

The Panoramic Cinema in Tashkent: From Type to Experiment

Karolina Pieniążek | karolina.pieniazek@polimi.it

Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani, Politecnico di Milano

Abstract

This paper examines the Panoramic Cinema in Tashkent (1964) as a case of typological adaptation at the intersection of technological innovation, spatial experimentation, and seismic engineering. Designed to host panoramic film screenings while supporting stage-congress use, the ensemble is composed of two contrasting volumes—a fully glazed, horizontal foyer and an oval-plan auditorium calibrated to the curvature of panoramic screens, acoustics, clear sightlines, and seismic constraints. Anticipating rapid change in projection systems, the hall was conceived as multi-standard, enabling screenings across formats alongside full professional performance use.

Rather than treating the cinema as an isolated object, the study situates its constructional logic within the Soviet architectural habitus—a recurrent foyer-auditorium schema—and reads it comparatively against cognate public buildings across the USSR (cinemas, theatres, sports halls, palaces of culture/arts). The analysis shows how Tashkent reworks the canonical (panoramic-) cinema type into an experimental realisation, retaining a shared morphological language while departing through plan geometry, structural strategy, and programme.

More broadly, the paper addresses how architectural value is recognised in non-canonical, geographically peripheral contexts such as Soviet Central Asia, and shows how broad comparative analysis within these contexts helps establish significance beyond the programmatic and visual repetitiveness that dominated modern architectural production in the USSR, demonstrating that, in this case, heritage significance arises from the interplay of media-specific spatial design, seismic adaptation, and typological innovation.

Keywords

Panoramic Cinema, Palace of Arts, Tashkent Modernism, Soviet Modernism, Soviet Architectural Types.

Palace of Arts in Tashkent: between typology and multifunctionality

In the second half of the twentieth century, new typologies of cultural buildings developed apace—from panoramic cinemas, derived from the experimental revolution in film technology of the 1950s and 1960s, to congress palaces intended for party and trade-union conventions. At that time, Tashkent possessed none of these types and additionally lacked a concert hall; limited resources precluded the realization of two separate investments¹. Consequently, in 1961 the Ministry of Culture of the Uzbek SSR announced a competition for a cinema-theatre building (later called the ‘Palace of Arts’, today known as the Panoramic Cinema) that would combine the functions of a concert and theatre hall, spaces for political and public events, and a cinema capable of projection in standard, widescreen, and panoramic formats². The response to this multifunctional brief and the rapid advances in projection technology was a concept articulated through two contrasting volumes: a horizontal, transparent entrance-foyer tract and the monolithic mass of the auditorium. The project was authored by architects Vladimir Berezin, Sergo Sutyagin, Iurii Khaldeev, and Dimitrii Shuvaev, with the

