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Retrofuturism. A Revisited Concept for Religious Architecture

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ABSTRACT

The text deals with the much debated question of renewal in contemporary Orthodox Christian architecture, a question that accompanied a wave of more than twenty years of building new churches in existing cities and villages in Romania after the fall of communism in 1989. Should they follow the post Vatican II trend of *aggiornamento* in Catholic architecture and update the traditional and regional building models? The answer the text offers tentatively is retrofuturism, a radical way of renewing the language of sacred spaces within the core prescriptions of tradition. In the process, the author gives two examples of how this might work.

KEYWORDS

Retrofuturism, tradition, sacred space, cathedral.

Lately I have tried to etch a concept that would help me describe how we, architects, relate to yesterday (i.e. Christian tradition) when we build today churches for tomorrow. Now, for this same purpose, most resort to the (ab)used phrase "merging tradition and (post)modernism." And yet this can no longer describe the correct stand of "he who builds churches." Modernists like Richard Meier fruitfully call into question Christian architecture – as he does with his Church of the year 2000, in Rome. On the other hand, there are two categories of traditionalists: a) Catholic like Michael S. Rose (2001), who accuses the second Vatican Council not only for the ugliness of modern churches but also for the desecralization of their space, which, he thinks, may be recovered through traditionalist aesthetics (revivalism); b) Orthodox, and not just from Romania, who reject all talk about sacred architecture, treating the matter as plagiarism or pseudo-vernacular abomination. That is why the term we propose here intends to revamp

the very relationship between the extremes of Christian geography and history. I was looking for a definition of the context in which it could work when I stumbled on the words, in no way connected to the past, of Mr. Andrei Pleșu. He thinks that this "futurity of past gazing", that true renewal which makes the topic of this article, "is a *fresh feeling of the original*, it is a *free rearrangement within the space of tradition*" (Pleșu 2000: 11).

Therefore why not set out from Professor Pleșu's pithy formula with the following goals in mind:

1. To define the object of renewal (Christian religious architecture, with the stress on the church proper).

2. To assess together and judge the validity of those procedures by which the Christian past may be revisited, basically the first millennium (up to the Great Schism), with a view to particularizing the present and predicating an equally and concurrently old and new approach to tradition.

3. To give examples of how retrofuturism, once defined conceptually, can be utilized in its dual capacity: first, as interpreter of the already existing (i.e. as genealogist) and second, as a (re)generating concept.



Credit: Augustin Ioan.

As a corollary, I will dwell on the usefulness of the concept of retrofuturism via a few personal projects: the one for the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchal Cathedral that won the 2002 national contest (but did not come to be put in practice for reasons that are not relevant to this text); then two private chapels with different purposes yet similar premises; and finally the more recent project (2008) of the St. Filofteia church-necropolis, designed as a burial place for the Royal Family of Romania, in Curtea de Argeş, and which is almost finished today (2015).



What is a church?

A church is a strangely familiar entity implanted in the heart of a community. A place of universal religion and a pretext for bringing in tow the simplest unit of viable social neighborliness (the parish), the church is at the same time:

- I) *sacred space* containing, according to believers, the radical otherness;
- II) a (three-dimensional) *icon* of God and
- III) itself a *resonance chamber for the significance of icons* or statues, on the

background that contains, displays and spatially arranges these, which, situated in a certain place and in a certain mutual hierarchy of representation, make visible “the story” and “the iconographic contract” of the church (to paraphrase Charles Jencks’s well-known postmodern concept);

IV) both *public space* (interface of the exterior public space, the square or garden which it adjoins, and the interior public space of ecclesia, of pilgrimage); and

V) *the most private space possible*: the space where one prays in front of an icon, far from the maddening crowd and the world’s trivialities, and where one becomes intimate with God;

VI) a privileged *topos of public and individual psychodrama*, and an emotion intensifier;

VII) a place of staging/ reiterating via the cyclic rite of Bible events and characters;

VIII) *an archivist’s place* that remembers – for us, in our stead, or even against our will – a place where we remember, by confession, and where we are also remembered/ commemorated.

The church is all this and much more; for an architect it is the alpha and omega of the sacred space. Withal, it is the most difficult type of architecture. It is not easy either to design or to use a Christian worship place; let alone raise the question of rewriting the protocols and canons under which it gains flesh and, while being used, also soul(s). And yet:



What’s the purpose of renewing Christian church architecture?

The joyous paradox of Christian architecture is that while being an expression of teleological religion it also needs to be archaic and futuristic.

