

NEOECLECTICISM – OTHER MODERNISM OF THE 1930s

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Abstract

Neoelecticism was one of the stylistic trends of the interwar architecture. It was based on the classical architectural language and especially flourished in the 1930s parallel with the then dominant Modern movement. Roots and development of this stylistics in different countries and in Latvia are studied in the article, and its innovative nature in the context of Modern movement is analysed. Historical place of Neoelecticism and its value in the cultural heritage is identified.

All figures in the text are photographs by the author, unless stated otherwise.

Keywords: *Neoelecticism, Modern movement, Architecture of 20th century.*

Introduction

The whole of the 20th century visual art, including the development of architecture, is saturated by the concept of modernism, conceiving that as art trends seeking new means and forms of expression. The root of the word “modern” means everything that is contemporary or in accordance with the requirements of its time and the latest achievements. Requirements and achievements can be different and do not have an unambiguous definition, so at the same time art works with quite different formal expression can be considered modern.

Since the Renaissance, interpretations of elements of antique orders have been one of the main proofs of contemporaneity in architecture. Baroque and especially early 19th century Classicism were based on the classical language of architecture. It also survived in most of the eclectic neostyles of the second half of the 19th century, but around 1910 flourished in neoclassical format. The early 20th century Neoclassicism was a kind of contrast to the Art Nouveau, but soon merged with it in a uniform artistic expression.

The twenties of the 20th century were dominated by formally stylistic diversity, in which even contemporaries were not always able to navigate [Laube 1928,

Rutmanis 1934: 257, Ārends 1938: 89]. Then both Art Deco and Functionalism or the Modern movement were born, but one of the various expressions of historicism at that time was the use of classical means of architectural language. For the most part, it was a successive continuation of pre-war neoclassicism, moreover often in a rather orthodox form, but often with the addition of a lot of details rooted in Art Deco aesthetics. Classic examples are the *Konserthuset* in Stockholm (1920–1926, architect Ivar Tengbom, Figure 1) and the Finnish Parliament building in Helsinki (1930–1931, architect Johan Sigfrid Sirén, Figure 2). Both buildings are dominated by large-scale porticoes with exaggerated slender columns. Art Deco is more noticeable in the architecture of the concert hall, but the Parliament building has earned the honour of “the most eminent building of independent Finland” [Krūmiņš 1939–1940: 39833].



Figure 1. Stockholm, Sweden. Concert hall. 1920–1926. Ivar Tengbom.

Figure 2. Helsinki, Finland. Parliament building. 1930–1931. Johan Sigfrid Sirén.

Neoelecticism

In the 1930s, and especially in the second half of the twentieth century, when the Modern movement reached maturity, the parallel architecture of classical forms acquired a generally monumental and heavy expression, which quite noticeably differs from the neoclassicism of the turn of the century. The ideological background of the architectural vocabulary was also quite different. It was a worldwide, conscious choice of classical language as eternal and enduring artistic values for solving modern architectural tasks. This trend, using a conceptual and terminological analogy, can be called Neoelecticism: the choice of stylistic forms was also the basis of the artistically creative method of the 19th century style of eclecticism.

The term “Neoelecticism” was first introduced in the book “*Latvijas Republikas būvmāksla*” (“Construction Art of the Republic of Latvia”), published in 1992 in Riga by “Zinātne” (239 pages), and since then, has been used in all publications of the author. It was also used by Jānis Lejnics in his doctoral thesis “Functionalism and Neoelecticism in 20th Century Latvian Architecture”, defended at Riga

Technical University in 1994. True, the art historian Eduards Kļaviņš later called this term a “less clear designation”, which, in his opinion, “refers to the buildings of the Neoclassicism of that time” [Kļaviņš 2016: 25]. However, there is no reason to attribute stylistics of the 1930s directly to the architecture of the early 20th century.

The orientation on classical language of architecture of the 1930s is sometimes called Authoritarian architecture, Totalitarian architecture, or Fascist architecture, as it was quite popular with Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, and other dictatorial regimes. The ideology of these regimes really sought to promote an imposing, monumental and large-scale construction that should express grandeur and virility, not only as a symbol of the strength of the existing political power, but also as a symbol of the unity and ability of each nation. It was officially proclaimed that the “new task of architecture was to serve not only certain sections of society, but the entire nation” [Krūmiņš 1942: 562], and that the buildings “must symbolize the nation and its era” and “find a special form with its content” [Neue deutsche Baukunst 1941: 9].

