

Architecture of Cossack fortresses in the Middle Volga in the 18th century

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Abstract. The urgency of the problem under investigation is determined by the ever increasing interest in architectural traditions of ethnical and sub-ethnical communities in various Russia's regions, including the Cossacks. The purpose of the paper is to reveal regularities in how Cossacks' early settlements emerged and their architectural development shaped itself in the Middle Volga. The methodology of the study is based on a comprehensive architectural historical analysis of the layouts and housing of early Cossack settlements in the region. The author analyzes a wide range of issues related to the architectural layout, composition and character of Cossack settlements in the 16th–18th centuries. The paper reveals an interesting stratum of regional heritage. It contains a description and analysis of little-known architectural monuments based on the author's field surveys of the remaining settlements. The work includes examination of comprehensive archival data from local and central archives, as well as rich graphical material. Based on the surveys and data analysis, the author identifies formation patterns and peculiarities of the architecture of the early Cossack settlements located in the region. The findings in this paper can provide a framework to further research in the area of town planning culture of the Cossacks in the Mid Volga regions.

1. Introduction

The urgency of the subject matter of the paper is determined by the fact that the role of Russia's regions has been on the increase; consequently, key findings and conclusion of studies under way may be critical for the work of preserving and reviving the historical environment of these settlements. The formation of historical consciousness is currently of great importance; interest in the role of regional traditional architectural and urban planning culture in modern life has been significantly increasing. The architectural and urban planning culture of the Russian Cossacks is a substantial part of the architecture and urban planning of the Russian State provinces. Urban planning and architecture is the least studied areas of artistic and historical culture of the Cossacks from the Volga region and entire Russia.

In order to reveal national features of architectural and town-planning culture of Russian Cossacks, without any doubt, means to first study local and regional versions of this culture. My methodology is



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based on comprehensive historical architectural analysis of the most typical Cossack settlements. The cornerstone method of the study is historical architectural analysis and wide archival research leading to generalization of data from documents, field data, ethnographic and historical materials. Relying on the “historical, memorial, cultural/ideological and aesthetic” aspects of the value of this architectural heritage, revealed by A.S. Shchenkov [26], the author of this paper proposes a paradigm facilitating analysis of such settlements.

No full-scale study of the architectural and town-planning culture of the Cossacks has been done so far. The beginning of research on Volga Cossacks culture was launched in late XIX – early XX c. In early XX c. a series of works appeared where, along with such issues as the history, organization and the then current state of the Cossack Army, some attention was paid to town development and architecture.

The best-investigated portion of the Cossack culture was that of the Caucasus and Kuban river communities. There is a fundamental work, in two volumes, titled “The history of the Cossack Army”, F.A. Shcherbina Typography, 1910 [27], where the development of these military units was studied in a great detail. However, even in this book only a paragraph was given to the issue of “a Cossack’s household”. In this respect, very typical is a monograph by A.I. Riegelmann “A History of or Narration about Don River Cossacks” [14] that came out in 1846. It is a key subject is how the Don River Cossack Army was initially formed and subsequently developed. The Volga River Cossacks fell out of its scope and consideration.

Russian historians occasionally touched upon the subject in conjunction with other ethnographic issues. This was, first and foremost, V.N. Vitevsky [4]. Exemplary was his work “Russian Orthodox Church Schism in the Urals Cossack Army and how it was perceived and reacted to by church, civil and military authorities in XVIII and XIX c.». In much more detail the issue was tackled by E.P. Savelyeva in her three-volume book “The Old history of Cossacks”, “The Medium History of Cossacks” and “The Don River Democratic Republic of Cossacks” [20]. Widely known are monographs by P.N. Bibik (“The Terek River Cossacks. Their history and revival” [1]), Yu.A. Trofimov (“The Terek River Cossacks: history, traditions, customs” [24]), V.O. Kluchevsky (“A history of social classes in Russia” [8]), L.N. Gumilev (“Ancient Russia and the Great Steppe” [6]), V.A. Potto (“Two centuries of the Terek River Cossacks” [13]), etc. However, the town-planning traditions and architectural history of Cossacks is not considered there at any length, except for sporadic day-to-day life sketches.

