

# ArmArch

Language of Armenian Architecture

2018 July (N1)



**REGIONALISM IN ARMENIAN  
MODERNISM**

In memory of Hrach Galstyan, one of the  
best critical minds in Armenia

Versailles  
2018

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## INTRODUCTION

ArmArch ([www.armarch.net](http://www.armarch.net)) is an international think-tank and an online platform dedicated to studies of Armenian architecture. It started in 2017 by Dr. Talinn Grigor and architectural critic Yeva Ess-Sargsyan with the ArmArch Online Encyclopedia of Armenian Modernist Architecture, which can be accessed here: [www.armarch.net/en/encyclopedia](http://www.armarch.net/en/encyclopedia). The aim of the project was to photograph modernist structures from all corners of Armenia and present them in a form of an online database. During the fieldwork and the following desk-research we realized that this modernist architectural stratum, most part of which is not known, not documented and decaying in oblivion, is very peculiar and has a pronounced local characteristics. We came across many classical modernist structures which featured local traditional (national) architectural elements mostly decorative, which were transformed to the point of looking almost post-modernistic. Yet the modernist background was sounding clearly even below those decorative layers.

Armenia is a country which is currently facing many challenges, neglected and decaying historical architectural heritage is among them. In case of modernist heritage the situation is even more complicated, since it is hardly perceived as a part of national architectural tradition. The reason of this is can be found in local architectural traditions which start with early Middle Age church architecture (some prolong it until Urartian architecture) and finishes in mid 20th century, when neo-classical, neo-traditional Tamanyan school architecture had to give way to foreign, locally non-rooted modernist architecture. These two architectural traditions-middle age sacred architecture and 20th century Tamanyan school architecture, which was the secularized version of traditional church architecture, are what is today considered to be Armenian national architecture. Modernism is still known and valued mainly by specialists, whereas larger social layers, including in official circles, perceive Soviet Armenian modernist architecture, which is devoid of any visually recognizable links with the beloved historical architecture, as sort of a stepchild. The more or

less known part of it either belongs to the international modernist direction or is perceived as a culturally or historically invaluable part of usual urban scenery. It has never been studied or presented as a part of national architectural tradition and is far not perceived as a valuable artifact of historical heritage. By revealing this large layer of tradition inspired modernist architecture we now can assert that modernism in Armenia had in fact obtained a very interesting local characteristic and can be fairly considered as a modern continuation of local architectural traditions. Yet Armenia is not the only country having had produced tradition inspired modernist architecture. Regional modernism, which is the conventional term classifying this type of architecture, is a division within international modernist movement that took place in many other countries in the second half of the 20th century.

Yet both the term regional modernism and particularly the architectural phenomenon which it denotes have controversial interpretation among specialists. In fact regional modernism is one of the most undefined and uncertain architectural tendencies in the history of architecture. We can still argue where it starts and where it finishes. Its borders and exact characteristics remain blurred, as it can tend sometimes towards neo-nationalistic eclectic propaganda or towards postmodernism.

While compiling the Encyclopedia we needed to provide descriptions and explanations of this architectural domain, which was not an easy task to accomplish. After months of work and many discussions among professional circles within and beyond Armenia we realized that introducing this architecture in the ArmArch Encyclopedia requires much deeper conceptualization and research.

This current journal is aimed at raising discussion around regional modernist architecture and particularly regional modernism in Armenian on an international level. We have collected interviews and articles by different specialists who discuss tradition and its local specificities. We have constructed the overall narrative of the journal with certain coherence and expect that the development of themes and questions can eventually help to understand how the term regional modernism can be applied in

the case of Armenian modernist architecture.

Ethnographer Levon Abrahamyan tells about Soviet cultural policies regarding nationalism and tradition in arts and architecture. Architectural historian Colin Davies questions the validity of the term and phenomenon of regional modernism, whereas architectural historian Ricardo Agarez uses the term in an inverted form as modernist regionalism and applies it to the analysis of a large architectural stratum in Portugal. Architect Davit Stepanyan talks about the architecture of two great regional modernist masters of Armenia: Jim Torosyan and Rafael Israelyan. Whilst architectural critic Tigran Harutyunyan takes Israelyan out of the national and nationalistic context and places him as a pure modernist architect. Architectural critic Yeva Ess-Sargsyan gives a brief historical review of the term and phenomenon of regional modernism and attempts to ‘cleave’ and classify Armenian regional modernist architecture into constituent elements and design methods. The comparative gallery of Armenian Medieval churches, neo-classical and regional modernist architecture, which follows the article, comes to exemplify what has been discussed in all the previous texts.

ArmArch is a versatile research platform with this journal being only one of its projects. The Encyclopedia of Armenian Modernist architecture is ArmArch’s main project and is being constantly compiled and developed. With this journal we want to raise a discussion about regionalism in Soviet modernist and particularly Armenian modernist architecture. We hope that this journal will become a start of a dialogue with our readers about the below presented and many other architectural subjects.

***Yeva Ess-Sargsyan***

*ArmArch*

*Co-founder, Editor-in-Chief*



*Yeva*

## THE NATIONAL AND THE NATIONALISTIC IN SOVIET CULTURE

### Interview with ethnographer Levon Abrahamyan

*Levon Abrahamyan is a Candidate of History,  
Professor, NAS RA Academician |  
Chair of Archaeology and Ethnography*

#### ***ArmArch: What does it mean, national culture?***

***Levon Abrahamyan:*** National is what a given group of people perceive as theirs. Such self-identification obtained definition as national during the last several decades, before then it was the ethnic which was perceived as national. Normally there was ours and not ours. There was our world and the world of the others, which was perceived as savage. This phenomenon was well exemplified by the ancient Greeks, who distinguished Hellenes from the rest, who were called Barbarians. Barbarian means someone who mumbles, who is incomprehensible. Such demarcation is typical for all archaic peoples, not only for such a high civilization as the Hellenistic one, which is a very natural phenomenon. The situation changes when different cultures start understanding each other, in which case each side situates its own culture in the global cultural system higher than that of the other. The opposite existed as well, for example in the case of the Japanese who considered Chinese culture as a high culture, whereas their own culture was perceived as rather savage. However what is important here is that own culture or ‘the own’ in general becomes a means of self identification and self differentiation from the others. On later stages, when states formed, people united in states not on the bases of kinship but on common culture.

***ArmArch: Your recent video lecture about the Opera building was titled “The Opera of Tamanyan: Between the National and the Stalinistic”. How does na-***

*tional contrapose Stalinistic, what's the difference between the two?*

**Levon Abrahamyan:** Tamanyan was accused of bringing in national motifs in his architecture. Back in those days, national or, what Paperni calls Culture 1, was being denied. They needed a new revolutionary world which should have been international, not national. The famous slogan of Stalin that culture should be national in its form, but socialistic in essence, came much later. The initial revolutionary culture was exactly anti-national, the futurists of those times believed that national as a means of proud demarcation should disappear.

**ArmArch:** *What was considered as a national expression in culture in those times?*

**Levon Abrahamyan:** For example Tamanyan was accused in building his Opera House as a church, which was seen as one of the main national cultural pillars. Yet he wasn't building an abstract church, as for example the Palace of Soviets would have been, he was literally reciting the structure of the cathedral of Zvartnots. Yet that first revolutionary period had also a nation-constructing aspect. In those years alphabets for many member nations were created, so that all nations could be equal in the Union. Stalin used to say that there are two types of nationalism, one is the chauvinism of great nations, and the other one is the nationalism of small nations. During the first period of revolution, the rise of chauvinism was considered more dangerous, hence they strived to support the maintenance of the idiosyncratic culture of smaller nations.

When the competition of the Palace of Soviets was announced, in the competition brief some retrospective signs towards the culture of the past were already noticed. For example, constructivism was becoming unfavourable and Stalinist aesthetics was starting to take rise. As a result of this tendency such purely constructivist buildings, for example the Moscow Cinema, obtain ornamentations on the bases of national motifs. But Tamanyan was doing the same before, except he was referring to tradi-

tional architectural and decorative motifs before the Stalinist cultural and aesthetic ideology established, for which he was greatly criticized. But afterwards it became an official state doctrine.

**ArmArch:** *Does this mean that the official ideology of the Soviet government regarding national culture had opposite meaning during the rule of Lenin and Stalin?*

**Levon Abrahamyan:** For certain there was contradiction between these two ideologies. But the final goal in both cases was the same, to eliminate the notion of distinct nations and to unite them under one uniform communist society, among a single Soviet nation. This was a futuristic theory, which certainly was nonsense. For example in Soviet ethnography, in studies of Nordic people, there was a slogan saying that we have to help them make the leap from their 'prehistoric' state into socialism, whilst skipping the period of capitalism.

So, why does Paperni's Culture 1 turn into Culture 2, into a vertical, hierarchical structure, into a 'cult of personality'? I believe it has to do with the fact that Stalin was from the Caucasus, he originated from a traditional Georgian society. And perhaps because of this the past played a great role in his cultural ideology compared to proletariat Culture 1 which completely negated the past. In the 1920s the alphabets of all small nations became based on Latin, so that they would not be dependent on Russian culture and in order not to provoke the chauvinism of a greater nation. Whereas Stalinist ideology did exactly the reverse, those alphabets became based on the Russian, on a Cyrillic alphabet, which is a sign of suppression of national culture. This tendency continued until the Khrushchev Thaw when many previously prohibited things became allowed. Interestingly enough, when limits of freedom become extended, it is the national which appears first. Moreover, the national manifests itself the easiest in a form of the ethnographic, hence national folkloric arts as the safest mode of national cultural expression became supported on a state level.

**ArmArch:** *If to sum up, could we say that during the Soviet years there were three periods of national cultural policy: Leninist, Stalinist and Khrushchev's?*

**Levon Abrahamyan:** Yes, the first period was the revolutionary period which manifested itself as constructivism in architecture, the aim of which was to destroy the past and bring in the innovative. Yet meanwhile folkloric arts were supported. Then Russification of culture started and by the end of the 1930s national artificial cultures was already created. This is a paradox since in the beginning of the 1930s the national was considered as dangerous, whereas by the end of the decade each member nation had to have its own national mythology, legends, opera and culture in general, which were fake cultural constructs.

**ArmArch:** *So all forms of national cultural expressions of Soviet times were artificially synthesized cultural constructs?*

**Levon Abrahamyan:** They were being synthesized during Stalinist period. On later stages, during 1960s-1970s the authentic folklore comes out of the artificial one. These folkloric arts and cultural forms were not synthesized or formulated according to official doctrines. They truly existed. This was a period when ethnographers started collecting the authentic folklore among the peasants of rural places and remote villages, instead of creating artificially a national opera or a national epos. In other words, in this period the ethnographic become the national. By studying the culture of peasants, scientists attempted to retrieve the authentic past. At this moment ethnographic culture become a means of self differentiation from the others and a tool in the hands of nationalism.

**ArmArch:** *How did this newly discovered national cultural motifs manifest itself in modernist architecture?*

**Levon Abrahamyan:** This was the period of the Khrushchev Thaw, when architects were inspired and excited by the possibility of creating free ar-

chitectural forms. For example, in the architecture of Rafael Israelyan, the reference to national motifs is obvious. But his references are rather conceptual than formalistic, for him the building itself is a monument to the national architecture. This approach is expressed, for example, in the building of the Ethnography Museum. Here he has sacrificed such functional requirements as proper illumination in order to have one window facing mount Ararat, and the other window facing mount Aragats, (both of which are symbolic, sacred mountains in the Armenian tradition). The overall building is designed as a castle. All of this is a conceptual approach, whereas it is impossible to organize exhibitions inside the building, its function as an exhibition place is not very well solved. This, perhaps, seemed as a secondary requirement to the architect, as his aim was to design an architectural monument.

