

Permanent Palaces and Transient Rooms: *Uplotnenie* or the Introduction to Ephemerality in the Soviet Domestic Interior

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The communal apartment became an essential feature of everyday life in the Soviet Union. This type of housing, where several unrelated individuals were instructed to live together sharing spaces that have been traditionally defined as private, had become the domestic (and natural) habitat of several generations of Soviet citizens. Although communal housing itself is not an unprecedented spatial typology,¹ the uniqueness of Soviet communal living comes from the method of constructing the communal rooms, especially during the period between 1918 and 1956, when the Soviet state implemented the policy of *Uplotnenie*, which dictated repurposing former bourgeois apartments into communal apartments. This paper dwells on the unique case of *Uplotnenie* and its applications in communal apartments of Moscow and Leningrad, where the room as an architectural element is transformed into an ephemeral construction.

Uplotnenie, Russian word for condensation, is a policy initiated by the Soviet state in 1918 and turning into a general campaign to repurpose existing bourgeois quarters in major cities of the Soviet Union into *Kommunalkas* (communal apartments). The method of this transformation forms the basis of this study, as it created a specific phenomenon of reconfiguring and dividing the interiors of the existing buildings, with partitions to shape communal rooms, while the facades of these buildings remained untouched. Soviet communal rooms that were installed in existing buildings as the result of *Uplotnenie* were unique, as they were mounted into the ornamented and lavished shells of 19th century buildings, which creates a curious phenomenon for architectural/historical analysis. This study traces these partitioned interiors and ephemeral rooms that were formed during the implementation of *Uplotnenie* policy.

The policies and regulations declared by the Soviet state played a significant role in the formation of a new architectural typology for the Soviet home and the architects' design ideas themselves, as the Soviet state determined both the material and the social construction of everyday domestic space. The role assumed by the State in the design and distribution of housing during the Soviet rule can be said to be the main determining force behind the formation and design of the Soviet domestic living. In this sense, the policy of *Uplotnenie* is not only relevant for the case study of the ephemeral room, but also for understanding the influence of the State on the formation of a new typology in housing and in constructing a socialist domesticity.

After a brief introduction to the State ideologies behind the regulations and policies that determined the formation of Soviet housing, the article focuses on the policy named *Uplotnenie*: the design, planning and initiation of the policy and its application in big cities of the Soviet Union, especially between 1918 and 1956. The paper traces the changing spatial organizations and boundaries of communal rooms in Soviet *Kommunalka* in two different case studies:

1 It is a known fact that model housing "colonies" had been built for workers in various German cities since 1863. Similarly, during the heydays of the Industrial Revolution, workers' dormitories were common across London. See Eric Mumford, *Designing the Modern City: Urbanism Since 1850* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2018).

one based on a digital archive of the once-*Kommunalkas* of St. Petersburg, conducted by Ilya Utekhin; and a historically significant building in Moscow's Boshaya Sadovaya, whose records were well-kept, as the building once hosted the well-known author Mikhail Bulgakov. The study aims to document the changing interior patterns of the *Kommunalka*, where a single communal room was created, reconfigured, or vanished overnight. The analysis of the two case studies provides insight into the effects of constant spatial reconfigurations in the domestic sphere on its inhabitants' behavioral patterns, as the inhabitants often had to take individual initiative to mark the boundaries of private spaces against the ever-changing boundaries of the very public communal rooms. The constantly changing relations between the interiors and exteriors of these buildings are also revealed, as the ephemeral rooms create a dichotomy between transient interiors and permanent exteriors.

This study benefits from archival documents — plans, sections, photographs — as well as oral historical records and documentaries tracing the changing configurations of communal rooms in Moscow and Leningrad *Kommunalkas*, with the objective of documenting the influence and impact of these ever-changing rooms on the lives of their inhabitants, while commenting on the formal dichotomies between ephemeral rooms and the unchanging facades of these buildings.

Introduction to Soviet Housing: Towards a New Socialist Domestic Space

In order to understand the underlying factors that made the policy of *Uplotnenie* a necessity as well as an ideological decision, it is important to look at the history of socialist housing.

The long history of the Soviet house began immediately after the October Revolution as the new regime was still battling with the effects of World War I. Even before the Revolution, during the first years of the 20th century, housing was one of the main problems of Tsarist Russia. Although one could witness a rapid increase in the construction of apartment buildings in both Moscow and St. Petersburg even before the Revolution, most of the newly built apartments were out of the reach of the working class, which represented the majority of the population. As the Tsarist regime focused more on the construction of “extravagant” apartments for the upper-middle class, merchants and aristocrats, the more significant problem of housing availability for the majority remained unheeded by social reforms. In his article “Building for Comfort and Profit: The New Apartment House,” William Craft Brumfield summarizes the situation as:

“Unscrupulous property owners gained more profit per square meter in overcrowded, substandard buildings for transients and the lumpenproletariat that did the builders of apartments for the prosperous.”²

While even large segments of the middle class were faced with inflated rents,³ the proletarian class was at the bottom of the scale. The majority of the workers lived in workers' barracks on the outskirts of cities, which were mainly subdivided and overcrowded apartments.⁴

This chaotic housing situation was the legacy that the young Soviet state took over. On the second day of the Revolution, the new Soviet government abolished all private ownership of land. On August 19, 1917, the “Decree on Land” was published in the newspaper *Izvestia*, the first article of the decree stating that: “Landlord property rights are abolished immediately

2 William C. Brumfield, “Building for Comfort and Profit: The New Apartment House,” in *Russian Housing in the Modern Age*, ed. William C. Brumfield et. al. (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 76.

