The Problem of "Art-House" and Economic Tendencies in the Project "Great Vladivostok"

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Abstract: The project "Great Vladivostok," conducted during the period of Nikita Khrushchev, was very important for the Primorye region and state, but remained little known in the wider history of the USSR due to the policy of the Soviet government after 1964. It was not only part of the great housing reform in the country but was also an attempt at establishing the Soviet position (through the large new city of Vladivostok) in the East Asian region. However, many processes within this project are unknown for various reasons—primarily political ones. We consider and analyze one of these processes, the question of "art-house" and "economic" styles in "Great Vladivostok." The authors have used oral history materials (for example, collected interviews), visual sources, written works, and records from Russian archives to consider and analyze the results of the "art-house" and economic styles in "Great Vladivostok" as applied to housing developments.

Keywords: Far East, "Great Vladivostok," housing, urbanization, USSR, Vladivostok

Vladivostok is a major city of the Primorye region, located in the far southern part of the Russian Far East. Although this area became part of the Russian Empire in the 1860s, the Russian government did not initially develop the region. A similar situation can be seen after the collapse of the Russian Empire in the earliest history of the Soviet Union. Even the period of hostility with Japan in the 1930s–1940s and the start of the "Cold War" did not lead to a change of policy in the USSR: the Soviet leader Stalin did not regard development of the Far East as important.

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However, after the death of Stalin in 1953 Nikita Khrushchev became the head of the USSR. Until he lost power in 1964, he was responsible for the initiation of a number of different reforms that changed many aspects of daily life in the USSR; one of these was a new policy of state support for the population of the country. This was a drastic turn from the state of affairs that Stalin's policies had established. Khrushchev promoted political rehabilitation for dissidents, supported the peasants of the collective farms (known as *kholkhozy*), and supported space studies and housing improvement. His administration considered the conditions in the Far East several times and concluded that the region needed support in many areas. During this period, the Far Eastern population was small, and agriculture and industry in the region were weak. Moreover, with the powerful neighboring state of China growing more hostile toward the USSR, and with the northern part of the Far East—Chukotka and Kamchatka—lying very close to American territories, there developed a greater willingness on the part of the new Soviet government to pay attention to its eastern outposts.

The modernization and development of Vladivostok had assumed greater importance many years earlier. Vladivostok is the biggest city and seaport in the Primorye region to this day, but at the end of the 1950s it was still seen only as part-city and part-large village. Nearly 50 percent of all buildings were one-story houses and barracks. The proportion of private houses with yards was considerable (Lomova 2013: 93–94; Vlasov 2014: 176). Water supply and electricity lines in Vladivostok were chaotic. Moreover, the city had problems with both the provision of food and the development of cultural life; as a result many people wanted to migrate to the western part of the country. The seaport of Vladivostok did not have a modern communications system, and the Soviet military fleet needed a stronger base for activity in the Pacific region. The government of the USSR had an interest in developing this main city of the Primorye region to foster trade and political relations in East Asia. So, as we can see, the development project of "Great Vladivostok" (in official documents also referred to as the "General Plan—1960") was very relevant for political and economic reasons.

In order to realize these aims, the Soviet Union needed to establish Vladivostok as a "new" city—one that was attractive not only to the local population, but also to people from other regions of the country. The main problem was housing, which was in a deplorable condition at that time: in the USSR, the average citizen had 9 square meters of living space, but in the Far East the allowance was only 5.2 square meters. However, the actual situation in the cities of the region was even worse.

For example, one citizen, Dr. Nesterenko, lived with his family in Vladivostok in 1959. His family consisted of six individuals who all lived in a room of 12 square meters (Slabnina 2008: 435–436). They had only a small kitchen, which was very cold and froze during the winter. We must note that Dr. Nesterenko was a specialist with a PhD and had work experience and was therefore treated more favorably than many others.

