

# **Urban Planning Visits and Anglo-Soviet Communication in the 1930s and 1950s**

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## **Abstract**

Professional visits allowed specialist groups such as urban planners to learn about Soviet thinking, practice and life. This paper examines the communication and learning which occurred during two specific visits in 1936 and 1957/8. The paper shows the visual nature of planning assisted non-verbal communication and learning. It also highlights the impacts of different political contexts and the forms of visit, particularly between one-off trips (1936) and reciprocal exchange arrangements (1957/8). In 1936 the bold and comprehensive Soviet approach to planning was admired, bolstering domestic British arguments for a stronger planning system. By 1957/8, however, the balance had shifted so that the visit to the USSR served more symbolic, quasi-diplomatic and touristic functions. Despite a relatively warm and informal encounter, British planners now found less in the USSR to admire professionally though Soviet planners were eager to investigate and apply British planning achievements.

## **Introduction**

Western visits to the former USSR by specialist groups in technical, cultural, artistic, educational and other professional fields were important in developing knowledge and understanding of Soviet thinking, practices and life. The visits occurred on both a unilateral, one-off basis or as part of reciprocal exchange arrangements. They drew on the knowledge and experience of organisations and wider networks which existed on both sides to promote and facilitate contacts on a non-governmental and non-business basis. The actual experiences of the visits varied, depending on their primary focus. Many artistic and cultural visits took the form of performances, exhibitions or lecture tours by visiting groups. Others in more formal professional and technical fields were primarily concerned with what political scientists have termed 'cross-national learning' (Rose, 2005). This involves looking abroad not merely to gather exotic knowledge or even copy foreign experiences but rather to assess how far programmes effective elsewhere might be adapted for a new setting and ineffective approaches avoided.. It is these learning visits that are the concern here, specifically in what is broadly termed urban planning, embracing town planning, architecture, housing and related aspects of urban policy.

This paper examines the communication and learning processes typical of such encounters by comparing specific visits during two particular 'high points' of interest in Anglo-Soviet contact. The first example was a four-week visit to Moscow in 1936 by British urban planning and governance experts. The second was a 1957/8 pair of exchange visits (lasting 19 and 22 days respectively) of town planners from each country. Both examples were relatively well documented. This allows a critical examination of how changing political and cultural contexts, the form and structure of visits themselves and the visitors' own perspectives affected communication and learning.

Barriers to genuine Anglo-Soviet communication were substantial. Cultural and linguistic differences had always been substantial and post-Revolutionary ideological differences and mutual suspicions were profound. It was unlikely that there could ever be learning connections in urban planning as close as those between Britain and nearby European countries or the wider Anglophone world. Even so, some urban planning contacts had developed before 1917, evident in the development of a Russian garden city organisation whose members communicated with the movement in Britain (Cooke, 1977).

The early USSR certainly fascinated some urban planners in the West, especially those with left-wing sympathies (Ward, 2012). There was a strong sense that it was a uniquely bold and comprehensive experiment in planned development, especially so in the 1930s and 1940s. Later, during the 1950s and early 1960s there was also a Western feeling, not just on the left, that the Soviet Union might well overtake the United States as the world's largest economy (Gunther, 1958: 406-8). Its prowess in space exploration by the later 1950s certainly showed it ahead of its major rival in some key sectors. This perspective suggested a value in studying other aspects of the Soviet system. In urban planning, as in other fields, it could not simply be ignored.

Both sides in the post-Stalin period also saw cultural, professional, technical and educational contacts of all kinds as having a more general role, lessening the chill of the Cold War. Finally, we should not underestimate the significance of plain curiosity; to groups such as urban planners on each side, the other represented an unknown land. Visiting was a way of satisfying that curiosity, potentially also to gain knowledge of value to one's own profession. Moreover, because of the comparative rarity of such visits, publicising travellers' tales and distilling lessons to be learned potentially allowed travellers to gain professional and wider status.

Two distinct phases of Anglo-Soviet contact in the urban planning field are identifiable, the first during 1931-9. Visits in these years were unilateral, involving British parties or occasionally individuals travelling to the Soviet Union. There were very few Soviet visits in the opposite direction and none forming part of exchange arrangements. All visits ceased shortly after the outbreak of war in the West. Despite great British interest in Soviet reconstruction planning in the 1940s, no group visits specific to this field occurred while Stalin ruled. From 1953, however, a new period of contact opened, based from the outset on the principle of mutual exchange. There were far more Soviet visits to Britain in the urban planning field than ever before. Although affected by periodic crises in Soviet relations with the West, the Khrushchev 'thaw' era 1953-64 was a particularly fruitful one for Anglo-Soviet contacts in the urban planning field.

