

Study on the Formation of the Scientific Concept of the History of Architecture and Urban Planning of the Soviet Period*

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Abstract—The article discusses the change in scientific approaches to the study of architecture and urban planning of the Soviet era, characteristic of the research of the last three decades. The discussion at the round table in 1991 where the methodological issues of the study of Soviet architecture have been seriously raised for the first time is taken as a “starting point”. The qualitative change of approaches can be associated, first of all, with the opportunity for historians to take a new research position, to look at the phenomenon of Soviet architecture “from the outside”, with the necessary time distance. It is shown that the attitude to the subject of research has been gradually changing not so much evaluatively but axiologically. It has been not so much rethought, but expanded and integrated into the complex socio-cultural context of the Soviet era. The desire to overcome the “knowledge exhaustion syndrome” in regard to the Soviet architecture and attract new types of historical sources is revealed. Such phenomena as the complication of the principles of the periodization of Soviet architecture, as well as a significant increase in attention to the manifestation of regional features within the unifying influence of the general architectural and urban trends of the Soviet time are considered.

Keywords—*architecture and urban planning of the Soviet period; image of the city; management of urban development; urban design methodology; history of architecture; scientific conceptions of history*

I. INTRODUCTION

The attitude of the society to the practice of Soviet architecture largely depends on how the new concept of the history of architecture and urban planning of the Soviet time is formed, and how this heritage appears before us today. Undoubtedly, scientific approaches to Soviet architecture have changed significantly over the three decades that have passed since the beginning of the Perestroika processes in

Russia. Enough time has passed since the historians dealing with Soviet architecture, ceased to be part of that system. They have got the opportunity to take a different research position, look at the phenomenon of Soviet architecture as if “from the outside”, keeping the necessary historical distance. In this regard, we have the right to ask — what has changed today in our understanding of Soviet architecture and the methods of its study? This is a little researched topic, and, of course, it cannot be fully covered in one small article, so only a few considerations can be presented on this issue.

II. FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

How can we determine what has changed qualitatively in those studies of Soviet architecture, which have been conducted in the post-Soviet period — dissertations, planned scientific works carried out at Scientific Research Institute of the Theory and History of Architecture and Urban Planning (NIITAG), Moscow Architectural Institute and other research centers? Fortunately, we have something to compare the current situation with. It is the joint Round table held in April 1991 which has been organized by VNIITAG (now NIITIAG), Union of Architects and Moscow Architectural Institute. It was called “Problems of Studying the History of Soviet Architecture”. The materials of the round table have been published shortly after as a collection of works [1]. The event actually went far beyond the format of the round table, arousing a great interest — almost 70 scientists including foreign ones expressed their opinions in one way or another.

What is so interesting about this event today? It has recorded a very important moment in the development of the professional consciousness of historians of Soviet architecture: first, it has been the first attempt to sum up some of the results of the development of Russian architecture in the twentieth century (and according to the observations of historical science, this happens, as a rule, in the last decade of the century); second, (more importantly) — it has been the first attempt of the historians of Soviet architecture to develop a reflective attitude towards the goals and methods of their work, to think about how to work in new social and cultural conditions. We can say that in

* 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 1.2.3.

psychological terms it has been both a "transition point", where the old was intertwined with the new, and a "point of no return" — just a few months later the Soviet Union has collapsed, and it became obvious that a new social reality has begun.

The most important in the discussion at the round table have been two interrelated issues that had a conceptual significance: *"What should be the name of the discipline that historians of Soviet architecture are engaged in?"* and *"Is it necessary to rethink the subject of the history of Soviet architecture in the new conditions?"*

The desire to break out of the shackles of isolationism, in which the history Soviet architecture, as well as the Soviet architecture itself have existed, to get rid of the evaluative and ideological components of that activities, was felt then by everyone, and therefore the name of the discipline proposed during the discussion: *"The History of the National Architecture of the Newest Times"* (Volchok Y. P.) has been enthusiastically grasped and supported by many participants.

During the discussion the participants have suggested that the separation of Soviet architecture from the global flow has been an immanent property of the Soviet architecture, and once the ideological prerequisites for that have disappeared, then there has been nothing to isolate — everything was a single flow of history. Others disagreed with that statement and said that the huge cycle of the specific historical experiment connected with a number of ethical problems has ended, and that a special toolset was necessary for its analysis.

III. IN NEW CONDITIONS

The years that have passed since those disputes and specific historical and architectural studies have shown that it is impossible to get away from the phenomenality of Soviet architecture and its "specificity", no matter how hard we strive to integrate it into the context of certain world trends and trace the threads of mutual influences. There is still a certain "core" of fundamental qualities that distinguish this phenomenon, and one of the serious challenges we face today is to understand the structure of this core.

