



## MODERNISM IN BULGARIAN MAGAZINES IN THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS (1920-1945)

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### INTRODUCTION

WW1 (1914-1918) was unsuccessful for Bulgaria and it added more problems to the misfortunes of the Balkan Wars (1912-1913). The country came out devastated from this 6 year conflict. The period after the wars was a chance for something new, for a change. It could be argued if the misfortune of the wars was the main reason, but it is a fact that between the 1920s and the 1940s Bulgaria experienced quite a fast economic, political, social and even cultural change. Quite naturally change was manifested mostly through the renewal of the urban environment, which was constantly being modified. Just like in the rest of Europe at the time cities were the place where things were happening. They were the arena of industrialisation, of population growth, of social unrest and innovative thought. Although Bulgaria was not experiencing an industrialisation at the scale of the big Western European countries (England, France, Germany, Italy) the same symptoms of the new time could have been observed in Bulgarian cities. Urban expansion and the quality of dwellings were the main concerns in the big cities (Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv). Various opinions were being expressed on the matter of how the urban environment should be managed. And architectural/engineering magazines were the arena of such debates. It is interesting to note that the number of periodicals concerned with the world of construction increased from 1 in the beginning of the century to 6 in the beginning of the 40s. The diversification of magazines also increased with the years. At the beginning of the century magazines where architecture was discussed were referred to as technical periodicals and were publishing a great variety of issues on technology, construction, machines, mining, urbanism, agriculture and even ship building. Such a union of topics can be explained with the fact that industrialisation was beginning to gain ground only in the 1900-1910 and areas where technology was being applied were not many. There was not enough happening in order to diversify the topics. With time, as machines and new technologies became more popular magazines began to specialise on certain technical issues. Architecture continued to be treated together with urbanism and infrastructure, as well as topics like hygiene, light and greenery. As magazines specialised they became also more specific and published more in

detail on certain subjects. One of the subjects covered most extensively by Bulgarian architectural/technical magazines, especially after WW1 was the structure and expansion of cities. The housing crisis, caused by a rapidly increasing urban population was part of that discussion. The second major topic that emerged by the 1930s was the issue of style. More specifically-the creation of a Bulgarian national style of architecture that would correspond to the requirements of the new times. These two topics were the main problems discussed in periodicals in the strip of time between the two wars and these two topics are going to be examined in more detail in this essay. What is going to be a continuous reference of the development of these two topics is how they relate to the ideas of Modernism, which were being developed in some architectural circles in Europe at the same time.

### THE CONTEXT

It is important to spare few words on what Modernism's main peculiarities were and on what was the context, in which Bulgarian architects were working. Very briefly it can be said that Modernism was an ideology, concerned with the spiritual and material adjustment of men to the New age of machines, science, speed and pragmatism. In the field of architecture that often meant following the principles of Functionalism. The ideal of Functionalism was the exact adjustment of form to purpose. It was trying to order functions and give an answer in the means of buildings to new, unknown until then functional requirements. What distinguishes Functionalism is that it had as a basic principle the physical and practical unity of the utilitarian and the artistic. The ideal of beauty was not sought in applied decoration but was supposed to grow from the unity of form and function. Depending on the personal conviction and ideology of each architect Modernism was advocated and propagandised with different intensities. Typical for hard-line functionalist was to expand the tasks of architecture to a means for a harmonious society. They advocated the idea of architecture as a binding element of all spheres of life. For example architects like Hannes Meyer (1889-1954, active in Germany, Bauhaus director 1928-1930) were a sort of Modernist extremists that would not make any compromise with their idea of how Modernism should be applied. In general Modernism was a belief for a complete re-organisation of society. Architecture was supposed to have a very active role in it by its very task of forming the human environment and thus, as believed by many at the times, influencing human behaviour.

Such ideas were spread in various architectural circles in the most industrialised parts of Europe. In Bulgaria the very social, economical, urban and even political situation was different. The first university offering architectural and building engineering education was founded in 1942 in Sofia. Until then all architects practising in Bulgaria were either educated abroad Bulgarians or foreigners. They were receiving their education in the well established schools and academies of Paris, Vienna, Berlin and Prague, which were advocates of Classical virtues and classically inspired architecture. For that reason the Bulgarians that were graduating as architects there brought with them the then popular eclectics of Western Europe and established it as criteria for a high culture, class and achievement. By the 1920s the "noble" styles of the past had become a measure of good taste and their use a way to gain respect, social privileges and prestige.

