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Oscar Nemon's *Center of Universal Ethics* Project: Modernist Tendencies and Russian Constructivism

Centar univerzalne etike Oskara Nemon: modernističke tendencije i ruski konstruktivizam

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Oscar Nemon's *Center of Universal Ethics* project, a visionary but unrealized endeavor within his utopian movement advocating for universal ethics. Drawing heavily from interwar modernist and avant-garde architecture, particularly Russian constructivism, the design resonates with Konstantin Melnikov's architectural oeuvre. Through comparative analysis, the paper proposes hypotheses regarding the project's origins and its relationship with Melnikov's innovative architectural concepts.

KEYWORDS

Oscar Nemon, modernism, architecture, sculpture, Konstantin Melnikov, constructivism, *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*

APSTRAKT

Rad se bavi analizom projekta *Centra univerzalne etike*, neostvarenim djelom kipara Oscara Nemon, zamišljenim kao središnje arhitektonsko zdanje autorova utopijskog pokreta univerzalne etike. Njegovo se idejno rješenje formalno-stilski oslanja na predložke suvremene modernističke i avangardne međuratne arhitekture, prvenstveno u kontekstu ruskog konstruktivizma. Temeljem komparativne analize s projektima ruskoga arhitekta Konstantina Meljnikova, iznosi se hipoteza o polazištima za Nemonov projekt Centra univerzalne etike.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

Oscar Nemon, modernizam, arhitektura, skulptura, Konstantin Meljnikov, konstruktivizam, *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*

Introduction

From Étienne-Louis Boullée and Claude Nicolas Ledoux to Sant'Elia, Le Corbusier, Bruno Taut, Erich Mendelsohn, Konstantin Melnikov and the Russian constructivists, the various examples of visionary aspirations and attempts by artists – primarily architects – in the creation of ideal architectural and urban concepts, as well as the utopian communities related with them, have remained solely on paper. Nemon's *Center of Universal Ethics* project presents a similar scenario. This paper serves as both a continuation and a supplement to the previously published paper, which explored Nemon's theoretical framework known as *The System of Universal Ethics*.¹ In this study, Nemon's *Center of Universal Ethics* will be examined within the context of modernist tendencies and avant-garde models in architecture and sculpture between the two world wars, with a primary focus on constructivist architectural examples from the Russian avant-garde. Through a comparative analysis with the works of the Russian architect Konstantin Melnikov, this paper aims to propose a hypothesis regarding the origins of Nemon's *Center of Universal Ethics* project.

The utopian vision of Nemon's *System of Universal Ethics*

During the period spanning from approximately 1930 until the mid-1940s, Oscar Nemon² developed and publicly presented his utopian concept of the *System of Universal Ethics*. This vision comprised two main components: a conceptual-theoretical aspect, grounded in lofty ethical principles of pacifism and humanism, drawing from Jewish ethics and moral philosophy. This aspect aimed to establish the framework for a new school of thought and a new social movement, as well as an ideal social community.³ The second component was more tangible – a “concrete” manifestation centered around a bold

modernist architectural structure envisioned as the focal point of this movement: the *Center (or Temple) of Universal Ethics*.

Nemon's concept was first introduced to the public in May 1933 through coverage in two Belgian daily newspapers. These publications featured photographs showcasing the earliest iteration of the project idea – the model of the *Temple of Universal Ethics* – accompanied by brief descriptions. An article in the Brussels newspaper *La Dernière Heure* (Fig. 1) included a photograph of Oscar Nemon alongside the temple model, with a short note:

“We will build the *Temple of Ethics* in Palestine for reconciling the nations. Representatives of all parties and religions will unite in order to find a common spiritual link despite everything that separates them. Right: Mr O. Nemon, conceptual creator of the *Temple*. Left: the *Temple* itself, which will be 100 meters high and 150 meters long. The three triangular masses represent the three branches of humanity that came from Shem, Ham and Japheth”.⁴

In the other newspaper article, entitled *Le Temple de l'Ethique*, it was reported:

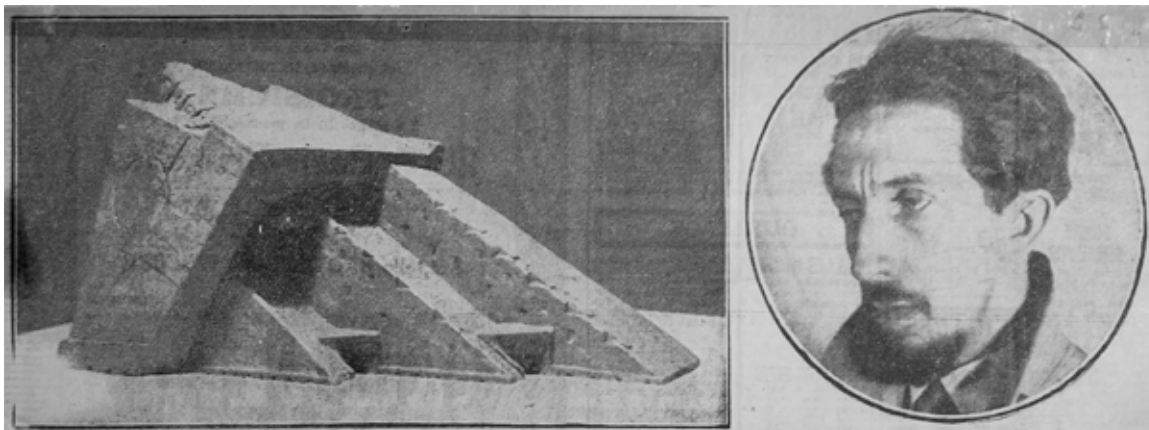
“Shown is a model of the *Temple of Ethics*, which a certain number of people want to build in Jerusalem. It is a rather fantastic work, in the spirit of international conciliation. The construction of the edifice itself is symbolic; its three triangular masses represent the three branches of humanity: Shem, Ham and Japheth”.⁵

The ideas and principles of the *System of Universal Ethics* were published in their entirety by Nemon at the end of 1938 in England, in a self-published printed edition titled *Towards Moral Conviction*. In this publication, he advocated the construction of a *Center of Universal Ethics* as a central meeting place and a union of all nations and beliefs, as well as a primary facility for documenting all forms of intellectual research.

