

Conference Paper

Rationalism and Decorativeness in a Search for Social Foundation of Soviet Avant-Garde Architecture

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Abstract

The article presents a brief description and characteristic ideas of three important styles in Russian and Soviet architecture (Eclecticism, Art Nouveau, and Avant-Garde). Based on this description, we develop a thesis that the period under consideration was deeply marked by a continuous development of the idea of functionality and by the dialectics of form and function. Only after following a path from the purely capitalistic in nature idea of economic profit to the humanistic considerations, functional approach found an ability to become the cornerstone of the avant-garde architecture.

Keywords: avant-garde, constructivism, art nouveau, eclecticism, form, function

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1. Introduction

The subject of this article is the search for the social foundation of Soviet avant-garde architecture. This topic on the intersection between the humanities and the technical sciences has never before been properly explored. The relevance of this issue is obvious, due to the dismal situation in construction culture both in Saint-Petersburg and across Russia in general. Despite popular opinion that social revolution was accompanied by an avalanche-like revolution in architecture, function as a formal principle had been applied much earlier.

Industrial revolution and the development of full-blown market economy in XIXth-century Russia exerted profound influence on the meaning of Saint-Petersburg building [1, p. 6]. Monumental buildings constructed in accordance with the pathos of grandeur and absolutism were replaced by buildings whose form was already partially determined by the utilitarian consideration. This is evident in the tenement buildings constructed to maximize the profit depending on their conditions [1, pp. 84-85]. Their decor, which was more and more sparse with each story, represented strict social

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stratification. Wide doorways of the ground floors, required by the commercial property needs, also facilitated the dismantling of classic facade design. This shift, accompanied by the opportunities brought by new construction materials (metal structures), happened within the eclectic style. However, these buildings still featured lavish decorations, which had not yet been subjugated to function and constricted their structural element (Baltiysky Railway Station, Saint Petersburg). At the same time, theorists of architecture (notably A.Krasovsky) were substantially ahead of contemporary practice. Already in the mid-XIXth century they posited such architectural truisms as: 'our needs, qualities of the materials and prudent economy'. Despite the fact that Krasovsky distinguished between the aesthetic and utilitarian aspects, his ideas were quite novel. While aesthetic considerations undoubtedly mattered in the eclectic style, material and structure were denied any aesthetic value. Even critics of constructivism noted its similarities with the eclectic style: "... poverty of imagination and cold shrewd calculation", "ideology of rationalism and mercantilism of the faceless financial bourgeoisie and large industrial capital", "unprecedented growth of technology subjugated to the task of wringing out surplus value" [8, p. 36], [10]. Since architecture can reflect its historical era and its general zeitgeist, as well as express the main characteristics of public consciousness, we may say that the emergence of capitalism in Russia [8, p. 7] caused the decline of classical tradition with its primacy of form, as well as the growing role of economic factors (rationalization of spatial and, to an extent, aesthetic composition of buildings).

2. Humanistic Ideas of Modernist Architecture

The switch in priority to the structure and the materials was really and truly made in the early XXth century. Architects who followed rational Apollonian variety of Modernism stopped shying away from the building's structural elements, naked metal bars and free-form layouts based on the building's functional division (House of Lidvali, Kamennostrovsky av. 1-3, Saint-Petersburg). Also, many traditional constructivist artistic techniques (such as ribbon windows, already mentioned free layout or the use of separate spaces for vertical utility lines) were already widely used in modernist architecture [5, p. 195]. At the height of popularity of the Modern style, residential blocks were governed by the ideas of humanism and concern about individuals: they served, to a large extent, as blueprints for the Soviet commune houses with socialized facilities (Nekrasov st. 56-60, Saint Petersburg). The issues of social equality acquired primary importance. They drove the development of such features as courts

of honor that extended representative features deep within residential neighborhoods; deliberately vertically uniform facades; and roofed passages between the blocks that allowed all residents to enter from the street, thereby equalizing their social status (Dostoyevsky st. 36, St. Petersburg) [5, p. 198]. At the same time, it was deemed particularly important to provide residential houses with the basic facilities, insulation (also provided by the courts of honor and free layouts), water, heating and ventilation. Modernist architects also strove to overcome the lack of affordable housing, which was caused, according to Saint-Petersburg architect A.Zazersky, by the fact that “residential construction is fully in the hands of the capitalists, and not those who actually need apartments” [5, p. 539]. As a result, cooperative construction became popular in the imperial capital. The formal aspect of the buildings was still highly decorative, although it was increasingly more guided by the structural elements, geometric image, functional layout and other aspects of the new architectural forms [4, p. 9]. The unity of internal structure and spatial composition becomes obvious.

