

# The Central Part of the Neva River and Its Role in St. Petersburg of Peter's Time\*

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**Abstract**—On the basis of analyzing the panoramas of St. Petersburg of Peter's time, this paper gives the town-planning characteristic of the city's central space — the waters of the Neva against Peter and Paul fortress. The character of the spatiality of Petersburg of Peter's time gives grounds for the stylistic evaluation of the city as the work of Baroque town-planning art. However, in the urban composition of St. Petersburg it is not the monarch's Palace, to which traditionally for Baroque architecture, the power lines go, but the central urban space, to which all the objects personifying the monarch's presence are turned.

**Keywords**—water area; Baroque; building; landscape; panorama; space

## I. INTRODUCTION

The research of early Petersburg's urban planning problems is far from fully revealing its artistic phenomenon. There are still noticeable gaps in the study of the city, in the stylistic analysis of the phenomena of the urban history of St. Petersburg at an early stage in particular. On the other hand, a good level of study of the problems of the early 19th century urban planning is not accompanied by attempts to understand the city's flourishing of the Empire period in connection with the previous periods of its urban development. Researchers do not find a meaningful relationship between the Empire style of the beginning of the 19th century and Peter's time, although the town-planning history of St. Petersburg holds the clear impression of the unifying vector of the city development for over a century.

The city from its very beginning has features that have not changed over the centuries of its existence. On the avenues of Mikhail Makhaev of the middle of the 18th century, we find the same town that is depicted in the panoramas of A. Zubov, H. Marcellius, imaged by P. Pikart. In turn, the panoramas of D. Atkinson, A. Toselli, engravings of M.-F. Damame-Demartrais, paintings of B. Patterson, F. Alexeev and J. G. Meyer, drawings of M.

\*This paper was funded by the Science and Technology Development State Program of the Russian Federation for years 2013-2020, Program of Fundamental Research of State Academies of Science for years 2013 – 2020, within Program of Fundamental Researches of Ministry of Construction, Housing and Utilities of the Russian Federation and Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction Sciences, the Research Project 1.2.21.

Vorobyov and I. Ivanov represent the same recognizable Petersburg as on Makhaev's avenues. Neither the change of positions from which the views are drawn nor the appearance of new buildings does not negate the features of commonality. These observations require a detailed consideration of the structure and composition of the urban space of early St. Petersburg to identify its specific characteristics and determine their stylistic nature.

The Central Neva water area against the Peter and Paul fortress is an indicative object for the research of this kind. This object combines all the "components" that define the unique appearance of St. Petersburg: clear space, sky, water, architecture. The analysis of the water area from the position of its spatial structure and features of the style of this urban formation reveals the main features of the specific St. Petersburg's spatiality, which has not change throughout the 18th century and connects two eras of the development of the city — from its inception to the time of urban prosperity, separated by a century.

## II. THE CENTRAL PART OF THE NEVA RIVER: SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS AND THE STYLE

The penchant for paradoxes characteristic of the Baroque style made the Neva River and the water area against the Peter and Paul fortress the main square of St. Petersburg of Peter's time. On the plans of early Petersburg, the city center is located in this most significant, in terms of urban planning, place. The principle of the spatial organization of St. Petersburg of the early period is based on a circular view of the city from the inside, from the waters of Neva. The panorama of the city was thought as closed, and the preferred direction was not revealed. Many dominants (church spires) created a feeling of the saturation of the urban fabric.

Already in the Zubov's panorama of 1717 [1], the central waters of the Neva appear as a grand square. To create such an image, the artist chose the point from which the space of the Neva has been seen most widely. At the same time, he faced the impossibility to show in detail the architectural environment of all the banks from this point. The artist had to "turn" embankments to face the viewer, thus breaking the perspective. As we can see, the choice of the viewpoint was more important for the author of the panorama than the task of reliable display of the city. The image here was more

important than the truth, and space was the central element of this image. But no matter how much Zubov has skewed the reality, we cannot agree with the fact that the broad waters of the Neva River are truly impressive, and only the artist's vision can convey the spatiality of this place.

