

## SOME OBSERVATIONS

### BY AN ARCHITECT

In the past few decades world architecture has seen radical changes as the result of industrialization, standardization and mass production. For Soviet architecture this half century of scientific and technical revolution along with the growth of economic potential has been the most fruitful in its history. If we return to the past and try to form a judgment on the urbanism of our day we will no doubt see that what is offered us by new cities, modern residential zones and social amenities corresponds to our dreams of the cities of the future. From the point of view of the past, we have only to look at the zones of Yassenevo, Tropariovo, the Olympic village or the civic centers of Tashkent or Navoi.

The urbanistic achievements of this last quarter century are enormous. We are living in a world in which space, distance and architectural norms and forms are different. Our ideas as to the quality of housing and comfort in working conditions in factory or services have changed: we have other esthetic ideals.

However, the dreamed-of future is one thing and our appreciation of it is something else. The latter depends on the new ideals suggested by concrete experience and opposes to

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

present reality a new vision of the future that, because of its positive and critical content, has an effect on later developments. Consequently, it is logical that some of the aspects of our environment are satisfactory and others are not, or merely leave us indifferent.

#### WITH REGARD TO THE ORDINARY AND THE EXCEPTIONAL

If we believe the sad story of the creators of St. Basil's Cathedral (blinded so that they could not reproduce the same building elsewhere) the idea of the ingratitude and pitiless cruelty brings up another, namely, what monstrous forms the desire to prevent the repetition of a unique piece of architecture can take. Contemporary society, however, is fortunately more clement with regard to its architects. They may reproduce their own works or those of others in all tranquillity. Not only do they run no risk, it is even probable that they will be rewarded for their activity.

For hundreds, even thousands, of years humanity has selected and accumulated architectural treasures unique to each city, while we, in a relatively short historical span, have overwhelmed the differing aspects of cities with a flood of standardization. If we want to overcome this deplorable situation in which the past is opposed to the present; if we want to bring about harmony between the old and the new; if we want to ameliorate the esthetics of urban environment, we must ask ourselves how we arrived at this point and how we may put an end to it.

To rectify existing contradictions we must first understand and then resolve the problem of interaction between the exceptional and the standardized. To tell the truth, this interaction has always existed; it is inherent in the nature of architecture. There is no need to be a particularly attentive observer to see that certain details, elements and forms repeat themselves. In large complex constructions entire sections are repeated following a determined logic. In some old cities there are sections in which the buildings are partially or totally identical. This is nothing new. Furthermore, this professional process—creation of a rhythm of identical forms—is one of the most powerful means of architectural expression. However, the buildings we have inherited from the past do not appear to us stereotyped, banal, boring and inex-

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pressive: we cannot reproach them with these epithets as we do the buildings in urban zones of today. No doubt the reason for this is that in the past the repetition—whether of decorative motifs, elements of construction or entire buildings—followed from original models created for the circumstance and not with models that were uniform, once and for all, as is the case today.

In the past, the extraordinary diversity of architecture was determined by many factors, the presence of only one of them in an architectural form sufficing to determine its unique character. The most important factors were those of time and style. The first confers the characteristic forms that are proper to the creations of a given period. As for the second, it depends both on the nature of the situation of the city, the purpose of the buildings and the personal preferences of the architects. Style united cities having different natural conditions, buildings with certain specific uses and architects with different personal preferences. The unity of style derived from a common inspiration at the level of form, and we may easily distinguish antiquity from Gothic from Empire, for example.

There may be a wealth of forms within the same style. This offers many possibilities for original interpretation to the architect as regards his personal taste, the characteristics of the city and the intended purpose of the construction. Style is a source of diversity; the location of the city—climate, landscape, environment, available materials for construction—is a source of unity. We often see different, even contrasting characteristics in the architectural aspects of neighboring localities. Vladimir and Souzdal are different; Munich and Nuremberg are not the same; Venice and Vicenza offer contrasts.

