

‘Creating Order amid Chaos’: Architect Lotte Beese in the Soviet Union, 1932–1935

Lotte Beese (Reisicht, Silesia 1903 - Krimpen aan den IJssel, the Netherlands 1988) cooperated for some years as an architect in building the *Sotsgorods* (socialist cities) in the Soviet Union. In interviews in the seventies and eighties, she looked back on her work and the living conditions in this country. These memories are being examined against the results of research carried out in archives and by means of literature studyreview. Consideration will be given to where she worked, with whom, and which designs she made.

This paper discusses whether there are similarities between her working experiences and the conclusions drawn by architectural historians on the work of western architects involved in the Soviet Union. How can these personal memories be evaluated within the perspective of a later approach to this issue by architectural historians?

From the seventies, architectural historians have written critically about the participation of western architects in the urban development of the communist state. In their research, these authors focus mainly on the Russian growing suppressive and hostile attitude towards the architects by the Russian authorities. Beese’s ego documents will be compared with the views of these historians.

Keywords: ego documents, history of architecture, socialist cities, city planning

You could say we were composing something – which starts with where you place your buildings. For instance, as in Orsk, you can choose whether to build the district up against the hillside, or on top of the hill. We certainly didn’t know everything; but there was something we all had inside us. Creating order amid chaos – that was the reason we were there, and what we were all trying to do.¹

These words by Rotterdam’s then retired urban planner and architect Lotte Stam-Beese (1903–1988)² tell us something about her experience of working as a foreign architect in the Soviet Union during the 1930s.

This paper takes her recollections of that period, recorded in interviews from the 1970s and 1980s, as the starting point for a number of questions. What work was she doing there, and in what context? Do later conclusions by architectural historians about the work of western architects in the Soviet Union tally with what she claimed to have seen and felt while she was there? And how are her recollections to be assessed in the light of all this?

The Lure of the *Sotsgorods*

Lotte Beese was one of more than 20,000 architects, urban planners and engineers who travelled from Europe and America to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s to help build up the country.³ The engineers worked in the rapidly expanding Soviet industry, and the architects and urban planners

- 1 Interview by Cor de Wit with Lotte Stam-Beese (Krimpen aan den IJssel, January 15, 1977), Het Nieuwe Instituut (HNI) archives, Rotterdam, WITC CD-R 5. The interview quotations are translated from the original Dutch.
- 2 After her marriage to Mart Stam in 1935, Lotte Beese was officially known as Lotte Stam-Beese (in the Netherlands, married women often retain their maiden names in this hyphenated form). She kept the full name after her divorce in 1943. For simplicity’s sake, the name ‘Stam’ will be omitted in the remainder of this paper.
- 3 Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union 1921–1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 184.

mainly developed plans for the construction of *sotsgorods*, the 'socialist cities' built near projected new industrial areas. The number of architects and urban planners grew swiftly during the period of the First Five-Year Plan initiated by Stalin (1928–33), but then drastically declined. The great majority of them left the country – sometimes, but not always, of their own volition.

The involvement of these professionals was not an isolated phenomenon. A like-minded group were the 'fellow travellers': writers, artists and scientists who sympathised with the ideology of 'the red utopia' and went to the Soviet Union for a temporary stay or an incidental visit. This 'travellers' hype' continued up to the mid-1930s, and attracted about 80,000 enthusiasts.⁴

A key stimulus to work in or visit the Soviet Union was cultural exchange between countries through exhibitions and distribution of art magazines and technical journals.⁵

Going to the Soviet Union, of course, had a far greater impact on the lives of these early labour migrants than on those of their fellow travellers – for the former were leaving their homes and families to settle and work in a foreign country for long periods of time.

Most of the architects came from Germany. Important contacts had developed between the Weimar Republic (1918–33) and the Soviet Union, and Germany now had experience with the construction of modern housing districts (*Siedlungen*) in long slabs. Russia lacked such expertise in the field of modernist architecture, and was keen to take advantage of it.

