

# THE INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION FOR THE STATE UKRAINIAN THEATER (1930)

## Application proposals from Japan

Hirimitsu Umemiya

**ABSTRACT:** Even although the International Competition for the State Ukrainian Theater (1930) did not result in any construction, it was a major landmark of Modernism in Ukrainian architecture. The competition received 144 entries from Soviet Union states and other countries, including four individual and one team proposals from Japan. Of these, Renshichiro Kawakita, a 29-year-old architect from Japan, was awarded the fourth prize and ranked higher than world-famous architects and designers like Walter Gropius, Norman Bel Geddes, and Hans Poelzig. This article deals with the modernist architectural scene in Japan around 1930 by introducing Japanese modernist architects' applications to the competition. The structure of this paper is as follows: The introduction presents the four groups of applicants from Japan, and highlights the tense shipping deadline faced by Kawakita based on a retrospective by his collaborator. The main part points out that the proposal from Japan understood the organizer's purpose to seek new ideas for theaters as cultural facilities for the proletariat via this competition, and designed it in line with that purpose. In this regard, Kawakita's effective presentation in the drawings led to his prize. It also examines Kawakita's architectural philosophy based on his comments after winning the prize. Kawakita praised functionalism and anti-aesthetics and believed that new architects should be engineers (rather than artists) with "inventor" nuances. This idea resonates with the international avant-garde ideas of the time in modernist architecture.

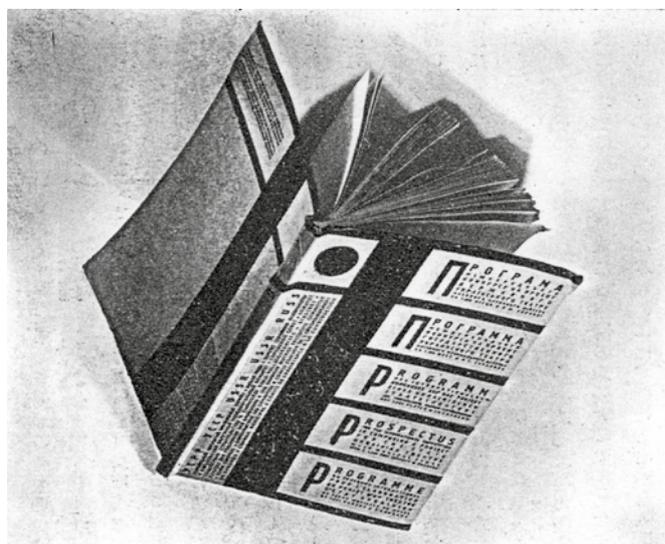
**KEYWORDS:** international architectural competition, theater reform, constructivism, Japanese architects, 1930

**INTRODUCTION:** In 1930, the International Competition of the National Ukrainian Theater called for ideas for a large theater to be built in Kharkiv, the then capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The competition was organized by the Kharkov District Executive Committee, Town Council, and Constructive Aid Committee. Three thousand copies of the prospectus were shipped around the world [FIGURE 01]. On the cover of the prospectus, the following was written in Ukrainian, Russian, German, English, and French: "PROSPECTUS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION IN COMPOSING A PROJECT FOR THE STATE UKRAINIAN THEATER MASS MUSICAL STAGE WITH A 4,000 SEAT CAPACITY, KHARKOV." The prospectus began as follows:

*The cultural revolution and socialist competition calling on the wide masses to active creative work in all domains in its turn gives out new formessages for the acceleration of the tempo of socialist reconstruction of our Public Economy and our daily life. The State Opera Theater of mass musical stage—as one of the strongest instruments*

*to act on the masses—should mobilize its activity around the basic problems of our epoch.*<sup>1</sup>

01 A photograph of the prospectus in an architectural magazine published in Japan, June 1931. © "Kenchiku Gaho" (Architectural Graphics), 22(6), Jun. 1931, 13.



