Pertzoff signing the construction contract for Boston's Holy Trinity Cathedral with representatives of the parish council and contractor A. J. Martini. Archival photo.

EARS TO HEAR, EYES TO SEE

Constantin Pertzoff and the Quest for American Orthodox Architecture

Inga Leonova

No architect can rebuild a cathedral of another epoch embodying the desires, the aspirations, the love and hate of the people whose heritage it became. Therefore the images we have before us of monumental structures of the past cannot live again with the same intensity and meaning. Their faithful duplication is unreconcilable.
—Louis Kahn, "Monumentality"

Study the old work but do not copy. Rather think what the masters of old would have done if they had the methods and materials of construction which we have now. Then go ahead with the design and, during this long and difficult process, fight hard for the right to do things in as simple and straightforward a way as possible.
—Constantin Pertzoff

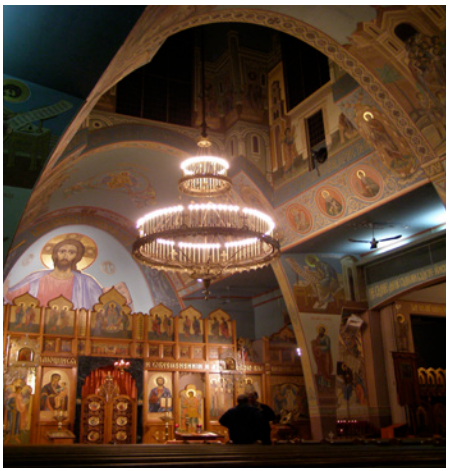
The history of church architecture in America reflects in wood, brick, stone, and concrete the turbulent history of the establishment and development of Orthodoxy in America. The first missionaries in Alaska began by resorting to the tradition of house worship of the early years of Christianity, establishing chapels in houses of the Russian American

Photos by author, except as noted.

Company and later, as the mission expanded, in homes of the converted native Alaskans. The first church buildings reflected the architecture of the northern Russian wooden churches. As the mission moved its headquarters into the mainland, first to California and then to the East Coast, it carried with it the same tendency to construct its houses of worship in the image and likeness of churches of its homeland.

However, with the influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Western Russia in the first decades of the twentieth century, the establishment of the new parishes far outpaced the ability of the immigrant groups to finance construction of new churches. Everywhere in the United States Orthodox parishes had to rely on the hospitality of neighboring Christian communities. Borrowing space for worship in Episcopal, Congregational and other churches often led to the subsequent purchase of these buildings, followed by modifications to accommodate Orthodox liturgy and to make them look more "Orthodox." More often than not exterior changes were limited to the addition—usually highly incongruously—of onion domes. Most of the work done in the interior spaces, where iconostases, panikadila, and other Orthodox interior decorations and appointments were added, created a curious transition from a familiar Protestant exterior to a fairly typical Orthodox interior. Around that time, however, a decidedly non-Orthodox element of interior space established itself in many Orthodox churches: pews, which were generally the legacy of the "previous owners." In the early years of such conversions, pews were removed so as to imitate the open and more functional liturgical space of the home parishes. But as the immigrants became more assimilated into the American mainstream, pews began to become a familiar fixture of American Orthodox churches.

The Orthodox appropriation of those "foreign" buildings usually reflected the prevailing taste of one or another ethnic group, which is why the ethnic pedigree of the Orthodox immigrant communities can be easily traced by the Carpatho-Russian, Ukrainian, Northern Russian, or Vladimir shapes of the onion domes on their churches.



Three Saints Church, Ansonia, Connecticut: exterior and nave.

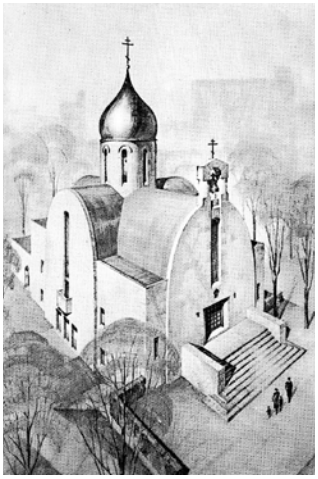
It is worth noting that the Westernized style of Orthodox architecture of post-Petrine Russia made little mark on the American Metropolia. Nostalgia focused on the images of pre-Petrine structures which felt more "native" to the immigrants. Where new churches were built from the ground up, and when there was sufficient capital to spare, their design strove to imitate" the familiar—from the clean white stone of the ancient churches of Vladimir and Suzdal to the architectural richness of the Russian and Ukrainian Baroque.

