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CHANNELLING THE PAST: THE
MOBILIZATION OF TRADITION AND
POLITICS IN IVAN LEONIDOV’S “UTOPIAN
CONSTRUCTIVISM”

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CHANNELLING THE PAST: THE MOBILIZATION OF TRADITION AND POLITICS IN IVAN LEONIDOV’S “UTOPIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM”

The work of Ivan Leonidov, a talented graduate of the Vkhutemas School, was met with much enthusiasm both from fellow practitioners and the wider public in espousing the possibilities and dynamism of the new Soviet state. Although it hasn’t been explored widely in an academic context, the work of Leonidov is deeply rooted in traditional Russian art and architecture and thereby carrying with it, the weight of subconscious and abstract recognition in the people of the traditional past.

When presented against the sober political realities of the emerging Soviet economy however, Leonidov’s iconic canon of work under the stylistic label of Constructivism began to be labeled and derided by its detractors as “Formalist,” “Utopianism” and ultimately, “Leonidovism.” The analysis and critique that has been overlooked however, due both to the early zeal of the Constructivist endeavor and the collapse of the utopian ideal later, is the underlying role that tradition played in informing and shaping the Constructivist project in general, and the work of Leonidov specifically.

This paper will advance the current scholarly interpretations of the work of Ivan Leonidov’s iconic brand of Constructivism, by repositioning it within the context of traditional Russian art and architecture. The role of tradition in avant-garde strategies of the 1920’s demonstrates a broader, and politically complex paradigm that underpinned architectural production in the period. The work of Leonidov was central to this, marrying tradition and utopia, and reflecting the contemporary politicization of the role of tradition in the architectural language of Constructivism.

INTRODUCTION

In any analysis of Leonidov’s work, it is essential to begin with an understanding of the environmental context of this architect’s early formative life and the influence of those numerous externalities that helped dramatically to shape how he saw, perceived, and later, envisaged the world. No creative individual is immune or separate to the forces and environment that has shaped them. Those forces – be they political, societal, cultural or artistic – were all tumultuous and indeed revolutionary, at the turn of the 20th Century in Russia. The timing and location of his development in this historical and geographical milieu is vital to enable a thorough understanding of his work, especially when measured against and viewed through the lens of possible traditional sources and when compared with the work of his contemporaries.

Ivan Il’ich Leonidov was born of humble Russian peasant stock in the year 1902 in the village of Vlasikh, his childhood years reared in the village of Babino. In 1920, his eighteenth year, he undertook painting and drawing for a year at the Free Art Studios in Tver before relocating to Moscow and enrolling in 1921 at the Higher Artistic and Technical Studios, VKhUTEMAS (Vysshie khudozhestvenno-teknicheskie masterskie), from where he graduated spectacularly onto the architectural scene in 1927. This vintage has placed Leonidov amongst what Cooke has described as the “fourth generation of the Revolutionary Profession” or what she more prosaically calls, “the true children of the Revolution”1 whose higher and architectural education was informed and affected by the October Revolution and Civil War that followed.

Due to this chronology, some historians have placed an emphasis on the premise that as a young post-
revolutionary graduate, Leonidov was therefore “free” of the burdens of tradition, that his education and spatial dynamism was therefore entirely a result and product of, “the new regime.” An examination under closer scrutiny illustrates that this is not the case.

Whilst Leonidov indeed had his vocational training in the hot beds of avant-garde Constructivist architecture and theory of Moscow of the time - at which he excelled and emerged a leader, this paper will propose that he arrived both informed and pre-armed with a keen knowledge steeped in the traditions of his rural and traditional artistic background - and that it was those very traditions, in addition to his formal training, that helped to craft his technique, aesthetic sensibilities, and dynamism for which he is famous today. This paper aims to examine those formative experiences forged by his traditional environment and then secondly, to argue using examples, their important role in defining the work of Leonidov.

THE ICONIC LANDSCAPE

Foremost, and perhaps most importantly, Leonidov was raised a rural Russian peasant, the son of a forester. As such, he was more than acutely aware of traditional Russian wooden architecture and its typologies, the basic forms of which have since earliest history been derived from wooden construction techniques and their methodology, that only later included masonry in a complex mutual symbiotic relationship. Russian wooden architecture takes as its reference and starting point its relationship with the land - here the defining landscape characteristic of Russia has been identified as “spaciousness and measurelessness” that throughout the ages and periods of both peace and strife has ultimately defined and shaped traditional Russian architecture above all else.

