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REDISCOVERING THE SILVER AGE: RUSSIAN ARCHITECTURE IN THE 1990s

In December 1989, the city I arrived in was monochrome. It was 4.30 pm, already dark and minus 24. The snow was grey, except for the tinge of blue from the only neon light allowed – a sign for the Soviet Import-Export Service. That soon changed. The 1990s was the decade in which Moscow got color. Advertising and street lighting entered the cityscape. The pavements became congested stalls laden with American cigarettes, German beer, Chinese noodles and Italian tomato sauce. In the bookshops, tomes – all blue – of Lenin’s teachings were replaced by memoirs illustrated with glossy photographs, revealing a past that was only ever whispered about for most of the century. Buildings were cleaned of their socialist grime to reveal the colors of the Imperial past: lemon, pink and powder blue. Russianness was being sifted out of Sovietness and mixed with global culture, in an attempt to forge a new identity.



Figure 1: “Chinese” takeaway in Moscow

The eclecticism of Russian architecture in the 1990s gives some insights into the process of defining the new Russia. This was a decade when a thousand buildings bloomed in reaction to decades of sterility. There was a frantic search for the right style to fit post-Soviet Russia.

Bad taste seemed often to rule the day. But, according to Vladimir L. Khait, Director of the Institute for Architecture and Town Planning Theory, this was inevitable as people – architects, clients and the public – learned that not everything had to be the color grey, that they could wear (as Khait did on the day of our conversation) yellow; that curves can be good and buildings asymmetrical.¹

Here is the story of one aspect of the nineties' architecture – a short-lived revival of Art Moderne,² Russia's particular style of Art Nouveau style. It is one particular house, the Derozhinskaia mansion, now the Australian Embassy in Moscow, built in 1901-03 by Franz Shekhtel, which inspired my interest in the rediscovery of the Silver Age, including its architecture. I worked in the Embassy from 1990 to 1993. These were tumultuous times, when the pursuit of history was shaping the political fabric of post-Soviet Russia. I watched Art Moderne become fashionable again, no longer having only its covert admirers. Experts could talk more openly; enthusiastic amateurs compensated for the few known facts by retelling stories of bourgeois decadence. Myths had always surrounded the Derozhinskaia mansion. It was said to have been built for a diva; people were sure that Lenin and Mao had visited the house; one ambassador's wife had used the bathroom to type her thesis, afraid of the bugs planted everywhere else in the building. What fascinated me was the woman who had commissioned the house, Aleksandra Ivanovna Derozhinskaia (née Butikova) whose shadow I am still chasing. That search has taken me in many directions, including into the field of architecture.

Goethe described architecture as "frozen music." This is a particularly apt phrase for the Moderne style, which imparts a rhythm and melody that hint of special times. Its buildings have much to tell us about their clients and their aspirations, the development of the architectural professions, even of the national mood. These were the issues being explored in the early nineties, by historians and journalists and architects. There was a flourishing of newspaper commentary, not always grounded in the facts. That led me to the scholarly literature of the pe-

1. Interview with Khait, December 10, 1999.

2. Art Moderne was influenced by the Art Nouveau style of Western Europe, and particularly by the domestic architecture of England and Scotland. Russian architects were drawn to the philosophy and aesthetic of the Art and Craft movement, in which they found parallels with their own ruminations about Russian folk art and its place in contemporary culture. That said, Art Moderne developed its own distinctive style. See William Craft Brumfield, "Redesigning the Russian House, 1895-1917," William Craft Brumfield and Blair A. Ruble, eds., *Russian Housing in the Modern Age, Design and Social History* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993).

riod and to the Russian archives, as well as to a series of interviews with contemporary architects and historians conducted in late 1999, thanks to a grant from the University of New South Wales. This essay is the result of that research.

Like its predecessor, the 1990s' Neo Moderne was a fleeting, evocative phase, a mirror of uncertain times, a mixture of excitement and nostalgia. Both styles were loved and hated by their critics, either seen as liberating and democratic, or vulgar and ostentatious. Each survived for only a short time, when circumstances of economic boom and political, indeed, national transition produced clients willing to sponsor fantastical, individualistic buildings, as symbols of their own emergence into the world of commerce and patronage.

