

# “International style” and its interpretation at the beginning of the XXI century

## Abstract

The article is dedicated to similarities, differences, borrowings and authenticity of the “international style” in the researches of modern architects-scientists

Keywords: “international style”, functionalism, modernism, art deco, architectural theories, architects, architectural schools

## Introduction. The problem raising

Nowadays it is much easier to study architecture of Gothic, Renaissance, baroque based on scientific published works of the authors who are representatives of various schools, cities and countries, rather than have clear understanding of what what happening in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which eyewitnesses we all were not so long ago. Well-established scheme of understanding the genesis, development and style changes in 14<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> centuries is passed from one book to another being added with various examples of buildings and structures that illustrate this theory in various countries. Scientific surveys are directed at discovering new objects of famous masters rather than general understanding of processes. It all has become possible due to the fact that a lot of time has passed between the researched period and present times – whole ages and scientific thought have managed to be shaped and established. 20<sup>th</sup> century has ended recently, there is a vast amount of primary sources which described the events at the moment when they were happening, very often architects, clients and eyewitnesses of created objects are still alive, families keep archives and photos. Thus, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – 20<sup>th</sup> century is still ending its flow and its results do not have established and defined for all character yet. During whole 20<sup>th</sup> century the history of architecture and art was presented in a bit different interpretation on the territory of The Soviet Union and beyond its borders. The world was relatively divided into socialist and capitalist camps. USSR collapse in 1991 caused the situation that a big amount of countries which appeared on its territory, including Ukraine, actively started being in contact with western partners and conducted experience exchange. In such a way European integration has also marked architecture science. Therefore, terms which have appeared and illustrate certain phenomena in Western and Central-Eastern Europe are nowadays

actively attempted to be “adapted” to post-Soviet countries. It leads to the situation that blind imitation of “everything western” brings to unjustified change of authentic terminology which was created by the Soviet Union for phenomena that took place on its territory and did not have direct analogy beyond its borders. Ukraine has its own peculiarity. Before 20<sup>th</sup> century its territory was divided between two empires: The Habsburg Empire (The Austrian Monarchy) and The Russian Empire. Since 1921 bigger part of Ukraine became part of the Soviet Union and received a name Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and western lands belonged to The Second Polish Republic (Poland), The Kingdom of Romania and Czechoslovakia. The western border of the Ukrainian SSR, according to The Treaty of Riga, was going along the line of Zbruch river to the west of the city Yampil, to the east of the city Ostrog and further along the current border of Rivne and Zhytomyr regions. Therefore, nowadays neither scientists from the east nor those from the west of Ukraine have common view on the theory of architecture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its terminology. On the lands which had become part of the USSR earlier either Soviet vision of the problem is followed or Soviet terms are attempted to be substituted by the international ones. In the west of Ukraine, at least what concerns architecture of the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is attempted to

use the terminology of the countries of which these lands were part of during the times of researched objects construction. In connection to this, recently in order to characterize architecture of the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the territory of Ukraine the term “modernism” is widely used, which in its meaning is close to understanding of “international style” by Le Corbusier. Ukrainian wikipedia, as the most accessible source, provides the following explanation of these terms “architecture of modernism generalizes a few tendencies in itself, styles in architecture which appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and tried to bring the features of dashing technological advance into architecture. Modernism was one of prevailing styles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture and still adheres to its position in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” [1]; international style is presented as “leading tendency of modernist architecture thought during 1930-1970s, its aesthetics demanded the refusal of national cultural peculiarities and various kinds of historical décor in favour of direct lines and other clear geometric shapes, light and even surfaces made of glass and metal. Reinforced concrete was a favourite material of international style, wide open spaces were valued in interiors. It was architecture of industrial society which did not hide its utilitarian purpose and ability to economize on “architecture redundancy” [2]. Thus, the difference between “modernism” and “international style” lies in the fact that the first one impersonates only the idea of refusal of decors and gradual architecture rationalization in the frame of various stylistic differences, the second one is already embodiment of this idea and presents development of industrialization processes. If distinguishing the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century then among general diversity of “modernism” variations “international style” will only be noticeable in 1930s and most brightly – before World War II. In the west of Ukraine the term “functionalism” is mostly used for such architecture. In the east there was a bit different course of events and rational architecture was in place in 1920s and was named “constructivism”. Later this evolutionary way of modernization was interrupted by appearance of “socialist realism”, when not only abundantly decorated buildings were constructed which aimed at becoming “palaces of Soviet authorities” and glorifying their power but also buildings constructed before were “changed into pompous garments”. However, it did not last for a long time. With the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and arrival of Nikita Khrushchev to power “fight against redundancies in architecture” was announced. It lead to the Soviet architecture comeback to global tendencies. Thus, the following may be outlined as the main problems appearing while researching architecture of the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: absence of established terminology and its huge variety for a short historical period; difference in interpretation of processes and phenomena in various countries which shaped the map of Europe; historical belonging to fundamentally different state formations with different cultural values; substitution of established terms with more modern and trendy ones, what frequently contradicts with the essence of the meaning which is used.

