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TAKEAWAY ARCHITECTURE

«**N**owadays one often meets peculiar individuals; in the majority of cases they are young poets who almost always pronounce the word 'German' with an air of superiority», wrote Georg Lichtenberg, an Enlightenment wit at the end of the 18th century. His observation sounded quite innocent at the time. And yet there is no need to elaborate on how those 'airs' evolved in the following centuries. The national idea has disgraced itself as no other. Today, having put the wooden compasses aside, the politically correct circles prefer to talk about «ethnic specificity» and «identity». Having recovered from the postwar shock, art historians ask themselves again the questions from which their profession originated: how national character manifests itself, how German German art actually is, how English is English art, etc. The list of suppliers of mirrors in which nations look at themselves searching for their identity puts architects at the very top, next to writers.

I HAVE A FIREBIRD IN MY SOUL AND I MISS THE MONARCH

Attempts to build Russian national identity out of the materials ready at hand resemble spiced cocktail, whose ingredients are Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality, in various measures. Initially, architects tended to produce «blancmange with jelly», a mixture of French and Nizhny Novgorod motifs. No wonder: the locality was as well known to them as «the borderlands of China». At the end of the 18th century in romantic fantasies about the Middle Ages, say by Vasily Bazhenov¹ or Matvej Kazakov², 'Russian' stood for 'Gothic' in general. Yet the fathers of national architecture tend to come from the classicistic camp. «Strict and slender» Rossi, Stasov, Voronikhin, Montferrand³...

¹ Vasily Bazhenov (1738-1799). [All Russian names in the article are given in the English transcription; all footnotes supplied by E. R.]

² Matvej Kazakov (1738-1812).

³ Carlo Rossi (1775-1849), Vasil Petrovich Stasov (1769-1848), Andrey Nikiforovich Voronikhin (1759-1814), Auguste de Montferrand (1786-1858).

It takes an effort to imagine these names in a row with idealists like Ropet, Gornostaev, Sherwood or Pomerantsev⁴. Incidentally, Konstantin Ton's design for the first 'national' Orthodox church was drawn in 1830 when grand Russian complexes were being built on a large scale – they were to be the face of Pushkin's *ancien regime* Sankt Petersburg.

The said Lichtenberg wrote, «I went to England to learn to write in German». To the contemporary reader, used to 'alienation' and 'empathy', it is an utterly inconsequential idea. But two hundred years ago Russians would have had to travel across the whole Europe and conquered Paris in order to find their feet in their own land. It was then that firebird soup, richly thickened with governmental noodles,

⁴ Ivan Pavlovich Ropet (1845-1908), Alexey Maksimovich Gornostaev (1808-1862), Vladimir Vladimirovich Sherwood (1867-1930), Alexander Nikanorovich Pomerantsev (1849-1918).

St Trinity Cathedral in Saint Petersburg, designed by Vasil Stasov, 1828-1835

entered our menu for good. Those 'Russian-Byzantine' Orthodox churches, built to 'good Ton's rules', are the very same ones which Alexander Herzen called five-headed sauce boats with onion-like domes instead of corks. Those were the 'Heroic gates', the embroidered towels and other refinements of the 'Ropet Style'. Those were all sorts of fruit borne by archaeological expeditions and historical studies. The turn-of-the-century national and romantic variations on Pskov and Novgorod motifs, called 'Neo-Russian' (not to be confused with 'pseudo-Russian!'). And so forth, until the postwar architecture which was 'socialist in content and national in form' and the present day shams of holy Russia.

In Petersburg in any case the imperial family's passionate affection for visual manifestations of all things Russian was suppressed by the inertia of the surroundings: images of the imperial capital and classicistic school. Otherwise, you would have to imagine a toy 'Fyodorowsky townlet'⁵ and other Tsarskoye Selo-like petite noblesse joys but on a full town scale. After all, there were designs of that kind, represented by the Military and Histori-

⁵ Fyodorowsky townlet (Фёдоровский городок) is a complex of buildings in the 17th century style, designed by Stepan Samoylovich Krichinski and Vladimir Pokrovski and built in 1913-1917 in the town of Pushkin (formerly Tsarskoye Selo) next to the Fermiski Park. The symbolism of the building's uniform stylistics went far beyond its functionality – it emphasised the unity of the empire of the Romanovs.



cal Museum by Vladimir Pokrovski (1908) or a gigantic stadium – kremlin opposite Strelka⁶, by the said Pokrovski and Ieronim Kitner⁷ (1914). In historical cities – wonders never cease! – similar architecture seems entirely organic, regardless of its obvious derivative nature or perhaps owing to it.

In 1829, three years before Sergey Uvarov⁸ came up with his triple formula «Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality», a construction which demonstrated the uniqueness of the Russian search for self-identity was completed. Since it is commonly known that the Russian god is «particularly a god of the Germans», all that is actually

⁶ Strelka of Vasilevsky Island (Стрелка Васильевского острова) is the easternmost tip of Vasilevsky Island in Sankt Petersburg – one of the finest architectural complexes in the city.

