

# THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION?

## The Palace of Culture of the Railway Workers in Kharkiv

Błażej Ciarkowski, Maciej Miarczyński

**ABSTRACT:** The future reconstruction of Ukrainian cities from wartime devastation will require an extensive discussion on strategies and concepts of preservation of cultural heritage – including the heritage of the Modern Movement. It should involve not only the technical aspects but political and historical issues as well. The history of the Palace of Culture of the Railway Workers in Kharkiv (architect Alexander I. Dmitirev, 1927-1932) provokes a number of questions on the essence of Ukrainian pre-war Modernism and Constructivism, the idea of the Sovietisation of the theater against the Great Theatre Reform movement or the role of Workers' Clubs and Palaces as social condensers. Thus, its analysis cannot be limited to the form and content of the edifice itself, but should be perceived in the broader context of similar projects (for example the Kharkiv Opera House) and views on architecture in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Palace of Culture in Kharkiv can be considered as an example of "architecture in transition" where evolving trends in art as well as a dynamic socio-political situation left their marks and created a multi-layered palimpsest. Dmitriev's design included the Constructivist spirit as well as conservative monumentality. It seems to become a legacy of a revolution (in architecture, theater and society) which has never been really completed.

**KEYWORDS:** Constructivism, palace of culture, modernism in architecture, Kharkiv

**INTRODUCTION:** In times of war, the Muses fall silent. The buildings fall down. On the official UNESCO website the list of damaged cultural sites in Ukraine verified by the Organization consisted of 137 (as of May 23rd) and still counting.<sup>1</sup> The Orthodox churches and World War II Memorials, Baroque palaces and Art Nouveau department stores share a common fate as Russian artillery turned them into rubble. Among numerous assets, one can easily indicate important examples of Modernist and Constructivist architecture with the former Palace of Culture of the Railway Workers in Kharkiv at the forefront.

The analysis of the history of one of the finest examples of Ukrainian modernism and its social, political and cultural background reveals that its values do not only lie in the exceptional quality of architecture itself, but its history and the role of "lieu de memoire" as well (Nora, 1989). It also provokes many questions on architectural heritage identity and its future fate.

### THE CONSTRUCTIVIST CAPITAL OF UKRAINE

The popular term "Soviet legacy" "prevents us from seeing the phenomenon's breadth and contradictions", wrote

Jewhenija Hubkina (Hubkina, 2017). In fact the Soviet era was not homogeneous and different periods pursued different goals and ideologies. The early period, before the proclamation of "socialism in one country" doctrine, cannot (and should not) be equated to Stalin's era – neither in terms of politics, nor culture. At the same time, one can easily indicate several ideas which withstood the Great Terror, purges and political torments. Growing centralization of the Soviet state did not eliminate completely the decentralization concepts of Mikhail Bakunin or Peter Kropotkin, it just give them different forms. Within the system based on central planning, there was a space for local centers' development. Once peripheral towns changed their status – new factories being constructed and increasing number of inhabitants entailed development of public services such as schools, cinemas, theaters, workers' clubs and palaces of culture.

Kharkiv, proclaimed the capital of Ukraine in 1917 and named "Kharkiv City" by those who wanted to compare it to London (Cohen, 2021, 245) was apparently the embodiment of Kropotkin's dream of factories among the fields (Kropotkin, 1901, 183). The father of anarchism



01 Alexander Ivanovich Dmitriev, The Palace of Culture of Railway Workers, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 1927-1932. Front façade. © Błażej Ciarkowski, 2017.

would have been enchanted watching enormous KhTP tractor factories, the linear city of New Kharkiv (team led by architect Pavel Alyoshyn, 1929-1931), monumental complex of Derzhprom (architects Sergei Serafimov, Samuel Kravets and Mark Felger, 1925-1928). The Constructivist architecture was a manifestation of progress and, at the same time, a catalyst of change as avant-garde designers contributed to the modernization project of building the communist state. The so called "Red Modernism" built the identity of the Capital and is still abundant in the cityscape today (Chechyk, Mudrak and Pavlova, 2016).

