

# Modern Byelorussian Architecture 1920-1930 – European Features and Regional Peculiarities

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Byelorussian heritage of the late 1920s and early 1930s architecture is predominantly Modernist. It must be pointed out that avant-garde architectural trends can be seen both in the western and eastern parts of the country, in spite of the fact that Byelorussia was at that time (1920-30) partitioned into Soviet Byelorussia and Byelorussia incorporated into the 2nd Polish Republic (1918-1939), i.e. the two countries with entirely different political and economic systems. However, this division into two separate political bodies resulted in specific features of the Modern Movement architecture in the early 1930s: while in the western areas "luxury trend" of Functionalism developed, in the eastern regions it was "simplified Constructivism".

## Functionalism

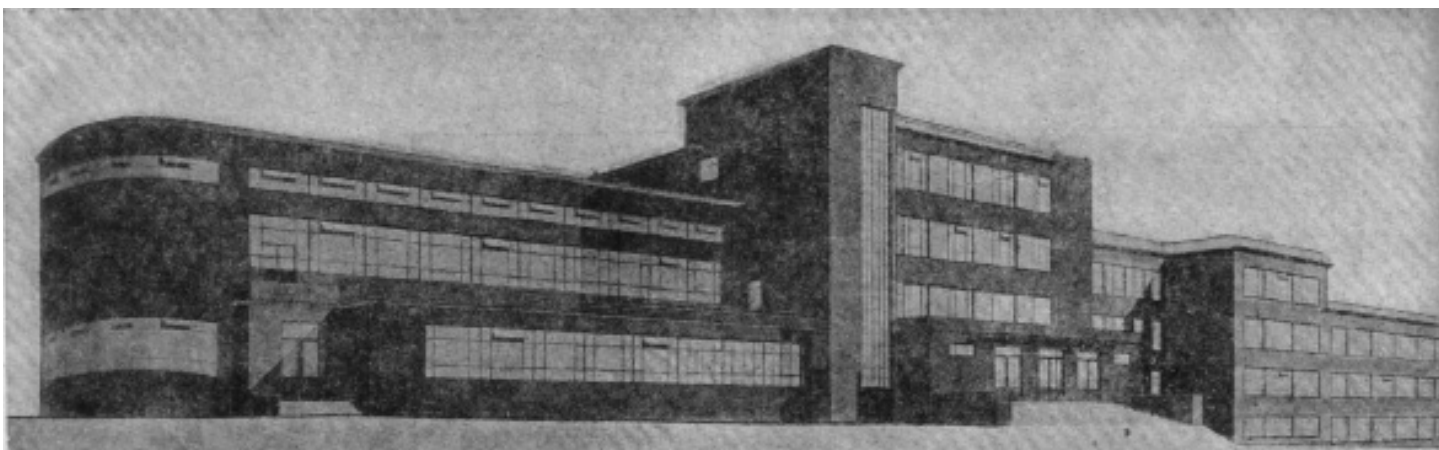
A formal idiom of Functionalist architecture was in fact a lingua franca. The first thing we notice when analysing the features of this formation is that the design had to meet the requirements of functional zoning. In western Belarus the most characteristic example is Marksman's House (1935) in Grodno in

