

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Soviet *Banya* and the Mass Production of Hygiene

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Around 1930, during the era of the First Five-Year Plan, the Russian urban bathhouse, or *banya*, was collectivized and placed under state care. How did changes in the architecture of the model *banyas* of Moscow and Leningrad articulate the changing role of the *banya* as a site of pleasure, cure, and socialization? How do the aesthetics, ethics, and choreography of bathing in this period illustrate the relationship between the state and the urban proletariat as mediated by modern technology? How did they reflect the vision of the Communist society as a mechanized universe?

## Introduction

Alexei Gastev was head of the Central Institute of Labor in Moscow, an institution founded in 1921 with Lenin's and Trotsky's support as means of reforming and streamlining mechanized production. Before he became a bureaucrat, in his pre-Revolutionary poetry, Gastev predicted the course of history. 'The world itself will become a machine, in which for the first time Cosmos will find its own heart, its own beat', he wrote (Gastev 1918: 131). It is not surprising that Gastev was both a poet of the machine and a bureaucrat engaged with mechanized production. As Boris Groys notes, Soviet ideology tried to organize the entire society according to a pseudo-mechanized model; art and architecture fit into this picture, and aesthetic programs corresponded to social, ideological, and bureaucratic agendas (Groys 1993). The main object of mechanized aesthetic production was to articulate the formal logic and ethos of the machine. It was not only a tool, but a model for organizing all of existence. This vision of the totality of the world as a machine, the totalitarian and even cosmological apprehension of mechanization, is characteristically Soviet. It developed as part of the socialist program for thoroughly reconstructing politics, aesthetics, and everyday life.

What I want to investigate here is a particular Soviet machine: the public bath, that apparatus of self-care. The machine, in general terms, was celebrated both in exuberant poetry and in bureaucratic edicts, but how was it celebrated in architecture? How did real machines work, in particular, mechanisms which articulated the proletarian's relationship to the physical body, which mediated between visceral experience and ideas about the Soviet subject?

The precedent for looking at the public bath as type of machine was set by the classic treatise on mechanization and modern life, Sigfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* of 1948. The last chapter of this book is about

the mechanization of the bath, and it reflects the author's ambivalence toward mechanization in the aftermath of World War Two. Giedion enthusiastically compiles images of all kinds of modern bathing contraptions, appearing to celebrate, in his pictorial material, the quirks of the modern age. But, as Brahan points out, the images are in discord with the text, which laments the loss of 'regenerative' bathing, performed in ancient steam baths and *thermae* (Brahan 1990). It is, according to the text, now replaced by the efficient 'ablution' brought about by modern technology. Giedion laments the loss of a culture of 'non-doing' and a 'dignified rhythm of life', which are replaced by a culture in which everything, including the care of the flesh, is purposeful and streamlined (Giedion 1948: 712). Modernity is fascinating, but it comes with a loss.

The problem Giedion notices is also a political one. The political subject formed through the shared rituals of public bathing is collective. The modern Western political subject is the individual, isolated in his shameful nakedness. Public bathing did not disappear in the modern age, and neither did the collective subject. The difference is that the modern bathhouse is designed for the urban proletariat, rather than the aristocracy and the upper class. Since the mid-nineteenth century bathing rituals have articulated the mores and social place not of the elites, as in the ancient world, but of the working class. Providing public baths for the general populace in Europe and America became a way to introduce progress, to reform morals, to cleanse both physically and spiritually, to, in fact, create a new, improved, collective political subject. In America of the Progressivist era, Marilyn Thornton Williams explains, efforts to 'wash the great unwashed' were intended to reform the immigrants, perceived as both morally and physically filthy, and make them suitable for contact with the rest of society (Thornton Williams 1991). State sponsorship of mass baths in England and Germany, from the end of the nineteenth century to 1930, were attempts to 'educate' the childish masses, and, in the German case, to celebrate racial and social purity, as Jennifer Reed Dillon discusses (2007).

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While the development of the modern public bath, or bathhouse, in the West has been studied, little has been written on the history of the Soviet public bath, the modern *banya*. The word *banya*, to the Russian speaker, immediately evokes an image of an enclosed bathing area. The *banya* envelops the user in a moist, controlled heat, and may include a sauna, and can be a small-scale rural establishment as well as an urban institution, for public use. The construction of large, technologically advanced *banyas* for the proletariat was meant to compensate for the general lack of bathing facilities in homes. The masses who used the *banya* were supposedly the sovereign subject, which the Communist state represented, becoming the agent of that subject's mechanization in all aspects of the subject's life, in particular the communal ritual of bathing. In this article, I want to examine how the mass subject was defined through the development of the technology of bodily care. I am particularly interested in how the architecture of the Soviet bathhouse fits into the totalitarian picture of the world as a machine, as presented by Gastev, and how this worldview was translated into the ethic and aesthetic of mechanized bathhouses, or *banya*.

During the First Five-Year Plan of the Soviet period, from 1928 to 1932, the *banya* became a monument to industrialization and a symbol of modernity. Although *banya* constructed in this period were relatively few, the activity of public bathing—its institutions and its architecture—tied together the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of socialist mechanization. It was a key moment in the evolution of the bath, when the mystique of the machine was connected to the mystique of the traditional bathhouse. This period is also the one from which the Soviet institution of the *banya* evolved. The power of technology was directly connected to the sensual experience of bathing, to the citizen's visceral experience of the pleasures of bathing, and to the logic of self-care. The building of *banyas* became a means of building the New Man in a mechanized world. As we shall see, the new *banya* was not only a rational system of bodily regulation, but also, in some cases, a microcosm in which socialist identity was related to metaphysical themes, and in which the rituals of bathing took on a quasi-religious nature.

### Magic

The *banya* was not only practical; it was at the same time both a site of pleasure and a site of beauty. Bathing in a *banya* was, among other things, about an aesthetic experience of technology. A photograph of a small pool in just such a *banya*, in Leningrad, dating to a winter day in 1932, not only shows the pool's technology fully deployed but also provides a way to understand how the experience of that technology had an aesthetic component (fig. 1).

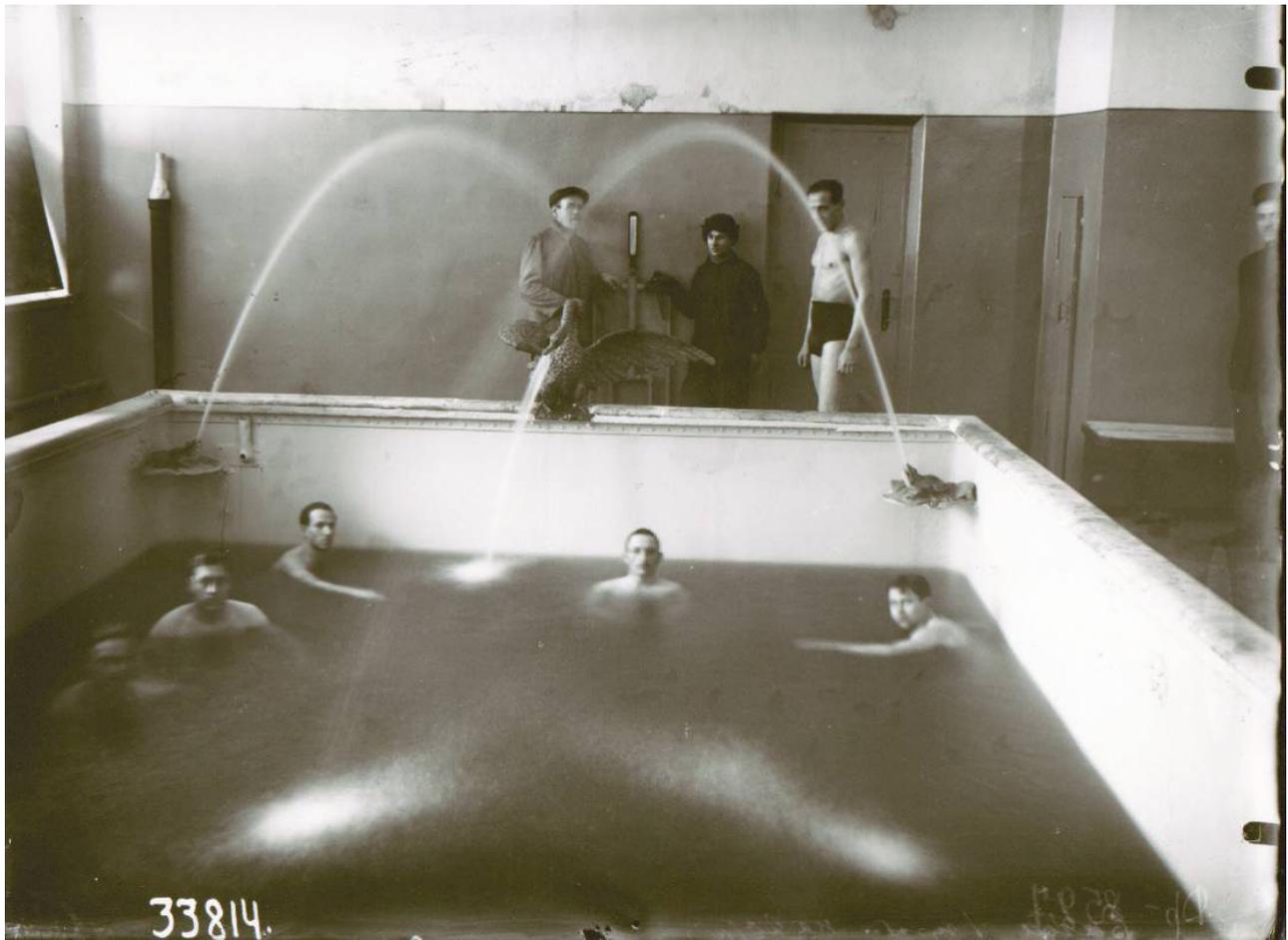
The five men within the pool, submerged just to the point where their shoulders and head are visible, are evenly positioned across its width. They look out at the photographer. The sides of the pool rise to obscure the lower legs of the four men standing outside it. Two men behind the pool, fully clothed and wearing winter hats, rest their hands on pipes against the wall, presumably the

