

MODERNIST MONUMENTS OF FREEDOM SQUARE IN KHARKIV

Destruction, Restoration, Reconstruction

Mariia Rusanova, Oleksandr Maimeskul

ABSTRACT: Since February 24, 2022, the architectural heritage of Ukraine has been exposed to dangerous destruction. The government center on Freedom (Svoboda) Square in Kharkiv - the largest urban development of early modernist architecture and its pearl, included in the Tentative UNESCO World Heritage List (2017) and provisionally inscribed on the International List of Cultural Property under Enhanced Protection (2023) - Derzhprom (The State Industry Building), were hit by a missile attack on March 1, 2022. In the conditions of non-cessation of hostilities and non-priority, the only means of protecting monuments in the city for months were, and in many places still are, sandbags, adhesive tape and plywood. The architectural research community and Government of Ukraine, together with international organizations, must take all possible actions to protect and restore the damaged architectural monuments. The article deals with the modernist monuments of Freedom Square, the chronology of their reconstruction since the Second World War and the damage received over the past almost two years. The paper raises important questions regarding their future fate with the possibility of restoring some objects of the square to their original appearance of the modernist era.

KEYWORDS: Kharkiv constructivism, Avant-garde, Ukrainian Modernism, monument protection



01 Freedom Square (the former Dzerzhinsky Square) in Kharkiv. In the foreground (from left to right): North building of Karazin University (former House of Cooperation), Derzhprom, Karazin University (former House of Projects), at the far end of the square - the building of the Kharkiv Regional Administration, on the left at the bend of the square - the Kharkiv Hotel building (former International). © Air Production, 2021.



02 The building of the Kharkiv Regional State Administration after the bombing. © Andrey Maiaenko, UNIAN: News of Ukraine, 2022.



03 The building of the Kharkiv RSA (architects V. Kostenko, V. Orekhov) before the shelling. © STATUS QUO. <https://www.sq.com.ua/>, 2020.

INTRODUCTION: The government center on Freedom (Svoboda) Square [FIGURE 01] (the former Dzerzhinsky square) in Kharkiv, Ukraine, was mostly completed in the 1930s. At that time, it was the world's largest, unique, integrated architecture complex of early modernism – its outline can fit the complex of the Roman Cathedral of St. Peter four times and twice the palace in Karlsruhe. The complex of Freedom Square included the gigantic buildings of the House of State Industry (Derzhprom, 1931), the House of Project Organizations (1932), the House of Cooperation (from 1929, it was not completed until the outbreak of World War II), and the Party Central Committee (1932). In addition, the "International" Hotel (1936), the largest in Ukraine at that time, was erected on the square (Khan-Magomedov, 1996).

These objects and the area itself survived the war, recovery and reconstruction after the Second World War and a number of transformations in subsequent years. But even after all the changes, this complex of the interwar period remains a valuable heritage item: all the objects on the square, as well as the square itself, are included in the State register of immovable monuments of Ukraine as architecture and urban planning monuments of local and national significance. The pearl of the square – the world's largest building in the Constructivist style (Derzhprom, 2022) – the House of State Industry (Derzhprom) in 2018 was included in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List¹ and in autumn of 2023, due to the war, it was provisionally inscribed on the International List of Cultural Property under Enhanced Protection among 20 cultural properties in Ukraine as the only object of modernist architecture (Ukraine, 2023). The Freedom Square complex is a difficult rebus in terms of possible strategies for its protection and further use and in recent years many Ukrainian architects and researchers raised this issue, among them: A. Bouryak (Bouryak & Kraizer, 2007), N. Antonenko and O. Deriabina (Antonenko & Deriabina, 2020), O.

Shvidenko (Shvidenko, 2014), I. Gubkina (Gubkina & Hatherley, 2017) and others. Today there are many more questions and tasks related to the restoration and preservation of the Kharkiv main square complex.

On March 1, 2022, Freedom Square in Kharkiv was hit by a rocket attack. As a result of the strike, absolutely all the buildings on the square, as well as on streets adjacent to the epicenter of the explosion, received damage to varying degrees. The building of the Regional State Administration [FIGURE 02] sustained the worst damage – the rocket hit in front of the monument. As a consequence, ceilings of the architectural monument collapsed, destroying everything and everyone inside the building, windows shattered, walls were partially destroyed. On August 28, 2022, there was a repeat attack on the main square of the city. The bomb fell under the very walls of the main facade of the Kharkiv RSA, while the other hit the building from the opposite side, damaging nearby buildings in the process, including a pure example of modernist architecture, the building of the Automatic Telephone Exchange, built as part of the government complex (architect V. Frolov, 1929-1930).

