

Kharkiv Modernism after Modernism: Loss of Authenticity

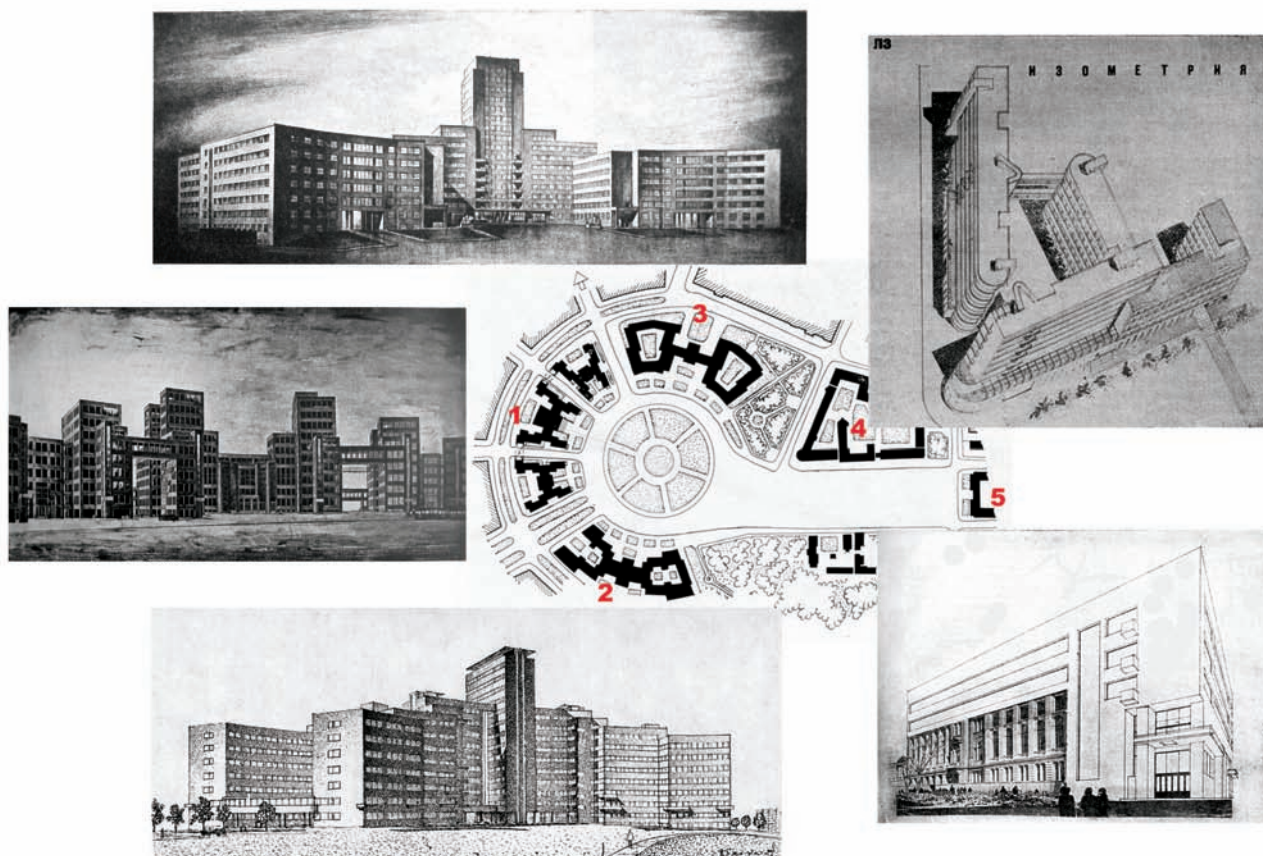
Svitlana Smolenska

In the 1920s and at the beginning of 1930s Kharkiv was the first capital of the Soviet Ukraine - an industrial, cultural and scientific centre. New progressive ideas found fruitful ground for realization in Kharkiv. Modernism was the prevalent style of architecture in the city which was reflected in its planning. Many apartment houses, residential developments, workshops and public buildings - clubs, schools, department stores, theatres, offices, etc. - were created in the Constructivist style (Soviet Modernism). At that time, Kharkiv was a grandiose polygon for implementation of a new revolutionary town planning and for architectural experimentation. Creation of a new administrative centre in the north of the city with its huge square - of 11