3 Evgeny I. Krichenko presents his findings on the rates of approximate rental figures to the proportion of income in Evgeny I. Krichenko, “Prostranstvennaia organizatsiia zhilykh kompleksov Moskvy i Peterburga v nachale XX veka” [Spatial organization of residential complexes in Moscow and St. Petersburg at the beginning of the XX century], *Arkhiturnoye nasledstvo* 19 (1972): 119-120.

4 Matvey G. Dikanskiy, “Kvartirnyy vopros i sotsial'nyye opyty yego resheniya” [“Housing problem and social experiments to solve it”], (report presented to St. Petersburg city government, 1908), 110.

without any compensation.”⁵ On January 13, 1918, all natural resources were declared property of the whole nation. The most critical factor about the Decree was the role assumed by the State on housing rights and distribution. While the state acquired rights over all building procedures, it also took complete responsibility to provide housing for its citizens.

Following the decree, the young Bolshevik government set on radical efforts towards a total cultural revolution inspired by the principle of environmental determinism — a late 19th century design tenet, given a Marxist makeover — which dictated that to change how a person thought and behaved, one must change their material surroundings. In terms of housing in a socialist state, however, environmental determinism failed to prescribe a typology of an ideal revolutionary habitat worthy of — and ideologically compatible with — the “proletarian” class. Therefore, the Soviet state took the role to encourage, influence and finance the design of a new typology for socialist housing. The key players during this period were formed with the establishment of *Vkhutemas* school, the founding of *Stroykom* (Building Economics Committee of the U.S.S.R.), the emergence of organizations like *OSA* (Organization of Contemporary Architects), and architectural journals such as *Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura*, all working under state patronage.

In August 1918, the new housing policy was adopted with the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and Council of People’s Commissars’ decree “On the Abolition of the Right to Private Ownership of Urban Property,” focusing on the design and construction of new houses with the acting principle of propagating collective living. Following the infamous proposal of Vladimir Illich Lenin to design the new model of collective house as “socialism in one building,” architects of the Soviet state developed the design of the new socialist house throughout the 1920s, which eventually found its way into the everyday discourse as *dom-kommuna* (house-communes).⁶

There were three main determining factors in the design of *dom-kommunas*: to achieve equality and social homogeneity for all citizens; to abolish the traditional domestic space that would promote individualism, including the nuclear family that was deemed to be the foundation of the bourgeois society; and to reduce construction costs to the absolute minimum. With the passing of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, *dom-kommunas* started being designed and constructed to be purely aligned with the guidelines set out by the government, “following the stipulations to cut public spending for construction and using the country’s economic resources as efficiently as possible.”⁷ Built on the theory of social condensers, house-communes designed as small individual units were complemented by shared service areas. Conceived as an intermediate step en-route to more socialized living in domestic interior, the plans of these houses proposed private quarters for the sole purpose of sleeping and carried the leisure activities as well as other amenities to common areas, as the kitchen became a collective canteen, and even the bathrooms were shared domains. House-communes later became the symbol of constructivist architecture in the domestic domain during the early 1920s, an infamous example of which being the Narkomfin building dated 1928, designed by OSA.

Although the project of house-communes left a significant mark on architectural history and was celebrated by architects of the time and the Soviet state for leading the transition to a fully Socialist sensibility in housing — as Moisei Ginzburg noted during his speech for the 1927 competition for a communal housing project sponsored by the journal *Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura* — the Soviet government was well aware that even with the reduced costs, the pace of constructions was far too slow to meet the needs of housing shortage in

5 “Dekret o zemle” [“Decree on Land”], *Izvestia Vserossiiskogo Soveta Krestyanskikh Deputatov*, August 19, 1917.

6 William C. Brumfield, “Introduction”, in *Russian Housing in the Modern Age*, ed. William C. Brumfield et. al. (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 17.

7 Daniel M. Vega, “Housing and Revolution: From the *Dom-Kommuna* to the Transitional Type of Experimental House (1926–30)”, *Architectural Histories*, 8 (January 2020), 15.

Moscow and Leningrad.⁸ To battle with housing shortages together with the grand purpose of giving a communist touch to the once-bourgeois buildings, the Soviet state also had to re-appropriate the existing buildings to fit “socialism in one building,” which gave way to the planning and initiation of the policy later named as *Uplotnenie*.

Uplotnenie: Palaces to the Workers

While the project of house-communes was set in motion, the Soviet government turned its attention to repurposing extant buildings as a practical solution to the housing shortage. The journal “Enlightenment” published an article by Lenin in 1917, accusing the former bourgeois inhabitants⁹ of still living lavishly and spaciouly in their rich apartments, while “the working-class lives in the basement with up to 15 people in crowded rooms,” and ending with: “The proletarian state must forcibly infuse a family in need into the apartment of a rich man.”¹⁰ Soviet Russia’s “housing redistribution” (*zhilishchnyperedel*) policy took effect on March 13, 1918, after the Council of People’s Commissars issued a decree later known as the act of *Uplotnenie* (Russian word for “condensation”).

The target of the *Uplotnenie* were the 19th century bourgeois residential buildings, mainly in Moscow and Leningrad. The main aim of the policy, as the name suggests, was to condense the existing living quarters in major cities. By reducing the living space per person, which meant cramming as many inhabitants as possible into already existing buildings, the State managed to get rid of the increasing cost of building new housing, while providing a quick fix to the growing housing crisis in major cities.

