

Designing difference: An ethnography of contemporary and late Soviet-era Sakha architecture

THE SAKHA REPUBLIC (YAKUTIYA)

The Sakha Republic (Yakutiya) is located in the northeast of Siberia and is the largest federal subject of the Russian Federation covering 20% of its territory.

In my research I am focusing on the capital Yakutsk and the surrounding region. Yakutsk currently has approximately 300,000 inhabitants and is the coldest city in the world: it is entirely built on permafrost. When the region was colonized in the 17th century under the Russian Empire, several hunter-gatherer societies, as well as the Sakha, who were subarctic/arctic cattle and horse breeders inhabited the region. During the Soviet era, Yakutsk became a bustling city and an important economic center.

WHAT DO I STUDY

My research explores the notions of difference and uniqueness in the context of architectural design in the Sakha republic (Yakutiya). By focusing on individual's narratives, I intend to provide an comprehensive ethnography of the work of two generations of architects, who can be understood as the 'pioneers' of contemporary Sakha architecture.



The architect Kuz'ma Lytkin designs a synthesis of Sakha dwellings and values and future lifestyles
Source: Lytkin, K.A. 2013. Elementy noosfernoy arkhitektury. Arkhitektura i stroitel'stvo Rossii (1), 36.

DESCRIPTION OF THE THESIS

"Kolorit" (coloring) is an important concept for many architects in the Sakha republic (Yakutiya) in Eastern Siberia to stress that their architectural designs are meant to express Sakhaness, uniqueness and difference. Based on qualitative data, my dissertation explores, 1 what a unique Sakha architectural design implies and 2 how it came to be meaningful in contemporary architecture, 3 how difference is negotiated and practiced in the process of architectural design and 4 how this is embedded in politics of difference.

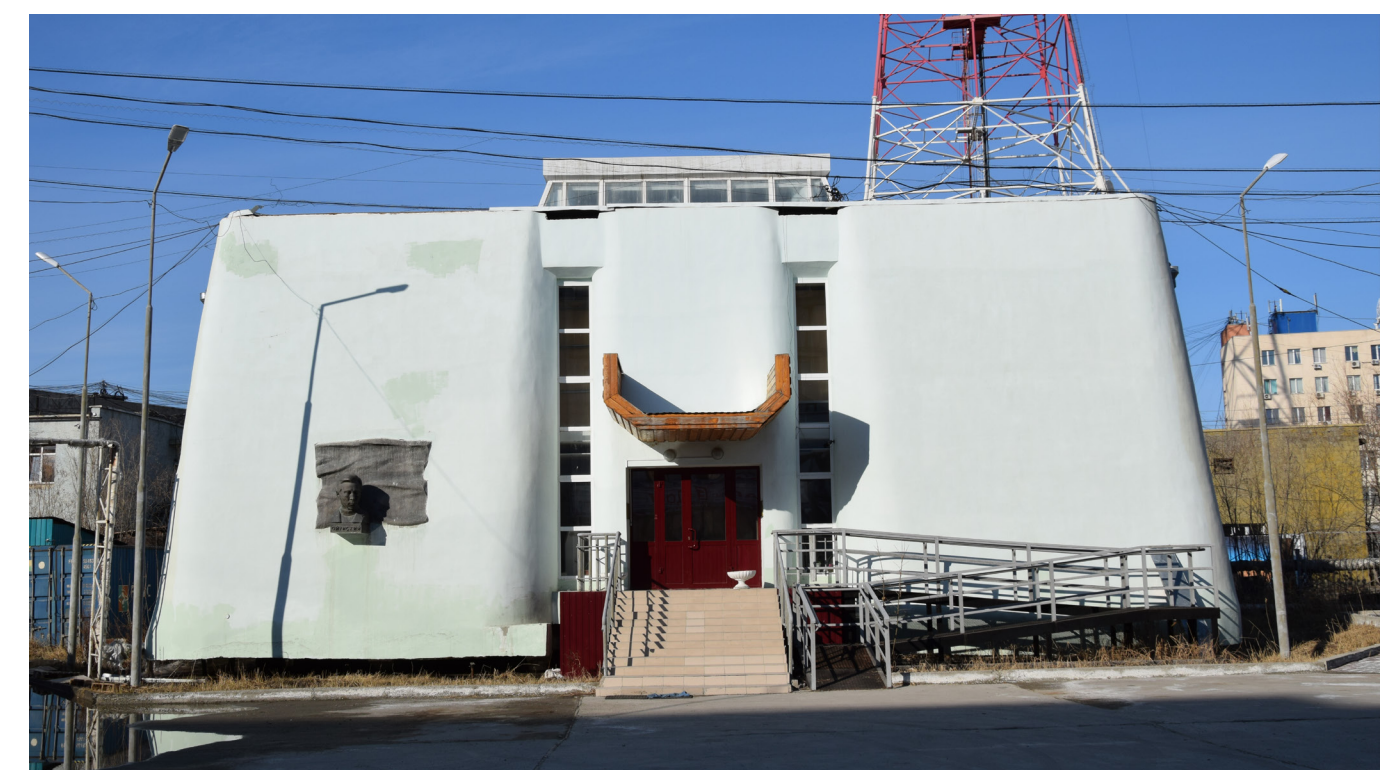
The practice of designing architecture with a Sakha "kolorit" involves not only an engagement with materials, but takes place in a complex set of political and social relations as well as financial and legal constraints. During my fieldwork applying ethnographic methods in the capital Yakutsk and its environs, I focus on two generations of professionally trained architects from the Sakha republic. Although having received an academic education based entirely on the European architecture school, since the late 1950's this group of architects began to reintroduce, debate and realize Sakha architectural tradition and aesthetics in a social environment predominated by Russian and Soviet values and architecture.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

During Soviet rule, striving for difference and uniqueness was difficult and maybe even dangerous, yet some architectural objects showing Sakhaness were realized. Although the dissolution of the Soviet Union opened the way for new politics of difference in the Sakha republic, my research shows that the scope of action for Sakha architectural design is nevertheless tightly regulated and strongly impacted by Russian legislation, building standards and a predominantly Russian lifestyle. Contemporary as well as Soviet-era urban Sakha architecture is a product of a complex entanglement of the Sakha republic within a colonial context. Architecture enables the Sakha, who are a minority in the Russian Federation to position themselves in the built environment as well as in social discourse.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

I apply ethnographic methods including participant observation among architects and architecture students, as well as biographical narrative interviews and informal conversations. My methodological approach is inspired by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory and Clifford Geertz's Interpretive Anthropology.



The literature museum (opened 1982) in Yakutsk resembles a Sakha winter hut, by embodying many features of Russian modernism and spatial conceptions.



Historical summer house (urasa) in open-air museum in Cherkekh.



The railway station (opened in 2004) resembles the historical Sakha summer hut.



The photo was taken during a long conversation with the architect Stanislav V. Danilov.



By assigning different design tasks, I could learn about the approaches of the current generation of students.



Sakha winter hut (balagan) from the pre-Soviet era, preserved in open-air museum in Cherkekh.

Photos by the author

STRUCTURE OF THE MONOGRAPH

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Methods and Methodology
- 3 Theoretical discussion about architectural anthropology, design and the politics of difference
- 4 "We were the first": Education of two generations of architects from the Autonomous Yakut socialist Soviet republic during the Soviet era
- 5 The young Sakha architects (the 'pioneers') return to Yakutsk: Designing Sakha architecture between 1959 and 1991
- 6 Architectural work of the 'pioneers' and the new freedom after 1991
- 7 Conclusion

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