

BOOK REVIEWS

Dmitry Shvidkovsky

Russian Architecture and the West

Translated by Antony Wood. Photographs by Yekaterina Shorban.

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Somewhat burdened by an ideologically charged title, the book *Russian Architecture and the West*—the mythical “West”—by Dmitrij Švidkovskij* is in essence the history of the predominantly Italian influence on the development of a unique Russian (and Ukrainian?) architecture since the Kievan Rus’ first Byzantine-derived sacred buildings. The book’s study of influences, and the role of Italy in it, reminds us of the special relationship that has existed between Russia and Italy for close to a millennium, allowing for a continued exchange between the two countries, uninterrupted even under Mussolini and Stalin.

Lavishly illustrated by architectural historian Ekaterina Šorban’s superb photographs, the book is the first comprehensive survey of Russian architecture in the English language that dwells specifically on its “European” character. Švidkovskij belongs to the first generation of major Russian architectural historians who did not spend the better part of their professional careers under the Soviet Union; the originality of his work resides in his intent to “look at Russian architectural history from a European viewpoint,” in an evident effort to undermine the perception of “otherness” in Russian architecture, while emphasizing its uniqueness. The author demonstrates forcefully that the received notion that “European” architecture appeared in Russia only with Peter the Great is unfounded.

In Chapter 1, the author makes an effort to explain the belated arrival of Italian Romanesque in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as a modifier of the already solidly established Byzantine models. Some of the formal analogies with the Lombard school are convincing, even though the comparative crudeness of execution undermines the author’s (unproven) claim that the Italian models were brought to Russia directly by Lombard masters. Given the documentary uncertainty, it is curious that Švidkovskij makes no attempt at exploring the traditional



Photographs: Reto Geiser

route of influence through the Balkan Peninsula, well established since Cyril and Methodos. Despite the decline of the royal lineage of the Komnens, the route was strengthened by the prosperous Orthodox kingdoms of Zeta and Raška where the dynasty of the Nemanides had long adopted, and adapted, Romanesque styles coming from Italy down the Dalmatian coast, beginning with the tenth century Saint Donat in Zadar.

The author’s use of the expression “architecture parlante” in reference to almost all the historical periods of Russian architecture -- a term introduced by Léon Vaudoyer in 1852 to describe (derisively) late eighteenth century French architecture -- resonates with questionable anachronism. Apart from the author’s zealous efforts to “Westernize” Russian architectural history at all costs, the use of the expression seems utterly unnecessary if not simply confusing.

* The transliteration of Russian names given in the bibliographic information here conforms with Anglo-American usage as adopted by the publisher; the different transliteration of Russian names in the text of the review is based on recent European usage, which is clearer and more logical within the context of the Slavic languages.

The second chapter, which discusses the “Renaissance” of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Russia, following the end of the Mongol occupation, is undoubtedly the central and most interesting part of the book. Documents about the presence of Italian masters abound, and the high quality of the craftsmanship testifies to it. The author aptly conjures all the sources with a wealth of fascinating details to develop a convincing narrative. What comes as a surprise, however, is the complete denial of any Mongol, Islamic or Middle and Near-East influences on Russian architecture of that period, not to mention the Ottoman culture. Švidkovskij credits the latter only for having “attempted to imitate” Byzantine models, a rather poor grade given to architects of such stature and influence as Sinan, to take just one example. The author leaves completely unexplained the sudden appearance of the dominant form of double-curved “ogee” arches, let alone the origin of their so-called “tent roofs.” This omission may be due in part to the exclusive pursuit of Western influences, but it could also be derived from the author’s rather explicit adherence to the concept of “higher” or “lower” civilizations, where “Russian” and “Western” are seen as inherently superior.

Chapter 3 introduces the interesting concept of “Post-Byzantine ‘Mannerism’” in the now firmly established Muscovite State following the final expulsion of the Mongols during the reign of Ivan IV, and prior to Peter the Great’s reforms described in Chapter 4. Švidkovskij startlingly proposes the revision of the traditional stylistic categorizations of Russian architecture to anchor it firmly into Europe’s mainstream architectural history.

The fifth chapter dwells on the dubiously termed “Age of Enlightenment” under Catherine the Great. Her autocratic rule, cultural and economic policies, and imperial territorial conquests evoke more accurately the century of the Roi Soleil and his “Illuminated absolutism,” than the “Siècle des Lumières” of a Voltaire.



Finally, with Chapter 6, Švidkovskij introduces what he calls “The European Age,” the ultimate stage of his eschatological quest. The 1920s and 30s do not seem to be his scholarly realm, which accounts for some factual mistakes. For example, he adheres to the Stalinist claim that the V H U T E M A S - V H U T E I N school (he misinterprets the V as standing for “All-Russian” instead of “All-Union”) was dissolved in 1930 because a great majority of students were suspicious of the Modernists, and demanded to be given a “serious” education by experienced, pre-revolutionary classicists. The exact opposite was true. Since the very founding of the school in 1919, the students had the option to choose either a “classical” or a modernist training. What is more, a stiff resistance was opposed in the last years of the 1920s to growing historicist trends outside any Party intervention.

Contrary to Švidkovskij’s claim that “Soviet Neo-classical Revival [was] ushered in by the Stalinist regime as the obligatory state architectural style in 1932” (which it never was), many Modernist buildings were still inaugurated throughout the 1930s, along with Stalin-inspired American corporate style; whereas voices defending constructivism were still heard as late as 1937 at the First Congress of the (Stalinist) Union of Architects. In addition, rather than merely representing a totalitarian regime, as Švidkovskij claims, the 1937 Soviet pavilion in Paris harbored sufficiently complex modernist qualities to excite Frank Lloyd Wright’s admiration.

The end of the book, which evokes Khrushchev’s housing campaign, closely resembling the urban principles of the Athens Charter, rings with the authenticity of a seemingly personal experience of the author’s youth.

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