

# Repressed Architecture

## THE PRAVDA PUBLISHING HOUSE IN MOSCOW

■ RICCARDO FORTE

**The “heroic” building of the Pravda’s printing complex, *sancta sanctorum* of the communist doctrinal orthodoxy and ideological manifesto of Soviet power, was erected between 1930 and 1935 in the Muscovite district of Yamskoye Pole. Thanks to its symbolic content and programmatic commitment, it undeniably embodies an unrivaled episode in the history of modern architecture in Russia.**

THIS PRODIGIOUS BUILDING of colossal dimension, eulogistic icon of a new model of society which, forged upon the ideals of the Revolution, advancing towards the “glorious edification” of socialism and containing in its poetics of bold lines inspired by the vision of a *civilisation machiniste*, provided a most profound sense of that ideology of progress and aesthetics—secular “religion of Utopia”—upon which the reformist expectations of the modern movement were founded.

The fire which in a sort of historic nemesis severely damaged the building on the Ulitsa Pravdy in February 2006 brought with pressing urgency the question of modern heritage and the process of identity redefinition within that “challenge of change” to the forefront of international debate—a debate which modern politics of conservation, integrated in the systems of meaning and in the mechanisms of transformation of globalized society, are destined to face.

### **A MANIFESTO OF UTOPIA: THE AESTHETIC SEARCH FOR THE “SUPREME BUILDING”**

In 1929 the Central Committee of the PCUS (Communist Party of the Soviet Union), in order to find a suitable solution for the growing production needs of the Pravda, the Bolshevik Party’s newspaper founded by V.I. Lenin in 1912, announced a national competition for a large-scale publishing house to serve as new headquarters for the newspaper, the regime’s official press organ. The plan for the editorial complex of the principal Soviet newspaper belonged in every respect to the vast modernization program which the

**LA CONSTRUCTION « HÉROÏQUE » DE L’ÉTABLISSEMENT POLYGRAPHIQUE DE LA PRAVDA, ENTRE 1930 ET 1935 À MOSCOU, A CONSTITUÉ UN ÉPISODE INÉGALÉ DANS L’HISTOIRE DE L’ARCHITECTURE MODERNE EN RUSSIE. CE BÂTIMENT AUX DIMENSIONS COLOSSALES, ICÔNE APOLOGIQUE D’UN NOUVEAU MODÈLE DE SOCIÉTÉ QUI AVANÇAIT VERS L’« ÉDIFICATION RADIEUSE » DU SOCIALISME, RECÈLE, DANS LA POÉTIQUE DE SES LIGNES HARDIES, INSPIRÉES DE LA CIVILISATION MACHINISTE, LE SENS LE PLUS PROFOND DE L’IDÉOLOGIE DU PROGRÈS ET DE L’ESTHÉTIQUE – « RELIGION LAÏQUE DE L’UTOPIE » – SUR LAQUELLE ONT ÉTÉ FONDÉES LES INSTANCES RÉFORMATRICES DU MOUVEMENT MODERNE. L’INCENDIE QUI, EN FÉVRIER 2006, A SÉRIEUSEMENT ENDOMMAGÉ L’ÉDIFICE REPLACE D’URGENCE AU CENTRE DU DÉBAT INTERNATIONAL LA QUESTION DE L’HÉRITAGE PATRIMONIAL DU MODERNE ET DE SON PROCESSUS DE REDÉFINITION IDENTITAIRE, DANS LE CADRE PLUS GÉNÉRAL DU « DÉFI DU CHANGEMENT » QU’UNE POLITIQUE MODERNE DE LA PRÉSERVATION, INTÉGRÉE AUX SYSTÈMES DE SIGNIFICATION ET AUX MÉCANISMES DE TRANSFORMATION DE LA SOCIÉTÉ GLOBALISÉE, EST APPELÉE À AFFRONTER.**

Russian government embarked on in the mid-1920s. The period’s extraordinary intellectual effervescence and unprecedented creative fervor were such that the NEP (New Economic Policy) contributed in a decisive measure to the feverish construction activity in the public sector. Such activity was embodied by the realization of great infrastructures, services and industries, as well as in the creation of new organizational typologies, such as the “social capacitors” (public housing, industrial

