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RULES OF ATTRACTION

Anastasia Vaynberg



fig. a
The ideal city, circa 1470.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

fig. b
Panorama of VSKhV, 1939.
Source: Retro Photo of Mankind's Habitat.

It is an imitation of a french park, scaled to the totalitarian scope, dominated by buildings of solemn classical architecture and decorated with bas-reliefs and mosaics of heroic subjects, gilded spires and statues. Once inside these buildings, however, one discovered that everything was out of place: a shashlik-house, a beer-garden, a cat show, an exhibition of wax figures, an aquarium with sharks, a chinese market and a sex shop. After the collapse of the Soviet Union a sense of surrealism prevailed in this peculiar place. It was strangely magical—to observe and to be a part of this barbarism of bad taste in the sacred spaces of the fallen empire. Such a condition, no matter how random it might seem at first glance, is quite natural. After all, this setting had been under permanent change, reflecting the transitory ideology of the state and with it numerous events that occurred in Russia and the USSR during the 20th century.

In 1935 the Central Committee of CPSU of the USSR initiated the establishment of the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition—VSKhV in Moscow. As planned, VSKhV was to become a platform to demonstrate the achievements of the socialist agricultural production of the USSR, where the best workers from across the country could learn from each other's experience, and citizens would enjoy ideologically appropriate entertainment. At that time the Soviet Union, a very young state, was not only busy finding the direction of its economic and industrial development, but also attempted to create «a new national culture that was to replace the concept of ‘Russian’ to ‘Soviet’».¹ VSKhV became one of the tools of this new ideology, physically embodying the ideas of the new state.

The exhibition was located on the outskirts of Moscow at that time, surrounded by forest, thus artificially excluding the context and ignoring the city. In essence, it was an illustration of the juxtaposition of the new and the old regime. Like all totalitarian regimes, whose initial success lies in the fact that they offer absolute clarity as an alternative to the usually preceding chaos, VSKhV was literally a perfect city with a clear structure and generosity of space, in contrast to the intricate network of alleyways of the old Moscow. The model for this ideal city adhered both conceptually and morphologically to the tradition of World Exhibitions, yet in this case temporary installations, planned to last for just 100 days, gradually turned into a permanent ideological platform. Pavilions were constructed of wood and standardized elements, with the whole complex planned to be erected in one year. The task was incred-

ibly unrealistic and builders failed to meet the tight schedule. 1937 saw the first wave of Stalinist repressions, which developed the tradition of deeming failure to be the operation of «saboteurs». Thus Vyacheslav Oltarzhevsky, the chief architect of the exhibition, was ruled a «saboteur» and spent the subsequent years of his life in exile in Siberia, probably designing barracks.

Despite the fact that many of the pavilions and the gate of the main entrance, built by Oltarzhevsky, were demolished and rebuilt of metal, concrete, marble and elements of more impressive architectural qualities, the general idea and the layout were preserved by the architect who replaced him. The masterplan, designed in the tradition of a classicist palace and park ensemble, developed along a central axis, reflected the new model of the world constructed for Soviet citizens. The structure is clear and simple: the central north-west axis leads visitors to the centre, from which the main avenues of the exhibition radiate. This centre was, of course, the location of the foundation of the world itself—Comrade Stalin in the form of a 25 metre concrete statue. No such statue was proposed in the original plan by Oltarzhevsky, which was undeniably an illustration of his «sabotage». «Agriculture was thus deprived of [a] name, which is unacceptable.»²

A total number of 84 objects were represented at the exhibition. Among them were 52 pavilions, which were mainly dedicated to the republics of the Union, but also partly to certain «cultures», like the pavilions «Peat», «Oil», «Gardening», «Sugar beet», «Cattle breeding», «Dog breeding», «Artificial insemination», «Beer» and «Tobacco». The same number of pavilions included sports facilities and leisure attractions. Like the newly assigned architect, the architecture of these objects grew more spectacular in character. Stylistically it did not adhere to the fully loaded Stalinist empire style, but was influenced by Art Deco and Constructivism. It was an assembly of commonplaces, all of which live in the subconsciousness of a man in the street, settled there by himself. The result turned out to be an eclectic collage; an amusement park of architecture: the architecture of the pavilions desperately juggling references—sometimes to the Italian Renaissance, at other times to the national character of one or another republic, and sometimes resembling a tower of soft serve ice cream.

