

**BEFORE DRAWINGS TURN INTO DUST:  
UNKNOWN MULTIFAMILY RESIDENTIAL BUILDING  
BY ARCHITECT V. VASILEV**

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**Abstract:** The researcher presents for the first time an unknown project, designed by architect V. Vasilev in the early 1930s, for a multifamily residential building located in the city centre of Sofia at 23 Vitosha Blvd., block 392. The author has found and digitalized original drawings, on the basis of which the apartment building's floor plans and facades are discussed as part of the fabric of European Modernism. Archival drawings are accompanied by author's contemporary photographs illustrating the current condition of the building. The article also discusses the present status of the building and the deviation from the orbit of the original design in the course of time.

**Key words:** Modernism, Rationalism, Bulgarian architecture in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, architecture of the Third Bulgarian Tsardom, architect V. Vasilev, architect Vasko Vasilev, Vassil Vassilev, multifamily residential buildings, Mehrfamilienhäuser, Sofia.

**Historical overview – whether or not “architect V. Vasilev”  
is “arch. Vasko Vasilev” or is he architect “Vassil Vassilev”?**

From a strictly scientific perspective “the well-known architect Vasko Vasilev” [Stancheva, NIOICH archive unit] is neither known well, nor is it certain that his name was really Vasko. After a careful study of the available original drawings so far, and due to the fact that no scientific publication deals with his biography, while the articles dealing with his works and personality alone gravitate to zero, the only trustworthy fact about this man of arts is the mere existence of an “architect V. Vasilev” which is proven by the drawings signed by the architect himself presented in this article.

Different people have mentioned Vasko Vasilev or have written a couple of sentences about him for one reason or another. However, none of them refers to sources or talks about knowing him in person, neither has anyone ever mentioned V. Vasilev's building at 23 Vitosha bul. which is the subject of the present article. [Stoyanov, 197; Mavrov, 1977; Stancheva, 1978; NIOICH archive unit

**302; NIOICH archive unit 384; NIOICH archive unit 409; Stoilova, 2001; Stoilova, 2007].** V. Vasilev is described as the author of at least three buildings registered as “monuments of culture” or “cultural heritage” – namely the multifamily residential buildings on 49 Alexander Stamboliyski Blvd. [**Stancheva; NIOICH archive unit 302**], 27 William Gladstone St. [**NIOICH archive unit 384, Not dated**], and 63 Vitosha Blvd. [**NIOICH archive unit 409, Not dated**]. He is known to have been a keen mountaineer and the author of at least two mountain hotels built after 1960 [**Stoyanov, 1977**], however Borislav Stoyanov writes nothing about V. Vasilev’s previous works. A paper [**Mavrov, 1977**] describing the tendencies in residential building in the period 1920–1944 contains only a picture of architect Vasilev’s building on 63 Vitosha Blvd. with a caption reading: „Жилищна сграда „Бумова 63”, 1944 г., арх. Васко Василев” (Residential building Vitosha 63, 1944, arch. Vasko Vasilev). Another publication [**Stoilova, 2001**] on Bulgarian architecture between the two world wars contains a picture of the same building with a caption: “The rent and apartment building, 63 Vitosha Boulevard and Asparouh Street. Architect: V. Vasilev, about 1940.” and while describing the tendencies in the residential building at the time mentions the common characteristics of four residential buildings, one of them being: “Profitable Apartment Building at 63 Vitosha Boulevard, by V. Vasilev, 1940”. Still another publication [**Stoilova, 2007: 73**] on the same topic – architecture in Bulgaria between the two world wars – again includes a picture of the Vitosha 63 building with a slightly different caption: “Apartmenthaus, Vassil Vassilev, Sofia 1939 - 1940” and on the next pages the building is mentioned as an example alongside buildings of other Bulgarian architects of the time.

