The Drawn City. Architectural Graphic Art: Tradition and Modernity

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I regard architectural drawing as not just a means of communication, but also an important way to study the contemporary urban setting. It helps me think about what architecture is today, in an age when the multivectoral nature of architecture's development has reached its apogee. Drawing is a path to oneself and to understanding what is happening around you and what you like in architecture. Here, of course, I cannot entirely separate my practice as a draughtsman from my main job: in terms of end result, drawing and architecture are very different from one another, but the two types of activity are based on reflections on one and the same subject – how to make cities interesting today, how to create *mises-en-scène* which in terms of quality and visual intrigue are a worthy match for the best examples offered by history.

I began drawing very early, at a secondary school specializing in art attached to the Academy of Arts in Leningrad. Almost immediately, I realized that my main interest in drawing was architecture. I found all these *mises-en-scène* involving cities –not just Leningrad, in which I grew up, but also the ancient Russian cities of Novgorod, Rostov Veliky, and Pskov– extremely exciting, and the genre of drawing with its special agility and incompleteness was the best way of translating those internal experiences into artistic imagery. And I have to admit that I have lived all my conscious life with this. To this day, I draw a great deal myself – from life, as well as fantasies that are reflections on the urban environment, and, of course, sketches for architectural projects. I have always been interested in drawings by other people – in outstanding examples in this field. Aleksandr Benoit wrote in his memoirs: "By their very essence, drawings are

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Fig. 1. Pietro di Gottardo Gonzaga, Set Design. Arcade with a flat roof on a town square, early 19th century, quill, dry brush and sepia, 448 x 552 mm (Tchoban Collection).

Fig. 2. Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine, View of the Roman Forum, 1788, brush in grey tone, quill and Indian ink, 483 x 627 mm (Tchoban Collection).

of great value: they are a kind of confession by the artist; they allow us to look into the secret places in the artist's creative work" [1]; this is something with which I can only agree. I have always been very interested to see which particular architectural subjects specific architects and artists have chosen to set down and which techniques they have used in order to convey their impressions. As soon as I had the financial opportunity to create a collection, approximately 20 years ago, I set about doing so. The first work which I consciously acquired, realizing that it could be the beginning of a collection, was a drawing by Pietro di Gonzaga of scenery for the theatre. Subsequently, a part of this drawing became the basis for the pattern of one of the tiers of the façade of the Museum for Architectural Drawing, which was built to my design (in collaboration with Sergey Kuznetsov) in Berlin in 2013. At the same time, I was interested in Japanese engravings. I still, from time to time, acquire for my collection engravings by Utagwva Hiroshige from the first edition of his series '100 Views of Edo'. There was also a period when I collected Russian art; to this day I bow down before the achievements of Aleksandr Benoit (1870-1960) and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (1875-1957). Later, it's true, I gave part of my collection relating to Russian art to the museum's endowment fund for subsequent sale to finance construction of the museum building. But the core of my collection is works by masters from the 18th and 19th centuries – that period which is justly known as the 'Golden Age' of architectural graphic art.

Architectural drawing came into being as an intermediate and ancillary genre, a way of depicting a future building on a plane. During the course of the 16th and even 17th centuries the emphasis was on the applied nature of this genre, with no opportunity for individual techniques and merits to be manifested to their full. Simultaneously, this period saw the development of the drawing depicting a view (*veduta*), a genre which, as the art critic Vladimir Sedov has noted, "was rather harsh and precise in the hands of architects and in the hands of artists gentle and rich in eye-catching effects, but often architecturally weak or inexact" [2]. As a genre, the drawing also had an applied, preparatory character, but by the late Renaissance had developed its own forms, media, and original style, and had also acquired its own circle of followers and connoisseurs. However, the drawing depicting a view, especially of a city or buildings, was a special case; it exhibited various different aims on the part of the artist – a tendency for either picturesqueness and freedom on the one hand or documentary precision on the other. It was the convergence of these different types of graphic art –the architectural drawing, the *veduta*, and the landscape drawing– that brought the onset of the Golden Age of

architectural graphic art. What these artists, draughtsmen, architects, and engravers all had in common was the desire to create works that were complex, virtuoso, and extremely difficult to execute. These synthetic works were not views or architectural sketches; they were fantasies on the subject of reality; they drew upon well-known or already sketched parts of buildings or entire buildings to create new compositions, allowing their authors to think up and invent new combinations of rhythms, new scales, and in the final analysis to reflect on what kind of city they liked. And it will come as no surprise that the principal city which exercised artists' minds was Rome. It was acquaintance with the Eternal City that was the most important starting point for many very different architects and artists, the key to their understanding of architectural spaces and details.

