

Cities in Europe, Cities in the world - 12th International Conference on Urban History. Portugal, Lisbon, 3-6 September 2014.
Session M50. Urban Design for Mussolini, Stalin, Salazar, Hitler and Franco During the Interwar Period

**Stalin's Sacred Capital:
Dreams and Reality, Propaganda and Necessity in 1930s Moscow**

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Last revision: February 12, 2015

Keywords: Stalin, Boris Iofan, Ivan Zholtovsky, Alexei Shchusev, 1935, Soviet Russia, Moscow, 1918-1953

Abstract

Stalinist urban planning and architecture still have a most noticeable presence in Moscow. Contemporary architects and designers use citations of this controversial period, ironically, patronising it. But the city, even in its post-modernistic manifestation keeps following the main trends of the so-titled 1935 Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow.

This plan, incomparable in its scope with any other undertakings of that kind, was meant to change the look of the ancient city dramatically: the main streets and squares were broadened, huge ensembles appeared, the Moscow Metro and Volga Cannel were laid. It was both practical and propagandistic, aimed to solve urgent city problems and to immortalize the name of Josef Stalin. The utopian image of the Communist paradise was created in order to make people work harder for the sake of a brighter future. It contrasted with images of gunned kolkhoz women and men, as a part of the militarisation process. A complex system of floral, military and human symbols with its convincing potential to tell stories, give advice, promise or warning was formed.

Stalinist dictatorship architecture and urban planning were influenced by a number of historical autocratic regimes, including Egyptian Kingdoms. Lenin's Mausoleum (1930) laid the cornerstone of urban communications based on divinity, immortality and eternity of power. Architectural propaganda of Jesuit Baroque and classical styles of the absolute powers of the XVIII-XIX centuries were resurrected again in the Soviet Russia in a new technological form.

Dictatorships speak the same language, and there are many similarities with the urban approaches of 1930s Germany, Italy and Spain. However, Moscow presents a unique

urban style of the 1930s around which there are continuing debates about its name and role .

Introduction

Stalinist urban development and architecture still have a noticeable presence in Moscow and can be traced in the city's layout, building design and décor, monuments, parks, universities, schools, hospitals, bridges and so on. One can hardly believe the giant scope of the architectural and town planning programme that took place under Josef Stalin in the middle of the twentieth century. Historically, Moscow developed outward in circles with the dynamics created by medieval fortresses eventually replaced by the dynamics of ring roads. The 1935 Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow reflected the same concentric expansion; however, in it the streets were made broader and straighter. Today, some transport experts believe that the historical plan of the city is a curse. Others believe the weaknesses of the concentric model simply demand that the city's public transport system is run effectively and that access for individual vehicles is regulated. During the twenty years of Stalin's reign, a quarter of Moscow's current Metro network was designed and constructed in both a very efficient and propagandistic way. Heavily decorated, temple-like Stalinist buildings with their unpractical lodges, balconies, galleries and spires now require expensive maintenance. The past grandeur of Soviet power is seen everywhere in Moscow. Attitudes to this kind of urban design have changed several times, and it now evokes a lot of interest among those who buy real estate in Stalinist skyscrapers, or are interested in architecture from either a professional point of view or as amateurs.



A panoramic view of Moscow showing Stalinist landmarks of 1930-50s (left), photo by Olga Zinovieva (2012); The 'Triumph Palace' Apartment Building (2005) that is marketed as the 8th Stalinist Tower (by Andrei Trofimov, Chapfevsky per., 5) (right), photo by Olga Zinovieva (2012).

Filmmakers of both fictional and non-fictional productions are now paying a lot of attention to this period and designers are fond of its colours and shapes and interpret it in their buildings and interiors. In the best spirit of post-modernism, contemporary architects use citations of this controversial period, ironically, to the extent that they almost patronise it. However, such interest is a bit scary: referencing totalitarian regimes has never been an innocent thing to do. The city, even in its post-modernistic manifestation keeps following the main trends of The 1935 Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow.