In the Old World, the nascent development of the new architectural thinking that had begun in prerevolutionary Russia (and carried great potential for the architectural development of the Metropolia) was arrested and squashed by the October Revolution. For the multitudes of Russian and Eastern European exiles, little need was felt to establish an American Orthodox architectural identity. Their desire was for romanticized traditional church architecture. Post-revolutionary immigrants reacted with sometimes violent disdain to the proliferation of cheaply constructed Orthodox churches in America, such as St. Gregory the Theologian Church in Wappingers Falls, New York or St. Stephen Cathedral in Philadelphia, which utilized typical, one-size-fits-all church blueprints prepared by American architects with minimal Orthodox "customization." One of the most vocal critics of the disparity and lack of vision in American church construction was an immigrant architect from St. Petersburg, Roman N. Verhovskoy. He was a curious figure. A graduate of the Imperial Russian Academy of Art in St. Petersburg, Verhovskoy aspired to be—and eventually succeeded in establishing himself as—the official architect of the Russian Metropolia. He vehemently professed that Orthodox architecture in America had one purpose only: to be the face of the Russian people in America. In the words of his manifesto:

*The church is the face of the national soul (spirit) of each nation. Only persons deprived of the deep feeling of their national dignity and self-respect (personality) go toward other foreign people to beg them for their 'face'—image (project) of their own church, i.e. of their own spirit, their own religion. As a result, the foreign, outside world considers this kind of people as being a '*lower race.*'*[1]

In the course of his long career in America, Verhovskoy was tireless in his violent criticism of Orthodox church architecture which deviated in any way from what he considered the "gold standard" of Russian Orthodox church building. This standard was, not surprisingly, his personal vision, which, judging by several surviving churches and drawings of unbuilt edifices, was a romanticized and somewhat modernized version of the Vladimir style, on par with the explorations of the great Russian architect Alexei Shchusev but nowhere near as elegant or sophisticated. In fact, an analysis of his archive demonstrates that he sought to legislate his oversight over every single architectural design in the Russian Metropolia, and he took as a personal offense every project that had been undertaken without appealing to his expertise and advice. In spite of such active campaigning for himself, his legacy includes only a handful of church-

[1] From the preparatory documents for the Eighth All-American Orthodox Church Council, 1950. Grammar, spelling, and emphasis are preserved from the original.



Left to right: early rendering of Holy Trinity Cathedral; 1960 exterior photo with original cupola. Archival images.

es, several iconostases and an unrealized project for an All-American Cathedral intended for the site of the present Cathedral of the Holy Virgin Protection on Second Street in New York City. In conflict with his repeated statements that only national architects should build national churches, he undertook two projects for the Greek Archdiocese and even one for a Buddhist temple.

Never was his criticism so vitriolic, however, as when the offending architect was striving to explore the vernacular legacy of the American architectural landscape and to develop the archetypes that would go beyond the repetition of familiar ancient forms from the old country. His comments on those projects are not for the faint of heart to read. One of his favorite targets, perhaps due to the fact that he practiced in the vicinity of Verhovskoy's own studio in New York, was a Boston architect, Constantin Pertzoff.

Constantin A. Pertzoff was also a White Russian immigrant from a similar background to Verhovskoy. Being some years Verhovskoy's junior, he had received his architectural training in his new homeland. He was a graduate of the Harvard Graduate School of Design at the time when austere Bauhaus Modernism brought from Germany by Hitler's exiles was triumphantly conquering the minds of young American architects.[2] He went on to become a friend and colleague of one of the greatest Bauhaus architects, Walter Gropius, who founded the famous Boston office of "gentlemen architects" from Europe, The Architects Collaborative (TAC). Pertzoff's professional legacy includes several houses, his own among them, in the modernist colony in Lincoln, Massachusetts; a fairly well-known 1944 master plan for the redevelopment of Manhattan; and a small but interesting collection of writings that are especially notable for his forward-thinking notions on sustainable architecture. In 1944, he coauthored an article ambitiously titled "An Organic Theory of City Planning." In it, he argued that modern city planning needed to recover the notion of the city as a community and to strive for reestablishment of social spaces. Without mounting a direct challenge to the governing American philoso-

[2] The Bauhaus was a design school in Germany founded by Walter Gropius that synthesized education in crafts and the fine arts. Active from 1919 to 1933, it had a lasting influence on modernist architecture and design.

Nave of Holy Trinity Cathedral. Photo by Christopher Smith.

phy of redevelopment—exemplified, for instance, by the mercilessly pragmatic enterprises of Robert Moses in New York City—Pertzoff and his collaborators presented a distinctly contrary view of the modern city. In urban planning as well as in sustainable residential design, Pertzoff was ahead of his time in terms of his concern with human scale and with social engagement in urban development, notions which are only now gaining traction in American urban design. He was a committed modernist and viewed architecture in moral terms, a philosophy that he shared with his European modernist colleagues. He was also well educated in the history of European architecture, having supplemented his studies with extensive travel thanks to a Wheelwright Traveling Fellowship in Architecture.

