

Revolutionised Through Glass: Russian Modernism in the Age of the Crystal Palace

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Abstract

From its very beginning, the glass architecture was perceived in Russia not only as a manifesto to the technological progress but as the constructive frame for the future society as well. Glass symbolized purity, equality and liberation from social chains; it became a paradisiacal material of modernity. Glass had become material of Russian socialist utopias since the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Crystal Palace designed by Joseph Paxton (1803-1865) for the 1851 World's Trade Fair in London inspired the dreams of Vera Pavlovna in Chernyshevsky's *What is to be done?* (1863) and up to the projects of the Palace of Soviets of the 1930s. Various aesthetic concepts that were associated mostly with the development of socialist and communist ideas were visualised through the wide use of glass in architectural projecting and construction. Yet glass remained a utopian material even for the Constructivists very apologetic architectural practice since due to mostly economic reasons, its application to the real construction in early Soviet Russia was rather limited.

In the present paper, I turn to the major milestones of the aesthetic discussion around glass projects, which include the works by Nickolay Chernyshevsky, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Evgeniy Zamyatin and Sergei Eisenstein to analyse the nature of the glass age as well as to give an overview of its critique in Russian literature and aesthetics.

Keywords: Glass architecture, Crystal Palace, Nickolay Chernyshevsky, Sergei Eisenstein, Evgeniy Zamyatin.