

BUILDING BETWEEN STONE

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Gallery and entrance of the Church of Saint Paraskewa. Photo: Florian Zapletal

Vernacular architecture is commonly seen as a static phenomenon, originating in closed societies resistant to change. It is assumed that because vernacular architects rarely travel outside their region, they lack an awareness of concepts and forms produced in the cultural mainstream. However, as is illustrated by two remarkable buildings in the Carpathian mountains of Ukraine, the work of a folk architect practising in a rural area may demonstrate an understanding of architectural forms and principles which originated in distant cities. Although the relationship of a city to dependent rural areas is seen as one of domination, cities always exist in relation to rural areas on which they depend for food, raw materials, manpower and other, more subtle resources.¹ In Ukraine the architecture of the city, after the Counter-Reformation, belonged to the dominant culture of landholders, and was built of stone by local and foreign masons. In rural areas, a vernacular tradition of wood construction was perpetuated by carpenters' guilds, and, although architecture was commissioned by the wealthy, its iconography reflected the preoccupations of the folk culture. Although it may seem that these two streams of architecture evolved simultaneously and independently of each other, this was in fact not the case.

¹ Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 38-39

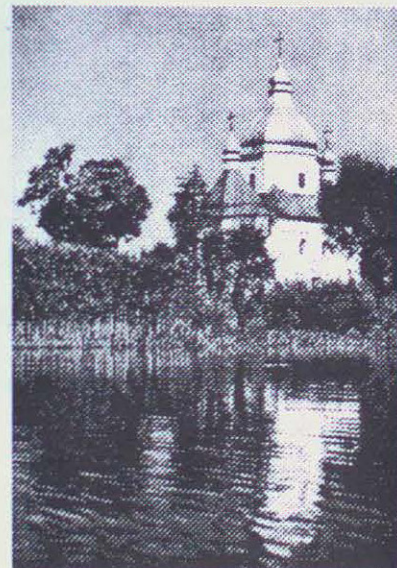


Church of Saint Paraskewa. Photo: Florian Zapletal

As contact between cities and rural areas increased in Ukraine in the 16th and 17th centuries, partly due to the growth of market towns, folk arts and high culture overlapped in music, painting, and architecture.² As Ukraine and indeed the rest of Eastern Europe emerged from a series of national wars in the 17th century, a surge of building activity followed, during which the stone architecture of cities and rural wood architecture developed similar massing, proportions, and details.³ A century later in the Carpathians, exchanges between the folk and the elite culture were still in evidence. In Central Ukraine, urban architecture drew on vernacular precedents for new resolutions of massing,⁴ while in the Carpathians, vernacular architects evolved church typologies based on the massing of German stone churches⁵ and the arcades typical of urban European dwellings.⁶ In addition, icon painters trained in market towns filled commissions both in the Carpathian region and in the urban centres surrounding it.⁷ Meanwhile, rural woodcarvers were hired in the cities to carve wooden screens and rocaille for churches built of stone.⁸ As Thomas

Hubka noted in an influential article on the design methodologies of vernacular builders, "folk and elite architecture overlaps on many levels and influences occur both ways, but certainly not only one way."⁹

Both the Struk Church in Jasyňa and the church of St. Paraskewa in Nyznje Selysce, built of wood in the Carpathians between the 18th and the 19th century, derive from urban stone prototypes. In their plans and details these buildings can be seen as refinements of architectural prototypes of both Western and Eastern European origin, given form within a repertory of local building techniques. As such, they document the dissemination of architectural ideas in proto-Enlightenment Europe, and the mediation of these ideas by the building traditions of the Carpathians. Today, as travel and communication technologies erode the critical distance between the observer and the work of architecture,¹⁰ the vernacular buildings of the Carpathians provide superb examples of openness to external ideas combined with critical distance in the production of architecture.



Church of Saint Michael in Polonky, Central Ukraine, 1777. Photo: H.N. Lohvin.

²O. K. Fedoruk et al., *Ukrainske Barokko v Evropejskim Konteksti* (Kiev: Naukova Dumka Editions, 1991), 7.

³Ibid., 10-11.

⁴H. N. Lohvin, *Po Ukraini* (Kiev: Mystetstvo Editions, 1968), 43.

⁵Paul Magosci and Florian Zapletal, *Wooden Churches in the Carpathians* (Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1982), 30.

⁶P. H. Yurchenko, *Derev'jana Architektura Ukrainy* (Kiev: Budivelnik Editions, 1970), 109.

⁷V. I. Svienszka and V. P. Otkovich, *Ukrainian Folk Painting of the 13th-20th Centuries* (Kiev: Mystetstvo Editions, 1991), 17-21.

