***Architecture of Life: Soviet Modernism and the Human Sciences*.** By Alla Vronskaya. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. ix, 281 pp. Notes. Index. Illustrations. Plates. Photos. $35.00, paper.

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*Architecture of Life: Soviet Modernism and the Human Sciences* by Dr. Alla Vronskaya examines formative episodes in early Soviet architectural theory and practice, from the fundamentals of design pedagogy to the principles of urban design. As someone with a deep interest in the topic of Soviet modernism and a focus on design pedagogy, I was naturally interested in the parallels and intersections with my own research. What I discovered was a highly original and greatly enlightened perspective, as nuanced as it is expansive, focusing on the rich intellectual history of Soviet architecture that transcends the usual narratives of the period's achievements.

The book focuses on the "interwar" period (nearly two decades between the two world wars, following the Russian revolution through the peak of Stalinist repressions) and centers on the First Five-Year plan, which aimed to turn the largely agrarian country (albeit rapidly growing before the revolution) into an industrial world power. Despite the usual interpretation of this period, spanning what is typically portrayed as two different eras of Soviet history, described as avant-garde and socialist realism, the book argues for the continuity of ideas (if not aesthetics) that shaped them. Vronskaya delivers erudite command of the interwar Soviet architectural discourse by eloquently demonstrating how the human sciences and western (mostly German and American) theories—from empiriocriticism to psychoanalysis, from Marxism to scientific management––traveled east and shaped the design thinking as well as the built environment.

The Soviet state, operating as a giant laboratory for experimenting with some of the most progressive ideas of its time, saw nature as something that needed to be managed, the author argues. Both its human citizens and its vast territory were seen as a resource for constructing an imperial colonial power. While Vronskaya acknowledges that by the mid-1930s the dogmatic race towards the "communist future" resulted in the horrors of Stalin's totalitarianism and terror, it focuses on an earlier attempt to govern the economy and population with the help of western managerial techniques. This allows the book to discuss Soviet modernism not as an "aberration of history" but an integral, albeit radical, part of modernity "not only informed by Western ideals but actively participating in their formation" (xxvii).

*Architecture of Life* centers on the conception of Soviet modernism. Challenging the established pairing of form and function, the book argues that Soviet modernism was rooted in "monism," a philosophy that questioned such dualistic binarism. Monistic philosophers, chief among whom was Baruch Spinoza, posited that both form and function are interconnected as part of an all-encompassing unified substance. Instead of the Descartian

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split between body and mind, Spinoza argued for their unity—a unity that his followers interpreted as energy or "life." This "organicist" view is placed at the core of the discussion, drawing connections between perennially rival directions in Soviet interwar architecture––rationalists (formalists) and constructivists (functionalists)––both known under the umbrella of the avant-garde. Presented as a universal ideology at the core of modernism, monism, according to the author, is fundamental to both movements.

The book focuses on the work (research, teaching, and practice) of the legendary architectural protagonists: rationalist Nikolay Ladovsky, constructivist Moisei Ginzburg, and El Lissitzky, who managed to successfully navigate both camps, collaborating on projects with both Ladovsky and Ginzburg, all while forging strong ties with his western contemporaries. Their seemingly diverse approaches originate from monist thinking, and can be seen as complementing (rather than contradicting) approaches, resulting in design principles that have more similarities than differences. Vronskaya masterfully reconstructs the theories and ideas that shaped rationalism and constructivism by focusing on the pedagogical initiatives, research experiments, and architecture as such (projects and buildings). While the book centers on Soviet architecture and its protagonists, it presents this narrative not just encased in the Stalinist Iron Curtain but in conversation (both imaginary and real) with western counterparts (both contemporary and past). The author weaves a tapestry of interconnected networks of philosophical doctrines, scientific discoveries, and design concepts. By tracing the reception and influence of western ideas in the Soviet context, Soviet architecture is seen as a part of a larger intellectual history rather than an isolated outburst of design genius.

Conceived through the lens of monism, each of the book's six chapters presents an encounter between modern architecture and the human sciences. The pairings, in author's words, are as follows: Chapter 1: Space with pedagogy; Chapter 2: Orientation with Urbanism; Chapter 3: Fitness with Disciplinarity; Chapter 4: Process with Standardization; Chapter 5: Energy with Interior Design; and Chapter 6: Personality with Landscape Architecture. Each chapter discusses a monistic tenet within a disciplinary architectural discourse by centering on a particular case study: tracing a relationship between scientific discoveries and philosophical discourse to form-making, design pedagogy, professional fitness, standardization, urbanism, and planning. In this exquisitely composed narrative, figures such as Baruch Spinoza, Richard Avenarius, Ernst Haeckel, Herbert Spencer, Sigmund Freud, and Frederic Winslow Taylor are all as much a part of the story of Soviet architecture as Ladovsky, Ginzburg, and Lissitzky.