THE BUILDING OF REGIONAL STATE ADMINISTRATION

The building of Regional State Administration (RSA) was built on Sumska street, the main street of the city, in 1954, by Ukrainian architects V. Kostenko and V. Orekhov [FIGURE 03]. This object was built as part of the global post-war rebuilding of the city on the site of the modernist building of the Central Committee (1932, architect J. Steinberg) that was almost totally destroyed during World War II.

The lost unique Steinberg building was built as part of the government complex. In the design of the Central Committee building of the CP(b)U, Steinberg included a two-story volume of the former residence of the Kharkiv



04 The Central Committee building of the CP(b)U (1929-32, architect J. Steinberg). © Photo from the authors archive, 1930s.



05 The building of the Central Committee during WW2. © Photo from the authors archive, 1944.

provincial zemstvo (1900, architect A. Minkus), and a three-story mansion (1914, architect V. Velichko) attached to it. The resulting volume was built on three more floors receiving a large-scale “forehead”, made in the best traditions of functionalist architecture, and expanded to the intersection of Sumska and Veterinary (now Svoboda) streets [FIGURE 04]. The main entrance to the new huge building was arranged on the corner of these two streets. Thanks to its simple and expressive modernist shape, it confidently completed the composition of the rectangular part of the square. A unique research development, undoubtedly innovative for its time, was lost from another missile strike, now only photographs and J. Steinberg’s paper (Steinberg, 1931) remain from the building.

The new building of the Regional State Administration corresponded to its predecessor; however, it was dramatically different stylistically: the facade was made in the style of the solemn neoclassicism characteristic of the first post-war years. The massive columns of the modernized five-story warrant have nothing to do with the Steinberg project. Although in the urban context the scale and position of this object as part of the ensemble of the square was preserved.

It seems fateful that the building of the Regional State Administration was destroyed in much the same way as the building of its predecessor almost 80 years ago. Since at that time the architecture of modernism was not considered as historical and architectural heritage and therefore was not the subject of preservation – so the unique object of an incredible experimenter architect was dismantled [FIGURE 05].

The same fate overtook another no less interesting object by Jacob Steinberg – the building of the Kharkiv Institute of Civil Engineering (KhICE, now KhNUCEA. Completed in 1930-1932), located on one of the new axes laid out by the square - Nauki Avenue. This huge building was built for a new institute (created on the basis of the architecture faculty of the Kharkiv Art Institute and the construction faculty of the Kharkiv Technological Institute (now the National Technical University “KhPI”)) as part of the general plan of the “Kharkiv socialist reconstruction”, as the capital of Soviet Ukraine. During the Second World War

this unique building was badly damaged and rebuilt much later in a different style (Maimeskul et al., 2019). Due to the urgent need in the reconstruction of cities in builders and engineers, the Institute moved to another more intact building of the modernist era at Sumskaya, 40 - located 350 meters from Freedom Square. As in the case of the RSA the KhNUCEA building was also subjected to rocket attack by the occupiers in early March, 2022.

The Regional State Administration as well as the KhNUCEA building and many other objects affected by the attack should be restored as part of the overall Kharkiv reconstruction program². Relating to the predecessor of the RSA building - the constructivist building of the Central Committee, it should be at least restored as a graphic reconstruction (based on the preserved photographs and drawings of the monument) and included in a full 3D model of the pre-war square in the context of the return of the Freedom Square ensemble to its historical authenticity.

THE STATE INDUSTRY BUILDING (DERZHROM)

The State Industry Building (Derzhprom) - the most valuable object of the square complex received the least damage in the last 15 months. Being in the opposite part of the area from the explosion, Derzhprom has lost a noticeable, but replenishable, part of the windows and stained-glass windows in the stairs. All the broken windows of the building were only covered with plywood to avoid further damage from the weather and new blast waves.

Derzhprom is the only building in the architectural ensemble of the square that has almost completely preserved its original appearance [FIGURE 06]. This huge building is a masterpiece of Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Russian architects Mark Felger, Samuel Kravets, Sergey Serafimov – representatives of the Petrograd Architecture Schools. The Derzhprom building is the world’s largest monument of interwar modernism (Bouryak & Kraizer, 2007). Its volume is 347,000 m³, a total area – 67,000 m². This office complex, in the Avant-garde style, consisting of 3 blocks, connected by 6 bridge-transitions at different levels, was constructed in only 3 years (in the period 1926-29).

During World War II there were several unsuccessful attempts to blow up and set fire to the building, however the powerful reinforced concrete structures of Derzhprom survived. The building, which was burnt and lost all the glass, still received the least damage of all the objects of the square and already in 1944–47 was restored and put back into operation.

