

Spiraling out of Control: Modern Architecture, the Emigration Decade, and the Filming of Lubetkin's Penguin Pool

Deborah Lewittes

Art and Music Department,
City University of New York
2155 University Avenue, Bronx, New York 10453, USA
deborah.lewittes@bcc.cuny.edu

Abstract:

In 1936, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York commissioned the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy to make a film, called *The New Architecture of the London Zoo*, about the now-iconic Penguin Pool (1934), with its spiraling concrete forms, and other zoo buildings designed by the Russian architect Berthold Lubetkin. Along with Moholy-Nagy, Lubetkin was part of a large community of Jewish émigré artists and architects living and working in interwar London. Lubetkin, ever argumentative, was apprehensive about the project, concerned that Moholy-Nagy's overriding interest in "pure visual perception" would misguide the film. The finished product enraged the architect, and he responded abruptly and brusquely, that the film offered little reflection on the buildings or their historical and cultural contexts. The remark revealed the core of his concerns – architecture's social principles. Although the penguins were cute, Lubetkin insisted his intention was always "to build socialistically," and Moholy-Nagy's film had missed the point. Through Lubetkin's Penguin Pool and Moholy-Nagy's film, this essay will offer some thoughts on 1930s England, abstract art, modern architecture, and the Jewish émigré, in order to understand why Lubetkin might have responded so abrasively, and to widen our understanding of the Penguin Pool.

Keywords: Berthold Lubetkin, László Moholy-Nagy, Penguin Pool, London Zoological Society, Regent's Park, Tecton, Russian Constructivism, modern architecture, Le Corbusier, Highpoint I.

In 1936, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, Harvard University's Graduate School of Design (founded that year), and the Zoological Society of London jointly commissioned the Hungarian Jewish artist László Moholy-Nagy make a film, subsequently called *The New Architecture of the London Zoo*, about several zoo buildings designed by the Russian Jewish architect Berthold Lubetkin and his firm Tecton. The zoo buildings, located at both the Regents Park Zoo in London and the Whipsnade Zoo in Bedfordshire, about 30 miles north of London, were seen as interesting experiments in modern architecture, worthy of art world and academic attention, and the most well-known of these structures is the Penguin Pool (1934) at Regent's Park. [Figs. 1a-1b] MoMA's focus is especially noteworthy in that its architecture department, the first of its kind in a museum, was only four-years old at that time. The film was intended to be shown at MoMA's 1937 *Modern Architecture in England* exhibition, an important venue because part of the motivation for the show was curator Henry-Russell Hitchcock's aim to correct what he saw as an

earlier oversight, his almost complete omission of Britain from the landmark 1932 *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, having allowed only Joseph Emberton's 1931 Royal Corinthian Yacht Club to be included, and to an extent, this new exhibition was meant to bring deserved attention to the burgeoning modernism scene in England. In 1928, Hitchcock had written an article in *Cahiers d'Art* in which he critiqued England's slow acceptance of modernist ideals, but expressed hope that architects who were starting to experiment with modern forms may someday "develop seriously, vigorously, and individually."¹ The Penguin Pool, along with Lubetkin's well-known tower block Highpoint I, have in fact come to be seen as the two most iconic examples of modern architecture in England.² [Fig. 2] Lubetkin, though, often argumentative, was apprehensive about the proposed film project, and the finished work absolutely enraged him.

Lubetkin had been an émigré by choice, making his way to London via Paris, in 1931, after witnessing as a teenager the street art protests associated with the Russian revolution and then attending architecture school in Warsaw, leaving Eastern Europe before conditions for Jews deteriorated. Moholy-Nagy had moved from Hungary to Germany to work at the Bauhaus, but as a Jew was forced to flee as European society began to smolder with the rise of Nazi Germany, and in 1934 made his way to London. By 1936, when the film was commissioned, Moholy-Nagy had one foot out the door from London and had already received offers to set up the New Bauhaus in Chicago; he ended up having an important career in the United States at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Lubetkin, on the other hand, was in London to stay; he had founded a firm and had just married an Englishwoman. An émigré, a refugee, and interwar London. Through Lubetkin's Penguin Pool and Moholy-Nagy's film, this essay will offer some thoughts on 1930s England, abstract art, modern architecture, and the Jewish émigré in order to understand why Lubetkin might have responded so abrasively, and to widen our understanding of the Penguin Pool.

While vanguard centers of art and architecture in the first part of the twentieth century flourished on continental Europe, England is of course seen as having remained separate from that history. But when Highpoint I was completed in 1935, Lubetkin's work received favorable press internationally; Le Corbusier, for example, deemed the building revolutionary. It contained the hallmarks of modern architecture – a sleek white exterior, pilotis, a rooftop garden, ribbon windows, lack of ornamentation, flexible interior spaces – and progressive critics and architects saw it as having the potential to change the face of London, providing mass housing and relieving congestion in the city center, social elements that were important components of modernist thinking. Lubetkin had set modern English architecture on a new path.

The Penguin Pool had actually been completed a year earlier. Lubetkin consulted with scientist Julian Huxley (brother to Aldous) and other biologists at the London Zoological Society to create an environment that was conducive to the walking and huddling habits of a particular species of penguin that was to live there. The important engineer Ove Arup developed an innovative structural system to render the overlapping, reinforced concrete curving ramps delicate, thin, and light, yet strong, in what was apparently an enormous feat of engineering.³ [Fig. 3] In a sense, the

Penguin Pool functions as a sort of mini-manual of some of modern architecture's tenets and essentials: a *fenêtre en longueur* cuts through the smooth, white circular façade, linking inside and outside spaces; the sheer technical virtuosity of Arup's handling of concrete calls to mind the excitement of this new material in manifesto works such as Le Corbusier's *Maison Domino* (1914); and the entire structure is centered on a *promenade architecturale*, so fundamental to Le Corbusier's vision. In the Penguin Pool, the defining ramp of Le Corbusier's *Villa Savoye* (1928-29) becomes populated by penguins, and the sink that marks the beginning of the user's spiritual ascent through the house is replaced here by the penguins' swimming pool. [Fig. 4] Like *Highpoint*, the Penguin Pool made an immediate and impressive impact on the international architectural community. In fact, some scholars have suggested that these two works by Lubetkin constitute the entirety of modern architectural culture in England, and suggest that in the aftermath of *Highpoint*, the initial promise of the field taking hold in the United Kingdom simply faded away.⁴

