

COMPOSITION METHODS OF THE SOVIET ARCHITECTURAL AVANT-GARDE

Svoboda Square in Kharkiv

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the composition logic of the creativity of the Avant-garde masters and to identify the principles of the composition language of the architecture of modernism. To characterize the composition language of Avant-garde architecture, systemic, historical-genetic and semiotic methods of research are used. Architectural composition is interpreted as an activity that has its own semantic, morphological and syntactic features. In the example of Svoboda Square (the former Dzerzhinsky Square) in Kharkiv, the logical methods of artistic activity and thinking of the architects of the Soviet Avant-garde of the 1920-1930s are studied. At the beginning of the 20th century avant-garde movements were created artificially, consciously, by an act of will, and they strove to dictate their ideas, concepts and principles as universal and general. The architectural language of the Avant-garde is normative, ascetic and rigidly organized. Distinctive features of the artistic movements of the Avant-garde are the deep analyticity of thinking and the normativity of the declared requirements, abstract concepts and symbols. The logical principles of composition are often repeated thanks to stable semantic associations and are reflected in geometric structures and forms. Thus, the methods of compositional thinking of the Avant-garde form a monological system, i.e. they are internally holistic and normative, not allowing alternatives. It was possible to identify and show that the Avant-garde, as a monological language system, is characterized by the following features: internal integrity, self-sufficiency, normativity; stability of figurative language devices; restriction of freedom of artistic expression with the help of a concept, declaration, slogan, clear conceptual system. Researchers and designers should treat the phenomenon under study not as a "closed", stylistically defined object, but see it as a complex historical process of structure formation based on an even more complex process of development of thinking and activity of architects and builders of a particular period.

KEYWORDS: language of avant-garde architecture, monologue in architecture, compositional logic, constructivism, Kharkiv, Derzhprom.

FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

The architecture of the Soviet avant-garde, although it has reached only 100 years of age, is already history that requires reflection and puts forward the task of a thoughtful security policy. At present, the architecture of modernism in Ukraine is undergoing active destruction, often caused by a misunderstanding of the traditions of the place and the logic of its design, which ultimately leads to the destruction of the appearance of the monument. Since February 24 2022, Ukraine has been subjected to

brutal destruction as a result of Russian military aggression. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that the problem lies in two planes: the first one is in the field of "stones", that is, material values, and the second one is in the sphere of consciousness, finding practical and theoretical means of protecting the modernist urban environment and its architectural landscape. Another important aspect is the awareness of the regional originality of the interpretation of the ideas of the modernist movement.

ANALYSIS OF RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Docomomo attaches great importance to this problem. Within Docomomo International an exchange of views on the protection of monuments of the Modern Movement has been conducted for many years: Docomomo Journal № 67 (2022): Multiple Modernities in Ukraine; Docomomo Journal № 59 (2018): An Eastern Europe Vision. Recent studies have shown that the analysis of this problem has attracted the attention of a number of scientific conferences of Docomomo in Ukraine (Regional dimension of the Avant-Gard architecture: Ukraine and Europe 2018; Returning the lost: research, documentation and restoration of the damaged and rebuilt monuments of modern architecture, 2020; «Social condensers of the era» — space innovations in the architecture of modernism, 2021; and others) as well as publications of Ukrainian researchers (Bouryak, A. & Kreizer, I. 1999); (Nikolenko, T. & Gorozhankin, V. 1984); (Remizova, E. 2005); (Cherkes, B. 2008); (Didenko, C., Bouryak, A., et al. 2015); (Ivashko Y., Remizova O., et al. 2022); (Konoplyova O., Deriabina O. 2019) and others.

The humanization of the human environment sets the task of creating a polysemic and diverse urban environment that does not lose its old meanings, but also acquires the qualities of modern democracy. The main characteristic of a modern city is its ambiguity, which should be the subject of reflection for an architect who invades such a complex organism as the architecture of modernism, since the future of the place and the people living in it depends on the depth of understanding of the mechanisms of formation of the cultural landscape (Cherkes, B. & Petrishin 2014); (Remizova, O. 2014); (Cherkes, B. 2008); (Didenko, C., Antonenko, N., et al. 2021); (Ivashko Y., Remizova O., et al. 2022).