In subsequent years, the monument was repeatedly subjected to unsuccessful reconstructions. Terrazite plaster, an exquisite decoration of the facades of Derzhprom, survived the war, but later, in the 60s and 70s, was hidden under layers of rough cement spray. Such repeated barbaric “redesign” of facades turned out to be fatal for Derzhprom. The heavy multilayer cement cake lost its adhesion to the concrete wall, and began to exfoliate in thousands of square meters. The giant building, which was not afraid of a direct hit by a heavy aviation bomb, turned out to be an easy victim of ignorance [FIGURE 07].

Long-term operation and unsuccessful post-war repairs in 2001 forced the beginning of the reconstruction of the building. The reconstruction consisted in the complete replacement of plaster (over 74,000 m²) and filling of window openings (glazing area 17,000 m²).

Due to the modernization of technology and the lack of materials that were used at the beginning of the 20th century the original high-quality decorative plaster with mica slabs has not been restored. The facades of Derzhprom are now covered with fine-grained plaster according to the patent of the German Henkel company.

Double oak window frames were replaced, while preserving the binding pattern, with modern single-pane frames equipped with double-glazed windows. The original double steel stained-glass windows of stairwells with fine-meshed glazing were replaced by single-layer double-glazed windows. Overhead gratings, which were supposed to imitate the fine-mesh frames of the original stained-glass windows, were placed behind the stained-glass windows. This significantly influenced the perception

of the building composition. Nevertheless, in 2018, the Derzhprom building was included, by the efforts of Kharkiv Regional Department of Architecture and Urban Planning and with the assistance of the Ukrainian DOCOMOMO Chapter, into the preliminary list of UNESCO World Heritage and on September 7, 2023 at an extraordinary session of the Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, at Ukraine’s request, The UNESCO Committee decided to provisionally inscribe Derzhprom on the International List of Cultural Property under Enhanced Protection.

Architectural and artistic perfection, huge size, and world fame of Derzhprom are so significant, that sooner or later its original appearance will be reproduced in full detail. Scientific analysis, methodological guidance and an international program of protection and support could accelerate this process and make it more effective.

THE HOUSE OF PROJECTS

Another, even more perfect masterpiece of Serafimov and his wife M. Zandberg-Serafimova – the House of Projects (1930–1932, [FIGURE 08]) – in 1941, at the beginning of the war, was badly damaged by fire and stood dilapidated for many years. In the early 1950s restoration of the building began in order to accommodate the Kharkiv State University. The huge building (about 50,000 m²) was planned to be rebuilt in the triumphal style similar to Moscow high-rise buildings or to the Warsaw Palace of Culture and Science. This plan did not succeed: after the death of Stalin, the reconstruction project was radically simplified. But the building restored in 1961 had completely lost its original appearance [FIGURE 09]. False pilasters, cornices, lined with ceramic tiles were pasted on the elegant modernist composition, and later a pompous multi-column portico was added to the entrance. For the sake of enhancing the monumentality of the image, a deep courtyard from the side of the city garden was built up; this closed the amazing view of the movement of elevators in



06 The House of State Industry (Derzhprom), arch. Serafimov S., Kravets S., Felger M., 1926-28.
© Photos taken by a German agronomist student, 1932 (from the authors archive).



07 The House of State Industry before reconstruction. © Photo from archive of A. Bouryak, 1990s.



08 The House of Projects, arch. Serafimov S., Zandberg-Serafimova M., 1931-32.
© Photo of the 1930s, the archive of A. Bouryak.



09 Kharkiv National University named after V.N. Karazin (was opened after reconstruction in 1957).
© Mariia Rusanova, 2019.

four transparent prisms, especially spectacular in the evening hours. The soaring visor was removed from the central tower; therefore, its height was reduced, and the overall dynamics of the spatial composition was weakened.

In its current form, the building has ceased to be a modernist monument and has lost its architectural value. The only opportunity to feel the true spirit of this object appeared when the Center for Contemporary Art named after Kharkiv constructivist Vasil Ermilov was opened in a part of the university's vast cellars. Then the powerful monolithic structures of the underground part were bared and exposed, and it became obvious that the fundamental possibility of reviving the authentic appearance of the masterpiece still remains, and requires only human determination.

Of the three giants of the modernist ensemble of the round part of the square, the University building is closest to the RSA building and to the epicenter of the explosions, therefore, it received more damage - most of the windows of the monument were damaged by the blast wave. As in the case of Derzhprom, the broken windows were covered with improvised means.