To be an inspired recap of a bi-millenary tradition is one of its purposes; yet the wait for the Second Coming turns the church into a place cardinally oriented – not only in the proper sense of the term, but also

temporally. From this vantage, tradition is an archive of good practices, principles, and procedures, assumed by and immediate to the groups of producers and users of architectural spaces, all being accompanied by a justifying adjuvant narration: rites, myths, professional symbolism. Tradition is alive, or a museum object. Relaying tradition means assuming principles that can take contemporary forms and get embodied in contemporary materials, just as well as in shapes and matter validated by history. Tradition is a complex corpus, which is remembered and updated with a variable geometry.

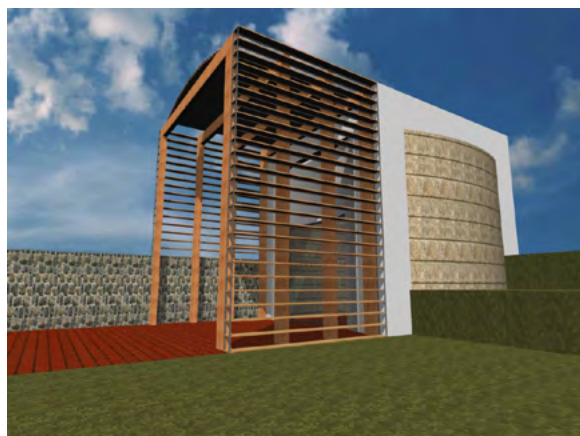
The term retrofuturism describes that way of doing architecture; when investigation of tradition reveals things sufficiently surprising and remote in time that particularization should occur not in the sense of “invention” but of rediscovery. This style of architecture needs to be a continuous recap and a tireless (experimental) investigation. Such is the internal mechanism of retrofuturism. Situating elements featured in one’s tradition in contemporary contexts and rewriting them turns reiteration into a good composition school, and the resulting architecture into a “new old” one. At the same time, experiment has its distinct place within the territory of Christian architecture. And this because the quest of how best to make built-up matter suit the *logos* should never cease to concern us in this journey of ours, till doomsday. Particularizing is a means of drawing attention to the work of the Word in this world.



Retrofuturism as Interpreter

With this in mind, we may readily observe that renewal and experimenting with tradition are inherent to Christian architecture. Once we know this, using retrofuturism as an interpreter could appear a cinch. Yet, if we look carefully, and

then fast-forward the eighteen millennia of triumphal presence and observe how Christian architecture has evolved all along, we will get a clear picture of the experiment paradigm itself. We are dealing here with an ongoing endeavour to adapt to existing spaces as well as an endeavour of existing spaces to adapt to the development patterns of worship needs; a ceaseless moulding of types shifted from one geography and culture to another, an endless quest for the best spatial, ornamental/ collaboration expressions with other arts for a better representation of the Eucharistic mystery and of Christian symbolism. From the basilica to the Greek cross-in-square (inscribed-cross) church, going through the in-between examples, there was a long trial-and-error journey, with abandoned by-paths and cross-fertilization galore. An architect really involved with the destiny of contemporary Christian architecture needs to see (simultaneously!) both sides of the coin. He must work with living tradition (with archetypes, repeating them in contemporary circumstances, and with new techniques and materials) and at the same time with experiment. The church is the repository of a two-time millenary tradition that it has to clothe, creating over and over

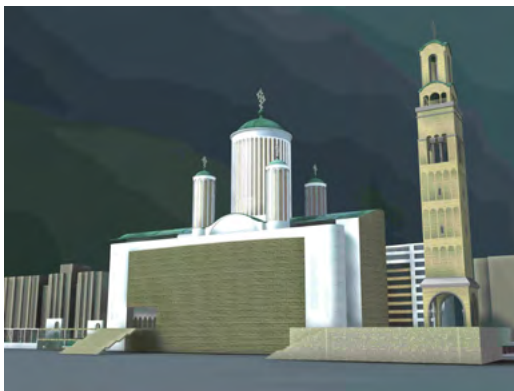


Credit: Augustin Ioan.

the perfectly appropriate garb of a bride and also a Penelope. At the same time the church is oriented to the future, anxiously looking forward to a time that “only the

Father” knows. Such is the motif in Eastern Orthodox church decoration: the wait.