**ArmArch:** *How did growing studies of Urartian culture affect national self-identification in Armenia?*

**Levon Abrahamyan:** Urartu was itself an empire, not a national state. Moreover, its ruling elite were not locals but invaders who came from within and started ruling over the local Indo-European population. Urartian culture was tied with Armenian culture quite late and hit its ideological peak during the rise of nationalistic moods during the 1988 liberation movement, when Armenians claimed to originate from Uratians. During these years even the name 'Urartu' was replaced with the Armenian translation 'Ararat', Armenian culture was seen as a successor of Urartian culture. This tendency had the aim of affirming the origins of the Armenians as locals. Nevertheless these moods soon started to recede, gradually leaving behind a stratum of modernist architecture based on Urartian art and culture.

## ARCHITECTURE AS OPEN TEXT

## Interview with architectural historian Colin Davies

*Colin Davies was Professor of Architectural Theory at London Metropolitan University and is the author of several books, including Key Houses of the Twentieth Century and Thinking About Architecture (both Laurence King) and recently published A New History of Modern Architecture.*

**ArmArch:** *As an architectural historian, how would you define the tendency in modernist architecture which is called regional modernism? What is that tendency about?*

**Colin Davies:** I am not very much in favour of definitions of architectural styles because a definition implies hard boundaries around an idea, or a style, or a manner of doing things. Architectural styles are vaguer, more fluid, one style leaking into another. We give names to architectural styles for convenience, but they are not at all precise. All I could say is that regional modernism is an adaptation of modernist ideas of uniformity and internationalism.

Modernist pioneers saw themselves as producing an architecture that would be relevant to any part of the world. But in the 1960s it became clear that this was not realistic. It was necessary to make some accommodations to local conditions, especially in non-western contexts. A good illustration to this is le Corbusier's attitude to air conditioning. His original idea which he tried to install in the Salvation Army hostel in Paris, didn't work. It was a technical disaster. The building overheated. But instead of developing this system, perhaps with reference to American technical developments, he changed his whole approach. He came up with the idea of brises-soleil, which is a passive energy control system. He conceded that modern architecture must adapt itself to local conditions, and that a global norm was unworkable. It was an important ideological shift. An

architect should not only reflect on local conditions, but should grow out of it. And the idea that architecture should respond to local conditions, whether climatic or cultural, became an important theme in the 60s.

**ArmArch:** *What about the term itself? What does it signify?*

**Colin Davies:** Whether it is regional modernism, critical modernism or critical regionalism (Kenneth Frampton's term), architects rarely sign up willingly for these or any other categories. I don't think any major architect has ever said 'I am a critical regionalist'. Even the architects of Gothic Revival never called themselves that. These terms are used by people like you and I (i.e. critics or historians) for our own convenience.

**ArmArch:** *So, basically, there is no certitude in any of the definitions about the past...*

**Colin Davies:** Architectural history is a cultural construct. It's not the truth about the past. It's impossible to establish the truth about the past, so we have this much less satisfactory term 'history'. Architectural history is a very imperfect thing. I think it is a better to start with individual buildings and architects and try to understand where their ideas come from. Take for example Charles Correa. We may find certain coherence in his buildings and in the way he combines certain Indian traditions with modernist traditions. But as soon as we group him with somebody else, the clarity disappears. The reason why I grouped him with Doshi in my book (A New History of Modern Architecture) is because they are both Indian and were trained in a modernist tradition but they are very different as architects.

**ArmArch:** *What about the term 'vernacular architecture'?*

**Colin Davies:** I am fond of the sentence: 'Architects cannot do vernacular architecture'. It is a logical impossibility. Architects subscribe to a particular professional culture which disqualifies them from the category 'vernac-

ular'. Architecture is an artificial art. There is no way an architect can walk into a village and design a cottage for a worker the way that the worker himself would design it. Architects produce architecture but we must bear in mind that most buildings are not architecture.

**ArmArch:** *Do you mean that there is 'academic' or 'professional' architecture and there is architecture made by the layman, by the non-professionals, which we might also call vernacular architecture?*

**Colin Davies:** If two architects, like you and I, have a conversation about architecture, we talk about a very specific cultural concept: It is western in its origin and it contains all sorts of things other than buildings. It contains educational institutions, galleries, photography, magazines, all sorts of other components. It is not just the design of buildings. And even if we talk about the design of buildings, architecture is the design of only some buildings. For example in North London there are thousands of terraced houses built in the early 20th century. Almost none of them belongs in the cultural field called architecture. One might argue that they are not vernacular either. They are the products of industrial culture, but if we pretend they are architecture then the concept of architecture is impoverished.

**ArmArch:** *Do you consider mass housing as architecture?*

**Colin Davies:** Yes, it can be. For example in the 1960s, in Britain, local authorities started to build mass housing in a form of tower blocks. And it was architecture to the extent that people building it called themselves architects and were very consciously influenced by Le Corbusier's projects of the 1920s and 1930s. But then the manufacturers of precast concrete panels saw an opportunity and said, we will take over now, we don't need architects anymore, because we can manage by ourselves. So there was a transition: There was architecture, then it became just buildings, industrialized buildings. And architects literally gave up and went away.

But we could say something similar about the 16th and 17th century British country houses. These buildings have survived because they are beautiful and have certain qualities that architects love, that everybody loves. But they are not architecture in the modern sense because, quite simply, the word was never used. The word architect in British culture is unknown until the late 17th or early 18th century. The word architecture does not appear anywhere in Shakespeare's complete works. It's too early. Architecture is a modern concept. And of course we apply the term retrospectively.

**ArmArch:** *Different countries have always had their idiosyncratic cultures, including architecture. How does that local idiosyncrasy manifest itself in modernist architecture?*

**Colin Davies:** In a way modernism got rid of that variety. It said: "We are human beings and have the same practical needs all over the world". It was a mad idea really. And it took us a long time to see that it was not an acceptable idea. As globalisation gathered pace in the second half of the 20th century, regional modernism arose, pulling the opposite direction.

**ArmArch:** *It emerged as a sort of a contra-reaction, perhaps.*

**Colin Davies:** If in Britain a builder builds a house, it will usually look like a cottage. And often this will be achieved by sticking fake beams on the front to make it look as if it is made of oak. Or putting on a chimney on the roof when there is no fireplace...

**ArmArch:** *Purely a formalistic approach...*

**Colin Davies:** Yes. Maybe that builder is unlikely to be a qualified architect, but he is a designer nevertheless, using borrowed motifs from vernacular architecture. He just takes those motifs from 200 years of architecture and sticks them on the building. But if we are trying to decide about its architectural quality, then it doesn't possess any.



**ArmArch:** *Can we define the border between regional modernist and post-modernist architecture?*

**Colin Davies:** I think that's a very good and clearly put question, but don't be too keen to get an answer. It might be better just to contemplate the question. In fact there is no one answer, that's for sure, because there are many differences between regional modernism and postmodernism. There is postmodernism in Charles Correa's work and there is regional-modernism in Robert Venturi's work. It is a really interesting comparison to make but I don't think you'll come to hard and fast answers. It is not that kind of a subject. Architectural history is not the field in which you can come to definite conclusions. It is a journey that never comes to an end. I think the discussion should be left open, because those people who read that architectural discussion, don't necessarily want conclusions. And if you give them a conclusion, do you know what will happen? They will disagree with it.

## BETWEEN INTELLECTUAL AND INTUITIVE DESIGN: MODERNIST REGIONALISM IN ALGARVE

Interview with architectural historian Ricardo Agarez

*Ricardo Costa Agarez (PhD in architectural history) is an architect and architectural historian. He is an author of the book *Algarve Building: Modernism, Regionalism and Architecture in the South of Portugal, 1925-1965*. He is currently Assistant Professor at the University of Évora, in Portugal.*

**ArmArch:** *You seem to prefer using the term modernist regionalism instead of regional modernism. Why?*

**Ricardo Agarez:** I really prefer the expression modernist regionalism in a sense of localism of language. The reason why I use such a category as modernist regionalism is because there were former episodes when in the 1920s in many countries there were attempts to find local languages or local lexica of architecture. There were similar attempts also in the late 19th century. So there is regionalism as a sort of continuum platform, a layer that has eruptions every now and then and which consistently resurfaces. It came out in Portugal between the two wars period and this time it manifested itself as modernist regionalism. So this term is in contrast with a more conservative term, regionalism, which existed in Portugal in the 1930s. This regionalism was more affected by countryside and peasant life, whereas modernism is much more cosmopolitan and urban.

**ArmArch:** *How would you define, formulate, what is modernist regionalism in essence?*

**Ricardo Agarez:** It is a localized experiment with the tenets and principles of the international modern movement. Although the role of locality is

much smaller here; the agency of locality is more limited. It has more to do with technologies, materials and tectonics. In the case of the region I studied, that is Algarve in Portugal, it was more about how to link this purely functionalist, modernist design, with possibilities of the locality, including poor experiences and expertise of people in working with concrete. The question was how to build a modernist building without having the required techniques? So they had to adapt local techniques to the international lexicon of the design. Modernism is really limited to techniques, technologies and materials. Whereas in regionalist modernism there is something more than that, it is a much more mature way of appropriation of forms and lexicon without constraints.

**ArmArch:** *What is the specificity of post-war era modernist regionalism?*

**Ricardo Agarez:** The period of modernist regionalism was completely different. The situation after the war was not at all the same as it was preceding it. Modernism internationally was under threat, under attack. Actors in this domain, architects and others, felt that they needed local agents and agency that was not only based on the practice of techniques and technologies. It was more about engaging with forms as well and using local, so called vernacular forms. So here we have this freedom of translating the form. Architectural artifacts of 1950s and 1960s that I analyzed are much more hybrid than in the pre-war period, because people, designers in particular, felt freer to elaborate the features of their locality, building customs and traditions on the bases of a modernist lexicon.

**ArmArch:** *Could we say that there are two approaches in modernist regionalism, in the first approach the regional component of the design manifests itself in local technical and technological know-hows, whereas in the second design approach the regional agent is expressed through rather artistic, formal elements?*

**Ricardo Agarez:** This is a very good summary. I believe that there is always

a technical and tectonic base even in the most formalistic building. We could say that before the Second World War they practiced a more functional and technological use of the local, and after the war the use of the local became more formalistic. But this formalism is very hybrid, it mixes the local with the universal and international. And in the case of Portugal, these influences might come from Le Corbusier or it might come from Le Corbusier's impact on America which then returned back to Europe. So this is a constant process of mirrors and reflections, it is not a straightforward influence of forms spreading from the center to the peripheries. That is why I find it particularly interesting to study regional appropriations of modernist style; in the countryside modernism finds a very complex presence instead of simply adopting certain details.

