

BULGARIA HOTEL AND CONCERT HALL THE WAY THEY COULD HAVE BEEN

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Abstract: The article contributes to a topic disregarded for decades in the history of Bulgarian architecture – modernism/rationalism. It presents two unknown conceptual designs for the emblematical *Bulgaria* Hotel and Concert Hall which ranked first and third in a national architectural competition in 1931-1932. They are made by two famous architectural firms: *Belkovski–Danchov* and *Vasilyov–Tsolov*.

This is the first article where these two conceptual projects are subjected to architectural analysis. The advantages of the third prize winner project of Vasilyov and Tsolov are proven. Another issue discussed in the article is the functional and aesthetic influence of the two projects upon *Bulgaria* Hotel and Concert Hall, which was erected later on in accordance with the remade winning project of Belkovski and Danchov. The consequences of selecting some ideas while casting aside others are pointed out in view of the good performance and splendour of the building from the time of its construction to the present day.

Key words: Bulgaria Hotel and Concert Hall, architectural competition, modernism, rationalism

Historical background

It all starts in the end of 1931 when the *Architect* Journal publishes an announcement of the Managing Board of the Civil Servants' Cooperative Savings and Insurance Company about "... an architectural competition for acquiring the most expedient concept for building up the sites and plots of the Company in Sofia." [Ом Управителния Съвет – i.e. Managing Board. 1931]. The date of the announcement is December 1931. It explicitly requires that the architects should be Bulgarian nationals. This deprives the competition of the participation of international architectural community but in those times that was not an issue, since Bulgarian architects graduated from universities all over Europe. Thus, from educational background perspective, European architectural ideas indirectly took part in the competition. Everyone willing to participate could receive a free "competition programme and drawings of the building lots". The text does not mention their location, however, based on publications that fol-

lowed, it can be inferred that the announcement refers to the location of the present day Bulgaria Hotel and Concert Hall in Sofia. The competition deadline was February 15, 1932.

Some architects managed to keep the short deadline but others were dissatisfied. At that point the troubles began: “As you know our Society (of architects) with the consent of all our colleagues from Sofia, and also informing our colleagues nationwide, boycotted the competition.” [Резолюция комитета – i.e. Editorial Committee. 1931] Probably the representatives of the Bulgarian Architectural Society and those of the Civil Servants’ Cooperative Savings and Insurance Company have had a discord. This was announced in a short article in the *Architect Journal* two issues later. It is not mentioned, however, what happened to the projects submitted which met the deadline. The article made it clear that such proposals existed, which was possible because not all architects were members of the Society of Architects, since the membership was not a mandatory condition to practice the profession. Apparently non-members did not boycott the competition.

The outcome of the competition can be found in issue No 5-6, September-October 1932. It announces the prize-winning projects of the following architectural offices: First prize was awarded to *Belkovski–Danchov*; second prize – to *Yordanov – S. Ovcharov*; third prize – to *Vasilyov–Tsolov*; first bought off project was that of *G. Apostolov – As. Mihailovski*; other bought off projects were those of *G. Fingov and D. Fingov* and *Zlatev and Koev*.

The conceptual designs envisage a multifunctional structure comprising new and old buildings. The new functions (hotel, café/restaurant and concert hall) are added to the administrative and commercial functions of the already existing corner building of the Civil Servants’ Cooperative Savings and Insurance Company. The drawings in the article are standalone – no text is added, other than the ranking and the architects’ names. This nonverbal but highly visual presentation of the winning conceptual projects leaves the modern researcher with the unanswered question what could the jury’s motifs have been to rank the projects the way they did. On the other hand, having no rational arguments provided, the modern explorer is free to make his own subjective analysis of the drawings without being influenced by any positive or negative arguments.

Aim

The two conceptual designs for *Bulgaria Hotel* and *Concert Hall* discussed here have never been a subject of architectural analysis since the publication in 1932 of their drawings as images with no accompanying comments, hence the innovative character of this publication. The article aims at analyzing the merits and setbacks of these unfamiliar, yet classical examples of the 20th-century architectural design. The projects are presented in the historical context of the architectural competition which was the cause of their advent.