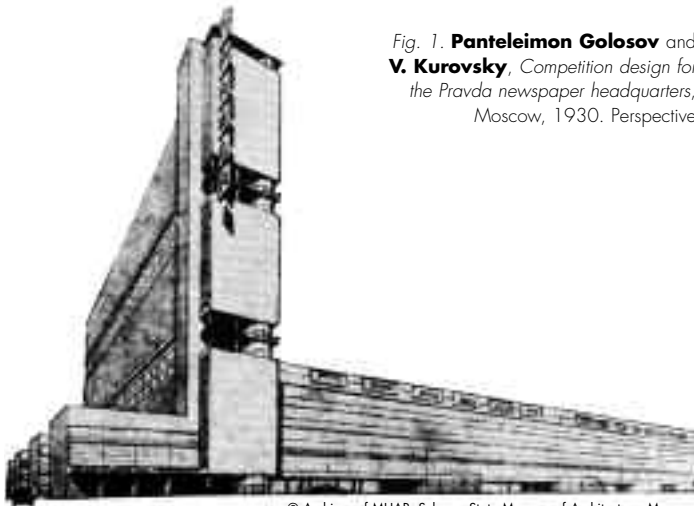


Fig. 1. **Panteleimon Golosov** and **V. Kurovsky**, *Competition design for the Pravda newspaper headquarters, Moscow, 1930. Perspective*

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establishments, workers' clubs), catalyzing centers of the new socialist culture, that are constitute the regime's most significant experimental results.

The ambitious project launched by the Soviet leadership, whose intention was to emphasize symbolically their own hegemonic control of Russian society, simultaneously developing the device propaganda for the official party line from one boundary of the Union to the other, constituted for the avant-garde architects a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and a formidable experimentation field for the new doctrinal directions and composition models that were formulated in those years. The competition's prescriptions laid down that the functional units of administrative offices, newspaper offices and typographic works were to be integrated in a single large complex. The chosen site—today the area comprised

between the Belorussky and Savyolovsky subway stations—was located in the Yamskoye Pole district, a strategic localization right in the city center, which at the time was still barely constructed.

The competition's winner, contending with figures such as El Lissitzky and Alexey Shchusev, was the architect Pantelejmon Golosov,<sup>1</sup> a leading representative of the constructivist movement, coordinator of a team of architects comprising V. Kurovsky, N. Borov, G. Zamsky, I. Jang and A. Damsky. The team developed a futuristic architectural conception, in which the cold geometry of the volumes assumed almost cubist symbolic connotations. The printing complex (*fig. 1*) consists of the juxtaposition of two separate edifices; the main multistory building, destined to host the publishing house with the administration and newspaper offices, is composed of three large superimposed parallelepiped blocks, spaced out lengthwise by large strip windows; laterally, placed in the rear position, a low building annex contains typographic works.

IN THE MONTHS following inception Golosov made substantial changes to the plan which, though essentially maintaining the original plan and interior lay out, completely redesigned the architectonic and formal solution. In the last variation, the main building's futuristic lines were eliminated to the benefit of a more balanced composition proportion-wise,<sup>2</sup> where the avant-garde's radical purism was filtered by a "classical" version of modernism, a combination of symmetry and asymmetry of volumes and surfaces which unequivocally converge

Fig. 2. **Panteleimon Golosov**, *The Pravda Publishing House, front view of the editorial building, 24 Pravda Street, Moscow, 1935–1936, as built*



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Fig. 3. **Panteleimon Golosov**, *The Pravda Publishing House*, side view of the print factory, Moscow, after 1935, as built

towards the canons of Corbusean language.<sup>3</sup> The editorial building (fig. 2), consisting of an eight-story block to which, on the rear façade, three perpendicular structures were connected, had horizontal strips of windows running along the entire façade interrupted only by a large central full length stained glass window. The rhythmic succession of “solid” and “empty” (the elliptical outline of the entrance *avant-corps*, the concrete projections of balcony railings, the glass walls at the corner stop ends and the top floor’s recesses) impressed a dynamism of composition and an extraordinary plastic tension upon this colossal edifice, which inspired the unconditional admiration of the same Le Corbusier—a real urban landmark conceived to be seen from a great distance in its totality in a single perspective view (fig. 4).

THE FURNITURE and lighting fixtures, among the most modern at the time architecturally (fig. 6), were specially laid out according to the principles of integrated design drawing upon the Bauhaus doctrine.<sup>4</sup> In line with the most advanced organizational and functional criteria concerning the separation of flows, inside facilities and dimensional and technical standards,<sup>5</sup> the Pravda complex (Sytin Dom)—at the time of its construction Europe’s largest printing establishment (fig. 3)—bears witness, with its suggestive and cyclopean dimensions, to the epic sense of a project which, concerning constructive ambition and logistic organization,<sup>6</sup> does not find its equal in any contemporary construction.

