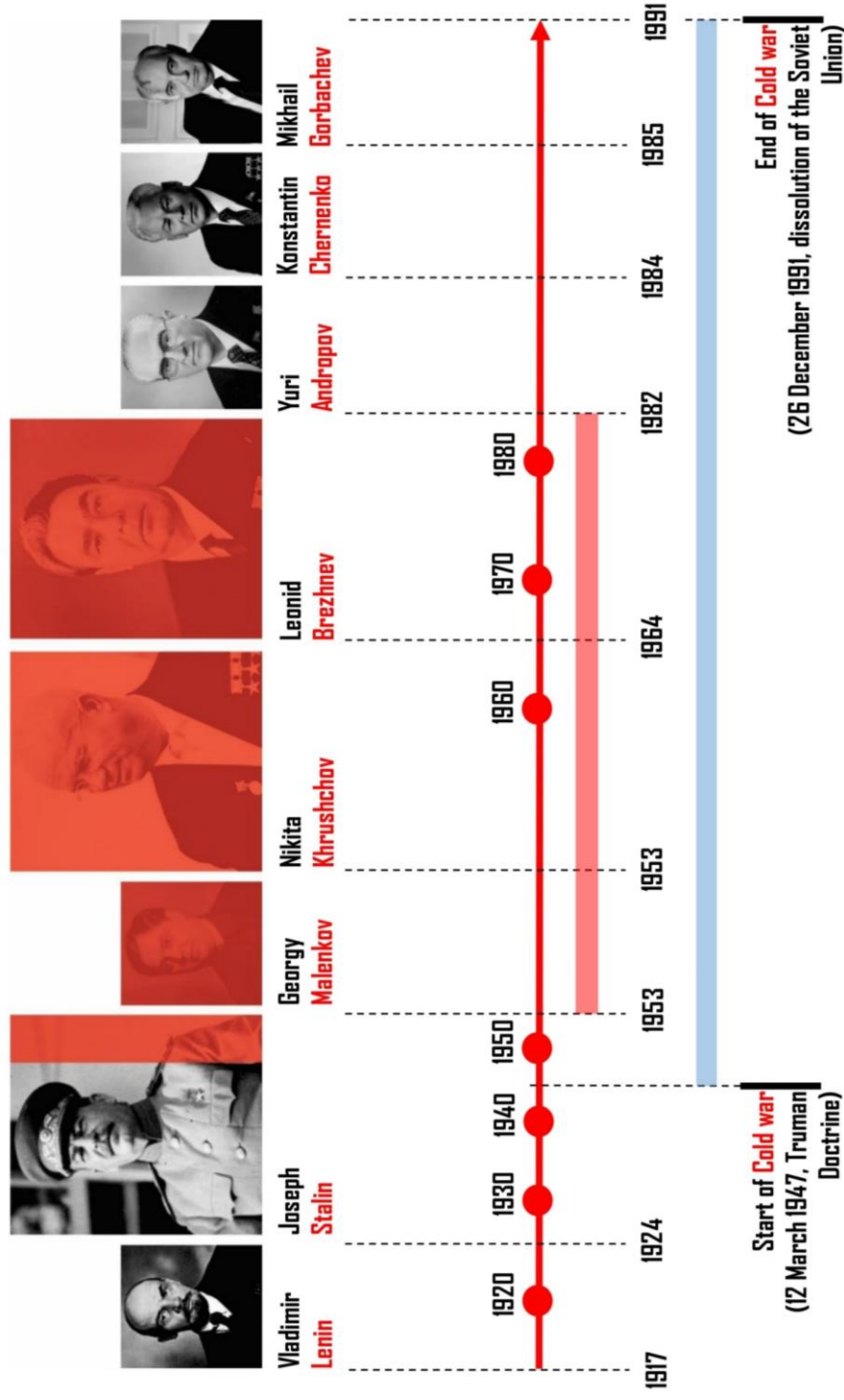


Soviet architecture and the **West**
Exchanges and influences during the cold war

Gevorg Torosyan



Soviet architecture and the **West**

Exchanges and influences during the cold war

Gevorg Torosyan

Author: Gevorg Torosyan

Gevorg Torosyan is an architectural researcher specializing in modernist heritage preservation. He serves as the secretary of DOCOMOMO Armenia, the national chapter of DOCOMOMO International, which focuses on documenting and conserving modernist architecture. Holding a Master of Architectural Engineering from Vrije Universiteit Brussel, his work bridges academic inquiry and practical advocacy for preserving architectural legacy.

