

Architectural history of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences building

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Abstract. The article traces the history of the central building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) as an architectural site. Comparisons are made with similar architectural constructions in Europe. The author examines the chronological stages of the project and construction work, studying data on specific architectural elements and analysing the style, function and features of construction.

The focus is on the contribution of architects and the specific (and novel for those periods) characteristics of the building's typology. The aim of the article is to present an integral picture of the building's architectural history in the context of the development of Bulgarian architecture in the early years of the 20th century.

Keywords: academic building, BAS, Sofia, architecture in the early 20th century

Introduction

The subject of this study is the central building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS), situated at the heart of the Bulgarian capital. The focus of the research is the building's architectural history, which is related to the more general historiographical narratives on the development of Bulgarian science (the edifice is more than ten years older than Sofia University) and the evolution of the iconic urban image of the city of Sofia.

This presentation does not include detailed technical descriptions, calculations or dating; it offers no catalogue listing of documents, blueprints, styles and decorative elements related to the BAS building. The leading aspect in the present study is the architectural perspective: tracing the architects' concepts and intentions, the choice of functions, zones, materials and solutions, and the interconnected roles of those who ordered the building, its designers, users, observers, and spaces. Thus, this article examines the chief points in the stages of designing and building the edifice; it presents stylistic, functional and construction-related analyses. The emphasis is placed on the contributions of architects and the important characteristics of the building's typology.

Preliminary history and context

Globally considered, the creation of academies of sciences has been recurrent throughout modern history. Their organizational specificity goes beyond that of universities and seeks a new perspective on scientific achievements and their role for society and the state. Thus, England's Scientific Society was founded in 1660 as an "invisible college of natural philosophers and physicians". In 1663, the institution was approved by the king and entitled "Royal Society". Two decades later, it published one of Isaac Newton's key works, *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica* (*The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*). Yet the Royal Society achieved academic autonomy and its first independent grant as late as 1850 (The Royal Society).

The French scientific society was founded under the inspiration of Jean-Baptiste Colbert in 1666, receiving the title "Royal Academy of Sciences" in 1699. It achieved autonomy as part of the French Institute in 1816 (Académie des sciences). The French Institute and its structures have as their central location the building constructed for the College of the Four Nations (Collège des Quatre-Nations) and designed by Louis Le Vau. It was referred to in the will of Cardinal Mazarin, and until February Revolution of 1848, it successfully functioned as a Parisian university (Institut de France).

With time, an increasing number of independent scientific societies appeared in more and more European countries. Thus, the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Vienna (Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien) was founded in 1847 by Emperor Ferdinand I (ÖAW). Since then and to this day, it has used as its central space the aula (built in 1755) of the University of Vienna¹. The building was designed by the architect Jean Nicolas de Jadot and the construction work was completed by the architects Johann Adam Münzer, Johann Enzenhofer and Daniel Christoph Dietrich (Karner 2017).

The graphic work by Sébastien Leclerc I, dating from 1671 and entitled *Louis XIV Visiting the Royal Academy of Sciences*², is a conventional and entirely narrative (although using visual means of expression) depiction of an institution of the "scientific academy" type. In it, we find no architectural spaces or functional divisions. In addition, in terms of artistic structure and content, it is strongly influenced by ancient models of depiction (similar to a mosaic preserved in Pompei and representing Plato's Academy) and Renaissance compositions (such as Raphael's mural *The School of Athens*). Still, the graphic work clearly presents the main functions envisaged for spaces in this type of organization: the possibility to conduct discussions and present projects in various fields of science.

Most academies, however, began their existence without specially erected buildings of their own. Historically, the first meetings of their members were not held under formal rules and took place in spaces provided by other owners

¹ For a view from the University square, see Bernardo Bellotto (Canaletto).

² See Sébastien Leclerc I.

or institutions. This fact was due to the syncretic nature of knowledge at the start of the Modern Age and the generalized functions of the scientific societies. In the early years of their development, scientific organizations used the already existing spaces of higher schools and institutions, or administrative buildings. Even today, there is no universally accepted (ideal) model or concept for a scientific academy's building.

Understandably, as the sectors, members and activities of academies grew in number, their spaces and sizes also increased. Over time, the representative and administrative areas of the scientific societies were complemented by spaces meant for publishing, libraries and archives, the separation of additional halls and cabinets for specific purposes, as well as special laboratories and workshops. (Each of these, however, was located in separate rooms or even buildings.) Important for the ultimate appearance of an academy's central building were the concrete stages in the history of its organization and the evolution of scientific and construction technologies. Thus, the first depictions of academies were most often focused on the variety of functions within the building, while the later ones expressed the building's importance in terms of urban planning as well as the increased compact vertical density of its floors.

