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House of Verse: An Architectural Reconstruction of Poetic Subject¹

Abstract

The interdisciplinary approach provides new ways for studying of subject and space. The paper is based on an architectural reconstruction of the relation between the space and subject, the project is a result of a collaboration between an architect and a philologist dedicated to a transformation of a poem into a house inhabited by the subject of poetic utterance.

In the project “House of verse” the text of a poem is perceived as an encoded architectural project. The aim in common for a philologist and an architect is to create a house which literally deals with all the peculiarities of a poem: starting from the configuration through phonosemantics and ending with accents and key words.

The presence and place of words which represent space and are related to the being of subject in space (such as *I, here, there, next to*). As a result a concrete drawing of a house is created, which has all the necessary detail and installation for everyday life (the plan of electrification and canalization included). The project is performed following the exact relation between meters and letters. The condensation of volume and empty spaces are detected in the text, this guides the position of doorways and windows, the light movement in the house during the day. The trajectories of the subject are reconstructed. This drawing can be actually used for construction of houses, or study the specific features of the poetic subject. The architectural representation of semantics of space provides a better idea of the relation between subject and space than any philological interpretation of a poetic text. This is an attempt to build an ideal house which fits exactly this poet, this precise relation between the subject and space and not the perfect architecture is expected to emerge as a result of the conceptualization of space built in the poem.

Keywords: Poetic Language, Contemporary Poetry, Subject, Architecture

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The interconnection of space and the characteristics of the subject, lies, it would seem, on the surface. Space has not seldom been considered in the description of the fabric of a verse, primarily, in structural poetics. However, it usually meant how the subject (or the lyrical hero or the author) sees the content of the verse; that is, the space was substantially equated to the subject's view and accordingly was structured as being based on some clear oppositions, such as top-down, close-far, etc. Of particular interest are those studies in which the relationship between the subject and space (though still more frequently the relationship of the author and space) is reconstructed proceeding from certain formal characteristics, rather than meaning. Such characteristics could be represented, for instance, by grammar. For instance, observing the frequency of prepositions in particular poets' works provides an interesting tool for the researcher for understanding the subject; for example, the prevalence of the preposition 'over' or 'under'² provides the basis for talking about how the subject positions itself in relation to the world, even including its social identity.

However, the search for formal tools for the reconstruction of the subject in the text cannot be restricted only to the area of grammar and, all the more so, vocabulary, because lexis is the most poet-controlled aspect of the verse. And the search for such instruments may take place not in the philological domain solely. Here philology can learn from other practices, including borrowing, which may seem paradoxical at first glance. Architecture is such a practice, though understood literally: not the architecture described in the poem, but the invisible architecture of the verse as such, which can be converted into a real or imaginary construction.

Verse represents the space already built, i.e. the space constructed by a poet, therefore it may serve as an unconditional characteristic of the subject. In other words, the text is already a house inhabited by the subject that has fitted out the space; he/she has structured it either in connection with a particular event, or in general, on the basis of his/her relationship with the outside world. Both are the essential, existential characteristics of the subject. However, such methods for a holistic description of the text as a space do not exist so far, because the methods of structural poetics have been based on the emphasis of certain individual characteristics. Our task is the literal transformation of the text into a visible structure, and therefore we could assess its host (the person who is to live in the house) already on the basis of analysis of this structure. In this way, such an analysis combines the methods of cognitive poetics, the purely formalist observations of the verse graphics, which appear as a future scheme of the house, and the methods of professional architectural design.

This project is carried out by me in collaboration with the artist and architect Alexey Lazarev. As a result, we have not created a rough picture, but a concrete chart of a real house with all the amenities necessary for everyday life (right down to a chart of the electric circuits and sewerage). A real house could be built within the framework of the proposed project.

Such houses have been built, based on the poems by Gennady Aygi, Vladimir Aristov, Konstantin Kedrov, Danila Davydov, Anna Alchuk, B. Konstriktor, Elena Katsyuba and myself. The house is not a metaphor, and the architect's fantasy is minimized here. The architect bases his/her work on a strictly developed algorithm of converting a text into a structure:

² Plungjan (2004).

1. First the scale—the ratio of the text and the structure—is set: the height of a letter is defined to be one metre. We choose a relatively short poem that fits onto a page so that it could be seen in its entirety, like a house.

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2. The verbal material is compressed proportionally and converted into graphics. The links and iteration units are emphasized (this can be done in colour), as concerns words, grammatical means, clusters and configurations of letters; the links are established between them. Thus, the graphic pattern of letter reiteration is more important for the method of architectural reconstruction than the sound of the letters (although this undoubtedly may correlate with the sound).

