Implementation of the Soviet Social Experiment of the 1920s in the Architectural Practice of Rostov-on-Don

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Abstract. With a birth of the Soviet state a new social system started to form which stimulated the search of new forms of living space and emerging of new types of buildings, such as transition-type houses, residential facilities and house-communes. These types of buildings have not been widely spread in real practice due to their utopian nature. However, the ideas of collective daily routine of the 1920s ended up viable and productive if not taken in radical forms. Thus, the architectural practice of one of the largest southern Russian cities Rostov-on-Don has managed to acquire reasonable balance which determined vitality of a new social idea of collective dwelling for many years to come.

1. Introduction

Soviet architecture of the 1920s-1930s attracts increasing attention of both foreign and domestic researchers. Practical and theoretical results of architectural and urban activities of this period are of such great importance that they have never ceased to provide data for scientific research. Moreover, the attention for this topic is not only holding but even growing with each year.

Dedicated to one of the key aspects of Soviet architectural and town-planning activities of the 1920s –implementation of utopian socialists’ ideas of the XVI – XVII centuries, introduction of new forms of living space resulting in emerging of new types of buildings, there appeared a lot of publications of various authors (first of all, S. Khan-Magomedov, V. Khazanova). The authors conclude that such social experiments of collective dwelling have not been widely spread mainly due to their utopian nature. The task of the present article is to show vitality of collective dwelling ideas through the example of one of the largest industrial centers in the South of Russia during that period – Rostov-on-Don. Based upon the analysis of a number of residential houses and complexes the conclusion is made that the ideas of collective daily routine of the 1920s ended up viable and productive in real life if not taken in radical forms.

2. The main part

Already during the first Soviet years due to revolutionary social changes new social household practices appeared which stimulated emerging of new forms of living space. The Soviet architects were facing a task of developing a socially new type of housing which would meet all the requirements of socialist daily routines. The architects both followed reconstruction of daily routine practices in the society of that period and studied that problem in the works of utopian socialists. S.O. Khan-Magomedov notes: “While creating the first design drawings of the new type housings the
architects were closely following processes of reconstruction of daily routine practices taking place in real life; they were getting acquainted with articulation of this problem by utopian socialists, and studying works of Marxism classic authors. Among other things, two tasks attracted the utmost attention: introduction of collective principle into real life and emancipation of women from household duties. Both problems were already present in one form or another in the works of utopian socialists of the XVI – XIX centuries: More, Campanella, Vairasse, Morelly, Dézamy, Fourier, Owen, Saint-Simon and others” [1, p. 302]. Much attention in these works was paid to the role of a family in the society of future. Many utopian socialists believed that family (as primary social unit) will be replaced by a larger collective formation, the demands of which they were considering while creating design projects of dwelling places of the future [1, с. 302].

Among the results of this research by Soviet architects were design projects and construction of new types of residential buildings, such as transition-type houses, residential facilities and house-communes. In spite of all the differences they were united by one main thing – collectivized daily life.

Here we could give the most spectacular example of a house-commune for students of textile institute in Moscow, by the architect Ivan Nikolaev (1929). This is the most quintessential instance of an experimental approach in the Soviet architecture. The design implemented in practice embodied the idea of the complete communalization of daily life. Regulation of daily activities of commune members could be compared to a production line.

In the USSR there were built several house-communes with a various degree of daily life communalization; however, this kind of a residential building received no further development due to its obvious utopian nature.

Besides, attempts at the complete communalization of daily life were criticized by the authorities. In May 1930, a decree of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b) “On activities aimed at restructuring of daily practices” was published which noted that “implementation of these harmful utopian initiatives without consideration of material resources of the country and readiness level of population would lead to a huge misappropriation of resources and would result in discredit of the very concept of socialistic restructuring of daily practices”.

Attempts at designing a new person were made not only in the places specially built for the purpose, but also in the so-called household communes which had got widespread as early as during the first years of the Soviet state not only in the capital but also in other regions of the country.

There is not a single design project of house-commune buildings in the architectural practice of one of the biggest cities in the South of Russia – Rostov-on-Don; but there is a record of individual cases of household communes. One of these is a youth working commune in the settlement of Rostselmach plant.

This youth household commune was organized by the workers of the plant in the building of the newly constructed residence hall and had a distinctive name “Vigorously”.

The commune members took collective decisions as to all the commune activities.

A commune member gave all his salary to a ‘commune cash pool’ regardless of its rate – whether it was 25 or 150 rubles. At the same time everybody was given equal sums for daily expenses (transport, cigarettes, water) – 7, 5 rubles. The main expenditure item of the commune – meals – accounted for almost half of the budget. The rest of the financial means was distributed for housing costs, household expenses, clothing and cultural events.

In case of necessity of purchasing personal items (clothes, books) the money was contributed and distributed from the commune cash pool as a result of a coordinated decision. In the same way cultural events were financed – going to theatres and cinemas, which was done on an individual or a collective basis.

All the cooking was done by a cook hired by commune members. The members of the youth commune were provided with hot and high-quality meals all day long.

The living conditions, as well as hygiene of the commune members were also within sight of the whole community. There was a struggle, both for individual hygiene of each person, and for cleanliness and order in public facilities and living rooms.
Not only good housekeeping but also decoration of rooms and facilities was always under the watchful eye of the members of the collective. The so-called contests of interior beauty were regularly held in the commune which contributed to eradication of bourgeois spirit from the space of the commune.

The issues of morality were also not left out. Behavior of comrades was discussed jointly. Relationship between young people and girls was characterized as “friendly”. In case of a deep serious feeling, love, young people could get a separate room in a commune upon entering into a marriage, or leave the commune if one of the spouses was not the commune member [2].

