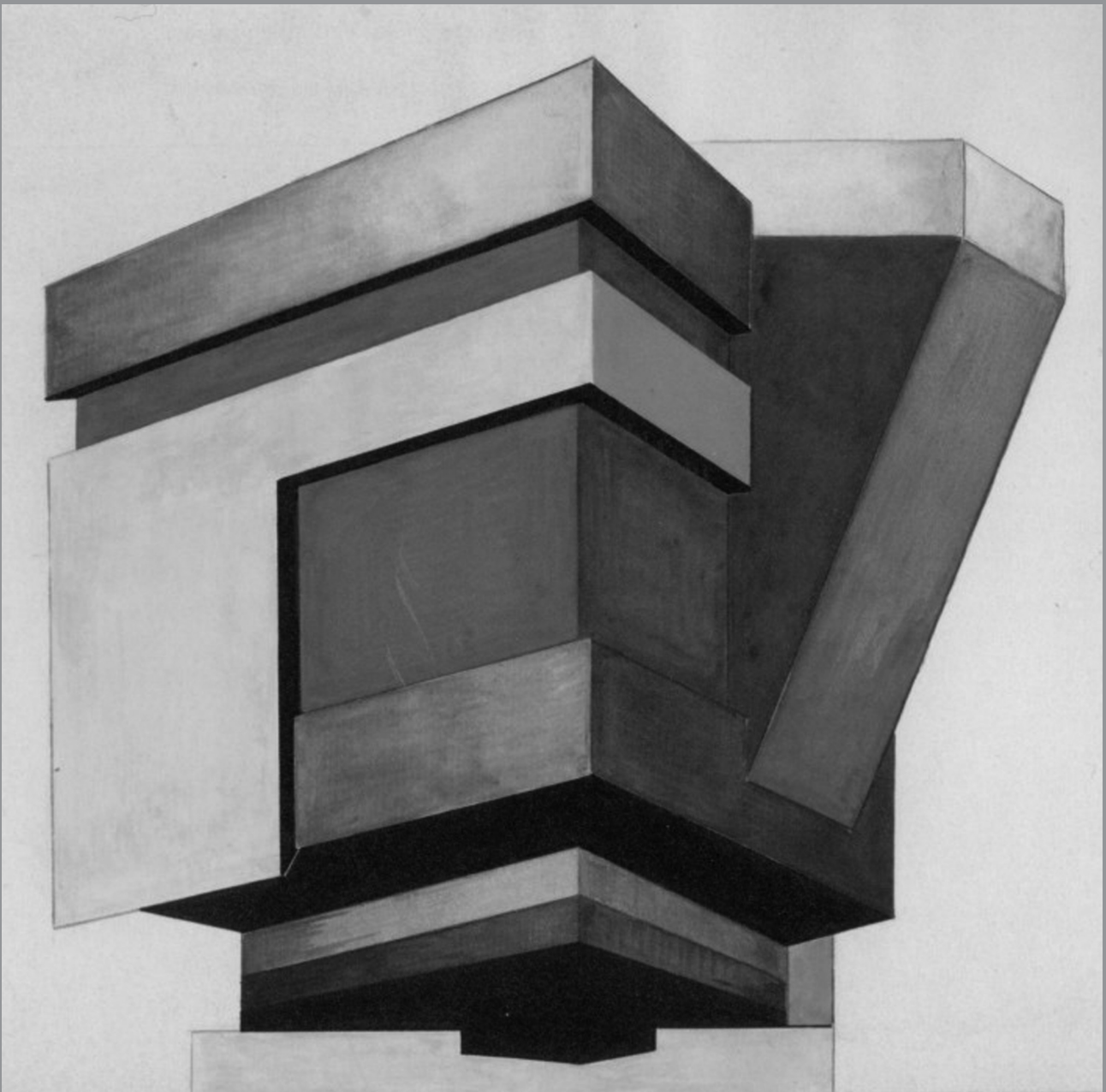


# Phenomenon of the Russian Avant-garde. Moscow Architectural School of the 1920s.

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**The phenomenon of the Russian Avant-garde architecture formed under the influence of the Moscow Higher School of Architecture and Art is today widely known by the name of VKHUTEMAS. This school is mentioned in the context of professional activity of the artists and architects who also worked in other institutes, but who had creative links. In the limelight is Nikolai Ladovsky, creator of the introductory course on architectural composition, lecturing along with many authoritative Moscow utilitarian architects, such as Alexander Kuznetsov, Vesnin brothers and others.**

