

A GIANT AVANT-GARDE STADIUM PROJECT IN UKRAINE: THE ENIGMA OF THE 1930S

Svitlana SMOLENSKA *

*Prof., DSc (Architecture); Kharkiv School of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, Kontorska st., 5, Kharkiv, Ukraine
ORCID 0000-0002-4953-9563
E-mail address: *smollana@gmail.com*

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Abstract

The paper is dedicated to the study of rare undeciphered documents: colorful architectural perspectives of a giant stadium of the 1930s with a caption in French, found by the author of this text in one of the Ukrainian archives. The authorship of the graphic images and the project itself, the name of the stadium, its localization on the master plan of the city of those years were established in the process of this research. The results of the study allow us to trace the fate of the project of a giant sports complex from its concept and design stages to the beginning of its erection; to reveal the reasons for the interruption of its construction and oblivion for many decades, as well as to restore the biographies of the architects involved in the found images. Features of the difficult historical period in the architecture of Ukraine: the violent transition from modernism to “socialist realism” in the 1930s are seen through the “lens” of the fate of this unique avant-garde unrealized project.

Keywords: Historical study; The 1930s; Ukrainian architectural avant-garde; Unrealized projects; The giant sports complex.

1. INTRODUCTION

The achievements of the Soviet architectural avant-garde have long been recognized worldwide. Unfortunately, many interesting plans weren't carried out at that time for a number of the objective reasons. But information about this bright stage in the development of architecture on the territory of Ukraine, which was part of the USSR then, is incomplete. A lot of documentary evidence of that time was lost during the war years or destroyed in the pre-war period of the struggle against modernism (constructivism, as it was called here). That is why any finds are so rare and represent special value.

Two unidentified colorful architectural perspectives of a large stadium were found in 2013 by the author of

this paper in the Funds of the National Reserve “Sophia Kievskaya” while searching for authentic architectural projects of the modernism period [1]. Visual analysis allowed them to be referred to the 1930s. They were entitled in French: “Champ avec tribunes pour 80 000 spectateurs” (“Sportarena with seating for 80 000 viewers”). An unidentified autograph signature of the author-architect was in a corner of one picture, a small photo of the stadium plan drawing was pasted in the corner of another. These original documents could not fail to draw attention by their great art skills of execution (Fig. 1). The grandeur of the conception was also impressive – the stadium for 80,000 spectators can be considered a significant structure even by today's standards.



Figure 1.
The view of the main entrance of the stadium titled in French “Champ avec tribunes pour 80 000 spectateurs” with the architect’s autograph signature in the right corner. Architectural graphics, 1930s [1]

However, such a stadium did not exist in Ukraine before World War II. It would be doubly interesting to trace the history of the grandiose stadium project, which had never been realized. It took several years, as the boundaries of the study were constantly expanding, covering the biographies of the architects connected with the stadium, as well as the events of that time.

The article aims to fill in the architectural history gaps of the Soviet avant-garde of the 1930s in Ukraine by deciphering unknown archival graphic documents of the giant stadium.

Methods of the study included: search and analysis of textual and visual information about the object in the media and architectural periodicals of the 1930s as well as today’s Internet resources; search for the author of images by his specimen signature; field surveys of the proposed construction site; comparison of

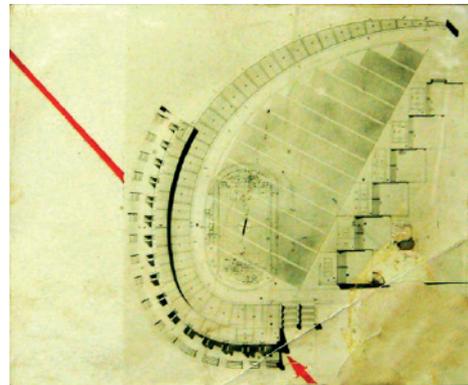


Figure 2.
The photo of the master plan of the stadium, pasted in the corner of one of the found paintings [1]

the found master plan of the stadium with the city master plan of the 1930s and modern geodetic maps.



Figure 3. The interior of the lobby of the art education sector of Pioneers' Palace in Kharkiv, arch. V. Kostenko, 1934 [2]

2. RESEARCH PROGRESS

Where and when was it proposed to erect the stadium? Why wasn't it carried out? Who is the author of the project? These are questions to be necessarily answered during research.