The object needs to be reconstructed with a preliminary assessment of its condition and, not least, an assessment

of architectural value in order to adopt a restoration strategy. The House of Projects has every chance to revive its original appearance of the period of the modernist era. This will require preliminary research, the implementation of graphic reconstruction, a skillful promotion campaign, the development of a restoration task and reconstruction project, fundraising efforts etc. But the ambitious task of rebuilding, next to the magnificent Derzhprom, its historical counterpart, can become for Ukraine a cultural feat of European scale.

THE HOTEL "INTERNATIONAL"

The Hotel "International" (1932-1936, architect G. Yanovitsky) received similar destruction from a missile attack, but to a much worse extent. The decoration of the facade of the building has fallen off in some places, almost all the windows on the side of the square have been broken out. Due to the lack of owners, many windows are still not closed in any way, leaving the building unprotected from all weather conditions and more [FIGURE 10].

Hotel "International" was also burned during WWII, lost its roofs and glazing. The famous interiors, which in 1937 at the world exhibition in Paris received the Grand Prix of the Architecture section, were completely

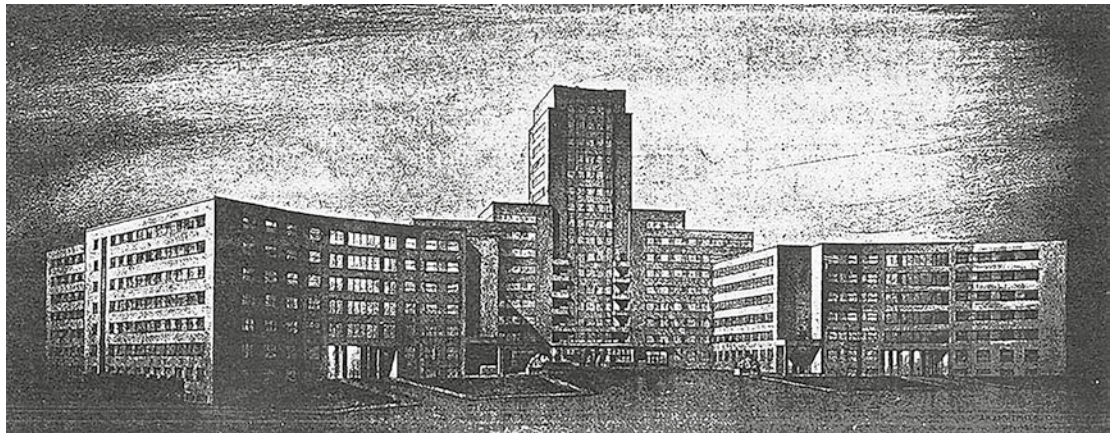


10 Hotel "International", arch. Yanovitsky G., 1932-36. © Album: From the history of Freedom Square, 1930s.



11 Hotel "Kharkiv", reconstruction by arch. Yanovitsky G. © Photo of the 1990s, the authors archive.

12 The House of Cooperation, arch. Dmitriev A., Munts O., 1929-54, perspective. © Photos from A. Bouryak's archive. North Building of Karazin University.



13 North Building of Karazin University © Mariia Rusanova, 2019.

lost (Protsenko, 2012). Just like the House of Projects, the hotel after the war was rebuilt in another, classicizing post-war style. The difference was that this building was restored by its author, Grigory Yanovitsky, once the head of Ukrainian Constructivists (Bouryak & Rusanova, 2020). He has changed and simplified the shape of the lower floors, enlarged the ledge of the crowning cornice and built a new, larger and more expressive entrance portico. After restoration the hotel (now the hotel "Kharkiv") has received a new architectural expressiveness, but has become a monument of another architectural era [FIGURE 11]. In 1976, a 16-storey building was added to the main building of the hotel. In 2008, another reconstruction of the hotel was carried out, but already as an architectural monument of the 1950s. Today, its appearance is considered one of the hallmarks of the city of Kharkiv, and only the well-disguised composition of the volume of the building reminds us of the style of the capital period.

The building is very dilapidated and again needs reconstruction. Despite understandable nostalgia for Constructivism, the hotel should still be restored to the forms that were imposed during the post-war reconstruction.

Paradoxically, the post-war "Kharkiv" was more expressive, more harmonious, more beautiful than the pre-war "International". But at the same time, it needs to return all the elements of architectural decoration that were lost "in the dashing nineties", in particular, the balconies on the main facade. That were cut to stretch advertising banners across the entire vast area of the facade. Of course, the original modernist appearance of the building should be reliably restored in graphic reconstruction and 3D models.

