

## Conference Paper

# A Heritage, a Project, an Art Space: How White Tower is Describing Now?

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**Abstract**

This paper considers the problem of discursive transformation in discussion about soviet avant-gard architecture. The traditional "discours of heritage" is criticized as an approach oriented in the past. The key question is which practice makes visible actual live of constructivist objects in Russian cities. Despite the growing interest of Russian researchers to the quotidian of the provincial avant-garde, non-academic languages which describe avant-garde architecture remain unexplored. This article is aimed at reconstructing a range of practices, which makes visible today the water tower of the Uralmash socialist city (White Tower, Ekaterinburg). Content of the White Tower project's site, of group at social network Facebook and Vkontakte is investigated. On this base significant elements of Tower's representation are detected and described. The rejection of "discourse of heritage" is fixed. Author propose to define new discourses as "projective" and "art-discourse". New practices and languages allow to attract new subject to avant-garde heritage.

**Keywords:** White Tower, Uralmash, Sverdlovsk avant-garde, cultural heritage, representation of heritage, non-academic discourses

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## 1. Introduction

Avant-garde architecture is in the center of research attention in post-soviet Ekaterinburg. For a long time, the theory of architecture was the main language of description of this cultural heritage. But today its comprehension has gone beyond the framework of highly specialized discussions. Certainly, the traditional interest of architects to the avant-garde remains. However, there is a transition from a meticulous study of the stylistic features of buildings to the investigation of the symbolic significance of heritage. In addition, new subjects are included in the conversation about avant-garde architecture.

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Philosophers, historians, cultural researchers, anthropologists unite their efforts to study the past and present of avant-garde buildings. In their projects citizens' stories often become evidences of the era. The avant-garde architecture becomes a space of artistic practices. The Urals Industrial Biennale of Contemporary Art contributes to this, its main platform for the fourth time is the Constructivist building. The value of avant-garde objects is an argument in the citizens' struggle for preserving the city space. It is important movement to change the position of the municipal authorities and developers, which are not ready now to invest in the history and Ekaterinburg culture. Their position is expressed in Exchange building's demolition under the guise of the reconstruction in 2012 (it was the cultural monument of the federal significance) or insensitivity to the threat of loss the landscape view at House of Physical Culture "Dynamo" after the planned construction of the temple in the water area of the city pond.

This transformation of discourses about the avant-garde architecture begins to receive analytical interpretation in the works of M. Ilchenko. He distinguishes two basic approaches to the description of Soviet avant-garde architecture: a comprehension of it as a "heritage" or as an "unrealized utopia" M. Ilchenko convincingly argues the thesis that both these approaches are oriented to the past; despite its substantial difference, "they are very similar in their shortcomings and are faced with the same problems in trying to give new meanings to avant-garde architecture" ([1], 59).

How to discover new discourses that allow to see the architecture of the avant-garde not as a valuable evidence of the past, but as an important element of the present? This article is aimed at reconstructing a range of practices, which makes visible today the water tower of the Uralmash socialist city (White Tower). It is one of the objects of Soviet avant-garde in Ekaterinburg. Unlike other iconic objects, the White Tower is relatively stably positioned as an architectural value, and is relatively regularly involved in city events.

## 1.1. Methods

The everyday life of provinciale avant-garde architecture is the significant topic for many russian researchers. The complex reality of the 20s-30s is studied, there ia shown how architectural practice and current power decisions determine the fate of constructivist projects [2, 4, 5]. The life of closed quarters is investigated through biographical interviews with residents [7]. Current state of the avant-garde heritage is considered in terms of the possibilities of its capitalization, the development of tourism brand

[10, 13]. However, there is unexplored question. Which non-academic languages are used today to describe avant-garde architecture, what view of it they offer?

