

# Universal aesthetic criteria in architecture

Ph.D.

**IRINA O. BEMBEL,**

Ph.D. of Art History. Chief Editor of the “Kapitel” magazine (St. Petersburg, Russia). Senior researcher of the Scientific Research Institute of Theory and History of Architecture and Urban Planning, branch of the Central Institute for Research and Design of the Ministry of Construction and Housing and Communal Services of the Russian Federation (NIITIAG).

**ORCID: 0000-0003-0876-8244**



The article is devoted to the search for a universal art criticism method against the background of a crisis in methodology. To this end, the author examines the most important trends of modern architecture through the prism of traditional aesthetic criteria. In the course of this analysis, she presents the specificity of the two “superstyles” (suggested by S. Khan-Magomedov) – classics and modernism. The author extends the meaning of classics and modernism onto the meaning of “traditional architecture” and “modern architecture,” which are considered as projections of two philosophical paradigms: tradition and modernity.

The subject of the research is the art history methodology crisis which appeared due to the change of relevant value paradigms.

The whole research methodology has been focusing on the consideration of modern processes in architecture through the prism of traditional aesthetic criteria.

This comparison is based on S. Khan-Magomedov's (Russian scientist) thesis on two superstyles in architecture: classics and modernism.

Following this, the first superstyle is broader than the classic style, because the whole traditional architecture falls under this term. The same pertains to the second superstyle, which is not confined to our avant-garde and modernism but includes the whole diversity of contemporary trends.

On the one hand, in our methodology, we rely on the philosophy of traditionalism (R. Genon mainly), and on the other – on the experience of the Vienna School of Art History (M. Dvořák, G. Zödlmayr).

To avoid confusion, it is necessary to precede considerations with some terminological refinements.

As a philosophical category, “modern” means the first stage of the modernity paradigm. The Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment and the Newest Time (through 1970s) are its main historical milestones, and humanism, enlightenment, theory of progress, positivism, materialism – its main philosophical directions.

The second stage of the modernity paradigm, which began in the late 1970s and has been continued to this day, is “postmodern,” with poststructuralism as its main philosophical content. “Postmodern” includes, but is not limited to, postmodernism in art.

The present crisis of Art and the humanities is also manifested in art criticism. It became one of the expressions of the universal postmodernity paradigm, with its rejection of absolute super-

personal categories and the orientation towards “universal relativity.”

If a work cannot be “good” or “bad” indeed, what is the point of art criticism? And where is the border between art and non-art? Following the logic of removing qualitative differences, any language, Logos as such, is at risk. It is replaced by a Digit.

Therefore, today's growth of the “survival” of humanities problem is not related to the sphere of quality. It also includes art history and theory.

“To be or not to be” depends on whether it proposes a method. First of all, it should be the method with which it would be possible to analyze the works of modern architecture, and, secondly, which would be applicable to the whole history of architecture, allowing it to be considered as a single process.

Today judgments are often pronounced subjective – as “authorial” as architecture itself. They have been partly based on the most general modernist “canons,” which are largely morally obsolete and clearly “do not work” as criteria for the latest architectural phenomena and processes.

At the same time, residual ideas on classical harmony are preserved in the professional mind, forming a bizarre postmodern mix which today's analysts are forced to work with.

In fairness, it must be noted that recently, there have emerged a lot of original art criticism methods in the West: art processes and individual works can be considered from the point of view of psychoanalysis, social history, gender history, structuralism, poststructuralism, etc.

But all these methods fit entirely into the philosophical field of the “modern” and give only a private, very specific, section of the problem.

All of this prompts the question of the opposite method competence, i.e. of the consideration of the latest architectural processes through the prism of traditional aesthetic criteria. This method was essentially proposed by the Vienna School of Art History at that time.

## The aesthetics of tradition

The method of the Vienna school is succinctly formulated in the thesis “The History of Art as the History of the Spirit.” Intended by M. Dvořák, it was developed by G. Zödlmayr, who posed the problem of the relationship between “art and truth” in full growth.