Despite initial expectations, the building site’s management was a long and difficult process. The work began in the final months of 1930, was protracted to 1935, while the finishing jobs were completed only two years later.<sup>7</sup> Among the factors explaining this delay,



Fig. 4. *The Pravda printing complex*, general view, photographed around 1936  
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the altered political climate of those years was no doubt a crucial factor: in April 1932, following the dissolution of all of the avant-garde associations and, as a direct consequence of the *ukase* issued by Stalin, as expressed in a nutshell by Anatolj Lunacharsky’s (the Education Commissioner of the People) with the populist slogan “columns to the people!,” the Soviet government enforced a “call to order” reverting to a classical Empire style which inaugurated the historical phase of socialist realism. It is the tangible expression of the cultural regression process which, under the grip of the repressive Stalinist system, officially pronounced the end of constructivism and of the modern movement’s “glorious decade” in Russia.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE PRESERVATION OF MODERN HERITAGE: THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

The Pravda Complex designed by Golosov, an exemplary legacy of the industrial architectural heritage of the



the Russian avant-garde architecture and on its interrelations with the international context.<sup>12</sup>

THE GUIDELINES that emerged from the scientific workshops contributed to shaping the future politics of the preservation of modern heritage favoring a methodological approach, which, freed from the sterile dogmatism of the doctrinal exegesis, should be able to promote more flexible strategies of intervention, according to the urban dynamics and the market rules of contemporary society, in line with that “cultural global challenge” which advanced preservation politics can no longer disregard.

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#### NOTES

**1** Pantelejmon Alexandrovich Golosov (Moscow, 1882-1945), older brother of Ilija Golosov, obtained his degree in 1911 from the Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture of Moscow. His professional career was devoted mostly to theoretical research and to teaching, which he carried out from 1918 at the Svomas. In 1924-1925 he joined the constructivist movement and during those years was a docent at the VKhUTEMAS and at the Institute of Architecture of Moscow. Member of the OSA, his professional beginnings date back to 1919, with his participation in the drafting of the town-planning scheme of the city of Moscow, under the direction of Alexey Shchusev and Ivan Zholtovsky. In 1922 he also participated with his brother in the national competition for the construction of model workers' houses in Moscow. In 1923 he realized a series of pavilions for the pan Russian agriculture and craftsmanship exhibition fair in the Soviet capital; in the same year he obtained the fifth prize in the competition for the Palace of Labor in Moscow. In 1924 he designed, together with his brother, a plan for the House of Soviets in Brjansk. In the following year he presented, with Ilija Golosov, Konstantin Melnikov and the Vesnin brothers, a selection of projects for workers' residences at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. In 1927 he participated in the competition for the realization of a film factory in Moscow with an innovative project which anticipated, concerning the general composition lines, the Pravda's publishing complex. In 1928 he took part in the competitions for the construction of the Lenin Library in Moscow and of the Post Office Building in Kharkov.

Fig. 7. The Pravda Publishing House, front of the editorial building on the Pravda Street just after the putting out of fire. On the top floor, the middle share or the roof frame is collapsed. Photographed on February 2006





Fig. 8. The Pravda Publishing House, general view of the editorial offices under present conditions

**2** Cf. Catherine Cooke, "Moscow Map Guide 1900–1930," in "Russian Avant-garde. Art and Architecture," *Architectural Design* a. XVI, vol. 53, n. 5/6 (1983): 83.

**3** On the influence of Le Corbusier's architectural doctrine on the theoretical and constructive developments of the constructivist avant-garde from the end of the 1920s to the first half of the 1930s in the Soviet Union, see: M. Il'in, "Le Corbusianisme en U.R.S.S.," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* a. II, n. 6 (August–September 1931): 58–61.

**4** Cf. V.V. Kirillov, *Put' poiska i eksperimenta (iz istorii sovetskoi arhitektury 20-h - nachala 30-h godov)*, [The Road of Research and Experiment (in the History of Soviet Architecture of the 1920s–early 1930s)] (Moscow: Edition of the Moscow State University, 1974), 195.

**5** Among the innovative technical solutions therein adopted was the pneumatic mail system that connected the various departments of the main building (administrative and editorial offices) with the printing works. The Pravda's printing works were in addition endowed with an independent electrical system and autonomous water supply. The advent of the Cold War made necessary the construction of atomic bomb shelters, as well as a network of underground passages with the purpose of guarantee the systems' continuity even in emergency situations (cf. Valeria Korzhagina, "Moscow Times Bids Farewell to Printing House," *The Moscow Times* (December 23, 2000): 4).

