During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was expected to lead the world once capitalism fell prey to its intrinsic contradictions, as Marx envisioned. Yet, what is currently happening to mass-housing blocks in Russia contradicts him: the very technological advances that Khrushchev put at play to launch the mass-housing program have evolved and left the blocks prey to its own obsolescence. In this text we see how, while the former USSR has been finally taken over by capitalism, mass-destruction seems to be the ultimate fate for Soviet mass-housing.

In November 2017, the Chief Architect of Moscow Sergei Kuznetsov, organized the plenary session “Architecture for the Masses: Overcoming Stereotypes” in the context of the VI St. Petersburg International Cultural Forum. I participated as a guest speaker to this meeting at the General Staff Building of the State Hermitage Museum, which was aimed at addressing the contemporary status of mass-architecture, “both in Russia and in the World.” The introductory briefing to the session wondered whether mass-architecture “can be unique, if not in a figurative sense, at least from the point of view of artistic quality.” If so, they asked, “How can this be achieved by using both legislative means and innovative technologies?”
This plenary session was timely. It tackled a rather urgent urban and political agenda. It came at the very same time President Vladimir Putin – who was actually in Saint Petersburg for the opening ceremony of the International Cultural Forum – had recommended the mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyanin, to demolish all of Moscow’s remaining khrushchovkas – the five-story large-concrete panel buildings built after a course of action set by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in his famous 1954 speech “On the extensive introduction of industrial methods and improving the quality of, and reducing the cost of, construction” (Khrushchev, 2002[1954]). As the Chief architect of the city of Moscow, Kuznetsov is therefore in the front line for the implementation
of what has being called the *Renovatsiya Programme*, officially launched on February 21st, 2017. Moving from mass-production to mass-destruction means the demolition of over 8,000 prefabricated panel structures, “totaling 25 million square meters of housing” (Snopek, 2017). According to the announced figures, the project will affect 1.6 million people (roughly the population of Barcelona), will cover more than 10 % of the total housing stock in Moscow (Trudolyubov, 2017), will cost 3 trillion rubles, and will take 15 years to complete (Sardzhveladze et al., 2018b). The scale of the plan is of course unprecedented: probably the “biggest program of erasure of modernist architectural heritage in world history” (Snopek, 2017).

According to the Russian РБК newspaper, “Putin agreed that the program is ‘good and right’ because we realized that in ten years all these five-story buildings will become dilapidated housing” (Sardzhveladze et al., 2018b). In their opinion, “the khrushchovkas are very difficult to repair and therefore they are cheaper to dismantle.” Both Sobyanin and the Vice-Mayor Marat Khusnullin seem to agree that extraordinary problems demand extraordinary solutions (Sardzhveladze et al., 2018b). In fact, the city leaders seem to believe that
the program is an absolute necessity (Luhn, 2017), and "a gift for Muscovites" (Sardzhveladze et al., 2018a). Together with the demolition, the massive resettlement of residents in new buildings will become Sobyanin’s political flagship “thanks to which the mayor will leave a mark in history as a man who rebuilt Moscow” (Sardzhveladze et al., 2018a). But while one of the objectives behind the demolition might be to boost Sobyanin’s popularity, so far it seems to have effectively done the exact opposite, sparking consecutive protests on May 14th, 27th and 28th of 2017, "gathering over 36 thousand people" (Sardzhveladze et al., 2018a; 2018b).

In political terms, Sobyanin’s mark in history could be seen as an attempt to override Khrushchev’s own reconstruction of Moscow. Not by chance, “Overcoming Stereotypes” means for Kuznetsov to ask the exact opposite that Khrushchev demanded in his transcendental speech of 1954, where, instead of wondering whether mass-architecture "can be unique, from the point of view of artistic quality," the First Secretary of the Communist Party openly criticized the way “…young architects hardly wait to cross the threshold of their architecture institutes […] before waiting to design nothing but unique buildings and
hurry to erect monuments to themselves" (Khrushchev, 2002[1954]:13). Khrushchev’s stance constituted an implicit critique of the fussy, elaborate style of late Stalinism, which began to be associated with ‘petty-bourgeois,’ philistine kitsch (Priestland, 2009:334). In rejecting Stalinism, and in order to symbolically ‘destalinize’ the country, the industrial mass-production of large-concrete panel buildings was embraced, against "certain architects that try to justify their incorrect principles and the superfluities in their designs by referring to the necessity of fighting Constructivism" (Khrushchev, 2002[1954]:15). Explicitly defending the Russian avant-garde, the constructivists, and the elimination of all superfluous ornamentation, Khrushchev criticized architects for waving “a flag to conceal the wastage of state resources” (Khrushchev, 2002[1954]:13).

