

THE POLITICS OF ARCHITECTURE: ILLUSTRATION OF GENDER ROLES IN COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST UKRAINE

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ABSTRACT. Wejnert Barbara, Zherebkin Sergei, *The Politics of Architecture: Illustration of Gender Roles in Communist and Post-communist Ukraine* (Polityka architektury: ilustracja ról płci w komunistycznej i postkomunistycznej Ukrainie). Rodzina w czasach szybkich przemian, Roczniki Socjologii Rodziny, XIII, Poznań 2001. Adam Mickiewicz University Press, pp. 117-126. ISBN 83-232-1172-8. ISSN 0867-2059. Text in English.

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The architecture and monuments that are one of the products of existing culture clearly reflect and define the social reality of the communist and post-communist periods throughout the regions encompassed by the former Soviet Union. This article explores the ideological and political meaning of such architectural forms, an exploration that supports, in conceptual terms, much recent systematic analysis of the interconnectedness rather than the particularities of the three basic social components of polity, economy and culture. In this sense, the discussion supports the post-Marxist viewpoint, embedded in postmodernism, that conceives a unique role for culture in the appraisal of social reality (Lyotard 1984). This perspective directly contradicts the theoretical approaches that prevailed from the 1950s through the 1970s, which analytically distinguished culture as distinct from other societal structures (Mukherjee 1998).

In this framework, the architectural forms of the communist and post-communist periods in the Soviet Union operated as articulated segments of societal structures, and thus, played a significant role in holding together configurations of Soviet-type societies. As Jameson vividly explains, „No satisfactory model of a given mode of production can exist without a theory of the historically and dialectically specific and unique role of 'culture' within it” (1984: XV).

Therefore, this chapter offers an analysis of how architectural forms and monuments can be understood as artifacts that articulate and portray the social, economic

and political reality of the developing communist society of the Soviet Union from its establishment in 1917 to its rupture in 1990. We first provide an analysis of the diversified architectural styles in *appendage* to their personification and reflection of social reality of different stages of communist system's development. We then offer some conclusions about the impact of democracy and market economy ideology on social reality of post-communism as mirrored by architectural forms.

GENDER IDEOLOGY, MONUMENTS, AND ARCHITECTURE: RELATIONAL IDIOMS OF THE SOVIET ERA

One of the most visible reminders of the communist epoch is undoubtedly the architecture which accentuated the appearance of Soviet cities for so many years. Regardless of post-communist societal demand for the immediate destruction of such monuments, most citizens of the former Soviet Union still live surrounded by communist architectural forms.

Since the 1917 revolution, the Soviet power, striving to realize communist utopian ideas of cooperative living arrangements and collectivism, supported artistic trends that elaborately glorified the happiness of the masses in drawings, painting, sculpture, artistic posters, films, architecture and monuments. In so doing, the regime intentionally promoted desire among the proletariat to be represented in fine art and other forms of artistic expression. Architectural forms and monuments constructed at that time strongly represented contrasts between the happiness of communist society and the enormity of grief from battles lost to enemies of the people. The category of *enemy of the people* was defined both in economic terms as any property owners, and in human rights terms as those who advocate individualism, human rights, civil liberties and exclusivity of private life. In simple terms, enemies were all those groups that did not want to conform to communist ideological guidance of to communalism, state control and planned living.

One of the initial strategic goals of the Soviet power was to eliminate privacy in social, individual and economic life. Thus, during the first stage of the communist revolution (1917 through the early 1920s), the destructive energy of the proletarian masses was channeled mainly against the policies of the pre-Revolutionary regime and its social institutions. These new post-revolutionary masses were conceptualized as a potency of energy, often represented in art and public monuments as super-productive females that, like the mythological images of sacred Mother Earth, were steadily giving birth to Gods and titans.

Graphic images celebrating this archetypal female potential for bringing new masses to birth were complemented by monuments suggesting the phallic, impregnating male, which, like the mythological Father/Creator, represented how the revolutionary leaders were guiding communist ideology and the collective mind of the Party. As a result, Soviet architecture and public monuments acquired a character of

gender asymmetry: women representing the masses; men representing the political power and leadership of the Communist party.