According to the prospectus, the competition consisted of two parts: i) nominations for domestic groups and ii) an international open contest; the best project was to be chosen from between both parts. The deadline for applications was December 1930. Ten groups participated in the nomination competition, with more than 140 applications for the open contest. In May 1931, as a result of the judging process, the Vesnin brothers' proposal was selected as the best project among both parts<sup>2</sup>. However, this project was never put into practice. The reason for this theater project falling through was the social turmoil caused by the decisive shift of the Soviet Communist Party in Ukrainian policy from Ukrainization to Sovietization that began in the mid-1930s. In 1933, the Soviet Communist Party intensified its crackdown on Ukrainian intellectuals. For example, in October of the same year, Les Kurbas, a leading Ukrainian stage director and a member of the jury of the competition for the State Ukrainian Theater, was dismissed as the director of the Beregil Theater (which he had also founded). In 1934, the Ukrainian capital moved from Kharkiv, where the theater was intended to be built, to Kiev.

Four Japanese individuals and teams applied to this design competition. While Renshichiro Kawakita's application proposal may be known to some because it was selected for the fourth prize, the other three are not; this article aims to introduce these proposals. It also compares the application proposals from Japan with those from around the world. However, the article provides only an overview because the original drawings of the proposal from Japan are missing,<sup>3</sup> and we have to rely on the small photographs in the Japanese architectural magazines of the time to understand the architectural content of the proposal. From these limited resources, it is difficult to examine the planning, structure, stage mechanism, and flow line processing in detail. Despite these limitations, it is possible to discover the resonance of Modernism in the young Japanese modernist architects' response to the international competition.

## CORRESPONDENCE OF JAPANESE MODERNISTS IN RESPONSE TO THE COMPETITION NEWS

The plan to build a large theater with a capacity of 4000 in Kharkiv was approved by the Soviet Union parliament in 1929.<sup>4</sup> The concept was solicited by an international competition, and 3000 copies of the prospectus were sent around the world.<sup>5</sup> The prospectus was delivered to the Architectural Institute of Japan through the Soviet Embassy. A shortened translation of the requirements was published in the August 1930 issue of the institute's magazine, the *Journal of Architecture and Building Science* (Kenchiku Zasshi), where it was also noted that "*The building is*

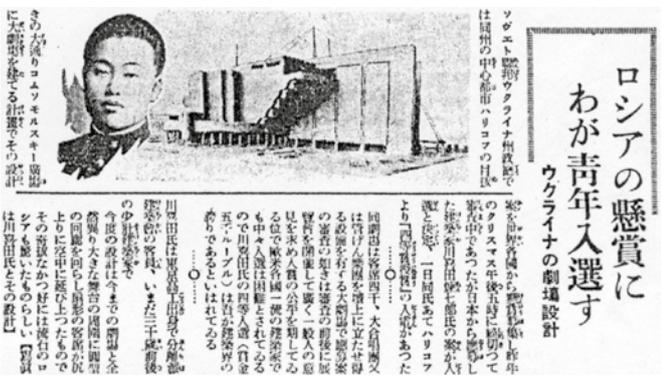
*scheduled for completion within five years ... the original program is held by the Architectural Institute and may be viewed there by potential applicants.*"<sup>6</sup>

The Emerging Architects League (Shinko Kenchikuka Renmei), a young modernist architect group formed in July 1930, saw this short article and responded quickly. The program and site map were printed and distributed; simultaneously, negotiations began with the Soviet embassy in Japan to ship the application proposals in bulk.<sup>7</sup> The four individual and team applications from Japan are as follows:

- 1 Renshichiro Kawakita (1902–1975): He was known for his fanciful and unrealistic projects for theaters.
- 2 A group named *Souu-sha*: They were draftsmen belonging to the Ministry of Communications. However, the leader Okamura "Yamaguchi" Bunzo (1902–1978) was absent while studying in Germany.
- 3 Nagatoshi Tsuchihashi (1901–1959): He was an engineer of the Ministry of Railways, and had just returned from Le Corbusier's atelier in Paris.
- 4 Hideo Noro and Aki Kato (year of birth and death unknown): Noro was a socialist architect, and Kato was an old-fashioned cinema architecture specialist. They were an interesting combination of ideologue and realistic practitioners.

Except for Kato, all others were young architects approximately 30 years of age.

