

Russian Constructivism

Suprematism

Introduction to Architectural History
Eugene Han
Spring 2021, 7:15 – 8:30pm
Remote Instruction

Key comments on Constructivism

- Centered in Soviet Union/Russia
- Pan-disciplinary movement across the arts
- Its development was stifled due to political pressures
 - Against avant-garde movements
- Focus was on the construction of works, and the inherent capacity of materials, a 'truth to materials'

Key considerations surrounding Constructivism

- Responding to Second Industrial Revolution
- Coincides with Russian Revolution (1917-22)
- Creation of 'The Soviet Union' (USSR / CCCP) (1922)
 - Previously 'Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic' (RSFSR)

SUPREMATISM

- The context of Russian Constructivism



Kazimir Malevich
Ukraine/Russia, 1879 - 1935

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- Pivotal proponent was Kazimir Malevich



Kazimir Malevich, *Self-Portrait* (1933)

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- By the time he developed his most well-known pieces, Modernism in the fine arts (e.g. painting) was well underway, with figures including Gauguin, Cezanne, Picasso, and Matisse already showing some of their most famous works.

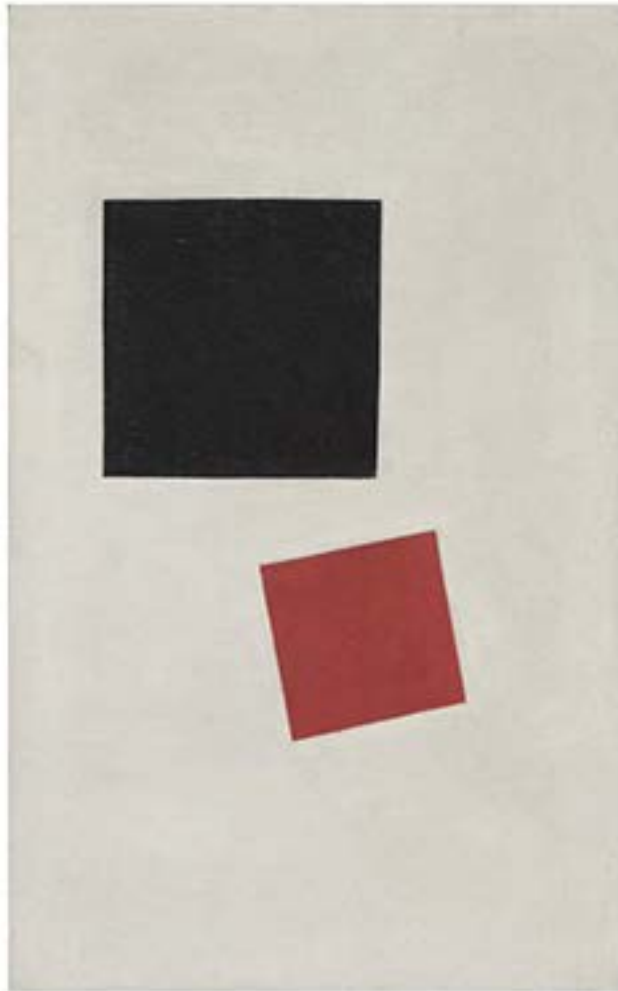


Left: Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VII* (1913)

Right: Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 27 (Garden of Love II)* (1912)

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- Closer to home, the work of Wassily Kandinsky generated broad interest.
- Well past classical representation, into full abstraction.

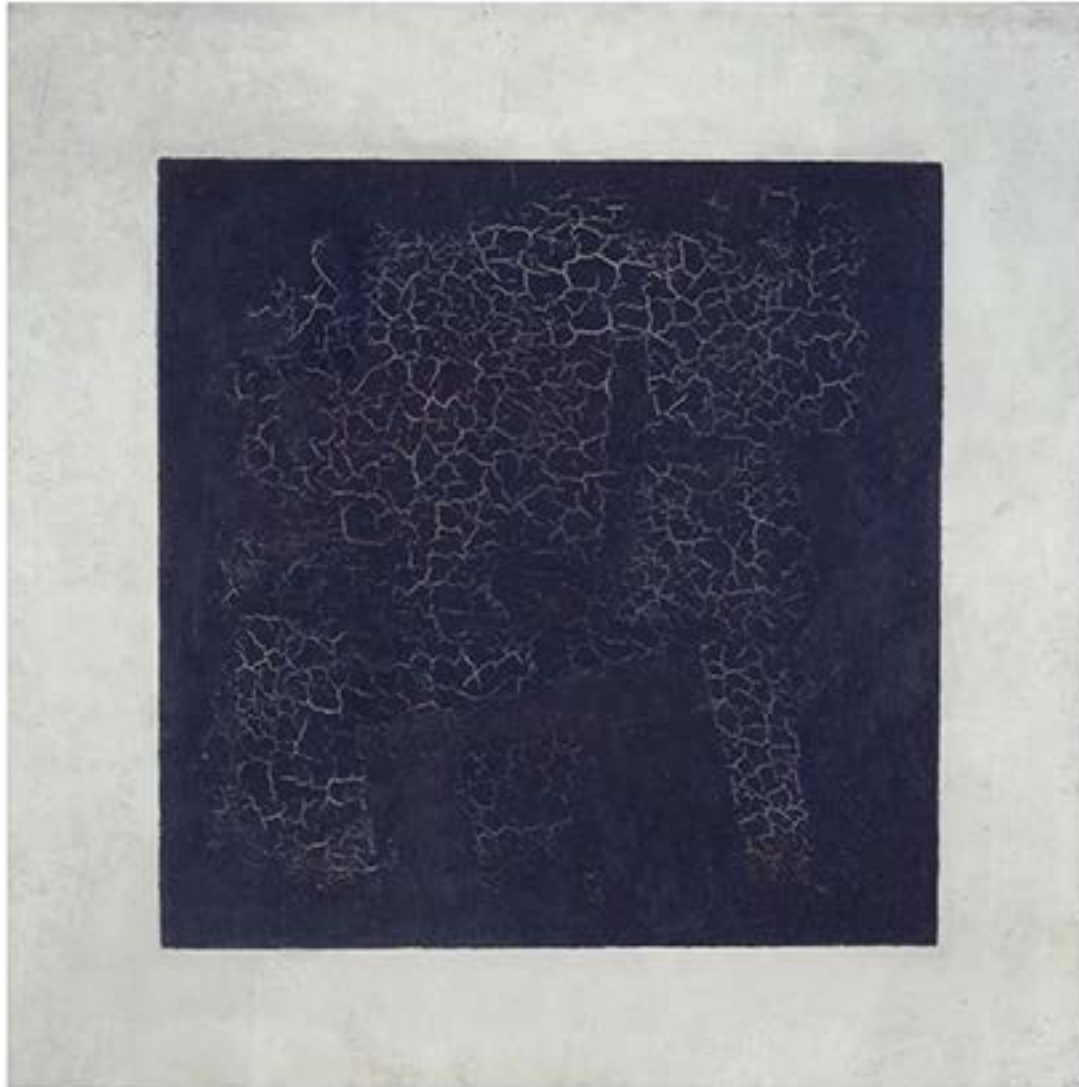


Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square and Red Square* (1915)

Right: *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0,10*, St. Petersburg (1915-16)

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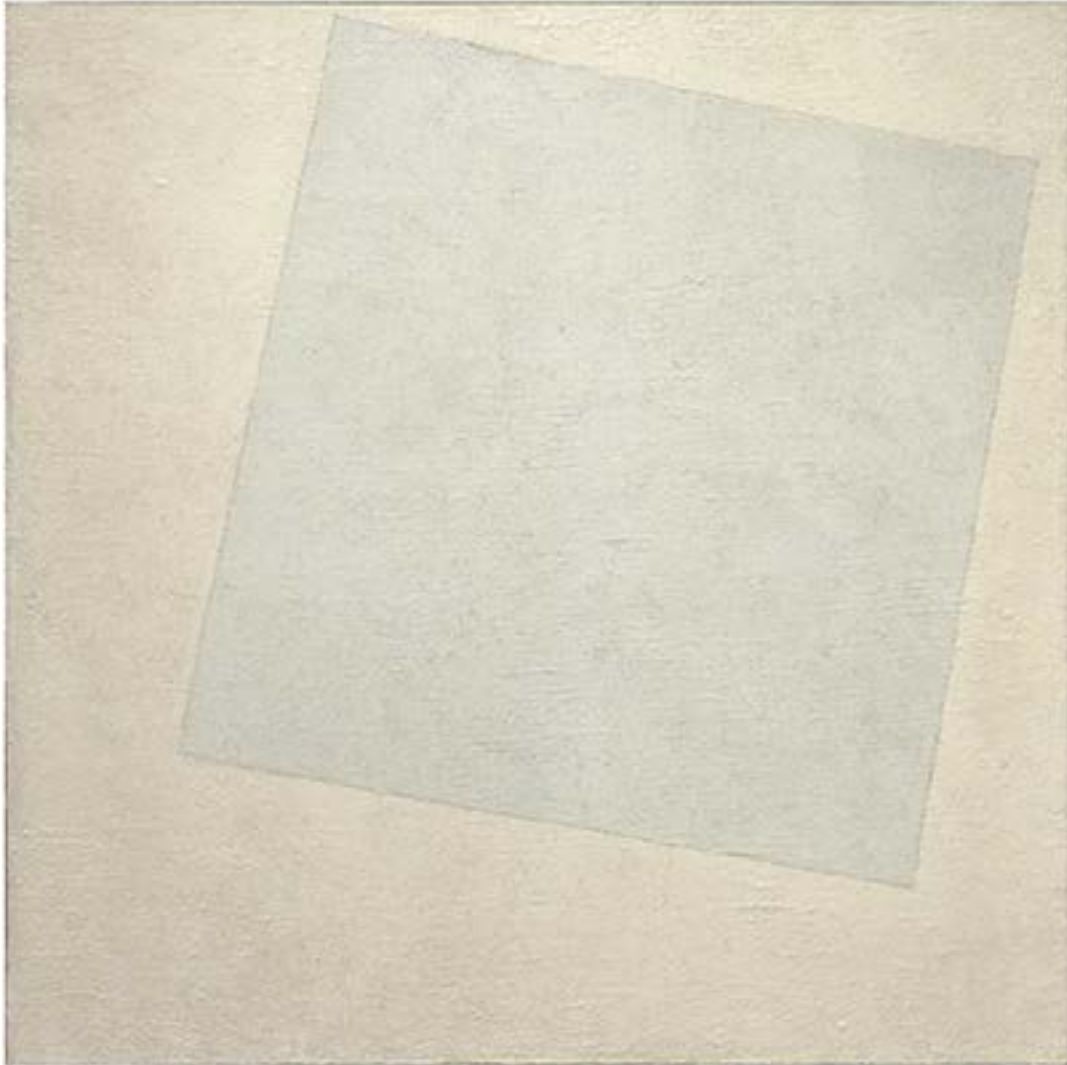
- One of the most important exhibitions which included Malevich's work, *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10* in St. Petersburg (then called Petrograd) in 1915-16.



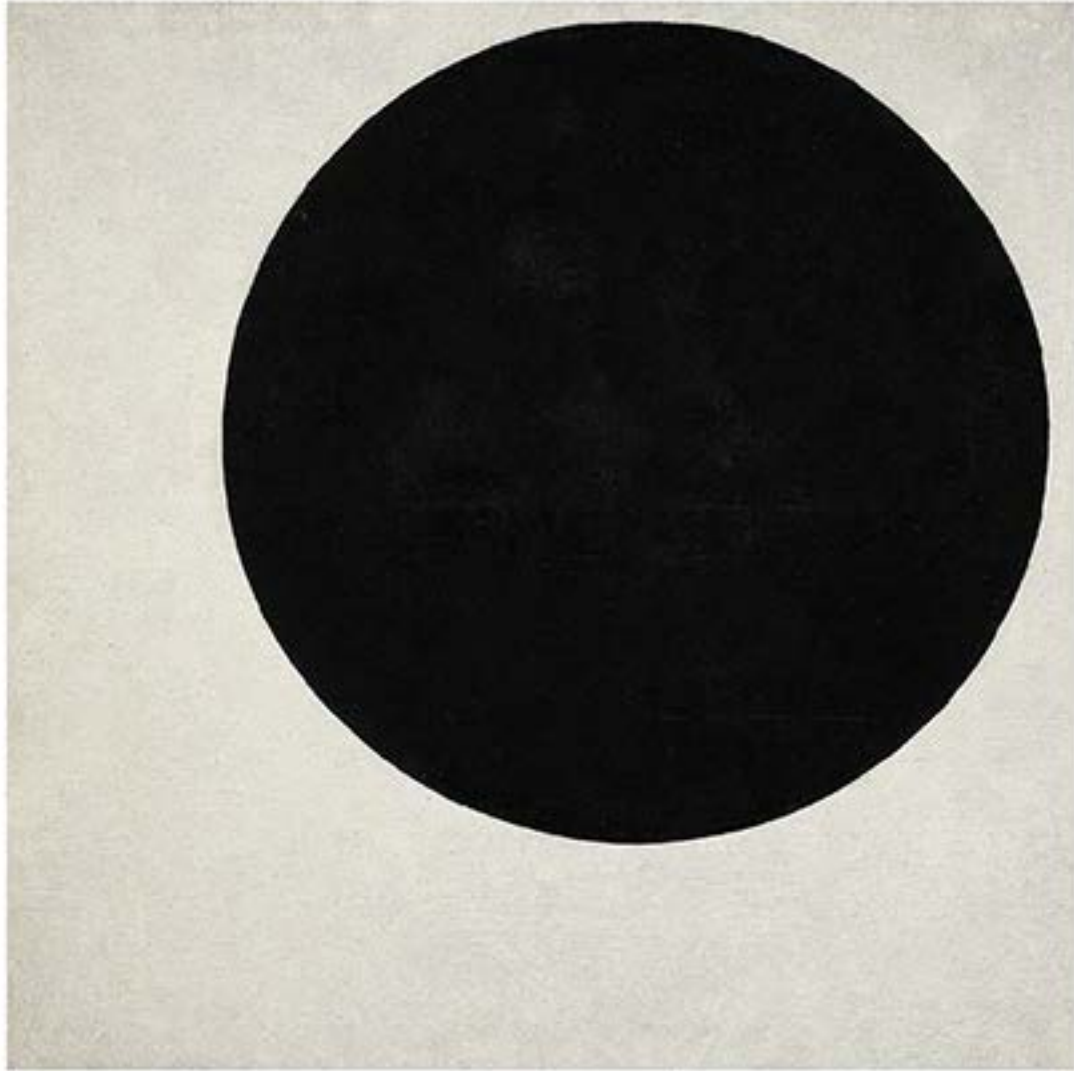
Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square* (1915 [to 1920s])

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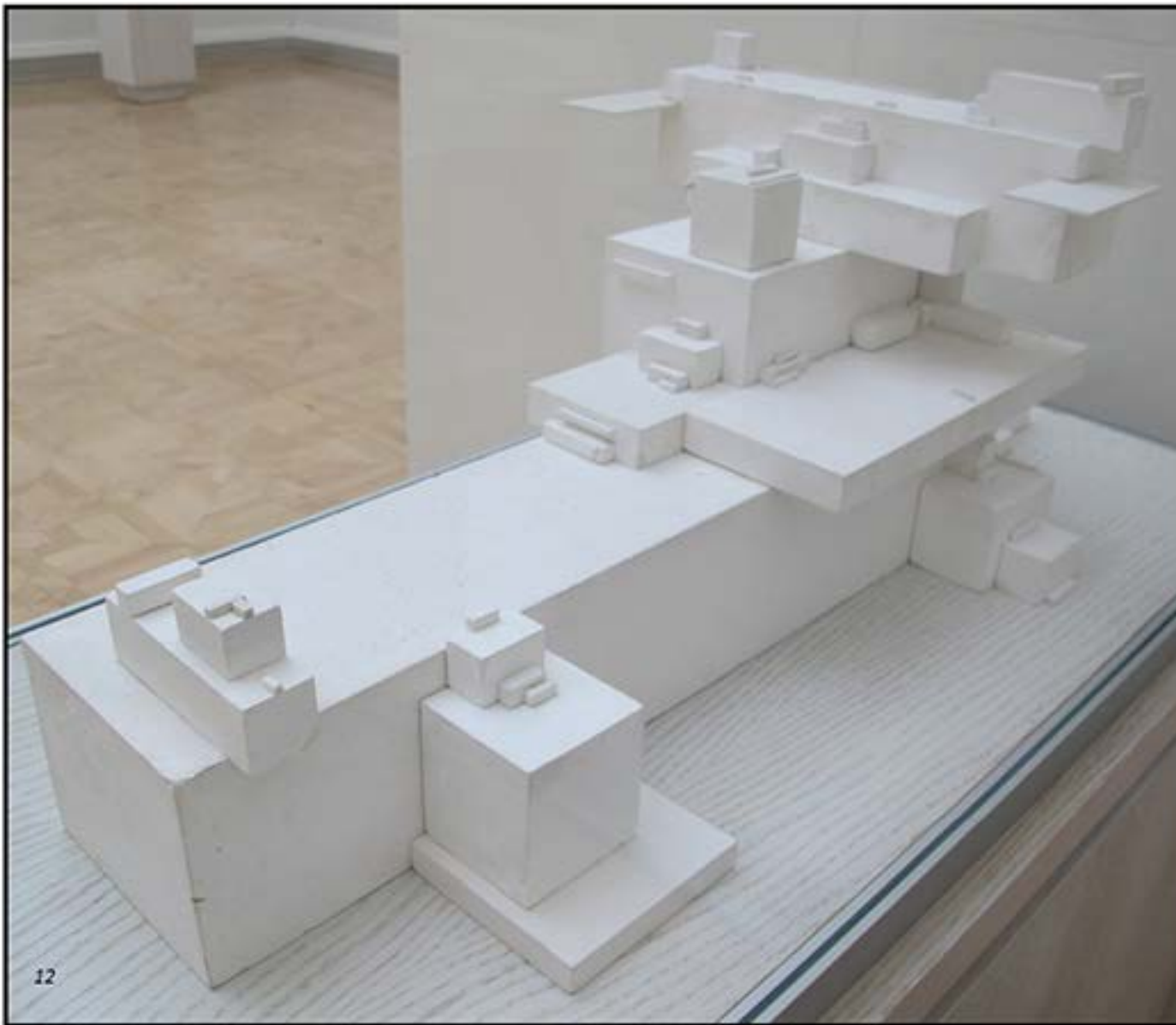
- The movement was concerned with exploring the absolute minimum, the basis of art itself.



