

Expert opinion concerning Hotel Kyjev, Bratislava, Slovak Republic

Date: Copenhagen 05.11.2012

In accordance with correspondence of September 2012 I hereby put forward the following expert opinion to the best of my ability based upon the project material as supplied by you in 3 emails dated 01.10.2012 and an onsite visit on the 16th of October 2012 to Bratislava.

The following themes - or aims - of the expert opinion have been put forward:

- 1) The degree of similarity between the mentioned buildings – (Royal Hotel in Copenhagen (finished in 1960) and the Hotel Kyjev).
- 2) The absence of the authors own creative mention
- 3) The degree of plagiarism and the lack of authenticity and originality of the Hotel Kyjevs architecture (work of art vs. copy or plagiarism) with regard to the exterior and interior of the buildings.
- 4) The existence of / non existence of innovation regarding Hotel Kyjev within the context of world architecture.

Preface.

To compare two projects built in two different architectural cultures is tricky because the obvious differences can simply be a question of taste or building praxis – and in actual fact be a true plagiat, but thru circumstance it comes out and can be interpreted differently.

The hope and aspiration to build a big project in 1960 in the new international and modern style – and in the local arena be at the front of the architectural field – is understandable.

There is little doubt in my mind upon seeing the Hotel Kyjev in Bratislava (1960-1973) that this complex could not have been created without having seen the Royal Hotel (1955-1960) in Copenhagen – either in reality or thru the substantial coverage this hotel has had from even before it was finished in 1960 – in international exhibitions, newspapers and architectural magazines.

Despite the fact that much of the detailing in terms of craftsmanship and design approach bears little resemblance to the refinement of the Royal Hotel - the overall exterior conceptual approach and volume geometri of the Hotel Kyjev - the horizontal base and vertical curtain wall building – seems a very concrete and direct inspiration (annexe page 1).

One can also pinpoint building elements that bear a clear likeness to the same elements in the Royal Hotel: the spiral staircase in the reception Hall (annexe page 6), the view and atmosphere of the reception area as a whole (annexe page 4 and 5), the circular lighting in the ceiling on the first floor area (annexe page 7), the wall paneling in the hotel hallways and execution of the built-in furniture of the hotel rooms etc (annexe page 7).

Based upon the manner in which the Hotel Kyjev is built – in other materials, in other dimensions, in other design detailing – it is however not possible to call the Hotel Kyjev a copy of the Royal Hotel.

But is the Hotel Kyjev extensively inspired by the Royal Hotel? Yes indeed. Is it a copy? – No.

Ad 1) Similarity

The apparent similarities are of course the general architectural concept of the high rise building resting above the rectangular base with the slimmer technical floor in between making the building very light and seeming to be floating above the base.

The concept of the large horizontal base resting on a light, glass facade creating a pedestrian area under the base with shops and access “under” the heavy building is similar in the two projects. (Annexe page 1, 2 and 3).

More detailed one can see the formulation of the base with its horizontal glass window cut into the masonry – underlining the horizontal movement – contradicting the vertical building above. This window is higher than the original making it a more heavy/robust design, but the basic concept is the same (Annexe page 1 and 3) The module in the base of the Kyjev Hotel strangely suggests a slightly more vertical orientation of the base – which seems a little destructive of the dynamic between the high rise block and the base. This dynamic balance is precisely and firmly sought and conceived in the Royal Hotel.

The curtain wall construction with the closed and open parts of the facades – from a distance seen as a large grid is almost identical even though the height and width of the building (Kyjev) differs to that of the Royal Hotel. (Annexe page 2).

The gables of the Kyjev are fitted with travertine stone cladding – whereas the Royal Hotel has glass facades all round. Interestingly enough there was an early proposal published by Arne Jacobsen for the gables of the Royal Hotel to be closed from 1957 (annexe page 10) - but this was rejected by the Hotel owners, who wanted a full circle view from all sides of the building.

The Hotel Kyjev is quite similar to this early proposal, so it would seem that this could in fact be the real source of inspiration.

In the different areas of the interior there is also a striking resemblance to the style and concept of the Royal Hotel:

Here we see the placement of the reception desk parallel to the walking direction from the access doors towards the spiral staircase – it is almost identical to the early photos of the same area in the Royal Hotel. (Annexe page 4 and 5).

The round pillars underlining the direction of focus and the wood covered wall finishings creating this “cigar box” atmosphere that in the early 60’s was one of the images of the international style, where smoking, drinking, travelling was the essence of the Modern – along with expensive materials, high-end craftsmanship etc.

The spiral staircase is very alike the staircase in the Royal Hotel - despite the fact that it is built as a reversed image (annexe page 5). The conceptual image of the vertical movement at the end of the perspective of the reception area – the focus of the movement in the reception space - is identical. The staircase in the Royal Hotel is built from welded steel and is a much more elegant design. The thin outline of the flow of the steps is very a modern way of looking at materials and structures. The way that the steps, side panels, the railing and supports are treated as separate elements that together form the stairs is unique at that time.