Many families in the cities of Primorye lived in a so-called *kommunalka*. In the Far East, a *kommunalka* was a large apartment in the prerevolution or Stalinist Empire style with several rooms (sometimes as many as ten).[1] In each room lived one family. Each apartment had only one kitchen, one bathroom, and one WC. Clearly, this led to tensions every morning and evening, when people were preparing for work or returning home. Unfortunately, the prospect of receiving a self-contained flat for one family was very small. As the situation in the eastern part of the USSR was worse than in the west, many Soviet citizens did not want to live in the Far East and migrated to western parts of the USSR. Moreover, almost all specialists who arrived from the west of the Soviet Union in the Far East through the program of administrative migration wanted to return after one to two years of their stay for various reasons (economic ones at first).[2] Therefore, "Great Vladivostok" had to attract inhabitants from the western part of the country.

The Soviet government announced the General Plan—1960 in 1959 and Khrushchev promised that Vladivostok would become a "second San Francisco" (Smirnov 2017). This statement had important significance for the future of the project. Within a short time the government of the USSR had created a number of different institutions and administrative units to support "Great Vladivostok." The Soviet administration engaged many specialists in the fields of architecture, design, and the economy. The General Plan—1960 drew on the experience of the housing exhibition in New York in 1959.[3] The project was very expensive, so the Soviet government wanted to decrease costs while increasing the efficiency of residential buildings. As a result, the country's leaders reduced salaries for the local population for many years and used financial support from other regions to finance the project. However, this was not enough to cover all needs, and the budget of the project was corrected and increased from time to time. This led to difficulties in implementing the General Plan—1960, because heads of project could not reach compromises in discussions about architecture, housing, planning, and so on.

In some cases, the administrators of the project were able to agree on decisions, for example, on using the first floors of the five-story housing buildings for markets, libraries, barbers' salons, children's clubs, and other spaces.[4] This was more convenient for housing and for encouraging the cultural life of the inhabitants of Vladivostok. They also found compromises over some significant public buildings because the administrative system of the region demanded it. Of course, this still begs the question of why specialists working on the project named it "Great Vladivostok."

In order to understand the situation, we need to consider the political and social conditions of the time. In the period of Khrushchev's modernization, political slogans played an important role. These fostered enthusiastic attitudes in society and helped give rise to new ideas in policy too. Many people in the Soviet Union hoped that the General Plan—1960 would improve their careers, as well as their general quality of life, and many specialists were eager to participate. The concept of a "Second San Francisco" was considered from different positions and interpreted through the perceptions and agendas of the officials, specialists in architecture, and other involved groups. Clearly, each administrator in the project saw this slogan through the prism of their own outlook, interests, and position. These personal factors influenced not only the overall speed of the work on the project, but also the style of building.

One group of architects believed that "Great Vladivostok" should be an elegant modern maritime city in the Far East. In their opinion, this city could be considered a symbol of the victory of socialism in the eastern USSR. It could be used as international propaganda by the Soviet Union, to enhance the reputation of the biggest country in the world. This applied not only to district buildings and public places, but to residential buildings too. Many specialists in architecture (among them Yuriy Trautman)[5] believed that a high proportion of buildings should be luxurious and grand, in keeping with Khrushchev's image of Vladivostok as a "second San Francisco."

After many discussions, they decided to adopt the "Stalinist Empire,"[6] art deco, and other styles. The Stalinist style combines elements of the Renaissance, Baroque, Napoleonic-era imperial, late classicist, post-constructivist, art deco, and neo-Gothic styles (as exemplified in the Russian Federation's Ministry of Foreign Affairs building); it combines pomposity, luxury, majesty, and monumentality. In the architecture of "stalinok," (houses of Stalin period) this style is characterized by the use of architectural orders with clear proportions and rich decor. Soviet symbols, workers and collective farmers, and the

military were the main characters of the bas-reliefs and mosaics. Marble and granite were often used to decorate buildings. Through this style, we can see how in the postwar years, architecture was an ideological tool that conveyed ideas of striving for a brighter future.

