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On Building a Temple in Today's World: Lessons from the Moscow Patriarchate's 1989-90 Architectural Competition¹

The need for new churches in Russia²

After the Communist Revolution, church art and church architecture in particular practically ceased to exist in Russia. Many churches were torn down or put to improper use. Services continued in churches of all kinds of styles and periods, but without many of their appointments, which had been confiscated or transferred to museums. Construction of new churches, with few exceptions, was simply discontinued and did not resume until the end of the century. It is true that after the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945, a fair number of parishes reopened, but only in the 1970s did any notices of new construction appear in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*. Moreover, new towns like Komsomolsk-on-Amur sprang up which had no church buildings at all, and in some older towns, no ancient church survived.

Under such conditions it was impossible *not* to launch construction of new churches once the opportunity arose. Unfortunately, the Church's ability to do build was hampered and remains so by scarcity of funds— and above all by loss of tradition.

Not surprisingly, the architecture of many new churches is utilitarian and remote from the beauty and richness of form characteristic of Russian church architecture. Only small unpretentious

¹ The contest was announced in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* (English edition) 1989 no. 8, pp. 2-3 ("Programme and Conditions of an Open Contest for an Architectural Design of a Memorial Church Dedicated to the Millennium of the Baptism of Russ") and design requirements outlined on pp. 3-4 ("Preliminary Design Requirements for a Memorial Church Dedicated to the Millennium of the Baptism of Russ"). The first round of results were discussed in 1990 no. 5, pp. 29-32 (M. Kudryavtsev and T. Kudryavtseva, "Reflections on Church Architecture") and in 1990, no. 6, p. 19 (Patriarch Pimen, "Architectural Contest for a Memorial Church to Mark the Millennium of the Baptism of Russ: Message") and pp. 20-24 (A. Dukhanin and A. Batalov, "The Contest: Two Opinions"). Unfortunately, the *Journal* seems to have been unable to publish the final results and further discussions, due to the political and economic turmoils of the time. This paper is a somewhat freely written digest of the series of articles.

² Based on comments of Kudryavtsev and Kudryavtseva, JMP 1990 no. 5, pp. 29-30.

cupolas and crosses have remained as symbols of the Lord's house. Rare exceptions such as, for example, the Church of St. Nicholas in Novgorod have not "set the tone."

The all-around renovation of Soviet society which got underway with the celebration of the Millennium of the Baptism of Russia in 1989 brought about a major upswing in church life, as ancient cloisters and thousands of temples were returned to the Church. It might seem that where such numbers of superb but neglected, desecrated, and dilapidated churches existed, whose restoration was yet beyond the means of both the state and believers' communities, there was no need at present for new church construction. However, this was not the case. Apart from the need to build in towns where there are no churches, new Russian saints were being canonized and important events are taking place in the life of the people. It has been a tradition from the days of yore to commemorate new saints and important spiritual turning points by building new churches.

Among such important events was the 1000-year jubilee of the baptism of Russia, which took place in 1989-90. During those celebrations, therefore, the Holy Synod held an architectural competition for the design of a 10,000-person capacity church celebrating the Millennium of Russia's Baptism, which was to be located near the Tsaritsino Ponds of the Orekho-vo-Borisovo district of Moscow.

The Synod desired that the project "express in the language of architecture and monumental art the triumph of Orthodoxy, the history of the Russian Church and her sanctity, and the millennial existence of Christianity in Russia", and that it produce a "vividly expressive" church which furthered "the best traditions of Russian church architecture". The triumph that building a church of this size with government assistance meant *after* 70 years of Communism was not overlooked; this was to be a major showcase church.

Archbishop Aleksy of Zarskoye oversaw the contest, and entries were judged by the Holy Synod itself. More than 300 designs were submitted— an unexpectedly large number— reflecting all prevailing modern architectural trends and the traditional styles of Russian and Byzantine architecture, and even modern Protestant and other architectural models.

A description of the new temple³

At the risk of seeming tedious, but in order to grasp the full significance both of what the Synod envisioned and of the reflections that followed, it's important to spell out some of the project details, and to gain a clear picture of the size and dimensions of the new temple:

The church was to be built as a "first-category public building", made for permanence, suited for use by 10,000 people at a time, incorporating modern building materials and elements.