Although the idea behind *Uplotnenie* was mainly to provide equal living conditions for all citizens while propagating collective living, the method of housing distribution was a unique case of equality quantification. In the grand planning of Soviet Housing redistribution, a person was treated as a statistical unit and was entitled not to a private space or a room, but rather to a certain number of square meters.¹¹ The Soviet authorities called this statistical calculation “the sanitary norm,” upheld by sanitary and hygiene experts, and statisticians, who regarded only the biological necessities of a body in a given space or volume, when calculating the norms.¹² The sanitary norm was the minimal space needed to survive, and in the State propaganda tools it was advertised as the ultimate form of achieving and quantifying social equality. The initial sanitary norm was set at about nine square meters per person, according to the instruction issued by the State Committee for Public Health in 1923. After a base sanitary norm was determined, the once-bourgeois quarters started being redistributed as approximately one quarter per a family of four.

8 “Inadequate housing stock and rapid industrialization were deciding factors in the establishment of *uplotnenie*. With no supervision and maintenance, lack of resources and the general disintegration of the ownership system, housing stock declined rapidly during 1914-1921.” Gregory A. Andrusz, *Housing and Urban Development in the USSR* (London: Palgrave, 1984), 16.

9 “A rich apartment is [...] any apartment in which the number of rooms equals or exceeds the number of bodies permanently living in this apartment. The owners of rich apartments are obliged immediately, under the threat of confiscation of all property, to submit [...] an application for the release of one of the two rich apartments for the needs of the poor population of the capital.” Vladimir I. Lenin, “Dopolneniya K Proyektu Dekreta O Rekvizitsii Teplykh Veshchey Dlya Soldat Na Fronte” [“Addition to the draft decree on requisition of warm clothes for soldiers at the front”], November 8, 1917, (first published in) *Leninskoye sbornike XXI*, (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1933), 21.

10 Vladimir I. Lenin, “Uderzhat li bol'sheviki gosudarstvennuyu vlast'?” [“Will the Bolsheviks retain state power?”], *Prosveshcheniye* 1:2 (October 14, 1917), 14.

11 Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 125.

12 An example of the calculation of the norm was deeming the amount of air necessary for a dweller to “feel normal” after a night’s sleep.

While *Uplotnenie* was a practical solution to the housing crisis, it was also fueled with socialist ideology. Firstly, these buildings were unpleasant remnants of the former regime, the memory of which the Soviet state was very eager to erase. Secondly, they were the main housing stock in the country. *Uplotnenie* as a concept worked extremely well with the ideology behind the Bolshevik revolution, which was to redistribute the means of production and wealth in favor of the proletariat and to create equal access to public property through redistribution. The right to occupy the apartments of the “former exploiting class” fully corresponded to the idea of communal housing, propagated in the Soviet printed media with the slogan “Palaces to the Workers!” (*Dvortsy-rabochim!*) The use of the word “palaces” by the authorities was a conscious decision. Pre-Revolutionary apartments in the Soviet Union, bourgeois quarters built for the upper-middle class of Tsarist Russia, were commonly referred to as *Barskikh* in daily language. The word *Barskikh* comes from *Barski*, the Russian word for “Lordly.” To give the buildings a more material appeal, while downplaying the divine aspect of the word “lordly,” the Soviet state started using “palaces” with a negative connotation to refer to the once-bourgeois apartments.

The initial plan for the policy was to use the already existing space of the bourgeois apartments to cram as many individuals as possible, without altering the floor plans or interior organization of the buildings. However, following Stalin’s rule, the planning of the Soviet house took a radically different path as a result of continuing immigration and a shift in design approach to create the ideal socialist house. This period led to the radical decision to alter the interior configuration of the existing buildings, creating a new typology of housing later known as *Kommunalka*, and eventually to the emergence of the ephemeral communal room, which is the main focus of this study and the subject of the next chapter.

“National in Form, Socialist in Content”: On Communal Apartments and Transient Rooms

There have been two major developments under Stalin’s regime that affected the policy of *Uplotnenie* and eventually reshaped the design of the Soviet house. The first development was the growing housing crisis. The architectural design strategies drastically changed when Joseph Stalin came to power in 1927. The first measure the Stalinist regime took was to draft the first Five-Year Plan, which took effect in 1928 and proposed a comprehensive social economic and cultural planning,¹³ the main focus of which was to solve the continuing housing crisis. Due to the rapid industrialization, the flood of workers’ migration coming to Moscow and Leningrad from other cities and rural areas resulted in more than 3.5 million new inhabitants waiting to be located in apartments.¹⁴ This unprecedented influx of new inhabitants required an additional condensation in the existing bourgeois apartments, which will be referred to as “the second wave *Uplotnenie*” in this article.

The second development was the changing design approach of the Stalin government towards the ideal socialist house. Stalin himself believed the Constructivist approach in architecture was not worthy of the working class and that it was lacking regional influences. He believed a new design strategy had to be introduced, keeping formal regional elements, while designing the interiors of the residential buildings to dictate communal living. To address Stalin’s concerns, the residential buildings constructed during this period (named *Stalinkas*) created a new typology embodying the slogan “National in Form, Socialist in Content.”¹⁵ While the facades of these buildings were constructed with the influence of Russian Empire style, for the interior

13 Gerasimova, “Sovetskom Gorode,” 25.

14 With increasing industrialization and migration of new workers, urban population in the Soviet Union had reached 26.3 million in 1928 compared to 20.9 million in 1920. See Ilya Utekhin, “Introduction,” in *Ocherki kommunalnogo byta* [Essays on Communal Life], (O.G.I.: polit.ru, 2001), 9.

