

Tashkent. Forging a Soviet City. 1930–1966

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--The main theme of this book is Soviet urban planning and architecture in Central Asia between 1930 and 1966. It seeks to explain how Russian Bolsheviks wanted to transform the city of Tashkent into a model Soviet city, with impressive public buildings worthy of the new political order, and adequate housing projects for the city's proletariat. The author uses Tashkent as an example to analyze Soviet architecture in general, but the main focus remains on this Central Asian city, today the capital of Uzbekistan.

Starting from 1930, the independent scholar Paul Stronski lays out in chronological order how Soviet architects went about transforming Tashkent into a Soviet city. Tashkent was originally an old city of the Silk Road, which was captured by Russian forces in 1865. The new colonial masters immediately started construction of a modern, Russian (European) city by the side of the old, native one.⁽¹⁾ By the time of the Bolshevik assumption of power, Tashkent was in reality two cities, one beside the other; one for the local Muslims and one inhabited by Russians and other Europeans. So, for the Bolsheviks it was not only a question of creating a new urban environment inspired by their communist beliefs; it was just as important to merge these two into one. By the outbreak of the Second World War, some monumental structures had been erected, but at the expense of the citizens' more immediate needs, such as infrastructure and housing. During the war, Tashkent received a massive influx of refugees from European Soviet Union, among them high-skilled laborers and scientists. Some heavy industry, including an aviation plant, was also evacuated to Tashkent. This would change Tashkent radically. With victory secured, Tashkent, as with other Soviet cities, faced an overwhelming challenge in creating adequate housing for the city's expanded population. This would not be solved until the 1970s, as in April 1966 a massive 7.4 earthquake left in ruins much of the construction work carried out in the 1960s to solve these problems.

In Tashkent, Soviet architects saw an opportunity to create new urban spaces where industry and technology could benefit the people, the party and the state. Soviet politicians and artists saw architecture, both through specific buildings but also in overall urban-planning, as a means to express and symbolize the new political ideas and moral values. The city was an architectural scene which should reflect new science and rational thinking, be sanitary, and whose buildings should be functional. Furthermore, Soviet architects viewed architecture as one of the principal agents in creating the ideal Soviet man and woman, who would participate in productive labor, preferably as a toiler or academic, appreciate high culture and share the visions of communism. But as the book explains, the Soviet urban renewal campaigns were also about bringing about the breakdown of traditional social structures and increasing the state's ability to monitor its citizens. Tashkent architecture was, like much else from the early Soviet era, a laboratory, where the victims of far-fetched ideas and heavy-handed implementation were the very citizens the Bolsheviks sought to liberate.

In his book, Paul Stronski stresses the utopian ideals of the Bolsheviks; an elevated living standard for all, ethnic and gender equality, industrial growth, and educational and socio-economic opportunities for every citizen. But with such lofty promises realization was hard. As the author points out, the regime's blind and uncritical faith in Marxism, its desire for total control of its citizens and its economic development, combined with an inefficient bureaucracy, hindered the realization of these promises. In addition, Stronski tells us, repeated ideological shifts and ever-changing political priorities hindered long-term planning and were major obstacles to urban renewal. It is thus interesting to read that during periods of political liberalization, for example just after the Second World War and after the death of Stalin in 1953, more realistic proposals for the city's desperate need for additional and more locally-suited housing projects were presented. To illustrate, many of the bigger housing projects constructed before mid 1960s were unsuited to the warm climate of Central Asia, and the apartments built did not take into consideration the Uzbeks family structure, which tended towards bigger and extended families. Instead, Soviet architects used only one common standard for housing projects in the entire Union. And it is also telling that most of the plans were drawn by Moscow-based architects which rarely or never visited Tashkent. 'Cities were not supposed to suit the customs of the inhabitants; inhabitants were supposed to transform their customs to suit the new Soviet city', Stronski illustratively points out (p. 223).

