

Modernism in Soviet Armenia

‘Soviet modernism’ has attracted much interest in recent years. In fact the countries of the USSR often took differing architectural directions, as *Yeva Ess-Sargsyan* explains



Right: The 'Cascade' complex (Jim Torosyan, Sargis Gourzadyan and Aslan Mkhitarian, 1972-88) in Yerevan, Armenia, represents modernised elements from Armenian traditional architecture

While fascination with Soviet modernism has been stimulated by books like Frederic Chaubin's *'CCCP' (Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed)*, the structures in books like this present a rather stereotyped idea of Soviet modernist architecture, and tend to overlook the rather different directions taken by Armenian modernism. 'ArmArch' is a multidisciplinary research group studying the morphological development and meaning in Armenian architecture. One of our current projects is a photographic survey of Armenian regional modernist architecture which is available as an open online resource at armarch.net/en.

Just as elsewhere, architects in Soviet Armenia (mainly Leningrad 'VKHUTEIN' graduates) were influenced in the early 1920s by what came to be called modernism or the 'International Style'. Soon, however, the state doctrine of social realism proscribed modernist or avant-garde expression in art and architecture, and for almost four decades, the predominant styles in Armenia (like the rest of the empire) were classicism and mutations of the neo-traditional and neo-classical.

This situation changed in the 1950s. Once again Soviet architecture was constrained by state doctrines, but now it was sumptuous classicism which was condemned, as in a 1955 decree about 'Liquidation of Excess in Architecture and Construction'. Modernism was now politically acceptable: its minimalist structural solutions, together with new, industrially manufactured construction elements, had the potential to build more



Above: The Museum of Ethnography (Raphael Israelyan, 1978): traditional wooden ceiling elements are here translated into a concrete structure (top). Below left, Israelyan's Aragil cafe (1959), and (opposite page) his Sardarapat memorial complex (1968). Below right, Armen Aghalyan's Armentel building (1970) a high-rise with hundreds of concrete brise-soleil elements



Hayk Bianjyan: Romina Katchi: Armine Aghayan/Wikimedia Commons (2)

cheaply. But many member countries, with distinct histories and cultural traditions, developed their own idiosyncratic or regional modernist aesthetics and structural principles. Armenian architects who had for decades worked in neo-traditional styles had to adapt themselves to new ways of thinking and design for which there was no school or professional base, either here or in the rest of the USSR.

The deeply embedded tradition of Armenian architecture (evident in the sacred architecture surviving from as early as the fifth century) is based on principles of tectonic connection between geometry of volumes, spatial structure and materials/ technologies deployed. This is an austere architecture, relatively devoid of ornament. Walls of plain tuff (a three-layered cladding with two rows of tuf stone filled in with lime mortar) usually act as an architectural theme, the decor appearing in places only to stress the structure and the geometry of the composition. These traditional principles, which in many ways align with modernist architecture, accompanied by the widespread use of stone cladding and local ornamental motifs, formed the very spirit of Armenian regional modernism.

Thus it was that in the 1960s architects who had worked in a mainly classical style began to adopt the new modernist language. One of the brightest regional-modernist masters, whose work is generally

seen as neo-traditional or post-modern, was Raphael Israelyan. Like many of his colleagues, he started out as a typical neo-traditionalist, but unlike others in the Armenian avant-garde (who enthusiastically embarked on modernist principles) he openly opposed the rigid language of modernism. For him, context, whether geographical or cultural, and humanness expressed through scale, proportion and materials, were the essence of architecture. Ornament, and the warmth of traditional stone cladding, made a building 'readable', in contrast with what he saw as the austere and rigid rhetoric of glass and concrete modernism. The 'Aragil' café (1959, currently derelict) in Yerevan's Monument Park is a perfect example of Israelyan's regional-modernist architecture, with simple arch openings bevelled from inside instead of a classical vertical form. He never saw himself as such, but he shows himself here as a modernist master, despite the few decorative elements on the side facade.

After leaving the profession for some years, Israelyan returned with his Sardarapat memorial complex (1968) and the Museum of Ethnography (1978). The complex (a memorial to an early C20 battle) could be seen as either tending towards post-modernism, or a relic of neo-traditional ideologies and styles, while the museum has more clearly articulated modernist aesthetics. Israelyan's skill, which perfectly

links modernism and the traditional, was to translate traditional 'hazarashen' wooden ceiling elements into a concrete structure.

