

Architectural and Compositional Features of the Armenian Temple Architecture in Aleppo

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Abstract. The article examines the architectural and compositional features of the Armenian temple architecture in Aleppo. Syria is a unique country: it is one of the countries where Christian architecture was born, and here it is represented by the cultural heritage belonging to various Christian denominations. The history of Christianity in Syria, particularly in Aleppo, is directly related to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Six Armenian churches have been built in Aleppo. The article examines three of them built at different times. These are the Cathedral of the Forty Martyrs, the construction of which dates back to the 16th century, the Church of the Holy Trinity, built in Aleppo in 1965, and the Armenian Church of the Exaltation of the Cross, opened in 1993, differ in spatial characteristics and symbolic significance.

Introduction

Armenian Diocese of Beroea (Բերիոյ Հայոց Թեմ) is a diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Syria. It is named after Beroea, the name of Aleppo city from 301 BC until the Arab conquest of Syria in 637 AD. It covers such Syrian governorates as Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor, Idlib, Latakia, Raqqa, and Hasaka.

In the 17th and early 18th centuries, Armenians intensely migrated from Western Armenia to Syrian cities. The majority of the migrants set up their houses in Aleppo where they lived in the territory of the detached Christian neighborhood of Al-Jdayde at the north-western boundary of the old city. One of the oldest Armenian temples, the Forty Martyrs Cathedral, is located there.

From 1915 till 1920, the inflow of Armenian refugees to Aleppo increased. The migration was caused by the genocide of the Armenian population in the territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire. According to the 1922 census results, the number of Armenians in Aleppo was 20,000 people, or 12.76% of the city's total population. To accommodate such a great number of refugees, the municipality of the city allocated lands, which are now Bustan al-Basha and Al-Midan districts [1].

The Armenian community in Syria was considered one of the largest expat communities before the start of the conflict in the country. It comprised about 110,000 people. The community members primarily lived in Aleppo (60,000 people).

By efforts of the refugees, during the late 1920s – early 1940s, several Armenian churches were built in the districts where the Christians generally lived: Al-Jdayde, Al-Midan, and others.

Later on, Armenian churches were built only as late as in the second half of the 20th century. The great Church of the Holy Trinity built in Al-Midan, known as the Zvartnots church, resembling a famous Armenian temple in its shape, was consecrated in 1965. Finally, the Church of the Holy Cross built in the tradition of Armenian church architecture was consecrated in 1993.

Three Armenian temples, the Forty Martyrs Cathedral, the Church of the Holy Trinity, and the Church of the Holy Cross described in this article, are the most interesting buildings in spatial, architectural and artistic respects.

Methodology

During the study, the following methods were used: examination and analysis of archival and literary sources, illustrations and maps; field observations with architectural and urban-planning analysis as well as photoshoots.

Architecture of the Armenian churches in Aleppo

In the early 15th century, Al-Jdayde district, located outside the fortress of the old city, was formed in the north-western part of Aleppo. It was inhabited by people from Christian communities. Al-Jdayde district represented a closed block. The blind walls of the houses at the boundary of the district separated it from other territories. The communication with other districts and roads leading to other cities was carried out only through gates that closed at night. The gates were guarded by men who lived nearby. Their duties included keeping an eye on people who entered or left the district [2]. New houses and churches were built in the area. Initially, members of the Syriac Orthodox Church settled in the district. Later, Maronites and Armenians began to build their houses there. Being located at the trade route connecting the East with Western countries, Aleppo was an attractive place for trade.

Forty Martyrs Cathedral. Churches were erected in the center of Al-Jdayde district around Farhat Square. Armenian temples were built in the area as early as in the 16th century. This is evidenced by the notes made by German traveler Pietro Della Valle in the 16th century. Describing the district, he wrote: “Armenians take service in two churches. The first one, the largest and the most beautiful, was built in the name of the Forty Men of God (Martyrs), and the second one, much smaller, was built in the name of the Holy Virgin...” [3].