Architectural analysis

The selection of the author includes two conceptual designs: those of *Belkovski–Danchov* and *Vasilyov–Tsolov*. Each of the architectural firms has its own preferences, therefore, emphasizes different functions out of all those

incorporated in the multifunctional building. Belkovski–Danchov’s project has been selected for the analysis because it evolved in the course of time – in the long run it was implemented with certain modifications. Vasilyov–Tsolov’s project has been selected because of a brilliant architectural idea which none of the other awarded projects offered – the design of an internal square in front of the concert hall providing excellent access to it.

The lack of published terms of reference for the competition leave a lot of room for interpretation as to what the requirements might have been. Therefore, the analysis of different aspects of the selected conceptual designs shall be completely and only based on their architectural merits, as seen by the author of this article, without taking into consideration the terms of reference or the opinion of the architectural competition jury.

The analysis should start from the perspective of modern times when the once astounding hotel lies under an ankle-high layer of dust, while the adjacent concert hall is still functioning being the largest one in Bulgaria, designed only and solely for concert performances. Both the hall and the hotel share the name of their country of location – Bulgaria. The residential part of the multifunctional building has its façade along Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd but is almost completely bare of inhabitants. The concert hall to a great extent is full of life and spirit but does it have a face? Up to the present day the most sustainable and most visited part of the multipurpose combination of functions – the concert hall – has not obtained its own façade that corresponds to its scale and importance – a face to clearly represent it to the world. It did not get one at the time of its construction during the Third Bulgarian Tsardom, neither did it get one in the next seventy years to follow, although such an idea had long been in existence: “It is a pity that the general conceptual design of the concert hall has not been completed with the initially planned/designed main approach from 9th September Square (Levski St.)” [Танъров, 1962]. Nowadays it rather has a modest entrance – a small face – going out on the narrow pavement of the tiny Aksakov Street, parallel to Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd, which is extensively used as a parking lot. The situation can be considerably improved if parking in front and in the vicinity of the concert hall entrance is banned; if the pavement and the roadway are put on the same level and covered with stone, thus forming a small square which at concert time is only for pedestrian access.

***Bulgaria Hotel and Concert Hall as envisaged
by the architects Vasilyov and Tsolov***

Let us go back to the early 1930s when the problem with the missing façade (procrastinated for the future) originated with the first award-winning project of Belkovski–Danchov which was later altered and then implemented. This problem had its original solutions in one of the other projects – the third-award winner – the project of Vasilyov–Tsolov. How was their project different from those of the other competitors? (Fig. 1).

Vasilyov and Tsolov were the only architects who correctly estimated the functional value of the would-be concert hall and ranked it second in importance after the residential/hotel part on the list of jointly working spaces of the larger ensemble. The rest of the architects, including the 1st award winners,

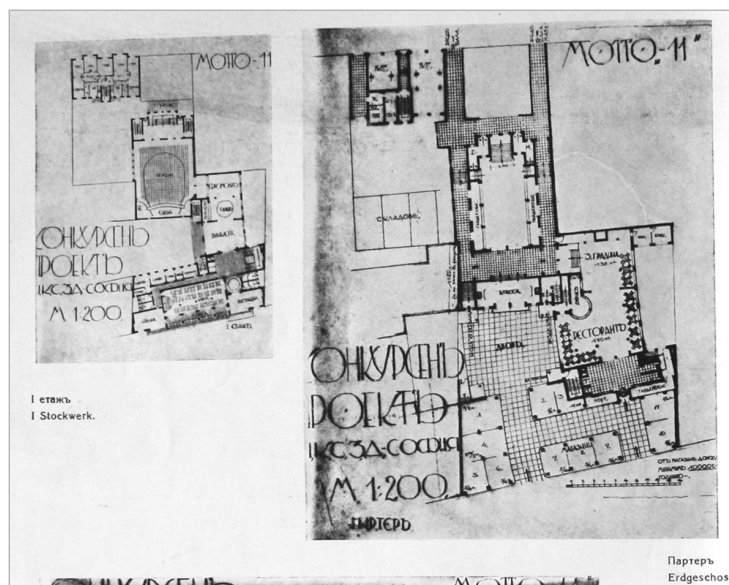


Fig. 1. Bulgaria Hotel and Bulgaria Concert Hall – floor plans;
Tsolov–Vasilyov Architects, 1932