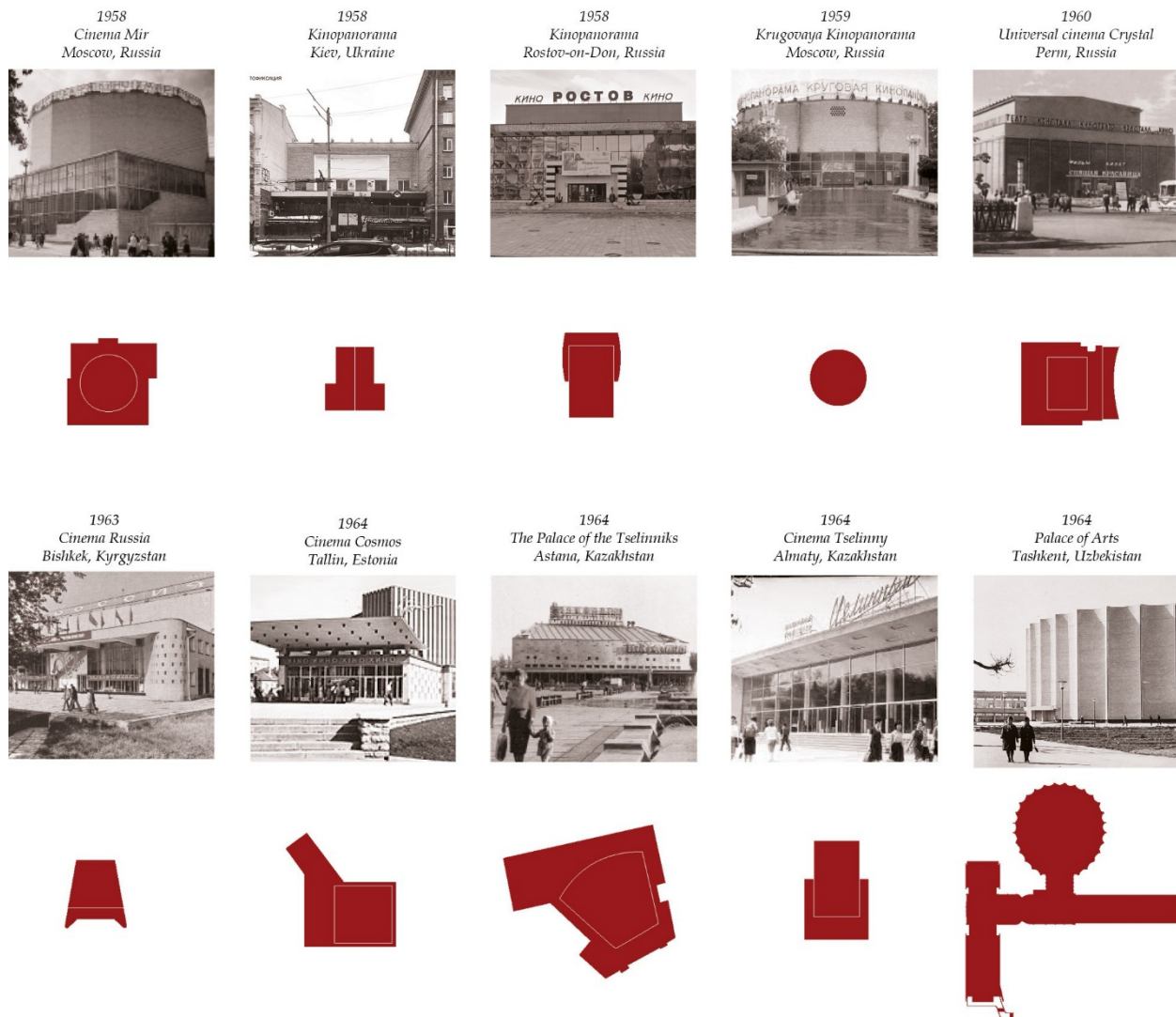


Fig. 1 Panoramic cinemas in USSR.

participation of Ol'ga Legostaeva; engineers Aleksandr Braslavskii, David Antman, and A. Avakina; and artists Arnol'd Gan, Viktor Gan, Aleksandr Kedrin, and R. Avakian. The building was erected in 1962–1964, with a subsequent extension in 1977.

From panoramic cinema to multifunctional hall: a typological adaptation

The emergence of the panoramic-cinema typology was closely intertwined with the global context of 1950s technological experimentation. In 1952 Cinerama was introduced in the United States; in the USSR, NIKFI developed the three-strip Kinopanorama in 1956–1957; and in 1958–1959 Krugovaya Kinopanorama enabled 360-degree circular projection. The diversity of these systems required specific spatial parameters: large-format (often curved) screens, a long projection throw, column-free halls, and a precisely modelled auditorium geometry. Initially, screenings were organised in adapted theatres and existing cinemas, but by the late 1950s and early 1960s purpose-designed buildings began to be erected³. One recognisable variant was the rotunda – a

formula likely borrowed from the typology of painted-panorama buildings (e.g. Mir cinema, Moscow 1958; and, a year later, its application in the circular projections of Krugovaya Kinopanorama). In parallel, rectilinear and trapezoidal schemes (often with one curved wall) were developed, reproducing the geometry of the screen and the auditorium.

