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Three Neoclassical Residential Building Projects in Russian Cities

*Tres proyectos de edificios residenciales
neoclásicos en ciudades rusas*

*Três projetos neoclássicos de construção
residencial em cidades russas*

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

In this article we share our experience in the design and construction of residential buildings in the historical centers of the Russian cities of Kaluga and Saint Petersburg. Through three projects, two of which are intended for implementation, we will consider principles and approaches that, on the one hand, favor traditional architecture in residential building, and on the other, allow new buildings to become an organic part of the urban environment.

En este artículo compartimos nuestra experiencia en el diseño y la construcción de edificios residenciales en los centros históricos de las ciudades rusas de Kaluga y San Petersburgo. A través de estos tres proyectos –dos de los cuales se van a realizar– consideraremos los principios y planteamientos que, por un lado, favorecen la arquitectura tradicional en los edificios residenciales y, por otro, permiten que los edificios nuevos se conviertan en una parte orgánica del tejido urbano.

Neste artigo partilhamos a nossa experiência na concepção e construção de edifícios residenciais nos centros históricos das cidades Russas de Kaluga e São Petersburgo. Através de três projetos, dois dos quais destinados a serem implementados, iremos considerar os princípios e abordagens que, por um lado, favorecem a arquitetura tradicional na construção residencial e, por outro, permitem que os novos edifícios se tornem uma parte orgânica do ambiente urbano.

House-building in Russia today is predominantly large-scale, with the erection of high-rise residential complexes. Architectural and building techniques are utilitarian and cheap, with financial gain as the main focus, not quality of construction. The Soviet approach to architecture, with its standardization and typification of construction, still largely affects consumer perceptions of urban housing and has an impact on the general agenda in architecture. At the same time, high-budget projects in large cities, primarily Moscow and Saint Petersburg, are often ordered by developers in a neoclassical style, and reminiscences of Art Deco are relatively popular. In historic city centers there are also height restrictions, albeit sometimes not well thought out. These two factors allow the emergence of some comparatively high-quality architecture in the classical tradition.

Project in Kaluga

The first project we consider worth presenting is a small apartment building in the provincial Russian city of Kaluga, 200 km from Moscow. Our design was created for a closed competition held at the end of 2021 by a large Moscow developer. The task was to create a compact low-rise residential building in the premium segment, located in the city center.

The plan of historic Kaluga was formed mainly at the end of the eighteenth century in the period of Russian classicism, and is characterized by regularity and orderliness. Yet the urban fabric itself is

Entrance from the northwest side





View from the west



View from the south

heterogeneous and largely random. On any one street a classical property erected in the nineteenth century can coexist with a Soviet standard residential block. A large part of the city is made up of low-rise individual residential buildings, partly wooden. It is such multi-temporal and diverse small-scale development that forms the setting of this project.

There are two landmarks in the vicinity: first, the City Garden, where the Russian thinker and visionary Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, whose work is a milestone in the history of Russian cosmonautics, is buried. The second is the Konstantin E. Tsiolkovsky State Museum of the History of Cosmonautics, a high point of Soviet modernist architecture. The project site has a corner location in the quarter and faces two streets without heavy traffic. The house's L-shaped three-story volume includes a courtyard open toward the garden, separated from the urban space by a transparent fence. This volume is divided into several parts and resembles a conglomerate of low-rise mansions, or wings.



Fragment of the southwest facade

The height restrictions, with a site limit of 10 m, affected the design. As the assignment was for premium housing of three stories, we proposed lowering the first floor and courtyard levels by 0.75 m relative to ground level. All the apartments on the first floors were designed as two-story, some

View of the yard from the southwest





Master plan



2nd floor plan



3rd floor plan



Entrance hall interior

with separate entrances. The windows and doors to the courtyard are on a level in proportion to the yard, and on the street side we proposed landscaped balcony terraces to shield the private space from the urban environment and offset the effect of the lowered ground floor. The first-floor apartments are planned in such a way that the ground floor combines communal spaces – lobbies, kitchen-living rooms, or offices – while the mezzanine floor contains more domestic accommodations, mainly bedrooms.

