

A LITTLE HOUSE ON CHELSEA; OR, A THEME AND VARIATIONS¹

Alexander Zholkovsky
(Los Angeles)

Photos by Lada Panova

I know houses too... Some are dear friends; one of them intends to be treated by an architect this summer. I shall go every day on purpose to see that the operation is not a failure. God forbid!

Dostoevsky, "White Nights"
(trans. C. Garnett)

I

I am not a connoisseur of architecture—nor has our god-blessed Santa Monica, named after St. Augustine's mother, ever contended for the visual splendor of Venice or Florence. Its cityscape is rather eclectic. The northeasterly part of the town, where we live, is a middleclass neighbourhood. Some houses are visible from the street, others, more luxurious, hide behind palms and magnolias at the far ends of their grounds. The houses differ in style, some are downright vulgar, but the overall view, as seen from my bike, gives an impression of cosy prosperity—thanks to the generous evergreen environment and the general air of tidiness, cooled by the ocean breeze.

There are also some arresting sights, for instance, the house that the architect Frank Gehry (who later became famous for his Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles) once built for himself (Fig. 1).

It is a conglomerate of cubistic shapes, characteristic of Gehry, but thriftily made from plywood, tin and roofing slate, reminiscent

¹ Authorized translation by Arina Volgina.



Fig. 1

of the Russian Futurists' famous early publications on shabby wrapping paper. Anyway, it is not our subject for today.

Then there is also the remarkable house designed like a miniature *château* (or shall I say *chalet*?). It is located in the northwestern part of Santa Monica, far from the freeways, close to the ocean, in a quiet part of a rather expensive district. I don't have the right words to describe its architecture—but every time I bike past it I can't help admiring it and envying the owners (Fig. 2).²

2

The house I want to tell about is not far from our own, which is not special in any way except, perhaps for its two sunny verandas (see Fig. 3).

It is just a few blocks away (2436 Washington), on the southern side of Washington Street and the eastern side of Chelsea, and I have

² Since I wrote this, the house has been sold to new owners, who painted it all white, completely ruining the Old French effect.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

a full view of it on my right when I bike back home from the beach (Fig. 4).

It's a spacious two-story house that looks rather plain, with its walls painted a modest off-white and its dark-grey roof, adding up to a rather bleak overall color scheme. It stands on the corner, with almost no trees blocking the view. It was built over half a century ago, in 1946, and an expert described its style as "unremarkable neo-classical eclecticism." However, there is something to it that caught my eye and left a permanent impression of understated but imposing completeness. Figuring out the secret of its charm took me quite a while but now I seem to have it.

Let's start with the angle from which I see the house as I pass it on my way to the beach along Washington Street (Fig. 5). At first sight it looks like the façade, as it faces Washington, a larger roadway than Chelsea the cross street, and has the front door, situated at its right-side end.

The immediate impression is of unity hidden behind diversity. What grabs attention is the quantity and variety of components: two



Fig. 5

storeys (plus the chimney), three (if not four) levels of relief, two more or less distinguishable turrets, four sloping roof surfaces (three triangles of different sizes and one trapezium) and a number of windows that deserve special consideration.

There are six main apertures—and they are all of different shapes and sizes. At the same time, they are uniform in that they are all panes designed in the same style, with an even number (2, 4, 8, and 16) of similar rectangular segments in each window. The other parameters are specific for each window: the size (all elements of the ground floor are bigger than those of the second), the shape (rectangular, square), the layout (horizontal, vertical), the number, the combination of the components and the distances between them.

Each storey has the same number of apertures (windows/doors)—three, which is an odd number counterbalancing the even number of segments of the windowpanes. The number of floors also deviates from a simple evenness: the square foursome of foursomes above the front door seems to be situated between floors. In addition, there is a certain triplicity, created by the three threesomes (on

the ground floor) each of which contains a combination of a double vertical group of eight with a horizontal one.

These combinations of vertical and horizontal clusters, together with the addition of an extra half-storey, emphasize the natural “upwardness” of an architectural construction, which here takes the form not of an extreme gothic flight, but rather of a gradual—“organic”—growth. The overall effect is one of diversity and unity combined.