The purpose of this article is to show that in the urban environment, the original and multi-temporal logical principles of its organization are preserved and interact over time, and a modern architect must be able not only to read, but also to develop, and not destroy the logic inherent in them. In the modern urban environment, it is necessary to track the dialogic and polylogical relationships between eras, styles, forms, methods of forming spatial structures, and especially emerging semantic connections. Each significant building or complex carries a message about its ideas and values. The proximity of objects of different times creates a dialogic relationship between them. Unawareness of all this multi-level polyphonism leads to the impoverishment and destruction of the historical environment, and ultimately to the degradation of one of its components - the architecture of the Avant-garde.

Actual methods of research are historical-genetic and semiotic approaches, which make it possible to identify

the most important meanings and senses corresponding to the stages of evolutionary transformations of the urban environment of the era of modernism, which were laid in it by the authors.

THE MAIN MATERIAL OF THE STUDY

The line of development of avant-garde ideas can be traced on the example of the events that took place in the architectural life of the young Soviet state and, in particular, one of its cities, Kharkiv.

The period of 1924-1930, when the government complex named after F. Dzerzhinsky, now Svobody (Freedom) Square in Kharkiv, was conceived and implemented, can be called transitional in many respects. It is distinguished by political, economic and artistic instability. The revolutionary ideas of the new state, and the Ukrainian SSR in particular, are looking for their aesthetic embodiment in many different artistic approaches. Avant-Garde Groups (such as Association of Modern Architects - OSA Group, Association of New Architects - ASNOVA, Association of Urban Architects - ARU, etc.) get ahead and defeat the followers of traditional architecture (Moscow Architectural Society and St. Petersburg Society of Architects, etc.). Their rationalistic slogans capture many, even followers of the classics, but only for a while. Intra-professional struggle goes on all the time (Khazanova, V. 1970). And in the midst of this struggle, there is a competition for the formation of a new government center in the city of Kharkiv - the capital of the Ukrainian SSR. The key words of the contradiction of this struggle could not but be reflected in the final result.

The fetishization of technological achievements has become the most widespread poetic symbol of architecture and art of the 20th century. The idea of "industrial paradise" proclaimed by Saint-Simon, asserting the power of the human mind and its rational and perfect application in the engineering and technological fields of human activity, in the twentieth century led to the cult of the "perfect machine" that serves for the benefit of mankind. New social utopias in art were embodied in machine images of people, houses and cities. A striking example of such a phenomenon is Freedom Square (former Dzerzhinsky Square) in Kharkiv, which included the House of Projects and the House of Cooperation, and its central building of state industry - Derzhprom. Arranged in a circle, they formed a centric composition that extended to the surrounding residential buildings.

The Derzhprom building was built in 1925-1929 according to the project, which received the first prize at the All-Union competition (architects S. S. Serafimov, S. M. Kravets, M. D. Felger). Let's start with the semantic component, namely from the idea and the name. The



01 Aerial view of the Freedom Square complex in Kharkiv. © V. Bysov, 2002.



02 Central entrance to Derzhprom in Kharkiv, architects S. S. Serafimov, S. M. Kravets, M. D. Felger. © O. Remizova, 2021.

name "Derzhprom" is ambivalent at its core. On the one hand, it is a proper name. But on the other hand, there is nothing personal in this name, it is immense and personifies the image of industry as such, and the system of its management as a universal law. In the era of the crystallization of Soviet power, everything individual had to be erased and turned into a collective. S. S. Serafimov, one of the authors of the project, speaks about this: "I tried to solve the State Industry House in Kharkiv as a part of the organized world, to show a factory, a plant that has become a palace." "Before the eyes of contemporaries, revolutionary romantic visions took on their visible flesh. ... Streets, movement, air pierced through the building, hung in different levels with bridges and passages, demonstrating the spatial thinking of a new era, declaring a new aesthetics of the continuity of architecture..." (Nikolenko, T. & Gorozhankin, V. 1984, p. 103).