The pathos of urban space, reflecting the triumph of the monarch's will, matched the mindset of the city founder. Otherwise, he would not look for a new place to build a fortress and a city, right after accepting the surrender of Nienshants. The Swedish fortress could have been expanded and strengthened. Researchers refer to Peter's own words that that place was not naturally strong and was too distant from the mouth of the river [2]. However, we see that the remoteness of the Swedish city from the sea did not prevent it from accepting ships. The position of the Nienshants fortress also could not be decisive in defense of the region. After all, Peter and Paul fortress was also far from the Bay. Enemy troops had enough space for a sudden landing on the bay. Realizing the weakness of the position, Peter took out the defense line of the city far into the bay. Only Kronschtlot fort was an effective protection on the distant approaches to the city [3]. Peter and Paul fortress would have been useless if the enemy had reached the Islands of the Neva Delta.

It is obvious that the fortress cannot adequately protect the city if it is located in its center. Peter has built the metropolitan capital city, too important and expensive threat to give it away, hiding behind the walls of the fortress, and destroying own guns, palaces and houses, including private palaces of the monarch. From these considerations, it should be concluded that the Peter and Paul fortress could be of military importance for Peter only immediately after the conquest of the area. In those days, the approval of the conquered territory necessarily involved the construction of an outpost. But after a short time, it became clear that the creation of the capital city is more important to strengthen that place militarily. The role of the fortress in the city-center, the built up palaces of the nobility, have already been purely symbolic. In the Imperial city, it served as a visual representation of the monarch's military power.

But also, the choice of a place for the Peter and Paul fortress, apparently, was not conditioned only by military expediency. Here we see an aesthetic attitude — an assessment of the beauty of the landscape, its statehood, which certainly had to be present in the appearance of the future capital. After all, this place in the Neva Delta is the most beautiful. It gives the most exciting and powerful spatial impressions.

The expedition on rowing boats, undertaken by Peter immediately after the surrender of Nienshants, particularly noted in the chronicle, can be recalled in this regard [2]. The emperor first went down the Neva River to the gulf, and for the first time saw the landscape of Neva's mouth. Panorama of the Neva water area, opening from the headwaters of The Great Neva, could not but excite the impressionable Peter. By coincidence, this is where the island suitable for the construction of the fortress was located. However, the fortress could be built in another place, for example, on the Spit of Vasilievskiy Island.

Returning to the panorama of Zubov, it can be noted that the point from which the view was taken is the land equivalent of the position from which Peter first saw the whole panorama of the Neva water area. Did not the emperor himself order to draw the panorama from here? Then one can understand his dissatisfaction with the finished engraving. Indeed, the point assigned to the panorama creates difficulties for the artist and does not allow showing the city with full documentary accuracy.

The closed character of the water square of St. Petersburg corresponds to the Baroque vision of urban space. The time of the openness of urban planning thinking, which requires a connection of squares with streets and urban landscape, has not yet come. In the context of the discussion of the Neva water area tributaries branching from the Neva river delta could be called "streets". The builders of the city were quite aware of the importance of spits or capes, (they have been marked with the buildings of high importance), but they have not yet considered channels going deep into the land "stereoscopically" — as a continuation of the spatial structure of the city. Neither A. Zubov nor the authors of other panoramas of the city (H. Marselius, O. Elliger) include the distant perspectives of the Neva sleeves in their panoramas. Even in the middle of the XVIII century, M. Makhaev sees the Neva water area as no more than a linearly oriented water Avenue<sup>1</sup>.

It should be noted that neither old Russian cities nor the European ones, the layout of which was formed in the Middle Ages, as a rule, did not give an opportunity for observing them from the inside. One could look at them only from the outside, and the impression of such cities was created by a picturesque skyline and a thick cluster of architectural masses. Of course, their structure has no such intention that accompanied the birth of St. Petersburg, and which is generally characteristic of the Baroque way of operating space, both in relation to its dramatic organization and in the pursuit of the inclusiveness of the plan, embracing everything that an eye can reach.

There is no contradiction in the Baroque closeness of the space and the desire for inclusiveness. The closed nature of the circular panorama of St. Petersburg is perceived as if all the outer space converging to the Neva, all covered by civilization, enlightened and well-maintained Russia came to the Neva banks to bow to its sovereign. The Baroque concept of a continuous landscape has been realized in St. Petersburg not in the form of space radiating from the center, where the Palace of the monarch has been (see the layout of Karlsruhe), but in the form of its contraction into a virtual center. This center for Peter was there, from where he could perceive with a single glance the panorama of the collection of the all-Russian space, stopped by the waters of the Neva River at a respectful distance from his person.