hectares, perhaps, the greatest in Europe - was one of such experiments. Several multi-functional multi-storey buildings had been erected on Dzerzhinsky Square: Gosprom (the House of the State Industry - 350,000 m²), the House of Projects (the Design Organizations Centre, 250,000 m²), the House of Cooperation (about 250,000 m²).¹ The best architects in the country took part in competitions on each of these projects. Each of these buildings was innovative in terms of its size, construction and architectural parameters. A new residential area in the Constructivist style had already been constructed behind Gosprom.

1. Janovitsky Gregory: *New Buildings of Kharkov*, [in:] *Architecture of the USSR*, 1938, No. 6, p. 53.

1. Dzerzhinsky Square. The location scheme of the constructivist buildings and their original project images 1) Gosprom. The competitive project, 1925 (architects Sergey Serafimov, Samuel Kravets, Mordukh Felger). Perspective. Image from: *Yearbook of the Architects-Artists Society. Leningrad: Edition of the Union of the Soviet Architects*, 1928, XII, p. 111. 2) The House of Projects. Perspective (architects Sergey Serafimov, Maria Zandberg-Serafimova). Image from: *Yearbook of the Architects-Artists Society. Leningrad: Edition of the Union of the Soviet Architects*, 1935, XIV, p. 172. 3) The House of Cooperation. Project (architects Alexander Dmitriev, Oscar Munts). Image from: *Yearbook of the Architects-Artists Society. Leningrad: Edition of the Union of the Soviet Architects*, 1930, XIII, p. 28. 4) The International Hotel, Project (architect Gregory Janovitsky). Image from: *Budivnitstvo*, 1931, No. 1-2, p. 21. 5) The building of the Central Committee of Communist Party of Ukraine. Project (architect Jacob Shteinberg). Image from: *Budivnitstvo*, 1931, No. 9, p. 35





2. The Red Factory Theatre. Perspective. The project of architect Valentaine Pushkarev (1930). Image from: *Kharkiv builds. Kharkiv: Kharkiv City Council Publication, 1931*

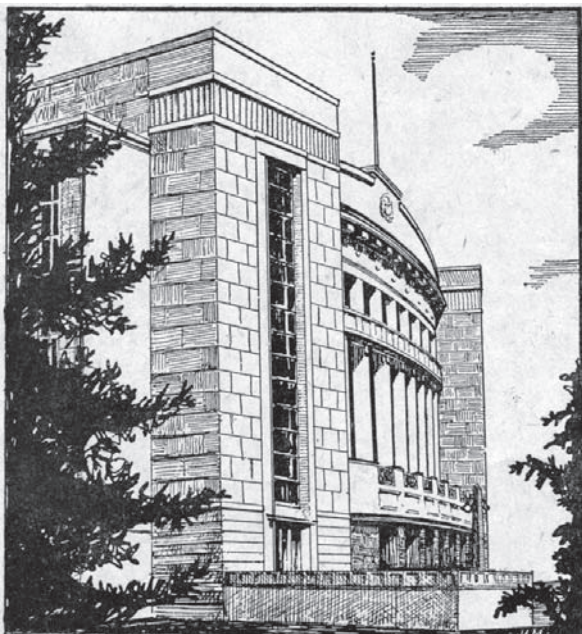
"New Kharkiv" – the residential neighborhood for 120 thousand inhabitants for the Kharkiv tractor factory was the other experimental building site in 600 hectares.² In 1930 Pavel Alyoshin, professor of architecture, got involved in the work with his talented team of vigorous young people to develop the project. "Social city", as it became known, had typified the progressive ideas of that time: linear character of planning, creation of the green sanitary protective zone between the industry and residential settlement, differentiation of apartment buildings according to demographic structure of the population, etc. Blocks of houses had been provided with service and support facilities — kindergartens, schools, polyclinics, clubs-dining rooms, etc. Functionalism and Constructivism left traces on design decisions of the master plan, composition and appearance of buildings of the complex.

