

JAROSŁAW STRIKER

ORCID: 0000-0001-5809-4634

Lodz University of Technology, Poland

ORTHODOX TRADITION WITH MODERN FORMS – MYTH ABOUT ORTHODOX SACRAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

ORTODOKSYJNA TRADYCJA O WSPÓŁCZESNYCH FORMACH – MIT O PRAWOSŁAWNEJ ARCHITEKTURZE SAKRALNEJ XXI WIEKU

Abstract

Orthodox sacral architecture is firmly rooted in tradition. Every element, even the smallest detail, should have a theological justification. For this reason, there is a myth that the architecture that meets theological requirements is “historicizing,” while modern forms are contrary to Tradition. But is it true? The aim of this article is to dispel this myth. On the basis of an analysis of three 21st-century projects: The Church of Saints Johns in Alba Iulia, Romania (2015, designed by D. Stefan), The Chapel of St Peter the Apostle and St Helen the Martyr in Paphos, Cyprus (2015, designed by M. Georgiou) and The Cathedral of Holy Trinity in Paris, France (2016, designed by J. Wilmotte), the author will try to prove that it is possible to design Orthodox sacral architecture of contemporary forms in harmony with the Orthodox tradition.

Keywords: sacral architecture, Orthodox church, architecture of the 21st century

Streszczenie

Sakralna architektura prawosławna jest trwale zakorzeniona w tradycji. Każdy jej element, najmniejszy detal powinien mieć uzasadnienie teologiczne. Z tego też powodu funkcjonuje mit mówiący, że architekturą spełniającą wymagania teologiczne jest ta historyzująca, a nowoczesne formy są sprzeczne z tradycją. Czy jest on jednak prawdziwy? Celem artykułu jest obalenie tego mitu. Na podstawie przeanalizowania trzech XXI-wiecznych realizacji: cerkwi św. Jana Chryzostoma w Alba Iulia w Rumunii (2015, proj. D. Ștefan), kaplicy św. Piotra Apostoła i św. Heleny Męczennicy w Pafos na Cyprze (2015, proj. M. Georgiou) i katedry św. Trójcy w Paryżu we Francji (2016, proj. J. Wilmotte) autor spróbuje udowodnić, że możliwe jest zaprojektowanie prawosławnej architektury sakralnej o współczesnych formach zgodnej z tradycją prawosławną.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura sakralna, cerkiew, architektura XXI-wieku

1. INTRODUCTION

Orthodox church – a place where profane passes into sacrum, where the material world merges with the spiritual, light, fire and gold blend with twilight, smoke and ground¹ and the sounds of various kinds of bells, chimes and human singing. It affects the viewer from all sides, all his senses, not only sight, touch or hearing, but also smell and even taste, because the air thick with the smoke of wax candles and incense also has a taste – the taste of honey, herbs and resin. It is an extraordinary, mythical, even transcendent place.

Orthodox sacral architecture is firmly rooted in tradition. Every element, even the smallest detail, should have a theological justification. There is a myth, thus, that the architecture fulfilling theological requirements is “historicizing,” while modern forms are contrary to tradition. But is it true?

This article is an extension of the research conducted as part of the master’s thesis written by the author. It consists of two parts. In the first part, the author shows the theological conditions playing an important part in the process of designing the forms of Orthodox sacral architecture. The second part is a case study. Three Orthodox church buildings erected in the 21st century were analysed. For this purpose, the author used the method of analysis of transposition of tradition in church architecture, developed by J. Uścińowicz in the monograph *Symbol. Archetype. Structure*. The complementary part of the article is the illustrative material attached at the end of the study.

On this basis, the author will try to prove that it is possible to design Orthodox church architecture with contemporary forms in accordance with the Orthodox tradition.

2. THEOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS OF ORTHODOX SACRAL ARCHITECTURE

Eastern Christian theology, in contrast to Western Christian theology which aims at the knowledge of absolute truth, focuses on the search for the way to salvation, to approach the Truth, seeing this way in Tradition.² In Eastern theology, one distinguishes between Tradition and tradition. Tradition is the whole revelation of God, experienced by mankind, Tradition is independent from man, whereas tradition is the way of expression of Tradition, its understanding and transmission.³

The Eastern Churches’ recognition of Tradition as the way to salvation means that all aspects of man’s spiritual life should be rooted in it. Also, the architect’s design creativity of an Eastern Christian temple should result from it.⁴ J. Uścińowicz points out that a temple must be traditional, but not in its formal aspect – historical and cultural, but by following the Tradition, which is the source of sacrality of a temple.⁵ According to it, an Orthodox church is a model of sacral space-time, a symbolic representation of the world, a reflection of the

¹ The term ground includes not only soil or sand, but also clay, rocks and materials derived from them, i.e. brick, concrete, plaster, as well as paints for painting icons and frescoes, the pigments of which come from crushed rocks, clays and ground.

