



**Svitlana Smolenska\***

*Avant-garde architecture and art of the 1920s–1930s in Ukraine  
and European modernism: interpenetration methods*

*Architektura i sztuka w latach 1920–1930 na Ukrainie  
a modernizm europejski: sposoby przenikania*

*Introduction*

The Soviet avant-garde was the dominant trend in the art and architecture of Ukraine in the 1920s–1930s. As an independent Soviet republic at that time, which was part of the USSR since 1922, Ukraine was a gigantic experimental platform for implementing the most advanced and grandiose modernist ideas. It took one of the key positions in the process of industrialization of the USSR that began in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 1920s. New cities and residential settlements began to be erected in accordance with modern principles here.

Cultural life flourished in booming industrial centers. Kharkiv was the first capital of the Soviet Ukrainian Republic then (1918–1934). There were 35 universities, 48 colleges, 80 research institutes, 13 museums, 62 clubs, 76 bookshops, two radio stations, 140 newspapers with circulation of 1.5 million copies, 125 periodicals in circulation of 1.5 million copies, etc. in Kharkiv at that time. A new high-rise administrative center with an adjacent multi-story residential area was built and dominated the whole city, forming its new silhouette. The theatrical, art, literary and architectural life reflected innovative directions, coexistence and struggle of creative associations and groups which were advocating different views on modern art and architecture [1].

Modernism in Ukraine and Europe developed in parallel. Mutual enrichment with ideas, creative work methods, and technical innovations took place thanks to close cultural ties at various levels.

The research conducted by the author in recent years has revealed several main methods of interaction between the European and Ukrainian avant-garde. The most important of them are highlighted and represented in this article:

1. Wide coverage of European achievements in the fields of painting, graphics, sculpture, design, applied art, architecture and town-planning in the All-Union (USSR) and Ukrainian press. In turn, foreign publications reported the best examples of the Soviet avant-garde.

2. Free access of Ukrainian architects and artists to foreign professional periodicals.

3. Participation of Ukrainian artists and architects in European contests and international exhibitions of different levels as well as the participation of foreigners in exhibitions and competitions in Ukraine.

4. Direct involvement of renowned foreign architects in the work on projects and their realizations on the territory of Ukraine and the USSR.

*European art and architecture as represented  
in Ukrainian art press*

One of the most accessible ways to overcome state and political borders between Ukraine and European countries was the exchange of information in the press. An analysis of the professional editions of that time testifies to their

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СУЧАСНА ТЕАТРАЛЬНА ШКОЛА В НІМЕЧЧИНІ

Оскар Шлемер. Баугауз. Дессау

Fig. 1. Modern Theater School in Germany. Oscar Schlemmer. Bauhaus. Dessau (source: [4])

П. 1. Nowoczesna szkoła teatralna w Niemczech. Oscar Schlemmer. Bauhaus. Dessau (źródło: [4])

openness to everything new that has appeared in Europe and the world.

Practically all the leading journals in the 1920s and 1930s in the USSR published on their pages reviews of foreign art and architectural exhibitions, articles prepared by Western masters, or materials about their works. Some of the foreigners were included in the editorial boards of domestic editions. Usually both the table of contents and illustration captions were published as bilingual: Ukrainian (or Russian) and foreign (often, German). The journal “Будівництво” (“Construction”, it began to be published since 1929) chronicled significant events in the field of architecture and construction abroad, published reviews of foreign professional literature, as well as articles on the state of modern architecture in different countries in each issue. A list and a brief informative description of specialized foreign journals on construction and architecture were presented in the journal “Строительная промышленность” (“Construction Industry”) for 1926 in the Bibliography section. The description of each publication was provided not only with useful information about its subject matter, the availability and quality of illustrations, but also about the cost of an annual subscription in

roubles. Therefore, everyone could subscribe journals in any language: German, English, French, etc.