Lotte Beese was also German (Fig. 1). She was trained at the Bauhaus in Dessau, where she was the first female student to take the *neue Baulehre* ('new theory of building') architectural course. She had an affair with the initiator of the course, the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer, who was also director of the Bauhaus, and because of this, she was forced to break off her training. She then worked for architectural firms in Berlin and Brno. In spring 1932 –when she was by then the mother of Meyer's

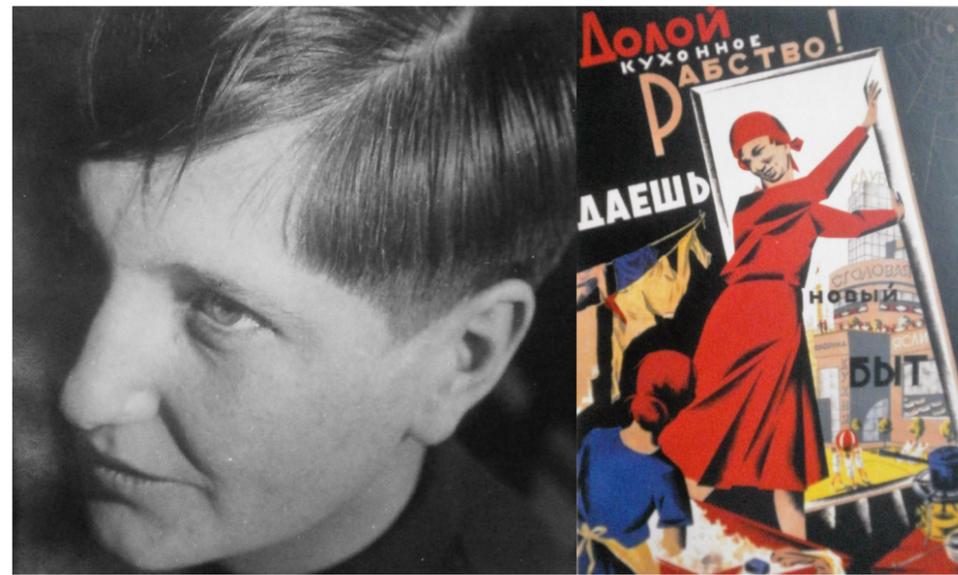


Fig 1. Lotte Beese, photographer unknown, c. 1928. Courtesy of A.R. Stam.

Fig. 2. G. Shegal, Poster *Down with kitchen slavery. A new life*, 1931.

Source: www.plakat.ru.

son – she left Brno for Kharkov⁶ in Ukraine. She did this entirely on her own, without a partner and not as part of a team – a bold undertaking for a woman in those days.

There were economic, political and cultural reasons to go and work in the Soviet state and Lotte Beese had all three. She could no longer find work in Czechoslovakia, not only because jobs were in short supply but also because she was an unmarried mother. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, there was plenty of work for architects, and women were greatly encouraged to work outside the home (Fig. 2). Beese was an active member of the pro-Soviet

Czechoslovakian communist party, and after several arrests because of her political activities it was no longer safe for her to remain in the country. There was also a cultural affinity. At the Bauhaus, where her teachers had included Wassily Kandinsky, and in Brno, where she attended meetings of the *Levá fronta* (Left Front) cultural association, she became fascinated by the work of progressive Russian artists and architects. In short, helping to build the *sotsgorods* was a very attractive prospect.

Recollections of Moscow, Kharkov, Orsk and Lake Balkhash

In 1976, 1977 and 1986, from eight to 18 years after she retired, Lotte Beese was interviewed at length by two former architects whom she knew well, on their initiative.⁷ The interviews revealed that her recollections of the Soviet Union were very much associated with places, friends and key events. In 1930, having been dismissed from the Bauhaus, her first love Hannes Meyer left for Moscow to become a professor at the State College of Building and Architecture and chief architect at the Institute for the Construction of Higher and Technical Schools. He asked her to move in with him and work for him. Although she said yes, they stayed together for only a few months. Out of solidarity with the Russian workers, Hannes refused to accept the food coupons that were issued to foreign employees. Lotte disagreed, and soon left him. Just over a year after this brief stay in Moscow, she set off for Kharkov. She never explained exactly how this was arranged, but she did

⁴ David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 184.

