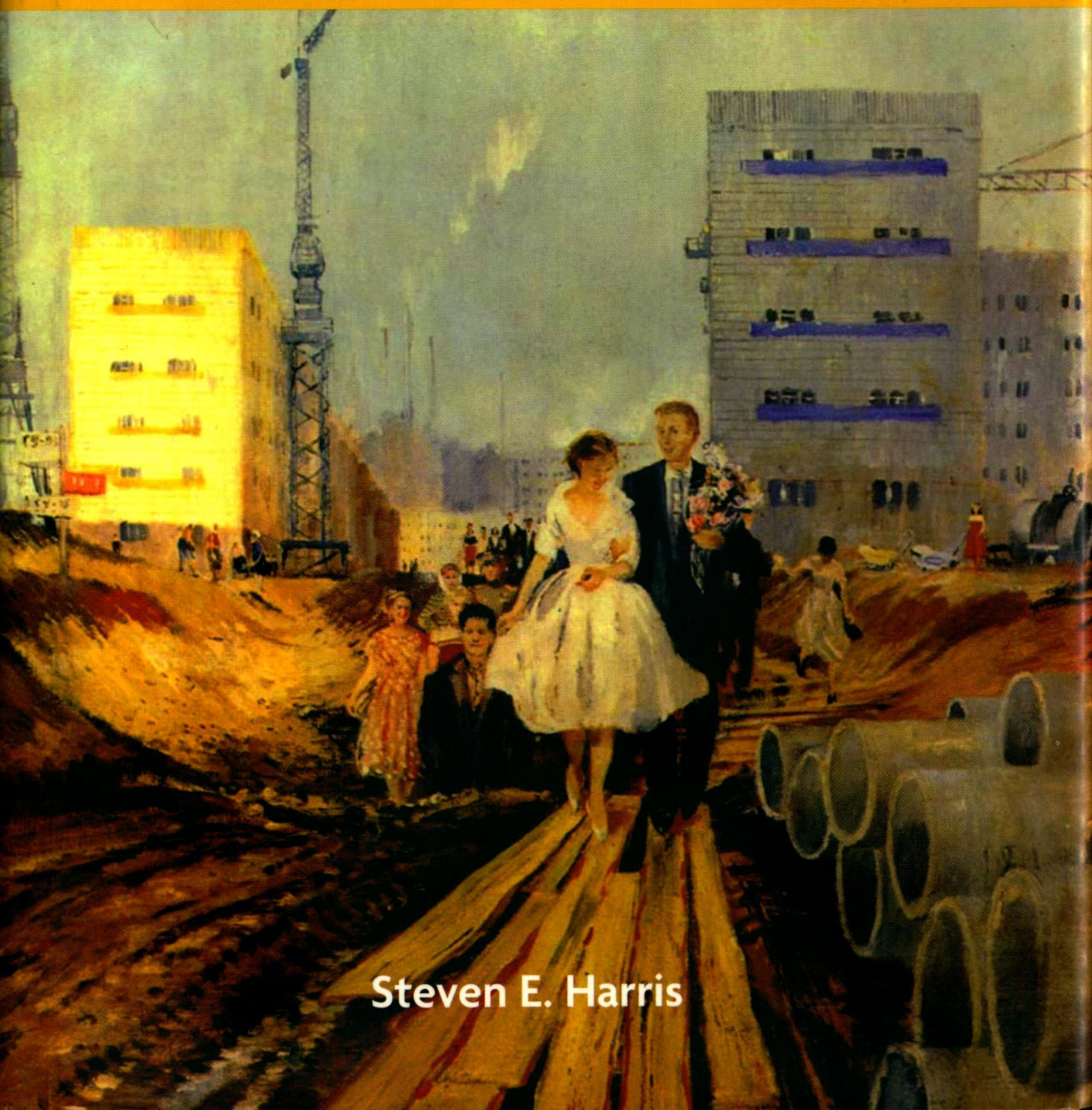
COMMUNISM on Tomorrow Street

MASS HOUSING AND EVERYDAY LIFE AFTER STALIN



Steven E. Harris

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Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin

Steven E. Harris

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Chapter 1

The Soviet Path to Minimum Living Space and the Single-Family Apartment

In a letter to the Third All-Union Congress of Architects in 1961, three faculty members of the Polytechnic Institute in Gor'kii lamented the shrinking dimensions of mass housing. "The existing standardized models of small-sized apartments can't in any way satisfy people in the present, let alone the future," the men huffed. "It isn't normal when you can't put a coat closet in an entranceway, when people have to drag in their furniture through the balcony and, we're sorry to say, carry out a coffin almost vertically, when a member of the family who's just bathed has to run out of the tub so another in dire need can use the space for another purpose." Such compact spaces did more than inconvenience those eager to use the toilet, bury the dead, or furnish their apartment. It even threatened class privileges. Small apartments lacked the extra workspace needed by writers and artists—"that is, those who fulfill, think over, and form the greater part of their creative work at home."[1] For members of the Soviet intelligentsia, to whom the Bolsheviks had provided extra living space soon after the Russian Revolution, Khrushchev's separate apartment must have seemed like a cruel joke.[2] Citizens of other social backgrounds, who were busy accumulating furniture and new consumer items, also found the separate apartment's small dimensions to be a major drawback. Upon moving to the separate apartment, many residents asked the same question: Why did apartments have to be so small?

