateral associations of sympathizers of the Soviet Union all over the world. At the time, Kopp, already in his forties, had not done much building and can be considered as rather a beginner architect. However, he was close to both the PCF and the Association France-URSS and, of practical importance, he spoke Russian and, together with a professional interpreter from the Soviet side, translated for the French delegation. Finally, Kopp's desire to go to the Soviet Union was also for personal reasons – he was looking for his Russian kin. At the very end of the trip, in Moscow, he succeeded in this search: his colleague Guy Pison wrote in the report: '... Kopp, who had been looking for his kin during the stay in Moscow, had found his blushing little cousin who accompanied us to the train station'.<sup>13</sup>

During the three weeks of their journey in the Soviet Union the French architects visited Moscow, Leningrad, Sochi, Erivan and Stalingrad. From what I already know, this itinerary was fairly typical of the long professional trips of foreign architects and planners in the USSR. According to Pison, Kopp was mostly interested in 'the profession, role and function of architects and how they work'.<sup>14</sup> The focus on the social function of architecture and the role of an architect as an actor of social change was the leading feature of Kopp's writing and his building projects.

The Soviet architectural system seen by the French delegation in 1956 was in the middle of change. In one of his articles, Kopp wrote that although he and his colleagues were 'astonished and surprised'<sup>15</sup> by the Stalinist neoclassic style, 'it must be noted that this formalist mistake was overcome'.<sup>16</sup> In a similar way, Pison noted

<sup>12</sup> Anat Falbel, 'Anatole Kopp (1915-1990): the Engaged Architect and the Concept of Modern Architecture' in *International DOCOMOMO Conference, The Challenge of Change: Dealing with the Legacy of the Modern Movement*, Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2008, 43-48.

<sup>13</sup> Archives Nationales, 88 AS //158, 'Voyages en URSS de cinq architectes français (aout 1956)', 40. 'Et c'est à ce moment que KOPP qui recherchait un parent en voyage à Moscou retrouve une petite cousine toute rougissante qui nous accompagne toute émue jusqu'au train...'

<sup>14</sup> Archives Nationale, 88 AS //158, 'Voyages en URSS', 3. 'Kopp étudiera la profession, le rôle et la fonction de l'architecte et comment il travaille.'

<sup>15</sup> Anatole Kopp, 'Impression de voyage d'un architecte', *La construction moderne*, 11, novembre 1956, 386.

<sup>16</sup> Kopp, 'Impression de voyage d'un architecte', 386.

some Soviet architectural projects with 'a plasticity close to ours'<sup>17</sup> and the fact that a group of young Soviet architects present at his speech in Leningrad welcomed his critique and, after his talk, approached the French delegation in order to share 'their enthusiasm about the new architecture liberated from this pompous formalism'.<sup>18</sup> Things changed fast, and only three years later, in 1959, in his report for UNESCO,<sup>19</sup> Kopp pointed out that contemporary Soviet architecture was based on the same principles as the European one and that 'both sides could profit from cultural exchanges'.<sup>20</sup>

I suppose that the particularity of the historical period when Kopp first came to the Soviet Union considerably affected his attitude towards the Soviet architecture. The end of the 1950s marked a sharp transition in many spheres of Soviet life. Thus, Kopp understood Soviet society as very dynamic, aspiring to be modern, willing to learn from other countries, and doing so very fast and successfully. The charm of a powerful country in a phase of renewal, opening (however selectively) its borders to foreigners, may also be one of the explanations for the rise in interest in the USSR and its history during the Thaw and the early Brezhnev era.

### **What town, what revolution?**

If, for Soviet architecture (as well as for the whole of Soviet society), the late 1950s-early 1960s were a time of renewal and hope, in France, however, the situation was different. On one hand, the so-called Glorious Thirties were on the rise: the national economy had increased dramatically; the society of consumption was nascent; the country achieved prosperity and well-being after the devastation of the war and pre-war stagnation. On the other, the cultural and social contradictions that led to the May revolution of 1968 had already become apparent.