1

La Dernière Heure, Brussels, 27 May 1933, paper clipping
The Henry Moore Institute Archive, Papers of Oscar Nemon, Collection Reference: 2004.21 (further: HMIA, PON, 2004.21), Box 4

La Dernière Heure, Bruxelles, 27. svibnja 1933., novinski izrezak
Arhiv Instituta Henry Moore u Leedsu, fond: Papers of Oscar Nemon, br. 2004.21 (dalje: HMIA, PON, 2004.21), kutija 4



2

Oscar Nemon,
Model of the
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HMIA, PON,
2004.21, Box
2, Temple of
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Oscar Nemon,
Model centra
univerzalne
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HMIA, PON,
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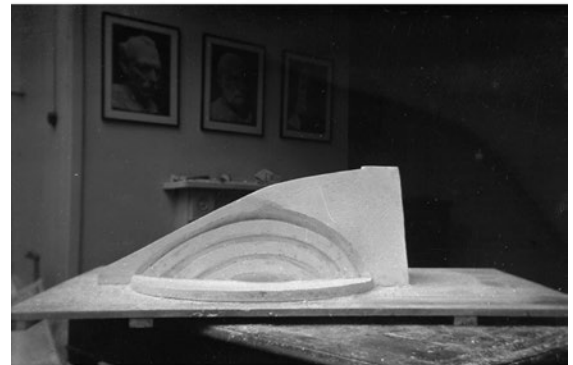
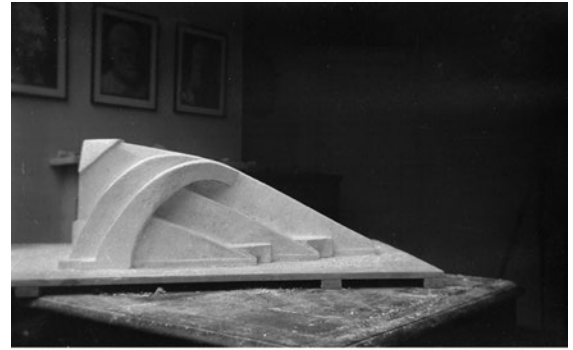
Nemon deviated from his original plan to locate the *Temple of Universal Ethics* in Palestine, instead envisioning its construction in England. Furthermore, he altered the terminology, replacing the term “temple” – which carried religious connotations directly linked to Judaism – with the neutral term “center”, aligning more closely with the universalism of his ethical system.⁶

Center of Universal Ethics: Formal and Stylistic Analysis

The architectural conceptualization of the *Center of Universal Ethics* draws heavily on the formal and stylistic elements of contemporary modernist and avant-garde architecture. It is particularly influenced by the constructivist architectural models and trends of the time.

However, we can only discuss the stylistic and morphological characteristics of the *Center of Universal Ethics* based on the preserved documentation since Nemon's project was never realized. It remains unclear whether Nemon commissioned architectural drawings for the *Center*, but it is likely that he did not, as he never elaborated on its individual architectural components and details. Today, we only have drawings, sketches, and photographic documentation of various versions of the project idea presented by models made of clay and plaster.⁷ Nemon primarily worked on these models in Brussels from 1932⁸ to 1938. He publicly released two versions: the initial reproductions appeared in the aforementioned Belgian newspapers in 1933, while the model of the final version was featured in the pamphlet *Towards Moral Conviction* in England in 1938. Nemon photographed the key developmental phases of the project, including the final version of the model from various angles and under different lighting conditions. These photographs provide valuable insight into the design characteristics of the envisioned structure. Unfortunately, the model itself has not been preserved.

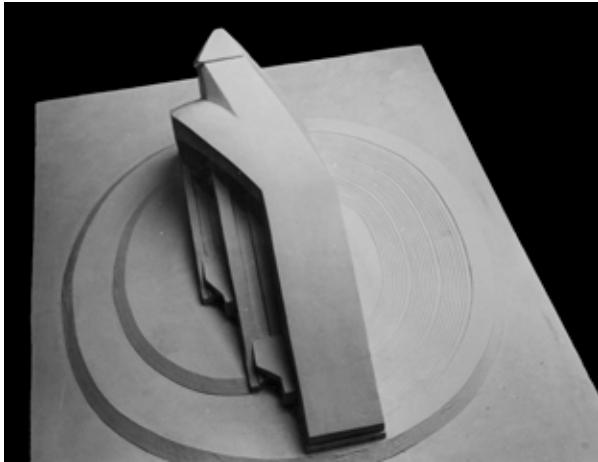
The earliest design of the *Center of Universal Ethics*, as documented by photographs of a clay model with rough, unfinished surfaces, exhibits simple and robust stereometry (Fig. 1). The fundamental motif of the composition, which remained consistent in later variations, consists of three massive volumes with triangular outlines – three three-sided prisms – arranged according to the principle of subordination. The sloping surfaces of the front two prisms accommodate flights of stairs, with roofed entrances located on the ground floor. All three volumes converge at their upper parts into a fourth volume, an irregularly shaped



prismatic body divided into multiple facets at the top. This fourth volume intersects them and arches over the staircase ramps.

In the subsequent phase of the project's development, modifications of the upper part of the composition resulted in a model featuring a triple arch motif that covers the three three-sided prisms (in the final version, the arch once again becomes single). The entire composition became more elongated, and compared to the original, the form became refined with rounded surfaces, taking on an elegant aerodynamic shape (Fig. 2).

Looking at the floorplan, the elongated main axis of the main volume, dominant in both height and width, is broken at an obtuse angle, bifurcating it into two arms – one forms the rounded volume of the side façade that arches and intersects the two smaller prisms of the flights of stairs, whilst the other, like a wedge, extends out into the space (Fig. 3).



The entire volume of the building is placed on a circular substructure with a staircase, which enhances its imposing presence. The circular base is bisected by the body of the edifice into two distinct halves: one half ascends towards the building with a double staircase, while the other half descends towards it with a semicircular staircase. The combination of the circle (with its various rhythmic concentric semicircles of the staircase) and the longitudinal structures within it (accentuated by the diagonals of the broken axis) creates a dynamic composition visible in the floor plan (Fig. 3).

The other longitudinal side of the façade features a motif of superimposed arches, with the lower and smallest one forming an apsidal space in the floor area. The repetition of these arches mirrors the movement of the semicircles of the staircases. Taking cues from ancient theater prototypes, the gently sloping staircase gracefully descends, guiding towards a semicircular space reminiscent of an orchestra, situated in front of the central section of the structure (Fig. 4). This area was undoubtedly envisaged as a space for public gatherings, speeches, and performances. On the opposite, main side of the façade, the rhythm of the staircase differs; here, the staircase ascends towards the edifice in two separate sets of semicircular steps. Only a few details of the envisaged building were elaborated on the models: the window openings arranged in two rows, and the accentuated plastic prismatic parts covering the entrances in front of the staircase ramps.