### **Anglo-Soviet interchanges in the 1930s**

Previous work on the more general phenomenon of cultural, technical, professional and similar non-trade visits to the Soviet Union has largely focused on the first period. A few Western visitors went even in the very early years after 1917 and numbers grew during the later 1920s. German and American visitors were the most common in urban planning (and

other fields). Some were hired or subsequently became involved in working to plan Soviet industrial and urban expansion. The brigade of largely German urban planners from Frankfurt led by Ernst May which went to the USSR from 1930-33 was the best known group, though there were many other individuals (Kopp, 1990; Flierl, 2011).

There were a few British visitors at this time, although until 1931 none were urban planners. It was only in July of that year that the first British urban planning visitor, the architect Clough Williams-Ellis, went to the Soviet Union. His wife, Amabel, a children's author with strong Communist sympathies, had been an earlier visitor and she contrived an invitation for her husband (UK TNA KV 2/784). More visiting parties followed, all seeing something of Soviet urban planning and several focused exclusively on architecture and planning. Most visitors returned impressed, even 'starry-eyed', and were happy to share their experiences.

Although no British planners ever worked in the USSR, the contacts were still surprising considering deep suspicions of Comintern by conservative and even moderate opinion in Britain during the 1920s (Ward, 2015). In the 1930s, steadily growing knowledge of Soviet domestic repression also contrasted with the high regard in which many intelligent and humane Western visitors clearly held the USSR. There have been many attempts to explain this paradox. Some have stressed the naïve gullibility of visitors, aided by the cynicism of Western journalists based in Moscow (Muggeridge, 1972: 205-76). The latter enjoyed a pampered lifestyle if they promoted favourable images of Soviet achievements.

Others have seen in Westerners' Soviet admiration a quest for a more perfectly rational society, where scientific expertise and planning, rather than private interest, shaped public decision making (Caute, 1988). Another interpretation posits a quasi-religious search for the new certainties and hopes of a secular Utopia (Hollander, 1981). Such sentiments were all the more potent for generations shaped by the Great War and its aftermath, with many losing faith in traditional ideologies and institutions. The 1930s realities of worldwide depression, mass unemployment, the rise of Fascism and seeming impotence of capitalist parliamentary democracies also caused many to look in hope to Moscow.

Yet there is an important silence in these older accounts, concerning the Soviet role in these links. Recent research has used Russian sources to show how Soviet agencies actively cultivated Western contacts. The key agency was VOKS (Vsesoiuznoe Obshchestvo Kul'turnoi Sviazi s zagranitsej - All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries), created as a formal entity in 1925 (Stern, 2007: 86-131; David-Fox, 2012: 28-97). This body's principal aim was to enhance Soviet 'soft power' by facilitating and stage managing its international cultural, scientific and professional relations to foster positive impressions of the USSR in other countries.

An important way of achieving this was by promoting national 'friendship societies', the first being the German Society of Friends of the New Russia, founded in Berlin in 1923. The London-based Society for Cultural Relations between the British Commonwealth and the USSR (usually known as the Society for Cultural Relations or SCR) followed in June 1924.

Similar organisations soon appeared in other Western countries. Despite their common format, however, some were much more arms of VOKS than others. The British SCR was a relatively autonomous body which did not slavishly follow the Moscow line (David-Fox, 2012: especially 82-3).

VOKS, however, played a central role in controlling the flow and nature of information about the Soviet Union which reached foreigners. Through its national friendship networks, it supplied information and publications, often in translations (of varying quality), and responded (sometimes erratically) to requests for specific information. Visits by foreigners were carefully orchestrated, ensuring the Soviet experience was showcased in as positive a manner as possible. Part of the approach involved encouraging criticisms and seeking advice. While there was probably some genuine basis for this, it also served to flatter the vanity of visitors and encourage their complicity in the great Soviet project to build a socialist society.

In 1929 a second Soviet organisation concerned with foreign visitors, Intourist, was formed. Essentially a tourist agency, it was also to some extent a rival of VOKS. It shared the general intention to show the Soviet system in positive terms but with the aim also of earning Western currency. VOKS remained important for more specialist contacts but its role was certainly diminished. Thus interpreters, except for the most specialist visits, now had to come from Intourist.

This more recent work has allowed a more balanced appreciation of Anglo-Soviet contacts during this period. Whether emphasis is on Soviet stage-managing or on the particular expectations and/or naivety with which Westerners viewed and understood the Soviet scene, however, does not affect a more basic point: The nature of the contacts have been viewed as ideologically tainted, with little scope for 'real' and accurate understanding.

