Hey Ivan, Come On To Our House: American Architecture in Cold War Moscow

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During the course of opening the American National Exhibition in Moscow, American Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's day-long argument culminated with their Kitchen Debate. While the photographs of Nixon and Khrushchev poking and pointing at one another have become icons of the Cold War, their setting has been largely forgotten. For six weeks, in the summer of 1959, "A Corner of America" stood in the capital of the Soviet Union. Here, Soviets tasted their first Pepsi Cola while American ladies demonstrated the wonders of the cake mix and American teenagers jitterbugged to Elvis Presley's "Jailhouse Rock" during the twice-daily fashion show. American automobiles spun on giant turntables while Walt Disney's 360° filmic celebration of America's scenic automobile destinations, Circarama, looped continuously nearby. These "typically American" events took place in an entirely American-made setting. By the end of its six-week run, an estimated five million Soviet citizens had found their way to "Oogolok Americki." "A Corner of America."

The American National Exhibition in Moscow of 1959 (ANEM) came about after years of pushing by the United States. Khrushchev's government agreed only after it had successfully challenged the architectural and martial primacy of the United States at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958. Critics were quick to point to out that there appeared to be little difference between the two country's glass and steel exhibition halls, the United States' pavilion was round while the Soviet Union's was rectangular. Inside, the focuses of the two nations were more marked; the centerpiece of the Soviet Union's pavilion was Sputnik, the world's first successful satellite, while at the center of the American pavilion was a large reflecting pool that was used as stage set for a daily fashion show. Flush with the successes of Sputnik and Brussels, Soviet officials agreed to an exchange of exhibitions about science, technology and culture with the United States. The Soviet's exhibition, which was held in New York City's Coliseum, was largely a reprise of their Brussels exhibit with Sputnik again taking center stage.[1]

From the outset, the American government was determined to take advantage "to the fullest extent" of what it recognized as a unique opportunity. While the publicly announced objective of the American exhibition was "to increase understanding by the people of the Soviet Union of the American people and American life," for the American government there was an entire and very separate agenda. According to the anonymous author of the "Secret Basic Policy Guidance for the US Exhibit in Moscow in 1959" the US government's objective at the American National Exhibition was to, "encourage evolutionary processes" and to "accelerate existing tendencies to question Soviet totalitarian methods." The American government did not set out to overthrow the Soviet Communists, rather it hoped to "reorient the Soviet system," to subvert Communism by showing the supposed superior benefits of Capitalism.[2] The mostly Modernist architecture of the American National Exhibition played a central role in propagandizing American political ideology to the Soviets.

While the American exhibition was designed to appeal to all "strata," including the masses or proletariat, the author of the Secret Basic Policy Guidance document declared that the "primary [propaganda] targets should be university youths, people in cultural work and teaching, middle-level bureaucrats and skilled-workers." These groups were viewed as the "more politically alert and potentially most influential citizens of the Soviet Union." It was among these strata that the US government saw its "best chance" of reaching its long-term goal of undermining the Communist regime. Despite this optimistic view, the American planners assumed that all Soviet citizens, many of whom had lived their entire lives under Communism, were going to have to be convinced of the superiority of the capitalist system.[3]

This was not the first time that the American Cold war government used architecture as propaganda, propaganda being defined by historian Walter Hixson as "the attempt to influence behavior by shaping the attitudes of masses of people."[4] By

1959, the Eisenhower Administration had developed architecture into a finely honed propaganda tool. Jane Loeffler's ground breaking study, *The Architecture of Diplomacy*, established that the Eisenhower Administration strategically employed the architectural language of Modernism in its global embassy building campaign, hoping that foreigners would equate this "new" style with the new world leadership role undertaken by post-war America.[5] And although temporary, American pavilions at international trade fairs were likewise built with the purpose of promoting America and American values through visual means.