In the middle of the 18th century a truly unique situation obtained in Rome, which had become a gathering place for all important forces among architects, artists, decorators, and antiquarians. The alliance between Rome and France and the emphasis on studying antiquity were factors that underwrote the existence of the French Academy in Rome; the Academy was where the most notable artists and architects of the time lived and interacted with one another. The special stipendium which they received allowed French artists to spend several years at a time in the Eternal City, in untiring search of new angles for viewing well-known and famous buildings, while also taking part in excavations aimed at discovering new buildings, paintings, or statues. This active artistic life was responsible for the emergence of a special genre –the architectural drawing depicting Rome. Among these works we may identify several main subgenres– elegiac drawings with depictions of antique ruins, views of ruins with the addition of generic scenes (sometimes including diggers or collectors), and, finally, fantasies on the theme of ancient-Roman life and ancient-Roman architectural ensembles. All these genres were especially popular among the French artists and architects who gathered around the French Academy in Rome. It is sufficient to name artists such as Charles-Joseph Natoire (1700-1777), Hubert Robert (1733-1808), Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), Charles-Louis Clérisseau (1721-1820), or architects such as Jean-Laurent Legeay (1710-1786), Charles Percier (1764-1838), Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine (1762-1853), and Jean-François Thomas de Thomon (1759-1813). Romans who belonged to this circle included Giuseppe Valeriani (1708-1761), Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal, 1697-1768),

Fig. 3. Giacomo Quarenghi, View of the Ponte Luciano near Tivoli, late 18th – early 19th century, pen and grey and brown wash, Indian ink, watercolours, 269x425 mm (Tchoban Collection).

and Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), as well as Giacomo Quarenghi (1744-1817), who subsequently left Italy to go to Russia.

There are works by all the above authors in my collection; they constitute its core – Natoire with his early drawings in blue paper with semi-fantastical, but recognizable views of Rome, Davide with his realistic depictions of typical spots in the Eternal City, or, for instance, Thomas de Thomon with his painstaking, almost documentary, recording of architecture, an approach which is in fact a profoundly original vision of antiquity. Hubert Robert likewise sometimes recorded and sometimes unabashedly made up ruins, going on to dream up little scenes relating to the study of antiquity: think of his 'Interior of the Palace', where he takes the liberty of embellishing the vestibule of the Palazzo Barberini with ancient sculptures, or his 'Architectural fantasy with excavations of an ancient city', where he gathers together all the best-known statues in a kind of abstract archaeological dump. I would especially like to single out Fontaine's 'View of the Roman Forum', a work characterized not just by a realistic recording of particularities, but also by the desire to fertilize this realism with an unfamiliar angle, to impart emphatically heroic features to a familiar view. By and large, all works of this synthetic character are distinguished by the quest for new subjects and ever new discoveries in the field of graphic techniques, and this is why they continue to be so interesting and relevant for artists and architects today.

Fig. 4. Joseph Maria Olbrich, View of the Russian Chapel in Darmstadt, 1904, watercolour, pencil, grey paper, 311x269 (Tchoban Collection).

Giacomo Quarenghi, who came to fame in Rome as a Neoclassical architect before enjoying a brilliant career in Russia, possessed a unique manner of drawing. When creating architectural views, Quarenghi was an artist characterized by comparatively intimate pieces in a light manner of execution and with elements of fantasy. His 'View of Ponte Lucano near Tivoli', for instance, is a drawing in which precisely recreated architecture is placed in an imaginary Italian landscape with mountains, individual buildings, trees, and the silhouette of a town in the background. "Equally imaginary is the staffage incorporated in the game proposed by the architect: together with him, we 'recall' something created which in reality looks different, poorer, and simpler," notes Vladimir Sedov [3].