Although most probably “architect V. Vasilev”, Vassil Vassilev and Vasko Vasilev are the same person, only the existence of original – therefore trustworthy – documents and biodata about him could turn this hypothesis into a scientific fact [**Kafelov, 2013**]. Herein he will be referred to as “architect V. Vasilev” or “V. Vasilev”, since there is no other documentary evidence so far. Rather than just mentioning his buildings as stylistic examples and/or publishing a couple of pictures of them, V. Vasilev’s designs should be studied in detail, since they are at the core of his professional significance. Analyzing V. Vasilev’s architectural thinking can contribute to amending the contemporary Bulgarian architectural status quo. Pictures of buildings or the mere mention of their address or author bears no fruit. The history of architecture is not a phone-book; it is meant to pass on knowledge useable in the present and improving the future.

## **Aim**

While architect Vasko Vasilev is a familiar name to the older generation of architects, his buildings practically have not been studied and not a single one has been analysed so far. Thus in-depth analyses of V. Vasilev’s works are absent from the architectural writings of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. The aim of the present publication is to introduce and analyze the original project of the multifamily residential building on 23 Vitosha Blvd. which the researcher has found and digitalized before the latter turns into mere tracing paper dust. The

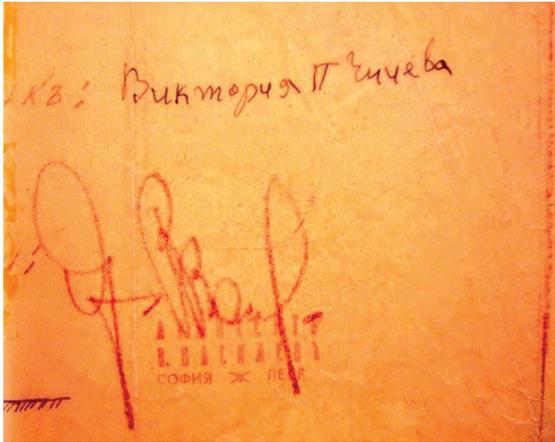


Fig. 1. Signature and seal of arch. V. Vasilev, address of his office and name of the project commissioner

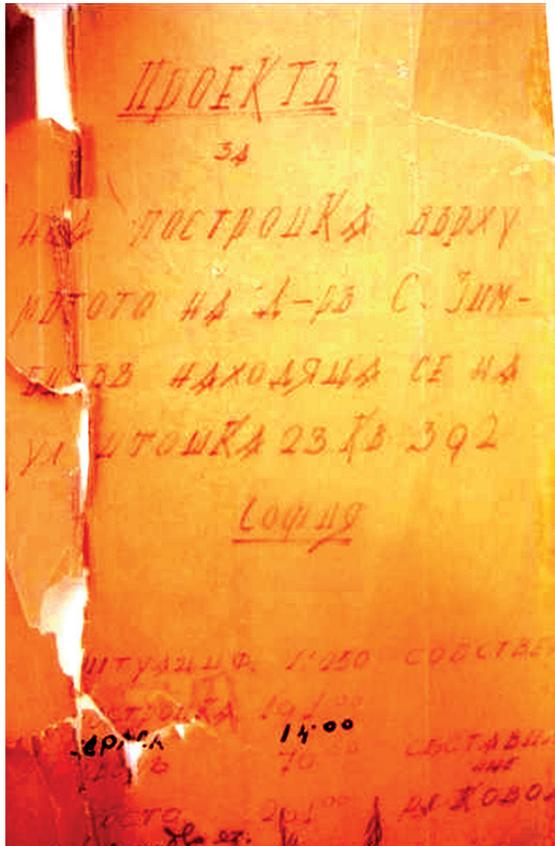


Fig. 2. Address of the designed building

project is an indispensable part of the fabric of European modernism whose local examples have undeservedly been disregarded as an object of study by the researchers who lived in the People's Republic of Bulgaria, which at the time was somehow loath to admit its fundamental affiliations with the European cultural area.

### Architectural analysis

The fragments of original drawings which the researcher found in the archives of the Architecture and Urban Spatial Development Service of Sofia Municipality at 5 Serdika St. were in bad condition. Yet, they provide the following valuable reliable facts: the seal of the author of the project reads: "ARCHITECT V. VASILEV", then also in capital letters but in a smaller font: "SOFIA\*LEGE" which is probably the location of his architectural consultancy in Lege St. in Sofia. The name of the architect is also present in the form of a legible signature. The person ordering the project was probably "...er: Viktoria P. Chicheva" (Fig. 1). The name is a readable signature. The front part of the word preceding the signature is absent. It was probably "owner", i.e. the person who commissioned the project.