**6** The printing facilities were realized following the most avant-garde technical procedures. A formidable organizational machine was put together to ensure the pre-established printing rhythm and the capillary system of distribution of the newspaper. Starting from March 5, 1934, printing date of the *Pravda's* first issue in the new location, the plates with ready-to-print fresh issues of the newspaper were delivered daily via air from the central location to the regional presses in the main cities of the Soviet Union. Similarly, the newspaper ink and paper supplies were delivered to the daily's Muscovite location by means of an appropriate railway line which led directly to the typographic establishments. At the height of its production capacity, between the 1970s and 1980s, the printing complex employed a total of 12,000 people, 9,000 of whom worked at the typographic works. In 1974, alongside the main newspaper, the Pravda's publishing house was putting out seven national newspapers (among which the newspapers *Sovietskaya Rossiya*, *Selskaya Zhizn* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the official organ of the Komsomol, the party's youth organization) and 32 magazines, for a total print run which reached the astonishing number of approximately 90 million copies (*ibidem*).

**7** In 1937, at the same time as the Pravda complex was completed, architect Moisej J. Ginzburg finished the Vacation Home and Retirement Home S. Ordozonichidze in Kislovodsk. These buildings were the last two important accomplishments of a contemporary nature built in the USSR in the postwar period.

**8** Sixteen years later, in an article entitled "Naklonnye Voprosy Sovetskoi Arkhitektury" (Pending Questions of Soviet Architecture), published in the *Pravda* on September 25, 1948, an anonymous journalist defines the headquarters of his own newspaper as a "squalid and soulless barrack, constructed according to the bad and perverted artistic taste of modern architecture." (See also: Peter Blake, "The Soviet Architecture Purge," *Architectural Record* a. LIX

(September 1949): 127–129).

**9** At the end of the 1990s, 90% of the real-estate surface area of the Pressa (the current name of the Pravda's printing complex), up to then the Russian government's property, was purchased by the LUKoil-Reserve-Invest, a brokerage company affiliated with LUKoil, Russia's top oil major company. Thus the typographic workshops were purchased by the multinational firm, while the building with the editorial offices, which had remained under federal control, were rented to a private company up to 1993. To the list of newspapers of the Soviet era which survived bankruptcy were consecutively added newer titles, such as *Vek*, *Rabochaya Tribuna*, *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, the magazine *Ogonyok* and the English language newspaper *The Moscow Times*, representing total of more than fifteen publications today.

**10** At about 10:30 on the morning of Monday February 13, 2006, a fire broke out on the sixth floor of the publishing house where the editing offices of the Russian tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* were located, then rapidly spread to the upper floors. The disastrous accident, set off by a short circuit originating inside the newspaper's graphics department, caused one victim and damage to the building's internal structure. The fire also completely destroyed the newspaper's offices and historic archives, which dated back to 1925, the pressroom and the cafeteria rooms (located on the sixth floor), while the heat released from the flames provoked the roof's partial collapse (fig. 7) (cf. "Fire destroys major publishing house in Moscow," in *Pravda*, February 13, 2006).

**11** Clementine Cecil, "Distruggere per dimenticare" [Destroy to forget], *Il Giornale dell'Architettura* a. V, n. 40 (May 2006): 6.

**12** In April of 2006, among the number of initiatives linked to the international scientific project *Preservation of 20th Century Architecture and World Heritage*, the photographic exhibition "Repressed Architecture" was staged at the Schusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow. In this exhibition, subdivided into typological categories (residential buildings, schools, industrial establishments, workers' clubs, garages), a selection of 48 modern edifices built in Moscow between the second half of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s was presented that are at the greatest risk of demolition. The Pravda building was added to the list alongside other acknowledged masterpieces of international modernism, such as the Narkomfin communal housing by Moisej Ginzburg, the house-studio by Konstantin Mel'nikov, the Zuyev workers' club by Ilija Golosov, the Planetarium by Mihajl O. Barsch and the Likhacev Palace of Culture by the Vesnin brothers.

Fig. 9. Front view of the editorial building at present. On the close-up, a detail of the elliptical outline of the entrance *avant-corps*



photo Pavel Shulgin (May 2007) © Russian Research Institute for Cultural and Natural Heritage, Moscow