THE PALACE AS TYPE
Finding Regionalism in Soviet Modernism

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Abstract

In a building campaign which spanned across all Soviet Republics, public "palace" buildings were the cornerstone of the architectural image which defined a political regime. At the time of their construction, the palaces were categorized primarily by program—wedding palaces, sports palaces, cinema palaces, youth palaces and cultural palaces. This paper will compare key sites of Soviet modernism (1955-1991) in three countries surrounding the Black Sea: Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia. Using these countries as case studies, this paper will discuss two important aspects of regionalism found in these works—first, the relationship between a universal program type and the local specificity signalled by the building's original design through the use of specific construction materials, ornamentation, and cultural references; second, the transformation the building underwent after 1991 adopting or rejecting new regional affiliations related to its geographical and political location.

Keywords: Soviet architecture, regionalism, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia

The classic Soviet film, *The Irony of Fate* portrays the plight of Zhenya Lukashin, a helpless romantic who mistakenly ends up on a flight from Moscow to Lenningrad after a ruckus New Year's Eve event. Unaware of his mistake and believing himself still to be in Moscow, Zhenya gives his address to a taxi driver and is promptly driven to a concrete housing tower. Still unaware of his true location, Zhenya stumbles into the building to find apartment number twelve where his key easily opens the lock. When it is later discovered that a mirrored version of his Moscow apartment exists in Lenningrad inhabited by an attractive young woman, comedy ensues.

The running gag of Soviet architecture was one of repetition across the entire Soviet Union regardless of local context. In popular Soviet imagination, each apartment block or government building was exactly the same—sparse, efficient, and most notably, grey. This stereotype of Soviet architecture today is not so

different, especially as it has been understood in the West. However, here I would like to offer a parallel reading of Soviet architecture, one which focuses on the unique, the special, and the one-off.

Often overlooked in the drab narrative of Soviet architecture are the large public buildings—often referred to as palaces (*dvorets*). In contrast to the well-known repetitive Soviet housing blocks, these unique buildings demand closer attention as a new generation of architects re-discover their international importance and as we continue to understand architecture's role in shaping and being shaped by ideas of regionalism and nationalism.

In a building campaign which spanned across all Soviet Republics, public "palace" buildings were the cornerstone of the architectural image which defined a political regime. At the time of their construction, the palaces were categorized primarily by program—wedding palaces, sports palaces, cinema palaces, youth palaces and cultural palaces. The term "palace" is often deceiving to a Western audience, as no English term so gracefully straddles the void between royal residence and public meeting house as the Russian term *dvorets*. The palaces were no doubt grand, but their ornamentation was modern, their gestures more expressive than classical. Much like a royal palace, each building created a holistic world and presented itself as a discrete object.

But, for a moment, consider Soviet palaces in another way—a nodal network of distributed ideas, a catalog of possible types. Not as a collection of objects, but as an architectural ensemble. No single project re-invents the type, yet, each instantiation of the palace builds upon the previous body of work. Soviet palaces were an experiment in mass customization. Palaces showcased the progressive cultural and artistic richness of each republic, and images of newly constructed palaces were publicized in tourism literature spread throughout the Soviet Union (Wheeler, 2016, p. 29). The paradox of the palace, and what distinguishes it from common stereotypes of Soviet architecture, is in its standardization of originality.

Although the Soviet Union aimed to unify millions of people under a single governmental system, its people were diverse; they spoke over 100 different languages and included many different ethnic groups. These differences were reflected in their architecture as well. Although the typologies were universal across the Soviet Republics, each palace reflected differences in the choice of materials, forms, and ornamentation. As framed by these case studies, the *region* is often influenced more by politics than geography. The region is a series of political, ethnic, and social delineations with spatial, formal and aesthetic consequences. As Alan Colqhoun writes, "In a sense, the nation-state is the modern "region"—a region in which culture is coextensive with political power" (Colqhoun, 1997, p. 20).

