

Architecture Tulane professor has spent 45 years photographing the iconic buildings of Russia's difficult-to-reach places

William Brumfield: We See Things in Russia We Never Expected to See

What Americans know about Russian architecture is mainly thanks to the work of one man, who has photographed the country since 1970.LARA MCCOY
RBTH

It's not easy to get William Brumfield to talk about himself. For Brumfield, 71, the foremost authority on Russian architecture in the U.S., the focus of any conversation is the work. And the work, first and foremost, is the photography.

"The photography has always been the fulcrum for me to convey this knowledge that I have about Russian culture and architecture," Brumfield said.

Although photography has defined Brumfield's career, he did not train as a photographer. He studied Slavic literature at the University of California at Berkeley, receiving his Ph.D. in 1973. Perhaps fittingly, he first picked up a camera on his first trip to the Soviet Union in 1970.

The only time a conversation with Brumfield hints at anything personal is when he talks about the connection between the Russian North and his native American South. Born in Charlotte, N.C., Brumfield did his undergraduate work at Tulane University in New Orleans, where he has also taught since 1980.

Like the South, Brumfield says the Russian North is full of structures that tell the story of a culture clinging to its heritage while searching for a way forward.

"For all the losses, the trauma...there is an extraordinary wealth, much of it in a ruined state. But for the historian, the ruin is also important. This is something of extraordinary power. What created it? Because there's nothing visible sustaining it now," he said.

A tireless advocate for the recognition and preservation of Russian architecture, Brumfield has published countless articles in English and Russian as well as several major books, including "A History of Russian Architecture" (1993), widely used as a textbook in Russian studies courses, and "Lost Russia" (1995), which Brumfield described as a book that tried to put Russian architecture into a familiar Western context, "this trope of the ruin as a point of meditation."

His more recent work, including "Architecture at the End of the Earth," which was published in June, approaches Russian architecture more on its own terms, as an anomaly that doesn't fit into the traditional narrative of Western art and architectural history.

"It's interesting because it's Russia," he said, adding that in his view, "architecture is as much an expression of Russia as its music or literature. Although it's rare to find any of the great novelists talking about the architecture of a church, for example, that ambience is there."

He has received numerous accolades for his work over the



William Brumfield attributes his ability to visit and photograph many hard-to-reach cities in the Russian north to his network of friends in the region who support his work.

years, but he says he doesn't seek out these opportunities; rather, they find their way to him.

When the National Gallery of Art approached him about creating an archive of his photographs in 1985, it was "not because of some abstract idea — we need to fill in Russia, there's a gap here — but because they saw my photographs," he said.

The National Gallery archive led to connections at the Library of Congress, which supported other research trips.

"These linkages have been so unpredictable in my career, but the image has to be there," Brumfield said. "There's a higher logic here that goes beyond anything that I could have predicted — it's the power of the image."

Brumfield's unique ability to create these powerful images comes from his roots as a scholar of Russia itself, according to Blair Ruble, former director of the Kennan Institute in Washington, D.C., and a longtime friend of Brumfield. "His interests grew from his love of Russian culture, which makes his photography different from that of an architectural photographer," Ruble said.

For now, Brumfield is focusing on archiving the images that exist in pre-digital form — as well as taking more.

He would like to do a trip to the Russian south and photograph some cities he has never visited, including Krasnodar and Astrakhan. Such a trip would take him in the footsteps of early 20th century photographer Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky, whose color photographs of imperial Russia

prefigured Brumfield's own work.

"How much I'll be able to get done in my allotted span is very much an open question. I've become almost fatalistic about it now," he said.

Although he says that he has spent more time in Russia than any American who doesn't live here, Brumfield has no desire to move to the country and do photography full time, because that would mean giving up teaching.

"We're trying to create educated citizens and they need to know something about Russian culture," he said. "To the extent that my work can reach out to our students, that's good. I do my job and I have to believe that it's going to make a difference to someone, because I know that the people who started me on this journey were just dedicated teachers, not art historians."

HIS STORY**William Craft Brumfield**➤ **AGE:** 71➤ **NATIONALITY:** AMERICAN➤ **STUDIED:** SLAVIC LANGUAGES

A native of Charlotte, N.C., William Brumfield took his first photographs of Russian architecture during a visit to the Soviet Union in 1970. Since that first trip, Brumfield has taken hundreds of thousands of pictures of Russia, documenting many structures throughout the Russian north that have since fallen into disrepair or been destroyed. He was named a Guggenheim Fellow in the Humanities in 2000 and last year was awarded the Dmitry Likhachev Foundation award "for outstanding contributions to the preservation of the historic and cultural heritage of Russia." He has taught at Tulane University since 1980.

