

Architecture of Soviet Avant-garde in the South of Russia: Past and Future

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Abstract—The study examines the architectures during 1920s-1930s in the south of Russia (a vast territory of the North-Caucasus and the Southern Federal Districts), in the context of issues of continuity, traditions and innovations. Both well-known architectural monuments designed by the leading masters of the country, and a wide layer of little-known objects are considered. It is concluded that although this period is usually associated with widespread avant-garde architecture, the influence of other stylistic movements (traditionalism, art deco) was also very great. A special place in the study is devoted to the problem of preserving the heritage. The study showed that only single objects are under state protection. Security status is not a guarantee of preservation of the monument. Moreover, the smaller the settlement is and the worse its economic condition is, the better the state of historical architectural objects will be.

Keywords—architecture of the South of Russia during 1920s-1930s; Soviet avant-garde; traditions; innovations; preserving the heritage

I. INTRODUCTION

The architecture of the Soviet avant-garde period between the 1920s and early 1930s draws more and more attention of Russian and foreign researchers. Theoretical and practical results of architectural and town-planning activity of this period are so considerable that was still sputtered out as material for scientific research, interest to this subject not only doesn't weaken, but also steadily grows. Although research of the architecture of the Soviet avant-garde has been quite active, entire regions have been very insignificantly represented in this research. South of Russia is one of such regions. Research on this topic was performed fragmentarily: as part of fundamental works on the history of the architecture of the Soviet avant-garde and the architecture of southern Russia [1], [2], [3], [4], they were limited to particular cities [5], [6], [7] and were dedicated to leading masters and their works, or separate monuments.

Over the past several years we carried out a large-scale study of architecture of this period in two federal districts: Southern Federal District and North Caucasus Federal District. The goals of the research project were as follows:

- to define, systematize, describe and enter into scientific discourse the numerous objects

(monuments, buildings and local urban construction units) of the mid-1920s~early 1930s;

- to catalog all the surviving works of architecture and urban construction of the 1920s~early 1930s;
- to assess the state of surviving objects of architecture and urban construction of the 1920s~early 1930s, and consider the options of registering them as objects of cultural heritage.

The following shows some of the most typical examples of the architectures in South Russia during 1920~1930s. Some objects have security status, while others do not. Some are in a tenable condition, while others are in an active stage of destruction. But in general, the given examples reflect features of the architecture itself, combining not only innovations, but also traditions, as well as the state of this heritage in our time.

II. ARCHITECTURAL OBJECTS WITH ASSIGNED STATUS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

A. *Drama Theatre Named After M. Gorky in Rostov-on-Don* (V.A. Schuko., V.G. Gelfreich. 1930~1935)

The building of the theatre is noted for a bright expressive image with the central embedded blank part and side glassed stairways brought forward ("Fig. 1"). After a series of improvements the form of the theatre building has a functionally perfect decision. The project is based upon the idea to locate the small auditorium in the front part of the building at the upper level above a lobby of the main auditorium and to arrange both entrances to the big and small halls from the front façade of the building. Separately located stairways are connected with the main building mass by means of bridge-galleries and lead to the lobby of the small auditorium. At the same time the galleries function as a display area. Open stairways and vehicle ramps lead to an entrance hall of the main auditorium located at the second level. Arranging one hall above the other made it possible to divide two streams of spectators and to provide a very compact, integral and monumental mass of the building. Both halls (the bigger one for 2250 seats, the smaller one for 860 seats) occupy the central mass of the building, marked by a blank "forehead" of the main façade, hanging over floor-to-ceiling glazing of the lobby with sides ornamented

with frame also relieve created by S.G. Korolkov. Solid surface of theatre “forehead” made it possible to use it as a screen for advertising purposes and film projections. The unique character of the theatre represents itself also in the fact that the volume of this building in avant-garde forms helped to solve a number of important city-planning tasks on the basis of classical principles and with consideration of the historically developed regular structure of Rostov central part. Unfortunately, the restoration of this outstanding Soviet avant-garde monument carried out in recent years doesn't hold up against any criticism and rather leads to a loss of its authenticity.



Fig. 1. Gorky Theatre (current state).

B. Health Resort Hotel in Sochi (A.V. Shchusev, D.D. Bulgakov. 1927-1928)

The location for the building was picked on the right foothill in the estuary of the Matsesta River 160 m above sea level. An extended rectangular building situated from the north to the south on the construction site housed hotel rooms, a lobby with an office, a dining hall, a library with a reading hall, a lodge, toilets, servant rooms, and bathrooms and so on.