Publisher: **Bookmundo**

Delftsestraat 33, 3013 AE Rotterdam, Netherlands

Edition number: 1

This book stems from Gevorg Torosyan's Master's thesis at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Conducted under the guidance of Prof. Rika Devos and completed in August 2022, the thesis explored Cold War-era exchanges between Soviet and Western architecture, forming the foundation of this publication

ISBN: 9789403772295

© Gevorg Torosyan

Abstract

In recent decades, Soviet modernism has attracted great interest in the world. There are many reasons for this. One of them, for example, is that the world may not have expected any particularly modern achievements from the Soviet Union following international trends, while the newly discovered "All-Union Modernism" showed the opposite. In the post-Soviet period, when borders opened the former Soviet countries became accessible to a wide range of international experts. Also, numerous studies, magazines, published books and catalogues contributed significantly to the process of the "discovery".

This book examines the relationship between the Soviet-Western architectures of the 1950s and 1970s. The study investigates how post-war Soviet architecture learned about, and from, the Western architectural experience beyond the Iron Curtain, and in what ways it appropriated it. Did Soviet architecture merely absorb Western experiences, or did its architectural-engineering circles also develop unique insights through a policy of 'self-isolation'?

To better understand the mechanisms of exchange and contact, this book categorizes them into chapters for individual analysis. These mechanisms or domains are "travel", "tourist groups", "business trips", "conferences", "foreign literature", "competition, fairs", "teaching, studying, research", "USSR - Eastern Europe", and "professional migration".

Contents

Introduction	5
Travel	23
1.1 General overview of tourist-working visits during 1922-1954	25
1.2 Tourist-working visits during 1950-the 1970s	39
1.2.1 Tourist groups	41
1.2.2 Business trips	45
Foreign literature	51
2.1 Magazines and books in 1922-1954	52
2.2 Magazines and books in 1950-the 1970s	59
2.2.1 French magazine L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui in the Soviet Union	60
2.2.2 Main Soviet architectural magazine Architecture USSR	63
2.3 Books	69
Teaching, Studying, Research	77
3.1 NER-City (New Settlement Element)	78
3.2 "House of the New Way of Life"	81
Congresses, international conferences, exhibitions and competitions, fairs	85
4.1 General overview of important events during 1922-1954	86
4.1.1 Le Corbusier and Tsentrosoiuz building	88
4.1.2 International competition for the new "Palace of the Soviets" in Moscow	95
4.1.3 The Soviet pavilion at the 1937 Paris World exhibition	102
4.2 Exhibitions and competitions in 1950-the 1970s	103
4.3.1 Architectural Competition for Pompidou centre	105
4.3.2 The Fifth IUA Congress in Moscow, 1958	110
4.3.3 To the IX Congress of the International Union of Architects	112
4.3.4 American expositions in USSR	115
4.3.5 Soviet International Exhibitions	123
The USSR is expanding its borders to the West	133
5.1 Eastern European socialist countries	135
5.2 "Second-hand" experience	138
Conclusion	142
Bibliography	143
Table of Figures	147



Introduction

From the early 1950s, international architectural relations intensified worldwide, including within the Soviet Union, where many initiatives were even state-sponsored. This shows that, in the opinion of the Soviet authorities, specialists in the field of architecture and construction should have mastered the innovative methods in the field of construction engineering as soon as possible, so that the state could overcome the crisis of the post-war period at a faster pace. This process implied that architecture should temporarily leave the field of art to become part of civil engineering. In the mid-1950s, after Stalin died, socialist realism¹ began to give way to "post-war modernism"², which would later become the dominant "spirit" of the era. At that time, Soviet architecture was developing mainly on the principles of European-American modernization, industrialization and mass construction, and aimed to establish itself as a part of the global professional community.

