

Moscow Out of Time

Varvara Stepanova and the Soviet Photobook in 1932

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ABSTRACT:

Russian artist Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958) is best known today for her radical contributions to Constructivism and Productivism in the early 1920s. The design work of her later career — especially after the 1934 ratification of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union — has been less thoroughly examined. One of these overlooked design projects is a 1932 album titled *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow]. The album consists of a paper folder containing twenty-two loose sheets; each sheet displays an excerpt from a speech on the Socialist reconstruction of Moscow by Communist Party official Lazar Kaganovich (1893-1991) and a set of related photographs.

This essay closely analyzes the album's text, photographs, and design while drawing from the avant-garde theorizations of book design by Russian artist El Lissitzky (1890-1941). By attending to the subtle arrangements of words and images, as well as the album's unique format, we can imagine how Stepanova may have responded to Lissitzky's calls to reinvent the printed book by expanding its spatial, material, and temporal potentials. From this perspective, the album is neither a belated holdover from Constructivism, nor an omen of impending state terror and total aesthetic control, but rather a product of its time: the final year of the first Five-Year Plan (1928-32). The album thus embodies the intense moment of transition when it was created in the artist's own career and in Soviet art and culture more broadly.

RESUMO:

A artista russa Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958) é hoje mais conhecida pelos seus contributos radicais para o Construtivismo e o Produtivismo no início da década de 1920. O trabalho de *design* da sua carreira posterior — especialmente após a ratificação do Realismo Socialista na União Soviética em 1934 — foi menos minuciosamente examinado. Um destes projectos de *design* negligenciados é um álbum de 1932 intitulado *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi*. O álbum consiste num arquivo de papel contendo vinte e duas folhas soltas; cada folha exhibe um excerto de um discurso sobre a reconstrução socialista de Moscovo feito pelo oficial do Partido Comunista Lazar Kaganovich (1893-1991) e um conjunto de fotografias relacionadas.

Este ensaio analisa de perto o texto, as fotografias e o design do álbum a partir das teorizações vanguardistas sobre *design* de livros desenvolvidas pelo artista russo El Lissitzky (1890-1941). Atentando nos arranjos subtis de palavras e imagens, bem como no formato singular do álbum, podemos imaginar como Stepanova pode ter respondido aos apelos de Lissitzky para reinventar o livro impresso, expandindo a sua potência espacial, material e temporal. Visto sob esta perspectiva, o álbum não é nem um remanescente tardio do Construtivismo, nem um presságio dos iminentes terror de estado e controlo estético total, mas sim um produto do seu tempo: o último ano do primeiro Plano Quinquenal (1928-32). O álbum encarna assim um intenso momento de transição tanto na carreira da própria artista quanto na arte e na cultura soviéticas entendidas de forma mais ampla.

KEYWORDS:

constructivism; El Lissitzky; socialist realism; temporality; transition

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

construtivismo; El Lissitzky; realismo socialista; temporalidade; transição

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Among the collections of the Houghton Library of rare books and manuscripts at Harvard University resides a curious object that seems out of place in time.¹ At roughly 7½ by 13½ inches and barely a quarter inch in depth, it is large for a pamphlet and thin for a book. The fading orange ink of the Cyrillic title, *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow], still springs off the yellowing cover (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Varvara Stepanova (designer), cover for *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow], 1932, phototype, 7½ x 13½ in. (20 x 34 cm.). Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. © 2022 Estate of Varvara Stepanova / UPRAVIS, Moscow / ARS, NY; author's photo.

The capitalized, sans-serif “Moscow” overlaps with two black-and-white photographs on either side. The photograph at left wraps around the edge of the cover, compelling the viewer to flip to the back; it depicts a densely packed crowd of men in caps and women in headscarves, all facing the same direction, as if waiting for something to begin (fig. 2).

¹ My sincere thanks to Maria Gough and anonymous readers for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

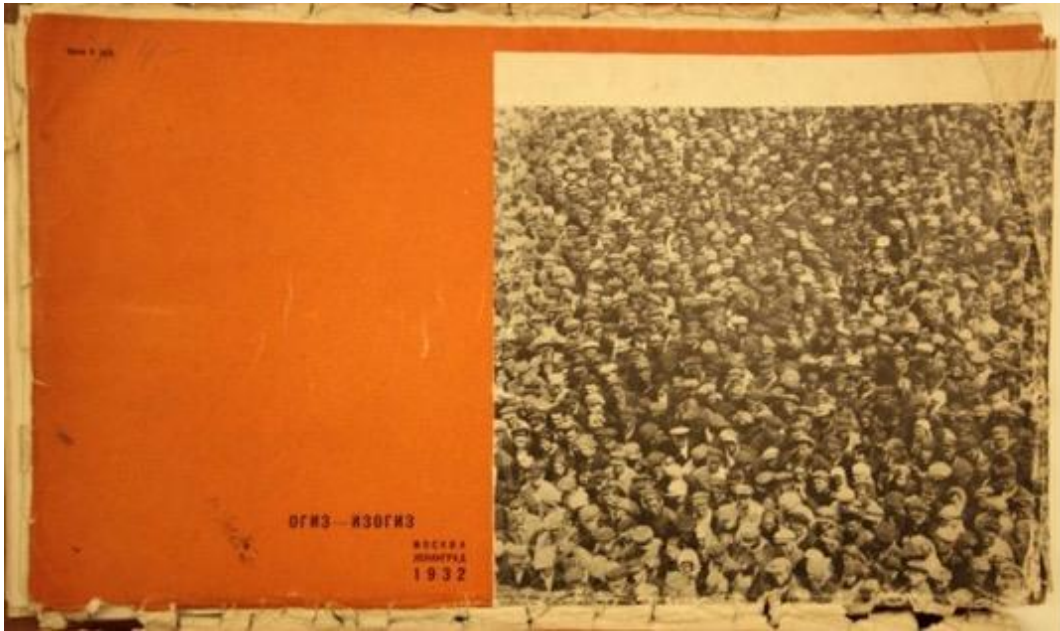


Figure 2. Varvara Stepanova (designer), back cover for *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow], 1932, phototype, 7½ x 13½ in. (20 x 34 cm.). Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. © 2022 Estate of Varvara Stepanova / UPRAVIS, Moscow / ARS, NY; author's photo.