By Elena Ovsyannikova and Vladimir Shukhov

**T**he Higher School of Architecture and Art in the soviet Russia had a decisive influence on the formation of Avant-garde architecture. This school originated in the Mossovet Architectural Studio, where Ivan Zholtovsky, Ivan Rytsky and Alexey Shusev taught, further developed as part of the Free Artistic Studios, established on the basis of the former Moscow College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and the Stroganov College of Technical Drawing. At that time two innovative training studios were formed by Nikolai Ladovsky and Ilia Golosov, who worked with Konstantin Melnikov. From 1921 the whole training complex was called the Higher Artistic-Technical Studios (VKHUTEMAS), and from 1927 onwards it was called the Higher Artistic-Technical Institute (VKHUTEIN), which was discontinued in 1930.

The Architectural Faculty of the Moscow Higher Technical School—MVTU (Moscow Institute of Civil Engineers—MIGI)—also functioned in Moscow until 1930 under the guidance of Alexander Kuznetsov. Viktor Vesnin, Moisei Ginzburg and others taught there while more attention was given to the engineering part of the business than in VKHUTEMAS—VKHUTEIN. The important advantage was that one institution of Higher Education integrated the future architects, printers, painters, ceramists and craftsmen on the artistic work of metal, wood, etc. But in 1930 separate Institutions of Higher Education were established on all the professional lines including the Moscow Architectural-Structural Institute (ASI) and the Moscow Architectural Institute (MAI). The reason of this reorganization was the government's fear of student unrest prepossessed by the democratic atmosphere formed at that time. Also in 1930 many non-governmental organizations were also disbanded such as the "Old Moscow" committee, the Society for the Study of Russian Manor and others, while some of their members were repressed.

A strong influence on the development of innovative

architectural ideas was exerted by the Scientific Institute of Artistic Culture (INHUK) which was established in 1920 within the Department of Fine Arts of Narkompros on the basis of the early formed group of the artists-painters (Council of Craftsmen), among whom was Vasily Kandinsky who was the first to head its directorate. Many innovative principles of the form-generation, which exerted influence on the pedagogical system of VKHUTEMAS, also took shape in the works of the "Zhivskulptarkh" organization, the members of which strived to find ways for the development of art through the fusion of arts (the initial name was "Sinskulptarkh"). The leading role was played by Nikolai Ladovsky. He devoted a specific attention to the dynamics of forms and simple volumes, which the viewer "could not disintegrate", but which together formed complex compositional structures.

At the very same time Ilia Golosov strived to formulate the universal laws of architectural composition without leaving ways to chaos. Both architects were just united by their interest in dynamic forms, vividly manifested in their own projects. However, unlike Ladovsky, Ilia Golosov emphasized "the organic link of the architectural form with the design and main idea of the structure."

A significant point in Ladovsky's system was the design of models which the students made from clay. The whole work started from this and the plans and façades of the structures were drawn afterwards.

Many of Ladovsky's apprentices worked under his guidance further on within the United Studios—OBMAS (1921–1923), where Nikolai Dokuchaev and Vladimir Krinsky were on the payroll as chiefs. The "abstractive" task was the determination of geometric properties of form, spatial expressiveness, mechanical-and-physical properties (mass and weight), design, dynamics, rhythm and proportions. These themes were simultaneously worked also as "the production assignments" (small industrial facilities).

In 1923 the main department of VKHUTEMAS was established. It prepared experts on all the specialties, not only architects but skilled artists on subjects which were

< Figure 1. V. Kolpakova. Architectural volume. Chief G. Klutsis. End of 1920s. MARHI Museum.

