



## Photographic memory

The private antecedent to coffee-table tomes on Soviet Modernism is reproduced as an artefact from an ever more distant moment in time, writes Tom Wilkinson

**↑** he school exercise book, intended for practising elements of the official curriculum, is just as likely the haven of bored minds, where doodles sprout and expressions of teenage lust proliferate. A web of scribbles, a heart pierced by an arrow incitements to a teacher's scolding on their inevitable discovery. Are these not also exercises of some sort, however? Tentative essays in amatory declaration, in free imagination, in how far the patience of authority will stretch? Perhaps we learn as much in the margins, if not more, as within the sanctioned space of carefully inscribed lines.

In the late 1990s, German photographer Ursula Schulz-Dornburg picked up an exercise book while travelling in Armenia and, on returning home, carefully pasted a selection of the photographs she had taken while abroad onto its pages. It was intended for her daughter, who was then studying architecture in Spain, and it has now been published in facsimile, with the letter dedicating it to the daughter reproduced on the final page. This maternal gift may have been re-gifted to a wider audience, but it

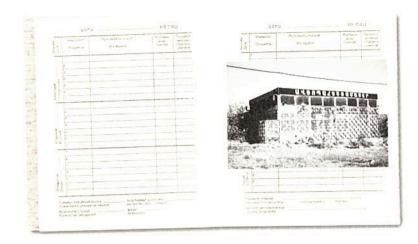


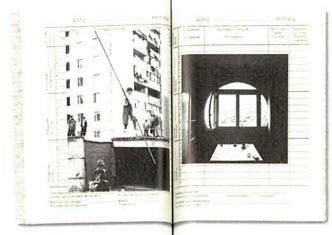
maintains the format in which it was first composed: a book for a young adult learning about buildings, which the author describes as 'a kind of fascinating Soviet concrete mania - an architecture that you would not find in Barcelona and that you would like'.

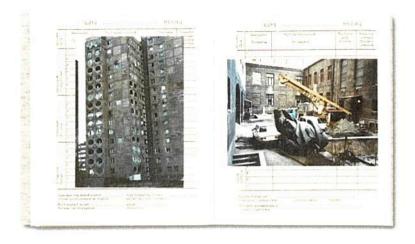
Twenty years later this statement, despite now being aimed at many more people besides a child whose taste the author knew, is truer than she could possibly have imagined. Neglected if not despised for decades, and in its homeland officially despised still, many of us do now like Soviet concrete. This development is due in part to the efforts of Schulz-Dornburg, who got there earlier than most other

> Westerners, as the date on the cover informs us: 96/97. Indeed, across more than 40 years of books and exhibitions, Schulz-Dornburg has striven to bring the works of late Soviet architects to wider awareness, as well as many other obscure structures from the Middle East and elsewhere. Her series of images of fantastical concrete

LEFT Contrary to the monumental quality of the black-and-white images for which Schulz-Dornburg is best known, the towering forms of these buildings are softened by life in full colour



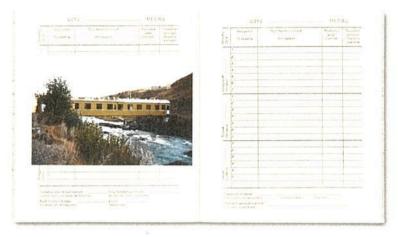


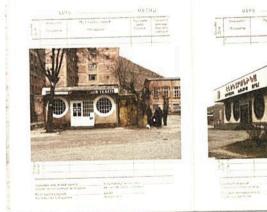


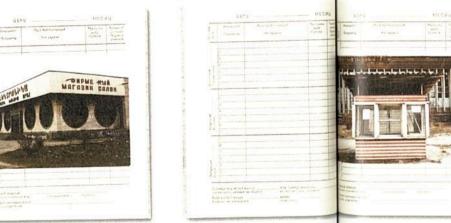


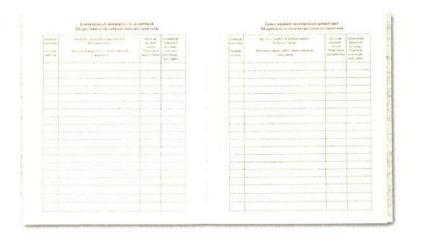












'The photographs blot out the text, suggesting in faithful Modernist style a truly international language of photography to supersede the word' bus stops in Armenia, begun in 1997 and first exhibited the same year, has been particularly influential, spawning imitations in print and even in built form (Herzog & de Meuron designed a bus stop inspired by one of her Armenian images in Burgos, Spain in 2012).

