

PUBLISHED RESEARCH SOURCES ON UKRAINIAN AVANT-GARDE

Architecture and Modernity

Ukrainian architecture is scarcely represented in Western libraries. And there are few Western investigations that specialize in the Ukrainian Modern Movement. For a long time, Selim Omarovich Khan-Magomedov's book *'Pioneers of Soviet architecture'*, first published in the German Democratic Republic in 1983 as *'Pioniere der Sowjetischen Architektur. Der Weg zur neuen sowjetischen Architektur in den zwanziger und zu Beginn der dreißiger Jahre'*, has been the best known source on this subject accessible for Western scholars. In 1987, this book was translated and published in English by Thames and Hudson/Rizzoli. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Khan-Magomedov reworked his manuscript and published an enhanced Russian version in two volumes¹.

In this short overview of published materials on Ukrainian Avant-garde, I want to focus on almost unknown publications from the 1920s-1930s and recent research published in the last three decades.

But we should first address why the Ukrainian Modern Movement is so unknown. Despite the many publications of the *Gosprom* complex in Kharkiv, the Socialist city of Zaporizhzhia or the impressive hydro-electric ensemble of the Dnieper Dam and the power station known as *DneproGES* in the 1920s-1930s in European journals, many

Ukrainian masterpieces, for a long time, did not enjoy the attention of Western scholars. Neither did this period get a lot of attention in the former USSR and Soviet Ukraine. In the 1960s-1980s, the Russian Avant-garde was gradually rehabilitated in the Soviet Union, while the Ukrainian version remained in the shadows. One of the reasons for this was that the Ukrainian architecture of 1920-1930 became closely associated with the rise of national consciousness, the flourishing of modernity in Ukrainian culture and the former Ukrainian capital Kharkiv. Many intellectuals, artists, architects and politicians were repressed in the late

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1930s, and their names became forbidden in official Soviet publications. A lot of monuments, but also publications and other materials, disappeared during World War II. Thus, the Ukrainian Avant-garde became very badly documented and difficult to access even for local Soviet art and architectural historians. Even in biographies of famous Ukrainian architects, the years 1920-1930 have been suppressed in their careers. A welcome exception was a series of architect biographies published in 1966-1967 in Kyiv: *Vidatni zodchi Ukraini* ('Prominent architects of Ukraine'). Among them were biographies of architects Pavlo Fedotovych Alyoshin, Alexander Leontievich Krasosel'skii, Alexander Matveevich Verbits'kii in 1966, architects Volodimir Gnatovich Zabolotnii, Valerian Mikitovich Rikov and engineer Alexander Inokentievich Nerovets'kii. Later on, the 1920s-1930s also received more attention and positive reflection in publications on Ukrainian cities and regions.

In 1988, at the start of the Perestroika period, Vladimir Evgen'evich Iasievich published an elegant book '*Architecture of Ukraine at the edge of XIX-XX centuries*' in Kyiv. This intelligent and comprehensive book analyzed the *fin de siècle* of Ukrainian architecture and town planning. The wealth of new information presented in this publication contributed to our understanding of the origins of Ukrainian Avant-garde in the 20th century. Iasievich systematically introduced the search for the national form in Ukrainian architecture and discussed Art Nouveau/Jugendstil and Rationalism. Rationalism, in his interpretation, was mostly presented in constructive and functional efficiency and innovation. Remarkably, a book about the already-mentioned *Gosprom* complex in Kharkiv was published in Moscow only one year after the Soviet Union collapsed².

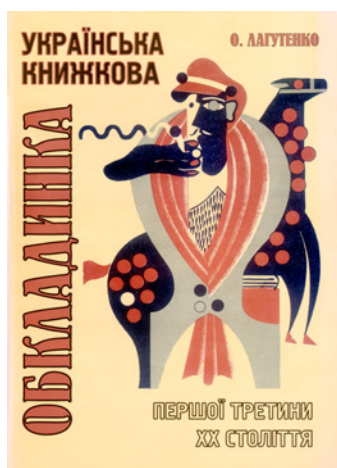
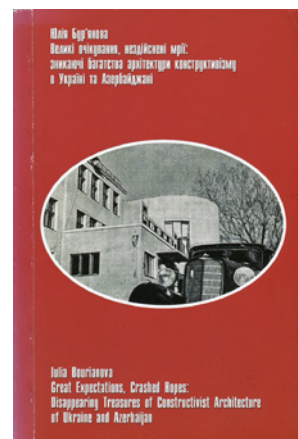
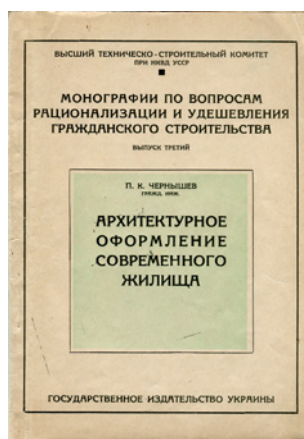
In 1920-1930, the Ukrainian State Publisher in Kharkiv published architectural books also in Russian and/or bilingual (Ukrainian/Russian). A reciprocal character of the Ukrainian and Russian Avant-garde has been nearly completely overlooked by the majority



