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Dimension

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MERA*, Three Measures of the Third Way

*mera (rus. мера)—measure, dimension

Умом Россию не понять,
Аршином общим не измерить:
У ней особенная стать—
В Россию можно только верить.
—Федор Тютчев 28 ноября 1866г.

Of Russia, mind cannot conceive.
Hers is no common yardstick.
You measure her uniquely:
In Russia you believe.
—Fyodor Tyutchev, 26 November, 1866

There are still a few days left before the Russian presidential election of 2008. By the time this text goes to print, it will already be over, the votes counted, campaign posters removed, streets cleaned. The outcome of course is already known and considering that it has only been 17 years since the collapse of the USSR, the epigraph above yet again rings true.

Believing in Russia, as the only viable option proposed in 1866 by Fyodor Tyutchev, a Slavophile poet, is taxing physiologically, for it—the empire, or it—the USSR, is periodically proclaimed an heir to one or another much larger disparate entity or concept. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Russia became the so-called Third Rome (the original Rome being number one and Constantinople, number two) and the last stand of the world's orthodox Christianity. After oscillating continuously between East and West for nearly 500 years, in 1917 Russia set off on the first physical attempt at implementation of yet another new doctrine—Communism. Today there is a special department in the Russian government searching for the next “national idea”; and in the meantime it is a bizarre hybrid of what it once had been, and what it was only recently, and what always stood against and what it will probably never be—Empire, USSR, the West, and democracy. All these ingredients blend into a unique mix of unknown proportions and, even more so than in Tyutchev's time, today's Russia is very difficult to simply believe in.

Debates rage in the world political press whether the country is a democracy, a Soviet-style autocracy circa 1936, a medieval monarchy and/or an oil-fed banana republic. Its economy is tightly intertwined with its murky politics, and it too exhibits signs the five-year plans overlaid with laissez-faire with tightening government control and grandiose reforms a la old empire. Culture... just recall the Turin Olympics: “Russia” emblazoned in a semblance of a traditional vernacular script over hoods of Hummers and Ferraris; the old/new anthem (Soviet awe-inducing music with a new libretto); the spectators waving the Imperial tri-color, cheering for athletes in red uniforms resembling those of the USSR Olympic machine. It is all at once fashionable to flex the old Soviet military muscle, go to church and distrust the West, yet its also “cool” to embrace (and multiply) its consumerist excesses. What kind of a “common yardstick” is there to speak of?

Having spent exactly one half of my life other there, I hate the idea that this first half is growing more and more distant and murky. Therefore, MERA is not purely detached academism; this is to a large degree personal. I am an architect, my father is an architect and my grandfather was one too—and architecture historically has been the vehicle of expression for ideology in Russia. Succession of national ideas can indeed be traced in the country's built oeuvre. Arguably the new national idea, the one that Moscow bureaucrats are busy searching for, can as well be crystallized in its modern architecture; but so far, Russian architecture has failed to produce an adequate measure of the new ideology. In architecture schools one is taught to push instruments to the point of failure and then invent new ones to achieve a task at hand. Therefore, to remedy the failure of the architectural “common yardstick”, we need specific and precise design tools produced

for taking measure of Russia today—its politics, history and economy—defying and rethinking established conventions that were inherited from the past.

MERA #1, Politics (Aleksandr Mergold, 2003–04)

Visiting Moscow in the early 2000s and trying to find accommodations, it quickly became apparent that there was a crisis in the city's hospitality industry. Yes, there were several Western five-star chains, conveniently located around the Kremlin. Having seen the price of a room (and potentially having not even found any availability) one quickly ended up in a fairly substandard (barely a one star) Soviet-era hostel. Anything in between—two-, three-, or four-star accommodation—for local and foreign travelers was simply not available.¹

This sharp divide between the two hospitality systems is also fairly accurately reflected in the political situation of the time. Russia is caught in the middle of two well-established political systems—the nominally hierarchical western and the nominally egalitarian Soviet/socialist. Instead of steering clear into a direction, Russian politics oscillate as if again invoking the old Slavophile maxim that the country is neither west nor east, politically, economically and socially, and that it has its own, Third, way.

