5-2010

From "Stalinkas" to "Khrushchevkas": The Transition to Minimalism in Urban Residential Interiors in the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964

Ksenia Choate
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd

Part of the Art Practice Commons, and the History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.
FROM “STALINKAS” TO “KHRUSHCHEVKAS”: THE TRANSITION TO MINIMALISM IN URBAN RESIDENTIAL INTERIORS IN THE SOVIET UNION FROM 1953 TO 1964

by

Ksenia Choate

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Human Environments

Approved:

Darrin Brooks, MFA
Major Professor

Steven R. Mansfield, MArch
Committee Member

R. Edward Glatfelter, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Byron R. Burnham, Ed.D.
Dean of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah
2010
ABSTRACT

From “Stalinkas” to “Khrushchevikas”: the Transition to Minimalism in Urban Residential Interiors in the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964

by

Ksenia Choate, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2010

Major Professor: Darrin Brooks, MFA
Department: Interior Design

During the shift from the rule of Joseph Stalin to that of Nikita Khrushchev, people in the Soviet Union witnessed dramatic political, economic, and social changes, evident even in such private aspects of life as residential home interiors.

The major architectural style of Stalin’s era, known as Stalin’s Empire Style, was characterized by grandeur and rich embellishments. The buildings’ interiors were similarly grandiose and ornate. By endorsing this kind of design, Stalin attempted to position himself as an heir of classical traditions, to encourage respect for his regime, and to signal his power. When Nikita Khrushchev became the country’s leader shortly after Stalin’s death in 1953, he proclaimed that “excessive decorations” were not only unnecessary, but harmful. As a result, the standardized panel buildings produced at his initiative were defined by straight, plain lines, and were devoid of literally any architectural details that were not considered functional. These changes in Soviet
architecture were reflected in interior design and furnishings: the minimalist aesthetic became their defining characteristic.

The purpose of this study is to gain, through examination of existing literature, new insight into why a transition to a minimalist aesthetic was happening in the 1950s and 1960s in Soviet urban interior design. To achieve this goal, the present thesis analyzes works by contemporary scholars on the subject and examines statements the Soviet government as well as Soviet architects and interior decoration specialists made regarding the state’s views on architecture and interiors during the period of 1950-1960.

While research has been published that explores some aspects of this stylistic transition, the present work is unique in that it identifies and focuses on three distinct reasons for the change to minimalism in Soviet urban residential interiors under Khrushchev: the deficit of apartment space, reduction of construction costs, and ideological motives.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, Irina Vedina and Vladimir Vedin, without whose help, support, sacrifice, enthusiasm, and the knowledge of scholarly research logistics this thesis would not have been possible. I extend my deep gratitude to the Choate family, especially Marilyn and Mickey Choate, who have stood by me during the three years while I was acquiring the master’s degree, giving me continuous and unwavering support. I also would like to thank my daughter Maya for her patience throughout the many hours that I spent working on this study when she could not have my undivided attention.

I give a special thanks to my committee chair, Prof. Darrin Brooks, and my committee members, Profs. Steven Mansfield and Edward Glatfelter, as well as my former committee chair, JoAnn Wilson, for their valuable suggestions, edits, and kind words of encouragement throughout the thesis-writing process.

Ksenia Choate
CONTENTS

Page

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .............................................................................................................. v

LIST OF TABLES ....................................................................................................................... vii

LIST OF FIGURES ..................................................................................................................... viii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................... 1

II. STALIN’S EMPIRE STYLE ...................................................................................................... 20

III. KHRUSHCHEV AND MINIMALISM ....................................................................................... 55

IV. REASONS FOR CHANGE TO MINIMALISM ...................................................................... 79

V. CONCLUSION ........................................................................................................................ 106

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................ 105

APPENDICES ............................................................................................................................ 117

APPENDIX A: RUSSIAN COPYRIGHT LAW ............................................................................. 118

APPENDIX B: SELECTED PHOTO CREDITS ............................................................................ 119
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rates of Soviet Housing Construction: 1918-1956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Comparison of Buildings Erected with the Use of Different Construction Methods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-1</td>
<td>Moscow. Apartment buildings on Gorkogo street</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>Moscow. Apartment building on Sadovo-Triumfalnaya street. Suite of rooms</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>Apartment-museum of the poet Musa Jalil. Kazan, Russia</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>Typical panel building of the Khrushchev era. Kazan, Russia</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>Arrangement of a khrushchevka living room</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-6</td>
<td>Brasilia. 2009</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>Panel apartment building in the suburbs of Lille, France. Construction of a panel building, France</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>Folk Art and Traditions Museum, Rome. Reich Chancellery, Berlin. The House of Stakhanovites, the city of Gorky, Russia</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-2</td>
<td>Apartment building on Sadovo-Kudrinskaya street in Moscow. Façade</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Apartment building on Sadovo-Kudrinskaya street in Moscow. Plan of a residential section</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4</td>
<td>Furniture placement plan in a two-room apartment</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>Apartment. View from the front room into the living room</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-6</td>
<td>Ceiling detail</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-7</td>
<td>Apartment building on Bolshaya Kaluzhskaya street in Moscow. Façade</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-8</td>
<td>Apartment building on Bolshaya Kaluzhskaya street in Moscow. Plan of a residential section</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-9</td>
<td>Furniture placement plan</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-10</td>
<td>Door between a kitchen and a dining room</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2-11 Furniture placement plan and a photographed perspective of a dining room in a four-room apartment .................................................................32
2-12 Dining-room furniture set ..........................................................................................................................34
2-13 Furniture samples ........................................................................................................................................35
2-14 Light pendants .............................................................................................................................................36
2-15 Sketches of wall- and ceiling-mounted light fixtures ................................................................................37
2-16 Decorative textiles ........................................................................................................................................38
2-17 Wallpaper samples .........................................................................................................................................39
2-18 Façade and floor plan of an apartment building in Stalingrad ..............................................................41
2-19 Worker barracks of Prokhorovskaya manufactory ....................................................................................43
2-20 Corner in a workers’ room. 1920s ................................................................................................................44
2-21 City of Kazan. Early 1870s ..........................................................................................................................45
2-22 Family gathered around a table ..................................................................................................................48
2-23 Workers in a new apartment .........................................................................................................................50
2-24 Kimry city Museum of Regional Studies ................................................................................................51
2-25 Rubtsovsk city Museum of regional studies .............................................................................................52
2-26 Furniture placement in a one-room apartment ..........................................................................................53
3-1 Typical Khrushchev-era panel apartment building. Kazan, Russia ......................................................58
3-2 Construction process of a panel building .....................................................................................................59
3-3 Typical Khrushchev-era large-block apartment building. Kazan, Russia ................................................60
3-4 Plans of three residential sections ................................................................................................................62
3-5 Floor plans and furniture layouts of one-, two-, and three-room khrushchevikas .................................................................63
3-6 Furniture layout for a one-room apartment intended for two adults with a child .................................................................66
3-7 Light fixture suggested for use by designers ...........................................67
3-8 Calico drapery with an ornamental pattern and a lace curtain ......................69
3-9 Light cotton curtain with a stylized tulip pattern .....................................70
3-10 Coarse-fiber floor mat ....................................................................71
3-11 Dining table with chairs ..................................................................73
3-12 Two-tier sectional units ..................................................................74
3-13 Pre-assembled sectional units ............................................................75
3-14 Rack-based shelving units ..................................................................75
3-15 Sectional units ..................................................................................76
3-16 Picture placement recommendation ..................................................77
4-1 “Before” and “after” of the young couple’s apartment ..............................80
4-2 Furniture layout: traditional and new ....................................................81
4-3 Suggestion for wall treatment ...............................................................83
4-4 Suggestions for doors .........................................................................84
4-5 Transformable cupboard-table-bed .......................................................87
4-6 Comparison of two ways of sectional furniture construction .....................93
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Urban residential home interiors in the Soviet Union underwent dramatic changes during the transition from the rule of Joseph Stalin, who was the country’s supreme ruler from 1927 till 1953, to that of Nikita Khrushchev (in power from 1953 to 1964) (Khan-Magomedov, 2006; Nikolskaya & Nikolskii, 1963; Varga-Harris, 2008). Addressing these changes, as well as those that happened in Soviet architecture, the present thesis uses the terms “stalinka” and “khrushchevka” to denote both the residential buildings and the apartments in those buildings, typical for Stalin and Khrushchev eras, respectively.

Since Soviet interiors constitute the main focus of this work and, as a result, a vast number of Soviet and Russian sources were used in the course of the study, it was appropriate to determine whether the term “interior” has a universal meaning in both Russian and English languages, as well as in the present time compared to the 1950s and 1960s. Comprehensive Soviet Encyclopedia (1972) has defined architectural interior as the “… inner area of a building or a type of a space (vestibule, foyer, room, hall, etc.)…” (Bolshaya Sovetskaya Entsyklopediya, 1972) (excerpt translated by the author).

Dictionary.com (04/2009) defined the same concept as “a. the inside part of a building, considered as a whole from the point of view of artistic design or general effect, convenience, etc. b. single room or apartment so considered” (Interior, n.d.). The similarity of definitions allows us to conclude that the further use of the word “interior” in this thesis will be understood by English speakers the same way it was understood by Russians in the second half of the 20th century. It should be noted that since the majority
of the urban population in the Soviet Union resided in apartments and not in free-standing houses, the term “residential interior” in this thesis refers to an interior of such apartment.

Design under Stalin and Khrushchev

The major architectural style of Stalin’s era is known as Stalin’s Empire Style (Khan-Magomedov, 2006). This style of architecture was characterized by grandeur, “decorativism and monumentalism” (Wilk, 2006). This neoclassical “architecture of victory” focused on buildings’ facades that overlooked streets and avenues (Varga-Harris, 2008), intended to impress with their solemnity and loftiness. Stalinist apartment buildings were usually 8-14 floors high (Khmelnitskii, 2005). Figure 1-1 shows examples of such apartment buildings.

Figure 1-1. Moscow. Apartment buildings on Gorkogo street. Architect A.G. Mordvinov. 1940 (Shkvarikov, 1950).
Architectural interiors in stalinkas were similarly grandiose. Common was the use of such elements as porticos, columns, rosettes, and decorative moldings (Mordvinov, 1954; Oshchepkov, 1951; Simonov & Mordvinov, 1937). The woodwork, such as doors and built-in storage units, was richly ornamented (Oshchepkov, 1951). The ceilings in apartments were high – 3.0-3.3 m (9.8-10.8 ft), and the rooms relatively large: 18-23 m² (193.8-247.6 ft²) was the area of a one-room apartment, 24-38 m² (258.3-409 ft²) – of a two-room apartment. Kitchen size in two-room apartments was 5.4-6 m² (58-64.6 ft²) and in three- and four-room apartments – 8-12 m² (86.1-129.2 ft²) (Alekseev, Bayar, Blashkevich, Makotinskii, & Cherikover, 1954). Figure 1-2 demonstrates an example of decorative millwork used in Stalinist buildings.

Figure 1-2. Moscow. Apartment building on Sadovo-Triumfalanaya street. Suite of rooms (Rzyanin, 1951).
The same quality of decorativeness held true for interior furnishings and décor. Elaborate carvings adorned wooden commodes and buffets, metal bed posts were topped with balls and other embellishments, rugs and pictures hung on walls, and embroidered cloths and runners covered furniture’s horizontal surfaces (Buchli, 1999). Shown in Figure 1-3 is a typical room of the period.

*Figure 1-3. Apartment-museum of the poet Musa Jalil. Kazan, Russia. Interior of the 1940s time period. 2009.*
When Nikita Khrushchev came to power shortly after Stalin’s death, he proclaimed that “excessive decorations,” or “ornamentalism” (ukrashatelstva) were not only unnecessary, but harmful (Khrushchev, 1955). The standardized panel buildings produced “on conveyor belts” (Varga-Harris, 2008) were defined by straight, plain lines and were void of literally any architectural details that weren’t considered functional (Khan-Magomedov, 2006; Varga-Harris, 2008). Interior architecture followed the same principle of simplicity: the walls, ceilings, and doors were plain and unadorned (Seredyuk, 1958). Figure 1-4 demonstrates an example of a Khrushchev-era residential building.

*Figure 1-4. Typical panel building of the Khrushchev era. Kazan, Russia (see more on panel construction in Chapter III). 2009.*
Typical residential buildings erected during the Khrushchev era had five stories and the apartments themselves were smaller: 22 m² (236.8 ft²) was the floor area of a two-room *khrushchevka*. Their ceilings were lower, 2.5-2.7 m (8.2-8.9 ft), than those of *stalinkas* (Khrushchev, 1974; Listova, 2006; Seredyuk, 1958; Varga-Harris, 2008). The standard kitchen size was 4.5 m² (48.4 ft²). The bathroom had enough room to fit in the tub and the adjacent sink. The toilet room was 73 cm by 1.5 m (2.4 by 4.9 ft) large and contained the toilet along with exposed sewer and water pipes (Listova, 2006).

Changes occurred in interiors as well. Furniture became simple, plain, and rectilinear (Seredyuk, 1958) and was made out of new materials that were lighter – both physically and visually – and cheaper (Seredyuk, 1961). In addition, the number of furniture pieces and items of home décor were minimized (Seredyuk, 1958). Figure 1-5 shows an example of a Khrushchev-era interior.

*Figure 1-5. Arrangement of a khrushchevka living room (Seredyuk, 1967).*
The influences of the International Style and Russian
Constructivism on Khrushchev’s architecture

A change to minimalism was a tendency not exclusive to the Soviet Union. Architecture and interiors worldwide were becoming more basic and functional, due to what is now known as modernism, or the Modern Movement. The Modern Movement, according to some theorists and historians, developed in two stages. The first sprang from the ideas and methods of design reformers of the late 19th century and was at the height of its success in the 1920s. The second stage, known as the International Style, was prominent from the 1920s till the 1960s. While it could be said that the Modern Movement was most recognized for its architectural legacy, it left a significant mark in such areas of design as “appliances, ceramics, glassware, furniture and fittings, carpets, textiles, typography, posters, and wallpaper” (Woodham, 1997). In simple terms, modernism can be defined as minimalist and functionalist in form and socially-minded in ideology. Its theorists and practitioners aspired to effecting social change by creating universally-available and universally-understandable products made out of new materials and through the use of new technologies provided by the Industrial Revolution (Wilk, 2006).