of researchers, including prominent researchers such as Selim O. Khan-Magomedov. Only two publications, which I have in my private collection, a bilingual album with '*Standardized designs of workers' housing*' (1928) and '*The Architectural organization of the Modern Housing*' published in Russian by P.K. Chernyshev (1930), obviously had an influence in Russia and other former Soviet republics. Without a doubt, these publications stimulated the all-Soviet Union practice of rationalizing housing design, searching for the most economical solutions in the standardized designs and supplying a critical analysis of German and Austrian modern housing designs presented in Chernyshev's monography³.

Nearly two decades ago, Julia Bourianova published the modest bilingual (Ukrainian/English) book '*Great Expectations, Crashed Hopes: Disappearing Treasures of Constructivist Architecture of Ukraine and Azerbaijan*', which became one of the first attempts to provide an overview of the Ukrainian Modern Movement monuments in English. For this publication, the author inspected surviving monuments from the 1920s-1930s and documented their present state over six years of research. The book used a building typology to order the material geographically: Kyiv, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia and Crimea were represented and illustrated with 115 images. The Azerbaijan part is shorter and includes only Baku, but it facilitates a possible comparison of the involvement of architects from Moscow and Leningrad, as well as, for example, of the application of local natural materials in Azerbaijani and Ukrainian Modern Movement monuments.

In the decades after the declaration of independence in 1991, Ukrainian (art and architectural) historians were freed from ideological pressure. This period came with a re-examination of the whole history of the country. A bulk of new historical research transformed the scientific understanding of the National Revival or the so-called Red Renaissance of Ukrainian culture in the 1920s-1930s. Some of these publications related to art history could serve



as good examples for architecture and urban planning historians. Thus, Ganna Veselovska's 'Ukrainian Theatrical Avant-Garde' and two publications on Modern Ukrainian book design: Lagutenko, Olga A. *Ukrains'ka knizhova okladinka pershoi tretini XX stolittia: Stilistichni osoblivosti khudozhn'oi movi* (Ukrainian Book Covers from the first third of the XX century: Stylistic peculiarities of the artistic language) Kyiv: Politekhika, 2005 and Mudrak, Myroslava M. *Beyond Border: Modern Ukrainian Book Design 1914-1945*, Kyiv Krytyka, 2008, brought an impressive amount of almost completely unknown achievements of Ukrainian Avant-Garde to light, while it established its solid place in pan-European context.

Another aspect of the revision of Ukrainian Modernism is the reassessment of the narrative of the so-called Russian Avant-garde. Traditionally, several key figures of the Russian Avant-garde were considered and generally accepted as Russians, but in fact, they had Ukrainian roots, were Ukrainians or started their carrier in Ukraine. The most striking example is Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1879-1935). It is not surprising that Kyiv art historian Dmytro Gorbachev published the book 'Malevich and Ukraine' in 2006. His re-examination of Malevich has a sound ground. For instance, Malevich published the series of his articles on architecture in Ukrainian, not in Russian, in the journal *Nova generatsiia: Zhurnal Levoï formatsiï mistetstv* (*New generation: Journal of the Left Front of the Arts*), an Avant-garde magazine published in Kharkiv.

In 2010, Boris Erofalov-Pilipchak published a hefty book about the architecture of Soviet Kyiv. It is a collection of essays, interviews and presentations of urbanistic projects as



well as biographies of some prominent architects and town planners. The book includes all styles and movements in Kyiv in the 20th century. Erofalov-Pilipchak presents polemical examinations of the 1920s-1930s and 1960s-1990s in Kyivan architecture. The book is written in prose in a free manner; it includes anecdotes and oral stories and reads like a detective story. It also presents many megalomaniac and bombastic designs and impressive neoclassical ensembles. One notable example is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, admired by Albert Speer, Adolf Hitler's architect, who reportedly wished to meet the architect of this building complex.