I will try to reproduce the last day of the preparation work for the competition entries, based on a retrospective written by a colleague of Kawakita,<sup>8</sup> which vividly conveys slapstick humor despite the sense of urgency just before the deadline. Kawakita and his collaborators were rushing to complete the application proposal on December 15th, 1930, with the information that the Soviet embassy staff was leaving for Moscow. Despite his schedule having been suddenly moved to 1:00 pm on the 13th, he knew of this change only the morning before. They hurriedly completed the execution of 60 drawings and a two meters wide perspective and rushed to the Ueno station. The embassy staff was on the train to Tsuruga, from where the ship to Vladivostok departed. They found a foreigner who seemed to be a member of the staff but could not communicate well. They were refused entry to the station platform because the attendant did not recognize the large roll of drawings as baggage. Regardless of this, embassy officials tried to board the train. The departure time was nearing. Kawakita hurriedly collected all the money for the train fare to Tsuruga from his juniors, had the drawings sent separately by rail, and boarded the train to continue negotiations. On a cold day, the men left on the platform had no overcoats or hats and wore sandals.



02 A newspaper article reporting Renshichiro Kawakita's prize. The headline says, "A young man of our country is awarded a prize in a Russian competition. Design of the theater in Ukraine." © The Tokyo Asahi Shimbun, May 2, 1931.

## RENSHICHIRO KAWAKITA'S PRIZE

While it was not clear whether the drawings had reached their destination, definitive news arrived with regard to Kawakita's application proposal. On May 1, 1931, he received a telegram announcing that he had been awarded the fourth prize in the competition. It surprised the Japanese architectural community that an unknown young Japanese architect had won a prize on the international stage. It was rare for a Japanese architect to tackle an international competition [FIGURE 02].

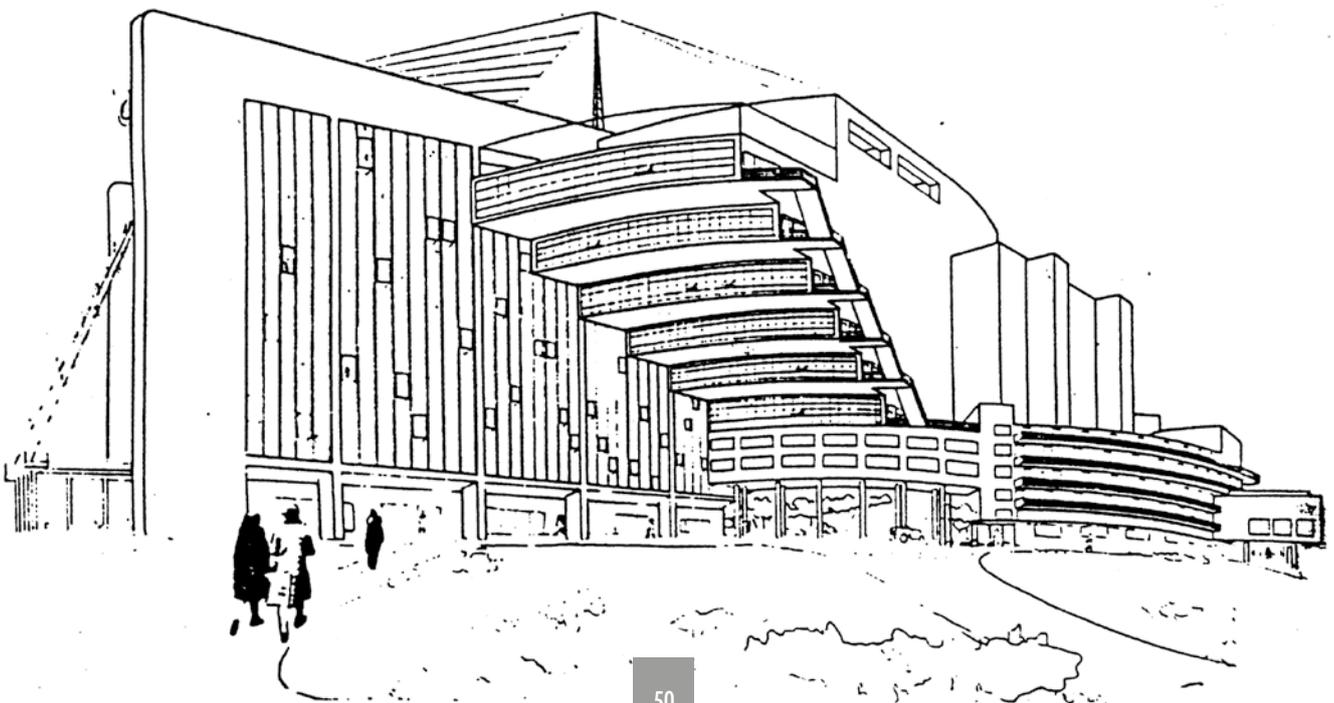
Of the 144 applications, approximately 100 were from overseas as open entries. The best of all applications was that of the Vesnin brothers, famous in Japan at the time as the leaders of Constructivism. As the first prize for the open contest was jointly shared by three groups, the next awarded prize was Kawakita's fourth prize, which received the second highest evaluation [FIGURE 03]. This was the culmination of a succession of imaginary projects of experimental theater he had been producing under the influence of theater reforms in Europe and America of the early 20th century. His drawings include well-thought-out