The German “Wasmuth’s Monats Hefte” was the most popular journal among Soviet subscribers<sup>1</sup> because it was picking up for its readers the latest news on advanced phenomena in architecture not only in Germany, but also in other countries, including Ukraine. The competition project for the House of the Ukrainian SSR Government<sup>2</sup> in Kharkiv by architect Alexander Dmitriev was presented in the January issue of the monthly for 1926 [3, p. 335].

### *“Нова Генерація” – an example of avant-garde Ukrainian art journal*

One of the “leftist art journals”, as publishers positioned it, which actively promoted European avant-garde art, literature and architecture, was “Нова Генерація” (“New Generation”), published in the Ukrainian capital from 1927 to 1930. The editorial board attracted the participation in each issue of famous European avant-garde leaders from Berlin, Prague, Paris, among which were: Johannes Becher, László Moholy-Nagy, Herwarth Walden, Enrico Prampolini and others. On the covers of many issues there were vivid innovative examples of the modern foreign avant-garde, articles and reviews were devoted to them. The new modern Ukrainian art was demonstrated and promoted along with them. Readers had the opportunity to compare the work of foreign and domestic masters, and the authors themselves – to learn from each other, to compete in achieving the highest results in their field. Pictures of the Ukrainian avant-garde artist Anatol Petritsky were shown alongside the latest artworks by Pablo Picasso (No. 3, 1927). Modern theater German School, represented by Oscar Schlemmer from Bauhaus (Dessau) was presented in No. 1, 1927 [4]. Schlemmer was well-known for his Triadic Ballet (“Triadisches Ballett”, 1922) where the performers were transformed into geometrical figurines. The costumes he designed were extraordinary and were based on cylinder, sphere, cone, and spiral shapes (Fig. 1). Examples of constructivist experiments in scenography of Ukrainian artist Vadim Meller for the theater “Berezil” were shown in the following issues [5] (Fig. 2).

To see how much attention was paid to European innovations, it’s enough to familiarize yourself with the content of one of the numbers of the “New Generation” (No. 2, 1927), where, along with the Ukrainian avant-garde, you could find:

- Poem by the Polish poet Julian Tuwim (translated into Ukrainian).
- Article about the exhibition of housing in Stuttgart.

<sup>1</sup> For us in the USSR, the German technical press has always been closer, both due to popularity of the language, and closer technical and industrial contact with this country. The current search for new paths also brings together some German architecture journals with ours, which are emerging [2, p. 739].

<sup>2</sup> Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic.



БЕРЕЗИЛ ЖОВТНЕВИЙ ОГЛЯД РЕЖИСЕР ЛЕСЬ КУРБАС. ХУДОЖНИК ВАДИМ МЕЛЛЕР ТАНОК ЦИФЕР—ПОСТАВА Н. ШУВАРСЬКОЇ

Fig. 2. Theater “Berezil”,  
directed by Les Kurbas.  
Artist Vadim Meller.  
*Dance of numbers*, 1927  
(source: [5])

Il. 2. Teatr “Berezil”  
kierowany przez Lesia Kurbasa.  
Artysta Vadim Meller.  
*Taniec liczb*, 1927 (źródło: [5])



– Review “Modern Psychological Germany”, where a critical analysis of trends in German philosophy and literature was given.

– Opinion of German authors on contemporary painting in the USSR.

– A leftist action in modern Polish literature.

“Stuttgart Residential Exhibition” was noted in the announcement of the article as “the most interesting phenomenon of modern life abroad”, as the achievements presented at the exhibition [...] *introduce us to a circle of interests that are close to us in terms of new directions in architecture and their interrelation with the construction of cities and villages, in which the work of Soviet left architects and advanced engineers is also progressing* [6, p. 4]. Photos of architectural projects from the Art and Industrial Exhibition in Kharkiv, which was held at that time in the capital of Ukraine, were published in the same issue next to the illustrations from Stuttgart (Fig. 3).

