

Socialist Realism and Armenian Building Tradition: Steps to Form a Unique Architectural Language

Nune Chilingaryan and Gagik Gurjyan

According to the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, the term Socialist Realism means the “artistic method which is an aesthetic expression of socialist world perception of the epoch of fighting for establishing and building socialist society”. In other words, it defines the art which shows the fight and the victory of the socialist way of life in all its manifestations. Despite the clearness of the formulation, Socialist Realism is one of the most ambiguous cultural phenomena with rich symbolical content, especially in architecture.

In Armenia as well as in other former republics of the Soviet Union, the architectural concept of Socialist Realism initially had the purpose of victory over abstract and, as it was considered, empty constructivism (functionalism). With time this indistinct idea, enriched with local art and building traditions, has been incarnated in concrete buildings and

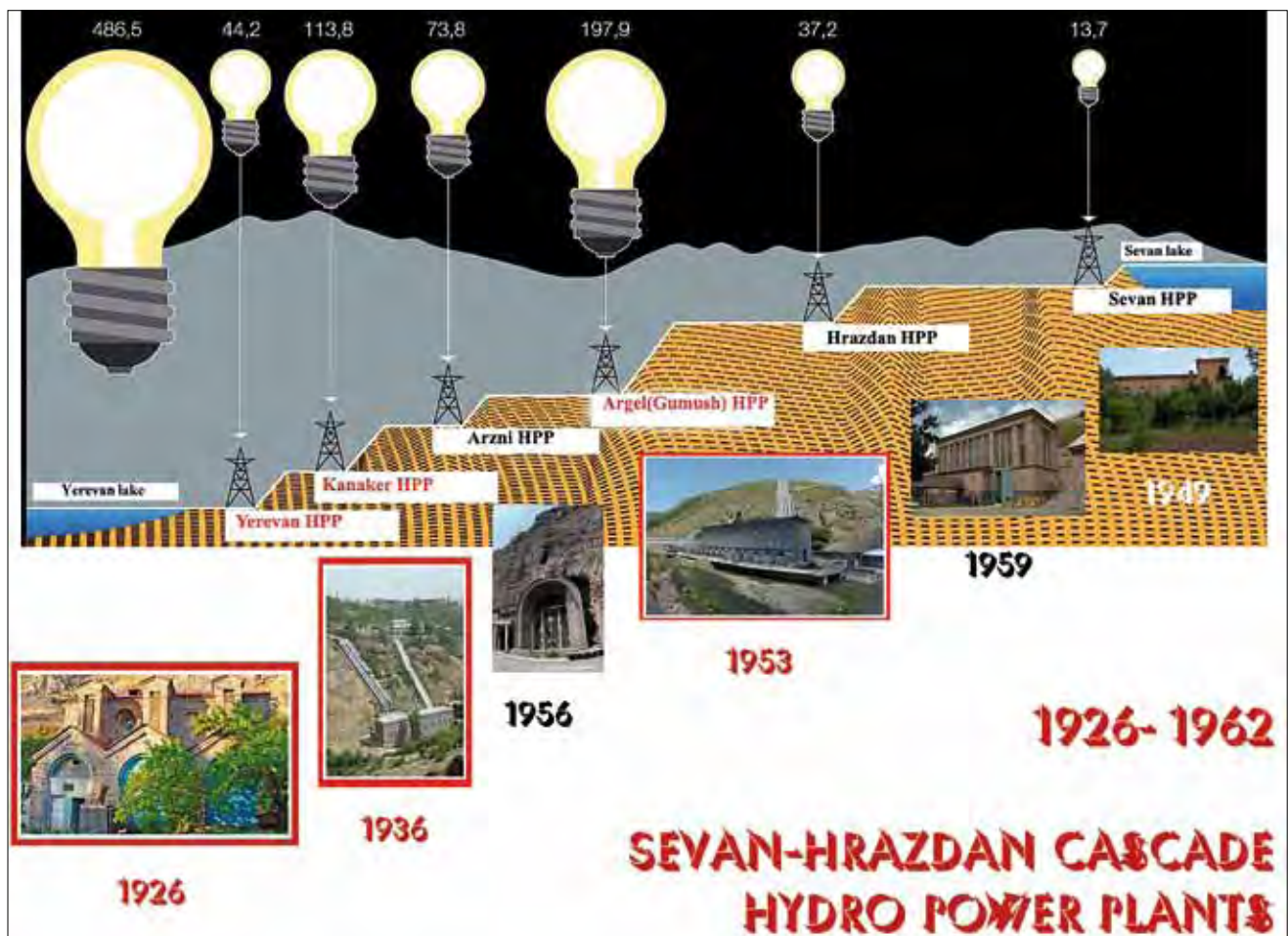
ensembles symbolizing major phenomena and events where “victory” remains the keyword. Today, it has become more and more clear that the value of this heritage goes beyond the limits of ideological achievements on a local scale.