location of the pool's mechanical controls, and they also look at the photographer. To their right, a man in swimming trunks faces not the photographer but the pool, as if about to enter it, while to the far right of the photograph stands another fully clothed man, again looking at the photographer. In the pool, two crisscrossing jets of water emerge in high, graceful arcs from the gaping mouths of cast-iron frogs nested in the two corners. Perched atop the back wall of the pool, precisely in the middle, a sculpture of a swan captured in half flight emits a short and forceful spray. The two pool operators flank the thermometer and thus frame the display, drawing attention to what is probably the perfect temperature of the water.

All the men in the photograph gaze back at us—all but one. The man in swimming trunks, in a classic *contraposto* pose, stands at the edge of the pool. The stark white of his body matches the white expanse of the pool's low wall. These spaces of white mark a threshold between the phantasmagoric aquatic world of frogs, swans, and bathers, framed by the two arcs of spray and the men flanking the pipes on the wall, and the world of machine technology, operated by the bathhouse workers and observed by the half-hidden figure in the right side of the picture. The body of the one person who does not look our way is part of that threshold between the domain of excess and the domain of regulation, the domain of pleasure and the domain of work. This threshold, however, does not separate the organic from the mechanical, work from pleasure: it connects them. The machine operates the idyllic artificial milieu of the basin. The machine brings the frogs and the swans to life and tempers the bodies of the naked men. It is the rational instrument of modernity, aiding the collective ritual of healing, bathing, and enjoyment. Not only that: it produces the spectacle of hygiene; it renders the mundane act of bathing beautiful and magnificent. It is both a machine of efficiency and a machine of magic.

### Prehistory

The fascination with the *banya* as a wondrous site is nothing new. The bathhouse had been traditionally understood as a site of magic, pleasure, and universal cure, albeit not characterized by special effects of modern mechanization but instead by changes of heat, which produced elation and extreme bodily states. In a typical visit to the Russian country *banya* around the end of the seventeenth century, at the time of Peter the Great, the visitor would have encountered an enclosed structure containing moist, heated air (Bogdanov 2000: 42). The *banya* would first be heated until it was so hot that no one could stand on the floor for more than fifteen seconds. Five or six individuals would go in, and one of their companions would close the door so tightly that they would hardly be able to breathe. Then they would start yelling and he would let them out to get some fresh air. They would reenter the *banya* and repeat this until they turned completely red. Then they would jump into a river or, in winter, into snow and stay there, up to their noses, for several hours, 'depending on what their medical condition required, as they considered this method one of the main means of medical recovery' (Bogdanov 2000: 42). Sayings about the *banya* have been



**Fig. 1:** Group of men in the swimming pool of the Trust for Baths and Laundries, Leningrad (photo 1932). Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film and Photo Documents in St Petersburg (item Dr 8525 685 1932).

around for centuries, and continue to reflect the belief in it as a universal panacea: 'If it weren't for the *banya*, we would all perish'; '*Banya* is our second mother'; 'A day in the *banya* is a day without aging'.<sup>1</sup>

The *banya* was a source of universal cure and (masochistic) pleasure because it could produce not only extreme corporeal states, but also extreme spiritual states. In pre-modern times and in village communities, it was often associated with magic and supernatural forces (Ryan 1999). Thus, the *banya* was, prior to the spread of modern medicine, a place employed by village magicians, or *kolduns*, for both healing and casting spells. It was a space of divination and pagan magic, which rivaled or complemented the sacred rites of the Orthodox Church, the dominant religious body in Russia since the tenth century. According to peasant tradition, it was a space governed by demoniacal forces, where one's body was put in contact with the supernatural. Finally, people believed that the *banya* could temporarily cure social ills, as a liminal space where hierarchies and relationships of power were temporarily abolished. The sense that the *banya* was a liminal zone was enhanced by the fact that the bathers, on entering it, had to remove their amulets and crosses. Later, this is translated into an ethos of the equality of the naked. 'In the *banya* there are no epaulettes', go the sayings, which emerged way before the Soviet period; 'in the *banya* there are no generals'; 'in the *banya* all are equal'.<sup>2</sup> The *banya*

was a proto-Communist zone of universal equality, a community of equals, stripped of their clothing and, at the same time, of all forms of protection and protectionism. It was the mass institution par excellence.

As the concept of the *banya* developed into a modern institution run by the state, the old notions about it were not radically transformed. It was still the place of universal cure, the space where superindividual powers took over the body, and a place where 'everybody is equal'. The old ideas simply mutated under new conditions. The modern body of the late 1920s no longer yelled in the sauna, jumped into icy water, and generally engaged in the practice of collective ecstasy. It became a body disciplined by the state, or the military as the state's agent, which now took over the occult rituals. The management of the Soviet *banya* was informed by modern medicine, rather than by the demoniacal forces of the *kolduns*. In it, everybody was equal because everybody is a state subject. Modern medicine found it to be a source of universal cure.

The first ideas about modernizing the bathhouse were inspired by developments in Western Europe. The Prussian military, for example, created a *Volksbrausebad* (people's shower) in the 1880s (Reed Dillon 2007: 63). The first treatise about the modern *banya* in Russia, written in 1898 by a doctor in the Russian military named Goldenberg, was likely influenced by such a Prussian example. Goldenberg's treatise was called *The Bath for Armies and*

for *Popular Masses: Its Sanitary, Medical and Economical Aspects: Short Instructions for Doctors, for Military Units, for Municipal and District Governments: For Schools, Factories, Plants, etc.* According to Goldenberg, the task of official authority, in every government institution, is to provide public bathhouses. The right to bathing is the right of the citizen, he said, and as the traditional proverbs say, bathing is the social equalizer, joining people of all classes and ranks:

Public, social, baths for the people should definitely be made and organized in such a way that every man, independent of his class or rank, living anywhere, would at any time be able to easily access what is absolutely necessary for the care of the external layers of his body, that which he does not have at his home—to access it if not completely free of cost, then for a minimal price. (Goldenberg 1898: 6; all translations by the author)

Changes to the bathhouse were modeled on the military institution, in which hygiene habits were precisely timed, regimented, supervised, and scripted, like daily drills. Bathing, Goldenberg envisioned, was a sort of ‘gymnastics’ for the organism, ‘gymnastics for muscles and nerves and a system for regulating our organic temperature’ that ‘insures the organism against every kind of danger’ (Goldenberg 1898: 9–10).