The protests against the renovation program have shown that the mayor’s plans have not been perceived as a gift by the Muscovites, and that they shall resist its implementation. As disclosed by РБК, this has produced yet another argument on the absolute necessity for demolition. After analyzing the criminogenic map of Moscow, “the authorities have found out that five-story blocks outdo the entire city in terms of crime rate” (Sardzhveladze et al., 2018a). And because Khrushchev’s legacy belongs to a low-cost housing, “the higher proportion of residents have low social status, including alcoholics” (Sardzhveladze et al., 2018b). The mayor’s office has therefore "decided to reduce crime in Moscow by demolishing five-story buildings" (Sardzhveladze et al., 2018a).

Beyond the clear deformations contained in this report, and in a rather unexpected turn, it seems to completely reverse Adolf Loos’ famous association between ornament and crime. After about a hundred years, delinquency now becomes associated to the lack of ornament. Using Loos’ very same terms, we may conclude that if someone who lives in a bare khrushchovka dies at liberty, it means that he or she has died a few years before committing murder (Conrads, 1970:19). At the height of modernity, Khrushchev was not just aligning himself with Loos’ struggle against ornamentation, but was directly quoting Walter Gropius who had insisted in saying, in relation to the architect of the future, that “if he wants to rise to the top again, [he] will be forced by the trend of events to draw closer once more to the building production” (Gropius, 1952). In fact, echoing Gropius, Khrushchev decidedly transformed the modernist discourse of prefabrication into actual state policy in proposing that: "If an architect wants to be in step with life, he must know and be able to employ [...] new progressive materials, reinforced-concrete structures and parts, and, above all, must be an expert in cost-saving in construction" (Khrushchev, 2002[1954]:14). It goes without saying that it was him, and not Gropius (nor Wachsmann or Le Corbusier), who turned the modernist discourse into reality, utterly fulfilling the most cared aspirations of the modernist dream about
the industrialization of housing, resolving on its way the Loosian rejection of ornament, and adhering to Sigfried Giedion’s dictum that “construction becomes form” (Giedion, 1995:142). If the ruthless industrialization of housing prompted by Khrushchev achieved something, it was the successfully matching of Taylorism and Fordism within transnational industries for the mass-production of large concrete-panels. Against this backdrop, and as a perfect example of the pendulum of history, today’s Renovatsiya would become Putin’s way of both overcoming modernity, while at the same time ‘dekhrushchevizing’ the Russian Federation.
Yet Khrushchev’s remembrance to Constructivism has a deeper connection to the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s, in particular to the work of Kazimir Malevich. As we have argued elsewhere, large-concrete panels are to architecture what Malevich’s Black Square is to painting: irreducible, extra-spatial, extra-temporal and extra-historical elements. Against the ornamental excesses of Stalinist socialist realism in architecture, they embody a reductionism or call to simplification in search of a minimal but real “point of support” (Alonso & Palmarola, 2014). Like the Black Square, the non-objective Concrete Panel was the most radical gesture of the acceptance of the total destruction of all the tradition of European and Russian architecture: “It announced the death of any cultural nostalgia, of any sentimental attachment to the culture of the past” (Groys, 2014:36). In such a way, concrete panels – as the Square – behold a destructive path already conceived by Malevich in his text “On the Museum” (1919):

> Life knows what it is doing, and if it is striving to destroy one most not interfere, since by hindering we are blocking the path to a new conception of life that is born within us […] In burning a corpse we obtain one gram of powder: accordingly, thousands of graveyards could be accommodated on a single chemist’s shelf. We can make a concession to conservatives by suggesting that they burn all past epochs, since they are dead, and set up a pharmacy (Groys, 2014:37).

At first glance, this destructive drive (and not crime or technical necessity) would be enough to condemn the khrushchovkas. After all, as pointed out by Andrei Martin, “nostalgia, for any period, must be nipped in the bud” (Martin, 2002:9). But one difference between art and architecture emerges immediately. The mass-destruction of 8,000 panel houses will not end up in setting up a pharmacy, but in the creation of a colossal new artificial topography of debris, the result of wrecking 10 million cubic meters of reinforced concrete. In fact, Kuznetsov’s inquiry on the artistic quality of mass-architecture brings up the question whether it is possible or not to draw a comparison between the destruction of art collections, and the mass-destruction of collective housing. In art, the object could be characterized as always already external to the subject. No matter how immersive the experience proposed by the artist, people rarely live inside the artworks. This relative position allows us to contemplate, experience, cherish and ultimately collect art, keeping it safe within the gallery, the museum or the bank vault. But the relationship of the subject with the architectural object is rather double, both external and internal. While buildings can be contemplated and appraised aesthetically, people do live inside.

