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The Cooper Union Promotes Russian Architecture. Why?



By [Peder Anker](#)

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The Cooper Union's 41 Cooper Square building neighboring the St. George Ukrainian Catholic Church in the Ukrainian Manhattan Village. Source image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Ajay Suresh. (CC BY 2.0)

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This month, the [School of Architecture at The Cooper Union](#) in New York City is scheduled to open an extensive exhibition on Russian architecture. *Vkhutemas*:

Laboratory of the Avant-Garde, 1920–1930 is the title of a show presenting what is loosely known as the "Soviet Bauhaus." Undoubtedly, it's an essential part of the Russian architectural legacy worthy of attention. But not now. I would have been first in line ten years ago to see the exhibit, but not today. To support Russian architecture now is simply tone-deaf. I believe the Cooper Union should terminate this exhibition and put a pause on its courses on Soviet and Russian architecture. Here is why.

All historical reflections are meditations on current affairs. [Russia is currently attacking Ukraine](#) in a brutal war that, in its gruesomeness, can be compared to Hitler-Germany's campaign against the Soviets. The armies of Vladimir Putin, the dictator, are annihilating not only military targets but also civilians, along with the nation's [cultural heritage](#) (including its [architecture](#)). To hide [war crimes](#), Russian acolytes in New York try their best to make their nation shine as harboring highbrow culture. It's a cultural war of propaganda targeting our minds to soften our politicians' support of Ukraine. It's called "soft power."



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The exhibition and the courses in Soviet architecture at The Cooper Union are an exercise in non-coercive "soft power" to make Russian legacies, and thus policies, more appealing to the architectural community and New Yorkers. Even though the scholarly work behind the exhibit is solid, it serves in the current cultural politics as Russian propaganda. Indeed, the patronage of the exhibition leads directly to Putin's inner circle.

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The exhibition is supported financially by various reputable New York agencies. The intellectual patronage is different, as it takes societal connections to access Vkhutemas archives, imagery, and key holders. Anna Bokov, the assistant adjunct professor at Cooper Union behind the exhibit, is the daughter of Andrey Bokov, the National Architect of the Russian Federation and former President of the Russian Union of Architects. In Russia, he is a renowned Putin insider who wields tremendous influence. Tellingly, in a picture from 2017, he is shaking hands with Putin after receiving a national award.



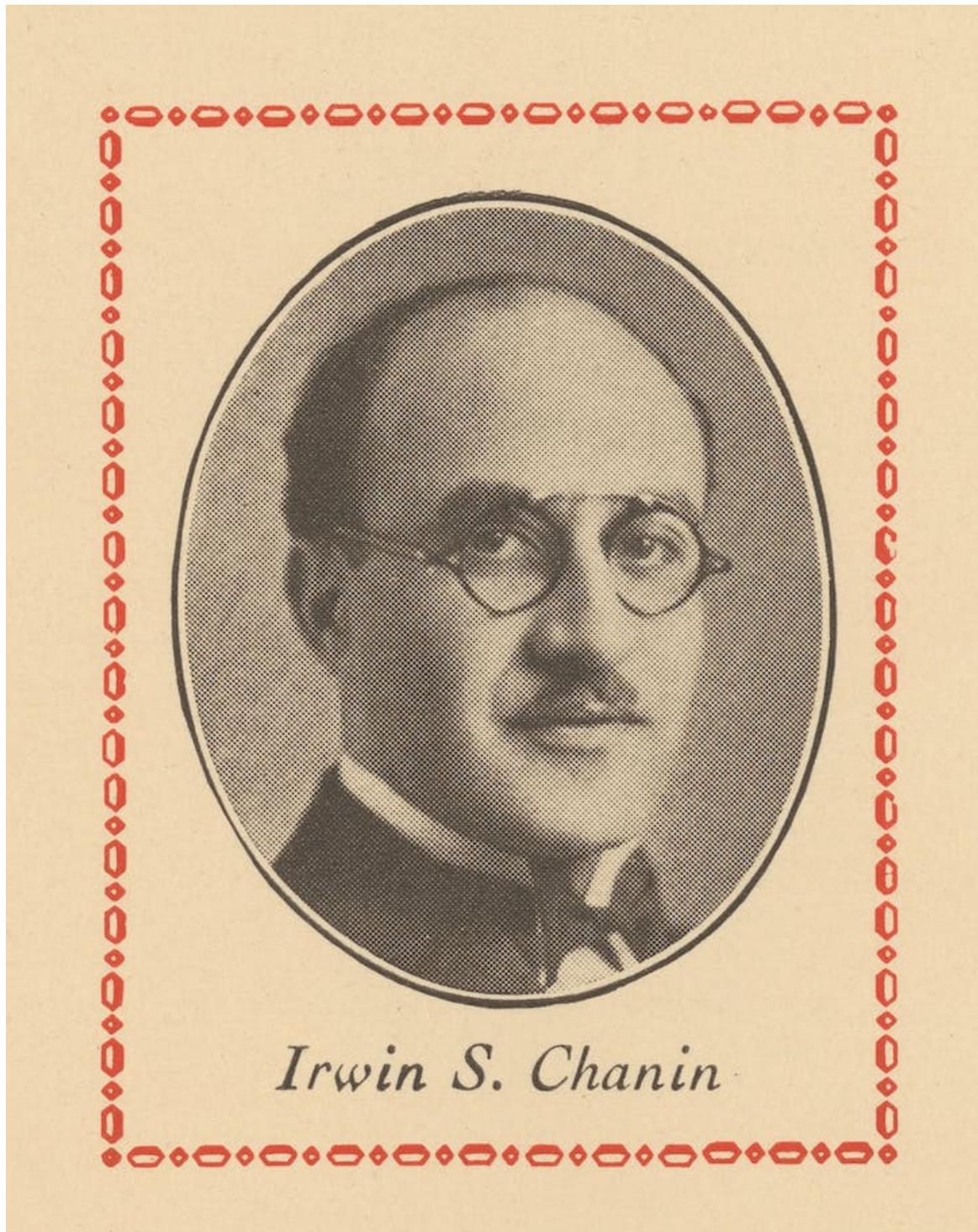
Vladimir Putin and Andrey Bokov, 2017. Source: Alamy.

