

On the Interpretation of Historical Styles in The Contemporary Architecture of Christian Churches

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Abstract: This article examines the necessity of continuity in modern church construction in relation to historical architecture. Based on an analysis of the architectural solutions of Christian churches, typological groups have been identified according to the elements that comprise their spatial and planning structure. A range of the most frequently used volumetric and spatial elements of churches has been determined. The article discusses the feasibility of composing traditional volumetric and spatial elements and designing parish churches based on this approach.

Keywords: Church architecture, cultural heritage site, continuity, standard volumetric and spatial element, architectural form-making.

Introduction: The design of modern Christian churches using standard volumetric and spatial elements is a significant and relevant task in architecture and urban planning. With the growing interest in preserving cultural heritage and reviving spiritual traditions, the use of standardized stylistic architectural solutions not only accelerates the construction process but also ensures the harmonious integration of new churches into the existing urban environment. At the same time, the implementation of standardized elements requires careful analysis of their compliance with canonical requirements and aesthetic norms, making this research crucial for the further development of church architecture.

In this regard, the objects of this study are church buildings with a completed architectural composition. The study and analysis of the architectural solutions of Christian churches, the formation of their typological groups according to the elements that comprise their spatial and planning structure, and their stylistic features will allow us to identify emerging trends and directions for the development of style in contemporary ecclesiastical architecture [1].

It can be observed that while direct replication and citation of architectural examples from the past

dominate the general approach, there is an active process of reinterpretation and the search for a new architectural style for Orthodox churches.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars are engaged in studying the stylistic evolution of contemporary church architecture, a highly relevant issue today. They approach the subject from the perspectives of architectural design, scientific research challenges in this field, style development trajectories, typology, and other related topics.

One of the researchers who explored the use of standardized church elements in contemporary church construction is Nikolay Alexandrovich Korotaev. In his article "Architectural and Artistic and Typological Characteristics of Some New Orthodox Churches from the 'Program 200,'" he analyzes the architecture of new Orthodox churches and compares them with their historical predecessors. The author examines the stylistic, artistic, tectonic, compositional, and typological characteristics of church architecture. He also makes assumptions about possible future directions for the evolution of contemporary Orthodox church architecture [2].

Elena Yuryevna Verkhovskaya, in her article "Main Trends in the Stylistic Development of Contemporary Church

Architecture Based on the Example of Sverdlovsk Oblast," discusses the primary stylistic directions and the eclectic combination of historical style elements [3].

Dmitry Olegovich Shvidkovsky, a Soviet and Russian architectural historian, reflects on the development of contemporary ecclesiastical architecture. He highlights the particular interest in its relationship with its ancient origins and the integration of unprecedented technologies into the creative process [4]. The demands of modern technology, in turn, dictate the stylistic features of church design.

Natalya Vladimirovna Laitar uses the following definition for classifying architectural styles: "The affiliation of a new church with a particular stylistic direction (or style) is determined based on general patterns in volumetric, spatial, and artistic solutions, in which borrowings from a specific architectural source of past eras predominate." [5]

Natalya Yuryevna Zavarkina, in her study of stylistic preferences in contemporary church architecture, assigns names to church architectural styles "based on the presence of features of a particular architectural movement that... dominates in architectural solutions..." [6].

The stylistic development of contemporary church architecture has been studied by several scholars, including: Natalya Vladislavovna Grechneva, author of the article "Neo-Eclecticism in Contemporary Church Architecture" [7]; Irina Yuryevna Pozdnyakova, author of the article "Architectural and Construction Features of Modern Orthodox Churches in Gorno-Altaysk"; Yuri Alexandrovich Kreidun, author of the article "The Problem of Style in Contemporary Church Architecture in Russia"; and many others.

MAIN SECTION

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is primarily based on an analysis of the process of contemporary architectural style formation and the identification of key trends in the stylistic development of church construction over the past few decades.

However, it would be more appropriate to begin with a brief historical overview of the use of standardized elements in the architecture of Christian churches.

Ancient Roman and Byzantine Periods: Since the 4th century, early Christian churches were often built following standardized plans derived from ancient Roman basilicas. The main architectural elements of these churches included elongated naves, apses, and transepts. A notable example is St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Middle Ages: During the medieval period, architectural styles such as Romanesque and Gothic also incorporated standardized elements. Romanesque

architecture featured massive walls and barrel vaults, while Gothic architecture introduced pointed arches and stained-glass windows. Many cathedrals, such as Notre-Dame de Paris, adhered to these stylistic principles.