In his brief essay on consumerism, Tomás Moulian re-elaborates some of Sigmund Freud’s observations to explain that objects cannot be possessed when they lack interior. “You can only possess that which has it […]”
Possession has to do with the control of the interior” (Moulian, 1998:20). And when an architectural object, by having interior space, is possessed by people, the object is more difficult to destroy. According to Freud, “Many symbols represent the womb of the mother [...] as wardrobes, stoves, and primarily a room. The room-symbolism is related to the house-symbol, doors and entrances again become symbolic of the genital opening.” All those objects “share its peculiarity of enclosing a space capable of being filled by something” (Freud, 1920:18). This is why the same Malevich was reluctant to give his architectural explorations an interior, and explains why he called these objects Architektons, transforming the Russian female for architecture – Архитектура – into the masculine neologism Архитектоны. A male with no ‘womb’ to be filled: an architecture conceived and displayed as pure externality.

In his book on Malevich, Serge Fauchereau refers to a report by Polish writer Tadeusz Peiper on the 1927 meeting at the Bauhaus, between the Russian artist and Walter Gropius, where Malevich differentiates architecture from architectonics:

[...] the former has a utilitarian aim whereas the latter is strictly artistic. Architectonics produces work which only describes the artistic relationship of spatial form; it does not take into consideration the fact that people will inhabit the form [...] Gropius, who unlike the plastician Malevich is an architect by training, proposes another aim. For him, the method of construction depends with the greatest precision on the ultimate use of the building (Fauchereau, 1992:30).
In meeting Gropius, Malevich discarded any interest in architecture’s self-indulgent functionalist claims. On the contrary, the only thing that matters is art. And art – living art – must be always ready to die. For Malevich, what could be worse than preserving dead architectural bodies just based on a discourse on necessity? He did not abhorred interiors because he was interested in entering the modernist debates on functionalism (from the standing point of destruction, both functionalism and “the critique to naive functionalism” are the same) (Rossi, 1982:46-48).

On the contrary, by avoiding the Arkhitektons to be possessed, Malevich aimed at preserving architectonics from preservation itself. Paradoxically, only when buildings enter the world of pure, absolute, living art, they achieve the calm acceptance of their own fate, the destruction and disfiguration in the flows of time. This is the problem Sobyanin and Kuznetsov are facing. They may insist that the "khrushchovka flats are beyond redemption: the kitchens are too small, there are no lifts or waste disposal system and the roofs often leak" (Leslie & Charley, 2017), but as long as they...
hold an interior, panel houses will be possessed by people that will not want to leave. With Malevich, the only acceptable reason to the mass-destruction of the khrushchovkas would be an aesthetic one.

However, we know that Sobyanin and Kuznetsov do not seem to have Malevich in mind. Even if they did, sadly, Malevich’s argument seems to dissolve when it comes to mass-production. In both art and architecture, the tension between destruction and conservation always relates to debates on individual and rather unique objects, and are rarely situated at the level of the collective production and reproduction of series. Therefore – perhaps unwillingly – any argument about the conservation of khrushchovkas is unavoidably trapped within the paradigm of the conservation of uniqueness, forcing the conservationists’ effort to find something that would make one particular mass-housing project special. And while the khrushchovkas are hard to be destroyed because people keep their original economic function intact, from an aesthetic perspective repetition emerges first and foremost as a resource against destruction. In brief, what is not unique can’t be destroyed. It will always be outlived by its copies. Aesthetically and symbolically, all replications are worth the same. In order to completely destroy the object, the only alternative would be to eliminate all the exemplars, and this should not be called destruction but extinction. This is why, instead of setting the problem within normal accounts of architectural history, we shall explore the epistemological framework offered by natural history, a more appropriate field where to look at the mode of existence of panel houses, and a better ground to understand the scale of the Renovatsiya Program.