The building of the Bulgarian Learned Society

The academic organizations in the Balkans were created during the 19th century. The Serbian Academy of Sciences was established in 1841 by a decree of Prince Mihailo Obrenović (SASA). The General Rumanian Academy of Sciences was founded in 1866 (The Romanian Academy 2006). In turn, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (at first called Bulgarian Learned Society - BLS), was founded in the fall of 1869. Its Constituent Assembly was held in Brăila, Rumania, in the home of Varvara Hadzhi Veleva. The headquarters of the Society were located in Brăila until 1878.

According to the Statutes of BLS, adopted by the Constituent Assembly, its activities were to include:

“A. Elaboration and improvement of the Bulgarian language, Bulgarian history, and our national literature in general.

B. The dissemination of universal enlightenment and progress among the nation...”.

Explicitly mentioned was the dissemination of knowledge “of all sciences and art” (Ustav na BKD 1869).

In order to implement these goals, a scientific journal was regularly published in the first decade after the creation of the Society. The assets of the organization included a library, a museum collection and an archive (Hristov 2015, 56-61). However, the funds provided for the functioning of the BLS were extremely insufficient.

In order to fulfil the activities mentioned in the Statutes, the BLS required halls for presentations and meetings, cabinets, archive and library areas, auxiliary spaces, installation networks and systems. But, similar in this to many of its European counterparts, in the first years after its creation, the BLS had no

rooms of its own; moreover, detailed data about the spaces used in Brăila are lacking.

After the Liberation, the Learned Society moved its headquarters to Sofia and held its First Annual Assembly in 1881 in the Large Hall of the National Library³. In April 1882, the BLS was given a temporary space by the State Council - an office in the Council building. At that time the Temporary Committee that headed the Society submitted a request to the Sofia Urban Municipal Management to be given a terrain on which to erect a *building with a botanical garden*. In justifying the request, the Society announced that it had the financial means to begin the construction and that the head of state, Knyaz Alexander I, was acquainted with the intention of seeking a terrain (Gesheva 2015, 71-72). In the course of the correspondence, a letter was received in 1883, announcing that a place for construction was granted free of charge: the space was 4,600 square metres and situated near the Austrian Embassy (Fig. 1).

It should be noted that the bold goal - to acquire a special building with a special garden - indicates the large scale of the organization's plans at that time. It is not accidental that Konstantin Yovanovich, who was asked to make the initial design, was also the architect of the Bulgarian parliament building.

Preparation for the construction of the BLS building began in the summer of 1885; architect Yovanovich was asked to prepare architectural sketches for the future edifice and to estimate the cost of the materials and construction work (Gesheva 2015, 84). Due to the stormy events connected with the Unification of the Principality of Bulgaria with Eastern Rumelia, the projects and their consideration were delayed for nearly a year. However, the search for, and obtainment of, funds for construction continued.

In April 1886, Konstantin Yovanovich sent his project and preliminary cost estimates to the Vice-President of the BLS Vasil Stoyanov. The cost of the building (not counting certain exterior completion works, which could be stretched out in time) was 30,635 Austrian florins, or 61,270 leva. The possibility for future enlargement of the building was provided for, and the submitted project stated that "... on the main floor are situated the most necessary rooms and a large assembly hall (around 142.5 square metres). Due to the characteristics of the terrain, the front part is provided with a lower floor, where there is a depot for books, a small dwelling for the superintendant of the building, and a storage space for heating fuel. In all, the surface area of the building is 622.5 square metres" (Gesheva 2015, 86).

According to Yovanovich's design (preserved in the Scientific Archive of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) the new building was to be situated within the terrain, at a distance from the central boulevards. The interior and exterior of the building were designed in a neo-Renaissance style and with an emphasized volume of the central part. The building was to be surrounded by a stately garden. The symmetrical distribution of space and outline also strongly suggested the importance of the BLS building.

³ The National Library, together with other institutions, was housed in the Büyük Camii (Grand Mosque) (Karadimitrova).