⁵ The first exhibition of Russian art in Western Europe was organised at the Van Diemen gallery in Berlin by the artist El Lissitzky in October 1922. Twenty exhibitions of work by famous western architects, including Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Erich Mendelsohn, Max and Bruno Taut, Ludwig Hilberseimer and Hugo Häring, were held in Moscow in the early 1920s. Among the western journals distributed in Russia were Germany's *Städtebau* and *Der Industriebau*, Britain's *Architectural Review* and *The Architect*, France's *La Construction moderne* and the USA's *American Architect* and *Architectural Forum*.

⁶ This city is now known in English by its Ukrainian name Kharkiv, but in the days before Ukrainian independence its Russian name Kharkov (sometimes transliterated as Charkov) was more common. For ease of reference in historical contexts, the Russian place names will be used throughout this paper.

⁷ Lotte Beese was interviewed by Cor de Wit and Arno Nicolai. De Wit produced a publication based on these interviews, see note 8.

mention that she left her little son, Peter, with a married couple in Prague for six months. As soon as circumstances permitted, she took him back with her to Kharkov, where a homeless girl called Manya looked after him.

Lotte Beese said she was shocked by the state of the city. The forced collectivisation of agriculture had caused a terrible famine. Resistance by farmers had led to large areas of land remaining uncultivated, and millions of people in Ukraine starved to death. She saw people dying in the street and the corpses being collected in the evening by the health services. An ensuing typhus epidemic had an immediate impact on her working conditions: 'Our trust included some 160 architects, but by the spring there were only 30 left – the rest had died of typhus.'⁸

She did not say much about her work in Kharkov. It seems she mainly drew up standards for future housing for, among others, the many homeless people. This involved making calculations and standard ground plans for the requisite amount of living space, play areas and so on.

Besides the shocking confrontation with the fate of the local population, something good also happened to her. She ran into her former Bauhaus teacher the Dutch designer and architect Mart Stam, who was also working in the Soviet Union. Lotte and Mart, whose marriage had broken down, fell in love and decided to spend their lives together. She felt it was very important for male foreign architects to live with a woman.

Even though you were working with Russian and non-Russian colleagues, you were still living in an alien environment. The great majority of the foreigners were men. The married men often had their wives and even children with them. But if you didn't have a wife and children, things were difficult. Some men started drinking, and some simply disappeared. So a man couldn't just remain alone. He had to have someone with him.⁹

We would now see this as a confirmation of traditional gender roles. At the same time, it makes clear why she wanted to live with Stam. The need to find a new father for her young son must also have been a factor.

They worked together on the redevelopment of Orskaya in the southern Urals into the industrial *sotsgorod* Orsk. She was supposedly involved in discussions there about the construction of the *sotsgorod*, making drawings and designing children's homes for the city.

She was more candid in her interviews about a project that was never carried out and would lead to the couple quitting the Soviet Union permanently. Their assignment was to build a town on Lake Balkhash, in what is now Kazakhstan. They both found their journey there a memorable experience,

flying in a small plane from Orsk to Alma-Ata and from there across the desert, with Lake Balkhash spread out beneath them.

We could see a toxic-looking expanse of water whose blue-green colour turned out to be due to copper mining ... We landed in an area with no trace of life, no flora or fauna of any kind. We were overwhelmed by the utter silence – an almost unimaginable silence ... Not the slightest sound. Since the soil was thoroughly polluted by salt and copper, animals and plants couldn't live there – and nor, in fact, could people.¹⁰

They discovered that thousands of prisoners and forced labourers had been brought to the inhospitable area to mine copper. Back in Moscow they reported that it was impossible to build a town in such a polluted region; it would be better to build new housing in the nearby city of Alma-Ata and create encampments in the new town where rotating teams from Alma-Ata could come and work for a month at a time. But their proposal was not accepted, and furthermore was seen as refusal to work. It was a frightening moment for them both: 'The fellow could have put us straight up against a wall, for in the Soviet Union refusing work was the ultimate crime'. Stam, who had taken on the assignment, felt he had no option but to leave the country. But Beese had her doubts:

At first I hesitated. Should I stay there, or go with him? I hated the idea of leaving Russia. If we hadn't left, what would have happened? And God help us if Hitler had got his hands on this country. At the time I had more faith in the Russians and in politics than Stam did. He wanted to take me to Holland, but I didn't like the idea at all. It was all very difficult for me.¹¹

The fact that Ukraine and Byelorussia (now Belarus) would in fact be occupied by the Nazis is not mentioned in the interview.