Against this backdrop, Tashkent, unlike many contemporaneous 'Palaces of Arts' with panoramic cinemas (fig. 1), adopted the key elements of the 'panoramic canon' (the rotunda, screen curvature, long projection throw, column-free volume), embedding them within a flexible framework capable of accommodating both projection in multiple technologies and stage-congress functions. Instead of a perfectly symmetrical rotunda, a one of a kind oval plan was adopted, shaped to match the panoramic screen's arc and the seating geometry. Anticipating the rapid evolution of film technologies, the hall was conceived as multi-standard, enabling projection across various systems alongside full, professional stage and congress use.

Typology and convergences in architectural layout and massing

The design of the multifunctional building in Tashkent formed part of a broader project to shape facilities for 'mass entertainment'⁴. Cinema – privileged within Soviet culture – served, on the one hand, as a paradigm case for tensions between spectator comfort and the building's representational function⁵, and, on the other, as a site shaped by the demands of rapidly modernising projection systems. Analogous dilemmas confronted theatres⁶, circuses⁷, and large auditoria. Cinemas increasingly gravitated toward a model that coupled the projection hall with an enlarged foyer and catering facilities, while, in parallel, other building types expanded their representational zones and service programmes. Consequently, cinemas, theatres, palaces of art and culture, and other event halls began to converge in both functional schemes and outward expression. A recurrent arrangement – the pairing of a principal auditorium volume with a distinct vestibule – standardised the user journey (entry, waiting, collective participation, exit). Architecture thereby materialised patterns of functional organisation while consolidating social dispositions of participation in culture and in the rituals of socialist modernity. Taken together, the patterned recurrences described here can be understood as a *habitus*⁸: a structured set of dispositions that reproduces similar layouts and massing across building types.

Habitus and the reproduction in architecture: comparisons

Architectural *habitus* (understood as a lasting ensemble of design and functional practices) within Soviet building culture provided layout and volumetric frameworks, while still leaving room for formal, structural, and aesthetic exploration. A recurrent spatial scheme – the vestibule (foyer) and the auditorium – served as a stable matrix within which architects developed their own interpretations, experimenting with façade composition, roof structures, and urban linkages. In this sense, *habitus* operated as a stabilising yet not fully determinative structure: it enabled formal differentiation while preserving a recognisable functional and volumetric logic.

Against this backdrop, the Panoramic Cinema (former Palace of Arts) in Tashkent (1964) offers a compelling reference point for comparative analysis. When set alongside cognate realisations, the Oktyabr cinema in Moscow (Mikhail Posokhin et alii, 1967)⁹ and the Dailes Theatre in Riga (Marta Stana, 1977)¹⁰, shared

