

„Socialist postmodernism”: residential architecture in Kyiv Podil district (Ukraine)



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This article analyzes residential blocks in the historic Podil district, designed and built in the 1970s–1980s in Kyiv. They vividly demonstrate the postmodern ideas embodied in Ukrainian architecture in the Soviet time.

Introduction

The term “postmodern architecture” of the 1960s–1980s is commonly identified with Western Europe, the United States and is cautiously, infrequently used when talking about the countries of the former Soviet Union (including Ukraine). Therefore, it seems that the postmodern architecture, which captivated the world in the second half of the 20th century, did not affect the countries hidden behind the Iron Curtain. However, new recent studies prove the opposite.

The article aims at showing that, despite the relative isolation of Ukrainian architecture in the 1960s–1980s, the latest world architectural trends impacted the construction sector of the developing country. The four residential neighborhoods in the historic Podil district, designed and built in the 1970s–1980s in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, are vivid examples. This area has already become an object of interest for researchers in Soviet times [1, 2, 3]. However, the novelty of the article is the perception of its architecture in the context of advanced world trends of its time.

Methodological approach

Conceptually, the article analyzes the paradigm of postmodernism in architecture, proposed by Charles Jencks: “Post-Modernism of all our commitment to pluralism and this more than anything else unifies a disparate tradition. In fighting for heterogeneity, they combine the Modernist emphasis on universalism with the rights and values of the local, ethnic group and individual” [4].

The methodological approach consists of comparing Ch. Jencks’s definition with the peculiarities of the residential architecture in Kyiv in the 1970s–1980s, given the classification of any facility as postmodern in Soviet architecture, was an undeniably complicated process. Unlike Western architects, who provided extensive theoretical work to substantiate

their concepts, the Soviet Union strayed from that path. The Soviet architecture did not have a theoretical basis: the discourse of socialist realism in the mid-1950s lost all meaning, repeating several ritual phrases in the introductions and conclusions to any text [5]. Pluralism of architectural forms underwent scathing criticism: “Through architecture, society forms a complex material and spatial environment ..., which would contribute to the formation of ideology and worldview that meets the requirements of the communist society we are building” [6]. Any discussion of stylistic pluralism, as well as any “isms” in architecture, were not welcomed, and comparisons with the developing trends of the architecture of capitalist countries could be interpreted as “anti-Soviet”. Namely, the concept of “postmodernism”, which became known in the Soviet Union after the translation in 1985 of Ch. Jencks’ book “The Language of Postmodern Architecture” into Russian, was dangerous to use concerning Soviet architecture at that time [7].

Presentation of main material

In a totalitarian country such as the Soviet Union, the ruling party dominated cultural life, and its vector varied dramatically due to changing conditions. Architecture, unable to develop according to its inherent professional laws, becomes a reflection of the ideology of the ruling regime, demonstrates its strategy, and, ultimately, is forced to realize “non-architectural”, even utopian goals. Thus, after the Second World War, international modernism became the dominant style of architectural development on a global scale. On the contrary, in the USSR, the situation was the opposite – the country promoted Stalinist neoclassicism (Stalin’s empire style), which was openly opposed to the West. J. Stalin’s death in 1953 brought change to the USSR, and architecture was no exception.

M. Khrushchev, coming to power, built his policy on the denial of what was done by J. Stalin. In architecture, the radicalism of the rejection of Stalin’s neoclassicism accompanied a total appeal to the Western experience of construction. Therefore, “Khrushchev Thaw” saw a comprehensive “comeback” of Soviet architecture to international modernism with its achievements and downsides.

It is a well-known fact that the modernist paradigm underwent crisis at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. It was a time of searching for new ways of architectural development, which was called “postmodernism” [4]. It preached addressing the old values of architecture: the local context, pluralism, history. An active search for new approaches to urban planning in the existing urban structures began both in Europe and the United States. The concepts of urban development formulated by Aldo Rossi [8] and Leon Krier [9] emphasized the “timeless” values of urban art and the preservation of cultural heritage.

