

KHARKIV INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

The Apogee of the Soviet Architectural Avant-Garde

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ABSTRACT: One of the sides of a large study dedicated to the forgotten international competition of 1930 for the Project of the State Ukrainian Theater of Mass Musical Action in Kharkiv is touched upon in this article. Its purpose is the reconstruction of the competition events, identifying the features of the process of their organization. The competition attracted a record number of foreign contestants not only from many European countries, but also from other continents (from the USA and Japan). Why did it generate such widespread interest? Which famous architects took part in it? Who evaluated the projects and according to what criteria were the awards distributed? The author of this article is looking for answers to these questions. The problems of the research are due to the fact that the originals of the competition projects have not survived, and their photocopies and preparatory sketches are scattered in the archives of many countries. Information about the competition and its contestants is scarce and is documented in different languages: Ukrainian, German, French, Russian, Japanese, English, Croatian, Swedish. Only painstaking gathering, meaningful and comparative analysis of textual and graphical information obtained during the study, allows the author to reproduce the course of the competition, to reveal its significance for the development of architecture in Ukraine and for the world Modern Movement. The article analyses the methods that ensured a high level of organization of the competition and an open, unbiased assessment of its results. The distribution of prizes and the authors of the winning projects are also listed. The Kharkiv competition took place at a crucial period for the Soviet avant-garde: 1930-1931 were the last years of its heyday, after which it was banned and persecuted for many years. That is why it is so important to collect these lost puzzles of architectural history.

KEYWORDS: international architectural competitions, theater buildings, modernism of the 1920s-1930s, history of Ukrainian architecture.

INTRODUCTION: The short but bright period of the architectural Soviet avant-garde has long been inscribed in world history. It is recognized as an integral part of the Modernist Movement of the early 20th century. The results of the well-known international competition for the Palace of Soviets in Moscow in 1931-1933 are justly considered its disastrous end. But what can be called (at least symbolically) its apogee? After all, modernism in the USSR was interrupted on the rise, during its heyday. I recently found the answer to this not an idle intriguing question in a book by the Italian researcher of the Soviet avant-garde De Feo. Although the maxim was expressed by him back in the 1960s, it became an authoritative confirmation of my own conviction, which I came to as a result of my many years of research on this little-known event under a long name

“The International Competition in Composing a Project for the State Ukrainian Theatre Mass Musical Stage with a 4000 seat capacity. Kharkov”:

“Two episodes in 1931 are extremely representative of the situation: two competitions, namely, for the state theater of Kharkov, and for the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow. The first marks the high point of modern architecture in the Soviet Union, the second marks the beginning of its decline”

(De Feo, 1963, p. 60).

The list of primary sources that was compiled during the study turned out to be quite limited. Avaricious information was scattered throughout publications of various

countries in the early 1930s. But from the materials, it was clear that the competition gathered a record number of participants and became an event of truly international scale and significance. Why did it not find worthy coverage in the press and was almost forgotten for decades? Even in Kharkiv itself, where I come from, few of my fellow architects or city historians know about it. There are good reasons for that.

- 1 The theater building was not implemented.
- 2 Authentic projects submitted for the competition have not survived. They were lost forever during the period of struggle against modernism, which began almost immediately after the end of the competition and dragged on until the mid-1950s. In addition, the occupation of Kharkiv and the heavy fighting for its liberation during the WWII did not leave hope for the preservation of documentation.
- 3 The jury did not include foreign representatives who would comment on what was happening for the general architectural community abroad. And the Ukrainian professional press was not accessible to Western readers due to the language barrier, unlike European architectural and construction journals, which could be obtained in the USSR in the late 1920s-early 1930s (Smolenska, 2019, p.12).

Therefore, *the purpose of the study* was set: on the basis of the materials collected about the Kharkiv competition in 1930, to identify and show its contribution to the history of the development of world modernism and its role in the fate of the Soviet avant-garde.

The task turned out to be difficult and stretched out over years. It was necessary to collect as many projects as possible, to find out from which countries they were sent, to restore the names of the contestants, to find any documentary evidence regarding the competition and its participants.

The aim of this article is more local: to reconstruct the competition events, to identify the organizational features of it, to analyze their impact on the final results.

