

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Housing and Revolution: From the *Dom-Kommuna* to the Transitional Type of Experimental House (1926–30)

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In the USSR, against the backdrop of political change and social instability in the 1920s, the issue of housing for the masses was addressed by the Association of Contemporary Architects (OSA), under the leadership of Moisey Ginzburg. Their mission was not only to provide a solution to the lack of accommodation in the major cities of the country, but to redefine housing as a framework suited to a society transitioning towards a fully socialised life. The response was developed in three stages of design research, over a period of five years. The initial conceptual phase was formally presented by members of the OSA at the 1926 Comradely Competition, and focused on the housing question, with specific designs for communal houses. The second stage revolved around the scientific and methodological research of the Stroykom, developed in parallel with the designs for the new communal living units. The final stage took material form in six specific buildings, known as transitional-type experimental houses. One of these, the Narkomfin, gained worldwide recognition as a modern prototype of Soviet avant-garde housing, and has been widely researched as a result. However, to date no study has approached all three phases with equal scrutiny and methodology. This article offers a detailed account of the OSA's experimental design strategies for collective workers' housing between 1926 and 1930 under Ginzburg's leadership by examining original sources, as well as analysing and restoring the individual projects at each stage. It provides a new interpretation of the famous Narkomfin House and ideas on the first Soviet avant-garde housing project by reconstructing the complex research context in which the building, in tandem with other projects, was developed.

Introduction

In 1926, the leading theorists of the Association of Contemporary Architects (OSA) announced a 'Comradely Competition for Preliminary Design of Housing for Workers'. The competition brief, published in the third issue of the association's journal *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura* (SA), called for the development of new residential typologies. The stated goal was not merely to resolve the shortage of workers' housing in the Soviet Union, but, most important, to facilitate 'new relations falling under the notion of community' (Ginzburg et al. 1926a; translation by the author). There had, of course, been earlier efforts to address the pressing housing question. But the Comradely Competition was the first to systematically develop innovative solutions at both the scale of the individual living unit and the residential building scale in a deliberate attempt to assist women's emancipation. Its intent was to redefine not only the nature of the 'socialist family', but also the relationship between individual and collective, more broadly.

Only a few of the avant-garde projects that sought to address the migration of rural populations to the rapidly expanding cities during the years of the New Economic

Policy (1921–28) were actually implemented.¹ Lacking both the economic and technical means for new construction in the immediate aftermath of World War I and the revolution in 1918, workers and their families were initially re-housed in existing dwellings that, until then, had been single-family bourgeois homes.² However, this measure of turning private into communal apartments – a result of the nationalisation of land and the abolition of property – could at best provide a temporary fix to workers' precarious living conditions in cities like Moscow or Saint Petersburg, where industrial enterprises were typically concentrated.³

During the first half of the 1920s, Soviet planners and architects began to develop new habitat models. The earliest of these models featured low-density single-family homes built close to the new factories and industrial enterprises. An example of this type of settlement is the Sokol cooperative on the industrial outskirts of Moscow, designed by Nikolay Markovnikov in 1923 (Khan-Magomedov 1987: 345). As the decade went on, the more economical solution of multi-family blocks proliferated and soon became the norm for newly built workers' housing. Aleksandr Gegello, Aleksandr Nikol'skiy and Grigoriy Simonov's three- and four-storey buildings on Traktorskaya Ulitsa in Leningrad, built between 1925 and 1927, are prime examples of this second approach (1987: 275–76).

While these first two models are rather conventional, the third habitat model, developed by Soviet avant-garde theoreticians and architects, entailed experimental projects for communal housing, called *domma-kommuny* (singular: *dom-kommuna*). It is with the *domma-kommuny* that this article's research into experimental design strategies for collective workers' housing really begins. By introducing a range of additional programmes into these dwellings, the avant-garde's intention was to transform workers' consciousness and induce collective behavioural patterns — a process of socialisation of daily life (*byt*)⁴ deemed consistent with the objectives of socialist politics.

A series of architectural competitions initiated by local authorities — those by the Soviet of the City of Moscow (Mossovet) in particular — tried to stimulate the development of these communal housing types. For example, a 1922 competition for the design of two exemplary workers' housing schemes in Moscow asked for the provision of social infrastructures such as clubs, kindergartens and playgrounds, communal kitchens and dining rooms, washrooms and showers, laundries, doctors' surgeries, garages and storage facilities (Bliznakov 1993: 93). And in 1925, for the first time a competition brief for communal housing explicitly stated as its goal the liberation of women through the promotion of communal amenities and the encouragement of new and improved relationships among family members and residents (Kopp 1970: 145).

Few proposals were submitted to this 1925 Mossovet competition, and none came from members of the OSA. However, it helped fuel the debate among architects on communal forms of housing for workers, prompting reconsideration of hierarchies of class and gender. Just one year later, the young group of Constructivists, who openly opposed political interference in design work (Hudson 1986: 559–560), began their own research on the issue of workers' housing. Led by Moisey Ginzburg, the OSA architects embarked on a five-year investigation of experimental housing models, taking technical progress, economic constraints and the Soviet leadership's goal to establish new social relationships as their point of departure.

Drawing from a wide range of primary sources from archives and personal collections in Moscow, Rotterdam, Cambridge, Dessau, New York and New Jersey, the present article offers an account of the OSA's experimental design strategies for collective workers' housing under Ginzburg's leadership between 1926 and 1930. It argues that, during this period, the design process consisted of three key stages — conceptual, scientific and empirical. The essay seeks to diachronically map out the different views held by the architects in Ginzburg's team when designing, evaluating, and executing their proposals. Developed in various competition entries, their architectural solutions are represented here in plans, sections and axonometric views that were redrawn by the author using the same scale and graphic standards. These restitutions, collated from original plans, drawings, planning and construction documents, building permits and official bulletins, allow systematic analysis and comparison

between the range of proposals while also highlighting continuities in spatial arrangements throughout the three stages of the design process. Revisiting theoretical debates among the authors in relation to their designs, the article builds on and expands previous studies on the Narkomfin Communal House (Buchli 1998, 1999; Cramer and Zalivako 2013; Pasini 1980; Udovički-Selb 2016). At the same time, and more importantly, it offers new insights into the collective genesis of Ginzburg's theories concerning standardisation and typification in residential design.

First Stage, Conceptual Approach: The 1926 Comradely Competition

The OSA brigade's initial attempts to define the *dom-kommuna* emphasised quick and easy construction in an effort to provide inexpensive housing for individual working-class families. One of the main goals of the Comradely Competition, launched in 1926 among OSA members in their journal *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura*, was 'the creation of a *house-organism* to facilitate novel productive and domestic relations between workers, leading to the notion of community.'⁵ The design proposals were not only to strike a balance between social and economic requirements. They were also expected to lay the groundwork for optimally meeting housing needs. To establish the programme and its basic parameters for the design brief, two surveys, one assessing workers' demands and the other collecting recommendations from construction experts in the USSR, were published in the following issue (Ginzburg et al. 1926b: 109).

Aimed at ordinary citizens, the first of these surveys included six questions about the conditions for a transition to the new *byt*, as well as about any past petit bourgeois residue that ought to be rejected. The second survey, geared towards specialists, focused on building technologies and raised questions about construction materials and methods, occupation, the advisable number of floors, minimum space standards and other building requirements. Only five responses were published in the journal (*Otvety na anketu SA 1927*). Four of them addressed the problem of *byt* reform from different perspectives: defending art as the main driving force in the transition to a new way of life, denouncing newly built apartments that reproduced earlier bourgeois ones, and indicating the functional and spatial necessities of these new dwellings. Despite occasional differences in tone and opinion, a number of common requests were formulated in response to the questions, including, most importantly, requests for collective forms of childcare and education, for the separation of public and private domestic spheres and for the liberation of women from domestic oppression. Only one of the five published responses focused on technical aspects. Its author, a factory worker from Donbas, envisioning the extensive use of reinforced concrete structures, recommended the construction of walls equipped with closets and folding beds, and suggested the installation of lightweight sliding walls to achieve greater flexibility in the use and inhabitation of rooms.

On the basis of the five responses, eight proposals were presented by OSA members Moisey Ginzburg, Gregoriy Vegman, Vyacheslav Vladimirov, Andrey Ol', Nina Vorotyntseva and Raisa Polyak, Aleksandr Nikol'skiy, Aleksandr Pasternak and Ivan Sobolev (**Figure 1**). These designs – in a clear nod to the West – generally followed a modern architectural language that favoured free space over enclosures.⁶ Despite their shared aesthetic, the schemes varied greatly in terms of their scale of intervention due to the freedom granted by the design brief. In fact, there were relatively few similarities, for instance, between the proposals of Vegman and Sobolev, whose *dom-kommuna* resembled an entire neighbourhood, and of Pasternak and Nikol'skiy, who designed a single building. All proposals included at least one private kitchen and toilet in each unit to allow some degree of privacy for individual households. In line with the responses to the survey, communalisation was introduced with considerable caution to maintain a balance and differentiate between the domestic and the communal spheres of the *domma-kommuny*.⁷ The only entry to include communal sleeping areas was that by Vorotyntseva and Polyak, although the restraint shown in their design suggests their recognition of a need for privacy.

All entries gave special attention to the circulation systems (**Figure 2**). The designs by Vegman, Vladimirov and Nikol'skiy featured modest-sized stairwells, while those by

Ginzburg, Ol', Sobolev, and Vorotyntseva and Polyak used corridors. Only Vorotyntseva and Polyak put forward a proposal with an open gallery, alternating its position within the block from one side to the other. It is also worth noting Ginzburg's careful treatment of the corridor, which defined areas for entrance and exit, rest and storage, and allowed light to enter the building through windows high up in the wall (**Figure 3**). Finally, the entry by Pasternak combined horizontal and vertical systems of circulation, including a corridor on the second level giving access to all the stairwells in the block.