Architecture and construction were considered important matters by the leaders of the USSR in the postwar period. The reform of architecture and construction was one of the first projects launched by Nikita Khrushchev after he came to power³. In 1954, during the All-Union Conference of Architects and Builders⁴, the new leader harshly and unexpectedly criticized Stalinist architecture as being too expensive and pompous. One year later, on November 5, 1955, the decree "*on the elimination of excesses in design and construction*" appeared. It confirmed the new direction and caused even more confusion among architects. Architects were forced to create a new style "according to the best foreign achievements"⁵. Together with the promotion of mass housing and steps toward Western architectural styles, the Khrushchev reform of architecture and construction had another outcome, more unfortunate for architects. With the ascendancy of standardized constructions, the discourse on the economy and a pragmatic approach toward the building, architecture lost its exceptional status. Even before *Khrushchyovka* (low-cost, low-rise apartment buildings)⁶ became a reality, symbolic discrimination was taking place: the magazine *Architecture USSR*⁷

¹ Socialist realism is a style of idealized realistic art that was developed in the Soviet Union and was the official style in that country between 1932 and 1988, as well as in other socialist countries after World War II.

² After the end of the Second World War.

³ Nikita Khrushchev served as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964

⁴ National Conference of Builders, Architects, Workers in the Construction Materials and Manufacture of Construction and Roads Machinery Industries, and Employees of Design and Research and Development Organizations on December 7, 1954

⁵ Decision of the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers of the USSR, point 4

⁶ *Khrushchyovka* is an unofficial name for a type of low-cost, concrete-panel or brick, three-to five-storied apartment buildings which was developed in the Soviet Union during the early 1960s, during the time its namesake Nikita Khrushchev directed the Soviet government.

⁷ Monthly theoretical, scientific and practical journal *Architecture USSR*. Organ of the State Committee for Civil Engineering and Architecture under the USSR State Construction Committee and the Union of Architects of the USSR. It was published from July 1933 to June 1, 1992 (from July 1933 to June 1941 monthly, from 1942 to 1947 non-periodically (18 issues); from 1948 to October 1951, it was not published; from November 1951 it is again published monthly). Soviet scientific and technical publishing house (Stroyizdat), Moscow.

published in Moscow by the scientific and technical publishing house *Stroyizdat* was renamed *Architecture and Construction in the USSR*, and the *Academy of Architecture* was renamed the *Academy of Construction and Architecture*⁸ until its closure in 1963⁹.

In this book, several main means of communication between 1950 and 1980 are studied to trace the mechanisms of the import of these foreign principles in the USSR: individual and group travel, business trips, conferences, foreign, particularly European literature, competitions, fairs, teaching, studying etcetera. Several other factors are also taken into account that could influence the relationship between Western and Soviet architecture, such as the spread of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe and certain forms of professional immigration.

These "revolutionary" and drastic steps were more political; it would not have been so simple to make a similar change in actual architecture, if only for the simple reason that the architects who had been designing under Stalin's "instructions" for more than two decades were still working on unfinished projects and structures.

However, after the adoption of these decisions in 1954-1955, many projects were revised and adapted to the new principles.

These events were not limited to Russia but touched on the production of buildings throughout the USSR. For example, as Karen Balyan mentions in his book¹⁰, the Radio House and the railway station in Yerevan (Armenia), two of the projects already under construction when the new law was issued, the towers were removed. In 1956 Yerevan station, designed by Edmond Tigranyan, was opened without a dome and a tower (the station tower was later built anyway). Under pressure from the government, the architects corrected their designs, trying to understand the still unclear content of the new guidelines. The architects were often accused of "wasting people's money" and were persecuted. Until the end of the 1950s, many buildings continued to be constructed with pre-approved designs, without removing the "unnecessary" and "stunning" decorations of the facades. In this context, the complex on Yerevan Kievyan Street was implemented without significant changes¹¹.

According to the 1954 issue of the magazine *Architecture USSR*, almost a year after Stalin's death, photographs and drawings of buildings built on the principles of Stalin's "classicism" continued to be published. This style was still prevalent in the Union. However, it can be assumed that this eleventh issue, published in November 1954, is the last reporting on this style. A month later, on December 7, at the All-Union Conference of Architects and Builders,

⁸ *Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction Science*. Accessed 11 21, 2021. raasn.ru.

⁹ In 1963, by the Decree of the Council of Ministers of the USSR (N 853) of August 6 "On the Academy of Civil Engineering and Architecture of the USSR and the Academy of Civil Engineering and Architecture of the Ukrainian SSR" both Academies were liquidated. (Source: Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction Science. Accessed 11 21, 2021. raasn.ru.)