## Basic material statement

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century interest in studying art and architecture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has increased. Unfortunately, cultural achievement of the period which has begun after World War II has not gained overall recognition yet, it can be at least claimed about the territories of Ukraine. Nevertheless, the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is currently in focus of numerous world researchers. Addressing what questions can most frequently be found in scientific published works dedicated to this historical period?

Origin of modernist ideas and “international style”

Society modernization is closely connected with the development of enlightenment, social and political revolutions. Industrial revolution, technological and engineering achievements and possibility to use such new building materials as steel, cast iron, concrete and glass have also had great influence. As a different version “international style” and modernization processes are seen as the reaction to the classics and decorating which were associated with an old world. After the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapse a new conception of creating Europe and the World appeared and it grounded itself on the basis of refusal of old principles of using historical styles. Therefore, architecture theoreticians consider two dates from which establishing modernism is counted off. The first date is 1918 which is associated with the end of World War I, its depreciation and construction of a new world. That time “...meant rising of unknown in this part of Europe political reality and emergent from it new possibilities of introducing high-level reforms. Phenomenon of regional modernism of Central-Eastern European countries should be described comparing a lot of diverse substantial and mutually influencing changes in political, social and cultural life, which this peripheral from the viewpoint of the history of the present time, region was supposed to be transformed into the part of civilization “centre” [3]. Nowadays Central-Eastern European countries are the ones which are most interesting and least studied in the sphere of architecture and art history and theory. It was back then in 1918 that it was already possible to clearly see the materialization of modernists’ ideas. The second date is not specific one – it is based on the fact that there are no exact examples of modernist thinking implementations yet but new architecture ideas are

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already promoted in theories, slogans and manifestos of architects and artists as far back as since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, in 1896 Louis Sullivan publishes the following article “The tall office building artistically considered” where he states his famous maxim – “form follows function” [4]. Certainly, theory is always ahead of practice. Thus, since “international style” is in its essence antagonism to historicism, it was not immediately accepted as its ideas were considered to be way too revolutionary.

The process of creating new tendencies in architecture and art can be generalized by the word “modernism”. The epoch of classical avant-garde modernism in architecture – its experimental period – ended after World War II. Those new forms and styles which appeared in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century get new full value life in its second half (approximately until the 80s) when there was no need to fight for novelty of thoughts anymore. At that time modernism ideas are common and spread around the whole world – affirmation period, for which the name “international style” is more suitable.

Conception of “international style” and simplicity aesthetics Around 1900 in Europe there was heated discussion on the topic of the role of architecture and architects in modern world. Frank Lloyd Wright said that “Every outstanding architect is by all means an outstanding poet. He has to be an outstanding, genuine interpreter of his time”.