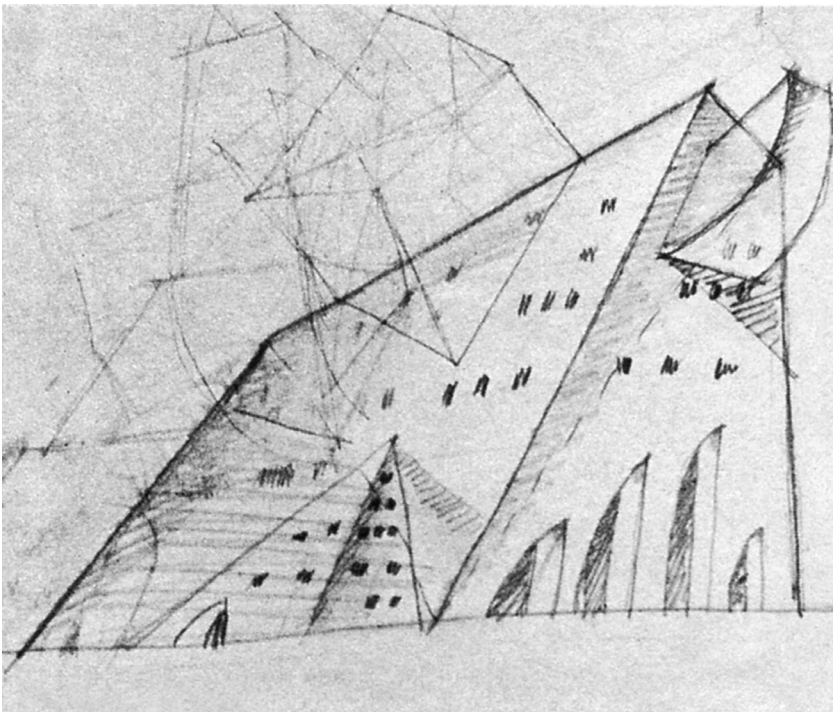


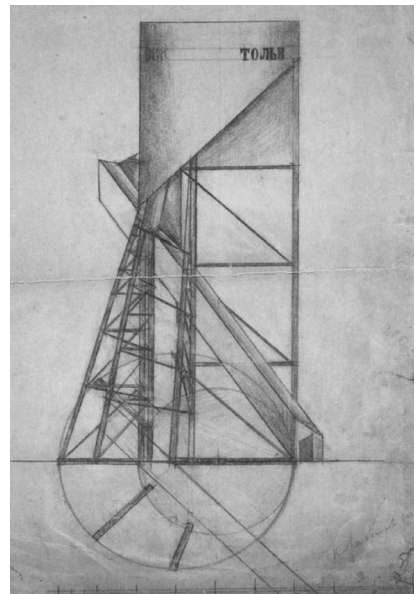
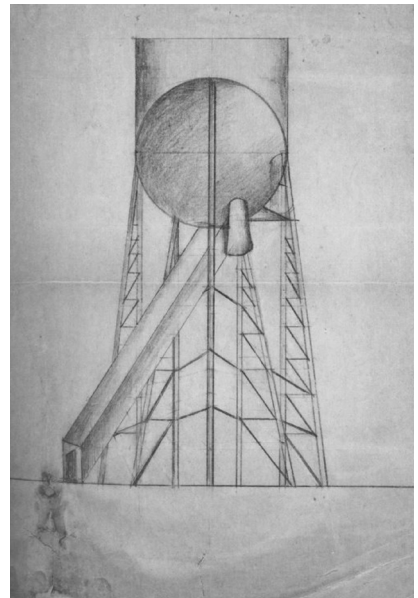
Figure 1. **N. Ladovsky**. Temple of the people communication. Experimental project in the Zhivskulptarkh group. 1919.

Figure 2. **N. Krasilnikov**. Production assignments. Water tower. Chief N. Ladovsky. 1921.

Figure 3. **I. Chashnik**. Monument on the Red Square in Smolensk. Chief L. Lisitsky. L. Lisitsky. Tribune. Mid 1920s.

