

THEOLOGY OF SPACE: ORTHODOX ARCHITECTURE IN THE NEW CENTURY

Article by Inga Leonova

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No architect can rebuild a cathedral of another epoch embodying the desires, the aspirations, the love and hate of the people whose heritage it became. Therefore the images we have before us of monumental structures of the past cannot live again with the same intensity and meaning. Their faithful duplication is unreconcilable.

- Louis Kahn^[1]

In ecclesiastical architecture, the stark 20th century principle of “form follows function” poses an interesting and somewhat ambiguous problem. Conceptually, Christian understanding of life presupposes that since all human activity should ideally be directed toward worship of the Divine, it therefore assumes theological significance. While this might seem a stretched argument in some areas of life, it is certainly a valid principle in ecclesiastical art and architecture.

It has been argued that the theological significance of places of worship is an acquired quality. Colin Cunningham, for example, states that “a church building is not the essential basic element in Christian worship”^[2], supporting his statement by evidence that the first Christians often worshipped in the open air or in various enclosed spaces of

no templar significance, and that the symbolic definitions associated with sacred space developed very slowly. I would like to argue that architectural space is highly significant in Christian worship, that its organization derives from the both the functional requirements of the liturgical process and the spiritual aspects of people's perception of their environment, and that its development is an organic process which should ideally follow the living tradition of the Church as well as progress of other human activities such as building technology.

Understanding of what theological definition of space means in terms of material reality can help redefine the architectural principles that govern the design of contemporary Eastern Orthodox churches. Unlike Western ecclesiastical architecture, the live continuity of Orthodox architectural tradition, as it relates to other aspects of Orthodox art and theology, has suffered various interruptions at different points in history, resulting in the somewhat disappointing current condition of Orthodox church architecture. An explanation for this can be found in the political history of the Eastern Orthodox world, with Orthodox countries either suffering under Muslim occupation for many centuries (Middle East, North Africa, Greece, Bulgaria and the Balkan states), or going through violent internal political changes that were often unfavorable for the Church (Russia).

However, over the course of the last 150 years the geopolitical climate in Eastern Europe had changed, and it finally became possible for the Orthodox tradition to begin to reinvent itself. Greece gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in the mid-19th century. In the beginning of the 20th century, the Communist revolution in Russia and the banishment of religion has led to the exodus of the Orthodox to the West, to Czechoslovakia, Germany, France, and finally, America. The second event more than the first has led to resurgence in interdenominational communication, and the subsequent creation of the ecumenical World Council of Churches. Orthodox theological thought has experienced a true renaissance, fostered by the necessity to redefine the Church's position in the transformed world. Seventy years later, Russia overthrew the Communist regime, and the Orthodox Church regained its position as the principal religion of the state.

It is worth noting that the globalization of the Western world over the last 100 years has redefined its cultural and ethnic boundaries. Whether the Orthodox choose to be aware of it or not, their ethnic churches no longer exist in a vacuum, neither liturgically nor architecturally. The International Style of the early 20th century virtually erased ethnic architectural frontiers, and nowadays it would be possible to construct an entire homogeneous city out of buildings selected at random and indifferently from Moscow,

Paris, Jerusalem or New York. By the same token, the Orthodox population of the world is also no longer limited to Eastern Europe. In Western Europe as well as in both Americas, there are several Orthodox Churches with numerous congregations, each struggling to define its identity in the context of the larger Orthodox world as well as the world as a whole.

Re-establishment of an independent mentality in the Orthodox Church, as well as in other areas of cultural and political thinking, has not been a smooth process. In church architecture, although new construction has been quite prolific, especially in the last 20 years, it appears that, more often than not, designers opt to fall back on vernacular origins. The architects of the present-day Orthodox churches struggle with both the burden of the nostalgic ethnic vernacular (such as the notion that there can be no Orthodox church without an onion dome), and more importantly, the lack of a clear understanding of what defines the Orthodox worship space beyond the familiar paraphernalia. Numerous attempts to force the Orthodox liturgical process into the religious forms of the West, without a clear understanding of what defines a particularly Orthodox space, have always been unsuccessful. The problem is not in the change of form as such, but rather in the deliberate imposition of an archetype on a particular existing function, forcing the function to adopt rather than transform the archetype. As a result, those churches become merely “easternized”, decorated with Orthodox paraphernalia, perpetuating the stereotype of Orthodox space as one delineated by a multitude of icons.

