

CULTURE OF WOOD : YESTERDAY & TODAY

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Abstract. 2011 year is declared an International year of Wood. The report «culture of wood» touches upon the issues of a large context: worldwide wood symbolic, its protection, forest fires, rational use, the wooden building etc. Various solutions and diametrically opposite attitudes of architects towards the wooden architecture monuments are presented – from its restoration, - in case of open air museums or `in situ`, as in case of accurate copying of historical monuments in new sites – and to the kitsch-like use of the image and details of famous monuments («à la russe»). The refusal to resort to traditions and at the same time the new non-trivial and modern approaches to the wooden buildings construction, its structures, design and décor are also subjects of interest and research. However the approaches of those architects involved both in traditional and modern building technologies deserve a special attention. Such examples become essential for the experts in the course of discussion and finding solutions of use of wood in a modern architecture and methods of conservation and development of urban and rural wooden build-up areas in Russia and other countries.



The year 2011 is acknowledged an International year of wood. This date as well as the 21st of March, as the Day of Wood, was fixed by UNO in 1971. Today the forests occupy about one third of the Earth's territory and play a significant part in the forming of the people's life, the atmosphere and the planet's climate, yet it's still a place of habitat for many animals. But its surface is steadily declining due to the cause of: fires, pests, adverse weather conditions and many other causes, related with human activity. This year such a topic was discussed during the Berli-nale (Germany), where among others - the book called «Holy Wood» was presented. The authors formulate its message as: *We do not protect the trees, the trees protect us.* Yet its very name is not accidental. Apart from the direct connection with the film industry in respect to this event such a name implies polemics

with American Hollywood, which most of the time is very far from the ideas of nature protection.

“Wasteful extravagance, excess, superabundance, wealth, stars and plastic, artificiality, falsity. This modern symbol of *horn of plenty* sucks in all the myths. ... However it uses the image of tree «as a basis of life, a giver of energy... and provides the foundation for nothing less than one of the most successful films of all times, James Cameron “Avatar”. “Holy Wood” project – is a new trend and standard-setting attempt of a real practice of industrial use of wood as well as its cultural presentation. While Hollywood is trying to take on the world, “the peace prevails in Holy wood.” (Berndl et al 2011). And besides an “alive” installation in Berlin's park “Holy Wood” offered some virtual excursions across various countries.

The trees are ecological building material and

traditional element of culture in many countries, including Russia, where fires are raging while unique monuments of the wooden architecture are disappearing for all to see. This is why it's a proper time to consider "wood as an object of culture", its symbolism and role in historical and actual development of different countries.

A large number of monuments are preserved all around the world in Open air museums: "scansens" or "in situ". In Europe they number over 2090 (Czajkowski 1991), in Russia nearly 40. One of the most famous and largest is a museum «Malye Korely» near Arkhangelsk (Sevan 2011). Such museums were considered institutes, destined to prepare specialists in the field of vernacular architecture, preservation and search of new models and specimen of regional architecture. It is also concerns the milieu of historical settlements, correlated with the construction of modern wooden architecture.

As early as the beginning of the XX century in young Russia during the period of the constructivism, they began to project and build modern wooden constructions. A project by architect I. Melnikov won in the competition and was presented during the International fair of decorative arts in Paris, 1925. 2-floored glazed building of timber framework is diagonally cut by wide wooden steps upstairs. The stairway is spanned by two rows of inclined and crossing plates. "Red exhibition hall" is an "anti-palace" according to the architect which was performed in the spirit of a revolutionary ideology of the time. Le Corbusier used to say that it was the only hall of exhibition to see.

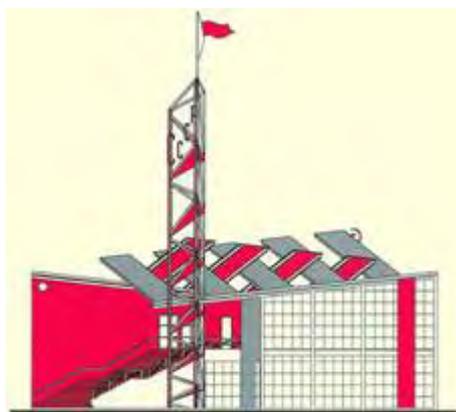


Figure 1. Project of USSR's exhibition hall—a symbol of the wooden constructivism in architecture. Architect I. Melnikov, 1924

New settlement "Sokol" with wooden dwelling houses started to build near the Moscow during the period 1923 (today it is a part of the city). There are famous Russian architects (A. Shusev, brothers of Vesniny, N. Markovnikov etc) took part in this project and presented different new and modern variants of vernacular architecture for artists and intellectual people, using the patterns and models of local buildings from different regions of the country. "Sokol" was included to the Federal List of the monuments of city planning in 1979.