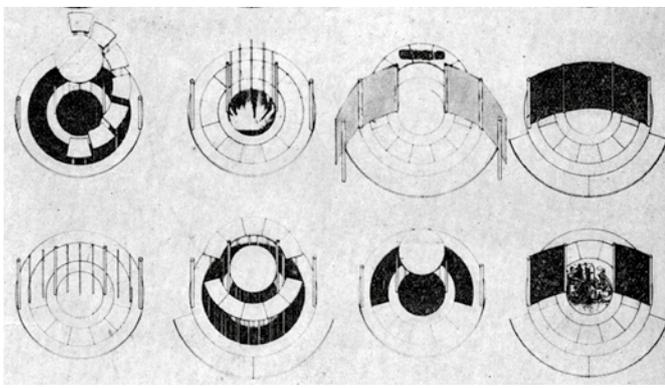
diagrams showing the stage effect and the correlation in theater, as shown in [FIGURE 04, FIGURE 05]. The other three proposals submitted from Japan were not selected, but Tsuchihashi and the *Souu-sha* received limited evaluation although they had some drawbacks.<sup>9</sup>

The presented list about the winners of the competition is incomplete and needs further investigation [FIGURE 06]. A source is Renshichiro Kawakita's Report of the International Competition for the State Ukrainian Theater and commentary on the awarded proposal (Kawakita, 1932). Kawakita is quoted in this article saying that he wrote the report based on the information he received from the Ukrainian Society of Cultural and Scientific Relations with Foreign Countries through the Soviet Embassy in Japan. However, the entity of the information is unknown. Some code names and organization names are translated from Japanese in Kawakita's article; therefore, they are not the same as the original. The notations of the country and city names are those from that time (Richter, 1931).

News about the other winners, which arrived after that of Kawakita's fourth prize, were also a surprise to everyone. The eighth prize was awarded to Walter Gropius (1883–1969), a leader of Modernism, and the 11th prize was awarded to Norman Bel Geddes (1893–1958), who later became a well-known industrial designer; however, at that time, he was known as a stage designer in Japan. The famous expressionist Hans Poelzig (1869–1936) and Bauhaus master Marcel Breuer (1902–1981) were among the honorable mentions. All of them were held in high regard by young Japanese modernist architects of the time. Yet in terms of rankings and prizes, the 29-year-old unknown Japanese architect Kawakita had performed

03 The entry with code name "R", by Renshichiro Kawakita, was awarded the fourth prize. © Kenchiku Gaho (Architectural Graphics), 22(6), Jun. 1931, one of frontispieces (no page number).



