

ARMENIA

The Central Covered Market in Yerevan

The Central Covered Market of Yerevan built in 1952, the acknowledged masterpiece of 20th-century Armenian architecture representing a unique example of the so-called “neo-Armenian” style of the Soviet period, was seriously damaged in its original architectural and structural shape due to impermissible reconstruction.

The distortion works, begun in January 2012, continued until October 2013 without any approved project documents. Within a short period of about one and a half years, under the guise of

public organisations permanently called upon the Yerevan City Municipality and relevant Ministries to stop the destruction of the Covered Market, to take urgent measures for dismantling the newly erected structures, to oblige the owner to fully restore the authentic structural, architectural shape of the Covered Market and reconstitute its original use. However, no serious measures to stop the illegal construction were undertaken. The distorted landmark was reopened and has functioned illegally since 8 October 2013.

The Central Covered Market was built just after the Second World War. During this period (1945–1955) in Soviet Armenia many significant buildings with architecture representing the synergy of traditional local artistic techniques and concrete struc-



The Central Covered Market in 1985 (architect Grigor Aghababyan, engineer Hamazasp Arakelyan)

renovation and construction of an underground parking area, half of the building was dismantled and replaced by a four-storey supermarket whose structures are incompatible with the authentic design and seriously endanger the Market’s important heritage values. This vandalism was not stopped despite warnings from professionals and a powerful public protest movement. Since the beginning of the reconstruction a great number of architects and

tures, new for that period, were realised. The Central Covered Market is not only one of the most interesting creations of Armenian post-war architecture, but also a significant contribution to the movement of neo-national styles in Soviet architecture in general. This type of “double technique – double face” building is an original example of a coherent combination of exterior stone masonry and concrete support structure.

The Central Market was built in the historic centre of the capital of Armenia. It was designed by Grigor Aghababyan (1911–1977), a famous Soviet Armenian architect and Honoured Artist of the Republic of Armenia, as well as by engineer Hamazasp Arakelyan. The original use of the building was a grocery market with different services: shops, a medical centre, newsstands, a post office and a railway station office. Architecturally, structurally and functionally this building represents an exclusive phenomenon of its time. It could be considered as a precursor of the contemporary trade malls.

The Covered Market was not only a significant artistic and architectural creation, but also a rare social phenomenon, an exceptional attempt to realize the utopian dream of a society where everything, including the grocery sale and household services, are a cultural manifestation of a progressive nation with centuries-old traditions and fighting for a better future.

The massive rectangular volume (42 x 92 m) of the building is inscribed in a dense residential plot in the very centre of the capital. This area is located between Kond and Dzoragyugh, the two oldest districts of Yerevan. The intensive urbanisation of this territory began in the second decade of the 19th century, when Eastern Armenia was annexed by the Russian Empire, and Yerevan became the main city of Erivan Province. In 1856, the entire territory of the present small centre of Yerevan received a regular planning structure, which was maintained in the first master plan of Yerevan of the Soviet period (1924) and in all subsequent master plans. The Covered Market occupies a plot of 5,000 square metres in a quarter bounded by Mashtots, Proshian, Leo and Saryan Streets. Its main, most richly decorated facade overlooks Mashtots Avenue (formerly Lenin Avenue, Armenian Street), one of the most important transport and compositional axes of Yerevan. The stained glass main entrance, representing an original interpretation of mediaeval Armenian decorative forms, itself is an outstanding work of decorative art. This monumental portal accentuates the continuous linear facade of Mashtots Avenue with residential houses of tuff, and at the same time does not disturb its compositional integrity.

The building has no analogies in the Soviet and foreign architecture of this period with regard to its multifunctional organization closely related to the structural and artistic interpretation.

The building represented a two-level three-nave hall with larger central nave. The roof was supported by 19 concrete arches of 42 metres width (ten of which are now destroyed). The structural system of the building was clearly expressed in the interior. The supporting arcade was also the main means of artistic expression in the interior. The surfaces of the big arches were treated with gradually reduced additional arcs that visually give a lightness and elegance to the structure. Despite the huge size, the interior space had a very human scale, thanks to the masterfully drawn arch galleries of the side naves and to the interior details, like metal railing of the corner stairs and the higher tiers. The 34 stationary shops were located in the side galleries. The restaurant, café and medical centre were situated on an underground floor. At the main entrance there were the post office and the railway station office to serve the sellers – farmers from different regions.

Despite the fact that the valuable stained glass of the main facade and several supporting arches remained intact, the authentic structural and architectural integrity of the building was seriously damaged. The floors, escalators, and other incoherent elements of the newly built structure create a sharp dissonance with the remaining authentic part of the former Covered Market. This



The authentic interior of the Covered Market



The demolition of the Covered Market started in 2012



The new structures of the "renovated" Covered Market

The interior of the former Covered Market in September 2013



kind of gross interference suggests that the owner also intends to reconstruct the remaining part of the building.

The Covered Market has been on the State List of Immovable Historical and Cultural Monuments of Yerevan as a monument of Republican (national) level since 1983. It retained its Republican Protection Status (within three existing protection levels – local, regional and Republican) on the latest State List of Immovable Historical and Cultural Monuments approved in 2004. The building was privatized in 2010. Until 2012, no restoration work or changes to the landmark had been made.

The history and analysis of the Covered Market were widely presented in numerous publications and research on 20th-century architecture in Armenia and abroad, which proves the outstand-

ing universal value of this building. It was one of the most visited tourist sites in Armenia. The luminous hall impressed visitors by the colors and scents of the rich gifts of Armenian nature. For many tourists the Covered Market was a symbol of traditional Armenian hospitality.

Nune Chilingaryan
Doctor of Architecture, Professor at the Yerevan State
University of Architecture and Construction
ICOMOS Armenia
Vice President of the ICOMOS International Scientific
Committee of 20th Century Heritage