KHARKOV AS A CAPITAL OF SOVIET-UKRAINIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM

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It is well-known in architectural historiography, that constructivism was born in Soviet Russia or, more exactly, in post-revolutionary Moscow, as a professional reaction on new political, social and cultural changes both in that country and in the whole west world. Vladimir Tatlin [Pevsner 1992] was that young man who detonated this modern ideology with his famous Project of a Monument to the Third International (1919–1920). Many other artists and architects, representatives of a new generation followed him. There have been established if not harmony then at least creative coherence between Soviet and European modern architects during the 1920-ies.

But it is also well known, that soviet constructivists of 1920-ies should often work, so to say, for the waste-paper-basket only. There were a few realizations in large cities and almost nothing in small and middle ones, in the Ukraine too. Nevertheless there is one city, which can be named as a real, not virtual, center of Soviet-Ukrainian constructivism. The name of the city is Kharkov, one of the major industrial, commercial, scientific and cultural centers of Ukraine. Unfortunately its constructivist's heritage is still almost unknown. Some authors many times stated existence of "Kharkov's constructivism" but simultaneously they are writing about a luck attention to that phenomenon [Буряк and Крейзер 2000].

The city was founded in the 1650-ies on the high bank of the small river named Kharkov. Initially a wooden fortress was built here and in a few years later a civil township has been placed around that military position. Until 1917 its population reached the number 382,000. The old wooden fortress was already fully demolished and replaced by new buildings from brick and stone.

Since Bolsheviks' Revolution of 1917 and till 1934 the city was determined a capital of Soviet Ukraine, i.e. of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) as a part of Soviet Union [Харьков... 1987]. No wonder the population

in Kharkov grew further up to 850,000 residents in 1934, i.e. almost tripling in 17 years [Лейбфрейд and Полякова 2004]. But in the same 1934 all the bodies of republic power were transferred from Kharkov to Kyiv again – to the Old-Russian capital in the pre-mogul's times (from 10-th till 13-th century). Official justification of such transferring was connected with political maneuvers of Kremlin [Субтельний 1992].

In that short time, Kharkov as a capital of Soviet Ukraine became one of the biggest socialist industry centers (probably the third-ranged in the whole USSR after Moscow and Leningrad). There were especially developed large-scale branches (mechanical and power engineering, transport, etc.), as well as scientific research institutes of all-union importance too. There should be mentioned also significant and often successful attempts in Kharkov at these years to revitalize the Ukrainian culture life and, in other words, to return national identity of this Ukrainian historical region, named Slobozhanshchyna, lost almost fully in 19th century

It is to be emphasized that just constructivism was that architectural ideology which was dominating there in 1920-ies and early 1930-ies. Obviously, the leading representatives and authors of that ideology lived and worked in Moscow and Leningrad and many of them participated both in architectural competitions and in real works for the Ukrainian Capital. Among them were brothers Vesnin', K. Mel'nikov, A. Byalogrud, I. Fomin, A. Shchusev, V. Shchuko a.o.

Second half of the metropolitan period in Kharkov's history was very successful for new construction activities. Capital of Soviet Ukraine really needed a lot of office buildings for governmental services and their numerous departments. The quantity of former offices was insufficient for that purpose, so some big rent-houses were turned into offices as well as all the palaces and residences of former aristocracy. But new capital demanded also new buildings and a new architecture too.

As early as 1922 it was decided to expand Kharkov's territory for new construction. The main additions were made in northern suburbs on the lands once owned but never used by Kharkov University. Here, according to the project which won a competition, it was foreseen to lay out a big round place and to surround it with many residential blocks. As it seems to me it was the decision not without influences of Garden-City-plans by Ebenezer Howard. By the way, such similar plan was also realized to the Dizenhoff Circle in Tel Aviv 1930 [Smith 1998].

But initial intentions have been shortly changed. Instead of housing blocks the construction of new administrative center around that circle have been started 1925 (fig. 1). So a large round square with diameter 300 m appeared and it was named after ChK-chef F. Dzerzhinsky who died in 1926 (now Freedom Square). Soon an orthogonal part with dimensions 430 m \times 115 m was added to the circle eastwards. Thus it was be formed the biggest square in Europe occupying the territory of 29.5 acres (c. 11.9 ha).