By the mid-thirties, when Lubetkin had started his prolific architectural output in England and Moholy-Nagy had arrived in London, many other émigré architects and artists who had grown up steeped in continental culture and politics and modernist thinking were forced to escape from Nazi Germany. Many settled in London, and so emerged an active community of exile intellectuals; Walter Gropius, Ernö Goldfinger, Oskar Kokoschka, Eric Mendelsohn, Piet Mondrian, Erwin Panofsky, Kurt Schwitters, and Rudolf Wittkower were just some of a lengthy list of crucial figures who played formative roles in twentieth-century thought and who made their way to London. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, the artist's wife, referred to the thirties more generally as the "emigration decade,"⁵ and the story of twentieth-century modern architecture does seem to be largely the story of emigration, immigration, and migration. International style modernism is often said to have been codified in 1927 with the houses created for the *Deutsche Werkbund's* now-canonical *Weissenhofsiedlung*, and from that moment on the architecture's dissemination and dispersal throughout Europe and beyond insured that its ideals and aesthetic were indeed international in scope. While some thinkers such as art historian Herbert Read, co-founder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, described England in the thirties as a "nest of gentle artists" willing to accept the foreigners entering the country,⁶ Lubetkin, on the other hand, had strongly contrarian views about émigré culture in spite of his own status as foreigner, declaring that the presence of the refugees hindered the development of modern architecture in England, because indigenous forms were not permitted to develop apart from comparisons with continental ideas.⁷ He clearly had tough views about Moholy-Nagy's art as well. In the late twenties, Moholy-Nagy had taken over the foundation arts class at the Bauhaus and was responsible for bringing the school in line with its original stated aims of uniting art with technology. His abstract forms combined with his interests in photography and in kinetic sculpture; he embraced new materials such as plexiglass, and experimented with the interaction of light and shadow, age-old painterly concerns rendered through new technology. [Fig. 5] It would seem that Lubetkin and Moholy-Nagy might be kindred spirits of a sort, but Lubetkin's concern upon hearing of the planned film had been immediate, anticipating

that that Moholy-Nagy's overriding interest in "pure visual perception" would misguide the work.

In the completed film, which is silent, each section begins with an image of a Tecton-designed zoo building distilled into a sketch of its essential geometric forms. [Figs. 6-7] The camera slowly pans over the concrete structures, then documents the animals' use of the structure, then moves over the crowd, focusing on contrasts between light and dark. There is a constant emphasis on shadows – shadows cast by the animals, by the structure, by the setting. Images of people (the zoo-goers) are cropped in ways that emphasize abstract shapes and chiaroscuro more than narrative content or figurative form. Lubetkin responded harshly and dismissively, that the film offered little reflection on the buildings or their historical and cultural contexts. His initial trepidation had been borne out. He wrote: "I doubted the value of a merely descriptive account of what happened, rather than why it happened, or what had to happen;"⁸ "[a]s I had been afraid, it was an aggregate of disconnected sense-data, and had very little to say about the buildings or about the world for which they were intended."⁹ His apprehension and his subsequent remarks reveal the core of his pursuit: architecture's social principles. The jab at "sense-data" was intended to distance himself from the trend towards empiricism that dominated much cultural thought in England at the time.¹⁰ As John Allan, Lubetkin's biographer, notes, Lubetkin was suspicious that an over-reliance on empirical thought could result in "generalization."¹¹ Although the penguins were cute and amused audiences, Lubetkin insisted his intention was always "to build socialistically,"¹² and Moholy-Nagy's film, too formalist for Lubetkin, had missed the point of the architect's designs.

Although modern architecture, from its inception in Europe, contained strong social content, the standard narrative in the field is that in 1932, Hitchcock along with Philip Johnson, the curators of MoMA's seminal International Style exhibition, had wiped away the social component of modern architecture and concentrated instead on its aesthetics, for the benefit of its American audience for whom discussions of mass housing in a socialist context would have made little impact. Stylistic concerns had always been important to Hitchcock in his architectural scholarship anyway, and the social angle had had little impact in England either, which was one of Lubetkin's constant frustrations. He frequently wrote that he carried with him for his whole life, and put in all his work, the revolutionary protest spirit that surrounded his youthful years in Russia. He had actually participated in the agitprop street theater of the Constructivists, and a running theme in his notebooks and private papers is that the heroism of modern art and architecture is rooted in that social protest art.¹³

But what could Lubetkin have realistically expected? How could a zoo pavilion meant for penguins contain social content, or at least discernibly so? What did he want the Pool to say "about the world for which [it was] intended?" Lubetkin knew well that modern architecture, in spite of being stripped of ornamentation and historical references, could still contain symbolic elements. In fact, his design for Highpoint I clearly exemplified such a strategy. As his engineer Arup explained:

Lubetkin welcomed my proposal to do away with columns and beams, and then, typically, as I was to discover, proceeded to make it almost impossible for me to do so....That the block of flats had to be put on columns à la Corbusier was a purely architectural device. It would be difficult to pretend that

it is useful in this case...And as the vertical forces are taken to the ground through the outer walls, it would have been simpler, if there had to be columns, to place them in the line of the external wall instead of pushing them inwards to a position which pleased the eye rather than the physical facts. Transferring the whole weight to the building horizontally creates considerable moments, necessitating crossbeams which again have to be concealed, etc., this causes a fair amount of trouble and expense. But it could be done fairly easily, and the architects of course wanted it done...¹⁴