Importantly, *Architecture of Life* draws connections not only with the past (centered chiefly on the nineteenth and early twentieth century theories and discoveries) but with the present and future, inscribing Soviet modernism within a more recent (less distant) architectural discourse, which includes such luminaries as Henri Lefebvre, Hanna Arendt, and Kenneth Frampton, as well as Bruno Latour, Boris Grois, Pier Vittorio Aureli, Georgio Agamben, and Dipesh Chakrabarti, among others. By tracing leaps and failures of the architecture of the "machine age," Vronskaya not only critiques its problematic bio-economic model, but also sheds new light on the aspirations and challenges of the forthcoming information age and its "terrestrial" (post-Anthropocene) model. While *Architecture of Life* examines a formative, though difficult, chapter of an industrial ecological model it can also be read as a precursor of today's environmental movement through the ideas of monist philosophy. Although monism lost much of its appeal in the post-WWII world, as it was interpreted as being opposed to pluralism, it is finding new relevance in our current worldview, as the author argues, providing the foundation for such fields as cybernetics and environmentalism.

The book casts a comprehensive net by painting a large-scale intellectual landscape that contextualizes Soviet interwar architecture by centering on several key episodes, artifacts, and experiments. This approach offers a high-fidelity understanding of the theoretical influences that shaped a body of architectural work that had been conventionally housed under the umbrella of the Soviet avant-garde. Yet, what I appreciate most as an architect and historian, is that Vronskaya succeeds in addressing what is, arguably, the key disciplinary question: what constitutes architecture as a field of knowledge, or architecture in an epistemological sense. Using a fine-tuned historical lens, the book analyzes such fundamental and ever-relevant concepts in architecture as space, perception, orientation, and aesthetics. In *Architecture of Life* Vronskaya uncovers the underlying intellectual landscape of Soviet modernism and literally breathes life into this formative and, arguably, still influential historical period.

Chapter 1, "Space," unpacks the so-called psychoanalytical method devised by Ladovsky, which while inspired by the Freudian doctrine of the unconscious, fused it with the empiriocriticist theory presenting the material world in terms of human sensations. Space, conceived as a phenomenon of perception, echoing Ladovsky's dictum: "space not stone is a material of architecture," enabled the aspiring architects to think of it as a substance to be molded into form. As someone who has been trained as an architect in several academic settings, I can attest that this dictum continues to resonate with most architecture students today as much as it did when it was proclaimed over one hundred years ago.

Chapter 2, "Orientation," posits Lissitzky's view of architecture as an instrument of "evolutionist" urbanism through its agency to organize a modern metropolis on terms unimaginable in previous epochs. The quickly growing modern city with its heights, lights, and speeds, seemed to instantly render obsolete any anthropocentric urban models, as well as the architecture that shaped those. Instead, Lissitzky called on new architecture to be "measured with architecture," rejecting the Protagorean dictum where man was "the measure of all things." From his artistic experiments, which he called Prouns and described as the interchange stations between painting and architecture, to his design of horizontal skyscrapers, Lissitzky, argues Vronskaya, offered insights into alternative modes of perception as well as solutions for new spatial models.

Chapter 3, "Fitness," unpacks arguably one of the most fascinating attempts in the quest for the "scientification" of architecture: the psychoanalytical laboratory at Vkhutemas/Vkhutein. The laboratory instruments conceived and constructed in 1927 by Nikolay Ladovsky (together with his former student Georgy Krutikov) aimed to test, as well as shape, the professional "fitness" of future architects, understood in terms of perceptual apparatus. The laboratory's most innovative device, space-meter (*prostrometr*), was designed to measure depth perception. Using a stereoscope (a device that enabled binocular vision), the user would view the two separate tilting planes of the instrument with static objects placed on them. The brainwork that would need to go into making this bifurcated construction into a coordinated image, would, according to the author, constitute the measure of architectural talent. The energy required for perception to occur in order to make the work of seeing "measurable" was the same energy (economy of perceptual energy) that would need to be "saved" in visually understanding a spatial form, such as the one discussed in Chapter 1.