The name of the owner of the building plot is not completely readable: "Project for ... tial building on the p...t of Dr. S. Zim...v, located on 23 Vitoshka St. block 392 Sofia" (Fig. 2). The drawings were checked

and approved by the architectural department of the capital city municipal administration on 15. 8. 1933. The faded letters of the seal on the drawing read: “ SF. CITY MUNIC. ADMINISTRATION ARCHITECTURAL DEPARTMENT” (Fig. 5). This means that the project was probably completed a bit earlier the same year. The date of commencement and completion of construction are unknown, probably it started later in 1933 and finished in 1934.

This is the earliest project of architect V. Vasilev the researcher has discovered so far. It considerably differs in approach and style from the one for the residential building on 63 Vitosha St., approved on 20.5.1946. The location of the building on the busy Vitosha Boulevard (No 23), in the close vicinity of St Nedelya square and cathedral and across the street from the plot for the future Court of Justice, was probably quite attractive for people working in the administration of the Third Bulgarian Tsardom. The building faces west on the side of the street and east on the side of the inner courtyard.

The building is semidetached – with blind walls on both sides – and although the blind walls are not perpendicular to the street, architect V. Vasilev managed to design two almost symmetrical condominiums on each residential floor. In vertical direction the building starts with a publicly accessible shopping area – a 3.5 metre high ground floor, followed by a 2.5 metre high mezzanine with offices, four residential floors with a height of 3 metres each, and an attic (Fig. 3). The building opens to the boulevard through a shopping arcade – clearly visible in the cross section drawing. This fusion of public and private space provides more shops, longer shop windows and more public walking space.

The vertical communication between the floors is through a staircase – there is no lift – even though the building has six floors from the perspective of the contemporary building code. However, in the past the first two floors were considered a ground one and a mezzanine, thus the counting of actual floors began above them and in this case there were four real floors. That was probably the legal reason for designing the building with no lift which was an expensive piece of technical equipment at the time. In view of comfort, this fact reduces the quality of living, thus ranking the building at the standard level of