Other sources of diversity are national or cultural; the way of life and religious aspects have also contributed. Cities differ from each other in the kind of work that is done in them, their historical past and their evolution, whether expansion or regression.

Differences in architecture may also be explained by the different uses for which buildings are intended. It is obvious that we cannot apply the same architectural details, the same plastic language or the same rhythm to a palace, a place of worship, a private dwelling and a fortress. Here it is function that determines style.

All architectural conception is realized with technical means proper to a period and a region. In the past, there were no materials comparable to ours: diversity in form was assured by the hand of man. The architect, too, was a powerful source of diversity in form. Each master had his own tastes, his preferred procedures and his way of creating. This is clearly seen in works by masters such as Kazakov, Bajenov, Quarenghi, Rossi, Stasov and other talented architects. The role played by the ideas and concepts of the clients themselves should not be overlooked either. Patrons were eager to help and encourage their architects, but the latter in exchange had to bow to the tastes and whims of their protectors who demanded exceptional constructions to confirm their prestige.

After having examined the different factors that are at the origin of the incomparable character of the cities and buildings that we have inherited, let us examine in their light the situation of contemporary architecture.

The factors of time and style are today universal constants. When we speak of present-day architectural style, we have difficulty in defining its characteristics and in giving it a name. It is certain that architectural practices of the last twenty-five years are complex and often contradictory. Various artistic tendencies have appeared, and an evolution in style is undeniable. It is nonetheless true that the architecture we see around us reflects, for the most part, the characteristics of our age, particularly its marked tendency to give priority to technique. Perhaps no better word can be found than "technicism" to qualify contemporary architectural style.

Descended in a straight line from the scientific and technical revolution, it has relegated to second place everything emotional or artistic and ignored all regional, national and at times even social reference in creating architectural forms. Most modern buildings have a schematic aspect; they are stripped of all ornamentation, and rationality is expressed in a mechanical and precise way with no solicitude for esthetic or adequately artistic form. This is indeed in the truest sense technicism, by its very nature the antithesis of diversity and the source of repetition and uniformity. The style that has been formed in the last twenty-five years continues to multiply identical structures.

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The diversity formerly created by a site is ignored today. Actually, the natural milieu in which old cities developed has not lost its singularity; we know how different the locations are in which new cities rise. However, this factor is no longer taken into account, even though the site retains its originality. It is neutralized by the repetition of monotonous standard constructions that follow each other along the highways: four high buildings (the larger the town the taller the buildings) followed by four long, low houses (the smaller the town the lower the houses), then four more tall buildings, and so on. In short, urban monotony. Public buildings are also deprived of character.

It goes without saying that architects consider the building site as one of the fundamental factors of an architectural form. If a large number of deplorable errors have recently been committed in our cities it is because the environment has too often been neglected: space, means of access, landscape and neighboring constructions may have important architectural or historical value. Each of these external factors must be considered in the composition, because each has an influence on the general orientation of the structure and its interior organization. However, these data cannot be taken into consideration in typical projects, in which the environment is set aside. The author of a standard type of construction has no information on the matter. Public buildings are erected on the basis of abstract schematic directions that accompany the projects—the same buildings that in the past were distinguished for the originality of their conception and still figure among the interesting sights of a city. The originality of location disappears under the uniform aspect of the buildings; functional diversity also disappears. The same structures and the same procedures are found in buildings intended for completely different functions. Thus the buildings on “stilts” that are so prevalent today may house museums, theaters, commercial centers or administrative offices. The interior arrangement of private homes does not escape the rule of uniformity. The original models of doors, windows, lighting fixtures and furniture that were formerly conceived especially for each building have been completely standardized. Monuments—willingly undertaken by modern architects—are the only works in which the hand of man intervenes.

The effects of industrialization are seen in the general uniformity of construction.

Is there still a place for artistic inspiration? Can the work of different architects be distinguished?