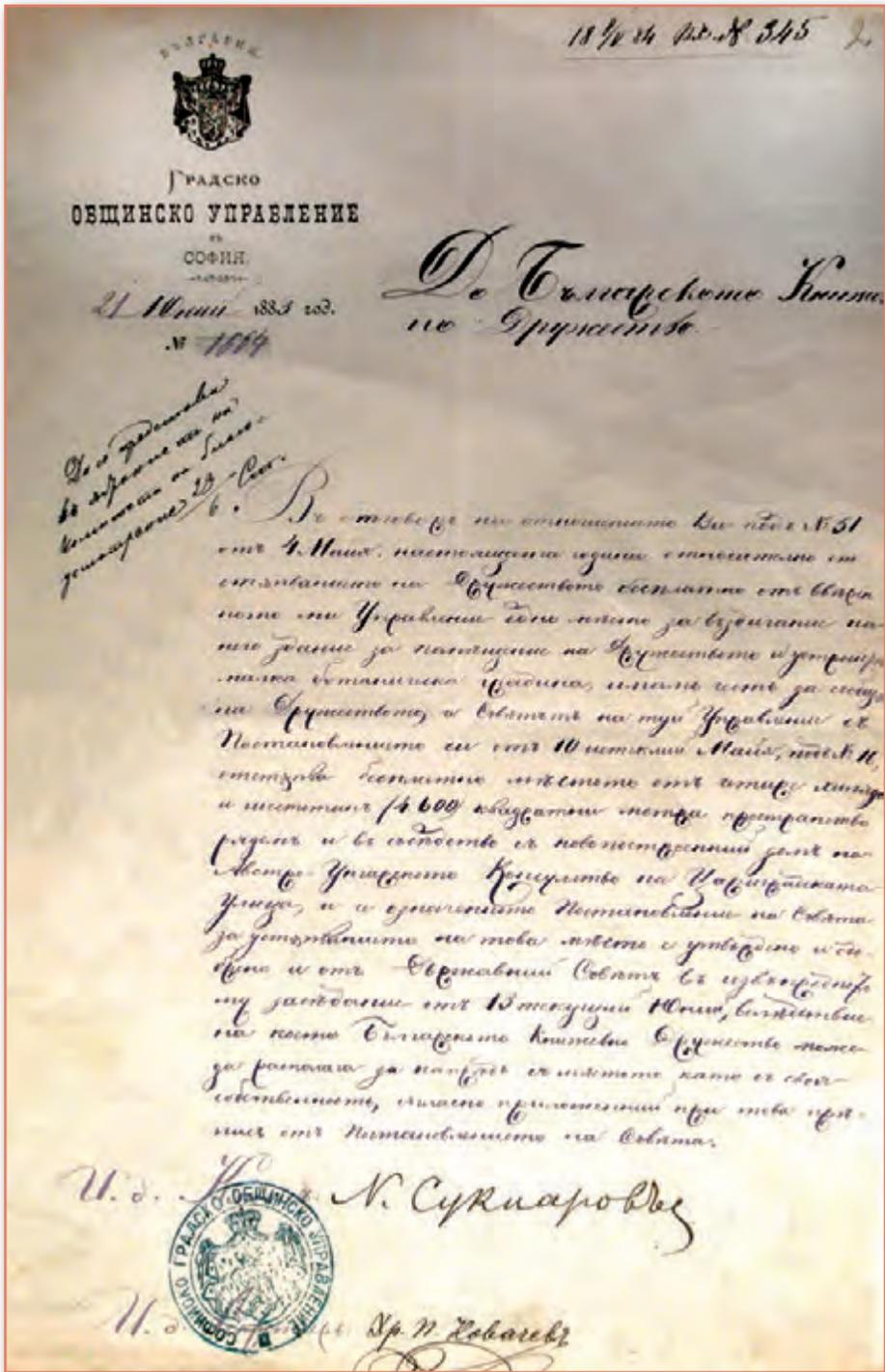


Fig. 1. Letter from the Urban Municipal Management granting a terrain for the erection of a building for the Bulgarian Learned Society, 1883 (SA of BAS, f. 1-k2)

Konstantin Yovanovich's drawings were discussed and commented on by various architects and builders, such as Frank and Grünanger, but ultimately they were not accepted. By 1890, Heinrich Jacob Meyer⁴ and Theodor Hünerwadel⁵ were working on the project. That was the time of the final urban planning decision, whereby the terrain was enlarged and the contours of the land property provided by the Sofia Urban Municipal Management were modified. This regulation determined the present location of the building, which was designed to be parallel to the axis of the boulevard and the long sides of the Parliament building.

In the Sofia Municipality archives, we find plans that Heinrich Jacob Meyer and Theodor Hünerwadel (Fig. 2-4) prepared at the end of the 19th century for the building ordered by the BLS. The design was aristocratic and elegant