**ArmArch:** *Do the architects of the periphery adopt and apply modernist design elements intuitively or they show a professional, academic approach to such design?*

**Ricardo Agarez:** I would say that the spontaneous or intuitive aspect in this process of appropriation and application is stronger than the academic approach. There is a sort of a beautiful freedom in the 1950s period when architects ceased being constrained by the rules of modernism. There is more freedom in incorporating one's own locality and local traditions, which was perhaps a stronger agent than the influence of academia or any sort of rational approach. I think that here the local spirit has a stronger influence than the weight of the center, at least in the case of the region that I studied. Not many of the actors of those times such as architects or designers had professional training, many objects they designed did not have this academic bases, but it possessed something which was not less, and maybe more important than that. I do not think that architecture can be tied to only architects and architectural education. I saw civil engineers who did not have any training in architecture, or draftsmen whose task was supposedly merely drafting the sketch, but who brought in their own design, architectural interpretations into the drawing.

**ArmArch:** *Is such a non-academic design practice still based on certain rules or stylistic principles?*

**Ricardo Agarez:** We are talking about eclecticism here, but a very good one. Eclecticism is usually understood as decadence, loss of the authentic. In our case there is not one style or one set of rules. The design process is very free and is largely based on intuition and the possibilities enabled by local geography. If I was asked to name the elements of modernist regionalism in Algarve or the vocabulary that defined this style, I could do it. But as a whole it consists of many different styles.

**ArmArch:** *So could we say that modernist regionalism is an architectural concept?*

**Ricardo Agarez:** When those people were designing and building they were not following any set of rules or any goals. They were not doing modernist regionalism in their minds. It is similar to the concept of critical regionalism when people who were involved in such a practice were not conscious of it, so the concept was created much later and applied back in time. So the same is with modernist regionalism. It is some kind of intellectual device that we use to describe the past; it is not something that they knew they were doing. Today people like us create tools and categories which help us to understand the past and the work of those people. But they didn't have that definition in their mind. Yet they did talk about modernizing the tradition, about ways of pursuing modern architecture while respecting tradition, while engaging with the tradition. And in fact both terms modernism and regionalism are very poor terms to render what those people were trying to do.

**ArmArch:** *What do you think, why and how did this need to respect and engage with the tradition emerge? If it is simply a requirement to maintain tradition, then the design result can be a pretty much formalistic architecture...*

**Ricardo Agarez:** Many of the elements they used were indeed much formalistic and simply artistic. But I think there is another important reason why architects wanted to engage with the tradition. After the war in the 1950s it became known to them that modernism internationally was being questioned and attacked because of being inhumane, insensitive to local conditions, etc. So this tendency led people to look for ways to pursue modernist architecture because they really believed that it was worth practicing, they were trained as modernist architects and honestly believed in its advantages and values. But they were interested in finding new ways out of modernist architecture, new ways of going forward. And imputing tradition into modernism could be like a lifebuoy for it.

On the other hand there was a period of conservatism in architecture between the 1930s-1940s when tradition was used in a much more romantic, pastoral way that exuded the life of the countryside and was going along with certain nationalistic ideas. What took place after the war period was the transformation of tradition itself to sort of a tool to fight against this conservative architecture. As Victor Palla says, "To turn the witchcraft against the wizard". So, referring to tradition in modernist architecture had two advantages, first it would help modernism to survive and advance forward, second it would fight against the conservative architecture of the times.

**ArmArch:** *So after all it was an intellectual, conscious design process with a certain goal and vision?*

**Ricardo Agarez:** It was an intellectual process. There was indeed a deliberate attempt to engage with the tradition in a modernized way. What is interesting in the case of this region is that there were indeed actors who believed in modernism but then decided to engage with tradition in an intellectual way. But then there is another layer which is very interesting; it is the repercussions, dissemination or what I call popularization of modernism of the 1960s in this region. And this popularization is not executed by the architects as a deliberate strategy but in a much more spontaneous

way. So there was sort of a vernacular modernism taking place in 1960s Algarve. So what I detected is that there was this tendency of popularized modernism in the countryside, namely in the architecture of houses built by local people, where modernist lexicon was used in a much more intuitive way. This was more intuitive, spontaneous architecture closer to vernacular architecture. There is a catalogue of elements that architects in 1950s-1960s used to devise solutions for example to solve insulation issues. We are talking for example about brise-soleil elements. But there are elements which are not based on Le Corbusier's brise-soleil solutions, but rather on vernacular tiling methods, special brick structures, etc. This problem was solved in many different ways, including local traditional methods.

## ARCHITECT JIM TOROSYAN: ENCODED MESSAGES OF TRADITION

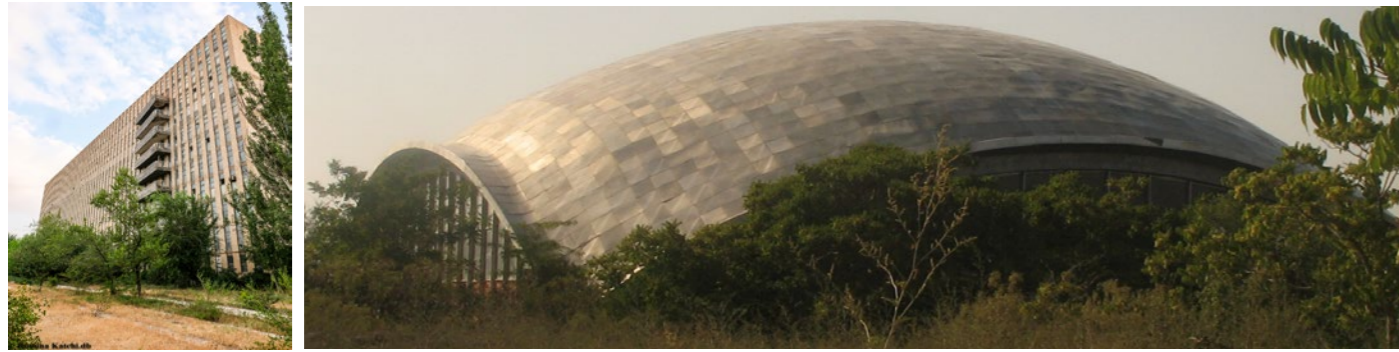
### Interview with architect Davit Stepanyan

*Davit Stepanyan is an architect, artist and architectural researcher, member of the Union of Armenian Architects. His recent publications include a book of essay Talking Monuments in English and Armenian (Yerevan, 2015)*

***ArmArch: Jim Torosyan started his architectural career as a typical modernist architect but made a shift to traditional architecture at one point. How and why did this shift happen?***

***Davit Stepanyan:*** This transition happened after 1975, although before then he referred a lot to traditional ornamental motifs in his small architectural forms, such as memorial plaques, drinking fountains, etc. It is very difficult to use traditional motifs tectonically in modernist architecture, which was the main architectural tendency back in those days.

On one hand, Torosyan was well familiar with Renaissance architecture, on the other hand, his professors who were modernist and functionalist architects Karo Halabyan and Samvel Safaryan, played a great role in his professional development as an architect. He had also studied with Rafael Israelyan and Grigor Aghababyan, who taught him the art of uniting traditional and contemporary architecture. His 1975 trip to the USA with a group of Soviet architects was another source of influence to his modernist works. He was very impressed with the prominent modernist architects of the period-Niemeyer, Khan, Portman, Van der Rohe, etc. This influence and admiration with Western modernist architecture is



*Institute of Cardiology, 1964-1969*     *'VDNKh' Complex, the Pavilion of Industry, 1961*

evident in his designs of the 8th Polyclinic and of the Scientific-Research Institute of Cardiology.

Built in 1961, the Pavilion of Industry at the VDNKh complex is a double-curvature dome structure of neo-expressionist style and is in contrast to his other modernist works. He was the first architect in Armenia to use this structure, which was later adopted by other architects, yet Torosyan himself refused afterwards working with expressionistic forms and went on working with rather rigid and geometric forms of pure structuralism.

We could claim that structuralism by means of its pure geometric forms and tectonic unity of the overall structure responds better to the essence of Armenian traditional architecture. We could observe a similar but structurally different phenomenon on the example of Japanese traditional architecture, where the silhouette of traditional curved roofs is easier to translate into expressionistic 'dialect' of modernist architecture. Armenian traditional architecture is devoid of expressive forms; hence any attempt of translating the principles of traditional architecture in an expressionist-structuralist language would yield a non-organic, formalistic result. Most of architects would simply avoid this subject. For example, Rafael Israelyan believed that creating plastic forms by means of steel and concrete structures was not the only method of being 'contemporary', and preferred to work in the system of strict and 'dry' structuralism. Although being in essence a traditionalist architect, he had attempted several designs of large-span forms, which were still rather sculptural.

***ArmArch: How did Torosyan, after all, unite the traditional and modernist architectural principles?***

***Davit Stepanyan:*** He possessed perfectly modernist design principles, which are present in Armenian medieval architecture as well-structural thriftiness, simplicity, overall integrity and unity of function and construction. For example the Town Hall building, despite its seemingly decorative facade, has a totally tectonic structure. It uses a post and lintel system, the effect of which is reflected in the overall structure of the building. For example, there are no partition walls, wherever there was a need to fill in the space between columns, glass partitions are used, the construction grid can be overall read even on the façade. Concerning decorative motifs and artistic finishing, Torosyan polished their design to avoid all redundant elements and to reach maximum simplicity. This is the true minimalism which consists not in denying the ornament, but in making it devoid of all possible excesses.

***ArmArch: In your article about the Obelisk dedicated to the 50th anniversary of Soviet Rule in Armenia designed by Jim Torosyan and Sargis Gourzadyan, you bring very interesting facts about the application of pre-Christian symbols. Why did they refer to that historical layer? Did they mean to convey a certain message?***

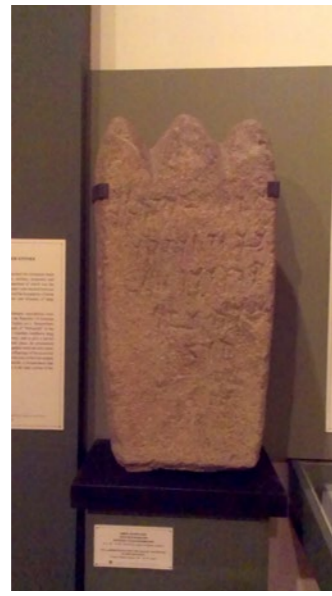
***Davit Stepanyan:*** Construction of this monument had a very interesting history. In 1965 a competition for the design of the memorial was announced by the government of Soviet Armenia, which was won by the team of Jim Torosyan and Sargis Gourzadyan. In the initial design the obelisk finished with its three-part dented structure, which was taken from the so called border-stones of the king Artashes. The then Soviet Armenian society didn't know about this historical reference and perceived this structure as simply a form which gave them some phallic associations and triggered similar nicknames. Yet during one of our conversations,

Gourzadyan deliberately accentuated the fact that the reference to the historical border-stones had a particular message. According to the authors, they tried to connect the structure of the Obelisk with the history of Armenian kingdom in 3rd century B.C. where these border-stones carried important state records particularly regarding to land regulation between the peasants and the landlords. These regulations contributed greatly to the formation of united Armenian Kingdom. Despite that the Obelisk itself was dedicated to the Soviet rule, yet the message of the authors was deeper, it praised the Armenian national statehood.

The Obelisk was 50 meters high which was perhaps a reference to the 50th anniversary of the Soviet rule. However given this height, overall proportions and particularly the circular symbols of eternity on four sides of the column, it was strangely perceived and gave way to the above mentioned phallic nicknames.