ranked the catering area second and the concert hall – third in functional importance. Vasilyov and Tsolov's floor plans make the hall autonomous from the rest of the functional members of the multipurpose building. They provide the most original solution to the problem of representing the concert hall as an important functional element and develop an adequate well-suited to the purpose façade. To that end the rectangular hall is situated in the inner part of the lot, the shorter side of the rectangle being parallel to the boulevard. Vasilyov and Tsolov's design offers an original approach to the concert hall. It is developed directly along its axis of symmetry. The city enters the building in a natural way through a shopping gallery especially designed for the purpose and covered by the hotel section of the building. A closed courtyard follows which plays the part of an internal plaza for the multifunctional structure. Its design is a brilliant spatial solution because:

- At the macro-level: From the perspective of town planning the city gets a small plaza in front of its only (at the time and to the present) concert hall.
- At the mini-level: The neighbourhood gets a neat internal open space which was rare both then [Белкофски, 1930] and now.
- At the micro-level: This courtyard turns into a full of life piazzetta because alongside the main entrance of the concert hall, which opens into it, the place is framed by some of the gallery shops and the food court, snuggled away from the glances and the noise of the boulevard. The windows of the hotel section and those of the already existing administrative building of the Civil Ser-

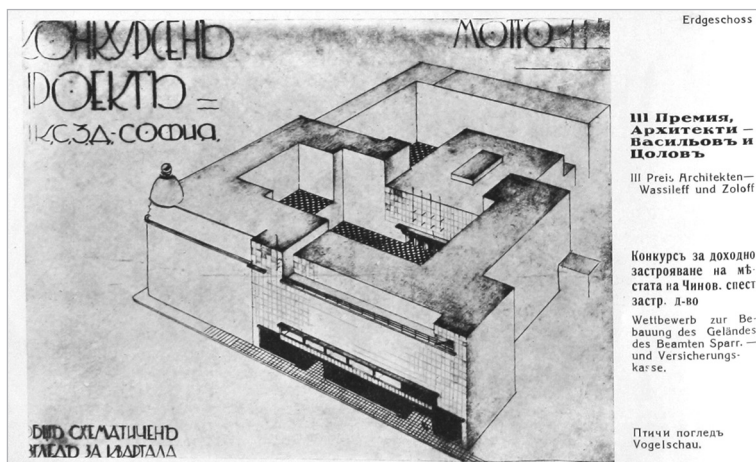


Fig. 2. Bulgaria Hotel and Concert Hall – bird’s eye view; Tsolov–Vasilyov Architects, 1932

vants’ Cooperative Savings and Insurance Company also overlook the internal piazzetta which increases the quality of life in both buildings – the new and the old one. The fact that the internal courtyard of the old building is visually attached to the new piazzetta, although at a different level (See the Bird’s eye view in **Fig. 2**) provides additional space to the little square.

Tsolov and Vasilyov present their project through a bird’s eye view (**Fig. 2**) in order to illustrate the logic of their multilayered and multifaceted architectural design in which there are no major and minor facades. By letting the public and the city access the core of the building, the two architects turn the structure into a complex volume bordered by equally treated and ground surfaces. This brings the design closer to the vanguard tendencies in modern architecture. So far as it can be gathered from the not so detailed architectural drawing, the connection of the new building with the existing administrative building of the Civil Servants’ Cooperative Savings and Insurance Company is done through precise balancing of the size and shape of the new architectural volumes with the already existing ones, rather than through details. At the level of details the two buildings would have hardly had anything in common.