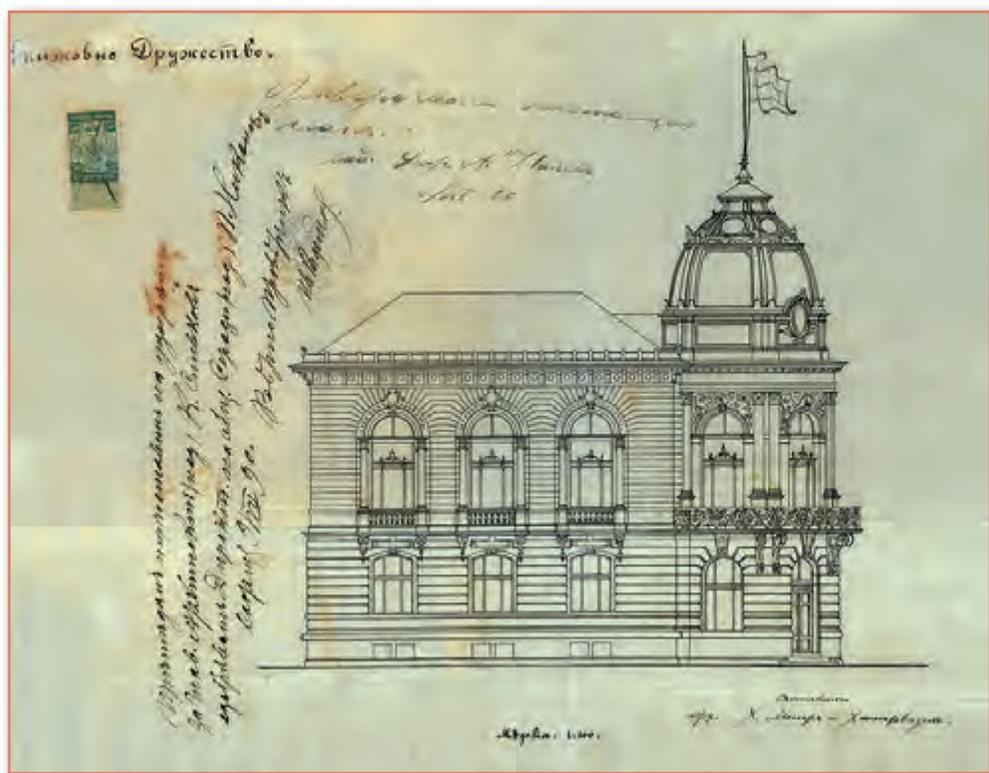


Fig. 2. Project for the facade of the building of BLS/BAS on Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd., architects Heinrich Jacob Meyer and Theodor Hünerwadel (Archive SM-DAUP)

⁴ According to Velichkova (Velichkova 2007), he was born on December 1856 in Freiburg. In 1888 he won a competition for the Bulgarian National Bank building in Sofia and was appointed government architect of Bulgaria, entering employment at the Ministry of Public Works.

⁵ According to the obituary (Mieg 1956), the Swiss architect Theodor Hünerwadel was born on 16 February 1864 in Lenzburg and died in 1956. In addition to the BLS building, he worked on projects for the Town Hall of Sofia (Stoilova 1998).



Fig. 3. Plan and location of the building in the design by Heinrich Jacob Meyer and Theodor Hünerwadel (Archive SM-DAUP)

and the decoration and palatial style of the exterior once again emphasized the stately character of the building.

The symmetrical L-shape plan of the building is situated along the contour of the terrain. Thus, its shape takes into account the building's location at the corner of the land property and provides for a maximum of green surface around the edifice (Fig. 3).

We know that in 1890 today's National Assembly Square did not exist as such, despite the empty space left around the adjacent properties. The Monument to the Liberator Tsar was also inexistent at the time. Hence it may be said that, in this respect, Heinrich Meyer's project was visionary. It provided for the sides of the building to run along the lines of the crossroad and also defined the diagonal position of the future central square.

The plan of the building envisaged various-sized halls and rooms on the two floors above ground level, as well as many auxiliary rooms in the basement (Fig. 3). Between the offices on the first floor, the design established an enfi-

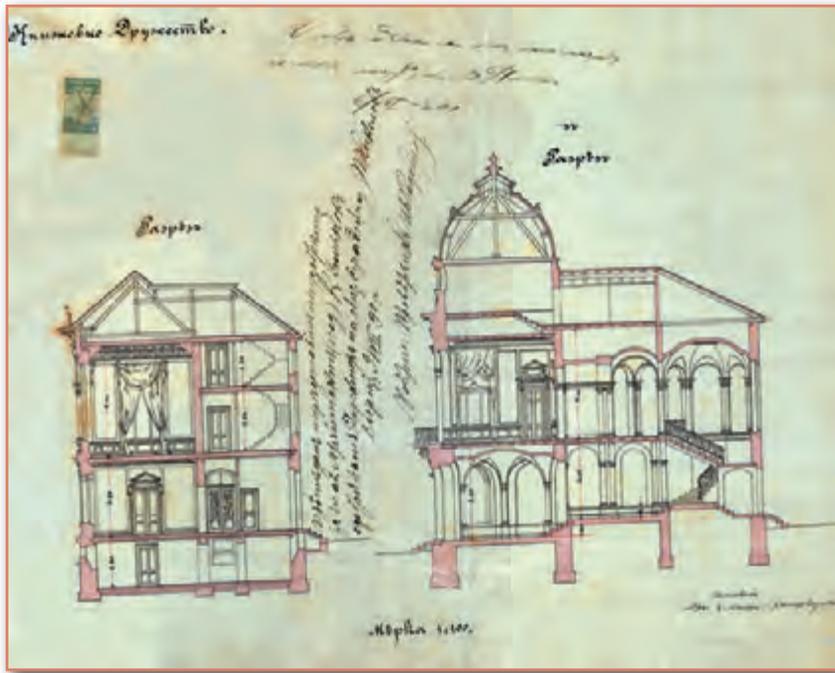


Fig. 4. Cross sections of the plans by Heinrich Jacob Meyer and Theodor Hünerwadel (Archive SM-DAUP)

lade connection and corridor access, while an imposing grand staircase led to the halls on the second floor. The corner space, for its part, was emphasized by means of its separate roof construction - a dome - and organized the access to the inner spaces. The impressive portals included in the plans and the decorations on the walls and ceilings of the halls are typical for academic and administrative buildings at the end of the 19th century. The cross sections of the plan (Fig. 4) demonstrate the envisaged variety of sizes of the official rooms and reveal the conception of the interior design.