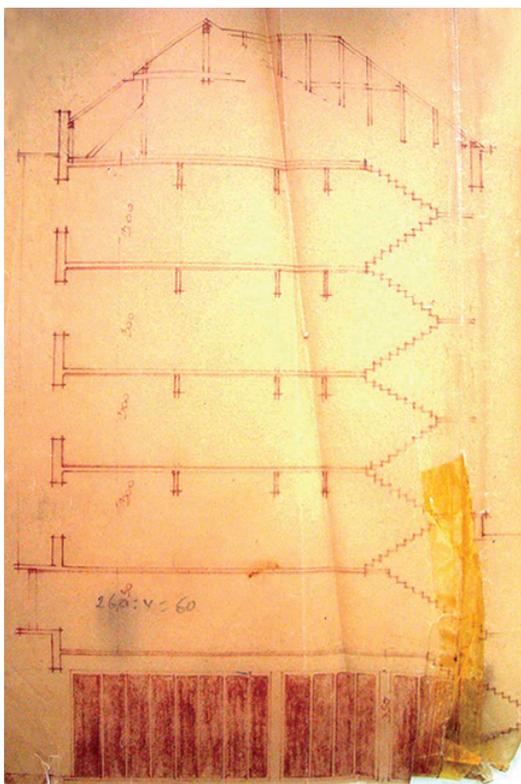


Fig. 3. Coss section

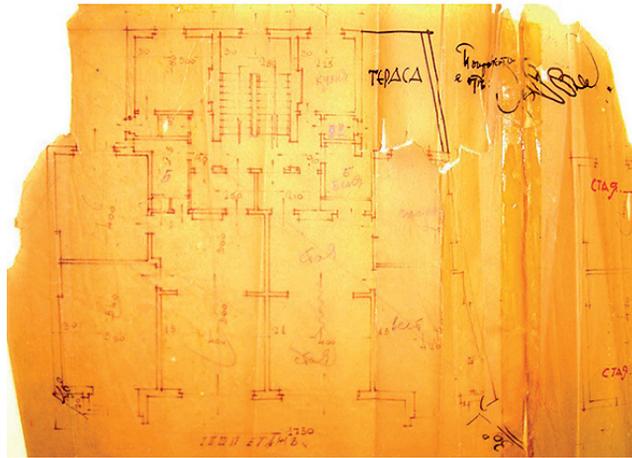


Fig. 4. Floor plan of I, II, III, IV floors

the middle class residences, in spite of the prestigious location and the spacious three-room condominiums with two entrances each. The architect placed the staircase on the side of the courtyard, thus correctly opening the building to the open space of the boulevard and providing good lighting for two out of the three rooms of each condominium.

The floor plan (Fig. 4) of the symmetrical apartments is divided in functional zones with a clearly defined living zone comprising a main entrance into a small entrance hall, followed by a vestibule merging through a portal door with the living room. The vestibule has unusual tiny walk-in closets on the side of the bathroom. This practical architectural approach is a reminiscence of the traditional Bulgarian houses of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet it has a newly added function – providing sound insulation between the bathroom and the vestibule. This design has also an aesthetic value – on the other side of the same vestibule wall is the door to the entrance hall – and since architect V. Vasilev has put the chimneys right in the middle of the wall (thus making the appearance of a fireplace almost a must), in the end of the day the interior features a fireplace, fixed precisely in the central longitudinal axis of the merged vestibule-living room, flanked by doors on both sides.

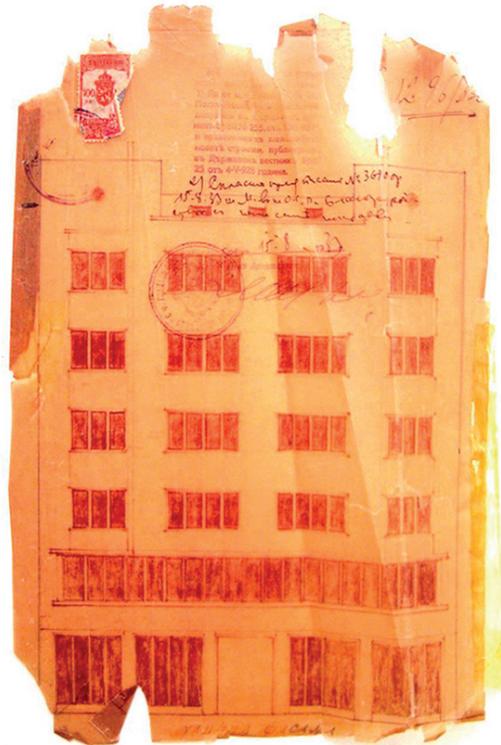
However, the zoning of the condominiums is not absolutely differentiated – which actually is a characteristic feature of the end of the studied period (1918 – 1948) – and leaves the use of the second room facing the boulevard free for owners' interpretation. It could be either added to the living zone as a salon or office, or to the sleeping zone as a second bedroom. The sleeping zone definitely includes only a bedroom facing the inner courtyard, although the bedroom has no bathroom attached to it alone. Since the two rooms facing opposite directions are accessible directly from the vestibule, by wish of the owner, the function of a bedroom could also be assigned to the room facing the boulevard in spite of the worsened noise characteristics of such a choice. The indistinct limits of the sleeping zone are due to the lack of bathrooms attached to it. This lack of attachment is both positive – from the perspective of interchangeability of room functions

– and negative – because of the longer walking path from the sleeping zone to the bathrooms which passes through the entrance hall. Had the bathroom been more spacious, another approach could have been used: a second door could have directly connected it to the room facing the inner courtyard. However, this would have completely defined the latter as a bedroom which apparently was not the aim of the architect. The bathroom and the water closet are attached to the service zone facing the courtyard and, conforming to Art. 40 of the *Construction-police regulations for the buildings in the capital city* (published in issue 255 of State Gazette on February 13, 1924), are directly ventilated through windows overlooking the courtyard. There is a slight difference in the floor plans of the two condominiums here. In the left one, due to the larger size of the kitchen, a small pantry appears next to it. The water closet is therefore probably ventilated indirectly through a small window and a horizontal air duct passing through the pantry. The service zone is accessible both through the main entrance hall and through the servants'/black entrance and its adjacent area.

