

culture, and yet their creative breath can be traced to the pre-revolutionary Russian architectural profession, which lay the foundations for much of the technical and design expertise in later projects.

Moscow at the beginning of the twentieth century is described (10–11) as a backward, provincial territory, and there is evidence to support this impression. Yet Russia's vibrant prerevolutionary architectural press, as well as the popular media, were filled with references to Moscow's near future filled with skyscrapers rivaling those of America. Beginning with a chapter in the book *Reshaping Russian Architecture: Western Technology, Utopian Dreams* (1990), I have written in detail about these informed and often fulsome perceptions of American urban architecture. Far from gape-mouthed expressions of wonderment, these reports in journals such as *Zodchii* were often interested in specific technical details, especially related to skyscraper construction.

One of the most intriguing figures in this architectural cohort was Viacheslav Oltarzhevskii (1880–1966), whose flourishing pre-revolutionary career is given cursory mention in this book. Others, such as Lev Rudnev (1885–1956) and Sergei Chernyshev (1881–1963), the lead architects for Moscow State University, were also superbly educated in imperial Russia's best art academies, as was Vladimir Gelfreikh (1885–1967), a lead architect for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building on Smolensk Square. His collaborator, Mikhail (Moisei) Minkus, belonged to the following generation but was thoroughly grounded in the same educational culture, inspired by Ivan Fomin (not mentioned in the book), Shchuko, Leontii Benois, and Andrei Belograd. Indeed, this quadriga pulled the early Soviet architectural profession through Constructivism to a reaffirmation of traditionalism in design, supported by the critical help of Ivan Zholtovskii, another major contributor to the professional environment that produced the *vysotki*. With their love and knowledge of Italy, as well as a thorough grounding in classical architecture, these and other architects had created before 1917 an intellectual and aesthetic milieu that would be essential for shaping the towers that so visibly link Moscow to the Stalin era.

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***Avant-Garde as Method: Vkhutemas and the Pedagogy of Space, 1920–1930.*** By

Anna Bokov. Zurich: Park Books, 2020. 624 pp. Appendix. Notes. Glossary. Index. Illustrations. Plates. Photographs. \$65.00, hard bound.

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At 624 pages and weighing over six pounds, *Avant-Garde as Method: Vkhutemas and the Pedagogy of Space, 1920–1930* might initially seem to aim above all at rendering the Soviet Union's most famous school of art, architecture, and design both accessible and enticing for the Anglophone reader already in possession of a heavily reinforced coffee table. Between its oversized covers, the book presents a stunning array of archival images—965 in color; 80 black-and-white—procured from private and institutional collections in North America and Russia. Many illustrations cover an entire page for maximum visual impact; many are previously unpublished; and some reproduce entire historical pamphlets in useful facsimile. Countless photographs show objects or installations that no longer exist, making them especially tantalizing guardians of the historical record. Given the centrality of VKhUTEMAS within the history of modern architecture as well as the paucity of Anglophone scholarship on the school, any presentation of its pedagogical structure and approach is

to be treasured. This one also serves as a helpful compendium of primary material, including numerous translations of essential texts relating to the school, and will be savored for many years to come by scholars, design students and aficionados, and others interested in the school's extraordinary achievements in the realm of architectural pedagogy and design.

VKhUTEMAS (Vysshie khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie) or the Higher Art and Technical Studios, was founded in Moscow in 1920 to replace SVOMAS (Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskie), or the Free State Art Studios; renamed VKhUTEIN (Vysshii khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskii Institut), or the Higher Art and Technical Institute, in 1927 and dissolved in 1930. Recognized, both at the time and in later historical accounts, for its connections to Constructivism and its radical pedagogical orientation, its personnel within the discipline of architecture actually covered the early Soviet creative spectrum, as Anna Bokov elucidates, from Ivan Zholtovsky and other traditionalists to members of the leftist avant-garde. Courses were offered by such luminaries of modern architecture as Moisei Ginzburg, Ilya Golosov, Ivan Leonidov, El Lissitzky, Konstantin Melnikov, and Aleksandr Vesnin. Prizing process and experimentation more than the study of historical precedent, architectural education at VKhUTEMAS emphasized studio work and theoretical analysis, with each student required to take a two-year foundational course (reduced to one year after 1926) before choosing an area of specialization.

