

Cultural heritage and the model Soviet city: Vladivostok, 1960–1991

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This paper examines the master plan for the new city, considers what was built, what was destroyed, and what was re-created as part of the overall effort to make Vladivostok a better place to live for its inhabitants. The paper considers issues of historic preservation, environmental heritage and design, and problems resulting from the conflict of Soviet ideology with the desire for protection of historic sites.

Introduction

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This essay examines the master plan for the new city, considers what was built, what was destroyed, and what was re-created as part of the overall effort to make Vladivostok a better place to live for its inhabitants. The paper considers issues of historic preservation, environmental heritage and design, and problems resulting from the conflict of Soviet ideology with the desire for protection of historic sites.

Vladivostok Before 1917

Vladivostok is located in a mountainous maritime region with cold winters and rainy summers. The city's principal geographical feature, the Bay of the Golden Horn, is surrounded by mountains originally covered by a forest of evergreen and deciduous trees, in which lived a variety of animals, among them the famous Ussuri tigers. Vladivostok's first substantial buildings date only from the 1870s, and while there were discussions about the need for a rationally thought out urban development scheme for the city, they always foundered on realities of budget and funding.

It was during the two decades surrounding the turn of the century that Vladivostok acquired some of its most striking architectural monuments through the construction of buildings commissioned by military authorities, government ministries, and business enterprises. It was these buildings that came to define the city center, and that decades later would be the basis for discussions about how Vladivostok's architectural heritage should be preserved. The neo-Muscovite central Post Office, facing Svetlanskaia Street, was seen as the most important building of one of the city's most prolific architects, A.A. Gvozdiovskii. The Eastern Institute of 1899 signified a solid commitment to education and scholarship in the city, and the new Commercial School of 1913 suggested something of the character of the city's economic evolution. The city was also home to a series of neo-Russian *art nouveau* and *moderne* office buildings and residences. Among these the new railroad station of 1912 was one of the most notable, but the Brynner townhouse and a series of buildings along Svetlanskaia Street have been preserved as examples of Russian versions of these influential styles.

Probably Vladivostok's best-known building from this era was the Kunst and Albers department store, one of several structures built by the firm in support of its business enterprises, projects including employee housing and the city's first electrical power plant. The firm's main building was decorated in a style combining German baroque with the Russian *moderne* so popular at the time, and included retail space, offices, and apartments. It remains to this day one of the great architectural monuments of the city's main thoroughfare.

Completing the architectural ensemble of the period were numerous other trading concerns, shipping offices, theaters and banks. Finally, Vladivostok's Catholic cathedral, Lutheran church, and Buddhist and Shinto temples suggested the cosmopolitan nature of a city with a large foreign population that had become an international center.

Vladivostok During the First Decades of Soviet Rule

The revolutionary events of 1917 caused great confusion and a certain dismay in the city, and while political developments in the west were followed with interest in Vladivostok, the city itself essentially had to wait for clarification of its fate from Petrograd and Moscow. Bolshevik rule in Moscow was soon followed by foreign intervention in Vladivostok, and it was only in 1922 that the Bolsheviks were able to occupy the city permanently. There was little wholly new construction in the city during the NEP years, although some older buildings were remodeled for industrial worker housing in the spirit of functionalism so popular in European Russia at the time. By necessity, lack of funds resulted in the preservation of Vladivostok's Tsarist architecture.

This period ended fairly quickly with the implementation of the First Five Year Plan, beginning in 1928-29. Over the next decade, Vladivostok was to be given a far different image of itself than it had ever imagined in the past. The capitalist, Tsarist urban center of the turn of the century was to be transformed into something entirely different, and ostensibly at least, completely new.

Almost immediately, the city began to feel the changes brought about by the new Stalinist tempo of economic and political transformation. Physically, the city began to look different, as new construction projects replaced much of what had existed before, as older structures were torn down, and as buildings constructed for other uses were given different purposes. New monuments to the icons of the Soviet era appeared. The cathedral was destroyed, and replaced by a school and club. The neo-Muscovite triumphal arch built to celebrate the visit by the future Tsar Nicholas II in 1891 was demolished, ostensibly in the interests of traffic flow. The Cemetery church (the Pokrovskii Sobor) and the cemetery itself were destroyed, including the Orthodox, Catholic, Chinese, and Japanese graves located there. The site became the city's central park of culture and rest, a process mimicking similar transformations in any number of other Soviet cities. In Vladivostok's case, a dancing platform was constructed over the graves, and above the location of the former church altar a statue of Stalin was placed.