³ Summarizing "Preliminary Design Requirements", JMP 1989 no. 8, pp. 3-4.

It was to be a cathedral-level temple dedicated to the Millennium of the Baptism of Russia, which would be used for regular services of worship, significant jubilee celebrations of the Russian Orthodox Church, and Local Councils. Its central church was to be dedicated to the Life-Giving Trinity and it would have two side-chapels, one dedicated to the Protecting Veil of the Theotokos, and the other to All Saints Who Shone Forth in Russia.

Bells were to be located in towers atop the main building. On the western side there should be three entrances with large narthexes. There had to be three choir galleries: the central and in the two side-chapels. Space was to be provided for 4 to 6 candle-selling kiosks on the porches. In the left-hand wing of the church there had to be a baptistery for infants and another for adults. Rooms were to be available in the right-hand wing of the church for the performance of other church rites. The left-hand wing of the sanctuary had to accommodate the sacristy and service rooms, and the right-hand wing, a vestry with a changing room. There also had to be facilities for live radio and tv coverage of divine services, conferences, and councils.

The temple proper was to be built above a ground-floor level which would contain a conference hall, lobby, foyer, and auxiliary rooms for formal international receptions, simultaneous interpretation facilities, rooms for members of the presidium with a refreshment room; dining rooms of 50 and 100 seats for clergy, separate lounges 30 clergy occupants, and also for service and kitchen staff, and a separate ground-floor entrance leading to the rooms of the presidium members, connected with the sanctuary by staircase and elevator. The requirements further specified a shop to sell church articles and souvenirs, accommodating 20 shop assistants, with its own separate entrance. The ground floor should be even larger than the main building, as the podium of the church.

The basement would accommodate a kitchen, prosphora bakery, vestry and storage rooms for church vestments, vesting rooms for 200 clergy, rooms for engineering installations, storerooms and repair shops, janitorial rooms, guard rooms and cloak-rooms, rooms for administrative staff, service rooms and lounges for technical staff (20 persons) in charge of the engineering installations, control (dispatcher) room, an information and excursion office, lavatories and showers, and a cloak-room proportional to the capacity of the conference hall. Elevators had to be provided between all floors of the building, including the sanctuary. Escalators should connect the main hall on the ground floor with the cloak-room and lavatories in the basement.

Externally, the design was to incorporate a monumental tracery fence and main entrance, bus access, roads; an underground garage for 700 cars and street-level parking for 200 more cars, underground toilet facilities, a landscaped park, and planning for the adjacent city district.

All sections of the church complex were required to have hot and cold water supply, sewer systems, electricity supply, heating, ventilation, passenger and freight elevators, air conditioning, centralized dust and refuse removal systems, public address facilities and

telephones even in hallways and lobbies, and an intercom system linking all the engineering and technical services.

The Competition: Entries⁴

The entries fell roughly into two groups:

- designs based on Graeco-Byzantine architectural traditions, or on historic Russian architecture— early, baroque, classicist, and 19th-century eclecticism. Despite obvious adherence to established architectural styles of various epochs, none of these were mere imitations.
- modernist designs using some traditional elements and often accompanied by some complicated esoteric symbolism. Modernist projects demonstrated great individuality. But avant-gardism in the field of church architecture struck the critics as “rather premature”, in the words of A. Dukhanin.

Critical Responses⁵

Most of the entries assumed that without some continuity with tradition, church architecture cannot develop. But since architecture embodies the reality of its own time, the exhibition very interestingly demonstrated present-day perceptions of Christianity and of the role of the Church in the history and culture of the nation.

Perceptions of tradition

Many designs were based on the stylization (even caricature) or hypertrophy of traditional elements. Seeking to accentuate the “spirituality” of Orthodoxy, some proposed buildings of an exaggerated height, for example. Such designs, however, gave little thought to the correct proportion between the floor of a church and its height, a matter of vital importance for good acoustics (and people actually sing in Orthodox churches!)— to say nothing of the fact that such designs would place frescoes and icons out of sight.

The purpose of a church

Numerous balconies, passages and staircases might look impressive, but hardly generate an atmosphere of prayerful concentration. “Real prayer is quiet and peaceful, and remains such at all stages”, St. Feofan the Recluse says. Not all of the architects seem to have realized the basic purpose of a Christian church.