For French architecture, two processes were important in the 1960s: the social housing boom and the dramatically obsolete system of architectural education that profoundly affected architectural practice. Both phenomena appeared long before the 1960s but became critical only during this period. The history of social housing in France started in the middle of the XIX century when ideas of hygienism, population control and philanthropy encouraged industrialists and municipalities to build special low-rent housing for workers. The housing crisis in France worsened during the first half of the XX century and became untenable after the end of the Second World War. The large mass housing campaign started in the mid-1950s on both a

<sup>17</sup> Archives Nationale, 88 AS //158, 'Voyages en URSS', 11. '...d'une plastique très proche de la nôtre.'

<sup>18</sup> Archives Nationale, 88 AS //158, 'Voyages en URSS', 40. 'Les jeunes sont venus parler librement avec nous, nous dire leur enthousiasme sur une nouvelle architecture libérée de ce formalisme pompier.'

<sup>19</sup> In the verbatim of the report held in archives of the Association France-URSS it is marked '24 April 1959 – the UNESCO room'.

<sup>20</sup> Archives Nationales de France, archives of the Association France-URSS, 88 AS 158, Anatole Kopp, Communication sur l'architecture et l'urbanisme en URSS, 24 April 1959, 19. 'Je pense qu'aujourd'hui les conditions sont réunies pour que les échanges culturels profitent aux deux parties.'

local and national scale. The main goal of this was to build as much housing as possible at the lowest price, so, not surprisingly, artistic quality (if not the quality in general) was fairly unimportant. Moreover, new skills were required from architects: not only technical ones related to new construction technologies, prefabrication and standardization, but also more sophisticated knowledge in urbanism and planning. New neighbourhoods, *les grands ensembles* (literally – big ensembles, large housing complexes), were often bigger than French architects were used to planning and, moreover, their prospective inhabitants belonged to social categories<sup>21</sup> whose needs had never been taken into consideration before. Thus, the skills required by the post-war building practice, as well as its problems and goals, were very different from those before the war, while the body of architects and the system of architectural education in France were not ready to meet these requirements.

Until the late 1960s, the French architectural education maintained the same old Beaux-Arts system originating from the XVII century. The Higher National School of Fine Arts (École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, ENSBA) and its regional branches dominated the education of architects. The only institutional alternative to the ENSBA was the Special School of Architecture, opened in the late XIX century. From today's perspective, one can imagine that architecture in France was very progressive given that Le Corbusier is the most important name in French architecture of the XX century, but this was not the case. In reality, French architecture was technically and stylistically old-fashioned and drawn according to XIX century models. Indeed, until the mid-1960s Le Corbusier was a *persona non grata* in the Beaux-Arts, his ideas were disapproved and rejected, and, moreover, he was the target of some nationalist mockery.

As a result of the obsolete model of architectural training, the lack of transparency regarding the criteria for the entrance examinations and the evaluation of students' works, the School of Fine Arts finally exploded in the 1960s. It must be noted that, although French youth at the time was mostly leftist, not many students of the Beaux-Arts were politically engaged and that amongst these few militants Trotskyism and Maoism were more popular than communism.<sup>22</sup> In general, communist ideology was important for the interwar generation of French intellectuals and rather unpopular amongst the post-war generation of baby-boomers.

Going back to Anatole Kopp, there is no evidence of his active participation in the May 1968 events, presumably because he was occupied by his work in Algeria. Nevertheless, after the May revolution and the following reform of French architectural education, he started to teach, first, at the ESA (1969-1973) and, from 1973 and until his death in 1990, he was a professor at the University Paris-VIII Vincennes, the cradle of the May'68 movement and one of the most progressive

<sup>21</sup> Contrary to common knowledge, French mass social housing was initially destined not to the poorest social strata but to the middle class: skilled workers, low-ranking officials and different types of professionals with median (not low!) income. Social housing was not any kind of a charitable enterprise, and tenants were chosen meticulously by managing companies in order to be sure that they would pay the rent.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Louis Violeau, *Les Architectes et Mai 68*, Paris: Recherches, 2005, 59.



French universities at the time.