From a systemic perspective, architects value Soviet palaces' adherence to strict typologies and repetition of structural systems, but as this paper will argue, in order to save these works, it might be best to discover the forgotten regionalism in Soviet modernism. This paper will compare key sites of Soviet modernism (1955-1991) in three countries surrounding the Black Sea: Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia. Using these countries as case studies, this paper will discuss two important aspects of regionalism found in these works—first, the relationship between a universal program type and the local specificity signalled by the building's original design through the use of specific construction materials, ornamentation, and cultural references; second, the transformation the building underwent after 1991 adopting or rejecting new regional affiliations related to its geographical and political location.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, its architecture survived. As Lenin statues fell across the newly independent countries, public palaces were often spared from decommunization attempts as they were too integral to the infrastructural and communal integrity of each city to be destroyed. Instead, they adapted. Today, these buildings are located in a group of countries with diverse political structures and economic situations, not to mention relationships to their Soviet past. When looking at this collection of architectural works, it is not the original fusing of national, indigenous or foreign elements of architecture which makes them compelling, but in their fallout. Almost as in a game of

chance, these buildings are sprinkled throughout Eastern Europe and are challenged to survive an ever-shifting context. Given their unique relationships to issues of nationality and regionalism, the buildings which exist today located in post-Soviet independent nations can serve as case studies of architecture's ability to weather tumultuous times.

Program's plight

Several social and economic issues threaten the survival of Soviet architecture. The first well-discussed issue is the general acceptance of Soviet architecture through its symbolic and nationalistic intentions. In 1956, Arthur Voyce reported that Russian "architecture, even if it is for utilitarian purposes, is a form of education—aesthetic, political, and social—and that is why the Metro…has been conceived not only as a means of transport but also as a source of inspiration, as a symbol of a finer culture and a promise of a happier and more abundant life to come" (Voyce, 1956, p. 111). Unlocking the societal meaning of Soviet architecture today is nearly impossible. The complex relationship between individual and collective understandings of Soviet architecture in post-Soviet states is too daunting a web to attempt to untangle. What can be observed, however, is that these feelings are in flux. Particularly, as a new generation with little or no memory of the Soviet Union (but possibly a very clear memory of its fallout) take the reigns of the power structures of society. This change happens slowly, however, and with both forward and backward progression. The contemporary hurdle now is to disentangle the economic connotations from the past political ideals.

The second issue threatening Soviet palaces, is their reliance on a clearly defined program. If, as John McMorrough has suggested in "Notes on the Adaptive Re-use of Program," we should understand modernist buildings "in which the integration of programmatic source is directly and legibly made manifest on the form of the building" as the exception, and not the rule, then a study of Soviet palaces is a study of exceptions (McMorrough, 2006). The alignment between form and function in this collection is unique in its ability to

exaggerate functionality to the point of exuberance of form. Whereas an earlier generation of Soviet architects embraced modernism's structural efficiency, technological improvements, and formal austerity, the generation of architects working between 1955 and 1991 used an obsession with program as an alibi for formal exuberance. This distinct correlation between form and program is one of the striking features of Soviet palaces and can either cause challenges for their reuse today or be identified as the reason for their sustained survival. Palaces rely on the sustainability not only of their physical construction, but on a social and cultural sustainability of their specified program. For example, the many cinemas, wedding halls, youth palaces, or marketplaces rely on a steady stream of patrons who will support economically the specific programs specified by the architecture. As cultural and economic shifts continue to happen in post-Soviet public spaces, it is unclear whether their survival is assured.

Regionalism, again?

If early Soviet Constructivism had stripped buildings of any ornamentation or reference to national styles or ethnic distinction, later phases of Soviet modernism (1955-1991) saw a return to the incorporation of ornamentation reflective of regional difference. As early as the 1939 VSKhV exhibition in Moscow vernacular motifs were used in a calculated attempt to rebrand the Union with a single, progressive artistic and political vision. The exhibition was filled with pavilions representing non-Russian ethnicities, remixing vernacular forms and intricate motifs, and manipulating traditional elements in order to express an eclectic past and a more cohesive, unified future (Castillo, Peoples at an Exhibition, 1997). Thus, the Soviet practice of standardizing difference was codified and later used as a strategy in the design of Soviet palaces.

At first glace, Soviet palaces may seem flamboyant or extravagant. Palaces often utilized long-span structures to create dramatic, expansive interiors as these structures were built to handle large numbers of people for communal activities. Embedded in this combination of exuberance and efficiency was the class consciousness of the Stalinist era where buildings should serve and elevate