During the summer of 1890, the construction work was assigned to the entrepreneur Nikola Dukov (Gesheva 2015, 92). The first sod ceremony took place on 5 October 1890.

Soon after, the BLS received its title deed for the land property donated by the Sofia Urban Municipal Management (Fig. 5).

Contrary to the preliminary estimates, the planned funding for the Academy building - a very ambitious project for post-Liberation Bulgaria - proved insufficient. By December 1891, the 70,000 leva available in the account of the Society had been used up, while a number of completion works related to the building and the terrain remained to be done. In this connection, with the support of the Minister of Finance, a loan was drawn from the National Bank. In order to pay back the loan, the newly completed building was “rented to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Confessions for an indefinite term for the sum of 10,000 leva per year. Before the building was rented, it was insured



Fig. 5. Title deed for the land property on which the building stands, 1892 (SA of BAS, f. 1-k2)

for 100,000 leva with the Dacia - Romania insurance company” (Gesheva 2015, 93); the rent changed in accordance with the inflation. The Ministry continued to occupy this part of the edifice until 1944.

A paradoxical fact, but understandable in view of the time and region, was that the building - one of the few in Europe specially meant to house an academy of sciences - was first used to house an administrative government institution. But once the financial matter was resolved, the BLS building, now inhabited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Confessions, started to lead a relatively calm life of its own.

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, several important events took place in the architectural history of the edifice. The first was the participation of architect Petko Momchilov, one of the founding members of the Bulgarian Engineering-Architectural Association, in its further construction (Tsonev 2001: 127).

At first, a fire having broken out in the building in 1900, the architect was asked to assess the damages and estimate the cost of the eventual renovation. Subsequently, in 1906, at the demand of the Ministry, Momchilov designed another 376 square metres, or 28 additional rooms, of which 25 were offices and three were for the service staff (Gesheva 2015, 109). The rooms were situated in annexes along Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd. and 15th of November Str.

The additional space designed by Petko Momchilov (Fig. 6) is also important in an urban planning aspect. New plans for the land property of the BLS

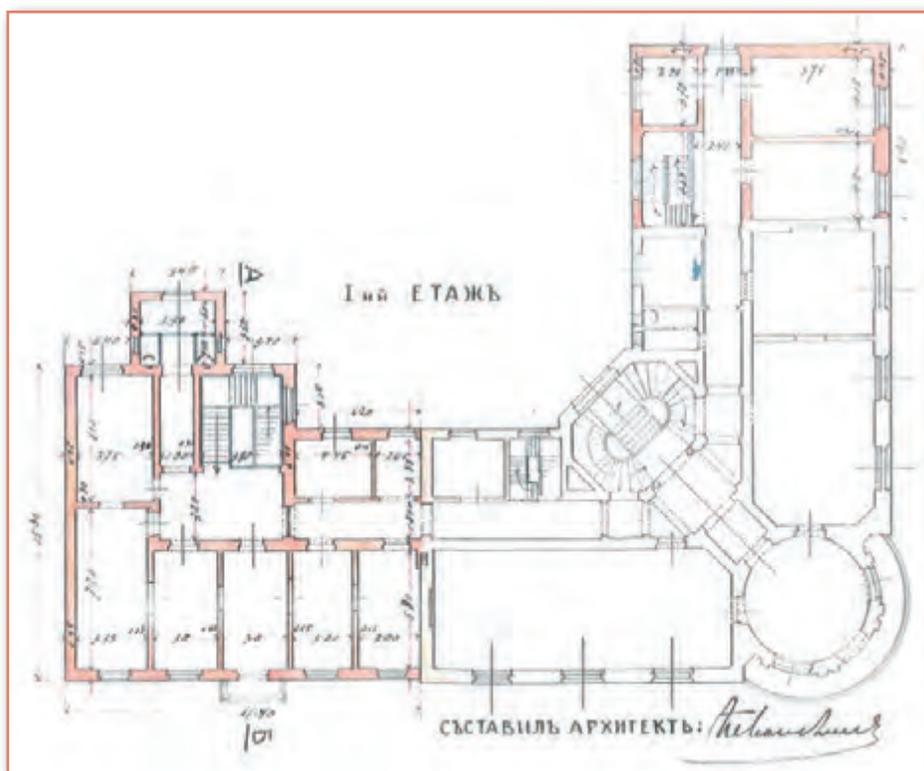


Fig. 6. Annexes dating from 1906 along Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd. and 15th of November Str. Architect Petko Momchilov (SA of BAS, f. 1-k2)

appeared in 1904: the Municipal Council wanted to take part of the donated terrain and transfer it to the Italian Legation. This procedure was carried out in 1906: the terrain of the BLS was reduced by 2,400 square metres, for which the Society received a compensation. Although the property was divided, thanks to the appropriate and active additional construction work planned by architect Momchilov, the future front of the building facing Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd. was emphasized, thereby ensuring to some degree the future preservation of the territorial integrity of the property along this boulevard.