This usage of Classical styles was part of a bigger social logarithm present in Bulgaria. It is the idea of catching up with the rest of Europe. During the 500 years of Ottoman yoke Bulgarian society had followed a very different path from the one of many other European countries. After its re-establishment as an independent state in 1878 Bulgaria was very far behind in terms of social, economical, political, technological and cultural aspects in comparison to other countries. As a result of the feeling of a necessary equality with the rest of Europe, Bulgarians had been looking up to the more developed countries and had been very often copying even literally social, economical, technical and even cultural models. For

example all widely known architectural styles since the Middle Ages (Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism, etc.) had been imported in Bulgaria. Since there was a lack of canon and tradition in their application these styles had been used in a very selective and chaotic manner. The “correct” application of a style depended on the experience and criteria of each architect as well as the technical and financial capabilities of the client. The public, even the so-called “high class” was in its majority unaware of stylistic principles and differences. That made possible for the establishment of an eclectic attitude towards the use of foreign styles. This same attitude was applied also to Modernism. Since, as it will be discussed further on, there were no prominent Modernist ideologists in Bulgaria, Modernism was often used more as a style and its formal language was almost always more important than its principles. It was more often used as a source for ideas for volumes, materials and shapes rather than developed as an ideology and a system, with which to confront reality. But precisely because of this fashion-like consideration of Western styles Modernism had become by the 1930s a symbol of progress and the new.

In that sense technical periodicals were an important source of reference for catching up with the developed West. During the entire period in discussion magazines provided glimpses of how architecture was being practised in Frankfurt, Paris, Milan, etc., they gave summaries of various architectural congresses, presented the development of urban planning in Europe and the Americas and were mentioning names such as Gropius, Taut, Behrens, Out, le Corbusier. Still such presentations were partial, they reflected a foreign environment, and thus their context was different. Often there was no critical assessment of the foreign ideas that were presented. It is also worth mentioning the technological context in which architects were practising in Bulgaria between the two wars. Just after WW1 the use of the “new” materials, concrete and steel, became very wide spread (ill.1).



ill. 1-advert of steel ropes

By 1928 these materials were much more widely used than the traditional stone, wood and terracotta walls. (ii) There were even quite avant-garde proposals such as for example steel houses. (iii) At the end of the 1920s they were advertised as being durable, providing thermal comfort at a low cost of construction, prefabricated elements and fast assemblage were a plus. There are no built examples of these houses, but the case shows that Bulgarian architects were aware of and were trying to use the technologies of Modernism. Unfortunately they were failing to use them with the appropriate quality. The application of

concrete especially was often of poor standards and executed unprofessionally due the desire to save money on the construction. (iv) So it can be said that very basic modern technologies were used and their application was often not up to the standards. This was a serious obstacle for the introduction of architectural concepts requiring other than the traditional building techniques. With time though the situation was improving and by 1939 there were laboratories specialised in the testing of building materials, which showed an increased attention to how were buildings being built.

In all the years discussed by this essay it has been the practice of architects to use the pages of magazine to accuse developers for their way of handling new materials and building technologies. That attitude of developers was coming increasingly in contrast with a kind of technocratic ideology that some architects were trying to promote. Already in the 1920s some authors urged to allow technical thought and organisation to lead society in order to cope efficiently with the post-war crisis. There was a belief that technology can lead to a better and a more prosperous society and for that reason technicians had to be given greater responsibilities and power to guide development. This urge for having technical thought as a leading principle in society was taking both practical and idealistic manifestations. Among the practical ones was the changing attitude towards construction, witness of which was the increasing number of testing laboratories for building materials (bricks, stones, cement, concrete, roof tile, metals). Results coming out of such laboratories were being published in magazines and failures in construction, both home and abroad, were discussed in extensive, scientific manner. This attitude, probably coupled with a foreign influence, led to the founding of a National institute for standardisation and norms in 1938. Its main purpose was to rationalise production by providing common norms for the materials and techniques used in construction and industry. The logic behind it was that the creation of typologies and standards was part of a rational organisation of society. This was a pure manifestation of Modern thought. The same drive for standardisation was producing also some idealistic, poetic stand points. One can find articles, in which rationalisation was promoted as a principle for all spheres of life and was to be used for coping with the economic crisis or others, in which technology has been described as the new driving force of humanity and because of that engineers had to be humanity's new leaders. Also that progress depended on an engineer's capability of organisation, professionalism and inventiveness. For that reason the work of an engineer was a heroic one.

