

The Architectural and Urban Legacy of Petersburg: Modernity's Challenge

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St. Petersburg, once the grand imperial capital of Russia, is in the midst of a bold new plan to revitalize the city's historic center as it celebrates its tercentennial this year. The cornerstones of this core are the city's three world-renown cultural institutions – the Russian Museum, the Hermitage Museum, and particularly the Mariinsky Theater of Opera and Ballet. Maestro Gergiev, artistic and general director, has a compelling vision for the Mariinsky makeover, one encompassing a major refurbishing of the existing building and the construction of a dynamic new building to house a second stage. The result is to be a dazzling new home that will greatly enhance the Mariinsky Theater's production and performance capacities to make it one of the most modern and innovative opera and ballet houses in the world. The new Mariinsky development, he insists, must be bold and innovative, embrace contemporary architecture, and create a daring arts complex that would project both the Mariinsky and Petersburg into the 21st century.

An initial design by LA architect Eric Owen Moss provoked intense discussion. The responses ranged from opposition to any intrusion of contemporary architectural forms into the unified fabric of St. Petersburg's historic center to bemusement by its supporters at the ferocity of the objections and dismay at what they perceive to be the categorical rejection, or fear, of modernity. In fact, the initial Moss project represents the first introduction of ultra modern design in St. Petersburg since Alexander Nikolsky's bold Constructivist projects in the 1920s.

Contemporary architecture in St. Petersburg, long stifled by the effects of both

Soviet central planning and an obsessive reverence for the city's classical architectural legacy, has long been in a moribund state. Maestro Gergiev's bold vision for the Mariinsky Theater and arts complex offers an exciting, unparalleled opportunity to reinvigorate St. Petersburg's architectural production and embellish both the Mariinsky Theater and the city's its cultural setting to a degree unmatched since the enterprising imperial initiatives of almost a century ago. An international architectural competition has recently been announced for the design of a new building to house Mariinsky's second stage.

In considering the revitalization of the Mariinsky and the city's vibrant historic center, however, Petersburgians will have to reconcile in a thoughtful, creative way the apparent conflict between, on the one hand, the view of the historic center as a "living museum" that has resolutely preserved, and is determined to sustain its peerless 19th-century classical urban fabric and, on the other, the aspiration of those seeking respectfully and vigorously to modernize the city center's cultural as well as physical infrastructure. At the announcement, Maestro Gergiev declared: "Precisely because we love St. Petersburg for the remarkable achievements that propelled it into the leading ranks of 18th- and 19th-century world architecture, let us dare to astound the world with something in the 21st century."

To help contextualize the situation, I will reflect on those achievements as well as on the myth of St. Petersburg as an sacrosanct classical colossus.

St. Petersburg, which Peter the Great founded 300 years ago on the marshy banks of the Gulf of Finland as his "window to the West," was the principal focus for the political, cultural and artistic reforms undertaken by Peter and his successors. Peter's decision to open Russia to Western influence marked a decisive break with Moscow

and the country's conservative and traditional past. As a result of these reforms, Russia moved from a parochial, quasi-medieval civilization into the "Age of Reason." — in a deliberate and strategic pursuit of modernity. St. Petersburg emerged as the seat of the new modernizing Russian imperial government proclaimed by Peter the Great and a practical and symbolic vehicle for its development.

The city's imposing physical and spatial setting, encompassing a seamless ensemble of built forms, squares and waterways, represents an unparalleled achievement of urban design. That achievement was fostered by the keen interest and enlightened participation of key sovereigns — from Peter the Great to Catherine II and Alexander I — in the embellishment of their new capital as the preeminent embodiment of imperial Russian culture. That the venture proved a success was also due in no small measure to the high caliber of the architects recruited for the task. Involving individuals from Western Europe and Russians trained abroad, chiefly in France, these architects demonstrated a singular capacity to create magnificent urban ensembles and a genius for integrating them into the overall physical and spatial fabric of the city.