The Third Way Hotel (TWH) was initially conceived as a literal hybrid of the Soviet and western hospitality system and was designed to fill the obvious gap in the market. Located on the site of the new Cathedral of Christ the Savior (formerly the swimming pool Moskva, formerly the site of the Palace of the Soviet, formerly the original Cathedral) the TWH is an appropriate addition to this array of architectural monuments—after all they too succeeded each other as markers of new political regimes. The new architectural typology reflected the struggle that Russia experiences politically, and becomes a physical representation of a society between West and East in search of its Third Way.

TWH is a complex of towers, housing a number of units that can each accommodate a range of amenities from one to five stars. This is achieved by a combination of 19th century mechanics and 21st century computation technology. Each room consists of a series of compartments that through a telescoping mechanism become accessible depending on what level of accommodation was purchased by the client. At the same time, the issue of a “better view” which so key to any western hotel, is eliminated all together. Each room has the best view in town beamed electronically through hotel's intranet and projected onto a large screen inside—the virtual window into the city. The view is generated from what would have been the eye of the statue of Lenin atop of the winning scheme of the Soviet Palace in 1932 that was to be located on the same site. As the levels of individual accommodations increase in certain rooms, a larger portion of the view bandwidth is allocated to those units, making the image HD and “real time.” Lower levels of accommodations receive more pixelated images with a slower refresh rate.

TWH solves the biggest problem that plagues hospitality establishments—it virtually eliminates vacancy due to the off-season or a slow economy. Given its ultimate flexibility of accommodations (15 stars all together!) it promises virtually 100 percent occupancy. Yet the hotel, like any system, has a weakness—too many five-star accommodations will deplete the bandwidth, resulting in a drop of image quality even in the most luxurious rooms. This built-in spoiler is the Aristotelian tragedy of the commons, an eloquent reminder of the shortcomings of all political systems that promise redistribution of finite wealth.

TWH can accommodate any combination of guests—from wealthy oligarch and corrupt politician to a foreign student traveling on a budget—all in the same room. Furthermore, based on the telescoping nature of the units, the façade TWH tower is naturally animated—reflecting the economic status of the demographic that the hotel houses on a given day. Thus the new hotel model produces its own microcosm of societal relations; an exaggerated reflection, a model, a critique of Russia today.

MERA #2, History (Pentagram, 2007)

In late 2006 a new lifestyle magazine, *Russia!* (the magazine's mission is eloquently described by its enthusiastic title) approached several design bureaus to create a T-shirt that reflects a designer's vision of Russia today. I was the resident Russian at Pentagram New York at the time, and the project ended up on my desk. *Hello, I am not a graphic designer!* That was somehow ignored, and I was left to figure out what

a modern designer might think of Russia today. After a while it occurred to me that I am much more interested in a broader picture—what any modern Russian might be thinking of his or her motherland, especially given the country's schizophrenic mix of allegiances to both its imperial and Soviet pasts.

Considering the towers of the Moscow Kremlin as the ultimate bearers of the country's symbology, it becomes fairly obvious that something is amiss—some towers still have Soviet ruby five-pointed stars, while others have been replaced with the double-headed imperial eagles. Below, on the Red Square, on any given day one might observe a monarchist rally (the ruby star looks on with disapproval) or a communist meeting (the eagle turns its heads). These are obviously extremes on the far right and far left; historical allegiance for majority of Russians is somewhere in between. It is also not a fixed scale: from time to time one might feel more sympathetic to a particular portion of history—nostalgically longing for the Romanoff's empire and its black two-headed eagle, or the more recent successor—the fearsome USSR with its red, five-pointed star. No viable new symbol ever replaced these—and no clear direction is evident for the country in terms of its two histories. In fact a vacuum of symbolism is now apparent; and it needs to be filled with something clearly reflecting the concurrent influence of both Russian pasts on the lives of its every citizen.

The proposed new symbol is literally a hybrid of the two old ones—the star and the eagle. Admittedly questionable from a standpoint of classic tenets of graphic design, each single iteration of this hybrid is only a part of a whole range. Together these patterns describe the present hybridization of Russian history far better than any whole symbol.

As a result of this thought process, instead of a t-shirt, the editors of *Russia!* received an analysis of the state symbology and a design for a reversible fabric pattern. In red and black it rendered the hybridization of the old Russia into the USSR on one side, and back into the Empire on the other. This reversible fabric essentially becomes a new camouflage—the khaki of Russian history—that can make the wearer at home at a monarchist rally and also not fail him/her at a communist gathering.