The gradual development of archaeology took architectural drawing down the path of excessive precision and detail. During the late-Classical age drawings were executed extremely precisely, in detail, correctly, and, consequently, with a kind of artistic dryness. A brilliant example of the graphic art of this period is a drawing by Leo von Klenze (1784-1864), the most important Bavarian Neoclassical architect. In his drawing depicting the forum in Rome the 'limits' of the graphic art of the time are more clearly visible: the delicate lines display craftsmanship, but a certain freedom or boldness is lacking.

There was also a gradual change in the face of the architecture of this time. In the 19th century, especially during its second half, architecture saw active quests for new forms and layout techniques, but architectural drawing continued to be an invaluable school of craftsmanship for architects. For instance, drawing served Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814-879), the founder of architectural restoration, as an important support in his practice. Just as active as a draughtsman was Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928), who used drawing to study the fundamental links between forms and elements and then re-told them in a completely different language. Or take, for instance, the Austrian architect Joseph Maria Olbrich (1867-1908), one of the founders of the Viennese Secession. Olbrich's graphic art is characterized by simplicity and structural clarity. Interestingly, he was equally fervent in drawing both historical and contemporary buildings. For instance, my collection contains his drawing of the Church of St Mary Magdalene in Darmstadt, which was built in 1903 to a design by Leonty Benoit (1856-1928).

Rome in its primeval beauty likewise did not lose its importance for artists and architects, remaining a desirable destination for artistic pilgrims – including for artists and architects from Russia. In his book *Moi vspominaniya* ['My memoirs'] Aleksandr Benoit described his stay in Rome as an extremely important landmark in his biography. Summing up this "artistic feast", he describes the very strong impression made upon him not so much by ancient-Roman or early-Christian monuments, as by masterpieces of the Baroque age and, in particular, St Peter's Basilica. "Where the entire Baroque system creates its miracles utterly freely and yet draws upon unsurpassable knowledge, techniques, and a feeling of architectural masses, there I felt an incomparable delight and fascination. Is this not divine architecture? Is this not artistic might at its peak?... It's a celebration enshrined for all time, an apotheosis built of stone and yet quivering with life" [4]. In a series of watercolour views of Rome created in 1903 Benoit makes this feeling visible to the viewer.

Fig. 5. Alexandre Benois, View of the Capitoline Hill in Rome, 1903, watercolour, pen in brown tone and whiting over a black chalk preparatory drawing, 233 x 335 mm (Tchoban Collection).

Fig. 6. Ivan Zholtovsky, Painting underneath the arcs of the main building and on the tower of Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, 1909–1912, watercolour, bronze, preparatory pencil drawing, 194x263 mm (Tchoban Collection).

The motif of Rome and Italy's elevated, even heroic beauty is characteristic of the entire circle of Russian Neoclassical-Revival architects. This felt 'heroic' quality made it possible for them not to concentrate on details, but to capture the whole, to capture it almost impressionistically, but always on a large scale. Such are the album drawings of Ivan Zholtovsky (1867-1959) and the sketches of Ivan Fomin (1872-1936). Of extreme interest is a drawing of the Baroque church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice by Boris Iofan (1891-1976), the architect of the USSR pavilions at the world exhibitions in Paris 1937) and New York and of the never-realized Palace of the Soviets in Moscow: the subject chosen, the composition of this work, and the attention given to drawing the architectural details of the soaring cathedral are evidence of Iofan's lively and impartial interest in pyramidal compositions – an interest which he carried with him throughout his life, from his diploma project for a monument to 'Fallen Heroes' to the unrealized 416-metre-high Palace of the Soviets, which was intended to be the principal building of the Country of the Soviets. Le Corbusier (1887-1965), an innovator who substantially shaped the face of architecture in the 20th century, brought back from Soviet Russia in 1928 a drawing of the cathedrals of the Moscow Kremlin. And although the pioneer of Modernism might have been expected to renounce historical forms, it was in fact the latter especially that he documented with great care in his album.