Because of the importance that Peter and his successors attached to the establishment of St. Petersburg as a modern world capital of unparalleled splendor, architecture and urban design assumed preeminence among the emerging imperial Russian arts, determining the very style of the empire. They were not employed simply to embellish the stage on which the acts of imperial statecraft and reform were to be played out. They were also deployed as both instruments and symbols of reform. In this sense, architecture and urban design proved the most imperial of the Russian arts, supplying vivid means for reforming, interpreting and re-possessing the Russian townscape.

Peter's plans always took into account the city's location on water, which weaves its way through the city's streets. Although earlier plans had been prepared by Domenico Trezzini and Jean-Baptiste-Alexander Le Blond, the plan of 1737 by Pyotr Yeropkin supplied the basis for Petersburg's ensuing development. In addition to incorporating existing building and advancing a more dynamic approach for managing the city's southward expansion, it projected the Admiralty as the plan's orienting focal point, creating a symmetrical convergence of three primary radial thoroughfares at the Admiralty tower. The road from the east became the great Nevsky Prospect, the main street in the city. This dynamic device, which Edmund Bacon termed "one of the wonders of urban design." proved an effective vehicle for coalescing the city's ensuing architectural and urban development.

The buildings erected during the reign of Peter the Great were designed by architects from Italy, Germany, Scandinavia and France in variations of the Baroque style. Its appropriation was a classic symbol of Peter's rebelling against Moscow and pursuing a Western identity and character.

The view that Peter I had a precise idea of the future appearance of St Petersburg and organized its construction according to a defined plan, based on ideas gained during his travels in western Europe, above all from his stay in the Netherlands, is rather off the mark. Designed by a random array of architects whom Peter had managed to recruit to Petersburg, the buildings were varied in scope and caliber and lacked any unifying architectural or urbanistic whole.

Domenico Trezzini, Peter's chief architect, was a competent manager of works, but less inspired as an architect -- a factor that militated against the sort of imposing architectural character Peter had desired and envisioned.

The Peter and Paul Fortress and the Cathedral of SS Peter & Paul (1712-32)

- Conceived by Peter to be a leading monument of the fledgling new city

Summer Palace (1710-14)

- Peter commissioned Trezzini to build a small modest palace in the park (modeled after a Scandinavian manor house)

The "Twelve Colleges" Building, Vasily Island (1722-32)

- conceived by Peter and Trezzini for the twelve government bodies of Russia (Peter the Great's *Senate*, *Synod*, and ten ministries - or *kollegii*).

Except for Trezzini, most of the other architects died shortly after arriving in St. Petersburg, thereby exerting only a limited impact on the city's development.

Still, their buildings contributed a symbolic imprint of Peter's fledgling new capital:

Kunstkammera, Vasily Island(1718-25)

- Peter's Cabinet of Curiosities, so called because it was used to store all the materials & supplies Peter had brought back from his trips to Europe in 1694-97
- Designed by Georg Johann Mattarnovy, who began working in St. Petersburg in 1718 and died the following year.

Menshikov Palace, Vasily Island (1711-14)

- Built for Prince Alexander Menshikov, the governor (mayor) of St. Petersburg.
- Designed by Giovanni Fontana And Gottfried Schädel

For all of its initial drawbacks and shortcomings, St. Petersburg is, more than anything, a city born of the vision, resolute determination, and *passion* of its founder, Peter the Great. -- That singular initiative was to infect and sustain key successors.

Developments Under Elizabeth and Catherine II

If Peter the Great's era was one in which St. Petersburg was still in process of becoming, that of his daughter, the Empress Elizabeth, marked the point at which St. Petersburg began to acquire more compelling trappings of an imperial setting. Her architect, Count Bartolomeo Rastrelli, built several outstanding late Baroque and Rococo urban complexes in St. Petersburg, ranging from the Smolny Convent (1748-57) to the vast Winter Palace (1754-62), firmly integrated into the core of the emerging capital.