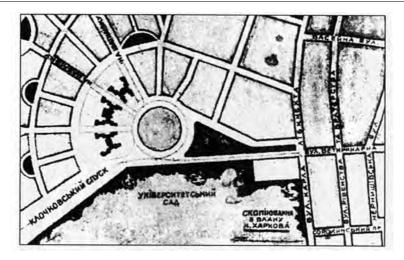
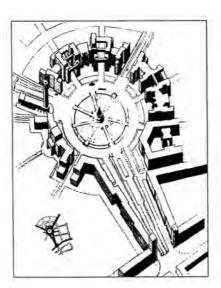


Fig. 1. First plan of Dzerzhinsky Square with Gosprom location in the northern suburb of old Kharkov. 1925. After: Андрущенко М. Боротьба творчих методів і авторських концепцій при формуванні центральної площі Харкова // Архітектурна спадщина України. – Вип. 5. – Київ, 2002. – Рис.14

Ryc. 1. Pierwszy plan placu Dzierżyńskiego z lokalizacją gospromu w północnym przedmieściu starego Charkowa. za: Андрущенко М. Боротьба творчих методів і авторських концепцій при формуванні центральної площі Харкова // Архітектурна спадщина України. – Вип. 5. – Київ, 2002. – Рис. 14



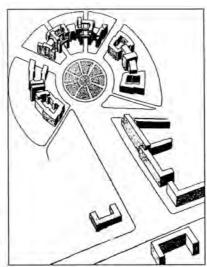


Fig. 2. Dzerzhinsky square composition: a-as it was projected by architect V. Trotsenko 1929; b-its contemporary lay-out. After: Андрущенко М. Боротьба творчих методів і авторських концепцій при формуванні центральної площі Харкова // Архітектурна спадщина України. — Вип.5. — Київ, 2002. — Рис.15, 16

Ryc. 2. Kompozycja placu Dzierżyńskiego, a – zaprojektowana przez V. Trotsenko w 1929, b – jego współczesny plan. Za: Андрущенко М. Боротьба творчих методів і авторських концепцій при формуванні центральної площі Харкова // Архітектурна спадщина України. – Вип. 5. – Київ, 2002. – Рис. 15, 16



Fig. 3. The Gosprom project which has won by the All-Union competition 1925. Architects S. Seraphimov, M. Felger, S. Kravets. After: Андрущенко М. Боротьба творчих методів і авторських концепцій при формуванні центральної площі Харкова // Архітектурна спадщина України. — Вип. 5. — Київ, 2002. — Рис. 1

Ryc. 3. Projekt Gospromu, który wygrał konkurs w 1925. Architekci: S. Seraphimov, M. Felger, S. Kravets. Za: Андрущенко М. Боротьба творчих методів і авторських концепцій при формуванні центральної площі Харкова // Архітектурна спадщина України. — Вип. 5. — Київ, 2002. — Рис. 1

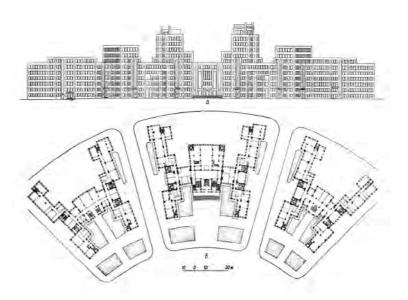


Fig. 4. The Gosprom. Façade onto square and plan. Architects S.Seraphimov, M. Felger, S. Kravets. After: Нариси історії архітектури Української РСР (радянський період)ю – К.: Держбудвидав УРСР, 1952. – Табл. 16

Ryc. 4. Gosprom. Fasada w kierunku placu i plan. Architekci: S. Seraphimov, M. Felger, S. Kravets. Za: Нариси історії архітектури Української РСР (радянський період)ю – К.: Держбудвидав УРСР, 1952. – Табл. 16

Such enormous dimensions have been caused by different reasons. From one side, there were no limits for planners and architects because the land has been already nationalized. From other side it is undoubtedly too, that important role in decision-making belonged to revolutionary pathos, which vivified and provoked project-makers on the hyper-visions (fig. 2). As architectural paradigm for demonstration of such pathos there was elected rigorous large-scaled constructivism as the most proper for that post-revolutionary mood resulted in slogan "new life demands new forms for itself". Undoubtedly, it was simultaneously caused by the all-penetrating Zeitgeist of Modernity born still before WWI.