Retrofuturism is one of the acceptable ways religious architecture may be “transfigured”, not in the sense of producing singular, “new” images made *de rigueur* by modernism, but in the sense of delving into one’s own tradition (i.e. its place and geography, the tradition of the community, the language, culture and especially religion) with a view to iterating it. Particularizing – induced by the permanent repositioning of traditional elements, in geo-cultural



Credit: Augustin Ioan.

instances of new materials and meaning – has always been, in fact, the very path to transfiguring architecture. This is also the source for “lay” architectural discourse to get geared to contemporaneity. Because, while rejecting tradition as a whole, modernism itself has actually revisited vernacular Mediterranean architecture, white and rectangular.

Concerning retrofuturism as generating new Christian art, I will start from an anecdote. In 2005 my wife and I lived for a while in Lyon. Not far from La Fourvière Basilica, there is the museum of Textiles and Decorative Arts that hosted then an exhibit of the most representative ceremonial attire of the late John Paul II. I found most of the items captivating, but what intrigued me most were some that came from a rather obscure Italian workshop making clothes according to a retrofuturist aesthetic design. As by then I had broadly outlined

the topic and I was already writing on it together with Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, California, I promptly grasped the analogy between our endeavours and those of the papal couturiers. In brief, what they did was research the history of the first Christian centuries in search of less known symbolic and/ or decorative elements to use in contemporary contexts. The result was fabulous as I hope my illustrations may prove even if modestly.



The Patriarchal Cathedral: A Competition Won (2002)

I perceived retrofuturism as the only possible approach when I designed the (winning) project for the contest for the Patriarchal Cathedral of Bucharest, in 2002. The project featured elements of Byzantine Christian religious architecture from Ravenna onward, yet the final result struck men of the cloth (and not only) as “futurist” despite its being “archaic” in the sense of introspection back to the source. Again, the references were either to Ravenna architecture (the window/walls in alabaster), i.e. that time when Italy was Byzantine, a moment celebrated also by inter-war Romanian architects, or to prestigious local examples (Voronet, Curtea de Arges). Admittedly, re-contextualization also means a change in significance: translucent alabaster windows allowed Ravenna churches to get light as alabaster was the only natural source available. Used today, translucent stone would no longer hinge on natural light (glass could play that part very well) but instead spell Jesus’s effort to have man attain godliness, just as light seeps in through rock. Similarly, the frame/bridges – double, abstract – made of over-polished Rușchița and Moneasa marble (the kind of rocks proposed reflected the diversity of texture and colours of Romanian stone and represented the only “national” element of the project) were meant as a reference to Brâncuși and his obsession with instilling

life into rock through extensive touching.¹ But my project also integrated an effect of marble deplored by Brâncuși: a certain translucency that actually gives the surface a milky depth, apparently of course, a sort of hypersurface. I relied on this effect in conjunction with that of total translucency noted from the inside: during the day light would penetrate the stone, the only source of natural light in a space deprived of windows (which, the design notwithstanding, would put a time stamp on any building), while at night it would go out of the inner space, streaming into the city, like a pale beacon. This effect copiously used by Brâncuși – that brings about the volatile presence of over-polished surfaces, caressed surfaces as Mircea Eliade put it – I wanted to turn into a “signal” heralding the show of light coming from inside, and passing through rock.

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Martyr Filofteia Archbishopric Cathedral with Royal Necropolis at Curtea de Argeș

The construction duly began with the consecration of the site, in 2009, in the presence of Her Royal Highness Princess Heir Margareta and of Prince Radu Duda. The celebration was officiated by Archbishop Calinic of Argeș and Muscel. A collaboration protocol was signed by the Royal Family and the Archbishopric, the approved project being part of the protocol. The Royal family undertook to decorate and take care of sixteen crypts, while the Archbishopric took upon them to build and adorn the cathedral proper.

Two were the references used for this worship place. One was the Princely St Nicholas local church shaped as a (Greek) cross-in-square, with equal bays for the nave and transept, crowned by a dome or a turret over the vault intersection – noted for its elegant

proportions and one the very few such churches in Wallachia. The Greek inscribed cross represents the ultimate and most representative Byzantine contribution to the architecture of Eastern Christianity. The resulting inner space is highly capacious for a location that is actually square. The second reference is the (arch)bishopric palace and royal residence created by Lecomte de Nouy, who also restored, in the manner of his master Viollet Le Duc, the main cathedral of the ensemble, called Master Manole's. The palace was finished in exposed brick, with frames in local stone (unfortunately no longer quarried). The necropolis is the circular arc portico preceding the entrance into the church. The centre of the circle falls on the altar table, the very mystical east of the church. With each new liturgy, the living and the dead, together, look forward to the wine and the bread being turned into the blood and body of Christ, and naturally to the dreaded Day of Reckoning. Obviously so many tombs (practically four times more than in the old cathedral) could not be aligned facing the geographic east. Between the circle of the necropolis and the

1. Mircea Eliade suggests that stone itself, thus sculpted, begs touching (1973: 226).



Credit: Augustin Ioan.