Despite the competition's rather vague specifications, seven of the eight proposals featured elements for communal use.⁸ Communal kitchens and dining rooms, libraries and reading rooms, workshops, washrooms, crèches and kindergartens were generally included in the programme to relieve women of the burden of domestic work and childcare, and to grant residents access to culture and leisure. These collective facilities were presented as a social service infrastructure for the residents, a restricted public sphere that would expand and enrich their individual domestic sphere.

Even though all participants grouped the different communal areas in different ways, three principal strategies for clustering these spaces can be observed. While both Vladimirov's and Pasternak's proposals accommodated communal facilities on the lower floor of the residential building, Ginzburg and Vegman separated them, setting

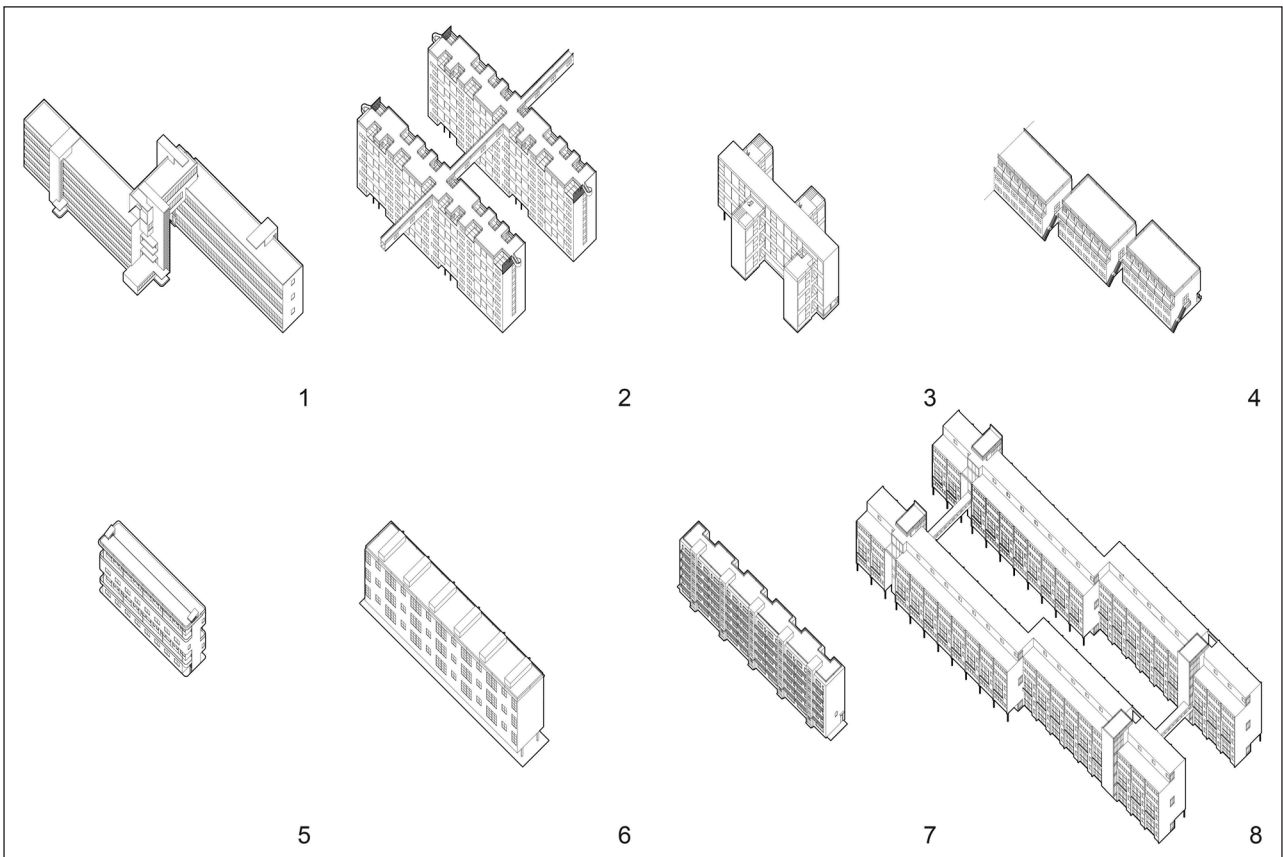


Figure 1: Axonometric views of the eight proposals submitted to the 1926 Comradely Competition: Ginzburg (1), Vegman (2), Vladimirov (3), Ol' (4), Vorotyntseva and Polyak (5), Nikol'skiy (6), Pasternak (7) and Sobolev (8). Graphics by Daniel Movilla Vega.

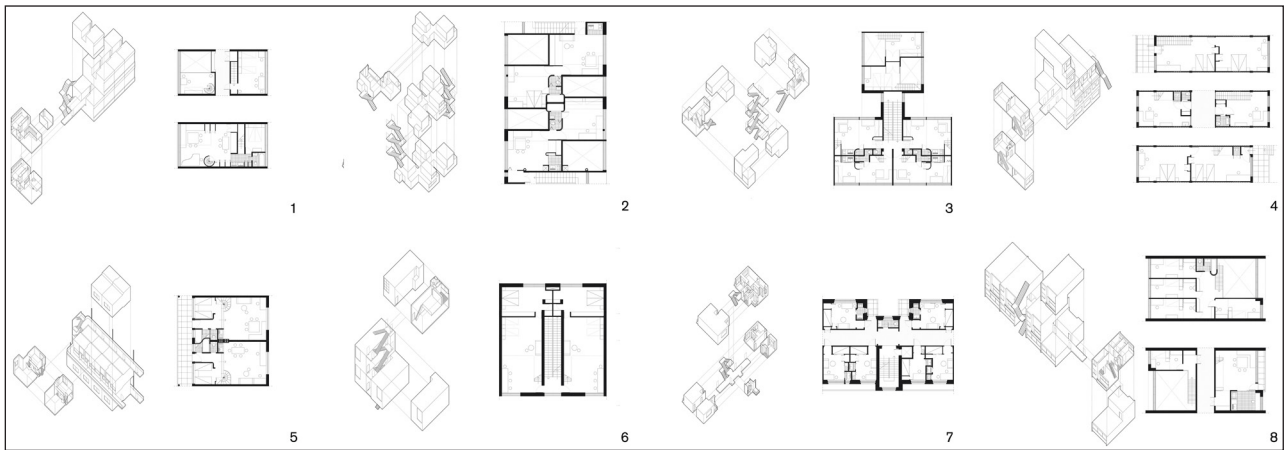


Figure 2: Axonometric views of the cluster system and floor plans of the eight proposals submitted to the 1926 Comradely Competition: Ginzburg (1), Vegman (2), Vladimirov (3), Ol' (4), Vorotyntseva and Polyak (5), Nikol'skiy (6), Pasternak (7) and Sobolev (8). Graphics by Daniel Movilla Vega.

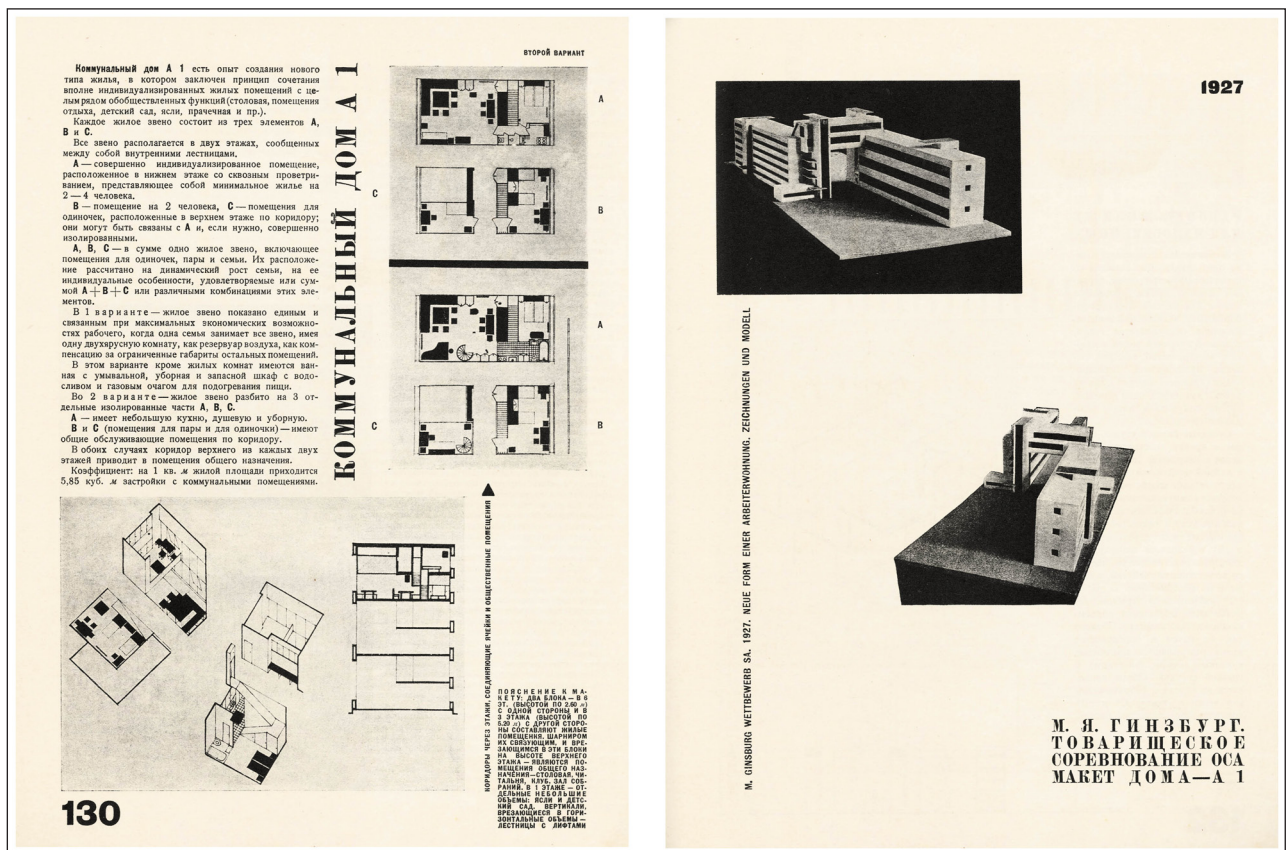


Figure 3: 'Communal house A 1', Ginzburg's entry for the 1926 Comradely Competition. From *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura* 4–5, 1927.