Fortunately, there are encouraging signs that the profession is not completely deprived of original work, whether at the level of homes, urban zones or entire cities, but the cases are rare. Out of a dozen or so new towns that appear each year in Russia there is a real success only once every five or ten years, which means that the number of successes is not more than one percent.

It seldom happens that a building is conceived taking into account its setting; that the technical means used are submitted to esthetic criteria; and that the architect profits from conditions that permit him to express his personality as an artist. It should be just the opposite: what is the exception today should become the rule. The evolution of our architecture, though slow, is undeniably moving in this direction, and wherever this aspiration is recognized we see it in the results.

We could ask ourselves if the negative aspects of present-day urbanization are not due to a fervent desire to solve a pressing social problem, that of housing. Are they justified by this necessity? We do not think so. There is another complex social imperative, that of not only furnishing society with comfortable houses, apartments and rooms, but of also furnishing it with elements that can diversify and esthetically improve the habitat. This task should be accomplished in all cities, old or new, in Siberia or in the Far East. When we lose sight of this principle and neglect the diversity of human needs, social problems remain intact which in the long run may bring other negative social phenomena. Furthermore, diversity and desired esthetic qualities in the urban milieu may very well be obtained while staying within the framework of industrialization. Interesting examples are the Lazdinai quarter in Vilnius, a pure product of industrial technology, and certain rural centers in Estonia that have been set up according to personal projects. The objective can always be attained when creative and suitable organizational efforts correspond to it.

The harmonious association of the old and the new, the esthetic richness of a milieu exploited and diversity in cities will not occur until a new style replaces technicism, a style symbolizing

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new artistic concepts within modern methods of construction, and architecture enters into rapport with the times, the site and the function and is guided by the personal artistic concepts of the architect.

#### FORM, THE CULT OF FORM AND FORMALISM

Form in architecture is the ultimate goal of creation, the conception of new forms is its content and formalism is an isolated aspect of its result. That being so, the first thesis of this definition is indisputable, the second may appear doubtful, while the third is profoundly rooted in our minds as a negative characteristic of architecture. This judgment is not without foundation. It is based on many examples of different periods in the development of architecture that show different artistic tendencies. Our attitude toward the heritage of the past has changed with time. Numerous works that were formerly criticized now occupy a prominent place among the treasures of world architecture.

What is formalism in architecture, and how is it manifested?

In Pavlenkov's dictionary (edited in 1913) formalism is defined as "attachment to form to the detriment of meaning." Fifty years later it had a broader definition as an artistic method characterized by the "cult of form as such." What is the cult of architectural form, and is it always bad? If we speak of the negative phenomena in present-day architecture, we must admit that they consist of the negation of form, a negligent attitude toward it and, so to speak, the absence of a cult of form.

To understand this complicated problem, we must examine our architectural heritage, namely, those structures whose artistic value has undergone the test of time and still today draws millions of admiring spectators. As far back as we go into the past we find a whole universe of varied form, harmonious, expressive, easy to comprehend and, seemingly, created only for beauty. If this is true, why do we not tax our architectural heritage with "form for form's sake," that is, formalism? We do not do so because we would run the risk of denying uncontestable architectural masterpieces. Even more, we understand that what seems at first as created only for form is full of a determined historical meaning



that is revealed through an artistically perfect expression. It is precisely in this search for an esthetic form that the essence of architectural creation resides, because when we see only a content deprived of esthetic form, architecture is absent. We see constructions that serve indifferently as houses, theaters, factories, stadiums, in short, as no matter what, without being architecture.

Such constructions may be realized without the intervention of an architect: norms, standards and instructions are there to replace him. A qualified engineer can bring to completion a project endowed with these parameters. But architecture, architectural composition, architectural creation, always shows a solicitude for form, the cult of form in the positive sense. We find this in the past and the present as we will find it in the future, but in its extreme manifestations it always ends in formalism.