Erofalov-Pilipchak also told the story of a special piece of art from around the decline of Soviet Communism, the 'Wall of Remembrance'. It stands 213 meters long with 2000 square meters of bas-reliefs in the large-scale memorial complex on the Baikov Cemetery in Kyiv. It took a decade to execute. When it was finally completed (1982), the Soviet authorities ordered to cover up the sculpture with concrete to hide 'this piece of art alien to the principles of Social Realism'. Yet there are plans to unveil this masterpiece.

In 2017, Svitlana Oleksiivna Smolenska defended in Lviv the dissertation 'The Architecture of Avant-Garde Modernism in Ukraine: Genesis and Heritage'. It is digitally available in Ukrainian language, and, for the time being, it is the best, comprehensive attempt to re-examine the progressive Ukrainian architecture of the interbellum. Smolenska presents a very rich and multidimensional research on terminology, periodization, architectural history and heritage preservation. Her dissertation includes both Western and Eastern parts of Ukraine. The analysis of the former Polish part of the country brought interesting comparisons. Dr Smolenska's systematic approach to her subject is worthy of praise. She accurately placed the Ukrainian Architectural Modernism of the 1920s-1930s in the international context.

In the same year of the defence of this dissertation, an international 'research-to-practice conference' was held in Zaporizhzhia. It focused on

research and preservation issues of the interbellum Modern Movement architectural heritage. A team of scholars, officials, activists and architects addressed the relationship of the phenomena of interwar Modernism in various countries of Western and Eastern Europe (with special attention to the heritage of the Bauhaus architectural school and Constructivism of Zaporizhzhia), practices of conservation of Modern Movement heritage in Germany, Ukraine and the world, emerging legal and technical issues, ways of advocacy, popularisation and protection of architectural heritage, etc. The proceedings of this conference, published a year later in 2018, present a multidisciplinary approach and a wealth of ideas and interpretations by internationally established researchers as well as by young Ukrainian scientists and activists. The inclusion of a section on activism is especially important, as it provides a roadmap for preserving Modern Movement buildings in Ukraine.

In this overview, we have to mention the regular international conferences with publications of books and abstracts organized by the Ukrainian Chapter of DOCOMOMO and Kharkiv National University of Civil Engineering and Architecture. These publications deserve a special review, which we are planning to publish in the next issue of the DOCOMOMO Journal. The driving force behind these conferences and the scientific editor of their proceedings is Professor Dr Alexander P. Bouryak.

In the past decade, the brutalist movement got prominent international attention. A welcome addition to the



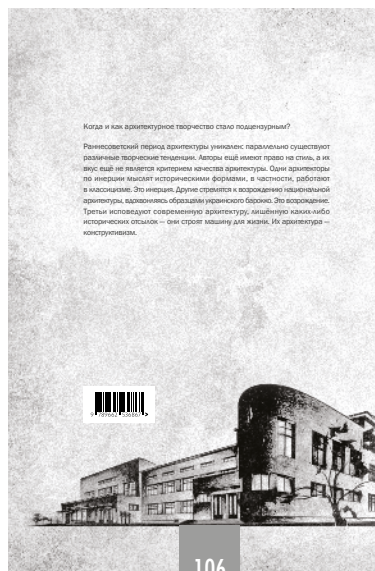
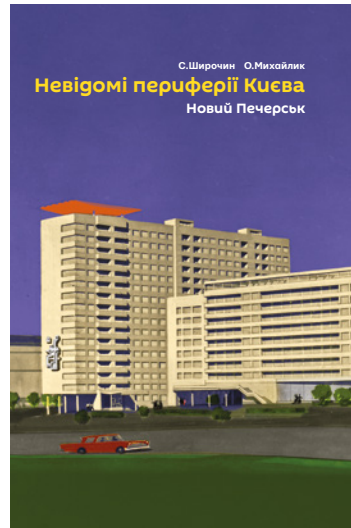
storm of publications on this subject is 'Soviet Modernism. Brutalism. Post-Modernism. Buildings and Structures in Ukraine 1955-1991' by Ievgeniia Gubkina and Alex Bykov, published in Berlin by DOM publishers in 2019. In her introduction to this impressive collection of recent photographs, Ievgeniia Gubkina sketches a historical context of Ukrainian architecture in the years 1955-1991 and discusses the terminology connected with Modernism. Gubkina suggests a periodization of Ukrainian architecture in which 1955-1963 was the Thaw Period, 1964-1973 were the years of the Libermann reforms, 1974-1982 was the time of Soviet Brutalism during the Brezhnev period of stagnation, and finally, 1985-1991 was the period of Ukrainian Socialist Postmodernism. Gubkina described an oppressive atmosphere in the profession during the whole period. She did not discuss the institutional role of the large state design institutions, nor did she analyze standardized mass housing. Only briefly did she mention Avraham Miletski (Avraam Moiseevich Miletsky) (1918-2004), who together with his team of his collaborators really deserves more attention.