### **The 1936 Moscow Visit**

The first visit being examined occurred in September 1936 to conduct a research investigation into the Mossoviet, the Moscow City Government. The outcome was published in a 1937 book called *Moscow in the Making* (Simon et al., 1937) with related lectures and newspaper articles (eg *Manchester Guardian*, 1937a, 1937b). Apart from its very specific focus, the visit was similar to many other Soviet visits during the 1930s. Lasting four weeks (the normal duration of a Soviet visa) it was arranged by the SCR, with, in this case, personal facilitation from the Soviet Ambassador in London, Ivan Maisky. VOKS and Intourist gave their usual assistance at the Moscow end, identifying specific people to interview, sites to visit and providing interpreters (Simon et al., 1937: v-vi). The visit was a one-off event though, coincidentally, a Moscow delegation led by Nicolai Bulganin, then Mossoviet Chairman, was visiting London (and Paris) at almost exactly the same time (*Times*, 1936). However the groups never met and their trips were not part of an exchange arrangement.

The members of the British group were fairly typical of many others who visited the USSR during the 1930s. The leader, instigator and funder of the visit and book was Sir Ernest Simon (Stocks, 1963), a successful Manchester industrialist of progressive views who was

active in public life in the city. He had two brief spells as a Liberal MP though later joined the Labour Party. Another was Simon's wife, Shena, who shared her husband's commitment to public life and progressive causes, though was already a Labour Party member, with a special interest in education (Jones, 2004). The third member was a London School of Economics academic, William A. Robson, an expert in constitutional law and local government (Crick, 2004). The final member was a Manchester economist, John Jewkes, an expert on industrial and regional matters. Accompanying them was one of the Simons' sons and a nephew, whose exact identities are unclear (Ricketts, 2004). They took no active part but it is relevant that one son was already in 1936 a Communist and the other (probably the one on the trip) joined in 1937. (The parents were not best pleased.)

The dominant though not unanimous perspective of the visiting group proper was that of the Fabian Society, essentially that socialism could be realised gradually through democratic, progressive, efficient, informed and rational governance. Ernest and Shena Simon were friends of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, intellectual leaders of the Fabians, and Ernest's wealth helped fund many projects to advance these ideas. Robson had a very similar perspective. Yet Jewkes's outlook was never Fabian and can be termed 'updated Manchester School', i.e. pragmatic regarding state intervention when market processes were in crisis but remaining at heart a classical liberal. Subsequently, from the later 1940s, he became a pioneering advocate of economic neo-liberalism and fierce critic of economic planning (Jewkes, 1948).

Despite Jewkes's somewhat different perspective, the principal inspiration of the 1936 visit and ensuing book was the Webbs' own two volume work *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?* (Webb and Webb, 1935). The Webbs also helped more directly by making suggestions about the investigation, questions, matters to be probed etc (pp. v-vi). Simon saw the project as supplementing the Webbs' work by focusing on the governance and planning of the showpiece Soviet city following the 1935 General Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow.

Many details of the visit such as the exact itinerary, the identities of individuals encountered and how evidence was recorded and assimilated remain vague. Some Soviet printed material was secured but with great difficulty, even during the visit, and was certainly not a significant source. It is, however, clear that meetings with senior Mossoviet and central officials were very important. Sometimes these encounters involved all visitors while others were conducted individually. However, it is not known what was said by whom in these presentations and subsequent questioning. It may be assumed that their significance was substantial since they typically lasted 2-4 hours though, since none of the visitors spoke Russian, translation must have accounted for at least half of this time.

Further information came from visits to inspect and observe activities at relevant sites such as schools or housing. The visitors clearly spoke to local residents, albeit many in various local supervisory roles. There was some use of the opinions of anonymous Russian professionals working at, for example, construction sites. The experiences and opinions of unnamed Western foreigners living or working in Moscow were also utilised (Simon et al.,

1937: 161, 179). The rigid inflexibilities of Moscow life were amply displayed even in the otherwise comfortable hotel where the party stayed. More significantly, the visitors saw and, to some extent, experienced aspects of more ordinary Soviet life for themselves.

How they recorded and made sense of the information they uncovered is not fully clear, though it would seem that detailed notes were taken. Ernest Simon at one point mentions making notes in public places during street walks, sometimes facing challenges from security personnel (Simon et al., 1937: 224). During the visit the group met each night to discuss their respective findings and take stock of events which they had all experienced. Later, they also compared their own findings with the impressions of other visitors, not just the Webbs. Thus Ernest Simon (Simon et al., 1937: 183) contrasted his views with those of Walter Citrine, the General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress who published his own account in 1936 (Citrine, 1936).

These four weeks were a time of serious hard work and the visitors seem to have resisted purely touristic sight-seeing. Ernest Simon may incidentally have pursued some business interests, visiting a flour mill (one of the Simon companies specialised in manufacturing milling machinery) (Simon et al., 1937: 224), but this was probably a 'local industry', controlled by the Mossoviet. Some of the party, though it is not known who, undertook short side visits to Leningrad (St Petersburg) and Kharkov (Simon et al., 1937: v.) It is not clear what purpose these trips served but the two cities are referred to briefly for comparison in a few chapters.