It is characteristic that in the early 1970s, professional literature of the USSR began generating considerable interest in contextual design. In the 1960s, times of “rapid reconstructions”, the architects came to the fore with the slogans of modernism: “where is the reality that makes an architectural object a work of art. Admittedly, the image may not appear from the functional or structural basis of the building but can be predetermined by the urban planning requirements” [10]. The general dissatisfaction with architectural and urban planning practices contributed to new qualitative shifts in the understanding of the city and the formulation of new approaches to urban planning [11]. The architects realized the obvious danger of total renewal: “modern” was isolated in the historical urban context and eliminated from the process of forming “the memory of place”, which is of paramount importance for a person [12].

The analogues discussions have been expanded in Ukraine, which was one of the republics, belonged to the USSR. This debate was extremely heated in relation to the historical cities as they were constantly losing their identity because of the postwar socialist reconstructions. The list of such cities included the city of Kyiv – the capital of Ukraine since 1934.

The Podil district formed the core of historic Kyiv and, together with Upper town (Old Kyiv), belonged to the oldest part of the city of the Kyivan Rus times (Fig. 1.). At the moment of reconstruction (the middle of 20th century) it counted more than 180 monuments of architecture, history and culture. The nature special features, namely, the river, hills, lowland areas were the crucial factors influencing the urban planning. A convenient location, the availability of the harbor promoted the development of the Podil district as a trade and craft center, and since the 16th century it has become an important cultural and educational center of Kyiv. Thus, in 1635 the Bratska school and in 1632 the first Academy of Slavonic people were opened here. Almost till the 18-th century there remained the self-administration system in Podil [1].

For early 19th century the urban planning system of Podil district represented the net of the embrangled narrow streets, the tracing of which corresponded to a nature topography of the locality. The city blocks were of an estate or farmstead type of building with one- and two-storey houses placed in a red line. The building facades were kept up in the forms of the album drawing patterns dated back to 1809 published for the housing construction. The Podil district housing system was characterized by using the pargetted wood as well as the combination of wood and bricks. In 1811 Podil district caught fire and, as result, all the wooden buildings were ruined. In 1815 on the project of William Heste a new regular urban planning structure reflecting the ideals of classicism was laid. The project envisaged the erection of a new public center within the square, Mezhyhirska, Spaska, and Kostantynivska Streets (towards the square). But the only edifice built on this project was the Contract House. In the second half of the 19th century the industry began to actively develop in the Podil district, hence its former significance as a city center was lost. The district became an industrial center but with the continuance of the trade and craft function. A housing development of the late 19th early 20th century was forming according to the classicism urban planning structure: the 2–4 storey buildings were erected in a red line using the bricks, which were immediately coloured without plastering (for the purpose of savings). A perimetric housing system of the profitable buildings alternated with the industrial edifices as well as the unused plots



Fig. 1. Historical district Podil in the urban structure of Kyiv. Drawn by S. Linda, 2021

forming a bit chaotic, «collage» but a picturesque, at the same time, architectural manner of the Podil district at the turn of the 19th – 20th century [1].

Kyiv housing system was severely affected by the Second World War. Therefore the first postwar master plan by 1947 became the command paper for the restoration and reconstruction of the central part of the Ukrainian capital, and for the deployment of mass housing development of the peripheral districts at those times. However, in the middle of 1960s it became clear that the urban planning calculation indices were considerably reduced. It necessitated the development of a new document. The Master plan of Kyiv of 1966 approved by the government industrial of Ukraine in 1967 solved the task of a mass industrial housing program. But, as in 1960s the city of Kyiv succeeded 1-million boundary by population, the Master plan also envisaged the underground railway building up [13].