Kazimir Malevich, *White on White* (1918)

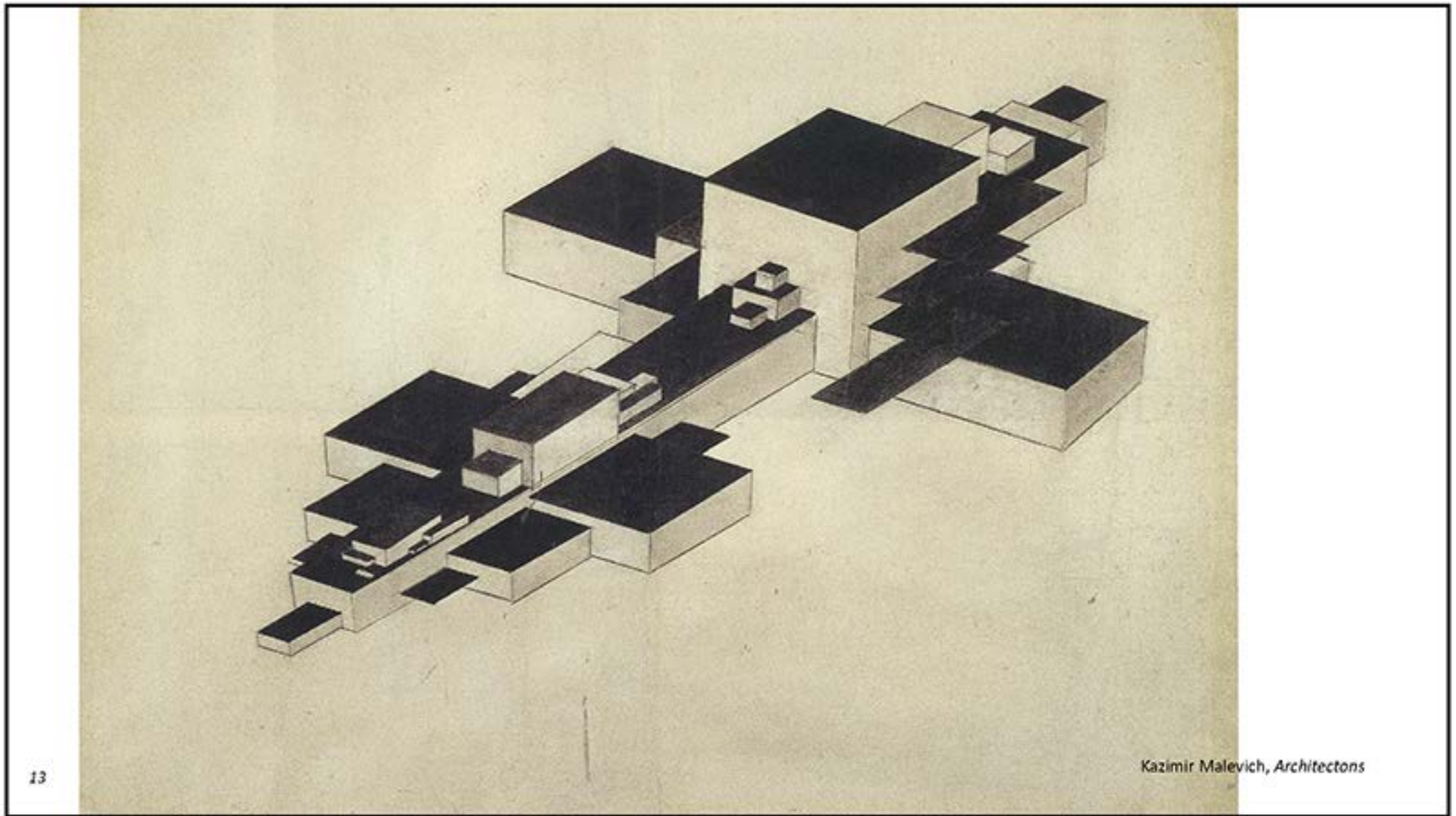


Kazimir Malevich, *Black Circle* (1924)

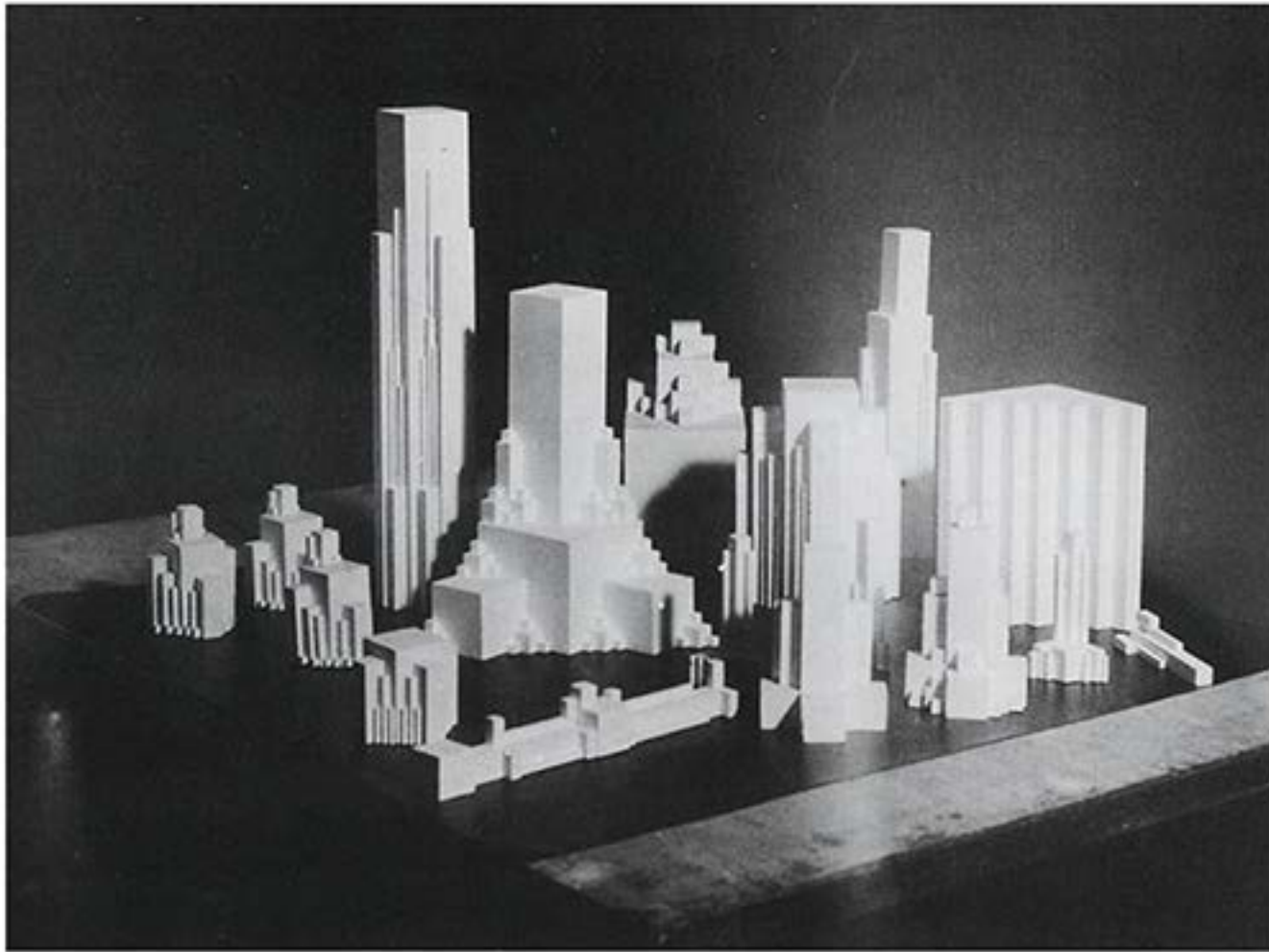


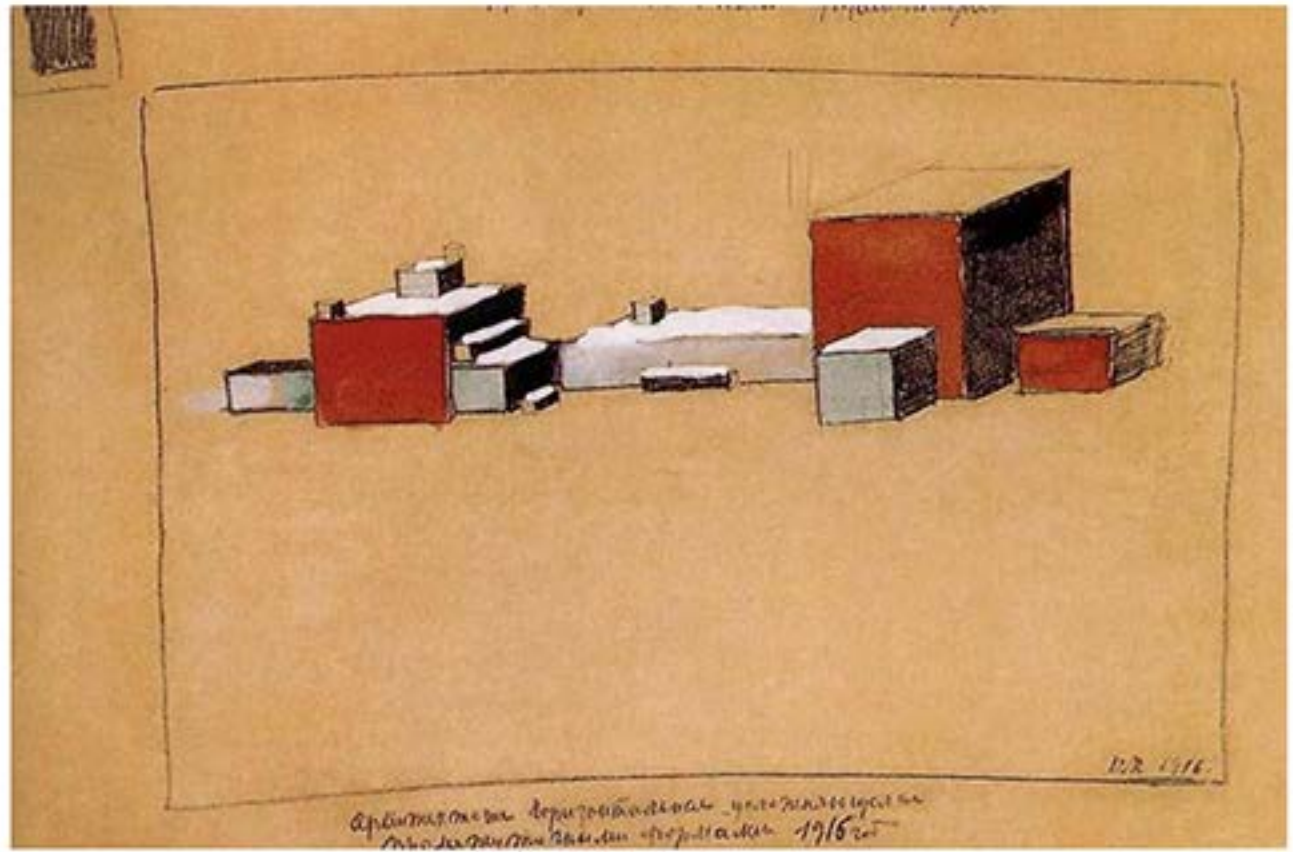
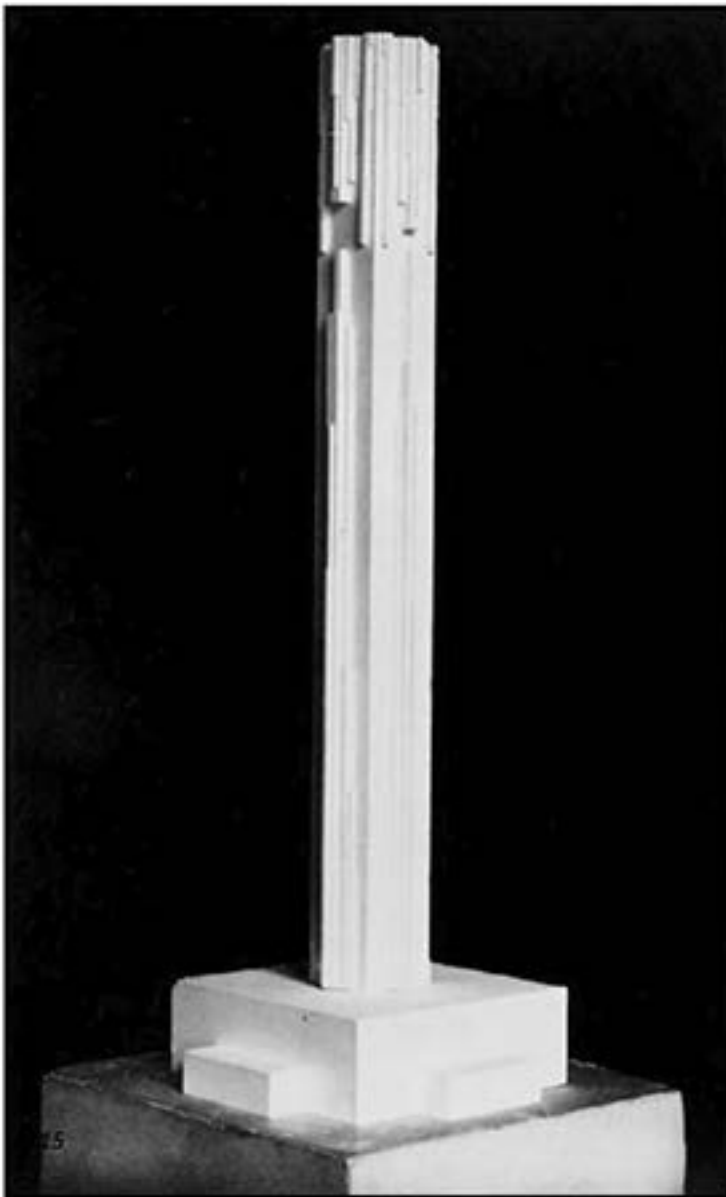
Kazimir Malevich, *Architectons*

- It's better to think of these pieces not so as architecture, but absolute minimum of a tectonic form

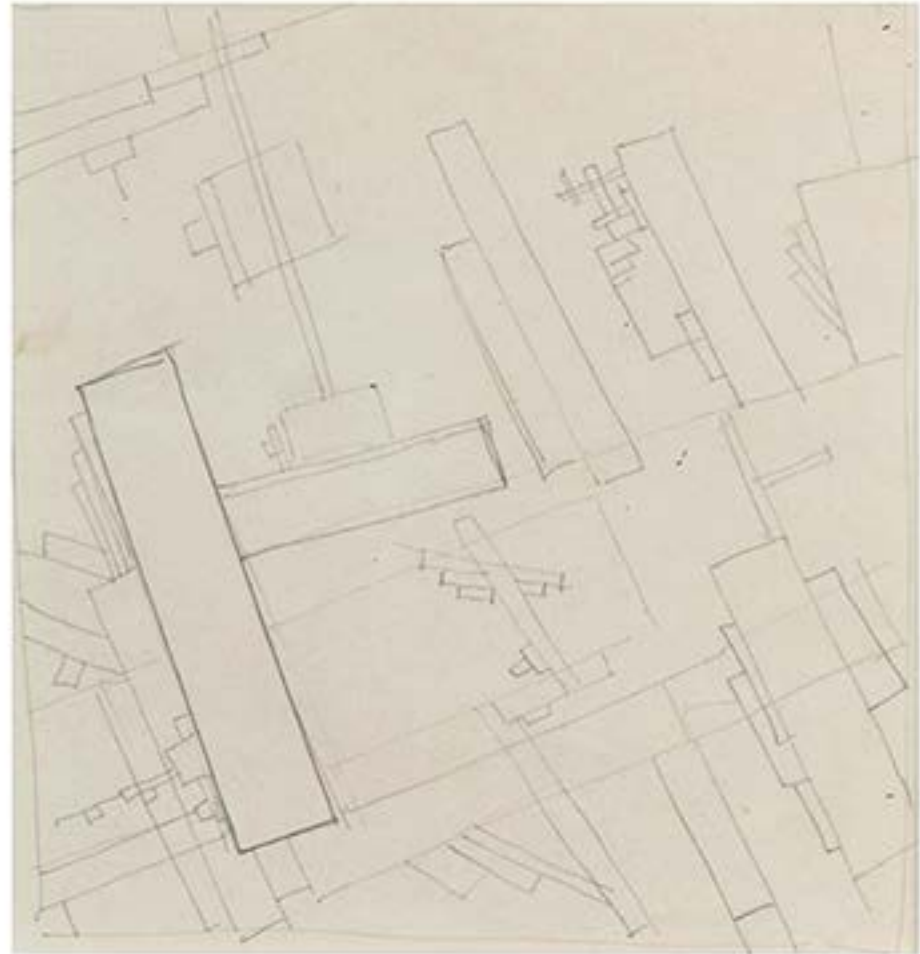
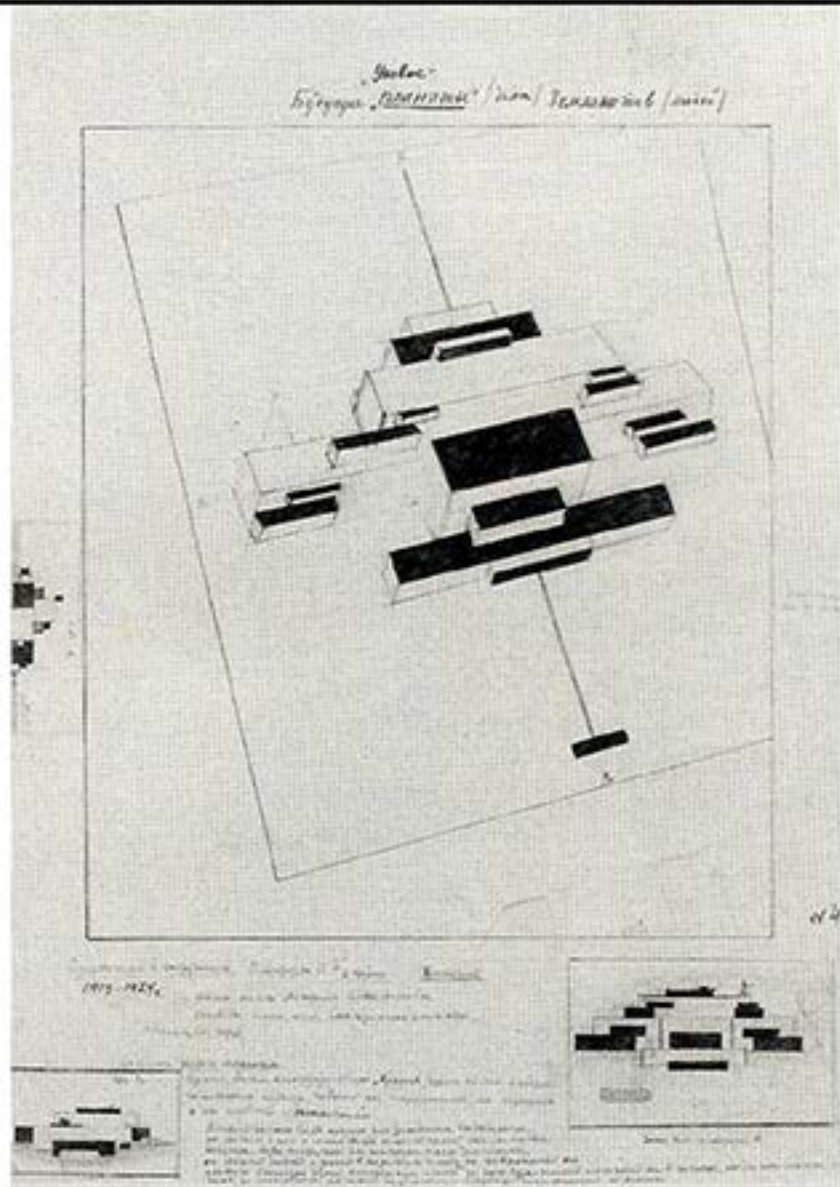


- no indication of material, and no indication of scale.

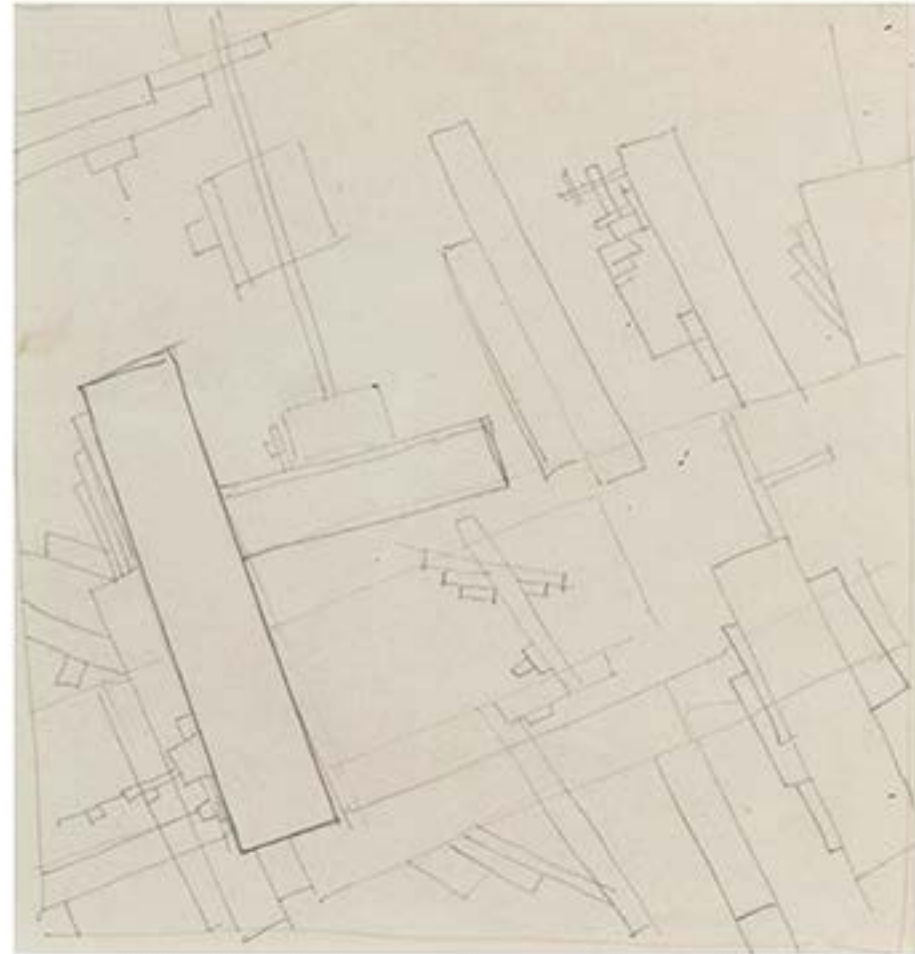




Kazimir Malevich, *Architectons*



Kazimir Malevich, Architects



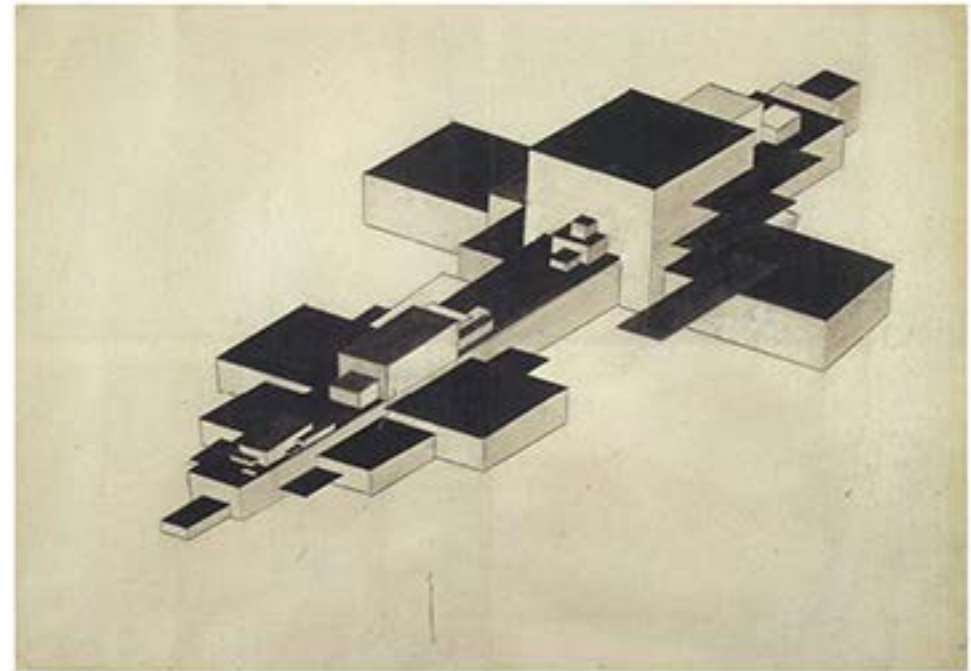
Left: Piet Mondrian, *Tableau No. IV* (1925)
Right: Kazimir Malevich, *Architectons*