Somewhat closer to the subject declared herein are works by F.M. Starikov (“Historical and statistical essays on the Orenburg Cossack Army” [21]) and A.I. Krivoshchekov (“At the Orenburg defense line: essays on Cossaks’ past history” [9]). On the other hand, these authors touch upon the issues linked to town-planning and architectural traditions of Cossacks only indirectly since in the main focus of their consideration are folk art, rituals and customs.

Foreign scientists considered the history of the Cossacks. The French historian Charles Louis Lesur wrote in 1814 on the orders of Emperor Napoleon “The History of the Cossacks.” In this book, he examines some examples of Cossack customs. However, the Cossacks for Lesyur ethnographic concept, he considers the Cossacks isolated people. Despite the commonality of language and religion, it divides Russians and Cossacks, compares the life and manners of the Black Sea Cossacks with the customs of the Huns and Pechenegs [28].

In the book, L. J. Carr examines the stay of the Cossacks in France during the war of 1812. In the latest chapter, “Analysis of the various Russian peoples who today serve as Cossacks” the author distinguishes between Don and Ukrainian Cossacks, but he analyzes only their clothes, weapons and methods of warfare [29].

2. Methodological Framework

The cornerstone method of the study is historical architectural analysis and wide archival research leading to generalization of data from documents, field data, ethnographic and historical materials.

The systems approach implies relying on the methods of genetic history, architectural and town-development analyses (typological and stylistic). It is particularly important that such an approach allows considering many aspects of sub-ethnic, national and confessional peculiarities of historical settlements.

We have searched through and analyzed documents from central and regional archives, museums and cartography divisions of libraries. Among other materials, we have studied extensively on cartography sources dating back to XVIII and XIX cc.: provincial maps, maps of defensive border lines and fortresses; county/district maps of fortified settlements and Cossack villages. We also did a comprehensive analysis of building plans, façade layouts and photos of most typical structures, including those inexistent by now. Multiple published sources – books by foreign and Russian geographers, travelers' memoirs and accounts from medieval ages, XVIII and XIX cc., subject collections and periodicals – have been considered and analyzed.

3. Results

The first Cossacks who appeared on the territory of the Middle Volga and adjacent lands in the middle of the 15th century were not soldiers of the regular army but 'free' people involved in robbery. Those freemen formed an independent Cossack community, the largest center of which was located near the Zhiguli Mountains.

At that time, merchant convoys were moving through the Middle Volga to the Don River or the Yaik River (former name of the Ural) and sailing along the Volga. The Middle Volga Cossack freemen were most active at the end of the 16th century. Central (Moscow) authorities tried to get these Cossacks involved into transportation along the Volga, but all these attempts were unsuccessful (Fig. 1).