² J. Uścińowicz, *Symbol. Archetype. Struktura. Hermeneutyka tradycji w architekturze świątyni ortodoksyjnej*, Dział Wydawnictw i Poligrafii Politechniki Białostockiej, Białystok 1997, p. 20.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 14–19.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

whole Church.⁶ As St. John of Damascus said, the Eastern Christian temple is an icon,⁷ and just like in an icon, all the present elements have meaning, both content and form, colour⁸ and also light, shadow, smoke and sound.⁹

The Eastern tradition introduces the symbolic meanings of individual elements of the temple – space and sub-space, liturgical and architectural forms, boundaries – partitions, connectors and furnishings, geometry and numbers, as well as cosmic symbolism, phenomena and forms of nature, or colours and iconographic representations.¹⁰

The Orthodox Church as a whole has several symbolic meanings. It symbolizes both the House of God, the Kingdom of God, the Garden of Eden, as well as the Holy Trinity, man and the Cosmos – the whole world.¹¹ For this reason, the temple is one, but at the same time bipartite and tripartite. The bipartite character of the temple manifests itself in the division into visible (accessible during the liturgy to the faithful) and invisible parts (which can only be entered by the clergy and ministers), just as it is with the body and soul of man, or the two natures of Christ – human and divine. The tripartite nature of the church is reflected in the three main parts: the sanctuary, the nave and the narthex, just as the Holy Trinity and the states of the Universal Church are tripartite – penitent sinners, pilgrims on Earth and the saved in Heaven.¹² Finally, the church has four walls and two main perpendicular axes east-west and north-south, just as the world spans four directions.¹³ The intersection of these axes marks the centre of the world – the axis mundi.

The temple is basically tripartite, consisting of the Sanctuary (also called the altar), the nave (also called the naos) and the narthex. The Sanctuary, as the most important place, should be located on the elevation and on the eastern side, where Paradise was once located. It symbolizes the coming Kingdom of God, as well as the Holy Sepulchre and the Mother of God,¹⁴ which was the first sanctuary to shelter the Body of Christ. In the middle of the altar stands the “altar” – the Holy Table or throne, which has both a purely liturgical function, on which the sacrifice is offered, and a symbolic function, as the Throne of God and the Holy Sepulchre. From the east, the sanctuary may be completed by an apse. Its wall is the so-called “Unassailable Wall”, in which there should be no passageways but only one or three windows through which Christ illuminates the sanctuary and the Divine Sacrifice at sunrise. Adjoining the Sanctuary on the sides are the pastophorions, which have both an important liturgical and symbolic role. They can be separate rooms or just sub-areas of the sanctuary: the northern one, called prothesis, is intended for the preparation of sacrifice, its main element is the table of oblation, while the southern one is diaconicon, intended for keeping the books and liturgical vestments.¹⁵

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 23–25.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁹ P. Florenski, *Ikonostas i inne szkice*, Bractwo Młodzieży Prawosławnej w Polsce, Białystok 1997, pp. 33–47.

¹⁰ J. Uścińowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 88–89.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 124–131.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 134,

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 134–138, 154–158; I. Dowhaniuk, *Architektura ukraińskich cerkwi*, [Wydział Architektury Politechniki Gdańskiej], Gdańsk 2004, pp. 38–45; Symeon z Tessaloniki, *O świątyni bożej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2007, pp. 38–49.