Competitions to participate in the main exhibition of the country were held all over the USSR. Pacesetters, the best of which were invited to travel to VSKhV from diverse remote places in order to exchange expertise,

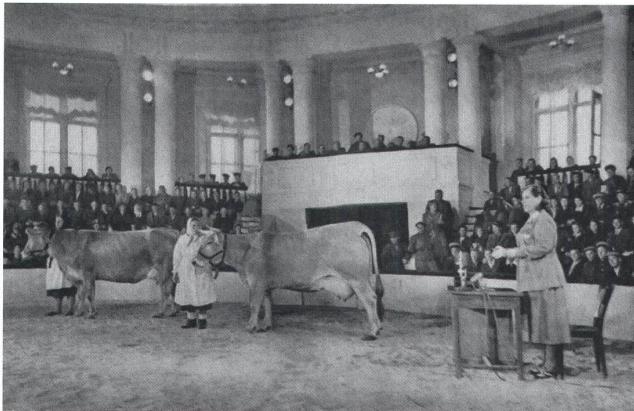


fig. c-d
Spreading an ideology: agricultural advancements are being presented to the citizens to encourage productivity.
Source: Retro Photo of Mankind's Habitat. ©boch1953

fig. e
Spreading advertising for pure commercial attraction.
Main gates of VVC, 2012.
Photography: Anastasia Vaynberg.

aimed to achieve the fastest rate of production of various goods. Visitors of the exhibition returned home, theoretically spoke with enthusiasm about the abundance they saw at the VSKhV, thereby theoretically encouraging fellow-villagers to reach new records and aim for greater dedication. This place—ingratiatingly called ‘paradise on earth’—was to show the people in a hungry and poor country why they overstrain themselves in collective farms and factories, why some disappear from their homes at night and do not come back, why the denunciation of your neighbour is also a part of a larger, brighter and common affair, and that abundance, luxury and happiness is what awaits the dedicated soviet citizen.

It is not by chance that the exhibition-goers are shown the vast array of agriculture—the food, and not, for example, heavy industry, into which all forces and finances of the state were actually invested then. Food, as a metaphor for individual happiness, was embodied not only in the exhibits with varying degrees of done-ness (from live pigs to barbecued shashlik), but also in the classical bas-reliefs and sculptures that surrounded them. The sheaf of wheat suddenly became one of the major architectural elements, appearing in gold sculptures, elements of ornamental lattices and even as capitals. The classic order obtained a worthy historical development, interbred with a constructed food industry.

The space of VSKhV, serving as a tool for editing, ideological preaching and curation as it were, skilfully set the canon of everything: from rates of agricultural production, the sizes of representations of cattle or fruit to the image of man himself. This image, heroic of course, was illustrated not only by bas-reliefs depicting the everyday life of Soviet collective farmers, but also by a number of sculptures. ‘Worker and Kolkhoz Woman’, the steel titans, a man and a woman, greeted visitors at the entrance to the exhibition. The heroic fighters of the national economy, carrying a hammer and sickle by the sculptor Vera Mukhina, crowned the Soviet pavilion at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1937. The commanding sculpture was conceived to stand opposite the German pavilion, and was subsequently moved to Moscow.

VSKhV-39, which at that time was not yet a year-round complex, was opened for three seasons. In the first season from August 1 to October 25, 1935, it was visited by over 3.5 million people. During the first five months in 1940 it took in 4.5 million guests. The Second World War, which began that same year, forced

a temporary closure of the exhibition. It was a moment which called for propaganda and heroism of a different kind.

In a country ruined by war, with a population loss of 20 million, the promise of future prosperity became more than appropriate once again, and so the decision to resume the exhibition was made by the ruling clique of the USSR. The reopening was preceded by massive reconstruction, in accordance with new trends in architecture as well as propaganda, both of which were affected by the victorious war. The heroic pathos and the position of the USSR as a propagator of classical traditions in architecture and art led to the decorations of pavilions, borrowing motifs of triumphant military symbols: palm or laurel branches, flags, modern weapons as well as swords and shields. Pavilions were rebuilt or built anew according to the comprehensive canon of Stalinist architecture. They took on the role of temples of contentment and prosperity, were decorated ceremonially and received domes, hipped roofs or spires. One delightful example of this process is the pavilion ‘Mechanization’, which was turned into a basilica with a glass dome after its reconstruction.