The next key intervention in the land property and the building was during the interwar period. Discussions and solutions were impelled to some degree by the introduction of a draft law in the National Assembly in December 1922 regarding the expropriation of the Academy's building and terrain for the needs of the state. The motivation of the draft law referred to the urgent need of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to possess a building of its own. In the *Statement of the BAS*, written in response to the National Assembly, the author stated with irony, "[i]t is precisely the building of the academy that, by its location, distribution and large yard, best meets the urgent need and the special position of this

ministry”, although “[i]n its distribution, the building was erected precisely in view of the needs of the academy, and not at all those of a ministry, much less those of a ministry of foreign affairs. The building has neither storage rooms for the archive of valuables, etc., nor appropriate salons for holding receptions” (Dokumenti za istoriyata na BAN, 77).

And while the Ministry was using the building on Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd., the BLS (finally renamed as BAS in 1911) carried out its activity in spaces rented from others. In addition to concrete organizational inconveniences, this situation did not permit taking proper care of the archive and library in the building. According to Nikolay Poppetrov, “[the] intention to build was formulated as early as June 1924, and at an Extraordinary General Assembly from 30 June 1925, the decision was made to begin the construction of a new building for the Academy” (Poppetrov 2015, 136).

In connection with the fulfilment of the plan for a new BAS building, one more regulation of land property was carried out and an extra terrain was added, in which the entrance space was to be inscribed (Fig. 7). At the end of the First World War, in 1918, the building then belonging to the Austro-Hungarian legation was taken over by Italy. Subsequently, in 1925, the buildings of the Austro-Hungarian and Italian legations were exchanged (Avstriysko posolstvo Sofia). The Austrian Embassy is the present neighbour of BAS.

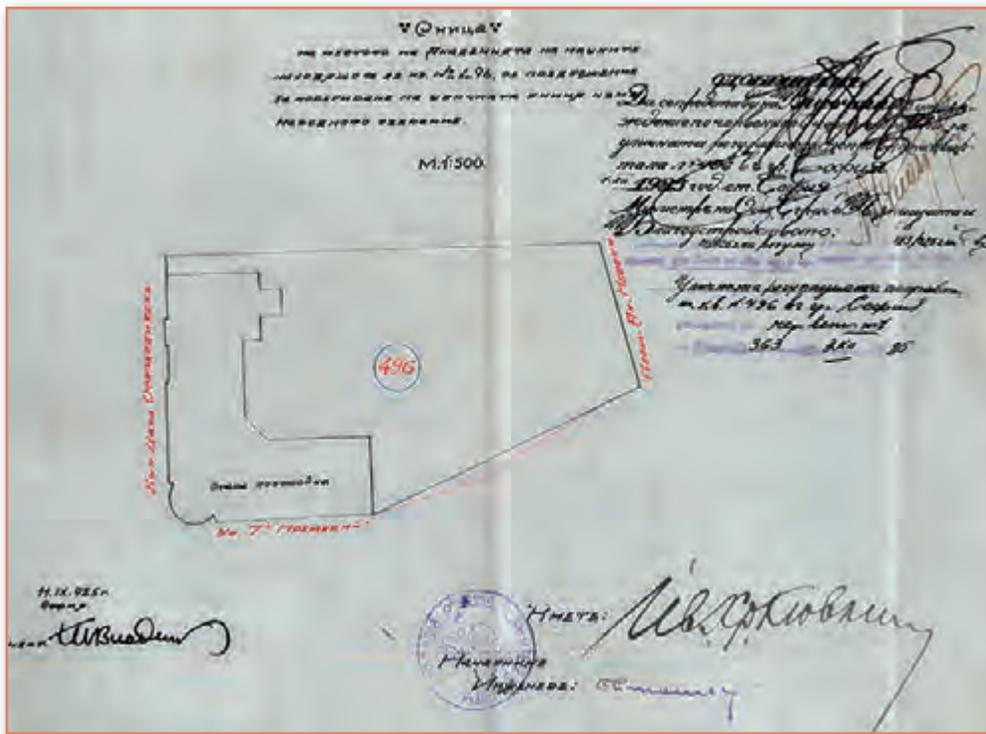


Fig. 7. A sketch of the location of the BAS, 11 September 1925 (Archive SM-DAUP)

A special architectural competition for a new building was held, for which six projects were submitted. The one to be implemented was the winner of the first prize, presented under the motto “BAS” (Poppetrov 2015, 136). It was the creation of one of the important duos in the history of Bulgarian architecture, the architects Yordan Yordanov and Sava Ovcharov. The building’s foundation stone was laid on 27 May 1926.

