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Politics and Architecture: At the Crossroads with Young Moscow Architects

Andrew McKernan
University of New Hampshire

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research article

Politics and Architecture: At the Crossroads with Young Moscow Architects

—Andrew McKernan (Edited by Brigid C. Casellini)

It was Thanksgiving weekend of 2007, and I was trying to find my hostel in Moscow. I had gotten off at the wrong metro stop. I was wandering the streets in the pre-dawn *temnota* (somehow, the Russian word for “darkness” works better here), trudging uphill through a couple inches of slush when I noticed a shadow before me and looked up. I had seen pictures of this skyscraper, but even warned of its size and grandeur (it is styled more like a Gothic cathedral than the typical American’s idea of a skyscraper), I found the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, built at the end of Joseph Stalin’s 1928–1953 rule, to be literally awesome. I stopped and stared. It was as imposing as Kafka’s castle, or some nobleman’s ancestral home.

This memory served as inspiration when I returned to Moscow in the summer of 2008 to research “Stalin’s ghosts” in buildings and monuments through a grant provided by the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) of the University of New Hampshire. I wanted to comprehend the conflicting urges to destroy and to conserve, which are apparent throughout Russian history. As one historian puts it, “Iconoclasm seems so very Russian, so very revolutionary. But so is anti-iconoclasm” (Stites 76). How do Muscovites react to Stalin’s ghosts, the ruins of a system that, by Marxist definition, is based upon every other society’s ruins (Yampolsky 99)?

As part of my research, I met and interviewed a group of young Moscow architects who have founded an artistic group devoted to reviving elements of the work and philosophy of a famous Stalin presents their views, and some of their peers’ responses, to convey architects is holding as they consider architecture and national iden



Andrew McKernan, with fellow IROP-er Sarah Gormady (Class of '09) in front of the main building of Moscow State University. The structure joins the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as two of the “Seven Sisters” skyscrapers.

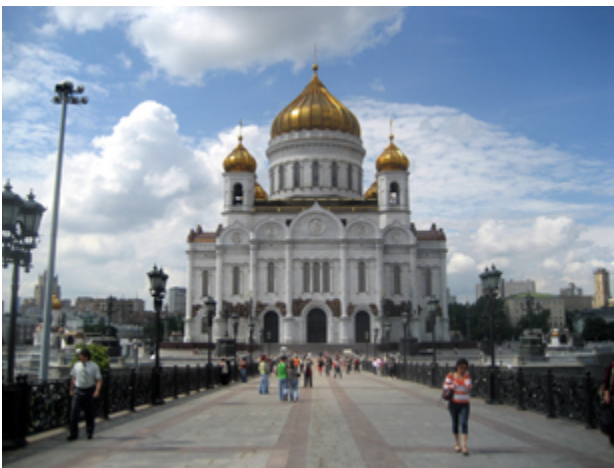
The Politics of Architecture

Russian architecture illustrates art history’s sine wave pattern, bouncing between realism and abstraction, form and function, minimalism and magnificence. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia led the way for the world’s avant-garde; the new Soviet state encouraged schools of thought like Futurism, Cubism, and Suprematism. In the Soviet Union the turn to Suprematism meant a complete abandonment of and disregard for the tsarist regime (Voyce 123). Constructivism, whose emphasis was on function and rationality, was the dominant influence of the 1920s architectural projects (Auty 1). Under Joseph Stalin, however, architects turned away from modernism and towards forms of eclectic Classicism. They incorporated elements from many historical periods, but works were based in the forms of Classical Greece and Rome.

The era's catchphrase was *svetloe budushchee*, the "radiant future" (Grois 15). These words referred to pure Communism's eventual (and utopian) triumph. The Stalinist period's projects were meant to be palaces for the everyday man, lighthouses guiding the way toward that future society. Soviet architects created projects that were "vastly regressive in their wasted space and elaborate decoration—isolated points of opulence in a country wracked by destruction and depression" (Brumfield 492).