⁴ Cf. JMP 1990, no. 6.

⁵ A. Dukhanin and A. Batalov, JMP 1990, no. 6, pp. 20-24

Indeed, there is an understanding that regards history as a product of the human spirit, and another which sees it as the working out of God's plan. In keeping with the former, people erect monuments to human achievement. Christianity, on the other hand, builds churches in thanksgiving for the grace and mercy of God.

Commemorating an event such as the Millennium of the Baptism of Russia by building a memorial church is certainly in line with ancient tradition. Even in the Old Testament, the Transjordanian Tribes said: *Behold the pattern of the altar of the Lord, which our fathers made... as a witness between us and you* (Js 22.28), and indeed Christian architecture shows many examples of churches built to commemorate deliverance from calamity or other historical events.

Yet when we start to introduce into the House of God the signs of our own participation in history, it is well to pause before the inscription placed upon one of the pediments of St. Isaac's Cathedral in Leningrad: *Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory* (Ps. 115.1). There is a difference between a temple of God and a historical monument. It is well to keep in mind a comment of I.S. Aksakov, concerning the monument to the Millennium of Rus' in Novgorod:

“Instead of building a monument to themselves, in premature anticipation of the judgment of history, they should have erected a temple to Him Who passes judgment over times and ages, and they should repent therein, confessing all their historical falsehoods and trespasses”.

That said, however, for most of the entrants, the Baptism of Russia and its millennium seemed chiefly to be historical events, and the mystical significance of Russia's entry into the Universal Church was pushed into the background.

Attempt to create a new “sacred architecture”

Never has such a gap between church and secular art existed as it does today, a fact which inevitably formed the background of the competition. Many entries tried to address this gap, but in doing so, succeeded only in reducing the traditional forms of Orthodox architecture to emblems and symbols that were merely pasted on onto modern forms, structures, and assumptions. And as one prominent art expert and restorer commented, “What is art? Art is the glorification of life. And what is church art? It is the glorification of our covenant with the Almighty. This calls above all for profound sincerity, profound truthfulness. Any attempt to pass oneself for something which one is not introduces an element of falsehood.”

Present-day technical methods allow for endless interpretations of traditional architectural elements— such as giant, transparent, tent-like roofs, glass vaults, and so forth— and in some cases, the forms were so removed from the Church's architectural tradition that their confessional nature could only be guessed at. The desire to create an expressive image is

laudable, but the treatment of tradition merely as a repository of artistic forms actually results in a loss of the deeper unity of temple architecture. Many proposals were full of emblematic “symbolism” but were not organically connected with Christian life on the soil. And just placing forms from different epochs into new combinations offers no escape from this artificiality.

Today’s professional skills are capable of capturing the essence of a temple only if they are animated by a genuine understanding of tradition. The architecture must be oriented, for example, not at the onlooker, but toward God in the act of worship. Only from this stance can a new synthesis of the cruciform domed and tent-roof churches be essayed, which will achieve much more than emblematic symbolism. A new temple space has to be organically created from the *assumptions*, not just the forms, of traditional church architecture.

The contest transcended the concrete objective of building a new church and exposed to a considerable extent the problems facing us today on the road toward a revival of Orthodox architecture.

Reflections on Church Architecture⁶

With the 1990 announcement in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* of the winners of the first round of the competition, there also appeared an understated but quite remarkable reflection by M. Kudryavtsev and T. Kudryavtseva on the problems that would be encountered in any attempt to build a traditional church with modern materials and assumptions:

What determines the tradition

The shortage of funds and materials experienced by Russian master builders under the Mongol yoke and after devastating wars and fires affected the size and splendour of churches but never led to a reduction in their spiritual or artistic quality. These were determined not by available funding but by *continuity of tradition* from the days of St Olga up into the late 17th century and, in Northern Russia, even into the late 18th century, and by the main feature that distinguishes church art from secular art, namely its *theological conception and canonicity*.

The canons of Christian art are based on the Holy Scripture, church tradition, the holiness of the Holy Fathers, and are embodied in sanctified examples which the conciliar consciousness of the Church has recognized as expressing the truth and beauty of divine revelation with a certain fullness. Adherence to these canons helps to maintain a certain level of spirituality, despite differences in the spiritual attainment of any given architect. The development of the canons of church art and the emergence of new sanctified examples is possible, but only through fresh inspiration.