The category of truth inevitably implies the existence of objective evaluation criteria: the fuller and the more truthfully a piece of art testifies to the truth, the better it is.

In Art, the criterion of “radiance” (Plato) of truth is beauty. It is also the main criterion for the value of a piece of art.

Tradition has also developed certain ways to achieve beauty in Art. If we try to generalize it, then we can reduce them to the following three main ways:

1. The way of following the canons containing the memory of revelation and the experience of generations;
2. The way of a personal spiritual experience;
3. The way of the mimesis as a principle aimed at understanding the general laws of creation through the contemplation of nature (reflected beauty).

On the one hand, the artist relies on centuries of experience, enshrined in the canons, on the other: with a “smart gaze,” with the help of austerity, seeks to contemplate invisible perfection.

At the same time, the canons themselves are not just “natural selection,” selection through trials and mistakes, but they are also the experience of revelation passed down from generation to generation.

The basis of the objectivity of traditional beauty is the mimetic principle of the approach to architecture, to Art in general. Mimesis is usually interpreted as an imitation of nature, but this general interpretation needs to be clarified.

In comparison with, for example, modern biomorphic architecture, imitating private natural forms and structures, the mimesis is aimed at understanding the principles of creation.



Illustration 1. Architecture embodying the idea of beauty “as the transformation of matter through the embodiment in it of another, supramaterial principle” (V. Soloviev)

Dante expressed the essence of mimesis with ingenious force and simplicity:

*Art, as far as it is able, follows nature, as a pupil imitates his master; thus your art must be, as it were, God's grandchild.*  
(*The Divine Comedy, The Hell, Canto 11*)

It should be noted that both the mimetic principle and the personal experience of communion with God as ways to achieve beauty are simultaneously important conditions for protecting from “slavery” of the canon.

This allows us to define beauty as “the emission of spiritual light into a sensual environment” (M. Dvořák) [1], as “the transformation of matter through the embodiment in it of another, supramaterial principle” (V. Soloviev) [2].

Unreformed matter, matter as such, is ugly, because it does not carry the “Image of God.”

According to V. S. Soloviev, ugliness in nature comes down to the following features:

1. An exorbitant development of material animality;
2. A return to formlessness;
3. A caricatural anticipation of the highest form.

“(…) in essence, these three reasons can be reduced to one, namely the resistance that the material basis of life at different stages of the zoogenetic process exerts on the organizing force of the ideal cosmic principle” [2].

The aesthetic criteria of V. Soloviev corresponding to the nature-oriented mimetic approach can logically be applied to works of architecture.

### The aesthetics of the New Time

In the period of the New Time, the vector of creative attention is gradually shifting from supersensible perfection to the beauty of ready-made forms of the past.

Beauty ceases to be an objective category. It is important that in the same period, architecture ceases to be “true,” tectonically “honest”: the former unity of form, function and construction is lost. But even in this “reflected” form, traditional aesthetics inherits the fundamental properties of traditional beauty, such as harmony, symmetry, rhythm, tectonics, hierarchical subordination of parts and the whole. Along with that, these general basic patterns are becoming increasingly fixed, quantifiable standards.

It seems that this was one of the symptoms of the general “solidification of the world,” about which Rene Guenon writes: “a world that is less sensitive to the Spirit and more and more perceived as a world of matter” [3, p. 120].

The fact that the New Time, out of the whole incredible variety of traditional forms, has chosen a single Greco-Roman version of the architectural order confirms the gradual loss of a living connection with the supersensible, eternal source of beauty – the guarantee of an infinite variety of beautiful forms.

And not surprisingly, as the initial sacred impulse was being steadily weakened, till the end of the New Time, architecture was declining. The growing splendor was not able to compensate for the substantial emptiness of desacralized forms.

