

# DEVELOP(MENT)ING STAGNATION

ARCHITECTURE CONSERVATIVISM in the city SAINT PETERBURG

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Research Plan

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"The difference between architecture in Saint Petersburg and the rest of the world is close to the difference between a personal computer of the 1980s and a modern laptop"

Maria Elkina, 2020

## INTRODUCTION

Saint Petersburg is a second-largest city in Russia, having a population over 6 million people. Located in the northern part of the country on the edge of the Baltic Sea it was founded by tsar Peter the Great in 1703 as a future capital for Russian Empire. Tsar was wishing the new capital to become the most beautiful city in Europe and the city was built with an intention to open up Russia towards western traditions and western European world. Built in record time Saint Petersburg became the capital in 1712 and remained such through the rise of Russia as one of the strongest Empires in the world until 1918 and is still known for its beauty and unique architecture styles.

Peter the Great believed that Russia of his time was behind the Western world in terms of technological developments and achievements and wanted to stimulate the exchange between the cultures (Gorbatenko, 2015). For this he believed it was necessary to create a capital, which would have an appearance of a Western European city. Inspired by canals of Amsterdam and Venice, architecture of such world known capitals as Paris, Rome and London he desired to bring the same “European” feeling into the new Russian Capital. Following this will the tsar invited a lot of foreign architects and city planners to work on the city of Saint Petersburg. People such as Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Le Blond, Reiner Ottens, Giovanni Maria Fontana, Domenico Trezzini came to bring European understanding of architecture to Russian Empire. All the plans for the city were drawn under tsars’ control and the historic center we see today was created by strict planning based on 18th century Western European traditions. The same tendency to invite European architects was kept during the reign of the rulers who followed (Empresses Anna Ioanovna, Elizabeth Petrovna and Catherine II the Great) and the historic city center of Saint Petersburg gained the monumental splendor with various palaces, cathedrals and gardens built by Italian, French and British architects - Bartolomeo Francesco Rastrelli, Antonio Rinaldi, Giacomo Quarenghi, Charles Cameron, Jean-Baptiste Vallin de la Monthe, Carlo Rossi.

Today the first core of the city – its’ historic part built through 18-19th centuries – is world known as Northern Venice and conquers the hearts of millions visitors. But through 300 years of its’ history the city turned from being one of the most progressive cities in Russia (not only architecture sense, but also art, culture, traditions) into the one of the city with the prejudice to anything new. Today the city is trying to keep its’ “historical appearance”, to preserve how it looked like when it was envisioned by one of the greatest tsars in Russian History, but this intension is leading the historic city center of Saint Petersburg to its’ devastation.

If one visits Saint Petersburg, what will be found on the touristic routes and showed off city center are the shining facades of palaces, beautiful views of architectural ensembles on the canals and golden spires of cathedrals. But if the observer would care to take a deeper look into the insides of he city the discoveries would be the opposite. Numerous buildings in the city center of Saint Petersburg are rotting from inside, dying behind the closed doors, abandoned by their inhabitants, who believe that the historic appearance of the city should be kept, but prefer to move to more luxurious river-side apartment complexes (Maria Elkina, 2020).

The fascination of my Master thesis comes from exploring the city I come from, the city I grew up in and the city I highly admire. It comes from my own pain of seeing the city center of the city dying alongside with its’ architecture stagnated by the people, who oppose any kind of change which is brought from the “outside world”. It comes from my own will to explore how the situation can be improved and leads me towards not only exploration of the cities’ architecture values, but also the people, who are behind those walls.

## RESEARCH STATEMENT

In this Master Thesis I wish to explore what are the origins of conservatism among the citizens of Saint Petersburg and can the historic center of Saint Petersburg overcome the stagnation it is currently captured in. I do believe that the Historic Center of Saint Petersburg has a potential to become a driver for the development of the contemporary architecture of the city as by its` historical nature Saint Petersburg is a city which emerged from the new knowledge brought to the land. I will aim to discover if local values of the city can be used to overcome and question the conservative views of its` citizens and be used to re-interpret the gaps in the historic fabric.

During my research I would be focusing on revealing why the city have formed its` conservative views and how they are influencing the development of the city and its` architecture. I wish to reveal the anchor points that do not allow the architecture of the city to move forward and discover how the field of the debate around the possible ways that the historic city center of Saint Petersburg and its` architecture can develop. Therefore the research question will be the following:

Can contextual values of Saint Petersburg help it to overcome conservative views about applying contemporary architecture in historically important areas of the city?

The main research question will be supported by sub questions:

1. What are the contextual values of the historic city center of Saint Petersburg? When and how were they introduced to the city?
2. How do conservative views influence the city? Why the conservative views of the city and its` citizens have developed?
3. What is influencing the opinions of the people and (how) can architecture environment change them?