Here are four Armenian ensembles expressing the “epoch of fight and overcoming”, and also the stages of elaboration of an original architectural thinking:

1. Cascade of Hydropower Plants “Sevan-Hrazdan” (1926–1962);
2. Victory Monument (Mother Armenia) (1950);
3. Yerevan Railway Station (1956);
4. Memorial Complex of Sardarapat Battle, National Museum of Ethnography and History of Liberation Struggle of Armenia (1968–1977).

Fig. 1: Cascade of Hydropower Plants “Sevan-Hrazdan” (1926–1962)

Abb. 1: Stufen der Wasserkraftwerke „Sevan-Hrazdan“ (1926–1962)



Before a more detailed presentation of each of these four complexes, I will try to name their common properties:

- Each of these ensembles was especially created for a particular landscape or urban environment, organically connected with it and dominating it.
- Each design solution, the exterior and interior details are submitted to the logic of a general concept, suggested by the peculiarities of urban context, functions, thematic focus.
- Despite the different usage, regardless of the presence or absence of specific socialist decorative symbols, despite the different realization periods and events to which they were dedicated, their architecture is based on the rich structural and aesthetic opportunities of traditional building material: stone (tuff, basalt, granite).
- An original synthesis of artistic means is applied; in particular, the contrasting combination of masterly executed sculptural bas-reliefs and polished stone surface.
- In the architecture of all selected objects the purely decorative elements are used in small quantities, but they have a powerful artistic influence; this method is very characteristic of traditional Armenian architecture.
- All of them are monuments of national importance.

According to the preliminary analysis, each of them can pretend to meet at least one of the following criteria of the World Heritage Convention:

- ii. to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;
- iii. to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;
- iv. to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;

*Fig. 2: Yerevan first Hydropower Plant (HPP), 1926
(architect: A. Tamanyan)*

*Abb. 2: Das erste Wasserkraftwerk in Jerewan, 1926
(Architekt: A. Tamanyan)*

*Fig. 3: Kanaker Hydropower Plant (HPP), 1936
(architect: M. Grigoryan)*

*Abb. 3: Kanaker Wasserkraftwerk, 1936
(Architekt: M. Grigoryan)*

*Fig. 4: Kanaker Hydropower Plant (HPP), 1936
(architect: M. Grigoryan)*

*Abb. 4: Kanaker Wasserkraftwerk, 1936
(Architekt: M. Grigoryan)*

*Fig. 5: Argel/Gjumush/Hydropower Plant (HPP), 1953
(architect: Tiran Marutyanyan)*

*Abb. 5: Argel/Gjumush/Wasserkraftwerk, 1953
(Architekt: Tiran Marutyanyan)*



- vi. to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.

1. Cascade of Hydropower Plants (HPP) “Sevan-Hrazdan” (1926–1962)

The creation of the Cascade began in 1923 with the building of first Yerevan HPP. In 1931, a scheme of using the waters of Sevan lake was elaborated, meaning a gradual decrease of the level of the lake at 50 m. The realization of the entire Sevan-Hrazdan HPP system was suspended for the period of the Second World War and restarted in 1949. The Sevan-Hrazdan Cascade includes seven derivational hydro power plants located on Hrazdan River:

1. Yerevan first HPP, 1926 (architect A. Tamanyan);
2. Kanaker HPP, 1936 (architect M. Grigoryan);
3. Sevan HPP, the highest level of the Cascade, 1949;
4. Argel/Gjumush/HPP (the most powerful station of the cascade), 1953 (architect T. Marutyanyan);
5. Arzni HPP, 1956;
6. Hrazdan HPP, 1959;
7. Yerevan HPP-1, 1962.