15 Hugh D. Hudson, *Blueprints and Blood: The Stalinization of Soviet Architecture, 1917-1937* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 79.

planning scheme a standard draft was designed, influenced by the theory of social condensers. A Stalinist take was to be applied to both the new buildings and to the condensed palaces, later to be referred to as *Kommunalka* (or communal apartment).

The term *Kommunalka* was used to refer to both nationalized (condensed) apartments and newly built *Stalinkas*. Architects of the period started drafting standard plan schemes for *Kommunalkas*. A typical *Kommunalka* contained communal rooms, communal corridors and communal kitchen and bathrooms on each floor. Spatial divisions in *Kommunalka* were mostly arbitrary and followed two main principles: the space of each room had to be adjusted according to sanitary norms, and each room must open to a communal corridor. The typical communal apartment had a long, narrow, and dark corridor (up to 1m in width), initially leading to every room. The function of the “corridor” in a communal apartment was more than a core of circulation; it connected the rooms to the other communal areas: the kitchen, “the central place of secular communication”¹⁶ and public interaction, and to the bathrooms.

Following the waves of immigration, as the pace of construction of *Stalinkas* fell short of meeting the housing demands, in 1928, the sanitary norm was reduced to 6.4 sqm, and in 1931 it was reduced to 5.8 sqm per person.¹⁷ The housing crisis remained so dire that, in the 1940s, more than 60% of the housing stock in Moscow was still made up of “nationalized palaces.” Although the standard plan worked well with *Stalinkas*, it was challenging to apply this scheme to nationalized palaces. In Stalinist apartments (*Stalinkas*), the floor plans were designed to be somehow flexible to allow changes in the future, since the Soviet government had foreseen further reductions to the sanitary norm, as the industrial areas in Moscow continued to grow. However, the case for the repurposed bourgeois apartments was different, as the reorganization scheme required an overall transformation of the interior. In the 1920s, during the first wave of *Uplotnenie*, the condensation of any given quarter was planned accordingly, with spatial reconfiguration of the 19th century apartments to create not only communal rooms, but also the corridors connecting them to the other communal areas, without adding or removing any partitions from the original blueprints. However, during the 1930s, following the second wave *Uplotnenie*, as the constantly changing sanitary norms required further condensations in existing apartments and since the once-bourgeois quarters had more square meters per individual than the determined norm, the floor plans of these buildings had to be altered to follow the standard plans of a *Kommunalka*. The architectural solution for making nationalized palaces more flexible, to adjust to changing sanitary norms, consisted of marking the boundaries of communal rooms with plywood partitions, each of which was installed into quarters that was originally up to 40 sqm. Since the communal corridor, the kitchen and the bathrooms were the fixed elements of a given floor, the only space that would be subjected to alteration were the volumes of the rooms. Therefore, the walls of the rooms had to be easily moved and arranged at will. This constant reconfiguration of the rooms resulted in a very bizarre architectural phenomenon that emerged in the interiors of these apartments. These large rooms are carved up “mathematically and bureaucratically as if they were not a living space, a real home once inhabited by real people, but some topological abstraction.”¹⁸ Non-load bearing walls were dismantled, displaced, or relocated, while over the years, new partitions were added forming “a new matrix of spatial organization.”¹⁹ And as they started being reconfigured and altered with each changing sanitary norm, transient spaces and ephemeral rooms began to be formed.

16 Utekhin, “Introduction”, 19.

17 Anon., *Statisticheskiiy spravochnik po g. Leningradu i Leningradskoy oblasti* [Statistical reference book for the city of Leningrad and the Leningrad region], (Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1932), 24.

18 Natalia Lebina, *Sovetskaya Povsednevnost': Normy i Anomalii. Ot Voyennogo Kommunizma K Bol'shomu Stilyu* [Everyday Soviet Life: Norms and Anomalies. From Military Communism to Stalinist Architecture] (Moscow: New Literary Review, 2018), 119.

19 Boym, *Common Places*, 131.

The reorganization scheme of the nationalized palaces often required the insertion of communal kitchens and bathrooms into already over-partitioned floors. Communal kitchens and communal bathrooms were installed on each floor of the apartments, usually at each end of the corridors, which would make them the most well-lit places in communal apartments. Although the Moscow Real Estate Directorate stated that the added partitions would be coherent with the interior organizations of the existing apartments,²⁰ the sanitary norms made it impossible to follow the directive. The condensed bourgeois living quarters complicated the task of creating a uniform language in interiors. While walls and ceilings preserved elements of the *Style Moderne*, the partitions were built with plywood and often did not follow the formal references of the exteriors (the window axes on the facades), or the axes of the stucco moldings on the ceilings, as whatever spatial void left in a given floor from the kitchen and the bathrooms had to be designated as zones for rooms. Partitions divided each room according to the precise number of square-meters, sometimes non-load bearing walls were torn down to create a communal corridor against all odds, which resulted in, as Ekaterina Gerasimov defines it, “the honeycombed cells of the communal rooms.”²¹ As a result of this curious spatial reconfiguration, the rooms were left with long dark corridors, back entrances, windowless units, and labyrinthine circulation schemes.