The book which followed was well received and became a respected English language source on Soviet city planning and governance. In retrospect, its judgements might be seen as too laudatory in some respects but were far from being the most fulsome. At any rate, it was the most substantial work in this field to result from any Soviet visit during this period and was a significant contribution to a rapidly evolving debate about policy directions for urban planning in Britain in the late 1930s and 1940s (Ward, 2015: xxi-xxiv).

### **Anglo-Soviet interchanges during the Khrushchev 'thaw'**

Until recently, less attention has been given to foreign cultural and similar relations during the Khrushchev 'thaw' period than those during the 1930s, though this is now changing. It is, however, first necessary to understand the period which preceded it. Following the hiatus of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939-41, there was an upsurge of British interest in the USSR until the onset of the Cold War in 1947-8 (Northedge and Wells, 1982: 151-4; Keeble, 1990: 28-31). The common sense of wartime struggle against Hitler and shared urban planning challenges of reconstruction were strong unifying themes. The 'Bond of Friendship' (twinning) agreement between Coventry and Stalingrad in 1944 was symptomatic of this new mood. Previous suspicions of the SCR diminished as British professional bodies, pressure groups and government ministries now eagerly sought its knowledge of Soviet reconstruction planning (Ward, 2012). Yet specialist visits on the pre-war pattern were no longer possible, restricting how far British interest could be refreshed. Soviet misgivings during the early

post-war years further inhibited contacts and after 1947 Anglo-Soviet relations generally worsened.

By 1952-3, however, there were signs of renewed interest and, following a Soviet invitation, a group of British architects and planners visited under SCR auspices in 1953, with a smaller Soviet group coming to Britain the following year (SCR, 1954). As the Khrushchev regime became more established, however, further opportunities for greatly improved relations with the West opened (Keeble, 1990: 35-8; van Oudenaren, 1991: 283-96). With this came more exchange visits in professional, cultural and similar fields. Improved cultural and related exchanges were positively discussed at the July 1955 Geneva summit of the leaders of the 'big four' (USSR, USA, UK and France).

The Soviet desire for better relations with the West reflected both its continuing concern to promote more sympathetic understanding of the USSR and a newer desire for specific knowledge from Western countries. Housing, urban planning and construction had particular significance, since Khrushchev was eager to raise the generally poor standards of Soviet housing (Smith, 2010: 59-99). Here Western expertise in industrialised housing systems and in the planning of new satellite towns attracted particular Soviet interest. These topics were prominent in Soviet visits to several Western countries (notably France, Western Germany and Scandinavia) from an early stage. It was also the case for Soviet links with Britain. For example, there were Anglo-Soviet exchange visits of housing and building specialists in July and September 1955 promoted by the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) (UK TNA 128/1; Smith, 2010: 75-6). It is also significant that the British government immediately followed Khrushchev's visit to Britain in April 1956 with a return visit the following month by the Minister of Housing and Local Government, Duncan Sandys (also responsible for urban planning).

As this Soviet window opened, a new basis for Anglo-Soviet cultural diplomacy was also created. On the British side, the main concern was again to marginalise the SCR and other friendship societies, particularly the British-Soviet Friendship Society. They were again perceived as politically untrustworthy, liable to represent Britain too negatively to Soviet visitors and be too positive about the USSR. A Soviet Relations Committee of the British Council was therefore established in May 1955 as an official agency without communist connotations to organise visits to and receive visitors from the USSR (UK TNA BW 2/250). Its head was Christopher Mayhew, formerly a junior minister in the Attlee Labour Government charged with combatting Soviet propaganda during the early Cold War (Mayhew, 1998).

Shortly after these new arrangements appeared, however, Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in late 1956 triggered a severing of links by the British government. Yet this proved only temporary, partly because of fears that friendship societies would otherwise regain their dominance. For its part the Soviet Union initially continued to work through old friendship networks, annoying the British government and the British Council. Quite soon, however, the Soviet government also began to create its own new framework (van Oudenaren, 1991: 287-9). A new State Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign

Countries was established in 1957 to negotiate new exchange agreements. These were then implemented by a new Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries which replaced VOKS in early 1958. New Soviet societies were also created for cultural relations with individual countries which together comprised the Union.

In part this remodelling was simply a cosmetic exercise. Yet it also reflected a growing sense that aging pre-war friendship organisations and memberships might not be the optimal framework to engage with the best of current Western thinking and practice or, conversely, to represent the best on the Soviet side (van Oudenaren, 1991: 288). This was especially so in Britain where the Communist Party had declining credibility in cultural and professional circles compared to the 1930s and 1940s. There were also (well justified) fears by individuals that Soviet involvements via the old pro-Communist friendship societies would jeopardise their opportunities to work the United States, then becoming a far more lucrative prospect (Ward, 2012: 510). Therefore it made sense for Soviet authorities to concede Western demands for a less overtly ideological framework for cultural diplomacy.