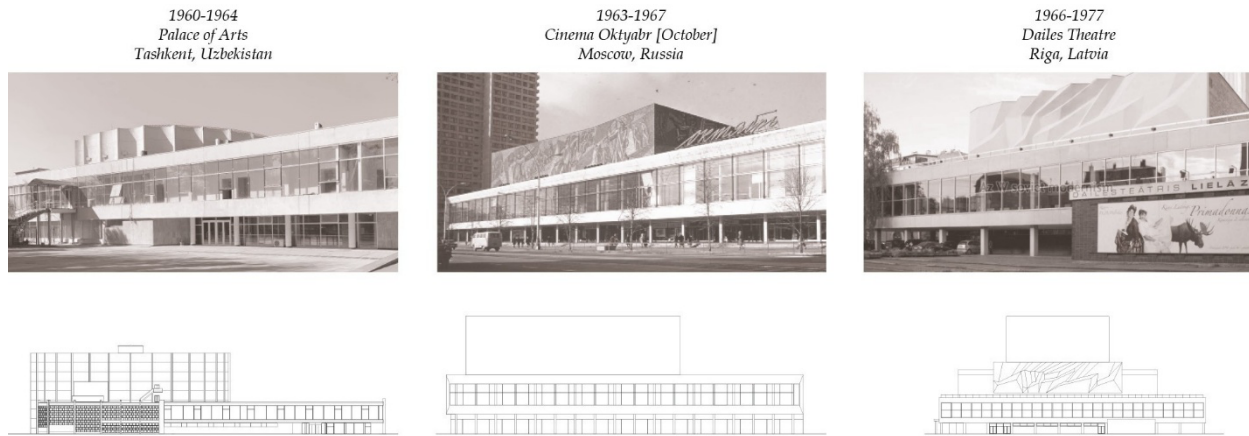


Fig. 2 Comparison between different building types.

characteristics become evident: a pronounced contrast between the transparent, open foyer and the compact, emphatically articulated mass of the main hall (fig.2). In all three cases, a horizontal, glazed vestibule is paired with a monumental auditorium volume. In Tashkent and Riga the two parts read as distinct volumes within a single composition, whereas in Moscow an expansive foyer wraps the projection hall, intensifying the sense of duality. The foyer's language—rectilinear, largely glazed prisms with clearly expressed slabs and columns—sets a 'neutral' backdrop for the halls' expression. In Tashkent, a rotunda evokes a monumental Doric colonnade. In Moscow, a rectilinear mass is adorned with mosaics by N. I. Andronov, A. V. Vasil'tsov, and V. B. Elkonin, and with reliefs by G. I. Motovilov, referencing revolutionary iconography. In Riga, the façade is organised around a central relief by Ojārs Feldbergs (under the direction of Imants Murovskis), a stylised flame that alludes to the theatre's emblem. The shared scheme does not preclude far-reaching individualisation. On the contrary, it encourages compositional closure and façade plasticity.

These affinities extend beyond homogeneous typologies to a broader family of buildings governed by the same functional-spatial principle: an entrance zone with foyer juxtaposed with a massive auditorium block. Palaces of culture, music theatres, and sports halls—although programmatically distinct and often subject to strict typification—came to resemble one another by virtue of a shared habitus of spectacle and collective participation (fig.3).

A clear instance of such cross-typological convergence is the comparison between the Tashkent building and the Yubileyny Palace of Sport in Leningrad (today St. Petersburg) (1936-1967). Both ensembles comprise two volumes: cylindrical and rectangular. In St. Petersburg the cylindrical part houses the arena with stands for approximately 5,500 spectators and under-stand facilities. In Tashkent the space beneath the rotunda seating is used analogously, calibrated to the requirements of panoramic projection technology. The crucial difference lies in the roof: at Yubileyny a pioneering two-level rope-and-cable structure (intersecting paraboloids of revolution) is carried by a central steel drum and an external reinforced-concrete ring on high-capacity columns, whereas in Tashkent—also with a central drum—a trussed system was adopted, dictated by seismic demands and the specificities of panoramic projection¹¹. The rectangular volume accommodates sporting functions in St. Petersburg and circulation/representational functions with a restaurant in Tashkent. Viewed from another