By the late 1920s, as architects began to promote the notion that proletarian power could be only expressed and represented by the masses, this elemental approach to form began to give way to a new movement now called Soviet Modernism. Directly portraying working people rather than archetypes, this movement coincided with the first five-year plan for rebuilding the Soviet industrial centers, and intentionally linked architecture/monument design style with ideological shifts.

By way of example, in the late 1920s Kharkov, the capital of the Ukraine and one of the biggest industrial and military cities lacking academic or cultural traditions, was selected to serve as a model city that would demonstrate how workers were not only to be organized but to be presented to others as organized by the Soviet power. To underscore this political message, alongside tractor and tank-building plants, the biggest construction works of the first 5-year plan, the government built colossal architectural constructions of iron, concrete and glass in the Bauhaus modernist style (ironically borrowed from socialists in noncommunist Europe). Among the most sizeable of these was the famous Gosprom—the State Industry Management Office Building, constructed between 1925 to 1929 – which Romain Rolland, the famous French writer who visited Kharkov early in the 1930s, called an *organized mountain*. Gosprom, representing the new trend in architecture, was at the time of its construction the biggest Ferro-concrete building in Europe. Its shape is that of a rising stepped figure, with many assorted verges and surfaces symbolizing rational organization of the masses. The mountain-ridge is reinforced by the descending contours of the university and military academy buildings located in a semi-circle on the right and left of the Gosprom building itself.

Soviet architectural styles changed again in the 1930s, this time to accommodate new groups of communist hard-liners and their political guidance. It was this period that saw the culmination of mass repression in the USSR, including the continuation of forced collectivization of farms, and, as a result, great famine. The first evidence of corresponding change in the architecture of the time was a visible rupture with the avant-garde and modernist style of the previous direct representations of the masses. Second, most of the new monuments were devoted to the one theme of massive statues portraying the leader of the communist masses – Joseph Stalin. Third, a tendency emerged to connect art with functionalism in the architectural styles expressed in the construction of such buildings as the Moscow Metro, the Communist Party and military headquarters, and high buildings in both the center of Moscow and the capitals of other USSR republics. Each of these buildings was designed to serve not only an administrative or production function but also as a massive public monument, crowned with large-sized figures whose very mass and power would imprint the readiness of working masses to sacrifice themselves to phallic communist utopia.

A good example of this style is the well-known Kharkov monument of Taras Shevchenko (built in 1935), which presents a figure of the poet on a pedestal, surrounded by a spirally-arranged sculptural ensemble that includes three female and thirteen male figures. The characters of the ensemble symbolize the history of the struggle of the Ukrainian people, women and men alike, against oppression.

The three female figures, who represent the various stages of the process of radical transformation for Ukrainian woman, are particularly prominent. Two of them are placed below the pedestal, where they eloquently speak for the sufferings of Ukrainian people in pre-Revolutionary times. The first figure is the „mother-pokrytka” (covering/hiding) with her illegally borne child, a frequent female image found in Taras Shevchenko’s poetry. The second is a woman-peasant doing her serf obligation work at panschina. The third female image, prominently figured at the top of the monument, represents the new generation of Ukrainian women: the Soviet woman, worker and Komsomol member. Her position at the pinnacle of the monument symbolizes the feeling of joy and happiness of Ukrainian workers within the new socialist society. The mimicry and poses of female images in the Shevchenko monument, like other sculptures of Stalinist times, thus illuminate by juxtaposition the division between, on one hand, the deepest of people’s sufferings, the torments caused by oppression and aggression prior to the communist period, and on the other, the feelings of supreme joy and enthusiasm of the communist masses.

The male figures in the ensemble serve as links between woman’s terrible past with her promising future. These thirteen figures are massively male, positioned physically between the women, as if to fill in the gaps between the past and present of woman’s status, and to express through their bodily postures their determination to sacrifice themselves for the new political system.