*The Obelisk in its urban context*



*Border-Stone of king Artashes, 3rd century B.C.*

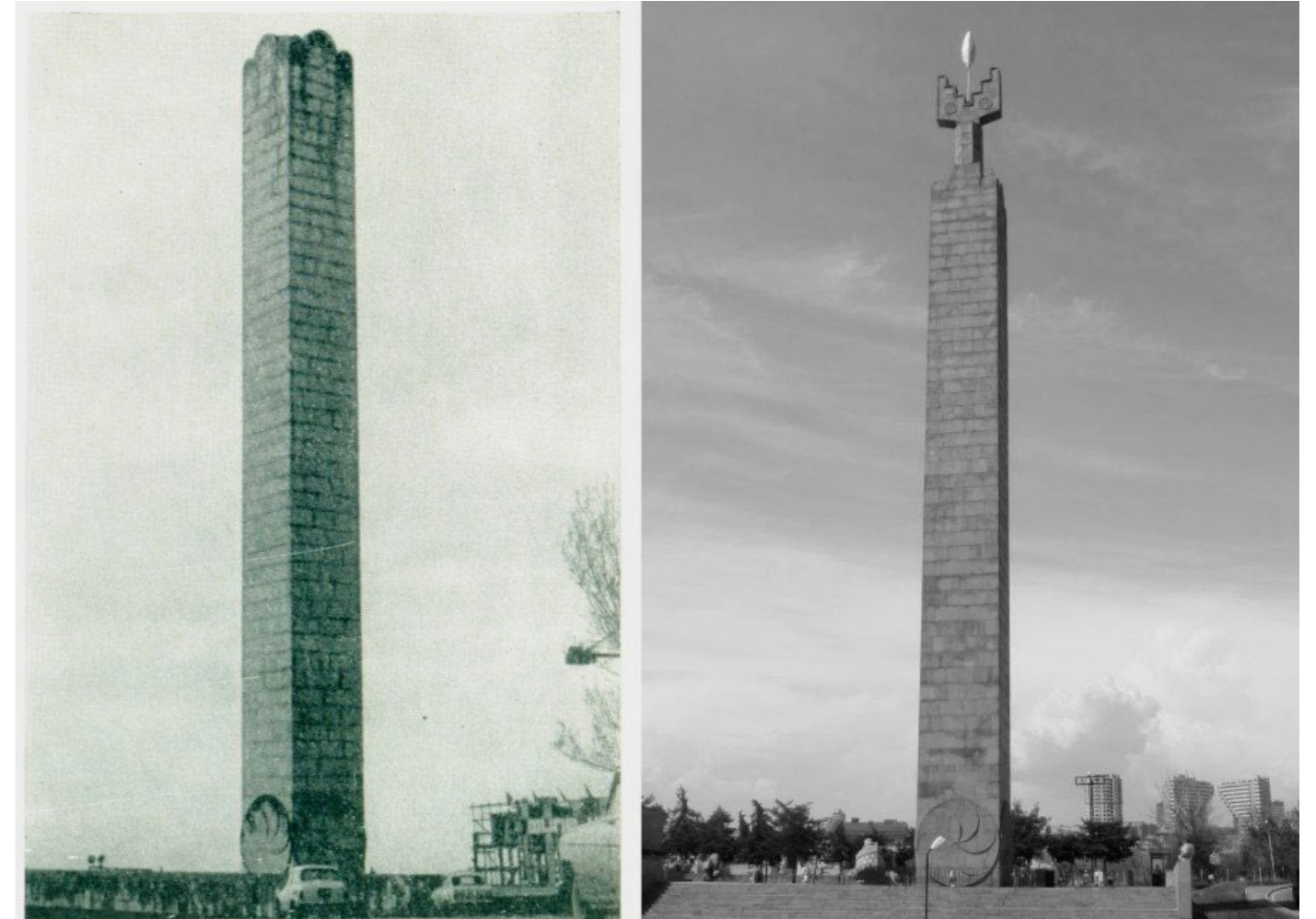


*Circular symbols of eternity on the bottom part of the Obelisk*

### ***ArmArch: How was the culminating 15 meter high ending added?***

***Davit Stepanyan:*** I believe this was a retrospective decision taken under the pressure of the mocking and criticism. As far as I am concerned, Torosyan and Gourzadyan asked for the help of their senior colleague Rafael Israelyan, to solve this design problem. In the memoirs of one of their

friends, he recalls that Israelyan spent several days in the studio of his former students working on this design. He mentions an episode when Israelyan asked to spread the designs of the finished project in the courtyard of the studio and looked at it down from the window to better perceive the proportions.



*The Obelisk before and after the addition of the final top part*

Torosyan himself had told me another anecdotal episode remembering that after completion of the tip, he and Israelyan climbed on the top of the Obelisk (there are stairs inside the column leading to a narrow terrace on the top of the Obelisk) to celebrate its construction. But only after having drunk substantially they realized that they couldn't go down the steep stairs in their state. So, they had to wait until they sobered up to be able to go down.



The top part of the Obelisk



An excavated vessel adorned with an image of an Urartian fortress



Increased image of the Urartian fortress

**ArmArch:** That 15 meter addition represents an image carved on several Urartian plates which are kept in the Museum of History of Armenia. Was this reference again another intentional message?

**Davit Stepanyan:** Gourzadyan had told during one of last conversations that I had with him that this design was developed throughout multiple sketches. Nevertheless, I am sure that Israelyan, who worked with them on those designs, was well aware of those artifacts, because it was he who designed the cellars of the Wine Factory, which were erected on the place of a former Urartian fortress with towers similar to that 15 meter decorative motif. The only difference is that in the initial Urartian fortresses, that architectural motif was a spatial, volumetric structure, whereas in the Obelisk they used the frontal projection of that motif on the bases of its image appearing on antique excavated plates and turned that image into a symbolic silhouette. The golden leaf culminating that 15 meter structure is also an ancient Urartian motif symbolizing the tree of life.



Images of the tree of life on the palace of Persepolis, on an Urartian castle and its replica in the Obelisk



Top and bottom left: Torosyan's design archive being transported to the Museum of Architecture after his death. Bottom right: Craftsmen carving the symbol of eternity on the Obelisk

## RAFAEL ISRAELYAN AS A MODERNIST ARCHITECT

### Tigran Harutyunyan

*Tigran Harutyunyan is an architect, architectural writer, Doctor of Architecture. He is the author of many articles and a recent guidebook on Yerevan (DOM Publishers)*

Architect Rafael Israelyan is considered to be one of the coryphaei of Armenian neo-traditional architecture of the pre and post-war periods. Therefore discussing his work in the light of modernist architecture, at first glance, may seem inappropriate. Israelyan's architecture is largely based on Armenian national epos, mythology and historical episodes, which constitute the narrative of his designs. What links could be found between such profoundly national, even nationalistic architecture and modernism?

Despite being fully engaged with traditional architecture and history of his nation, Israelyan was still an architect of the second half of the 20th century and could not stay immune against the architectural tendencies of the times, namely modernism. Indeed, between 1930-1950 his designs were based on the principles and elements drawn from classicist vocabulary and medieval church architecture, which cease appearing in his works after the 1960s. After which point Israelyan starts using steel and concrete constructions that allowed him to design freer, more sculptural and even abstract architectural forms. The national component was still present in this architecture and was expressed mainly through reinterpretations and symbolical depictions of distinct traditional architectural elements. However, Israelyan aimed to create modern architecture where modernist design principles and aesthetics had to be applied in order to synthesize a new idiom of local architecture or to secure continuation of their traditions.

In the architecture of this period, Israelyan applies traditional architectural elements which he interprets according to modernist design principles, sometimes turning them into sculptural, rather than architectural elements. Yet his architecture cannot be classified as post-modernistic either, since while transforming traditional architecture in order to modernize it, Israelyan does not turn it into an intellectual game of multilayered references. His aim is to create a new architecture by reinterpretation and modernization of traditional architectural motifs, which would be modern and as authentic as the traditional architecture itself.

These endeavors are particularly well expressed in the architecture of the Sardarapat and Musaler monuments. In both monuments, Israelyan has used animalistic images of bulls and eagles as traditional symbols of the power of the nation. He has packaged these nationalistically infused narratives with a minimalistic form representing laconically drawn stylized images of animals. The author doesn't refuse or criticize modernism by such stylized approach or reference to traditional symbols. On the contrary, he appealed to the aesthetic principles of modernism to construct the new national architectural idiom. This approach could, to a certain extent, be compared with the Stalinist motto of "National by form, socialistic by content", except in case of this particular and many other monuments designed by Israelyan the form is modernist and the content is national.



*Figures of bulls, eagles and the wall depicting episodes of national history in Sardarapat monument complex*

The 'Aragil' café and 'Tsovinar' restaurant designed in the 1960s, represent a stronger and purer modernist design approach. Here, we do not see any symbolical or figurative references to traditional architecture. The



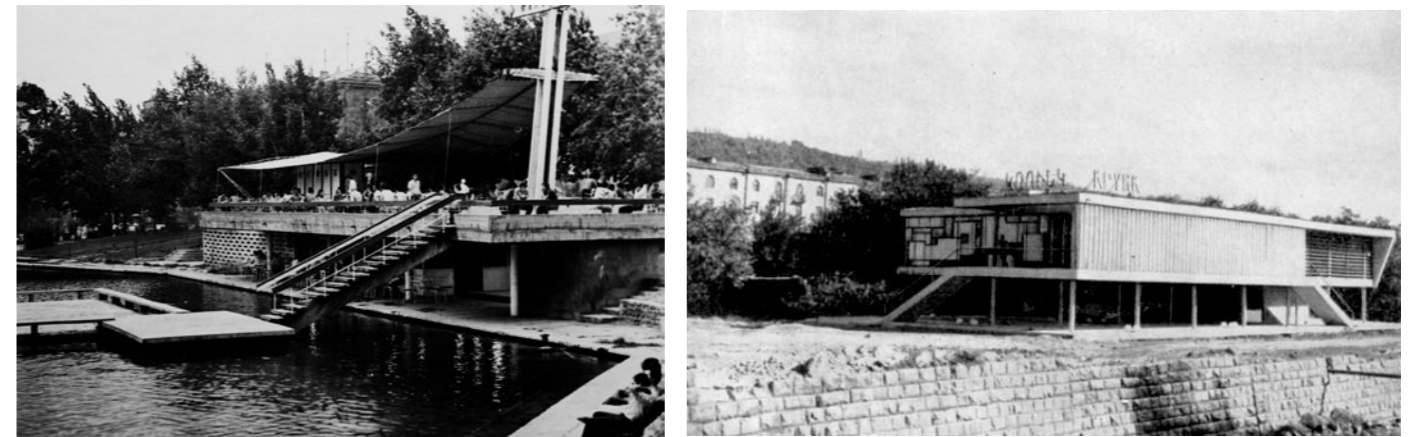
overall design is minimalistic, featuring pure geometric forms and clean lines. The only elements disturbing the completeness of a modernist image, in both cases, are the use of traditional stone cladding and several laconic ornamental motifs.



*'Aragil' cafe, 1960. Currently abandoned*

'Aragil' café, realized in 1960, is constructed with light yellow felsites and features several decorative motifs of linear, minimalistic sketching applied on the side facade. The specificity of this building is in the structure of the arcade on the front facade. Instead of traditional vertical structure the arches here are enlarged towards the bottom showing a sort of a sculptural, artistic design approach, pretty much in the spirit of expressionist modernism. Thanks to its innovative, fresh modernist design, 'Aragil' café became a model for other cafes and restaurants, such as 'Krun' and 'Ara-

gast' cafés, the architects of which went even further experimenting with modernist aesthetics, forms and technologies.