⁶ Based on M. Kudryavtsev and T. Kudryavtseva, JMP 1990, no. 5, pp. 29-32.

It is therefore not accidental that quite a few Old Russian master builders and most icon-painters in Russia were monks. Their creative work was accompanied by fasting and prayer, for they sought to bring about the “ecclesiastical” of matter— and this was an act of co-creation with God.

The 19th-century revival

Such was the background of church construction, whose restoration is before us today.

In asking whether it is possible to build in accordance with these traditions in today’s world, then, it is useful to consider the reversion to Old Russian traditions and canons of church art in the mid-19th century, after a period of enthusiasm for classicism and the Empire style.

In pre-Petrine Russia, most creators of church art did not leave their names on their creations, for they were deeply convinced that God is the only Creator of all that exists. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, however, architects were no longer free from aspiration for worldly fame and, in returning to the canonicity of church construction, they had to fight down their own striving for self-expression. They sought to copy ancient models, but the choice of models was determined by taste. Thus, K.A. Ton, architect of the original Church of Christ the Savior in Moscow, contributed to the spreading of Byzantine-style structures, and A. Shchusev was inspired by specimens of 14th-16th century Pskovian architecture. V. Suslov and V. Pokrovsky took Moscow, Vladimir and Suzdal architecture of the 16th and 17th centuries as their models. But their monuments were seen as “Byzantine” or “Muscovite” etc. only in “style”— as actual monuments, they were even more identified with their designers’ names.

Yet the creative work of these architects offers a vivid example of how important the choice of models is. Following the architectural traditions of Pskov, Novgorod, Smolensk, Moscow and other areas is justified where those architectural traditions are prevalent. But the enormous cathedrals built by K.A. Ton in Moscow, Uglich and Tver— which to be sure played a positive role in turning public consciousness toward the traditions of Byzantine church architecture— are completely devoid of an element intrinsic to Old Russian architecture: the delicate and harmonious blending of church buildings with the urban environment. On the other hand, A.N. Pomerantsev’s Cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky in Sofia, Bulgaria, also in the Byzantine style, is much more organic, for in Bulgarian church architecture, Byzantine traditions were not so markedly transformed as they were in Russia.

Also characteristic of quite a few 19th century structures is a certain eclecticism. Monumental churches built in the Byzantine style often have disproportionately small décor borrowed from 17th-century architecture. The “Pskovian” shapes of the churches designed by A. Shchusev not infrequently display the somewhat vapid expressiveness typical of Art Nouveau.

The Revolution nipped the 19th-century revival in the bud, but the organic assimilation of Old Russian canons along with their subsequent creative development promised excellent results,

as eloquently attested in the designs of V. Suslov and V. Pokrovsky. The memorial church built to honour the Russian servicemen fallen in the war of 1812, designed by V. Pokrovsky and built in Leipzig in 1913, is an outstanding example.

The situation today

In comparison with their 19th-century counterparts, present-day architects are, on the one hand, in a worse position. Traditions and techniques have not been preserved, skill in working with natural materials has been lost, and the finer points of designing and manufacturing traditional structural members have been forgotten.

But present-day architects are at the same time better off than those who worked before the Revolution, for the latter did not have a clear idea of what many old churches originally looked like, since they had been rebuilt and altered over time, and were restored only in the 20th century.

Yet this is precisely where fresh problems arise. In some cases there are serious questions as to how *authentic* this restoration of the ancient forms, decor elements, color schemes, and symbolism is— of the entire artistic and symbolic make-up of a church. Moreover, it is one thing when distortions occurring in the process of restoration lead art critics to build wrong theories, but quite another, when such theories become a basis for creative work in the Church.

The contest requirements and those of tradition

In the programme of the Synod's 1989 contest, two sentences are devoted to the architecture and outward appearance of the church, a half-page to a list of its main rooms, and the rest, about seven pages, to a list of facilities to be provided outside the temple proper— beneath the church or around it— conference hall, foyer, service rooms, dining rooms, kitchen, souvenir shop, workshops, lavatories and showers, etc.