Interruption of Soviet societal life by the Second World War, post-war involvement in border disputes and discourse regarding internal political structures of neighboring countries diverted Soviet leaders’ attention away from internal politics and toward external affairs. One of the consequences of this political turmoil was relative stability in architectural trends of that time. During the 1950s through 1980s, the period following Stalin’s death and subsequent softening of the communist regime, Soviet architecture reflects the ideological shifts that characterized that time. In the earlier period, the focus had been the dictatorship of workers initially presumed essential for establishing a communist system. Now, the dominant ideology called for emphasizing the achievement of the communist regime in terms of developed rather than emergent socialism. The images of the proletariat, the joyful victims, sacrificing themselves for the good of others gave way to a festive style expressive of an epoch of fully-developed socialism. The main theme portrayed in architecture and monuments of this time was that of workers not only desiring to support of the programs and policies of the communist leaders but also courageously withstanding all failures to realize the new regime’s full potential.

It was at this time, in the end of 1970s, that Soviet architecture created its apotheosis in the most significant Kharkov monument of the Soviet period: the monument to Lenin, constructed in Svoboda Square. From the ground level one sees, on the right and left of the monument's base, a bas-relief depicting the contours of one female and five male figures. The details of faces and clothing are not as precise as those of the figures of the Shevchenko monument, but the figures themselves similarly symbolize the people's struggle against capitalistic oppression prior to the communist revolution. In the Lenin monument's case, however, their primary purpose lies less in what they themselves symbolize but in how they serve as a foundation for the phallic figures of the leaders of the communist revolution, embodied here in Lenin himself.

Ironically, at the same time that the Lenin monument celebrated communist leadership built on the committed backs of the people, other artists began to privilege attention to the base itself as significant in its own right. In a monument built about the same time – the Heroes of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917 – for example, it is the base in itself that expresses communist ideology. This monument, one of the last large monuments of the Soviet era, was built in the central part of Kharkov, in Sovietskaia Square (now Constitution Square). It consists entirely of a granite block base in the shape of an irregular parallel-piped. Around this base are five figures representing the heroes of the Ukrainian revolution – three workers (including a farm worker), a soldier and a salesman – but no leader: the space above the base is empty. The monument is thus in actuality, and powerfully, an empty pedestal, which contemporary Kharkovites describe ironically, with characteristic post-Soviet humor as *Five of them are carrying a refrigerator*.

At this same time, when leaderless pedestals suggested a shift in perception about the relationship of the people to the state, some Soviet architecture focused more specifically on representing issues of the people's rights. One example of this is a set of monuments (in Tibilissi, for example, which portrays a powerful Mother Georgia looking protectively out over the city) supposedly celebrating women's political rights and their participation in social, economic and political structures such as people's councils, committees of trade unions and congresses of the Communist party. Like the empty pedestal, however, such monuments speak more of irony than reality. While it was true that the overall representation of Soviet women in political institutions was much higher than that of women in Western parliamentary structures, very few women actually held positions at the highest levels of the decision-making political structures, such as the Politburo, the Central Committee of the Communist Party or Ministries. Most of the women representatives served only on the lowest levels of the nomenclature, where they reached up to 30 percent of the total number of members of the lower administration. Thus, while public monuments might try to praise the progress of women toward equality, such representations of gender equality were more faade than real – just as publicly promoted strategies of gender equality were more democratic-appearing facades of an other-

wise totalitarian regime than real attempts to establish or promote equality, civil and democratic rights, or to include a broader spectrum of society's representatives into local and national governing assemblies.

ARCHITECTURE OF THE POST-SOVIET ERA

Since the collapse of the USSR no new monuments that symbolize general communist ideology have been constructed. On the contrary, in many Soviet cities communist monuments have been demolished.

The scope of the destruction of monuments varies between republics and their cities. For example, in general in the Ukraine most remaining Soviet-period monuments have been destroyed, but in Kharkov, site of so many of the previous regime's symbolic monuments, only one has been shattered: that of Dzerzhinskiy, the first chief of the Extraordinary Committee that preceded the Soviet Security Forces (KGB), located in front of the Metro Station. Furthermore, also in Kharkov, the post-perestroika period saw the construction of a huge, communist-style monument of Marshal Zhukov, a famous Soviet commander in the Second World War, in one of city's central squares, [the Prospect of 50th Anniversary of the USSR]. This construction raises questions about whether the state authorities may remain more ambivalent with respect to the former Soviet traditions than more recently proclaimed desires to gain a new *democratic* image of the independent nation state would suggest.

