

Museum of USSR in Moscow, Russia

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Design of the Museum is meant to express architecturally the principles, nature and experience of the Soviet reality (culture and society).

Starting this project I tried to identify the specific principals of culture and society that had developed through the existence of Soviet reality, in order to translate them into architectural language. For example, one can say about the United States: “this is a country of equal opportunities” or about the Soviet Union: “this is a hierarchically structured culture”. I propose to explore this thesis through examples and then visualize the statement, graphically and architecturally.

This is how cultural investigations may lead to the understanding of the architectural forms of the Museum and type of exposition that would give the most complete picture of the USSR to even the outside viewer.

To explain that method, I must say, that I see the culture as a complex structure that directs all the fields of human activity, while including them in itself. On one hand that means that I had to study all the variety of the activities, in order to understand the culture, on the other hand each one (as architecture, for example), being dissolved in culture, reflects it, represents it using its own language. Reading this language I find the connections between other fields and architecture.

Actually, to be able to capture the movement that organizes society in a certain way understanding of architecture is enough.

I base my studies mainly on the book "Culture 2", written by Vladimir Paperny, who did the research of law, political history, art, literature, architecture, narrated legends... etc. of USSR (different aspects of culture) and developed a theory opposing two cyclical cultures in the SU. The examples and conclusions of the book help me to distill the essential principles of Soviet culture (and transforming them to architectural) without studying the whole of the culture on my own.

The author introduces the concepts of Culture 1 and Culture 2 as purely functional, cognitive contrivances, which are not meant to identify everything that took place in Soviet history.

The main object of analysis of the book is architecture, but the architecture here is dissolved in culture.

In general main idea is that all the changes that are happening in architecture, as well as in other arts, (in economics, life style, types of organizations, newspapers headlines, etc.) are devoted to the common movement, which is called "culture". Not the individuals turning the architecture (literature, film) to develop in this or that direction, but this movement itself drags individuals to participate, playing on their interests and concerns.

Paperny's statement: "All developments in Soviet architecture at the end of the 20's - beginning of the 30's may be viewed as the expression of more general cultural changes, the most important of which is the victory of Culture 2 over Culture 1... certain process in Russian history and specifically in the history of architecture are cyclic and may be viewed in terms of the alteration cultures 1 and 2."

Indeed the architecture styles of the first decade after revolution and from 30' to 50's are quite different The Culture 1 - period from 1917 up to 1932, in arts presented by Avant-Garde expresses the revolutionary new thinking. Culture 2 is presented by "Socialist Realism" at most, denies the achievements of the previous culture, narrowing all goals to a main one - representation of "happy future of the mankind under the Communism" Thinking of the methodology of my research and following design I find it important to compare the two cultures in different aspects.

For example, the Avant-Garde is interested in the future, to the point that it refuses the heritage of the past. It does not want to have any roots; it wants to start completely anew. The future that culture 1 interested in is close to present. That is the real future that people are constructing themselves, hoping to live in it. "I want the future today" - Maiakovskii.

In Culture 2, the future becomes equal to the infinity. The process of reaching the future (means happiness in communism) is endless and self satisfactory (in architecture it is expressed also by aiming towards the sky and light). Since the future is so far away, that it is hard to see anything there, so Culture 2 turns its look to the past. It begin to study history (but sees and only what is needed by socialist ideology), all styles of all mankind, and finally begins to see itself as the end and conclusion of all ways. That was supposed to be represented in Palace of Soviets (the reason it was never built is the same why the future is infinity - no one project is ideally perfect for such an utopian building, - instead there were built 7 skyscrapers, as the realistic representations of an ideal building).

Even the methods of design are different in two cultures.

Architects of Culture 1 were thinking horizontally - in plans, while in Culture 2 even the word “plan” is getting the negative meaning,

Culture 1 is a culture of movement - housing is designed to be transforming, rotating after the sun, be on the wheels: cities - desurbanized, means there is no center points, no hierarchy of space - uniform. That also means no significant difference between the substances, like - air and sky are the same places of habitat as the ground, which is quiet not so in Culture 2. The sky is definitely for the “gods”. The colossal style in architecture, with the symmetry of huge prospects that can not be perceived from the ground level (can be viewed only on the models, by the leaders, or from the airplane).

International architectural values were applicable to Culture 1, which means that geographically there was no difference for the ideas. Carl Marx is the same in Soviet Russia or in any other country. That can be called the “horizontal” thinking. In Culture 2 all from abroad becomes alien in ideology. The border between proletarian and bourgeoisie, between good and evil moves from social to geographical border (vertical thinking). That develops special relation of the culture to any border - crossing the border can not happen unnoticed. In architecture it finds the reflection in emphasizing the entrances (sometimes entrances are arches up to 7 stories high) to the buildings or subways station (border between matters - ground - underground).

Functionalism, practical values, rationalism belong Culture 1, while Culture 2 seems to have mythological consciousness, that leads it to symbolic art and identification of signifying with signified. At the same time both have the utopian ideas and goals.