Methods:

- collecting documents, photographs, other illustrations and any information about the projects submitted to the Kharkiv competition in archives, magazines, websites, books, etc.;
- collection and study of biographical information about contestants from various sources;
- processing photocopies of projects in Photoshop to improve their quality;
- meaningful and comparative analysis of textual and graphic information obtained during the study, its systematization.

MAIN PART

Although my search began in the late 2000s, my ability to access foreign sources was limited at the time. Over the past decade, interest in this topic has also appeared among other researchers. But they were also restricted by borders and language barriers. The materials they published did not add knowledge, had inaccuracies, were incomplete and only convinced me that “step by step one goes far”.

The most interesting was the recent article by Hiromitsu Umemiya in DJ (Umemiya, 2022), based on the analysis of publications from the Japanese press and shedding light on the distant Japanese trace of the Kharkiv competition. I undertake to fill in the gaps left by Umemiya in his text and table, and to answer some of his questions in this article.

The research faced a number of problems from the very beginning.

- Too many projects (144) and even more authors. For example, the group of designers from Kharkiv, which received one of the first prizes, included 13 people: architects, theater artists, designers, acoustic engineers and other specialists.
- Projects were submitted to the competition anonymously, under the mottoes without indicating the author and country, in order to avoid bias in their evaluation by the jury. Only the authors of the awarded projects were announced, the rest remained unknown.
- The motto of the project could be numbers, letters of any alphabet, mathematical formulas, words or phrases, as well as images or geometric shapes. Difficulties arose with the latter, since they were described in different ways in the texts.
- Information about the competition is fragmentary and scattered across various resources and countries, preserved in different languages: Ukrainian, Russian, German, French, English, Japanese, and so on.
- The obtained information is not always accurate, and in some cases, it is erroneous, it should be constantly verified, compared with data from other, more reliable sources.
- The quality of photocopies of competition graphics published in the press in the early 1930s was often of poor quality. In this regard, there was an acute need to look for images of the same project in different sources in order to find copies with the best parameters.

It was hoped that the preparatory drawings and sketches of projects, their photographs remained in the personal archives of the contestants from different countries. And most importantly, there was a “hook” – an album of photographs of the awarded projects, made for one of the officials of the Kharkiv city council immediately after summing up the results of the competition. It was kept in the main Kharkiv library. In addition, the magazines of those

years in Ukrainian and Russian were at hand – the most reliable primary sources, from which it was possible to extract a fairly detailed description of the course of events, a list of received and awarded projects.

The most complete foreign publication, as it seemed at first, was information and illustrations in the French *L'Architecture Vivante* (Programme du concours, 1933). However, it was found out during the research that the description of the course of the competition process in it was completely based on information from Ukrainian sources, in particular, from the articles of architect Alexander Linetsky. As it was established later, the French delegation visited Kharkiv in September 1932, more than a year after the end of the competition. Perhaps the publication about it became one of the outcomes of that trip? The resolution of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks "On the restructuring of literary and artistic organizations" (dated April 23, 1932) had already been issued, and the results of an open competition for the Palace of Soviets in Moscow (February 28, 1932) had already been announced by that time. The start for the reorientation of Soviet architecture, its turn to the classics had already been given.

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE COMPETITION EVENTS

In mid-1929, the Ukrainian government "recognized the need to build a 4,000-seat theater in Kharkiv on the basis of a decree of leading Kharkiv professional and public organizations" (Linetsky/Rudnik/Shestopal, 1931, p. 35). The initiative to create a gigantic theater in the then capital of Ukraine, absolutely new in its content and technical equipment, apparently came not only from the professional and public organizations of the city, to which the authors of the article refer, but an active, and probably one of the leading roles in this was played by the People's Commissar of Education of the Ukrainian SSR Mykola Skripnik. He chaired the Competition Jury Council, which worked under his chairmanship (Program, 1930). It would be extremely prestigious for the authorities if the most modern and one of the largest theaters in the world at that time were built in the capital of Soviet Ukraine.