Following the analysis of discourses undertaken by M. Ilchenko, I also explore existing approaches to the representation of avant-garde architecture objects, but I shift the focus to non-academic practices. The article presents the results of the case study. Transformation of the "discourse of heritage" into new languages describing the avant-garde architecture is represented on the example of the project "White Tower". Under the "discourse of heritage" in its modern Russian version is understood "struggle for the formal recognition of the "past" without any clear understanding of what this "past" is for society, what values it includes" ([1], 60). Key practices that make this object distinguishable on a modern city map are identified by the materials of the project site and publications in social networks.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. What is the white tower?

"White Tower" is the informal name of the water tower, which was built in 1929-1931 for the Uralmash socialist city (image 1). In the late 1920s, the Uralmash was built as a new district of Sverdlovsk (old name of Ekaterinburg). The district included Ural heavy machinery factory and working village. For these a water tower was an important infrastructure object. About thirty years the building was used for its intended purpose, after it was abandoned. No plan for its redevelopment was implemented in Soviet times. Architectural style of this building is constructivism. It was designed by M. Reysner. Researchers note that the White Tower has become a symbol of constructivism. Now in Russia it is the Architectural monument of federal significance (Objects 2017).

The project of tower's reconstruction have the same name. The project team is the arch-group Podelniki. Young architects created a public organization "Group of architectural events, communications and initiatives" to get a legal opportunity to obtain the rights for research, conservation and further restoration of that avant-gard object. Their project started in 2012, for five years the ways of representation White Tower have been changing a lot.

The movement towards new languages began with a specialized language of architects. At the beginning of its work Podelniki used "discourse of heritage". However, in contrast to a traditional "discourse of heritage", which use a lot of historical facts

and detailed architectural style's descriptions, they describe research procedures and form a projective vision. This idea is incorporated in the group goal *"to keep the White Tower and bring it back to life in the city"* (Site's Home Page) and is confirmed by specific activities.

Starting in 2012, Podelniki was publishing the project's details on the website sawe-thetower.ru (today this site is closed). Simultaneously they created a group in the social network Facebook. Early publications contain links to the old site and working materials (documents, photographs, reports); current publications do not duplicate an existing website tower1929.ru.

Also Podelniki created two groups in the social network Vkontakte. The first group was opened in September 2014 to disseminate information about the special project "Cultural Laboratory of the White Tower" (theater, clubs, lectures, exhibitions financed by the Ministry of Culture). The second group was opened in January 2015 to attract residents of the district to cultural and educational events. Contents of the first group is stylistically homogeneous, it works on project's promotion, the second group mainly contains reposts from partner sites. In this regard, the study of new languages of conversation about the avant-garde that are formed during the implementation of the White Tower project, is based on the materials of the current site, the group on Facebook and the first group Vkontakte.

## 2.2. New languages: project vision and friendship with the tower

Today Facebook group allows to give back some of the publications of the old site. Podelniki was documenting the passage of bureaucratic procedures that enabled them to get the White Tower for free use: the treaty, order, security obligation and other official documents were published. A significant part of the publications was aimed at attracting volunteers and sponsors of the project. Crowdfunding results and working party was presented in detail. Podelniki explained the order of the specialized investigation and condition assessment of the building, which was supported by The Brandenburg University of Technology (Cottbus, Germany); Invited students to summer practice; popularized the project. Based on the results of this work, on August 30, 2013, Podelniki first tried the exhibition format to present the history and current state of the White Tower.

In all these practices the White Tower was serving as a valuable architectural object, which requires research and revitalization. Relying on the "discourse of heritage", Podelniki have formed a projective language for the discussion of the avant-garde [3].

It differs from moralizing or bureaucratic assessments, that only point to the value of cultural heritage, but do not translate good ideas into real steps to preserve them. A necessary part of the "projective discourse" is implemented measures (cleaning, garbage collection, crowdfunding for the tower's investigation, assessment of its state, searching and publication of archival documents, etc.). In addition, there was appear new subjects, which are ready to invest time and resources in preserving the monument of avant-garde architecture in Uralmash (citizens, information partners, business).