Since this last monument of Zhukov, no monuments have been constructed for or about the masses in any other Ukrainian city. This reflects the very real changes that have occurred in the character of the proletariat, who – no longer blindly following the communist leaders, relying on their help in every aspect of life – are now independent, self-organized survivors in the initiated market economy system. The new masses have gone through proletariat dictatorship, developed socialism and the collapse of the USSR. They are no longer killed, nor put in prisons, camps or psychiatric clinics. They may often be impoverished, but they are also victorious over the former monopoly of a totalitarian communist regime that had unlimited control and hegemonic decision-making power over all issues of life and death for its citizens.

The new masses no longer desire to be glorified in monuments or to accommodate themselves to communist ideology. Their primary concern is participation in and adaptation to new economic structures (Baev 1995). Hence, the role of public monuments is being replaced by functional architectural constructions designated to serve *consumer needs* of the people living in the post-perestroika period of transition to the market economy.

Since the early 1990s, architectural developments no longer emphasize construction of the large-size industrial plants and Party headquarters or other political insti-

tutions' buildings which typified the architecture of the Soviet period. Rather than embodying the previous ideological propaganda about the greatness of communist society, the focus of post-Soviet architecture now emphasizes consumerism, commercialism, private ownership and societal wealth. New commercial buildings, such as banks, private offices and small luxury shops for the newly rich post-Soviet societies, are copies of contemporary Western European and American architectural styles. Moreover, many of the old residences that used to belong to aristocratic families prior to the revolution are being renovated in central cities of the former Soviet Union (e.g., Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev and Kharkov).

But most visible of all, especially during the first years of the post-communist period, are new shopping places, geared to accommodating new consumers' needs. Along with exclusive, luxury shops are mushrooming market places for the working masses, the bazaars. Unlike the luxurious stores mirroring Western cultural images, these bazaars have a distinct style that is worth serious attention.

Initially, just after the collapse of the communist regime, bazaars consisted of miniature trading posts or booths where tradesmen, placing clothes, cosmetics or other consumer or food products directly on pavements on blankets, small portable tables or on chairs, tried to sell their goods to passers-by. Most such bazaars were located on main streets and squares, or in front of public places with heavy pedestrian traffic, such as train, metro and bus stations or large stores. The most common architectural forms prevailing in every city's central streets and traffic arteries, the functional purpose of bazaars was to provide public spaces for non-formal business transactions. Given their enormous numbers, however, such bazaars can be also seen as a kind of architectural monument that functions similarly to those of the Soviet years, redecorating cities to reflect the changing ideologies and values of the new era.

Initially, after the collapse of the Soviet state, the bazaars sprang up spontaneously, when a lot of people who had lost state jobs started to sell food and second-hand goods wherever it was possible to find potential buyers. By the mid-1990s, city authorities began to take control over bazaar activity and development, regulating their spread and controlling income acquired from sales by its taxation. As part of such new regulations, bazaar owners were now required to get permission, or a formal license, to establish a bazaar, and hence to be registered as a bazaar owner. The registered bazaars were allowed to be placed in cities as more permanent constructions, characterized by roofs, walls and counters similar to newsstands. Sometimes they were separated from the street or sidewalk by a fence. Atypical in communist countries, these new architectural forms now widely decorate post-communist cities.

As more permissions were issued, creating more such structures taking up more space within cities themselves, some bazaars were moved outside the city limits to specially designated fenced-off squares. These new spaces, similar to American flea-markets, are characterized by rows of trading booths arranged in geometrical order

with an office building designated for city managers of the property, and for militia that execute control over sales' taxation and can confiscate goods or issue fines if proof of paid taxes is not presented.

From a distance, these bazaars resemble besieged forts, an image which in actuality comes close to a kind of truth. In fact, due to an atmosphere of fear, the uncertainty of tax inspections, militia, and the possibility of fines and confiscations, bazaars have indeed become kinds of forts, not keeping danger out but containing it by providing parameters that can be more readily controlled. In other words, bazaars are forts where the enemies do not stand outside the walls but rather penetrate inside, fueling an atmosphere of threat and fear. Within the limited space that the newly-constructed bazaars provide, executing control over non-formal trade transactions is easier and quicker for the new state regime.

