

# *Ezelsoren*

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VOL. III, 2010, NO. 2

Album amicorum for  
Otakar Máčel

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Maurizio Meriggi *An architectural ensemble  
in furniture.*

# *An architectural ensemble in furniture.*

**Maurizio Meriggi**

On page 145, Otakar Mačel's book *2100 metal tubular chairs. A typology*, shows a tubular chair by Ivan Leonidov. The portrait of the object is extracted, without background, from the image of the 'interior ensemble' of the Oktjabrjat House of the Pioneers in Moscow of 1936 published in the prestigious soviet architectural magazine *Arkhitektura SSSR* no. 10, 1936, at pages 14-15.<sup>1</sup> In a room of the House of Pioneers, whose interior was enti-

rely designed by Leonidov, appear four metal tubular chairs characterized by a sinuous line, gathered around a circular table supported by four legs. The four legs are fixed to a circular column basement and they also have the shape of columns with a sort of *entasis* inverted (like the Egyptian column enlarging on the basement and on the top); in this way also these columns present a sinuous line (fig. 1). The table looks like a miniature of a static



FIG.1 Ivan I. Leonidov, Furniture for the House of Pioneers in Moscow, 1936

indeterminate building while the chairs recall the flexible shape of the human body seated and free to impose the weight on the various articulations. The juxtaposition of the two objects produces: a sort of symphony of sinuous lines with the table in the role of the main theme and the chromed tubular steel chairs as 'fugue'; a sharp contrast between a rigid structure and a flexible structure that amplifies the sense of elasticity of the chair. The group of chairs and table forms an 'ensemble'.

Ivan Leonidov started to use this principle of the symphony and contrast of sinuous lines in his projects for the Ermitage garden in Moscow of 1932 and in his following works, as in his masterpiece of the People's Commissariat of

Heavy Industry in Moscow of 1934 until one of the few projects realized: the Monumental Staircase of the NKT Sanatorium in Kislovodsk<sup>2</sup> of 1937-38 widely illustrated and commented in the book by Moisej Jakolevič Ginzburg, *Arkhitektura Sanatorija NKTP v Kislovodske (The Architecture of the Sanatorium NKTP in Kislovodsk)*, Izdatel'stvo Akademii Arkhitektury SSSR, Moskva 1940 (fig. 2).

As is well known, Ivan Leonidov was publicly criticised and discredited at the beginning of the 1930s because of his 'formalism', and 'leonidovism' became synonymous to a 'petty bourgeois tendency' in architecture. At that time Leonidov was one of the most radical supporters of 'constructivist' architecture