From Recollection to Reality

What can we find in the literature and archives that confirms – or conflicts with – Lotte Beese's personal recollections as recorded in her interviews? What we do know about her brief period of work in Moscow in autumn 1930, when she was living with Hannes Meyer, is that initially he was working there with seven former Bauhaus architecture students, all of them men, who had followed him to Moscow. Meyer had formed them into the Red Front Brigade which was working to build up the Soviet state in accordance with 'Marxist philosophical' principles. At first the team worked on the construction of technical schools and later the *sotsgorods*. Lotte Beese must have been involved in the initial project.

8 Cor de Wit, *Lotte Stam-Beese (1903–1988), "Je moest kiezen, zwart of wit...": Op weg naar helderheid, Ontmoetingen en herinneringen van een architect* (Apeldoorn, self-published publication, 2005), 42.

9 Interview by Cor de Wit with Lotte Stam-Beese, (Krimpen aan den IJssel, February 15, 1976), HNI archives, Rotterdam, WITC CD-R 4.

10 De Wit, *Lotte Stam-Beese*, 44.

11 See note 9.



Fig. 3. Drawing for *KhTZ* signed by Lotte Beese, 1932. Courtesy of Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, STAB ph174.



Fig. 4. Dwellings *KhTZ*, Kharkov, 2015. Photo by Hanneke Oosterhof.

The archives shed new light on her work in Kharkov from spring 1932 to autumn 1933. Some photographs of drawings of Russian housing districts (*kvartals*) bearing her signature have survived in her personal files at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. They are made for Giprograd, the Ukrainian section of the State Institute of Town Planning. Research in Kyiv and Kharkov shows that the drawings resemble designs for *sotsgorod KhTZ*, a large, linear district on a railway line ten kilometres from the city centre of Kharkov. It was built from the end of the 1920s and was officially intended for employees of the newly-built nearby Kharkov Tractor Factory. The factory was funded with capital provided by the American industrialist Henry Ford and designed by the architect Albert Kahn. Kahn was the leading American architect working in the Soviet Union, where he and his staff had built over 500 factories.¹² In the years when Beese was living in Kharkov, the *sotsgorod* was the biggest construction project in the city, supervised by the Ukrainian architect and urban planner P. F. Alyoshin. The forecast number of people that would come to live in the *sotsgorod* was 36,000. The files that Alyoshin left after his death indicate that old-age pensioners, young graduates and unemployed people would also be housed there.¹³ This accounts for Beese's recollection that many people, including homeless people, were to be accommodated in the new dwellings.

In each *kvartal* her designs placed the central kitchen and collective dining room on the south side, and in the middle were parallel rows of four-storey blocks of flats interspersed with crèches, schools and green areas (Fig. 3). Socialist ideas about the importance of women working outside

the home were enshrined in the *sotsgorods*, including this one. The flats had no kitchens, and children were placed in crèches with permanent sleeping areas so that their mothers did not have to look after them.

As of 2015, two *kvartals* in the now dilapidated *KhTZ* district are still inhabited or otherwise in use (Fig. 4).

For her work from autumn 1933 onwards, Beese had to move to Moscow with Peter and Manya. It was from here that the work she did with Stam for the *sotsgorod Orsk* (where they also stayed from time to time) was organised. The project was carried out with members of the May Brigade. Comprising some 40 architects and headed by the famous and politically uncommitted Frankfurt architect Ernst May, this brigade had been

invited to the Soviet Union by the Russian authorities in 1930. Stam, who had worked on the Hellerhof *Siedlung* in Frankfurt, was also a member of the group. In late 1933 the Russians stopped working with May, who then had to leave the country because of an internal power struggle in the Soviet leadership, in which the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) had seized full control and no longer wanted foreigners in positions of authority.¹⁴ The brigade became part of the new Standartgorproekt state trust, in which some 150 foreign professionals now worked.