Art Moderne made its first appearance at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was, in the words of one of its best historians, Evgenia Kirichenko, both an aspiration to contemporaneity and a flight from it into worlds of the past and the exotic.³ Moderne architecture, like its counterparts in Scotland, Belgium and Vienna, expressed a desire to combine modern technology with the Symbolist yearning to express the beauty of nature in art.

The clients of the Art Moderne architects were a new breed of patron. Up until the middle of the nineteenth century, it was the tsar and his family who dictated trends in art, trends which, since Peter the Great, had been firmly focussed on Western Europe and on classicism. The emperor's seat, St. Petersburg, boasts the work of one of the finest classical architects, Rastrelli.

In Moscow, the old capital abandoned by Peter, the mid-nineteenth century saw a new stratum of wealth emerge, built by merchants, many of whom hailed from the Old Believer sect, where they had cultivated values identified in Western Europe as the Protestant work ethic. They were growing rich on textiles, railways and banking but did not have a place in the power élite commensurate with their economic strength. As their wealth accumulated, they began to have mansions built, based not on the rambling palaces of the economically waning aristocracy but harking back to religious and wooden peasant designs, while also boasting the newest of materials and appliances. These mansions⁴ represented the merchants' assertion of their place in the modernizing economy and of their belief in Russian culture. What that place was is the subject of

3. E. Kirichenko, "Theoretical Attitudes to Architecture in Russia 1830-1910s," *Architectural Association Quarterly*, 11, no. 2 (1979).

4. *Osobniak* in Russian, deriving from the root *osobyi* meaning special, apart, or one-off.

much interpretation and reflects the changing historiography of the period. The central question has been whether the merchants constituted the missing bourgeoisie who might have changed the course of history?⁵ Those interested in architecture have entered this debate. Catherine Cooke, an English expert on twentieth-century Russian architecture, has suggested that Shekhtel's work expresses the democratic convictions of his clients.⁶ William Craft Brumfield, an American scholar who has produced wonderful photographs of Russian architecture, doubts that "Style Moderne had any meaningful relation to the development of the democratic, bourgeois values advocated by critics supportive of the style."⁷ Kirichenko, writing during the period of stagnation, sought to distance the adherents of Moderne from ideas of capitalism,⁸ a word many of the merchants themselves were also allergic to.

What is perhaps most striking about these interpretations is that they remind us to tread carefully in attaching political or other symbolic meanings to a building. Certainly the Moderne houses were startling, innovative and nostalgic at the same time, striving to reach the epitome in comfort and aesthetics. There may have been no conscious bourgeois or democratic philosophy written into the commission; there was almost certainly a desire to assert a place in society defined not by the imperial system of ranks but by wealth and aesthetic choice. And given that these houses were built at a time when the debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers was again current, it is not unreasonable to see them also as an attempt to define Russia's place between East and West, to put a Russian stamp on modernity.

The foremost of the Art Moderne architects, Franz Shekhtel,⁹ started out as an illustrator, signing his name *Fin Champagne*.

5. Two theses aired by American scholars in the early 1980s shaped this debate: T. C. Owen, *Capitalism and Politics in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981); Alfred J. Rieber, *Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia* (Chapel Hill N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982). In the 1990s a new generation of Russian historians considered the question of the bourgeoisie, including Yuri. A. Petrov, *Dinasti Riabushinskikh* (Moscow: Russkaia Kniga, 1997) and Galina M. Ulianova, *Blagotvoritelnost' Moskovskikh Predprinimatelei* (Moscow: Mosgoarkhiv, 1999). Waltraud Bayer also entered the debate in her book *Die Moskauer Medici* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1996).

6. Catherine Cooke, "Fedor Osipovich Shekhtel: An architect and his Clients in Turn-of-the Century Moscow," *Architectural Association File*, No 5 (Jan. 1984), p. 27.

