

The Tower as a Semiotic Message

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In modern Moscow, the city scenery is to a great extent defined by the tower as one of the most typical and widespread architectural details. This essay focuses on the issue of the tower as a highly representative hallmark of the historical landscape in Russia, as well as a specific phenomenon in the context of local tradition. In this article the tower is argued to be a dynamic agent of place spatiality that undergoes changes in the course of time. It discloses the *genius loci* of a place and specifies a location that makes an impact on the natural environment. The issue is considered from a multidimensional interdisciplinary perspective, from the viewpoint of cultural anthropology and taking into account the background of national history, as well as the socio-semiotic context of the present.

Let me first clarify the kind of tower that is the subject of this study. I will focus on towers recently built in Moscow as components of private mansions, residential constructions and public buildings (mainly banks, shopping centers and office corporations) in which a tower appears as a compulsory detail of the architectural composition. The towers vary in their functions, the most common of which is an ornamental one. As a rule they are in the shape of tall parallel-piped bodies crowned with pyramid tops. There are also towers in the shapes of obelisks, chimneys, pipes and spirals. Each of these constructions conveys its own message, which synthesises into a more prominent entity by going back to a general pre-text of culture.

The tower in the perspective of cultural anthropology

The tower can be regarded in the context of natural landscape. It represents a sort of human invasion into scenery with the purpose of adapting some upright oriented shapes in the wild – such as rocks, mountain tops, high trees, etc. – to human habitat. In relation to natural scenery, a tower reveals its main mean-

ing as an upward movement and in this way articulates itself as an arrow-like vector-oriented construction. It simultaneously arranges the space around it by gathering all its elements together and endows its surroundings with the essence of growth. Originating in nature, a tower articulates the ideas of biological hierarchy and evolution. These are the main features on which the semiosis of the tower have been based since ancient times. Being inspired by two opposite basic features of the universe, as well as of natural scenery – horizontal and vertical disposition of elements – the tower, as an upright construction purified of any additional connotations, has created a basis for numerous human aspirations towards supernatural substance. In the context of natural scenery, the tower manifests itself as a feature of unlimited entity breaking boundaries for the sake of reaching the infinite. In an implicit way it combines two of the most significant issues of the world and emphasises the second part of binary oppositions: ground versus sky, Earth versus Space, chaos of water and physical existence versus cosmos of vegetation and spirituality.

The correspondence between the vertical features of the wild and the tower as a component of architecture has been acknowledged by cultural anthropology. According to cultural anthropology, the tower is one of the most universal visual images in human culture. Referring to mountains as their natural prototypes, pyramids and pyramid towers created by various ancient civilizations represent the human thrust towards the heavens and the social hierarchy as an example of its projection on Earth. The tower can be derived from the most profound foundations of the ancient image of the world and is often revealed articulated in a body code. The tower's vertical dominance can be traced to archaic beliefs which appeal to the corporeal essence of the universe as a symbol of masculinity. The pyramid, on the other hand, represents the triangle as the most stable geometrical figure based on feminine symbolism. The two parts of the contraposition are brought together in the male/female nature of the pyramid tower. The pyramid tower can be interpreted as a 'prolific (= efficient) superiority'. The corresponding projection of the tower onto a town could also be seen as a feminine symbol, and the projection of the tower onto a temple as a masculine one. According to Vladimir N. Toporov, the eminent Russian scholar, 'not only does a woman's lap correspond to a sanctuary and the flame in its center to a membrum virile, but also a female personage (as a virgin or mother) corresponds to a town (or a country), while a male personage (as a bridegroom and a participant of hierogamy)

corresponds to a temple located at the city centre' (Toporov 1987: 129). In that way a tower as a town/temple, or a sacred town in the context of archaic culture, intertwines two opposite body language meanings – the masculine and feminine. It brings to the entity a symbolism that goes back centuries.