Lubetkin knew that pilotis served a functional purpose in Le Corbusier's Five Points, but inherent in them were urban and social implications as well, hinting at the highrise Highpoint participating in a future skyscraper city modeled on Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine* of 1922. [Fig. 8] Lubetkin admitted his "structural dishonesty," but also said "architects do that sort of thing all the time and they only criticize it in buildings they don't like, not in ones they do."¹⁵ In a draft of a letter written in the forties, Lubetkin wrote: "Indeed, if you conceive design exclusively in terms of (functional) utility, if you ignore the energy and power of architecture's symbolic language (and ignore the emotions inherent) you ignore everything."¹⁶ For Lubetkin and Tecton, the message of the pilotis was more important than the constructional reality. The insistence on pilotis and the consequent reworkings of the structural system to accommodate them was no mere morphological addition to Highpoint, but acknowledged the building's discursive place in an inchoate urban system. In Lubetkin's private papers he referred to "architecture as a weapon for social renewal," criticized those who "disliked" theory, and asserted that architecture should be a "thesis of social aims."¹⁷ The theory behind the pilotis offered the possibility of a new social organization, and Lubetkin knew that by "faking" the structural role of the pilotis he was in fact planting "the seed of a vertical garden city."¹⁸

The Penguin Pool, too, spoke of a radical future, as there was an enormous amount of artistic precedent that linked the forms of the Penguin Pool with an avant-garde sensibility. In the context of revolutionary Russia, spirals were given a precise interpretation of spiraling forward into a new post-Tsarist world. Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the 3rd International (1921) was among the most famous examples of the meaning of the spiraling forms, a model for a never-built tower that would have been taller than the Eiffel Tower, with rotating rooms and assembly halls. Aleksandre Rodchenko's Spatial Constructions and sculptures by Naum Gabo and El Lissitzky were also part of this dynamic, forward-looking world, and the aesthetic links to the Penguin Pool are evident. Later historians did in fact link the spirals of the Pool to Russian Constructivism; Manfredo Tafuri specifically connects the overlapping ramps to El Lissitzky's designs for the Meyerhold Theater.¹⁹ [Fig. 9] Much earlier, though, Lubetkin in his private papers bluntly tied the energy and activity of post-revolutionary Russia to the "dynamism of spiral architectural forms,"²⁰ inflecting the Pool and its curves with the political content he was confident they contained anyway.

These are intensely abstract forms, though. Would the revolutionary content of these spiraling shapes would be readily apparent to an untrained viewer? On the one hand, then, Lubetkin was correct that filming the zoo buildings would not bring this content to light. But on the other hand, was he being reasonable to expect the film to convey a social and political component, and if not,

would it really invalidate the whole undertaking? If we go back to Lubetkin's Constructivist days in Russia, perhaps we can think of this split as paralleling a rift among the early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde, when Kazimir Malevich declared that in 1913 he took desperate refuge in the square, finally free from the burdens of representation. His spiritual approach clashed fervently with that of his contemporary, Tatlin, whose embrace of functional, utilitarian materials announced that in the drive to redesign the world in the spirit of the engineer, taking refuge was not an option. Even Wasily Kandinsky, whose radical turn towards abstraction in painting was simply not far-reaching enough for the engineering-based Constructivists, was expelled from the Constructivist movement. Kandinsky's easel paintings were seen as precious not political, embracing abstraction as spiritual and formalist expression at the expense of revolutionary propaganda. Had Moholy-Nagy's film, through a painterly focus on light and dark and dynamic compositional elements, emphasized a similar preciousness? Perhaps Lubetkin's criticism was self-directed, indicative of a sense that architects might grow weary of the language of international style architecture. Tafuri, who in general lauded Lubetkin and his firm's work, seemed to think it was possible that the Penguin Pool, in being so far removed from modernism's social programme, had indeed become "mere spectacle."²¹ He wrote:

The pool is a veritable dictionary of the motifs that had become the stock-in-trade of radical architecture: pillars, subtle projections, continuous apertures...Signs and symbols of the language fused in the crucible of the avant-garde were repropounded here with a didactic clarity, but in a deliberately paradoxical context. A deconsecrating meditation on the disposability of the language, the Penguin Pool definitely canceled out the aura and expectations on which radical architecture had nourished itself.²²

Since Lubetkin himself declared that art must relate to "the world for which it was intended," we must address what that world – London, 1934 – was. No matter the *content* of thirties art, its *context* was a world on fire, a world that was spiraling out of control into tragedy and horror. The backdrop to London in the thirties is Europe in the thirties – the decimation of Europe's Jewish communities and the aforementioned migration of refugees to England. Lubetkin might have come by choice, but he was foreign and Jewish in a culture that noticed both, and although he became part of that refugee community that absolutely was responsible for bringing much of continental modernism to England, and even though England was described as a "beacon of freedom," it was in fact something of a dichotomy during the interwar years.²³ Even if we just focus for a moment on the architecture community, consider for instance a short piece published in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* announcing the appointment of a RIBA Refugee Committee.²⁴ The Committee clinically spoke of the refugees as "problems." The announcement made clear that issues of nationalism and citizenship would affect its decisions, and the underlying message almost seemed to be that while the Committee would help refugee architects find employment, it would do so grudgingly – the "conflict of loyalties is not easily resolved into a policy; there is the natural fellow feeling, amounting even to a definite sense of responsibility, for our fellow architects who through no fault of their own are driven, homeless and workless, from their own countries."²⁵ RIBA's

statement indicated a terse recognition of the situation, but in practice, a slew of regulations were set up and limits put in place. Refugee architects had to collaborate with established English architects; Gropius, for instance, partnered with Maxwell Fry, and Marcel Breuer partnered with F.R.S. Yorke. RIBA Fellows and Associates had to be born as British subjects. Charlotte Benton has asserted that fear of deportation among foreign architects was so strong that they often were afraid to be associated with, or vouch for the expertise of, other foreign architects.²⁶

The welcome doled out to foreigners, then, was hardly a warm one. Many exiles were placed in internment camps merely for not being British, and, as has been well-documented, England was a hotbed of anti-Semitism. Jews were told to keep quiet, to avoid being too loud or too noticeable, and not to draw attention to themselves.²⁷ We have already encountered Lubetkin's own skepticism about exile culture, but as a Jew – one who hid this identity from his children, no less – it is possible this ornery attitude towards exiles was part of the performance, as he was known for his belligerent personality. Nevertheless, this was the upended, desperate world in which the Penguin Pool was created. Lubetkin worked within that world.