3. The deictic words and existential lexis are marked in the layout of the house: I, we, you, here, there, this, that, life, live, be. The presence of these words serves as a guarantee that the poem is inhabited by its host (the subject). Certain links are built between them, which are further transformed into key zones of habitation space.

4. The outer perimeter of the verse walls is built, and the author determines how thick or permeable the walls are. The proportions between the line length and line spacing condition the number of windows, their location, size, and, eventually, the extent and characteristics of light in the house.

5. The geometric component of the key letters is set (not exceeding two or three elements); it shows itself in configurations of the subject's possible movement in the house and in the interior decoration.

6. The passage lines, exit lines and enter lines are assigned—this signifies one's movement, activities, everyday life. The empty spaces of the verse are set out—for contemplation and work—where we stay for a long time, motionless. Thus there emerges a plan where life zones are marked; here the conglomeration of particular grammatical forms is taken into account (verbs, nouns, etc.). The furniture in these spaces is placed by conventional means, therefore it is of special interest to see which words of the verse are matched with, say, a bed, a dining table, a desk.

7. The house, rendered habitable, is raised vertically. This procreates the house volume.

First, let us imagine the verse texts stage by stage (Scheme 1), the schemes of converting the text into a layout (Scheme 2), the final layout of the house according to the verse (Scheme 3) and then the volume reconstruction of the house (Scheme 4).

- 1a. Boris Konstriktor's verse:³

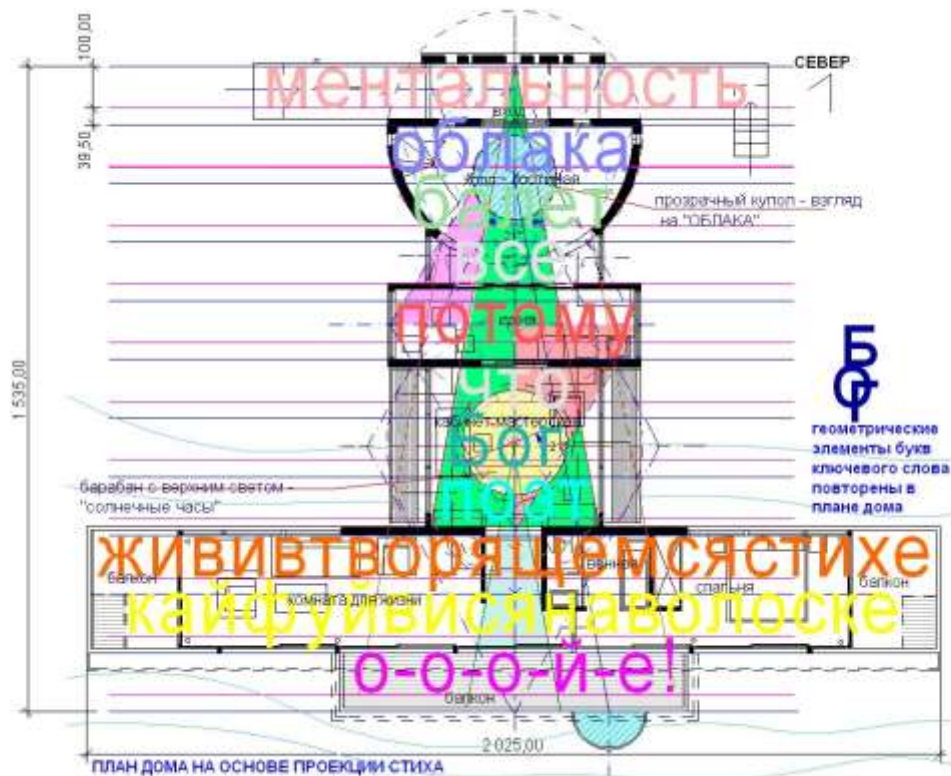
МЕНТАЛЬНОСТЬ
облака
балет

³ English translation: Mentality // clouds // ballet // everything // be // cause// God // is a poet // live in an emerging verse // be high when hanging within a hair's breadth // oh- yeah!

всё
потому
что
Бог
поэт
живи в творящемся стихе
кайфуй вися на волоске
о-о-о-й-е!