“Sevan-Hrazdan” Cascade played a decisive role in the formation of the Armenian economy in the 1930s to 1960s and also during the period of power blockade of Armenia in 1989–1994, when the work of thermal power stations was practically stopped because of a lack of fuel.

Until today, the cascade is one of the basic manufacturers of electric power and produces about 10 % of the internal consumption of the Republic of Armenia. The use of the water of Sevan lake and Hrazdan river allows not only to solve the problems of producing electric power, but also to regulate the water supply of agricultural consumers and of the population. Today, the cascade supplies about 70% of the farmlands of Armenia with water.

The complex of the cascade is first of all an exclusive example of a technological ensemble. Its realization has been connected with serious technical problems, due to the features of a mountain relief and to the construction difficulties on rocky ground. In particular, the stations of Sevan (1949) and the Arzni HPP (1956) are underground.

Each of these stations is a combination of unique technical decision, building design and architectural expressiveness. Among these seven plants three, Yerevan first HPP, Kanaker HPP and Argel/Gjumush/HPP, are included in the List of Landmarks of the Republic of Armenia. The Sevan, Arzni and Hrazdan HPP also meet the requirements sufficient for their inclusion in the List of Landmarks of national importance. At present, the documentation for their inclusion is at the preparation stage.

Currently, the Cascade belongs to the company “Rus-Gidro” which intends to carry out an extensive reconstruction for the period 2013–2017 to adapt it to a modern technological system. For this reason, efforts to include the Cascade in the World Heritage List will be very important for the protection of its authentic architectural and structural shape during the technical renovation.



Fig. 6: Argel/Gjumush/Hydropower Plant (HPP), 1953
(architect: Tiran Marutyanyan)

Abb. 6: Argel/Gjumush/Wasserkraftwerk, 1953
(Architekt: Tiran Marutyanyan)

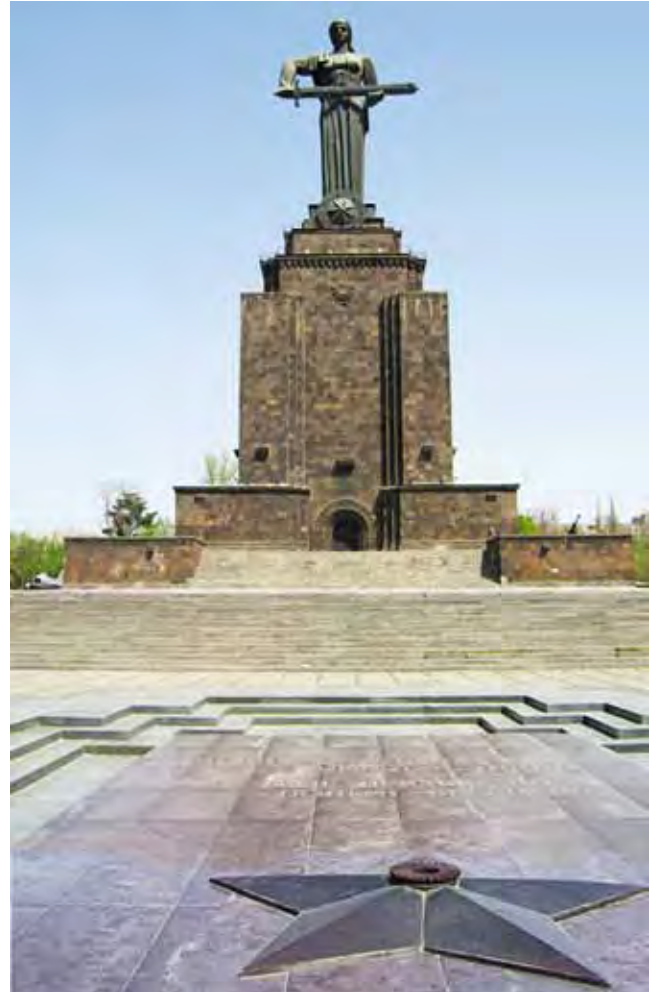
2. Victory Monument (Mother Armenia), 1950

The Mother Armenia Monument (former Victory Monument) is placed in Victory Park in Yerevan. The monument was built in 1950 as a victory memorial for the Second World War. Initially it represented the statue of Stalin on a pedestal (containing a military museum) designed by the famous Armenian architect Rafael Israelyan. The authors of the monument were awarded the USSR State Prize in 1951. The statue was considered a masterpiece of the sculptor Sergey Merkurov. Nevertheless, following the criticism of the personality cult of Stalin and the end of his repressive reign, the statue was replaced in 1967 by the statue of Mother Armenia (author: Ara Harutyunyan).