Each ideology had its own arguments, but the diversity of the choice of arguments did not in itself determine a different artistic output. To the same extent, a similar ideology could be symbolically realized in a different artistic expression. Political forces could not and did not determine the style of art, they only adapted to the general global fashion, in which Neoelecticism had a broad and stable place.

There are also various other designations of this stylistic – “Stripped Classicism”, “Starved Classicism”, etc., thus trying to put into words the formal features of the trend. True, these labels do not always have a precise chronological framework.

In the history of modern architecture, Neoelecticism has traditionally been considered something retrospective, time-lagging, or the like. However, in the context of its time, it was as innovative as the Modern movement and, in the sense of “modern”, an absolutely contemporary phenomenon. In the sense of the time, “obeying one style throughout and denying others the right to exist would mean working against the spirit of time” [Laube 1928].

Neoelecticism in authoritarian countries

It is regularity, not a paradox that the Fascist House (*Casa del Fascio*) in Como, Italy (Figure 3), built between 1932 and 1936 to the project by the architect Giuseppe Terragni, is a real nugget of Modern movement architecture, although the general tone of architecture at that time sought to dictate B. Mussolini’s fascist regime. In turn, the headquarters of Hitler’s National Socialist Party Central Committee in Munich (Figure 4) is a typical example of Neoelecticism. The building was built in 1938–1939 to the project by Paul Ludwig Troost (1879–1934), an architect who had then already passed away. The building now houses the State Academy of Arts.

The most visible determinant of the tone of architecture in Germany was Albert Speer (1905–1981), who became one of Hitler’s closest confederates. Almost all of his architectural works were destroyed during the war or remained unrealized, including grandiose alterations of central Berlin with the monstrous “People’s Hall” (*Volkshalle*) – a hall for 180,000 visitors with a ceiling dome diameter of 250 m! One of the most characteristic architectural monuments of Neoclecticism in Berlin at that time is the Ministry of Aviation building (1934, Figure 5) designed by the architect Ernst Sagebiel (1892–1970). The building has been renovated and now houses the German Ministry of Finance.



Figure 3. Como, Italy. Fascist House (*Casa del fascio*). 1932–1936. Giuseppe Terragni.

Figure 4. Munich, Germany. Central Committee of the National Socialist Party. 1938–1939. Paul Ludwig Troost.

Figure 5. Berlin, Germany. Ministry of Aviation. 1934. Ernst Sagebiel.

In Italy, a number of large-scale urban development projects took place in the 1930s. In 1934–1935, 90 km southeast of Rome, a new city Sabaudia was built in course of 253 days. It is often described as “one of the biggest acts of propaganda of the fascist regime” [Sabaudia, Italy]. Although the architecture of the main public buildings in the city centre (Figure 6) clearly reflects the language of Neoclecticism, several buildings in Sabaudia, mainly residential ones, are today included in list of the Italian Modern movement top monuments. The theoretical basis of the Modern movement in Italy was laid by Gruppo 7, founded in 1926 by seven architects at the Polytechnic of Milan, publishing the Manifesto of Rationalism. The rationalists were influenced by both Le Corbusier and Russian constructivists, but their idea was also to preserve traditions. James Stevens Curl has called Italian Rationalism curiosity [Curl 2005: 539]. However, “Sabaudia was conceived as a model city intended to showcase Italy’s Rational Architecture, and it ultimately solidified architectonically into a Fascist utopia caught between Classicism and Modernism” [Sabaudia].

At the end of the 1930s, the construction of the *EUR* (*Esposizione Universale Roma*) began to the southwest of Rome, in the area where the World’s Fair was to be held in 1942. Due to the war, this did not happen, and later this place was developed into a business district. The design was led by Marcello Piacentini (1881–

1960). Central parts of Turin and Genoa also were completely transformed to his projects. In Turin, an ambitious intervention was carried out in the historic centre, introducing a new city artery, the Via Roma, which connects several historic squares and includes the newly created Piazza C.L.N. (Figure 7). The ensemble includes heavily monumental commercial, administrative and residential buildings. The architecture of the typical facades of these buildings is a contemporary interpretation of the language of generalized classical architecture, and is also commonly referred to in Italy as Rationalism (*Stile razionalista*).

The tallest skyscraper in Europe at that time, now named after the architect Torre Piacentini (Figure 8) was constructed during similar urban alterations in Genoa, at Piazza Dante in 1935–1940. Architecture of the building displays interpretations



Figure 6. Sabaudia, Italy. Town hall. 1933. Gino Cangelotti, Eugenio Montuori, Luigi Piccinato, Alfredo Scalpelli.