Pertzoff spent the early years of his career working for architectural firms that were known for church architecture among other things. After returning from his travels in Europe in 1938, he set up his own practice, which focused mostly on residential design.

By virtue of being a parishioner of Holy Trinity Cathedral in Boston, in 1948 Pertzoff received a commission for the design of the new cathedral on Park Drive, which led to another church project in Ansonia, Connecticut. The church of St. Nicholas in Whitestone, New York, designed by Sergey Padukow, who became a successor of sorts to Roman Verhovskoy as the spokesperson for the architecture of the Metropolia, exhibits interesting parallels with the design of Holy Trinity.

In a contrast to many of his compatriots, Pertzoff had been so successfully assimilated into American society that his 1937 marriage to Olga Monks, a niece of the art collector and philanthropist Isabella Stewart Gardner, took place in an elaborate three-stage ceremony that included two religious services (one Orthodox and one Episcopalian) and a reception in the Gardner Palazzo. Pertzoff family history maintains that this connection proved highly advantageous to the Holy Trinity parish when, a few years later, it was seeking a site for the new cathedral. Apparently the Gardner family assisted the parish in their negotiations for the plot in the prestigious Fenway neighborhood across the park from the Palazzo. According to parish documents, Pertzoff, in addition to being the architect for the new cathedral and its iconostasis, was one of its most significant do-

nors, which allowed him to exercise considerable freedom in making decisions and to wield significant power in his relationship with the cathedral building committee.

The design and erection of the new Holy Trinity Cathedral was plagued by considerable financial difficulties and ultimately relied heavily on supplemental "penny collection." In spite of that, the groundbreaking ceremony, presided over by Bishop Dmitri (Magan) of Boston and Fr. Theodore Chepeleff, took place on September 25, 1949. The first (lower) part of the building, at 165 Park Drive, was consecrated by Bishop Dmitri on February 3, 1952. The construction of the upper structure of the cathedral began in 1959, and on October 16, 1960, the new Holy Trinity Cathedral was consecrated by Metropolitan Leonty and Archbishop Ireney of Boston and New England. The consecration was attended by, among others, Bishop Valerian of the Romanian Diocese and Princess Ileana of Romania, who was apparently one of the most significant benefactors.[3]

Due to a lack of additional funds, the construction of the iconostasis did not begin until 1968 at the earliest. The original design called for painted icons, but subsequently a decision was made to commission mosaics from Baron Nicholas B. Meyendorff, an iconographer residing in Vienna, Austria. Special collections were taken to cover the cost of each mosaic icon. In June 1969, Nicholas Meyendorff unexpectedly passed away, and the mosaics already started were completed by his daughter Helen. Ten out of the planned twelve mosaics of the Apostles were eventually completed and installed.

The architectural design of Holy Trinity Cathedral is completely unique in the fabric of Orthodox architecture, American or otherwise. Pertzoff's inspiration for the space was the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, a grand volume of space uncluttered by structure and permitting unrestricted movement and visibility. The architect attempted to synthesize his knowledge of traditional Russian ecclesiastic architectural forms with the motifs of New England ship design, using glued laminated wood beams as barrel ribs and wood planking as cladding to evoke the imagery of a boat's hold—a reference both to seafaring traditions and to the ancient Christian image of the Church as ship. The architect's modernist sensibility is evident in the simplicity of the main volumetric solutions as well as in the use of light yellow brick, which contrasts with the traditional Boston red brick. In a rather charming nod to his modernist friends, Pertzoff used the same pendant light fixtures in the cathedral hall and wall sconces in the nave that had been used by Gropius in his projects at the Harvard Law School and in his own house in Lincoln.

The success of this synthesis is more evident inside the church than on the exterior. The cathedral's cruciform barrel vaults, completely uninterrupted due to the load-bearing structural properties of laminated wood, form a glorious open space that inspire a feeling of awe and of a soaring of the spirit in those who enter. The use of natural wood allows for a more intimate feeling in the space than would be expected from its physical size. The abundance of natural light and the placement of the windows bestow a dynamic and sometimes mystical