No doubt all these facilities are necessary for rendering services to the huge numbers of people participating in international conferences and church solemnities. It seems essential, however, that these outward aspects of church life should not overshadow the Church's main function, divine service.

The programme breathes vanity and excessive concern for all kinds of modern amenities. Let them be provided, but only around the temple and not beneath it. For good reason the ancient conciliar rule stipulated placement of the relics of the holy martyrs in churches. Later on, this was fulfilled by placing an antimension with the sacred relics on the altar. The Russian Orthodox Church, however, has preserved the tradition of placing burial vaults and tombs under the church floor and next to the walls and altars of a church as well as outside. Would it not then be better if the church commemorating the whole of our millennial road Christ stood directly on the Moscow soil sanctified by the remains of unknown righteous people, martyrs and warriors, instead of over conference halls, kitchens, guardrooms, and lavatories?

Another major question relates to the building materials and structural members to be used in the construction of the church. The programme of the contest includes a provision which may have serious consequences: “The memorial church should be built of modern building materials and structural members and faced with brick...” Since bricks are mentioned here only as a facing material, “modern building materials and structural members” clearly means a metal framework, cast-in-place concrete, and glass. In principle, it is quite obvious what led to the incorporation of this provision in the program: the loss of building traditions and the absence of highly skilled traditional builders. Under such conditions, the construction of a church accommodating 10,000 people in conformity with “the finest *traditions* of Russian church architecture” is a rather complicated problem, to say the least.

Indeed, modern building materials and structural members facilitate the design and erection of buildings of any shape. But are the losses really so insignificant that, yielding to our weaknesses, we can still build a traditional church of non-traditional materials?

The nature of a traditional Orthodox temple

In Old Russia, white stone, shell rock, or bricks were sometimes used to imitate wooden structures; why not imitate older architecture with modern materials today?

Building materials determine more than just the form of a building. Those churches made of brick and stone did not simply *imitate* elements of earlier wooden structures; *they remained “wooden” in terms of their interaction with the soil, the environment and the human person.*

Before the foundations of such buildings were laid, great oak piles were driven into the ground and the stone or brick-and-mortar walls were established on them. These oak piles acted like the roots of a tree. These wooden roots, which did not rot because they remained in an anaerobic environment, induced a free upward movement of ground water into the walls. Hemp fibres were added to the lime mortar, so that this water from the soil, together with the mineral salts dissolved in it, penetrated the walls and continued upward by capillary action to the top of the building, where it evaporated intensively— a process facilitated by the complex, split-up shapes of the upper parts of churches and bell towers, which thus functioned like the crown of a tree. Cemented, as it were, by the “juice of the earth”, the church building grew stronger over time, accreting or even crystallizing into the ground. Egg, mixed into the mortar, also hardened over the centuries, just as it does in egg-tempera icons. Thus unlike modern cement and concrete, lime mortar and natural stone did not hinder but instead facilitated natural water and air circulation inside the building. This in turn ensured a microclimate favourable for people, icons and frescoes. It is no mere chance that Old Russian churches still stand, like trees, sometimes on the crests of hills, reinforcing unstable slopes.

The physical similarity of this traditional architecture to a tree has a spiritual meaning as well. Old Russian churches fully embody the idea delineated by the two principal sacred objects of

Christianity— the Life-Giving Tree of the Lord’s Cross and the cave of his Sepulchre, carved in a rock. Also, brick, made of clay— “zod” in Slavonic— is not only the basis of “zodchestvo”, “architecture”; it is also a symbol of that “dust of the earth” from which man was formed. The St. Spyridon of Tremethus even chose a brick to illustrate the dogma of the Holy Trinity, pointing to its triunity: clay, water, and fire. So It is by no means merely because modern technology hadn’t been invented yet that these materials— wood, stone, and brick— remained the only building materials used in the construction of temples for nearly two millennia. They remained the materials of choice because of their profound symbolic connectedness.

A church built of concrete and metal, even if it has a traditional shape, is a sculpture and not a living Tree. It actually can stand on a pedestal and not on the ground, as was clear in the programme of the competition.

Building temples in the modern world

From what has been said, it’s clear that the task formulated in just two paragraphs of the programme— namely, to design a church the likes of which has never before been built in Russia— is daunting.