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- Comparison to show how Modernism stretched across Europe, carrying with it a recognizable style



VS



Constructivism vs Suprematism

- Contrary to Suprematism, Constructivism celebrated material potential



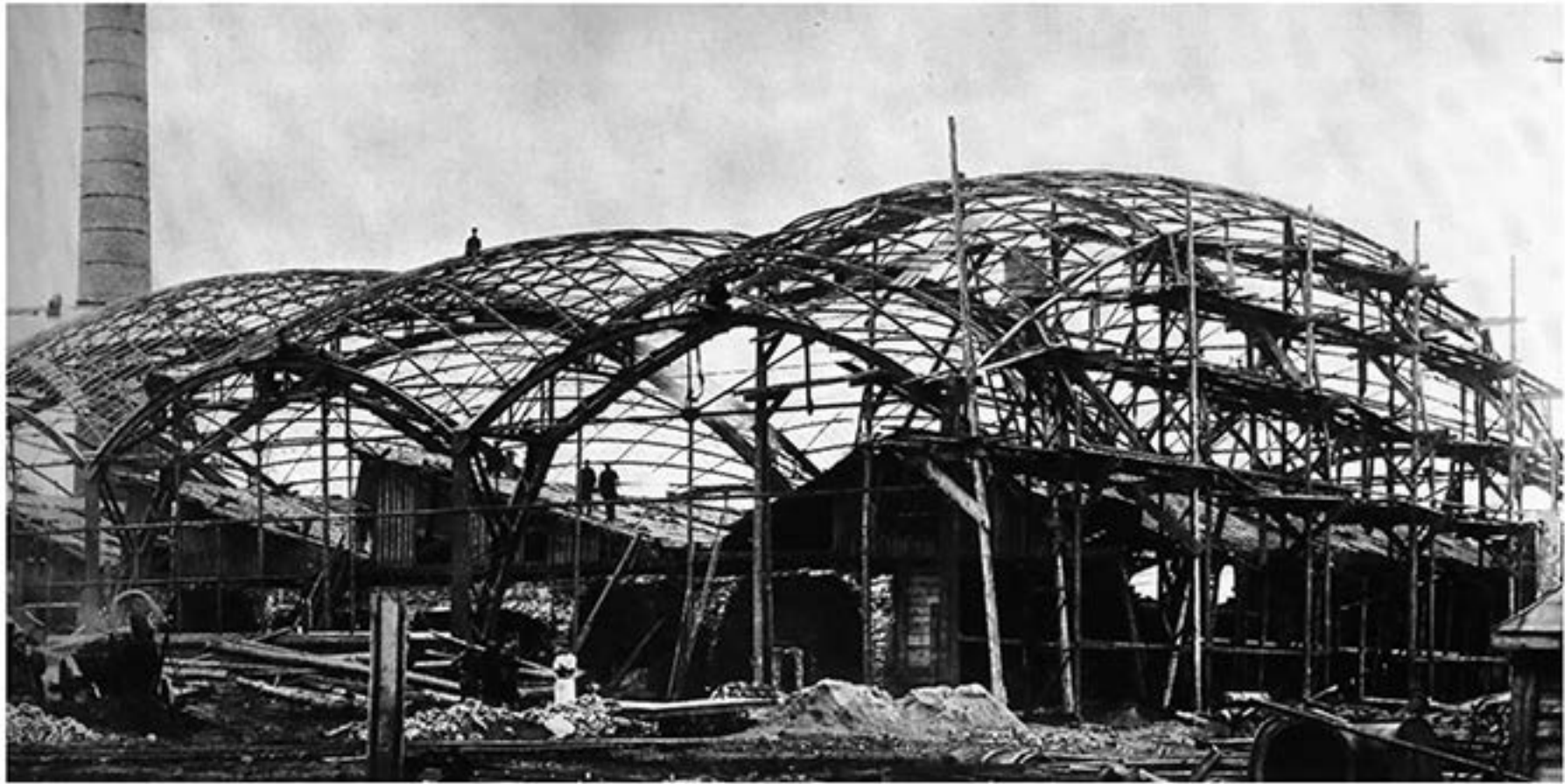
Vladimir Shukhov
Russia, 1853 - 1939

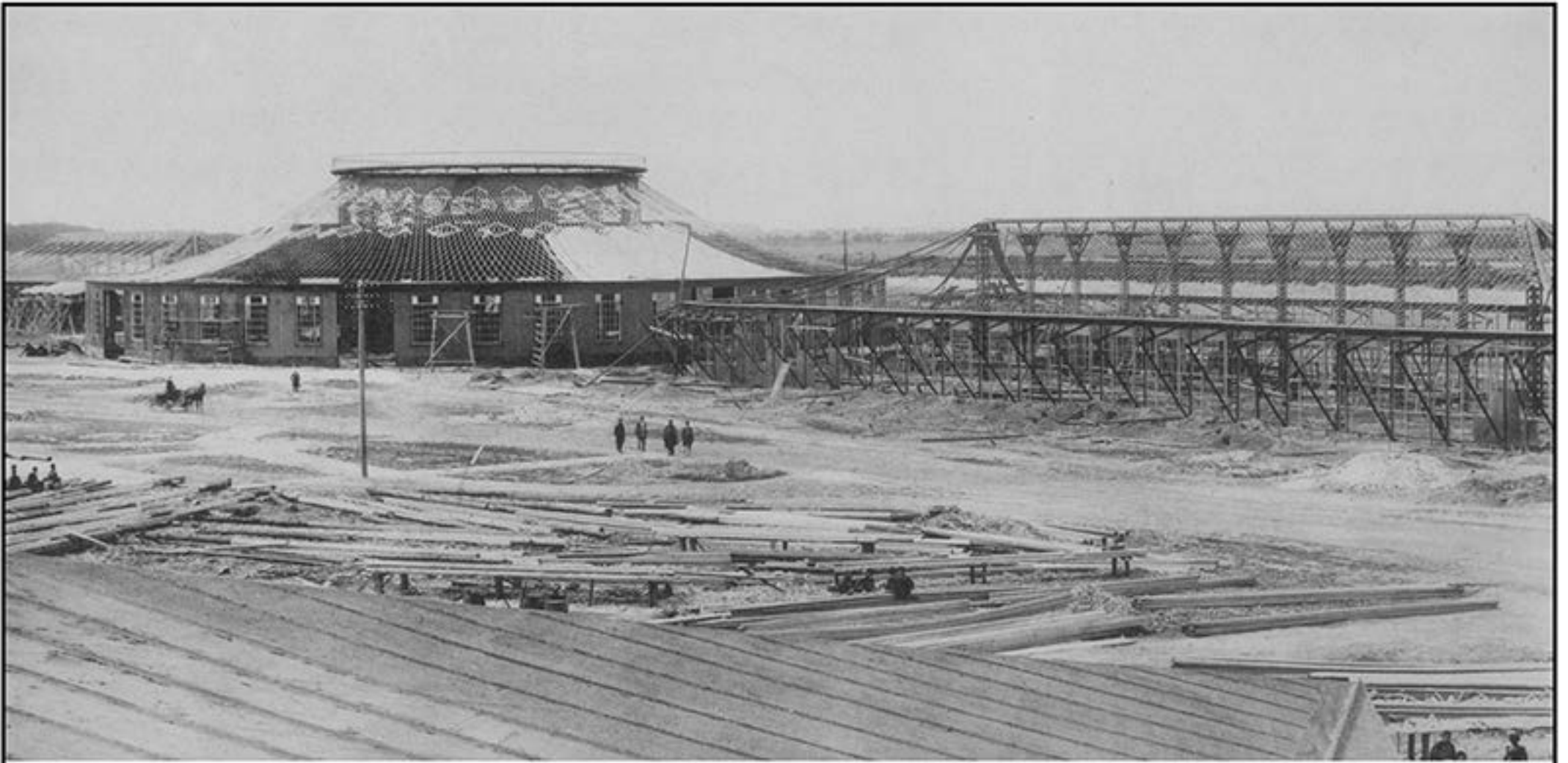
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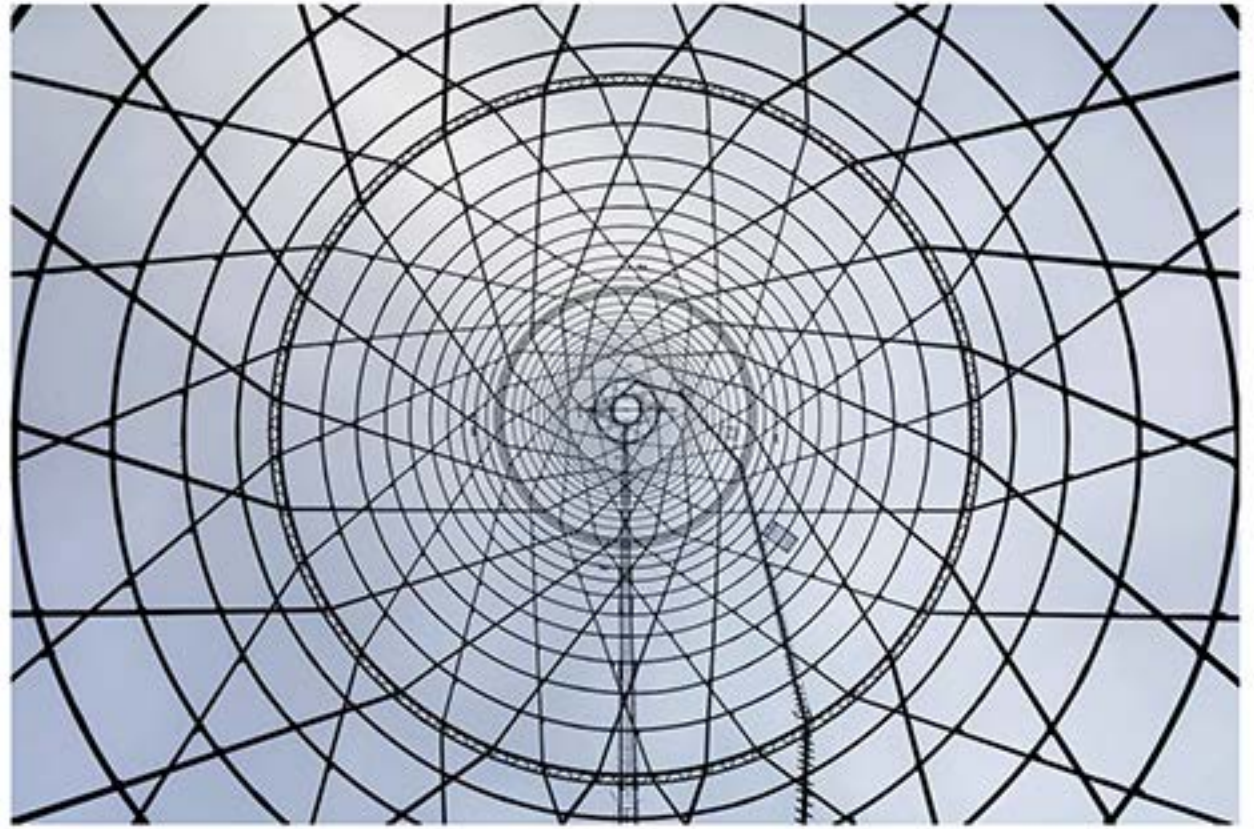
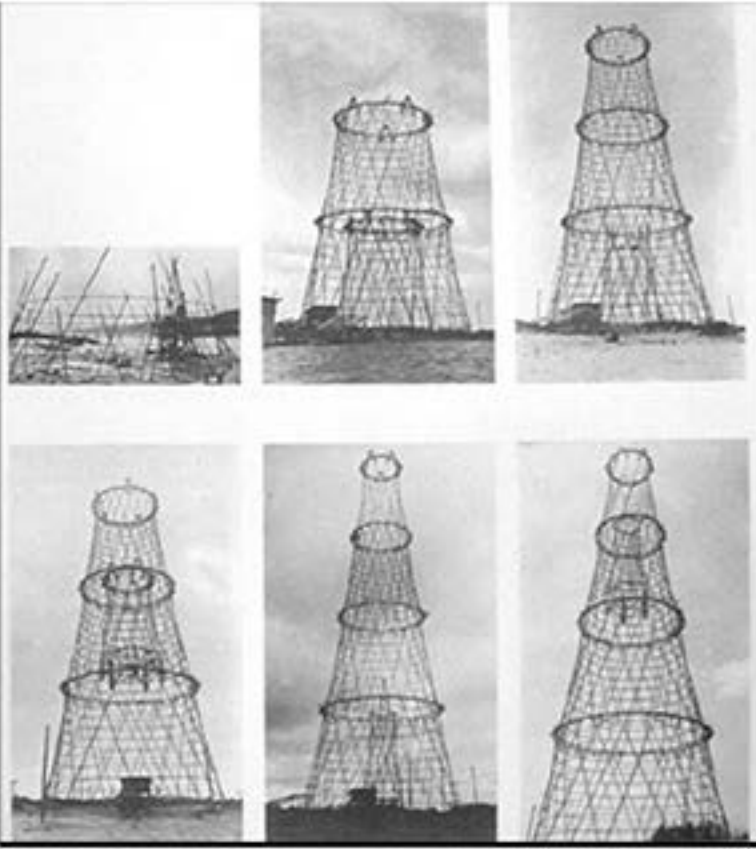
- Much of Shukhov's work predated the height of Constructivism (late 1900's to mid 1910's)
- However, at times he is included because he helped to build structures that inspired later Constructivists
 - Structures with a strong industrial-tectonic grammar.



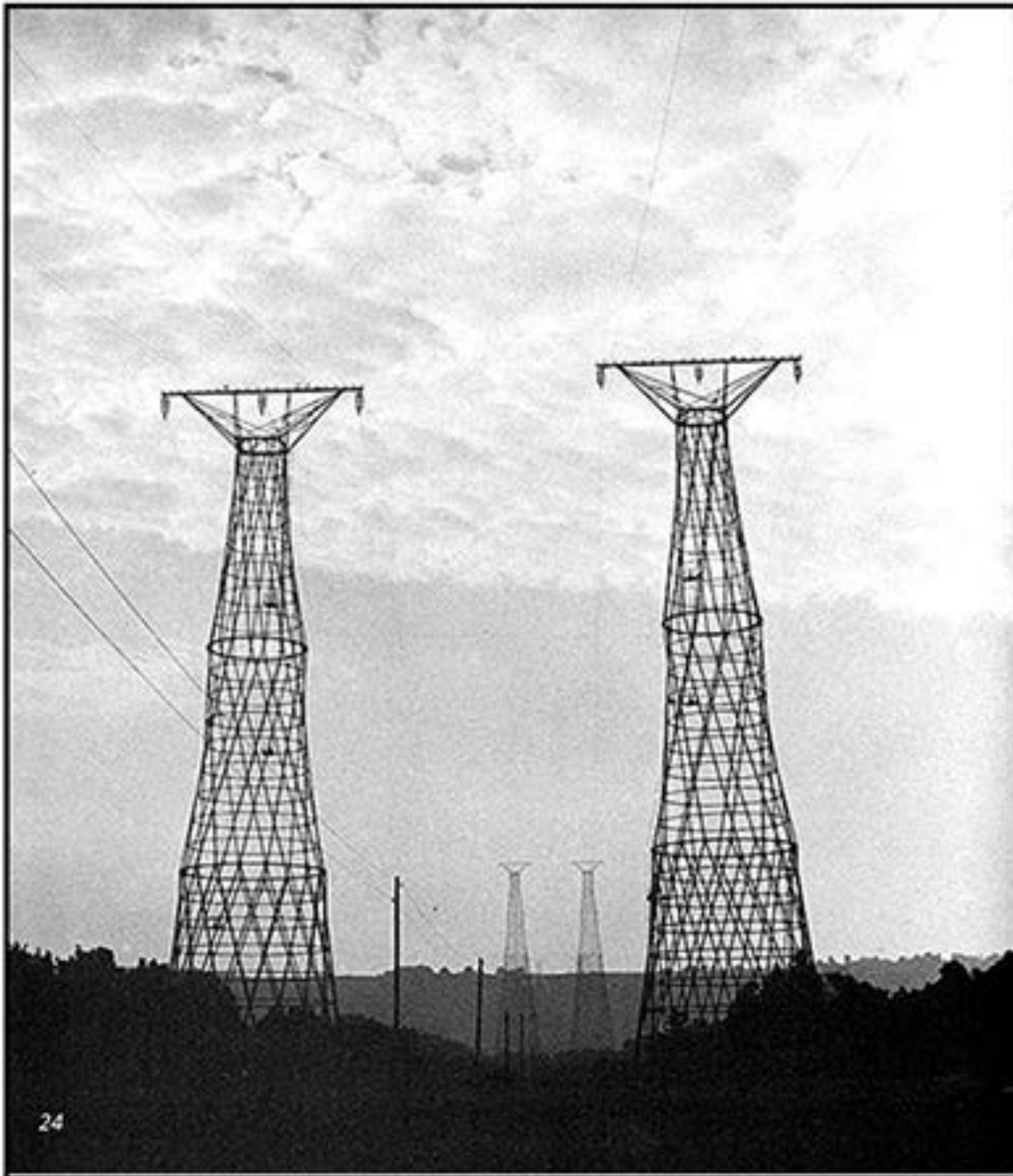
Vladimir Shukhov, Water tower, Polibino, Russia (1896)







Vladimir Shukhov, *Shukhov Tower on the Oka River, Russia (1927-29)*



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Vladimir Shukhov, *Shukhov Tower on the Oka River, Russia* (1927-29)



El Lissitzky
Russia, 1890 - 1941

- Within the movement was El Lisstzky.
- Trained in architecture, today known for his art, with a strong influence on graphic design.

PROUN (ПРОУН)

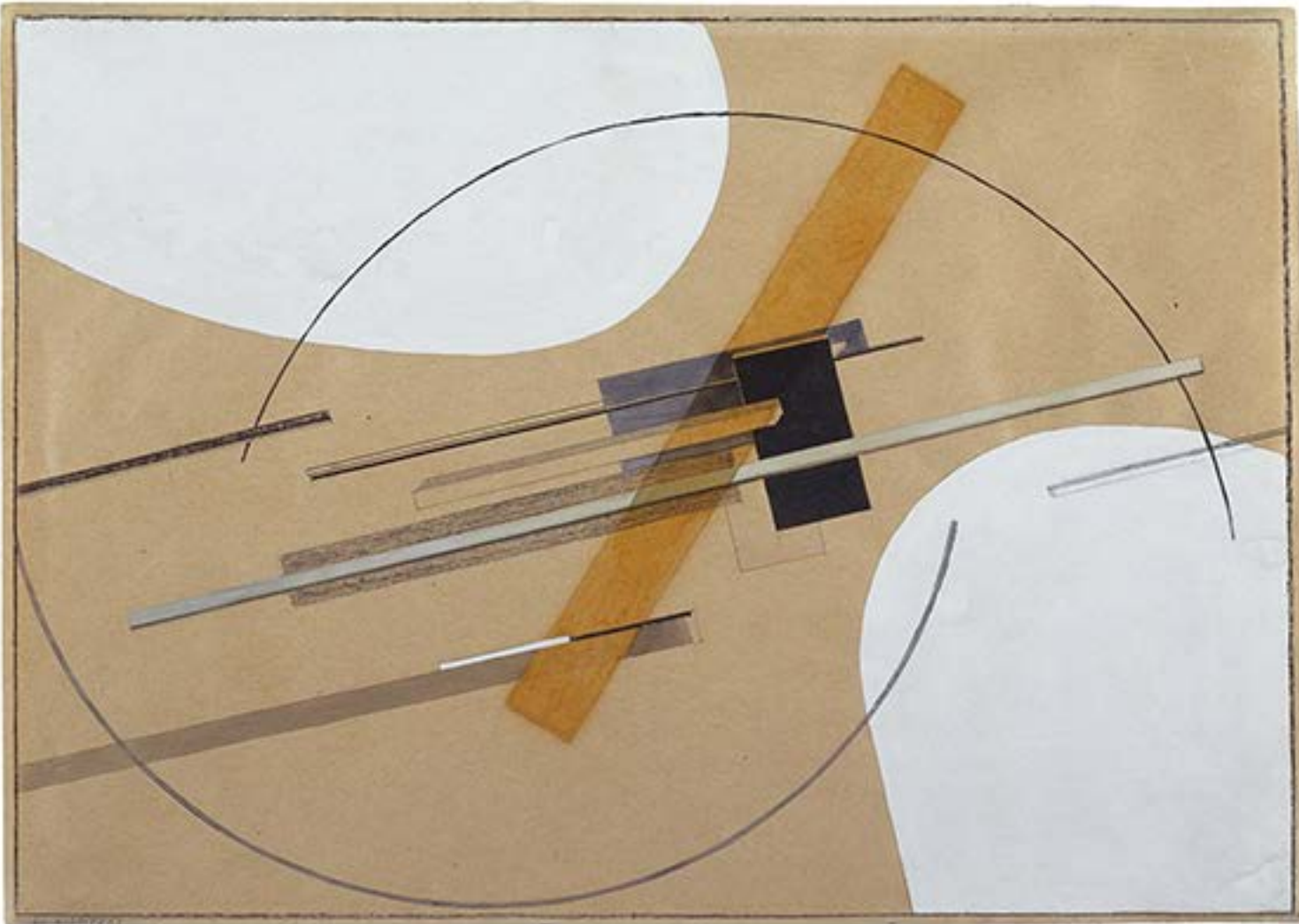
Ornamental openwork of delicate or intricate design