The Constructivism of the 1920s: Vanguard and Future Seeds of Totalitarian Architecture

In 1918, the first Soviet Government took the decision to leave Petrograd, formerly St. Petersburg, and move back to Moscow, which had not been the capital for 200 years and was unprepared for its new role. Under the very harsh conditions of the Civil War, a lack of food and fuel, and general political and economic collapse, two esteemed architects, Ivan Zholtovsky and Alexei Shchusev, headed the Moscow Government's city-planning workshop and quickly came up with the 'New Moscow' city plan. At the same time, those intellectuals, designers, artists and architects, who stayed in the troubled country and idealistically believed in the democratic changes, formed an array of independent architectural associations that included the Organization of Contemporary Architects (OSA), Association of New Architects (ASNOVA) and All-Union Association of Proletariat Architects (VOPRA). These associations took part in the city's planning and contributed to the creation of a new style known as Constructivism in architecture and Vanguard in fine arts, design and theatre. Expressed in the aesthetics of geometry with its clear walls, pure forms of cylinders, cubes or parallelepipeds, Constructivism was meant to solve social problems. Le Corbusier in France, Frank Lloyd Wright in the USA, members of the Bauhaus schools and many other prominent architects had already conveyed similar ideas in one form or another worldwide.

“According to most interpretations, designs and buildings had apparently evolved in parallel to the chronicle of Western architecture but with minimal interaction between the two, both in the early years of post-Revolutionary culture and in the later years when Socialist Realism blossomed”.¹ In this quote of Jean-Louis Cohen the use of 'Socialist Realism' to define and integrate almost all Soviet cultural cycles between the 1930s and 80s highlights the lack of and need for a more nuanced architectural terminology for this period and place. Cohen is obviously referring to the 1930s, when Avant-garde or Constructivism in architecture was very much restricted to the projects already in implementation especially in provincial cities.

In Moscow, new types of constructions came to life such as workers' clubs and communal houses. Simplistic, asymmetrical and flexible designs for factories, office buildings, schools, worker's clubs and communal houses carried the idea of social equality and communal life, work and leisure time. It was the time in which the Soviet Government declared its industrial revolution and many non-production constructions, like apartment buildings or clubs bore images of industrial facilities or machines. By prioritising public space, Soviet planners practically ignored individual space and needs. Many ideal city plans were proposed, but only a few were realised as company towns or garden cities – the latter as exemplified by Sokol. In less than ten years, Constructivist architects managed to build a lot, including famous workers' clubs and garages by Konstantin Melnikov, communal houses by Ivan Nikolaev and Moisei Ginsburg, office buildings for the new growing bureaucracy by Alexei Shchusev, Le Corbusier, Boris Iofan and many others. Constructivism, as with other modernisms in the West, reflected changes in society – the desire for equality, democracy and freedom, dreams of a new and happy city that was good for all.

¹ Jean-Louis Cohen. *Uneasy Crossings. The Architecture of Russian Avant-Garde between East and West. Building the Revolution. Soviet Art and Architecture. 1915-1935.* Royal Academy of Arts. P. 13. 2012. ISDN 978-1-905711-92-5

However, monumental propaganda had not been forgotten, and already in 1918, Vladimir Lenin signed a decree to remove the monuments to the Tsars and their servants and to create instead monuments to the Russian Socialist Revolution (1918).

Vladimir Lenin died on 24th January 1924 initiating a brutal fight for power between his former comrades-in arms.

New Time and New Style

In the early 1930s Josef Stalin became the sole leader of Soviet Russia and was able to focus on the industrial development of the country that he had been fighting so vigorously for with his rivals. His political and economic reforms as contained in the Five-Year Plans were to turn Russia into a leading world power. This looked like the realisation of a provocative dream, considering the ruined economy and the enormous brain drain that had been caused by the October Revolution of 1917, the Civil War and the so-called red terror.



The Palace of Soviets project (1933) (architecture by Boris Iofan, Vladimir Shchuko and sculpture by Sergei Merkulov), copy of the drawing from N. Atarov. Monument to Lenin. Pioneer, Moscow. Pravda, 1939, № 1, January, p.20.