The photograph at right on the front cover also portrays an urban gathering, but here the crowd gives way to an organized procession of marchers with banners held aloft. The cover thus offers the same message in three different ways (text, photographs, and graphic design): the old, backward-facing Moscow under capitalism is transitioning into the new, socialist Moscow of the future.

The Association of State Book and Magazine Publishers and the Fine Art Publishing House, known by the combined acronym OGIZ-IZOGIZ, printed *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* in 1932, one year after vanguard artist and theorist El Lissitzky (1890–1941) wrote that the cover is “essentially the book’s poster, its advertisement” (1987: 62). But to judge this book by its avant-garde cover would be to miss half of its meaning. Upon opening the cover to the title page, the reader discovers a wealth of potentially unexpected information. The text is sourced from a June 15, 1931 speech on the Socialist reconstruction of Moscow by Lazar Kaganovich (1893–1991), a high-ranking Communist Party official and close associate of Joseph Stalin (1878–1953).² The artistic designer is Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958), known then as a former contributor to the radically-experimental 1920s Constructivist working groups based in Moscow. The photography credits include Stepanova’s husband and fellow Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), as well as the state-run photo agency Soyuzfoto. In 1932 Moscow, the Avant-Garde comes together with the State.

The reader also learns that this book is not bound; rather, it is a stack of twenty-two loose sheets contained within a paper folder, which I will refer to as an album.³ Each sheet contains an excerpt from Kaganovich’s report and a set of related

² For more information on Kaganovich, see Rees, 2017, and Davies, 2003.

³ The material categorization of this publication has been inconsistent across scholarship and catalogs. Whereas most mentions are bibliographical citations formatted as books, two offer the phrases “album-

photographs contrasting the old Moscow with the new: gas lamps and electricity, tenement houses and communal housing, crowded market stalls and open parks, and so on. The worn and brittle cover requires extremely careful handling, which imparts a sense of preciousness, yet the pages inside have been protected. Their relative sturdiness brings the reader a step closer to the experience of handling this album when it was new: the sheets could be flipped through quickly, shuffled, and stacked back together with ease. For the twenty-first century reader, the tattered material remnants of the exterior and the Stalinist contents of the interior make this album a historical relic. Yet, the freshness of the graphic design, the insistently forward-looking ethos of the text and images, and the reader's direct involvement in handling the loose pages refuse attempts to relegate it to the past.

The album's unstable temporality is but one of the many challenges and questions the reader confronts from the cover/folder alone. Who is the author? Is it Communist Party leader Kaganovich or the artistic designer Stepanova? What about the photographers, editors, and publisher? The city itself? How does one proceed to view a book with no binding? Are the pages in order? Or should the sheets be spread before the reader, face-up, so they can be viewed in their totality? Is the design meant to compel the readers to physically engage with the book more than is typically necessary, forcing them out of bourgeois passivity and fulfilling Lissitzky's call for the book to be "made active"? (1987: 62). Or is the folder merely a simple and inexpensive way to present the contents without binding? Whom was this meant for, and what does it try to accomplish?

Some of the tensions inherent in this album may have been intentional, as everything about it embodies a state of transition. In the following three sections, I will analyze the album's text, photographs, and design, in order to argue that *Ot Moskvyy kupecheskoi k Moskvye sotsialisticheskoi* is neither a belated holdover from Constructivism, nor an omen of impending state terror and total aesthetic control, but rather a product of its time: the final year of the first Five-Year Plan (1928-32). This herculean program of industrialization and modernization concluded one year early, only for Stalin to launch the Second Five-Year Plan immediately after (1933-7). In mid-1932, Soviet political rhetoric emphasized monumental accomplishments as well as the immense work remaining to be done. During this moment of sea change, previously open aesthetic debates were drawing to a close and increasingly centralized publishing houses were piloting new formats for commemorative books, Party texts, and propaganda magazines. Socialist Realism was crystalizing ahead of its 1934 designation as the official artistic style of the Soviet Union.

This context shaped the album's deliberately transitory status as an object produced when the radicalism of the early Russian Avant-Garde was brought under control — by publishers, artists, and the state — in anticipation of a looming yet unpredictable future. At the center of this tangled web is Stepanova, an artist grappling with her avant-garde past but continually evolving to fulfill new professional demands and design briefs. In the absence of extant writings by Stepanova on this project, I draw from Lissitzky's contemporaneous and strikingly

folder" and "photo-album." See Lavrentiev and Bowlt, 1988: 126; Rodchenko and Dabrowski, et al., 1998: 310.

radical theories on book design as interpretive aids.⁴ Through this analysis, a strange sense of temporality emerges from the album; it demonstrates that in 1932 Moscow, to be “ahead of one’s time” was to be “of the moment”.