The masterplan of the complex also changed: the territory grew larger, the main axis, curved in the version of 1939, was straightened. Stalinist architecture finally formed its canon: the schematic notion of the world, embodied in the initial spatial organization of the exhibition (the idea of infinity, which comes together toward the centre) transformed itself into the concept of a finite linearity. This linear development constituted a kind of triumphant path. The new entrance was articulated by a triumphant arch, while the fountain ‘Golden Spike’, a monument of fertility and prosperity and a 16-meter high phallic symbol, marked the end of this axis.

In this extremely theatrical space into which it had developed by that time, an attraction of happiness and altar of fertility, VSKhV, reopened in 1954. There were significant changes that reflected the world of the soviet citizen—the sculpture of Stalin disappeared. One must pay tribute to the facts, it was removed because the material from which it was made, concrete, fell into disrepair during the years of war due to the extreme weather conditions. The plaster cover of the statue began to peel off, causing the Leader to literally lose his face. Despite the fact that the statue’s head was changed, the destruction of the monument could not be stopped, hence the decision to dismantle it was



fig.f
Sculpture of Stalin surrounded by ideologically correct comrades, 1939.
Source: Retro Photo of Mankind's Habitat. ©boch1953



fig.g
Sculpture of Chewbacca surrounded by advertising, 2012.
Photography: Anastasia Vaynberg.

- 3 In 1954, at the All-Union meeting of builders, «the practice of decoration in architecture» was heavily criticized. The following year, 4 November, 1955, the Resolution No.1871 of the CPSU of the USSR «On elimination of excesses in the design and construction» was officially implemented. It completed the era of Soviet monumental classicism.
- 4 Maria Silina, «VDNKh returns. The guide through the main Park of soviet period. The story of construction and reconstruction of VDNKh in case of seven noteworthy exhibits», <http://www.colta.ru/articles/specials/4084?part=1>, retrieved: 30.07.2014.
- 5 The report «On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences» was read by the first secretary of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev at a closed meeting of the XX Congress of the CPSU, held on February 25, 1956.

made in 1952. According to a legend, after dismantling the body of the Leader it was buried on the territory of VSKhV. The void left by where the monument and central symbol in soviet iconography once stood was now covered by a flat body of water. The idiosyncrasy of this allegorical story is that it happened during the lifetime of Stalin, even if shortly before his death, thus outstripping or predicting the debunking of the cult of personality, followed by the destruction of sculptures, paintings or mosaics portraying the Leader—a distinct tradition among the Ancient Egyptians.

Stalin's death in 1953 also seriously affected the architecture of the USSR. With the replacement of the Leader, the design of the existing had to be changed. Already in 1954, at the professional conference of builders, ‘the struggle against excesses’³ in architecture was proclaimed. This proclamation became the part of a «wider movement of reconsideration of Stalinist ideological heritage»⁴. The apex of this process became the report by the New Leader, Nikita Khrushchev, «On cult of the personality [of Stalin] and its consequences»⁵ in 1956. As a result, VSKhV suddenly became an example of bad taste and a ‘false path’. Khrushchev, the ideological author of prefabricated mass-housing construction, which has shaped the architectural appearance of most of the former territory of the Soviet Union until today, defined the new architectural ideology of the country, under which the official style of Soviet construction becomes modernism. The changes that took place at VSKhV with regard to this, affected not only the pavilions that were subsequently built, but also existing buildings of Stalinist architecture. Some of these were ‘reconstructed’ in the late 50's, which translates to, ‘they were simply wrapped with new laconic facades’, and by this literal layering of meanings were turned into classic modernist boxes. Thus the splendorous pavilion ‘Azerbaijan’, for example, became austere ‘Computer Technology’. This trend was also partly connected to the reorganisation of the entire structure of the Soviet economy. The exhibition, always moulded in accordance with the principle of the economic management of the country, was restructured and renamed ‘The Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy’—VDNKh.