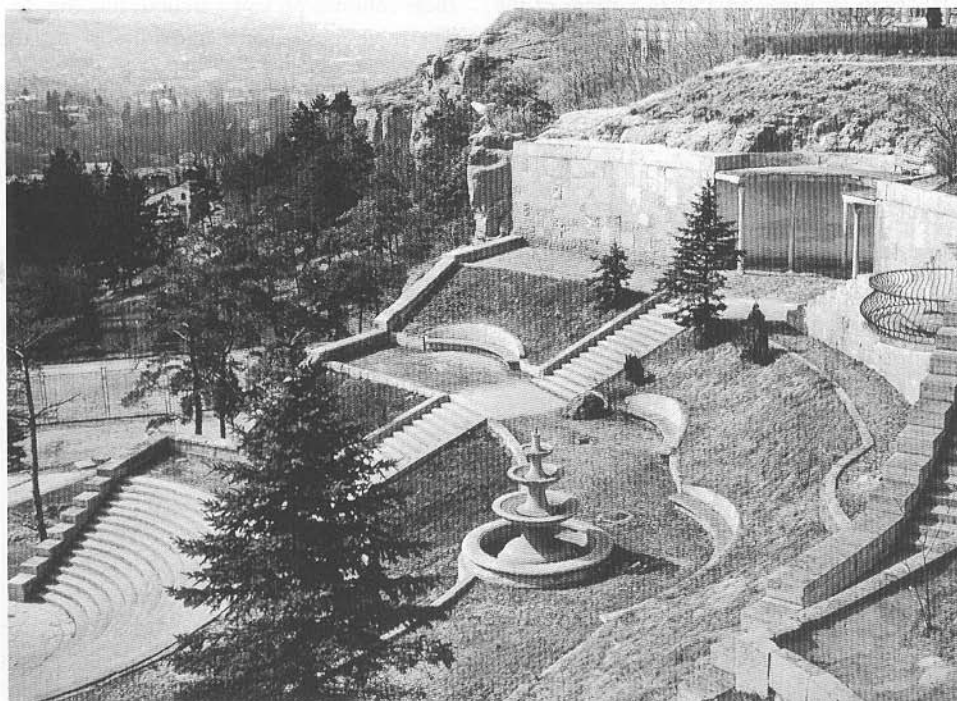


FIG.2 Ivan I. Leonidov, Monumental Staircase in the park of the NKT Sanatorium in Kislovodsk, 1937-38

and respected as a young master with a great number of followers in the new generations whose projects were strongly influenced by his minimalist architecture based on the composition of pure geometric forms and volumes: starting from his diploma project for the Lenin Institute (sphere and parallelepipeds), to the Palace of Culture of Proletarskij district (parallelepiped, half sphere, pyramid) and Magnitogorsk linear settlement (a sequence of cubes, vertical parallelepipeds, reversed half-cylinders, *ogives*).<sup>3</sup> It must be noticed that in all these projects pure solid forms are accompanied by immaterial high, thin and dynamic antennas fixed to the ground with wires.

Equally well known, a radical change occurred in the architectural discipline in the Soviet Union after 1933, with the affirmation of 'Socialist realism' that was calling for an art closer to the taste of the common people – and classicism was considered the heritage that could more easily meet the taste of common people, compared to the intellectualistic avant-garde formalism, functionalism and rationalism of the 1920s.

Trying to correspond to the new atmosphere of the 1930s, Leonidov reworked his formal repertoire introducing forms derived from Russian folk craft on the one hand and from classical architecture on the other hand. As was asked to the architects in that time, he also adopted the compositional methodology of the 'architectural ensemble'<sup>4</sup>, according to which every moment of the life of the soviet citizen should be acted in a scenery composed as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of classical taste: this was the utopia of Socialist realism affirmed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, after the avant-garde utopias of the 1920s.<sup>5</sup>

The point of our discourse here is: how did Leonidov succeed to insert an object like a steel tubular seat so strongly belonging to the imagery of the avant-garde of 1920s<sup>6</sup> into the classicist 'socio-realistic' climate of the 1930s?

Trying to provide an answer we will propose a 'formal analysis' of some works by Leonidov belonging to same artistic season as the chair. The Monumental Staircase of 1937 is made of a series of half circular open-air auditoria (*cavea*) connected through linear staircases, ramps and paths that service various terraces. This Monumental Staircase connects the lower path of a beautiful valley in the Region of 'Mineral'nye vody' (Mineral waters) with the top of the hill on which stands the complex of the Sanatorium. Each terrace has different furniture in stone and earth: seats, flowerbed, fountains, porches and balconies whose forms are originated by the intersection between spherical and circular shapes with the slope.<sup>7</sup> Among the forms frequently used are the *scotia* and *torus*: two of the elements of the basement of the ionic order overlapped on the 'plinth'. The combination of *scotia* and *torus* is also used to form gigantic architectural details like in the balcony, whose metallic tubular fence reproduces the profile of the section of the ionic basement, as well as to generate new objects in the proper scale, like in the case of the fountain. It must be noticed that even here the Egyptian column is present, in the porch excavated in the wall of the first terrace. If we look at the plan of this terrace we recognize still another alternation of *scotia* and *torus* in the sequence of excavated 'porch' and outstanding 'balcony'.

In the Narkomtkazprom building of 1934,



three columns of different plan are based on a *stilobate* to form a group of high-rises on a platform that hosts inner squares; a gigantic *scotia* coloured like a Russian folk dress is inserted in a sort of *propileia* to form the main hall of the complex; all the porches of the complex present the shape and proportion of the Egyptian column (the same used in miniature in the legs of the table in the interior of the House of Pioneers), while the same shape is used in a gigantic version in one of the three high-rises.