Figure 4. **I. Lamtsov**. Assignment on the revelation of construction. Chief N. Ladovsky. 1922.

Figure 5. **K. Malevich**. Arkhitekton (State Tretyakov Gallery). Malevich, N. Suetin. Arkhitektony. End of the 1920s. Student's reconstructions under the guidance of E. Ovsyannikova.



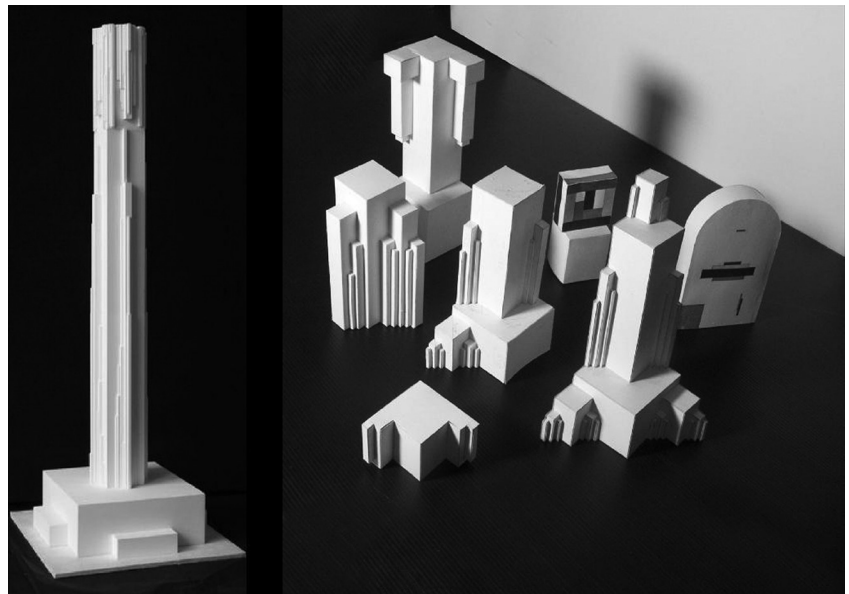
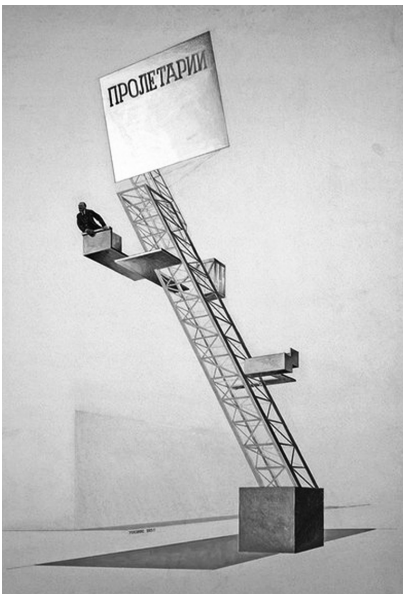
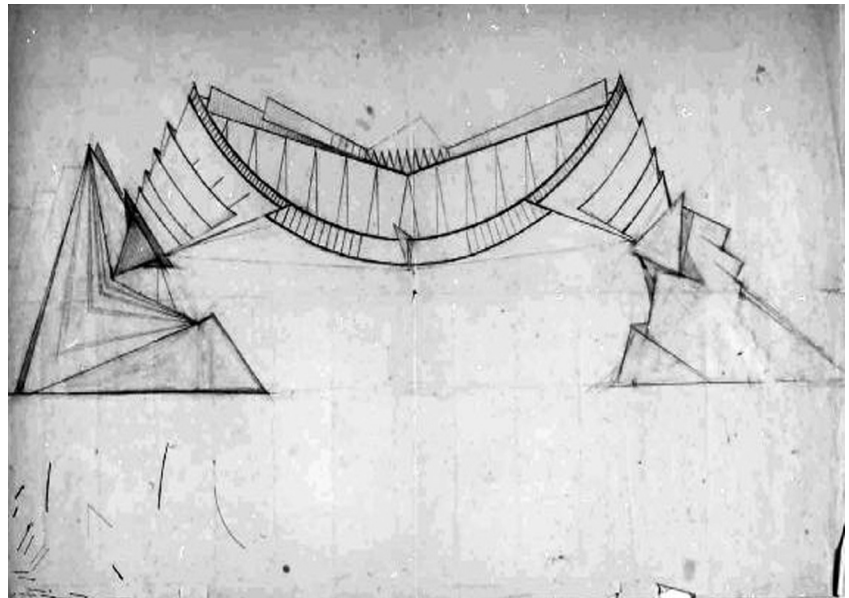
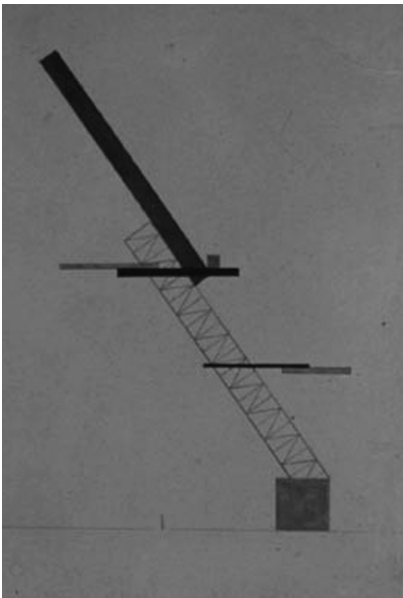
common for everybody: "Space" (Nikolai Ladovsky), "Graphic Arts" (Alexander Rodchenko), "Color" (Alexander Vesnin and Lyubov Popova, further on Gustav Klutis). In the estimation of Selim Khan-Magomedov, the subject "Space" was the key one in the architectural-artistic education. He saw this as the major difference of the Moscow Institution of Higher Education from the German Bauhaus, which had an effect on the development of the object design worldwide. In the 1960s the course of modeling according to Ladovsky's system was resumed in the Moscow Architectural Institute (MARKHI) by Vladimir Krinsky and his apprentices Mikhail Turkus and Ivan Lamtsov. But one should not forget that Vladimir Tatlin also worked at VKHUTEMAS, moreover exactly as a designer, and his creative work could not but have an effect on architects.

