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Yekaterinburg, the Capital of Constructivism

By John Freedman

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It has been almost four weeks since I was in Yekaterinburg, but the city still clings to my memory. I had been there before but I must say I only really saw the place for the first time last month.

My connection happened late one night as I was walking back to my hotel from an event at the Actors House. Every time I had walked to or from this venue until then I had been on the north side of Ulitsa Lenina, the main drag, and the midday sun had been beating down on me. It was a nice enough walk, dotted with some interesting elements — a beautiful view of a new riverside section of town a kilometer or so away; a gorgeously renovated building, probably from the 19th century, that I was told is now President Vladimir Putin's residence when he is in town; the imposing central post office.

But, see, there's the catch right there. I mention the post office, but I would never have brought that up unless I had taken that late night stroll on the other side of the street.

The town was empty and the buildings lining Ulitsa Lenina stood out in stark relief thanks to an array of strategically placed spotlights. And that's when I saw it: Almost the whole other side of the street — and much of the side I was walking on, too — was lined in gorgeous Constructivist style buildings. The central post office was one of the most prominent among them.

I felt as though I had been transported into a fairy land. As though someone had slipped in replacement scenery to cover up everything I had been seeing until that moment. This was a whole new street and a whole new city.

From then on I was a man quietly obsessed, and I began to see what previously had remained hidden from my eyes. Yekaterinburg virtually teems with examples of Constructivist architecture.

It's easy to miss, actually. So much contemporary architecture has borrowed from Constructivism that we sometimes fail to see its distinctive nature. Its pristine use of geometry — squares, rectangles, lines, circles, oblongs — has been incorporated wholesale into most of the styles of architecture that followed it.

But Constructivism, and specifically the Constructivism of the early Soviet period, is truly unique. It is the source, and as with all primary sources, it retains its innovative energy and charisma.

Here are just a few of the elements that set Constructivist architecture apart: boxes within boxes; rounded corners; rectangular turrets or towers; spinning, circular elements crashing into linear spaces or elements; stylized, usually over-sized bay window shafts protruding from flat facades. Somehow Constructivism easily combines mutually exclusive components — a bacchanalia of mashed-up geometrical shapes in a cool, reserved style. Paradox is always a sign that we are approaching the territory of great art.

As I learned from a book I was given there are 140 Constructivist buildings in Yekaterinburg. Most were built in just a decade, from 1924 to 1934, when the city was the administrative center of the Ural Mountains region. One-hundred more such buildings were planned for construction, but were left on the drawing board when for a time the city lost its designation as a federal center.

By the time that decision was reversed a few years later, Constructivism was not only a thing of the past, it was anathema to increasingly hard-line Communist politicians and cultural bureaucrats. According to the book "Yekaterinburg: The Heritage of Constructivism," virtually all mention of Constructivism as an art form was wiped from textbooks and the historical record.

Many of the buildings in Yekaterinburg fell into disrepair, if not ruin. In recent years the city has turned that around with renovation projects that have given new life to old buildings.

Now as you walk Ulitsa Lenina, Ulitsa 8 Marta, Ulitsa Vainera or most any other street near the center of the city, you are greeted on left and right by the beautiful, understated and clean lines of Constructivist masterpieces that have been rebuilt, repainted and refocused for a modern age.

I don't use the word "greeted" lightly. I lived in St. Petersburg for six months as a student way back in another age and I still retain personal relationships with dozens of buildings in that astonishing city. I would nod in recognition to my favorite structures and I always felt that they, as best they could, responded in kind.

In Moscow I feel that way about St. Basil's Cathedral and several other far less exotic, but no less welcoming, buildings in my Zamoskvorechye neighborhood.

Yekaterinburg for me has now joined company with these other architecturally exciting Russian cities. But as I unexpectedly learned on a visit to the Metenkov House photography museum, there is no reason to oversimplify or over-romanticize the charisma of Constructivism.

Curator Artyom Berkovich was presenting an exhibit, a photographic journey of the 20th century, when he stopped before a photo of one of the city's Constructivist buildings.

"We see this as beauty today," he said. "But what we don't remember or don't know is that Constructivism is one of the most inhumane architectural styles ever devised. It's purpose was to deprive the individual of a private life and to throw him into a collective existence."

Berkovich went on to explain that Constructivist living quarters built for Soviet workers tended to have no kitchen or dining room. This ritual place of any family life was replaced by a cafeteria where everyone was thrown together. Rooms were smaller, because inhabitants were expected to spend more time outside at work or at collective endeavors. The individual's back in these spaces was literally pushed up against the wall.

It was then that I remembered visiting Nikolai Kolyada's theater many years ago when it was located in a former NKVD building. In fact, this famous Constructivist landmark is known locally as the "city" or "campus" of the Cheka, or secret police. This was a whole architectural block that housed the homes, offices and other working spaces required by the local secret police.

By "other working spaces" I mean, for example, the indoor shooting range where the Cheka, or NKVD employees honed their rifle and pistol skills. Chances are good that none of the gunmen here took part in the execution of the family of the last Russian Tsar a few blocks away in 1918, but they likely took part in other such executions.

Kolyada, when he occupied a corner of this building, turned the former shooting range into a small stage and a large storeroom for sets and costumes. It was a nice way to take back a space with a dubious background.

I mention this because Constructivism is not just a form that provides beauty, it is also profoundly bound up in the history of the land which gave rise to it.

In the end, we cannot rewrite history. What happened happened and it's to our advantage never to forget that.

At the same time I can't help but ask: Does an artistic movement carry moral responsibility? I don't know. I suspect not. But it may be a conversation that deserves to be heard, although not here and not now.

Right now I want to raise my voice in praise of the astonishing array of gorgeous buildings that grace the streets of Yekaterinburg. I didn't know that until recently and I'm richer for the knowledge I now have.

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