Yordan Yordanov and Sava Ovcharov designed a number of projects for administrative, municipal, bank and residential buildings, including the Home of Jurists in Sofia, the Municipal Home in Sliven, the theatre-cultural centre-museum in Yambol, the theatre-cultural centre in Sredets, the Post Office Building in Plovdiv, the Museum and Art Gallery in Samokov, the Karlovo Mineral Baths, the building of the Teachers’ Savings Bank on Slaveykov Square in Sofia, and many others (Arhiv Zhekov 35, 17). The works of the two architects are striking and original; most often rendered in a neo-classical style, they also display modernistic influences, while being conceptually enriched through adaptation to the regional particularities of the architectural environment and to each specific site - whether that be an art gallery, a bank, or a rental building.

Their new project is striking by the careful attention paid to the style of the already existing building and the fine design of the lateral foundations, which are in harmony with the specificity of the neighbouring buildings and adapted to the sloping terrain (Fig. 8).

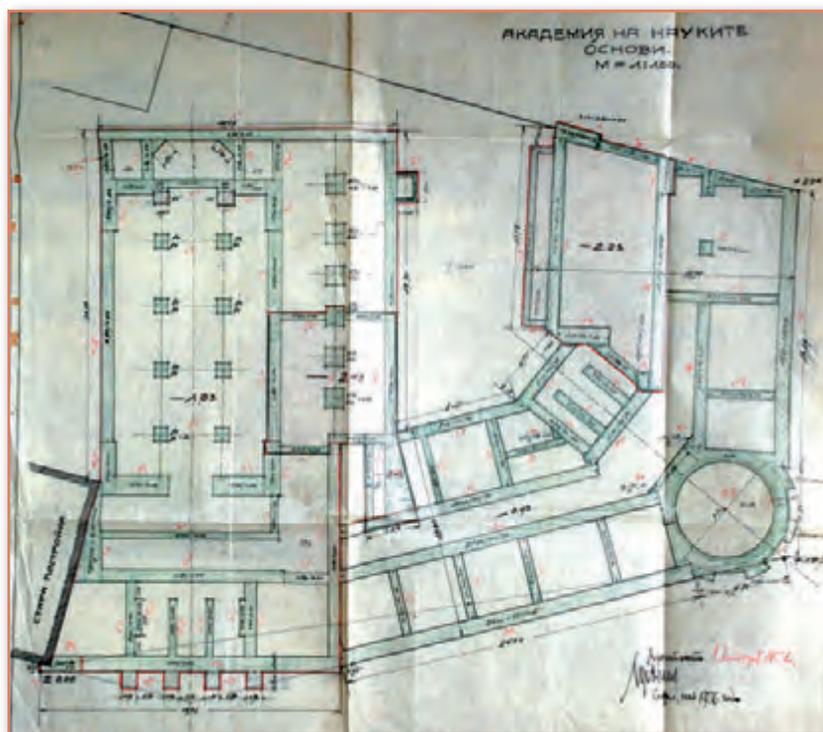


Fig. 8. Foundations of the new building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in the project by Yordan Yordanov and Sava Ovcharov, 1925 (SA of BAS, f. 1-k2)

The construction was conceived as an enormous continuation of the existing building in the direction of Shipka Str., the building plot being branched and displaced under an angle from the front located on 15th of November Str. Thus, three more wings are added to the L-shaped structure and a new centre is lent to the architectural composition. In this way, the emphasis in the building's outline is shifted to the separate entrance provided uniquely for the Academy.

The two Bulgarian architects decided to follow the competition program and not to clash with the esthetics of the building designed by Heinrich Meyer and Theodor Hünerwadel, and rented to the Ministry. Taking into account the eventual future merging of the buildings, Yordanov and Ovcharov managed to inscribe the new parts in a congruous visual scheme. This was a complex task, as the new spaces were slightly more numerous and higher than the existing ones, and there had to be an official access to the Great Hall.

The project added 1,170 square metres to the existing building and even provided for the possibility of future construction (Dokumenti za istoriyata na BAN, 102). And by forming the imposing central portal and symmetrical second dome (Fig. 9) in the direction of St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, Yordanov and Ovcharov succeeded in placing the visual focus on the new building and to lead the user to its basic function.

In fact, Yordan Yordanov and Sava Ovcharov submitted two plans for the competition. The second, under the motto "Cyril and Methodius" was awarded third prize. In it, they proposed similar spatial and functional elements - a portal and dome, but these were moved in the direction of the cathedral and not balanced in the building's silhouette. In the jury's protocols regarding this



Fig. 9. Design for the view of the new BAS building seen from the National Assembly.
Motto "BAS" (BIAD 1925, 367)

second project, the connection with the old building is assessed to be “inadequate” (BIAD 1925).

After the basic construction was finished, a number of improvements and corrections were made in the interior completion plans, as traced in many commission protocols. Special attention was devoted to the design of the Great Hall within the building. At that time, its size exceeded many other ceremonial halls in the city and “demanded” a high-quality interior. That is why rich neo-classical decoration and multi-level vertical construction was applied for the interior spaces.