In order to realize such an ambitious intention, it was decided to hold an international competition that would allow to attract a wide range of specialists from abroad. The most difficult type of competition was chosen: international, two-stage, mixed. Its announcement was preceded by serious preparatory work. Initially, a special commission was set up to develop a preliminary program. Then (at the 1st stage) two projects were ordered, which made it possible to clarify the details of the program, determine the volume of the future building, the relationship of its individual parts and elements, the parameters of the main

and service premises, technical requirements and other features (Linetsky et al., 1931, p. 36). Several meetings to discuss the revised version of the program were held in the three most important cultural centers of the Union: Kharkiv, Moscow and Leningrad. The best specialists directly related to theatrical art: outstanding directors, conductors, architects, artists, stage specialists, acousticians, etc. participated in these meetings. Ultimately, after making numerous amendments and changes, the commission drew up the final program.

An international competition was announced in July 1930. Its program in the form of a multi-page book was published in five languages (Ukrainian, Russian, German, English and French) with a circulation of 3,000 copies. Its distribution around the world was carried out by the Ukrainian Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries.

The program-book (183 pages), designed by the remarkable Kharkiv artist, sculptor, poster artist Adolf Strakhov, was in itself a work of art, an example of talented book graphics. In fact, it was a kind of message, an unambiguous allusion to the style that was expected and welcomed by the organizers and the jury. It was designed to turn away adherents of the classics and attract modernist-minded professionals capable of generating bright, new, extraordinary ideas and images.

The competition was mixed. In addition to the open competition, in which everyone could take part, 15 projects had been ordered from the leading architectural universities, organizations or associations of the USSR to involve them in the design of the Kharkiv theater.

Authoritative specialists of various profiles from many cities of the Union: architects, civil engineers, acousticians, theater directors, artists, playwrights, composers, members of the public were included in the jury (54 people). Their names were announced in the program. Here are just a few of them: architects-professors: N. Zamechek (Odessa), V. Krichevsky and V. Rykov (Kiev), S. Belyaev (Leningrad), I. Rylsky (Moscow); architects G. Yanovitsky (Society of Contemporary Architects of Ukraine, Kharkiv); F. Yalovkin (Society of Contemporary Architects, Moscow), well-known urban planner A. Eingorn (Kharkiv), civil engineers V. Ungern (Kharkiv) and prof. A. Garmash (Dnipropetrovsk), Ukrainian experimental theater directors Les Kurbas (theater "Berezil", Kharkiv) and Gnat Yura (Franko Theater, Kyiv), progressive theater designer A. Petrisky (Kharkiv), composer B. Lyatoshinsky, representatives of factories, trade union and cultural organizations, city and regional authorities, etc.

The auditorium for 4 000 seats was supposed to ensure the fusion of the actor and the audience, the stage and the audience, the audience and the street (demonstrations,

rallies and other “mass actions”), equal visibility and audibility from all places. The transformable stage was supposed to contribute to the most efficient use of the stage space and the entire hall for the most diverse forms of theatrical performances (Program, 1930).

The site for the future theater was chosen on the main city artery – Karl Liebknecht Street (Sumska str.) on the segment connecting the old city center with its new administrative ensemble of Dzerzhinsky Square (Svoboda Square). It was no coincidence that the Kharkiv competition attracted so many foreign participants. In those years, such active construction unfolded in the Ukrainian capital that the hope for the implementation of the most innovative projects was very solid. The ensemble of the new square – the largest in Europe – with its giant high-rise buildings, was in the process of its construction and served as clear evidence of that. Illustrations of its first building Derzhprom (1925-1928), a huge modern multifunctional complex, had already made the rounds of the foreign architectural press (for more on the ensemble of Svoboda Square in Kharkiv, see Smolenska, 2023).

Judging by the subsequent reviews, the detailed program contained clear and understandable requirements for all architectural, urban planning and technical aspects of the project. At the same time, it provided freedom to the participants. This was noted by the German press of those years:

“...the authors are allowed to divert from the existing norms and rules as long as there are sufficient bases so as to secure the safety of the public and the conditions for perfect visibility and audibility”. It was one of the most important passages in the competition program. This sentence, which meant almost unrestricted freedom in the design, became decisive for the success of the competition. Rarely has an architectural competition produced such a variety of interesting and developable ideas”.
(Richter, 1931, p. 1562).

Six months were allotted for the development of projects. The deadline for their provision was indicated as December 25, 1930.