#### THE EXPANSION OF CITIES

Let us go back to the main topics of this study. As mentioned before the most discussed issues in Bulgarian magazines in the period 1920-1945 were urban expansion and the creation of a national style. Despite the fact that the Balkan and WW1 wars were unfavourable for Bulgaria, the time of peace after them was a period of growth. At the beginning of the 1920s small and middle scale industries started appearing in the bigger cities. That unleashed a process well known in Western Europe for already few decades - fast urbanisation. Since most of the population was also impoverished during the war, cities provided a chance for a fast new beginning and possibly for a greater income. The cities that were most affected by the wave of migration from the countryside were Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv and Burgas. A statistical study from the 1923 shows that about 75% of all households in the capital consisted of 1 to 2 rooms. Most people were renting their homes, which was extremely untypical for Bulgarians. It was common for people to sleep in places, which were used for other activities and most families shared a common kitchen every 2-4 households. It was further found out that most rooms were used by 2-4 people and a dwelling meant for a single family was most often shared by few households. (v) All that showed a very unpleasant picture. So how were architects reacting to this typically Modern challenge?



During the very first years of the 1920s architects seemed to be living in a parallel world. Discussion in magazines were concerned with hypothetical scenarios of whether homogenous or heterogeneous building facades would make a city more beautiful, whether skyscrapers were an appropriate form of city development and how could aesthetics of buildings be controlled. Most of the architects of the 1920s understood their task mainly in the plastic design of exteriors. The housing crisis, on the other hand, demanded innovations and attention mostly to the interior. So all questions quite separated from what was going on in cities. The coming back to reality came quite fast though. In issues from 1924 one can already follow the beginning of discussions on how architects can cope with the building crisis. (vi) Modern ideas started making their way into publications. A house was supposed to be hygienic, functional, well exposed to the sun and equipped with the simplest kitchen. Authors were attempting to establish a direct link between light availability and dwellers' health. So a healthy dwelling had to be concerned with light and orientation. The architecture of such a house should follow the current technical advances. There are proposals for green, sparsely populated suburbs with gardens and villas. At that time appeared the first references to the English Garden city ideas, but they were discussed only from an ecological perspective (air, greenery, light) and there was no mentioning of any social or economical modes of organisation. According to such references the way to cope with the crisis would be to follow four principles: to encourage the construction of new buildings, to limit the crisis only to the bigger cities, the state to start co-financing new housing projects and to have hygiene as a primary concern. (vii) Even though architects started getting busy with the topic, concrete proposals were still quite idealistic and vague and much of the discussion did not lack some poetic pathos. For example skyscrapers and high density were illustrated as evil and cities were synonymous with an inhuman environment and only the countryside could provide the best living conditions. Multi-nucleus, low density urbanity had to be sought. The garden city was presented as a solution to the housing shortage and some architects were expressing regret that other disciplines and most of the other architects too did not show much interest in such urban solutions. (viii) Very often the name of Ebenezer Howard was mentioned and his theoretical work was given as an example of how cities develop. This passion for Garden cities continued to be expressed in many publications. In an article of 1925 Howard's city has been romanticised and presented as a heroic enterprise. The author of the article had stated that Letchworth, Howard's first city, was the best city of Europe and had emphasized how the power of a revolutionary idea, such as the book "Garden cities of tomorrow", was sufficient enough to make people build a whole new city. (ix) Other magazines of the 1924- 25 published images of garden cities around Vienna or plans of such urban arrangement (ill.2).



ill.2



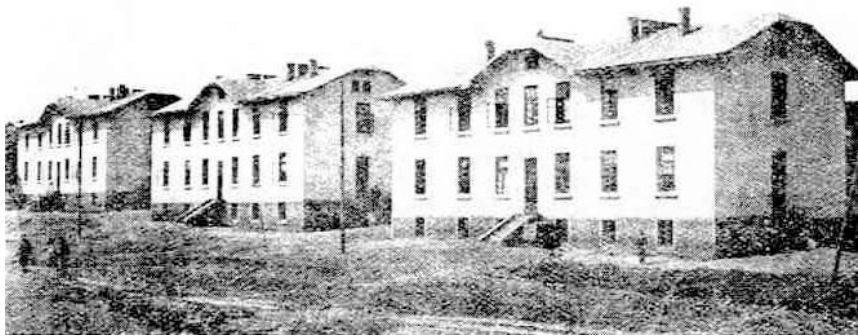
There were also calls for limiting the expansion of cities, the creation of satellite towns and green belts around urban areas. It seemed that the Garden city idea had conquered the mind

of most Bulgarian architects. The whole trend was similar and in fact influenced by the same trends in Germany, England, France and other western countries. Unfortunately all the statements that were presented in magazines were more or less copies of the theories of Howard or other Garden city ideologists from the West. There was no detailed discussion on how such ideas could have been implied into the Bulgarian social and environmental reality of the 1920s. There was no specific study or proposal for a Garden city in Bulgaria. So in fact there seems to have been awareness of the rising urban problems in Bulgarian cities and it seems that architects were trying the fast and already researched panacea – to copy a “ready” solution. But they did not seem interested in how theorists, Howard for example, arrived at their conclusions that Garden Cities would be a solution. They were missing the very Modern attitude to the problem: to analyse pragmatically the situation, to work with facts (Howard used in his theory specific number of people, land and buildings), to research in an almost statistical way the problems of city growth. Because, even though Garden Cities were not straight forward Modernism, their logic of existence (time and resource efficiency, programme, industrial production) and the way authors arrived at their ideas (statistical studies, economic theories and the notion of people as a mass, which desires could be satisfied by a common solution) were Modern in themselves.

