

Postmodernism in the Formation of the New Identity of Armenian Post-Independence Architecture

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the obtained independence was the starting point for the conception of a new narrative of national culture in post-Soviet Armenia. Many former Soviet countries, including Armenia, demonstratively expressed denial of their Soviet past by instantly changing toponyms and dismantling monuments associated with Soviet history and culture. This was done in the context of the overall political course accepted by the country that did no longer want to see itself as an assignee of the Soviet Armenia. Hence a new cultural paradigm replacing the ancient one had to be adopted, which, nevertheless, was not a mere antithesis of the old one. In fact, whilst refuting the old ideology, the new cultural paradigm borrowed the structural features of the old one on the one hand, and on the other hand, it was striving to find means to accentuate its individuality through a language of its own. Such a process of forging a new cultural paradigm was a complex task not only for Armenia, but also for the rest of the former Soviet states, which all had been formed as a Soviet project and had started developing their contemporary national cultures only in the second half of the 20th century.

The question at stake was how the idea of the new, local, and independent culture should manifest itself in architecture: through traditionalism, through the vernacular, through something completely different? On the one hand, the country wanted to develop its independent and locally/historically inspired national identity, and on the other hand, it aspired to become a modern country tending towards the future. Hence, despite the urge to recreate and maintain its local national identity manifested by architecture, among other forms of culture, direct mimicry of traditional, historical architectural forms was considered as too obvious and anachronistic. Subsequently the method of symbiosis of the traditional with the modern, which is a well-known principle better known as post-modernism, was adopted as a seemingly logical solution to the problem.

In this paper we will refer to the already established definitions of the overall paradigm of postmodernism and particularly its expressions in architecture with the aim of applying them in the analysis of the post-independence Armenian architecture. Here the question that we strive to follow is how the postmodernist approach and ideology have been applied in the conception of this new architecture in general and how postmodernism became a tool to forge the new national ideology, instead of acting as an ideological tool to criticise the aftermaths of the past epoch, i.e. modernism, as was the case in the rest of the world.

In the context of pluralism, as one of the tenets of postmodernism¹, there are certain interconnections between the traditional, the national and the contemporary in Armenian late modern architecture. Modern Armenian architecture refers to Armenian architecture that started to form on the territory of the current Armenian Republic at the end of the 19th century, which at that time had become a part of the Russian empire. This was a crucial moment in the development not only of the architecture of Armenia, but also of the country as a whole. Architecture in Armenia obtained a westernized look and continued its development in the paradigm of western architectural tendencies (albeit fusing them with local architectural characteristics). Classicistic and renaissance architectural motifs were localized and quoted in such buildings as mansions, gymnasia, factories, hospitals, etc. Local black and orange tuff stones were used to give those foreign classicistic elements a local touch. The tectonics of the stone obtained their manifestation in the overall proportions of buildings as well as in their filigree curved ornamentation and decorative elements that in the Russian brick and stucco architecture had not been able to be realized. In this way, Armenian 19th century architecture differed greatly from the similar style in Russia, from where these tendencies were mostly soaking into the country. Yet, despite these and other similar attempts to localise otherwise European architecture, this architectural stratum has not become a part of the accepted national architectural thesaurus. But it was a method of forging a pluralistic architectural language that incorporated features from the local historical architecture and western motifs and became sort of a generic principle for the coming decades (fig. 1).

Later, during the Soviet period, the tendency to represent the traditional in the system of pluralism became the main method of expressing national self-identification in Armenian architecture. Yet the roots of this tendency obtained its linguistic coherence during the second decade of the 20th century when architect and academic Alexander Tamanyan, who was himself of Armenian origin, was summoned to Armenia first by the government of the first Armenian republic, and a few years later, after the establishment of the Soviet reign in the country, by the local Bolshevik authorities, to rebuild the capital of the newly established soviet Armenia that was Yerevan. He had the ambitious task to give it a decent architectural look and an urban structure while erasing to the maximum all ancient historical layers and to let the newly built city and its architecture demonstrate the new political direction that the country had embarked on.

¹ Jencks 1985.



Fig. 1 From left to right: one storey building initially built as the residence of the Persian consul (architect unknown, 1876) and headquarter of the ARF (Dashnaktsutyun Party), Yerevan (architect Mikhail Von der Nonne, 1895).