### **The 1957-8 Anglo-Soviet urban planning exchange visits**

The 1957-8 visits were organized as this new framework was emerging (Cook, Ward and Ward, 2014). The idea came from the Sandys Ministerial visit of May 1956 and specific arrangements began at the Vienna World Congress of the International Federation of Housing and Town Planning (IFHTP), in July (HALS, H17). On the British side the key figure was Frederic J. Osborn, Chairman of the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), the foremost British planning pressure group, and IFHTP Vice President. On the Soviet side, his equivalent was Mr. A. Koudriavtsev of the USSR State Committee on Construction Affairs who headed the Soviet delegation in Vienna.

The TCPA organised annual overseas study tours and had long harboured hopes of a Soviet visit, so far without success. Now both sides were keen to proceed. Arrangements were delayed by the Hungarian crisis but eventually, six Soviet planners arrived in London in September 1957. The delegation included the heads of planning, architecture and building construction bodies in Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk and Kiev along with the acting director of the Academy of Building and Architecture of the USSR. It was led by Mr. S. I. Kolesnikov, director of the USSR State Committee on Construction Affairs, who also accompanied the 1958 party throughout their Soviet tour the following year. The Soviet Relations Committee of the British Council provided the official English-Russian interpreter and there was also Soviet embassy interpretation support.

In consultation with the Soviet Relations Committee and Koudriavtsev (who did not attend the tour), the TCPA itinerary focused principally on post-war urban reconstruction and New Town development. Attracting great local media interest, the visitors went to London, Stratford-upon-Avon, Oxford, Birmingham, Coventry, Stafford, Liverpool, Manchester, Preston, Edinburgh and Glasgow – and rural areas of the Cotswolds, Loch Lomond and the Highlands. Also featured were the New Towns of Hemel Hempstead, Welwyn Garden City, Glenrothes and East Kilbride. The visitors met many government officials, mayors, planners,



architects, New Town Development Corporation officials and university lecturers. Some who they met comprised the group they welcomed a few months later in the USSR. These members of the 1958 delegation accompanied the 1957 Soviet visitors for sections of the visit.

In May 1958, the British visitors arrived in Moscow to be met by members of the previous year's delegation. The party comprised the leader Osborn, Richard Edmonds (Chairman of the London County Council Town Planning Committee, a Labour Party member) together with Henry Wells (Chairman of Hemel Hempstead New Town Development Corporation), H. Myles Wright (Lever Professor in University of Liverpool's Department of Civic Design), E.G.S. Elliot (Chief Technical Officer in the Ministry of Housing and Local Government) and Dennis W. Riley (Chief Planning Officer of Staffordshire County Council). Like the Soviet delegation the previous year, these were all senior urban planning figures, none speaking the language of the visited country. An official Soviet interpreter was provided, supported by a British Embassy official who gave much additional support.

The places visited were all west of the Urals, beginning in Moscow, then Leningrad, Kiev, Sochi, Gagra, Krasnodar, Stalingrad (now Volgograd) before returning to Moscow. The pattern echoed that in the UK, visiting planning offices, city centres, existing housing areas, construction sites, and places of 'historic interest' and 'natural beauty'. They saw plans for three proposed satellite or 'sputnik' towns around Leningrad – Sosnovaya Polyana, Otradnoye and Gorsky [all sic](Edmonds, 1958). Outside the big cities, they visited collective farms, coastal resort developments in Sochi, the USSR Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition in Moscow and the ongoing Volga Dam project.

They also inspected housing plans and models and visited a prefabrication factory and actual construction sites for the new Soviet housing drive. This very important programme drew partly on similar construction systems in France (especially), Scandinavia and Britain (Dremaite and Petrulis, 2013). Already Soviet architects and construction engineers had begun to inspect Western techniques, (for example the July 1955 ECE visit to Britain noted above). The physical outcome was the characteristic Khrushchev-era apartments built in their millions, mainly in five-storey blocks throughout the USSR (Ruble, 1993).

Unlike the pervasive seriousness of the 1936 visit, lighter activities within the programme counterbalanced earnest profession inquiry, having also featured in the 1957 Soviet visit to Britain. Within the Soviet Union, the 'social programme' included several visits to theatres, the circus and a Moscow trip to watch a diplomatically convenient 1-1 draw in a Soviet Union-England football international. There were also numerous receptions and dinners where visitors met fellow professionals and officials in less formal settings.

