

“I HAVE BEEN DRAWING OVALS SINCE MY CHILDHOOD”

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ВРЕМЯ

НОВОСТЕЙ

They Are Celebrating Centenary of Architect Oscar Niemeyer in Museum of Architecture

An exhibition has been opened in the Shchusev Museum of Architecture devoted to the centenary of Oscar Niemeyer, legendary Brazilian architect. For obvious reasons the hero of the day missed the event. Those present congratulated him via a spacebridge. Oscar Ribeiro de Almeida Niemeyer Soares Filho was born in Rio de Janeiro and got his education there. Like many other great Latin-Americans of the 20th century he had been a staunch democrat and socialist since his early years. In 1967 he designed the headquarters building for the French Communist Party where the shining arch was, the architect thought, to demonstrate the beauty of the ideals for which the party fought. Quite recently the architect made several designs for Cuba and Fidel Castro once said that just two real Communists were left in the world: he himself and Niemeyer... Even the architect's preference for the cheap, democratic concrete instead of expensive titanium covers (an evident attack on Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao built by Frank Gehry) is ideologically based. And still, it is hard to find the forms more sophisticated, fine and aristocratic than those created by the winner of the Soviet Peace Prize, the person banned from entering the US, architect Oscar Niemeyer.

His first outstanding work, the Pampulha Resort on a lake near Belo Horizonte was accomplished thanks to the order by Juscelino Kubitschek, the city Prefect at the time. After becoming the Brazil's President, Kubitschek created the new capital shifting it from the ocean shores to a remote underdeveloped area of the country. It was there that the city had been born resembling in plan a butterfly – to some, and a jet plane – to others. Launched in 1953 the city of Brasilia is still developing but its radiant image became known to the whole world as early as forty years ago. There, the Niemeyer's style had attained its highest harmony. Just as his mentor Le Corbusier he created horizontal overhead covers that soared in the air turning walls into massive glass surfaces. But rigid lines and right angles, the laconic rationalism of the European vanguard were not to his taste. Niemeyer said that he had always preferred curved lines. “What I like is a free and sensual curve. The curve that I see in the mountains of my country, in winding beds of its rivers, in clouds of the sky, in the body of the beloved woman. The whole Universe has been created with curves.”

The ensemble created by Niemeyer is a structure of elongated, pointed light arches, meandering roof strips, concrete bowls: in the Presidential Palace block one of them is turned up to the sky and the other – down to earth. The fairy-tale, sleepy world of those forms somewhat resembles the pictures by Dali but their vibes are quite optimistic. When creating the palaces for the Square of the Three Powers Niemeyer wanted “to see them full of dreamy and poetic shapes.” The Itamaraty Palace consists of grand, very tall and light arches while in the Alvorada Pal-



ace the arches protectively support the roof with their thin top points. Those arches-columns look similar to surrealist works, since they possess their own character, behavior and emotions as well. Curved shapes resembling vertical boomerangs stand in a tight circle and all together they create the ecstatic image of the Cathedral. That building so easily and clearly personifies the spiritual rapture that it has become a real calling card both for the city and for its architect.

A lot of famous designs and those unknown to us can be seen at the exhibition – the UN Headquarters building in New York, arched façade of the Mondadori Publishers offices in Milan, the Algiers University building covered with a massive twisted surface, the Latin America memorial in São Paulo with the bloody palm of a hand in front. They said about Niemeyer that he was a sculptor rather than an architect – so plastic and integrated in the landscape were his large shapes formed with rough concrete. But he also likes tense structures that quarrel with the ambient environment.

Niemeyer's role in the 20th century architecture is two-sided. On the one hand, he has shown that the new capital of a great nation can be an architectural gala, a dream about the marvelous future. The latest "echo of Brasilia" is Astana, the current capital of Kazakhstan. On the other hand, Niemeyer has created a lot of idea buildings, examples of the form diverging from the strict geometrism of the West. And in this he is, in my opinion, amazingly close to Konstantin Melnikov, whose plastic ideas have been taken up in various periods by Ilya Golosov with his Zuev Club or Mikhail Posokhin with his USSR Pavilion for the Montreal Expo. The Presidential Palace in Brasilia is compared with the Comecon building in Moscow designed by Posokhin, Senior – the double skyscraper with a cylinder at its foot. Visitors to the exhibition can also contemplate prototypes of the Palace of Congresses in the Kremlin. The exposition organized by the Museum of Architecture with the participation of Russian Avantgarde Heritage Preservation Foundation is an infusion of the fine architecture to our feverish construction life. It is symbolic that the Foundation also works on establishing Melnikov Museum.

Pavel Kogan, a poet, once wrote, expressing the uncompromising enthusiasm typical for a person in the 1930's: "I have disliked ovals since my childhood!// I have been drawing angles since my childhood!". But Niemeyer could have written: "I have disliked angles since my childhood, I have been drawing ovals since my childhood." Is it the wiser vanguard? Or reverting to the human being from a pure idea? ■

