

# National originality of the architecture of Khreshchatyk as a unique ensemble of the period of totalitarianism

Olena Oliynyk<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>National Aviation University, Kiev, Ukraine, Kosmonavta Komarova Ave, 1, Kiev, 03680, Ukraine

**Abstract.** Khreschatyk is a page apart in the history of world architecture. While it has a number of distinct characteristics of totalitarian architecture, Khreschatyk is the only architectural ensemble of the period to combine national tradition with the exalted sentiment of Soviet architecture of the Stalin era. Also, it uniquely matched architecture and landscape. The façades has elements of Ukrainian baroque, which sets Khreschatyk apart from similar ensembles of the 1940s-1950s in other countries that mainly drew upon Neoclassicism or Modernism. While period architecture in other countries is typically marked by its grand scale and heavily accentuated civic spirit – complete with a denigration of the individual at the expense of the manifest greatness of Authority, Khreschatyk stand out for its pronounced harmony as an environment based on the careful preservation of old heritage, the skillful use of the landscape, and the introduction of traditional motifs, alongside an almost total lack of Soviet symbols. Unlike the grim grandness of totalitarian architecture in other countries, the facades of the residential buildings that line Khreschatyk emanate *joie de vivre* and admiration for the fertility of Ukrainian soil.

## 1 Introduction

The period of totalitarianism is perhaps the most dramatic not only in the history of Ukraine, but also all the countries of Eastern Europe. The tragedy experienced by the Soviet people, the physical destruction of the intellectual elite of the population, the atmosphere of constant fear and ideological pressure have affected the fact that any cultural phenomena of this period, later received a negative assessment. This primarily concerned architecture. Studies of totalitarian architecture and even today in European countries are isolated, often based not on art studies, but on political grounds. [1,2]

Yes, even in Italy, and so far, this period remains completely unexplored. In Rome, recently the funds of the former Institute of Asia and Africa were destroyed, where unique materials were collected about the Mussoliniev construction in Greece, Eritrea, Ethiopia. Consequently, not only Stalin's architecture is a symbol of tyranny, the Italian period architecture of Mussolini, too, is in the minds of Italians as a symbol of fascism, and its

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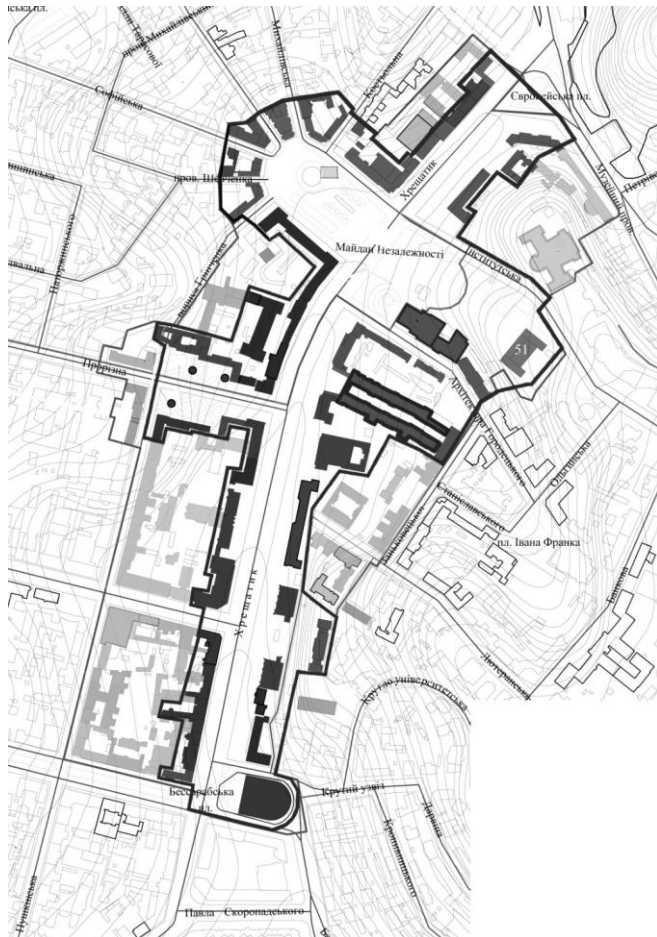
\* Corresponding author: [archiprestig@gmail.com](mailto:archiprestig@gmail.com)

research is still not prohibited, but not encouraged. Therefore, any architectural research on the architecture of this period is very relevant. [2,3]

It was at this time that majestic ensembles of the main streets of several European capitals - Minsk, Berlin, Warsaw, Kiev - were built. Most of them are built in the style of the characteristic imperial neoclassicism. Only Khreshchatyk, in contrast to the usual image of totalitarian architecture, embodies the features of Ukrainian folk architecture and the Ukrainian Baroque.