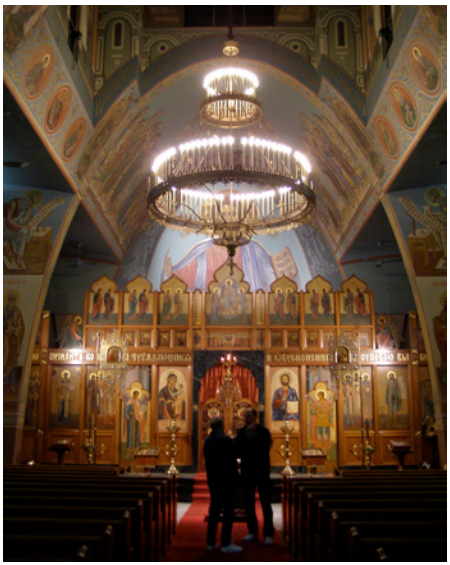
[3] Princess Ileana later became Mother Alexandra, founder of Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Ellwood City, Pennsylvania.

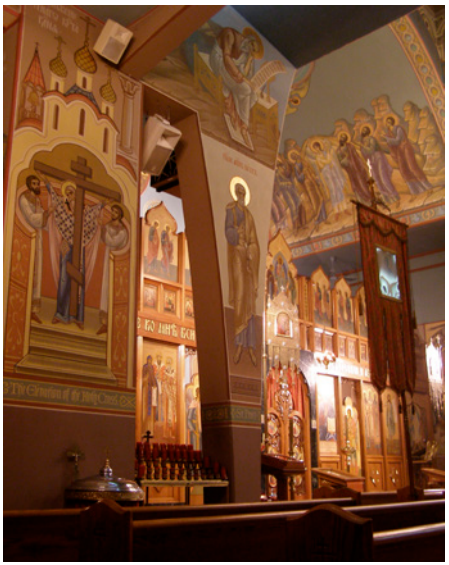
Three Saints Church, Ansonia, Connecticut: view from the east and interior of cupola.

quality upon the space that enriches the experience of liturgical services. The absence of interior divisions in the nave, save for the iconostasis which separates the main space from the sanctuary, conveys the "oneness" of the church community in the celebration of the Liturgy. The exterior form of the cathedral lacks proportional development and shows evidence of the difficulty of synthesizing disparate architectural traditions. The main cupola was redesigned several times, evolving from a classic Vladimir-style drum and cupola as represented in the early fundraising rendering to its ultimate form, sporting elliptical arches around the drum and an austere top. The original "space-age" form was replaced in 1994 by a more traditional Ukrainian Baroque onion dome, which resolved the practical problem of leaking but did not help alleviate a certain stylistic confusion.

Holy Trinity Cathedral is recognized as a landmark of Boston modernist architecture and is featured as such in the American Institute of Architects' *AIA Guide to Boston*. In spite of Verhovskoy's expressions of disdain for Pertzoff's architectural experimentation, the design brought Pertzoff the commission for Three Saints Church in Ansonia, Connecticut. Completed and dedicated in 1965, the church in Ansonia represented the architect's attempt to respond to an iconic New England church image with its tall white spires. The design was a true marriage of a traditional Orthodox temple with the local vernacular. It is both modern and traditional in lines and volume, and it walks that fine line gracefully.

Like the Boston Cathedral, Three Saints appears much larger inside than it does from outside—another success of Pertzoff's command of volume and space. The interior volume is more partitioned than that of Holy Trinity, responding to the requirement to have secondary chapels in side naves, but the main space remains open and soaring. The demand for pews gives the building a more





Three Saints Church, Ansonia, Connecticut: details of the nave.

Western feel. There is a complexity of architectural references in its design, such as the central cupola under the spire which simultaneously evokes the *shatyor* churches of medieval Russia and the spires of the American colonial era. The iconography, executed in close coordination with the design, enhances the richness of the experience of the space without overwhelming its clarity. Constantin Pertzoff's explorations of American Orthodox architecture in response to an emerging American Orthodox identity represent an effort which, while not completely isolated, is nevertheless unique in both its courage and the strength of its results. Unfortunately, those explorations were conducted without the benefit of creative collaboration or theological dialogue and produced little ongoing development. Nevertheless, they represented a response to the profound necessity "to build churches out of that reality which we experience and verify every day" while remaining faithful to the definition of an ecclesiastical building as one whose primary function is to be an epiphany of divine and human transcendent co-celebration. Recovering the freedom of creative thought that nourishes such experimentation is essential if American Orthodoxy is to gain its own unique architectural identity. ✠

[4] Rudolf Schwarz, *The Church Incarnate: The Sacred Function of Christian Architecture* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958), 11.

Inga Leonova is a practicing architect and educator. She teaches a course on monotheism, culture, and sacred space at the Boston Architectural College and serves as a thesis advisor at the New England School of Art and Design. She is the author of several publications on Orthodoxy and cultural issues, including liturgical architecture and ecology.