In Khrushchev’s USSR, the majority of citizens, unfamiliar with the world design trends, saw the styles offered by the Soviet designers as “indigenous and thoroughly Soviet” (Buchli, 1999). However, while it was never openly acknowledged, the country’s architects and designers were undoubtedly influenced by the International Style. In fact,
some very distinct parallels can be seen between the statements of the western modernists and those of Khrushchev’s government.

Antonio Sant’Elia (1888-1916), an influential Italian architect and a futurist, declared that “the world of the twentieth century demands a reformulated modern city, one devoid of monumentality and decoration” (Glazer, 2007). Le Corbusier (1887 – 1965), a Swiss-born French architect and one of the most outstanding figures of the Modern Movement, in one of his major works, The Decorative Art of Today (1925), stated, “Trash is always abundantly decorated; the luxury object is well-made, neat and clean, pure and healthy, and its bareness reveals the quality of its manufacture” and “the more cultivated a people becomes, the more decoration disappears” (Le Corbusier, 1987).

Strikingly similar in its essence is the following excerpt from the Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet of the Ministers Concerning the Eradication of Excesses in Building Design and Construction (November 4, 1955):

The Central Committee and the Soviet of Ministers of the USSR point to the fact that in the work of many architects and planning organizations, the ostentatious side of architecture gained ground, abounding in numerous excesses, which is not in line with the party and government policy in the affairs of architecture and construction… Taking interest in the outer aspect [of architecture], many architects are engaged mostly in decorating the buildings’ facades. (Postanovleniye, 1955, pp. 532-533) (translated by the author)

In the above-mentioned book, Le Corbusier asserted that along with architecture, interior and furniture design should follow the principles of rationalization, standardization, and mass production. In the same 1955 resolution, the Communist Party, in turn, decreed to “consider the main goal of planning organizations, architects, and
engineers, the development of standardized projects and standardized designs, and the application of those in their construction practices” (translated by the author).

It also appears that the Party was no stranger to the famous slogan of modernism, “form follows function.” The same resolution made it clear that “an attractive look of buildings and structures must be attained not through the use of artificial and costly decorative ornamentations, but through the organic connection of architectural forms with the purpose of buildings and structures…” (translated by the author).

In the beginning of the 20th century, the ideas of modernism were spreading fast around Europe. In Germany, the Bauhaus activists were among the most well-known designers of the International Style. Its three architect-directors were Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, all of whom are now considered to be iconic figures of the world modernist architecture. In Italy, the architects-designers of Group 7, known as rationalists, adopted the modernist ideals, such as simplicity of form, as well as the use of new materials and technology, and hoped that rationalism would become the official aesthetic of fascism (Woodham, 1997).

By the mid-1930s modernist buildings were being erected not only in Europe and the US, but also in Japan, South America, and the Middle East (Wilk, 2006). Modernism was becoming truly an “International” Style and its practitioners were making decisions and implementing them not just in their countries, but also on a global scale. In 1933, during the fourth congress of CIAM (International Congresses of Modern Architecture)

---

1 Bauhaus was an architecture and design school that operated in Germany from 1919 till 1933.
assigned areas separated by “green belts,” with large multi-unit apartment buildings, were to be the universal solution to the global housing problems (Wilk, 2006).

One of the examples of this decision being realized, decades later, is the construction (1957-1960) of Brasilia, the current capital of Brazil, where Lucio Costa was the principal planner and Oscar Niemeyer the main architect. For instance, Brasilia’s city-planning strategies included apartment buildings grouped in residential areas, where each such area contained its own stores, child care facilities, schools, etc. This approach, as well as the apartment building designs, was very similar to the one utilized in Khrushchev’s Soviet Union (Yanitskii & Hait, 1960). Figure 1-6 is an illustration of city planning strategies and building designs in Brasilia that resemble those in Khrushchev’s USSR.

*Figure 1-6. Brasilia. 2009.*
Similar construction practices were being implemented in France at the end of the 1950s-beginning of the 1960s. Apartment buildings were long (150-180 m), had 5-11 stories, and many were built with the use of prefabricated panels (Bravinskii, 1961; Kibirev, 1959). Figure 1-7 shows panel apartment buildings in France built around 1961 (compare to Figure 1-4, *Typical panel building of the Khrushchev era*).

*Figure 1-7. Left: Panel apartment building in the suburbs of Lille, France. Right: Construction of a panel building, France (Bravinskii, 1961).*

The change to minimalism was also evident in interiors around the world in the 1920s-1960s. The following words from the *Guide to Easier Living* (Wright & Wright, 1951) sound very identical to those of Soviet architects and interior designers of the 1950s and 1960s: “The home itself is smaller; rooms must serve more than one purpose.”
Another example is post-WW II Italy, where young designers began to offer furniture that could be mass-produced at a low cost and was compact and multi-functional to help solve the space deficit problem (Sparke, 1990). Likewise, in other countries, such as France, Britain, Germany, Scandinavian states and Eastern Europe, at different times during the first half of the 20th century, furniture and interior design took the turn to modernism (Jackson, 1991; Woodham, 1997).

An attempt to understand all that shaped Khrushchev-era architecture and design would be incomplete without the mention of Russia’s own version of the International Style, namely constructivism, which manifested itself as a distinct architectural movement in the early 1920s. Constructivism shared a lot with its western counterpart, both in form and philosophy. This is how the movement’s approach was explained, in part, by Aleksandr Vesnin, one of the most well-known Russian constructivists:

Materials and suitability to function determine the structure of an object… It is clear that objects… must be pure constructions without the ballast of figuration, and must be built according to the principle of the straight and the geometrically curved, and on the principle of economy. (Kopp, 1985, p. 44)

The Russian constructivists believed not only in the need for design to affect political and social issues, but also maintained that it had an important role in building the new Soviet reality. Their opinion was that “contemporary architecture must crystallize the new socialist way of life!” Constructivism was strong in the Soviet Russia until Stalin put an end to it in 1932 and “Social Realism” became the official aesthetic of the state (Cooke, 1997; Kopp, 1985).
A number of publications address the subject of a transition to a new aesthetic in the Soviet Union during Khrushchev’s Thaw. Victor Buchli, in the article entitled “Khrushchev, Modernism, and the Fight against Petit-Bourgeois Consciousness” in the Soviet Home” (1997), suggested that turning to modernism under Khrushchev was a part of the reinstatement of the values of the Socialist revolution of 1917. He offered the opinion that the change to modernism was not merely a cultural trend, but a reform of everyday life, the first attempt at which happened in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Buchli pointed out that in the 1950s-1960s, just as it happened in the 1920s, the concept of petit-bourgeois consciousness came under attack. The author maintained that in order to help people switch from petit-bourgeois mentality to progressive socialist-mindedness, and furnish and decorate their apartments in the manner consistent with the latter, the state, along with design specialists, put a strong emphasis on the ethical aspects of such a switch. He mentioned that as much as those specialists desired for the Soviet people to

---

2 The Thaw is the epithet given to the Khrushchev era. It refers to the changes that happened in the USSR after Stalin’s rule of terror.

3 *Petit-bourgeois* consciousness (or, in Russian, *meshchanstvo*), is an ethically-charged term, and in the context of the socialist propaganda, always having a negative connotation. *Meshchane*, known in English as the *petite bourgeoisie*, were a social class in pre-1917 (pre-Socialist Revolution) Russia. This class consisted of small homeowners, city-dwellers, and craftsmen. Dictionary.com defines it as “the portion of the bourgeoisie having the least wealth and lowest social status; the lower middle class.” In the Russian language it also came to mean self-interested, narrow-minded people.
dispose of their old furnishings and items of home décor upon moving into new apartments, it was not quite happening. Thus, if advice alone could not eradicate the lingering traditions of meshchanstvo, the heavier artillery of heralded moral values attached to the reform of everyday life was employed. According to Buchli, petit-bourgeois consciousness, which in the 1920s was criticized as a remnant of the tsarist regime, in the 1950s and 1960s was accused of an additional crime, the one associated with the abominations of Stalinism. Buchli suggested that the phenomenon of the cult of personality and the support it had from the Soviet people was explained away as the result of petit-bourgeois consciousness not being blotted out of the “collective Soviet psyche” early enough (before Stalin came to power). He made another interesting point by proposing that Stalinism, in order to exist, had to maintain a degree of societal acceptance, which is why, generally speaking, it left the realm of domesticity alone, to develop as it would.

Buchli ended the article by offering an observation that during Brezhnev’s “Period of Stagnation” the achievements of the reform of everyday life started to become obsolete, and that they kept dying out during and after Perestroika. He also made an argument that in the mid-1990s the values of petit-bourgeois consciousness regained their positive meaning in the minds of the Russian citizens.

Susan Reid (1997), in her article “Destalinization and Taste,” explored the metamorphoses that the definition of taste underwent during Khrushchev’s Thaw. She argued that constructs of beauty and taste became central to the cultural reform that was taking place at the time, and examined changes that occurred in the establishments of art
and design. Reid suggested that the newly revived intelligentsia, which was oppressed under Stalin, felt it important to reclaim its right to define good taste. In agreement with Buchli’s point of view, she stated that beauty and taste took on political meaning in the course of destalinization. Like Buchli, she saw the turn to modernism in part as the renaissance of Russian constructivism of the 1920s.

Reid brought up the point that by the 1950s design of consumer objects had been stagnant for decades. The intelligentsia explained it partly as the symptom of a command economy and partly as the result of elitist attitudes from artists and artistic organizations who refused to see the creation of utilitarian products as a form of cultural production valid in its own right. The intelligentsia also blamed this situation on bureaucrats who had the responsibility of approving art and design for public consumption but who, at the same time, did not distinguish themselves as the bearers of impeccable judgment in the matters of aesthetics.

Reid addressed the subject of the conflict between the intelligentsia and the bureaucrats spurred by desire of each of these groups to have the right to dictate and define good taste. Supporting Buchli’s opinion, she suggested that taste became a matter of ideology rather than personal preference. However, in attempting to explain the reasons for the disgrace into which the petit-bourgeois consciousness fell during the Thaw, she disagreed with the above-mentioned author and maintained that the 1950s’ reformists were not clear whether it was criticized as a remnant of pre-revolutionary Russian capitalism or as a vestige of Stalinism.
Reid called attention to a contradiction that accompanied the reformists’ discussion on taste: on the one hand they condemned Stalinism as limiting people’s right to decide for themselves, and on the other hand, when it came to matters of taste, the intelligentsia ascribed that right to themselves. She summarized her article by reiterating the same point and stating that “the cultural reformism of the Thaw was paternalistic rather than populist.”

In the essay called “Forging Citizenship on the Home Front: Reviving the Socialist Contract and Constructing Soviet Identity during the Thaw” (2006), Christine Varga-Harris examined the letters ordinary Soviet citizens wrote, mainly with the hope of bettering their living conditions, to the government authorities and other figures of power in the 1950s and 1960s. She stressed the contradictions between the desperation expressed in those letters and the exuberance of the official press publications of the time, describing the joy of the citizens moving into the new apartments given to them as a result of Khrushchev’s building campaign. Varga-Harris brought up the point that despite the enormous scale of the campaign, housing remained a problematic issue.

The author analyzed letters from three groups of people who ascribed themselves the following social identities: soldier, worker, and rehabilitated. Varga-Harris pointed out that these people employed arguments explaining that the state was not fulfilling its promises to them, and those explaining why they deserved to receive the kinds of living conditions they were asking for. She noted that the official press, which at the time was the mouthpiece of the government, in its stories on housewarming often positioned the giving of the new apartments to people as a compensation for either their military service,
years of hard work for the prosperity of the Soviet state, or the unjust imprisonment under Stalin. Thus, people who saw themselves as falling under those categories, but who still found themselves in unsatisfactory living conditions, complained, invoked the principles of justice, and sometimes even expressed their disenchantment with the regime. The author suggested that by writing such petitions people hoped not only to improve their housing situation, but also to validate their living circumstances and their identity (while unable to remedy the problems of every petitioner, administrators and commissioners often paid visits to them to verify the validity of their claims).

Varga-Harris closed her essay by concluding that in their letters to state officials, people asserted their right to housing based on two premises: first, on the alleged commitment of the Soviet government to provide each family with a separate apartment, and second, on their individual perception of entitlement to suitable living conditions, “as members of a public intensely aware of its human rights.”

In her other article, entitled “Homemaking and the Aesthetic and Moral Perimeters of the Soviet Home during the Khrushchev Era” (2008), Varga-Harris addressed the role of interior design in the 1950s and 1960s Soviet Union. She characterized the change in such physical manifestations of everyday life as exterior and interior architecture, as well as the appearance of furniture and other household wares, as “ideologically charged.”

Echoing Victor Buchli’s opinion, she suggested that the large-scale building campaign initiated under Khrushchev was seen as a sign of return to the goals set by the Socialist revolution of 1917. She expanded on the topic beyond that which is suggested
by Buchli, and in addition to that stressed that the number of residential buildings erected during this campaign was seen as the proof of communism winning over capitalism: in the Soviet Union each family was given an apartment by the caring government, while in capitalist states people’s housing situation fell prey to the exploitative nature of private ownership.

Varga-Harris also maintained that another contraposition of Khrushchev-led reinstatement of the values of socialism-communism was to the vestiges of Stalinism. She offered the opinion that even the furnishings came to symbolize the two epochs, the Stalin and the Khrushchev ones. She supported Buchli’s opinion by pointing out that Khrushchev’s regime treated the concept of meshchanstvo as anti-proletarian and thus unworthy of a Soviet citizen. Varga-Harris emphasized that as a result of such attitudes, the way one furnished and decorated one’s apartment became not simply a matter of personal preference and taste, but that of a moral and ethical significance.