up rooms for dining, leisure, education and services on the upper floor, while spaces devoted to children were located on the lower floor. This ground floor location for nurseries and kindergartens meant that space was no longer taken up by hallways, as children could be dropped off and picked up by parents directly on their way to and from work. Lastly, Ol', Sobolev, and Vorotyntseva and Polyak proposed separate buildings for communal uses. Ginzburg, Vegman and Sobolev also added raised passages to connect the communal wings and residential blocks. This allowed access to all areas without leaving the

building. From outside, these elevated footbridges made the *dom-kommuna* appear as a closed, autonomous circuit, reminiscent of Konstantin Melnikov's earlier proposal for workers' dwellings in Serpukhovskaya Ulitsa (Starr 1978: 45–52).

The architects endeavoured to use complex spatial arrangements to minimize the floor area of the residential cells (Figure 2). Vegman's design made up for the increase in volume in the residential rooms by reducing the size of the service rooms, arranged symmetrically on each floor. Vladimirov's dwellings, linked in pairs along three

Cartesian axes, provided independent rooms without resorting to internal partitions. Other participants, including Ol' and Sobolev, presented a two-tiered housing design around a central corridor, found later in Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation*. Ginzburg's residential cells, distributed along two floors linked by staircases, were organised into three modules, two of which were accessed through an internal corridor, allowing for variations in these units to suit residents' individual requirements.

All eight proposals were published in *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura*, introduced by a five-page assessment by Aleksandr Pasternak (Pasternak 1927). To construe the proposals as both the status quo in residential design and a baseline for further exploration, Pasternak's article deliberately highlighted common features of the architects' schemes, instead of paying attention to their differences. The housing projects were exhibited in the first international architecture exhibition by the Constructivist architects at Vkhutemas in 1927, where they occupied an entire room. The extensive publicity given to the proposals in both the journal and at Moscow's prestigious School of Architecture had one central aim: to cement their authors' status as the most qualified designers of habitat models for the transition to socialism.

Second Stage, Scientific Approach: The Standardisation Department at Stroykom RSFSR

The widespread promotion of the OSA architects' work in the Comradely Competition alerted the planning and construction authorities of the USSR to the need to explore further possibilities for housing. As a result, in 1928, the Standardisation Department at Stroykom RSFSR, an official section for the development of typified and standardised housing, was created.⁹

Among the tasks of this institution were not only the development of new dwelling types and standards, but also the technical training of construction workers, to increase their skills in dealing with new building materials and techniques (Kazus 2009: 292–93). From its earliest beginnings, the Stroykom expressed the need to align the purely economic aspects of the new dwellings with the guidelines set out by the government as part of the First Five Year Plan. Under government control, and following the stipulations to cut public spending for construction, the department needed to address four major objectives. The first was to meet the demand for workers' housing in large cities, while using the country's economic resources as efficiently as possible. This meant developing designs for new housing types that would reduce construction costs to the absolute minimum. The second objective was to improve the quality of the apartments by establishing a catalogue of basic standards of equipment for all new apartments.¹⁰ The third was to reduce the usable floor area of small apartments, based on the estimation that three-quarters of the population in a big city needed either one- or at most two-room apartments. The idea was to match the type of dwelling to the number of inhabitants as closely as possible, to avoid the practice of allocating several families to a single apartment. The final objective was the creation of a new residential type called

the transitional type: a residential building in which small individual units were complemented by shared service areas. Conceived as an intermediate step en route to more socialised living in communal houses, the transitional type was to respond to the new situation of women working outside the home, children attending kindergartens, and the rapid growth of culture, physical education and leisure (Stroykom RSFSR 1929: 13).

Ginzburg coordinated and supervised the work of the Standardisation Department at Stroykom, overseeing the work of other architects such as Pasternak, Vladimirov, Grigoriy Sum-Shik and Mikhail Barshch. The fact that three of these five members had already participated in the 1926 Comradely Competition ensured continuity for the OSA's work on the *dom-kommuna*. This also meant that the Stroykom's work on standardisation, the industrialisation of building processes and the mass production of housing originated in the design of collective dwellings. Within a period of just a few months, the OSA produced and promptly disseminated several standardised cell models (Figure 4) (Stroykom RSFSR 1929: 55–76). The aim was for these models to become standard dwelling types ready for mass production across the country in a short timeframe.

In pursuing the mutual goal of encouraging a shift towards a new socialist way of life, both the speculative designs of the Comradely Competition and the subsequent research by the Standardisation Department took into account economic and technical realities. But there was a

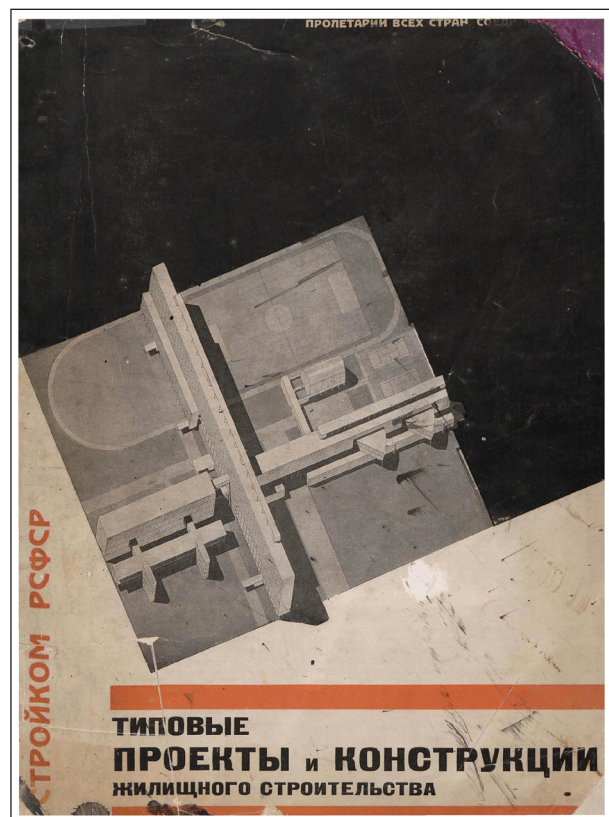


Figure 4: Cover of the album published by the Stroykom in 1929, *Tipovyye proyekty i konstruktsii zhilishchnogo stroitel'stva, rekomenduyemyye na 1930 g* [Types of Projects and Standards for Housing Construction, Recommended for the year 1930].

key difference between the two stages. While the competition operated largely outside the borders of state bureaucracy, the work of the Standardisation Department was subject to strict rules adopted by the Stroykom RSFSR on 17 February 1928.¹¹ Thus, scientific protocols, standards, norms and parameters came to replace the artistic freedom and creativity of earlier design explorations. Primarily, it was the need to meet economic requirements that led to an engagement with the ideas of ‘Existenzminimum’ successfully employed by Ernst May in Germany at that time. With this strategy for increasing the production of housing units by reducing apartment size, standardisation and rationalisation, the work of May’s office in Frankfurt am Main was considered an important precedent (Bibliografiya 1929).

The Standardisation Department at the Stroykom RSFSR employed mathematical calculations to rate the spatial efficiency of the different proposals for housing. It established a factor to calculate the optimal ratio of outer surface dimensions to volume or different dwelling types. This factor had already been alluded to in some of the contributions to the 1926 competition. But these were little more than token explanations. Employing these algorithms meant that the spatial characteristics of different dwelling unit types could be rationally assessed and compared in tables and diagrams. The shift from more abstract ideological goals to economic, production-oriented principles established objective evaluation criteria. In turn, it also allowed the newly designed housing types to be tested through set performance indicators.

The OSA’s scientific methodology was completely novel to Soviet architectural practice and was considered

exceptional even in the West (CIAM 1997: 20; Garrido 2007: 371–380; Ginzburg 1929: 4–6; Kopp 1970: 130, 135; Mumford 2002: 44). Yet surprisingly, this rational method of analysis also revealed that the existing typology of converted pre-revolutionary bourgeois homes arranged around a vertical stairwell proved more efficient in relative economic terms than the minimum apartment models built during the 1920s, as a comparison between total building volumes and apartment surface area of both housing types confirmed. Because living areas had already been pared down to the bare essence in designs for minimum dwellings, the only way to further reduce the floor area was to streamline service spaces such as kitchens, bathrooms and entrance halls. To this end, Ginzburg’s team adopted the analytical methods of time and motion studies, championed by American household reformer Christine Frederick, to rationalise domestic labour, which Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky had also employed in her design of the Frankfurt Kitchen in 1926 (Espiegel and Rojas 2018; Frederick 1913; Schütte-Lihotzky 1996). This allowed Ginzburg and his colleagues to develop the so-called type A residential units (**Figure 5**), saving space by a further 10% compared to previous models.