Looking at such unique objects, we have one question of combination and incorporation of new objects into historical context of towns and villages. This question was once covered by the international project «Cultural development in Europe and regional architecture». The project enlisted European as well as Russian experts. The topics included the principles of preservation and development of the environment of historical settlements, as well as the ways of formation of such environment. All the materials of discussions, seminars (Machat 1993) and conferences (Sevan 1994) were published.

However the question - how to build in historical centers of the cities and how to preserve the «genius loci» and how should modern wooden architecture be introduced in the environment context, was and still is open-ended. And I am not sure that we could offer any concrete examples and methods of such architecture. But we can trace a way to follow, pursuing the assigned task. In any case the potential of modern wooden architecture is worth analyzing as an important factor of social, cultural and economical development of the country.

But the idea of preservation and development of the wooden towns, so widespread throughout the Northern Europe 30 years ago, has not won the support in our country. There are few examples of such cities (Tomsk, Irkutsk, some small towns like Yelabuga and Gorodets), where such approach struggles through. Even here we can see a distinctive game and reproduction of details of historical wooden patterns and images.

Analysis and various approaches towards modern wooden architecture deserve a closer examination. Today its shapes are quite diverse: reproductions of the wooden buildings, cathedrals and chapels, touristic villages "à la ruses". The same can be said about big commercial and touristic complexes, set in the cities, in the nearby dwelling houses, totally oriented towards the sales. There are some unique examples of private buildings, built at the "dawn of perestroika", that did not stand the test of time (Fig.2). New wooden buildings, put in place by Russian architects are hard to see because they are usually built for



Figure 2. 13-floored wooden house with no lift – the symbol of modern Russian architecture by today disassembled. Arkhangelsk. N. Sutyagin. Photo A. Lozhkin, 1998.

of the last 10 years. There were buildings of Russian architects, unfamiliar to the world for the time being.

The point of this project – was a comparison and confrontation of the ancient and modern wooden architecture, traditional – innovative, restored or neglected. The very fact of search of the analogues proves the necessity of understanding why the question of such association and comparison rose today, for instance, in Russian architecture and the world culture in whole.

The monuments chosen for the book – are the palaces of emperors, nobility and merchants that kept the cities down and others. As for the present day buildings – the architecture of the last decade is far more democratic and stylistically young. The very destination of objects as well as its functions and dwellers – are different. In our country the modern wooden architecture began to develop starting from 2000 years, unfortunately coming to a stop in the beginning of the XX century. It's in search of new patterns and constructions and technologies, by the time

private persons and hidden from views behind high fences.

These issues gotten obvious today in the field of work with wood were partly dealt with during the international exhibition held in Moscow in 2011 “Will Pryce. Parallels. Wooden architecture: yesterday, today and everywhere”. The experience of research and travels of the English architect was illustrated in the book



Figure 3. Commercial and artisanal complex is in the town of Gorodets: imitation of traditional forms of Russian architecture. Photo A. Ivanov, 2008



Figure 4. Wooden houses of the XVII – XVIII c. and indoor stairways in the street of the old part of a town - UNESCO World Heritage list. Norway, Bryggen at Bergen.

«Architecture in woode» (Pryce 2005) and the very book became the basis of the presented exposition. Many of the monuments mentioned in it are preserved in open air museums or became in the List of World heritage UNESCO sites. Among the items featured were wooden monuments, built during the past 10 centuries in different countries of the world and in parallels we could see the modern constructions



Figure 5. “Dwelling house –Telescope” and indoor stairways. Russia, Moscow region, resort “Pirogovo”. Architects: T. Kuzembayev, D. Kondrashov. Photo I. Ivanov, 2004



Figure 6. Timber-framing of dwelling house. Amiens, France, 15th c. Photo: Will Pryce



Figure 7. Timber-framing of dwelling house. Chateau-Thierry, Champagne, France. Architect: Eric Pace Architects. Photo: Eric Pace, 2004

of countrywide disappearance of unique monuments of the wooden architecture. The naturally risen question is: if the monuments of XVII – beginning of the XX centuries will disappear, what will remain as models and creative patterns of search and projects? In what way not only historical, but also modern Russian identity will manifest ?

Here are the names of the well-known Russian masters of these days: Alexander Brodsky, Nikolay Belousov and Totan Kuzembayev, Evgeny Asse, Yuri Grigoryan and others. One can also recall the world-famous – Thomas Herzog, Hermann Kaufmann, Sami Rintala, Imre Makovecz and others, featured in the mentioned exposition. But we suggest the analysis of the Russian wooden architecture to be carried out in following directions (Malinin 2010).