Because our present-day architecture and architects are very remote from the tasks and problems of *temple* construction, it is essential to carefully elaborate the *theological concept of the temple* as the House of the Lord, an image of the universe, the place of actual unification of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant.

A temple built in commemoration of the Millennium of the Baptism of Russia must epitomize the spiritual state of the Russian Church at the end of this millennium. And only the Church can comprehend the spiritual outcome of the thousand-year-long life in Christ which is to be expressed in the language of architecture; it is therefore to the Church’s understanding that architects must turn.

The condition stipulated in the programme— “to express in the language of architecture and monumental art the theme of the triumph of Orthodoxy, the history of our Church and her sanctity, as well as the theme of the millennial existence of Christianity in Russia”— orients architects only towards artistic “symbolism” in frescoes, mosaics, bas-reliefs, etc, and not really to the substance of a deep, grounded, theological sacramentality.

But even with regard to the “symbolism” of frescoes, mosaics, bas-reliefs, etc, there arises another problem, that of the absence of a theory of Christian symbolism in modern architecture.⁷ The Orthodox Church has a definite theology of icon-painting, church architecture,

⁷ “The study of Christian symbolism launched by A. S. Uvarov at the end of the 19th century had as its outcome only the posthumous publication in 1914 of the first part of his work, dealing with early Christian symbolism. Few architects and historians of architecture are familiar today with the works of N. Troitsky such as *Russkiy*

and church singing which was ever an important dimension of her spiritual culture. This theology has received a good deal of attention in the context of icon-painting, but it awaits further examination in other areas. Yet we can deduce from this legacy a few principles which must be followed in modern church construction:

- Inherent in Old Russian church architecture is a detailed elaboration of the upper part of the church— in particular, its multi-tier, multi-dome design and the combination of *zakomary*⁸ and *kokoshniki*⁹ of various shapes— flamelike symbols. These reflect the increase of the Church Triumphant by the multitudes of saints who have accomplished their path.
- In building a temple, an older system of measures was used. As were other metrological systems of the past, geomorphic and anthropomorphic proportions ensure the harmonious scaling of all of the parts of a church, both internal and external, in a manner commensurate with the human person. It also ensured superb acoustics. And the Old Russian system of measures makes it possible to organically incorporate Christian numerical symbolism in the spatial design of a church.
- Floral, zoomorphic and geometric patterns are not just ornamentation; they are elements of a symbolic language one of whose major functions— which has disappeared from modern architecture— is a protective one: the painted decoration of platbands and lintels, the design of window frames, the portals over the entrances, and the painting of the walls— expressive of light and color— render the church “inaccessible” to the powers of darkness.
- The flamelike shape of domes, *zakomary*, *kokoshniki*, platbands, and portals combines two images of fire: the Heavenly Fire of the Holy Spirit nourishing and inspiring the earthly Church, and the earthly ardour of the soul reaching up to God in prayer and response.

Pravoslavniy Khram v Yego Ideye (Russian Orthodox Church in Its Idea) and others. Present-day architects have no access to *Novaya Skrizhal (The New Tables)* and even to Volume 4 of *Nastolnaya Kniga Svyashchennosluzhitelya (Manual for the Clergy)* published in 1983, which offers a concise description of the fundamentals of church symbolism.” (Kudryavtsev and Kudryavtseva).

⁸ *Zakomara* (pl. *zakomary*): the parapet over the extrados of the vaulting, conforming in outline to the type and number of vaults and thus dividing the parapet into several arched sections.

⁹ *Kokoshnik* (pl. *kokoshniki*): a structural feature, a series of corbelled-out, round or pointed arches arranged in receding tiers for the purpose of supporting the elements of the superstructure.

- The color scheme of Old Russian churches plays a major part in the symbolism and facilitates the best perception of a church at various distances in any weather and under various lighting conditions. The use of gold, silver, and tile is part of the system.

The revival of the symbolic language of all the varieties of church art can contribute to the revival of the spiritual life of Orthodoxy. But there are no slow-moving centuries ahead of us through which this revival can feel its way— the task is immediately upon us today!

Thus to spiritually comprehend the past as we enter upon the road towards the future is a pressing necessity for architects, as well as for historians and theologians.