The author described the attempts of the national press and literature of the time to steer the realm of domesticity in the direction approved by the party and called attention to the fact that contradictions existed in what meanings were ascribed to interior design and decoration by the state, experts, and fiction authors, such as the fact that sometimes a house decorated according to petit-bourgeois values did not serve as a basis for condemning its owner, so long as that owner exhibited the signs of behavior worthy of a Soviet citizen. She concluded by reiterating that the above-mentioned contradictions notwithstanding, the standard was rigid, and was geared toward advancing destalinization.
It is evident that existing publications partially address reasons for change to minimalism in interiors under Khrushchev. Each of the essays described above concentrates on one or two such reasons. However, there remains a need for a more comprehensive study, the kind that would encompass all of those ideas in one academic work, expound on them, and focus solely on explaining the transition to minimalism in urban residential interiors in the Soviet Union at this particular moment in its history. The purpose of the present thesis is to fill this void.
CHAPTER II
STALIN’S EMPIRE STYLE

Ideology

Stalin’s Empire Style was dominant in the Soviet architecture from 1933 till 1954 (Ikonnikov, 2004; Khan-Magomedov, 2006). The ideology behind it was a return to the “eternal values” (Ikonnikov, 2004) of classical design. For about 25 years the development of architecture in the Soviet Union took the direction of neoclassicism, exploring the heritage of the Italian Renaissance, as well as Russian Classicism and the Russian Empire Style (Khan-Magomedov, 2006). While allowing some variations of style, it was quite uniform. The reason for this was the formation of Stalin’s dictatorial regime that made architecture serve its purposes; in this sense it was not unlike the architecture of totalitarian Germany and Italy (Ikonnikov, 2004). By endorsing construction of extraordinarily large buildings, mostly of brick and stone, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, and other dictators attempted to show their connection to ageless classical art, to identify their regimes with progress, and to communicate their omniscience. The role of architecture was to intimidate people, making them feel inadequate and insignificant. It served as a means of propaganda, signaling power of the ruler and the state that were to be feared and respected (Sudjic, 2005). Shown in Figure 2-1 is a comparison of neoclassical buildings erected under Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin in their respective countries.
Stalinist Architecture and Design: Signature Traits

It has already been mentioned in Chapter I that it was common for Stalinist architecture to have decorations – simplicity and minimalism weren’t among its characteristics. This idea is illustrated by the talk entitled “Architecture of a Residential
Apartment Building” (translated by the author) given at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Architects in 1937 by architects G.A. Simonov and A.G. Mordvinov. In the course of their speech they quoted L. M. Kaganovich (the First Secretary of the Moscow All-Union Party of Bolsheviks) who proclaimed at the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Party in September of 1933, “Some think that simplified, crude design is the style of proletarian architecture. Excuse me, but no, the proletariat wants not only to have buildings, not only to live comfortably in them, but to have beautiful buildings” (translated by the author). Simonov and Mordvinov proceeded to criticize “formalism in architecture,” saying that “formalism is evident in the recurrence of constructivism and simplifications in our architectural practice…” When touching upon the subject of interior architecture, the speakers expressed their disapproval of those architects who added such unnecessary, in their opinion, architectural elements as columns, pilasters, and intricate moldings in small apartments, “wanting to create… an impression of some kind of a palace” (translated by the author). The latter was a criticism of decorations for their own sake, with no regard for the conveniences of the apartment dwellers. However, it was not a criticism of the entire idea of decorations; for example, the speakers suggested practical ways to improve production of such elements of architectural décor as cornices, rosettes, and plafonds. In conjunction with their criticism of excessive embellishments in interior architecture they added, “This doesn’t, of course, in the smallest degree mean a rejection of sculptural and other decorations in apartments” (Simonov & Mordvinov, 1937) (translated by the author).
When analyzing trademark characteristics of Stalinist-era design, it is beneficial to see apartment buildings as a whole – to consider the exterior and the interior together, to observe how neoclassical façades corresponded to the intricate details of interior architecture and ornate interiors of individual apartments. Following are two groups of images (Figures 2-2 – 2-6 and 2-7 – 2-11) that offer such analysis of two Moscow apartment buildings. Moving from the outside in, they show the relationship between the inner and outer aspects of Stalin’s Empire Style architecture and their connection to interior design.

Some of the images (designated in figure captions) were published in the 1951 almanac of the Sovetskaya Arkhitektura [Soviet Architecture] magazine, and others were part of the book entitled Interyer Zhilogo Doma [Residential Interior]. Written by a group of Soviet architects4 (S. Alekseev, O. Bayar, R. Blashkevich, M. Makotinsky, and L. Cherikover), this volume was published in 1954, one year after Stalin’s death, but was conceived and written during his life. This collection of essays was a study of residential apartment buildings erected mainly during the period of 1946-1952 and was geared toward architects and construction workers, as well as general public. Expressing design specialists’ opinions, mostly on the matters of interior architecture and design,

*Residental Interiors* included suggestions on space planning, the use of finishes,

---

4 The book does not make it clear who the authors of specific chapters were. As a result, when a writer of a particular chapter is mentioned in this thesis, he is referred to as simply “author.”
materials and color, the choice of furniture and light fixtures, as well as kitchen and bathroom fittings, etc.

Shown in Figures 2-2 – 2-6 is an apartment building (architects L.V. Rudnev, V.E. Ass, and V.O. Munts) on Sadovo-Kudrinskaya street in Moscow. Built in 1949, this structure is a typical example of Stalin’s Empire Style architecture. The arrows in Figure 2-2 (A and B) point to the floors (third and fifth) that seem to correspond to the residential section on the plan in Figure 2-3. The arrow on the plan in Figure 2-3 (C) indicates the façade of the building. The apartment outlined on the plan in Figure 2-3 is practically identical to the one shown in Figure 2-4.

*Figure 2-2. Apartment building on Sadovo-Kudrinskaya street in Moscow. Façade (Rzyanin, 1951).*
Figure 2-3. Apartment building on Sadovo-Kudrinskaya street in Moscow. Plan of a “residential section” (Rzyanin, 1951). Dimensions given in meters.

Figure 2-4. Furniture placement plan in a two-room apartment (Alekseev et al., 1954). Dimensions given in centimeters.

Residential section (or simply “section”) is a term that was used by Soviet architects to describe a group of apartments sharing the same stairwell and situated on the same floor.
The floor plan in Figure 2-4 demonstrates an example of a typical space planning and furniture layout for a two-room stalinka. In this apartment, the front room and the living room were connected by the means of sliding glass doors. The kitchen and bathroom were situated in the farther side of the apartment. The bedroom had two doors, one leading to the entryway and another – into the living room.

The authors of *Residential Interior* noted that decorative nature of these doors (a photograph of which is shown in Figure 2-5) allowed to unite the two rooms in an elegant manner: the front room could serve as an extension of the living room when necessary. Such emphasis on aesthetic, as opposed to strictly functional, qualities of architectural and interior design elements was an important part of design philosophy in Stalin’s USSR.

*Figure 2-5. Apartment. View from the front room into the living room (Rzyanin, 1951).*
Another example of this emphasis, Figure 2-6 demonstrates a sample of an elaborate ceiling finish in one of the apartments of the same building. This image, as well as those featured above, supplies additional evidence that under Stalin, architecture was treated as an art form rather than a design field intended to merely satisfy human need in shelter.

*Figure 2-6. Ceiling detail (Alekseev et al., 1954).*
Figures 2-7 – 2-11 offer a visual analysis of another Moscow apartment building (architect I.V. Zholtovsky) featured in *Residential Interior*. It was also built in 1949, and while it had a less ornamented façade, it was, nonetheless, a classical example of Stalin’s Empire Style architecture. The arrows in Figure 2-7 (A and B) point to the floors (second through fifth and eighth) that correspond, as it appears, to the residential section on the plan in Figure 2-8. The arrow on the plan in Figure 2-8 (C) indicates the façade of the building. The apartment outlined in Figure 2-8 is practically identical to the one shown in Figure 2-9.

*Figure 2-7. Apartment building on Bolshaya Kaluzhskaya street in Moscow. Façade (Rzyanin, 1951).*
Figure 2-8. Apartment building on Bolshaya Kaluzhskaya street in Moscow. Plan of a residential section (Rzyanin, 1951). Dimensions given in meters.

Figure 2-9. Furniture placement plan (Alekseev et al., 1954). Dimensions given in centimeters.
Figure 2-9 demonstrates a furniture layout suggested by architects in the *Residential Interior* book for a two-room apartment of the same building. Seeing as this floor plan features a balcony, it would be safe to assume that this particular apartment faced an inner courtyard, just as did the apartment outlined in Figure 2-8 that it resembles, rather than the street. (Even though the apartment outlined in Figure 2-8 does not have a balcony, its floor plan is very similar to the one in Figure 2-9.) Besides having a balcony, this apartment differs from the one in Figure 2-4 in that the kitchen is located near the apartment’s front door and the bedroom – away from it. One of the similarities between Figure 2-4 and Figure 2-9 is that the bedrooms in both of them were outfitted with two doors.

In *Residential Interior*, this floor plan was given as another example (see Figures 2-4 and 2-5) of a successful combination of the entry hall and the living room. Convenient adjacency of the kitchen to the dining nook (a door between a similar kitchen and a dining room can be seen in Figure 2-10) was also pointed out, as well as the advantages of placing the bathroom next to the bedroom. The author emphasized that the living room served as a compositional center of the apartment, being connected to the dining nook through a wide open entrance and to the front room – by the means of glassed folding doors. He stressed the fact that due to these space-planning techniques the living room became particularly expressive, especially since the door leading to the bedroom was made to look plain, to accentuate the compositional unity of the living room and the entry hall.
According to one of the authors of *Residential Interior*, in apartments with two or more rooms, spaces were differentiated as “shared living rooms” and bedrooms. The former were used as dining areas, halls for entertaining guests, places for resting, and sometimes also contained study desks. The same author stressed that since shared living
rooms served a variety of functions, they had to be of certain sizes and areas. He indicated that those areas, according to the then typical standards were set to be between 15 and 20 m$^2$ [162 and 215 ft$^2$] and that the width of shared living rooms was accepted to be between 3.1 and 4.3 m [10.2 and 14.1 ft] and its length – between 4 and 6 m [13.1 and 19.7 ft]. The author also suggested that a shared living room, adjoining the entrance portion of the apartment and the bedrooms, served as an architectural and compositional center of the apartment. He also noted that it differed from other rooms by having a central location on the floor plan, a larger floor area, different finishes, furnishings, placement and sizes of door and window openings, etc. (See Figure 2-11.)

*Figure 2-11.* Top: Furniture placement plan in a dining room of a four-room apartment. Bottom: Photographed perspective of the same room (Alekseev et al., 1954). Dimensions given in centimeters.

*Residential Interior* stressed that the people in the USSR must live in well-equipped and beautiful homes, in accordance with the high material needs and cultural
standards of the Soviet society. It also maintained that as a result of the construction practices in the country, a distinctly Soviet type of dwelling emerged, which was principally different from its pre-revolutionary and western counterparts. It was characterized as having a balanced architectural and artistic composition, and as lacking in both unnecessary ostentation and unjustified simplicity. It was advised that the articles of furniture and home décor follow the same suite and be made “free from all pretentiousness, such as excessive pomposity and fancifulness, and from unnecessary plainness, as well as from eclecticism and deliberate stylization, which are alien to the Soviet people” (translated by the author).

Furniture

Emphasizing their importance in creating a sense of unity in a room, or between several rooms, one of the book’s authors mentioned that furniture sets had begun to be manufactured by several Soviet factories. He also touched upon the fact that some rooms had more than one function, as it has already been mentioned previously, and needed, therefore, sets of furniture that were designed to include pieces that fulfilled all or most of those functions. Shown in Figure 2-12 is a set of furniture for a dining room. The book describes it as an example of a more elaborate kind of furniture that was not always popular: its large piece sizes and complex shapes lead to its relatively high cost.
One of suggestions that the author expressed was that rooms should not be overcrowded with furniture, thus “resembling furniture exhibitions as was often the case with pre-revolutionary apartments of bourgeoisie” (translated by the author). He noted that having fewer pieces of furniture in a room makes an interior more visually pleasing, allows for easier access to furniture, and simplifies its use. Figure 2-13 shows a furniture set that was developed as a less complex, cheaper alternative to furniture in Figure 2-12. It is evident that the design of pieces in Figure 2-13 is less elaborate and is smaller in scale. However, it is not significantly different in aesthetic sense, as it undoubtedly exhibits signature characteristics of Stalin’s Empire Style (use of solid wood, curved lines, ornamental details, decorative millwork, etc).
Figure 2-13. Furniture samples. The caption in Russian reads: “Furniture set design for a three-room apartment. Architect Parusnikov” (Alekseev et al., 1954) (translated by the author).
Lighting

*Residential Interior* mentioned several aspects of interior lighting that were characteristic of Stalinist design, such as placement of a light (either a chandelier or the then-popular light covered with a silk, often orange, lampshade) right above the dining table in the center of a room. It also asserted the importance of light fixtures to have high decorative qualities (see Figure 2-15). It is evident from Figure 2-14 that tall ceilings allowed ceiling-mounted lights to be fairly large. The book suggested two meters to be the minimum length between the bottom of the light and the surface of the floor, which would mean that at the ceiling height of 3.0-3.3 m (9.8-10.8 ft), the entire length of the light could be as much as 1.0-1.3 m (3.3-4.3 ft).

*Figure 2-14.* Light pendants (Alekseev et al., 1954).
Figure 2-15. Sketches of wall- and ceiling-mounted light fixtures (Alekseev et al., 1954).