THE HOUSE OF COOPERATION

The third giant of the government center – the House of Cooperation (project of architects A. Dmitriev and O. Munts, 1929) was not completed before the war [FIGURE 12]. This building, with a total volume of 115,000 cubic meters, was supposed to be the tallest in the city, overtaking the House of Projects located opposite. In the pre-war period, only the two side six-story buildings were completed, and the dominant central one, which was planned to be 16-storey, was completed according to a new project, losing 4 floors in height [FIGURE 13]. In 1935, the unfinished building was transferred to the military academy and was

completed after the war, also in a classic triumphal style (1954, architects P. Shpara, V. Dyuzhikh, N. Lineckaya, D. Yevtushenko). Since 2004, the building has been used as the second, "northern" building of Karazin University. In its current form, it is, of course, a monument of architecture of the post-war period. Facades and a significant part of interiors of the monument have been preserved and are subject to protection (Grigoryev, 2012). As a result of the explosion on March 1, the building lost some of its windows, but being "around the corner" received the least damage.

CONCLUSIONS

Military destruction each time poses the problem of choosing a strategy for restoring objects: updated or in their original form. In the case of the RSA building, a few weeks after the strike, the head of the Kharkiv administration, Oleg Sinegubov, publicly made an assumption about the impossibility of restoring this object. In this case, careful consideration of the issue is necessary, since, firstly, the city administration has no right to decide the fate of an architectural monument - in order to legally dismantle an object, it must be excluded from the lists. Secondly, there are a number of successful restoration examples of both individual objects and entire cities in Ukraine and abroad: Rotterdam (Netherlands), Warsaw and Gdansk (Poland), Berlin (Germany) and others. Ukrainian and foreign experts have already begun collecting information and working on projects for the restoration of cities in Ukraine. The Ukrainian public organization "Urban reforms" has launched a project to collect up-to-date information about the experience of restoring cities that suffered during wars. A joint group of practicing Ukrainian architects, led by the British office of Norman Foster and Partners, is currently working on the draft general plan of Kharkiv, but there is a danger that such work will not include the interests of the city's monuments or, even worse, will simply "bypass" them. The architectural research community of Ukraine, as well as international organizations, should state their position regarding the fate of the affected architectural monuments and come together to come up with the best strategy for their protection and restoration. Taking into account the fact that in the course of any reconstruction there is a modernization of objects, which is already very expensive, it is logical to consider the possibility of restoring the original appearance of some objects.

In the context of the return of the Freedom Square ensemble to its historical authenticity, the problem of identity is exacerbated by the new five-star hotel "Kharkiv Palace" (2012, architect S. Babushkin), built on a site between the former House of Cooperation and the former hotel "International". In the architecture of the hotel, which

was built in connection with the holding of the European Football Championship, in Kharkiv in 2012, a pompous monumentalism oddly combines with attempts at Deconstructivism. The building was fairly removed from the square so as not to spoil the integrity of the complex but, even so, showed the problem of introducing a new object into the unique historical environment. A separate problem is a large mass of greenery, planted on the circular part of the square by 1963, simultaneously with the erection of a monument to Lenin. Now the monument is demolished according to the law on decommunization, and the square has finally become open, transparent and spacious again, as it was intended when it was founded. In the course of recent reconstruction, a Splash pad was laid in the center of the round part of the square, which made this place a point of attraction for citizens, especially during the warm season.

After the Second World War, many interesting examples of early modernist architecture were lost due to the lack of a mechanism for the preservation and conservation of monuments and because the architecture of this period has not yet been recognized as heritage. It is very important now, again in a war-afterwar period, that these processes should be established so that architectural heritage has a chance to exist. The Modernist Ensemble of Freedom (Svoboda) Square, with the central building of Derzhprom - a symbol of industrial Ukraine of the 20th century, both for residents of the country and abroad, as well as the square itself, including the destroyed RSA building - the closing part of the largest urban development of early modernist architecture - should be protected as one of the most important aspects of world heritage.

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In October 2023, Oleksandr joined the Ukrainian army, deciding to defend what is dear to him on the front lines. On December 11, 2023, Oleksandr was declared missing. Come back alive.

ENDNOTES

- 1 All information about these monuments is publicly available: Historical and architectural basic plan of Kharkiv city. Designation of the inter-historical area. (2018) UKRNDIPROEKTRESTAVRATSIYA, Kyiv.
- 2 Jacob Steinberg's objects were decades ahead of their time. The mentioned monuments and other Kharkiv objects of the Ukrainian architect are considered in more detail in another article by Rusanova M. and Maimeskul O. "Innovative concepts in the Kharkiv projects of J. Steinberg of the capital period." In the article, the authors determine the significance of projects unique for their time and their influence on the development of style.