

# Aleksander Rzepiszewski.

## Pioneer of early modernism in Kharkiv (CA. 1909-1915)

### Abstract

The subject of this paper is an excellent architect of Polish origin, Aleksander Rzepiszewski, associated mostly with Kharkiv. In the first half of the 20th century, he designed 27 buildings of different use, 25 of which have survived to this day; whereby 17 have been given a status of architectural monuments. The architectural innovations of Rzepiszewski in the city contributed to its originality and elegance. The architect modernized the image of Kharkiv, skillfully applying the ideas of early modernism, which promoted comfortable living and working conditions. He was the first to introduce a new method of arranging flat interiors through the possibility of using sliding walls. Rzepiszewski was also the first architect in Kharkiv who started to design the so-called “cooperative houses” with their own flats. The characteristic profile of the roofs, which cover the tenement houses designed by him, provide the historical center of Kharkiv with an original look, complementing the dominants of orthodox towers.

**Key words** Aleksander Rzepiszewski  
| Kharkiv | early modernism  
| cooperative houses

This paper is devoted to the work of the great Polish architect Aleksander Rzepiszewski (Fig. 1), who is primarily associated with Kharkiv. In the first half of the 20th century there were 27 objects of various uses built in the city according to his designs, 25 of which have survived up till now; whereby 17 have the status of architectural monuments. Despite its importance for Polish cultural heritage abroad, Rzepiszewski's work has not yet been reflected in the Polish literature on the subject. So far, this figure has been dealt with only by Ukrainian and Russian researchers<sup>1</sup>.

Aleksander Rzepiszewski was born on January 24, 1879 in the city of Izmail, in the Bessarab province (now the Odessa district) as the son of Jan (Ivan) and Maria Rzepiszewski. His father served as a police officer. At that time, there were many Polish names in the Bessarab

<sup>1</sup> V. Timofeenko, *Zastrojka Har'kova vo vtoroj polovine XIX – nachale XX veka*, „Materialy k Svodu Pamjatnikov Istorii i Kul'tury Narodov SSSR” 1984, s. 6-53; V. Jasievich, *Arhitektura Ukrainy na rubezhe XIX-XX vekov*, Kiev 1988, passim; V. Lisovskij, V. Isachenko, *Nikolaj Vasil'ev, Aleksej Bubyr*, Sankt-Peterburg 1999; A. Lejbfrejld, J. Poljakova, *Har'kov ot kreposti do stolicy*, Har'kov 2004; J. Poljakova, *Arhitektory Har'kova pol'skogo proishozhdenija*, w: *Pol'ska diaspora u Harkovi. Istorija ta suchasnist'*, red. eadem, Harkiv 2004, s. 111-124; J. Klykova, *Arhitekturnye ansambli Har'kova, sformirovannye pri uchastii A. I. Rzhepishevskogo*, „Slobozhans'ke Kul'turne Nadbannja” 2009, s. 95-102; L. Sokoljuk, *Arhitekturnyj dekor doby modernu v Harkovi*, „Ukrains'ke Mistectvoznavstvo” 2014, s. 149-158; H. Korovkina, *Tvorchist' arhitekturiv pol'skogo pohodzhennja v epohu modernu v Harkovi*, w: *Ukrajins'ko-pol's'ki arhitekturni viziji. Pogljad kriz' chasy ta epochy*, red. V. Babajev i in., Harkiv 2016, s. 22-28.

Governorate, located on the edge of the Russian Empire, as this area became one of the centers of the emigration of the Poles who suffered from repression of the Tsar at that time. This was the case of Rzepiszewski's ancestors who fought in the November Uprising or at least actively supported it<sup>2</sup>.

In 1882, the architect's family moved to Akerman (now Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy). All 10 children received thorough education. Two of Aleksander's older brothers, Wiktor (born in 1871) and Michał (born in 1877) were educated at the University of Novorossiia in Odessa, respectively in the field of natural sciences and mathematics. Aleksander initially studied in the six-grade secondary school in Akerman. However, he received the final certificate of education at the secondary school in Odessa. At that time painting was his core interest. Eventually, following the footsteps of his older brother, in 1898 he started a mathematics course at the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics of the University of Novorossiysk.