Agriculture was no longer the foundation of the promise of happiness. In general, as a result of Khrushchev's reforms, Soviet agriculture was almost destroyed. For the USSR, embattled in the Cold War at the time, the key to success was sought not only in technological progress, but mainly in space programs. Its success in particular became the target of the status

competition between the parties divided by the Iron Curtain. After the first man's flight into space, the empty site of the mystical centre of the exhibition, previously occupied by Comrade Stalin, was conquered by a copy of Yuri Gagarin's rocket. Space was proclaimed the ‘heart’ and the centre of aspirations of the soviet idea; a far more impressive void than the pond, which had replaced Stalin.

After the viscous last decades of the Soviet Union's fading, which did not sway the history of the country in any remarkable way, the next intriguing moment in the history of the VDNKh came in the 90s, the period after the collapse of the Union. Along with the breakdown of the state, VDNKh also lost its meaning. Renamed VVC (‘All-Russia Exhibition Centre’) in 1992, the ensemble, once again, mirrored the development of the whole country: a marketplace without any regulations. The pavilions were filled by what were called ‘shuttle traders’ during the years of ‘Perestroika’: Private entrepreneurs, a vocation that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in need of empty spaces. It is symbolic, that one of those places turned out to be VVC—a ‘religious’ institution of the previous authority, deserted due to the change of the political paradigm, or because it had never really been filled. Entrepreneurs adapt the pavilions to suit themselves: parts are dismantled, others covered with gypsum, new partitions are added and fluorescent lamps illuminate the fretted ceiling. VVC freed from any meaning imposed from above, finally openly becomes what it has actually always been—an attraction. The immense commercial pressure, an assortment of strange private museums (collections of butterflies, dinosaurs, or mammoths), and an amusement park all contributed to the burgeoning nature of this funfair, all made possible in the theatrical context of senselessly gleaming spires. The result is an infiltration of unsightly and absurd buildings, a consequence of the strengthening capitalist culture which lead to interventions growing in scope. ‘The biggest oceanarium in Europe’ and ‘inverted house’—two exemplary exercises in architectural lack of taste. But money, the new editing tool for the VVC, not only operates by addition, but also by subtraction. It has become a Russian custom for landmarks located on valuable property to ‘spontaneously combust’. Small pavilions situated on the border of the ensemble started to disappear, making space for new oceanariums.

These examples illustrate a touching paradox: the exhibition, conceived and mostly positioned as a project of the future, call on us today with distinct clarity, raising

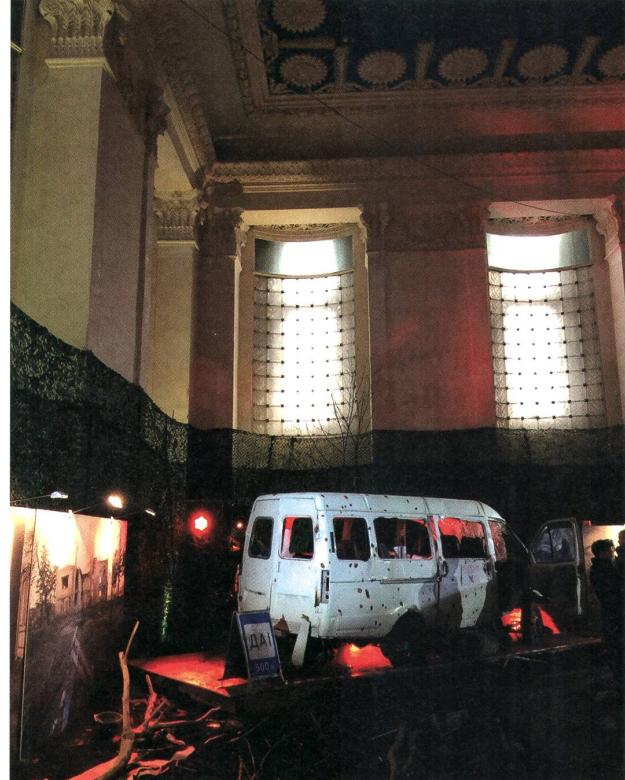


fig. h
German and Soviet pavilions facing each other at the
World Exhibition in Paris, 1937.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

fig. i
Exhibition as propaganda: The pavilion 'Ukraine' during the conflict between the two countries in 2015.
Photography: Anastasia Vaynberg.