During the time from 1925 till 1928 there was erected the first majestic building with 14-storeys central part on the Dzerzhinsky Square (fig. 3, 4, 5). This unordinary composed building housed dozens of government offices, mainly the administrations of nationalized as well of newly-built state-owned industrial enterprises. Thenceforth this building became the name Gosprom, (i.e. Russian abbreviation for the State Industries Hall). It was the first and the highest one of such type in the whole USSR at that time. Its grandeur must symbolize for all people the grandeur of the socialist construction program [Седак et al. 1987].



Fig. 5. The Gosprom. 1925–1928. Architects S. Seraphimov, M. Felger, S. Kravets. Photo from 1st half of 1950-ies. After: Архітектура Радянської України за 40 років. – Київ, 1957. – il. 42

Ryc. 5. Gosprom, 1925–1928. Architekci: S. Seraphimov, M. Felger, S. Kravets. Zdjęcie z pierwszej połowy lat 50. Za: Архітектура Радянської України за 40 років. – Київ, 1957. – il. 42

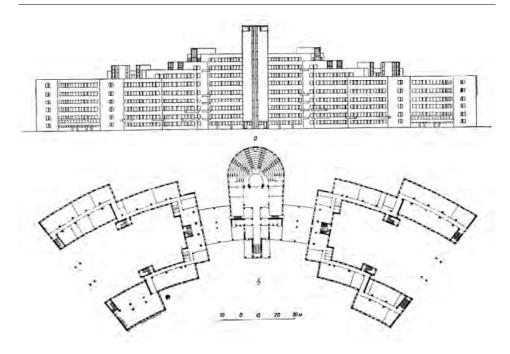


Fig. 6. The House of Designing. Façade onto square and plan. Architects S. Seraphimov and M. Serafimova-Sandberg, 1932. After: Нариси історії архітектури Української РСР (радянський період).

– К.: Держбудвидав УРСР, 1952. – Табл. 17

Ryc. 6. Dom projektowania. Elweacja od strony placu I plan. Architekci: S. Seraphimov i M. Serafimova-Sandberg, 1932. Za: Нариси історії архітектури Української РСР (радянський період).

— К.: Держбудвидав УРСР, 1952. — il. 17



Fig. 7. The House of Designing. Architects S. Seraphimov and M. Serafimova-Sandberg, 1932. Pre-war photo after: Історія українського мистецтва. – Т. 5. – К.: Мистецтво, 1967. – Іл. 46

Ryc. 7. Dom projektowania. Architekci: S. Seraphimov i M. Serafimova-Sandberg, 1932. Przedwojenna fotografia za: Історія українського мистецтва. – Т. 5. – К.: Мистецтво, 1967. – II. 46

The second grand building on the Square was the House of Designing, located on the southern square side (fig. 6, 7). The architectural image of this symmetrically composed object was logically passed to the Gosprom, so between these buildings appeared evident stylistic alliance. Not to forget: architect S. Seraphimov was author of both. The building was badly damaged during WW II and later rebuilt in the spirit of Stalinist's architecture. It is now occupied by the Kharkov State University.

The third imposing object on the Square was the House of Cooperation, named firstly as "Sotzselkhoz" in accordance with its agricultural destination. It should be erected on the northern side of the square. Project of the House was elaborated by architect from Leningrad A. Dmitriyev and its construction started already 1929. Next year the same architect has made a new version with overbuilding two floors. We know this one due to publication in a periodical (fig. 8). Unfortunately the construction was stopped 1934 and completed after WW II for needs of the Military Academy. Of course, the building, reconstructed at that time, has today nothing common with constructivism and mirrors the Stalin's epoch very brightly.