In these compositions the application of many of the rhetoric disposals studied by the 'Russian formalists' of the OPOJAZ (*Obshchestvo Izucheniia Poeticheskogo Yazyka* - Society for the Study of Poetic Language)<sup>8</sup> in literature seem to be recognisable. Following this methodology can be explained the compositional devices that generated the gathering of pure geometrical volumes of Leonidov's projects of the 1920s and of the 1930s, as well as those of many of the masters of the

avant-garde of the 1920s (like M. Ginzburg, A. Vesnin and others). The formalist principle of the *ostranienie* (the distancing effect or *Verfremdungseffekt* in German) is translated in Leonidov's architectural works by using out of scale elements, juxtaposition of purely technical objects with purely architectural forms, sliding polyrhythmic registers and formal redundancy.

By saving an 'avant-garde' methodology under ambiguous formal dress, Leonidov produced a series of experiments in the 1930s, of which the metal tubular chair is one of the most intriguing samples: a formal transition of the archetype of the chair into a static diagram of the weight of the seated human body by using the classical forms of *scotia* and *torus* as static knots.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> On this work see the recent publication in A. De Magistris, I. Korob'na, *Ivan Leonidov, 1952-1959*, Milano 2009, pp. 220-221, and see also A. Gozak, A. Leonidov, *Ivan Leonidov. The Complete works*, New York, 1988, pp. 134-135.

<sup>2</sup> On this work see the recent publication in De Magistris, Korob'na, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 228-233, and see also Gozak, Leonidov, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 155-161.

<sup>3</sup> See the model realised by Robert J. Nottrot for the exhibition *Una città possibile*.

*Architetture di Ivan Leonidov, 1926-1934*, Triennale di Milano, 1 June - 8 July 2007, published in the homonymous catalogue at pp. 178-187

<sup>4</sup> On the 'architectural ensemble' in Leonidov's works see: M. Meriggi, *La città di Leonidov tra ansambl' e montaggio*, in O. Mačel, M. Meriggi, D.W. Schmidt, J.P. Volchok, *Una città possibile. Architetture di Ivan Leonidov, 1926-1934*, Milano 2007, pp. 38-49. On the 'architectural ensemble' in Soviet culture in general see: D.S. Lichačev, *Ansampli pam-*

*jatnikov iskusstva*, Moskva 1987; J. Lotman, 'Arhitektura v kontekste kul'tury,' in: *Arhitektura i obščestvo-Architecture and society* (6) 1987, Sofia; engl. trans. *Architecture in the context of culture*.

<sup>5</sup> On the 'socio-realism' in Soviet architecture see: A. De Magistris, *Paesaggi del realismo socialista*, in A. De Magistris (ed.), URSS anni '30 - '50. *Paesaggi dell'utopia staliniana*, Mazzotta, Milano 1997, pp. 9-31.

<sup>6</sup> We call to mind that the school of the Vhutemas in Moscow in the 1920s was no less productive than that of the Bauhaus in Germany in the design of prototypes of metal tubular seats, as referred by O. Mačel, *2100 metal tubular chairs. A typology*, Rotterdam 2006, p. 244. We also call to mind that in the book by M. Ginzburg, presenting the architecture of Sanatorium NKT in Kislovodsk, a lot of models of chairs, chaise-longs and divans in tubular metal are reported as furniture

for the medical units of the complex.

<sup>7</sup> See O. Adamov, 'L'immagine - la geometria - la forma architettonica: il processo creativo di I.I. Leonidov,' and E. Barčugova, N. Ročegova, 'Analisi di una creazione dinamica: la scalinata del parco nel Sanatorio del Narkomtjažprom a Kislovodsk,' in: Mačel et al., op. cit. (note 4), pp. 78-87 and pp. 88-91.

<sup>8</sup> The OPOJAZ, whose members were V. Sklowkij, J. Tynianov, R. Jacobson, V. Propp and others, produced investigations on the field of literature, language mechanisms and thought association. The 'formalist method' had a quite well documented feedback in the 1920s in the soviet 'avant-garde' architectural group and in the Association of Contemporary Architects (OSA), in which Leonidov took part. See for instance the essay by M. Ginzburg, leader of the OSA, *Ritm v architecture of 1922*.