1. Text

In the same 1931 essay mentioned above, Lissitzky wrote, “*The book must be the unified work of the author and the designer*. As long as this is not the case, splendid exteriors will constantly be produced for unimportant contents, and vice-versa” (1987: 62). For *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi*, the text was predetermined, subject only to editorial control through excerpting passages from Kaganovich’s June 1931 report. The author is, literally, the Party; Kaganovich narrates in the first-person plural as he describes the Party’s plans to transform the socialist capital into a modern metropolis. Slogans and statistics riddle the text — a typical passage included in the album mentions the half-million workers now residing in former bourgeois apartments and new apartment buildings “75-80 percent” occupied by workers. Stepanova likely never met with Kaganovich to discuss the album, but a looser interpretation of Lissitzky’s call for “unified work” could still apply in this case, as Lissitzky himself had learned to accept the state as a co-producer of all his work by the start of the 1930s (Johnson, 2015: 232-233). In the political climate of the First Five-Year Plan, Kaganovich’s report would certainly qualify as important content — second only to speeches from Stalin and his communist forebears — and deserving of a “splendid” design.

Publications of Party speeches proliferated in the early 1930s, but Stepanova’s striking design rises to the level of the distinguished contents, refusing to allow the text to assert priority over the images.⁵ Most conspicuously, the title signals that this album is not an exact record of the report like other published versions, but an artistic adaption. Rather than original title “The Socialist Reconstruction of Moscow and Cities of the USSR,” Stepanova spreads a pithier phrase across the album cover that previews the dialectical format of the design. The result falls between the traditional, direct transcription model of Party speeches and the “formalist” model of earlier avant-garde book designs.⁶ Text and photographs, content and form, here work together.

One additional aspect separates the album from comparable Party publications: a delay between the delivery of the report and printing. Whereas the English translation of Kaganovich’s June 15, 1931 report appeared in September, at

⁴ Stepanova’s own writings, and those of other Soviet women artists, remain under-published in comparison with those of her male contemporaries. The largest collection of texts by Stepanova is published only in Russian. See Stepanova, 1994.

⁵ For comparison, see the English translation with a cover by John Heartfield and no other illustrations inside in Kaganovich.

⁶ By *formalist* I mean generally concerned with questions of form over content, though precisely this sort of oversimplification fed criticisms of this model in the late 1920s to early 1930s. The best-known example of formalist book design is Lissitzky’s 1922 Suprematist “children’s book” *Of Two Squares*. Mikhail Karasik and Manfred Heiting (2015: 118) claim that *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* may have been the first of many publications applying avant-garde design to a Party text.

least eleven more months elapsed before the 1932 publication of *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi*.⁷ Intentional or not, the delay enabled Stepanova and the editorial team to update readers on Soviet accomplishments since the time of the report and enact the pervasive ethos of progress of the final (fourth) year of the First Five-Year Plan. By combining the text with recent photographs in an innovative album format, the report becomes a living document, continually making new strides into the future and converting a potential liability for printing an outdated text into an asset. In this way, *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* aspires to achieve precisely what Lissitzky called for: an *activation* of the book on multiple levels, beyond just the cover.

2. Photography

In conjunction with the text, photography plays a key role in developing the album's transitional image of Moscow, primarily through the "then versus now" format that was a staple of early twentieth-century photographic publications made around the globe. Soviet examples often contrasted two images in terms of form and content. For instance, in the September 1931 "Moscow" issue of the propaganda magazine *USSR in Construction*, the "old" photographs of horse-drawn carriages are somewhat blurry and printed with a slightly higher contrast, which results in a loss of detail, whereas the "new" photographs of a Constructivist bus garage and an automobile on a paved road are sharply focused and offer more mid-range tones to form a more precise image (fig. 3).



Figure 3. R. Ostrovsky and I. Urazov (designers), "Yesterday and...To-Day," in *USSR in Construction* no. 9 (September 1931), offset lithograph, 16 ¼ x 12 in. (41 x 30 cm.). Five College Library Repository Collection, Amherst, MA. Author's photo.

⁷ Images of May Day displays narrow the range for publication from May to December 1932.

Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi employs the comparison method somewhat differently. A contrasting pair appears on all but four of the twenty-two pages, but this liberal use of juxtaposition does not correspond with a heightened visual contrast between the old and the new. Instead, a consistency of tonal range and sharpness characterizes photographs on both sides of the temporal divide, as we see on the album cover (figs. 1 and 2). The pre-revolutionary photographs adhere to a general set of standards for press photography of the era: straightforward views with the subject at the center, maximizing the amount of visual information in the negative.⁸ Both old and new photographs are thus treated as historical documents, appealing to photographic “objectivity” and constructing a visual argument for the ongoing transformation of Moscow since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Near-identical vantage points in the old and new photographs thus establish a temporal *continuity* between pre- and post-revolutionary Moscow; the original city fabric remains as market squares become public parks and the untapped potential of the medieval city is finally fulfilled as a socialist capital (fig. 4). Instead of invoking the finality of a “then versus now” transformation, this continual process of change suggests *ongoing* progress and improvement, consistent with the logic of the Five-Year Plan immediately leading into a second.



Figure 4. Varvara Stepanova (designer), *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow], 1932, phototype, 7½ x 13½ in. (20 x 34 cm.). © 2022 Estate of Varvara Stepanova / UPRAVIS, Moscow / ARS, NY; image open access: <https://archive.org/details/O.1932>.