In 1899, Rzepiszewski left for St. Petersburg, where he commenced studies at the Institute of Civil Engineers. In 1903, as one of the most talented students, he received a diploma and a gold medal. Graduates awarded with such medals had the opportunity to improve their skills at the Paris School of Fine Arts. Thus, in the years 1904-1906 Rzepiszewski mastered his talent in the capital of France. For the next two years, he traveled around Europe, making numerous sketches of the monuments in Nuremberg, Venice, Paris, Brussels and other cities. Eventually, he settled in St. Petersburg, where he got married and had two daughters – Natalia and Halina (Fig. 2)<sup>3</sup>.

At that time, Rzepiszewski was making designs of various character. He also took part

in numerous architectural competitions. In one of the letters to his brother, he mentioned "he was working 18 hours a day"<sup>4</sup>. The intense effort began to bring results: he received top positions and prizes in eight out of the twelve competitions in which he participated. Seven of them were performed by him together with his colleague from the Institute of Civil Engineers, Nikolai Vasilyev<sup>5</sup>. During this period, Rzepiszewski was interested in the trend of national neo-romanticism, paying particular interest to the raw Romanizing forms used in Scandinavia, Finland and the Baltic States. Such a convention resulted, among others, in an uncompleted competition design of the North Insurance Association's market halls in Moscow (Fig. 3).<sup>6</sup>

A particularly prolific time for Rzepiszewski was 1909, when four of his designs were created, amongst them one for Kharkiv: the Merchant Bank and Astoria Hotel. The fact that his design was to be implemented and the need of authorial supervision made Rzepiszewski move to Kharkiv in 1910<sup>7</sup>. In terms of population, Kharkov was the third city in the Ukrainian territories (after Kiev and Odessa) and the eighth in the entire Russian Empire. The architectural development of the city, particularly intense at the turn of the 20th century, fitted in a historically shaped, radial layout of the streets with a central area – the so-called University Hill – with the magistrate, the Pokrovski Council and the university. At the end of the 19th century, due to the railway construction (1869) and the location

<sup>4</sup> O. Perminov, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> By himself and in cooperation with others, Nikolai Nikolaevich Vasilyev designed a number of Art Nouveau and Early Modernist buildings, especially in St. Petersburg (including a mosque and numerous residential structures), as well as the German theater in Tallinn and the Geographic Institute in Belgrade. In 1918 he emigrated to the USA; he was a city architect in New York in later years; V. Lisovskij, R. Gasho, *Nikolaj Vasil'ev. Ot moderna k modernizmu*, Sankt-Peterburg 2011, passim.

<sup>6</sup> O. Lejbfrejd, *Grazhdanskij inzhener A. I. Rzhapishevskij* (photo album, unpublished), Harkiv 1987; Library of the Architect's House in Kharkiv.

<sup>7</sup> J. Poljakova, op. cit., p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> O. Perminov, *Arhitektor Rzhapishevskij*, <https://old-akerman.livejournal.com/10731.html>, accessed: 18.05.2018.

<sup>3</sup> D. Sarab'janov, *Stil' modern. Istoki, Istorija, Problemy*, Moskva 1989, za: H. Korovkina, op. cit., p. 23.

of a large number of industrial plants, banks and schools, the number of inhabitants began to grow rapidly: in 1901 it was 160,000, and in 1910 it exceeded 230,000. At the same time, the city's area increased, reaching 19,000 hectares in 1914<sup>8</sup>.

The Merchant Bank and the Astoria Hotel was the architect's largest and most representative design, fulfilled in cooperation with Vasilyev, and the first skyscraper in Kharkiv. The construction took place the years 1910-1913 and was the result of a national architectural competition organized at the request of the Kharkiv merchants by the Imperial Society of Architects in St. Petersburg. Even though the architects ranked second in the competition, it was their idea which was chosen by the clients for implementation<sup>9</sup>.

The six-storey building was located at the present Soborna Square, in the central part of the city (Fig. 4). The design was very innovative: for the first time in Kharkiv, a supporting structure in the form of a monolithic reinforced concrete was used, which made it possible for the layout to be flexible. The building was conceived as a functional complex with the shops and post office on the ground floor, the bank and museum offices on the first and second floors, and the Astoria hotel rooms above. The individual storeys were connected by a stylish, three-flight staircase<sup>10</sup>.