Also unlike the 1936 visit, there was no single major publication for that of 1958. However five group members produced their own account(s). Most ambitious was Edmonds who, following several newspaper articles, published a book. Osborn wrote newspaper articles, a more thoughtful piece in the TCPA journal and gave several talks. Wells, a

chartered surveyor by first profession, gave a lecture to that professional body, published in its journal. Similarly Riley addressed his professional body, the Town Planning Institute (Riley, 1959). Wright wrote a long article in the prestigious scholarly planning journal, *Town Planning Review* (Wright, 1958). Nothing published or unpublished has been identified by Elliot but it seems likely that, at the very least, he wrote an internal report for fellow Ministry officials.

### **Comparing Anglo-Soviet communication in 1936 and 1957-8**

What then can be said about the communications aspects of these visits? The most striking point is how much the exchange arrangements altered the tone of the 1958 visit, compared to 1936. The 1958 visit benefited by being the second ‘leg’ of the exchange, since the Osborn party had already met Kolesnikov and their hosts for different sections of the visit. The effect was immediate; as Edmonds wrote of the party’s arrival – ‘...we are in the arms of friends, friends I say because of their smiling and warm-hearted welcome, but through the memory, too, of a busy week in London in September last...’ (Edmonds, 1958: 10). This sense of friendship contrasted with the greater formality of 1936 when visitors were received cordially but in the context of the matter in hand (Simon et al., 1937: v-vi). There were fewer opportunities for informal contacts and social bonding than in 1957-8.

Yet greater warmth could not overcome more obvious communication barriers. In both 1936 and 1958 verbal and written communications were filtered through interpreters, clearly limiting the quantity (and almost certainly the quality) of information that could be orally communicated. This was particularly so in 1936 when very little printed information was available. However, the essentially visual nature of much urban planning activity was helpful on both visits, with non-written texts such as plans and models helpful in understanding planning intentions (though less so actual achievements).

Site visits to view living conditions, developments in construction and recently completed projects were important. In 1958 many colour photographs could be taken to keep memories fresh and be used subsequently in lectures and publications. This was, at best, a minor feature of the 1936 visit with no photographs from the visit appearing either in the book or related publications and lectures. The capabilities of portable cameras and film in amateur hands were also somewhat less in 1936 than in 1958. Yet by 1936 it was certainly possible to acquire high quality Soviet photographs, albeit selective in their portrayals, of many subjects, especially so in Moscow, the showpiece Soviet city. From 1930, many regularly appeared in *The USSR in Construction*, an attractive large format foreign language illustrated magazine highlighting Soviet achievements. Only one appeared in the book, however. This was the frontispiece showing a model of the colossal proposed (though never realised) Palace of the Soviets on the site of the demolished Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (now rebuilt).

The explanation for the lack of photographs may perhaps lie more in the essentially social scientific disciplinary interests of the visitors, happier with written texts and statistical tables than images. Yet there is no doubt that photography was more constrained on these

earlier visits. Other accounts of 1930s visits refer to camera use being restricted and in at least one case an errant British architectural photographer was temporarily detained. Moreover, as noted earlier, even note-taking in public places could easily attract security attention, especially if this was outside the formal programme rather than when the group was with Soviet minders.

There is no evidence of this on the 1958 visit. By that stage, of course, a wider Soviet public, certainly in professional activities such as architecture, planning and construction, would regularly use cameras, professionally and privately. The 1957 Soviet party in Britain was reported by one newspaper as being ‘draped with cameras’ (*Lancashire Evening Post*, 1957). At any rate, the 1958 British visitors did not, according to Wells (1959: 374). ‘...feel that we were only being allowed to see “what was good for us” although naturally the Russians wanted to show us those things that they were most proud.’ Another visitor (Edmonds, 1958: 48) described ‘...wander[ing] at will through the city [of Leningrad] unaccompanied and unfettered in every way, and certainly not followed.’ Yet he also understood that ‘...in a full programme the chances for wandering at will are naturally limited. Photography is also unfettered; but the sensible traveller does not take pictures of bridges and industrial installations. If the point did arise his guide would probably insist on the visitor’s right to take the pictures’ (Edmonds, 1958: 48).

Of course, all visits of this kind to all countries are to some extent managed events, where the knowledge that can be gained is largely structured by its organisers and possibilities of accessing random information correspondingly curtailed. Moreover incidental factors such as travel arrangements could compound this; as Osborn commented ‘VIP travel could give unbalanced impressions’ (HALS, C1: 2). On a day-to-day basis, both parties travelled by Zim automobiles to visited sites, limiting the extent to which they could see ordinary life at close quarters. This was more so during the 1936 visit when motor cars themselves were extremely rare. The position in 1958 was less stark but even then to be chauffeured in a Zim was a signifier of moderate importance (if not quite as elevated as travelling in a Zis limousine) (Wells, 1959: 378).