The latest photographically documented version exhibits the clean lines of a sophisticated and highly complex composition characterized by asymmetrical balance, broken lines, diagonals, and a dynamic articulation of volumes and surfaces (Figs. 5–7). By combining refined elements of form with an inventive

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4

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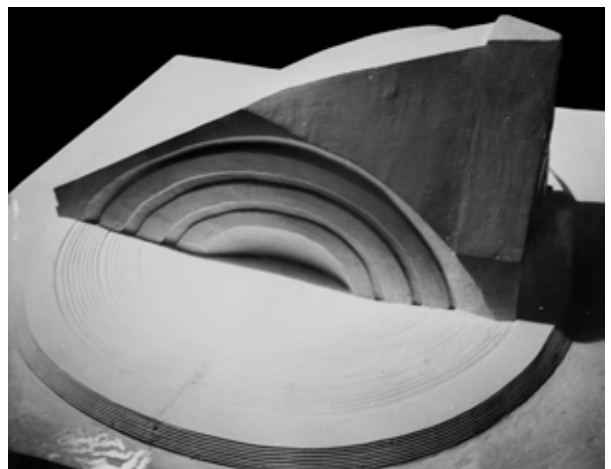
dynamic arrangement of compositional parts, Nemon conceived a structure that, with its conceptual design and form, rivaled the exemplary modernist designs of interwar European architecture.

It should be noted that Nemon's structure was essentially conceived with a sculptural mindset, and when considering the characteristics of its expressive form, it is impossible to avoid associations with sculptural design. Nemon thought exclusively as a sculptor, concentrating primarily on the plastic properties of the envisaged building. If we observe the model of the *Center of Universal Ethics* as a sculptural form, it bears resemblance to a constructivist sculpture or part of a machine – a product of a mechanized constructivist utopia enamored with the myth of technology and progressive industrial culture.

In his concise history of modern sculpture, Herbert Read examines constructivism, particularly the theoretical and artistic contributions of Naum Gabo. Read highlights how the standards of constructivist art, as established by Gabo, align with the ideals and standards of modern architecture set forth by Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Aalto, and Le Corbusier.⁹ Through a rhetorical question, Read prompts consideration: "Must we conclude that Constructivist sculpture is a proto-typical or ideal form of architecture, with no aesthetic justification as a separate art?"¹⁰ This question directs attention to the *Center of Universal Ethics* as a manifestation of the interconnected relationship between modernist architecture and sculpture.

Konstantin Melnikov's projects as a model and starting point for Nemon's idea

During his period of activity in Brussels (from 1925 to 1936), when he achieved affirmation as a portrait sculptor, Nemon was at the same time in direct contact with European modernist tendencies. He



experimented with post-cubist geometric stylization and constructivism, which was important for the genesis of the artistic form of his *Center of Universal Ethics*.¹¹ Without doubt, he was influenced by the progressive ideas of contemporary architects, from the artists gathered around the Belgian group and the magazine *7 Arts* to the ubiquitous Le Corbusier, or the Russian architect Konstantin S. Melnikov (1890–1974). The reason for the special emphasis on Melnikov, who in 1933 – the same year that Nemon published his project – was declared one of the 12 greatest contemporary architects at the international triennial in Milan,¹² has its own justification. Specifically, Melnikov was particularly highlighted by Nemon himself in his memoirs. These memoirs reveal Nemon's fascination with the most famous work of that architect – the exhibition pavilion of the Soviet Union erected at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in 1925 in Paris – a masterpiece of inter-war avant-garde architecture, which Nemon viewed during a visit to the Paris exhibition and which left a strong impression on him.¹³ However, there are additional reasons for highlighting this particular architect in the context of Nemon's spatial-plastic research, and this will be shown by a comparative analysis of Melnikov's works with Nemon's *Center of Universal Ethics*. The references to Melnikov's architecture are very clear and are barely accidental or random, so it can be hypothetically assumed that the projects of this architect were in indeed the starting point for Nemon's *Center of Universal Ethics*.

The Soviet pavilion at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* (Paris, 1925)

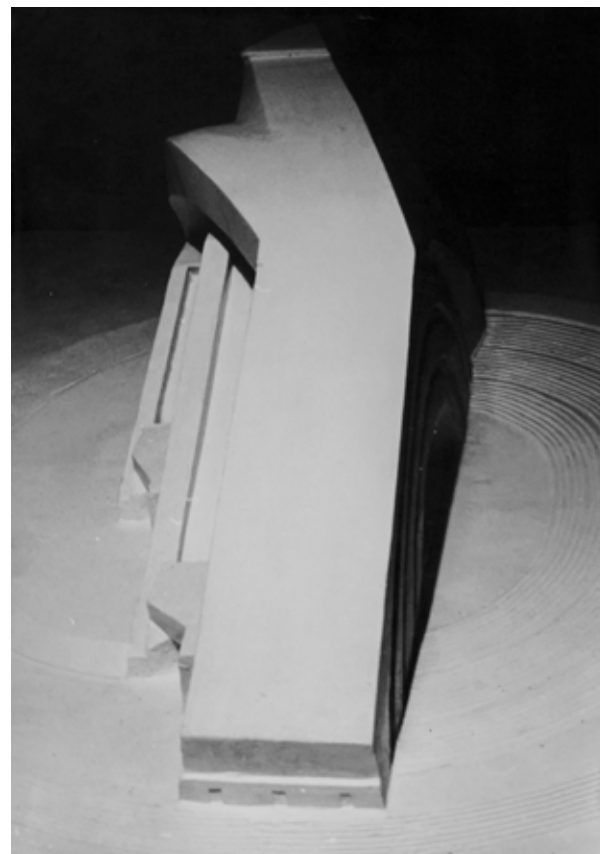
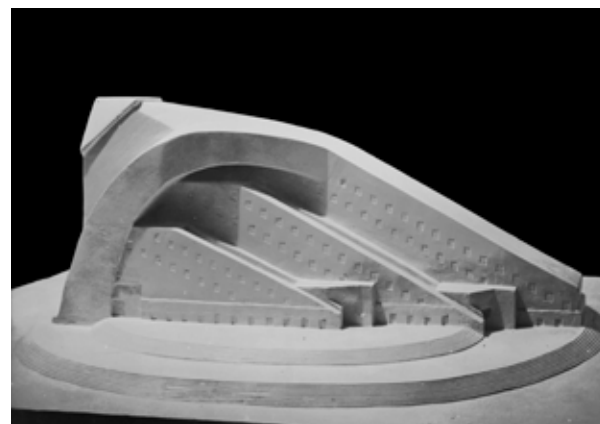
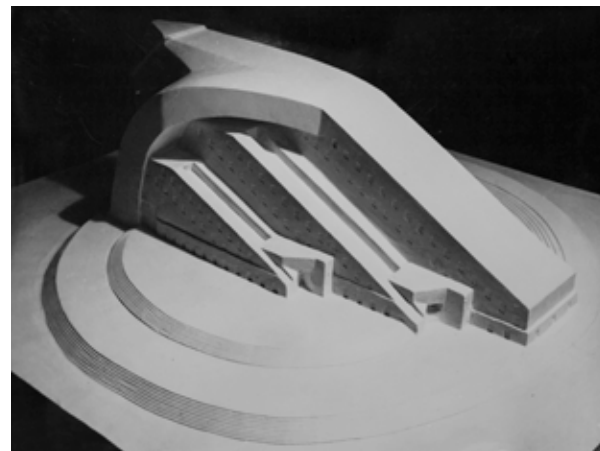
Melnikov's belief that "architecture is a dramatic endeavor that arouses feelings"¹⁴ is corroborated by Nemon's first impression of the Soviet Pavilion in Paris in 1925. This encounter left a profound impact on the young Nemon, who found himself at the heart of events in the European art scene, experiencing a wholly new and different world of contemporary art. This pivotal moment in Nemon's artistic journey, sparked by the architecture and content of the Soviet avant-garde exhibition pavilion, had far-reaching consequences for his subsequent creative development. The influence of constructivism as a formative style and Melnikov's architecture as the primary model shaped Nemon's understanding of modernity and the stylistic-morphological possibilities, encompassing the spatial-plastic values of contemporary art. Nemon directly experienced these influences at