The two churches had one court, and in spatial respect, they represented a closed form. The Forty Martyrs Cathedral is the most ancient. According to some sources, it was erected in 1429 since it was first mentioned in the book “The Exploit of the Holy Bible” written by Father Melikseth in 1476 [4].

Initially, the church was built using a compositional technique characteristic of Byzantine temples. Such a spatial solution was traditional for Christian church buildings during that period in Aleppo. The Forty Martyrs Cathedral was a basilica in the form of an equal-sided cross; in its central part, the basilica had a pendentive dome (the dome was later dismantled). The space of the temple was divided by longitudinal arcades connected by pendentive vaults. Using such a structure, it was possible to cover a large area and span the internal space. The initial “Byzantine” church was small and accommodated 100 people, which is why it had to be enlarged in the future.

The configuration of the temple changed many times, and in the early 17th century, its area significantly expanded [5]. An upper floor where the choir aisles were located was additionally built on the western side when the church was enlarged (Fig. 1). The latest changes in the spatial characteristics of the Cathedral were introduced in 1912–1929 when a high bell tower was built (Fig. 2). Recently, an Armenian training, cultural and educational center has formed around the Forty Martyrs Cathedral.

Since the church was built, tuned, and rebuilt over several centuries, the facade compositions differ. The facades have both smooth walls and walls decorated with arcature, carvings, and reliefs with floral motifs. Nowadays, the church is square in shape and has four annexes where the central altar is made out of white alabaster (Fig. 3).

The church houses a unique group of sacred images dating back to the Renaissance. Some of them belong to the Aleppo school of icon painting [5].

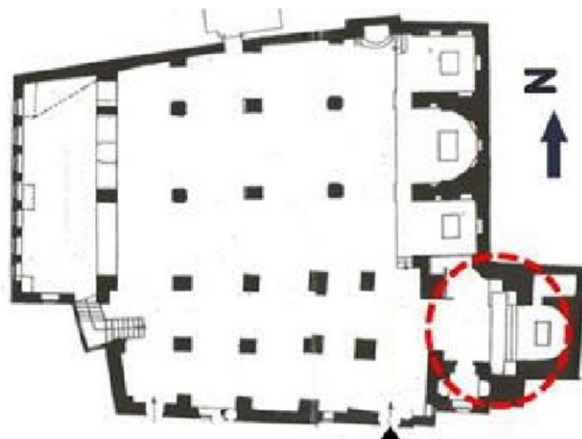


Fig. 1. Layout of the Forty Martyrs Cathedral



Fig. 2. Appearance and fragments of the Forty Martyrs Cathedral



Fig. 3. Interior of the Forty Martyrs Cathedral

Church of the Holy Trinity (Armenian Orthodox community). The Church of the Holy Trinity is located in Al Midan district. This district started to form in the 1920s [6]. In 1918, at the Partition of the Ottoman Empire, France obtained the League of Nations mandate over the territories that are currently Lebanon, Syria, and some parts of South-Eastern Turkey. Al Midan district is one of the districts that the French administration allocated for the settlement of refugees who fled from the genocide and arrived from the regions predominantly populated by Armenians in the territory of the Ottoman Empire [7].

In 1965, the Armenian community in Aleppo built the Church of the Holy Trinity, more famous as Zvartnots Church. The architect of the church was Pascal Paboudjian. It was constructed in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. It should have become a spiritual bridge between the present, the past (1915), and the ancient (the time of Zvartnots Cathedral construction in Armenia).

Zvartnots Cathedral near Etchmiadzin (Armenia) was built in the 7th century. At the time, centrally-planned temple buildings became quite widespread. Several Armenian churches, including Zvartnots, were characterized by the harmonious combination of individual interior elements, and roundabout galleries in their interior. Zvartnots Cathedral was destroyed in the 10th century, and its ruins were found as late as in the early 20th century. Only lower parts of the walls and separate fragments survived. Therefore, architects see the initial appearance of the cathedral differently. The most famous reconstruction of the cathedral was created by Toros Toramanian. His model has a round domed structure with three tiers [8]. Currently, Zvartnots is considered one of the significant monuments of Armenian religious architecture and an unquestioned masterpiece of the world culture.

