

# Soviet Architecture of the 1960s: Between Internationalization and Regionalization

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**Abstract**—This article deals with the evolution of Soviet architecture during the 1960s, marked by the triumph of a modernist architecture, which will also generate forms of regionalization within the USSR, and which will be marked at the same time by an important phenomenon of internationalization, which is particularly illustrated by the export of Soviet specialists to decolonized territories.

**Keywords**—architecture; urban planning; history of the USSR; connected histories; postcolonial history; epistemology of architecture

## I. INTRODUCTION

The late 1950s and early 1960s were marked by the triumph of the international style in the USSR. The process of uniformization of architectural production, which characterized architecture in the 1960s, actually preceded Nikita Khrushchev's policy, and was initiated in the late 1940s, at the height of Stalinist totalitarianism, with first the return to universally Soviet "classicism", minimizing the possibilities for regional variants, and the gradual transition to widespread prefabrication of construction. At a meeting of members of the Academy of Architecture in October 1954, Arkady Mordvinov (1896-1964) gave a speech in which he denounced the decorative excesses and eclecticism of architectures such as the Leningrad Hotel in neo-Russian style (architects Poljakov and Boreckij, neo-Russian), or the residential buildings built by Mikhail Usejnov, in "oriental style" (1905-1992) in Baku [1].

However, it soon became apparent that the concern to preserve and even support regional diversity was once again omnipresent in the discourse, as if Soviet architects could not get rid of this eminently political issue. This can be deduced from the shorthand of the conference on the problems of the theory and history of architecture and building technology that took place following the XXI Congress of the CPSU on 15 and 16 April 1959, published in 1960 in the collection Questions of architectural theory [2].

## II. CROSSING OF SOVIET AND FOREIGN CRITICAL AND THEORETICAL THOUGHTS: BETWEEN REJECTION AND REACTIVATION OF INTERNATIONAL STYLE'S UTOPIA

In his presentation entitled "The Meaning of the Historical Experience of Soviet Architecture", art historian P.A. Volodin (1904 - ?) summarizes the official position quite well: "In our architecture we have observed expressions of national narrowness and a tendency to stylize past heritage. These shortcomings must be overcome, but their correction does not mean abandoning the autonomous development of architecture in each of the sister socialist republics. The socialist architectural style of all Soviet architecture implies the development of each of the Soviet national styles based on a common understanding of social objectives." [3]

In his introductory speech to the conference, the architect Aleksandr Vlassov (1900-1962) spoke of the need to pay more attention to the proper assimilation of national traditions. For Vlassov, who refers to the case of Kazakhstan, it is now essential to take a real interest in what architecture can be in a territory, whose population practiced nomadism, and whose ways of living have never produced monumental architecture: "It is certain, for example, that the development of the Kazakh people, before the great socialist revolution of October, in the context of tsarism, was very difficult, given that this people led a semi-nomadic life. I do not know of any large buildings that these people would have left, except tombs and mausoleums. Vlassov asks this rhetorical question: "How the problem of Kazakh national architectural form has so far been understood? It was largely reduced to the use of large decorations on the friezes of buildings." [4] Vlassov points here to one of the fundamental aspects of the criticism made against the national stylizations of the Stalinist period. Realistic-socialist architecture had reintroduced a hierarchy between the different architectural cultures of the USSR. The architecture of Iranian heritage had thus been considered superior, qualified as oriental classicism, compared to the architecture of the Turkish-speaking peoples. The classical architecture of European tradition occupied the top of the hierarchy, and the national architecture by the socialist form not the content, was thus reduced to integrating motifs from local architecture on buildings following general principles of classical composition. The Soviet modernism of the 1960s

was partly to remedy this "unworthy" hierarchy of an egalitarian socialist society, leading to rather astonishing results. We will sometimes witness the monumentalization of minor forms, like in Alma-Ata, where a circus was built in the form of a monumental yurt (architects Vladimir Kacev and Innokentii Slonov, 1972).

It is interesting that this concern to preserve and even develop regional diversity within Soviet architecture is expressed even at the level of the problem of prefabricated architecture. The architect M.V. Fedorov says: "Standardization and serial design, which must be approved on a national scale, must at the same time take into account the particularities of different geographical areas and nations, unlike what we see abroad, where the standardization and serialization of building elements are mainly produced by private firms and monopolies, in a competitive context" [5]. In other words, even in the context of a general prefabrication of the building, the socialist state makes it possible to preserve regional diversity, particularly in terms of the technical and constructive qualities of the buildings. This idea is not new, and M.V. Fedorov takes up ideas already developed by the architectural avant-garde of the 1920s [6].