Within the Master plan the district of Podil was given the role of the reserve area for housing deployment. In the late 1960s the housing system of Podil district remained to be a chaotic and unregulated one, in which the historical buildings were intermixed with a typical background building system of the turn of the 19th–20th century and the wooden structures as well. Consequently, a new concept envisaged an actual elimination of the existed housing system of Podil district (saving especially valuable architectural ensembles nearby Contract Square) for the purpose of making way for new construction and routing the underground railway with the new stations, namely, “Contract Square” and “Taras Shevchenko” along the western part of historic Podil [13].

Within a new Master plan, developed in 1967, the concept of Podil district reconstruction was elaborated. According to the plan almost all background housing system of the late 19th – early 20th century had to be torn down. However for the time being the inadmissibility of such approach had already been perceived not only by the heritage restoration specialists but also by the residents of the city and the architects. Already in 1977 a new project on city center detailed planning envisaged the «organization of the Protective Zones of the architectural, historic and cultural monuments». In 1977 the territory of Podil was proclaimed to be the zone of a regular housing system «aimed at a maximal conservation of a historically formed appearance of this original city district» [14].

Thus, in the late 1970s a renewed project on a detailed plan of Podil district was presented. According to this project a lot of city blocks had to be regenerated. In 1977 – 1979s the projection started. The two architectural workshops of “Kyivproject” institute were involved in the process. The first team working under the guidance of V. Rozenberh was planning the city blocks between Skovoroda, Pochainynska, Voloska and Horiv Streets. The second team working under the guidance of J. Szalacky was projecting the city blocks between the Kyrilivska, Obolonska, Mezhyhirska and Olenivska Streets (Fig. 2.). The latter city blocks had been realized and are the object of analysis of a present paper [14].

The values of the team working under the guidance of J. Szalacky substantially differed from a modernistic approach dominating in a Soviet projecting. The authors of the project wrote, that «Architectural heritage of a concrete place became a starting point in





Fig. 2. Architects of the blocks in Podil, photo from 1984. From left to right: Jerzy Szalacki, Tetiana Lazarenko, Ihor Shpara. Photo from the archive of J. Szalacki

the team of architects, a new architecture of Podil district must restore the lost elements of a traditional building, namely, the bay windows, figured metal fences on the open balconies, updated façade décor, small front gardens under the windows of the ground floor and, even, «moulded house signs». Besides, the courtyards of the new city blocks should again be endowed with «cosiness» and «social function» of people rapprochement, the function of good neighbourliness and the link between generations.

The city blocks between the Kyrlyvska, Mezhyrirska, Olenivska and Obolonska Streets were located in periphery of historic Podil, bordered with the industrial zone (Fig.3). The architects designed around 50,000 square meters for various purposes for almost 2,500 residents. There weren't especially valuable architectural monuments here and this fact gave the architects free rein. But, the project envisaged the highest

the city blocks in order to provide the dwellers with quick access to the underground railway lines. The multifunctionality became an important characteristic of the housing project: on the level of the ground floors there have been planned the imbedded different service institutions, cafes and shops of micro-scale (100–200 m²). Apart from dwelling the three kindergartens, school the the edifice of the bank in Poshtova square were projected by the architects (but not all of planned objects were realized).

The height of the buildings was the principal and one of the most important peculiarities of the project. For the providing with the viewing points it was accepted different height of housing system: from 4 to 7 storeys, and, in general, the height was losing close to Shchekavytsya Hill for the purpose of the perpetuation of classical view of the Kyiv mountains. Architects sometimes deliberately envisioned the buildings of different heights to achieve the effect of the diversity of skyline, typical for the historical buildings of Kiev.