One Imperial Eagle, one Soviet star morphed into each other over a series of iterations; at the same time, the color is blended from red to black (and back.) The color field and color objects are interdependent—for example the black of the eagle becomes more apparent on the red, Soviet, field, and vice versa.

MERA #3, Economy (MERA, 2007, Aleksandr Mergold, Boris Ravvin)

In 2007 the Union of Russian Architects conducted a design competition for a new hotel in the center of Moscow on Strastnoi Boulevard across from Pushkin Square. The type of accommodations was intended to be flexible, the occupancy rate was to be maximized, yet the site constraints limited the height of the new building to a mere 27 meters—the vertical dimension of surrounding existing urban fabric from late-1800s/early-1900s. Two aspects were the driving forces behind this project: preserving the existing built context and economic index RevPAR (revenue for every available room for every day of the year).

Upon some consideration, it became apparent that a traditional luxury hotel would not be viable on the site. A noisy Boulevard at the front, adjacent buildings on the sides and rather unattractive backyard with refuse bins and a metro ventilation tower, height limitation and lack of compelling views from 90 percent of the building envelope—these factors would make the number of reasonably attractive market-rate rooms extremely low. On the other hand, given the site constraints and considering the high costs of construction and real-estate in the center of Moscow, making the entire hotel sub-market rate was economically unfeasible. Instead, we proposed to consider the theoretical notion of the Third Way Hotel (see *Mera #1*) and apply it as a development model.

Instead of the traditional western hotel orientation that separates residential and public areas horizontally (i.e. restaurant, gym, lobby below and only then multiple floors of rooms above), TWH Strastnoi proposes vertical organization where all public functions face the noisy boulevard and Pushkin Square, creating a visual dialog between the building and the city. At the same time, all the rooms are located in the back, providing a quiet retreat from bustling Moscow outside. Instead of scrambling for a few attractive glimpses into the city, each room features an imposing view toward the beautiful Moscow sky—both a nod to the work of James Turrell, and an alternative to the constant chasing after the “best view in town” by western hotel chains. One can still experience the city from inside of each room—a view from a camera attached to a mast above the

hotel's roof (and projecting far above the 27-meter limit) is constantly projected inside onto the virtual TV window, allowing for a real-time connection with the city. It also opens possibilities of multiple views of Moscow or other, more distant, places. At the cost of radically rethinking the established hospitality formulas, the goal of development was accomplished—within the severe site constraints a high count of rooms with equally attractive amenities is indeed possible!

The TWH Strastnoi received the highest acclaim from the project developer and the third prize from the architecture jury. Perhaps this is where the success of the project hinges—precisely registering the conflict between the economic demands of modern Russia and the architectural establishment that is alarmed by the radical transformation that those demands create.

Post Scriptum (September, 2008)

It took far less time to elect an old/new president/prime-minister, restart the old/new war and to dust off the rogue status of the old/new empire than to write, edit and publish this article.

For a while things looked hopeful—it seemed that the search for the Third Way could become a unique, new and exciting direction born out of a careful evaluation of the confusion produced by Russia's historic geo-political and cultural proclivities. Yet instead of embarking on difficult self-searching, the new/old leadership opted to continue in the same old “old/new” direction—and imperial ambitions, embraced by the soviets are as appealing now as they ever were. Nothing focuses attention like an outside threat that the people are coerced into believing (in the US it is a familiar concept). And nothing puts off the measured self-evaluation further.