The architecture of the building indicates that the architects were looking for innovative solutions and opportunities related to the new type of buildings not implemented in the city previously. The picturesque, yet monumental silhouette is highlighted with a corner tower covered with a domed roof. Freely, though symmetrically composed elevations, an unusual rhythm of semicircular bays of different heights, limited by sloping lines of a huge pediment, a distinctive mansard roof profile; and stone

rustication, covering a significant surface of the facade in an irregular layout, allow this implementation to be incorporated into the northern neo-romanticism architecture<sup>11</sup>. The artistic expressiveness of the building is emphasized by the masterful masks above the door, powerful atlases and other figures, arranged in different areas of the elevations (Fig. 5). These elements, especially sculptural ones which referred to archaization and art deco, made by the sculpture studio „Kozlov and Dietrich”, are associated with the work of the Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen. The architecture of the building combined the modernity of the structure with the archaism of sculptural details, the functionality of architectural elements with the sophistication of their form, and finally the tectonic structure of the facade with the decorativeness of the sculptural detail. The building is still one of the most characteristic landmarks of Kharkiv.

Another architectural design from this period had a similar style – a stark, monumental Iwaki Bakakin textile workshop building in Kharkiv from 1910 located at today's Rizdviana St. 19 (Fig. 6), similarly to the Merchant Bank, was a product of Rzepiszewski's cooperation with Vasilyev. Due to its less representative function, the design was more discrete. However, a similar repertoire of forms was used – facades partially faced with stone rustic, mansard roof and a sculpture-like detail stylized in the archaic and art deco spirit. The avant-corps placed in the extreme axis, with a passage and a bay covering two floors, was to enrich the entire construction. The building is currently the seat of the Kharkiv Institute of Mechanization and Electrification of Agriculture.

The most prolific period for Rzepiszewski were the years 1911-1915, when he designed

<sup>8</sup> J. Klykova, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> The competition projects were published in a prestigious architectural journal “Zodchij”; “Zodchij” 1909, no. 38, pp. 43-44.

<sup>10</sup> J. Poljakova, op. cit., p. 140.

<sup>11</sup> More on the subject of national neo-romanticism, also known as “northern modernism”, in relation to the lands of the Russian Empire, cf.: V. Kirillov, *Arhitektura severnogo moderna*, Moskva 2011; V. Lisovskij, *Severnyj modern. Nacjonal'no-romanticheskoe napravlenie v arhitekture stran Baltijskogo morja na rubezhe XIX i XX vekov*, Sankt-Peterburg 2016.

a several residential houses, mostly tenement ones. The high point took place in 1914, when the architect fulfilled nine designs – the most of all contemporary Kharkiv designers. At that time Rzepiszewski changed his style, giving up neo-romantic inspirations for early modernism in a very characteristic way. He complemented asymmetric building structures with picturesque compositions of elevation with a discrete detail combining the features of classicism and Art Nouveau. The characteristic elements used by the architect included polygonal bay windows, loggias, simplified lesenes with stylized capitals, and various window patterns. Rzepiszewski attached great importance to the plaster decoration. There were the motifs of Art Nouveau (botanical ones), but most often antique: garlands, cornucopias, fasces, Rods of Asclepius, centaurs, vases, medallions, antique scenes, figures and masks (Fig. 7). He placed these elements on the façades in a free manner, which was deprived of academic stiffness. Similar elements were used in interior decoration.

The owners of flats in tenement houses designed by Rzepiszewski included doctors, artists, representatives of free professions and traders. They were waiting for apartments in the buildings created according to new tendencies, marked with high quality, equipped with elevators imported from abroad, ventilation systems, etc. The tenement at the current street Rymarska 19 (1912, Fig. 8) is one of the most impressive tenement houses of that type. It was also one of the first houses in Kharkiv built in line with cooperative principles: it was the so-called company house, built at the expense of future owners of apartments, in accordance with their requirements and aesthetic preferences<sup>12</sup>.