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their source, precisely when the work of the Russian architect was being discovered and acknowledged by Europe and the entire Western world.

The exhibits themselves, as part of the presented showcase of the Soviet Union, stood out for their style and innovation, predominantly executed “in the same avant-garde, politically engaged style as the architecture of the pavilion itself”.¹⁵ Displayed were the works of the most daring artists, with “the most radical artistic trends represented, and the art of constructivism dominated”.¹⁶ It's crucial to emphasize that Nemon fully absorbed the Russian theorem – he was influenced not only by Melnikov's pavilion but also by examples of all the media of contemporary Russian art. Nemon himself highlights this in his memoirs, where he openly expresses his fascination with the Russian example in 1925, a sentiment that remained undiminished even decades later when he penned his memoirs.¹⁷

However, it is important to note that the most representative and significant exhibition of contemporary Soviet art was not housed within the national pavilion, as stated by F. Starr and C. Gray,¹⁸ but rather within the Grand Palais des Beaux-Arts, where the USSR occupied approximately 500 m² of space. On the upper floor of the Palais d'Antin, visitors could view a model of Tatlin's famous *Monument to the Third International*, architectural plans by A. A. Vesnin and K. Melnikov, photomontages and drawings for theatre costumes by A. M. Rodchenko, prints by D. Sterenberg, and sculptures by Joseph Chaikov – all of which are documented by photographs of the exhibition display as well as the exhibition's catalogue. Within the Soviet pavilion itself, there was an exhibition of folk art representing all the peoples of the Soviet Union, a display of publications by the leading Soviet publishing house *Gosizdat*, and an exhibition by the main Soviet trade agency *Gostorg*.¹⁹ The Soviet pavilion was conveniently located right next to the Grand Palais.²⁰

The symbolism of simple geometric shapes

As Frederick Starr, the author of an extensive monograph about Konstantin Melnikov, points out – “Melnikov was preoccupied with the task of identifying in the hermetic vocabulary of abstract form a symbolic system from which could be fashioned a modern *architecture parlante*, capable of communicating to the Parisian public that buoyancy and optimism which he found in contemporary Soviet culture”.²¹ The same sentiment can also be applied to the symbolic elaboration of the ideas embodied in Oscar Nemon's *Center of Universal Ethics*. Additionally, in one of his



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Konstantin Melnikov, Rusakov Club, Moscow, 1927 – 1928
copyright William Craft Brumfield, 1980, National Gallery of Art Washington

Konstantin Melnikov, Rusakov klub, Moskva, 1927. – 1928.

Foto: William Craft Brumfield, 1980. National Gallery of Art Washington

unpublished texts, Nemon interprets the symbolism of the architectural forms of the *Center of Universal Ethics*, explaining the symbolic role of the motif of three connected triangles and the architectural motif of the arch that connects them:

“The edifice destined as the home of the *Universal Center of Ethics* will symbolize the union of the three branches of humanity – white, yellow and black – on the aesthetic plane. They are united by an arc, dedicated to all the great minds of humanity, supporting the common effort of these three great branches who, rooted in the earth soar towards the sky in protest against the abasement of man and all the insults that he is forced to undergo”.²²

The symbolic significance of the edifice is thus rooted in the principles of *Universal Ethics* as defined by Nemon in his theoretical works. He articulated these principles in their purest form, employing ultimate abstraction to convey their essence.

The motif of a triangle or trapezoid with its distinct dynamic properties, along with the motif of a dominant diagonal axis broken at an acute or obtuse angle, is emblematic of constructivist architecture and visual art. This motif is pervasive throughout various constructivist works: from the iconic propaganda poster of the Soviet revolution *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (El Lissitzky, 1919), to Tatlin's project for the *Monument to the Third International* (from 1919 to 1920), El Lissitzky's design for Lenin's tribune (1924), and Melnikov's architectural designs, including his *Soviet Pavilion* at the 1925 Paris exhibition. Melnikov's fascination with the most dynamic and symbolically rich forms of triangles and diagonals (later cylinders)²³ was the driving force behind his architectural ideas and designs. However, the symbolism of simple

9

Konstantin Melnikov, Project for the MOSPS theatre, 1931. The State Schusev Museum of Architecture collection, Moscow (negative, B&W film)

Konstantin Melnikov, Projektne skice za Kazališni kompleks (MOSPS teatar), 1931.

