Soviet Orientalism: Socialist Realism and Built Tradition

GREG CASTILLO

The cultural practices of the Soviet Union in consolidating its eastern empire after the 1917 revolution bear a striking, yet largely unexplored, resemblance to practices that have been well documented in the West as colonialist and Orientalist. Under an imperative to remake "backward" societies in the image of socialism, cultural authorities monumentalized the forms of vernacular design to symbolize the regional identity of peoples, at the same time they were eliminating the social and political structures that underpinned vernacular traditions. The paper studies these practices both in the construction of high-profile individual buildings and in terms of a more general attack on regional urban forms. The calculated use of regional folk tradition largely disappeared in the years after Stalin's death. But modern variants have reemerged since the late 1960s in ways that border on kitsch.

The cultural invention of a Soviet "East" assumed a privileged role within the discourses of Stalinist architecture. According to the USSR's design authorities, pavilions erected in Moscow to represent Central Asia and the Transcaucasus were among the first buildings to successfully negotiate Socialist Realism's call for a compositional method "national in form and socialist in content." These exhibition structures of the late 1930s cross-fertilized Neoclassicism with decorative elements borrowed from folk traditions. The result was a stylistic hybrid which monumentalized vernacular architecture and was intended to supersede it. Stalinist architecture's essays in geographic and historical identity were publicized as proof that a universal socialist culture was being built from the ground up, in a host of native dialects. This expressive system bore remarkable affinities to practices now identified with Orientalism. Like British and French colonial architectures, Socialist Realism was the signifier of a domain assembled by force and legitimized by a myth of a modernizing mission civilisatrice that was reflected in the reform of the built environment. Soviet architectural
strategies, like those of other European empires, began with the straightforward implantation of new building types, and culminated with their stylistic “nativization.” In the process, local cultural traditions were studied, cataloged, and redefined in the context of new power relationships — the paradigmatic tasks of an Orientalist epistemology. 

**AN UNEXPLORED HYBRID**

The myth of a Soviet family of nations composed of Russia and its “younger” and less advanced “brothers” is colonialism’s terra incognita. Western architectural histories are particularly uninformative. Their evaluation of the Stalinist building program — both that associated with the cultural revolution of the late 1920s as well as its Neoclassical successor — is largely driven by the canons of taste (or in the case of Socialist Realism, their violation). The architecture of high Stalinism is portrayed as monotonous and undifferentiated, its personalities as unworthy of individual assessment, and its history as static — verdicts that in themselves rehearse colonial appraisals of cultural inferiority.

Nor have scholars of Western European Orientalism stepped in to fill the gap. Difficulties in accessing sites and archival sources have certainly played their part in maintaining the state of academic underdevelopment in which Soviet Orientalism remains mired. Equally important is its violation of a key precept of colonial studies: that empire is the story of global capitalism. Russia’s imperial legacy, launched by Tsars and commandeered by commissars, is consciously omitted from Edward Said’s enormously influential works, which negotiate a tension truce between Marxian paradigms lost and reframed. Said abandons the class-based formulas advanced by Marxism/Leninism as the means to redress imperialism. Yet he concurs with the framework developed by the Marxian historian of empire V.G. Kiernan to explain imperialism’s emergence as a competitive global project. Said and Kiernan agree that modern empires imitate each other. Capital accumulation is the payoff for these efforts, but imperialism’s underlying causes “are to be found less in tangible wants than in the uneasy tensions of societies distorted by class division. . . .”

The USSR provides a case study that deviates radically from this ideological convention. Soviet expansion was driven by a program to replicate a formula for rectifying class stratification. Soviet architecture, devised to serve that goal, documents the confluence of anti-colonialism, socialism, nationalism, and imperialism: the seemingly incompatible cultural strategies which intermingled in the Socialist Realist deployment of Orientalism. As a tradition of scholarship, Soviet Orientalism was derived from a prerevolutionary Russian root stock. It flourished in Russia during the 1920s, like other ethnographic disciplines devoted to the study of pre- and proto-socialist native cultures. But after the “Great Break” (velikiy perelom) of Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan (1928-32), Orientalism, like other ethnographic enterprises, was retired for its fixation on backward practices now seen as incompatable with the construction of socialism. Only with the elaboration of a Socialist Realist epistemology in the latter 1930s did such research find a new raison d’être. Native traditions within Soviet borders would become fodder for local expressions of a Stalinist cultural master plan; native traditions abroad (that is, in capitalist colonial settings) would be examined by Soviet Orientalists to diagnose cultural shortcomings.

“The October Revolution opened up the widest possibilities for a genuine scientific development of orientalism,” declared an exponent of the revived discipline in 1935. Marxist/Leninist empirical methods permitted Soviet Orientalists to reveal the presence of de-facto class relationships in traditional societies. This was done through the “unmasking” (razoblacheniye) of outdated cultural practices which deadened their subjects to the promise of socialism, and which were conserved under Western imperialism, it was claimed, for exactly that purpose. Socialism would come to backward peoples only through Socialist Realist prescriptions for social transformation. Because the Soviet construction of Oriental Otherness postulated this condition as historical rather than essential, backward subjects had not only the possibility, but the personal responsibility, to conform to Stalinist standards of social modernity: anything else would be an act of resistance that invoked other categories of identity — namely that of recidivist deviance. A forced march into a new historical epoch would end the Orient’s chronic exhaustion. Redemption would be characterized by multiculturalism (as formulated by Socialist Realism) and a vibrant spectrum of post-imperial subjectivities (as defined by Party doctrine): objectives that challenge the notion that these cultural phenomena were certified remedies for imperialism, rather than counting them among its many possible symptoms.