*'Aragil' and 'Krun' cafes, the first modernist cafes in Yerevan, 1960s*

'Tsovinar' restaurant represents a much stronger modernist concept, particularly by using a cantilevered volume and large glass panels. Yet roughly hewn basalt walls, reminiscent of traditional architecture, is still present. Such tectonic and structurally justified fusion of old and new architectural principles is what makes Israelyan a true modernist architect with strong command of traditional architectural design principles.



*'Tsovinar' restaurant, 1960. Currently modified*

Israelyan was one of the first architects in Armenia to attempt putting together modernist technologies, aesthetics and traditional architecture. The result is surprisingly honest architecture without any declination neither towards formalism or nationalism, nor postmodernism or eclecticism. Whilst being a passionate opponent of modernist architecture in his theoretical writings, in his design he proves to be a perfect modernist. In his many articles from the 1960s he says that modern architecture must be used to create one's own national architecture. In his essays he tries to define what national, local architecture is, which he contraposes against modernist architecture, referring to the latter as to a disaster that kills local traditions. Yet he differentiates between modernist architecture which is a result of industrialization and modernist architecture that can be applied in an urban context. His above described buildings perfectly illustrate his endeavors to find the balance between cold and impersonal industrial modernism and modernism as an idiom that can be applied to any narrative, including national.



*Rafael Israelyan on the background of the eagles' path in Sardarapat monument complex, 1960s*

## MONUMENT OF REBIRTH IN APARAN

**Davit Stepanyan**

*Davit Stepanyan is an architect, artist and architectural researcher, member of the Union of Armenian Architects. His recent publications include a book of essay Talking Monuments in English and Armenian (Yerevan, 2015)*

*“The Armenian was born amidst stones and has lived amidst stones. He has put a stone over another, risen above stones and raised stones high. Armenian children grow up in the midst of stones: they play with stones, know what a stone is and are as firm as a stone. Throughout thousands of years, the Armenian has made his very first steps in the midst of stones. He has dressed stones to earn his living. He has created true masterpieces of stone and cut entire monasteries in the bosom of mountains. He has erected bridges and palaces and made intricate reliefs and ornaments of stone. He has built numerous cities and the city of cities, Ani”.*

*Rafael Israelyan 1975*

With this phrase celebrated Armenian architect of mid 20th century Rafael Israelyan starts his essay on Ani, one of the medieval capitals of Armenia. Throughout the many years of prolific work, he proved a true successor of Armenian masters of the Middle Ages, developing the vast cultural heritage passed down by them. This is exemplified in his numerous works, buildings and monuments spread all over Armenia.

Israelyan was particularly interested in heroic themes. One of the most outstanding examples of Israelyan's works is the Monument of Rebirth in the city of Aparan which glorifies the Armenian nation's courage and strength. Designed in the last years of his life, it was erected after his death thanks to the efforts of his son Areg Israelyan, also an architect.



*The southern frontal facade of the monument. Constructed in 1979 (construction architect is Areg Israelyan)*

Thanks to its ingenious design, a single structure commemorates three major historical episodes from the history of the Armenian nation: the Great Genocide (1915), the Second World War (1941 to 1945) and the heroic battle of Aparan (1918). The monument depicts three distinct pages of history united by the same patriotic spirit and coherent architectural concept.

The Monument of Rebirth rises on a small elevation along a highway in the outskirts of Aparan City. Its right placement makes it visible from various points in the neighborhood. The peculiar technique applied in the design of the volumes and overall spatial structure of the monument makes it appear in different perspectives from different points of view as one approaches it, something that leaves visitors in utter amazement and fascination.

The southern and northern facades of the monument are in structural unity, at the same time showing striking expressive contrasts. This is



*The placement of the monument in the landscape. Northern facade (left) and southern facade (right)*

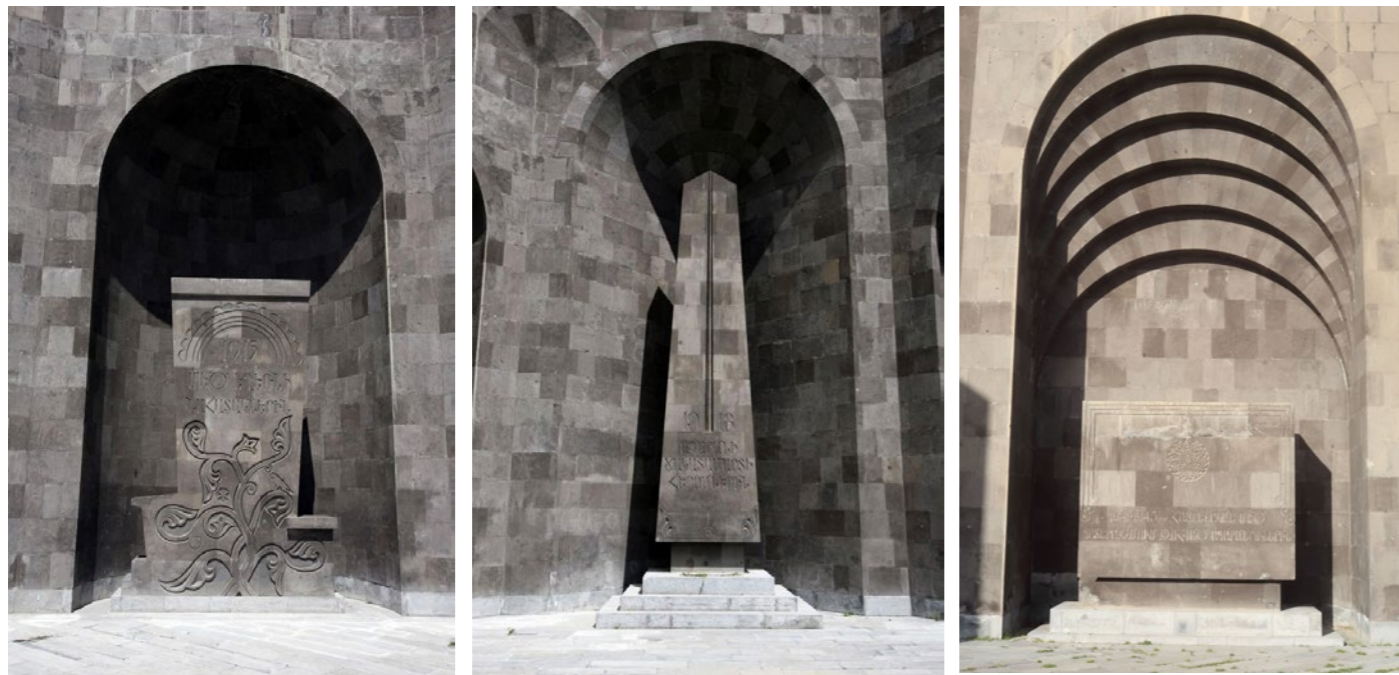
typical of Israelyan's style, an approach which is also applied in his other monuments. The interior and exterior of the monument (or the northern and southern facades) look considerably different, at the same time maintaining their architectural connection. These architectural principles are one of the main know-hows of Armenian traditional architecture and consists of structural and tectonic interconnection between interior and exterior.

The general silhouette of the southern facade resembles ruined three-nave church where destruction only exposes its inner structural richness and beauty. Each 'nave' here is implicated by an arched niche or an apse as if an imprint of a church's section has been applied onto the facade. The middle apse is triangular in its plan and is a direct reference to triangular niches used in Armenian medieval church architecture to secure the firmness of the structure. There is also a sword-shaped obelisk commemorating the heroic battle of Aparan against Turks placed in it.

On the left apse there is a memorial dedicated to the Great Genocide of 1915. Shaped like a khachkar, an Armenian cross-stone, it is embellished with a plant motif reminiscent of the Tree of Life and a grape vine. At the right corner of the composition there is a dove symbol of peace, sitting on a branch of a tree and its head bent, as if grieving. Overall this memorial acts as a Divine Service in memory of the innocent victims of the Armenian Genocide.

The right apse of the monument is dedicated to Armenians from Aparan killed during the Second World War and comprises a simple quadrangular block of stone with a star-shaped rosette in the centre. The apse is topped with arches following each other in several recessing rows. Whilst this multi layered arrangement of arches is another quotation from Armenian traditional façade decorations, here it has also a symbolical message of hinting the fact that the Second World War involved not one, but several nations.

Uniting these three geometrically different apses and the sword-shaped topping of the facade in one holistic composition, Israelyan refers to another principle of Armenian traditional architecture, that is the



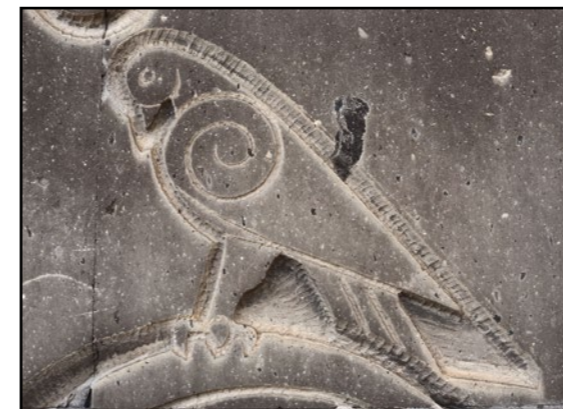
*The three apses with memorials. From left to right: Memorial dedicated to the Great Genocide, memorial dedicated to the Battle of Aparan and a memorial dedicated to World War II heroes*

symmetry of asymmetry. This principle had been largely practiced by Armenian Medieval architects throughout centuries, yet it has never been classified as a distinct design principle. The principle of uniting symmetry and asymmetry has been empirically or intuitively passed throughout centuries until the 20th century.

The facade is monumental, laconic and is perceived in large pieces, unless one approaches it close to see its details. The only elements breaking its 'silence' are two rosette resembling ornaments applied asymmetri-



*The northern facade*



*A stylized ornamental motif from the southern facade*

cally on the top left and top center parts of the facade composition. Israelyan's ornaments are eloquently poetic and, just as the duality game between symmetry and asymmetry, ornaments also emphasize opposite values such as greatness of what is small, importance of what is unimportant and the meaning of what might seem a nonsense.

The uncompromising spirit of Armenians from Aparan is embodied by the northern facade of the monument, which is conceived in the classical modern style and by such contrasts with the southern, traditional architecture-based facade. Despite that the monument does not have a coherently articulated interior and exterior, nevertheless the northern facade represents the exterior of the monument. It looks like a group of stone swords soaring high into the air, like stalactites full of dynamism and can be read as a metaphor of an army of heroes.

Despite this abundance of references to traditional architecture and the heroic, nationalistic content of many of his monuments, Rafael Israelyan can still be viewed as a modernist architect. He shared design approaches and methods with such modernist architects as Mies van der Rohe, Alvar Aalto and Mario Botta. Yet being a person of a bright individuality, he never confined himself to

simply borrowing design principles neither from modern or traditional architecture. His works, which are particularly distinguished for their vivid expression of national narratives, are full of creativity and innovation. And whilst in his building designs after the 1960s he proves himself as a very strong modernist, his memorial monuments of the same period are full of national, traditional sentimental references applied with reserved pathos. Yet, it is this romantic and honest desire to give a new life to traditional architectural motifs that strips him of the ability to be classified as a postmodernist architect.