Buildings in the new socialist realist style appeared, most notably two "Sovroco" apartment blocks in the center (known affectionately today as the "Gray Horses"), which became models for other structures in various parts of the city. One is surmounted by statues of Stalinist worker heroes, and has become part of the city's architectural heritage. Today, it awaits remodeling befitting its original elegance. Other existing buildings with politically acceptable historicist exterior decorations were embellished by adding more floors or expanding into adjacent spaces. The Tsarist-era railroad station was remodeled. In Vladivostok, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union during these years, certain parts of the pre-revolutionary past was usable and could be appropriated by an architectural esthetic that mixed past styles with current ideological dogma.

The 1930s in Vladivostok can be remembered best from an urban development perspective because of the general plan developed by E.A. Vasiliev (in conjunction with P.A. Golosov) for the complete restructuring of the central parts of the city. Vasiliev labored on the plan for almost the entire decade, and his work was very much in the spirit of the times, when the general plan for the development of Moscow as an ideal socialist city galvanized the attention of so many in the USSR and abroad. Vladivostok was to mirror the planning and development decisions made for Moscow, and was to be a model Soviet city on the shores of the Pacific Ocean. The plan called for the wholesale destruction of much of the architectural legacy of Vladivostok's capitalist period, and many notable buildings were scheduled for destruction. It was an ambitious project, and one that was subjected to great reworking as the decade progressed. By the outbreak of the Second World War little of the project had been realized, however, and with the beginning of the war, the plan was essentially shelved in the face of more immediate concerns. What was erected has now become part of the city's Stalinist esthetic heritage.

Goals for Bolshoi Vladivostok under Khrushchev

By the end of the fourth decade of Soviet rule, it was recognized that while Russia had recovered in many ways from the dislocations and destruction of World War II, the quality of life of Soviet citizens had not kept pace with the country's exceptional economic, technological, and military growth. In many urban areas throughout the USSR, impressive plans were laid for a significant improvement in the lives of the nation's urban population. Vladivostok was one such area.

The main impetus for expansion in the city came after a visit to Vladivostok by Nikita Khrushchev in 1959. On his way back from the United States, Khrushchev had stopped in the city. Looking around him, he remarked that "Vladivostok is a fine and beautiful city, but it can and must be made better, more beautiful, more comfortable." It was this kind of encouraging signal, in essence a blessing by the Soviet leader, that made it possible for city planners to begin preparing, yet again, for the entire reconstruction of the city. It would prove to be the most ambitious plan for the city's rebuilding in Vladivostok's history.

By 1961 planners from Vladivostok and Leningrad had put together an extensive and complicated series of projects that would have an impact on every section of the port city. Because of the shortage of housing in the old, central sections of the urban area (typical of all Soviet cities at the time), rapid mass-production of suburban pre-fabricated housing was to be emphasized. One deficiency the planners noted in the city as it existed in 1960 was that there was so little green space, and their designs incorporated extensive projects that would reintroduce vegetation into the city through provision for parks, trees, and other "greening" projects. New regional recreation areas would help restore to the city some of the native vegetation lost during the predatory expansion of the nineteenth century.

Realities of Bolshoi Vladivostok Under Brezhnev

Nikita Khrushchev's forced retirement had no significant impact on the central government's commitment to the expansion of Vladivostok. The city's development continued at a brisk pace throughout the next two decades. Much that had been planned under Khrushchev was finally completed under Brezhnev and his successors.

Two significant projects were underway in the central sections of the city during the mid-1970s. On Vokzalnaia Square, facing the railroad station, a new post office and long-distance

telephone station building was being constructed. The post office was functional and undistinguished on its exterior, though it was decorated by a massive mosaic inside. What was lost was the pre-revolutionary headquarters of the military commander of the fortress, a building that was a substantial example of late-Tsarist architecture, but one that possessed no real uniqueness of its own. To the east, farther along the bay, a World War II submarine was placed on a pedestal in 1975 to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of victory over the Japanese. This was to be the first component of a memorial complex that would include an eternal flame and a series of *bas reliefs* located on and around several stairways and terraces leading from Leninskaia Street (formerly Svetlanskaia), down to the bay. This area would become the principal location for celebrations of military anniversaries in the city, particularly naval ones, and had a dramatic orientation to the bay and the sections of the city surrounding it. Just up the hill, on Leninskaia, a monument to merchant marine sailors lost in World War II was constructed in 1967, with an eternal flame added in 1975. A decade later, this segment of the harbor would be expanded with the construction of a new ferry terminal intended for trips to the islands in Peter the Great Gulf and by the completion of the *Krasnyi Vympel* memorial ship complex and a new monument to the first sailors who set foot on shore in 1860. This area became one of the city's principal memorial centers, its aim being to aid the citizens of Vladivostok in developing a sense of belonging to the historic fabric of their city. These plans, like so many others during these last decades of Soviet rule, mirrored what was happening throughout the USSR at this time.