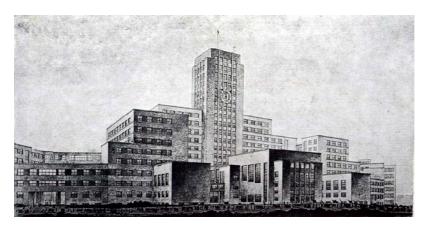


Fig. 8. The House of Cooperation "Sotzselkhoz". Proiect with overbuilding 2 floors.

Architect A. Dmitriyev. 1930

Ryc. 8. Dom współpracy "Sotzselkhoz". Projekt nadbudowy dwóch pięter. Architekt A. Dmitriyev. 1930

Until the middle of 1930-ies, the Dzerzhinsky Square was surrounded by other public buildings too. Thus its composition became more complicated. On the orthogonal square part in opposite to the House of Designing was built the big hotel "International" (architect G. Janovitski, now with name "Kharkov"). It was awarded with Gold Medal in Paris on the World Exhibition 1937. On east square side appeared the Building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of the Ukraine (architect Ya. Steinberg, 1932), that was a result of reconstruction of two older buildings. Both the hotel and the Party's

office manifested the same constructivist's style and, together with former realizations on the Freedom Square, they all have accomplished this monumental urban and architectural formation.



Fig. 9. Settlement "New Kharkov" for the workers of the Tractor Plant. Perspective. Arch. P. Aleshin a.o. 1927–1931. After: Історія української архітектури. – К., 2003. – С. 405

Ryc. 9. Osiedle "Nowy Charków" dla pracowników Fabryki Traktorów. Perspektywa. Arch. P. Aleshin a.o. 1927–1931. Za: Історія української архітектури. – К., 2003. – С. 405



Fig. 10. Post-Office Building on the Railway-Station Square. Arch. A. Mordvinov. 1927-1929. Аfter: Архітектура Радянської України за 40 років. – Київ, 1957. – il. 56

Ryc. 10. Budynek poczty na Placu Dworcowym. Za: A. Mordvinov. 1927–1929. After: Архітектура Радянської України за 40 років. – Київ, 1957. – il. 56

It is very pity but only one building from former five ones on the Freedom Square has preserved its previous constructivist's style (Gosprom). The Stalinist's time has leaved its strong mark by other four.

Naturally, constructivism has left in Kharkov many other interesting objects. A part of them was connected with the socialist town-planning policy. The project of a settlement "New Kharkov" for the workers of the Tractor Plant could be mentioned as an example of socialist housing program (architect P. Aleshin a.o., 1927–1931) (fig. 9). Its authors have made an attempt to supply a new settlement with all spatial units for living and recreation, i.e. with apartments, shops, kindergarten and school, club and so on. It was planed but not realized the idea of spatial connection of all functions by means of warm pedestrian passes. Other similar settlements were also planned at the marginalia of the city.

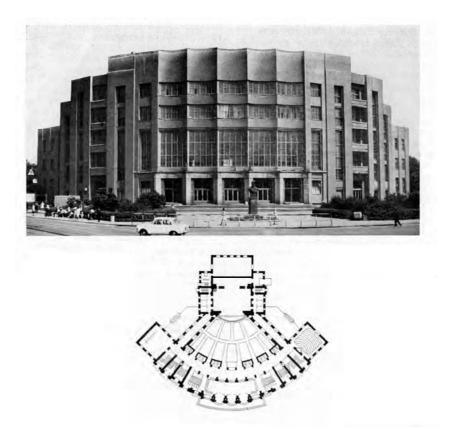
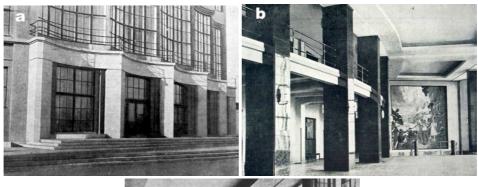


Fig. 11. Palace of Culture for Railway-Workers (previously Stalin Palace of Workers) Arch. A.Dmitriev; 1928–1932; After: Ежегодник Общества Архитекторов-Художников. – Вып. XIV. – Ленинград, 1935. – С. 56

