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# NOTE

## On Preserving Architectural History: The Armenian Experience

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*The assembly of the Armenian Architectural Photographic Archives—the first of its kind among ethnic histories—has revealed the value of using microform techniques for both preserving photographic records at relatively low cost and for aiding architectural research which involves large amounts of photographic detail. Moreover, the values multiply as computer capabilities are integrated with the assembly process for internal cross-referencing and for facilitating availability to researchers as an on-line data base. The article also discusses the severe difficulties that projects of this kind face due to the political-geographic barriers existing in many historical regions.*

THE ARCHITECTURAL history of an ethnic group offers the most visible and dramatic picture of its economic, political, cultural, and spiritual life. However, when monuments and cities become victims of time and, in some cases, of destroyers, that history can pass into oblivion unless preserved by some means. The losses of homeland and of architectural monuments have been particularly severe for the Armenian people, whose conversion to Christianity in the early 300s generated a passion for building and rebuilding religious and secular structures that was matched only by the ferocity of the invading destroyers.

Even today, within the Soviet sphere the passion for architectural innovation, and particularly for the restoration of historical religious monuments, continues through the united efforts of the people, the church, and the government. Unfortunately, across the borders, in areas now under the rule of Turkey and of Soviet Azerbaijan, where there were once large numbers of Armenian churches and monasteries, the national policy has been to reduce the monuments to ruin by neglect—if not by deliberate destruction.

1. As a nuclear physicist, not an architect, by profession, the author is affiliated with the RPI School of Architecture only as Director of the Armenian Architectural Archives project.

Armenian churches began as traditional basilicas but, as described by Cyril Mango in his *Byzantine Architecture*,

The basilica did not have a long life-span in Armenia and gave way toward the end of the sixth century to the domed church, which attained a surprising degree of elaboration in the first great period of Armenian architecture, roughly between 610 and 670. These dates are significant. Armenian architecture developed at the very time when Syrian Christian architecture came to a halt; at a time, moreover, when the Byzantine Empire was entering its Dark Age. It may be said without exaggeration that in the seventh century Armenian architecture was leading the entire Christian East. It proved a short period of supremacy: the occupation of that country by the Arabs put an end to this remarkable development, and it was only two centuries later that Armenian builders resumed their work on a monumental scale.<sup>2</sup>

Through the long centuries and invasions that followed it has been in Armenian architecture that we continue to see

The soul of a people revealed in stones  
Of a hundred hues and bolder forms;  
Cathedrals to shout the glory of God  
Chapels to comfort the troubled heart  
Dotting a thousand hills and vales

They stand in thousands still;  
Broken of heart and soul and  
Witness more to human treachery—  
More to a people that will not die—  
Than to the God they praised.

V. L. Parsegian

It was the fear that much of the architectural history would be forever lost that in 1970 motivated a group at the Rheinische-Westfälische Technische Hochschule of Aachen, West Germany, organized officially under the name Research on Armenian Architecture, to propose field trips into Turkey to locate and photograph the remaining Armenian monuments. With financial help from the Armenian Educational Council, Inc., based in Troy, New York, and led by Armen Haghazarian and his colleagues Hartmut Hofrichter and Gundolf Bruchhaus, the

2. Cyril Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, New York, 1976, 181.

group managed to produce over 5,000 photographs. With this fine beginning, and at the strong urging of architectural historians, the Armenian Educational Council decided to assemble a more complete collection with sufficient documentation to make it an archival resource for university research.

Invitations to participate in the project brought enthusiastic response from Dumbarton Oaks, the Courtauld Institute of the University of London, the Centro Studi e Documentazione Cultura Armena of the Politecnico di Milano, the Centro Studi Architettura Armena of the University of Rome, the Casa Editrice Armena of the Island of San Lazzaro, Venice, Archbishop Shahe Ajemian of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Helmut Buschhausen of the Institut für Byzantinistik of Vienna, and Robert Edwards, who was at Berkeley at the time. These sources added nearly 6,000 more photographs to the collection. But some 30,000 more would be needed to cover the monuments in the Armenian S.S.R., the Gharabagh and Nakhijevan regions of Azerbaijan, and Turkey. To our great advantage, the Commission for Restoration of Historic Monuments of the Armenian S.S.R., directed by Grigor Hasratian, agreed to make this project a vehicle for developing a more complete record of the monuments of their region. To this point of the project the Commission has contributed over 18,000 photographs and much academic help.

There being no alternative, I agreed to serve as unpaid director for the project, despite the handicap of my being a nuclear physicist and retired former dean whose knowledge of architecture was quite negligible. An international advisory board of specialists, including the always helpful Dr. Sirarpie Der Nersessian, agreed to guide the work. But the geographic separations, and the even wider differences of ideas on how to proceed with the project, greatly reduced the exchanges.

A grant of \$75,000 from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the interest of its Executive Director, Mary Davis, gave status and momentum to the project. At about that time, Dean Patrick Quinn of the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute School of Architecture invited us to make RPI the physical center for the project, while Librarian James Andrews graciously provided the working space. The arrangement was quite helpful, since I was already Rensselaer Professor Emeritus.

Our early plans envisaged a collection in terms of conventional large prints, with the hope of producing ten to 15 copies of each that might serve as many centers around the world. But 40,000 prints, costing two to four dollars each and filling many cabinets, would require even more expensive room facilities of each recipient institution. Then Dora Crouch of RPI called to our attention the collection in microfiche of Washington, D.C. monuments being prepared by the Dunlap Society. Clearly, the microfiche had achieved qualities that warranted its consideration as a substitute for the large prints.