Smolny Convent and Cathedral. Having deepened her devotion to the Russian Orthodox Church upon ascending the throne, Elizabeth conceived of building St. Petersburg's first convent. Taking the Empress's devotion and interests to heart, Rastrelli produced an ingenious design for the Smolny Cathedral and Convent that would blend the five-dome church paradigm of Old Russia with the Baroque designs of the West. Together with its connected chapels, convent buildings, and outer walls, the soaring Smolny Cathedral called vividly to mind the great fortified monasteries that had defended Russia in earlier times, albeit in a profoundly and resolutely urban scheme.

The Winter Palace The Winter Palace that became the ultimate monument to Russia's Elizabethan age stretched for nearly five hundred feet along Palace Square. Rastrelli articulated his facades with a sequence of pavilions whose plastic articulations he enlivened with the point-counterpoint of dynamic window frames and engaged columns that seem poised to spring loose from the facade. Rastrelli's projects pointed the way to the ensuing creation of integral urban ensembles in St. Petersburg.

Developments Under Catherine II

During Catherine's reign, architecture and town planning lost the last vestiges of provincialism and became full-fledged contributions to the legacy of European architecture. Embracing the Neoclassical project of the French Enlightenment, Catherine evinced a passion for architecture. She replaced Rastrelli's exuberant Baroque, which she detested, with the more sober but elegant neoclassical idiom that epitomized the grander imperial vision of which she was determined to make Russia a part. More emphatically than any sovereign before or since, Catherine insisted that Russia must be Western in culture and destiny, and she set out to make her adopted country the equal of Europe in ways that even Peter the Great could not have foreseen. Catherine's energy and vision transformed the city of her predecessors into a grander, more elegant imperial capital.

Imperial Academy of Fine Arts Begun just three years after Catherine ascended to the throne, the building that houses the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts illustrated the transformation of style and function that Catherine had in mind. The Academy's main building blended the neoclassical designs of the Frenchman Vallin de la Mothe and the Russian Alexander Kokorinov into a work of classical elegance. A huge rectangle that was 460 feet long and 410 feet deep, the building rivaled the Winter Palace in size and signaled the importance that was to be attached to public institutions and amenities during Catherine's reign. With none of the elaborate ornamentation and exuberant design that Rastrelli had incorporated into the Winter Palace, the Academy of Fine Arts building spoke to the rationality of the Enlightenment that Catherine sought to embrace and brought to St. Petersburg an imperial image that drew more forcefully upon the legacy of Greece and Rome.

Small Hermitage Impressed with Vallin de La Mothe's assured deployment of

architecture to define the public character of the emerging capital, she commissioned the French architect to design the original Hermitage, now known as the Small Hermitage," just east of the Winter Palace, from which she felt estranged. A flying bridge connected her private apartments in the Winter Palace to her "petite hermitage." She conceived it as her "little retreat," from which all but her inner circle of favorites were excluded. Vallin de la Mothe's facade devised a discreet classical "stage curtain" that projected an urbane face to the expanding embankment streetscape while screening the intimate internal stage set for Catherine's private life.

Market Arcade (1757-85). Vallin de la Mothe made another major contribution toward the urbanizing design strategy unfolding in St. Petersburg as Catherine's behest in adding a major public and architectural focus to the city's main thoroughfare (Nevsky Prospect) with his design of the Market Arcade. The vast two-story yellow-and-white building, articulated by a continuous 2-story loggia arcade, occupies an enormous city block south of Nevsky Prospect.

Catherine's growing concern for town planning prompted her to establish the Commission on the Building of St. Petersburg and Moscow in 1762. The commission devoted considerable attention to controlling growth and building through a strict regulation of lot and building lines. Its proposal to establish a system of regular lot and building lines was incorporated in the official plan for St. Petersburg adopted later that year.

By the early 1770s, St. Petersburg's embankments had begun taking on the form they have today. Anxious to bring a full-blown capital city into being, Peter and Elizabeth had paid little attention to the rivers' and canals' edges, which languished as

muddy banks punctuated by wooden docks and ramshackle pilings. Catherine astutely proposed a project that would not simply clean up the embankments, but devise ways to bind the nearly twenty-five miles of the city's waterfront to the buildings along it into a dynamic, integral whole. She commissioned the architect Yuri Velten to undertake the project. While serving the very practical purpose of providing landing stages for river traffic, Velten's granite embankments framed St. Petersburg's riverfront in a way that the builders of 18th-century London and Paris never managed to match.