Renaissance and Baroque: The Renaissance and Baroque periods saw a return to classical forms and symmetry. Typical elements included domes, colonnades, and centralized floor plans. A prominent example is St. Paul's Cathedral in London, designed by Christopher Wren.

Modern Era: In the 19th and 20th centuries, church architecture was influenced by various movements, including Neo-Gothic and Modernism. Standardized elements during this period included simpler, more functional forms. In the 20th century, modular architectural elements were often used to reduce costs and accelerate construction.

Contemporary Period: Today, many modern churches incorporate standardized elements to create harmonious and functional spaces that reflect both historical traditions and contemporary architectural trends. This approach allows for the preservation of cultural heritage while adapting to the needs of modern society.

Many researchers studying this topic have conducted graphical analyses of church façades and overall volumetric and spatial compositions to identify the primary stylistic trends in contemporary church architecture.

According to the author of one study in this field, "The analysis methodology involves identifying the characteristics of historical styles in the architectural composition of building façades, while the classification of a structure within a particular stylistic direction is based on the predominance of a specific historical or contemporary stylistic solution in the volumetric and spatial architectural composition of the object, its components, and details." [8]. The author's article provides a detailed examination of the following stylistic directions: "Old Russian," "Byzantine," "Moscow," and "Minimalism without stylistic attribution."

We will begin our review with the Old Russian architectural style, which is widely used in modern church construction. This style represents a fascinating combination of traditional elements and contemporary architectural solutions.

Key Features of the Old Russian Style: traditional dome and tented roof forms, often covered in gold or colorful tiles; richly decorated façades featuring carvings, mosaics, and frescoes; the use of arches and semicircular windows characteristic of Old Russian architecture; abundant crosses and icons, both inside and outside the church. Churches in this style are

typically composed of a cubic main volume with a large helmet-shaped or onion-shaped dome on a circular drum, sometimes surrounded by several smaller domes. The use of arches and galleries adds dynamism and variety to the composition. A tall bell tower, often positioned adjacent to the main structure, emphasizes the verticality of the design—such as in the Church of St. George the Victorious on Poklonna Hill in



Fig. 1. Church of St. George the Victorious on Poklonna Hill in Moscow

Byzantine architecture is an outstanding and significant movement in the history of Christian church construction. Emerging in the 4th century from classical traditions, the Byzantine style flourished in the Eastern Roman Empire (or Byzantium) and continues to exert its influence to this day.

Key Features of the Byzantine Style: one of the most recognizable characteristics of Byzantine architecture is the use of domes, often placed on drums and supported by pendentives. These structural elements create a grand spatial effect and provide excellent acoustics within the church..

Byzantine churches are richly decorated with magnificent mosaics, depicting biblical scenes, saints, and episodes from the life of Christ. Gold was

Moscow, built in 1995 (Fig. 1).

A striking example of a modern church constructed in the Old Russian style is the Church of the Feodorovskaya Icon of the Mother of God at Ganina Yama (2010), which almost exactly reproduces the composition of traditional Old Russian churches (Fig. 2).

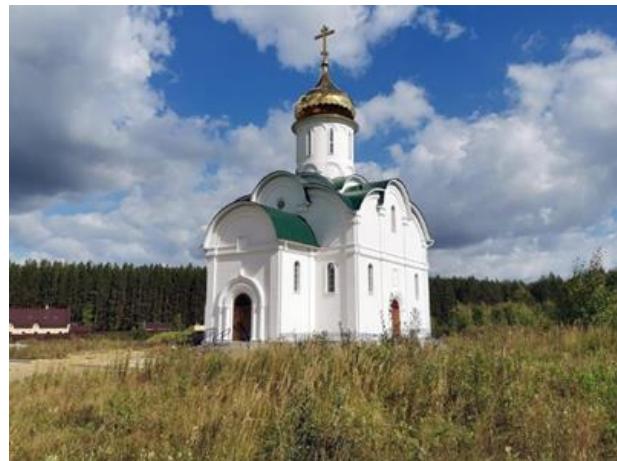


Fig. 2. Church of the Feodorovskaya Icon of the Mother of God at Ganina Yama

frequently used in mosaics, producing luminous and radiant images. The layout of Byzantine churches is often based on a cross-in-square design, where the central space is surrounded by four arches supporting the dome.

Great emphasis is placed on iconography in Byzantine churches. Icons often serve as focal points in the interior, reinforcing the sacred atmosphere.