How many projects were submitted for the competition? There are discrepancies in the primary sources on this matter. Jury member Vasil Sedlyar pointed to 149 (Sedlyar V., 1931, p. 23), and a recognized expert on the Soviet avant-garde Selim Khan-Magomedov – 142 (Chan-Magomedov Selim O., 1983, p. 478). Architect Alexander Linetsky who was an authoritative figure in this topic – the executive secretary of the jury, who published the most complete description of the course of the

competition immediately after its completion, stated a number of 144 (Linetsky et al., 1931, p. 36). This number could be considered valid, but in the same article he gave a list of all the submitted projects under their mottos. When they were counted, it turned out that only 136 mottos were mentioned. Where did 8 more projects go? Of course, mistakes in listing so many mottoes, sometimes quite exotic ones, are inevitable.

It was also not clear from which countries the projects came and in what quantity. Only the process of painstaking searches made it possible to restore the original picture, find omissions, correct possible errors in authentic texts and confirm the total figure of 144, as well as clarify and supplement the list of projects’ mottos. The number of projects received from abroad and the countries from which they were sent were established – 99 projects from 11 countries: Austria – 3; Bulgaria – 1; Estonia – 1; France – 6; Germany – 67; Holland – 1; Hungary – 2; Italy – 5; Japan – 4; Sweden – 5; USA – 4. For comparison, only 24 projects from 7 foreign countries were presented at the already mentioned competition for the Palace of Soviets in Moscow.

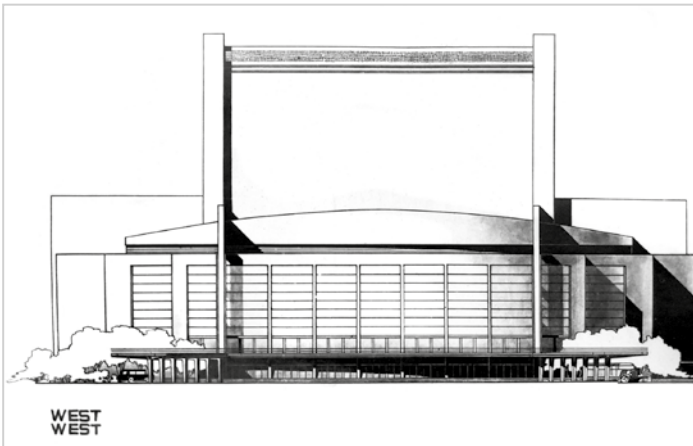
For the purposes of the study, it was important to recreate the project evaluation process in order to better understand the results of the competition. The work of the Jury took place in 2 stages due to the unexpected influx of submitted projects. It was decided to organize a special expert commission of 70 people under the leadership of 9 members of the Jury Council at the first stage. Its main task was to carefully analyze all the projects (both submitted to the open competition and invited) and distribute them into three categories depending on the quality. The first category included the best projects, which were supposed to be awarded. Projects with certain advantages, but not sufficiently developed were assigned to the second category; projects that are less successful or do not meet the requirements of the program – to the third.

It was necessary to minimize the bias of the members of the commission, to conduct an assessment in the most objective way, so that all aspects of each project were taken into account. Therefore, questionnaires, designed to systematize the material on the evaluation of projects from all points of view, were distributed to the experts. The expert commission was divided into teams, each of which included professionals from different areas: architect, director, conductor, artist, specialists in acoustics, fire prevention, stage, sanitary hygiene and technology. The final assignment of nominations to projects and the presentation of prizes was carried out by the Jury Council through open voting at the second stage. The work of the jury lasted two and a half months, during which 120 meetings were held (Linetsky et al., 1931).

The system of awarding projects turned out to be difficult, hierarchical due to the fact that the competition was "mixed", and also because of the large number of participants (information about the distribution of places and other incentives can be found in the primary sources (Linetsky et al., 1931; Sedlyar, 1931, etc.). The authors of only the 14 best projects were announced. However, the fact that their initials and surnames were published in Ukrainian in the local press became one of the problems

of the research. The names of foreign nominees, written in Cyrillic, had to be restored in their true spelling in their native language, which was done in the course of the research. Errors in the spelling of surnames/names or initials of some Ukrainian authors were also revealed.

12 prizes (in Soviet rubles) were assigned in advance for the open part of the competition. They were distributed as follows. The three first prizes were divided among three projects of equal value in the opinion of the Jury Council:



01 „Machine“. Arch. Alfred Kastner, USA, Stamford. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).

