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CONSTRUCTION OF THE CENTRAL UNION HOUSE IN MOSCOW AS INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

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Abstract

The article studies sociocultural, political and economic conditions for the development and implementation of the project aimed at creating the Central Union House in Moscow as an example of international cooperation. The study of historical experience of international cultural interaction is of particular relevance in the context of modern globalization. The successful cooperation between Russian and European architects and builders in a conflicting atmosphere of 1920–1930 is studied. The article aims to reveal the sociocultural significance of the Central Union House as an example of joint work of domestic and European architects. The basis of the study is a systematic approach that combines analytical and synthetic methods, and problem-chronological and historical methods. The specific historical conditions for the development and implementation of the Corbusier project are studied on the materials of professional periodicals and official documents. Diverse and conflicting factors that determined features of the Central Union House in specific historical conditions were summarized. The transformation of ideas about this object was described. The complex, multilateral significance of this cultural object was substantiated both in the general historical context and in relation to history of architecture and construction equipment. Objective and subjective difficulties were described. The ways of coordinating technical, organizational, legal and aesthetic disagreement were identified. Features of the Central Union House which influenced the development of world architecture were identified.

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Keywords: Architectural avant-garde, constructivism, rationalism, Central Union, CIAM, Corbusier.



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1. Introduction

The interaction of domestic and foreign architects embodied in buildings has deep historical roots. Since the Ancient Times, Russian architects have borrowed and rethought compositional techniques, building materials, technologies and constructive solutions from various sources. The number of European engineers and architects was large in the 18th-19th centuries. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Russian architecture has been developing in a global context, being an integral part of European architecture. Along with original trends, such as various versions of the revived “national” styles (from Russian-Byzantine to “Ropetovskiy”), the neo-Greek style and the Franco-Belgian Art Nouveau and Austrian Secession became popular. The implementation of new organizational principles, materials and technologies was facilitated by the activities of large foreign companies.

Leading European architects and engineers worked on their projects in Russia. The teacher of Mies van der Rohe, V. Gropius and Le Corbusier Peter Behrens built a new building of the German embassy in St. Petersburg. The fundamental upheavals associated with the First World War, revolutions and civil wars changed all spheres. Requirements for architecture and urban planning began to be formulated in a new way.

2. Problem Statement

Ideas about architecture in Germany which survived the defeat in the war, and in Soviet Russia after the October period radically changed. By the mid-twenties, the positive results of the new economic policy (NEP) became apparent. The implementation of cost accounting principles, creation of new government structures (Gostorg, Tsentrosoyuz, Kozhsindikat, etc.), as well as attention of the party leadership to their activities, required architectural projects for building administrative facilities for these organizations. The phrase “architecture of the people's commissariats” referred to Moscow architecture in 1920–1930 does not reflect the whole diversity of buildings and organizations. The issue of international cooperation is understudied.

3. Research Questions

The customers of interesting projects were large government departments and companies. One of such customer organizations was the Central Union. In the mid-1920s, the cooperative movement was in its heyday, and the Central Union had resources and political weight. The personnel involved in cooperation activities were highly qualified and businesslike. Kosygin began his political career in the Central Union.

Architectural and construction activities performed in the interval between two world wars, became an object of close attention of architectural historians, philosophers and architects, starting from the second half of the 20th century. Khan-Magomedov (1996, 1997) worked on the history of Soviet architectural avant-garde for a long time. The influence of various factors on the Russian architecture of 1920-1930 was studied by Ikonnikov (2004) in the work “Utopian Thinking and Architecture”. This work continues a critical analysis of the projects designed by the architects of the OSA and ASNOVA, I.A. Fomin and K.S. Melnikov (as cited in Ikonnikov, 1978). An analysis of trends in the development of

Moscow architecture was carried out in the work by Bronovitskaya et al. (2012). The most interesting structures of the initial stages of the Soviet architecture were studied by Molokova and Frolov (2010). Vivid personalities of the era of the domestic avant-garde and features of their creativity were described in the collective monograph “The Architects of Moscow. XX Century” (Astafieva-Dlugach et al., 1988).

This issue has attracted attention of foreign authors who studied outstanding monuments of the Soviet avant-garde and trends in the development of domestic architecture (Gines, 2007; Maerhofer, 2009). The specific historical conditions under which the project of the Central Union House was implemented are described by Cohen (2012) “Le Corbusier. Theories and projects for Moscow”. Cohen (2005) studied the Soviet avant-garde and other works by Corbusier (Peer et al., 2007). Socio-philosophical aspects of Corbusier's works were analyzed in the works by Mironov (2012), Vasilieva (2016) and Rogachev (2015).