Although Moholy-Nagy's film was literally silent, perhaps Lubetkin felt it was symbolically silent too. Its formal focus on shapes and shadows merely played into the hands of those who demanded quiet from Jews, a retreat into the recondite non-objectivity of Malevich or Kandinsky over and above the protest-minded Constructivist abstraction that had inspired the spiraling ramps. Perhaps Lubetkin saw that Moholy-Nagy had made the Pool into hermetic art, and for Lubetkin, such politesse was inadequate in a time of despair. But was it Moholy-Nagy's responsibility to reveal this social content, or Lubetkin's? Furthermore, the audience was to be the American MoMA, and Moholy-Nagy's film would not have focused on the politics of architecture in such a setting.

Lubetkin's own writings give us some hint how he wanted his architecture to be read. A short piece he wrote for *The Architectural Review* in 1951, focusing on his flats at Spa Green Estate (design begun 1938; built 1943-50) in London, begins with an unsigned introduction that declares the flats "represent but one stage in a process of working out a certain philosophy of exterior design which can only properly be understood in relation to previous and subsequent designs by the same architects."²⁸ [Fig. 10] Later in the article, Lubetkin acknowledges this idea and concurs; he sees the innovations of the Spa Green scheme as having evolved in relation to his work in 1938, in Highpoint II, a companion tower block built in the aftermath of the aforementioned Highpoint I.²⁹ By conceiving his work as a series, Lubetkin enables more dynamic interpretations of his work, but also shows his awareness that to construct a self-contained art object is far-removed from his concerns. Thus the curves of the Penguin Pool need to be seen in relation to his ongoing work. One can therefore look back a year to Lubetkin's first English work, the 1933 Gorilla House also at the London Zoo. The reinforced concrete curving structure with revolving roof and walls, also engineered by Arup, was seen as technologically astounding, and in it we see the beginnings of Tecton's collaboration with Arup as well as the idea that radical architecture had a place in England. But we can also then use the Penguin Pool to look ahead, to see where Lubetkin's vision was heading. In addition to the Gorilla

House and the Penguin Pool, the curve as a motif appeared often in Lubetkin's work for the remainder of his career. A closer look at the exterior of Highpoint I reveals arabesque balconies, and curving walls frame a path down to a garden. There are interior curving walls, which also appear in the Finsbury Health Centre (1938); there are grand ceremonial curving entranceways such as those at Spa Green, the library at Dorset Estate (1957-62), and a monumental, spiraling, Constructivist-inspired sculptural stairway in the foyer of Bevin Court (1954), a postwar tower block near King's Cross Station in London. [Fig. 11] The stairwell marks the central core of the building, no mere decorative flourish. Allan has documented in detail Lubetkin's use of the curve.³⁰ Lubetkin himself called these sculptural features "intellectual" in his notes, where he also made comparisons between Pablo Picasso's collages and the balustrades on Francesco Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane (1638-41). Always though, Lubetkin presented detailed drawings and evidence of intense research for his designs, emphasizing to skeptics that these elements were far from mere surface ornamentation; there were reasons and justifications for these so-called flourishes. As Lubetkin's career progressed further into the twentieth century, his work turned increasingly more ornamented; he became interested in patterned facades, for example, but his writings always connected his work to explanations for his designs, such as the vitality of the city, and the building lots' relationship to its surrounding street plans. The curving lot and sloping terrain of his Spa Green Estate grew out of the neighborhood layout and its resulting form in the aftermath of World War II bombings, the winding footpath opening into a vista framed by the sinewy footprint of the Estate's Sadler House. By the late forties, Lubetkin was an important voice in international planning communities and had been closely involved in postwar reconstruction and architectural debates in England after the war. And so in his later work these curving elements are clearly and explicitly connected to work that is focused social housing theories and urban planning discourse.

But the Penguin Pool was a thirties work. What about it, and its revolutionary aims?

The sleek surface of the Penguin Pool was a perfect mirror to the state of being Jewish in thirties London. Somewhat quiet on the outside, the smooth, pure abstract surface masked what was underneath, radical content and the social ruptures of the avant-garde, ideas that had to be searched for and researched, but active and brewing nonetheless. Allan claims the zoo buildings were ways for Lubetkin to experiment with architectural form and to work out ideas that would be applied to other architectural projects. He sees references to Le Corbusier's Bestegui Penthouse in Paris (1929-31) in the jagged Pool staircase, thereby connecting Lubetkin to the modernist master and the main idioms of architectural modernism. In fact, Lubetkin's insertion of sculpturally expressive elements into his overall cubic architectural forms calls to mind Le Corbusier's approach as well, where dramatic volumes emphasize the freedom of the interior from performing structural work, where technocentric language is balanced by an interest in pure, ideal, classical forms, where architecture must be combined with art, and where emotions matter.³¹

Moholy-Nagy suggests, in fact, that he is fully aware of the layers and latent meanings of modern architecture. A caption at the beginning of the Penguin Pool section refers to the setting of

the pool being “not natural, but organic.” Of course, with its hard-edged materials and strict rational geometries, it is far from natural, though perhaps declaring it non-naturalistic would be a more accurate term. As Hadas Steiner has eloquently written, the Penguin Pool exemplified the “structural inevitability” associated with modernist architectural theory. The Pool was functionally useful, providing penguins a space to behave as they would do in their native habitat, an organic use of a non-natural[istic] structure, an outgrowth of Viollet-le-Duc’s tenet that architecture should directly and honestly express function. But certainly, there are polemics behind modernist architects’ drives to pare architecture down to its essentials, and thus the caption indicates that Moholy-Nagy indeed took Lubetkin’s work out of the realm of pure formalist art, in spite of Lubetkin’s brash and abrupt dismissal. Moholy-Nagy recognized the functionalism inherent in modern architectural theory, and emphasized it in spite of, or even through, the cinematic focus on Lubetkin’s ideal, sculpturally-rich forms. A few years before he completed the film of the zoo buildings, Moholy-Nagy also finished his film *Berliner Stilleben*, an eight-minute film that is remarkably similar to *The New Architecture at the London Zoo*. The film captures the bustle of Berliners getting on and off trams, crossing streets, and walking down sidewalks, shot from oblique angles and overhead views. [Figs. 12-13] Side-by-side film stills reveal clear visual echoes. As in the zoo film, emphasis is placed on light, shadows, and abstract angles and forms. We see, then, that Moholy-Nagy treated the Pool like an urban landscape, a modern concrete city for penguins bustling about their concrete world, just as the people of Berlin are visually captured doing their own bustling. Or perhaps, Berliners are treated as penguins, navigating the highways and byways of modernism. Moholy-Nagy has, through the forms of geometry, revealed a social world. Both Moholy-Nagy and Lubetkin have made strong statements about the expressive potential, use, and meaning of abstract forms.