3

A comparison with verse structure suggests itself. There unity is ensured by strict metrical discipline while variety relies on fleshing out the metrical scheme with different, sometimes whimsical, verbal and poetic patterns that carry the theme. To take this parallel further, I’ll allow myself a brief digression into the field of poetics and use as an example the description of a St. Petersburg morning in Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*:

Встает купец, идет разносчик,
 На биржу тянется извозчик,
 С кувшином охтенка спешит,
 Под ней снег утренний хрустит.

(I, 35)

A merchant is getting up, a peddler is going <his way>,
 A cabman is trailing to the cab-stand,
 A woman from Okhta is hastily walking with a jar,
 The morning snow is crunching under her <feet>.

(literal translation)

the merchant’s up, the cabman’s walking
 towards his stall, the pedlar’s hawking;
 see with their jugs the milk-girls go
 and crisply crunch the morning snow.

(trans. Ch. Johnston)

In this seemingly simple picture, the joint effect of unity-in-variety is created by devices similar to those mentioned above. Let's then analyse the text, with an eye to the parallels with our house, as if its smallest segments were represented here by verse feet, its windowpanes—by words and lines, and its façade—by the quatrain as a whole.

The rhyme scheme is quite simple—grammatical (= unity), but the first two rhymes are feminine and fall on nouns, while the next two are masculine and fall on verbs (= variety). There is an almost overdone evenness, indeed, “squareness” (= unity): iambic tetrameter, 4 lines, 2 pairs of couplet rhymes. But this evenness is accompanied by oddness (= variety): in the first line all four feet are stressed, the next two lines bear 3 stresses each, while the last one has either 3 or 4, including the extra-metrical stress on *sneг*.

The combination of unity and variety is manifest on the syntactic level as well. The quatrain comprises five simple sentences. In the first line there are two simple ones (2 words long each), with the predicates preceding the subjects. The second line is one simple sentence—but this time an expanded one (4 words long), with the subject still at the end. The third line is similar to the second (both open with a prepositional phrase: *на биржу / с кувшином*), but here the final position is taken by the predicate. The last line seems to have the same structure, but it is further expanded by an attribute (*утренний*), so that the word count reaches 5. The main novelty here is that this sentence, independent though it is, is linked to the previous one (by the prepositional phrase *под ней*), forming a two-line syntactic unit with it. This connection is provided by the causal relationship between the woman's walking and the crunching of the snow, *снег*, which is the only inanimate noun in the entire quatrain (yet another novelty here). Overall, the sentences are gradually gaining in length and complexity.

And what is happening on the semantic level? The first three subjects are names of professions in their masculine form (*купец*, merchant, *разносчик*, peddler, *извозчик*, cabman), next comes a

feminine noun characterizing a woman by her place of residence (*охтенка*, a woman from Okhta) and the final one is the name of a natural phenomenon (*снег*, snow), masculine again. The semantic diversity is supplemented with morphological variety (the suffixes *-ец*, *-чик*, *-енка* plus the zero suffix in *снег*), as well as with rhythmical (the iambic *купец*, the amphibrachic *разносчик* and *извозчик*, the dactylic *охтенка*, and, finally, the monosyllabic *снег*).

The predicates, despite their similarity (all of them being present-tense imperfective verbs in the 3rd person singular), also obey the general tendency of gradual but very consistent development. The first two verbs (*встаёт*, is getting up, and *идёт*, is walking) can be seen as consecutive stages of the same process, as it were in a relay-race, and thus convey the flow of time. In the third sentence, the temporal element is rendered even more distinctly—by the sense of slow motion in the verb *тянется*, i. e. is trailing; at this point, the mode of locomotion changes too: the cabman is horse-drawn rather than on foot. Then the time-motion connection becomes more tense (*спешит*, is walking **hastily**), only to be followed by a certain slowing down (walking on foot again), which is, however, compensated in part by a more detailed and intense picture of the movement (the woman carries a jar and her walk makes the snow crunch). As opposed to the four very similar verbs *встаёт*, *идёт*, *спешит* and *хрустит* (all active and iambic), the predicate *тянется*—the only three-syllable (dactylic) reflexive verb here—is perceived as especially sluggish.

Thus a seemingly trivial list of morning routines develops—thanks to techniques implementing the principles of unity and variation—into a graphic, dynamic and completed scene.