Decorative Textiles

The chapter on decorative textiles in *Residential Interior* also mentioned several details typical for Stalinist interiors. For example, it suggested that large-patterned fabrics be used for upholstery of big, heavy furniture pieces (the size of rooms in stalinkas allowed for use of such furniture). The book also mentioned that textured fabrics created a pleasing contrast to polished and lacquered woods (solid woods and glossy surfaces were being widely used in furniture manufacturing at the time). The text also stated that wall-hung rugs were used to unite several furniture pieces (such rugs were a traditional feature
of interior design under Stalin). Depicted in Figure 2-16 are several examples of decorative textiles used at the time.

*Figure 2-16. Decorative textiles (Alekseev et al., 1954).*
Wall Coverings

In regards to wall coverings, *Residential Interior* also gave advice reflecting signature traits of Stalin’s Empire Style. For instance, one of the suggestions stated that wallpaper must extend all the way up to the crown molding or to a decorative border (made out of paper or wood) at the top of the wall. This shows that ornamental woodwork was a typical architectural detail at the time. Another recommendation specified that the optimal repeat for wallpaper in a room with the ceiling height of 3.0-3.3 m (9.8-10.8 ft) should be no more than 40-50 cm (16-20 in), suggesting again that high ceilings were typical of Stalinist architecture. And yet another piece of advice maintained that wallpaper imitating certain materials, such as jacquard, printed velvet, tapestry, wood, or tile, needed to be chosen carefully, since it presented a danger of looking fake. The fact that the author would give such an instruction suggests that appearance of richness was then a sought-after trait in Soviet interior design. Figure 2-17 shows several wallpaper samples featured in *Residential Interior*.

*Figure 2-17. Wallpaper samples (Alekseev et al., 1954).*
One of the general characteristics emphasized in *Residential Interior* as a sign of quality design, was the connection of the interior with the outside by the means of windows and balconies. As one of the volume’s authors stated, “…the connection of the apartment space with the outside and the abundance of fresh air are necessary conditions for the proper structuring of the Soviet people’s dwellings.” Another quality emphasized as important was the unity between all the spaces in an apartment: it was suggested that their furnishings, finishes, and colors, as well as details of interior architecture and home décor must create an impression of wholeness and harmony. The books suggested that Russian classical architecture and interiors of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century were an ideal example of such harmony effectively achieved. This statement serves as another confirmation that classical design played a pivotal role in the development of Stalin’s Empire Style.

*Stalin’s Empire Style in Provinces*

Complexity was characteristic for Stalinist design not only in large Soviet cities, but in smaller towns as well. The difference was that the elaborateness was on a more modest scale, with the apartment buildings being smaller in size and adorned with fewer decorations. The Figure 2-18 shows a façade and a floor plan of an apartment building on Stalin Avenue in Stalingrad (1952), designed by the architect N. A. Khokhryakov. The building had 48 apartments the total floor area of which equaled 1747 m² (18804.6 ft²) (Rzyanin, 1954).
Figure 2-18. Top: Façade of an apartment building in Stalingrad. Bottom: Floor plan of the same building (Rzyanin, 1954). Dimensions given in centimeters.
The Housing Crisis

Despite the fact that *Residential Interior* was written with the idea that each apartment was inhabited by only one family, in reality during Stalin’s era most families did not have separate living quarters. Instead, they inhabited housing “without conveniences,” such as barracks and dormitories, or occupied one or two rooms in the so-called communal apartments or *kommunalkas*, where the kitchen, as well as bath and toilet facilities, were shared with other tenants (Brodsky, 1986; Paperny & Degot, 2002; Varga-Harris, 2008). As Joseph Brodsky, a Russian-American poet, essayist, and Nobel laureate in literature, pointed out in one of his memoires, “… laundry… hung in the two corridors that connected the rooms to the kitchen, and one knew the underwear of one’s neighbors by heart” (Brodsky, 1986). While separate apartments were being given to some, those few were primarily select state and Party authorities and “hero workers” (Meyerovich, 2008; Varga-Harris, 2008).

The housing crisis under Stalin had its origins in pre-revolutionary Russia. Due to a large industrial growth in the middle of the 19th-beginning of the 20th century, “urban population in Russia grew from 3.5 million in 1861 to 8 million in 1867 and reached 28.1 million by 1914” (Baranov, 1958) (translated by the author). However, housing

---

6 In the Soviet Union, an apartment or a house was considered to be “without conveniences,” if it had no hot water (or no running water at all), no inside bathroom, and sometimes no centralized heating.

7 The title “hero worker” was given by the Soviet government to those who showed outstanding results in the fields of production, science, state or public work, and who had a work experience of a minimum of 35 years.
construction in cities was lagging behind the speed of population growth. For example, during the period of 1869-1900, the number of people in St. Petersburg almost doubled, while the number of houses built during the same time grew only by 20.7% (Baranov, 1958).

In some instances commercial enterprises, such as plants and factories, provided housing accommodations, so called “worker barracks,” to their employees. The barracks were of two types: for single people and for those with families. The living quarters for unmarried people often consisted of large bedrooms furnished with 100-110 beds (example shown in Figure 2-19). Some workers slept on two-level bunk beds. Family barracks accommodated small rooms, up to 15 m² (161.5 ft²) in size, situated on the sides of long narrow corridors. Separate rooms were available only to families of highly-skilled professionals, while the rest had to share one room between two or three families. Some of the workers had enough room for only one bed per family.

Figure 2-19. Worker barracks of Prokhorovskaya manufactory (Baranov, 1958).
According to the 1912 census, in Moscow the number of people who rented a bed in a room shared with other people constituted about 350,000, and the number of those living in underground and half-underground basements – around 125,000. About 27,000 apartments were grossly overpopulated and housed about 400 thousand people (the average of 15 people per apartment). Thus, in 1912, about 800,000 Muscovites (70% of the city’s population) were experiencing highly unsatisfactory living conditions (Baranov, 1958). Figure 2-20 demonstrates living conditions of people who rented corners in shared rooms.

*Figure 2-20. Corner in a workers’ room. 1920s (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003).*
At the time, urban housing stock consisted mainly of small one- or two-story wooden houses without conveniences. In 1910 one-story houses constituted 91.2% of all residential housing (Baranov, 1958). Shown in Figure 2-21 are residential buildings in a provincial Russian city of Kazan.

![City of Kazan. Early 1870s](image)

*Figure 2-21. City of Kazan. Early 1870s (Milashevskii, 2005).*

After the Socialist Revolution of 1917, the state usurped the power of property ownership, as all privately possessed real estate was seen as a cause of petit-bourgeois consciousness. Thus, it was condemned as a reason for individualistic tendencies in people, a threat to the idea of communal living and ultimately – to the new regime itself. The workings of such a system, where the state owned, controlled, and distributed real
estate, aggravated the already existing housing crisis (Meyerovich, 2008). In addition to that, during the first forty years of the country’s existence, according S.O. Khan-Magomedov (born 1928), a prominent Russian architecture historian, the following factors also contributed to the problem.

First, as it has already been mentioned, the majority (about four fifths) of the housing stock in Russia consisted of old, worn-out wooden houses that quickly delapidated and had to be replaced. Second, having been moved by the state into the “rich apartments” and being exempt from paying rent, some of the poorest strata of society contributed to the deterioration of existing dwellings. This was happening, in part, because those people did not have a sense of ownership of their new living quarters, felt alien in the luxurious houses of the former bourgeoisie, and as a result did not pay adequate attention to their maintenance and upkeep. Third, the rapid industrial growth, which started at the end of the 19th century and was still taking place in the country, resulted in massive increase of urban populations. For example, in the year of 1932 alone, the population of Moscow increased by 220,000. That same year only 120 barracks of 16 apartments each were built (Listova, 2006). As a result, people who came to the country’s capital in response to the Party and government appeals to help raise the heavy industry were, for the most part, provided with housing not through the process of new residential construction, but by being moved into already existing and already inhabited living

---

8 The term “rich apartment” was coined by V.I. Lenin two weeks after the 1917 Socialist Revolution and was defined as “any apartment, in which the number of rooms is equal to, or exceeds, the number of people permanently inhabiting it” (Meyerovich, 2008) (translated by the author).
quarters (Khan-Magomedov, 2006). Fourth, the destruction wrought by WWII exacerbated the situation that had already been critical prior to it (McCauley, 1987). During the war, 70 million m² (753.5 million ft²) of living space were destroyed (Khan-Magomedov, 2006) and an estimated 25 million people were displaced (Listova, 2006). Fifth, during the first Five-Year Plan⁹, especially when building cities around new industrial enterprises, a lot of temporary dwellings were erected. They were without conveniences and included houses built with light-weight frames and out of local materials, as well as barracks and dormitories. This building method, albeit not of the optimal kind, allowed to increase the rate of residential housing construction. In 1934, the Council of People’s Commissars¹⁰ passed a resolution “On the Improvement of Residential Construction,” which limited the construction of building types mentioned above. Instead, higher quality, permanent apartment buildings with all conveniences began to be erected, and the rate of housing construction went down in the second half of the 1930s. Sixth, in the 1950s the problem was aggravated by the influx of collective farm (kolkhoz) workers who got back their passports, confiscated under Stalin, and were coming into cities looking for better-paying jobs. All this meant that for decades communal apartments were the most common type of housing quarters, and by the middle of the twentieth century constituted 90% of Moscow’s housing stock (Khan-Magomedov, 2006).

---

⁹ In the Soviet Union, Five-Year Plans were a strategy devised to realize rapid economic development of the country. The first Five-Year Plan was to run for a period of 1929-1933 and was completed ahead of time, in four years.

¹⁰ The Council of People’s Commissars was the USSR’s highest government authority from 1917 until 1946.
Communal Apartments

The typical interior of a room in a communal apartment was centered around a table covered with a table cloth that often was made out of a heavy, plush material and had decorative fringe at the bottom. Right above the table hung a lamp, typically with a silk orange shade, which was also fringed (Dunham, 1990, Varga-Harris, 2008). Thus the table (surrounded by chairs), illuminated by the lamp above, served as the focal point of the room and the center of family activities: it was used for eating, studying, working, and entertaining guests (see Figure 2-22) (Buchli, 1999).

*Figure 2-22. Family gathered around a table. 1957. Despite the date, this interior is very characteristic of stalinkas (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003).*
The rest of the furniture was placed around the perimeter of the room. That is where a bed (usually metal) was situated, with the bed skirt and pillows with coverings abundantly decorated with lace. The focal point of the bed was a placement of three pillows stacked from the largest (at the bottom) to the smallest. Often this pillow mound was dressed with a lace coverlet. On the wall above the bed hung a small tapestry depicting a “nature scene,” such as deer, bears, rabbits, and other animals in the woods, or a swan on a lake. Sometimes instead of a tapestry it was a low-nap rug with a floral or geometrical design. Besides being an element of décor, rugs served sound- and heat-insulating purposes, and signaled the level of the owners’ (relative) prosperity (Buchli, 1999).

A divan (a type of sofa with no arm rests) was also situated on the perimeter of the room. It was used for both sitting and sleeping. The takhta was another piece of furniture used by some in place of a divan. It differed from the latter in that its seat was wider and it had a folding two-leaf board hinged to its back side. This board was folded out during the day, when the takhta was not being used for sleeping: its horizontal surface was used as a shelf and a vertical front side – as a back rest (Buchli, 1999).

Another piece of furniture placed along the room’s periphery and sometimes in its own corner at an angle, facing the center of the room, was the buffet cupboard. It was made of intricately-carved wood and contained open or glassed shelves on top and a cabinet with doors on the bottom. The upper part was used for the display of china sets, while the base served as a storage space for dishes and other household items. An
alternative to the buffet cupboard was a commode, or a chest of drawers. Its surface was covered with crocheted or embroidered cloths and displayed photographs, perfume bottles (sometimes already empty but still cherished), vases, porcelain figurines, and other family paraphernalia (Buchli, 1999).

Most, if not all, furniture’s horizontal surfaces were covered with decorative cloths, such as tea-cloths (Paperny, 2002). These crocheted and embroidered items of home décor were hand-made by women and were among the few articles that, amidst a severe deficit of consumer goods, allowed people to personalize their dwellings (see Figure 2-23) (Buchli, 1999).

![Figure 2-23](image)

*Figure 2-23. Workers in a new apartment. 1950s. Despite the date, this interior is very characteristic of stalinkas (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003).*
Another typical element of décor was a set of seven stone elephants that were placed in a line from the biggest to smallest and believed by some to bring good luck (Buchli, 1997; Lebina & Chistikov, 2003). Artificial and real flowers served as additional means of decoration (Dunham, 1990). The floors were typically wooden, often partially covered with rugs (Buchli, 1999).

Figures 2-24 and 2-25 show museums expositions featuring kommunalka interiors.

*Figure 2-24. Kimry city Museum of Regional Studies. Exposition entitled “Interior of the 50s” (Interior of the 50s exposition, n.d.).*
Returning to the *Residential Interior* book (Alekseev et al., 1954), mentioned earlier, it would be relevant to note that its only two suggested space planning options that somewhat resembled the reality of *kommunalkas* were the plans of shared living and dining rooms in multi-room apartments (see Figure 2-26) and those of one-room apartments (the percentage of the latter was small compared to that of the former). For example, one of the book’s chapters mentioned that in a one-room apartment, the place for dining and resting should be in the center of the room, the optimal place for studying would be situated by the window, and the place for sleeping – in the part of the room farthest from the window.
Figure 2-26. Furniture placement in a one-room apartment. Architect G.P. Pavlov, 1950 (Alekseev et al., 1954).

It can only be speculated whether the authors and editors of *Residential Interior* intended the articles to serve solely the needs of the select families that really did live in separate apartments, if they were hoping that the day will come when such an arrangement will become a reality for the majority of the Soviet people, or if publishing anything that acknowledged the existence of communal apartments and, as a result, of the housing crisis, was a taboo subject in Stalin’s USSR.