The building was founded on the layout of the letter C, with two symmetrical corps and a front yard, following the architectural type popular in Saint Petersburg at that time<sup>13</sup>. Such

a disposition facilitated ventilation and made it possible to provide the flats with an appropriate amount of light, contrary to four-sided tenements with yard-wells. The façades of both parts of the structure were solved in a similar, yet not identical, way. Both of them have an asymmetrical composition, emphasized by polygonal bay windows, shifted towards the courtyard, as well as tent roofs with pinnacles that highlight the inner corners of both blocks. The house was inhabited mainly by doctors, which were reflected in the decoration of the façade, i.e. figures from Greek mythology associated with medicine. On the second floor, there was Rzepiszewski's studio, and on the third, in the mansard - a flat with an artistic studio. The architect's workshop employed architects of both Ukrainian and Polish backgrounds (Tenne, Janowicki, Trocenko). Decorative elements placed in the elevations were most often made by the sculptor Peszyński<sup>14</sup>.

Other tenement houses designed at that time are characterized with similar features of form but there is no repeatability - the architect obtained an original effect each time. Here it is important to mention „cooperative” tenement houses at Rymarska St. 6 (1911, Fig. 9), Chigirin St. 8 (1914, Fig. 10), Chaykovska St. 8 (1914, Fig. 11) and Chaykovska St. 17 (1914, Fig. 12) and one of the largest designs - a tenement house at Pushkinskiy Vyizd St. 6 (1914-1915, Fig. 13). All of these facilities were created within the Pushkin Housing Association. The organization was founded by the architect in 1914 to improve the implementation of the idea of cooperative

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is The Salamander House located at today's Sumska Street 17 - a tenement house of the insurance company "Salamandra" from 1914-1915, made in a classicist style by the St. Petersburg architect Nikolai Wierowkin, an outstanding representative of the neoclassical trend. It is worth adding that this architect was, among others the author of a profitable tenement house of the "Salamandra" society in St. Petersburg, designed together with a Polish architect, Marian Peretiatkowicz; *Arhitektory-stroiteli Sankt-Peterburga serediny XIX-nachala XX veka*, ed. B. Kirikov, Sankt-Peterburg 1996, passim.

<sup>12</sup> J. Poljakova, op. cit., p. 138.

<sup>13</sup> One of the most popular assumptions of this type in Kharkiv

<sup>14</sup> J. Poljakova, op. cit., p. 140.

houses<sup>15</sup>. There are occasionally some classicistic features which appeared in the foreground, like in a Moldavian merchant's house at Darwin St. 15 (1912, Fig. 14) - with a symmetrical façade, flanked with two polygonal bay windows, and an axis highlighted by a triangular pediment. The same design is evident in the tenement houses at Sadova St. 6a (1913, Fig. 15), Yaroslav Mudry St. 33 (1913, Fig. 16), and Pushkinska St. 3 (1913-1914, Fig. 17). The latter is similar in terms of the composition of elevation to the tenement house at Rymarska St. 19. A remarkable realization is the tenement house at Pushkinskiy Vyizd St. 3 (1913, Fig. 18), with a central, narrow, triangularly closed avant-corps and side bay windows. Another example is rather modest, one-story reconstruction of a residential house at Moskalivska St. 20, completed in 1913 at the request of a merchant Lavrov. The facades were lined with the fluting pilaster strips. The middle section is highlighted with a semicircular pediment with a motif of a mask encircled with a garland (the same motif is found above the passage, located in the side of the building). The other building is dominated by early modern features. This is the case in the administrative storage building at the corner of Kotsarska and Yaroslavska street (1912, Fig. 19), which is distinguished by a wide range of glazing and limited sculptural decoration.

The most important implementation of the early modernist trend was undoubtedly the Mindovski Workshop at Rizdviana St. 6 (1912-1914, Fig. 20). The building was very bold in terms of construction, which was based on reinforced concrete. The facades of this three-storey edifice are almost entirely glazed, which was possible due to the use of a reinforced concrete structure. The architect's devotion to traditional forms was expressed in the shape of the corner tower, covered with a domed roof, as well as a vertical articulation of the elevation with raw lesenes with stepped profiles.