The naos is vaulted by a dome. From a horizontal perspective it symbolizes the pilgrim people, while it also has a vertical symbolism: the lower part represents the Church on Earth, the tholobate of the dome – the hosts of saints and angelic choirs, the bowl of the dome – Christ as the head of the Church. Separated from the nave is the solea – the elevation at the level of the Sanctuary, which is its extension. The central place of the solea is called the ambon, during the liturgy it is the place where the Word of God is preached, sermons are given and the Eucharist is celebrated. It symbolically refers to the stone thrown from the Holy Sepulchre, on which the angels announced that Christ had risen from the dead.¹⁶

The last part of the church is the narthex, historically intended for sinners and catechumens. It symbolized hell which, according to the ancients, was supposed to be in the west. In case there was no baptistery next to the church, a baptismal font was placed in the narthex, because only after baptism one could enter the nave.¹⁷

The domes and their quantity are crucial theologically in Orthodox churches. One dome symbolizes Christ as the head of the Church, three – the Holy Trinity, and five – Christ and the four gospels. The 7-dome arrangement refers to the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit or the 7 days of the creation of the world, 9 refers to the number of angelic choirs, 13 to Christ and the 12 Apostles and 33 to the age of Jesus. In the case of the 5-dome layout, we should also pay attention to the composition of the 4 smaller domes – axial (over the arms of the cross), typical for Ukrainian churches, and diagonal – over the arms of St. Andrew's cross – in the corners of the square, when the church plan is inscribed in a square, typical for Russian churches.¹⁸

Moreover, the role of light in architecture is extremely important. Light symbolizes the presence of God, it can be a spotlight illuminating the altar and iconostasis, and diffused light touching the temples, or daylight falling directly through the window, the light of candles and lamps, as well as reflected – especially from shining gold icons.¹⁹ There should not be too much daylight in the temple, for the reason that it is supposed to play its symbolic role. It ought to be supplemented with artificial light or from candlesticks or lamps of different intensity adjusted appropriately to particular parts of the temple.²⁰

The importance of light is that it hierarchizes the various spaces of the temple, showing the way to salvation. At this point, the role of the colour gold should be highlighted, which in the Eastern tradition is not considered as a colour but light, a reflection of God.

The Orthodox church is complemented by candlesticks – the main one under the dome is a panikadylion and similar but smaller polycandelons if there are lateral naves. These candlesticks take the form of circles with a Greek cross in the middle. The panikadylion is a symbol of the paradisiacal tree of life, the cross – which is at the centre of the universe – the axis mundi. That is why it hangs in the middle of the church at the crossing of axes under the dome, illuminating and pointing the way of God's people to salvation. Another candlestick is the eternal olive lamp in front of the Beautiful Gates symbolizing the Holy Spirit who revealed Himself in the form of flames of fire, and the seven-branched candlestick behind the Holy Table directly referring to the Old Testament temple menorah.²¹

¹⁶ J. Uścińowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 138–145; I. Dowhaniuk, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–46.

¹⁷ J. Uścińowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 145–146; I. Dowhaniuk, *op. cit.*, pp. 46–48.

¹⁸ J. Uścińowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–167; I. Dowhaniuk, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–59.

¹⁹ J. Uścińowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 225–229; J. Kryworuczko, *Світло в сакральній архітектурі*, Elpis, 2011, no. 13, pp. 99–137, <https://elpis.uwb.edu.pl/index.php/Elpis/article/view/67> (access: 13.06.2021).

²⁰ *Ibidem*; I. Dowhaniuk, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–74.

²¹ J. Uścińowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 227–229.

3. TRANSPOSITION OF TRADITION – ANALYSIS OF SELECTED EXAMPLES OF ORTHODOX ARCHITECTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Orthodox architecture in the world takes on “historicizing” and modern forms, and also forms that attempt to be a combination of both. The first of these groups is often criticized as inauthentic – not reflecting the modern times. On the other hand, modern forms are accused of deviating from the theological message, which is to be carried by the temple of Eastern Christianity. The main problem is the occidentalization of this architecture – the introduction of direct borrowings from the solutions of temples of Western Christianity,²² above all, the introduction of too much glazing, especially lateral, and consequently too much light. As a result, the church becomes evenly lit, the hierarchy of light and the symbolism of its various sources disappear. The divisions between individual spaces of the church are also lost.