Context and size relationships were always a problem for architectural projects in the former Soviet Union, and the ambitious plans for Vladivostok resulted in as many grandiose and out of scale structures and spaces as they did in other Soviet cities. Monuments and memorial complexes were particular temptations, and Lugovaia Square, with its memorial to Admiral S.O. Makarov, was typical of the enormous and often poorly-maintained urban spaces to be found throughout the Soviet Union on its fiftieth anniversary in 1967. The functionalist addition to the old pre-Revolutionary, Siberian *moderne* Churin and Company store on Leninskaia Street, executed in the early 1970s, was a deliberate affront to the architecture of the past in much the same way the Palace of Congresses in the center of Moscow's historic Kremlin had been. Indeed, both were typical of the era of Khrushchev, a time during which the central government had little respect for the historical architectural legacy of the past. They both were intended to mark the divide between the world of the past and the scientifically rational world of the future, and they both ended up looking out of place. The decision to build in such a modernist style in Vladivostok was a significant one because of plans to redesign entirely the city's main street, Leninskaia, by connecting it more effectively to the hillside and the bay, to open it up to the water, to widen it, and to plant trees that were to give it a more pleasant, "natural" feel.

For decades, writers and politicians had lamented the city's lack of a large open assembly space like Red Square in Moscow. Without it, many felt, the city seemed unfinished. The result was that the once pleasant, park-like plaza to the south of Leninskaia, facing the harbor, was converted to a large paved square lacking any vegetation. It was dominated by a monument to the heroes of the Civil War, dedicated in 1961, but expanded significantly later when statues were added to make the previously understated memorial far more impressive within the context of the empty openness of the new space. It was this square that was to be the new center of the city, and an ensemble of huge new buildings was to be built around it.

Dealing With Cultural Heritage under Khrushchev and Brezhnev

Many of the sketches used to illustrate the Bolshoi Vladivostok plan during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras showed little of the old city center remaining, and they conveyed a sense not of a rehabilitated older city, but of an entirely new city built on virgin ground. The Stalinist plans of the 1930s anticipated the destruction of many of the city's most unusual historic structures, and the sketches of the 1960s and 1970s focused only on the new functionalist buildings to be constructed in the city, with historical structures disappearing into the sea mists so characteristic of the area.

In reality, however, architects and planners (and certainly the city's residents) felt that substantial numbers of historic, pre-revolutionary buildings and parks should be preserved. As has been noted, some of the city's neighborhoods underwent wholesale destruction, though most of the buildings demolished had little architectural value when compared to the potential use to which the sites could be put for other, generally more socially-conscious purposes. This is particularly true for the Sports Harbor area, for example (the *Milionka* district had little to recommend it in the postwar period) and for the northern shore of the Bay of the Golden Horn immediately adjacent to Leninskaia Street. Other parts of the city also saw individual historic buildings preserved, though had the most ambitious parts of the plans been executed, they too would probably have been torn down and replaced by newer buildings constructed in late-Soviet style.

By the 1970s, the inconsistencies of realizing the city's urban plans were striking. The Orthodox Cathedral and Cemetery church had been destroyed, while the Catholic and Lutheran churches remained. Structures associated with the large pre-war Korean and Chinese populations had disappeared, but the former Japanese Consulate and a Chinese businessman's house (the "Green Bricks") were two of the most striking structures in the city center. Elsewhere local traditions influenced buildings reflecting the city's maritime location: one typically Russian wooden house not far from the city center used sand dollars as design motifs incorporated into the window frame designs.

All the architects and planners appeared to recognize the uniqueness of the city's main street. Despite the grandiose House of Soviets, with its enormous square and monument to the establishment of Soviet rule, Leninskaia retained more of Vladivostok's original character than any other part of the city. To a great degree, this was true because so little had been done to alter the street's built form since the time of Stalin. Most of the buildings situated along the street could have been recognized by someone who had left the city in 1917 and not returned until 1980. Many were in deplorable condition, but many others were well-maintained and subject to regular *remont*. The old Kunst and Albers department store remained the city's principal retail center, and the pre-revolutionary Post Office continued to play that role even after construction of the new central post office near the railroad station. Certain buildings maintained something of their pre-revolutionary purposes, though others had been adapted to new uses (the Japanese Consulate, just up the street from Leninskaia on Okeanskaia Street, had become a hospital, and the red brick Lutheran Church was used as a naval museum). Even the few buildings constructed along the street in Stalinist times had taken on a quality of historical patina by the late 1970s because of their pseudo-historicist inspiration and despite some of the unsavory activities associated with them. While some unfortunate projects were executed along the street during the 1970s and 1980s (the modern addition to the Churin and Company store and the billboards honoring local socialist heroes put up in front of the attractive and undoubtedly comfortable workers' housing built by Kunst and Albers are the best examples), on the whole Leninskaia was treated with respect and even affection. Leninskaia remained the street that defined what Vladivostok had been, and it shaped the vision of what the city center

would continue to be. It was the place where Vladivostok's built heritage could be best appreciated.