## KEY WORDS:

*CONSERVATISM/CONSERVATIVE VIEWS*

*STAGNATION*

*VALUES*

*Architecture Values*

*Historical Values*

*Community/Local Values*

*CONTEXT*

*Contextual features*

*Historical features*

*DRIVER*

*CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE*

*TECHNICITIES*

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of his Master Thesis will be based on researching the cities' development and the process of formation of not only its' appearance today, but also the views of its' citizens. The theoretical framework will be supported with three main topics that would be gradually explored.

Topic 1: The discourse about the contemporary development of the city

In this section I wish to seek an answer to the question of why the conservative nature of the city and its' architecture was developed and enter the discourse which talks about the future ways the city can develop. How are the conservative views influencing the city? Is there an impact on contemporary architecture/trends/opinions on the appearance of Saint Petersburg? What is the relation between the two sides and the arguments for both?

After explorations of the topic I wish position myself within the discourse not only based on my personal wish, but also reflect on the opinions that currently exist in the city. I would like to explore where the city is heading to and if this direction can be seen as the moment of turning in its' history. During my research I would like to examine how the city turned from its' innovate nature to conservative views.

Topic 2: Architecture Values of Saint Petersburg

In order to understand the city it is important to understand its' values – architectural, historical, cultural. The city of Saint Petersburg have initially gained its' appearance after brining together the inspiration of various European cities, but later own it developed its' own architecture. I would like to research what can be considered the main values of the city, are they something that benefit the city today and how can they be re-interpreted to bring the city out of its' stagnation.

Topic 3: Western tradition that influenced/influence and can influence the city

As mentioned previously the city of Saint Petersburg has a strong impact of Western European culture. Even nowadays it is perceived as the “most European” city of Russia. In the last topic of my research I would aim to unfold the influence of Western traditions and architecture on the city of Saint Petersburg – today and in the past – and see in what way they are influencing the current situation. It would be researched whether the implementation of Western traditions can push the city forward or, on the contrary, cause a dissonance in the community.

## METHODOLOGY

Multiple steps would be undertaken to reveal the reasons behind the conservative views of Saint Petersburg and possible means to overcome them. The methodology used in the research will be combined out of different methods, which will be supporting the three main topics of theoretical framework. The combined methodology will be using the idea of unfolding the city into its` technicities, values and historic layers in order to identify the crucial points in the city fabric, where the change can be made.

As mentioned the three main aspects of the research will be Historical Layers, Technicities and Values. All the three aspects will benefit the research, however every one of them is most likely o give more information to specific topics mentioned in the Theoretical Framework.

Technicities (main aspect of the Theoretical Framework - the discourse about the contemporary development of the city) :

1. The process of building production.  
The scale of projects, how they are made, which parties are include. To identify the points where the end users can be involved in the process of making architecture.
2. Architecture production.  
How much architects are include in the process of design. How often the foreign architects are invited. The closed circle of Russian architecture.
3. Living culture.  
Where are the spaces, what is the market, what is the process of getting (and renting) the place. The place of your own. What are the leases for the market and how often people rent/buy
4. Study culture.  
The way students are admitted, live and study. Where, how long, travel distances, culture. (interviews with students)
5. Public spaces.  
Where, how are they made, what are they (now) oriented towards. What is the city plan for such spaces and why.

Site visit Historical (main aspect of the Theoretical Framework - Architecture Values of Saint Petersburg)

Historical (main aspect of the Theoretical Framework - Layers Western tradition that influenced/influence and can influence the city)

The history f the city and its` events that influenced the attitude of people and their views. The timeline and the development of the city in layers.

## ARGUMENT OF RELEVANCE

As an architect I do not agree with the conservative views of the architecture of the city I come from. I believe that we should preserve the past, but not get stuck in it, opening the possibilities for developing the architecture of the city and the country by reinterpreting the values we find in the current state of the city and enlarging our views with the values from across the border. We need to abandon the conservative, preservatory approach and proceed with the developing nature of the city which it had when it was built.

Despite the fact that Saint Petersburg developed based on imposed traditions brought from abroad I do not wish to do the same in my project by simply introducing the Western Contemporary Architecture to the Historic City Center. I believe that the historic appearance of the city which represents the innovative approach of the 18th and 19th centuries should be supported by the architecture which re-interprets those values in a new approach.

## DESIGN RELATION

Being one of the largest cities in Russia Saint Petersburg is experiencing a big inflow of people attracting the people from all over the country. A big group of those people are students, who come to the city for five years of their study and most often stay in the city. Among the "native citizens" those people are seen as a foreign body to its' nature as with them students bring their own cultures from not only all over the country but all over the world. I see the narrative of it very similar to the one I will be focusing in my research question, therefore I see an option of a Student Housing Design as the one which would most likely be a perfect fit for the topic I wish to discuss in my Master Thesis.

Provisional location will be searched among the existing gaps in the fabric of historic city center. As have been discussed before I see an unrealized potential for architecture innovations in the historic city center of Saint Petersburg and its' historical nature.

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