What exactly were Bulgarian architects trying to tackle by making references to Garden Cities? Urbanisation in the big cities was happening in two areas: in city centres and in new suburbs. Due to historical reasons city centres were not densely populated and most buildings were of 1-3 floors. That presented a good chance for developers to densify city centres by raising 5-6 storey flat houses, which would in most cases occupy the whole lot of land. At the beginning of the 1920s there were very few urban regulations that could control city core densification. A law from 1920, for example, had the purpose of requiring minimal distances between buildings and a certain amount of greenery to be present in each plot. But this is where it stopped. Legislation was not extensive and the administration was not very effective in applying the rules. In reality developers could find ways to make big profits and speculate with the living conditions they were providing for occupants. The situation in the suburbs was also quite chaotic. Most urban plans had been produced immediately after the liberation from the Turkish, so at the end of the 19th century. They were very much outdated for the fast urbanisation that these cities were experiencing in the 1920s. What was happening was that people would build even 5-6 storey buildings outside the city lines. That meant in areas with no water, roads, sewage or electricity. Town halls were not very active in preventing this or providing any of the required services. In a way cities were expanding without any plan or control.

These were problems that all architects had realised already by 1924. Besides the majority that was prophesising on Garden cities there were also architects that were calling for detailed urban plans that would specify all possible construction parameters for every plot and would take hygiene as a primary consideration. These plans would be achieved by detailed studies of the dwelling crisis, by statistical, economical and architectural simulations, which would take reality as their starting point. In few publications of 1924-25 city planning was presented as a complex activity, as opposed to street paving and square arrangement. In order to plan a city, especially in the future, an architect had to know the economical and social principles that move the city. (x) According to different authors there were different priorities from which to start studying cities and building up a plan for their enlargement. Some emphasized on greenery, functional, typological or stylistic zoning, transport system. Others were keener to provide open spaces public activities, to consider aesthetical aspects of buildings and to create a certain typological unity of the edifices in a city. Common to all such voices was the idea of the need of planning in advance the new suburbs in order to replace the chaotic city expansion. An even more important issue that these ideas had in

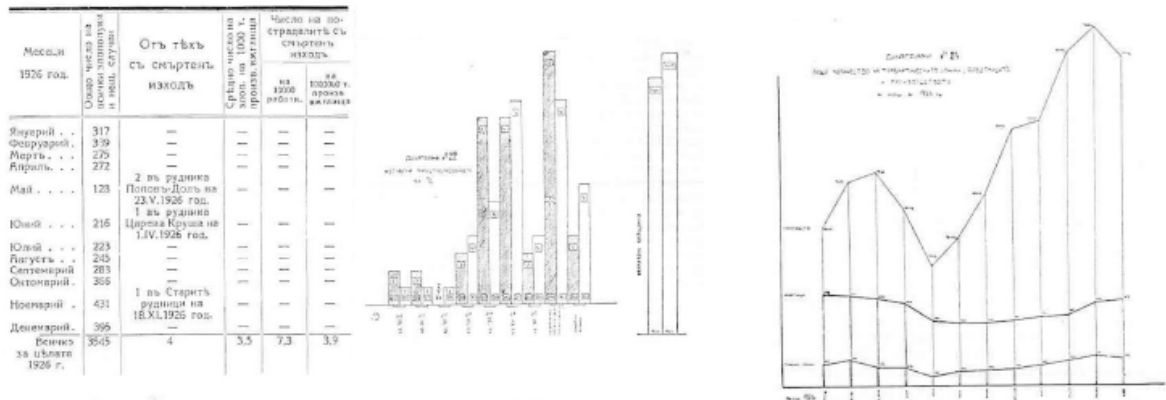
common was that all proposals involved large scale action. Private institutions at the time could not tackle city expansion and housing crisis in the complexity of all their issues. There was also no financial means for any private or state Bulgarian company to organise an urban expansion on their own. Private enterprises were very small and were active through building single buildings. For that reason the role of the government, local or national, became of crucial importance to the fulfilment of any of the ideas that were being advocated in architectural periodicals. And in fact starting from the 1924 and continuing all through until the mid 1930s architects used pages of magazines to urge the government to take at least a supportive, if not a leading role in solving the urban problems. The first one to partially satisfy these calls was the City Council of Sofia. In 1925 it decided to subsidise multi-storey apartment buildings. Unfortunately the Council only stipulated money for such housing, but did not provide clear rules for what requirements should these houses satisfy and did not directly organise any construction. There was a private response to this government financing though. In 1925-26 appeared the first housing corporations. These were privately owned shareholder unions that made use of the government subsidy. Eventually these corporations became the way not only to cope with the crisis, but also to shape the image of Bulgarian cities. Initially many architects supported the initiative and started getting involved with designing for these corporations. In issue no.7 of "Newsletter of the Bulgarian Engineers and Architects Union in Sofia" from 1928 the conditions making of affordable housing possible have been stated as follows: good and cheap administrative support, cheap and highly conscious work force, building materials that are industrial products (prefabrication, lowering of costs), simple architecture and building technology. Some bigger industrial plants, like the iron mine in Pernik also took the initiative to create their own internal plans for housing their workers. The plan of the mine in particular involved the construction of 400 family dwellings for the miners, houses for the technicians, a hospital a bath, a school, a laundry room and a community centre. Every house would have been built of concrete. Four families would share one house and each house would have one kitchen. (ill.3)



