



HOUSING COMMUNES

Elizoveta Likhacheva

Strange as it may seem, the concept of housing communes does not have its origins in communist ideology. The idea of creating communal areas in a building designed to house several families arose long before the October Revolution. For example, architect Richard Nirnzee's house built in Moscow in 1914 at 10 Bolshoi Gnezdikovsky was designed as an "accommodation for bachelors", with no stoves, only primuses, which was quite unheard of in Russian kitchens at the beginning of the 20th century. This multi-storey building in Moscow was at that time intended for single employees who could dine in the in-house restaurant on the 11th floor and avail themselves of the services of manservants and chambermaids.

By the dawn of the 20th century, the process of urbanization had created a class of urban bourgeoisie. Working all day, they had no time to cook meals, take care of their children or do the family's laundry, and there were no refrigerators or washing machines in everyday use then. Whereas in the 19th century it had still been possible to employ servants, in the 20th, real incomes fell and a whole class of families appeared who could no longer afford them.

Parallel with this, there were the consequences of female emancipation in the wake of the First World War, something that was especially marked in Russia. The country had suffered horrendous human losses in the Great War and the Civil War that followed the Revolution, and there were simply not enough people to restore the country's economy. The period of the New Economic Policy laid bare this problem even more starkly and explains why female emancipation in the USSR was the most advanced of any country in the world. But in order for a woman to go out to work, she had to be free from household chores. The concept of housing communes provided the ideal solution, with their small residential cells and the entire domestic side of life located in the communal areas: the dining-room, laundry room, bathhouse, kindergarten and so forth. But the development of this kind of infrastructure required considerable financial investment, and money was short in the Soviet Union at that time. As a consequence, housing construction in the 1920s had to make significant savings on finishes and winter insulation. The housing communes that were built then cannot be called successful in terms of their design, though it should be noted that, as regards construction proper, they were very well thought-out and solid. They are still habitable, even a century later, though in need of refurbishment.

So, why is it that a concept so fortuitous and correct from the point of view of communist ideology did not take root? First and foremost, because of the trend in household appliances, which were making their appearance from the West, primarily from the United States. In 1937, Soviet architects

brought back with them from the United States the four-volume edition of construction standards, and almost all post-war Soviet construction was carried out in accordance with them. The kitchen provided was small (only 6 square metres) but it had to be equipped with an electric oven and a refrigerator, washing machines, electric irons, electric lighting, toasters, coffee-makers, coffee-grinders and electric kettles appeared next, and by the 1950s every Soviet apartment was decked out with household appliances.

Second, there was a lack of a well-designed, high-quality infrastructure. And third, because by its nature the Soviet Union was not a communal-minded country and it lacked the developed horizontal societal ties that existed in Europe. The main reason for the absence of such ties lies in the unfinished process of urbanization, which was interrupted by the October Revolution. The first stage of urbanization is characterized by the supremacy of the individual, followed by the emergence of horizontal connections and communities within the individual's apartment building or condominium, or across the same floor. But in the USSR, the initial stage was passed over, largely as a result of accelerated industrialization and collectivization driven by the Soviet regime.

The authorities' attempt to force people artificially to share communal spaces failed, of course, without the natural development of horizontal, or neighbourly, connections between them. Much later, due to the shortage of urban housing, communal flats did emerge, with several families housed in one large apartment of pre-revolutionary "bourgeois" buildings, all sharing the same kitchen and bathroom. This sort of communal housing was for many years viewed by the Soviet population as the most terrible of options. Paradoxically, in the Soviet Union, a country defined by its socialist system, an enduring aspiration to individualism developed, which is still rather strongly felt in modern Russia.

Today, the idea of housing communes is again of interest within the context of the new megacities. Modern inhabitants of large Russian cities are autonomous individuals who work and travel a lot. They want to live in the city centre in functional housing, which can be very minimalist.

One of Moscow's famous housing communes, on Gogolevsky Boulevard, was restored and many duplex residential cells were reconstructed on the basis of Constructivist principles, using modern materials and accommodating people's new requirements. The incredible projects of avant-garde architects have once again been imbued with new life! An excellent example is the duplex studio apartment with compact built-in kitchen unit, bathroom, bedroom and living area designed by international design Studio Bazi.

"COMMUNA 33"
a compact multifunctional
flat designed by Studio
Bazi, designer Alireza
Nemati, 2017



Living room area. **82**
Photo Polina Poludkina.

One of Moscow's famous housing communes, on Gogolevsky Boulevard, was restored and many duplex residential cells were reconstructed according to Constructivist principles, using modern materials and accommodating people's new requirements. The incredible projects of avant-garde architects have once again been imbued with the breath of new life!



Living room area,
view on the stairs. **83**
Photo Polina Poludkina.

Kitchen unit. **84**
Photo Polina Poludkina.

The oak block contains the kitchen, hidden behind folding doors, and a wardrobe with washing machine and cleaning storage. A curtain embedded in this block separates the bedroom and bathroom from the living zone, making them more cosy and private.



Bedroom. **85**
Photo Polina Poludkina.
The small bathroom is characterized
by a round window.



Built-in wardrobe,
integrated under the stairs **86**
Photo Polina Poludkina.