

The State of the Public Palace

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In a building campaign which spanned across all Soviet Republics, public “palace” buildings were the cornerstone of the architectural image which defined a political regime. At the time of their construction, the palaces were categorized primarily by program—wedding palaces, sports palaces, cinema palaces, youth palaces and cultural palaces. This paper will compare key sites of Soviet modernism (1955-1991) in three countries surrounding the Black Sea: Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia. Using these countries as case studies, this paper will consider the state of the public palace and its architectural and cultural future.

PEOPLE & PALACES

The classic Soviet film, *The Irony of Fate* portrays the plight of Zhenya Lukashin, a hopeless romantic who mistakenly ends up on a flight from Moscow to Leningrad after a ruckus New Year’s Eve event.¹ Unaware of his mistake and believing himself to still be in Moscow, Zhenya recites his address to a taxi driver and is promptly driven to a concrete housing tower. Still unaware of his true location, Zhenya stumbles into the building and finds that at apartment number twelve his key easily opens the lock. When it is later discovered that he has entered an identical version of his Moscow apartment inhabited by an attractive young woman in Leningrad, comedy ensues.

The running gag of Soviet architecture was one of repetition across the entire Soviet Union regardless of local context. In popular Soviet imagination, each apartment block or government building was exactly the same—sparse, efficient, and maybe most notably, gray. This stereotype of Soviet architecture today is not so different, especially as it has been understood in the West. However, this paper offers a parallel reading of Soviet architecture, one which focuses on the unique, the special, and the one-off.

Often overlooked in the drab narrative of Soviet architecture are the large public buildings—often referred to as palaces (Ukrainian: *palats*, Russian: *dvorets*). In contrast to the well-known repetitive Soviet housing blocks, these unique buildings demand closer attention as a new generation of architects re-discover their international importance and as we consider architecture’s ability to adapt to shifting cultural and political contexts.

Architects are good at the singular. We study works of singular specificity: location, architect, program, or context. We

often are less adept at understanding buildings as pieces of a broader network: collectives, systems, polities. In order to understand nuanced relationships between buildings and their cultural and political context, we must understand both the singular object and the collective network simultaneously. Using case studies in Post-Soviet republics with a specific interest in Georgia, Ukraine and Armenia, we can consider the following: What are the risks of seeing only the singular building and not understanding the network of collective knowledge required to create it? What happens to an individual architectural work after the collapse of its broader network? What are the risks or rewards of regionalism in architecture?

From 1955 to 1991 a series of Soviet public “palaces” were constructed to serve the general population as sites for communal cultural activities. In a building campaign which spanned across all Soviet Republics, these buildings were the cornerstone of the architectural image which defined a political regime. At the time of their construction, the palaces were categorized primarily by program—wedding palaces, sports palaces, film palaces and culture palaces. Interrupted by the prior mandate of Stalinist architecture, architects in the 1970s to late 80s, using the plasticity of reinforced concrete could finally realize forms imagined by an earlier generation of Constructivist architects.

Much like a royal palace, each Soviet palace creates a holistic world and presents itself as a discrete object. But, for a moment, we might consider Soviet palaces in another way—a nodal network of distributed ideas, a catalog of possible types. Not as a collection of objects, but as an architectural ensemble. No single project re-invents the type, yet, each instantiation of the palace builds upon the previous body of work. Each wedding palace subtly referenced previous wedding palaces in various republics, but also strove to identify a unique solution to the typological problems suggested by the program. Soviet palaces were an experiment in mass customization. The paradox of the public palace, and what distinguishes it from common stereotypes of Soviet architecture, is in its standardization of originality.