The manifestations of formalism in architecture are multiple. On the one hand, they derive from objective imperatives; on the other, from the excessive subjectivity of an author desiring form in contradiction to the actual function of his project. A good example is the main theater of the Soviet Army in Moscow, whose contours suggesting a five-pointed star are not serviceable. During a discussion one day with other architects, I heard the technologist involved in the building say that no director existed anywhere who could overcome its structural contradictions.

Esthetic formalism may be manifested in the pretentious nature of some architectural forms. Soviet architecture of the first ten post-war years offers us examples of this kind of formalism: sculptures placed in front of the windows of houses, the functional void of some multi-storeyed buildings, the false division of façades and the heavy simulated cornices: posthumous masks of long-elapsed periods. We find the same tendency in some recently-constructed buildings where we really see form for form's sake, "beauty" for beauty's sake or rather for an affected prettiness that has no logical meaning.

Economic formalism is clearly seen in the awkward placement of standardized constructions in the very center of Moscow. Historical sites are completely ignored. Among the negative aspects of formalism we may mention examples attesting to the exaggerated passion of some architects for national and traditional motifs. So-called "national" formalism is seen in the wide-



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spread mechanical use of ornamental subjects in modern building, out of place and contrary to present construction methods. Another kind of formalism is seen in the servile imitation of architectural forms created under different conditions, for different reasons and using other techniques. One example of this phenomenon is the excessive predilection for glass surfaces. Another kind of formalism appears where the architect tries to seem an innovator and creates pretentious forms with no logical basis of technical meaning. The manifestations of formalism do not stop there: undoubtedly their diversity will be studied and their number determined. In a way, the theory of formalism recalls the periodical table of chemical elements. Within the limits of each type, formalist manifestations appear with many variants. The future will present us with new varieties of formalism, and in each case it will be the cult of the form to the detriment of the meaning. Nonetheless, the cult of form is an indispensable condition for the creation of a work of great esthetic value. This means that any factor in the creation of architectural forms can only give positive results when it is taken into consideration with the other factors.

That is when realism triumphs, because the creation of architectural forms has a logical basis, and each form, even if its author is unaware of the fact, is justified and natural. What at first seems an arbitrary result and uniquely conceived for form, beauty, flows logically from function, site, technique and the composition itself.

Our ancestors were no richer than we are in means, construction materials, technique or workmen. Construction for them was as long and difficult as it is for us. However, they knew how to profit from the resources at their disposal and materialize the ambitious designs of their architects.

Architecture and the creation of architectural forms are inseparable. To deprive architecture of the possibility of form is to deprive it of expression, to destroy it. It is an art that observes natural forms and does not try to imitate them but conceives its own forms, rhythms and structures in harmony with nature and that serve as milieu for human activity. Since time began, this milieu has been based on elements that were not only material but also spiritual. The rendering of this spirituality is the *raison d'être*

and the objective of architecture, and it can only be realized through form, having no other means. This is why the creation of architectural forms has always been the professional task of the architect. In this context, there is only one thing for him to do: be realistic without, at the moment of creation, losing sight of the ties binding architectural form to its origins.

#### ON TASTE AND LACK OF TASTE

Of course, personal tastes are not a matter for discussion. Public taste, however, whether in music, literature or architecture, is something else. It is given consideration, and it is formed.

The formation of public taste necessarily goes through the intermediary of the personal tastes of the artist, to whatever domain of art he belongs. Even though ideas on taste evolve with time and each period has its own, the best artistic achievements always have certain traits in common. Examining universally recognized masterpieces, we can determine the manifestations of taste proper to the architecture of antiquity, of the Gothic, Renaissance or Classical periods by following the subtle differences in the tastes of the artists of those periods. We can see what there is in common between the most remarkable works of all time and that may be characterized by the ideas of "unity" and "harmony." This harmony is felt even by the layman contemplating the Church of the Intercession on the Nerle or the Temple of the Ascension at Kolomenskoi. It is present in the multicolored symphony of St. Basil's Cathedral, in the elegant buildings of Charles Cameron and the solemn aspect of the Admiralty Building by Adrian Zakarov. The history of Russian and world architecture offers many examples of the refined taste of artists who were able to find in plastic forms the perfect expression of the esthetic ideals of their time.