Buildings in this wide and broad context are strong formal objects, by their very existence resonating against the background, especially the verticality and counterpoint of the traditional typologies of church, fort and windmill found throughout. Bartenev and Fyodorov summarize numerous typical features common of rural traditional Russian architecture and its setting. They note the laconic austere lines, a “special kind” of severity - not rich in decorative detail, an exterior almost void of ornamentation, the details being linked to overall structure and integrity, the salient feature being always:

“...to be found in the overall effect produced by the combination of different masses, their proportions and outline...special attention was the roof...because it provided a dramatic contrast to the flat countryside...in the Russian mind height was always the attribute most closely associated with beauty.”

In heavy part due to the nature of the Russian landscape, Kudriavtsev and Krivov have noted that another important trait and characteristic of this architecture is the desire to organize space through strong systems of orientation and to demarcate them as clearly as possible over considerable distances. Whilst this may on first reflection appear universal, the emphasis must remain on the vast scalar differences associated with Russian landscape compared with for example, Europe and there was an
essential requirement to “create nodes” in the open landscape to orient the traveller in a vast, uninhabited space. In addition to this spatial recognition, Brumfield acknowledges there exists:

“...a perception of structure deriving from the oldest traditions of Russo-Byzantine architecture – the ability to interpret form without ornament...logically and economically expressed in the high medieval period.”

These were then Leonidov’s early spatial experiences - essentially natural, and when they came across architecture, it was informed by the traditional village, the small farming community or occasional town scattered within and upon this vast horizontal tableau. Leonidov as such was more familiar and comfortable with the wide horizon, with long vistas of rural landscape covered with forests and dotted with rivers and lakes - than he was with more dense civic and urban landscapes. The formal characteristics of this architecture and its contextual setting can be seen repeatedly in the work of Leonidov, initially and earlier in his career in more subtle gestures, then emerging stronger in his later projects, but throughout, it maintains its continual connection to Nature, the outdoors, open space and sky.

According to Leonidov’s son Andrei, his first childhood experiences with the arts was from the wandering painters that plied the various villages and towns across Russia since medieval times painting religious icons for the church and populace, the so called “icon daubers.” In the history of art and architecture it has been observed that Russia “missed” and was bypassed by the rapid changes of artistic style that swept through continental Europe – no Gothic, no Renaissance and only slightly touched by the baroque and neo-classicism through the establishment of St. Petersburg by Peter the Great and his subsequent heirs. As a result, the artistic traditional remained primarily with these icon painters and ecclesiastic artists who, due to the nature of icon painting, remained fundamentally anonymous. The icon painting as method and typology had particular nuances that reinforced this status. They are designed not so much for the satisfaction of doing but rather for those who read them. The icon paintings function as communicators, originally designed to portray the scriptures to the illiterate masses. They are as Stuart observes “…above all a medium for the expression of ideas. (These are) is in fact their raison d’etre.” Stuart continues, suggesting that the icon painter paints without doubt, that he uses symbolism and a true symbol is a “revelation.”

According to Gabo, in the Russian consciousness, a work of art such as the icon was first and foremost a social phenomenon, valid for a link between man and the universe. The icon can thus be understood to deal in simple terms about things which are complex, which are universally understandable and comprehensible, hence their suitability for communication to the masses. Florensky goes even further, delving into Russian mysticism stating that:

“An icon is an image of the time to come; it enables us to step out of the context of time and see to something beyond, even if it is only ”through a glass darkly.”
The best Russian characteristics evident and identified in icon painting are an economy of detail married with an elegant solution to complex pictorial problems. In contrast to Western European art there is also a liberal use of deliberate asymmetry thereby providing compositions an “open feeling.” These devices are then placed in tension and composition by fine radiating lines called “assist” denoting divine energy and, as such, are used with deliberate circumspection.

Overall this collective symbolism and meaning was a binding spirit, a mystical idealism of religion that with the rise of the Soviet state and its official atheism following the revolution was replaced by a newly promoted secular faith in science and technology:

"Indeed, such is the nature of the Russian, that he even has the capacity to channel the current of his religious energy into non-religious subjects... for instance a political creed which can replace Christianity... and believe with the same depth of passion and conviction...”

It is from this cultural artistic tradition that Leonidov learnt his first graphic and artistic techniques, lessons, and how they are represented and symbolized. This communicative language of iconography would be brought to his subsequent training as an architect and that would ultimately openly manifest itself in the communication of his works.