However, researchers do not pay attention to the problem of interaction between Russian and foreign architects involved in the development and implementation of the Central Union House project, as well as the nature of this building, its role in the development of both world and domestic architecture.

4. Purpose of the Study

The article aims to describe the socio-cultural significance of the Central Union House as an example of joint creativity of Russian and European architects.

5. Research Methods

The Central Union House has become a vivid example of international cooperation in which all the contradictions of 1920–1930 were manifested. On the one hand, the initiator of the international competition for the best project was the influential All-Russian Central Union of Consumer Societies. On the other hand, the All-Russian Society of Civil Engineers guided the project competition. The results of two creative competitions did not satisfy either the initiator or the organizer. The board of the Central Union insisted on holding one more closed tender.

In the summer of 1928, the projects had to be evaluated by a special commission. The initial requirements assumed the mandatory observance of a number of conditions. The building was supposed to have an administrative part and trading offices designed for two thousand employees. In addition, it was considered obligatory to have premises for public organizations, as well as a club with a hall that could accommodate the whole team and circle sections. A sports hall and a spacious foyer were mandatory. New ideas about sanitation and hygiene entailed the need to equip the gym with a shower compartment. A dining-restaurant with its own kitchen, separate rooms for the library and the dispensary and a boiler room, repair shops, warehouses, six apartments for the personnel (locksmiths, stokers, and fitters) had to be part of the building (Rogachev, 2015).

It was difficult for developers to combine customer requirements and fit them into aesthetic criteria and estimated limitations. Polarity of judgments about the projects and acuteness of discussions can be traced in the professional periodicals (Lissitzky, 1928; Markovnikov, 1928; Mestnov, 1929; Tatarinov, 1928a, 1928b). The competitive commission preferred the Corbusier's project. In 1928, the

Swiss architect arrived in Moscow. He had to finalize his project taking into account comments and amendments and assess the urban environment. He had to evaluate the resource base of the industry, the level of qualifications of workers involved in the project, and available equipment and materials. The latter caused serious concern.

Corbusier returned to his Paris workshop with a Moscow architect Nikolai Collie. They had to meet the requirements of the customer; in addition, the project should take into account capabilities of the Russian construction industry. In Paris, N.D. Collie got a status of the Plenipotentiary Representative of Corbusier. The author of the project visited Moscow several times, but it was Collie who supervised the project implementation. He had to implement the plan of the European architect in the conditions of Soviet society at the turn of 1920–1930.

The idea of a special role of an architect determined the Corbusier's work on the Moscow project. The manifesto "Toward Architecture" written by him five years before his arrival in Moscow contained the slogan "Architecture or Revolution!" (Le Corbusier, 1923), which was very significant for the author. Like many European intellectuals of those years, Corbusier considered wars and revolutions as an unacceptable chaos. Social transformations are necessary, but they can and should be implemented with the help of rational architecture. The stable relationship between the social organization and the spatial forms of its existence seemed obvious. He concluded that rational architecture can and should be the beginning of a rational living arrangement. Dreams of optimizing and harmonizing social processes by means of architecture were typical of Corbusier and the leaders of Soviet constructivism. The idea of transitional houses" combining workplaces, residential sections, social and cultural facilities, educational institutions and sports and recreational facilities in one complex has already been implemented in Moscow since the mid-1920s. Corbusier followed this approach when designing the Central Union House.

Prominent statesmen influenced the competitions and the construction process. One of them was a chairman of the board of the Central Union Isidor Lyubimov – the head of government of the Turkestan Republic and the chairman of the Central Asian Economic Conference in 1920–1924. Lyubimov visited some European capitals in order to familiarize himself with the large urban economy and construction. The impressions were described in the collective work "Big Cities of Western Europe. Berlin. Paris. London". Later, his involvement in the urban development, including architectural and construction activities, contributed to his keen participation in the implementation of the Moscow project designed by Le Corbusier. Since 1932, I.E. Lyubimov headed the People's Commissariat of Light Industry. The new building in Myasnitskaya Street was immediately given to the People's Commissariat.

Corbusier believed that urban development would be based on new solutions and designs determining new economic, social, and political systems (Le Corbusier, 1935). This will create an opportunity to build harmonious society.