“One of the urgent goals for the Bolshevik party was to make people work very hard for the sake of the bright future”.² Stalin’s life experience and unfinished education at a theological seminary in Georgia had helped him recognise that art, music and architecture, as well as rituals could inspire people to sacrifice themselves on the battlefields or work, agriculture and war. In the course of history, monumental propaganda and rituals have played crucial roles in bringing people together behind common aims and actions, as demonstrated, for example, by a burial temple in Ancient Egypt or a Jesuit monastery in a Western European city. Stalin was a brilliant choreographer of mass ceremonies, but he badly needed ceremonial locations: broad squares, straight avenues and lavishly decorated palaces. At the same time urgent needs in infrastructure, transport, housing, healthcare and education awaited immediate solutions.

² Olga Zinovieva. Symbols of Stalinist Moscow. Moscow. Tonchu Publishing House. 2009. P. 31. ISBN 978-5-91215-040-1

The Constructivism of 1920s, architecturally austere and almost completely devoid of any décor, could hardly support examples of dedicated labour or illustrate glorious pictures of future Soviet prosperity. Vladimir Paperny argues that ‘Culture One’, (as he called the Constructivism of 1920s – O.Z.), “cuts off its links with the past, rejects the historical heritage”³, meaning that it was a new austere style of pure geometrical forms, presenting no traces of the cultural heritage. However, Stalin considered himself as the heir of Russia’s glorious past and wanted to see citations or allusions to the classical architecture.

Moscow was to become the supreme world capital, the sacred city of communist ideology, the lifetime monument to Josef Stalin, who made himself perceived as the father and the sun of the nation. With this mission fixed in their minds, the government centralised and structured all independent creative societies and individuals into hierarchical unions either of musicians, artists or architects. Prior to that, in 1931, the last open competition of independent associations, individual Soviet and international architects took place. It was for the project of the Palace of Soviets on the site of the Christ the Saviour Cathedral, a national symbol of the Russian victory over Napoleon’s forces in 1812. During the competition directions to follow the classical style, with its symmetry, columns, porticos and decoration, in order to show the grandeur of Soviet power trickled down to the architectural community. Thus, what Paperny calls ‘Culture Two’ reinterpreted Russia’s cultural heritage for the needs of the new totalitarian regime. Actually, “it looked as if Culture Two had elevated its own history in front of itself. But it was the history of Russia in its own reading”.⁴

The first prize was awarded to Boris Iofan. Architect Yury Somov, who worked in Stalinist period, recalled that: “[...] the Palace of Soviets as designed by Boris Iofan was a pro-fascist type of building, a sort of populist fascism that developed in the Italian architectural school, from which Iofan had come”.⁵ The never completed Palace of Soviets that was topped with a statue of Vladimir Lenin, became an architectural ghost on the Moscow skyline, influencing many of the buildings constructed between the 1930s and 50s. According to Vladimir Paperny It reflected the crystallisation of Soviet power.

Art Deco and its Many Communications

At the same time, Art Deco, announced at The International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts in 1925 in Paris, was flourishing in the West. This highly eclectic style combined allusions to classical palaces with columns and porticos, a heaviness of archaic Mesopotamia and Egypt, and bright and exotic folk motives with images of the machine age. It expressed both themes of hard labour after World War One [WWI] and prophesised future prosperity. It used down-to-earth figures accompanied by the tools and products of their work mixed with imagery of machines, technology and futurism such as airplanes, air balloons, and the conquering

³ Vladimir Paperny. Culture Two. Moscow. Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie. 2006. P. 41. ISBN 5-86793442-X

⁴ Vladimir Paperny. Culture Two. Moscow. Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie. 2006. P. 52. ISBN 5-86793442-X

⁵ Yury Somov in Alessandra Latour. Birth of Metropolis. Moscow 1930-1955. Moscow. Iskusstvo – XXI vek. 2002. P. 237

of the skies. Art-Deco in America or Western Europe promoted the ideas of economic growth and dominance and later the dictatorial leadership of Hitler, Mussolini and Salazar. In the 1930s, the Soviet establishment realised that Art Deco could also serve the propagandistic needs of their country and communicate the concepts of hard labour both then and in the intended future for Communism. The new style, which thrived in the Soviet Union between the 1930s and 1950s had many names. They called it the Soviet style during Stalin's life and later, after his death, the Stalinist style, Stalinist Baroque or Stalinist Empire. It was, obviously, very eclectic and possessed both the philosophy and manifestation of Art Deco along with its borrowings and revivals of ancient styles, themes of labour and power, as well as promises for the future.