To write off the Penguin Pool as just an aesthetic triumph indeed neglected the less obvious content, and also Lubetkin’s entire biography, which boiled beneath the surface. He was a Jew whose ancestors had known the pogroms of Russia and hence he was informed and propelled by the symbols of the Russian Revolution. And yet he was now in a world that was telling him to lower his voice, to hide his Jewish identity in a culture that was deeply anti-Semitic. And so indeed for him, architecture and art, as he wrote, needed to reflect their world, which meant that formalism was inadequate. Moholy-Nagy’s approach was subtle but rich, and just as Tatlin’s *Corner Counter-Relief* sculptures (1915) used abstraction to draw attention to the useful value of industrial materials, the film highlighted the fullness and expressiveness of modern architecture’s forms to Anglo-American society for whom this was new architectural language.

Moholy-Nagy and Lubetkin have each given us a manifesto on modernism.

There is a third émigré that also must enter our discussion. That is, of course, the deracinated penguins for whom the Penguin Pool had been built. Having been forced to migrate from Antarctica, they too were refugees, displaced from their home territory and placed within this curving concrete sculpture. The zoo, we know, had studied the birds’ habits and had created spaces for huddling in addition to the ramps for their walks around the pool, and so as foreign as the terrain

was to their homeland, they were able to emulate some of their activities and actions from the motherland. Much diaspora theory focuses in fact on this sort of interaction, between an émigré's host country and his/her country of origin, between the way exiles and refugees retain some customs and traditions from their homeland, and yet allow others to assimilate or be forgotten. The penguins perfectly enact the general plight of the exile as formulated by James Clifford, for instance, who suggests that diaspora communities always remain separate from mainstream culture, never quite fitting in. That is the world for which the Penguin Pool was created. The penguin refugees were simply always on the move, up and down the ramps, never quite settling in, perpetually migrating and being gawked at. At some point, the species of penguin was replaced with a different type, who didn't use the nesting huts and who had trouble walking on the concrete, which led to the closing of the Pool in 2004 and the opening of a replacement habitat, the Penguin Beach, in 2011.

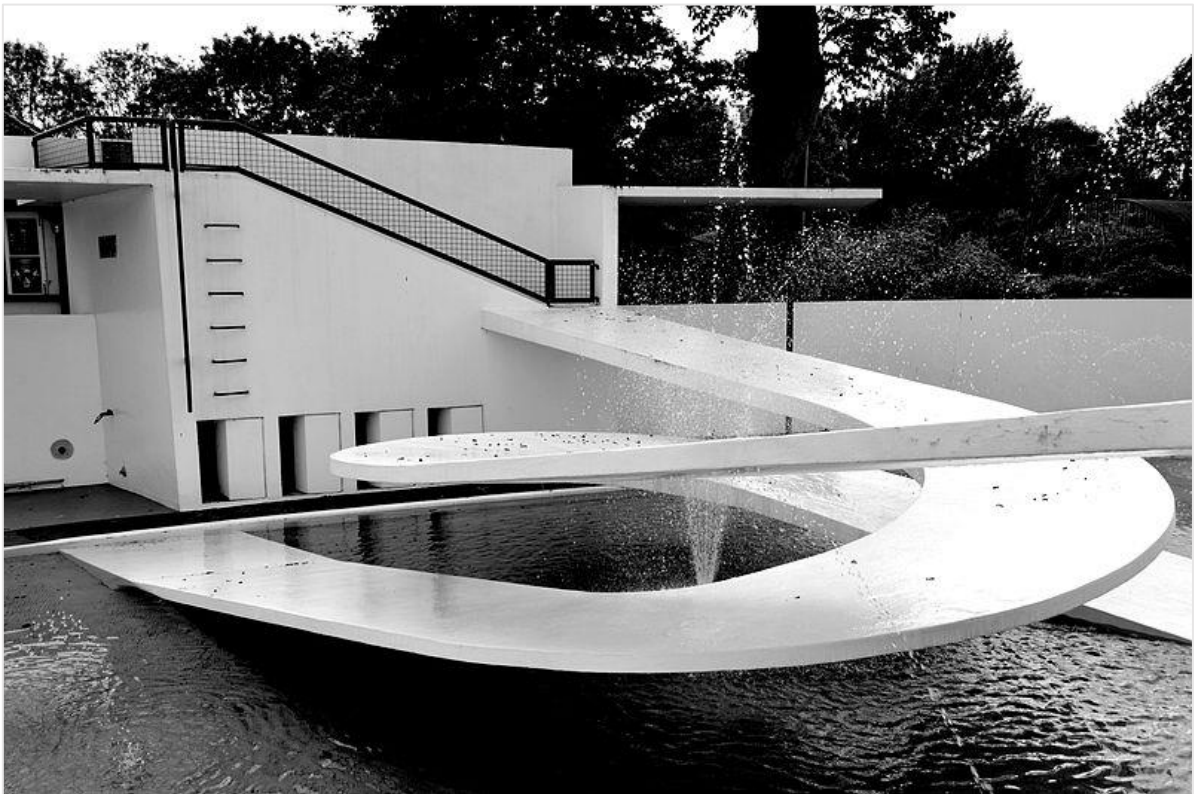
The penguins are a reminder that the 1930s were a heavy, loaded decade. Just as a "nest of gentle artists" is at first a comforting, cozy description, a deeper realization sets in that such words mask a crisis. A nest, gentle or otherwise, was needed because Jews were being forced to flee from continental Europe. Perhaps Lubetkin did not want the focus on serious architectural ideals to be masked by the charm of the penguins, as the nest he created for them grew out of a world that was far from gentle.