Although the shape of the square arose in the process of its competitive selection in 1923-24 (before the announcement of the competition for Gosprom) and was largely dictated by the urban situation, its cosmic scale of new architecture evokes images of ideal Renaissance cities, in the structure of which architects sought to reflect their understanding of the structure of the world. The universal vision is reflected in the concentric rings of buildings surrounding a round square with radial axes of streets running to infinity [FIGURE 01]. This cosmogonic picture shows the Renaissance model of the world - the heliocentric system of planetary rotation around the Sun. However, here it seems to be turned inside out. The center of rotation is not marked by anything, and this is very symbolic, because for the Soviet avant-garde the key word was "space", i.e. emptiness. But, in this spatial model, the idea of a hierarchy of centralized power are expressed as an ideals of the

integrity and unity of the state (Remizova, E. 2005). This expressed the dictatorial monologism of the new way of thinking, its clear code, artistic law.

However, a certain duality can be traced in this grandiose structure. When designing Derzhprom, two ways of development of architecture appeared, expressed in two artistic languages. The loud, screaming, declarative avant-garde was looking for a new abstract language, renouncing the figurativeness and layers of the past, asserting hitherto unseen technicalism. Knowing its worth and self-confident traditionalism calmly appealed to history and classics. Outwardly declaring the Constructivist method, Derzhprom has a decorative character. Two languages - Constructivist and retrospective-decorative - are fighting in these work and in architecture in general.

This can be seen by examining how architectural vocabulary and syntactics were practiced not on paper and wooden models of Vkhutemas students, but in concrete and glass of Derzhprom.

The multi-axis composition of the building contains a multiple order of symmetry, which is a common law of world harmony. Each part of the building is symmetrical in itself and symmetrical about the central axis. The facades inside the passages seem to face each other. Many details are symmetrical within themselves. All these methods of construction bring Derzhprom closer to classicism and its heir - Art Deco (Bouryak, A. & Kreizer, I. 1999). It would seem that the general structure is clearly and easily guessed, but it is precisely here that another contradiction lies. There is no such point of view from where all this complex construction would be perceived symmetrically. Derzhprom is always perceived dynamically and asymmetrically, which is typical of the Soviet Avant-garde. This is the effect of cinema, or rather cinematography,



03 View of Derzhprom from Svobody Square in Kharkiv, architects S. S. Serafimov, S. M. Kravets, M. D. Felger. © O. Remizova, 2021.



04 Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Large part of the magnificent doorway. Engraving, 1749-1750. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Parte_di_ampio_magnifico_Porto_all%27uso_degli_antichi_Romani.jpg.

which developed rapidly in the 1920s. On the one hand - absolute organization and multiple symmetry, and on the other - a variety of views, angles, plans, spatial permeability [FIGURE 02, FIGURE 03]. While the nature of the perception of Derzhprom pushes us to think about the Avant-garde, the geometric order inherent in it gravitates towards the emerging Art Deco (Remizova, E. 2005).

The vocabulary of Derzhprom consists of elementary units: identical windows assembled into ribbons, vertical stairwells, flat roofs of different heights - all this corresponds to the language of the "Modern Movement". At the same time, the classical mirror symmetry of the passages, marked by the verticals of the staircase glazing, is broken by the asymmetry of the height of the parts of building, as if growing towards the center, but sharply falling when approaching the central axis. The middle part of the facade is not raised, but collapsed both vertically and horizontally. So in a separate monument there is a dialogue between constructivism and Art Deco.

The futuristically gigantic scale and almost abstract geometry bring this work closer to the historical fantasies of G. Piranesi [FIGURE 04] and the abstract industrial drawings

of Y. Chernikhov (Chernikhov, Y. 1933) at the same time, which gives it even greater duality [FIGURE 05].