“Machine”

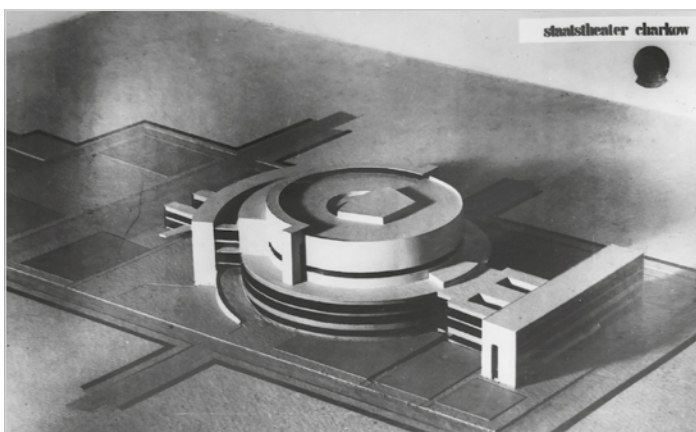
(arch. Alfred Kastner, USA, Stamford).

1931p.

(design team from “Ukrbudob’ednannya”: architects Yu. Afanasiev, V. Kostenko, M. Movshovich, R. Fridman, Ya. Shteinberg and artist V. Meller with the participation: Anatoliev - acoustics, sanitary engineer A. Zlatopolsky, model designers D. Ivanov and Sonichkin, constructor S. Freyfeld, artists V. Shirshov and M. Shteinberg; Ukraine, Kharkiv).



02 “1931p.” Design team from “Ukrbudob’ednannya”, Ukraine, Kharkiv. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).

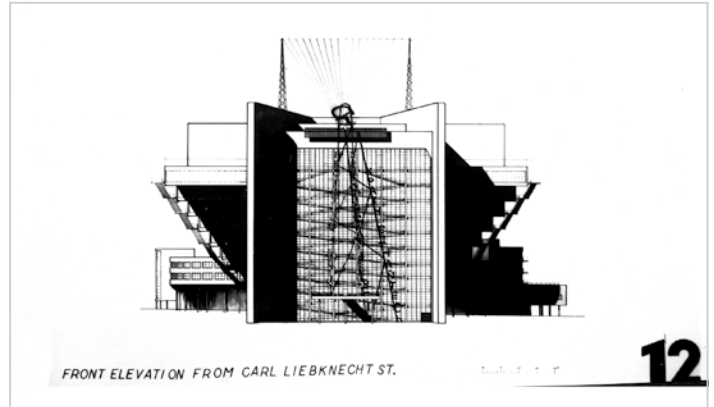


03 “Black sector in a red circle”. Arch. Zdenko Strižić in collaboration with engineer Karl Ebbecke, Germany, Berlin. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).

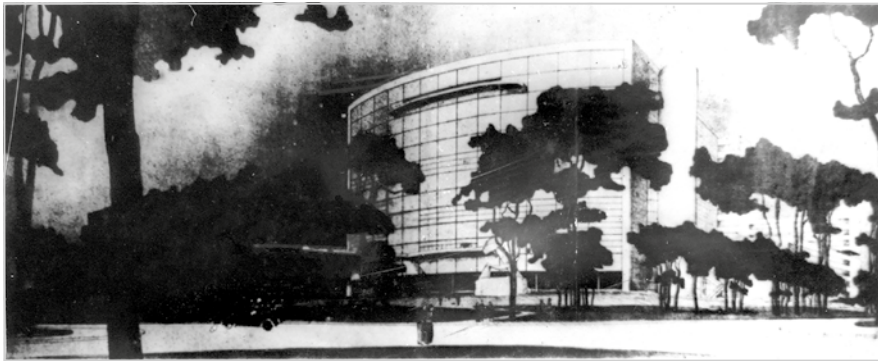
Black sector in a red circle

(arch. Zdenko Strižić in collaboration with engineer Karl Ebbecke, Germany, Berlin).

IV - R
 (arch. Renshichiro Kawakita, Japan, Tokyo).