We paid great attention to the entrance. As the house consists of two residential sections with a single entrance, and to offset the compact nature of the building and its spaces due to the project constraints, we suggested using the full height of the structure for the entrance lobby. The volume is cut through by a solemn, slender space illuminated through two high portals facing the street and the courtyard. For this space we proposed interior solutions outside the competition program, combining elements of late seventeenth-century Russian Baroque with Art Deco motifs.

This was a visually dynamic version of Art Deco, close to Streamline, allowing us to create a unified image of volumes and spaces flowing into each other: bay windows, balconies, terraces, window compositions, etc. These dynamics are also correlated with the local theme of outer space and space technology. The slender proportions of the windows and doors and the widely applied golden ratio are intended to give monumentality to the low extended volume.

A number of planning and volumetric/spatial ideas are taken from the structure and principles of the classical property mentioned above, a townhouse of nineteenth-century aristocrats. A synthesis of this style with Art Deco decorative features forms the aesthetic basis of our design.

La Petite France, Saint Petersburg

The next two projects are residential buildings for central Saint Petersburg, for the historic district on Vasilyevsky Island in the Neva delta. The urban layout is a regular grid dating from the early eighteenth century. The island was supposed to be subdivided by thirty canals intersected by three perpendicular avenues, but by the mid-eighteenth century the canal scheme was abandoned and the canals already built morphed into city streets (known as “lines”), referred to by numbers.

1: Bird's eye view from the west side

2: Central courtyard from the twentieth line





1: Central courtyard from the south

2: Facade from the south and separate entrances to ground-floor apartments



The first project built here is called La Petite France, located on Vasilyevsky Island's twentieth line, composed mainly of four or five-story buildings erected in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, typical of European cities of the time. The project was carried out on behalf of a Saint Petersburg developer in 2016-18, with the building to be completed in early 2023.

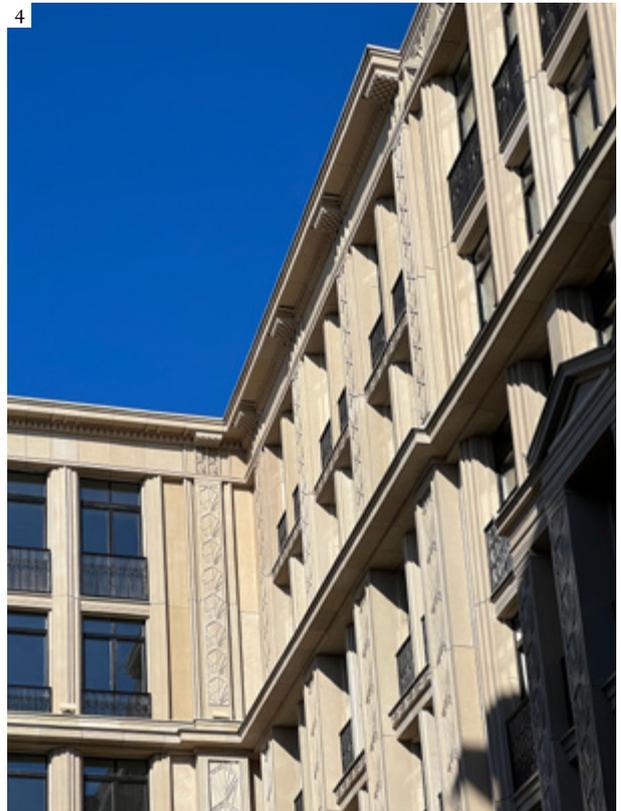
Its structure is almost entirely based on the principles of Saint Petersburg development in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, albeit influenced by high-rise and planning regulations. Two symmetrical five-story wings overlook the street development line and the number of stories increases deeper into the block, where there is a rectangular cour d'honneur separated from the street by an openwork fence. The inner spaces contain smaller partitioned courtyards.



The site with the landscaping project

The building's architecture is based mainly around two aspects: the straight line of the frontage and the front yard space. As in the Kaluga project, the first floors of La Petite France are residential; the apartments are two-story with separate entrances. In the courtyards the apartments have small front gardens; on the street side there are entrance niches, as used later in Kaluga, creating a kind of buffer between the city and the private space.

- 3: Facade ornamentation with Art Deco motifs
- 4: Facade fragment from the central courtyard



The building has four sections, two entered from the street, punctuated by small porticos, and the main front entrance for the courtyard sections is located in the cour d'honneur. This entrance is accentuated by a monumental portal with a decorative panel. The apartments on the upper floors have extensive balcony terraces.