If, as John McMorrough has suggested in “Notes on the Adaptive Re-use of Program,” we should understand modernist buildings “in which the integration of programmatic source is directly and legibly made manifest on the form of the building” as the exception, and not the rule, then a study

of Soviet palaces is a study of exceptions.² The alignment between form and function in this collection is unique in the multiplicity and variability of the formal parts in buildings with extremely clear programmatic functions. Whereas an earlier generation of Soviet architects embraced modernism's structural efficiency, technological improvements, and formal austerity, the generation of architects working in the late Soviet period distinguished themselves through an obsession with programmatic clarity combined with formal exuberance. This distinct correlation between form and program is one of the striking features of Soviet palaces and can either cause challenges for their reuse today or be identified as the reason for their sustained survival. Palaces rely on the sustainability not only of their physical construction, but on the social and cultural sustainability of their specified program. For example, the many cinemas, wedding halls, youth palaces, and marketplaces rely on a steady stream of patrons who economically support the programs specified by their design. As cultural and economic shifts continue to happen in post-Soviet countries, it is unclear whether their survival is assured. Soviet palaces are often political and programmatic orphans. They are buildings left with only their singularity, and not their collective.

Each of the former Soviet countries experienced profound cultural, economic, and societal changes after the collapse in 1991. Many of these buildings adapted, transformed, and survived the tumultuous shift—others did not. As we strive to understand both the node and the network, it is important to remember that Soviet architecture is viewed differently country by country, city by city, even block by block. However, architecture has the capacity to transform, shake off, or rehabilitate its political image in many contexts. Soviet palaces are in need of new national narratives that bind together their fractured collective and reveal their disciplinary contributions.

THREE BUILDINGS

At first glance, Soviet palaces may seem flamboyant or extravagant. Palaces often utilized long-span structures to create dramatic, expansive interiors as these buildings were built to handle large numbers of people for communal activities. Embedded in this combination of exuberance and efficiency was the class consciousness of the Stalinist era where buildings should serve and elevate the general population as a reflection of the socialist state. One example of this structural intelligence and programmatic efficiency is the Wedding Palace in Kyiv, Ukraine (officially known today as the Kyiv Central Registry Office or Central Palace of Marriages). Completed in 1982 as the city's premier wedding destination, the building makes use of its triangular plan with a grand entrance hall on one corner and two wedding halls in the opposite corners, creating two mirrored halls for simultaneous services. Other than their color schemes (one blue, one green), both halls are adorned identically with long

sheer curtains, stiff wooden chairs, and ornate chandeliers. The sweeping roof form in the entrance and the wedding halls creates an atmosphere of drama and flair. The ceiling opens toward the entrance, compresses in the central circulation space, and releases again at the two wedding alters.

Not only is the Kyiv Wedding Palace exemplarily of public palaces' formal and programmatic relationships, as seen today it is also emblematic of trends in post-Soviet urban development. What was once a grand building on a largely open site, is now dwarfed between two high-rise towers and an adjacent McDonald's, perhaps a fitting example of Kyiv's post-socialist urban development. Despite its current urban condition, the palace is not only in use today as a wedding venue, it is thriving. On any day of the week multiple weddings occur simultaneously, as guests of various events glide seamlessly through the many ornate and gilded vestibules, lobbies, and waiting areas.

Often Soviet palaces are subtler in their exuberance, cloaking their grand gesture behind modest, non-descript facades. One such example is the Tigran Petrosian Chess House in Yerevan, Armenia (ironically, another triangular building) which marries functionality and volumetric experimentation behind a simple, yet sculptural facade. In dramatic fashion, the visitor to the Chess House passes through the entrance and directly onto a mezzanine overlooking a chess hall. Dozens of chessboard tables organize the hall below; the viewer is in perfect position to observe the play from above. The spectator is instantly part of the games, without ever disturbing the players—a sectional move which makes the building one of the best places in the world to watch a game of chess. In the case of the Chess House or the Kyiv Wedding Palace, their hyper-attentiveness to the alignment of form and program have created enduring buildings which thrive as their programmatic activities remain popular.

The Tbilisi Archeology Museum exemplifies the expressive, figural and sculptural tendencies in Georgia's Soviet modernism. The museum takes a dramatic stance perched on a hill overlooking the city. The building's posture is pronounced, stocky and bulging. Its formal presence overshadows the sculptural relief adorning the entrance. The oversized stairs leading to the front door challenge the viewer to experience the building beyond the outwardly focused expression and speculate on the interior spaces. Inside, the building reveals the exterior segmentation disguises an expansive, shallow-domed space. Not untypical of some Soviet-era public buildings, the museum was never fully completed due to financial strains, and thus, is now in private ownership. Georgia has struggled publicly in recent years to deal with their Soviet legacy as political leaders in the country have often used architecture to directly symbolize their aspirations for the independent nation. At best, the country has gained notoriety for several contemporary architectural works by



Figure 1: Wedding Palace, Kyiv, Ukraine. Photograph by author, 2018.