## 2 History of the formation

Khreshchatyk, the main street of Kyiv, runs along the thalweg (the line of lowest elevation) of Khreshchatyi Ravine between the Starokyivska and Pecherska hills. (Fig.1). Descending toward the street, which is located 20 to 30 meters lower than both plateaus, their terraced slopes create a multi-plane visual perception of Khreshchatyk's modern buildings. Three squares – Yevropeiska, Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) and Besarabska – were formed organically where the sloping relief recedes from the thalweg the most.



**Fig.1.** Khreshchatyk. Proposal boundaries of the street as national heritage.

In Kyiv Rus times, the fortifications of the Upper Town stretched across the slopes of Starokyivska (Old Kyiv) Hill above the ravine. Partly destroyed during Mongol attacks on

Kyiv in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> cent., they had all but disappeared by the early 19<sup>th</sup> cent. When the remnants had been cleared away, a square formed at the foot of Starokyivska Hill just next to Khreschatyk. That was the beginning of what we know as Maidan Nezalezhnosti today [4, 8]

The development of Khreschatyk got under way in the 1830s-1840s. It started from Yevropeiska Square and acquired its current shape in 1837 under the city's master plan (architects L. Shmihelsky, V. Beretti and L. Stanzani) to become the city's main thoroughfare. In the 1850-1860s, Khreschatyk was built up with mainly one- and two-floor buildings either to standard or individual designs by Kyiv-based architects A. Melensky, M. Samonov and L. Stanzani, which failed to constitute an integrated whole. [5]

The formative process was completed in the mid-1910s, when Khreschatyk turned into the city's most representative section. Multistoried buildings in historical and Art Nouveau styles (architects E. Bradtman, G. Schleifer, V. Nikolayev, F. Lidvall, L. Benois, V. Horodetsky, P. Andreyev and O. Schille) put Kyiv on a par with the best cities of Europe. The street housed the main government institutions (Kyiv was the seat of a large province in the Russian Empire) and boasted 17 jeweler's stores, 13 cinema theaters, seven hotels, seven major bank offices, a stock exchange, the Noble Assembly, and the town's best retail stores. Some of these pre-1917 Revolution buildings have survived to this day on the even side of the street and are of special value. These are the complex of bank and office buildings from the 1910s at the beginning of the street (##6-10) and some commercial apartments and hotels of the late 19<sup>th</sup> cent. (##40/1-52), all of them architectural landmarks.

The final stage of Khreschatyk's development came during the Soviet era. In 1941-1943, most of the street was destroyed. Khreschatyk was rebuilt from its war damage in the late 1940s-1950s to the project design of a team of Kyiv-based architects: A. Vlasov (team leader), A. Dobrovolsky, V. Yelizarov, B. Pryimak, O. Zavarov and O. Malynovsky. The centerpiece of their concept was to build up the even side of the street with a continuous front of administrative, commercial and civil structures and its odd side, with mostly residential buildings with stores, cafes and cinemas on the ground floor. The city's first subterranean passageways for pedestrians were built on Khreschatyk to facilitate traffic in 1961-1962. [6,7]

The competition for the reconstruction of Khreschatyk was announced back when the war was still on, in June 1944. It can be seen from the detailed terms and conditions of the competition that it Khreschatyk's ensemble was first supposed to play the role of a government seat and consist of civil structures only. It was recommended to push residential buildings deep inside the blocks. The level of the competition as well as the tasks set before the participants and their urban planning solutions were without parallel both in Ukraine and in all of Europe in the first postwar decade.