*A decorative motif from the southern facade depicting traditional Armenian symbols, including mount Ararat*

## MONUMENT TO THE HEROIC SELF-DEFENCE OF HAJN

**Davit Stepanyan**

*Davit Stepanyan is an architect, artist and architectural researcher, member of the Union of Armenian Architects. His recent publications include a book of essay Talking Monuments in English and Armenian (Yerevan, 2015)*

The period of the formation of postmodernism took shape in the second half of the 1960s as a counteraction against rigidly rational and purely functionalist thinking of modernism. The final works of Rafael Israelyan are considered to be the first representations of postmodernist architecture in Armenia. However the peculiarity of these designs, which represent typical post-modernist references to the local culture, history and tradition, is simultaneously a pursuit of fundamental principles of modernism.

One of the main tenets of modernism is the undisguised reflection of functional and constructive structure in the architecture of a building. This principle was also one of the main characteristics of traditional Armenian architecture which laid the bases of Israelyan's professional education and later his architectural thinking. That is why even if he plays seemingly postmodernist games with traditional architectural forms by cutting them of their original context, it is still not a formalistic caprice. Rather he turns these forms into an organic part of another new and modern context, and by such reveals the universality of these forms and design principles.

The best example of this is the artistic embellishment of the facade of the well known building of wine cellars in Yerevan (1938). Here a pediment, traditionally used in Armenian medieval churches to flank entrances, is applied on almost fully blank walls, which in turn is an architectural characteristic of a cellar reflecting its function of a warehouse. Large stone

pitchers adorned with motifs of grapes are placed in these pediments, which lead to nowhere but are rather turned into a frame for wine carrying pitchers.



*The cellars of the Wine Factory and Ereruyk basilica, which was the prototype for the facade composition*

Such artistic decoration of a blank cellar facade, which supposedly should render a purely functional architecture, was also conditioned by urban planning considerations. The cellar building is standing just at

the end of a highway leading from Yerevan to Echmiadzin (later to the airport) and was considered as the gates of the city. Hence it had to have certain representative aspect which was one of the reasons why Israelyan had to refer to a decorative vocabulary to complete the architecture of this building.

The Monument to the Self-Defence of Hajn constructed by Israelyan's son Areg Israelyan in 1974 according to Israelyan's initial drawings is dedicated to the 1920 actions of self-defense of the Armenian city of Hajn located in the mountainous Cilicia region (presently Turkey). This monument is another remarkable example of Israelyan's pursuit of architecture of the plain wall.



*The main facade of the monument from the street side*

At first sight the monument strikes with its peculiar composition and unexpected proportions and seems to be a holistic cast of a sculpture of



*The main facade of the monument from the street side*

some sort. The composition arrangement of the monument consists of a stylized depiction of a church, a castle and a sword, each of which has its symbolic meaning referring to the historical event that the monument commemorates. As most of Israelyan's monuments, this one as well is an architectural, rather than a sculptural monument, meaning that it can be actually entered. It seems that its nature of a monument is an excuse to have sculptural, non-functional volumes of pure symbolic purpose.

This monument, alike the monument in Aparan, has a three part structure: The middle part represents a sword-shaped form flanked by a volume reminiscent of a traditional church on the right and a fortress-resembling one on the left. The volume on the right reiterates in concrete the silhouette of Armenian traditional churches, but instead of a complex stone structure it is cast in a holistic concrete form and represents a wonderfully stylized, yet still tectonically justified modernist geometry of plain surfaces and sharp angles.

The middle part consists of a pyramidal volume which at the top is divided into three vertical forms symbolizing swords. This volume is the compositional and ideological dominant of the monument. Its vertical structure is accentuated by the varying height of the three swords, an effect which is even strengthened by the long and thin shadows it casts. There are five ornamental details applied in the monument. Whilst being principally alien to modernist ideology, here ornaments are used rather architecturally accentuating the compositional tensions of the wall, instead of complimenting it as a mere decoration.



*Ornamental details*

This is another traditional principle borrowed from medieval church architecture. Asymmetrically applied ornamental accents appear to stress the facade composition and the eloquent muteness of plain walls.



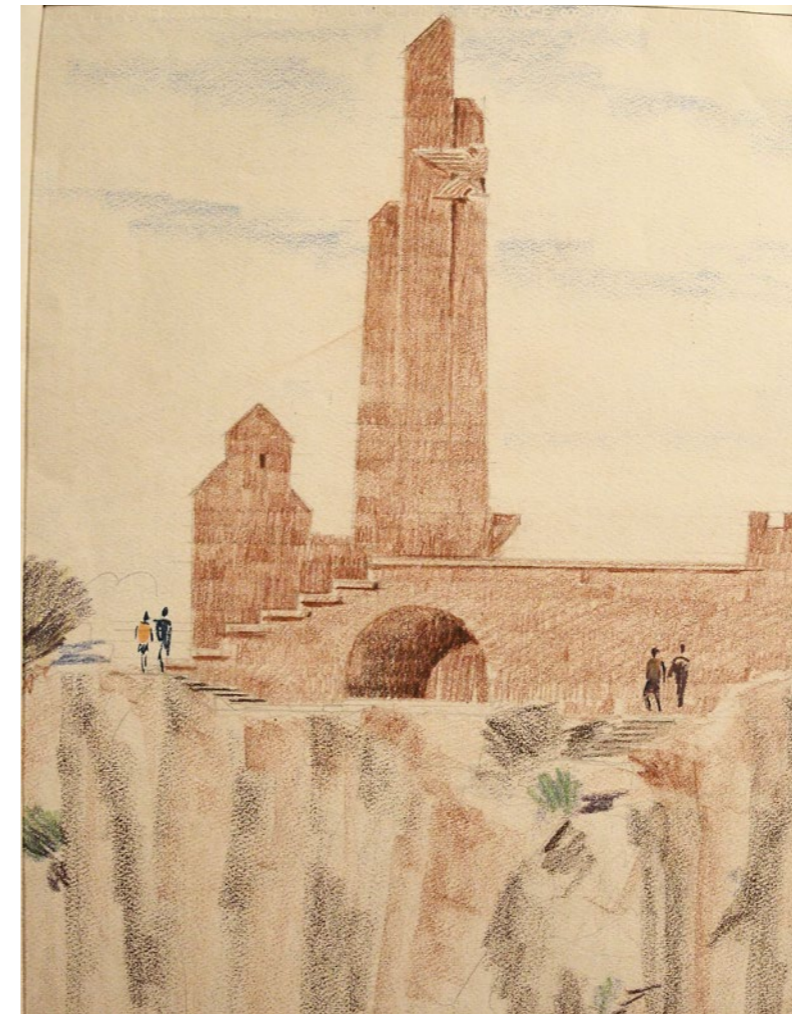
*The dome resembling Armenian traditional 'erdik' roofs from inside of the church-shaped volume*

The interior of the monument lacks the impressive splendor typical of Israelyan's other works. The monument which looks slender outwardly, inwardly uncovers a confined and restrained space. Perhaps this is another reference to those terrible days of blockade of Hajn that Israelyan decoded as a message in the feeling of this narrow and gloomy interior. The placement of the entrance door is also intended to support this feeling. It could have been placed solemnly in the middle of the decorative triple-arches on the front facade. Instead it is placed in the corner, unnoticed and discretely leads into a corner of the interior.

However the most peculiar feature of the monument is found at its rooftop. Twelve stairs on the front facade lead to a terrace roof from which a magnificent view on a gorge is revealed. The stylized denticles of the

parapet meant to convey a feeling of standing on a castle tower. The spirit of mountainous Cilicia, the land where historical Hajn was located, is revived and transforms this memorial building of modest dimensions into a huge, powerful fort.

Such secret tricks of revealing the hidden greatness of what seems small were often applied in Israelyan's works. From the side of the street, where the main approach to the monument is, the view to the gorge is carefully hidden behind the monument. This is another trick, a scenario of spatial experiences that the architect has encoded in this architecture. By creating a witty fusion of architecture and nature he has turned the latter into a part of the experience of the monument to remind once more about the dramatic historical episode that happened in Hajn more than a century ago.



*Israelyan's own drawing depicting the monument from the side of the gorge*



## MODERNISM, POST-MODERNISM OR REGIONAL MODERNISM: LOCALISING ARMENIAN MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE

Yeva Ess-Sargsyan

*Yeva Ess-Sargsyan is an architectural theorist and critique, co-founder of ArmArch. She has published numerous articles in Armenian, Russian and English. She studies architectural semiotics and carries a research concerning recurrent patterns in contemporary architecture.*

### *The beginning*

Soviet modernist architecture became particularly popular in the world during the last decade. Reasons triggering this interest are many, including the fact that the world perhaps did not expect Soviet architecture to produce anything close to the high level of international modernist-expressionist architecture. Whereas the suddenly discovered Soviet modernist heritage proved the unexpected.

It was Frederic Chaubin's book entitled "CCCP" to be first to shed light on this hidden domain of Soviet architecture and introduce the fashion of researching it. For this book, Chaubin selected modernist structures from all Soviet countries on the bases of one common characteristic: they are all 'cosmic' structures.

The 'cosmicity' according to Chaubin is a mythologized narrative of the universe, which was seen by the Soviet citizens as a future escape from their not satisfying current reality. Many Soviet sci-fi films and literature contributed to the aestheticization of this idea, the mythology of which "... was steeped in the irrational but had the advantage of espousing the official dogma of the day: *The race to the future*"<sup>1</sup>. This endeavor towards space was

1 Chobin 2011, p.12

in fact an aspiration of freedom of Soviet citizens, in particular artists and architects. Their individuality and possibility of self-expression had been suppressed for decades and they were doomed to create an architecture which was "mute and of no address-meaning anonymous". The dreams of artists and architects about space where the first symptoms of breaking state imposed dogmatic cultural ideologies, and the cosmic architecture they created was a praise of emancipation of their individuality.

Yet Chaubin notices that before becoming a symbol of emancipated personal individuality cosmic architecture started as a reflection of the age, which "began with 'contextualism', a rising tendency of the age, which at the very highest levels asserted the postulate that all buildings should express their environment. All architecture must manifest its local specificity-its address"<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, Soviet cosmic and modernist architecture in general remained known as a manifestation of futuristic aesthetics connected with freedom and identity issues of the Soviet citizen, whereas its origins and connection with the larger locality, its engagement with the individuality of the locality, remained unnoticed. Until today Soviet modernism is mostly known through such cosmic or expressionist-structuralist buildings, whilst one of the most interesting aspects of Soviet modernist architecture, its contextual aspect, remains not well explored.

As a typical multinational empire, Soviet Union consisted of many different nations and ethnic groups each of which had its own unique history and traditions. The member countries represented not only different cultural, but also geographic regions, which made the cultural differences between them even more prominent. Consequently Soviet cosmic architecture, which was supposedly conceived everywhere in the same social-political context, obtained unique local characteristics in the case of each of the countries. Chaubin cites several examples how 'cosmicity' became contextualized in different countries. Yet the overall cosmic architectural stratum overshadows the true contextual architecture, which in other terms is called regional modernist architecture.

2 Chobin 2011, p.10

### **Regional modernism**

The global tendency of modernization of the traditional (or globalizing the local) showed particularly interesting results in architecture. This new type of architecture became classified among architectural theorists and historians as regional modernism.

