

*Translation of article, published 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2020 in Kyiv city magazine "Skyscraper"*

## **The Embassy of the Netherlands is called one of the best post-Sovjet buildings in Kiev. We tell why.**

Architects often cite the embassy building of the Kingdom of the Netherlands as an example of the sensitivity of modern architecture to the historical context. Kyiv's new buildings often lack just such a careful fitting of the new into the historical landscape. "Skyscraper" asked the authors about the history of the house and the peculiarities of their approach.

### **New building in Podil without pseudo-historical imitations**

The Embassy of the Netherlands is located on Kontraktova Square, not far from the Church of Our Lady of Pirogoszcz, which was rebuilt in the late 1990s. The design of the house began in 1997, and construction was completed in 2001. The competition for works in Kiev was won by the Dutch architectural firm **Atelier PRO**, headed by architect Hans van Beek. The Ukrainian side was represented by **Vadym Zaplatnikov** and **Larysa Merkulova** from GARAZD ARCHITECTS, who at that time had returned from Belgium after postgraduate studies at the Center for the Conservation of Historic Cities and Buildings. Raymond Lemaire.

The challenge of the project was the need to place a new building between a two-storey building of the XVII century and a four-storey building of the XIX century. According to the architects, it was to be a recognizable project of a modern Dutch building in maximum harmony with historic buildings, but without pseudo-historical imitations.

"Hans thought that the houses next door have a significant historical, architectural and artistic value, manifested on the facades in detail and decoration. All this together gives the historical building maximum information richness, a general sense of complexity and richness of decoration, - says Vadym Zaplatnikov. "In this sense, the modern building should not be inferior to the surrounding historical neighbors - due to the variety of shapes, textures, textures."

"For me, as an architect, the task is always to satisfy the requirements of two clients - the direct customer (individual or legal entity) and the city itself," says Hans van Beck about his principles of work. "In my opinion, in addition to your wishes and the wishes of the customer, you should try to guess the wishes of the city, to make the feeling of space a prerequisite for an architectural project."

### **Partnership and work with context**

"At the stage of creating the concept the Dutch played the "first violin". For our part, we helped our colleagues to orient themselves in an unusual context. After all, at that time we knew much more about the Netherlands than they did about Ukraine and the Kyiv Podil in particular, "Larysa and Vadym recall.

The research stage included the study of the history of the site and its surroundings, the study of historical documents, their translation into English. In order to understand the role of the site in the historical context, the architects examined all the buildings on the adjacent part of Kontraktova Square, including the relevant measurements, graphic reproduction of the facades and the creation of a town-planning layout of Kontraktova. They found out that, according to one version, the place of the current embassy was the family estate of Hryhorovych-Barsky.

"We understood that we were not going out into the open. And our knowledge of conservation, gained in Belgium, came in handy here. It was important for us to take into account the historical longevity. This is the exact opposite approach to the modernist superimposition of the project on space from above. The very concept of the embassy seems to have grown out of this space. That is why it is so harmoniously inscribed in it", the architects explain.

"Later, at the last stage, working drawings with all the necessary external and internal details were performed mostly by our bureau and under our license (both architectural and civil engineering). During the construction process, it was often necessary to make immediate decisions, when there was simply no time left to physically wait for the Dutch reaction and it was necessary to take a risk", Larisa and Vadim recall

### **Tribute to the historic canvas of the city**

Sensitivity to historic buildings, according to the authors, creates many limitations. However, if you pay attention to such limitations, they suggest interesting architectural solutions. For example, the arched configuration of the main facade of the embassy repeats the lines of the lost medieval Podolsk radial-circular building around the Church of the Mother of God of Pirogoshcha.

"The division acquired a rectangular-rectangular configuration after the fire of 1811. Before the fire, it had a radial-circular structure typical for the Middle Ages. But there are very few examples of such construction. This is a monument to the history of urban planning and architecture of the XVII century to the left of the embassy. That is why the curve of the embassy facade is first of all a tribute to the historic urban fabric (historic urban fabrique)", explains Vadym. It is thanks to this curve that the embassy building fills the empty space between the two historical monuments, combining them into a single line without trying to dominate the historical environment.

The architects managed to achieve the saturation of the forms thanks to a combination of four types of stone decoration with sandstone, which was often used to decorate the historic center of Kyiv. According to Hans, in the Netherlands almost no sandstone is built, because brick houses are traditional there. The use of this stone refers to the Kiev traditions.

Monolithic sandstone created a good contrast for the transparency of tall windows, located arrhythmically. This "dance" of windows draws attention to the seemingly neutral

building of the embassy. Such a "free" displacement of holes is a conscious conceptual, not just a formal compositional or fashionable technique. The windows further enhance the dynamics of the facade and the expressiveness of the overall architectural image of the building.