Like the Western bathhouse, the *banya* was also a tool for educating the ignorant, a tool of enlightenment. Its benefits, although apparent to the authorities, were, presumably, not always obvious to the populace, that democratic subject under government tutelage. The *banya* as a government institution epitomized the paternal role of the state, ‘the care of the father for the health of the family’ (Goldenberg 1898: 2):

The mass is a big child, to whom it is necessary to show its own good by force, and to draw [the child] to it by delicacies and lures, until [the child] naturally and mentally grows to the point where it can rationally understand what is to its own benefit. (Goldenberg 1898: 56)

People were informed about what was to their benefit through medical literature, which replaced the expertise of the *kolduns*. This information was similar to that which proliferated in the West, in the redefinition of hygiene as the care of the skin. As Reed Dillon points out, in the German ‘physiology of the environment,’ the role of the house is that of clothing, to protect the skin, and the skin was the main organ that protects the body from diseases (Reed Dillon 2007). Moreover, for example, at the Hygiene Exhibition of 1882/83 in Germany, bathhouses were not exhibited in the section on public architecture, but in that of skin care, a fact which illustrates the close connection between hygiene theory and the fetishization of the skin. A turn-of-the-century pamphlet in Russian, ‘The *Banya* and its Benefits and Impact on the Human Organism’, signed only by the author’s initials, explains

that the *banya* indeed mediates between illness and health, sanity and insanity, life and death (D F 1905). But this time it is not because the *banya* harnesses demoniacal forces but rather because it has the power to act on the most vital organ of the human body, the skin, which, if neglected, could bring peril to the organism and even death. Still, in the tradition of the mythology of the *banya* as universal cure, the *banya* continues to be a magical fountain of youth and a cure for all ills. The author argues that it could cure everything. By rejuvenating the body, bathing heals rheumatism and cold. The slow introduction to a humid environment aids in curing hydrophobia. The *banya* cures irregular menstrual cycles. It is a medicine against syphilis and scrofula. People with a problematic emotional disposition benefit from the exposure to water, heat, and cold: bathing speeds up the circulation of melancholy individuals, and also brings the phlegmatic ones back to life. Even if one has no illness, the *banya* is good for hypochondria. To prove this last point, the author enlists the help of the French physician Louis Alfred Becquerel, who, according to the Russian author, apparently studied the *banya* in detail.

### The *Banya* after the Revolution

Imported modern European ideas about the public bathhouse converged with traditional notions about the *banya* as a site of universal healing, collective spirit, and social equality. The development of the *banya* took another turn in the Stalinist era, when the spirit of Communist industrialization merges with these ideas.

The *banya* was among the first of the institutions collectivized after the October Revolution. When the Decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), ‘Ob obmene prava chastnoi sobstvennosti na nedvizhimosti v gorodakh’ (On abolishing the right to private property of real estate in cities), was passed on August 20, 1918, public baths became common property. In 1920 Lenin passed the decree ‘Ob opespechenii naseleniia respublik banyami’ (On the supply of the population of the Republics with *banyas*) and founded the Trust for Assembling Bathhouses and Laundries (Banprachmontazh) as part of the Russian People’s Commissariat of Municipal Economy (Narodny komissariat kommunal’nogo khoziaistva)

Prior to the twentieth century, the *banya* was a key vehicle of the state’s paternal care of the citizenry. After the Revolution, that paternal function was passed on to the socialist government, by which the rule of the proletariat, promoting universal equality, became a permanent state. As Tricia Starks writes in *The Body Soviet*, under Communism the pursuit of health and hygiene was closely linked to the pursuit of the Communist utopian ideal: a society of universal equality characterized by purity and the absence of disease and suffering (Starks 2009). One of the objectives of the Soviet civilizing project, which began with Trotsky’s call for the reform of everyday life, or *byt* (Trotsky 1923), was physical health for all, sought through many projects of the People’s Commissariat of Health of the Soviet Union and other government bodies. This objective also corresponded with the pursuit of moral purity; many hygiene terms, such as *chistka* (liter-

ally, 'cleansing'), became political jargon. The *banya* was not only the institution by which the state demonstrated its capacity to care for and regiment citizenry on a most intimate level, but also a place where the citizens were prepared, physically and spiritually, to enter Communism—by achieving a state of universal equality and total moral and physical health.

During the Period of New Economic Policy (1921–1928), when collectivization came to a contemporary halt, no new *banyas* were built in Moscow and Leningrad. The existing ones were rented to private entrepreneurs. However, a few instances of megalomaniac visions were the precursors of the monumental *banya*, which would emerge around 1930. In July 1919 the Khudozhestvenyi Sovet Arkhitekturnoi Masterskoi SovKomHoz (Artistic Committee of the Architectural Studio of the Soviet Communal Management) organized a competition for the first regional *thermae* in Petrograd, for Litovsky Castle. The winning entry by Trotsky, Tversky, and Buryushkin was a project for a gigantic complex of showers, pools, stadia, a skating ring, and other facilities, occupying the entire island. The project, never realized, was inspired by the *thermae*, or hot baths, of ancient Rome and was organized around a public square. The intent was to demonstrate the colossal importance of hygiene in the ideal Communist society.

The first socialist *banyas* that were actually built were also monuments to hygiene, but in a period when the status of the mass subject changed. During the First Five-Year Plan (1928–1932), the mass subject was no longer an imperial one, a subject of neither Tzarist Russia nor of the empire of workers, but rather of industrialization. The challenge in designing a new *banya* of this period was not to offer a vision of unabashed splendor but to conceive how collective hygiene was related to modern production techniques and how the proletariat as producer figured as proletariat the bather.

What made the construction of the first Soviet *banyas* possible was the re-collectivization of the economy during the First Five-Year Plan. When it began to consolidate industry and collectivize agriculture, the state also began to take over *banyas*. The case against the private trust *Stroitel'* (Builder) in 1930, demonstrates how the state intervened. The case was brought to light in an article in the specialized Leningrad journal about municipal economics, *Voprosy Kommunal'nogo Khozyaistva* ('Problems of Municipal Economy'), published by the Advertising Trust of the Leningrad Regional Department of Municipal Economy (Reklamtröst Leningradskogo oblastnogo Otkomhoza) (Ivanov 1930). In 1922 the trust had rented seven baths from the Leningrad Regional Department of Municipal Economy. According to the rulings of the Leningrad Regional Court of 1930, the agreements were annulled and the baths went back to the Banno-Prachechnoe Khozyaistvo (Bathroom and Laundry Management). The case against *Stroitel'* was not criminal but ideological. The renters were 'unmasked': the court discovered that the trust was 'capitalist in its essence' and that it only 'worked in the guise of a workers' association'. The result of the unmasking was that the state took

over the baths in the interest of 'people's health' (Ivanov 1930: 62).

The attempt to take over all *banyas* and integrate them into the social project of the First Five-Year Plan materialized in the construction of new *banyas* around 1930. Between 1928 and 1932, six were built and two reconstructed. In 1928 Gundorov's Stalinskije Bani (Stalin Baths) and Panin's Proletarskie Bani (Proletarian Baths) were finished in Moscow. In 1930 the Kruglaya Banya (Round Bath) and the Gigant, both designed by Alexander Nikol'sky, were built in Leningrad. The Gavanskije Bani were transformed into the Sanpropusnik Vasileostrovskogo Raiona (Sanitary Conveyer of the Vasileostrovsky District) in 1931, and the Raznochinnye Bani were renovated in 1932. These reconstructions were designed by Alexander Gegello. Nikolai Demkov designed two standardized baths in Leningrad, on Ligovskaya and Stantsionnaya streets.