The life of this, as well as of many other similar household communes, was not a very long one.

In addition to individual household communes in Rostov, there were single projects of residential household complexes occupying one or several blocks of the city.

But in actual practice the most consistent communalization of daily routine was carried out in large residential houses: the so-called “giant houses”. Such houses comprised up to 200 and more detached apartments. Each apartment was occupied either by one family or by one family in each room. These large residential formations which sometimes occupied a whole city block included a whole system of cultural and social services – nurseries, kindergartens, clubs, "Krasny ugolok" propaganda rooms, libraries, laundries, shops.

One of characteristic examples of such type of residential buildings is «the Giant-house № 1» planned for 246 flats and built during 1929–1931 in Krasnoarmeyskaya Street, between Voroshilovsky and Sokolova Avenues (figure 1), [3, 4].

![Figure 1. The Giant-house № 1. Plan of a typical floor.](image)

The dimensions of three main and essential yards of this giant house have a universal character – they are spacious enough, but only to the necessary extent which allows them to function as public space open into the city, but at the same time without losing necessary isolation. This is something public which can also be called private. The exactly defined form and space proportion made it possible for the residential house to function the way it was always supposed to – as residential, cultural and social space. The space of the yard existed as planned by the architect who was carrying out social services commissioning. In summer the yard was functioning as a location for recreation, educational and instructional practices (for example, film shows which were visited by residents of other town blocks) and also as a place for a midday nap. The yard space was actually used in the same way as a club or a park for recreation and leisure (that is, an open-air club), but only within local spatial boundaries, on a spatial level of a separate house.

According to numerous stories of the residents who have spent their whole lives in this house – from birth and until the present moment – the house still retains its inherent common space spirituality.
Another spectacular example is a residential complex of a housing association “Novy Byit” (New way of life) built during 1927 and 1931 (figure 2).

![Figure 2. Residential complex of a housing association “Novy Byit”. Plan of a typical floor.](image)

The residential complex consists of two huge buildings and is situated on the corner of the present Suvorova Street and Sokolova Avenue. The plan has a unique zigzag configuration. The aim of such a planning solution (apart from architectural emphasis) is to boost built-up density of the site and to improve illumination of living spaces. In an explanatory note to the design project the authors pointed out that “they deliberately had planned a large yard with a wide open driveway providing natural ventilation” [5–8].

The design project of the residential complex presupposed an extensive network of utility lines. In addition to central water heating the design project also presupposed construction of elevators and a separate garbage chute for each apartment. Apart from residential function it was also planned to locate a gym, rooms for meetings, a nursery, a laundry, baths and hobby groups (a school was also planned here for later) in a separate building in the yard; the plan was never accomplished, though.

The authors’ decision for the yard space was not utilitarian but the one with the most important social and symbolic meaning – being filled with a public function it plays the leading role – it is no longer just a territory for recreation and communication of the house residents – it is the core, an integral part of the whole organism. Each residential section with its separate yard and life blends into public yard space along the central axis of the whole building. A system is built – a yard within a yard, and the house itself is like a city within a city. And the whole thing as a united collective unit on a nationwide scale – a particular model of a new society. Isolated and historically utilitarian yard space gets characteristics of the front yard and takes on particular importance of inclusive and collective space.

Unique for Rostov architectural practice is also an unrealized project (1930) of a residential housing association “Smichka stroiteley” (Linkage of builders) (figure 3).
In the design project the house has an architectural decision of a huge arc about the size of a town block, occupying a territory of huge yard space. But whereas before the revolution closed yard space had secondary utilitarian function, here it is the composition basis of the whole block filled with some special semantic content. In this case the volume, close to a shape of the circle in the design project is the most efficient form of expressing the idea of unification [9]. The design project also presupposed a number of cultural and social functions.

The same idea has become a basis of the famous “Round house” in Taganrog (a satellite-town of Rostov) – a residential house of “Krasny Kotelschik” (Red Coppersmith) built in the period from 1929 till 1932 (figure 4), [10].

Figure 3. Residential housing association “Smichka stroiteley”. Ground floor plan.

Figure 4. “Round house” in Taganrog. Plan of a typical floor.
The sense of pathos of new way of life, of the idea of unification is intensified in the “Round house” to the maximum. Each apartment becomes a part of the whole. The central spot of the yard becomes the central one for the whole house. There appears almost physical sensation of the united space. The impression of shrinkage and compactness of space is also strengthened due to the fact that along the whole inner façade of the house in Taganrog there are galleries connecting yard space to each single apartment. The author has managed to create such powerful effect in an elementary way, in fact, by means of one single procedure – he has folded up into a ring a traditional in typology a unit of a fringe house.

During our numerous inquiries of residents living in various parts of Rostov-on-Don in the houses built during the 1920s we got very similar evidence: these spaces were filled with public cultural events both during pre-war and post-war periods. And both adults and children were active participants of this life. The yards of residential houses were used as places for recreation, entertainment and education.

It is essential to mention that not only by introduction of collectivized functions but through the planning structure itself the architects-authors of these houses and complexes managed to create the space which inspired coming into existence both social contacts of the house residents and, to some extent, started a kind of a teambuilding process.

3. Conclusion
Let's summarize the main results of the study.

The ideas of collective daily routine of the 1920s ended up viable and productive in real life if not taken in radical forms, and provided some degree of personal freedom, some part of space was retained for an individual who could define it as “his own”.

The architectural practice of Rostov-on-Don has managed to acquire reasonable balance, some solution which determined vitality of a new social idea for many years to come.

It is of crucial importance that not only by introduction of collectivized functions but through the planning structure itself the architects managed to create the space which inspired coming into existence both social contacts of the house residents and, to some extent, started a kind of a teambuilding process.

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