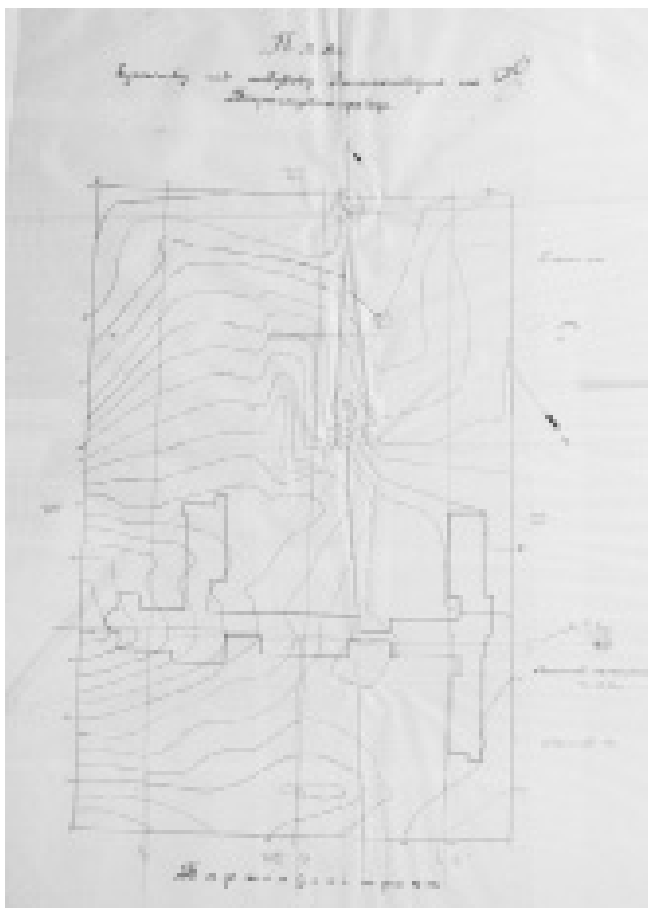


**1.** Marksman's House, Orzeszkowa street, Grodno; 1935, designed by A. Dubanovich. Photo by the author

Orzeszkowa street, designed by A. Dubanovich (Fig. 1). Its architectural exterior clearly proves the application of this rule. The spatial layout of the building was designed around the central staircase, extending above the roof, from which hallways with hotel rooms run off in two directions – and this can be clearly seen in the shape of the building. The semicircular staircase, a characteristic feature of functional

**2.** The design for Minsk Technical University, perspective (1930); architect G.L. Lavrov. State Archives of Science and Technology Documents. Set 112. – Sp. 1. – Ak. 8





**3.** The design for Minsk Technical University, plan (1930); architect G.L. Lavrov. Minsk District State Archives. Set 351. – Sp. 2. – Ak. 26

architecture, resulted from the fact that a ramp was introduced, which was rather unusual in residential buildings. A vertical length of windows was intended to highlight the interior structure of the building.

A clear-cut division of rooms into functional groups is also present in the original design of the Minsk Technical University building (Fig. 2), completed in 1930. Its author was architect G.L. Lavrov<sup>1</sup>. The building had three wings running from the main entrance in three directions: the left wing contained a lecture theatre, and the mid and right wings contained lecture halls and staff rooms. The roofed passage on the first-floor level, above the drive, was intended to link the university building with the hall of residence (Fig. 3). It should be noted that this layout copied the composition of the *Bauhaus* school building in Dessau (1925-26).

Following Modernist manifest guidelines, i.e. functionality and modern technological solutions, architects introduced certain technological innovations, e.g. roof terraces. However, due to limited technical capacity of the building industry at the time, flat roofs were expensive to construct,

1. Minsk District State Archives. Set 351. – Sp. 2. – Ak. 21



**4.** Byelorussian National University in Minsk (1930), main building; architect G. Lavrov. Source: I. M. Куркоў, *Мінск незнаемы 1920-1940, аўтар-укладальнік, Мінск: Ураджай, 2002, p. 47*

so they were rarely used in practice. One of the few examples of roof terrace is the main building of the National Byelorussian University in Minsk (Fig. 4). Most frequently, roof terraces designed by architects were in practice replaced with small gradient sloping roofs (e.g. the buildings of clinical hospital in Minsk and numerous other buildings erected at that time).

In the western areas of present-day Belarus (unlike in the eastern regions), roof terraces were designed not only in public buildings but in residential houses as well. In Grodno, the house in Osipienko street has a big terrace above its two-floor living segment, with metal railings of typical modern line (Fig. 5). The building itself, however, had a timber frame, and the terrace was in fact a single-slope roof with a small gradient.

Flat roofs were extremely fashionable, and even if a house did have a sloping roof, it was hidden behind a high balustrade to hint a flat roof and a terrace. This was the case with the house in Mogilev, at 34 Pionierska, where the balustrade does not stand out against the façade, linking with it by decorative stripes (Fig. 6). The polyclinic building in the town of Hlybokaye has a gable roof covered with metal sheet, with a gradient so small it can hardly be seen from street level (Fig. 7).