The Classical style, originating from Ancient Greece, has appeared more than once in the course of history albeit under different names, such as neo-classicism, revival or pseudo-classicism, and due to different economic and political conditions. In short, it appeared, when either strong political power or the desire for such power, or, alternatively, political stability was in place. For example, the Classicism and Empire styles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries expressed the ideology and economy of European absolutism. Stalin wanted to link his empire to Russia's respectable past and the country's rich culture and history. The Classical style provided an ideal means to do so. Russian classical churches and estates, built in the era of absolutism, were nearby and served as brilliant inspiration. In comparison with the austere constructivism, the new Soviet forms of classicism, adorned with pompous baroque features and fairy-tale motives of Russian folk art, had greater potential to tell stories, give advice, promise and warn, all in brick and stucco

From the early 1930s strong recommendations to use a fusion of artistic methods so that architectural ensembles should include sculptures, murals, mosaics and stained glass appeared in regulations and decrees. Theoretical papers and popular articles in the media put a strong emphasis on Ancient Egyptian art, as one of the most convincing forms of a monumental language. "Synthesis of arts has the strongest combined impact on human minds in the integral perception of all arts".⁶ Very soon, the word 'temple' became popular in the description of Stalinist buildings. In this respect and based on the synthesis of the arts both temple and palace architecture possessed the greatest force.

Lenin's Mausoleum as a Cornerstone of the New Policy

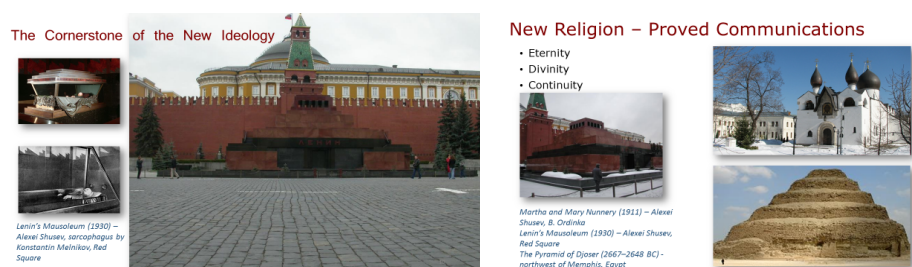
Aware of these new trends, Alexei Shusev, one of the most recognised church architects before the Revolution of 1917, created Lenin's Mausoleum in Red Square. He chose the style of an Egyptian tomb, where "the rhythm of horizontal steps on the transcendental pyramid form the image of the monumental shrine".⁷ "Soviet architecture became Stalinist in its typology earlier than in its style. Stylistically, Lenin's Mausoleum, made of stone, belongs to the 1920s, but typologically it can be considered as the first building of the Stalinist era. Even the first two Mausoleums,

⁶ V.S. Balikhin, P.B. Budo. «Synthesis of architecture, sculpture and painting in classical art». *Soviets Architecture*. 1933, №2. P. 13-14

⁷ Alexander Lobodanov. *Semiotics of Arts*. Moscow. State Institute of Art History. 2011. P. 488

built of wood, had a religious character. It was not a gravestone but a place for the worship of relics”.⁸

The use of a glass sarcophagus, designed by Konstantin Melnikov, the most well-known vanguard architect, emulated the immortal pharaoh-god in order to strengthen Stalin’s political capital. In a symbolic way, it could also be considered as the burial place of constructivism in Moscow. Melnikov would not build anything in the new Stalinist style. In his approach, Alexei Shchusev used the aesthetics of geometry that were common to Constructivism, but in ways that lacked asymmetry, flexibility and any movement towards democracy. The symmetry of the design including its ascending ceremonial, heavy steps hinted at the autocratic power soon to come. Lenin’s Mausoleum on Red Square became hallowed ground, where atheistic ceremonies were enacted. Stalin and his comrade-in-arms ascended the steps of the tomb to watch processions of hundreds of thousands of people and greeted them with hidden smiles.