Zbirka Državnog muzeja arhitekture Schusev, Moskva (negativ, C/B film)

geometrical shapes was also characteristic of the language of contemporary Soviet architecture since the early post-revolutionary years.²⁴

The Soviet pavilion served as a medium for communicating the ideological messages of the newly established regime through its architectural forms.²⁵ In his memoirs, Nemon vividly portrayed the enthusiasm shared equally by the creator of the Soviet pavilion and its producers, the Soviet socialist government.²⁶ The overarching ideological aim of Russian constructivism was the socialization of art, where “the artist became a responsible member of the social community and a co-creator of everyday contemporary life”.²⁷ Architects were also actively engaged in the concepts and initiatives of the Soviet societal and cultural transformation, serving as “bearers of many of the most utopian hopes of the earlier phases of that Revolution”.²⁸ This ideological theme of social responsibility of the artists resonated with Nemon’s own ideals, which he endeavored to actualize through his *System* and *Center of Universal Ethics*. Similar to the Russian example, Nemon, through his utopian vision, sought to effect change in the world through his architectural endeavors.

Other comparative projects by Melnikov

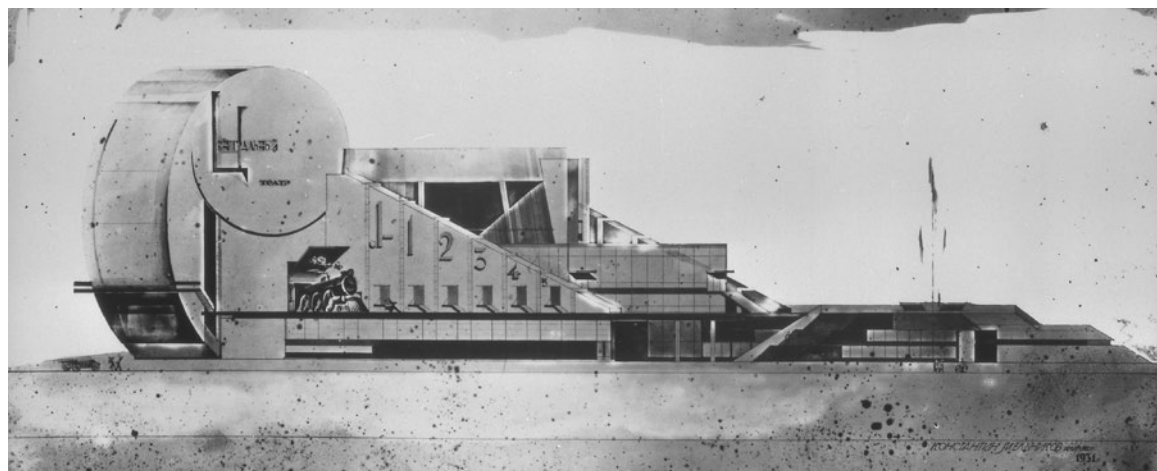
For Oscar Nemon Konstantin Melnikov’s Soviet pavilion was one of the key sources of inspiration. Although it was not a direct model for the *Center of Universal Ethics*, certain similarities are visible in both projects – primarily, this refers to the motif of the diagonal extension of the building’s volume upwards, which the diagonal of the staircase follows. There are, nevertheless, other examples in Konstantin Melnikov’s opus that are comparable to Nemon’s project.

The earliest of them is the *Rusakov Workers’ Club*, built in Moscow from 1927 to 1928. Its prismatic volume

(Fig. 8) with asymmetrically cut surfaces is very similar to one part of Nemon’s *Center of Universal Ethics* project – specifically, its side façade with a volume that protrudes into space like a wedge. Professional journals of the day compared Melnikov’s club design with a drawing of a factory by Erich Mendelsohn from 1914, and Melnikov indeed might have drawn inspiration from the aesthetics of Expressionist architecture.²⁹ The emphasized rear volume of Nemon’s *Center* exhibits some similarities to both Melnikov’s and Mendelsohn’s designs.

The composition of the *Rusakov Club* is notably characterized by a diagonal axis, particularly evident in its rising longitudinal façade – a motif echoed in Nemon’s *Center of Universal Ethics*. Melnikov frequently employs diagonally oriented architectural elements to dynamically articulate the main volume of his architecture, often incorporating staircase ramps with closed railings – a motif also utilized by Nemon. This motif is evident not only in the *Rusakov Club* but also in the *Svoboda Factory Club* (1928) by Konstantin Melnikov,³⁰ which features two staircase ramps. Additionally, the dominant motif of the flight of stairs was incorporated into the composition of the Soviet pavilion itself at the Paris exhibition in 1925.

Nemon’s *Center of Universal Ethics* shows the greatest similarity with Melnikov’s sketches for a theatre complex (*MOSPS Theatre*)³¹ from 1931 (Fig. 9), which were created just one year before the first draft of Nemon’s project. The diagonal orientation of the side façade of the *MOSPS Theatre* in the form of a three-sided prism ascending towards the segmentally completed volume, bears a striking resemblance to Nemon’s design. The *MOSPS Theatre* was envisioned as “a proletarian temple in which the emerging society would be celebrated”, with the public tender for its construction being “only one of several held during the First Five-Year Plan





to elicit proposals for great auditoriums in which large theatrical spectacles and meetings could be held".³² Similarly, Nemon planned architecture for large auditoriums and large gatherings, aspiring for it to serve as a central point for social transformation. In his memoirs, he recounted his youthful fascination with the ideals of the Russian Revolution, only to reflect later that the ideals of a decade and a half ago seemed to have lost their way, as he wrote about the Soviet pavilion at the 1937 Paris exhibition.³³

The concept of architecture serving as hub for communal gatherings with ideological significance is further exemplified in Melnikov's plans for the *Palace of the Soviets* (1932), which continue the idea of diagonal extension by ascending upwards, incorporating a combination of a three-sided pyramidal volume with the segment of an arch covering it (Fig. 10).

The second variant of the drawing for the *Palace of Culture* in Tashkent (1933) by Konstantin Melnikov contains a distinctive motif of three superpositioned staircase ramps that retract step-like towards the

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Konstantin Melnikov, Project for the Palace of Soviets, 1932. The State Schusev Museum of Architecture collection, Moscow (negative, B&W film)

Konstantin Melnikov, Projektne skice za Palaču Sovjeta, 1932.

Zbirka Državnog muzeja arhitekture Schusev, Moskva (negativ, C/B film)

11

Konstantin Melnikov, Project for the Parking garage for Intourist, 1934.

Melnikov House Archive, Moscow (negative, B&W film)

Konstantin Melnikov, Nacrt za garažu za parkiranje Intourist, 1934.

Arhiv Muzeja Melnikov, Moskva (negativ, C/B film)



main mass, the corner of which ends in a circle – very similar to the composition of the *MOSPS Theatre*, or to Nemon's *Center of Universal Ethics*.