Subsequently, adjustments to the volume of apartments were made by dropping the height of auxiliary areas, a strategy that had already been explored in several of the proposals for the Comradely Competition. For example, the design by Vorotyntseva and Polyak experimented with interlocking auxiliary and inhabitable rooms, which became a precedent for the dwelling known as type B, achieving savings of another 10% over type A.

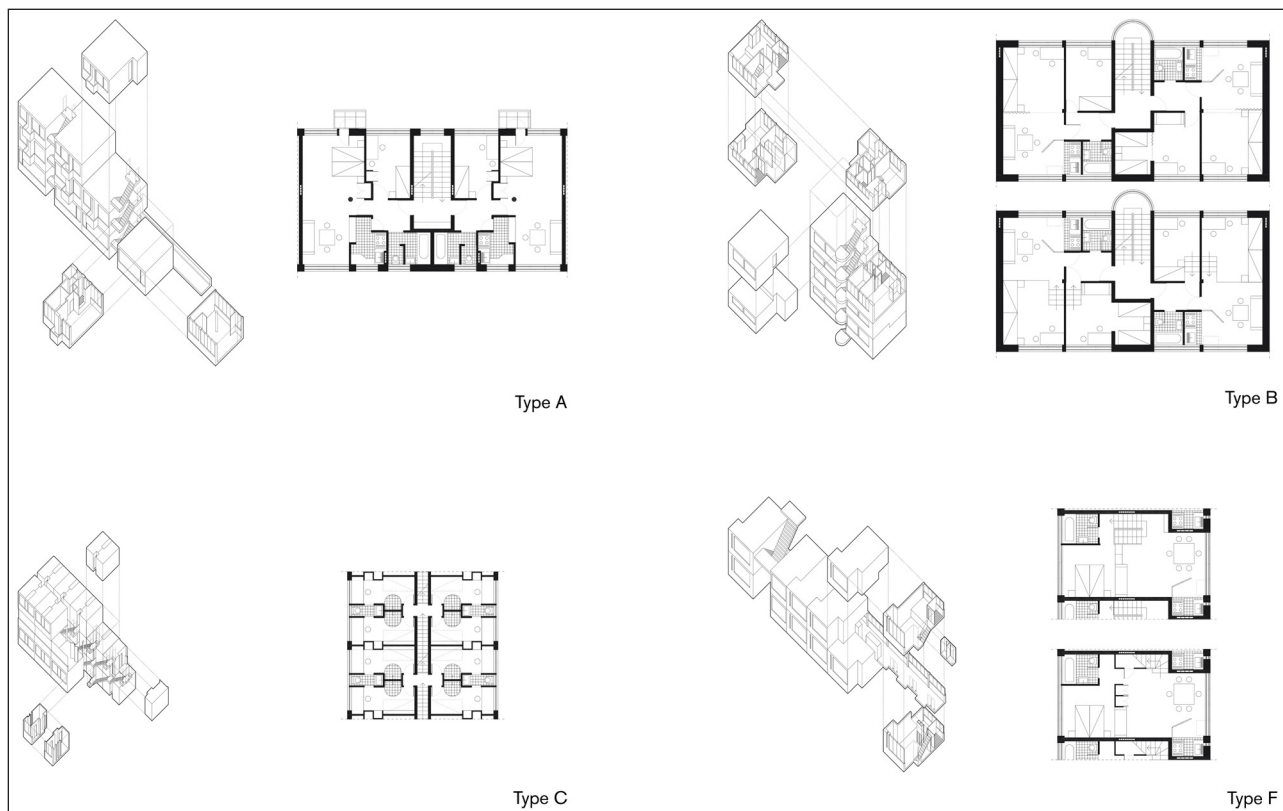


Figure 5: Axonometric views of the cluster system and floor plans of types A, B, E and F, developed by the Standardisation Department at Stroykom RSFSR (1928–29). Graphics by Daniel Movilla Vega.

However, further economic analysis revealed these measures to still be insufficient. Type A and B dwellings as well as new generic layouts (C, D, E and F) each established different circulation routes and vertical connections between floors and dwellings. While types A and B were designed around a central stairwell, layouts C, D and E featured conventional stacking, with a single corridor giving access to one, two or three floors respectively. Layout F, which was more original, incorporated a corridor between every two floors, with floor slabs placed on split levels.

Each spatial configuration was evaluated in terms of its 'economic efficiency', as the inhabitable surface area differed between various types (Figure 6). Economic efficiency was identified with a *k* coefficient, the result of dividing the

built volume of the dwelling by its usable area. The lower the coefficient, the more economically efficient the corresponding housing type. Surprisingly, this study revealed that layout A was the most advantageous for dwellings larger than 50 square metres. However, based on studies of the housing demand, this 'family unit' was only suitable for 40% of the population. To provide single-occupancy apartments for the remaining 60%, the only solution was to design a single-room dwelling no more expensive in relative terms than a two- or three-room dwelling.

Layouts C and E did meet the strict requirements in terms of economy and demand (Figure 7), but it was the wide range of layout F variants that best fulfilled them (Figure 8). Here, space was reduced along the side of the

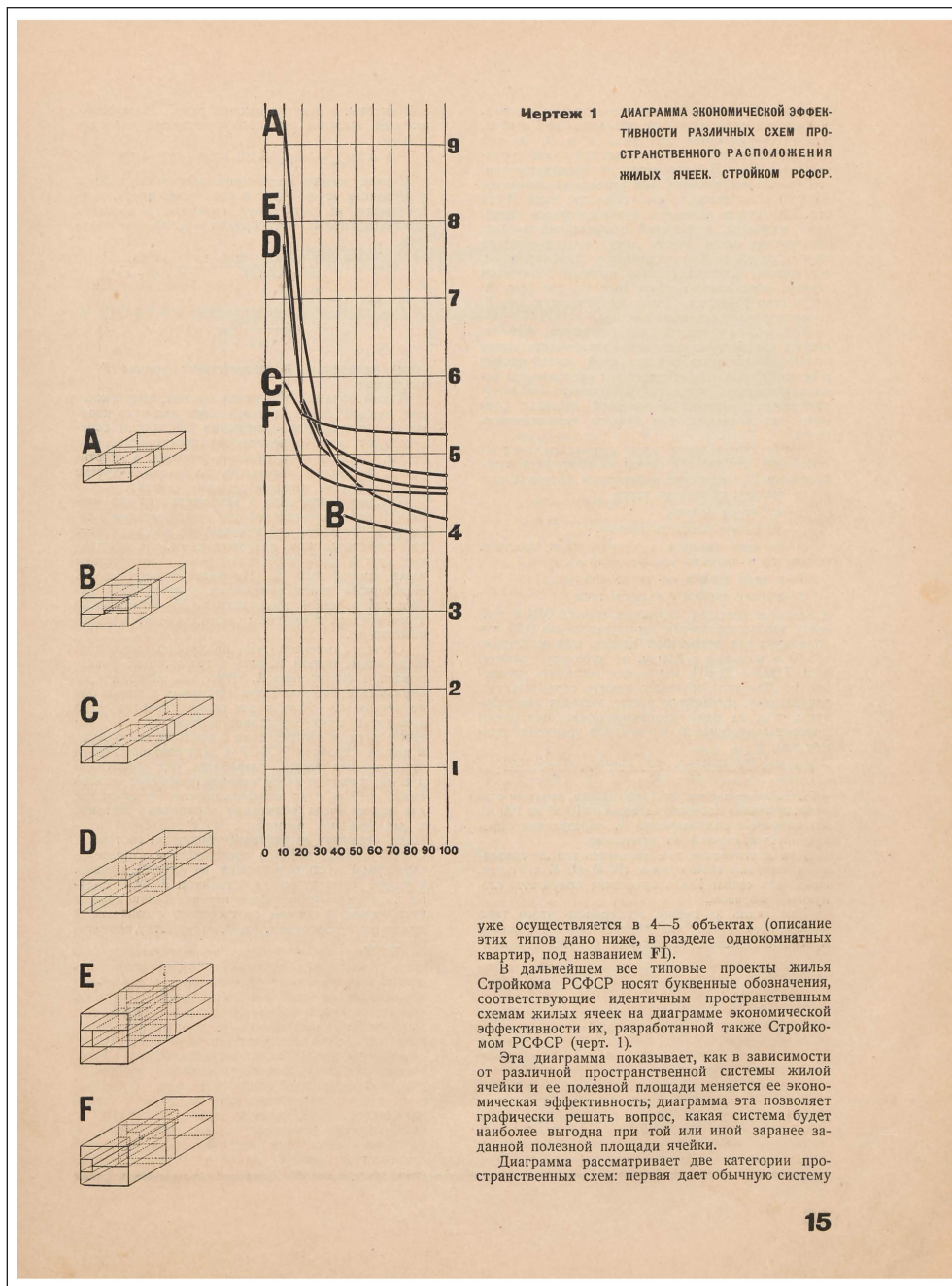


Figure 6: Diagram of economic efficiency presented by the Standardisation Department at Stroykom RSFSR for layouts A, B, C, D, E and F. On the X-axis: inhabitable surface areas; on the Y-axis: *k* coefficient. From Stroykom's album *Tipovyye proyekty i konstruktsii zhilishchnogo stroitel'stva, rekomenduyemyye na 1930 g*, 1929.