The *banyas* receiving attention in this period were few. Their construction was not part of any comprehensive project to bring hygiene into the everyday life of the proletariat on a mass scale, as would be the case with the project of constructing prefabricated *banyas* in the late 1930s. The availability of bathing facilities did not significantly increase. The situation in Moscow and Leningrad was dismal. According to surveys in 1931 by BanPrachProekt (The State Agency for Designing Banyas and Laundries), Moscow had a total of fifty-four baths for 2.75 million inhabitants. The figures for Leningrad were similar, with fifty-five baths for 2.5 million inhabitants (Rammo 1931: 47). If one inhabitant visiting a bathhouse used four square meters and spent an hour, that inhabitant could count on 12.1 baths a year (Rammo 1931: 47). If some people bathed at home, according to one survey, a citizen might take seventeen baths a year, which translates into 1.42 baths a month (Binshtok 1931: 80).

The new *banyas* did not significantly improve the general state of health. Instead, they figured as symbols of mechanization and new collectivity, models for the regulation of the sensory environment of bathing during the First Five-Year Plan, and tools for celebrating the ethos of industrialization. They also articulated a new proletarian collectivity. The rituals of this new collectivity were the alternative not only to drunken brawls but also to the trend of disorderly and lewd activities disguised as hygiene regimens. One of these 'regimens' is described in the letters of the constructivist photographer Gustav Klutis of August 1924:

It turns out that we never noticed the centerpiece, so to speak, of Moscow in the summer. It's the best of what is in Moscow. Wonderful sight for a distance of about 2 versts along both banks. Everywhere there are folks lying in (as old women would say) indecent postures in the sun. And the horror is that about ninety out of one hundred men wear no swimming suits at all or their birthday suits warm their cannons and bombshells (round ones) in the sun. And, as if that weren't bad enough, what's even worse is that the men and the women are all mixed with no sign of separation between a women's and



**Fig. 2:** *Banya* on 3 Stantsionnaya Street, Leningrad, Nikolai Demkov, architect, ca 1930 (photo 1934). Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film and Photo Documents in St Petersburg (item Gr 20416 685 1934).

a men's section. This is something I have never seen in my life. And moreover, the women, though not as often but still about thirty out of a hundred, are in their birthday suits. The other seventy per cent are in all sorts of bathing suits. All this is all mixed. Young and old, children and old people, families and singles, girls and boys—you see all sorts of things in groups or alone. (Klutsis 1924: 168)

This mixing of ages, sexes, and bodies, and the performance of 'all sorts of things', was a regimen for hygiene that was seen by many as decadent and debauched. Around 1930, official representation of the goals of hygiene rendered such practices invisible; the utopia of the *banya* in 1930 was about a world in which a new, healthy, sane regime replaced the old practices. What was this salubrious modern world of hygiene about? As we shall see, in the design of the *banya* Soviet architects articulated an ethos according to which the proletariat was a mechanized, disciplined collective of the industrial era. But the design of bathhouses, as we will see later, was not free of mystical elements.

### **Banya as Machine**

A parallel was established in the early Soviet period between bathing and production. What was the mechanized *banya* like? How was mechanization imaged? What was the relationship between the building and the

machine established in the architecture of the model *banya* of 1930? A photograph of a standardized *banya* on Stantsionnaya Street, Leningrad, designed by Nikolai Demkov around 1930, shows the main bathhouse building as well as the plant next to it, which provides heat for the *banya* (**fig. 2**). The architecture of the *banya* mimics the architecture of the plant, in unadorned surfaces, in the curvature of the chimney, and in construction material—the same brick appears to have been used for both.

It is easy to draw a direct parallel between this architecture and the Le Corbusierian concept of the building as a 'machine for living'. The 'machine for living' concept provided a foundation for establishing formal similarities between utilitarian and industrial buildings and the idea that buildings should be like machines: functional and efficient. However, the bathhouse building and the plant are not only like each other: they are functionally connected. The plant provides heat for the *banya*, and they are part of one industrial system. The *banya* is not only 'like' a machine; it works 'with' the machine.

In addition, the *banya* was commonly defined not by its formal features, but in terms of the machines it contained. Its mechanized nature is elaborated in long essays in *Problems of Municipal Economy*. The journal from Leningrad discusses the architecture of the *banya* as a unity of structural and mechanical aspects. The plans of different rooms in the *banya* show all the machines of a typical *banya*.

Numerous detailed calculations elaborate the physical properties of each machine and its performance. Most of the pages, however, are occupied by careful renderings of dozens of apparatus, with shading and texture to show the material nature of surfaces: washing machines, electric motors, hot water tubs, spinning machines, various types of driers, steam rollers, and boilers (fig. 3).

These machines are the essence of the *banya*. Architecture, in the traditional sense, is represented in terms of segments of surfaces to which the machines attach. Architecture is not only like a machine, but is defined by the presence of efficient machines, which, as we will see, contribute to its aesthetic quality and ethical import.

The mechanization of hygiene was not just efficient; it also introduced beauty and pleasure into the realm of hygiene. It was machines that brought about beauty and pleasure, and the experience of beauty and pleasure contributes to the creation of the political subject, a crucial point that Jacques Rancière makes in *The Politics of Aesthetics*. The central role of art—of beauty and pleasure—Rancière says, is to create political subjects, who are defined when ‘regimes of the sensible’ are articulated in art. The politics in art consists of what is made visible and what is made invisible (Rancière 2006: 23).

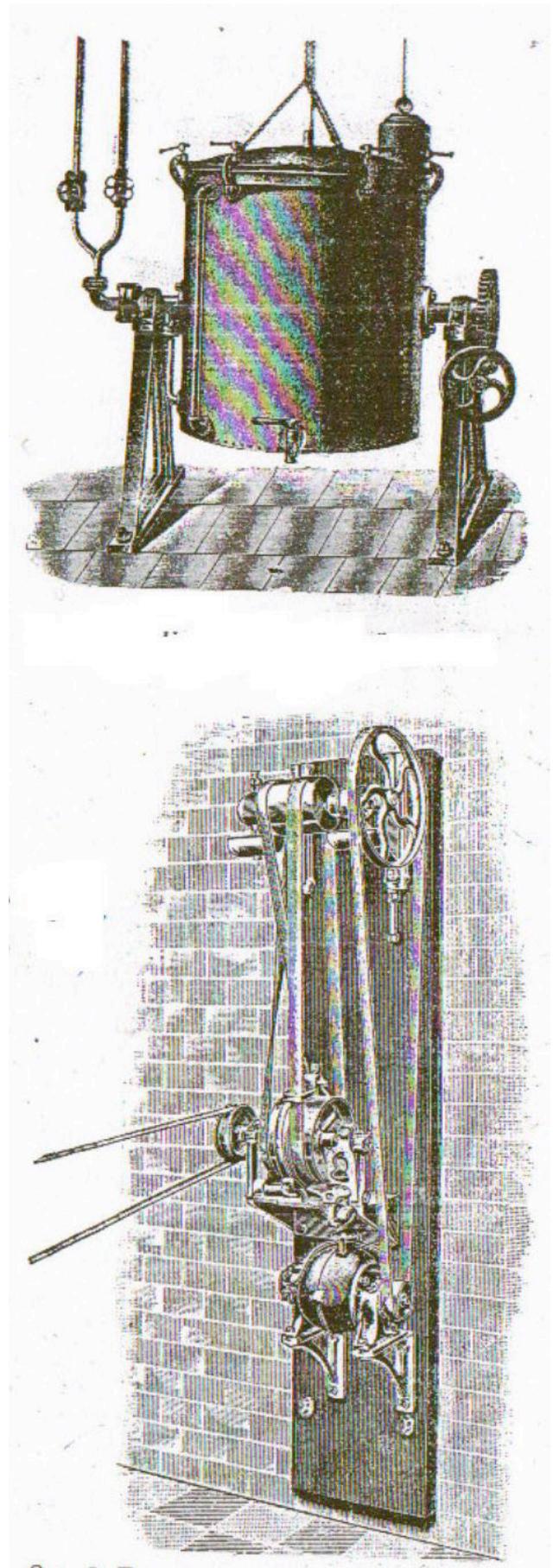
The beauty of the *banya* was the beauty of the machine; it was the beauty of processing, which the citizen had to experience directly, through the care of the self, through sensations of heat, cold, immersion, and cleanliness, thus to become a protagonist of modern life and a participant in industrial production. But the citizen was also produced in the bathhouse, not only symbolically but also in the most literal sense: the machines processed the proletarian, his skin and his clothes. The citizen came in the most immediate, visceral contact with the machine, becoming thus the proper protagonist of the machine age.