The specific "plastic" method of the form-generation, which reflected the concept of "rationalism", set forth by Ladovsky, supposed the "rational" perception of the architectural form (the term was used only within that epoch). Ladovsky equaled the compositions from simple geomet-

rical bodies (cube, parallelepiped, prism, pyramid, cylinder and cone) to the refusal from the architectural orb. This artistic process developed not without the influence of the European trends: Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism, which disturbed the traditional architectural logic.

The other method of form-generation - 'constructivism' - was manifested in the works of students from the senior classes of VKHUTEMAS-VKHUTEIN, done under the guidance of the well-known utilitarian architects and also in MIGI-MVTU under the guidance of Kuznetsov and his apprentices (George Vegman, Alexander Vlasov, Ivan Nikolaev, the Boris brothers, Vladimir and Gennady Movchan, and others), who focused on the new construction technologies. Relatively recently an interesting detail





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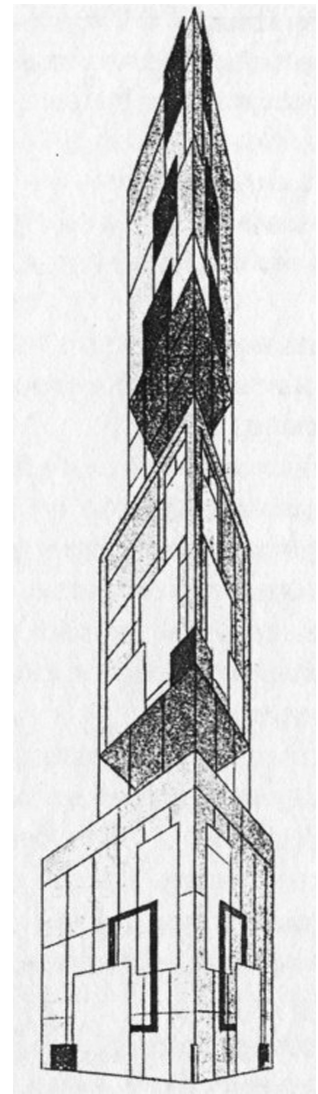
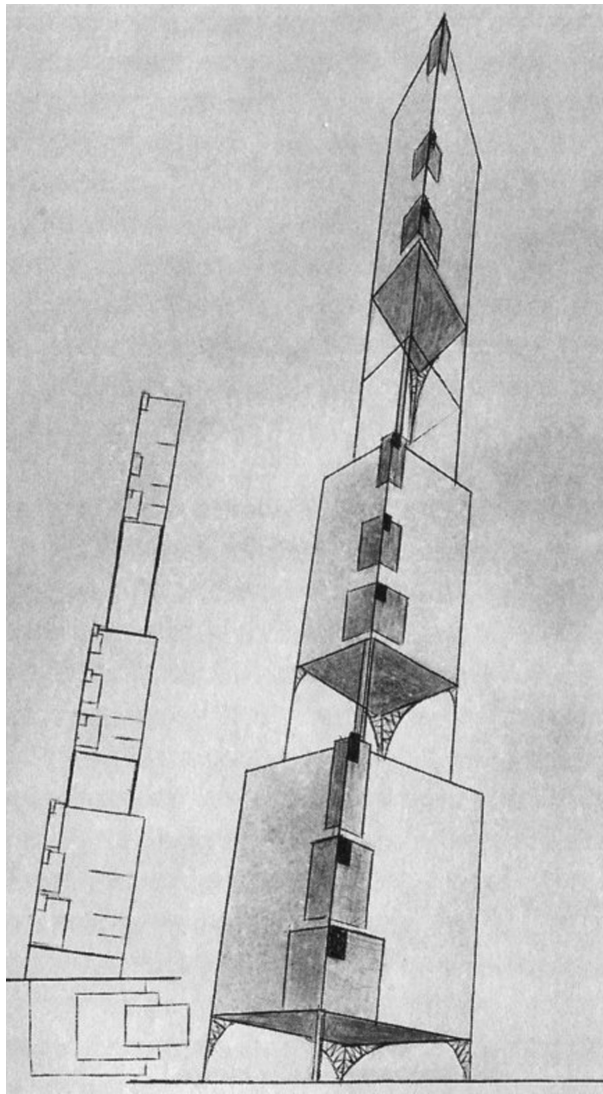
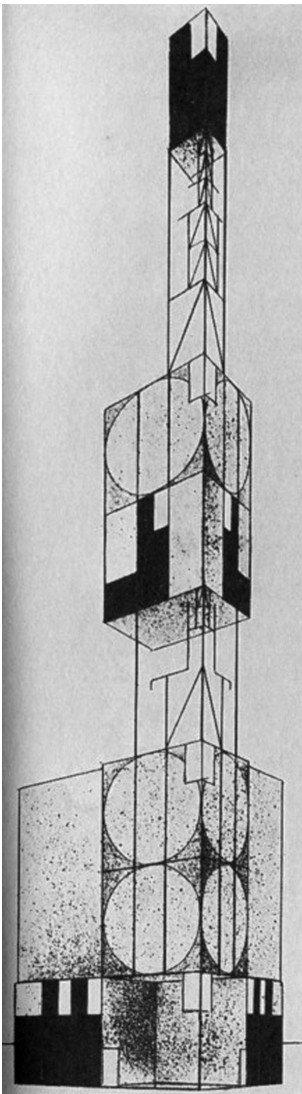
was found out: at the same time some of them attended classes at VKHUTEMAS as well (Vegman, for example). This fact suggests the mutual influence of the two architectural institutions of Higher Education, as the number of teachers combined their work in these two institutions.

In 1923, Ladovsky established the Association of New Architects (ASNOVA), which was joined by his apprentices. The Union of Modern Architects (OSA)-more known abroad than ASNOVA thanks to the magazine *Modern Architecture*, edited by Alexander Vesnin and Moisei Ginzburg, the main theorist of that group-was formed in 1925. Ginzburg called the works of his like-minded fellows "Constructivism" (earlier the term was used in the context of creations of Avant-garde artists

such as Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko and others) and strongly criticized the creations of the ASNOVA members as "Formalism".

