

Preserving the legacy of the Russian north in photographs

Historian uses architecture as a starting point for research and scholarship

Architectural historian William Brumfield has written a love letter to the Russian north.

Released in June after years of research and photography, Brumfield's new book "Architecture at the End of the Earth" presents the quickly fading architecture of this remote part of the world on its own terms.

"In some ways this is a continuation of a book I did 20 years ago, 'Lost Russia,'" Brumfield told RBTH recently. "But that book was more of an elegiac essay in black and white about the sort of aura of ruin, which is a very well-established tradition in Western art history. That's what 'Lost Russia' really was – a meditation on the beauty of these abandoned structures."

When "Lost Russia" was first published in 1995, Brumfield was still trying to fit Russia into the boxes that Western scholars called architecture and art history.

"It's well known that Western art historians aren't interested in Russian architecture with the exception of constructivism," said Brumfield. "It doesn't fall into any of the guidelines they've established for the progression of architecture."

Brumfield sees the need to carve a place for Russia in the architectural canon. For him, the distinctive character of Russian architecture is a starting point for historical research and scholarship.

"There are questions that need to be addressed here," he said, indicating the photographs of wooden churches in the book. "Questions that break stereotypes, that make cultures more interesting and richer than we assume."

Since his first trip to the Soviet Union in 1970, Brumfield has taken thousands of photographs of buildings and monuments across Russia, many of which – particularly in the north – now exist only in images.

"The traditional culture of the north is extremely compelling, but very, very tenuous," Brumfield said. "In a sense, you go to the north to get there and see what you can and record it, because the truth is that most of it is not going to be there."

"Architecture at the End of the Earth" tells the story of this culture clinging to its heritage while searching for a way forward. In photographs spanning nearly 30 years, Brumfield shows the changes the north has undergone since the fall of the Soviet Union. While depopulation has left some buildings in disrepair and ruin, the Russian Orthodox Church has reclaimed and restored others. With the support of the state, architectural preservationists have also cre-

HIS STORY



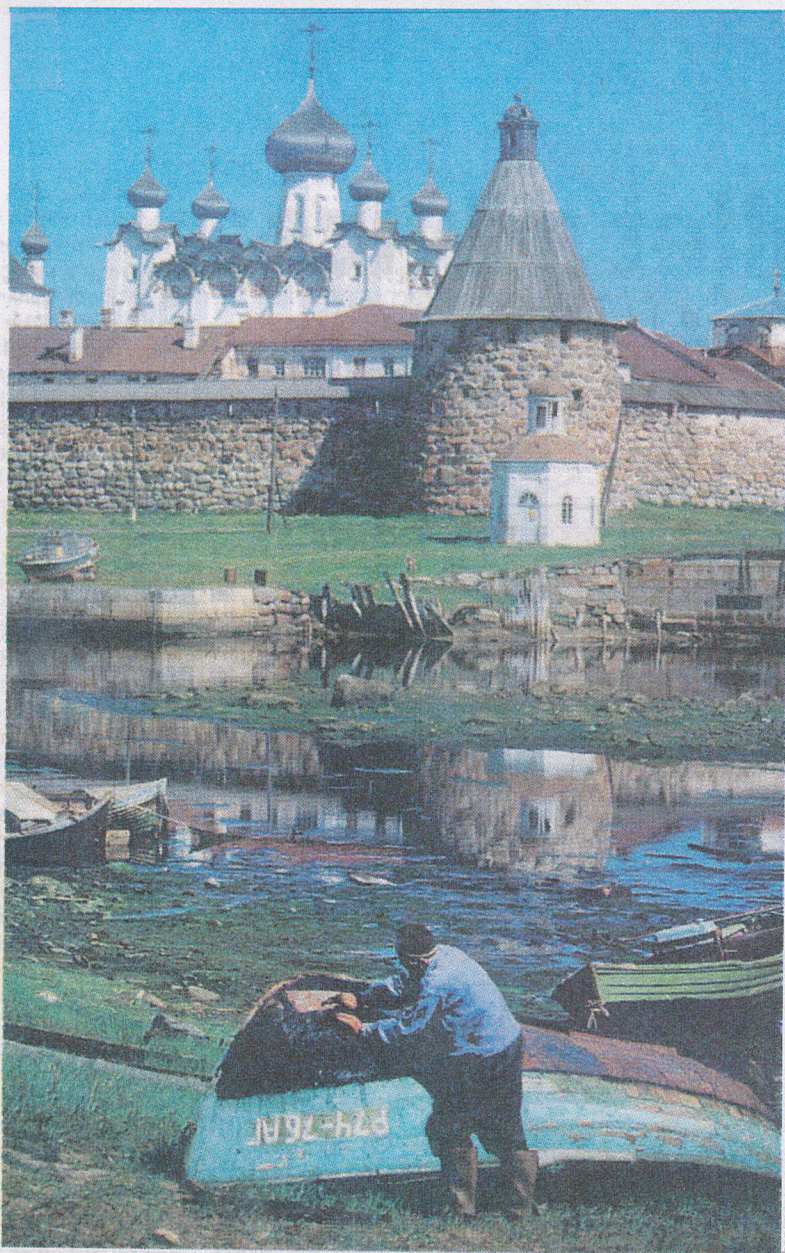
A native of Charlotte, N.C., William Brumfield took his first photographs of Russian architecture during a visit to the Soviet Union in 1970. Since that first trip, Brumfield has taken hundreds of thousands of pictures of Russia, documenting many structures throughout the Russian north that have since 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. He has taught at Tulane University since 1980.