The decorative relief on the gable above the entrance was added according to an instruction by the two architects. The instruction points out that the plan should “take into account the style of the building” and should “contain emblematic elements that emphasize and express its function as an Academy of Sciences” (SA of BAS f. 1-k2 N:512). The sculptural composition was executed by the eminent Bulgarian sculptor Kiril Shivarov. It was made of artificial stone (cement and marble particles), and in its colour, a harmonious correspondence was sought with the white stone of the portal (SA of BAS f. 1-k2 N:517). The leading image in the triangular motif is a book situated on a central shield. From a present-day perspective, it is worth mentioning the equal presence of the figures of a man and woman on both sides of the book, symbolizing their equal standing in scientific activity.

The gathering of funds for the construction was also a complicated task. Funding the building was a problem to the very end, and part of the needed resources were “taken, with the help of Prime Minister Andrey Lyapchev and the Minister of National Education Nikola Naydenov, from state banks by mortgaging the property of 22 members of the Academy” (Poppetrov 2015, 136).

Nevertheless, in 1927, the building was completed; a separate Great Hall for public gatherings, an office for the President, and a session hall on the first floor were provided. The Bulgarian Academy gradually began to breathe life into the spaces. The library was moved in, and the building was solemnly consecrated “on 14 May 1929 in the context of the official state celebrations marking the 1000th anniversary of the Age of Simeon and the 50th anniversary of the Liberation (Poppetrov 2015, 137). A reading room for students and teachers, with 32 seats, was set up in 1935 through a donation made by Stefan Panaretov (Argirova-Gerasimova, Peycheva-Gospodinova 1994).

From a present-day perspective, it is interesting to note the high quality of the building’s construction. The wooden roof frames and bents (made of dry pinewood) still remain in good condition after 90 years. According to the *Construction Expertise for the Roof Construction of the Building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences*, in the first part of the building to be erected, “first-quality coniferous material (evidently - spruce fir) - carved beams” was used, and there were still “no damages caused by wood-eating insects, decay and ply separation. In the elements of the roof construction, there were found to be no deformations, destroyed parts, loose or damaged parts...” (Simeonov, Vakova, Angelova 2013).

However, even the suitably chosen long-lasting constructions and materials were not able to protect the building during the bombing of Sofia in 1944. Together with this, after the change of the political regime in 1944, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs no longer rented the building; moreover, the conditions and ways of functioning of the Academy changed.

In the *Construction Expertise* (Simeonov, Vakova, Angelova 2013), five stages of the execution of the construction were defined (Fig. 10):

Stage I - construction based on Architect Heinrich Meyer's design, 1890-1892.

Stage II - expansion of the building along Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd., and a second expansion along 15th of November Str. - based on the design by Architect Petko Momchilov, 1906.

Stage III - construction of the New Building, including the Great Hall for meeting in the inner yard - based on designs by the architects Yordan Yordanov and Sava Ovcharov, 1925-1928.

Stage IV - construction of the library depot, added to the main wings and facing the yard at the side of the Austrian Embassy building, 1954.

Stage V - an annex with a covered terrace in the yard near to the Great Hall, 1963.



Fig. 10. Scheme of the stages of construction of the building: Stage I - red; stage II - violet; stage III - blue; stage IV - green; stage V - yellow

With regard to the appearance of the building and its function and role within the surrounding urban area, the first three stages are of key importance. Understandably, not all of their elements remained unchanged after they were first built: besides undergoing repairs, some of them underwent restoration due to the bombings, and this work continued until 1950. The functions of rooms also changed: after 1944, in the spaces vacated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the office of the President of BAS was moved to where it was meant to be according to one of the initial architectural plans.

Conclusion

In examining the history of the construction of the BAS building, we may conclude that, in fact, there are *two* specially designed Academy of Sciences buildings. There is a visible difference in their sizes, due to the authors' conceptions and to the 35-36 year development of architectural thought. While the halls in the first building are of more modest size, and the entrance spaces there have the character of reception places and are somewhat palatial in character, those of the second building accord with a different (public) mode of access. In them, the function of an assembly hall has been completely provided for, including theatre cloakrooms and service spaces; the function of the library has also been ensured. We have an enlargement and greater complexity of the division of space, with careful attention to lighting and hygienic working conditions; a thorough connection has been sought with the yard area.

The final connection between the two buildings is not only physical. In the course of time, the Academy of Sciences proved to be a complex organism with various and increasingly important functions. In this sense, the general geometrical division of space and the high quality of the construction can be assessed as appropriate, because they ensure the necessary adaptivity of the building. The choice of architectural style followed by several generations of architects has also proven fitting, and to some degree determining, with regard to the form of the adjacent square.

Even today, in terms of colour and shape, the special buildings in the centre of Sofia define the charm and perception of the specific, actively emphasized urban planning perspectives created by dozens of professional architects after the Liberation. To this day, viewers are stirred by the elegant way in which the Academy building recedes from the square, thereby forming a corridor of additional visibility of Alexander Nevsky Cathedral.

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