Moreover, during the 1940s, as the sanitary norm decreased yet again, the rooms already fitted in the former bourgeois apartments were re-divided to host more rooms. The space of a communal room was always in flux: being divided, fragmented, united, bifurcated, it was transient and ephemeral. The arbitrary division of space caused “a curious effect of the space being taken away.”²² The space of one’s room could disappear overnight, sliced off by an added partition to meet the decreased sanitary norm. The rooms started being installed in already existing partitioned rooms as the sanitary norms kept changing. While the material used to create these separations only strengthened the contradictions between the installed rooms and the interior configuration of the previously bourgeois quarters, the ever-changing character of the communal rooms deformed the interiors to a point it became impossible to trace the remaining elements of the former *Style Moderne* interiors. The conditions got more complicated during the heydays of communal living in the 1940s. The latest sanitary norm of 5 sqm dictated that the housing authorities should accommodate more tenants into the already partitioned rooms. Since securing any loans from housing committees for installing more partitions was not possible and adding more partitions to the overcrowded rooms seemed physically impossible, tenants came up with their solutions to achieve relative privacy.²³

In a communal apartment, one’s ‘own’ space is limited to a room as opposed to the common or communal spaces, which makes the tenants’ rooms the most private spaces in a *Kommunalka*. The division of places assigned to different tenants directly bordered each other, but the border itself was mobile and often not formally fixed. That is why the open/closed boundaries that appeared within the *Kommunalka* is significant, since the borders of the rooms constantly changed the blueprints of entire floors. The state policy of maximum compaction of large apartments and penalties for “surpluses” forced the housing authorities and the residents themselves to install partitions in large rooms and block off corners in kitchens and corridors. Since the partitioned rooms were at the disposal of a family in most cases, the individuals set certain physical boundaries to divide the rooms even further to achieve relative privacy.

20 In July 1928, the rental department of the Moscow Real Estate Directorate sent a directive to the housing management board stating a directory of how the partitions (if needed) should be established to preserve the interior organization stating: “The location and type of partitions can only be installed according to the instructions of the Office.” Central Historical Archive of Moscow (TsIAM). Fund 179 (inventories 62 and 63).

21 Ekaterina Gerasimova, “Public Privacy in Soviet Communal Apartment,” in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life*, ed. David Crowley et. al. (London: Berg, 2002), 206.

22 Ekaterina Gerasimova, “Gilje v sovetskom gorode” [“Housing in the Soviet city”], *Sotsiologicheskii zhurnal*, 1 (September 1998): 25.

23 Vladimir Papernyi, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 46.

The ever-changing nature of the house left almost no space for privacy. After the “house” was re-defined as the space of one room, it was up to the tenants to organize zones of relative privacy inside the rooms. While the partitions were used to separate one house from another, an increasing number of lighter partitions appeared, used as space markers that recursively separated functional areas within one room. Although plywood partitions separated one room from another, they did not quite reach the ceiling. Curtains, screens and even pieces of fabric were used as space markers; markers of one’s own space were extremely important “road” signs in the architectural configurations and reconfigurations of *Kommunalka*. These lighter partitions added another layer to the labyrinthine plan of the communal apartment, as the zones of privacies were ephemeral as well: they constantly changed, shifted, and disappeared.

In her PhD dissertation entitled *Sovetskaya Kommunal'naya Kvartira Kak Sotsial'ny Institut: Istoriko-Sotsiologicheskii Analiz* [“Soviet Communal Apartment as A Social Institution: Historical And Sociological Analysis”], Ekaterina Gerasimova traces the experiences of tenants of communal rooms, to decipher how *Kommunalkas* shaped the notions of privacy. In one of the interviews in her study, Gerasimova talks to a tenant who has been living in the same room since the 1940s and describes how one family achieved privacy in a single room:

“We used to mark the zones with border markers — curtains, cabinets, screens. My mother somehow managed to partition the whole room into a bedroom, a hallway, and a living room by using a closet, a stove and two curtains [marking each space’s boundary].”²⁴

Every time a new partition was added within an existing room, a new sub-space was created. These sub-rooms were however never fixed. The ephemerality of the communal rooms that kept changing form over a period of 80 years makes it almost impossible to trace the floor plans of the *Kommunalkas* over the years. Almost all the communal apartments in big cities had been actively used until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and even in the post-Soviet era. Any case study on the transient communal rooms can only be constructed either by tracing oral histories of the tenants who lived in these rooms, or by tracing the visual remnants of the partitions in once-communal apartments. However, on top of (almost) a century-long history of ever-changing interiors, communal apartments have been going through radical changes in the post-Soviet period, when the State ownership of the apartments was dropped. Although almost all apartments are still in use in contemporary Russia, the new owners of the apartments have been attempting to remove the partitions, either to increase the space of the apartment, or to erase the remnants of the communal use. Therefore, it becomes realistically impossible to draw complete floor plans of communal apartments throughout the years. However, it is still possible to document the changing plans of communal apartments partially, and this study attempts to trace such cases where partial documentation of communal palaces and their transient rooms are possible.

On Facades and Interiors

Architectural historian T.I. Timokhovitch states that pre-revolutionary apartments in Russia were designed and built in four categories: luxury apartments; “mid-level” (*srednei ruki*) apartment houses; cheap apartments and furnished rooms; and attics, basements, and flophouses.²⁵ Most of the apartments transformed into *Kommunalkas* in the big cities of the Soviet Union, especially in Leningrad and Moscow, fall into the second category, as they were designed mainly for middle or upper-middle classes. At the turn of the 20th century, the stylistic tendency of the residential

24 Ekaterina Gerasimova, “Sovetskaya Kommunal'naya Kvartira Kak Sotsial'ny Institut: Istoriko-Sotsiologicheskii Analiz” [“Soviet Communal Apartment as A Social Institution: Historical and Sociological Analysis”]. PhD diss., European University of St. Petersburg, 2000, 89.