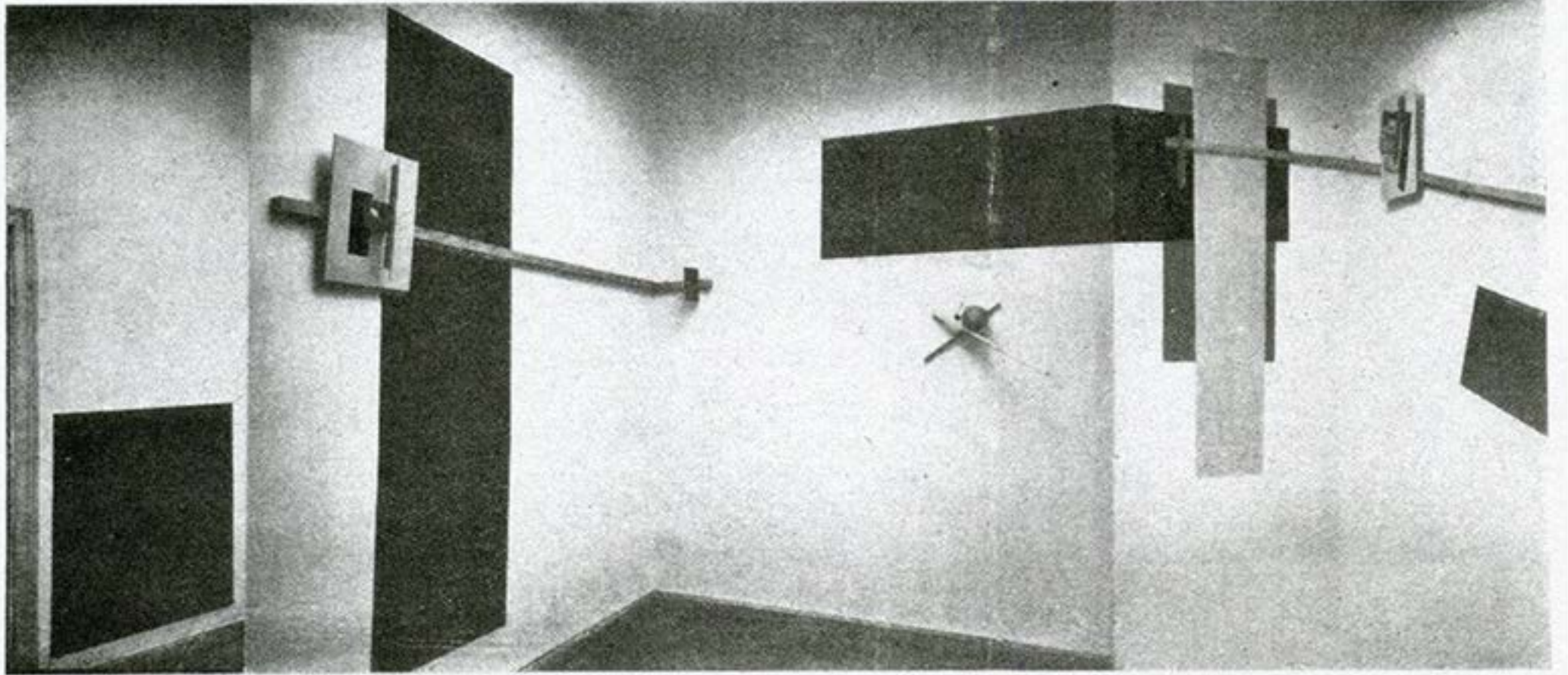


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- Between 1919 and 1927, El Lissitzky produced a range of work that he called Proun (pronounced)
- PROUN stood for 'Project for the Affirmation of the New'
 - In Russian, ПРОЕКТ Утверждения Нового (ПРОУН)



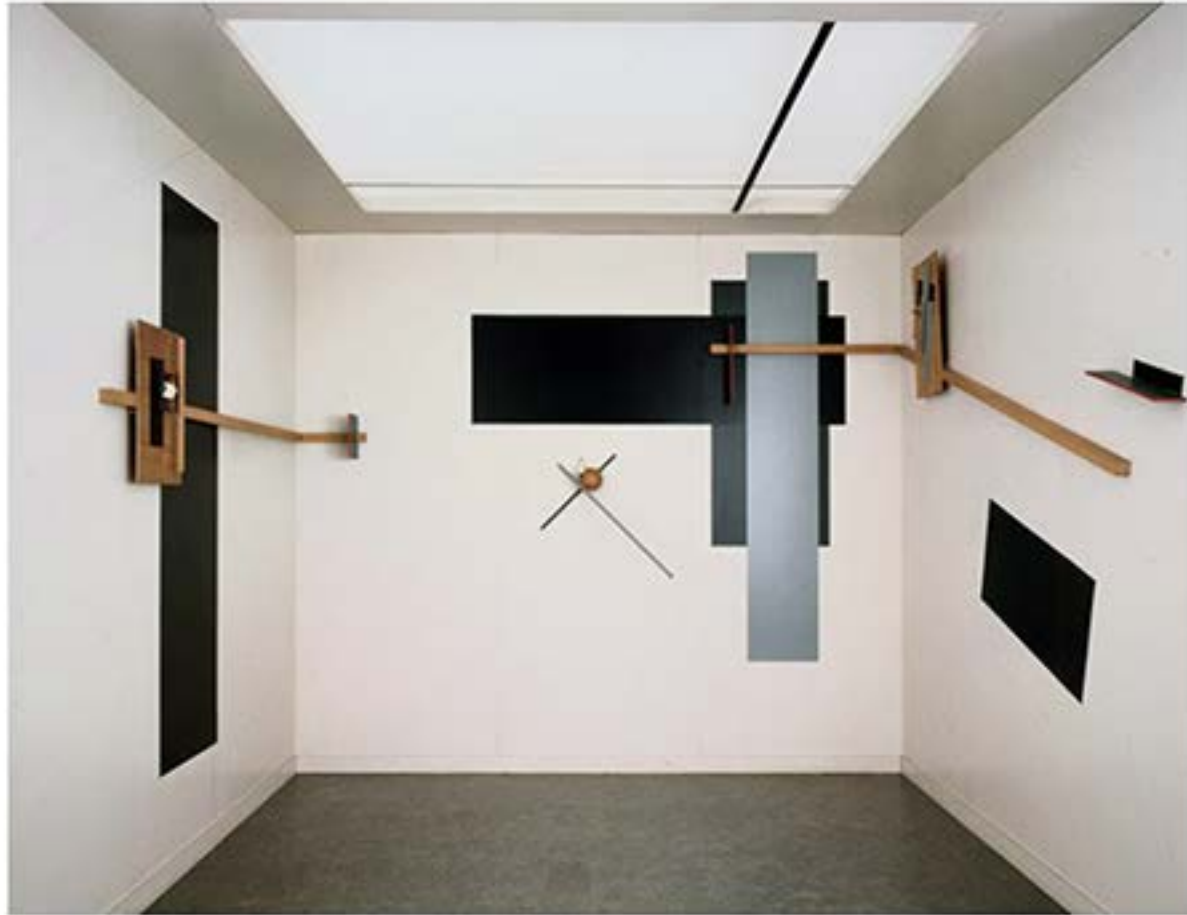




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El Lissitzky, *Proun Room* (1923)

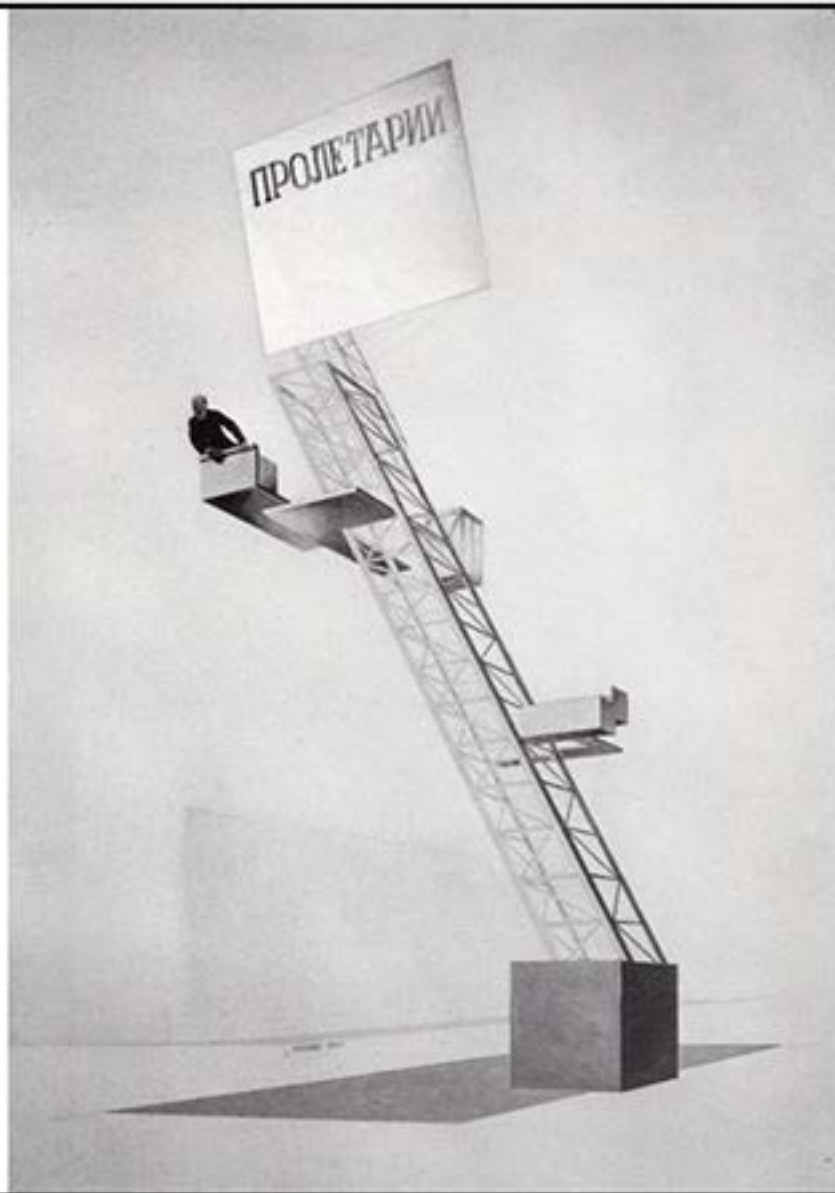
- Oftentimes were sculptural and occupied interior spaces.



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El Lissitzky, *Reconstruction of Proun Room* (original 1923, reconstruction 1971)

- His PROUNs are an excellent example of a trend in architecture known as 'Paper Architecture'



El Lissitzky, *Lenin Tribune* (1930)

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- One of El Lissitzky's most well-known pieces is the *Lenin Tribune*.
- The artist was deeply committed to the ideals of the Communist party.



El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919)

- One of his most famous paintings, and one of the most recognized images in Constructivism.
- The 'red wedge' symbolizes the Bolsheviks (a far-left Marxist group founded by Lenin), while the 'white' circle symbolizes the White Movement, anti-communist forces that fought the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War (1917 – 22).





Lyubov Popova
Russia, 1889 - 1924



Left: Popova, *The Traveler* (1915)
Right: Popova, *Painterly Architectonic* (1918)

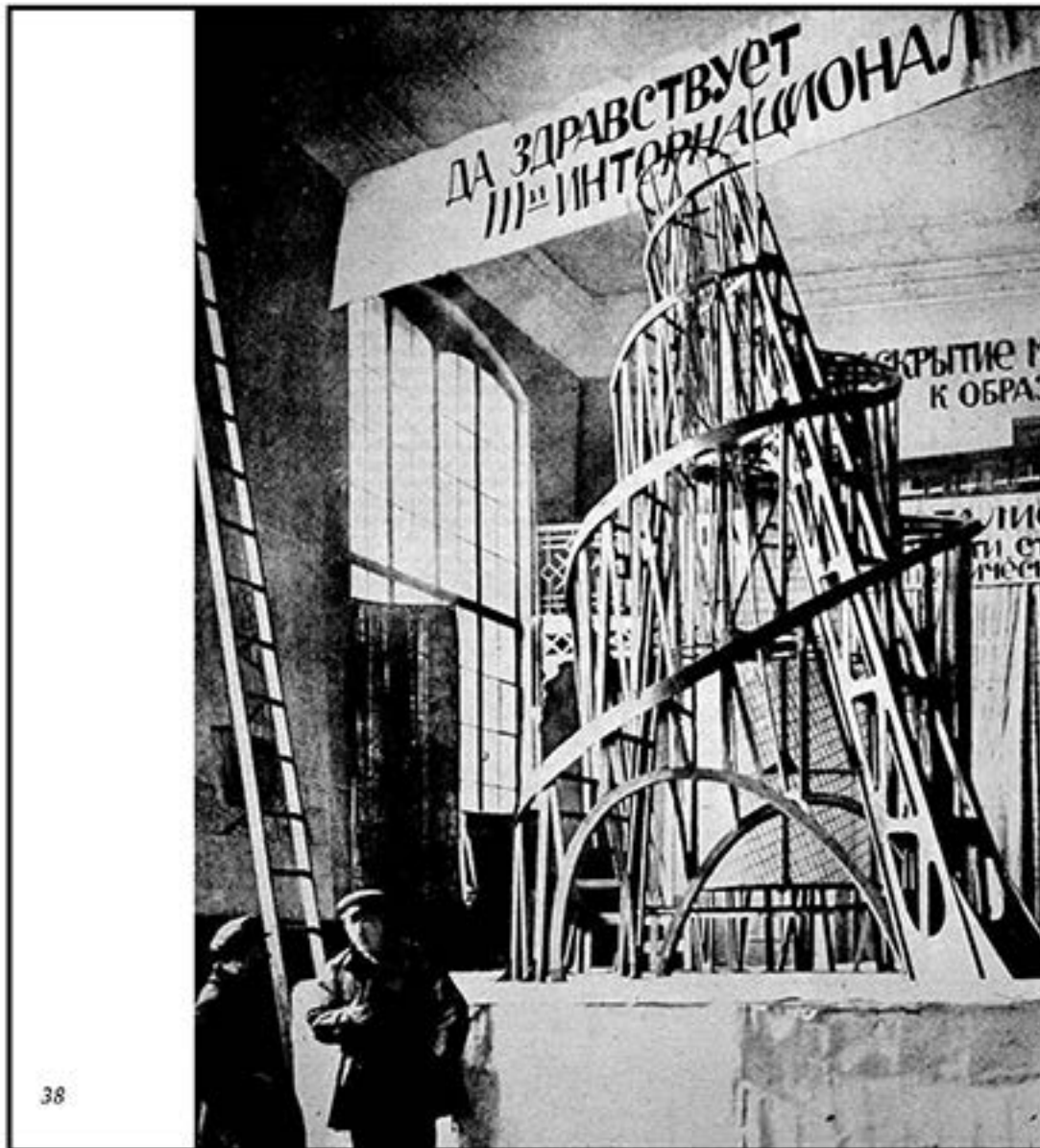
- Like many Constructivists, Popova practiced her work through a range of media, from painting, to fashion and set design.
- Clear resonance with other Modernist styles occurring throughout Europe at the time.



- The most well-known of Popova's set designs were for Vsevolod Meyerhold's "The Magnanimous Cuckold" (as shown on right)

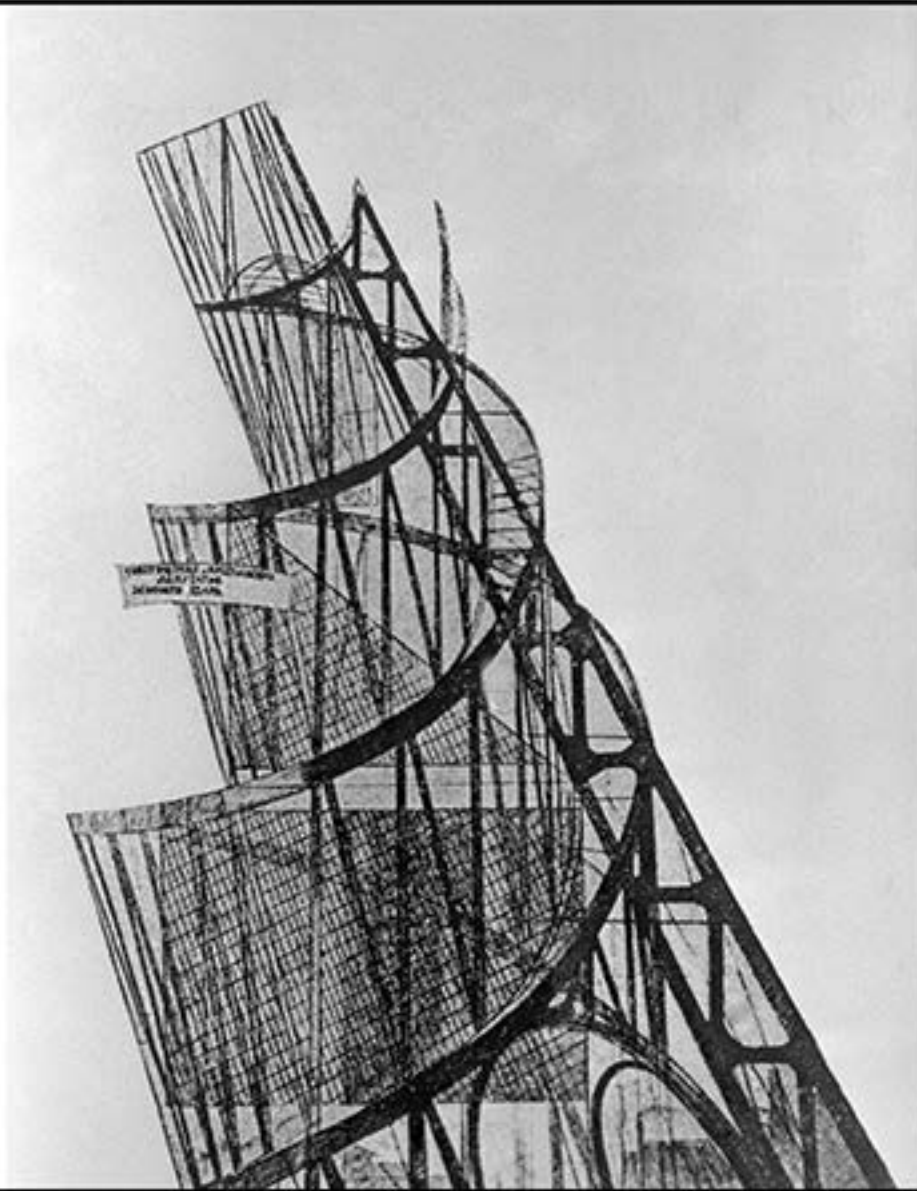


Vladimir Tatlin
Ukraine/Russia, 1885 - 1953



Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International* (1919)

- Also known as *Tatlin's Tower*
- Arguably the single most important architectural work within the Constructivist movement
- Unrealized project, intended to be built from iron, glass, and steel
- Should be thought of as Russia's answer to the Eiffel Tower



Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International* (1919)

- Basic form consists of a double corkscrew helix
- Within the double helix are four volumes, in the Constructivist style as basic geometries, and each volume rotating on vertical axis



Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International* (1919)



Alexander Rodchenko
Russia, 1891 - 1956



- Printing was a key medium for Constructivism (machine technology)



Alexander Rodchenko, *Steps* (1929)

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- In addition to printing, photography was also symbolic of a marriage between machine and art