Figure 7. Turin, Italy. Piazza C.L.N. 1935–1938. Marcello Piacentini.

Figure 8. Genoa, Italy. Torre Piacentini, Piazza Dante. 1935–1940. Marcello Piacentini. Postcard of early 1940s.



Figure 9. Milan, Italy. Courthouse. (*Palazzo di Giustizia*). 1932–1940. Marcello Piacentini.

Figure 10. São Paulo, Brazil. Banespa office building. 1938–1939. Marcello Piacentini.

Figure 11. Palermo, Italy. Post (*Palazzo delle Poste*). 1928–1934. Angiolo Mazzoni.

of classical forms merged with Art Deco motifs, which are most likely borrowed from American high-rises. In many buildings by Piacentini, the language of classical architecture often manifests itself indirectly, mainly as monumentally symmetrical compositions and even without the direct presence of order elements (Figures 9 and 10). On the other hand, the expression characteristic of the architecture of that time can be clearly read in the works of many other architects, in which the classical elements of ancient architecture have been reproduced quite directly. For example, the central, entrance section of the Palermo Post office building facade is emphasized by a stylized Tuscan order portico, but the seemingly classical window surround and surface articulation of the side wings do not contain any detail taken directly from the classical vocabulary (Figure 11). The building was built in 1928–1934 to the design by Angiolo Mazzoni (1894–1979), an architect of the Italian Ministry of Transport. He has been called “one of the most brilliant and prolific Italian architects of the 1920s and 1930s” [Angiolo Mazzoni].

Neoelecticism in other countries

Formal manifestations of Neoelecticism in many countries were often even more monumental and weighty than in Germany, Italy, or Soviet Russia. A typical example is the National Museum in Krakow, Poland, which began to be built in 1934 by architects Bolesław Szmidt, Czesław Boratyński and Edward Kreisler (Figure 12). It is true that Poland was ruled by the authoritarian regime of Józef Piłsudski at the time, but the country had then recently regained its independence after a long time. The construction of the museum was completed only after the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1992.

Countless similar buildings were built in many parts of the world and in countries that even positioned themselves as citadels of democracy. For example, St. Andrews House, which housed the Scottish Government’s premises, was built in 1934–1939 in Edinburgh (Figure 13). The architect of the building, Thomas Tait (1882–1954), is most often described as a prominent Scottish modernist architect, whereas St. Andrews House architecture – as “Beaux-Arts unified modern concept, which Tait himself described as sculptural” [Thomas Smith Tait]. The descriptions state that “St. Andrews House much influenced by the RIBA Headquarters, 1934, in London” [McKean 1992: 100]. This building, the seat of the British Royal Institute of Architects in London, at 66 Portland Place (architect Gray Wornum), is an iconic example of Neoelecticism, although various publications attribute it to Art Deco, “Late Neoclassicism” or “Imperial Neoclassicism”. However, in the information that the building was classified as a “Grade II building of architectural and historic importance” in 1970 was always emphasized that it was “one of the very first examples of modern architecture to be so recognized” [RIBA].

In the United States, neo-eclecticism was almost the benchmark in the architecture of almost all post offices, schools, and train stations built in the 1930s. So was also the New York City building at the 1939 World's Fair in New York (now the Queens Museum), designed by architect Aymar Embury II.

A typical example in the context of the understanding of modernism in the interwar period is the history of the construction of the headquarters of the League of Nations in Geneva. It is best known for the results of the 1926 design competition. To this day, more and more new publications are appearing, in which the jury of the competition is accused of falling into seemingly traditionalism, rejecting the project developed by Le Corbusier, which was supposed to be the most innovative and the best. An international team of architects was set up after the competition, and a huge building was built to the project by this team (Figure 14). The building is shaped in noble, representative, modernized classic forms – as a temple for the cooperation and unity of the nations of the world. There is no reason to record a deliberate backwardness for this building. Neoelecticism at that time was one of the most modern expressions of art.



Figure 12. Krakow, Poland. National Museum. 1934–1992. Bolesław Szmidt, Czesław Boratyński, Edward Kreisler.

Figure 13. Edinburgh, Scotland. St. Andrews House. 1934–1939. Thomas Tait.

Figure 14. Geneva, Switzerland. Palace of Nations. 1929–1938. Carlo Broggi, Julien Flegenheimer, Camille Lefèvre, Henri-Paul Nénot, Joseph Vago.

