



VERTIGINOUS
MOSCOM

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The city of Moscow encapsulates the transformation of an entire country: here everything happens first, faster, and on a larger scale. Moscow functions as a city-state, and as a result since the mid-1990s it has undergone vast and radical transformations, which make of it today one of the most extraordinary laboratories of urbanism.

Its transformation is, however, relatively little known, compared with the wealth of information available on the growth of European and American cities and, more recently, those of Asia and the United Arab Emirates. The reason is that there are hardly any images of this unique journey from the USSR to the New Russia, involving history and politics, economics and society, that is embodied in the new architecture. It seems that, at least where architecture is concerned, the eyes of the Western world have skipped over Moscow and post-Soviet Russia and looked to the Far East.

In her book *New Moscow 4*, Irina Korobina, Director of the Centre for Contemporary Architecture in Moscow, reconstructs the history of the city's recent development stage by stage. First comes the period following the Revolution, from 1918 to the end of the 1930s; then comes the Stalinist city when Moscow was the 'capital of the world proletariat', from 1935 to 1954; from 1955 to the end of the 1980s it was the 'capital of social justice', with mature Socialism under Khrushchev and 'stagnation' under Brezhnev; and finally there is the fourth Moscow, from the 1990s to the present, seen as a model twenty-first-century capital. But already a fifth is imminent, described in the General Plan for the period up to the year 2020.

From all this the idea of the present book was born. In it a photographer of cities, Gabriele Basilico, documents the transformation of the urban landscape through new images, taken from the tops of Stalin's seven towers – a viewpoint of highly original and symbolic character. The motivation was not merely to study the post-Socialist metropolis from the most celebrated monuments of the former regime, erected under Stalin the 'Great Architect'. These towers embody the idea, initiated with the approval of the General Plan for the reconstruction of Moscow in 1935, to make of the Soviet capital a monument to the success of Socialism and a jewel to be flaunted with pride before the capitalist world; built from 1948 to the mid-1950s, they express a radiocentric city where territory and architecture are indissolubly linked – a concept still easily perceptible today.

The sites of the towers were carefully chosen to impress upon the silhouette of the city vertical features that would embody Socialism, and at the same time to provide views of one another. They were planned to be a crown surrounding the most prestigious of all the Revolution's buildings, the Palace of Soviets – which was never built. Symbols of the Muscovite urban world of their time, they still today offer a privileged viewpoint for new urban exploration. In the spatial journey embarked upon by Basilico, these buildings, conceived to be seen from below and from faraway, as inhabited monuments, become tall platforms from which to take headlong dives into the city, or theatrical boxes from which to look around, beyond, to the horizon. Moscow becomes a vertical city, unlike the horizontal city seen in images from the past. At the same time, these *vysotnye zdania*, or 'tall buildings' – as they were called in ideological opposition to the American skyscraper – after the passage of half a century, and the development of criticism that shows them in a new light, can be read now in the context of the new urban landscape.

The presence of these seven towers is both marked and acknowledged in a city which has in the meantime undergone an extraordinary transformation into a capitalist metropolis. It is significant that the gigantic new constructions that proliferate (true technological challenges to verticality) are never called *vysotnye zdania*: instead, the English word 'towers' is often used for them. The physical, moral and spiritual stature implied by the term 'tall buildings' is attributed to the Stalinist buildings, and to those alone.

Looking down with a camera from these terraces in the sky suggests the many differences between the urban panorama of today and the Moscow that surrounded the towers at the time of their construction, and went on developing until the recent fall of the USSR. The contemporary city, framed district by district, is like a much more animated, much denser, veil stretched out over the original radial and annular arteries of the 1950s, which loosely enclosed buildings seldom more than three storeys tall. The Stalinist thoroughfares, deserted avenues leading in grandiose state from the city centre out to empty space occupied at most by rural dachas, their metaphysical theatrical wings providing a backdrop for parades made up almost entirely of lorries, now look like canals choked with incessant, impatient traffic. The pure and geometrical buildings are enclosed in an inharmonious setting, the result of growth based on individual structures rather than a plan.

The urban layers that spread out from the centre as far as the ring road with its large factories, and further on still towards the surrounding *oblast* or region, suggest the strata of geological eras. In the midst of them large voids at times open up, some due to major works of rebuilding in the central area (e.g. the demolition of the Hotel Moskva and Hotel Rossia), and some due to redevelopment of the industrial areas of the first Five-Year Plan, of 1928–33 (ZIL, AZLK, GPZ-1). Like wild ancient forests now surrounded by the structures of progress, the vast green areas of the parks survive (Sokolniki, Losinyi Ostrov, Izmailovsky), the bequest of past Socialist planning that was so attentive to the leisure and amusement of the proletariat, and to maintaining the ties between the urban and Soviet 'new man' and his Russian roots in legendary forests.

Seen close up, in the historical centre many small wounds inflicted by new commercial and residential development appear like cavities in the architectural fabric. Seen from further off, in a landscape that is still horizontal, dense vertical accents, the result of new market pressures, rise up like newborn mountains that coexist somewhat awkwardly with the ancient stone hills of the Socialist towers, guardians of a revolutionary past which now lives largely forgotten in archives.

The camera, mindless of historical eras, often focuses on hybrid architectural structures, which reflect forever-hybrid Russian culture. As Anna Zafesova, the Russian correspondent of *La Stampa*, explained in long conversations during the genesis of this work, we Westerners do not know whether to embrace what is closer to us or what is more exotically different.

Gabriele Basilico's evocative photography is not concerned merely with history and topography: through its poetic and creative mediation we can explore urban space, and discover the new scenes of Moscow's astonishing evolution.



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