References

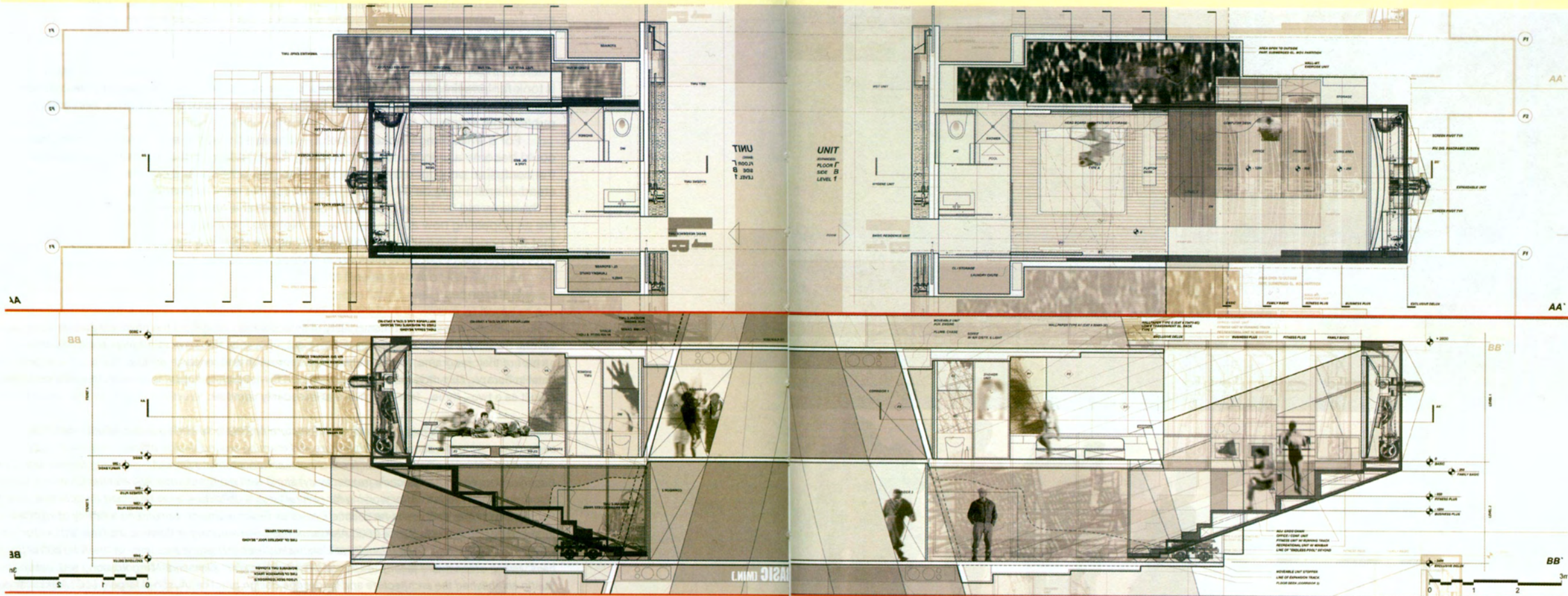
1. Today, finally, it seems that municipality of Moscow has recognized the hospitality crisis. There are several Soviet-era hotels that are undergoing gut renovation that have mid-range accommodation as part of their programs. Most notable is the demolition and redesign of Hotel Rossia, the largest hotel in Europe. This monument to heavy-handed Soviet architecture was recently demolished to be rebuilt as a two-, three-, four- and five-star hospitality complex.

Aleksandr Mergold, a third-generation architecture professional and educator, spent most of his early days playing in a school of architecture and roaming around design offices. This childhood eventually led him to attend architecture school—at Princeton and Cornell—receiving Master and Bachelor degrees in Architecture (respectively) along with the NY chapter AIA and the Charles Goodwin Sands medals. After working for several large architecture firms he joined the office of Pentagram in New York where he spent six years as senior architect, working on a variety of architectural and design projects. Since 2006 Aleksandr has been teaching at Parsons the New School for Design; in 2007 he was visiting faculty at Listaháskóli Íslands/Iceland Academy of the Arts; currently he is visiting architecture faculty at Cornell University. In 2007 Aleksandr Mergold along with Jason Austin established the architecture and landscape design practice, Austin+Mergold LLC. Aleksandr is also a founding partner of MERA—multi-disciplinary design practice established in 1997 in New York City specializing in interiors, product and graphic design. Aleksandr Mergold is a registered architect in the State of New York and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He is also a US Green Building Council LEED accredited professional and a member of the American Institute of Graphic Arts. www.austin-mergold.com, www.meradesign.com