An extension of bazaars particularly worth noting are trading posts operated by shuttles, or Chelnocks in Russian (Morvant 1995). The name is a slang word for a person who is working as a seller at a big market (a post-Soviet outdoor shopping center) who at times travels to neighboring countries such as Turkey or Poland to purchase more goods. The shuttles' posts are similar to the initial bazaars that emerged within cities, with goods exposed on blankets and a trade-person standing by, but with a difference: Rather than respected entrepreneurs, shuttle sellers carry a negative image of an impoverished, dishonest beggar more than that of an honest salesman, and most of them are women. The shuttles are legally permitted to sell goods only within the limits of bazaars, and are prime targets for taxation.

On the radio, tradesmen are constantly reminded about their liability for breaking the rules of trade and tax legislation which, with time, have become more rigid and often confusing, as double tax systems and regulations reversing prior rules become more frequent. In other words, the bazaars that were spontaneously established to the secure financial needs of workers released from work within the Soviet controlled economy – and which are spontaneous expressions of adaptation to the new market economy – are now becoming targets of local government control. In Michel Foucault's words, the totalitarian repression has acquired a form of biopower of biological survival finally beyond gender codes of phallic" and/or female" (in Rabinow 1991: 257).

The harsher restrictions placed on shuttle operators as compared to bazaar operators take the form of more parsimonious scrutiny (and control) of their trading activities, and more frequent control of their tax liabilities. Such discriminatory treatment reinforces the negative image of shuttles, vividly portraying the role that gender plays in acceptance of entrepreneurial pursuits. In contrast to bazaar operators, who are predominantly male, the shuttles are mostly women, and this gender distinction fuels differential images, of men's and women's entrepreneurial skills and abilities.

The post-communist symbolic portrayal of women has changed a great deal since communist times. In architectural iconography she is no longer referred to as a

Motherland, a hero Woman-Worker and a hero Woman-Peasant. Two emerging symbolic presentations of women include the historical symbol of Bereginia, the *feminine* keeper of Ukrainian hearth and home, as now the owners of the marginal, publicly criticized shuttles. These new female symbols bear little or no relation to the mystery of femininity so glorified by pre-communist as well as communist iconography. They also suggest, particularly in the social architecture of the shuttle, that the social-economic status of post-Soviet women, who receive scanty pensions or eke out livings through shuttle management, represent the highest percentage of those suffering the severest financial deprivation.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As noted, the politics of architecture and the architecture of politics within the communist period went through a number of transformations with respect to the relationships of style, form and functionality to ideological messages intended to convince both Soviet citizens and the outside Western world that Soviet communism embodied great *Truths*—particularly about the revered role of proletariat in a communist society. Such old symbolic representations of proletariat power, replete with obedience to the guidance of the Communist party and political leaders, no longer hold in the post-communist time, but no new politic of architecture has yet emerged to take its place.

The visible architectural forms of newly built banks, shops and commercial places, trading booths and bazaars, however, may play a disturbingly similar role to that played by architectural monuments during communism. On one hand, they symbolically deliver a message to former Soviet citizens and to the outside world that post-Soviet society is indeed changing its priorities and values. But, just as the previous era's monuments symbolized proletarian obedience to communist political power, so the commercialized architectural forms of post-communist society may embody a new set of Westernized values, such as individualism, materialism and consumerism. If so, the new politics of architecture may represent less an engagement with democracy than a shift of proletarian obedience from one master to another: from communist political power to the new macro-structures of a market economy.

Regardless of political connotations and the impact of diverse systems of communism and post-communism, the description of the politic of architecture provides vital evidence that „the evaluation of the cardinal valuation of humankind in any configuration of human society, at any point in time, is internalized and registered by its culture” (Mukherjee 1998: 40). But it also suggests the importance of broader structural relations between institutional structures of polity, economy and culture, and an exegetic expression of biases toward minorities that protrude ideological

statements communicated within, and through, cultural artifacts and political ideology.

The latter points to the interconnectedness of culture with political and economic spheres, and to the interaction of new cultural images with the social stratification system, an argument that has received insufficient attention in studies on post-communist transitions. Although much more research on this theoretical proposition is needed, this discussion illustrates that a broad array of variables can significantly influence the societal internalization of reality, and calls potential researchers to further investigate this problem. If future analyses are conducted, such an integrated view will add to the understanding and measurement of democratization processes, and potentially lead to parsimonious accounts of their outcomes.

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