I must say, that the original idea (that I had found exiting to work on) of creating Museum of the USSR belongs to the founders of “The Andrei Sakharov Museum and Public Center”:

http://www.sakharov-center.ru/doc_uss/ideaMusUssrEng.htm

I feel strongly that in this museum the building itself as important and should represent at least as much as exhibitions it is going to hold.

Dealing with such complex image of what the USSR was, trying to represent it in a building, without being illustrative and literal I felt that the only possible way would be to visualize the main statement which is: the struggle of Culture 1 and Culture 2, the first is progressive but the second is dominating, one is movement another is stability, one is the Equality and other is the Center.

From there I came to the idea of the conflict of two systems:

One - is a free flow of individuals in the stream that creates the mass movement, represents "Culture 1" - the positive side of revolution (the changes, new ideas, new hope...). Another - is a rock, standing on the way of the flow. It suppresses the flow, the individuals; it represents the country of the USSR as system, as machine with which the first system - is constantly in conflict. The flow however is not stopped by the rock, more than that - it destroys the solidity of the rock creating an open, transparent structure inside.

"The stream" was here 100 years ago, and more and it is still going. It had left many marks on the structure of the rock or on history of the country, which became the museum of itself now (the country, probably is a museum). That museum contains the tracks left by the individuals, while the individuals are gone long ago. Tracks are this voids left on the walls of the museum.

So the cube is broken by the flow of individuals in 4 pieces, with the courtyard in between. The river facing building is the largest one and it is a Main Gallery. It consists of captured inside fragments - the smaller galleries, the pieces of the past that became part of the system (part of the history). These smaller galleries are to hold various types of expositions and some other utility functions, such as café at the last floor, the videotheaque, the information room and the cloakroom - on the first floor. The gallery of particular interest can be accessed directly by the elevator, or they can be observed continuously by going up or down the stairs that connect them all.

The buildings on the ground level are part of the present life (the stream is keep going) They provide several accesses to the museum, and also serve as assemble and storage spaces.

The very last floor provides the outside views to south and north, which are parts of permanent exhibition. All the windows on the west wall (voids left by the stream of the past) are facing northwest, providing with the view to the Church of Christ the Savior (which was reconstructed a few years ago). That is quite a remarkable place. In 1930-s the Palace of Soviets was proposed to be build on that spot. The church of Christ the Savior, built after the victory in the war with Napoleon, beloved by the people was to be demolished. The palace was never built and in 1960 the “Moscow” swimming pool was constructed in the foundation of the palace. I think everybody in Russia knows this place and the events that happened there, which makes the visual connection very important.

The interior of the Main Gallery is large and high, open space left in between the hanging galleries. It is left for the possibility to expose large items. The marks on the west wall visible on the exterior, providing the light from outside and the surfaces for the expositions in the main open space. Standing on one of these balconies one can observe the whole interior and the exposed items. The skylights and the large window that occupies the whole east wall are providing light in the gallery.

Second building (to the north) is the library. The same principal as in Main Gallery building and in all of them creates the space of it. The fragments of the system 1 - “the free flow of individuals” is captured inside, and appears as layers of balconies that hold the bookshelves. First floor is left open so one can feel the heavy weight of history above his head.

Classrooms & Auditoriums attached to the Library are on the ground level. They provide the spaces for present activity. These buildings are part of the stream that is still going.

Two more buildings are completing the cube - Sports Galleries (to the east) - the galleries devoted to the sports, as it was a significant part of the Soviet Culture.

Theater is facing south - the smallest of 4 buildings, just for 200 seats, is to hold conferences, movie shows, plays, lectures...

Site

Proposed location for the Museum is in Moscow, Russia.

The site is located inside the Garden Ring - in the center of Moscow, on the corner between the Moscow River embankment and the Garden Ring Street, within historically significant buildings and places.

The site is a large, flat, green space around the existing Central Artist Gallery. The spot that I choose be occupied now by the Sculptures Garden, which is a part of exhibition, already, as it, consists of sculptures and monuments of the Soviet Communist Party leaders, famous Soviet people, and slogans built in metal or stone. The huge garden around the Gallery (approximately 1 500 000 sq.ft. provides plenty of space by the riverbank, - 300 000 sq.ft for the new museum).

The whole park around the CAG proposed to be rearranged in order to meet the needs of present life. It will consist of the “flow” of 1-story buildings, which are leading the visitor’s way towards the main galleries. These one-story buildings can provide the shelter for endless rows of “art dealers” who are crowding around the CAG, standing under the open sky, selling objects of art from little camping tables or right from the ground. Besides the function of being the art galleries, this 1-story buildings serve as documentary storage, assembling spaces, administration offices, etc. (all that is necessary for a large museum, like one of the USSR)

The museum will be either visible from the Moskva river embankments on both sides, from the Krymskii Bridge or from Garden Ring street.

It will have visual connections with:

Church of Christ the Savior - across the river,

Central Gorkii Park - across the Garden Ring Street

Kremlin

Embankment House (which has a lot of stories to tell about the Soviet times)

October Square

It will have the accessibility from the river as well as from the Garden Ring. The well-known artist gallery will also drag the attention of visitors to the new museum.