

## **"An Unfinished Essay on Architectonics"** **A. S. Khomyakov (1804 - 1860), philosopher**

*This article, from "Collected Writings of Khomyakov", vol. 3, p. 478  
(Moscow, 1900), was translated in 2006 by M. Ishutkina*

One August evening in 1826, around 6 o'clock in the afternoon, I found myself standing in the Cathedral Square in Milan. In front of me there was an enormous church rising like a mountain of white marble. Its delicate, beautiful tower and innumerable Gothic columns, covered with rich carvings, were distinctly visible on the background of dark blue Italian sky. Every wall cavity was filled with depictions of saints; each pointed column had a praying saint high above the ground, as if a mediator between the earth and the sky. I spent a long time standing in front of this magnificent building, motionless from astonishment, feeling deep, unexplainable enjoyment. I did not notice the crowds which filled the square as the evening set in, and the careless Italians did not pay attention to me: they were used to seeing awe-struck foreigners in front of the monuments of their charming homeland. The sun has set and was followed by the night shadows and with it, meditation.

I started questioning myself and looking for the causes of that pleasure which has held captive, so to speak, all of my senses. I remembered everything of what I have ever read about architectonics, but no explanation seemed satisfactory. Nobody yet has managed to elucidate the mysteries of this art; nobody has explained its laws and its effects on our soul or the means by which it achieves those effects. Some have written about Classical Architectonics, but always in a rather pedantic style concentrating more on the inanimate laws rather than on the living and blazing artistic genius. Others have written about Romantic Architectonics, but, not understanding the general theory of art and guided more by emotions rather than logic, they rarely and only accidentally stumbled upon the truth and were unable to make the appropriate conclusions. Perhaps the terminology used by me — Romantic Architectonics — sounds unconventional. I will try to defend it.

All of art is an expression of emotion and represents different means to satisfy the soul's single demand. Different forms of art are linked via an invisible, but unbreakable, chain and their existence is so co-dependent that as soon as the essence of one of them changes, we can say with certainty that the general understanding about fine arts has changed and with it have had to change the three different forms of its expression (i.e. speech, sound, and form). Therefore, what kind of a human being, who is somewhat knowledgeable about the workings of the human mind, can doubt that the same reasons which have divided Poetry into Classical and Romantic, had to spread their influence on all forms of art and in similar way divide Music, Painting, Sculpture and Architectonics? Some will say that even in Poetry this division is not clear and remains to be defined. I do not argue, but it definitely exists, and, perhaps, the reason for this division can be found in two emotions: *pleasure* and *desire*.

The unifying goal of fine arts is to foster composed and sublime observation. This observation improves our existence and stimulates our conscience. But how does Architectonics achieve this noble goal? Perhaps (but this is only a guess), by reducing space to simple shapes, in which it is rarely seen in nature, and by harmonious allocation

of light, shadows and colors. One can hardly accept an opinion (though witty) of those, who explain the secret of this art only through certain characteristics of geometric figures which materially represent a general notion of space. Firstly, it rejects the influence of shadows and light which is felt by any careful observer of Architectonic objects. Secondly, since it started from unrelated origins, it assumes that there is a proven connection between geometry and the science of fine arts, which may seem dubious to some. So why then does one often encounter the symmetric geometric figures in Architectonics? I will try to explain this occurrence. Each of us has experienced that sweet sensation which occurs when we see a boundless sea or wide lakes and steppes in the southern parts of Russia, or something that is even more beautiful — a uniform blue color of a clear sky. The eyes rest comfortably on these objects and some sort of sublime tranquility envelops the soul. Should we look for the source of this pleasure in geometry? Yet, the horizon is often cut off by a broken and irregular line of mountains and lakes, locked by shores, which Nature drew without following the Euclidean laws. So what is it then that spurs the attraction? Maybe my opinion will sound like a paradox, but I believe that we like the uniformity of forms and colors which gives our senses an impression of something absolute and whole. The assortment of shapes in nature rarely gives us such a pleasure, so arts should make up for this omission. Fine arts have an opportunity to compose large uniform objects into a whole thereby providing a comfortable rest for our eyes. However, going from one dimension to another, the eyes require that all the lines be harmonious and transitions be smooth so as not to disturb the tranquility. That is why symmetry became a necessary companion of Architectonics. It is not some tangent idea presented in material form, but a necessary condition to achieve tranquility in our emotional world, tranquility, which awakens moral strength and leads to better self-understanding.

Until now I have spoken exclusively about harmony in shapes; but the same rules apply to light, shadows and colors. A surface, no matter how grand in size, cannot look magnificent while having uniformity in size and not having uniformity in lighting and color. For example, a chess board, composed of two opposing colors, never leaves a pleasant impression on the eyes. I do not want to conclude that all parts of an Architectonic object should be in only one color. However, I maintain that the harmony should be conserved while transitioning from one color to the next and these transitions should not be sudden or frequent and that the artist should not forget the correlation between geometric objects and colored surfaces.

From the above discussion, one can conclude that Architectonics (just like other fine arts) takes its roots in Religion, or, at the very least, its roots are dedicated to Religion. The magnificence of form and flawless transitions give rise to involuntary veneration and remind us about the existence of a higher being. One should not look for the original purpose of Architectonics by looking at the Romans the Imitators who have given all of fine arts a false direction. One should look for that purpose on the banks of the Nile river, or in India, where people long ago established educated societies, on in Persia and, finally, in the land beloved by all arts – Greece. Looking at these lands we can convince ourselves that all of the monuments created for grandeur and beauty, all of the buildings which have stood through the test of time, they all have a strong connection to Religion. Cathedrals, tombs and sometimes palaces of the rulers, who were revered by the Eastern people as if they were live representatives of the gods — this is what meets

the eyes of the traveler. Even now, a European, entering an abode of a forgotten god or a long-dead demigod, still feels their presence and slows down his stride so as not to disturb the holy stillness presiding over the empty building. Vastness and harmony — this is how the ancients saw Divinity. Looking at the remains of their air work, however, one might say that they were mistaken.