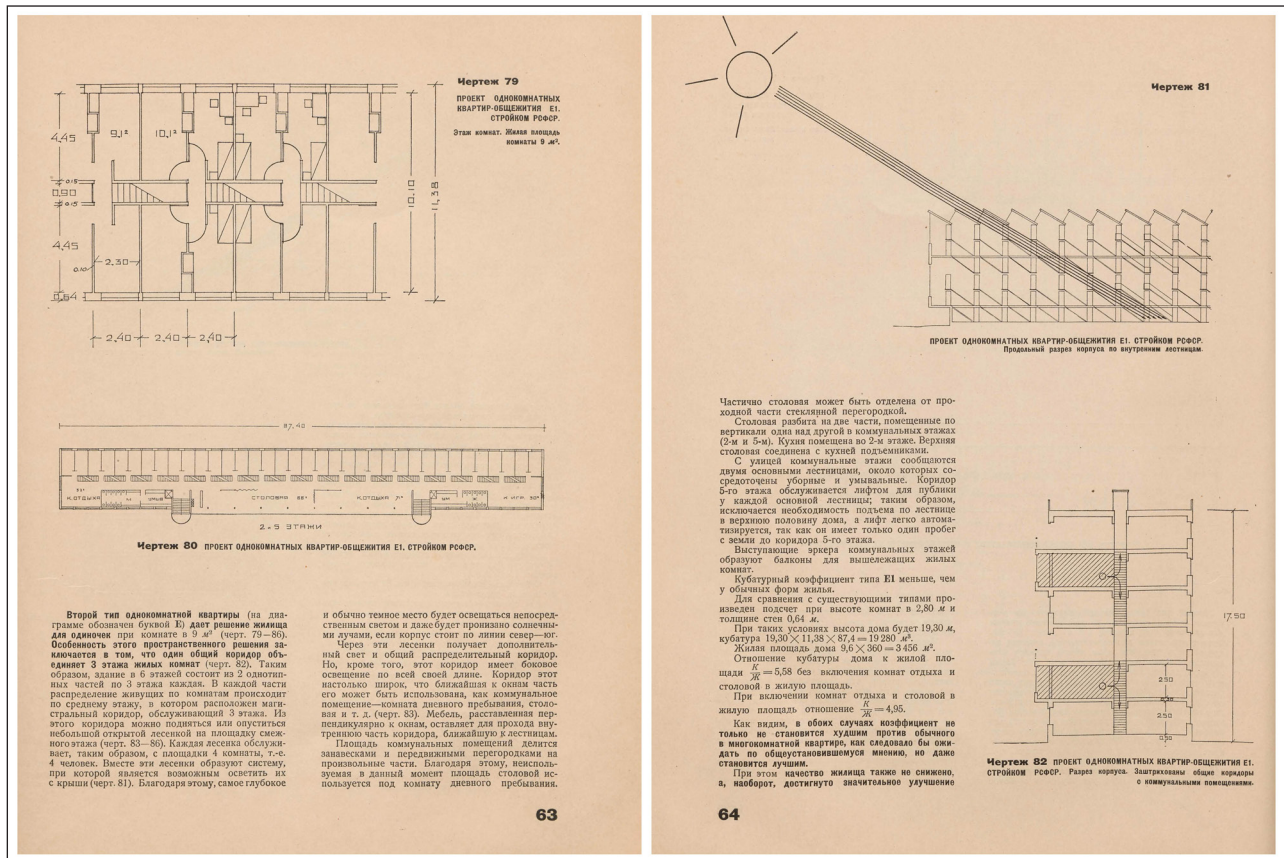


Figure 7: Type E-1 developed by the Standardisation Department at Stroykom RSFSR (1928–29). From Stroykom's album *Tipovyye proyekty i konstruktsii zhilishchnogo stroitel'stva, rekomenduyemye na 1930 g*, 1929.

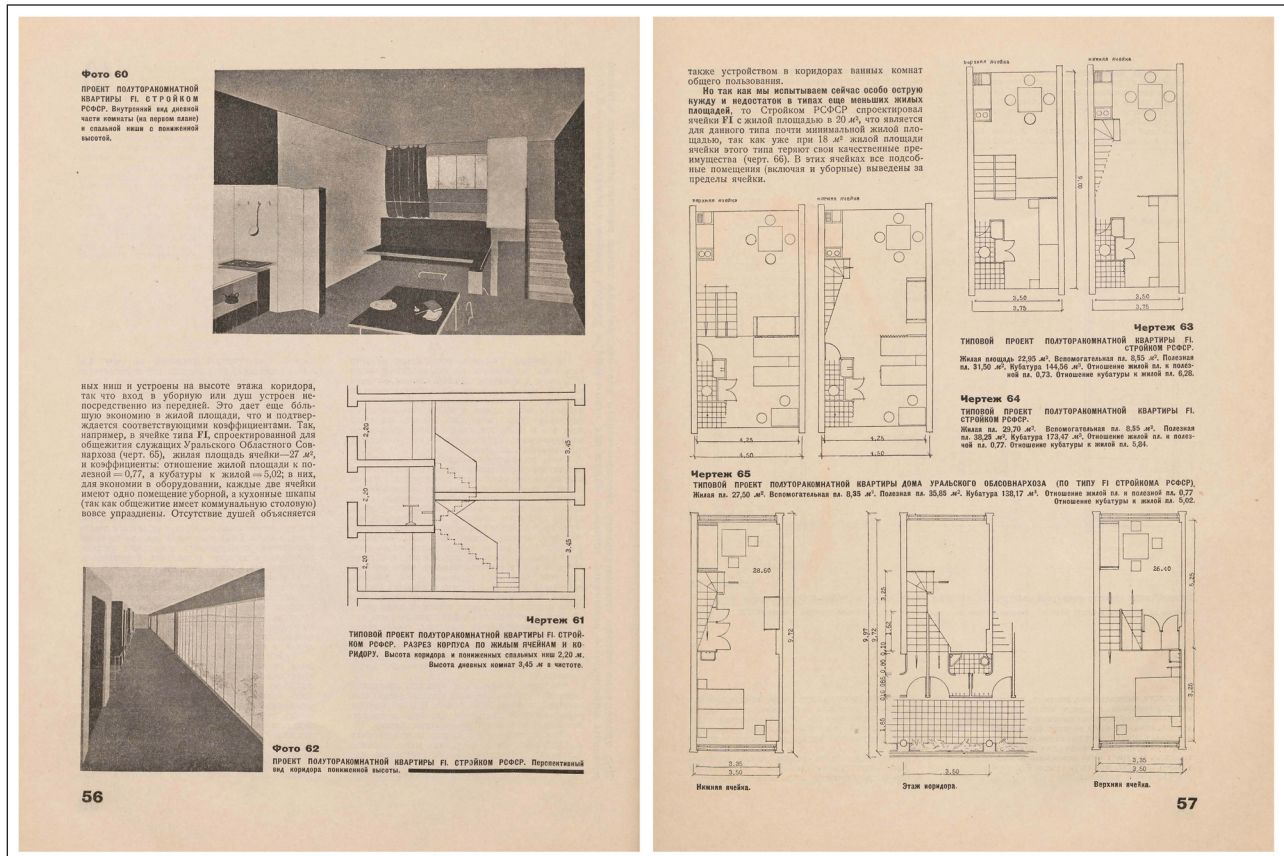


Figure 8: Type F-1 developed by the Standardisation Department at Stroykom RSFSR (1928–29). From Stroykom's album *Tipovyye proyekty i konstruktsii zhilishchnogo stroitel'stva, rekomenduyemye na 1930 g*, 1929.

dwelling where bedroom and bathroom were located. In turn, the height gained in the lower and the upper dwellings was combined, with the resulting intermediate-level corridor providing access to the dwellings through internal stairs. This granted natural ventilation and lighting on both façades of the dwellings while establishing the corridor as a bright outdoor gallery. The overall coefficients obtained were equivalent to those of dwellings of 54 square metres, while the average height of the inhabitable areas was also greater than in conventional models.

Compared to the other dwelling types, which used more traditional layouts such as the ones featured in the 1926 Comradely Competition, type F was entirely novel. This residential unit provided the best architectural solution not only with respect to economy and quality, but also as a prototype for a habitat in transition towards the community dwelling model and thus for a way of life that was considered more socially advanced (Udovički-Selb 2016: 65–66). The lighting conditions in the corridor encouraged group activities by linking residential and community spaces. In turn, this meant that the boundaries of the new dwelling extended to the communal kitchens, dining rooms and bathrooms as well as culture and leisure spaces. Individual kitchens were replaced by small stoves, encouraging the use of collective kitchens while allowing residents the possibility of warming up food or preparing small meals or tea within their own residential unit. Occupants could adjust participation in communal life or choose private family life and independence from neighbours according to their individual preference. Type F thus took into consideration Ginzburg's distrust of an immediate shift to fully collectivised housing models. It went on to play a key role in promoting a gradual and peaceful transition towards the new *byt*.

Type F quickly became popular throughout the USSR (Bliznakov 1993: 109, 113). Between 1928 and 1929, the Stroykom presented several theoretical proposals for housing complexes of this type, including the House for 80 to 100 dwellers. Other examples include the apartment building designed by Ginzburg and Pasternak in Sverdlovsk and the housing complex for 'Exemplary Construction' in Moscow, designed by Barshch, Vladimirov, Pasternak, Ignatij Milinis, Lyubov Slavina and Sergey Orlovsky. However, without a doubt the most significant proposal was that which was most successful in developing the postulates of Ginzburg's team – Narkomfin House.

Third Stage, Empirical Approach: The Narkomfin Transitional Type of Experimental House

The House for the Popular Commissariat of Finance, Narkomfin, was built by Ginzburg and Ignatij Milinis in collaboration with engineer Sergey Prokhorov in Moscow between 1928 and 1930. It was commissioned by the Commissar of Finance, Nikolay Milyutin, a leading Soviet theorist on urban planning (Milyutin 1930) and a steadfast supporter of Ginzburg's team and its research on housing.