Using the terminology of Pavel Florensky, this phenomenon can be called the final stage of exfoliation of the mask, a casting of the original image with the filling made by the old forms that have a sacred genesis, which is strange to their original nature – “profane,” secular content [4, p. 209–213]. Ceasing to be the “radiance of truth,” beauty gradually becomes a meaningless, frozen mask, which, as the initial formative impulses are forgotten, is steadily distorted; its subsequent casts increasingly lose their resemblance to early prototypes and, finally, turn

into miserable or deliberately ugly postmodern grimaces.

This final stage was preceded by a modernist “explosion” that destroyed the meaningless empty casts of old forms – everything that remained of tradition in its material architectural manifestation by the beginning of the twentieth century.

### The aesthetics of progress

In the Newest Time, the search for a figurative ideal moves from the past to the future: the passion of architecture is replaced by futurism. In fact, this was the other side of the same problem: a coup destroying a fundamental orientation toward eternity in favour of a one-dimensional linear time model.

The “reflected” beauty of the past, which inherits the “genes of truth,” is now contrasted with different – *new* beauty. It is rooted in a different truth – not divine, but human. Instead of the images of the Paradise, the heavenly city of Jerusalem, it draws the projections of the earthly kingdom of universal prosperity, into which progress will inevitably lead. Hence the fundamentally different symbolism and radically new language, which S. Khan-Magomedov logically called “the second superstyle” [5, p. 8]. This language is based on well-known postulates, such as: “form follows function,” “less means more,” which meet the criteria of functionality and practicality and thus comply with the slogan of social equality and justice.

Moreover, the most famous avant-garde projects were very far from the requirements of functionality and practicality from the very beginning. Their value was in the visual preaching of new ideals opposed to traditional ones.

Since this was an alternative ideal, architecture sought and found alternative means. A horizontal orientation instead of a vertical one (“flat-



Illustration 2. Self-sufficient value of the beauty of certain material forms

ness," tape windows, exedras, flat roofs), everything reflected the desire to move forward by progress. The game with simple volumes symbolized the destruction of the old world and the construction of a new one from the "primary elements."

The most daring of that projects were not implemented. The time of such architecture came later, by the end of the twentieth century. And it seems symbolic that by this time, the ethical message of modernity as a paradigm, its moral "justification" in the search for universal social good, has already practically dried up. However, there remained the second and more significant aspect: symbolic, visual destruction of the old world and the construction of various options for an alternative model.

It is interesting that simultaneously with the beginning of modernism, there arose the theme

of organic architecture, the search for harmony of new forms with the natural environment. Why didn't this problem appear before? The answer is simple: the whole traditional (mimetic) architecture was organic by definition. The path of Art was the path of joint creation of a man and God, with this approach being consonant with the theological term "synergy" from Eastern Christianity.

New Art began to see an artist as an independent demiurge, creating his own alternative world from scratch. Later the term "synergetics" arose as the probability of spontaneous and unpredictable emergence of a new order from chaos. This purely hypothetical concept, fundamentally different from "synergy," has recently been considered one of the new scientific justifications for the nihilistically interpreted freedom of authorship.

These two fundamental varieties of modern architecture: functionalism as a mass version and "author's" architecture for individual objects – still exist. Following the criteria of V. Soloviev, both of them are ugly architecture from the point of view of tradition. Functionalism, which focuses on the satisfaction of the material functions of a person, seems to be nothing more than the "exorbitant development of material animality."

As for the "author's" architecture, its nihilistic, destructive message certainly refers to "the resistance exerted on the organizing force by the material life base for the ideal cosmic principle" [2].

Approximately at the end of the 1970s, there was a new paradigm shift. In the tradition, the category of truth was measured by eternity, in the Modern Era, it started to be measured by a man and has been completely removed from



Illustration 3. Architectural manifestations of "exorbitant development of material animality" (V. Soloviev)





Illustration 4. "Return to formlessness" (V. Soloviev)

the agenda now. There is a return to the sophisticated message "everything is relative," with the poststructuralist philosophical base trend under it. The Postmodern Era has arrived.