Isabel Lowry of the Dunlap Society gave us the benefit of their experience. The Eastman Kodak Company made tests to determine conditions for optimizing the quality of the microfiche. They recommended using 16 × 24-cm. matte prints, with care to avoid dark contrasts that lose detail when reduced to 1 × 1.3-cm. images. Each print would be mounted on acid-free cardboard and given a caption. Limiting the number of images to 50 per fiche offered the great advantage of selecting the pictures with the unaided eye. The enlarged images are not quite the equal of large prints for finding details, but the ability to scan 50 images quickly easily matches the alternative of handling 50 large prints in and out of the files. A search among producers of microfiche led to the Inter Documentation Company of Leiden, Holland, which had produced microfiches of historical Armenian book collections and was now eager to extend the techniques to the more difficult architectural reproductions.

We searched for a standard thesaurus of architectural terminology, only to learn that no such standardization existed. As it turned out, our search inspired the beginnings of the Art and Architecture Thesaurus Project which is now being funded by the Getty Foundation. Questions having to do with the organization and content of the collection had no easier answers. Logic suggested that the code numbers for the monuments and the volumes to be issued should follow some kind of order—geographic, chronological, or otherwise. But how systematic could we be with uncertain chronologies and where the work had to be pursued piecemeal in forbidden and dangerous regions controlled by Turkey and Azerbaijan? We divided the Middle East into a number of regions and allowed 1,000 or 2,000 code numbers for each region. Within a region a number might randomly represent a church, monastery, fortress, or other building type. Toward the completion of the project, however, there will be prepared many listings and cross-references relating to locations, types of structure, chronology, et cetera. Computers, which we now use liberally for processing the texts and cataloging the monuments, make the cross-referencing easy and effective for research use. In due time it will be possible to incorporate the collection with national and possibly international bibliographic resources and data bases as well.

For documentation, an introduction is prepared for each monument, giving its names, its location by town and map coordinates, the history of its construction and repairs when known, some of its architectural details, and a bibliography specific to that monument. The introductions vary from a page to 20 or more pages in microfiche, although printed forms are also available. The images that follow include a map, plans and drawings, and the photographs, which may number from a few for a ruin site up to 600 for a monastery or complex church. The caption of each photograph includes the code number, the name of the

monument, direction of view, the photographer or source, and the copyright holder.

The transliterational spelling of the names in English introduces arguments. Although the classical Armenian used by the church is said to be the one Indo-European language to have remained relatively unchanged, popular Armenian has an Eastern form which is used in the Armenian S.S.R. and in Iran, and a Western form used elsewhere. The transliteration favored by the Eastern wing and by many scholars follows the Hübschmann-Meillet-Beneviste system, while the Western wing follows the Library of Congress system. Neither system is very attractive, but for people who speak the languages the H-B-M system appears offensive in its disregard for the Armenian phonetics as commonly used. For our project the compromise was to include all the spellings one might find in the literature.

For the first volume of the series, which included nearly 6,000 photographs, a General Introduction was prepared in printed form. This includes a series of chronological maps along with a review of the violent political history of the region. These can help to identify possible cross-cultural exchanges between Armenia and the many invaders. Professor André Grabar of Paris very kindly prepared a Preface for the series. The General Introduction also includes language aids and an extensive bibliography. The process of selection of monuments for the first issue had two objectives; first, to present a bird's-eye view of the monument types ranging from the 5th to the 14th century, and secondly, to include some of the monuments located in Turkey for which greater world awareness might help to prevent deliberate damage. These threatened monuments include the magnificent Church of the Holy Cross on the island of Aghtamar in Lake Van, dated 921, and the concentration of important monuments of the old city of Ani, which was called "the city of a thousand and one churches." UNESCO has been trying for some years to get Turkish permission to repair the roof and dome of the Holy Cross church, without success.

Volume I had some faults which we were able to correct in the succeeding volumes. The text materials are now being prepared with a laser printer through the computer system, and the Inter Documentation Company has further improved the photoreduction process to eliminate fine lines and smudges. We hope that readers with improved optics will be made available to take maximum advantage of the qualities that are possible in the fiche images. Of course, all the prints and microfiches are in black and white for permanence, but the Armenian Educational Council, which continues to be the main sponsor of the project, is making available 35-mm. transparencies in color for lecture purposes.

The documentation for the collection has come from many sources and in at least five languages. For the first four volumes we have been fortunate in having access to Armenia's academic resources. The texts, bibliographies, and chronological tables for these volumes have been prepared by Lucy Der Manuelian and Krikor H. Maksoudian, while the preparation of the photographs and text materials for photoreduction, including the computerization of the materials, has been carried out at RPI by Jeanne M. Keefe-Watkinson. The project has been attracting favorable comments with respect to organization and content, and appears to be serving as a model for similar projects.

We are grateful to the institutions and individuals who have given freely of their collections and advice. Their co-operation has provided the bright spots in a project effort that has had more than its share of political, geographic, and financial obstacles. On the financial side, a contribution of \$120,000 from Zaroohi Noorjanian of Milford, Massachusetts provided the main support for the publication of the second volume, and the untimely death of my sister, Julia Parsegian, resulted in additional support for the third volume. The project is only half completed, however; there are four more volumes to be produced on the monuments that lie outside the Armenian S.S.R.