Modern buildings often simplify the solutions of the temple, reducing the elements that are carriers of theological content. It should be noted, however, that there are buildings with modern forms and a well-thought-out theological program.²³

3.1. THE CHURCH OF SAINTS JOHNS IN ALBA IULIA, ROMANIA²⁴

This temple has modern forms (Ill. 1). The design is based on a symbolic 12-metre module. The temple is oriented to the east and designed on an elongated rectangular plan (24 x 12 m) with a concave western wall. The higher, the walls become bulged to form a three-cornered cross plan at cornice height. Moreover, at the intersection of the naves there is a dome that from the outside is covered by the same roof surface that the whole body of the building, at the same time outlining its presence through the bulge. The roof constitutes a clear compositional accent with its far-reaching, gilded eaves and is cut off from the walls by a narrow ribbon of windows running around the perimeter just under the eaves.²⁵ Three rows of inscriptions below it, decorated with “miniatures” of a lamb and seraphim, complete this ribbon. The lateral and eastern elevations are devoid of other decorations in contrast to western *façade* dominated by the large image of Christ. The main entrance is a gold-covered, richly decorated double doorway with images of angels blowing trumpets. Moreover, there is also a painted foundation inscription above the portal.

The interior of the temple comprises two spaces: the naos and the sanctuary, which are separated by a two-row wooden iconostasis. The underside of the roof, like the eaves, is

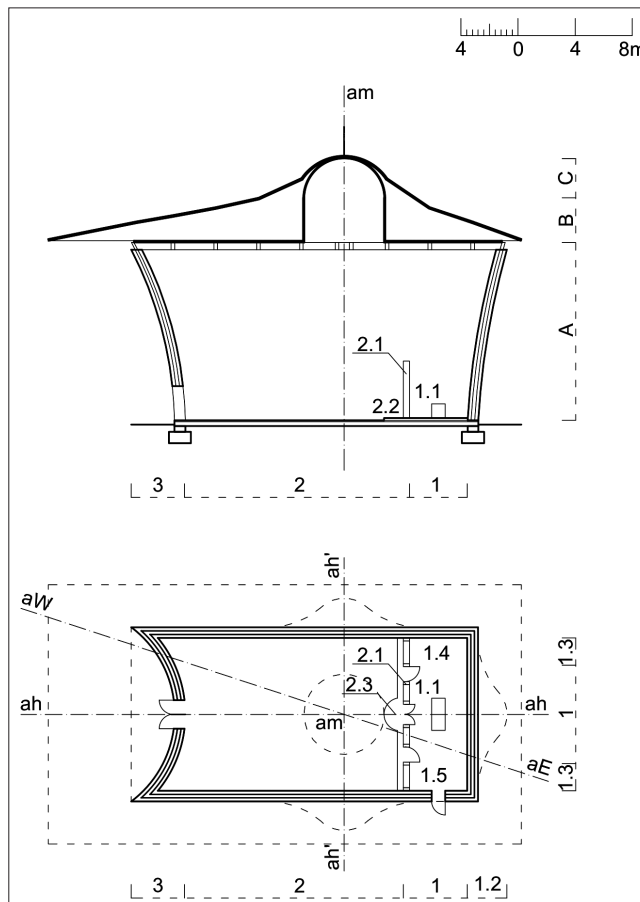
²² Western art, including modernist art, has its genesis in the Renaissance and Baroque. Theologians and philosophers of Eastern art accuse it of departing from theocentrism and giving it a theatrical character. Both painting and architecture have the character of scenery needed to show a performance. Light has ceased to be a medium carrying a theological message (the theology of light rooted in Christ’s words: “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12)) and became only a means to achieve a specific artistic effect. After: P. Florenski, *op. cit.*

²³ According to the principle, an Orthodox church is one big icon (in a spiritual context, not an image). When creating an architectural project, its creator should go through a similar spiritual journey as the writer (painter) of icons. The creative process should be preceded by theological reflection and prayer, and the final effect is a record of this prayer. After: P. Florenski, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Original name: *Biserica Sfinților Ioan Botezătorul, Ioan Teologul și Ioan Hrisostom*, 2015, designed by D. Stefan.

²⁵ D. Stefan, *Biserica Alba-Iulia*, <https://dsba.ro/portfolio/bisericaalba-iulia/> (access: 13.06.2021).

gilded. Inside the dome is situated an image of Christ Pantocrator. The tholobate depicts the heavenly liturgy and is surrounded on its underside by images of seraphim and cherubs, all interwoven with the text of the Sanctus hymn. The walls are decorated with frescoes depicting scenes from the lives of Jesus, Mary and the saints. These are dominated by a representation of the Virgin Orans on the eastern wall and the Dormition of the Mother of God on the western wall. A wooden panikadylion in the form of an octagon within a circle hangs under the dome. The whole interior is in sepia colours.