Tamanyan had encoded certain national ideas in the structure of the master plan of Yerevan already in the year 1919, when he was working for the government of the First Republic. Surprisingly these ideas passed into the later versions of the master plan which was developed in 1924 already under the command of the Soviet Armenian government that reached communist ideologies. According to Tamanyan's master plan Yerevan had to open itself towards the biblical mount of Ararat² that was and is a sacred symbol for Armenians. According to Tamanyan's idea the master plan and overall architecture and urbanism of Yerevan had to symbolize the revival of Armenia after centuries of cultural and political depression under foreign rule. To realize his idea of reviving or rather creating the new national or neo-national architecture of Soviet Armenia Tamanyan referred to the European classical architecture and at the same time to the historical architecture mainly excavated in those times in one of the most glorious ancient capitals of Armenia, namely Ani (9th-11th centuries AD).

One of the first buildings to feature this stylistic mixture was the Government House on the Republic Square. For the first time in the history of modern Armenian architecture an arcade was deployed in this building. This architectural element, along with the pink tuff stone, the true trademark of modern Armenian architecture, became one of the leitmotifs to be deployed by many architects throughout coming decades (fig. 2; fig. 2-1; fig. 2-2; fig. 2-3). Tamanyan established an architectural idiom that became known as Tamanyan school and was the main architectural style up to the 1950s, when the decree about "Elimination of Excess in Architecture and Construction" was accepted in the whole Soviet sphere, thus launching the start of modernism in the empire. Nevertheless, despite such prohibition of decorative or ornamental excesses, in the 1970s-1980s some decorative or symbolic quotations start to emerge in otherwise modernist architecture. Many public buildings of those times start featuring certain traditional narratives which appear as secondary codes, as compared to Tamanyan school neo-classicist architecture where the reference to the traditional motifs was used in a rather integrated and structural way. Here the codes referring to the historical narratives and traditional motifs appear as local quotations addressed to an average viewer to be decoded. That is how traditional motifs maintain the modernist elitist character. They are compositionally integrated into the modernist structure and act as subtle additions without pretensions of any domination. For example, in the building of the Gabriel Sundukyan Academic Drama Theatre (architects R. Alaverdyan, S. Burkhadzhan, G. Mnatsakanyan, 1966) an orange tuff clad portal is inserted in the glazed front facade that depicts a fusion of different theatrical and national themes. For example, female figures embody life and beauty as a symbol of the revival of Armenia; the head of ancient Armenian king Artavasdes II (1st century B C) refers to the theatrical domain as he is a major historical personage connected with Hellenistic theatre in Armenia.³ There are many other symbols, such as pomegranates and birds that have been used in historical architecture and had been adopted as symbols of national cultural identity (fig. 3; fig. 3-1).



Fig. 2 The House of the Government, Aleksander Tamanyan (1926-40).

2 Balyan 2009.

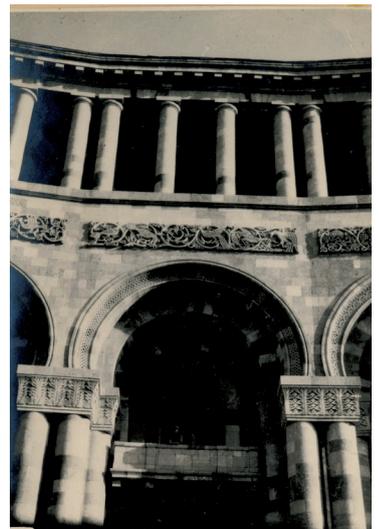


Fig. 2-1 The House of the Government, fragment. Aleksander Tamanyan (1926-40).

3 Zurabov 1986.

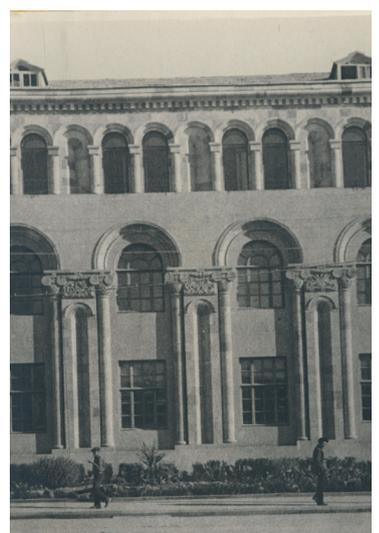


Fig. 2-2 The House of the Government, fragment. Aleksander Tamanyan (1926-40).