Despite heated discussions between the teachers, projects of the VKHUTEMAS and VKHUTEIN students were often more extravagant than their own. Some examples include the project of the Lenin Institute of Library Science (diploma of student Ivan Leonidov) or the project of the Komintern Building (diploma of student Lidia Komarova), which became as famous as the works of their chief Alexander Vesnin.

The creative method of the VKHUTEMAS members correlated to a large extent with the sculpture works of Malevich and his apprentices at the Vitebsk Art School,



where the “Confirmers of the New Art” (UNOVIS) union was established. The works of Malevich’s best pupils, Ilia Chashnik and Nikolai Suetin, were exhibited in Moscow, together with his own creations of the same kind in the form of pyramids and pillars first called “Planity” and then “Arkhitektomy” by Malevich. Though he did not set

Figure 6. **G. Glushenko, A. Silchenkov, I. Yiozefovich.** Assignment on the revelation of dynamics, rhythm, vertical proportions. Chief N. Ladovsky. 1924.

Figure 7. **N. Ladovsky.** Communal house. Experimental project in the Zhivskulptarkh group. 1920

Figure 8. **S. Silchenkov.** Production assignment. VSNH skyscraper. Chief N. Ladovsky. 1924-1925.

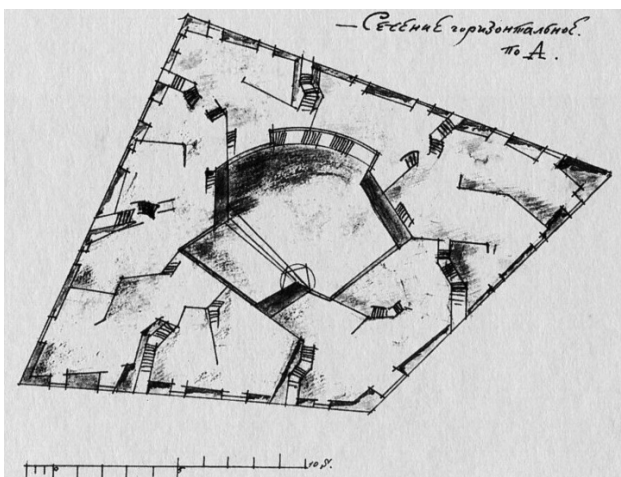
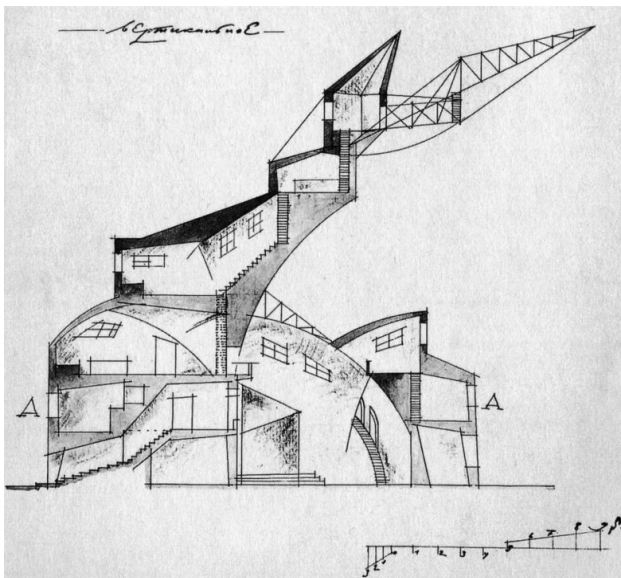
Figure 9. Student **M. Korzhev.** Abstractive assignment on the revelation of mass and weight. Chief N. Ladovsky. 1921.

a task of remaking them into concrete buildings or monuments, he talked about architecture as of the most progressive field of artistic creativity of that time.