Eisenhower formally established the Office of International Trade Fairs (OITF) in 1954 as a means of promoting, "Capitalism as a system superior to Communism in politically uneasy countries." In the mid-fifties the geodesic dome was still an experimental form: until 1956 only the US military was using geodesic domes and then only for its geographically remote weather stations. Buckminster Fuller's patented prefabricated and portable geodesic dome was first used by the Office of International Trade Fairs at the Kabul Afghanistan Jeshn Trade Fair in 1956 and quickly became the OITF's most favored architectural type. Geodesic domes were deemed "identifiably American" and served as American trade fair pavilions in such diverse sites as Casablanca, Poznan, Solonika and Tokyo.[6]

According to ANEM Design Coordinator Jack Masey, everyone involved agreed that a geodesic dome must be used in Moscow.[7] Designed by the offices of Los Angeles architect and OITF veteran Welton Becket, it was a low golden bowl of a dome, hovering over an opaque white drum, supported by twin pilotis on each of its five sides. The pentagonal shape was repeated in the individual aluminum panels of the dome, which were machine stamped on site by an international construction crew. The geodesic dome was an immediate propaganda coup. When Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev made an advance visit to the exhibition grounds he, liked the innovative structure so much that he told reporters, "I am thinking of authorizing [the chairman of State Committee on Building and Architecture] to do the same thing here in the Soviet Union."[8]

The golden geodesic dome was intended to introduce the Soviets to what the Secret Basic Policy Guidance Document calls a "progressive, dynamic America," and a "free, creative America," an America that was not bound by tradition. Once inside the geodesic dome, the Soviet visitor was introduced to an America that enjoyed "freedom of choice and expression, and the unimpeded flow of diverse goods and ideas [that are] the sources of American cultural and economic achievement." That "goods and ideas," objects and concepts, were interchangeable is a central tenet on which the ANEM planners devised their display strategies. In 12 minutes time, on seven enormous television shaped screens, Charles and Ray Eames presented thousands of images depicting a typical day of America's middle-class. From milk bottles arriving on seven front porches, to seven fathers taking off in the family sedan for the daily freeway commute to the big city job, to supper and the subsequent family television hour, to goodnight kisses, the workingman's day was played out seven times over. Chief exhibit designer George Nelson later wrote that the Eames film, with its multiplicity of images, was an attempt to prove to the Soviet people that what the American had was real and not hype as they had been lead to believe by the Soviet press for so many years, thus implying that images were more trustworthy than words.[9]

In the place of an American drive-in style restaurant (which was not allowed by the Communist Party), the Soviets were offered "Circarama" and another geodesic dome. Walt Disney had originally presented his 360-degree film of America's natural wonders at the American Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair and was asked to have its narration dubbed into Russian for the ANEM. The film and its building were the perfect counterpoint to the Eames film and geodesic dome. Just as the Eames film had introduced Mr. and Mrs. Soviet Union to Mr. and Mrs. America at the beginning of the ANEM, the Disney film now introduced them to the landscape of America. The Soviets could now see for themselves where Mr. and Mrs. American drove off to in those fabulous automobiles the Soviets had just seen spinning on their giant turntables.

Assuredly the architectural housing for Circarama was chosen because it was cost-effective. A 100-foot geodesic radome, perhaps the very same one that had traveled to Kabul, Bangkok, Tokyo and Osaka, was taken out of storage in Milan and shipped to Moscow in the spring of 1959. But once there, it served to re-iterate the exhibition's themes. George Nelson had pointed out that the Eames film had shown seven supermarkets, seven shopping malls, seven of everything in order to prove to the Soviets that Americans really did have all of the things that the US Government was claiming. This (comparatively) small geodesic dome proved that the golden aluminum dome was not a "prototype made for display purposes" but was the result of technological progress. If any Soviet should doubt this claim, geodesic dome kits were available (for inspection rather than sale) on the second floor of the glass pavilion. The kits effectively demonstrated that the geodesic dome was a quintessentially democratic form: its use was not confined to ceremonial buildings, e.g. the theme building, nor commercial buildings, e.g. the Circarama movie theater, but it could also be used as a dwelling. "Identifiably American" the multiple geodesic domes were but one of many examples of capitalist democracy shown in Moscow.

While the United States Information Agency press announcements continually emphasized that the American National Exhibition was "devoted to the demonstration of the development of science, technology and culture," it must have become increasingly clear to the Soviets that their American counter-

parts were emphasizing culture over science and technology.[10] The Soviets demanded that the Americans make good on their agreement and show something innovative and experimental. The American response was to build "a plastic forest." As Jack Clifford of the Reynolds-Feal Corporation, on-site construction supervisor at the ANEM explained it to the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle*, "It's the funniest thing that happened over there. Russians are crazy about plastic and aluminum. They think it makes everything modern. Especially plastic. Well, they kept asking us, 'When are you going to make something of plastic.' It got tiresome after a while."[11]