The building of the Central Union completed in 1936 became the first major building of the most famous architect of the 20th century. The technological, organizational and compositional principles became widespread. Accusations of "alienation" and unacceptability were rejected by N.D. Collie. He noted that the independence of national artistic traditions is so strong that everything built by foreign masters has an independent Russian character (Astafieva-Dlugach et al., 1988).

Le Corbusier considered necessary the interaction of like-minded architects at the European level. His brainchild - CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture) was conceived as the focal point of the architectural avant-garde. Based on the experience of Soviet constructivists, Corbusier seemed obligatory to participate in the work of CIAM.

However, in the midst of construction works in Myasnitskaya Street, there was a change in the vector of development of domestic architecture. It was assumed that new aesthetics of the country should be associated with "palace forms" that were understandable and familiar to the urban population. The building of the Central Union did not fall into the category of palace buildings. This circumstance strengthened the position of critics of the project. An object was considered as Trotskyism in architecture. The architectural avant-garde began to be interpreted as ideologically harmful formalism. The Soviet leadership did not allow Russian architects to participate in the CIAM.

The utopian nature of the ideas of avant-garde leaders about the social role of architecture is obvious. It is hardly possible to solve diverse problems by means of architecture. However, in spite of their unrealism, the utopias retained their attractiveness for a long time.

The House of the Central Union was the first major Corbusier project, based on "five starting points" of architecture. Over the next decades, the author implemented them both in separate buildings and in the whole city. Luis Costa and Oscar Niemeyer also contributed to the dissemination of ideas embodied in the Athens Charter of CIAM. The building of the UN secretariat in New York designed by O. Niemeyer and Le Corbusier develops the plan of the Central Union House. At the turn of the 1950-1960s, Brazilian President J. Kubitschek believed that the construction of Brasilia should be a visible symbol of transformations. The creator of the dream city Oscar Niemeyer was guided by the same architectural ideas as Corbusier.

6. Findings

The development and implementation of the project of the Central Union House was influenced by several factors. Firstly, it is the desire preserved in the late 1920s to emphasize the fundamental difference between Soviet and pre-revolutionary styles of architecture. The Corbusier project had advantages. The second important factor that determined the choice of the Corbusier project was its versatility. The Central Union house was conceived as a group of interconnected administrative buildings.

The main advantage was a possibility of implementing the idea of a "rational living arrangement" in its spatial forms. Multifunctionality was considered obligatory. Collie and Corbusier were able to achieve a high level of mutual trust and understanding in overcoming difficulties.

The ideological and political factors played a negative role in the construction process. A.I. Rykov was removed. His initiatives were perceived as "politically doubtful." Currently, there is no doubt about the multilateral significance of this cultural object both in the general historical context and in relation to the history of architecture and construction equipment.

7. Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn: 1. The Corbusier's house built in Myasnitskaya Street was the first major independent work of the master which embodied "five starting points" of modern architecture. 2. The House of the Central Union is a unique monument of the era of architectural avant-garde. New solutions, original structural and technical elements, and ways of "greening" maintenance conditions were developed. 3. The restoration works contribute to the preservation and popularization of this cultural object. Compliance with the principle of continuity in materials and technologies, preservation of the external appearance of the object in accordance with its original style allows us to hope for possible inclusion of the Central Union House in the UNESCO World Heritage List. 4. Being a visible embodiment of courageous architectural and urban planning plans and fruitful international cooperation, being closely connected with bright characters of domestic and world history and culture, the House of the Central Union can help increase tourist attractiveness of the city and the country. 5. The modern urban landscape of Myasnitskaya Street and Akademik Sakharov Avenue is determined by the Central Union House and modern buildings of Gostorg, the First All-Russian Central Executive Committee, the People's Aviation Commissariat and the ground pavilion of the Chistye Prudy metro station. That is there is a visual connection between large fragments of Moscow urban environment of 1920–1930.

Thus, it is obvious that the building of the Central Union is not only an outstanding work of a brilliant architect. It symbolizes a layer of domestic and world culture. Complex and contradictory sociocultural trends appeared at the turn of the 1920–1930s.

The House of the Central Union had an obvious impact on the works of several generations of domestic and foreign architects. Vesnin (1934) wrote about the building that this will be the best building built in Moscow in the last century. The work of the founder of functionalism was positively evaluated abroad. Jencks (1973) believed that Corbusier's influence on world architecture can be compared with the influence of Andrea Palladio.

Rejected "starting points" of functionalism returned to Russian architectural and construction practices during the Khrushchev era. In Moscow and other Russian cities residential and public buildings genetically connected with the Central Union House were being constructed.

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