Figure 2: Tigran Petrosian Chess House, Yerevan, Armenia. Photograph by author, 2018.

internationally-acclaimed European architects, and at its worst, the campaign has resulted in the dilapidation, privatization, or ruination of Soviet architectural gems.

There are many other states of Soviet palaces today not represented by these three examples. Rock concerts are being held in crumbling Soviet markets in Ukraine, fashion shoots occur at war memorials, abandoned palaces near Chernobyl feature prominently on tourist routes, schoolchildren continue folk dancing at youth palaces, movie posters cover the facades of cinema palaces, wedding palaces are bought by oligarchs to be used as private houses...the list goes on. The current state of the public palace is as complex as their original creation. Caught between generations and rapidly shifting attitudes, palaces today are silently negotiating new economic and cultural landscapes.

REGIONAL?

Clearly, Soviet palaces are adrift within architectural discourse. Do their achievements belong to the larger nation state or to the individual republics? As we are distracted by the question of the collective or the singularity, there may be a third way to categorize these palaces: the regional.³

It is clear that Soviet palaces were expected to engage in ideas of regionalism from their inception. Sculptures, mosaics and other adornments often interpreted local iconography through a Soviet lens. Many buildings were charged with representing the cultural and ethnic diversity of the Soviet

Union rehearsing regional materials and ornamentation with the charge to be, as the Soviet slogan encouraged, “national in form and socialist in content.” Palaces showcased the progressive cultural and artistic richness of each republic, and images of newly constructed palaces were publicized in tourism literature, printed on postcards, and spread throughout the Soviet Union as symbols of progress and invention.⁴

It has also been suggested by scholars that ornamentation after the Stalinist period became kitsch, colonialist⁵ or possibly even a form of silent protest against the colonization of the communist project.⁶ As Greg Castillo writes, “Under an imperative to remake ‘backward’ societies in the image of socialism, cultural authorities monumentalized the forms of vernacular design to symbolize the regional identity of peoples, at the same time they were eliminating the social and political structures that underpinned vernacular traditions.”⁷

However, it seems less important today to debate the authenticity of regionalism in Soviet architecture than to embrace its inherent possibilities. Motifs which could be seen as infantilizing in their non-Russian-ness, can now be recast through a regional lens and harness a growing local interest in national history. Whether accurate or not, reclaiming palaces as regional could preserve the buildings for the next generation. It might be irrelevant if these buildings are “Ukrainian” or “Armenian” or “Georgian.” What will preserve them as lasting pieces of heritage is if contemporary architects can craft a convincing regional narrative around them to advocate for their survival, and regionalism might provide that discourse.

A SOCIAL CAMPAIGN

A rebranding exercise might allow Soviet palaces to absorb new narratives and gain public support. A public rewrite is already happening through social media, blogs, and architect activist groups in each country. Recently published books such as *CCCP: Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed*, *Soviet Bus Stops*, and *Decommunized: Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics* have tapped into the market for Soviet “ruin porn.”⁸ In the age of recirculating images, media platforms—most prolifically Instagram—have given Soviet modernism a new life and a new audience.

There are several reasons why images of Soviet architecture are so popular in the West, particularly in America. The first comes from the direct formal attributes of the designs. Viewers delight in the pure spectacle of the gothic scale, the strong forms embodying a pre-language aesthetic and the ubiquitous use of concrete. These characteristics relate to a contemporary moment when, as Michael Meredith has suggested, architecture has returned to an obsession with fragments, primitives, generics and crude shapes.⁹ As we witness a swing towards nationalism in Europe and the extreme political polarization in America, these images may



Figure 3: Archaeology Museum, Tbilisi, Georgia. Photograph by author, 2018.

give us a glimpse into a previous world not necessarily filled with harmony or prosperity, but at least one of unification.

