

Echoes of Theatre Ostantkino

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Echa Teatru
Ostantkino

Deus conservat omnia (God preserves all)

Sheremetev family Coat of Arms motto

Introduction

A quick glance at any map of the city of Moscow is enough to grasp the striking similarity of its layout with a wheel; not a lightweight spinning wheel, but a heavy, archaic, and a coarse wooden wheel, heavily rolling over and grinding everything that comes its way. That impression is quite justified. Almost all new buildings in Moscow that would initially puzzle and amuse its residents never seemed to fit the city landscape. With the passage of time, however, sometimes it was a short and sometimes a very long period, they would be absorbed by the city, and grinded by this ever-spinning wheel, would become an organic attribute of the Moscow's landscape.

Building of Moscow since 1940 years

The seven buildings that were built in Moscow in late 1940's-early 1950's and dubbed "Stalin skyscrapers," were initially conceived as the symbols of the political system and not as architectural highlights. It's hard to view them as the objects of architectural art, because genuine architecture always implies a blend of structure and space, and these buildings rather look like a combination of space and volume, which is more typical of sculpture art. By their interior layout, the skyscrapers look like huge "termite mounds" and their

inner space is in no way aligned with the surrounding area. Yet, regardless of their architectural "merits," these buildings quite quickly became "rooted" in Moscow's landscape and their spiky silhouettes have become the landmarks of the city skyline – something which has never happened in Warsaw, where a similar "Stalin skyscraper" did not manage to integrate into the city landscape, and to this day looks like something alien and out of place.

It is quite interesting that many well-known Moscow architectural monuments, including the Church of the Assumption in Kolomenskoye and St. Basil's Cathedral in the Red Square, do look like pieces of sculpture, as their external design is much more interesting, expressive and significant, than their interior space. These buildings were meant to be the landmarks from the very beginning: the church in Kolomna was built to commemorate the birth of Ivan IV, and St. Basil's Cathedral – the seizure of Kazan.

The history of Moscow's development is extremely dramatic, and over the previous century, passions were only getting hotter. Destruction of Moscow's architectural monuments and the history of standoff between scholars, art historians, architects, journalists and municipal authorities deserves a separate study. Many buildings of historic and artistic value have been deleted from the list of architectural monuments under state protection. The process contin-

Fig. 1. Podkluchnilov N.I., The view of Ostankino village (1833)



ues to this day, due to the efforts of poorly educated, selfish bureaucrats and unscrupulous developers.

Yet, Moscow would not be Moscow – a mystical city built on an empty space beneath it (literally, because the city stands in the area where karst processes have long been underway, causing voids and cavities in the earth's crust), and continuing to live and develop under its own laws, often in spite of the obvious and in defiance of the laws of physics – if it didn't constantly see the events, that would always look the exceptions, rather than rules.

The heavy wheel of Moscow not only knocks together everything that comes within the scope of its power, but also with unexpected care preserves some of the objects that by all indications stood no chance to survive the hard times and dramatic events in the history of the city.

Ostankino one of Moscow suburban

One of such object is the Ostankino Estate – an architectural landmark of the 17th and 18th centuries that was originally located outside the city limits, but with the passage of time, became part of the growing city and is now firmly established in its metaphysical essence (fig. 1).

One of the earliest 16th century sources mention the area as the "village of Ostashkovo on a dry meadow," owned by "Alexei Satin,

a serviceman." A little bit later, the village was "passed over in possession of a certain "oprichnik (guardsman of Ivan IV), Orn an alien," and since 1585, it was owned by Vassily Shchelkalov, the Duma deacon. He built a small wooden church and a pond, and planted pine and oak groves around it, and some of these trees have survived to this day"¹.

The estate went through a period of neglect and abandonment during the Polish intervention, until in 1620, it was acquired by Ivan Cherkassky, a prominent, wealthy and energetic nobleman, who in 1677 married a daughter of Prince Y.N. Odoyevsky. The bride received a large dowry, including serfs, and one of them was a talented architect, Pavel Sidorovich Potekhin, who designed and in 1678 started the construction of a stone church of the Holy Trinity in Ostankino.