Russia’s imperial bequest to the Bolsheviks was geographic rather than territorial. Post-revolutionary independence movements in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkestan, and the Khanates of Khiva and Bukhara obliged Lenin to use the military power of the Red Army to reassemble the Tsarist realm. What was passed along to the new authorities without a fight was the mental map of a domain split by a modest continental divide and a formidable cultural chasm.

The West’s sway upon Russia was a contentious topic in imperial times, prompting acrimonious debates between “Westernizing” and “pan-Slavic” factions. The topic of Asia’s influence, however, usually inspired a contemptuous consensus among these rivals. “Millions of Asiatics stagnate today in proud satisfaction with their decrepit civilization, or vegetate on the various levels of savagery and crudity . . ., devoid of practically all hopes for an independent and sovereign future,” remarked the ethnographer Vladimir Lamansky in a pan-Slavic manifesto of 1892.

Prejudices aired by Lamansky, among others, found an unlikely source of support in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marx’s theory of “Oriental despotism” was founded on the inferiority of Asian cultures, which were incapable of plunging into history’s turbulent current without a
push from the West. His elastic geography of a despotic Orient included China, India, Turkey, Persia, and Russia. According to Marx, England’s imperial subjugation of India, while brutal, served two historical missions: “...the annihilation of the Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.”

Engels elaborated on the theme, proposing that “all impotent nations must in the last analysis, owe a debt to those who, under the laws of historic necessity, incorporate them in a great empire, thus allowing them to take part in an historic development which would be otherwise impossible for them.” Colonialism thus served history’s ultimate ends, a plot line that would reappear in Stalinist histories of Russia’s nineteenth-century territorial expansion.

Aspects of Tsarist and Marxist thought overlapped in the Bolshevik view of the East. Within Soviet discourse, “Asiatic” was a synonym for “backwardness,” although its manifestations were by no means limited to one continent. The Russian peasant of the Bolshevik imagination — dirty, ignorant, passive, and unconscious of time — was “Asiatic.” So was the society that kept him oppressed. The problem was one of historical retardation rather than racial inferiority, and so historical intervention was its patent remedy. “The profound meaning of the revolution,” Trotsky declared, “is that the people have made a final break with the barbarism of Asia, the seventeenth century, the icons and cant of Holy Russia.”

The Russian peasant’s Oriental counterpart was the Muslim traditionalist of Central Asia. Semi-nomadic agrarians of the steppe were seen as remnants of the feudal past. An equally retrograde urban counterpart was identified in the torpid but garrulous habitue of the bazaar, who victimized his wife by keeping her sequestered behind veils and blind walls. “Those old men take their tea as seriously as one does the Revolution,” complained a Russian worker to Anna Louise Strong, an American feminist visiting Central Asia in the mid-1920s. Bolsheviks saw such local types not as part of the “picturesque background,” according to Strong, “but as a positive obstacle — something to be removed that young life may flourish.”

The young life slated to replace socialism’s Asiatic Others was that of a proper proletariat. Its individual members would be characterized by ethnic and linguistic diversity and catalogued into discrete national identities, as outlined by Stalin in his 1913 treatise, Marxism and the National Question. The universal attributes of productivity, orderliness, optimism, and correct class consciousness would bond human variety into a coherent socialist organism, an ideal displayed to best advantage in mass demonstrations of the sort convened for Soviet political holidays. A 1922 Pravda report on a march in Moscow noted that its “sense of order and balance in the mass movements” stood in stark contrast to “Asiatic chaos, lack of discipline, and contagious disorder...”

Soviet architects argued that their profession would perform a crucial role in purging the USSR of its “Asiatic” tendencies. In the 1920s, Constructivists elaborated a theoretical basis for the transformative influence of built form. Modern building types were conceived as “social condensers” capable of instilling socialist modes of conduct and thought while meeting basic needs. The factory and the workers’ club were celebrated exemplars. Implicit in this theory was the concept of demolition as a technique of social reform. If a social condenser could function as a “workshop for the transformation of man,” traditional environments might contaminate new proletarians with discredited ways of life.

The First Five-Year Plan of 1928-32 and its accompanying cultural revolution set into motion a Janus-faced program of construction and demolition. New factories were designed to forge an economy based on heavy industry and a true working class. A rural proletariat would be created by reorganizing agriculture on a collective basis. As “social condensers” went up, buildings that embodied traditions deemed incompatible with industrial socialism were vacated, put to new uses, or razed. Religious buildings were at greatest risk. Adaptive reuse was more cost-effective than demolition, and the new uses to which sacred structures were put could, in effect, combine the best of both. Conversions of cathedrals into museums of atheism, churches into Soviet worker’s clubs, and monasteries into prisons involved minor remodeling. The technique established the regime’s institutional hegemony on a budget, while packing the ideological wallop of a wrecking ball.

