

Monumental Dream

Vladimir Tatlin became famous for a work that was not built (and could never have been). He started to make plans for a monument to celebrate the Russian Revolution of 1917 around the beginning of 1919. In March of that year communist parties from across the world met in Moscow to unite under a single organisation, the Communist International (abbreviated to Comintern and also known as the Third International). Rededicating his work to this historic meeting and the vision it embodied, Tatlin unveiled a model for his proposed monument – a vast spiralling tower – in November 1920. He went on to make two further models during the 1920s but never produced detailed proposals for the tower's construction, not least because chronic shortages of materials made the project unrealisable at the time. But his plans for celebrating a new world order cemented his place as a major figure in the Russian avant-garde, and in its sheer ambition and use of modern materials (iron, steel and glass, as opposed to stone or marble), Tatlin's concept was to have an enormous impact on modern architecture. A concept rather than a reality, the tower has since become a world-famous symbol of utopian thinking.

Born in a part of Russia now in the Ukraine, Tatlin moved to Moscow in 1911, where as a young artist he was able to observe the fast-paced evolution of the European avant-garde thanks to international exhibitions and the availability of foreign publications. In 1914 he travelled to Paris and gained first-hand knowledge of the latest developments in art, meeting Picasso in his studio and viewing the latter's cubist constructions. The visit sparked Tatlin's growing interest in abstract three-dimensional works, and led to a series of pieces termed 'painterly reliefs' that explored the boundaries between two- and three-dimensional representation. Tatlin wanted to change art and the art world. Writing to a Moscow newspaper in December 1914, he claimed: 'it has been my constant aspiration ... to find a way out of the present most unhappy artistic reality and into new conditions of artistic life'. He began to develop his constructions into fully freestanding or hanging works, rejecting the physical limitations of wall-hung paintings and plinth-based sculptures. Strung from taught ropes and wires, his 'counter-reliefs' suggested to some aeroplanes in flight.

Tatlin's experimental views found favour with the new communist regime. He was appointed head of the Moscow office of Izo-Narkompros, the branch of the Soviet Ministry of Education concerned with the fine arts, and found himself responsible for reform of art education and the protection of Russia's artistic past. In April 1918 – barely a few months after the start of the Revolution – the Ministry of Education began implementing the new 'Plan for Monumental Propaganda', removing Tsarist monuments from Russia's cities and replacing them with works

honouring communism. Tatlin was in charge of the plan in Moscow, yet the resulting works – largely life-like sculptures honouring historical figures – were something of a disappointment to the artist. Writing to his superiors in October 1918, he argued that artists should work, ‘not only on monuments to prominent figures but also on monuments to the Russian Revolution, monuments to a relationship between the state and art which has not existed until now.’ Tatlin embarked on his own monument to the Revolution that winter.

In March 1919 – the same month as the founding of the Third International – Nikolai Punin, head of the Ministry of Education in St Petersburg, wrote an article about Tatlin’s planned monument for the state’s art journal. Although no specifics were given, there is a clear sense from Punin’s text that Tatlin’s work would be both politically and artistically revolutionary:

The ideal monument must respond to the widespread call for ... one unified form which is at the same time architectural, sculptural and painterly ... [Tatlin] is tired of creating busts and statues of heroes ... all the elements of the monument should be modern technical apparatuses promoting agitation and propaganda ... the monument should be a place of the intense movement.

Tatlin worked together with a ‘Creative Collective’ of young artists on his planned monument. In both its form and its method of production he wanted the monument to emphasise the relationship between art and society, and between the achievements of the individual and the influence of the masses. In his 1919 text ‘The Initiative Individual in the Creativity of the Collective’ he wrote, ‘invention is always the working out of impulses and desires of the collective and not of the individual.’ An element within Tatlin’s sense of collectivity was the project’s references to labour and industry: an assistant recorded that Tatlin found in the cranes and girders along the river Neva in St Petersburg ‘an inexhaustible source of inspiration ... a poetry of metal’. Tatlin and his team worked on plans for the monument throughout 1919–20, first in Moscow, and then in St Petersburg after Tatlin was appointed teacher at the city’s Free Art Studios. Here Tatlin also founded his own studio, the ‘Studio of Volume, Material and Construction’. Just as workers had risen against the government in 1917, so artists, he believed, needed to rebel against the naturalist art of previous generations. He described this shift in his collective’s 1920 statement ‘The Work Ahead of Us’: ‘What happened in ’17 in a social sense has been carried out in our craft ... distrusting the eye, we place it under the control of touch.’

Tatlin envisaged a tower of four hundred metres (a third higher than the Eiffel Tower and, if realised, the tallest building on earth), straddling the banks of the River Neva in St Petersburg. Inside the spiralling structure were to be four suspended chambers, linked by lifts and offering functional spaces that rotated around the building’s central axis at different speeds (in Tatlin’s plans, ‘revolution’ was understood as both political revolt and physical rotation). At the base would be a giant cube for lectures and conferences that rotated once a year. Above, a pyramid housing party offices would

revolve once a month. Further up, a cylinder housing a restaurant and an information and broadcasting centre would revolve daily, while at the top would be a hemisphere housing radio equipment. For Nikolai Punin, one of Tatlin's supporters within the state hierarchy, Tatlin's spiral structure was like 'a muscle tensed with a hammer', a dynamic symbol of a liberated humanity moving away from 'all animal, earthy and grovelling interests'.