For very different reasons, capitalism is – like Malevich – neither nostalgic nor sentimental about the past. It only sees one kind of value, surplus value. Not by chance different media have stressed the idea that the renovation program is really all about profiting from real estate development as the demolition of thousands of buildings will clear up land in central Moscow that could be further densified by taller buildings within new urban layouts (Leslie & Charley, 2017). Both the inhabitants’ protests in May 2017, and recent initiatives from heritage and conservation supporters are trying to offer both a critique and a reaction to this possibility. Strelka Institute professor Kuba Skopek – for instance – has written about the preservation of the spatial and cultural values of these prefabricated landscapes of Moscow’s microrayons. Skopek’s Belyayevo Forever brings the provocative statement that we should put “the most generic of all Soviet estates – on the unesco heritage list” (Snopek, 2013). What a paradox that within the generic, one estate would be the most. For Snopek, a separate khrushchovka might not be impressive, “but the whole spatial system into which it was embedded is
complex and extremely well thought out. Designers of microrayons studied them from all possible angles: visual composition, public transport, functionality, and health. Clearly, it is the architecture of the whole spatial system which harbors exceptional value, not the architecture of separate buildings” (Snopek, 2017). But his idealized assessment must be confronted against their standing as “an algorithm for the prefabrication of all aspects of life” (D’Hooghe, 2005:23), resulting from a singular obsession with mass production, where “every aspect of reality had to be redrawn to fit the new generic type, no matter how outlandish”. As pointed out by Alexander D’Hooghe (2005:17), these “signaled that the organization of space would be subordinated completely to the purpose of increasing production”.

The announcement of the mass-demolition of 8,000 old khrushchovkas, therefore, largely exceeds particular buildings and urban spatial arrangements. Renovatsiya comes as the final blow to a whole industrial complex that dominated production during the second-half of the twentieth-century. Pulling it to pieces recalls on Karl Marx and Frederick Engels famous observation that “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production [...] with them the whole relations of society [...] All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed” (Marx & Engels, 1988 [1850]: 212-213). In this case, what has been destroyed is an entire vision of industry – one that was successfully implemented thanks to a “centralized State and its centralized planning of the economy” (Solopova, 2001:13). By constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, the mass-destruction of mass-production will be followed by the installation of a different kind of industry where building systems and urban planning will play a different role, if any. Architecture, mobilized towards uniqueness as the cared goal behind Kuznetsov’s appeal, will return to its normal mode in providing “a velvet glove of aesthetics for the iron fist of the instrumental
production of the capitalist built environment,” as Jeremy Till (2008:9) would have it. Seen in this light, it is conservation (and not socialism), what seems to resist capitalist constant revolution in the means of production. Yet, if conservation attempts succeed, they will only achieve the preservation of some scattered fragments, some remaining components, of a larger industrial apparatus that is already gone.

In this setting, my own contribution to the plenary session in Saint Petersburg was to show the manner in which this is a global history of transiting panels. I tried to dismantle prevalent assumptions that keep characterizing panel houses as generic, in what Reinier de Graaf – paraphrasing Robert Musil’s 1943 Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften – has come to call the Architektur ohne Eigenschaften (De Graaf, 2017) (“Architecture without Qualities”). However, de Graaf, just like Kuznetsov, disregards the fact that the end result of Khrushchev’s plea was far from dull repetition, but the emergence of a whole range of industrial research, producing – only in the Soviet Union – over 8 hundred different prefabrication systems that were conceived in series adapting and evolving when arriving to new regions, countries and socio-technical contexts. The sounding title of “Architecture without Qualities” is telling about a profession that is still unable to understand an architecture of difference within repetition, and to see variation in series over time instead of always assessing buildings one by one. It only reaffirms an architectural conviction where the only acceptable quality is formal diversity. Within a different understanding of quality, we face the history of panels as the successful provision of mass-housing across the Soviet territory: an industrial complex capable of housing – according to the Russian state statistics service – 54 million people in nine years (1955 to 1964), with over 1.3 bn square meters of housing produced by 1975 (Luhn, 2017), and which ultimately stretched towards Siberia, and all along Asia and the Eastern Bloc in countries like China, North Korea, Mongolia, Yugoslavia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Albania, Romania, Czechoslovakia, reaching

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Cuba in the 1960s, and Chile in the 1970s. Taken in quantitative terms, the successes of such massive industrial apparatus haven’t been matched in recent times, and might never be in the future.

It is unclear whether Sobyanin and Kuznetsov will in the end manage to implement the renovation program, but if they do, they will be only continuing a process already started: the mass-destruction of mass-production itself. The industrial complex from the twentieth-century did not include only buildings and spatial systems. It was composed by a more intricate network of elements, including standardization, mechanization, automation, transport logistics, assembly, architects, engineers, and proletarian workers, as well as politics, policies and state bureaucracy. These were all integral components in a larger industrial complex encompassing the programming and delivering of production. They were all but nodes within a larger machine, a scattered object whose conditions of existence had long ceased to exist.

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Notes / Notes


4 Most of the buildings set to be destroyed are from the earliest K7 series. Each housing block has an average 1,200 m3 of reinforced concrete. Eight thousand buildings amount for a total of 9.8 million m3 of reinforced concrete.