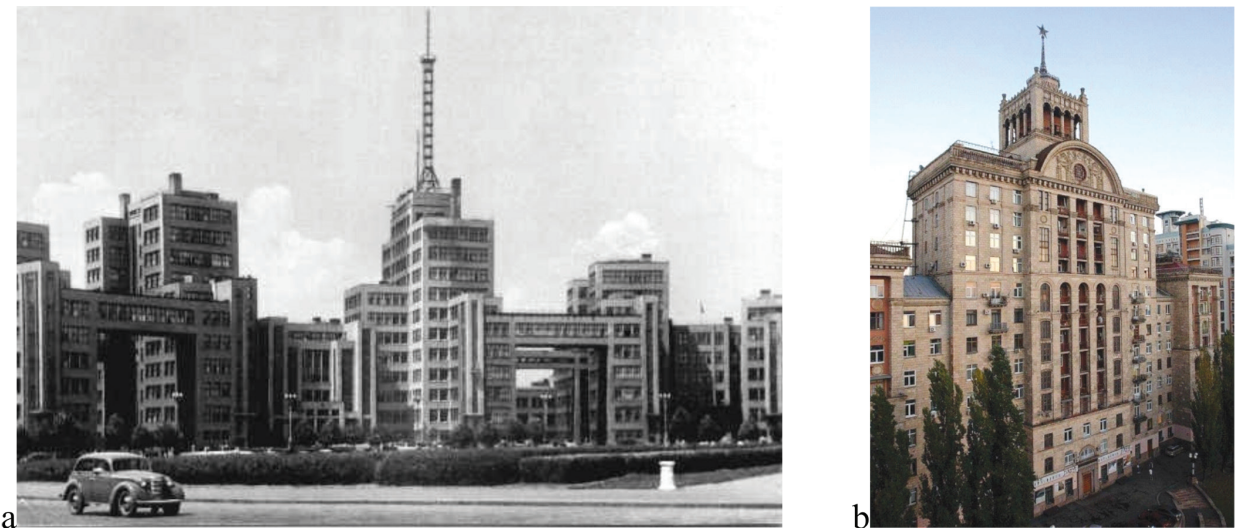
There was increased criticism of decorations abundance and later on of ornament usage itself. From different sides the 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture is severely criticized since it applies new technologies but does not correspond to them in its essence. During these discussions it was accepted as a rule that it was necessary to use fair, not falsified with plaster or paintings materials. Architects declared that beauty of a building does not lie in decorating it but in its functionality. The leaders of this idea were the following: Mies van der Rohe who said “Less is more”; Frank Lloyd Wright – “Five lines where three are enough is foolishness”; Adolf Loos who wrote a treatise “Ornament and Crime” and others.

Simultaneously, together with reinterpretation of architecture forms there was a discussion about relation between architecture and art and technique and implementation of mass production. The main task of modernists was replication (“put on production line”) of new goods which due to production speed were supposed to become widely available to all population sections erasing the sharp border between wealth and poverty. In such a way their goal was to create “international style” – democratic, similar and the same in the whole world. Architect working with this style had to break off with traditions and surface decorations. Most frequently used materials were the following: glass for facades, steel for external structures, concrete for floors and internal structures; Floor plans were functional and logical. The main idea of modernist architecture was not existing during lots of years but solving social problems of time, technology and economy demands. However, it had extremely negative consequences at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when architecture was slowly becoming a completely soulless phenomenon. Charles Jencks defines

“the place of modernism death” as following – July 15, 1972 at 15:32 in St. Louis, Missouri, USA at the site of explosion of residential complex “Pruitt-Igoe” which consisted of thirty residential multistory buildings designed by an architect Minoru Yamasaki [5]. It is not surprising at all since between interwar, experimental modernism and a relative end date of its industrial continuation about thirty years passed. World tendencies of mass quick construction with the help of typical project solutions absolutely did not correspond to the thesis of a modernism pioneer – F.L. Wright “Until construction mechanization serves artistic architecture and not architecture serves mechanization, we will not have outstanding architecture”. It explains this extremely big gap between functionalism (last form of interwar modernism) and final phase of “international style”.

Traditionalism and avant-garde and a lot more The question of style variety is certainly the most interesting of all those appearing while researching architecture of a whole 20<sup>th</sup> century and interwar modernism in particular.

Traditionalism and avant-garde, historicism and modernism, nationalism and internationalism, local and world context – all of the mentioned above are the definitions which characterize the differences of processes taking place in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Modernist movement in architecture did not have one beginning, it was developing independently, in different ways in different countries. Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was actively studying its past in both overall European and in local contexts, what at the beginning found the reflection in exploitation of historical styles on facades of the buildings. However, in America, where patriotism building strategy was excellent, the ideology was directed at the future, not past. The same tendencies could be observed on the territory of a former USSR in the 20s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a newly established country had to self-identify in architecture using absolutely new methods and declaring not only look into the future but a complete and definite break with the past. Present-day Western Ukraine found itself in interwar twenties between Europe and the USSR what influenced the understanding of architecture history and theory processes as well as its stylistics. First of all, the problem lies in the fact that during the whole Soviet period we were suggested a theory of styles, developed by Soviet authors, which