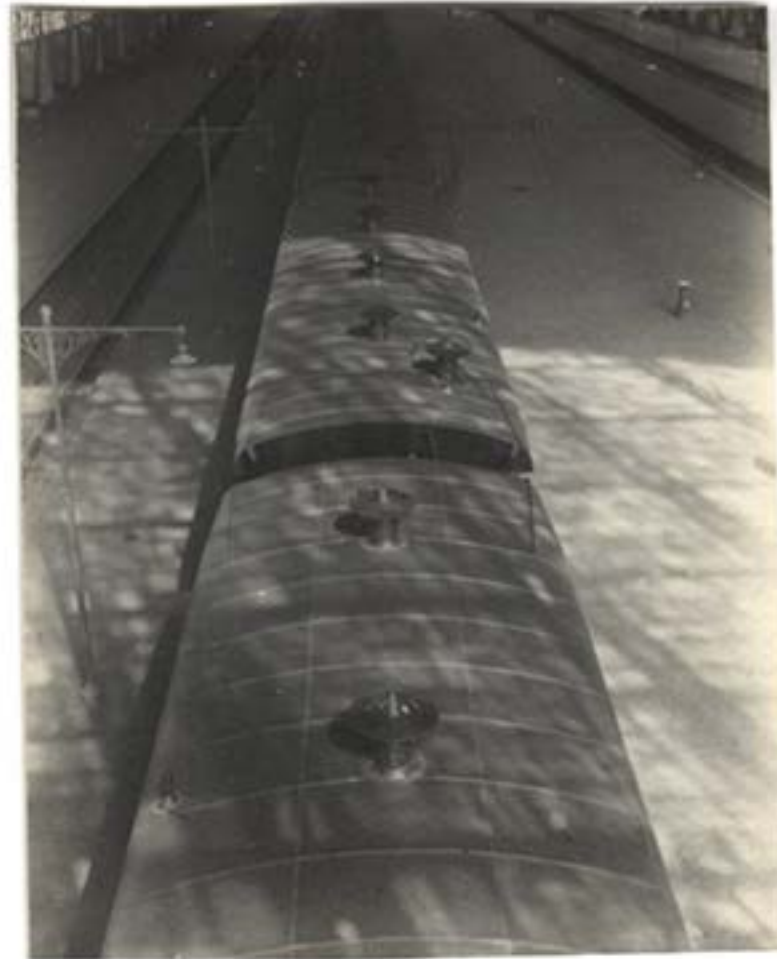
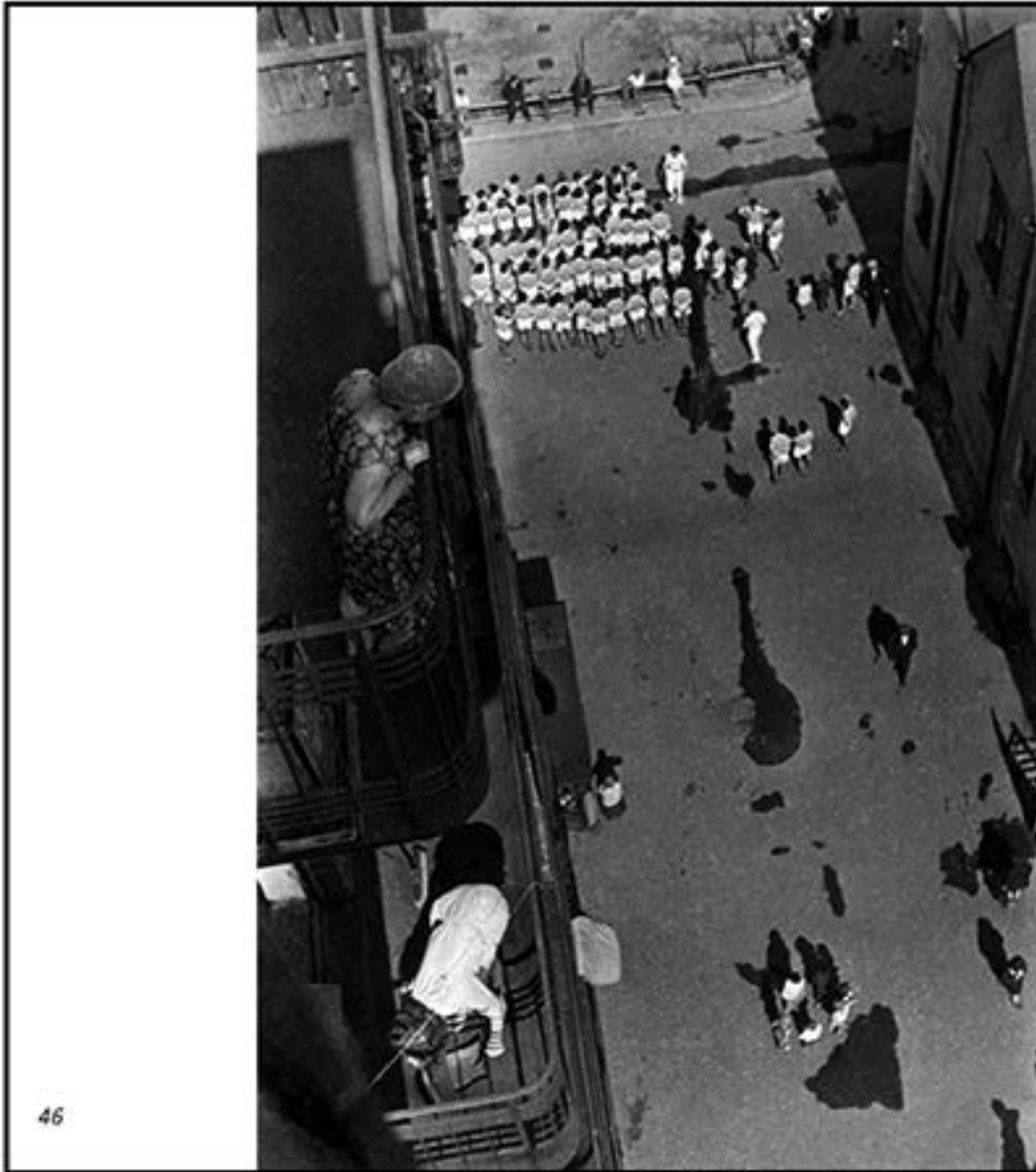
Alexander Rodchenko, *Various photographs*



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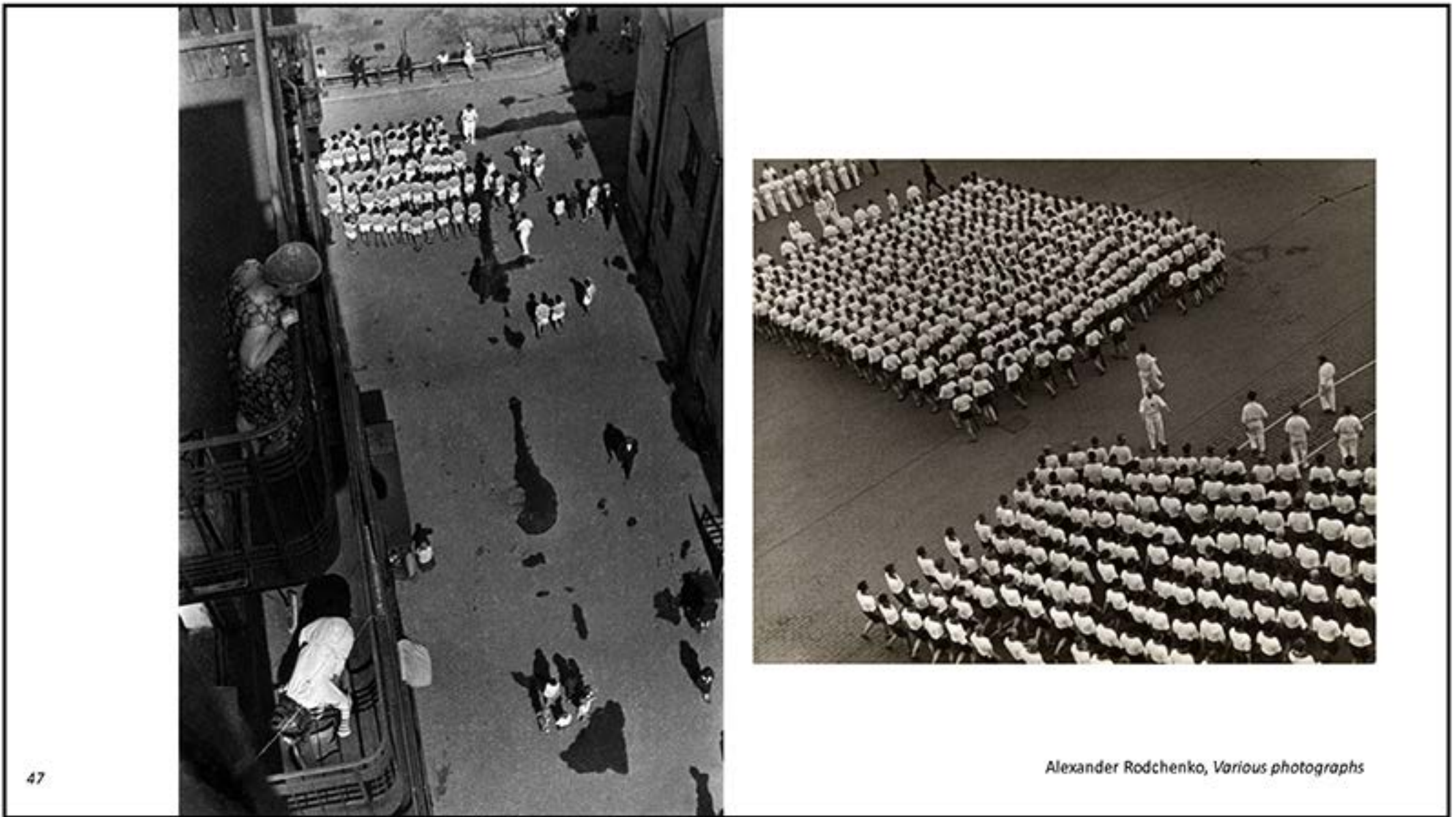


Alexander Rodchenko, *Various photographs*



Alexander Rodchenko, *Various photographs*

- Rodchenko believed that Constructivism was first and foremost about social purpose



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Alexander Rodchenko, *Various photographs*

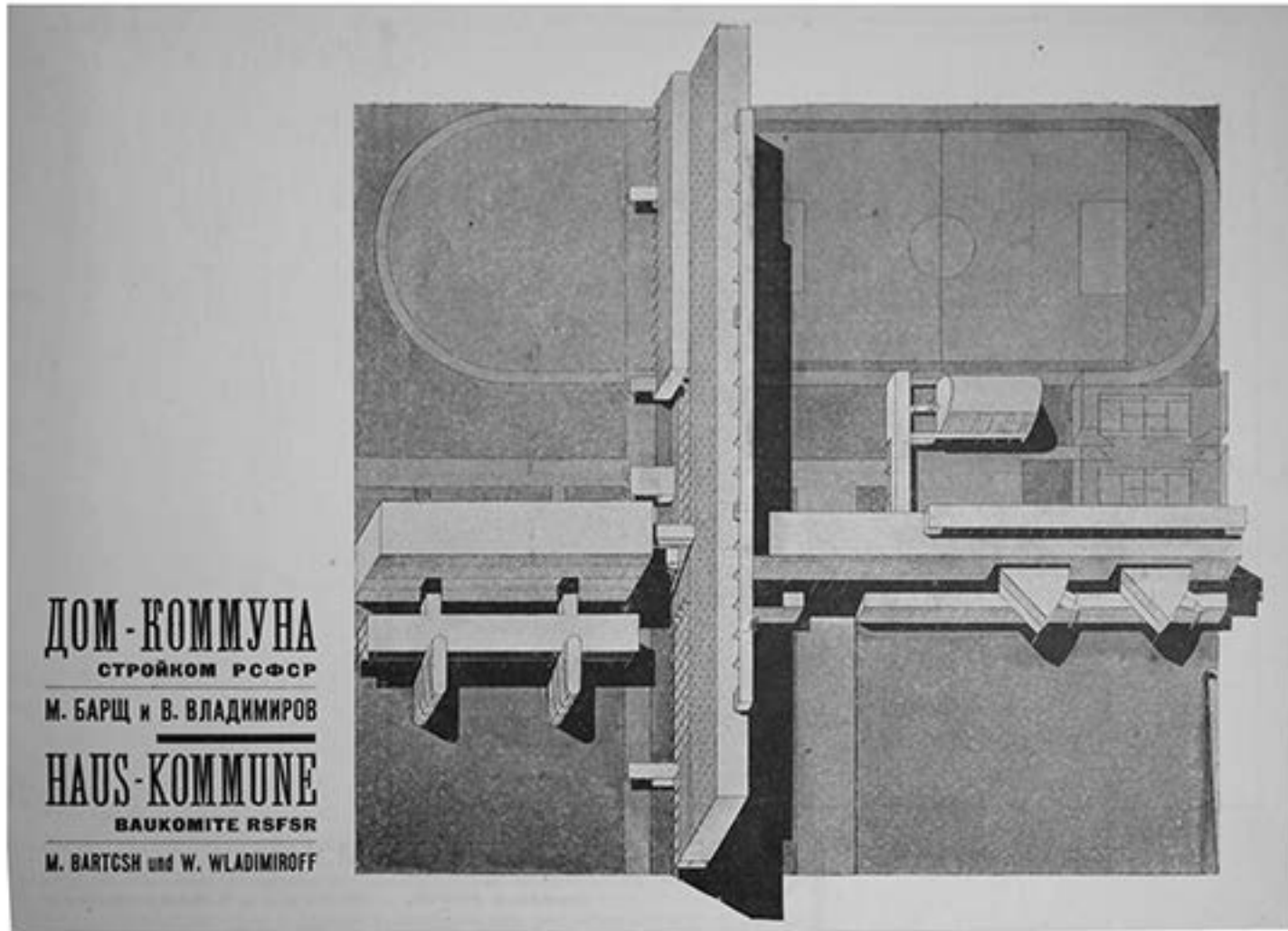
- Photography could be used to show the inherent artfulness of society



Moisei Ginzburg
Belarus/Russia, 1892 - 1946

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- An important figure in Russian Constructivism (architecture), namely for his role in merging theory with practice
 - He evolved his work and theory from Constructivism towards an emerging Modernism



Moisei Ginzburg, *Narkomfin Housing Project*, Moscow (1932)

- Most significant building project was *Narkomfin Housing Project* in Moscow (1932)



Moisei Ginzburg, *Narkomfin Housing Project*, Moscow (1932)

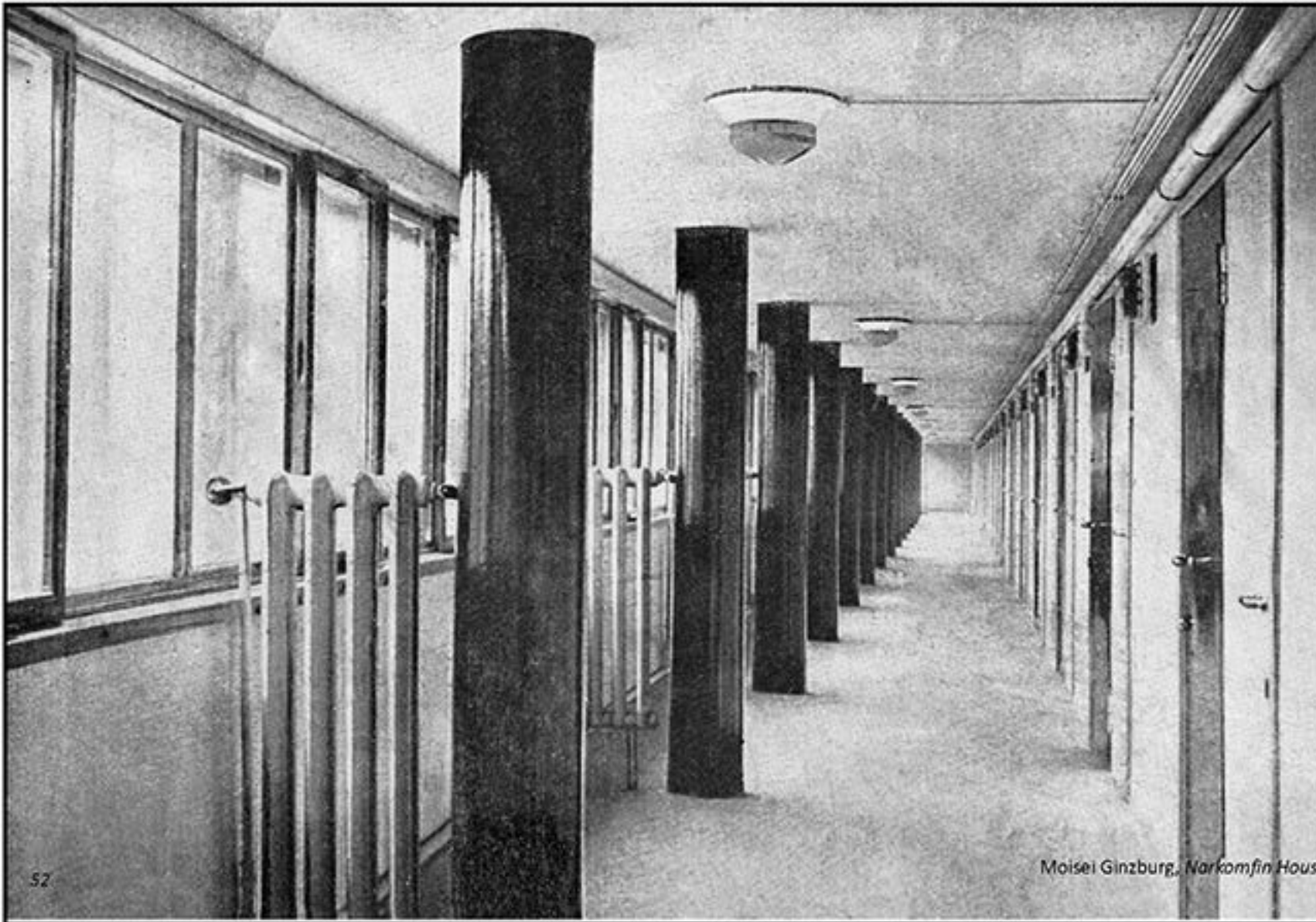
- Architecture as a means to materialize Socialist ideals.

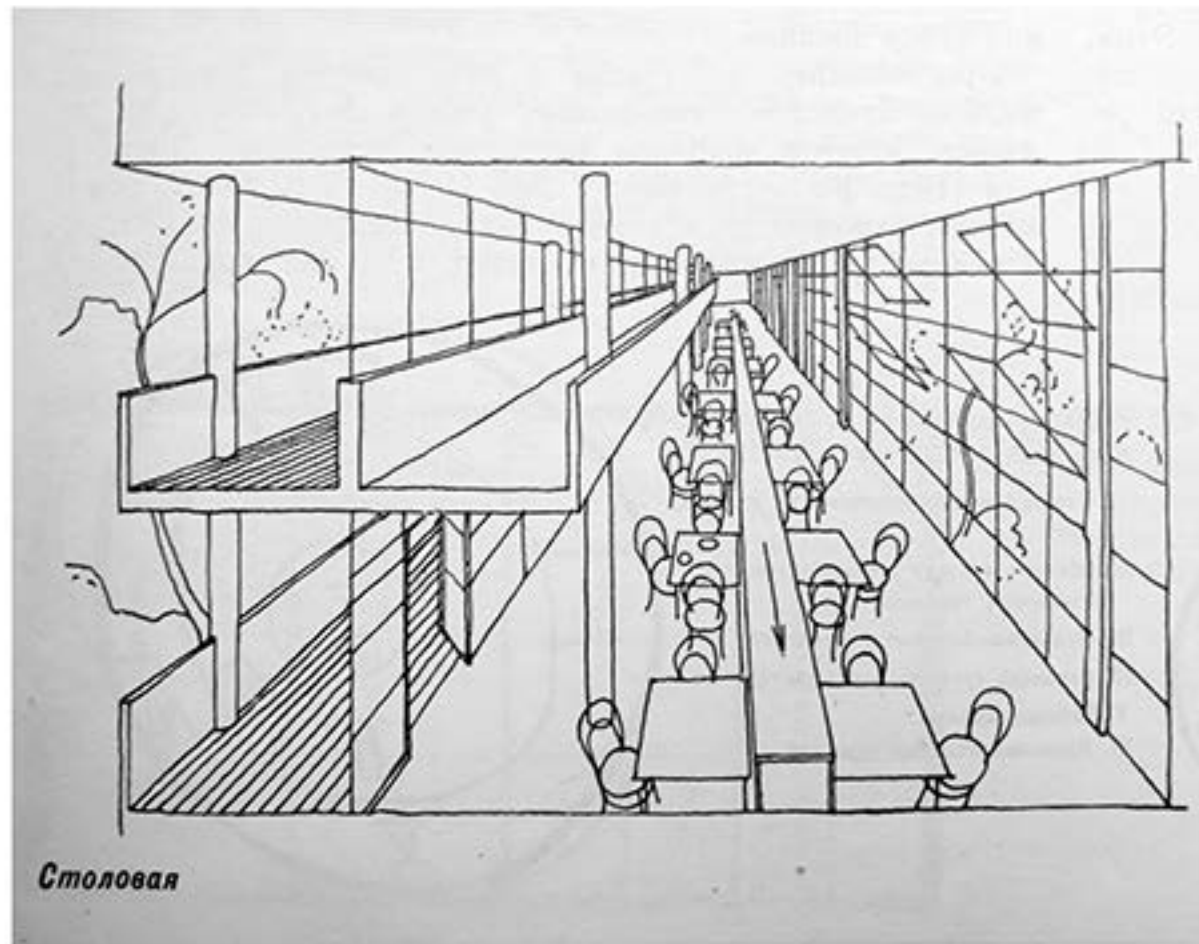


Moisei Ginzburg, *Narkomfin Housing Project*, Moscow (1932)

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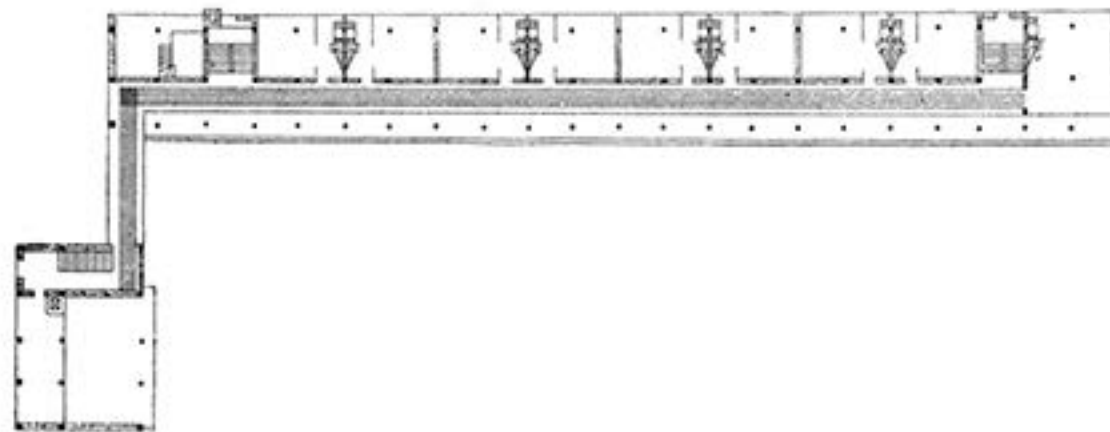
- Basic design consists of a large block on pilotis (columns), with intersecting smaller block for communal functions
- Thinking of living as you would a factory – about efficiency, production, understanding the ‘system’ of living and socializing