*ill.3 – concrete houses*

In reality only some of the houses got built, but that was due to financial problems. What matters is that both privates and authorities realised the importance of planned development. Not only for coping with an otherwise chaotic urbanisation but also, as in the case of the Pernik mine, for increasing productivity, handling large number for people and producing good basic living conditions for better personal motivation. This mine carried out a statistical study of workers' habits, prevention of injuries and living conditions. (xi) (ill.4) That showed that some officials (the mine was state owned) and architects were starting to have a technocratic view on the work process. That could correspond to the far more exaggerated principles for organising the living environment expressed by some hard-line Modernist architects (and practised by the Nazis and the Soviets) in the 1930s in the rest of Europe.





ill.4 – some of the statistical methods used for the research

The way the whole issue was handled, both by privates and the government was in my view quite Modern. Firstly people were starting to organise themselves and to think of cost optimisation, standardisation, providing a certain existenz-minimum and this not only at the scale of one building but for the whole city. And secondly the very fact that the state/local government got involved, not in full, but still involved, showed a certain social preoccupation from the authorities and that was a typically Modern symptom. Still since these initiatives were carried out by housing corporations, and they were organisations of small size, the scale of the intervention always remained limited to a group of buildings. There were no large scale, coordinated urban expansions, since the authorities did not get involved further than providing financial support. Sofia did not have its Plan Zuid.

By the mid 1930s housing corporations had satisfied the hunger for dwellings. In fact a negative side of this development had appeared, at least in the eyes of some of the people writing in architectural periodicals. These unions had been building with the biggest preoccupation being the satisfaction of the dwelling needs of citizens. And that meant much greater effort for the plan and interior than for the exterior. In publications from 1935 until 1940 many architects expressed their dissatisfaction with the aesthetics of the apartment blocks built by housing corporations. They described them as grey, repetitive, transforming the city into a mass of faceless housing and with boring facades with no use of monumentality or decoration. In their view such buildings gave a monotonous image of the city.(ill.5)



ill.5 - housing



This dissatisfaction with the appearance of the new buildings was coupled with a disapproval of the local governments' slow action on new urban plans for the cities. If in the 1920s articles on the topic were more suggestive and were written in a spirit of proposals, in the 1930s architects were expressing much stronger opinions. The poor urban legislation at the time and its badly regulated application were the reason for much criticism. And if housing corporations managed to solve the housing problem, the question of how these new housing blocks were to be arranged in the city and how the city should expand were still unanswered. Only in 1933 the City Council of Sofia commissioned a new master plan for the city and it took from 1934 until 1937 to work on it. This new master plan had the following main points: to provide green spaces for the ventilation of the city and for public recreation; to divide the city into zones depending on function; to discourage too dense urbanisation; to provide a type of a Garden City environment, where most families would inhabit their own houses with gardens. The plan was also very concerned with the provision of light and air to every dwelling; it aimed at controlling traffic by limiting car access to the centre. It was establishing 4-5 storey buildings as a standard and was speaking against any skyscrapers or a metro system. And finally the plan was concerned with the image of the city: advertisements, views and panoramas from, towards and within Sofia. (xii) The implementation of the plan though never came to reality since in 1941 Bulgaria got involved in WW2. Interestingly, despite having no clear plan for its development, the city had a department by its Architectural Office, which task was beautifying shop windows and adverts. One can find some discussion on this matter in some magazines. (xiii) It seemed that there was a good number of architects for whom the city should have been protected against too expressive adverts and for whom shop windows and boards were crucial for the image of the city. That showed a misunderstanding of the real problems that cities were facing. Instead of concentrating real efforts on new and effective urban plans, authorities and many architects were going into the details of street furniture. As in the case with the "promotion" of Garden Cities, the architects and authorities interested in a more "pragmatic" approach were still not getting to the core of the problem. Besides the work on the new city plan of Sofia, which still proposed quite idealistic Garden city environments, commissioned by the city council, there were no other proposals, be it in magazines or separate writings, which would look in details of how and where and when a city should expand.