The action suggests an image as an impulse that "triggers" the creative process. This image brings forward

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<sup>1</sup> G. Z. Kaganov writes about the attitude of the artists towards the space of the city, and the property not to notice the spatial breaks and depict the urban development as the "film, covering the water area of the Neva", in particular [5].

sensuality as a spiritual foundation, the artistic basis of the city. We can assume that the idea of St. Petersburg of Peter the Great grows from that strong emotional lift, which had swept the impressionable soul of Peter when he first came on the boat to the expanse of the Neva. The sensual nature of the first impulse opens up St. Petersburg to us as a fruit of the baroque sovereign's inspiration.

It is necessary to pay attention to the closeness of space in regard to St. Petersburg. Here again, we should turn to the perception of the city space of the contemporaries of its construction, embodied in its early images. G. Z. Kaganov has brilliantly analyzed them [5]. The researcher notes one special feature of the early panoramas of the city. All of them concentrate on the representation of space, and one of the techniques is showing the line of development of the banks as a "thin film", covering the waters of the Neva as if there is nothing behind. The viewer is offered such an image of the city, in which the space of the Neva water area is not only the main but the only one in the city.

On the other hand, by giving their engravings an enlarged sky "segment", their creators invite the viewer to feel the air of space. There is a wide band at the bottom of the Neva, the dome of heaven almost merging with it, no foreground and a narrow strip of small facades of the houses on the embankments. Formally, only those houses can be considered a city. But in fact, the image of the city includes everything: the sky, water, and only in the last place, the houses. The city is present in space in the form of a particular layer that does not belong to either water or air, but in the end conquers all the space, because only the creation of human hands gives this landscape meaning and content.

If we talk about the "structure" or the image of the existence of space, we face a paradoxical situation in St. Petersburg of Peter's time. The area enclosed by the ring of building is unexpectedly open, due to its size and a special "program" of visual exploration of space, defined by its structure (the ratio of the size of the area horizontally and the height of the building front). This program directs the vision of the observer, leading it into the depth of open space — from the area of closure to the space of infinite openness.

When speaking about the urban specificity of early Petersburg, N.F. Gulyanitskiy noted the freedom of spatial development of the city, allowing perceiving it as a living and developing system, giving a sequence of changing pictures of buildings and landscape [6]. On the one hand, this is true if we compare St. Petersburg of Peter's time with the city at the beginning of the 19th century. Empire penchant for permanence and certainty of spatial impressions is contrastingly different from the liveliness of the fabric of the city of Peter's time. But it should be noted the specificity of the early period, consisting of a large proportion of randomness, gave the city its picturesqueness. Conceptuality, which has covered the whole area with a single plan later, had not been there yet. The city has still included areas of natural landscapes with wild vegetation. Ever changing sky and water surface of the Neva have given the city its picturesque appearance. However, the factors of the picturesqueness can only be regarded as incidental and

successfully complementing the main — architectural motives. Thus, it is crucial for the clarification of this stylistic phenomenon.

We have identified the signs of Baroque attitude, expressed in the desire to close the stage space of the Neva water area. At the same time, the Baroque city is endowed with the spirit of universality, modeled as a spatial expression of the world order in which the monarch is the center, the sovereign of power.

Speaking about the "spatiality"<sup>2</sup> of Peter's Petersburg, it should be admitted that at that time the city has not been a bunch of separate spaces yet. The researchers emphasize the dispersed nature of the development, which is not subject to any pre-conceived urban scheme [7]. But within the limits of the Central Neva water area, which existed at that time as a "real" Petersburg, it appeared as a city of a single space. Its mostly closed character was formed by clear constraints: a continuous front of embankments and a ring of high-rise dominants. But, as we have shown, the paradoxical nature of St. Petersburg spatiality was manifested in the fact that the closeness of the Neva "square" in the perception, tuned by the scale and structural features of the Neva space, transformed into openness.

Everything meaningful in the city, including first and foremost the private residence of the emperor, his city palaces, was strapped to the river. The Spit of Vasilievskiy Island facing the Neva occupied a special place in Peter's plans. The spit has given its future dominant — St Andrew's Cathedral to Neva water area. A centric domed church of large size has been built upon the project of N. Tessin Jr.<sup>3</sup>. The scale of the building fully meets its urban importance. If the project had been implemented, the ensemble of the Neva water area would have received full completion already during Peter's the Great reign. A circular view of the water area of St. Petersburg would have been confined to the opposite sides of St. Andrew's Cathedral and effectively put the Hospital building on the Vyborg side with a high volume of the Church in the center. The two dominants at the ends of the water area, "holding" the urban composition, would have started a "dialogue" with the Peter and Paul Cathedral, dominant in the Northern part of the panorama. In the form that the main city square could have received in Peter's time, it would have a well-thought-out composition, created and fixed by buildings located at key points-dominants, giving the configuration of space certainty and meaningfulness.