Alexander Bouryak and Maria Rusanova warn against being hasty in generalizing and classifying Ukrainian modernism and early Modernism as Constructivism, as only a few assets in Kharkiv, designed by the Moshe Ginsburg's group, can be described as "pure constructivist" (Bouryak and Rusanova, 2019, 72). The Palace of Culture of Railway Workers in Kharkiv [FIGURE 01], designed by Alexander Ivanovich Dmitriev and built between 1927 and 1932, can be considered as a case study of the architecture in transition and hence the monument of its volatile times.

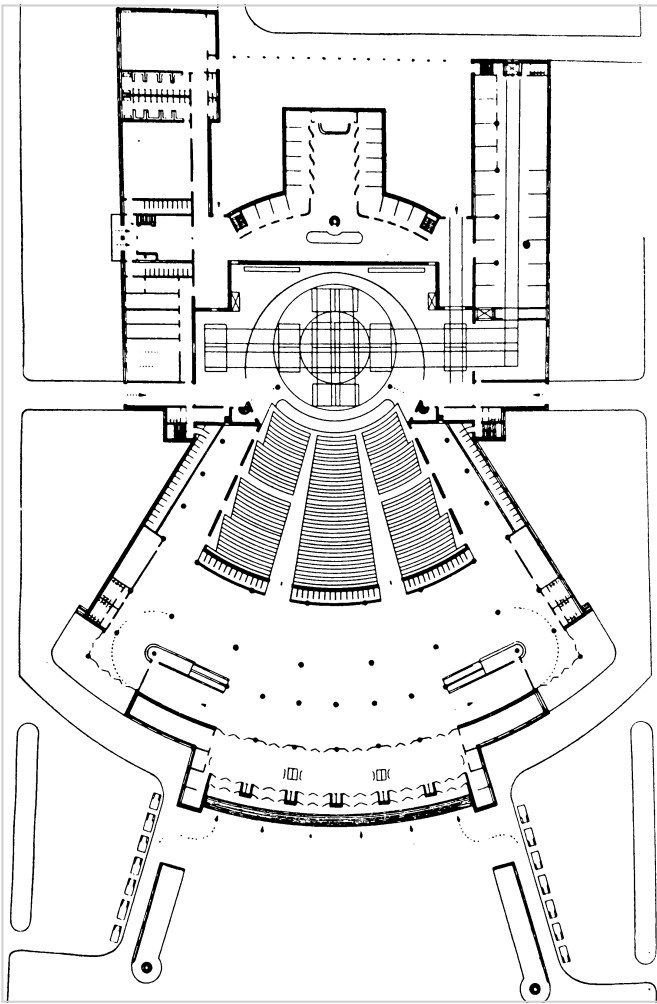
### THE CLUBS, THE PALACES AND THE THEATERS

The idea of workers' club concerned as a social condenser emerged from Constructivist architects in mid-1920s (Bokov, 2017). It was supposed to become a new type of architectural space for the new type of society – collective

and classless. A space which would overcome an alienation and privation and replace them with equality and empathy. A shrine for secular rituals with its own liturgy and scenography (Murawski and Rendell, 2017).

The houses of culture, the palaces of culture or the clubs associated with specific enterprises offered educational and cultural programs, fulfilling the task of "culturalization of the masses". The most recognized, such as Rusakovs Workers Club (architect Konstantin Melnikov, 1927-1928) or Gorbunov Palace of Culture (architect Yakov Abramovich Kornfeld, 1929-1938) became icons of modern architecture (Khan-Magomedov, 1975, 105). The political and social importance of clubs resulted in codification of general "guidelines" concerning their design. Nikolai Luhmanov, author of the "Architecture of Clubs" book analyzed several examples of workers' clubs and Palaces of Culture describing their location, form and functional distribution (Luhmanov, 1930).