Fig. 2-3 The House of the Government, fragment. Aleksander Tamanyan (1926-40).



Fig. 3 Gabriel Sundukyan Academic Drama Theatre (architects R. Alaverian, S. Burkhadzhan, G. Mnatsakanyan, 1966).



Fig. 3-1 Gabriel Sundukyan Academic Drama Theatre (architects R. Alaverian, S. Burkhadzhan, G. Mnatsakanyan, 1966), main entrance.

4 Jencks 1985.

This tradition-inspired modernist architecture of the last four decades of Soviet reign cannot be considered as postmodernist, despite its chronological overlap with the western postmodernism, since postmodernism was officially banned in the Soviet empire as a reflexion of western bourgeois culture. Here we probably deal with mere aesthetic, decorative derivations of traditional motifs, because this tendency became popular after 1967, when the political elites decided to encourage national expressions in arts and culture to a certain extent, whereas the discourse around postmodernism became popular only from the 1980s onwards.

Along with decorative quotation of historical architectural motifs in modernist architecture that acted as reference to history and national identity, there was also the method of compositional or structural reference to the historical material that started to appear as part of the modernist idiom. The most characteristic examples of this method are the Museum of Lenin in Gorky (1978-87), the Dramatic Theatre in Novgorod (1987), and the Pioneer Palace in Moscow's Perovo district (late 1980s).

The period of modernism in the Soviet Empire lasted almost 40 years and ended up with the collapse of the Union. This fact should have a logical effect on the nature of representation of national narratives, since absence of censorship and centralized ideology should supposedly have given more freedom of expression. Yet the fact of the change of the client (the government in the case of the Soviet system and the private customer during the post-Soviet or independence period) commissioning architecture had its impact on the formation of the nature of post-independence architecture in Armenia as in the rest of the post-Soviet states. During the 70 years of Soviet rule it was the centralized government that dictated and demanded the program of national representation in culture and architecture. Whereas after the collapse among the independent states we could witness the aspiration of returning to the pre-Soviet cultural roots and traditions as an expression of the free will and aspiration of the Nations themselves. This dropback towards the pre-Soviet past was also conditioned by a tiredness with the industrialized and standardized Soviet architecture of the last four decades in favour of the rich vocabulary of historical forms in architecture, as well as with the newly emerging opportunity to assimilate new construction technologies and materials.

In fact, these aspirations of fusing contemporary technologies with bold and innovative interpretations of historical material are nothing but direct references to postmodernist aesthetics and radical eclectics⁴. As compared to the Soviet version of reference to historical motifs, in the post-independent architecture historical motifs are used without respecting classical canons, such as the proportions or compositional principles. They also appear as the main and dominant architectural narrative, making the new architecture evolve in the frame of historicism.

In post-Soviet Armenia the Soviet heritage, particularly the neo-traditional or neo-national Tamanyan school of architecture, received a new and

rather decontextualized reading, almost beyond its Soviet belonging. What happened was a very specific reassessment of its own Soviet history and architectural heritage as a reminiscent of that history. For example, the neo-national classical architecture was adopted as a true and almost authentic historical architecture and accepted as part of the national culture and representative of a national identity, whereas the modernist architecture was left in oblivion and disregarded until very recently. Having this neoclassical national architectural style accepted as the prototype of its historical architectural DNA, post-independence Armenia now embarked on the realisation of its major urban and architectural project of the period, which is the Northern Avenue.

In the beginning of the 2000s the relative economic upheaval created a fertile ground for the implementation of large scale investment projects that had great impact first of all on the urban fabric of Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Construction of the Northern Avenue has been one of the most ambitious projects in the history of independent Armenia. The concept of the Avenue was already drafted in the 1924 master plan of Tamanyan, the idea of which was to connect the two main squares of Yerevan, the Opera Square and the Republic Square, together by means of a pedestrian avenue that would form long north-south axes directed towards Mount Ararat. However, by the construction of the building of the State Gallery the view of the axes was obscured, hence the Avenue lost its conceptual idea⁵. Also, the Soviet centralized economic system made it extremely difficult to conceive such a large development project from a social-economical perspective. Only with the advent of the liberal capitalistic market it became possible to conceive an economical model of the project by means of participation of private investors. Yet the gap of ideological and even urban reasoning behind the construction of the Avenue still existed. Its construction had rather the economic and social purpose of cleaning up the centre of the city from hectares of slums and to give it a decent modern look. As to the ideological background, the revival of a Tamanyan project simply being a Tamanyan project was presented as the main ideological reason for the project on which the authors usually indulged to justify its shortcomings.