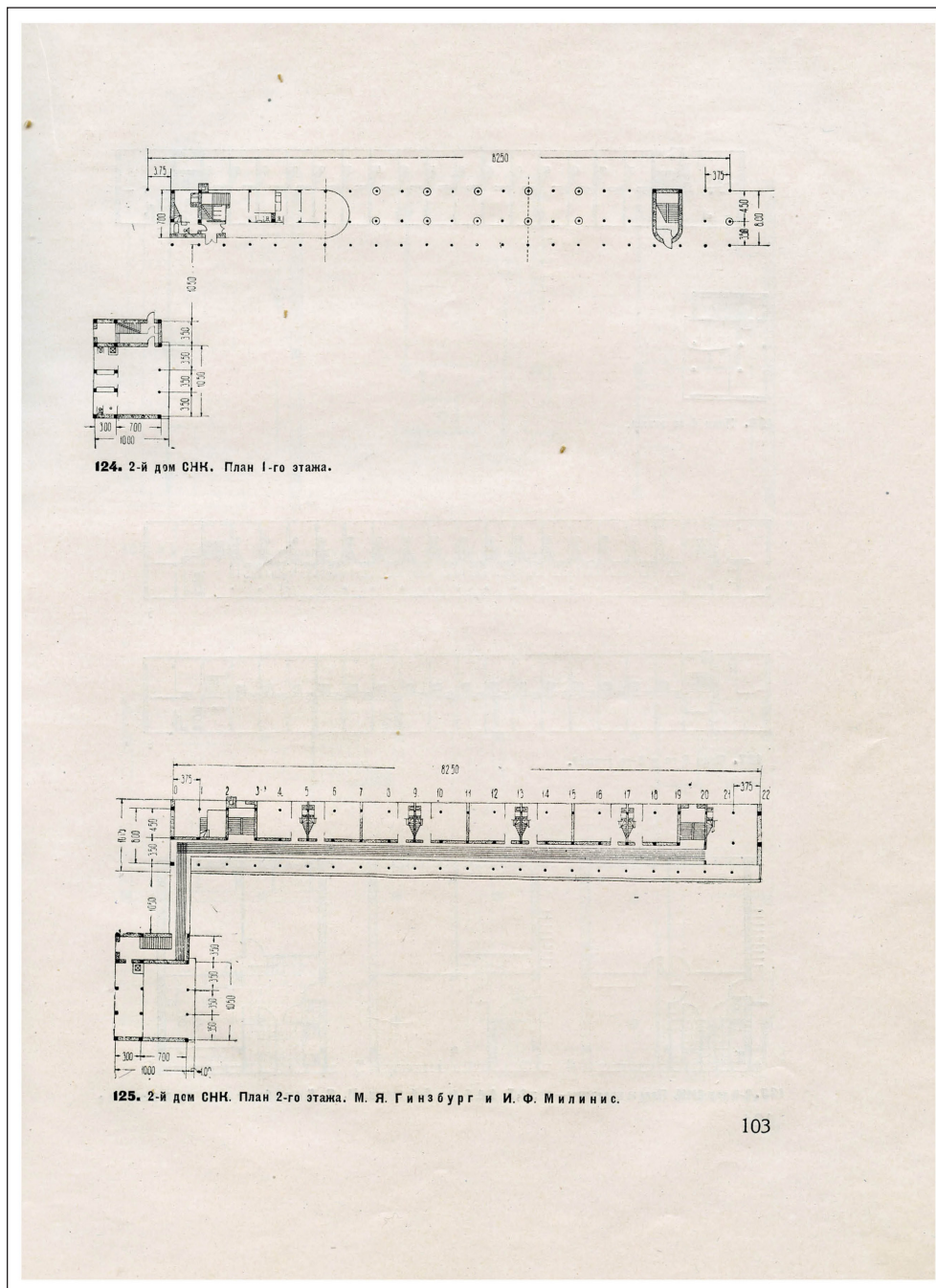
The Narkomfin building was conceived as a prototype. Ginzburg himself considered it a 'transitional type of experimental house' (Ginzburg 2017: 82) and it became the most noteworthy example of practical execution of

the work of the Standardisation Department at Stroykom RSFSR. The challenge lay in housing almost 50 families, roughly 200 people of all ages, half of whom maintained their 'old' way of life in separate households. For Ginzburg, this challenge was an opportunity to encourage a shift to the new socialist *byt*.

The initial proposal included four buildings for residences, communal activities, child daycare, and laundry facilities, in addition to a second phase in which new dwellings would be built. However, only the residential, communal and laundry buildings were eventually implemented. Although the design solution of a free floor plan on pilotis for the residential block had already been considered in some of the earlier schemes submitted to the Comradely Competition, in this case it was expected to achieve more than the mere reproduction of a language attempting to resolve practical and urban conditioning factors. As the building stood on a park, almost the entire ground floor of the residential block was raised on pilotis. In this way, the dwellings were no longer negatively affected by topographical conditions, and privacy was ensured while continuity with the park through this covered space was also maintained (Figure 9).

In the initial project, only F and K types (Figure 10) were employed, with very specific variations to the units at the short end of the building (Figure 11). Type F cells – small households composed of individuals or childless couples – were in some way connected to the community economy and helped to facilitate the residents' transition towards a fully socialised life. Type K cells were for families whose members were financially dependent on each other but who mostly wished to remain independent from the community. Type K, which had an outdoor gallery onto two floors, was actually a variant of layout D as defined by the Standardisation Department. Furthermore, it shared elements with Ginzburg's proposal for the Comradely Competition. Thanks to the nearly 5-metre-high two-storey living room, which operated as a reservoir for air, the height of the bedrooms could be kept to just 2.30 metres (Figure 12). Similarly, the 3.60-metre-high inhabitable rooms in type F made it possible to incorporate 2.30 metres in the portion of the dwelling that was lower in height, allowing room for small gas cookers to heat food previously prepared in communal kitchens. However, type K was designed to promote a more gradual separation according to individuals' financial status, incorporating kitchens where food could be cooked and not just reheated. Nevertheless, their small size, just four square metres, shows that their function may have been rather more symbolic.

The upper part of the building, initially intended for installations and services such as a community room and solarium, in the final version included five dwellings of different sizes (Figure 13). A penthouse, designed by Milyutin for his own use, was notably similar to type K. The four other type C dwellings, with rooms between 9 and 15 square metres, saved on space thanks to the use of folding beds and shared showers and sinks. The design, in which areas with sanitary fittings were set out in a row, was not unlike that illustrated by Milyutin in his model for the socialist city, or that of the floor plan of type E as



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Figure 9: Narkomfin House proposal developed by Ginzburg and Milinis (1929–30): ground floor and second floor, first version. From Ginzburg’s publication *Zhilishche* [Dwelling], 1934.

defined in the *dom-kommuna* designed by Barshch and Vladimirov.

From the perspective of social organisation and *byt*, this blending of types was intended to not only bring traditional and new socialist ways of living together, but also to stimulate a painless transition towards the latter with its more collective forms of housekeeping. The services in the communal building – a double-height sports hall with room for showers, changing, storage and relaxation; a two-storey-high public dining hall linked to a communal kitchen and to a reading and leisure room; and the laundry building with a mechanical laundry and drying room – were considered instrumental for the gradual and non-enforced transformation of family and household structures.

The two horizontal arteries on the second and fifth floors were crucial for interlinking the dwellings and connection hubs in different ways. In the Narkomfin building, the brilliantly designed corridor, already featured in Ginzburg’s 1926 proposal, took the form of uniformly lit galleries providing space for interaction between inhabitants. The lower corridor linked the residential and communal buildings through an elevated, enclosed and heated passageway similar to those frequently found in the 1926 proposals and adopted by the Stroykom for its House for 80 to 100 dwellers.

Ginzburg assessed the Narkomfin building and its performance in 1932, two years after its completion, in his seminal work *Zhilishche* (Ginzburg 2017: 82–97). Although the communal kitchens were in full operation, he observed