The parallels between the palaces of culture and theaters were indisputable, as the main part of each of them was a great auditorium with the proscenium and backstage, preceded by the spacious lobby and accompanied with adjoining rooms. "What is characteristic," wrote Mykola Kholostenko, "is that in every club the auditorium occupies from 50% to 80% of the entire usable area of the club and the hall is designed as a theater hall and a cinema hall" (Kholostenko, 1928). However, the clubs' auditoriums and



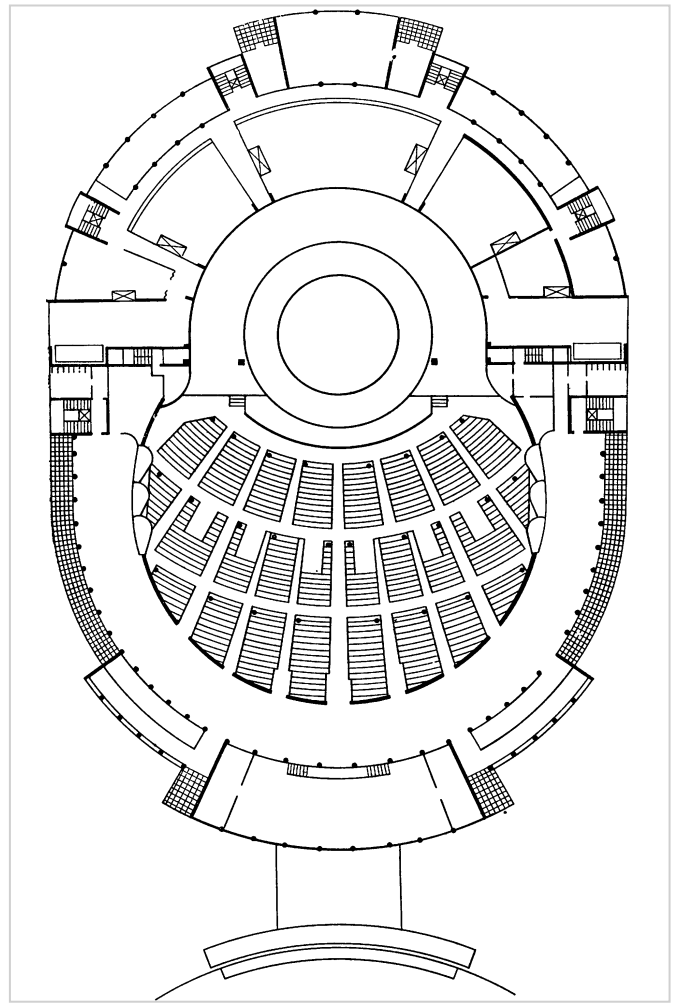
02 Walter Gropius, Theater, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 1930-1931. Theater of mass musical action - competition project. Ground floor plan. © A. Busignani, Walter Gropius, Firenze, 1972.

stages were too small for traditional theatrical productions and too large for the needs of amateur circles working within the club. The revolution in culture gave birth to the reformed "new theater" which was supposed to be closer to the mass audience. "Three or four years ago, when our theaters were insufficiently Sovietised, not connected with the demands and needs of the working audience, the clubs then assumed the tasks of the workers' theater," admitted Holostenko in 1928, who also described the arrangement of club halls similarly to theater halls as "unnecessary and harmful" (Kholostenko, 1928).

### UNREALIZED SOVIETISATION OF THE THEATER

The correlations between the archetype of the Soviet club and the archetype of the Soviet theater were not limited only to the similarities in design of the floor plan. Both of them were supposed to serve as landmarks in the urban space and social magnets which attract people and catalyze changes. Thus, the history of the Palace of Culture has to be set against the background of similar initiatives in Soviet Ukraine.