Never a Dialogue

The architects of the modern Russian Federation are in a period of conflicting motifs and motives. During the Soviet era (1917–1991) architects had little opportunity for debate. Decrees outlined architectural parameters, which should "make famous the great days of the Russian Socialist revolution" (Anisimov 15–16). Even during "The Thaw," the time under Nikita Khrushchev when political prisoners were released and demands on the artistic community were eased, creativity was stifled. A Central Committee Resolution from January 4, 1955 delineates the boundaries of future projects' creativity, and blacklists some of the most famous projects of the Stalinist era (Khmel'nitskii 328).



The reconstructed Palace of Christ the Savior (1994–2000), carefully reconstructed to resemble the original 19th century monument, is one of many reconstruction projects post-Soviet architects have elected to create.

During the 1991 round-table discussion "Problems of Teaching Soviet Architecture," Russian architects began to question their work's orientation; only since the fall of Soviet ideology is architecture not under dictatorial direction (Khmel'nitskii 356). Aside from city ordinances, architects and their clients are free to pursue almost any project that strikes their fancy. What some perceive to be the "danger," then, results from what Igor Golomstock calls "nostalgia for Art's lost social role, for its purposeful organization, for its direct link with social and political life" (Golomstock x). Faced with a cultural context that supports less regimentation, artists and critics—although not desiring the system, per se, to be restored—toy with the idea of returning to totalitarian aesthetics.

Any artistic individual educated within the country remembers that Classicism experienced a renaissance under Joseph Stalin. Classicism as an architectural style does not

have a political bias (one remembers that American architecture of roughly the same time period was also very Classical, and yet did not designate totalitarianism in the country). Nevertheless, the architects using it are certainly conscious of their culture's heritage. Cultural heritage and memory were themes that arose in all of the interviews I conducted. These interviews provide anecdotal evidence that support research delving into the role of politics in a society's architectural aesthetic, and the relationship between the "built environment"—the architectural landscape—and the people who live within it.

Children of the Political Right

Deti Iofana ("Children of Iofan") is the title assumed by Boris Kondakov and Stepan Lipgart. I originally met the pair during Boris's thesis defense at the Moscow Architectural Institute, from which both have now graduated. At the time of our interview, *Deti Iofana* were planning an exhibition of their architectural plans at the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture.

"The explanation for our group name is very complex," Stepan said. "We try not to continue only the work of Iofan, but also Dushkin, Trotsky, and all architects of that time period. We find this city to be a city of childhood. ...For us it was an interesting interpretation, to be children of Iofan." While the name is an explicit

allusion to Stalinist architecture, the two architects separate the period's aesthetics from its political and social practices.

They focus, rather, on *dinamitsizm* (making the structure have some type of movement or, literally, dynamic features) and *order* (an obvious cognate, referring to utilizing the classical Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian orders in some system). *Deti Iofana* use these features to add flair and creativity to their designs. One recalls that Khrushchev's government punished Stalinist projects for their wasteful ornamentation. *The Deti* believe that ornamental architecture is the only kind that can be thought of as art.

Not surprisingly, Boris and Stepan derided Constructivism as the product of a dry, mechanical process. Stepan stated, "Of course it's cool that one can program into a computer a certain form, and it'll print it out for us. That's hysterical." Boris was quick to add, "But there's a huge difference between what a computer can do and what a human can." In so thinking, *Deti Iofana* emphasize humanism, a trait, they pointed out, that dates back through the Renaissance to Classical architecture.

Their postulates have met criticism among architectural critics of their own generation in Moscow, including the curator of their exhibit at MUAR. *Deti Iofana's* tendency towards Classicism could also be nostalgia for a totalitarian government. Their ties to Stalinist *dinamitsizm* and *order*, however, may only be ties to the abstract concepts, and any cultural metaphors of "totalitarianism" will lose themselves in the grand history of Classical architecture.

Centrism

Maria Sedova is the daughter of Vladimir Sedov, a prominent architectural historian and professor at the Moscow Architectural Institute. She is a journalist, although she received a degree in architectural history from Moscow State University. About her childhood, she said, "My father never told me 'this building is good or this building is bad' in general. He would identify elements of its design and the way that it interacts as part of an ensemble as good or bad, but then I would be asked to come up with my own opinion."



Maiak [Lighthouse], one of the pieces at the Arkhstoianie festival. Visitors to the site are welcome to climb the inside of the wooden structure.