The search for a new universal language was reflected in the abstract geometric forms of Derzhprom, as well as in the buildings of the Merchants' Bank, now the Conservatory [FIGURE 06], the Donugol Trust [FIGURE 07], and the Railwaymen's Club [FIGURE 08] in Kharkiv. Kazimir Malevich's Black Square (Malevich, K. 2008) became the ultimate expression of this idea, since it was both "absolute everything" and "absolute nothing". The cosmic primordial matter is expressed in Malevich's Suprematist paintings. Achieving absolute and total harmony did not imply further development. The world and creativity should, according to the authors, stop, because there is nothing beyond this perfection. Derzhprom demonstrates such an absolute system [FIGURE 09].

Derzhprom was conceived as an ensemble within an ensemble. Circular Dzerzhinsky Square was formed by three buildings: the first skyscraper in the USSR, Derzhprom (1925-1929, architects S. S. Serafimov, S. M. Kravets, M. D. Felger), the House of Projects (1930-1933, architect S. S. Serafimov jointly with M.A. Zandberg-Serafimova, completely rebuilt in the 1960s) [FIGURE 10] and the House

05 Yakov Chernikhov. Fantastic composition of the organization of space No. 28. © Chernikhov, Y. *Architectural fantasies*, Leningrad 1933 (without page numbers).



06 Commodity exchange on Constitution Square, 11/13 in Kharkiv, architect A. V. Linetsky, 1925. © O. Remizova, 2013.





07 "Donugol" Trust on Pushkinskaya street, 5 in Kharkiv, 1925, architects A. I. Nossalevich, I. A. Lomaev, sculptor I. P. Kavaleridze. © O. Remizova, 2021.



08 Palace of Culture of Railway Workers in Kharkiv, 1928-1932, architect A. I. Dmitriev. © O. Remizova, 2009.

of Cooperation (architect A.I. Dmitriev, O.R. Munts, project 1928, construction 1933-35 also rebuilt after the war) [FIGURE 11]. The original composition of the last two objects had more Constructivist poetics before the postwar reconstruction. The composition triumphantly ascended in ledges to the central elevated risalit, the windows flew apart in horizontal ribbons, the glass ribbons of the flights of stairs rose upwards, the reinforced concrete frame emphasized the novelty of the appearance. The project of the House of Cooperation had more features that brought it closer to the American skyscrapers of the Art Deco era than signs of Constructivism. Asymmetric facades, functionally organized plans, intersection of large geometric volumes



09 Panorama of Derzhprom from V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, architects S. S. Serafimov, S. M. Kravets, M. D. Felger. © O. Remizova, 2021.



10 Project House in Kharkiv, 1930-1933, architects S. S. Serafimov, M. A. Zandberg-Serafimova. Photo 1930s. © Unknown, private archive of A. Bouryak.



11 House of Cooperation in Kharkiv (on right), project 1928, architects A. I. Dmitriev, O. R. Munts, construction began in 1933-35, rebuilt after the Second World War. Photo from the early 1950s. © Unknown, private archive of A. Bouryak.

in space, contrast of large glass planes and blank wall surfaces, dynamic compositions became the characteristic features of the new code (not only in Kharkiv, but the whole constructivist one) as well. All these features were possessed by buildings created in Kharkiv in the 1920s to the early 1930s by members of the Moscow OSA - the society of contemporary architects - or Ukrainian OSA, established in 1928 (Society of Contemporary Architects of Ukraine, 2023). Among them are the hotel "International" on Dzerzhinsky Square, (1931-34, architect G. A. Yanovitsky, the member of the OSAU (Yanovitsky, Grigory Oleksandrovich, 2023), (Kharkiv (hotel), 2023), a group of buildings on Rudnev Square – now Square of Heroes of