7. Brumfield, "Redesigning the Russian House, 1895-1917," p. 25.

8. E. Kirichenko, *Russkaia arkhitektura 1830-1910* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1978).

9. Fyodor Osipovich Shekhtel, known until the outbreak of the First World War as Franz, was born in 1859, of German parentage. His father was a civil engineer who died in 1867. His widow, Daria (Dorothea) Karlovna, and children left Saratov when Daria found a position in Moscow as the household manager of the Tretyakov family. This was to be Shekhtel's entrée into the cultural milieu of the Silver Age. For an account on



Figure 2: F.O. Shekhtel

He mixed with the Chekhov brothers and was introduced to the Abramtsevo circle, which cultivated the Neo-Russian style in the second half of the nineteenth century. Shekhtel spent just two years at the School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture before joining the fashionable architectural practice of Aleksandr Kaminiskii in 1878. He developed into an educated cosmopolitan, whose architectural skills were in high demand in Moscow's merchant circles, even before he gained his certificate of practice. Shekhtel accumulated an extensive library, travelled abroad every year and maintained membership in architectural societies across Europe.

In addition to the inspiration of Russian art and nature, Shekhtel was impressed by English perpendicular gothic, and by the work of John Ruskin, William Morris, and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. But his interests were not only historical; he also strove to master new construction techniques.

Shekhtel in English, see Cooke, "Fedor Osipovich Shekhtel," pp. 4-31, and her chapter on Shekhtel in M. Raeburn, ed., *The Twilight of the Tsars* (London: South Bank Centre, 1991), pp. 43-66. See also Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant Garde, Theories of Art, Architecture and the City* (London: Academy Editions, 1995), p. 10.



Figure 3: Mansion for A. I. Derozhinskaia, Architect: F. O. Shekhtel, 1903



Figure 4: Interior

The best of Art Moderne was built in the first decade of the twentieth century, by which time its practitioners had thrown off the excesses of Historicism (for example, ornate Gothic references) and found a purity of line which produced some of the most impressive, and least known, examples of domestic Art Nouveau architecture worldwide. The clientele for this work was limited. While the style was adapted for banks and factories and hospitals, it began to lose its momentum in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution, when its patrons and practitioners either lost their audacity and retreated to the safer ground of Neo-Classicism, or turned to the more revolutionary avant-garde. As Brumfield has noted, it turned out, ironically, that classicism – with all its nostalgia for the past glory of the ancien régime – was more appropriate to the contemporary demands for apartment-style housing than the much more individualistic Art Moderne.¹⁰

And then architecture was put on hold, first by World War I, then by revolution. The Bolsheviks seized private property, nationalizing what had not been pilfered or destroyed. A new world order, free of the baggage of the past, was declared. Aristocrats and the bourgeoisie fled abroad, or lived cowered in communal flats at home. All traces of *fin-de-siècle* Moscow were hidden in boxes under beds. Even to talk of one's prosperous past was taboo. Aspects of the Silver Age lived on: some Avant Gardists became Constructivists,¹¹ and there were poets who took up the cause of building socialism. Other aspects, including architecture, quickly gathered thick layers of dust, which concealed their beauty, or were locked behind gates that barred the ordinary citizen from being dazzled or inspired.

For a while in the twenties the new Soviet state encouraged a modernist architecture – inspired by the Constructivists and championed by Le Corbusier – which strove to build functional, communal housing fit for Socialist man. It was during this period that Konstantin Melnikov, regarded by some as the Soviet Union's greatest architect, flourished, creating his distinctive style of cylinders and diamond windows.¹²

10. William Craft Brumfield, "Anti-Modernism and the Neo-Classical Revival in Russian Architecture, 1906-1916," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. XLVIII, no 4 (Dec. 1989), p. 386.

11. So called in 1920 when its exponents published their Realist Manifesto, directing artists "to construct art" and to work as engineers did with modern industrial materials such as plastic, steel, and glass. This was the heyday of the worship of machines, best symbolized by Vladimir Tatlin's design for a monument to the Third International (1920), where everything rotated around a steel skeleton.

12. For an account of the effects of Constructivism or Suprematism on Soviet architecture, see Natalya Dushkina, "Some Thoughts on the Historical Fate of Twentieth

But Stalin did not approve.¹³ Like everything else, architecture became bureaucratized again. State intervention prompted a return to heroism and decoration. By the thirties, Soviet architects were adopting a kind of Russified classicism and creating, *inter alia*, the most ornate metro stations in the world. In the early fifties, they were building Gothic skyscrapers which were to rival those of New York and became a secular tribute to socialism in one country.