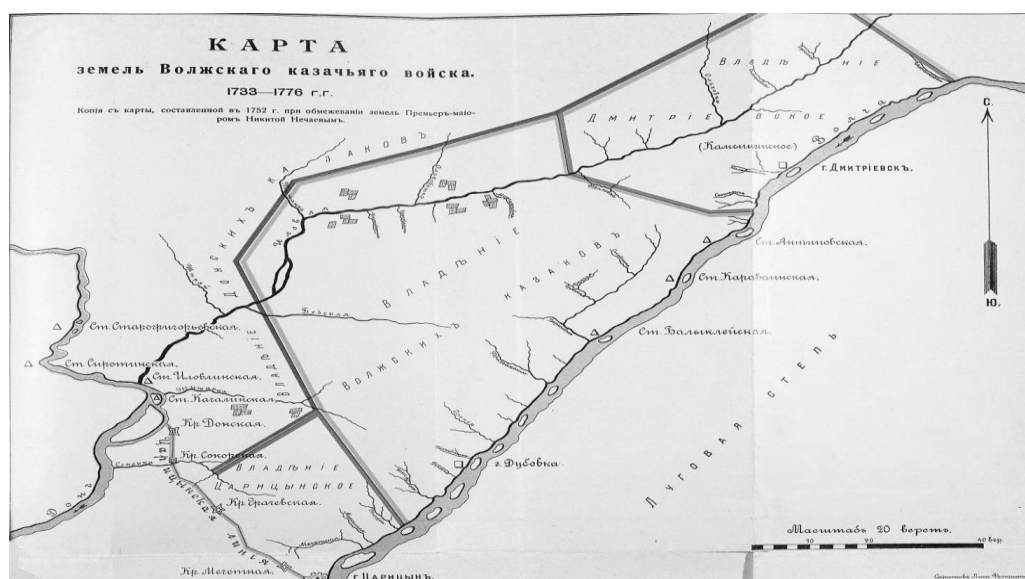


Figure 1. Map of lands accommodating the Volga Cossack Host in 1733–1776

In the middle of the 16th century, a part of the Cossacks remained at their original location (Figure 1). Some of them returned to the Don; others migrated east to the river Yaik. A significant number of the Cossacks (more than 7000) stayed near the headquarters of the chieftain (Russian *ataman*) Yermak (the modern village of Yermakovo in the Zhiguli Mountains in Samara Oblast) [18].

Thus, it was the beginning of the Cossack freemen community on the territory of Orenburg. In the 18th century, P.I. Rychkov spent much time travelling in the Southern Urals and studying the history of the region. 'In those old days <...> there was a man hailed from the Don Cossacks, of the name Vasily

Gugnya; this man, having taken around thirty people out of the local Cossacks as partners <...> went away from the Don on business or, more to say, for theft' [19]. That is how P.I. Rychkov describes the emergence of free Yaik Cossacks. A group of Cossacks-robbers took cover in the reeds on the Caspian Sea and headed for the Yaik River and set up a camp there.



Figure 2. Cossack village of the 18th century

The settlements of free Cossacks were mainly of two types: *gorodok* — town for permanent residence and *zimovka* (*zimovye*, *zimovishche*) — winter camp, settlement that was used only in winter. As noted by M.N. Kharuzin, '*zimovishcha* were just winter shelters abandoned in early spring for militant raids' [20].

The Cossack towns *gorodki* of the 16th–17th centuries were well-protected settlements with randomly arranged huts within wooden and earthen fortifications. They evidently served military purposes. As a rule, in the center of a town, there was a square for the council gatherings (*Kazachiy krug*) and a church (Figure 2).

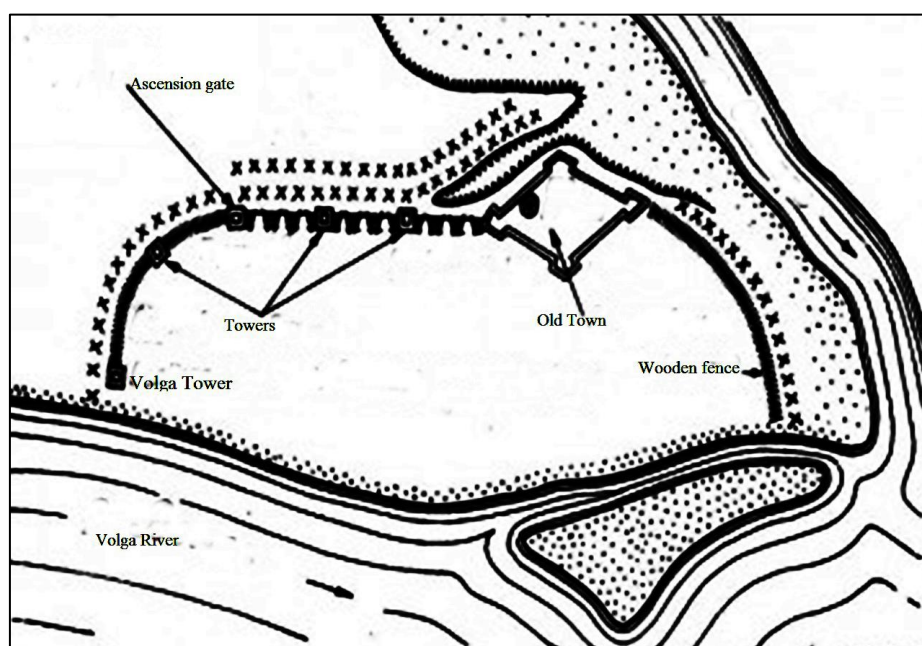


Figure 3. Layout of Samara fortress, the 17th century

Another important type of military settlements of the period under review was Russian fortresses, where Cossacks of different nationalities eventually started to serve. The policy of building fortified lines at the borders appeared in Russia in the 15th century, when the first *zasechnaya liniya* — line of defense (abatis) — was constructed and included the settlements of Tula, Kozelsk, and others. However the last quarter of the 16th century, it evolved into a long Belgorod line of defense and went far to the south.