When designing the new temple in Aleppo, the architect did not attempt to reproduce the structure or follow Toramanian's reconstruction model. Pascal Paboudjian designed the church based on both scientific data and his own imagination. We can assume that the architect conveyed just the image of the ancient structure following the composition of Zvartnots's volumes and forms. The general layout of the ancient temple was taken as the basis for the new church. The Church of the Holy Trinity is round in plan view (Fig. 4). The building consists of three polyhedra decreasing in diameter, located on top of each other (Fig. 5). A roundabout arch system was formed in the main volume of the building, which served as the foundation for the polyhedron in the middle. An L-shaped primary school (Al-Farah School) was also added to the church [9].

The church is situated on a triangular land plot where two streets cross at an angle of about 45°. With such a configuration, the church building was pushed away from the crossroads, inwards the land plot, which made it possible to create a small square in front of the entrance. The fact that the building is located in a corner makes it a dominant element of the adjacent territory (Fig. 6).

To make it more solemn, two groups of stairs, each consisting of nine steps, were arranged in front of the entrance. The sides of the three front doors are ornamented with groups of columns with capitals, having botanical motifs. The entrance space is deepened in such a way so that we pass the gallery passage made up by columns — a structure that holds the second tier — and then immediately find our way to the main space of the church. Its interior astonishes with the integrity of the space and its verticality. When installing facade cladding, the architect used beige limestone, a stone with dynamic texture, which presents a contrast to decorative elements and slabs with religious symbols [10].

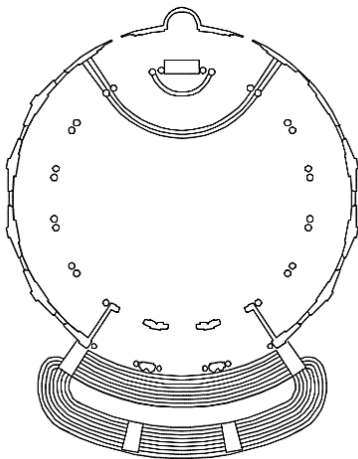


Fig. 4. Church of the Holy Trinity (Armenian Orthodox community). Layout

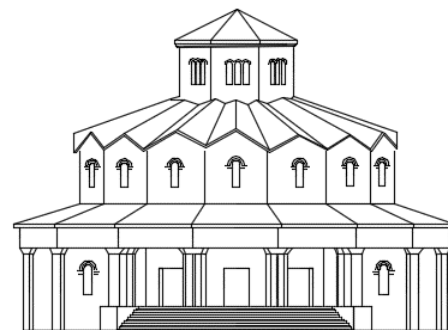


Fig. 5. Church of the Holy Trinity (Armenian Orthodox community). Facade



Fig. 6. Church of the Holy Trinity (Armenian Orthodox community). Appearance

Church of the Holy Cross. The church is situated in Aziziyah district where followers of Christian confessions primarily reside. The French also settled in the area. This district is in the near vicinity of the downtown (the old city). That is why it became one of the first districts where, in the 1920s, when the French mandate was introduced, the works to regulate the street network, reshape and landscape the territory started [11].

The Church of the Holy Cross was designed by architect Sarkis Balmanougian under the influence of the temple architecture style prevailing in Armenia [12]. The first stone in the foundation of this church was laid under Archbishop Georges Layek in 1981. The church was solemnly unveiled under Archbishop Boutros Mariati in 1993 [13].

The architect had to fit the church in a small land plot of irregular shape, situated near residential buildings (Fig. 7). He used the limitations for the benefit of the building's spatial solution. Prevailing vertical lines in the facades, their emphasizing with triangular forms, and height characteristics make the church well-proportional (Fig. 8) and dominating in terms of style and composition despite the fact that a high-rise residential building is situated nearby (Fig. 9).