What was it like to be processed in the hygienic microcosm of the First Five-Year Plan? The ways in which the *banya* was supposed to work contrast with unofficial narratives that described how it did not work. In his short story, ‘Banya’, of 1924, Mikhail Zoshchenko disrobes in a *banya*. He receives two amulets: two tickets from the wardrobe attendants, which he ties to his ankles. He proceeds to the bathing area, where he does not have much luck. There is no bucket and no soap available. When he decides to go home, he has the following exchange:

I go back to the locker room. I give them one ticket. They give me my linen. I look. Everything is mine, but the trousers aren't mine.

‘Citizens,’ I say, ‘mine didn't have a hole here. Mine had a hole over there.’ But the attendant says, ‘We aren't here just to watch for your holes.’ (Zoshchenko 1930: 124)

The ‘protection’ Zoshchenko receives from the authorities, in the form of the ticket, although meant to guarantee his safe return to a clothed state, does not protect against anything. The *banya*, the space of chaos in which the author tries to manipulate objects by hand, to take hold of a bucket, to grab a bar of soap, is rendered dysfunctional



**Fig. 3:** Boiler and conveyor belt for laundries. Reprinted from *Voprosy kommunal'nogo khozyaistva*, 2–3 (February–March), 1931.

and banal. Authority, which appears as two idiotic figures managing people's holes, is ridiculed, as is the author, an unwilling participant in this social nightmare.

Six years later, by 1930, the *banya* had become not only mechanized, but a source of the mystical. The pleasure of bathing is the pleasure of submitting to perfect regulation and to the benevolent and mysterious power of the bathing apparatus. The journal *Kul'tura i byt* ('Culture and Everyday Life'), for example, aided the struggle against what Communists saw as one of the main social ills and a product of suffering in the long, dark, and cold winters: alcoholism. Visiting the *banya* was part of 'cultured' everyday life which the journal promoted, a remedy against this ill. Instead of drinking, the worker would visit the bathhouse. One of the issues from 1930 describes a scene from a mechanized Soviet *banya*. This scene, which occurs in the Proletarskie Bani in Moscow, is completely different from the sketch in Zoshchenko's story. It is again about the manipulation of pants and underwear. But what the worker describes is not a nightmare but a dream:

So I came to the bathhouse, took off my dirty underwear, gave it into the laundry, and went to wash myself. For the period it took me to rinse in the bath, to swim, time passed, then I returned to the waiting room and my underwear was clean and ironed, waiting for me. (Kudriakov 1930: 67)

The *banya* is a building that works perfectly. The powers that operate this system of carefree pleasure and guaranteed provision of cleanliness are mysterious, working behind the scenes, powers that, like demoniacal forces, cannot be seen but must be believed because of the miraculous effects they produced. The worker and his clothing are perfectly processed: by the authority that operates the machines. The machines work like magic.

### Banya as Opaque Monument

The idea that the *banya* is an assembly line is reflected in the name of a public *banya* redesigned in Leningrad by Alexander Gegello, Sanpropusnik Vasileostrovskogo Raiona, translated as 'The Sanitary Conveyor of the Vasileostrovskii District' (fig. 4). It replaced the old Gavanskie Bani in 1931. According to its name, the building is likened to a production plant: this time, a production plant that churns out salubrious citizens. Cleanliness could be something akin to any other industrial product processed on a conveyor belt. But the Sanitary Conveyor does not really look like a production plant. In fact, the façade resembles an Egyptian pylon. A monolithic brick surface is pierced by thin slits to give the building the appearance of heaviness and impenetrability: this façade defines the Conveyor more as a temple to production itself than as an ordinary production line.

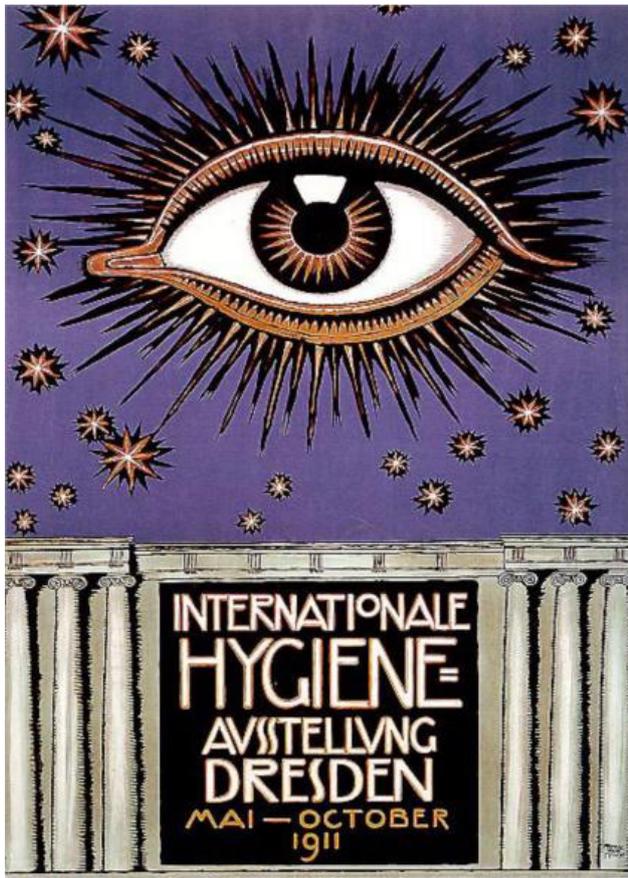
This impenetrable architecture of heaviness and opacity represents a peculiar interpretation of the ethos of hygiene, different from the dominant modernist ethos of light air and transparency. Architectural transparency



**Fig. 4:** Sanitary Conveyor of the Vasileostrovskii District, Leningrad, Alexander Gegello, architect, 1931 (photo 1933). Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film and Photo Documents in St Petersburg (item Ar 40389 685.2 1933).

is related to modern ideas about the body, says Beatrice Colomina, and modern Western architecture is allied with aesthetics and technology (Colomina 2007). According to Colomina, new ways of imaging the body, primarily the X-ray, provided a template for new ways of imaging architecture. The modernist attempt to reduce the materiality of the building's skin reflected how the body was apprehended when pierced by the scientific seeing apparatus. Colomina primarily examines 'X-ray architecture' after World War Two in the context of the American architecture of the Cold War. But the model of the body as transparent had been established and promoted in Europe much earlier, at the time of the monumental opaque *banya* in the Soviet Union. While Gegello was designing the Sanitary Conveyor, Russians participated in the International Hygienic Exhibition held in Dresden in 1930, the central venue for promoting ideas about health and hygiene in Europe (Overy 2007). The exhibition, which provided examples of healthy products and ways of life, including healthy architecture, followed the First International Exhibition of Hygiene of 1911, organized by a soap manufacturer. In 1930 the exhibition was transformed into a permanent establishment, turned in Nazi times into a venue for exploring ideas about eugenics. The two posters for the 1911 and the 1930 exhibitions contain the exhibition's logo: an eye in the sky, overseeing life on Earth (fig. 5). In the first version, the eye oversees architecture, and is stylized to emit rays, like the sun. The image was supposed to manifest both the power of science to illuminate earthly mysteries as well as the vehicle of this power, eyesight, embodied in new scientific technologies: the microscope and the X-ray. The most popular exhibit at the convention was the Glass Man, a transparent plastic figure of a male, with veins made of copper wire and specially dried and prepared internal organs, illuminated by electric lighting. Visitors were fascinated by the opportunity to see the interior of a body.

There are many Soviet examples that follow the logic of transparency, such as the Narkomfin house of Ginzburg



**Fig. 5:** Poster for the International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden, Franz Stuck, designer, 1911. Courtesy WikiPaintings <<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/franz-stuck/poster-for-the-international-hygiene-exhibition-1911-in-dresden-1911#supersized-artist-Paintings-273063>>.

and Milinis, the model of which was exhibited in Dresden. But the *banya*, especially in Gegello's interpretation, is not about the elimination of the skin, about seeing through the skin, but about making the skin thicker. It reflected a *banya*-specific concept of medicine as the art of skin care, rather than penetrating beyond the body's surface, quite in line with such popular pre-Revolutionary medical pamphlets such as 'The *Banya* and Its Benefits for the Human Organism'. The proletarian body was not a see-through body. The power of cure was not the power of the eye, the power of reason. The power of the state to cure and purify was not conceived as the power to see, but rather a hidden power, to process and produce. It was the power of the machine, an invisible power operating behind the scenes.