The Art Moderne and Constructivist phases of architecture had been fleeting moments of freedom, an aberration. As Vladimir Sedov put it in a survey of the role of the architect in Russia, the return to neoclassicism “in the Stalinist era restored respect for rank, architectural ‘teams’ and ‘approval’ of styles in an even stricter form than had existed in the capitals and provinces of imperial Russia.”¹⁴

From the late fifties utopian design and monumental architecture gave way to the pressure for housing. The industry concentrated on developing prefabricated construction techniques and came up with the ubiquitous, ugly reinforced concrete panel. Buildings, just like street names, were standardized, the exact same hairdressing salon, book shop or block of flats appearing in cities across the Soviet Union. Soviet architects retreated into the world of imagination creating buildings they knew would never be built. This was the paper generation.¹⁵ Not until the 1990s did the profession begin to establish its independence, with architects beginning to venture into private practice.

Those who sought to wipe away the grime caked onto old buildings risked their careers. Research into the bourgeois, decadent past was, at best, frowned upon. This work had to be done furtively, and either stored away or dressed up in Leninist jargon to make it acceptable for

Century Moscow,” in *Transition: Discourse on Architecture* (Melbourne, RMIT, no. 33 [1990]), pp. 40-57.

13. In saying this, I am adopting a shorthand phrase, for despite the generally held view that Stalin, like the other Fascist leaders, Hitler and Mussolini, took a special interest in architecture, there is evidence that he was indeed somewhat indifferent. In putting forward this view, S. Frederick Starr has argued that “to the extent that Soviet architecture in the 1930s and 1940s was dictated to ‘from above,’ it was not done by the direct intervention of Stalin or even of his deputies, but by the very strategy of development that was embodied in the Five Year Plans. . . . [C]entral Ministries . . . emerged as the primary patrons of architecture.” Moreover, the architectural profession itself was bureaucratized and emptied of its diversity. S. Frederick Starr, “The Social Character of Stalinist Architecture,” *Architectural Association Quarterly*, 11, no. 2 (1979), p. 51.

14. Vladimir Sedov, “The Great Prince’s Master Builder,” *Project Russia*, no. 18 (2001), p. 36.

15. Blair A. Ruble, “From khrushcheby to korobki,” in Brumfield and Ruble, eds., *Russian Housing in the Modern Age, Design and Social History*, p. 238. See also Aleksandr Vysokovskii, “Will Domesticity Return?” in the same volume.

publication. Such was the task of Shekhtel's biographer, Evgenia Kirichenko. She published her first book on Shekhtel in 1973. It is a dry, architectural account. The man hardly appears. Facts are not distorted – Kirichenko is a meticulous scholar – but sometimes they are avoided. When I met Kirichenko in 1999, it was immediately obvious how difficult such self-censorship must have been. For she is a Shekhtel lover, an architectural historian who has been captivated by the charm of her subject.

When she embarked on that first book her colleagues could not believe she would waste her time, not a “good” person like her. Her superiors did not like it, at least not enough to give her a letter attesting to her good character which would have allowed her access to archives with possible files on Shekhtel. Despite the obstacles she persevered, writing about Art Moderne for both Russian and foreign publications. Occasionally she would touch on the social context in which it was created, but stuck mainly to safer questions of pure architecture.¹⁶

By 1989 – the *glasnost'* period – the climate had changed. Kirichenko published a modest, pocket-sized monograph, called simply *Bolshaiia Sadovaia No 4*. This was the address of the house Shekhtel built for himself in 1909-10 in the Neo-Classical style. Despite the book's drab appearance and misleading title – perhaps a degree of subterfuge was still necessary – it is a biography. We learn about Shekhtel's life and character. There are curious tidbits, such as the fact that Shekhtel had no head for numbers, leading him to quote different years for his date of birth. We are introduced to his circle, including the Tretiakovs and Chekhovs, and learn about his activities in the Moscow cultural scene. We get hints about how difficult it was for Shekhtel after the revolution, though the whole of that story has still to be told.¹⁷ It nearly came to light in 1998 when Kirichenko submitted a new Shekhtel

16. Interview with Kirichenko, December 11, 1999. Another historian of the city of Moscow, Sergei Romanouk – whose specialty until the collapse of the Soviet Union was the “safe” period of the eighteenth century – was still frightened in 1988 of being seen entering the Australian Embassy. He did so to hand deliver a paper he had prepared about the provenance of the building, one of Shekhtel's quintessential Moderne mansions. Today his books revealing stories about the streets and lanes of Moscow sell fast. Interview with author, 1993.

