

The Haunted House of Soviets Gets a New Life

By Emile Duce for *The New York Times*

Required Annotations	Student-Created Annotations	Summary / Questions / Reflection
Student-created		Required (bold)



KALININGRAD, Russia — Yevgenia Kvasova was still young when she watched something resembling, by design, a gigantic head rise in the center of her city, on the westernmost edge of Russia.

“It gives me the evil eye every time I leave home,” said Ms. Kvasova, now 62, referring to the offending structure, the House of Soviets, which indeed sports an array of eye-like balconies that gaze from its façades.

Even architects who admire the original, bold design in a mixture of the modernist and brutalist styles **concede** that the House of Soviets fell short of its promise as a symbol of the Soviet Union’s control over formerly German land captured during World War II.

Instead, the building became emblematic of flaws in the Soviet system, as shoddy construction and structural defects meant it could never be occupied.

Now, 42 years later, a regional governor has announced that the House of Soviets will finally come down. Demolition is scheduled this spring.

But its very ugliness has made it strangely beloved by young people in town who have embraced the building as a quirky emblem of their home and the Soviet Union they never knew firsthand.

“It’s like a monument to the Soviet Union we should keep,” said Yevgenia Kryazheva, a waitress at Tyotka Fischer, a German restaurant with windows overlooking the House of Soviets. “I don’t like how it looks,” she conceded. But “people like things with defects. It’s ugly, but it’s ours.”

Kaliningrad, a pleasant port city where sea gulls flap about over the broad central

squares and steep-roofed houses that line the leafy side streets, was once German and known as Königsberg, the seat of power in East Prussia, as the region was known.

After the Soviet Union captured the territory from the Nazis during World War II, about 80 percent of the structures were in ruins. In the 1960s, the Soviet authorities, intent on scrubbing Kaliningrad of its German heritage, blew up a still-standing portion of a Gothic castle to make way for the House of Soviets.

Construction began a decade later. The building evokes a head because it was intended as a headquarters.

The protruding balconies are eyes, above which looms an oversize braincase of office space intended for Communist Party functionaries who would guide the economy. They never settled in because of the structural flaws.

Critics say the concept was nothing if not **redolent** of authoritarianism. Locals nicknamed it the “Robot Head.” Adding to its woes, the building was never actually completed. Rain seeped in. Waterlogged concrete swelled, and blocks of it fell off. For a time, market traders stored goods in abandoned rooms. Nobody ever used it as office space.

But even in the post-Soviet period, local governments shied from taking the politically **fraught** step of removing the empty building because it would be in essence admitting a flaw in the Soviet effort to replace Germany’s cultural legacy.

So, the House of Soviets went to seed. These days wind whistles through broken and missing windows. On a recent visit, two shaggy, evil-tempered guard dogs barked viciously behind storm fencing.

“Actually, it would be better if they built something different,” Aleksey Levanyuk, standing beside his parked van, mused while gazing up at the building as if noticing it for the first time. “It’s really horrible. But it’s been here so long we all got used to it.”

To be fair, the building, loosely modeled on the futuristic National Congress in Brazil’s capital, Brasília, is included in several anthologies of outstanding modernist designs and admired by some architects worldwide.

Over the years, the fate of the derelict House of Soviets became entwined with competing ideas about the future of Kaliningrad itself, a Russian **exclave** wedged between Poland and Lithuania.

In the immediate post-Soviet period, President Boris N. Yeltsin floated the concept of a Russian Hong Kong, a hub for banking and investment, open to Europe.

During this time, plans emerged to tear down the House of Soviets and rebuild the Royal Königsberg Castle as a symbol of embracing the German past and European future — and drawing in tourists. President Vladimir V. Putin even endorsed the idea early in his tenure.

Back then “we had **utopic** visions,” said Aleksander Dobralsky, a lawyer and a supporter of the opposition leader, Aleksei A. Navalny, who like other liberals advocates for Kaliningrad to integrate with its European neighbors.

After relations with the West soured in the Ukraine crisis, Poland canceled visa-free travel for Kaliningrad residents as the region began to loom as a security threat. A former American national security adviser, Robert O’Brien, called the Russian exclave “a dagger in the heart of Europe.”

Moscow deployed to the region nuclear capable missiles, called Iskanders. Just south of the city lies one of Europe's new security hot spots, the 64-mile-wide Suwalki Gap between Kaliningrad and Belarus, the only overland route for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization from Western Europe to the Baltic States.

Inside Kaliningrad, nationalist groups took to speaking up for the unloved House of Soviets, whatever its flaws. The building shows "our Russian power on former German land," one such group, the Russian Society, asserted in a statement.

But it's never really become clear how that power will be **wielded**.



"We are either a forward position for the military, a base for rockets, or a gateway to Russia for the European Union," for trade, said Pyotr Chernenko, the chairman of a union of architects in Kaliningrad. "You cannot be both."

Some, though, see the building as an important reminder of history.

Maksim Popov, 40, a graphic designer, has done a brisk business selling tote bags and T-shirts featuring the House of Soviets, sometimes with a fanciful body parts like legs and arms underneath the head.

"The House of Soviets was built as a symbol of victory over our history," Mr. Popov said. "But if we destroy it, like we did the castle, then did we really learn any lessons?"

So what is the plan now?

The governor, Anton A. Alikhanov, who announced the demolition last

November, has promised what he called “a new House of Soviets” in its place. It will be a near copy — but with the distinction that it will work this time. “It will be reconstructed,” he said in an interview.

The new building will go up on the original foundation and to the same height and dimensions, and have similar architectural motifs, he said. The plumbing, elevator shafts and other engineering elements will be modern. It will not be an exact replica, he said.

“We cannot leave this place empty,” he said “Before the Germans arrived, there were Prussian towns. Then the Teutonic Order came and built a castle. When we conquered the land, Soviet symbols appeared. Now, a new time has come, a new Russia, and new symbols should appear.”

But he said he may keep the name, the House of Soviets. “Branding is important,” he said.

Vadim Chaly, a professor of philosophy at Baltic Federal University, said it was a telling solution to the city’s decades old House of Soviets problem.

“Now, they want to tear it down and put in its place a copy,” Mr. Chaly said. “That is exactly what is happening to us. They want a copy of the Soviet Union in many senses but with a few changes. A more modern version.”

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Questions

Summarize the arguments presented in the article (there are two).

Argument 1

Argument 2

What do you think should be done with this building? Which argument is more convincing?