⁸Fedoruk et al., *Ukrainske Barokko*, 104-105.

⁹Thomas Hubka, "Just Folks Designing: Vernacular Architecture and the Generation of Form,"

Journal of Architectural Education Vol. 32, No. 3 (February 1979): 27-29.

¹⁰Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 13.

In the years between the first and the second World Wars, Florian Zapletal, a Czech journalist and ethnographer took nearly 500 photographs of wooden churches in the Carpathian mountains of Ukraine, which form the geographic and cultural boundary between Eastern and Central Europe. Zapletal, who was stationed in the region as a soldier during the first World War, was fascinated by the wooden churches built using log construction between the 16th and the 18th century. Returning to the region in an administrative post, Zapletal amassed glass plate photographs of over 150 churches, which today represent the most complete documentation existing on these buildings, many of which have since been destroyed or modified. Zapletal commented that "these churches would be the pride and the joy of any people, but present day Rusyns value them little, if at all, replacing them whenever possible by banal stone structures."¹¹ Ironically, the wooden churches of the Carpathians are characterised by the use of architectural paradigms originating in stone construction. Superficially, the Struk Church resembles centrally planned Byzantine churches of Eastern Christianity. The church of St. Paraskewa, with its tall spire, looks vaguely Gothic and recalls in plan the nave churches favoured by Roman Catholicism west of the Carpathians. The presence of these two types of churches within 80 kilometres of each other confirms the position of the Carpathians as intermediary between Eastern and Western European culture. The variety within these churches shows the regions' permeability to both surrounding cultures.

The plan of the Struk Church is a centralised Greek cross, in which a central square covered by a domed ceiling is surrounded by four square arms of smaller size. The diagonal of the smaller squares is

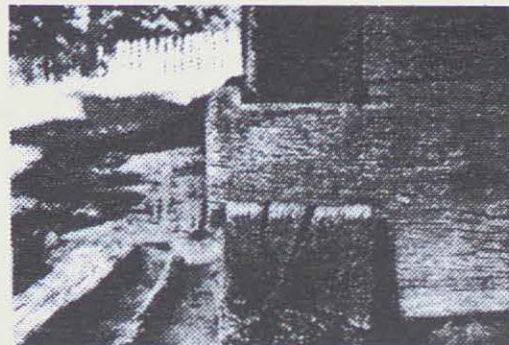


Log construction corner joint in Kosiw, Carpathian Region. Photo: P.H. Yurchenko

equal to the side of the larger square, a proportion used in both wood and stone churches in Ukraine which corresponds to a method of laying out the plan on the ground.¹² The sequence of spaces answers the needs of the Orthodox liturgy for a vestibule, nave, and chancel, oriented from east to west. The plan of the Struk church can thus be seen as a refinement of the type of centralised Byzantine plan used in both wood and stone churches in Ukraine since the 10th century.

By contrast, the plan of the church of St. Paraskewa, consisting of a rectangular nave with a small chancel on the eastern side, is clearly related to the church architecture of Western Christianity. Zapletal noted that

"there is much evidence (especially in ground plans adapted to the Eastern Rite) that this Gothic type of Rusyn church arose *insitu* and was developed by degrees, although obviously under the influence of Gothic stone architecture, which was indeed brought by German immigrants."¹³



Log construction corner joint in Novoselysja, Carpathian region. Photo: P.H. Yurchenko

The adoption of forms derived from stone construction, for instance in arches and arcades, did not imply an imitation of the detailing of stone. The material joints in Carpathian wood churches make no reference to stone construction techniques. Instead, the use of log construction and shingle roofing gives prominence to the massing as well as to such details as the joining of corners and the treatment of the roof surface.¹⁴

¹¹Magosci and Zapletal, *Wooden Churches*, 25.

¹²Yurchenko, *Derevyana Architektura*, 125.

¹³Magosci and Zapletal, *Wooden Churches*, 30.

¹⁴Yurchenko, *Derevyana Architektura*, 5.

In the arcade of the church of St. Paraskewa the arch form is developed from the braces which consolidate the posts and the beam, curving up from the posts to meet a similar curve carved into the beam. The lap joints, although well executed and not concealed, are de-emphasized by three round protrusions which unify the arch form. The origin of this detail is unknown, but it exists in a large part of the Carpathians, as well as in regions of Poland and Slovakia.¹⁵

By contrast, the cantilevered galleries of the Struk church appear to originate directly from the techniques of log construction, although other details inside the church point to translations from stone. The cantilevered brackets supporting the gallery roof have a zigzag profile, a form which both throws off water and acts as a scaling element, relating the height of the gallery to the height of the church. Inside, semicircular arches cut out of the log walls connect the interior spaces, similar to the way arches are used in the interiors of Byzantine stone churches.