**REBUILDING THE SOVIET “EAST”**

Islamic Central Asia was one of the proving grounds for this approach to creating a socialist urban infrastructure. Indigenous cities of the region were composed of residential communities called mahalla, each particularized by a neighborhood khaus (water pool), chaikhana (tea house), and mosque. The Friday mosque and the madrasa, an Islamic academy, crowned the city’s sacred topography. In the late 1920s, when Anna Louise Strong toured Bukhara’s religious structures — itself a comment on their changed use — she noted that worker’s clubs and the dormitory of the construction workers union were located in former madrasas, and that the city’s largest religious academy was in the process of being remodeled as a women’s club. Well-funded “Red chaikhana” were appended to the headquarters of trade unions and social organizations, Strong reported. Here, patrons quaffed tea beneath portraits of Lenin and posters exhorting them to revolutionary activity. Above the waters of a neighborhood khaus, a banner welcomed the Regional Congress of Trade Unions to a conference in Bukhara. Beside it was a recently remodeled club room plastered with “instructive placards about tuberculosis, the industrial loan, the unveiling of women, venereal diseases — everything at once that is new and scientific.”

The socialist reformatting of Islamic urban life was achieved through new construction as well as adaptive reuse. Most of Central Asia’s largest cities conformed to a morphology of nineteenth-century colonial segregation in which Muslim districts were separated from a newer zone of broad avenues and geometric city blocks of Russian provenance (FIG. 1). The
pattern could be found in Tashkent, Samarkand, Kokand, and Andizhan, among other examples. Soviet construction in the late 1920s focused primarily on sites in the new town; but there were exceptions. Tashkent's master plan of 1929-31 by A. Silchenkov called for demolitions within the mahalla in preparation for new construction. In Samarkand a large outlet of the Uzbek State Trading Company was built in the old town alongside the bazaar. The department store's antiquarian location was determined by a marketing policy intended to establish socialist hegemony in the distribution of goods. Strong notes: "The crowds outside were greater than anywhere else in the market; they were standing in line to buy cotton goods at prices below those in the private booths." Private trade was undercut by the innovation of low- or below-cost retailing in a market regulated by scarcity instead of profit. Cooperative stores set up to distribute goods to agrarian populations also interrupted the flow of consumers to urban bazaars. Socialist merchandising, bewailed by native shopkeepers, sent the bazaar into a period of decline.\textsuperscript{17}

The economic hegemony of Islam's male breadwinners was assaulted by a revolution in production as well as in distribution. Samarkand's Khudzhum silk factory opened in 1927 on another site near the bazaar. The rationale behind this location, which broke with the Five-Year Plan's fetish for modern industrial practices, can be explained in a name. \textit{Khudzhum}, the Turkic and Arabic word for "assault," was the official title of the state campaign to eliminate the traditional sequestration of women. The new factory would access the untapped resource of female labor, representing an unprecedented advance in social productivity, as well as in the Party's search for a native proletariat.\textsuperscript{18} Managers initially hired out piecework to be done at home, at least until female employees were considered vocationally and culturally equipped for factory labor. Within a decade, all Khudzhum workers were unveiled and putting in regular shifts at the mill.\textsuperscript{19}

Semi-nomadic agrarians of Soviet Central Asia, deprived of "the cultural effects of factory life," were to be transformed through the reorganization of agriculture into a collective enterprise. The key to the project was their resettlement into permanent villages, considered a requisite step in the liquidation of "tribal attitudes" that came with a "semi-feudal" way of life.\textsuperscript{20} The yurt was the architectural corollary of nomadic existence, and as a functioning building type, it assumed a position in Soviet culture that could well be described as purely illusory. As the state prepared to eliminate demountable dwellings from the vocabulary of socialist housing, yurts presented a fitting contrast with a modernist future in the "new-and-old" imagery of First Five-Year Plan propaganda (FIG. 2).\textsuperscript{21}

The campaign to reforge the \textit{auli} (migrating village) of the steppes into the fixed settlement of a rural proletariat gained momentum with a November 1929 decision by the Party's Central Committee plenum to appropriate the nomadic lands of Kazakhstan for state agricultural communes. Moscow's

\textbf{FIGURE 1.} Russian colonial Samarkand, ca. 1910. (Source: Karl Baedeker, Leipzig.)