However, we should not regard the activity of the members of this group as simply following architectural trends from the Stalinist period: they accepted new ideas (for example, from international exhibitions), understood the importance of economic conditions (though they viewed these in different ways), and wanted to use innovative methods in architecture from abroad. Moreover, they wished to include arches, decorative handrails, columns, porticos, belvederes, and other similar features in the various kinds of buildings. As a result, their projects became expensive, but they believed that these monumental and luxurious buildings would support socialist ideals and remain as long-term features in the city (for example, see Figure 1, which depicts the House of Soviets). According to these architects, Vladivostok was to be an urban embodiment of socialism in East Asia; it should appeal not only to foreigners, but to Soviet citizens from other regions of the country too. However, many people did not initially support the position of

Figure 1. House of Soviets in Vladivostok.

this group for economic reasons. It is likely that these architects did not take into consideration the problems with housing conditions faced by many inhabitants in the region and focused instead on the artistic and political aims of the project. Accordingly, the ideas of this group may be termed "art-house."

At the same time, another group of participants in the General Plan—1960 had a different vision of "Great Vladivostok." They also supported Khrushchev's idea regarding a "second San Francisco," but considered it from both economic and human angles. They followed Khrushchev's principles about supporting the population in low-cost housing, and so believed that above all, Vladivostok should be a well-populated city. Thus, they insisted that only a major seaport could be considered a "second San Francisco." This would be possible only if the project could guarantee sufficient low-cost apartments (the so-called *Khrushchevky*).[7] Clearly, these flats would be very plain. In the opinion of the administrators of "Great Vladivostok" these apartments had to be low-cost for the state and free for inhabitants.[8] This being the case, the budget of the General Plan—1960 had to be fiscally tight and could not call on financial support for grand and expensive buildings. Moreover, the management of the project faced problems of lack of materials, transport, planning, water- and power-infrastructure, and other resources.[9] Accordingly the leaders of this group—Polikanov, Smirnov, and others—stressed economic aspects of the project. Clearly, this was a source of conflict with Trautman's interests. This second group prioritized the economic aspects of building and so can be considered as supporting the economic tendency above all. They preferred five-story buildings, because such buildings did not need an elevator or reinforced plumbing (Vlasov 2014: 144). Moreover, the group was sensitive to the economic situation of residents and wanted to support them. For example, this awareness is apparent in the planning of two-room housing units. The architects believed that inhabitants should save energy and be responsible for their own sanitary appliances. Therefore, they designed apartments with separate bathrooms and WCs (in the case of one-room apartments, there existed the option of a combined bathroom). In the wall between the bathroom and kitchen a small glazed window was fitted (see Figures 2 and 3).

There were two reasons for this configuration. Firstly, in the afternoon, light would enter the bathroom through the kitchen, saving energy, and less money would be spent on utilities. This demonstrates the way that the administrators of the project considered the family budget. Moreover, in some apartments the builders created windows in

Figure 2. Position of window in bathroom from the kitchen side. Photograph by Alexander Kim.

Figure 3. Position of window in combined bathroom from inside (in the case of one-room apartments). Photo by Alexander Kim.

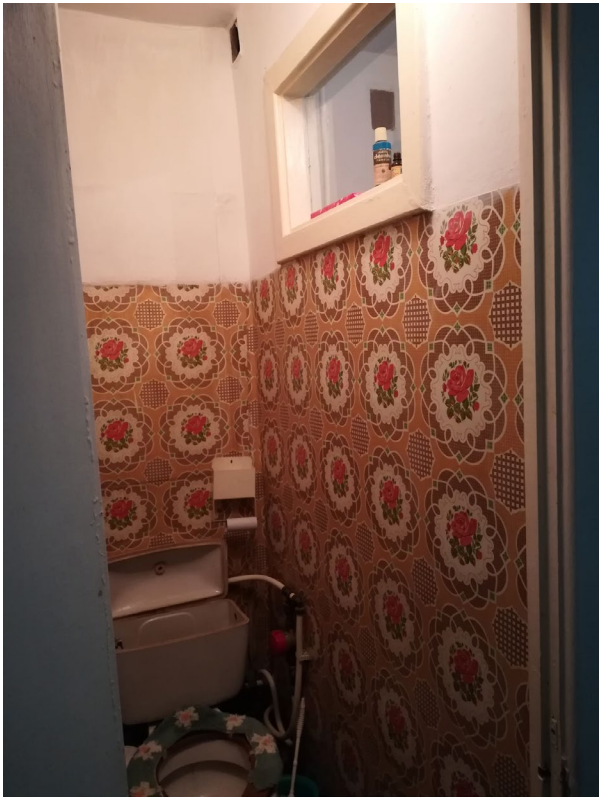

Figure 4. Position of window from the WC side (in the case of two-room apartments). Photograph by Mariia Surzhik.