III. 1. Modern understanding of Art Deco style in the east of Ukraine and on post-Soviet territory. a) House of State industry. Kharkiv 1926—1928. Architects S. Serafimov, S. Kravets, M. Felger. Constructivism. Author: unknown — from the book “Kharkiv architecture”, <https://uk.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=654832>; b) House in Khreshchatyk housing system. Kyiv 1954. Architects A. Dobrovolsky, O. Malynovsky, P. Petrushenko. Socialist realism. 25, Khreshchatyk str. <https://uk.bn.ua/prodaja-3-kvartira-kiev-pecherskiy-lipki-kreschatik-ul-25-66243/>, access: 20.08.2018

suits Eastern and Central Ukraine perfectly but absolutely does not correspond to the situation which has been historically established on the lands of Western Ukraine. Until 1939 Eastern and Central Ukraine was a part of the Soviet Union where mainly Stalin socialist realism and soviet constructivism dogmas were proclaimed whereas the western territory was developing under a strong influence of Europe where in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century not only great amount of styles and stylistic tendencies existed but also the very essence of architecture was more democratic. This situation is brightly presented in the modern publication on history of Ukrainian architecture, publishing editor Tymofienko V.I., which was published in 2003 [6]. At the beginning of the chapter “Architecture of the 20s – beginning of the 30s” in the paragraph “10.1.1. General characteristic of architecture development” the following is stated at the beginning: “Architecture development on all lands of Ukraine, especially in the 20s, has a lot in common as almost everywhere various stylistic directions coexisted. However, there were also considerable discrepancies connected with existing of various socially-economic systems in the east and west of Ukraine”. Nevertheless, that is all what is said about discrepancies. Further, the chapter tells about artistic groups of architects in Ukraine but on its eastern and central territories which at that time were part of the USSR. Achievements in architecture sphere of this period in Western Ukraine are presented only as fragmentary facts which are automatically interwoven with the text which is generally related to architecture history of Eastern Ukraine. Such examples are not solitary ones.

Revolutionary and political changes in architecture and art sphere that took place after 1917 in the Soviet Union caused search for rational architecture – at that time popular in the whole world. Similar to futurists, Russian avant-garde movement was united by the faith into the future and technology

advance. Thanks to new art, ties were broken with everything reminding about the past. For some time until cult of Stalin period, constructivism served the purposes of communist propaganda [7]. In connection to this “constructivism” style has an interesting explanation in a Soviet dictionary of foreign words, compiled during Stalin times. “Constructivism is a formalistic tendency in a degrading bourgeois society which emerged after World War I, it characterizes ideological devastation of bourgeois art of imperialism epoch. Rejecting educational nature of art, its ideological contents, constructivism representatives use mainly simple geometric shapes (cube, cylinder). In architecture constructivism is characterized by showing the very construction and building materials. Constructivism has found its reflection in literature and music” [8]. There is an impression that in Russia there was no El Lissitzky, Volodymyr Tatlin, Kostiantyn Melnikov and constructivism itself is solely foreign achievement. Indeed, by general conception of building dimensional and spatial compositions of buildings and constructions it is really close to functionalism. The difference is that on the contrary to functionalism, constructivism does not involve expensive materials, elite and luxury. Time frames are also an interesting moment: constructivism is architecture of the 20s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and functionalism is the one of the 30s.

Lately, the term “constructivism” is extremely popular in Ukraine due to its soviet roots and



state decommunization program. Another negative factor influencing the desire to erase this term out of circulation in Ukrainian science is the fact that in a neighbouring Russia architecture of Kharkiv in the 20s (the first capital of Ukrainian socialist republic within the USSR) is considered to be the best example of Russian constructivism. It all led to the situation that the term “constructivism” is attempted to be substituted by either moderate and not touchy “modernism” [9], or by fashionable “Art Deco”. Thus, for instance in the publications by O. Buriak and J. Kreiser from Kharkiv this problem is clearly defined: “further, in the history of modern movement not all relations are outlined between doctrine consistent architectural modernism and a wide architecturally-artistic movement which was being developed at the same time and during the last decades got a generalizing name “Art Deco”. In researches on soviet architecture history this problem is only being defined” [10]. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Ukraine and Russia theses are defended and their goal is to adapt a foreign term “Art Deco” to a soviet reality [11], [12], [13]. Thus, it was not only constructivism that was influenced by this process but also richly decorated socialist realism (III. 1).

