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Paper: Completing the City of St. Petersburg

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored to speak here today. I am also immensely grateful to the conference organizers Aura Neag, Matthew Hardy, and the INTBAU chairman Robert Adam for the opportunity to serve as a member of the academic committee.

During my presentation, entitled Completing the City of St. Petersburg, I am going to focus on the old industrial areas of the city – the areas, which, as of yet, stand unfinished.

Despite the general perception of St. Petersburg as a complete architectural setting, only a small part of the city has a dense architectural fabric.

Between the center and the belt of “sleeping areas” lays a buffer zone comprised of decaying factories and incomplete nineteenth century working-class residential lots.

There is little doubt that these industrial areas will now be filled, during these times of intense economic growth. Between the years 2003 and 2007 the investments in St. Petersburg economy increased by 400%. Between 2005 and 2006, the value of St. Petersburg real estate has doubled. It is expected to double again during the years 2008-2009.

The proposition by some preservationists to conserve these industrial areas sounds unrealistic. Even if they were protected de jure (which is no longer the case), de facto the commercial pressure is so high that sooner or later, the government would find a legal excuse to complete them. As happened with the New Holland Island redesigned by Lord Foster.

The industrial areas will be developed. But the manner in which they are going to be completed should be debated.

We live in the age of Modern Historicism. All styles, including modernism are historic. There is no dominant style. To say that we should complete underdeveloped areas with “architecture of our time” is a meaningless proposition. Worse: it’s a call for visual anarchy.

The symptoms of current disorder

While this anarchy is already happening all around, St. Petersburg conservationists do little more than routinely appeal to zoning regulations. Their lack of alternative vision, combined with legalistic efforts, is easily counted by the authorities. The authorities, following Mussolini's dictum "Everything to a friend, law to an enemy", find all sorts of "legal exceptions" and subjective interpretations of law.

The symptoms of the current architectural disorder include:

Advertisement shields that disrupt façades;

Banners that block street-views;

Inappropriate window replacements with cheap white plastic frames;

Intrusive temporary structures such as newspaper kiosks and fruit stands;

Structures built with evident lack of consideration to their surroundings;

Post-modernist parodies on classicism, which not only distort the integrity of the city, but discredit the very idea of classicism;

Architecturally confusing areas where several structures of different periods are assembled together in chaotic, rather than picturesque manner;

Incomplete blocks, which, in the nineteenth century, were intended for completion;

Demolition of those historic buildings that used to form a complete and dense architectural fabric;

The current architectural disorder of St. Petersburg reminds a traffic jam caused by immature drivers.

The government's vision

But one should not oversimplify the governmental architectural policy judging it by the most obvious errors. The government is as unhappy about the current architectural mess as the opposition, for which it quite rightly blames St. Petersburg architects. But the main tactical strength of the government, compared to the opposition, is that it managed to create a captivating, populist architectural vision, one where international star-architects are supposed to build several iconic architectural pieces of national importance to improve design standards. The most important among these projects is the 396 meters-tall Gazprom tower (25 meters higher than the Empire State building in New York). The tower supposed to be the center of the

new “Downtown of St. Petersburg” and a symbol of the new city and new Russian imperial might. American downtowns, with their empty streets, locked shops and cafés after working hours, are not warning enough to challenge this vision.

Dominique Perrault has designed the new Mariinski Theater to symbolize Russian outstanding theatrical achievements.

In order to emphasize the nation’s strength and youthfulness, Kisho Kurokawa created a design for a new football stadium on the site of the, previously listed, but now demolished, old stadium.

The emphasis on such superficialities explains why there is still no meaningful overall rejuvenation program for the vast industrial areas. And why the ground tests for the Mariinsky Theater site were done no sooner than after the demolition of the entire building block. And why the government called the competition for the Gazprom tower even before the new site plan for the entire area had been developed.

Why this ideological populism prevails over a search for beauty needs to be clarified. The communist ideology was replaced by the twin forces of nationalism and modernity. In order to maintain public enthusiasm for business-driven politics, as well as to promote the neo-imperial agenda, nationalism became a useful tool in portraying the interest of the few – as the interests of the many.

Russian elites realize that the oil-driven economy will have to be completely replaced by technology-driven economy in about ten years. The emphasis on modernity helps to promote this futurist technological vision.