The smaller, one- and two-storey residential buildings were designed somewhat differently. These include two objects from the late period: a residential house at Darwin St. 29 (1913, Fig. 21), designed for the well-known director and actor, Nikolai Sinelnikov, creator of one of the best Russian theaters. This building is sometimes referred to as a reference to the European residential architecture of the Gothic period<sup>16</sup>. It does not have literal Gothic features, still some analogies with the Middle Ages might be made due to the wooden elements, which, very interestingly, slightly resemble a timber-framed construction. Narrowly shaped wooden elements create a successful contrast with smooth facades. The income house at Marshal Bazhanov St. 14 (1913-1914, Fig. 22), which belonged to the German-French company Helfferich-Sade, one of the largest producers of agricultural machinery at that time, was designed in a similar, though even more outstanding fashion.

In the last stage of the Kharkiv period, the architect used the neoclassical stylistics widespread in the second decade of the 20th century. This is proven by such designs as a residential building at Mironosycka St. 21 (1915), with the entrance portico supported by Ionic columns, the Moldavian merchant's house at Darwin St. 4 (1915, Fig. 23), and, above all, the magnificent building of the Red Cross Hospital at 13/5 Feuerbach, with facades articulated with Ionic pilasters in a great order and a corner highlighted with a rotunda with semi-column articulation (Fig. 24). The area of the ground floor is emphasized by rustication, while the façades bear the motifs of garlands and panels with antique sculptural decoration.

Rzepiszewski's works from the Kharkiv period are very individual and difficult to confuse with projects of the other contemporary architects of this city. Particularly characteristic were the windows with carved wooden elements which frequently appeared in frames.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 142

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 140.

The aesthetics and the characteristic form of Art Nouveau were visible in the rails of the balconies, as well as pointed, original roofs, associated with gothic architecture. An interesting element of Rzepiszewski's design were not only elevations, but also the interior layouts: representative staircases, oak parquets, high quality ceramic tiles from Baron E. Bergenheim's factory or elevators from the German company Unruh & Liebig. Most of these objects have been preserved to this day, and their original form is clear, despite frequent, disfiguring transformations - plastic window frames, bunches of air conditioners and glazed balconies and loggias, common in Eastern European countries. The exception is the Mindovski workshop, which is now in a state of far-reaching devastation.

The outbreak of the First World War did not bring about any significant changes in the architect's career. Kharkiv, located at the back of the global conflict, gave the impression of a relative oasis of peace, even taking into account thousands of refugees, prisoners of war, overcrowded military hospitals and the news from the frontline. The main changes were brought by 1917 and the February Revolution in Russia. In the spring of 1917, Kharkiv became a part of the Ukrainian People's Republic, and a year later he joined the so-called Hetmanate (the state of the Ukrainian hetman Pavlo Skoropatski). It was when various groups of Russian society, such as activists of the Russian social circles, representatives of the scientific and creative elite and the officers, arrived in the great Ukrainian cities. In this way, they were trying to save themselves from the persecution and repression of the Bolshevik regime.

At the end of 1918, power in Ukraine was assumed by the Directorate. The country entered the orbit of the Bolshevik regime, which resulted in direct military intervention and Soviet terror. In January 1919, Kharkiv became the capital of a puppet Ukrainian folk state. The Bolsheviks organized concentration camps in the city, where

over 3,000 people were executed.

Aleksander Rzepiszewski with his property - two apartments, a design studio and equipment, origin, education, and appearance fit perfectly into the image of the class enemy, eligible for liquidation. In this situation, the architect decided to save his family and emigrate through the Crimea to the West. This was the only way he could get to Europe or America. In 1920, Rzepiszewski's former partner Vasilyev decided to follow his steps, emigrating first to Belgrade and then, in 1923, to New York. Having arrived in the Crimea, Rzepiszewski intended to do all the necessary travel formalities and prepare for the trip. Unexpectedly, he met a woman from Moscow. The acquaintance turned out to be fateful: the architect made a sudden decision to leave his family and set off for the capital of the Bolshevik state with his new love<sup>17</sup>.