At the time of our interview, Maria planned to curate *Deti Iofana's* exhibition. Asked what kind of professional relationship she saw evolving out of her work with *Deti Iofana*, she answered, "I'd like to work on a large article for them in some type of catalogue of the exhibition. After that I am not sure. Although right now we seem to be starting together and are in the same place artistically, there's no way of saying that as our careers continue we will stay in the same artistic direction."

Maria's philosophy turns from *Deti's* in her disapproval of emulating past architectural forms. In response to the reconstructed Cathedral of Christ the Savior (destroyed 1931; reconstruction completed 2000), she says that "the cathedral is done improperly, done not to the correct dimensions. It was a celebration of the new order, of the feeling of this new country. When the Soviet Union fell it became a symbol of

this New Russia." For the Cathedral and for any reconstruction project (which are commonplace in Moscow), Maria thinks that "they are not the same [as the original]. They don't have the same feeling, the same air about them." She worries about public opinion: "They are going to think that these are the ancient buildings. I can say that right now, the majority of people who come to Moscow aren't able to tell the difference between the older buildings and the buildings that now stand."

Instead, Maria lauds the aesthetic principles of architectural ensembles such as that of Arkhstoianie, a festival in which architects use natural building materials to make landscape architecture. “Arkhstoianie stands upon ruin and destruction. If they’ve made there a structure, or a tower, or anything, it is completed and new. It stands, and is used. When it begins to fall apart, no one repairs it. It lives its own life, and the destruction is part of that life,” she said.

My research was based on the dichotomy of emulation–destruction, which are external, “unnatural” forces. Maria’s philosophy, accepting a natural lifespan to any architectural structure, sidestepped that binary division. Hers is an intriguing viewpoint that applies not only to Russian architectural decisions, but to the relationship any country has with its heritage.

In the Face of Cold Logic

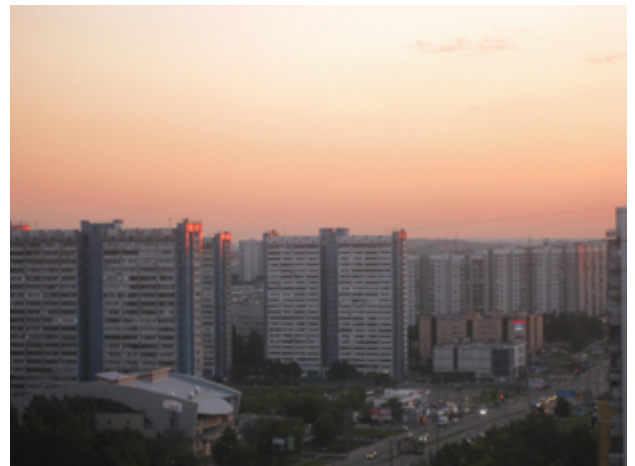
Evgenii Shirinyan is a student at the Moscow Architectural Institute. At the time of our interview, he worked as a junior architect and designer at the studio of Aleksandr Brodsky, who previously had spent a great deal of time in New York. When asked about *Deti Iofana*, Evgenii replied, “They carry a great amount of romanticism that is rarely seen, but without great pragmatism.”

Evgenii identified his two favorite metro stations in Moscow, Kropotkinskaya and Mayakovskaya, both of which are known for negative architecture, i.e., space, to allay any fears of being underground. Evgenii explains that these stations succeed where others do not by describing the weight, or “gravity,” as he says, of a typical metro station at rush hour. “The gravity is in the press of the crowd. When there is a press, it’s because the station is not doing its job.” Such gravity is never felt in Kropotkinskaya or Mayakovskaya, which means that the stations optimize foot traffic. His favorite stations, then, are those that best perform their function.

This is quite the utilitarian view. Any architectural style contains some belief that a structure’s form should follow a function, but the extent to which function plays a defining part of the design depends on the style. Avant–garde (or, as the two terms are often interchangeable in Russian, “left–minded”) architecture derives its beauty from the extent to which it fulfills its function.

Evgenii identified problems that arise in architecture that do not possess this combination of form and function. “If you look at the apartment complexes that have been going up around the city for now about fifty years, you see there are no more courtyards. Architects make these—practically skyscrapers—tall buildings, but they are scattered into general complexes. From generation to generation, people lose the places where they used to gather. The social illnesses we see are a symptom of this lack of architectural design.”