At its initial stage, the only clues were the specimen signature of the author-architect and the tiny master plan of the stadium (Fig. 2).

2.1. Signature identification

Fortunately, an identical signature, but already with the name of the author, was found during further study of archival graphic documents from the same period on one of the projects (it was the interior of the lobby of the art education sector of Pioneers' Palace in Kharkiv) [2] (Fig. 3).

It was established in the course of research that Veniamin Kostenko was born on January 13, 1903 in Kharkiv. He graduated with honors from the Kharkiv

Art Institute in 1928 and received a diploma of an architect-artist. The range of his projects was very wide: from factories to residential and public buildings. He was part of a group of Kharkiv architects who received the first prize for the project of Mass Musical Stage Theater with 4,000 seat capacity in Kharkiv at the international competition in 1931. He was the author of many significant buildings in the city. The most famous are: the administrative building of the Regional Council (before the Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine at 64 Sumska street, 1951–52, co-authored with architect V. Orekhov), the post-war reconstruction of the building of Kharkiv University on Dzerzhinsky square (Svobody Square now, co-authored with I. Ermilov, V. Livshits, V. Kamirny, 1951–52) and a number of many-storied residential buildings in the center of Kharkiv: Sumska street, 69 (1925) and 114 (1950) ets. In 1934–41 V. Kostenko worked in Moscow. At first, he was involved in the construction of the 1st stage of the Moscow Metro (exterior and interior



Figure 4.
The master plan for the reconstruction of Kharkiv, 1936 [5]

decoration of the vestibule of “Lenin Library” station, etc.). Then he participated in the design and construction of the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition as an architect and artist of the pavilions “Western Siberia”, “Kazakhstan” and “Ukraine”. In 1939 he was engaged in the decoration of the interior and the exposition of the Soviet pavilion of the World Exhibition in New York [3, 4].

The study showed that the successful beginning of the architectural activity of V. Kostenko was associated with Kharkiv – the capital of Ukraine in those years. It was logical to assume that the gigantic stadium was supposed to be built there. In the 1930s, the professional career of the architect was on the rise, as evidenced by an invitation to Moscow to design the most important objects in the capital of the USSR. It is also obvious that he had authority not only as an architect, but also as an artist, was a master of interior decoration and exhibition displays of the highest level. However, no mention of his participation in the design of any stadium was found in archival documents. An absence of information seemed suspicious: such a large object should have been reflected in the creative biography of the architect.

2.2. Search for the name and urban planning location of the sports complex

A sports complex of that great magnitude had to be marked in the master plan of the city. As it turned out, the original materials of the master plan for the reconstruction of Kharkiv in the 1930s were lost during the war. Its low-quality photographs were found in the course of the research: they were published in the professional press of those years [5]. The master plan was approved by the Kharkiv City Council in early 1936. However, in fact, it was developed before – in the early 1930s at the Ukrainian design institute “Giprograd”. Therefore, in 1931–35 new construc-



Figure 5.
A view of the real current state of the site. Photo by V. Tsebenko, 2018



Figure 6.
Comparison of the geodetic survey of the site in M 1: 500 with the modern photo from «Google earth»

tion in the city had already been carried out in accordance with its main directions. Even in a bad photograph, it was not difficult to spot a large green area in the south-east of the city (the area of the “Selection Station” at the time) with a characteristic – unusual shape – plan of the stadium, resembling a huge inverted comma (Fig. 4).

The next step was the search for this site on the modern geodetic survey of the city and its field studies. The area marked on the 1936 city plan is partially built up today. In the 1960s, the Sports Palace and the Tourist Hotel were erected there. But the location of the stadium itself remains abandoned, overgrown with bushes and trees, built up with garages in some places. It was a revelation to discover the remains of an earth mound prepared for the construction of the stands (Fig. 5). Geodetic survey confirmed its presence and the similarity of its shape to the shape of the stadium (Fig. 6). This meant that the construction of the stadium began in those years.

What was the name of that sports complex? The Petrovsky All-Ukrainian Stadium with a complex of gyms for the Institute of Physical Education is mentioned in some Internet resources dedicated to the sports life of Kharkiv in the 1930s [6]. A huge territory was allotted for its construction. It was just the right location, coincidentally, which was marked on the general plan of the city in 1936, and confirmed during field studies.