During WW II “the Soviet Army walked across Europe and noticed that there, the “oppressed working class” was living in better conditions than the “free” citizens of the
It was after the war, that for the first time the government started to discuss the housing problem publicly. However, it was not until after Stalin’s death that it began to be seriously addressed (Khrushchev, 1974).
CHAPTER III

KHRUSHCHEV AND MINIMALISM

The Reforms

When Khrushchev came to power in 1953, he denounced the cult of personality and started a number of political and social reforms, as well as changes in some spheres of the economic sector, such as industrial administration and investment priorities (Tompson, 2000). Some of his other reforms included the following:

1. Reduction in the number of taxes that peasants had been subject to, which allowed kolkhozes and sovkhozes\(^\text{11}\) to receive a significantly higher compensation for their products from the state.
2. The overhaul of the secondary-education system resulting in the introduction of a mandatory trade-skills training to schools.
3. A limited monetary reform when the purchasing value of the ruble was increased tenfold, while all wages and prices were reduced by the same factor.
4. A cutback in the military budget and in the numbers of the Soviet Army (labor force and money were needed for the development of agriculture and industry).

This period was also marked by the rehabilitation of those who, during Stalinism, were imprisoned as the “enemies of the people” (Varga-Harris, 2008). In his so-called “Secret Speech” delivered at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 in a “closed” meeting intended for the Soviet Congress delegates only, and in his public address at the Twenty-Second Congress in 1961, Khrushchev denounced Stalin and revealed the extent of his

\(^{11}\text{Kolkhozes and sovkhozes were the two types of state-owned collective farms in the USSR.}\)
crimes: torturing and imprisoning millions of innocent people, forced migrations of entire ethnicities, fatal mistakes made during WWII, and other atrocities. Stalin’s body was removed from the Mausoleum on Red Square, all of the publicly displayed monuments to and portraits of the former leader were destroyed, and all places, organizations, and institutions previously named after him, were redesignated (Medvedev & Medvedev, 1976).

One of the changes that took place under Khrushchev was the domestic reform. In 1957, five years after Khrushchev became First Secretary of the Communist party’s Central Committee, he announced his determination to move the country out of the housing crisis and meet the basic need of the working class for shelter. During the jubilee session of the USSR’s Supreme Soviet on November 6, 1957, he addressed the Soviet:

The housing programme, drawn up by the Party and the Government and warmly approved by the entire people, sets the task of securing a considerable increase in accommodation so as to put an end to the housing shortage in the next ten to twelve years.” (Varga-Harris, 2006, pp. 101-102)

Khrushchev went on to fulfill his promise and between 1956 and 1970 a building campaign of grand proportions took place (Buchli, 1997). During this time, about 34 million apartments were built, and more than 126 million individuals were able to move into them (Varga-Harris, 2008). Only in the course of the Five-Year Plan, which lasted from 1956 till 1960, a larger number of housing units were completed than in the whole period from 1918 to 1946, with the total floor space area of 474.1 million m² (5.1 billion ft²) (Varga-Harris, 2008). Table 1, taken from the book Razvitie Zhilishchnogo Stroitelstva v SSSR [Development of Housing Construction in the USSR], shows the rates of residential housing construction in the country from 1918 to 1956.
Table 1

*Rates of Soviet Housing Construction: 1918-1956* (Baranov, 1958)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Total floor area of residential buildings constructed and put in operation (excluding those in kolkhozes) in millions of m² (millions of ft² in parenthesis)</th>
<th>Including buildings constructed by state- and cooperative-run organizations</th>
<th>Including buildings constructed by urban residents, at own expense and with the help of state-given money credits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1918-1928</td>
<td>42.9 (461.7)</td>
<td>23.7 (255.1)</td>
<td>19.2 (206.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929-1932 (first Five-Year plan)</td>
<td>38.7 (416.6)</td>
<td>32.6 (350.9)</td>
<td>6.1 (65.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933-1937 (second Five-Year plan)</td>
<td>42.2 (454.2)</td>
<td>37.2 (400.4)</td>
<td>5 (53.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938-July 1, 1941 (3.5 years of the third Five-Year plan)</td>
<td>42 (452.1)</td>
<td>34.4 (370.3)</td>
<td>7.6 (81.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1, 1941-January 1, 1946</td>
<td>49.8 (536.1)</td>
<td>41.3 (444.5)</td>
<td>8.5 (91.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946-1950 (fourth Five-Year plan)</td>
<td>102.8 (1106.5)</td>
<td>72.4 (779.3)</td>
<td>30.4 (327.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951-1955 (fifth Five-Year plan)</td>
<td>151.7 (1632.9)</td>
<td>112.9 (1215.2)</td>
<td>38.8 (417.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956 (first year of the sixth Five-Year plan)</td>
<td>36.9 (397.2)</td>
<td>29.5 (317.5)</td>
<td>7.4 (79.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The same magazine wrote that the aggregate floor area of all residential buildings constructed in the USSR in 1957 was 48 million m$^2$ (516.7 million ft$^2$). Thus, in one year the country was provided with more living space than it was in the entire first decade after the Socialist Revolution (Baranov, 1958). Instead of having one or two rooms in communal apartments, families and individuals were given the opportunity to live in separate dwellings.

Architecture

A typical Khrushchev-era apartment building had five stories and one- to three-room apartments. Many of the construction elements, such as stairwells, landings, and roofs, were prefabricated and assembled onsite (Varga-Harris, 2008). One of the major types of residential architecture were the so-called “panel” (or “large-panel”) buildings. Shown in Figure 3-1 is an example of such building.

*Figure 3-1. Typical Khrushchev-era panel apartment building. Kazan, Russia (2009).*
While panel construction started in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1940s, it became large-scale only under Khrushchev. The building block of this construction method was the “panel.” Each panel constituted a wall of a room. Thus, a room with four walls was built with the use of four panels, where the exterior panels had cut-outs for windows and balcony doors, and some of the interior ones had openings for room and main apartment entrance doors (Plessein, 1959). Figure 3-2 demonstrates the make-up of a panel building.

Figure 3-2. Construction process of a panel building (Plessein, 1959).
Another building method popular at the time was the “block” construction. Blocks were akin to panels, but smaller in size, and were widely used during Khrushchev’s building campaign. This construction method was also not entirely new and began to be implemented in the Soviet Union in mid-1930s (Novikov, 1937). Figure 3-3 shows what a block building looked like.

![Figure 3-3. Typical Khrushchev-era large-block apartment building. Kazan, Russia (2009).](image)

However, the panel building method was considered superior compared to the other construction techniques used at the time, such as block and brick construction (see Table 2) (Rudkovskii, 1959).
Table 2

*Comparison of Buildings Erected with the Use of Different Construction Methods* (Rudkovskii, 1959)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics (per m²)</th>
<th>Brick buildings</th>
<th>Large-block buildings</th>
<th>Large-panel buildings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weight of structure</td>
<td>2970 kg (6548 lb)</td>
<td>2380 kg (5247 lb)</td>
<td>1475 kg (3252 lb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor intensiveness (man-days)</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of cement used</td>
<td>152 kg (335 lb)</td>
<td>220 kg (485 lb)</td>
<td>155 kg (342 lb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of steel used</td>
<td>33.5 kg (74 lb)</td>
<td>34.4 kg (76 lb)</td>
<td>20.2 kg (45 lb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated cost (rubles)</td>
<td>1101</td>
<td>1070</td>
<td>960</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both the panel- and block-built khrushchevkas were rectilinear, box-shaped, and unadorned by any decorative elements, with interior architecture being as strictly functional as the outside of the buildings. They had 3 to 5 stories and, on average, 3 to 5 stairwells, where one floor around one stairwell comprised a “residential section” (see Figure 3-4) first mentioned in Chapter II. Khrushchevkas had one- to three-room apartments, with the numbers of apartments in a building ranging between 24 and 80 (Baranov, 1958). The average apartment floor area ranged from 22 m² (236.8 ft²) to 30
m² (322.9 ft²) (Baranov, 1958), depending on the building type, and the ceilings height was 2.5-2.7 m (8.2-8.9 ft). An example of a two-room khrushchevka floor plan and its furniture layout is shown in Figure 3-5.

*Figure 3-4.* Plans of three residential sections. Dimensions shown in centimeters. The outlined apartment is practically identical to the one outlined in Figure 3-5 (Rzyanin, 1951).
Figure 3-5. Floor plans and furniture layouts of one-, two-, and three-room khrushchevkas. Dimensions shown in centimeters. The outlined apartment is practically identical to the one outlined in Figure 3-4 (Baranov, 1958).

Interior design

Obyvatel i reformy [An Average Person and the Reforms], a book comparing the reform of everyday life in the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 20th century with the one that happened under Khrushchev, offers an ample description of a typical khrushchevka interior (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003). The present section relies, in part, on the information derived from this book.
While interior design of the early Khrushchev years could still be defined as Stalinist, some of Empire Style’s hallmark elements began to be seen as outdated. For example, metal beds with bulbous posts were labeled by the designers of the early 1950s as lacking in aesthetic qualities. They began to be replaced by the newly popular wooden beds. Pillow mounds and lace bed skirts were by this time considered passé and the Chinese-silk bedspreads took their place (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003).

Even though furniture sets and sectionals reminiscent of the early 20th century modernist designs began to be manufactured even before Stalin’s death in 1953, his Empire Style was still very much alive. Monumental and intricately carved oak wood buffet cupboards and mirrored wardrobes, as well as mahogany beds, vanities, and nightstands, were in demand and being produced, albeit in small quantities (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003).

As in decades prior, in the beginning of the 1950s, communal apartments constituted majority of the Soviet housing stock. Thus, a typical room at the time was still centered around a table, usually circular or oval, covered with either a velvet or an embroidered Chinese-silk table cloth and was surrounded by dark-wood chairs, which sometimes had slip covers. A buffet cupboard was placed nearby. A wooden bed stood next to a divan or a takhta. Large lampshades were still in vogue, and so were heavy window and door draperies. Although sets of seven elephants were no longer a part of Soviet home décor, small vases and statuettes still adorned many apartments, and
tapestries retained their popularity as well. A new addition to Soviet households, refrigerators and vacuum-cleaners were a sign of prosperity (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003).

By the mid-1950s a television became the biggest novelty in many apartments. The name of the first television set was KVN-49 – in honor of its creators, V. Kenigson, I. Varshavsky, I. Nikolaevsky, and of the year when these sets began to be produced – 1949. A KVN had a 20 cm (7.9 in) screen and often came with a lens that had to be filled with distilled water or glycerin and that was placed in front of the screen to magnify the image. The television was usually placed on an old kitchen table covered with a table cloth, since stands made specifically for the purpose of housing television sets were expensive and owned by very few. A bulky radio was another typical element of a Soviet interior, and radiolas, being a combination of a radio and a record player, while still unaffordable to most people, began to replace gramophones (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003).

**Late 1950s-Early 1960s**

As Khrushchev’s building campaign grew in proportions, the interiors started to evolve. Furniture was no longer placed centripetally, but in a way that divided rooms into several areas, each with its own function (sometimes more than one). Furniture and fixtures became smaller and lighter and were often designed to serve multiple purposes. New materials began to be used.

**Space Planning**

In khrushchevkas, rooms were often multi-functional. As a result, the use of screens, curtains, and other types of partitions (or using pieces of furniture as such) was
encouraged (see Figure 3-6 and Figure 3-9). This allowed to create several zones in one room, for example, one for children and one for parents (Bayar, 1958; Rybitskii, 1959). Figure 3-6 shows a layout of such a room proposed for the 1959 All-Union furniture design competition and featured in the same-year issue of the *Arkhitektura SSSR* (The USSR Architecture) magazine.

*Figure 3-6. Furniture layout for a one-room apartment intended for two adults with a child (Golverk & Mindlin, 1959). The outlined rectangle represents a cupboard that separates the child’s space from the main area of the room.*
The authors of the article suggested that the cupboard, placed sideways by the wall, effectively divided the room into two well-defined areas (child’s and adults’). Alternatively, in its place could be a book case that, on this plan, is situated by the bathroom wall (Golverk & Mindlin, 1959).

Lighting

Large lampshades and chandeliers were gradually becoming less popular and were being replaced by more compact light fixtures, such as wall sconces, ceiling lights with bowl-like shades giving off indirect light, and lights similar to those shown in Figure 3-7.

*Figure 3-7.* Light fixtures suggested for use by designers (Sveshnikov, 1959).
Design specialists did not recommend using textiles in manufacturing of lights, and the previously popular orange lampshade became the thing of the past. As plastics\textsuperscript{12} were gaining popularity, some of the lights began to be produced out of this promoted material, but since its qualities weren’t yet very well researched, it was not uncommon for lampshades to overheat and melt around the edges (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003).

\textit{Textiles}

In an article entitled \textit{O meblirovke i otdelke kvartir odnoseminoego zaseleniya} [On furnishing and decorating one-family apartments], published in a 1958 \textit{Zhilishchnoye Stroitelstvo} [Housing Construction] magazine, architect Seredyuk criticized textiles that were being manufactured in the Soviet Union at the time as being bleak, and having simplistic and tasteless patterns. He suggested that the fabric background colors should be “clear”: yellow, light blue, or green, and that whatever designs they might have should not make them look busy. He recommended using light-weight window treatments, either of solid colors, or patterned, in combination with sheer curtains. His advice was that such draperies would serve only decorative purposes – according to Seredyuk, the new, centrally-heated apartments did not need heat-insulating heavy curtains (see Figure 3-8).