III. 1. The Church of Saints Johns in Alba Iulia, Romania (by J. Striker); symbols: am – axis mundi (vertical axis), ah – major horizontal axis, ah' – second horizontal axis, aE–aW – east–west axis, A – naos, B – tholobate, C – dome, 1 – sanctuary, 1.1 – Holy Table, 1.2 – apse, 1.3 – pastophorion, 1.4 – prothesis, 1.5 – diakonikon, 2 – naos, 2.1 – iconostasis, 2.2 – solea, 2.3 – ambon, 3 – narthex.

Such an elaborate form of the temple required individual development of its construction. Giving shape to the geometry of the walls, the main elements are vertical steel columns made of I-sections. They were walled up with an inner and outer row of bricks. The space between the rows was filled with concrete.

This temple is a reinterpretation of the traditional Moldavian Orthodox churches dating back to the time of Stefan the Great (Romanian: Ștefan *cel Mare*, Count of Moldavia from 1457 to 1504). These churches had an elongated rectangular ground plan with an apse to the altar and lateral apses to the north and south. The body of the church was crowned with a roof with far-reaching eaves, and above the crossing of the arms of the cross there was a cupola. The characteristic elements of the Orthodox churches were the wall paintings located both on the inner and outer side of the temple walls. The interiors were bipartite or tripartite.

The plan proposed by D. Stefan, starting rectangularly on the ground floor and ending with a three-horned cross at the base of the roof, is full of theological symbolism. The simple rectangular plan of the temple on the ground floor is a cosmological model of the world. At the same time, it shows the simplicity of the earthly world. The varied geometry of the plan, along with the height, directs the viewer's attention upwards, showing a golden cross glowing with reflected light – the level of heaven. In its centre there are the angelic daughters surrounding the heavenly liturgy, whose reflection / icon is the Divine Liturgy celebrated by people in the church. Above the level of heaven, Christ is towering. The horizontal layout also preserves the traditional division. The internally bipartite church is additionally complemented by the external space of the narthex “separated” from the outside world by the concavity of the western wall and the far-reaching eaves.

The modern form of the church with an interior iconographic program of the walls in toned sepia, combined with golden accents, creates a homogeneous, thoughtful and spiritual space in keeping with the tradition of Eastern Christianity, yet modern at the same time.

3.2. THE CHAPEL OF ST PETER THE APOSTLE AND ST HELEN THE MARTYR IN PAPHOS, CYPRUS²⁶

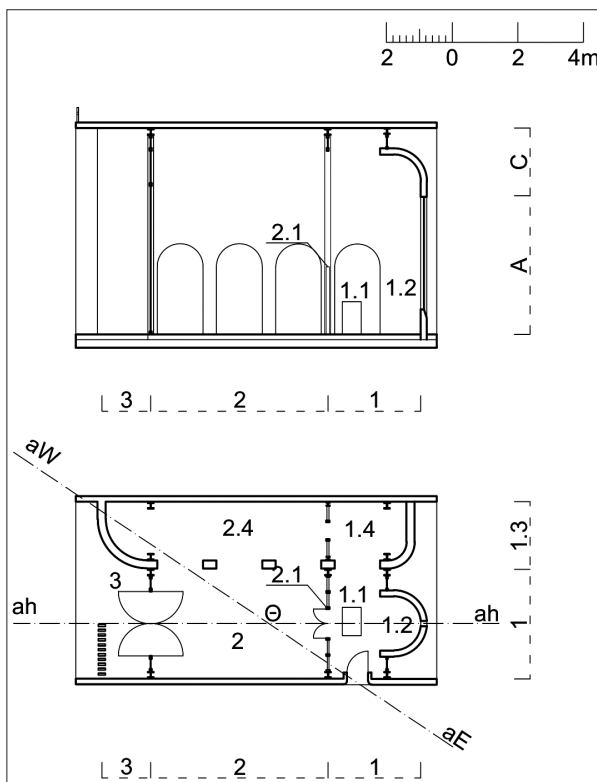
The temple was designed on a rectangular plan with two naves (Ill. 2). The main nave is covered by a barrel vault, from the outside seamlessly passing into the semi-barrel vault of the side nave. The gable walls are deeply set back inwards creating deep arcades. In this way, the rectangular plan is preserved, while at the same time, the sanctuary ends in an apse which is internally tangential to the rectangle. The apse is slightly narrower and lower than the barrel vault, creating a narrow archivolt glazed by M. Georgiou. The wall separating the sanctuary and prothesis from the nave was also glazed, as well as the gable wall of the nave. The narthex is separated from the outer space by a deep arcade and an openwork partition. It is also the structure for the bell. The interior is ascetic. White concrete is combined with glass and steel. The only difference is the image of Virgin Orans on the apse's hemisphere and the bottom of the eaves covered with wood. The project proposes an interesting structural solution combining a steel structure with a thin-wall shell of reinforced concrete.