In order to combine the existing preserved buildings with the buildings of a new housing system the architects reduced the height of the latter ones using the arches, which promoted the perspective views of the courtyards space. A complex system of visual links between the accents on the ways of pedestrian moving, fixing the angles of the city block had to create, by the architect's design, the effect of psychological protection of the dwellers. Thus, via the opening in a corner Tower (the corner of Kostyantynivska and Yurkivska Streets) a pedestrian could see harmoniously organized internal space and the turned at the angle building – «Castle»; the corner of the street could be unexpectedly accented by the reduction of the building height, which was substantiated as just over the way there was placed not high historic building and there could happen the dialogue between them (Fig. 5).

Residential units were assembled from ready-made section blocks which aimed at reducing the cost of construction. Although the residential quarters had an experimental design, the architects had only territorial catalogs of construction products (for example, only two types of windows and two types of balcony doors could be opted for). Thus, it was necessary to achieve diversity by having limited resources. Therefore, each building was designed by different architecture teams to diversify it and ensure maximum freedom of expression. The designers turned to the unprecedented in the practice of Soviet architecture of the time "non-functional" elements. Hence, brick arches, columns, towers were constructed, bearing a metaphoric and contextual meaning, and did not perform utilitarian function. "Dovecote" on the roof of the boiler room was designed as a memory of the practice of keeping pigeons

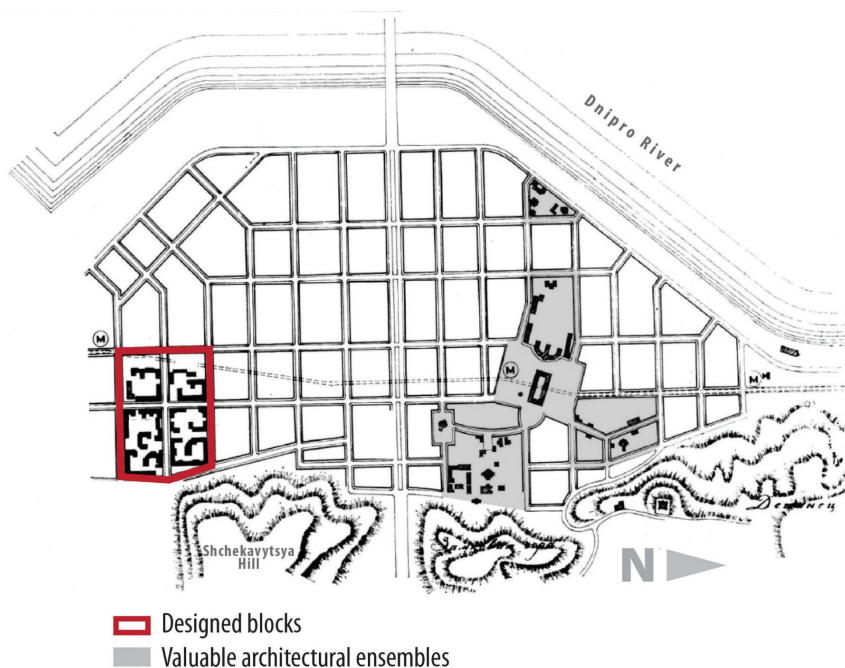


Fig. 3. Site plan of the historical district of Podil in Kyiv with the indication of the designed blocks Drawn by S. Linda based of the site plane provided by J. Szalacki, 2021

creating the appearance of a new housing system of Podil district. We tried to renew the lost canvas via forming the new housing, creations using a traditional character of the house, yard, apartment, street or crossroads» [3]. The team has intended to renovate the district by: restoration of all local architectural monuments, reconstruction of background housing according to the old drawings and erection of the modern housing city blocks. It is necessary that the city blocks should be up-to-date and comfortable, but, at the same time, be harmonically described into the surrounding historic housing system by their colours, facades, sloping roofs and the décor techniques as well. In the view of

possible preservation of the existing buildings (Fig. 3.). The architects consciously kept the close front of a housing system and ensured continuation of local building tradition. In some cases (for example, along Konstantynivska Street) the continuous front was interrupted in order to ensure the insolation of the preserved 19th century buildings, which were located inside the city block.