the Heavenly Hundred (1928, authors I. A. Steinberg, I. I. Malozemov and I. F. Milinis, one of the key figures of the OCA and co-author of M. Ginzburg), the post office on the railway station square (1930, architect A. G. Mordvinov), residential buildings at the Pushkin entrance (architects R. M. Fridman and I. A. Steinberg, 1929-1932). All of them are marked by characteristic "Suprematist" shifts in volumes, stepped tops, emphasized dynamism even at small sizes, etc. And this has become a universal rule that has spread throughout the world. Here it is important to make a digression and emphasize that the ensemble of Freedom Square has undergone significant changes in the post-war years and during the period of independence of Ukraine. Its architectural language was violated by the Art Deco style during the reconstruction of the House of Projects and the House of Cooperation, and only Derzhprom retained its avant-garde constructivist look. The further invasion of the Palace Hotel demonstrated a deep misunderstanding of the language and logic of the avant-garde design of the entire ensemble (Remizova, O. 2014, p. 315).

Modernist currents created "architecture in general", "architecture for everyone, but for no one personally". The dictatorial aspirations of these concepts were expressed in the monologism of architecture, which asserted the only possible path of development.

The first Manifesto of the De Stijl group in 1918 stated: "There is a new and an old consciousness of the era. The old is directed towards the individual. The new is directed towards the universal. The conflict between the individual and the universal was reflected both in the world war and in contemporary art... The new art demonstrated the essence of the new consciousness of the era: the balance between the universal and the individual. The new consciousness is ready to be realized in everything, including the objects of everyday life" (Frampton, K. 1990, p. 208). These words can be attributed to any pictorial and architectural work of the 20s, in which the artist strives for maximum generalization, universalization and even internationalization.

The architectural avant-garde embodied the idea of a machine paradise in "universal planning", Corbusier's five principles: house on pillars, strip glazing, universal plan, horizontal roof and roof garden, which were realized from Alaska to Australia and from Russia to the USA with kilometres of monotonous reinforced concrete panel standard houses and micro-district settlements that do not notice either a person, or a place, or time. In fact, this was the new language of modernism. Mies van der Rohe said that "Language can be used for everyday needs like prose if you can speak very well - like great prose. And if you really speak well, you can be a poet. But in all cases it is the same language, and its character remains the same,



12 Saltovka residential area in Kharkiv. Modern look. © Unknown, private archive of O. Remizova.

and it has the same possibilities" (Ikonnikov, A. 1972, p. 381). The idea of an "ideal society", for which a new refined language was most welcome, ultimately failed. The liquidation of CIAM was proof of this, but it left traces terrifying in its dullness and facelessness in the form of endless micro-districts of socialist cities and towns [FIGURE 12].

Perhaps it is thanks to this monologism that the innovation of the Modern Movement very quickly exhausted its resources. The artistic language was cleansed to the limit and by the 1950s it had become primitively simple. The universality of this language has crossed all the boundaries of the possible, and architecture and art have become simply uninteresting, boring. In 1960-70s there is an avalanche of critical speeches against modernism and its artistic language. The main reproach to modernism was that its architecture had become meaningless. The break with history and cultural memory led to the loss of artistic content, and no technical means of improving the form could save "modern architecture".

Now, when Modernism is recognized as one of the many historical movements and styles, and after it we noted Brutalism, High-tech, Postmodernism, Deconstructivism, etc., the novelty of modernist trends seems to be something transient. The creators of the modernist movement (Le Corbusier, W. Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and others) assumed, or rather affirmed, the enduring nature of their truths. They believed that they were discovering the general universal laws of peace-making! And a person with his character, psychology, world outlook is only a grain of sand in the world ocean, unable to influence this process, and therefore unimportant, not valuable and uninteresting for the "creators of history". Hence the impersonal character of most works of modernism. The cold crystals of skyscrapers and villas by Mies van der Rohe. Le Corbusier's Marseilles unit is a machine for living and a man is a cog in this mechanism, a sign, an automaton in the paintings of Corbusier himself and Fernand Léger, Rene

Magritte and J. de Chirico, P. Filonov. Hence the idea of "paper architecture" as architecture that does not require implementation, intended only to awaken the mind. Hence the analytic attitude to the world, hence the destructive principles of creativity, which were actively developed in the postmodern artistic culture of the late twentieth century.