### ***Ukrainian artists and architects at international fairs/exhibitions***

The participation of Ukrainian artists in international exhibitions of various levels held both in the USSR and abroad, played a significant role in the exchange of information and the demonstration of their own capabilities. Ukrainian architectural schools from the Kiev Art Institute and the Odessa Polytechnic Institute were presented at the First Exhibition of “Contemporary Architecture” in Moscow in 1927 along with the German Bauhaus, Moscow and Leningrad architectural universities [7]. An impressive list of names of participants – famous architects from Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, Dessau, Prague, Brno, Warsaw, Utrecht, Rotterdam and other European cities can be found on the poster of the Exhibition, which was made by Russian constructivist Alexei Gan (Fig. 4).

At the “Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs” in Paris in 1925, the graphic artist, poster designer and sculptor Adolf Strakhov from Kharkiv gained internation-

al fame and was awarded the gold medal for the poster “V. Uljanov (Lenin)/1924–1934” [8, p. 214]. Later, in 1927 he showed his constructivist posters in Vienna, Berlin and Hamburg. Vadim Meller was awarded the prize at the Paris exhibition in 1925 also for the design of the play in the theater “Berezil” [9].

In 1928, Meller participated in the International Press Exhibition in Cologne, together with other Ukrainian artists such as Vasil Yermilov. Yermilov was one of the leaders of the Ukrainian avant-garde. He worked in many genres: easel painting (portrait, landscape), book graphics, street furniture design (projects of news-stands, street propaganda advertising stands, etc.), industrial graphics, interior of public buildings, poster design. In the 1920s, in his “constructivist” period, he carried out sketches for the painting of agitation trains, invented his “Ermilovski” font, constantly experimented with various materials:

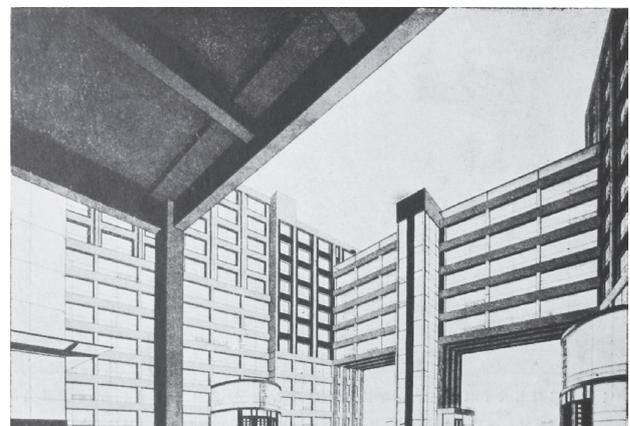


Fig. 3. Project of the House of Government of the Ukrainian SSR.  
Anniversary exhibition in the House of State Industry.  
Department of architecture, 1927 (source: [6])

Il. 3. Projekt siedziby Ukraińskiej SSR.  
Rocznica wystawy w Domu Przemysłu Państwowego.  
Dział architektury, 1927 (źródło: [6])