Another aspect of an increasingly rational urban planning was the development of workers’ neighborhoods, which, together with tenants’ associations, were an attempt to solve the challenges posed by an unprecedented urbanization. The construction of Havana workers’ neighborhood and ‘Ludvig Nobel’ plant workers’ neighborhood were particularly vivid reflections of the Modernist democratic intentions [5, pp. 339–345, 351–355]. The creators of these complexes used rational planning principles reflected in a well-designed balance between the height of the buildings and the distance between them, as well as in low housing density and large volume of light and air. The main purpose of such urban residential units was to create hygienic, rationally built living spaces for underprivileged social groups, in order to improve their daily life and environment. For these purposes, they included schools, kindergartens, canteens with teashops, lecture halls with library and reading room, mini-parks, playgrounds and shops. The result was a self-sufficient housing unit equipped with all the necessary facilities. Such housing complexes with their ribbon development, repetitive layouts and typization, became the blueprints for residential neighborhoods of the Soviet cities and foreshadowed the concept of a homogenous polycentric city without the outskirts [2, pp. 314–319]. Because of these features of rational Modernism, the criticism of avant-garde architecture that accuses it of expressing its own bourgeois foundations, seems not completely unfounded [10]. Therefore, a purely economic rationality of explosively growing late XIXth-century capitalism became intertwined with a completely different type of rationality. Declaring humanistic ideas and social equality, this rationality was

born out of the unprecedented flowering of social life in Russia, with its socialist and liberal tendencies.

3. The Contradictions of Avant-garde Architecture

Although modernist architecture did not completely neglect the formal aspects of buildings, the heirs of their deeply humanistic ideas wanted to reduce decorativeness to a minimum. However, hypertrophied constructivist approach of the avant-garde architecture became self-contradictory; it lost its practicability due to the irregularity of layouts based on functional analysis [3, p. 234]. As a result, realizing the failure of the orthodox constructivist approach, avant-garde architects again based their style on the dialectic between the form and the function in building design. While the functional aspect was completely focused on human needs, the formal one reflected the pathos of the idea of social order, while preserving its functional expressiveness [11]. Even OSA Association, though more radical than ASNOVA, admitted the psychological importance of building block arrangements, even basing this idea on a full-blown scientific theory. However, the influence of building's form in avant-garde architecture is abstract, based on Malevich's Suprematism and Lisitsky's *Prouns*. Architecture as a whole preserved this duality throughout the entire period under consideration; however, avant-garde radically changed the balance. In constructivist theoretical texts, functionality is equated with beauty [11]. Also, Soviet avant-garde architecture differed from the Western architecture of the same period in its heightened expressiveness [6, p. 184], [7]. It is worth noting that French functionalist Le Corbusier, who sympathized with the socialist ideas, created his buildings as an opposition to the class society: concrete pylons and flat roof terraces allowed to get rid of the first and the last (attic) floor, therefore stressing the social equality of all floors in the building. At the same time, Le Corbusier's buildings are more tranquil and static; they are free from overt propagandist goals.

Soviet urban construction was developed based on the new approaches. The construction of residential neighborhoods for working masses has started immediately; these neighborhoods were provided with all the necessary infrastructure: houses of culture, schools, stadiums, saunas, healthcare centers and 'kitchen factories'. Residential neighborhoods built according to the principles of the garden city (ribbon construction, a lot of air and greenery) helped to instill collectivism, freeing residents from the tyranny of small things and household chores – that is, they created conditions for the development of the 'new man', someone unfettered by the daily inconveniences

and possessing a space for personal development [9, pp. 195-224]. The continuity with the previously described residential units and worker's neighborhoods is obvious. Avant-garde architecture combined the highest level of humanism with a distinctive pathos of social transformation and absolute idea manifested for the first time since the age of classic architecture. These features were created by the conditions within the country, characterized by the unprecedented freedom, oversized idea of justice, widespread refusal to compromise and single-mindedness.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that the description of three most important stages in Russian architecture demonstrates their deep genetic connection, both on the level of natural evolution and developing ideas, and on the level of artistic techniques. Dialectic between form and function, which had first appeared in the mid XIXth-century, continued until the 1930s, and, under the influence of the social and political situation, determined the development of architecture throughout this entire period. Therefore, the social basis of avant-garde architecture is actually rooted in the early stage of market economy. However, only after having developed and transformed, repudiating its origins in the essentially capitalist idea of profit to embrace humanistic ideals, this rationality managed to create avant-garde architecture.

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