**5.** Residential building in Grodno (Osipienko street) (1920-30); architect unknown. Photo by the author





6. Residential building in Mogilev (34 Pionierska street) (1920-30); architect unknown. Photo by the author

Another fashionable modernist attribute was ribbon windows. They also became a popular architectural motif, although interpreted in different ways. For example, the windows of the clinical hospital in Minsk were arranged as ribbons with wide brick walls between particular windows, all in the form of a shallow recess and slightly darker in colour (Fig. 8). This method of linking windows into strips by means of recess and colour was commonly used in many modern buildings at the time.

### “Luxury trend” of Functionalism

Economic and political differences between Soviet and Polish parts of Byelorussia were reflected in some artistic differences in their architecture: in the western part of the country, the “luxury trend” developed, while in the eastern regions it was the “simplified Constructivism”.

The term “luxury trend” – introduced by Polish scholar T. S. Jaroszewski – is most appropriate to describe the characteristic features of stylish, elegant urban villas constructed in the western areas of the present-day Belarus. According to Jaroszewski, this term defines *solid architecture of very high building standard, with painstaking finishing touches, equipped with all the high-tech appliances to provide high standards of living and luxury for its user*<sup>2</sup>. The term “luxury trend” was accepted by Polish art and architecture historians. It is also beginning to be regarded as a significant element determining the style of late Functionalism, i.e. the period

2. Jaroszewski Tadeusz S., *Od klasycyzmu do nowoczesności: O architekturze polskiej XVIII, XIX i XX wieku*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1996, p. 273.

between 1933-39<sup>3</sup>.

The “luxury trend” emerged and became popular after the world had recovered from the Great Depression. Therefore, the general public associated the trend with chic and elegance, but also with technological progress, which provided all possible facilities and luxury. In the 1930s, the idea of “pure” Functionalism, present in numerous modernist manifestos, lost its rigidity and was applied in a more flexible way.

The layout of the rooms in the luxurious villa at 10, Kirpiczna in Grodno, , provided living comfort with relatively small floor area (Fig. 9). The hall, the living room and bedrooms were,

3. Sołtysik Maria Jolanta, *Na styku dwóch epok. Architektura gdyńskich kamienic okresu międzywojennego*, Gdynia, 2003, pp. 38-40.

7. Polyclinic building in Hlybokaye (1920-30); architect unknown. Photo by the author





**8.** *Clinical hospital in Minsk (1931); architect G.L. Lavrov. Source: I. M. Куркоў, Мінск незнаемы 1920-1940, аўтар-укладальнік, Мінск: Ураджай, 2002, р. 199*



**9.** *Villa in Grodno (10, Kirpiczna street, 1934); architect unknown. Photo by the author*

however, big enough to be connected by a system of passages and hallways. There was a garage in the ground floor. The design included built-in closets and a separate walk-in closet, where windows were placed close to the ceiling, directly above the shelves and hanger rods. The plot is situated on a slope, so the architect designed a system of steps for the residents' convenience and retaining walls to support terraces with lawns and flower beds. Undoubtedly, these features constitute an important element of the composition, and were made of quality reinforced concrete, thanks to which they have survived for 70 years.

High-quality architectural finish can also be seen in the luxurious villa in Grodno, at 18, Lenin street (Fig. 10). The plasterwork of the building, like in many other "luxury trend" buildings, was enriched with crystalline schist

which added some distinct lustre to it. The front foundation was covered with granite blocks. The gateway to the premises is quite unusual: it is compositionally incorporated into the building, so they both form a unity. Another example of the "luxury trend" is the villa in Kobryn at 4, Suvorov street (Fig. 11). It has an interesting feature of a flowerbed incorporated into the structure of the plinth, both built of the same material.

### **"Simplified Constructivism"**

Constructivism developed in the eastern regions of Byelorussia. It was neither a copy of any architectural style nor direct transfer of definite theoretical concepts into practice. Its peculiarity resulted from the oddities of the economic and political model the Soviet authorities instituted from mid 1920s to early 1930s.