So in the period covered by this essay there had been no substantial urban achievement in any Bulgarian city, not only in terms of practice but also in terms of proposals. One can speak of opinions and ideas expressed in the periodicals, but there had never been a complete vision or plan executed by a Bulgarian architect for a specific city. It seems as if architects were expressing partial views, but none had a complete picture with all the details included on how Varna, Sofia or Plovdiv should develop. And on the matter of how Modern the ideas were one finds again a sort of superficiality. The importance of air, light, green, hygiene and zoning were notions that were familiar to Bulgarian architects. In fact most of the articles from the period in question discuss these topics. But there was no idea expressed on social relations, open space use, city structure, transport network, specificities and relationships of zones, etc.

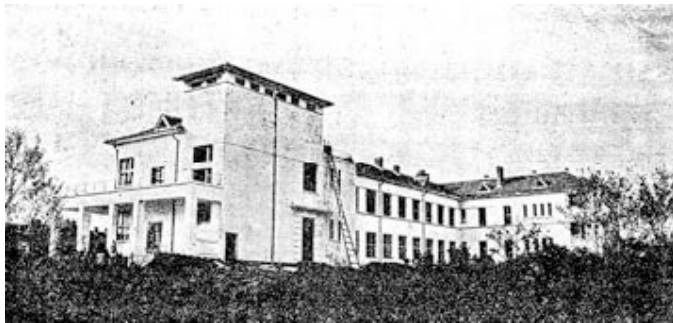
The point where one can get closest to Modernism in terms of actual building production was a state programme for building schools, hospitals and community centres in the period 1935-43. In a reality of limited resources and technical capabilities there was a need for easy, functional and repetitive construction. In that sense certain prototypes were agreed on for each of the 3 categories of buildings. Since schools were the largest amount of buildings built by the state in that period many of the schools resembled or were equal to each other, both functionally and aesthetically. That programme was one of the fields where Modern thought

had been implied and the results were very much an outcome of the principle “form follows function”.

It is interesting to know that the state programme for the construction of schools and hospitals was part of a governmental effort to take a more active part in shaping the life of people. It had a sort of propaganda function, similar to the Fascist and Nazi projects of the same period aimed at convincing the population of Italy and Germany respectively of the progress and the care for the people that these regimes were providing. There were no such ideologies in Bulgaria, but the government, being also an ally of Italy and Germany was clearly inspired by the big building projects being carried out in these countries. In Bulgaria the programme for the construction of the above mentioned public buildings had a more nationalistic side. (ill.7, 8, 9) It was partially aimed at boosting national spirit, providing the grounds for a second National Revival and creating an identity for the New Bulgarian in the age of the machine. That brings us to the second main topic discussed in Bulgarian magazines in the period 1920-45. The question of style.



*ill.7 – hospital in Tarnovo, 1938*



*ill.8 – hospital in Pazardzik, 1931*

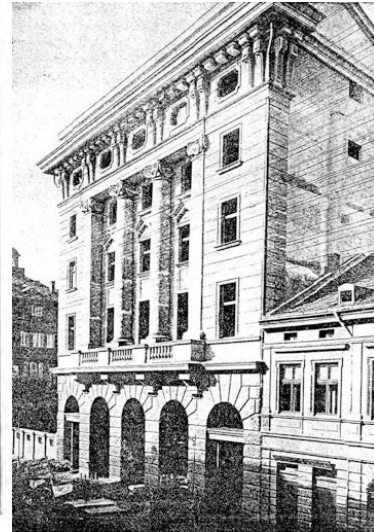
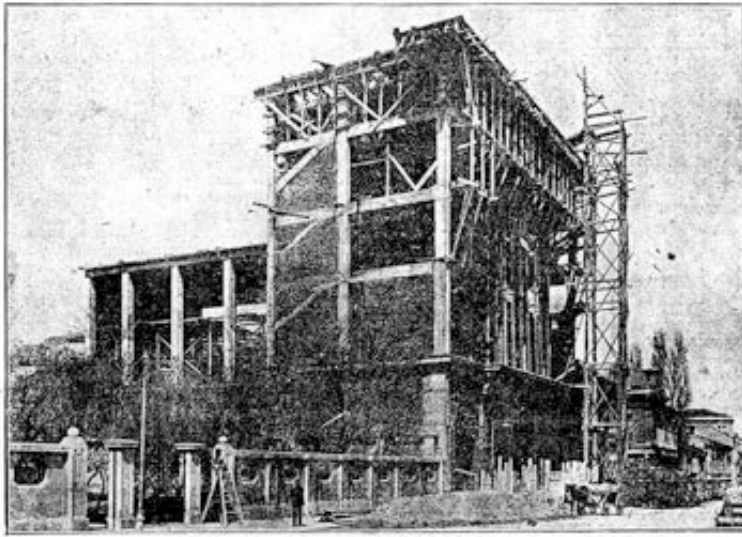