The stylistic prototype is also Art Deco. But in developing the facade solutions we also considered the history of Saint Petersburg architecture, combining three sources. First we drew upon the German classicism brought to the Saint Petersburg tradition by Leo von Klenze, who built the New Hermitage in the 1840s; second was the geometrized Northern Art Nouveau as practiced by the Saint Petersburg architect Fyodor Lidval; third was the Leningrad architecture of the 1930s, linked to the European neoclassicism of the time (primarily with Italian prototypes).

In scale and character, the composition is based on a combination of three orders of modules. The scale of the courtyard is more monumental, closer to the Italian-Leningrad style, while the street side is closer to the small-scale style of the late nineteenth century. Additional facade complexity and ornamentation is provided by geometric pilasters and friezes, interpreting the crystal and sunburst motifs of Art Deco.

The facades are covered with glass-fiber reinforced concrete of different textures imitating limestone and gray gabbro granite. Initially there was to be cladding in the form of fixed formwork, without the use of subsystems, and so the whole facing ensemble was designed in large blocks, to the height of one floor. Unfortunately the developer later abandoned this idea in favor of a hinged facade. The courtyard facades are rendered with painted plaster.

Facade from the south





Birds-eye view from the south

AMO, Saint Petersburg

Finally, our latest project is a residential building on the twelfth line of Vasilyevsky Island, named AMO. It was designed in 2018, with construction scheduled for 2024. The site is in many ways similar to that of La Petite France: a landscaped residential street with medium-rise buildings. The architecture of both projects is similar, and in fact this one continues and develops the ideas of its predecessor.

Typologically AMO is somewhat more complex. It includes a hotel as well as a historic building – a two-story wooden house built in the mid-nineteenth century. The open courtyard is formed by a U-shaped volume of 5- or 6-story buildings, partially separated from the street by a wooden mansion.

Reconstructed wooden mansion on the territory of the residential complex





1st floor plan of the residential building



3rd floor plan of the residential building

Perspective view along the twelfth line from the south. The hotel is in the foreground



In formulating the design we interpreted the main courtyard space not as regular but as picturesque and plastic. As a prototype we may cite the square of a European city of the medieval period. Indeed, the urban fabric of that time was formed largely spontaneously, based on convenience and individual needs. Squares became a receptacle for urban life: commercial, spiritual, and administrative – a kind of nucleus or cell from which the traditional town was formed. A private courtyard in a European city was the antithesis of a public square, but at the same time its likeness: a reservoir of urban life. Thus the framing of these nuclei within private residential buildings of 2, 3, or 4 floors formed a sort of a shell, or walls of an open-air room. With their scale and complexity, such spaces were humane and readily perceivable.

Setting out from this notion, we formed the AMO structure as a complex shell around the living space. The complex lines of the building's contours divide the volume into an assembly of slender individual facades. In order to avoid chaos, the composition is based on a series of related modules, emphasized by ornamented panels.

As in La Petite France, the first-floor apartments are designed with two stories. The fifth floor on the street side is designed as a mansard with dormers and wide terraces. Decorative elements are to be made of glass fiber reinforced concrete, the walls finished with plaster, and ornamentation executed with the sgraffito technique.

South yard facade of the residential section





Balcony terrace on the street facade



Fragment of the west courtyard facade

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Stepan Liphart

Stepan is the founder of the Liphart Architects practice based in Saint Petersburg, Russia. He obtained an architectural diploma from the Moscow Architectural Institute in 2007. He has a special interest in Soviet architectural heritage and art conceptions of the 1920s and '30s. His practice specializes in residential architecture in neoclassical style, with a portfolio of private and multi-apartment residential building projects built in 2011-23 in various Russian cities: Saint Petersburg, Kaluga, Kazan, Syktyvkar. In his work he strives for proportional and compositional harmony, giving artistic value to each project.

Ekaterina Liphart

Ekaterina is an urban researcher and advisor at the Liphart Architects practice. Currently she is obtaining a master's degree at the Bauhaus Universität Weimar. From 2019 to 2022 she worked for the *Project Baltia* journal, devoted to architecture and design in Saint Petersburg and the Baltic states. She has a special interest in urbanism along with the implementation of democratic values in urban planning.