While hundreds of architects were trained at VKhUTEMAS, many more students there worked in other fields; architecture was only one of the school's eight original departments, with the others being ceramics, graphic design and printing, metalworking, painting, sculpture, textiles, and woodworking. *Avant-Garde as Method* neither surveys the school's aims and activities as a whole nor attempts to explore all of its achievements within the field of architecture, instead focusing on its innovations in architectural pedagogy. It traces the conceptual origins of these innovations to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Germany and elsewhere in the intertwined fields of perceptual psychology and aesthetics and describes the school's pedagogical approach mostly in reference to contemporaneous efforts at the Bauhaus in Germany. (In a foreword, the architectural critic and historian Kenneth Frampton hails this as an "audacious comparison," although calling VKhUTEMAS the "Soviet Bauhaus" has long been a central cliché of European modernism and, as Bokov argues, at least where their foundational courses were concerned one might more accurately label the Bauhaus the VKhUTEMAS of Weimar Germany). In general, the book would benefit from deeper engagement with—and, at times, simply acknowledgement of—the abundance of relevant scholarship from recent decades. It also relies heavily and, in some paragraphs, perhaps too closely on Selim O. Khan-Magomedov's foundational publication on the school, published in Russian in 1990 and still in print in French translation, *Vhutemas: Moscou, 1920–1930*. Comprising 1600 pages and 2000 illustrations (and weighing almost 15 pounds, conveniently divided into two volumes), this dwarfs even Bokov's tome and covers the school's full range of disciplines. Those with knowledge of Russian or French would profit from reading these books together.

Perhaps the central scholarly achievement of *Avant-Garde as Method*, bolstered by an abundance of photographs, is its foregrounding of the creation of architectural models as a central mode of inquiry, both within the foundational course and in the more specialized field of architecture. Models made by VKhUTEMAS students (above all for the "Space" course, developed by Nikolai Ladovsky—the closest the book has to a protagonist—along with Nikolai Dokuchaev and Vladimir Krinsky) were not preparatory designs for actual works to be built later, at a larger size, but studies that investigated formal and spatial relationships or presented solutions to specific design

problems. Made of clay, paper, or wood, they were utopian proposals for the very idea of building: conceptual models for construction itself. As pedagogical tools and as objects, they also engaged post-Revolutionary Soviet artistic practice, invoking works by such major players as Liubov Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Vladimir Tatlin—all of whom also taught at VKhUTEMAS.

A welcome building block for future scholarship on VKhUTEMAS, *Avant-Garde as Method* is gloriously laid out on some black pages and some white, with red accents to mark its Soviet pedigree, and contains four chapters, arranged more thematically than chronologically (“The School: Institutionalizing the Avant-Garde,” “Laboratory: Architecture as Science,” “Pedagogy: Teaching as Experiment,” and “Praxis: Inventing a Universal Future”). Even for those already familiar with the school’s history the text can be difficult to follow, owing only partly to some baroque design choices. Citations for the competing numerical systems employed for the book’s illustrations (labeled variously as “fig.,” “ref.,” and “coda”) appear throughout in superscript, like footnote references, as do citations for various diagrams included in an appendix; transliterations and translations (including that of VKhUTEMAS itself on pages 22 and 40) are inconsistent and unreliable. All this prompts an experience as dizzying as it is dazzling. But if the book’s strongest arguments are often visual—made by the sheer plethora, size, pictorial quality, and exquisite rarity of the photographic evidence—this is perhaps appropriate; what was ultimately produced at VKhUTEMAS may have been less a set of model objects, no longer extant, and more a scattered archive of extraordinary visual representations and a revolutionary model for the pedagogy of modern architecture.

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***Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts.*** By Dana Dragunoiu. Studies in Russian Literature and Theory. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021. xxiv, 288 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$120.00, paper.  
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Dana Dragunoiu’s study approaches Nabokov’s poetics from a new and unexpected angle. Following the studies of Nabokov’s engagement with moral questions, it dismisses “the false dichotomy between Nabokov the master stylist and Nabokov the humanist” (12) and moves beyond this assumption by claiming that Nabokov’s statement “style is matter” should be treated not in terms of analogy, but as a literal truth: his aesthetics and ethics form one inseparable whole. The cornerstone of the discussion is the concept of courtesy, redefined to combine form and content in a moral act seen as the ultimate embodiment of human freedom of choice that makes one rise above any form of self-interest.

The key argument of the book is the Kantian idea that “an action must be voluntary to count as ‘moral’” (6), essential for Nabokov’s ethical aesthetics. Thus, courtesy is seen as the truly moral act, since it does not result from a passion (like love and pity), but constitutes a fully conscious choice which has nothing to do with utility. Detached, often sacrificial courtesy is demonstrated as the hallmark of Nabokov’s ethics through comparative analysis of his fictions alongside works by William Shakespeare, Aleksandr Pushkin, Lev Tolstoi, Marcel Proust, as well as chivalric literature and other texts.

The book is constructed around four key scenes from Nabokov’s fictions: the generosity of Mrs. Luzhin to an obnoxious acquaintance in *The Defense*; in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Helene Grinstein’s kind attention to “fantastic affairs of a completely