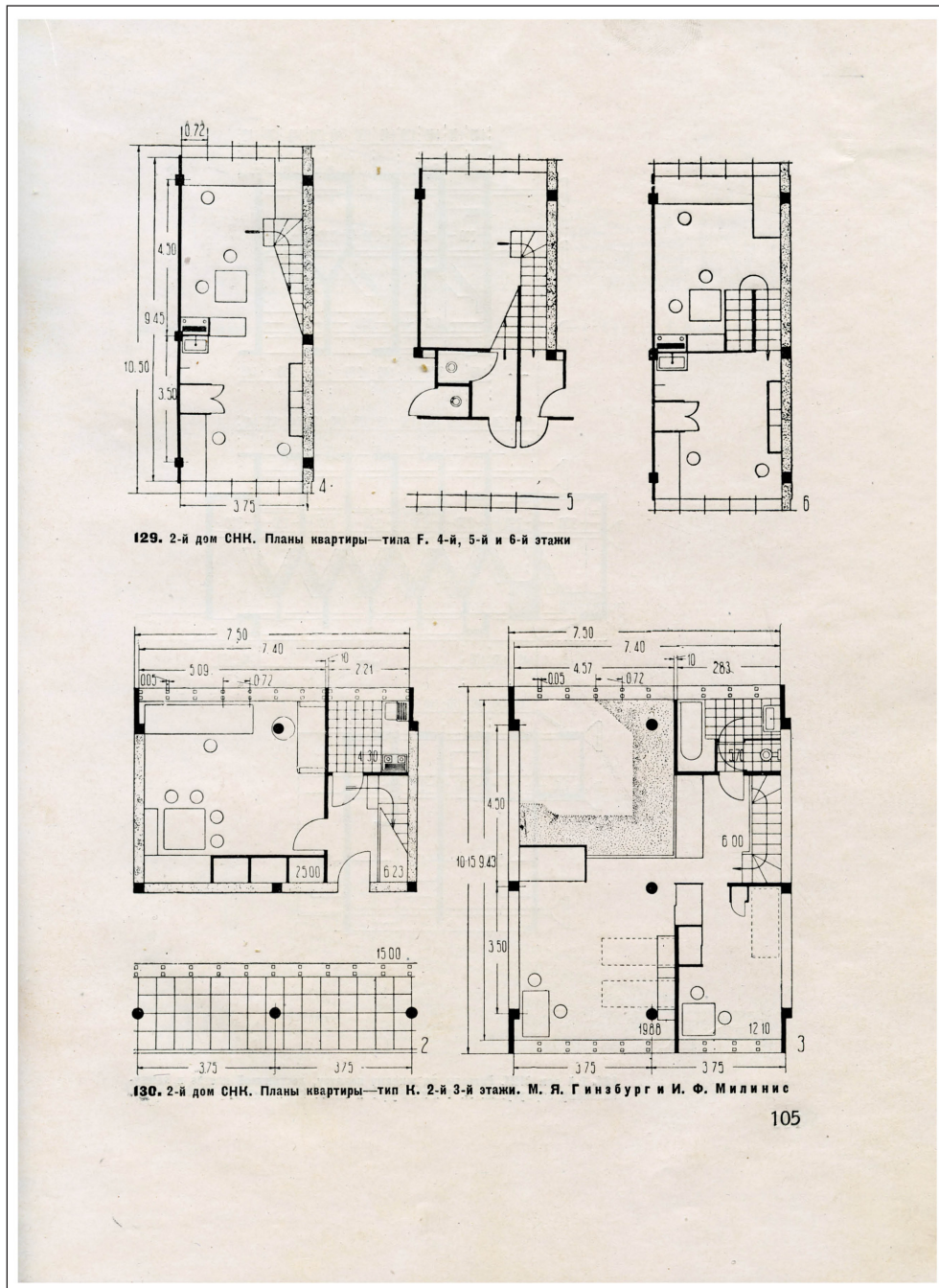


Figure 10: Narkomfin House proposal developed by Ginzburg and Milinis (1929–30): floor plans for types F and K, first version. From Ginzburg's publication *Zhilishche*, 1934.

that most of the residents ate in their own dwellings. The playground took up the area originally allotted for the child daycare building, which was never built, while the mechanical laundry facilities were built and functioned as designed (Buchli 1999: 103; Ginzburg 2017: 82). The evaluation of the Narkomfin building's spatial articulation, colour, light and construction, which Ginzburg wrote in 1932 and published two years later, constitutes an epilogue to one of modernity's most ambitious investigations into housing design. From the outset, Ginzburg strongly believed that the social and economic context of the USSR was not yet in desperate need of forceful change. This explains the complete absence in his work of utopian or radical proposals calling for the full imposition of

communal life, the abolition of the family, and the separation of parents and children. The 37.40 square metres of usable area and 160 cubic metres of built volume of the type F units implemented in the Narkomfin building respected the living patterns of different social groups, while at the same time revealing the extraordinary potential of housing to bring about social change.

The value of the Narkomfin building lay not only in the scope of its execution as a singular object or its high quality, which indeed added to the building's intrinsic value (Buttchereit 2013; Schäfer 2013; Zalivako 2013), but also in the application of the theoretical principles that were developed in both the 1926 competition and the Stroykom RSFSR Standardisation Department. It

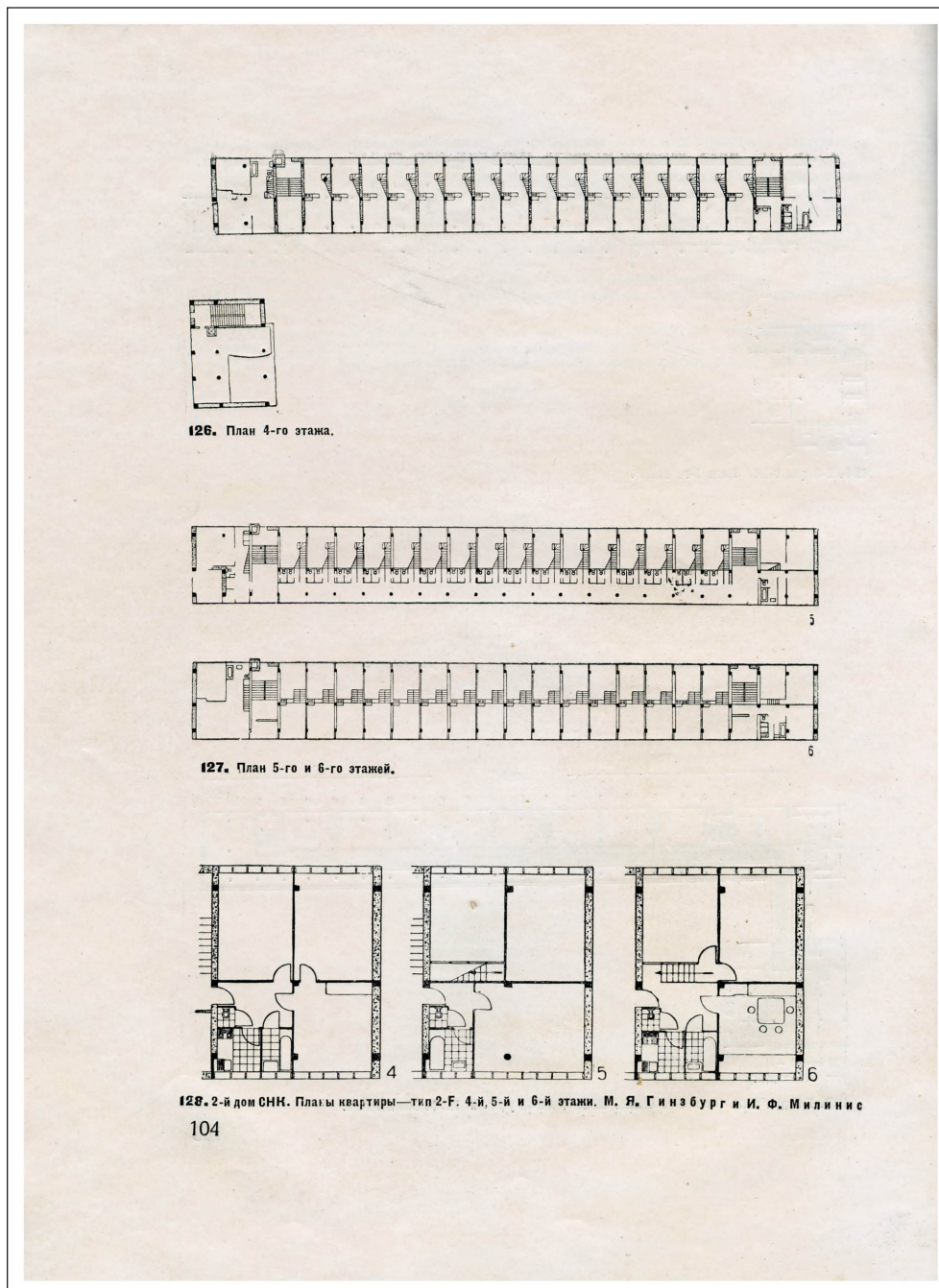


Figure 11: Narkomfin House proposal developed by Ginzburg and Milinis (1929–30): fourth, fifth and sixth floors (above), and floor plans on the end dwellings (below), first version. From Ginzburg's publication *Zhilishche*, 1934.

is this continuity and fine-tuning of social, spatial and constructive principles that validates the work on housing by Ginzburg's team over these five years as a single research process. The Narkomfin building, brought about by an unprecedented social and political situation, was praised by Le Corbusier and hailed by international critics as an architectural paradigm in the building of the new socialist society (Cohen 1992: 122–24). But this recognition was of little use. Although Ginzburg's solutions were more economically efficient and socially conciliatory than those that followed Narkomfin, the timing of its construction intersected with the fading of Lenin's socialist dream. In 1930, the year of the building's completion, Stalinist hostility sparked the imminent proscription of

avant-garde architecture, bringing with it the building's stigmatisation.

