

# **The Role of Medieval Armenian Architecture in the Process of the National Self-Identification**

Anush Ter-Minasyan<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, Institute of Arts, Yerevan, Republic of Armenia

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [anoush\\_arch@hotmail.com](mailto:anoush_arch@hotmail.com)

## **ABSTRACT**

**For hundreds and thousands years, under the extremely difficult conditions of regular wars, raids of foreign invaders, political and natural cataclysms, the self-identification of the Armenian people has been developed only through the national culture, particularly in architecture. There is no exaggeration to put architecture at the first place among other factors of self-identification – not only because it is a synthesis of various arts and sciences, but also because of the close connection between architecture and natural and climatic peculiarities of the country, the national mentality, art ideas of the people of Armenia, and even the political and economical situation in the country. The loyalty to the national sources led to the awareness of the national identity, to the desire to possess and keep a specific worldview, and – thanks to that – to stay in centuries.**

*Keywords: architecture, composition, Armenian Church, globalization, self-identification, art concepts, space, national traditions*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Nowadays, up to the final of the first quarter of the twenty first century, the peoples of the world, who kept their self-identification, have a new task: from one hand, in the course of extremely fast technical progress there is an obvious necessity of the common informational. Economical, financial, and in a sense cultural space – i.e. the phenomenon of globalization; from the other hand, on that background, peoples are in the search for the ways of preservation of their national identity and the specific of their culture, as well as the creative variety of the world cultures. To what extent and how is it possible to preserve one's self-identification, and therefore one's attitude, in the modern world?

There is no doubt that the phenomenon of globalization was reflected in architecture to its full extent: we see faceless buildings, the same architectural techniques and solutions throughout the world. This also applies to new church buildings, which are being constructed in Armenia and in other countries. Should the Armenian Church maintain its national image, both in Armenia and outside the country? And what is the role of national traditions in creating the artistic image and special approaches to creativity in the contemporary world?

In search for answers to these questions, one should turn to national sources as a non-exhausting source of the attitude to the world, artistic representations, ideals

and creative methods that shape the architecture of a certain nation.

## **II. CREATIVE METHODS AND COMPOSITIONAL IDEAS OF MEDIEVAL ARMENIAN ARCHITECTURE**

The history of the architecture of Armenia – one of the most ancient states of the world, a contemporary of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Ancient Greece and Rome – could be traced to 6,000 years back. Settlements of the Chalcolithic period and the Bronze Age, cave dwellings, megalithic constructions, and the most ancient fortifications, cult and memorial buildings, and an extremely rich heritage of the culture of Urartu shape the fundament of the life and construction traditions of the Armenian Highlands.

A special place in Armenian architecture was taken with the period of the royal dynasty of Arshakid/Arshakuni (52 – 428 CE). That very Arshakid Period was marked with the most important event in the history of the country and the nation, and naturally for its architecture and art – it was the establishing of Christianity as the state religion in 301. It became the starting point for creation and development of such unique cultural phenomenon as medieval Armenian architecture with its numerous types, forms, and compositional ideas. However, the rapid development of Christian architecture was characterized with the translational motion, it was based on traditions of

ancient art and culture, i.e. on the national sources; thus, there was bright and pronounced continuity [1].

Just after the Christianization and the further mass destruction of pagan cult constructions and places, there has been a necessity to build numerous new churches – basically located over the ancient demolished cult places (sometimes, over their fundamentals), often accepting their plan composition. They changed the orientation from the west to the east – where the altar was to be. So, the earliest type of Armenian Christian architecture has been formed: a hall church with its numerous types and subtypes. Another variant wide spread in Armenia of that epoch was a three-naved basilica of two types: the eastern one (with naves under a common gable roof) and the western one (with a basilical section, when the central nave is higher than the other two).

The most important and interesting part of the ecclesiastic architecture of that period was cupola buildings. Working out a system of Christian cupola buildings was made on the base of the local traditions about the early fourth century. Armenian cupola buildings used the principle of traditional house: a cupola over four pillars; since the beginning, they have been developed in an original way. Architects got a great success both in compositional ideas and in engineering methods.