On the urban planning level the architects departed from the «automobile-centric» approach, having closed the transport access to the yards (excepting the under-sized guest parkings for 10 cars). At the same time, the pedestrian orientation promoted the emergence of the new diagonal links within

which was common in the first half of the twentieth century. A micro-amphitheater with a "Portal" was designed on the top of the roof of the another boiler room, where the performances for the city block residents could take place.

The architects named such spatial composition with the word "collage", belonging to the postmodernism vocabulary and which reflected the characteristic features of this style. The conscious "anti-hierarchy" of the collage and the uniqueness of each individual element, the simultaneous coexistence of different ones that are inherent in the image of historical buildings, were taken as the basis of the stylistic concept [3]. The principle of collage was not just a fashionable technique: it promoted the affirmation of a new attitude to the past as well as the idea of a historical development of a particular place.

A special role in the perception of the holistic image was given to color. Active use of color is also one of the features of Podol's historical architecture. According to the explanations of J. Szalacký – the head of the group of architects they took as a basis a characteristic color scheme, which was based on a combination of background colors (mostly earth tones) with accents [15] (Fig. 6.). The polychromy considerably enhanced a visual perception of not only the individual facades, but the whole groups of houses. The overlap of the various compositional ideas, which reflected the historical layers and time slices, was necessarily emphasized by the plasticity of the wall and the polychromy of the facades, enhancing the effect of collage and fragmentation. The paint was applied directly to the brick surface of the walls, which also was according to the Kyiv traditions of construction.

In 1984, J. Szalacký's team project even received a diploma at the All-Union Project Review in Moscow and was presented at international exhibitions in Krakow and Sofia in 1989. International recognition contributed to the project's funding. Construction work started only in 1984. The project dates back to the 1980s when the Soviet political system was in a deep crisis (the last building was completed in 1992). Therefore, the project was not fully implemented. Unfortunately, during construction several houses of the 19th century, which were fundamentally important for holistic concept (pharmacy on the cross-road of Yurkivska and Kostniatynivska streets and a children's shelter along Yurkivska street) were destroyed. Later, "Dovecote" remained empty; micro-amphitheater on the stairs of the boiler room never started operating...

Results and discussion

The presented project was one of the few in the architectural practice of that time, which operated with popular concepts in the world architecture such as "environmental