The condensed history of the first three years of the project "White Tower" is placed in presentations-reports on the site tower1929.ru. This new site is aimed at popularizing the project, attracting citizens on excursions and concerts. "Discourse of heritage" became extremely simple. In 2012 Podelniki represented the Tower as "a recognized masterpiece of the architecture of constructivism" and emphasized that "it was originally designed and built as a symbol of the district, city and era.. it is a wonderful example of the industrial architecture of the Soviet avant-garde" (The project's conception). Already these descriptions have reduce to the formula "the White Tower has a worldwide recognition as a monument of avant-garde architecture" (Site's Home Page).

In Facebook Podelniki have been creating a circle of Tower's friends, talking openly about the current processes, reporting on spending for crow-funding, seeking help:

*The White Tower Project added 14 new photos to the album "financial report on spending on the inspection of the White Tower." [October 11, 2013] (Facebook. The White Tower Project)*

*Do not miss a charity party in favor of our project! This Saturday in the bar Druzhba from the promotional group Tesnota! [October 9, 2014] (Facebook. The White Tower Project)*

*Yesterday we had a very important day, we were given electricity! We've been waiting for this for more than two years! All those who want to rejoice with us - come to the work-party on the tower today at 19:30! The official opening of the site we are planning on August 20th, you have a chance to see our preparations before everyone else! [August 3, 2016r.] (Facebook. The White Tower Project)*

*Dear friends! On April 15 we will organize a traditional spring work-party on the White Tower! The work-party is timed to the World Heritage Day (April 18). Wear old warm clothes and come help us! All volunteers have tea, cookies and*

*a tour of the Tower. This year we have a new, expanded list of tasks. [3 April 2017]* (Facebook. The White Tower Project)

Involvement of citizens in the process of conservation of the Tower and in the preparation of particular events here supports the projective logic of talking about the object of cultural heritage, and also proposes to build a personal connection with it through participation in meaningful events. Some partners and volunteers who made a significant contribution to the revitalization of the White Tower received their own keys to its doors. Values is not an architectural construction, sustained in the style of the avant-garde, but privileged access to it, the opportunity to make it a part of private stories.

Publications show that Podelniki consistently focus on a two-pronged goal: to keep the Tower and bring it back to city life. The physical safety of object was provided in 2015 by its cleaning from garbage, installation of fence and alarm, and then by conservation, which prevents the destruction of the monument (doors' installation, windows' protection, roof waterproofing). At the same time, Podelniki was launching a media campaign to popularize that fortified ruin. Actively drawing attention to the history and the current state of the architectural monument, the Podelniki have created from it an attractive culture center. Because that arch-group don't have own resources to save the Tower, they are forced to look for supporters. His project vision requires a friendly and confidential conversation with people.

### 2.3. New languages: popularization and art

Popularization of the architecture of the avant-garde and the White Tower have taken place thanks to interviews with city television channels, video materials and publications about the Tower on information portals, lecture halls and exhibition projects. If in 2013 Podelniki presented their project on partner spaces four times (presentation "Architectural monument in the hands of architects" for PechaKuchaNight, participation in the exhibition "Cities for people", discussion "Is Activism an instrument?" On the NCCA, exhibition in the museum of history Ekaterinburg following the results of summer research practice on the Tower), then in 2014 the White Tower itself became a platform and a symbol of cultural laboratories.

In an effort to make the Tower a cultural platform, Podelniki, in partnership with the Ural branch of the State Center for Contemporary Arts, seek help from the relevant ministry. They win a grant for the project "Cultural Laboratories of the White Tower" in 2014. The constant part of these laboratories was the "Uralmash: Reload" lecture

hall, which was organized on the partner space. Also on the external platform exhibition projects were prepared. An anchor art event of the laboratories was a theatrical performance.

Lectures were organized in the Gorky Library, which is located a few blocks from the White Tower. The lecture hall had a very broad thematic framework, which can be called "city life". In this context, themes of particular speeches was far from each other. Intellectual life of the district was told by the library staff, Digger told legends and the truth about the caves of the city, the creator of the walking club called to see the city as a network of itinerary.