Church of the Resurrection (Struk Church) in Jasynja, Carpathian Region, 1824. Photo: Florian Zapletal

The presence in these buildings of architectural paradigms derived from stone construction presents a curious condition of ambiguity. It implies that for these architects, form is independent of material and develops from cultural ideas potentially shared by the high culture. Details become the means by which these ideas are translated in established construction materials and methods.¹⁶

The profound continuity between urban and rural architecture in 17th and 18th century Ukraine invites speculation on the means by which architectural ideas were disseminated. Unlike elite 18th cen-

tury architecture, preoccupied with the development of sophisticated means of representation, folk architecture "is a non-literary method of design which stores its complex traditions not in treatises and drawings, but in the minds of its builders."¹⁷

As discussed previously, certain forms and ideas were adapted by folk architects from the buildings of foreign immigrants.¹⁸ Rural master-craftsmen were hired in cities, gaining experience of urban architecture. Itinerant painters working in urban centres and rural areas depicted churches of wood and stone together with Renaissance palaces adapted from West European engravings.

Taken separately, neither of these arguments is sufficient to explain the remarkable transmigration of forms between the wood architecture of the Carpathians and the stone architecture of Ukrainian cities. However, because in vernacular architecture change occurs as a result of small but significant modifications,¹⁹ the convergence between the architecture of cities and rural areas from the 16th to the 18th centuries may well have been the result of such small scale exchanges.

The refinement of architectural ideas through such incremental change is in direct contrast to the role of change and travel within the elite culture. In 18th century England, for instance, the Grand Tours of architects such as Burlington and Wren brought about abrupt changes in architectural design and methods of building. Wren's voyages to Italy provided him with both the prototype for the dome of St. Paul's, and the knowledge needed for its structural resolution. Whereas Wren imported both the form and its method of construction, the Carpathian vernacular architects used the image of an imported form within a vocabulary of local building methods.

In adapting plans from Eastern and Western sources, and in using architectural elements such as arcades and arches derived from the vocabulary of urban stone construction, the Carpathian folk architects were not merely imitating stone buildings. Rather, the use of the plan and construction details as elements of an architectural

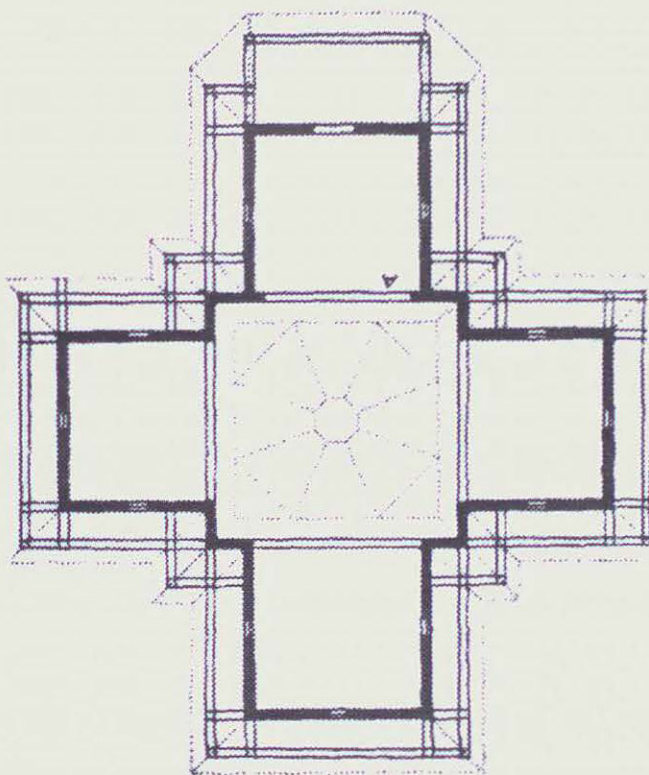
¹⁵Yurchenko, *Derevyana Architektura*, 164.

¹⁶Marco Frascari, "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," *Via* 7 (1984): 23-37.

¹⁷Hubka, "Just Folks Designing," 28.

¹⁸Lohvin, *Po Ukraini*, 354.

¹⁹Hubka, "Just Folks Designing," 28.



Plan of Struk Church. Source: V. Sicynski, *Drevene stavby v Karpatske oblasti* (Prague, 1940). Reprinted in *Wooden Architecture of the Carpathians*.

language allowed the architects of these two churches to interpret architectural paradigms from outside of their region within congruent buildings. Unlike the cultural displacement of the travelling voyeur, the migration of architectural ideas and their translation into buildings through the plan and building details results in poetic adaptation and incremental change, both primary characteristics of vernacular architecture worldwide.

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