17. There is a letter from Shekhtel written to Stanislavsky in 1924 which describes his terrible living conditions in a crowded communal flat, complains that he has had to sell half of his library, and that he is finding it difficult to feed his family. It is in the MXAT archives where the librarian remains very sensitive about her files. When she saw me copying furiously, in longhand, she warned me that permission would be required to quote any letter in full.

manuscript to her publisher on August 15. On 17 August the Russian economy crashed. The book remains unpublished.

The August 1998 financial crisis also brought the neo-Art Moderne period to a close. It had started in the early nineties, first in the form of huge “cottages” on the outskirts of town.¹⁸ These were built by what most Russians consider to be a contemptible breed, the “New Russians”: the people who made money as the economy began to open up and the privatization process began. Some of these buildings were off a generic plan, shoddily-built red brick monsters. Others harked back to the quirky individualism of Art Moderne. Soon many of the New Russians lost their fast, if not ill-gotten, gains, leaving half-finished dachas to scar the countryside. Others discovered that the romance of living outside the city was spoiled by poor utility services and dreadful traffic jams. Furthermore the city real estate market was emerging with apartments for sale for first time since 1917. Those who could afford it moved to the center of the city into large pre-revolutionary apartments, hitherto communal flats which were being privatized and emptied of their less fortunate occupants, who had to move out to tiny, dilapidated flats on the edge of town. This created a new demand for architects, now called upon to renovate interiors, many in Neo Moderne style.

In Moscow particularly, the financial boom consolidated and there was serious money – much of it from foreign sources – to be invested. This produced a new clientele, notably the banking sector, who wanted prestigious new buildings to declare their commercial presence. The rich also came to demand more of their domestic arrangements – they needed tight security, underground garages, gyms, saunas and even cold storage for fur coats. Exclusive new blocks were built, many boasting the distinctive Moscow tower, a prism usually placed at one corner of the building and capped with a round or square canopy, sometimes of the right proportion, often not.

The decisions about the style for all this new building had several sources: their historical context (the boom began with a wave of restorations, some already started in the late 1980s); the urge to escape the Soviet box; nostalgia for pre-revolutionary Russia; and the taste of the city’s mayor, Yuri Luzhkov.

Luzhkov has transformed Moscow since he took office in 1992. He has fostered pride in a city whose splendor had for so long been hidden by soot. Everywhere buildings have been cleaned, restored or replaced,

18. The best examples of Neo Moderne country houses are in St. Petersburg, for example the mansion built by I. Kniaziev in the village of Tiarlevo near Pavlovsk. See Grigori Revzin, “Neo-Art Nouveau,” *Project Russia*, no. 2 (1995), p. 40.

and floodlit. Quickly the iconic depiction of St. George, the patron saint of Moscow, slaying the dragon was frescoed onto spare walls all over the city. It replaced huge posters which once reminded Muscovites that: “We are building Communism.”

For the first years of his term ordinary Muscovites spoke about Yuri Luzhkov as the savior of Moscow.¹⁹ They were prepared to tolerate his strong-arm tactics and unsavory alliances because he got things done. He gave them something to be proud of, revived their Russianness. His opponents deplored his corruption, his favoritism, his interference in aesthetic decisions. As one of his architectural critics, the renowned Classicist, Mikhail Filippov, saw it, Luzhkov and his cronies:

entered historical Moscow as the barbarians entered Rome, ignoring the unknown and hostile structure of architectural civilization, creating an indigestible cocktail of irreconcilable elements. “Luzhkov Style” emerged based on the conglomeration of caricatured details of old architecture piled onto a lifeless modernist framework. . . . This is like playing with Lego while blindfolded picking up various blocks vaguely resembling roofs, columns, cornices and frontons and blindly sticking them onto facades. The most impertinent and shocking results provoke joy like the delight felt at a child’s prank. Then everything is buffed to a high gloss so that even natural materials end up looking like plastic. . . . With boorish self-confidence this style is striding across Moscow transforming it into a huge Asiatic Disneyland. . . .²⁰

When the architectural intelligentsia dissected the Luzhkov style for the layman, all its architectural faults and aesthetic travesties became obvious. But they were missing the point. This outpouring of historicism, this reaction against modernism, was driven by the people, not the artists. It was a popular attempt, shrewdly captured by the politician Luzhkov, to cope in post-Soviet society by finding a more savory past, a shiny present and a hopeful future. Eclecticism flourished.

