THESIS COMMITTEE

William O’Brien Jr
Associate Professor of Architecture
Thesis Supervisor

Joel Lamere
Homer A. Burnell Career Development Professor
Assistant Professor of Architecture
Reader

Alex Anmahian
Co-founder / Principal
Anmahian Winton Architects
Reader
THE WORLD IS A WINDOW

by

Robert Panossian
Submitted to the Department of Architecture
on January 18, 2018 in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture

ABSTRACT:

"We were searching for ourselves in each other."
- Sergei Parajanov

Straddling the border between the continents of Europe and Asia, the South Caucasus, the name referring to the geographical region that stretches from the Black Sea to the Caspian has played an important role in connecting peoples. Traversed by a great chain of mountains rising to a height of 18,000 feet, it was used by merchants as the only way to reach the Middle East from Europe by land [Kilyakov]. Today, we know the South Caucasus as a collection of three nations: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Former Soviet socialist republics, the three neighbors have been engrossed in conflict since the 1990s thereby ushering perpetual instability in the region.

But was there a time of mutual understanding?

Perhaps the answer could be found in the poetry and songs of Sayat Nova, an 18th-century Armenian ashough who wrote in the three major languages of the Caucasus: Armenian, Georgian and Azerbaijani. The poet provides us with the realization that the cultures of the Caucasus were once intertwined to an extent that is virtually a distant memory today. Sayat Nova would later become the central character in filmmaker Sergei Parajanov's 1968 masterpiece 'The Color of Pomegranates,' a film which attempts to depict the poet's life through a sequence of active tableaux. This thesis attempts to analyze and employ the formal techniques used by Parajanov, in order to create an architecture framing and framed around the poems and songs written by the famous ashough. Sited at the tripoint where the three countries meet, it aspires to serve as a point of convergence between the three neighboring nations of the South Caucasus. A place of retreat, contemplation, and celebration. To remember what once was and dream of what again could be.

Title: Associate Professor of Architecture
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my committee, thank you for your guidance and critical feedback throughout the development of this thesis and for helping me find clarity in a mess of ideas and thoughts.

To my friends and colleagues, Grisha Enikolopov and Alexander Kobald, thank you for all your help at short notice as things were rapidly coming together.

To Iris, I cannot express enough my gratitude and appreciation for all you have done throughout the past year. Thank you for your patience and unwavering support.

Thank you to Sergei Parajanov whose genius continues to unravel imagery in my mind long after the completion of this thesis.

To my parents, thank you for your undying support throughout my academic endeavours and instilling within me a deep sense of wonderment since the early days of my youth. This thesis is dedicated to you.
CONTENTS

Title Page 1
Thesis Committee 3
Abstract 5
Acknowledgments 7
Contents 9
Sayat-Nova and Sergei Parajanov 10
Film Stills 13
Objects-in-Frame 37
Spatial Studies 47
Design 56
Model Photos 69
Final Critique 77
Bibliography 83
Artist rendition of Sayat-Nova. (Image from discogs.com)

Parajanov re-enacting his own imprisonment. (Image from Wikipedia)
SAYAT-NOVA AND SERGEI PARAJANOV

In order to understand the breadth of this thesis, it is necessary to examine two key figures from the South Caucasus: Sayat-Nova and Sergei Parajanov, whose works serve as the story through which the research unfolds.

Born in 1712, Sayat-Nova, the pen name of Arutin Sayadian, was an Armenian ashugh who would ultimately rise to fame within the Georgian royal court for his poetic mastery and melodical composition. His surviving 1765 manuscript of his own poems illustrate the use of all major languages within the region; 128 poems in Azerbaijani, 63 in Armenian, and 35 in Georgian; providing us with a glimpse into how the cultures of the South Caucasus were once closely knit together -- a trait that is a distant memory today [Steffen, 118].

Sergei Parajanov, born in 1924, was a Soviet-Armenian filmmaker raised in Tbilisi, Georgia whose films "reflected a fascination with the particularities of national cultures, a cosmopolitan outlook, and a penchant for playing with cultural boundaries or sometimes even with the notion of authenticity itself [116]." In 1968, Parajanov created The Color of Pomegranates, a film based on the life of Sayat-Nova. While undergoing heavy censorship under Soviet supervision, it was just as important to the State that the project see completion as it did to Parajanov. This was largely due to the fact that Sayat-Nova wrote in all the languages of the South Caucasus, which for Soviet ideology, helped render the poet as a symbol of the brotherhood of the Caucasus. James Steffen writes, "He succeeded at pushing the film through completion precisely because it was not about just himself or a single poet, but about the creative spirit and historical fate of the people of Transcaucasia [116]."

