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## Russian Architecture Between Anorexia and Bulimia

### Vladimir Paperny

The Russian visual sensibilities (if there is such thing) are formed by two contrasting influences. On the one hand, there is a natural attraction to decorative surfaces, to richness of colors and shapes. Historians tell us that in the 10 th century Prince Vladimir decided to convert to Christianity mainly because of the visual experience his emissaries had had in Constantinople: "The Greeks led us to the building where they worship their God," they wrote to the Prince, "and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss to describe it." [1]

"The Russian gift for decorativeness is well known," wrote in 1936 German architect Bruno Taut, after visiting Moscow . "For an architect this gift could be dangerous if not kept on leash." [2] A clear architectural manifestation of such gift is the Cathedral of the Intercession on the Moat (Temple of Basil the Blessed) on the Red Square in Moscow . In the 19 th century this gift could be seen in the Historical Museum building, the one which Le Corbusier in the early 1930s proposed to blow up. In the 1990s, the same sensuous attitude towards a building surface may be found in the so called *Kobzon House* (see photo).

The opposite tendency is a deep distrust of anything related to senses, a Platonic rejection of this world for the sake of the higher world of ideas. An example of such rejection was the reaction of Prince Evgenii Trubetskoi, a well known critic of religious art, who after a Russian icon looked at Rubens and found "fat, flabby, shaking flesh, enjoying itself, devouring and killing for the sake of devouring, this is exactly what must be stopped and pushed away by the blessing hand." The Russian icon, according to Trubetskoi, is different because it announces "extra-biological meaning of life, and an end to the animal kingdom." [3]

Trubetskoi's reaction was by no means unique. Here is what another Russian religious thinker of the 19 th century, Sergii Bulgakov, experienced in front of Rafael's Sistine Madonna. He was shocked to find "male feelings, male love, male lust." He felt that the Russian Church was very wise in her rejection of "sentimentality and sensuality." [4]

The Russian Orthodox church's position on icon painting had a profound influence on many aspects of creative activity, including architecture. The

resolutions of 1551 Synod (Stoglavii Sobor) in addition to warnings against depicting flesh and invoking carnal feelings, limited the artist's activity to copying the old patterns. The message was: never use your own inferior ideas on how to depict Divine entities, follow approved examples.[5]

Paradoxically, the Russian icon itself presents such a rich combination of shapes, colors, materials and textures that it seems that both, the Russian church leaders and the German expressionist architect were struggling with the same national "gift for decorativeness."

This ambivalence towards flesh reminds of an anorexic/bulimic attitude towards food. The Russians seem to be infatuated with the flesh, ashamed of this infatuation and ready to accept punishment. This is the motif of almost every Dostoevsky's novel, particularly *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Contemporary psychology offers a wide variety of theories of eating disorders. There are a few common themes, however. Eating disorders are related to self-punishment, they imply a desire to please an internalized parent, and they represent an anxiety over the prospect of adulthood and independence.[6] All three themes are highly relevant to Russian cultural development. The whole history of Russian architecture could be seen as a history of attempts to reconcile these two conflicting traits, either to find a higher justification for the feast of shapes and colors, or to reject one for the sake of the other.

In 1817 the Russian government held an architectural competition for the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow to commemorate the victory over Napoleon. The winner was a 30-year old artist Alexander Vitberg who had very little architectural experience. The site he selected was Vorob'evy Gory where the 32-story high Moscow University now stands. His project had two things in common with the competition entrees by acclaimed architects Giacomo Quarenghi and Andrei Voronikhin: all three clearly belonged to classicism and all three were crowned with domes. What sets Vitberg's project apart is a strong sense of symbolism. The structure was to consist of three parts: the bottom part was a parallelepiped symbolizing the body, on top of it sat a cube representing the soul, and finally, a cylinder with a dome signifying the Holy Spirit. Perhaps, the reason why Vitberg's proposal was selected was not its architectural merits but rather its dualism: shapes were used as reference to the realm of ideas. One should not forget that the organization which handled the competition was the Ministry of *Spiritual Affairs*.

A century later, almost the same symbolism appeared in Vladimir Tatlin's

proposal for the Monument to the Third International where the cube was to house the legislative body, the pyramid — executive powers, and the cylinder — mass media. This symbolism underwent yet another transformation two decades later, in the Iofan-Gelfreikh-Shchuko design for the Palace of Soviets where the bottom level represented “precursors of communism,” mid-level, the teaching of Marx and Engels, and from them the viewer’s gaze, according to the authors, “would turn to the statue of Lenin crowning the building.”

None of the three projects — Vitberg’s cathedral, Tatlin’s Monument, or the Palace of the Soviets — has been, or even could have been realized. Vitberg’s cathedral was supposed to be 230 meters high while the tallest building of its time, St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome, had only 141 meters. Czar Nicolas I set up an architectural commission to investigate the feasibility of Vitberg’s project, and the commission’s verdict was “not feasible.” Vitberg was accused of embezzlement of funds, wrongly convicted and spent the rest of his life in exile in Siberia .