In January 1945, the results of the first round of the competition, in which all first-rank Soviet architects took part, were summed up. It was during the first round that the final concept formed in the main: to change the scale of the main street, give different treatment to the even and odd sides, ensure functional zoning, and create a pedestrian boulevard along the residential front on the odd side. As far as style was concerned, the designers still looked to Classicistic or Renaissance motifs, and only a few entrants dared use Ukrainian baroque forms. Three teams were selected to take part in the second round in 1945. Those were headed by A. Vlasov, V. Zabolotny and O. Tatsiy. However, V. Zabolotny did not participate in the further competition, so a duel of Tatsiy and Vlasov's teams ensued. The third round took place in 1947. Finally, Workshop #1 of the Kyivproekt Institute consisting of A. Vlasov, A. Dobrovolsky, V. Yelizarov, B. Pryimak, O. Zavarov and O. Malynovsky, with invited engineers I. Skachov and V. Repiakh, was commissioned to sum up and elaborate on the best designs of the competition.

However, the final master plan of Khreschatyk was not approved until 1949, and its realization became the task of Dobrovolsky, Yelizarov, Malynovsky and other Kyivans (A. Vlasov was appointed chief architect of Moscow in 1950). Their team was instrumental in implementing the best of the competition designs. Most importantly, they managed to lend the city a new dimension that befitted the capital of a large Union republic, underscore central Kyiv's unique natural landscape with the gentle double curve of the built-up area, and recall the traditions of Ukrainian baroque and folk architecture in the top embellishments and facade décor of the buildings.

At the implementation stage, the architects took account of almost all of the more interesting ideas put forth in the competition designs. In A. Vlasov's proposal, for example, Khreschatyk was treated as a "throughway street." It was at the implementation stage, too, that the green slopes of Khreschatyi Ravine were included in the composition (as was suggested by O. Tatsiy), the pedestrian lanes designed (O. Malysenko), and Ukrainian baroque motifs used (V. Zabolotny).

The imagery of Khreschatyk's architecture is based on interpretations of baroque forms and methods. As the architectural heritage of the Ukrainian baroque era was not yet studied at the time, O. Zavarov, who supervised the décor part of the project, partly used drawings and measurements of some West European (primarily Spanish and German) and Latin American architecture. For the most part, however, the architects drew upon local tradition. The resulting combination lent Khreschatyk a truly unique appearance. [6,8,10]

In the process of realization, the number of civil buildings stipulated by the competition was reduced, and the odd side of the city's main thoroughfare was built up with multi-storied residential houses. (Fig.2,3)

The original conception is based on creating a "pulsating" space, which we now perceive as a logical scenario for a street with obvious landscape distinctions rather than a fruit of the architects' imagination. The short initial stretch of the street briskly flows into the broad elongated expanse of Independence Square that crosses it in a perpendicular, making it possible to engage parts of Pecherska and Starokyivska hills complete with the several tiers of buildings going up the slopes at either end of the square. Looking in the direction of the Old Town, this majestic panorama is crowned by the gold domes of Sancta Sophia of Kyiv – a WH property. On the opposite, the odd side of Khreschatyk, the square continues into a stepped rise leading to Hotel Ukraina (formerly, Moskva) with its grandstand stairs.

After its major reconstruction in 1977, the square was renamed to October Revolution Square. Its semantic purport as the city's main square, designed for holding ceremonies, gala events and festive parades, was translated into a new spatial conception. The latter was modified in 1998, when the engineering networks were reconstructed and the entire street was revamped from Yevropeiska to Besarabska Square.

Taking a gentle turn just after the Maidan, Khreschatyk runs straight as far as the diminutive Besarabska Square. At this stretch, it acquires its unmistakable asymmetrical look. While the odd side sports a festive boulevard-like pedestrian strip all along its residential front, the opposite one is a serried row of predominantly civil and administration buildings marked by a sober linear continuity of same-height principal cornices. This contrast underpins the street's artistic conception. The architecture of the even side is marked by greater laconism and a palatial restraint. On the other side, the varied profiles of the cornices, the miniature gable fronts and pendant pillars, and the ceramic faced tiles with their ornamental motifs in relief call the rich imagery of Ukrainian embroidery to mind. In combination with the original urban-planning conception, all these elements create a distinctly Ukrainian architectural ensemble.