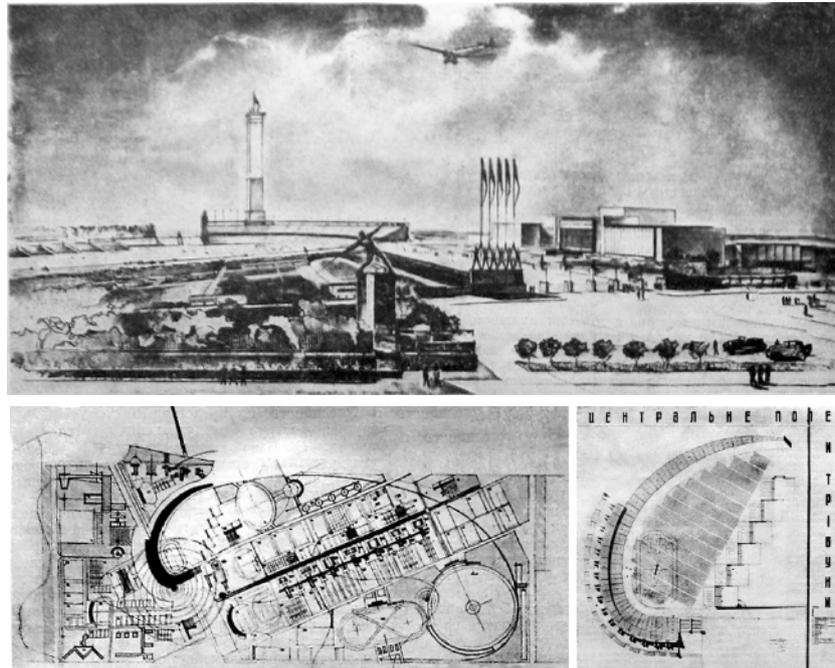


Figure 7. The view of the sports complex from the side of the main entrance, the master plans of the entire territory and sports arena [7]

2.3. The project of the sports complex

To find information about the object, the study was again focused on the analysis of the architectural press of those years. Finally, an article in the journal “Soviet architecture” for 1933 [7] gave answers to many questions. Architect Nikolay Zvegilsky was the author of the project “The G. I. Petrovsky All-Ukrainian Physical Culture Center in Kharkiv”. The complex was really planned on a grand scale. The stadium with the stands was its heart. It had a major sports core of international proportions and a field of mass actions, with different sports grounds flanking it. The complex also included a cycle track with a cycling and ski station, a palace of physical culture, a swimming pool measuring 50 × 20 m, and a children’s sector. Places of mass cultural and educational work and a theater for 2500 people were located near the main entrance. The middle of the site was set aside for athletics and football fields, volleyball, basketball, handball, gymnastics, possession of cold weapons and weightlifting. The southeastern part of the site was occupied by a military town, a tent camp, a military sports hippodrome, an airfield, a place for sports cars and a combat shooting range. The Institute of Physical Culture, hostels and hotels were to be located on the territory.

The project was approved by the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Physical Culture of the USSR on

7th December 1932. The article noted: “The general solution of the master plan is interesting and successfully linked to the city, the surrounding industrial area and the Chuguev highway. The design of the stands and action fields is fresh and bold. The project makes satisfactory use of the favorable terrain conditions. The field of mass action is of exceptional importance here, since it will be the only foothold in the city for mass demonstrations, republican parades, etc.” [7]. Graphic documents were also published: the perspective/view of the sports complex from the main entrance, master plans of the entire territory and sports arena (Fig. 7).

Earlier mentions of the stadium project were found in the mass press of 1930–1931. It was interesting to discover that at first the stadium was supposed to be built in a completely different place near the municipal park in the northern part of the city. The area allocated there was much smaller – 61 hectares, and the stadium itself was designed for 40 thousand spectators – half as many.

An illustration of very poor quality nevertheless leaves no doubt that the master plan of the site, published in 1931 [8] (Fig. 8), was different from the master plan of 1933 [7] (Fig. 7). Therefore, it can be argued that between the end of 1931 and the end of 1932 (when the project was approved by the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Physical



Figure 8.
The master plan of the site near the municipal park in the northern part of Kharkiv, 1931 [8]

Culture) the decision to locate the stadium on a new territory and increase its capacity was made. Architect N. Zvegilsky revised his project in accordance with new requirements and a different urban planning situation.