Endnotes:

1. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "L'architecture contemporaine en Angleterre," *Cahiers d'Art* 3 (1928): 446.
2. The building was originally called Highpoint, and not known as Highpoint I until an adjacent structure, subsequently called Highpoint II, was completed three years later.
3. For details on the construction, see Hadas Steiner, "For the Birds," *Grey Room* 13 (Autumn 2003), 5-31 and John Allan, *Berthold Lubetkin: Architecture and the Tradition of Progress* (London: RIBA, 1992), 208-12.
4. For a summary of some of these ideas as well as a counter to that conclusion, see my *Berthold Lubetkin's Highpoint II and the Jewish Contribution to Modern English Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2018).
5. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, "The Diaspora," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 24 (March 1965): 24-5.
6. Jane Beckett, "Circle: the Theory and Patronage of Constructive Art in the Thirties," in Jeremy Lewison, ed., *Circle: Constructive Art in Britain 1934-40* (Cambridge: Kettle's Yard Gallery, 1982), 16.
7. Berthold Lubetkin, "Modern Architecture in England," *American Architect and Architecture* 150 (February 1937): 29.
8. Terence A. Senter, "Moholy-Nagy in England" (MPhil thesis, University of Nottingham, 1977), 102-3.
9. Senter, 166.
10. See for instance A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1946 [1936]). For a general discussion of logical positivism as it relates to the arts in Britain from the thirties to the fifties, see Isabelle Moffatt, "'A Horror of Abstract Thought': Postwar Britain and Hamilton's 1951 *Growth and Form* Exhibition," *October* 94 (Fall 2000): 89-112. Moffatt makes clear that logical positivism was initially closely tied to radical Marxist thought in Germany and Vienna, but its British incarnation drained it of its political incisiveness. For a history of empiricism in England, as well as a critique of it as a methodology, see Gareth Stedman Jones "History: the Poverty of Empiricism," in Robin Blackburn, ed. *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory* (London: Fontana, 1972), 96-115. For a discussion of empirical thought in the fifties, see Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies*

- (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 114-15; 134-36; 232ff.
11. Allan, 105.
 12. Berthold Lubetkin, "Architectural Thought since the Revolution," *The Architectural Review* 71 (May 1932): 201. Also quoted in Anthony Jackson, *The Politics of Architecture: a History of Modern Architecture in Britain* (London: The Architectural Press, 1970), 44.
 13. Lubetkin's papers are held by the British Architectural Library (BAL) of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). Archival folders hereafter referred to by the abbreviation BAL followed by the folder number; BAL LuB/20/4.
 14. Arup, Ove. "The Engineer Looks Back: Arup Associations." *AR 30s*, special issue of *The Architectural Review* 166 (November 1979) 315-21.
 15. Lubetkin, *Allan*, 278.
 16. BAL LuB/17/2.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. Le Corbusier, "The Vertical Garden City." *The Architectural Review* 19 (January 1936) 9-10.
 19. Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture* vol. 2, trans. Robert Erich Wolf (London: Faber & Faber, 1980 [1976]), 231.
 20. BAL LuB/20/4 contains notes from the sixties on the importance of the Russian Revolution on the development of modern art; BAL LuB/20/5 contains an unpublished draft (c. 1962) of a book on Soviet architecture.
 21. Tafuri, p. 231.
 22. *Ibid.*
 23. On England as a beacon of freedom, see Pierre Vago, *Une vie intense* (Brussels: Editions AAM [Archives d'Architecture Moderne] 2000), 256. For the idea that England's attitude towards the refugees indicated something of a dichotomy, see my article "A Clean Sweep? Contemplating the Ruins of Postwar London," *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, Journal of the Bard Graduate Center published by University of Chicago Press (vol. 37, number 4: 2018), 246-60.
 24. "The New R.I.B.A. Refugee Committee," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* 46 (6 February 1939): 324.
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. Charlotte Benton, paper delivered at the conference *Exile and Refuge: the Influence of Refugee and Emigré architects on British and International Architecture*, organized by RIBA, at the London Jewish Cultural Centre, June 16, 2002. John Gold tells a related anecdote in which the German architect Peter Moro, who later worked on the design of the Royal Festival Hall in London (1950), recalls that Gropius promised him a job in England if he sought refuge, but that upon Moro's arrival, Gropius claimed he had made no such offer. See Gold, *Modern Architects and the Future City 1928-1933* (New York and London: E&FN Spon, 1997), 91-2).
 27. For a case study, see Janet Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder: "Diasporist" Art and its Critical Response," in James Aulich and John Lynch, eds., *Critical Kitaj: A Critical Anthology of Essays on the Work of R.B. Kitaj* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 1-28.
 28. Unsigned introduction to Lubetkin, "Flats in Rosebery Avenue, Finsbury." *The Architectural Review* 109 (March 1951) 138.
 29. Lubetkin, "Flats in Rosebery Avenue," 140.
 30. Allan, 141-46.
 31. In 1923 in *Vers une architecture*, Le Corbusier, for instance, writes: "...suddenly you touch my heart, you do me good, I am happy and I say: 'This is beautiful.' That is Architecture. Art enters in...By the use of raw materials and *starting from* conditions more or less utilitarian, you have established certain relationships which have aroused my emotions. This is Architecture." Quoted in Kenneth Frampton, *Le Corbusier* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 29.

Figures:



Figs. 1a and 1b: Penguin Pool (Photo credits: 1a: Gillfoto: Creative Commons; 1b: Fillfein: Creative Commons)



Fig. 2: Highpoint I (Photo credit: Leo Eigen)