In regard to mythology, the tower is connected with the idea of *axis mundi* and thus represents a link between Earth and Space. The archaic ambition of reaching eternity, the source of the Cosmos, has also been embodied in the tower, which organises and intensifies the space around it. The idea of *axis mundi* embodied in the shape of the tower places it in a significant position in relation to all levels of human existence. Thus the meaning of the mythological World Tree is implicated in the tower as its typologically permanent message.

The essence of eternity implied in the pyramid tower led to using it as a universal funeral symbol, especially when the tower featured the glory of a collective sacrifice (military obelisk). In archaic culture, upright, erected stones, which can be considered predecessors of modern towers, were widely used as sanctuaries, with the aim of establishing a correspondence with the cosmic entity (e.g. Stonehenge), or as a tombstone. One can still observe towers in the function of tombstones crowned with turbans in present-day Muslim cemeteries. Developing its sacred meanings, the tower became a model element of medieval architecture in Europe: it appeared in cathedrals and fortifications, as well as in castles. To a certain extent it kept its significant role in the Renaissance but lost its position in the Classicism of the 18th and early 19th centuries. As a sort of significant quotation it appeared in Romanticism. But the tower owes its proper revival in European architecture at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries to the fast development of new building materials and technologies. The Eiffel Tower in Paris, built for the World's Fair of 1889, is the most articulated symbol of the *époque*. Based on the technology of the 20th century, the tower brought to life a feature of the skyscraper that appeared all over the world in large numbers, especially in the New World, i.e. on the American continent. The sacred meanings of the skyscraper, in the context of contemporary culture in the United States, fully saturated with archaic symbols, are quite evident.

The tower and its historical background

Conveying the sense of upright position, the tower sets its particular location in motion and marks the movement of time, as well pointing out the historical

dimension of the place on which it has been erected. This is the context in which it can be regarded in the Russian historical background. Pagan beliefs in Russia are known to have never entirely been overcome by Christianity, and to a large extent they defined some characteristic features of the Russian mentality. The tower is an eloquent example. It represents both the sense of corporeality in the framework of an agricultural chain of rituals and the utopian rush to superiority typical of Russia with its imperial past.

In Russia the tower as a symbol of an imperial state can be seen in the cultural sense of this architectural element, which is reflected in the Russian language. In Russian there is a word *bashnya* for 'tower', and etymologically this word derives from the Turkish *bashka*, which means 'head' (for the etymology see Preobrazhenskij 1959: 20). 'A tower' as 'a head' extends this meaning to the cultural body, creating a corporeal metaphor: the head as a political/social leader (the same is true in English – consider the head as a part of the body and as a person who represents the top of a hierarchy). The Turkish (Muslim) origin of the word for tower in Russian may have some links with the cultural message that contemporary Russian towers convey. Thus 'tower' as a watch tower conveys the meaning of a fortress. In ancient times it used to be a location protected from outside aggression. The protected place, the safest place, transforms the initial meaning of the tower as a fortress into the tower as a state symbol. One may derive the meaning of authoritarian dominance, 'authoritarian power' or autocratic state, 'a state with autocratic intentions'. Over the course of time another connotation occurred in the meaning of 'tower' in Russia: the utopian component incorporated in its cultural message. Both the imperial and utopian significations were revealed in Moscow towers.

This obsession with towers in contemporary Moscow can be traced to the historical past of the city. The towers that define its contemporary specific look were initially inspired or determined by Moscow's natural landscape (scenery): the city is located on several hills, while the landscape surrounding Moscow is mainly flat. Thus each vertical feature becomes a very important token of this predominantly horizontal relief. In the 16th and 17th centuries the city's location in the hills was one of the arguments used to emphasise the resemblance between the Muscovite state and the Roman Empire, with all the ideological and political consequences of this comparison, especially concerning the imperial ambitions of Russian czars and other political leaders (Plukhanova 1995).