The most significant was the competition for the Theatre of Mass Musical Action announced in 1930, almost three years after the commission for the Palace. It was one of



03 Aleksander Vesnin, Leonid Vesnin, Viktor Vesnin, Theater, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 1930-1931. Theater of mass musical action - competition project. Ground floor plan. © N. V. Baranov, Architecture of the USSR, Moscow 1975.

the last high-profile international competitions organized in the Soviet Union before the shift to Socialist Realism and this status was confirmed by the number of entries – 142, comparing to only 19 entries in competition for Derzhprom in 1925. Study of the submissions reveal mass fascination in new type of theater shared among architects as most of them presented their own versions of the idea of *Totaltheater*. The original concept, developed by Erwin Piscator and Walter Gropius in 1927, was based on the use of the latest technological improvements to achieve simultaneity and unity of stage and audience. It was probably the most "constructivist" concept made by the director of Bauhaus, with multimedia projections and mobile stage platforms. [FIGURE 02] Also another architect from school in Dessau, Marcel Breuer, was inspired by *Totaltheater* presenting a concept of a wedge-shaped, steel and concrete auditorium with a curved glass façade and a stage connected directly with the space of the spectators. On the other hand, the American architect familiar with the ideas of Soviet theater (Maffei, 2018, 52), Norman Bel Geddes, submitted a project of the enormous complex including three auditoriums: indoor with 4000 seats, an open air stage of half this size and an outdoor auditorium for mass meetings with a stage for 5 000 actors and 60 000 audience members.

None of them won the first prize, as in May 1931 the jury announced the winners Alexander, Leonid and Victor Vesnin (Maffei, 2018, 112-118). [FIGURE 03]

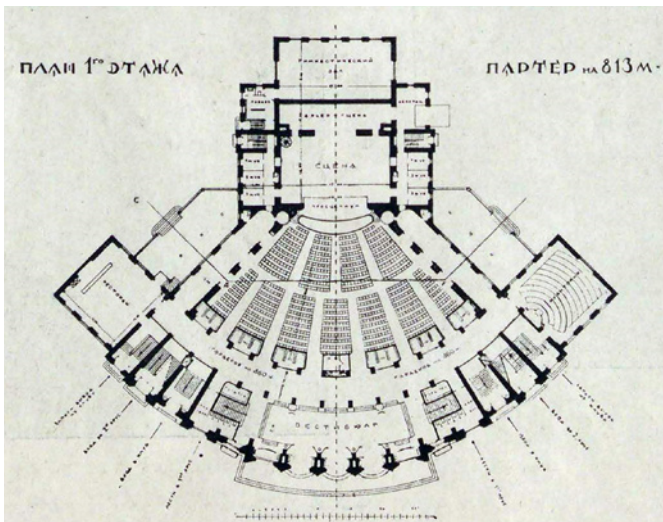
Their project never materialized and so neither did the authors' goal to create a theater which would become a catalyst of change towards the democratization of culture. The Sovietisation of theater, mentioned by Kholostenko, remained more on the conceptual level as a Constructivist dream. The reality was much more complicated and determined by the political conditions. The Clubs and Palaces of Culture were stuck between "the old" and "the new". Just like the Palace of Culture of the Railway Workers in Kharkiv.

## THE PALACE OF CULTURE

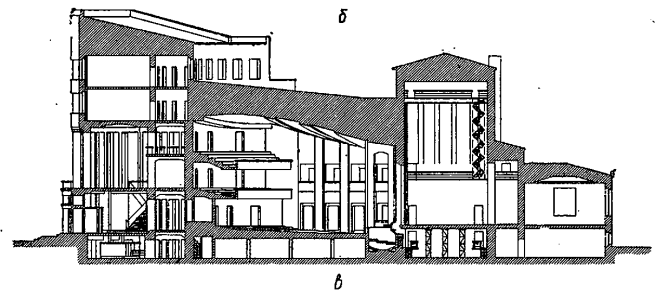
During the celebration of the 10th anniversary of Great October Revolution, Grigory Ivanovich Petrovsky the chair of the Ukrainian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic) Central Executive Committee, laid the foundation stone of the new Palace of Culture of Railway Workers in Kharkiv. The old Russia was known for its churches, but "the new proletarian society would be defined by its clubs," he said

(Sigler, 2009, 201). The official inauguration took place five years later, in November 1932.

