



Eastern Block

Being an architect in capitalist Russia can be harder than it was under Soviet rule.

BY JOHN VAROLI / PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER BLAKELY

> PRACTICE A cold snap has left St. Petersburg, Russia's former imperial capital, in a deep freeze. Knee-high snowfall blankets the city, and on this 20-below-zero day, architect Boris Podolsky—head of the architectural design bureau of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the nation's most prestigious academic association—sits in his spacious downtown office, a stone's throw from the gold-domed, 19th-century St. Isaac's Cathedral. The office is neat and spartan. Architectural designs and plans hang on the wall.

Looking across the plans, one can see the breadth of Podolsky's 30-year career as an architect. The work begins with the collective

monotony of the Soviet era, when prefabricated structures were the norm, and continues through to the design opportunities made possible by Russia's new, chaotic capitalism. On one end are plans for a Soviet-era astronomical observatory and housing for scientists. On the other is the latest and largest project of Podolsky's career: an international diplomatic center at the Konstantin Palace in St. Petersburg's southern suburbs.

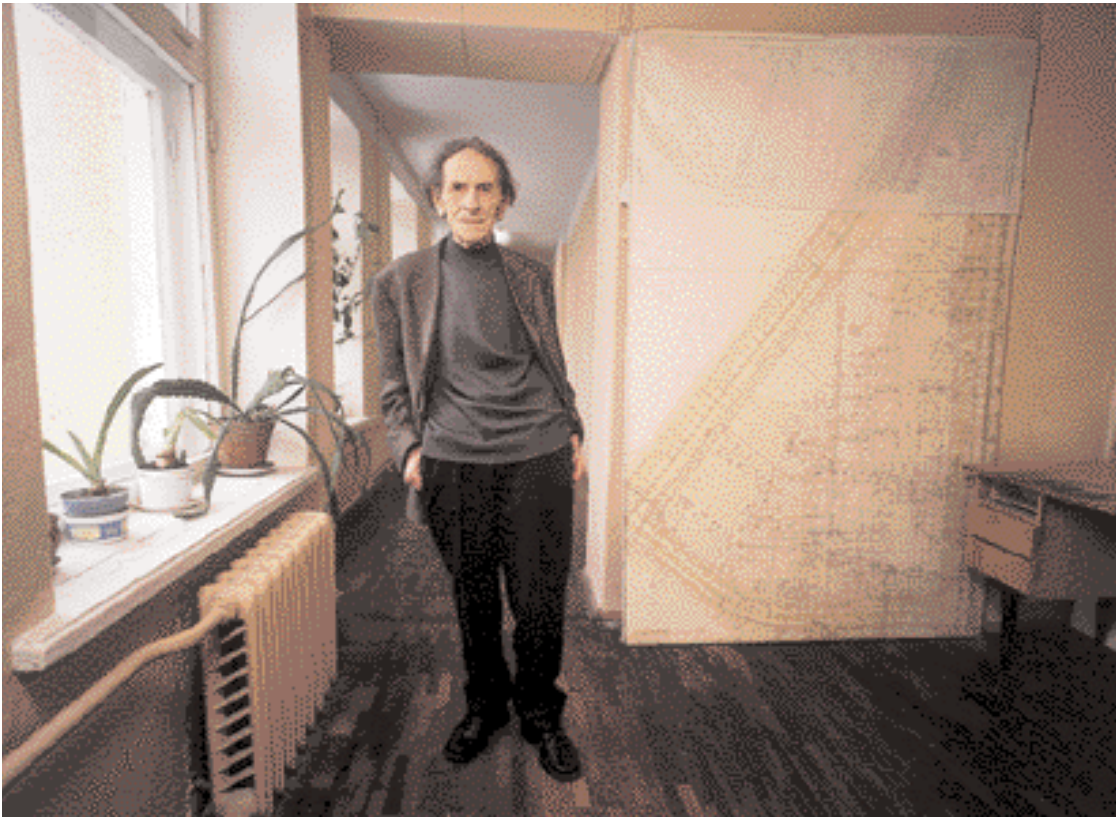
The \$150 million center is one of the city's most ambitious undertakings since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, and comes to Podolsky directly from President Vladimir Putin. Podolsky must renovate the existing 18th- and 19th-

century palace and adjacent historical buildings, and design a new Congress Hall, yacht club, diplomatic village, and two luxury hotels. As part of the city's reconstruction leading up to its 300th anniversary in 2003, the Konstantin Palace is only one of dozens of projects currently under way. Over the next three years, the government plans to spend \$1.7 billion rebuilding Russia's "Window on the West."

