My Banya, Your Banya: From Reality to Myth

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Nudity is a condition relieved of any hierarchical differentiation by the theology of layers of clothes and other masks. Consequently, the true collective is a naked collective. Nakedness is an intimate state, requiring privacy and usually doesn’t take place as a collective act. But to what extent can people share this condition? And what function and characteristics should be implemented in any given space to extend this intimacy?

In Russian society the value of the collective and the common was always very high, even before the USSR. This collectivism expressed itself on many different levels, but spatially it was especially representative in the form of the banya, a traditional Russian steam bath. Through the figure of the banya, collective nakedness and communal intimacy became a cultural condition, and one that developed through many historical periods.

As a type, the banya evolved from the traditional extension to a house, through a collective space in the USSR, to a contemporary, multifunctional entertainment space. Banya contains myths in it, whether it is a creature Bannik from a Slavic folklore or a communist myth. In many ways, the history of the country can be seen through the transformation of this type. Even though the banya is a traditional type in Russia, it is only ever defined by its interiors and structure, and never codified or celebrated as a distinct architectural form. Despite its cultural and infrastructural significance, this type has not been studied before. The aim of this project is therefore to document and analyse the history of the banya, to create an archaeology of this type and understand how it remains relevant as both an interior form, and even as a urban model in contemporary Russia. Therefore the archival research has been made and the timeline of development of that type is documented.

The architectural taxonomy of the type was based on archives of Saint Petersburg. This city is said to be a city of Banyas. Historically, the land on which the city sits was a swamp, reclaimed by a polder – artificial, experimental land. It is a fake city. The urban facades make Saint Petersburg look like the city of Peter the Great, but when you look inside any arch you see Dostoevsky city inside. It is also a city that has both, Dutch and Italian qualities. Perhaps the only Russian thing about St Petersburg are the banyas.

All banyas from the archival material are exist or existed in Saint Petersburg, which makes this city a perfect example that contains all this patterns of spaces and different degrees of shared intimacy in the city. The study of the type had been conceptualised through the categories of that intimacy, like ‘individual perception’, ‘select collectiveness’, ‘hierarchal collectiveness’, ‘ideological collectiveness’ and ‘ultimate collectiveness’. Ironically, these degrees of intimacy demonstrate private-public issues, hierarchy, complex relations of genders and many other layers of myths through the most unvarnished state, the state of nakedness.
Healthcare Soviet poster
“Banya” by Liapkalo Victor 2014
Fonarnie (Voroninskie) Bani by Suzor, 1870-1871, 1874

'Kruglaia Banya' v Lesnom by Nikolsky, 1927-1930
Site Information

Saint Petersburg is said to be a city of Banyas. Historically, the land on which the city sits was a swamp, reclaimed by a polder – artificial, experimental land. There is a myth that the city was built on the bones of those who built it. It is a wet, humid city, whose grid was defined not by streets but by the water system of its canals. Seemingly constant rain makes the city atmosphere even wetter, even depressive.

It is also a fake city. The urban facades make St Petersburg look like the city of Peter the Great, but when you look inside any arch you see Dostoevsky city inside. It is also a city that tries to be European – a watery, Amsterdam-like city, with buildings modelled on Italian classicism. Perhaps the only Russian thing about St Petersburg are the banyas. All banyas form the archival material are exist or existed in St.P, which makes this city a perfect example that contains all this patterns of spaces and different degrees of shared intimacy in the city. But more fundamentally in using the banya as a form that defines city, it presents St P through the only Russian element, that it has.

Architects traditionally define cities through their types, for example, London is a city of Georgian squares, Paris is a city of arcades, New York is a city of brownstones, Berlin – of the mietskaseme block. The banya therefore becomes an equivalent type for St P.
As a type the banya has been studied through extensive archival research. The archival research is been made and the timeline of development of that type is documented. This includes a number of Banyas designed by famous architects, like Suzor or Nikolsky, but most of them were made by unknown architects from different times. This material, in form of plans, sections and elevations, is housed in the archives of St P, in particular The Main State Archive, the Historical State Archive, The Archive of the Art and Literature and The Technical State Archive.

Different historical links with folklore, ideology, hierarchy, complex relations of genders and most importantly collective scale that banya has, were explored by redrawing precisely the banyas from archive and zooming in to details, like furniture, tiles and other materials. The creation of archaeology of this type became a project itself. The study was conceptualised through different degrees of shared intimacy on the urban scale.
Banya and laundry for the Palace Administration of Petergof, 1911

Banya in a form of a pavilion, 19 century
Architect: Tyurin

Bathroom on a lake in Alexander summer palace, in Alexander Garden, 1850
Architect: Shohin

Banya in Neskuchn Garden, 19 century
Typical Banya in Village, circa 1-19 century
Shared banya for three houses

Banya, mid 19 century

Banya, 19 century

Fonarnie Bani on Moyka River, 1870
Naberezhnaya reki Moyki, 80-82
Renovation of Karpovskie Bani, built in the 19th century, renovated circa 1930.

Alexandro-Nevskaya part, 2nd plot on Obvodny canal № 34.

Architects: Klimov, Shestov, Kokovcev.

Renovation of Finliandskie Bani.

Finsky alley, plot № 9.

Banya in the courtyard of Polkovnik A.A. Schildknecht, 1911.

Petergof, Bogomolovskaya street №82, Sapejnikov alley №1, plot of Putilov railway.

Banya and laundry for coastal complex in Military Harbor in New Petergof, 1915.

Kruglie Bani (Bani u Lecnom), 1927.

Karbisheva 29a/3.

Architect: Nikolsky.

‘Gigant’ Banya (Ushakovskie), 1928.

Zoyi Kosmodemyanskii Street, 7.

Architect: Nikolsky.

Competition for rayon thermae in Petrograd, 1920.

Architect: Tverskaya.

Competition for rayon thermae in Petrograd, 1920.

Architect: Lamgbard.


Outcomes and Deliverables

The study of the type had been conceptualised through the categories of that intimacy, like ‘individual perception’, ‘select collectiveness’, ‘hierarchal collectiveness’, ‘ideological collectiveness’ and ‘ultimate collectiveness’.

For instance, the individual perception is represented in the form of private noble bath pavilions from 17 century and contemporary model, when banya is surrounded by the apartment. The select collectiveness is shown in examples of separate rooms of banyas from 18-19 century, as well as in the form of the first banya. It echoes also in examples of 1990, when banya became more private place.

The hierarchal collectiveness was presented in examples of city banya from 18-19 century, which first introduced gender separation and a hierarchical division.

The ideological/constructive collectiveness was represented in Soviet examples, in which Soviet masses were marching collectively.

The ultimate collectiveness was represented in the first city Banyas, since there were no separations or divisions.

Banya is the most collective, yet intimate space for Russians. The constant transformation of the banya shows the on-going change and eternal presence of this type in a Russian context. The relevance of this type is not only an architectural knowledge that it brings, but it also shows a relation of body to a space.

Ironically, these degrees of intimacy demonstrate private-public issues, hierarchy, complex relations of genders and many other layers of myths through the most unvarnished state, the state of nakedness.