During Perestroika there were voices to rebury Lenin in a cemetery, but nobody suggested the demolition of the tomb itself. It was Shchusev’s amazing talent that irrevocably cast it into Red Square between the Senate dome and the main entrance to GUM (*Glavnyi Universalnyi Magazin*), the state department store that was formerly known as the Upper Trading Rows.

(Slides from the presentation “Stalin’s Sacred Capital: Dreams and Reality, Propaganda and Necessity in 1930s Moscow” by Olga Zinovieva and Alexander Lobodanov at EAUH-2014 in Lisbon. Photos by Olga Zinovieva)

The 1935 Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow

The 1935 Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow (hereafter referred to as the 1935 Master Plan) was design by Vladimir Semenov and Sergei Chernishev between 1931 and 1935. It incorporated the ideas of the 1920s, but its scope could hardly be compared with any other undertaking in the world. It included the complete reconstruction of the city’s main streets and squares, as well as the creation of some new ones. Moscow was expected to look like one huge ensemble. “In composition, they paid attention to the street facades, making them highly pompous and ornate” while courtyard facades remained without any decor. Thus, the plan emphasised the theatricality of the urban environment.⁹

⁸ Dmitry Khmel'nitsky. Stalin Architecture. Psychology and style. Moscow. Progress-Tradition. 2007. P. 181. ISBN 5-89626-271-1

⁹ N.F. Gulianitsky. History of architecture. Volume № 1. Moscow. Stroiizdat. 1978. P. 227

With total property ownership, funds and resources concentrated in the hands of the state, which was both the sole client and executer, and with cheap, almost slave labour the Soviet state was able to rebuild the city in a record time. In a serious Soviet academic publication dating to 1945, you find a political explanation of the reasons behind the immense changes to the urban images of Russian cities: “the Great October Socialist Revolution abolished private property of land and other real estate and made it possible to reconstruct old towns and build new ones”.¹⁰ In Moscow, the main streets, including today’s Tverskaya and Prospect Mira were broadened through the demolition and relocation of flanking buildings. A new ring of squares around the Kremlin appeared on the site of historical residential buildings. Granite embankments with cast iron railings decked the Moskva and Yauza rivers and eleven new bridges were constructed.

The 1935 Master Plan included three other giant projects: the Moscow Metro, the Moscow-Volga Canal and the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition. The first Metro line (the Red Line) was opened in May of 1935 and by Stalin’s death in 1953, forty underground stations had been created along lines stretching fifty kilometres long. The stations, decorated with stained glass, mosaics, majolica, semi-precious stones, stucco, sculptures and reliefs looked more like underground palaces from a fairy-tale than transportation nodes. In 1937 the completion of the Moscow-Volga Canal connected the Khimki Reservoir with the Volga River and brought long-awaited water to factories, power plants, schools, hospitals and monumental apartment buildings. It had beautiful ports, locks and embankments, lavishly decorated with sculptures of Lenin and Stalin. The Northern River Terminal (also known as the Northern River boat station) built by Rukhliadev as a Renaissance palazzo with open galleries and majolica, is still considered a true masterpiece.

In 1939 the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition was opened as an outdoor propaganda venue. “A true paradise on Earth with palaces of dairy products, gardens and orchards, stables, monuments to horses and portraits of the heroes of agricultural labour”.¹¹ The most famous Soviet sculpture, the Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman, created by Vera Mukhina for the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris, made the journey back home to be remounted as part of the Agricultural Exhibition. They wrote songs and made movies about it, guides told convincing stories of the wellbeing of the Soviet collective farmers. After World War Two [WWII] the place was renamed the All-Russian Exhibition of Economic Achievements and became even more triumphant with the introduction of new palaces for all of the fifteen Soviet Republics along with industry pavilions, recreational parks, lakes, fountains and statues of their respective leaders.