Another important theme influencing regional-modernist architecture was the rise of national consciousness in Soviet countries in the mid-1960s. The revival of folkloric arts and crafts was encouraged, being seen by the Soviet government as a 'generous' gesture towards the diversity of national cultures and traditions, without encouraging dangerous nationalisms. Monumental arts such as mosaics, fresco and bas-relief began to appear as a means of architectural rhetoric and a part of architectural form. This partly ornamental tendency probably helped Armenian architects to make the shift to the new mode of purely modernist design. Examples include the buildings decorated with bas-reliefs by the sculptor Ara Harutyunyan, whose works represent various national historical or mythological themes and revive the ancient techniques of Urartu (the earliest of the ancient Armenian kingdoms). One attractive example is the Erebuni museum in Yerevan (Shmavon Grigoryan, Baghdasar Arzumanyan, 1968), built on the archaeological site of an ancient Urartian fortress, Arin-Berd. The building itself is a metaphor of a fortress, being an enclosed box with plain walls of red tuff. In plan it represents the basic structure of Urartian houses, with an inner courtyard surrounded



Left: the Institute of Stones and Silicates (L Nushikyan, Z & V Tonikyan, 1968), a typical example of ornamental modernism. Above, the Erebuni museum (Sh. Grigoryan, B Arzumanyan, 1968), built on the archaeological site of an ancient fortress

is another typical example of ornamental modernism. A classical concrete and glass modernist building is animated with a side ‘tattoo’ on a theme again borrowed from the vocabulary of traditional ornamentation. The Spondiaryan music school (Rouben Zubietyan, 1971) has a magnificent front facade by esoteric abstractionist artist Van Khachatur. Windows act as a part of the ornamental structure which itself represents another geometrised, modernised interpretation of national ornamental motifs.

In the 1970s and 80s Armenian modernists became more confident in the architecture of pure geometry, free forms and open spaces, and in operating with typical modernist materials. Ornament and monumental art now played much less of a role, except in interiors. But concrete structures are still usually hidden behind stone cladding which remains a characteristic feature.

The two masters of high regional modernism are Stepan Qyurqchyan and Jim Torosyan, who transformed surface ornamentation into sculptural structure. Qyurqchyan’s most vivid work is the Chamber Music Hall (1977) which, despite its challenging geometry and structure, still retains a traditional air with its plain walls of dark tuff, touches of sculpted decor and rows of roughly-hewn incrustation. His monumental abstract forms have no obvious historical references or iconography, whereas Torosyan’s architecture is very much based on traditional plastic art forms. The ‘Cascade’ complex (1972-88) is one of the last and best examples of Armenian high regional modernism, representing all kinds of traditional ornaments and architectural elements. Unfortunately, the political and cultural upheavals of the years that followed meant that it proved to be the swan-song of the Armenian regional modernist school.

lintel systems and glazed facades. One exponent of high-rise architecture was Armen Aghalyan. His buildings often have ornamental facades created with hundreds of concrete brise-soleil elements, for example the Institute of Geodesy (1972-78), the ArmenTel building (1970) and the laboratories of the State Engineering University (1981-85). One could say that he translated decorative folkloric ornaments into modernist architecture by using one of the latter’s key technologies: the industrial manufacturing of standardised elements. But his red tuff decorations once again resemble Urartian motifs, or could be traced even further back to Mesopotamian ziggurats. His buildings, in contrast with the austerity of both Armenian and Mesopotamian arts, were often called ‘bonbonerka’ (chocolate boxes).

The Institute of Stones and Silicates



Above: the Spondiaryan Music School (Rouben Zubietyan, 1971). Below, the Sundukyan Theatre (R Alaverdyan, R Badalyan, S Burxajyan, G Mnacakanyan, 1966) a clearly modernist building of steel and glass but with traditional bas relief ornament above the entrance



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by galleries with dwelling chambers. The dominant motif is Harutyunyan’s bas-relief on the front facade representing scenes from Urartian history.

The Sundukyan theatre (1966) is a clearly modernist building of steel and glass. The lobby, two floors high behind a glass facade, and the semi-circular glass winter garden were totally new to Armenian architecture. Ara Harutyunyan’s bas-relief framing the front entrance depicts Urartian king Argishti II (said to be the founder of theatre in Armenia). This too recalls ancient Urartian bas-relief technique.

In the 1960s many research institutes were formed all over the Union. Seen as centres of scientific advancement, they required an equally advanced architectural setting. For the first time, high-rise buildings (of ten floors or more) were built using reinforced concrete post-and-