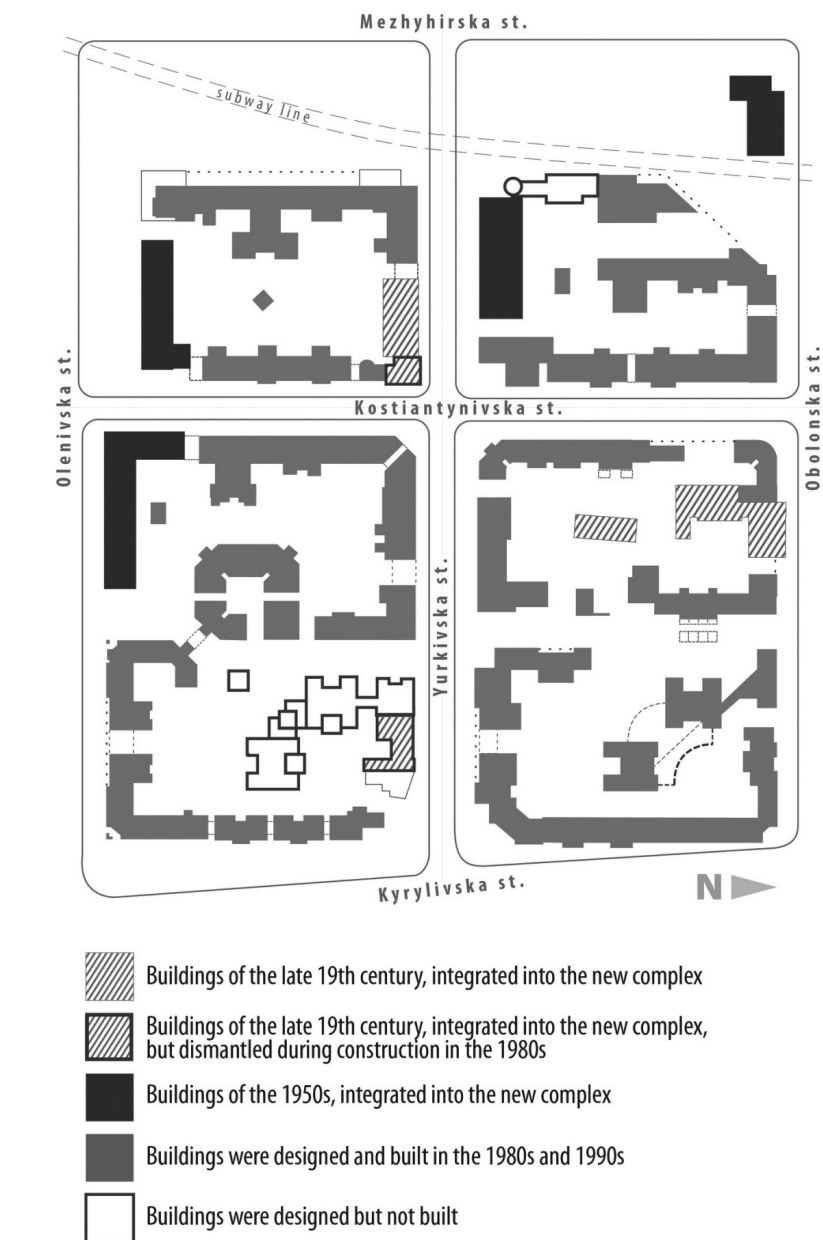


Fig. 4. Site plan of the blocks in Podil with indication of designed and existing buildings. Drawn by S. Linda based on the site plan provided by J. Szalacki, 2021

approach" or contextualism. The architects designed not just a residential area, but an environment full of images and associations. The streets and courtyards were conceived as interior public spaces, visual accents on the pedestrian path, defined the corners of the city blocks, multi-layered and superimposing different compositional and color schemes, the use of "non-functional" elements created a nostalgic and, at the same time, extremely contemporary environment. The social function of the project was important, as it visualized the establishment of neighborly contacts, the creation of people community and their love to the home place. In this regard, the project was somewhat utopian and ahead of its time. It rejected utilitarian architecture and

its interpretation as a multifaceted form, which was abundant in different historical quotations with demonstrative communicativeness, steeped in "words" and metaphors. Undoubtedly, this was a "language of postmodernism" formed by Ch. Jencks. In a publication dated by 1984 the word of "postmodernism" was carefully used by A. Sedin: "I think that this work can be regarded as an expression of the native modern tendency, which in the West was called postmodernism" [2].

The architecture of the city blocks is full of many references and quotations: here one can find references to the archetypes of Aldo Rossi, a specific reading of the architectural order of Ricardo Boffil, the gate-houses of Rob Krier (Fig. 7). Principle of "patching" of