\textbf{FIGURE 2.} The original caption reads: "In the Kalmyk region in the middle of the naked steppe grow buildings of steel and concrete alongside the felt tents of the nomads. (Source: I. Ilin, Russia's New Primer: The Story of the Five-Year Plan, G.S. Counts and N.P. Lodge, trans. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931].)"
architectural avant-garde jumped on the bandwagon. Students at Vkhutein (the successor organization to Vkhutemas, a kind of Soviet Bauhaus), including Andrei Bunin, Mariia Kruglova, and Viktor Kalmykov, drew up futurist-inspired resettlement communities for Central Asian nomads. Those by Kalmykov, a native of Tashkent, combined the yurt’s domical space with avant-garde shapes and details associated with works by the Moscow architect Konstantin Melnikov (FIG. 3). This stylistic arrogation of indigenous form, said to support “a traditional life style and social organization” while simultaneously eradicating both, presages later Socialist Realist praxis, and demonstrates one of the many continuities between “high” Stalinism and its avant-garde preamble.23

Socialist Realism fashioned a literally fabulous narrative around agrarian resettlement. Soviet journalists recounted its ultimate success as a fairy-tale come true, as demonstrated in this postwar account:

Given every encouragement by the State, the former nomads settled on the land and gave up their wanderings. From year to year the nomad camps grew smaller and smaller and in their place arose new towns and villages, and the people of whom it had once been said that they were “born in the saddle” were finally able to dismount and lead a happy existence.”

The reality had a greater affinity to social chaos — albeit one strictly governed by state directives. To guard against “vagabondage,” newly settled peasants were forbidden to drive their herds to pasture, although fodder was neither available nor provided by authorities. The futurist communities drawn up by architects in Moscow remained an outstanding order as well. For the 400,000 Kazakh nomads declared settled by 1936, only 38,000 housing units were built.24 Native resistance included armed insurrection, a mass slaughter of livestock (resulting in mass starvation), and migration to labor-starved industrial sites. At the new steel town of Magnitogorsk, visitors reported seeing “Kirgiz girls who had arrived directly from the tents of the nomads” laying the bricks of a new German-designed kindergarten.25 Collectivization’s final scoreboard with respect to Kazakhs has been calculated at one million deaths in less than a decade, and this out of a total population of about four million. Nomadic resettlement was an exercise in genocide that Western imperialism would be hard pressed to match, as the historian Robert Conquest has noted.26

Paradoxically, in the wake of the First Five-Year Plan’s demolition of vernacular traditions in the name of a socialist economy, a call went out in Moscow for a revival of folk art. Denigrated in the late 1920s as a dangerous cultural remnant, folklore had become by the mid-1930s an artistic legacy that, according to its proponents, “has been and continues to be a weapon of class conflict.”27 Maxim Gorky, the eminence grise of Socialist Realism as well as Stalin’s confidant, provided the folk renaissance with its biggest boost.28 Since his return from exile in 1931, Gorky had advocated a formal synthesis of high literature with the traditional fable as a means of meeting the didactic demands of Soviet literature. In his closing remarks to the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Gorky admonished authors to:

Collect your folklore, make a study of it, work it over... The better we come to know the past, the more easily, the more deeply and joyfully we shall understand the great significance of the present we are creating.”

The Soviet cultural apparatus was quick to respond. Collecting and studying folklore became primary tasks for regional ethnographic centers. Specimens of native literature suddenly graced the pages of newspapers, and new epic poems and folk songs, considered genuine contemporary examples of their genre, began to appear in 1935. Modes of production were revolutionized here as well. Native bards created their compositions under the tutelage of ethnographic specialists, thus guaranteeing the pedigree of the performer, the authenticity of the rendition, and the political correctness of the content.29 Traditional Russian bylina verse rode into the age of steel in an early prototype of this new genre, A.V Morozova’s “Of the Miracle Staircase,” which appeared in Pravda in December 1935. The poem describes a first ride on the Moscow Metro and its escalators from the point of view of a provincial babushka (granny), and ends with reverent thanks to two miracle workers, Lazar Kaganovich and “The great and greatest, Our wise
walked a thin line between ideological virtue and the deviance of was dynamited and backfilled as part of a road-building pro-

was remembered in Soviet design histories not as a model farm,

All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, or 

The new traditional architecture made its debut at the 1939 All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, or vskhv in its Russian acronym. Celebrated in the Soviet folklore as “a paradise on earth,” the exhibition was originally conceived as a pilgrimage site where collective farmers could absorb the latest developments in Soviet agriculture. A second programmatic mission soon eclipsed that function. Visitors arriving through the main gates were led to a cour d’honneur surrounded by regional and national pavilions. Two thousand artisans had been brought to the fairgrounds from their native lands to contribute their mastery of traditional decorative techniques to works designed by academy-trained architects. The most highly acclaimed structures, representing Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, were exercises in hybridity that mounted ornament derived from folk sources on a regulating Neoclassical matrix. When viewed from a distance, cultural idiosyncrasies disappeared in a Beaux Arts display of collective unity. The vskhv was remembered in Soviet design histories not as a model farm, but as the Eden in which a family of socialist architectures came into harmonic coexistence.35