the general population as a reflection of the socialist state. One example of this structural intelligence and programmatic efficiency is the Wedding Palace in Kyiv, Ukraine (officially known today as the Kyiv Central Registry Office or Central Palace of Marriages). Completed in 1982 as the city's premier wedding destination, the building makes use of its triangular plan with a grand entrance hall on one corner and two wedding halls in the opposite corners, creating two mirrored halls for simultaneous services. Other than their color schemes (one blue and red, one green), both halls are decorated identically with long sheer curtains, stiff wooden chairs, and highly decorative chandeliers. The sweeping roof form in the entrance and in the wedding halls creates an atmosphere of drama and flair. The roof structure opens toward the entrance, compresses in the central circulation spaces, and releases again at the two mirrored wedding alters. Not only is this building exemplarily of public palaces' formal and programmatic relationships, as seen today it is also emblematic of trends in post-Soviet urban development. What was once undoubtedly, a grand building from the exterior, is now dwarfed between two high-rise towers and an adjacent McDonald's, perhaps a fitting example of Kyiv's post-socialist capitalistic tendencies. Despite its current urban condition, the palace is not only in use today as a wedding venue, it is thriving. On any day of the week multiple weddings occur simultaneously, as guests of various events glide seamlessly through the many ornate and gilded vestibules, lobbies, and waiting areas.

Figure 1. Wedding Palace, Kyiv, Ukraine. Interior hall of one wedding chapel. (Photograph by author, 2018)

Often Soviet palaces are subtler in their exuberance, cloaking their grand gesture behind modest, non-descript facades. One such example is the Tigran Petrosian Chess House in Yerevan, Armenia (ironically, another triangular building) which marries functionality and volumetric experimentation behind a sculptural facade. In dramatic fashion, the visitor to the Chess House passes through the entrance and directly onto a mezzanine overlooking the main chess hall. Dozens of chessboard tables organize the hall below; the viewer is in perfect position to observe the games from above. The spectator is instantly part of the games, without ever disturbing the players—a sectional move which makes the building one of the best places in the world to watch a game of chess. In the case of the Chess House or the Kyiv Wedding Palace, their hyper-attentiveness to the alignment of form and program have created enduring buildings which thrive as their programmatic activities remain popular.

Figure 2. Tigran Petrosian Chess House, Yerevan, Armenia. View from entrance hall mezzanine toward chess hall. (Photograph by author, 2018)

The Tbilisi Archeology Museum exemplifies Georgia's more expressive, figural and sculptural tendencies. The museum takes a dramatic stance perched on a hill overlooking the city. The building's posture is pronounced, stocky, and bulging. Its formal presence overshadows the sculptural relief adorning the entrance. The oversized stairs leading to the front door challenge the viewer to experience the building beyond the outwardly focused expression and speculate on the interior spaces. Inside, the building reveals the exterior segmentation actually disguises an expansive, shallow-domed space. Not untypical of some Soviet-era public buildings, the museum was never fully completed due to financial strains, and thus, is now in private ownership. Georgia has struggled publically in recent years to deal with their Soviet legacy as political leaders in the country have often used architecture to directly symbolize their aspirations for the independent nation. At best, the country has gained notoriety for several contemporary architectural works by internationally-acclaimed European architects, and at its worst, the campaign has resulted in the dilapidation, privatization, or ruination of Soviet architectural gems.

Figure 3. Archaeology Musem, Tbilisi, Georgia. View from exterior pathway toward museum entrance. (Photograph by author, 2018)

Political and economic shifts in the past decade, particularly with the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity and subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, have strengthened nationalistic tendencies in the region. The is no cultural capital at the moment for "Russian" architecture. In fact, city tourism and local historians are painstakingly documenting and promoting urban histories which are pre-Soviet. The local frustration with an international equation between local history and Soviet history is palpable. The city of Lviv, for example, has been awarded a UNESCO designation for its historic city center (dating from the 5th to the 17th centuries) while significant examples of Soviet modernism such as the Striyskyi Bus Terminal (1980), have been left to decay on the outskirts of the city.

Will Soviet palaces become regional again? In the intervening years, Soviet palaces have become known as just that—*Soviet*. Yet, as has been described, they always included regional motifs and ornamentation, even if ornamentation after the Stalinist period became kitsch, colonialist (Castillo, Soviet Orientalism: Socialist Realism and Built Tradition, 1997) or possibly a form of silent protest against the colonization of the communist project (Czaplicka, 2005, p. 173). It seems less important today to debate the authenticity of regionalism in Soviet architecture than to embrace its inherent possibilities. Motifs which could be seen as infantilizing in their non-Russian-ness, can now be recast through a nationalist or regional lens. Whether accurate or not, reclaiming palaces as regional could preserve the buildings for the next generation. At some point, it becomes irrelevant if these buildings are "Ukrainian" or "Armenian" or "Georgian." What will preserve them as lasting pieces of heritage is whether or not contemporary architects can craft a convincing narrative around them. A rebranding exercise might allow the buildings to absorb new narratives and gain public admiration.