In 1586, a fortress was built in the mouth of the Samara River; it was named after the river (Figure 3). The fortress was necessary to defend against the attacks of nomads and to control trade. The important task of the military post was to combat the Volga Cossack freemen. Nevertheless, in 1630, the Volga Cossacks began to cooperate with the Russian fortresses against the nomadic Kalmyks.

Over time, the Cossacks decided to legalize their status and become law-abiding subjects of Russia again. Thus, the territory of the Yaik River Basin was developed by the Russian people. The Yaik Cossack Host as a combat unit was established in 1591. Despite the fact that the Cossack free settlements of the Middle Volga were the earliest in the region, the Volga (Russian *Volgskoe*, or *Volzhskoe*) Cossack army was officially recognized only in 1734.

A new stage in the development of the region began in the second half of the 18th century. In 1739, they started construction of the Sakmarsk line of fortresses. It included fortress (Sakmarsk, Bekkuva, Prechistenskaya, Vozdvizhenskaya) and redoubts (Nikitinskiy, Zheltyt). Following the foundation of a new foothold in Orenburg, the Samara line (range) was built in 1736. It included the fortresses of Samara, Alekseevsk, Village of service-class Tatars, Krasnosamarskaya, Borskaya, Olshanskaya, Buzulukskaya; Pogromnyy redoubt, Totetskaya, Sorochinskaya, Novosergievskaya, Perevolotskaya fortresses, as well as Poltavskiy and the Holy Cross redoubts between them.

The most important task of the Orenburg army at that time was the protection of boundaries against the Kazakh (Kirghiz-Kaisak) warriors, which required strengthening of the army. In order to construct fortified lines in spring 1768, two ‘physical’ expeditions were formed: to Orenburg and Astrakhan. The first one consisted of three groups headed by Academicians P.S. Pallas and I.I. Lepyokhin and Professor J.P. Falk, under the general superintendence of P.S. Pallas.

The Orenburg line included the fortresses Orenburg, Krasnogorskaya, Verkhneozernaya, Ilyinskaya, Guberninskaya, and redoubts Nezhinskiy, Vyazovoy, Volodimerskiy, Gilyarskiy, Nikolskiy, Podgornyy, Razboinyy.

The Upper Yaik line consisted of fortresses Orskaya, Tanalytskaya, Urtazymyskaya, Kizilskaya, Magnitnaya, Verkhneyaitskaya, and redoubts Kalpatskiy, Teraklinskiy, Berezovskiy, Urtazymskiy, Gyaznushenskiy, Syrtenskiy, Yangelskiy, Spasskiy, Verkhne-Kizilskiy [21].

A fortress was also found on a place of the former Cossack freemen; it was called Yaitskiy gorodok. This is a rare example of a fortress that was situated outside fortified lines. The settlement was subsequently moved a little. The Yaik River was renamed as Ural, and the city as Uralsk [22].

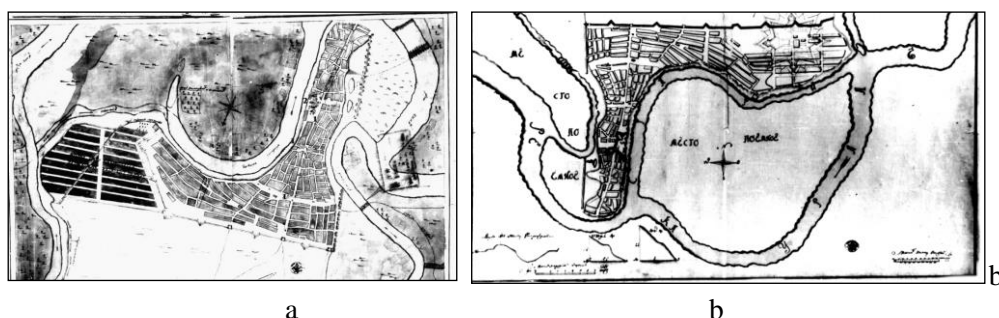


Figure 4. Layout of Yaitskiy town: a – at the beginning of the 18th century; b – in 1776

The fortifications of this period didn't survive, but chronicles and some drawings or engravings let us assume that in general they replicated constructions of the same type located in European Russia,

because they were built by Russian back-settlers. The towers were rectangular, topped by a gabled hip roof. Inside the towers there were usually two ‘bridges’— log floors for the fighters of ‘lower’ and ‘upper’ bout.