The main building oriented to the south has an expressive semi-cylindrical volume with a dining hall functioning as a restaurant, a kitchen and various multifunctional rooms. The restaurant has two open half-round verandas overlooking the sea and the surrounding territory. The main entrance as well as access to it was arranged from the side of the yard. Having architectural decision based upon principles of modern architecture, the health resort building is functional and expressive at the same time — this all is due to excellent proportions, active sculptural development and details. Subdued forms of balconies and staircase risalits resemble the art deco style.

Nowadays this monument of federal significance is in a sad state — it is devastated and desolate (“Fig. 2”).



Fig. 2. Main façade element of the health resort in Sochi (current state).

C. Health Resort “Gorny Vozdukh (Mountain Air)” in Sochi (A.A. Vesnin, L.A. Vesnin. 1928-1930)

The project of the health resort “Gomy Vozdukh (Mountain Air)” was developed by Alexander and Leonid Vesnin in 1928, during the period of when constructivist functional method was flourishing. As opposed to pavilion planning structure popular among constructivists, the health resort plan has a compact L-shaped plan configuration. The volume is simple and utterly rational. The group of medical facilities of the health resort is situated on the ground floor. The entrance with a hall is located in the corner part of the building and is practically not defined on the façade. “Gomy Vozdukh (Mountain Air)” health resort has one of the most rational architectural decisions as compared to other numerous health resorts in Sochi (however, the overwhelming majority of them has historical forms). Despite the fact that the building is being used, it actually remains in a state of failure.

D. The Central Health Resort of RKKA (The Workers' and Peasants' Red Army) Named After K.E. Voroshilov in Sochi (M. I. Merzhanov. 1930-1934)

The central health resort of RKKA (The Workers' and Peasants' Red Army) named after K.E. Voroshilov was considered to be the largest one in the USSR (for 700 guests) at the moment of its opening and was called “The giant” by its own project designer. It is located in one of the best spots of the resort region of Sochi-Matsesta, its front is oriented to the south-west, towards the sea, and it occupies the territory of 75 ha and has height difference from 0 to 170 m above sea level.

The building of the health resort dominates on the hillside coming down to the sea coast line. It is a fully functional complex composed of buildings of various profiles. All 7 main buildings located above the present-day Kurortny Avenue create a picturesque multidimensional and almost symmetrical composition. In front of the main building there is a starting platform of a cable-railway with

side stairs coming down towards the sea. The buildings interact with landscape by means of open verandas, retaining walls, staircase descent, and viewing platforms which are connected to expressive level-space in the central part. Dynamic diverse greenery is combined with balustrades, fountains, pergolas, summerhouses, sculptures and so on. Below the avenue there was planned an open concert venue, a residential house for the staff, a garage, a greenhouse, a water station, a beach and so on. In the 1930s the critics used mostly one term while describing such type of architecture, constructivism. Nevertheless, though obviously belonging to modern architecture, the work of Merzhanov definitely has traces of art-deco influence. Currently the health resort is used for the purpose intended. However, the appearance of the building has been substantially altered by random repairs and requires restoration.

E. Health Resort No.10 "For Industrialization" in Kislovodsk (M.I. Roslavlev, I.A. Fomin. 1928-1929)

Health resort No.10 "For industrialization" is the most modernistic one in creative activity of Ivan Fomin. A supporter of his own "proletarian classics", he does not use any order elements — exteriorly this architecture looks up-to-date. An extended building of a complex plan configuration is based upon the corridor-type arrangement. The main entrance is north-oriented towards the present-day Mira Avenue, with a characteristic semi cylindrical volume — a technique replicated in the Soviet architecture of that period dozens if not hundreds of times. Cylindrical volume of the entrance group is embedded on the level of the ground floor due to a vast gallery. On the first floor the dining hall is located. Plastic façade decision from the inland area side is more rational than from the outside.

The building of the former health resort "For industrialization" was completed in a neo classical way and no traces of its modernistic look remain.

F. Health Resort Named After A.P. Smirnov in Zheleznovodsk (M.I. Roslavlev, I.A. Fomin. 1927-1929)

I.A. Fomin figures in the history of Soviet avant-garde architecture as an inventor of "proletarian classics". Reconstructing the familiar order he chooses not to use column bases and head-pieces of columns; and the problem of visual harmonization of a straight column stretched to reach the height of modern multistoried buildings is solved by means of its duplication — a paired column with insignificant diameter appears monumental. This is exactly the technique used by Fomin (co-authored by M. Roslavlev) in designing and developing of health resort named after A. P. Smirnov (later called "Udarnik (a super productive worker)", nowadays — "Zdorovie (Health)". Besides, Fomin pulls one more of his favorite tricks — he fixes abutting ends of eastern and western buildings with tower prism volumes. Currently the health resort is used for the purpose intended. The appearance of the building has been slightly altered.