*ill.9 – National Bank, Sofia, 1939*

### STYLE

Discussions on style had been present in Bulgaria, as in other countries, already since the establishment of architectural publications. What made this topic more special in the period this essay is concerned with is that authors were particularly interested in style as the expression of a nation in the age of modern technology. It is important to mention again the peculiar tendency of trying to catch-up with the rest of the West and the fact that all famous architectural styles of the past, Renaissance, Baroque, Neo- Classicism were literally imported in Bulgaria. Already in the beginning of the 1920s one can observe a fairly progressive tendency on the opinions expressed in architectural magazines. That tendency was the idea to leave behind past architectural languages as they did not correspond to the social and economical requirements of the 20th century, to the new construction techniques and to Modern art. From the early 1920s there was a good amount of articles that spoke against the copying of past styles. Foreign architecture should not be copied, especially without considering the climate of the place, traditions, lifestyle of local people and the achievements of their local architecture. A beautiful house was one that suited better the lifestyle of its inhabitants. In 1931 it was even proclaimed that dwellings had to be getting closer to the principle “a house is a machine for living in”. It seems that architects were quite aware of the similar tendencies in other European countries, since issues like the death of ornament or constructivism were discussed. (xiv) To quote: “passed are the years when ornamenting a building with plaster decorations was considered architecture”. (xv)

New architecture instead was about harmonic volumes, secure and permanent construction, comfort and time efficiency. Building had to be driven by necessity and should emerge out of functionality and rationality and not out of decoration. The simplest forms had to be sought, since a house did not need to be necessarily a work of art, but rather a true expression of its time. Hand in hand with the ideological discussion went also a discussion of how should modern materials be used. It was being said that copying architectural styles of the past using concrete or steel was useless. A proper style for these new materials should be found instead. Surprisingly enough even the very “Union of Architects” (BIAD) was an institution to be criticised for its use of Neo-Classical style to decorate its otherwise concrete built new headquarters.(ill.10)



*(ill.10) – concrete construction and Classical decoration*

Saying that concrete was used inappropriately for imitating old aesthetics was not enough. An article of 1927 called “The aesthetics of reinforced concrete” was already bold enough in its title. (xvi) It argued that concrete was not suitable for imitating stone and that the new materials could achieve the expressiveness of old styles in a way suited to the new times. So what did architects see as a suitable style for the new age?

Some publications of the 1920s are critical on market forces as a source for shaping the outlook of buildings and the city. This opinion was strongly reinforced by the uncontrolled urban expansion and densification driven by the same market forces. Authors argued instead that a style should be agreed upon among architects and there should be a constant effort in its application. In fact they were speaking of one style, as opposed to many, that could suite the spirit of the time. To quote: “...despite the big achievements that industry and technology have made in the last decades there has been little in common between the material and the spiritual and these achievements lack a true cultural value...”. (xvii)

That was an opinion expressed also by Western ideologists and in fact Bulgarian architects were inspired by their writings. This longing of one style found a possible way of getting concrete when from the 1930s the state started getting more involved in construction and the image of what was being built. As mentioned before for the first time a sort of state policy was established and it aimed at supporting national spirit and identity by providing public buildings that would be characteristically Bulgarian, but would also suite the requirements and technologies of the new times. Opinions on the importance of a local style were present in periodicals from the beginning of the 1920s. The calls for a strongly national architecture were stating that the new national style should be based on a selection of simple, characteristic and expressive forms. What was important were juxtapositions, proportions, plans and colours and the relation of the new buildings to their context was to be inspired by past examples. For some the reason why architects had to research into a specifically Bulgarian contemporary architectural style was that in rational/functionalistic architecture one could not find the soul of the artist. The soul of the artist was needed to give a specific, national character of the activity of building. Bulgarian architects were urged to research into the architectural heritage of their own country. Some even believed that architects should develop typologies based on national buildings from the past. They were to



use certain architecture for certain buildings and were to develop a specific expressive language for each typology.