The minimalist dimensions of the "small-sized apartment" (*malometrazhnaia kvartira*) were indelible features of Khrushchev's mass housing campaign. The *khrushchevka* had low ceilings, narrow corri-

dors and doorways, a compact kitchen, and one to three small rooms. Spaces common in the prerevolutionary apartments of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy had been erased. These included the service entrance to the kitchen, the back stairwell, the vestibule between the inner and outer entrance doors, and the adjoining, larger foyer. The toilet and bath, which had occupied separate units in the past, were combined in the same space; and kitchens were condensed. Upon entering a *khrushchevka*, a resident stepped not into an entranceway but immediately into the corridor that led to the kitchen, rooms, and bathroom. In some apartments, residents had to walk through a pass-through room to access another room that lacked access to the corridor. Rooms served two or three functions instead of one. A main room was a dining and sitting room during the day, but someone's bedroom at night. A new line of minimalist furniture lacking all ornamentation was designed to conform to these spaces. Small tables, chairs, stools, sinks, stoves, and cabinets were squeezed into the compact kitchen; couches folded out into beds, and bookcases featured foldout desks. The separate apartment not only shrunk space but also the objects that went in it. According to one post-Soviet joke, the *khrushchevka* was so small that a toddler's portable potty had its handle on the inside rather than the outside.[3]

Scholars have provided several explanations for the *khrushchevka*'s small size and why it mattered. Echoing Khrushchev's exhortations to architects and constructors, some have argued that the separate apartment's minimalist dimensions were a function of cost. The leadership committed unprecedented, but not limitless, resources to mass housing. Industrial and military needs remained greater priorities that were never eclipsed by housing and consumer needs. Separate apartments had to be cheap if the regime's ambitious goal of fully resolving the housing question in ten to twelve years after 1957 was to be met. Operating under such budget and time constraints, the regime chose prefabricated panel housing based on a few standardized models. Lowering ceilings, simplifying layouts, slashing an apartment's floor space, and reducing the number of rooms were key elements of keeping costs down. Khrushchev's personal involvement in architectural affairs and his previous experience in managing housing construction played no small role in shaping housing policies toward cheaper and more efficient construction.[4]

Other scholars have argued that ideology played a critical role in making apartments smaller and more efficient. Inspired by the constructivist aesthetics of the 1920s, architects and furniture designers under Khrushchev remade the Soviet home into a scientifically and rationally organized space to complete the transformation of all residents into the New Soviet Man and New Soviet Woman. Throughout the new apartment, unnecessary ornamentation and excess spaces were purged in the name of scientific management and efficiency. Nowhere was this better seen than the kitchen, which architects designed as a laboratory of industrial efficiency and rational organization. The kitchen was even a site of Cold War ideological conflict in which the Soviet housewife's mastery of rational living and restrained consumerism would prove the superiority of socialism over the grotesque excesses of irrational capitalist consumption. The "austere consumerism" that characterized separate apartments and consumer items under Khrushchev were not simply a matter of necessity dictated by budget constraints or, pace János Kornai, by the inevitable shortages of a planned economy.[5] Such austerity was instead an ideologically inspired choice made primarily by members of the cultural intelligentsia. In designing the *khrushchevka* and telling residents how to use it, architects, furniture designers, and taste arbiters revitalized the Russian intelligentsia's historical and self-appointed struggle (from both its prerevolutionary and early Soviet past) to rid society of lowbrow, petit bourgeois values and define the proper tastes and consumer behaviors of a modern, socialist society.[6]

To be sure, not all architects were excited by the design aesthetic of new housing. In explaining why smaller apartments and lower cost went hand in hand, some scholars have examined what this meant for architects working in the supposedly more liberal atmosphere of Khrushchev's thaw. The architectural principle that embodied the regime's obsession with low costs and small apartments was known as *tipovoe proektirovanie*, or "standard-design construction from prefabricated parts." As Stephen Bittner argues, Khrushchev's regime imposed *tipovoe proektirovanie* on an architectural profession that was initially skeptical if not resistant to the limitations it placed on architects' creative work. It effectively banned their previous tendency, nurtured under Stalin, to design costly individual works frequently based on a neoclassical style and full of ornamentation. In the early years of the mass housing campaign, architects' role was subordinated to that of construction firms that produced reinforced concrete panels and assembled them on site in identical five-story buildings. *Tipovoe proektirovanie* limited rather than