G. Health Resort of NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) in Kislovodsk (M.I. Merzhanov. the Early 1930s)

Health resort belonging to People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs was built in Kislovodsk in the early 1930s at the height of the Soviet avant-garde, and this is perhaps the most "constructivist" object among the works of Miron Merzhanov as rationality of the form is concerned. At the same time this health resort of NKVD is practically symmetrical in plan — the strongest arranging means of classics is revealed here even more actively than in the central health resort of RSKA (The Workers' and Peasants' Red Army) named after K.E. Voroshilov located in Sochi. Symmetry, frontality, center accentuation — all the main elements of the classics composition are present. But once deviated from the central axis — everything changes — this is a modern building with a complex space-volume composition which no suggestion of classical statics.

Today, this monument is in an abandoned and dilapidated state ("Fig. 3").



Fig. 3. The former health resort of NKVD (current state).

H. Narkomtiazhprom (People's Commissariat for Heavy industry) Health Resort Institution (Named After G. K. Ordzhonikidze) in Kislovodsk (Project Directed by M. Y. Ginzburg. 1935-1938)

Narkomtiazhprom (People's Commissariat for Heavy industry of the USSR) health resort (from 1941, named after G. K. Ordzhonikidze) in Kislovodsk was built in the period of post-constructivism. Though ornamental and order elements are used in decoration of façade surfaces they are stylized and maximally simplified. This is one of the best examples of the pre-war Soviet architectural practice.

The health resort is situated on a brim of a wide plateau over a steep slope of Rebrovaya Balka. The main elements of the health resort are three buildings constructed in an arc form on a cliff — two bedroom buildings and one medical one in the middle between them. The central medical

building consists of two cubic contents — an arched-formed one in plan moved to the main southern façade (medical rooms), and a cylindrical one located behind it (bathrooms) with an inner round patio. The volumes are completed in different levels; they are connected by means of a staircase with a passage over a driveway in a short isthmus.

The shape of the medical building is contrasted with the volume of the side buildings — it is lower, it has a facade bending and besides, because it is shifted inward as related to the side buildings, there is a small cour d'honneur in front of it. The façade is symmetrical, the main axis of the building complex starts from its entry portal; a famous staircase by Ivan Leonidov is running down the slope in cascades along it. The health resort is relatively well preserved, but requires high-quality restoration ("Fig. 4").



Fig. 4. Main Building No.1. Entrance Group and Concert Hall (current state).

III. ARCHITECTURAL OBJECTS WITHOUT ASSIGNED STATUS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

A. *Gynecological Health Resort in Saki (G. B. Barkhin, M. G. Barkhin. 1927-1932)*

Gynecological health resort in the town of Saki in the Crimea has architectural decision of one building though principles of pavilion planning pattern can be easily traced in its extended volume - a canteen unit (in a design scheme) is connected with the main building by means of a glassed-in passage. This is architecture based upon constructivist principles with a pronounced modernist style.

Not everything planned in this project was successfully accomplished. Nowadays the building of this health resort designed by G. B. Barkhin and M. G. Barkhinis is in the condition which can be hardly visually identified with its prototype.

B. *Educational-experimental State Grain Farm No. 2 in Zernograd (V.I. Eramishantsev, P.A. Golosov, N.M. Vavirovsky, F.N. Andreev, A.M. Kryilov. 1929~the Early 1930s)*

Construction of an educational-experimental state grain farm No.2 started near "Verbliud (Camel)" railway station of North Caucasus railroad 70 km away from Rostov-on-Don in 1929 thus laying the foundation of the town of Zernograd. All the buildings were divided into three main groups: public, industrial and residential. The residential area of the state

farm was located in northern part which provided its isolation from dust and gases of the industrial area situated in southern part of the settlement. All kinds of public services and amenities were provided for — central heating, hot and cold running water, wastewater sewerage.

Unlike typical state farms of Zernotrest (State Association of Soviet Grain Farms), the residential area of the future Zernograd was developed mostly with 2-3-storeyed buildings — sectional (apartments) and residence halls. The author of the majority of public and residential buildings was Panteleimon Golosov. Residential structures of the settlement have attributes of constructivist architecture. These attributes are even intensified in the architecture of public and industrial buildings — a communal kitchen with an expressive semi-cylindrical volume oriented towards the square, a repair shop and especially the main building of the institute of mechanical engineers of socially-owned farming dominating over surrounding housing development.

The unique fact is that the overwhelming majority of buildings and structures of the first years of Zernograd construction (over 30) have remained intact or almost unchanged until the present day, but none of them is under state protection.

C. *Factory Kitchen in Tikhoretsk (The End of the 1920s~the Early 1930s)*

Factory kitchens, buildings of a new type, included both production areas for cooking dinners, prepared food and a canteen. During the 1930s factory kitchens were built in many southern cities and towns of Russia. For example, in a small town of Tikhoretsk of Krasnodar krai a factory kitchen is in operation even nowadays. Its undamaged condition is unique for an object of a constructivist period. It is performed with application of prism volume of a staircase with a corner glazing characteristic of the early 1930s ("Fig. 5").