Panoramas of the water area had a unique character in St. Petersburg. The view of the city unfolded not as a ribbon of developed banks. Artists depicted panoramas from a single fixed point. Thus, pictures haven't shown architectural facades in an orthographic projection. On the panoramas of Neva River St. Petersburg of Peter's time appeared

<sup>2</sup> A.V. Ikonnikov found a suitable replacement for the word "spatiality" — "spaciousness" but, recognizing the success of the replacement, it is necessary to note that "spaciousness" can be rather understood as the presence of free open space around the viewer, and not as a vision and understanding of space in an artistic system [8].

<sup>3</sup> Drawing of N. Tessin Jr. is kept in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

completely. The main character of the panorama was the space. But if we turn to the image of St. Petersburg of Peter's time only as a simple sum of facades, an orthographic projection of the banks of the Neva, given from the central point, we will still see a rare coherence in the presence of groups, in their sequence, in the alternation of accents, in the arrangement of dominants.

So, architecturally comprehended space is the main factor of the artistic impression of St. Petersburg at all times of its existence. We are not surprised by this fact in relation to the city of the days of Alexander I, but isn't it surprising when it comes to the city that has just been built?

There are, however, some properties of St. Petersburg's spatiality, which in the city of Peter's time have been properly noticed neither by its creator nor by the authors of its images. Early panoramas of the city ignore the mouths (or sources) of rivers and channels branching off from the main channel of the Neva river. Neither Zubov nor P. Pikart, or H. Marcellius does not show these mouths as independent and meaningful objects of the image. Zubov, for example, as if does not notice that the Neva branches and continues with rivers. On his panorama, it is impossible to see the Spit of Vasilyevskiy Island and the channel of the Small Neva. The Big Neva below the spit turns out to be just a Bay. The big Nevka "disappeared", without going out from the Neva. And the spit of the Neva and Nevka River has straightened so that the two banks, meeting at a right angle, have turned into a straight embankment. Fontanka's channel is also gone. In general, the Neva's bay on the first panoramas of St. Petersburg looks more like a lake than a segment of the river.

This kind of insensitivity to places that could be the most picturesque on the panoramas amazes. After all, these river sources could give spatial breaks so important for monotone river banks. The views represented on the panoramas catch the viewer's eye. However, misunderstanding or underestimation of the effects that arise in the mouths of spatial breaks existed in subsequent times. Only in Alexander's time, it is possible to note the attention to the distant panoramas along the flow of the Neva's tributaries.

### III. CONCLUSION

The study shows the importance of the Central Neva water area in the structure of St. Petersburg. In terms of urban planning, it is the main square of the city which receives the design which corresponds to this status (development of banks, buildings-dominants, semantically significant town-planning composition nodes). The town-planning features of the Neva water area are considered through the method of the fixation of spatial impressions by artists of the first panoramic views of St. Petersburg.

It is believed that the choice of the place for the construction of the city was entirely due to considerations of military expediency. However, the location of the new fortress far from the sea and moving defense outposts far into the gulf casts doubt on the full validity of such judgments. The aesthetic motive was not the last when choosing a place for the construction of the city in terms of the flow of the Neva River, giving the richest and diverse impressions. The

choice of a place to draw the first panorama of St. Petersburg indirectly confirms this statement.

The originality of the Neva water area of Peter's time is determined by the dual nature of its spatiality, which combines the closure of the boundaries of the perimeter front of the coast and the openness of space in the perception of the viewer. This paradoxical connection of opposites is explained by the low height of the front of the building, located in a single plane. The viewer's attention in this situation is not captured by the walls of the buildings and is directed over the building, going into the vast airspace.

The stylistic characteristic of St. Petersburg spatiality is equally dual. Its Baroque character is realized in the image of the confluence of power lines of spatiality to the water area of the Neva — the Central square of St. Petersburg inverted in relation to the typical Baroque cities.

Consideration of the Neva water area gives an understanding of the key characteristics of St. Petersburg at that time. Already during Peter's time St. Petersburg was designed as the city of a spatial idea. Peter's St. Petersburg is a city of mostly open spaces with a tendency to open space to the outside and its unlimited expansion.

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