\textsuperscript{12} Various types of plastic were considered to be very promising materials. They were being used, or suggested for use by some design specialists, in production of finishes (paint, enamels, polishes, etc), floor and wall coverings, furniture, bath tubs and faucets, light fixtures, pipes, window treatments, details of interior architecture (window sills, baseboards, cover plates for electrical outlets, window and door frames), and even entire apartment buildings. For example, \textit{The Main Planning and Scientific Research Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR} designed an experimental three-story apartment building where all structural elements, including some foundation columns, as well as finishes, architectural details, doors, and window frames, were made out of different plastic materials (Popov, 1959).
Seredyuk mentioned that floral motifs used in fabric designs were to be stylized and somewhat abstracted – this was preferred to the use of realistic details. The author’s suggestions for geometric designs were to make them simple and not a “conglomeration of rhombuses, squares, cartouches, etc” (Seredyuk, 1958). For example, a dark blue fabric with wide white stripes or checkers was considered an example of a good geometric design. Light-toned textiles with splashes of bright color were also
recommended (Seredyuk, 1958). The same types of fabrics were suggested for use as room-dividing screens and bed covers (see Figure 3-9).

*Figure 3-9. Light cotton curtain with a stylized tulip pattern separates an alcove, used for sleeping and resting, from the main part of the room. Furniture upholstery is solid-colored (Milyavskaya, 1959).*

Fabrics with repeated patterns were suggested for use as decorative table cloths and tapestries, as opposed to before-used textiles with large designs (Milyavskaya, 1959). Rugs, mats, and runners were said to be an important part of an interior, “due to their decorative characteristics, as well as excellent heat- and sound-insulating qualities”
(Milyavskaya, 1959) (translated by the author). It was suggested that their designs should be not only traditional oriental, but also solid-colored and of other “modern types” (see Figure 3-10) (Milyavskaya, 1959).

![Figure 3-10. Coarse-fiber floor mat. The sofa upholstery is blue, black, and white cotton (Milyavskaya, 1959).](image)

*Electronics*

By the beginning of the 1960s the small KVN televisions were almost extinct. New television sets were placed on special tables and stands. Electronics were still considered a novelty and thus were treated as elements of décor; for example, the
television was often decorated with plastic doilies and small ceramic vases: “It was considered stylish and modern” (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003). Smaller radios were gaining popularity, especially portable ones, called tranzistory. Tape players also started making their ways into Soviet homes.

Furniture and Décor

Overall trends. Similarly to buildings, lighting, textiles, and electronics, furniture became smaller, lighter, and simpler in form. For example, flat, plain cupboards replaced commodes and buffet cupboards, and secretaires became a substitute for desks. In order to liven up the “boring” box-shaped furniture pieces, it was suggested that different finishes, colors, and materials be used in their production, for example, the same piece could have light wood veneer as the main type of finish, the edges of the panels that comprise the piece could be covered with a darker wood, and the doors painted with “clean intensive colors, such as yellow, blue, burgundy, etc” (Seredyuk, 1958).

Functionality was emphasized by experts as another important quality, and folding and convertible furniture fulfilling more than one function became popular (Golverk & Mindlin, 1960; Rybitskii, 1959; Seredyuk, 1961). For example, fold-up sofas were to be used for sleeping at night and for sitting on and entertaining guests during the day (Golverk, 1958).

Eating and resting. Design specialists emphasized practicality of furniture-sets production, since they were easier to furnish with than individually-bought tables, chairs, cupboards, etc, which would have to be matched. In contrast with domestic practices of Stalinist era, they recommended that the place for eating be separate from the rest area
and argued that putting dining tables next to sofas was impractical, because the height of a standard sofa was smaller than that of a dining chair, which made sitting at the table uncomfortable. As an alternative, they suggested either placing a sitting area (a sofa, an armchair, and a coffee table) next to the window, with the table situated in the interior portion of the room, or switching these two groups (dining and sitting) around. (It did not mean, however, that people were always following this advice. Many still used sofas for sitting on during meals.) It was suggested that the table itself be rectangular, rather than round or oval, so that it be could easier combined with the other furniture pieces (see Figure 3-11). It was also proposed that foldable tables be produced in larger quantities (Luppov, 1959).

Figure 3-11. Dining table with chairs. Table and chair frames were made out of thin-walled hollow steel tubes (Luppov, 1959).
Storage. Design specialists suggested that sectional storage units, such as cupboards and bookcases, were a promising innovation. These units could be of three types. The first kind was to be put together by the customer according to his or her needs and preferences (which was convenient for this very reason, but involved some material overuse due to double walls occurring when furniture pieces were put side-to-side) (see Figure 3-12 and Figure 3-15). The second kind was to be pre-assembled (see Figure 3-13). This took away the problem of material overuse, but allowed for less flexibility (Luppov, 1959). The third kind was rack-based (see Figure 3-14), where vertical pieces – either affixed to the floor and ceiling or free-standing – had horizontal shelves attached to them (Luppov, 1959). Storage-unit sets containing individual pieces that could not be combined in compact groups were criticized as impractical.

Figure 3-12. Two-tier sectional units (Luppov, 1959).
Figure 3-13. Pre-assembled sectional units (Luppov, 1959).

Figure 3-14. Rack-based shelving units (Seredyuk, 1967).
Sleeping. Design specialists recommended that when sofa-beds were used, traditional night stands be replaced with either shelves or small cabinets for bedding storage (both of which could also serve the same purposes as night stands) placed on the sides of the foldable sofa (Luppov, 1959).

Materials. Metal, plywood (straight and bent), and particle board (often covered with veneer, plastics, decorative paper, or PVC films) were used in manufacturing of this new furniture, as opposed to solid wood, popular in the previous decades (Luppov, 1959) (see Figure 3-15).

Figure 3-15. Sectional units manufactured out of bare particle board with limited use of colored layered plastics. Board edges covered with veneer (Luppov, 1959).
Décor. Design specialists recommended that decorations also be minimal and simple. Embroidered cloths, porcelain figurines, and perfume bottles began to be seen as a sign of poor taste (Bayar, 1959). In addition to that, those elements of Stalin’s Empire Style that were more characteristic of universal classical interior design, were also considered inappropriate for the new dwellings. For example, it was suggested that pictures be hung not at an angle to the wall, but parallel to its plane (see Figure 3-16). Picture frames were to be simple in shape and finished with black, brown, or burgundy lacquer. The use of carved frames covered with gold leaf was discouraged as being in disharmony with the overall style of the new apartments (Seredyuk, 1958).

Figure 3-16. Picture placement recommendation (Seredyuk, 1958).
Conclusion

When comparing Stalin and Khrushchev eras, particularly as they pertain to architecture and interior design, it becomes evident that the two differed significantly. In the 1950s-1960s practicality and minimalism were replacing aestheticism and ornamentation; the sizes of residential buildings and furniture were diminishing, while furniture layouts in apartments stopped being centered around one point (the table). The following chapter explores three reasons for such changes.
CHAPTER IV
REASONS FOR THE CHANGE TO MINIMALISM

As it has been mentioned previously, the purpose of this thesis is to answer the question why a transition to a minimalist aesthetic was taking place in Soviet urban residential interior design in the 1950s and 1960s. This chapter answers the posed question, by giving three such reasons: practicality, cost of construction, and ideological motives.

Practicality

*Space planning*

When moving into new apartments, people, naturally, brought with them their furniture. However, in the smaller spaces of *khrushchevka*, the old furniture layouts and even the furniture itself became nonfunctional (Listova, 2006). For example, when a table was placed in the middle of the room, with various other furniture pieces along the walls (which was the space-planning arrangement traditionally used in stalinkas), the passages on the sides of the table ended up being so narrow that walking through them became quite an awkward endeavor (Nikolskaya & Nikolskii, 1963).

Nikolskaya and Nikolskii (1963), the authors of the *Book on Culture of Everyday Life*, analyzed an apartment of a young couple with a child who had recently moved into a khrushchevka. The couple furnished their new apartment in the same manner as they had the old one. The authors discussed why such an arrangement was impractical and
offered, with the help of professional architects, a solution. Figure 4-1 shows the state of the apartment upon the family’s move-in as well as the proposed variant.

*Figure 4-1.* “Before” and “after” of the young couple’s apartment. The rectangles on the floor in both images represent a wardrobe (Nikolskaya & Nikolskii, 1963).
Just like the authors of the abovementioned book, other design specialists suggested that the number of furniture pieces in new apartments be minimal. In his article *On Furnishing and Decorating One-Family Apartments* (1958) (translated by the author) architect Seredyuk offered a furniture layout (see Figure 4-2, right) that, according to him, was superior, in both functional and aesthetic sense, to the traditional layout (see Figure 4-2, left): on the traditional plan the furniture took up 45% of floor space, while on the proposed one – only 31% (Seredyuk, 1958).

*Figure 4-2. Furniture layout: traditional and new (Seredyuk, 1958). Dimensions given in centimeters.*

In the same article the author maintained that placement of furniture should not obstruct traffic flow (which, as it has already been mentioned, was the case, when the layout characteristic of stalinkas was used in khrushchevkas). He suggested that tall furniture pieces should be placed along back walls, and areas for sitting, resting, and
working – closer to the light. In his opinion, the optimal furniture layout would allow the apartment dwellers to easily rearrange individual furniture pieces when needed: for example, to place chairs in front of a TV for recreation or to put up a folding dining table for entertaining guests, without making any drastic changes to the original composition.

As a result of these changes in interior design, people were forced to throw away many of the furniture pieces they had previously owned. It was not uncommon in the late 1950s to see antique tables, bookcases, and cupboards, left in dumpsters by their owners who couldn’t utilize them in their new apartments (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003).

*Interior Architecture*

Besides changes in space planning, designers started to employ other “tricks” to make the new apartments appear more spacious, such as the use of color and light (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003). It was recommended, because of low ceiling height, that walls should not be visually divided and that no crown moldings or other decorative woodwork should be used (see Figure 4-3). It was also suggested that wall colors should be solid, to visually heighten the ceiling and emphasize the shapes and colors of furniture pieces and items of décor placed against them. Design specialists advised that wall paper patterns could be large and the colors – rich, if the room was spacious and well-lit. For smaller rooms, they recommended wall coverings of more subdued hues and with finer patterns. They also suggested that in smaller apartments, adjacent rooms could be finished with exactly the same wall paper, or wall paper of the same pattern, but different colors, in order to enlarge the space visually (Bayar, 1958). The ceiling was to be white or bluish-white, to make it appear taller (Seredyuk, 1958).
Hollow-core flush doors were advocated as being more hygienic and aesthetically fitting with the new interiors than solid-wood doors with decorative millwork (Seredyuk,
Figure 4-4 features two types of doors: the one on the left was typical of stalinkas and was seen by design specialists of the 1950s and 1960s as inappropriate for the new apartments. The door and a door opening draped with a curtain featured on the right are simpler and were recommended for khrushchevkas. One of the suggestions directed at visually widening the space was painting doors the same color as the walls (Bayar, 1958). Built-in closets and cabinets were an element of interior architecture advocated for use as a space-saving alternative to free-standing storage units. They were to be used for keeping clothes, bedding, books, dishes, etc (Golverk, 1958).

Figure 4-4. Suggestions for doors. Left: a door with decorative woodwork (not recommended). Right: a panel-board door and a door-replacing curtain (recommended) (Seredyuk, 1958).
Lighting

The height of ceilings in khrushchevkas was responsible for the size of new light fixtures. Hanging an elaborate chandelier in an apartment where the ceilings were no taller than 2.5 meters (8.2 ft) was not a viable option - the newly designed flat lights were much more practical (see Figure 3-7) (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003). The experts recommended that ceiling-mounted light fixtures have the height of 200-300 mm (7.9-11.8 in). They also suggested using compact multi-functional lights that could serve as both table lamps and wall sconces (Sveshnikov, 1959). Under Khrushchev, just like in the 1920s, there was a renewed emphasis on hygiene and health benefits of living spaces. As a result, silk lampshades, which traditionally used to cover lights hanging above dining tables, were criticized as obstructing the distribution of light and collecting dust (Bayar, 1958).

Furniture

In the 1950s and 1960s “‘minimization’ was becoming a fetish of the Soviet people’s everyday life” (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003) – khrushchevkas required more compact furnishings to fill them (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003). Since the building campaign was on a national scale, giving people access to a supply of furniture for the new apartments became a task of the state-level importance. In December 1956, the All-Union Conference of Furniture Industry Workers took place. At the conference, it was noted that the then-produced furniture took up to 40-50% of the new apartments’ floor space. Designers faced a task unknown to them before: creating furnishings that would
“work” with the new residential spaces. For example, participants of the 1958 design competition held in Moscow were challenged to design furniture that would occupy no more than 20-33% of the apartments’ usable area (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003).

An example of new thought in action, a 1958 magazine article dedicated to outfitting the new apartments, issued a call to rethink such piece of furniture as a desk. The author, architect Seredyuk, emphasized the need to get rid of “cumbersome” desks with large drawers as uneconomical and impractical size-wise. Instead, he suggested using smaller desks, about 100 by 60 cm (39 by 64 in) in size and with only one or two drawers. He also suggested that a traditional round table placed in the center of the room be replaced by a smaller, lower sofa-side table – either circular, 50-60 cm (20-24 in) in diameter, or rectangular, 50 cm by 70 cm (20 in by 28 in) (Seredyuk, 1958).

As a result of this paradigm shift, new kinds of furniture began to be produced – and their modest size was one of the most significant modifications. Besides furniture becoming smaller, another innovation in the realm of product design was transformable furniture (due to its multi-functionality it was freeing up space, traditionally occupied by additional furniture items) and collapsible furniture (capable of being folded and easily stored away when not in use, and thus also clearing up much-needed floor area). At a furniture design competition held in Leningrad in 1958, the following transformable cupboard-table-bed was one of the featured pieces (see Figure 4-5) (Golverk, 1958).
In addition to more compact, foldable, and collapsible furniture, design specialists encouraged people to use sectional pieces as appropriate for the new one-family apartments – they were versatile in use, and when designed to specifications based on thorough research of basic household items’ sizes (such as books, dishes, clothes, etc), occupied just the room needed to hold those items, saving precious square centimeters of apartment’s usable area (Seredyuk, 1961).

Analysis of advice offered by design specialists in the late 1950s and early 1960s suggests that practicality was one of the reasons for the change to minimalism in interiors at the time. Decorative architectural elements appropriate for spacious stalinkas were irrelevant in the new, smaller apartments. For the same reason, khrushchevikas required
fixtures and furniture that were more compact, versatile in use, and easy to put away when needed.