"Yes, in the architecture of the 1990s, you can find a lot of solutions using such 'dancing' windows. I think, on the one hand, they are meant to introduce a certain irrational deregulation, the same elements of protest against traditional rational ordering (since the student revolutions of 1968). At the same time, they are a sign of the then era of the late twentieth century, with the corresponding architectural styles and forms that allows to define time of creation of the building", Vadim Zaplatnikov tells. "Ideally, the city, along with all the buildings and structures, should be read like a book, where the semantic role of letters is performed by architectural elements that consist of words and sentences."

Architects pay special attention to the fragment where the facade of the embassy approaches the neighboring two-story building, but does not touch it. Sufficient (slightly more than one meter) distance between houses symbolically articulates respect for the 'older neighbor' with its ornamental-capital decorated finish. As a result, from the window of the embassy you can take a closer look at the ornaments of the pilasters of the neighboring house against the background of the panorama of Podil.

### **Building inside: atrium and imaginary ship**

The atrium - a solid space open from the bottom up - is constructive for the interior of the building. This is a popular alternative to the corridor system in the West, which creates more opportunities for social interaction. The atrium provides various forms of communication, in particular, echoes between floors. Thanks to large windows and a transparent roof, a lot of natural light gets there. Norwegian stone, concrete, metal, wood, ceramics, glass are used in the interior decoration.

"This is not the first embassy where I work," said Ernst Prosman, head of the embassy's economic department. "But I really like this house. It has a kind of 'Dutch spirit'. Everything is open here. Lots of space. And when everyone goes home in the evening, the last person has to turn on the security system. Then it's easiest to shout to those upstairs - "hey, are you still here?" If you really need it, you can even call the ambassador on the top floor. "

"We can accommodate about 150 people here, and we periodically organize business meetings, live music parties or meetings of LGBT activists in the atrium," said Dutch Ambassador Jennes de Mol. "Before the pandemic, we were looking for new approaches to work. And the question arose - does the embassy really need such a large space? The concept of a separate office for each person seemed outdated. But now, in times of social distance, we are very happy to be able to provide enough space for each employee. We are lucky with this building. "

Yennes notes that the structure of the building from the inside reminds him of a ship. Interestingly, the architects had no idea of the ship. "Creating the required number of square meters in this area was a real challenge," says Hans. - We were interested in how to build a spacious and bright house on this small piece. Thus was born a form that can really be seen as a ship, and the idea to make a glass roof. In fact, the internal design is purely functional. It's because of the place we worked with, not the idea of building a ship. "

The embassy has its own symbolic aspect, but it is hidden elsewhere. Hans researched that one of the routes for swallows to fly from the Netherlands to Africa for the winter runs through Ukraine. Therefore, the architect arranged six built-in swallow nests under the top parapet of the main facade so that the birds could rest there in the middle of the flight.

### Reception and reaction

According to Serhiy Babushkin, the then chief architect of Kiev, "the city square with a dominant temple inside has acquired a perfect look." However, according to the authors, their approach did not immediately find support among many local colleagues, who accused the architects of "total disrespect for the historical heritage." In addition, the town-planning council could not approve the construction project for a long time.

For example, Ruslan Kukharenko, the then head of the Department for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments in Kiev, was strongly opposed to the embassy's location on the site, calling its construction an "unacceptable urban planning mistake," stressing that such a structure would be appropriate in Obolon. in Troyeschina, or in the social town. "

However, not all colleagues were so critical. Many called the embassy building an example of tactful interaction with the facades of historic buildings. "If there is nothing to restore, [...] harmony can be achieved by contrasting a modern building with existing buildings," said architect Vladimir Smirnov.

"I really like to compare architecture with people. And if you look at the building of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Kiev, it is immediately clear that such a person would be an attentive and pleasant dialogue partner, - describes the building architect Victor Zotov. - In Ukraine, there is a popular tendency to do something higher, better, more significant than what is located nearby. And here everything is the opposite. At first glance, the house does not stand out among others. If you look closely, the irregularity of the windows seems to suggest examining the building again and again, like an arthouse movie.

"The Embassy of the Netherlands is a great example of modern architecture located in the historic center of the city. It shows that every generation has the right to speak in the city, - says "Skyscraper" architect Anton Oliynyk. - Respect for the context is an important topic for discussion, especially in Kiev. The architectural quality of the cities in which we live depends on the willingness to understand and talk about it. That's why I wish you and myself more buildings such as the Embassy of the Netherlands. "

According to Hans van Beek, the tendency to build large and luxurious is not unique to Kiev. In the Netherlands, in particular in The Hague, there is also a tendency to create something new in place of the old in the historic center, when architects seek to build something large and magnificent, to create a monument to themselves. "Of course, I also like working with clean, unfilled space. However, the multi-layered historical place has its appeal, - says Hans. - How to add something new so as not to spoil the old? I always look for answers to this question in my projects. "