Ryc. 11. Pałac Kultury dla Pracowników Poczty (dawniej Robotniczy Pałac Stalina). Arch. A. Dmitriev; 1928–1932; Za: Ежегодник Общества Архитекторов-Художников. – Вып. XIV. – Ленинград, 1935. – С. 56

Of course Kharkov's constructivism was not limited with the buildings on the Freedom Square. During capital decennium there were erected hundreds of residential, public and industrial buildings in different places of the city in this style. It should be mentioned among them the next significant ones: the Post Office on the Railway-Station Square (architect A. Mordvinov, 1927–1929) (fig. 10), the Palace of Culture for Railway-Workers (previously Stalin Palace of Workers, architect A. Dmitriev, 1928–1932) (fig. 11, 12), the Hostel "Gigant" for students of Kharkov Polytechnic Institute (architects A. Molokin, G. Ikonnikov, 1928–1929) (fig. 13), the various apartment blocks (fig. 14–17), the Building of the Automatic Telephon Station in Ivanov Street (anonymous architect, 1932) (fig. 18) a. o.



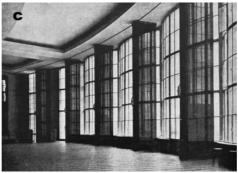


Fig. 12. Palace of Culture for Railway-Worker. Fragments of entrance (a) and interiors (b, c); After: Ежегодник Общества Архитекторов-Художников. – Вып. XIV. – Ленинград, 1935. – С. 57–59

Ryc. 12. Pałac Kultury dla Pracowników Kolei. Fragmenty wejścia (a) i wnętrza (b, c). Za: Ежегодник Общества Архитекторов-Художников. – Вып. XIV. – Ленинград, 1935. – С. 57–59

An important place in the history of Kharkov's constructivism belongs to the international architectural competition on the Mass Musical Actions Theater with 4,000 seats, which has drawn in 145 competitioners from 12 countries. The project of Alexander Vesnin with participation of both his brothers Victor and Leonid has won the first prize, but it never came to realization (fig. 19). Nevertheless, its brilliant pure forms and organic functional and spatial connections

between scene and auditorium, placed under a large reinforced concrete dome, added one more portion of constructivist's fame to the city.

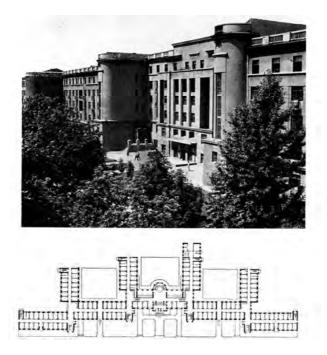


Fig. 13. Hostel "Gigant" for students of Kharkov Polytechnical Institute. Arch. A. Molokin, G. Ikonnikov. 1928–1929; After: Архитектура Советской Украины. – М., 1987. – С. 76

Ryc. 13. Akademik "Gigant" dla studentów Charkowskiego Instytutu Politechniki. Arch. A. Molokin, G. Ikonnikov. 1928–1929; After: Архитектура Советской Украины. – М., 1987. – С. 76



Fig. 14. Appartment block in the Pushkinskaya Street, 40. Arch. N. Plekhov, A. Tatsij, F. Postnikov. 1931; After: Архітектор Олекса Тацій: Бібліографічний покажчик. – К., 2003. – с. 14–15

Ryc. 14. Blok mieszklany przy ul. Puszkina 40. Arch. N. Plekhov, A. Tatsij, F. Postnikov. 1931; Za: Архітектор Олекса Тацій: Бібліографічний покажчик. – К., 2003. – с. 14–15



Fig. 15. Apartment block in the Pushkinskaya Street, 54. Arch. G. Yanovitski, 1932; After: Архитектура Советской Украины. — М., 1987. — С. 78

Ryc. 15. Blok mieszklany przy ul. Puszkina 54. Arch. G. Yanovitski, 1932; Za: Архитектура Советской Украины. – М., 1987. – С. 78



Fig. 16. Apartment block in the Chernyshevsky Street, 96. Arch. B.Dobrotvorski a.o., 1931; After: Архитектура Советской Украины. – М., 1987. – С. 78

Ryc. 16. Blok mieszklany przy ul. Czernyszewskiej 96, Arch. B. Dobrotvorski a.o., 1931; Za: Архитектура Советской Украины. – М., 1987. – С. 78

Really, it was just the feature of metropolitan Kharkov like no other city in USSR that there were built hundreds various objects in constructivist's style in a short term. Some of them, such as Gosprom, became world-known. Many other buildings, especially apartment's blocks, belong now to the architectural background in the city-image. They all together create for Kharkov a unique architectural environment, where the old historical styles from 18th and 19th centuries are closely fused with the new one under name constructivism.