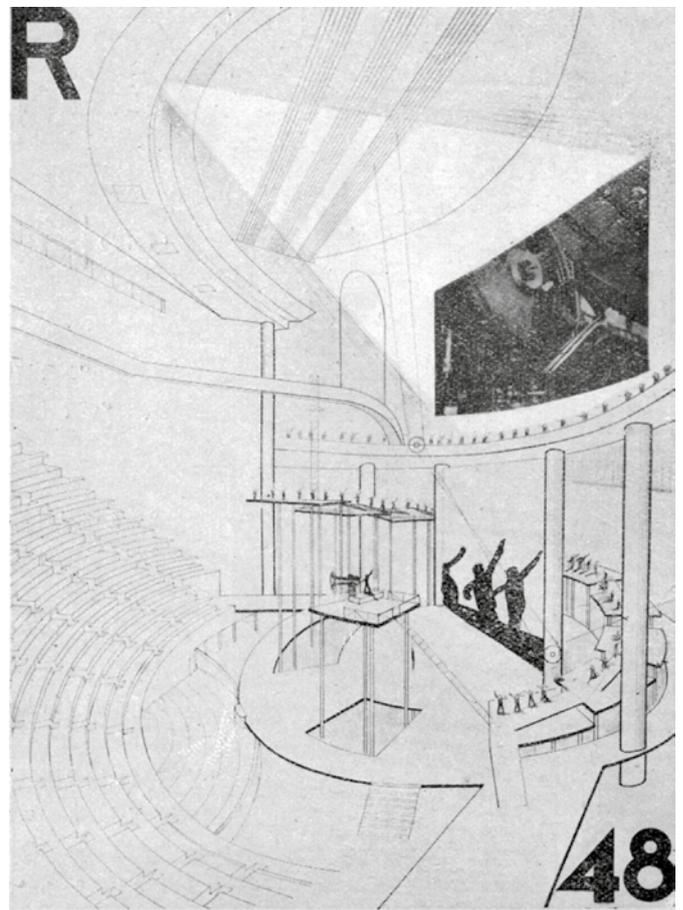


04 Stage concept of Renshichiro Kawakita's fourth prize (partially).  
© Kenchiku Kougei I See All, 2(9), Sept. 1932, 29–41.

better than these more well-known architects.

The competition demanded the following specifications for the theater: an audience capacity of 4,000 and a space that could be used not only to stage theatrical performances but also demonstrations, festivals, cinemas, circuses, and various combinations of performances. Furthermore, the theater's function and form had to be a symbol of the ideals of culture creation of the Ukrainian proletariat, Soviet industrial and economic development, and the human culture of all nations. Because the Soviet Union was the first to promote experiments on the construction of a socialist state, the theater was not a place for hedonistic entertainment, but an important platform for social functions to boost national development.

Proposals for such requests had some things in common. First, in terms of functionality, an amphitheater equipped with a three-dimensional movable stage mechanism that enabled a variety of productions and effects for programs was common. Second, some code names used when entering the competition were reminiscent of titles such



05 Interior view of Renshichiro Kawakita's fourth prize.  
© Kenchiku Kougei I See All, 2(9), Sept. 1932, 29–41.

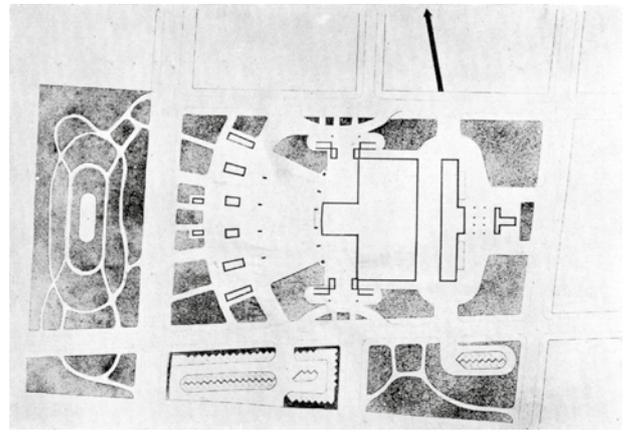
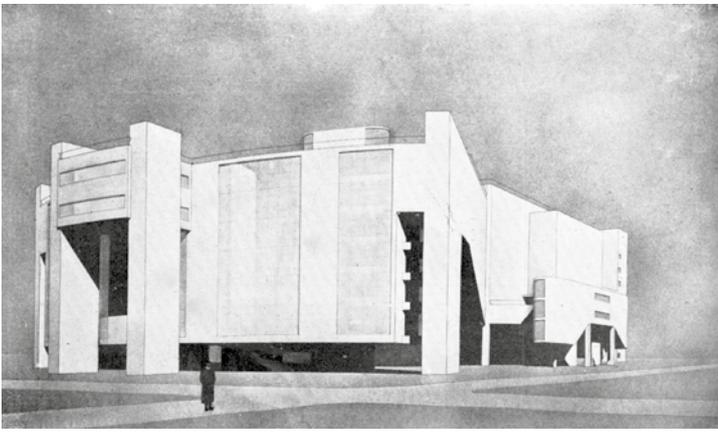
as El Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* or Malevich's *The Red Cross on a Black Circle*.