Possibly, it would not be such a big problem as in both cases this “artistic decoration of walls, not taking into consideration the fact that the nature behind these meanings is different. Art Deco in bourgeois world is fascination with luxury regardless of the fact whether far Egyptian pyramids in Africa or times of a dear Polish king – Stanislaw August Poniatowski – are taken as a standard. Constructivism and socialist realism were aimed to glorify a new soviet state “from scratch” and its latest socialist values.

It is possible that the problem lies in the term Art Deco itself as it artificially reflects the name of an International exhibition which took place in 1925 in Paris and was officially titled “Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes” – “International exhibition of modern decorative and industrial arts”. However, this phenomenon did not start and end in 1925, moreover, the exhibition displays did not look the way we understand Art Deco nowadays. Therefore, this name is rather artificial itself, not mentioning its relative transformations in the USSR. A.K. Olshevsky was extremely precise and correct when in 1967 he named this phenomenon “Architecture of decoration” [14] as it was actually some variation of decaying modern (secession).

Obviously, next to and very often simultaneously with Art Deco Czech cubism and northern European expressionism, Italian futurism and Polish “rural style” existed which are frequently combined, completing each other in architecture of buildings and creating the problem for a researcher who is trying to classify the object by adding it to a certain style. Regardless of the fact that a huge number of styles existed and that they were often promoted by a particular studio in a certain country, the exchange of information via professional press, exhibitions and trips at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was so big that those styles were quickly sunk and adapted in a different, originally foreign for them environment. In addition to that it is worth saying that each of mentioned above stylistic tendencies was manifested brightly only in one cer-

tain country while in the rest of Europe it was merely a picked up echo.

**Research results**

As it is seen from all the mentioned above, despite a vast amount of terms and concepts, architectural stylistics of Europe in the 20s-30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is still entirely centered around one style – modernism which in its different phases acquires different shades – stylistic tendencies which colour rational and puristic modernism with various qualities (cubism – geometricality and sculpturality of forms, expressionism – dynamics of solutions, Art Deco – increased stylizing and decorative effect, functionalism – laconism and consideration). Therefore, due to such a big amount of representatives that appeared within a rather short period of time in various parts of the world, modernism is a very versatile phenomenon (collective meaning) in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it expresses rather a way of thinking than specific visual characteristics. Thanks to constant and active exchange of information between modernism representatives, common features of this style are worked up, the ones which were promoted around the World known as “international style” (Five rules of modern architecture by Le Corbusier). The term “international style” was for the first time used in 1932 by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in their essay titled “International style: architecture starting from 1922” which was used as a catalogue at architecture exhibition at Modern art museum.

**Conclusions**

Regardless of the fact that the question of interpreting and using the terms “modernism” and “international style” does not arouse doubts with most scientists irrespective of the country where they are from, concerning understanding styles and processes within these meanings there are still lots of debates. Despite the fact that the world nowadays is not divided into capitalist and socialist camps anymore, there is still a considerable amount of “open” questions:

- Is the change of soviet terms adequate if they impersonate the concepts connected solely to soviet society and life-style to such which are widely used beyond this space and have their meaning and connection to the processes;
- Whether there is any point in looking for more specific and subtle stylistic differ-

ences which are to be found within an embracing meaning “modernism” and “international style” and on which geographical territories it is possible to do it and on which it’s not;

- How different are processes of architecture development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the end, depending on the country, ideology – socialist or capitalist, of their happening.

These and other questions demand answers to be found. However, it is obvious that no matter how diverse the palette of styles and stylistic tendencies of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was, first of all, behind architecture styles of the objects preferences of their creators are hidden – of specific people – architects and thus the very understanding of their tastes and motivations is a solution key to understanding stylistics of the buildings. V. Sichynsky described this situation extremely well: “...at current epoch there cannot be artistic creativity in the style of a past epoch. Epoch and style are inseparably connected! A person is style! When a person of an epoch dies, style dies as well in order to free place for modern art” [15].

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