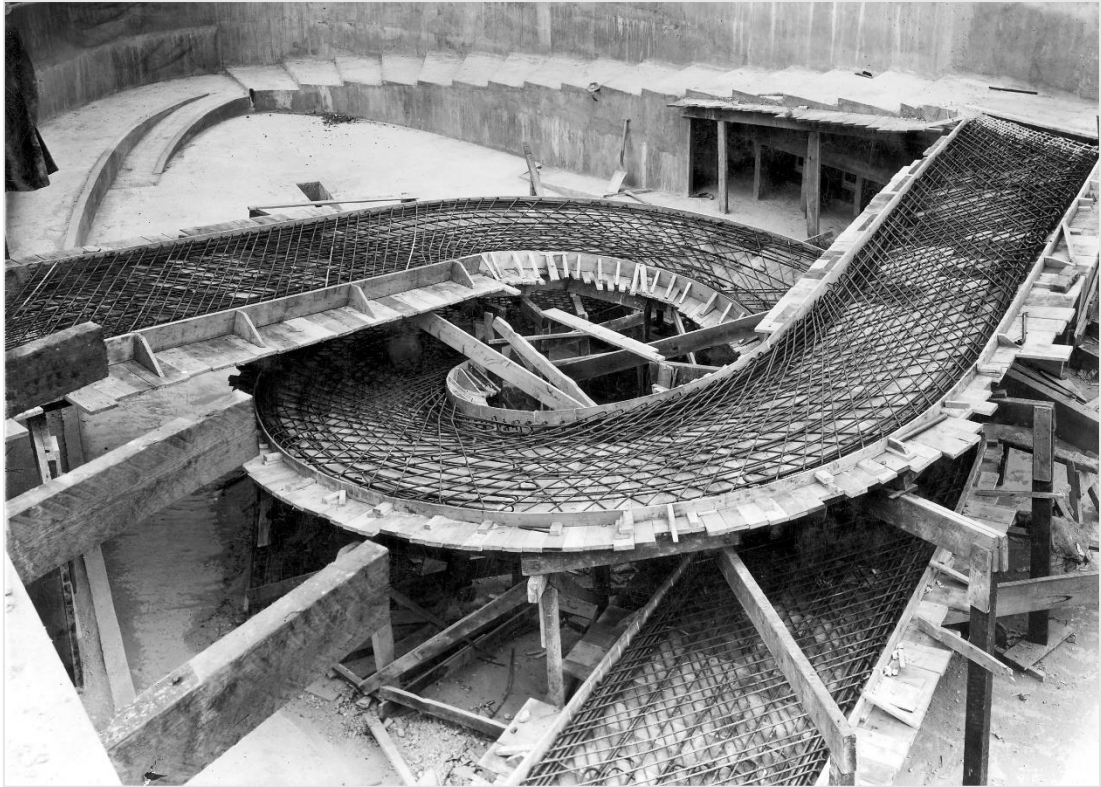


Fig. 3: Penguin Pool, London Zoo, Regent's Park, London: ramps under construction.
(Used with permission from RIBApix.)



Fig. 4: Villa Savoye ramp and sink
(Photo credit: End User/Iainb/via ArchDaily)

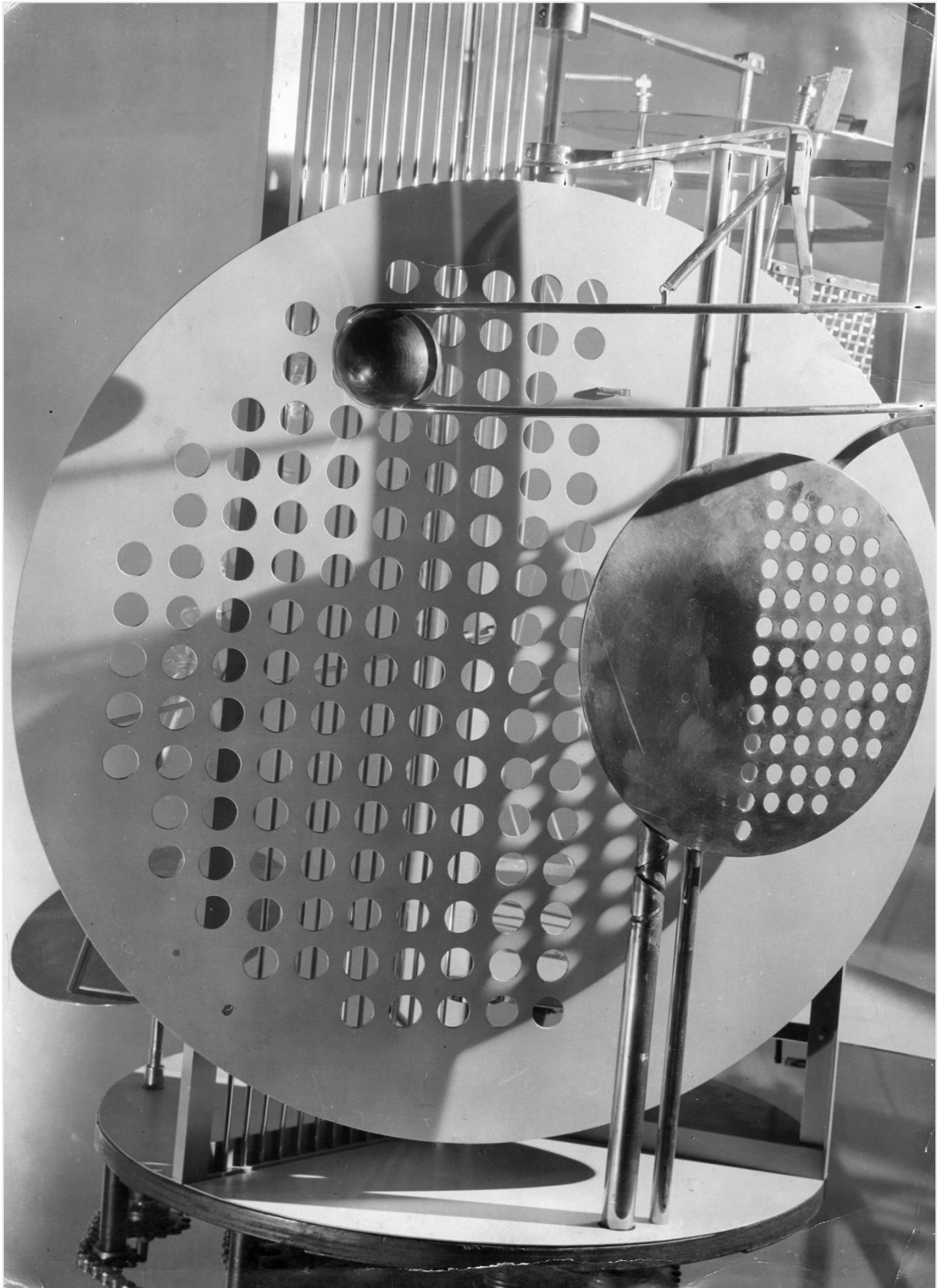
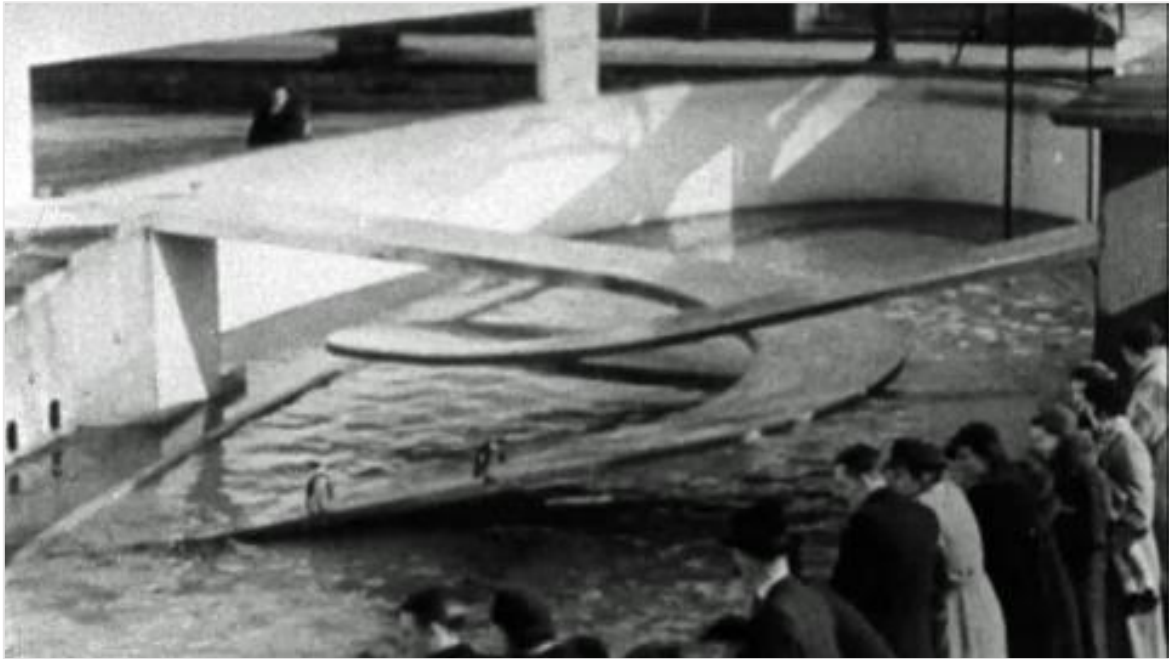