Alexander I - Nicholas I

It was in the reigns of Catherine's grandsons Alexander I and Nicholas I that St. Petersburg achieved its final dynamic physical and spatial definition as a consummate imperial capital through the execution of a network of central squares encompassing the core of St. Petersburg. Rulers of the nation that had defeated Napoleon, they reigned as conquering heroes. Under their command, St. Petersburg became the hub of a colossal empire between 1796 and 1855, and the cosmopolitan neoclassicism of Catherine's era gave way to ambitions and design strategies that befitted a victorious nation. Just as in earlier times the Winter Palace and its court had demonstrated the elegance, sophistication and worldly authority to which the empresses Elizabeth and Catherine had aspired, so the massed formations of marching troops symbolized the imperial taste and culture that the force of arms had come to represent. Enthralled by symbols of command, Alexander and Nicholas rebuilt the center of their capital into a gigantic network of parade grounds covering more than four million square feet, extending for a half mile along Admiralty boulevard from the winter palace to the Senate Square.

Cathedral of the Virgin of Kazan. St. Petersburg's triumphant age of the architectural ensemble had actually been inaugurated in 1801 by the Cathedral of the Virgin of Kazan by Catherine's son, Paul I, who commissioned the serf architect Andrei Voronikhin to build a new cathedral in honor of the miraculous icon of the Virgin of Kazan. Paul had stipulated the inclusion of a classical version of Bernini's colonnade for St. Peter's in Rome to face Nevsky Prospect in order to create a monumental public square. Voronikhin complied, thus inaugurating the construction of a series of new ensembles that related spatially to the main thoroughfare of St. Petersburg.

The full measure of the Alexandrian Empire style was revealed in the Stock Exchange (now the Naval Museum) begun in 1805 by the French architect Thomas de Thomon. Thomon transformed the ragged contour of the cape into a harmonious ensemble aimed at creating a monumental setting for civic ceremonies. This ensemble consisted of a monumental temple housing the exchange, combining elements taken from Ledoux and from temples at Paestum, which de Thomon had visited; a granite embankment with a semi-circular promontory and ramps descending to the river; and a square in front of the exchange framed by two lighthouses in the form of rostral columns with seated figures of marine divinities at their feet.

Thomon oriented his ensemble toward the cape of Vasily Island, washed by the Greater Neva on one side and by the Little Neva on the other. This masterful orientation served to enhance the Exchange's connection to the Peter and Paul Fortress, the Admiralty and the Winter Palace – the symbolic and spatial core of the imperial capital. The result was a singular urban ensemble that encompassed both land and water as integral parts of a dynamic spatial whole -- a quintessentially Petersburg solution.

The Central Squares

In the 18th century there had been no functional requirements that would have called for the creation of large squares or the development of a strong spatial network in the center of St. Petersburg. Around 1802, however, a major reorganization took place of the whole governmental structure of the Russian empire. A large number of ministries was set up to replace Peter the Great's Collegia, creating a demand for major new governmental buildings to house the new ministries [Figure 15]. Similarly, Russia's victory over Napoleon in the War of 1812 created a demand for a system of squares in the ceremonial center of St. Petersburg to accommodate the frequent military parades in honor of Russian victories. The construction of the new ministries and the need for large open spaces around the Winter Palace for military parades provided the final impetus for creating the ensemble of central squares in St. Petersburg, including Admiralty, Palace, and Senate Squares

Of all the architects at work in Russia after Napoleon's defeat, only Carlo Rossi dared ask why Russia should "fear to be compared with [the Romans] in magnificence, and only he worked on a scale worthy of the Romans, from whom he drew his chief inspiration, and whose urban planning and design strategies he saw as effective means for projecting the full grandeur of Russia's destiny. In doing so, he transformed St. Petersburg into an imperial metropolis that had no rival in the modern world.