A striking example of Byzantine church architecture is the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul, Turkey). Built in the 6th century under Emperor Justinian, this majestic church remains one of the most iconic examples of Byzantine architecture. With its enormous dome and luxurious mosaics, it continues to impress with its scale and beauty (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Hagia Sophia Cathedral, Turkey.

Byzantine architecture has had a profound influence on the architectural traditions of many regions and

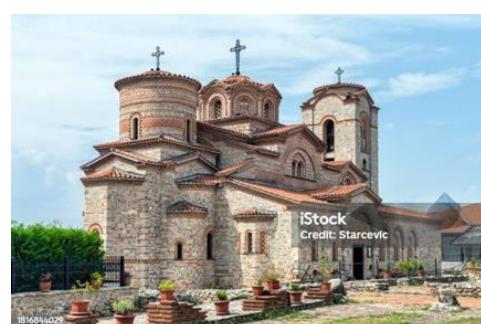


Fig. 4. Church of Saint Sophia in Ohrid.

continues to captivate with its beauty and grandeur. These stylistic techniques remain widely used in

modern church buildings, interpreted in a broad range of ways.

The Church of Saint Sophia in Ohrid is an outstanding example of Byzantine architecture dating back to the 11th century. Its architectural style exhibits the key characteristics of Byzantine architecture while incorporating elements unique to the region. The Church of Saint Sophia in Ohrid is not only a religious landmark but also a cultural monument, drawing attention for its historical and architectural significance. Its distinctive combination of architectural elements makes it an important subject for the study

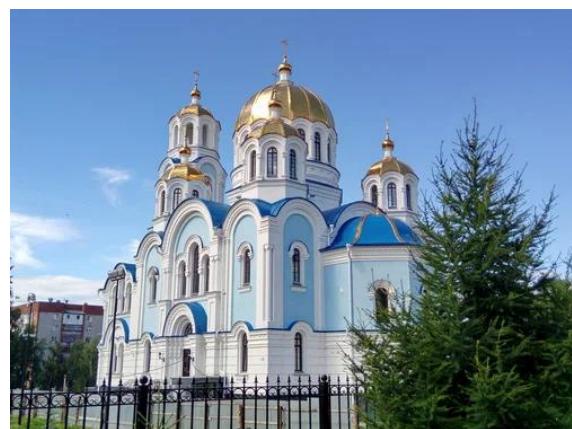


Fig. 5. Church of the Protection of the Most Holy Theotokos (1992, 2009–2016) in Zarechny
Fig. 6. Church on the Blood in Yekaterinburg.

The Church on the Blood in Yekaterinburg features a voluminous composition and a well-defined layout (Fig. 6). Its main dome is placed on an octagonal drum with arched window openings. All of its domes are helmet-shaped, a characteristic element of Byzantine-style churches. The architects envisioned this design as a symbol of continuity through time and the revival of Orthodox tradition.

The Moscow style of Christian church architecture, which developed between the 16th and 18th centuries, is considered one of the most striking and unique trends in Russian ecclesiastical architecture. This style blends elements of the Byzantine tradition with local influences and Western European architectural features. Below are some key characteristics of the Moscow style:

Multi-tiered onion domes, often covered with brightly colored tiles or gilded.

Semi-circular or triangular decorative elements, known

as kokoshniks, placed above windows, portals, and around domes, giving the churches an ornate and diverse appearance.

Tented and pyramidal roofs, which enhance the visual lightness of the structures and emphasize their upward movement.

The use of colored ceramic tiles (izraztsy) and intricate decorative carvings, particularly in interior detailing. One of the most iconic representatives of the Moscow style is Saint Basil's Cathedral (the Cathedral of the Intercession on the Moat), which stands as one of the most recognizable and vivid examples of this architectural direction. Its multi-colored domes and rich decorative details make it a true masterpiece of Russian ecclesiastical architecture (Fig. 7).

The combination of architectural forms harmoniously integrating elements of Moscow and Western European architecture is represented in the Novodevichy Convent. (Fig. 8)

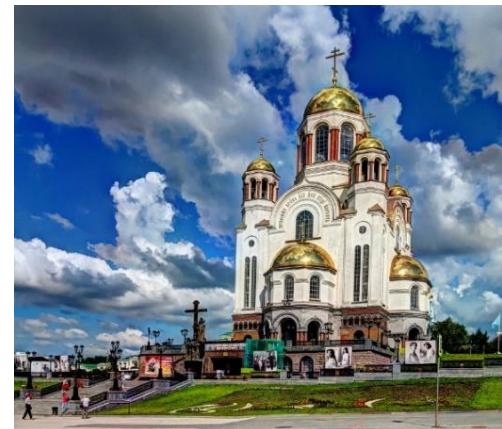




Fig. 7. St. Basil's Cathedral (Intercession Cathedral).