Construction of the multipurpose 4000-seat musical theatre, the biggest in Europe, had been completed in Kharkiv at that time.³ The international competition on the theatre project had been held in 1930. Known architects from the USSR, France, Italy, Germany (Walter Gropius), the USA and Japan participated in the competition. 144 design submissions were received, of which 100 were from overseas. That event of world value would enrich the history of development of theatrical construction. A new type of a modern theatrical building was envisaged. Scene and hall transformations would permit any kind of theatrical action from drama performance to ballet, circus representation or mass activities involving the participation of great number

2. Shkodovsky Yuri, Lavrentev Igor, Laibfraid Alexander, Polyakova Julia. *Kharkov Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. Kharkov: Folio, 2002, p. 48.

3. In those years, the largest opera houses of Europe were: the Opera House in Vienna, with a hall for 1800 seats, the Bolshoj Theatre in Moscow (2000 seats), the Paris Opera House (2300 seats), the Milan Opera House (3000 seats). Linetsky Alexander. *International Competition on the Theatre of Mass Musical Action in Kharkiv*, [in:] *The Soviet Theatre, 1931, No. 4, p. 30*.

3. The Red Factory Theatre after the changes made by architect Victor Trotsenko (was put into operation in 1937). Graphic picture by architect Mashkov, I. of the journal cover "Architecture of the Soviet Ukraine", 1938, No. 9



of actors and spectators. Cinema, acoustic sound options, lighting and other means would also be widely used.⁴

Kharkiv promised to become a capital of Constructivism in Ukraine. However, in 1932, after the competition of the project of Palace of Councils in Moscow, the official authority condemned Modernism and proclaimed a new classical direction in architecture. It was later entitled "Stalin Empire style". In 1934, simultaneously, the capital of Ukraine was transferred to Kiev. Kharkiv Modernism had been interrupted and had gradually started to lose its authenticity. Its later biography was tragic. In my research I have outlined some periods which have defined this loss of authenticity.

The official prohibition of Modernism (Constructivism), plus loss of a capital-city status by Kharkiv (1933-1941)

The interruption of construction of some buildings an /or processing of projects in classical style (the House of Cooperation and the International Hotel on Dzerzhinsky Square, the House of Political Convicts Society on Pushkin Street, the Red Factory Theatre, etc.).

In the early 1930s, the stage of generating formal-aesthetic avant-garde ideas reached the height of their realization. Many projects were completed or were in an erection stage. Intervention in creative process by the state authorities in the form of a directive of "single course" on neoclassicism in the Soviet architecture led to a unique situation in world architectural practice. Existing buildings throughout the country were redesigned hastily, acquiring new neoclassical façades, columns, pilasters, principal cornices by unnatural processes. Their authors and designers publicly and often under duress, renounced their creative principles and, as a repentance, over an extended period, they deformed the appearance of their Constructivist creations by their own hand, recreating new façades in the "correct" style.