the wall between the bathroom and WC with the same goal (Figure 4). Such a construction would also save bricks. Clearly, this was important for the representatives of the "economic" tendency.

Secondly, at that time many people believed that the tubercle bacillus could exist in the bathroom, but also that sunlight could kill it. Therefore, in the opinion of the architects, a window between the bathroom and kitchen would be beneficial for sanitary conditions in the apartment. In the Soviet Union at that time, tuberculosis was considered a very real threat and the state took it very seriously. This theory about the tubercle bacillus and sunlight was not confirmed or discussed until recently. Furthermore, the architects wanted to help residents keep their food fresh. In 1962 only 5.3 percent of Soviet families had refrigerators (Zhirnov 2007). The Soviet production of refrigerators was low at that time and was beset by many problems. Imported items were

more reliable, but generally the USSR did not buy them, especially as foreign refrigerators were expensive. To help meet this need, the builders of the apartments created a small chamber under the window of the kitchen, which was cool because of ventilation. This was known as an "under-window refrigerator" or "Khrushchev refrigerator" (Figures 5 and 6). Clearly, it was not a typical refrigerator and was not cooled artificially. But in comparison with other places in the apartment, it was not warm and could be used by the inhabitants as a refrigerator in the winter period.

So, as we can see, two distinct groups of administrators of the project considered their plans socialist ideas in the urban field, but each had different aims. As a result of this difference, discussions about budget and building style were common between the two sides. Supporters of the economic tendency criticized their opponents, because they argued that grand buildings demanded money, time, and human resources, while Moscow wanted to maximize the number of housing units built in Vladivostok. The "economists" therefore insisted that administrators concentrate on housing conditions in the region, not on public buildings. Specialists of the "art-house" tendency wrote that

Figure 5. A closed "Khrushchev refrigerator." Photo by Alexander Kim.

cheap apartments had a great number of defects and problems (passage rooms, small kitchens, soundproofing of in-house walls among others), because construction was not rigorously overseen by inspectors and others. This was indeed the case. The influence of Trautman proved dominant in many discussions. According to information in a monograph by Anikeev and Obertas (2007: 96–98), Trautman fought against many decisions on the building of cheap apartments (*khrushchevky*), the composition of districts of the city, and other areas. He also successfully supported some ideas and plans of the specialists of the "art-house" tendency. As a result of these frictions, he was moved from his post before reaching retirement in the 1970s (Obertas 2010). This fact limited the scope of his supporters. Many architects of "Greater Vladivostok" not only actively criticized the decisions of the "economists" in the 1960s, but have done so more recently too. While they may have had some merit to their arguments, they failed to consider material factors. As is common with many creative people, they objected when other plans (those of their opponents above all) limited their options.

These architects could not understand that the housing situation in many regions of the country (including Primorye) demanded low-cost

Figure 6. An open "Khrushchev refrigerator." Photo by Mariia Surzhik.

apartments because the *kommunalka* could generate social conflicts. The Soviet government understood this crisis and planned to build a great number of low-cost apartments, but it was aware that these units would have a shorter life. Specialists estimated that these constructions would be habitable for just 25–50 years. After this, the administration under Khrushchev planned to implement a new housing reform, which would be the final stage of housing policy.