In a country burdened by billions of dollars of foreign debt, the scale of the Konstantin Palace project makes many skeptical. The financing is uncertain, and the project could easily drag on for more than a decade. In addition, directly serving the interests of the Russian president puts a terrible burden on Podolsky: Failing Putin has ended many careers.

Architect Boris Podolsky in front of the 18th-century Konstantin Palace, where he must please President Vladimir Putin with an immense \$150 million renovation and expansion.

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"This," Podolsky says grimly, "is a very big project."

Built in 1757, the palace overlooks the Gulf of Finland. It suffered greatly during World War II, was partially rebuilt in the 1950s, and housed a school for Russia's merchant marines until 1990. Its shell is intact, but stripped of its once luxurious interiors. The building's stone foundation is in a disastrous state, and experts say this is where the most work needs to be done.

For all his anxiety, however, Podolsky manages to be optimistic. "This project, since it is sponsored by the office of the president, has a number of advantages over private work," he says brightly. "State regulatory committees move faster granting permission, and without the usual hassles."

It's difficult to build in Russia, even now. The country's red tape alone—the need for approval from dozens of state regulatory organizations ranging from fire to health boards and historical preservation committees—hinders real estate development in an already weak investment economy.

In some ways, Russian architects miss the old days of Communism. Podolsky points out that while in Soviet times the licensing and standards enforced by state regulatory boards were rigid, the system was at least uniform throughout the country. Today, each Russian region has different standards, and often establishes rules that bureaucrats interpret to best serve their interests.

"What we have in Russia is 'chinovnichestvo' [a Russian term that denotes arbitrary rule by petty officials] and not bureaucracy," says Lev Savulkin, senior analyst at the Leontieff Center for Economic and Social Research in St. Petersburg. "In a well-ordered bureaucracy, the rules are clear to everyone and the state official follows them. But

in our Russian *chinovnichestvo*, the state official interprets the rules of the game as he wants.”

Developers say that besides being vexed by long lists of required approvals, they must coddle officials who often intentionally withhold permission, usually to necessitate a bribe. “The worst as far as corruption are the fire protection and health agencies,” says one British developer who has restored several buildings in the city center. “Our company has had to pay bribes of almost \$5,000 each to a number of officials.”

Vladimir Lemekhov, a St. Petersburg architect with his own firm, is all too familiar with the situation. Several years ago, he and three other architects were hired to put up a 25,000-square-meter apartment block in downtown St. Petersburg.

Before working on the design, Lemekhov had to run a yearlong bureaucratic rat race. First up was permission from the provincial governor’s office stating the site was fit to be built on; next was permission from the standard potpourri of regulatory agencies, such as fire and health, as well as yet another permission from the City Architecture Committee saying—again—that the land was fit for building and, additionally, that the city needed the building.

Once the building was complete, says Lemekhov, he needed inspection from the same regulatory agencies once again before the structure could be classified as “sound and operational.” Translation: bribes.

Another prominent regulatory agency in St. Petersburg, KGIOP (the State Committee for Historical Preservation), has become more influential in the past decade. It often demands, for instance, that builders limit projects to the reno-

vation of the original façade and interior. This may seem like good preservation, but often it’s not economically feasible when a developer is trying to adapt an old building to modern needs—and once again bribery enters the picture. Lemekhov’s apartment building was nearly derailed in this way. “We originally had something more modern in mind, but the prevailing taste in City Hall is for something more historical,” he explains.

“Strict control is actually ineffective because in the end people just pay bribes to get around the rules,” comments Podolsky sadly.

Growing up amid the czarist architecture of Leningrad (St. Petersburg’s Soviet-era name), Podolsky entered the Academy of Arts while still a teenager. When it came to a higher education, he chose to study at the Moscow Architectural Institute, the city’s leading architectural school, known for its constructivist teachings.

Today, the remnants of the old guard of Soviet architects, such as Naom Matsuyevich, 80, defend their legacy. Sitting in his steam-heated office in an art nouveau building, a congenial and slightly hunchbacked Matsuyevich shrugs off criticism that his generation created a blight on the nation’s architectural legacy.