The House of Cooperation (architects Dmitiriev, A. and Munts, O.), designed to complete the modern ensemble of the round part of Dzerzhinsky Square (Fig. 1), did not benefit from the original architect's ideas. Unlike Gosprom, (which was finished in 1928) and the House of Projects (which was put into operation in 1933), the House of Cooperation had not been completed. And after Kharkiv lost the status of Ukrainian capital in 1934, construction of the House of Cooperation had been stopped. A new competition for adapting the unfinished building of the Kharkiv Military-Economic Academy was declared, but already, certainly, in the new approved style.⁵

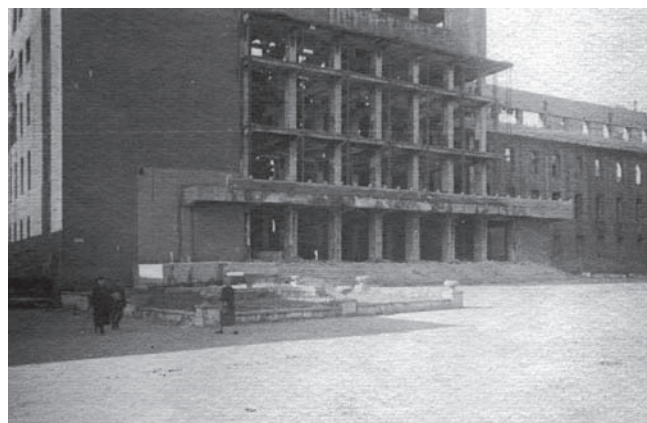
The building of the International Hotel which served as a transitive link between the round part of Dzerzhinsky Square to the rectangular part had been immediately subjected to changes also.

It was proposed in 1928, with all the combined graces of composition and style, and was begun in 1934-35. Its author,

4. Linetsky Alexander. *International Competition on the Theatre of Mass Musical Action in Kharkiv*, [in:] *The Soviet Theatre, 1931, No. 4, p. 29*.

5. Zvonitsky Edward, Laibfraid Alexander. *Gosprom*. Moscow: Stroyizdat, 1992, p. 80.

4. The House of Red Army in World War II. Photo-exhibition "Kharkov 1941-1943". Photo: Brintsev, A. from Pilin Nicholay's private archive





5. Complex of Dzerzhinsky Square in the 1950s. Gosprom is in the centre. The International Hotel after reconstruction is on the right. The House of Projects during its reconstruction is on the left. Photo from: Mehilik, A. *Kharkov is 300 years old*. Kharkov: Kharkov Regional Press, 1958, p. 135



6. The House of Projects. Perspective of the central part (modern condition). Photo by Smolenska Svitlana, 2009

architect Gregory Janovitsky⁶, admitted it was necessary “to enrich it a little” and to decorate the façade by terrazzo plaster in the course of its construction. However, the distinguishing constructivist nature of the plan and the architectural composition was not possible to modify at that time.

The Red Factory Theatre with a main hall of 1600 seats would become the main composite accent of the new town-planning node on Stalin Avenue. Its erection had begun in 1931-32. “The functionalist project” of architect Valentine Pushkarev (Fig. 2) had been selected on this basis⁷, therefore the authorities made the decision to “correct” the building’s design “on the run”. They had commissioned the development of new variants of its design to academician Beketov, A. and professor Pokorniy, M. But both variants “significantly changed the external image of theatre, but retained its internal design”⁸.

Then the redesign was transferred to architect Victor Trotsenko. He changed both the exterior and interiors of the theatre. The building had thus inherited many doubtful features (Fig. 3). We call it “postconstructivism” now.

A similar sad fate overtook the House of Political Convicts Society on Pushkin Street, 49. Architect Noah Podgorny combined two functional parts in his project of 1932: dwelling and public spaces. Originally the building had been approved in the Constructivist style. But building continued until 1936. The author had been compelled to “rethink” his planes of façades from classical architecture: to apply cornices, columns, to refute the use of glazing tape in a public semicircular area where the museum and club were located.⁹ Nothing remained from the former image.