¹⁰ Balyan, Karen. 2020. *Fenix Darbinyan*. Edited by Armen Amirkhanyan. Translated by Ruben Tarumyan. Yerevan: NewMag

¹¹ Balyan, Karen, interview by Gevorg Torosyan. "Soviet architecture and the West." (May 2020, September 2021, January 2022) Moscow-Yerevan

the new head of the union was to attack Stalin's architecture with a critical and condemnatory speech. The next issue available on the Russian TATLIN online platform is the fourth issue of 1962. Only by comparing the two pages opened by these two magazines, one can see the rather big change in style and content of the past eight years, plus colour photos. It seems that, for the government at least, architecture at some point merged with and was absorbed by construction. Stalin's architecture¹² did not aim to solve the accumulated social and housing crisis that the Soviet Union faced by the 1950s, and by the end of the Stalin era, more than half of Moscow's population still lived in communal houses and barracks. Of course, the explanations are many, but the foremost remarkable is that under Stalin, the fastest and doubtless most brutal industrial revolution in the history of the USSR was forced between 1929 and 1940. Moscow was full of rural migrants fleeing the starving countryside to work in the new factories. Many lived in barracks, basements, tents, and even trenches. This housing crisis was barely dealt with when the war compounded the matter, making millions homeless.

In the post-Stalin period, the party leadership of the USSR set a task to solve the housing crisis as quickly and efficiently as possible, to separate its image from the events of the previous period. This process involved prefabricated houses made of prefabricated elements, structures without excessive luxuries, and apartment buildings, to provide the camp with apartments and other structures necessary for living as soon as possible.

One of the interesting examples is the beginning of the construction of the new micro-district south of Moscow, in the former village of Cheryomushki. The difference between the Stalinist boulevards and therefore the first parts of "Novye Cheryomushki"¹³ is striking. In the beginning "Novye Cheryomushki" was an outstanding public space and public buildings: health centres, kindergartens, schools, cinemas, libraries, and theatres.

The district included both five and nine-story Khrushchev buildings. This may have been a significant social advancement for the people of Moscow., not only within the sense of amenities but also therein private life was now possible, after three decades of living in cramped communal flats.

¹² Stalinist architecture, mostly known as Stalinist style or Socialist Classicism, is the architecture of the Soviet Union under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, between 1933 and 1955.

¹³ The name of the new residential district, which means "New Cheryomushki"



Figure 1: Yerevan railway station was opened in 1956 without a dome and a tower, which was later built according to the original plans

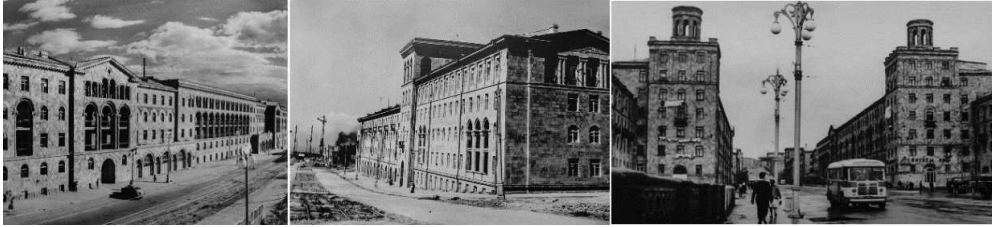


Figure 2: Yerevan Kievyan Street under construction in the 1950s



Figure 3: New Cheryomushki, Quarter No. 10, Moscow, 1965, Soviet residential development.

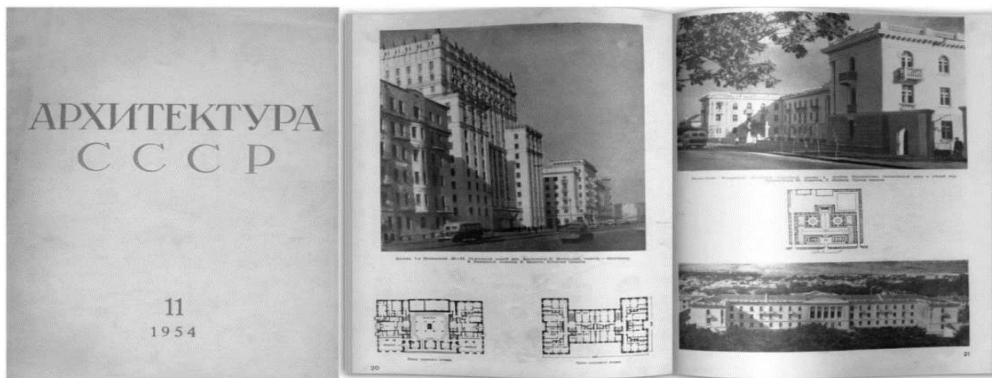


Figure 4: Cover and Internal Page of Architecture in the USSR Magazine (Issue 11, 1954)