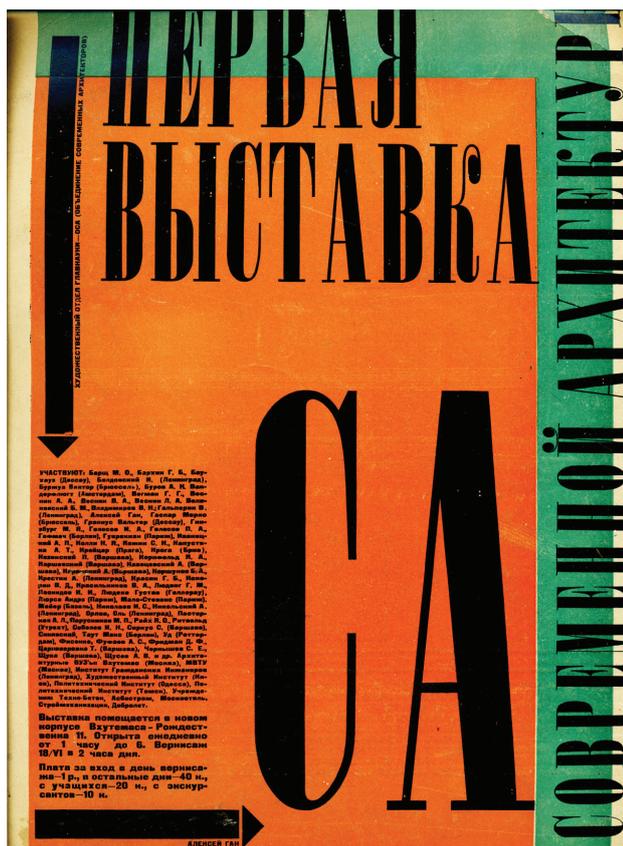


Fig. 4. Poster from the First Exhibition of “Contemporary Architecture” (author: A. Gan, 1927) (source: [7])

II. 4. Plakat pierwszej wystawy „Współczesnej architektury” (autor: A. Gan, 1927) (źródło: [7])

wood, metal, fabric, creating relief compositions. Vale-rian Polishchuk, a writer, founder of the modernist group “Avangard” in Kharkiv, wrote about his friend-artist in that time: *Yermilov... lends his hand to those left-wing artists of Western Europe and Russia, who also managed to timely transfer to spatial art the laws of industrial beauty... This line of constructive art brilliantly embodied in European architecture and in the Soviet theatrical design (our “House of Industry” is also a work of this trend). In the meantime, it has captured all other branches of artistic life. Entire art complexes like Bauhaus in Germany, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Gan in Russia (especially their work in the field of books) appeared. Manifestations of this trend are noticeable in Poland (“Dźwignia”), in the Czech Republic (Teige), in the Netherlands and in other industrialized or industrially developing countries of the world. Ukraine, represented by Yermilov, also gave a very bright artistic unit in this growth from the industrial life of constructive forms of spatial (visual) art* [10, p. 62]. Participation in the international fair in Leipzig earned him (and a group of teachers and students from the Kharkiv Art Technical School) the Gold Medal “for graphic work” at the art stamp competition on the relief of the hungry, which was held during the exhibition [10, pp. 15, 529]. Designing the Ukrainian section of the Soviet pavilion for the Cologne exhibition in 1928, he completed the stands of the two factory wall newspapers, “Generator”

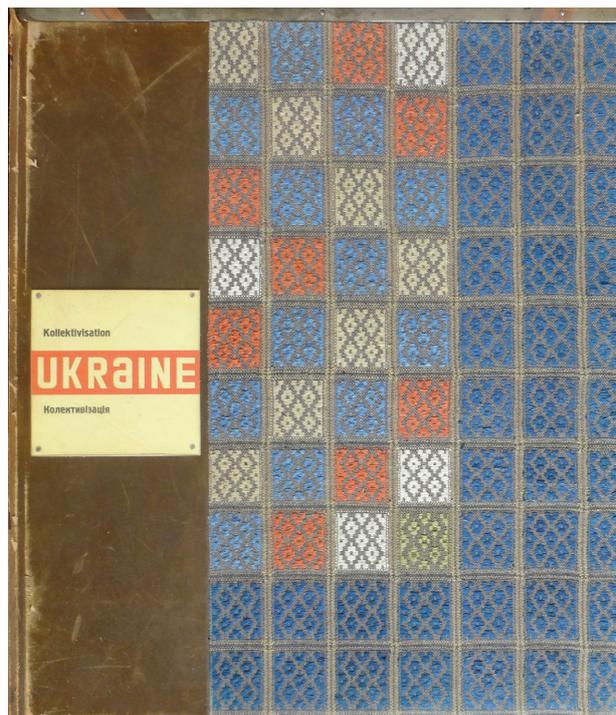


Fig. 5. The cover of the album *Ukraine. Collectivization*. Fabric, leather, metal, paper (author: V. Yermilov, 1928) (from the Funds of the Kharkiv State Scientific Library of V.G. Korolenko) (photo by S. Smolenska, 2019)

II. 5. Okładka albumu *Ukraina. Kolektywizacja*. Tkanina, skóra, metal, papier (autor: V. Yermilov, 1928) (z funduszy Kharkiv State Scientific Library of V.G. Korolenko) (fot. S. Smolenska, 2019)

and “Kanatka”, and prepared a series of 20 large albums “Ukraine” [11, p. 154]. He used different materials: fabric, leather, wood, metal for album covers (Fig. 5).