The motif of a diagonally cut façade that ends segmentally at the top also appears in the design for the *Intourist Garage* in Moscow (1934) (Fig. 11). Here, Melnikov revisits his earlier interest in imbuing architecture with a sense of dynamism and movement. The breaking of the rectangular main façade with prominent diagonals recalls numerous projects from the 1920s. It was Melnikov's last project in Moscow.³⁴ Finally, Melnikov's design of the *Narkomtjažprom* building from 1934 was also defined by the impressive motif of two gigantic staircase ramps with prominent diagonals (Fig. 12). These stairways were also intended to incorporate escalators. The question is – did Oscar Nemon also envision his *Center of Universal Ethics* with an escalator mechanism, as Jon Wood claims?³⁵ There is no confirmation of this in the available archival documentation.

Soviet workers' clubs and Nemon's project: Ideological and socio-cultural function

The comparison of Nemon's project with Melnikov's Moscow Workers' Clubs surpasses solely formal similarities; rather, it highlights their conceptual alignment, as both projects hold significant ideological significance.³⁶ The Soviet workers' clubs from the 1920s and 1930s were conceived as pivotal hubs of the new collectivity – their political and socio-cultural function was placed at the service of the proletariat as new forces of Soviet society. The architecture of Soviet workers' clubs as "social condensers" embodied a utopian projection of the future through experimental, avant-garde art forms ushering in a new architectural paradigm.³⁷ Similarly, Nemon's architectural composition, particularly the inclusion of an auditorium as an

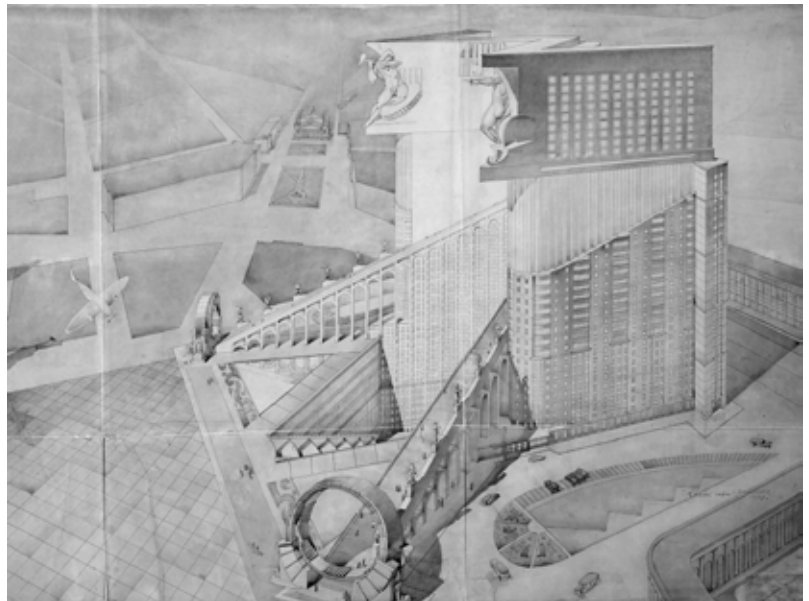
integral element, resonates with the concept of the auditorium as a focal space for communal gatherings and performances – a key spatial unit that made up the core of every Soviet workers' club.³⁸ Moreover, Nemon's idea of situating the auditorium externally, thereby integrating the building with its urban surroundings, reinforces the symbolic notion of openness, inclusivity, and connectivity – key tenets of the envisioned utopian social order.

At that time, Soviet workers' clubs were often discussed in articles and books both in the Soviet Union and abroad. Nemon could have been familiar with examples from these publications, which were available a few years before he announced his project in 1933, showcasing the new type of contemporary Soviet architecture.³⁹

The avant-garde idea of designing a building that would have a new social function in the early Soviet post-revolutionary years predates the realization of the Soviet workers' clubs itself. Nemon's project may have been influenced by another Russian avant-garde example predating Melnikov's projects: the idea of international brotherhood and friendly connections among people came to life, as an experiment, in 1919 through conceptual designs of "Sinskulptarkh" for a building that was named *Temple of Communion Between Nations*. This grandiose structure was envisioned as a "platform for events or as an open-air court for large meetings".⁴⁰ Besides the apparent coincidence in the essential terms within the building's title and its purpose, amongst these experimental projects of "Sinskulptarkh" or "Zhivskulptarkh", which were inspired by cubism and cubo-futurism, there is one with which Nemon's project shows a particular compositional and formal similarity: that of Nikolai Ladovsky. This resemblance is evident in the diagonal extension of the main volume and the parallel staircase ramp, as well as the use of rounded elements of the concha-shaped composition and rows of square window openings on the façade's flat surface.

Abstract vs figurative

While Oscar Nemon established himself as a portraitist and sculptor working within the traditional, representational line of mimetic art and realistic design, he did not incorporate the human figure in design of the *Center of Universal Ethics*. This deliberate choice allowed him to avoid the risk of employing clichéd or simplistic symbolic effects associated with humanism and interpersonal connection. His envisioned building, intended as both a tangible and symbolic hub for the promotion of universal ethics, thus took a departure



12

Konstantin Melnikov,
Project for the
Narkomtiazhprom,
1934.

The State Schusev
Museum of
Architecture
collection, Moscow
(pencil, Indian ink
on paper)

Konstantin Melnikov,
Nacrt zgrade
Narkomtjazhprom,
1934.

Zbirka Državnog
muzeja
arhitekture
Schusev, Moskva
(olovka i tuš na
papiru)

from the path taken by Russian avant-garde artists and architects of the revolutionary era. Unlike them, who often sought to integrate the individual human form into their designs,⁴¹ Nemon prioritized a different aesthetic and conceptual approach.

The concept of revolution often relied on the symbolic power of the human figure as a readily comprehensible vehicle for conveying messages to the masses. This tendency is evident in the works of avant-garde architects like Melnikov, who incorporated heroic Atlases in projects such as the *Palace of Soviets*. Additionally, projects like those by Boris Iofan, Vladimir Šuk, and Vladimir Gelfreikh for the same palace featured giant figures of Lenin atop the structure. Nemon's observations about the World Exhibition in Paris and his comparison of the Soviet pavilions in 1924 and 1937 shed light on this aspect.⁴²

During the "cultural revolution" and in some later projects, Melnikov favored the idea of *architecture parlante*; architecture that speaks about its function with its forms and that eloquently explains its meaning and identity. Nemon, on the other hand, did not follow Melnikov's example when the Russian architect implemented abundant hyperrealistic motifs in his architecture – using them as adjectives in the vocabulary of *architecture parlante* – which with their theatricality nullified the value of the architecture itself. Nevertheless, Nemon's architecture of the *Center of Universal Ethics* is indeed "architecture that speaks", albeit in a concise language of abstract stereometric forms. He leaves no doubts about the symbolic function of the forms he employs, meticulously shaping his edifice to convey his vision of modern art's communicative

power. In designing and articulating the architecture of the *Center of Universal Ethics*, Nemon reaches for pure abstraction in spatial and formal terms.