Fig. 5. The factory kitchen in Tikhoretsk (current state).

D. *Palace of Culture of Railway Workers in Belorechensk (the End of the 1920s)*

Built during the period of constructivism Palace of culture of railway workers in Belorechensk is stylistically very close to art nouveau buildings. In this case it is most likely a typical example of the so-called professional

thinking delayed response. And there are lots of such examples even in the end of the 1920s, clearly supporting the idea of I. A. Azizian who observed relative stability of architecture at critical stages of cultural evolution. At the present moment the building of Palace of culture retained the state very close to its original condition. A deplorable fact: the smaller the town and the scarcer investment in its development, the better is the condition of historical architecture.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study yielded the following results and allowed us to make the following main conclusions:

First, since one of the main tasks of the study was to analyze the most significant avant-garde samples and reflect the range of professional views of that era, stylistic heterogeneity of the architecture of that period, the research focused not only on those monuments that are considered “modern” architecture. Leading architects of the country — A. Shchusev, I. Fomin, A. and L. Vesnins, G. Barkhin, V. Shchuko, V. Gelfreich, I. and P. Golosovs, M. Merzhanov and others, whose work was widely represented in the South of Soviet Russia, had created excellent truly avant-garde buildings, which, in one way or another, had been covered in studies of previous years. However, the share of such buildings in the total number is too small, and our research uncovered a layer of architecture which had been practically unknown until recently, which possesses out of the ordinary, unique qualities. And we do not mean here ordinary buildings which were built in great numbers during that period.

Second, the South Russia saw fierce combat in WWII, and many buildings, constructions and infrastructure objects were destroyed. Moreover, as reconstruction started after the war, with historicism being the leading style in Soviet architecture, most of the avant-garde buildings that were damaged but survived, were rebuilt in the spirit of that school. As a result, a large number of buildings that belonged to the avant-garde style were lost forever.

After the war, and especially during the last decades of the Soviet period, many of the buildings were operated in such a chaotic fashion that owners of the buildings either rebuilt them beyond recognition or demolished them altogether. Moreover, the scale of these destructive actions was so significant that they could be considered a second major wave of loss of architectural avant-garde monuments comparable in scale with war-time devastation.

Third, the topic of retaining the cultural heritage of the avant-garde period was one of top priority for our research. It is for this reason that the study was carried out in close cooperation with DOCOMOMO Russia (International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement) and Schusev State R&D Museum of Architecture. The study included eight expeditions, more than 70 communities, and it showed that most buildings of certain historical and cultural value are not being protected as heritage. For instance, in Zernograd (Rostov Region)

leading Soviet architects built an entire town, which survives to this day (more than 30 buildings, most created by P.A. Golosov). None of the buildings is considered a cultural heritage site. The attempts to declare those or other buildings heritage sites were vehemently opposed by the residents as well as (paradoxical as it may sound) by the Ministry of Culture (its Rostov branch), the very body responsible for defining heritage sites and organizing their protection.

Fourth, unfortunately, even the officially protected buildings cannot be guaranteed survival. The building of the Gorky Drama Theater in Rostov, despite its status as the cultural heritage object of federal significance, and despite it being used for its intended purpose and regular restorations, has been dilapidated for many years. Moreover, the research found the opposite being true: the smaller the city, and the further away are investments, the better is the state of historical architecture. For instance, as of the date of the study, the Club of Railway Workers in Belorechensk and the Kitchen Factory in Tikhoretsk (Krasnodar Krai) were in virtually ideal condition.

Fifth, the monuments of Soviet architecture of the 1920-1930s that remain largely dilapidated show the attitude of the Russian society to cultural heritage. This is true of the major avant-garde monuments, but even more so of ordinary buildings of the 1920s, which is quite unique and peculiar not only for ordinary residents but even for specialists. The residents, who had stayed in these buildings for decades, usually do not appreciate, understand or notice architecture as it is in these buildings. Even the agencies charged with protection of cultural monuments often do not give the architecture of this period the appreciation it deserves. The problem here is that most city residents do not consider modern architecture as part of cultural heritage. They are accustomed to calling only historic buildings true heritage. The austere character of ordinary buildings of the 1920s was heavily criticized even during the period of their initial construction (the term “box architecture” was used to describe the style).

This was especially true of the mass-scale architecture of residential buildings, which often was of poor construction quality. All these problems deserve conscientious efforts to popularize architectural and construction projects of those years among the general public and the authorities. Separate buildings as well as large city districts must be listed as cultural heritage as well.

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