The planning of Yaitskiy gorodok at the beginning of the 18th century is an example of a settlement of irregular shape and irregular layout [22]. This irregularity was determined by the unusual configuration of the bed of the Yaik river, on the banks of which the town was situated. *Selitba* — residential districts — was located between the curving arms of the river and enclosed by the fortifications (Figure 4a).

Two large residential areas were separated by a wide street and followed the riverbed direction. In general, the settlement was significantly stretched along the river. In one of the areas, there is a clearly visible longitudinal axis — a broad street, which goes to a large square in the center. The opposite side of this square from the broad street faces the river. The irregularly shaped residential blocks and a complex combination of the riverbed and channels formed the picturesque layout of the town.



Figure 5. Map of Uralsk at beginning of the 19th century

The map of 1776 shows that Yaitskiy gorodok grown slightly to the East. Its fortifications surrounded a larger area at that time. New blocks replaced the gardens of the previous plan (Figure 4b).

The map of Uralsk made at the beginning of the 19th century (Figure 5) shows that by 1822, the size of the town had significantly increased [23]. The authors of this map tried to make the town streets look regular. The vertical axis, the street with the church square we have already seen on the previous maps, extends through the whole town. An incipient horizontal axis also goes through all the *selitba*. The districts and blocks have become rectangular. Nevertheless, the picturesqueness of the land makes the layout interesting. The connecting arms of the river serve as a natural barrier for possible enemies, so the town needs fortifications only on the north side.

The map of 1869 represents Uralsk and its suburbs as a large regular city without any fortifications. The city's rectangular layout is clearly distinguishable. The districts consist of several sectors of similar form and size (Figure 6).

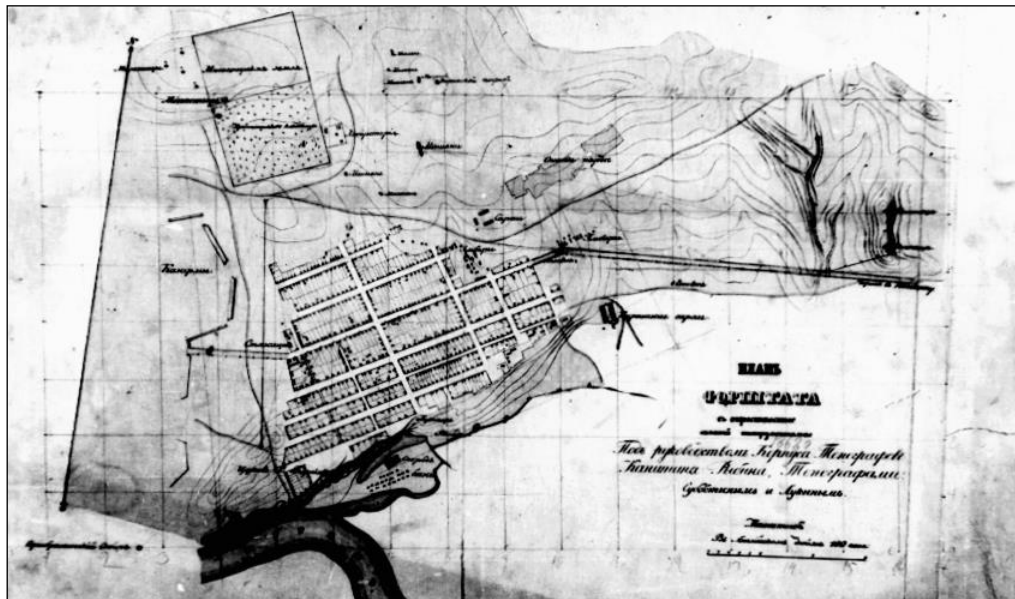


Figure 6. Map of Uralsk in 1869

In most cases, such a sector is a Cossacks house — *kuren*. A Cossack *kuren* was both a residential place and a fortification. It was two-storied, though in the Middle Volga region, the ground floor was very low. The ground floor was intended for household purposes, while the first floor was designed for sleeping, cooking, having meals, meeting guests, etc. and had a front porch. A significant part of these unique Cossack houses is still preserved in today's Uralsk, at the confluence of the Ural and the Chagan rivers. Besides *kurens*, this territory still has a typical Cossack Orthodox cathedral — the Cathedral of the Archangel Michael, which was built in 1750 in the classical style with decorative elements of the ancient Russian architecture. The cathedral is large enough; its size was determined by the size of the square for council gatherings (*Kazachiy krug*).