THE UTOPIAN BRAND

When Leonidov studied in Moscow he promptly came under the influence of the Vesnin brothers and the Constructivism they were espousing. The work produced by Leonidov in the years following graduation from 1927 to 1934 represent an oeuvre of work that has been labeled the “Suprematist series,” but could also lay claim to be categorized as “the Utopian Brand” - for it was the output produced at this time, that whilst stylistically and graphically portrayed similarly - came to be categorized, labelled, denigrated and indeed branded as “utopian”... and "out of touch with reality...” amongst other, predominately negative accusations.

Leonidov’s graduating project, The Lenin Institute of 1927, launched him into the architectural spotlight. For all its dynamism, innovation, spatial and technological feats, it was, above all, a vision into the future and of a possible new way forward that captivated the many who saw it. Peter Anders has labelled it an “icon of the future” and has argued that elements in its composition can be related and traced back to traditional church architecture and iconography, primarily through its siting, formal architectural spaces and symbolism.

The work that marked something of a departure in Leonidov’s “style” was the Narkomtiazhprom competition entry of 1934 for the headquarters of the Commissariat of Heavy Industry located prominently on Red Square in Moscow. This project has been the subject of an analysis by Catherine Cooke who makes references to the “new” forms Leonidov has brought to his work and their resonance with traditional church forms, their civic spatial awareness and including the remarkable
example and similarity of one of the major tower structures for the project bearing semblance to a landmark rostral column in St. Petersburg.

To illustrate the development of the ideas which were informed by Leonidov’s traditional framework one can look at two other projects from this period. These were the competition entries for “The Palace of Culture” and the “Plan for Magnitogorsk,” both from 1930 that straddle this “Utopian” period.

The Palace of Culture in the Proletarskii district of Moscow was a scheme that Leonidov pushed outside the competition brief by enlarging the scope and scale of the parameters. The overall impression one has from the Palace scheme is a formal spatial one. From Leonidov’s notes accompanying the entry 21 there are references full of symbolism, both in a formal relationship to space and program but also politically and culturally.

The overall planning is appreciated from the elevations of the whole complex. Here the buildings are strongly defined by their physical shape in a broad horizontal spatial arrangement. The vertical counterpoints to this horizontal are the communication and dirigible spires that delineate both the “mass activities station” and the “scientific and historical sections” respectively. These traditionally derived spatial signifiers using vertical landmarks is clearly marked out and would continue to be utilized on other projects, however here and in Magnitogorsk they manifest most strongly.

For the mass activities station – the area Leonidov demarcates for “mass assemblies,” he employs a giant sphere with a hemispherical roof dome consistent with the tradition of religious architecture as gathering space, albeit here, post Revolution and secular, as a space: “...for public and political activities...the whole system of spreading political knowledge.”22

The formal structure of the leisure and physical culture sector is interesting in its departure from purely orthogonal Constructivist language hitherto deployed by Leonidov. Here the recreation facilities are arranged around a stepped pyramid structure that from a purely superficial observation could be claimed as a reference to Egyptian architecture but has more reference to the tiered “iarusnyi” structure – the traditional pyramidal silhouette ascension employed by traditional church typology and the strong tent shaped spires, the “shatior.” In the second round scheme the exploration of traditional octahedron and hexagon bases that are the fundamental structural arrangements of traditional timber construction can be found in the crèche, kindergarten and Pioneer buildings.

Turning to the Magnitogorsk project, Leonidov proposed a linear city arrangement that enabled the city to grow in numerous directions whilst also allowing maximum contact for its inhabitants with Nature. On an investigation of the Magnitogorsk proposal, it takes its cues and, as a point of departure, the traditional urban profile qualities inherent in Russian urbanism and combines them with vernacular behavioral tendencies of the urban Russian populace. Kudriavtsev and Krivov note that:

“For centuries...the most distinctive characteristic of Russian urbanism was it's stretched out, thin-spread quality...the way it merged urban forms into nature...more accurately described as landscape planning.”23
The plan for Magnitogorsk brings the landscape into the urban fabric at all scales as a fundamental conceptual driver. There is a profusion of streams, gardens and greenery playing an active role in the organization. Leonidov aimed to make the city a place where the inhabitants gathered in a social milieu connected to Nature and thereby enabling the dispersion of the “need to create rest homes outside the city” and the urbanite Russian’s tendency to migrate back and forth from what he saw as the isolation of culture in the cities. This scheme allowed for a mixture of housing type, contrasting lower scale housing with tower housing for hostels, singles and couples as a vertical counterpoint. The proposal lay outside the then circulating theories of the “urbanists” and “de-urbanists” current at the time and reflects on Leonidov’s rural sensibility and perception of space.