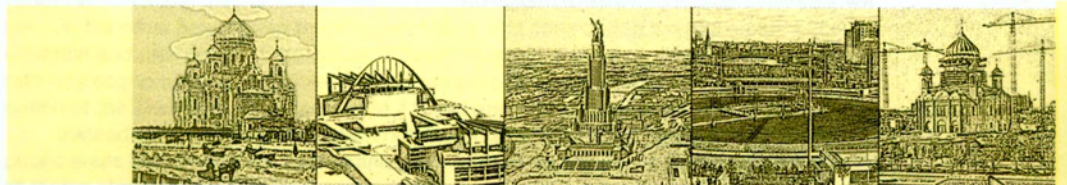
POLITICS

ПОЛИТИКА



★ Plan / Section at Typical room

★★★★★ Plan / Section at Typical room



Cathedral 1830-1917 Empire Slavophiles	Palace I 1930 USSR Corbu et al.	Palace II 1936 USSR Stalin	Pool 1960 USSR Thaw	Cathedral-2 1990's Russia Default	Hotel 2000's East/West Third Way
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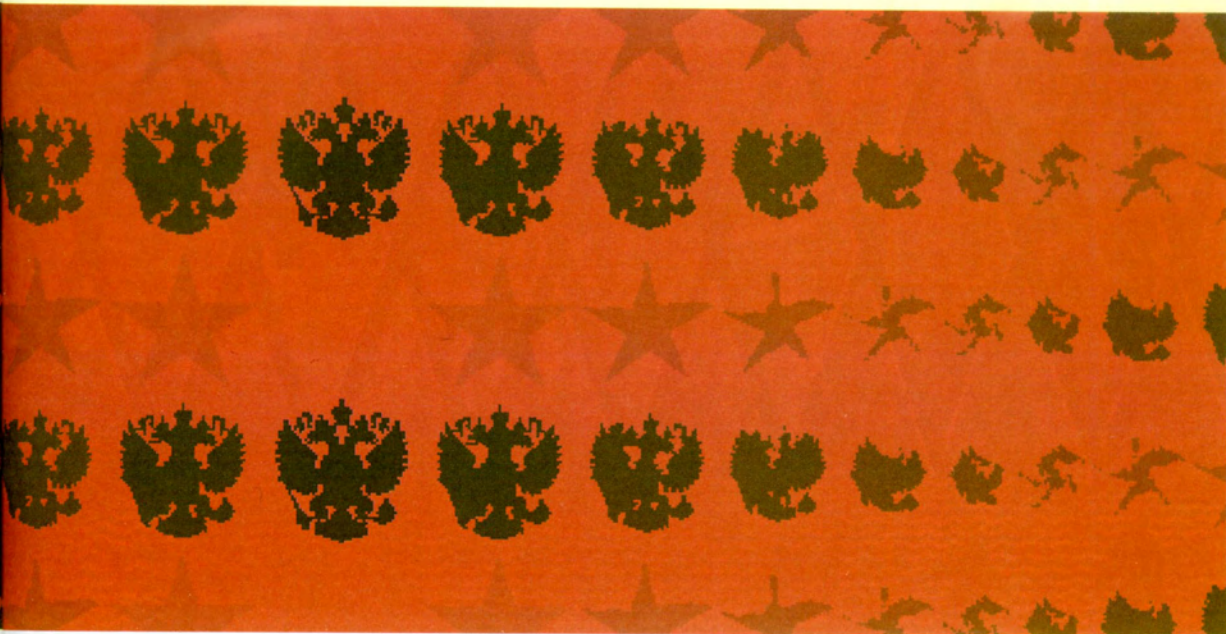
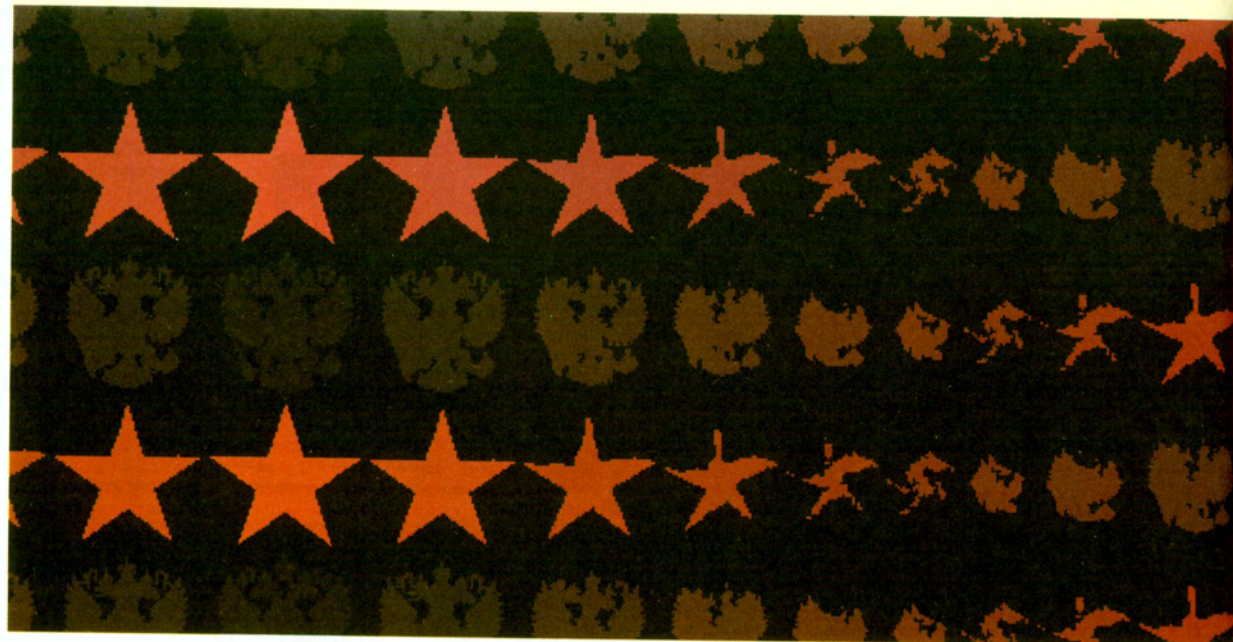
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 ★★★★★★ LUXURY (MAX. OCCUPANCY)