More significant, however, was the extent to which visiting groups were able to exert any control over what they were shown. In 1936, Ernest Simon reported that some requests to visit particular sites were plainly ignored. When they passed construction sites on the Moscow-Volga canal where prisoner labour, corralled by guards with fixed bayonets, was being used, requests to stop the car were denied (Simon et al, 1937: 224-5). Other distortions could be more subtle. For example, Ernest Simon commented that, despite being allowed to see many Moscow flats and the high intensity of their occupation, what must have been quite common family situations were never shown to him.

The 1958 party, by contrast, was less aware of any such restrictions, distortions or obvious gaps. This probably reflected several things. Objectively the Soviet Union was a less repressive state within its own boundaries than it had been in 1936, especially so within its European core. The 1958 visit was also generally far more relaxed and occasioned very generous hospitality which may itself have dulled any critical intent the visitors may have

had. Consciously or unconsciously the visitors also appear to have absorbed the notion that they had a quasi-diplomatic role. Osborn (1958a: 8) reported that ‘...our mission, being technical, we did not discuss political issues.’ For their part, their hosts were certainly aware that they should emphasise Soviet desires for peace. This was something visiting parties in all fields experienced over many years (van Oudenaren, 1991: 295). The 1958 visitors were, however, amongst the first to experience it and clearly reciprocated. Again from Osborn: ‘propaganda was not entirely absent – there were of course pleas, which on both sides were obviously sincere, for peace and better understanding – but tendentious and controversial international issues never obtruded’ (Osborn, 1958b: 309).

As might be expected, the quality of communication in relation to urban planning matters appears to have been good on both the 1936 and 1958 visits. The visitors in both cases gained a relatively clear view of the formal plans, policies and programmes, of what, in other words, was going to be achieved. In relation to housing for example, the appalling scale of Moscow’s overcrowding was also in general terms clear from statistical evidence. But, especially in 1936, it was less easy for visitors to gain a detailed sense of existing conditions and of how quickly present aspirations and proposals would be realised.

Ernest Simon went to some lengths to investigate actual housing conditions, to see the human experiences that lay behind these figures. Yet although he reckoned to have seen inside over fifty flats of various types, he realised that these excluded the most seriously overcrowded families: ‘...though there were often three or four adults living together in a room, never once did I find more than two children. Where the large families live remained a mystery’ (Simon et al, 1937: 147). He estimated that roughly half of Moscow families lived at less than 3 square metres per head in so-called grade IV accommodation. However, ‘I did not see any of these grade IV houses; they are not normally shown to visitors, and unfortunately owing to lack of time I did not insist on seeing them.’ (Simon et al, 1937: 153). Nevertheless he built an impressionistic picture of the worst overcrowding in other ways, including walking outside in the evening in poorer districts of the city. Through lighted windows, he was able to see barrack-style worker accommodation with twenty or more people to a large dormitory room. Anecdotal evidence was also used.

The 1958 party was perhaps less concerned than Simon with the social dimensions of actual housing conditions, being more interested in their relation to wider planning issues. Well aware of the extraordinary Soviet housing drive then underway and the real improvements this was bringing, the group still noted average space standards, even in new properties, remained below contemporary British norms. The visitors appear not to have experienced difficulties in seeing what they wished of housing conditions but their main comments were about the rather austere flatted accommodation being provided and the often poor quality of workmanship and finish. Two of the group, however, praised a recent housing development in south-west Moscow, Cheremushki, actively being promoted to Soviet citizens as a showpiece (Edmonds, 1958: 114-7; Wright, 1958; Smith, 2010: 115-6). The visitors particularly appreciated the slightly lower buildings and greater informality of the site plan, and landscaping which they saw as a sign that standards more generally were improving.

The common tendency towards nationalistic narcissism during international interactions of this kind was also apparent. Greatest interest was shown in those aspects most related to British experiences. Outstanding in this respect were the proposed new Soviet satellite towns, particularly the intention that they would have more lower rise dwellings including houses with gardens. The debt these proposals owed the British New Towns was readily acknowledged by their hosts (and examining these had featured strongly on the first leg of the exchange in 1957). Osborn and Wells, both heavily involved in the British New Towns, were especially proud of this connection and reported it widely on their return (Osborn, 1958a, 1958b; Wells, 1959).

Conversely however the perceived relevance of what was seen in the USSR to British experience directly affected how much attention it received. In 1936, Ernest Simon found Moscow far better equipped to tackle metropolitan planning problems than London or any other major city in the world. In the final paragraph of *Moscow in the Making*, after making several important caveats, he expressed his belief that ten years on, Moscow would be well on the way to being ‘the best planned great city the world has ever known’ (Simon et al., 1937: 234). Although war prevented his prediction being realised, Simon was in 1945 still referring to Moscow as ‘the planner’s paradise’ (Simon, 1945: 129-33).