Very quickly, a complex system of floral, military and human symbols was set up in order to tell stories that would convince people of the joys that Communism would bring. Sculptural archetypes got new roles. Usually peaceful Kolkhoz women and men were armed with guns in order to deliver the message that they were fighting for a better future but also that enemies were everywhere and war was inevitable. “The Soviet Government also returned to some form of the militarised labour. Workers and staff members could not leave their jobs without special permissions from the

¹⁰ Urban Planning. Academy of Architecture. Moscow. 1945, edited by V. Shkvarikov. P. 287

¹¹ Olga Zinovieva. Back into the Bright Future. Eneable of VSKHV-VDNKH-VVTS. Moscow. 2013. P. 35

administration under the threat of their arrest and imprisonment. Narkomats (Councils of People's Commissars) had the right to move people from one production to another, even to other regions, without asking for their consent".¹²

One can define two periods of Stalinist architecture. Before WWII it was an electric mixture of classicism and baroque, enriched with Russian national traditions. After WWII, an Empire style became the prevailing source of inspiration. The years of WWII between 1941 and 1945 acted as a noticeable cultural phenomenon; they contributed a lot to Soviet music, literature, art and architecture. It is amazing that regardless of all hardships endured, construction never stopped in Moscow. It merely slowed down. Already in 1943 the Council for the Reconstruction of the Destroyed Cities was established. Soviet architects created an almost Napoleonic anthem to the country's victory in WWII. The shapes of the buildings became more elaborate; balconies and cornices, heavier; and arches, bigger. More weapons, including contemporary armaments, ancient helmets and spikes, as well as banners, drums, horns were used to show the glory of the Red army that had ensured the victory.

The seven towers or high-rise palaces, which appeared on the Moscow landscape between 1947 and 1953, presented the peak and the swansong of the Stalinist era. They have become definitive landmarks, reminiscent of both the Kremlin towers and Russian temples of the same period. Towering into the skies, they were palaces where the Soviet elite, worked, studied and lived: two apartment buildings, two hotels, two office buildings and the Moscow State University. Designed by seven groups of architects they followed the same style but have their unique images, elaborately decorated with sculptures, ceramics, mosaics and natural stone. In America and later in Western Europe they stopped building in Art Deco during the war and then architects came up with the idea of simplistic designs, which reflected economic, political and social changes after the war. In this way many actually rediscovered Constructivist ideas. In the Soviet Union, meanwhile, Nikita Khrushchev dismissed Art Deco after Stalin's death in 1953.

Conclusions

A number of historical autocratic regimes, including the Russian Empire, Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt had an impact on Stalinist dictatorial architecture and urban planning. Lenin's Mausoleum laid the cornerstone of urban communications based on divinity, immortality and eternity of power. Soviet Russia also resurrected the Baroque and Classical styles of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century absolutist powers in a new technological form in order to serve as a further example of architectural propaganda.

Dictatorship or autocratic powers speak the same language, and the Soviet example provides many similarities with the urban design and planning approaches pursued in Germany, Italy and Spain during the 1930s. However, Moscow presents a unique urban style of the 1930s whose exact name, nature and role are still being debated. No other time and place can boast such a range of symbolic decorative elements, borrowed from different cultures, religions and historical periods. Ancient symbols,

¹² Olga Zinovieva. Symbols of Stalinist Moscow. Moscow. Tonchu Publishing house, 2009. P. 62. ISBN 978-5-91215-040-1

retrieved from their cultural context have been perceived as Soviet emblems ever since.

Stalinist architecture had the greatest impact on Moscow through the 1935 Master Plan that broadened the city's main streets and squares, created huge palaces, dug the Volga Cannel and laid the Moscow Metro, with its underground fairy-tale stations. This plan was both a practical and political undertaking that solved urgent city problems and simultaneously immortalised the name of Stalin. New technologies of urban propaganda were discovered and successfully implemented. Postmodernism with its constant marketing has adopted a lot from Stalinist monumental propaganda. Social criticism of Stalin through books, films and programs draws attention to this period and creates interest among designers to interpret the styles of the 1930s-50s.

The new city's redesign was comprehensive, and included the construction of new power plants and factories, schools and universities, hospitals and department stores, offices, apartment buildings and parks. One can still find evidence for this all over the city. A lot of beautiful churches and monasteries, as well as romantic wooden houses disappeared but the new capital grew up when in 1918 the Soviet government changed its seat from St. Petersburg to Moscow and one should not forget that until then Moscow had not been the capital city. However, it should also be noted that the changes in the city's design and planning were only possible with very strong political power and the use of the labour of political captives and prisoners of war.

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