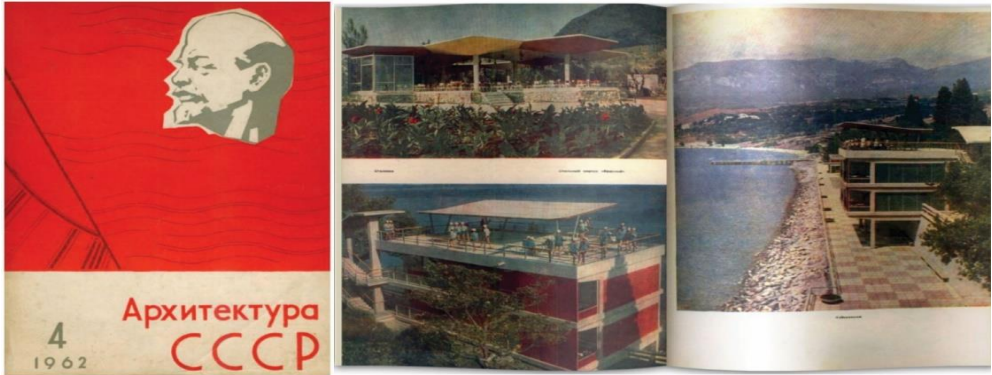


Figure 5: Cover and Internal Page of Architecture in the USSR Magazine (Issue 4, 1962)



Figure 6: Cover for the Decca DVD release of "Cherry Town"(original name "Cheryomushki") and posters for the film



Figure 7: Stalinist towers in Moscow named "Seven Sisters".

This huge construction project was so significant for the Soviet period that in 1958 Dmitry Shostakovich¹⁴ composed an operetta¹⁵ on it and in 1962 director Herbert Rapaport directed a musical film comedy based on that operetta called *"Moscow, Cheryomushki"* which shows the great enthusiasm of homeowners of the new apartments¹⁶.

Since the mid-1950s, huge-scale housing and public buildings have been built in socialist countries, first and foremost in the Soviet Union, where, according to the USSR CSD¹⁷, more than 2.3 million apartments were built each year. There was an opportunity to talk about the recognition of urban development humanitarian ideas put forward by international progressive organizations of architects (in particular, the International Union of Architects¹⁸, which includes the USSR Architects Union and other organizations)¹⁹.

However, some architects did not find this process of "modernization" very acceptable, not only because they came from the Stalinist school of architecture, which was "founded" in 1932 according to the decision of the politburo²⁰, but also because it was difficult for them to work under new conditions and new principles, and they also argued that the process often damages or destroys the historical layers, as many noted that modernist construction has barbarically penetrated the historical landscape. Ahistorical in its essence, modernist architecture crippled the look of Soviet cities that had taken centuries to mature. One of the most vivid examples of such urban development is the "artificial jaw of Moscow", a series of high-rise buildings on Kalinin Avenue²¹ passing through the historical centre of the city²².

This 1962 project aimed to give the Soviet capital a new look by demolishing existing historic buildings and replacing them with high-rise buildings. The main author of the project was architect Mikhail Posokhin, who was already prominent in many projects. Of course, Posokhin collaborated on many parts of the projects with other architects, such as Gleb Makarevich, Boris Thor and Russian-Armenian architects Shagen Hayrapetyan (Airapetov)

¹⁴ Soviet-era Russian composer and pianist. He is regarded as one of the major composers of the 20th century and one of its most popular composers.

¹⁵ Operetta is a genre of light opera.

¹⁶ Shostakovich's operetta *Moscow, Cheryomushki* (Op. 105) | Belcanto.ru
Film *"Moscow, Cheryomushki"* "Черемушки" Герберт Раттапорт, 1962 г. (youtube.com)

¹⁷ Central Statistical Directorate

¹⁸ The Union of Architects of the USSR was established on July 4, 1932. But each republic of USSR had its own Union of Architects founded in different years

¹⁹ Smolyar, Ilya, and Michel Ragon. 1969. "Cities of the Future (Introduction of Russian translation)." Moscow, 4-5.