5 Balyan 2009.

The pedestrian avenue is built up with high-rise residential buildings qualified as elite dwellings. The style of the architecture of the Avenue is rather eclectic starting with an imitation or contemporary take on some known modernist buildings and getting more classical by the other end of the axis. Yet one can feel the domination of the national neo-classical style throughout the prospect due to the quotation of its typical elements and the ubiquitous decorative use of tuff as a facade material. It is exactly this aspiration of stylistic uniformity that created many controversial moments in the interpretation of the architecture of the Avenue. In particular, as compared to the initial, original neo-classical style the logic of the tectonics of materials has changed. Here proportional consistency is no longer a key factor. For example, there is a high-rise residential building on Europe Square in the central part of the Avenue where the centrally placed large arch, the non-adorned,

Fig. 4 Northern Avenue.



Fig. 4-1 Northern Avenue.

bare columns attached to the concave facade, the arcade on the upper volumes and the facade material, all strive to give a classical sense to the otherwise banal architecture of the building (fig. 4). Another example is the “Soglasie Armenia Building” at the end of the Avenue, where the reminiscence of national neoclassicism is manifested in a form of very free interpretations of traditional architectural decorative elements, such as the vaults of the capitols that have been turned into merely curved decors (fig. 4-1).

Northern Avenue became not only the most ambitious, but also one of the most controversial and criticized projects in the history of post-independence Armenia due to the fact of not having maintained the main architectural principles drawn by Tamanyan, such as the overall scale and authentic stylistic idiom. Yet Northern Avenue became also a manifestation of an important social-cultural and, not the least, political message, by meeting the challenge of being the only country at that time among the independent states to realize such a large-scale project at all, whilst still being in a state of cold war. Hence the post-independence historicism obtains certain utopistic traits of aiming at the future by leaning on the past. In other words, this project established the idea of seeking contemporary Armenian identity in its presumed historical identities. Whereas if the connection and the reference to the past was realized in a more profound and canonical way, perhaps in that case the principle of distinct quotations obtains a certain meaning without ironic or grotesque interpretation of the history. But the Northern Avenue was realized mostly as a business project and didn't aim at reviving or restoring the historical layers. On the contrary, throughout the project several historical buildings were demolished, whilst certain grotesque reminiscences of their architecture were quoted in the newly erected buildings.

Realisation of the Northern Avenue gave an impetus to the rebirth of the national neo-classicist style and affirmed the status of this style as dominant in the architecture of 21st century Armenia. According to the main ideologue and chief architect of the Avenue, Narek Sargsyan, this style is the most characteristic style for Yerevan and the whole of Armenia that identifies the city the best. Hence, he saw the further development of the city exactly in this style, which I have already qualified as an utopistic idea. However, it should be emphasized that the domination of this style was not ubiquitous or imposed by the state. It was a style that was propagated by the construction of the Avenue itself which then became a favourite of many developers and private investors as a reminiscence of their beloved Tamanyan school architecture that was seen to be able to feed national aspirations and fill the ideological vacuum following the independence of the country.

This reinterpretation of the neo-traditional or neo-national classicist style became popular in the handwriting of other architects as well and was served to accentuate the national architectural-cultural self-identification with the purpose to maintain a certain historical stylistic coherence. This aspiration was particularly well manifested in newly constructed public (governmental) buildings. One of the brightest examples of how a style communicates messages related to, for example, the historical inheritance of Armenian political diplomacy is the building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012-2014, architect Narek Sargsyan, chief engineer Hrach Sargsyan). The architecture of the building demonstrates an overt adoption of distinct architectural motifs from the former building of the MFA (1950s, architects R. Israelyan, S. Safaryan). The architect of the new MFA building in this new design has particularly quoted the turret of the ancient one, as well as the large arch. The light colour of the chosen facade stone also suggests certain hints to the ancient one, although it could be speculated that substituting traditional tuff or felsite



Fig.5 The new building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

stone with the white sandstone from Shushi (an important city in the non-recognized republic of Nagorno Karabakh, a conflict zone between Armenia and Azerbaijan), has the purpose of transmitting the subtext message of the unity of the two Armenian republics (fig. 5).