### **Banya and the Regeneration of Matter**

The fact that the *banya* was conceived both as a 'conveyor' and a temple reflects the coexistence of two logics: that of pre-modern *banya* mystique and that of the mysticism of the machine. The narratives about the processing of the body in official documents provide more insight into how these two systems of logic are connected. Around the same time that Gegello designed the Sanitary Conveyor,

Soviet bureaucracy was extending the notion of bodily processing by creating a scheme for recycling organic and inorganic substances found in the *banya*, so that all matter produced in the bathing process could be reused. Bureaucracy and rational management would merge the organic and the inorganic, the body and the building, the machine and the organism, creating a universal cycle of matter. In 1932 Narodnyi komitet komunal'nogo khozyaistva (People's Committee for Municipal Management) proposed the inclusion of various kinds of organic refuse into the detailed circular system of product 'regeneration'. This was systematized in the document 'Ob usilenii rabot po vyiavleniyu i ispol'zovaniyu othodov v banno-prachechnom khozyaistve' (On the Intensification of Works on Extracting and Utilizing Waste Products in Bathhouse and Laundry Management):

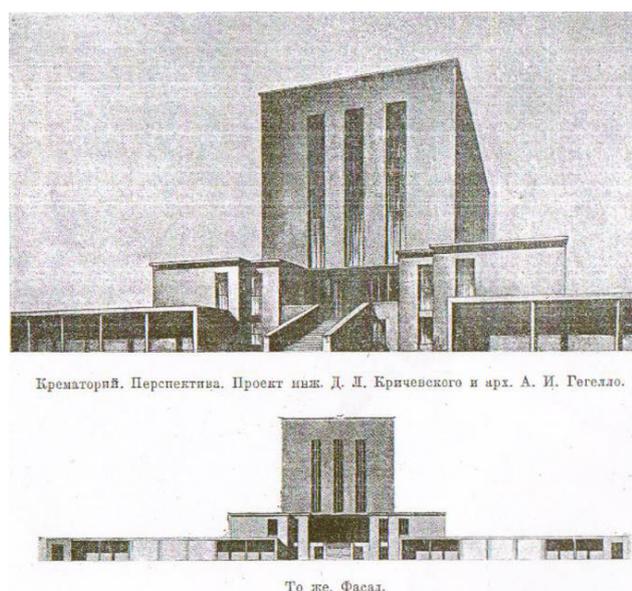
NarKomKhoz, in cooperation with scientific and research institutes, approached the investigation of these issues:

1. the regeneration, collection and utilization of soap from processed bath and laundry water
2. the use of heat in bath water
3. the use of human hair from hair salons as mix in felt used for construction (NKKKh 1931: 537)

Other ideas included using fiber from hair left in bath water, as well as all the paper, used to wrap clean clothes, that was handed back. The idea of rejuvenating the body was coupled with recycling the substances it left behind. One of these substances, human hair, was not only integrated into the chemical ecosystem of the building, but also built into the very edifice, as construction material.

In his visionary projects, developed while he was designing the Sanitary Conveyor, Gegello went further than the state administration. The *banya* building type would process bodies in all their physical and metaphysical states. The solemnity and references to sacred architecture in the articulation of the Conveyor façade is therefore understandable. For in Gegello's vision, the *banya* could be used both as a site of cure and as a site of processing the body that could not be cured, a site for tending to the living and a site for tending to the dead. In *Problems of Municipal Economy* Gegello, working together with David Krichevsky, uses the formal solution that he employed for the Sanitary Conveyor in the design for a crematorium (**fig. 6**). On either side of the monumental façade of the Conveyor, however, he added wing extensions.

The project is not fantastic when we consider that the idea of using the *banya* as a crematorium was not alien to the Soviet post-Revolutionary administration. The first Leningrad facility for cremation (the alternative to church burial) was established in 1921 in the *banya* of the Vasileostrovsky District (Semeneva 1996: 236). The attempt was not a great success, and the facility was only used for a couple of months, but the concept returned in 1959, when baths and crematoriums were grouped together in city planning.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, no plans exist



**Fig. 6:** Design for a Crematorium, Alexander Gegello and David Krichevsky, architects. Reprinted from *Voprosy kommunal'nogo khozyaistva*, No. 9 (September), 1930.

that illustrate how the Leningrad *banya* was transformed into a crematorium in 1921; all we have are Gegello's graphic elaborations of the idea from *Problems of Municipal Economy*.

Both the *banya* that recycles hair as building material and the *banya*-crematorium reflect the desire to create a comprehensive hygiene regimen that would involve total processing on one site. They are expressions of the desire to define the *banya* as a place in which the citizen negotiates the relationship with one's ephemeral condition, with mortality and fragility. Whether it was demoniacal forces, militarized medicine, or the machines that aided this process, whether it resounded with frenetic yelling or was a space of solemn repose, the *banya* remained a site where one came to experience and make sense of one's corporeal existence through rites of hygiene. In the case of the Soviet *banya*, these were also the rites of initiation into a society that was undergoing a process of industrialization. According to the ideology of the period, citizens were to experience intimate contact with the machine, to submit to its invisible and magical powers. The Soviet subject was supposed to establish a relationship with the state; by experiencing the change of bodily states and participating in a circulation of matter, the Soviet subject became connected to the power that administered the transformation of the economy and the circulation of materials and goods.

### The Round *Banya* as Microcosm

The *banya* is therefore not only a conveyor, a factory belt, a machine for the mass production of hygiene. It is also what Foucault called an 'architectural mechanism', a machine in the abstract sense, which 'creates and sustains a power relationship' that is central to how an institution operates, and how society at large operates as well (Foucault 1977: 201). Through architecture, power