Conclusion

The project of the *Temple*, or the *Center of Universal Ethics*, embodies a bold modernist architectural concept, largely influenced by constructivist spatial-plastic considerations. However, other contemporary examples – as possible incentives – also indicate how deeply rooted Nemon's architectural vision was in its time. Le Corbusier's architecture serves as a significant point of reference, showcasing sculptural quality, dynamic diagonals, clean lines and the combination of curved and flat surfaces for comparison. Additionally, Nemon's design can be analyzed comparatively in relation to Expressionist architecture, particularly exemplified by Erich Mendelsohn's iconic *Einstein Tower* in Potsdam (1920 – 1924) or earlier sketches like those for a car chassis factory (circa 1915). Similar to Nemon, Mendelsohn's Jewish heritage played a significant role, suggesting a connection to the geometric symbolism of ancient Jewish mystical texts.⁴³ Furthermore, Nemon's project, with its stepped elevation motif, can be associated with the design of the *House of German-Turkish Friendship* (1916) by Hans Poelzig or the works of Hamburg Expressionism, such as *Chilehaus* (from 1922 to 1924) by Fritz Höger.

Nemon's *Center of Universal Ethics* stood in contrast to the recent modernist architecture in Belgium, which was influenced by De Stijl, Bauhaus, purism, or functionalism. It diverged even further from contemporary architecture in England. During the 1930s, the British architectural scene remained largely conservative. It was primarily thanks to emigrants, particularly architects who had fled Nazi Germany, that there was a notable integration of modern architecture into public discourse and production in Britain at the time. The issue of evaluating the significance of Nemon's project, particularly its position within the avant-garde or as an exemplary modernist phenomenon in art history, raises the question: Is the *Center of Universal Ethics* truly avant-garde? As previously mentioned, its form and style align with the modernist examples of European and primarily Soviet avant-garde architecture between the two world wars. However, the *Center* is an integral part of the broader *System of Universal Ethics*. Viewed as a whole, Nemon's utopian concept of the *System of Universal Ethics* is indeed avant-garde – a perspective echoed, for instance, in Ješa Denegri's definition.

“In contrast to a modernist work of art, which is typically formally completed and aesthetically compact, the avant-garde is inherently experimental, fragmentary, and often interdisciplinary and multimedia. By its meanings and messages it is oriented towards a utopian optimal projection of the future or critically opposes the concrete contemporary living reality, which, more importantly it cannot change, but still refuses to accept as a given pre-set”.⁴⁴

NOTES

- 1 See: Daniel Zec, “Oscar Nemon's *System of Universal Ethics*,” in *Art and Politics in Europe in the Modern Period, Conference Proceedings*, ed. Dragan Damjanović, Lovorka Magaš Bilandžić, Željka Miklošević and Jeremy Walton, 41–52 (Zagreb: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, FF-Press, 2019).
 - 2 Oscar Nemon (Osijek, 1906 – Oxford, 1985), a sculptor born in Osijek, Croatia, made most of his sculptural work by establishing himself in Brussels (from 1925 to 1936) and in the United Kingdom (from 1936 to 1985) primarily as a portrait sculptor. See: Daniel Zec, ed., *Oscar Nemon: memoari, eseji, osvrti i zapisi*, (Osijek: Muzej likovnih umjetnosti, 2016); Aurelia Young and Julian Hale, *Finding Nemon, The Extraordinary Life of the Outsider Who Sculpted the Famous* (London, Chicago: Peter Owen, 2018).
 - 3 Zec, “Oscar Nemon's *System*,” 41–52.
 - 4 “Un va ériger un Temple de l'Ethique en Palestine...,” *La Dernière Heure*, Bruxelles, 27 May 1933, press clipping, The Henry Moore Institute Archive, Papers of Oscar Nemon, Collection Reference: 2004.21 (further: HMIA, PON, 2004.21), Box 4.
 - 5 “Le Temple de l'Ethique,” *Le Matin*, Anvers, 26 May 1933, press clipping, HMIA, PON, 2004.21, Box 4.
 - 6 Zec, “Oscar Nemon's *System*,” 47.
 - 7 Drawings and photographs of the conceptual design of the *Center of Universal Ethics* as well as other archival material related to the *System of Universal Ethics* project are kept in the archives of the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds: HMIA, PON, 2004.21, Box 2, *Temple of Universal Ethics*.
 - 8 In one letter, Nemon states that the *Temple of Ethics* is “completed in its first draft”. Oscar Nemon, letter to Bella Neumann, Brussels, 10 July 1932, handwriting, Croatian, HMIA, PON, 2004.21, Box 7.
- It is conceivable that he began contemplating the concept of the *Temple* even earlier, given that a 1930 Belgian paper references the “sculptor's dream of the great symbolic building”. See: “Un ensemble d'œuvres...,” [paper clipping], *Le Soir*, Bruxelles, 7 November 1930, HMIA, PON, 2004.21, Box 4, Scrapbooks.
- 9 Herbert Read, *Modern Sculpture, A Concise History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 114.
 - 10 Read, *Modern Sculpture*, 114.
 - 11 See: Daniel Zec, “Modernistička sastavnica u opusu Oscara Nemona i kontekst modernizma i avangardnih kretanja u Bruxellesu (1925. – 1936.),” *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti* 44/1 (2020): 149–162.
 - 12 Stephen Frederick Starr, *Melnikov, Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 10. The fifth triennial international exhibition of modern decorative and industrial art and modern architecture (*Esposizione triennale internazionale delle arti decorative ed industriali moderne e dell'architettura moderna*), Milan, 1933.
 - 13 He later recorded his impressions in his memoirs. See: Oscar Nemon, *Paris*, typewritten manuscript, Oscar Nemon Estate,