Fig. 17. Apartment block in the Sumskaya Street, 71. Arch. V. Kostenko a.o. 1929; After: Архитектура Советской Украины. – М., 1987. – С. 77

Ryc. 17. Blok mieszkalny na ul. Sumskiej 71. Arch. V. Kostenko a.o. 1929. Za: Архитектура Советской Украины. – М., 1987. – С. 77



Fig. 18. Building of the Automatic Telephon Exchange in Ivanov Street (anonymous architect, 1932); Pre-war photo after: Історія українського мистецтва. – Т.5. – К.: Мистецтво, 1967. – Іл. 57

Ryc. 18. Budynek Automatycznych Rozmów telefonicznych przy ul. Iwanowskiej (architekt nieznany, 1932); fotografia przedwojenna za: Історія українського мистецтва. – Т. 5. – К.: Мистецтво, 1967. – Іл. 57



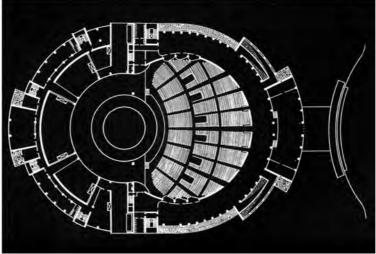


Fig. 19. Competition project for the Mass Musical Action Theatre. Architects Vesnin brothers. 1930: а – perspective, b – plan. After: Мастера советской архитектуры об архитектуре. Т.2. – М.: Искусство, 1975. – ил. 18–19

Ryc. 19. Projekt konkursowy na Masowy Teatr Muzyczny. Architekci bracia Wiesninowie. 1930, а – perspektywa, b – plan. Za: Мастера советской архитектуры об архитектуре. Т. 2. – М.: Искусство, 1975. – ил. 18–19

There is one interesting feature of constructivist's experience in Kharkov to mention. Sometimes in realized projects we can't find clear borders between constructivism as a modern morphology and previous historical styles. So we can observe interrelations between constructivists' forms and former architectural heritage. Thus, for example, the building of State Insurance Company of Soviet Ukraine in the Sumskaya-Street shows us unusual combination of classical Doric order at the main entrance with pure wall surfaces and balconies on the upper floors (fig. 20). It may be probably so interpreted as if the Dorica symbolizes the reliability of that Company. Nowadays the building accommodates Kharkov State University of Construction and Architecture.

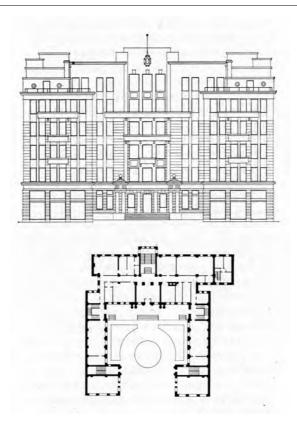


Fig. 20. Building of State Insurance Company of Soviet Ukraine in the Sumskaya Street 1925–1927. Architect O. Molokin. Front façade and plan

Ryc. 20. Budynek Państwowego Funduszu Ubezpieczeń dla Sowieckiej Ukrainy na ul. Sunskiej. 1925–1927. Architekt O. Molokin. Elewacja frontowa i plan

It would be also important to emphasize that in Moscow at 1930-ies constructivism as creative position has been already separated from architecture as an artistic activity [Хан-Магомедов 2007]. New ideology of historicism or, as it was then proclaimed, of "socialistic realism" came as a powerful alternative to constructivist's and, widely speaking, modernist's ideology. Such transition was intensively encouraged by Communist Party and personally by Stalin. That is why the similar constructivist's projects for similar governmental objects in Moscow could not already find the official support in the changed 1930-ies, needless to say about the real construction. For example, it may be mentioned some gigantic unrealized versions for a governmental complex in Moscow by architects brothers Vesnin' (fig. 21) That is why, the first capital of Soviet Ukraine, not holding the leadership in the elaboration of constructivist's ideology, gained, in my opinion, the first place in the real and mass introduction of this ideology in architectural practice.