The Moscow style of Christian church architecture is distinguished by its beauty, rich decoration, and unique architectural solutions. This heritage not only shapes the distinctive appearance of Moscow but also serves as an important element of Russia's cultural legacy. Modern churches in the Moscow style continue the

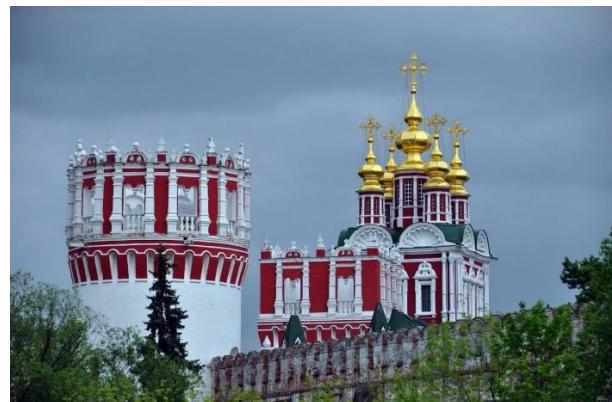


Fig. 8. Novodevichy Monastery.

traditions of Russian architecture, combining historical elements with contemporary architectural solutions. One example is the Church of St. Nicholas in Khamovniki. Built in 2007, this church blends traditional Russian architectural elements with modern construction technologies.

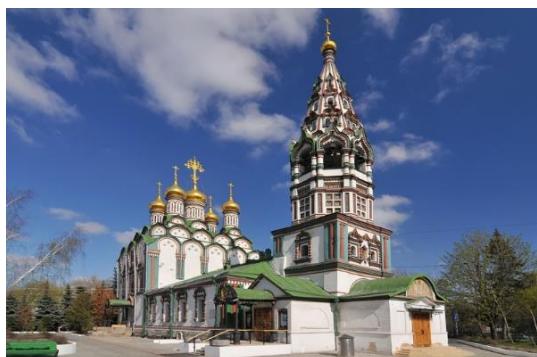


Fig. 9. Church of St. Nicholas in Khamovniki.

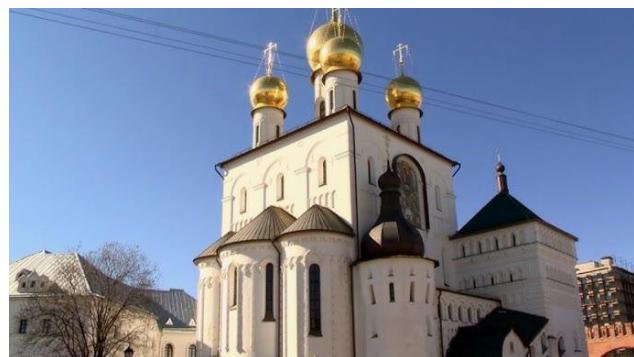


Fig. 10. Church of Alexius, Metropolitan of Moscow, Joasaph of Belgorod, and Athanasius of Athos (2010–2015), Yekaterinburg.

"Another manifestation of the 'Moscow' style is the enrichment of the church's volume through its segmentation, the addition of numerous annexes, and the creation of a 'multi-domed' composition with small elongated drums featuring complex dome structures. Examples of this include the Church of Alexius, Metropolitan of Moscow, Joasaph of Belgorod, and Athanasius of Athos (2010–2015) in Yekaterinburg" [8]. These churches demonstrate how modern architects can integrate historical elements of the Moscow style into contemporary projects, creating unique and significant structures.

The issue of stylistic borrowing in architecture is one of the most debated topics. On the one hand, borrowing elements from historical monuments can serve as a tribute to traditions and cultural heritage. This helps maintain generational continuity and highlights the succession of culture.

Minimalism in Christian church architecture has become a popular trend in recent years. This style is

characterized by the use of clean, simple lines and forms, the absence of decorative elements, and an emphasis on functionality. Minimalism focuses on creating calm and meditative spaces that encourage contemplation and reflection.

Minimalist churches often utilize light and shadow to create an atmosphere of sanctity and elevation, as well as employ natural materials such as wood, stone, and concrete. The core idea is to eliminate all unnecessary elements, leaving only the essential, thus shaping a spiritually enriched space.