The author of the Twitter @TramEkb described how Uralmash looks from the window of the tram driver; the significance of public art was the speech's subject of the "Cultural Transit" Foundation director; the director of the of street art festival "Stenographia" dedicated a conversation to graffiti; the urbanist described how buildings can create attractive environment for pedestrians. The activist-ecologist explained the logic of separate garbage collection, the Gorod.PRO Foundation presented its projects to improve the urban environment of Ekaterinburg, a researcher told about the life of the district and the Uralmash factory in the World War II. Some meetings had the character of a club of interests (drawing with an illustrator or games).

All lecturers, with the exception of one (the editor of the site UrbanUrban.ru), are residents of Ekaterinburg. They shared their views on the city, their projects and studies, for which large capitals do not stand. Lecture became a kaleidoscope of city experience. Sometimes the White Tower came to the attention of lecturers. The organizers had a goal to collect practices of mastering the city and offer residents a conversation about the modern city. Traditional greeting "friends" was used for invitations to lectures, some topics attracted up to fifty listeners.

Unlike the lecture hall, which was not thematically associated with heritage of the soviet avant-garde, the performance and exhibitions within "Cultural Laboratories" concentrate the public's attention at the White Tower and Uralmash.

First, the Tower became a space for the event, which was prepared by the Liquid Theater. Describing the creators of the performance, Podelniki emphasized their ability to feel the place: "Almost the only theater in the country that works in the genre site-specific. Performances grow out of the territory on which the actors are here and now, whether it's a factory, a park, a courtyard of a residential building, a station or a staircase of the theater" [September 29, 2014] (Vkontakte. Belaya Bashnya)

Liquid Theater assembled a team of Ekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk and Moscow actors. Together they created four stories, combining them into a journey through the building.

The audience watched the first action of the performance from the street, and then climbed the Tower and met on its floors different characters. The history of the place was transmitted through a link to the image of the first inhabitants of Uralmash, to the noise of building (the hero who cutting metal) and the splash of water (the hero in the tank), to rave culture and graffiti (dances and painting the walls in the space under the tank), to personal stories (reader on the observation platform).

Secondly, the "Cultural Laboratory" in cooperation with the gallery of street art "Sweater" presented their thoughts on vandalism and graffiti:

*Dear friends! We remind you that today in the gallery of street art "Sweater" the Laboratory "Exhibition" starts its work with a small but very important research about what vandalism is and how to live with it. Of course, we would like to apply the experience that we gathered with the help of experts from cultural studies, curators, anthropologists. [25 November 2014] (Vkontakte. Belaya Bashnya)*

Curator of the exhibition and one of the participants of the arch-group Podelniki Polina Zinovieva explored foreign examples of works with the "heritage of vandals." At the same time, graffiti which left street artists on the White Tower requires reflection. On the one hand, it interferes with the perception of the architectural idea. On the other hand, graffiti is part of building's history, talks about the way citizens have mastered this abandoned object. Seeking to recreate the Tower's superficies without denying its history, Podelniki justified the decision to paint over graffiti on the outside, but leave them inside.

Thirdly, with the help of photographer Fyodor Telkov, the exhibition "Heirs of a Dream" was created. There the past of Uralmash was connected with its present.

*Dear friends! We invite you to the opening of a large, beautiful and intelligent exhibition about the first builders of the factory and the socialist city of Uralmash. It is an exhibition of revived history - with its face and its experiences. The magical Fyodor Telkov made a wonderful project, and it must be seen! [3 December 2014] (Vkontakte. Belaya Bashnya)*

The exposition combined archival photographs of Uralmash construction with portraits of the descendants of the first factory workers and family stories' fragments. Personal archives and people stories appeared as a new source of knowledge about the life of the district.



Finally, the White Tower itself became an art object within festival "Netemno" (image2) Simultaneously, the illuminated models of Sverdlovsk's avant-garde buildings were placed on its first floor.

