The Rational and Irrational Standard: Russian Architecture as a Facet of Culture

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What can be more rational than a building designed for a human being to live in and carry out his daily routines? Everything seems so thoroughly thought-through, down-to-earth and normal. It is no coincidence that the Latin word ‘rational’ means something based on reason, not contradictory to logic. But if one looks closely, the word zdanie (building) derives from the Old Russian verb zdati, which means ‘to build, to raise’, but, even earlier, from the word zd, which means ‘clay’.

It all seems to make sense: a building, a construction, clay (from which bricks or – as they were called in ancient times – plinths are made). But in the very sound of the word zd, there is a feeling of unstable, fast-moving sliding, of falling and collapse. This series of associations somehow does not readily tie in with the rational idea of construction, with its aim of obtaining stability and peace. This duality, or even multi-layered quality, appears in Moscow architecture in all its manifestations, from buildings of high aesthetic taste and international cultural significance to common, everyday buildings constructed to fulfil the basic need ‘to hold on through the night and then keep on standing up through the day, too’.

After a first glance at any of the maps of Moscow, the resemblance of the city’s features to an outline of a wheel leaps straight out at one. Moreover, it is not a subtle, swift, light wheel, but a heavy, archaic, rough wooden wheel, which in its unstoppable movement grinds through everything that gets in its way. This impression is not as groundless as it might seem. In reality, everything built in Moscow that has failed to blend in with the general countenance of the city has at first provoked bewilderment or surprise from its inhabitants. Then, with the passing of time – sometimes quite quickly, sometimes after a great deal of time – it has been swallowed up by the city and ground down under that eternally moving wheel to become an organic part of the whole.

So it was with the seven buildings nicknamed Moscow’s ‘Seven Sisters’ or ‘Stalinskie vysotki’ (‘Stalin’s High-rises’). Built in Moscow at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s, they were at first perceived not as architectural monuments, but exclusively as monuments of a political era. In fact, one cannot call these constructions ‘architecture’ in the strict sense of the term, because architecture always consists in the blending of construction and space, whereas these buildings blend space and volume, something which is more characteristic of sculpture. The way in which the internal space of these ‘high-rises’ is organised makes it possible for them to be seen as peculiar ‘termite mounds’. This internal space is in no way connected to the exterior of the building. Yet architecture, or rather not architecture, but these constructions fairly quickly grew to be part of the Moscow landscape, and these sharp-pointed silhouettes have become one of the characteristic symbols of the face of Moscow. The same did not occur with a similar building in Warsaw. That building did not blend into the cityscape, but remains to this day something foreign brought in from outside.

It is telling that such famous buildings of Moscow’s architectural heritage as the Church of the Annunciation at Kolomenskoe or the Cathedral of the Virgin’s Shroud on the Moat (the Cathedral of St Basil the Blessed) resemble sculpture, as their exteriors have a much more interesting, expressive and meaningful character than their inner space. They were also built as commemorative constructions – the church at Kolomenskoe for the birth of Ivan IV, and St Basil’s in honour of the taking of the city of Kazan.

We would dare to suggest that such an irresistible striving for the external beauty of a building, even at the cost of functionality and utility, is one of the characteristic signs of Russian irrationalism in architecture. We find an interesting confirmation of this view in the work of Ivan Il’in, who, criticising Western European ‘rational culture’, notes that “on close inspection it turns out that at is basis lies a discipline of will, a concept of usefulness and a skilful organisation, not love, conscience or feeling”. From his point of view, in this abides the reason for the crisis of Western European culture, which ‘is built as though from stone and ice. Here religion, art and science (apart from a few genius exceptions) are cold. Love can hamper the mind and the will; culture is

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