Futurism was part of some Russian philosophical theories of the 19th century, which portrayed Russia as a country of the future, rather than the past. Futurist belief was greatly influenced by Christian belief in the transfiguration in the future life. Russian problems of the time were conveniently expected to give way to the national triumphs of the future. Thus futurism merged with Russian nationalism. In the 19th century, the futurist focus led to the underestimation of Russian achievements of the time, including classical architecture. Later on, this resulted in the triumph of Russian Constructivism. Due to its history, modern Russian nationalism, too, is remarkably detached from the past cultural achievements. It is oriented towards the future.

Putin flew to Guatemala to lobby the future Russian Olympics as an event of national importance, but speaking of the Gazprom tower, he noted that “there is no question that the city needs buildings like this, but the question where to build them must be decided by the local authorities. Do not put this on my shoulders – I have my own problems to worry about.” If Russian nationalism drew on the national culture, rather than symbolic abstractions, the authorities would, at least, show keen interest in national heritage, if not promote architecture that employs symbols of this heritage.

The concept of St. Petersburg

I believe that the government's understanding of Russian national interest is working against our long term national interest. While Russia may have significant disagreements with Europe, the main source of our cultural nourishment is Greco-Roman, Christian tradition. It may not be in our national interest to ally with the EU politically, but it is in our national interest to reconnect with the fundamentals of European culture, even as the West seems to depart from them. I believe that this premise should guide St. Petersburg architectural vision.

As several authors, including David Mayernik, have pointed out, our cities are reflections of cultural concepts, rather than purely functional entities. Following the Christian ideal Churches marked the Possesso route of papal processions in Rome – the city that serves as 'our great icon', as Russian catholic philosopher Vladimir Soloviev, observed. Mikhail Talalay spoke of 'the holy presences' referring to the angelic figures, which crown St. Petersburg vertical dominants:

The Alexandrine Column;

St. Isaac Cathedral;

And the spire of Sts. Peter and Paul cathedral.

St. Petersburg is dominated by a horizontal with carefully placed accents pointing to Heaven above. Arcadi Nebolsine argues that 'the line of construction is nothing but a frame for the sky which, reflecting itself in the water, dominates the city with spiritual authority'.

The 396 meters-high Gazprom tower will not only rupture the scale of the city, where the highest dominant is 123 meters-tall, but it will also contradict the spiritual meaning of the vertical dominants of St. Petersburg.

Remarkably, the Soviet Union, eager to project its influence upon every theory, including the theory of genetics, was respectful of the "architectural DNA" of St. Petersburg.

Thus the Frunzensky department store, built in 1930's, and now scheduled for demolition to give way to yet another Norman Foster's signature building, respects the height limit while convincingly articulating the intersection of street and canal.

The architectural DNA of St. Petersburg was equally resistant to misdirected market forces of the early 20th century – such as the attempt to build surface railway system, which would have disrupted the street views.

The underground metro – a masterpiece of Stalinist architecture – was built much later, in 1955.

In 1912, when St. Petersburg economy was booming just as it is booming now, architect Ivan Fomin proposed a plan of a new city with modern facilities. Built according to St. Petersburg

architectural principles, this city would save the historic center from over-development by exploring new land. The Classical City Association, which I represent, revived this idea some time ago and perhaps some of you here would be interested in joining forces to propose designs for the new city of St. Petersburg.

While it is true that, just as the Soviets, many people today do not share the beliefs of our predecessors, and that Western societies became increasingly secular, we should nevertheless be able to respect the ideas and ideals that formed our cities. We can – and indeed should – use the entire arsenal of modern architectural means to implement these ideas.

Modernist architects have succeeded in laying claim to an “inbuilt”, their own, future heritage. Star-architects are regarded as ingenious carriers of to-be-born future landmarks. Do we really believe, as did Sir Nicholas Pevzner’s *The Pioneers of Modern Movement*, that modernism is capable of improving our society? Perhaps not. But this doesn’t stop the current architectural establishment from preserving the idea.