Kopp's personal approach to architecture is very clear from his work in Algeria in the early 1960s. His housing projects for Alger and Oran are an example of the realization of political ideas into architectural practice. In 1962 Kopp and his colleague, Pierre Chazanoff, were charged with reconstructing two big shantytowns - Oued Ouchayah in Alger and Les Planteurs in Oran. In Oued Ouchayah, the former inhabitants of the demolished slums were hired as construction workers; in this way these people, most of them very poor and unemployed, not only were building their future homes by themselves but also had a paid job. However, this very humanistic approach became possible only because of the vernacular building techniques used by Kopp and Chazanoff. It was hardly possible to entrust highly industrialized construction to unskilled workers, but the idea of the two French architects was to build using local materials, local building techniques and simple architectural forms. During this period, in an article written in 1965,<sup>23</sup> Kopp and Chazanoff expressed their belief that architecture can and must participate in the creation of a better, socialist society. Although in his earliest writings Kopp had criticized the blind belief in architecture's capacity to change society and people just by the power of building form, he was now persuaded that architecture could contribute greatly to the building of a new social organization of human life.

*Town and Revolution* was Kopp's attempt to answer the professional and social crisis of the French 1960s from his own political convictions, lived experience from travelling in the USSR, and his architectural practice. At this time, he seemed to believe in leftist militant architecture that promised to build a better world. In what follows, I will analyse how Kopp revised the Modernist movement history in order to find the right place for the Soviet avant-garde and will describe Kopp's estimation of the Soviet architecture of the early 1960s.

### **The social project of Soviet avant-garde architecture**

Anatole Kopp's masterpiece, *Town and Revolution*, was first published in 1967 in French. Already in 1970 it was translated and published in English and the second revised French edition appeared in 1972. The book was welcomed by the reviewers<sup>24</sup> and, as the French philosopher Paul Virilio stated, 'made quite the splash in France and beyond'.<sup>25</sup> Apparently, the popularity of the book was not only due to its novelty but also due to the strong connections Kopp established between the past and the present. He used the Soviet avant-garde as an example and a possible model for French architects who were building mass social housing in order to struggle with

<sup>23</sup> Anatole Kopp, Pierre Chazanoff, 'Pour une architecture', *Révolution africaine*, 108, 20 February 1965, 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, 'Ville et Révolution' in *Le Carré Bleu*, 4, 1967, URL: [http://www.lecarrebleu.eu/PDF\\_INTERA%20COLLEZIONE%20LCB/FRAPN02\\_CARR\\_1967\\_004.pdf](http://www.lecarrebleu.eu/PDF_INTERA%20COLLEZIONE%20LCB/FRAPN02_CARR_1967_004.pdf); Marcel Cornu, 'Anatole Kopp, Ville et Revolution', *L'Homme et la Société*, 5:1, 1967, 201-209; Nicole Haumont, 'Anatole Kopp, Ville et Revolution', *Revue Française de sociologie*, 9:2, 1968, 265-267.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Ross Wolf, 'On Anatole Kopp', URL: <http://thecharnelhouse.org/2013/08/02/on-anatole-kopp/>

housing crisis. At this point, Kopp's history of architecture was absolutely up-to-date in its interpretations and intentions.

Pointing out that Soviet avant-garde architecture had been forgotten in the West and almost nothing had been published on the issue, Kopp made a bold statement that '[Soviet avant-garde architecture] deserves to be known and to find its place in the history of world architecture which it is one of sources and not the smallest one as we will see.'<sup>26</sup> Thus, he was not writing about a little known national branch of the Modern movement, one of many; instead, he claims a reconsideration of the Modern movement genealogy. His point was that the extreme revolutionary art of the Soviet avant-gardists heavily affected their European colleagues, especially the French and German ones. Not only artistic development but the October revolution itself and the radical changes that it provoked made architects think on a bigger scale and dare that one day utopia may come true. Kopp's favourite quotation from Le Corbusier – 'yesterday's utopia is today's reality' – reveals the spirit of this audacious hope very well. It should be noted that the idea of a deep influence of Soviet avant-garde architecture on the European Modern movement was rapidly widely accepted. Already in 1980, Kenneth Frampton in his classic *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*<sup>27</sup> not only included two chapters on the Soviet architecture (the avant-garde of the 1920s and Stalinist neoclassicism) but also pointed out the influence of Soviet constructivism on Alvar Aalto, for example.