The basics of the architectural and constructive system of Christian cupola church, laid down in the early medieval period, were reworked and enriched with new details and new methods of architectural expression of religious categories – it led to the creation of numerous types of centered cupola constructions. The variety of compositions in all architectural types, forms, and means or artistic expression logically led to the unprecedented flourishing of architecture in the seventh century, which was called the ‘golden age’ of medieval Armenian architecture. That time, not only quantitative growth of ecclesiastic buildings took place, but also a quality leap – its “most obvious feature ...was the dominance of centered cupola compositions of those without cupola” [2], and – as a result – invention of numerous subtypes of centered cupola buildings. At that, the composition of few cross-cupola churches with a cupola on four pillars, which had come from previous centuries, gave way for the new centered compositions in their various forms. In the course of that process they created not only original architectural compositions, but also the most interesting constructive systems. So, Armenian architects worked out a composition of churches of the Avan-Ripsime type, where they located corner cameras between the aisles of the cross-plan, which were connected with the main praying hall through passages and niches in  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the circle, i.e. the weight of the cupola was spread not on four pillars, but on eight supporting niches. They also

built small cross cupola churches (the so called ‘croix libre’), striking in their harmony of limited space; they worked out the type presented in Mastara – a vast pillarless single hall with a complicated and logical system of transitions from the under cupola square to the cupola and with supporting niches from four sides – “an unusual tetraconch which became a source of a group of similar churches” [3]; multi-absidal cupola churches, and, finally, tetraconchs inscribed into an outer polygon (St Zion in Garni), and tetraconchs with a bypass gallery (famous church of the seventh century Zvartnots near Ejmiatsin and several similar churches). But the architecture of the Armenian church of Zvartnots differs from buildings of the same type, presenting “an organic product of early medieval Armenian architecture” [3], as well as from the other architectural types invented in Armenia. An important peculiarity of Armenian centered cupola constructions of the 6th – 7th centuries, which makes them different from similar buildings in other countries, was the uniting of the church interior around the undercupola space; it was inherited from early medieval constructions of the previous period, and that continuity – in spite of some variations in details – created that artistic image which could be called the national one [4]. And that typical feature of Armenian architecture refers not only to the centered cupola constructions, but to the longitudinal ones: there ‘...the space is single, not separated, it is bravely completed at the great height with a mighty cupola... everything provided light and solemn mood’ [5].

At the same time, one of the main factors of the unity of Armenian architecture manifested itself: it was volumetric thinking of Armenian architects which allowed them to create church buildings comparable with sculptural compositions. That period, they created architecture unique in its unity, precision of architectural language, staying in harmony with the surrounding landscape; it was of importance for the development of the world architecture: “...almost all that millennium, Armenian architecture was a source of shaping, it generated principal ideas, and as if supported the fragile basement of the cultural bridge connecting the Greek Late Classic with the Italian Renaissance” [6]. Among the characteristic features of thinking of Armenian architects, we could note also their longing for monumentality, expressed even in buildings small in size; it was got with the thoroughly calculated system of proportions, the module system, and the precision of architectural language, independently from this or that subtype of centered construction. “There were various manifestations of one architectural style – the style of Armenian architectural classic of the seventh century, laconic and noble, severe and solemn at the same time” [7]. One of the defining features in the creation of an artistic image made by Armenian architects was their longing for the unity of the interior space, which was

typical not only for centered cupola constructions, but for longitudinal cupola ones; it provided ‘supporting’ the cupola with a drum without pillars [7].

An unusual international commercial activity of the late medieval period (9th – 14th cent.) led to the rapid growth of cities and influenced at the development of the civic architecture and its flourishing – at that, the ecclesiastic architecture also was at its brilliant peak. Ecclesiastic constructions could not concede civic ones in their decoration; it provided richer design of churches and a new plastic ornamentation of walls with various reliefs. The task was especially important in the 12th and 13th centuries, when elements of decoration of the civic architecture ‘went out’ at the church facades and were completed with original details and multi-coloured ornamentation, which made facades bright, almost picturesque in their language [8]. At the same time, they invented new constructive ideas and new architectural types on the base of early medieval ones; they transformed proportions of building characterized with their vertical orientation. Volumes were centered around the vertical axis – it was also calculated with modeling, using a model of the future building to check its shape [9].