Yet the newer photographs are not without their own set of unique visual conventions. In order to read these photographs more closely, we must survey the contemporary activities of Rodchenko in particular, one of the few photographers credited on the title page.⁹ John E. Bowlt describes the latter’s close artistic

⁸ The photographs are not credited individually, though we can surmise from the cover page information that these older photographs came from the collections of the Museum of the Revolution, the Communal Museum, Soyuzfoto, and the revolutionary-era photographers V. Savelyev and Kazachinski.

⁹ The other two photographers credited in the album are Eleazar Langman (1895–1940) and Boris Ignatovich (1899–1976), two of Rodchenko’s close colleagues and occasional rivals from the late 1920s and early 1930s. For more examples of their work and biographical information, see Goodman et al., 2015: 223, 225.

relationship with his life partner Stepanova as a “collective” (Lavrentiev and Bowlt, 1988: 7). In the realm of photography, Rodchenko generally focused on camera work and Stepanova focused on graphic design, often using Rodchenko’s images in her compositions. Rodchenko probably supplied the majority of the newer photographs for this album, as Moscow had been his most common photographic subject since the late 1920s (Rodchenko and Stepanova et al., 1991: 37; Tupitsyn, 1998: 13-14).

Rodchenko’s career and artistic principles had been evolving constantly since before the 1917 Revolution, but exactly at the time of the album’s publication he underwent a particularly intense and involuntary transformation. In the mid 1920s, Rodchenko developed a radical photography practice that embraced the ability of the handheld 35mm camera to shoot from oblique angles and create jarring foreshortenings (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Alexander Rodchenko, *Pozharnaia lesnitsa*, from the series *Dom na Miasnitskoi* [Fire Escape, from the series *Building on Miasnitskaia Street*], 1925; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund: gift of Frances and John Bowes, Evelyn Haas, Mimi and Peter Haas, Pam and Dick Kramlich, and Judy and John Webb; © Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / UPRAVIS, Moscow / ARS, NY; photo: Don Ross.

He believed these photographs embodied modern forms of perception — like the experience of looking up at or down from a multi-story building — and held the potential to promote a revolutionary consciousness (Rodchenko, 1989: 258-9; Dickerman, 1998: 33). These bold theories met with equally vociferous criticism starting in 1928, with bitter arguments aired publicly in the Soviet photography journals.¹⁰ By 1932, Rodchenko had been expelled from the *Oktyabr* photography group he founded the year prior, and his radical imagery was no longer acceptable for display in the Soviet Union. In a confessional biographical essay of 1936, Rodchenko describes this time as a low point in his career (Lavrentiev, 2005: 283-8, 297, 329). He emphasizes his artistic rebirth through photojournalism in 1933, yet the tone of this essay reveals that earlier wounds have barely healed and his

¹⁰ For an example, see Kushner, 1989: 250.

transformation into a “proper” Soviet artist was still incomplete (Lavrentiev, 2005: 298; Tupitsyn, 1998: 16).

The photographs in *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi*, presumably selected by Stepanova from Rodchenko’s Moscow negatives, offer a slightly watered-down version of Rodchenko’s evolving photography practice at this time. The frontal “belly-button” view he had sought to eradicate appears throughout the album but is not the sole means of representation.¹¹ Of the forty-three new photographs in the album, twelve are rotated more than ten degrees from the natural horizon line (figs. 6 and 7). These tilts are conspicuous, but they do not drastically transform the image of the subject through foreshortening and fragmentation. I interpret these photographs as neither the politically-motivated radical oblique of Rodchenko’s practice in the mid 1920s, nor a total concession to the conservative straight-on view. Instead, they are “slightly skewed,” hovering at the limits of acceptable photographic practice in the Soviet Union in 1932.¹²

The role of the skewed image in the album is clearest when compared with a collection of photographs intended for a never-published book on Moscow, also featuring images by Rodchenko and design by Stepanova (Tupitsyn, 1998: 23). Originally scheduled to appear in 1933, this unfinished book would have juxtaposed hand-drawn caricatures of “Old Moscow” with Rodchenko’s photographs of “New Moscow” (14).¹³ Close variations of over a dozen photographs for the book appear in the album; significantly, many of the images in the book are rotated within their rectangular frames, whereas their counterparts in the album are typically less extreme or fully upright. Judging from the 3:2 aspect ratio of Rodchenko’s Leica, the rich detail in the prints, and minor disparities between the images, he appears to have made multiple exposures of each subject from the same general vantage point, sometimes shooting with his handheld camera level to the ground and at other times tilting his camera to angles ranging from negligible to extreme. Exposing multiple negatives offers practical advantages for any photographer, but Rodchenko’s motivation was personal as well. As he wrote in 1936 of his work several years prior, “I was photographing sport events. Seems without any tricks...[But] creatively it was unbearable for me to work in Moscow. [Arkady] Shaikhet made the same photos, but slightly worse, different....They were praised. My mood was down. With malice I began to take pictures at severe angles. I was criticized anyway. I could have left

¹¹ The “belly-button” view refers to typical cameras like the Kodak Brownie that were held at the abdomen for a rectilinear perspective. Rodchenko saw this practice as completely unimaginative. See Rodchenko, 1989: 256-63, and Dickerman, 1998: 33-4.

¹² Rodchenko uses this phrase in a November 1930 letter to Stepanova to describe Dziga Vertov’s 1930 film *Donbass Symphony* (also known as *Enthusiasm*). The meaning here is pejorative; he writes, “The camera work isn’t that good, it’s... bad, slightly skewed frames”, indicating he viewed Vertov’s tilting effects as more surface-level visual enhancements than a full embrace of the revolutionary oblique. See Lavrentiev, 2005: 288.