In the project "Cultural Laboratory of the White Tower" Podelniki was experimenting with formats that could be suitable for a new use of the tower. Since the building itself had been being unsafe for visitors, most of the events were held on partner sites. Thus, the Tower stimulated the cultural activity of the district (Library, culture center, museum of history of the Uralmash factory). The project received a regional award in the field of development of public relations "Silver Archer" (for the promotion of culture and historical heritage) and was nominated for the Russian award Innovation-2014 as the best regional project of contemporary art.

Art projects attracted new viewers, the press, experts and became an important tool for popularizing the White Tower. It is no longer presented as a valuable ruin, which restoration requires collective efforts, but as an object that impresses the viewer. Watching, walking around and climbing its roof, looking at graffiti and going inside the tank are a new format for interacting with the Tower. Unlike volunteering and sponsorship, it is designed for a wider range of participants.

In 2015 Podelniki found funding for the building's conservation and in August opened it for excursions. Later in the publications at groups and the site the White Tower is increasingly positioned as a place where you can get new impressions. Also in 2015, the arch-group won a charitable foundation grant to create a museum in the Tower. At the same time, the Soviet and modern history of the Tower is presented at partner spaces (Shchusev Museum of Architecture, Shabolovka Gallery, Moscow; UralGAHA Architecture and Design Museum, "Sweater"gallery, Ekaterinburg).

From the autumn of 2015 until the summer of 2016, the interior space of the Tower was being refined: there are floor and electricity, graffiti inside the tank is removed (image3). Volunteers are still involved in the work through the Facebook group. Equally, visitors are active attracted to the Tower. The new project's site is also focused on excursionists. The opening of the White Tower as a museum took place on August 20, 2016. It is designed for year-round visits. In 2017 acoustic concerts became the new format of events at the Tower (image4). Art events became a main tool of its popularization.



**Figure 1:** Whie Tower, 2014. Podelniki's public archive in the group in vkontakte.

### 3. Conclusion

The transformation of the White Tower from an abandoned building into a sightseeing object is a complex process, which combine physical transformation and discursive shift in the Tower's representation. The project for its preservation is described by organizers in social networks. On the project site this avant-garde building is promoted as a museum. The content of publications allow to distinguish and analyze new languages describing the White Tower.

The first publications informed subscribers with details of the work on the physical preservation of object, attracted volunteers and sponsors. Podelniki reported on expenditures and shared plans. Specific measures for the conservation of that avant-gard object were implemented. "Projective discourse" was formed in these practices. The complex process of physical preservation of the White Tower is described as a



**Figure 2:** Illumination of the Tower for the Festival Nemtemno, 2014. Podelniki’s public archive in the group in vkontakte.



**Figure 3:** Working-party 2016. Work inside the tank. Preparation of walls as a screen for multimedia exposure. Podelniki’s public archive in the group in Facebook.

common task that not only experts can deal with. In communicating with follower Podelniki use friendly appeals, simple phrases, easy formulations. In this case the



**Figure 4:** Acoustic concert "The White Tower LIVE", 2017. Podelniki's public archive in the group in vkontakte.

conversation about the avant-garde heritage has ceased to be a matter for specialists who are versed in architectural terminology and styles.

The internal work of the project is less often seen on public display, although the facebook group is still used to attract volunteers. The site is aimed primarily at organizing excursions. In social networks, cultural events at the Tower are advertised. Art-discourse became a new mode of its representation. Tower itself is positioned as art-object. Cultrre events attract new visitors. There a museum was opened thanks to the support of a charitable foundation. Art (in the broadest sense of this term) becomes a way of popularizing the Tower. In comparison with projective discourse, art-discourse is oriented to a wider audience.

These new discourses appeal to the audience in a understandable language. Unlike the "discourse of heritage", they describe the present and are oriented to the future. The return of the object to the actual cultural field can already be considered accomplished.

The Wite Tower is a significant example of discursive transformation in discussion about avant-garde heritage in Ekaterinburg. Today, thanks to research and exhibition projects, this heritage becomes visible not only for specialists and connoisseurs. Citizens get acquainted with the heritage of constructivism as a space of contemporary

art as a tissue of individual stories. In these experiments the objects of Sverdlovsk constructivism get a new life.

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