Ask the Professor: Why the Onion Domes?

William Brumfield answered questions from RBTH readers about traditional Russian architecture and the best places to see it.

Mireya Rodriguez: I am going to visit Russia and would like to see the classic highlights, but also the new Moscow and St. Petersburg. What would you recommend I see?

There is so much to see in the central part of European Russia: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novgorod, Pskov, the Golden Ring towns accessible from Moscow such as Vladimir, Suzdal and Yaroslavl.

In terms of recent developments, Moscow has the more dynamic architectural mix. The sky-

scrapers of Moscow City are the most visible and can easily be reached by subway. But new projects are spread throughout the city. Tastes and opinions vary, but the energy is undeniable.

Kimberly Zenz: Where are the best places to see wooden architecture? Are there any places where it is still built or masters exist?

Wooden architecture is alive and well in Russia. Indeed, traditional wooden buildings are visible throughout the country. There are also a number of open-air museums where distinctive examples of regional wooden architecture have been reassembled.

The most famous of these sites

is Kizhi Island, in Lake Onega in Karelia. Others are Vitoslavlitsy, near Novgorod, and Malye Korely, near Arkhangelsk.

Yes, there are indeed masters in the traditional crafts of wooden construction still working in Russia. There is even a school devoted to traditional construction methods at the St. Kirill Belozersk Monastery, in the northern town of Kirillov.

Charles David Shaw: Where and when did the first onion dome emerge? And why in Russia? Our knowledge about their origins is quite limited.

The earliest visual evidence appears to be an engraving of St.

Basil's on Red Square in a book by the German scholar Adam Olearius (1599-1671). In the engraving, St. Basil's (a.k.a., Cathedral of the Intercession on the Moat) clearly has the elaborate onion domes we associate with it today. They apparently appeared as the result of a major repair following a fire that damaged much of the upper structure in 1588.

Why did this form take shape at this time? We are not sure. One hypothesis is that it imitates an onion dome that was presumably over the Holy Sepulcher (the grave of Jesus Christ) in Jerusalem in the early medieval period.

Jerusalem was a very important theme in Russian spiritual

culture in the latter part of the 16th century. Some even considered Moscow the new Jerusalem. Therefore, the argument goes, the onion dome would have expressed this idea in the most visible new church of Ivan the Terrible's Moscow.

We do know that the onion dome became so admired that it replaced more traditional domes on Russian churches far older than St. Basil's.

Prepared by
Anna Sorokina

Read more questions at
rbth.com/37769

**CIRCLE OF LIGHT**

Nine venues in Moscow will take part in the annual Circle of Light Festival. Some of the world's best light designers will present videomappings projected against some of the city's most iconic buildings in 2-D and 3-D installations and multimedia shows as part of the event.

lightfest.ru

This announcement was produced by the Department for Multicultural Policy, Interregional Cooperation and Tourism of Moscow

From Sept. 26 to Oct. 4
MOSCOW

○ **THE RUSSIAN DEFENSE MINISTRY ON THE FRUNZENSKAYA EMBANKMENT**

Artists from Russia, France, the U.K. and the U.A.E. will display their work on the buildings belonging to Russia's Defense Ministry and also on the Andreyevsky Bridge over the Moscow River.

○ **THE CENTRAL CHILDREN'S STORE**

Amazing stories about fantastic creatures and a parade will turn the facade of the country's biggest children's store into a fairytale village.

○ **THE MOSCOW RIVER**

Boats projecting light and multimedia shows will run from the House of Music near Paveletskaya railway station to the Luzhnetskaya Embankment. Projections from the boats will be visible on both sides of the river.



TRAVEL2MOSCOW.COM

○ **THE BOLSHOI THEATER**

The facade of the Bolshoi will become a canvas for variations on the opera "Carmen" and the ballet "Swan Lake."

○ **VDNKH**

The revamped VDNKh park and exhibit center will host a light show that includes figure skaters. Light installations will greet visitors at the park entrance and accompany them along the main promenade.

○ **PATRIARCH'S PONDS**

The location memorialized in Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov's mystical novel "Master and Margarita" will feature projections of the novel's characters.

○ **CHISTYE PRUDY (CLEAN PONDS)**

The Life in the City light installations will take place in this favorite haunt of young Muscovites.