Socialist Realism, defined as “national in form and socialist in content,” had been espoused as the goal of Soviet architecture for several years preceding the opening of the vskhv, but practicing what the profession was instructed to preach had turned out to be a risky venture. Earlier expressions of national culture had walked a thin line between ideological virtue and the deviance of “bourgeois nationalism.” It was a charge that in the mid-1930s had the power to make members of the intelligentsia in non-Russian republics vanish into thin air.36 The question of what constituted an appropriate national heritage was dogged by other paradoxes as well. While Azerbaijani designers were being exhorted to learn from the treasure house of native tradition, for example, the millennial shrine of Bibi Eyat, just outside Baku, was dynamited and backfilled as part of a road-building pro-

from men and from the public realm — were expunged from the original building type by peeling away one of its sides. The court of this revised prototype opened directly onto the street, further emphasizing the inner yard's role as a showplace rather than a living space. Within the pavilion's richly decorated interior, a panoramic landscape mural framed a view of the Central Asian countryside (FIG. 5). An architectural journal described the ambiance as that of "a house where the hostess invites guests to see the beauty of the sunny country, its fields full of tractors, (and) precious cotton. . . "

The revision of vernacular form used to created this idyll of a socialist Uzbekistan inverted the tropes of Islamic exoticism deployed at nineteenth-century colonial expositions. There the claim was the visitor was seeing native culture in its unadulterated form. In contrast, at the pavilion pride was taken in the overt manipulation of tradition. Western colonial representation fetishized the mystery of unintelligible calligraphy and "curious" practices. Socialist Realist representation domesticated the exotic — in the Uzbek case by superimposing upon it the conventions of an idealized collective farm and household. And whereas the colonial exposition froze native cultures "in an ambiguous and distant past," demonstrating them as "incapable of change and advancement," the pavilion depicted exotic national cultures converging at full speed upon a predetermined communist destiny.

Not all vernacular artifacts, however, were suitable as raw material for the construction of progressive national traditions. Monumental building traditions were the most suitable for recycling. Where these were lacking, "true examples of folk art" — as found in the elaborate window-frame ornament of Karelian wood cottages, for example — could be exploited as a regionalizing motif. Perhaps the most daunting task that confronted Soviet architects in the latter 1930s was that of designing buildings to represent cultures "without any national traditions in architecture." The term applied to peoples who were formerly semi-nomadic, and whose transient housing was a target for state intervention during collectivization. One attempt to resolve the dilemma, illustrated in a project by V. Veriuzhsky, used monumentality as an anchor (FIG. 6). Appropriately enough for its proposed function as a Kirgiz museum, Veriuzhsky's design is a catalogue of regional form. Native textile patterns embroider the ample surfaces of a yurt-like edifice rendered in masonry; a vaguely Doric portico frames four greatly enlarged Khivan columns. The project was to remain unrealized, a fate insured by its attempt to salvage the yurt as a cultural memory worth reprocessing. In a state devoted to eliminating agrarian movement in order to "sever patriarchal and tribal survivals of the past and . . . hasten the development of culture," the vernacular symbol of a nomadic existence was considered too retrograde, both economically and culturally, to constitute the basis for progressive traditional design.

A "correct" (by Stalinist standards) resolution of tradition and progress is displayed instead by the headquarters of the "Alisher Navoi" Academic Theater of Opera and Ballet, completed in 1947 in Tashkent. The home of art forms alien to native Uzbek culture, Tashkent's opera house was named for a fifteenth-century bard, Mir Ali Shir, who appended the nom-de-guerre "Navai," or "the melodious," to his writings in the Chatagay language (he was "the transitory" — "Fani" — to his Arabic and Persian readers). Alisher Navoi, as he became known to Uzbeks, enjoyed a posthumous career as Uzbekistan's "national poet." His monumental namesake structure was designed by Alexei Shchusev, a Moscow architect who achieved legendary status as the creator of the Lenin Mausoleum on Red Square. Tashkent's opera house, his final work, was rewarded with a Stalin Prize, First Class.

The hierarchies embodied in this building, both in physical form and labor organization, summarize the Orientalist discourses of late-Stalinist architecture. The delicately carved stucco ornament (gancb) showcased throughout the interior
was executed by local artisans, who were supervised by craft masters, who in turn labored under the watchful eye of a Western-style professional. At the very bottom of the pyramid were the forced laborers who provided the muscle for unskilled construction tasks, and who, by the mid-1940s, were mostly Japanese prisoners of war.44

Externally, the opera house is a neoclassical mass accented with exotic details (FIG.7). Within this “natived” shell, walls were graced with themes from ancient miniature paintings (here inflated to the scale of murals), ornamental bands inscribed with the words of the prophets (Lenin and Stalin), and an Oriental carpet proclaiming the twenty-fifth anniversary of socialist Uzbekistan. The diversity encompassed within the republic’s bounds was catalogued in six celebrated foyers. Each was executed in a distinctive manner identified as that of a specific region; each bore the name of that region’s main city: Khiva, Samarkand, Bukhara, Termez, Fergana and Tashkent. In the Bukhara foyer, carved tracery recapitulated the organic and geometric patterns found on local carpets, overhead beams bristled with honeycomb muqarnas, and hanging fixtures filtered electric light through perforated arabesques (FIG.8).