At the same period – about the 10th century and later, monastic complexes were built in Armenia; they were famous not only with their numerous functions as centers of theology, education, research, and art, but also with working out significant and mighty architectural and constructive ideas for their monumental architectural ensembles. Such monasteries as Haghpat, Sanahin, Harichavank, Tatev, Hovhannavank, Saghmosavank, Goshavank, Haghartsin, Geghard, Amaras, Dadivank, and many others can serve an architectural school for building organic and harmonic, architectonic and dynamic, traditional and innovative spaces uniting and organizing various architectural constructions in a whole complex. The mastery of medieval architects was manifested there in creating ensemble and in adjustment of architecture to the landscape.

Along with brilliant solutions of compositional and constructive systems in all types and subtypes of early medieval Armenian churches, there are restrained and expressive images of buildings, reflecting the worldview, artistic representations and independent, peculiar thinking of Armenian architects.

### **III. MEDIEVAL ARMENIAN ARCHITECTURE AS A QUARANTEE FOR THE NATIONAL SELF-IDENTIFICATION**

During its distressful history including wars, political, historical, and natural disasters, the Armenian people managed to preserve the uniqueness of their culture, particularly architecture. And that, in turn,

allowed the nation to maintain its identity and to survive through centuries.

Famous Russian poet Feodor Tiutchev said: “Blessed is that one, who visited this world in its fatal minutes...”. The contemporary generations are ‘blessed’ in a way: we have seen the change of ages and even millennia, demolishing of empires, and creation of new states. The first century of the new, third millennium, where we live, set a row of unexpected and inescapable tasks before the humanity. If we try to present them in a relatively integral form, there is a fundamental transformation in the worldview and connected concepts, which has occurred in the minds of people as a result of global changes of previous systems almost in all areas. Changes in attitude were also reflected in art and, of course, in architecture. Useful in many aspects, the global unification of the world through the availability of information and new technologies can lead to some similarity in the development of culture, when national elements cease to be decisive in the creative process and its results. In art, and particularly in architecture, the emerging socialization of forms can lead to such a degree of unification that national identity will be lost. In architecture, this tendency manifests itself especially clearly when a construction, breaking away from national traditions, loses its image, becomes unified, and takes on a form that corresponds to a certain average standard. In the sphere of urban planning, large, sometimes irreversible changes also take place: rash urbanization can jeopardize the ability, developed over centuries, to work with the environment, with the natural landscape, which had been very characteristic for Armenian architecture; and even the natural landscape itself – along with its openness to it, and correctly chosen points of view, can be completely transformed. Among the basic principles of Armenian architecture, there is the unity of architectural construction with the landscape, the integrity of the whole, undivided interior space and the correspondence of its interior and exterior, when the internal composition is read in the external one; such peculiarities were a powerful factor in the creation and preservation of the national image, which in its turn has served for centuries as a guarantee of self-identification of the nation.

The formative principle “...is mainly the result of clear attitude. It is expressed as a result of the continuous development of the form... with all possible types arising from it” [10]. Creation of certain form and its further development completed to perfection, plastic elements characterizing specific construction, polychrome and stone laying method, the system of volumes, their rhythm, and others are products of the attitude of architects, their way of thinking and artistic representations; that is, they are purely national in nature, which in turn forms a worldview and mentality.

Preserving and developing the architectural traditions worked out over the centuries, the people managed under the most difficult conditions – even after a long creative downtime – to be reborn like a phoenix, and to continue designing and building ecclesiastic and civic buildings, and to improve cities according to the centuries-old traditions. And the loyalty to national sources, in turn, led to the realization of their national essence, the desire to possess and maintain their own vision of the world, and – thanks to this – to survive through centuries and to preserve the unique peculiarity of their culture. No wonder that Josef Strzygovski in his well-known work on Armenian architecture emphasizes that the Armenians were able to remain independent, resisting invaders penetrating into their country from the West and from the East. He meant not only physical resistance, but also creative one: foreign influence did not have significant consequences, and Armenian architecture retained a vivid unity of its essence [11]. And this circumstance, undoubtedly, played an important role in the self-identification of the nation and in the formation of its worldview.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Being a result of national thinking and philosophy, the compositional methods of Armenian architects are so valuable and enduring, that they can and should be used in the creative ‘laboratories’ of contemporary Armenian architects as well, no matter in which country they work. Preserving the artistic image, national in spirit, an architectural construction, in addition to fulfilling its main functional task, also contributes to another goal – conscious or involuntary way – of preserving the nation’s identity. Created on the basis of natural and climatic features, national worldview, and other small and large factors, the principles of Armenian architecture are still applicable. Another thing is that the national image should not be a blind imitation of the forms of the past – and here we need a very subtle approach by an architect, in this case a building he creates would take a worthy place in the contemporary architecture of his country.