In Moscow, Rzepiszewski was employed as the chief architect of „Mosdrew”. In subsequent years he designed several buildings of various functions, including a sanatorium in Kratovo near Moscow and the „Dolossy” guest house in the mountains near Yalta<sup>18</sup>. In the years 1926-1928 he designed three buildings in the center of Moscow, at Sadovoye Koltso. At that time, the cooperative houses of the representatives of the new elites were created according to individual designs. They were characterized with a small living area and originality of the apartments layout. In addition, the 1920s marked the birth of a new architectural philosophy - constructivism. Rzepiszewski's designs from this period already had the hallmarks of this new trend. One of such buildings, implemented at Furman Street 15, was included in the so-called Moscow Red Book - a document drawn up in 2009, covering over 200 endangered, valuable modernist objects. The structure and elevations of the building were already made in accordance with the recommendations of constructivism,

<sup>17</sup> O. Perminov, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> O. Lejbfrejð, op. cit.

while the interior still had some decorative elements. In 1927, according to Rzepiszewski's design, another constructivist building was built at Makarenka St. 8 (Fig. 25); it had apartments of various sizes - from two to six rooms. An interesting fact is that it did not have a number 13 in it. There was one with number 12a instead<sup>19</sup>.

In the mid-1930s - the years of the great wave of Stalinist terror - the inhabitants of the large, bright, cooperative apartments were repressed and executed; and private flats were transformed into municipal flats for new hosts. The architects of these buildings could not count for anything better. In 1930, as a class enemy for both his class and Polish descent, Rzepiszewski spent six months in one of the NKVD prisons. Shortly after he was released; he died of a stroke. Rzepiszewski was buried in Moscow, but the exact location of the grave remains unknown to this day<sup>20</sup>.

In Rzepiszewski's rich output, one can see an interesting evolution, which is a reflection of the phenomena in the architecture of the first half of the 20th century. The cosmopolitan character of his inspiration proves the architect's good orientation in European tendencies and a great sense of their specificity. It was also caused by his thorough professional background. Thanks to his technical education in St. Petersburg, he had the knowledge of new constructions and materials, whereas an education in Paris consolidated his aesthetic sense and an orientation in contemporary Western trends. It is worth noting that the designer did not assume a completely popular - at that time - national Byzantine-Russian style, so widespread among the Moscow architects.

Undoubtedly, the best works of Rzepiszewski were created in the Kharkiv period. The last building was designed in 1915, when the architect was 36 years old. At that time,

Rzepiszewski was also active in several social activities: he took part in the exhibitions of the Kharkiv Architects' Society (his designs were presented at the exhibition in 1916, e.g. a staircase design for the Polish House and numerous sketches of monuments, performed while travelling in Europe). He was also a member of the Kharkiv Literary and Artistic Club. In 1918, during the Hetmanate period, he was a delegate from Kharkiv at the All-Ukrainian Artists' Congress. He acted as an urban architect, too. Rzepiszewski's great reputation as a designer at that time is confirmed by the fact that he was entrusted with designs by Kharkiv entrepreneurs and people of culture.

Aleksander Rzepiszewski is associated with innovations in architecture, which provided the city of Kharkiv with originality and elegance. The architect modernized the space of the city, skillfully applying the ideas of early modernism, such as creating the most comfortable living and working conditions. He was the first to introduce a new method of internal housing devices through the possibility of using sliding walls. The characteristic profile of the roofs, which cover the tenement houses, gave the historical center of Kharkiv a unique view and complemented the dominants of orthodox towers. „Rzepiszewski's windows”, „Rzepiszewski's roofs”, „Rzepiszewski's spires and skyscrapers” are terms used in the local architectural environment to this day; they indicate the ability to incorporate innovative - in terms of designs and materials - buildings and interiors into the cityscape. It should be emphasized that Rzepiszewski was the first designer in Kharkov who initiated the construction of so called „company houses” with their own flats, which were a prototype of cooperative houses. It is thanks to these buildings that the city acquired a unique and exceptional character.

<sup>19</sup> D. Oparin, *Dom kooperativa Osnova*, [http://bg.ru/city/dom\\_kooperativa\\_osnova-18611/](http://bg.ru/city/dom_kooperativa_osnova-18611/), accessed: 18.05.2018.

<sup>20</sup> O. Perminov, op. cit.

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