"The economists" were aware that cheap apartments were not of the best quality; for example, Vasiliy A. Polikanov (the head of Glav-Vladivostokstroy from 1960 to 1963) said many times in meetings that they were building slowly and with defects, but at least they were building. However, they understood the realities of the state plan for construction and believed that in the future, a new housing reform would radically transform Vladivostok and the USSR. In the 1960s and 1970s cheap apartments were vital not only in Primorye, but in the rest of the country too. In the period between 1960 and 1965 nearly 0.9 million square meters of *khrushchevka*-style apartments were built in Vladivostok (Vlasov 2010:187). Meanwhile, in the years 1960–1985 "Great Vladivostok" provided more than 8 million square meters of residential accommodation (Baklanov et al. 2017: 32). At any rate, *khrushchevky* were certainly better than the *kommunalka* and the barracks.

This type of apartment had a significant impact on the population. Konstantin Dulov, who lived in Vladivostok in the 1950s and was mayor of the city during the 1980s, wrote in 2012: "It's a terrible thing when people live in communal apartments. Now few people imagine what it is like to live for decades in a communal apartment, where several families have one kitchen, one toilet and a corridor. As a result, constant scandals and mutual dirty tricks, hatred . . . Of course, when under Khrushchev they began to demolish barracks, resettle communal apartments, and in return give separate apartments, albeit with tiny six-meter kitchenettes and combined bathrooms, for people it was real happiness. It is now with disdain they say "khrushchoba", but then people were so happy with the very fact of getting a separate apartment! ."

Another resident we spoke with, Lyudmila T., remembered: "When I received a one-room 'Khrushchevka' I moved in eagerly and quickly. I repeatedly used to flush the toilet even though I did not have to. I wanted to feel that I could use the bathroom without having to queue up and to have water without interruption."[10] In the departments of architecture at universities in the Primorye region the "art-house" movement was dominant. As a result, almost all specialists in the Far

East supported this tendency. However, this was not reflected in the situation in Vladivostok—after the collapse of the USSR, architectural studies in the region faced problems with development for financial and social reasons.

As it turned out, these two tendencies ceased to exist in the 1980s. Soviet leaders after Khrushchev put little emphasis on great building reforms for the population. The newly announced *brezhnevka* (a new type of housing building in period of Leonid Brezhnev) could not replace *khrushchevky* for reasons of cost, speed of construction, a number of defects, and other reasons. People continued living in old buildings, some constructed more than sixty years earlier, as new apartments could not be provided for financial reasons. It is worth noting that the *khrushchevka* became the model for housing reform in China in the 1980s and 1990s too.[11]

So, as we can see, in the General Plan—1960 there existed two tendencies, which had independent positions regarding the project. Supporters of both ideas had influential positions and opinions that affected the speed and style of building in Vladivostok. The compromises and struggles of the "art-house" and "economic" tendencies played important roles in the project. "Economists" paid attention to the human factor and made some interesting decisions about low-cost apartments and their improvement, in spite of the number of defects such apartments had. All inhabitants in the city received a *khrushchevka*, and this was the most important outcome of the project. Polikanov and his group had many problems in different areas, but they successfully achieved the main aim of the General Plan—1960. This plan provided a forum for discussions on architecture in the Stalinist period, and we can see late examples of the "Stalinist Empire," art deco, and other styles. However, this does not mean that the "art-house" tendency failed to leave its mark on Vladivostok. Trautman and his supporters built several grand buildings and their ideas can be seen realized in contemporary Vladivostok too.

In the end, though, hostile relations between specialists of the two tendencies damaged the ideals of "Great Vladivostok," and the effects are still visible now. Many ideas could not be realized, because each side stuck rigidly to their positions, and plans came to an abrupt halt. Both tendencies were focused on a socialist future, but the fall of the USSR meant an end to those ideas in 1991; without state support these plans were forgotten. However, we can still see traces of these tendencies in the architecture of Vladivostok today, as well as in the other cities of the Primorye region.

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Notes

1. For further details on the *kommunalka* situation and other types of housing in the Soviet Union, see also Reid (2009), Gerasimova (2002), Semenova (2004), and Sosnovy (1954).

2. See the Kratkaia istoricheskaia spravka No. 1. [Short historical reference No. 1], Arhiv PGSHA (Primorskaia gosudarstvennnaia sel`skohoziaystvennaia akademiia) [PGSHA Archive (Primorye State Agricultural Academy)].