The most important focal point of Vladivostok's preservation of its heritage was the Arseniev Museum, housed in an impressive pre-revolutionary commercial building. With its extensive holdings emphasizing the region's natural and human history, it is visited by school groups, tourists, and residents who wish to learn more about their city's past. It is the treasury of what Vladivostok was.

Overall it can be said that during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years, destruction of the city's architectural heritage was limited. While many new projects were initiated and completed, for the most part, they resulted in a city whose amenities for its citizens were notably improved. Better theaters, cleaner beaches, improved access to transportation, and of course mass-produced housing made life tangibly better than it had been. Cultural performances by folk dance and music groups were encouraged and promoted, though these tended to be primarily of Slavic traditions, part of the central government's efforts at reminding citizens of their European rather than Asian cultural roots. The city's natural heritage left much to be desired, however. Most notably, natural vegetation in the city was lacking, water quality in the Bay of the Golden Horn and in the Amur Gulf was deplorable, and the air was often unpleasant to breathe. Soviet citizens were accustomed to these everyday realities no matter where they lived in the USSR, of course, but in Vladivostok there appeared to be little eagerness or ability to solve these problems by the local administration.

Despite what is commonly believed, Soviet citizens in the years before *glasnost* did have opportunities to express their views about the transformation of their cities, and in Vladivostok even in the 1930s lively discussions about urban planning projects were recounted in newspapers. Citizens clearly cared about what happened around them, and valued the historical continuity signified by the exceptional buildings located in Vladivostok's center, particularly since the city was so young by European Russian standards. In the end, in most cases, the authorities decided which course they wished to take, but they clearly were influenced by the strong views of citizens who wished to maintain their connections to earlier times and periods in the city's history, even though few of them would have wanted to return to pre-revolutionary conditions of living.

Urban Cultural Heritage in the Late Soviet Era

When Mikhail Gorbachev visited Vladivostok in 1986, he found a city that had been fundamentally changed by communist rule. It had more and better housing than at any time in its history: thirty new *mikroraiony* had been built since the 1950s, with more than seven million meters of living space. The city's infrastructure, public utilities, and transportation system were much improved from what they had been in the past; a new hotel nearing completion, the "Amur Bay," would be one of the largest in the Soviet Far East, and a new Pioneer Camp to the north of the city along the Ussuri Gulf was as extensive as any elsewhere in the Soviet Union, and indeed, was considered to be one of the country's best. *Perestroika* meant that it would soon be possible for foreign firms to be hired to remodel the Sea Station (a project of the Italian firm Tegola Canadese), and the former outpost and military fortress was becoming a window to Asia and the booming economies of the Pacific Basin. Warships of the United States navy made an official visit to the city in 1990. Yet at the same time all these positive developments were taking place, as John Stephan has pointed out, there was extensive prostitution because of the large number of sailors with hard currency in the city; it could take longer waiting in line to buy an Aeroflot ticket to Moscow than the flight itself took; fresh

fruits and vegetables were frustratingly difficult to find in winter; families were living on ships in the Bay of the Golden Horn because there was not enough housing for them on shore; citizens could wait decades for an apartment; and the city's sewage treatment consisted of pouring raw sewage into Peter the Great Bay. Unfortunately, conditions did not improve with the collapse of communism.

There were also few projects undertaken to restore Vladivostok's architectural or natural heritage. There was no serious talk of reconstructing historic buildings destroyed during the Stalin era, and little if any remodeling of some of the major projects built during the period of Stalinist rule. Neither was seen as a priority for a city struggling to survive, and some neighborhoods are still haunted by the sad remains of once elegant structures such as the old Stalinist movie theater on the Shkot Peninsula. In general, the Gorbachev years were ones in which citizens of Vladivostok looked neither to the future nor to the past, but concentrated instead on surviving a *perestroika* that was devastating for the city's residents. The city's heritage, like everything else, was held hostage to everyday realities.