In the Kyjev the architects have tried to imitate the construction in concrete by setting back the main load bearing section of the construction and emphasize the steps – to make these seem thin and lightweight. I read this as a direct attempt to imitate the image of the staircase in the Royal Hotel.

On the first floor of the Hotel Kyjev there is a ceiling with round light fixtures that is also identical in concept to the Royal Hotel – yet not as fresh and delicate – but again one has the feeling that this has been added on as a “symbol” and not so much as an actual design endeavor (Annexe page 7).

The wooden wall finishings in the corridors on the hotel floors seem inspired by the Royal Hotel, creating the same atmosphere.

In the rooms the detailing around the windows – the light rail at the top – the curtains and the broad window sill giving space for the heating system – the wooden panel front – all these elements can be seen in the Royal Hotel done with better detailing (Annexe page 8).

In the rooms itself there is a horizontal wooden wallpanel circumventing the room (the correct term is wainscoting) and onto which beds and shelves and drawers are fixed – again to a different standard, but it seems quite unlikely that this idea should arise out of the blue in Bratislava around 70-73, when the interior of the Royal Hotel has been widely published and famed for its design. So it is understandable and reasonable to assume that these features have been seen and studied closely by the interior designers of the Hotel Kyjev.

When you add all these imitations or inspired features up it becomes quite clear that the interior design of the Hotel Kyjev - the whole style and concept of the hallways, public areas on the ground and first floors, the hotel rooms – all seem to allude the concepts and styles of the Royal Hotel.

The aspiration to grasp and copy the atmosphere of the latest modernistic icon in Copenhagen is clear and evident.

Ad 2) Absense of personal creativity

When discussing whether a building is an individual concept and design (work of art) or not - one must take into consideration that most architectural design/development is done in an open academic dialogue and in learning from your predecessors – as for instance the Royal Hotel lends much inspiration from the Lever House in New York.

The important thing to note here is whether the new design is elevated out and away from the inspirator to a new status in its own right – that the architectural design gives a distinct individual identity that is quite apart from its inspiration - and Arne Jacobsen adds to the Royal Hotel his own vision and design – puts a new layer of understanding and a new design that becomes a contribution in the development of the new modernism.

It seems obvious to me that the Royal Hotel has been a great and direct inspiration for the Hotel Kyjev. And in the framework of this inspiration the architect must bring in his own design for it to be distinguished as an individual creation in its own right.

On a concept level I see no specific individual creativity – however there are many project details that are solved in their own right: the masonry travertine cladding details, the curtain wall, the interior finishing – yes these have all been sketched and drawn by the architects of the Hotel Kyjev. But I fail to see that the produced has resulted in a new design experience and a new understanding of materials or the architectural/esthetic issues - and by that - a new singular architectural identity.

So one has also to discuss the level of “work of art”.

The clarity and simplicity for instance of the Royal Hotel has not been upheld or developed further in the design and execution of the Hotel Kyjev.

The vocabulary of the Hotel Kyjev is stone, glass, steel and aluminum. In the Royal Hotel it is glass, steel and aluminum.

So yes - there is “authorship” and an architectural design been done - but it seems strongly influenced by the overall concept of the Royal Hotel. And by this it is my opinion that the project has not resulted in a new “work of art” with its own integrity that can or should be protected.

Exterior:

The architect has to some extent had to adapt to local building standards and tastes – whereby adding his own way of executing the project.

There are different and simultaneous schools of architectural thought at this time, but in this context I have the feeling that other architectural elements than that of the Royal Hotel have found their way to this project also: the detailing of the masonry/travertine work with curved finishings is not the “new modernistic” way of the late 50’s and early 60’s - and is to me out of character with the overall design approach (annexe page 9). This is lending more of an Oscar Niemeyer approach to the building (e.g. like the PCF Headquarter in Paris).

For instance - the base of the Hotel Kyjev is constructed with travertine cladding with a vertical marked module per 750 mm and with rounded 180 degree curved travertine finishing at the roofline of the base serving as a parapet for the terrace on top of the base (Annexe page 9).

The high-rise building has both gables and a small border on the curtain wall closed with travertine cladding. These details and this approach are individually designed and contributed by the architect.

Upon closer scrutiny the curtain wall of the Hotel Kyjev shows a different grid format of 750 mm against 600 mm in the Royal, but also a much more robust/heavy detailing: the protruding aluminum "sword" coming out of the façade is 35 mm thick (18 mm in the Royal Hotel) and the overall width of the frame is more than 120 mm giving the whole facade a more heavy grid (annexe page 2).

The Royal Hotel is renowned for the quality and "personal/individual" architectural design of the detailing of building elements such as the dimensions of the curtain wall.

The width of the facade frame/grid in the Royal Hotel is 60 mm – quite an achievement in the late 50's.