Among some of the leading architects of the decade were two who worked for the Moscow government as well as maintaining practices outside. Both were moved in the mid-nineties to create buildings with strong Art Moderne references. The more prominent building – and

19. “George” in Russian is “Iuri,” a prophetic kind of coincidence.

20. Mikhail Filippov, “Moscow Style,” in *Project Russia*, no. 10 (1998), p. 24. Filippov represented Russia at the Venice Biennale in 2000.

widely disliked one – was designed by the younger architect, Aleksei Rostislavovich Vorontsov.

When I visited Vorontsov in 1999 he was the Deputy Head of Mosproekt 2, the main architectural studio of the city administration. His office was guarded by a middle-aged blond with a bold sense of fashion and of her own power. Once you got inside, it was clear this was the room of a decision-maker not a working architect. We sat at a long shiny table, sipping tea from exquisite Chinoiserie cups.

Vorontsov had a round, smooth face. His hair had turned white but he still had a youthful twinkle in his eye. We were there to talk about his building, Nautilus, which he completed in 1998, for a company of the same name. The Kommersant critic, Grigorii Revzin, once described Nautilus as a pimple on Lubyanka Square; others dismissed it as a ship out of water. In fact the architect had taken into close account the physical and historical context of his site. Next door is the Art Moderne Metropole Hotel (1898-1903), and down the road the Moscow Merchants' Society built by Shekhtel in 1909. Across the square is the Lubyanka building, home to the Cheka and its successors, the KGB, now the FSB – *the* symbol of Soviet terror.

For Vorontsov, Lubyanka was also a reminder of what happened to his own family during the Soviet period – they were of German origin and hounded as possible spies. Nautilus was therefore an emotional project for him, one which he felt suited the expressive mood of Art Moderne. Vorontsov admitted to having always liked Moderne, and to have painted in the style during his student days. But during the period of stagnation (the Brezhnev years), there was only contempt for Moderne: not only was it a reflection of a despised period of bourgeois decadence, it was more difficult to design and build than was panel housing.



Figure 5: Nautilus, Architect, A. R. Vorontsov, 1998

Despite the grim ghosts on the site, Vorontsov's exploration into *Moderne* has resulted in a playful building. Its historical references are clear, yet it is no mere copy. Its curves and colors demand attention. It is bold. At the time of its unveiling most critics, expert and lay alike, judged it too bold. Nevertheless, it stands as a sign of the turbulent times at the end of the twentieth century when Russia was navigating uncharted waters.

Andrei Meerson's references to *Art Moderne* are much more understated. Meerson, a Gorbachev look-a-like, was one of Vorontsov's teachers. When I met him he too was working at *Mosproekt*, absorbed again in the creative process and no longer swept up, as was his protégé, in the day-to-day politics of the city administration.

A third-generation Muscovite, Meerson situates Russia not just between east and west, but also between north and south, between the plain, somber north, reflected in the Novgorod style of church architecture, and the glitter of the Byzantine south. He clearly prefers the north, stressing in his work a simplicity and elegance of line. He also believes in building according to context, taking into account the organic nature of Moscow, with its hills and crooked lanes, and weirdly shaped plots of land. He loves the city's unruly terrain.

Meerson has been involved in architecture for over thirty years. He recalls the time in 1966 when he visited Le Corbusier's grave in the south of France. It was a stirring moment, one which confirmed his conviction that he must contribute to the creation of a new and better world. And so he participated enthusiastically in the social engineering that was architecture in Brezhnev's time. Slowly, he realized that all the

theorizing about how people should live was not creating the right houses. At first this was an intuitive change for him, which he expressed in a departure from angles towards more fluid, plastic forms. Only during the Gorbachev years, when his views were sought and respected, including by the then reformist First Secretary of Moscow, Boris Yeltsin, was he able to be explicit about his concerns.