In addition to the problems produced by an inflexible ideology, the new Tashkent architecture suffered from poor workmanship and a lack of good coordination and management. For example, new buildings could be without gas or running water years after their construction. And even though the Soviet ideal was multiple-storey apartment buildings run and constructed by the state, by 1958 Tashkent still had the highest percentage of people living in private lots in the Union, and 85 per cent lived in one-storey buildings. This clearly shows that the local population were active participators in Tashkent's expansion, and that the centralized ambitions of the authorities largely failed or were inadequate in providing housing for the city.

Finally, the architects ignored the constant menace from earthquakes in the region. This became very evident in the 1996 earthquake in which destroyed 78,000 homes.

Stronski's book is structured around archival documents drawn from a wide array of party and state organs in which the further development of the city was discussed. As mentioned, ideas of how this development should be brought about, what should be prioritized, and not least what political ambitions should be materialized, were, especially until 1940, in constant flux. According to Stronski, frequent new directions from Moscow were the reason for this. To illustrate, one can follow the career of one of the principal agents in the Soviet transformation of Tashkent; Kharkov-born architect Stepan Nikolaevich Polupanov, who was ejected from his post several times, yet as a consequence of his well-developed political skills was rehabilitated several times and would eventually influence Tashkent's design profoundly.

A modernist, Polupanov moved to Tashkent in the 1920s to bring Central Asian architecture in line with the ideas of the rest of the Union. His first designs were housing projects, where he brought daily routines, such as washing, cooking and child care, into communal structures, in order to liberate women. But in addition to housing, Polupanov is best known for having designed the new Government building in the heart of the capital, a modernist building, with simple aesthetics and a stress on functionality. However, by the time of its completion in 1933, Moscow had ordered the stylistic replacement of the constructivism of the 1920s with a Soviet form of neoclassicism, which was to become the Union's standardized architectural expression. Therefore, Polupanov was forced to add columns to make the appearance more 'monumental'. Polupanov was lucky to survive the late 1930s purges, but his earlier ideas were criticized, and he himself was accused that, as a leading architect in the city, he had failed to develop 'socialist Uzbek national architecture' (p. 165). Polupanov adapted his aesthetics to changing times and the new Soviet standards. In the 1950s, he was still a leading figure, who mentored the up-and-coming local architects

Stronski's archival research also shows the planned and standardized approach Soviet architects and politicians had towards city development, and it further highlights the seemingly boundless confidence Soviet policymakers had in their ability to bend and transform every aspect of society towards the realization of their communist utopia. For example, like other Soviet cities, Tashkent required 'planned' demographic growth, with precise set targets: 52 per cent to be employed in industry and transportation; 9 per cent to be employed in political and economic institutions; 19 per cent to be employed in science or culture; 9 per cent in construction; and 11 per cent in others.

The city was also planned as a balance of nations and of religious and ethnic background. Soviet policymakers wanted Uzbek cultural workers involved in the reconstruction, but the paternalism of Russian communism and Soviet centralized control undermined real local influence. 'It was largely Russian academics ... who helped determine what constituted Uzbek national character' (p. 56). Stronski's research unearths the conflicting desires for Tashkent architecture to reflect both local history and culture, but also socialist and universal symbolism. Thus, in decorating the government building, Polupanov designed detailed carvings of rosettes and cotton motives, symbolizing the importance of agriculture to Uzbekistan, and especially the cotton industry. 'With the cotton design, Polupanov came up with a clear "recipe" for Uzbek national architecture' and "created standardized format" which enabled "Soviet architects to design building for Tashkent without ever setting their foot in Central Asia' (p. 55). This design would have lasting utility, and is even used in present Uzbekistan. This example is indeed illustrative of the paradoxes of Soviet nationalities policies; Soviet policymakers sought to create a Uzbek nationalism, but it was to be a nationalism which was designed and sanctioned in Moscow. But this nationalism was merely a step towards the long term goal of creating an identity devoid of class and ethnicity distinctions, often labeled 'homo sovieticus'.