25 From the lecture by S.I. Timokhovitch at the Second Congress of Russian Architects. S.I. Timokhovitch, “Proekt blagoustroennikh kvartir v gigienicheskom i sanitarnom otnosheniiakh” [“The project of comfortable apartments in hygienic and sanitary relations”], in *Trudy II s'ezda russkikh zodchikh v Moskve* [Proceedings of the Russian Architects in Moscow], (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1899), 179-185.

buildings in major cities of Tsarist Russia consisted of slightly different reinterpretations of *Style Moderne*, combining undulating metal cornices, curved windows, and sculpted figures, gothic pinnacles, and a characteristic projecting tower at the corner. Although the facades were somehow a variety of *Style Moderne*, the apartment plans were almost identical, typically with three or four main rooms overlooking the street, and the bedrooms and service areas (kitchen, storage, bedroom) relegated to the interior of the building block.²⁶

This existing historical texture clashed with the socialist ideals of constructing the Soviet city from scratch. During the first years following the Revolution, the primary concern of Soviet city planners was the question of what to do with the existing texture of the cities such as Moscow or Leningrad. However, with the introduction of the 1935 Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow,²⁷ the Soviet state decided to embrace the existing bourgeois texture as the nucleus of urban social and political life. One reason for this sudden change of heart was the establishment of Socialist Realism as the official style in art and architecture in 1932. Socialist Realism embraced a style in architecture, today known as Stalin's Empire Style,²⁸ the main ideology behind which was a return to eternal values. As it was explained in the report on the Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow, any new additions made to the texture of the city had to create unified and uniform architectural ensembles within the existing texture. Following two decades after its announcement as the official style, Socialist Realism presented aesthetic similarities to the image of historical cities, only with a socialist turn. After the initiation of the 1935 Master Plan under Stalin's rule, a somehow uniform architectural language covered all facades defining the cityscape. Very similar to the Stalinist apartments, the once-bourgeois apartments revealed a "palace-like" appearance, since the design of the facades that overlooked streets and avenues were highly decorated to display their "solemnity and loftiness."²⁹ However, the formation of *Kommunalka* interiors created a radical dichotomy between the facades and the interiors of former bourgeois palaces, as the facades of these buildings remained untouched, while inside, they were constantly parted and re-parted to adopt the changes in the living norms.

Unlike the decorated facades looking at the avenues, the facades looking at inner courtyards were imprecise, while the interiors presented a bizarre organization with rows and rows of rooms, each partitioned into maze-like cells, connected with long, dark, and endless corridors. The dichotomy between the ephemeral interiors and permanent exteriors was only strengthened by the added or removed plywood partitions, with the reducing sanitary norms, while the flamboyant facades of the palace-like apartments presented almost a theatre decor to the massive avenues. Artist Ilya Kabakov described this contradiction between the palace facades and communal interiors: "The world beyond the walls of the communal apartment was beautiful and whole. Only we lived divvied up; that we were shit."³⁰ While the buildings staged a scene of a theater set to the visible public sphere, the rooms were almost like installations huddled in the extravagant shell of these palaces that held dark rooms, even darker corridors and sloppily used common areas. Coincidentally, the condensed palaces fulfilled the promise of

26 For a detailed analysis of the typical arrangement of apartment space in the fashionable buildings of the period, see Peter I. Goldenberg, *Planirovka zhilogo kvartala Moskvy* [Layout of the residential quarter of Moscow] (Moscow: Stroitel'naia Literatura, 1935), 136-139.

27 The 1935 Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow was designed by Vladimir Semenov and Sergei Chernishev. In 1932, GosPlan and the Central Committee of the CPSU organized a competition for the Master Plan for the Reconstruction of Moscow. Seven regional and international architects and planners were invited to the competition. As a result, Central Committee issued a report stating all presented plans will be rejected for the ignorance of the historically developed structure of the city.

28 Selim O. Khan-Magomedvedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987).

29 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life During Khrushchev's Thaw* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 17.

30 Ilya Kabakov quoted in Victor Tupitsyn, *Vis-à-vision: Conversations with Russian Conceptual Artists, 1978-2013* (London: Spector, 2018), 40.

being “national in form, socialist in content” more than the *Stalinkas*, as their facades were relics from the history of Russian Empire architecture, while the interiors were rearranged to follow the socialist principle of collective living. In this sense, the slogan “national in form, socialist in content” became the best way to justify the policy of *Uplotnenie*, which ended up creating a mismatched relationship between the exterior and interior.

Tracing the Transient Room: A House in Leningrad and a House in Moscow

This article dwells on two case studies to trace the transient rooms of the *Kommunalkas* formed in repurposed bourgeois apartments as a result of the policy of *Uplotnenie*.

The first — an oral history project, not only for tracing the transient rooms, but also for tracing the history of *Kommunalka* — is “Communal Living in Russia” and was conducted in 2006 by Ilya Utekhin, Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, Slava Paperno, et. al. The aim of the project was to compile an oral history of communal living from the tenants of once-communal apartments who still inhabit the apartments. The authors chose six apartments from the Bolshoy Prospekt located in the Petrogradsky District in St. Petersburg and conducted interviews with the tenants while documenting on film the apartments, with the main focus of compiling the experiences on communal living and communal spaces.