As an example of non-governmental, private development projects featuring a new take on neo-traditional architectural style we can look at the residential building on Moskovyan street (architect Levon Vardanyan, 2013). Despite the obvious need and requirement of fitting harmoniously in terms of scale and composition into the existing urban fabric, the building became a huge clumsy cube inserted brutally into almost half of the district area without featuring any proper spatial or facade composition. The only idea of this obvious urban and architectural failure was to again mimicry certain elements from neo-traditional architecture, namely the arcade with badly executed and primitive ornamentation. Again, the reference to the pink tuff of Tamanyan's Yerevan has been quoted by equipping the building facade with monochrome slabs of light pink tuff which look like a uniform stucco rather than an imitation of stone cladding. All the architecture of the building talks about is the fundamental structural pretention falsely aimed at corresponding to the vaguely defined notion of national or traditional architecture by a blind copy of citations. (fig. 6)

These architectural examples demonstrate clearly that the classical structure of neo-traditional architecture developed by Tamanyan with its deliberate tectonics of stone and logic of decorative motifs became a purely superficial screen in the post-independence Armenian architecture. What once was pure architecture—structure, tectonics and logic of composition based on certain canons—became the source of a game, juggling with deformed architectural elements that were used as stickers or markers, references and empty quotations pretending to belong to certain architectural and conceptual strata, of which it actually never became a part of.

Fig. 6 The Administrative building in Moskovyan str.



Tamanyan school architecture is perceived among Armenians as an absolute, since beyond its unquestionable qualities it carries the messages of national belonging and historical continuation of its traditions. Hence its recreation in the 21st century could have a certain logic in terms of a desire to maintain the historical continuation of national identity through architecture. Yet we should not forget that Tamanyan architecture was created in a completely different social-cultural and political reality, hence its recreation in 21st century capitalist and post-independence reality led to its structural and ideological distortion. There are many factors, including the simple absence of appropriate professional knowledge, that prevent this style to be reproduced canonically. The result of this distorted reproduction is a sort of modernism without being able to maintain the concept of postmodernism. Postmodernism here acted merely as a method of visual reproduction, since an absolute cannot be played on or interpreted, it can only be mimicked. Whereas what we find in case of this new architecture is a rather naive attempt at development or interpretation that turned the authentic architecture into a fake mimicry.

We imply that postmodernism is a philosophy that proclaims the 'post' state as a denial of linearity particularly of the kind the modernist paradigm posited. What happened in the architecture of post-independence Armenia cannot be described as a 'classical' form of post-modernism, as here the linear connection with the past has been retained or, to be more exact, has been returned to. Armenian 21st century post-modernism has denied its connection with the Soviet modernism, but has based itself on the earlier historical layers thus acting not as a philosophical category but rather as a mechanism of denial of the previously assumed linearity. There is no notion of irony or mimicry in the attempts of this architecture to restore the interrupted linearity of the national-neoclassical architecture. Post-Soviet post-modernism is not a game of symbols or wittiness. Instead, it takes on the global task to restore the interrupted, unfinished grand narrative of the national.

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Tigran Harutyunyan (b. 1983), architect, candidate of architecture, independent researcher. He graduated from the Yerevan State University of Architecture and Construction, Faculty of Architecture in 2005. He pursued his scientific activity in the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, Institute of Art, where he defended his candidacy thesis devoted to the stylistic features of post-Soviet Armenian architecture in 2008. In 2019 he took a master's degree in Sphere of Heritage in Higher School of Economics in Moscow. His research interests mostly focused on the post-Soviet architecture which is viewed in the context of current and past trends of modern architecture, the problems of architecture of the transitional period, as well as memory policy issues of new architecture and urban space. He is the author of *Architectural Guide of Yerevan* DOM Publishers 2017, as well as a number of articles in academic journals, collective volumes and professional websites.

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Figures

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