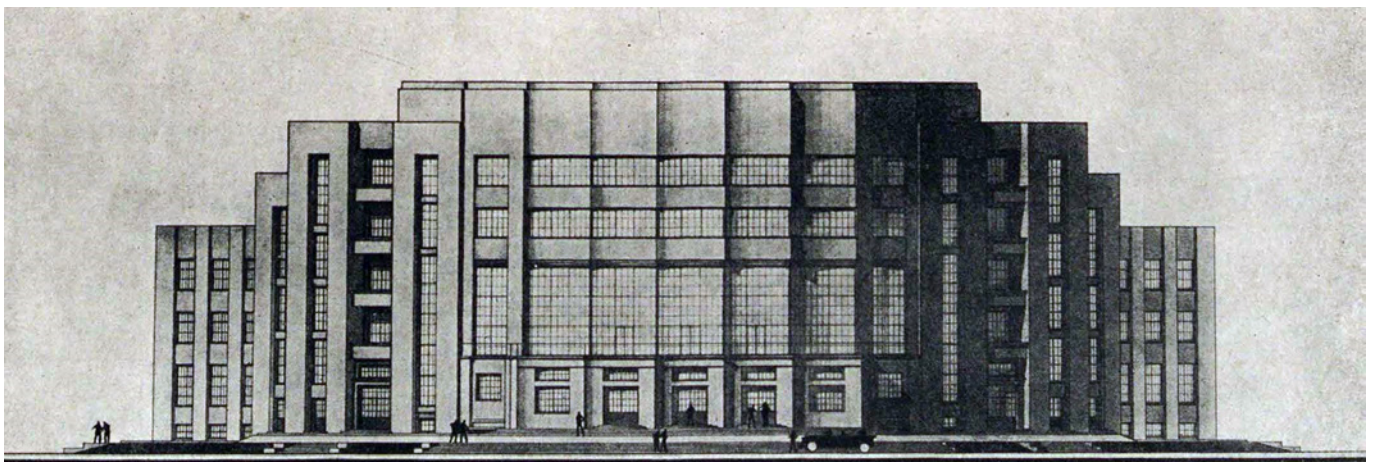
The building was raised on the corner plot of land. Its spatial composition reflected the modernist concept of architectural form as a result of internal functional program. The quarter-circular auditorium with large backstage were preceded by a large foyer and flanked by auxiliary rooms. [FIGURE 04] [FIGURE 05] The aesthetics of the edifice reflects both – the upcoming turn towards passé historicism and the origins of the author whose professional career began with projects of historicist mansions and public buildings. The composition of the facade reflects the structure of the building and is made in the form of five concave vertical surfaces which shape resembles stretched accordion bellows or fluting of a gigantic column. On both sides there were simple pylons hiding staircases. [FIGURE 06] The symmetry of the composition and the emphasized verticality created an impression of monumentality which was even stronger inside the lobby where granite surfaces provided the architectural frame for two enormous frescoes by Eugene Lansere (Yevgeny Yevgenyevich Lanceray).



04 Alexander Ivanovich Dmitriev, The Palace of Culture of Railway Workers, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 1927-1932. Ground floor plan. © Yearbook of the Society of Architects-Artists, Vol. 12, Leningrad: 1927.



05 Alexander Ivanovich Dmitriev, The Palace of Culture of Railway Workers, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 1927-1932. Section. © Yearbook of the Society of Architects-Artists, Vol. 12, Leningrad: 1927.



06 Alexander Ivanovich Dmitriev, The Palace of Culture of Railway Workers, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 1927-1932. Front façade. © Yearbook of the Society of Architects-Artists, Vol. 12, Leningrad: 1927.