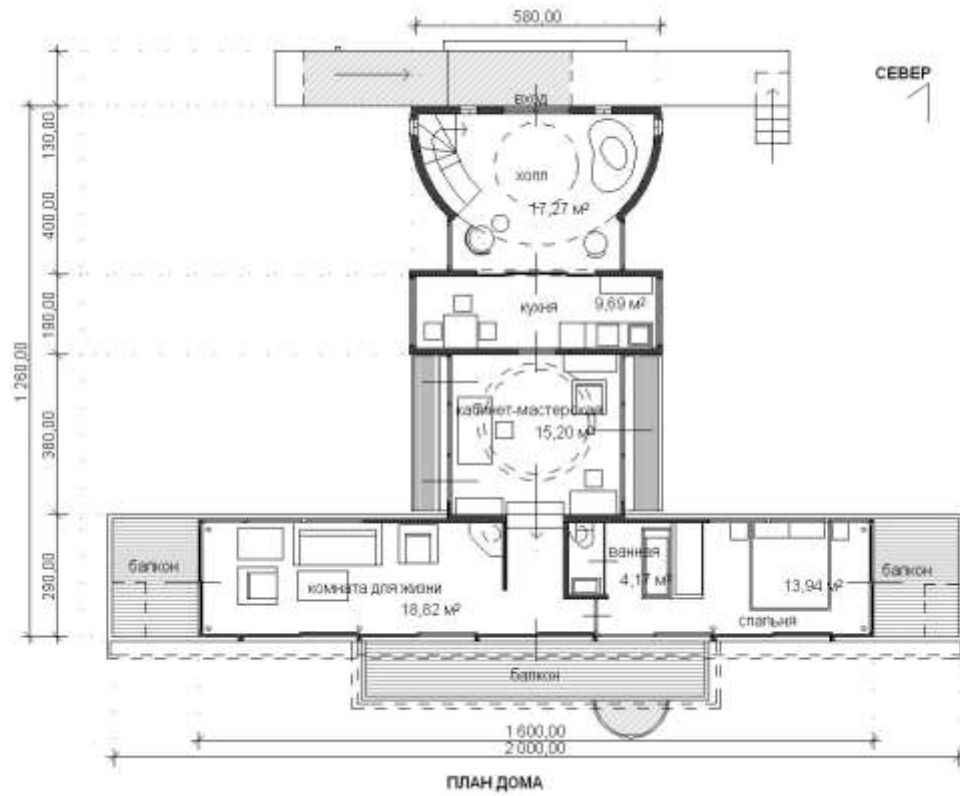
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2а.



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3a.



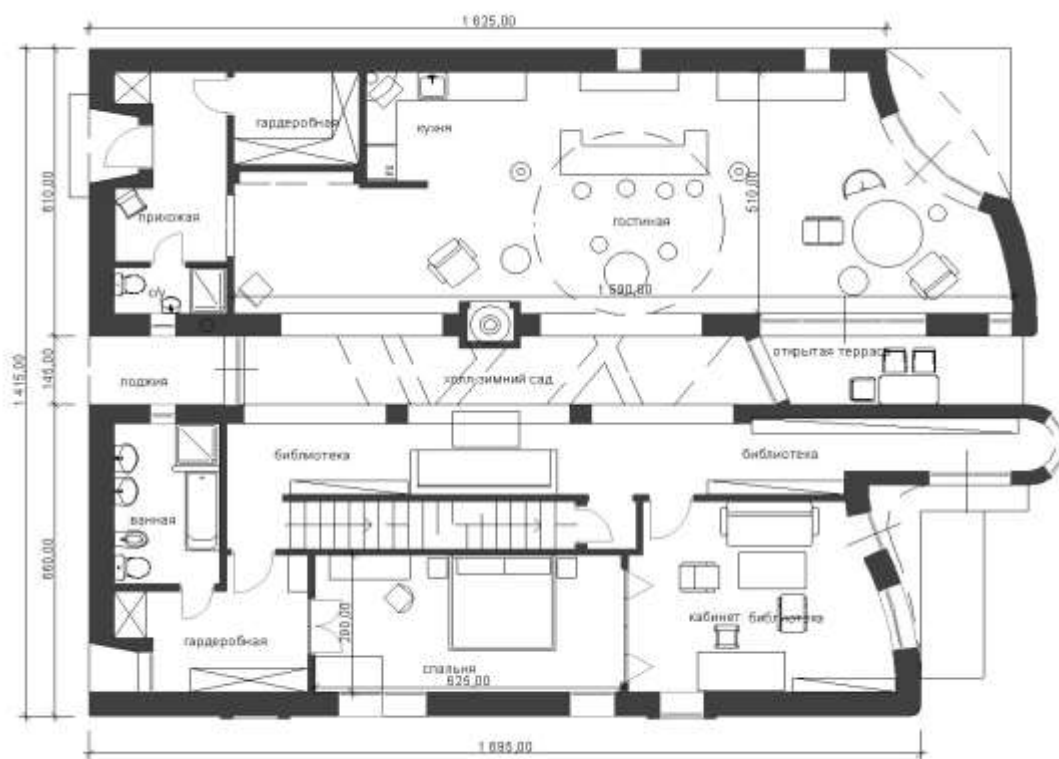
4a.