Chapter 4, "Process," addresses the ambitious project of standardization permeating modern architecture and its accompanying doctrine of social engineering that fascinated Soviet authorities and architects alike. It paints standardization not only as a result of a state policy of industrialization, but offers insight into ideas of organicism and theories of organization (most notably "tectology" by Aleksandr Bogdanov). Through examining Aleksandr Rozenberg's theoretical work on normalizing and norming architecture, along with Lissitzky's and Ginzburg's collaboration on developing standard housing and furniture modules (partly realized at the famous Narkomfin), the chapter addresses the standardization of the entire cycle of architectural production—from design to construction. Vronskaya argues that despite what appears to be a mechanicist and automated approach, Soviet interwar architecture's quest for standardization (typification, unification, normalization) was rooted in monistic tradition and organicism. It describes the process of how architecture, interior, and furniture sought to shape, standardize, and normalize environments for the collectivization of life, all while raising such perennial questions as canon versus standard or norm.

Chapter 5, "Energy," discusses the use of color in architecture as both a design direction and an emergent scientific field. The central setting for this work was a state office for wall-painting (Malyarstroy) led by the Bauhaus transplant–designer Hinnerk Scheper, who developed a program for using color in order to induce a certain physical and emotional state in its users, such as productive rest (known as economy of energy) or productivity. The chapter explores such concepts as "invisible colors" deployed by Scheper in collaboration with Ginzburg at Narkomfin. The author describes how these experimental programs sought to transform the use of color in wall-painting (mostly though not only) of interior spaces from something that is perceived in aesthetic terms to something that is a psychological and physiological category. As the chapter unfolds, color is increasingly understood not as an artistic but a scientific medium, deliberately used for psychological control.

Chapter 6, "Personality," discusses the Central Park of Culture and Leisure in Moscow (known as Gor′kii Park) as a heterotopia where a worker could remedy the effects of the division of labor and restore their oneness (understood as integrity of one's personality). The park, conceived as a productive landscape designed to "awaken" workers' interest in culture, science, and technology (since personal "vertical" development was considered essential to the Soviet concept of leisure), sought to do so through a series of collective activities from sports and performances to mass spectacles and games. This universal playground sought to offer everyone "independent of their level of culture" something that could resonate with them, as their personality could be developed. As such, the park appears to be simultaneously an escapist man-made paradise and a giant laboratory for social engineering. The setting for the park's elaborate "evolutionist" program was developed through a series of design competitions, and at a certain moment was led by Lissitzky, who devised a system of spatial elements for organizing the masses. The system of planned functional zones, organized by way of the so-called "switching zone," allowed the park visitors to devise their own entertainment program. To me, this approach to design as a kind of programmable code seems to anticipate solutions to landscape architecture of the late post-modern era.

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***Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding***. Ed. David W. Montgomery. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2022. xliii, 738 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Tables. Maps. $75.00, hard cover.
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*Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding* is impressive, both by its sheer size (738 pages!) and by the number of leading scholars who have contributed insightful chapters. Multi-disciplinary, yet accessible, this volume brings together thematic chapters with nuanced case studies in order to facilitate an informed understanding of this often underrated or overlooked region. With its wide range of topics, from social structures and dynamics to work, religion, and arts, to name just a few, it is a seminal reading on social and cultural aspects of Central Asian societies.

The book is framed and held together by the notion of context. This thematical focus is carried through the eight parts that structure the book ("Contextualizing Central Asia," "Contexts of History," "Contexts of Living," Contexts of Structure," "Contexts of Transformation," "Contexts of Work," "Contexts of Vision," and "Contexts of Aesthetics"). Each of these deals with contexts of different walks of human life such as living, structures, transformations, work, or aesthetics and explore the multidimensionality of life within this particular context. The parts are further broken down into thematical chapters, four for each part, that deal with particular aspects plus three case studies. These are followed by discussion questions and suggestions for further readings. Before the parts proper of the book start, there are two introductory chapters, one by the editor David W. Montgomery ("Central Asia in Context") that explains the aims and structure of the book; the other by Julien Thorez and Emmanuel Giraudet ("Mapping Context") that introduces critical cartography. The last part, "Contexts of Aesthetics," is followed by a short reflection ("Translating Contexts into Policy") by David M. Abramson, Laura L. Adams, and David W. Montgomery. The rigid focus on context makes the book appear