Princes Cherkassky owned Ostankino for 123 years, until Varvara, the daughter of Chancellor Alexei Cherkassky, married Count Peter B. Sheremetev, with the estate becoming part of her huge dowry.

When Ostankino was owned by Princes Cherkassky, it served as a Court venue for ceremonial events. In 1742, the park acquired a special dancing and masquerade pavilion, which quickly turned into a very popular place among the aristocracy; the pavilion's construction had been timed for the visit of Empress Elizabeth (fig. 2).

It would be true to say that the golden age for Ostankino began when it became owned by Nikolai Sheremetev, the man with amazing destiny, the keeper of many unresolved mysteries of his time, a Mason, a close friend of Emperor Paul I, a collector of works of art, philanthropist, musician, and the creator and enthusiast of theater art. Sheremetev's very existence may be described as a miraculous and unearthly phenomenon, if we consider his tremendous artistic and creative potential.

In 1788, after he inherited the vast estate from his father, there was no reason for Nikolai Sheremetev to further indulge in public service, which he found terribly boring, to the extent that it would cause his frequent fits of "hypochondriac anxiety"² and that fact deserves a more careful study and further clarification (fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Unknown artist, Portrait of Countess P.I. Sheremetev (1800-th)

Ostankino place – theatre

According to all known sources, theatre turned into Nikolai Sheremetev's life passion, and, as the contemporary cliché goes, theater turned into the area of application of his professional interests. It is known that the Count took great interest in music and was an excellent cellist, could read opera scores, direct an orchestra and stage performances, i.e., he was an excellent producer of opera and ballet shows. During his trip to Europe, Nikolai Sheremetev attended lectures in Leiden University, attended the local Opera House, and was always among the first to learn about the latest theatre trends and pieces by the most popular com-

posers, including A.E. Gretry, P.-A. Monsigny, K.V. Gluck, A.N. Salieri, N. Piccinni and others.

Construction of Ostankino palace theatre began in 1790, and continued for more than six years. Over that time, many prominent architects participated in the project: Vassily Bazhenov, Franz Kazie, Francesco Camporezi, Giacomo Quarenghi, Pavel Argunov, Ivan Starov, and Vincenzo Brenna. The habit of inviting several architects... was especially popular in Moscow. It is also important to note that the capital, where every nobleman wanted to satisfy his ambitious fantasy and exceed the luxury of not only his neighbors, but was out to reach the level of royal palaces – was dominated by competitive spirit that inspired continued improvement of their private residences. The latter were built as showcase objects meant to “surprise and overwhelm”. At the same time, the construction of palaces would satisfy the yearning of educated customers for their personal artistic advancement³. The goal was not just building a palace, but a “temple of art” with a theatre stage in the middle and luxuriously designed rooms surrounding it, serving as the preamble to the show. The same concept was later brilliantly implemented by C. Garnier, who built the Paris Opera.

In Ostankino theatre, before entering the theater hall, the audience walked through a gallery in rooms displaying sculptures, paintings, prints and works of decorative

Fig. 4. Ostankino palace, Art gallery



art (fig. 4, 5). The theatre “state-of-the-art” mechanisms and equipment could produce various effects: thunder and lightning, rain and wind. During a performance, the audience saw the awesome episodes where actors would suddenly take off and move in the air from one end of the scene to another. The equipment room located beneath the stage and built to French blueprints by the serf craftsman, Fyodor Pryakhin, could quickly transform the theater hall into a ballroom.

In the beginning of the 20th century Jury Shamurin has paid attention that the nature of Ostankino with its faded Central Russian modesty does