The project of the theatre of 4000 seats had not been realized also. That section, which had already been started, was altered to become an apartment house. To this day it exists in the heart of the public garden – the territory

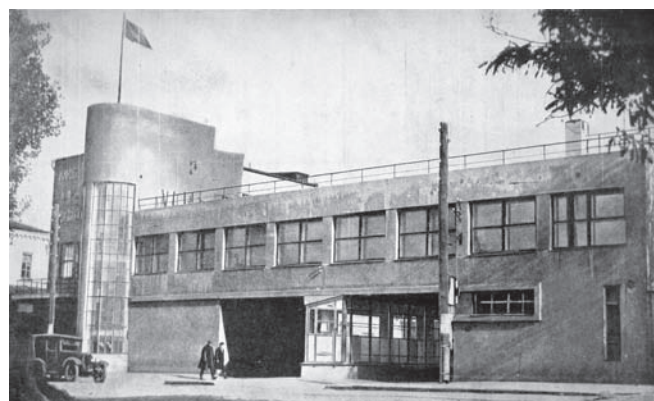
6. Janovitsky Gregory: *New Buildings of Kharkov*, [in:] *Architecture of the USSR*, 1938, No. 6, p. 53.

7. Janovitsky Gregory: *New Buildings of Kharkov*, [in:] *Architecture of the USSR*, 1938, No. 6, p. 53.

8. Trotsenko Victor: *The Red-factory Theatre in Kharkiv*, [in:] *Architecture of the Soviet Ukraine*, 1938, No. 9, p. 5.

9. Smolenska Svitlana: *Creative Work of Architect N.M. Podgorny*, [in:] *Cultural Heritage of Slobozhanshchyna: Proceedings of the International Conference “The Fifth Slobozhansky Readings”*, Kharkiv, 2003, No. 5, pp. 74-77.

7. Builders Club was one of the first and most interesting clubs of Kharkiv Constructivism. Photo from: *Kharkiv builds*. Kharkiv: Kharkiv City Council Publication, 1931



which was originally allotted for revolutionary theatre, arises a mysterious gloomy block of the past.

Destruction of buildings during the World War II in 1941-1943 (The House of Red Army, the building of the Central Committee of Communist Party of Ukraine, etc.)

Between 1941 and the liberation of occupied Kharkiv in August 1943, the city had suffered greatly. More than one million square metres of living space had been destroyed.¹⁰ Many public and industrial buildings were also ruined. Some Constructivist buildings had been lost forever: the main city department store “Khatorg”, the House of the Red Army, Building of Central Committee CPU, etc.

The House of Red Army (Tatsy, A. and Kasjanov, A. with the assistance of Kostenko, V.) was on University Street in the old centre of Kharkiv. It was the finished reconstruction project of a nineteenth-century building in the modern Constructivist style. It was one of the largest clubs in the city with an auditorium of 1200 seats and with a flat roof-terrace and the fine view over the city.¹¹ After World War II the public garden was created on that site (Fig. 4).

The building of the Central Committee of Communist Party of Ukraine (CC CPU) had been destroyed on the side opposite Gosprom. It supplemented and extended the style of the Dzerzhinsky areas and was in own way unique. It was a successful example of blending different styles. Architect Jacob Shteinberg who was a member of Society of Modern Architects of Ukraine (SMAU), inventively united the old existing building (which dated from the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th centuries) and a modern superstructure adding three further storeys in his project of reconstruction. In the beginning the author had kept former façades of old building and got the effect of a modern building thanks to strong horizontals of tapes-windows on the top new floors; a vertical of the front staircase; and displacement of the front entrance on the corner. For technical reasons, details of the original façades had been simplified subsequently. Ruins of the building of CC CPU had been totally demolished after the end of World War II in favour of new buildings.¹²

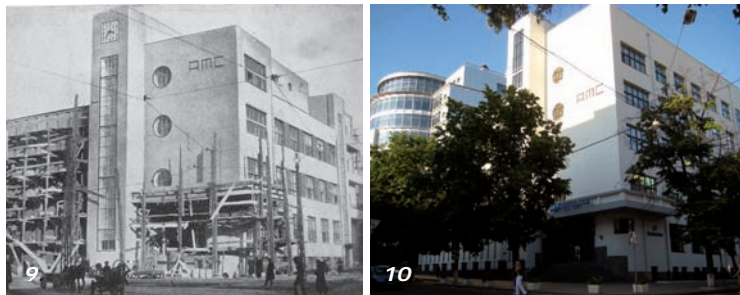
10. Mehilik, A. *Kharkov is 300 years old*. Kharkov: Kharkov Regional Press, 1958, pp. 105-106.