The proposal of the Vasilyov–Tsolov Architectural Company has a modern look even today – 82 years later. In the architectural drawing the façades of the hotel and concert hall are segmented into identical rectangles which a contemporary observer could easily perceive as glass façade panels (curtain walls). Since no detailed elevations have been published in the *Architect* Journal and due to lack of other information sources, researchers may only surmise what the elaborated ideas of Vasilyov and Tsolov could have been. Yet, even a detail as small as the strip window of the café/restaurant is fully indicative of the architects’ looking into the bright future of architecture with the eyes of visionaries.

***Bulgaria Hotel and Concert Hall as envisaged
by the architects Belkovski and Danchov***

In architectural plans of Belkovski–Danchov (**Fig. 3**) the concert hall is situated in the same place, however, its space totally merges with the spaces of the other functional parts of the building. The approach to the hall is a long corridor which in no way provides an impression of spaciousness.

It is quite interesting that the entrance of the café/restaurant, the space of the winter garden (that later on became emblematic), the vestibule in front of the concert hall and the hall itself lie in one straight line. The spaces merge into one another. There are gates only on the sides the vestibule. The concert hall forms the end of the axis. It seems much more natural and formal to access it through the café/restaurant, since the spans between the columns and the spaciousness of the zone make the especially dedicated access corridor to the music hall (on the right side) look like a maintenance area.

The different functional spaces are in each others close vicinity and the spatial development of this project is probably aimed at making sure that the lovers of music in no case miss the culinary delights. This fact though brings the architectural solution dangerously close to designing a restaurant with a space for an orchestra, i.e. the concert hall is too intimately close to the catering area. Thus the music hall, although in the core of the multifunctional structure, is not the very heart of the building – a role it truly deserves. The hall is left without a face. The lighting courts/shafts, situated on both sides of the abovementioned axis are not accessible by the public but remain with their basic function – only providing light and air.

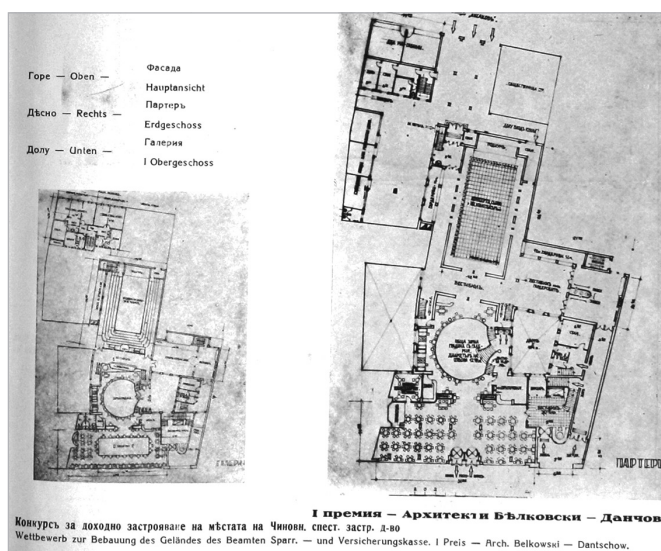


Fig. 3. Bulgaria Hotel and Concert Hall floor plans;
Belkovski–Danchov Architects, 1932