6 TV debate 'Meanwhile' with Alexander Archangel'sky, 'VDNKh: Soviet project in the postmodern era', participants: Natalia Dushkina, professor of Moscow Architectural Institute; Yuri Awakymov, architect and artist; Marat Gelman, curator; Elena Zelinskaya, president of 'Mediasoyuz'; Alexander Vysokovsky, dean of Higher School of Urbanism; Alexander Kazintsev, publicist, deputy editor of the magazine 'Our Contemporary', on channel 'Russia K'. It should be noted that those, who are reckoned as 'hipsters' in Russia are, as a rule, moderately in opposition to the existing government of the country.

the question of our attitude towards the past. The reconstruction of the ensemble has long been discussed, but convincing proposals for giving the landmark a reviving breath of life without ruining it are few and far between. The VDNKh has always been surrounded by tendentiousness, not innovation, and so the intention of the renovation which began in 2014 is to repeat the enormous success of reconstructing another park of Stalin's period in Moscow—Gorky Park.

Gorky park was the site of the very first All-Russian Exhibition, opened in 1923. The park was transformed in the 30s and became one of the most important public spaces during Soviet times. During Perestroika it was invaded by an amusement park and with the stipulation of an entry fee practically died for the public. The reconstruction of Gorky Park began with the dismantling of attractions, liquidation of illegal buildings and the lifting of the entry fee. The territory was cleaned, playgrounds, sport grounds, wooden platforms on the waterfront, dozens of cafes, restaurants and stalls with fast food, a summer theatre and even a museum were built. Events are regularly held in the park and promote a busy social life. Gorky park has even become overcrowded at times. It is presumed that the reason for this success is practically embedded in the architectural structure of VDNKh. But one condition seems to be very important: the aesthetic canon. For this reason the discussion surrounding Gorky Park or the renovation of VDNKh constantly sounds the phrase *‘hipster culture’*⁶. Among other things the result of the Gorky Park reconstruction has caused significant and, finally, positive public resonance, and being a kind of payoff from citizens, serves as an excellent showcase of a pretty dastard political situation.

Since the beginning of the reconstruction of the ensemble, nostalgically renamed VDNKh, some actions have begun to be cause for alarm. VDNKh lost its conservation status, which had prohibited building on the site of the landmark. For those, who are familiar with the Russian reality of real-estate, it is clear that this decision is likely to serve the interests of private developers and can lead to dramatic consequences for the architecture of the complex. As part of the reconstruction the facades of the 60s, which encased various Stalinist pavilions, were dismantled. The *‘Computer Technology’* pavilion became *‘Azerbaijan’* again. This peculiar episode of historical justice reveals several critical problems. The most symptomatic and contradictory is the decision to dismantle the facades, felled by some faceless power, reminiscent of the authoritarian gov-

ernance of the past. While Stalinist architecture does possess a spectacularity and is aesthetically more accessible to the man in the street, it is not clear what is worthier of preservation in the historically-layered architecture of the VDNKh, and who has the authority to decide. After all, the facades of the 60s have already acquired historical value. But this is just another example of the social trends of late—a frightening passion for stalinism. Since the beginning of the reconstruction of the exhibition and the banishing of the tradesmen from the pavilions, it has become apparent that this very same *‘hipster culture’*, by means of which the ensemble is meant to be implanted in the body of the official culture, is already serving as a screen of political propaganda. In spring of 2015, during which Russia was in economic crisis (a result of the controversial and unclear foreign policy towards Ukraine) an exhibition took place in the pavilion *‘Ukraine’*. It was devoted to the military conflict in the eastern part of the country. The tragedy was turned into an attraction: a scenery decorated with ruins surrounding the rotating platform. The message of the exhibition in so many words supported the official reporting of the Russian authorities.

Current aspirations to get VDNKh rooted in the body of official culture cause sadness. Not only because the renovation coincides with the rise of imperial sentiments or that the reconstruction itself could harm the landmark profoundly, but because the informal existence VDNKh has had since the early 90s is likely to return to the limits of the official paradigm, and will probably serve as its instrument once again. In contrast to the fact that VDNKh and its history served authoritarian interests, the last decade has finally given this space a life of its own. In this respect, the situation in which VDNKh is to be found is an accurate metaphor for modern Russia: buildings of grandiose architecture enclosing sacral interiors that contain little more than a nation's vanity.

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