The monument has a total height of 52 meters (pedestal 30 m and statue 22 m). Erected on a high hill, it dominates the city and is visible from practically everywhere. The silhouette of the memorial is very strong and expressive. Each of its parts is self-contained and has an independent architectural and artistic value. The design of the pedestal is dualistic. Outside it represents a monumental undissected volume of polished black tuff which comprises three levels



*Fig. 7: Victory Monument, 1950
(architect: Rafael Israelyan, sculptor: Sergey Merkurov)
Abb. 7: Sieges-Denkmal, 1950
(Architekt: Rafael Israelyan, Bildhauer: Sergey Merkurov)*



*Fig. 8: Victory Monument (Mother Armenia), sculptor: Ara Harutyunyan (1967), architect: Rafael Israelyan (1950)
Abb. 8: Sieges-Denkmal (Mutter Armenia), Bildhauer: Ara Harutyunyan (1967), Architekt: Rafael Israelyan (1950)*

of the museum: an exhibition dedicated to the Second World War, a hall of the Artsakh Liberation War and the conference hall. The structure of the two pairs of intersecting arches supporting the domed conference hall resembles the narthexes of Armenian medieval churches. As the author confessed many years later: “Knowing that the glory of dictators is temporary, I built a simple three-nave Armenian basilica”.

The main accents of the façade are the entrance, a sculpted portal with 19 different rosettes and a massive door covered with stamping copper, a bas-relief of the “Victory Award” and decorative brackets with socialist symbols. Despite the lack of windows, the major part of the internal premises is well illuminated by the horizontal roof lanterns. The conference hall of the museum inside the pedestal is the most interesting part from the structural point of view. The dome is inscribed in the rectangular volume of the pedestal. The museum belongs to the Ministry of Defense. The complex of the monument and the adjoining esplanade were renovated in the early 1980s.

3. Yerevan Railway Station (Architect E. Tigranyan, 1956) Statue of David of Sasun, (Sculptor E. Kochar, 1959)

At the beginning of the 1960s the Station Square in Yerevan was a complete urban ensemble with the cinema “David of Sasun” to the right and the House of Culture of Railway Men to the left of the station. Later the cinema was demolished. The hotel complex at the site of the former cinema has been unfinished for more than 15 years. However, the railway station building and the statue still dominate the composition of the square, now partially distorted.

The history of the creation of this ensemble shows once again how interestingly the ideological phenomenon of socialist realism can be linked to the local and classical European architectural tradition. The idea of erecting this monument originated in 1939, the year of the millennium of the Armenian epic “David of Sasun”. Its plaster version was installed in the same year and destroyed two years later, after the arrest of its author, the famous painter and sculptor



Fig. 9: Yerevan Railway Station, architect: Edmon Tigranyan, 1956, Statue of David of Sasun, sculptor: Ervand Kochar, 1959

Abb. 9: Hauptbahnhof Jerewan, Architekt: Edmon Tigranyan, 1956; Reiterstandbild des David von Sasun, Bildhauer: Ervand Kochar, 1959

Yervand Kochar. It is very strange and interesting that the decision to restore the monument was taken in 1957 in honor of the 40th anniversary of the Socialist Revolution.

In the architecture of the railway station we can see some influence of the St. Petersburg architectural school of the mid-19th century. The luxurious interiors with an abundance of socialist symbols in the elements of decor are very characteristic of the pre-war architectural style of Soviet Socialist Realism. Nevertheless, just after the completion of the station it became a very “Yerevan”-style building, and together with the reconstructed statue in front of the new building it remains until today one of the main symbols of the Armenian capital. Several years ago, the station building was partially renovated.