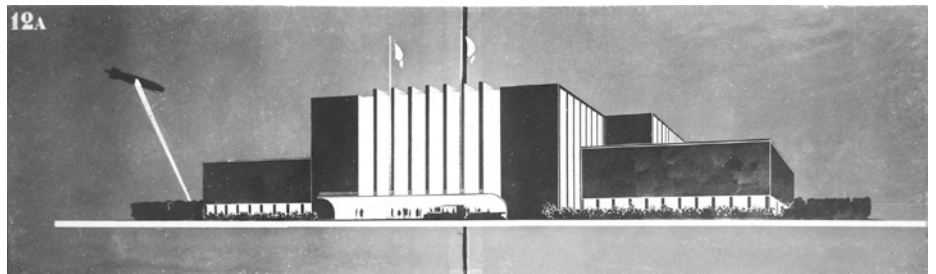
04 "R". Arch. Renshichiro Kawakita, Japan, Tokyo. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).



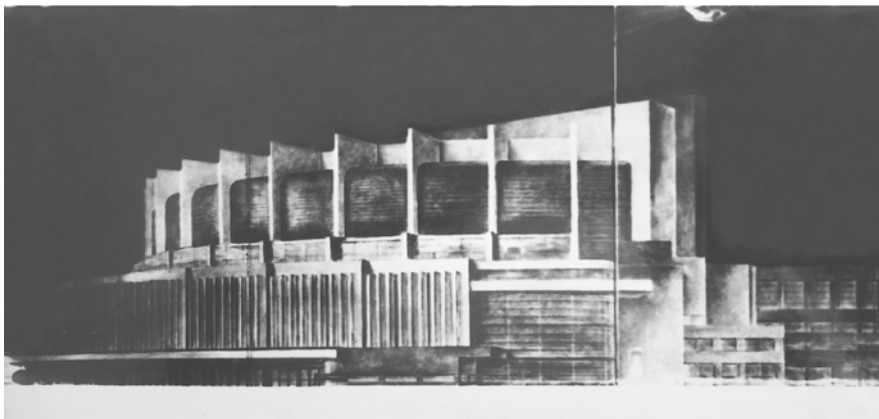
05 "12A". Arch. Victor Olenev, RSFSR, Leningrad. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).

V - 12A
 (arch. Victor Olenev, RSFSR, Leningrad).

VI - OCT 1930
 (arch. Willy Boesiger and Oscar Stonorow, Germany, Karlsruhe).

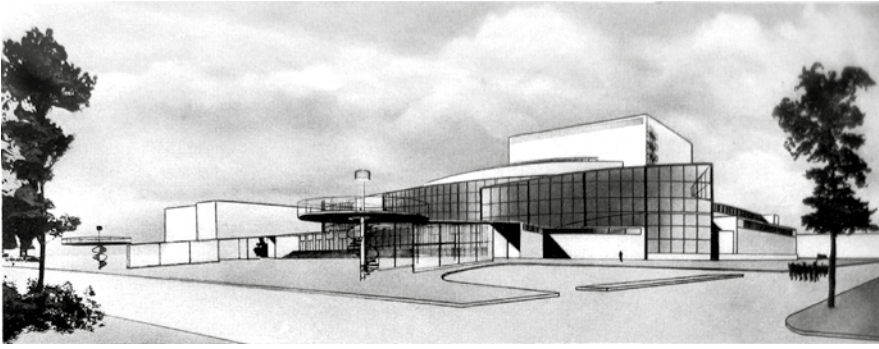


06 "OCT 1930". Arch. Willy Boesiger and Oscar Stonorow, Germany, Karlsruhe. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).



**VII - Vstrechniy /
 Oncoming**
 (architects Samuel Kravets and V. Gerasimov; "Ukrbudob'ednannya", Ukraine, Kharkiv).

07 "Vstrechniy" / "Oncoming". Architects Samuel Kravets and V. Gerasimov; "Ukrbudob'ednannya", Ukraine, Kharkiv. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).



08 "Mass Center". Arch. Walter Gropius, Germany, Berlin. © Bauwelt, 1931, 35, p.53.