The negligible quantity of comprehensive monographs on the leading figures of the Ukrainian Avant-garde is, in fact, the general problem in the historiography of the country's Modernism. The author is only aware of one book about the above-mentioned Soviet and Israeli architect Avraham Miletski: V. Levin edited his texts and published them in 1998 in Jerusalem under the title 'Flashes of memory'⁴.

Recently, two biographies were published about another unquestionable master of Ukrainian architecture of the 20th century, Josif Iul'evich Karakis (1902-1988). It was his great-grandson Oleg Iunakov who published the last and most impressive book in Russian in New York in 2016. This book is richly illustrated with drawings, photographs and scans of historic personal documents. Some documents are striking in their drama: in the group photograph of the Presidium of the Union of Soviet architects of Ukraine in 1937 (p. 81), a person next to Karakis was later retouched in black as an 'enemy of Soviet people'. As a result of this manipulation, Karakis got a black jacket to make the photograph look more realistic. In its weirdness and complexity, the story of Karakis' various designs for the Jewish theatre in Kyiv could serve as the best illustration of the fate of Ukrainian Modernism in general.

In Iunakov's book, Karakis is praised as 'the main architect of his generation', 'the person of the Epoch'. Indeed, this maestro of Ukrainian Modernism has shown incredible virtuosity in staying creative and innovative during all twists of Soviet architecture. He kept his place as the moral authority among his colleagues. Karakis was a brave person who fearlessly defended Constructivism in public, even in 1936, when this had become extremely dangerous.

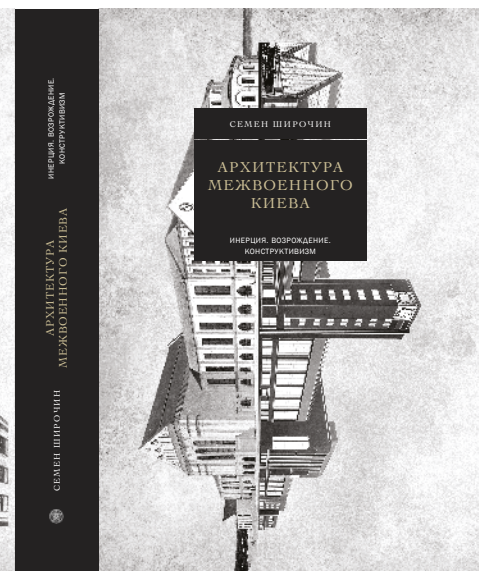
Some of his buildings of the 1920s-1930s and 1960s-1980s became icons of the Ukrainian Modern Movement. In his housing projects from the 1920s-1930s and his famous Dinamo restaurant of 1931 in Kyiv, we can immediately recognize his personal style within the Modern idiom. Karakis is one of the most internationally oriented Ukrainian architects. Frank Lloyd Wright influenced his designs in the 1920s-1930s. But also in the postwar period, Karakis remained open to World architecture. On page 373, Iunakov wrote that Karakis' design for a high-rise in the Batiyeva Hora (Batyev Mountain) neighborhood in Kyiv (1975) was compared with Bertrand Goldberg's Marina City in Chicago, built from 1964-1968. Though, in the opinion of the author of



this paper, Karakis' design has even more in common with the *Torres Blancas* designed in 1961 for Madrid by Spanish architect Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza.

In recent years, with the growing interest in local and regional history, many publications have appeared that deal with specific regions and cities. Several series of publications about Kyiv by Semen Shyrochyn must be mentioned here. In the dark November evenings of 2022, several presentations were held in war-plagued Kyiv of his last book *Architektura mezhvoennogo Kiieva: Inertsia, Vozrozhdenie, Konstruktivism* (*Interbellum Architecture of Kyiv: Inertia, Revival, Constructivism*). The presentations were held by candlelight. In his book, Shyrochyn describes more than 150 buildings, presenting a wealth of new visual information on such crucial competitions as the one for the Main Railway Station of Kyiv. He provocatively questions the role of the Constructivist architects in their fight against the National architectural movement in the 1920s.

Ievgeniia Gubkina and Semen Shyrochyn among others represent a younger generation of Ukrainian architectural historians, who without a doubt, will be able to bring Ukrainian architectural Modernism from obscurity to objectively question its Russia-centric perceptions and present this rich and complex phenomenon to a broad public.



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ENDNOTES

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