¹³ The caricaturists Mikhail Mupriianov, Porfirii Krylov, and Nikolai Sokolov (working together under the name Kukrynsky) were responsible for the drawings. Margarita Tupitsyn suggests the project ended when they started new jobs at *Pravda* (1998: 14-17).

photography and worked in other fields, but it was not possible simply to give up” (Tupitsyn, 1998: 16).¹⁴

As Rodchenko worked through the challenges posed to his photography practices, Stepanova collected the more conservatively composed images to appear alongside Kaganovich’s quotations, perhaps in anticipation of greater scrutiny of the album from government censors. The primary purpose of these tilted photographs seems to be graphic: they increase the visual dynamism of the album by guiding the viewer’s eye into deep recessions and bold diagonals. On one sheet, Stepanova arranges three photographs so that the lines of tram rails lead into the curves of a racetrack then into a garden path, perhaps highlighting the seamless integration of transport and leisure in the modern Moscow (fig. 6).

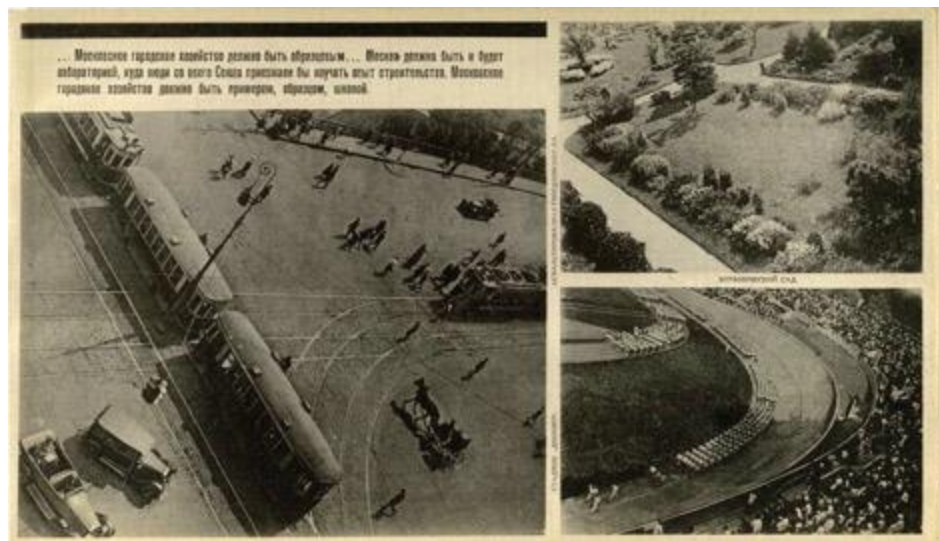


Figure 6. Varvara Stepanova (designer), *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow], 1932, phototype, 7½ x 13½ in. (20 x 34 cm.). © 2022 Estate of Varvara Stepanova / UPRAVIS, Moscow / ARS, NY; image open access: <https://archive.org/details/O.1932>.

In several other cases the rotated frame of the “new” photograph contrasts with the upright “old” photograph. The slight skew also helps to emphasize ideologically acceptable content and conceal undesirable blemishes on the socialist Moscow landscape. For instance, a 1930 photograph of a parade in Red Square skillfully aligns the length of the procession, the crowd of spectators, Lenin’s tomb, a Kremlin tower, and even some smokestacks in the distance; the iconic, ostentatious façade of St. Basil’s Cathedral is just outside the frame (fig. 7).

¹⁴ Arkady Shaikhet (1898–1959) belonged to a rival faction of photographers that championed the legibility of images over formal experimentation, though he and many other prominent Soviet photographers often used gentler oblique angles in their work, to Rodchenko’s chagrin.



Figure 7. Varvara Stepanova (designer), *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow], 1932, phototype, 7½ x 13½ in. (20 x 34 cm.). © 2022 Estate of Varvara Stepanova / UPRAVIS, Moscow / ARS, NY; image open access: <https://archive.org/details/O.1932>.

Another set of photographs demonstrate the album’s commitment to radical aesthetics tempered by the need for accessibility: two aerial photographs of a workers’ housing estate (fig. 8).



Figure 8. Varvara Stepanova (designer), *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow], 1932, phototype, 7½ x 13½ in. (20 x 34 cm.). © 2022 Estate of Varvara Stepanova / UPRAVIS, Moscow / ARS, NY; image open access: <https://archive.org/details/O.1932>.

A variation of upper image appears almost incidentally *within* another photograph on a separate page, depicting the 1932 anniversary displays at Freedom Square (figs. 9 and 10).



Figure 9. Varvara Stepanova (designer), *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow], 1932, phototype, 7½ x 13½ in. (20 x 34 cm.). © 2022 Estate of Varvara Stepanova / UPRAVIS, Moscow / ARS, NY; image open access: <https://archive.org/details/O.1932>.



Figure 10. Detail of figure 9.

This diminutive reproduction is actually a photomontage made by German avant-garde artist John Heartfield (1891-1968) during his 1931 visit to Moscow. He used this aerial negative — made by an unknown photographer — to make his widely reproduced photomontage of urban Moscow overlaid with the silhouette of Lenin. Stepanova likely would have seen these reproductions in places like title page of the September 1931 issue of *USSR in Construction* (fig. 11).¹⁵

¹⁵ Heartfield's photomontage also appeared on the cover of the aforementioned English translation of Kaganovich text. See Gough, 2009: 163-7.