Generally the identical functional scheme of the floor plans of the two condominiums precisely reflects the time the building was designed – right in the middle of the studied period – in 1932-1933. The architect provides the owners with a moderate opportunity to rearrange the internal world of their condominiums by suggesting, rather than imposing the best functional zoning of activities performed during the day/night.

The front façade of the building (**Fig. 5**) is cool, calm and collected – there are no decorations or extravagant windows – yet unusual due to the volumes it consists of. It has a central vertical axis of symmetry which is untypical of rational architecture but transparently demonstrates the floor plans behind it. In this case the symmetry is an expression of rationalism, rather than a reverberation of previous architectural styles.

The front façade starts with the vertical pattern of the ground floor shop windows. The floor above it probably contains offices and is duly paned by a continuous horizontal strip of windows containing a single module: a wood-framed verticalized glass rectangle. The ratio of the sides of the rectangle is approximately 1:2.5. Since the modules repeat many a time, they lose their own meaning and merge into a single continuous transparent horizon-



**Fig. 5.** Front façade facing Vitoshka St.

tal strip window, accentuated by a pair of concrete mouldings framing it above and below.

The four residential floors that follow (**Fig. 5**) are an apotheosis of proportions built upon whole numbers. The main module – one window pane – is a vertical rectangle with sides' ratio of 1:2. Four such modules form the windows of the living rooms – rectangles with sides' ratio 2:1. The horizontal distance between the windows equals the window height; therefore the ratio is 1:1. The vertical distance between the windows equals the height of the windows. i.e. a ratio of 1:1. Without being compelling, the proportions of the façade elements lend rhythm to the façade in both horizontal and vertical direction. Thus the major part of the façade has an order which contributes to the intelligent and harmonious look of the building. The two symmetrical lines of oriel windows parallel to the blind walls stand out and bond the floors in vertical direction through one decorative reinforced concrete *lisene* along the inner edge of each oriel (**Fig. 5**). The *lisenes* go higher than the top level of the oriels and turn into a kind of finials. The attic of the building is unusual – its central part is lower and withdrawn backwards, while two symmetrical tower-like volumes flank the façade. The finials crawl up the towers surpassing them in height and become the two uppermost points of the building (**Fig. 5**).



**Fig. 6.** Façade with *lisene* which no longer dominates above the attic. Photo: Georgi Kafelov, September 26, 2015

Thus the façade, undoubtedly modern in a European way at the time, interweaves different architectural styles. Rationalism is manifested in the horizontality of the windows, Art Deco – in the upward impetus of the two oriels, De Stijl – in the two *lisenes* standing out of the oriels which turn into independent planes at and above the level of the attic. Unfortunately nowadays the finials are cut and finish as high as the fourth residential floor, the two tower-like volumes are eliminated and an eave is built above the attic floor totally changing the original façade (**Fig. 6**).

A similar element – tower with a reinforced concrete *lisene* going upwards on its surface (**Fig. 7**), standing out to an extent that it is perceived as a plane perpendicularly crossing the front plane of the tower – was designed in 1928/29 by architect Hans Scharoun on top of his building located in Berlin – Charlottenburg, at the corner of



**Fig. 7.** Apartment building, Berlin – Scharlottenburg, 1928/29, architect Hans Scharoun [Kirschenmann. 1993]

Kaiserdamm and Königin-Elizabeth-straße [Kirschenmann., 1993]. The horizontal mould turning into a vertical *lisené* resembles the detail in architect V. Vasilev's building in Sofia. Other common elements are the oval windows which both architects used in these buildings.

The façade of the building at 23 Vitosha Boulevard fully reflects the cross-roads of aesthetics at which architect V. Vasilev and his architectural age stood.