Mera #1, Politics, Aleksandr Mergold for Princeton University, master in architecture thesis, copyright 2003, Aleksandr Mergold.



HISTORY

ИСТОРИЯ



Moscow Kremlin in 1837



1897



1907



1937



1987

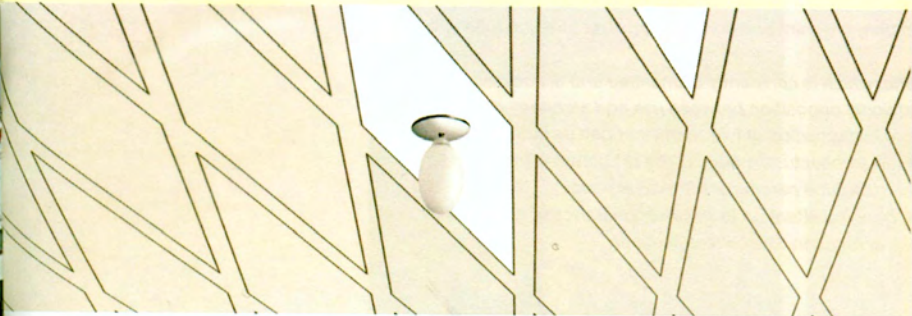
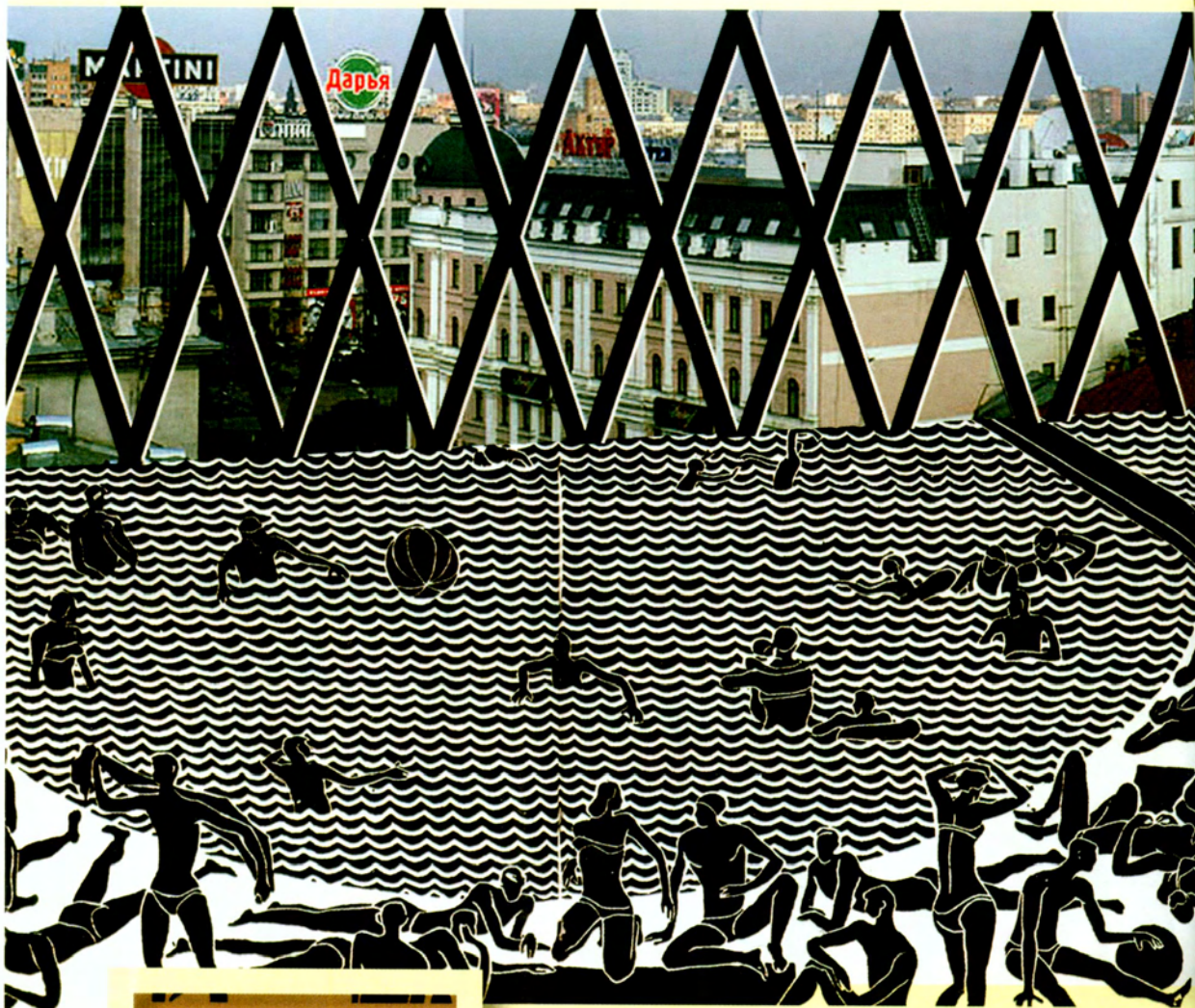