It is interesting to notice that early writings on Soviet avant-garde paid great attention to the international contacts of Soviet architects and to the presence of foreign architects and engineers in the USSR. In *Town and Revolution* Kopp included a chapter on foreign architects and later in the 1980s he conducted research on German and American constructions specialists in the USSR. In the late 1960s, Italian historians from the University Institute of Venice worked on the foreign architects in the Soviet Union and on the influence of Soviet architecture on the European architectural scene. On the one hand, it is likely that sources for this kind of study were more accessible than Soviet ones; on the other, it is always easier to explore a new field through a well-researched one.

As Kopp stated in his introduction, the Soviet avant-garde architecture is worth studying:

Because many of today's inventions and researches are only a continuation of those started in the 1920s (if not a simple plagiarism) and that the knowledge of what was done at the time must help contemporary architects to escape the vicious circle they seem to be blocked today. Because the researches done at the time did not concern only forms and techniques but also projects, and the most of the so-called 'social' projects now have their origins in this bygone period and appeared as a reaction to the economic, politic and social context of that era. In our opinion, these three reasons are sufficient enough for make a study of the Soviet architecture of the 1920s. However, these three are only minor

<sup>26</sup> Kopp, *Ville et Revolution*, 34. The book is cited from the second edition of 1972.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 4th ed., World of Art, London; New York, N.Y: Thames & Hudson, 2007.

reasons...<sup>28</sup>

The most important reason for studying Soviet constructivism is that: 'the Soviet architecture of the era was one of the means placed at the service of the highest ideal that has ever been set by humanity – to build a society based on social justice, equality, and progress'.<sup>29</sup> According to Kopp, the architectural project of the 1920s did not realize this because of the economic, technological and cultural backwardness of the country: good quality constructivist buildings could not have been built due to the lack of materials and technologies, and people were not ready for the new aesthetics (the latter also explains the turn towards neoclassical architecture in the 1930s). However, as Kopp pointed out in the conclusion, up to the 1960s the USSR had accumulated the necessary amount of knowledge, wealth and education so that, finally, the new architecture could be built. Kopp cited examples of the New Element of Settlement (NER<sup>30</sup>) and the House of the New Way of Life by Natan Osterman<sup>31</sup> (1965-1969) as proof of the renewal and the important future of contemporary Soviet architecture. In his view: 'these experiences prove the permanence of the idea of the way of life transformation in the materialization of which architects must play a crucial role.'<sup>32</sup> Kopp ended his book with the statement that the only true role of architect (not only Soviet) is to build 'a social habitat and society itself'.<sup>33</sup>

It is clear that Kopp saw in Soviet architecture the solution to the professional crisis in which the French architectural community was stuck. However, this belief did not last for long. Already in 1972 he wrote in a bitter preface to the second edition of *Town and Revolution* that he had overestimated the potential of Soviet architecture. Sadly, he became disillusioned with not only Soviet architecture but

<sup>28</sup> Kopp, *Ville et révolution*, 36. 'Parce que bien des inventions et des recherches actuelles ne sont que la suite de celles entreprise au cours des années vingt (quand elles n'en sont pas de simples plagiat) et que la connaissance de ce qui a été fait alors devrait aider l'architecture contemporaine à sortir du cercle vicieux dans lequel elle semble aujourd'hui enfermée. Parce que les recherches alors entreprises ne portent pas que sur les formes et les techniques, mais aussi sur les programmes eux-même et que la plupart des programmes dits « sociaux » d'aujourd'hui ont leur origine dans cette lointaine période et sont précisément apparus en fonction du contexte économique, politique et social existant alors. Ces trois raisons seraient à notre avis, largement suffisantes pour entreprendre aujourd'hui une étude de l'architecture soviétique des années vingt. Elles ne sont pourtant que des raisons mineures.'

<sup>29</sup> Kopp, *Ville et révolution*, 38. 'L'architecture de l'URSS de cette époque a été l'un des moyens mis au service du plus haut idéal que se soit jamais proposé l'humanité : bâtir une société fondée sur la justice sociale, l'égalité, le progrès.'

<sup>30</sup> On NER see Daria Bocharnikova, *Inventing Socialist Modern*, Ph.D. thesis, European University Institute, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> This building had a sad destiny. It was conceived by Natan Osterman as a housing unit of a new type, but the architect died in 1969 before the completion of the project and the latter were converted into a student's dormitory.