If our society is capable of preserving the modernist idea without fully believing in it, why should it not preserve, what is seen as, the “Christian utopia” likewise? Why not take the Soviet precedent of atheists completing the city of St. Petersburg with respect to the Christian idea if it serves a clearly perceptible aesthetic? David Watkin argues that “ideal concepts, just as the works of art that inspired by them, often “transcend *Zeitgeist*”. “We still have the inestimable privilege” – he writes – “of being able to conduct a dialog between the ancient world, idealized as it has always been, and the creative present. Great works of art transcend the social and political situation in which they were created...”

“Undoubtedly” – writes Arcadi Nebolsine – “the creation of any large project used to bring with it a good amount of toil, unacceptable to us in modern days; whether it be the Pyramids, St. Petersburg, or even just the New York water supply tunnels. This gives us something to think about: continuity of progress in societies related or unrelated to the kind of regime. But allow me to brush over such considerations here and point to the result that the magnificence of St. Petersburg is for the people, poor and rich alike: The grandeur of it enhances the dignity of the people who are the true heirs of the Emperors and grandees who can now luxuriate in this “garden”. Isolation from the *Zeitgeist*, as any isolation, is not necessarily a negative thing. Isolation, including an isolated vision for St. Petersburg is similar to a diet. Too one-sided, it will lead to malnourishment. Properly balanced, it will increase health and vitality.

Thus in the midst of the international Bauhaus movement, America successfully combined its adoration of modernity with a self-perception as the “New Rome”. With this concept in mind, New Yorkers easily rendered still-framed and elevator-equipped high-rises and other technologically advanced buildings with Roman columns and pediments. America has purposefully combined its aesthetic isolation with technological engagement with the rest of the world.

There is no reason why St. Petersburg, while undergoing the current major technological and infrastructural upgrade, should not consider its distinct character superior to any particular fashion, especially since there is no evidence that the new functions cannot exist in a horizontal city or be articulated within the Greco-Roman architectural vocabulary. After all, this vocabulary was never meant to render any specific or unique function: in Rome it was used for palaces as well as viaducts.

In St. Petersburg it was employed, for instance, for the Alexandrinsky Theater, built in 1834 and equipped with, what one might call, 'high-tech' stage mechanisms and central heating.

St. Petersburg needs a restoration of its architectural DNA independent of the Zeitgeist. Once the conceptual restoration is done, the material one will follow (as illustrated by this Stalinist building on the left).

Although it is important to have restrictions (such as the building height), they alone are not enough. Reality shows that the majority of proposed buildings, while fully complying with legal requirements, are totally alien to the overall concept.

How to complete a city according to a singular concept? The answer to this question is particularly vital for the existing flabby pattern of St. Petersburg industrial areas, the pattern which will be compressed by the new construction. Completed in modernist idiom, they might look fine (if incoherent), but will they belong to St. Petersburg?

In my opinion the industrial areas represent both: a declaration of intent and an incomplete urban fabric. They need neutral architecture (such as this new street front), subordinate to the existing architectural motif. Moscow architecture critic Artiom Dezhurko criticized this vision, pointing out to me that I am proposing "architecture, that doesn't exist". What I actually meant is architecture that is hardly noticeable: "the line of construction is nothing, but the frame to the sky..."

I believe the industrial areas should be completed by filling in the missing parts of the fabric, which already has its own pattern. This can also be described as an architectural version of dental restoration, which is determined by existing factors. The architectural implants will closely emulate or even copy of the existing buildings of St. Petersburg. As far as the styles go, it could be baroque, classicism, Stalinist classicism or Gothic, as long as buildings include sculpture, ornament, and have the right scale of details and noble proportion. And there are some successful examples of such an eclectic mix.

The spectacular early 20th century Mosque built next to the neo-Palladian residential building shows respect to the cornice line and St. Petersburg's tradition of punctuating the sky with the spiritual dominants of its majolica dome and two minarets.

This Stalinist metro station (on the right) is a perfect illustration of how technologically advanced building can be harmoniously incorporated into the street façade with respect to the

religious landmark – Vladimirsky Cathedral. The effect was achieved due to the right scale of detailing and stucco finish.

The building on the opposite side of the square deserves no comment.

I would like to conclude by informing you that my colleagues and I are currently working on the formation of the Russian Chapter of the INTBAU, which should become an effective instrument for promotion of European tradition, Christian identity and classical architecture.

Thank you.