Nevertheless, the invaluable understanding of Soviet architecture as a kind of the "melting pot" of ideas, laid down in the title *"The History of Russian architecture of Modern times"* has been the most acceptable at that times. But today the name *"The History of Architecture of the Soviet Period"*, becomes more widespread, thereby as though designating, on the one hand, a historical distance between the researcher and his object, and on the other — the completeness and integrity of this object, despite inherent internally contradicting features.

The question of whether to rethink the subject of the history of Soviet architecture, at that time has also caused much more excitement than it does now. The memories of conjunctural reconsiderations and reassessments, which, as we know, the academician of architecture, Ikonnikov A. V. has named with a marine term — a "sudden turn", have been

then too fresh. Therefore, the question of rethinking caused rather a negative reaction.

The time that has passed since then show that in historical and architectural studies, firstly, gradually formed not so much an evaluative, but a holistic-axiological attitude towards the subject of research, the realization of its interrelation with the complex historical and cultural context, as well as a preferably objectivist position of the researcher seeking not to evaluate, but explain a certain phenomenon; secondly, there has been a gradual expansion of the subject of research taking place. Shortly speaking, in the scope of the historian there have been not only traditional for the architectural studies of the Soviet time "what?" and "how?" questions but also the "why?" question has appeared. Moreover, the subject of the study has started to include not only a set of "objects", like buildings, projects or texts, but also "operational mechanisms", sometimes subjugating and changing those "objects" beyond recognition. The separation of the desired and the actual in Soviet architecture — is, in our opinion, one of the most profound conceptual changes in the work of historians in recent years [2].

The transformation of the subject of the history of Soviet architecture is closely related to the other three topics, which have been actively discussed at the round table in 1991. These are the *volume and the level of study of the factual body of knowledge about Soviet architecture; the accuracy of the projects', buildings', events', etc. datings; principles of the periodization of the history of Soviet architecture.*

As for the study of historical material, in particular, it has been suggested that the main body of knowledge had been already developed and further changes would follow the path of clarification, identification of connections, etc. That has resulted in the focus on individual "achievements" of Soviet architecture and the ensuing descriptions of the best architectural works in the capitals and major cities of the country characteristic of the official historical and architectural publications of the past years. But even at that times, a different point of view has prevailed stating that: *"We know too little about the history of Soviet architecture and these gaps need to be filled"*.

The years that have passed since then have revealed a clear desire of the historians of Soviet architecture to overcome the so to call it, the "knowledge exhaustion syndrome", which has developed in the Soviet period [3]. Moreover, the expansion of the factual field is carried out not only by increasing attention to the 1930s-1950s [4], but also to the later periods of the history of Soviet architecture [5]. The range of sources used is rapidly expanding, which start to include such documents as official institutional correspondence, materials of industrial departments, state and public organizations, memoirs of participants of events, etc. [6]. Local archives are being increasingly investigated.

Within the general levelling tendencies of Soviet architecture, researchers examine regional characteristics, which have significantly influenced local patterns of architectural development. It is no secret that the timelines of many specific historical and architectural studies devoted to the peculiarities of particular regions of Russia, as a rule,

interrupt at the turn of 1917 – as the “break” of the foundations of life in the Soviet era seems too radical, with local features completely erased. This trend is changing today slowly but steadily. The understanding comes that despite the schematism and repeatability of many architectural and urban planning decisions, implemented in the Soviet period, regional features, still have definitely manifested themselves. Such factors as the landscape, climate, the level of the development of the urban base, local architectural and urban traditions that have formed specific cities, and finally, just the reluctance of the regional authorities and urban workers to accept the instructions of the “Center” — uncritically created a complex and ambiguous picture of the urban formation in the regions, worthy of a separate close study [7].

IV. PRACTICAL ISSUES

The overall picture of architecture and urban planning of the Soviet period is gradually changing, but even now historians face a lot of practical issues here — first of all, the loss of geopolitical unity of the country, the loss of historians in the former Soviet republics and often a general negative attitude to the study of the history of architecture of the Soviet period there.

No less difficult is the situation with the loss of documentary sources on the history of Soviet architecture that have formed over the years. There are problems with accurate dating, and, therefore, accurate chronology and identification of actual relationship between events and phenomena. The “Architectural life”, given the many extraordinary ideas and projects that have not found their implementation in the practice of Soviet architecture, is an integral and perhaps the most interesting part of the content of the architectural and urban planning process of the Soviet period.