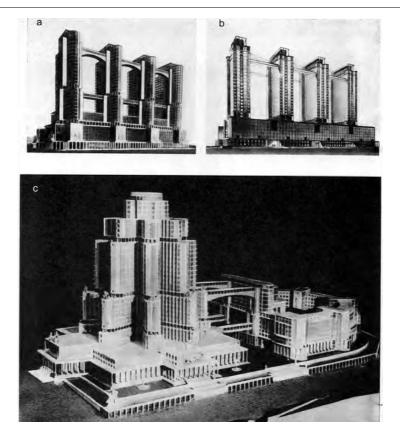


Fig. 21. Competition projects for "Narkomtiazhprom" in Moscow. Architects Vesnin brothers. 1934-1936: a, b, c – first, second, third versions. After: Бархин М.Г. Архитектура и город. Проблемы развития советского зодчества. – М.: «Наука», 1979. – Рис. 76

Ryc. 21. Konkursowy project na "Narkomtiazhprom" w Moskiwie. Architekci bracia Wiesninowie. 1934–1936. a, b, c, pierwsza, druga I trzecia wersja. Za: Бархин М.Г. Архитектура и город. Проблемы развития советского зодчества. – М.: «Наука», 1979. – Rys. 76

If a main goal of soviet architects-constructivists was proclaimed as "an organization of new life" [Веснин 1975] by using the possibilities of modern technology, if another authors define constructivism even more widely as "a method of life itself" [Матушкин 2000], it is not easy to make the clear borders between various aspects of it. So in such wide context, we can define soviet constructivism as a rational response to the social needs of Bolshevik's revolution. This response contained at least three tasks: firstly to brake with the past, secondly to find the new ways for post-revolutionary life and thirdly to give for these new ways former unknown architectural forms.

At later years, constructivism as a creative trend has gone down from architectural scene in the USSR, both in the Ukraine and Russia, and was often characterized negatively as "a main formalistic trend" and "false innovation" [Apxitektypa... 1957].



Fig. 22. Place of Freedom in Kharkov. Pre-war Air Photo Ryc. 22. Pałac Wolności w Charkowie. Fotografia przedwojenna

Contemporary Kharkov is the second-large city in the Ukraine after Kyiv. It is no more capital-town in a sense of Ukrainian State order. But due to its modernist's architectural heritage the city is undoubtedly fully worth to obtain the nomination as a capital of Soviet-Ukrainian constructivism. The penetration of constructivist's ideology in all branches of constructional activities as well as a big quantity of such buildings let us to speak about Constructivism, maybe, as about the most distinguishing feature in Kharkov's architectural landscape (fig. 22, 23). This heritage is really immense. It is so immense that it would be possible, in my opinion, to spread the above-stated capital's nomination on All-Union and further on World scale.



Fig. 23. Place of Freedom in Kharkov. Contemporary Air Photo by W. Bysov Ryc. 23. Pałac Wolności w Charkowie. Fotografia współczesna z lotu ptaka. Fot. W. Bysov.

Today it is clear us, that Soviet Constructivism should be considered not only as an essential fusion of architecture and Bolshevik's policy, whose leaders attempted to balance the "hunger situation" with "a good new regime". In the world-wide context it should be also considered as an interesting site for hard fundamental debates on relationship between tradition and innovation, between historicism and modernism. In the last sense, the origin and death of Kharkov Constructivism demonstrate itself as an outstanding phenomenon not only in Ukrainian architectural heritage but also in the world context. The failure of Soviet Constructivism at the begin 1930-ies means also, that the modern architectural paradigm in the USSR has fallen under the powerful extra-professional influences. But the posterior failure of Stalin's monumentality as a regressive "wedding-cake style" proved in the middle of 1950-ies, that there are no impenetrable and eternal borders in the architectural evolution.

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