VIII – Mass Center

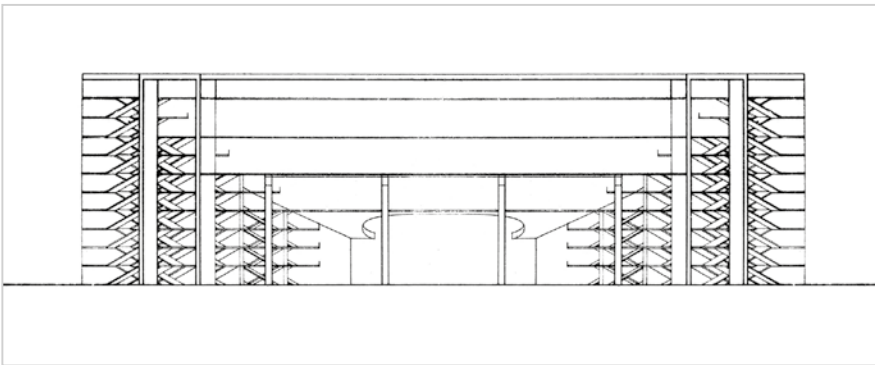
(arch. Walter Gropius, Germany, Berlin).

IX – Down with the stage

(arch. N. Likin with the participation of arch. S. Panin; RSFSR, Moscow).



09 "Down with the stage". Arch. N. Likin with the participation of arch. S. Panin; RSFSR, Moscow. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).



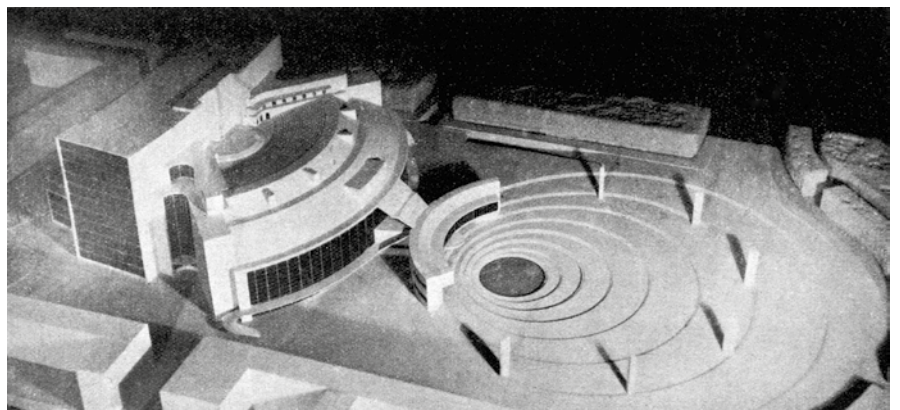
10 "KTH". Arch. Sune Lindström, Jöran Curman and others; Sweden, Stockholm. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).

X – KTH

(arch. Sune Lindström and others; Sweden, Stockholm).

XI – File 203 Number

(arch. Norman Bel Geddes, USA, New York).



11 „File 203 Number” . Arch. Norman Bel Geddes, USA, New York. © Richter, 1931, p. 1572.

XII – Green ring

(architects Georgy Wolfenzon, Roman Valdenberg and Dmitry Meyerson; RSFSR, Moscow).



12 "Green ring". Architects Georgy Wolfenzon, Roman Valdenberg and Dmitry Meyerson; RSFSR, Moscow. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).

Not all the persons who participated in the Swedish project "KTH" [FIGURE 10] have been identified. Swedish names were interpreted in the Ukrainian text in Cyrillic: І. Курман, Л. Гірц, С. Ліндштрот, Г. Петерсон (Linetsky et al., 1931, p. 49). German version from „Die Baugilde“ was: Kurmann, Hirtz, Lindstrom und Peterson (Richter, 1931, p. 1571). French spelling of names: Kourman, L. Hirs, L. Lindstrom, G. Peterson (Programme du concours, 1933, p. 48). Since the project came from Stockholm, it could be assumed that KTH is an abbreviation for Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan (KTH) – Sweden's largest technical university, and the authors of the project worked or studied at the Faculty of Architecture of KTH in 1930. As it was discovered during the research, Sune Lindström (Lindström, 2022) was a KTH student in 1930 (1926-1931) and spent a semester at the Bauhaus, Dessau in autumn 1928. He became a famous Swedish architect later. A second possible candidate for authorship could be J. Sigurd Curman, whose name was found in a list of pedagogues who worked at KTH in the early 1930s. He taught the history of architecture. However, another

architect more suitable as a co-author was his son Jöran Curman (Jöran Curman, 2021), who studied at KTH at the same time as Sune Lindström (1927-1931). Moreover, both of them did a joint architectural project in 1959. This could mean that their collaboration was not accidental and that they knew each other before. The search for the other two authors continues. This is just one example, one episode, demonstrating the difficulties that research faces in identifying even publicly named authors.