At a finer scale we find the materials used for the low scale housing are timber and glass with a formal courtyard arrangement and planning strategy that reflect an acknowledgement of traditional building material and construction techniques. The drawings for these spaces reveal a traditional architectural vocabulary. Here are stairways that connect porches to individual entrances, the typical vernacular domestic devices called “kryltsa” and “seni.” The courtyards themselves act as the walled and enclosed “dvor” of traditional rural dwellings. This was the communal or summer space that could be utilized as a living room, store, workshop, or as a space for communal activities.

The high tower elements take these formal devices further by having their circulation (lifts and stairways) on the periphery, whilst whose apparent lineage would appear to be of a more modern aesthetic, can however be traced to the asymmetrical facades and peripheral and corner stair tower strategies of traditional medieval architecture e.g. The Cathedral of St. George, Iurev Monastery, Novgorod.

In a summation, both the Palace of Culture and Magnitogorsk projects employed traditional techniques not just in the architecture but also in the graphic communication of the ideas and symbolism inherent in them. The methodology and abstraction of the drawing techniques reflect this emotive quality. Whilst being attacked for “schematicism” they can more objectively be read as an effective and traditional means of communicating ideas, much like the role of the icon paintings. At a time when Soviet economic conditions made realization of these schemes unattainable or unrealistic, they represented idealistic goals for the future and an exploration of traditional and historical techniques utilized in exploratory ways that would continue to be developed by Leonidov in the work that followed.

IMAGINING THE IDEAL

With increasing professional isolation as a result of attacks on his work Leonidov nonetheless continued and persevered with his exploration of architecture. The primary methods of denigration were statements and declarations decrying Leonidov’s work. These crystallized with VOPRA, the All-Union Proletarian Architect’s Association who coined the term Leonidovshchina – “Leonidovishness” or “Leonidovism” to describe formalism, willfulness, unreality, and utopian schemes. VOPRA produced the resolution
“The Petit-Bourgeois Trend in Architecture (Leonidovshchina)” in 1931, portraying Leonidov and his work as individualist, going so far as to describe him as a hostile class enemy of the proletariat. It was an unrelenting, sustained and deeply personal attack, Hudson comparing it to placing Leonidov in the role of the devil of architecture as Trotsky was of politics.26

Confined to the margins of discourse and practice and when major constructions and commissions of the time had retreated to an eclectic historicism of forms that came to be manifested in the “Soviet Realist” or “Red Doric” style,27 Leonidov, more than acutely aware of the new agenda, continued his own development more interested and informed by Russian medieval models. Concurrent to work on numerous designs of this later period, Leonidov continued to return to and develop a private project that was evocatively titled “The City of the Sun,”28 which manifested his imagined ideal vision of a future city and which he labored on from 1943 until his death in 1959. This ideal took numerous strategies and placed them within a scheme that was a personal work and therefore removed from the possibility of condemnation and attack. In this work can be observed a retreat to tradition, but also what Gozak claims is a distillation, “…born of opportunity to write in one place everything he had created so far.”29

At this juncture it is important to note here the relevance and symbolism of the Sun in the context of Leonidov’s position. In traditional wooden dwelling houses the relevance of the Sun is paramount, it symbolizes the protective powers and represents the victory of light over darkness which is manifested formally in the three positions of a typical house’s roof gables.30 With his professional career effectively sidelined and struggling to reassert himself from sustained attack and criticism via the authorities and their agents, the symbolism could not be more potent.

The forms, language, graphics and techniques employed by Leonidov for this ideal developed in parallel with such diverse projects as the development of the southern coast of Crimea around Yalta (1935-37), The Narkomtiazhprom Sanitorium landscaping at Kislovodsk (1938), The United Nations complex (1957-58) and The Monument to the First Sputnik (1957-58). These projects aided in the development and progression of his imagined, ideal vision. The synthesis of their concepts in “The City of the Sun” trace their lineage once again to Leonidov’s comprehension and interpretation of traditional art and architecture.