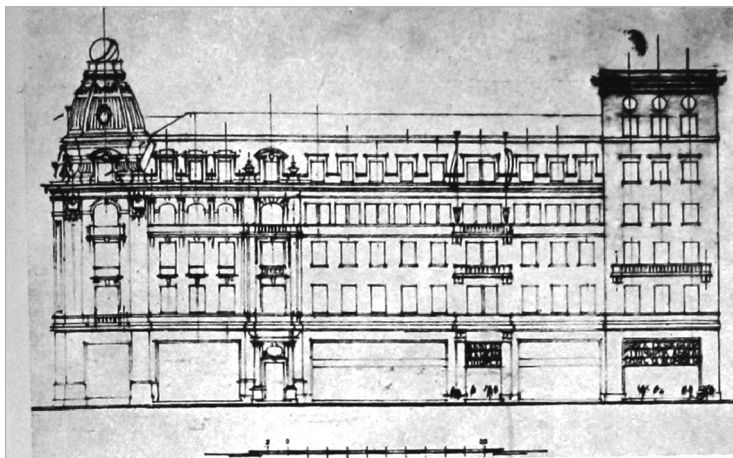


Fig. 4. Bulgaria Hotel and Concert Hall – façade; Belkovski–Danchov, 1932

In Belkovski–Danchov’s conceptual design the concert hall is an inseparable part of the building, although it houses a function different enough for the designing architects to provide a separate entrance. However, the executive architectural drawings used for its construction have been changed – due to the fact that the Civil Servants’ Cooperative Savings and Insurance Company [Белковски, 1939] purchased some adjacent plots, the concert hall [Белковски, 1943] was rotated at 90 degrees and obtained a main entrance from Aksakov Street.

The façade designed by the architectural firm of Belkovski–Danchov (**Fig. 4**) seems to have been targeted at impressing the conservative architectural critics at the time and could be enjoyed by the eclectically-minded nostalgic individuals of today. The order of the façade of the new building is completely subordinated to the existing administrative building of the Civil Servants’ Cooperative Savings and Insurance Company on the left side.

As a result the two buildings merge into one nearly symmetrical whole volume. And that is where the problem stems from: the right wing of the new building is flanked with a tower but that tower is at the border with the adjacent plot. Such an architectural solution could be adequate if the plot of the new building was at the corner of the block, but it is not. It is the next plot on the right that is located at the corner, and a building in it should complete the face of the block overlooking Tsar Osvoboditel Boulevard. Regarding the details on the façades: the windows of the new one, although similar in size with those of the old building, are not so richly decorated. Both the windows and the proposed tower are strictly orthogonal – the arches of the old façade are absent. The conceptual design is eclectic with a tint of rationalism – the two large horizontal windows on ground floor.

An interesting fact: the façade of Bulgaria Hotel and Concert Hall along Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd (**Fig. 5**), built in accordance with the later remade de-



Fig. 5. Bulgaria Hotel and Concert Hall – the remade design of Belkovski–Danchov Architects; Photo: Georgi Kafelov, 2013

sign of Belkovski–Danchov, obtained a lot less decorated look and the tower shrank to a size that reminded more of Vasilyov–Tsolov’s design of the same section of the façade. The huge glass windows of the café/restaurant were designed and made to slide down and disappear into the basement [Kafelov, 2013], thus opening the building to the boulevard. This compelling innovation shall remain unsurpassed in the history of architectural technological achievements of the Third Bulgarian Tsardom, in the history of the “People’s” Republic of Bulgaria, in the short of intellect, dreams and aspirations Republic of Bulgaria of today, and probably in the history of Bulgaria of the future.

Conclusion

The two projects analyzed here present original and significantly different architectural designs although they use the same building components: a concert hall, café, restaurant, hotel rooms. The strengths of both projects prevail over their weaknesses. The design of Belkovski–Danchov fascinates with its various elegantly and rationally designed interior spaces – part of the catering area. The particular strength of Vasilyov–Tsolov’s design lies in the inner square and the easy natural access to the concert hall.

The two designs prove that a consonance of mutually complementary ideas is possible because the remade design of Belkovski–Danchov used for the actual construction of the building – which every citizen or visitor can see nowadays in Sofia – is influenced by the ideas of Vasilyov–Tsolov’s design. The hotel façade is very modernistic – striving to formulate national type of modernism, rather than to fully comply with the rules of the international one, which at that time was also still in search for its own image. The concert hall in Aksakov Street has its own, although rather a small façade. Regardless of its age it has not gone out of fashion, and in the present lack of genuine architectural competition it probably never will.

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