Figure 11. John Hartfield [sic], “[Untitled],” in *USSR in Construction* no. 9 (September 1931), offset lithograph, 16 ¼ x 12 in. (41 x 30 cm.), Five College Library Repository Collection, Amherst, MA. © The Hartfield Community of Heirs / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2022; author’s photo.

But only a keen observer would notice this detail, which is marginalized and partially obscured at the right edge of the photograph. Hartfield’s work is thus downplayed in Stepanova’s album in favor of a more direct illustration of Soviet achievements in modernization and collective life, without darkroom manipulation. Seen from an airplane — as the caption generously points out for the unprepared reader — the view itself is modern. This strategy aligns with the views expressed in Stepanova’s unpublished 1928 article on Rodchenko’s abandonment of photomontage in favor of the “independent recording of reality,” which “increases the documentary importance of the photograph” (Lavrentiev and Bowlt, 1988: 178). Here, the contents (new workers’ housing) and the means (aerial photography) speak for themselves. According to this view, we might see Moscow itself as the ultimate work of Constructivism that Stepanova and Rodchenko had sought a decade earlier: the city is a construction (as opposed to a composition) of total efficiency, requiring no additional interference from the hand of the artist.¹⁶

3. Design

Caught somewhere between the robust demands of the state publisher and the embattled avant-garde ideals of Rodchenko is the album designer Stepanova. In this final section I argue that Stepanova masterfully adapted to her circumstances and designed a book that potentially exceeded the terms of its brief. In doing so, I hope to illuminate a neglected period of her career. Though Stepanova is widely acclaimed

¹⁶ For key texts on Constructivism, see Gough, 2005, and Kiaer, 2005. Not long after this album appeared, Rodchenko would again embrace montage as an artistic device, as seen in his infamous design for the December 1933 issue of *USSR in Construction*. See Glebova, 2019.

for her talents in graphic design, most scholarship tends to focus on the earlier stage of her career as a Constructivist, when she worked in a variety of media from painting to poetry to fashion design.¹⁷ In order to examine her career in and beyond 1932, scholars must confront the issue of authorship (disentangling artist input from publisher input, as I attempt to do here), as well as the thornier issue of propaganda production for a brutal political regime.¹⁸

Stepanova's earlier avant-garde career offered valuable lessons for her later work. During her brief Productivist phase in 1923–24, she studied textile factory production with the goal of maximizing productivity and achieving “a transparency of formal means” (Kiaer, 2001: 194, 195). She failed to transform the Soviet clothing industry as planned — either because of or in spite of these theoretical underpinnings — but Stepanova likely gained valuable insights into the nature of collaborative design work requiring the input of multiple professionals and production processes. Her rather brash cooption of the factory for avant-garde experimentation became a more equalized working relationship between artist and producer by the 1930s, coinciding with Lissitzky's 1931 presentation at the Moscow Polygraphics Institute when he declared “the author must be a polygraphist” and “the technical editor must be an author” in order to advance the field of book design (Johnson 2015: 174-175).¹⁹ In the intervening years, Stepanova honed her skills in graphic design and book design — as well as diplomacy — accepting hundreds of commissions with Rodchenko.²⁰ She continued to devise novel solutions to maximize graphic economy in newspapers and magazines, but her ideas were rarely adopted in full, apparently due to bureaucratic and censorship concerns.²¹

We can detect faint echoes of the Productivist principle of efficiency in the design of *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi*. On each page, Stepanova fills nearly the entire sheet, but deliberately leaves a small area blank, as if to balance the demands of maximizing the amount of information on each page and making this graphically legible and compelling. Even more significant is Stepanova's use of preexisting type-setting elements, including the typeface and the lines and rectangles that fill the negative space around the text and photographs.²² Apparently, Stepanova learned to work within the confines of what was already available from a practical standpoint. *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* is not the Productivist ideal of the everyday object “penetrated and transformed by the processes of production” (Kiaer, 2001: 202). Nor is the relationship between text and image anything like that of the non-objective poetry

¹⁷ This selective focus on the early Russian Avant-Garde reflects a wider trend in Western scholarship on Russian art. A typical example is the biography for Stepanova in Bowlt and Drutt, 2004: 248-9. A recent exception is Glisic, 2021:707-734.

¹⁸ The same concerns have steered scholars away from examining Lissitzky's 1930s work in greater depth. See Nisbet, 2003: 211-13.

¹⁹ See Stepanova's extensive list of demands for the factory administration in Kiaer, 2001: 193.

²⁰ Over an unspecified three-year period in the 1920s, Lavrentiev tallies 322 commissions, presumably from materials in the family archive (2005: 103-4).

²¹ One newspaper was impressed by Stepanova's ideas but declined to make the changes because the editors “didn't want to risk it” (Lavrentiev and Bowlt, 1988: 124, 126).

²² See some matching design elements in *We Are Building the Five-Year Plan* (1931), *The Self-Financing Steam Engine* (1931), and *The Fight for Peace* (1932), reproduced in Karasik and Heiting, 2015: 110-15, 118, 130-3.

and graphics in Stepanova's earliest book designs of the late 1910s. Overlaps of photographs and black squares are emphatically not the axonometric signifiers of free-floating space and infinity they had been a decade earlier among the Avant-Garde; they simply accommodate more images of varying sizes and perhaps help to conceal aesthetic or ideological flaws in the images.