3. Gosudarstvennyj Archiv Primorskogo kraia [State Archive of the Primorye region]—GAPK. Fond 1596. Opis' 1i. delo 360. According to information from this document, Soviet specialists took part in this exhibition and received important information about innovations and modern tendencies in the world of housing. One participant from this team was present in the discussions about "Great Vladivostok" and the information he had learned was passed on to administrators. As result, some of these materials were used in the project.

4. GAPK. Fond 1596. Opis' 1. Delo 2. Pp. 40–41.

5. Yuriy Andreevich Trautman (1909–1986) was a famous Soviet architect and a professor in the Department of Architecture at the Far Eastern Polytechnic University. He played an important role in many grand building projects

in the Soviet Union as a specialist, including in Vladivostok and Sevastopol. In 1961 he was appointed chief architect of Vladivostok, and later worked at the university there. Trautman was the cofounder (along with another professor, V. V. Riabov) of the school of architecture in Vladivostok.

6. One example of an interior decorated in the Stalinist Empire style is the banquet hall in the Central Moscow Hippodrome. The decor of the furniture used in interior design in the Stalinist Empire style includes carvings, including images of laurel wreaths, ears of corn, and five-pointed stars. A detail of this style are the chandeliers that illuminate the room; they have a grand appearance, are often made of bronze, and are decorated with crystal pendants. For interior decoration, natural materials are often used, such as wood, marble, bronze, ceramics, and crystal.

7. During the 1950s and 1960s the USSR would produce a great number of these low-cost and quick-to-build apartments, though the quality was not good. After the Khrushchev period, the Soviet government criticized *Khrushchevka* for their many defects. The new type of apartments (the *Brezhnevka*) produced in the period of the next Soviet leader (Leonid Brezhnev) were considered superior. Accordingly, the Soviet administration believed that the new type of apartments would replace the buildings from the previous decades. However, despite the technical experience and improvements, *Brezhnevka* had many defects too (problems with sound insulation, the communal yard, and others). Moreover, the USSR could not produce these in great numbers, as they had been able to in the period of Khrushchev. Clearly, the criticism against *Khrushchevka* had political aspects; for example, in the 1970s many press organizations in the USSR referred to these buildings as *Khrushcheoba*. This is a portmanteau of two words—Khrushchev and *truschoba* (Russian for "slum"). However, both types of building are seen as popular apartments in the modern Russian property market. We shall consider the situation with *Khrushevka* and *Brezhnevka* in another forthcoming article, entitled "Khrushevka—Positive and Negative Aspects in Planning."

8. In the USSR at that time, private property was limited, and these apartments were the property of the state. This meant that a citizen could live in a flat but could not buy and sell it. Of course, one could exchange it, but only in very limited situations. However, a Soviet citizen could be allocated an apartment through a variety of channels. For example, a person could apply for housing through their employer if they did not have suitable accommodation, but after the end of the job contract, the employee would need to leave the apartment and find a new home. Any selling and buying of the apartments was unofficial and viewed as criminal activity, with both sides risking imprisonment on charges of fraud. Usually, Soviet citizens preferred to wait their turn in the housing queue of the regional and city executive committees. After several years (sometimes more than ten) they might be allocated a state apartment, almost exclusively for families. Of course, they had to pay utilities (drainage, water, energy, and so on). A citizen could live in this apartment

until their death, when the right to live there passed to relatives registered in the apartment. However, they could not sell or buy this flat either. In the 1970s there also existed another form of housing: cooperative societies. However, their possibilities for selling and buying officially were very limited and this form of property was not popular. The situation changed completely after the collapse of the USSR.

9. GAPK. F. 1596. Opis' 1i. Delo 55. GAPK. F. 333. Opis' 1. Delo 3. List 4.

10. This conversation with a citizen in Vladivostok took place in 2018.

11. We shall consider this question in another article entitled "Khrushchevka—Positive and Negative Aspects in Planning."

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