The Soviet combination of boldness, commitment, comprehensiveness and emphasis on a scientific and rational approach in planning and governance appealed to those in 1930s Britain advocating a new and stronger form of national territorial planning. Fabians such as the Simons and Robson were prominent in making these arguments but a widening coalition of interests was also sympathetic. There was mounting acceptance in progressive and left-wing circles that a more statist approach was appropriate with stronger commitment to economic as well as spatial and physical planning. This gave a particular salience to Soviet experience which grew as war produced both a much larger state sector and stronger commitment to a more planned post-war Britain.

A key facet of this Soviet boldness in urban planning was the complete absence of private land ownership and a capitalist land market, something which appealed greatly to Ernest Simon (Simon et al., 1937: 211-3). It meant that land, far from being itself a commodity, became a neutral platform without market value onto which a city that was functionally efficient and conducive to human welfare might be redrawn. Many admired aspects of Soviet urban planning at that time derived from this. Roads could be drastically widened as necessary, buildings moved, historic monuments spared commercial despoliation and living areas co-ordinated with social provision and employment areas. Thus Moscow planners could raise the level of the Moskva River by 3 metres without fear of compensation claims from riparian occupiers. Such occupiers (amongst them the British Embassy) lost their basements, a significant amount of space, yet were obliged simply to make the best of it. Ernest Simon reported this with amused approval because it showed that, without obstructive private interests, planning really could do things. He wished to see bolder action by urban planners in Britain and, indeed, began to advocate land nationalisation in the 1940s (Simon, 1945: 165-71).

By 1958, however, Britain had changed. After becoming a very statist economy during the 1940s, it had in the 1950s shifted towards a more 'mixed economy', where market processes, not least in urban development, had been significantly restored. The result was that the features that made Soviet planning admirable in the 1930s no longer held the same appeal. In general, the 1958 visitors found relatively little within Soviet urban planning that they might wish to emulate in Britain. The obvious cherishing of major historic buildings was one aspect they could still genuinely endorse. Soviet planning's overall scale might also still be admired but less unequivocally than in the 1930s. Mere knowledge of it was fascinating but the transferable value of that knowledge in relation to British urban planning had declining appeal in the 1950s. Wells was merely the most forthright of the 1958 visitors when he told the Chartered Surveyors that: 'In general, the Russians have nothing to teach us on principles of town planning.' (Wells, 1959: 378).

## **Conclusions**

Overall therefore, this paper shows how cross-national specialist visits give valuable insights into communication and learning between countries, particularly where the cultural and ideological 'gap' was as great as that between Western countries and the Soviet Union. The mere fact of such contacts, especially exchange visits, had symbolic and quasi-diplomatic value, a way of proving mutual good will, especially after the 1955 changes when British government fears about ideological subversion of visitors were largely assuaged. In other respects, the political and cultural contexts for both visits also differed. While the 1936 party was eager to learn from Soviet experience, the balance had shifted by 1957-8. Britain had turned away from the quasi-Soviet statist solutions favoured in the 1940s and now there was greater Soviet eagerness for Western lessons. Yet while British professional interest dwindled, interest in 'ordinary' Soviet life burgeoned. Reading the 1958 accounts, it is striking how they commented on everyday Soviet life. How Soviet people dressed, how they enjoyed their free time, how much they liked ice cream and other small details appear, even in articles in professional journals. It underlined just how much the Soviet Union remained to most Westerners an unknown land and the status that might be gained by having seen it.

The visits still had specific roles in cross-national learning, even though its significance varied. The present study has only been able to investigate one side of the story. Yet the limited insights presently available into Russian sources suggest that Soviet foreign visitors in the 1950s produced findings closely reflecting already endorsed perspectives. So too British learning on Soviet visits was the more valued when it spoke to current or evolving perspectives, though not necessarily those yet officially endorsed. In some cases, such as Simon's admiration of state land ownership, Soviet experience buttressed a growing counter-argument to shift the balance of public to private interest in the British planning system.

A further point to stress is organisational. The exchange arrangements introduced in the 1950s encouraged personal contacts and thus a less formal, stronger kind of communication. Also of particular importance in urban planning was its reliance on communication forms other than written or verbal communication. Using plans, models and

site visits was very important in this. Since these were methods familiar to planners in all countries, sharing them was a further way of identifying with the other's experience.

Over time more visiting groups had these experiences, certainly improving Anglo-Soviet communication in the urban planning field. Yet relations were never normalised so as to be indistinguishable from those between planners in different Western countries. Moreover from the early 1960s British planners referred more to the United States than to the Soviet Union and by the 1990s were looking increasingly to Western Europe. That sense that the USSR was a 'planner's paradise' peaked in the 1930s and 1940s. It seemed in the later 1950s as if it might have a somewhat different salience but this did not last long. British visits continued intermittently, yet more for their symbolic and quasi-diplomatic role or as touristic quests for a different experience. Any real expectation that they might furnish answers to the professional concerns of British planners had largely gone.

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