However, this shift toward rationalization and practicality does not mean Stepanova sacrificed her drive to innovate new solutions to design problems. I suspect that she focused her creative energies in a new direction for *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi*. She may have been inspired by Lissitzky's 1931 call for further experiments on book making by concentrating on its material and spatial possibilities (Lissitzky, 1987: 62). Lissitzky and Stepanova were never intimate friends, but they lived and worked in the same artistic circles throughout their adult lives and would have been closely familiar with the other's work. Much like Stepanova and other avant-garde artists, Lissitzky intended to transform the conditions of perception by transforming the everyday object (Bois and Hubert, 1979: 118-19; Nisbet, 2003: 223). In 1919, he predicted that the book "will give birth to a work not in one copy — not a unique object for the enjoyment of the patron — but in thousands and thousands of identical originals for all: whosoever thirsts, he shall be satisfied" (Lissitzky, 1968: 261). In 1926, Lissitzky pondered the dematerialization of the book through new technologies and imagined a future in which the "automatism of the present day book will be overcome" and "supplanted by sound recordings or talking pictures" that would ease the burden and waste of "cumbersome masses of material" (Lissitzky, 1968: 360-1).

Perhaps Stepanova endeavored to begin this process of reconceptualizing the book with the folder. The album format of loose sheets sets this publication apart from its peers by expanding the spatial, material, and temporal potentials of the printed book. Beyond the tactile engagement with the cover, described at the opening of this essay, the folder format offers a wide range of possibilities for interaction with the interior contents. The twenty-two unbound, unpaginated, single-side sheets can be spread out and displayed all at once in a block, like a gigantic poster, or in a line, like an extended scroll. The excerpts from Kaganovich's report function independently, so any number or combination of pages is possible. Single sheets might be pasted onto a curved post, folded into a letter, or displayed on the wall like a miniature poster in one of the new socialist spaces of the canteen, the communal apartment, or the workers' club.

Rodchenko famously reimagined the latter in his design for the Soviet Pavilion at the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris.²³ Stepanova herself described its key elements in an article for the Soviet journal *Modern Architecture* published the following year. At the heart of the club was the reading area, designed with special attention to visitors' visual, spatial, and tactile experiences as they browsed or picked up a rotating selection of books and magazines (Varst 1926: 36). At every turn, objects were meant to be mobile and modifiable according to current club needs, including a "a movable vitrine for the storage and display of materials, documents, and photographs with a place for

²³ See images and descriptions of the club in Fore and Witkovsky, 2017: 218-28.

headlines and theses, a movable vitrine for posters and slogans, a movable photo exhibition case for displaying current photo materials” and a portable “live newspaper” installation for speeches, equipped with screens for displaying visual aids. Yet the capacity for seemingly infinite modifications sprang from the modern principle of maximum efficiency, particularly through expansion and contraction. “Comrade Rodchenko,” she explained, had demonstrated that “a dynamically organized subject achieves larger and larger distribution, proving its vitality and timeliness”.

These principles translated directly into Stepanova’s album design. If the format could be standardized, each page would fit seamlessly into the corresponding display system at the workers’ club. Better still, new sheets could be inserted as old ones became outdated — a flexible method of adaption for a rapidly changing historical moment. For instance, the aspirational image of the illuminated metro map could have been replaced with a photograph of the actual metro interior after the opening of the first line in 1935 (fig. 12).

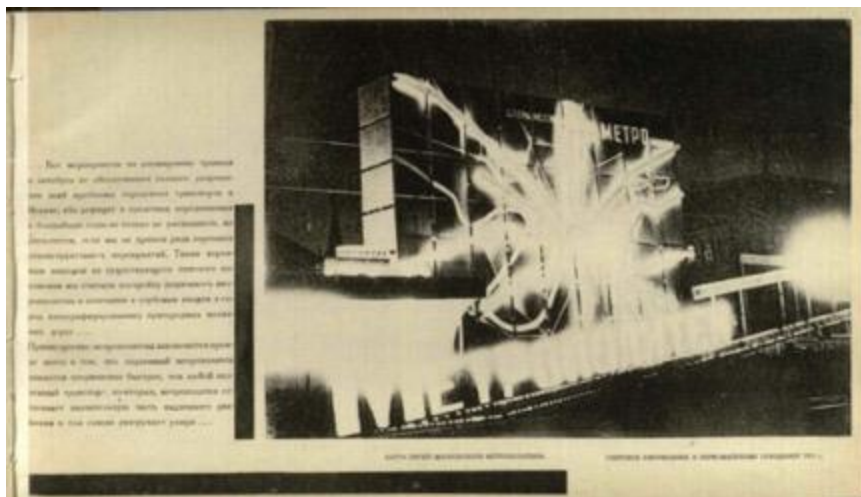


Figure 12. Varvara Stepanova (designer), *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow], 1932, phototype, 7½ x 13½ in. (20 x 34 cm.). © 2022 Estate of Varvara Stepanova / UPRAVIS, Moscow / ARS, NY; image open access: <https://archive.org/details/O.1932>.

Or, Party leaders could issue additional directives on the topic of Moscow planning that would require new forms of representation; the album could potentially respond.

Lissitzky suggested as much in 1931 by forecasting the replacement of the book with the card file. He explained, “the poems of the still-living poet are being published. They are printed on cards, and every new poem he writes can easily be added” (Lissitzky, 1987: 62).²⁴ The need for errata or editions would be eradicated, reducing waste and inconvenience.²⁵ Patrons could invest in a single folder as a group and purchase individual sheets at low prices, reinventing the avant-garde

²⁴ In a 1931 speech, Lissitzky used the Russian word *list*, meaning a loose leaf or sheet of paper, to describe the kind of material he envisioned for the ever-expanding file (Johnson, 2015: 3).

