

THERE'S NO SPACE LIKE HOME

Space architect Galina Balashova's work was exhibited at Frankfurt's German Architecture Museum (June – Nov 2015)

"She is utterly down to Earth," enthuses Berlin architect Philipp Meuser, barely finding the words to describe just how much of a treasure she truly is. After years of conducting research on pre-fabricated buildings and serial housing in Russia, he fortuitously stumbled across the unique work of his now 83-year-old colleague Galina Balashova. For almost three decades, she was the architect for microgravity.

1963: The United States and the Soviet Union are in the midst of the Cold War. Everything related to space is top secret. The coexistent Space Race could also have been denominated Wernher von Braun versus Sergei Korolev. Here, the Soviet rocket scientist is leading the race: Yuri Gagarin is the first man to travel to space. It is now time to perfect the Soyuz spacecraft.

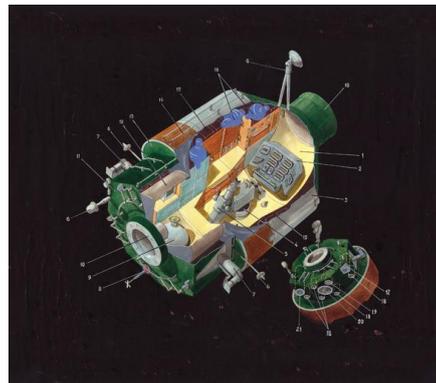
Engineers from the OKB-1 design bureau show Korolev the wooden model they have designed - alas, without success. Korolev will not present it to the Soviet leaders. He meets Galina Balashova in the stairwell. At the time, she was responsible for company housing for the project staff. Over the weekend, she drafts an architectural drawing of the Soyuz habitation module. Period.

Korolev wants more detail. The sofa to the right of the hatch is equipped with Velcro straps, so the cosmonauts can sit - or more precisely, be strapped - comfortably. Three books are stuck inside the cabinet. A calendar and an artwork of the local countryside decorate the room, screwed to rods on the wall. The architect chooses a grass green color for the floor and a light shade of yellow for the walls. In this space, the cosmonauts should be able to move around with ease, but also be comfortable.

These drawings and watercolors are just the beginning - orders for the Salyut and Mir space stations follow, introducing folding work-tables and beds strapped to the wall. Even a shower is included. One design shows the cosmonauts playing cards at the table. Many ideas are discarded. After each space flight, Balashova wants to hear whether her ideas are useful in microgravity - directly from the cosmonauts. The artist and architect is also asked to work on the Luna and Buran programs. She is allowed to take the architectural plans home with her - only engineering work will be archived in the project office.



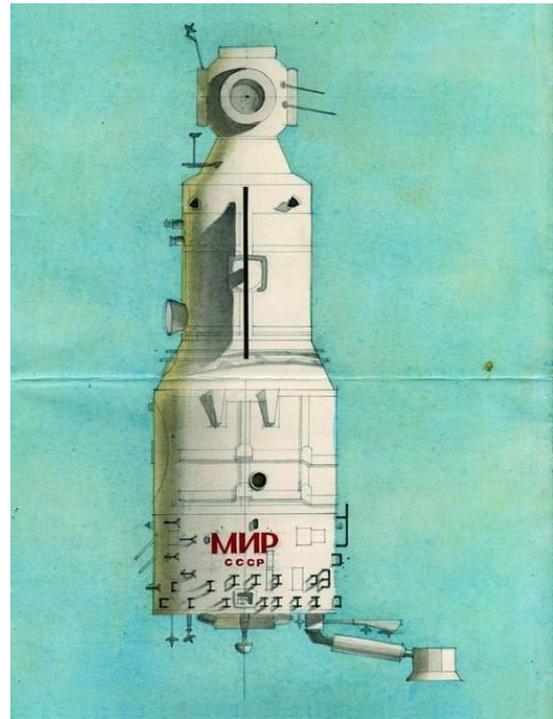
Curator Philipp Meuser with Galina Balaschowa



Interior design of a Soyuz capsule



Design of the workspace for the MIR space station



Design outlining the logo on the MIR

Philipp Meuser visited the pensioner in her two-room apartment near Moscow (in his words, it is "as broad as the inside of the Mir"). She also keeps some autographed drawings in her country residence - among them, the designs for the 1975 US-Soviet Apollo-Soyuz Test Project.

Balashova designed the logo for the joint mission - used for souvenirs, pins and stamps in 35 countries.

The exhibition included a glimpse into the architect's living room. At Frankfurt's Deutsches Museum für Architektur (DAM), visitors could appreciate the dimensions of Mir and watch the artist on film. Wall drawings compared the height of the Soyuz rocket to that of the Römer, Frankfurt's city hall, and the height of the Buran space shuttle to St. Paul's Church.

The museum visitors could not help but ask: why is this woman was not world-famous? One reason is, without a doubt, the extreme secrecy maintained throughout the Cold War. In addition, a great deal of her artwork decorated the walls of the space capsule, which burned up during re-entry into Earth's atmosphere. Architect and exhibition curator Meuser, however, attributed Balashova's inconspicuousness to her unwavering modesty - never seeking the limelight, unaware that she could be proud of her work. And exploring space did not interest her that much: "The Universe never excited me in the way that architecture does."

Sylvia Kuck is Editor of Hessischer Rundfunk.
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