1b. Danila Davydov's verse:⁴

интересное отличие
настеперьуженетак
прилетелончтоптичье
перекусываетпроводок

вдисконфортеневобиде
напоследнемэтаже
мынезримыесоседи
нас не так теперь уже

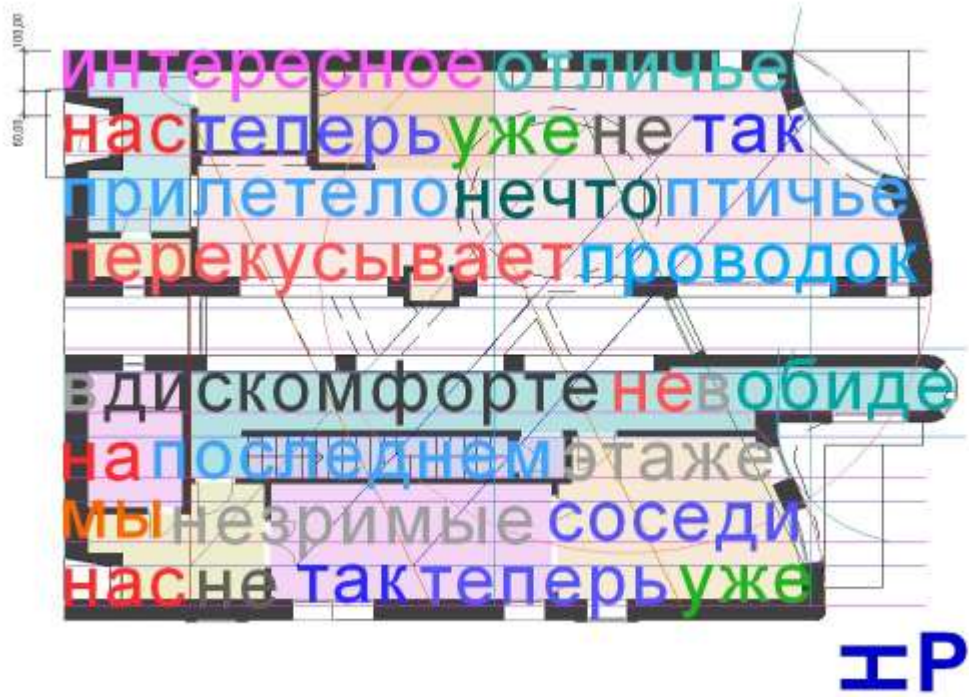
2b.



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⁴ English translation: an interesting distinction // not like us anymore // something similar to a bird have come // it bites through a tiny cable /// it's discomfoting but not insulting // on the last floor // we are invisible neighbours // not like us anymore.

3b.



4b.

If we compare the two houses presented by the poets Danila Davydov and Boris Konstriktor, we can see significant differences in the manner of interaction between the subject and the space.

Boris Konstriktor's text is structured along the central axis and not aligned to the left, as traditional verse would be. A verse aligned to the left somehow presumes some wall with a density that can vary, but in the case of a central axis and lines with different length we experience maximum exposure to space and the willingness to link one's house (the poem) with space. A house built along the central axis provides an overall view. The subject walks around the house and sees it throughout, and at any point it sees the sky that appears both at the passage ends and in a large drum built over the central part that is formed by short words, the principal word being 'Бор'. The person who lives in this house (the subject of the verse) is not afraid to be open, is not afraid to be seen. The central letters in the graphic configuration are 'o', 'б' and 'r': cloud, poet, God, ballet (облако, поэт, Бог, балет). The dominance of 'o' and 'o'-shaped forms engenders distinctive circles that are emphasized by round wells of light. The configuration of letters predetermines also the character of movement in space—the roundish movements. The subject proceeds in space with rounded, circular 'r'-shaped movements. The letter 'Б' graphically represents the merger of 'r' and 'o'. These are the simplest movements, the original motion as it were. The subject aspires either to return to some initial model of relationship with the world and space or to act solely as a demiurge of this space. If God is the poet, then the poet is God.