It is that fluidity, realized in tasteful curves and cylinders and circles, which makes his apartment building on Veskovskii Lane so distinctive. It combines a classy contemporary feel with resonances from pre-revolutionary times. Meerson picked up on the earlier Russian influences which so impressed the *fin-de-siècle* artists (the shapes of northern Russian churches, and decorative use of bricks for example), and sought to locate a new building in its neighborhood of tall pre-revolutionary blocks of flats. For Meerson this was no reverential adaptation of the Art Moderne style. He was no admirer of the Silver Age, telling me he could not abide Chekhov's ponderous bourgeois characters, and blaming many of the merchant class for the country's demise into revolution.



Figure 6: Apartment on Veskovskii Lane, A. D. Meerson, 1999

In Russia an architect's professionalism is assessed by his ability to turn to any style. While this is not a purely Soviet phenomenon, it has clearly been reinforced by the twentieth-century history of the profession where instead of branding oneself to compete in the market as Western architects do, Soviet architects had to be able to do whatever

their political masters dictated.²¹ For Meerson, the question of style goes beyond practicalities to aesthetics. He finds the eclecticism of Moscow to be one of its charms and inspirations. He told me that he encouraged his team to build on the city's past, not the one tarnished by the horrors of the twentieth century, but on what came before. He knew he could not obliterate the bad but hoped he could introduce an interplay of styles which was fresh and apposite.²² This attitude was common in the 1990s. The urge was to bury the Soviet past. Now in the mid-2000s, thinking has changed again. There is much concern in architectural circles about the neglect of Soviet buildings and indeed about the zeal to pull them down.

To find the most deliberate recreation of Art Moderne you have to travel to Nizhnii Novgorod, as the nineteenth century merchants did each year to attend the annual trade fair, among the most important dates on the commercial calendar. After the revolution Nizhnii Novgorod became Gor'kii, a closed city sealed away from peering eyes while it developed the Soviet arsenal. The West knew it as a sinister place, as Andrei Sa-kharov's place of exile. When the democracy movement Sakharov had spearheaded erupted in the early nineties, Nizhnii Novgorod returned to the world in a blaze of economic reform, which brought banks and money and foreigners to the town on the Volga. In the building industry, there was an Art Moderne renaissance.

Visiting the town in the company of one of the creators of that renaissance, leading architect and academician, Evgeni Pestov, I saw how the momentum for the final revolt against Soviet power had been building throughout the eighties. For while the lost bourgeois style could only be overtly retrieved in the nineties, subtle references to it were already being used to challenge the status quo a decade before.

Pestov described his Neo Moderne style as national romanticism but preferred not to elaborate further on the political impulses for his work. He explained that he was an artist, not a philosopher. It was also clear that he was a Russian nationalist, not of the virulent type but one who worried about the position of Russians in the Federation. If minorities gained too much power, he asked, against the background of war with Chechnya, what of the ethnic Russians and what of the Russian identity? His foray into Moderne was an attempt to provide an answer to such questions, by offering a distinctly Russian style which people could be proud of. They are.

21. Grigori Rezvin discusses this in an article "Scripts for Russian historicism" in *Project Russia*, no. 10 (1998), p. 30.

22. Interview with Meerson, December 14, 1999.

Pestov attended the Gor'kii Institute of Architecture in the early seventies, when the syllabus was filled with Constructivism, Le Corbusier, and the Bauhaus. Art Moderne did not exist. There he joined a group built up around the charismatic Aleksandr Evgenevich Kharitonov who became his friend and partner and inspiration until his untimely death in the summer of 1999.²³ That group also included Kharitonov's and Pestov's wives, who together formed a vanguard for change.

For the first ten to fifteen years of practice, Pestov was not interested in Art Moderne. It simply did not enter his world view. He became conscious of Art Moderne in the early eighties while working on a housing site close to the ruins of two churches, one in the Russian baroque style, the second in the Moderne style. He was impressed by the latter's curves and, above all, its sense of proportion.



Figure 7: Art Nouveau Stable in Nizhni Novogorod

Glasnost' allowed the group to experiment. Then came the beginnings of a market economy and a banking boom which opened up a bevy of opportunities to realize what had before so often been only exercises of the imagination. There were still the old constraints – poor building materials, in particular – and new obstacles such as the ca-

23. Kharitonov died in a car crash in the summer of 1999. He had been chief architect of the city since 1991. The last year or so of his tenure had been marred by clashes with the new Mayor, who, perhaps taking a leaf out of Luzhkov's book, wanted to impose his style on the city's architecture. In a gloomy moment, Pestov suggested that the crash was no accident. Interview, December, 1999.

prices of the private client. But for a while there was plenty of money for building projects and a demand for the idiosyncratic.