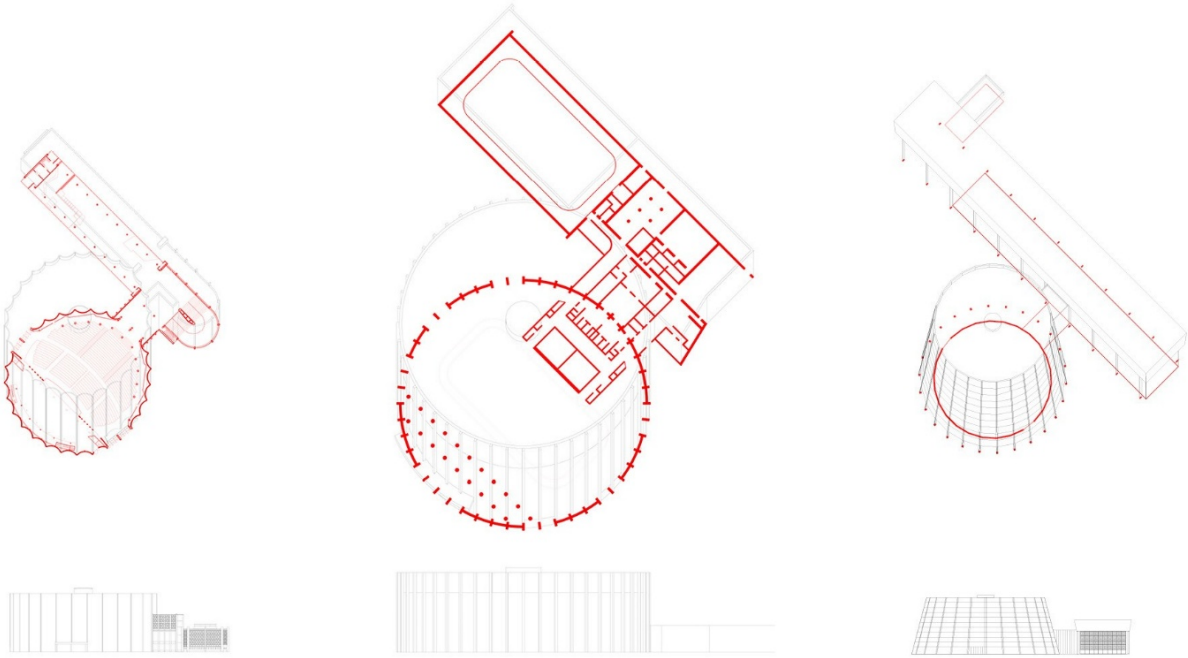
*Palace of Arts, Tashkent 1961-64**Palace of Sports, Leningrad (St Petersburg) 1936-67**Concert Palace, Dushanbe, 1984*

Fig. 3 Comparison between different building types of the same spacial layout.

angle, the kinship of the scheme appears in the concert hall in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), erected roughly two decades later under the direction of the same chief designer, Sergo Sutyagin. The basic functional layout and volumetric motifs (a rectilinear foyer paired with a central hall) were reprised but given a different expression. In Dushanbe the rotunda has a symmetrical circular plan, and the wall inclination can be linked to Tajikistan's seismic conditions. In both cases, anti-seismic measures were decisive; in Tashkent there was a deliberate rejection of the rope-and-cable roof experiments then pursued in the USSR in favour of a trussed roof better suited to local loads and offering greater stability¹². The structural system concentrated the principal load-bearing reinforcement in monolithic wall terminations, enabling more extensive prefabrication and simplification of element production.

The same logic of foregrounding and strongly articulating the principal volume recurs across numerous late-Soviet buildings of different functions; the Kyiv Palace of Culture of the Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute (1984) is a representative example. There, the auditorium is set on a hexagonal plan, and the elevations are clad with a monumental fresco. As in Tashkent, the emphatic separation of the performance function from the circulation/representational zone establishes a clear spatial hierarchy and a sculptural culmination to the composition.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The Panoramic Cinema in Tashkent is not an isolated realisation. It stands out for its lucid structural rationale and typological innovation. Its spatial disposition follows a widely disseminated scheme comprising a dominant

principal volume for the primary function (performance, congress, cinema, or theatre) and a separate, elongated rectilinear volume serving as vestibule. This arrangement provides a clear point of reference and a basis for comparative analysis with buildings of a similar programme. In this sense, the building belongs to the Soviet family of public edifices designated for mass entertainment, predicated on the contrast between a central main mass and a linear wing. Morphological analysis reveals a recurrent emphasis on the central volume, coupled with a pronounced separation of the performance zone from the circulation and reception zone.