The curtain wall of the Hotel Kyjev have single window frames for each grid that can open – so that in each hotel room one can open all the windows. This is a much more simple approach and much easier to produce – but because of this simplicity it cannot be seen in any way to be the bearer of genuine innovation.

The facade of the Royal Hotel is developed so that the frames are hidden – so that a fixed and open window will seem alike from the outside. This detail is seen as a true modernistic approach and manifestation – that architectural design and craftsmanship and understanding of new materials come together.

The craftsmanship is very good and is a witness to the whole modernistic "project" in Copenhagen. And it is a product of the academic aspiration and dialogue with the actual builders – both on site and in the workshops, so as to optimize the design.

Interior.

The fame of the Royal Hotel is also based upon the very high standard and quality detailing of the interior completion and furniture concept. A large number of the designs for furniture and fittings were made for this hotel alone and are even today "classics" in the furniture world.

The build quality is outstanding for the period in the finishing in the public space, restaurants, bars and reception areas and also in the hotel rooms.

In the Hotel Kyjev there is foremost a feeling that the interior finishing of the ground floor, the first floor and the hotel floors are apart from the architecture of the building. The exterior and interior designs do not seem to be fully aligned. The exterior with the travertine stone cladding and other more robust design elements and inside there is the "international style" with a finer detailing – a strange contradiction. The elements do not support one another to a total realization of the project and a full artistic breakthrough.

The public areas seem presumptuous of a modernistic "international" lifestyle rather than an original idea. Maybe this is due to inadequate possibilities as far as craftsmanship and building materials at the time – I cannot be sure - so the aspiration of the design is also not met equally by the design quality and the build craftsmanship.

The interior of the Hotel Kyjev does generally seem to be inspired by the Royal Hotel, but in no way meeting the standards given. And by this aspect one cannot say that the inspiration has been adapted and developed further – and thereby giving the project its own unique identity.

Ad 3) Degree of plagiarism etc.

Even though there is a striking similarity in the overall concept of the Hotel Kyjev and also in some interior elements one cannot say that this building is a plagiat or copy of the Royal Hotel in Copenhagen – on the other hand it is also difficult to state that the Hotel Kyjev could have been conceptualized and built without knowledge of the Royal Hotel I Copenhagen (annexe page 1)

The similarity lies in the exterior volume and conceptual approach and not so much in the actual detailed design.

As stated in the above there are numerous direct elements in the Hotel Kyjev, where one can wonder about the origin of the idea – when in reality the concepts are so close in fact to the Royal Hotel – and yet the execution – the architectural detailing - is changed according to local possibilities etc that one cannot state that this is a copy.

So there is a degree of individual thought and application – but the underlying conceptual statements are taken/inspired from another project – the Royal Hotel.

In the interior design one can state the same – that there is an immediate feeling of resemblance, but the execution of the work – in the detailing, the quality of materials and the craftsmanship – is to another standard. In a way a more simple approach – a poorer design.

Ad 4) Innovation and World architecture

The period around 1960 was a very fruitful period with many exchanges of architectural discussions and experiments across Europe and the USA – and from the early '20' s with Mies van der Rohe to the Lever House in NY (1952) – this push towards Modernism was happening across Europe. Architects and designers were eager students of each others projects and there was much borrowing and inspiration taken from completed buildings on to new projects – it was a collective process with significant leading designers at the forefront.

The technical qualities of the new curtain walls was still in the early stages and the limitations in both materials and construction methods were obvious - and in itself dictated to a large extent the looks and presentation of the early curtain walls – they all looked very much alike.

On presentation of the Royal Hotel in 1955-1960 – there were discussions on whether Arne Jacobsen had just copied Lever House in New York – even though the two houses are distinctly different in detail. Conceptually they are similar – and the Royal Hotel could not have been concipated without knowledge of the Lever House and the academic discussions. Arne Jacobsen was quite frank about this in his academic discussions, when his project was published.

I can imagine that the Hotel Kyjev must have seemed forward in the early 60's in a country with very little contact and information from western Europe and USA – and maybe even little free academic discussions on architectural issues and modernism. Most of all the lack of real possibilities to travel and see – and by that take part in the intellectual “education” that was going on in the 50's and 60's.

If in the context of modernism and World Architecture the Hotel Kyjev would have been presented as a discussion topic – it would not have gone well.

The lack of true originality and academic endeavor and the lack of craftsmanship is apparent – it would have been dismissed as just another copy of the new style of which there were many in the 60's.

In the academic world in the west the Hotel Kyjev would not be taken seriously.

Architecturally there is no apparent innovation – no apparent new academic endeavour - all the features are done to the same or to a lower build- and concept standard than being done at the same time elsewhere in the world.

In the context of world architecture the Hotel Kyjev has no place.

Sincerely
Ole Holst

Expert opinion concerning Hotel Kyjev, Bratislava, Slovak Republic

Date: Copenhagen 05.11.2012 - Annexe

Annexe, pages 1-10.