While living in Amsterdam in 1935, Beese edited an article on crèches and children's homes in the Soviet Union for the architects' association journal *De 8 en Opbouw*.¹⁵ She included sketches of two pavilion-style children's homes designed for Orsk; she may have been the designer, but this was not specified. Curiously, she wrote nothing about her personal experiences in Orsk. The May Brigade is known to have produced designs for one *kvartal* in this *sotsgorod*. The fact that Lotte Beese was involved in designs for flats is apparent from notes by the architect and former Bauhaus student Philipp Tolziner, who stated that the staircases she had designed for the flats had to be altered because they did not fit.¹⁶ Beese's archives contain some photographs of designs for flats in Orsk that she may have helped produce. There is also a photograph of a ground plan for a school with 640 pupils (Fig. 5). This design, which in all likelihood was hers, was eventually built in the *sotsgorod* in an adapted form.¹⁷

¹² See Anatole Kopp, "Foreign architects in the Soviet Union during the first two Five-Year Plans," in William C. Brumfield (ed.), *Reshaping Russian architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 176–214.

¹³ Christina E. Crawford, "The long-term effects of settlement isolationism: Armenikend/Baku, KhTZ/Kharkiv, Sotsgorod/Magnitogorsk" (paper presented at the Ekaterinburg Academy of Contemporary Art, Ekaterinburg, Russia, May 2014), 3. P. F. Alyoshin's archives can be found in the Central State Archives Museum of Literature and Arts of Ukraine in Kyiv. Drawings of *KhTZ* in the Zabolotnov State Science Library of Architecture and Constructions in Kyiv.

¹⁴ See Thomas Flierl, "Vielleicht die grösste Aufgabe, die je einem Architekten gestellt wurde," in Claudia Quiring et al., *Ernst May 1886–1940* (Munich: Prestel, 2011), 157–95.

¹⁵ Lotte Beese (ed.), "Over bewaarplaatsen en kindertehuizen in U.S.S.R.," *De 8 en Opbouw* 6 (1935), 7–23.

¹⁶ Note by Philipp Tolziner, Mapped Tolziner 58, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin.

¹⁷ Written communication to the author by Astrid Volpert (Berlin, August 19, 2015).