Neoelecticism in Latvia

Latvia and its economy were badly damaged during the First World War. Construction only began to come to life in the mid-1920s. Until then, architecture reflected different interpretations of pre-war artistic trends. It was historicism in the broadest sense of the word. Important public buildings were usually shaped in classical forms, mainly in the early 19th century Empire style, often supplemented by some Art Deco elements. The most typical buildings of this type are Folk House (now Valka City Culture House) in Valka, Emīla Dārziņa iela 8 (1924–1927, architect Augusts Raisters, Figure 15), Gulbene State Commercial and Vocational School

(now Gulbene County State Gymnasium) in Gulbene, Skolas iela 10 (1927–1928, architect Indriķis Blankenburgs, Figure 16) and French Lyceum (now the building of the Faculty of Chemistry of the University of Latvia) in Riga, Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela 48 (1929–1930, I. Blankenburgs, Figure 17). Several other educational institutions, folk houses, state bank branch buildings, railway stations and other buildings have been built in similar stylistic.



Figure 15. Valka. People's House at Emīla Dārziņa iela 8. 1924–1927. Augusts Raisters.

Figure 16. Gulbene. State Commercial and Vocational School at Skolas iela 10. 1927–1928. Indriķis Blankenburgs.

Figure 17. Riga. French lyceum at Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela 48. 1929–1930. Indriķis Blankenburgs.

In the second half of the 1920s, the Modern movement or Functionalism quite definitely introduced itself in Latvia, but at the same time the opinion that classical architectural language is an inexhaustible value, and also “most national efforts in architecture have been and will continue to be founded in the world of classical forms” [Birzenieks 1940: 118] became more and more established. The main defender and populariser of classical means of expression was Eižens Laube – an architect who had always been able to react sensitively to current events and the latest trends in art, finding the most appropriate solutions for his views and professional beliefs.

In the 1930s, Neoelecticism became already a clearly definable trend in fashion. It also left certain traces on almost every building of Modern movement. It was usually a certain addition of elements from classical vocabulary, without avoiding crowning the facades with cornices or hiding the roofs behind the parapets typical for Modern movement. In 1929–1931 in Riga, at Brīvības iela 39, a very modern apartment building with offices of doctor Pēteris Sniķeris was built to the project by E. Laube (Figure 18). Widely glazed facade of the building is crowned with a classic dentil, an ionic frieze and a cornice supported by modillions. Attic crowned with classic balustrade rises above the cornice. In 1999, the building was remodelled, trying to install a trading house and constructing another floor above the balustrade.

One of the most impressive examples of the creative work of E. Laube and also of the entire interwar architectural heritage of Latvia is the State Ķemeri Hotel in Ķemeri, at Emīla Dārziņa iela 28 (Figure 19), built in 1933–1936. In terms of scope and architectural qualities, it has been equated with the palaces of the Dukes of Courland in Jelgava and Rundāle [Ārends 1939: 124]. The dynamic massing of the building corresponds to the compositional principles of the Modern movement, but it is organically fused with a relatively rich range of architectural details rooted in the classical language. However, it does not contain any of the frozen compositions of Empire style, in which the portico crowned with a triangular pediment is characteristic. In terms of artistic expression, the building leaves no one indifferent. In the context of the accumulation of world cultural heritage, it seems to be awaiting its revelation.



Figure 18. Riga. Apartment building with shops and offices at Brīvības iela 39. 1929–1931. Eizēns Laube.

Figure 19. Ķemeri. Hotel at Emīla Dārziņa iela 28. 1933–1936. Eizēns Laube.

Figure 20. Daugavpils. Unity House at Rīgas iela 22A. 1936–1937. Verners Vitands.

A strong touch of Neoelecticism can be clearly perceived in the main façade of Daugavpils *Vienības nams* (Unity House, Figure 20). This huge public building designed by architect Verners Vitands was constructed in an extremely short time: the foundation stone was laid on 15 May 1936, but it was consecrated on December 19 the following year [Latvian State Historical Archives]. It is a multifunctional building housing premises of Latvian Association, various offices and clubs, a supermarket, a theatre and even a swimming pool. The diversity of the spatial structure can also be read in the relatively complex massing. The façade architecture also displays formal elements of the Modern movement, including ribbon fenestration, and vertical glazing of stairwells. The main façade is dominated by a classic entrance portico with slender columns. Indoors, including the theatre hall covered with modern reinforced concrete shells, an Art Deco atmosphere is present as well.