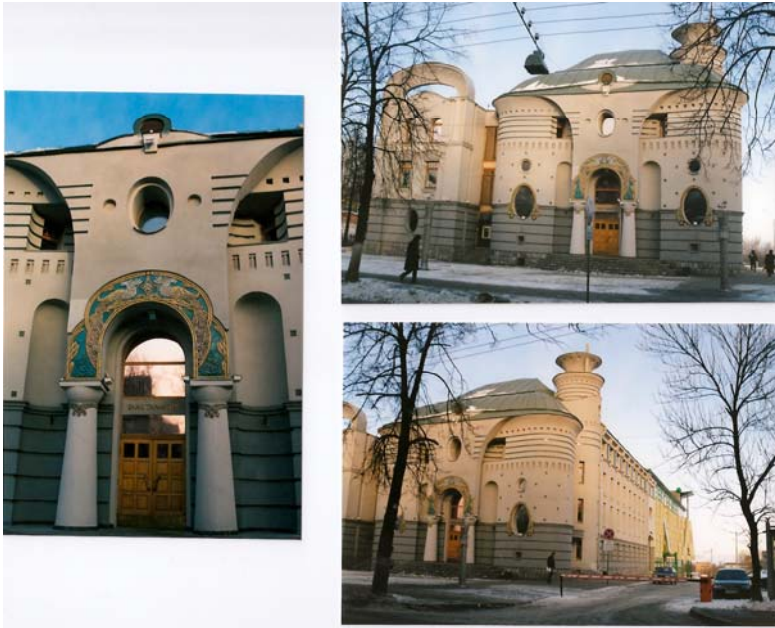


Figure 8: Garantia Bank, A. E. Kharitonov and Pestov, 1993-95

The Garantia Bank (1993-1995), Kharitonov's and Pestov's most distinctive Neo Moderne work, is in many ways extraordinarily true to Shekhtel originals, although its more precise symmetry is an immediate sign of different authorship. They won the 1996 Architecture Prize for the work. For Kharitonov, this was an endorsement of a style that was not only seeking to capture the spirit of pre-revolutionary Russian architecture, condemned in Soviet times as decadent, but that was also determined not to mimic America, as so much of Russian life and art was doing in the immediate post-Soviet era.

Like many of their Silver Age predecessors, these Nizhnii Novgorod architects were seeking political and cultural solutions through their art. As their city strove to return to its merchant roots, and their new clients reveled in their freedom from the state, it was again the fluidity and individualism and sheer beauty of Art Moderne which supplied answers. This could not last.

The euphoria about the reemergence of a Russian nation became overshadowed by a disappointment in politics before being completely wiped out by the financial crash of 1998. By that time architecture had

developed a connection with the economy and could not be protected from the vagaries of the market. Neo Moderne, which involved complicated building techniques and meticulous handiwork, became too expensive. Clients strapped for cash demanded cost-effective solutions. Architects could no longer just be artists; they had to acquire financial and management skills.

For Pestov the years after the crash were tough. Orders were down but the clients were still demanding, his cash flow was poor, and his greatest friend was dead. In these circumstances, he moved towards a new form of modernism, in part a reflection of more somber times, but also of the availability of better materials and technology, and, he would stress, the dictates of the physical sites where he was working.²⁴



Figure 9: Pestov's modernism, *Titanic*

By the end of the twentieth century, romanticism was again yielding to rationalist impulses. Just as the Moscow merchants had to come to terms with the implications of the 1905 revolution, which for many marked a move away from notions of art for art's sake towards greater politicization, so the artists and clients of the 1990s learned that nostal-

24. Interview, December 6, 1999.

gia for the pre-Soviet past was not enough to rebuild the Russian nation. The foray into the Silver Age failed in the wake of economic collapse, political corruption and ongoing grinding hardship. A more sober assessment of history, a renewed distrust in capitalism, and a deep cynicism about democratic politics, took its place. Still, the brief revival of Art Moderne served to rekindle interest in and appreciation of the cityscape. While it did not last long, it set the way for Russian architects to make further sorties into a real or imagined past to help to interpret the present and define the future.

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