If modernism, in relation to tradition, was a kind of anti-system, postmodernism rebelled against the system principle as such.

On the background of the revolt against the total rationality of the Modern Era, there emerged new "author's" trends: deconstructivism and postmodernism. Each of them, symbolically, in its own way, destroys existing compositional systems: deconstructivism by demonstrating, visually and exponentially, the return to formlessness and defeating chaos that did not submit to the "bright world order" element, that dead matter that "is not transformed by the life-giving rational principle" [3].

Postmodernism makes the process of visual deconstruction less obvious; it uses the classic dictionary but applies the old vocabulary arbitrarily, outside the classical system. In the model examples of ironic postmodernism, there is also a caricature and a parody of beauty and mean-

ing. According to V. Soloviev, this point meets another criterion of ugliness: "an advanced caricature of a higher form."

Biomorphism is another new trend imitating natural forms and structures, including microstructures. This direction has been already mentioned above, in the context of analyzing the traditional mimetic approach in architecture. It is better to emphasize again that biomorphism does not inherit the inherent holistic view of the world and actually splits the picture of the universe into parts, like deconstructivism and postmodernism, formally focusing on nature.

"Of course, it is worth paying attention to the fact that chaos and disorganization cannot cause a positive aesthetic feeling. Therefore, beauty is associated with entropy, with a certain inverse relationship: a beautiful object has less entropy than an ugly one. The latter contains more 'distracting details'. That is why the concepts of order and beauty as assessments of natural phenomena or scientific theories and pieces of art are going

hand in hand. Their kinship is also confirmed by psychological experiments. Presenting to the people organized (ordered) geometric shapes and the ones devoid of this quality, scientists noticed that a sense of aesthetic satisfaction appears when the form is captured by an internal organization" [6].

Thus, from the point of view of tradition, the main directions of "modern architecture" are ugly. Perhaps the exception is only made for those directions which consciously inherit the general principles of tradition, for example the New Urbanism.

This example confirms again that the meaning of tradition as a paradigm is not in certain specific forms but in the presence of a serious ethical basis.

The desire to revive open-minded architecture, to create a humane environment is a foundation of the New Urbanism. Moreover, some architects and theorists, for example K. Alexander, N. Salingaros, emphasize that it is not only about formal methods of traditional planning, because for a full-fledged residential environ-



Illustration 5. "Caricature of the highest form" (V. Soloviev)

ment, it is necessary to have sacred spaces, as the main organizing element of various settlements [7, 8].

### Conclusion

The comparative analysis of aesthetic criteria of traditional and modern architecture confirms the validity of the thesis of S. Khan-Magomedov on two superstyles in architecture.

In the case of modern architecture, the most important aesthetic criterion becomes the criterion of freedom and innovation, interpreted as overcoming and deconstructing the traditional norms and shaping principles.

Specific modern forms meet the traditional criteria of ugliness, the essence of which, according to V. Soloviev, is reduced to the resistance exerted by matter on "the organizing force of the ideal cosmic principle". This symbolism visually reflects the antagonism of the two superstyles in architecture and, accordingly, of the two paradigms, the projections of which they are.

In these circumstances, the analyst must at least be aware of the coexistence of the two antagonistic philosophical paradigms and the fact of their influence on architectural formation. Further, it is necessary to determine the personal position.

According to G. Zödlmayr, the certainty of the initial position, as well as the clarity of the goal, are indispensable conditions for building a successful art criticism method.