Ukrainian constructivist architects also presented their best projects at international and world exhibitions in the 1920s and 1930s. Two colorful perspectives were found in the archive [12] and identified by the author of this article as a project of a sports complex for 80,000 spectators in Kharkiv. This architectural graphic was supposedly prepared for the World Exhibition in Paris (Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, 1937) and was entitled in French. Architect Nikolay Zvegilsky was the author of the project of the sports complex. However, two perspectives of the future grand structure were made by the architect-artist Veniamin Kostenko, who perfectly mastered the architectural and graphic art. Therefore, he was tasked to prepare materials for the overseas exhibition (Fig. 6) [13].

### *International competitions in Ukraine and abroad*

International contests played an important role in the interpenetration of advanced ideas. “Competition is the most perfect method of obtaining a project, because competition always and everywhere was a powerful incentive to creativity” as stated in the journal “Construction Industry”

Fig. 6. Project of a sports complex for 80,000 spectators in Kharkiv (arch. N. Zvegilsky, early 1930s). One of the colorful perspectives by the architect-artist V. Kostenko, 1937 [12] (photo by S. Smolenska, 2012)

Il. 6. Projekt kompleksu sportowego dla 80 tysięcy widzów w Charkowie (arch. N. Zvegilsky, wczesne lata 30. XX w.). Jedna z perspektyw architekt-artysty V. Kostenki, 1937 [12] (fot. S. Smolenska, 2012)



in 1926 [14, p. 140]. Such an understanding of the significance of the competitions was completely in line with the spirit of time. For many talented architects and artists, the competition was a chance to reveal their creative potential, to demonstrate their professional abilities.

The competition for the project of the Kharkiv Theater of Mass Musical Action for 4000 seats (1930) was a bright event in the architectural life of Ukraine and aroused great interest all over the world. The competition program in 5 languages: Ukrainian, Russian, German, English and French was designed in an avant-garde manner by artist A. Strakhov. 144 projects were submitted under the motto (without specifying the authors), 100 of them were sent from abroad: Germany, France, USA, Japan and other countries. The jury awarded 12 best works with prizes. Among the authors, along with Ukrainian and Russian architects, were: American architects Alfred Kastner and Norman Bel Geddes, Japanese architect Renshichiro Kawakita, leader of European modernism Walter Gropius, and others (Fig. 7) [15].

In turn, Ukrainian architects took part in international foreign competitions, for example, architects A. Kasyanov and Afanasyev – in the competition for Columbus monument in San Domingo in 1929, architects A. Einhorn, A. Kasyanov and V. Andreev – in the competition for the redevelopment project of the Stockholm Center in 1933 (Fig. 8) [16].

### **Foreign architects-modernists in Ukraine**

Foreign experts visited Ukraine in those years: they held lectures, consultations, became acquainted with our achievements. They were fascinated by the high rates of industrialization of the Ukrainian Soviet Repub-

lic, the active construction of new cities, revolutionary transformations in art and architecture which started at that time.

With the beginning of industrialization in the USSR, adopted in 1925, the issue of developing housing-type projects for standardized industrial housing construction became especially acute. Strategists of Soviet industrialization were interested in attracting foreign experts to solve the housing problem. The European experience of social housing projects, in particular in the Weimar Republic, was repeatedly studied by Soviet delegations during the 1920s [17, p. 161]. Many leading Western architects of the modern movement, for their part, inspired by large-scale transformations in the social, architectural and artistic spheres in the USSR, hoped to realize their boldest original ideas here. They took a direct part in the planning of new cities and the design of new housing estates and public buildings for the Soviet Union and including Ukraine. The importance of the presence of foreign – particularly German – architects and quite a large number of them in the USSR in the early 1930s is emphasized in some studies<sup>3</sup>.