2. The centre of each of the circles lies on the perimeter of the other, the *vesica pisces*, one of the oldest symbols of Christianity, being the shape resulting from their intersection.

3. At first, they were supposed to be placed in the left exedra inside the church, where the sun comes in at zenith and they could have been worshipped without disturbing the service in the cathedral.

counter-circle of the western façade, where the Judgment Day scene is featured, a *vesica pisces* relationship is established.² To the case in point, this *vesica pisces* would have been a skylight bathing the Doomsday painted on the inside of the cathedral in the light of the setting sun. The entrance to the necropolis would have been a bridge of structural glass, lit from below, the tombs at the level of the ground, and the living literally walking on light to enter the sacred space. Each group of two tombs is surmounted by a vault in golden mosaic lit by a candle. Initially, two cupolas were supposed to be built at the far ends of the necropolis, allowing southern sunlight in at some moments of the day. But the order of occupancy has changed so that the necropolis is narrower, meaning that the small chapel on the left will display the relics of Martyr Filofteia.³ The southern exedra in the church would have had to feature windows just at the level of the floor, with embedded tabernacles containing the relics of the local bishops.

On the outside I wanted the necropolis to be in exposed brick with Albești stone frames, while the church proper would be in alternating stone and masonry (a typical Byzantine technique with anti-seismic virtues); and the altar exclusively in local stone to illustrate St. Maximus the Confessor's words from his *Mystagogy* (2017): "Each space in the church advancing east as firmament to the one preceding it." Mr. Drăgoi's great masons being consummate masters of the exposed brick technique, he was eventually retained for the job. Finally, this choice also evinces the connection with the initial monument of the restoration project commissioned by King Carol I, and the construction of the palace and chapel.

Any such project is one of collaboration so the commissioners readily make their own contribution, and often modify the given data of the space. Some of the changes brought to the initial project are neutral; others resulted in altering proportions, destinations, surfaces and heights. Anyway,

from the initial stage there have been successive ones. I remember one observation made by H. M. King Mihai I, about the copper cupolas in the model in front of his eyes: "Oh, they look like large muffins!"

We are now fine-tuning things in the necropolis. The inside of the church really grabbed my eyes only when the scaffolding was removed. The beauty of the exposed brick technique stood out perfectly even more so as I watched the seams being filled with coloured putty and the perfectly fired bricks being glazed. I carry loads of memories from the umpteen trips made to the site since 2007, when I had my first meeting with Prince Radu and Archbishop Calinic. The building process, the alterations – talked over or not – make up the small personal story of an exemplary collaboration with the royal contractor (represented by director Ion Tuca) and the chief of the area, a charismatic founder of many local worship places and not only. I will always have this feeling of admiration for one trustworthy constructor and exceptional human being, Mr. Drăgoi, whom I hope to have by my side in other projects in the future. Now the space is no longer ours but has been opened to receive its august guests unto eternal repose...

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Conclusions

New Churches after the Earthquake (1942), the title of Petre Antonescu's book – born out of a lecture he gave on May Day 1942 at the Romanian Academy – suggests today a novelty effect that has slipped into oblivion but which still keeps awake a craving for freshness. The fact that when he started to design the Saints Sergius and Bacchus Church, for instance, Antonescu went directly to the Byzantine source, which he reinterpreted in the light of contemporaneity, proves that – in the absence of trend-setting models situated in the proximity of the church to be built – *the* solution is a "return to origins." As this is no

longer possible (fact indicated by the use of inverted commas), we will agree that through retrofuturism we can revisit tradition from the vantage of contemporaneity in order to propose to it what it may have forgotten or ignored, for reasons not relevant now. The mellowing of the post-Byzantine episode and the direct reference to Byzantium made possible, in the 1930s and 1940s, not only a circumvention of the historic fact that local tradition did not feature big-size quotable precedents but also a Byzantine revival of a tradition that after 1453 was oft relegated

from the original source.

Petre Antonescu's 1942 title, filtered through the words of poet Mircea Ivănescu, would become today a retrofuturist "Old Churches New," precisely the twofold take that I propose. Furthermore, the blend of local and universal Christian tradition, i.e. the numerous prestigious precedents to be quoted, turns the inventive, experimental re-visitation of the past into a long-standing enterprise meant to keep us busy until the Second Coming.



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