The language of classical forms was also considered as one of the possibilities to obtain national architecture: “Latvian beauty is manifested in modern buildings both in simple, restrained shapes, as well as in more complex forms of European classics” [Laube 1939: 47]. One of the methods of obtaining such an understanding of Latvianness was porticos with emphasized slender columns of the great order – similar to Daugavpils Unity House. Such columns are associated with a prototype of a Doric order in a wooden version, the image of which has been found on a Greek vase and reproduced in many textbooks of architectural history, but wood has always been the main building material in Latvian vernacular construction. Such porticoes are, for example, in a single-family house in Riga, Poruka iela 14 (1931, architect Haralds Kundziņš, Figure 21), Ikšķile Evangelical Lutheran Church (1933, architect Pauls Kundziņš), several pavilions in Zemgale province exhibition in Jelgava, of which Latvian bank pavilion (1937, P. Kundziņš) has been preserved partially rebuilt and extended (now the culture house “Rota” at Garozas iela 15, Figure 22), Dzintari Concert Hall in Jūrmala, Turaidas iela 1 (1936, architect Viktors Mellenbergs, Figure 23), and other buildings. These slender columns sometimes resembled posts of vernacular buildings, sometimes were bricked in expressively broken Art Deco shapes.



Figure 21. Riga. Single-family house at Poruka iela 14. 1931. Haralds Kundziņš.

Figure 22. Jelgava. The former pavilion of Latvian bank at the exhibition of Zemgale province. 1937. Pauls Kundziņš.

Figure 23. Jūrmala. Dzintari Concert Hall at Turaidas iela 1. 1936. Viktors Mellenbergs.

In the second half of the 1930s, Neoelecticism, developing in parallel with the Modern movement, became something like official architecture. Almost all most significant public buildings were shaped in this style. Architect Jānis Rutmanis aptly described the situation at that time: “In recent years, we have two architectures – new – official, with a tendency to accentuate, decoratively dress, and applied – in balanced expression of constructivism” [Rutmanis 1939: 168]. The term “expression of constructivism” refers to the Modern movement or functionalism, and J. Rutmanis called it “healthier and safer”.

Most of the Neoelectic buildings were built in the capital of the country, Riga. The most monumental and “classical” in terms of stylistics was the Courthouse at Brīvības bulvāris 36 (1936–1938, architect Frīdrihs Skujiņš, Figure 24). The heavily representative image of the building is emphasized by the entrance portico, whose Doric columns are made of Swedish granite. Other noble materials used in the finish of facades are of local origin. The building now houses the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia.

The architectural image of the Neoelectic trading house “*Galerija Centrs*” at Audēju iela 16 (1936–1940, architect Artūrs Galindoms, Figure 25) is determined by the rhythm of the Corinthian pilasters and a solidly classic cornice. The building was built as the Latvian Army Economic Store replacing several antique buildings on the site. It was structurally innovative skeleton building on a cast-in-situ reinforced concrete slab. Radiant heating system was installed in it, and the first escalator in Riga (demolished in the sixties) connected ground floor with the upper one. In 1997–1998, the interior was completely rebuilt, but in 2005–2006, the building was incorporated in the significantly larger shopping centre, which covers seven plots.

One of the largest Neoelectic public buildings in Riga was the Ministry of Finance at Smilšu iela 1 (1937–1939, architect Aleksandrs Klinklāvs, Figure 26). The huge building merges three older quarters between Smilšu and Zirgu streets. Only four buildings have been preserved and incorporated in the new structure. Facades of it are coated in local dolomite sandstone from Rembate County in Ogre district. From this material are made also fluted pilasters crowned with Corinthian capitals, which accentuate the rhythmically arranged entrances in the very long facade facing Zirgu iela, and are arranged in a dense rhythm in the facades facing Meistaru iela and Smilšu iela.



Figure 24. Riga. The Courthouse at Brīvības iela 36. 1936–1938. Frīdrihs Skujiņš.
 Figure 25. Riga. Army Economic Store at Audēju iela 16. 1936–1940. Artūrs Galindoms.
 Figure 26. Riga. Ministry of Finance at Smilšu iela 1. 1937–1938. Aleksandrs Klinklāvs.

Conclusion

Neoelecticism in architecture was a formal trend based on a creative interpretation of the language of classical forms. Use of classical vocabulary has periodically been repeated several times in history. Neoelecticism developed in parallel with the Modern movement, Art Deco and other stylistics. These trends interacted and often merged.

Soviet and German occupations during the World War II almost completely stopped construction. During the reoccupation by the Soviet Union after the war, Latvian architecture was pulled out from the mainstream of the world development, interrupting the natural continuity of architectural styles. However, pre-war Neoelecticism was the actual basis of Soviet “Socialist realism”, which lasted until the late 1950s. Difference was in ideological background and directive promotion of a superficially decorative manner of architecture.

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