George Nelson set about designing a series of standardized, prefabricated fiberglass umbrellas, or plastic parasols as they were often referred, as housing for several exhibits: the Family of Man photograph exhibit, the architecture exhibit, and the fashion show area. Nelson informed the ANEM guides, who would presumably pass the information on to their Soviet visitors, that fiberglass was so new in 1959 that it had never previously been used as a structural element, "as far as we know, this is the first time that a reinforced plastic has been used without the assist [sic] of other materials to make a piece of architecture."[12] As was true of the geodesic dome, the fiberglass umbrellas were intended to proclaim that America promoted creativity and progress and that the end goal of experimentation and research was of peaceful benefit to all citizens. The underlying comparison to Soviet emphasis on experimentation and research for military gain was left unsaid.

Viewed in conjunction with the displays they housed, the fiberglass umbrellas were designators of American high culture – fashion, architecture, and photography. George Nelson designed a half-dozen miniature circus tents to house such low-culture displays as American television shows, beauty demonstrations (originally intended to include a give-away of Coty products), and Pepsi-Cola (which was given away in Dixie Cups). American publications were likewise housed under one of Nelson's colorful tents – Russian translations of the Bible and classic American novels shared shelf space with US telephone directories and Sears-Roebuck catalogs – many of which repeatedly went missing (when the American guide's backs were ostensibly turned) and had to be replaced at a rate that alarmed the Soviets officials and delighted their US counterparts. Whereas Nelson's almost colorless fiberglass umbrellas had allowed only for the observation of American culture from a distance, his brightly colored circus-tents created an atmosphere that invited the Soviets to reach in their hands and take a bit of American culture for themselves.

Directly behind the golden geodesic dome theme building was the exhibition hall, which shared the dome's gold and white color scheme (both were permanent structures that were sold to the Soviets and half their production costs). Welton Becket wrapped the exhibition hall around the geodesic dome, creating a fan shaped building and in a further articulation of the fan motif, gave it an accordion-fold roof. The 500-foot long walls of the exhibition hall were sheathed in glass. The contents of the exhibition hall could be seen during the day and even better at night, and the structure was easily accessed from several points of entry: both elements permitted the ANEM publicists to make allusions to this being "democratic" structure.[13] Inside was a great "jungle gym" of a scaffolding designed by George Nelson, on which were all of the chairs, the dishes and dish racks, the lawn mowers and sewing machines, the entire gamut of household goods that were part and parcel of middle-class American life. Each of these displays offered only disjointed bits of information to the Soviet audience; alone they did not "increase understanding by the people of the Soviet Union of the American people." These gadgets and goodies could only make sense if they were given a context, literally, a home.

A suburban model home was offered to the US government, with all expenses paid, by developer Herbert Sadkin and his firm All State Properties of Floral Park, Long Island. The model home, designed by Stanley Klein, measured 44 by 26 feet. It was entirely prefabricated on Long Island and then erected in Moscow by an all American crew, supplied by All State Properties. This diminutive house could not have accommodated the anticipated crowds and so it was literally split down the center and an interior rampway was inserted. The model home was immediately dubbed Splitnik, punning on the Soviet's satellite, Sputnik.

Its donated status perhaps explains why the model home did not conform to the Modern idiom of the ANEM. That the model home was a Ranch House bespeaks the domestic trends of nineteen fifties white America, rather that the US government's desire to represent American homeownership. The Ranch House was, according to Kenneth T. Jackson, "almost as popular in Westchester County as in Los Angeles County."[14] This little Rambler or Ranch, both commonly used terms, was installed here at the far back of the exhibitions grounds, between the children's playground exhibit and Walt Disney's Circarama – just before the exits. It would be the last exhibit that the Soviets would see, the grand finale of what Life magazine called their "Glimpse of the USA."

The suburban experience started on the "driveway," where Soviet visitors walked past a red AMC Rambler Station Wagon just before entering Splitnik's split. Splitnik's banana split exterior, with vertical redwood siding on one half and horizontal yellow siding on the other, featured a cobalt blue front door which effectively showed Soviets how American suburbanites would set their home apart from dozens of identical neighbors. Sliding glass doors fronted living and dining end of the house, indicative of the new American fad for "indoor-outdoor" living. Lawn furniture and BBQ equipment stood just outside on the patio. The very concept of a lawn required a great deal of translation for the Soviet audience, if the number of lines devoted to it in the *Guide's Guide Book* is any indication.