Moisei Ginzburg, *Narkomfin Housing Project*, Moscow (1932)

- Designed as a test for social housing

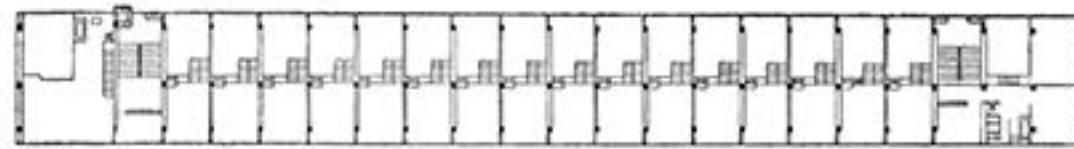


first floor

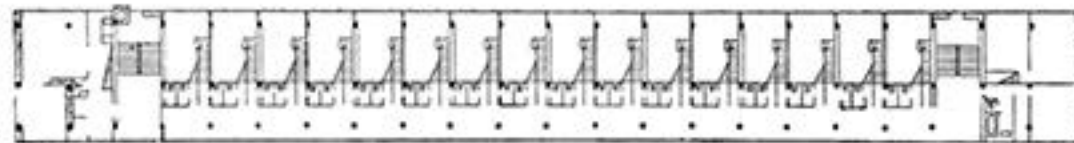


ground floor plan

Moisei Ginzburg, *Narkomfin Housing Project*, Moscow (1932)



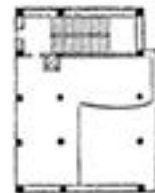
fifth floor



fourth floor



third floor



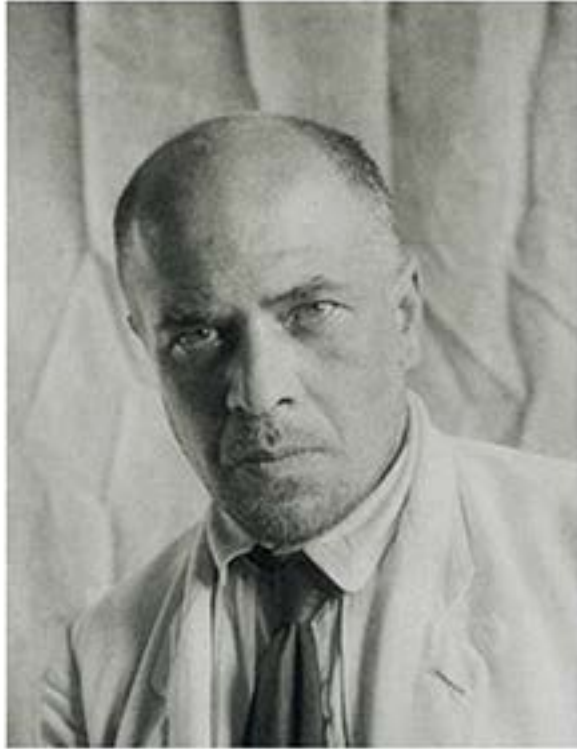
Moisei Ginzburg, *Narkomfin Housing Project*, Moscow (1932)

- The repetition was not merely aesthetic, but served two important purposes
 - Equality in living standards
 - Importance as a prototype



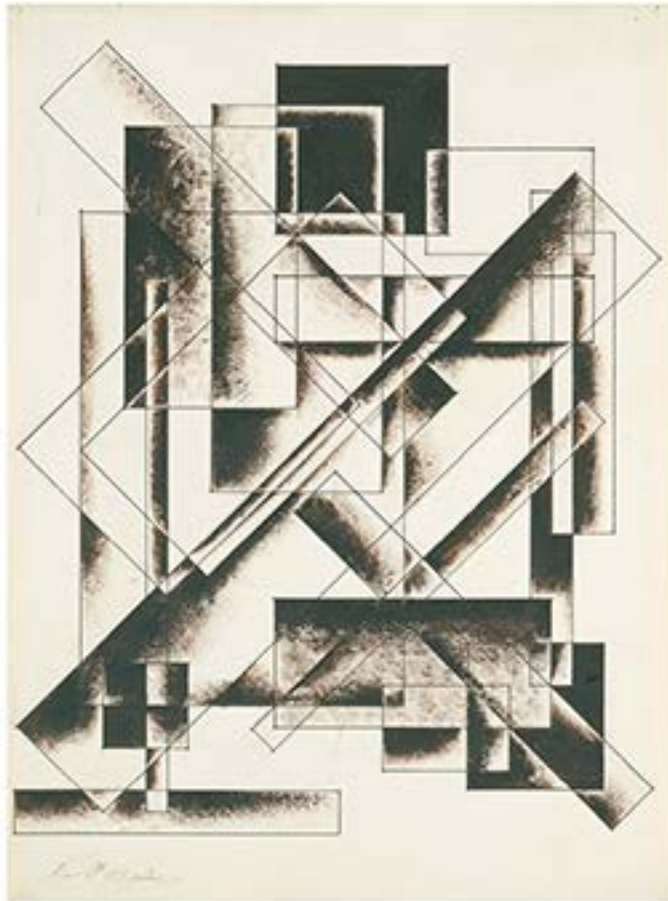
Ginzburg et al, *Contemporary Architecture Journal* (1926 – 1930)

- Besides Narkomfin, Ginzburg was also a teacher and an editor
- Along with his colleagues, published an architectural journal called 'Contemporary Architecture'



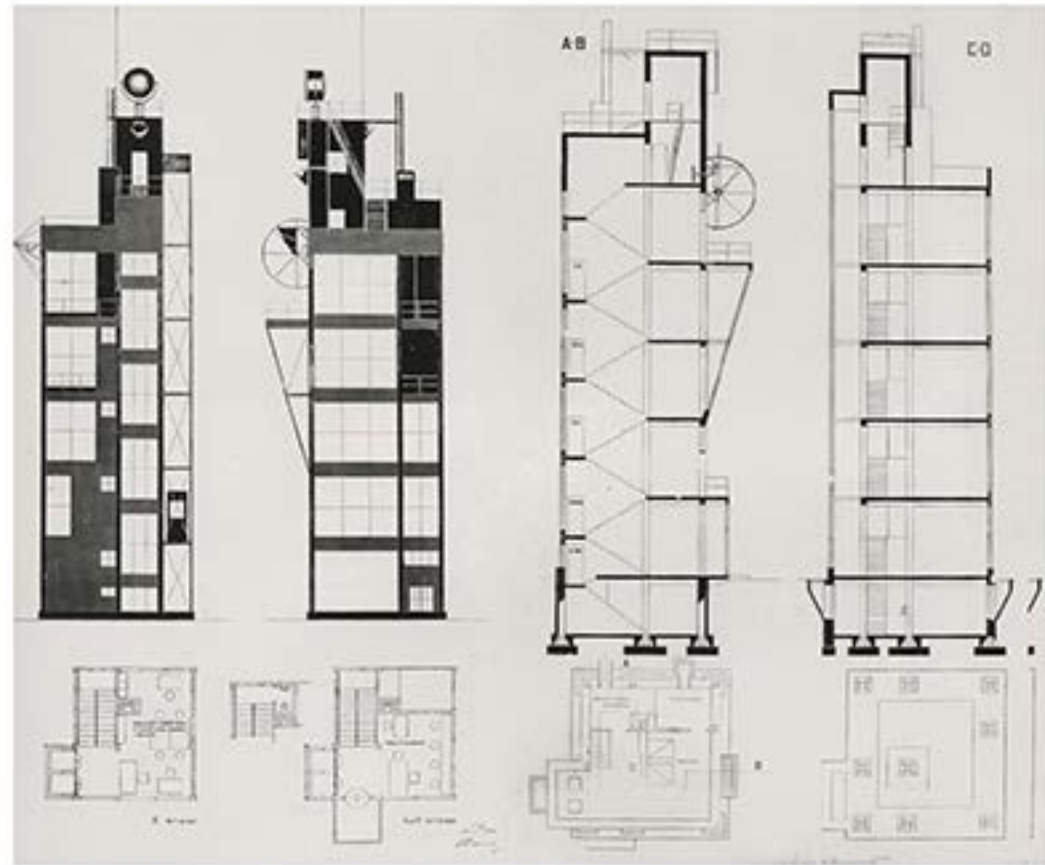
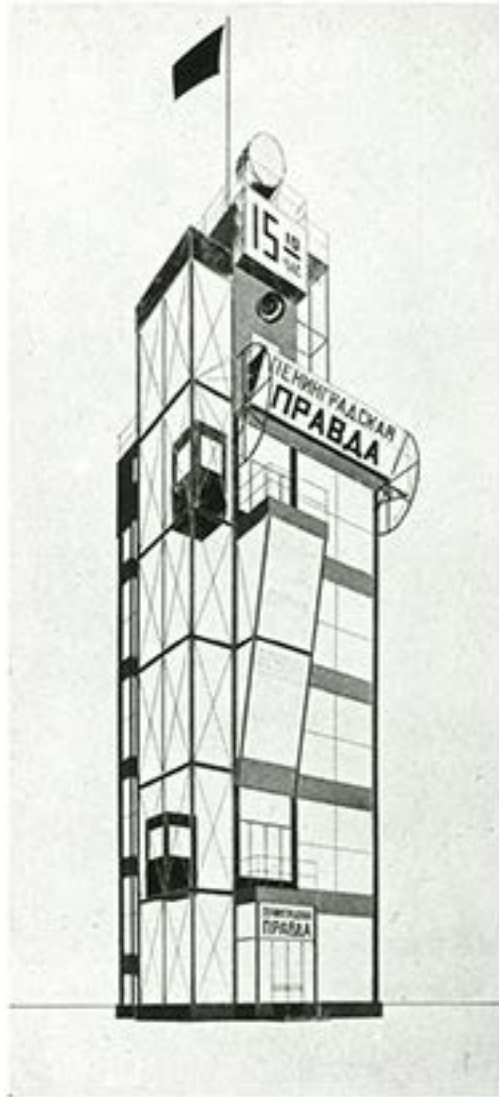
Alexander Vesnin
And brothers Leonid and Viktor
Russia, 1883 - 1959

- Among the brothers, Alexander had led the design of some of the most iconic Constructivist works in painting, set design, and architecture



Alexander Vesnin, *geometrical drawings* (ca. 1920 – 29)

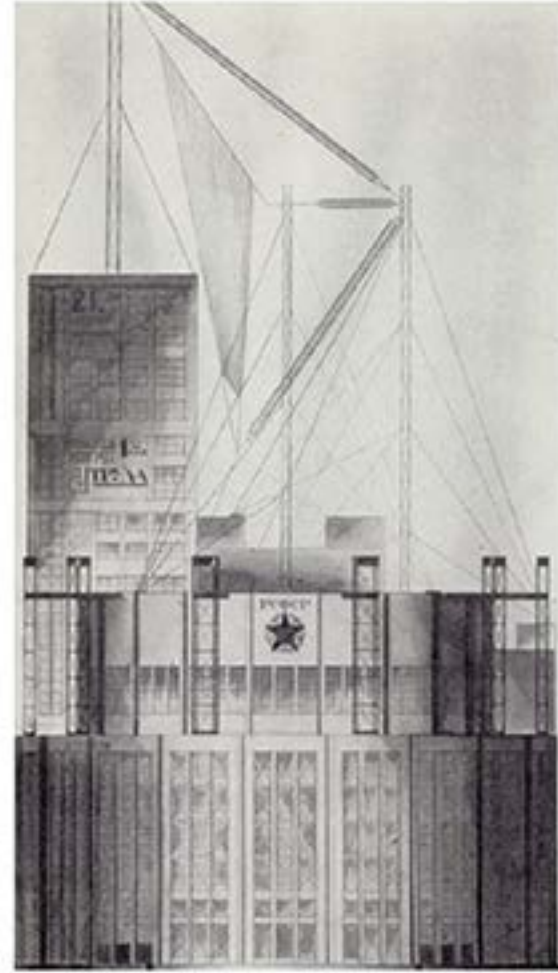
- Like many others covered, continued the Modernist aesthetic in painting



Left: Vesnin Brothers, *Leningrad Pravda Building* (1924)



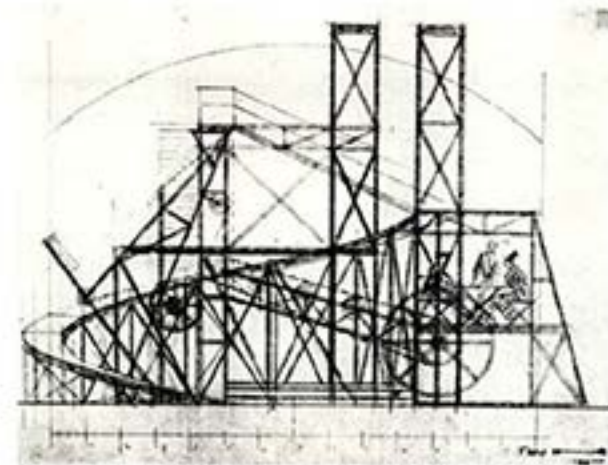
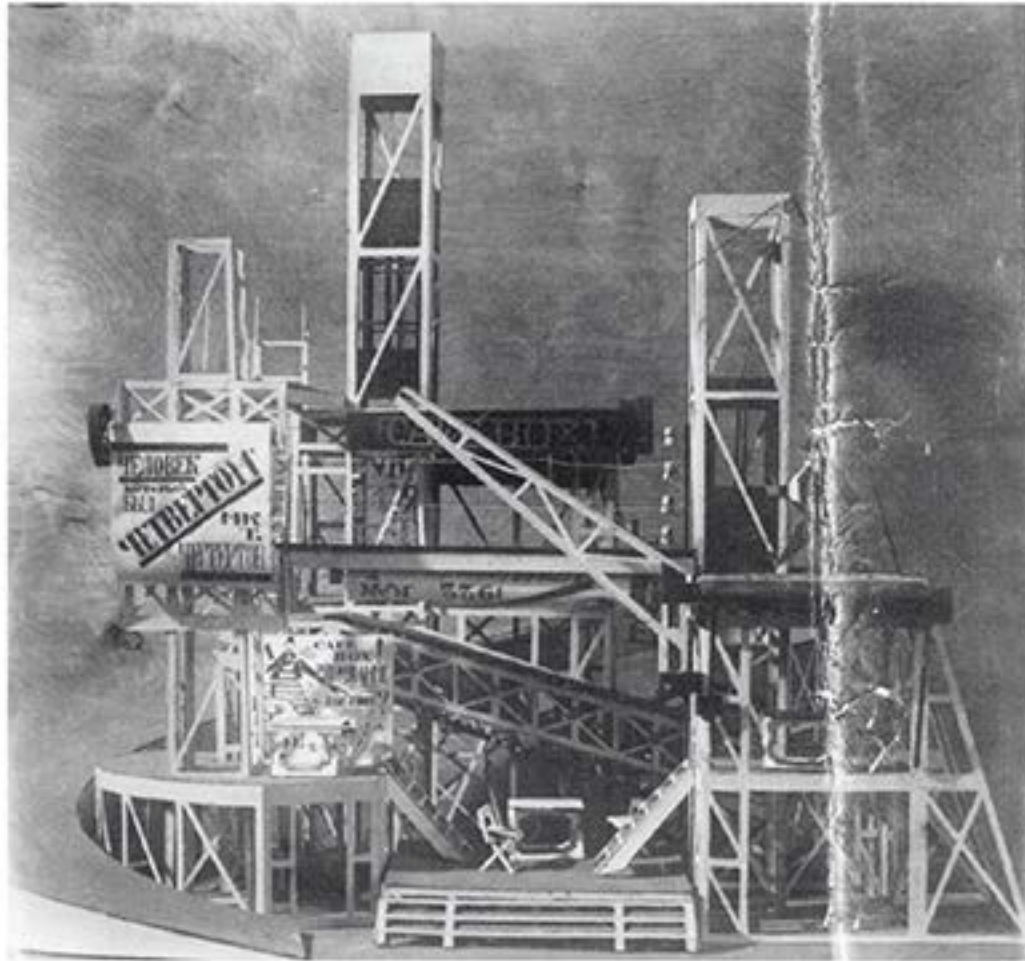
Left: Vesnin Brothers, *Arcos Headquarters* (1924)



Left: Vesnin Brothers, *Palace of Labor* (1923)

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- Palace of Labor (1923)
 - Vesnin brothers' entry to national competition



Alexander Vesnin, *Set design for GK Chesterton's Man who was Thursday* (1924)

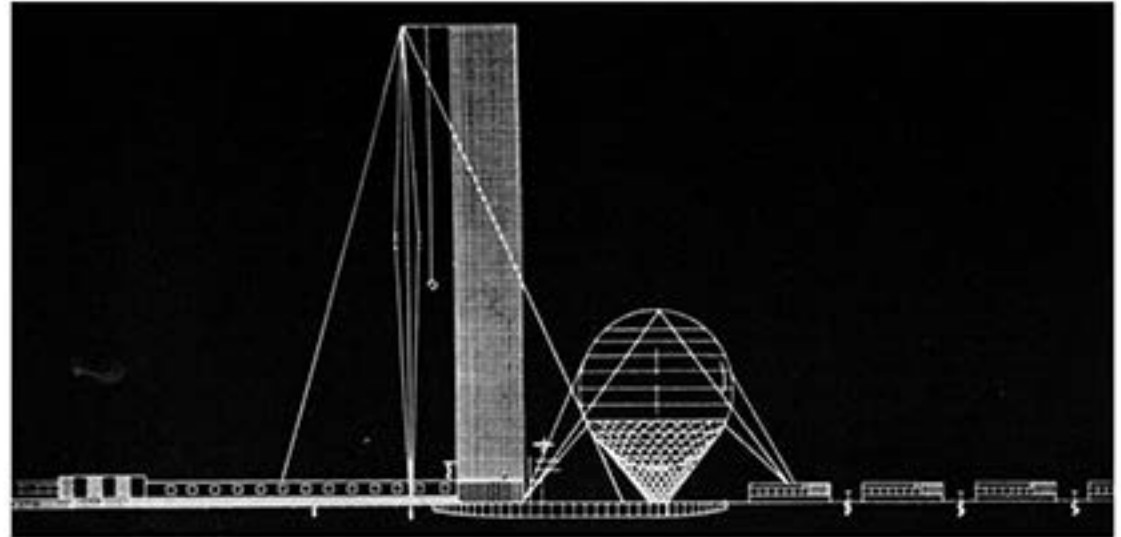
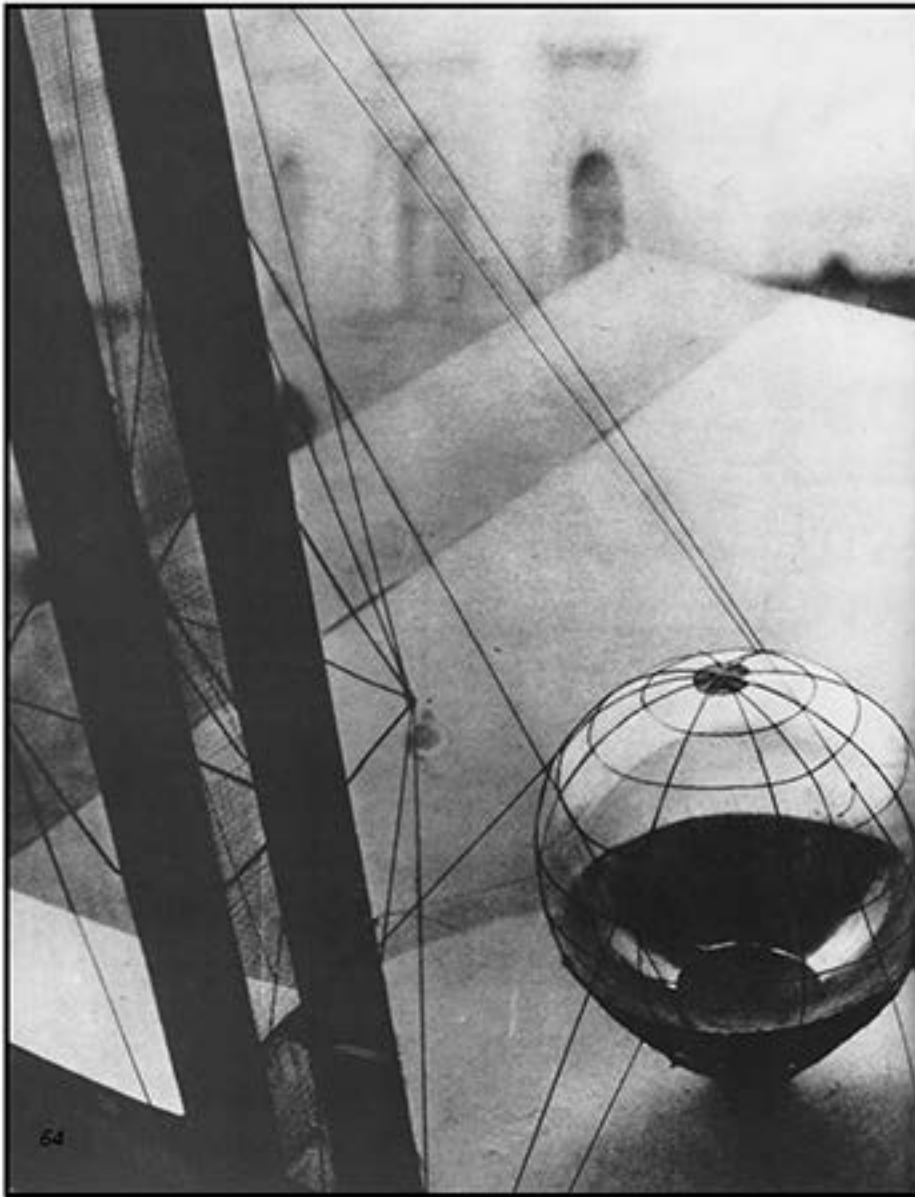
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- Example of Alexander Vesnin's set design
- Like Popova, set design was a convenient means to produce architectural one-offs without the cost/building commitment of full structures