Moscow's historical heart is formed by the Kremlin – the medieval fortress surrounded by 22 towers. Erected in different periods of time, these towers, to a great extent, became a distinctive hallmark of the city, conveying the idea of state power. Beginning in the 17th century most of these towers were given hipped roofs, which reveal the geometry of a pyramid. Some of the Kremlin towers were rebuilt in the 19th century. During the Enlightenment and the Classicism of the late 18th and 19th centuries, the tower seemed to abandon its highly significant position in cultural discourse. It partly preserved its position in Matvei Kazakov's rotundas and to a great extent defined the architectural handwriting of Vasily Bazhenov (see the palace complex of Tsaritsino, as well as the famous Pashkov House in Moscow). The latter can be comprehended due to the Masonic circle to which the architect belonged. In the ideology of the Russian Freemasons, the tower, and especially when it was shaped as a pyramid, was connected with key Masonic concepts, being one of the most important entries in its symbolarium.

The tower returned to the stage triumphantly in the historical avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s, when it became a visual manifestation of a radical utopian breakthrough towards new worlds – both in the social and esthetic realms. The tower of Vladimir Tatlin's famous *Monument of the Third Communist International* is the most striking example of this. The etymology of the tower as 'a head' (especially a Turkish head crowned with a turban) corresponded to the highly spiritual aspirations of Tatlin's tower, which was in the shape of a spiral. Although the piece was never built, it definitely inspired architectural concepts, and some of its ideas later came into being in the tower constructed by Vladimir Shukhov. The Shukhov Tower was built in Moscow in 1919–1922 and for a long time has served as a tower for television and radio transmission. The function of transmitting information applied to the construction lay in the fertile field of the utopian idea of correspondence between lower and upper layers of the Universe, implicated in the tower in the times of the Russian Revolution. In our times, one Russian scholar has detected a relationship of the *Monument of the Third Communist International* to the Tower of Babylon, as shown in the following statement by Wassily Kandinsky: 'And each person getting deep into the hidden treasure of his art is a worker desiring to create a spiritual pyramid that rises up to the heavens' (cit. Mikhailov 2001: 376).

The avant-garde tower was, in a contradictory way, inherited by totalitarian architecture. In the period of Joseph Stalin's rule, the tower was realised in fabu-

lous Moscow skyscrapers. There were seven of them erected in Moscow, as well as in other cities after the Second World War. The skyscrapers evoked the Kremlin towers, appearing as a metonymy of the Soviet regime. At that time the tower implied an entity of the utopian idea of totality. In a popular song of the 1930s, the words 'Kremlin' and 'the whole' are set in parallel to each other: 'Утро красит нежным светом / стены древнего Кремля / просыпается с рассветом / вся советская земля.' (*The morning is painting the old Kremlin walls with a tender light / The whole Soviet country is awakening with the sunrise.* [My emphasis – N.Z.] The skyscrapers irradiated the utopian idea of the tower as an infinite urge towards a happy society and a perfectly governed totalitarian empire.

Socio-semiotic context

Towers define, to a great extent, the city view of the post-Perestroika era. Contemporary Moscow, as a centre of intensive economic and political life in modern Russia, is undergoing great renovation and represents a striking pattern of intense architectural development. During the last two decades the city's appearance has been drastically modified: with many new buildings erected and many old ones reconstructed, Moscow now looks like a huge construction site. Meanwhile, in respect to aesthetics, the changes can often be disputed, and the value of the new buildings is open to debate, although I will not concentrate on the aesthetic issues. Although there are a lot of towers on private houses in Moscow suburbs, the dominant trend in the renewed city manifests itself in business centres, banks, shopping centres, concert halls and other public buildings. The formal language is mainly based on allusions to historical and modern styles which correspond to the inter-textuality of post-modernist fiction and art.