Cost of Construction

Architecture

The cost of buildings and furniture construction affected design in ways that led to minimalism as well. In 1954 (November 30 – December 7) in Moscow the All-Union Conference of Builders, Architects and Building Industry Workers, Building- and Road-Construction Machinery Industry and Project and Scientific Research Organizations took place (translated by the author). The leaders of the Party and the government chaired by Khrushchev himself were present. At this conference, architect Mordvinov gave a talk criticizing an apartment building that belonged to the Moscow State University. The construction of this building took two years and the cost of the façade constituted 19% of the total building cost “because of the huge number of architectural details” (Mordvinov, 1955). Mordvinov contrasted it to a group of Moscow buildings that took only six to seven months to build. They were constructed using “typical sections” (panels); as a result, and due to the limited number of architectural details, the cost of the façade constituted only 6% of the total cost of each building (Mordvinov, 1955).

In his closing speech at the same conference, Khrushchev criticized those architects who, according to him, were more concerned with the way the buildings looked rather than with construction and maintenance costs. He specifically attacked architect Zakharov, whose proposed building designs looked like “churches”
Khrushchev quoted Zakharov who said that it was “necessary to show the buildings’ silhouettes.” Then Khrushchev concluded, “So these, apparently, are the problems that comrade Zakharov is mostly concerned with. He needs pretty silhouettes, while people need apartments. Their need is not to admire the silhouettes, but to live in apartments!” (Khrushchev, 1955) (translated by the author). Interestingly, this statement is in almost direct contradiction to the declaration made in 1933 by L.M. Kaganovich, quoted in Chapter II (“Some think that simplified, crude design is the style of proletarian architecture. Excuse me, but no, the proletariat wants not only to have buildings, not only to live comfortably in them, but to have beautiful buildings”), which is another testament to the stark contrast between the Party agendas concerning architecture under Stalin and Khrushchev.

Thus, economy was one of the reasons why khrushchevkas, compared to stalinkas, had smaller floor area and had lower ceilings – it allowed to carry out the construction according to the slogan of Khrushchev’s building campaign, which was “Better, faster, and more economical!” (Varga-Harris, 2008). Khrushchev himself in his memoires remembered the dilemma of building smaller apartments with taller ceilings (“from a medical point of view, a higher ceiling allows better circulation of air”) or larger apartments with lower ceilings (“of course, there is nothing luxurious about a two-and-a-half-meter ceiling”) (Khrushchev, 1974). This was a matter of financial priorities, as well as practicality, and making floor area larger was chosen over making apartments taller: “… ask any housewife: she’ll tell you she’d rather have a little lower ceiling and more floor space” (Khrushchev, 1974).
Other sacrifices had to be made in the name of frugality as well. The chairman of the Soviet State Committee for Construction (Gosstroy) V. A. Kucherenko stated in his address at the 1960 All-Union Conference on Urban Building that some construction specialists suggested implementing such improvements to khrushchevkas as making larger storage units, building isolated rooms (where each living space had its own door leading to the hallway, as opposed to the scenario where one of the rooms’ only door lead to the other room), and installing elevators in apartment buildings. Kucherenko noted that doing so at the time was not plausible, as the need for more dwelling spaces existed, and making the abovementioned improvements would have meant cutting down construction volumes “by at least one million square meters” (11 million sq. ft) (Na Vsesoyuznom Soveshchanii po Gradostroitelstvu, 1960). Other elements of interior architecture also underwent cost-cutting changes. Doors, for example, as it has already been shown in section on practicality of this chapter, (see Figure 4-4) were made more plain and thus cheaper (Seredyuk, 1958). Elimination of decorative woodwork, such as cornices, rosettes, crown moldings, and carvings served the same money-saving purposes. Of course, reducing construction costs meant that not only apartments themselves, but also shared spaces, such as stairwells, had to be tighter. They were so small, in fact, that when khrushchevka inhabitants happened to die, it was impossible to carry a coffin down the stairwell without walking into neighboring apartments to turn it around (Kapustyan, 2006).

Disposing of all “excesses” bore its fruit and building costs went down significantly, compared to previous decades. According to the Academy of Architecture
of the USSR, a panel building was twice as light as a brick one of the same size. As a result, transportation expenses, which typically constituted about 20% of total construction costs, became significantly lower. Likewise, materials used on a panel building were half the cost of materials used on a brick one (Dudorov, 1952).

Table 2 in Chapter III demonstrates comparative cost of construction per sq. m. of brick, large-block and large-panel buildings, showing that they constituted 1101, 1070, and 960 rubles respectively (Rudkovskii, 1959). Thus, large-panel buildings, advocated and widely endorsed by Khrushchev, proved to be most cost-effective. Reduction of constructions costs per building unit, necessitated by the need to erect a large number of residential dwelling spaces to address the housing crisis, resulted in buildings that were very minimalist in nature, containing no decorative elements in exterior and interior architecture.

Furniture and Décor

A large number of buildings required a large number of furniture, and in order to produce it in the amounts that would satisfy the needs of the Soviet citizens who had to outfit their new apartments, the costs of furniture production had to be cut down as well. For example, in his 1961 article entitled Certain Aspects of the Economics of Furniture Manufacturing, published in Zhilishchnoye Stroitelsvo (Housing Construction) magazine, architect Seredyuk noted that furniture industry was still practicing certain ineffective methods of product manufacturing, which lead to material overuse. The author recommended that the size of furniture strictly depend on its function. He maintained that the length and width of closet, bookcase, and cupboard shelves had to
correspond to the sizes of objects (such as dishes, books, shoes, clothes, etc) stored thereon. For example, for calculating the sizes of shelves in clothes closets and wardrobes, Seredyuk suggested using the “overall dimensions of a folded man’s shirt,” suggesting further that there were two ways of placing a shirt on a shelf: length-wise and cross-wise, which resulted in two types of shelf sizes: one that had the depth of 300 mm (12 in) and the width that was a multiple of 470 mm (19 in), and another, where those two dimensions were in reverse (Seredyuk, 1961). According to the author, such precision would lead to economical use of materials, and thus would result in cheaper furniture.

In the same article, Seredyuk mentioned that then-popular and convenient sectional furniture was somewhat expensive due to the large amount of wood used in its production (for example, as it has already been mentioned in Chapter III, manufacturing of such furniture resulted in creation of double walls). He suggested that to solve this problem, it would be beneficial to make individual furniture sections larger (see Figure 4-6) (Seredyuk, 1961). Further in the article, Seredyuk noted that shelving units without back walls could be easily put together by buyers, which would reduce the units’ price, and suggested that such furniture be widely used. He also listed several other ways of saving money in furniture-construction process, such as making furniture doors thinner (which was possible since they were not weight-bearing elements), using metal instead of wooden legs, utilizing plastic and metal hardware in place of complicated carpentry joints, manufacturing standardized furniture elements, and insuring furniture’s sturdiness (Seredyuk, 1961). The author brought to readers’ attention the fact that in furniture-
manufacturing industry, the cost of materials constituted 60-80% of production costs, and stressed that rational choice of materials and the components’ sizes could lead to reductions in price (Seredyuk, 1961).

Figure 4-6. Comparison of two ways of sectional furniture construction. Due to having fewer sections, which are larger in size, the cupboard on the right is more cost-efficient than the one on the left (Seredyuk, 1961).

As emphasized by the architect-author above, choice of materials affected manufacturing costs, and designers were experimenting with new materials, such as particle board, plywood, veneers, plastics, PVC films, polyurethane foam, etc, which were cheaper than solid wood, cotton, lacquers, paints, and other materials and finishes used in decades prior (Luppov, 1959; Golverk & Mindlin, 1960). Often particle board and plywood were left either unfinished or were covered with clear resins for money-saving reasons (Luppov, 1959). Wallpaper was recommended as an economical wall-treatment option and inexpensive viscose and cotton fabrics – as appropriate choices for upholstery (Bayar, 1958).
When it came to decoration, design specialists insisted that items of décor did not have to be expensive antique objects. They recommended to use vases, dishes, and bowls with Soviet republics’ (Ukraine, Caucuses, Middle Asia, etc) ethnic motifs, which were “characterized by beautiful colors, soft, organic shapes, intricate design details, and [could] satisfy the demands of the highest taste” (Bayar, 1958). For those who could not afford original watercolor or oil paintings to decorate walls, designers recommended using “artistic photographs of landscapes, flowers, [and] still life” (as opposed to buying cheap copies of paintings) in simple frames. They also suggested using plants as decorative elements (Bayar, 1958). Producing inexpensive furniture and decorations meant that those items were becoming fairly plain and simple. Thus, cost of construction and production affected furniture styles, which acquired purely functionalist and minimalist qualities.

Ideology

In countries with dictatorial regimes even the most mundane aspects of people’s lives can become tools for propaganda. For example, the so-called “Kitchen Debate” is an eloquent example of Khrushchev’s desire to show the world that the USSR was not behind, but on par with or ahead of, the West in production of household wares (Safire, 2009; Varga-Harris, 2008; www.teachingamericanhistory.org). The Kitchen Debate was a series of dialogs between Nikita Khrushchev and then Vice President of the United Sates Richard Nixon, which took place in Moscow in 1959 at the American Exhibition in Sokolniki Park. For the exhibition, a model house was built, where Nixon presented to Khrushchev the achievements of the US industry in the area of consumer goods
manufacturing. Since the exchange was taking place in view of a large number of American and Soviet citizens, as well as journalists on both sides, and was going to be televised, Khrushchev took the opportunity to turn the household wares exhibition tour into an ideological battlefield (Hearst, Considine, & Conniff, 1961). The following statement made by Khrushchev in response to Nixon’s showing him American household wares demonstrated his views on the overall condition of the US and Soviet economies at the time, as well as his attitude toward the countries’ political systems:

America has been in existence for 150 years and this is the level she has reached. We have existed not quite forty-two years and in another seven years we will be on the same level as America.

When we catch you up, in passing you by, we will wave to you. Then if you wish we can stop and say: Please follow up. Plainly speaking, if you want capitalism you can live that way… We can still feel sorry for you, but since you don't understand us, live as you do understand. (Creating Great Places, n.d.)

While the American Vice President introduced exhibited items, Khrushchev continuously declared that in each particular area that Nixon talked about, the USSR was ahead, as the following examples show:

Nixon: “I want to show you this kitchen…” [Nixon points to dishwasher.] Khrushchev: “We have such things.”

Nixon: “There are some instances where you may be ahead of us… there may be some instances in which we are ahead of you—in color television, for instance.”
Khrushchev: “No, we are up with you on this too.” (Teachingamericanhistory.org, n.d.)

These and many other remarks that the Soviet Premier articulated in the course of the Kitchen Debate reveal his desire to prove the advantages of socialism as compared to capitalism, by alleging the superiority of the Soviet...
consumer goods over those manufactured in the United States. The same, as shown in the section below, held true for architecture.

Architecture

Under Khrushchev, the grandiose scale of his residential construction campaign was a highly ideologically-charged issue. From the point of view of the Party and Khrushchev himself, the number of residential buildings erected during his rule served as the proof of communism winning over capitalism (Varga-Harris, 2008). Thus, the building campaign was not only the tool of providing the USSR’s population with much-needed housing, but also a way of showing the capitalist West the supremacy of socialism. Another ideological aspect pertaining to architecture was destalinization, during which not only ideas, but also artifacts of Stalin’s era were ardently criticized. Rejection of Empire-Style architecture was a part of renunciation of Stalinist ideology in general (Varga-Harris, 2008). “Back to Lenin” was the famous slogan in Khrushchev’s USSR shortly after Stalin’s death. It implied that the former leader, during the years of his reign of Terror, deviated from the course to the “radiant future” (Cooke, 1997) set by Lenin. This was the period of sifting through the original values of the socialist revolution in order to go back to the “proper” way of building socialism and, eventually, communism, based on the true virtues of Marxism/Leninism. What Khrushchev revealed to the Soviet people concerning the Stalinist system, particularly in his “secret speech” (Khrushchev, 1956), overthrew their ideas of what the country’s political and social culture ought to be (Buchli, 1997).
Architecture was one of the aspects of this social culture that needed to be redefined. At the time, debates over how buildings’ design must reflect the tenets of the state were common and impassioned. Representative in this respect is the article entitled *On Outdated Views and Pursuit of Innovation in the Art of the Soviet Architects* found in the 1959 *Arkhitektura SSSR* [The USSR Architecture] magazine. The author, architect A. Obraztsov, suggested that the issues concerning the direction of artistic thought, the definition of a modern Soviet building, as well as proper understanding of the national characteristics of architecture, were among some of the deep philosophical questions that the architects in the USSR had to face when the Party made known the new course of architecture’s development.

The author considered the main objectives of Soviet architects to be, first, a profound understanding of people’s physical and spiritual needs, second, a creative approach to the latest building materials and construction practices (which, according to him, entailed “fully abandoning decorations”), and, third, achieving beauty and expressiveness of buildings through “organic means.” He criticized architects who understood the state’s call to changes as merely an appeal to eradicate “excesses,” while in reality it was meant to bring about an overhaul in the entire theory of Soviet architecture.

Obraztsov told a story of a certain V. Samorodov, a state official, who overlooked building construction in the city of Tambov. Samorodov declined a standardized design, based on prefabricated elements, for a city club, and declared that instead, they were going to erect a “beautiful” structure. As a result, another project was chosen, the one
where the building resembled a model of classical architecture. The author of the article, who met with Samorodov, raised an objection saying that the accepted design was not in harmony with the spirit of modernity. A reply followed, “I don’t believe that columns have been banned.”

Obraztsov went on to explain that learning from classical architecture was not against the new principles, but that it did not include blind copying. He declared that “first and foremost, from classical architects we must learn their ability to be modern,” suggesting that buildings of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Italy were very modern for their times.