For example, Ernst May, who was known as one of the leaders in mass housing, a specialist in the development of low-cost housing for workers, was invited by the Soviet government for a lecture tour<sup>4</sup> (on the subject of

<sup>3</sup> [...] the Section of Foreign Architects within the Union of Soviet Architects [Obshchestvo sovetskikh arkhitektorov] between 1933 and 1936 comprised between 800 and 1000 members despite the fact that not every foreign architect was a member [of the Union]. It is characteristic that about half of them were Germans [18].

<sup>4</sup> Ernst May's lecture tour in May 1930 included the main cities of the Soviet Union: Moscow, Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and Kharkiv [19, p. 135].

“The New City”, the “Status of Housing in Germany” and the “Rationalisation of Housing Construction” [17]). He visited Kharkiv in May 1930 during his tour. In addition to lectures, he advised projects of new “socialist cities” that were being built then in Ukraine: “Great Zaporizhzhie” and

“New Kharkiv” [19, p. 135]. He and his so-called “May’s Brigade” were invited to work in the USSR. Many architects from his Frankfurt team were recruited and arrived in Oktober 1930 (it amounted to a task force of 17 people then, some foreign experts joined “May’s Brigade” after

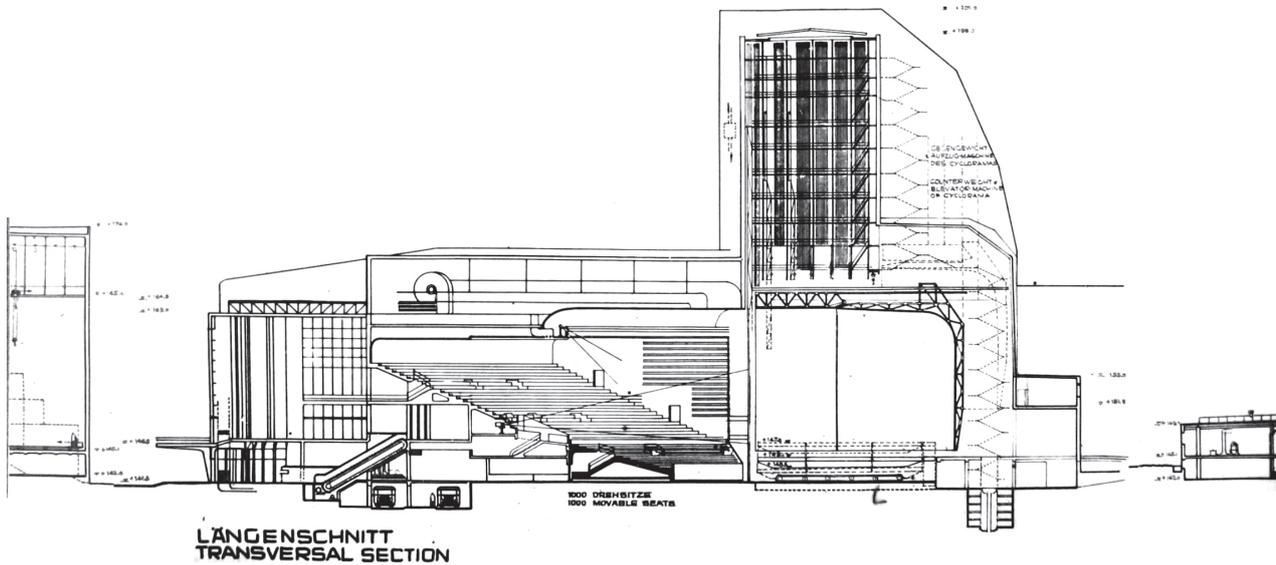


Fig. 7. The project of the Kharkiv Theater of Mass Musical Action for 4000 seats. Section (arch. A. Kastner, USA, 1930) (source: [15])