Wall panels in the Tashkent foyer paraphrased the traditional motif of a floral bouquet framed by a Muslim ogee arch. Stylistic traditions corresponded as nicely to administrative centers in these interiors, as language, ethnicity and geography did to the Stalinist construct of a national identity. Tashkent’s opera house was more than a public monument “which could well grace any European capital,” in the words of two English visitors.45 It was a hybrid of the extremely familiar and the extremely exotic, the product of a culture steeped in ancient Oriental traditions, yet conversant with arias, electrical wiring diagrams, and the collected works of Lenin — precisely the dialectic that Socialist Realism created and resolved in its invention of a Soviet “East.”

All six master artisans charged with creating interiors for Tashkent’s new opera house — Shirin Muradov, Tashpulat Aslankulov, Kuli Dzhahilov, Abdulla Boltayev, Gaibulla Nigmatov, and Said Narkoziev (to use their Russified names, as was done in Soviet publications) — were inducted as honorary members of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences.46 Tributes bestowed upon these and other indigenous artists under the patronage of Socialist Realism were publicized as proof of Soviet resistance to Western imperialisms’s destruction of craft traditions (FIG.9). In the late nineteenth century, the British socialist and craft enthusiast William Morris had decried this aspect of the British Raj, lamenting that the “beautiful works of the East . . . [are] fast disappearing before the advance of Western conquest and commerce.”47 Soviet texts of the 1930s aired the same condemnation of colonial capitalism. It had drawn Russia’s distant periphery “into world commodity circulation, wiping away its local characteristics, ruining its ancient handicraft industries, turning it into a market for manufactures.”48

In the case of Soviet Central Asia, the charges were misleading. As noted earlier, Soviet state retailing was also responsible for undermining the bazaar’s viability — and by extension its native crafts — by flooding the market with cheap goods. In addition, traditional architectural handicap had also found its own market niche under Tsarist rule, and had survived quite nicely in the service of capital. In Samarkand alone, the local school of builders had produced sixteen major projects in the two decades before the Revolution. Almost all of these consisted of buildings incompatible with the new regime: mosques, madrasahs, private mansions, a ritual ablutions facility (zaharatkhana), and a Jewish synagogue.49 This late resurgence of native craft accounted for the survival of the ornamental techniques exploited in Socialist Realist extravaganzas like Tashkent’s opera and the pavilions of the VSCvKh. Under the previous mode of production, however, craft masters like Shirin Muradov were not merely specialists in carved stucco, but repositories of a comprehensive architectural tradition that included all aspects of building design.50 Socialist Realism indeed perpetuated some aspects of folk art, rehearsing a colonial model of cultural exchange in the process. Like the Indo-Saracenic architecture of the British Raj, it provided a stylistic framework in which masters of indigenous construction were reduced to specialists in the decorative arts working under the supervision of outside “experts.” In Soviet Central Asia, as in British India, the process reconstituted vernacular tradition to suit the needs of a foreign power.51

CHANGES IN URBAN FORM

While proponents of Socialist Realism found beauty in local ornament, they had no patience for indigenous urban form. Even the bards of the new folklore rallied against the native city. A “song of wonder” by the Tadjik poet Munavvarsho began with an inventory of Asiatic memories, like that of a “multitudinous bazaar where the silence is never broken,” only
to dispense with such trifles in a paean to the miraculous new
capital of Stalinabad, which held him transfixed by its "great,
big square with clubs and cars and cinemas and factories and
lights." Soviet Orientalists and urban historians concurred.
Their investigations revealed that Central Asian cities had been
in decline since the end of the fifteenth century. Straight streets
marked by domed intersections, long consumed in the snarl of
unregulated incremental construction, had been built during a
lost golden age. Stagnation was manifest in the centuries of
subsequent city building which had "preserved the traditional
forms without making any innovations." This unhappy state
of affairs came to an end with the introduction of Russian
imperial rule. Its military new towns were artifacts of "a more
progressive culture ... distinguished by the breadth of their
streets, by their parks and public gardens."13
Praise for nineteenth-century garrison-town planning was
based on teleology rather than history. The true referent was
Moscow's urban improvement scheme of 1935, the so-called
"Stalin Plan" (Fig. 10). Its renderings showed a city in which
virtually every structure outside the Kremlin walls would be
razed and rebuilt. In accord with "the masterly suggestions of
Stalin concerning the development of the construction of cities
of the USSR in general, and of Moscow in particular," the new
capital would be composed of solidly framed street corridors,
symmetrical building ensembles, and vast expanses of formal
park landscape: a townscape promoted as the universal
signifier of progress.14 This design formula would purge the
capital of any resemblance to an older Moscow characterized
by "Russian backwardness, Asiatic ways, merchant extravagance,
clerical obscurationism, and extreme exploitation of the
workers and toilers." Particularly unloved were "narrow,
crooked, filthy, ill-smelling, dusty, and unpaved streets, with
numerous lanes and blind alleys ...": reminders of a Moscow
mocked by sophisticates as "the big village."15
The fetish for arrow-straight streets and wide, open plazas boded poorly for the tight-knit urbanism indigenous to Central Asia. Moscow's 1935 plan was promoted as a model for emulation, and master plans such as that by M. Bulatov for Samarkand were drawn up throughout the USSR by local architects in collaboration with colleagues from Moscow and Leningrad (FIG. 11). An aerial perspective of Bulatov's plan reveals Muscovite precedent in its planned web of radial and ring boulevards dividing the city into administrative quadrants, the parceling of land into superblocks, and the convergence of this new urban fabric on an enormous square designed to accommodate mass pageantry. Of the native city's landmarks, only the Timurid-era Registan complex, the Bibi Khanum mosque, and Timur's tomb appear to be preserved, a telling indication of the monumental and archeological biases of the Socialist Realist notion of tradition.