### References:

- [1] Dvořák, M. (2001). "The history of Art as the history of the spirit. Research of Western Art development". Academic project / Tr. by A. Sidorov, V. Sidorova, A. Lepork. (In Russian).
- [2] Khan-Magomedov, S., Ivan Zholtovsky, I. (2010). M. - 352 p.: Fig (In Russian).
- [3] Soloviev, Vladimir. "Beauty in Nature". Institut Filosofii Rossijskoi Akademii Nauk. Accessed September 16, 2019. [https://ip-hras.ru/elib/Soloviev\\_Krasota.html](https://ip-hras.ru/elib/Soloviev_Krasota.html). (In Russian).
- [4] Guénon, René. "The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times". Rus. ed. Transl. by Tatiana Liubimova. Moscow: Belovod'e Publ., 2011. (Izbrannye proizvedeniia). (In Russian).
- [5] Florensky, Pavel. "Iconostasis". Accessed September 16, 2019. <http://www.vehi.net/florensky/ikonost.html> (In Russian).
- [6] Sukhotin, A. "Rhythms and algorithms" - 2nd ed. - Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1988. Accessed September 21, 2019. (In Russian). <http://nplit.ru/books/item/100/s00/z0000093/st028.shtml>
- [7] Bembel, Irina. "Superstyles' and Problem of Periodization in Architecture". Academia. Arkhitektura i stroitel'stvo, no. 4 (2018): 29–34 (In Russian).
- [8] Salingaros N. "Socially-Organized Housing: Biophilia, Connectivity, and Spirituality". Accessed April 11, 2020. <https://www.archdaily.com/922149/socially-organized-housing-biophilia-connectivity-and-spirituality/>.
- [9] Sedlmayr, Hans. "Art and Truth: Theory and Method of the Art History". Rus. ed. Transl. by Iurii Popov. St. Petersburg: Axioma Publ., 2000 (In Russian).
- [10] Wąs C. „Antynomie współczesnej architektury sakralnej”. Wrocław: Muzeum architektury we Wrocławiu, 2008. – 322 s.: il. (In Polish).
- [11] Salingaros, Nikos. "Anti-architecture and Deconstruction. The Triumph of Nihilism". Rus. ed. transl. by Tat'iana Bystrova and Elena Duilovskaia. 4th ed. Moscow, Ekaterinburg: Kabinetnyi uchenyi Publ.; Fedor Eremeev Publ., 2017 (In Russian).

DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0014.4531

PRAWIDŁOWY SPOSÓB CYTOWANIA  
Bembel Irina O., 2020, Universal aesthetic criteria in architecture, "Builder" 11 (280).  
DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0014.4531

**Abstract:** The article is devoted to the search for a universal art criticism method against the

background of a crisis in methodology. To this end, the author examines the most important trends of modern architecture through the prism of traditional aesthetic criteria. In the course of this analysis, she presents the specificity of the two "superstyles" (suggested by S. Khan-Magomedov) – classics and modernism. The author extends the meaning of classics and modernism onto the meaning of "traditional architecture" and "modern architecture," which are considered as projections of two philosophical paradigms: tradition and modernity.

**Key words:** tradition, modernity, modern, post-modern, modernism, postmodernism, superstyle, aesthetic criteria, art criticism method

**Streszczenie:** UNIWERSALNE KRYTERIA ESTETYCZNE W ARCHITEKTURZE. Artykuł dotyczy poszukiwania uniwersalnej metody krytyki sztuki w warunkach kryzysu metodologii. W tym celu autorka rozważa najważniejsze kierunki współczesnej architektury poprzez pryzmat tradycyjnych kryteriów estetycznych. W toku tej analizy pojawia się specyfika dwóch „superstylów” (zaproponowanych przez S. Khan-Magomedova) – klasyki i modernizmu. Autorka rozszerza znaczenie klasyki i modernizmu na znaczenie „architektury tradycyjnej” i „architektury nowoczesnej”, które są uważane za projekcje dwóch paradygmatów filozoficznych: tradycji i nowoczesności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** tradycja, nowoczesność, postmodernizm, modernizm, superstyl, kryteria estetyczne, metoda krytyki sztuki