Il. 7. Projekt Charkowskiego Teatru Masowej Akcji Muzycznej na 4000 miejsc. Przekrój (arch. A. Kastner, USA, 1930) (źródło: [15])

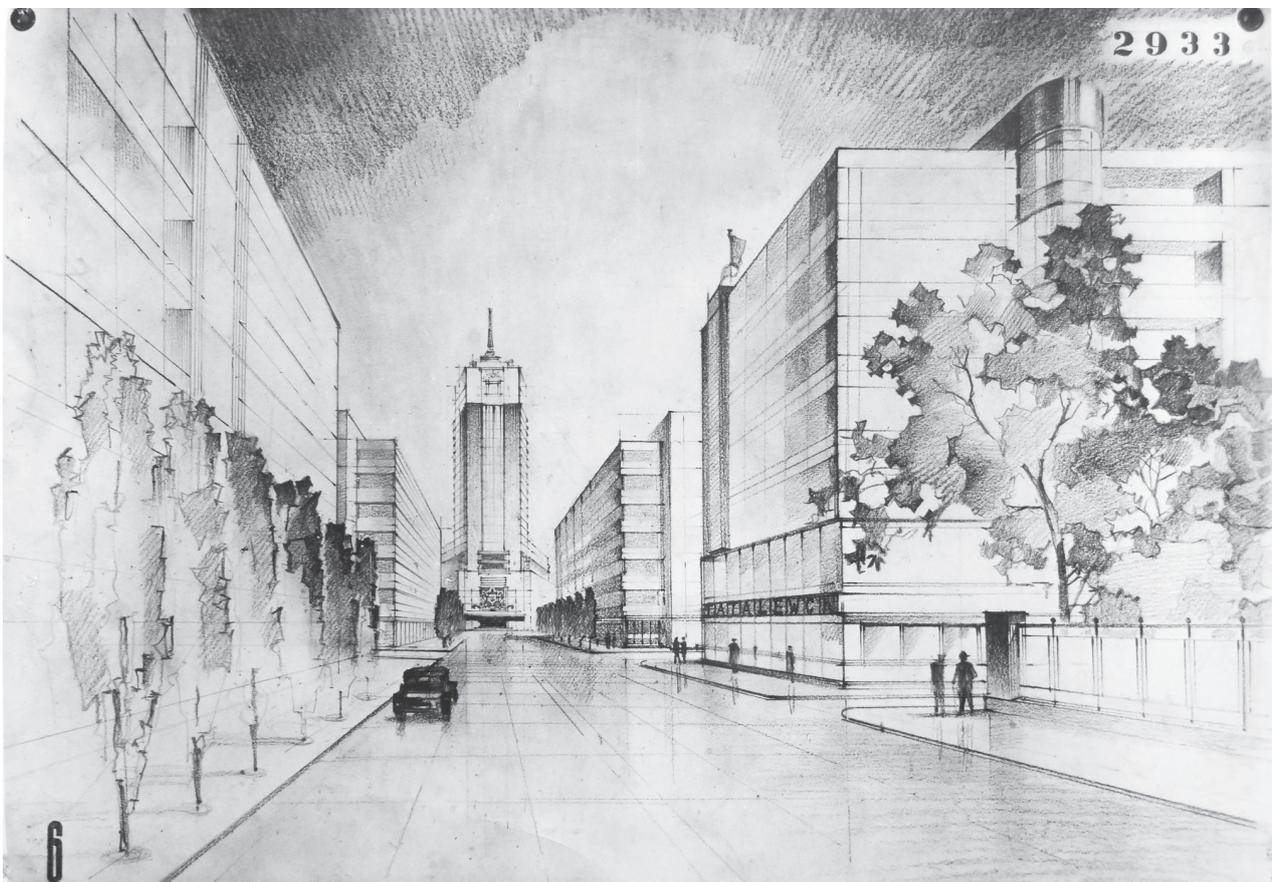


Fig. 8. Project for the redevelopment of the Stockholm Center. Perspective (arch. A. Einhorn, A. Kasyanov and V. Andreev, 1933) (source: [16])