In his presentation entitled "The main orientations for the development of architectural theory in the light of the objectives of the seven-year plan" (1960), the architect G.A. Chemyakin takes up the same idea: "One of the main current challenges is to overcome the contradictions that have emerged between the national forms of culture and lifestyle of the peoples of our country and the current trends in the development of architecture that require maximum typification and standardization of construction. It is clear that maximum consideration of local conditions and progressive domestic traditions is essential." [7]

While Shemyakin puts forward the idea of a general rapprochement between the different national entities, and the creation of a universal Soviet culture [8], he points out that this "process is long, and must be carried out simultaneously with a full use of all progressive national traditions. It is important, on the one hand, to overcome national narrowness, local nationalism, the non-critical relationship to historical culture, and on the other hand, to remove obstacles to the development of a national socialist culture. Understanding this dialectic in the specific conditions of the current development of architecture is our major challenge". This fundamental idea that art, to continue its evolution, must be both national and international, familiar and universal, had been formulated by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Bequeathed to Marxism, it was one of the fundamental points of realistic-socialist doctrine. Positioning in the face of national cultures had always been a central issue in debates on architectural issues. But if under Stalin, the architecture national by form and socialist by content, had essentially expressed internal dynamics of Soviet politics, the period that followed, masked by the "reopening" of the USSR to the rest of the world, would in many ways complicate the problem. The rise of modernism in the USSR during the 1960s came at a time when post-modern criticism was simultaneously developing in the rest

of the world. This critique of modernism takes various forms, and reflects very different ideological postulates. The theoretical contributions of this post-modern critique will quickly contaminate Soviet architectural theoretical thought, and will often prove complementary to the internal challenges of the USSR.

Criticism of the international style is rooted in an observation that is increasingly universally accepted by Soviet critics and architects: the architecture produced by the generalization of prefabricated construction is monotonous, repetitive, sad, devoid of identity, we must find a way to diversify it, to animate it, and to give it back the means of expressiveness. This includes the need to reactivate the artistic function of architecture. As early as May 1961, the resolution of the Third Congress of the Union of Architects of the USSR stated: "Some architects pay less attention to the resolution of artistic issues; they do not make sufficient use of the possibilities offered by the needs of new urban planning and technological advances". In resonance with these remarks, several trends will emerge during this period in an attempt to respond to the stagnation of modernism. On the one hand, with the research of groups of experimental and prospective architects, who seek more than to condemn it, to reactivate the modernist utopia, and on the other hand, the spatial thinking of post-modern criticism, which seeks to restore meaning to the modern city, to recreate a humanized and diversified urban environment, paying particular attention to social and environmental conditions.

These are the writings of Bruno Zevi (1918-2000) (*Architecture as a space*, Horizon Press, New York 1957), Kevin Lynch (1918-1984) (*The image of the city*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1960), Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) (*The death and life of great American cities*, New-York : Random house, 1961) or those of the Marxist philosopher and field sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) (*La critique de la vie quotidienne*, 1947, 1961), which contribute in particular to this transformation of urban thought. This spatial thinking will soon be combined, under the influence of the signing of the 1964 Venice Charter, with a revival of the heritage interest in ancient cities, their study, preservation and, far beyond, the integration of their historical experience into the modern city.

The year 1966 was marked by the publication of three major works from this point of view: *Complexity and contradiction in architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art Press), by Robert Venturi (1925-2018), *Architettura della città* (Padova: Marsilio 1966) by Aldo Rossi (1931-1997) and two works by Giancarlo de Carlo (1919-2005), *La pianificazione territoriale e urbanistica nell'area milanese*, (Padova, Marsilio, 1966.) and a monograph on his project to restructure the university city of Urbino, Urbino, *la storia di una città e il piano della sua evoluzione urbanistica* (Padova, Marsilio, 1966). It should be noted that Giancarlo de Carlo had close links with the Soviet architectural scene at that time, which is why we mention him here in particular.

The problem of articulation between modern architecture and ancient urban environments that was absolutely central

to the debates of that time. For Selim Han-Magomedov, the trend towards national stylization, which reappeared in architecture in the late 1960s, is closely linked to a renewed interest for the ancient architectural heritage. But this patrimonialization responds, according to him, to the rise of mass tourism. The restoration of old towns or districts, their museumization, is accompanied by the construction of a number of tourist architectures, which, in order to better integrate into the historical environment, develop a stylized architecture [9]. Han-Magomedov criticizes this new fashion, because for him, the national characteristics of architecture are manifested more in the laws of construction of form, rather than in the external qualities of the form itself. That's why it's not a matter of adding them or bringing them out, like an exotic dye, but you have to feel them deeply. Han-Magomedov cites as an example the avant-garde architects Konstantin Melnikov and Ivan Leonidov, whose work, pursuing an internationalist ideal, at the same time remains deeply Russian. This reflection is fully in line with the rehabilitation process of the avant-garde of the 1920s, which became an integral part of the national heritage.