Specific formal traditional architectural devices innovatively explored in these projects (but not limited to) are: the “laroslavl” window form, the sphere and onion dome “lukovitsa” and “glava” of the church, the stepped pyramid and pagoda like imagery of the “kokoshniki” and “shatior” vertical roof spires and the “zakomary” of arched gables. These devices can be directly traced to vernacular architecture and their complexity is derived from a profusion of a purely tectonic and aesthetic logic. Overall is a characteristic involvement and engagement with Nature, most clearly articulated in the one built example of his mastery of symbiosis with site, the landscaping at the Kislovodsk sanatorium.

In the expression and communication of these works and its culmination in “The City of the Sun,” Leonidov once more returned to the traditions of his earlier icon painting training and its employment of
symbolism. In the technique of their portrayal, he employed painting directly onto a plywood substrate and utilized a rich palette of polychromatic colors that imbued the work with a stronger luminescent representation, a defining characteristic of traditional icon painting and methodology. While earlier work in the “utopian brand” years had achieved this “cosmic” spatial quality through white lines and colored areas on a black background, giving the images a quality of depth and infiniteness, the background used now was warm and radiant with the natural color and grain of the prepared plywood is allowed to show through. The icon technique of “assist” was used to greater emphasis to define the architecture and the application of paint proper was with traditional tempura mediums. Throughout the portrayals of this ideal city lies the Sun, a reverence for geometry and traditional Russian architectural forms, bright and diverse colors and the symbolism contained within them.

CONCLUSION

It would appear that Leonidov, with both his formal training and rural upbringing, could lay claim to Rudofsky’s observations of the traditional, vernacular or peasant tradition, he being one of those:

“...builders in space and time...: demonstrating an admirable talent for fitting their buildings into the natural surroundings. Instead of trying to conquer nature...they welcome the vagaries of climate and the challenge of topography.”

The traditional environment certainly permeated Leonidov’s artistic subconscious and world view. In his earlier work, it is certainly less immediately obvious to an uncritical eye, whilst in his later work it manifests itself more clearly in both form and technique. Leonidov’s oeuvre of work can perhaps be summarized by an observation of tradition within modernity by Shvidkovsky:

“Tradition is as diverse as it is complex. The manner in which it affects our own lives is often surprising; it may illuminate our work unnoticed...”

Throughout his career, Leonidov was labeled “utopian” and “schematic” and ultimately even his own name became associated with the terms. It is with the benefit of hindsight that contemporary observers can examine his work with more appropriate phrases such as “enlightened,” “prophetic” or even “visionary.” At the time of its production however, Hudson makes clear this utopian world-view was: “...the democratization of political and social life. As such...(it) emerged as a challenge to Stalinism” and as such, was destined to relegation, or worse. Leonidov’s prolific canon of work is today widely recognized as masterpieces of the avant-garde, particularly Constructivist architecture, which despite their vision and possibility for a new way forward, nonetheless never materialized. It is with poignant irony that they have become iconic themselves, symbols of a utopia that failed to materialize yet still fascinate and demand the attention of the viewer with their prospect of possibility. As has been argued in this paper, that vision had strong roots in
Leonidov's own sensitivity to rural space, an appreciation of the power of its architecture and an artistic tradition derived from the communication of ideas. To his detractors, one could leave the defense of his work to his own words:

“...I do everything in my power to make things real and concrete...one should believe in socialism – and it is hardly a fault to dream a little in this connection.”

NOTES AND REFERENCES


11 J.Stuart, Ikons, Faber & Faber, 1975, p266.


13 P.A. Florensky, Ikonostas extract from Ikons, J. Stuart, Faber & Faber, 1975, p152.

14 J.Taylor, Icon Painting, Phaidon Press, 1979, p77.


Numerous contemporaneous articles and journal pieces followed this editorial line with varying degrees of venom attacking Leonidov throughout this period. The more memorably vicious were from, but by no means limited to: "The Building Industry" (Aronovich, 1927), "Architecture to the Masses" (Mordvinov, 1930), "The Construction of Moscow" (Dokuchaev, 1930; Sherbakov, 1931; Karra & Simbirsev, 1930; Aronovich, 1934). A good source of these documents can be found in A. Gozak & A. Leonidov's monograph published by Academy Editions, 1988.


Ibid, p73.


The title of the project was taken from the Italian writer Campanella's book of the same name that Andrei Leonidov claims closely related his father's ideological outlook. Refer to A. Gozak & A. Leonidov, Ivan Leonidov - The Complete Works, "Artist, Dreamer and Poet", Academy Editions, 1988.