The macrocosm created in this House of Verse is transparent. The words in the poem are short, the structures of the house are not massive, but lightweight, wireframe. There is no density or concentration that would be predetermined by the thickness of the walls. At the same time, the overall plan of the house resembles a plane. This is a residence of some God who has not yet arrived. This is an aircraft which is on the ground, but always ready to take off. Possibly, it even stands on the edge of a cliff. The subject can be viewed, on the one hand, and on the other hand it is capable of seeing everything from different sides and even slightly from above. People are present—it is not a desert—but the subject is somewhere between the people and heaven. Perhaps he/she would like to be God and to view the world from an aeroplane. The organization of a house with the aircraft pattern makes the designer furnish the home with furniture of the constructivism era and shows the subject's passion for the era of modernism.

First the poem has short lines, then the tempo speeds up, and all this turns into a spreading out, to the right and left, between two broad lines. This is a place of a more relaxed stay, a retardation, the place where the text is born and a place of contemplation. Thus the house is open towards the south, because we have accepted in the general rules of the verse that north is the top and south is the bottom on the house plan, like in any map. It is quite difficult to enter this House of Verse. The entrance that is usually in the house front facing north is not seen. The first word is considerably longer than the subsequent ones. It seems to be blocking the entrance. Perhaps, one should enter delicately—the subject does not seem to be inviting us in. However, once you have entered you easily move around the house.

The subject in Danila Davydov's poem has a fundamentally different relationship with space. First, it is notable that the poem, divided—as it would seem—into two classical stanzas, accentuates this division. The last line of the first quatrain and the first line of the second quatrain realize the semantics of separation: 'перекусывает проводок', 'вдискомфорте' ('it bites

through a tiny cable', 'it's discomfoting'), that is, the strophes or parts of the house are, as it were, cut through or divided by slots into two sections. It forms two habitats, accentually

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separated: the guest area and the private area, the open one and the closed one. One zone is designed to be available for others—strangers, friends—and is at the same time optional. The second zone is personal; it represents the concentration of reticence towards life. The first one even has a bar counter for many people (for 'us'), but 'we' is rather a certain longing for a second 'I'. These I's, however, appear and disappear, at the same time making the appearance of 'you' impossible. The internal split, a gap, is a source of light. The walls are so solid that there is no way to install windows, so all the light gets in through some openings overhead. And in general, the top is the safest place, the roof is flat, and one can reach it. The shelter the house affords is upwards (on the 'top floor' in the text of the poem).

The poem has many repetitions, the same short lines, in the first place 'нас' ('we') and 'уже' ('already'). If we connect 'нас' with 'нас' and 'уже' with 'уже' in the first and the second stanza, we get an angle, one side of which is the height of the house, and the angle as such serves as a basis for all configurations of the internal premises. In the first strophe, 'уже' and 'нечто' ('something') form a centre. The walls of these premises, unlike the walls of Konstriktor's house, are distinguished by astonishing density, which is based on the poem's being aligned strictly to the left, and all the first letters in the lines are either repeated or are geometrically similar to each other. The vertical reiteration of 'нас' and 'нас' at the lines beginning also adds density to the structure. The first and the last two lines of the verse paraphrase one another, which closes the space, makes it tight, protected. This is one of the main aspirations—to create a secure space, almost a fortress, around which there is possibly a desert. The life scenario in such a house refers us to the Oriental cultural tradition, but the architecture of the finished house resembles the Eastern model as well; therefore, continuing this logic, the architect places carpets on the floor, connects the internal space units with pointed arches. At the same time the contours of the space within the house are also oriented towards the East.

It is curious that both poets were quite satisfied with their houses, whilst remaining indifferent to the other poets' houses, which possibly indicates a true correlation of the reconstructed spaces with the subject.

There is the possibility to turn the project into an interactive model: one can walk round the House of Verse, may live in it: the poet can live in his own House of Verse, while the reader can live in the poet's favourite poem; the literary critics will turn to the study of the House of Verse rather than to direct interpretation of the text. The architectural realization of the space semantics provides a better understanding of interaction of the subject with the world than the traditional philological interpretation of the poetic text. This is an attempt to build a 'perfect' house, suiting a particular poet; it is reality, not the perfection of architecture, that serves as a basis for reconstruction of a subject, proceeding from the conceptualization of space contained in the verse.

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