Il. 8. Projekt przebudowy centrum Sztokholmu. Perspektywa (arch. A. Einhorn, A. Kasyanov i V. Andreev, 1933) (źródło: [16])

1930). It was German, Austrian, Dutch and Swiss architects and engineers (Dutch Mart Stam, Austrian Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky etc.; a list of their names was given in a study by T. Flierl [17, p. 191]). They were specialists in different areas of urban planning and architecture, which could solve the whole range of issues in planning new cities and designing new types of buildings. The May's Brigade developed the master plan of the "socialist city" Makeevka [20, p. 6, 7] for workers and miners in the Donbass region of Ukraine, where Mart Stam applied the principle of row housing and an expanded residential quarter with all types of social and consumer services (Fig. 9).

Historical distance allows us, without prejudice inherent in previous periods, to discern many common features in the work of Western and domestic pioneers of contemporary art. Despite geographic boundaries and ideological and political differences between states, "parallel" development of professional thinking was fuelled by interpenetration of ideas, the availability of information about the most progressive trends and achievements in the field of architecture, art, design, which was based on the support of mutual contacts. Openness to the world and, in this



Fig. 9. The prospect of a quarter-complex in Makeevka (arch. M. Stam, early 1930s) (source: [20])

Il. 9. Widok kwartału kompleksu w Makiejewce (arch. M. Stam, wczesne lata 30. XX w.) (źródło: [20])

sense, the democratic nature of the professional architectural and artistic community in the first decades after the revolution, the desire to absorb cutting-edge ideas and developments, the thirst for knowledge of the best that was already created in theory and practice, contributed to the birth in the 1920–1930s of the new modern avant-garde art and architecture in the fertile Ukrainian ground.

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### Abstract

The 1920s and 1930s were the period of unprecedented flowering of Ukrainian art and architecture. The Soviet avant-garde in Ukraine gained world recognition then. It developed in line with European modernism. In what ways did the intermingling of Western and Ukrainian culture take place in those years? The most important methods of interaction between the European and Ukrainian avant-garde are presented in the article: wide coverage of European achievements in the All-Union (USSR) and Ukrainian press; free access of Ukrainian architects and artists to foreign professional periodicals; participation of Ukrainian and European artists and architects in international exhibitions and competitions; direct involvement of renowned foreign architects in the work on projects on the territory of Ukraine.

The main statements of the article are based on the analysis of publications in the avant-garde press of the 1920s–1930s, as well as on authentic materials from several Ukrainian archives.

**Key words:** modernism, avant-garde, Ukraine, interpenetration of ideas

***Streszczenie***

Lata 20. i 30. XX w. były okresem niezwykłego rozkwitu sztuki i architektury ukraińskiej. Sowiecka awangarda na Ukrainie zyskała światowe uznanie. Rozwijała się razem z europejskim modernizmem. W jaki sposób przeplatały się kultura zachodnia i ukraińska w owych latach? W artykule przedstawiono najważniejsze metody interakcji między awangardą europejską i ukraińską: szerokie ujęcie osiągnięć w ZSSR i prasie ukraińskiej, wolny dostęp architektów i artystów ukraińskich do profesjonalnych czasopism zagranicznych, udział ukraińskich i europejskich artystów i architektów w międzynarodowych wystawach i konkursach, bezpośrednie zaangażowanie znanych zagranicznych architektów w prace nad projektami na terytorium Ukrainy. Główne twierdzenia w artykule są oparte zarówno na analizie publikacji w prasie z lat 1920–1930, jak i na autentycznych materiałach z kilku ukraińskich archiwów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** modernizm, awangarda, Ukraina, przenikanie się idei