Fig. 5: Light machine designed by Moholy-Nagy (1930).
(Used with permission from RIBApix.)



Figs. 6-7: Film stills from “New Architecture of the London Zoo” (bfi.org.uk)



Fig. 8: Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret), La Cité Radieuse - Plan Voisin (later manifestation of Ville Contemporaine), 1925 (Banque d'Images, ADAGP / Art Resource, NY ©ARS,NY. Used with permission.

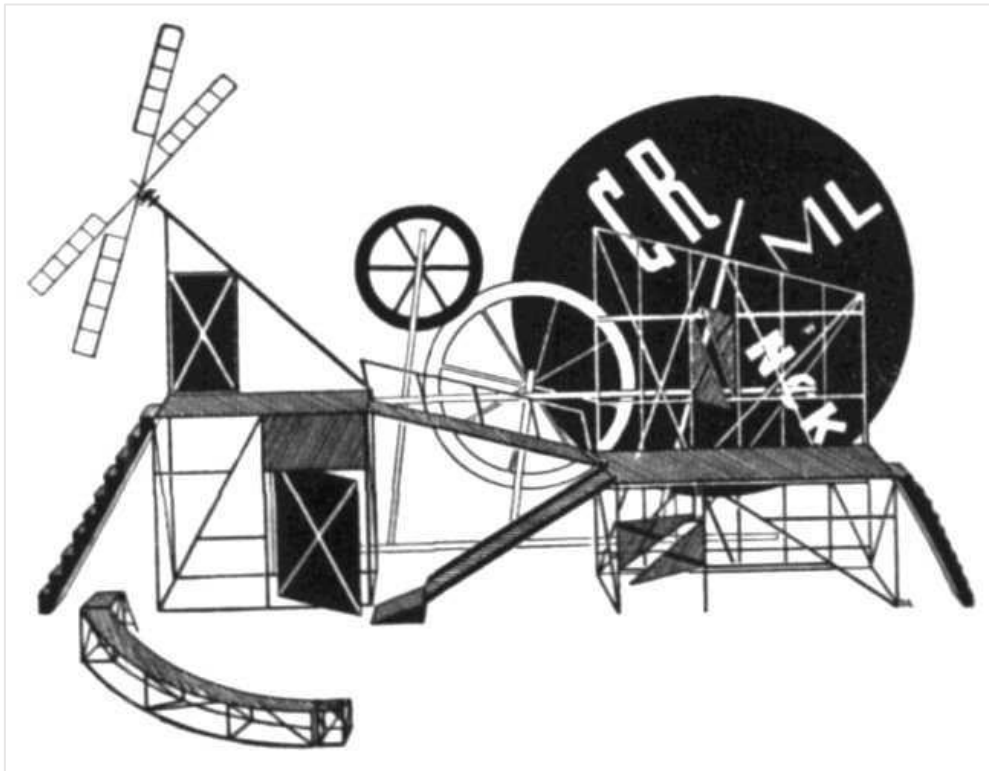


Fig. 9: Stage plan for Meyerhold's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922) (PD-US)



Fig. 10: Lubetkin and Tecton, Spa Green Estate, Rosebery Avenue, Finsbury, London: Sadler House seen from the roof of Wells House (Used with permission from RIBApix.)



Fig. 11: Bevin Court (Photo credit: Leo Eigen)



Figs. 12-13: Film stills, “Berliner Stilleben” (<http://www.moma.org>; fair use non-commercial copyright laws) and “New Architecture of the London Zoo” (bfi.org.uk)

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