The works of Soviet architects shortly after the October Revolution are distinguished by their taste. Among them, Lenin's tomb, created by Chhtchussev, is undoubtedly in first place. Other constructions of great artistic value are those of the Fresnin brothers, Ginzburg and Melnikov. The magnificent constructions of the Volga-Don canal, the work of a group of architects under

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the direction of Leonid Poliakov, are admirable. Conceived as a monument to victory in the great patriotic war, it seems in every detail like a single work, remarkable for the stylistic unity that also distinguishes other works by Poliakov.

If it is easy to define the tastes proper to one or another historical period, it is on the contrary much more difficult to determine those of one's own times, to establish the traits of an architectural work that must respond to the wishes of one's contemporaries. Our descendants will certainly be more able to do this than we are. However, it seems in the wider definition that good taste in contemporary architecture is expressed in the rationality of the construction, unity in style and composition and harmony of artistic forms and means. On the contrary, always opposed to good taste are false monumentalism, negligence toward the site and pretention in forms that are in contradiction with the function of the building.

Contemporary Soviet architecture is represented at international exhibitions and competitions by many works that testify not only to the broad scope of construction in the country but also to the level of urbanistic and architectural culture of our specialists. This level is primarily seen in urban planning in cities such as Togliatti, Novoi, Chevtchenko and Zelanograd. There is also convincing evidence in the experience of the reconstruction of Moscow, Leningrad and the capitals of our republics.

Here are some examples. The dominant tastes of our architects have been shown in the conception of the new residential areas of Kichiniov, Minsk and Vilnius. They are well represented by public buildings that are unique in their genre, and figure among the interesting sights of our cities. In Moscow are the Convention Hall in the Kremlin, the cancer center, the TASS agency and the opera theater for children. In Kiev it is the new bridge over the Dnieper; at Tiflis the main post office; at Erevan the youth center; at Achkhabad the Karl Marx Library; at Alma-Ata the Lenin building and the Medeo sports complex; at Tashkent the civic center; and in Estonia public rural centers. Finally, one of the manifestations of our architectural level are the Olympic buildings in Moscow and Tallinn. All these interesting artistic phenomena have yet to be studied and appreciated. Their essential quality resides in creative research, discoveries and the individual nature

of each work, since what each of them has as most precious is its unique character and diversity, in composition, detail, in short, in esthetic aspect. This is what explains their singularity.

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If there is one word to express the character of our age in every aspect of life, it is "dynamism." In the same way we may define in one word the phenomenon that impedes the natural course of life and slows down development and progress: "inertia." It is astonishing to see how ready-made ideas and instructions that have come down to us from an obsolete past are still alive. Twenty-five years ago, for example, when the construction of the first of the buildings of the urban planning offices in Mayakovsky Square was being completed, an influential person recommended that the interior partitions be removed and projectors be installed in the resulting large rooms. This was done. Later it was seen to be an error, because noise and activity kept people from concentrating. It would have been much better to separate the teams of architects. Years have passed. For a long time now the influential person has been gone from his function and from this world, but in a newly-completed Mosproikt-2 building the rooms are still too large. Inertia. Perhaps all this is not serious, but in daily life inertia appears in small details as well as in larger ones.

If we mention this today, it is because, a quarter of a century after the radical change in our architecture, analyzing the experience acquired during this period and looking to the future, we must renounce all that is not justifiable and return to what we have carelessly abandoned.

But to what are we going to return? To whatever leads to the betterment in the quality of construction, to permit the prompt application of new and promising concepts, to bring dynamism to urbanism and architecture. The architect has priority in the process of construction. Its execution must never be placed above conception and idea.

Felix Novikov  
(*Moscow*)