<sup>32</sup> Kopp, *Ville et révolution*, 287. 'Mais ces expériences illustrent aussi la permanence de l'idée d'une transformation du mode de vie, dans la matérialisation de laquelle les architectes ont un rôle capitale à jouer.'

<sup>33</sup> Kopp, *Ville et révolution*, 287. 'cadre de la société et la société elle-même.'

also with post-war modernism in general. In this preface he reproduced the discourse of a betrayed modernism:

But their [interwar modernists] success was small and in millions of cubic meters built during this period we will only rarely recognize their mark, we will never see any systematic application of the solutions they proposed. Their success, however relative, came later, from the 1950s, and was only apparent. From the ideologies of the modern architecture of the 1920s and 1930s, only some urban planning receipts were borrowed, the architectural language was copied, and, stripping the functionalism of its real content, only exterior forms was adopted, considered as a more proper decoration to the contemporary reality but decoration anyway. It is this recuperation of exterior forms of functionalism and its global failure that let us think that the epoch ends today: the epoch that opened in XIX century and that found its theorists in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>34</sup>

For Kopp, the gap between the aesthetic of modernism and its social program was huge. Much later, in the 1980s, he published a book called *When the Modern was not a style but a reason*<sup>35</sup> in which he elaborated on social projects by Soviet constructivists, Bauhaus (including Bauhaus members in exile in the US and Palestine), Le Corbusier, and the American New Deal. In this work he debated the subject of a 'betrayed', 'spoiled', or 'lost' modernism. It should be pointed out that, in the 1950s-1960s, the relationship between style and the social project of architecture was an issue not only for communist militant architects like Kopp. The famous British architectural critic Reyner Banham called his book on the newest architectural trend in the UK and the US *The New Brutalism. Ethic or Aesthetic?*,<sup>36</sup> putting the opposition of the form and the social project behind it in the center of his inquiry. British brutalism was a direct offspring of the interwar modernism that appeared as a solution to the crisis of the latter. For Anatole Kopp the nature of modernist architecture was clear – modernism was a social project and the remedy to its crisis laid in the sphere of the social.

In the same preface of 1972, Kopp pointed out the unfortunate destiny of

<sup>34</sup> Kopp, *Ville et revolution*, 14-15. 'Mais leurs succès sont minces et dans les millions de mètres cubes qui seront bâtis aux cours de cette période, on ne reconnaîtra que rarement leur marque, on ne verra jamais la mise en application systématique des solutions qu'ils s'acharnent à proposer. Leur succès, tout relatif d'ailleurs, viendra plus tard, à partir des années 50, et ce succès ne sera qu'apparent. Aux idéologues de l'architecture modernes des années vingt et trente, on n'empruntera que quelques recettes urbanistique, on copiera leur langage architectural et, vidant le fonctionnalisme de son contenu réel, on n'en adoptera que les formes extérieures considérées comme un décor plus adapté à la réalité contemporaine, mais décor quand même. C'est cette récupération des formes extérieures du fonctionnalisme et son échec global qui permet de penser qu'une époque s'achève aujourd'hui: celle qui s'ouvrit au XIX siècle et qui trouva ses théoriciens pendant les années vingt et trente.'

<sup>35</sup> Anatole Kopp, *Quand le 'Moderne' n'était pas un style mais une cause*, Paris, ENSBA, 1988.

<sup>36</sup> Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism. Ethic or Aesthetic?*, New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1966.

Osterman's House for the New Life adding that 'concerning other experiences of the same type that should have been done, we do not hear about them in the professional press and all make us think that, like the House for the New Life, these experiences are dead before even being born.'<sup>37</sup> Actually, the explanation of this failure was in perfect harmony with the book's general idea: new architecture needs a new society. Hence, Kopp put forward that the new architecture in the USSR failed because no real socialism, 'popular, utopian, fraternal and collectivist',<sup>38</sup> was built. The disillusionment in the USSR is easily understandable in 1972, after the Prague spring and May 1968 in France.