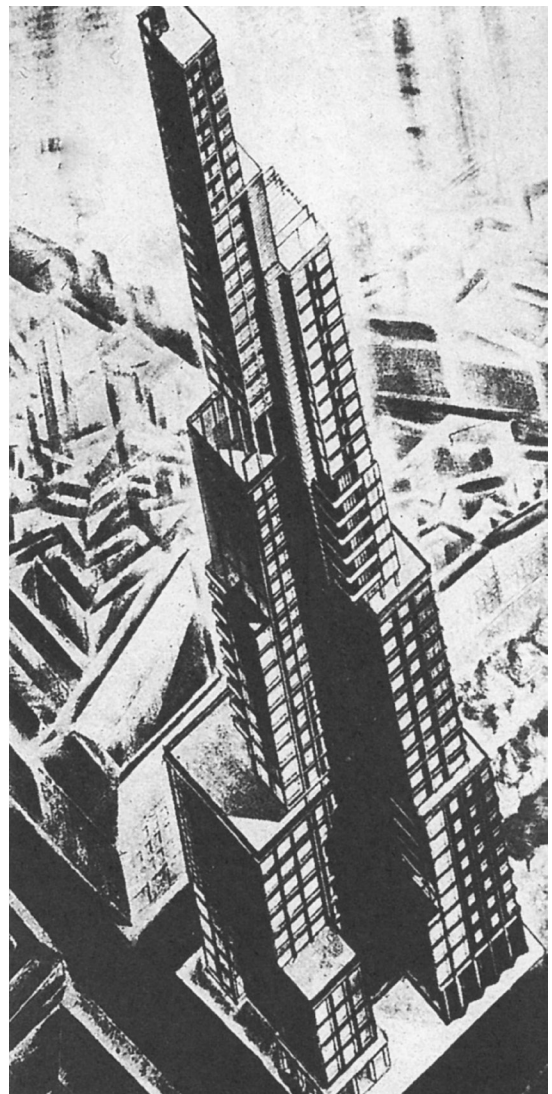
While working with Malevich in Vitebsk, Lazar Lisitsky (architect by education) created the experimental designs called ‘Prouny’ (Projects for the Affirmation of the New). It is worth noting that he was member of the Dutch group De Stijl, published his creations in the West, decorated the soviet exhibitions, taught at VKHUTEMAS-VKHUTEIN and intercommunicated a lot with the members of the OSA constructivist group. We can establish that many craftsmen of the *avant-garde* worked in the 1920s in cooperation or in the form of creative dialogue.

The reflections of philosophers of that time corresponded to the searches of the new architectural language. It is no coincidence that Vladimir Favorsky, while being the VKHUTEMAS rector (1923-1926), invited the outstanding philosopher, scientist-physicist and priest Pavel Florensky





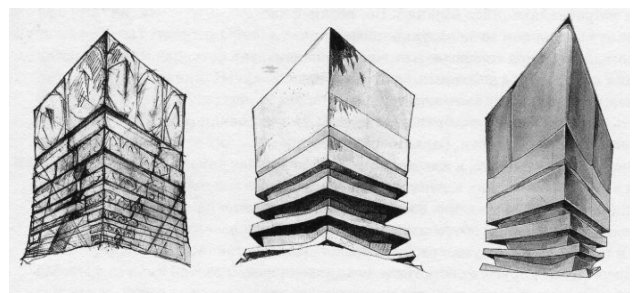
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to give a series of lectures on perspective, which, as educational subject, he taught himself. Just as Ladovsky, Florensky addressed on the properties of geometry of the architectural form, its dynamics and statics, spatial movement, the duration of comprehension of the artwork and the condition of the viewer. That is to say, he developed the idea about searching a sort of “genetic code” of the artistic decision and, in particular, of the space arrangement.

The expression, specific to the creations of the Moscow Architecture School teachers and students, was partly induced by the absence of the latest construction technologies. The impossibility to implement the projects facilitated the stretch of their imagination without limitations. The search of the new architectural ideas was as well caused by the excessive social ambitions, what is distinctly shown by the projects of the spatial structures meant for the buildings of the far future and also for the space objects.



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