Another complex task was to combine new construction with the historic late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings that had survived the war. According to A. Dobrovolsky, the team aimed at creating an integral architectural composition that would look both majestic and

picturesque. The serried front of the one and the hiatuses of the other side made it possible to emphasize Kyiv's distinctive terrain. In a pioneering urban-planning technique, the pedestrian strip along the odd side united separate clusters of buildings, the hiatuses between them, and the three squares into one whole. The designers were also instrumental in seamlessly blending the triumphal scale of the project with the Romantic and ethnic motifs of the rich and variegated plastic décor as well as the visual depth of new construction on adjacent hills.

In addition to its function as the city's main thoroughfare and ceremonial public space, the visual dynamism of the combination of civil and residential buildings restored to Khreschatyk its mid-19<sup>th</sup> century scale and feel of a cozy pedestrian boulevard.

Khreschatyk is a page apart in the history of Ukrainian architecture that had defining influence on its further development. While it has a number of distinct characteristics of totalitarian architecture, Khreschatyk with its unmistakable national touch is a symbol of the country's rebirth from the tragedy of WWII and its residents and visitors' favorite public space. [9]

Khreshchatyk's new appearance had enormous influence on the development of architecture in the former Soviet Union. It still remains one of the best works of the so called totalitarian architecture. From the town planning perspective, it is an integral architectural ensemble 1200 meters long and an average of 75 meters wide, with three squares, broad sidewalks, and buildings from various periods. In my own opinion, nothing better was built in all the subsequent decades.

### 3 Comparative analysis with similar architectural ensembles

Its unique character was built into Khreschatyk's rebuilding program back at the inception stage. Designed as the result of several rounds of a competition to a clear-cut plan and within very stringent deadlines, it preserved all of the surviving buildings and the integrity of Kyiv's urban space as a whole. It also made full use of local vernacular tradition. Also, it was in Khreschatyk and integral part, Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), that the dramatic events of 2004 and 2013-2014 with their strong impact on Ukrainian (and European) history and the nation's identity took place. The distinctive features of its spatial solutions and its relationship with the relief of downtown Kiev have played a central role in the organizing of mass rallies and the formation of the Ukrainian national identity.

Khreschatyk is the only architectural ensemble of the period to combine national tradition with the exalted sentiment of Soviet architecture of the Stalin era. Also, it uniquely matched architecture and landscape. The façades has elements of Ukrainian baroque, which sets Khreschatyk apart from similar ensembles of the 1940s-1950s in other countries that mainly drew upon Neoclassicism or Modernism. Khreschatyk has a unity of the imposing monumentality of proportion that befits a state capital, the lyrical intimacy of its unique terrain, the bright decorative character of Ukrainian baroque, and the comfort of a well-thought-out human environment.

While period architecture in other countries is typically marked by its grand scale and heavily accentuated civic spirit – complete with a denigration of the individual at the expense of the manifest greatness of Authority, Khreschatyk stand out for its pronounced harmony as an environment based on the careful preservation of old heritage, the skillful use of the landscape, and the introduction of traditional motifs, among them flowers, fruits, rosettes, and *rocaille*, alongside an almost total lack of Soviet symbols. Unlike the grim grandness of totalitarian architecture in other countries, the facades of the residential buildings that line Khreschatyk emanate *joie de vivre* and admiration for the fertility of Ukrainian soil. [6]

Another distinctive aspect of the Khreschatyk project is that it was designed for a territory to be rebuilt from war damage rather than a vacant space. Leaning on the landscape forms that were definitive for the historic center of Kyiv, it incorporated surviving buildings (which



were painstakingly restored). The architectural and artistic treatment was different for the odd and the even part of the street, which became the key aspect of the composition.

Furthermore, landscape was not only factored in but rather given priority. Situated in a valley between two picturesque hills, Khreschatyk has numerous spatial ties to surrounding built-up areas. This can be seen from the completions of the streets connecting it to the Upper Town, the dominant high-rises on the odd side, the asymmetrical composition of the odd and even sides, the fluid turn of the street as it goes with the relief, and the hiatuses and arched driveways that create additional visual connections.

The architectural décor continues the local vernacular tradition and the distinctive Ukrainian baroque style. Colorful mosaic compositions decorating the vaults of the archways and the interiors of the Khreschatyk subway station (1960) draw upon the traditions of Mykhailo Boychuk's school of monumental art – an original if short-lived phenomenon which was almost completely eliminated in the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. All these features of Khreschatyk's appearance attest to an upsurge of the national spirit and the designers' intent to revive an artistic tradition in which monumental art and façade decoration held a central place. Specialized ceramic workshops were set up for the manufacture of tiles, ornaments and sculptural compositions at the experimental factory of the Ukrainian Academy of Architecture. Summing up, it can be said that the synthesis of arts used in the reconstruction of Khreschatyk both performed political tasks and revived national traditions in the décor, color scheme and plastic artworks of its buildings.