Fig. 5. Ostankino palace, the northern facade, the modern view



Fig. 3. Ostankino Park, The Hill Panas

Fig. 6. Ostankino, Egyptian pavilion,
the northern facade



not assume occurrence here an Art temple, but as a result of the strange magic on the marshy meadow situated near Moscow, at the edge of the dusty road and thin, as though deplumated forest the sonorous porticoes, rhythmical bas-reliefs and garlands rise, they are the oeuvres of the higher aesthetic harmony epoch which was ever created by mankind. A marble bas-relief, an accord of the columns, all of it was born under the hot sun of Ellas. There the marble which has been filled in with the sun, gave sharp effects: the dark, almost black shades were even more strongly allocated with shine of the shined parts, but in the cloudy Russian sky they give the gentle harmony, easy pearled-grey modulations, the weak shades of columns, transparent stains lay down on the facade smooth surface. In such softened concept the classical beauty matches the grey sky, with faded meadows⁴. Judging by the remained documents and the evidence of contemporaries, Nikolaj Petrovich's father – Peter Borisovich Sheremetev with all classical conformity to an image of the Elisabeth' time grandee, who constantly was in the attention centre, loving a life and taking from it everything that it could offer the person with unlimited financial possibilities generally found rest not in the living rooms and «mezzanine floor» of the palace, and especially, not in the «magnificence rooms», but in the small wing which was in the landscape part of park which has

received the name of “the solitude House” (fig. 6, 7).

Nikolaj Petrovich has continued this tradition and has ordered to reconstruct for himself “Mylnja” (Bath-House) in Kuskovo which was situated “there, where silvery poplars are growing now”⁵ outside of the regular park.

Ostankino park

In Ostankino, about which N.P. Sheremetev wrote that “this place serves me as a uniform hiding-place and my room”⁶, the life passed also not in a palace-theatre, but in those constructions which unfortunately had not remained till our time. There were the various inhabited wings – the Old mansion, Gostinyj wing, Detinyj wing, Knjazhy wing – they were situated through the parties of the palace building. The aspiration to the loneliness was distinctly embodied in creation of the Ostankinskij own garden near Old mansion, which was accompanied by command, that “the gardener would especially choose a special place, where it is possible for walking alone and invisible”⁷.

When the palace-theatre building was started, park Ostankino which was created by the specially invited gardener Manners, was in the deplorable condition, however thanks to Nikolaj Petrovich's efforts it was quickly restored and has found more huge magnificence (fig. 8, 9).

It is known that plants for park were specially sent from the foreign greenhouses and then to the cedars, oaks and lindens which remained since the foundation of park there were added the various bushes, grapevines braiding the decorative lattices and pergolas, covering the owners of manor from the immodest sights because the solitude and private life became more and more significant and valuable.

The rare plants have drawn attention not only those people who disinterestedly admired their beauty, but also those people who wished to appropriate although a small part of the seigniorial magnificence. And what is a problem? The flowers and bushes grow and grow in their own right, so it is possible to dig out something for sale. However Nikolaj Petrovich, as the person inclined to a solitude and quiet “stay-at-home” life, who according the evidence of the doctor Freze “liked to indulge the house needs and to be engaged in happiness of his numerous peasants”⁸ strictly and repeatedly gave orders to the watchmen watched that “nobody would take any grasses and dig roots... that nobody would ramble in the garden”⁹. It confirms the value which was given to park as the place providing the style of life which became more and more characteristic for the Count, corresponded to changes of its character and requirements of his sensitive heart.