The author concluded by stating that questions concerning the new artistic direction of Soviet architecture were on the mind of many a design specialist at the time. He then stated the need for a public discussion, as a result of which the main questions of such direction would be clearly answered (Obraztsov, 1959).

We can see from this article that under Khrushchev, as far as the Soviet leadership and certain architects were concerned, Stalinism was not only an inadequate and base ideology, “Stalinism was bad taste” (Reid, 1997). As a result, designing “classical” buildings became wrong from the standpoints of both economy and morality, and minimalism emerged as the new style du jour.

*Furniture and décor*

During the 1950s and 1960s, even the furnishings came to represent the differences between Stalin’s and Khrushchev’s regimes. For example, light wood was widely used in furniture manufacturing because it represented deliverance from the
oppression of the cult of personality, while dark-wood furniture pieces were hard to come by at the time (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003; Luppov, 1959). The heaviness of Stalin’s Empire-Style furniture symbolized the unhealthy past which was to have no influence on the progressive present, and when people were throwing away their old commodes, cupboards, and bookcases, they were not merely freeing up space in their new apartments, but also demonstrating their contempt toward Stalinism (Lebina & Chistikov, 2003). In the same spirit, popular under Stalin lights with silk lampshades that illuminated the centerpiece table and left the corners of a room in the dark were being seen as overshadowing the path to communism (Varga-Harris, 2008). The new furniture, which was lighter (in both color and weight), simpler, and easier to maintain, was meant to exemplify the joys of moving toward and achieving the “radiant future” (Cooke, 1997) and to distinguish it from the dark Stalinist past on the level of material culture (Reid, 1997).

As it has been mentioned before, one of the highly criticized characteristics ascribed to Stalinism was petit-bourgeois consciousness, which Stalin did not condone, but Khrushchev waged a war on (Buchli, 1997). Literary scholar Vera Dunham offers an opinion that after WWII Stalin’s regime offered the Soviet middle class an unwritten agreement of sorts, according to which the middle class would commit to raising the country up after the war and support the regime, and the regime would allow the middle class to reap material rewards of its labors enjoying consumer goods, recreation, and a “rich home life” in general. Assessing middle-class values of the Stalinist period reflected in the Soviet literature of that time, Dunham suggested that, as a result, the middle class
began to associate certain objects with “spiritual values.” Those were the objects intended to help “maintain… high level of serenity”: the iconic orange lampshade, heavy drapes, a grand piano, a windowsill with potted flowers, pictures, wallhangings, etc.

“Conveniently, the [Stalinist] system had granted permission either to own them or to crave for them” (Dunham, 1990). Thus, under Stalin petit-bourgeois consciousness was not seen as a folly, the way it was in the 1920s – on the opposite, it was encouraged. Dunham points out that “material craving engulfed post-war society from top to bottom” (Dunham, 1990). It would not be unreasonable to assume that the Soviet citizens, starving for peace and stability – economic, political, and emotional – of which they were deprived during the four years of the war, were trying to seize that which symbolized for them permanence and security, namely the “hearth,” the essence of home. And the regime allowed for this desire to be satisfied, partly because it needed those very people to help rebuild the country (Dunham, 1990).

When Khrushchev initiated the reform of everyday life after coming to power, he had to face the fact that “in the recovering and post-war society these joys [of domestic bliss] could not easily be denied” (Buchli, 1997). So, when suggestions of design specialists were not enough to motivate people to overturn their traditional way of life and enthusiastically engage in living the “out with the old, in with the new” philosophy by throwing away their old Empire-Style furniture and purchasing the new boxy types, ethical values began to be heavily emphasized in order to prevail upon people to do so (Buchli, 1997).
Under Khrushchev, concern and preoccupation with collecting the kinds of objects that signaled to the subconscious of the Soviet people the symbolism of domestic coziness were positioned as signs of “deheroisation and deprolitariatization” (Dunham, 1990). Khrushchev’s regime treated the concept of meshchanstvo as anti-proletarian and thus unworthy of a Soviet citizen (see page 18). “Under Khrushchev, the iconic fringed lampshade became an object of derision” (Varga-Harris, 2008) as it epitomized meshchanstvo with its vulgarity and lack of aesthetical refinement, being preoccupied solely with its own petty interests and possessing social and political blindness.

Of course, the orange lampshade was only an emblem. An array of objects and concepts denoting petit-bourgeois mentality suffered the destiny of their ostracized silk compatriot. Decorations, “excessive (or inappropriate)” (Varga-Harris, 2008), were considered anti-communist and anti-patriotic.

To understand what was seen as “excessive (or inappropriate),” it would be helpful to analyze the article entitled About the Book “Decorate Your Dwelling” that was written by an architect O. Bayar and published in the 1959 issue of Zhilishchnoe Stroitelstvo [Housing Construction] magazine. This article was a review of the book entitled “Decorate your Dwelling” that came out shortly before the publication of the article. According to Bayar, the authors of the book gave tasteless advice in the spirit of petit-bourgeois mentality. For example, they recommended using for decoration embroidered and other decorative cloths hung on backs of chairs and walls; table cloths, runners, and fabrics, placed on tables, night stands, and pianos; throws and shawls nailed over sofas, beds, and tables. Bayar warned that those who followed advice imparted by
the book risked creating “petit-bourgeois coziness” and suggested that “simplicity must be the main aesthetic characteristic of a modern home – in combination with comfort and harmony of all decorative elements it will create an impression of spaciousness and abundance of air” (translated by the author).

Further, Bayar criticized the book authors’ suggestion to adorn tables and shelves with multiple “knick-knacks” (as it has been mentioned in Chapter II, under Stalin it was popular to display porcelain figurines, vases, family photographs, perfume bottles, etc), advising his readers that, instead, decorations should be minimal and of high artistic quality. He also disapproved of the idea to decorate window treatments with fringes, lace, and ruffles, and to eschew having a central source of light in a room in favor of hanging one lampshade right above the table.

Bayar concluded his article by stating that there had long been a need to help the general population with the issues of home decoration. He offered an idea of having a specialized magazine, dedicated to specifically to this topic, and suggested that furniture exhibits must have posters educating people on the matters of home décor, as well as artist-decorators in attendance, consulting people on how to create appropriate interior ensembles (Bayar, 1959).

Analyzing designers’ suggestions on educating general public in the matters of interior design, some scholars have noted that Soviet people were, perhaps, steered by the state in the direction of developing a certain kind of taste, the one that was in tune with the Party’s ideological goals (Buchli, 1997; Reid, 1997; Varga-Harris, 2008). Various furniture exhibits served this purpose, showcasing the types of products that were “right”
for the people, as well advice given by design specialists in press. The process of
developing one’s taste turned again from a private (as it was under Stalin), into a public
(as it was in the 1920s) matter. Following is an excerpt from an article in the 1959
Sovyetskaya Arkhitektura [Soviet Architecture] magazine, entitled Decorative textiles in
an apartment interior and mentioned previously in Chapter III, that illustrates this notion:
“Architects and artist-decorators must assist general population in cultivating a good taste
when it comes to choosing decorative fabrics” (Milyavskaya, 1959) (translated by the
author). And here is a quote from another article, this time from the 1960 Zhilishchnoe
Stroitelstvo [Housing Construction] magazine. Talking about manufacturing and
distribution of the new furniture in Leningrad, the authors M. Golverk and G. Mindlin
noted that “wide educational work is being done among the population: lectures and
discussions, exhibitions, television programs, artistic public forums, etc. This will help to
skillfully and correctly solve all the problems related to furniture, equipment, and interior
design…” (Golverk & Mindlin, 1960) (translated by the author).

There seemed to be a goal of developing some kind of a group mentality, and a
one of a very large group at that (USSR was the largest country in the world, spanning,
like modern Russia, 11 time zones). This was the mentality that was to be formed in
people living in standardized buildings with standardized furniture (Lebina & Chistikov,
2003).

It would be easy to conclude that the state needed such mentality in order to
control its citizens and that at the time, just like under Stalin, the proverbial “big brother”
was well and alive. Likewise, it can be speculated that Khrushchev needed this
confirmation of success of destalinization on the level of the most mundane and seemingly inconsequential material objects because such confirmation assured that every small corner of the big Soviet house was free from dust-bunnies of Stalinism, figuratively speaking. This, in turn, may have given the state the confidence that it had the loyalty of its citizens on all levels of life, even on its very private levels.

At the same time, it can be suggested that those architects and other design specialists who sincerely believed in the possibility of communism in the USSR and had the chance to influence public opinions, were deeply convinced that petit-bourgeois mentality was truly a stumbling block on the way to the “radiant future.” It is not, however, the purpose of this work to analyze such possible motives of the state and design professionals, but merely to suggest that ideology was, indeed, one of the reasons for the change to minimalism in Soviet design at the time.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

The changes that occurred in the Soviet Union shortly after Nikita Khrushchev came to power affected people even on such intimate levels of life as domestic interiors. There has been research conducted and published that explored some of the reasons for transition to minimalism in residential interiors in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, Buchli (1997) maintained that the reform of everyday life that took place under Khrushchev was based on the premise of returning to the values of socialism-communism as introduced by Lenin and fought for during the Socialist Revolution if 1917. Since interior design was part of this “everyday life,” it can be concluded that ideological motives were at least partially responsible for the change to minimalism under Khrushchev. He also mentioned several reasons for why transformable furniture was used, i.e., minimization of the number of objects in a room and hiding the room’s less traditional functions (for example, the only room in a one-room apartment was to appear as a dining hall and a space for entertaining guests, while its functions as a bedroom and a study were hidden thanks to transformable future pieces). From this analysis of multi-functional furniture roles it could be assumed that practicality was one of the reasons behind minimalism under Khrushchev. Supporting Buchli’s opinion, Reid (1997) emphasized the fact that the notions of taste and beauty became politicized during the Thaw. She also maintained that the domestic reform was to distinguish Khrushchev era from the Stalin one on the level of “visual environment.” Both of these ideas allow the reader to conclude that ideology was one of the forces behind the
transition to minimalism. Reid also noted that smaller furniture pieces of plain, rectilinear design were easier to clean and allowed for “efficient use of space,” which could serve as another indication that practicality was an important factor behind simplification of furniture and interiors in general. Varga-Harris (2008) mentioned that building smaller apartments resulted in quicker and cheaper construction, which points to both a financial reason behind the switch to minimalism, and the one of practicality. She also asserted that design principles that were being popularized during the Thaw mirrored the state’s goals pertaining to destalinization (for example, the unity between parts of buildings symbolized the equality of all members of the socialist society, etc). This information, in addition to the studies mentioned above, provides supplementary evidence that ideology affected design.

As expert as these scholars are in their respective fields, none of the above-mentioned works have it as their goal to explain the reasons for change to minimalism in Soviet interiors in the 1950s and 1960s. While they touch upon the subject as part of their topics, the present study focuses on this subject exclusively. Explaining that some of the reasons for transition to minimalism were practicality (specifically, deficit of space), economy, and ideological motives, this thesis offers a valuable insight into an important aspect of this period in the Soviet history. It presents another angle of looking at the Soviet government and its political agenda in regards to design, as well as affords a new vision of how the government’s actions affected Soviet people on the level of day-to-day life. At the same time, this research serves as another confirmation that in countries with dictatorial regimes politics and private life of their citizens are inseparably intertwined.
Indirectly, it poses a question of whether these regimes constitute a credible form of government. Such question is valid in the world where authoritarian governments continue to exercise their power over people, making intrusion into the private aspects of life a regular practice. This thesis also provides a better understanding of Russian mentality, which has been affected by peculiarities of Soviet material culture.

The present study lends itself to possibilities of additional research, including the exploration of such subjects as the connection between Stalin’s Empire Style and neoclassicism and art deco in the USA, analysis of similarities between architecture and interior design in countries with dictatorial regimes, connection between Russian constructivism and the world modernist movement, comparison of interior design trends in republics of the Soviet Union, and other topics.
REFERENCES


Bayar, O. (1958). Oborudovaniye i ubranstvo kvartiry [Equipment and decorations in an apartment], Zhilishchnoye Stroitelstvo, 8, 14-17.


Stroitelnogo i Dorozhnogo Mashinostroeniya, Proyektnykh i Nauchno-Issledovatselskikh Organizatsyi [All-Union Conference of Builders, Architects and Building Industry Workers, Building- and Road-Construction Machinery Industry, Project and Scientific Research Organizations]: Abridged Stenographic Report (pp. 379-409), Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye Izdatelstvo Literatury po Stroitelstvu i Arkhitekture.


Na vsesoyuznom soveshchanii po gradostroitelstvu [At the All-Union conference on urban building] (1960). *Arkhiitektura SSSR*, 8, 3-5.


Postanovleniye TsK KPSS i Sovyeta Ministrov SSSR ob Ustranenii Izlishestv v Proyektirovanii i Stroitelstve 4 noyabrya 1955 g. [Resolution of the CC of the CPSU and the Soviet of the Ministers Concerning the Eradication of Excesses in


Rybitskii, V. (1959). *Kak blagoustroit zhilishe?* [How can a dwelling be made more comfortable?], *Zhilishchnoye Stroitelstvo*, 9, 24-29.


APPENDIX A
RUSSIAN COPYRIGHT LAW

Images used in the thesis (with the exception of those indicated in Appendix B) were acquired from Soviet and Russian print sources. Copyright law of the Russian Federation allows for non-commercial use of such images without obtaining the author’s agreement and without providing the author with material compensation (RF Law on Copyright and Neighboring Rights, 2006).
APPENDIX B

SELECTED PHOTO CREDITS

The photographs in the following figures: 1-3, 1-4, 3-1, and 3-3 were taken by the author’s father, Vladimir Vedin. The photograph in Figure 1-6 was taken by the author’s friend, Ana Beatriz Donadio. The abovementioned individuals donated the images to the author and are not seeking compensation for the use of the images. The photograph in Figure 2-1, top left, was taken by the author.