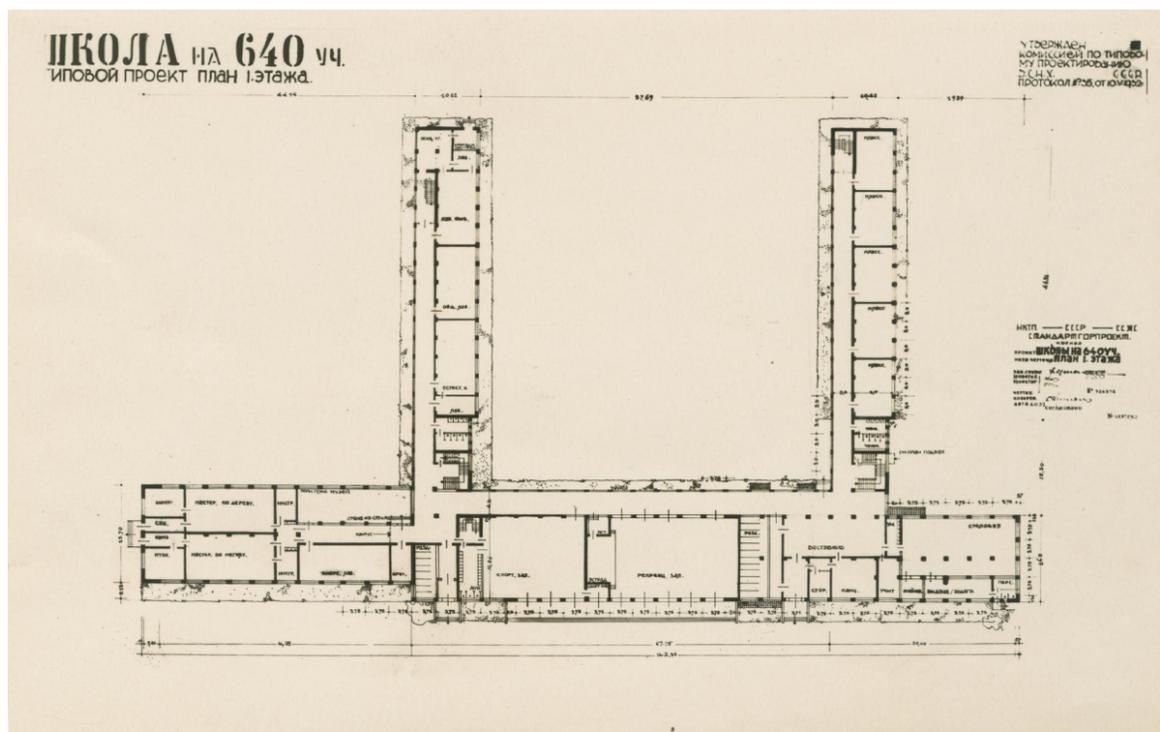


Fig. 5. Ground plan for a school in Orsk, 1933. Attributed to Lotte Beese. Courtesy of Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, STAB ph126.

Another female foreign architect who worked in the Soviet Union was Austrian, Grete Schütte-Lihotzky. She was the only female architect to join the May Brigade, together with her husband the architect Wilhelm Schütte. She had first made a name for herself with her rationally designed 'Frankfurt kitchen', but she now also had experience as an urban architect. Her job in the Soviet Union was to design crèches and nursery schools. Among the places she worked on was the *sotsgorod* Magnitogorsk in Siberia.¹⁸ She must have met Lotte Beese when Lotte started working with architects from her brigade; but neither of them made any mention of the other in their correspondence, personal notes or interviews.

As far as we know today, Beese and Schütte-Lihotzky were the only female foreign architects working in the USSR at the time.

Beese's recollections of the assignment for the town on Lake Balkhash cannot be verified from archival material, but they do appear in publications about both her and Stam. The independent

¹⁸ See Peter Noever (ed.), *Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, Soziale Architektur: Zeitzeugin eines Jahrhunderts* (Vienna: MAK, 1993).

accounts of the pair tally.¹⁹ The *sotsgorod* Balkhash was eventually built in 1937, after almost all the foreign specialists had left the country. The project was carried out by the Russian construction company Pribalkhashstroy in partnership with the copper factory BGMC.²⁰

Utopian or Idealist?

When reviewing western architects' help in building up the Soviet Union, architectural historians refer to these pioneers as utopians.²¹ They wanted their architecture to create a new reality; but this goal remained utopian, for their avant-garde architecture could not be built according to plan, among other things because of lack of proper materials and – a more fundamental consideration – the Russian authorities' subsequent switch to a neo-classicist style, also known as socialist realism.

The use of the terms 'utopia' and 'utopians' recalls the imagery used by Russian thinkers and writers when talking about the realisation of a 'communist utopia'. The terms thus seem to reflect a single notion – but there is a clear difference. The western architects were unwilling or unable to create a utopia. Their 'utopia' was to build a better – in this case, socialist – society through their work and its products.

There was a good deal of philosophising about a Russian utopia well before the revolution, particularly in popular books. The favourite volume in the genre was *Красная Звезда* (Red Star), published in 1908 by the Bolshevik physician and science-fiction writer Aleksandr Bogdanov (Fig. 6). The book is about a Russian scientist who travels to Mars to study the socialist system there. On returning to Earth he tells of what he has learned. The constructivist architecture that flourished in Russia in the 1920s



Fig. 6. Cover *Red Star* by Aleksandr Bogdanov, 1908.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Simone Rümmele, *Mart Stam* (Zurich: Verlag für Architektur, 1991), 111; Jeroen Schilt and Herman Selier, "Van de oevers van de Oder tot Krimpen aan den IJssel," in Hélène Damen and Anne-Mie Devolder (eds.), *Lotte Stam-Beese 1903–1988* (Rotterdam: De Hef, 1993), 18–19.

²⁰ See "Balkhashtsvetmet," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balkhashtsvetmet> (accessed August 3, 2015).

²¹ See, for instance, Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Architektur der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Belsler Verlag; Milan: Electa Editrice, 1977), 214–220; Kopp, "Foreign architects," 210.

was prophetically propagated here.²² An explosive outpouring of utopian books and experimental designs was to follow in the course of the century.