Fig. 7. Ostankino, Egyptian pavilion,
the eastern facade



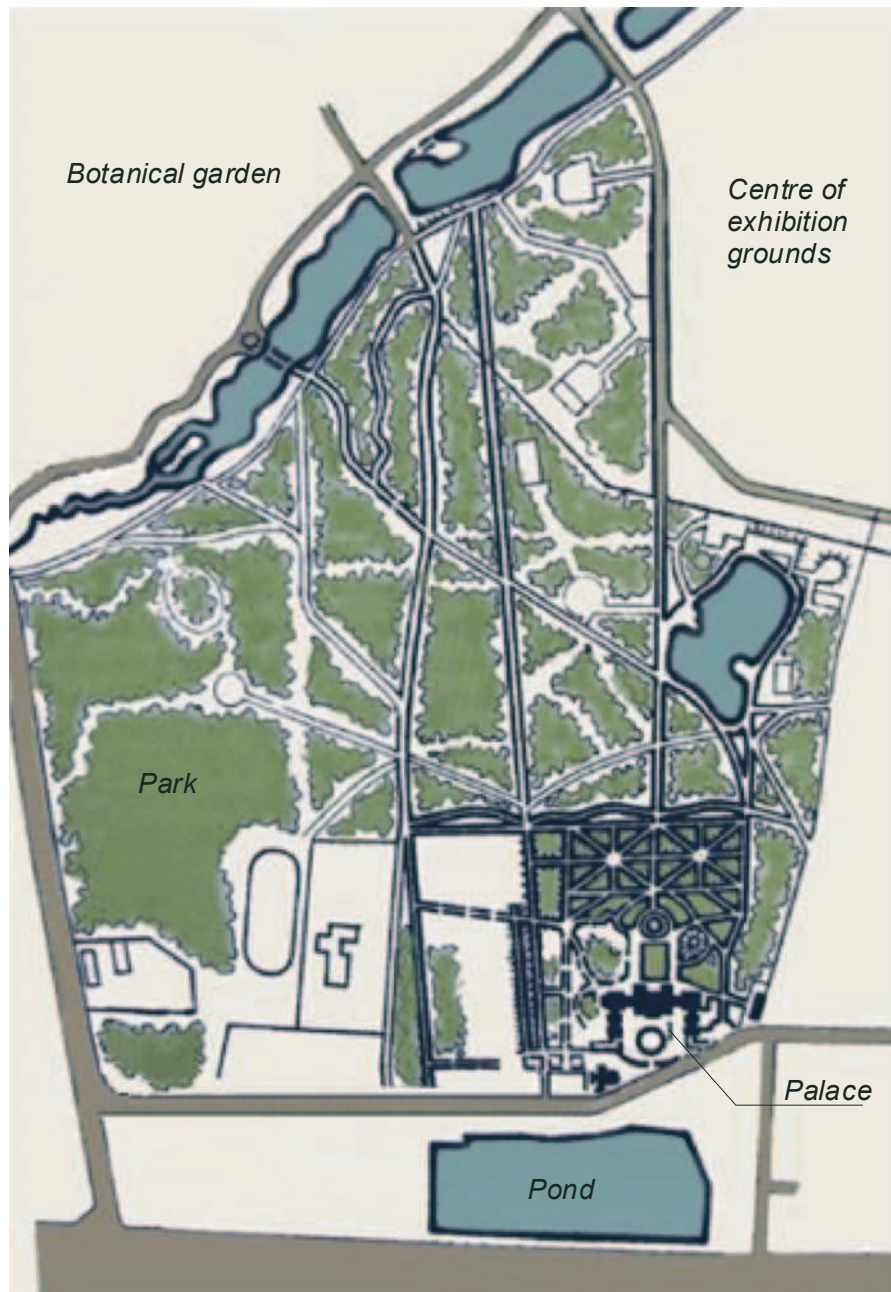


Fig. 8. The general plan of Ostankino park

Listen carefully, and you may hear the gentle sounds of music among the old trees in the park, the subtle chime of crystal chandeliers in the theater room, and the sound of steps fading backstage, where you can still see the chariot, the character of a fairy tale where love always wins.

Photographs made by author.

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- ¹ Rakina V.A., Suslova M.D., 2008, *Ostankino*, ITRC Publishers, Moscow, 2.
- ² *Echoes of 18th Century*, Moscow, 1905, Vol. XI, 24.
- ³ Yefremova I., *State Lounge of Count N. Sheremetev, Count Nikolai Sheremetev. Personality. Activities. Fate*, Moscow, Our Home Publishers, 2001, 133.
- ⁴ Shamurin J., 1914, *Moscow-area (Podmoskovnye)*, Izdatelstvo Tovarishchestva Obrazovaniya.
- ⁵ Sheremetev S.D. T.V. Shlykova (1773–1863), SPb., 1911. 5.
- ⁶ Scientific archive of the Moscow memorial estate Ostankino, □350, 56.
- ⁷ Devjatova □. *the Mansion in which I live, Count Nikolaj Petrovich Sheremetev. The person. Activity. Destiny*. Izdatelstvo Nash Dom, 2001. 80.
- ⁸ *18th century Echoes*. □, 1905. 11. 21, 22.
- ⁹ Scientific archive of the Moscow memorial estate Ostankino. □352, 41. 1793.

Conclusion

Thus, the park in which creation it have been enclosed not only considerable means, but also sincere feelings, desire to protect the life from strangers, became that protective cover which has partly remained up to our time, a palace covering from everyday storms like the thickets of a dogrose protecting a dream of the Sleeping beauty.



Fig. 9. Ostankino, the shrine in the park