The development of "simplified Constructivism"

**10.** *Villa in Grodno (18, Lenin street, 1920-30); architect unknown. Photo by the author*





**11.** Villa in Kobryn (4, Suvorov street, 1930); architect unknown. Photo by the author

tivism” resulted from the fact that the main building investor was the State, which strictly standardized (i.e. limited) construction costs and materials. At the same time, the Soviet economy suffered constant shortages of both concrete and steel; there was also a shortage of roll-form insulation materials for constructing flat roofs, and their imports were next to none. Moreover, during the civil war and the economic collapse, the skills of architects, engineers and construction workers degraded greatly. As a result, advanced building technologies were out of use and architectural and structural solutions had to be simplified. In practice, these circumstances caused the growing popularity of forms and principles of Constructivism introduced by young generation of architects. A specific idiom of architecture appeared that can now be called “simplified Constructivism”.

A good example of this “simplified Constructivism” is the former school building in Minsk, at 96 Mayakovsky street (Fig. 12). The sketch design made in 1933 assumed brick load-bearing walls, wooden beam floors and high gable roofs, together with two terraces: one of them with a doorway to the library, the other with a doorway to the gym (Fig. 13). However, the concept of terraces was given up while layout plans were being made,<sup>4</sup> which definitely changed

4. Minsk District State Archives. Set 351. – Sp. 2. – Ak. 61

**12.** Former school in Minsk (96, Mayakovsky street, 1930); architect S. Borodin. Photo by the author



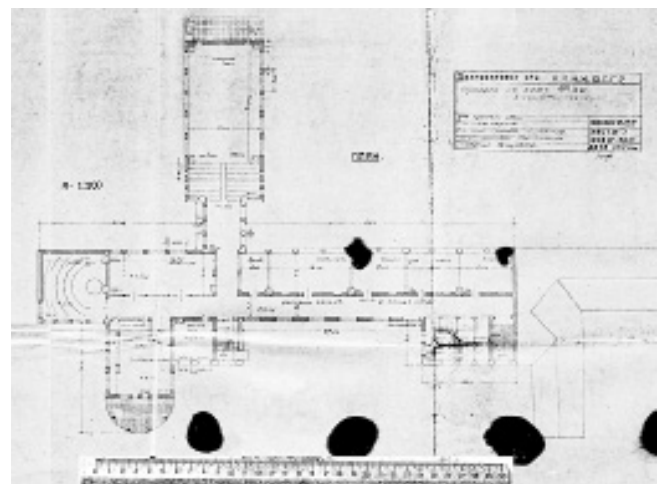
the shape of the building. What remained of the characteristic features of the original concept was wide windows with recessed walls between them giving the impression of ribbon windows. The unusual, elongated layout of the building was based on the principle of functionality and good passage of sunlight, which is why it can be called a Constructivist building.

There are many more examples of “simplified Constructivist” architecture in Belarus, most of which – according to public opinion (shared by many architects) – are of no aesthetic value. However, they reflect the times of their creation.

### Protecting Modern Architecture

The examples presented above show how some specific features of Functionalist heritage of the late 1920s and early 1930s were reflected in both the “luxury trend” and “simplified Constructivism”. It must be stressed, however, that strategies for protecting historic buildings of the time should take into account all the particularities of that architecture, namely all the elements of the architectural form of the buildings as well as typical building and finishing materials.

What is now understood as preservation of architectural heritage is maintaining the “artefact” as the relic of the past culture, reflecting the outlook on the world, social development and the level of technological advancement of a given community. Therefore, present-day methods of upgrading buildings dating from the 1920-1930 period, commonly regarded as conservation, are hardly acceptable. Numerous irregularities can be seen here, e.g. the replacement of original windows with plastic ones, the use of bright-coloured roof tiles or colourful finishing materials with the original construction substance. This



**13.** Former school in Minsk (96, Mayakovsky street, 1930), first-floor plan; architect S.S. Borodin. Minsk District State Archives. Set 351. – Sp. 2. – Ak. 61

problem does exist in Belarus as well as in many other European countries.

It must be strongly stressed that the most outstanding, characteristic buildings of the 1920-30 period should be conserved as meticulously as buildings from more ancient epochs like the Renaissance or the Middle Ages. We may even say that it is more important to preserve Functionalist heritage, because these buildings have preserved their original looks and function in their original urban environment.

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