These characteristics were also common to the proposals from Japan. The *Souu-sha* adopted a symmetrical plane and a static elevation, with a combination of functional elements. Even though the *Souu-sha* group's proposal

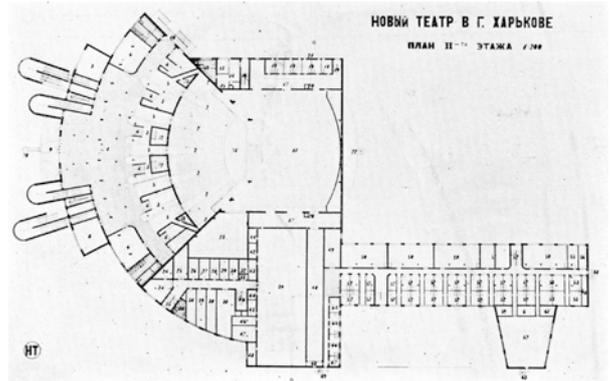
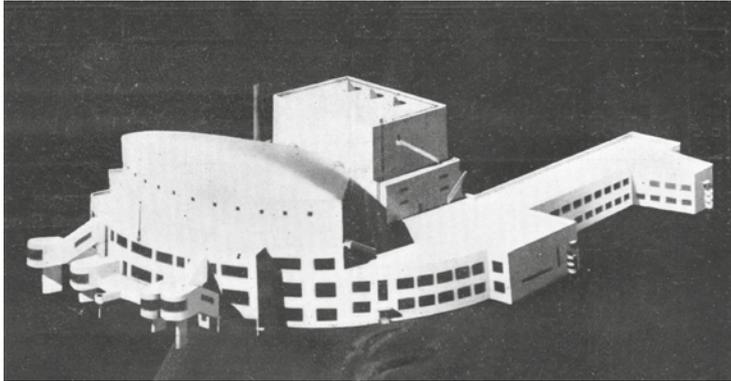
06 Award winners of the competition (incomplete list). This list is based on information from the following articles in Japanese and German architectural magazines; nonetheless, there are some unclear points. © Author.

**The Best of All Projects : Crossing Rings / Vesnin brothers**

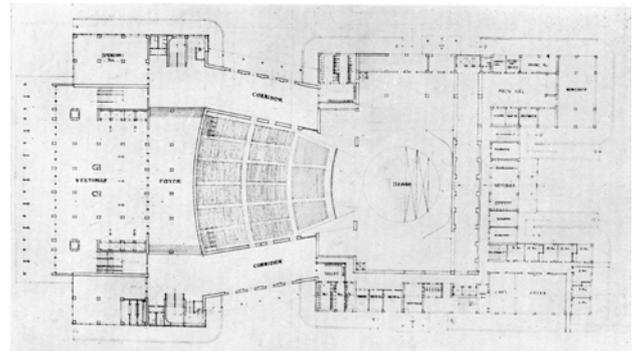
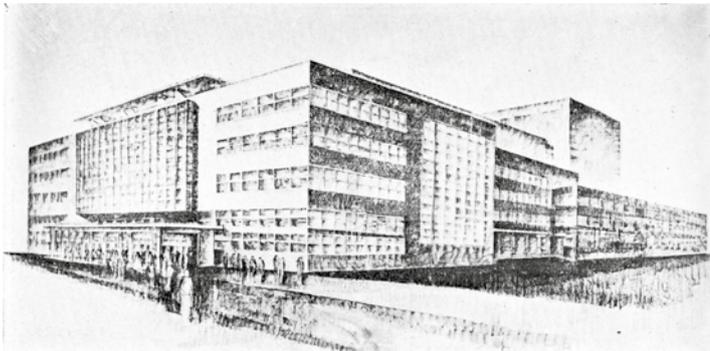
domestic nominations				international open contest			
prize	code name	nominator	city/republic	prize	code name	applicant	city/country
1A	Crossing Rings	Vesnin brothers	Moscow /Soviet Union	1A	Black Wedge in a Red Ring	Zdenko Strižić	Berlin/German
1B	ASI	unknown	Moscow /Soviet Union	1B	Machine	Alfred Kastner et al.	United States
2A	Factory of Emotions for Proletariat	Kharkiv Scientific Structural Society	Kharkov /Soviet Ukraine	1C	1931	unknown	unknown
2B	SI	Kyiv Construction Association	Kyiv /Soviet Ukraine	4	R	Renshichiro Kawakita	Tokyo/Japan
2C	Mask made of Note	Kharkiv Science Construction Federation	Kharkov /Soviet Ukraine	5	12A	Olenev	Leningrad /Soviet Union
2D	Red Star	Leningrad Architectural Association	Leningrad /Soviet Union	6	October 1930	Willy Boesiger and Oscar Stonorov	Karlsruhe /German
<b>works not chosen (nominators unknown)</b>				7	unknown	unknown	unknown
Art of Ukraine / Komsomol Square / The First Order / The Flow / Black Mask / OSA / 5A / Vibrated Notes				8	Mass Center	Walter Gropius	Berlin /German
				9	Towards the Bottom of a Stage	unknown	unknown
				10	KTH	Kurmman, Hirtz, Lindstrom, and Peterson	Stockholm /Sweden
				11	File #203	Norman Bel Geddes	United States
				12	Green Ring	Wolfensohn, Waldenberg, and Meerson	Moscow /Soviet Union