2007

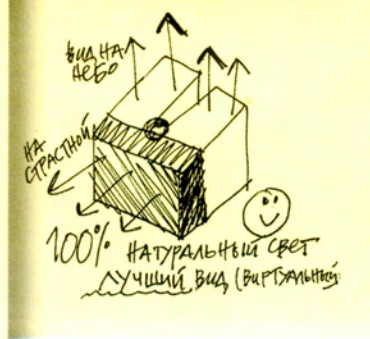
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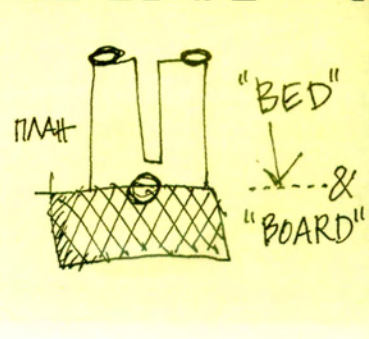
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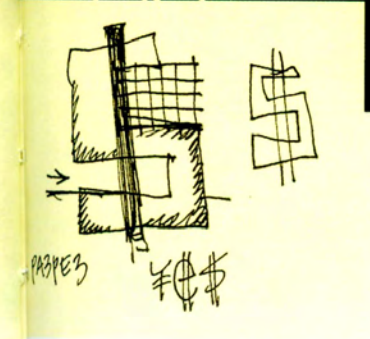
Sky, Light, Safety



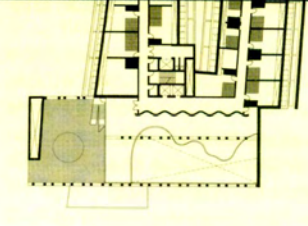
Street / Sky



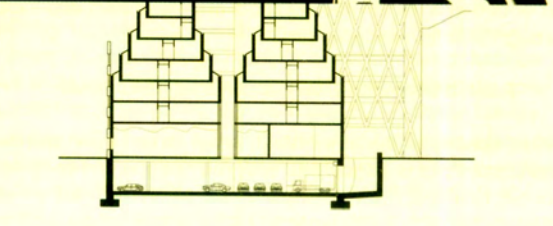
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Typical Plan



Typical Cross Section

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