4. Memorial Complex of Sardarapat Battle, National Museum of Ethnography and History of Liberation Struggle of Armenia (Architect Rafael Israelyan, 1968–1977)

This unique three-part complex can be considered an example of the historical-patriotic realism of the socialist pe-

riod. Sardarapat Memorial is dedicated to the historic Battle of Sardarapat against the Turkish invaders. The memorial is located in the village of Araks in the Armavir Province, 11 kilometers southwest of the town of Armavir. The complex was inaugurated in 1968 during the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Sardarapat that took place from May 22–26, 1918. In the words of historian and researcher Christopher J. Walker, if the Armenians had lost this battle, “it is perfectly possible that the word Armenia would have henceforth denoted only an antique geographical term”.

The entrance is flanked by huge winged oxen made of red tuff. The steps lead to a square with a 26-metre-high bell tower whose twelve bells can be seen from afar.

The next part of the memorial is the avenue of eagles leading to the Victory Wall. Through the arch of the wall we can see the final part of the complex: the National Museum of Ethnography. It is designed in the form of a massive and monolithic medieval fortress. The rectangular plan of the building accommodates the courtyards and three central exhibition halls covered by an original structure in the form of the traditional roof of the Armenian house called “haz-arashen”.



Fig. 10: Memorial Complex of Sardarapat Battle (1968–1977), architect: Rafael Israelyan
Abb. 10: Gedenkstätte der Schlacht von Sardarapat (1968–1977), Architekt: Rafael Israelyan

Fig. 11: National Museum of Ethnography and History of Liberation Struggle of Armenia (1968–1977), architect: Rafael Israelyan
Abb. 11: Nationalmuseum für Ethnographie und Geschichte des Befreiungskampfes Armeniens (1968–1977), Architekt: Rafael Israelyan



The Sardarapat complex represents an exceptional synthesis of architecture and monumental art, an original interpretation of axial composition harmoniously inscribed in the landscape of the Ararat plain.

Zusammenfassung

Sozialistischer Realismus und armenische Bautradition: Stufen der Herausbildung einer unverwechselbaren Architektursprache

Der Großen Sowjetischen Enzyklopädie zufolge bedeutet der Begriff „sozialistischer Realismus“ die „künstlerische Methode, die ein ästhetischer Ausdruck des sozialistischen

In Armenien wie auch in anderen ehemaligen Republiken der Sowjetunion hatte das architektonische Konzept des „sozialistischen Realismus“ anfangs den Zweck des Sieges über den abstrakten und, wie er gesehen wurde, leeren Konstruktivismus (Funktionalismus). Mit der Zeit hat sich diese verschwommene Vorstellung, bereichert durch örtliche Kunst- und Bautraditionen, in konkreten Gebäuden und Ensembles niedergeschlagen, die die wichtigsten Phänomene und Ereignisse symbolisieren und bei denen „Sieg“ der Schlüsselbegriff bleibt. Heutzutage wird es immer klarer, dass der Wert dieses Erbes über die Grenzen der ideologischen Errungenschaften von lokaler Tragweite hinausgeht. Im Beitrag werden vier armenische Ensembles vorgestellt, die die „Epoche des Kampfes und der Überwindung“ ebenso ausdrücken wie die Stufen eines eigenen, landestypischen architektonischen Denkens:



Fig. 12: National Museum of Ethnography and History of Liberation Struggle of Armenia (1968–1977), interior, architect: Rafael Israelyan

Abb. 12: Nationalmuseum für Ethnographie und Geschichte des Befreiungskampfes Armeniens (1968–1977), Innenraum Architekt: Rafael Israelyan

Weltbilds von der Epoche des Kampfes zur Einrichtung und zum Aufbau der sozialistischen Gesellschaft ist“. Mit anderen Worten: die Kunst, die den Kampf und den Sieg der sozialistischen Lebensform in all ihren Manifestationen zeigt. Trotz der klaren Formulierung ist „sozialistischer Realismus“ eines der mehrdeutigsten kulturellen Phänomene mit reichem symbolischen Gehalt, insbesondere in der Architektur.

1. die Kaskade der Wasserkraftwerke „Sevan-Hrazdan“ (1926–1962);
2. das Siegesdenkmal (Mutter Armenien) (1950);
3. der Bahnhof in Jerewan (1956);
4. das Sardarapat Denkmal und das Nationalmuseum der armenischen Ethnographie (1968–1977).