In his article "Historic ensembles and the composition of contemporary buildings" (1970) [10], Nikolaj Gul'nickij (1927-1995) writes: "The development of modern architecture... goes in the direction of a polysemy and a multipolarity of its compositions. It even tends, in one of its poles of expression, to be closer to traditional architecture, which plays an important role in the interaction of modern and historical architecture." [11] Nikolaj Gul'nickij cites two examples of architecture, which in his opinion are very poorly integrated into the pre-existing urban environment: the new Arbat and the Rossia Hotel in Moscow. Gul'nickij sees in the New Arbat complex a too strong contrast with the immediate environment. It is even concerned that such an operation would create a new urban scale for the city center, which could lead to the destruction of the historically constituted spatial structure [12]. On the other hand, he considers, that Hotel Iveria in Tbilisi (architect Otar Kalandarishvili, 1967), and the Palace of Art Exhibitions in Tallinn (1967), by the Estonian architect Vytautas Čekanauskas (1930-2010), as very successful former-modern architectural integrations.

### III. THE CONCEPT OF SYNTHESIS OF ARTS AND THE REEMERGENCE OF AN ORNAMENTAL FOLKLORE IN SOVIET UNION

The national or regional theme also covers a more prosaic reality. The emergence of "ornamental folklore", which will slightly brighten the monotonous lines of prefabricated architecture, mainly on balconies, stairwells, blind facades and various types of claustras, is also one of the consequences of the nationalists' hints of Brezhnev politics. Architects are in fact often called upon to create from scratch, based for example on traditional motifs seen on clothing, textiles, carpets, various craft objects, decorations that are supposed to express the spirit of a nation, a region or even a district. Simone Fa'f, widow of Soviet architect Garry Fa'f (1942-2002), told us that when her husband was appointed chief architect of Tiraspol in 1970, he was asked

to produce Moldovan national designs, although there was never a Moldovan architectural tradition.

We can find the roots of this decorative phenomenon in the concept, originally much more ambitious, of arts synthesis, which experienced a real renaissance and reinterpretation in the 1950s and 1960s. Russians are nourished by the writings of the American Paul Damaz (1917-2008) in the United States [13], or Michel Ragon (1924) whose works were published in the USSR in 1963 [14]. The same year, in the book *Aesthetic of the Socialist City* [15], Andrei Ikonnikov (1926-2001), devoted a chapter to the problem of the synthesis of the arts in the urban space. In the chapter "Stil' v arhitekture", Ikonnikov refers to the city as a complex "aesthetic symphony", where architecture is completed and extended by works of painting, sculpture, monumental and applied arts. For Ikonnikov, the last great style, which had created artistically homogeneous cities, was Gothic, and it is according to him with the Renaissance that the stylistic unity of the urban environment will disappear. He cites as contemporary models the monumental paintings of muralists Diego Rivera (1886-1957) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), which are based on a desire to renew the national traditions of Mexican art. Ikonnikov also mentions the artist Candido Portinari (1903-1962) who resurrected the use of azulejos in modern Brazilian architecture.

For Andrei Ikonnikov, the problem of the synthesis of the arts and the creation of a unified urban space can only be achieved by relying on traditions. He writes: "The feeling of decoration is closely linked with the popular roots of art. Each people has its own favorite color combinations and rhythmic variations, its own specific ornamental motifs, its systems of symbols and allegories. Constituted over centuries, they offer a rich space for the creative research of architects and artists" [16] and further in the text "The forms of interrelation and interaction of the arts correspond to the degree of development of the specific qualities of each art form. Mastery of past traditions should not be based on the use of individual techniques, but on a thorough understanding of the internal logic of the interaction between architecture and art, the foundation of which is the method of forming space" [17].

For Iouri Jaralov (1911-1983) this perception and construction of space would reflect a psychological state specific to each people [18]. In an article published in 1970 "About national features of architecture", Selim Han-Magomedov (1928-2011) also relies on the idea of the existence of a peoples' psychology, but explains that the national character is not an innate physiological fact, and derives less from ethnic kinship, than from the living conditions and concrete environment in which peoples live [19].