The Kharkiv City Council published an album designed in a modernist style and representing the achievements of the city economy in 1931. Photos of projects that had already been completed or were under construction for various purposes had been published there. Fragments of the project of the All-Ukrainian stadium: the facade and the perspective of the stands (without mentioning the author-architect) were presented in the section “National-cultural construction” in connection with the beginning of its erection (Fig. 9). The laconicism of the architectural language of the project leaves no doubt about the author's commitment to constructivist ideas [9].

The luxurious park was to become an integral part of the sports center. Information about it was found in a study dedicated to its author – the famous Ukrainian dendrologist Professor A. I. Kolesnikov. He wrote in 1937: “Here, on 70 hectares (out of 280) of steppe soil, green spaces have already been created, in which there are many valuable species and interesting combinations associated with the nature and purpose of sports grounds and facilities” [10]. Much of the work on the creation of the park had already been completed when the construction of the stadium was stopped. Unfortunately, today there is no trace left of the park, although various compositions of decora-

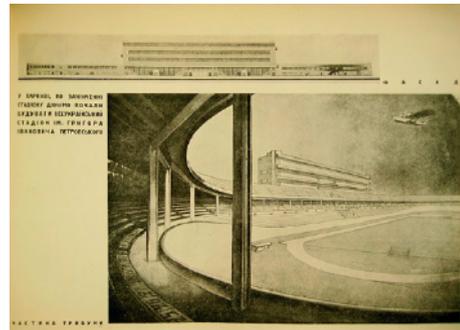


Figure 9.
A sheet from the album “Kharkiv is building” with fragments of the project of the All-Ukrainian stadium: the facade and the perspective of the stands, 1931 [9]

tive trees and bushes with artificial hills, pools and ponds were laid here in due time, flower beds were laid out, many unique species of green spaces were planted.

The file “On the appropriation of funds for the construction of the Petrovsky All-Ukrainian Stadium in Kharkov 10/17/1930 - 01/11/1934” is kept in the funds of the State Archive of the Russian Federation in the materials of the Secretariat of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR [11]. Consequently, the design and start of construction work was supposed to be carried out in the period from the end of 1930 to the beginning of 1934. But in January 1934 the plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine decided to transfer the capital of Soviet Ukraine from Kharkiv to