Alexandrine Theater. On Nevsky Prospect Rossi experimented with his idea of setting key buildings into larger ensembles, as Nicholas I commissioned Rossi in 1828. It was there, on a large square separating the Public Library from the Anichkov Palace, that Rossi's scheme embraced two squares and a street in between, beginning with the Public Library and Anichkov Palace, which stand at right angles to the Nevsky

Prospect, and ending with Chernyshev Square bordering on the Fontanka. The Alexandrine Theater formed the center of this new ensemble, and Rossi altered the facades on all the buildings facing the square to emphasize its spatial and compositional unity. Behind the theater he cut a new street called Theater Street — now known as Rossi Street — leading to Chernyshev Square. He designed matching, identical facades on both sides of the street, creating a unified exterior corridor in the manner of Vasari's Uffizi Palace in Florence to highlight his vision. Yet even this bold move did not allow Rossi all the room he was projecting to transform St. Petersburg into a dynamic urban network of sequential open spaces. As he began to build the Alexandrine Theater, he was already at work on two even grander ensembles that would complete the vast imperial complex that Zakharov's Admiralty had begun.

Palace Square. In 1819 Rossi embarked upon the culminating project of his career -- rebuilding Russia's Imperial General Staff Headquarters and, in the process, re-designing and completing the gigantic square that separated it from the Winter Palace across from it to the north. Ever since Rastrelli had finished the Winter Palace in 1762, architects had struggled to define the spread to its south, but all had failed to find a worthy solution. Rossi solved the problem by joining the building housing the General Staff to the one containing the Ministries of Finance and Foreign Affairs to create an integral hemispherical building ensemble. Originally, the street had entered the square at a very awkward angle, running alongside a row of structures that was at once part of and detached from the complex. Rossi's solution was to unite the two buildings with a bold triumphal arch and to situate the resulting complex directly across from, and integrally linked to, Rastrelli's Winter Palace. Although Rastrelli's

palace and Rossi's building are in completely different styles, Rossi succeeded in making his own spare but superbly proportioned complex blend admirably with Rastrelli's exuberant frontage. He solved the problem by transforming the complex of buildings housing the General Staff, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs into a sweeping, unified complex in the shape of a huge arc stretching the length of six football fields. He did so by focusing attention on the bold triumphal arch in the center of the complex. This triumphal arch was actually a complex assemblage of three arches, the first two framing an unroofed cubical pavilion; the third, extending from the second and set at an angle to it to frame a bending of the street that connects Palace Square to the city's main thoroughfare, Nevsky Prospect. The triumphal arch also frames a magnificent view of the Winter Palace, whose entrance pavilion is precisely on axis with Rossi's arch. Together, his sweeping bow-shaped facade and dynamic triumphal arch pavilion defined the southern limits of Palace Square, creating a stunning backdrop – a virtual proscenium – against which to silhouette tens of thousands of troops marching in massed formations for the emperor's review.

With Rossi's ensemble's the instruments that expressed the secular and religious power of the nation had been gathered around a single central area to signal that St. Petersburg had become a very different city from the one which Catherine the Great had reigned less than a half century earlier. Rossi's network of architectural squares constituted the crowning pieces of scenery that completed and energized the monumental stage set for Russia's imperial statecraft. By the time Rossi retired in 1832, St. Petersburg was almost fully formed.

By the 1840s it was already surrounded by a lively mythology:

- Conceived as a fundamental challenge to Moscow, St. Petersburg had stood for a century in stark contrast with Moscow and Russia in general.
- Now it became the symbol of the hoped-for transformation of Russia, even a kind of utopia.
 - For the Westernizers, who believed that Russia's future lay in a closer political and cultural integration with the West, St. Petersburg was both the focus and the catalyst for this tendency.
 - For the Slavophiles, who called for a return to the principles of ancient Russia, summarized now in the formula of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality," the imperial capital represented the abominable creation of an evil spirit.
- Neoclassicism had instilled both patriotic sentiment and a strong faith in the inevitability of absolutism; it began to decline with the growth of nationalism and the tendency to exploit "Old Russian" sources, which eventually affected all the arts.
- The evolution of the "image" of St. Petersburg began as a symbol of perfect order, a sort of heaven on earth, but the novels of Dostoevsky, who uncovered the cancers at the heart of the city, described a living hell. This contrast is hardly surprising. From the moment of its inception the city harbored an inner contradiction: standing well away from the heart of Russia, metaphorically and literally, it was nevertheless the symbol of her ambitions.