Fig. 5. Sketch of visual links and dominant elements:
 1 – The view toward to the historical building of the end of 19th century (Yurkivska street, 54); 2 – The view toward to the building at the crossroad of Yurkivska and Kostiantynivska streets; 3 – The view toward to the building “Tower” at the crossroad of Yurkivska and Kostiantynivska streets; 4 – The view toward to the building “Castle” (Olenivska street, 10); 5 – The view toward to the arch between the buildings on Kostiantynivska street, 63 and Olenivska street, 12; 6 – The view toward to the building on Kostiantynivska street, 46/52; 7 – The view toward to the building “Castle” (Olenivska street, 10); 8 – The view toward to the arch between the buildings on Olenivska street 8 and 10; 9 – The view toward to so-called “Propylaea” – the passage between the buildings on Olenivska street 2/6 and 8/12.; 10 – The view toward to the building on the corner of Kyrylivska i Obolonska streets; 11 – The view toward to the building on the corner of Kostiantynivska i Obolonska streets; 12 – The view toward to “bridge” between the building on Obolonska street 13/15 and the boiler room “Non-functional” and symbolic details:
 A – Symbolic “Portal” which spanning over the micro-amphitheater on the roof of the boiler room; B – Top of the corner of “Tower-gate”; C – The house “Castle”; D – Symbolic tower accentuating the corner of the building; E – Symbolic dovecote on the roof of the boiler room; F – The tower that forms the visual accent of the street
 Drawn by S. Linda based on the site plan provided by J. Szalacki, 2021
 All photos by S. Linda, 2021

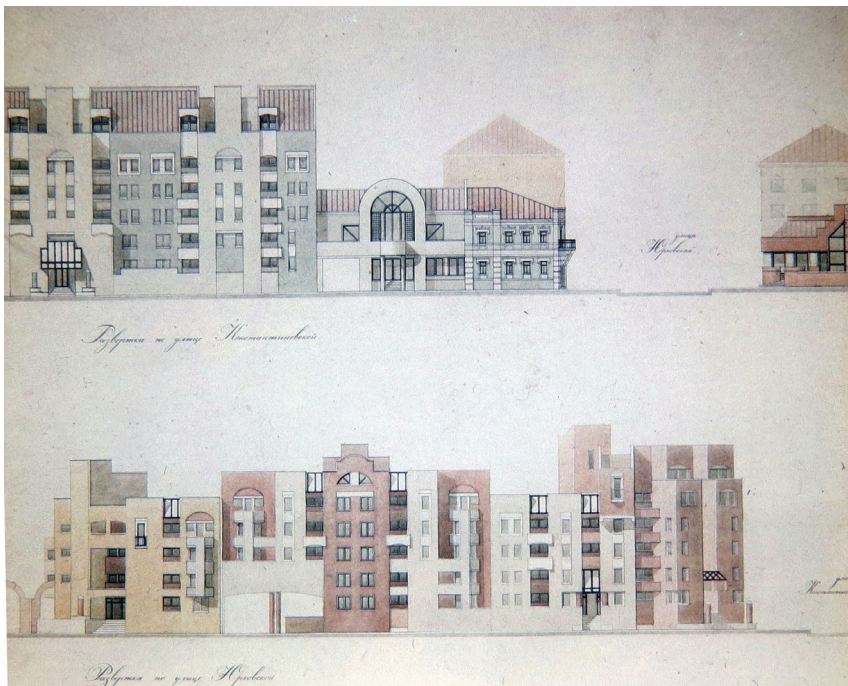


Fig. 6. View of the building from Kostiantynivska and Yurkivska streets. Colour scheme. The picture above shows the combination of the newly designed building with the historical building from the end of the 19th century, as well as the different heights of the new building. Drawn by T. Lazarenko, 1980. Drawing from the archive of J. Szalacki

the urban fabric resonated with the practice of “critical reconstruction”, which at that time was actively implemented in Berlin. “Pedestrian centrism” was close to the ideas of the New Urbanism. The use of bricks, a tricks of the buildings’ heights of the boulevards, which demonstrate the appeal to the local tradition of construction – all indicates the neovernacular trends. However, just the architecture of the city blocks is the most brilliant reflection of the historical traditions of Podil district. To the question of “what inspired such architecture” the chief architect of the project J. Szalacki answered: “Podil” [15].