A quote from 1940 sums up these desires: "...at the time of WW1 the term architecture was considered to be equivalent to the term technology – an endeavour, which had brought the art of building to a complete industrialisation, the architectural form to a geometric form, architecture style to a universal soulless scheme, completely empty of the homely and human element which should distinguish a style...". (xviii)

The discussion on a national style was boosted not only by the state schools and hospitals programme, but also by the local initiatives that started appearing in the 1930s for the construction of community centres and churches. A whole debate was carried out between 1935-43. The debate was on the style that had to be used for building new public buildings in Bulgarian villages and the "urban" layout of their streets. Two opposing camps emerged in the debate. One group of architects was supporting the idea of infiltrating new materials, architecture and typologies into villages. They argued that people in villages deserved enjoying exactly the same advances of modern technology as urban citizens. And that meant not only the provision of sewage, electricity and well paved roads. It meant also moving villagers along the track of Modern times by creating an architecture inspired by modern times: wide and straight streets, use of concrete and steel, introduction of automatisations in agriculture, zoning, etc. Villages in way had to take the way of industrialisation and conveyor belt production. The other group of architects was in favour of building up on a traditional, Bulgarian style. They were against foreign influences, Modernism included. In their view the "purity" of tradition had to be followed as it best expressed the way of living of the local people. Traditional architecture had already found the best answers to climate, culture and lifestyle. The dispute remained active mostly on the pages of magazines as very few Modern or "national" style buildings were brought to reality. Of what was built, some community houses for example (ill.11), one could have the impression of a truly Modern building.



*ill.11 – community centre in Draganovo*

But in fact the examples, both from the village initiatives and the government programme, were not so much concerned with the principles of Modernism. Instead what was sought was more an iconic image of the new. Elements of Modern architecture were included in buildings, but only to the extent that they fitted the local style and technical capabilities. In that sense Modernism was applied more like a style, constantly being adapted to the specific contextual requirements. Added to that comes the fact that there was a stylistic multiplicity in the work of each architect as well. There was no architect practising a total devotion to an ideal or a style. Nor there were architects developing theories in the spirit of the machine age. Some authors had called this pragmatism, others had named it superficiality. In my view it is a combination of both. The low level of socio-economic, political and cultural maturity of

Bulgarian society was the reason for the lack of an avant-garde discussion. At the same time the lower penetration of Modern technologies in comparison with the West and the more limited financial capabilities of the population were making architects to improvise with every new building and single style architects seemingly did not have much ground to survive.

## CONCLUSION

From the above discussion one can draw some conclusions. As noticed in the beginning two topics could be distinguished as most important in Bulgarian architectural discussion between 1920 and 1945. They can also be divided chronologically. The first one took place until the mid 1930s and was typical with a more strong influence of Functionalism, also in relation to the then very active Bauhaus and other Modern architects. Discussions were aimed at finding solutions for the building crisis and urban expansion that were present in these years.

Architects of this period exhibited different levels of “modernistic” idealism. The main antagonism in this period is between tradition and innovation. The second one took place from the beginning of the 1930s to the beginning of the 1940s and was dominated by the discussion on the relationship between national and international architecture. The polemics there were surrounding the issue of national identity, expressed in a national style and the responsibility that each architect had for developing such a style. For the first time one could observe a government strategy, that was ideologically motivated and aimed at a big scale construction program.

Still the practise of Modernism in Bulgaria was fragmented, undecided and cautious and it lacked the power to convince. The signs of Modernism were more of an attitude towards the contemporary, a type of fashion, and not so much the result of an universal theory shared by a group of intellectuals or even society. That was reflected also in periodicals. Most publications were merely roughly conceptual and sometimes propagandistic. They took a stand and tried to advertise a certain idea, but there were almost no developed concepts and the arguments remained mostly general and imprecise. With time architecture increasingly became a political instrument and was incorporated into political and ideological programs, like the emphasis on a national spirit for example. That unified most architects around the search of a national style, but still then there was an uncertainty how Modern such a style had to be. It seems as if Bulgarian architects were lacking the Modern spirit. One can state that they were not able to produce Modern architecture because they were being unfavoured by the economical, political or cultural context. But there seems to be no reason why they were also unable to develop well researched and motivated theories that would come from the Bulgarian reality and would propose to solve pragmatically real issues. In that sense Bulgarian architects unfortunately did not contribute to the major European debates of the time.

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