The project was premeditated by the architect with both theological and architectural considerations.²⁷ The chapel is a combination of two traditional types of Greek Orthodox churches: a double-aisle mountain region Byzantine church with a steep-pitched roof, and single-aisle coastal region Byzantine church with vaulted roof. The glazed walls provide a view into the

²⁶ 2015, designed by M. Georgiou.

²⁷ M. Georgiou, *Apostle Peter and St. Helen the Martyr Chapel* [in:] The Greek Foundation, <https://www.thegreekfoundation.com/architecture/apostle-peter-and-st-helen-the-martyr-chapel#more-12275> (access: 13.06.2021).

successive spaces while indicating the boundaries between them. The whiteness of the walls and the barrel vault directs the gaze to the most important place – the sanctuary, which the Virgin Mary takes care of. She was the first sanctuary in which the body of Christ was hidden. In spite of the large glazing, the fact that areas of glass are set back means that not too much light enters the room, and the gradation and hierarchy of light sources is maintained.



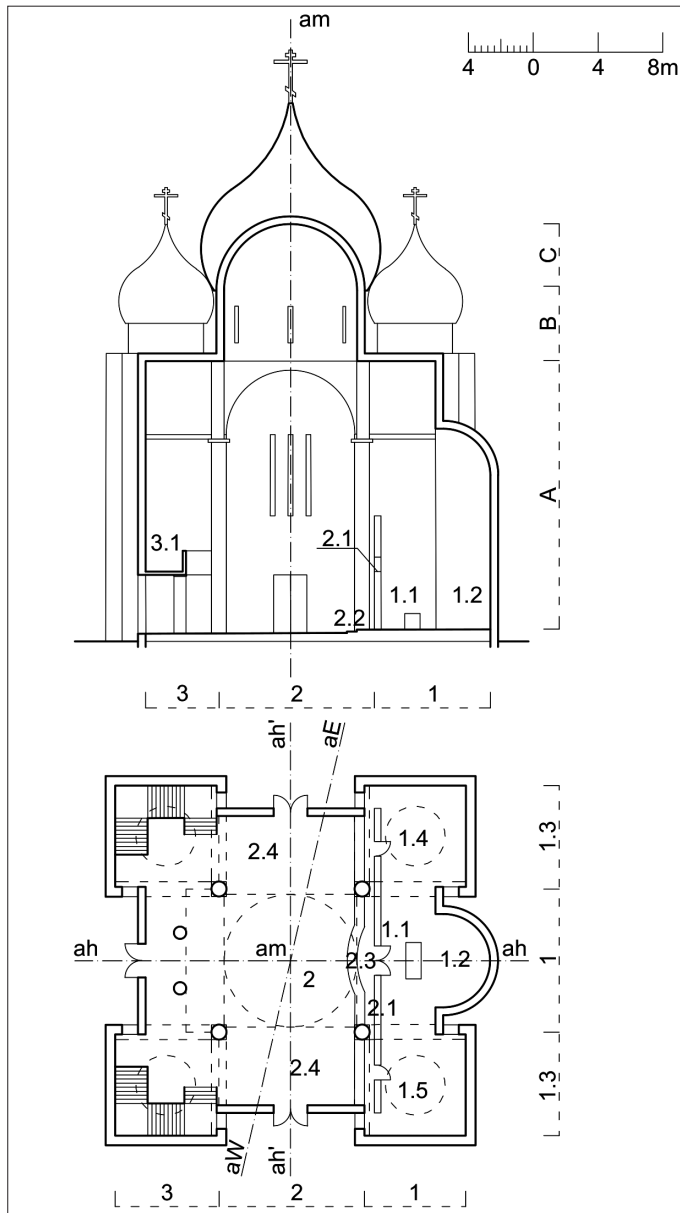
Ill. 2. The Chapel of St Peter the Apostle and St Helen the Martyr in Paphos, Cyprus (by J. Striker); symbols: Θ – axis mundi invisible in the structure, ah – major horizontal axis, aE–aW – east–west axis, A – naos, C – semi-dome and vaults, 1 – sanctuary, 1.1 – Holy Table, 1.2 – apse, 1.3 – pastophorion, 1.4 – prothesis, 2 – naos, 2.1 – iconostasis, 2.4 – aisle, 3 – narthex.