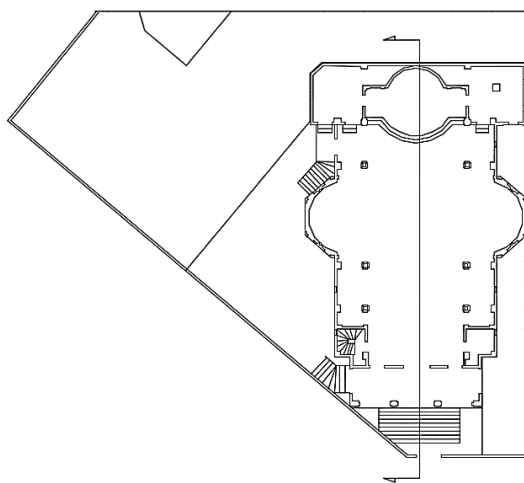


Fig. 7. Armenian Catholic Church of the Holy Cross. Layout

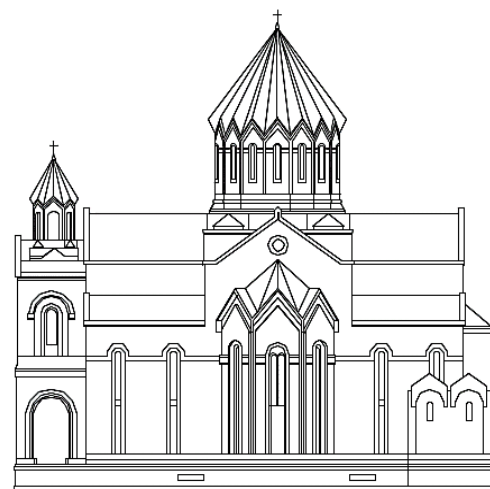


Fig. 8. Armenian Catholic Church of the Holy Cross. Facade



Fig. 9. Armenian Catholic Church of the Holy Cross. Appearance

Due to the lack of space, it was not possible to create a large square in front of the building. Instead, a separate entrance space decorated with an arch and a pediment with arcature was formed.

The church is notable for its shape in the form of a cross in plan view. The structural layout is traditional for this type of temple [14]. It includes cross vaults with pendentives used to form the dome. The main dome is a polygonal cylinder crowned with a multifaceted pyramid. This pyramid is made of brick and faced with stone. To install facade cladding, beige limestone was used. The same stone was used for the interior, altar, columns, and various details. The church has three annexes, where the middle annex is the main one and is devoted to the Virgin Mary.

Conclusion

The article describes three Armenian temples in Aleppo, which differ in the time of construction as well as their spatial and compositional solutions.

The Forty Martyrs Cathedral, the most ancient Armenian church, is situated in the historic Al-Jdayde district adjacent to the walls of the old city where followers of Christian confessions settled. By studying multiple changes and modifications of this Armenian temple, we can track the development of this facility from a Byzantine religious building to a temple with a more complicated liturgy. Currently, the temple has three altars.

The unique image of the church was chosen to perpetuate the memory of the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire in 1915–1916. In 1920, the French government allocated Al-Midan district for Armenian refugees, and almost fifty years later, the Church of the Holy Trinity was built in Aleppo. In its spatial and compositional characteristics, it was similar to Zvartnots — the most ancient Armenian cathedral and one of the buildings of the classical period in Armenian architecture.

In the late 20th century, the Church of the Holy Cross was built in Aziziyah district. Its spatial and architectural solution comes from stylistic integrity with traditional Armenian religious architecture.

Having considered these three completely different Armenian temples, we can confidently conclude that all of them were built in the tradition of Armenian religious construction. They are distinguished by harmonious spatial composition, unique architectural forms, the boldness of artistic solutions, and original structural techniques.

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