- Oscar Nemon Studio Archive, Pleasant Land, Boar's Hill (Further on: ONE, ONSA); Oscar Nemon, "Pariz," in Zec, *Oscar Nemon: memoari*, 43-49; Oscar Nemon, *Unacknowledged legislator*, typewritten manuscript, ONE, ONSA.
- 14 Starr, *Melnikov*, 67.
- 15 Starr, *Melnikov*, 97.
- 16 Starr, *Melnikov*, 97; Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863 - 1922* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 264.
- 17 Nemon, "Pariz," 45-47; Nemon, *Unacknowledged legislator*.
- 18 Starr, *Melnikov*, 97; Gray, *The Russian Experiment*, 264.
- 19 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderns, Union des Républiques Soviétistes Socialistes*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, 1925).
- 20 Describing his impressions of the Paris 1925 exhibition in his memories approximately 50 years later, Nemon states that 'entering the Russian pavilion, he found himself surrounded by abstract forms that must have seemed disturbing to the ordinary visitor, to whom they were no doubt incomprehensible and incoherent'. However, it is important to clarify that he is most certainly referring to the exhibition of Russian avant-garde artists in the Grand Palais, and not to the exhibits inside the Soviet pavilion.
- 21 On the elaboration of the symbolism of the Russian pavilion, see in: Starr, *Melnikov*, 88-97.
- 22 Oscar Nemon, *The edifice...*, typewritten manuscript, HMA, PON, 2004.21, Box 2, *Temple of Universal Ethics*.
- 23 Starr, *Melnikov*, 96.
- 24 Selim Omarovich Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet architecture: the search for new solutions in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 76, 101-102.
- 25 Starr, *Melnikov*, 86.
- 26 Nemon, *Paris*; Nemon, "Pariz," 47.
- 27 Gray, *The Russian Experiment*, 271, 276.
- 28 Starr, *Melnikov*, 149.
- 29 Starr, *Melnikov*, 136. On comparisons with Mendelsohn's drawings, see also in: Dietrich Schmidt, "From People's Houses to 'School of Communism': Houses for Training Programs and Recreation The Development of the Soviet Worker's Clubs," in *Konstantin S. Mel'nikov and the Construction of Moscow*, ed. Mario Fosso, Otakar Máčel and Maurizio Meriggi (Milan: Skira, 2000), 79.
- 30 Starr, *Melnikov*, 145.
- 31 MOSPS - Moscow Regional Council of Trade Unions (Московский областной совет профессиональных союзов).
- 32 Starr, *Melnikov*, 153.
- 33 Oscar Nemon, *The 1937 Exhibition*, typewritten manuscript, ONE, ONSA; Oscar Nemon, "Izložba 1937," in Zec, *Oscar Nemon: memoari*, 85-86.
- 34 Starr, *Melnikov*, 192.
- 35 Jon Wood, "Oscar Nemon: 'Temple of Universal Ethics' (1938)," *Sculptors' Papers from the Henry Moore Institute Archive, The Essays on Sculpture* 71 (2015): 16.
- 36 On the ideological background of Nemon's project, see in: Zec, "Oscar Nemon's System," 43-45.
- 37 See: Anna Bokov, "Soviet workers' clubs: lessons from the social condensers," *The Journal of Architecture* 22:3 (2017): 403-436, DOI: 10.1080/13602365.2017.1314316.
- 38 Bokov, "Soviet workers' clubs," 412.
- 39 Nikolaj Lukhmanov, *Arhitektura Kluba* (Moscow: Teakinopechat, 1930); Leonie Pilewski, "Neue Bauaufgaben in der Sowjetunion," *Die Form* 9 (1930); Cf. M. Ilyne, "L'architecture du club ouvrier en U.R.S.S.," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 8 (1931): 17-19. Information on the above-mentioned publications taken from: Schmidt, "From People's Houses," 79, 83.
- 40 See: Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers*, 67, 68, 69, 459.
- 41 Starr, *Melnikov*, 167-168.
- 42 Nemon, *The 1937 Exhibition*; Nemon, "Izložba 1937," 85-86.
- 43 William J. R. Curtis, *Modern architecture since 1900* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 186-187.
- 44 Ješa Denegri, "Povijesne avangarde, neoavangarde i postavangarde u jugoslavenskom umjetničkom prostoru XX. stoljeća" (2006), *Museum of Avant-Garde*, accessed 5 April 2018, <<https://www.avantgarde-museum.com/hr/museum/arhiva/tekstovi/jesa-denegri-povijesne-avangarde-neoavangarde-i-postavangarde-u-jugoslavenskom-umjetnickom-prostoru-xx-stoljeca-croatian-no6489> >

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- Gray, Camilla. *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863 - 1922*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.
- Ilyne, Cf. M. "L'architecture du club ouvrier en U.R.S.S." *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 8 (1931): 17-19
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SAŽETAK

Centar univerzalne etike Oskara Nemona:
modernističke tendencije i ruski konstruktivizam

U radu je analiziran arhitektonski projekt prezentiran modelom *Centra univerzalne etike*, nerealiziranim djelom kipara Oscara Nemona, koje je bilo zamišljeno kao središnja zgrada njegovog utopijskog pokreta univerzalne etike. Idejno rješenje arhitekture *Centra univerzalne etike* formalno-stilski se oslanja na predloške suvremene modernističke i avangardne arhitekture međuratnog razdoblja, prvenstveno u kontekstu konstruktivističkih arhitektonskih uzora i utjecaja. Na temelju komparativne analize s djelima ruskog arhitekta Konstantina Meljnikova, iznosi se hipoteza da su Meljnikovljevi projekti bili inspiracija, primarni uzor i polazište za Nemonov projekt *Centra univerzalne etike*, na kojem je Nemon radio od 1932. do 1938. godine. Osnovni motivi kompozicije *Centra* su tri masivna lučno zasvođena trokutasta volumena, koji simboliziraju tri grane čovječanstva, te stubišne rampe. Složenu arhitektonsku kompoziciju karakterizira asimetrična ravnoteža, lom linija, dijagonale te dinamična artikulacija volumena i površina. Kombinirajući pročišćene formalne elemente i inventivan dinamički raspored kompozicijskih dijelova, Nemon je zamislio arhitekturu koja nimalo ne zaostaje za uzornim modernističkim rješenjima međuratne europske arhitekture. Nemonov posjet sovjetskom paviljonu Konstantina Meljnikova na Međunarodnoj izložbi umjetnosti (*Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*) u Parizu 1925. bio je od velikog utjecaja za njegov projekt. Meljnikovljevi nacrti i projekti kao što su *Radnički klub Rusakov* (Moskva, 1928.), *Kazalište MOSPS* (1931.), *Palača Sovjeta* (1932.), *Palača kulture u Taškentu* (1933.), *Garaža Inturist* (Moskva, 1934.) te *Narkomtjažprom* (1934.) mogli su poslužiti kao uzori za projekt *Centra univerzalne etike* Oscara Nemona. Također, inspiracija je mogla biti crpljena iz djela Le Corbusiera, Mendelsohna, Högera i Poelziga.

Translation into English by Martin Mayhew.

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