Personal notes, interviews and memoirs by foreign architects who worked in the Soviet Union make clear that the term 'utopia' was not part of their vocabulary – they were far too practically-minded for that. An exception was Hannes Meyer, who did use the term, only to dismiss it as 'bourgeois'. He spoke instead of 'Leninist architecture', which would serve as a weapon in the class struggle – aesthetics was not a factor here.²³ To the best of my knowledge, Lotte Beese did not use the term 'Leninist architecture', nor did she call herself a utopian. Had you asked her if she had been a utopian living in the Netherlands, looking back on her time in the Soviet Union with some detachment, and aware that 'utopian architecture' was a much-used post-war term she would have said no. Her pragmatic attitude was not compatible with belief in utopias, or thinking in terms of them. Like many of her fellow architects she considered herself an idealist, although she did have her reservations.

I wasn't a thoroughgoing idealist. Of course, I did have my ideals; but I was also a realist and a materialist, in the good sense ... I went to Russia out of conviction, a basic belief in socialism, if you like. But I did realise things wouldn't always go the way you'd expected ... Many people, myself included, did look forward to a better society.

She was also aware of the potential friction here.

The funny thing is that the Russian authorities were none too keen on idealists. They preferred people who were down to earth. They had no problems with people who'd gone there with down-to-earth motives – they were there to work, and that was that!²⁴

'Inhuman Cities'

In the years when Beese lived and worked in the Soviet Union, there was a shift in ideas about what architecture should mean. The 1932 worldwide design competition for the Palace of the Soviets, with proposals submitted by such figures as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Auguste Perret, as well as the less famous Dutch architect Han van Loghem, is generally seen as a major turning point in Russian architecture. The avant-garde architects' designs were rejected in favour of one submitted by the Russian Boris Iofan – a megalomaniac neo-classicist palace. Buildings – including to some extent those in the *sotsgorods* would henceforth have to have historical, classical features.



Fig. 7. Dwellings *sotsgorod* Magnitogorsk with at the left crèche designed by Grete Schütte-Lihotzky, 1932-35. Courtesy of Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

Beese had her own direct experience of this change while living in Moscow.

Kaganovich, the then Minister of Construction, gave a speech in which he said: 'We're on the way to prosperity, and we have to show it.' And what happened? It seems hard to believe nowadays, but they actually did it. We were living in a five-storey building. They stuck columns in front of it, one of which obscured about a third of our window, and they put a cornice and a tympanum on the roof. After the first heavy snowfall the snow was a metre thick. When it melted, the water would normally have drained off – but the tympanum got in the way, so it leaked right through the roof and floors instead.²⁵

Pressure was also put on the foreign architects. The long slabs of housing in the *sotsgorods* were supposedly bleak and monotonous. Such criticism came not only from the government, but also from Russian architects' associations. The western architects were told that their 'formalism' was associated with capitalism, and that they had lost their way in their abstract pursuit of a new architectural form.²⁶

In their analysis of the work and position of western architects in the Soviet Union, the neo-Marxist Italian architectural historians Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co concluded that the architects

22 See M. Bliznakov, "The realization of Utopia," in Brumfield, *Russian architecture*, 145–75.

23 Hannes Meyer, *Welche ist die Rolle des Architekten im sozialistischen Aufbau?* (typescript, June 28, 1931), Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt am Main, Hannes Meyer archives 164–902–003.

24 De Wit, Interview. See note 1.

25 Interview by Arno Nicolaï with Lotte Stam Beese (Emmen, August 20, 1986), manuscript, HNI, NICO d641.

26 Otto Das, Gerrit Oorthuys and Max Risselada, *Russische architectuur en stedenbouw 1917–1933* (Delft: Technische Hogeschool, 1969), 25.

had been accused of producing 'inhuman cities'.²⁷ Unfortunately, the authors cite no sources for this accusation but they do make clear that it had an ideological basis. In the architects' urban models the Soviet state saw the ideology of the 'working city', which it wanted to replace with an ideology of 'the city for socialist man'. In other words, what 'inhuman' really meant was 'unsuitable for socialist man', who would be alienated by functionalist, objective architecture.

We do not know whether Lotte discussed with her colleagues what it was that made the *sotsgorods* 'human' or 'inhuman', but she did have her own ideas about what had gone wrong with their designs.