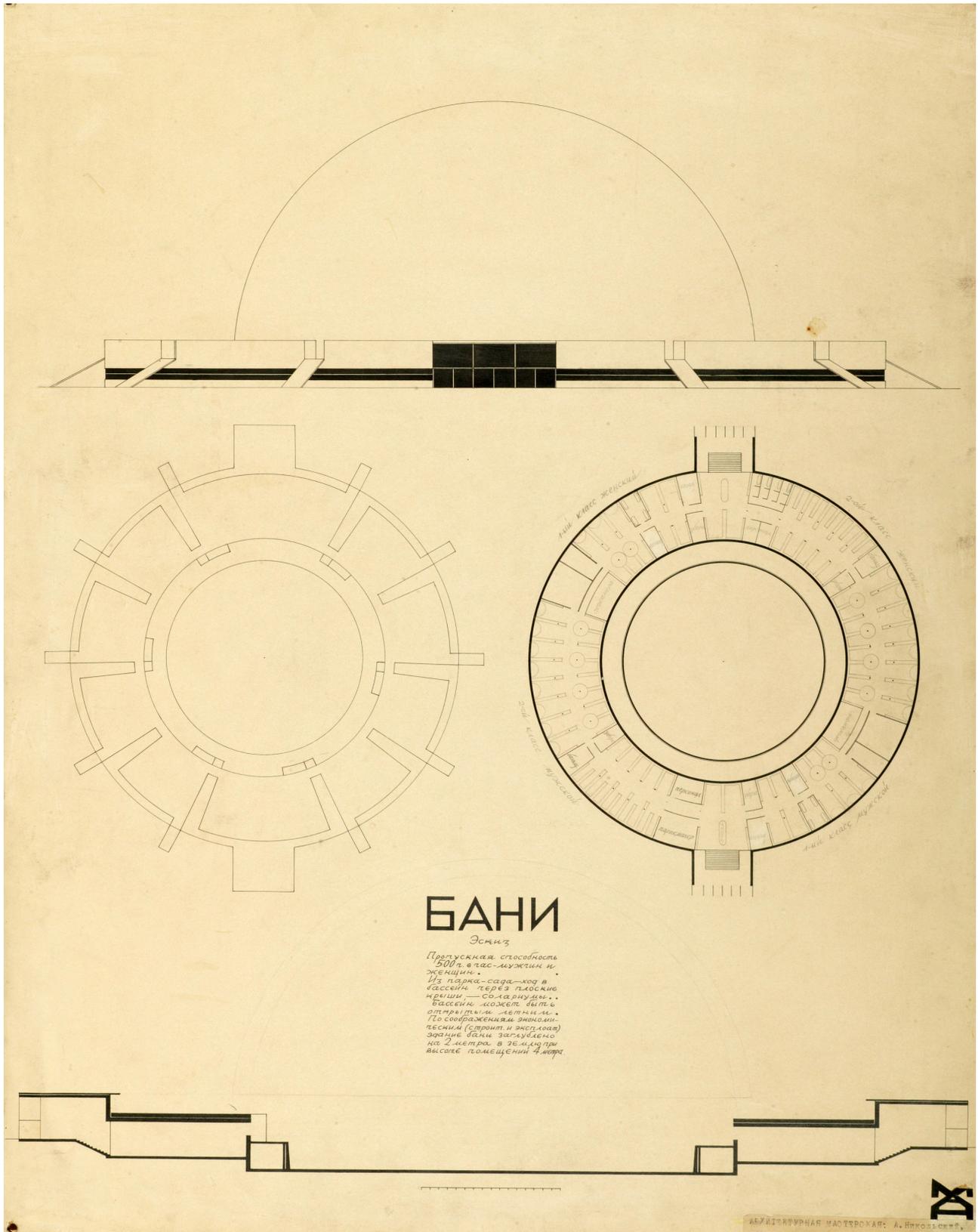
is de-individualized. In other words, power is no longer embodied in the sort of authority held by Zoshchenko's two grumpy wardrobe clerks. It is abstract power, and power established by aesthetic means. In the case of Bentham's Panopticon, which is, for Foucault, a paradigm for the functioning of the modern 'disciplining' society, these aesthetic means involve a 'distribution of bodies, surfaces, light, gazes', a certain optical regime (Foucault 1977: 202).

As we have already seen, the power of the socialist state and its medicine is not envisioned as the power of the eye. Thus the logic is slightly different. The architectural mechanism is, in this case, not a visual mechanism but a mechanism defined by choreographies of cleansing. Still, like Bentham's Panopticon, the *banya* is a microcosm that reflects the relationship between the state and the citizen on an intimate scale, in the realm of the senses. What is the key to the ritual transformation of the citizen in the *banya*, and what is at the center of this experience? Where does the transformative power of the *banya* reside?

The most fantastic example of architecture dedicated to the initiation into the industrial society through care of the self is the round *banya*. The round *banya*, like other *banyas*, was a symbolic microcosm of hygiene, an aesthetic milieu that reflected power relationships and articulated choreographies of hygiene, but it was also formally articulated as a microcosm, and resembled the general scheme of the Panopticon. Round *banyas* were worlds in miniature, and by using them the citizen could experience the logic of the world as machine; within the round *banya*, the citizen's participation in the world, along with the citizen's Communist self, were the subject of nascent industrialization. This was not only a visceral but also a mystical experience.

The first round *banya* appeared in 1927, before the First Five-Year plan. Its author was Alexander Nikol'sky, and it was an unrealized project. The plan was in the shape of the world. It had a gigantic glass dome, akin to Byzantine churches, in which the dome represented the heavens. These heavens, however, were mechanically operated: a mechanism that could open and close them, depending on the weather (**fig. 7**). Nikol'sky's round *banya* is deliberately isolated from its surroundings. The building is not level with the ground. Dressing, showering, and steaming facilities are buried two meters below ground level, and the solarium on the roof is two meters above, connected to the ground only by narrow ramps. Detached from its surroundings, Nikol'sky's round *banya* becomes an isolated ritual territory of collective bodily care.

This collective bodily care is unlike the debauchery on the banks of the Moscow River described by Klutskis. The model is divided into half, one side for male and one side for female users, with separate entrances. Hygiene is precisely choreographed: facilities for dressing, bathing, and steaming are planned to appear in succession. The precise choreography is necessary, because this *banya* can process five hundred bathers per hour. A collective spirit is not achieved through the mingling of users, however, but



**Fig. 7:** Project for a Bathhouse, by Aleksandr Nikol'sky, 1927; original drawing. Courtesy of the Central St Petersburg State Historical Archive (item I-B-2508-ch).

through collective immersion into the immense pool in the center of the construction, fifty-four meters in diameter, in which the organized bathing ritual culminates. This space is dedicated to proletarian mass baptism under

the mechanized heavens, in a world of mass pleasure and mass cure. The transformative power of the *banya* resides in the collective experience of hygiene, a collective immersion into a well-tempered environment. At the center of



**Fig. 8:** *Banya*, Leningrad, by Aleksandr Nikol'sky. Reprinted from *USSR in Construction*, 11 (November), 1931.

the *banya* and, by extension, of the Communist world of which it is an image, are the proletarian masses and the power of the Communist *esprit de corps*.

Nicol'sky's model *banya* was the only edifice of its type considered as a major Soviet monument in El Lissitzky's 1930 treatise, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*. The design's emphasis on bodily care as a public, communal ritual paralleled Lissitzky's call for public and 'universal' architecture as a replacement for 'private and intimate' commissions of the past (Lissitzky 1930: 27). Nicol'sky's small-scale universe for 'phys-culture'—the culture of the body—is one of Lissitzky's main examples of architecture that responds to the new economy of socialist industrialization. It is presented side by side with buildings such as Brothers Vesnin's Palace of Labor of 1923, Leningradskaya Pravda of 1924, and Melnikov's Soviet Pavilion at the World Fair of 1925. For Lissitzky, the round *banya* was important as a model of cosmological 'universality' and collective life—one of the main symbols of the new age.

While Nicol'sky's initial project for a site of proletarian mass immersion into an artificial aquatic world under mechanized heavens was never built, Lissitzky celebrated it in 1930, in *Architecture for World Revolution*, as an example of collectivist utopia, and in the same year, a simplified version of it on a smaller scale appeared in a suburb of Leningrad. Between 1927 and 1930 NarKom-Stroi, the Leningrad Committee for Municipal Construction, undertook the erection of a *banya*, now redesigned by Nicol'sky to process only 2,400 citizens a day. Its diameter was twenty-one meters—less than half of the size of the pool in Nicol'sky's plan. There was no dome and no roof deck. Instead of separate entrances for the men and women, the project had one entrance, and the separation took place in the interior.

A photograph of this project was published in *USSR in Construction*, a lavishly illustrated elite international journal of propaganda (of which El Lissitzky was the editor) (fig. 8). Even as a scaled-down version of the original conception, this round *banya* was considered a unique and

spectacular achievement of the socialist state and a symbol of its civilizing effort, both as a model site of mass hygiene and as an example of radical modernist architecture.