The $10,000 model home was decorated for an imaginary nuclear family, including a boy and girl, for each of whom a bedroom was appropriately furnished. The soon to be famous lemon yellow kitchen was entirely outfitted by General Electric. When the Soviet news agency Tass challenged the affordability of Splitnik's price tag by actual American workers, American publications produced statistics to prove that the "typical" wage earner brought in $100 a week and that one-quarter of his salary went to house payments. Confidence in the affordability of Splitnik became a nationwide concern if not obsession. One headline ran, "Hey Ivan, Come On To Our House. It's Not the Taj Mahal, But We Think You'd Like It." By the time the American National Exhibition was ready to open in July, Splitnik had reached the status of cause celebre: it had become a focus of American patriotism. The climax came on opening day of the American National Exhibition, July 24, 1959, when American Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev held the last round of their "Day Long Debate" in Splitnik's all-electric kitchen.

The American National Exhibition in Moscow of 1959 serves as a case study of how the American Government used the architecture to market Capitalism and to combat Soviet Communism and of how architecture served as propaganda at the height of the Cold War. The architectural imagery of the ANEM, which ranged from a gold-tinted geodesic dome to a suburban tract home, fully participated in the central messages of the ANEM. By using a golden geodesic dome as its centerpiece and surrounding that building with repeated examples of Modernist architecture such as the glass pavilion and the fiberglass umbrellas, the US Government proclaimed itself to be modern and progressive. By the same token, a modest worker's Ranch house served as the sole representative of American home ownership, which ultimately showed the Soviet people the modest goals and aspirations of the American middle-class. It was only by this mixture of Modern and modest buildings that the American government could hope to present viable face to democratic Capitalism in their effort to subvert Soviet Communism.

NOTES

[1] *New York Times Magazine*, (May 10, 1959).

[2] Secret Basic Policy Guidance for the US Exhibit in Moscow in 1959, RG306, 25/67/20 Box 1, US National Archives, College Park MD.

[3] Secret Basic Policy Guidance, 1.

[4] Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 1. My use of the term "propaganda" is in no way meant as derisive rather that there was manipulation involved, that the visual materials presented at international trade fairs, world's fairs, and the ANEM itself were meant to prompt a political or ideological response in the viewer – of a desire for the prosperity that America was then enjoying as a fruit of its economic and political systems. Phil George told me that he "didn't want that [propaganda]. He wanted a straightforward show." Phil George, Designer, George Nelson & Company, interview with the author, September 8, 1999. Jack Masey and Ambassador Gilbert Robinson both expressed strong derision at the word "propaganda." Both felt that the word inferred that lies were being perpetrated on an innocent public. ANEM Director Harold C. McClellan concurred, "We definitely are not putting on either a propaganda show or a trade show. We have tried to make a comprehensive presentation of the way American people live, work, and enjoy the fruits of their labor." Facts About the American National Exhibition in Moscow, revised August 18, 1959, RG306, 25/67/20 Box 2, US National Archives, College Park MD.

[5] Jane Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1998).

[6] Jane Fiske Mitarachi, "Design as a Political Force," *Industrial Design* (February 1957): 37-55.

[7] Interview with the author, July 23, 1999.

[8] Osgood Caruthers, "Khrushchev Sees US Exhibit Site," *New York Times* (May 15, 1959), 6.

[9] Stanley Abercrombie, *George Nelson: The Design of Modern Design* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1995), 165.

[10] *Department of State Bulletin* (October 13, 1958), 577.

[11] Philip Kemper, "Russ Love Plastics, Says Builder Here," *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle* (July 25, 1959), 1.

[12] *Official Training Book for Guides at the American National Exhibition in Moscow*, edited by Dorothy E.L. Tuttle (Washington, D.C.: United States Information Agency, 1959), 137. Richard Nixon Pre-Presidential Papers, National Archives and Records Administration Pacific Regional Branch, Laguna Nigel, California.

[13] Ironically, the suggestion that both long walls of exhibition hall be made of glass seems to have come from the Soviets. "Ivan [gave] a letter of recommendations but couldn't overstep. Taking 'recommendations not requirements' to heart e.g., in the second building, 'It is now our plan to have both front and rear walls of glass. We are also eliminating the moat.'" Quoted in, "Chronology of Project Development: Meetings, Russian and American Negotiators for Exchange of Exhibitions," RG306, 25/67/20 Box 1, US National Archives, College Park MD.

[14] Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 240.