Conclusion

The development of architecture in the countries of the former socialist camp was relatively isolated without much external influence. Notwithstanding the strict restrictions and a complete ideologization of architectural design, the Soviet architects’ works reflected postmodernist tendencies. It emphasized the importance of adopting new approaches to urban planning and architecture, which spread across the world, regardless of borders and ideologies. The authors of the Podil



Fig. 7. Use of elements from the architectural dictionary of postmodernism: a – appeal to the forms of archetypes: the facade of the building on Obolonska street, 13/15; b – interpretation of the elements of architectural order and monumentalism: the facade of the building on Yurkivska street, 59. All photos by S.Linda, 2021

projects created real examples not of the Soviet typical buildings but the then international postmodernism. It had no analogs not only in Kyiv but also across Ukraine in the Soviet era. These realizations laid the foundation for a new architectural thinking and instantaneously engendered spread of postmodernism in the architecture of Ukraine after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

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PRAWIDŁOWY SPOSOB CYTOWANIA

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Abstract: Despite the short chronological span of the socialist era architecture heritage, it remains little investigated and underappreciated. Given the political and cultural isolation of the Soviet Union republics and strict architectural design regulations, there was a widespread belief that architects should not use innovative trends. This article exemplifies residential quarters in the historic Podil district, designed and built in the 1970s-1980s in Kyiv. They vividly demonstrate the postmodern ideas embodied in Ukrainian architecture. Methodologically, the article bases on the Ch. Jencks definition of postmodernism and in the comparison of his ideology with the implemented Kyiv project. It states that Kyiv architects proposed not typical Soviet construction projects but international postmodern architectural solutions. It proves that, on the one hand, Ukrainian architects had perfect qualifications to draw construction projects implementing advanced world trends of the time. But on the other hand, it highlights that postmodernism in architecture did not merely confine to Western Europe and the United States but also penetrated the Iron Curtain, exemplifying innovative architectural thinking which ran contrary to the modernist paradigm.

Keywords: postmodernism, Kyiv, city blocks, Podil, Soviet era

Streszczenie: „SOCJALISTYCZNY POSTMODERNIZM”: ARCHITEKTURA OSIEDLI MIESZKANIOWYCH NA PODOLE W KIJOWIE (UKRAINA). Mimo niewielkiego dystansu chronologicznego dziedzictwo architektoniczne epoki socjalizmu wciąż pozostaje nie do końca zbadane i docenione. W wyniku istniejącej izolacji politycznej oraz kulturowej republik dawnego ZSRR, a także surowej regulacji działalności architektonicznej, ukształtowało się przekonanie, że wiodące światowe trendy w rozwoju architektury nie mogły znaleźć swego miejsca i odzwierciedlenia w architekturze oraz budownictwie w ZSRR. W niniejszym artykule na przykładzie osiedli mieszkaniowych, które zostały zaprojektowane i zbudowane w latach 1970–1980 w jednej z zabytkowych dzielnic Kijowa, Podole, pokazuje się, że aktualne w tamtym okresie idee postmodernistyczne znalazły swoje odzwierciedlenie w architekturze ukraińskiej. Stosowane w artykule metody zostały oparte na definicji postmodernizmu sformułowanej przez Ch. Jencksa oraz na jej porównaniu z projektem zrealizowanym w Kijowie. Wówczas przez kijowskich architektów zostały zaproponowane nie obiekty reprezentujące typową architekturę socjalistyczną, lecz takie rozwiązania architektoniczne, które doskonale wpisywały się w międzynarodowy kontekst postmodernistyczny. Z jednej strony świadczyło to o tym, że ukraińscy architekci potrafili tworzyć i wznosić obiekty, które w pełni odpowiadały ówczesnym trendom światowym, a z drugiej pokazywało, że postmodernizm w architekturze nie ograniczał się do krajów Europy Zachodniej i USA, lecz także przenikał przez „żelazną kurtynę” jako nowa forma myślenia architektonicznego, będąca przeciwstawieniem paradygmatu modernizmu.

Słowa kluczowe: postmodernizm, Kijów, osiedla, Podół, okres sowiecki