#### IV. INTERNATIONALIZATION OF SOVIET ARCHITECTURE AND POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT: A COMPLEXIFICATION OF THE DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL THEME

At the same time, Han-Magomedov describes a trend towards enlargement and rapprochement between the different national cultures of the USSR, which should lead to cultural cohesion in the USSR. Selim Han-Magomedov makes a clear distinction between a process of rapprochement and what would be a fusion of cultures, meaning their complete disappearance. This evolution is compared by Han-Magomedov to the processes of traditional crossbreeding, already observed in history. Han-Magomedov's two examples of national architecture illustrate very well his preferences for regional schools oriented towards modernity, experimentation and the inventiveness of new forms, in line with the development of new techniques. The Tarasova gora hotel in Kanev near Kiev (1961), does not cultivate the reminiscence of traditional architecture, but develops a relatively bold structural development. As for the Tashkent Palace of the Arts (architects Vladimir Berezin, Yuri Haldeev, Sergo Sutjagin and Dmitri Shuvaev, 1964-1965), its architecture offers a minimalist evocation, at the limit of abstraction, of the mausoleums with ribbed facades found in Central Asia. Han-Magomedov writes: "In these buildings there is no traditional form, but they can be fully considered as emblematic works of contemporary architecture in Ukraine and Uzbekistan". In other words, for Han-Magomedov, the value of a regional school lies in its ability to reinvent itself, to respond to the challenges of modernity, and in the talent of its architects.

Beyond the ideological dynamics within the Soviet system, the problem of the national was largely shaped by the context of a significant internationalization that characterized Soviet architecture in the 1960s. This internationalization will take different forms (close integration of Soviet architects into international professional networks, strong activity within the UIA and participation in many international architectural competitions). This coincides with the period of decolonization of the African and Asian continents, which will result in the export of many Soviet experts to these regions. This is a very significant phenomenon, but it is still insufficiently studied today. However, it allows us to get rid of the idea that the USSR was a periphery of the second modernism. In the 1960s, the USSR became a full player in the world architectural system, participating in an alternative internationalization to that of the West, particularly in the direction of emerging countries. The USSR is far from being the only actor in the development of this alternative architectural globalization. Countries of the communist bloc, such as Bulgaria, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, will export their specialists to post-colonial areas to a very large extent. Among the most representative examples is the action of Soviet and Bulgarian architects in the major programme for the reconstruction and extension of the city of Tunis, initiated in the 1960s by Habib Bourguiba.

In the post-colonial context, the defence of national and regional particularities becomes a weapon of emancipation in the face of the domination of Western cultural cosmopolitanism, embodied in architecture in the international style. On July 2, 1959, in a presentation to the Academy of Architecture, M.I. Rzânin stated: "The orientation of the development of capitalist architecture, from the levelling of abstraction, of the international style, towards the search for new paths for architectural creativity, was dictated by the economic and political changes that occurred after the Second World War. During this period, in parallel with the collapse of the imperialist colonial system, criticism of the abstract canons and cosmopolitan principles of the "international style" intensified. At the same time, there is an increasingly persistent tendency to seek ways to develop regional and local styles, reflecting the desire to link architecture to the historically developed culture, traditions and nature of countries, while simultaneously using the achievements of the international style... the process of regional style formation is developing in the most energetic and natural way in countries recently freed from colonial dependence" [20]. For Selim-Han Magomedov, it is precisely the arrival on the international scene of the formerly colonized countries of Africa and Asia, which is the main cause of this renewed interest for the question of the national specificities of each culture, including architectural, having acquired in this context, a very important political significance [21]. Khan-Magomedov raises the question of an architecture that would truly allow a dialogue of cultures. He said: "It is a pity that there have not been any experiments, where architects from Tbilisi, Kiev, Riga, Tashkent, Baku or Yerevan, have themselves worked on a Russian national architecture form: this would undoubtedly have produced interesting results, because the particularities of Russian national architecture would have been perceived and interpreted differently by architects from different peoples of our country" [22].

#### V. CONCLUSION

It is precisely in context of internationalization that in the 1960s and 1970s, we witnessed interesting crossbreeding within regional modernisms, embodying the Hegelian idea of a socialist architecture that was both national and international. In many ways, this architecture reverts to certain art deco sensibilities, with its taste for exotic evocations and hybridizations. The Karl Marx Library in Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan (1969-1974), designed by the architect Abdulla Akhmedov (1929-2007) as a Turkmen Parthenon, produces a particularly interesting synthesis of the arts, between the large bas-reliefs sculpted by Ernsts Neizvestnij (1925-2016) which embodied the idea of an "architecture-sculpture", and the Japanese garden, which seemed to rebuild a bridge between Asian cultures. This mix resonates with the Japanese garden of Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) for UNESCO headquarters in Paris, or with the Chinese gardens created by Viktor Andreev (1905-1988) and Kaleria Kislova (?), at the Chinese Embassy in Moscow, one of the finest examples of the interaction between exotic traditional forms and architectural modernism, in the mid-1950s. It should be noted that for these three architects, the

creation of Asian gardens had been an exercise of acculturation. These examples summarize very well the essence of the national form in second modernism, between the synthesis of the arts and the interpenetration of diverse traditions and modernities, inventiveness and constant play on forms, quotations and traditions, in a context of globalization already in a phase of multipolarization.

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