One of the constant issues which the Soviet authorities struggled to solve was the merger of the old, local city with the younger Russian, now communist one. The symbolism of this situation was thus that the majority of Muslim Tashkenters were somehow reluctant to fully embrace the ideals of the 'homo sovieticus'. 'Tashkent's planners wanted to unify the city, but residents preferred separate lives', Stronski tells us (p. 70). It is, however, important to add, just as Stronski does, that Central Asians to a large extent

eventually embraced the Soviet system and very much saw themselves as a part of this multi-ethnic empire – even though they felt like they were treated as poor relations by the Slavs. In the era of *Glasnost*, when Baltic and Caucasian republics sought independence, Central Asia remained firmly committed to the Union.

For Moscow, Tashkent was also symbolically important externally. A key components of Bolshevik ideology was the liberation of the oppressed colonized people of Russia and abroad. As such, the Bolsheviks wanted to give equal rights and material goods to all the nations of the Soviet Union, not just the Russians. For the Bolsheviks, Tashkent became the primary arena to demonstrate colonial liberation from the oppression of the Tsarist-state, and to show delegates from Asia, Africa and Latin America a modern, industrial and communist city of Asia. Tashkent was the venue for a wide variety of international cultural festivals and happenings and the city was a ‘beacon of hope for Asian peoples living under western colonialism’ (p. 7).

However, as Stronski discusses, Soviet cities were not only venues for housing and social and political control, they were very much the site of economic activity, especially industry and science. The early Bolsheviks were skeptical of the Russian peasant and looked to the industrial worker for their main support. For them, industrialization and urbanization was the same thing. As this book explains, before the Second World War Tashkent saw little actual industrial activity, although much was planned for. It was not until the evacuation of 1941, and the changes wrought by the further duration of the war, that Tashkent became an industrial city. The consequence of the chaotic evacuation was that the reestablishment of industrial plants and barracks lacked overall coordination. This would in turn result in large shantytowns, industrial and human waste problems, and pollution in the midst of the city. The Ankhor Canal, the City’s main waterway, and the barrier between old and new Tashkent, was heavily contaminated. Clean water was in short supply throughout the period.

Stronski’s book can be read as a description of Soviet urban planning and architecture in general and of how the Bolsheviks saw architecture as an agent to realize political goals. But the book might be more interesting for those already familiar with Soviet history. Though the city of Tashkent may sound exotic for the common reader it was nevertheless the Soviet Union’s fourth largest city after Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev, with a population of nearly three million by the 1980s.

Soviet urban-planning was imperfect in many respects. The author nevertheless tends to somewhat underplay the huge and impressive transformation of the city of Tashkent in this period of time. Some of the chapters of the book, especially the one concerning the Second World War, are somewhat repetitive and the relevance, for instance, of the descriptions of incoming refugees to the book’s stated objects is somewhat unclear. The author may also have exaggerated the significance of, and put too much of the book’s content into analyzing, the conflicts between Europeans and the local Muslim population. There were certainly conflicts and discrimination, but the main obstacle to efficient and functional urban planning was to be found in the ineffective and politicized Soviet system. The book’s primary emphasis is not on architectural theory and methodology, but an additional focus on such would certainly both have made the book even more interesting and have contextualized its content further. Stronski states that the early Bolshevik architecture of Tashkent reflected the early Soviet trend towards modernism, and that by the mid 1930s, constructivist ideas had been purged and replaced by ‘classism’. However, the book offers only limited insight to architectural trends and styles after this.

Nevertheless, this well-narrated book leaves a vivid impression of the construction of a Soviet Asian metropolis. The book’s strength is in the descriptions of local power struggles and individual architects’ ambitions and visions for the city. In general, Soviet architecture outside the main Russian cities is rarely discussed, so Stronski has certainly filled a vacuum with this book. And lastly, Stronski must be given credit for his work in the archives, covering much previously unread material for a western audience.

Notes

1. Jeff Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865–1923*. (Bloomington, IN, 2007). [Back to \(1\)](#)
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