Unfortunately, or perhaps consequently, there is also a scarcity of architectural research on the subject of contemporary Orthodox liturgical architecture. The rich and diverse study of sacred space in contemporary Western architectural theory is typically oblivious to Orthodox architecture, perhaps due to a shortage of notable modern buildings, as well as the low profile that the Orthodox Church maintains in the contemporary world. One of the examples can be found in Richard Kieckhefer’s seminal book *Theology in Stone*, which, although it begins with Byzantine examples of “sacramental churches”, eventually gravitates toward Western “sacramental liturgy”, thereby leaving a whole archetype beyond the limits of the book.^[3] Alternatively, most of the writing on Orthodox architecture is produced within theological liturgical research. At best, this work considers these buildings from the purview of art history, and is typically concerned only with historical examples. There is also ample architectural research focused on the religious buildings produced during the seventy years of the Communist regime in Russia. However, political constraints obliged this research to limit itself to the physical and historical properties of church buildings, completely ignoring the theological

aspects of worship space.^[4] Sadly, the inertia of this imbalanced approach carries into the present day. On the other hand, the proliferation of churches built by immigrants in Western countries over the past century has not yet attracted the attention of architectural researchers. Even Frank Lloyd Wright's amazing Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Milwaukee remains one of the least studied of his buildings. Surely the time has come to fill this void in the architectural thinking, and to endeavor to suggest the contemporary understanding of space and material in the Orthodox church building.

To this end it appears necessary to determine what, if anything, defines the uniquely Orthodox perception of built space. It is essential to separate what can be considered fundamental to the concept of space as it reflects the function of the liturgy, and what is the veneer of local traditions and ethnic stereotypes that have obscured the utilization of space and consequently the understanding of the liturgy. The liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church is considered by many to be the most conservative of any currently practiced in the Western world. To some, it means that the Orthodox church buildings should also remain frozen in time. There exists a body of apologetic writing, typically by architects of "revivalist" churches, that argue that since the tradition has been interrupted, the only appropriate path for a modern church designer is to go back in time and faithfully replicate the forms and materials of what is considered the "high age" of a particular ethnic liturgical architecture.^[5] However, the quote from Louis Kahn that has been used as an epigraph to this essay appeals to me as highly valid argument. I would like to contend that there must be a way to acknowledge the past without resuscitating its forms. Architecture, as any other art form, is rooted in its time and its culture, and while its best achievements transcend the confines of time, still the distinction must be made between the objective principles, and the subjective particulars of a given period. To use an example from the realm of music, the classical overtures in Alfred Schnittke's *Concerti* serve to connect his works to the great classical music tradition, but were the composer to write a pseudo-Baroque piece, which is something he was certainly technically capable of, it would have been, no matter how skillfully done, nothing but a pale shadow of the period since it would have been completely misplaced in music history.

To understand the challenges facing the modern architects of the Orthodox church, one must begin by examining the historic development of Orthodox architecture, and attempt to reconstruct the aspects of this architecture that are essential for the process of the liturgy as well as the Orthodox theological awareness of built environment. The great wealth of Orthodox ecclesiastical architectural tradition should be utilized to inform,

but not govern, the church construction of today. I believe that the example of the 20th century Orthodox theologians can serve as a guide for following a similar process in architectural research. Clarifying the underlying historical principals of the organization of Christian worship space, as well as engaging in a dialogue with contemporary Western architects on this subject, should only help to establish the guiding principles of contemporary Orthodox church design. Orthodox architecture can and should reconcile itself with the profound necessity “to build churches out of that reality which we experience and verify every day”^[6], while remaining faithful to the definition of an ecclesiastical building as that whose primary function is to be an epiphany of Divine and human transcendent co-celebration. Ultimately, the design should respect the primary concept of the Church as a body of Christ, and remember that this body is built of “living stones”^[7], not suspended in time and frozen in tradition, but growing as the world grows...

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^[1] Louis Kahn. *Monumentality*, in Peter Twombly, *Louis Kahn: essential texts*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York/London, 2003, p.22.

^[2] Cunningham, Colin. *Stones of witness: church architecture and function*, Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1999, p. 3

^[3] Richard Kieckhefer. *Theology in Stone*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

^[4] I would suggest that perhaps one of the last endeavors to analyze Orthodox art in its living context was made in 1918, at the crest of Russian Revolution, by Eugene Troubetskoy. After that, research tended to address singularly historical subjects.

^[5] See, for example, Marina Golokova. *Church architecture: tradition and modernity*. St. Petersburg Construction Weekly, August 2004; A. Anisimov. *Contemporary Orthodox temples: construction experience*. Construction Technologies, no. 1, 2004; and many others.

^[6] Rudolf Schwarz. *The Church Incarnate: the sacred function of Christian architecture*. Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1958, p. 11.

^[7] 1 Peter 2:4-6