Beyond such political messages, the planned monument also had religious undertones, its huge scale evoking the Russian tradition of building great churches to commemorate historical events. Tatlin was well travelled and familiar with a range of religious architecture. By echoing the shapes of famous mosques in Egypt and Iraq (for example, the El Malwiya Mosque at Samarra, Iraq), Tatlin hoped his communist tower could become another great non-Christian temple. He wrote of his tower in 1919:

The temple represents the Earth, which returns its dead, and Heaven ... which is being populated by resurrected generations ... a sturdy structure could be created – a Temple of the Worlds – which would exist without props or supports, and which would move in an infinite space. Such a temple would emancipate all the world from bondage.

The design also recalled well-known representations of the *Tower of Babel*, notably a famous image of a tower with helical ramparts by the German scholar Athanasius Kircher of 1679. According to the biblical story, the *Tower of Babel* was built as a challenge to God's power at a time when the earth was united by a single language. God's response, according to the Book of Genesis, was to 'confound the language of all the earth', creating incomprehension and distrust between men to curb their power. With the spiral twists of Kircher's *Tower of Babel* recognisable yet radically altered, Tatlin's tower was intended to symbolise the Third International's aspiration to reunite mankind under communism. Equally, the design also made reference to a striking symbol of progressiveness, albeit of a bourgeois and ultimately decorative character, the Eiffel Tower. Constructed in 1889 to mark the centenary of the French Revolution, the Tower symbolised for many not only France but also modernity itself. With its iron structure Tatlin's tower not only alluded to its French counterpart but also – as the artist Robert Delaunay did in his pre-war paintings of the iconic building – dramatised its shape and visual impact. With its sideways lunge, Tatlin's tower provided both usable space and a sensation of vast spirals that appeared to continue indefinitely.

At over five metres tall and constructed from wood, cardboard, wire and paper, the first model for the impossible building was itself spectacular. It was displayed in Tatlin's studio in the former Mosaic Studio of the Free Art School in St Petersburg from November to December 1920. In December 1920 the model was dismantled and moved to Moscow to be displayed for two months at the Eighth Soviet Congress. Russia was then in the midst of a civil war in which many European states had taken sides: the eyes of the world were on the Soviet capital. When the Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin used the Eighth Congress to outline his plans for agricultural reform and the electrification of Russia, Tatlin's Tower became seen by many as a symbol of the

optimism and modernity of the Soviet regime. His work was also acclaimed by those who believed that art should be socially useful.

Even in these early days, however, there was a sense that the monument was somehow detached from reality. Tatlin provided no detailed plans for how the tower could be constructed. Though they praised its design, many of Tatlin's communist colleagues questioned its appropriateness at a time of chronic shortages of materials. Others objected on aesthetic or utilitarian grounds. Anatoli Lunacharsky, overall head of the Ministry of Education, described the 'iron monster' of the Eiffel Tower as 'a thing of beauty compared with Tatlin's slanting building', while Leon Trotsky, a leading figure in the government, wrote of the tower's moving chambers in 1924: 'I cannot avoid asking: for what purpose?

As the 1920s progressed Tatlin's tower remained unrealised, yet it continued to stand as a symbol for the Soviet regime. In 1925 Tatlin constructed a second, simplified model for the Russian pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition of Decorative and Visual Arts. Standing alongside a bust of Lenin, the model formed the focal point of the pavilion. Back in St Petersburg, Tatlin worked on a third model of the monument, for use in the city's Workers' Day celebrations on 1 May 1925. This model was larger and more complex than the Paris version, yet less dynamic than the original plans; its slant was reduced and its base made oval to fit onto the processional cart. There were still no plans for the tower's realisation, and it was becoming increasingly clear that the symbolic value of the idea was overtaking a desire for an actual monument.

Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* was never built, and all three of the artist's original models were lost. Tatlin's avant-garde idealism fell from favour in the Soviet regime in the late 1920s. During the Stalin years he was criticised for his 'formalist errors' as an artist; though he was never officially condemned by the party, his death from food poisoning in 1953 went unremarked.

With the resurgence of interest in Marxism in the west following the social and political upheavals of 1968, however, fresh attention was paid to the artistic achievements of the Russian Revolution in Europe and America. For some, Tatlin's tower assumed an almost mythical status as a symbol of utopian aspiration, while the fact that so little was known about it beyond a few photographs and descriptions meant that it was open to many interpretations. Writer Brian Dillon described Tatlin's unrealised tower in 2009 as, 'a monument of the mind: half ruin and half construction site, the receiver and transmitter of confused messages regarding modernity, communism and the utopian dreams of the century gone by'.

To try to represent this unrealised work, some museums and galleries in Europe and America have built reconstructions of Tatlin's models; and filmmakers have attempted to use modern technology to visualise how the tower might have looked. Although it is difficult for modern audiences, familiar with the achievements of architecture today, to imagine fully the sense of excitement and sheer audacity of Tatlin's tower, such

Theme
Unrealised

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Vladimir Tatlin 1885–1953
Monument to the Third International 1919
Iron, steel and glass
Height c.400 metres
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reconstructions help underline the idealism and cultural freedom that lay at the origins of the Soviet regime. They also serve as a reminder of the yawning gulf that can often exist in art as well as society between theory and practice.

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Text—
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