11. Laibfraid Alexander, Polyakova Julia. *Kharkov: From the Fortress to the Capital: Notes on the Old City*. Kharkov: Folio, 2004, p. 241.

12. Laibfraid Alexander, Polyakova Julia. *Kharkov: From the Fortress to the Capital: Notes on the Old City*. Kharkov: Folio, 2004, pp. 100-101.

8. Builders’ Club (modern condition). Photo by Smolenska Svitlana, 2009





9. Automatic Telephone Exchange (ATE) on Ivanova Street. Photo from: *Kharkiv builds. Kharkiv: Kharkiv City Council Publication, 1931*

10. ATE (modern condition). Photo by Smolenska Svitlana, 2009

Post-war reconstruction of the destroyed modernist buildings (the second half 1940s-1950s)

Changing of functions of some buildings and their image in "Stalin Empire style" (the House of Projects, the House of Cooperation and the International Hotel on Dzerzhinsky Square, the student-hostel "Giant", the school on Moscow Avenue, etc.).

During this period the complex of Dzerzhinsky Square lost its modernist shape entirely. Only Gosprom kept its authenticity. The majority of reconstruction projects, replacing destroyed buildings, continued until the middle 1950s when the "Stalin Empire style" became official. Realization of these projects proceeded up to the end 1950s. Therefore many constructivist buildings received neoclassical façades during that time. It was during the World War II occupation that the German fascists tried to blow up and set fire to it. However, the ferroconcrete structure was sufficiently strong to withstand the test. Only the wooden elements such as floors, doors, and window frames were partially damaged.

A special operations department which was responsible for the maintenance and repair of Gosprom had been created before the war. It was staffed by engineers and workers who had built Gosprom. After the end of World War II they returned and restored the building.¹³ Their knowledge of structural and technical characteristics of that unique construction promoted its restoration in an original style.

But other buildings on this square were subsequently altered considerably. The International Hotel was reconstructed in "Stalin Empire style" by its author, architect G. Janovitsky.

The House of Projects (Serafimov, S., Zandberg-Serafimova, M.) which was so well combined with Gosprom in terms of style, suffered heavily in World War II as it had both ferroconcrete and wooden ceilings. Its function was changed also: it was handed over to the Kharkiv University (Fig. 5). Its reconstruction was executed by new authors (Kostenko, V., Kamirny, V., Livshits, V., Ermilov, I., Lipkin, V.). They used the existing skeletal frame, but changed plans somewhat and also considerably changed façades and surfaces. The façade was revetted with ceramic tiles (Fig. 6).

In the process of post-war reconstruction the student-hostel "Giant" (Molokin, A., Ikonnikov, G.), the school on Moscow Avenue (Gamza, E.) and many other modernist buildings underwent changes.

Reconstruction, renovation, the expansion of buildings in 1960s-1980s for updating and/or changes of function (the Builders' Club on Rudnev Square, the Club "Kharchosmak" on Karl Marx Street, etc.)

In the late 1950s the government published various decrees ("About elimination of architectural extravagances in design and construction" in 1955, etc.). A new sharp redirection in architectural styles to simple forms and mass industrial construction occurred. It is known in architectural history as "Khrushchev utilitarianism". In effect it was an official condemnation of "Stalin Empire style" for its diseconomy.