Although widely diffused, the scheme was creatively reworked in Tashkent, where seismic requirements were integrated with the technological demands of panoramic projection, lending the ensemble a distinctly experimental cast and a visual idiom that echoes 1960s Soviet modernism. Among comparable buildings, the multifunctional hall is particularly striking: an oval volume calibrated to projection technology, acoustics, and spectator comfort. The Panoramic Cinema is therefore not a routine iteration of a known type but a purposeful reworking that situates the project at the hinge between standardized practice and invention in Soviet architecture.

More broadly, it shows how, alongside dominant typification in the USSR, singular and experimental works arose in response to complex programmatic and environmental demands. In this light, the Tashkent Panoramic Cinema vividly couples context-specific (above all seismic) solutions with the requirements of panoramic projection, offering a clear demonstration of how normative frameworks could generate original architectural outcomes.

¹ BORIS CHUKHOVICH, *Panoramic Cinema*, in Boris Chukhovich, Davide Del Curto, Ekaterina Golovatyuk (a cura di), *Tashkent Modernism XX/XXI*, Zürich, Lars Müller Publishers, 2025, pp. 425-441.

² *Ibidem*.

³ VASIL' BYKOV et alii, *Tipy kinoteatrov s universal'noi proektsiei* [Types of Cinemas with Universal Projection], «Arhitektura SSSR», vol. IX, 1959, pp. 24-35.

⁴ N. EROFEEVA et alii, *Problemy proektirovaniya massovykh zrelisnykh zdaniy* [Problems of designing mass entertainment buildings], «Arhitektura SSSR», vol. VII, 1972, pp. 18-22.

⁵ VASIL' BYKOV et alii, *Tipy kinoteatrov s universal'noi proektsiei* [Types of Cinemas with Universal Projection], «Arhitektura SSSR», vol. IX, 1959, pp. 24-35.

⁶ EKATERINA OKUNEVA, *Teatry* [Theaters], «Arhitektura SSSR», vol. VII, 1972, pp. 23-27.

⁷ I. CHIPIGA, *Tsirki* [Circuses], «Arhitektura SSSR» [Architecture of the USSR], vol. VII, 1972, pp. 28-29.

⁸ In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, by the matrix of design practices (*habitus*) I mean a historically formed, durable, and transposable system of dispositions. In architectural terms, this refers to the professional dispositions, norms, and design routines – shaped by education, design institutes, standards (SNiPs, typification), and user expectations – that steer how architects solve recurrent problems. In this article, the term designates the stabilising 'design matrix' of Soviet mass-entertainment buildings, understood both as a recurrent spatial script (foyer-hall sequence) and as a recognisable visual idiom (a monolithic auditorium volume paired with a glazed foyer). This matrix orders the plan and massing while still permitting variation in formal articulation, structure, and programme. See: PIERRE BOURDIEU, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1977; see also PIERRE BOURDIEU, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford, Stanford University Press 1990.

⁹ ANNA BRONOVITSKAYA et alii, *Moscow: A Guide to Soviet Modernist Architecture 1955-1991*, Moscow, Garage 2019.

¹⁰ ILIANA VEINBERGA, *The Architectress*, in Katharina Ritter, Ekaterina Shapiro-Obermair, Dietmar Steiner, Alexandra Wachter (a cura di), *Soviet Modernism 1955-1991: Unknown History*, Zürich, Park Books 2012, pp. 47-49.

¹¹ See more on structures for mass public facilities: P. FRANOV, *Stroitel'nye konstrukcii obšestvennykh zdaniy* [Building structures of public buildings], «Arhitektura SSSR», vol. VII, 1972, pp. 48-50.

¹² The structural system of the Concert Palace in Dushanbe remains unknown.