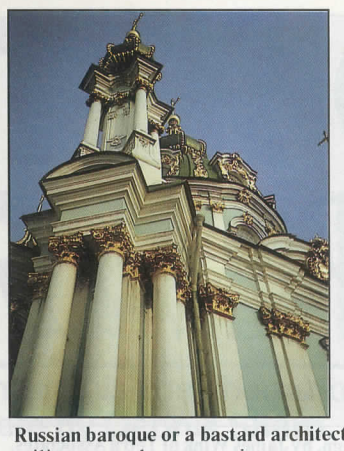
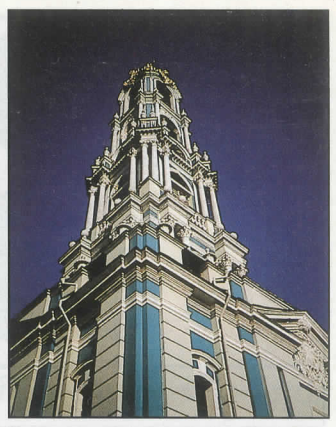
Window on the West

The Petrine Revolution in Russian Architecture, by James Cracraft. University of Chicago Press, 372pp, £35.95.

By Jonathan Charley

Nevski prospect, Leningrad.





Russian baroque or a bastard architecture.

WITHIN both pre-and post-revolutionary Russia, tensions can always be located between those who have looked to the West for solace, inspiration, and economic stability; those who have looked to the East; and those of a more introspective nature.

The impression in modern history that the Russian intelligentsia has been more occidental in its search for an identity is probably an accurate observation. But in 16th and 17th century Russia, in a country that after all lies east of the "lands in between", this impression conceals a far more complex set of relationships between the national and cultural diversity of Asia, the hegemony of 18th and 19th century Western Europe, and the burning need to assert some kind of indigenous Russian national identity.

The Petrine Revolution in Russian Architecture examines some of the manifestations of these relationships as they revealed themselves in Russian architecture of the 18th century. This period in Russian history can be characterised by the pragmatic need and overwhelming desire to forcibly drag a largely backward and feudal country into the pathway of modernism. A pathway that would in time lead to the reassessment of traditional values and attitudes and to an inevitable rupture in time and space, a result of the collision between a feudal society and the wounds and possibilities of nascent European capitalism. One of the most important catalysts in this process came in the person of Peter the Great; the hero, tyrant and founder of St Petersburg — Russia's first big window on the West.

After Prince Alexander Nevski and Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great is perhaps the next best "popularised" Russian leader to have carved himself indelibly into the history books. It is with the origins and consequences of his vision of St Petersburg (a "Venice in the North" and a window "through which to gaze on Europe") that the book principally concerns itself. St Petersburg holds what is in many ways a unique place not only in the history of town planning and architecture, but more generally in what Marshall Berman called the "tragedy of development". As a story of heroism, grief, madness and ambition, part of its uniqueness lay in the contempt that Peter the Great had for the forces of nature; the arrogance of a demand that a whole new city would be built, at whatever cost, on the swamps and frozen wastelands of the inhospitable north. It was to this new location built in the plagiarised image of Dutch, Italian, French and other European architectural traditions that the court be moved, a new European capital, away from the chaotic and largely unplanned reality of "Asiatic" Moscow.

The Petrine revolution in architecture embodied three things. Firstly, it was a revolution in style, in that hitherto the Russian builder had not so consciously looked to and absorbed Western architectural language. Secondly, it involved a revolution in the techniques of construction. And thirdly, it involved a scale of construction that, in sheer size, surpassed any previously conceived limits on the volume of building work that could be produced.

In attempting to disentangle the origins and sources of the Petrine revolution James Cracraft is confronted with a series of problems. He argues that there is not only a paucity of Russian architectural history, but that what there is of it, is flawed with inconsistencies and lacks detailed periods, dividing itself into just two principal phases: "old" before 1700, and "modern" after 1700. There is also the problem of destruction. At the hands of fire, the Bolsheviks, the Second World War, and Krushchev, much of the historically important built stock of the past five centuries has either decayed or been destroyed. No timber architecture before the 17th century has survived, although some masonry construction can be traced back to the 11th century, leaving the historian to the pitfalls of those drawings and impressionistic sketches that have survived the years.

Nevertheless, Cracraft has assembled a vivid and valuable addition to our knowlege of the development of Russian architecture. We start in the steamy mythology of the 17th century. Visions of ornate timber, the odd twinkling onion dome and icon, the peasant hut hewn from a tree. Long dark gowns and thick drooping beards wandering in all the depths and extremes of wealth and poverty. To this 17th century landscape we are offered a fascinating collection of reactions from adventurous European travellers, which are on the whole disparaging — the disappointment that comes from finding that what seemed a "jewel from afar" turns out to possess a decaying heart.

But towards the end of the 17th century we find the infiltration of the language of "old Russian" architecture by a new phenomenon. It appeared in masonry form and seemed to display some of the characteristics of the baroque movement in Europe. The precise origins of this pre-Petrine architecture of which the Church of the Intercession of the Mother of God at Fili, in Moscow, is generally considered to be the finest example has been a matter of controversy, one that Cracraft explores. Soviet architectural history under Stalin — similar to tendencies in Soviet history of this period in general — was fired by a fervent nationalism that tried to distance Russian history from the influence of Western Europe. This has lead some Russian historians to conclude that these pre-Petrine buildings had nothing to do with the "catholic reaction" in Europe and were the product and culmination of a unique national culture.

The most plausible answer on offer would seem to be the recognition that such architectural production is a result of the contradictory relationship between national and international traditions. We thus find the simultaneous display of barbarisation of form, the results of the assimilation and application of the baroque from Europe, and elements that it can be argued were in essence peculiarly Russian. The historian Vipper sums up the process with the word "rusticalisation" which implies the penetration of a "primitive art form" by an art of a "higher order". Cracraft completes this look at the 17th century with an analysis of the military roots of medieval town planning and of the development of building construction.

By the beginning of the 18th century with the ascension of Peter the Great, any question as to the uniqueness and autonomous development of Russian architecture was to become an untenable position. Russia under Peter was to shackle itself to the West, away from Asia, away from Moscow, onwards to the Netherlands and beyond.

Cracraft sees St Petersburg not only as a preference for things European by Peter the Great and the rest of the ruling class, but as a product of military and economic necessity. With the founding of the St Petersburg shipyards the navy could expand, the oceans could be explored, the empire protected and new trades routes created. Although it was on the new capital that Peter would expend most of his energy, his influence was not confined to St Petersburg. Early experiments in both civil and military construction were conducted in Azov and Moscow.

Through foreign envoys, the importation of European masters, and the translation of their textbooks, Peter began to pave the way for his revolution. By 1725, in just two decades, St Petersburg had been built with a population of 40,000 of whom 15,000 were soldiers and sailors, and 5,000 of whom were industrial workers. All the major buildings had been designed by European masters and many thousands of builders, conscripted criminals and prisoners had perished. Significantly the beginning of the 18th century in Russia had seen the first attempts to mass produce building components, culminating in 1709 when more than 30,000 workers laboured on the sites and in the