Upon its debut, the film was met with harsh reviews by Soviet critics, criticizing the film for its ‘archaic thinking’ and seemingly aimless use of cryptic metaphors. The Color of Pomegranates would eventually see very limited distribution with the Soviet Union.
FILM STILLS

Due to the strong cinematic underpinnings of the research, this thesis references and draws extensively from the film stills from *The Color of Pomegranates.*

Inspired by the vivid miniatures painted within medieval Armenian manuscripts, Parajanov constructs a series of active tableaux through which he conveys his poetic biography of Sayat-Nova, as it is depicted through the poet's texts.
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from The Color of Pomegranates, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from The Color of Pomegranates, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from The Color of Pomegranates, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from The Color of Pomegranates, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from The Color of Pomegranates, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).
Film still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, dir. Sergei Parajanov (1968).

*The world is a window...*
OBJECTS-IN-FRAME

Parajanov’s use of folk objects play an important role in how viewers perceive *The Color of Pomegranates*. In an interview for the almanac *Ekran*, the director describes his intentions:

"The film won't be traditionally biographical, as in tracing the life of the poet year after year, consecutively. We want to show the world in which the ashugh [Sayat-Nova] lived, the sources that nourished his poetry, and for that reason national architecture, folk art, nature, daily life, and music will play a large role in the film’s pictorial decisions. We are recounting the epoch, the people, their passions and thoughts through the conventional, but unusually precise language of things. Handicrafts, clothing, rugs, ornaments, fabrics, the furniture in their living quarters -- these are the elements. From these the material look of the epoch arises[115]."

The following graphic studies explore relations within the *mise-en-scène* by uncoupling objects from their scenes to render frames of architecture void of objects. These elements are extracted and isolated on the page to better illustrate their relationship.
SPATIAL STUDIES

Spatial studies were conducted using orthogonal means of representation, mainly the section-cut. It stems from the previous studies concerning objects-in-frame, but serves as a more larger-in-scale inquiry into to use of frames as an organizational tool as well as a space-making device.

A black fill is used as a two-dimensional vertical frame and invites the viewer to imagine whether the forms are embedded within a mass (poche) or floating in space.
South Caucasus Region
DESIGN

This thesis manifests in the form of a building at the geographical tripoint where Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia meet (coordinates: 41.297086, 45.015069). Each nation is given exhibition spaces to curate and display artwork, films, artifacts, etc. The form at which these exhibition spaces are joined to is the Sayat-Nova archive, housing the entire collection of the poet’s extant work. At exactly, the tripoint is the Recital Chamber, where visitors are encouraged to recite poetry as well as sing melodic compositions, resulting in a sonic overlap of different languages that will echo throughout the building. Housing units are designed in the Soviet dacha typology and located along the hillside to accommodate visitors during their retreat.
Tripoint Plan
First Floor Plan
Section through Azerbaijani Exhibition Spaces
Section through Georgian and Armenian Exhibition Spaces
Rendering of niches in common space.
Rendering from within housing (dacha) unit.
Rendering from within recital chamber.
Exterior rendering of building (from Azerbaijan).
MODEL PHOTOS
Model of building and housing units with landscape. Scale: 1/32" = 1' 0"
Model of building and housing units with landscape. Scale: 1/32" = 1' 0"
Photo of housing unit model. Scale: 1/4" = 1' 0"
Photo of housing unit model. Scale: 1/4" = 1' 0"
Context model milled from high-density foam.
Context model milled from high-density foam (detail).
FINAL REVIEW

December 21, 2017

CRITICS

William O’Brien Jr.
Joel Lamere
Alex Anmahian
Jaffer Kolb
Rosetta Sarah Elkin
Bryony Roberts
Photo credit: Sarah Wagner.
Photo credit: Shokofeh Darbari.
Photo credit: Shokofeh Darbari.
Photo credit: Sarah Wagner.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Sometimes I ask, "Did I make it up or is it the truth?"
Everyone says, "It's made up."

No, it's simply the truth as I perceive it.

-Sergei Parajanov