4

But let's return to our house and contemplate its other side—the one looking not onto the arterial Washington, but onto the shady cross-street Chelsea (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6

Thanks to its corner location, the house also offers this other aspect of its architectural design. As a result, it boasts, as it were, two façades, whose correlation highlights the themes of “growth” and “unity in variety.”

The second façade is also framed by two trees, but is obviously bigger and therefore claims the role of the main one, although this effect is muted by the fact that it overlooks a side street and features no doors. Horizontally, this side of the building comprises six large components (i. e. twice as many as in the first façade,—a mathematical product of the odd 3 and the even 2), each section with its own sloping roof surface. At both ends, there are “blind” components: a sidewall of the minor façade to the left and the garage to the right (that is, a door of sorts, just like the one at the right-side end of the minor façade). All six sections, especially the middle four, vary in width and height as well as in the size and shape of their rooftops.

In terms of height, this façade is even more varied than the minor one. There are three floors at the least, with all three turrets differing in height. As for their relative horizontal positioning, it



Fig. 7

is intricate: the two turrets to the left are adjacent, but the third, the lower one to the right, is separated from them by an even lower part of the structure, while the garage to the utmost right is even lower still. The entire view is dominated by the middle tower, which is situated to the left of the axis of symmetry (an approximation of the so-called golden section?). It is the tallest and widest one, architecturally different from the rest of the building—with the number of windowpane segments divisible by 5 and a balcony on top of its bay window that further enriches the relief of this façade. The entire building seems to come under its dome, thus forming a schematically integrated pyramidal contour. But the overall effect is once again understated: the main tower finds itself neither in the centre of the façade nor at the corner of the house.

On a closer look, one notices that almost all of the first ten arithmetical numbers are represented here: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 (the window pane 3×3 behind the balcony), 10, with only the magical 7 missing. If we add to this the diversity of the windowpane segments in shape and size, we arrive at a very impressive variety, crowned by

the unique parameters of the main turret. Yet, this very complex construction is built from standard components.

Returning to the analogy with poetry, the basis for such constructions is the rhetorical principle of VARIATION. Its general idea is that a central theme (love, death, victory, wealth...) is best embodied via a number of various manifestations. Sometimes the theme is projected onto the elemental spheres of existence (earth—water—heaven—underworld; past—present—future; nature—emotions—social sphere); in other cases, the range of embodiments is less ambitious, but it is always aimed at conveying the sense of completeness, totality, control over an integral whole.

5

So as to provide a poetic parallel to the dual architectural construction, let us consider the correlation of the quatrain discussed above with the lines that immediately follow it:

Проснулся утра шум приятный.
Открыты ставни; трубный дым
Столбом восходит голубым,
И хлебник, немец аккуратный,
В бумажном колпаке, не раз
Уж отворял свой васисдас.

(Pushkin's original)

The pleasant noise of the morning has awakened.
The shutters are open; the smoke of chimneys
Is rising in a light-blue pillar.
And the baker, a neat German
In a paper cap, has already many a time
Opened his *wasistdas*.

(literal translation)

The city's early sounds awake her;
 shutters are opened and the soft
 blue smoke of chimneys goes aloft,
 and more than once the German baker,
 punctilious in his cotton cap,
 has opened up his serving-trap.

(trans. Ch. Johnston)

The theme of a busy morning is further developed here, with “variety” expanding in all directions. The fragment itself and the sentences it contains become longer, the rhyme scheme, more complicated (four lines with enclosing rhyme plus the final couplet); there appear run-ons (...не раз / уж отворял...); in addition to present-tense imperfective verbs there are now also perfective verbs and past-tense forms. To crown it all, the final line sports the conspicuous loanword *васисдас* (from the German *Was ist Das?* i. e. “What is it?”), a funny Pushkin-era Russian term for a serving-trap—which brings us back to windows, houses, and architecture in general.

6

As we have seen, the effect of two façades joined in a convincing image of multiple variations on the single theme of “well-grounded harmonious growth” is attained thanks to the rhetorical device of VARIATION. At the micro-level, the design is implemented through the uniformity of the structure’s minutest components, while at the macro-level, the integration involves the two façades as well as the variety of their architectural components, all enclosed under the pyramid-like system of roofs.

This becomes clear if, for comparison, we adduce a commercial design of an affordable modern French-style palace executed in the age-old architectural tradition (Fig. 9).³

³ See <http://www.dreamhomedesignusa.com/Castles.htm>



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

“My” house is of course a lot more modest, but the general outlook is the same: many various but similar turrets, terraces, wings etc. integrated into a multi-level but unified—organic—upward movement.