Furthermore, the humanistic project of social housing in France was over by the early 1970s. In March 1973, the notoriously circular Guichard appeared and by May of the same year the construction of about forty already designed *grands ensembles* were cancelled. The circular Guichard, together with a few preceding intergovernmental circulars dated from 1971, stated the link between the built form of habitat and the so-called 'urban malaise' in which French suburbs became stuck in the late 1960s.<sup>39</sup> Soon after construction, big housing complexes became spaces of this 'malaise', a malaise that preceded ghettoization and pauperization: huge and monotonous, lacking urban diversity, most of the *grands ensembles* were sad places in the middle of nowhere.<sup>40</sup> Social heterogeneity,<sup>41</sup> the ideal of French social policies in so many spheres, was not achieved: the middle-class tenants, who first had settled there, left as fast as possible; managing companies replaced them with unemployed, numerous families and poor immigrants because no one else wanted to live there and because the state paid for them; the prosperous post-war years were over; and the social housing conceived for large social groups became ghettos for economic and social outcasts. However, this disillusionment in mass social housing was not a unique French phenomenon. It was shared by other European countries and, moreover, by the United States. The most famous manifestation of this disenchantment in modernist housing dream happened in Saint Louis, Missouri, US. The low income residential complex Pruitt-Igoe, built in the mid-1950s, became such a dangerous and unmanageable place that it was blown up in 1972. The prophet of postmodernism, Charles Jencks, wrote in 1984 that the day of the demolition of Priutt-Igoe was the last day of modernism,<sup>42</sup> and he was not the first to see proof of modernism's falsity in social housing crisis. For Kopp, who was a devoted modernist

<sup>37</sup> Kopp, *Ville et revolution*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Kopp, *Ville et revolution*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> See Isabelle Backouche, *Histoire urbaine. Définition, méthodes et chantiers*, vol. 2: *Analyser le changement urbain. Les abords des monuments historiques en France (1943-1979)*, Habilitation à diriger des recherches, Université Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2011, 309.

<sup>40</sup> The classic artistic description of the (sub)urban malaise is Jean-Luc Godard's movie *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* made in 1967.

<sup>41</sup> It must be noted that, unlike France, the Soviet Union had this spatial social heterogeneity, first of all because of the state system of housing distribution. With minor exception of cooperative housing built for personnel of enterprises or artistic elites, in Soviet times the social composition of inhabitants of one building (or even one communal apartment) may be extremely different.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli, 9.

and a believer in the social role of architecture, these accusations were a catastrophe. In his writing from the 1970s, he tried to defend modernism from attacks that it was exposed to and proclaimed that the interwar socially oriented modernism was 'spoiled' and falsely interpreted after the Second World War. For Kopp, the post-war International style was just an imitation of the true interwar modernism, following only aesthetical modernist style and not its social project.

In the 1960s, Anatole Kopp was not a historian in the strict sense, and history did not interest him *per se*: he was an architect, theorist and militant, looking for solutions to contemporary problems in the past. He found them in the USSR of the 1920s, and he was not the only one to be charmed by the Soviet revolutionary avant-garde.

## Conclusion

The case of Anatole Kopp shows very well how art history is linked to politics and ideology. Kopp considered the Soviet Union as a sort of a laboratory, an experimental range for the socially oriented architecture in which he believed. To be sure, he was a communist and his political views affected his architectural writings. However, he had many professional reasons to sympathize with the Soviet post-Stalinist approach to architecture and housing and to invite his colleagues to learn from the Soviet Union in these fields. From my perspective the main novelty of Kopp's approach (and the important service he rendered to Soviet architecture) consists in the incorporation of the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s to the general historiography of the international Modern movement. For him, Soviet architecture was not a gimmick, nor was it a precious relic from the past. He considered it as a working method that failed for very precise economic, political and cultural reasons but it could be reconsidered and applied anew.

Kopp's belief in Soviet architecture equalled his belief in modernism as a social project of better life for all. Although from the 1970s he lost any hope for the realization of the social principles of modernism in practice, he was still a devoted defender of modernism and an opponent of postmodernism. France and the Soviet Union, architectural theory and practice, welfare state efforts in housing policies, internal Soviet affairs and international politics melted together in Kopp's biography and oeuvre and render his story a fascinating testimony of his time.

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