In her exhibition-related book *Avant-Garde as Method: Vkhutemas the Pedagogy of Space, 1920–1930* (Park Publishing 2021), Bokov has dedicated it to her mother and father. Also, a widely published catalog from the 14th Venice Biennale credits Bokov and her father, Andrey Bokov, with staging an exhibition on Soviet-*Vkhutemas architecture in the Russian National Pavilion*. With the war raging, why would The Cooper Union agree to support this now publicly?

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Moreover, this unfortunate event happens in the Ukrainian Manhattan Village, which adds insult to injury. Their most important church, the Cornerstone (The First Ukrainian Assembly Of God), is right across the street from Cooper Union. Around the block is The School of Ukrainian Studies, along with The Ukrainian

Museum. The Cooper Triangle Park — outside Cooper Union — is the chief outdoor hangout for Ukrainians in New York. It is no accident that Irwin S. Chanin, as in Cooper Union's "Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture," was a Ukrainian. The exhibition organizers seem unaware of being part of a legacy, neighborhood, and community of Ukrainians. Instead of insulting their neighbors with a show about Russian architecture, progressive, creative minds at The Cooper Union should consider drawing up plans and presenting architectural ideas for rebuilding their country.



Irwin S. Chanin, as in Cooper Union's "Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture," was a Ukrainian. Source: New York Public Library.

Please make no mistake about it. My letter is not to be offensive towards The Cooper Union. On the contrary, it is an institution I highly respect and that elevates close friends and colleagues, including Bokov. Yet, I can't get my head around how this could happen. We can all make mistakes. And when we do, we need to acknowledge them and rectify them as best as we can.

So abandon the ill-timed Vkhutemas exhibition along with related courses. And then reach out to your neighbors in the Ukrainian Village and ask them how you can help imagine a future for their war-torn nation.

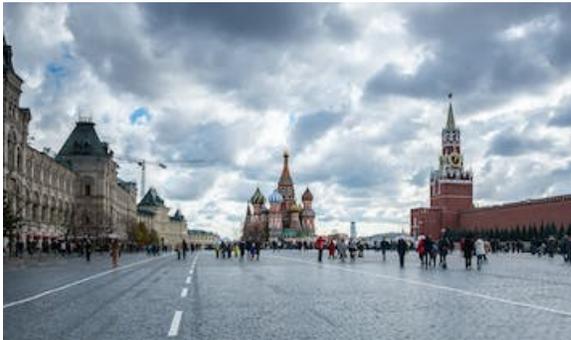
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Peder Anker is a Professor of History at New York University and the author of *From Bauhaus to Ecohouse: A History of Ecological Design*, along with other books and articles available at Pederanker.com

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