In a way it's understandable that our architecture failed in Russia, for New Objectivity calls for structural perfection – the perfection of the machine. In Russia you were forced to build with unskilled workers and materials of extremely variable quality, assuming they were available at all – so you simply couldn't achieve such perfection. You had to use axes or pickaxes to make openings in the walls for the windows. Iron was sometimes available, but it soon ran out. On the balconies the reinforcing bars were left sticking out of the concrete, and there were never any railings, because there was nothing to make them with. And the open slabs were completely unsuitable for the windy steppe. They looked quite dreadful out there, without any paving or greenery (Fig. 7). We just couldn't work the way we wanted to.²⁸

Mission Impossible?

Does all this mean that the work of the western architects and urban planners, which came to an end during the 1930s, was a fiasco? Architectural historians writing forty to eighty years after the event have generally concluded that it was not a success. The Dutch architectural historian Koos Bosma's recent article "New socialist cities: foreign architects in the USSR" states that the architects must very soon have realised this was 'mission impossible'.²⁹ They had not yet acquired enough experience of building cities in Europe to put it into practice in the Soviet Union and they did not have the slightest idea what was meant by a 'socialist city'. To make matters worse, they had to build districts rather than whole cities. The failure of architect Han van Loghem's plans in the late 1920s for the Siberian town of Kemerovo, where lack of materials forced him to build wooden houses rather than avant-garde architecture, was a warning that the foreign architects who followed him would be no more successful.

Bosma's conclusion is surely correct. But could Beese have foreseen all this, and did she too think of her work as 'mission impossible'?

She travelled from Brno to Kharkov at a time when her fellow architects were still euphoric about the Soviet ideal. It is not known whether she was then aware of how her predecessors had fared. But even if she had been, her enthusiasm for the communist ideal and her abhorrence of national socialism were so great that she had no reason to take a critical view of things.

When reviewing her years in Russia she made no mention of specific results. She did acknowledge the difficulties and imperfections of the project, and had to concede that the Stalinist regime had become a dictatorship. This was hard for her, which is not surprising given her firm belief at the time that a socialist society was feasible. She said conflicting things about life under the Stalinist regime. She supposedly felt free, and was never afraid, except on that one occasion when she and Stam 'refused work'. Yet she couldn't help wondering.

Not a day went by without something shocking. This was a world where black was white and white was black. You saw so many incomprehensible things – things you couldn't help seeing, but couldn't find an explanation for. And the explanation only came after so much else had happened. Then you could suddenly see the underlying causes.³⁰

On the other hand, there was the challenge of 'creating order amid chaos' together with her fellow architects. Her recorded recollections make clear that she did not see her work in the Soviet Union as 'mission impossible'. It had not been an easy project, but she would not have missed the experience for the world. By broadening her horizons, it had given her life meaning.³¹ However, in acknowledging that the *sotsgorods* had not been built according to plan, or to her own and the Russian authorities' satisfaction, she also made clear that the mission had not been fully accomplished. She had been prevented from creating order amid chaos. This must have been a great disappointment to her.

Translation from Dutch into English: Kevin Cook.

27 Tafuri and Dal Co, *Architektur*, 220.

28 See note 1.

29 Koos Bosma, "New Socialist Cities: Foreign Architects in the USSR 1920–1940," *Planning Perspectives* 29, no. 3 (2014), 301–328, DOI: 10.1080/02665433.2013.825994 (accessed June 6, 2014).

30 See note 1.

31 Lotte Stam Beese, *Farewell speech* (Rotterdam City Council, February 1968), HNI, STAB d50.

Hanneke Oosterhof

PhD candidate at University of Technology Eindhoven



Hanneke Oosterhof (MA) is an external PhD Candidate in Architectural History and Theory at University of Technology Eindhoven (NL). Her research focuses on the subject of an interdisciplinary biography (architecture, history, gender) of the urban architect Lotte Stam-Beese (1903–1988). She studied History and Dutch at Teacher Training College in Nijmegen and Culture Sciences at Open University Nederland. She graduated with a thesis on the life and work of the decorative artist Agathe Wegerif-Gravestein (1867–1944). She worked for over thirty years in the museum sector, both as a manager and as a curator, and has published in the field of social history, woman history and culture history.

E-mail: hoosterhof@home.nl