The eradication of tortuous lanes in the former old town suggests that the new Samarkand was to be a city built for speed, and perhaps surveillance. Colonial administrators in the previous century had been frustrated by the tangle of windowless alleys in native districts, which concealed inhabitants from census takers, public-health officers, and the police. Modern transportation imperatives had provided a rationale for minor interventions in the 1920s, when massive gates which had sealed off native neighborhoods at sundown began to be kept open around the clock to permit the passage of buses. With its unobstructed thoroughfares and panoptic organization, Samarkand's new plan was not only a bus driver's dream, but that of a colonial official as well, permitting the administrator's gaze to penetrate every urban quarter.

As in the case of many other Soviet cities, Samarkand was spared the totalizing redevelopment prescribed by its 1939 master plan. Financing for urban construction was more often guided by the pragmatic needs of industrial ministries than the aesthetic and ideological inclinations of city administrators and their architects. Except in the case of showplace cities (and, later, cities ravaged by war), funds were not often available for the tabula rasa approach to urban renewal depicted in the plans of the 1930s.

An unfortunate exception was that of Tashkent. Considered the most "advanced" city of the region, it bore the standard imprint of Russian colonialism in its division into a nineteenth-century new town and an Islamic old town. The latter was a wellhead of "Asiatic" impressions that muddled the city's representational role as a national capital. Old Tashkent's memories were given this stream-of-consciousness inventory by Nikolai Mikhailov, a Russian geographer writing in the late 1930s:

... an ant-heaps of clay huts with no windows facing the street, flat roofs, a labyrinth of narrow streets as tortuous as the path of a worm in a tree-trunk; the sinister reticence of the Musulman family; the lack of rights for women before men, and men before the authorities; nests of white storks on the minarets of the mosques; the confused and noisy activity of the oriental bazaar...
To lay claim to a more fitting image of Uzbekistan’s first city, Alisher Navoi Street, designed by M. Bulatov and V. Smirnov, was cut through the old town in 1943 to broaden and straighten the course of what had been known previously as Deharkucha Street (Fig. 12). Navoi Street penetrated the old town with an extension of the arterial network native to the colonial district, demolishing every indigenous structure in its path. From a Socialist Realist perspective, the displacement of Tashkent’s oldest neighborhoods by the new monuments of Alisher Navoi Street in no way implied an abandonment of tradition, but rather the careful mending of its flaws. The finished product was another triumph of the progressive socialist East over its Asiatic Other. “Now there is a women’s club here, a medical technical school, a printing press, and the Uzbek National Theater,” Mikhailov thrilled. “In the heart of the ‘old’ town, which till quite recently was a stronghold of Islam, there stands a monument to Lenin.”

The victory was demographic as well as ideological. As in all Soviet Central Asian cities, the cleft structure inherited from colonial times was reflected in continued ethnic segregation, with almost all Russians residing in the new town and Uzbeks and Tadjiks in the old. Demolition of the mahalla’s housing stock eliminated the option of cultural insularity for many of its former residents. Mikhailov noted that “most important of all changes is the fact that many Uzbek doctors, engineers, professors, and industrial workers live in the new town now....” According to the official narrative, the native city’s disappearance was accompanied by an apparition. The long-awaited socialist subjectivity, ethnically varied and uniformly classed, was observed at home in the zone formerly associated with colonial occupation, but now absolved of that legacy. In the wake of extensive demolition, almost all of Tashkent had become the new town.

The emergence of a “New Man,” multinational in form and socialist in content, proved to be more apparent than real. Ethnic segregation remained a fact in cities with intact mahalla.
districts. In apartments where Slavs and Central Asians mixed, the latter were disgusted by the constant smell of cooking pork, the former by noisy neighbors unaware of how one lived "is drugimi" (with others). Russians continued to perceive the diet, dress and rites of Muslim culture as Asiatic vestiges best expunged from modern life. In accord with the ongoing celebration of Soviet socialism's cultural specificity, Central Asians regarded these legacies as legitimate components of a modern ethnic identity. Stalin had defined national identity as a single, carefully delimited element in the construct of a socialist post-colonial subjectivity. Non-Russians with increasing frequency saw nationalism, and the body of cultural traditions that were its signifier, as post-colonialism incarnate: a synecdochic revision that contained the seeds of the New Man's unmaking. Socialist nationalism proved, in the end, to be an unstable hybrid that reverted to its "bourgeois" stock in the absence of ruthless pruning.