Opportunities and Challenges in the Post-Soviet Period

In 1991 Vladivostok raised the historic tricolor flag of Russia and the following year the navy replaced its Soviet banner with the old Tsarist flag of the St. Andrew Cross. In 1992 the city, long closed officially to Soviet citizens and foreigners alike, opened itself to visits by anyone. Streets reverted to their old pre-revolutionary names as a token step toward reestablishing some of the city's connection with its past. Foreign consulates returned to the city; economic ties with the outside world began to grow; sister city agreements were signed; and new direct air service was begun with cities around the world. It was clear that Vladivostok had great potential: a third of the Primorskii Krai's capital assets were located in the city, and a third of its industrial manpower; more than half of all its fishing and ship-building facilities were located around the Bay of the Golden Horn; its industrial enterprises dominated the economy of the region, and new private enterprises and businesses were energetic and eager to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the transition to a market economy. It was a difficult transition, however, one paralleled by the extremely awkward move to democracy. The governor and the mayor quarreled with each other and ignored their common problems in the city, as public transportation, water supplies, public health, heating, and air quality all declined precipitously. What construction and remodeling there was seemed to be focused on the needs of foreigners or the desires of the "New Russians." Chinese workers were brought in to restore the 1909 Versailles Hotel to more than its original Tsarist beauty; a joint venture firm was created to convert what had been a Komsomol (Young Communist League) complex to an extensive five-star hotel for Japanese businessmen; Koreans, Americans, and Australians invested in new business enterprises in the city. There was even some talk of humanizing and remodeling some of the worst excesses of Soviet mass-produced housing, and restoration and reconstruction of central parts of the city began to be carried out. Churches were reopened and rebuilt, and religious processions to religious sites desecrated by communist zealots took place. In many ways, Vladivostok's past was returning with a vengeance. Clearly, the city had one foot in the future and one in the past.

In recent years, the city has become increasingly concerned with heritage issues, preservation of human and natural sites, and commemoration of the many peoples who contributed to Vladivostok's history and development. The railroad station was restored to its pre-revolutionary condition, and the 1930 statue of Lenin facing the station is being preserved as reflective of a page from Vladivostok's history. Newly-dedicated memorials to pre-

revolutionary historical figures have been added to the numerous Soviet-era monuments in honor of communist heroes, soldiers, and sailors. Plans are underway to develop a memorial park around the site of the former Japanese temple, the Honganji, and to create a Korean cultural center to help commemorate the thousands of Koreans who lived in the city over the course of its history. Monuments to those who suffered during the Soviet period include a memorial complex to the Koreans exiled from the Primorskii Krai to Kazakhstan in 1937 and a striking monument to the poet Osip Mandelshtam, who perished in the city's Second River Gulag transit camp in 1938. The monumental gate built to welcome the young Nicholas II and destroyed at the Stalinist government's orders, has now been rebuilt. There are ongoing projects to raise funds to rebuild the Orthodox churches demolished during the Stalin years. On the whole, Vladivostok is making substantial progress in restoring the missing pages in its history, and there is new appreciation for the rich legacy of the city's past.

Conclusions

Vladivostok is fortunate to have as many historic buildings remaining in its city center as it does. While the city did suffer the destruction of religious sites typical of the Stalinist period, it was spared the extremes of Stalinist city planning that affected many Soviet cities. The city also avoided the fates of so many cities in the European parts of the USSR during the Second World War. Finally, it was fortunate to undergo most of its rebuilding during the Brezhnev era, a time when appreciation for the architectural heritage of the past could at times, and indeed sometimes frequently did, take precedence over the utopian plans of the Khrushchev period. The result is that while much was lost, much nonetheless remains. While the last decade has been difficult in terms of heritage preservation in Vladivostok, many unique buildings have been saved and put to new use. Creative joint-venture projects have preserved a number of pre-revolutionary structures which might otherwise have fallen into serious disrepair. There is a general understanding that it is Vladivostok's historic center which lends the city much of its character, and that even some of its Stalinist-era structures add to its uniqueness. Similarly, Vladivostok's citizens are more sensitive than ever to the natural heritage of their city's location, and while the environmental damage of a century and a half will be difficult to ameliorate, there is general popular desire to accomplish what can be done in an area of great natural beauty.

Today the city is at a turning point, but all indications are that the city is moving in the right direction in terms of its cosmopolitan human heritage as well as its natural heritage. The potential is great for the city to realize its possibilities as a unique heritage site on Russia's Pacific Coast. How it does this will be one of Vladivostok's greatest challenges, but it will be able to build on many of the architectural and planning decisions of the late communist era which, as it did in so many other parts of the former Soviet Union, in the end preserved more of the city's heritage than it destroyed.

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