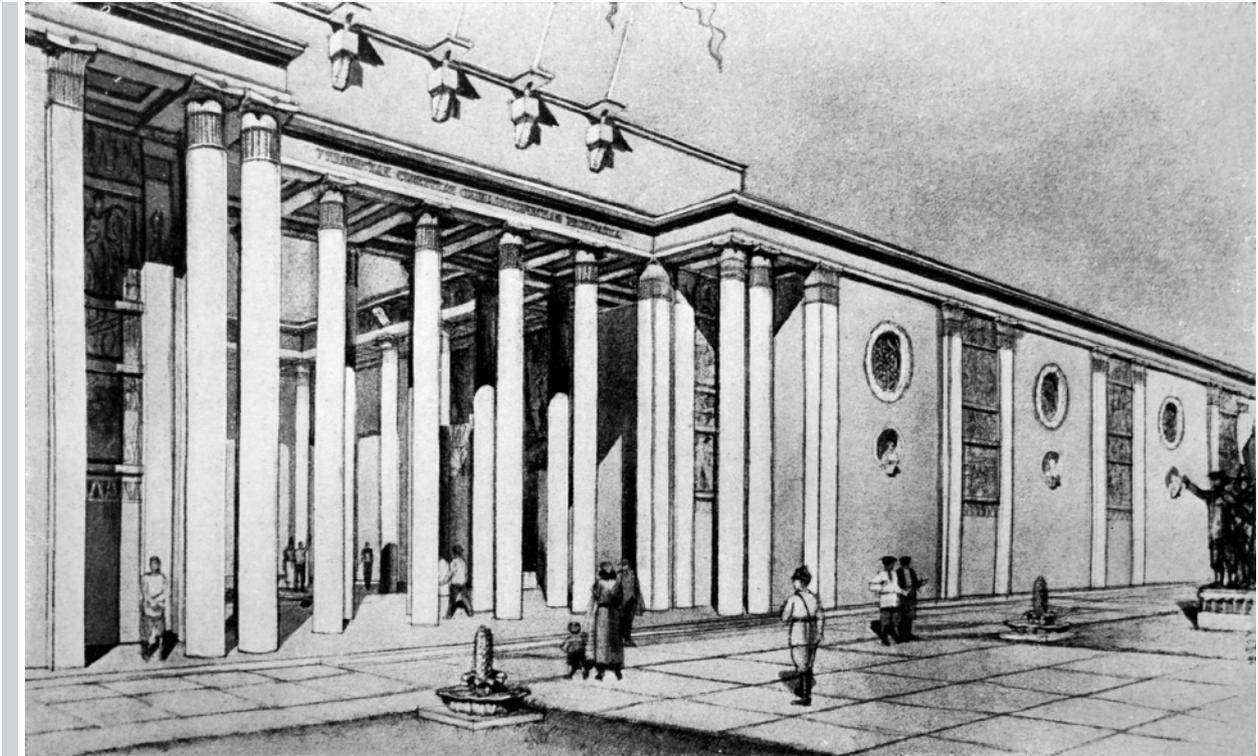


Figure 10. Competitive project of the Pavilion of the Ukrainian SSR at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (2nd Prize). Arch. N. Zvegilsky, M. Klimentov, A. Popov-Shaman, G. Yakovlev. The main entrance perspective, 1935 [12]

Kiev. The relocation of the government, central sports institutions, and the reduction in appropriations had a detrimental effect on the idea of implementing a grandiose sports complex. Its construction was stopped.

2.4. The authorship

The turn came to learn more about the architect Nikolay Zvegilsky. He was not even mentioned in the directory of Kharkiv architects. Information about him had to be collected bit by bit in the literature of the 1920s–1930s and the archives of various cities of Ukraine and Russia, incl. Moscow. The study found that N. Zvegilsky was born in 1897, received an architectural education in Kharkiv in the same years as V. Kostenko. Most likely, they knew each other well. He was the author of projects for several sports facilities, incl. stadium “Dynamo” in Odessa (1932), Regional stadium in Saratov (1937), etc. [7]. There was unverified information that at the very end of the 1920s the architect taught at the Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute at the architectural department of the Faculty of Civil Engineering, which coincides with the period of his work in Kharkiv on the project of the All-Ukrainian Physical Culture Center. After 1934 (probably when

the construction of the stadium was suspended) he moved to Moscow, becoming a graduate student at the Institute of Postgraduate Studies of the Academy of Architecture of the USSR (V. Kostenko worked in Moscow in the pre-war years also). Together with other colleagues, N. Zvegilsky took part in the competition for the design of the Pavilion of the Ukrainian SSR at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition in 1937 (Second Prize, Fig. 10) [12]. Like all other competitive designs of the mid-1930s, that project was executed in a neoclassical manner in accordance with the official style change. In the 1950s–1970s, several books were published in central Moscow publishing houses, where Zvegilsky co-authored sections on sports facilities [13, 14, 15]. In the same years he taught at the Moscow Institute of Architecture at the Department of Architectural Design of Public Buildings.

Where did the signature of the architect V. Kostenko come from on the colorful architectural perspectives of the stadium? And why was their caption written in French? In the 30s, the architect worked in Moscow on important projects. He participated in the creation and design of the pavilion exposition for the New York Exhibition of the 1939. It would be logical

to assume that Kostenko was involved in the design of the exposition for the previous World Exhibition of Arts and Technology in Paris in 1937, where, as it is known, the works of Kharkiv architects were demonstrated. In particular, he completed the graphic design of the two main images of the stadium.

It is not difficult to see that the perspective view of the main entrance of the stadium, made by V. Kostenko in 1937 (Fig. 1), is identical to that chosen by N. Zvegilsky (Fig. 7) in his initial design of the early 1930s. However, the change in style is obvious: Kostenko decorated the facades of the buildings in the entrance group with columns, decor details, and sculptures in the spirit of the late 1930s.