One of these apartments was a previous *Kommunalka* that Ilya Utekhin lived in. (Fig.1) In 1924, the entire eleven-room apartment was given to Utekhin’s great-grandfather who was a Party official. Over the years, as the sanitary norms constantly changed, other families were gradually moved into the apartment. By the 1960s, when the apartment had over fifty tenants, six people were living in the room Utekhin occupied. Although the partitions in Utekhin’s room were removed two months prior to filming, in connection with a government inspection prior to privatization, it is possible to trace the remnants of them in the documentary. According to Utekhin, the room was previously divided into two rooms with an interior walkway dividing them. (Fig. 2) Throughout the same documentary, Utekhin visits two other rooms that were further partitioned back in the 1960s to 1980s, the partitions of which were recently removed. Although it is impossible to trace the changes in the floor plans of this particular apartment, it is possible to partially recreate the transient rooms on different periods of time. (Fig. 3)

While this example presents a room created (then removed) inside of a room, in another documentary of the same series, Utekhin visits an apartment with a room that was created out of thin air, in a building the boundaries of which had to be extended to include a communal bathroom. The apartment, also located on Bolshoy Prospekt, was originally built for the teachers of the *Annenschule Gymnasium*, before the Revolution, under the rule of Nicholas I. (Fig. 4) On the second floor of this apartment, Utekhin shot two documentaries: first, tracing a room which he calls “The Empty Room,” which was originally created from scratch on a spot that had been a remnant area in the apartment; and second, a part of a wing that once belonged to an adjacent apartment, which was incorporated and reconfigured to be a communal bathroom. What is interesting about the “Empty Room” is that the only reference by which one could trace its previous function is the stucco molding on the ceiling. Utekhin states: “The interesting thing is, if you look at the ceiling, there are two different bulbs for lighting, the one with the stucco molding was probably for a chandelier from the pre-Revolutionary times.” The chandelier Utekhin mentions is bizarrely located on the corner of the room. That means it was probably at the center of a larger room which was then divided into two, maybe three rooms. He continues: “Here was once a door, but it is blocked now. The hallway we used to get to this room was probably part of that larger room, too.”³¹ (Fig. 5)

31 Ilya Utekhin, “No Hallway, No Bath Either,” in video documentary “Tour.4: Smaller Apartments” by Ilya Utekhin, 2006, 00:48, https://kommunalka.colgate.edu/cfm/v_tours.cfm?ClipID=487&TourID=25.



Fig. 1: The apartment on Bolshoy Prospekt.

Fig. 2: Ilya Utekhin's Room and the traces of the partitions.

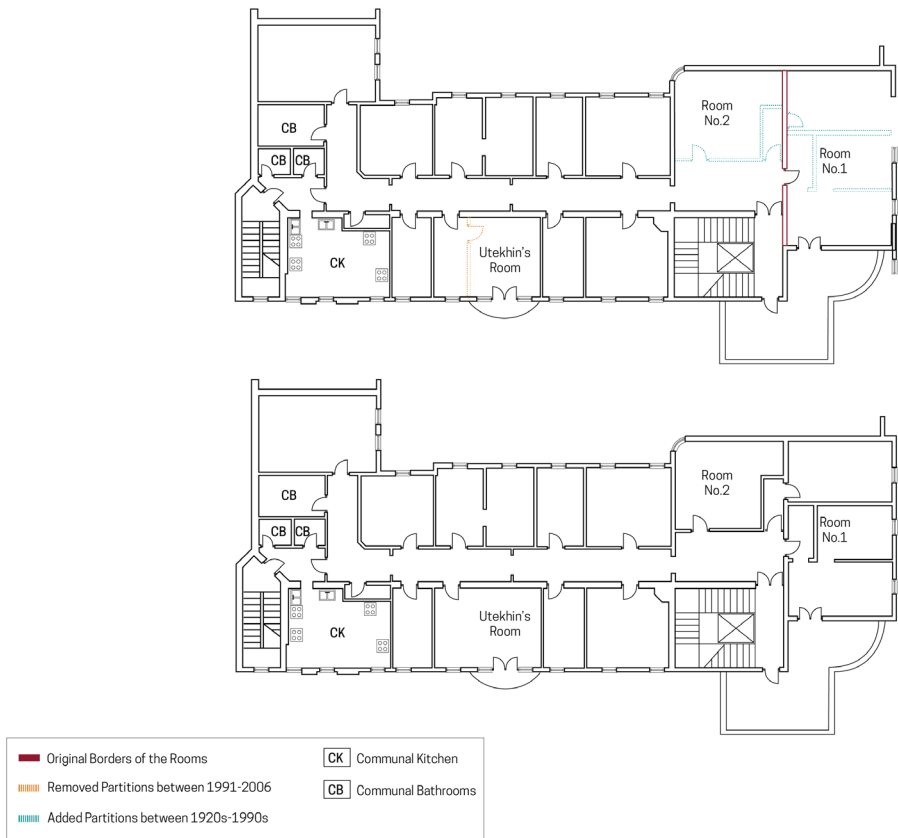


Fig. 3:[Above] The current floor plan of apartment on Bolshoy Prospekt recreated by the author on the blue-prints of the apartment.

[Below] The transient rooms recreated by the author on the floor plans of the apartment.

While the oral histories give valuable insight into the physical alterations of the interior and transience of the living space from the perspective of inhabitants, the case study of Bolshaya Sadovaya offers visual documents gathered from the archives that would show a comparative visual story of before and after for transient rooms.

As mentioned before, as a natural result of the ever-changing character of the plans, it is challenging to trace and document the transient rooms of a *Kommunalka*, the exceptions to this rule being buildings with historical significance that have usually been well documented. One example is the former *Kommunalka* on Bolshaya Sadovaya, 10 in Moscow. Built between 1896 and 1904, commissioned by the merchant Ilya Davidovich Pigit and designed by architect Edmund Stanislavovich Yuditsky,³² this five story Art Nouveau apartment is famous not because of its commissioner or architect, but for one of its many tenants: it is the apartment Mikhail Bulgakov resided in. (Fig. 6)

In 2014, the Bulgakov Museum launched a project to document the long history of the building named as “House on Bolshaya Sadovaya,” with Dmitry Oparin leading the project. In over 6 years, the Museum launched exhibitions, published a book, and formed a virtual archive for the apartment. Out of all the quarters that were well documented in the project, this study particularly focuses on Quarter No:5 of the building, where the commissioner Ilya Davidovich Pigit lived once; the documents gathered on the Quarter No:5 give valuable insight on *Uplotnenie* and the formation of transient communal rooms.