International success

Soviet modernism has become an increasingly popular topic for architectural consumption in the past few years. Recently published books such as *CCCP: Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed*, *Soviet Bus Stops*, and *Decommunized: Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics* have tapped into a market for a particular type of Soviet "ruin porn." In the age of recirculating images, media platforms—most prolifically Instagram—have given Soviet modernism a new life and a new audience. Given the age of many of its devoted followers it may be safe to say that this obsession is one of an imagined collective past.

In addition to the informal success of online collections of images of Soviet modernism, other similar collections are gaining notoriety to a Western audience. The Museum of Modern Art in New York is currently exhibiting works which share a striking formal similarity to late Soviet architecture in the exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980*. Ironically, in both instances buildings designed to spread propaganda at the time, are just now reaching an international audience surprisingly willing to soak up the images and their embedded ideas. The strong forms emboding a pre-language aesthetic and the ubiquitous use of concrete easily links Soviet and Yugoslavian works. Viewers delight in the pure spectacle of the gothic scale and geometric purity. As we witness a swing towards nationalism in Europe and the extreme political polarization in America, these images may give us a glimpse into a previous world not necessarily filled with harmony or prosperity, but at least one of unification.

Why are images of Soviet architecture so popular in the West, particularly in America? There are several reasons why these images carry so much cultural currency at present. The first comes from the direct formal attributes of the designs. The immediacy of their forms come through an austerity regime of geometry, strong character independent of ornamentation. These characteristics related to a contemporary moment when architecture has returned to an obsession with fragments, primitives, and crude shapes. (Meredith, 2017) The second is the continued fascination and "othering" in their international image,

enhancing the strong aesthetic fetishization of post-industrial landscapes. The intense greyness of the images, the monochromatic buildings and relentless use of concrete simply reinforces preconceived stereotypes about Eastern European cities as bland places devoid of color. (Of course, a visit to any of these sites would prove quite the opposite.) In all of these instances, photography is used as the primary means of communication; shockingly absent are the extraordinary plans, sections or other architectural drawings which would reveal to an architectural audience the underlying formation of the works. This use of medium might suggest that the audience for this architecture may not be the architect at all, but instead the millennial eye.

In their new form as "ruin porn" these images do not require the viewer to engage critically with the building as a site of continual habitation or functioning entity. Instead, buildings are typically presented as unoccupied ruins, even when most are fully-functioning as university buildings, performance halls, or bustling marketplaces. The viewer of contemporary images of Soviet palaces can engage with the image as a relic, a seemingly objective view of a defunct political regime tinged with nostalgia, and even possibly, envy. These images serve as a cautionary tale and an inspirational past. The inherent geographical remoteness of the site and the immediacy of the image work to blur the connection between time and space. Most importantly, they allow the viewer to momentarily imagine alternative scenarios to our contemporary politics. We want to judge their symbolism *and* admire their form. However, the moralistic outlook of the contemporary viewer fails on both accounts. What the photos fail to show is that these buildings endure; they survive, die, adapt, expand, grow, fall down—they are in formation.

Rebranding Regionalism

In conclusion, this paper makes little claims on the authenticity of regionalism in Soviet palaces. In fact, the phenomenon of faux regionalism found in Soviet architecture created something no one anticipated—a new type of architectural ensemble. Soviet palaces as a series of architectural works created buildings

linked by their similarities and use of programmatic expression, yet regionally different enough to be considered reflections of the diversity of the Soviet republics.

If we release issues of regionalism from any moral or ethical imperatives, we can find in Soviet palaces a series of buildings truly able to adapt to shifting political tides. It can be tempting to assign palaces authenticity based on ornamental details, but the arbitrary act of assigning authenticity will not result in the political or cultural shift needed to save the buildings from demolishment. The challenge now is to harness the potential of standardizing the unique and recast Soviet palaces as regional works in independent nations. This strategy of preservation (or act of appropriation) may find the success within post-Soviet countries that the image culture of the West found in highlighting their Sovietness. If architects spend less time looking at buildings as archaeologists and more time understanding their contemporary consumption, Soviet palaces may still be around to usher in the cultural and social life of the next generation.

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