Analysis of the auditorium itself reveals several inconsistencies in the design. Dmitriev reconstructed the traditional form of ancient Greek theater with fan-shaped plan, similar to works of Richard Wagner and Otto Brückwald in Bayreuth and consistent with the Great Theatre Reform movement. By recalling the antique, the architect tried to create the democratic space (Sennet, 1998, 275), where audience and actors become unity experiencing the spectacle (Leśniakowska, 2012). The tendencies to democratize the theatrical space were vivid among modernist architects achieved by reduction of distance or even (like Gropius) rejecting the traditional proscenium as an independent part of the theater, framed space based on the central perspective scheme – a reference to the simplest way of spatial perception with one focal point. But comparison with Gropius', Geddes' or Breuer' concepts, indicates that Dmitriev's design is apparently not "really avant-garde". The proscenium arch is an integral part of the auditorium whose size appears to be too narrow to provide the audience with a seamless contact between the stage and the actors. The auditorium of the Palace is apparently too flattened to provide an optimum view for all the spectators. To some extent, these problems refer to the balconies as well. The first, rather superficial impression leads to the conclusion that Dmitriev failed the attempt to create a modernist, open theater within the Palace of Culture in Kharkiv. However, it can be interpreted not as a result of the architect's incapability but his intuition of upcoming changes.

### BETWEEN LENINGRAD, KHARKIV AND DONETSK

As mentioned above, Dmitriev's early projects were oscillating between historicism and Art Nouveau. His career suggests that he was rather a skilled designer than a devoted modernist and the Constructivist aesthetics was probably another architectural costume he used - just like Art Nouveau or neo-Baroque details that he used to implement in his projects in 1900s and 1910s. Prior to the Revolution he was already a recognized author of several buildings including Peter I School or the residential building for the employees of the New Admiralty in St Petersburg.

Nevertheless, one cannot deny Dmitriev deep architectural awareness and great timing. Years before the Stalinist crusade against modernist aesthetics, he designed an edifice which was already "in transition" between Constructivism and Socialist Realism. This moderate strategy is clearly visible when one compares "Zheleznodorozhnik" to concepts of the Kharkiv Opera House from 1931 and other public buildings designed in the late 1920s and 1930s. The spatial distribution of the Palace of Culture of Railway Workers is far more



07 Alexander Ivanovich Dmitriev, Palace of Culture of Metallurgists, Donetsk, Ukraine, 1929. © Wikimedia Commons, public domain. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1930.\\_%D0%97%D0%B4%D0%B0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5\\_%D0%BA%D0%BB%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%B0\\_%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8\\_%D0%9B%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B0.jpg?uselang=ru](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1930._%D0%97%D0%B4%D0%B0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5_%D0%BA%D0%BB%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%B0_%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8_%D0%9B%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B0.jpg?uselang=ru)

traditional than the *Totaltheater* of Gropius or Geddes who put emphasis on merging of audience and actors. So is the architectural envelope which, contrary to the work of Alfred Kastner or the Vesnin brothers, rejected the machine-alike Constructivist aesthetics.

Apparently, it did not differ from other similar Dmitriev's projects; the projects of the theater-club in Kramatorsk (1930) or the Palace of Culture of Metallurgists in Donetsk (then Stalino) (1929). [FIGURE 07] Both of them had a similar composition with a dominant volume of the auditorium hidden behind the convex facade. The latter had outer walls clad with white ceramic tiles and slender pilaster strips which resemble the modernist architecture of the 1930s and its search for inspirations in classical monumentalism. The buildings were praised as a "pride of the region". Authors emphasized both – the form and the complexity of functional program with "a decent auditorium, a sufficiently equipped stage, and the service accommodations for it" (Dmitriev, 1929).

A few years earlier, in 1925, Dmitriev, in collaboration with David Lvovich Krichevskii and Alexander Ivanovich Gegello, won the design contest for a Palace of Culture in Leningrad (now St Petersburg). [FIGURE 08] The building was completed in 1927 and named after Alexei Maximovich Gorky six year later. The symmetrical convex front facade was glazed, divided with faceted pilasters and flanked with massive avant corps with accentuated staircases. The foyer set along the facade preceded the fan-shaped auditorium for 2 200 people. The functional distribution and a the composition of the specific parts of the building, does not differ significantly from Dmitriev's later works - clubs and palaces of culture.