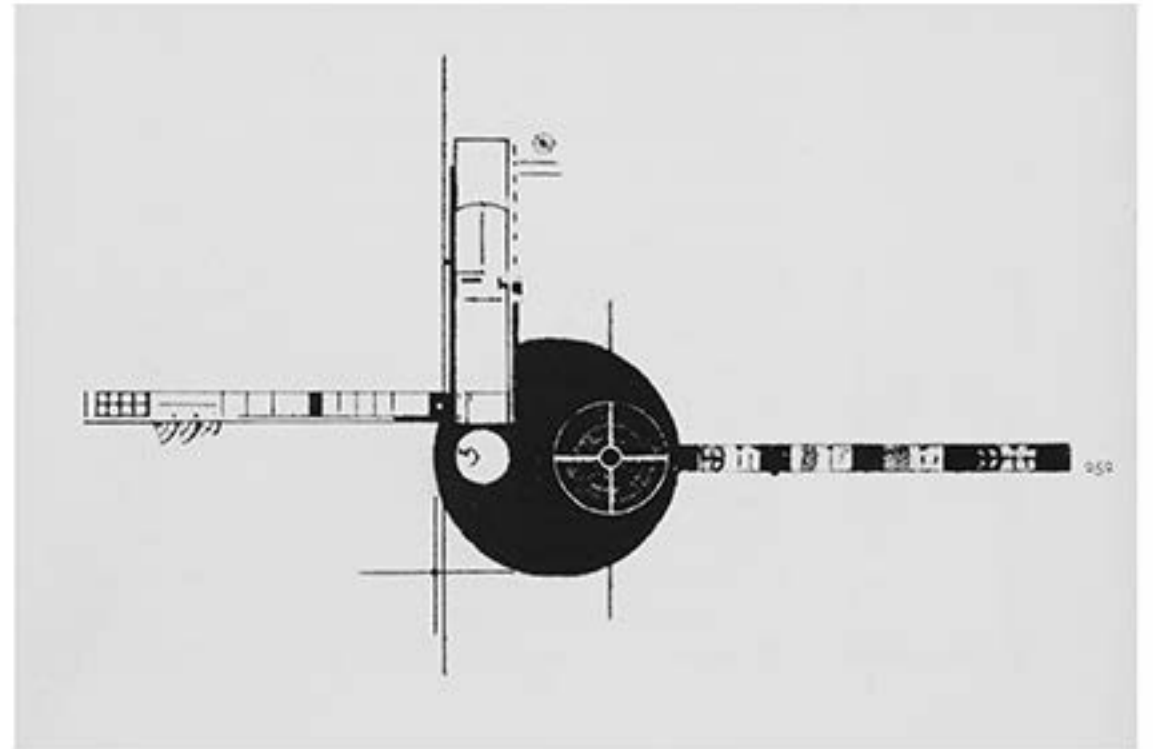
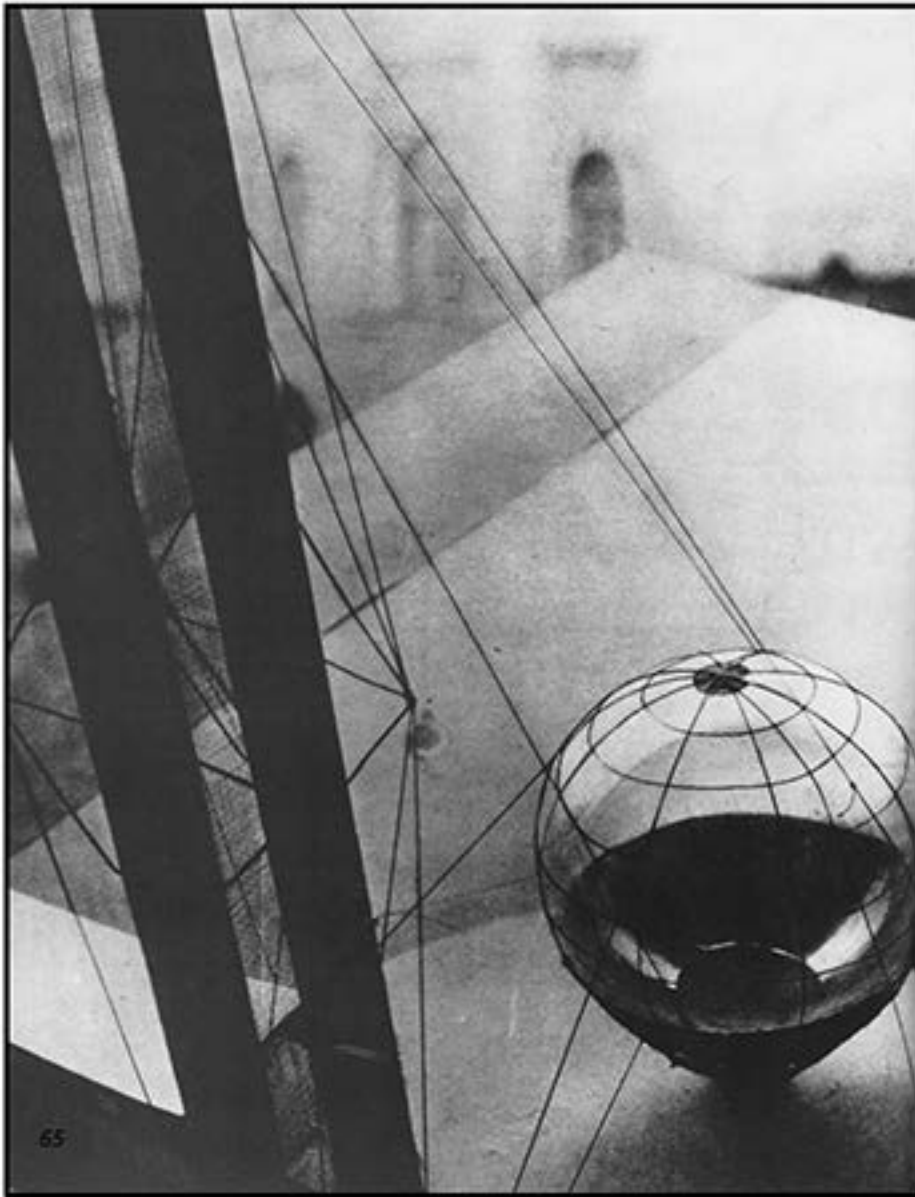
Ivan Leonidov
Russia, 1902 - 1959

- Studied at the VKhUTEMAS (an important early 20th century school of architecture)



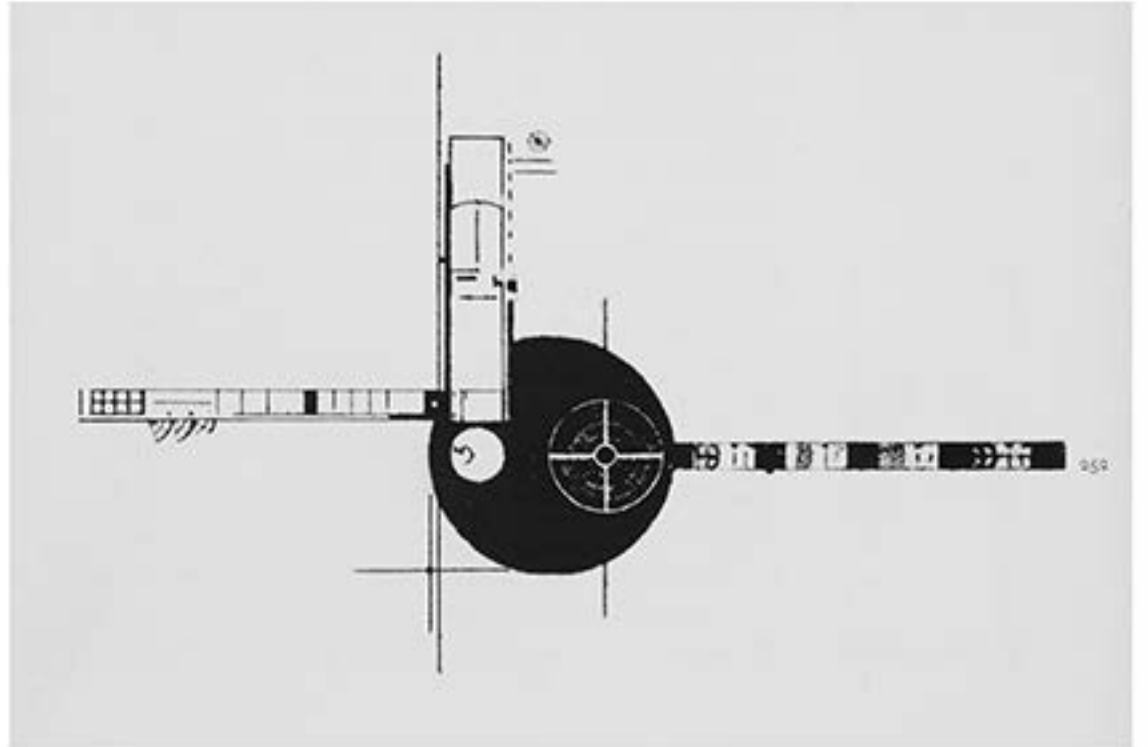
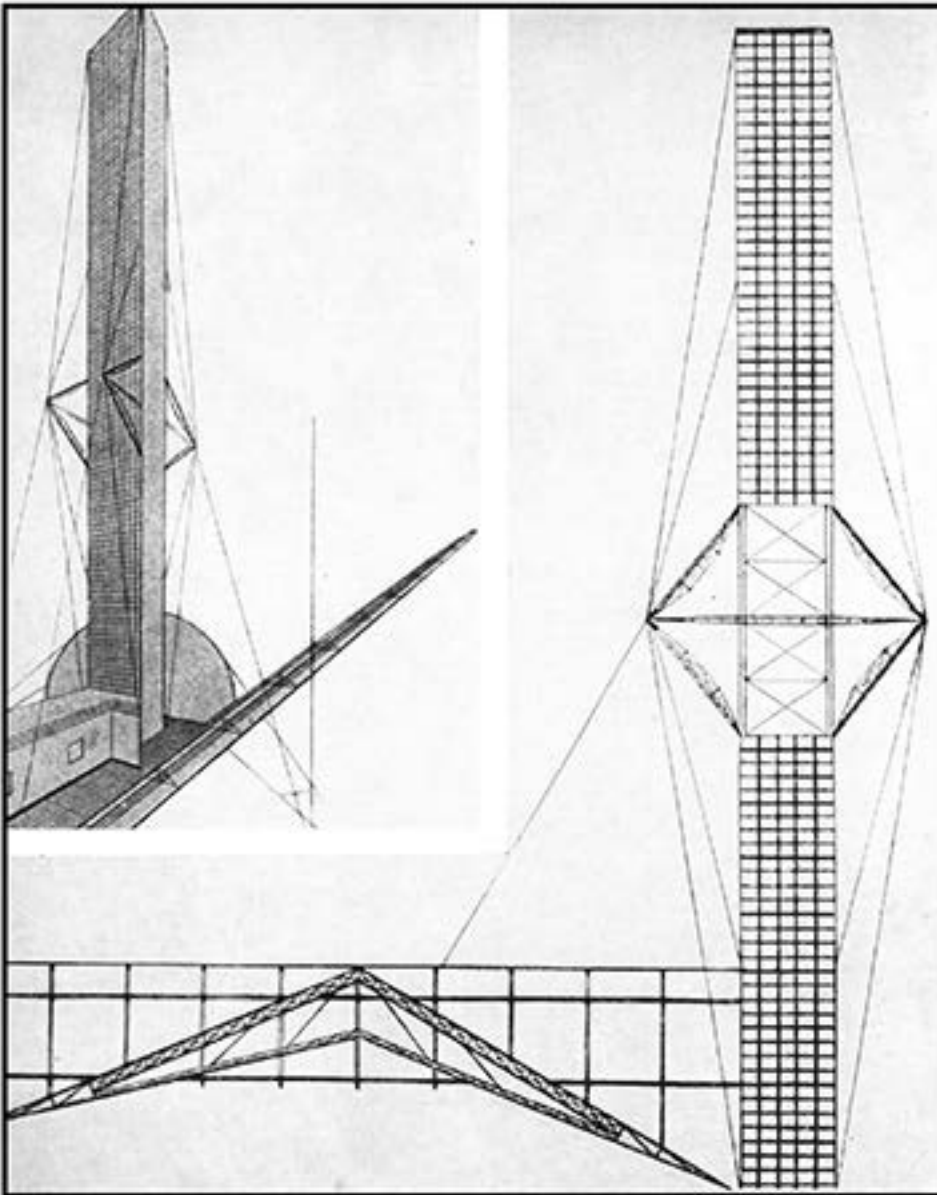
Ivan Leonidov, *The Lenin Institute for Librarianship* (1927)

- Most well-known work of his was his thesis project of 1927

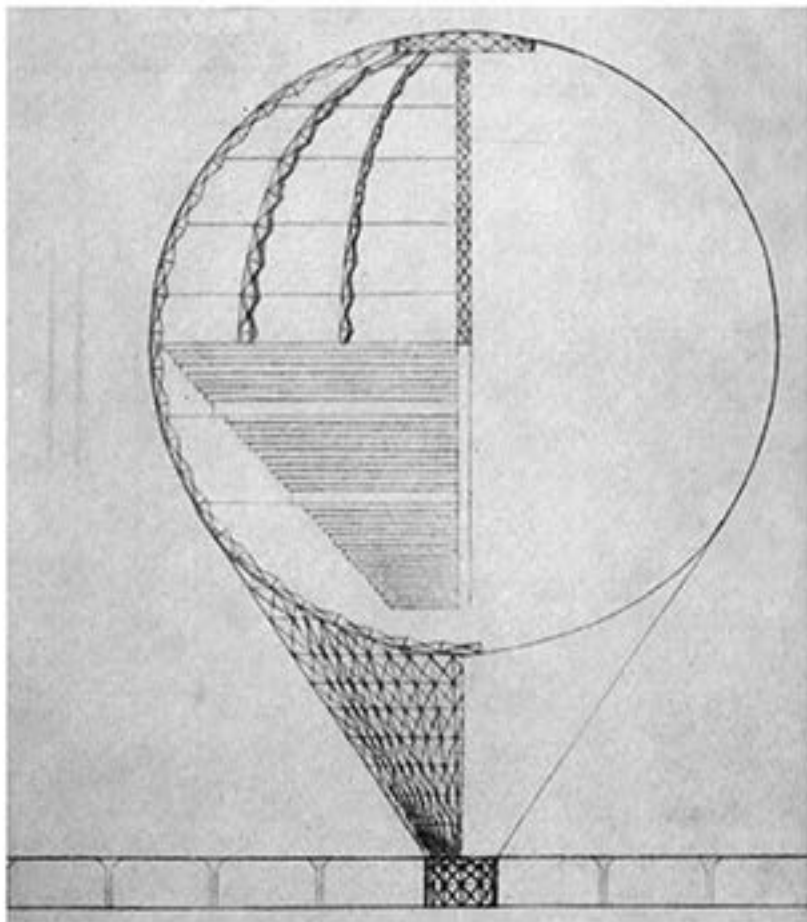


Ivan Leonidov, *The Lenin Institute for Librarianship* (1927)

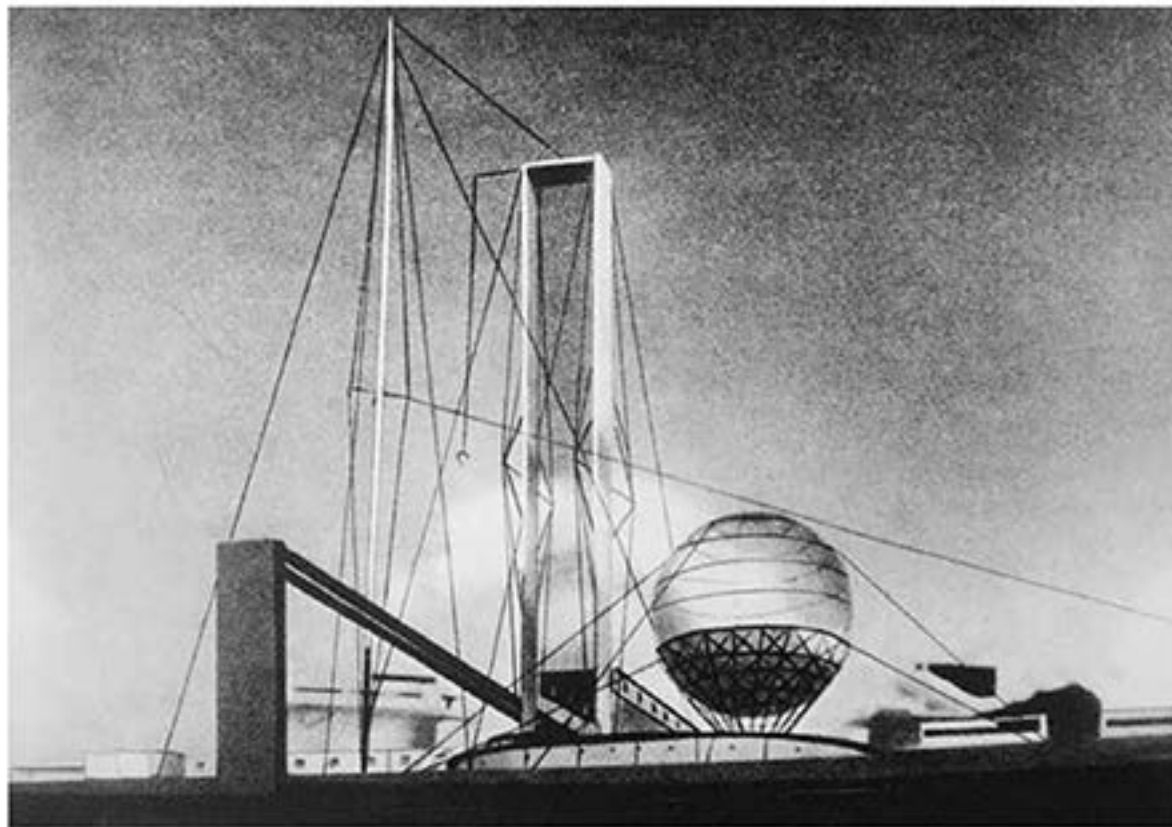
- Also symbolic of communication among the various departments of the institute



Ivan Leonidov, *The Lenin Institute for Librarianship* (1927)



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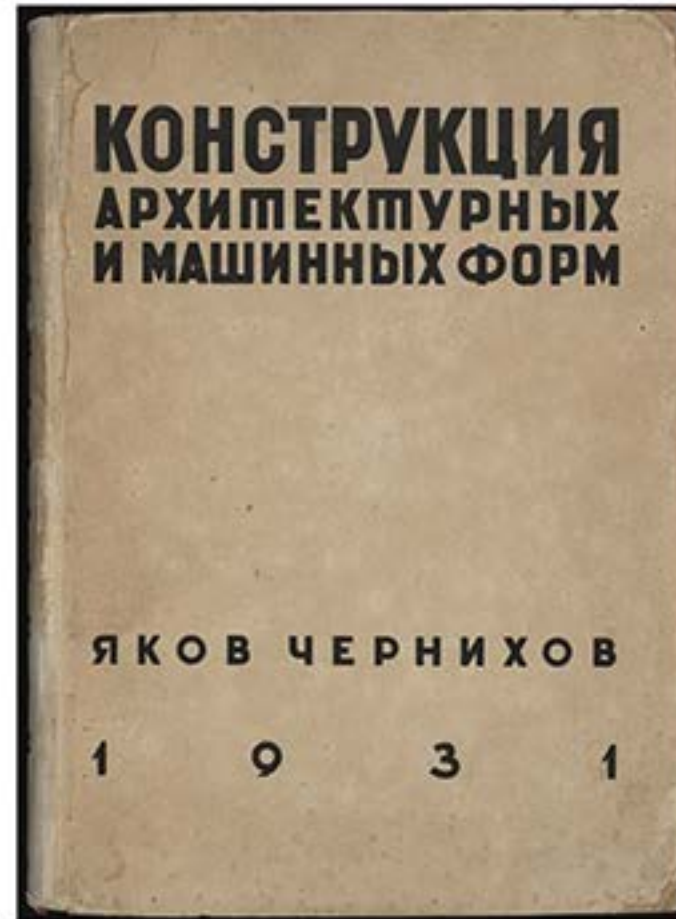


Ivan Leonidov, *The Lenin Institute for Librarianship* (1927)