As I have said above, I am convinced that drawing is vitally necessary to architects in order for them to feel and understand what they like in particular urban formations and forms. It is for this reason that in my own practice I spend so much time on drawing from life, using my pencil to record almost every city –large and small– which I have the fortune to visit. Over time I have put together quite an extensive selection of drawings of urban spaces of various types.

For me, getting to know a favourite city begins with visiting its central square. What is a square? It is a space which is shaped usually by mainly public buildings, some of which play the role of architectural landmarks while others are a frame for the latter buildings, a mounting which compels the precious stone to gleam in the most attractive light. I always find it extremely interesting to study the character and rhythm of this interaction and the conditions it creates for the pulse of the city's life. For instance, Piazza del Duomo in San Gimignano, the famous city of medieval skyscrapers in Italy, which used to be the centre of religious and economic life in the province of Sienna, is now a major tourist attraction. The western part of the square is occupied by the façade of the collegial church, while the northern part is formed by twin towers – the Torri dei Salvucci; together they form an extremely picturesque silhouette and dialogue of textures. If this is an example of a medieval square, then Piazza Navona in Rome is a similarly harmonious alliance of background and landmark buildings, but from the Baroque age. This square, which runs strictly north-south, is framed by eight palazzos, and its main embellishments are the church of St Agnese in Agone, whose magnificent Baroque façade was created by the architect Francesco Borromini, and three fountains (del Nettuno, dei Quattro Fiumi, del Moro) created by the architect Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini. An example of a square from the second half of the 20th century is Place Georges-Pompidou, which appeared on the map of Paris in the middle of the 1970s. The square was designed by the authors of the Centre Georges Pompidou, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, in 1971, at the same time as work was begun on construction of the museum complex; the architects understood very well that in order for their complex façade with its exposed utilities systems to be seen properly, there needed to be a large public space in front of the building. For the same reason the new square was placed slightly lower than the level of the surrounding urban blocks. The square is made

Fig. 7. S.Tchoban, Piazza Navona, Rome, 2017, pastels, charcoal, chalk, 402x602 mm.

distinctive by the enormous white ventilation shafts for the underground structures situated beneath it, and by a pronounced slope towards the museum, which allows the square to be used as an improvised amphitheatre where pedestrians can relax. Today this is a popular recreational place for citizens and, of course, tourists.

Development on the embankments of European cities is usually the same kind of multi-dimensional urban interaction of background buildings and individual architectural landmarks which together form an extremely picturesque river (or seaside) façade for their city. Here, of course, we should, above all, remember Venice, whose every embankment is as individual as a fingerprint and yet is harmoniously entwined into a uniform image of the city, whether this be the imposing façade of the Grand Canal opposite the Fish Market or a view of one of the numerous islands in the district of Castello. The embankments of many other historical cities –e.g. Ghent, Amsterdam, San Sebastián– took shape in a similar way. An important discovery for me in my travels to cities throughout the world was that the idea of interaction between landmarks and background buildings is extremely relevant for the non-European tradition of urban design as well. A good example is Suzhou, a Chinese city situated in the delta of the River Yangtze which is often called the 'Chinese Venice' due to its plethora of canals and bridges.

Fig. 8. S. Tchoban, Centre Georges-Pompidou in Paris, 2017, pastel, 395x575 mm.

And, of course, an extremely important element in the image of any city is its streets. Whether a street is pedestrian or mixed-use, what is crucial from the point of view of urban design is always the relation between the distance between the buildings, i.e. horizontals, and their height, i.e. verticals, a relation which forms a certain rhythm and mood. Thinking about the character of streets and especially about what kind they can and should be in new city districts, I usually show a drawing of a street in the historical centre of St Petersburg, the city where I was born and grew up and whose urban fabric largely shaped me as an architect. The traditional street in historical St Petersburg is relatively wide and densely built-up on both sides. Usually, the buildings which constitute its façades are not individually memorable, but together they nevertheless create a feeling of the traditional harmony of similarity. In these buildings designed by architects who are not known to us, buildings which are usually collectively known as 'Dostoevsky's St Petersburg', what is especially important for me is the level of detailing of their façade surfaces. The presence of the finest details creates a very dense fabric, one which is diverse in terms of tactile sensations. It is this which has