⁷ Ieronim Sevastianovich Kitner (1839-1929).

⁸ Sergey Semenovich Uvarov (1786-1855).

Russian is revealed to the Germans first. 'Our penetration of the planet' started in the colony of Aleksandrovka near Potsdam. No wonder that the Orthodox church was built there to the plans of Vasil Stasov, who had designed the probably most Russian of Sankt Petersburg's shrines, the Holy Trinity Cathedral (1827-1835). The custom of testing national identity on neighbours caught on.

LOOK AT ONESELF, IMPRESS OTHERS
«Everything resembled [...] the picture of one of the well-known cities in Asia whose actual existence one doubts and which seems to exist only in the fecund imagination of Arab poets».

Replace Arab poets with Hollywood directors and you will see that in their image of Russian architecture average Europeans or Americans have not departed far from the French officers who entered Moscow in 1812.



Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Tallin, designed by Mikhail Timofeevich Preobrazhenski, 1894-1900
 Below: Uspienski Cathedral in Helsinki, designed by Alexey Gornostaev, 1862-1868

built in the place where epic hero Kalevi-poeg was said to have been buried. Another one, the Orthodox cathedral in Warsaw, the tallest building in the city at the time its construction was completed (1912), fell victim to «an inner dispute among the Slavs»: after Poland recovered independence the work by Leontiy Benoit¹⁰ was blown up. In contrast, the Uspienski Cathedral by Alexey Gornostaev is still standing in the centre of Helsinki despite all vicissitudes in the Finnish-Russian relations.

In the remote foreign lands architects also built a little homeland for their compatriots without particular consideration towards the French, Italian or German aborigines. The outcome were Orthodox churches in Florence, Vienna, Dresden, Geneva and other cities. A fresh example is St Catherine's Orthodox church, built to the design of architect Andrey Obolenski¹¹ on the premises of the Abamelek-Lazarev Villa in Rome, close to St Peter's Basilica. Many Italians are not at all pleased with that gift, even if there was an advance warning that, for decency's sake, the cross on the new building should be eight metres shorter than that on St Peter's. An uncharacteristic reply to those 'diplomatic shrines' was the construction of a French church in St Petersburg, designed by Leontiy Benois and Marian Petyatkovich¹².



As a matter of fact, we are to blame for that. We owe the way we are perceived by the world largely to the efforts of architects who «create a positive image of Russia abroad». At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries the effects of those efforts were visible in the borderlands of the empire: the Baltic states, Poland and Finland. Architecture for export is demonstratively Russian and does not wish to have anything to do with its surroundings. Which is understandable: for which general governor would waste an opportunity to demonstrate to the subordinate nation who is the landlord of the house? Thus, according to an Estonian tale, the Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Tallin (designed by Mikhail Preobrazhensky⁹) was

⁹ Mikhail Timofeevich Preobrazhenski (1854-1930).

¹⁰ Leontiy Nikolaevich Benois (1856-1828).

¹¹ Andrey Obolenski.

¹² Marian Marianovich Peretiatkovich (1872-1916).

The reason for building shrines abroad was not only to meet the needs of the diplomatic corps. After the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 shrines started to be built for Slav brothers. In 1912 Aleksey Shchusev¹³ built the pilgrim's house with a shrine in Bargrad, i.e. Italian Bari. Russian Orthodox churches were constructed even in health resorts so that the public could drown their nostalgia in mineral water. Karlsbad and other «Bads», San Remo, «pastoral Vevey», Nice - «those Russians know the meaning of life»...

However, the genuine fairs for architects' vanity were international exhibitions. The Russian pavilion at the 1878 World Exhibition in Paris was designed by Ivan Ropet; in 1900 the country was represented by a mini-'kremlin' by Robert Friedrich Meltzer¹⁴. Fyodor Schechtel¹⁵ distinguished himself with his fairy tale town in Glasgow (1901); and in the 1910s Europe beheld 'Neo-Russian' pavilions by Alexey Shchusev and Vladimir Pokrovski. The 20th century exhibitions were used not only to search for self-identity but also to conduct politics by means of architecture. The ruling pen was made equal to the bayonet. At times, the competition of builders took peculiar forms. Suffice it to mention the comic detective story of Albert Speer who secretly saw the plan for the Soviet pavilion at the

1937 exhibition in order to design something more impressive opposite.