The tendency of regional modernism in architecture is probably the most complex and contradictory terminology and phenomenon in the history of architecture. Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, the authors of this term, introduced it for the first time in the 1980s and initially used the term 'critical regionalism' to denote "*an approach taken by a number of architects who were working towards an alternative to postmodernism*"<sup>3</sup>. According to the authors the word 'critical' was coined with 'regionalism' to distinguish modernist regionalism from the romantic use of the term regionalism in the late 19th century.

Trying to avoid universal formulas such as those suggested by modernism and postmodernism, critical regionalism "*indicated an approach to design giving priority to the identity of the particular rather than to universal dogmas*"<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, the term critical regionalism soon became discredited, obtaining denotation of an architecture which expresses nationalistic-romantic ideas instead of its original purpose of reflecting the architecture based on rather intellectual and academic approaches. In order to return to its original meaning, Tzonis and Lefaivre suggested replacing the term re/gion/alizm with the term realism. They believed that the term realism also reflected the idea of "individuality of particular" to define regional modernism as a "*bottom-up approach to design, that recognizes the value of the identity of a physical, social and cultural situation, rather than mindlessly imposing narcissistic formulas from the top down*"<sup>5</sup>.

The critical regionalism of Tzonis and Lefaivre refers to a design approach or a design concept which is similar to contextualism. It does not imply ready-made set of particular design methods. Critical regionalism

3 Tzonis, Lefaivre, 2006, p.10

4 Idem

5 Idem

is an architecture that is conceived on the bases of social-cultural, as well as practical demands of a current region of current times and as such it obtains certain similarity with the ideas of phenomenology.

William Curtis, another architectural historian studying this architectural tendency, calls critical regionalism authentic regionalism, explaining that "*it tries to read the collective memory the same way as contextualism does*"<sup>6</sup>. Like Tzonis and Lefaivre, Curtis believes that authentic regionalism is beyond being simply a style or a set of design principles, and that there is something more and deeper, perhaps more ephemeral and not easily defined to these buildings such as "*...their deeper lessons of order...to reduce tradition to stillborn recipes is actually to kill it*"<sup>7</sup>. Working according to set formulas, one cannot secure the authenticity of architecture, and it is definitely not a method of first-hand design thinking. Curtis believes that intellectual and methodological design can at the very best yield a reminiscent of a postmodernist architecture which is "*part of the disease, not its cure, since it reduces the problem of tradition to a trivial manipulation of signs and references*"<sup>8</sup>. Elements from traditional architecture cannot be used as mere symbols of what they once were or as a reference to their historical roots. Instead while referring to traditional architecture a "*distinction between signs that have no expressive base and genuine reinvigoration of symbols*"<sup>9</sup> must be made.

### **Examples of regional modernist architecture**

Tzonis's and Lefaivre's concern with the term regional modernism was appropriate, as not only the term but also the architecture which the term denoted was confusing. Among buildings, which have been classified by various authors or historians as representatives of regional modernist architecture, there are some which have used traditional architecture as

6 Curtis, 2006, p.29

7 Curtis, 2006, p.25

8 Curtis, 2006, p.26

9 Curtis, 2006, p.27

a formal quotation, as a symbol of itself. Whereas others do not represent any visually recognizable traditional features, but they still possess an aura, an aspect which is reminiscent of the traditional architecture which it aspires to evoke.

One of the best examples of the first approach is the French town Deauville, which, along with the surviving historical buildings, has been constructed with multistory residential complexes in a style that recreates the traditional fachwerk architecture of the region. This architectural structure represents a network of wooden frames, which act as a skeleton of the wall. Whereas in the structure of the new buildings there was no need to use these wooden framings. Yet this wooden frame has been inserted in the structure of the wall in many of newly constructed buildings and in some cases it is applied to the facade as a decorative element.



*Historical (on the left) and modern (on the right) fachwerk buildings in Deauville*

For a non-professional visitor of the town this overall stylistic coherence of the town can be pleasant. One could even believe in historical consistency of the town's architecture. Yet an architect would always know that these buildings are actually dummies and imposters.

Charles Correa, one of the most famous Indian modernist architects, in some of his buildings recites distinct formal aspects of traditional architecture which makes it stand closer to postmodernist concepts. For

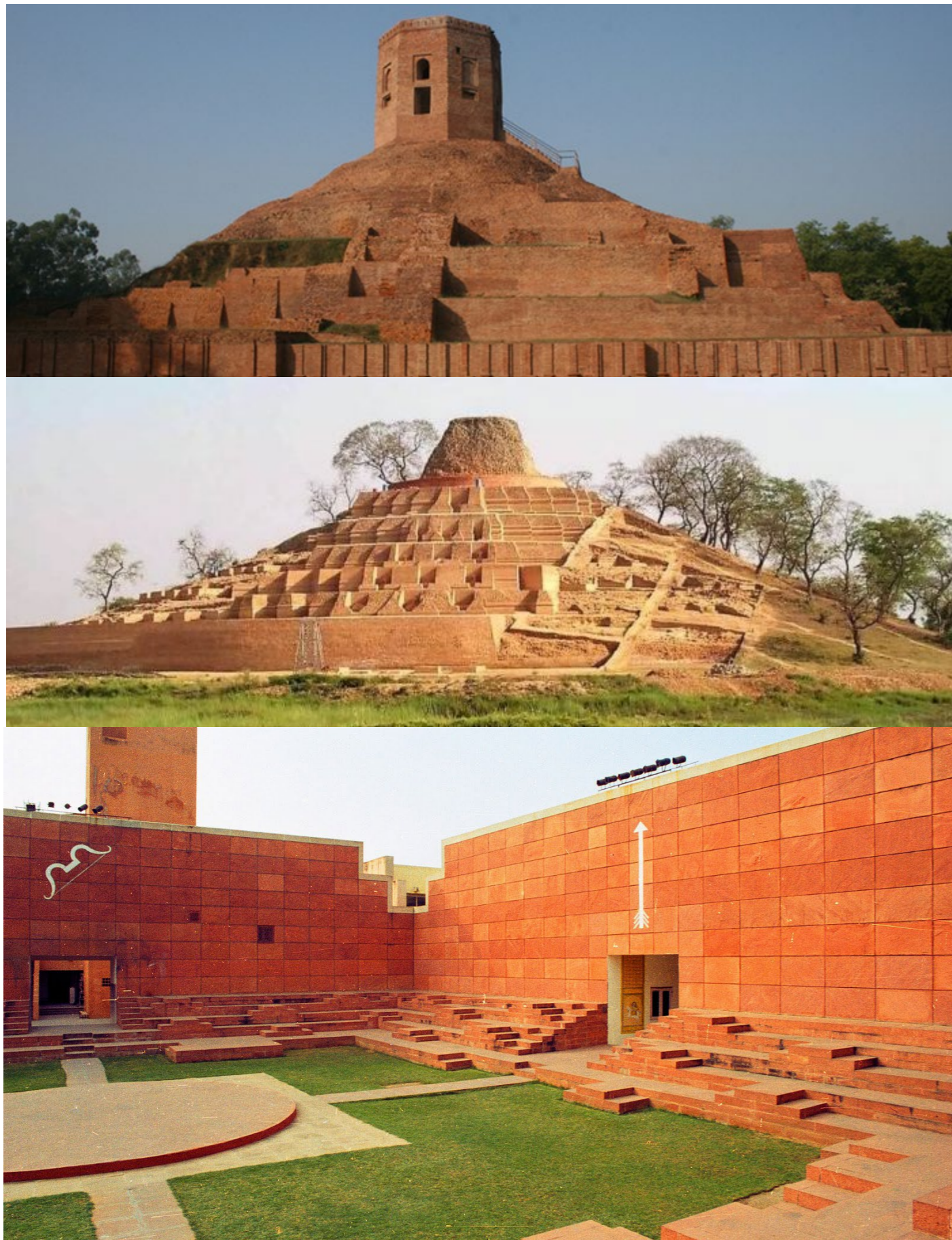
example the silhouette of his Kanchanjunga apartment building can be related to the silhouette of traditional Indian temples or stupas. In spite of being based on completely different structural principles, the visual impression from both the historical prototypes and the modernist building are pretty much the same.



*The Virupaksha temple, 7th century (bottom left) and Chauikandhi stupa 7th century (top left) in India*

*Correa's Kanchanjunga apartment (1983) inspired from traditional temples and stupas*

Whereas the square in Jawahar Kala Kendra (Jaipur) reflects better the main tenets of authentic regionalism. Here again the stepped structure of traditional stupas and temples is evident, yet this time Correa didn't simply reproduce its' silhouette. Instead he created a unique improvisation on the theme of this stepped structure, which he turned into a large



The Chaukhandi stupa, 4th-6th centuries (top), Kesaria stupa, 3rd-8th centuries (middle) and square in Jawahar

system of asymmetric and chaotically distributed terraces.

To sum up the above discussed theories and design examples, it could be perhaps concluded that many modernist architects referred to traditional architecture in their designs on the bases of retrospect interpretation, intellectual analysis or translation of traditional architectural elements from historical artifacts. Yet, if we are talking about authentic regionalism or regional modernism, then any analytical approach to the traditional architecture is inappropriate, as it usually renders a postmodernist architecture, rather than anything authentic. The authentic design can be achieved not by translating elements from traditional architecture but by looking into the current reality which already contains all the elements that conditioned that traditional architecture.

### *Regional modernism in Armenia*

From the 1960s, architecture in Armenia was developing in the modernist direction. Yet that architectural stratum is not as uniform as it might seem. Alongside with cosmic modernism there was another architectural tendency taking form in Armenia and other Soviet countries. This new form was even more popular among architects than the exclusive architecture of cosmic modernism. This was the tendency which represented the aspiration of Armenian architects to express freely their love and knowledge of traditional architecture, on the bases of which they were educated. This was the start of regional modernism in Armenia.

There are several reasons conditioning the rise of regional modernist architecture in Armenia. First of all 1960s was a period during which the rise of the national consciousness and a return to national roots, history and traditions took place. Secondly, achievements in Urartian studies paired with excavation of the Urartian fortress of Erebuni in the outskirts of Yerevan facilitated these growing tendencies of nationalism and historical self-identification in Armenia. Hence Urartian art and architecture became another large stylistic theme used by Armenian modernist ar-

chitects to synthesize an architecture which would be both modern and linked to tradition.

What is peculiar in this tendency is the fact that Armenian historical architecture is almost devoid of any survived examples of secular architecture and is based predominantly on church architecture. That is why when architect Alexander Tamanyan in the beginning of the 20th century faced the problem of reviving the traditional Armenian architecture in the designs of new Soviet Armenian cities, he had only church architecture to reference. This was also the case of modernist architects in the 1960s. Both times architects had only the large heritage of medieval church architecture as a reference. So they turned to it to create the modern continuation of Armenian urban architecture.

Yet the problem here was not only in translating the traditional architectural elements into modernist idiom. The main problem was applying elements borrowed from sacred architecture to secular architecture. Church architecture was not fit neither structurally, technologically or functionally to be transferred into secular architecture. So both Tamanyan and modernist architects of the referred to distinct decorative and compositional elements mainly used on the facades of churches and applied them in the composition of their own designs. By doing so they secured at least artistic or visual passage from traditional to modern and from sacred to secular architecture.