given me personally from childhood onwards an absolutely distinct impression of architecture as an organism which exists in time and which is capable of ageing beautifully and with dignity, gradually becoming covered with expressive patina. There are many such streets in Rome, Paris, and Brussels too. I have found it just as interesting to study the streets of old Delhi – streets which look more chaotically built-up than those in European cities, but which also in their own way withstand the effects of time, bearing the marks of ageing with dignity. Of course, it is impossible to ignore too streets in modern megalopolises built in accordance with the principles of Modernism – avenues in Tokyo or Hong Kong formed by the outlines of high-rise buildings and even the multi-level car junctions in whose endless rings it is so easy to get lost without the benefit of precise instructions from a navigator.

However technocratic the modern megalopolis is becoming, it fortunately always has space for vegetation, and, as someone who draws, I find it incredibly interesting to observe the union of nature and the manmade environment. Interaction between architecture and nature is always an interaction between regularity and irregularity. Its literally inhuman capabilities ensure that nature always surpasses any idea man might have of freedom of form, which is why architecture, even architecture of the most sculptural kind and of extreme intricacy in terms of surface decoration, is always more controlled than free-growing trees and grass. This can be clearly seen in idyllic views of cities such as Gras and Cannes in France and even in the look of the Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia (which, although entirely covered in intricate carving, cannot compare in terms of the complexity of its forms with the intertwining trunks of the trees which grow against the background of these buildings).

A central place among the themes which exercise me as a draughtsman is given over to so-called 'icons' or landmarks – buildings which clearly stand out against the background of their surroundings. As a rule, these are sculptural buildings whose emphatic individuality of form serves as an expression and direct consequence of the unique functions which they perform in the structure of the city. I follow their role in the urban context using the example of structures from various different ages – from monuments of antiquity (the Pantheon) and the Middle Ages (Santa Maria del Fiore) to the most modern buildings which create a visually unfamiliar effect (an effect which 100 years ago would have seemed impossible from the point of view

Fig. 9. S.Tchoban, Venice, view to the island San Pietro di Castello, 2012, sepia, watercolours, 370x535 mm.

of traditional harmony) of a contrast-rich mise-en-scène involving the historical surroundings or natural landscape. Such, for instance, are works by the Russian Constructivists (e.g. the Zuev Club built on Lesnaya ulitsa in Moscow in 1927-1929 to a design by architect Ilya Golosov (1883-1945)), and almost all buildings by the celebrated Oscar Niemeyer (1907-2012), including his National Congress building in Brasilia with its famous upward-pointing white bowls and the presidential Palácio da Alvorada with its distinctive plastically expressive colonnade. Incidentally, during the very short period in which the centre of Brasilia was constructed Niemeyer's architectural language invented and 'sang' the melodies for almost all the architectural hits with curving volumes of various kinds which are still in extensive use to this day [5]. Consider, for instance, the forms given to modern skyscrapers and to new museums of contemporary art, buildings which are very popular today and which every more or less wealthy city considers it its duty to acquire.

For every theme in drawing I always try to select the most appropriate medium, one which allows me to convey with maximal precision the feeling that arises from a particular architectural and urban-planning situation, whether this is the scorching sun and the contrasting shadows which the sun creates on the narrow streets of Rome or, on the contrary, the morning light of the sun tinting the dome and upper part of the façade of the Pantheon to a warmer shade.

Fig. 10. S. Tchoban, Kolokolnaya Street in Saint Petersburg, 1984, charcoal, 480x345 mm.

Fig. 11. S. Tchoban, Mumbai, India, clash of the epochs, 2018, sepia ink, watercolours, paper, 485x351 mm.