Vladimir Tatlin’s Monument was described by a contemporary critic this way: “Least of all you should stand and sit there, you should be propelled upward and downward, drawn against your will.”[7] There is something in this description that reminds of the legendary Labyrinth: “The famous builder, Daedalus, designs and then constructs this maze. He tricks the eye with many twisting paths that double back. . . . The clear Meander delights in flowing back and forth.”[8] As if to complete the analogy, Tatlin, after falling out of grace during “high Stalinism,” spent the rest of his life working on a *flying machine* in his studio located in the bell tower of Novo-Devitchii Monastery in Moscow . Tatlin, like some other Russian avant-garde architects, came to architecture from icon painting, and working in a bell tower must have been quite natural for him. The flying machine, *Letatlin*, never flew. Just like the Monument, or Vitberg's Cathedral, it was about shapes and symbols, and not about structural engineering, aerodynamics or cost analysis.

The Cathedral of Christ the Savior was eventually erected in 1883 — by another architect (Konstantin Ton) and on another site (Prechistenskaia Embankment) in another style that could be roughly defined as pseudo-Russian revival. Evgenii Trubetskoi, predictably, was not impressed: “Architects lacking inspiration and the understanding of the meaning of church building are always substituting spiritual elements with decorative ones <...> A typical example of such costly absurdity is the Cathedral of Christ the Savior that looks like a huge samovar around which the whole

patriarchal Moscow has gathered cheerfully.”[9]

In the 1930s the Cathedral was demolished to make room for the Palace of the Soviets. Boris Iofan, Vladimir Gelfreikh and Vladimir Shchuko have not fallen out of grace but their project has not been finished anyway. Some architects have suggested that it could not have been built because of structural problems with the huge dome incorporated into the building. The first sixteen stories of its metal structure were demolished during World War II. In 1960s the foundation was turned into a swimming pool. At that time, rumors were spreading that religious fanatics with scuba-diving equipment were dragging down unsuspecting swimmers under the water to punish them for desecrating the place. In 1990s new religious fanatics declared that the swimming pool, despite the intentions of the builders, was functioning as a giant font for baptizing the unsuspecting swimmers, therefore, everyone who has ever swam there had now become a Christian. This building site turned out to be guilty of same crime that some Christian critics accused Mother Teresa of: coercive baptizing.

In the late 1980s, projects for restoring the blown-up cathedral started to emerge. The most interesting one was Yuri Seliverstov's idea to restore the building as a “wireframe,” an empty metal outline, a pure idea, a symbol of humility and repentance. I also would like to mention my own proposal for recreating the Palace of the Soviets as an inflatable clear plastic roof (in the shape of the Iofan-Gelfreikh-Shchuko project) over the swimming pool.[10]My idea, despite its playfulness, had something in common with Seliverstov's more serious idea: both were devoid of flesh. “The whole patriarchal Moscow ” (to use Trubetskoi's expression) has cheerfully rejected attempts at conceptualism, and the cathedral was restored exactly as it was designed by Ton.

Ton's pseudo-Russian revival turned out to be the style of choice in the early post-Communist days. Modernism was rejected together with socialism and liberalism. Perhaps, Ton's style was seen as a symbol of Alexander III's conservatism. The Russian postmodernism was not identical to its Western counterpart. Western postmodernism was a rejection of oppressive “grand narratives.”[11] In Russia , postmodernism became exactly that: a grand narrative, a unifying national idea.[12]

First thing that strikes an observer of the new postmodern buildings in Moscow is their poor architectural quality. With very few exceptions, they don't look professional. Russian architectural critics have exactly the same reaction.[13] The explanation may lay in the peculiar fate of modernism in

Russia . Modernism here was rejected twice. In the early 1920s modernism in architecture was understood not as a method, but as another set of patterns to replicate. Getting rid of Constructivism in the early 1930s was perceived by the majority of Russian architects, as well as by the public, as a newly acquired freedom.

The second wave of modernist influences took place in the 1960-1970s. Both waves were too short to leave any deep traces in the way Russian architects think. The language of modernist architecture was never fully accepted in Russia . Western architectural postmodernism did not reject the language of modern architecture, it just deprived it of its universalistic pretensions. Modernist language is still a significant part of Western postmodern vocabulary. In Russia , modernism was rejected completely. Perhaps, this is what makes most contemporary Russian buildings appear unprofessional: they look like a text written on a typewriter with a few missing characters.

In Russia , as shown by Grigory Revzin, the profession of an architect was an innovation of Peter the Great. Traditional church building was (just like the icon painting) to a large degree limited to replicating of the approved old examples. "In Russia," writes Revzin, "the very status of the architect as a profession was contingent upon his departure from the Old Russian tradition." [14]

Bulimic appetite for the Russian tradition in the 1990s could be seen as a retreat from professional adulthood. The next step, apparently, will be to find another spiritual justification for the new feast of shapes and forms. Boris Yeltsyn's call to find a new "unifying national idea" is perhaps a first step in this direction.

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14. Grigory Revzin, "'Russian style' and the professional tradition," *Project Russia*, No. 3, 1996, p. 22.

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