One of the basic elements of Armenian traditional architecture, the special stone cladding system called 'midis', was also adopted in modern architecture. Thanks to it, more fundamental and structural similarity between the architecture of both types and epochs could be achieved. Stone cladding by means of its technical and technological specificity conditioned several unchangeable design aspects of architecture which were evident in medieval church architecture, as well as in modernist urban architecture.

These attempts of re-invocation of the traditional architecture hardly included any basic technological or structural principles, except the stone cladding. And despite that, most of the references to the traditional archi-

tecture had an artistic nature, they were conceived largely on the intuition and aesthetics of Armenian architects, who were educated as specialists on the bases of medieval church architecture.

To summarize, regional modernist architecture in Armenia can be classified by the following design methods:

- Use of traditional stone cladding for outer walls combined with a steel and concrete post and lintel structure in the interior. This technological principal didn't allow any other design form than simple boxes with limited number of narrow fenestrations. This technical limitation resulted in a unique image of architecture which shortly can be summed up as architecture of stone aesthetics.
- Narrow, often arched or circular openings which were typical elements of medieval church architecture.
- Large surfaces of mute walls with few openings. The stone wall itself becomes an architectural and structural theme with an immediate reference to medieval church architecture.
- Laconic and limited applications of ornaments and decorative elements. Usually they cover the side, mute facades, or are asymmetrically applied, as if quoted, on the surfaces of plain walls.
- Abstract and geometric ornaments usually derived or inspired by traditional carpets. This tendency of abstract, geometrical ornamentation is also connected with the raise of abstract arts in Soviet, which was still not very welcomed, hence artists used tradition as an excuse to create abstract compositions under the pretext of reference to traditional ornaments.
- Reference to Urartian and even to Mesopotamian architecture by quoting the enclosed structures and vertical façade divisions of fortresses and ziggurats.
- Use of red, brown and white tuff, white travertine or falsite for most of public buildings. Pink tuff with which most of the administrative and residential buildings in the first half of the 20th century were constructed in modernist era becomes rather associated with industrial architecture and is rarely used in urban architecture.

These are the main characteristics of Armenian regional modernist architecture. In some cases these design methods render obviously synthetic architecture, which tended towards eclectics rather than modernism. In other cases the spirit of local architecture was maintained by quoting distinct design elements, which, again, brings it close to ‘unconscious’ post-modernism.

In any case this architectural stratum represents a peculiar historical phenomenon of how a non existing tradition of historical urban architecture could be twice invocated, first in neo-classical architecture in the early 1920s and in modernist architecture of 1960s, to safeguard the continuity of local architectural tradition.

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### **COMPARATIVE GALLERY OF MEDIEVAL CHURCHES, NEO-CLASSICAL AND REGIONAL MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE IN ARMENIA**



*Kecharis monastery, 11th-13th centuries*



*St. Hripsime church, 7th century*



*Astvacacin church, Noravank monastery, 14th century*



*St. Harutyun church, Kecharis monastery, 11th-13th centuries*



*Detail on the wall, Kecharis monastery, 13th centuries*



*St. Karapet church, Noravank monastery, 14th century*



*Marmashen monastery complex, 10th century*



Armenia Marriott Hotel, M.Grigoryan,, 1958



Government House N2, S.Safaryan, 1955



Details of a residential building facade, 1950s



Yerevan Brandy Factory, H.Margaryan, 1953



'Nairi' cinema, drawings Al.Tamanyan's, constructed in 1952



The Matenadaran, M.Grigoryan, 1957



Government House N1, Al.Tamanyan, 1926



3rd Government Building, Yerevan, T.Gevorgyan, V.Housyan, 1980



'VDNKh' Complex, Guests Pavilion, Yerevan, Fenix Darbinyan, 1961



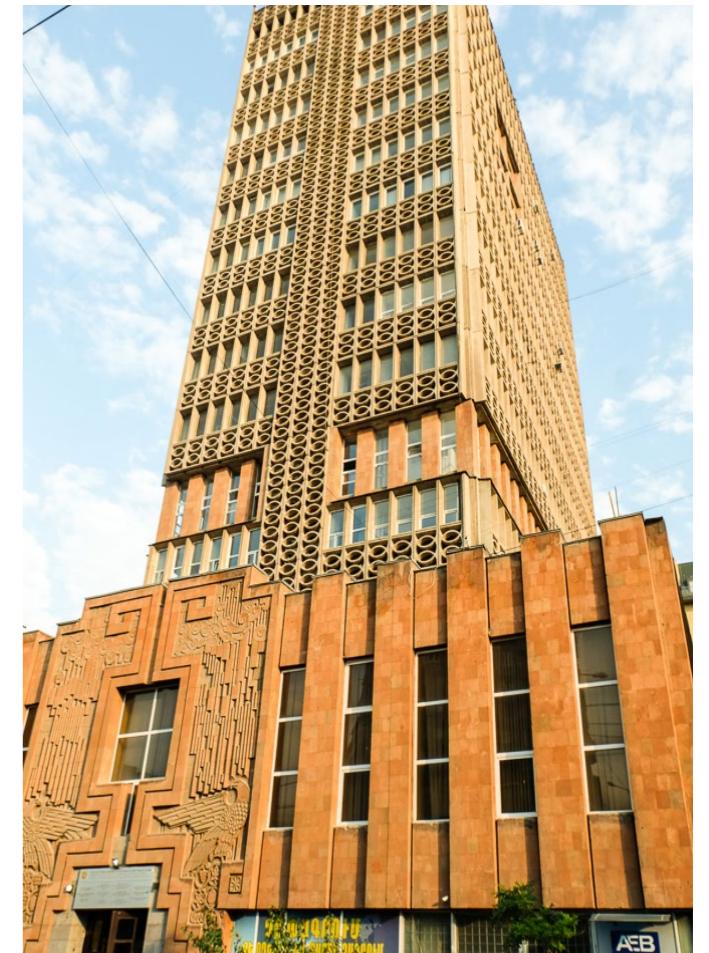
'Citadel' Business Centre, Yerevan, A.Aghalyan, 1990s



Palace of Culture and a Theatre, Hrazdan



Shopping Mall, Ashtarak



The Institute of Geodesy, Yerevan, A.Aghalyan, 1978



Metro station 'Republic Square', J.Torosyan, 1985



Towerette on the hotel 'Dvin', A.Alexanyan, 1979



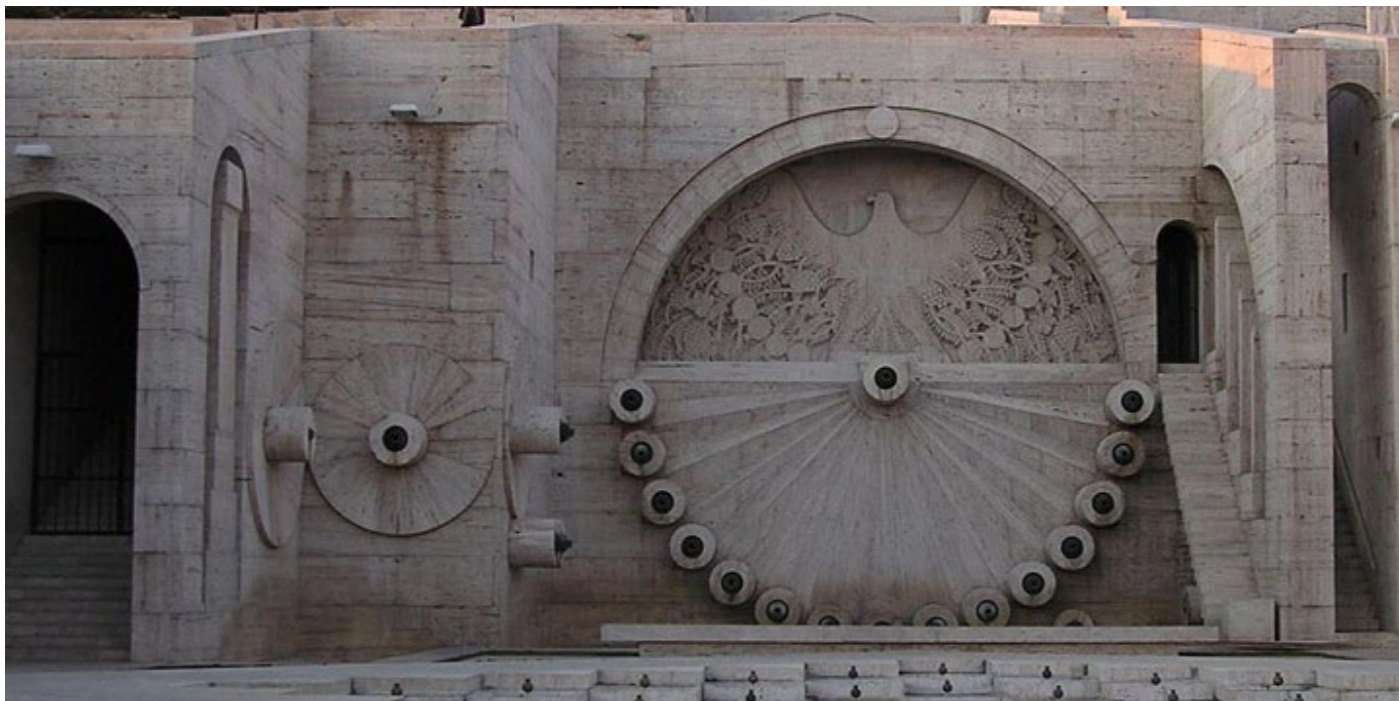
'Garoun' Cinema, Vagharshapat S.Gourzadyan, M.Alexanyan, 1978



'VDNKh' Complex, 'Progress' Pavilion of Technics, Yerevan. Fenix Darbinyan, 1960



Vagharshapat Post Office



'Cascade' complex, J.Torosyan, S.Gourzadyan, 1988



State Ethnography Museum, R.Israelyan, 1977



Music School after A. Spendiaryan, Yerevan, R.Zoubietyan and V.Khachatour, 1971



Interior of the State Ethnography Museum, R.Israelyan, 1977



Sardarapat memorial complex, R.Israelyan, 1968



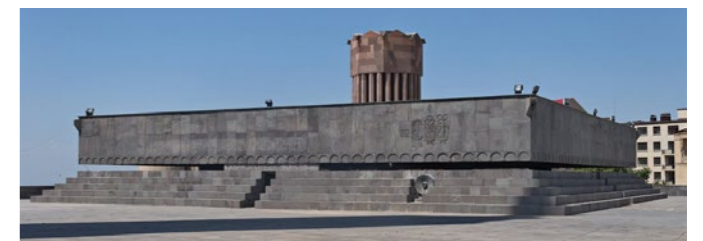
Monument to the Victory of WWII, G.Rashidyan, 1985



Sundukyan Academic Theatre, R.Alaverdyan, 1966



Geological Museum, Eghegnadzor, T.Kajoyan, 1984



Monument of the 50th anniversary of the Soviet of Armenia, J.Torosyan, S.Gurzadyan, 1970



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Yeva Ess-Sargsyan

Editors:  
Greta Gasparyan  
Vache Asatryan

Photographers:  
Davit Stepanyan  
Yeva Ess-Sargsyan  
Armine Aghayan  
Romina Khatchidb  
Roberto Conte

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www.armarch.net  
Email: armarchinfo@gmail.com, info@armarch.net  
Tel.: +33 6 59 45 31 07