The monologue of the Avant-garde differs significantly from the monologue of canonical language systems. First of all, by the fact that it is formed artificially, that is, by a volitional act of a group of creators, by declaring a universal idealistic idea, which never happened in antiquity. Despite the absence of a canon that has been developing for a long time, the Avant-garde very quickly forms the rules of artistic thinking on the basis of a strictly defined conceptual apparatus, with the help of which it normalizes the creative process. The language of modernist architecture is distinguished by asceticism, a limited set of iconic forms, and strict regulation of compositional rules. This is due to the approval of the only possible point of view, the certainty with which the masters of the avant-garde spoke and asserted their position.

One of the newest ways to develop the monologue can also be considered digital architecture, which claims to be universal, similar to Avant-garde. Many digital projects are also abstract, geometric, non-scale and irrespective of the environment in which they are placed. The mathematical logic of their creation is subject to the parameters entered into the program.

CONCLUSIONS

Summarizing the results of the study, it is important to note that the monologue as a form of thinking and activity is characteristic of the Avant-garde. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, for the first time, style and artistic movements were created artificially, consciously, by an act of will. Avant-garde movements tend to dictate their ideas, concepts and principles as universal and general. Distinctive features of the artistic movements of the Avant-garde are the deep analyticity of thinking and the normativity of the declared requirements, abstract concepts and symbols. Each artistic direction puts forward its own key concept, on the basis of which new meanings and rules for creating a form are formed. On the one hand, through the destruction of what they depicted, they were looking for an inner meaning, invisible to the eye, but comprehensible and cognizable, of the existence of form. On the other hand, they demanded to strictly observe the abstractness of form and space, to exclude any historical associations.

The fetishization of technological achievements and the cult of the "perfect machine" became the most common poetic symbols of architecture and art in the first half of the 20th century. On their basis, the concepts of functionalism

and constructivism were formed, and then the whole rationalism of modernism. The architectural lexicon and syntactics of modernism are marked by the characteristic features of the new rationalistic code: dynamic intersection of large geometric volumes in space, asymmetric facades, functionally organized plans, contrast of large glass planes and blank wall surfaces, dynamism of horizontal and vertical glazing strips, "suprematist" shifts of volumes, stepped tower tops, the impersonal nature of most works.

The architectural avant-garde refers to monologue language systems that arose by consciously declaring a new concept. The language of Modernism is monological because it was formed not by the natural path of evolution, but artificially, by the conscious assertion of a doctrine or concept. It relied on a strictly defined logic of artistic creativity and a strictly limited conceptual apparatus.

An architectural monologue is characterized not only by the unity of logical, i.e., compositional methods of building a form, but also by the unity of the forms themselves, which is very important for architecture. The mechanism for implementing the unity of forms is the activity aspect, that is, the possession of certain skills in constructing forms.

Avant-garde as a monological language system is characterized by the following features: internal integrity, self-sufficiency, normativity; stability of figurative language structures; artistic language does not borrow the means of other cultures; restriction of expressive means with the help of a concept, declaration, slogan, clear conceptual system (restriction of freedom of expression).

OFFERS

Knowledge of compositional logics is extremely important in the reconstruction and restoration of monuments, which, of course, include the Avant-garde. Turning an object into a museum is not always the best way to preserve it. It is much more important to find a way to further extend the life of the monument, fill it with really necessary processes or functions, or preserve its original function. In accordance with this requirement, it is important to emphasize that researchers and designers should treat their object not as a "closed", stylistically defined phenomenon, but see it as a complex historical process of structure formation, based on an even more complex process of development of thinking and activity of architects and builders of a particular period. At the same time, the object under consideration enters into a complex relationship with the environment, which could arise as a result of other requirements and criteria, a change in artistic tasks and aesthetic criteria. The development of knowledge about compositional logics and their translation into the monument protection system can contribute to a deeper understanding of urban problems and their resolution.

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