LATTER-DAY VARIANTS

Soviet architecture's manifestations of regional tradition went into a brief remission during Khrushchev's war on those aspects of the recent past that seemed "Asiatic" in their own right — namely the "Oriental despotism" of the Stalin era and the barbaric splendor of its monuments. Authentically socialist architecture suddenly became synonymous with mass production and an industrial kit of parts. The public relations spectacle of Central Asian artisans posed beside stucco filigree now made way for shots of their younger counterparts in hard hats, hoisting precast panels. But while handicraft of the time-honored variety was out, local ornament soon caught up with the times and came back in. By the late 1960s, standard Soviet glazing details were disappearing behind exterior light baffles of vaguely Islamic configuration. Concrete-paneled housing slabs received larger-than-life variants of Timurid tile patterns on their windowless stub ends (FIG.13). By the 1980s, traditional motifs had become almost mandatory in public construction of every sort. Tashkent's Maxim Gorky Russian Drama Theater, bordering a new civic center, featured an overhanging cornice of precast concrete fins suggesting the muqarnas found on mosques of a bygone era (FIG.14). The city's television tower and revolving restaurant introduced the minaret to the space age, and underground metro stops were a tour of contemporary design's archeological reminiscences. To the uninitiated, these applications of tradition had more in common with generic kitsch than with local craft, but they held a cultural message decipherable by those with a previous knowledge of the language, although now layered with unintended meanings. The exuberance with which local ornament was being reproduced and propagated at the periphery drove Moscow's design authorities to ponder just why it was that the issue of nation-
al tradition in architecture so often seemed to be the proprietary domain of non-Russian republics. The building type that invariably received the full allotment of contemporary tradition was the "palace of culture." Every major city in Soviet Central Asia got one, and always in a prominent place. Samarkand's went up beside other buildings executed in the modern Oriental manner as part of a new civic center. The project owed two debts to Stalinist design precedent: one in the vast scale of its central plaza, the other in its location. The plaza and its administrative and cultural institutions were planted at the edge of the old town, at the confluence of the colonial district's main avenues — precisely where Bulatov's 1939 city master plan showed a square surrounded by an architectural ensemble flush with Orientalisms of a lower-tech order. Until the 1960s this site had belonged to an ancient citadel, long considered a hindrance in the integration of modern socialist Samarkand and its Asiatic counterpart. The structure's demolition to make way for demonstrations of mass identity recalled a Stalin-era slogan: "There are no fortresses that Bolsheviks cannot storm!" Given the ends to which their cultivation of national tradition was eventually put, one should add that there turned out to be fortresses from which Bolsheviks could not escape, even if they happened to have been the architects.


REFERENCE NOTES

1. Of course, the spectrum of locally and historically specific constructions of ethnographic Otherness ranges far beyond the limits of Anglo-European imperialism. As in the Soviet case, many of these have also spawned subsequent "imagined communities" of national identity. To consider all of them in relation to Soviet Orientalism would demand comparisons of the USSR with Fascist Italy, Kemalist Turkey, Spanish-colonial portrayals of Mesoamerica and the reverse discourse of "La Raza," Ghandi's invocation of British Raj prejudices to spin a nationalist vision of an eternal Indian village nation, and so forth — a task clearly beyond the scope of this paper. I conceive my assignment instead as the complication of the construct of Orientalism proposed by Edward Said; this I attempt through consideration of the Soviet deployment of parallel tropes within a Socialist Realist epistemology which included a Marxist/Leninist discipline also called "Orientalism" by its scholarly proponents.

2. In a 1993 interview with David Barsamian (published as "The Pen and the Sword" in Design Book Review 29/30, pp.13-23), Said notes: "Interestingly enough, I'm not really concerned with the kind of imperialism that one finds in Russia, where the Russians simply advanced by adjacents. They moved east and south, whatever was near them. I'm much more interested in the way the Europeans, the British and French predominantly, were able to jump away from their shores and pursue a policy of overseas domination." The author's explanation is remarkable for a number of reasons. Taken literally, it envisages Russians as non-Europeans, and reinforces rather than dismantles a Western Orientalist conception of Russia's Asiatic "Otherness." It rehearses the nineteenth-century notion of land-based expansion as categorically different than its overseas counterpart, a geopolitical rationalization common to both Russian and American imperialism. Finally, Said's explanation is, of course, factually inaccurate. By the early nineteenth century the Tsarist domain had vaulted across the Bering Straits to include Alaska and trading posts located in what is today California.


5. Ibid., p.256.


17. Ibid., p.90.

18. Ibid., p.145. The bazaar would spring back to life by the late 1930s, when the state tem- pered its policy on private sales of foodstuffs as a means of addressing their chronic scarcity.


29. According to contemporary observers, Gorky's relationship with Stalin was one of considerable influence. Boris Nicolaevsky claimed that Gorky "remained until his death the only person whom Stalin was compelled to take into consideration, to some extent at least." See B. Nicolaevsky, *Power and the Soviet Elite: The Letter of an Old Bolshevik* and *Other Essays* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1975), p.62.


37. I. Rabinovich, "Arkitekturnyje motivy na-
44. Coates, *Soviets in Central Asia*, p.266.
45. Ibid., pp.265-66.
50. Ibid., p.516.
51. On the Indo-Saracenic style advanced by Britain’s Raj, see Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision*, pp.55-175.