3.3. THE CATHEDRAL OF HOLY TRINITY IN PARIS, FRANCE²⁸

The temple was designed as a five-dome temple on the plan of a Greek cross within the square (Ill. 3). The body of the church is cuboidal with avant-corps corners and an added apse on the side of the sanctuary. The domes are arranged in a diagonal manner – the main, bigger one in the middle and four smaller ones in the corners. They are onion-shaped and set on round tholobate. There are three entrances to the cathedral, one on each side of the church. The facades are covered with white French limestone. On the walls of the main body

²⁸ Original name: *Cathédrale de la Sainte-Trinité de Paris*, 2016, designed by J. Wilmotte.

are located the flat panels, while the risalits are accentuated by individually designed profiles resembling saw teeth.



III. 3. The Cathedral of Holy Trinity in Paris, France (by J. Striker); symbols: am – axis mundi (vertical axis), ah – major horizontal axis, ah' – second horizontal axis, aE–aW – east–west axis, A – naos, B – tholobate, C – dome, 1 – sanctuary, 1.1 – Holy Table, 1.2 – apse, 1.3 – pastophorion, 1.4 – prothesis, 1.5 – diakonikon, 2 – naos, 2.1 – iconostasis, 2.2 – solea, 2.3 – ambon, 2.4 – aisle, 3 – narthex, 3.1 – choir gallery.

The interior of the temple is divided by four columns supporting the tholobate of the main dome into nine parts: the sanctuary, naos and narthex on one side, and on the other side into the main nave and two lateral naves. The sanctuary and pastophorions are separated from the naos by a brick single-row iconostasis set back from the columns, approached by a raised solea with an outlined ambon. A gallery for the choir was also designed above the narthex. The interior of the church is illuminated by three windows in the apse, windows in the dome tholobates and glazed slits separating the risalits from the main body of the building.

The structure of the church is made of reinforced concrete. Another interesting solution is the technique of making the domes. The aim was to achieve a perfectly smooth golden surface, which is very difficult to obtain using traditional methods. It was decided to create them from composite materials using the same technique as for the aeronautics and navy. They were prefabricated, brought to the construction site in parts, bolted together on the ground and lifted into place. This also allowed the weight of the domes to be reduced by 80% compared to domes made using traditional techniques. This is the first example of this technique being used for sacral architecture.²⁹ The cathedral dedicated to the Russian diaspora in France is firmly rooted in the traditional architecture of Moscow Rus' with its characteristic five-dome diagonal layout. The square plan corresponds to the cosmic model of the world, while at the same time, the cross-shaped layout emphasizes the axis mundi. It is crowned by a larger dome symbolizing Christ. The other domes are smaller to maintain the hierarchy of importance and symbolize the four Evangelists. The design also maintains the hierarchy of space by means of light. Three windows like the Holy Trinity illuminate the sanctuary. The bowls of the domes are well lit thanks to the windows in the tholobate. The closer to the ground the less light there is, and the narthex remains in semi-darkness thanks to the shadow cast by the choir gallery.

4. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Orthodox churches take one of two stylistic forms: “historicizing” or modern. Designing churches with modern forms is more difficult, requires much deeper theological reflections, redefining the appearance of unchangeable archetypical-symbolic elements. According to the author, on the basis of the three examples analysed, it has been shown that it is possible to reread these elements and give them entirely modern forms, using contemporary construction materials and a modern perception of space. Thereby, the author hopes to prove the thesis defined in the introduction that it is possible to design Orthodox sacral architecture with modern forms in accordance with the Orthodox tradition, and at the same time to demolish the myth that this thesis contradicts.

Translated by Joanna Striker

²⁹ *Centre Spirituel & Culturel Orthodoxe Russe à Paris. Dossier de Presse. Inauguration. 19 Octobre 2016, 2016, p. 5.*

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Author's Note:

Jaroslav Striker, MSc, Arch.

Completed a master's degree in the field of architecture at the Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Environmental Engineering of the Lodz University of Technology in 2021. Member of the Architecture Students' Scientific Club "The 9th Floor", since 2015.

jaroslav.striker@gmail.com