The problem of the periodization of the history of Soviet architecture is directly related to the accuracy of dating. This topic has been discussed at the 1991 round table as one of the most important. The possibility of moving away from old methods and techniques of historians who formed a “zigzag-like” picture of the development of Soviet architecture, with sharp polar changes in estimates, with the denial of all previous “achievements” has been linked to the periodization research in particular. The practice of periodization of Soviet architecture by the Party and governmental resolutions has been unanimously recognized as vicious. Many speakers have spoken about the blurring of chronological and substantive boundaries, about the internal driving forces of the architectural process.

It has been suggested in particular that the years are clearly critical should not actually be located at the beginning or an end, but in the middle of the “epicenter” of the chronological period (Volchok Y. P.). For example, the roots of the “Creative Reorganisation of Soviet Architecture” (the so-called transition to industrial housing) in the mid-1950s actually go back to the 1930s-1940s, when its upper chronological boundary-perhaps is located at the turn of the 1950s-1960s. At this time, there has already been a

significant interest in the artistic qualities of the environment of historical cities, although in practice, industrial housing construction has just begun to unfold.

Obviously, it is possible to express the idea that there is no and cannot be a single, ones established periodization. It all depends on the tasks set by the researcher, and on that element of the overall structure of the architectural and urban planning process, which a researcher takes as a core.

But the principle of multiple vision of the history of Soviet architecture itself brings us to the arguably most important question discussed at the round table in 1991: a question of linking the facts into a new, modern concept of history. Rather, at that time it had been interpreted as the creation of an array of authentic, personal concepts opposed to the dead historical scheme of the Soviet period. There have even been plans to publish a collective monograph entitled “Concepts of the History of Soviet Architecture”. That book has really come out 5 years later, in 1996, and the names of the authors had been deliberately put in alphabetical order, as if emphasizing the equal right to the existence of all points of view. But it has been called differently: “XX century. Images of the History of Russian Architecture”, which seems much more accurate in relation to its content [8]. Indeed, these are individual images of the history of Soviet architecture, not holistic scientific concepts, which, of course, does not make this book less interesting. And it is unlikely that such concepts could be created immediately, in response to a specially assigned super-complex task.

It seems that during all the past years the process of forming a new modern concept of the history of Soviet architecture as the product of a collective scientific creativity has been slowly but steadily going. It seems that the plurality of the authors’ visions today is necessary mainly in order to repeatedly change the optics in various kinds of research, to try identify the most common, fundamental properties of Soviet architecture, manifested at all stages of its development, despite all its fluctuations and self-denial as fully as possible. A few years ago, the author of this article has attempted to conduct such an experiment with the material of Soviet urban planning. The analysis has revealed the presence of a number of stable professional urban planning mental structures, which remained independent of the dominant urban concept and architectural trends. Those results have been presented on Ikonnikovskie readings in NIITIAG and later published [9].

The processes of commonality and continuity of the various stages of Soviet architecture are not so obvious, they are hidden from superficial observation, but they have certainly taken place and should be closely monitored — only in this case, we will be able to talk about the creation of the modern holistic concept of the history of Soviet architecture.

V. CONCLUSION

The modern concept of the history of Soviet architecture is in the stage of formation, with all its integrity evolving naturally. It is open to changes and additions. In a sense, this

is a pioneering work, because it is ahead of, or at least on a par with, the development of the typology of Soviet culture, on which, it should actually have to rely. The process of forming the concept of the social history of the Soviet time is now also under development. In this sense, historical and architectural studies are sometimes at the avant-garde, referring to the materials, which are almost out of the field of view of social historians.

There are the fundamental publications, which seem to grasp the synchronous slice of the state of the professional consciousness of historians of Soviet architecture. For the Soviet period — this is the 12th volume of the General History of Architecture, published in the mid-1970s, for the transition period — the anniversary book-album “Soviet Architecture of 1917-1987”, published for the 70th anniversary of the Revolution. There is no opportunity to give a comparative analysis of these books in such a small article, although conceptually it might be very indicative.

But the large-scale conference on the architecture of the Stalinist Era, which has been held in NIITAG few years ago and gathered more than 40 researchers, and a large collection of works issued shortly after has showed that we, apparently, can state the end of a certain stage, which has been characterized by a fairly politicized attitude to Soviet architecture in general and to the architecture of the “Stalinist Era”, in particular, as something that had been entirely determined by the instructions from above. This phenomenon is gradually rising in its entirety and ambiguity, attracting an increasing number of researchers primarily with the complexity of the relationship between the creativity and the system of humanitarian values underlying the architectural profession, with the conditions of social and political life of the country, to put it mildly, which did not have the freedom of expression. This is evidenced by the collective monograph in two volumes published in 2018 devoted to the pre-war Soviet urban planning [10].

Modern research in the history of Soviet architecture not only answers the questions once stated, but also raises new, unthinkable in the Soviet period, so this fascinating process continues.

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