²⁵ More darkly, this flexible format would obviate the violent defacement of photographs of denounced persons in books — a practice that became common during the Great Purge of 1936-1938. See King, 2014.

tradition of cheap and experimental artists' books as a medium for the worker (Lissitzky, 1968: 362). By embracing these potentialities, the album embodies the spirit of the Five-Year Plan: it encourages communal ownership through sharing and promotes continual renewal. Progress and its representation would cycle infinitely into the utopian socialist future.

Of course, this is a generously imaginative reading. There is no direct evidence that any of these possibilities were explored. On the contrary, the condition of the sheets in the Harvard copy indicates that they seldom left the confines of their folder, which seems to have borne the brunt of its traffic and handling over the past eighty-five years. The same is true of a second copy held at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, CA. The interior sheets are in good condition compared with their brittle and faded envelope. Intriguingly, blue pen marks appear on several pages, crossing out the name Kaganovich in most places where it appears and sometimes the name Stalin as well (fig. 13).

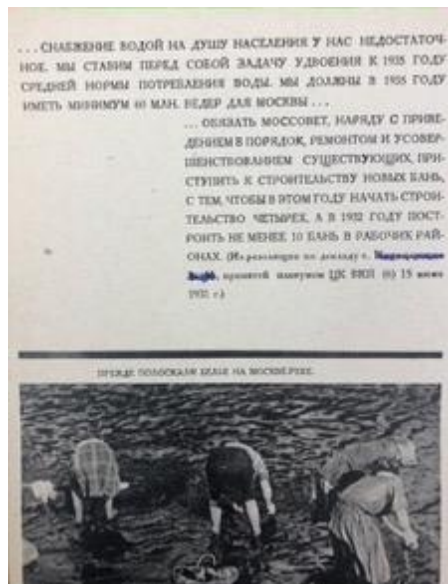


Figure 13. Detail of Varvara Stepanova (designer), *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* [From Merchant Moscow to Socialist Moscow] with marks, 1932, phototype, 7½ x 13½ in. (20 x 34 cm.). Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA. © 2022 Estate of Varvara Stepanova / UPRAVIS, Moscow / ARS, NY; author's photo.

Yet this palimpsest offers few clues as to when these marks were made; they were no more likely to appear in the 1930s than they were during the post-Stalinist 1960s or the post-Soviet 1990s.

Considering these later moments of major historical revision, when de-Stalinization and decommunization transformed the face of visual culture in Russia, was the album actually ahead of its time in allowing these modifications (or iconoclasm)? Or was it simply out of sync with the economic realities of 1932, when a publication priced at five rubles was still out of reach for the average worker, even through a communal viewing practice at the workers' club?²⁶ Is this the poster/book hybrid that Lissitzky describes and Yve-Alain Bois dismisses as a "Trojan horse"? (Bois and Hubert, 1979: 120). Did this ever stand a chance against the poster, the

²⁶ By comparison, issues of the popular photography journal *Proletarskoe Foto* cost 60 to 75 kopecks in 1932.

newspaper, the cheap illustrated weekly, or the traditional book? Would Stepanova have preferred the usual double-page spread to expand the space for graphic design? Did the publisher capriciously insist on loose sheets in a folder to Stepanova's dismay? Or is there another explanation?

4. Out of Time

Consonant with my reading of this album as deliberately open-ended, more questions remain than answers. Peter Nisbet has argued that the propaganda publication of the mid 1930s intended not to win over new converts, but to demonstrate the “belief and loyalty of the elect, among whom, of course, were the artists themselves” (Nisbet, 2003: 228). Yet Erika Wolf has demonstrated that early issues of the deluxe magazine *USSR in Construction* made (largely unsuccessful) attempts to reach a broad base of international workers and activists in addition to the new Stalinist elite (1999: 53-4, 69).²⁷ *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* may have been part of this late push to transform mass media that ended, paradoxically, by reaffirming the luxury, “bourgeois,” armchair book.

The album's uneasy combination of Party content and forward-thinking design suggest that in 1932 Stepanova's experimentation may have been too late. Put another way, the album's spotlight on progress and change across the Soviet capitol, combined with the potential for material alteration of the contents, destabilized the album and threatened its status as visual testimony of the Party line. Susan Buck-Morss has considered these issues at length in relation to Russian art of the early post-revolutionary years, but her ideas about the fundamental contradictions between the artistic avant garde and the political vanguard — especially regarding their opposing conceptions of time as open to ruptures or locked in a set course — help explain why this album could never fully achieve the “activation” of Lissitzky's theorizations (2000: 42-67). Even if *Ot Moskvy kupecheskoi k Moskve sotsialisticheskoi* successfully embodied Moscow's physical transformations during the Five-Year Plan, the future ultimately remained shrouded in uncertainty. To be “ahead of one's time” at a moment when the Party alone had the power to define the future is a risky endeavor. And yet, by creating this enigmatic album, preserved today in libraries around the world, Stepanova offers a glimpse of an alternate future in a utopian Moscow that — however unlikely — may still come to pass.

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²⁷ Stepanova and Lissitzky, alongside their respective partners Rodchenko and Lissitzky-Küppers, contributed their design talents to multiple issues (Wolf, 1999: 77).

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