The second reason for their continued success is found in the continual “othering” of these images, reinforcing an aesthetic fetishization of post-industrial landscapes. The intense greyness of the images, the monochromatic buildings and relentless use of concrete simply reinforces preconceived stereotypes about Eastern European cities as bland places devoid of color. Photographs with snow or fog are wildly popular. In their new form as “Soviet porn” these images do not require the viewer to engage critically with the building as a site of continual habitation or functioning entity. Instead, buildings are typically presented as unoccupied ruins, even when most are fully-functioning as university buildings, performance halls, or bustling marketplaces. The viewer of contemporary images of Soviet palaces can engage with the building as a relic, a seemingly objective view of a defunct political regime tinged with nostalgia, and even possibly, envy. These images serve as a cautionary tale, one which the West adores. The inherent geographical remoteness of the site and the immediacy of the image work to blur the connection between time and space. Soviet porn allows the viewer to judge a building’s political symbolism while still admiring its form.

The narrative on the ground is a bit more interesting. A new generation of architects in the former Soviet republics are increasingly attentive to issues of regionalism, nationalism, and urban image culture in their cities. Nuanced interpretations of what it means to live in a post-Soviet landscape are visible in music, film, and popular culture. After decades of neglect, some Soviet palaces are being reclaimed and embraced for both their national and international achievements. They are adapting to a new context where they can absorb multiple narratives and political climates, from the regional to the singular.

INFORMATION

In conclusion, this essay makes few claims on the authenticity of regionalism in Soviet palaces. Instead, the phenomenon of faux regionalism found in Soviet architecture created something no one anticipated—a new type of architectural ensemble. If we release issues of regionalism from any moral or ethical imperatives, we can find in Soviet palaces a series of buildings truly able to adapt to shifting political tides. Regionalism no longer needs to be tied to any “truth” related to materials, geography, craft or tradition, but instead, can adapt to more immediate cultural needs. Regionalism can reflect technological and socioeconomic conditions, but it is also an active participant in creating the future conditions of culture. Regionalism shapes futures, not pasts.



Figure 4: Industrial Technical College Auditorium (1976), Tbilisi, Georgia. Photograph by author, 2018.

The challenge now is to harness the potential of standardizing the unique and recast Soviet palaces as regional works in independent nations. This strategy of preservation (or act of appropriation) may find the success within post-Soviet countries that the image culture of the West found in highlighting their Sovietness. What we must remember, and what the viral photographs fail to show, is that these buildings endure; they survive, die, adapt, expand, grow, fall down—they are in formation.

ENDNOTES

1. *The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath!*, directed by Eldar Ryazanov, Mosfilm, 1976, film.
2. John McMorrough, "Notes on the Adaptive Re-use of Program," *Praxis* 8, (2006): 102-110.
3. Here I want to distinguish the way I am using the term regionalism from a geographical definition, and instead offer regionalism as a term in the spirit of Lewis Mumford's *The South in Architecture*, which among other things, advocates for the incorporation of technology as a representation of culture.
4. Angela Wheeler, "Socialist in Form National in Content: preserving late Soviet culture at Tbilisi Palace of Rituals," Master's Thesis, (Columbia University, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.7916/D88W3DFD>.
5. Greg Castillo, "Soviet Orientalism: Socialist Realism and Built Tradition," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 8, no.2 (1997): 33-47.
6. John Czaplicka, "The Vernacular in Place and Time: Relocating History in Post-Soviet Cities," In *Vernacular Modernism: Heimat, Globalization, and the Built Environment*, ed. Maiken Umbach and Bernd Hüppauf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005) 173.
7. Greg Castillo, "Soviet Orientalism: Socialist Realism and Built Tradition," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 8, no.2 (1997): 33.
8. See also McLain Clutter, "Notes on Ruin Porn," in the *Avery Review* 18 (October 2016), <http://averyreview.com/issues/18/notes-on-ruin-porn>.
9. Michael Meredith, "Indifference, Again," *Log* 39, (Winter 2017):75-79.