Apparently, the A. M. Gorky Palace of Culture can be considered as a prototype for future projects as it contains most of the important features of architects' concept of monumental modernism – symmetrical convex facade with regular rhythm of vertical elements, centrally placed



08 Alexander Ivanovich Dmitriev, David Lvovich Krichevskii, Alexander Ivanovich Gegello, Alexei Maximovich Gorky Palace of Culture, St Petersburg, Russia, 1925-1927. Front façade.  
 © [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gorky\\_House\\_of\\_Culture\\_SPB.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gorky_House_of_Culture_SPB.jpg).



09 Alexander Ivanovich Dmitriev, The Palace of Culture of Railway Workers, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 1927-1932. Palace of Culture foyer. © Błażej Ciarkowski, 2017.

main entrance with the portico, fan-shaped auditorium with lodges and balconies, long and narrow foyer and interior decoration based on contrast between modernist simplicity and Soviet splendor, whose reign was yet to come. [FIGURE 09]

## THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

The complicated history of “Zheleznodorozhnik” is connected to important and tragic historical events which left deep marks on the collective memory and Kharkiv cityscape (Schlogel, 2019). Designed and raised in the times of the Ukrainian cultural renaissance, it was inaugurated in 1932, just before the beginning of Holodomor. During the

World War II the Palace of Culture was partially damaged by the Nazis, who destroyed its interiors and equipment. Soon after the war, it again opened its doors for the workers of Kharkiv. In 1967 the building was adapted for the Museum of the History of the Southern Railway and, a year later, by decision of the Ministry of Culture of the Ukrainian SSR, it was awarded the title of "People's Museum".

The exceptional value of Dmitriev's work was officially appreciated in the late 1980s as the Palace of Culture was recognized as an architectural monument in 1987. In 2022 the building, which had been turned into the Central House of Science and Technology of the Southern Railway in the meantime, was listed in the State Register of National Cultural Heritage as a "Monument of architecture and town planning" with protection number 7028-Xa.<sup>2</sup>

As it is a part of cultural heritage listed in the State Register, labeling "Zheleznodorozhnik" as "dissonant heritage" seems to be inappropriate. Nevertheless, the building's history provokes multiple questions which go far beyond the aesthetics to the delicate matter of architecture's ethics. The recent crusade against monuments of the Communist regime which started in 2015 when the Law of Decommunization was proclaimed (Antonenko and Deriabina, 2020), and is known under the name "Leninopad" as numerous statues of the Soviet Leader were destroyed then. In the case of the Palace of Culture of Railway the controversies concerned monumental paintings by Lanceray. Murals representing Partisans of the Caucasus saluting the Red Army and the Meeting of Komsomol members with the peasants of Crimea, were the only monumental works of the artist preserved in Ukraine and the only examples of murals of the 1930s that remained in Kharkiv. Nevertheless, the political context of Lanceray's works provoked a heated public discussion and discouraged the authorities from giving them the status of cultural heritage.

## CONCLUSIONS

The historical issues have impact on the choice of preservation methods. Following Alexander Bouryak, who analyzed the strategies for the preservation of authenticity and integrity of the Freedom Square Complex (Swobody Square), several possible solutions can be distinguished – from restoration of original forms, through reintegration to conservation of the asset with its post-war modifications (Bouryak and Rusanova, 2020, 91). Each of them brings different meaning and highlights specific paths of interpretation. Even an act of intended destruction (like in Dontesk, where the Palace of Culture designed by Dmitriev was transformed into the center for Slavic Culture) appears to be a declaration of a certain attitude to the heritage of "Red Modernism".

Dmitriev's building's importance is contained not only in its materiality but also in its history. The "Palace of Culture" is a carrier of a complicated history. Even now, when destroyed by Russian bombs, it did not lose this function. On the contrary, as a "lieu de memoire" and historical palimpsest it bears a new layer of tragic memories. Wouldn't the conservation of ruins or reconstruction be a simple manifestation of what Pierre Nora named as a "fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future" (Nora 1989, 13)? The future of "Zheleznodorozhnik" requires discussion and, probably, development of new preservation strategies - just like those after World War II, when deep revision of preservationist doctrines concerning restoration and reconstruction was necessary.

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## ENDNOTES

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