It was on the trip to Yerevan during which the photographs that make up this album were taken that Schulz-Dornburg first came across we presented with the crisp,

a lightness of touch, and drains the monumentality with which Schulz-Dornburg otherwise endows such 'minor' architectures: bus stops, kiosks, pavilions, a covered footbridge. However, this does not result in ephemerality, or an attenuation of the seriousness with which she treats these structures. Their inclusion alongside massive housing projects suggests instead a valorising eye that holds each object up, however abject, to peruse it for signs of facture and use. The presentation of these little buildings does not have the polemical

intent of an 'architecture without architects', as the accompanying blocks testify. It demands instead that we take the life of which these are the artefacts seriously, while seeing beyond the glamour of its grandeur.

The latter quality is admittedly not in great supply on these pages. And this despite the fact that Yerevan was home to an advanced Modernist architecture in the late Soviet period, often in pink tufa and with distinctive local characteristics. Perhaps its greatest monument is the airport, a stunningly futuristic orbital building. Neither this, nor the cluster of travertine drums that make up Yerevan's museum of contemporary art - the USSR's first such institution - are present here. Instead we first encounter a succession of panel-constructed towers, with expressive elements typical of later experiments in the form: jutting balconies, or balconies as massive portholes, or balconies as scooped out segments à la



those fateful bus stops. They are not the main attraction here. Neither are black-and-white, large-format

images for which the author is known. Instead of the typological consistency, affectless perpendicularity and extremely fine detail of her usual work - an approach with a long tradition in Germany, from Renger-Patzsch and Sander to the Bechers and Gursky - here is a collection of images taken with a very small format point-and-shoot camera, many of them in colour. The diminution in resolution and equipment gives these images

Scharoun in Berlin. There is also an extraordinarily expressive tower reminiscent to a degree of Marina Towers in Chicago. This sequence is to some extent a minor typology - an investigation into the use of balconies to enlive a type, the panel-built tower, still generally thought of as stultifyingly uniform. But Schulz-Dornburg also shows us the life that this architecture both encourages and is modified by. In the latter instance, the grey concrete is enlivened by strings of colourful laundry; in the former, two neighbours speak across the narrow void between their balconies. This is housing as a framework for life.

This run of large buildings is followed by a group of details, including a spermatozoic light fitting of which HR Giger would have been proud, and then a longer sequence of small buildings. Among these are an

extraordinary pair of pavilions, which float above the ground on recessed podiums and are almost Rossi-esque in their Euclidean purity. (These mysterious shelters were in fact erected in the garden of a restaurant as private dining rooms.) Finally, there is a sequence of furniture-scaled constructions, eccentric and homespun attempts at remaking everyday life, perhaps, to match the overwhelming revolution of the tower builders.

In her 2015 book Stop Reading! Look!, Pepper Stetler argued that the photobooks of German 'classical modernity' - such as the works of Moholy-Nagy and Renger-Patzsch - were means of 'teaching modern vision'. In other words, these serried ranks of commodities, morphologies of natural forms, and X-rays of frogs and other unfortunate creatures, were intended as exercise books. They were meant to instruct their users in the correct mode of apprehending modern life, the latter having been rendered inscrutable by speed-ups, fragmentation and scalar distortion.

Schulz-Dornburg's book fits within this tradition, as her employment of a school exercise book makes clear. But not entirely, This is not about adequation to modern conditions, or at least not in the sense intended by Moholy-Nagy or Renger-Patzsch. Instead these images are relics of a lost modernity, observed as if by a tourist, albeit one unusually handy with a camera. Furthermore, this book is a message in a bottle from back when this photo-didactic process began, complicating its temporality even more. When I use the word didactic, I by no means wish to reduce Schulz-Dornburg's work to this rhetorical mode; however it seems the most appropriate in this instance. On the other hand, it is significant that the didactic element of the printed pages - printed in both Cyrillic and

Armenian alphabets, a testimony to the vaunted (if not always achieved) multiculturalism of this transnational agglomeration - has itself been rendered inscrutable by the superimposition of photographs. These blot out the text, suggesting in faithful Modernist style a truly international visual language of photography to supersede the word - and yet, the extremely local subject matter gives this reading the lie. This, then, is an old and graffitied exercise book, washed up on our shores from a receding point in time to remind us that the work of re-visioning and recovery of which it is itself now an artefact is longstanding and ongoing, and must go on still.

ABOVE Dislocated from their context and uncaptioned, many structures appear as eerie or peculiar architectural provocations OPPOSITE The stuff and structures of everyday life take on an anecdotal quality in these photographs; their dissemination into the public sphere two decades later distancing them even further, and fictionalising their origin

Yerevan 1996/1997 Ursula Schulz-Dornburg MACK books, 2019