«A RUSSIAN AND A GERMAN SHALL REST SIDE BY SIDE...
... for example at Stalingrad». Or else at Leipzig, where the monuments which were erected to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the Battle of the Nations in 1813 are the best possible representations of the idea of national identity expressed in material. 'Russianness' was embodied in the famous tent shrine, which was filled with motifs from the church of Ascension in Kolomensky, designed by Vladimir Pokrovski. A cyclopean monument by Brunon Schmitz became a symbol of 'Germanness'. The monument, like numerous statues of Bismarck scattered all over the then Germany, shows a degree

of self-important seriousness that may be quite disturbing. In the architecture of the 1910s the German embassy designed by Peter Behrens, situated in St Isaak's Square in Petersburg, started a debate on national character. Criticism of the building in the then Russian press betrays a degree of relief: the word has been found, this is it, the architectural formula for Teutonic imperialism. Everything became entirely clear with the outbreak of World War I: the Germans are barbarians who destroy civilization and culture, while we are Rome, bah, all three Romes in one.

In the 20th century art historians, followed by architects, made the knight's move and laid ethnic claims to Classicism. What had earlier been simply Europe and part of the job now became - Russia. There were many,

¹³ Aleksey Viktorovich Shchusev (1873-1949).

¹⁴ Russianised: Roman Fedorovich Meltzer (1860-1943).

¹⁵ Fyodor Osipovich Schechtel (1859-1926).

Russian pavilion at the World's Fair in Paris, designed by Ivan Ropet, 1900



Warszawa.

Sobór na Saskim placu.



Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Warsaw, designed by Leontiy Benois, 1894-1912, demolished 1924-1926

both in the East and West, who wanted to look at themselves as the only rightful heirs of antiquity. The Russians and the Germans were ones in the trend. That explains the favourable fate of Russian style Orthodox churches on German soil. The shrines in Aleksandrovka, Dresden, Darmstadt, unlike their Russian fellow churches, were not destroyed. What is more, the present Orthodox cathedral in Berlin was founded ... in 1936 and consecrated in 1938.

In the classics camp military activities were in full swing. It was necessary to set up the new 'capital of the world' and crown it with 'the most important building of all times and nations'. Designs for the buildings could say a lot about the extraordinary national sense of forms. In

practice the German spirit was transformed into the bombastic boredom of Troost and Speer. Further and deeper into the 'blood and soil' of new German hamlets, into the fight against cosmopolitan flat rooftops to be replaced by the ethnic pointed ones, into 'order castles', into designs for gigantic 'soldiers' halls' and monuments by Wilhelm Kreis and other simple Teutonic pleasures. It is very difficult to tell the difference between Russian architects' works and 'enemy' ones. For example, the plans for the Pantheon of the heroes of the Great Patriotic War (1942-1943) resemble those for the monument of the East Front by Kreis: the same kurgan, the same megalomania. In the 1930s architects preached simplified order and colonnades - regardless of the language they spoke. After the vic-

tory Soviet architecture flourished with sheaves and ears of grain, 'ethnic' skyscrapers and absolute rubbish in the form of Moscow Baroque-inspired motifs in the décor of underground stations. All in all, an ideal *entourage* for Hollywood bears and deerstalker caps. Incidentally, the grand mastermind, who is traditionally believed to have proposed the idea of crowning the Seven Sisters¹⁶ with tent roofs and spires, turned out to be extremely accurate in his choice of the method of forging 'national identity'.

IMAGINED COMMUNITY

If Russian constructors 'moulded' national identity 'out of what was available', the Finnish neighbours came up with a different model of how to create a distinctive visual language in a largely desert environment (if 'images of native land', mythology and other typically non-architectural matters are not taken into account). The outcome was quiet and solid architecture which perfectly reflects the image of Finnish national character. A little austere and sometimes toy-like but essentially graceful

¹⁶ Stalin's Seven Sisters (Сталинские высотки) are seven high-rise buildings erected in Moscow at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s to commemorate the eight hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the city. The edifice of the Academy of Sciences in Riga and the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw are sometimes also counted among the Seven Sisters. The buildings are the leading realisation of the Stalinist Empire style and were intended to provide the background for the Palace of the Soviets, which was never built.



and friendly. Petersburg's architects did not avoid that language, either. Anyway, regardless of whether the classical group or imperial arrogance are to blame, disappointment came quickly and collocations like «Finnish style» or «Finnish modernism» turned into invectives. And there are still so many variations of architectural identity: Swedish, Scottish, Catalan...

As Benedict Anderson wrote, «the nation is an imagined community; communities are to be distinguished by the narratives in which they are imagined»¹⁷. If we regard architecture from the perspective of 'national motifs', those 'fairy tales' often turn out to be either a little scary or schoolish-boring, or perhaps blissfully silly. There are pleasant exceptions, however, especially if the architect, using Swiss-born Mario Botta's formula, «works in the field of memory».

TRANSLATED FROM POLISH BY
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¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso 1991 *Wspólnoty wyobrażone*, Znak, Kraków 1997

Main building of the M. V. Lomonosov Moscow State University – one of the “Seven Sisters”, designed by Lev Rudnev, 1949-1953