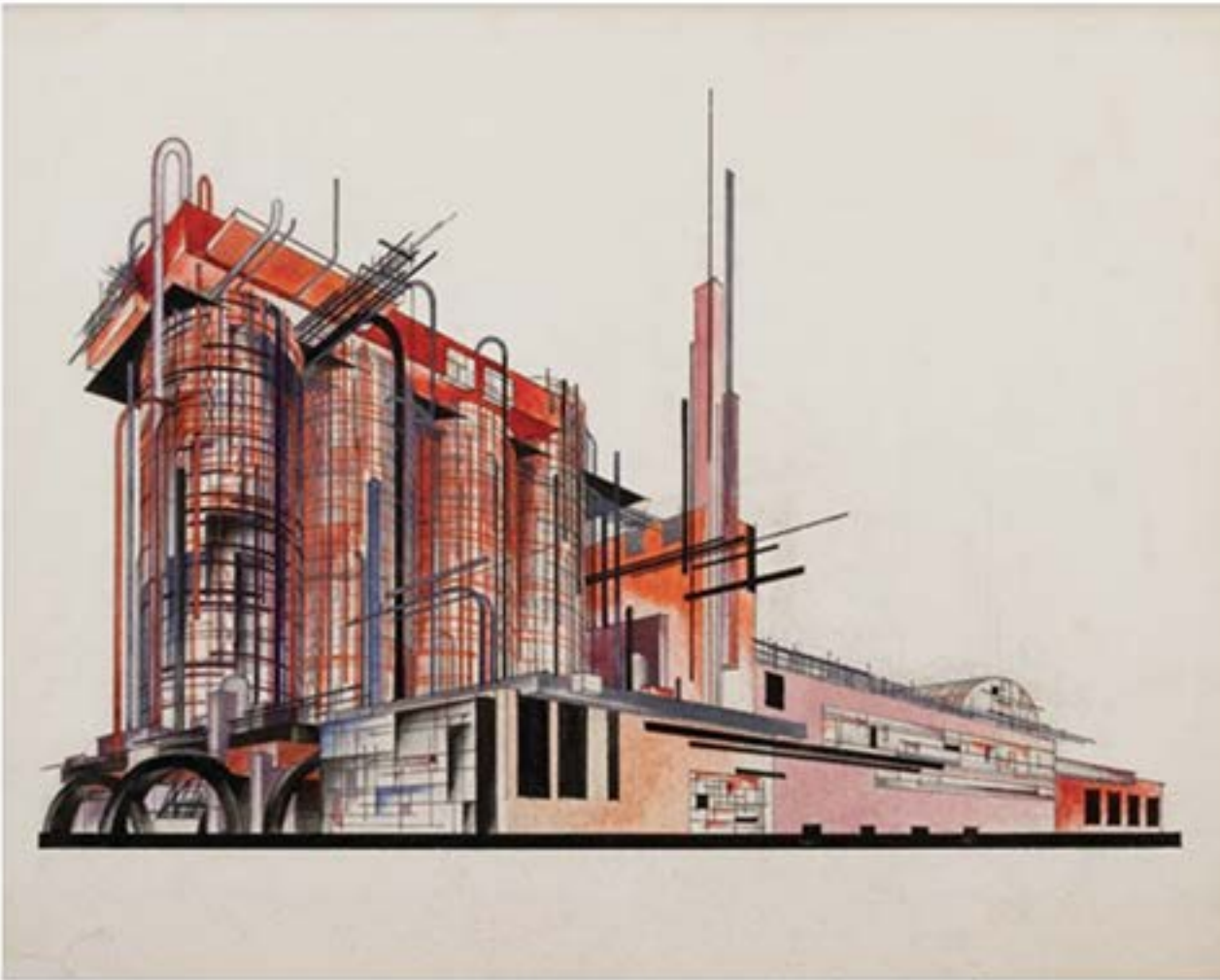
Yakov Chernikhov
Ukraine/Russia, 1889 - 1951

- Designed a number of 'Architectural Fantasies'



Yakov Chernikhov, *The Construction of Architectural and Machine Forms* (1931)

- Published *The Construction of Architectural and Machine Forms* in 1931
- Can be read like the many of Piranesi's sketches of fictional architecture



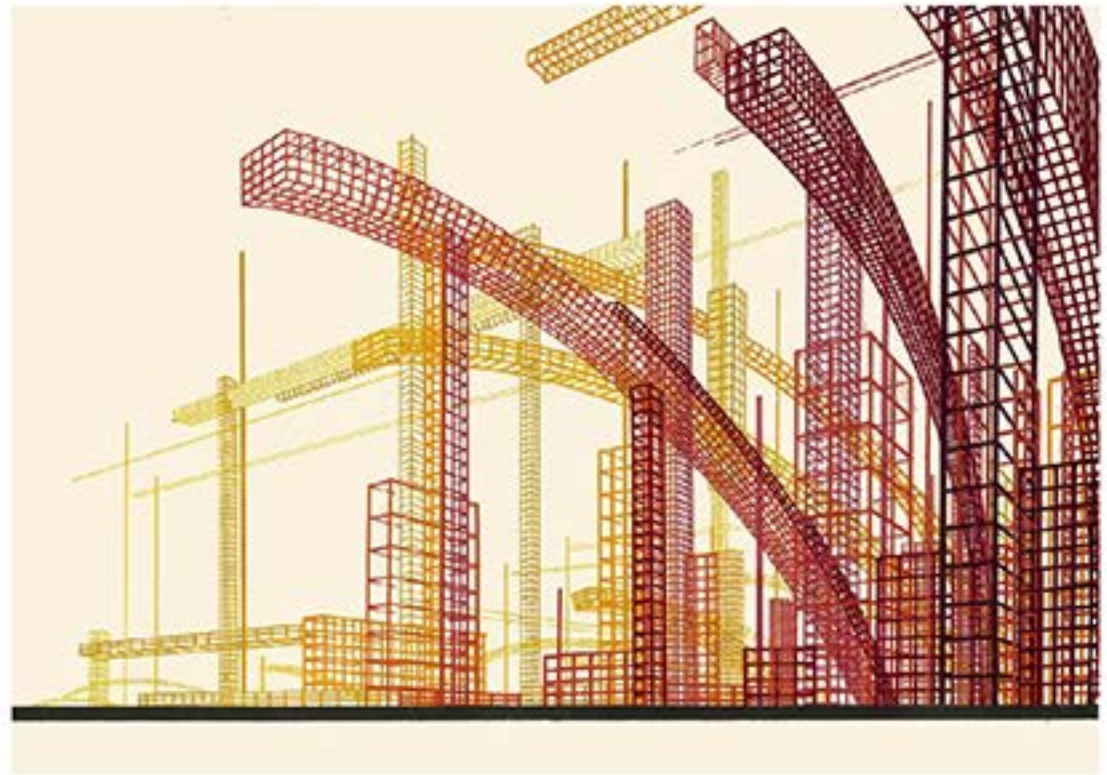
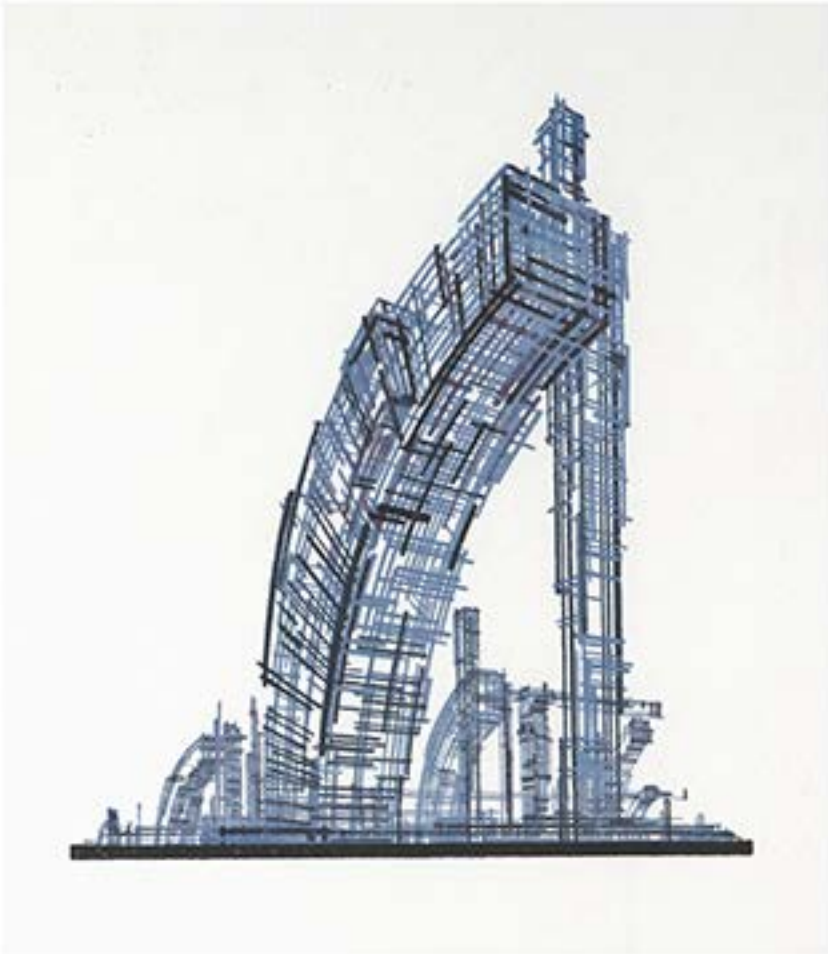
Vladimir Shukhov, *Radio Tower, Moscow (1919-22)*

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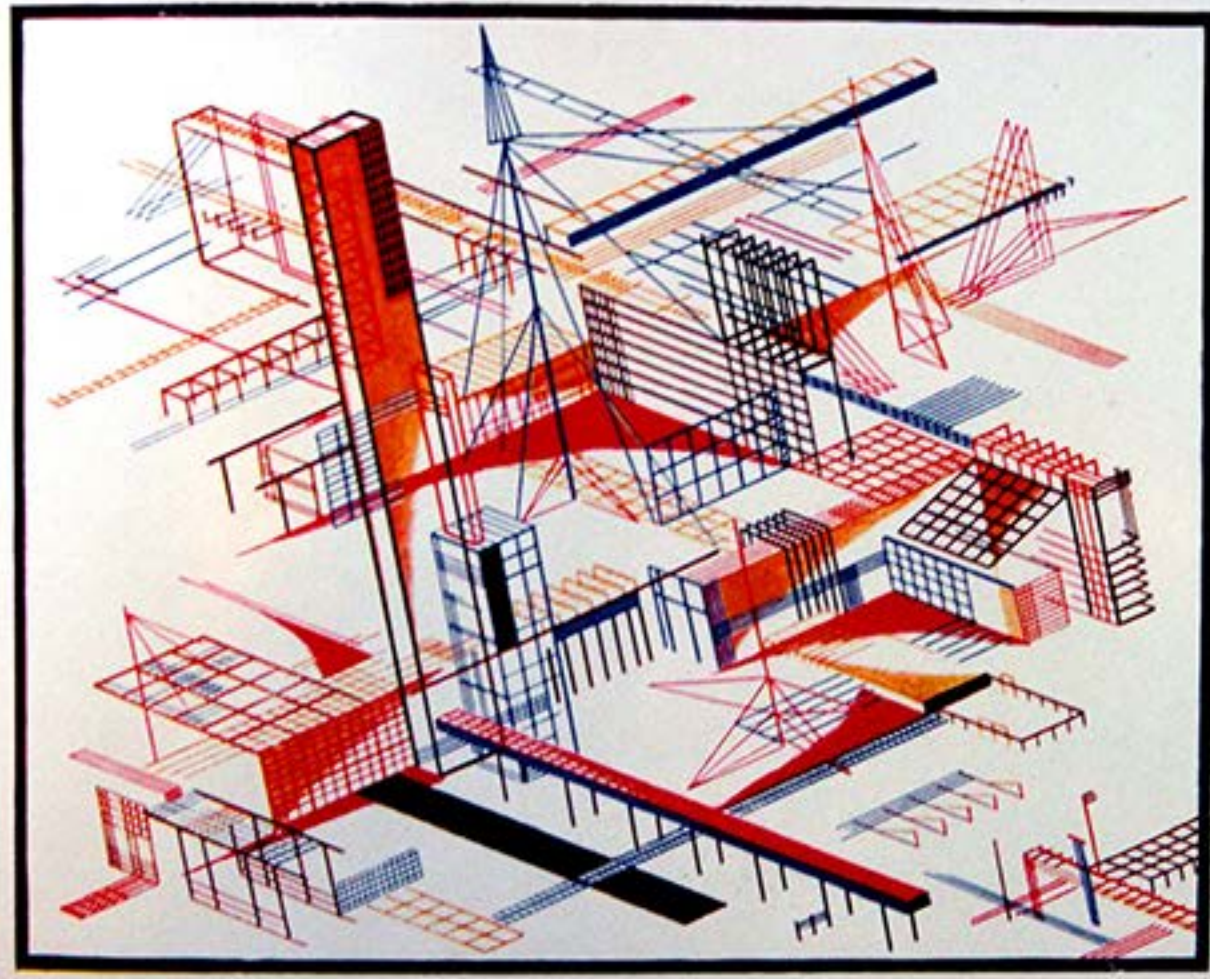
- Tectonics are used not so much to inform construction but to define an aesthetic, a style



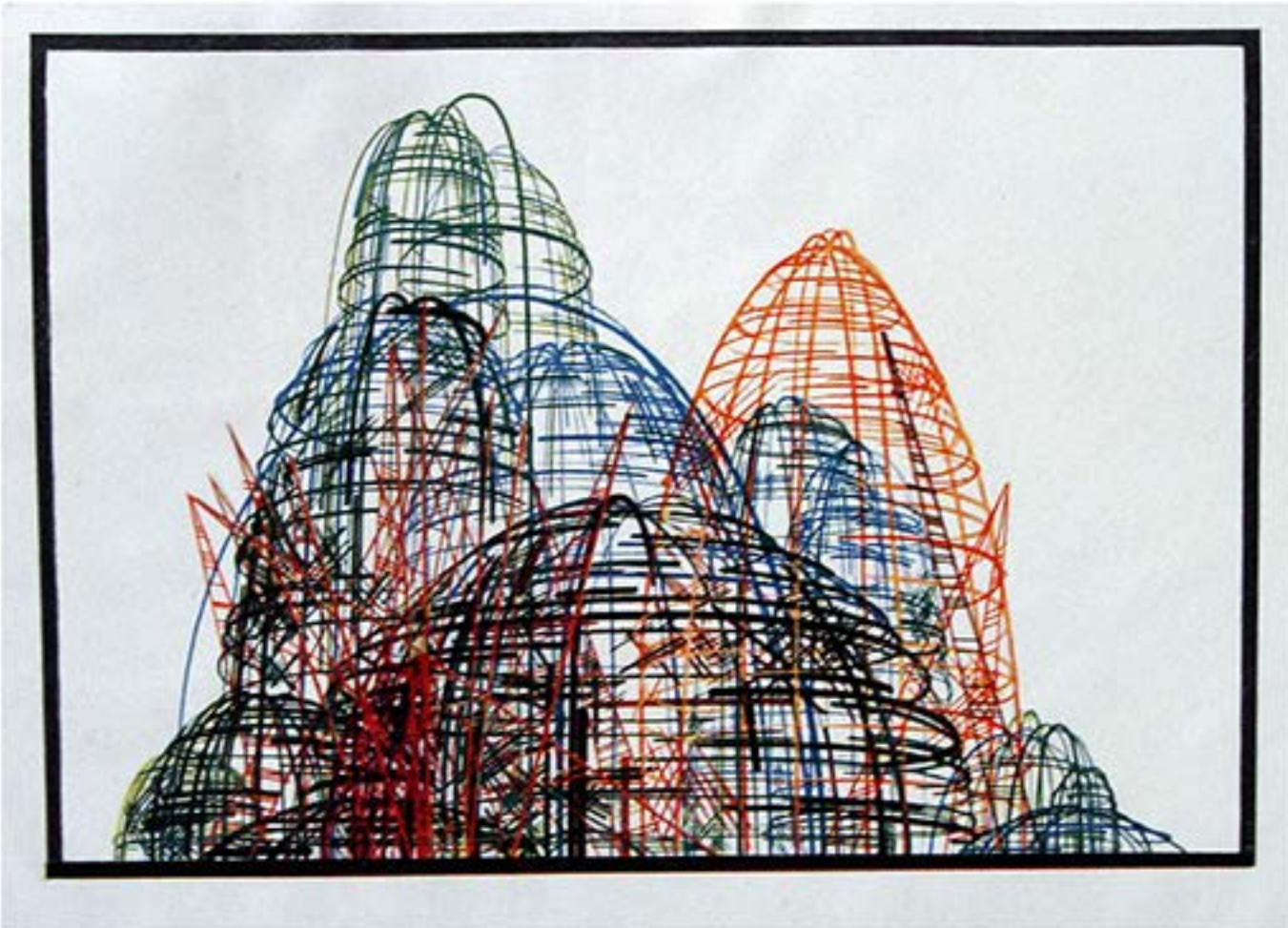
Vladimir Shukhov, *Radio Tower, Moscow* (1919-22)



Vladimir Shukhov, *Radio Tower, Moscow* (1919-22)

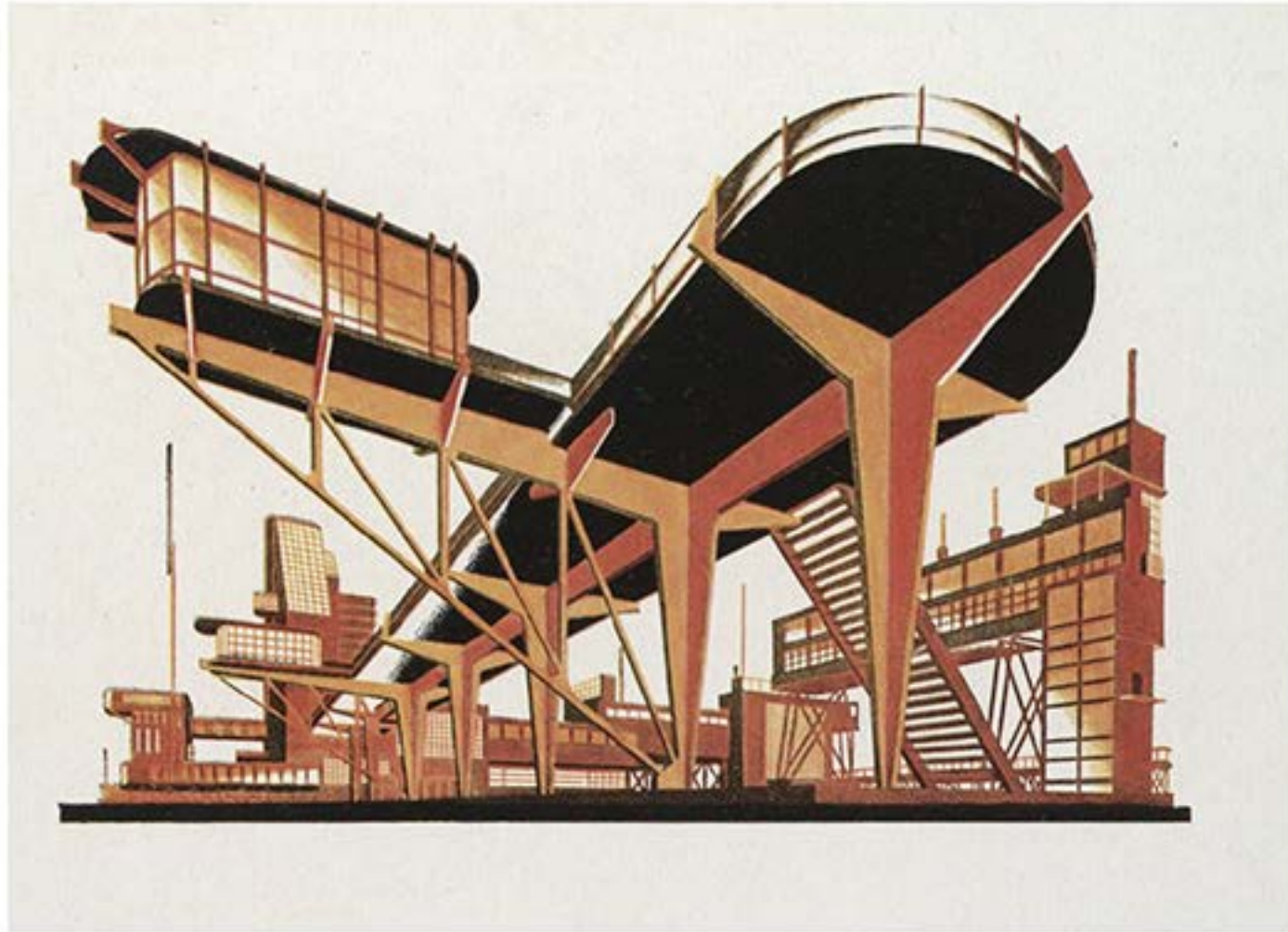


Vladimir Shukhov, *Radio Tower, Moscow* (1919-22)



Vladimir Shukhov, *Radio Tower, Moscow* (1919-22)

- This fantasy echoing Shukhov's double lattice structures



Vladimir Shukhov, *Radio Tower, Moscow* (1919-22)

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- The aesthetic merging the visuals of architecture with industrial factories into a single aesthetic



- Left a strong graphic legacy, used today for 'catchy' visuals used for commercial or graffiti-type purposes.



Left: Isaak Brodsky, *Portrait of Stalin* (~1939)
Right: Vasily Orlov, *Native Land* (1950)

- The rapid decline of Russian Constructivism (along with other avant-gardist movements in other fields) was due to pressure to adopt a state-endorsed artistic style
- In place, the Communist Party, headed by Stalin, endorsed Socialist Realism
 - Subject matter emphasizing the value of work
 - Stylistically eschewed any abstraction