This interest in artistic form and intent to rethink national artistic tradition in the country's main street was a manifestation of ideological resistance and national awakening.

The ideas built into the reconstruction of Khreschatyk are topical even today. This project became a one-of-a-kind case of transforming a provincial town into a European capital that was not unlike Paris or Vienna in places. The scale and character of the street's architecture reflect the intuition and skill with which proportions needed for the city's central thoroughfare were defined and realized without detriment to the intimate, humane, and almost lyrical character this ancient city has always possessed.



**Fig.2.** Khreshchatyk. Even-side elevations of revival buildings



**Fig.3.** Khreshchatyk. Odd-side elevations



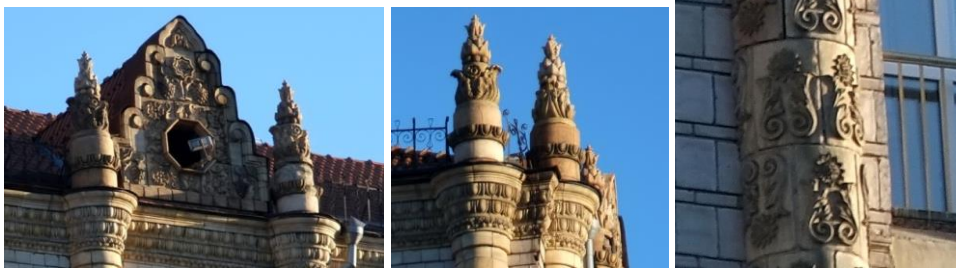
**Fig.4.** Khreshchatyk. Even-side elevations



**Fig.5.** Maidan Nezalezhnosti



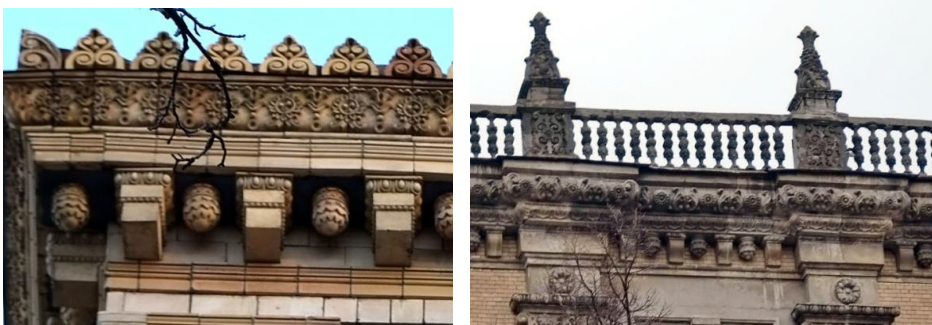
**Fig.6.** Odd-number Side Khreshchatyk. General view.