²⁰ Decision of the Politburo of the Communist Party of April 23, 1932 "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations"

²¹ Now New Arbat Avenue

²² Bazdarev, Alexei. 2015. *History of Soviet Architecture: From Palaces to Boxes*. April.

and Ashot Mndoyants, latter was famous for his design of one of the Stalinist towers in Moscow named “Seven Sisters”, Kudrinskaya Square.

He also collaborated with Mikhail Posokhin in 1963 in the exhibition hall of the SEV²³ building, and in 1967 in the Soviet pavilion, both in Moscow.

In addition, architectural revisionism mercilessly destroyed monuments of truly socialist architectural design.

The “reconstruction” of the exhibition and amusement park VDNKH²⁴ in Moscow is quite an example. A unique architectural complex combining the good samples of worldwide classical art with the unique charm of the national republics of the USSR, which was established on February 17, 1935, as the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (VSKhV) and was designed as a “City of Exhibitions” with streets and public spaces. One of the most memorable features of the exhibition site was the “Worker and Kolkhoz Woman”²⁵ statue, featuring the gigantic figures of a man and woman holding together the famous hammer and sickle. The sculpture, which reaches 24.5 meters toward the sky, was originally crowned the 35-meter-tall Soviet pavilion at the World's Fair ²⁶ in 1937.

The exhibition complex was to be “modernized” for the jubilee of the October Revolution. In 1967, the classical look of many of the pavilions was crooked by the modernist “innovations” beyond recognition, while the unique pavilions of the Central Alley were simply demolished²⁷.

Although the modernists of the first period also came out of the Stalinist school of “neoclassicism”, nevertheless, it was they who did the “modernist revolution” in architecture and construction.

²³ The SEV Building, also known under the name COMECON (The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, СЭВ, SEV) is one of the most expressive buildings in Moscow which are perceived very differently from all sides and change its appearance from every point. The building is 105m high with 31 floors. The SEV building is now the Government administration building.

²⁴ Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy of USSR

²⁵ Sculpture of two figures with a sickle and a hammer raised over their heads. It is 24.5 meters high, made from stainless steel by Vera Mukhina for the 1937 World's Fair in Paris, and subsequently moved to Moscow.

²⁶ Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne (1937)

²⁷ Bazdarev, Alexei. 2015. History of Soviet Architecture: From Palaces to Boxes. April.

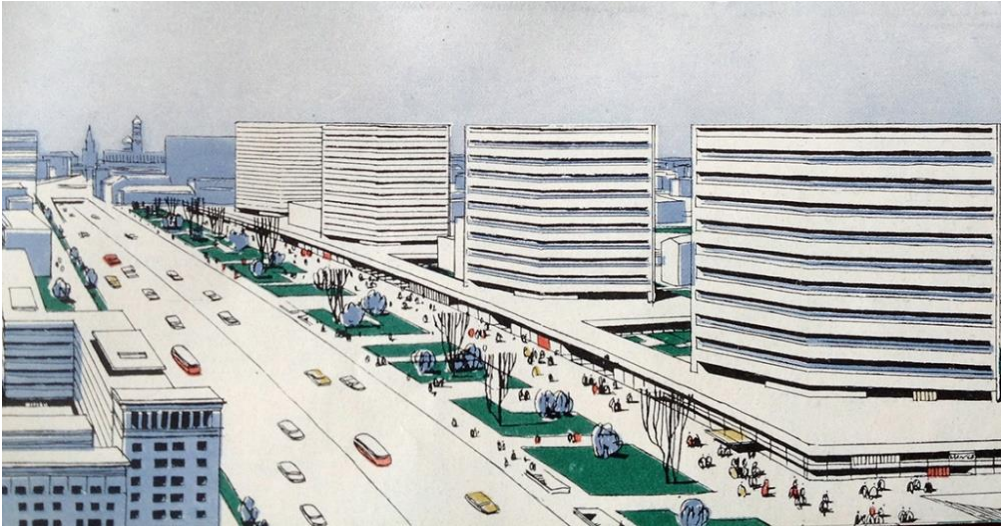


Figure 8: Kalinin Avenue Project, published in the "Construction and Architecture of Moscow" magazine in 1962



Figure 9: The location of the current Novy Arbat according to the plan for the reconstruction of Moscow in 1935 and the location of that project on the map of 1853