A drive to rekindle public interest in St. Petersburg's classical architectural heritage succeeded in striking a popular chord and determination to sustain it. In the process, it shaped a fundamental cultural and aesthetic consciousness that has pretty much continued to resonate in St. Petersburg to the present day, engendering what I would term the "myth of classical St. Petersburg."

Launching this concerted drive was the "World of Art" [Mir Iskusstva] movement, a cosmopolitan group of St. Petersburg university students who banded

together in 1898 under the leadership of Sergei Diaghlev and Alexander Benois to pursue their avid interest in the arts. Of special concern to the group was the degradation of Petersburg's art and architectural scene. Its programs aimed to rekindle interest in the former splendors of classical St. Petersburg. Alexander Benois made a vital contribution to re-evaluating and promoting the architecture of St. Petersburg and its outlying palaces and parks during this period.

The culminating point of this effort occurred in the 1911 Historical Exhibition of the Architecture of St. Petersburg, organized by the Society of Architects-Artists in collaboration with the "World of Art" group. The exhibit featured a stunning array of original architectural drawings, models, and interior furnishings that the young architect Ivan Fomin, then emerging as a leading exponent of the Russian Neoclassical Revival, had assembled from several archives. The success of that exhibition and its catalog in arousing public interest in St. Petersburg architecture combined with the impact of the "New Petersburg" or "Contemporary Petrograd" movement in seeking to revive the classicism of "Old Petersburg" as a model for the continued planning and development of the imperial capital. In 1915 Georgi Lukomsky, one of the movement's leading spokesmen, published a book entitled *Contemporary Petrograd*. An essay on the emergence and development of classical construction from 1900 to 1915, Lukomsky's opus proved retrospective manifesto of the movement. The book's purpose, in Lukomsky's words, was "to underscore the presence and note the conception of a particular group of architects now building up their forces" and to promote their recent projects.

The ultimate theme of this movement was sounded in Alexander Benois's preface to the 1911 exhibition catalogue. Reaffirming the motivations that had

prompted Mir Iskusstva and the Society of Architects-Artists to join forces in illuminating the classical legacy of Petersburg, Benois observed:

If there is anything that tempts one to become immersed in the art of this past, it is precisely that vital taste which had permeated the Russian people's past existence and communicated a basic fundamental beauty. One can love or not love Russian Baroque and Russian Neoclassicism. But one should, in any event, admit that both styles became firmly established in Russia, felt themselves utterly at home in the limitless space of the latter-day Muscovy and gave a new face – a wonderfully majestic, a wonderfully affable face – to the revived and remarkable world of Russia.

He then went on to conclude:

Reverting to an art of past epochs constitutes a form of dilettantism. A new life also requires a new art. But it is beneficial to cultivate one's taste by studying the art of the past. And it goes without saying that it is more beneficial to study the past which is closer to us in spirit; which contained in embryonic form all the distinctive conditions of our time; which in our opinion began to grasp the demands of culture, comfort and hygiene, and which likewise created both the monumental forms befitting the outward brilliance of a grandiose society and the "comfort factor " so close to the Russian soul.

The sentiment that Benois poignantly expressed seemed go further than issuing a call merely for preservation. Citing the "comfort factor so close to the Russian soul," Benois seemed to be sensitizing his fellow Petersburgians to the comforting as well as enduring significance of their city's architectural and artistic heritage, one involving not just preservation, but the curatorial management of the objects of that heritage. Benois and his colleagues seemed to have defied modernity in shaping the mindset of Petersburgians in ways that that contributed mightily to the myth of St. Petersburg as a congenial neoclassical colossus, and which still resonate to the present day.