Tradition as an example of grotesque can be observed in works of Nikolay Belousov and others architects. This line originates in national carpentry

traditions, but develops theirs, at times with grotesque. Architect studies and analyses traditional log-houses, bath-houses and different constructions, but changing it in his projects. He adds the outgo of the logs, sometimes over two meters or underlines them in contrast to modern polycarbonate. Thus wooden surfaces are protected from the dampness, and there goes a comfortable loggia before the façade. These facades are realized in an utterly compact way, with only strict window crosses or openings between the logs in a bath-house. Thus it is not just a log-cabin as it is, but its artistic idea, its image.

“In our country, – says Belousov, – the culture of the wooden architecture formed over the centuries, yet, its social environment is completely lost, so it’s hard to talk about the succession. I wouldn’t refer what I do to or label it as the revival of the Russian wooden architecture traditions; it is rather a technologic and modern approach to the material that I consider uncommon and interesting. Working with the wood literally means a handicraft through the lenses of today. What weighs with me is that the houses I built would be personal and possess some picturesque and evoking emotions. I am also trying to do my best to keep them linked with the surrounding landscape, so that the skies will be seen from the indoors, that’s why I often use big glassy surfaces, translucent roofing» (Malinin 2010).



Figure 8. Dwelling house and bath-house. Russia, Moscow region. Architects N. Belousov, V. Belousov, 2009





Figure 9. Supporting structure put up with crib (grillage), XIX c. windmill from Mezen` region in "Malye Korely" museum. Russia, Arkhangelsk. Photo O. Sevan, 2005



Figure 10. Supporting structure put up with grillage of the passage from the bath house to the summerhouse. Russia, Kuznetsovo, Moscow region. Architect N. Belousov, 2005

Lyric expressionism is associated with the names of architects Totan Kuzembayev, Svetlana Golovina and others. On the one hand they are guided by Russian avant-garde (Fig. 1), on the other – by new technological capabilities of the wood. It seems like their houses are flying (above the lands and waters), walls and roofs are bending and growing round, distinguished by unusual red color or familiar shingles. That is why every such construction has its own name: «skate-house», «boat-house» or «telescope-house». Dining-hall windows open a view of the nearby landscapes, and a spacious glazed terrace reminds of the ship's deck (Malinin 2010).

Poticizing the trivial. Alexander Brodsky is in charge of this trend, although the wood is not a crucial or constitutive for him, as every his project is deeper and wider than any stylistic direction. His works stand apart, and he's calling himself an «artist-architect». Any of his buildings looks «unserious», but after all is

invariably metaphoric. Brodsky aesthetics ideally fits in the aspirations of the growing «creative class»: the beauty can be born out of simple, poor, even recyclable materials. «The same ideology is embodied not only in the objects of art, but also within the realm of dwelling house...Thus, for example, House in Tarusa (2005) looks like a stack of boxes, covered with temporary shed (hovel): three-floored wooden capacity is placed under semitransparent plastic roof with self-supporting piles» (Malinin 2010).



Figure 11. "Skate house". Moscow region., "Pirogovo" resort. Architects: T. Kuzembayev, D. Kondrashov, Photo I.Ivanov, 2004



Figure 12. "Dwelling house – Telescope". Russia. Moscow region, "Pirogovo" resort. Architects: T. Kuzembayev, D. Kondrashov. Photot I.Ivanov, 2004

Along with the above mentioned trends the expert can note the presence of a **European minimalist line** in «modern Russian wooden building». Which is a group of architects: Evgeniy Asse and his followers: bureau «Panacom», «Group DNA» and others. Their works – ascetic restrained houses, as a rule devoid of any decorations and meant to teach the Russian house-builders to appreciate the simplicity and rationality.

There are examples of new approaches to the carpentry education of modern architects with the wood treatment as a unique building material. These are lectures, survey trips and sketching of the monuments and towns and villages` environment, joint workshops of restorers, scientists and modern wood

designers. Without that it is impossible to introduce the young architects into the context of the historical environment, to understand and to fill deeply the «spirit of the place», just as above mentioned during the ICOMOS in Canada (Sevan 2008). In addition this means getting acquainted with modern works of architects in their workshops. This is not only a designing, but also a manual work with the material on Land-art projects in towns and rural areas of the country.

Exhibition we mentioned in the beginning, as well as modern projects, make us think hard and raise important questions. Can we imagine not just any particular modernity features on their own, but try to place them in the cultural environment, some specific contexts? Is there a place for intersections in wooden architecture - not just parallels, but the intersection into the wooden architecture of yesterday, today and tomorrow...? Can we talk about the particularly concerning not only historical monuments, but also today's buildings and - what will be chosen among them to get onto UNESCO world heritage` list later ?



Figure 14. Lifeguards tower. “City festival – Archfarm”. Group of architects “Children of Iofan”. Architect S. Lipgart. Moscow region, 2011



Figure 13. Country house in Tarusa, Kaluga region, Russia. Architects A. Brodsky, N. Korbut. Photo Y. Palmin, 2006



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