P.S. As for calling the house “mine”... For a while I only dreamed of visiting it, but then mustered my courage and wrote to its owners a respectful letter on my university (USC) stationery, expressing my admiration for its architecture, my desire to view its interior and to learn more about its design and construction history. There was no answer.

Later on, passing by the place one day, I saw the whole family—the husband, the wife and two children—on the front lawn of the house; I spoke to the man, reminding him of my letter, but he flatly refused all my requests—wouldn’t open his *wasistdas*. I had to admit defeat, my only consolation being that the house did indeed prove that it was its owner’s proverbial castle.

7

Having written and published the above essay,⁴ I did not lose interest in the house. But seeing it regularly felt pretty much like rereading an already analysed literary text (a Mandelshtam or Pasternak poem, a Zoshchenko short story etc.)—with a vague apprehension that it might defy my analysis and play some unexpected trick on me—just like what Pushkin’s Tatiana once did to her creator.

For a while all remained quiet on this front. The house stayed in its place, my essay was intact on the website and in my mind’s eye, so that riding by the house on my bike I serenely enjoyed the lovely sight, my elegant description thereof, and their perfect mutual correspondence.

But one day, casting a habitual loving look on the house (see Figs. 6, 7) I suddenly noticed something new in it, something I hadn’t seen

⁴ Sections 1–6 of this essay (in Russian) can be found online in *Novaia Iunost’*, 2010, no. 1 (http://magazines.russ.ru/nov_yun/2010/1/zh6.html), section 7, in *Stengazeta* (8 September 2011; <http://stengazeta.net/article.html?article=8091>).

before. On the right side of the structure, there was no turret similar to the tallest central one or the adjacent lower one on its left. In fact, none had ever existed, but it was only now that I became aware of the absence. Or, rather, that imaginary low turret *had been there*—in my text, where I wrote, hypnotized by the idea of “unity in variety”:

In terms of height, this façade is even more varied than the minor one. There are three floors at the least, with all *three turrets* differing in height. As for their relative horizontal positioning, it is intricate: the two turrets to the left are adjacent, but *the third, the lower one to the right*, is separated from them by an even lower section, while the garage to the utmost right is lower still.

On examining the house anew, I realized that I had been mistaken—but not entirely wrong. Calling this section of the structure a “turret” was certainly a stretch, as it had no pointed rooftop characteristic of towers. Nevertheless, the foundation of a turret, similar, although not identical, to its two other counterparts (at the centre and to its left) was there all right. Present was also the familiar difference in height: this “turret” was lower than the other two but it reached over the horizontal line separating the ground and the second floors.

What was undoubtedly missing was the turret itself—a pyramid-shaped hip roof crowning the foundation. The question arose, whether it was yet another difference foreseen by the framework of “unity in variety”—or a serious flaw disproving the formula itself. Considered a flaw, it would be especially grave as this section was the only part of the house with a flat roof: all the other sections had roofs with sloping surfaces.

The very fact that I until recently had been absolutely unaware of this “flaw” seemed to support the idea of its conforming to the overall pattern. But now that I had noticed the “flaw,” it began haunting me as a scandalous hiatus, an insult both to my eye as a common sightseer and to my ambition as an analyst. Summoning the emotional resources of the former and the intellectual might of the latter, I made an unexpected discovery.

Well, “discovery” may be too big a word here, and I will settle for “hypothesis.” I supposed that, according to the original plan of the architect, this dubious turret was to be topped with a pyramid hip roof, but owing to certain reasons (most likely, financial) the plan failed to be carried out, leaving the house slightly unfinished. If for a split second we imagine the missing tricorne on top of the extant foundation, we will see that it would fit perfectly into the broken skyline of the house: the right-most turret will look very much like the left one—but it will *remain a lower one!*

Anyway, that is my reading, right or wrong! Moreover, now that the house has been virtually “finished,” it has become even in more ways “mine.”

P.P.S. About a year ago, the house went on sale and finally—as a would-be prospective buyer—I had a chance to go inside it. Later I learned from the real-estate agent that the house was sold for a couple of million dollars paid in cash (!), i. e. most likely to some mafioso, probably a Russian one.