The jury singled out 12 more projects for their merits, which were "recommended for purchase" (they were not awarded, but interested customers could buy them). But the names of the authors were not published. Projects ordered from architectural organizations and paid in advance (closed competition) did not receive cash prizes. However, they competed on equal terms with the nominees of the open competition. The best of all 144 projects was recognized as an invited project under the motto "Two rings crossing each other" by the leaders of Soviet Constructivism Brothers Alexander, Viktor and Leonid Vesnin [FIGURE 13]. The project "ACI" (RSFSR) was equated



13 "Two rings crossing each other". Arch. Vesnin brothers; RSFSR, Moscow. © Projects, 1931 (without page numbers).

with the first prize. Its authors were students from the Moscow Institute of Architecture and Construction, headed by architect Alexander Vlasov.

Four more invited projects were assigned to the 1st category (in fact, their level was recognized as equivalent to the level of awarded projects). Their authors were established in the process of research.

- "Mask with a note" (architects A. Tatsiy, E. Mikhailovsky and A. Kasyanov; with the participation of Lyubarsky, Simanovsky and Krytov; Ukraine, Kharkiv)
- "Factory of Proletemotion" (A. Ginzburg, Ya. Mamontov, A. Pleshkov, V. Pushkarev, V. Trotsenko; Ukraine, Kharkiv).
- "Red star" (arch.-artist N. Lansere with the participation of A. Izosimov; R.S.F.S.R., Leningrad).
- "CI" (arch. P. Yurchenko, N. Kholostenko; Ukraine, Kyiv).

The Kharkiv competition attracted many well-known architects. In addition to the Vesnin brothers, Walter Gropius, Norman Bel Geddes already mentioned above, there were also Hans Poelzig, Ossip Klarwein, Wilhelm Brurein and others. But a much larger number of talented young people wanted to test their strength, demonstrate their capabilities on the international arena on a par with recognized masters. It should be noted: not all the merits of some projects were appreciated by the jury. For example, study of Hans Poelzig's preparatory drawings of the Kharkiv theater produced unexpected results that were not noticed by the judges at the time (for more details, see Smolenska/Nägelke, 2023).

The Belgian journal "La Cité & Tekhne" assessed the organization of the Kharkiv competition in the following way:

"This competition, which we hope to talk about again soon, is one of the most important and best organized of those in which architects from all countries have been able to participate in recent years"

(*La Cité & Tekhne*, 1931, p. 37).

CONCLUSIONS

Restoration of competition events, carried out in the course of the study, allows us to assert that the competition was held at the highest level - from drawing up a detailed and beautifully designed program to summing up its results. The organizers used effective methods to ensure the fairest, unbiased assessments of the final results: the requirement to submit competition projects anonymously under mottos, a multi-stage system for their evaluation

involving professional experts from various fields in order to take into account all the features of the design and further functioning of a modern theater building, a hierarchical incentive system for nominees etc.

It makes sense to mention here some of the results of the research.

- 1 The mottos of all 144 nominated projects have been restored, as well as the countries from which they were submitted, and in some cases the cities.
- 2 The categories to which each project was assigned by the jury, the distribution of prizes and other rewards were determined. For example, the three projects mentioned in Umemiya's article (Umemiya, 2022), which came from Japan, were ranked in the third category: "S", "HT" and "Monogram" (the architects Aki Kato and Hideo Noro submitted their project under this motto).
- 3 Photocopies or originals of preparatory drawings were found for about 40 projects, which is more than a quarter of the total number of applications for the competition.
- 4 The names of the authors of almost all projects whose images were found have been established.

The significance of the results of the Kharkiv competition for the development of world modernism still needs to be substantiated. The research is ongoing. But even now it can be stated that it was not only the apogee of the Soviet architectural avant-garde, but also one of the culminating moments in the process of formation of modern multi-functional spectacular theater buildings. In addition, the competition became, for many young talented architects from different countries, the first step on the path to success in the profession. Later, many of them became famous. They made a meaningful contribution to the development of architecture in the 20th century. As this research goes deeper, it becomes more and more convincing that behind each project there is an intriguing story, reflecting the relationships between people and events that characterize the architectural environment of the heyday of interwar modernism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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