07 a & b The Souu-sha group's proposal is characterized by an attempt to manage the flow lines of the audience, performers and stage staff by pilots under the auditorium and another building.  
© Kokusai Kenchiku (International Architecture), 7(6), Jun. 1931, 20–23.



08 a & b Even though Nagatashi Tsuchihashi's proposal (code name "HT") did not win a prize either, it was selected as one of the third-grade groups.  
© Kokusai Kenchiku (International Architecture), 7(6), Jun. 1931, 14–16.



09 a & b Aki Kato and Hideo Noro's team (code name unknown) was not chosen. Its large curtain walls, orthodox theater plan and Emil Fahrenkamp-like drawing convey a relatively old-fashioned modernity by comparison with the cutting-edge trends of the time. © Kokusai Kenchiku (International Architecture), 7(6), Jun. 1931, 18–19.

(code name "S") did not win a prize, it was selected as one of the third-grade groups [FIGURE 07].

Tsuchihashi combined arcs and straight lines to create an asymmetrical equilibrium. Dynamism was created by adding flow lines such as stairs [FIGURE 08].

Kato and Noro adopted a large glass curtain wall reminiscent of the Bauhaus building in Dessau while retaining its old style [FIGURE 09].

It may be difficult to evaluate Kawakita's proposal fairly as the result was already known. Nevertheless, it was an outstanding feat even when considering application proposals from around the world. Some of its features included a quadruple revolving stage that created various stage configurations; a stage mechanism that could combine movies, shadow puppets, and performances by actors; numerous parallel see-through elevator shafts; and

an overhanging gallery that looked as if it was hung on a huge beam. These were effectively expressed through drawings. The jury termed the overall conception "invention brimming with originality"<sup>10</sup>

### RESONANCE OF AVANT-GARDISM

It is not possible within the scope of the present article to also relate how Kawakita went on to create a fulfilling project in a short period before the deadline; rather this article focuses on how he viewed the significance of this design competition. In May 1931, after the news of his accomplishment, he made the following remarks at a celebration held by his colleagues:

*"In most Japanese architectural competitions, the important concern is the facade as an artistic expression of individuality. In such competitions, the architect is nothing*

more than a draftsman who paints a facade that looks good. However, such a job is not an architect's mission. The new architect of the future must be an engineer."<sup>11</sup>

We need to be cautious of Kawakita's individual phraseology when understanding "draftsman" and "engineer" in contrast; while a draftsman can pursue originality and newness as style not only in historical eclecticism, but also in the style of Modernism, engineers can invent new facilities using a series of new technologies. On the assumption that he considered these nuances of an artist and inventor, he regarded engineers as the ideal future architects.

Kawakita regarded the International Competition for a Ukrainian theater as an ideal model for the production of architecture. This way of thinking had become generally prevalent among more radical modernist architects in Japan around 1930. They had pondered the vision of the "architecture" and "architect," and the concepts that emerged were Functionalism and anti-aesthetics. This idea, which was not always political, was a manifestation of the influence of Marxism on intellectuals in the architectural community at the time, underlying which was a youthful—and slightly naive—hope and desire for isolation from the tradition and engagement of modern architecture. They understood how the program of an architectural production should be based on the competition conducted for the Ukrainian theater.