**Fig.7.** Khreshchatyk. Symbols of Ukrainian baroque in architecture of facades. (Build. 13, Khreshchatyk)



**Fig.8.** Symbols of Ukrainian baroque in architecture of facades. (15, and 25, Khreshchatyk)

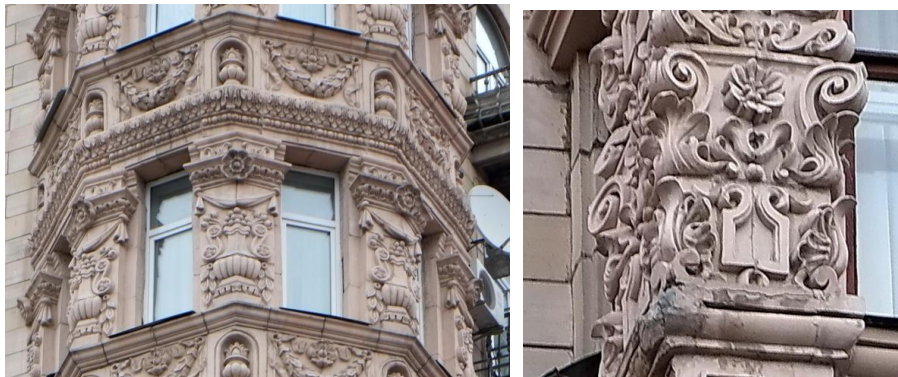


**Fig.9.** Architectural décor on facades. (30/1, Khreshchatyk 30/1 and 6, Prorizna)

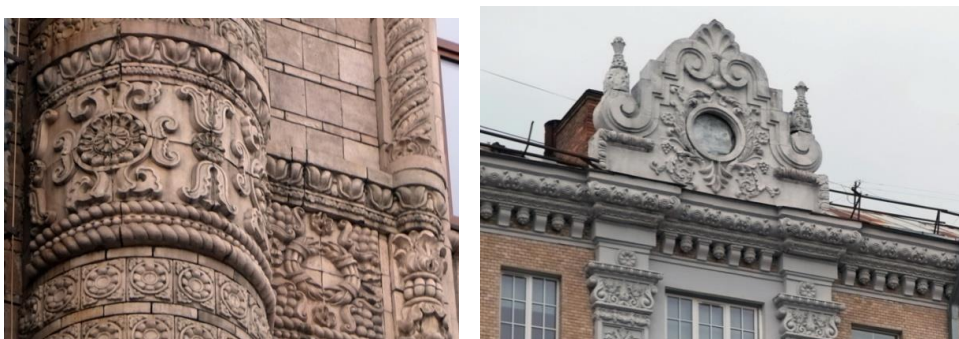




**Fig.10.** Architectural décor on facades. (30/1, Khreshchatyk)



**Fig.11.** Architectural décor on facades. (27, Khreshchatyk 29, Khreshchatyk)



**Fig.12.** Architectural décor on facades (30/1, Khreshchatyk and 8, Prorizna)



**Fig.13.** Symbols of Ukrainian folk art in architecture of facades. (10, Prorizna)



**Fig.13.** Symbols of Ukrainian folk art in architecture of facades. (27, Khreshchatik)





**Fig.14.** Mosaics in interior of metro station “Khreshchatik”



**Fig.15.** View of Khreshchatyk from the side of Khmelnitsky (former Lenin) street/ 1950<sup>th</sup>. Photo by G. Ugrinovich



**Fig.16.** Spatial ties to surrounding built-up areas. (21-23, Khreshchatyk)



**Fig.17.** The arched driveways that create additional visual connections (24-26, Khreshchatyk)

#### **4 Characteristic features of Khreshchatyk architecture**

- Khreshchatyk is an integral contemporary urban planning ensemble throughout its 1,200 m length
- Built to the winning design of Europe's first and only reconstruction competition held when WWII was still on (1944)
- Odd and even sides each has its own design reflecting unique landscape situation
- City planning methods that organically continue the scenery
- Spatial interactions with existing relief and urban structure – high top of city planning
- Incorporation of surviving buildings in the ensemble and their restoration
- The express use of elements of Ukrainian baroque and traditional art to underscore the national identity



## 5 Conclusions

Khreshchatyk street is an unique town-planning structure, both from the view of the general planning and space-spatial solution, as well as from the view of the architecture of buildings and small architectural forms. A feature of Khreshchatyk, which distinguishes it from other ensembles "Totalitarian architecture", is the priority of the national component. Another distinctive aspect of the Khreshchatyk project is that it was designed for a territory to be rebuilt from war damage rather than a vacant space. Leaning on the landscape forms that were definitive for the historic center of Kyiv, it incorporated surviving buildings (which were painstakingly restored).

The ideas built into the reconstruction of Khreshchatyk are topical even today. This project became a one-of-a-kind case of transforming a provincial town into a European capital that was not unlike Paris or Vienna in places. The scale and character of the street's architecture reflect the intuition and skill with which proportions needed for the city's central thoroughfare were defined and realized without detriment to the intimate, humane, and almost lyrical character this ancient city has always possessed.

Summing up, it can be said that the synthesis of arts used in the reconstruction of Khreshchatyk both performed political tasks and revived national traditions in the décor, color scheme and plastic artworks of its buildings. This interest in artistic form and intent to rethink national artistic tradition in the country's main street was a manifestation of ideological resistance and national awakening.

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