The tower is one of the most distinctive tokens in the so-called 'Luzhkov Moscow' (named after Moscow major Yuri Luzhkov). Towers are everywhere. Most new buildings integrate a tower into their spatial composition as a significant component. Towers occupy a predominant position not only in architectural compositions but also in the cityscape as a whole. A problem to consider is why the tower has emerged at the forefront of the modern city and what socio-semiotic message it conveys in the framework of the 'city text'.

Modern Moscow towers differ in their shapes as well as their stylistic and sign functions. There are buildings in the shape of towers evoking medieval western fortresses or monasteries, and there are those alluding to the Russian past. Many

towers just crown the tops or side wings of buildings. Along with the tower as an element of compositional integrity should be mentioned towers shaped like roundas and – more frequently – towers shaped like pyramids. The pyramid towers are mainly made of glass and concrete, with a polished metal coating them. Under floodlights at night, the pyramid tops glisten.

In contemporary Moscow, towers encompass the local and universal meanings of the urban discourse. They demonstrate the mainstream of the social mind as masculine *par excellence*. The current trend in Russian self-comprehension manifests itself in its ambitious longings in economics and politics, and towers fully embody these aspirations. Being symbols of state dominance, Moscow towers as a cultural phenomenon also reveal their close relation to the local history, configured in its authoritarian mode. In the totality of contradictions in contemporary Russia, the imperialistic rhetoric seems to abandon the present-day political discourse. Meanwhile the latter comes into evidence in towers as reflected in the pyramid-shaped tops of public buildings. In modern Moscow, these tops reflect the significance of the rising middle class. Consumer ideology proclaims the arrogant superiority of middle class values over the rest of population, in spite of the middle class' vulnerability inside the shaky social hierarchy.

The towers of modern Moscow reveal their archaic meaning in the city cultural context, and that is crucial for semiotic comprehension of the issue. They refer to the archetype of the Tower of Babylon, which is multiplied in the urban environment of the megalopolis. It is the archetype of the Tower of Babylon traced to the Bolshevik past (see the above-mentioned parallel between the Tower of Babylon and the *Monument of the Third Communist International* by Tatlin) that gives rhythm to the modern Moscow reality. The ancient city of Babylon, which was called a 'city-whore', famous for its wealth, luxury and wickedness, conducted its symbolic message through the centuries, revealing its feminine symbols. Since the 19th century, the so-called Moscow and St. Petersburg texts of Russian culture can be found. Moscow and St. Petersburg are considered to be two opposite models, which describe the specifics of Russian culture in the 19th and 20th centuries. The distinction is primarily based on the interlacing of the two genders in the Russian language (Moscow belongs to the feminine gender while St. Petersburg belongs to the masculine), and the semiotic typology is mainly based on the gender distribution. While Moscow mostly reveals features of a feminine nature, the St. Petersburg text manifests itself in a sort of masculine discourse. Literature,

art and music created by artists in Moscow and St. Petersburg were divided into two trends, and this distinction penetrated the very core of poetics.

Extending this comparison, we may say that the two parts of the contraposition are related to the Babylon and the Jerusalem cultural texts respectively. The Moscow cultural text, understood as the Babylon text, reveals its deep controversy: namely, the controversy of Babylon as a feminine symbol in its negative mode (Babylon as a city-whore) and a feature of the tower as an archetype of masculinity, on the other hand, based on its vertical geometry (see the body code of the tower body mentioned above). Moscow, in which over 70% of the national wealth is concentrated at the moment, is greatly associated with the ancient multinational Babylon as a city of great wealth, luxury, and vice, as well as of a city of multiple languages with high ambitions. As a multinational megalopolis, Moscow is not only a place of national diversity but also one of high criminality and social discrepancy. Moscow towers reflect the controversy of the national state politics. The Muslim element widely occurs in the city, and the pyramid towers can be seen in the prospect of mosques as well. With regard to the Babylon intertext, the message that Moscow towers convey can be read as a suppressed social anxiety brought about by the political ambitions of its leaders, on the one hand, and a feeling of catastrophe among the population on the other.

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