The national essence is not only a form, as architects often think, but the national artistic mentality that has created a certain form. If we try to generalize the basic principles and characteristics of the national originality of Armenian architecture, it will be a threefold unity, relevant at all times: the unity of the internal space of construction (in the course of its creation Armenian architects made many brilliant engineering discoveries, created very specific architectural types); the unity of internal and external spaces, when the internal composition of building is clearly and logically reflected in its external volumes; and, finally, the exceptional unity of the entire volume-space composition of building with its environment –

whether it is a natural landscape or other buildings created earlier in the centuries-old architectural complexes.

Nowadays, it is extremely important to use the significance of architecture, which has come from centuries, as the most important cultural value, one of the main presentations of national consciousness, which retains its role in any country. In the contemporary world, it is necessary to return to national sources – the deeply rooted worldview of the nation, artistic representations and ideals, which served as an inexhaustible source of creative methods of our ancestors.

Medieval Armenian architecture gives such possibility.

#### References

- [1] T. Toramanyan, *Materials on the History of Armenian Architecture* (collection of articles), Yerevan, 2003, p.178 [in Armenian].
- [2] A. Kazaryan, *Ecclesiastic Architecture of the Countries of the Trans-Caucasia of the Seventh Century (Formation and Developing of the Tradition)* (Tserkovnaya arkhitektura stran Zakavkazia VII veka (formirovanie i razvitie traditsii)), Moscow, 2012, vol. I, p.16 [in Russian].
- [3] A. Kazaryan, *Ecclesiastic Architecture of the Countries of the Trans-Caucasia of the Seventh Century (Formation and Developing of the Tradition)*. (Tserkovnaya arkhitektura stran Zakavkazia VII veka (formirovanie i razvitie traditsii)). Moscow, 2012, vol. II, p.47, p.434 [in Russian].
- [4] M. Hasratyan, *Early Christian Architecture of Armenia*. Yerevan, 2010, p.20 [in Armenian].
- [5] N.M. Tokarsky, *Along the Pages of the History of Armenian Architecture* (Po stranitsam istorii armyanskoy arkhitektury), Yerevan, 1973, p.85 [in Russian].
- [6] S.O. Khan-Magomedov, *The Phenomenon of Armenian Architecture* (Fenomen armyanskoy arkhitektury). Arkhitektura, stroitel'stvo. Yerevan, 2007, №10 [in Russian].
- [7] N.Ya. Marr, *The Armenian Church in Aruch* (Armyanskaya tserkov' v Aruche), 1904, p.49, p.63 (Cit. on: A. Kazaryan.. Op. cit., vol. III, p. 12) [in Russian].
- [8] A. Yakobson, *An Essay on the History of the Architecture in Armenia in the Fifth-Seventeenth Centuries* (Ocherk istorii zodchestva Armenii V-XVII vekov), Moscow-Leningrad, 1950, pp.96-99 [in Russian].
- [9] C. Mnatsakanyan, K. Hovhanissyan, A. Sahinyan, *Essays on the History of the Architecture of Ancient and Medieval Armenia* (Ocherki po istorii arkhitektury drevnei i srednevekovoi Armenii), Yerevan, 1978, p.12 [in Russian].
- [10] A. Zaryan, *Geometrized Space* (Erkrachapakanatsvats taratsutyun). Collection of articles “Armenian architecture” (Haykakan chartarapetutyun), Yerevan, 1996, pp.217-218 [in Armenian].
- [11] J. Strzygovski, *The Architecture of Armenians and Europe* (Arkhitektura arman i Evropa). Book I, Yerevan, 2011, Book II, 2018 [in Russian].