However Constructivism could not be identified as the heritage which should be restored. Many buildings constructed in 1920s-1930s, required renovation at that time. Their

occupants transformed them beyond recognition in the course of expansion and reorganization undertaken to increase space. The utilitarian approach which prevailed in architecture at that time led to changes of plans and façades. Many modernist buildings had undergone re-planning, had lost horizontal windows, their façades had been revetted with ceramic tiles. They had become typical faceless boxes of the 1960s.

Constructed in the late twenties on Rudnev Square (Shteinberg, J., Malozemov, I., and Milinis, I.), the Builders' Club was one of the first and the most interesting club of Kharkiv Constructivism.¹⁴ The courtyard was its composite centre. It served as an open-air hall. It was possible to get to different functional parts of Club from that central point. The combination of vertical and horizontal volumes, overhanging the second floor above the pass to the courtyard, semicircular glass stairs, flat roofs, round windows on the ground floor – all created an original modern architectural image (Fig. 7). The reconstruction transformed the courtyard into a covered hall. The third floor was overbuilt into a two-storey section. Windows and glass stairs were changed; the flat roof was converted into a ramp roof (Fig. 8).

Modern distortions of the 1990s – the early 2000s

Re-designing of buildings, with the addition of new elements that were not compatible with the Heritage style, use of non-authentic details and materials in furnish of interiors and exteriors, and remodelling of the ground floors to meet the needs of offices and shops (many Modernist apartment houses, Automatic Telephone Exchange on Ivanova Street, etc.).

It seems that after gaining independence in 1991, Ukrainian society should revise its opinion of the heritage of Modernism – and try to ensure it remains authentic. However, the long-term scornful attitude to the Soviet avant-garde continues to affect the mentality of the population and representatives of official power, even today. The authorities leave unpunished the worst cases of distortion of our Modernist heritage. Revival of private business has created a situation when separate owners rent or buy some parts or entire floors of their building and change them according to their individual tastes. They jettison some aspects; create new parts, deform elements of façades: windows, entrances, balconies etc. It leads to a complete loss of integrity and authenticity of heritage.

Automatic Telephone Exchange (1930-1932) on Ivanova Street (Fig. 9) was reconstructed in the 1960s, but it retained its modernist features. The fifth storey was added on the southern aspect, without infringing the overall style (Lavrentev, I.). In 1970s an expansion project of the northern wing was proposed in the Constructivist style, but it was not implemented. Last years, the ATE was rebuilt again, though it was included in the register of National-Cultural Heritage of Ukraine. The new expansion project of its northern wing demonstrates a new, modern style (Fig. 10). Inveracious materials have been used for finishing of façades and the front entrance also.

Summary

One can assert, that Modernism in Kharkiv (Kharkiv Constructivism) was a very short period in the history of architecture – almost a decade. It reached its blossoming in the early 1930s. Kharkiv Modernism lost its authenticity during the following 70 years. Those buildings which kept their initial shape were destroyed by war, time and people's policy. Modernism in Kharkiv was the unique phenomenon of the 20th century. Returning and recovery of authenticity for its buildings, is the important task of preserving Heritage in Ukraine.

14. More than 60 clubs for employees of different specialties were presented in Kharkiv in the early 1930s. Several new buildings in the style of Constructivism were built: the Builders' Club, the Club for workers of rope factory (Lutsky M.), the Club "Harchosmak" (Linetsky, A.) for workers of the food-processing industry, two club-cafeterias in the urban complex "New Kharkiv" (Al, A., Tarusov, A. under the guidance of P. Alyoshin); *Kharkiv builds. Kharkiv: Kharkiv City Council Publication, 1931*; Laibfraid Alexander, Polyakova Julia. *Kharkov: From the Fortress to the Capital: Notes on the Old City. Kharkov: Folio, 2004, pp. 238-242.*

13. Zvonitsky Edward, Laibfraid Alexander. *Gosprom. Moscow: Stroyizdat, 1992, p. 80.*