Epilogue to a Research Process

Of all the different attempts to establish a new residential environment for workers in the 1920s, the research led by Ginzburg in the USSR became the first and the most influential exercise in housing in which material and historical conditions were intricately connected. The interdependence between architectural principles and socio-political factors had become a fertile ground for the revolutionary ideas of Constructivist research. As a result, the OSA architects viewed the reform of the material environment as a necessary, yet insufficient,

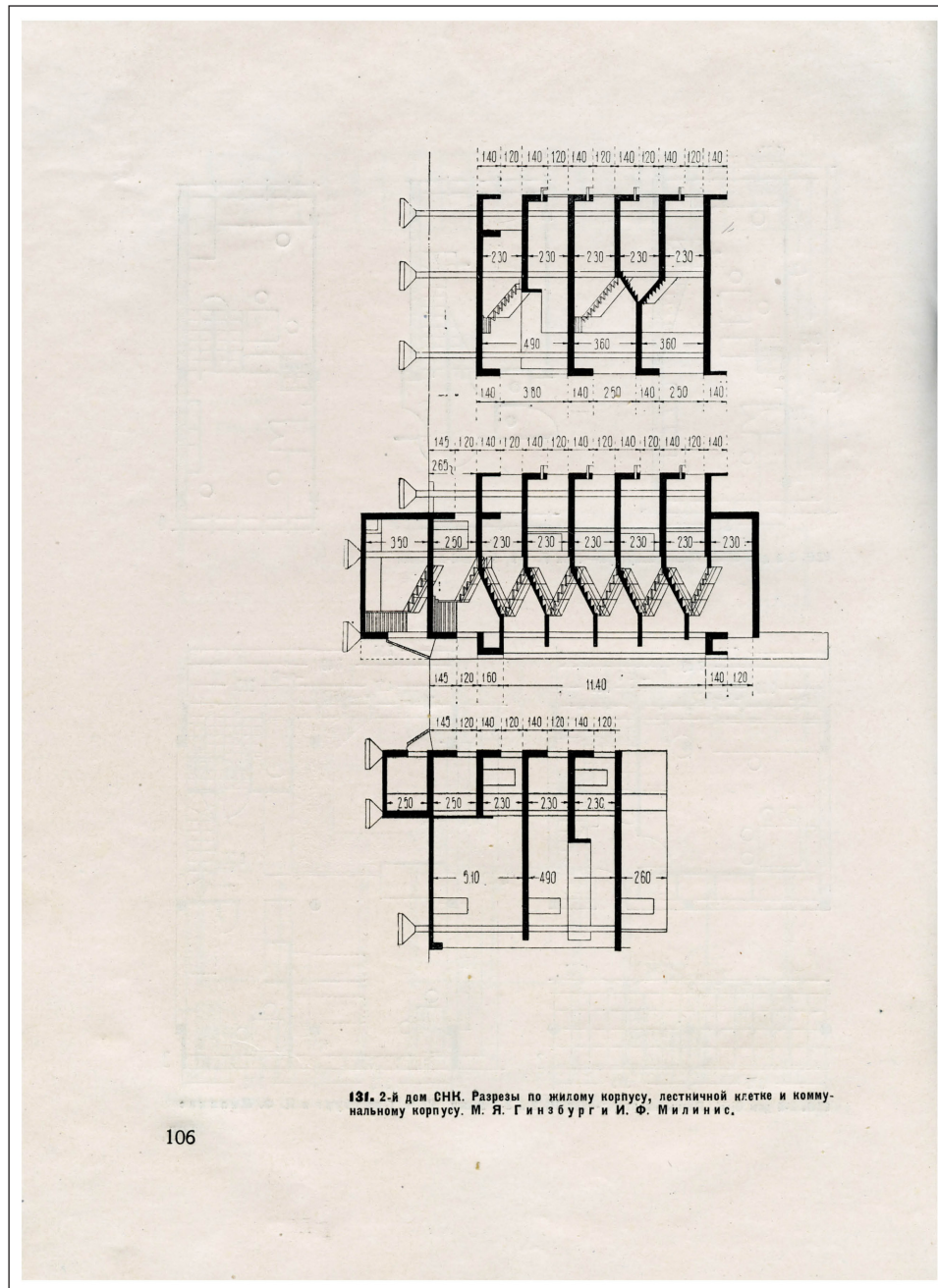


Figure 12: Narkomfin House proposal developed by Ginzburg and Milinis (1929–30): sections of the residential and communal buildings, first version. From Ginzburg's publication *Zhilishche*, 1934.



Figure 13: Narkomfin House proposal developed by Ginzburg and Milinis (1929–30): axonometric view of the cluster system and floor plans of types K, F, and C, built version. Graphics by Daniel Movilla Vega.

element for unleashing the transformation of traditional living standards: new forms of organisation were expected to lead to new, more complex and efficient housing models with an additional social and educational role, promoting the renewal of the economic basis of society. In accepting this principle of Marxist dialectical materialism, Ginzburg and his team were not content with merely providing a solution for the immediate needs of their time. Their work had to be an active part of the progressive evolution of society towards a more complete, perfect and integrated form of reality, embodying what Lenin termed a *transitional period* (Lenin 2012: 114).

As the work of the OSA team began to be questioned in the USSR, the opportunities it provided for developing a new architecture for citizens based on modern premises – utterly inconceivable within the bounds of Western thought – began to attract the attention of the European avant-garde. The knowledge and learning opportunities that this Ginzburg-led research on housing afforded contemporary architects, through publications and occasional trips as well as architectural practice in Russia, opened up new avenues for design and organisation in European housing. A straight line can thus be traced from Ginzburg's spatial investigations to major Western projects, including Hans Scharoun's apartment block for the Werkbund exhibition *Wohnung und Werkraum* in Wrocław, Georges-Henri Pingusson's l'Hôtel Latitude 43 in Saint Tropez and the *lotissement à redent* of Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse (Cohen 2013).

The influence of the OSA's body of work was not restricted to formal appearance and design. The social significance of the proposals of the Constructivists, as well as their belief in architecture as an instrument for humanising and integrating society, were also greatly influential in Western social programmes in the interwar period, acting as a counterpoint to the work promoted in Europe around the Congrès international d'architecture moderne (CIAM). By October 1929, when the 2nd CIAM on the Minimum Dwelling was taking place in Frankfurt, the research work by the Standardisation Department was already complete and the Narkomfin House was under construction. At that time, the work of Ginzburg's team, which had put considerable effort into critically assimilating the most advanced modern residential approaches of the period, had emphasised the narrow social scope of modern housing research in the West (Movilla Vega et al. 2018). Constructivism was triggering debate in Europe regarding the potential of a new residential type, the 'social condenser', which expanded the concept and social scope of collective housing.

Ultimately, this exchange of positions between the USSR and the West meant that the research conducted by Ginzburg's team was brought to life in an economic, social and political context that differed greatly from the one in which it had been conceived. The new Constructivist ideas which emerged from the fertile landscape of the Russian Revolution crossed borders to become universal ideas for advancing knowledge and society as a whole.

Notes

- ¹ The New Economic Policy's kindling of the economy caused Moscow's population to double between 1921 and 1926.
- ² This re-use of pre-revolutionary houses came as a response to pragmatic considerations highlighted by Engels in *The Housing Question*:

'How is the housing question to be settled, then? (...) There is already a sufficient quantity of houses in the big cities to remedy immediately all real 'housing shortage', provided they are used judiciously. This can naturally only occur through the expropriation of the present owners and by quartering in their houses homeless workers or workers overcrowded in their present houses.' (Engels 1970: 30–31).
- ³ Existing apartments were communalised by collectivising the use of their facilities and registering them as communal homes (*domma-kommuny*). In most cases, communalisation was carried out by individual families being assigned a single room in the house, while a single kitchen and the entrance hall were converted into common places for cooking and socialising respectively. Bliznakov (1993: 85–86, 95–96) estimates that 865 such communal apartments were registered in Moscow by the end of 1921.
- ⁴ *Byt*, Russian term used to refer to 'daily life'. Victor Buchli (1998: 179) defines it as an 'ethnographic term relating to the totality of quotidian behavior [including] food, clothing, domestic material culture and family life'.
- ⁵ Translation by the author. The editors used the expression 'house-organism'. In the first issue of *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura*, Ginzburg referred to the 'organic condition of architecture' to define the 'social condenser', that is, the specific material response of architecture which ought to result from the functional analysis of each of the parts that make up a building. For Ginzburg this connection between form and function was equivalent to that which characterised biological organisms (Ginzburg 1926: 1–4). It should also be noted that he used *dom*, the Russian word for 'house', to refer to residential buildings.
- ⁶ It is worth highlighting the similarities between the façade by Ol' and that by Le Corbusier in the Pessac quarter, and between Pasternak's design and Walter Gropius' Siedlung Dammerstock. In addition, Ginzburg's design of the façade is a clear nod to the *fenêtre en longueur* used by Le Corbusier in his Villa La Roche-Jeanneret.
- ⁷ When revisiting the proposals submitted to the Comradely Competition in his book *Zhilishche*, Ginzburg distanced himself from the 'hypertrophía' of other housing experiments of the 1920s in which life was fully collectivised, the private domestic sphere disappeared and all the residents were expected to lead an identical and 'universally-standardized way of life' (Ginzburg 2017: 138, 142).
- ⁸ Nikol'skiy's entry may not have included a communal area. This design was not accompanied by a written

report and the floor plans do not seem to indicate any shared spaces beyond the potential use of the flat roof.

- ⁹ *Stroykom*, abbreviation for *Construction Committee*. The *Stroykom* was in charge of regulating and rationalising issues referring to construction in the country.
- ¹⁰ These requirements were 1) light in all living areas of the residential cell, as well as in corridors and stairwells; 2) cross ventilation and natural lighting on both façades of the dwelling; 3) identical orientation for all bedrooms; 4) size of the living rooms and bedrooms depending on the number of occupants, following the norm of nine square metres per person; 5) size and proportions of rooms in keeping with work and domestic function within them; 6) as much domestic equipment as possible; 7) favourable proportions of the rooms; and 8) practical colour solutions for all the surfaces of the dwelling (Garrido 2007: 378–379; Ginzburg 1929: 6; *Stroykom RSFSR* 1929: 13).
- ¹¹ The fourth of the eight tasks set out by *Stroykom RSFSR* specifically comprised ‘the establishment of recommended housing types, representing the various agencies and organisations’ (*Narkomyust RSFSR* 1928: 328–329; translation by the author).

Authors Note

This article is a translated, revised and extended version of the original piece published in the Spanish journal *Proyecto, Progreso, Arquitectura* (Movilla Vega and Espejel 2013). **Figures 2, 5 and 13** are unpublished documents. The introduction and epilogue were also expressly written for this article after the completion of the Ph.D. dissertation, *Housing and Revolution* (Movilla Vega 2016).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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