At the end of the 19th century, Uralsk had 15 churches, 4 mosques and several houses of worship of the Old Believers.

Broadly, in the territory of Mid Volga we can identify two main stages of Cossack settlement development. First was XVI – XVII cc. when most of the villages were simply winter camps or strongly fortified villages of the so-called free Cossacks, and XVIII c. when a solid line of defense lines and Cossack fortresses was being formed on a large scale.

In the aspect of historical development, the process of formation of architectural and town-planning heritage of Cossacks may be represented as a series of an artificial environment's distinct states. Key parameters of each of the stages are determined by the actual historical situation that is in its turn subject to a range of factors (climatic, cultural, economic and political).

4. Discussion

Altogether, up till now, no comprehensive studies on architecture and town development traditions of the Cossacks in the Mid Volga have been put on the table. In a fragmentary fashion, this issue has been tackled in the works written by architects such as G.V.Yesaulov, [7], N.N.Velikaya [2], A.G.Lazareva [11], S.D.Sulimenko [22], S.O.Terekhina [23], and others.

Currently, foreign scientists are doing research on the history of the Cossacks. A typical example is "Qazaqlıq, Or Ambitious Brigandage, and the Formation of the Qazaqs: State and Identity in Post-Mongol Central Eurasia" by Ju Li. In this work there is a section "History of Crimean, Kasim and Volga Tatars." However, the author attributes the Cossacks to the Turkic-Mongolian peoples of Central Asia and confuses with Kipchak.

In recent decades, we have witnessed a revival of Cossacks. On the other hand, the *status quo* of this movement cannot be regarded as definitely settled. In many a document, for instance in “The Concept of public policy on the Cossacks in the Volgograd Region” (2011), the Cossacks are termed ‘an ethnic group’. In other documents they are called ‘cultural-ethnic community’, ‘social-ethnic community’, ‘class’.

In this connection, new studies have been showing up. Individual contributions to this issue were made by A.V.Venkov (“Veshenka Village Uprising” [3]), A.A.Gordeev (“A history of Cossacks” [5]), S.A.Kozlov (“The Caucasus in the history of the Cossacks” [10]), O.V. Matveev (“A Historical account of the Kuban River Cossacks’ worldview: social aspects of warrior mentality” [12], etc. All these works, to a large degree, deal with the history of Cossacks, while their architectural and town development culture and traditions are considered there only in fragments.

Concurrently with the revival of the Cossack movement and due to it, an abundance of amateurish and politicized publications on the subject are coming out.

All the works considered here focus on Cossack settlements in various regions of Russia except for the Mid Volga and the South Urals. The villages are analyzed from the perspective of their development history or the state and condition of individual monuments in this or that historical period. The problem of revealing the patterns and tendencies of how the architecture of early Cossack settlements formed itself and what its peculiarities are is, alas, not becoming the object of contemplation or analysis.

5. Conclusion

Thus, by the early 19th century, in the Middle Volga and adjacent territories, there had been an established settlement system, an important part of which was the fortified lines of the Cossack fortresses. There were redoubts — the smaller fortifications — between the fortresses of all lines. The most significant element in the fortress-settlement composition was the fortress itself. Surpassing the residential areas in size and expressiveness, fortresses successfully fitted into the surrounding landscapes and made a strong artistic impression on their contemporaries.

6. Recommendation

Currently, we are witnessing a revival of cultural traditions of ethnic and sub-ethnic populations in various Russia’s regions. This process manifests itself in restoration and reconstruction of individual settlements. At the same time, we observe a steady rise in the public interest towards town development and architecture as components of cultural and spiritual heritage. The practical value of this study is that it allows: carrying out comprehensive and systematic restoration and reconstruction of former Cossack settlements relying on newly revealed knowledge; better fitting new buildings in the historical and architectural environment, not spoiling at this the individuality of a town of a city.

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