It sounds as if it is Evgenii who is most nostalgic for a Soviet past. I believe, however, that he refers more to traditional culture than to the Soviet apparatus. In older sections of cities, buildings contain a *dvor*, a courtyard isolated from the street. In *dvory* groups gathered and, in the 1960s, dissident singer/songwriters (à la Bob Dylan) performed. Contemporary architecture and its “scattered, general complexes” no longer provide these opportunities. What Evgenii seems to enjoy most of all in the metro, and miss most in residential buildings, is the human element in architecture.



In the southwest of Moscow, a series of apartment buildings built in the 1980s demonstrates architecture without dvory.

At last, a Debate

The projects rising along Moscow's streets seem to indicate that plans aligning with ornament, perhaps with the right, are in favor. Nevertheless, one cannot emphasize enough that there is an opportunity for discussion and interpretation. Buyers may choose what they will from architects, who may plan as they will. As Evgenii qualified all of the statements he made, "Some things are purposeless, but we'll see that the things that are purposeful are those that are going to be interesting. Obviously my opinion might possibly change, but right now it is such."

It wasn't until the last week of my research, reading in the Russian State Library, that I happened upon a picture of the room in which I was sitting. The entire time I had been working in Russia, I had been sitting in and experiencing the built environment of one of the products of Stalinist architecture. While the library was frequently referenced in my research, only then did I realize how the question of destruction or construction was more than theoretical. The tendencies at work in Moscow, often emulated throughout the country, continue to be of great import. I cannot pretend—nor would I ever wish—to choose which of the three "archetypes" herein included is correct. The designs I've seen from *Deti Iofana* are beautiful, while Maria's philosophy is equally so, and one finds it hard to argue with Evgenii's logic. The debate rages on, and to hear it is refreshing.

The author cannot thank enough Professor Cathy Frierson (UNH) and Professor Vladimir Sedov (MARKhI) for their support and guidance throughout this research. Gratitude is also owed to the International Research Opportunities Program at the University of New Hampshire for the generous research travel grant to Moscow during the summer of 2008. Additionally, the author is indebted to the Moscow Architecture Institute, the Shchusev Museum for Architectural History, those who agreed to answer interview questions, and the friendly people of Russia who are too numerous to name individually.

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Author Bio

*"I went into this research with general knowledge of Russian culture and no knowledge at all of its architectural history," said **Andrew McKernan**, an Honors Program student from Bow, New Hampshire. "I learned from the ground up about the country's architectural history and about a side of twentieth-century history that is not usually covered in academic classes."*

The idea for Andrew's project, funded by the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) at the University of New Hampshire, was conceived of his sophomore year and refined with the help of his mentor, Dr. Cathy Frierson. "She was amazingly helpful in her commentary of what would be feasible or not," said Andrew, who will graduate in May 2009 with a dual major in Russian and linguistics. While studying overseas, he found living alone in Moscow to be difficult yet fun at the same time: "I learned a lot about myself and the ways that I can motivate myself to do work when I'm so far away from any kind of a traditional deadline, overseer, or system of accountability. I also learned about making new acquaintances in a different city, and made some unexpected friends with whom I still correspond today."

Andrew received a Fulbright to return to Moscow for academic year 2009-2010, after which he will begin the Ph.D. program in Russian history at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He hopes eventually to become a professor.

Mentor Bio

*Dr. **Cathy A. Frierson** is a professor in the Department of History at the University of New Hampshire, where she has been teaching for seventeen years. Her research and teaching interest focuses on Russian history. Although she co-founded the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) in 1997 with Dr. Donna Brown, Dr. Frierson's first experience as an IROP mentor came in 2008 when she mentored three students, Andrew McKernan being one of them. Andrew's work with the group *Deti Iofana* introduced Dr. Frierson to newly emerging aspects of contemporary Russian culture that were previously unknown to her. "This," she says, "is one of the tangible rewards of directing IROP students who choose to work in Russia, where change is occurring so constantly and rapidly that every possible source of information 'on the ground' adds to my understanding of contemporary Russian culture."*