

NOUVEL HAY MAGAZINE

SANS FRONTIÈRES

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WRITING AGAINST STALIN'S WESTERN CITY: MKRTICH ARMEN'S YEREVAN (1931) AND THE SPECTER OF THE "NEW EAST" (NOR AREVELK')

Whether Jim Taranian's late Soviet construction of the Cascade or the prestigious megaproject Northern Avenue in the post-Soviet period, to this day the spatial arrangement of the Soviet Armenian architect Aleksandr Tamanian continues to form the most important parameter for the urban development of Armenia's capital Yerevan. Tamanian's architectural work, which can be understood as a local variation of Stalin-era Neoclassicism (Dzer-Zhmerianizm), is understood by many residents not only as an unquestionable legacy but as proof of Armenia's place in an alleged grand narrative of Western modernity.

However, this retrospective perspective of the city's Stalin-era imperial legacy obscures the view on the deep fault lines that ran between him and his opponents, revealing the urban trajectory of the nascent capital as a site of ambivalent urbanity. One of his opponents was the surrealist writer Mkrtich Armen, who advanced a powerful critique of Tamanian's Western-modified city in his writings. Banned upon publication by censors, his first novel "Yerevan, A Saga" (1931) cherishes a retrotopian vision for the future city, which ambles from the historical legacy of pre-Turanic, Persianate-Islamic Yerevan towards the communist horizon of a "New East" (Nor Arevelk').

In his talk, Dr. Leopold will argue that these alternative imaginaries of the urban were informed, in an unexpected dialectical twist, both by retrotopian yearning for a pre-colonial past that was coming undone before their eyes and anticipation for a utopian future at a point of post-revolutionary history largely understood by its contemporaries as the dawn of socialist worldbuilding. Based on this, he will conclude by discussing how the specter of a "New Eastern" city, built in union with "architects of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan", speaks to a precarious and war-ridden present in which Armenians and Azerbaijanis are pitched against each other in a relentless struggle for mutually exclusive ethno-nationalistic futures.



WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2024 | 4 PM PT
HYBRID: BUNCHE HALL, ROOM 103B & ZOOM
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