Quarter No:5 is located on the third floor of the house. While the windows of the hall, dining room, study, and living room overlook Bolshaya Sadovaya, the bedroom windows overlook the courtyard. Following the first wave of *Uplotnenie*, the quarter started being condensed to hold a family in the dining room, study and living room without the need of any physical alterations to the interior. However, in 1928, during the second wave of *Uplotnenie*, these rooms started being divided. According to a directive dated 1928 from the Rental Department of the Moscow Real Estate Administration (MUNI), sent to the board of the housing and communal office of house no. 10, the quarter was to be partitioned into three rooms, according to the new sanitary norms, to locate three families in the quarter.³³ Although the directive clearly states that the main hall should be divided in three rooms, the quarter was recorded as if it was divided into two as 5a and 5b in legal documents and “House Books” (*domovoy knigi*) at the time, which again proves the difficulty of tracing the changes in architectural space only through documents without referring to tenants’ accounts. In the case of Quarter No:5, although the directive suggested paying attention to the décor of the former hall, a restoration project initiated by the Center for Historical and Urban Planning Studies under the leadership of B. E. Pasternak in 1997 proved differently. During the project, the staff started drafting the original plans of the Quarter No:5, before the partitions were added, to be able to trace the original interiors and compare them to the additions made in the Soviet period. The initially constructed plans, together with photographs taken from the quarter after the partitions were removed, show that, although the rooms were transient in character, the architectural elements – the partitions, the doors and fixtures added to construct the transient rooms – left marks in the historical interior that mutilated the original décor and its character permanently, as the furnishes on the walls and ceilings were destroyed and the walls were demolished. (Fig. 7) Although, in the Bolshaya Sadovaya example, the transient rooms themselves vanished in time, their physical remnants that mutilated its host (the bourgeois apartment) still stands today, which brings the question: “In a discipline such as architecture where a spatial construct does not completely vanish before leaving a mark, to what extent does ephemerality exist?” In the case of transient communal rooms, the answer to that question can be summarized as follows: the socialist room was designed to be evanescent and ephemeral, not to belong or to be appropriated, while the building, the host that the transient room is installed into – the bourgeois palace – was built to last.

32 Unpublished document, RGALI. F. 680. Op. 2. D. 918.

33 CGA of Moscow. OKHD after 1917. F. 2433. Op. 4. D. 725. L. 113.



Fig. 4: The apartment on Bolshoy Prospekt: “The Annenschule Gymnasium.”

Fig. 5: [Above] The current floor plan of apartment “The Annenschule Gymnasium” recreated by the author on the blueprints of the apartment.

[Below] The transient rooms recreated by the author on the floor plans of the apartment.



Fig. 6: House on Bolshaya Sadovaya, 1970s.

Fig. 7: The former office of the landlord Ilya Pigit, divided into separate rooms. On the left, the original colors of the frieze, cornice and ceiling have been preserved.



Conclusion

The formation of the communal apartment was something remarkable, especially from the perspective of architecture. The communal room had been one of the fascinating spatial configurations in the residential history of the Soviet Union. The case studies of communal housing created within the shells of bourgeois apartments, although politically symbolizing the socialist regime taking over the Tsarist rule, prove that the application of this ideology was more complicated and significant than its symbolism. Communal interiors had been the embodiments of the dichotomy between the long-lasting exteriors and ephemeral interiors. Although, as mentioned above, the methods causing this ephemerality varied, the communal room as a transient entity is an insightful topic of study.

When one starts to trace the small clues, and not only the remnants of the architectural components used to create *Kommunalka* interiors, but also the pre-Revolutionary ones, it is remarkable how much information they provide on the transience of the communal interiors. This study aimed to present only a small portion of data gathered by tracing the architectural details of once-communal apartments, which proves that a study of communal interiors is potentially a great, yet barely touched field, especially from the disciplinary perspectives of architecture and architectural history.

The traces of communal rooms do not only shed light onto the histories of Soviet residential space, but they also have the potential to provide clues for the domestic spaces and everyday life in contemporary Russia, as they are still a permanent part of the lives of Russian society today. Although in the late 1950s, under Nikita Khrushchev's rule, private apartments were reintroduced to Soviet citizens, *Kommunalkas* remained the main housing stock of the Soviet Union until its dissolution, and even during the post-Soviet times. In contemporary Russia, the buildings previously used as *Kommunalkas* still host many tenants, especially in Moscow and Leningrad, and the majority of these apartments preserve their *Kommunalka* blueprints. Many tenants stay in these apartments, partly due to the economic status of the people residing in them or the lack of will of the State to pass on restitution laws that include repairs of the apartment buildings; however, one of the most important reasons is that the communal room has become a part of the cultural heritage of Russian cities.

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- Fig. 3, 5: Recreated by the author on the blueprints of the apartment.
- Fig. 6: From the collection of Boris Evgenievich Pasternak. Image courtesy of the Bulgakov Museum.
- Fig. 7: From the personal archive of Paul Spangler (1996). Image courtesy of the Bulgakov Museum.