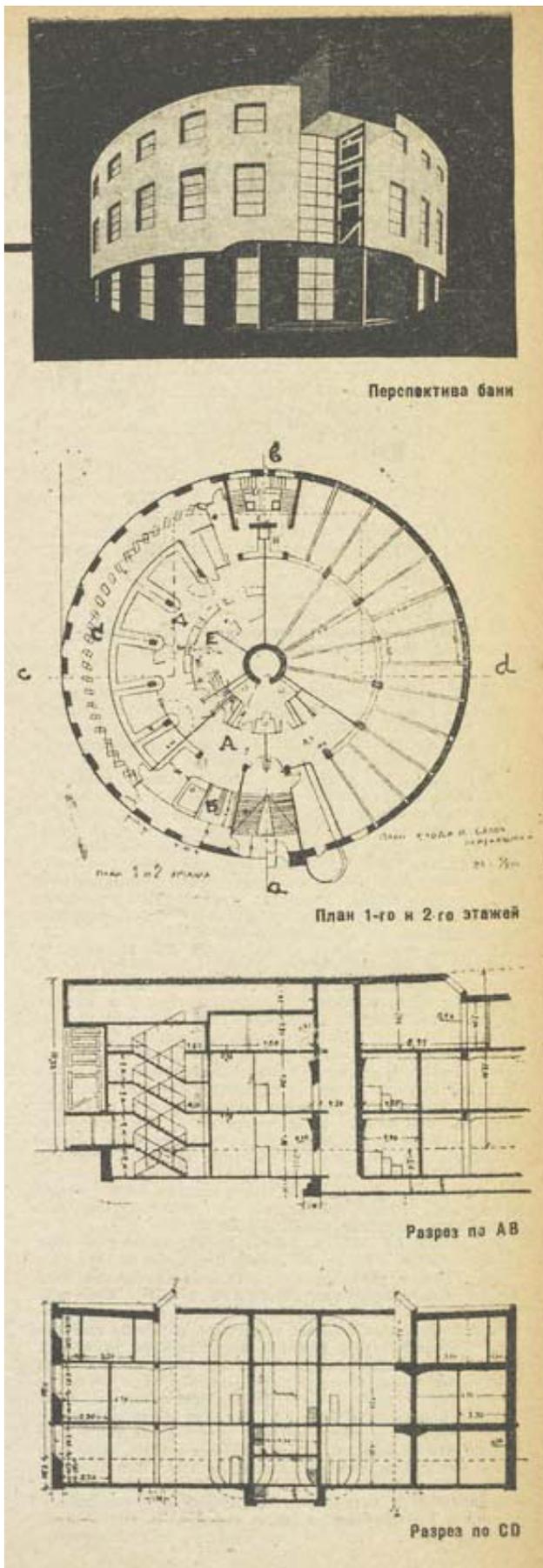
The most interesting element of the built project is not what is there but what is not there. In the center of this cosmos of hygiene, which Nicol'sky had planned as an area for proletarian communion that would celebrate the oceanic feeling of mass belonging, all that is visible are a couple of sheds in an otherwise empty and uncovered space. In Nicol'sky's unrealized vision, the power of the proletarian collective is at the core of *banya*'s design for orderly hygiene and, by extension, of the socialist political order, of which the *banya* is a microcosm. In Nicol'sky's building in Leningrad, constructed during the transition to the First Five-Year Plan, the place is left empty. Physically, but also conceptually, it is unclear what is at the center of the Communist world.

### Banya and the Order of the Universe

The center of the Communist world is more evident in a project by Nicol'sky's pupil, Nikolai Ladinsky. In 1931 Ladinsky designed another round *banya*, which opened in the Siberian city of Tyumen (fig. 9).

The project was published in the January 1932 issue of *Stroitel'stvo Moskvy* (Building in Moscow). The title of the article that deals with the bath is 'Kogda tselesoobrazna postroika zdaniia bez pryamogo osveshcheniia?' (When is the construction of structures without direct lighting feasible?) (Ladinsky 1932). Ladinsky comes up with rational justifications for creating a round *banya*: the shape minimizes and protects the outer wall, and is more compact. 'Comparing the rectangular and the round plan, we see that, with the approximately same area of usable space, the area of walls in the round building is 12.5% less than in the rectangular one. This made us choose the round form' (Ladinsky 1932: 31). The *banya* has no exterior lighting because the main activities are organized around the central core, a heating shaft three meters in diameter with air ducts. This shaft prevents the exterior from being damaged by moisture and ice. The main idea behind this scheme is to demonstrate not only rational ideas but also the desire to isolate the building from its surroundings, both optically and climatically. Like the Sanitary Conveyor of the Vasileostrovsky District, Ladinsky's *banya* is a fortress, solid and impermeable. It is not a building penetrated by light and air, like Western 'X-ray architecture' (as Colomina would put it), but is rather a building with thick skin.

Architecture with thick skin, as discussed earlier, embodies a completely different kind of authority and power: not that of the (technologically augmented) eye but specifically that of the machine as a magical instrument that can heal and transform, a medicinal power. Such architecture defines the bathing experience as a visceral one of 'processing' rather than an experience of visual 'purification'. *Banya* hygiene is not about the power to see but the power to produce. Ladinsky's *banya*, in fact, functions as a production line. Ladinsky calculated that the citizen will spend five minutes undressing, forty minutes wash-



**Fig. 9:** *Banya*, Tiumen, by Anatoly Ladinsky. Reprinted from *Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura*, 1 (January), 1932.

ing and steaming, and fifteen minutes dressing, accomplishing his task in an hour of constant activity. Ladinsky's self-enclosed world of hygiene consists of five concentric zones: heater, saunas, showers, lockers, and two corridors leading to the two sides of the lockers. These are arranged according to temperature. The citizen follows a prescribed path, which prevents a mixing of the dirty and the clean. The bather enters a 'dirty' staircase, takes off his clothes, and puts them in a two-sided locker. He proceeds to the washing room and the sauna, then goes into another 'clean' hallway, approaching his locker from the other side, where he dresses. He exits the building through a 'clean' staircase.

In Ladinsky's *banya* and, to some extent, in the built version of Nikol'sky's *banya*, the proletarian, as a producer, now also becomes the object of production. Through the *banya*, the body is exposed to the power of the machine, which heats, cools, washes, and steams the body. Submitting oneself to this sequence of procedures and sensations, and acting according to Ladinsky's choreography, means participating in a particular economy: the mass production of hygiene.

This economy, however, and the bathing choreography materialized in this building, unlike the efficient mechanized bath in the West, is not only the site of collective intercourse and a collective experience of mechanization, but also an economy which involves mystical elements, despite the rationalist rhetoric. The care of the body takes place in a round, isolated microcosm that resembles, in its conception and with its zones of different heat, the solar system. In a way, being processed in a health apparatus like the round *banya* resembles travelling to the center of the world and back. The machine of efficiency does not cease to be a machine of magic, even when it loses spectacular elements, such as the leaping swans, gaping frogs, and sparkly jets of water of the *banya* in Figure 1. What happens, in effect, is that the microcosm of the round *banya* presents us with an image of the world mechanized, of a kind that is supposedly rational and efficient, but which acquires cosmological features with a machine in the center.

What was this cosmological modernization about? The urban proletariat could apprehend modernization immediately, as the regulation of sensations of hot, cold, steamy, and wet; it could enjoy it as an environment that runs perfectly; and it could experience it as the subject of bodily processing. Ultimately, the *banya* was the world: a world inhabited by the mechanized proletariat.

The architecture of the *banya* around 1930, which was so intimately related to the understanding of the proletarian self, not only articulated the aesthetic and ethic of mass cleanliness, as was the case in both Europe and the Soviet Union. It was also related to a conception of society and the world as parts of a machine. The *banya* was an abstract machine, in which the bathing process was a process of production. The experience of that process established the relationship between the Soviet subject and state authority, which organized such mechanized production and the broader processes of industrialization.

The *banyas* defined relationships of power, but they were also concrete machines that tied visceral experience to the logic of mechanized production, bringing mechanization close to the citizen's skin in the most literal way. There is not one standard project, but an entire range, from a 'sanitary conveyor' where cleanliness could be efficiently produced both before and after death, to round *banyas* resembling the dome of Byzantine church, recalling and recreating the order of the universe. The characteristic of all these projects is that the production of hygiene, and by extension, industrialized production in general, was both an example of modern efficiency and a transcendental experience. The architecture of mass hygiene in this particular moment in Soviet history employed mechanized cleansing as a collective rite in which pleasure, physical sensation, and often rapture helped convey a unique experience of modernity and proletarian belonging. The architecture of the *banya*, in its many forms, created a system in which efficiency and magic and modernity and the occult worked together.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 'Koli b ne banya my by vse propali', 'Banya—mat' vtoraya', and 'V kakoi den' parishysya, v tot den' ne starishysya'.
- <sup>2</sup> 'V bane net epoletov', 'V bane net generalov', and 'V bane vse ravnye'.
- <sup>3</sup> In 1959 *banyas* in the USSR were officially grouped together with crematoriums with the passing of 'Rules and norms of planning and building cities: 'Bathroom-laundry buildings, bathhouses and crematoriums have to be placed on the parts inside living zones and micro-zones that are equipped for that purpose' (Bogdanov 2000: 143).

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