3. CONCLUSIONS

1. It was found in the course of the study of undeciphered archival documents, that two colorful images of the stadium with 80,000 spectators belong to the 1930s. The stadium was designed for Kharkiv, the first capital of the Ukrainian SSR. It was planned to place it on the site between the present Moskovsky avenue and Olympic street in the southeast of the city. The author of the project named "The Petrovsky All-Ukrainian Physical Culture Center" was an architect Nikolay Zvegilsky. It was supposed to be a grandiose complex with many different sports facilities located in a beautiful park area of 280 hectares. The famous Ukrainian dendrologist Professor A. Kolesnikov was engaged in landscape design of the park. The project was completed in two stages. Its first version was developed to be located in the northern part of the city near the municipal park on an area of 61 hectares in 1930. In 1932 the site for the construction of the sports complex was changed: an enlarged site more than 4 times greater in area in the south-east part of the city was chosen, the capacity of the stadium itself was doubled in terms of the number of spectators. International status could be attributed to it due to its enormous size and compliance with international standards. The initial design of the complex was redesigned by its author-architect N. Zvegilsky, taking into account the new requirements in the same 1932.

Construction began after that, as evidenced by traces of earthworks that have survived to the present day. By 1937, the park was already laid out for 70 hectares, valuable species of trees and shrubs were planted. After the transfer of the capital of Ukraine to Kiev in 1934, large-scale architectural

projects of the city, designed for the capital's scope, were stopped. The erection of the grandiose sports complex of the All-Ukrainian stadium – probably one of the largest not only in the country, but also in Europe at that time – was also abandoned.

In the post-war period, the idea of creating a sports zone in this part of the city was developed by the architects of the Institute "Kharkivproject". Sports Palace and the Hotel "Tourist" were built on that territory in the early 1970s. However, over the next half century a large part of the site was neglected, chaotic built up with household buildings. The project of the giant stadium from the modernist period was forgotten.

2. Architect-artist Veniamin Kostenko (1903–1969), whose signature was found on the studied images - excellent examples of architectural graphics of the 1930s, was their author, but he was not the author of the project of the sports complex. V. Kostenko was involved in their execution as a high-class artist, fluent in artistic and graphic techniques. Most likely, the images were made during the design of the exposition of the Soviet pavilion at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1937. Soviet gigantism was supposed to impress both compatriots and representatives of other countries. Perhaps that is why the project was selected for the demonstration of the achievements of Soviet architecture in the international arena. The original modernist facades of the buildings in the image of the main entrance to the complex were changed in 1937 – saturated with classical details in order to please the new requirements of the soviet authorities.
3. The creative biographies of the two talented architects were restored, which made it possible to find answers to many questions, to confirm the hypotheses that arose during the research. The forgotten name of Nikolay Zvegilsky, who made his contribution to the development of modernism in Ukraine, in particular, to the design of sports facilities returned to the architectural history. The significance of the work of Veniamin Kostenko was proved, a wide range of his possibilities as an architect and graphic artist was revealed.
4. The 30s of the twentieth century were a difficult, controversial period in the history of Ukrainian architecture – a period of violent transition from modernism to "socialist realism" with its return to classical forms. Modernism (constructivism) was outlawed, and its followers were persecuted. Because of that many interesting constructivist

ideas unfortunately were never implemented. That time gave rise to very unusual forms of mixing the two styles, when classical details were hastily superimposed on the constructivist basis of buildings under construction in order to “hide” the forbidden style. The famous Russian researcher of the Soviet avant-garde S.O. Khan-Magomedov called this period “post-constructivism” [16].

5. The fate of the stadium project has absorbed the tragedy of the heyday and the death of modernism in Ukraine. That period was vividly reflected in the architecture of the Ukrainian capital of the late 1920s – early 1930s. Giant modernist construction projects were underway at that time in Kharkiv. The grandiose complex of administrative buildings around Dzerzhinsky Square – the largest in Europe (11.9 hectares) – was actively completed, giving a modern look to the new city center. However, during the 1930s, some of the buildings of the complex began to lose their modernist appearance (the facades of the Hotel «International» and the building of the House of Cooperation under construction were “modified” with a touch of neoclassicism, intensified during the post-war reconstruction). A huge theater of mass musical stage with 4,000 seat capacity, whose foundations were already laid then, and remained unrealized. The stadium for 80,000 spectators was on a par with them, striking in its size and its international scale.

The unrealized project of a giant stadium is a vivid example of how authoritarian power cracked down not only on people, but also on buildings, on progressive architectural trends, regardless of material and human costs thereby having an irreversible impact on the course of architectural history.

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