Here are some examples of churches in a minimalist style:

St. Immanuel Church in Cologne, Germany – This church features an ultra-minimalist design, emphasizing simplicity of form and the use of natural materials. (Fig.11)

La Ascension del Señor Church in Mexico City – This project serves as a place for both spiritual connection and community gathering. It was built using simple

construction methods and affordable modern materials. (Fig. 12)



Fig. 11. La Ascension del Señor Church in Mexico City.

Fig. 12. St. Immanuel Church in Cologne.

These examples illustrate how minimalism can be applied in church architecture, creating serene and peaceful spaces.

The minimalist style is indeed not traditional for church architecture, especially when compared to more ornate styles such as Gothic or Baroque. However, this does not mean that minimalism has no place in religious architecture. Contemporary minimalist churches reflect changes in cultural and spiritual preferences, where some people value the simplicity, clarity, and tranquility that this style offers.

Minimalism in modern church construction can help create a more contemplative and meditative space, free from distractions, allowing worshippers to focus on their spiritual practices and inner world. While it may be unconventional compared to traditional church architecture, minimalism offers a modern reinterpretation of religious spaces, adapted to the needs and aesthetic preferences of today's society.

Every architectural solution has its unique value and can reflect the spirit of the time and place in which it was created. Perhaps minimalism in church architecture is yet another step in the evolution of styles and forms, enriching cultural and spiritual heritage.

Minimalism in church architecture can significantly influence spiritual perception. Here are some key aspects:

Contemplation: The simplified and clean design of minimalist churches fosters an atmosphere of peace and solitude. With no distracting decorative elements, worshippers can focus on inner spiritual work and meditation.

Emphasis on Light and Space: Minimalist churches often utilize natural lighting and open spaces. Light can create a sense of divine presence, enhancing spiritual

perception and a feeling of sanctity.

Natural Materials: The use of materials such as wood, stone, and concrete creates a connection with nature and earthly elements, reinforcing a sense of unity with the world and the universe.

Symbolism: In minimalism, every element holds significance. Even small details, such as cross-shaped forms or the use of certain colors, can carry deep spiritual meaning.

Focus on Spiritual Content: Since minimalist churches lack excessive decorative elements, attention is directed toward worship services and rituals, allowing for a deeper immersion in spiritual teachings.

Thus, according to the architects of modern minimalist churches, this style can create a more profound and focused spiritual experience, helping worshippers find inner peace and a connection with the divine.

Nevertheless, traditional church architecture has deep roots and plays a crucial role in the cultural and spiritual life of many people. Ornamented details, stained glass windows, iconostases, and sculptures often evoke a sense of sanctity and grace, filling the space with grandeur and solemnity.

These elements can enhance emotional and spiritual experiences, helping worshippers feel connected to the history and traditions of their faith. For many, the rich decor of traditional churches symbolizes divine presence and contributes to spiritual elevation.

It can be said that both minimalism and traditional styles have unique ways of enhancing spiritual perception, and each can be preferable depending on personal preferences and cultural context.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the issue of stylistic borrowing in architecture remains one of the most debated topics. On the one

hand, incorporating elements from historical monuments can serve as a tribute to traditions and cultural heritage. This approach helps maintain generational continuity and emphasizes cultural succession.

On the other hand, some scholars and architects argue that each era should develop its own style, reflecting the spirit of the time, modern materials, technologies, and social conditions. They believe that excessive reliance on historical elements may overshadow contemporary identity and hinder innovation.

Ultimately, the question of borrowing architectural elements remains open and largely depends on the context and objectives of a particular project. It is essential to strike a balance between tradition and modernity to create a harmonious and sustainable architectural solution.

Religious architecture carries profound significance, and preserving continuity helps sustain a connection to spiritual and cultural traditions that are meaningful to believers. Borrowing elements from the past can enrich modern architecture, adding depth and historical value.

At the same time, architecture must evolve to reflect current realities and societal needs. The key to successful church design may lie in a harmonious blend of tradition and innovation, creating spaces that are both functional and symbolically significant.

It is crucial for designers to understand not only architectural elements but also their symbolic meaning and function. Excessive experimentation may lead to a loss of connection with the fundamental purpose and spiritual atmosphere of a church, making it appear overly modern or misaligned with religious traditions.

Thus, designing modern Christian churches requires a thorough study of both the theoretical and practical aspects of traditional church architecture. This approach can help architects develop a deeper appreciation for cultural and historical contexts while finding a balance between innovation and tradition.

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