“You have to understand the times we lived in,” says Matsuyevich, a project director at LenNiiProyekt, the city’s largest architecture design company. “After World War II, we needed to build up the country, to provide housing for people, and these [prefabricated] structures were the fastest and cheapest. Certainly with hindsight we can say it’s not beautiful, but at the time, the country needed it.”

Matsuyevich’s was an era of standardized design; Soviet architects didn’t know life could be

otherwise. The state ministries, led by the ideological dictates of the Communist Party, told architects and construction companies what, where, and how to build. While private architecture firms developed in free countries, the Soviet Union built itself a vast network of state design and architecture institutes where architects were hand-fed work, and didn’t have to compete.

Original projects were rare, and most architects were forced to build from standardized, prefabricated parts. Theirs was the role of executor, not creator. A huge, centralized construction industry, based at four giant factories, produced building materials. Podolsky remembers having only five to 10 types of exterior prefabricated panels to choose from. The profession was marked by such servitude to state ideology that many eventually abandoned architecture altogether.

Now, with the rise of a free market, thousands of building materials from Europe and America are available, and Podolsky and other architects are generally thankful to have left the Soviet era behind. “We’ve seen radical changes in what it means to be an architect in Russia,” says Podolsky. “We see this in the amount of freedom an

architect now has, as well as in the technology and building materials at his disposal. Overall, we are seeing an improvement in quality [of construction].”

But the free market has introduced unfamiliar challenges as well. After the U.S.S.R.’s collapse, many institutes closed when state financing dried up. Architects’ lives changed radically. Forced to suddenly compete for business, many simply left the profession. Some, however, were able to adapt to the free market thanks to experience obtained in the peculiar economy of Soviet Russia.

Vladimir Lemekhov was one of the architects who left the profession in Soviet times. He became a freelance museum exhibit designer. There he learned to manage a client’s expectations, and that experience prepared him for capitalist Russia. “Since I already knew what it meant to go out and find

Vladimir Lemekhov (facing page, top), who abandoned a thankless career in architecture during Soviet times, returned to the fold with the coming of capitalism. Naom Matsuyevich (facing page, bottom), 80 years old, struggled for decades with gray-block standardization, and now works for the city’s largest firm. Podolsky’s office (this page) is decorated with drawings of his work both pre- and post-Soviet collapse.



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work, to please the client, I was miles ahead of other architects [once the Soviet Union fell],” he says.

A decade ago, Podolsky and Lemekhov’s clients were the new class of robber barons—former Communist officials and mafia bosses—who were looting the ruins of the Soviet Union and building country mansions. Today, the client base is the new middle class, building modest country homes. Lemekhov says that about half his time is spent designing houses. These jobs are the most sought after since they promise good money for relatively easy work, as opposed to the uncertain and grandiose plans of the state—such as the Konstantin Palace project.

Private-sector commissions allow architects to earn a living. Under the Soviet policy of equality, an architect made the same \$100 a month as the janitor in Podolsky’s office. Today, an architect may make between \$300 and \$1,000 a month. (A janitor earns roughly \$50.)

In Soviet times, Podolsky was fortunate to work for the Academy of Sciences, which designed high-priority, sometimes top-secret, individual projects for Russia’s vast and powerful scientific community. Such work allowed individual creativity. His 30 or so completed structures range from observatories and research labs to family housing.

Since Podolsky’s architectural bureau operated with more freedom and creativity than others in Soviet times, it is able to use that experience to compete successfully as a company today. Though still state-owned, Podolsky’s bureau has as much freedom as a private company, and must earn money to cover its costs. Its name and management structure are more or less the same, but to survive in a capitalist system, it cut personnel by about 70 percent. The computer is responsible for sending many into early retirement. Computers, once prohibited by Soviet authorities, became available about five years ago. Though all skilled drafters, Podolsky’s staff has learned that more can be done in less time with computers, even though the office has only one computer per 20 architects. Still, the digital world doesn’t sit well with the analog sensibilities of architects who grew up under Communism.

“The computer allows us to do things quicker, but it can adversely affect an architect’s sense of aesthetic and taste,” cautions Podolsky.

Freedom also has its down side. “Today, one must make a name for oneself, build a reputation to attract clients, while before most architects just sat in their office and waited for the state to hand-feed them work,” says Podolsky.

“We were raised not to aim to make money, but to be happy that we had work to do, and especially interesting work,” says Lemekhov. “We used to see the West as a rat race where one had to work all the time to survive. Well, this has now come to Russia.” ■

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