IN HER OWN WORDS

Andrea Gibbs

CURATOR OF ARCHITECTURE AT THE IMAGES COLLECTIONS OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART LIBRARY

The Department of Image Collections of the National Gallery of Art Library is one of the largest image research libraries with almost 15 million images. William Brumfield's ongoing donation of over 67,500 photographs and digital images of Russian architecture is the largest gift from a private individual to this collection."



The culture of the Russian north is extremely compelling for Brumfield. He visited Solovetsky-Transfiguration Monastery twice in the late '90s.

ated open-air museums of architecture, re-locating buildings to one place to make them more accessible to tourists.

Although Brumfield did not photograph these staged architectural sites, he isn't opposed to the idea.

"The architecture parks were a noble way of preserving what could be preserved from a culture that economically and demographically was diminishing. It allows people to be exposed to their cultural past," Brumfield said.

For 30 years, Brumfield's work has enjoyed the support of two important Washington institutions: the National Gallery of Art and the Library of Congress.

"[Brumfield] leaves a lasting legacy at the Library of Congress, and has helped the Library and our patrons to better understand Russia and Russian culture," said John Van Oudenaren, director of Scholarly and Educational Programs at the Library of Congress.

According to Van Oudenaren, Brumfield has lent invaluable assistance to the Library of Congress by taking of thousands of photographs of Siberia and northern Russia for an online project called the Meeting of Frontiers, which makes connections between the American westward expansion and the Russian empire's expansion to the east. Additionally, he has researched and written descriptions of many Russian photographs on the World Digital Library.

"All in all, it's been a very substantial contribution," said Van Oudenaren.

Today, the Library of Congress maintains a physical archive of more than 1,100 of Brumfield's color slides of the Russian north and Siberia, preserving these images for future researchers who may continue his legacy of discovering distinct value in other cultures.

Early Russia in color, see it in D.C.

William Brumfield wrote the introduction to the Library of Congress's collection of photographs by early 20th-century Russian photographer Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky, who documented the Russian empire in color from 1909-1915.

Tsar Nicholas II enjoyed the color photos, and with his blessing, Prokudin-Gorsky received permission and funding to further document Russia in color. After the October Revolution, Prokudin-Gorsky was appointed to a new profession under the new regime, but he left Soviet Russia in August 1918. He died in Paris in 1944 at the age of 81. Most of his photographs now reside in the U.S. Library of Congress.



Spinning yarn. In the village of Izvedovo, near Suzdal, 1910.

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