I usually merely name the colour without trying to document it scrupulously, merely indicating whether it belongs to the warm or, on the contrary, cold chromatic spectrum. I very often choose coloured paper, using it as an additional means of creating the atmosphere I need. For instance, for a nocturnal view of the cathedral of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice coloured paper proved indispensable: by using white and light-grey pastels on dark-grey paper, I was able, I hope, to convey the feeling of mirage which envelops you when you see this church at night, especially in late autumn when the city is often shrouded in mist. Coloured pencils and black paper were my irreplaceable companions on a journey through Japan; this is an ideal way to convey the texture of the wooden façades of the traditional two-storey little houses in old Kyoto. I am also very fond of using coloured paper of uneven texture coupled with white pencil, this makes it possible to recreate the tactile sensation of old plasterwork or a wall of white stone – for instance, the apparently modest façade of the church of San Marziale in the Cannaregio district of Venice, a façade which conceals rich interior decoration. I like recording the motifs of Baroque architecture with the help of dense calli-

Fig. 12. S. Tchoban, Niterói Contemporary Art Museum, 2012, Indian ink, watercolours, 308x408 mm.

graphic ornamentation and Niemeyer's floating forms with Sennelier Gris ink. The latter has a concentrated colour, but with the addition of water can become almost transparent, making it ideal for conveying the feeling of weightlessness characteristic of Modernist buildings. And although neon felt-tip pens, for instance, are not at all something you would find in my arsenal, I sometimes use them too, in order, for instance, to convey as closely as possible the character of advertising billboards and LED screens, things which are now an integral part of the look of the streets and high-rise buildings in many megalopolises.

In conclusion I would like to talk about one more theme which I have already touched upon indirectly and which is for me one of the main themes in my practice not just as a draughtsman, but also as an architect. This is the textures of the urban environment and how different materials are affected by the impact of time. There is no doubt that some materials –for instance, natural stone or brick– age with dignity and beauty while others have great difficulty in coping with time's onslaught. They enter into severe conflict with one another, and this conflict introduces into the appearance of our cities a perceptible visual discomfort. I have tried to record this situation in my drawing 'Collision of epochs', which I created in Mumbai: a Victorian building from the second half of the 19th century is shameless butted into by a building from the postcolonial period, a typical International-style structure made from concrete. This contrast-rich collision of two utterly different architectural structures and two artistic and plastic languages had a profoundly disturbing effect on me due to the way that they compete with one another, fighting instead of interacting. Is this how it should be? I am convinced that unions of this kind should be more gentle and harmonious. "We live in an age when the figurative element in architecture has disappeared – together with the Classical order, decoration, relief, and ornamentation. At its top now reside challenge and radical dialogue, while the outskirts are occupied by the faceless, pragmatic, and beauty-less ('beauty' is a forgotten word in respect to architecture!) form of Minimalism" [6]. This is a quotation from my book '30:70. Architecture as balance of forces', which I wrote together with the architecture critic Vladimir Sedov and which has been translated into English, German, and Chinese. The subject of the book is the direction in which today's contemporary architecture –especially background architecture, which accounts for the majority of residential and office buildings built today– can develop in order to serve as a visually rich and harmonious environment for particular outstanding buildings embodying the technological and artistic attainments of their age. And in the conclusions to which I come in this study I was undoubtedly helped by drawing. By studying the city with the help of pencil and paper, I can not only better understand the character and laws of formation of our contemporary urban environment, but also seek out for it particular solutions which I then realize as an architect – on the path, I hope, to a harmonious and comfortable city, one which is not drawn, but real.

Notes

[1] Benois, A.N. (1913). Drawings collection by S.P. Yaremich. In *Starye gody magazine*, november issue, 1913. Sankt-Petersburg, p. 13.

[2] See the 2010 exhibition catalogue: *The Golden Age of architectural graphic art. Drawings by European masters from the 18th-19th centuries from the collection of Sergei Tchoban*. Moscow: Iskusstvo-XXI vek, p. 09.

[3] See the 2014 exhibition catalogue: *Only Italy! Architectural graphic art from the 18th-21st centuries*. Moscow: Iskusstvo-XXI vek, p. 130.

[4] Benois, A.N. (1980). *Moi vospminaniya (v pyati knigakh)*. Moscow, p. 390.

[5] Tchoban, S., Sedov, V. (2017). *30:70, Architecture as a Balancing Act*, DOM publishers. p. 123.

[6] Tchoban, S., Sedov, V. (2017). *30:70, Architecture as a Balancing Act*, DOM publishers. p. 141.

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