The Ukrainian theater project was considered a part of the first Five-Year Plan under the Stalin administration. In the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic during this period, the official national policy of Ukrainization, espoused by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was promoted. It brought about an upsurge of nationalism, called at the time the "Ukrainian Renaissance," while simultaneously serving as a kind of conciliation policy aimed at removing the barriers between Soviet power and the Ukrainian masses. After Holodomor (the Great Famine of 1932-3), caused by the reckless agricultural policies of the Five-Year Plans, the Soviet Communist Party made a major shift in policy from Ukrainization to Russification. In 1932, it tightened control over artists and adopted Socialist Realism as the official form of expression of the state, cracking down on many avant-gardes, including architects, during this process. In retrospect, proposals for the Ukrainian theater design competition were the last symbol of the two chief strands of avant-gardism—architectural and political—under Modernism just before the Soviet policy shift.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to judge how well the applicants from each country understood the political situation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic at the time. There seems to have been a big difference in understanding between the

Japanese and Europeans, which cannot be overlooked. However, most applicants may have expected socialist ideology while also realizing that this competition was a means of propaganda. This could be seen in the applications from Japan, particularly Kawakita's proposal. He added the famous silhouette of Lenin giving a speech in the illustration of the stage mechanism as well as a large depiction of Marx's slogan ("Workers of all lands, unite!")<sup>12</sup>, written in Ukrainian and raised high in front of the theater. Kawakita wrote the following words when reviewing application proposals including his own work in January 1932: "This competition has succeeded in two senses: one by acquiring epoch-making ideas for a theater; the other by disseminating the propaganda of the Soviet Union."<sup>13</sup>

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**Hiroimitsu Umemiya**, (Japan, 1958) B Eng. (Kindai Univ.), M Eng (Kyoto Institute of Technology), PhD (Kobe Univ.). Architectural historian and professor of the Graduate School of Human Development and Environment, Kobe University. Curatorial advisor of the exhibition "Bauhaus Imaginista" (2018). Member of Docomomo Japan.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Kharkov District Executive Committee, Town Council, Constructive Aid Committee. *Prospectus for the international competition in composing a project for the state Ukrainian theatre mass musical stage with a 4000-seat capacity, Kharkov*, (Although there is no indication of the issue date, it seems to be July 1930), 115.

- 2 KAWAKITA, Renshichiro (1932). Report of the International Competition for the State Ukrainian Theater and commentary on the awarded proposal. *Kenchiku Kogei I See All (Architecture and Design "I See All")*, 2(9), 1932, 43–45.
- 3 According to the bereaved family of Renshichiro Kawakita, his drawings are not in the family house. After World War II, members of *Souu-sha* established an architectural design office named RIA. According to the former staff, *Souu-sha's* application is not available in the office. Accordingly, it is considered that the application proposals from Japan were not returned.
- 4 Kawakita, op.cit., 43–44.
- 5 Ibid., 44.
- 6 Information, *the Journal of Architecture and Building Science* (the journal of Architectural Institute of Japan), 536, Aug. 1930, 113
- 7 Renshichiro Kawakita, Regarding the International Competition for the State Ukrainian Theater. *Kokusai Kenchiku (The International Architecture)*, 6(9), 1931, 36
- 8 S.A., Umekusa, *Kenchiku Gaho (Architectural Graphics)*, 22(6), 1931, 4. The author's name "S.A." is likely to be Saburo Asano, a junior of Kawakita who helped him with the competition entry.
- 9 Renshichiro Kawakita, Report of the International Competition for the State Ukrainian Theater and commentary on the awarded proposal. *Kenchiku Kougei I See All*, 2(9), 1932, 46–48.
- 10 Ibid., 56.
- 11 Renshichiro Kawakita, About the application plan of the Ukrainian theater. *Kenchiku Gaho*, 22(6), 1931, 4.
- 12 This slogan is printed at the beginning of each language of the Prospectus written in five languages.
- 13 Renshichiro Kawakita, Report of the International Competition for the State Ukrainian Theater and commentary on the awarded proposal. *Kenchiku Kougei I See All*, 2(9), 1932. 82