Unlike V. Vasilev's building in Sofia, nowadays the building in Berlin looks the same as Hans Scharoun designed it almost a century ago. Nobody has ever dared challenge his architectural genius through modifications.

### **The devolution of the original project**

In the course of the past decades the building at 23 Vitosha Boulevard encountered some inhabitants whose intellect and aesthetics were a bit too far from being impressive. As a result, the attic was redesigned by an unknown perpetrator who devastated the top of the building through eliminating the two flanking towers, cutting the two finials and putting eaves above the top floor. (Fig. 8). The only thing that has remained from the original attic is the old mould which can be seen under the uppermost windows. These interventions spoiled the architect's original concept, which was quite unique for Sofia, and turned it into a banal semi-detached building. They are probably the reason why this work of architect V. Vasilev is not listed as an individual piece of architectural heritage.

If the unknown perpetrator had abided by the order of the façade through putting windows on both flanks of the attic with the same size as the ones below them, it would not have been necessary to destroy the two finials; therefore, the building would have preserved at least part of its original look. Since the fini-



**Fig. 8.** Façade on Vitosha Boulevard – present status. Photo: Georgi Kafelov, September 26, 2015



**Fig. 9.** Part of the façade on Vitosha Boulevard – present status. Photo: Georgi Kafelov, March 29, 2012

als and the mould could not peacefully coexist on the façade, the obscure perpetrator should have pertained to the original project of V. Vasilev and should not have designed eaves or a mould above the top floor. The volume that was added between the two original towers should have been drawn back by some 20 or more centimeters in order to preserve at least the phantom of the original. The redesign was made in a perfunctory manner, disrespecting the caring and unique approach of architect V. Vasilev. Some other small but aesthetically harmful changes (**Fig. 9**) having taken place in the course of time are: air conditioning equipment units perching just above the ground floor; replacement of the original windows of the office floor – the new ones differ in size and spoil the original rhythm of the string of identical modules; the original windows of the first and second residential floors (whose economically rational pane partition was once also meant to emphasize horizontality) have been preserved and make it clear that the windows of the third and fourth floor have been replaced by various unsuccessful versions of the originals.

States, enjoying the availability of intellectually full-fledged population and legislators, make it either very expensive or impossible to put air-conditioning units on the façades of historic buildings; old windows of the latter are either restored or reconstructed in their authentic shape and material. The majority of citizens of Sofia who inhabit historical buildings need an upgrade in the field of architec-

ture, since similar non-professional arbitrary façade interventions have become a rule rather than an exception. They have already ruined the authenticity of a number of old buildings in the city centre. Every professional who needs a proof of the above statement could take a walk along Vitosha Boulevard and see the devolution this architectural ensemble of the Third Bulgarian Tsardom is subjected to. The historically significant architectural heritage should be restored/reconstructed only and solely by professionals who care for its wellbeing in the orbit of exquisite architecture.

## Conclusion

The present article presents for the first time and analyses the original drawings of the project for the residential building at 23 Vitosha Boulevard in Sofia. This design is important for the history of Bulgarian architecture mainly because of the inimitable dynamic top of the building which once relieved the monotony of the city's roof line. In the past, the two reinforced concrete finials added a vertical pause to the actively forming horizontalism of the street silhouette melody. The floor plans of the building represent the unique style of architect V. Vasilev, who both rationalized and partially zoned the condominium floor plan without going to the extreme. He liberally let the inhabitants attribute functions of their choice to some of the rooms. The architect did so not because he was unaware of the European examples<sup>1</sup> – which often clearly differentiated the living, sleeping and service zones in the apartments and had the most rigid zoning possible – but probably because he felt an inner urge to provide some free choice to the owners, as far as this was possible in the limited space of a condominium. The building is important for the history of Bulgarian architecture as a building block of the European architectural identity. Had the latter not come into existence, our present time would not have had the criteria for rational and irrational, for well-considered and perfunctory for imaginative and uncreative when judging the approach of contemporary architects.

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<sup>1</sup> Architect Dechko Dyakov, in a conversation with the author of this article, testified that the circulation of international architectural journals in Bulgaria existed until 1948, then for the whole period of existence of the People's Republic of Bulgaria it ceased to exist.

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